

THE WAY OF ALL FISH

A Novel

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Scribner

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INCIDENT IN THE CLOWNFISH CAFÉ

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They came in, hidden in coats, hats pulled over their eyes, two stubby hoods like refugees from a George Raft film, icy-eyed and tight-lipped. From under their overcoats, they swung up Uzis hanging from shoulder holsters and sprayed the room back and forth in watery arcs. There were twenty or so customers—several couples, two businessmen in pinstripes, a few solo diners who had been sitting, some now standing, some screaming, some crawling crablike beneath their tables.

Oddly, given all that cordite misting the air like cheap champagne, the customers didn't get shot; it was the owner's aquarium, situated between the bar and the dining area, that exploded. Big glass panels slid and slipped more like icebergs calving than glass breaking, the thirty- or forty-odd fish within pouring forth on their little tsunami of water and flopping around in the puddles on the floor. A third of them were clown fish.

All of that took four seconds.

In the next four seconds, Candy and Karl had their weapons drawn—Karl from his shoulder holster, Candy from his belt—Candy down on one knee, Karl standing. Gunfire was exchanged before the two George Rafts backed toward the door and, still firing, turned and hoofed it fast through the dark.

Candy and Karl stared at each other. "Fuck was that?" exclaimed Candy, rising from his kneeling position.

They holstered their weapons as efficiently as they'd drawn them, like the cops they were not. They checked out the customers with their usual mercurial shrewdness, labeling them for future reference (if need be): a far table, the two suits with cells now clamped to their busy ears, calling 911 or their stockbrokers; an elderly couple, she weeping, he patting her; two tables shoved together that had been surrounded by a party of nuts probably from Brooklyn or Jersey, hyenalike in their braying laughter, all still under the table; a couple of other business types with Bluetooth devices stationed over their ears, talking to each other or their Tokyo counterparts; a blond woman, or girl, sitting alone eating spaghetti and reading something, book or magazine; a dark-haired woman with a LeSportsac bag slung over the back of her chair, who'd been talking on her Droid all the while she ate; and a party of four, girls' night out, though they'd never see girlhood again. Twenty tables, all in all, a few empty.

All of that ruin in under a minute.

The Clownfish Café was nothing special, a dark little place in a narrow street off Lexington, its cavelike look the effect of bad lighting. A few wall sconces were set in the stone walls, apparently meant to simulate a coral reef; candles, squat and fat, seeming to begrudge the room their light, were set in little

iron cages with wire mesh over their tops, their flames hardly flickering, as if light were treasure they refused to give up. They might as well have been at the bottom of the sea.

Now the brightly colored fish, clown fish, tangs, angelfish of neon blue and sun-bright yellow, were drawing last breaths until the blonde who had been eating spaghetti tossed the remnants of red wine from her glass and scooped up some water and added one of the fish to the wineglass.

Seeing this, Candy grabbed up a water pitcher, dipped up what he could of water, and bullied a clown fish into the pitcher. The other customers watched, liked it, and with that camaraderie you see only in the face of life-threatening danger, were taking up their water glasses or flinging their wineglasses free of the cheap house plonk and refilling them from water pitchers sitting at the waiters' stations. The waiters themselves ran about unhelpfully; the bartender, though, catapulted over the bar with his bar hose to slosh water around the fish. Wading through glass shards at a lot of risk to their own skin, customers and staff collected the pulsing fish and dropped them in glasses and pitchers.

It was some sight when they finished.

On every table was an array of pitchers and glasses, one or two or three, tall or short, thin or thick, and in every glass swam a fish, its color brightened from beneath by a stubby candle that seemed at last to have found a purpose in life.

Even Frankie, the owner, was transfixed. Then he announced he had called the emergency aquarium people and that they were coming with a tank.

"So who the fuck you think they were?" Karl said as he and Candy made their way along the dark pavement of Lexington Avenue.

"I'm betting Joey G-C hired those guys because he didn't like the way we were taking our time."

"As we made clear as angel's piss to him, that's the way we work. So those two spot Hess in there, or they get the tip-off he's there and go in with fucking assault weapons thinkin' he's at that table the other side of the fish tank, and that's the reason they shoot up the tank?"

"Call him," said Candy, holding tight to his small water pitcher.

Karl pulled out his cell, tapped a number from his list of contacts, and was immediately answered, as if Joey G-C had expected a call. "Fuck's wrong with you, Joey? You hire us, and then you send your two goons to pull off a job in the middle of a crowded restaurant? No class, no style, these guys got. Walked in with Uzis and shot the place up. And did they get the mark? No, they did not; they just messed the place up, including a big aquarium the least you can do is pay for. Yeah...."

Candy was elbowing him in the ribs, saying, "Tell him all the fish suffocated and died."

"And there was all these endangered fish flopping on the floor, some of them you could say were nearly extinct, like you will be, Joey, you pull this shit on us again. Yeah. The job'll get done when the job gets done. Good-bye."

"We saw Hess leave through the side door. You'd think he knew they were coming."

"Jesus, I'm tellin' you, C., the book business is like rolling around fuckin' Afghanistan on skateboards. You could get killed."

"You got that right."

They walked on, Karl clapping Candy on the shoulder, jostling the water pitcher as they walked along Lexington. "Good thinking, C. I got to hand it to you, you got everyone in the place rushing to save the fishes."

The water was sliding down Candy's Boss-jacketed arm. "Don't give me the credit; it was that blond dame that did that. She was the first to ditch her wine. You see her?"

"The blonde? I guess. What'd she look like?"

Candy shrugged; a little wave of water spilled onto Lexington. "I couldn't see her face good. She had a barrette in her hair. Funny."

"You didn't see her face, but you saw a hair barrette?" Karl laughed.

"Crazy, man."

They walked on.

There are those girls with golden hair whom you half notice in a crowd. You see one on the outer edges of vision, in the people flooding toward you along Lex or Park or Seventh Avenue, blond head uncovered, weaving through the dark ones, the caps and hats, your eye catching the blondness, but registering nothing else. Then you find, when she's passed, it's too late.

A girl you wish you'd paid attention to.

A girl you knew you should have seen head-on, not disappearing around a corner.

Such a girl was Cindy Sella.

Some of them would talk about it later and for a long time. The businessmen climbing into a cab, the girl with the LeSportsac bag, her Droid lost inside.

As if there'd been an eclipse of Apple, a sundering of Microsoft, a sirocco of swirling iPhones, BlackBerrys, Thunderbolts, Gravities, Galaxies, and all the other smartphones into the sweet hereafter; yes, as if all that had never been; nobody, nobody reached for his cell once the fish were saved and swimming. They were too taken up with watching the fish swimming, dizzy-like, in the wineglasses.

Nobody had e-mailed or texted.

Nobody had sent a tweet to Twitter.

Nobody had posted on Facebook.

Nobody had taken a picture.

They were shipwrecked on the shores of their own poor powers of description, a few of them actually getting out old diaries and writing the incident down.

Yes, they talked about that incident in the Clownfish Café the night they hadn't gotten shot, told their friends, coworkers, pastors, waiters at their clubs, their partners, wives, husbands, and kids.

Their kids.

—Way cool. So where're the photos?

—Remarkably, nobody took one.

—Wow. Neanderthal.

—But see, there were these neon-bright blue and orange and green and yellow fish, see, that we all scooped up and dropped in water glasses, and just imagine, imagine those colors, the water, the candlelight. Look, you can see it . . .

But the seer, seeing nothing, walked away.

NEW GRUB STREET

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Cindy Sella walked along Grub Street in the West Village with a clown fish in a big Ziploc bag that Frankie had furnished when she'd asked whether she could keep her fish, the one she had saved, and take it home with her. Yes, he had told her, my pleasure.

As many times as she'd eaten at the Clownfish Café, she could not remember coming across Frankie. He must have been there, somewhere behind the bar or in the kitchen or watching the fish, but she hadn't been observant enough to see him.

That was the difference between today and yesterday.

She thought about the extraordinary episode at the Clownfish as she passed the stingy little trees set in their foot-square patches meant to beautify the streets of Manhattan. They were blooming thinly, their branches mere tendrils. She didn't know what kind of trees they were. This, she thought, was shameful. If someone threatened to beat her with a poker until she named ten trees, she'd be dead on the Grub Street pavement.

Cindy had decided she was one of the least knowledgeable people she knew. And she was a writer. How did she ever manage to create a book without the most rudimentary knowledge of basic facts, such as what this little tree was right outside the door of her building? What reader would want to place himself in the hands of a writer who didn't know that?

Didn't she really know the names of ten trees? Apple cherry lemon orange peach banana. For God's sake, if you were going to name fruit trees, any five-year-old could do it.

Speaking of which, there was one sitting on the stoop of the row house right next door to her building. A five-year-old named Stella something. What was she doing out here at ten at night without her mother?

"Stena!"

Oh, there she was.

"Stena!"

Mrs. Rosini yelling from the doorway. Stena, not Stella, because Mrs. Rosini was adenoidal or perhaps had a cleft palate. You see, Cindy told herself, you don't even know the difference between these physical maladies.

Stella stood up and gazed at Cindy, who said, "Hello."

Stella stuck out her tongue.

"Stena, get in here!"

When Stella turned her back, Cindy stuck out her tongue, too. Then she entered her building.

Cindy liked her apartment building. It was painted white and was only eight stories high. It was dwarfed by the new high-rise co-op across the avenue, which was all metal and glass, glass at odd angles so that the sun staggered around it, drunk with its own light, setting off knifelike reflections. The building ran unsteadily upward to thirty or forty stories. The higher it got, the more it became the sun's broken mirror.

The doorman, Mickey, caught the door as she pushed it. Mickey and his little mouse-brown terrier were standing guard...