

THE REMAINDER

by

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NOTES

Characters:

Lillian a book editor; in her seventies.

Thom a writer; early to mid forties

Time and Place: The present, New York City

A Word: This is about failure, *loss*, time.

For Trish

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The Remainder premiered at Spokane Civic Theatre's Firth Chew Studio Theatre in Spokane, Washington on June 7, 2002.

The Remainder was featured in the 2003 Turnip Festival in New York City, and was performed on April 28, 2003 at the American Globe Theatre, directed by Trish Harnetiaux.

(At rise. LILLIAN's office. She is at her desk. There's a phone, a desk calendar, perhaps a computer and keyboard. Manuscripts are everywhere; some are in boxes. There is also a box containing some personal effects, including a framed photograph. The phone buzzes.)

LILLIAN

Yes.

(A quick look at calendar.)

Who is it? *Thom. Thom?* T-H-O Oh, - the "H" is silent. "Tom." Thom. Do you have him- I don't have him down . . . I'm not here. Have him - no, wait. Is he standing, is he right - say *yes* Kristie, if he's - *Kirstie*. "I - R," yes. *Kirstie* - sorry. Is he - what's he doing? Well, is he or isn't - If he comes back, let him - no, tell him I'm in conference and to make an appointment for Monday. Yes, yes, I know that. Mr. Irving can handle -

(THOM pokes his head in, sees LILLIAN, and enters uninvited.)

- never mind. Thommy! ThommyThommyThommy.

THOM

(Agitated.)

Lillian.

LILLIAN

Lovely to see you, Thommy.

THOM

Hope you don't mind -

LILLIAN

No, no -

THOM

Your bouncer was bouncy, but unhelpful.

LILLIAN

Tell me.

THOM

She didn't have the foggiest idea who I was, I mean, is that any way to greet people?

LILLIAN

Kirstie belongs behind a counter at The GAP. Not a literary bone in her body, except her parents apparently played anagrams in the delivery room. Sit down, Thommy. I've got something in a few minutes. It's good to see you. So, what's up? It's been months.

THOM

Eight. Long enough for you to change the locks. What happened to Miller & Frieman?

LILLIAN

Gobbled up.

THOM

(Reading from a business card.)
Dominion International.

LILLIAN

Megapublishing, vertical integration, global village, all that. Miller & Frieman is gone. *Poof*. I'm sure father turned over more than once. He never liked Miller *or* Frieman, but he loved this place, the work. All gone. No more carbon paper, quill pens, cabling threats to writers. But you got my e-mail.

(No response.)

Thommy?

THOM

No.

LILLIAN

It went out to all clients.

THOM

That was Kevin's department.

LILLIAN

Kevin. Oh, Kevin! Oh, Thommy. When?

THOM

[Indicates the month six months back.]

LILLIAN

I'm so sorry. He was a lovely man.

THOM

Thank you.

LILLIAN

And a more than decent poet.

THOM

You once told him his work needed less *I am* and more pentameter. He liked you for that. For your rigor.

LILLIAN

There wasn't anything in the trades. I would have caught up with you, gone to the service.
(THOM crosses to window.)

THOM

There was no service. His choice - ultimatum. I forgot how thin the air is up here. He left very explicit instructions. He was to be cremated and his ashes were to be folded into a devil's food cake and baked at four hundred for thirty minutes. I was to let it cool, frost with Bavarian chocolate, and eat it in one sitting. I was then to catch a red eye to Raleigh and precisely at sunrise take a dump on Jesse Helms' front porch [or grave if now deceased].

(Several beats.)

LILLIAN

And did the FBI show up at your apartment a few days later with DNA results from the stool, and a warrant for Kevin's arrest?

(A beat.)

Really, Thommy. Kevin *is* gone?

THOM

Yes.

LILLIAN

What would he say to your using him to ferret out whether I'd read your manuscript? Your little anecdote is somewhere in chapter six, as I recall.

THOM

He might have thought me very clever and resourceful.

LILLIAN

Or maddeningly elliptical, like your story lines.

THOM

Consider it part of the grieving process.

(LILLIAN retrieves the manuscript, confronting THOM with it.)

LILLIAN

There. Safe, nearby and well-thumbed.

(THOM takes the manuscript and pointedly checks it for dust.)

THOM

They say the first thing a smart editor does with a new manuscript is have her assistant riffle the pages thoroughly, then lace the margins with cryptic and indecipherable notes.

LILLIAN

That would be a sly editor. Smart ones don't let their writers anywhere within eyesight.

(THOM shows her the passage in the manuscript.)

Alright, chapter seven. I'm slipping.

THOM

Kevin was very fond of this passage. He would have me read it to him in his less triumphant moments.

LILLIAN

I am sorry, Thommy. But you're still a scoundrel.

THOM

And the "EC" in the corner, here?

LILLIAN

That's an intake designation. Existing client.

THOM

Ah, good, then I do exist. Nice to know. You might have had the decency to acknowledge it now and then.
(He produces an envelope.)

Ah, but we do have this from Dominion International reminding me I still exist, if only barely.

LILLIAN

What?

THOM

Oh, please, Lillian.

LILLIAN

No, what -

THOM

My registered, certified, irradiated, powder free remainder notice.

(He tosses the envelope on the desk. LILLIAN picks it up and reads the letter.)
The unsold copies of *Hell Bent*.

LILLIAN

The bastards.

THOM

Come on, you don't know your own client's being remaindered?

LILLIAN

I didn't. Editor's honor. Things are still shaky after the acquisition. You're right, Miller & Frieman - wouldn't happen this way. It's different now, Thommy.

(Indicating the letter.)

Anyway, this is marketing, not aesthetics. Way downstream and around the bend. I should have been told, but I couldn't have stopped it.

(A friendly dig.)

I would have e-mailed you.

(THOM doesn't respond.)

This is part of it, Thommy.

THOM

Discount houses at two-bits on the dollar.

(At window again, tracing his route below.)

First, I cut over a block to miss the *Barnes and Noble* bargain window at fifth and thirty-sixth, then up sixth to forty-eighth where I dodge the second one right there – I have to cut through the alley behind Guido's Take Out.

LILLIAN

It's had two printings.

THOM

(He shudders.)

Little stickers on the jackets. Yellow and unpealable.

LILLIAN

Your first one, *Stemwinder*, one printing.

THOM

(Referencing his manuscript.)

And, meanwhile, high above *Gotham*, not a word on this -

LILLIAN

(Somewhat overlapping.)

Skulking about in alleys - re-read your review in *The Atlantic*, you'll feel better. Honestly, you all want the Book Award, or you're suicidal.

(THOM is up and pacing.)

THOM

Seventeen years, Lillian! Now, I'm all but out of print, and they communicate by registered letter! Ah, but I shouldn't feel bad because they'll let me buy back as many copies of my own book at the special author's rate, so I can avoid the humiliation of the ash pile at the *Strand*!

LILLIAN

Oh, Thommy. It's the business end of the stick.

THOM

It's extortion! You're supposed to be fighting for me, not lecturing me about sticks and defending betrayals.

(Referencing the letter.)

I'd rather have anthrax.

LILLIAN

Well, at least you've found new imagery. With *Stemwinder*, it was a stake through the heart.

THOM

And you're still *ruthless*.

(LILLIAN smiles at this.)

LILLIAN

Sit down.

THOM

You're not my mother! How am I supposed to write a line when you're all busy devaluing me and my work!? I mean, tell me so I can -

LILLIAN

Damn it, Thommy, sit down!

(THOM sits.)

You know the rules. One tantrum per visit.

THOM

You're my editor!

LILLIAN

Was.

THOM

You, you quit! Look, I . . . Isn't that a bit -

LILLIAN

You've been re-assigned. To someone else. Robert Irving.

THOM

Irving? First remaindered, now re-assigned. What's next - rape?

LILLIAN

I know the timing's not good. It never is. They're consolidating.

THOM

You and I, Lillian. You're all I've known. You changed my diapers. You let me keep the "H" in Thom. My one allowable pretension. I'm this twenty-seven year old Capote wannabe, with half a voice. You're my Ruth and my ruthless.

LILLIAN

More ruthless than Ruth, Thommy. It's the work. I warned you. Father would say, don't forget - read 'em their rights. *Mirandize* them. The uncomprehending critics. The fickle public. Crass commercial considerations. The inevitable decline in sales - interest. That only a handful survive. You know all this, Thommy.

(He's inconsolable.)

I did love it when you called me Ruth. I think it's Hebrew for companion. Oh, come on, it's a misadventure, not treason. All this could have been avoided. If you'd join the rest of us in cyberspace... you wouldn't have to surrender your hammer and chisel.

THOM

So you lay down your blue pencil, to this Bob Irving fellow? Would this be some relation to Washington Irving? John? Amy? Clifford?!

(Dribbling an imaginary basketball.)

Julius! *Bob*.

LILLIAN

I wouldn't call him Bob. He's very much a *Robert*.

THOM

(Referring to his manuscript.)

And this?

LILLIAN

Don't, Thommy. It doesn't matter -

THOM

Because it's Bob's case now.

LILLIAN

Who knows, he may be a nice fit. He edited the Walker short story collection. I've heard some very good things.

THOM

You owe me this.

LILLIAN

I've got to go.

THOM

At least this. You thumbed it for eight months, scribbled insights. Tell me. As a former editor ... companion. As a bystander, then.

LILLIAN

I think you know. You would have been hounding me months ago. It's been my role ... to name things for you, Thommy. It's a mess. A somewhat entertaining mess, but still a mess.

(Referring to the manuscript.)

I'm not against rearranging reality, if ultimately it has some order to it all. Reading this, I had this image of you madly sandbagging to avoid the flood. If I'd known about Kevin... it would have made complete sense. As a home remedy, not literature. So there, ruthless me.

THOM

Is it salvageable?

LILLIAN

Really, Thommy. Take it up with Bob. I've said more than I should. I'm out of it now. I've sent along my thoughts...

THOM

I don't want to hear *no* from a stranger.

LILLIAN

It isn't a complete *no*. I recommended they acquire it for their internet project. Dominion has a cyberspace library -

(THOM *groans*.)

Listen, will you. Mainly known authors, when the work isn't deemed marketable in hard copy.

THOM

Would I have to sit in the corner of a chat room and be interrogated by idiots!?

LILLIAN

Stephen King [or another well known author] has used the internet.

THOM

Good for him [her]!

LILLIAN

There's a modest advance. If it gets legs, it could turn hard cover. I'm sure the money wouldn't hurt.

THOM

Ah, alms now. Are we finished? I'm wondering if you keep a gun or poison pen nearby.

LILLIAN

(Spent and exasperated.)

Move on, Thommy. If you can't take it anymore, get married, start a family. I've done what I can. They probably won't listen, anyway.

(Silence. THOM drifts to the window, again.)

THOM

You're right, of course. I don't know anymore. I haven't written a true sentence in over a year.

(A beat.)

I used to love this view. Now I watch for planes.

LILLIAN

Write that down. It's a start. Don't hide from it, Thom. Grab it, shake it. Force it down your arm, out the end of your *Ticondiroga* number 2. It's what's always worked for you.

THOM

When I was younger. It's different now.

LILLIAN

I refuse to feel sorry for you. You're a kid. Sure it's harder. So what. There are compensations. You're wiser. It's about discipline. Hemingway was over fifty when he wrote *The Old Man and the Sea*. Call a crisis line, or write. You have choices. Now, go.

(LILLIAN hands THOM his manuscript.)

Here, take this. I'm sure you can decipher what you want.

THOM

Goodbye, Lillian. I - thank you. You're a . . . I've always trusted you. Your father would be pleased.

LILLIAN

Go.

(THOM starts to exit but stops, for the first time sensing something is amiss. He takes in the room, finally focusing on the wall behind LILLIAN, then the other walls in the room. He then looks around the room itself, his eyes settling on a box on the floor.)

THOM

When we were working *Stemwinder*, you quoted your father - the story's in the details, Thommy. The story's always in the details.

(THOM pulls the framed photograph out of the box; it is a photograph of LILLIAN's father and Max Perkins, the well known and highly regarded editor from another era.)

He was a handsome cuss. You've got his eyes, and his sure hand.

(Indicating photograph.)

And standing next to God himself, Max Perkins. Outside the Algonquin, wasn't it?

(LILLIAN nods.)

Always mine the details, Thommy. You told me that the first day I came here.

(Indicating the framed photograph, and the place on the wall where it used to hang.)

The first day I saw this right there. I've let you down, Lilly. I've neglected the details. When?

LILLIAN

Friday.

THOM

What will you do?

LILLIAN

(She shrugs.)

Get married, start a family.

(They share a laugh.)

THOM

Something lean and Spartan, no doubt. What about travel?

LILLIAN

I've seen as much of the world as I care to see. There are a couple of writers colonies that want me to help out. Work with newborns.

THOM

Will you make them diagram their sentences? What is it, disassemble their thoughts?

LILLIAN

You hated that. Father would say, it's a fine line, Lilly. Don't be a pedant, and for God's sakes don't be their friend.

(LILLIAN rises, falters.)

You'll have to excuse me Please

(THOM goes to LILLIAN and takes her in his arms and holds her.)

THOM

I don't think I've ever taken you to lunch, Lilly. How about it?

LILLIAN

When?

THOM

Now. Hungry?

LILLIAN

Yes.

THOM

We'll plot the future. Let's go. What'll it be? *Sardi's?*

LILLIAN

Wendy's.

(On exit.)

THOM

You're a cheap date.

LILLIAN

Reality, my boy. They'd seat us in the back room, anyway.

(THOM exits, followed by LILLIAN.)

END OF PLAY

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