

though, great snaking slippery chains of them, mounting the tombstones in their legions and fearlessly sailing the high seas of the greening grass. The village priest intoned the immortal words, the widows wept, the children huddled beneath their umbrellas and we buried both men, if not with pomp and circumstance, then at least with a great deal of respect.

(1992)

FILTHY WITH THINGS

T.C. Boyle

He dreams, amidst the clutter, of sparseness, purity, the wheeling dark star-haunted reaches beyond the grasp of this constrained little world, where distances are measured in light-years and even the galaxies fall away to nothing. But dreams get you nowhere, and Marsha's latest purchase, the figured-mahogany highboy with carved likenesses of Jefferson, Washington and Adams in place of pulls, will not fit in the garage. The garage, designed to accommodate three big chromium-hung hunks of metal in the two-ton range, will not hold anything at all, not even a Japanese fan folded like a stiletto and sunk to the hilt in a horizontal crevice. There are no horizontal crevices—not vertical, either. The mass of interlocked things, the great squared-up block of objects, of totems, of purchases made and accreted, of the precious and unattainable, is packed as tightly as the stones at Machu Picchu.

For a long moment Julian stands there in the blistering heat of the driveway, contemplating the abstract sculpture of the garage while the boy from the Antique Warehouse rolls and unrolls the sleeves of his T-shirt and watches a pair of fourteen-year-old girls saunter up the sidewalk. The sun and heat are not salutary for the colonial hardwood of which the highboy is composed, and the problem of where to put it has begun to reach critical proportions. Julian thinks of the storage shed behind the pool, where the newspapers are stacked a hundred deep and Marsha keeps her collection of Brazilian scythes and harrows, but immediately rejects it—the last time he was back there he couldn't even get the door open. Over the course of the next ten seconds or so he develops a fantasy of draining the pool and enclosing it as a sort of step-down warehouse, and it's a rich fantasy, richly rewarding, but he ultimately dismisses it, too. If they were to

drain the pool, where would Marsha keep her museum-quality collection of Early American whaling implements, buoys and ship's furniture, not to mention the two hundred twelve antique oarlocks currently mounted on the pool fence? The boy's eyes are vapid. He's begun to whistle tunelessly and edge back toward the van. "So where'd you decide you want it?" he asks listlessly.

On the moon, Julian wants to say. Saturn. On the bleak blasted ice plains of Pluto. He shrugs. "On the porch, I guess."

The porch. Yes. The only problem is, the screened-in porch is already stacked to the eaves with sideboards, armoires, butter churns and bentwood rockers. The best they can do, after a fifteen-minute struggle, is to wedge the thing two-thirds of the way in the door. "Well," says Julian, and he can feel his heart fluttering round his rib cage like some fist-sized insect, "I guess that'll have to do." The laugh he appends is curt with embarrassment. "Won't have to worry about rain till November, anyway."

The boy isn't even breathing hard. He's long-lipped and thin, strung together with wire, and he's got one of those haircuts that make his head look as if it's been put on backwards. For a long moment he leans over the hand truck, long fingers dangling, giving Julian a look that makes him feel like he's from another planet. "Yeah, that's right," the boy finally murmurs, and he looks at his feet, then jerks himself up as if to drift back to the van, the freeway, the warehouse, before stopping cold again. He looks at Julian as if he's forgotten something, and Julian digs into his pocket and gives the boy three dollars for his efforts.

The sun is there, a living presence, as the boy backs the van out of the driveway, and Julian knows he's going to have to do something about the mahogany highboy—drape a sheet over it or maybe a plastic drop cloth—but somehow he can't really seem to muster the energy. It's getting too much for him—all these things, the addition that was filled before it was finished, the prefab storage sheds on the back lawn, the crammed closets, the unlivable living room—and the butt end of the highboy hanging from the porch door seems a tangible expression of all his deepest fears. Seeing it there, the harsh light glancing off its polished flanks, its clawed feet dangling in the air, he wants to cry out against the injustice of it all, his miserable lot, wants to dig out his binoculars and the thin peeling ground cloth he's had since he was a boy in Iowa and go up to the mountains and let the meteor showers wash him clean, but he can't. That ancient handcrafted butt end represents guilt, Marsha's displeasure, a good and valuable thing left to deteriorate. He's begun to move toward it in a halfhearted shuffle, knowing from experience that he can squeeze it in there somehow, when a horn sounds breathlessly behind him. He turns, condemned like Sisyphus, and watches as Marsha wheels into the drive, the Range Rover packed to the windows and a great dark slab of furniture lashed to the roof like some primitive landing craft. "Julian!" she calls. "Julian! Wait till you see what I found!"

"I've seen worse," the woman says, and Julian can feel the short hairs on the back of his neck begin to stiffen—she's seen worse, but she's seen better, too. They're standing in the living room—or rather on the narrow footpath between the canyons of furniture that obscure the walls, the fireplace, even the ceiling of what was once the living room—and Julian, afraid to look her in the eye, leans back against a curio cabinet crammed with painted porcelain dolls in native costume, nervously turning her card over in his hand. The card is certainly minimalist—*Susan Certaine*, it reads in a thin black embossed script, *Professional Organizer*, and it gives a telephone number, nothing else—and the woman herself is impressive, brisk, imposing, even; but he's just not sure. Something needs to be done, something radical—and, of course, Marsha, who left to cruise the flea markets an hour ago, will have to agree to it, at least in substance—but for all his misery and sense of oppression, for all the times he's joked about burning the place down or holding the world's biggest yard sale, Julian needs to be reassured, needs to be convinced.

"You've seen worse?" he prompts.

"Sure I have. Of course I have. What do you take me for, an amateur?"

Julian shrugs, turns up his palms, already on the defensive.

"Listen, in my business, Mr. Laxner, you tend to run across the hard cases, the ones anyone else would give up on—the Liberaces, the Warhols, the Nancy Reagans. You remember Imelda Marcos? That was me. I'm the one they called in to straighten out that mess. Twenty-seven hundred pairs of shoes alone, Mr. Laxner. Think about that."

She pauses to let her eyes flicker over the room, the smallest coldest flame burning behind the twin slivers of her contact lenses. She's a tall, pale, hovering presence, a woman stripped to the essentials, the hair torn back from her scalp and strangled in a bun, no cheeks, no lips, no makeup or jewelry, the dress black, the shoes black, the briefcase black as a dead black coal dug out of the bottom of the bag. "There's trouble here," she says finally, holding his eyes. "You're dirty with things, Mr. Laxner, filthy, up to your ears in the muck."

He is, he admits it, but he can't help wincing at the harshness of the indictment.

She leans closer, the briefcase clamped like a breastplate across her chest, her breath hot in his face, soap, Sen-Sen, Listerine. "And do you know who I am, Mr. Laxner?" she asks, a hard combative friction in the back of her throat, a rasp, a growl.

Julian tries to sound casual, tries to work the hint of a smile into the corners of his mouth and ignore the fact that his personal space has suddenly shrunk to nothing. "Susan Certaine?"

"I am the purifying stream, Mr. Laxner, that's who I am. The cleansing torrent, the baptismal font. I'll make a new man of you."

This is what she's here for, he knows it, this is what he needs, discipline, compulsion, the iron promise, but still he can't help edging away, a little dance of the feet, the condensing of a shoulder. "Well, yes, but"—giving her a sidelong glance, and still she's there, right there, breathing out her Sen-Sen like a dental hygienist—"it's a big job, it's—"

"We inventory everything—*everything*—right down to the paper clips in your drawers and the lint in your pockets. My people are the best, real professionals. There's no one like us in the business, believe me—and believe me when I tell you I'll have this situation under control inside of a week, seven short days. I'll guarantee it, in fact. All I need is your go-ahead."

His go-ahead. A sudden vista opens up before him, unbroken beaches, limitless plains, lunar seas and Venusian deserts, the yawning black interstellar wastes. Would it be too much to ask to see the walls of his own house? Just once? Just for an hour? Yes, okay, sure, he wants to say, but the immensity of it stifles him. "I'll have to ask my wife," he hears himself saying. "I mean, consult with her, think it over."

"Pah! That's what they all say." Her look is incendiary, bitter, the eyes curling behind the film of the lenses, the lipless mouth clenched round something rotten. "Tell me something, Mr. Laxner, if you don't mind my asking—you're a stargazer, aren't you?"

"Beg pardon?"

"The upstairs room, the one over the kitchen?" Her eyes are jumping, some mad electric impulse shooting through her like a power surge scorching the lines. "Come on now, come clean. All those charts and telescopes, the books—there must be a thousand of them."

Now it's Julian's turn, the ball in his court, the ground solid under his feet. "I'm an astronomer, if you want to know."

She says nothing, just watches him out of those burning messianic eyes, waiting.

"Well, actually, it's more of a hobby really—but I do teach a course Wednesday nights at the community college."

The eyes leap at him. "I knew it. You intellectuals, you're the worst, the very worst."

"But, but"—stammering again despite himself—"it's not me, it's Marsha."

"Yes," she returns, composing herself like some lean effortless snake coiling to strike, "I've heard that one before. It takes two to tango, Mr. Laxner, the pathological aggregator and the enabler. Either way, you're guilty. Don't ask your wife, tell her. Take command." Turning her back on him as if the matter's been settled, she props her briefcase up against the near bank of stacked ottomans, produces a note pad and begins jotting down figures in a firm microscopic hand. Without looking up, she swings suddenly round on him. "Family money?" she asks.

And he answers before he can think: "Yes. My late mother."

"All right," she says, "all right, that's fine. But before we go any further, perhaps you'd be interested in hearing a little story one of my clients told me, a journalist, a name you'd recognize in a minute. . . ." The eyes twitch again, the eyeballs themselves, pulsing with that electric charge. "Well, a few years ago he was in Ethiopia—in the Eritrean province—during the civil war there? He was looking for some refugees to interview and a contact put him onto a young couple with three children, they'd been grain merchants before the war broke out, upper-middle-class, they even had a car. Well, they agreed to be interviewed, because he was giving them a little something and they hadn't eaten in a week, but when the time came they hung back. And do you know why?"

He doesn't know. But the room, the room he passes through twenty times a day like a tourist trapped in a museum, seems to close in on him.

"They were embarrassed, that's why—they didn't have any clothes. And I don't mean as in 'Oh dear, I don't have a thing to wear to the Junior League Ball,' but literally no clothes. Nothing at all, not even a rag. They finally showed up like Adam and Eve, one hand clamped over their privates." She held his eyes till he had to look away. "And what do you think of that, Mr. Laxner, I'd be interested to know?"

What can he say? He didn't start the war, he didn't take the food from their mouths and strip the clothes from their backs, but he feels guilty all the same, bloated with guilt, fat with it, his pores oozing the golden rancid sheen of excess and waste. "That's terrible," he murmurs, and still he can't quite look her in the eye.

"Terrible?" she cries, her voice homing in, "you're damned right it's terrible. Awful. The saddest thing in the world. And do you know what? Do you?" She's even closer now, so close he could be breathing for her. "That's why I'm charging you a thousand dollars a day."

The figure seizes him, wrings him dry, paralyzes his vocal apparatus. He can feel something jerking savagely at the cords of his throat. "A thousand—*dollars*—a day?" he echoes in disbelief. "I knew it wasn't going to be cheap—"

But she cuts him off, a single insistent finger pressed to his lips. "You're dirty," she whispers, and her voice is different now, thrilling, soft as a lover's, "you're filthy. And I'm the only one to make you clean again."

The following evening, with Julian's collusion, Susan Certaine and her associate, Dr. Doris Hauskopf, appear at the back gate just after supper. It's a clear searing evening, not a trace of moisture in the sky—the kind of evening that would lure Julian out under the stars if it weren't for the light pollution. He and Marsha are enjoying a cup of decaf after a meal of pita, tabbouleh and dolma from the Armenian deli, sitting out on the patio amidst the impenetrable maze of lawn

furniture, when Susan Certaine's crisp penetrating tones break through the muted roar of freeway traffic and sporadic birdsong: "Mr. Laxner? Are you there?"

Marsha, enthroned in wicker and browsing through a collectibles catalogue, gives him a quizzical look, expecting perhaps a delivery boy or a package from the UPS—Marsha, his Marsha, in her pastel shorts and oversized top, the quintessential innocent, so easily pleased. He loves her in that moment, loves her so fiercely he almost wants to call the whole thing off, but Susan Certaine is there, undeniable, and her voice rings out a second time, drilling him with its adamancy: "Mr. Laxner?"

He rises then, ducking ceramic swans and wrought-iron planters, feeling like Judas.

The martial tap of heels on the flagstone walk, the slap of twin briefcases against rigorously conditioned thighs, and there they are, the professional organizer and her colleague the psychologist, hovering over a bewildered Marsha like customs inspectors. There's a moment of silence, Marsha looking from Julian to the intruders and back again, before he realizes that it's up to him to make the introductions. "Marsha," he begins, and he seems to be having trouble finding his voice, "Marsha, this is Ms. Certaine. And her colleague, Dr. Doris Hauskopf—she's a specialist in aggregation disorders. They run a service for people like us . . . you remember a few weeks ago, when we—" but Marsha's look wraps fingers around his throat and he can't go on.

Blanching, pale to the roots of her hair, Marsha leaps up from the chair and throws a wild hunted look round her. "No," she gasps, "no," and for a moment Julian thinks she's going to bolt, but the psychologist, a compact woman with a hairdo even more severe than Susan Certaine's, steps forward to take charge of the situation. "Poor Marsha," she clucks, spreading her arms to embrace her, "poor, poor Marsha."

The trees bend under the weight of the carved birdhouses from Heidelberg and Zurich, a breeze comes up to play among the Taiwanese wind chimes that fringe the eaves in an unbroken line, and the house—the jam-packed house in which they haven't been able to prepare a meal or even find a frying pan in over two years—seems to rise up off its foundation and settle back again. Suddenly Marsha is sobbing, clutching Dr. Hauskopf's squared-up shoulders and sobbing like a child. "I know I've been wrong," she wails, "I know it, but I just can't, I can't—"

"Hush now, Märsha, hush," the doctor croons, and Susan Certaine gives Julian a fierce, tight-lipped look of triumph, "that's what we're here for. Don't you worry about a thing."

The next morning, at the stroke of seven, Julian is awakened from uneasy dreams by the deep-throated rumble of heavy machinery. In the first startled moment of

waking, he thinks it's the noise of the garbage truck and feels a sudden stab of regret for having failed to put out the cans and reduce his load by its weekly fraction, but gradually he becomes aware that the sound is localized, static, stalled at the curb out front of the house. Throwing off the drift of counterpanes, quilts and granny-square afghans beneath which he and his wife lie entombed each night, he struggles through the precious litter of the floor to the bedroom window. Outside, drawn up to the curb in a sleek dark glittering line, their engines snarling, are three eighteen-wheel moving vans painted in metal-flake black and emblazoned with the Certaine logo. And somewhere, deep in the bowels of the house, the doorbell has begun to ring. Insistently.

Marsha isn't there to answer it. Marsha isn't struggling up bewildered from the morass of bedclothes to wonder who could be ringing at this hour. She isn't in the bathroom trying to locate her toothbrush among the mustache cups and fin-de-siècle Viennese soap dishes or in the kitchen wondering which of the coffee drippers/steamers/percolators to use. She isn't in the house at all, and the magnitude of that fact hits him now, hard, like fear or hunger.

No, Marsha is twenty-seven miles away, in the Susan Certaine Residential Treatment Center in Simi Valley, separated from him for the first time in their sixteen years of marriage. It was Dr. Hauskopf's idea. She felt it would be better this way, less traumatic for everyone concerned. After the initial twilight embrace of the preceding evening, the doctor and Susan Certaine had led Marsha out front, away from the house and Julian—her "twin crutches," as the doctor put it—and conducted an impromptu three-hour therapy session on the lawn. Julian preoccupied himself with his lunar maps and some calculations he'd been wanting to make relating to the total area of the Mare Fecunditatis in the Southeast quadrant, but he couldn't help glancing out the window now and again. The three women were camped on the grass, sitting in a circle with their legs folded under them, yoga style, while Marsha's tiki torches blazed over their heads like a forest afire.

Weirdly lit, they dipped their torsos toward one another and their hands flashed white against the shadows while Marsha's menagerie of lawn ornaments clustered round them in silent witness. There was something vaguely disquieting about the scene, and it made Julian feel like an interloper, already bereft in some deep essential way, and he had to turn away from it. He put down his pencil and made himself a drink. He flicked on the TV. Paced. Finally, at quarter to ten, he heard them coming in the front door. Marsha was subdued, her eyes downcast, and it was clear that she'd been crying. They allowed her one suitcase. No cosmetics, two changes of clothing, underwear, a nightgown. Nothing else. Not a thing. Julian embraced his wife on the front steps while Susan Certaine and Dr. Hauskopf looked on impatiently, and then they were gone.

But now the doorbell is ringing and Julian is shuffling into his pants and looking for his shoes even as Susan Certaine's whiplash cry reverberates in the stairwell and stings him to action. "Mr. Laxner! Open up! Open up! Open up!"

It takes him sixty seconds. He would have liked to comb his hair, brush his teeth, reacquaint himself with the parameters of human life on the planet, but there it is, sixty seconds, and he's still buttoning his shirt as he throws back the door to admit her. "I thought . . . I thought you said eight," he gasps.

Susan Certaine stands rigid on the doorstep, flanked by two men in black jumpsuits with the Certaine logo stitched in gold over their left breast pockets. The men are big-headed, bulky, with great slabs of muscle laddled over their shoulders and upper arms. Behind them, massed like a football team coming to the aid of a fallen comrade, are the uncountable others, all in Certaine black. "I did," she breathes, stepping past him without a glance. "We like to keep our clients on their toes. Mike!" she cries, "Fernando!" and the two men spring past Julian and into the ranked gloom of the house. "Clear paths here"—pointing toward the back room—"and here"—and then to the kitchen.

The door stands open. Beyond it, the front lawn is a turmoil of purposefully moving bodies, of ramps, ladders, forklifts, flattened boxes in bundles six feet high. Already, half a dozen workers—they're women, Julian sees now, women cut in the Certaine mold, with their hair shorn or pinned rigidly back—have begun constructing the cardboard containers that will take the measure of his and Marsha's life together. And now others, five, six, seven of them, speaking in low tones and in a language he doesn't recognize, file past him with rolls of bar-code tape, while out on the front walk, just beyond the clutter of the porch, three men in mirror sunglasses set up a gauntlet of tables equipped with computers and electric-eye guns. Barefooted, unshaven, unshowered, his teeth unbrushed and his hair uncombed, Julian can only stand and gape—it's like an invasion. It is an invasion.

When he emerges from the shower ten minutes later, wrapped only in a towel, he finds a small hunched Asian woman squatting on her heels in front of the cabinets under the twin sinks, methodically affixing bar-code stickers to jars of petroleum jelly, rolls of toilet paper and cans of cleanser before stacking them neatly in a box at her side. "What do you think you're doing?" Julian demands. This is too much, outrageous, in his own bathroom no less, but the woman just grins out of a toothless mouth, gives him the thumbs-up sign and says, "A-OK, Number One Charlie!"

His heart is going, he can feel it, and he tries to stay calm, tries to remind himself that these people are only doing their job, doing what he could never do, liberating him, cleansing him, but before he can get his pants back on two more women materialize in the bedroom, poking through the drawers with their ubiquitous stickers. "Get out!" he roars, "out!" and he makes a rush at them, but it's as if he doesn't exist, as if he's already become an irrelevance in the face of the terrible weight of his possessions. Unconcerned, they silently hold their ground, heads bowed, hands flicking all the while over his handkerchiefs, underwear, socks, over Marsha's things, her jewelry, brassieres, her ashtray and

lacquered-box collections and the glass case that houses her Thimbles of the World set.

"All right," Julian says, "all right. We'll just see about this, we'll just see," and he dresses right there in front of them, boldly, angrily, hands trembling on button and zipper, before slamming out into the hallway in search of Susan Certaine.

The only problem is, he can't find her. The house, almost impossible to navigate in the best of times, is like the hold of a sinking ship. All is chaos. A dark mutter of voices rises up to engulf him, shouts, curses, dust hanging in the air, the floorboards crying out, and things, objects of all shapes and sizes, sailing past him in bizarre array. Susan Certaine is not in the kitchen, not on the lawn, not in the garage or the pool area or the guest wing. Finally, in frustration, he stops a worker with a Chinese vase slung over one shoulder and asks if he's seen her. The man has a hard face, smoldering eyes, a mustache so thick it eliminates his mouth. "And who might you be?" he growls.

"The owner." Julian feels lightheaded. He could swear he's never seen the vase before.

"Owner of what?"

"What do you mean, owner of what? All this"—gesturing at the chaotic tumble of carpets, lamps, furniture and bric-a-brac—"the house. The, the—"

"You want *Ms. Certaine*," the man says, cutting him off, "I'd advise you best look upstairs, in the den," and then he's gone, shouldering his load out the door.

The den. But that's Julian's sanctuary, the only room in the house where you can draw a breath, find a book on the shelves, a chair to sit in—his desk is there, his telescopes, his charts. There's no need for any organizing in his den. What is she thinking? He takes the stairs two at a time, dodging Certaine workers laden with artifacts, and bursts through the door to find Susan Certaine seated at his desk and the room already half-stripped.

"But, but what are you doing?" he cries, snatching at his Velbon tripod as one of the big men in black fends him off with an unconscious elbow. "This room doesn't need anything, this room is off-limits, this is mine—"

"*Mine*," Susan Certaine mimics, leaping suddenly to her feet. "Did you hear that, Fernando? Mike?" The two men pause, grinning wickedly, and the wizened Asian woman, at work now in here, gives a short sharp laugh of derision. Susan Certaine crosses the room in two strides, thrusting her jaw at Julian, forcing him back a step. "Listen to yourself—'mine, mine, mine.' Don't you see what you're saying? Marsha's only half the problem, as in any codependent relationship. What did you think, that you could solve all your problems by depriving her of *her* things, making *her* suffer, while all your precious little star charts and musty books and whatnot remain untouched? Is that it?"

He can feel the eyes of the big men on him. Across the room, at the bookcase, the Asian woman applies stickers to his first edition of Percival Lowell's *Mars and Its Canals*, the astrolabe that once belonged to Captain Joshua

Slocum, the Starview scope his mother gave him when he turned twelve. "No, but, but—"

"Would that be fair, Mr. Laxner? Would that be equitable? Would it?" She doesn't wait for an answer, turning instead to pose the question to her henchmen. "You think it's fair, Mike? Fernando?"

"No gain without pain," Mike says.

"Amen," Fernando chimes in.

"Listen," Julian blurts, and he's upset now, as upset as he's ever been, "I don't care what you say, I'm the boss here and I say the stuff stays, just as it is. You—now put down that tripod."

No one moves. Mike looks to Fernando, Fernando looks to Susan Certaine. After a moment, she lays a hand on Julian's arm. "You're not the boss here, Julian," she says, the voice sunk low in her throat, "not anymore. If you have any doubts, just read the contract." She attempts a smile, though smiles are clearly not her forte. "The question is, do you want to get organized or not? You're paying me a thousand dollars a day, which breaks down to roughly two dollars a minute. You want to stand here and shoot the breeze at two dollars a minute, or do you want action?"

Julian hangs his head. She's right, he knows it. "I'm sorry," he says finally. "It's just that I can't . . . I mean I want to do something, anything—"

"You want to do something? You really want to help?"

Mike and Fernando are gone, already heading down the stairs with their burdens, and the Asian woman, her hands in constant motion, has turned to his science-fiction collection. He shrugs. "Yes, sure. What can I do?"

She glances at her watch, squares her shoulders, fixes him with her dark unreadable gaze. "You can take me to breakfast."

Susan Certaine orders wheat toast, dry, and coffee, black. Though he's starving, though he feels cored out from the back of his throat to the last constricted loop of his intestines, he follows suit. He's always liked a big breakfast, eggs over easy, three strips of bacon, toast, waffles, coffee, orange juice, yogurt with fruit, and never more so than when he's under stress or feels something coming on, but with Susan Certaine sitting stiffly across from him, her lips pursed in distaste, disapproval, ascetic renunciation of all and everything he stands for, he just doesn't have the heart to order. Besides which, he's on unfamiliar ground here. The corner coffee shop, where he and Marsha have breakfasted nearly every day for the past three years, wasn't good enough for her. She had to drive halfway across the Valley to a place *she* knew, though for the life of him he can't see a whole lot of difference between the two places—same menu, same coffee, even the waitresses look the same. But they're not. And the fact of it throws him off balance.

"You know, I've been thinking, Mr. Laxner," Susan Certaine says, speaking into the void left by the disappearance of the waitress, "you really should come over to us. For the rest of the week, I mean."

Come over? Julian watches her, wondering what in god's name she's talking about, his stomach sinking over the thought of his Heinleins and Asimovs in the hands of strangers, let alone his texts and first editions and all his equipment—if they so much as scratch a lens, he'll, he'll . . . but his thoughts stop right there. Susan Certaine, locked in the grip of her black rigidity, is giving him a look he hasn't seen before. The liminal smile, the coy arch of the eyebrows. She's a young woman, younger than Marsha, far younger, and the apprehension hits him with a jolt. Here he is, sharing the most intimate meal of the day with a woman he barely knows, a young woman. He feels a wave of surrender wash over him.

"How can I persuade you?"

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, fumbling with his cup, "but I don't think I'm following you. Persuade me of what?"

"The Co-Dependent Hostel. For the spouses. The spoilers. For men like you, Mr. Laxner, who give their wives material things instead of babies, instead of love."

"But I resent that. Marsha's physically incapable of bearing children—and I do love her, very much so."

"Whatever." She waves her hand in dismissal. "But don't get the impression that it's a men's club or anything—you'd be surprised how many women are the enablers in these relationships. You're going to need a place to stay until Sunday anyway."

"You mean you want me to, to move out? Of my own house?"

She lays a hand on his. "Don't you think it would be fairer to Marsha? She moved out, didn't she? And by the way, Dr. Hauskopf tells me she passed a very restful night. Very restful." A sigh. A glance out the window. "Well, what do you say?"

Julian pictures a big gray featureless building lost in a vacancy of smog, men in robes and pajamas staring dully at newspapers, the intercom crackling. "But my things—"

"Things are what we're disburdening you of, Mr. Laxner. Things are crushing you, stealing your space, polluting your soul. That's what you hired me for, remember?" She pushes her cup aside and leans forward, and the old look is back, truculent, disdainful. He finds himself gazing into the shimmering nullity of her eyes. "We'll take care of all that," she says, her voice pitched low again, subtle and entrancing, "right on down to your toothbrush, hemorrhoid cream and carpet slippers." As if by legerdemain, a contract has appeared between the creamer and the twin plates of dry unadulterated toast. "Just sign here, Mr. Laxner, right at the bottom."

Julian hesitates, patting down his pockets for his reading glasses. The origi-

nal contract, the one that spelled out the responsibilities of Certaine Enterprises with respect to his things—and his and Marsha's obligations to Certaine Enterprises—had run to 327 pages, a document he barely had time to skim before signing, and now this. Without his reading glasses he can barely make out the letterhead. "But how much is it, per day, I mean? Marsha's, uh, treatment was four hundred a day, correct? This wouldn't be anywhere in that ballpark, would it?"

"Think of it as a vacation, Mr. Laxner. You're going away on a little trip, that's all. And on Sunday, when you get home, you'll have your space back. Permanently." She looks into his eyes. "Can you put a price on that?"

The Susan Certaine Co-Dependent Hostel is located off a shady street in Sherman Oaks, on the grounds of a defunct private boys' school, and it costs about twice as much as a good hotel in midtown Manhattan. Julian had protested—it was Marsha, Marsha was the problem, she was the one who needed treatment, not him—but Susan Certaine, over two slices of dry wheat toast, had worn him down. He'd given her control over his life, and she was exercising it. That's what he'd paid for, that's what he'd wanted. He asked only to go home and pack a small suitcase, an overnight bag, anything, but she refused him even that—and refused him the use of his own car on top of it. "Withdrawal has got to be total," she says, easing up to the curb out front of the sprawling complex of earth-toned buildings even as a black-clad attendant hustles up to the car to pull open the door, "for *both* partners. I'm sure you'll be very happy here, Mr. Laxner."

"You're not coming in?" he says, a flutter of panic seizing him as he shoots a look from her to the doorman and back again.

The black Mercedes hums beneath them. A bird folds its wings and dips across the lawn. "Oh, no, no, not at all. You're on your own here, Mr. Laxner, I'm afraid—but in the best of hands, I assure you. No, my job is to go back to that black hole of a house and make it livable, to catalogue your things, organize. *Organize*, Mr. Laxner, that's my middle name."

Ten minutes later Julian finds himself sitting on the rock-hard upper bunk in the room he is to share with a lugubrious man named Fred, contemplating the appointments. The place is certainly Essene, but then, he supposes that's the idea. Aside from the bunk bed, the room contains two built-in chests of drawers, two mirrors, two desks and two identical posters revealing an eye-level view of the Bonneville Salt Flats. The communal bathroom/shower is down the checked linoleum hallway to the right. Fred, a big pouchy sack of a man who owns a BMW dealership in Encino, stares gloomily out the window and says only, "Kind of reminds you of college, doesn't it?"

In the evening, there's a meal in the cafeteria—instant mashed potatoes with gravy, some sort of overcooked unidentifiable meatlike substance, Jell-O—and Julian is surprised at the number of his fellow sufferers, slump-shouldered men

and women, some of them quite young, who shuffle in and out of the big room like souls in purgatory. After dinner, there's a private get-acquainted chat with Dr. Heiko Hauskopf, Dr. Doris's husband, and then an informational film about acquisitive disorders, followed by a showing of *The Snake Pit* in the auditorium. Fred, as it turns out, is a belcher, tooth grinder and nocturnal mutterer of the first degree, and Julian spends the night awake, staring into the dark corner above him and imagining tiny solar systems there, hanging in the abyss, other worlds radiant with being.

Next morning, after a breakfast of desiccated eggs and corrosive coffee, he goes AWOL. Strides out the door without a glance, calls a taxi from the phone booth on the corner and checks into the nearest motel. From there he attempts to call Marsha, though both Susan Certaine and Dr. Doris had felt it would be better not to "establish contact" during therapy. He can't get through. She's unavailable, indisposed, undergoing counseling, having her nails done, and who is this calling, please?

For two days Julian holes up in his motel room like an escaped convict, feeling dangerous, feeling like a lowlife, a malingerer, a bum, letting the stubble sprout on his face, reveling in the funk of his unwashed clothes. He could walk up the street and buy himself a change of underwear and socks at least—he's still got his credit cards, after all—but something in him resists. Lying there in the sedative glow of the TV, surrounded by the detritus of the local fast-food outlets, belching softly to himself and pulling meditatively at the pint of bourbon balanced on his chest, he begins to see the point of the exercise. He misses Marsha desperately, misses his home, his bed, his things. But this is the Certaine way—to know deprivation, to know the hollowness of the manufactured image and the slow death of the unquenchable Tube, to purify oneself through renunciation. These are his thirty days and thirty nights, this is his trial, his penance. He lies there, prostrate, and when the hour of his class at the community college rolls round he gives no account of himself, not even a phone call.

On the third night, the telephone rings. Absorbed in a dramedy about a group of young musician/actor/models struggling to make ends meet in a rented beach house in Malibu, and well into his second pint of bourbon, he stupidly answers it. "Mr. Laxner?" Susan Certaine's hard flat voice drives at him through the wires.

"But, how—?" he gasps, before she cuts him off.

"Don't ask questions, just listen. You understand, of course, that as per the terms of your agreement, you owe Certaine Enterprises for six days' room and board at the Co-Dependent Hostel whether you make use of the facilities or not—"

He understands.

"Good," she snaps. "Fine. Now that that little matter has been resolved, let me tell you that your wife is responding beautifully to treatment and that

she, unlike you, Mr. Laxner, is making the most of her stay in a nonacquisitive environment—and by the way, I should caution you against trying to contact her again; it could be terribly detrimental, traumatic, a real setback—”

Whipped, humbled, pried out of his cranny with a sure sharp stick, Julian can only murmur an apology.

There’s a pause on the other end of the line—Julian can hear the hiss of gath-ering breath, the harsh whistle of the air rushing past Susan Certaine’s fleshless lips, down her ascetic throat and into the repository of her disciplined lungs. “The good news,” she says finally, drawing it out, “is that you’re clean. Clean, Mr. Laxner. As pure as a babe sprung from the womb.”

Julian is having difficulty putting it all together. His own breathing is quick and shallow. He rubs at his stubble, sits up and sets the pint of bourbon aside. “You mean—?”

“I mean twelve o’clock noon, Mr. Laxner, Sunday the twenty-seventh. Your place. You be there.”

On Sunday morning, Julian is up at six. Eschewing the religious programming in favor of the newspaper, he pores methodically over each of the twenty-two sections—including the obituaries, the personals and the recondite details of the weather in Rio, Yakutsk and Rangoon—and manages to kill an hour and a half. His things have been washed—twice now, in the bathroom sink, with a bar of Ivory soap standing in for detergent—and before he slips into them he shaves with a disposable razor that gouges his face in half a dozen places and makes him yearn for the reliable purr and gentle embrace of his Braun Flex Control. He breakfasts on a stale cruller and coffee that tastes of bile while flicking through the channels. Then he shaves a second time and combs his hair. It is 9:05. The room stinks of stir-fry, pepperoni, garlic, the sad reek of his take-out life. He can wait no longer.

Unfortunately, the cab is forty-five minutes late, and it’s nearly ten-thirty by the time they reach the freeway. On top of that, there’s a delay—roadwork, they always wait till Sunday for roadwork—and the cab sits inert in an endless field of gleaming metal until finally the cabbie jerks savagely at the wheel and bolts forward, muttering to himself as he rockets along the shoulder and down the nearest off-ramp. Julian hangs on, feeling curiously detached as they weave in and out of traffic and the streets become increasingly familiar. And then the cab swings into his block and he’s there. Home. His heart begins to pound in his chest.

He doesn’t know what he’s been expecting—banners, brass bands, Marsha embracing him joyously on the front steps of an immaculate house—but as he climbs out of the cab to survey his domain, he can’t help feeling a tug of disappointment: the place looks pretty much the same, gray flanks, white trim, a thin sorry plume of bougainvillea clutching at the trellis over the door. But then it hits

him: the lawn ornaments are gone. The tiki torches, the plaster pickaninnies and flag holders and all the rest of the outdoor claptrap have vanished as if into the maw of some brooding tropical storm, and for that he’s thankful. Deeply thankful. He stands there a moment, amazed at the expanse of the lawn, plain simple grass, each blade a revelation—he never dreamed he had this much grass. The place looks the way it did when they bought it, wondering naively if it would be too big for just the two of them.

He saunters up the walk like a prospective buyer, admiring the house, truly admiring it, for the first time in years. How crisp it looks, how spare and unclut-tered! She’s a genius, he’s thinking, she really is, as he mounts the front steps fin-gering his keys and humming, actually humming. But then, standing there in the quickening sun, he glances through the window and sees that the porch is empty—swept clean, not a thing left behind—and the tune goes sour in his throat. That’s a surprise. A real surprise. He would have thought she’d leave something—the wicker set, the planters, a lamp or two—but even the curtains are gone. In fact, he realizes with a shock, none of the windows seem to have curtains—or blinds, either. What is she thinking? Is she crazy?

Cursing under his breath, he jabs the key in the lock and twists, but nothing happens. He jerks it back out, angry now, impatient, and examines the flat shin-ing indented surface: no, it’s the right key, the same key he’s been using for six-teen years. Once again. Nothing. It won’t even turn. The truth, ugly, frightening, has begun to dawn on him, even as he swings round on his heels and finds him-self staring into the black unblinking gaze of Susan Certaine.

“You, you changed the locks,” he accuses, and his hands are trembling.

Susan Certaine merely stands there, the briefcase at her feet, two mammoth softbound books clutched under her arms, books the size of unabridged dictio-naries. She’s in black, as usual, a no-nonsense business suit growing out of sensi-ble heels, her cheeks brushed ever so faintly with blusher. “A little early, aren’t we?” she says.

“You changed the locks.”

She waits a beat, unhurried, in control. “What did you expect? We really can’t have people interfering with our cataloguing, can we? You’d be surprised how desperate some people get, Mr. Laxner. And when you ran out on your therapy . . . well, we just couldn’t take the chance.” A thin pinched smile. “Not to worry: I’ve got your new keys right here—two sets, one for you and one for Marsha.”

Her heels click on the pavement, three businesslike strides, and she’s stand-ing right beside him on the steps, crowding him. “Here, will you take these, please?” she says, dumping the books in his arms and digging into her briefcase for the keys.

The books are like dumbbells, scrap iron, so heavy he can feel the pull in his shoulders. “God, they’re heavy,” Julian mutters. “What are they?”

She fits the key in the lock and pauses, her face inches from his. “Your life,

Mr. Laxner. The biography of your things. Did you know that you owned five hundred and fifty-two wire hangers, sixty-seven wooden ones and one hundred and sixty-nine plastic? Over two hundred flowerpots? Six hundred doilies? Potholders, Mr. Laxner. You logged in over one hundred twenty—can you imagine that? Can you imagine anyone needing a hundred and twenty potholders? Excess, Mr. Laxner,” and he watches her lip curl. “Filthy excess.”

The key takes, the tumblers turn, the door swings open. “Here you are, Mr. Laxner, *organization*,” she cries, throwing her arms out. “Welcome to your new life.”

Staggering under the burden of his catalogues, Julian moves across the barren porch and into the house, and here he has a second shock: the place is empty. Denuded. There’s nothing left, not even a chair to sit in. Bewildered, he turns to her, but she’s already moving past him, whirling round the room, her arms spread wide. He’s begun to sweat. The scent of Sen-Sen hangs heavy in the air. “But, but there’s nothing here,” he stammers, bending down to set the catalogues on the stripped floorboards. “I thought . . . well, I thought you’d pare it down, organize things so we could live here more comfortably, adjust, I mean—”

“Halfway measures, Mr. Laxner?” she says, skating up to him on the newly waxed floors. “Are halfway measures going to save a man—and woman—who own three hundred and nine bookends, forty-seven rocking chairs, over two thousand plates, cups and saucers? This is *tabula rasa*, Mr. Laxner, square one. Did you know you owned a hundred and thirty-seven dead penlight batteries? Do you really need a hundred and thirty-seven dead penlight batteries, Mr. Laxner? Do you?”

“No, but”—backing off now, distraught, his den, his den—“but we need the basics, at least. Furniture. A TV. My, my textbooks. My scopes.”

The light through the unshaded windows is harsh, unforgiving. Every corner is left naked to scrutiny, every board, every nail. “All taken care of, Mr. Laxner, no problem.” Susan Certaine stands there in the glare of the window, hands on her hips. “Each couple is allowed to reclaim one item per day from the warehouse—anything you like—for a period of sixty days. Depending on how you exercise your options, that could be as many as sixty items. Most couples request a bed first, and to accommodate them, we consider a bed one item—mattress, box spring, headboard and all.”

Julian is stunned. “Sixty items? You’re joking.”

“I never joke, Mr. Laxner. Never.”

“And what about the rest—the furniture, the stereo, our clothes?”

“Read your contract, Mr. Laxner.”

He can feel himself slipping. “I don’t want to read the contract, damn it. I asked you a question.”

“Page two hundred and seventy-eight, paragraph two. I quote: ‘After expiration of the sixty-day grace period, all items to be sold at auction, the proceeds going to Certaine Enterprises, Inc., for charitable distribution, charities to be

chosen at the sole discretion of the above-named corporation.’” Her eyes are on him, severe, hateful, bright with triumph. This is what it’s all about, this—cutting people down to size, squashing them. “You’d be surprised how many couples never recall a thing, not a single item.”

“No,” Julian says, stalking across the room, “no, I won’t stand for it. I won’t. I’ll sue.”

She shrugs. “I won’t even bother to remind you to listen to yourself. You’re like the brat on the playground—you don’t like the way the game goes, you take your bat and ball and go home, right? Go ahead, sue. You’ll find it won’t be so easy. You signed the contract, Mr. Laxner. Both of you.”

There’s a movement in the open doorway. Shadow and light. Marsha. Marsha and Dr. Hauskopf, frozen there on the doorstep, watching. “Julian,” Marsha cries, and then she’s in his arms, clinging to him as if he were the last thing in the world, the only thing left her.

Dr. Doris and Susan Certaine exchange a look. “Be happy,” Susan Certaine says after a moment. “Think of that couple in Ethiopia.” And then they’re gone.

Julian doesn’t know how long he stands there, in the middle of that barren room in the silence of that big empty house, holding Marsha, holding his wife, but when he shuts his eyes he sees only the sterile deeps of space, the remotest regions beyond even the reach of light. And he knows this: it is cold out there, inhospitable, alien. There’s nothing there, nothing contained in nothing. Nothing at all.

(1992)