

The Holder

This all started when I found her on the Internet. I'd been living single for three weeks. The guys at work said the best thing to take my mind off the divorce was to start looking. They try to talk me into a lot of stuff though, and I just wasn't sure what to do.

So I asked Russell, the retired police sergeant who lives on the other side of the driveway we share. He knows things. He said to be careful about it and find out if hooking up on line was right for me. When I typed in her name and the picture came up, I knew. It took a few days, working myself up to send her a request. Two days after that, the Facebook said we were friends.

I look at those old pictures 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, smile like a toothpaste commercial, and 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. When they gave me the laptop at work, I started again, typing in little poems, stuff I think about, and things that happen to me.

I've been holding those school pictures in my mind ever since. If you know where to look, there's one of me behind those glass doors, too. A couple of the custodians like to tease me when they catch me standing there, gawking. They don't know it's not me I'm looking at.

I remember staring at that poster of the solar system when they made me turn my desk to the wall for time out. I would see me and Denise circling our high school in different orbits. She was on a planet I couldn't get to. Hers was with the perfect, popular kids. Mine was with those who would never be. Sometimes we'd hear stories about wild parties where the parents were out of town and the lucky cool guys got hot, wet make-out sessions in the backseat of cars parked

outside. I would lay awake in bed late at night, watching my hanging airplane models sway in the ceiling fan breeze, just aching and wondering when I would get mine.

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 version where I wouldn't have to gag her with a pair of rolled up gym socks at some point, I thought up other ways.

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. I would graduate, with honors even, as an architect. I was always real good at drawing things. A successful career would follow, with Denise as my business partner and what they call a "trophy wife" on all the talk shows. Our wedding picture would be on the cover of magazines in the check-out lines at the grocery store.

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, was assigned to that little room for being too annoying to be 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 all I knew until that night I was sitting right there in my 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 my 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.

I remembered too. 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. No, 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 when I'd see her in the hallways during class change, it was like she didn't even know my name. She would turn her head the other way, toward the group she walked with, and laugh out loud like a comment one of them made was

extra funny. Still, I guess the way she treated me was better than all the guys who called out names like Ree-tard or Dumbfuck Chuck as they bumped me hard up against the lockers. That's why what she said in 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. I don't mind telling you, 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 made me drop my spinning head to the countertop.

It didn't seem real after I picked her up. Just me and Denise in my old Monte Carlo. There wasn't time to get that rear fender panel painted like I wanted but the primer still looked fresh enough to get by. We drove past the old places where the popular kids used to hang out. Denise seemed nervous and didn't have much to say. I thought maybe she was having second thoughts about being there with me. I started to worry that my lifestyle; working most days, fast food and video games at night, might be too dull for a girl like her. She didn't remember my ex-wife, Mary Ann, even though they had been in some of the same classes and worked on several club projects together. Denise did remember where the liquor store was, though.

"Hey, can we swing by there for just a sec?" I cut across two lanes to make the turn. Inside at the cashier line, holding the vodka and wine, she turned to me in a quiet voice with her eyebrows bumping together. "Haven't been to the bank yet, do you think . . ." I waved away her worries with my wallet in hand. "You're still so sweet," she said. I felt that itchy blush creeping up from below my collar and turned away while Denise asked the cashier for two packs of Marlboro Red.

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While Denise was dating the co-captain of the football team and other “in” guys, I saw Mary Ann, off and on, junior and senior year. She lived three doors down the street from my house. Back then, my future wife was super shy and had trouble saying words 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 was learning to walk without the leg brace.

After high school, me and Mary Ann shared an apartment and both of us worked part time when we weren’t going to classes. 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 training to get my certificate. 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. After all, she was the only girl I had ever been with. 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 way past the time I usually go to bed. That beautiful face from the past shone out through the folds and creases that the years had hung on it. I guess you could say her charm was practiced

like everything else she used to do, but I didn't care. It still worked for me. I 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 are some of the things I thought I'd say it in a poem I was already writing in my head.

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 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 in 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 my second Mountain Dew and just about 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 ex-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 when I was coming out of being hypnotized by the school psychologist. I had to find the words and the right way to put them together. "There's a couple options," I finally was able to say, 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 made me think 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. 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 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.” I pointed at the old desktop that Mary Ann left in the living room when she moved out.

“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. The book was a graduation present from Mary Ann. 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 really isn’t. I like to rub my left-hand fingers over it while my right hand works the mouse. It relaxes me.

I showed Denise all about moving from screen to screen, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and the like. I wanted to show her my poems and stuff but the idea made me so nervous that I figured maybe the time just wasn't right. Seemed like she picked up on most things 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.

“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 what I always say to people when I'm explaining things on the computers at work. I went to bed early. Mondays are always big days on the job. A lot of things in the school business seem to break over the weekend.

Before I fell asleep I kept flashing back to that time when Mary Ann and I were still together, when she 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 places. The way she looked started to change, too, new hair style and clothes and fancy makeup like she'd been studying those *Cosmopolitan* magazines stacked on the low tables in the dentist's waiting room.

Then, I always think back on that night not too long ago when I came home 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 at 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 wiped black streaks of eye makeup off one side of her face with a paper towel. The other still looked like half of a homemade Halloween mask. “If you ever get confused or scared or need to know about something, remember Russell’s right next door.”

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.

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

“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 unhooked the car keys from my belt and laid 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 the sides of her face, like a cute, confused little girl, made a lump come up in my throat.

“Oh,” I said, thinking up something clever, “I have my ways. See you this afternoon.”

“It’s another great day at Davis.” She said through a little laugh. I chuckled to myself on the way down to bus stop. 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 to keep our personal phones turned off at work so that’s what I do, but I fought the urge to call the house all day. I was busting to tell somebody about what was happening, 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 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 ranged outside my customer profile,” whatever that meant. I hurried down to the corner and stood there all jittery

until the Route Eleven bus came. When I finally got to my corner and walked up the street, the driveway was empty. I was glad Denise got out to have some fun. As I came closer, I saw the unlatched side screen door yawning slowly open and closed in the draft between the houses.

It was so quiet inside the house as I stood there in the open doorway. I leaned over 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 couldn'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 right then I couldn't seem to reach out and grab a hold of any one of them. At first, I didn't know whether the voice I heard came from inside my head or from some other place. Then I caught a whiff of cigar smoke.

"Not to worry, Chuck-o." It was my neighbor, Russell, standing just outside the screen door. He never comes inside when he's smoking. He was standing there in his old Police Department ball cap and faded-out tee shirt from the last time the Dolphins won the Super Bowl. "When I saw the out-of-state plates on the rental van, I called the station to run a check. They think they recovered most of your items, furniture, electronics, the whole shootin' match."

"Whoa! Maybe my lifestyle's not so dull, after all." I still don't know whether I said that out loud or inside my head, but I was already thinking up how I would tell Denise about all the excitement when she came back in the Monte Carlo.

"Come over after a bit," Russell said, tilting his head back toward his place. "Sit on the porch awhile. A few things we should talk about."
