

Titles for The Ice Cream Man Cometh And Other Stories include: White Cadillac, The Ballad of the Sad Hotel, The Actor, Tenacity, The Hold Up, The Absolute, A Shooting on Plymouth Street, The Ice Cream Man Cometh, Girl on a Pedestal, So This Nun Walks Into a Bar, Flying Down to Rio, Anthony, The Boy Who Quoted Nietzsche, Up From Chastity, and O Death!

The Ice Cream Man Cometh and Other Stories

by Douglas DiNunzio

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**THE
ICE CREAM MAN
COMETH**

And Other Stories

Douglas DiNunzio

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The Ballad of the Sad Hotel

by Douglas DiNunzio

Nick Adams stopped, stood for a moment, and examined the large neon sign that hung over the littered sidewalk. The sign said "Palace Hotel". Nick had been wandering the streets much of the afternoon without an address, searching for it. Now he was finally there, at 315 Bowery. Nick's ride from Trenton had suggested the place because it was cheap, and because it was in Manhattan. Nick had his own reason for wanting to be at the Palace, but he hadn't seen the folly in it yet, and he hadn't known enough about the Bowery when the recommendation was made to decline it. He would know soon enough, and with some discomfort, but he hadn't known back in Trenton, and he still didn't know. Experience was not his middle name.

He had a battered leather suitcase in one hand and a portable Underwood typewriter in a thin metal case in the other. It was high summer in the city, so clothes weren't an issue. He had a couple of T-shirts in the suitcase, a couple pairs of underwear, some socks, pajamas, and the usual toiletries. He was wearing the rest: a frayed summer suit, his only dress shirt, and a broad, loud yellow tie that didn't match the shirt. In his pocket, his leather billfold had exactly seventeen dollars, and there were a few quarters and some smaller change in the one pocket that didn't have a hole in it. He had no plan, except to succeed spectacularly.

The man at the front desk greeted him with a grunt. The low-ceilinged lobby smelled of sweat, tobacco, and indolence. It looked to Nick like the inside of a coffin.

"I'd like a room," said Nick Adams.

"Two bits," grunted the man.

"A day?"

"A day, a night. Twenty-four hours. Whatta you care? You want the room or not?"

Nick wanted the room. It was on the third floor, overlooking the street. There was a rusting metal bed frame along one wall and

a thin, slightly soiled mattress rolled on top of it. It had no pillow or sheets, but then the man from the front desk brought them up and dumped them on the threadbare carpet next to the bed.

"The toilet's at the end of the hall," the man said, and quickly disappeared down the corridor. The room was stuffy. Nick opened the window and felt a hot breeze that smelled of animal fat cooking somewhere. He heard the traffic in the street and the dull hum of pedestrians on the sidewalk. He placed his suitcase on the floor. There was a small wooden desk and a metal folding chair in the corner. He set the typewriter case carefully on the desk, unrolled the mattress onto the bed frame, and sat on the bed for a moment, bouncing playfully on the springs. Debauched and dirty as it was, the Palace Hotel was as good a place as any to start.

Another face appeared in the doorway, the face of a rheumy-eyed, tubercular-looking man in his late thirties or early forties. He was smiling, but it was a drunken, feral smile. His large, swollen nose almost glowed.

"*Salve!*" he said. *Quod nomen tibi est?*"

"Excuse me?" said Nick.

"Hello, and what's your name?" asked the man, who was now inside the room and walking briskly toward the open window. Nick answered, his brow forming tight knots of confusion and curiosity. The man stopped at Nick's typewriter case and screwed up his face.

"Whatever do you keep in there?" he asked. "It's too small for a Tommy gun."

"It's a typewriter," said Nick.

"What you need a typewriter for?"

"I'm a writer," said Nick.

"A *writer?*"

"Yes."

"Ah! You say you're a writer, but I think maybe you're only a typist," the man said, his smile growing wider. "*Timebunt angeli stulti irruit in conculationem.*"

"I don't quite understand," said Nick.

“Don’t worry. It’s not necessary here. You hungry, Old Sport? They’ve got a reasonable excuse for a restaurant downstairs.”

Nick had seen it. The Palace Restaurant Bar and Grill. “I could eat some dinner,” he said.

“You’d better bring that typing machine with you,” the man said. “There’s no locks on these doors, and there’s a pawn shop right around the corner. *Mox pecunia diviserunt stulto*. And that goes for fools and their typewriters, too.”

They sat at a small, round table by the front window. A cop was passing by on the sidewalk, absently twirling his nightstick. Nick set the typewriter case on the floor between his legs, keeping it in close contact with his knees.

“Name’s Kibbee,” said the man. “Guy Kibbee, like the actor. You ever seen *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*? He’s in that one. I met him once, on Market Street in San Francisco, but that’s another story.”

“I see,” said Nick, without enthusiasm.

“The stew’s not too bad here, but I’d stay away from the clam chowder if I were you. Guy last week got ptomaine eating the chowder. *Caveat emptor*, and all that.”

“And what are *you* doing here?” asked Nick.

“*Here* here?”

“At this hotel. At the Palace. And you don’t have to explain it in Latin this time.”

“You understand Latin?” asked Kibbee.

“A little. Tenth grade.”

“*Scire modicum periculosum*.”

“You could say that,” said Nick. The waiter wandered over. “I’ll have the stew,” said Nick. “And a Coke.”

“Not hungry,” said Kibbee to the waiter, “but I’ll have a drink. Two fingers of your best rot-gut, if you don’t mind.” He coughed and gave Nick a surreptitious look. “The doctors suggest that I might have a touch of TB,” he said with a grin. “But then again, I might not. So, what do you want to write about?”

“Life,” said Nick, and Kibbee laughed.

“Life?” Kibbee said with some indignation. “Hell, why don’t you write about porcupines, or apple jelly? Jesus! Life?”

“You still haven’t told me why you’re here,” said Nick with rising irritation.

“No, I haven’t, have I?”

“If you can’t answer any of my questions, you might at least try answering some of your own.”

“*Touché, mon ami.* You cut me to the quick. I am, in fact, a failed writer of some substance. A novelist, a poet. A *raconteur* of sorts. I even stayed at the Chelsea Hotel when Tom Wolfe was there. You ever hear of him? Not in tenth grade, I imagine. Well, I was there when he was there. On the same damn floor, even. Fifteen years ago. What do you think about that? I was there. And now I’m here. That’s porcupines for you. That’s real apple jelly.”

The waiter shambled over with Kibbee’s drink and placed it in front of him. Nick scowled at the waiter. “Okay, okay,” the waiter said. “The stew’s coming.”

“And a Coke,” Nick reminded him. “With ice.”

“So, I’m here. And now *you’re* here, too,” said Kibbee with a wry, caustic smile. “On your way up, you imagine, just as I’m on my way down. Well, I’m past down, actually. Well past that sad marker. Oh, I don’t mean to discourage you, Old Sport. Every dog should have his day, or the sweet illusion of one. I had mine, you’ve got yours. Life and porcupines, they go on, my friend. With us or without us. Ah, but I talk too much.”

“Can I pay for your drink?” Nick asked.

“You can, but you may not. Good grammar, that. You need good grammar to be a writer, that’s what I think. Unless you’re ol’ Bill Faulkner, of course. You know about him?”

“Of course.”

“*The Sound and the Fury.* Never understood a word of it. No decent grammar at all in it.”

“I don’t mind paying for your drink,” said Nick.

“You’re changing the subject,” said Kibbee. “But it’s excusable, given your lack of experience and, even more, your lack of failure.”

You haven't failed yet, have you? You haven't even started to fail. You haven't even started *thinking* about failure. Let me guess: you've got a ream of typing paper in that typewriter case between your knees, and you haven't so much as typed out a title for whatever *magnum opus* you're planning. Well, have you, Sport? What have you done in the world? Where have you been? You figured you'd just come to some cheap hotel like this one, for writer's ambiance or whatever, do a little fashionable slumming, and start churning out peerless prose off the top of your gifted head? Is that what you thought?"

The waiter shambled over with the stew and Coca-Cola, and Kibbee went silent, sipping his liquor and glaring across the table. Nick ate without pleasure. He wanted to go up to his room and close the door, but he thought that Kibbee would just follow him with more taunts and challenges. Some time passed. Nick was almost done with his stew. His glass of Coke was empty.

"There was a guy here a month ago," said Kibbee. "He wanted to be a writer, like you. Like me. Tried to shoot himself in the head. Didn't even die. Can you believe it? Just creased his thick skull with a .45. Now, there's failure for you. A perfectly good instrument of destruction, and he couldn't even kill himself. That kind of stuff goes on here at the Palace all the time."

"I'd like to go up to my room now," said Nick in a hollow voice.

"Sure, sure. Go right ahead. *Absentia cor amantius facit.*"

"I'll see you tomorrow, maybe."

"If you hear a gunshot from down the hall, that'll be me. And I won't miss." He paused a moment, smiled and said, "Just kidding, Old Sport. I'm past suicide, too. Slow and steady self-destruction, that's plenty good enough for me these days. Did you catch the alliteration there? *Slow and steady self-destruction*? Good, huh? But then, I was a poet once."

"Good night," said Nick, and Kibbee lifted his glass of rot-gut in a sardonic salute.

Nick tucked the typewriter case under his arm and went slowly up to his room. It was cooler now, but the breeze felt good,

so he left the window open. He opened the case, placed the Underwood portable on the desk, and tore open the ream of paper. He slid a clean sheet under the roller, advanced the sheet, set the carriage, and stared at the empty page. It seemed to stare back at him in undisguised contempt, and once again it issued him a challenge that had as yet gone unanswered. No, not even a title, he thought. Not even that much. Nothing. Less than nothing.

He slept fitfully. Each time he awoke, he told himself that he did not want to see Kibbee anymore. He even thought of moving to the Lanier, a good ten blocks down from the Palace. The rooms cost the same, and there was a cheap restaurant next door called Fuerst Bros., where he could take his meals in peace. Kibbee had been right about one thing, though. Nick had come to the Palace Hotel to play a part -- the noble, starving artist achieving greatness in his lonely garret. It had been a foolish idea, an infantile idea, and an embarrassment. In the morning, he would pack up his suitcase and his typewriter and take his leave of the Palace Hotel. Then he would return to Trenton, where he could lick his wounds in private.

It rained hard during the night. In the early morning, Nick got out of bed to close the window, and when he did, he happened to look down at the sidewalk. There was a man there, lying face up, right under Nick's window, three floors down. The man's tan summer suit was stained red in several places, and his eyes were open. His round head shone like the moon under the streetlight.

Nick took the steps two at a time. When he reached the lobby, Kibbee and the desk clerk were standing solemnly at the entrance to the Palace Hotel.

"Go on back upstairs, Old Sport," said Kibbee. "We've got it covered down here. *Mortem omnibus nobis arridere*, or something to that effect."

But Nick could not resist the temptation to stare at the corpse. He had never seen a dead body before. Not one like this, anyway. Never like this. Only at the funeral home in Trenton. Only in that

most artificial of places. A shadow crossed the corpse, and a beat cop in a raincoat briefly came into view before disappearing again.

"What happened?" Nick asked, but the cop didn't answer. Nick stared again at the corpse, and then at the two men.

"Tell you later, Old Sport," said Kibbee. "Go on back upstairs."

He found Kibbee at the bar and grill having breakfast just after eight that morning. The place was half-full. Or half-empty.

"Try the pancakes, Old Sport," said Kibbee with an almost pleasant smile. "The batter's probably two days old, but they're only two bits a stack."

Nick sat down. "Are you going to tell me now?"

"Sorry about dinner last night," said Kibbee. "I sort of popped my cork at you. Bad form. *Mea culpa, mea culpa.*"

"You know what I mean," said Nick.

"Oh, *that*. Happens all the time here at the Palace."

"Who was he?"

"Just a gungel. Worked for the mobster, Anastasia, until he did something stupid or disloyal enough to merit a chest full of bullets. Albert's wolves were after him. Too bad. Not a bad sort of guy, for a gungel."

"You knew him?"

"Hell, he lived right here, Old Sport. Maybe that's why they dumped him here. He was hiding out, but they found him. He had the room right under yours. I hadn't seen him for a couple of days, so I was kind of hoping he'd gotten away. He told me once he was from Philly. Wanted to go back to Philly. Won't get there now."

"Jesus," said Nick, and went pale.

"You okay?" asked Kibbee.

"I guess."

"Not a pretty sight, was it?"

"No."

"See that kind of thing all the time here. Well, other than that, how was your first night at the Palace, Old Sport? Started writing that *magnum opus* yet?"

"I'm checking out this morning," said Nick. "I'm going back to Trenton."

"Your folks, they live there? In Trenton?"

"Yes."

"Nice and clean in Trenton, I suppose. And quiet. Never been there myself. Been a lot of places, but Trenton's not one of 'em. A well-kept community, no doubt."

"It's okay."

"*Vita deformis esse, sed est vita*. You want the translation, Old Sport?"

"No, thanks," said Nick, and stood up so he could say goodbye from a distance.

Kibbee's rheumy eyes suddenly bore in on him. "You want to write about *life*, Old Sport? If you do, stay right here. You'll find plenty of it." Kibbee turned eagerly in his chair and pointed. "You see that old baldy there at the end of the bar? That man can open a can of beer with his front teeth. I've seen him do it. And that bushy-haired guy over in the corner, the one with the newspaper? Claims he's a Republican turned anarchist. He's got a PhD in something or other. Speaks more languages than I do. And the old guy across the hall from you -- he makes birdcages out of Popsicle sticks. Can you believe that? Got another who forges fine art, mostly Dali. We got a circus midget who speaks in tongues and a hophead who used to make stag movies. We got a colored here, too, just down the hall from me. Played ball with Cool Papa Bell back in the Negro League. We also got us a crazy Cuban, old as dirt, claims he fired pot shots at Teddy Roosevelt up on San Juan Hill. And then there's me, of course. I've got some swell stories to tell about ol' Tom Wolfe. I might even share some with you, if provoked. As for the colorful residents of this fine hotel, I'll take you around for an invite, if you like."

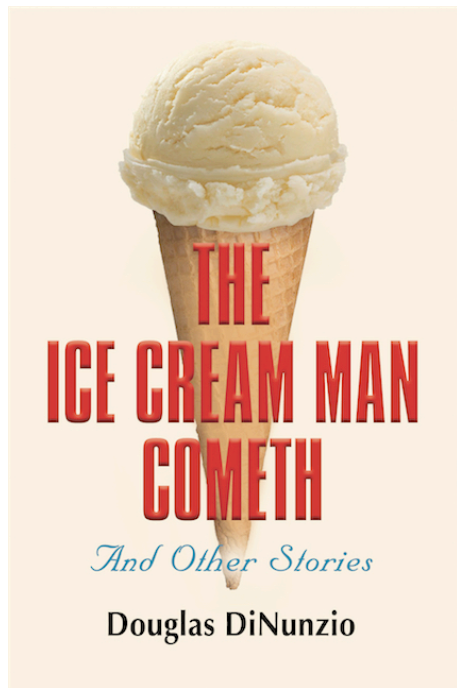
The waiter shambled over. "What're you having, kid?"

But Nick didn't hear him. He stopped in the lobby only long enough to give the desk clerk a shiny quarter and a smile, then raced the three floors up to his room. His typewriter was just

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where he'd left it. Quickly he sat down in the folding chair and typed: *My Happy Life at the Sad Hotel*, by Nicholas Adams.

And he went straight back to Kibbee.



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