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Eliot Fintushel

# IZZY AT THE LUCKY THREE

Eliot Fintushel's tale of the extraordinary motel manager, Izzy, is the first of several stories about this charming character. The author's philosophical hosteler will be seen in future issues of Asimov's.

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Illustration by Alan M. Clark





Izzy's back got so bad that he quit his job at Paragon Revolute and became night manager at the Lucky Three Motel, a hangout for lovers and suicides. Sarvaduhka, the motel mogul, didn't care about Izzy's looks; he just wanted some meat behind the desk, without having to lay out for fringes. "He loves me for myself," Izzy crooned.

"You're not front office," was Fay's view.

"It's the fingertips, isn't it, the ones I lopped off at the Wurlitzer Plant in Tonawanda? I'll glove 'em, Fay baby."

"No, Iz, it's the brow." A palisade across his forehead. "One stroke of the razor, Izzy!" Fay implored him.

"Nothing doing. That's my lucky charm."

"Some luck," she sighed, but she kissed it, right at the spot where she wanted to drag a blade, bisecting the thing.

Fay was the angel of his middle age. She loved his paunch. He loved her crow's-feet and her stretch marks. He lived for the increase of her silver hairs and would not be dissuaded from celebrating each one, however she groused.

"I think it's a kind of *antenna*."—That was Hamisch's take on the famous brow. She told Fay so over coffee at the Three.

Izzy had given Hamisch, his son's fiancée, a room on the sly, Number 6, to work on the Big Proof for her Ph.D. in math. "But none of your zen wall gazing," he told her, "neither you nor your Buddhist lover boy!"

"Aunt Anna?" Fay said.

"Antenna, Fay. An aerial. You know! That's how he hears spacemen and gets inside people's heads."

"I wish he *wouldn't*," Fay lamented, ruefully shredding the delicate, cinnamon-powdered inner surface of a danish against her tongue. "But I love him, Audrey, the bum."

"I know you do, Fay. He's a prince, honestly. But what about it—anything strange lately?"

"Naw, just the usual. Bits of CB radio or whatever from interstellar freighters, stuff like that. A couple of wrong numbers on the transdimensional thing. Nothing heavy. I like it quiet. We just make love and do traction."

"Poor Izzy!"

They laughed. Why not? Izzy usually laughed. What are you going to do—fix a broken pencil? That was Izzy's back. It hurt all the time, and he wouldn't take a pill.

The tinnitus came with the man in the jogging suit. Izzy winced.

"What's wrong?" Fay was working the string off the corner of the pastries' box. Izzy put out for fresh danish from his own pocket, though the boss had a bin of shrink-wrapped Sara Lees.

"Not a thing, Fay baby. Too much java, maybe. Let me rent this guy a



key." He dealt one of his Lucky Three registration cards and pushed a ball-point pen in the stranger's direction, clicking the point out for him. "Give me your vitals," Izzy told him. His ears wouldn't stop ringing; it felt like someone reaming his brains with piano wire.

Suddenly, Izzy drew back the pen. "Sorry! My mistake. No vacancy."

"Izzy!" Fay started to say—she had never seen him lie—but he shushed her.

The man smiled, parting his lips slightly to reveal a perfect row of recilinear teeth: matte steel. "Are you aware," he said, "of the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964? Title II, I believe, is the applicable section."

"I'm aware of everything," Izzy said. "I can't give you a key if I haven't got a room."

Fay was methodically laying out the danish on a tray near the Mr. Coffee. She liked to arrange things when she was nervous. She made three rows of four danish each, with the raspberries at the top and the cheese at the bottom. Then she offered the thirteenth, a cheese, to Izzy.

"Not now, Fay."

The man said, "I will wait to speak to Mr. Sarvaduhka, perhaps."

"He's out yachting."

"I believe I saw the gentleman in the laundry room when I pulled in." The man sat down in a plastic chair by the front window, and Fay put her finger on what was so strange about his looks. He was always backlit. There was always an outline around him, like a pen-and-ink in a children's book. And his features were too regular, as if a draftsman had laid them out.

"Look," Izzy said, "we don't need any lobby lizards here. I could toss you for hanging around, couldn't I? That wouldn't violate any statutes."

"I have requested accommodations," he said. "Q.E.D."

"Where's your luggage?"

"Perhaps you would like payment in advance?"

"Tell me where your luggage is."

Hamisch strolled in and made straight for the raspberry jelly Danish. "Sergeant Ducky is here," she said. "He's nosing around the laundry room. I'm going to drive around till he's gone." Then she felt something pulling on her heart the way an unripe persimmon sucks the juice out of a tongue. She stopped and turned around. "What's going on?"

"You know where my luggage is," the man was telling Izzy. Hamisch had the feeling that if she interrupted their gaze, something would sizzle, ring, or slide open.

"So!" said Izzy. "We're laying down our tricks, are we?"

"You rent me a room, you! It's the *law*—not *my* law, *your* law! This is a public house."

"We can't take you in," Izzy said dryly. "There are municipal ordinances against animals."

The man stood up abruptly. His nostrils flared. His eyes were so wide they beat the flesh of his forehead back under his watch cap. His jaw made a wheezing sound when it opened and closed, like an automatic car window. He bit off the words: "I am not an animal."

"Reminds me of Nixon," Izzy said. He tossed the man a key at just the right angle to make it awkward to catch.

The man caught it, however, and then smiled. "I will sign in."

"Don't make me laugh."

"I will sign in." He held out his perfect, large hand, and Izzy had to put a pen in it. The man filled out the card—Manichee Smith—and laid two crisp twenties and a five on the desk beside it. "I know where the room is," he said.

He made two right angle turns and left the office.

"Don't scare the girl in the shower!" Izzy shouted after him.

Hamisch's eyes were wide as a lemur's. "What the hell was *that*?"

"Damn!" Izzy said. In her anxiety, Fay had eaten most of his cheese danish.

"There's plenty more, Izzy," she said.

"Tell me who's checked in," Sarvaduhka said.

Izzy scrunched up his shoulders to ease the back pain a little, and then he gave him the lowdown: "Fornicators in 15. Nice young couple. Very shy. Kind of scared, but not their first time. I suggested condoms and told them how to use the Magic Fingers. Listen, I ordered a dozen *Kama Sutra*s to stick in strategic rooms. Your in-house videos eat the big one, frankly—literally, in fact; this is educational stuff, very highbrow, very explicit, and from the Sanskrit—I thought you'd like that. It's a business deduction on your Schedule C.

"I put a bunch of bicycle boys in the rooms on the west side by the highway, six of them in the three rooms with doors between them. They're on their way to a triathlon in Cleveland. I hope they won't bother the vegetable seed salesman in Number 4. That's not his wife, by the way. You should have heard the phone call that brought her here.

"Look out for the fellow in Number Five. Very sad. Very, very sad. I think I'm gonna give him some wake-up calls by mistake, if you know what I mean. Do you ever do that? No eye contact. Very sad. I worry about these folks. There was one the other night, a lady in her thirties. I made Fay go up and talk girltalk to her. Pregnant. Boyfriend's gone fishing. The usual.

"Hey! Isn't that your third danish?"

"They are stale anyway," Sarvaduhka said. He didn't care what Izzy did as long as the receipts added up. "Who's in Number 6?"

"Nobody."

"Someone left a typewriter in there. What's that about?"

"Don't know." Hamisch was getting careless.

"What about Number 11?"

"Don't ask."

"Did he pay in advance?"

"Cash on the barrel head."

"So what's the problem?" Sarvaduhka cleaned some big bills out of the cash register and bade Izzy good night. "I want you to push the videos," he said before leaving. "They are good videos. They are not bad videos. I use them myself. Good night. Also, give me a copy of this sutra book when they come in."

Just after Sarvaduhka left, Izzy went out to set up the NO VACANCY sign. He took a cup of Swiss Miss along and sipped it as he walked. He'd had it for the night. His back was killing him, and the jogger in Room 11 needed some thinking about.

Izzy had just slapped the big "NO" on the driveway signboard when the male fornicator from Number 15, an athletically built towhead in his late teens, wearing shirt tails and boxer shorts, danced up to him and stood under the halogen floodlights, smiling.

"Those Magic Fingers are something, aren't they?" Izzy said.

The boy said nothing. He scooped up a long, straight branch and balanced it on the tip of one finger.

"Don't do that," Izzy said. Something about it made him uncomfortable. The boy took Izzy's Swiss Miss before Izzy knew what was happening, and he placed the mug on top of his stick. He balanced it there. Just a little wave of chocolate sloshed over the side. The boy was good.

"Hey, quit it," said Izzy.

The light made the boy's skin look jaundiced, his lips black, surreal against the long, empty highway. "Look, Izzy!" the boy laughed. "Watch the coffee kupf!" That's what he said—coffee *kupf*. He made it wobble on top of the stick. A little chocolate sprayed Izzy in the face.

"I said, don't do that." When the cup dipped, Izzy's neck hurt. His back felt awful.

Then it fell. The lad caught it. Dark liquid dripped from his fingers. "Close call," he said, eyeing old Iz. Then he let it go. It shattered on a curbstone. "Too bad," the boy said. "Don't worry, though. I'll pay for it."

"I wish you could," said Izzy, pinching his shoulders and rolling his knuckles against the small of his back. "I really wish you could." He loped back to the office and leaned against the wall by Mr. Coffee. If he breathed too deeply, it hurt more.

Then the kid came in.

"That was quite a trick," Izzy said.

"What?" The boy blushed. "What trick do you mean?"

"Damn! *It wasn't you!*" Izzy grabbed Sarvaduhka's master key from its nook under the desk and headed toward Number 11, groaning with every



step. Fay poked her head out through the bead curtains behind the check-in desk—she had been watching “Wheel of Fortune.” She brushed past the young lover . . .

“ . . . I just wanted to get some danish for Thelma. . . .”

. . . and poked her head out the office door after Izzy.

“What’s the matter?” she called out.

“Later,” he said, without looking back.

Fay ducked back in. “I hope you’re using those things like Izzy told you,” she told the boy as she dialed Hamisch’s room.

“Um, yes. Thank you, Ma’am.” He chose a raspberry and cut half of the remaining cheese with the side of a plastic spoon.

“I know,” said Hamisch from over in 6, “I left the typewriter and Marmaduke saw it, right? Sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“It’s not that, Audrey,” Fay told her. “Something’s wrong. Izzy just charged out of here with all his tags on. I think it’s the jogger. Could you go and see?”

“Fay, I’ve got to stay and wait for Willy.”

“Well, I’ve got to cover the office. For heaven’s sake, Willy will find you.”

“That jogger guy scares me, Fay.”

“Never mind. I’m going over.” Fay hung up.

The closer Izzy got to Number 11, the more his head buzzed. He felt so dizzy that the eleven, when he got there, looked just like a one, and every time he turned his head, the earth and sky turned with it. He was mad enough to ignore it, though.

He didn’t need the key. The door was ajar. He pushed it open, and there was Smith, sitting at Number 11’s round, oak-veneered table, playing cards with Willy.

“Pop!” Willy said, laying down his cards. “Do you know Mr. Smith? I just met him by the ice machine. We seem to have a lot in common.”

Fay came up behind Izzy and carefully laid her hands on Izzy’s shoulders. Then Hamisch was there too, a little out of breath. The jogger man just stared at his cards.

“Yeah,” said Izzy. “He’s quite a guy.”

“He even knows something about Audrey’s doctoral area, don’t you, Mr. Smith?” Willy said.

The jogger man turned his head ninety degrees, absolutely without inclination on any plane whatsoever, and smiled at Izzy, Fay, and Hamisch—at their stomachs actually. Then he turned the ninety degrees back to his hand at gin rummy.

“About Excluded Middle?” Hamisch piped up. “Brouwer’s bald spot?”

“*Tertium non datur*,” the jogger man said in Latin, and he laid down all his cards in stacks of three and four.

“*Nondotter*, my Aunt Fanny!” Izzy snarled. “Of course he knows all



about it. This is the guy who stole the 'excluded middle' in the god-damned first place! And now he's after *my ass*."

### *Audrey's Doctoral Area*

Lucky old Sarvaduhka hadn't looked more closely at the word mill in Number 6! There was a half-filled sheet still hugging the platen, with two pieces of carbon paper (one facing the wrong way) and their couple of onion sheets. Beside the machine was a small stack of finished sheets with lots of erasures, cross-outs, arrows, sidebars, and coffee stains. Audrey was working on the *Tertium Excluisis*—and on torrid love letters to Willy to tide her over the hours of cerebral shutdown.

Her period was a few days late, and she was surprised to discover how happy that made her feel. She wrote the letters but didn't mail them, and she didn't tell Willy about her period either. She had bought a pregnancy test kit and hidden it under the bathroom sink in the motel room, in the curve of the trap; she couldn't bring herself to use it quite yet.

How come Izzy didn't know? Izzy with that WD-40 mind of his, a mind like penetrating oil that lubed-in on everything from the blinking Cepheids to Aunt Shirley's grocery list? Izzy was preoccupied. Izzy was in pain. And the guy in 11 was some kind of trouble. So Audrey's womb was still *juris privati*, even in Izzy's motel: good thing!

"I'm either pregnant or I'm not," Hamisch typed. Then she laughed at herself and typed x's over it; she typed o's on top of the x's just to make sure. But actually, it was right on the money—Hamisch was working on the Law of Excluded Middle, a foundational principle of mathematics, or at least some people thought so: something is either true, or it isn't, period—there is no third possibility, no *tertium*. "So if it's false that I'm not pregnant, then I am!" This time she didn't x it out. She opened the window and shouted "I am!" into the empty motel courtyard.

She was going to title her paper—which would clinch her Ph.D. and make her reputation by being published in the *Annals of American Mathematics*, or *not*—"Brouwer's Bald Spot." Jan Egbertus Brouwer was a Dutch mathematician back in the twenties who proved that, in layman's terms, however you groom it, every whorl of hair has a dead spot at the center—call it the cowlick conundrum. Brouwer called it a Fixed Point Theorem. ("Every map of the continuum onto itself contains at least one point which is its own image," was the way it came to Manichee Smith in his wet dreams.)

"Trouble is," Hamisch reminded Willy one day, "Brouwer had a sort of conversion experience. He decided that the Law of Excluded Middle was not to be trusted, but without it, you've got no Fixed Point Theorem, just a bald spot. Get it?"

"I get it," said Willy. He already had three letters after his name. He

was casually trying to peek past her to the stack of papers by her typewriter; it didn't look like mathematics.

"Oh, the *Exclusis* is all right for a universe of three or four things, or a million, or any finite number! Then you can just check each thing, one way or another, and if it's not *not* this, well then of course it *is*!"

"I get it," he said. She really loved him. He knew she did. That's what she was really talking about. It just came out like that.

"But for *infinite* collections, like numbers or points on a line . . ."

". . . or your red hair!" he said, kissing it.

"Don't mix me up. Excluded Middle might not apply. Maybe there's something besides yes and no, Willy. I feel like there used to be." He was unbuttoning her blouse. "I feel like there used to be *lots* of things besides. Colors, smells, feelings, all kinds of things! Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"No," he said. He took her lower lip between his teeth. "Let's meditate," he whispered. "Let's do some zazen, whaddaya say? Izzy'll never know."

She tried to ignore him . . . "Even wars and hatred and things like that are because of there being no *tertium* for people," she said. "Where did it go?" . . . but she liked what Willy was doing.

"Pop says somebody took it," Willy laughed, and that was the last thing either of them said that night.

All that had been when the moon was waning. Now it was new. Or was it? Tonight Willy was coming over, and she would tell him about the maybe-baby, that she was pregnant, or wasn't.

The phone rang. It was Fay. She was worried about Izzy and the guy in 11.

"Gin," said Smith.

"He lost? Willy *lost*?" Hamisch said.

"I never lose at cards," said Willy, but there were the threes, the queens, and the five hearts, from the four through the eight, all face up on the table in front of Smith. "Well, you caught me with a full diaper."

Willy laid down his cards and added up the points he was stuck with. He counted the pips one by one, touching them with the tip of his forefinger. He did it very slowly, like ice melting. Fay was moving slowly too. The shape of Izzy's shoulder remained in her hands, even after he had stepped away. Hamisch was saying something indecipherable because her voice was so low and scratchy, like rolling thunder or like a record trailing off when a fuse blows. Only Izzy and the jogger man were moving at their normal speed.

"Nice trick with the kid and the stick," Izzy remarked, "but you owe me a Swiss Miss."

"Put it on my tab."

"You're not gonna get me, you know. My funny bone's too strong. You guys are just a laugh factory, as far as I'm concerned."



"How is your back doing, Izzy?"

"You son of a bitch, what's your beef with me, anyway?"

"Some mutual acquaintances of ours got tired of land travel over the Isthmus of Izzy. They decided to blast a canal through."

"And you got the contract."

"Who better?"

"Yeah," Izzy growled, "who better than the guy who murdered the rainbow? Are you ever gonna give that thing back, by the way?"

"The *tertium*? Forget it. It is too interesting to watch you ciphers squabble."

"That's what I figured, you scum." Izzy had to sit down, but it didn't make his back feel any better. "Look," he said, "I can't help it if I'm some kind of cosmic relay station. I never asked for this noggin."

"Stop it," Smith said. "You're making me cry."

"Come on, Manny, can't we come to some kind of accommodation here? I mean, like the Panama Canal Treaty or something?"

"I am not authorized, Izzy."

"Right by the book, huh?"

"You know me."

"Yeah, I know you. Me and every mortician and hangman and IRS accountant. And Brouwer. He knew you."

"You should have seen his face, Izzy. Now, *that* was tasty. He just happened to be looking in the right direction—he was a little like you, actually—when I made off with the thing."

"I see it," said Izzy, reeling. "I see him that morning. He's trying to run after you, but he doesn't even understand what direction you're taking off in—it's not one of the regular three. He's shouting after you, 'Give it back! Give it back!' Something like that. It's Dutch. 'Give back our *woonerf*! What's a *woonerf*?'"

"Ha ha! Yes. That is what he called it, a *woonerf*. In Holland, they have little islands that slow down city traffic—parks, monuments, buildings even. Cars have to go around. *Woonerfs*! They think it makes life more charming. I think it just impedes traffic. Actually, *you* are a *woonerf*, Izzy."

"I'm gonna slow you down, Smith."

"No, you are not. Look at Brouwer. All he could do was write little monographs to his colleagues, trying to tell them their *Tertium Exclasis* was a lie. And he was a lot smarter than you, Izzy."

"What are you going to do?"

"The law of the place in which the guest is received by an innkeeper determines the nature of the obligation created by such a reception—Holland vs. Pack, Tennessee, 1823. There are analogous rulings all over the observable universe, Izzy."

"You have to follow local rules?"

"Yes, local—Milky Way, Solar System, Earth, et cetera, country, state, and municipality. That's how I am."

"Black and white. I know it."

"I'll have to think about what exactly to do. You'll have time to write a will."

Izzy stood. He walked backward, carefully, to replace his shoulders precisely in the curve of Fay's hands. "Your checkout time is ten A.M.," he said.

"... fifty-nine, sixty-eight—it's sixty-eight points," said Willy, "plus the thirty for going out without discarding. You fleeced me, Mister."

"This is your wake-up call, Mr. Lemming," Izzy sang sweetly into the phone. "It's eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty? Eight-thirty?" was the heavy response. "It's eight-thirty *at night*."

"Oh," said Izzy. He waved Fay away. She was trying to make him take some aspirin with codeine. She even had a glass of water ready for him. "Oh, wasn't it *supposed* to be eight-thirty at night? I thought it was supposed to be eight-thirty at night. You must have meant eight-thirty *in the morning*."

"Of course I did . . . wait a minute! I didn't ask for any wake-up call."

"Didn't you? Oh dear! I must have gotten you mixed up with Number 5."

"This is Number 5!"

"Oh. Please forgive me. I'm terribly sorry. I don't know *how* I made such a mistake."

"Well, see that it doesn't happen again!" Number Five slammed down the phone, starting Izzy's tinnitus again.

"That should do him for awhile," Izzy said. "Got a little rise out of him. The main cause of suicidal depression, my dear, is low levels of adrenaline."

"Izzat so?" said Fay. She took the pill herself.

"Hey, what gives?"

"I don't feel so good."

"It's that joker in 11," Izzy said. "We're gonna fix his wagon. Pull me his folio out of the bucket."

Fay found Smith's card in the big rolodex and pitched it to Izzy. She slumped down in a Naugahyde chair by the map of tourist attractions on the easel by the door. She closed her eyes and thought about marsh gas.

Willy sauntered in and announced that he and Audrey were finished. He looked back and forth from Fay to Izzy, waiting for a response.

"Oh, shut up," Izzy said at last. "Things are bad all over. Why don't you come over here and make yourself useful?"

Izzy showed him the card he was studying. "Manichee Smith," it said.



What a riot! "Who was Manichee?" Izzy asked him. "Tell me, Mr. Ph. of D., was he somebody?"

"Look, Pop," Willy pleaded, "I feel awful. Audrey is being the most incredible bitch."

"It's not Audrey. It's the guy in 11, I'm telling you. He has this effect on people. Now answer my question."

"He was a Persian. Third century. Manichee, Mani—it's the same guy. A dualist."

"Interesting! What did he say?"

"This is not my field."

"What did he say, Willy?"

"There's Good. There's Evil. There's nothing between. Two worlds fighting it out. The Christians named a heresy after him: Manichean."

"What happened to him?"

"The Magi killed him. Zoroastrian priests. Same kind of guys who visited Baby Jesus. They put him in jail and killed him."

"So we had a breather of—eighteen twenties minus two hundred something—one thousand five hundred years, say, till Brouwer."

"What are you talking about, Pop?"

"I'm talking about the guy in Number 11."

"Oh Lord! More weirdness! This is all I need."

"You don't believe me?"

"Just leave me alone, okay?"

"The hell I will," Izzy said. "I need you, Willy." Izzy tightened up all over, making his muscles into a suit of armor to protect his ailing spine. It would cost him in the morning, but he had to be mobile to save his life. He folded up Smith's folio and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Then he took Willy's arm and led him outside. As he tugged Willy after him out the door, he said to Fay, "You're a worthless hag who never made a decent cup of coffee in her life, and if you don't get off your duff and wash my drawers, I'll dump you."

Willy was aghast. Izzy just pulled him along by the elbow, down past the laundry room toward the row of doors. Willy kept looking back to see if the office would explode. He saw Fay get up and pound the window. He heard her shouting something.

"Forget about Fay," Izzy said. "She'll be okay. I had to do that—Izotherapy. Between you and me, Fay is the absolute best woman on Planet Earth. She compares to my mother like the sun compares to a lit fart, and my mother is a saint in heaven."

"Now let's get down to business. I don't suppose you've noticed how the place has been filling up in the last hour or so, since your game of rummy with Manichee?"

"Izzy, there are no more than half a dozen people here, counting Hamisch. The darn parking lot is empty."

"That's not the way I see it, Willy."

"Okay, Pop, so how do *you* see it?"

"You want me to show you? Good. Hop on."

"What?" said Willy.

"Look, wild oat, Peter Pan I'm not. I got no faerie dust. Just hop on, Willy."

"I don't think I know what you're talking about, Pop."

"That's perfect. Don't think about it. Just *do* it."

"Hop on?"

"Hop on!"

He did it. He didn't know *what* he did—body English without the body?—but Willy *did* it, dilating his mind like an eye in the dark, and there he was, on his father's wing. Just like the time he *almost* heard the sound of one hand clapping. Everything looked the way ether smells, full of eddying movement, as if spirits were evaporating from the skins of things, filling the air, singing and jabbering, dancing through matter, oblivious to the conventional borders of people and things. "Holy shit, Pop!" Willy said.

"Shit Pop! I like that," Izzy said. "Definite marketing potential."

"Be serious. You *live* with this?"

"Yeah," said Izzy, "live or die, with this and my aching back. Now let's check the guest list, shall we?"

Izzy guided his son from door to door. Skipping the cyclists, the suicide, the salesman, Smith, of course, and Hamisch, he pushed each door open and turned on the lights. Willy was stupefied.

In one room, he saw the Nile River; it was a woman in her middle thirties with a face that made you feel that you were asleep and dreaming. At the same time, the room was empty. They were *all* empty. The room with the elephants was empty. They were trumpeting and stampeding, so that Willy slammed the door shut before Izzy could show him what he wanted him to see. Then there was the room with the square root of two. It was an actual number, a fraction, complete, logic despite, and it howled like a banshee, scurrying into the mop board when they turned on the light. All that remained was a trail of dots, an infinite, converging sequence.

Fear was in Number 7. Room 14 was red, deep red, red so searing to the eye that Willy thought for a moment he was bleeding to death. "That's a heart attack," Izzy said. "All of the heart attacks. Even animals'. That's what it is. Let's get out of here."

The ceiling of 17 was a fiery sky. Leprous devils with skins like plains full of volcanoes were fettered to the clouds. Twelve Maidens of Light appeared, rainbow-like above a distant hillside, and far above them all, devils and Maidens, a crowd of heavenly beings ejaculated. Their seed fell to earth like a rain of Light, and a Sea Monster sprang up out of the Ocean, where the clock-radio used to be.



Willy was terrified. He started chanting:

*"Roopung shunyatah shunyatah ayva roopum  
roopah na pirtuk shoonyatah . . ."*

"What is that?" Izzy asked him. "What are you saying? It's making my ears stop ringing." But Willy couldn't hear him for the Sea Monster's roar.

They moved away from the rooms and sat down on a rock near the big neon "LUCKY THREE." Willy was shaking. Izzy put his arm around him. They could hear the young couple at it again in nearby 15. Izzy liked that sound.

"They're from all over," Izzy said. "Some are here just to watch, to make sure Smith does the job right. Others are here to help out."

"What job, Pop?"

"There's a contract out on me, Willy. Mr. Smith is trying to kill me. Thing is, he has to follow the rules. That's where we can trip him up." Izzy groaned then and grabbed his back. Willy started to massage him. "That's it. A little lower. Ahh!"

Hamisch was coming toward them. "Look. I'm sorry, Willy," she said. "I think I might be pregnant."

"Or not," said Izzy.

"Or not," she said.

Willy tilted his head to call her over. She sat down beside him, and together they worked on Izzy's sacroiliac. They kept on digging and rubbing while Willy laid his head on Audrey's shoulder and softly wept.

Izzy said, "Thank you. Thank you," but it wasn't helping at all.

Their fingers got tired. Izzy was staring at Smith's crumpled folio, with all the big blank lines: no car model or license number, no employer, no home address, just "Manichee Smith," and "Rooms: 1. Nights: 1. Number in Party: 1."

"Okay," Izzy said. "Okay. We gotta move. I'm going back to the office to look up a couple of things. I want you two to help me, all right?"

"Sure, Izzy, anything," Hamisch said for them both.

"Go back to 6. Watch the clock. Willy, at midnight exactly, I want you both to say that thing you were saying over in 17."

"The Prajnaparamita Hrydaya Sutra?" Willy said.

"Gezundheit!" said Izzy.

Hamisch asked, "Were you chanting that, Willy?" Willy nodded. "It's a very old Buddhist text," she told Izzy. "We chant it at the zen center. 'Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form . . .'"

Izzy cut her off: "Whatever. It makes my tinnitus stop. It must do something to Manny too, something awful, I hope."

"Two person, zero sum," said Hamisch. She couldn't help herself.

"What?" said Izzy.

"Everything that helps you hurts him, and vice versa."

"Hamisch, you're a doll," Izzy said. "Did I tell you that Willy has a girlfriend in 3?"

"What?!" Hamisch shouted.

Willy said, "Pop!"

"Take it easy. Just a little Izzotherapy there; gets the juices flowing. Now you go back and watch the clock. I gotta check out *Il duce's* library." Izzy limped back to the office, past all the "empty" rooms.

As soon as he opened the door, Fay was all over him. "They're having an orgy in the connecting rooms on the west side," she said. "Where were you? They're riding their bicycles around inside. The seed packet guy is complaining, if you can believe it."

"What about 5?"

"I don't know about 5."

"Better go see, Fay. Wait a minute—Fay, I love you. You know that, don't you? I loved you since the minute I laid eyes on you. Do you still wanna shave my eyebrows apart? Go ahead. It's okay with me. Anything you want, baby. I really love you. Honest. I'll go get the razor."

"Iz, honey, what's wrong?" She put her arms around him.

He looked down. He was choking back tears, but he managed to say, "You better go check on 5, Fay. Bring him a cup of coffee. Tell him you thought he called for it. You know. Whatever."

"Sure, Izzy." She poured some stale coffee into a Styrofoam cup, snapped a lid on, and left the office with it. Just outside, she knocked on the window, and when Izzy looked up, she gave the pane a sloppy kiss that squeaked and left a big wet mark. Izzy smiled, and she walked away.

Izzy made himself a Swiss Miss and sat down in back at Sarvadhuka's rolltop desk. It smelled heavily of sandalwood incense. There was a little portable tape player, an old Sears Panasonic, in one corner of the desk under a row of little nooks with pennies, fasteners, and postage stamps stuffed in them. Izzy pushed the play button and heard a delicious, wavering soprano. She was singing something in Hindi, a love song. Sarvadhuka's desktop buzzed with the growl of the harmonium.

Izzy found the book he was looking for between two thin volumes with fancy nagari script and green monkeys on the covers. It was Joseph Henry Beale's *Law of Innkeepers and Hotels*, the 1906 edition. Stuffed between the pages were dozens of scraps, yellowed and dog-eared; Sarvadhuka tried to stay current on ways of maximizing income just inside the law. They were clippings from trade journals and newspapers, having to do with vice laws, civil suits against hotel owners, pending legislation, and so on.

Izzy sipped his chocolate and read. When the pain in his back got to be



too much, he stood up, or if he was standing, he sat down. Up or down, he kept reading till it was nearly midnight.

The salesman in 4 called. He wanted to know how to get the in-house video to work and if anyone had spoken to the rowdies on the west side. Izzy was conciliatory. He hung up and looked over Sarvaduhka's videotapes. Passing up the X's, he chose "Lyme Disease in Your Own Backyard: Identification and Precautions," dropped it into the machine and started the system. Then he bade the lovely soprano good night—she was still crooning as he stepped out the door—and he walked over to Number 11, balancing his skull as well as he could on top of his damaged spine. In his hand Izzy clutched Smith's crumpled folio.

"I do not want you to come in," Smith said, when Izzy reached the door.

"You got me there, pal," Izzy admitted. "*Newton Hotel vee Corbett*, Georgia Appellate Court, 1921. 'It is an unjustified intrusion upon the guest and a trespass against his rights incident to his occupancy and so on and so forth.'"

"You might look up *McKee vee Sheraton-Russell, Incorporated* as well, Mr. Molson," Smith said through the closed door. Izzy's head was pounding, and the tinnitus was like a high power line through his cranium.

"Come on, Manny," Izzy said, "can't we find some middle ground here? Maybe I can beat your bosses' offer. Let me in. Hey, come on! We can play rummy. I bet I could beat your pants off. You can kill me *later*. Willy's strictly small time; you know that, don't you? *I* taught him everything. *I'm* the man to beat at the Lucky Three, boy."

The door opened. Manichee Smith was wearing patterned silk pajamas. He was holding a deck of cards in one hand. The room behind him looked completely untouched except for the chairs pulled slightly away from the table where he and Willy had been sitting hours before. "I taught *Pythagoras* everything," he said.

Izzy stepped in. As he passed Manichee, he felt the skin pull away from his ribs, like hair standing up to follow a charged balloon.

"You hear it, don't you, Izzy?" Manichee said.

"Hear what?"

"The music of the spheres. You hear it, Izzy, just as Pythagoras did. That is why you can get past my door."

"So Pythagoras had tinnitus too! Listen, why don't we skip the small talk? You're out of here. I've got the goods on you, brother. Look at this." Izzy showed him the registration card.

"Come over here where the light is better," Manichee said. He laid his hand lightly on Izzy's back to escort him to a bedside lamp. The touch hurt Izzy, but he didn't let on.

"Your name isn't Smith," Izzy said. "You're in violation of the true-name registration statute, buddy."

"If I were to write my true name, Izzy, this entire continent and all the

sky above it and all the fluids below would burst into flame and be utterly consumed."

"Well, in that case," said Izzy, "you'd be guilty of a *number* of statute infractions, wouldn't you?"

"The penalty for the infraction you mention cannot be more than twenty-five dollars . . ."

"If you don't make tracks, I'm gonna call the boys in blue."

". . . and, in any case, there is no such statute in this jurisdiction, or in any jurisdiction, to my knowledge—which is complete—outside of Indiana, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Is there something the matter with your head?"

Unconsciously, Izzy had begun to rub his temple with the heel of his hand. He stopped. "Everything is aces," he said. He glanced at his watch: five after midnight. What was Willy doing?

"It is approximately ten hours until checkout time, Izzy," Manichee said. He smiled, and Izzy fell to his knees.

Just then the ringing in Izzy's ears stopped. His back even felt a little better. Manichee looked alarmed. He squinted and looked around. "What treachery is this?" he said. Leaving Izzy on the floor by the bed, Manichee stomped about the room, as if he were looking for a mosquito. "It almost sounds like the old tongue," he muttered.

"It's Sanskrit," Izzy said brightly. "Is that like Persian?"

"You fools!" Manichee said to Willy and Hamisch, but not with his audible voice, "do you know who I am? I am Maitreya, the Buddha to Come. I am He! Mani and Maitreya are the same. I command your silence!"

In Room 6, Willy's recitation started to flag. Hamisch gripped his arm. "Keep going," she said. "If the Buddha stops you, kill the Buddha! Izzy needs us." Willy continued to chant.

*" . . . pungcha skandhan tan cha svabhava shoonyatan . . . none are born or die, nor are they stained or pure, nor do they wax or wane . . . no ignorance, no end of ignorance, no withering, no death, no end of death . . . there is no pain, or cause of pain, or cease in pain . . . guttay guttay pahraguttay pahasunguttay Bodhi svahah. . . !"*

"Say, what about the phone bill?" Izzy said, pulling himself to his feet again.

"What phone bill?" fumed Manichee.

"The *phone* bill. You must have called all your friends here somehow—you know, the gals and guys made of Tempest and Devouring Fire up and down the hallway. I'm not talking about the bicycle kids. By the way, those are no-smoking rooms, Manny. I hope you know that."

"There is no one in those rooms. By local standards of perception, there is no one there. No one!"



"Yeah, well, you must have *called* them, though. And the FCC says that the motel takes a cut of the action. I can evict you for nonpayment *de diem in diem*, for each charge as it accrues, bub. *Morningstar vee Lafayette Hotel, New York, 1914.*"

"Make them stop that. What they are chanting is a lie. It is a lie. A thing either is or it is not. It cannot be both. It cannot be neither. Stop it! I can't think with all that noise."

"Nobody but us hears a thing, Manny. The way I figure it, with those calls of yours to the Andromeda Galaxy and intergalactic calls to your boys in the Magellanic Clouds or whatever, not to mention the interdimensional stuff, which can add up, you owe the Lucky Three about fifty-six hundred billion dollars, give or take."

"I will call Ashaqlon and Namrael to devour the aborted fetuses of the female devil's union in Hell! Heaven and Earth will collapse in a Great Conflagration lasting one thousand four hundred and sixty-eight years! According to the Federal Communications Commission, the motel may *not* charge a fee for non-intrastate calls."

"Who's talking non-intrastate, by which I assume you mean *interstate*, you scrawny Wisenheimer? The FCC allows fees of up to one hundred percent on calls *out of the country*, and if the Crab Nebula ain't out of the country, Jack, then the Pope has a flophouse in Dubuque serviced by Albigensian nuns and the Lubavitcher Rebbe eats Canadian bacon on Yom Kippur!"

"I'll *pay*," Manichee screamed. "Make them abjure! Make them say it is or it is not!" Izzy couldn't see where he grabbed the checkbook from, or the pen, but suddenly Manichee had them; he scribbled out his check and pressed it into Izzy's hand. On it was a five and a six followed by eleven zeros, but Izzy couldn't make out the bank it was drawn on—its name was written in six dimensions in florid Manichaeian script, with vowel signs that could only be seen in one's sleep.

"Now you will die," Manichee said. "I will not do it, not in any legally prosecutable sense in this benighted world of yours."

"Not so fast, Mr. Manicure. There's still the little matter of your address."

"Of my what?"

"Your *address*. Look here. You haven't filled it in." Izzy showed him the little card.

One might have called it a snuffle. Something was dripping from Manichee's nostrils. But it wasn't the usual effluence. It was a torrent of vaporous liquid, a roiled ocean teeming with tortured, drowning souls; yet at the same time, impossibly, it never passed the cleft in Manichee's perfect chin.

Izzy offered him his handkerchief.

"I came to Brouwer's Holland from Samarkand," the man in pajamas

said. "The Muslim holy men chased me out of Babylon, where the Father of Greatness abandoned me after Zoroastrian High Priests tricked me into their prison, keeping me there for twenty-six days until my body died, and with it the Eagle, the Demon, the Lion, the Fish, and the Dragon, two-legged, four-legged, swimming and crawling in perpetual lust and strife—no more!"

*. . . ayvong sarvadharmah shoonyatah lakshanah anutpatrah anirudhah amalah vimalah asongpurnah . . .* everything therefore is nothing, without beginning, without end, without perfection, without fault . . .

"I'm a simple man," Izzy said. "Just give me your home address."

"It would mean nothing to you. It would not even seem to you a separate place from this one. It *interpenetrates* all these seemings. This too is my home and my place of power, right here where we stand." He turned his gaze on Izzy, and the force of it pushed Izzy back against the door. Izzy felt his vertebrae crumbling to fine dust. The room was spinning.

Something hard was pushing against him from behind. Just then the door opened, shoving Izzy aside, and Sarvaduhka came in, carrying the big "NO" sign under his arm. "Izzy, what is this?" he said. He was angry. "No vacancy? You put up the no vacancy sign, and most of the rooms are *empty*? There is *plenty* of vacancy! There is *everywhere* vacancy. There is vacancy in your head, Izzy!"

Manichee was beside himself.

"Tell him, boss," Izzy said. "Tell him about *Golstadt vee Sleepytime Inn*, 1957."

"What is going on here, Izzy?" Sarvaduhka asked. "There are people bicycling in the west side rooms. There are close-ups of ticks—of *ticks*, Izzy!—on the video. Where are the *tits*, Izzy? Where is the *ass*? Nobody is interested in things that live in the grass! And why is there a light on in Number 6? And what is Fay doing with a harmonica and a washboard in Number 5?"

"Come on, boss, tell him about the *Sleepytime* decision."

Sarvaduhka paused. He looked around the room. He couldn't see the severed roots of the five trees of Hell between Mr. Manichee's bared teeth. He couldn't smell the sulfurous fumes or hear the anguished screaming of the Sea Monsters being defeated by the Adamas of Light in the smoke alarm by the bathroom door. Everything looked Okay.

"The 1957?" Sarvaduhka said. "You want to know the 1957? What's the matter, isn't this gentleman coming from somewhere else?"

"No," said Izzy. "That's my point. No luggage. Nothing. He just said he lives *here*."

"Yes, well, then, according to the court, as I recall, since the gentleman



is not a *bona fide* traveler, the relationship of innkeeper and guest, with its implied obligations and restrictions, is not, strictly speaking, established. Now what about the ticks, Izzy? What about the bicycles? What about the *harmonica*?"

"No!" gasped Manichee.

"You heard it," Izzy said. "I can boot you! Get out."

"No!" said Manichee.

"Izzy," Sarvaduhka put in, "are you being uncivil to a paying guest?"

Izzy ignored him. "You're gone, Manichee. You're not here. Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. I like the ring of that."

Manichee was fading, like a flock of pigeons turning on the wing, blinking out in thin profile against a blazing sky. Manichee was evaporating before their eyes.

"I'll be back, Izzy," he said. "I've left tokens in the caves of Turfan and the ruins in Tabessa and Fayyum, in Manichaeism, Chinese, and Coptic. You will be as nothing . . . *nothing* . . ."

He was gone. The deck of cards he had been holding to the very end fell and scattered on the floor.

Sarvaduhka stood motionless for a long time, staring at the place where the pajama man had been. Then he closed his mouth.

"Don't worry, boss," Izzy said. "You're gonna be a very rich man. . . ." He handed Sarvaduhka the check. ". . . if you can find someone to cash this."

Izzy walked out of 11 and made his way to Number 5, where Fay and the suicide were playing "Has Anybody Seen My Gal?" jugband style. "Do you have to go?" the man asked Fay when Izzy rapped on the door.

"Keep the washboard," she said. "The mouth organ too. I can't really play it." She tossed it to him and left with Izzy.

"Iz," Fay said, as they walked next door to 6, arm in arm, "I've never seen you so tall."

They walked in on Willy and Hamisch without knocking. "It's over," Izzy told them.

Hamisch said, "I'm going to have a baby."

"I would have told you that before," said Izzy, "but I had a lot on my mind."

The UPS man left the package of books outside the office while Izzy slept. Izzy didn't get up till noon. At eight-thirty, the salesman pushed his key through the mail slot and drove away to his next drygoods store, leaving the lady in Number 4 to enjoy HBO till checkout. The bicycle athletes left a mess, including a message in shaving cream on one of the bathroom mirrors: "WHAT THE HELL IS SHOONYATAH?"

The suicide from 5 was in the office, putting a filter full of Maxwell House in the Mr. Coffee. The gurgling noise woke Izzy up. "Fay . . ." he said.

"I'm asleep!" she said.

Izzy got up and stretched. The pain was like heat lightning—subtle, remote; his back would hurt again, but not for a while. He strolled through the bead curtains and gave the coffee drinker a nod.

"No danish today!" the man observed.

"Forgive me," said Izzy. "I slept late."

"That's okay," the man said. "I'm just leaving. Thank that woman for the harmonica."

"Sure thing," said Izzy. Izzy followed him out the door and picked up the parcel of *Kama Sutra*s. He took it inside and unwrapped it. He laid one copy neatly on Sarvaduha's rolltop, in front of the green monkeys. He put another one next to the folio well; he removed the card for the fornicators in 15 and stuck it in the book to remind himself to give it to them when they came to check out; they would certainly sleep late.

Hamisch breezed in with Willy in tow. "You're alive," she said. "Have you still got this job?"

"I don't know," Izzy said. "Sergeant Ducky's probably still out trying to cash that check. But I think he likes me, Audrey."

"What's not to like?" Willy said.

"Say, by the way, I'm glad you came in here. I've got something for you," Izzy said.

He fished through the folio well for a minute, and then he handed Hamisch a little white card. Hamisch's full name and license plate number were at the top, and there was a dollar amount at the bottom.

"This is for your phone calls and that," Izzy said.

"What phone calls?" she said. Then she looked at the card. "Forty-five bucks?" she howled. "Izzy, what gives? I thought we had an understanding."

"Well now. Hamisch, we did at that. And no navel-gazing was a part of it too. You think I don't know why you were five minutes late on the chanting last night?"

"Izzy," she said, offended, "we were sitting in meditation *for you*, doing *zazen for you*."

"Yeah, well, a deal is a deal, Audrey. We agreed: No Big Z. I just docked you for the time you were on that black cushion. One room, one night: forty-five smackers."

"*Sitzfleisch* don't run cheap," Fay put in, sleepwalking through the bead curtains.

Willy just reached for his checkbook. ●