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THE WAITERS

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THE WAITERS

by William Fisher

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
Yet if I am for myself only, what am I?
And if not now, when?

From THE TALMUD

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Note of thanks:

I would like to thank Robert Smith
and Eric Swenson for the aid and encouragement
given me in the writing of this novel.

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For my wife

RUTH

With love as ever

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1

HE WAS about to enter the colonial white entrance to the Fishbowl on City Island Road when he slowed down, mumbling to himself this sure won't get me off to a good start. So he rounded the corner of Rochelle Street and entered the restaurant through the delivery court.

It was a steaming hot Decoration Day—his first day to report for work—and the heat in the delivery court was almost tangible, hanging in the air like spots dancing before one's eyes. A long, narrow alley divided the restaurant into two wings. On the left, near the neck of this alley, a door led into the butcher shop where, besides the quartering of steaks and chops, fish and lobsters were cleaned. The alley was littered—garbage cans filled with fish innards, cases of empty beer bottles, baskets of crabs crawling in seaweed.

As he paused momentarily in the gateway of the delivery court, his eyes darted about, and he twisted his mouth wryly. His nostrils flared as the stench of decay shut out the salt air of the island. The same ol' crap everywhere you work, he said to himself. He spit contemptuously on the sidewalk. Any ol' thing is suppose to be good enough for us.

Then, picking a path carefully through the stinking gutter and making certain not to rub against the refuse cans, Asher Brown made his way into the butcher shop and down a flight of stairs into the waiters' quarters, his nose screwed up as if he were breathing chloroform.

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A rambling colonial cottage, the Fishbowl catered to some ten or twelve thousand of the upper middle class and assorted hangers-on—chiefly over weekends and on holidays, although it had a comfortable following during the week. Serving a fine bill of fare at a moderate charge, the eatery had a good reputation. It was City Island's finest restaurant.

The help's food was poor and the boss was known to be mean, but the tips were not bad. The place, however, was always in need of waiters. They constantly came and just as constantly left. Few survived long enough to acquire the nickname "old ace." It was, indeed, a down-and-out waiter's last resort—a job that could be got over the telephone. Asher, too, had received his job in this manner when, the day before, he had been told to report for work Decoration Day on the morning shift. Nothing could have been more misleading than the morning shift, which opened the doors of the restaurant at eleven and quit at eleven, only two hours before the place closed for the night. Thus a new waiter was always as welcome as a "Mr. Good," the waiters' name for a free spender with a party of twelve.

Asher Brown hesitated on the bottom step of the stairwell leading into the dressing-room and mopped his face and neck with a handkerchief.

The headwaiter, known only as Chief, looked up from the desk in his tiny, storage-bin-like office to the left of the waiters' room and seemingly read the newcomer's mind.

"Just as I say! Just as I say! You'll make a fistful of dollars today. We'll do a land-office business this day."

"It sure is hot," Asher retorted.

"Pay it no mind," Chief said as he winked at another waiter. "You won't know it's hot when you get to making money. Here's your locker." He pointed to the one at the end of a row of six which flanked a rickety old settee.

Asher grabbed a camp chair and plopped down on it, leaning backward until the back of the chair rested on the grimy, slate-gray, rough stone wall near the entrance to the headwaiter's office. He watched the other waiters changing their clothes.

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Not only did the inmates of the waiters' dressing-room in the Fishbowl reflect the passing mood of the Boss, but so did that most primitive of all winged insects, the cockroach, which had as much freedom to roam the walls of these basement quarters as cattle on a range.

Like everything about this seafood eatery, the Fishbowl's stable of roaches was the finest to be found anywhere. A day-old roach was easily the size of a horsefly and, without exaggeration, in a week he had become an adult—a big, strapping, healthy fellow the size of a half dollar.

The thousands who preferred to eat their chowder at the famous Fishbowl on City Island might be inclined to doubt that the King of the Island kept such a blue-ribbon kennel of roaches. Why, they would say, the dining room was always so spotless, with its white table linen.

Well trained, like everyone and everything bought by the Kingfish's money, the cockroaches never ventured across the threshold of the stairwell that led from the basement. Down here, however, they had complete freedom, with the sanction of the Kingfish, who always said a waiter represented the lowest form of restaurant life. "I can always get another waiter," was the way he put it, turning up his nose as if he had caught a whiff of a full garbage can soured by a week's standing.

Yes, these cockroaches were a well-trained lot. On a bright, sunshiny day—that Decoration Day—when the crowds had gone elsewhere, when the cash register played the pianissimo, rather than the crescendo, of the symphony of mounting profit, the Kingfish cracked his "whip" at a waiter over any minute infraction of any one of his million rules. The roaches scurried wildly in the tense air of the waiters' quarters. Their huge, brown, flat bodies darted in fast, short spurts over the dirty walls. Long, paired, lateral feelers jutting out of their heads fended furiously and blindly before them as though they instinctively knew a hundred waiters, goaded by the Boss's hell-raising, waited to flay them to death with folded newspapers.

In this atmosphere, charged with the zip of the Kingfish's cracking whip, the cockroaches made for a thousand hideouts—cracks and

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crevices which they knew well in this large, low-ceilinged room. Some darted under the rusty, red lockers which lined the walls in spaces just large enough to hold a waiter's shoes. Some climbed over the tops of the upper tier of lockers where, here and there, a waiter's hat had been shoved. Others made for timeworn cracks in the cement floor. They scampered over suits or work shirts left on hangers to dry.

A crack of the whip meant, simply, that ten, twenty or thirty-five waiters would not receive the fifteen-dollar "bonus" which the Boss so graciously added to their fifteen-dollar weekly salary when he was in high spirits. And, in his slave-house, the Kingfish never felt good when the jingle of the cash register was on a low beat. No matter if the day before the Fishbowl had outdone a twenty-year record.

"The dining-room sure is empty and the boss sure has her rag on," said a waiter seated on a camp chair with his work clothes draped over the open door of his locker.

Another waiter, with his foot propped on the rim of a rusty garbage can sagging against a post near the door, answered: "You better walk the chalk line or you'll come up on no bonus this week."

A waiter seated on the battered, sweat-stained wicker settee, looked up as he tied his shoes and said: "You ain't no lying man."

Then one waiter took to swatting roaches. Then another. And yet another. Soon every waiter in the room was at work killing the Kingfish's blue-ribbon roaches. And with each wallop cries of "You dirty son-of-a-bitch!" grew louder. For, on the shiny, brown backs of these fat roaches, each waiter saw the smile of the Kingfish, a smile like that of a young female turning into womanhood—stolen, secretive, elusive—learning to crack a whip to have her way.

Asher had not joined in the roach killing, but he looked upon the festival meditatively. He thought of other places he had worked—in Greenwich Village, at Saratoga Springs, in Atlantic City—under the same filthy conditions. Wherever you find us, we're wallowing in dirt, he told himself.

Partly in idleness, partly in search of a notch to hook his jacket to, he had been running the index finger of his right hand along the

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top of his locker while he watched the waiters in their daily Fishbowl ritual. When he removed his finger and almost unconsciously inspected it, he found it was covered with a thick film of soft coal dust.

Coal dust and roaches. What connection could there be, if any, between these seemingly two unrelated substances? Coal that provided man with heat and roaches that provided man with an outlet for his murderous instinct. Yet roaches had swarmed over everything at the same time that the earth had yielded coal. Long, long before man. It reminded Asher of one of the last things the minister said before committing a body to the earth: "From ashes to ashes and dust to dust." No! it should have been: "From dirt, through dirt, into dirt." That's the way it's with us, he said to himself. And the urge to get ahead overwhelmed him again.

Asher already had one foot across the doorless entrance to the headwaiter's room when he put his hand on the door frame to check himself. The headwaiter was in whispered conversation with a middle-aged, roly-poly waiter, who was bent almost double over Chief's desk. Both were fingering a batch of small slips of paper. Chief waited until Asher stopped himself, then he snarled:

"You told me you're a waiter? Don't you know you never walk into a headwaiter's office when he's talking business?"

"Yessir." Asher backed away.

That was Chief at his best. And his best was infinitely better than all the self-importance a second lieutenant would assume before a platoon of new arrivals at an army induction center.

Once a new waiter was dressed for the dining-room, Chief dispensed with all jokes—from that moment on he was strictly business. That is, until the newcomer had learned the ropes. How soon he learned his way around the Fishbowl depended on how soon he learned that Chief enjoyed fine cigars, that a drink of whisky rated him even higher in Chief's estimation as a "good man," that a dollar bill would make Chief say of any novice: "Why, he's one of my best waiters."

A waiter who had watched the studied act that the headwaiter

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had put on, said to Asher in the unctuous manner he usually reserved for customers:

"Yessir, what can I do for you?"

Asher started as he noticed a faint trace of a grin flicker across the waiter's face. But he contained himself. "Nothing, pal."

"Don't let it get you down, Jackson," said the waiter.

"The name's Asher, Asher Brown."

"Well, well, well! Bet you won't tell the guests that when they call you George or Sam," the waiter said. "Jackson is just a expression with me. Was gonna tip you off to Chief's jive, big boy."

Just then the roly-poly waiter shoved his head outside the headwaiter's cubbyhole and beckoned Asher in. The headwaiter sat, impressive in an upright position, at an over-sized mahogany desk. The little slips of paper Asher had seen before were gone. The edges of the desk were scalloped with countless burns from cigarette butts. The fat waiter stationed himself just inside the room, his broad back facing the waiters' room, screening the headwaiter from prying eyes. Asher stood between the fat waiter and the headwaiter's desk.

Chief let the seconds tick into minutes while he looked Asher up and down. "Look here, young man, I ain't running no waiter's school here." Then, as if Asher were not there, he said to the fat waiter, "Cap'n Logan, think he'll do?"

"I don't know, Chief," the captain replied. "Looks sort of weaklike to me."

Chief seemed to ponder that a few minutes. Then he turned his attention to Asher again. "What's your game, drinking or the girlies?"

"Sure, Chief, I'm regular. What the hell!"

Believing he'd made a good impression, Asher began to relax a little. But the headwaiter soon straightened him up again as he drummed the seconds away, beating his fingers on the arm of his swivel chair.

"You know a bright young man like you should take out some insurance," Chief said. Then he shot right over Asher's shoulder to his captain, "Shouldn't he, Cap'n?"

"That sure would be a smart thing," said the captain.

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"What—what's insurance?"

"Come, now," Chief exclaimed, "how do you expect to make a dollar in there in the dining-room? Don't be so slow, 'cause a dollar in there will get you five hundred here."

"The numbers?" Asher inquired. "Sure, I play 'em. I'm as regular as the next guy."

"Atta boy. He's hipped," the captain put in. "You can just see me every morning. Same time, same place."

The headwaiter lit a fresh cigarette from a half-finished one and smiled up at Asher as the smoke curled out of the corners of his mouth.

"Just as I say, let everybody have a piece of the pie. You do right by old Chief and old Chief will look out for you. Tell you what! I'm gonna put you on a good station. Yessir, you go tell Jordon I said for you to work next to him. Chief's orders."

It was an unusually large kitchen that Asher entered. He had made his way down a short ramp connecting the butcher shop with the kitchen. The rough, exposed beams, stretching across the room, were encrusted with a thick layer of greasy, brown dust. At the side, where the beams joined the top of the frame walls, they were heavy with cobwebs.

Along the right wall of the kitchen there were a number of fry stations and opposite them on the other side of a broad corridor was the pantry with its wide, high counters running nearly the entire length of the kitchen. As Asher walked along the cement-paved corridor the chicken-broiler yelled to the lobster-broiler, "New blood." The latter replied by asking the chicken cook if he thought the newcomer knew "what made the wheels of a wagon go 'round."

"Do you, buddy?" the chicken cook asked Asher.

"The horse, of course."

"Horse your Aunt Minnie," needled the lobster-broiler. "Grease, my boy. Same kind those people in the dinin'-room will give you for rushin' 'em out."

Asher smiled knowingly at the cook and asked him to point out Jordon.

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"There he is," the cook said. "That great big black boy up there drinking that white water." He pointed toward the water-cooler at the far end of the kitchen. "Tell him I called him black boy and your mother's a liar."

Asher, eying Jordon as he approached the water-cooler, said to himself, He's a *ree*al nervous waiter, a ol'-timer. Jordon's round head with its closely cropped gray hair reminded Asher of a bowling ball; yet the man's chin, which vanished in rolls of rubbery fat, told Asher instantly that he "had been carryin' the pan a many a year." Jordon, in a sense, was one of the thirty-five or forty old aces at the Fishbowl. In a sense, because when the cold air from Long Island Sound began to stir toward the end of each October, Jordon would say, "Jesus, this ain't no fit place for me." Then he would disappear, only to return with the May flowers. For the last twenty years he had been working at the Fishbowl when "the weather's warm enough to beat on my backsides."

A veteran of the First World War, Jordon put to good use the rumor that he had been gassed. He was a hardened waiter who stood for no foolishness from the guests or the headwaiter, the boss or the cooks. His constant explanation after flying off the handle was, "It's my complaint." Even then, Jordon would work more or less when he felt like it. Three or maybe four days a week, but never the full six days. That would have interfered with his drinking. Of late, his record had gone from bad to worse. He had taken to working only two days a week. Neither the headwaiter, the boss, nor anybody in the place could get him to work any more, and they were too short of waiters to fire him. So they had put him to work in a section of the restaurant the boys called the "farm." It was so called because most of the tables in this section were reserved for couples and, at the boss's orders, these tables were served by the waiters who had grown old and feeble making money for him. Not that Jordon was in that class. No, he still had a small but tidy fortune left in his body to contribute to the boss. But he wouldn't work, and the boss had a million and one ways to get even with him.

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"What the hell!" Jordon said when Asher introduced himself. "Chief put you in the farm."

"That's all right by me," Asher replied. "Where do you get sometin' to eat?"

"Listen, man, they pay you to work in this place, not to eat. But if they got anythin', Hughie's got it." He pointed to the steam-table. "The boss is too hot, I'm cuttin' outa here."

Asher looked over at the steam-table in back of the pantry. In front of him was a row of shiny, silvery coffee urns. He could see the dark brown liquid coursing through the slender glass tubes that extended up both sides of the huge pots. The rich aroma of the steam wafting from the urns made the juices bubble in his mouth. He walked over to Hughie.

"I ain't got nothin' left," Hughie growled before Asher could say anything. Asher just stood his ground. Finally Hughie threw a plate of food on the high counter that separated him from Asher.

Asher walked back to the coffee urns, reached beneath and got a cup and saucer from a shelf under the row of urns and drew himself a cup of coffee. He made a seat and table for himself out of several orange crates beside the water-cooler and looked at the stuff on his plate.

There was a lump of cold, stewed fish-ends and a dab of grayish-looking mashed potatoes which he speared into gobbets with his fork. He managed to get down only one or two swallows. A waiter passed the pantry counter and swooped up a freshly prepared plate of cold shrimp, putting them into his mouth, one shrimp at a time. The stale fish rose in Asher's throat. He swallowed hard. Then he stuck to coffee and stale bread. He had two extra cups of coffee while he got his first glimpse of the Kingfish.

The Kingfish stood in front of the service bar near the checker's desk, waving his arms like a man taking his morning exercises. He was waving so violently, in fact, that the checker had had to close the swinging door to the left of him and route the waiters through the door on his right.

"Just because I stand here in the kitchen," the Kingfish purred

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at the bartender, "don't think I'm nobody." His voice rising to a shout, he informed the red-faced unfortunate, "I'll have you to understand I'm Mr. Maddox."

The bartender growled a threat to quit.

"I dare you," whispered the Kingfish. "Why, you'll never work in the Bronx again. That's how big I am."

That was about the best exhibition of himself the Kingfish could give a newcomer.

He preferred to be called simply Boss. Although, to those of his employees that that little four-letter word all but choked, he would smile slyly and demurely when they addressed him as Kingfish.

Patrons who had eaten their chowder at the Fishbowl for twenty years had never in all those years seen Mr. Maddox perambulating furtively about the joint as he did when its doors were closed for the night. For when the dining-room was open, the Kingfish was in his kitchen like a queen in her boudoir.

In his kitchen the Kingfish was always present, always an irritant. Whether silent or unendingly talkative, he was there. Sometimes he could be seen switching along the kitchen's broad corridors with his hands neatly folded behind him. More often he was lolling near the checker's desk just inside the swinging doors through which the waiters either entered the dining-room or exited from it with trays laden with fish or fishtails. An ordinary-looking man, of ordinary build and ordinary height, he was never seen without a hat on his head. Beneath its narrow brim, his small, black eyes pierced everyone and everything before they momentarily and daintily closed.

Although the kitchen itself was four times the size of the average restaurant, at times it was none too large. What with an army of clam-openers, bartenders, dishwashers, fry cooks, fish-fryers, vegetable cooks, fish-broilers, chowder-dispensers, pantrymen, pie men, lobster-broilers, chicken-broilers, steak cooks, potato-fryers and sundry others, plus several hundred waiters—tray-carrying stevedores—it was like an army dispersing on a parade ground, each company going its own way.

When Asher went into the dining-room he found Jordon in ani-

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mated conversation with a waiter who was folding napkins at a service buffet near the swinging door he had entered. The waiter was a large-boned, jolly fellow with a sallow complexion. Named Dave, he was more familiarly known to the waiters as Pardner because he called everybody Pardner. As he talked, he continually cocked his head to one side.

"I sure need one, pardner," Asher heard Dave say.

"It ain't you, man," Jordon said, "it's me." He turned to Asher. "How's about gettin' us a drink?"

Asher looked at Jordon, then at Dave. "I jus' got here."

"That's why the boss won't know what it's all about, pardner," explained Dave.

"All right, I'll chance it," Asher said. "I can stand one myself after that slop they're dishin' out in the kitchen."

"Atta boy, pardner," Dave said. "Suppose we make 'em whisky sours like the white folks drink, then they won't know. Be sure to git that frog-eyed bartender. Tell him no garbage. He'll know they're for the boys. Fix us up fine."

Jordon's eyes danced in anticipation of the drink as he reached for the large checkbook sticking out of Asher's pocket, but Asher pulled himself beyond his reach.

"We've both cut checks already," Jordon explained. "I'll show you how to palm it off on some snake."

Asher handed Jordon the checkbook reluctantly. "Here, man, they'll never read that writin' when it gits cold," Jordon said.

Dave pointed to the swinging door to the right of the one through which Asher had entered the dining-room. "Shoot out that one, pardner," he said, "and Mr. Jerry—he's the checker—he'll think they're for some fish-eaters." Then he waved in the opposite direction. "We'll be up there behind the piano."

Asher took a quick look about the place as he moved toward the kitchen. It certainly is one large joint, he said to himself. No wonder they called it the track. He could see that there were really three dining-rooms connected by frame portals. From one end of the place to the other a shoulder-high copper screen ran down the center aisle,

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decorated here and there with large, potted ferns. Long banquet tables, which could be pulled apart for separate parties, stood at right angles to the partition. The log-cabin walls of the place were painted white; its beamed ceilings a flaming red.

As he came out of the kitchen with the drinks on a small tray, Asher looked first to the right, then to the left. Then he shot up the narrow aisle on the right-hand side of the screen which would shield him had he been followed.

A waiter was talking across the screen to another waiter near where the frame portal led into the back room.

"Looka here! Jack, he just threw his hat in the door a few minutes ago."

Asher looked back over his shoulder as he passed through the tiny arcade, and almost walked into the massive concert grand that stood in the center of the back room.

"No you don't, man," Jordon said as he reached across the rounded end of the piano and took one of the whisky sours off Asher's tray. Dave took one of the two remaining glasses and he and Jordon tossed off their drinks. Asher looked about for a service stand on which to set the tray.

"Well, this is it," Jordon said, waving his hand about. "The big house. Go on, knock your drink off, man. I'll git you some snake with a pocketful o' money to pay for 'em. A snake ain't gonna give you anythin' nohow."

"The big house!" Asher chuckled. "The boss was sure blowin' his top in the kitchen a few minutes ago. That was him, wasn't it—the girlish-looking thing with the brown hat pulled down to his eyes?"

"That was him all right," Dave chimed in. "Mr. Maddox—the one an' only Kingfish. But don't get no notion in your head that his top is gone."

Jordon said: "It's a wonder his wig don't snap, though. The man's got too much on his mind—running this great big place. Trouble is ain't no one man can do it all. But he acts like the joint would fold up if he wasn't here to see to everything."

"Ain't there no manager here?" Asher said, as he fingered his drink.

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"Sure!" Jordon replied. "Mr. Dunkel's the manager. But that don't mean a thing. You oughta see that Dutchman when the boss gets on the warpath. Man, the King chases him around like he was a messenger boy or somethin'."

Asher took a sip of his drink.

Dave turned to Jordon. "But you can't get around it, pardner—the Kingfish is a smart man. Made a million dollars peddlin' fish. Built it up from nothin'. Remember when it was jus' a beat-up clam bar 'cross the road. Now it's the biggest seafood house in the world."

"You brings nothin' in this world an' you takes nothin' with you," Jordon said, sardonically. "An' if he don't watch out he's gonna drop dead right in the kitchen. Then what?"

"His brothers and sisters will keep on livin' offa the gravy," Dave said, "jus' like they're doin' now, pardner."

"A bunch of liquor heads an' freaks," Jordon snorted.

"All messed up, huh?" Asher said.

"That's all right, pardner," Dave replied. "Jus' you remember when the Kingfish rubs all up close to you pretendin' to inspect your tray and says"—he lowered his voice to a girlish whisper—" 'Now doesn't that look nice,' you better watch out—'cause first thing you know he'll be pattin' you."

"Jesus!" Asher said. "A fairy!"

Dave smiled broadly. "Now don't tell me you'd mind? 'Specially if nobody sees you, pardner—all the money he's got . . ."

"I don't go that way," Asher cut him off.

"Look out, here comes Chief," Jordon shouted.

Asher had not finished his drink. He tried to hide it on a service stand behind the post that the headwaiter was approaching.

"What goes on here?" Chief asked as he walked up to the three waiters. He turned around and saw the drink. "Nobody knows a thing about this?" Then he walked over to the service buffet, picked the drink up and smelled it.

"Can't fool me! Been in this business too long," he said. Then he drained the glass. "That'll teach you a lesson."

Jordon's peanut-eyes snapped but he did not answer. Dave and

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Asher stood motionless. Then the headwaiter walked off, laughing to himself.

"Wonder what dog told him?" Jordon said when he finally got himself together.

"Huh?" Asher said.

"There ain't nothin' happens in this place that hound don't know 'bout," Dave said. "Better luck next time, pardner. But you gotta be faster than that."

Asher did not like to work on a holiday. A veteran in the business of "carrying roast beef," he knew that the people who came day in and week out, month in and year out—the "steadies," as the waiters called them—did not go to the Fishbowl or to any of their other favorite eating-places on a holiday. They were the shopkeepers, the small manufacturers, the furriers, the small middlemen, who on a holiday joined the vast pleasure-seeking throngs at some other place, turning the Fishbowl over to a rip-rahing crowd—searchers after something different.

Look at 'em, Asher said to himself, as he leaned against one of the posts which supported the small arcade between the second and third dining-rooms. Poor white hungry trash. Nothin' but a whole lot of work an' no money. I'll sho' be glad when this day is over and done. A bunch of fish-eaters.

Smirking scornfully, he looked about the dining-room. For a holiday, especially a summertime day of rest, brought all manner of people to City Island, just like every other place he'd ever worked. And, of course, nobody thought of coming out to the Island without eating at the Fishbowl. Asher knew that even if the prices allowed them only a plate of clams or pie and coffee at the Fishbowl, and then dinner at any one of the several greasy forks that lined City Island Road, they would still be rated among the multitudes who could boast of having dined in the world-renowned Fishbowl.

Rolling his icy eyes about the eatery he watched the Smiths with their next-door neighbors, the Joneses, from Long Island; the genteel old ladies, on their annual out-for-the-day expedition, having a glass

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of sherry with their dinner to warm their half-dead carcasses; the mean-eyed who "oh-myed" the colored waiters; the out-of-towners, green-arrowed to the place by the billboards; the scrub-faced young women who patterned themselves after the models in the slick magazines; the shopgirls enthralled with the place, and their sleek-haired young dappers in open-necked, yellow shirts and two-toned slack coats that looked liked sawed-off bathrobes; the schemers who after whispering among themselves cut their tips a third or even half because the colored boys didn't need as much to live on as white waiters; the fat and frowzy in bursting halters, their midriffs billowing out like accordions; the white-haired with the twinkle of the old rascal in their paunchy eyes, gay-ninety-ing their sweethearts; salty City Islanders who boasted of living in the country within the city; and a host of others a little surprised at themselves in their new surroundings, but nevertheless there.

He gave an involuntary start. For the dream he'd had the night before now came back to him. He had come half-awake, yelling aloud, almost in the middle of the dream, and the people about him now seemed like the faces, without bodies, which had been after him. They had been spurred on by a medium-sized dark-complexioned stranger, perfect in shape and form, who was brandishing over their heads what seemed to Asher to be a policeman's nightstick studded with the prongs of a rake.

"Jesus, no!" he muttered aloud, as he peered sheepishly about to see whether or not anyone had noticed him unwittingly jump away from the post.

A rush of business was just then flooding the Fishbowl, and although the second dining-room was by no means filled, Chief had, with a wave of his hand, chased the newcomers through the front rooms and back to the farm. That was another way, as Jordon explained it, the Chief had of getting back at the waiters for drinking on the job without inviting him to have one.

Asher's four tables for four, their narrow ends flush with the back wall of the room, were on the inside of the dining-room at the

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end of the copper screen. In front of them were rows of long family tables, large enough to seat as many as sixteen.

Four people sauntered up to the long table that ran counterwise to Asher's station and pulled the chairs back. A slender, long-faced waiter, who had been idling at the cashier's desk in the arcade, ran excitedly up to the party and jerked the chairs into position again.

"This table's reserved," he said, as he dusted off its spotlessly clean tablecloth with a napkin. "O-oh," apologized the man. He turned to Asher and pointed to one of his tables. "Are you serving here, mister?"

Asher pulled the chairs back and the party walked over and sat down. They were a red-headed man, with a frightened look; his wife, a pleasant-faced woman; and their two children—one a nine- or ten-year-old red-headed boy, and the other a girl just old enough to know herself.

When Asher handed her the large menu the pleasant-faced woman panicked as if a speeding car were coming toward her. Asher hesitated a minute before giving one to the boy, wondering whether his mother would let him read it. The young girl frowned over all the good things to eat.

"Oh, Daddy," she cried, "what's a Clam Pan Roast?" After her father explained she didn't want it.

Asher shifted from one foot to the other and fingered his pencil and checkbook. The young girl looked sidewise at Asher, then at her mother.

"We've got all afternoon; just take your time, Mother," she said.

"Good gracious, we're not the only fish in the sea," chirped the pleasant-faced lady. "How do you expect the young man to make any money?"

With the faint trace of a grin coming into his face, Asher told himself: you know it too, lady. He stood impatiently by while a long, detailed discussion about the relative nutritional values and the cost of the fish ensued between mother and daughter. Then the grin became a full-fledged grimace as he listened silently to the man who sighed something to him about all women being alike. Finally, the

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man was asked what he had selected and everyone decided to have the same—a broiled filet of sole dinner. Humph! Asher snorted under his breath. I knew it all the time. You turkeys can't fool me. The cheapest thing on the menu. I'll betcha you ain't got as much cash in your pocket as I got.

He went out to the kitchen for their first course, the chowder and the bread and butter and water, for the Fishbowl did not believe in the institution of bus boys. They were not needed with Negro waiters. The Kingfish had quieted down by then and was at his usual resting place—the counter of the clam bar just inside the kitchen's swinging doors. A girlish little pantryman was placing a cup of coffee before him. As Asher passed the Kingfish and made for the opposite corner of the kitchen to place his order with the fish-broiler, he felt the boss's eyes sweep him from head to foot.

"Don't you go trying to cut in, Ronald," Asher heard the Kingfish stage-whisper to the pantryman. " 'Cause he belongs to me. I saw him first."

Jesus! Asher said to himself, the place is a fairy's nest.

No sooner had Asher placed the water and bread on the table before the guests, and walked a few steps back to the serving stand at the end of the copper screen to get the steaming cups of soup, than the biscuits had disappeared from the bread plate.

"My gracious, the little cookies are so delicious," said the pleasant-faced lady when Asher returned with the soup. "Could we have more?"

Asher made the three-block-long journey back to the kitchen for the biscuits and returned. Then he went for their plates of fish. On one plate was to be mashed potatoes and green peas; on another French fries and corn-on-the-cob; on the third, julienne potatoes and cauliflower; and on the fourth, a boiled potato and string beans. God damn, Asher swore to himself as the vegetable cook swore at him, do they all have different vegetables with each meal at home?

When he had finally placed their dinners before them, one wanted tomato catsup, another Worcestershire sauce. He had to hunt all over the dining-room, not daring to take the condiments from other

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diners. Then they wanted more water. After that, they wanted more "little cookies."

Jordon had been looking Asher's party over, "casing them," as he put it. When he had found whatever it was he had been looking for in the man's face he called Asher to the service buffet.

"He'll do, man," he said. "Hand him the drink check 'long wid his own, face down, and tell him what his bill is at the same time. But don't take your hand off it."

"Jesus, but they ain't even had anything to drink," Asher said.

"Don't matter, man. That dope wouldn't open his mouth if you took the money outa his pocket. I'll be right here standing like the cap'n, should he holler. I'll fix it like it was a mistake. You're new, man, ain't you?"

"Sure hope you know what you talkin' 'bout," Asher said nervously as he looked at the frightened-faced man.

Finally the family finished their long-to-be-remembered dinner. The man thanked Asher for being such a "nice waiter" and asked for his check.

Asher poked the two checks toward him, and the frightened-looking man reached his hand out, and, very suddenly, he grabbed the checks out of Asher's hand. But he did not look at them. He began to fumble in his pockets with his other hand. "Can't see without my glasses," he said.

The girl reached for the checks. "Let me read them, Dad," she said.

Asher's body became as erect as a telegraph pole.

"Your bill's nine dollars," he finally managed to say.

"That's fine," smiled the man as he handed the checks back to Asher. He pulled a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Asher. "Keep the change, waiter."

By now people were standing everywhere in the restaurant: in the aisles, between tables. Suddenly, every head in the dining-room swiveled around like the crowd at a football game. Chief was snake-

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dancing a group, single file, through the restaurant. From the front of the dining-room straight through to the farm, Chief elbowed and shouldered this high-toned party with Mr. Jack right behind him.

Yes, this was Mr. Jack's party and nobody in the Fishbowl could wait on him but Jordon. Had he been another and less imposing personage, Chief would, perhaps, have persuaded him that he had a better waiter to serve him. But Mr. Jack was Mr. Jack, and Chief would all but have given him Mr. Maddox's restaurant had he asked for it.

"Yessir, Mr. Jack," beamed Jordon when he saw the florid six-footer.

"How you, boy," Mr. Jack puffed.

Chief and Jordon went into a hurried conference over how to arrange the tables for Mr. Jack's party. It was just loud enough for the people sitting at the nearby tables to learn they were trespassing on the big man's personal property. Mr. Jack marched nervously back and forth, stopping every so often to whisper a word to his haughty party. There were thirty-two in the party—about five more than Jordon could wait on by himself. So Asher was assigned to help him, that is, to be something akin to his bus boy. Their tables would be strung lengthwise across the room.

Chief surveyed the people who had been standing about before the party had arrived, waiting for tables, and chased them back to the crowded front room.

Finally, after Jordon and the headwaiter had all but taken the diners bodily from eight tables, cleared the dirty dishes, and spread fresh linen—all in the space of ten minutes—the party ranged themselves at the long, picnic-like board, the women on one side of Mr. Jack, the men on the other side.

The women were mostly in the out-of-shape bloom of middle age, gaudily dressed, some in black chi-chi, others in giddy flowered dresses—with blatant little things on their heads. And the men were loud and prosperous in their silk gabardines and flowing, surrealist-patterned ties.

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"Yessir, Mr. Jack," said Chief as he spread a napkin in the big man's lap. "I was just saying to myself, 'I haven't seen Mr. Jack in a month.'"

Mr. Jack smiled all over himself. A buxom lady sitting next to him appeared slightly, ever so slightly interested, as she toyed with her mink dog-collar.

Asher stood an appropriate distance from the table while Jordon hovered over the guests, straightening the folds in the table linen and moving salt-and-pepper shakers about. Chief took down the drink order himself as Mr. Jack called out an assortment of mixed drinks, two for everyone, to save time. Then the big man handed the head-waiter a crumpled bill in such a way that everyone at the table knew it was a five-spot.

"What do you want?" Mr. Jack asked as Asher took a good look.

Before Asher could think up an answer, the big man said to Jordon, "You boys get what you want and bring Chief his. Or do I have to tell you?"

Mr. Jack was what you would call a good-natured, free-spending wolf. Many of the old aces, including Jordon, remembered him as a gangling boy who came regularly to the Fishbowl with his parents who, they said, had made a barrel of money running a small grocery on Lenox Avenue, in Harlem. It was whispered about that Mr. Jack had a large wholesale business somewhere downtown. He came regularly to the Fishbowl, once or twice a month, always bringing a large party with him.

Now there was nothing that Mr. Jack liked so much as push-button service. So the drinks were left to Asher to serve while Jordon took the food order. Starting with the women first, he went from one to the other. They ordered seafood and chops and steak and all the trimmings that go to make a feast—as if it were their last supper. Mountains of steamed clams. Lobsters and steak for all. Huge platters of vegetables and salads. And they ordered wine—sixteen bottles of champagne—for the party.

Asher's eyes bulged as Jordon filled up four large-sized order checks. That's enough stuff for a hundred people, he calculated to

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himself as he placed the drinks on the table. Jordon went to the kitchen for part of the carload while Asher remained at Mr. Jack's elbow. The party drank and laughed and talked among themselves. But Mr. Jack was impatient and Asher was anxious. It seemed to them both that Jordon would never return.

It was one of those unavoidable things that detained Jordon in the kitchen. The boss's gaiety. Such was even the Kingfish's reaction when Mr. Jack was in the restaurant. Forgetting he was angry with Jordon, he held him up for a long conversation, promising to pick the lobsters for the party himself. He even inquired if Jordon thought the good-looking lad working with him was a good waiter.

Jordon had a little trick that he delighted his best customers with. Holding the tray in the palm of his hand, he would walk rapidly until he was within a few feet of the table, then break into a run, the tray sailing through the air high above his head. Mr. Jack grinned contentedly when he saw the tray laden with the platters of food piled one on top of the other like rough-dry clothes.

This way, hopping and jumping, Jordon rushed tray after tray of food to Mr. Jack's party. And Asher picked up dish after dirty dish from the table, setting down clean ones and pouring the wine. After each course, the men would rise and stretch their legs. The women fidgeted in their seats, pulling at their dresses and easing their girdles down an inch or two.

Once, during the feast, a bald-headed man yelled to the other end of the table, "Elsie, George is eating clams, you better look out tonight."

Elsie, her full mouth open, smiled hopefully, expectantly. A cutie seated near Elsie wanted to know if they helped. "Works like magic," Elsie replied. The cutie called to the boys to make Harold eat clams and everyone at the table had a good laugh at the expense of the red-faced man.

Asher said, "I'll be damned," to himself, and smiled, too.

On every trip from the kitchen Jordon brought himself a drink, one for Asher, and one for the headwaiter. But Jordon made it his business to be out of sight every time the headwaiter Uncle Tommed

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about the party looking for his drink. And when Asher began to feel light-headed, Jordon had all three drinks for himself.

When the party had stuffed themselves beyond further stuffing, Mr. Jack gave the waiters a new, crisp five-dollar bill apiece. And Asher asked himself if it had been worth it. He even recalled that another waiter had said to him: "I don't never want those large parties 'cause they work you too hard for nothin'." But Jordon was happy.

Yet, there was one redeeming feature about these large parties. They ordered so much they could not eat it all. And by the time Mr. Jack's party had left, Jordon had stored away a healthy platter of trimmings for his and Asher's supper—several large chunks of rare steak clinging to T-bones, bits of chicken, more lobster claws than either could eat, and a few other garnitures, including a generous helping of olives. This was theirs. Not even the Kingfish objected to his waiters finishing off the trimmings.

The dinner hour was over by then. And here and there throughout the dining-room dirty dishes had been left piled high on tables to discourage late diners from sitting in the rooms that were to be closed for the night. The waiters at these stations had drifted back into the farm to sit at the small tables placed in the cubbyholes along one side of the room. Here they would rest until they were off duty, which was apt to be whenever the Kingfish gave his headwaiter the signal.

Several of the waiters walked back to survey the remains of Mr. Jack's party. One of them spied the platter of food Jordon had put aside on a service buffet.

"Looka here," he drooled. "I just know you need some help with all this."

"Not worth a damn," Jordon said. "Go eat that watery stew they got for you dogs out there."

But Asher indicated to Jordon that they could not possibly put away all the food Jordon had collected. So Jordon very reluctantly dished out to the waiters a few of the less desirable scraps as if he were dealing the last round of cards in a stud-poker game and didn't want to give away anything good.

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"Come on, man," Jordon commanded Asher. "Let's git away from these here wolves."

They started for the kitchen. Jordon walked ahead, trying carefully to steer a straight course, for he was by then in a rosy haze. Asher followed at a respectful distance, carrying the trimmings on his tray. Jordon lunged into the kitchen door and held it for Asher. Mr. Jerry, the checker, rose from his high stool, leaned over the counter-desk and looked into Asher's tray.

"You boys sure are gonna dine in style tonight," he said.

Chief was standing in front of the steam-table talking with Mr. Dunkel, the manager. He watched Jordon sway down the broad kitchen corridor toward the dishwashing machine. When Jordon came abreast of the headwaiter, Chief stepped out and planted himself squarely in Jordon's path.

"Just as I say! You're not worth a damn," Chief said, shaking his finger in Jordon's face. "You would forget your old Chief."

Jordon's lips were parted and his red-rimmed eyes looked off into space. He stared hard at nothing in particular. Slowly, it seemed to make sense to him. "You got somethin' there. *You* ain't worth a damn. You got me in the farm, what more you want."

Jordon's body lurched forward, and he grasped Chief's left arm as he sought to brace himself. The headwaiter brought a wallop up from the floor that missed its mark and brushed the side of Jordon's neck. His hand went around the waiter's neck and in the next minute they were locked in an embrace, rolling over and over on the cement floor. Mr. Dunkel, the manager, rushed in to pull Jordon off the headwaiter. Then Asher jumped on Mr. Dunkel's back.

Heavy trays rattled and dishes shattered as they bounced on the hard floor. Waiters rushed from every point in the kitchen to get a better view of the fight. What had started as just one of Chief's routine "shows" for the benefit of Mr. Jerry, the checker, who would, of course, report it to the boss in Chief-was-on-the-job fashion, had turned into a free-for-all.

It wasn't much of a fight as fights go. Mr. Dunkel tripped and was kicked in the shoulder and small of his back twice, before he could get to his feet again. A heavy steel table near the coffee urns went

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over with a bang, and with it two large cartons of cut sugar. Gradually, Chief and Mr. Dunkel were subdued.

The fight had whirled around and over Jordon's stretched-out body. He lay where he had fallen, his arms folded about his head for protection. The sleeve of Asher's jacket was torn and his slight, strong forearm dripped blood.

Into this mad scene the Kingfish rushed. He had been summoned from his upstairs office by Mr. Jerry over the house phone. The girlish little pantryman had picked up his apron and rushed to the kitchen ramp to escort the boss into this mess of sugar, broken dishes and bashed-in heads.

"Oh! Oh! My poor business," the Kingfish shrieked. "What shall I do?"

Turning to Asher, who was dusting himself off, the Kingfish said: "Look what you've done to me. And just to think, when I first saw you this morning I said to myself, 'I know we're going to be' "— he arched his eyebrows—" 'special friends.' You! You young fool, why have you done this to me?"

"He started it," Asher blurted out, nodding in Mr. Dunkel's direction. "Lousy white . . ."

"There are no white or colored in my place," the Kingfish shrilled. "We all work together here like one big, happy family. I only want men who are on my side. I should fire . . ." With a sudden jerk of his head, he looked contemptuously at Jordon. "You're going to pay for this," he cried. "And I don't care if you don't have another pay check until this time next year." Then he turned and walked away.

Asher's eyes bulged with amazement as he watched the Kingfish go, swishing and switching, along the broad corridor toward the checker's desk. They're all the same, he told himself, the minute you stand up to 'em and let 'em know you ain't gonna stand to see no white guy sopping up one of your kind. Then they come tellin' you you're the same as them. Well, anyway, I didn't get the gate. And then he recalled the odd look of excitement which had come into the Kingfish's eyes as he had spoken to him. Jesus! He's really on the make.

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I hope he ain't around all the time 'cause it'll be rough trying to keep out of his way.

2

IT RAINED off and on the second day that Asher worked at the Fish-bowl. It rained as it does only in June, sprinkling now, clearing for an hour or so, the sun coming out blazing hot, followed by a torrential downpour.

The air hung in the restaurant as it does in a barn filled with manure—dank, musty, mildewed. Asher felt itchy all over, as if there were cobwebs on him. Rain had begun to fall long before he reported for work that day. And by the time he was "on the floor," as Chief said, the rain had cut out for him little chores about the restaurant. Irksome and laborious, they made him feel more like a porter.

Whenever it rained, as it did that day, the clam yard, the Fish-bowl's sidewalk café, had to be dismantled, packed and stored away. The heavy iron lattice-worked tables and chairs that the more arty customers ohed and ahed over and the Kingfish cherished as he did the softer moments of his childhood had to be carted to the basement. And, of course, this back-buster fell to the newer waiters.

Besides this, there was a seeming lull in business. At first, Asher attributed the slowness to the rain and the holiday's aftermath. But then, he decided, neither the rain nor the slow-motioning of the day-after had anything to do with the change. The restaurant was crowded, but with a different kind of patron. Jesus! he said to himself, they're cheaper than the bunch that was in here yesterday. I ain't served a shore dinner all day. And steak—they act like they ain't never heard of it. This is strictly a fried fish and potato and beer day. No wonder my pocket's so empty.

Asher wished he could have this day off—his only one in seven—every week. But he remembered Chief had said "only forty-year men could take off Fridays." Thus his dislike for working this day be-

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came as strong as was the dislike of the waiter longest in service at the Fishbowl. But he knew that come the same day the following week, and the following, he'd be there. Smiling, or attempting to smile, in the face of it all. The bonus the Kingfish dangled above the waiters' heads, in now-you-see-it-now-you-don't-see-it-fashion, would be lost if he did not work that day each and every week. That was one of the conditions attached to the job, for this day was a holiday, too.

Like all service workers whose lives hang on tips, Asher looked forward to the money if not the extra work that holidays brought. What kind of holiday was this, then, that he began to realize the Fishbowl waiters disliked so? What kind of people did it bring forth?

Friday—the day the waiters called the "once-a-week-fish-eaters'-day"—there was usually an "early dinner," beginning at five o'clock. But that day the patrons began to come in at four o'clock, first in parties of twos and threes, wandering cockily about the main dining-room, and then, in larger groups, strutting down through the second room. And as the larger parties sat down at the family-sized tables, spreading themselves irregularly throughout the room until they appeared more like the last few stragglers at closing time, they looked inquiringly about them, with expressions of hurt surprise, as though shocked at not finding a corps of genially smiling captains to take their orders and pass them on to the waiters.

Asher, who was spreading a fresh tablecloth over one of his four-seat tables in the rear of the farm, paused for a moment to watch the other waiters in the room, some of whom were hastily placing large menus, like pup tents, in the center of the banquet-like tables while others tilted the backs of chairs forward against the tables to indicate that their stations were reserved. Look at these slicksters trying to duck the snakes, Asher said to himself. Sure can't blame 'em. 'Cause if you get a bad break on the first sitting you won't make no kind of money this night. Then he went listlessly back to the task of providing the table with four place settings. When he had finished, he looked apprehensively at his two other tables which were already

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set up. Suddenly he screwed up his face in a deep frown, as he realized he did not know where the menus were kept. Everybody's got the jump on me, he told himself. Even the chairs on this old crummy station are so jammed up, I can't turn 'em up. Turning about, he walked rapidly toward a corner of the room where three service stands stood end to end, forming a long low buffet. Hope, I hope, I hope this is my lucky night, he thought, as he started to fold a stack of napkins.

Within a few minutes the crowd had begun drifting into the farm. Ignoring the improvised reservation signs, they seized upon tables on a first-come-first-served basis. And by five o'clock the room was nearly full of diners, mostly middle-aged men and women—managers of chain groceries, office-workers, department store junior executives, cashiers from the gas company, schoolteachers—drumming impatiently on unattended tables or stretching their necks as they looked demandingly about them.

In the corner of the room, Asher went purposely about putting the folded napkins away. With great care he spread out several of the napkins which, although freshly laundered, still bore faded grease stains, on the bottom ledge of the service stands. Then, taking no more than half a dozen of the long, narrowly folded napkins in his hand at a time, he slowly and neatly arranged them in the storage space. Working in a crouch, he glanced up every now and then to learn whether or not his tables had been taken. Once he looked directly into the face of a mean-eyed man who, seated with four male companions, was pounding on a nearby banquet table. Jesus! Asher said to himself, as he bent down again, his head going closer to the floor, I'm sure glad he ain't for me. You can see the spitefulness jumping out all over him.

The sharp rap of heels behind him made Asher glance up over his shoulder again. Three parties of four, all headed for his tables, were moving so fast they appeared to be running. They seemed to Asher to sit down at the several tables in a photo-finish. Immediately Asher became even more engrossed in his work, as he pondered which party to go to first. He fumbled with forks and knives in the upper draw-

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ers of the service stand and deliberately smoothed out the ends of a bundle of already smoothed-out linen table cloths.

Then Asher heard a man's voice, loud, insistent.

"BOY—ain't there no waiter here?"

Asher, hunching his shoulders as if he'd suddenly felt a sharp pain in the middle of his back, came slowly out of his crouch and looked from one to the other of his parties. At the table nearest where he stood he saw a bright, merry-faced young man in clerical garb sitting with three elderly people, two women and a man; at the second table sat a hard-faced man with a genteel old lady who was speaking softly to two squirming children, a boy and girl, neither of whom appeared to be more than ten years old; while at the table furthest away sat a red-lidded, hollow-eyed man with three women wearing large frumpy straw hats that reminded Asher of stuffed birds. The man fixed Asher with a vacant stare, while the three women looked on with sullen expressions.

Oh hell! Asher muttered to himself. A bunch of drunks. Then he said aloud, "Yessir! I'll be with you in a few minutes."

The red-lidded man's face took on a disgruntled look. "Whatta you mean a few minutes?" he said loudly. "We ain't got all night."

Asher, who was now walking toward the man with a water pitcher, did not answer. The people at his other two tables turned their heads in the direction of the loud voice.

Just then, Jordon rushed up to Asher. "Go on, take care of him," he whispered. " 'Fore that joker makes trouble for you. I'll take the other orders an' start 'em for you."

Asher moved over to the red-lidded man's side and stood fidgeting at his table. But the patrons' blank faces indicated a complete lack of interest in Asher. Suddenly they struck up an animated conversation, laughing and gesturing at one another.

Finally Asher asked, his voice very quiet, "Would you like to order, sir?"

The red-lidded man, who sat with both elbows spread out on the table, looked up at Asher. Slowly he straightened up on his chair and reared back, forcing his trouser-belt to gather itself tightly about his

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paunchy waist. Then he gave Asher a contemplative stare. "Now, that's better," he said.

"Yessir," Asher smiled. "Yessir?"

"Bring us some lobsters," the man snapped.

"How'd you like them, sir?" Asher ventured timidly.

"Fat and—" The man flashed a broad grin at his companions who scowled at Asher. "Listen, boy! Are you on the ball or not?"

Asher tried again. "Would you like them boiled or broiled, sir?"

"Bring us four large broiled lobsters," the man commanded, in a morose growl. "And bring us some bread an' butter right away, some of them biscuits."

Asher had moved only a few feet away from the table, preparing to go to the kitchen, when the man called him back. "Hey, George," he said importantly. Asher turned to face him with a tight-lipped expression. George, he repeated to himself. He oughta drop dead right here.

The man smiled victoriously and turned to his companions. "You girls want anything first?"

The three women shook their heads.

"Bring me a cup of coffee so I'll have something to keep me going while we're waiting."

You gonna have a long wait, Asher said to himself as he walked back through the second dining-room and headed for the kitchen. These donkeys is just like them peckerwoods down South. Irishmen an' poor-ass Southern crackers is all alike. Mean an' hateful as all get-out. Just hate to see you makin' a buck.

Out in the kitchen, Asher learned from Jordon that his two other parties had selected identical dinners. Each party had ordered a plate of broiled scallops, a dish of fried filet of sole, two French fries, a side order of cauliflower, and one broiled bluefish to be divided among each of the groups of four along with two draught beers apiece for each of the adults.

"Everything's ordered," Jordon told Asher. "All you gotta do is pick up. Cut your checks an' leave 'em with Mr. Jerry an' I'll run the beers in. What'd them bad folks order—lunch-time stuff?"

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"Lobsters," Asher said, spitting out the word. "An' that's all."

"Whatta you expect?" Jordon queried. "There ain't a shore dinner in the joint. Man, these people don't make as much as you an' me. That's what makes 'em so hard to get along with. For my part, I'll take the kind of people we had las' night. Business folks. 'Course, they make a man carry a lotta chowder. But they is the only ones who can afford to pay a man after takin' up his time. Not these bastards. They're damn near starvin' to death."

It took Asher all of seven or eight minutes, going first from the potato cook to the fish-frier then to the broiler, to load his tray. But to get even, he drew the red-lidded man's coffee from the urn before he went for his orders. And he placed the cup of steaming black liquid under the large urn close to where a gas jet gave off a bright flame until he was ready to leave the kitchen. This'll fix you, Asher said to himself. I'll let this cup burn your goddam mouth off.

Back in the dining-room, Asher made a great flourish, bending low at the waist, as he placed the cup of coffee in front of the man before he served his other customers. As he did so, the man merely grunted, looking Asher up and down. But as soon as Asher had retraced his footsteps to his service stand and picked up a handful of dishes, the man called Asher back to his table. Asher looked the man squarely in the eye. Then he glanced down at the dishes he held, and, finally, looked up again, smiling into the man's face. Go screw yourself, he thought.

That is how it went with Asher all that night. Every time he was in the midst of serving one of his other parties, the red-lidded man would call him for something—more drawn butter, more salad, more coffee. Long after Asher had served a second setting of people at his other tables, the trouble-makers were still there. In fact, they were the last party to leave the room, departing just before ten o'clock, allowing Asher to draw his first breath of gladness since the dinner hour had begun.

Yes, Asher was glad when that day was over. And he sang a song of lamentation in the locker-room that night—as only a waiter who has been bitten by a lot of cheap snakes can. The waiters welcomed

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him into the fold. Drenched in their common misery, Asher was one of them.

It was natural that Asher, no longer an outsider, should join the boys at the bar after that fish-eating holiday. In fact, several of the waiters who even dressed a little faster in anticipation of "throwing my head back" had, with a pat on his back, said, "We'll see you 'cross the way." The bar was just across the street—where the City Island bus, Bronx-bound, stopped at the corner of Rochelle Street—cater-cornered from the Fishbowl's delivery court. The boys stopped at this bar before going to work and as soon as they were off the job. In the first instance, perhaps, it symbolized their last futile grab at freedom for the day and, at night, their release from jail.

The night before, Asher had been so engrossed in his study of the waiters' faces etched strongly in the glare of the corner lamplight—the faces of the tired, of the jaded, of the relieved—standing at the bar as he waited for the bus, that he'd scarcely been aware of the bar itself.

Now when Asher crossed City Island Road he arched his eyebrows as he took in the old, rickety, weather-beaten frame house. It was so narrow that it gave him the impression of sliding up Rochelle Street in the direction of the railroad siding. No wonder they call this dump the Shanty, he said to himself. It sure looks the part. Beat-up as all get-out.

Upon entering the barroom, he saw five dark-stained booths, with tables and benches covered in a greenish-black linoleum. They were built into the wall, across from the long, dark-stained bar, between a point where the half-curtained show window ended and the partition that shielded the entrance to the "Gents Room." Asher frowned as he noticed the wide, fly-specked mirrors in back of the bar which were crisscrossed with narrow strips of red, white and blue bunting. And the feeble light the electric bulbs gave lent a twilight gloom to the place. Boy, a bucket of paint would sure work wonders in here, Asher said to himself.

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"How you doing, pal?" smiled Mike, the bartender, as Asher raised himself onto a high stool.

"I ain't," Asher replied.

Mike could tell, most astutely, how things had gone with the boys after any work day. He placed one hand on the beer-tap and turned his head in the direction of the little whisky glasses, turned bottom up on a red-striped dishtowel, lined up in neat rows on the counter behind him. "Beer?" he queried. "Or a shot?"

"Make it a bottle of beer."

The bartender smiled victoriously as he started for the old-fashioned, dark-stained refrigerator at the end of the long bar. "Yes-sir," he beamed. Mike knew no waiter would order the cheapest drink in his place. Had he ordered ten cents' worth of belly-wash in the morning, oh well, he would have understood.

In one gulp Asher drained off the suds the bartender had poured into the stemmed glass and tilted his glass slightly to pour the remainder from the bottle so he would not ring the glass with a deep collar of foam. He looked up and down the bar, crowded with waiters talking and laughing, some turning whisky tumblers to their mouths, others selecting drinks with the meticulousness of a Fishbowler ordering dinner. They talked differently there at the bar than on the job, Asher noticed. He heard snatches of their conversation:

"Did you lamp that fine corn-haired ofay with that Navy officer I was waitin' on, Jack? She was just like my old lady out in Chi."

"Stop sendin' yourself, man."

"Jesus, five thirty-five! I oughta have my whatsoname kicked. You know, I called that ol' Italian man I used to work for day 'fore yesterday. And whatta you know, his new number was Dayton 4—4-5-3-5."

"Go on, man! And I ain't been able to catch a figure since way last March."

The juke-box gave a wailful tune. And a deep, husky-voiced singer hollered the broken-hearted words of "The Tough Town Blues." Some of the waiters sighed, others shook their heads from side to side, while the faces of all were lit up with an expression of knowing, of under-

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standing, as the singer of this unhappy moodiness repeated each second line of the song with only a slight variation:

"I never seen a real tough town befo'
"Things are tough, an' money is tight
"Soon's I ketch the tough town number
"I'll be long gone from here"

At the bar were the waiters: a homesick stray from Chicago; an actor down on his luck waiting tables between shows; an older man whom the waiters had named Ole Man Mose because every diner was for him cap'n or madam; a waiter who, because he had served on an African-bound transport during the war, called everyone he liked a "Casablanca boy"; a youngish-looking fellow who nightly fed the juke-box a two-dollar stack of nickels, rocking and swaying to hi-hi-ho; a Georgian with bright tan shoes, a yellow tie, a swarthy face, forever sullen before the guests he served, whose constant hope was "that his day would come"; an effeminate young man from one of the city's conservatories who forever dreamed of becoming another Paul Robeson; a "broken-down," middle-aged waiter who limped through the dining-room beseeching life to let him "get off these burning dogs"; a jaded, bedraggled fellow who always needed one drink to chase the last one; the waiter to whom everybody—Gentile, Jew, Italian, Frenchman, Irishman, Greek—was a Southern cracker; the Preacher so called because whatever the occasion he had an ever-ready Bible quotation; a tall, childless, gray-haired man who by dint of half a century's saved tips was buying a five-story tenement on Seventh Avenue, Harlem's Great Black Way; the recently-married man from Mississippi, hostile, and bewildered by an inflated mortgage on a seventeen-year-old "bungaloo" in Jamaica, Long Island; two West Indians, brown as coffee beans, with high cheekbones; a dark, greasy, and flabby-looking but jolly waiter to whom the numbers were what the Church is to the devout; the flashy, zoot-suited New York-born boy; the would-be card shark, sly-looking and hard-eyed; a young Virginian, his mouth forever going like a bell-clapper,

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dreaming of his unborn child, an undertaking business; the smartly-dressed "sportsman," doping the horses for the next day's races.

They were all manner of men: college-trained, with bright, alert faces, from the Southern schools, burning with the spirit of the New Negro; the middle-aged victims of a lack of educational opportunity, rejoicing in their offspring and the bright, alert faces; the "beat," the defiled, those besmeared by a life that had taught them "all Negroes are alike," distrustful and suspicious of the bright, alert faces; the rum pots; the muckworms; the gamblers; the part-time whoremasters—America's black neglects and America's black hopefuls—all sprung from Southern infancy "over in nigger town" or door-keyed through the Harlems of big, industrial, Northern cities.

One of them, Walters, walked from the head of the bar where he had been perched on a stool to where Asher was sitting in front of the beer-cooler. He was a dried-up little fellow with red eyes; several of his upper molars missing. An old-timer, he had been a steamship and dining-car waiter for some fifteen years.

"No, pal, it can't be like that," he said to Asher, waving a high-ball glass with a scant half-inch of whisky in it. "Hey, Mike, give him a shot. A man can't drink that beer all night. Just ain't right. Set us both up."

"Sure bet," said Mike as he set down two whisky tumblers and fingered the bottles on the shelf behind him. He found Walters' brand and poured the drinks.

Asher mixed the rye and soda-water and touched the rim of his glass with that of Walters. "Here's to you, old man," he said, and turned his glass up to his mouth. Throwing his head back, he let the liquid funnel into his throat. Then he ordered another round for himself and Walters. Soon, the two waiters were exchanging common experiences they had had in other houses and in other cities. One drink led to another and eventually they fell to discussing girls.

"Say, pal," Walters said jubilantly, "I know where there's some fine chicks. Wanna come with me?"

"Not tonight. Got to get my things outa pawn 'fore I start out."

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Walters traced little circles on the bar in the puddle from his sweating glass. "Stop foolin' yourself, kid," he said. "You was born in hock and you gonna be in hock all your natural life."

"In or out, I'm gonna get my clothes first," Asher said. "This here is the only suit I've got to wear."

"Ain't nothin' wrong with it," Walters said as he looked Asher over in his neat, double-breasted blue suit. " 'Cause I can understand. When I was a young fellow I didn't wanna go chasing no chicks with my workin' pants on, either. Might get caught short."

Up and down the bar, in little groups of threes and fours, the waiters were treating one another, crying about the cheap snakes they had served that day, cursing the Kingfish, telling stories about what had happened to them on other jobs or making dates to go girl-hunting. Some were waiting for their girls or even wives to pick them up at the bar.

Yet, perhaps from long association with this and other shanties, the waiters were indifferent to their surroundings. It was not a place they came to admire. It was a place they came to treat one another. A drink in that place with their waiter-companion of the moment might spell the difference between unemployment or employment the next month or the next year in some other house or city. For in such terms was security measured for these men.

Nor did it matter to them that the Kingfish netted a pretty penny from their treating; that Mike had had it written into his contract when he had rented the old house from the Kingfish that the welcome mat would not be thrown out to the waiters at the other bars along City Island Road. But such was the way of things along that road, with the Kingfish owning almost every parcel of property of any value on the Island.

While Walters was talking to Asher, Dave, the waiter who called everybody pardner, walked into the bar jauntily. He waved an infectious hello to everyone. Behind him came the two girls who worked in the ladies' room in the Fishbowl. They were Hattie, a moon-faced girl, snapping on a wad of chewing gum, and a black-eyed girl whose

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name Asher did not know. Mike joined the waiters in a chorus of hello's such as are ordinarily reserved for someone just returned from a trip.

Dave and the girls looked about for a place at the bar, but it was crowded so they moved toward the booths. Asher watched the black-eyed girl's image in the mirror as she walked, her shoulders high, the skirt of her dress swaying gently as her hips undulated like those of a dancer. Jesus, Asher said to himself. She's hot stuff.

Walters kept up a rapid-fire chatter about the time he was in a bar in Rio de Janeiro with the crew of the *Santa Clair* and a fight started. As he talked, he gesticulated with his hands and arms, but Asher was not listening to him. He kept looking at the girl in the mirror. Suddenly, Walters gave him a wallop on his shoulder that made Asher jump. The girl looked up and her eyes met Asher's in the mirror. She narrowed her eyes very suddenly, giving him a faintly cynical look. Asher felt sick all over, as if the last drink had been one too many. But it was not an unpleasant sensation at all—painful but strongly agreeable; and then he felt quite weak. The girl dropped her eyes quickly.

"Who's that baby?" Asher said, almost as if he were talking to himself. Then he reached for his drink.

Walters turned his body halfway round on the stool to have a good look at Dave and the girls. The black-eyed girl sat on one side of the narrow table across from Dave and Hattie. Then Walters turned back to Asher. "That's Dave's old lady chewing the gum," he said, giving Asher a measured look.

"Not her, the other dame, I mean."

"Listen, pal," cautioned Walters, "that empty seat over there will put you further in hock. That's Miss Ester. She's high-powered. But she's a real woman. Everybody falls for her, but she never loses her head over it." Walters sipped his drink and took another look at Asher eying the girl in the mirror. "Right now, Monroe's shooting after her. Don't know why he ain't over there right now, unlessen his wife came out here for him tonight. An', pal, you gotta have the long foldin' green to go after what he likes."

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"Who in the hell is Monroe?" Asher said, his eyes still on the mirror. It seemed to him that Dave and the girls were discussing the men standing at the bar. "Who's Monroe?" he repeated.

"Are you jokin'? You worked over 'cross the way two whole days now and don't know Monroe. He's the boss's right-hand man. Acts like he's the Kingfish himself, dippin' up those steam clams."

Just then Dave stood up, and stretched himself languidly. He studied the backs at the bar and their faces in the dingy mirror. Then he walked over, and put his arm on Asher's shoulder.

"How'd you like to come over, pardner, and meet the folks," Dave said. "Now don't get no idea in your head that anybody sent for you. I just thought maybe you'd rather pass the time with us than with these turkeys."

Asher turned completely around on the high stool and looked at the black-eyed girl. She reminded him of the picture he saw every time he heard Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady"—a tall, tan, terrific dame.

"Okay by me," he said. He turned to Walters. "Be seein' you, pal."

"What the hell you puttin' down," Walters said good-naturedly to Dave. "Framin' my boy?"

"Not on your life, pardner," Dave replied. "I'm just gonna fix him up right. He don't have to be 'round ninety years like you, pardner. before he's got nerve to put one over on the Kingfish."

The boys walked over to the booth and Dave made the introductions. Ester nodded and smiled as Asher slid onto the bench beside her.

"How's the joint usin' you?" Hattie said in a pleasant, rehearsed manner.

"Me?" parried Asher. "I'm as green behind the ears as a newborn babe."

Ester turned her head sharply to one side and fixed Asher with a steady, opaque look. Becoming instantly restive, Asher looked off in space, wondering if he was making a good impression.

"He's all right," double-talked Dave, looking from Asher to Ester.

Joe, a red-faced old man with a toothpick stuck in his mouth, the

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combination waiter and porter about the place, hobbled over and whipped at the table with a damp rag. Dave gave the order: "Four Scotches with soda." He looked from one to the other of his companions. Asher wondered if the Scotch on top of the rye he had had would throw him. Not this night, he said to himself.

The old man returned and placed the whisky glasses on the table. Then he placed the soda tumblers before each of them on a round cardboard mat. Hundreds of tiny air bubbles pushed one another to the surface, bursting on the rim of the glasses.

Mike, that super-salesman, yelled from his side of the bar, "All right, folks, this one's on me." He raised his glass with an inch or two of straight whisky in it. The party saluted him back before they drank.

"Do you stop in here every night?" Asher asked Ester.

Ester looked into Asher's face for a split second. Her full red mouth was open and it quivered at the edges angrily as she countered, "What do you think I am?" Then she picked up a cigarette, rolled it between her fingers, thumped both of its ends on the table slowly. "All you men are the same. Like a bunch of children. Just 'cause you live in these bars you think every woman you meet is a bar-fly."

"Just a minute," Asher said. "I didn't mean no harm."

Ester smiled, very suddenly. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't have any right soundin' off like that."

Asher studied her face. It was difficult to guess her age, but figuring—as best he could—he took her to be thirty-five. And that much, only because of the way she carried herself. Yet she did not look as old as that. Her face was unlined and her skin was as smooth as a child's. She did not have very good features. They certainly would not put her up among the winners of a beauty contest, Asher thought. They were too blunt. Her short nose was a little thick; but her eyes had a deep blackness and they smiled with her lips, red and sensual. And her smile was the most friendly he had ever seen.

Nature had given her a heavy, sad look—the kind so many of life's dispossessed have—but when she smiled her sadness became sud-

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denly attractive, like the warmth of a child. Her face was a very pale brown like chocolate mocha, which gave to her black hair a brownish cast in the dim light.

She carried her head thrown back in a way that accentuated the brown beauty of her neck. She was slender, but her shapely breasts stood out firmly and her hips were well defined. Asher's face smarted as he watched her light her cigarette. His throat was dry but his lips were wet. The corners of his mouth twitched.

The long-headed waiter who nightly fed the juke-box, solo-dancing to its rapturous tunes but never missing what went on in the bar, apparently saw the rapt expression on Asher's face. He put his nickel on "If I Had You," shaking his head in time with the music. The hard-luck actor left the bar and walked over to the juke-box, standing near the party's booth, and called off another of its tunes, "It Ain't Gonna Be Like That." Such was the spirit of goodfellowship in the bar, so deeply rooted for the moment was that transient quality of cameraderie, that another waiter yelled from the bar, "Five Minutes More." Another joined in with "Baby You Can Count On Me." The effeminate waiter Billie Hollidayed, "My Sugar Is Refined." Even Mike, that Irishman turned inside out—that is, turned colored by his trade—joined in the sport with, "G Man Got the T Man."

The whole bar was, by then, in love with love or impassioned with passion. More drinks were ordered and there was a general clinking of glasses.

Dave and Hattie showed signs of becoming enamoured with one another all over again. Ester looked dreamily at the men standing at the bar. Then she turned her sad, heavy face to Asher. And Asher looked into her face, then hid his hot blood and his flushed face behind his drink, emulating the dried-up indifference of an old rounder as best he could.

The little party talked on, as the waiters at the bar again became interested in their drinks and conversation. At the table, Dave and Hattie were doing most of the talking, mostly wisecracking at Ester and Asher. They took it good-naturedly. More and more rounds of

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drinks were ordered. Soon, everyone was mellow; glowing in a different world untouched by the Fishbowl realities of their lives.

Hattie began to feel sick. Ester noticed it first and suggested that they go out in the air. They walked along City Island Road to where Dave's car was parked. Ester stayed with Hattie to let the cool night air blow on her friend while the boys crossed the street and went into the Fishbowl's parking lot.

"Looks like you made a hit, pardner," Dave said. "But I just wanna warn you, she ain't no push-over. She got a rough deal once. So you'll have to play her slow and easy and be nice to her. Inside a month's time, you'll have things your way."

"Jesus, that's like next year," Asher said as he slammed the door of the black sedan.

Dave wheeled the car onto the roadway. "Yeah, pardner! Come next year and she'll be jus' another gal to you," he said.

By the time they had pulled up in front of the house where the girls lived, Hattie was feeling herself again. She wisecracked to Asher, hoping he would be able to get to work on time in the morning. Then she and Dave went into the vestibule of the apartment house, leaving Asher and Ester standing on the squat stoop two short steps up from the pavement.

It was an ordinary-looking, red brick tenement in 158th Street just east of Amsterdam Avenue. A cat jumped out of an ashcan which stood near the stoop as a taxi came to a noisy halt at the corner. The cat knocked over an empty milk bottle.

Asher pointed to it and started to say something when Ester laughed.

"So what," she said.

She took the lapel of Asher's blue suit, pulled his face to hers and kissed him. She kissed him as one would kiss a relative. It was neither quick nor hot. But long enough for Asher to feel her very full lips, warm and soft against his. Gently and slowly she withdrew them, looking into his eyes. Then she pressed the vestibule door open with the back of her heel, turned, and ran up the long, narrow stairway.

Asher stood there, limp, for the next few minutes. Then he turned

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and walked off like an old man hurrying along when small children have laughed at him.

When Asher trudged through the butcher shop, the Kingfish stood at his usual early-morning haunt by the stairwell which led to the waiters' locker-room. He had been watching Mr. Dunkel check the day's incoming supplies. Asher opened his squinty eyes and looked at the Kingfish for a moment.

"Just look at him," taunted the Kingfish. "Why, he's got all day."

"Good morning, boss."

The frown on the Kingfish's face faded when he heard the title boss bestowed upon him.

"Never mind the good morning. Just you remember I pay a good bonus. But I have a million ways to take it from you."

It was already five minutes to eleven and Asher was due on the floor at eleven, dressed and smiling. But he did not walk with the sprightliness of a waiter intent upon catering to a customer's whims. Instead, he lumbered down the flight of stairs like a person descending from one boat dock to another. Propelled by the pitch of the stairs, he swayed from side to side, clutching the banister.

His eyelids were heavy from lack of sleep and his face was fixed in a masklike expression that not even the penetrating, fishy smell of the dressing-room could alter. It was a good thing, he thought, that he wasn't railroading and had to get back to the yards in some strange town to find his diner at six-thirty in the morning. But the thought of having been out with Ester sent a warm shudder through his body. That gal made it worth being beat for his sleep.

The rain of the day before had left the cement-plastered stone walls of the locker-room sweaty. Even the rusty steel lockers were clammy. Little pools of water had formed on the floor from the dripping pipes. Dead roaches, bloated with eggs, floated on the surface of the scummy water. Soiled newspapers, used by the waiters as dressing-rugs, carpeted the dry spots. In front of Asher's locker there was a small lake. The water covered the soles of his shoes as he set about removing his shirt.

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"Kid, you sho' play it hard," said Walters from his camp chair where he was busy clasping the band of his ready-made black bow tie around his neck. "That's the way it is with you lovers. Can't get your eyes open fo' nothin' in the mornin'. Looka me, fresh as a . . ."

"Lover?" the Casablanca boy cut in. "That's Daddy. Man, he comes on with the girls."

Asher's waxen face relaxed. "Hi, fellows," he said.

The waiter who nightly played the juke-box rocked and swayed his shoulders to an imaginary hi-hi-ho.

"What you mean, Daddy! Man, that gal was jus' drinkin' herself up some free Scotch. I'll bet a man. If she looks at him again he'll know he's Daddy-O."

Asher continued to smile as he occupied the center of this little stage. Again the thought of Ester sent a warm surge through his body. His chest puffed out as if he had taken a deep breath and he arched his shoulders, for he had been associated with someone the Fishbowl waiters felt was a big-timer. And it gave him a lift.

But for the most part, the waiters were preoccupied with getting their numbers in for the day, and they soon forgot Asher.

"Sure dunno what I done," moaned a waiter, one foot propped on a garbage can, counting a handful of coins. "After that ol' bastard, Jones, the cook who use to be here, died last month, I laid on the dead man number up 'til last week. Soon's I git of'n it here she comes buck-jumping."

"You dunno what's wrong wid you?" queried a waiter standing behind him. "You jus' got a bad break outa life. That's all. The white folks didn't take no hand in raisin' you."

"Mind your mouth now."

"Goldarn, mon, youse always cuttin' she fool 'nd I'm here tryin' to get me business straight. Dant say I didn't tell it to you. Mon, the nappy hair number is it for today. I'm tellin' you-all."

Cap'n Logan, the number-writer, strode to the center of the room from the headwaiter's office and looked about him.

"Off and on," he commanded in an authoritative voice. "Off your ass and on your feet. Ain't no time for prayin'. Put up or shut up."

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He moved from one waiter to another, taking a dollar from one, two from another. Some he marked in a little brown notebook—they paid their number bills by the week. Soon he had collected a stack of little slips of paper—about the thickness of a pack of cigarettes—with each waiter's play for the day. Chief stood in the doorway to his office, watching the money roll in. The waiter who did not feed his kitty would not last long at the Fishbowl.

"What you like today?" Cap'n Logan said when he reached Asher. But Asher did not answer fast enough to satisfy him. "I know you need some fresh money."

Asher finally got his wits together. The dream which had awakened him that morning now came back to him. An incoherent series of apparitions—the marble-walled public hallway of a six-story walkup; his seeming inability to climb the stairs, as if he were being pinned down by mountainous sea waves; the figure of a dark-complexioned stranger, perfect in shape and form, rushing down the stairs to meet him, swinging a spike-studded policeman's nightstick. The fantasy vanished the instant Asher awakened, and somehow he'd gained the impression he was in the house where Ester lived. So he put seventy-five cents straight on 501, her house number, and "combinated" twenty-five cents on each of the other five ways the number could play.

Cap'n Logan raised his eyebrows as he pocketed the coins. "Boy, you sure like them high numbers."

Asher was still jittery when the luncheon crowd streamed in. The entire dining-room was never opened for the noonday meal, and those waiters who worked in the farm for dinner took up stations in the second dining-room. Asher had only three small tables, but he found it difficult to keep the courses moving to each party with his usual assembly-line precision. There was either too much delay, on his part, between the soup and the entree—or he brought the dessert before his customers were through their main course. In short, he was up a tree, as the waiters said, and there he stayed for the entire noonday meal.

Even the noises in the kitchen played on his nerves. For at the

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height of the lunch hour, the kitchen hummed with the frantic cry of waiters demanding, insistently and excitedly, to pick up their orders. "Order three fried soles" . . . "I'll take mine" . . . "A porgy, a bass, a snapper" . . . "Let me go" . . . "Pickin' up a halibut" . . . "Double that order of broiled scallops, hold the French fries, give me a side of boiled."

Cooks yelled at waiters. "Three boiled soles" . . . "You want 'em raw?" . . . "Drop your draws if you wanta pick up" . . . "Take it easy" . . . "How many bass you pickin' up?" . . . "Rock bass your ass, it ain't left the icebox yet."

Waiters struggled in front of the cook's counter like a crowd in the restaurant trying to get a glimpse of a bride cutting her reception cake. Some elbowed their way backwards, pulling trays laden with fish from the shoulder-high counter; others sought to wedge their way up to the counter. Still others were after luncheon plates which were kept on the shelves beneath the counter—for the Kingfish had not bothered to equip his kitchen with steam cabinets which in most restaurants are standard equipment for keeping crockery warm. It was a small matter, he said, for a waiter to walk with a stack of plates up the kitchen's broad corridor to the coffee urns where the water was boiling-hot at all times. How else would they make use of all the hot water he provided?

A short, pot-bellied waiter stood on his toes, trying to yell his order to the cooks over the shoulders of the others. He spied Asher, in a crouch, pushing his way through the crowd of milling waiters.

"Look out, men," he yelled. "Here's tree-top Brown plowing on through."

When Asher sought to straighten up with his load of dishes, they slithered out of his hands—echoing throughout the kitchen long after the last fragment had come to its final resting spot on the cement floor. Instantly the little knot of waiters in front of the counter scattered in all directions as if hot water had unexpectedly geysered out of the coffee urns, spattering on them. Some ran down to the potato cook's stand; some darted across the broad kitchen corridor and engaged the pantryman in conversation; others busied them-

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selves wiping trays with their side towels. Only Asher was left in front of the counter, shaken and crestfallen over his mishap. Waiters in other parts of the kitchen muttered curses to themselves, their lips barely moving, while the eyes of others flashed hot with resentment. Mr. Jerry, the checker, left his desk between the swinging doors which led to the dining-room, and hobbled halfway across the kitchen. With one foot he moved the broken pieces around, like a kitten pawing little chunks of meat, until each piece had been joined to its mate. As Mr. Jerry started back to his desk, Walters walked over to Asher and whispered:

"Take it easy man. That's comin' outa your pay."

"Like hell you say!"

"You can take it or leave it. But if you work at the Fishbowl long 'nough, you'll pay for the bowl, too. They'll charge you accordin' to what mood the boss is in. And they'll throw in whatever the dishwashers break up besides."

"You're kiddin'?" Asher said suspiciously. "Yeah, you must be. Tellin' me I'm gonna pay for the dishes them tramps break up. Well how d'you like that."

"They may be bums but they're white just the same. What started it, is the boss can't get no regular dishwashers. These lushes just wanna work three or four days to get a few dollars to go on another binge. An' if he was to take the breakage outa their pay the employment agency wouldn't send him any more help. So one day, so many dishes got smashed up the boss just up and said, we'll pay and like it."

"Humph! I ain't chained to this place. There's too many jobs around."

"But look at the money you knock out here."

"Yeah!" Asher replied. "You got somethin' there."

On Asher's next trip to the kitchen to load up with a luncheon order, he dumped a freshly broiled sea bass into a garbage can when nobody was looking, to get even for what he'd have to pay for the broken dishes. Later, when he returned to the kitchen with a plate of unused bread, he threw that in the garbage can, too.

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Jesus, he said to himself, it sure is a crime to throw this away. To hell with it. It ain't no worser to throw it away than for that bastard to charge me for them dishes.

A week passed before Asher took Ester out again. Every time he ran into her in the restaurant she had a date or was otherwise busy. Finally, Dave tipped him off that Ester would be free that Saturday night. He suggested to Asher that he meet her up at the other end of the Island.

They met in the Nickel Palace, a hot-dog stand at the corner of Sutherland Street and City Island Road, just across from the Honor Roll—a war memorial—in front of the suspension bridge that led to the Bronx mainland.

At Ester's request, they lingered along the bank of Pelham Bay near the bridge, until long after the last Fishbowl employee who might have been going home about that time had ridden by on the bus. Then they went to Sugar Hill, a region of the newer Harlem, so named when Negroes had first begun moving up on Washington Heights which overlooked the old Harlem settlement down in the "valley." But, as they say, the Hill is still there but the white folks took the sugar with them when they left, for the buldings in this neighborhood now show evidence of decay. All the high stoops of the old-fashioned brownstone, three-story, private houses have been hacked away to make room for store fronts.

When they came up out of the subway kiosk on St. Nicholas Avenue near 147th Street, the Hill was astir with a stream of people going in all directions. Slowly, Asher became aware of muted sounds in the hot summer night air. It had, he thought, a tone like a musical interval that comes over the radio at times. Softly and steadily it came—tramp, tramp, tramp. Then off in the distance he heard the wail of a police patrol-car siren, and the strange sounds came to an abrupt and cruel halt.

Ester walked silently at Asher's side, holding firmly to his arm as they headed toward 145th Street. The two blocks that stretched ahead

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of them formed an electric-lit line of brilliance: bars, store-front churches, chop suey parlors, pool halls, food markets and barber shops.

The weird sounds took form again in Asher's ears. Tramp, tramp, tramp. It came from the marching crowd, it seemed to him. As he listened to the slow, plodding, yet rhythmical tramp, tramp, tramp of the crowd, it became challenging. The more he listened to its rhythm the louder, the angrier, the more determined its beat became —only to be met at its crescendo and subdued for a time by the shrill of the siren. Then the tramp, tramp, tramp again.

There was laughter in the air like the alternating sharps and flats of a jazz tune. Yet the muted undertone of the tramp, tramp, tramp persisted: pedestrians seeking the subway or the bus; idlers prowling in front of pool halls and store-front number dives; men and women from the monotonous and overcrowded cross streets, living in dark, mephitic tenements, brownstone fronts, dingy elevator flats and modern but rundown apartment houses; people going and coming from gin mills; boisterous groups of men and boys congregated on corners and in the middle of blocks, making passes at unescorted women; adolescent boys and girls flaunting their youth. Tramp, tramp, tramp. Then the intermittent and recurring cry of the siren.

Jesus, it's like this everywhere, Asher said to himself—in Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis. Crowds of Negroes walking. Just walking around in circles—always something to stop them. Some day, things will be better, maybe. He felt Ester tugging at his arm and it made him warm and secure.

There were in that crowd the sleek, the modish; the sad, the nasty-looking; women who seemed to be drudges or drunkards; men, pugnacious and loud—petty thieves and vicious parasites; children of ugliness and dirt; evil faces and scowlers; brutish men elbowing the passersby out of their way; the dreary-looking and the prosperous. All of them tramping, tramping, tramping—only to be halted at intervals by the commanding wail of the siren.

Ester wanted to go to Paradise, one of the newer bars on Sugar

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Hill. The place had only recently celebrated the grand opening to which several thousand Harlemites had been invited by printed invitation (although it took only cash-in-hand to partake of its delights). The place "jumped like a revival meeting," to quote the barflies.

Paradise was an imposing gin mill at the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and 145th Street where the crosstown streetcar rattled through on its way to the Bronx. From the outside the saloon was a huge expanse of glass brick, bordered with wide strips of shiny, black plate glass held together with bronze molding. So brilliant were the neon lighting effects that they snared passersby on the avenue three or four blocks away. This was Harry Schmell's gift to Harlem, where he had raised Scotch whisky to a kingdom and was charging seventy-five cents a shot for it.

As Asher and Ester were about to cross the threshold, a conked-haired zoot-suiter lounging in the doorway winked at her and stage-whispered to his crony, "That's my baby."

Ester threw her head back involuntarily and tightened her grasp on Asher's arm. "They ought to send this riffraff back to Georgia. These bastards just keep us back."

Before Asher could answer, Harry Schmell bounced in front of the couple and chased the hangers-on from the doorway, threatening to call the cops. He was a short, stocky, florid little man with a tailor-made smile which he snapped on and off like a flashing electric light.

"Ar, Miss Ester, I thought you was never coming to my place." Turning to his wife who sat in the cashier's desk just to the left of the entrance he announced: "Here is Miss Ester and her friend from the Fishbowl."

The Schmells, who lived on Pelham Parkway—the highway over which all traffic passed to and from City Island—usually ate once or twice a week at the Fishbowl. However, what with the opening of their new bar and the rush of business, they had not been out to the Island for several weeks. Naturally they had much to talk about and gush over with Ester. They tried to outdo each other in asking

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about the "boys"—each of them called no less than twenty of the older waiters by name, and inquired about their health.

Then the little manager ushered Ester and Asher to the corner booth farthest from the door. His brown eyes flashed. "The best in the house for you, Miss Ester."

Ester looked around with satisfaction. The red shade of the small lamp on the black, glossy table, the sea-green leatherette upholstery of the booth, the oak-paneled walls, the indirect-lighting fixtures sunk in long, narrow grooves around the room at the edge of the ceiling, gave a warm glow to the mural of Negro Greats on the walls just below. There were Joe Louis, Marion Anderson, Duke Ellington, George Carver, Paul Robeson peering out from an army of black workers.

"This place is ready," Asher said.

Ester gave him a smile. She had taken off her jacket, and he saw that she wore a pale blue summer print, cut low in the front. He ordered twelve-year-old Scotch, and when it came her eyes sparkled.

"Oh my, you're so good to me."

"Because of this?" he asked carelessly, as though he never drank anything else.

"I was so surprised when you asked me to come out with you. I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again, the way I ran off the last time."

Conversation flowed easily. The drinks seemed to have put her in a vivacious mood, and she talked with a quick, witty intelligence. Asher made one or two mild jokes, and Ester laughed heartily over them. For the most part, however, he had only to listen and, of course, order drinks, while Ester rattled on.

"Well, looka there," she said with a tinge of sarcasm in her voice. "Here's old Sister Wrong with a beat-up straw katie setting on the back of her neck, almost. It looks like the last turkey running from old Uncle Jake's shotgun. She musta got two of them for the same price."

"Where?" asked Asher, looking around.

"Over there at the other end of the bar—up by the door. That

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