

## The Holder

This all started when I found her on the Internet. I typed in her name and when the picture came up, I knew right away. I look at those old photos every time I walk by the trophy case. Denise dressed as cheerleader, Homecoming Queen, Senior Class VP. 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 mental image I've been holding on to. A picture of me is in there too. A couple of the custodians like to tease me about it. It took two days working up the courage to send a request to be her friend. Two days later we were.

It was like we circled our high school in different orbits. Hers was with 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 affection in the backseat of cars parked outside. I'd lay awake late nights, staring at suspended airplane models swaying in the ceiling fan breeze, aching and wondering when I would get mine.

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 understood the kind and caring guy I could be. When I couldn't come up with a variation that didn't, at some point, involve gagging her with a pair of rolled up gym socks, I came up with a more long-term strategy.

I'd go to State, where she was accepted, and graduate with honors. A successful architectural career, with Denise as my business partner and trophy wife, would follow. I was smart, but maybe that special diploma worked against me, among other things. Lack of tuition money, grade point average, and the ability to concentrate for very long landed me at the community college on a path to my Facility Maintenance Certificate. I work for county schools. When a campus calls in a repair and I show up, I'm the most popular employee in the system. I get back by Davis high school where we graduated a couple times a week.

I hadn't seen her since that day we all stood here 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.” 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.”

After the first day at football tryouts, Coach Collins pulled me aside and told me the cheerleader sponsor was looking for a guy just like me. So 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 while she shook her pompoms. Hoisting her up I’d have to firmly grip a thigh, right above the knee, and then hold her secure for the cheering crowd in the grandstand. For several seconds I could gaze all the way up those long legs into what I called, sequin heaven. After halftime I would try not to touch anything until I could get to 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. I guess that was better than the kids who called me names, like retard or spazmo, or 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. Sitting there in the breakfast nook, the thought of us face-to-face in my home dropped my spinning head to the countertop.

When we drove past the old hangouts, after I picked her up at the bus station, 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. Ellen had been in some of the same classes and worked on several group projects with her. She did remember the liquor store though.

“Hey, can we stop here just a sec?” I pulled over. Inside at the check-out 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 the blush creeping up from below my collar.

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I remember her dating the co-captain of the football team and other “in” guys. I dated Ellen, off and on, junior and senior year. She lived three houses down the street from my house. Back then, she was shy and had trouble speaking to anyone but me. It made her so nervous that she’d have to hold one with the other to keep it them from shaking. I’d walk her to school, holding my arm, taking it slow while she learned to walk without the leg brace.

After high school we shared an apartment and both worked part time while going to school. She went straight through to her Hygienist permit and a great job at the dental clinic about the time I finished up my classes. 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. Her cousin at Countrywide Mortgage kept after us to sign up and that’s how I ended up in this townhome I can’t pay for by myself.

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Denise loosened up and we talked into the night at my place. That beautiful face from the past shone through the changing forms of time. You could tell her charm was practiced but that didn’t keep it from working me over. No doubt there was 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 nodded at her words and replaced the melted ice cubes in her highball glass. She had decided it was over with her controlling, abusive husband. They first met at their A.A. group. It was his second marriage, her third.

“So when I couldn’t get the restraining order in time,” there was resignation 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. The words she spoke could not be her story. It was like watching one of those foreign movies without playing the subtitles.

“Chuck, I don’t know how to ask . . .” She bowed her head slightly and fluttered those convincing lashes. “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 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 was meant there was something more coming. “I wonder if I could talk to you about one other thing.”

“Of course.” The tightness in my throat made that come out like the changing voice of a teenager. Turned out there was more than one thing she wanted to talk about, but I would have listened all night. The husband was violent, had her under his thumb, kept her in the dark about their finances, bills and computerized records.

“Do you think you could teach a computer illiterate, like me, how to set up accounts and stuff?”

“Sure. We have all day tomorrow.”

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

We spent Sunday doing Computers 101, teaching her navigation, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and using the mouse. I showed her how I access and use my accounts. I’m used to teaching employees how to use our online request system. She was uneasy, tentative and sometimes pressed both clenched hands tightly against her lips when she made a mistake.

“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. Be a pro before you know it.”

I turned in. Mondays are always big days at work. A lot of things in the school business seem to break over the weekend.

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Ellen started spending more and more time at work. I'd drive by and see the clinic was closed and dark. She said it took forever after hours, putting away all those patient files in the right place. One day 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 her 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 a desire 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 good as you."

She stood up to leave and that was it. There were just a few things she'd want to take with her. She'd come to for them some day while I was at work. "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, getting an early start. You're a great student."

"Yeah, but I'm stalled here. I always have a hard time remembering passwords."

I pulled out the drawer under the telephone and tapped on my old leather bound organizer. "They're all written down in here. Happy computing. See you this afternoon."

“It’s another a 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’s morning announcements.

I fought the urge to call the house during the day. We finished up a little job about 3:15 and I turned on my phone. It powered up with a series 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 my truck for the short drive home. When I pulled up the driveway the unlatched side screen door yawned open and closed.

“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’d 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 knew Ellen would take 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 was 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 Ellen.