

Praise for
STEPHEN KING's
#1 *New York Times* bestseller
HOLLY

"*Holly* demonstrates that one of the last true rock stars of fiction can continue to grow as a writer, and doesn't define success solely as a continuation of what's worked for him before."

—*The Washington Post*

"Both intimate and sprawling in its ambitions . . . insightful . . . *Holly* is the imperfect but determined angel among all those demons."

—*USA Today*

"Stephen King does something amazing in his new novel, *Holly*. . . . King's storytelling skills are not dimming one bit."

—*Tampa Bay Times*

"Hugely successful . . . *Holly* surely deserves further episodes in the spotlight."

—*Portland Press Herald*

"[A] pitch-black thriller."

—*Publishers Weekly*

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—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

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—*Booklist*

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—Associated Press

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—*New York* magazine

"[King] eschews the supernatural here but finds all the horror possible in the evil that 'normal' people do. Mystery and horror fans will find much to love."

—*Library Journal*



STEPHEN
KING

H O L L Y
A NOVEL

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*This is for Chuck Verrill:
Editor, agent, and most of all, friend.
1951–2022
Thanks, Chuck.*

“Sometimes the universe throws you a rope.”

—Bill Hodges

HOLLY

October 17, 2012

1

It's an old city, and no longer in very good shape, nor is the lake beside which it has been built, but there are parts of it that are still pretty nice. Longtime residents would probably agree that the nicest section is Sugar Heights, and the nicest street running through it is Ridge Road, which makes a gentle downhill curve from Bell College of Arts and Sciences to Deerfield Park, two miles below. On its way, Ridge Road passes many fine houses, some of which belong to college faculty and some to the city's more successful businesspeople—doctors, lawyers, bankers, and top-of-the-pyramid business executives. Most of these homes are Victorians, with impeccable paintjobs, bow windows, and lots of gingerbread trim.

The park where Ridge Road terminates isn't as big as the one that sits splat in the middle of Manhattan, but close. Deerfield is the city's pride, and a platoon of gardeners keep it looking fabulous. Oh, there's the unkempt west side near Red Bank Avenue, known as the Thickets, where those seeking or selling drugs can sometimes be found

after dark, and where there's the occasional mugging, but the Thickets is only three acres of 740. The rest are grassy, flowery, and threaded with paths where lovers stroll and benches where old men read newspapers (more and more often on electronic devices these days) and women chat, sometimes while rocking their babies back and forth in expensive prams. There are two ponds, and sometimes you'll see men or boys sailing remote-controlled boats on one of them. In the other, swans and ducks glide back and forth. There's a playground for the kiddies, too. Everything, in fact, except a public pool; every now and then the city council discusses the idea, but it keeps getting tabled. The expense, you know.

This night in October is warm for the time of year, but a fine drizzle has kept all but a single dedicated runner inside. That would be Jorge Castro, who has a gig teaching creative writing and Latin American Lit at the college. Despite his specialty, he's American born and bred; Jorge likes to tell people he's as American as *pie de manzana*.

He turned forty in July and can no longer kid himself that he is still the young lion who had momentary best-seller success with his first novel. Forty is when you have to stop kidding yourself that you're still a young anything. If you don't—if you subscribe to such self-actualizing bullshit as “forty is the new twenty-five”—you're going to find yourself starting to slide. Just a little at first, but then a little more, and all at once you're fifty with a belly poking out your belt buckle and cholesterol-busters in the medicine cabinet. At twenty, the body forgives. At forty, forgiveness is provisional at best. Jorge Castro doesn't want to turn fifty and discover he's become just another American manslob.

You have to start taking care of yourself when you're forty. You have to maintain the machinery, because there's no trade-in option. So Jorge drinks orange juice in the morning (potassium) followed most days by oatmeal (antioxidants), and keeps red meat to once a week. When he wants a snack, he's apt to open a can of sardines. They're rich in Omega 3s. (Also tasty!) He does simple exercises in the morning and runs in the evening, not overdoing it but aerating those forty-year-old lungs and giving his forty-year-old heart a chance to strut its stuff (resting heart rate: 63). Jorge wants to look and feel forty when he gets to fifty, but fate is a joker. Jorge Castro isn't even going to see forty-one.

2

His routine, which holds even on a night of fine drizzle, is to run from the house he shares with Freddy (theirs, at least, for as long as the writer-in-residence gig lasts), half a mile down from the college, to the park. There he'll stretch his back, drink some of the Vitaminwater stored in his fanny pack, and jog back home. The drizzle is actually invigorating, and there are no other runners, walkers, or bicyclists to weave his way through. The bicyclists are the worst, with their insistence that they have every right to ride on the sidewalk instead of in the street, even though there's a bike lane. This evening he has the sidewalk all to himself. He doesn't even have to wave to people who might be taking the night air on their grand old shaded porches; the weather has kept them inside.

All but one: the old poet. She's bundled up in a parka

even though it's still in the mid-fifties at eight o'clock, because she's down to a hundred and ten pounds (her doctor routinely scolds her about her weight) and she feels the cold. Even more than the cold, she feels the damp. Yet she stays, because there's a poem to be had tonight, if she can just get her fingers under its lid and open it up. She hasn't written one since midsummer and she needs to get something going before the rust sets in. She needs to *represent*, as her students sometimes say. More importantly, this could be a *good* poem. Maybe even a *necessary* poem.

It needs to begin with the way the mist revolves around the streetlights across from her and then progress to what she thinks of as *the mystery*. Which is everything. The mist makes slowly moving halos, silvery and beautiful. She doesn't want to use *halos*, because that's the expected word, the lazy word. Almost a cliché. *Silvery*, though . . . or maybe just silver . . .

Her train of thought derails long enough to observe a young man (at eighty-nine, forty seems very young) go slap-slapping by on the other side of the road. She knows who he is; the resident writer who thinks Gabriel García Márquez hung the moon. With his long dark hair and little pussy-tickler of a mustache, he reminds the old poet of a charming character in *The Princess Bride*: "My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die." He's wearing a yellow jacket with a reflective stripe running down the back and ridiculously tight running pants. He's going like a house afire, the old poet's mother might have said. Or like the clappers.

Clappers makes her think of bells, and her gaze returns to the streetlight directly across from her. She thinks, *The runner doesn't hear silver above him / These bells don't ring*.

It's wrong because it's prosy, but it's a start. She has

managed to get her fingers under the lid of the poem. She needs to go inside, get her notebook, and start scratching. She sits a few moments longer, though, watching the silver circles revolve around the streetlights. *Halos*, she thinks. *I can't use that word, but that's what they look like, goddammit.*

There is a final glimpse of the runner's yellow jacket, then he's gone into the dark. The old poet struggles to her feet, wincing at the pain in her hips, and shuffles into her house.

3

Jorge Castro kicks it up a bit. He's got his second wind now, lungs taking in more air, endorphins lit up. Just ahead is the park, scattered with old-fashioned lamps that give off a mystic yellow glow. There's a small parking lot in front of the deserted playground, now empty except for a passenger van with its side door open and a ramp sticking out onto the wet asphalt. Near its foot is an elderly man in a wheelchair and an elderly woman down on one knee, fussing with it.

Jorge pulls up for a moment, bending over, hands grasping his legs just above the knees, getting his breath back and checking out the van. The blue and white license plate on the back has a wheelchair logo on it.

The woman, who is wearing a quilted coat and a kerchief, looks over at him. At first Jorge isn't sure he knows her—the light in this small auxiliary parking lot isn't that good. “Hello! Got a problem?”

She stands up. The old guy in the wheelchair, dressed in a button-up sweater and flat cap, gives a feeble wave.

"The battery died," the woman says. "It's Mr. Castro, isn't it? Jorge?"

Now he recognizes her. It's Professor Emily Harris, who teaches English literature . . . or did; she might now be emerita. And that's her husband, also a teacher. He didn't realize Harris was disabled, hasn't seen him around campus much, different department in a different building, but believes the last time he did, the old guy was walking. Jorge sees her quite often at various faculty get-togethers and culture-vulture events. Jorge has an idea he's not one of her favorite people, especially after the departmental meeting about the now-defunct Poetry Workshop. That one got a little contentious.

"Yes, it's me," he says. "I'm assuming you two would like to get home and dry off."

"That would be nice," Mr. Harris says. Or maybe he's also a professor. His sweater is thin and he's shivering a little. "Think you could push me up that ramp, kiddo?" He coughs, clears his throat, coughs again. His wife, so crisp and authoritative in department meetings, looks a bit lost and bedraggled. Forlorn. Jorge wonders how long they've been out here, and why she didn't call someone for help. *Maybe she doesn't have a phone*, he thinks. *Or left it at home. Old people can be forgetful about such things.* Although she can't be much more than seventy. Her husband in the wheelchair looks older.

"I think I can help with that. Brake off?"

"Yes, certainly," Emily Harris says, and stands back when Jorge grabs the handles and swings the wheelchair around so it faces the ramp. He rolls it back ten feet, wanting to get a running start. Motorized wheelchairs can be

heavy. The last thing he wants is to get it halfway up only to lose momentum and have it roll back. Or, God forbid, tip over the side and spill the old guy on the pavement.

“Here we go, Mr. Harris. Hang on, there may be a bump.”

Harris grasps the side-rails, and Jorge notices how broad his shoulders are. They look muscular beneath the sweater. He guesses that people who lose the use of their legs compensate in other ways. Jorge speeds at the ramp.

“Hi-yo Silver!” Mr. Harris cries cheerfully.

The first half of the ramp is easy, but then the chair starts to lose momentum. Jorge bends, puts his back into it, and keeps it rolling. As he does this neighborly chore, an odd thought comes to him: this state’s license plates are red and white, and although the Harrises live on Ridge Road just like he does (he often sees Emily Harris out in her garden), the plates on their van are *blue* and white, like those of the neighboring state to the west. Something else that’s strange: he can’t remember ever seeing this van on the street before, although he’s seen Emily sitting ramrod straight behind the wheel of a trim little Subaru with an Obama sticker on the back bum—

As he reaches the top of the ramp, bent almost horizontal now, arms outstretched and running shoes flexed, a bug stings the back of his neck. Feels like a big one from the way heat is spreading out from the source, maybe a wasp, and he’s having a reaction. Never had one before but there’s a first time for everything and all at once his vision is blurring and the strength is going out of his arms. His shoes slip on the wet ramp and he goes to one knee.

Wheelchair’s going to backroll right on top of me—

But it doesn’t. Rodney Harris flips a switch and the

wheelchair rolls inside with a contented hum. Harris hops out, steps spryly around it, and looks down at the man kneeling on the ramp with his hair plastered to his forehead and drizzle wetting his cheeks like sweat. Then Jorge collapses on his face.

“Look at that!” Emily cries softly. “Perfect!”

“Help me,” Rodney says.

His wife, wearing her own running shoes, takes Jorge’s ankles. Her husband takes his arms. They haul him inside. The ramp retracts. Rodney (who really is also Professor Harris, as it happens) slides into the leftside captain’s chair. Emily kneels and zip-ties Jorge’s wrists together, although this is probably a needless precaution. Jorge is out like a light (a simile of which the old poet would surely disapprove) and snoring heavily.

“All good?” asks Rodney Harris, he of the Bell College Life Sciences Department.

“All good!” Emily’s voice is cracking with excitement. “We did it, Roddy! We caught the son of a bitch!”

“Language, dear,” Rodney says. Then he smiles. “But yes. Indeed we did.” He pulls out of the parking lot and starts up the hill.

The old poet looks up from her work notebook, which has a picture of a tiny red wheelbarrow on the front, sees the van pass, and bends back to her poem.

The van turns in at 93 Ridge Road, home of the Harises for almost twenty-five years. It belongs to them, not the college. One of the two garage doors goes up; the van enters the bay on the left; the garage door closes; all is once more still on Ridge Road. Mist revolves around the streetlights.

Like halos.

Jorge regains consciousness by slow degrees. His head is splitting, his mouth is dry, his stomach is sudsing. He has no idea how much he drank, but it must have been plenty to have a hangover this horrible. And where did he drink it? A faculty party? A writing seminar get-together where he unwisely decided to imbibe like the student he once was? Did he get drunk after the latest argument with Freddy? None of those things seem right.

He opens his eyes, ready for morning glare that will send another blast of pain through his poor abused head, but the light is soft. Kind light, considering his current state of distress. He seems to be lying on a futon or yoga mat. There's a bucket beside it, a plastic floorbucket that could have come from Walmart or Dollar Tree. He knows what it's there for, and all at once he also knows what Pavlov's dogs must have felt like when the bell rang, because he only has to look at that bucket for his belly to go into spasm. He gets on his knees and throws up violently. There's a pause, long enough to take a couple of breaths, and then he does it again.

His stomach settles, but for a moment his head aches so fiercely he thinks it will split open and fall in two pieces to the floor. He closes his watering eyes and waits for the pain to subside. Eventually it does, but the taste of vomit in his mouth and nose is rancid. Eyes still closed, he fumbles for the bucket and spits into it until his mouth is at least partially clear.

He opens his eyes again, raises his head (cautiously), and sees bars. He's in a cage. It's roomy, but it's a cage,

all right. Beyond it is a long room. The overhead lights must be on a rheostat, because the room is dim. He sees a concrete floor that looks clean enough to eat off of—not that he feels like eating. The half of the room in front of the cage is empty. In the middle is a flight of stairs. There's a push broom leaning against them. Beyond the stairs is a well-equipped workshop with tools hung on pegs and a bandsaw table. There's also a compound miter saw—nice tool, not cheap. Several hedge trimmers and clippers. An array of wrenches, carefully hung from biggest to smallest. A line of chrome sockets on a worktable beside a door going . . . somewhere. All the usual home handyman shit, and everything looking well-maintained.

There's no sawdust under the bandsaw table. Beyond it is a piece of machinery he's never seen before: big and yellow and boxy, almost the size of an industrial HVAC unit. Jorge decides that's what it must be, because there's a rubber hose going through one paneled wall, but he's never seen one like it. If there's a brand name, it's on the side he can't see.

He looks around the cage, and what he sees scares him. It isn't so much the bottles of Dasani water standing on an orange crate serving as a table. It's the blue plastic box squatting in the corner, beneath the sloping ceiling. That's a Porta-John, the kind invalids use when they can still get out of bed but aren't able to make it all the way to the nearest bathroom.

Jorge doesn't feel capable of standing yet, so he crawls to it and lifts the lid. He sees blue water in the bowl and gets a whiff of disinfectant strong enough to make his eyes start watering again. He closes it and knee-walks back to the futon. Even in his current fucked-up state, he knows

what the Porta-John means: someone intends for him to be here awhile. He has been kidnapped. Not by one of the cartels, as in his novel, *Catalepsy*, and not in Mexico or Colombia, either. Crazy as it seems, he has been kidnapped by a couple of elderly professors, one of them a colleague. And if this is their basement, he's not far from his own house, where Freddy would be reading in the living room and having a cup of—

But no. Freddy is gone, at least for now. Left after the latest argument, in his usual huff.

He examines the crisscrossed bars. They are steel, and neatly welded. It must be a job done in this very workshop—there's certainly no Jail Cells R Us that such an item could be ordered from—but the bars look solid enough. He grabs one in both hands and shakes it. No give.

He looks at the ceiling and sees white panels drilled with small holes. Soundproofing. He sees something else, too: a glass eye peering down. Jorge turns his face up to it.

“Are you there? What do you want?”

Nothing. He considers shouting to be let out, but what would that accomplish? Do you put someone in a basement cage (it must be the basement) with a puke bucket and a Porta-John if you mean to come running down the stairs at the first shout, saying *Sorry, sorry, big mistake?*

He needs to pee—his back teeth are floating. He gets to his feet, helping his legs by holding onto the bars. Another bolt of pain goes through his head, but not quite as bad as the ones he felt when he swam back to consciousness. He shuffles to the Porta-John, lifts the lid, unzips, and tries to go. At first he can't, no matter how bad the need. Jorge has always been private about his bathroom functions, avoids herd urinals when he goes to the ballpark,

and he keeps thinking of that glass eye staring at him. His back is turned, and that helps a little but not enough. He counts how many days are left in this month, then how many days until Christmas, good old *feliz navidad*, and that does the trick. He pisses for almost a full minute, then grabs one of the Dasani bottles. He swirls the first mouthful around and spits it into the disinfected water, then gulps the rest.

He goes back to the bars and looks across the long room: the vacant half just beyond the cage, the stairs, then the workshop. It's the bandsaw and the miter saw his eyes keep coming back to. Maybe not nice tools for a caged man to be contemplating, but hard not to look at them. Hard not to think of the high whine a bandsaw like that makes when it's chewing through pine or cedar: YRRRRROWWWW.

He remembers his run through the misty drizzle. He remembers Emily and her husband. He remembers how they deked him and then shot him up with something. After that there's nothing but a swatch of black until he woke up here.

Why? Why would they do a thing like that?

"Do you want to talk?" he calls to the glass eye. "I'm ready when you are. Just tell me what you want!"

Nothing. The room is dead silent except for the shuffle of his feet and the *tink-tink* of the wedding ring he wears against one of the bars. Not his ring; he and Freddy aren't married. At least not yet, and maybe never, the way things are going. Jorge slipped the ring off his father's finger in the hospital, minutes after Papi died. He has worn it ever since.

How long has he been here? He looks at his watch, but that's no good; it's a wind-up, another remembrance

he took when his father died, and it has stopped at one-fifteen. AM or PM, he doesn't know. And he can't remember the last time he wound it.

The Harrises. Emily and Ronald. Or is it Robert? He knows who they are, and that's kind of ominous, isn't it?

It might be ominous, he tells himself.

Since there's no sense shouting or screaming in a soundproof room—and it would bring his headache back, raving—he sits down on the futon and waits for something to happen. For someone to come and explain what the fuck.

5

The stuff they shot him up with must still be floating around in his head because Jorge falls into a doze, head down and spittle slipping from one corner of his mouth. Sometime later—still one-fifteen according to his Papi's watch—a door opens up above and someone starts down the stairs. Jorge raises his head (another bolt of pain, but not so bad) and sees black lowtop sneakers, ankle socks, trim brown pants, then a flowered apron. It's Emily Harris. With a tray.

Jorge stands up. "What is going on here?"

She doesn't answer, only sets the tray down about two feet from the cage. On it is a bulgy brown envelope stuck into the top of a big plastic go-cup, the kind you fill with coffee for a long drive. Next to it is a plate with something nasty on it: a slab of dark red meat floating in even darker red liquid. Just looking at it makes Jorge feel like vomiting again.

"If you think I'm going to eat that, Emily, think again."

She makes no reply, only takes the broom and pushes the tray along the concrete. There's a hinged flap in the bottom of the cage (*they've been planning this*, Jorge thinks). The go-cup falls over when it hits the top of the flap, which is only four inches or so high, then the tray goes through. The flap claps shut when she pulls the broom back. The meat swimming in the puddle of blood looks to be uncooked liver. Emily Harris straightens up, puts the broom back, turns . . . and gives him a smile. As if they are at a fucking cocktail party, or something.

"I'm not going to eat that," Jorge repeats.

"You will," she says.

With that she goes back up the stairs. He hears a door close, followed by a snapping sound that's probably a bolt being run.

Looking at the raw liver makes Jorge feel like yurking some more, but he takes the envelope out of the go-cup. It's something called Ka'Chava. According to the label, the powder inside makes "a nutrient-dense drink that fuels your adventures."

Jorge feels he's had enough adventures in the last however-long to last a lifetime. He puts the packet back in the go-cup and sits on the futon. He pushes the tray to one side without looking at it. He closes his eyes.

6

He dozes, wakes, dozes again, then wakes for real. The headache is almost gone and his stomach has settled. He

winds Papi's watch and sets it for noon. Or maybe for midnight. Doesn't matter; at least he can keep track of how long he's here. Eventually, someone—maybe the male half of this crazy professor combo—will tell him *why* he's here and what he has to do to get out. Jorge guesses it won't make a whole lot of sense, because these two are obviously loco. *Lots* of professors are loco, he's been in enough schools on the writer-in-residence circuit to know that—but the Harrises take it to a whole other level.

Eventually he plucks the packet of Ka'Chava from the go-cup, which is obviously meant for mixing the stuff up with the remaining bottle of Dasani. The cup is from Dillon's, a truck stop in Redlund where Jorge and Freddy sometimes have breakfast. He would like to be there now. He'd like to be in Ayers Chapel, listening to one of Reverend Gallatin's boring-ass sermons. He'd like to be in a doctor's office, waiting for a proctological exam. He would like to be anywhere but here.

He has no reason to trust anything the crazy Harrises give him, but now that the nausea's worn off, he's hungry. He always eats light before running, saving a heavier caloric intake for when he comes back. The envelope is sealed, which means it's probably okay, but he looks it over carefully for pinpricks (*hypo* pricks) before tearing it open and pouring it into the go-cup. He adds water, closes the lid, and shakes well, as the instructions say. He tastes, then chugs. He doubts very much if it has been inspired by "ancient wisdom," as the label says, but it's fairly tasty. Chocolate. Like a frappé, if frappés were plant-based.

When it's gone, he looks at the raw liver again. He

tries pushing the tray back out through the flap, but at first he can't, because the flap only swings in. He works his fingernails under the bottom and pulls it up. He shoves the tray out.

"Hey!" he shouts at the glass eye peering down at him. "Hey, what do you want? Let's talk! Let's work this out!"

Nothing.

7

Six hours pass.

This time it's the male Harris who descends the stairs. He's in pajamas and slippers. His shoulders are broad but he's skinny the rest of the way down, and the pajamas—decorated with firetrucks, like a child's—flap on him. Just looking at this old dude gives Jorge Castro a sense of unreality—can this really be happening?

"What do you want?"

Harris makes no reply, only looks at the rejected tray on the concrete floor. He looks at the flap, then back to the tray. A couple more times for good measure: tray, flap, flap, tray. Then he goes to the broom and pushes it back in.

Jorge has had enough. He holds the flap and shoves the tray back out. The blood-puddle splashes one cuff of Harris's PJ bottoms. Harris lowers the broom to push it back, then decides that would be a zero-sum game. He leans the broom against the side of the stairs again and prepares to mount them. There's not much to him below those broad shoulders, but the deceitful motherfucker looks agile enough.

"Come back," Jorge says. "Let's talk about this man to man."

Harris looks at him and gives the sigh of a longsuffering parent dealing with a recalcitrant toddler. "You can get the tray when you want it," he says. "I believe we've established that."

"I'm not eating it, I already told your wife. Besides being raw, it's been sitting at room temperature for . . ." He looks at Papi's watch. "Over six hours."

The crazy professor makes no reply to this, only climbs the stairs. The door shuts. The bolt runs. *Snap*.

8

It's ten o'clock by Papi's watch when Emily comes down. She's swapped the trim brown pants for a floral wrapper and her own pair of slippers. *Can it be the next night?* Jorge thinks. *Is that possible? How long did that shot put me out?* Somehow the loss of time is even more upsetting than looking at that congealing glob of meat. Losing time is hard to get used to. But there's something else he can't get used to.

She looks at the tray. Looks at him. Smiles. Turns to go. "Hey," he says. "Emily."

She doesn't turn around, but she stops at the foot of the stairs, listening.

"I need some more water. I drank one bottle and used the other to mix that shake with. It was pretty good, by the way."

"No more water until you eat your dinner," she says, and climbs the stairs.

9

Time passes. Four hours. His thirst is becoming very bad. He's not dying of it or anything, but there's no doubt he's dehydrated from vomiting, and that shake . . . he can feel it coating the sides of his throat. A drink of water would wash that away. Even just a sip or two.

He looks at the Porta-John, but he's a long way from trying to drink disinfected water. *Which I have now pissed in twice*, he thinks.

He looks up at the lens. "Let's talk, okay? Please." He hesitates, then says, "I'm begging you." He hears a crack in his voice. A *dry* crack.

Nothing.

10

Two more hours.

Now the thirst is all he can think about. He's read stories about how men adrift on the ocean finally start drinking what they're floating on, even though drinking seawater is a quick trip to madness. That's the story, anyway, and whether it's true or false doesn't matter in his current situation because there's no ocean for almost a thousand miles. There's nothing here but the poison in the Porta-John.

At last Jorge gives in. He works his fingers under the flap, props himself on one arm, and reaches for the tray. At first he can't quite grasp it because the edge is slippery with juice. Instead of pulling it toward him, he only

succeeds in pushing it a little further out on the concrete. He strains and finally pinches a grip. He pulls the tray through the flap. He looks at the meat, as red as raw muscle, then closes his eyes and picks it up. It flops against his wrists, cold. Eyes still closed, he takes a bite. His gorge starts to spasm.

Don't think about it, he tells himself. Just chew and swallow.

It goes down like a raw oyster. Or a mouthful of phlegm. He opens his eyes and looks up at the glass lens. It's blurry because he's crying. "Is that enough?"

Nothing. And it really wasn't a bite, only a nibble. There's so much left.

"*Why?*" he shouts. "Why would you? What *purpose?*"

Nothing. Maybe there's no speaker, but Jorge doesn't believe that. He thinks they can hear him as well as see him, and if they can hear him, they can reply.

"I can't," he says, crying harder. "I would if I could, but I fucking *can't*."

Yet he discovers that he can. Bite by bite, he eats the raw liver. The gag reflex is bad at first, but eventually it goes away.

Only that's not right, Jorge thinks as he looks at the puddle of congealing red jelly on the otherwise empty plate. *It didn't go away, I beat it into submission.*

He holds the plate up to the glass eye. At first there's more nothing, then the door to the upstairs world opens and the woman descends. Her hair is in rollers. There's some sort of night cream on her face. In one hand she holds a bottle of Dasani water. She puts it down on the concrete, out of Jorge's reach, then grabs the broom.

"Drink the juice," she says.

"Please," Jorge whispers. "Please don't. Please stop."

Professor Emily Harris of the English Department—perhaps now emerita, just teaching the occasional class or seminar as well as attending departmental meetings—says nothing. The calm in her eyes is, for Jorge, the convincer. It's like the old blues song says: *cryin and pleadin don't do no good*.

He tilts the plate and slides the jellied juice into his mouth. A few drops splash onto his shirt, but most of the blood goes down his throat. It's salty and makes his thirst worse. He shows her the plate, empty except for a few red smears. He expects her to tell him to eat that, too—to scoop it up with his finger and suck it like a clot lollipop—but she doesn't. She tips the bottle of Dasani on its side and uses the push broom to roll it to the flap and through. Jorge seizes it, twists the cap, and drinks half in a series of gulps.

Ecstasy!

She leans the broom back against the side of the stairs and starts up.

“What do you want? Tell me what you want and I'll do it! Swear to God!”

She pauses for a moment, long enough to say a single word: “*Maricon*.” Then she continues up the stairs. The door shuts. The lock snaps.

July 22, 2021

1

Zoom has gotten sophisticated since the advent of Covid-19. When Holly started using it—in February of 2020, which seems much longer than seventeen months ago—it was apt to drop the connection if you so much as looked at it crosseyed. Sometimes you could see your fellow Zoomers; sometimes you couldn't; sometimes they flickered back and forth in a headache-inducing frenzy.

Quite the movie fan is Holly Gibney (although she hasn't been in an actual theater since the previous spring), and she enjoys Hollywood tentpole movies every bit as much as art films. One of her faves from the eighties is *Conan the Barbarian*, and her favorite line from that film is spoken by a minor character. "Two or three years ago," the peddler says of Set and his followers, "they were just another snake cult. Now they're everywhere."

Zoom is sort of like that. In 2019 it was just another app, struggling for breathing room with competitors like FaceTime and GoTo Meeting. Now, thanks to Covid, Zoom is as ubiquitous as the Snake Cult of Set. It's not

just the tech that's improved, either. Production values have, as well. The Zoom funeral Holly is attending could almost be a scene in a TV drama. The focus is on each speaker eulogizing the dear departed, of course, but there are also occasional cuts to various grieving mourners in their homes.

Not to Holly, though. She's blocked her video. She's a better, stronger person than she once was, but she's still a deeply private person. She knows it's okay for people to be sad at funerals, to cry and choke up, but she doesn't want anyone to see her that way, especially not her business partner or her friends. She doesn't want them to see her red eyes, her tangled hair, or her shaking hands as she reads her own eulogy, which is both short and as honest as she could make it. Most of all she doesn't want them to see her smoking a cigarette—after seventeen months of Covid, she's fallen off the wagon.

Now, at the end of the service, her screen begins showing a kinescope featuring the dear departed in various poses at various locations while Frank Sinatra sings "Thanks for the Memory." Holly can't stand it and clicks LEAVE. She takes one more drag on her cigarette, and as she's butting it out, her phone rings.

She doesn't want to talk to anyone, but it's Barbara Robinson, and that's a call she has to take.

"You left," Barbara says. "Not even a black square with your name on it."

"I've never cared for that particular song. And it was over, anyway."

"But you're okay, right?"

"Yes." Not exactly true; Holly doesn't know if she's okay or not. "But right now, I need to . . ." What's the

word that Barbara will accept? That will enable Holly to end this call before she breaks down? “I need to process.”

“Understood,” Barbara says. “I’ll come over in a heartbeat if you want, lockdown or no lockdown.”

It’s a *de facto* lockdown instead of a real one, and they both know it; their governor is determined to protect individual freedoms no matter how many thousands have to sicken or die to support the idea. Most people are taking precautions anyway, thank God.

“No need for that.”

“Okay. I know this is bad, Hols—a bad time—but hang in there. We’ve been through worse.” Maybe—almost certainly—thinking about Chet Ondowsky, who took a short and lethal trip down an elevator shaft late last year. “And booster vaccines are coming. First for people with bad immune systems and people over sixty-five, but I’m hearing at school that by fall it’ll be everyone.”

“That sounds right,” Holly says.

“And bonus! Trump’s gone.”

Leaving behind a country at war with itself, Holly thinks. And who’s to say he won’t reappear in 2024? She thinks of Arnie’s promise from *The Terminator*: “I’ll be back.”

“Hols? You there?”

“I am. Just thinking.” Thinking about another cigarette, as it happens. Now that she’s started again she can’t seem to get enough of them.

“Okay. I love you, and I understand you need your space, but if you don’t call back tonight or tomorrow I’ll call you again. Fair warning.”

“Roger that,” Holly says, and ends the call.

She reaches for her cigarettes, then pushes them away and puts her head down on her crossed arms and begins to

cry. She's cried so much lately. Tears of relief after Biden won the election. Tears of horror and belated reaction after Chet Ondowsky, a monster pretending to be human, went down the elevator shaft. She cried during and after the Capitol riot—those were tears of rage. Today, tears of grief and loss. Except they are also tears of relief. That's awful, but she supposes it's also human.

In March of 2020, Covid swept through almost all of the nursing homes in the state where Holly grew up and can't seem to leave. That wasn't a problem for Holly's Uncle Henry, because at that time he was still living with Holly's mother in Meadowbrook Estates. Even then Uncle Henry had been losing his marbles, a fact of which Holly had been blissfully unaware. He'd seemed pretty much okay on her occasional visits, and Charlotte Gibney kept her own concerns about her brother strictly to herself, following one of the great unspoken rules of that lady's life: if you don't talk about something, if you don't acknowledge it, it isn't there. Holly supposes that's why her mother never sat her down and had *The Conversation* with her when she was thirteen and started to develop breasts.

By December of last year Charlotte was no longer able to ignore the elephant in the room, which was no elephant but her gaga older brother. Around the time Holly was beginning to suspect Chet Ondowsky might be something more than a local TV reporter, Charlotte enlisted her daughter and her daughter's friend Jerome to help her transport Uncle Henry to the Rolling Hills Elder Care facility. This was around the time the first cases of the so-called Delta variant began to appear in the United States.

A Rolling Hills orderly tested positive for this new and

more communicable version of Covid. The orderly had refused the vaccinations, claiming they contained bits of fetal tissue from aborted babies—he had read this on the Internet. He was sent home, but the damage was done. Delta was loose in Rolling Hills, and soon over forty of the oldies were suffering various degrees of the illness. A dozen died. Holly's Uncle Henry wasn't one of them. He didn't even get sick. He had been double-vaxxed—Charlotte protested but Holly insisted—and although he tested positive, he never got so much as the sniffles.

It was Charlotte who died.

An avid Trump supporter—a fact she *trumpeted* to her daughter at every opportunity—she refused to get the vaccinations or even to wear a mask. (Except, that was, at Kroger and her local bank branch, where they were required. The one Charlotte kept for those occasions was a bright red, with MAGA stamped on it.)

On July 4th, Charlotte attended an anti-mask rally in the state capital, waving a sign reading MY BODY MY CHOICE (a sentiment that did not keep her from being adamantly anti-abortion). On July 7th, she lost her sense of smell and gained a cough. On the 10th, she was admitted to Mercy Hospital, nine short blocks from Rolling Hills Elder Care, where her brother was doing fine . . . physically, at least. On the 15th, she was placed on a ventilator.

During Charlotte's final, brutally short illness, Holly visited via Zoom. To the very end Charlotte continued to claim that the Coronavirus was a hoax, and she just had a bad case of the flu. She died on the 20th, and only strings pulled by Holly's partner, Pete Huntley, prevented her body being stored in the refrigerated truck that was

serving as an adjunct to the morgue. She was taken to the Crossman Funeral Home instead, where the funeral director had quickly arranged the Zoom funeral. A year and a half into the pandemic, he had plenty of experience in such televised final rites.

Holly finally cries herself out. She thinks about watching a movie, but the idea has no appeal, which is a rarity. She thinks about lying down, but she's slept a lot since Charlotte died. She supposes that's how her mind is dealing with grief. She doesn't want to read a book, either. She doubts if she could keep track of the words.

There's a hole where her mother used to be, it's as simple as that. The two of them had a difficult relationship which only got worse when Holly started to pull away. Her success in doing that was largely down to Bill Hodges. Holly's grief was bad when Bill passed—pancreatic cancer—but the grief she feels now is somehow deeper, more complicated, because Charlotte Gibney was, tell the truth and shame the devil, a woman who specialized in smotherlove. At least when it came to her daughter. Their estrangement only got worse with Charlotte's wholehearted embrace of the ex-president. There had been few face-to-face visits in the last two years, the final one on the previous Christmas, when Charlotte cooked all of what she imagined were Holly's favorite foods, every one of which reminded Holly of her unhappy, lonely childhood.

She has two phones on her desk, her personal and her business. Finders Keepers has been busy during the time of the pandemic, although investigations have become rather tricky. The firm is shut down now, with messages on her office phone and Pete Huntley's saying the agency will be closed until August 1st. She considered adding

“because of a death in the family” and decided that was no one’s business. When she checks the office phone now, it’s only because she’s on autopilot for the time being.

She sees she’s gotten four calls during the forty minutes while she was attending her mother’s funeral. All from the same number. The caller has also left four voicemails. Holly thinks briefly of simply erasing them, she has no more desire to take on a case than she has to watch a movie or read a book, but she can’t do that any more than she can leave a picture hanging crooked or her bed unmade.

Listening doesn’t render an obligation to call back, she tells herself, and pushes play for the first VM. It came in at 1:02 PM, just about the time the last Charlotte Gibney Show got going.

“Hello, this is Penelope Dahl. I know you’re closed, but this is very important. An emergency, in fact. I hope you’ll call me back as soon as possible. Your agency was suggested to me by Detective Isabelle Jaynes—”

That’s where the message ends. Of course Holly knows who Izzy Jaynes is, she used to be Pete’s partner when Pete was still on the cops, but that isn’t what strikes her about the message. What hits, and hard, is how much Penelope Dahl sounds like Holly’s late mother. It’s not so much the voice as the palpable anxiety in the voice. Charlotte was almost always anxious about something, and she passed on that constant gnawing to her daughter like a virus. Like Covid, in fact.

Holly decides not to listen to the rest of Anxious Penelope’s messages. The lady will have to wait. Pete sure isn’t going to be doing any legwork for awhile; he tested positive for Covid a week before Charlotte died. He was double-vaxxed and isn’t too sick—says it’s more like a

heavy cold than the flu—but he’s quarantining and will be for some time to come.

Holly stands at the living room window of her tidy little apartment, looking down at the street and remembering that last meal with her mother. *An authentic Christmas dinner, just like in the old days!* Charlotte had said, cheery and excited on top but with that constant anxiety pulsing away underneath. The authentic Christmas dinner had consisted of dry turkey, lumpy mashed potatoes, and flabby spears of asparagus. Oh, and thimble glasses of Mogen David wine to toast with. How terrible that meal had been, and how terrible that it had been their last. Did Holly say *I love you, Mom* before she drove away the next morning? She thinks so but can’t remember for sure. All she can remember for sure is the relief she felt when she turned the first corner and her mother’s house was no longer in the rearview mirror.

2

Holly has left her cigarettes by her desktop computer. She goes back to get them, shakes one out, lights it, looks at the office phone in its charging cradle, sighs, and listens to Penelope Dahl’s second message. It starts on a note of disapproval.

“This is a very short space for messages, Ms. Gibney. I’d like to talk to you, or Mr. Huntley, or both of you, about my daughter Bonnie. She disappeared three weeks ago, on the first of July. The police investigation was *very* superficial. I told Detective Jaynes that, right to her—”

End of message. “Told Izzy right to her face,” Holly

says, and jets smoke from her nostrils. Men are often captivated by Izzy's red hair (salon-enhanced these days, no doubt) and her misty gray eyes, women less frequently. But she's a good detective. Holly has decided that if Pete retires, as he keeps threatening to do, she'll try to lure Isabelle away from the cops and over to the dark side.

There's no hesitation about going to the third message. Holly has to see how the story ends. Although she can guess. Chances are good that Bonnie Dahl is a runaway, and her mother can't accept that. Penelope Dahl's voice returns.

"Bonnie is an assistant librarian on the Bell campus. At the Reynolds? It opened again in June for the summer students, although of course you have to wear a mask to enter, and I suppose soon you'll have to show a vaccination card as well, although so far they haven't—"

Message ends. *Would you get to the point, lady?* Holly thinks, and punches up the last one. Penelope talks faster, almost speed-rapping.

"She rides her bike to and from her job. I've told her how unsafe that is, but she says she wears her helmet, as if *that* would save her from a bad crash or getting hit by a car. She stopped at the Jet Mart for a soda and that's the last . . ." Penelope begins to cry. It's hard to listen to. Holly takes a monster drag on her cigarette, then mashes it out. "The last time she was seen. Please help—"

Message ends.

Holly has been standing, holding the office phone in her hand, listening on speaker. Now she sits and slots the phone back in its cradle. For the first time since Charlotte got sick—no, since the time when Holly realized she wasn't going to get better—Holly's grief takes a back seat to these

bite-sized messages. She'd like to hear the whole story, or as much of it as Anxious Penelope knows. Pete probably doesn't know, either, but she decides to give him a call. What else does she have to do, except think about her last few video visits with her mother, and how frightened Charlotte's eyes were as the ventilator helped her breathe?

Pete answers on the first ring, his voice raspy. "Hey, Holly. So sorry about your mom."

"Thank you."

"You gave a great eulogy. Short but sweet. I only wish I could have . . ." He breaks off as a coughing fit strikes. ". . . only wish I could have seen you. What was it, some kind of computer glitch?"

Holly could say it was, but she makes it a habit to tell the truth except on those rare occasions when she feels she absolutely can't. "No glitch, I just turned off the video. I'm kind of a mess. How are you feeling, Pete?"

She can hear the rattle of phlegm as he sighs. "Not terrible, but I was better yesterday. Jesus, I hope I'm not going to be one of those long haulers."

"Have you called your doctor?"

He gives a hoarse laugh. "I might as well try to call Pope Francis. You know how many new cases there were in the city yesterday? Thirty-four hundred. It's going up exponentially." There's another coughing fit.

"Maybe the ER?"

"I'll stick with juice and Tylenol. The worst part of it is how fucking *tired* I am all the time. Every trip to the kitchen is a trek. When I go to the bathroom, I have to sit down and pee like a girl. If that's too much information, I apologize."

It is, but Holly doesn't say so. She didn't think she had

to worry about Pete, breakthrough cases usually aren't serious, but maybe she *does* have to worry.

"Did you call just to bat the breeze, or did you want something?"

"I don't want to bother you if—"

"Go ahead, bother me. Give me something to think about besides myself. Please. Are *you* okay? Not sick?"

"I'm fine. Did you get a call from a woman named—"

"Penny Dahl. Right? She's left four messages on my company voicemail so far."

"Four on mine, too. You didn't get back to her?"

Holly knows he didn't. What she knows is this: Anxious Penelope looked on the Finders Keepers website, or maybe Facebook, and found two office numbers for two partners, one male and one female. Anxious Penelope called the male, because when you've got a problem—an emergency, she termed it—you don't ask for help from the mare, at least not at first. You call the stallion. Calling the mare is your fall-back position. Holly is used to being the mare in the Finders Keepers stable.

Pete sighs again, producing that disturbing rattle. "In case you forgot, we're closed, Hols. And feeling like shit, as I currently do, I didn't think talking to a weepy-ass divorced mom would make me feel any better. Having just lost your own mom, I don't think it would make you feel any better, either. Wait until August, that's my advice. My strong advice. By then the girl may have called Momzie from Fort Wayne or Phoenix or San Fran." He coughs some more, then adds: "Or the cops will have found her body."

"You sound like you know *something*, even if you didn't talk to the mother. Was it in the paper?"

“Oh yeah, it was a big story. Stop the presses, extra, extra, read all about it. Two lines in the Police Beat between a naked man passed out on Cumberland Avenue and a rabid fox wandering around in the City Center parking lot. There’s nothing else in the paper these days except Covid and people arguing about masks. Which is like people standing out in the rain and arguing about whether or not they’re getting wet.” He pauses, then adds rather reluctantly, “The lady’s voicemail said Izzy caught the squeal, so I gave her a call.”

Smiles have been in short supply for Holly this summer, but she feels one on her face now. It’s nice to know that she’s not the only one addicted to the job.

It’s as if Pete can see her, even though they’re not Zooming. “Don’t make a big deal of it, okay? I needed to catch up with Iz anyway, see how she’s doing.”

“And?”

“Covid-wise she’s fine. Shitcanned her latest boyfriend is all, and I got a fair amount of wah-wah-wah about that. I asked her about this Bonnie Dahl. Izzy says they’re treating it as a missing persons case. There are some good reasons for that. Neighbors say Dahl and her mother argued a lot, some real blow-outs, and there was a buh-bye note taped to the seat of Dahl’s ten-speed. But the note struck the mom as ominous, and Izzy as ambiguous.”

“What did it say?”

“Just three words. *I’ve had enough*. Which could mean she left town, or—”

“Or that she committed suicide. What do her friends say about her state of mind? Or the people she works with at the library?”

“No idea,” Pete says, and starts coughing again. “That’s

where I left it and it's where you should leave it, at least for now. Either the case will still be there on August first, or it will have solved itself."

"One way or the other," Holly says.

"Right. One way or the other."

"Where was the bike found? Ms. Dahl said her daughter got a soda at Jet Mart the night she disappeared. Was it there?" Holly can think of at least three Jet Mart convenience stores in the city, and there are probably more.

"Again, I have no idea. I'm going to lie down for awhile. And again, I'm sorry your mother passed."

"Thanks. If you don't start to improve, I want you to seek medical attention. Promise me."

"You're nagging, Holly."

"Yes." Another smile. "I'm good at it, aren't I? Learned at my mother's knee. Now promise."

"Okay." He's probably lying. "One other thing."

"What?" She thinks it will be something about the case (that's already how she's thinking of it), but it's not.

"You'll never convince me that this Covid shit happened naturally, jumping to people from bats or baby crocodiles or whatever in some Chinese wet market. I don't know if it escaped from a research facility where they were brewing it up or if it got released on purpose, but as my grandfather would have said, t'aint natcherl."

"Sounding kind of paranoid there, Pete."

"You think? Listen, viruses mutate. It's their big survival skill. But they're just as apt to mutate into a less dangerous strain as one that's more dangerous. That's what happened with the Bird Flu. But this one just keeps getting worse. Delta infects people who've been double-vaxxed—I'm a case in point. And people who don't get really sick from Delta

carry four times the viral load as the original version, which means they can pass it on even more easily. Does that sound random to you?"

"Hard to tell," Holly says. What's easy to tell is when someone is riding a hobbyhorse. Pete is currently aboard his. "Maybe the Delta variant will mutate into something weaker."

"We'll find out, won't we? When the next one comes along. Which it will. In the meantime, shelve Penny Dahl and find something to watch on Netflix. It's what I'm going to do."

"Probably good advice. Take care, Pete." With that she ends the call.

She doesn't want to watch anything on Netflix (Holly thinks most of their movies, even those with big budgets, are weirdly mediocre) but her stomach is making tiny, tentative growls and she decides to pay attention. Something comforting. Maybe tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich. Pete's ideas about viruses are probably Internet bullpoo, but his advice about leaving Penelope "Penny" Dahl alone is undoubtedly good.

She heats the soup, she makes the grilled cheese with plenty of mustard and just a dab of relish, the way she likes it, and she doesn't call Penelope Dahl.

3

At least not until seven that night. What keeps gnawing at her is the note taped to the seat of Bonnie Dahl's bicycle: *I've had enough*. There were lots of times when Holly thought of leaving a similar note and getting out of

Dodge, but she never did. And there were times when she thought of ending it all—*pulling the pin*, Bill would have said—but she never thought of it seriously.

Well . . . maybe once or twice.

She calls Ms. Dahl from her study, and the woman answers on the first ring. Eager and a little out of breath. “Hello? Is this Finders Keepers?”

“Yes. Holly Gibney. How can I help, Ms. Dahl?”

“Thank God you called. I thought you and Mr. Huntley must be on vacation or something.”

As if, Holly thinks. “Can you come to my office tomorrow, Ms. Dahl? It’s in—”

“The Frederick Building, I know. Of course. The police have been no help at all. Not at *all*. What time?”

“Would nine o’clock suit you?”

“Perfect. Thank you so much. My daughter was last seen at four minutes past eight on July first. There’s video of her in a store where she—”

“We’ll discuss all that tomorrow,” Holly says. “But no guarantees, Ms. Dahl. It’s just me, I’m afraid. My partner is ill.”

“Oh my God, not Covid?”

“Yes, but a mild case.” Holly hopes it’s mild. “I only have a few questions for you now. You said on your message that Bonnie was last seen at a Jet Mart. There are quite a few of them around the city. Which of them was it?”

“The one near the park. On Red Bank Avenue. Do you know that area?”

“I do.” Holly has even gotten gas at that Jet Mart a time or two. “And was that where her bike was found?”

“No, further down Red Bank. There’s an empty building—well, there’s a lot of empty buildings on that

side of the park—but this one used to be a car repair shop, or something. Her bike was on its kickstand, out in front.”

“No attempt to hide it?”

“No, no, nothing like that. The police detective I talked to, the Jaynes woman, said Bonnie might have wanted it found. She also said the bus and train depot is only a mile further along, right about where you get into downtown? But I said Bonnie wouldn’t leave her bike and then walk the rest of the way, why would she? I mean it stands to *reason*.”

She’s ramping up, getting into a hysterical rhythm Holly knows well. If she doesn’t stop the woman now, Holly will be on the phone for an hour or more.

“Let me stop you right there, Ms. Dahl—”

“Penny. Call me Penny.”

“Okay, Penny. We’ll get into it tomorrow. Our rates are four hundred dollars a day, three-day minimum, plus expenses. Which I will itemize. I can take Master or Visa or your personal check. No Amex, they’re—” *Poopy* is the word that comes naturally to Holly’s mind. “They’re difficult to deal with. Are you willing to proceed on that basis?”

“Yes, absolutely.” No hesitation at all. “The Jaynes woman asked if Bonnie was feeling depressed, I know what she was thinking about, suicide is what she was thinking about, but Bonnie is a cheerful soul, even after her breakup with that dope she was so crazy about she got back on the sunny side after the first two or three weeks, well, maybe it was more like a month, but—”

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Holly repeats. “You can tell me all about it. Fifth floor. And Penny?”

“Yes?”

“Wear a mask. An N95, if you have one. I can’t help you if I get sick.”

“I will, I absolutely will. May I call you Holly?”

Holly tells Penny that would be fine and finally extracts herself from the call.

4

Mindful of Pete’s suggestion, Holly tries a Netflix movie called *Blood Red Sky*, but when the scary stuff starts she turns it off. She has followed all the bloody exploits of Jason and Michael and Freddy, she can tell you the names of every movie in which Christopher Lee played the sanguinary Count, but after Brady Hartsfield and Chet Ondowsky—especially Ondowsky—she thinks she may have lost her taste for horror films.

She goes to the window and stands there looking out at the latening day, ashtray in one hand, cigarette in the other. What a nasty habit it is! She’s already thinking about how much she’ll want one during her meeting with Penny Dahl, because meeting new clients is always stressful for her. She’s a good detective, has decided it’s what she was born to do, her *calling*, but she leaves the initial meet-and-greets to Pete whenever possible. No way she can do that tomorrow. She thinks about asking Jerome Robinson to be there, but he’s working on the editor’s draft of a book about his great-grandfather, who was quite a character. Jerome would come if she asked, but she won’t interrupt him. Time to suck it up.

No smoking in the building, either. I’ll have to go out to the alley on the side once the Dahl woman’s gone.

Holly knows this is how addicts think and behave: they rearrange the furniture of their lives to make room for their bad habits. Smoking is rotten and dangerous . . . but there's nothing more comforting than one of these deadly little tubes of paper and tobacco.

If the girl took the train, there'll be a record even if she paid cash. Same with Greyhound, Peter Pan, Magic Carpet, and Lux. But there are two fly-by-nighters on the next block that specialize in transient travel. Tri-State, and what's the other one?

She can't remember and she doesn't want to do an Internet search tonight. Plus who's to say that Bonnie Dahl left on a bus or Amtrak? She could have hitchhiked. Holly thinks of *It Happened One Night*, and how Claudette Colbert gets a ride for her and Clark Gable by hiking up her skirt and adjusting a stocking. Things don't change that much . . . only Bonnie Dahl didn't have a big strong man to protect her. Unless, of course, she'd reconnected with the old boyfriend her mom had mentioned.

No point picking at this now. There will probably be plenty to pick at tomorrow. She hopes so, anyway. Penny Dahl's problem will give her something to think about besides her mother's pointless, politics-driven death.

I have Holly hope, she thinks, and goes into the bedroom to put on her pajamas and say her prayers.

September 10, 2015

Cary Dressler is young, unattached, not bad-looking, cheerful, rarely prone to worrying about the future. He's currently sitting on a rocky outcrop covered with initials, high on good grass and sipping a P-Co' while he watches *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. On a weekend, this outcrop—known as Drive-In Rock—would be crowded with kids drinking beer, smoking weed, and grab-assing around, but this is a Thursday night and he has it all to himself. Which is how he likes it.

The Rock is on the west side of Deerfield Park, near the edge of the Thickets. This area is a tangle of trees and undergrowth. From most locations therein it would be impossible to see Red Bank Avenue, let alone the Magic City Drive-In screen, but here a ragged cut runs down to the street, maybe caused by flooding or a long-ago rock-slide.

Magic City is barely hanging on these days, nobody wants to swat bugs and listen to the soundtrack on AM radio when there are three cineplexes spotted around the

city, all with Dolby sound and one even with IMAX, which is kickin'. But you can't smoke weed in a cineplex. On Drive-In Rock, you can smoke all you want. And after an eight-hour shift at Strike Em Out Lanes, Cary wants. There's no sound, of course, but Cary doesn't need it. Magic City shows strictly second-, third-, and fourth-run movies these days, and he's seen *Raiders* at least ten times. He knows the dialogue and murmurs a snatch now, between tokes.

"Snakes! Why did it have to be snakes?"

Raiders will be followed by *Last Crusade*, which Cary has also seen many times—not as many as *Raiders*, but at least four. He won't stay for that one. He'll finish his P-Co', get on his moped (now stashed in the bushes near the park entrance closest to Drive-In Rock), and ride home. Very carefully.

His current joint is down to a nubbin. He butts it on the outcrop between BD+GL and MANDY SUCKS. He stores the roach, inspects the contents of his fanny pack, and debates between a skinny jay and a fatty. He decides on the jay. He'll smoke half of it, eat the Kit Kat bar also stashed in his fanny pack, then putt-putt his way back to his apartment.

He gets lost in the bright images playing out a quarter of a mile away and ends up smoking almost all of it. He hears the John Williams music in his head and vocalizes, keeping it on the down-low in case anyone else is nearby—unlikely at ten PM on a Thursday night, but not impossible.

"*Zum-de-dum-dum, zum-de-DAH, zum-de-bum-zum, zum de—*"

Cary stops abruptly. He just heard a voice . . . didn't he? He cocks his head to one side, listening. Maybe it was his imagination. Dope doesn't ordinarily make him paranoid, only mellow, but on occasion . . .

He's about decided it was nothing when the voice speaks up again. Not close, but not all that far away, either. "It's the battery, hon. I think it's dead."

There's nothing wrong with Cary's eyesight, and from his vantage point he quickly spots the location of that voice. Red Bank Avenue will never be in the running as one of the nicest streets in the city. There are the Thickets on one side, crowding the few paths and pushing through the wrought-iron fence. On the other are warehouses, a U-Store-It outfit, a defunct auto repair shop, and a couple of vacant lots. One of those was home to a bedraggled little carnival that picked up stakes after Labor Day. In the other, next to a long-deserted convenience store, is a van with the side door open and a ramp sticking out. There's a wheelchair next to the ramp with someone in it.

"I can't stay here all night," the wheelchair occupant says. She sounds old and wavery, a little irritated and a little scared. "Call for help."

"I would," says the man with her, "but my phone is dead. I forgot to charge it. Do you have yours?"

"I left it home. What are we going to do?"

It won't occur to Cary until later—too late to do any good—that the woman in the wheelchair and the man with her are projecting their voices. Not much, not yelling or anything, but the way actors onstage project for the audience. Later he'll realize that *he* was the audience they

were playing to, the guy sitting on Drive-In Rock with the joint winking on and off like a locator beacon. Later he'll realize how often he stops off here for awhile on his way home from the bowling alley, smoking a doob and watching the movie across the way.

He decides he can't just sit there while the old guy goes off looking for help, leaving the woman alone. Cary is your basic good person, more than happy to do the occasional good deed.

He makes his way down the slope, holding onto branches to keep from going on his ass. He gives his moped—faithful pony!—a little pat as he passes it. When he reaches one of the Red Bank Avenue gates out of the park, he walks down the sidewalk until he's opposite the van. He calls, "Need a little help?"

It won't occur to him until later, in the cage, to wonder why they picked that particular place to park; an abandoned Quik-Pik store is hardly a beauty spot.

"Who's there?" the man calls, sounding worried.

"Name's Cary Dressler. Can I—?"

"Cary? My goodness, hon, it's Cary!"

Cary steps into the street, peering. "Small Ball? Is that you?"

The man laughs. "It's me, all right. Listen, Cary, the battery in my wife's wheelchair died. I don't suppose you could push it up the ramp, could you?"

"I think I can manage that," Cary says, crossing the street. "Indy Jones to the rescue."

The old lady laughs. "I saw that movie at the old Bijou. Thank you so much, young man. You're a lifesaver."

Roddy Harris is telling his wife how he and their

rescuer know each other. Cary grabs the wheelchair hand-grips and aims the chair for the ramp. Small Ball stands back to give him room, one hand in the pocket of his tweed jacket. Cary is so high that he doesn't even feel the needle when it goes into the back of his neck.

July 23, 2021

1

Holly arrives at the Fourth Street municipal parking lot half a block from the Frederick Building and swipes her card. The barrier goes up and she drives in. It's 8:35 AM, almost half an hour before the appointed time for her meeting with Penny Dahl, but the Dahl woman is also early. There's no mistaking her Volvo. It has large photos of her daughter taped to both sides and the back. Printed across the rear window (probably a moving violation, Holly thinks) is HAVE YOU SEEN MY DAUGHTER and BONNIE RAE DAHL and CALL 216-555-0019.

Holly parks her Prius next to it, which isn't a problem. There's no shortage of spaces in the lot; it used to be packed by nine, with the SORRY FULL sign out front, but that was before the pandemic. Now large numbers of people are working from home, assuming they still have jobs to work at. Also assuming they are not too sick to work. The hospitals emptied out for awhile, but then Delta arrived with its new bag of tricks. They aren't at capacity yet, but they're getting there. By August,

patients may be bedding down in the halls and snack stations again.

Because Ms. Dahl is nowhere in sight and Holly is early, she lights a cigarette and walks around the Volvo, studying the pictures. Bonnie Dahl is both pretty and older than Holly expected. Mid-twenties, give or take. She guesses it was partly the thing about Dahl riding her bike to and from the Reynolds Library that made Holly expect a younger woman. The rest was how much Penny Dahl's voice reminded Holly of her late mother. She supposes she thought Bonnie would look sort of like Holly had at nineteen or twenty: pinched Emily Dickinson face, hair pulled back in a bun or ponytail, fake smile (Holly had hated having her picture taken, still does), clothes designed not just to minimize her figure but to make it disappear.

This girl's face is open to the world, her smile wide and sunny. Her blond hair is short, cut off in front in a shaggy, sun-streaked fringe. The pictures on the sides of the car are full-face portraits, but the one on the back shows Bonnie astride her bike, wearing white shorts with V-cuts on the sides and a strappy top. No body consciousness there.

Holly finishes her cigarette, bends, scrapes it out on the pavement. She touches the blackened tip to make sure it's cold, then places it in the litter basket outside the swing gate. She pops a Life Saver into her mouth, puts on her mask, and walks down to her building.

2

Penny Dahl is waiting in the lobby, and even with the mask Holly sees the resemblance to her daughter. Holly

puts her age at sixty or thereabouts. Her hair might be pretty with a touch-up, but now it's rat-fur gray. *Neatly kept, though*, Holly adds to this first assessment. She always tries to be kind. Ms. Dahl's clothes are clean but slapdash. Holly is no fashionista, far from it, but she would never put that blouse with those slacks. Here is a woman for whom personal appearance has taken a back seat. Across the requested N95, in bright red letters, is her daughter's first name.

"Hello, Ms. Dahl," she says. "Holly Gibney."

Holly has never liked shaking hands, but she offers an elbow willingly. Penny Dahl bumps it with her own. "Thank you so much for seeing me. Thank you so very, very much."

"Let's go upstairs." The lobby is empty and they don't have to wait for the elevator. Holly pushes for the fifth floor. To Penny she says, "We had some trouble with this darn thing last year, but it's fixed now."

3

Without Pete or Barbara Robinson helping out (or just hanging out), the reception area feels like a held breath. Holly starts the coffee maker.

"I brought pictures of Bonnie, a dozen, all taken within a year or two of when she disappeared. I've got tons more, but from when she was younger, and that's not the girl you'll be looking for, is it? I can send them to your phone if you give me your email address." Her delivery is staccato and she keeps touching her mask to be sure it's in place. "I can take this off, you know. I'm double-vaxxed and Covid negative. I took the home test just last night."

“Why don’t we wear them out here? We’ll take them off in my office and have some coffee. I have cookies, if Barbara—the young lady who sometimes helps out—hasn’t eaten them all.”

“No thank you.”

Holly doesn’t have to look to know they’re all gone, anyway. Barbara can’t keep her hands off the vanilla wafers. “I saw the pictures of Bonnie on your car, by the way. She’s very attractive.”

Penny’s eyes crinkle as she smiles behind her mask. “I think so. Of course I’m her mother, so what else would I say? No Miss America, but she was a prom queen back in high school. And nobody dumped a bucket of blood on her, either.” She laughs, the sound as sharp as her delivery. Holly hopes she isn’t going to get all hysterical. After three weeks the woman should be beyond that, but maybe not. Holly has never lost a daughter, so she doesn’t know. But she does know how she felt when she thought she might have lost Jerome and Barbara—like she was going out of her mind.

Holly writes her email address on a Post-it. “Are you married, Ms. Dahl?”

Dahl pastes the note inside the cover of her phone. “If you don’t start calling me Penny, I may scream.”

“Penny it is,” Holly says, partly because she thinks her new client actually might.

“Divorced. Herbert and I dissolved our partnership three years ago. Political differences were part of it—he was all in on Trump—but there were plenty of other reasons, as well.”

“How did Bonnie feel about that?”

“Handled it in very adult fashion. And why not? She