TABLES

A NOVEL BY

JOHN LUCAS

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
BOSTON TORONTO LONDON

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For Frank

Tables

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THE MAN who had once been enormous sat up against the headboard of a bed that still was. He had been very fat, more than three hundred pounds, until very recently. Now he weighed less than half that, and his skin fell around him, like the robe he was wearing, in loose, useless folds. If he had chosen this, if he had ever found the willpower to shed so many pounds voluntarily in such a short time (he had resolved, many times, to do exactly that, but he always fell off whatever diet was fashionable that year), then of course he would have exercised for hours every day to keep his "tone." As it was, the cancer that had first taken root in his lungs, that now seemed to be growing in every direction at once, had prevented all but a few exhausting laps in his beautiful pool. And the last time he'd managed that had been weeks ago.

Because he was a rich man, he had at least been given the option of dying at home, and surrounding him now were all the paraphernalia for monitoring and regulating and nourishing that a hospital room would have provided. In his nostrils were the pale blue plastic tubes that led back behind him to the torpedo of oxygen. In his arms were lifelines leading up to clear plastic pouches dangling above him on a stainless steel tree, like fruit that was just out of reach.

The bed itself, canopied and hung with side curtains, which were now pulled back to allow access to the machinery, was a sore point. Every doctor or nurse who encountered him — and there had been dozens of them — wanted to wheel in the single hospital bed that

waited out in the hall at this moment. Easier to change, they said. Easier to get to him for all the poking and probing they needed to do. Easier to raise his head or his legs or — for all he knew — his hips, with marvelous electric buttons. He refused. He wanted to die in his own bed and he was paying enough for that privilege, wasn't he? The medical profession always backed down when he said that, because indeed he was, but it never totally gave up trying.

The nurse who came in now made a great show of grunting when she reached across to arrange his pillows and smooth the blanket across his legs. Then she straightened up and said good-bye and take care; she was going off her shift and the night nurse was here, not to worry, just downstairs talking with the cook for a minute so they could think up something yummy to tempt him to eat. The man in the bed growled that they were certainly *not* talking about his dinner because he hadn't eaten anything solid for days and what they certainly *were* talking over and drooling over was which yummies they wanted for their own fucking tummies. She laughed delightedly: he was such an amusing, such an original man! He curled his lip.

This sickness, this dying, formed an island at one end of a big, lavishly furnished room. In an armchair just offshore, watching the interchange and patiently waiting for the nurse to leave so they could resume their conversation, sat a visitor who knew the man very well and who understood why he was snarling now. The man had been known for his wit; he'd been famous for it; and it was paining him that a little sour sarcasm would be mistaken for it and that his audience, hour after hour, day after day, was so incapable of knowing the difference.

When they were alone, the man in the bed gestured for his visitor to move the armchair closer. The odor of the cologne that permeated the room was that much stronger here: a clean, spicy, slightly bitter scent from the blossoms of the linden tree. The man had discovered it in a little shop in the rue Royale just before the war, had used it exclusively ever since, and was now trying to hide his own dying smells from himself with it. He began to talk. The cancer had spread to his esophagus, which was the reason he couldn't swallow solid food, and the reason the strange rasping sound he made now was nothing like his own voice.

"Christ, I'm surrounded by well-meaning cows. And the next one's even . . ." He broke off and smiled with more gentleness than all but a handful of people had ever seen in his face. "But you've been here, thank the Lord in whom I decided I may as well better start believing. And that's what I was trying to say, before the changing of the cows just now. How much I appreciate it, how much it's meant to me. How much *you've* meant to me."

A few tears appeared in his eyes and began to trickle down his face. He wiped at them angrily, forgetting about the oxygen tube, and the time it took to get it back in position was long enough for him to recover himself. When he spoke again, his voice was weaker, barely above a whisper, and his visitor had to move the chair much closer to the head of the bed.

"I'm leaving you something *extra,* something I couldn't very well put in the will. None of the rest of them would know how to handle it. . . ." He smiled. "None of the others have the brains or the ambition or the . . . *balls* to handle it. Secrets. I'm leaving you secrets that belong to other people, a whole lot of other people, but I paid dearly for them one way or another, and so now they belong to me too. I never did anything with them, though," he said with an odd combination of pride and regret. "I never needed to, but I loved collecting them and having them and *knowing* them, and I suppose . . . soon, I guess . . ." He took a deep breath. "Soon, I'm beginning to hope, they'll belong to you."

He'd been gazing off across the room as he talked, fiddling with a cologne-drenched washcloth, but now he looked straight at his visitor and he spoke very slowly and deliberately. "They are things these people would never, ever, want anyone else to know. But you'll know them. Better yet, you'll be able to *prove* you know them. And the *very* best thing of all is that these people are all rich, at least as rich as I am and most of them a lot richer. And if you're very, very clever, my love, my beauty, and you are or I'd never have bothered with you, you'll be able to live very, very well for the rest of your life."

1

MARIO FERMI came down the steps of his apartment house and turned west on Eighty-first Street into the buttery afternoon sun that blessed even the buildings on his block and allowed them to be mellow for a little while instead of merely old and shabby. September often served up exhausted reruns of August's brown, wet heat, but the city had been spared today: the air was warm and dry and just faintly crisp; sleepy and softly buzzing at the same time. It was the beginning of fall, and fall was Mario's favorite time of year in New York.

Feeling pleased with himself because he didn't have to be at work for another hour, he pitied any of the eight million souls who had to be inside on an afternoon like this. He liked to think the sunshine would melt even the hardest cases — his boss, for instance, who thought New York weather was either something to be kept out or escaped from — but, thinking about it, he wasn't sure the man would recognize a beautiful day unless he'd spent a lot of time and money and effort to find it, unless it was the Caribbean in February or the Hamptons in August, and he thought that was a shame.

He started to whistle "Autumn in New York" but when he couldn't remember more than the first five notes, just the falling scale of the title, he switched to "The Best Things in Life Are Free" and then he laughed at himself because he knew — or, rather, he'd been told a hundred times — that he couldn't carry a tune. People passing him on the sidewalk stared, and he wondered if that

was because he was laughing or because he was hurting their ears.

He was comfortable and he thought he looked fine, but it occurred to him that he wasn't dressed the same as anyone else. Maybe that was it? He could see how a nice pumpkin-colored cotton sweater and some ivory corduroy pants and a pair of tasseled moccasins with no socks might be more acceptable. He was, in fact, wearing a black T-shirt, a loosely tailored, rather wrinkled, black linen suit, and black high-top basketball shoes. He wasn't at all depressed and he wasn't trying to make an eccentric statement of any kind: it was just that black was his favorite color, and so he only bought black clothes and he never had to think about what matched and what didn't. He made an exception for squash and jogging, when he wore all white.

He was tall and thin, with dark Italian features and black hair that he slicked back. Maggie, the girl he loved, tried to get him into other colors by telling him he was handsome enough to wear anything and look good. She bought him green sweaters and blue shirts, and when he returned them she called him a closet anarchist, a Sicilian widow. Her other campaign, also a lost cause, was for contact lenses instead of the wire-rimmed glasses he always wore, and she was particularly mean about the flip-up sunglasses he clipped over them on days like today.

At Third Avenue, he stopped at a deli for a pack of Winstons, laughing again — guiltily this time — when the woman behind the counter frowned and wagged a finger at him. She knew he'd given them up for a few weeks and now he was obviously back on them again, so he waited till he was out of her sight before he tore open the pack and lit up. He felt like a second-class citizen these days because he smoked; even this nice old babe — who must make a good profit on all the tobacco she sold — managed to make him act like a naughty schoolboy.

A single-engine plane droned overhead and, blocks away, a helicopter circled Central Park. Film crews, he thought, and he wished them luck at getting this day, this city, in a can. He remembered all the weekends he'd come in from Princeton, checking into the Chelsea and roaming everywhere and anywhere for hours with a camera. He'd moved here seven years ago, he still took long walks, but he

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didn't take pictures of the city anymore because he was part of it now and he didn't need to capture it and he wasn't sure he wanted to try.

The neighborhood grew cleaner and richer as he walked along. His own block, between Second and Third, had always been respectable but never very fancy. As he headed west, crossing Lexington and then Park, the real money began to show itself — elegant town houses, substantial old apartment buildings with doormen trying to look like admirals, and parking garages that rented slots for as much as a decent one-bedroom apartment would cost in most towns. It was part of what he'd always loved about New York, the way it changed so fast from block to block, and this rags-to-riches transition today was gentle compared to walks that took him along Twenty-eighth Street from wholesale flowers to furs to junk jewelry in five minutes, or up one of the streets on the Lower East Side from China to Israel to Puerto Rico to Italy in fifteen.

He turned onto Madison Avenue, the street that did its best to absorb whatever money anyone in the world happened to have in abundance, and when he sniffed the air he imagined he could actually smell its bouquet of leather, wool, oil paint, rich foods, and the exhaust fumes of well-bred limousines. There were other streets in the city where he could stroll past elegant shops — a few blocks of Fifth Avenue, of course, and those newly gentrified neighborhoods of the Upper West Side and Soho that really had much more charm than this — but nowhere else was there this concentration of wealth in such a small area, and it fascinated him for precisely that reason.

He zigzagged down the street, crossing whenever there was something he wanted to see in a window on the other side, ignoring red lights like the native New Yorker he'd become. There was much more traffic, the sidewalks were far more crowded, than the last time he'd taken Madison, and that was only a week before. Summer was suddenly over; it was official; everyone was back in town from wherever they'd been. He watched the women who walked slowly or briskly in and out of boutiques and galleries. Behind his dark glasses, he could stare at them a little longer than usual — a tweedy young matron coming out of Ralph Lauren, a dazzling South American beauty waving for a cab in front of Val-

entino, an older blonde woman holding a skirt up to the light in the window of Saint-Laurent. Sometimes he mentally undressed them, sometimes he only tried to guess what their lives were like, who their husbands were, who they loved and why they loved and whether they loved at all.

He bought a couple of books in the Madison Avenue Bookshop and, a little farther along, he treated himself to a silk shirt — black, it went without saying — at Gianni Versace. His last stop was in Sherry-Lehmann. Putting on the kind of thoughtful expression that was appropriate to a serious wine shop, he had a short talk with the assistant manager and ordered ten cases of a Château Pichon Lalande he'd tried a few nights before. Whenever he had a little extra money, he bought wine in quantities like this and had it delivered to a storage place in Brooklyn that kept it at the right temperature and humidity. The few people — two, altogether — who knew what he planned to do with it called it his hope chest.

Out in the sunshine again, he turned off Madison to head east on Sixty-second, walking fast as far as Second Avenue, where he paused before crossing the street and going into work. In just a few minutes, he'd left behind some of the most valuable real estate in the world and arrived at this block that consisted of a pizza parlor, a supermarket, a tanning salon, a Korean vegetable stand, and the corner building that waited for him now. It was an ordinary gray walk-up tenement with a typical New York mixture of tenants — old Greek and Polish couples, a floating stewardess arrangement, some single secretaries, a chorus boy, a methadone addict. The ground floor had once been a funeral parlor, and its only windows were small, discreet ovals on either side of the wide door, painted over with the same dark green as the walls and the awning that stretched out to the curb. It looked as if the building had been dipped in paint up to the second floor and only the brass poles and the plant boxes had been cleaned off and polished. On the sides of the awning and diagonally across each window, a white signature spelled "Rudi's."

To someone who didn't know better, Mario always supposed, it must look like a dozen other places on First or Second or Third — well-maintained, probably rather expensive, nice enough but no big deal. In fact, in the ten years since Rudi's opened, it had become

more than a restaurant and bar; it was now an institution. No review had ever awarded its food more than two out of four stars, *Architectural Digest* had never done a spread on its decor, but its clientele was as much a cross-section of the rich and the talented and the powerful and the beautiful as any restaurant in town. If it wasn't, literally, a club, it was very close to being one, but it was unique because it catered to no one element, no single crowd. Sardi's had theater folk; "21" had chairmen-of-boards and real estate lords; Four Seasons had politicians, publishers, and advertising czars. Rudi's attracted all of these and more. The cast varied, of course, because these people were nothing if not mobile and someone was always off to London for a taping or a house party in Palm Beach or a screening on the Coast, but this had become home base. Photographers were banned; outsiders were heavily discouraged; it was a place to relax.

Mario was partly responsible for this rich mixture of elements because he'd been the manager for five years now, after a year as a waiter and another year as a captain. The core group had been the people Rudi knew and liked and fawned on best: Old Hollywood, privileged wives and their eunuchs, fashion powers, and the very, very rich. Mario had stirred in his friends, the people who interested him — artists and their dealers, writers and their agents, dancers and their choreographers, actors and their directors — and now it was livelier and, up to a point, more democratic.

After scooping some cigarette butts out of the planters and tossing them in the gutter, he pushed through the door. The foyer, where he could still picture relatives standing and receiving condolences, was kept deliberately bare — rest rooms off to the left, coat check to the right, and two low couches for people to wait for friends or cabs or limousines. It was a dead space, a buffer zone between the street and the bar, a place to leave Second Avenue behind. He smiled at this month's coat-check girl — the tenth in the past year — and remembered her name just in time to use it. She was reading a paperback and looking a little bored, an actress-between-parts who was actually very pretty under too much makeup. He would never have hired her as a waitress — Rudi's only hired waiters, anyway — but he thought she looked exactly the way a coat-check girl ought to look.

He sent her in to make sure the ladies' room was empty before he checked it out, and then he looked into the men's. A busboy tidied them every hour or so; the restaurant wasn't even open yet and the bar had only been serving for half an hour; but they were the first stops on the tour Mario always made. A small mess, a tiny rudeness, the staff knew by this time, could make him as angry as a far bigger disaster. There were few enough places in New York where frazzled, creative, spoiled people could buy comfort and courtesy at any price, was his reasoning, and he was determined that as long as he was here, Rudi's would be one of them.

The big room that would be jammed with drinkers in a little while was nearly empty at this time of day. A few couples lounged on the tufted leather banquettes lining one wall, but no one sat at the tables that filled the center and only four solitary men hunched over their drinks at the U-shaped bar that bulged out from the other side. Covered with autographed photographs of Hollywood and Broadway stars, dead and alive, watercolor costume and set designs, and signed exhibition posters, the walls here made up for the starkness of the entrance space. Nobody except the occasional stray tourist ever looked at them very closely, but there was a sense that they were a natural accumulation of Rudi's life, and that was exactly the impression Rudi wanted to make.

He waved to the bartender and continued on through the room. Until six, when the first dinner customers were seated, the archway between the bar and the dining room was closed off with louvered doors. Just beyond them was an alcove that held telephones, credit card terminals, a cash drawer, and, perched on a high stool — like a parakeet, Mario often thought — Lillian. Lillian was not only the cashier, she was the Voice of Rudi's for most of the dinner bookings that came in. She was sixtyish and tiny, with bright, shrewd eyes peeping out from under a cloud of hennaed hair. She'd been here from the beginning and by now people only asked for Mario or Rudi if they needed special favors or if their membership in the club had somehow escaped Lillian, but she was practically never wrong about who should be blessed with a reservation. Daily, she devoured "Suzy Says," "Liz Smith," James Revson's "Social Studies," "Page Six" of the *Post,* and *Women's Wear;* weekly, she skimmed *People* and *New York;* monthly, it was *Vogue, Town & Country,*

Vanity Fair, and *Interview.* She was always able to give unknowns the impression that she'd love to book a table for them but that it just wasn't possible for the next few weeks.

She adored Mario and she was far more loyal to him now than she was to Rudi, who treated her nicely some days and not so nicely on others. Today, passing on the message that he'd gone for the day, that he'd be playing bridge, that he could be called at home in an emergency, she snorted. Mario laughed and spun the reservation book around to look at it. It was nearly full, of course — it always was. She'd bring it in to him later, and they'd sit with an erasable plastic table plan to figure out the seating. In the meantime, he read quickly down the neat columns for a sense of how the evening would be shaping up.

He walked on into the dining room, glancing into the smaller rooms on either side that could be used for overflow when they weren't reserved for private parties. Chairs and banquettes were covered in velvet that matched the dark green on the building's outside, and the off-white walls held a few second-string Impressionists that Mario had always found uninteresting but inoffensive. At this time of day, the room was an empty stage and the track lights bounced off the shiny wood surfaces of the two-tops along the sides, the square four-tops and the round six-tops in the center. Vases of white rosebuds and stacks of dark green tablecloths and napkins waited for the all-important seating arrangement.

Beyond the swinging doors, the noise level in the kitchen was about the same as Second Avenue at rush hour. Powerful exhaust fans whooshed above the ranges as other fans pumped fresh air back in; pots and skillets clanged on the stoves and in the dishwashing sinks; walk-in refrigerator doors were slammed; heavy knives chopped; heavy mallets pounded meat. Eighteen voices competed for attention in English, French, Italian, and Spanish. Mario was always surprised by the quiet that would be descending as soon as the first order came in. This was prep work, and for some reason prep work was supposed to be noisy.

He had to speak to the chef first, of course — the one time he hadn't, every knife had frozen in midair, every spoon had stopped in midstir. Louis turned to him from the pots he was watching, one with fish heads and skins that were being sweated with a little oil

and wine for a stock, another with the asparagus peelings from the night before that would go into a roux for soup. He was Alsatian, pear-shaped, balding, and rather mournful. He was in complete charge of the kitchen, but of course he worked for Rudi, and Mario spent what he considered far too much time as their referee. Louis was happiest when there was a private dinner in one of the small dining rooms because then he could show off his very real genius. The regular menu here bored him and so did the two or three nightly specials. Rudi didn't allow him much scope, and Mario knew that, after only a year here, Louis was looking for another job. The four sous-chefs would all like to fill his shoes, and their rivalry was sometimes friendly and sometimes bitter. Then one of the three cold-side cooks, who were in charge of salads and appetizers, might be elevated to sous-chef level, and one of their assistants might replace one of them, and one of the floating apprentices might move up, and so on down to the dishwashers. Mario thought he'd feel right at home in the Kremlin.

Louis was presenting him with only two problems today, and Mario was relieved. Rudi had insisted on changing to new fish suppliers because they were a little cheaper, but they had no bay scallops today, Louis refused to make his Coquilles Louis with chopped-up ocean scallops, so what good was a new supplier if they couldn't give him what he needed? And the produce man was giving him trouble because his bills weren't paid fast enough. Mario promised to see what he could do, and then he slowly made his way around the kitchen, finding a word for everyone in one language or another. In the dishwashing room, he turned down the volume on the disco-blasting radio and smiled at the two Puerto Rican boys who were bent over dirty pans in the huge sinks, knowing — because it happened every day — they'd turn it up again as soon as he was gone. He climbed down the staircase, so steep it was almost a ladder, to the storage room, and then he backed up the stairs and crossed the kitchen to the office.

Behind the double thickness of glass it was quieter, and he sank gratefully into his chair. He spent a little while with the secretary, a sweetly efficient Haitian woman, and then Lillian brought the reservation book in and it took another half hour to sort out the table arrangements. She quietly corrected him when she saw him

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