

There Are These Mysteries

There is this mystery – why was Susie Schofield laying in a pool of urine on the tile floor of a dormitory bathroom wearing only a faded black Rolling Stones tee shirt with its lolling red tongue, crying and laughing crazily while her right arm bled from a series cuts just below her armpit? In the moment, of course, there was no considering why. Mickey Powell got the call as he walked up the driveway towards home on a crisp October Saturday evening: a girl's voice – whose he did not know – panicky, shouting from a second floor window of Davis House, the women's dorm.

“Mickey! Mickey, you better come up here! Please come!”

As he turned, he saw a face move away behind the window screen and heard a muffled scream. “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” *They always believe when there's a crisis*, he thought as he ran toward the dormitory door. Taking the stairs two at a time, he turned toward the sounds of crying and shouting, pushing past the gaggle of girls clustered in front of the bathroom door.

Susie lay chuckling and sobbing in the open space between the room's six white sinks and its four shower stalls, the left side of her tear-streaked face flat on the floor, her bare butt cheeks humped over a pool that stank of piss. Emily Cooper, a first year English teacher, knelt next to Susie, hyperventilating and balling her hands into fists, and beyond Emily his own reflection in a full

length mirror – a tall, leanish man with graying hair cut short whose lined face was dominated by a broken nose with nothing about him to say *priest* or *chaplain*.

Powell squatted as slowly and calmly as he could next to the half naked girl, and spoke to his colleague. “Emily?”

Emily Cooper did not acknowledge him. Powell reached across the prone teenager and firmly slapped the young teacher’s left cheek. “Emily!” Now she turned and saw him and recoiled an inch or two.

“Emily! Get these girls out of here and bring a sheet. And get her roommate, too. Do it!” Emily blinked, stood, and began turning girls around, shepherding them through the door. Powell pressed his fingers around the Susie’s left wrist, feeling clammy skin and finding a weak, rapid pulse. Setting her left hand down gently, he slid the girl’s right out away from her body and leaned in close to examine her upper arm where blood still oozed from four incisions. Behind him he heard the door open and quick steps on the floor. Next to Emily stood a short trim redhead, shifting her weight from foot to foot, the color drained from her face.

“Shannon. Listen to me.” Powell’s words were soft and terse. Behind him, the girl on the floor was still giggling but quietly now, as if a battery was nearly gone. “I need to know what Susie took.”

“Um . . . uh.” Shannon looked only at the floor. “I, like, I really don’t know.”

“You do know. She told me to ask you.” Powell’s voice, still calm and firm as he lied, was a notch louder now. “And I need to know right now.”

“Um . . . it was, like, Sudafed or something.” Shannon glanced up and then looked back at the floor. “She snorted, like, a lot all crushed up. A whole package. I told her not to.”

Powell nodded. “Shannon, do you have a cell phone?”

The girl’s head bobbed twice.

“Good. Go get it.” After the redhead left Powell nodded to Emily who stood stock still with a flowered sheet draped over her arm. “She may be going into shock. We need to get her out of here. Let me have that sheet”

“What about the blood?” Emily’s voice was shaky but she handed off the cloth and moved a step closer. “What do you need me to do?”

“The cuts aren’t deep. We can let them go for now. Help me roll her over.” Susie had stopped laughing now and was instead panting shallowly. Powell spread the flannel cloth on the tile next to her, slid his left hand under her head, and grasped her shoulder with his right. “Get under her hips.” Emily reached but hesitated as her fingers approached the girl’s bare skin.

“Em, we need to get this done. Roll her.” Blushing and looking away, Emily lifted as he did, and together they eased her onto the sheet, quickly enfolding her in it to cover her nakedness. Powell slid an arm under her thighs and another across her back, lifting her like the sacks of seed corn he had hefted as a boy, surprised by the solidity of her compact body.

“Shouldn’t we call an ambulance?” Emily was visibly shaking now.

“She might not make it that long. Get the doors. My car’s outside.”

Edging carefully through the doors and the crowded common room, Powell called to Shannon from the top of the steps. “Call Rick – he’s the administrator on duty. His number’s on the bulletin board. Tell him to call the ER and tell them we’re coming. And to send someone over here. Can you do that?” A panicked Shannon nodded as Powell edged carefully down the staircase, across the narrow lawn, to the back door of a white Subaru wagon. Emily caught up with him, swung the door open, and watched as he eased the limp girl onto the seat and slid a gym bag under her legs. “Get in the other side. You need to hold her head.”

It was not until he had backed down the parking lot’s narrow drive and wheeled past the sign at the school’s entrance onto the gravel road that wound between stone walls toward the highway – not until he saw the headlights coursing through the cut where the highway lay – not until then did he allow himself to ask why. *Why do this? Why Susie? Why any of them?* Before any answer formed Emily, in the back seat with Susie’s head in her lap, her words quavering, gave voice to her version of his uncertain thought.

“I don’t . . . I don’t *get* this!”

“No one does, Emily.” An answer to his own questions as much hers.

The car was on the interstate ramp now, its lights carving a tunnel in the night.

“Now we have to just hang onto her and hope.”

It was enough. *This time, anyway*, Powell thought. The emergency room staff was bustling when they came and the tube for the stomach pump was started even before Susie was out of the room. *This time it was enough*. Now he and Emily were left sitting in square brown chairs on a beige carpet next to a table loaded with back issues of People and Readers' Digest.

"You okay?" She wasn't, of course, he could see that. Emily was staring at the waiting room's far wall, her face pale, her lips silently working on a word or a phrase.

"Huh?" Her eyes found him for a moment, then drifted away again. "Yeah, I'm . . . I mean, no . . . I guess the blood and everything . . . is that the way you'd want to die?"

"I'm not sure she was trying to die, Emily. Cutting's mostly not about that."

Now she looked up. "Cutting?"

"That's what they call it. Pretty common among girls and young women, but guys try it now and again. Usually they do it as a kind of release valve."

"From what?"

"Whatever emotional pressure they're feeling. Could be anything that sparks but it usually comes down to the same root: a little voice saying over and over, 'Not good enough.'"

Emily considered this, twirling a strand of blonde hair around her right index fingertip while her eyes remained fixed on his, finally looking away, asking, “What about the pills?”

“I don’t know – maybe nobody does – but I think it’s like this: you walk around feeling bad all the time, you take just about anything that will make you feel different.”

“What does Susie have to feel bad about? She’s *smart*. Her father gives her anything – what’s bad?” Tears welled up in Emily’s blue eyes.

Smart, Powell thought. *As if smart had anything to do with it.* “What’s bad for any of us, Emily? We’re living and we’ve got more than ninety percent of all the people who ever lived – but people still feel bad, don’t they? As to Susie, who knows? Maybe we’ll find out.”

As it happened they found out nothing. By noon the next day, Sunday, parents materialized, appeared briefly in the Head of School’s office, and vanished again. By six the dorm head was packing Susie’s clothes in boxes while Shannon sat weeping on the other side of the room. By seven when study hall started, Susie’s posters were down, her desk was clear, her bed was stripped, and Shannon’s nose was in a history book.

“You okay?” Powell, doing a dorm check, stopped in her doorway.

“Yeah.” Glance up; eyes quickly back on the book. “Yeah, fine.”

“Fine? I’m thinking that’s not true.” Shannon looked up again, eyes on his; a kind of pleading look there but no words. “Sometime you may want to talk,” Powell said. “I’ll be around, okay?”

“Okay, Mickey.”

The corridor between the girls’ rooms was as quiet as a convent. Unusual, even for study hall. Typically there’d be a low kind of bustle, a murmur of voices, occasional laughter from someplace unseen. But perhaps not so strange in the circumstances. *Like a death*, Powell thought. *Someone gone who wouldn’t be back*. He moved through the stillness to a door at the end of the hallway. Emily, a sign proclaimed in blue letters; Knock And It Shall Be Opened. Smiling, Powell rapped three times. Within the sounds of a woman’s voice calling “just a minute” and footsteps on a hardwood floor. The door’s plane swung away from him then, revealing Emily Cooper in loose khakis, a tee shirt, and Birkenstocks, her hair tied back in a pony tail from which blond strands strayed wispily across her forehead and ears, her left hand holding a page in an anthology of poems.

“Oh.” Emily’s eyes blink in wonder. “Oh – hi, Mickey.”

Powell felt himself smiling at her surprise. *Expecting teenaged girl, getting old priest*. “Just making the rounds,” he said. “Wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.” Emily spoke quickly, then hesitated. “Well. A little shaky maybe.”

“Yeah, me too.” Mickey stepped back an inch and quarter turned toward the door. “I like your sign.”

Emily Cooper smiled. “Yeah? It’s from an old Pete Seeger song.”

“I know that song – wasn’t old when I heard him sing it. But I’m pretty sure Pete borrowed that lyric from a bit farther back.”

“Really?”

Emily’s expression was open and earnest, curious and wanting to know. *When do we lose that?* Powell wondered. *At what age?* “It’s from the Bible,” he said. “In both Matthew and Luke.”

The young woman began to consider this – her lips pursing a bit, her pale eyebrows arcing up – before something, some shift of his weight or hers, reminded her of something, perhaps, Powell thought, of the *mise en scene*: two characters, a man and a woman, a foot apart on either side of a threshold, the woman’s hand on an open door. Whatever it was, he saw a faint blush rise on her cheeks as her gaze dropped and came back up again.

“I’m sorry . . . um . . . I should’ve asked. You want to come in? I was just making a cup of tea.”

“If you’re sure it’s no bother,” he heard himself say, “I’d like that.”

Following her across the hardwood floor towards the overlapping circles of light near her couch cast from lamps at either end, Powell considered what he meant by “like,” what its object was. The tea? The neat room with its scent of floral soap and fresh baking? Or Emily herself, her blue eyes, her quick smile,

the sway of her slim hips as she moved ahead of him to the kitchen doorway. *All of them.* A man who'd lived alone as long as he had couldn't deny that. *But mostly the last.*

"I'm having Earl Grey – that okay? I've got some other stuff, too." Emily's voice was as earnest as a young nun's and her eyes searched his as she brushed strands of blonde hair off her forehead.

"A cup of the Earl would be just fine."

Powell surveyed the room while Emily Cooper rattled and filled a teapot. The couch at one end below a picture window, its shade down; the end tables with their lamps, books piled on each, and more of every size wedged into shelves that ran from the corner to the door, breaking only for a beanbag chair beneath a New York City Ballet poster, feet in dancing shoes in the four principal positions, an abstract watercolor to its right and on the left a framed topographic map of the Presidential range. In the corner to the left of the couch, a dining nook: a table and four wooden chairs, two of them stacked with books and another stack on the table itself. On the floor before the couch still more books a pile of student journals, and an open notebook, its facing pages lined with even, precise script.

"Don't like to read much, do you?"

"Huh?" Emily turned from the stove. "Oh, the books? Well, English teacher, y'know? They're almost my whole world - that and the mountains. Since I stopped dancing anyway."

Wandering to the shelves, Powell idly surveyed the titles until one caught his eye – *Dream Work*. Sparked by a memory he eased the slim volume off the shelf, sat on the floor, leaning on the beanbag and thumbing pages, slipping out of the meticulous and even flow of time.

“Do you want something in this?” Emily’s voice, directly above him, pulled him out of reverie. “I’ve got milk or honey and lemon.”

“Nothing, thanks.” She handed him a bright red mug, stenciled with white hearts and white plate stacked with cookies, a half dozen of them, almost as big as biscuits.

He held the hot mug gingerly as she retreated to the kitchen and returned with its red twin. Steam and fragrance rose under his nose. “Mmmm. Bergamot. Nothing quite like it.”

“Is that what makes it smell like that? What is it anyway?” Emily sat across the room on the floor where her papers were spread, back resting on the couch, blue eyes curious.

“A bergamot orange is a small, kinda bitter one from Calabria – but there’s an oil in its peel that’s used for perfumes and Earl Gray tea.”

Emily Cooper laughed. “I think Charles is right. He says that you know everything.”

Charles, Powell knew, was Charles Lafond, the school’s academic dean, a bit of a polymath himself. “No, no.” Smiling and shaking his head. “But like

Socrates I at least know that I don't know. Not bad company." Then holding up the book. "Do you teach this?"

"Mary Oliver? Yeah, sometimes. I love her stuff but the kids don't always get it."

Powell sipped his tea. "I met her once."

"Really?" A look almost of glee on the young woman's face. "Where?"

"Cape Cod. On an empty beach near Provincetown. I was sitting there, listening to the surf and reading this very book and she came by with her dog, this goofy Labrador, and asked me if I liked it. I'm trying to find the poem I was reading. Remembering it made me think of Susie, but I can't think of the title."

"What was it about?" Emily leaning forward slightly, intent and curious.

Powell shook his head. "Not sure. But I still remember a couple of lines." He sipped the tea again, then gently rubbed his lips with his free hand as if forming the words on them. "'You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.'" Pause for another sip. "I think Susie was in that desert, you know? That not-good-enough dry place? So many people are and they have no idea how they got there."

Emily still looking but her gaze a little less sure. Then: "That's, um, *Wild Geese*. I've taught that poem." She closed her eyes. "'Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on.'" Shaking her head, eyes open again. "Something like that."

“Remember how it ends? With the world announcing our place in the family of things? I’ve always liked that.”

Emily nodded but did not speak, and for a long moment silence came and sat between them on the wood floor, like a cat in its own space, Powell thought, stretching and curling, completely comfortable and aloof. Emily Cooper busied herself with not looking at him, brushing her hair back again, fidgeting with a journal, tasting tea while he found the cookie plate.

“Not having one?” The cookie he gestured with was moist enough to bend but Emily raised her hand abruptly as if to fend off a thrown stone.

“No, no. Not me. Too fat already. I just make them for the girls.”

Odd. A single-celled thought raised itself to consciousness and stayed there for an instant, glimmering like a bubble on the surface of a stream. *She’s rail thin.* And then gone, swept away in the current, drawn under by the flavor and texture of the cookie and by Emily’s hesitant voice from across the room.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How could you, you know, be so certain that Shannon would know what Susie took?” An earnest searching look with this, the blue eyes seeking something beyond the question.

“I wasn’t certain.” Was it relief or disappointment that flickered across Emily’s face? “But someone always knows. Her roommate just seemed like a logical place to start.”

“Someone always knows?” Emily Cooper wide-eyed then, noticeably so, almost startled.

“Always.” Powell kept his voice soft. “Group consciousness is like God in that respect. The threads of knowledge are there. Sometimes not woven together, though.”

Then stillness again, but uneasy now, as if a wind had risen to trouble calm water. Powell set his mug down and watched as Emily examined first the back of her hand, then a spot on the kitchen wall through the doorway, then the cover of a journal on which her finger traced a random pattern. His eyes catching the ballet poster again, Powell’s voice broke softly into the disquiet, “You said you quit dancing. Why?”

“I dunno.” Lips pursed, a head shake. “It’s just something I did a lot when I was little. You get bigger.”

“Bigger? Isn’t Judith Jamison like, what, nine feet tall?”

That brought a rueful smile. “Not quite. And anyway we aren’t all Judith Jamison.”

“Yeah, but who wouldn’t want to be? Or Mary Oliver for that matter.”

Emily almost laughed, did shake her head, did grin widely. “You’re kinda crazy, Mickey. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Everyone.”

Emily Cooper leaned forward, curious and intent. “What did you and Mary Oliver talk about?”

“Nothing really. I told her I liked the book, very much. She said kind of sweetly, ‘I wrote that,’ then tossed a ball for her dog to chase and wandered off after him. And that was that.”

“Hmmm.” Emily nodded, sat back, picked up the journal on top of the pile.

And that was that. The journal was a signal that the moment had changed. Whatever possibility for connection there was, whatever link, was gone now like a ball rolling away on a beach. *Nothing to do but go.* Powell finished his tea and stood, making the small talk of departure. Outside under bright stars, the cool night air was tinged with the musk of fallen leaves, a scent that Powell found both melancholy and hopeful. Something of death in it, he thought, but a hint of resurrection as well. *Hope it works that way. For Susie. For me. For all of us.*

Alone in the chapel the next morning, Powell, sitting cross-legged on a cushion, inhaled the sweet scent of beeswax from the altar candles and followed the colors of the sunlight shining through stained glass as they inched almost imperceptibly across the green carpet like a rainbow tide rising in a hidden cove. *Alone in the chapel.* Thought about one way, that was often the case. Only rarely did anyone join him there – a lonely student now and again, or one in crisis, or one interested in meditation though generally only as something exotic and Eastern. And then, even more extraordinary, once in a blue moon: a believer; a student, a teacher, who knew that God is and is active in the world. *So never alone really.* For those who knew it was not possible to be alone in the

chapel whether anyone else was there or not. Believers and doubters, people of the past, both distant and near, people of the present; all of them rose around him there like the light of different shades and hues and intensities, squabbling Peter and Paul, Francis and Benedict and Ignatius, his parents and friends and long gone lovers, the dead of the wars of his Then, the living of the struggles of his Now, Susie and Shannon and Emily Cooper - and sometimes even the one in whose name the chapel had been set aside, the one who claimed to make all things new. Today Mickey Powell wondered what that claim meant. *A broken world – what was new about that?* No reply. But in the stillness and in the light and in the candle flame a wordless promise that, Powell thought, would have to do for now.

The dining hall was loud and bustling when Powell came in, students to the right, throwing words and napkins, staff and faculty to the left, sipping coffee, laughing quietly, giving lesson plans a last minute look., Shannon sat with a gaggle of girls at a table near the window, all of them, it seemed, talking at the same moment, as if speaking and listening were not mutually exclusive. None appeared worse for the weekend wear. *What was the line from the poem?* *“Meanwhile the world goes on.”* Emily, her face flushed, tucked into a huge plate of syruped French toast and sausage while Charles, waving a fork like a baton held forth on God knew what. *The world goes on.*

In the kitchen, Powell placed an order for eggs over easy and stepped out of the cafeteria line to wait while students slid trays past for the day's main offering. Breathing grill grease and dishwasher steam, leaning on the wall by the between the food line and the dishpit, he nodded at students and teachers as they passed and daydreamed about a walk in the late autumn woods that he had promised himself for that afternoon, imagining the rustling sound of some unseen animal scurrying away at his approach, the sharp sweet smell of leaves decaying.

"Okay, Mick, there they are." Paul, the head cook, bringing him back to the moment. "Bacon and home fries along for the ride, right?"

"You know me too well, Paul." Powell reached across the stainless steel serving counter for his plate and felt, suddenly and certainly, that something was wrong. The conviction startled him – nothing seemed amiss. In front of him, Paul looked back across the counter with a smile. To his left two students waited for bagels to reappear in a toaster. To his right, a red-faced Emily Cooper tossed silverware into a bin and stacked a plate on a dishwasher rack. This image pulled Powell in. Without knowing why at first, Powell moved toward the dishpit as Emily ducked quickly back into the dining hall, then found himself checking the garbage bin. A mess of oatmeal and grapefruit rinds on top – not French toast. Powell dropped his plate on the counter and hurried out of the kitchen, catching a glimpse of Emily on the far side of the hall, heading for the stairs.

Hurrying to follow, he sighted her again scurrying into the Link, the glass hallway that led to the classrooms, but when he reached it she was gone. Now Mickey Powell slowed, certain, almost mathematically certain, that he knew where Emily was. Entering the classroom wing, he sat on the bottom step of the staircase leading up to the science rooms and quietly watched the door of the women's room on the other side of the hall. Listening intently, he heard the faint noises he expected: something like a cough and a long throat clearing; then a groan and the throaty sound again, then a toilet flushing, then water running. After a moment or two, the women's room door swung inward and Emily Cooper emerged, as pale now as she had been florid in the dining hall. Seeing him stopped her short as if she had hit an invisible wall.

"Mickey." Flustered, unable to meet his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you. But a better question would be about what *you* are doing."

"I . . . I was . . . I mean . . . I don't know what you mean."

"Actually you do." *Calm. Still the waters.* "But just so it gets said, we're talking about your bulimia. Bingeing and purging."

"What? I don't binge! I hardly-"

"Actually you just did. I was there, Emily."

"No. No, I took too much . . . I . . ." A panicked tone now, as of something, some small creature, that sees only walls. "I threw it away."

"No, you didn't. I checked."

“Mickey, don’t tell anyone.” A plea more than a request. “No one knows.”

“Someone always knows, remember. And silence won’t get you help.”

“I don’t need your help!” Hot and angry words, as sharp as shards of something broken. Taking two steps toward him, a frightened animal’s aggressive display. “You have no right to butt in!”

“It’s about caring, Emily. I have no right not to.”

The tears came then, first in a soundless welling, then trickling silently on her cheeks, then with convulsive sobs. Between them her voice a quaver. “Why are you doing this?”

Questions without answers. Powell reached out and took the young woman’s hand in his. Moist, not quite clammy, but surprising warm, it surprised him by gripping his fingers tightly. “There are these mysteries, Emily. Susie? You? I don’t know why. But I do know you don’t have to stay in the desert.”

Emily Cooper wiped her eyes with the back of her free hand and became a teacher for a moment. “That’s the poem, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Powell stood next to her, squeezed her fingers hopefully. “Don’t forget how it ends.”

Emily’s fearful eyes searched his for a moment as though looking for a place to hide there. And tentative as a leaf quivering in still air, she nodded. “In the family of things.”