

## The Eye of the Holder

*Tuesday, March 17*

People always told me to stay off. The internet was nothing but trouble for a guy like me. But I'd been living single for almost two months, and the crew down at the maintenance shed said it was time to get busy. Rodrigo told me I could find anything I ever wanted online. I typed in her name and a few clicks later, the picture came up. I knew it was her right away. Last Friday, I finally got brave enough to send the request to be friends. Today I found out we are.

I look at those old photos every time I walk by the trophy case at the high school. Denise Hamilton 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 words I took from other poems and wrote down in one of my own during math class 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, to the right of the track team awards. You can find me easy too, because I forgot to wear my jersey that day. A couple of the custodians I used to work with laugh and tease a lot when they catch me standing there, staring at the pictures. 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 was with those who would never be. I guess she always did well in school. Every time report cards came out, they put her on the honor roll and me, you might say, in the toilet bowl.

The only class I ever really liked was keyboarding. Once the teacher stopped yakking and let us get our fingers working, the 55 minutes flew right by. I got my name on the board for high WPM scores, even before I found out that meant how fast I could type. Maybe because I liked to read so much, misspelled words always looked funny to me, even without Spellcheck like on this laptop my wife left me. My Special Resource Counselor told me I could build on those typing skills as part of what she called “ongoing therapy.” She said I should set aside some regular time and write a running auto biography. So, I still remember to do it. Every few days I type about stuff that happens to me and the muscle cars I’d like to drive someday.

*Thursday, 3/19*

When I got home from work today and checked the laptop, there it was. A message from Denise. She asked if I was working, where I was living, stuff like that. I thought real careful about what to say back. My whole life, people always told me I talk too much.

Denise must live a cheerful life because most comments under her pictures online are about a happy hour. In high school I used to hear stories about wild parties with the crowd that she hung with, where parents were out of town and lucky, cool guys got hot make-out sessions in the backseat of cars parked outside. I’d lay awake late nights, looking up at my hanging airplane models sway in the ceiling fan breeze, tensed-up till I ached, 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. I worked through a few plans in my head, leading up to the one where I would grab her after cheerleading practice, jam her in the back of mom’s station wagon, and keep her tied up in the basement until she really understood the kind and caring guy I could be.

But when I couldn't see how that could work without me, at some point, stuffing a pair of rolled up gym socks in her mouth, I knew I'd have to come up with something different.

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

Teachers had always said I was smart when I could focus, but maybe that Special Diploma worked against my plan, among other things. I was short on college money, grades, and the ability to concentrate for very long on any one thing. First, I got suspended after all I did was get punched in the back of the head. When I came back to school, I was assigned to that little room. One counselor said my file read that I was too annoying to be in regular classes. So, 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 her and the social worker, I found out about scholarships out there for people like me. I landed at the community college and on the way to getting my Facility Maintenance Certificate.

*Saturday, 3/21*

I just thought I was nervous before. Now I know what nervous is. Denise asked me to give her my phone number. We had typed back and forth a couple times. I told her about working for County Schools now and how when a campus calls in a repair and I show up, it's like I'm the most popular guy around. I mentioned I how get back over to Davis High School,

where we graduated, a couple times each week. That was the last time I saw Denise, twenty-three years ago, the day we all stood there in caps and gowns on the bleachers for the class picture. This guy that works at the Wawa once told me she got married and moved up north. Her message said we'd talk soon. Maybe this week.

*Tuesday, 3/24*

Guess I got a new routine now. Get home from work, take a shower, sit down with some dinner to watch when Wheel comes on, and then sit at this little desk in the breakfast nook with my phone right here by the laptop. I got a tingling feeling like maybe she'll call tonight.

I remember Denise dating the co-captain of the football team and other "in" guys while Mary Ann and I were seeing each other, off and on, junior and senior year. My future ex-wife 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 mom was glad to get me out of the house. Mary Ann 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.

I just heard my neighbor pull in. One of the best things left about living here is Russell. He's the retired police sergeant who lives across the driveway we share between our two end units. I talk to him almost every day when I can catch him out on the porch. About a month before he was scheduled to retire, Russell and another officer got T-boned by an SUV in heavy traffic. He told me the distracted driver was trying to send a text to the Day Care Center saying she 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 till he was eligible for retirement. So now, when he's not at the track, he's sitting out on the front porch, smoking his cigar and drinking a diet Pepsi. He usually listens to what I have to say. Sometimes he calls out "TMI" and holds his palm up toward my face. I figured out that means "talking must be interrupted," even if the letters for those words don't match up exactly.

Sometimes I think 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 those low tables in the dentist's waiting room.

Then, that night 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 this way, 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 at a new practice in some town I never heard of 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 wanted . . .” the words got caught up somewhere in the back of her throat. “Wanted something so bad 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 wiped black streaks of eye makeup off one side of her face with a paper towel. The other still looked to him like half 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 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 ever forgive me?” she turned and asked at the door. “I never planned on leaving you to face everything on your own.” But that’s just what Mary Ann did.

*Thursday 3/26*

Well it happened alright. I was working on my second Snickers and halfway through that 2 Liter Mountain Dew when my new Spider Man ring tone went off. Denise’s voice was just like it always plays back in my mind. I wasn’t sure what to talk about, and I didn’t want to say too much. My life probably seems pretty dull compared to the exciting times she must have. From the way she went on, I guess talking comes natural to her.

“That’s so cool! You still get to go by the school and everything. I remember all those nights we were out there on the football field, fighting for dear old Davis and the purple and gold,” she said. Then, kinda rushed at the end, “We’ll talk again soon. Ta Ta for now,” right before my phone went quiet. I’m so jittery I guess I’ll be sitting here a while before I go to bed, rolling those same old memories over and over in my mind.

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. No, I’d hold my hands like a stirrup Denise would step into and I’d lift her high above my head. Hoisting her up I’d have to firmly grab a thigh, right above the knee, and then hold her steady while the cheering crowd in the grandstands watched her shake those pompoms. For those several seconds I’d gaze all the way up those long legs into what I used to think of as Purple 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.

Somewhere about that time in English class, the teacher was talking about famous expressions we should know. I wasn’t listening too good because I was working on the best drawing ever of Darth Vader and Princess Leia. But when I heard her say, “beauty is in the eye of the holder,” it ran right through me. I shouted out, “I know that’s right,” and shot both arms straight up in the air. The whole class busted out laughing. I turned all red in the face and figured I was headed to the office for another suspension. But right then, the bell rang, and I grabbed my books and made it out the door.

Denise and I never got closer than at those Friday night games. 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 start laughing like some wisecrack one of them said was real funny. Still, I guess that was better treatment than I got from the guys who called me names like Ree-tard or Dumbfuck Chuck as they slammed my head up hard against the lockers.

Okay, I'm worn out. Going to bed. Ta Ta for now.

*Friday, 3/27*

The phone in my shirt pocket started vibrating like crazy just as I got home. Denise had a lot to say about things I didn't understand before she dropped the bomb on me.

"I can ride down there on tomorrow. 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. Two weeks ago, I wasn't sure she'd remember me. Now I'll be meeting her at the bus station this weekend. As I sat there in the breakfast nook, the thought of us face-to-face in my own home made my head seem to spin and then drop to the countertop. I gotta get this placed cleaned up.

*Saturday 3/28*

I can hardly get my fingers on the right keys. I'm trying to get this all down, so I'll always remember. Before today at the bus station, I just couldn't picture me, Denise, and my old Monte Carlo in one place at the same time. Of course, I didn't have a chance to get that rear fender panel painted like I wanted, but fresh primer always looks good too.



She's in there sleeping right now. 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 coming or being with a boring guy like me. 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?" She pointed at the flickering neon tubes in the front windows. Inside at the cashier line, holding the vodka, beer and wine, she turned in a quiet voice with her eyebrows bumping together like cuddling puppies in the pet shop window. "Haven't been to the bank yet, do you think . . ." I waved away her concern with my wallet in hand. "You're still so sweet," she said. I turned away when I felt that red blush creeping up from below my collar. I heard Denise asked the cashier to throw in two packs of Marlboro Red.

When we got back to my place, she loosened up and talked way past my bedtime. That beautiful face from the past shone through the folds and creases all these years had hung on it. I could tell 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. I'm working on putting those words together in another poem I write someday.

Our talk 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 and done 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 with her pause, “I thought it was best to leave town before his release date.” Those beautiful eyes cut up to mine. “And so, here I am.”

I was buzzed on the second beer we bought and scared 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 Mary Ann used to like, but without words you could read 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 so 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 felt myself shudder as the soles of her bare feet caressed the ceramic tiles down the hallway. That’s going in the poem, too.

*Sunday, 3/29*

I spent most of today teaching Denise how to work my laptop. She did great. I pulled out the little binder where I keep all my notes, passwords, gamer screen-name info and some of my most 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. It makes me feel relaxed.

I showed Denise all about moving from screen to screen, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and the like. I thought about showing her my poems and writings, but the idea made me so nervous, I figured another time might be better. Seemed like she picked up on most stuff real quick. But she was uneasy, too careful, 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’m going to bed early. Mondays are always big days at work. A lot of things in the school business seem to break over the weekend.

*Monday, 3/30*

I dressed quietly in my room this morning so as not to disturb my sleeping guest. With everything going on this weekend, it had me running late. When I hurried out through the kitchenette, wouldn’t you know, Denise was already sitting there at my laptop.

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

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

“Yeah, I know. I still write them all down in one, safe place so I can remember.” Right then I unhooked the car keys from my 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, made a fluttering feeling in my chest.

“Oh,” I put on my clever voice, “I have my ways. See you this afternoon.”

“It’s another great day at Davis,” she said with a little laugh. I laughed, too, on the way down to bus stop. That line was what 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. I thought about a line from those old, funny shows on cable, where they say don't pinch me, don't pinch me, because I might wake up.

They tell us not to make personal calls at work, so I don't, but I wanted to call the house so bad 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. No one I run into 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 and all I would do to help her.

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 range outside my customer profile," whatever that meant. I hurried down to the corner and found myself stepping in tiny circles until the Route Eleven bus came. When I was finally turned to walk up my empty driveway, the unlatched side screen door waved slowly open and closed in the draft between the houses.

My neighbor on the other side of my house from Russell called over from his front yard and said, "Glad to catch you before you're gone for good, Bro." I asked him what the heck he was talking about. He said he saw 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." I ran toward the door.

It was quiet and dark inside the house. I stepped over odd pieces of mail, spilled cereal boxes, and stray electric cords strewn across the floor. I leaned over and propped myself on both elbows at the breakfast bar because the stools weren't there anymore. I had planned on Mary Ann taking the flat screen and the sofas, but a lot of other things were 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. There were so many things spinning around my head it seemed like I couldn't reach out and grab a hold of any one of them.

That's when I heard the loud whistle through the screen door. I guess Russell learned to do that from his days as a traffic cop. He was standing there on my top step in his old police department ball cap and faded tee shirt from the last time the Dolphins won the Super Bowl.

"Not to worry, Chuckster. They got 'em all. I was just turning the corner when I saw the rental van peeling out of the driveway. Got the plates and called the station to run a check. They think they've recovered most of your items; furniture, tools, electronics. The whole shootin' match. Come on over to the porch later, if you wanna talk."

I watched him walk back across the drive and tried to figure out what to do next. So, I sat back down to type all this up. I left the door open so I can hear the Monte Carlo when it pulls back up the driveway. Maybe I don't have such a dull life after all. I can't wait to tell Denise all about it.