

The Holder

Trouble could find him without any help. He couldn't know, but that's just what Chuck provided when he found her online. He had been living single for three whole weeks when his co-workers in the maintenance department all seemed to say the same thing. The best thing to take his mind off the divorce was to start looking around. Fresh memories of all the pranks they had pulled on him left Chuck quite unsure of what to do.

I gotta ask Russell, the moving lips traced his thoughts. *He'll know*.

But Russell didn't know. He's the retired police sergeant who lives across the driveway they share between the two end units. As Chuck pulled in, he looked for a glint off the chrome walker behind the dark porch screen. Puffs of blue cigar smoke seeping through signaled that Russell was out there as usual, available for counsel.

"Well, it's not like I'm real familiar with internet and all that," Russell finally advised after hearing disjointed elements of Chuck's story. "Truth be told, I'm just not sure if hooking up online is safe for a guy like you. But, I say take it slow. Wait till you know if it feels right."

When Chuck typed in the name and her picture came up, it sure felt right. It took a few hours though, working himself up to send her a request. Two days later, Facebook told him they were friends.

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Chuck looked at those old pictures in the trophy case every time he was in the building. Denise dressed as varsity cheerleader. Denise Hamilton - Homecoming Queen. Denise the Senior Class Vice President. It's easy to pick her out. *The wild, windblown blonde hair, a smile from a*

toothpaste commercial, green eyes sparkling like gemstones in sunlight. That's the way he described her anyway, in that poem he wrote senior year. *No one ever read it but me.*

With the laptop they gave him to take home from work, he occasionally returned to typing up his recollections. He had held those images in mind, as vivid as those in the trophy case, ever since. If you know where to look, there's a picture of Chuck behind those glass doors, too.

The squeal of a squeegee on the terrazzo floor broke his concentration. He turned to see a couple of the building custodians he knew, working a few yards down the 500 Hall. They teased him every time they caught him gawking at the trophy case. Eddie called out down the corridor.

"There he be," he said through a tight grin on one side of his mouth. "The Holder. Immortalized." Leon's body language, up the ladder hanging a banner for the pep rally, reflected an overwhelming hilarity behind the remark.

Years of school counseling sessions left Chuck with a strategy for coping, when an incident triggered that angry sting at the top of his stomach that quickly slithered up his windpipe. This time, he closed his eyes and only had to count; *one alligator, two alligator, three,* before he composed himself. *They don't know it's not me I'm looking at.*

Walking down the science wing, he caught a glimpse of that same poster of the solar system he used to stare at when they made him turn his desk to face the wall for a time-out. Chuck would see himself and Denise circling their high school in different orbits. She was riding on a planet he couldn't get to. Hers was with the perfect, popular kids. His was with those who never would be. Sometimes he'd hear stories about wild parties where parents were out of town and lucky, cool guys got make-out sessions behind the steamed backseat windows of cars parked

outside. Chuck would lay awake in bed late at night, watching his hanging airplane models sway in the breeze from the ceiling fan, aching and wondering when he'd get his.

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Chuck caught Russell on the front porch again the next evening and rushed over to fill him in on the details.

“Back then, I figured that before Denise could ever fall in love with me, we'd have to spend more time together. My first plan was to wait around after cheerleading practice, grab her as she walked out to the parking lot, 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 really was. But when I couldn't come up with a way where she wouldn't be gagged with a pair of rolled up gym socks at some point, I thought up other ways.”

Russell put down his cigar long enough to empty the Diet Pepsi can over the ice in his tumbler before he spoke.

“It's always good to think things through like that, son.” He wasn't completely captive as an audience. He could reach for the walker and make his way inside at any time. It just hurt so badly when he did. Less than a month before his scheduled retirement, Russell and another officer were T-boned by an SUV in heavy traffic. The distracted driver was trying to text-message the day care center that he was running late for pick up. Russell's rehab took the better part of a year, eating up all the days marked on the calendar until his eligibility for retirement. That seemed like another lifetime now.

“Hey, stop me if I already told you this,” Chuck started up again.

“There’s a good chance of that, but I don’t remember ever stopping you before.” Russell smiled with his eyes while the cigar stayed fixed in the corner of his mouth. Chuck’s enthusiasm, once his stories started, left him pretty much unreceptive to subtlety.

“I figured I’d go to State, where she was already accepted. I knew that because she wore the Tiger sweatshirt with matching socks on college day. The plan was for me to graduate, with honors even, as an architect. I was always real good at drawing things. My successful career would follow, with Denise as my business partner and what they call a ‘trophy wife’ on all the celebrity shows. Our wedding picture would be on the cover of magazines in check-out lines at the grocery store.

They all told me I was smart enough 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, they assigned me to that little room for being too annoying for 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. You know, I could learn there, even through the smell of her coffee and cigarettes in the mornings and tuna sandwich breath after lunch.”

The last yellow light of sunset was gone. Through the thick mixture of lingering cigar smoke and still, humid air, Chuck could see Russell’s closed eyes and his head settling back into the tall, wicker rocker. He moved the burning cigar butt into the center of the ashtray and quietly pushed through the screen door to his place across the driveway.

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With a lot of help from a career counselor, Chuck had landed at the community college on a path to his Facility Maintenance Certificate. He went to work for the county school district. When a campus calls in a repair and he shows up, he feels like the most popular guy in town. He gets back over to Davis High School, where he graduated, a couple times each week. He hadn't seen Denise since that day they all stood there in caps and gowns twenty-three years before. Somebody told him she got married and moved up north. That's all Chuck knew until that night he was sitting right there in his kitchen with her on the phone.

"That's so cool! You still get to go by the school and everything." After swapping a few messages online, Denise had asked for his number. Her voice sounded just like it always plays back in his mind. "I remember all those nights we were out there on the football field, fighting for dear old Davis," she said, right before she hung up.

Chuck remembered too and the next evening, Russell heard the story he had repeated over the years to anyone who would listen long enough for him to get it all out. Senior year was his last chance to go out for football. After the first sweaty, brusing day at tryouts, Coach Collins pulled Chuck aside to deliver what he called some inside information.

"You're one of a kind, son," Coach had said. "I hear that the cheerleader sponsor is looking for a guy just like you." Chuck recreated the scene for Russell, pulling an imaginary ball cap tight to his brow and executing one brisk head nod for emphasis.

"So on game nights I was out on the field alright, no helmet and pads, but in shorts and a pep squad jersey. I was the holder. No, I don't mean the guy who catches the snap and places the ball for the field goal kicker." Chuck explained that his job was to cup his hands so Denise could step into that stirrup, and he would lift her high into the halo of lights at the fifty yard line.

Hoisting her up he'd have to get a firm grip on the back of her thigh, right above the knee, and then hold her secure while the crowd in the grandstands cheered Denise shaking her pompoms. For those several seconds he'd gaze all the way up those long legs into what he liked to think of as sequin heaven. After halftime he would try not to touch anything until he could get somewhere private and sniff the fading scent of her body lotion on the palm of his hand.

Chuck and Denise were never in closer proximity than on those Friday nights. Sometimes when he'd see her in the hallways during class change, it was like she didn't even know his name. She would turn her head the other way, toward the group she walked with, and laugh loud as if a comment one of them made was particularly witty. On the bright side, the way she treated him was better than all the guys who called out names like Ree-tard or Dumbfuck Chuck as they bumped him hard up against the lockers. That's why what she said in her phone call was such a surprise.

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

"Uh, cool," were about the only words he could get passed his quivering lips. Three days prior, he wasn't sure she'd remember him. Somehow, Chuck would be meeting her at the bus station that weekend with the wild possibility of bringing her back to his place. As he sat there in the breakfast nook, the thought of them meeting face-to-face in his own home dropped his spinning head to the countertop.

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During their junior and senior year, when Denise dated the co-captains of the football team and other 'in' guys, Chuck stayed good friends with his neighbor, Mary Ann. She lived

three doors down the street. Back then, his future wife was painfully shy and seemed to have trouble just talking with almost anyone. Sometimes it made her so nervous that she'd have to hold one hand with the other to keep them from shaking. Chuck had never spoken the name, "Mousey Mary Ann," the mean kids started back in middle school. Each day, he was through his front door early to wait outside her house, so they could take it slow on the way to school, with her firmly holding his arm while she learned how to walk without the leg brace.

After high school, Mary Ann started at the community college and it all seemed to be going well. When her Dad took a job offer out of state, she convinced him that she wanted to stay. She came up with the solution that she could share an apartment with Chuck. Both of them would work part time when they weren't in class. Her folks had known Chuck for years and, while they had some reservations, accepted that their daughter's new living arrangements might be the best bet. Chuck couldn't shake the feeling that his folks were glad just to get him out of the house.

Mary Ann went straight through to her Hygienist Permit and a great job at the dental clinic a semester before Chuck finished up training to get his certificate. The college had a placement program for special students and Mary Ann helped him all the way to the finish line. Those days, whenever anyone said his name there was another one attached to it. It was Chuck and Mary Ann, Mary Ann and Chuck.

They went on like that for years, him working for the county and her doing teeth. They had been together for so long; getting married seemed like what they were supposed to do. After all, she was the only girl he'd ever been with, and the totality of his other sexual experience didn't involve another person. Mary Ann's cousin at Countrywide said it would be easier to get

the mortgage loan if they were living in wedded bliss. He kept after them right up until they signed the contract, and that's how Chuck ended up with a townhome house note he couldn't pay for by himself.

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While waiting for Denise at the bus station that Saturday evening, thoughts raced through Chuck's mind more quickly than he could assemble in any order. After picking her up, the oddity of it all nearly overwhelmed him. It just didn't seem like these things could be together in the same place at the same time; Chuck, Denise, and his old Monte Carlo. There wasn't time to get that rear fender panel painted as he would have preferred, but fresh primer always looked good too.

They drove past the old places where all the popular kids used to hang out. Denise seemed nervous and didn't have much to say. Chuck wondered if she had second thoughts about being there with him. He started to worry that his lifestyle; working most days, fast food and video games at night, might be too dull for a girl like her. Denise said she didn't remember his ex-wife, Mary Ann, even though they had been in some of the same classes and worked on several club projects together. She did have clear recollection of where the liquor store was, though.

"Hey, can we swing by there for just a sec?" Denise pointed at the flickering neon tubes in the storefront. Chuck cut across two lanes to make a turn into the parking lot. Inside at the cashier line, holding the vodka and wine, she turned to him in a quiet voice with her eyebrows bumping together like two adorable cuddlers in a pet shop window. "Haven't been to the bank yet, do you think . . ." He waved away her worries with a wide grin and his wallet in hand.

“You’re still so sweet,” she said. Chuck turned away so she wouldn’t see that itchy blush creeping up from below his collar. He heard Denise ask the cashier for two packs of Marlboro Red.

After Chuck got her back to his place, she loosened up. They talked way past the time he was usually in bed. That beautiful face from the past shone out through the folds and creases the years had hung on it. Chuck sensed that her charm had a practiced ring to it, like everything else she used to do, but there was no doubt it still worked for him. He also noticed that there was much more of her now, but the way she carried it somehow made her seem like a riper, sweeter fruit. Those were among the thoughts he considered for the poem already coming together in his head.

The conversation was mostly about her. Chuck just nodded toward the moving mouth and replaced the melted ice cubes, as needed, in her highball glass. Among the many threads she spun around his head, she told him it was “over and done” with her controlling, abusive husband. They had first met at their A.A. group. It was her second marriage, his third. The details seemed to clog the tube that emptied into Chuck’s attention span.

“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.” Those beautiful eyes cut up to his. “And so, here I am.”

Chuck was buzzed on his second Mountain Dew and just about paralyzed with fear of saying something stupid. He kept thinking the words coming out of her couldn’t have happened to someone like Denise. It was like watching one of those foreign movies Mary Ann used to watch on DVD, but without words provided in English at the bottom of the screen.

“Chuck, I don’t know how to ask . . .” Denise bowed her head slightly and the way her eyelashes fluttered made the breath catch in his throat. “Any way you have room for me to stay a few days? Just until I can get things settled?” It felt like those times when he emerged from hypnosis by the county psychologist. He had to find the words and the right way to put them together.

“Well, there’s a couple options,” he was finally able to say, and pointed toward the narrow hallway. “The guest room is made up and ready.”

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

“Of course, anything.” The tightness in his voice box made a squeak like a changing teenage boy. As it turned out, there was more than one thing she wanted to talk about, but he would have listened all night. Her 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 as a precaution 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 feel like I need to make a fresh start.”

“Well, sure. We have all day tomorrow.” He pointed at his laptop on the counter and the old desktop computer that Mary Ann left in the living room when she moved out.

“You’re sweet,” she said and flashed that perfect smile. “Good night.” He stared and felt an involuntary shudder, watching the soles of her bare feet caress the ceramic tiles down the hallway.

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On the edge of sleep, Chuck kept flashing back to when he and Mary Ann were still together, and she started spending more and more time at work. He would drive by and see the clinic closed and dark. She would say it took forever after hours, putting all those patient files in the right places. The way she looked started to change; new hair style and clothes and fancy makeup as if she'd been studying those Cosmopolitan magazines stacked on the low tables in the dentist's waiting room.

That always led to thinking back on that night, more than a month before, when he came home after working overtime to fix a cafeteria water heater. She was waiting for him on the sofa, holding her face in her hands, crying like he'd never seen. She said she never wanted it to happen this way, but she was moving out. The affair had been going on for about two years. The dentist had finally agreed to leave his wife and take Mary Ann to live and work at a new practice in a town Chuck had never heard of in Ohio.

He sat there quietly until Mary Ann had slowly reached over to take his hand and turned to look at him. There was so much sadness in that face he almost started crying himself.

“Have you ever held on . . .” The words hung somewhere in the back of her throat. “Held on to something so long it becomes part of who you are?” He had. He 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 wiped black streaks of eye makeup off one side of her face with a paper towel. The other still looked to him like half of a homemade Halloween mask. “If you ever get confused or scared or need to know about something, go talk to Russell. Remember your guardian angel right next door.”

She stood up to leave and that was it. She said there were a few things she'd want later and would come by to pick them someday soon while he was at work. She didn't know when, but it would be easier that way.

"Can you forgive me?" she turned and asked at the door. "I didn't see this coming." Chuck could certainly relate. "I never planned on leaving you to face everything on your own."

But that's what she did, were the last thoughts before sleep took him.

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He spent Sunday teaching Denise what he likes to call, "Computers 101," when showing other employees how to use the online maintenance request system. He thought his new houseguest did really well. He pulled out the little binder where he keeps all his notes, passwords, gamer screen-name info and some of his more valuable Pokémon cards. The book was a graduation present from Mary Ann. His name, stamped on the cover, is still legible but most of the gold lettering flaked away some time ago. All the dates went wrong after the first year, but Chuck never used the calendar part anyway. He calls it leather but it really isn't. Chuck likes to rub his left-hand fingers over it while his right hand works the mouse. It relaxes him.

He showed Denise all about moving from screen to screen, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and the like. He thought about showing her his poems and writings but the idea made him so nervous, he figured maybe the time just wasn't right. He was pleased with her progress as she picked up on most things quickly. But she was uneasy, too cautious, and sometimes pressed both clenched hands tightly against her lips when she made a mistake. So he told her:

"Let's stop for now. 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.” That’s the line he always said to people when explaining things on the computers at work. He went to bed early. Mondays were always big days on the job. In the school business, a lot of things seem to break over the weekend.

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In the morning, Chuck dressed quietly in his room so as not to disturb his sleeping guest. The change in routine had him running late. When he hurried out through the kitchenette, Denise was already sitting there at his laptop.

“Whoa, it looks like you’re getting an early start.”

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

“Yeah, I know. Best to write ‘em all down and keep them in one, safe place.” He unhooked the car keys from his belt and set them on the table in front of her. “In case you need to get out and around while I’m gone.”

“How will you get to work?” The way she had both hands up to the sides of her face, like a cute, confused little girl, created a fluttering feeling in his chest.

“Oh,” he said, trying to invent a clever twist, “I have my ways. See you this afternoon.”

“It’s another great day at Davis,” she said through a little laugh. He chuckled to himself on the way down to bus stop. That was the line the cheerleaders used back in the day, signing off after the school’s morning announcements.

The way things had changed so fast made it seem like it couldn't be real. Like a dream. He thought about a line from those old, funny shows on cable, where they say don't pinch me. *I might wake up.*

District policy says all hourly employees are to keep their personal phones turned off at work. Chuck always complies, but he fought the urge to call the house all day. He was stressed with the urge to tell somebody about what was happening, but remembered how Mary Ann used to say he told people too much. No one at work could listen and understand what he was talking about, anyway. He thought again and again about Denise waiting for him at home, working hard to get her life back together and all he would do to help her.

They finished up a little plumbing job about 3:15 and he turned on his phone. It powered up with a string of alert noises he had never heard before. With three maximum ATM withdrawals, his bank account had been locked. MasterCard emailed him a priority number to contact them immediately. The message said they wanted him to "confirm flagged purchases that ranged outside his customer profile," whatever that meant. He hurried down to the corner and stood there dancing jittery steps in circles until the Route Eleven bus came.

When he finally stepped off the bus at his corner and walked up the street, he could see the empty driveway. He was pleased that Denise felt comfortable enough to get out for a while. *She's out there looking around the neighborhood. Having some fun.* Coming closer, he saw the unlatched side screen door yawning slowly open and closed in the draft between the houses.

It was so quiet inside as he stood there in the open doorway. He stepped over odd pieces of mail, spilled cereal boxes, and random electrical cords strewn across the floor. He leaned over to support himself on both elbows at the breakfast bar because the stools weren't there anymore.

Chuck had planned on Mary Ann taking the flat screen and the sofas but a lot of other things were gone, too. He couldn't figure why his wife would take his Xbox, the controllers, and all the games. *I never knew her to play them.*

So many notions spun around him right then he couldn't seem to reach out and grasp any one of them. He could hear the creak and rattle of the metal walker frame outside but it didn't seem to register with him. Then he caught a whiff of cigar smoke just before the groan of that familiar voice.

"Not to worry, Chuck-o." It was Russell, hand raised as a visor across his brow, peering in through the screen door. He was standing there in his old Police Department ball cap and faded tee shirt from the last time the Dolphins won the Super Bowl. "They got 'em all. When I saw the out-of-state plates on the rental van, I called the station to run a check. They think they've recovered most of your items; furniture, tools, electronics. The whole shootin' match."

Overwhelmed with the fast turn of events, Chuck sat down on the top porch step to collect himself. There was a certain thrill to the notion that maybe his life wasn't so dull after all. He swiveled his head in both directions, watching for the Monte Carlo to come around the corner. *Wait till I tell Denise all about this.*

"Come over to the porch after a bit," Russell offered. He strained, leaning forward over his walker and tilted his head back across the driveway. "There's a few things we should talk about."
