

Excerpt from "Raphael" by John Stewart Wynne

During the holidays, reservations were supposedly hard to come by at Tavern on the Green, but Kathryn wheedled her way into a table for two at ten PM. As for the lateness of the dinner hour, who cared? It was New York, wasn't it? And it was Central Park at Christmas.

So there they sat, against the window which looked out onto the parking lot and the skeletal trees whose iced branches, ablaze with tiny golden lights, shone against the drifting night clouds. But inside all was warm. Kathryn hadn't touched her food, but talked incessantly.

"Your daddy has had his hands in so many people's pockets for so long that he's turned into a bold son of a bitch and doesn't even bother to leave them with the lining anymore. They fall for that confident smile of his, they can't wait for him to fleece them. You'd think astute businessmen like Walter Newton and Theo Youngman would treat him like a leper after what he's done to them." She lifted the bottle of champagne from the bucket. Immediately a waiter was at her side to do the honors. "No, I can manage." She laughed. "You can't stand by my side all night." The waiter smiled in deference and moved away. She refilled her glass. "Maybe they figure if they let a Vice-President of Chase Manhattan Bank rob them, it gives them a kind of status. It couldn't happen to just anybody. Hoodwinked by the best of them."

Raphael made little pricks with his fork into the skin of the roast goose.

"Don't do that."

Raphael put his fork on his plate and stared at the white rose in the center of the table.

"Oh, yes," Kathryn continued, "David Hurst is the original Robber Baron and anybody from hell to breakfast is fair game to him."

Raphael gazed around the restaurant which was crowded to the hilt.

"Quit looking around. Do you want to attract attention? What if we're being followed? Your daddy will stop at nothing." She frowned. "The divorce should be finalized soon, except for one little item: your daddy will try to get permanent custody of you. We might have to pretend to give in. I'll sign a paper. What's a paper, after all? Nothing that can't be ripped in two and thrown to the winds. That's the trouble with your daddy, he's lived his life thinking that a signature on a piece of paper is binding."

The scent from the roses lingered over Raphael's crystal water glass. Rose water. Raphael yawned.

"I should get quite a settlement so we can really live in luxury. Lots of lovely stocks and bonds. We'll never come back from Europe. Never. Do you understand, Raphael?"

"I do."

"And not a word to anyone about our plans."

"I won't say anything."

"Oh, God," Kathryn kept swallowing champagne. "I just couldn't have spent Christmas under his roof. I don't care how many tantrums he throws. It's much better, just the two of us, right here." She put her hands over her eyes and the pearl ring on her finger seemed to be a crystal ball she was consulting. "Sometimes your mother feels so alone, like she was on a train all by herself, wandering from car to car, with plenty of beautiful scenery to stare at, but not another human face, anywhere, just empty seats. And all the time, the train is moving, moving, moving." The crystal ball cleared and her hands came down. "But it's all a silly nightmare. I open my eyes and there you are."

Raphael smiled.

"Now I guess I can eat something." Kathryn seemed relieved and exhausted at the same time. She took a small, tentative bite of Chicken Kiev.

Outside, heavy wet flakes had begun to fall, the kind Raphael knew would quickly accumulate. The snow had begun to dust the half dozen limos parked in the lot.

Raphael watched the drivers come grudgingly awake, nudge the caps back from their eyes, and step out into the cold to clear off the windshields. Only one of the men had been awake, smoking and reading a newspaper, but now he too stepped outside, flicking his cigarette into the damp bushes and passing the newspaper to one of the others.

Once outside, the drivers seemed rejuvenated, leaning against the warmed-up engines, sharing jokes with each other, cursing the snow, anxious for their employers to leave the restaurant so they could get a leg up on the storm.

In a reverie, Raphael saw Peter in the lot resting against their limo, cap pulled down over his forehead, arms folded, waiting, quiet. Raphael's fingers touched one of the white roses in the vase before him. Peter slowly raised his head and tipped his cap to Raphael who approached, shivering without a coat. There was a fleeting puzzlement that passed across Peter's face, then it was gone and he straightened like a stick, towering over the boy. He said nothing but opened the back door for Raphael to climb inside, his eyes all the while on the icy branches and the black sky; as he began to shut the door, Raphael touched his arm. Embarrassed, Peter glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching. They were alone. From behind his back, Raphael pulled the white rose which he pressed into Peter's hand. Gruffly, Peter accepted it and as he closed his fist around it, the petals turned a bright red.

With a gesture of finality, Kathryn dropped her napkin by the side of her plate. "I'm dying to get back to the hotel and you'll soon see why. We can have our dessert later. We'll phone room service around midnight and have them bring us some hot chocolate and biscuits." She giggled. "We can even invite that funny man who plays the violin by the coatroom to come up and entertain us. We can do whatever we want!"

In the cab ride back to the hotel, Raphael watched the streetlights stripe his mother, who had fallen asleep, her head tilted back on the seat at a slightly awkward angle. The lights went down her dress in even lines and Raphael thought she resembled a gentle

zebra. Her breathing was very soft like the snow that was blanketing Manhattan, and her profile was sharp as the ice that was building underneath the drift.

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