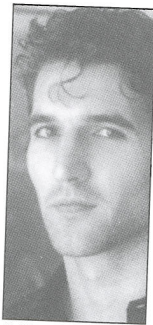


## WHEN THE NINES ROLL OVER an extract



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His name was not Hector, but that's what I'll call him. I met him the winter of '92, in a penthouse apartment far above the city streets. The man who owned the place, a famous photographer whose images of pretty boys and girls stood seven stories high in Times Square, had called me that afternoon to invite me to the party. I guessed I was replacing a more glamorous guest, a late cancellation.

'Bring a razor,' the photographer told me. 'I'll supply the rest.'

A servant, hired for the evening, met me at the door and helped me out of my raincoat. I've had that job before; I've catered rich people's parties, poured their drinks and bussed their dishes. I almost told him that, but I realized the intended gesture of sympathy would come across as merely patronizing – *I used to do menial work, too. And now look at me!*

The living room was empty. I panicked for a moment, the old high school chill, suspected that the entire party was a ruse. Lure Alexander here with promises, let him think he will play with the popular kids, while the real party rages miles away, the revellers laughing as they picture my confusion. But a pale-faced girl wearing a tuxedo stood behind a white-clothed table topped with rows of bottled liquor. I accepted a glass of vodka and looked around the room. The photographer's famous subjects hung from the walls, glassed and framed, smiling their famous smiles. I sipped my vodka and studied their poses. Stars, all of them, but they couldn't compete with the view out the windows, everything blurred and spectral in the rain, headlights and taillights streaming along the avenues, distant bridges glimmering like pearls for Godzilla – my nighttime city.

**“ ‘Bring a razor,’ the photographer  
told me. ‘I’ll supply the rest.’ ”**

I thought I would rather look out the rain-pelted glass than at anything else, but I was wrong.

'Are you Alexander?'

I turned around. A naked man, wet from the shower, holding a rolled towel in one hand, stood on the silver carpet. I looked at the girl