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GEORGE W. HIGGINS



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WONDERFUL YEARS

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V. HIGGINS
WONDERFUL YEARS,
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The hotel was old and made of wood, three white clapboard stories set back on a long curving gravel drive among pines, oaks and maples in the foothills of the Berkshires. The trees concealed it from view from the Mohawk Trail.

Four white columns supported the *porte cochère*, and the double doors leading into the foyer were painted dark green with tarnished brass hardware; the knockers were a pair of lion's heads. The floor of the foyer and lobby was red flagstone. It was furnished with white wicker. The oak registration desk was at the rear center of the lobby. Off to the left in the shadows was the entrance to the bar, small and cramped; off to the right was the dining room: twelve octagonal oak tables and seventy-two oak chairs. The tables in the morning were set with white paper placemats and pewter jam pots, in the evening with white tablecloths frayed at the edges and mended in places. The menu advised that boxed

lunches consisting of sandwiches and pastries would be prepared on request at a charge of two-fifty per guest.

To the left behind the registration desk there was an open hallway roofed in translucent greyish glass that led abruptly into a long solarium. The roof sloped away from the main building, the green iron framework rusting in places and slowly leaking at the joints, the large rectangles of glass darkened by the stains and detritus of pine needles and leaves that had fallen and remained to rot undisturbed under years of rain and winter snow. The shadowy outlines of small broken branches showed through the glass. The two glass walls facing south and west were soiled from the foliage decomposing on the roof.

The solarium was crowded with potted palms and ominous plants with broad leaves yellowed and browned at the edges. The air was heavy and moist. The flagstone floor was alternately slick and sticky underfoot. In the center there was a small unpainted iron fountain, its four-foot basin shaped like an open flower fluted at the edges. A hidden electric pump endlessly circulated five gallons of water through the center column, silently pushing it to spill into three progressively larger fluted receptacles. There were four small goldfish and some pennies in the bottom basin. Six dark green wicker chairs faced the fountain, with small circular tables between each pair.

At the rear of the solarium, there was a bower of palms and two sets of iron shelving holding stout short plants with spreading leaves. In the center there was an iron stand that held a large domed iron cage painted yellow. Inside was a big parrot, its body and

wings bright green, its head masked in yellow under its green crest. The parrot had angry golden eyes closed to slits most of the time; it stirred only fitfully, ruffling its feathers and resettling itself. It did not talk. There was a small hand-lettered sign taped to the bottom of its cage: "DO NOT FEED—BITES."

"In the winter, skiers," Arbuckle said, facing the fountain, "or so the brochure says. Supposedly they've got this great network of cross-country trails, and supposedly there's good downhill only about eight miles away. Didn't mean squat to me."

"It doesn't seem like the kind of place . . ." Morse said.

". . . that skiers'd line up to get into," Arbuckle said. "No, I agree with you there. And the picture on the front the pamphlet, it shows these people getting out their car at the door? It's a Seventy-three Chevy ragtop. So I think it's probably been a while, they printed that thing up. But the place is cheap, compared the lodges, and you get your real serious types, I imagine they're too pooped to do much at night anyway. In the fall you've got your leaf-peepers. They'll stay anywhere. And in the summer, well, they brag they've got a pool out back, but I took a look at it, and it's about as big as your toilet bowl. Except with green stuff in it. Fishing? Maybe golf? I don't know. There must be courses around. Tanglewood? Quite a drive. And I can tell you, after three nights, they don't come here for the food. Pot roast *à la* pot roast—that's the chef's specialty."

"Is anybody else here?" Morse said. "You seen anybody else?"

"Three old ladies show up at meals," Arbuckle

said. "Separately, at meals. They nod to each other, sit down, eat, and leave. Residents, I think, permanent residents. One of them's been reading *Rage of Angels* since I got here. She brings it down with her every night. I think she's covered maybe forty pages—not much more'n that. She reads like a buddy I had the *Tecumseh*—one book'd last him a year. Sunday night there was an older man, maybe forty-five, fifty, and a woman in her late twenties, early thirties. They had a thing of red wine, and they touched fingers now and then and looked sad. Neither one of them had a ring. Two drinks in the bar, White Label and water, and up they went to bed."

"End of the affair?" Morse said. "Couldn't pick a better place."

"That's sort of what I thought," Arbuckle said. "It's pretty nearly perfect, wouldn't you say? End of the goddamned world."

Morse surveyed the solarium. "I don't know," he said. "The first thing, of course, the first thing you've got to wonder's how you're going to get her up here. Going to take some doing." He paused. "Probably have to knock her out again."

"'Scuse me," Arbuckle said, "but I was under the impression that was not a problem. He called me in, well, Edith did, I got the clear impression that'd been disposed of—how to get her here, I mean. Hospital wanted her out, said she's not sick anymore and she's taking up a bed. So: 'Eugene, check out the joint.' And I did. The way I understood it, only question was whether this was the kind of place he wanted, put her in—she gonna be at least comfortable here. He asks me that, or she does, when I go to

pick her up, well, it ain't no Caesar's Palace but I guess it fits the bill. She gonna give me trouble?"

"Nothing's ever cut-and-dried with Nell," Morse said. "You've been around, you've had enough experience by this time, know it's never that neat."

"Yeah," Arbuckle said, "well, that's something to look forward to. Why're they letting her out then, she's still acting up? Doesn't make any sense. First I spend four joyous days, three quiet nights, making mine hosts very nervous. Now you're telling me I'm in for a rerun of *I Want to Live*? I'm gonna be the guy, locks her in the chamber, and then turns on the gas?"

"Calm down," Morse said. "You won't have to do anything. They'll give her an industrial dose of Thorazine. Whatever it is. She'll be all zonked out 'fore she even comes out of the building. Probably sleep the whole way up. And even if she doesn't, you know how slow it makes her talk. She'll be all right. All right's she ever gets, anyway. Zombied. And either Fanny or Jo'll be along, she does start to thrash around."

"Poor lady," Arbuckle said. "She'll fit right in here."

"You didn't, exactly?" Morse said.

"They didn't have any trouble, me staying one night," Arbuckle said. "I didn't say anything, except to ask, they had a room." He snorted. "Unless the old ladies're bunking together, which I tend to doubt, myself, them and the lovers were the only other guests, which'd mean they had forty-two rooms, I could find a use for them. Forty-two other rooms with short mattresses and thin blankets. My

wallet's thicker'n the pillow, which is nice when I want to buy something but not so hot, I want to sleep. I think they assumed I'd been driving all day and just got tired and decided, finish the trip in the morning. Guy at the desk seemed kind of surprised, I didn't check out after breakfast. Looked at me funny, you know? I was gonna say to him: 'No, I'm not on the run—just taking a little time off. For a rest.' But I figured: I deny it, he's gonna have a whole army of cops here in ten minutes. So: kept my mouth shut, for a change."

"What'd you do, all day?" Morse said.

"Tried to keep a grip on my sanity," Arbuckle said. "One thing, somebody puts you here 'cause you're nuts. But another thing, you got most of your marbles when you come here, part your job, like to leave with the same number. But it wasn't easy. I sat around the lobby—they don't get a paper here until the local afternoon comes out, and it's fascinating stuff, I guess, you know the background on the zoning fight between Mister Macalester and Cold Springs developers. Macalester says the new Cold Springs condos'll fuck up the traffic in town. Cold Springs says they won't. Macalester's buddy, Mister Desmond, he says Cold Springs'll screw up the solid-waste disposal. Cold Springs says it won't. Or you happen to be wondering what Lambert's got for back-to-school. Tried to get a rise out the parrot but I guess he's mute or something. Bored speechless, maybe. Although I did hear him screech once—awful goddamned shriek. At least I think it was him; I wasn't in the sunroom at the time. Could've been the owner, someone asking about lunch. 'You should

talk the old ladies, at least,' I told him. The bird, I mean. 'See they'd like a fourth for bridge, or something.' Nothing. I went for walks around the grounds—very pleasant, I must say, you like birds and shit like that. Which she told me once, Nell did, she does. Squirrels. Must have close to a million squirrels here. Big fat bastards, grey ones, and these mean little red ones that the grey ones stay away from. Must be oaks or hickories or something else around here with nuts on them—I don't know from trees much, either. Proprietor told me, like he was my mother or something—maybe Agnes in a bad mood—that no, they don't serve lunch. Pointed to the fine print onna menu. I drove into town after that, had a cheeseburger in the coffee shop. After pissing him off by agreeing his suspicion I'm staying on another night."

"It was probably the gold neck chain that got him," Morse said. "Don't see many of those here, I'd guess."

"Could've been," Arbuckle said. "He wanted to ask me what the hell I was up to, but he didn't quite dare."

"Probably thinks you're from the State," Morse said.

"That's what I thought," Arbuckle said. "Everybody's got a scam. 'Holding back on the meals taxes, chum?' That's what I wanted to say. 'That wetback you got, back there in the kitchen? He got his employment Green Card? How 'bout them two chambermaids? Paying the minimum wage? Sure you're turning over, all the withholding taxes?' Just for some excitement. But I didn't. I think the prop was

glad today, you finally showed up. Relieved, you know? Like maybe now I'd leave." He sighed. "Nothing I'd like better."

Morse nodded. He took a leather memo pad from his inside jacket pocket. "You're finished today," he said. "Just let me get some stuff down here, and you can go pack, get out and go back."

"I don't have to report him, direct?" Arbuckle said.

"You can if you want to," Morse said. "I was more or less assuming, since I had to anyway, and you've been cooped up here this long, you'd just as soon knock off, go back, get drunk or laid or something."

"Oh, I don't want," Arbuckle said. "You want to let me out of this, I'm more'n willing, friend."

Morse nodded. "No entertainment, then?"

"The big event here," Arbuckle said, "is when someone shows the gumption to turn on the TV set. In the bar. It's an old Hitachi and I think they get their signal parcel post or something. Two channels, one of which must be ABC—*Monday Night Football*. Watched the Rams play the Raiders. Went in there after dinner, probably seven, seven-thirty. Sat there by myself maybe twenty, thirty minutes, meditating on my sins. Like the priest used to tell me to do. Owner comes in like he's annoyed. Points out there's a pad on the counter, next the register. Just fix what I want and write it down and sign it. I apologized. Said I saw him doing the honors, previous night, the couple was in there with me. Thought that was policy. He said, No, that's just Sunday nights. Weekends. Rest of the week, honor system. Which I think's another way of saying he's

not going to stand around out here watching one person drink, he can be back in his own hole, sleeping. So I got into the bourbon moderately good, wrote down four drinks, which was true, but left out they were doubles—thought I deserved that, the labor. And when nine o'clock came, turned on the game. Local paper had that, at least. That was my big night here—getting swacked alone.”

“You should’ve brought a book,” Morse said, making notes. “I hope she does, at least. That last feature’s not one that’s going to please him. Or Fanny and Josephine, either.”

“Phil,” Arbuckle said, “inna first place, I didn’t think this detail was gonna be like in the service, you know? Or the brig. I associate, you know, stocking up on books with getting ready to go someplace for a long quiet time that I don’t have any choice about staying there. And I can’t possibly get out. And inna second place, the bar? The owner’ll change that, I know. You offer him some money, he’ll lock that bar up tighter’n a fried-fish fart. Hell, he’d probably do it for nothing. He’s got the two teenagers with the kind of acne that the only way they’ll ever get cured is to skin them, and they come in afternoons and change the beds—four beds—vacuum and dust. And then they serve the dinners, and wash up afterwards. He’s got the cook. He’s got himself. Caught a glimpse of another guy out by the pool yesterday, probably about forty, looked like a corpse, lying in the sun. Soon’s he saw me, got out of the chaise lounge, grabbed his towel and skedaddled. That’s the whole crew. He’s just barely getting by here. He’ll do anything for money.”

“Boyfriend?” Morse said.

“Boyfriend,” Arbuckle said, “idiot brother, stray dog, vagabond—who the hell knows? Or cares? He doesn’t bother anybody. Point is: the money. You couldn’t make enough off this operation, keep the parrot in chow. Which is probably why the bird’s not talking—he’s hungry. Conserving energy. You say to this guy you’ll cover his losses, closing the bar, he’s not there, and offer him fifty, a hundred a week, which he hasn’t seen his whole life out of income from this place, he’ll jump at it like a dog for meat.” He paused. “Unless you—he—*wants* her served. Might be another way, out of his troubles.”

“I don’t think I’ll mention that,” Morse said, making notes. “He wouldn’t go for it. Phones in the rooms?”

“Nope,” Arbuckle said. “I asked about that, by way of no harm, and he got all huffy with me: ‘None of our rooms have phones, sir,’ he said. ‘Few of our guests would desire them.’ Meaning, I suppose, that nobody who comes here knows anybody, that’d be worried about them enough to call. You come to this place, maybe you’re not all alone in the world, but you’re close enough, pal, close enough.”

“Good,” Morse said. “Nothing like old Nell and a phone of her own. Nero with a flamethrower—that’s old Nell with a phone in her hand.” He shook his head. “I sure don’t envy Fanny and Jo. He pays them all right, and I suppose if you’re an ex-nun at fifty, you take what you can get. But I wouldn’t want their jobs, four days a week of Nell.”

“‘Ex-nun, ex-con, they got no choice’—that what you’re saying, Philly?” Arbuckle said.

“Oh ease up, all right?” Morse said. “That’s not what I meant. I know you’re jumpy, don’t like this, but that’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Arbuckle said.

“It’s just something, we got to do,” Morse said. “Just something that’s got to be done.”

“It’s still kind of a shame, though, isn’t it?” Arbuckle said. “I only met her, the only times I’ve seen her’s been when something like this’s up, but those times she seemed like a very nice woman—kind of dazed, but pretty and happy and all. But there she is, got everything wrapped, whole fucking world on the half-shell, and everything’s all out of whack.”

Morse shrugged. “She doesn’t like what he does,” he said. “She found out about it, and she told him to stop, and naturally he couldn’t. He’d never see another contract. She took it the wrong way. Thought he was choosing between her and what he does, when he hasn’t got a choice—he’s got no choice at all. And she cracked. I guess that’s the way it happens sometimes. Everybody’s got their personal limit of shit, and then something happens, over the limit, and they crack. Like trying to reach too far from your ladder, when you oughta get down and just move it—there’s a point where you go too far, and it slips, and down you go, crash to the ground. Prolly sick all along, but bang, one more thing happens, and they go out of control. Blooey.”

“Yeah,” Arbuckle said, “but is she that dangerous? Does she really know that much, that she could hurt him if she talked? He doesn’t tell her things, does he? Now that she’s like this?”

“I assume he doesn’t,” Morse said. “Not anymore.”

I assume he hasn't told her anything for years. Does she know about things? She knows about some things, or she did, anyway. Some times, all right? Some times there was just too much money involved, so he couldn't keep it a secret. You know Buster Feeley?"

"No," Arbuckle said. "Never heard of him."

"I'm not far ahead of you," Morse said. "I met Buster Feeley maybe five times in my life. The first one was a night in a bar on Broadway in South Boston, and I recognized him from his description, the one I had of him. And I went up to him, I had this envelope, and I said: 'You Buster Feeley?' And he said, he was drinking a Bally draft ale, and he said: 'Yeah.' And I took the envelope out my coat and I said: 'This's for Sonny.' And he took it, and he said: 'Thanks.' And he put it in his pocket. And he said: 'You wanna beer?' Well, Ken didn't tell me much, but I know what's in that envelope and I'm going to be pleasant because this guy may be important. So I said: 'No, I can't. I'm a drunk. But I'll have a cup of coffee.' And he looked at me. 'Son of a bitch,' he said. 'Lots of guys are. Very few guys admit it. Have a Coke, or a ginger or something. Coffee's horrible here.' So I had a Coca-Cola. And he told me three dirty jokes about niggers, and I see this guy's not important at all—he's just an errand boy, like me. Only I, at least, am smart. And I left."

"So what?" Arbuckle said.

"Buster was the collector," Morse said. "There was fifty thousand dollars in that envelope. I know because I got it from the bank that day, cashing in fifty K in certificates of deposit."