

The Holder

This all started when I found her on the Internet. I'd been living single for less than a week, but the guys at work said it was time to get started. I typed in her name and when the picture came up, I knew right away. It took two days, working up the courage and sending a request to be her friend. Two days later we were.

I look at those old photos every time I walk by the trophy case. Denise dressed as a cheerleader, Denise as Homecoming Queen, Denise the Senior Class Vice President. It's easy to pick her out; the wild, windblown blonde hair, a smile like out of a toothpaste commercial, those green eyes sparkling like gemstones in sunlight. That's the way I described her anyway, in that poem I wrote senior year. No one ever read it but me. I've been holding those images in my mind ever since. If you know where to look, there's a picture of me behind those glass doors, too. A couple of the custodians like to tease me when they catch me standing there, staring. They don't know it's not me I'm looking at.

It was like me and Denise circled our high school in different orbits. Hers was with the perfect, popular kids; mine with those who would never be. We'd hear stories about wild parties where parents were out of town and lucky, cool guys got hot, wet make-out sessions in the backseat of cars parked outside. I'd lay awake late nights, watching my suspended airplane models sway in the ceiling fan breeze, just aching and wondering when I would get mine.

Back then, I figured before Denise could ever fall in love with me, we'd have to spend more time together. The first plan was to grab her after cheerleading practice, stuff her in the back of dad's station wagon, and keep her tied up in the basement until she really understood the

kind and caring guy I was. But when I couldn't come up with a version that didn't, at some point, involve gagging her with a pair of rolled up gym socks, I came up with a longer-term strategy.

I'd go to State, where she was already accepted. I knew because she wore that Tiger sweatshirt on college day with matching socks. I would graduate with honors as an architect. I always liked to draw a lot. A successful career would follow, with Denise as my business partner and trophy wife. Our wedding picture would be on the cover of magazines in grocery store check-out lines.

I was smart, but maybe that Special Diploma worked against me, among other things. I was short on college money, grade point average, and the ability to concentrate for very long on any one topic. First, I got suspended for getting punched in the back of the head and, when I came back, was assigned to that little room for being too annoying in regular classes. It was just me and three or four other special students. I liked the quiet and the teacher sat close to teach us one-on-one. I could learn there, even through the smell of her coffee and cigarettes in the mornings and the tuna sandwich breath after lunch.

With a lot of help from the counselors, I landed at the community college on a path to my Facility Maintenance Certificate. I work for County Schools now. When a campus calls-in a repair and I show up, I'm the most popular employee around. I get back over to Davis High School, where we graduated, a couple times each week. I hadn't seen Denise since that day we all stood there in caps and gowns twenty-three years before. Somebody told me she got married and moved up north.

"That's so cool! You still get to go by the school and everything." After exchanging a few messages, Denise had asked for my phone number. Her voice was just as it always plays

back in my mind. “I remember all those nights we were out there on the football field, fighting for dear old Davis,” she said, right before we hung up.

Senior year was my last chance to go out for football. After the first day at tryouts, Coach Collins pulled me aside and told me the cheerleader sponsor was looking for a guy just like me. So on game nights, I was out on the field alright, not in helmet and pads, but in shorts and a pep squad jersey. I was the holder. Not the guy who places the ball for the field goal kicker. Denise would step into the stirrup of my cupped hands and I’d lift her high above my head. Hoisting her up I’d have to firmly grip a thigh, right above the knee, and then hold her secure while the cheering crowd in the grandstands looked at her shaking pompoms. For those several seconds I’d gaze all the way up those long legs into what I liked to think of as sequin heaven. After halftime I would try not to touch anything until I could get somewhere private and sniff the fading scent of her body lotion on the palm of my hand.

We were never closer than that. Sometimes in the hallways during class change, it was like she didn’t even know my name. When she saw me she’d turn her head the other way, toward the group she walked with, and laugh like a comment one of them made was extra funny. Still, I guess that was better than the guys who called me names like Ree-tard or Dumbfuck Chuck and bumped me hard up against the lockers. That’s why her phone call was such a surprise.

“I could ride down there. Maybe you could show me all the changes to the old place.”

“Uh, cool,” were about the only words I could get to come out. It had me all shook up. Three days before, I wasn’t sure she’d remember me. Now I’d be meeting her at the bus station that weekend. As I sat there in the breakfast nook, the thought of us face-to-face in my home dropped my spinning head to the countertop.

After I picked her up, we drove past the old, popular hangout places. Denise seemed nervous and didn't have much to say. I thought maybe she had second thoughts about being there. She didn't recall my ex-wife, Mary Ann, even though they had been in some of the same classes and worked on several group projects together. Denise did remember the liquor store, though.

"Hey, can we stop here just a sec?" I pulled over. Inside at the cashier line, holding the vodka and wine, she turned to me. "Haven't been to the bank yet, do you think . . ." I waved away her concern with my wallet. "You're still so sweet," she said. I turned away when I felt that red blush creeping up from below my collar.

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I remember Denise dating the co-captain of the football team and other "in" guys while Mary Ann and I saw each other, off and on, junior and senior year. She lived three doors down the street from my house. Back then, Mary Ann was super shy and had trouble speaking to almost anyone but me. Sometimes it made her so nervous that she'd have to hold one hand with the other to keep them from shaking. We'd take it slow on the way to school each day, her holding my arm, while she learned to walk without the leg brace.

After high school we shared an apartment and both worked part time while going to community college. Her folks moved away and I think mine were glad to get me out of the house. She went straight through to her Hygienist permit and a great job at the dental clinic about the time I finished up my classes. Those days, whenever anyone said my name there was another one attached to it. It was Chuck and Mary Ann, Mary Ann and Chuck.

We went on like that for years, me working for the county and her doing teeth. We'd been together so long; getting married seemed like what we were supposed to do. Mary Ann's cousin at Countrywide said it would be easier to get the mortgage loan that way, too. He kept after us right up until we signed the contract, and that's how I ended up in this townhome I can't pay for by myself.

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The other night, when I brought Denise back to my place, she loosened up and we talked into the late hours. That beautiful face from the past shone through the folds and creases the years had hung on it. I guess you could say her charm was a practiced thing but that didn't keep it from working me over. You could also say there was much more of her now, but the way she carried it somehow made her seem like a riper, sweeter fruit.

The conversation was mostly about her. I just nodded at her moving lips and replaced the melted ice cubes in her highball glass. She told me it was over with her controlling, abusive husband. They first met at their A.A. group. It was her second marriage, his third.

"So when I couldn't get the restraining order in time," there was a slow sigh in her pause, "I thought it was best to leave town before his release date."

I was buzzed on my second beer and paralyzed with fear of saying something stupid. I kept thinking the words coming out of her mouth couldn't have happened to someone like Denise. It was like watching one of those foreign movies my wife used to like, but without words in English at the bottom of the screen.

“Chuck, I don’t know how to ask . . .” Denise bowed her head slightly and the way she fluttered those eyelashes made the breath catch in my throat. “Any way you have room for me to stay a few days? Just until I can get things settled?”

It was like I was coming out of being hypnotized. I had to find the words and the right way to put them together. “There’s a couple options,” I said, and pointed toward the narrow hallway. “The guest room is made up and ready.”

“That would be great,” she said, and the tilt of her head meant there was something more coming. “I wonder if I could talk to you about one other thing.”

“Of course, anything.” The tightness in my voice box made it squeak like a changing teenage boy. As it turned out, there was more than one thing she wanted to talk about, but I would have listened all night. The husband was violent, tried to keep her under his thumb and in the dark about their finances, bills and records. He even kept changing the log-on passwords to keep her out of their home computer.

“Do you think you could teach a dummy, like me, how to set up accounts and stuff? I need to make a fresh start.”

“Well, sure. We have all day tomorrow.”

“You’re sweet,” she said and flashed that perfect smile. “Good night.” I stared and shuddered as the soles of her bare feet caressed the ceramic tiles down the hallway.

I spent Sunday teaching her what I call, ‘Computers 101.’ I’m used to showing other employees how to use our online request system. Denise did great. I pulled out the little binder where I keep all my notes, passwords, gamer screen-name info and some of my more valuable

Pokémon cards. Mary Ann had given it to me as a graduation present. You can still see my name stamped on the cover but most of the gold lettering has flaked away. All the dates went wrong after the first year, but I never used the calendar part anyway. You can call it leather but it isn't. I like to rub my left-hand fingers over it while my right hand works the mouse.

I showed Denise all about moving from screen to screen, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and the like. Seemed like she picked up on most stuff real quick. But she was uneasy, too cautious, and sometimes pressed both clenched hands tightly against her lips when she made a mistake. So I told her.

“Take a break. That might be enough for one day.”

“I'm just so afraid I'm going to break something.”

“Don't be. You're doing great. You'll be a pro before you know it.”

I went to bed early. Mondays are always big days at work. A lot of things in the school business seem to break over the weekend. Before I fell asleep I thought back to that time when Mary Ann started spending more and more time at work. I'd drive by and see the clinic was closed and dark. She would say it took forever after hours, putting away all those patient files in the right place. The way she looked started to change, too, new hair style and clothes and fancy makeup like she'd been studying those women's magazines stacked on the low tables in the dentist's waiting room.

Then, the night last week I came home late, after working overtime to fix a cafeteria water heater. She was waiting for me on the sofa, holding her face in her hands, crying like I'd never seen. She said she never wanted it to happen but she was leaving me. The affair had been

going on for about two years. The dentist finally agreed to leave his wife and take Mary Ann to live and work with him in a new practice somewhere in Ohio. We sat there quiet for a while. She slowly reached over to take my hand and turned to look me. There was so much sadness in that face I almost started crying myself.

“Have you ever held on . . .” The words got caught up somewhere in the back of her throat. “Held on to something so long it becomes part of who you are?” I had. I couldn’t be mad at her. “Promise me you’ll watch out and take care of yourself. A lot of people out there aren’t as nice as you. Have as good a heart as you.”

She stood up to leave and that was it. There were a few things she’d want to take with her and would come by to pick them someday soon while I was at work. She didn’t know when, but said it would be easier that way. “Can you forgive me?” she turned and asked at the door. “I never planned on leaving you to face everything on your own.” But that’s what she did.

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I dressed quietly in my room this morning so as not to disturb my sleeping guest. The change in my routine had me running late. When I hurried out through the kitchenette, Denise was already sitting there at my laptop.

“Wow, you’re getting an early start. What a great student!”

“Yeah, but I’m stalled here. I have a hard time with all the names and passwords.”

“Yeah, I know. Best to write ‘em all down and keep them in one, safe place.” I waved my fingers. “Happy computing. See you this afternoon.”

“It’s another great day at Davis.” She smiled. I chuckled to myself on the way out to my old Mazda pickup. That was the line the cheerleaders used back in the day, signing off after the school morning announcements. The way things had changed so fast made it seem like it couldn’t be real. Like a dream. I thought about a line from those old, funny shows on cable, where they say don’t pinch me or I might wake up.

They tell us not to make personal calls at work so I don’t, but I fought the urge to call the house all day. I was busting to tell somebody about what had happened, but remembered how Mary Ann used to say I told people too much. I didn’t run into anyone who could listen and understand what I was talking about, anyway. I thought again and again about Denise waiting for me at home, working hard to get her life back together.

We finished up a little job about 3:15 and I turned on my phone. It powered up with a string of alert noises I never heard before. With three maximum ATM withdrawals, my bank account had been locked. MasterCard emailed me a priority number to contact them immediately. It said they wanted me to “confirm flagged purchases that ranged outside my customer profile,” whatever that meant. I hurried out to the truck for the short drive home. When I pulled up the driveway, the unlatched side screen door yawned open and closed slowly in the draft between the houses.

“Glad to see you before you’re gone for good, Bro.” It was my neighbor, Jimbo, calling over from his front yard. I asked him what the heck he was talking about. He had noticed the van with out of state plates in the driveway that afternoon. “Didn’t recognize the guys but they said you were moving out of town.”

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It's quiet inside the house. I'm standing at the breakfast bar because the stools are not here anymore. I planned on Mary Ann taking the flat screen and the sofas but a lot of other things are gone, too. I can't figure why she'd take my Xbox, the controllers, and all the games. I never knew her to play them.

My laptop is gone from where I usually have it plugged in at the kitchen table. The door to the guest room is closed. Denise must have taken it in there to work and decided on a nap. I won't make any noise. There are so many things spinning around my head right now I can't reach out and grab a hold of any one of them. When Denise wakes up, I'll have to remember to ask if she recognized Mary Ann.
