

The versatile William Mingin has appeared in our pages in many flavors. Here he takes us on an epic quest to the Heart of Darkness—through a museum kitchen.

Right There

by William Mingin

Crab soup was not worth losing your wife over, he later thought. He hadn't needed it anyway. The Cuban sandwich should have been enough.

Dan had picked both in the Museum café because he liked both and because...well, because it made Barbara wait. He was mad at her, he couldn't remember why afterward. Or disgruntled. He could be prickly, with a nitpickiness fostered by his job as an editor at an academic press. He'd wanted to spite her in some tiny way she couldn't reproach him for. He was entitled to lunch. Not his fault he didn't eat as fast as she did.

Later, he was bitterly ashamed of all that.

The soup had lots of crab and the sandwich was authentically garlicky and moist, but Museum prices were ridiculous. Two lunches for \$33.00? He examined the receipt. They'd charged him for two soups.



When she was gone, he wished he'd let them keep the money.

The cashier was a supersized black woman who talked as if he were a neighbor over to borrow a cup of rice. "Now how'd I do that?" she said, peering at the receipt. "The manager has to void that out. You come back in a little while. I'll remember you."

As he finished up and Barbara waited, chin in hand, staring off at nothing, he saw the cashier leave her post

behind one of the back-to-back, dual cash registers without even a look in their direction.

Well, *someone* was going to give him his money back.

He was still eating. Barbara muttered, "I'll ask. Watch my purse," and went to talk to the operator of the other register, a younger, smaller black woman. It was too far to hear. Barbara wasn't losing her temper yet, so it must be okay.

When he looked up again, an Indian woman was looking at the receipt. She turned and Barbara followed her between two partitions that walled off the cafeteria from, presumably, a service space beyond.

He'd been done for a while, and Barbara wasn't back. The second cashier was removing her cash tray. The first cashier was back, and both looked like they were leaving; a middle-aged white woman with half-glasses on a black string was taking the vacated place.

He started for the cashier station, then realized he'd forgotten Barbara's purse. He hated to hold a woman's purse, like outside a department store changing room. It transgressed a boundary in his mind. But he sighed and took it with him.

He came up to the cashier station just as the two off-duty cashiers reached the space between the partitions.

"Excuse me," he said. They kept chatting, too low for him to hear. "Excuse me!" he said loudly. They ignored him and passed into the opening. "Hey!"

He started after them.

The current cashier said, "I'm sorry, sir, that's for personnel only."

"My wife went in there."

"We don't allow unaccompanied members of the public back there. Insurance regulations," she said, with some sympathy. "That her purse?"

He bit his tongue on a sarcastic, *Well, it's not mine.*

“Yes. Can you get me the manager?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for her to come out. I have no way of getting hold of staff members from here, and I can’t leave my post.”

He didn’t see why not. It was after three, and no one seemed interested in the high-priced leftovers. What did she do in an emergency?

But he held all that back and stood near the cashier station.

Time moved like an exhausted climber mounting a wall of ice. He felt every minute pass, as if each dumped over him like a bucket of cold water. He already regretted having made Barbara wait.

He looked at his watch, shook it. Six years had passed. He decided to go in.

The cashier, who had aged badly, said, “Sir, you can’t go in there—”

“Yeah?” he called back, without turning around. “Call the police.”

But just as he got to the space between the partitions, the Indian manager appeared, as if by pure chance.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can. I was double-charged for my lunch—”

“Do you have the receipt?” Her interruption was smoothly inserted, not impolite.

“Uh, no, my wife took it. Actually, I was only double-charged for the soup.”

“Ah, well, we will need to have the receipt to—”

It was his turn to interrupt. “Well, she showed it to you. She went back there. I’ve been waiting forever.”

The manager glanced at the entranceway. “If she went in here...” She looked doubtful, then turned to him. “She may be out eventually, but not this way.”

“What do you mean? She *did* go in there, with you. Don’t you know where she went?”

She sighed. “Sir, many people go this way, some of them with me. I don’t know where they go. I’m not responsible for them afterward.” She had begun to work as she spoke. She had three stacks of menus. She was opening one from each and inserting a sheet listing dinner specials. The museum must be having an evening function.

Dan’s face flushed. “I didn’t see you take crowds of people in there. I want you to take me to my wife or get her back out here. *Now*.”

“I don’t care what you want!” the woman exploded, bringing a fist down on all three stacks of menus at once. “Wait and hope, or leave, but **YOU WILL NOT PASS HERE. STAFF ONLY.**”

“She’s not staff!” he hollered. He held up her purse. “She was coming right back. I’ve still got this!”

Her face turned dark and bitter. “IF SHE PASSED

HERE, SHE’S STAFF NOW. THERE IS NO FURTHER HOPE. AND I DON’T CARE ABOUT HER BLOODY PURSE.”

“I’m going to get her out of there.”

She rose up like a whirlwind, ten feet, fifteen feet, twenty feet high, her face a storm cloud, her voice a thunderclap, bolts of lightning flashing from her eyes, her many limbs outspread like the legs of a spider, and she howled at him: “AWAY! AWAY FROM THIS DOORWAY! YOU CANNOT PASS HERE!”



He felt a physical dread of her and stepped back, but didn’t fear her otherwise. He was too angry.

He spoke softly to counter her bellow. “You haven’t heard the end of this. I’m going to go in there and get my wife, do you understand?”

She tilted back her huge blue-black face and laughed savagely. “NO ONE GETS ANYONE OUT THIS WAY. EVER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” Then she bent toward him, leering, her tongue curved up between her tusks and pointed teeth.

Shaking with such rage that he didn’t trust himself, Dan turned on his heel and stalked off.

The museum seemed oddly empty; probably during his long wait it had closed.

On a posted floor plan he found the museum offices on the third floor mezzanine, though there was no fourth floor. He started for a nearby stairway, but a guard stepped in front of him, turning 60 or 70 of his eyes to Dan, leaving the rest to watch in other directions.

“I’m going up to the offices,” Dan told him.

