



#1 BESTSELLER

STEPHEN KING

WRITING AS RICHARD BACHMAN



THINNER

THINNER

by

Stephen King

Chapter One

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'Thinner,' the old Gypsy man with the rotting nose whispers to William Halleck as Halleck and his wife, Heidi, come out of the courthouse. Just that one word, sent on the wafting, cloying sweetness of his breath. 'Thinner.' And before Halleck can jerk away, the old Gypsy reaches out and caresses his cheek with one twisted finger. His lips spread open like a wound, showing a few tombstone stumps poking out of his gums. They are black and green. His tongue squirms between them and then slides out to slick his grinning, bitter lips.

Thinner.

This memory came back to Billy Halleck, fittingly enough, as he stood on the scales at seven in the morning with a towel wrapped around his middle. The good smells of bacon and eggs came up from downstairs. He had to crane forward slightly to read the numbers on the scale. Well actually, he had to crane forward more than slightly. Actually he had to crane forward quite a lot. He was a big man. Too big, as Dr Houston delighted in telling him. *In case no one ever told you, let me pass you the information,* Houston had told him after his last checkup. *A man your age, income, and habits enters heart-attack country a roughly age thirty-eight, Billy. You ought to take off some weight.*

But this morning there was good news. He was down three pounds, from 249 to 246.

Well the scale had actually read 251 the last time he'd had the courage to stand on it and take a good look but he'd had his pants on, and there had been some change in his pockets, not to mention his keyring and his Swiss army knife. And the upstairs bathroom scale weighed heavy. He was morally sure of it.

As a kid growing up in New York he'd heard Gypsies had the gift of prophecy. Maybe this was the proof. He tried to laugh and could only raise

a small and not very successful smile; it was still too early to laugh about Gypsies. Time would pass and things would come into perspective; he was old enough to know that. But for now he still felt sick to his too-large stomach at the thought of Gypsies, and hoped heartily he would never see another in his life. From now on he would pass on the palm-reading at parties and stick to the Ouija board. If that.

'Billy?' From downstairs.

'Coming!'

He dressed, noting with an almost subliminal distress that in spite of the three-pound drop the waist of his pants was getting tight again. His waist size was forty-two now. He had quit smoking at exactly 12:01 on New Year's Day, but he had paid. Oh, boy, had he paid. He went downstairs with his collar open and his tie lying around his neck. Linda, his fourteen-year-old daughter, was just going out the door in a flirt of skirt and a flip of her pony-tail, tied this morning with a sexy velvet ribbon. Her books were under one arm. Two gaudy cheerleader's pom-poms, purple and white, rustled busily in her other hand.

"Bye, Dad!"

'Have a good day, Lin.'

He sat down at the table, grabbed *The Wall Street Journal*.

'Lover,' Heidi said.

'My dear,' he said grandly, and turned the *Journal* facedown beside the lazy Susan.

She put breakfast in front of him: a steaming mound of scrambled eggs, an English muffin with raisins, five strips of crisp country-style bacon. Good eats. She slipped into the seat opposite him in the breakfast nook and lit a Vantage 100. January and February had been tense - too many 'discussions' that were only disguised arguments, too many nights they had finished sleeping back to back.

But they had reached a *modus vivendi*: she had stopped dunning him about his weight and he had stopped yapping at her about her pack-and-a-half-a-day butt habit. It had made for a decent-enough spring. And beyond their own private balance, other good things had happened. Halleck had been promoted, for one. Greely, Penschley, and Kinder was now Greely, Penschley, Kinder and Halleck. Heidi's mother had finally made good on her long-standing threat to move back to Virginia. Linda had at last made J.V. cheerleaders and to Billy this was a great blessing; there had been times

when he had been sure Lin's histrionics would drive him into a nervous breakdown. Everything had been going just great.

Then the Gypsies had come to town.

'Thinner,' the old gypsy man had said, and what the hell was it with his nose? Syphilis? Cancer? Or something even more terrible, like leprosy? And by the way, why can't you just quit it? Why can't you just let it alone?

'You can't get it off your mind, can you?' Heidi said suddenly - so suddenly that Halleck started in his seat. *'Billy, it was not your fault. The judge said so.'*

'I wasn't thinking about that.'

'Then what were you thinking about?'

'The *Journal*,' he said. 'It says housing starts are down again this quarter.'

Not his fault, right; the judge had said so. Judge Rossington. Cary, to his friends.

Friends like me, Halleck thought. Played many a round of golf with old Cary Rossington, Heidi, as you well know. At our New Year's Eve party two years ago, the year I thought about giving up smoking and didn't do it, who grabbed your oh-so-grabbable tit during the traditional happy-new-year kiss? Guess who? Why, my stars! It was good old Cary Rossington, as I live and breathe!

Yes. Good old Cary Rossington, before whom Billy had argued more than a dozen municipal cases. Good old Cary Rossington with whom Billy sometimes played poker down at the club. Good old Cary Rossington who hadn't disqualified himself when his good old golfing-and-poker buddy Billy Halleck (Cary would sometimes clap him on the back and yell, 'How they hangin', Big Bill?') came before him in court, not to argue some point of municipal law, but on a charge of vehicular-manslaughter.

*And when Cary Rossington did not disqualify himself, who said boo, children? Who in this whole fair town of Fairview was the boo-sayer? Why, nobody, that's who! Nobody said boo! After all, what were they? Nothing but a bunch of filthy Gypsies. The sooner they were out of Fairview and headed up the road in their old station wagons with the NRA stickers on the back bumpers, the sooner we saw the rear ends of their home-carpentered trailers and camper caps, the better. The sooner the -
- thinner.*

Heidi snuffed her cigarette and said, 'Shit on your housing starts. I know you better.'

Billy supposed so. And he supposed she had been thinking about it, too. Her face was too pale. She looked her age - thirty-five - and that was rare. They had married very, very young, and he still remembered the traveling salesman who had come to the door selling vacuum cleaners one day after they had been married three years. He had looked at the twenty-two-year-old Heidi Halleck and had asked politely, 'Is your mother home, hon?'

'Not hurting my appetite any,' he said, and that was certainly true. Angst or no angst, he had lain waste to the scrambled eggs, and of the bacon there was now no sign. He drank half his orange juice and gave her a big old Billy Halleck grin. She tried to smile back and it didn't quite happen. He imagined her wearing a sign: MY SMILER IS TEMPORARILY OUT OF ORDER.

He reached across the table and took her hand. 'Heidi, it's all right. And even if it's not, it's all over.'

'I know it is. I know.'

'Is Linda -?'

'No. Not anymore. She says she says her girlfriends are being very supportive.'

For about a week after it had happened, their daughter had had a bad time of it. She had come home from school either in tears or close to them. She had stopped eating. Her complexion had flared up. Halleck, determined not to overreact, had gone in to see her homeroom teacher, the assistant principal, and Linda's beloved Miss Nearing, who taught phys ed and cheerleading. He ascertained (ah, there was a good lawyerly word) that it was teasing, mostly as rough and unfunny as most junior-high-school teasing is apt to be, and tasteless to be sure, considering the circumstances, but what could you expect of an age group that thought dead-baby jokes were the height of wit?

He had gotten Linda to take a walk with him up the street. Lantern Drive was lined with tasteful set-back-from-the-road homes, homes which began at roughly \$75,000 and worked up into the \$200,000 indoor-pool-and-sauna range by the time you got to the country-club end of the street.

Linda had been wearing her old madras shorts, which were now torn along one seam and, Halleck observed, her legs had now grown so long and coltish that the leg bands of her yellow cotton panties showed. He felt a pang of mingled regret and terror. She was growing up. He supposed she

knew the old madras shorts were too small, worn out in the bargain, but he guessed she had put them on because they, made a link with a more comforting childhood, a childhood where daddies did not have to go to court and stand trial (no matter how cut-and-dried that trial might be, with your old golf buddy and that drunken grabber of your wife's tit, Cary Rossington, driving the gavel), a childhood where kids did not rush up to you on the soccer field during period four while you were eating your lunch to ask you how many points your dad had gotten for bagging the old lady.

You understand it was an accident, don't you, Linda?

She nods, not looking at him. Yes, Daddy.

She came out between two cars without looking either way. There was no time for me to stop. Absolutely no time.

Daddy, I don't want to hear about it.

I know you don't. And I don't want to talk about it. But you are hearing about it. At school.

She looks at him fearfully. Daddy! You didn't

Go to your school? Yeah. I did. But not until three-thirty yesterday afternoon. There were no kids there at all, at least that I could see. No one's going to know.

She relaxes. A little.

I heard you've been getting some pretty rough handling from the other kids. I'm sorry about that.

It hasn't been so bad, she says, taking his hand. Her face - the fresh scatter of angry-looking pimples on her forehead - tells a different story. The pimples say the handling has been rough indeed. Having a parent arrested is not a situation even Judy Blume covers (although someday she probably will).

I also hear you've been handling it pretty well, Billy Halleck says. Not making a big thing out of it. Because if they ever see they're getting under your skin

Yeah, I know, she says glumly.

Miss Nearing said she was especially proud of you, he says. It's a small lie. Miss Nearing hadn't said precisely that, but she had certainly spoken well of Linda, and that meant almost as much to Halleck as it did to his daughter. And it does the job. Her eyes brighten and she looks at Halleck for the first time.

She did?

She did, Halleck confirms. The lie comes easily and convincingly. Why not? He has told a lot of lies just lately.

She squeezes his hand and smiles at him gratefully.

They'll let it go pretty soon, Lin. They'll find some other bone to chew. Some girl will get pregnant or a teacher will have a nervous breakdown or some boy will get busted for selling pot or cocaine. And you'll be off the hook. Get it?

She throws her arms around him suddenly and hugs him tight. He decides she isn't growing up so fast after all, and that not all lies are bad. I love YOU, Daddy, she says.

I love you too, Lin.

He hugs her back and suddenly someone turns on a big stereo amplifier in the front of his brain and he hears the double-thud again the first as the Ninety-Eight's front bumper strikes the old Gypsy woman with the bright red cloth kerchief over her scraggly hair, the second as the big front wheels pass over her body.

Heidi screams.

And her hand leaves Halleck's lap.

Halleck hugs his daughter tighter, feeling goose flesh break all over his body.

'More eggs?' Heidi asked, breaking into his reverie.

'No. No, thanks.' He looked at his clean plate with some guilt: no matter how bad things got, they had never gotten bad enough to cause him to lose either sleep or his appetite.

'Are you sure you're?'

'Okay?' He smiled. 'I'm okay, you're okay, Linda's okay. As they say on the soap operas, the nightmare is over - can we please get back to our lives?'

'That's a lovely idea.' This time she returned his smile with a real one of her own - she was suddenly under thirty again, and radiant. 'Want the rest of the bacon? There's two slices left.'

'No,' he said, thinking of the way his pants nipped at his soft waist (*what waist, ha-ha?* a small and unfunny Don Rickles spoke up in his mind - *the last time you had a waist was around 1978, you hockey puck*), the way he had to suck in his gut to hook the catch. Then he thought of the scale and said, 'I'll have one of them. I've lost three pounds.'

She had gone to the stove in spite of his original *no sometimes she knows me so well it gets to be depressing*, he thought. Now she glanced back. 'You are still thinking about it, then.'

'I'm *not*,' he said, exasperated. 'Can't a man lose three pounds in peace? You keep saying you'd like me a little'

thinner

'a little less beefy.' Now she had gotten him thinking about the Gypsy again. *Dammit!* The Gypsy's eaten nose and the scaly feel of that one finger sliding along his cheek in the moment before he had reacted and jerked away the way you would jerk away from a spider or from a clittering bundle of beetles fuming in a knot under a rotted log.

She brought him the bacon and kissed his temple. 'I'm sorry. You go right ahead and lose some weight. But if you don't, remember what Mr Rogers says -'

'- I like you just the way you are,' they finished in unison.

He prodded at the overturned *Journal* by the lazy Susan, but that was just too depressing. He got up, went outside, and found the New York Times in the flowerbed. The kid always threw it in the flowerbed, never had his numbers right at the end of the week, could never remember Bill's last name. Billy had wondered on more than one occasion if it was possible for a twelve-year-old kid to become a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

He took the paper back inside, opened it to the sports, and ate the bacon. He was deep in the box scores when Heidi brought him another half of English muffin, golden with melting butter.

Halleck ate it almost without being aware he was doing so.

Chapter Two

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In the city, a damage suit that had dragged on for over three years - a suit he had expected to drag on in one shape or another for the *next* three or four years - came to an unexpected and gratifying end at midmorning, with the plaintiff agreeing during a court recess to settle for an amount that was nothing short of stupefying. Halleck lost no time getting said plaintiff, a paint manufacturer from Schenectady, and his client to sign a letter of good intent in the judge's chambers. The plaintiff's lawyer had looked on with palpable dismay and disbelief while his client, president of the Good Luck Paint Company, scratched his name on six copies of the letter and as the court clerk notarized copy after copy, his bald head gleaming mellowly. Billy sat quietly, hands folded in his lap, feeling as if he had won the New York lottery. By lunch hour it was all over but the shouting.

Billy took himself and the client to O'Lunney's, ordered Chivas in a water glass for the client and a martini for himself, and then called Heidi at home.

'Mohonk,' he said when she picked up the phone. It was a rambling upstate New York resort where they had spent their honeymoon - a gift from Heidi's parents - a long, long time ago. Both of them had fallen in love with the place, and they had spent two vacations there since.

'What?'

'Mohonk,' he repeated. 'If you don't want to go, I'll ask Jillian from the office.'

'No, you *won't!* Billy, what is this?'

'Do you want to go or not?'

'Of *Course* I do! This weekend?'

'Tomorrow, if you can get Mrs Bean to come in and check on Linda and make sure the wash gets done and that there aren't any orgies going on in front of the TV in the family room. And if -'

But Heidi's squeal temporarily drowned him out. 'Your case, Billy! The paint fumes and the nervous breakdown and the psychotic episode and -'