

RICHARD BUTNER

HOLDERHAVEN



In 1911, Nerissa and Jorn Holder move into Holderhaven.

In 1966, Nerissa Holder dies, having outlived her husband, both sons, and a son-in-law.

In 1983, Holderhaven opens as a country house museum.

In 2003, Rudy needs a summer job. His friend at college, Bill Mills, says he can pull some strings. Bill does not need a summer job. Bill's family is not quite as wealthy as the Holders had been, but they are rich enough. Bill's father is Ol' Dick Mills. Dick Mills' house does not have a name. It is much smaller than Holderhaven, but it still has a tennis court, a swimming pool, and a separate climate-controlled warehouse for his collection of vintage Jaguar convertibles. Ol' Dick Mills knows everyone in the county. Everyone who matters, at least. He places a call to Harriet Diamond, supervisor of operations at the Holderhaven House Museum.

Holderhaven has four floors, including a basement. Sixty-four rooms. The first and second floors are open to the public, as long as the public stays behind the velvet ropes and doesn't try to touch the leather-topped parquet desk in Mrs Holder's den, or the tapestries hanging on the balcony walls of the central hall. The board plans to open the basement to the public soon. The top floor, originally for storage, is occupied by the museum staff. Harriet Diamond has an office. Mary Holder Hodgson has an office on the top floor too, with access to the roof walk, but she is rarely around. Rudy gets to stay in a bedroom on

the top floor for the summer. The bedroom had been the majordomo's originally. In the 1960s it had been renovated as a teenager's hideout. As far as amenities are concerned, it is not much different from Rudy's dorm room.

Rudy is not particularly qualified to work in the house. He is studying math, not architectural preservation. The museum employs specialists to conserve the artwork, to clean the tapestries, to preserve the library books, to ensure that the flowers outside match the photographs of the gardens from the 1920s. That has been the great project of the museum: to send the house back in time. To erase the renovations and redecorations done by the family over the course of the 20th century. To make the house suitable for population by flappers, bootleggers, and gentlemen in straw boater hats. Mary Holder Hodgson has decided that the 1920s would be good for business. Competition in the house museum market is stiff. Everyone is second place to the Biltmore House. Everyone is trying harder. For a time, Mary Holder Hodgson pushes to come out with Holderhaven branded wine. But grapes had never been grown on the estate, and the board nixes this plan. Plans to re-create the 1920s continue.

Rudy is given keys and alarm codes. For the first weeks of the summer, he and Bill Mills spend their off hours together. Bill Mills is an avid moviegoer. Bill is looking forward to the next *Matrix* movie.

In 1974, Harriet Diamond is a Black Panther. She wears a black beret, a shiny black leather jacket, dark sunglasses, and a stern expression as she delivers breakfasts to hungry schoolchildren. In addition to holding a Black Panther ID card, she also holds a membership card to the Women's Auxiliary to the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. She and all her fellow Panthers sent in fake photos to a PO Box address they saw on a flier stapled to a telephone pole. They all received Klan cards. There was no membership fee.

"Know your enemy," Harriet said. Sending off for the Klan cards was her idea.

In 2003, a black and white photograph of herself and the other Panthers sits on Harriet Diamond's desk. Rudy steals glances between the photo and Ms Diamond, trying to interpolate the path between the two endpoints. He wonders if Ms Diamond feels conflicted as an African-American about working in a place like Holderhaven. He never asks

her about this, though. In Harriet Diamond's wallet, she still carries her Panther and her Klan membership cards. They are creased and torn now. Realistically old, unlike Holderhaven, which is constantly policed for any sign of decay.

Harriet Diamond is not surprised that Rudy's knowledge of upkeep and repair is not quite as expansive as Ol' Dick Mills implied it would be when he got Rudy the job. Rudy painted houses the previous summer.

"Rudy, what do you know about carpentry?"

"Not much, Ms Diamond."

"What do you know about plastering?"

"Not much, Ms Diamond."

"What do you know about, oh, swimming pool filtration?"

"Not much, Ms Diamond, but I'm a quick study."

"What do you know about secret passages?"

In 1910, Nerissa Holder works with architect Irving Gill on the house plans. She supervises every aspect of planning and construction. Mr Gill wants an asymmetrical design, with only one wing. Mrs Holder asks for two wings off the grand central hall. The primary building material will be rough granite stones, with a clay tile roof. She asks Mr Gill to design matching structures in miniature for the separate servants' quarters and for a playhouse for the children she plans to begin producing. And she asks for a secret passage. No one but Mr Holder is to know about the secret passage. She works closely with Mr Gill to ensure this. After the house is built, she burns the blueprints in the fireplace in the great hall. She adds them to the fire one page at a time, ensuring that each is completely consumed, leaving no trace.

In 1911, the secret passage exists. It begins in Mrs Holder's closet in the master bedroom. Clothes hang to either side. Pressing on the back wall panel at doorknob height pops a magnetic catch so that the entire panel swings open. There is no landing; the spiral staircase begins immediately, down a shaft barely wider than a chimney. The interior is black and featureless, and there is no source of light inside. Any traveler in the secret passage would navigate by feel. The staircase leads all the way to the basement, bypassing the first floor. The basement is a floor of amusements: a party room with large granite fireplace, a billiards room, a one-lane bowling alley, an indoor swimming pool, an elaborate bar

with mirrored walls. The secret passage exit is disguised as one of the mirrored panels behind the bar.

In 2003, there are no plans to put the secret passage on the public tour. Instead, it is to be fixed up for the wealthiest donors. A bonus for them. They are also going to get to use the bowling alley and swimming pool in the basement on special occasions. Harriet Diamond gives Rudy the task, for most of June, of fixing up the secret passage.

The secret passage is not the only unusual feature of the house. There is a safe in the master bedroom, behind a painting of a fox hunt. The painting is now hinged to the wall to make it easier for the docents to swing it away dramatically as they tell schoolchildren the tale of Mr Holder's money. There is an impressive collection of taxidermed animals in the library. Because of the harsh chemicals used – arsenic and mercury – they have been encased in plastic. Mr Holder had been a keen naturalist, and his love of nature is another paragraph in the script that the docents memorize.

When asked, Mary Holder Hodgson says she is not sure why there is a secret passage. Because the passage is not going to be placed on the public tour, there is no need to “interpret” it. When Harriet reveals the existence of the passage to Rudy, he asks her why it exists.

“Rich people,” she says, lowering her head to gaze at him over the top of her reading glasses. This is the only answer she gives.

Tours continue through the summer, so Rudy cannot leave the upper entrance open as he works. He places a fan at the lower entrance, trying to pull out the hot still air. He wears a mask, which makes breathing more difficult. First he sands the rust off the metal stairs, beneath a worklight tethered to a long orange extension cord. He starts at the top, wielding sandpaper and steel wool, dripping sweat, trying not to make too much noise. The docents are used to seeing workers painting a hallway or trimming the hedges, but Rudy wants to keep the secret passage a secret.

He has been sanding for a week when he makes the discovery. Swinging the light around, he notices scratches in the wall. About half-way up the climb, someone had carved a word. The letters are blockish and clumsy, all capitals. Perhaps this word was carved in the dark. The word is LIZZA. Following that name are tally marks, two sets of five plus four more.

Rudy tells Harriet Diamond many things, but he does not yet tell her about his discovery in the secret passage.

The history of Holderhaven is available in a coffee table book. It is also spelled out on a series of kiosks in the tour entrance area, which Harriet refers to as the emergency room. It's the converted garage. Behind velvet ropes sits a 1930 Rolls, not actually one that belonged to the Holders. The original car was totaled in the wreck that killed Crosby Holder, the eldest son, in 1932. The garage is where you buy your ticket and where, if you want more than the docents will tell you, you can learn about the history of the Holder estate. Rudy cursorily read the kiosks when he first started working at Holderhaven. Harriet asked him to check them for typos. She seemed pleased rather than annoyed when he found and fixed two: Pennsylvania and capitol instead of capital. Now he returns to the kiosks, looking for mention of anyone named Lizza. He finds none, not even an Elizabeth. Not one on the family tree chart. Not one in the endless paragraphs on Mrs Holder's various projects: her unsuccessful attempt to cultivate tulips, her more successful dairy operation, the school she founded to instruct the servants. No mention of a Lizza in the descriptions of the famous personages who stopped by Holderhaven to play croquet or to dance the Charleston. These personages included Charles Lindbergh and Calvin Coolidge.

Bill Mills calls up Rudy, wanting to go to a movie and then out to Jay's, his favorite bar. Rudy begs off, says he is feeling ill. He stays up late working on Harriet's computer, looking up more genealogy, looking up the names of Lindbergh's wife. Her name was Anne, not Lizza. Coolidge's wife's name was Grace.

Finally he gives up and goes back to the secret passage with a flashlight. He pores over the walls looking for any other marks. For anything at all, but finds nothing. No hidden chamber. Just the inscription.

It is against the rules, but that night Rudy steps past the velvet rope and sleeps on the Holders' bed, with the door to the secret passage left open. There is no pillow on the bed. There is no pillow on any bed in the restored rooms of Holderhaven. Mrs Holder believed that it was healthier to sleep without a pillow, to preserve the youthful straightness of the spine. Rudy does not have any revelatory dreams.

In 1899, Holderhaven does not exist. Mr William Bagge, sheep farmer, owns a small tract that will form the heart of the 1,066-acre Holder

estate. Mr Bagge's daughter is born. After Mr Bagge's death, his wife and daughter will go to work for the Holders. His daughter's name is Elizabeth, but she is called Lizza.

In 2003, Rudy and Harriet are having a conversation.

"What do you think the secret passage was for?" Rudy asks.

"Jorn Holder was a strange man. Maybe to make it easier to run down and get a nightcap from the bar? We know he liked to take over from the bartender and mix drinks. Maybe he liked to appear suddenly behind the bar at parties."

"Seems like a pretty useless trick to go to so much trouble."

Harriet is moving numbers around in a spreadsheet as she talks.

"He couldn't swim, either, but that didn't stop him from building a pool. And I hear he was lousy at bowling, too. How's the bowling alley coming?"

Rudy shrugs and winces. In addition to the secret passage, he is tasked with repainting the bowling alley. The restoration consultant, a big man named James, has chosen a color called Peach Surprise that is the closest match to the original paint. The bowling alley, though small, is airy and temperate compared to the secret passage. Rudy has inspected all of its nooks and crevices for markings or bits of papers and found nothing. He has not actually started painting it yet.

"Speaking of tricks, pick a card," Harriet says. She proffers a deck to Rudy.

"Do I get to inspect the deck first?" he asks.

"No, you don't get to inspect the deck. What, don't you trust me?"

"All right, Harriet, I trust you."

He pulls a card from the set fanned out before him. He tries to pull it from a non-obvious place in the deck. Not the middle. Not either end. Not halfway between the middle and the end. The card is the Jack of diamonds.

"Don't show me the card," Harriet says.

"Is this a comment on me?" Rudy asks. "Because if it is, I don't get it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Put the card back in the deck."

He slides the card in, again to a place that he thinks is the least likely. Harriet raps the top of the deck sharply, then carefully flips over the top card.

“Is this your card?”

The card is the nine of clubs. Rudy really wants the trick to work, but he doesn't want to lie. So instead he just waits. She repeats the question.

“No, Harriet. It's close, though!”

Harriet scrunches her brow.

“Not your card, huh? Damn. All right, sort through the deck and find it for me.”

She hands him the pack, which he flips over and begins sifting through. To Rudy it looks like a standard deck of cards. He can't find the Jack of diamonds, though, even though he'd just put it back in there.

“Hang on, hang on, I'm feeling something,” Harriet says. “Stand up.”

He stands up.

“Put your hand in your left trouser pocket.”

He puts his hand in. There is the usual junk: assorted change, a little pocket pen, his lucky paper clip. There is also a playing card. Rudy pulls the card out slowly, and as he does he unconsciously takes a step back from Harriet. The card is the Jack of diamonds.

“Pretty good, huh?”

“Damn good, Harriet.”

In 1912, Crosby is born, the first of Jorn and Nerissa's three children. Immediately after the birth, Jorn Holder commissions a painting and a statue. The painting is a portrait of a prepubescent girl, clad only in a diaphanous white dress. She clutches a spray of white flowers and has a pixie grin on her face. She has sharp cheekbones and a snub nose. The painting hangs over the mantel in his office. The statue is bronze, placed in the terraced garden, in the center of a circular slate walkway surrounded by rhododendron and azalea. The terraced garden is on the north side of the east wing, visible from the master suite and from Mr Holder's office. The statue is of the same young girl. She is nude, facing toward the house, her arms spread to display the bounty of the garden and grounds. Mr Holder calls her 'Lady Liberty'.

In 2003, Rudy continues his investigations. He is surrounded by objects, rooms full of them. He is surrounded by texts. Books in the library. Paperwork in Harriet's office. Mary Holder Hodgson's office is always locked, but he imagines she has some records too. It turns out that most of the surviving records from Holderhaven are now kept in a vault at the

university. Not available to the public. Someone is doing a dissertation, but she is out of town for the summer. Rudy sends the doctoral student an email, but gets no response.

Rudy imagines all these objects, all this text, laid out in a giant matrix. He is slowly picking his way through each cell in the matrix. He looks in the big maintenance building that's hidden at the end of a paved pathway in the woods. It's a modern structure, built after Holderhaven's transformation into museum. The gardeners' tools and machinery are kept there. There is also furniture from the now deprecated mid-century era of Holderhaven. Rudy carefully inspects the jumble of bent plywood chairs and steel and fiberglass tables, but he finds no graffiti, no spoor of the mysterious Lizza. He looks in the playhouse and the servants' quarters too, but finds nothing of interest.

Rudy takes the keys to these buildings back to Harriet's office, to replace them on their labeled hooks. He plops down in Harriet's chair, spins to face the shelf on the far wall. There is a series of boxes, labeled with years starting with 1923. He starts to pull the earliest one off the shelf.

"You don't want to touch that one," Harriet says, from the doorway. "That's what they call a valuable collector's item. Those have nothing to do with the house. It's my complete set of back issues of *The Linking Ring*. I'm reading through them on my lunch breaks."

Rudy raises his eyebrows, not comprehending.

"The magazine of IBM, the International Brotherhood of Magicians. They don't have an International Sisterhood, so I make do."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to snoop through your stuff"

Rudy gets up and moves to the chair on the other side of the desk. Harriet takes up her position behind the desk.

"How's the bowling alley coming?" Harriet asks.

"Uh, it's taking longer than expected."

"Has to be done by the party, which is next Friday. What are you looking for in the maintenance shed, anyway?"

Rudy hesitates.

"And don't lie."

So he doesn't. He tells her about the inscription in the secret passage. He offers to take her to see it, but she declines.

"I believe you. I don't need to see it."

Harriet tells him that the name Lizza does not ring a bell with her.

Not the name of any family members. Not the name of any of the servants that she can recall. Harriet pulls her copy of the coffee table book from the shelf. She points out the photograph on page 27: ‘Crosby, the governess Mags, Alvis, unidentified women and Jorn at Holderhaven, circa 1915’. Three-year-old Crosby is wearing a suit that matches his father’s. They stand at either end of the group of women. One of the women is holding Crosby’s younger brother, Alvis, in her arms. On top of the hill in the distance sits Holderhaven. The women all wear white dresses. Six women are unidentified; any of them could be Lizza. Mags wears her hair in a bun perched on the top of her head. Her hand rests on young Crosby’s shoulder.

“There are a lot of unidentified people who passed through these hallowed halls,” she says. So many names, especially servants’ names, are practically lost to history. Possibly recorded on census rolls, probably never engraved on a tombstone, just a dimly remembered story to their descendents. At any given time, especially in the early days of Holderhaven, there would have been cooks, laundresses, gardeners, maids, nurses. Someone to set the pins in the bowling alley. A chauffeur, whose name does survive, as does the name of the majordomo: Arthur Doyle.

“No relation to Sherlock Holmes,” Harriet says. “Trust me.”

“We could just ask Ms Hodgson,” Rudy says. “Maybe she knows some lore that didn’t get set down in the book.”

“Mary Holder Hodgson can tell you a whole other book’s worth of family history. If you want to talk about the ill-fated attempt to bottle and sell salad dressing made on the estate during the Depression, she can tell you all about it. If you want to know all about her uncle Alvis’s pet monkey that he kept in a cage next to the swimming pool, she can reel off a list of all the furniture and objets d’art that it broke or ruined every time it escaped during its two-year tenure in the house. If you want to talk about Nerissa Holder’s fondness for tomato pudding and lamb sandwiches at her Whist Club luncheons, she will recite the entire menu and then teach you to play Whist. Which is a boring damn game, by the way. But she didn’t even know about the secret passage’s existence – it had been sealed shut for decades when the restoration architects discovered it while they were drawing up plans. I doubt she wants to know that some girl’s name is scratched on the wall in there next to some tally marks.

“Also, she always keeps her office locked. And she’s the only one with the key.”

In 1965, two magicians visit Hattie Diamond’s fourth grade class. She and nine of her classmates pose for a photograph with them. The magicians, both of them white men, wear bow ties and plaid tuxedos. This photograph is published in the September issue of *The Linking Ring*, just above a joke about spades.

In 1916, Jorn Holder dies. The cause of death printed in the *Daily Lookout* is a combination of gastritis and exhaustion. Nerissa has the painting of the young girl removed from Jorn’s office and the nude statue removed from the terraced garden. Alone one night soon after, she burns the painting in the fireplace in the great hall. Later she will donate the statue to be melted down for the war effort. She has a large marble obelisk constructed and put in the place of the statue, a cenotaph for Jorn, whose remains were sent back to the old Holder family cemetery in Pennsylvania. Almost nine months after Jorn’s death, on Christmas Day, Nerissa bears their final child, a girl, Noelle.

The secret passage is not the only way to traverse the floors of Holderhaven. There is an elevator, but it is locked shut, deemed unsafe and too expensive to repair. There is a dumbwaiter, too, merely broken. And of course there are stairs; narrow ones to get up to the top floor where Harriet works and Rudy lives, grand ones on either side of the central fireplace to ascend from the first floor to the second, less grand ones to descend to the basement. Rudy wonders if the elevator holds any secrets, or the dumbwaiter. The dumbwaiter compartment itself is stuck between floors. He manages to pry open the doors and finds nothing but a black chimney, a secret passage in miniature. No scratches, no hidden messages. He crawls up as far as he can, which is not far, searching with a flashlight and finding nothing.

Holderhaven has its own ghost story. Everyone who works there, including Harriet, knows the story. The ghost in the story is Mrs Holder. A portrait of her hangs over the fireplace in the great hall. In the portrait, Nerissa Holder is thirty-one years old. A little brass lamp illuminates the portrait, night and day. The story is, if the lamp is shut off at night, Mrs Holder’s ghost will emerge from the portrait.

Rudy hears this story from Harriet, but assumes it is merely to keep him in his room at night, instead of wandering about in the dark house pretending to be an early 20th century aristocrat. Going beyond the velvet ropes, sitting in the chairs that are never to be sat in again.

Rudy decides to ask Mrs Holder herself about Lizza. He waits until midnight, goes downstairs and positions one of the dining room chairs in front of the portrait. He flicks off the light switch next to the mantel and takes a seat. And waits. In the portrait, Mrs Holder is kindly and radiant. She looks like Rudy's high school world history teacher, Ms Raney. The same knowing smile, the same piercing green eyes. Rudy has seen actual photographs of Mrs Holder and the portrait is a vast improvement. His eyes adjust to the darkness. It's a full moon outside but it remains extremely dim in the grand hall. On the third floor, the windows are normal glass, but on the public floors, the windows have been coated to keep out the damaging rays of the sun. Mrs Holder does not emerge from the painting. Her mouth does not even move. Rudy conjures up a mental image of Mrs Holder talking to him, but in reality the thin painted smile does not vibrate in the least. Mrs Holder says nothing. Rudy keeps waiting. It takes time to prove a hypothesis, he thinks, wondering if hypothesis is the right word. Rudy is also falling asleep.

He thinks about leaving his mark in Holderhaven, just as Lizza did. Not scratched into the wall of the secret passage, though. Something even sneakier. Maybe written in permanent marker on the bottom of one of the circular stair treads. Who would ever look there? RUDY and his signature doodle, a hyperbolic spiral. Permanent, or as permanent as anything in the house, living on unseen until the house collapsed or burned or until someone decided to repaint the bottom of the treads on the circular stairway. When would that ever happen?

He is jarred awake by a noise, or possibly just a dream of a noise. He focuses on Mrs Holder but she is as flat and lifeless as ever. The noise had not come from the painting. The noise had come from inside the secret passage.

Rudy flips the light switch back on, replaces the dining room chair, and slips upstairs to the master bedroom. He pushes the panel in the back of the closet and it pops open. He leans into the passage.

"Mrs Holder? Nerissa Holder?"

And then, after a moment: "Lizza?"

He is met with silence. He goes and gets a flashlight from his room, walks down the stairs and back up, but he finds nothing amiss. On his way back up the steps, he stops at the marks. Checks them with the flashlight – no change. He reaches out and touches the wall, brushing his palm over the scratchings. The marks are warm.

“Lizza?”

He turns and sits on the steps, flicking the flashlight off. He hears no more noises, though, and after a time he goes up to his room and to bed.

Downtown one Saturday at the end of June, the annual Summersplosion is happening, and Harriet is one of the entertainers. Rudy catches the bus to see her perform. She does sets on the side stage at noon, three, and six. In between she roams the crowd, doing close-up magic. She wears a gold robe with embroidered stars, and a turban with a large ruby brooch. Rudy gets there in time to see the finale of her three o'clock set. It's a card trick. The audience volunteer, a middle-aged white man in khaki shorts, discovers that the card he chose from the deck and signed with a permanent marker has vanished from a locked box and reappeared underneath his baseball cap. The crowd goes wild.

Rudy buys a hot dog and a plastic cup of beer from a tent set up by the local microbrewery. Across the square, a reggae band on the main stage has started up a song about a shantytown. Rudy walks along looking at the craft booths as he polishes off the hot dog and the beer. Pottery, beads, beads made from pottery, pottery featuring beads. He turns the corner and sees Harriet working the crowd. She has a brass urn in one hand. With the other hand she is discovering gold coins on the person of a young girl holding a helium balloon. The girl is extremely ticklish; she cackles as Harriet plucks coins from her armpits, from behind her ears, from out of her shoes. Endlessly they appear, and endlessly Harriet tosses them into her urn, which makes a loud clinking sound each time. Finally Harriet goes to work on the father of the girl with the balloon. Harriet is a lot bolder here than she is at Holderhaven. She displays an empty hand, then reaches around behind the man to pull a gold coin from his butt. The girl with the balloon spasms with laughter. Harriet tosses the coin into her bucket, clink, bows, and moves on.

Rudy walks up to her before she can find another victim.

“Great show, Harriet,” he says. She is squinting at him, not responding

to the compliment.

“What is that?” she asks. Her arm shoots out near his head, to pluck something from behind his ear. She holds it up between them. It’s a key.

“Look what you had behind your ear. Didn’t your mother tell you to wash back there? Looks like the key to Mary Holder Hodgson’s office to me. Maybe you better hang on to it.”

She presses the key into his hand.

“No, Harriet, I – ”

“You take the key, do what you need to do. If I got caught snooping in there, it’d cost me my job. Magic pays well by the hour but it’s not enough to pay the bills.”

“Thanks, Harriet.”

“For what?” she says loudly, then she pulls a gold coin out of his nose and drops it in her bucket.

Rudy pockets the key and takes the next bus back to Holderhaven.

The sun is still out when Rudy unlocks Mary Holder Hodgson’s office and slips inside. He is immediately confounded. The office is much emptier than he’d expected. The desk is bare except for a computer monitor and an inbox. Unlike Harriet’s computer, Mary’s is password-protected. He tries a few passwords, but none of them work: Holderhaven, Hodgson, Nerissa, passage. He types in Lizza, feeling sure that it’s the one, but when he hits the Enter key the same ACCESS DENIED message appears. He flips through the papers in the inbox, but nothing looks promising. They are mostly current magazines and newspapers, or clippings related to the Holderhaven House Museum. Nothing that looks old or archival. The desk is unlocked but contains mostly cosmetics. One drawer contains only skin creams.

The walls are covered in framed photographs: Mary Holder Hodgson shaking Ol’ Dick Mills’ hand as he offers her a check and mugs for the camera, Mary Holder Hodgson showing Nancy Reagan around the great hall, pointing at the fake medieval tapestries. There is a locked cabinet next to the desk. For all Rudy knows, there might be another safe hidden behind one of the framed photos. So he checks behind each one, finding only bare walls.

An unabridged dictionary and a large, leather-bound Bible sit on top of the locked cabinet. Rudy flips open the Bible. It opens to a section in the center for a family tree, but this has not been filled in. Pressed

between the pages is a small stack of old, fading photographs. He sorts through them. None look promising. Color snapshots from the 1950s and 1960s, children sledding, children hunting for Easter eggs on the grounds. An old black and white photo of the portico, with curvy edges. He checks the backs of the photographs for writing, finds none.

The photograph of the house feels thicker than the rest, because it's actually two photographs stuck together. Rudy carefully pries the photographs apart with his thumbnail.

In the photograph, Jorn Holder stands next to a statue of a girl in the terraced garden. Her nude torso touches his clothed torso. She has her arms outstretched, and his arm is draped over her shoulders. Jorn is smiling.

For a moment, Rudy can't breathe. He commits the photograph to memory, and replaces it and the other pictures in the Bible.

The door to the roof walk is not locked. Rudy walks out and up the steps to the flat tile spine of the roof. Most of the 1,066 acres of the Holder estate have been sold off long ago, but he squints and tries to imagine the surrounding countryside covered in green woods and pastures instead of parking lots and strip malls, lined with dirt paths instead of asphalt roads. The sun goes down and he says goodbye to the day.

The next weekend is the annual reception for the patrons of the house. This year they celebrate the imminent opening, thanks to their donations, of the bowling alley, the swimming pool, the bar and the party room, the same rooms that Rudy and the conservators have been trying to put in order. The patrons love doing things that ordinary visitors are not allowed to do. The frisson of going beyond the velvet rope is their reward for donating the hundreds of thousands of dollars that it takes to keep the place running.

Harriet asks Rudy if he is going to attend.

"I'm invited? I don't have to work the reception?"

"No. Mary Holder Hodgson suggested that you might be able to assist the caterers, but I talked her out of that."

"Thanks, Harriet," Rudy says.

"You might even get to meet some folks who really were in the Klan," she adds, as if that is a bonus.

The party invitations suggest that attendees dress up in the style of the 1920s. Bill Mills loans Rudy an ivory linen suit. Bill goes in a top hat

and tails, as if he'd walked out of a Monopoly set. Rudy scrounges up some spectator shoes at a thrift store, but he cannot find a straw boater hat. Bill's suit is a little too big for him.

Ol' Dick Mills is a platinum patron of Holderhaven. Platinum is \$10,000 a year and up. Platinum members are listed in the brochure, on a plaque in the entry hall, and in the back of the coffee table book. As it turns out, the platinum members, most of the patrons in fact, are not interested in dressing up in the style of the 1920s. There are a few people who make an attempt. The men are all would-be gangsters, in black shirts and white ties. The women are all would-be molls, in short dresses and shiny headbands.

Harriet wears her mentalist outfit, an embroidered wrap dress and turban with a large fake ruby affixed to the front. Harriet's husband, Harvey Roseboro, does not attend. Harvey never attends functions at Holderhaven.

The croquet lawn is lit up, and there are tents and tables set up on the south lawn. Most patrons circulate through the party room to take a cursory glance at the restoration before retiring to the tables outdoors to smoke and talk. Waiters circulate with trays of champagne, trays of foie gras on toast. Rudy politely turns down the champagne. Instead he orders a Maiden's Prayer, an authentic Prohibition-era cocktail, at the bar. He looked up the recipe earlier in the day, from the Savoy Hotel Cocktail Book in the house library. Gin, Cointreau, lemon juice, orange juice. The bartender is happy to make something that's not yet another bourbon and ginger ale. Twelve-year-old bourbon, bottle after bottle, drowning in a sea of ginger ale, sucked down by the platinum members who don't like champagne because it gives them gas. Ol' Dick Mills, he prefers single-malt Scotch doused with Coke.

Bill Mills is drinking both champagne and beer. He and Harriet and Rudy stand together, making small talk. Ol' Dick Mills has long since retreated to a table outside where he can smoke with his cronies.

"Hey, do a trick," Bill says to Harriet.

"I am doing a trick. I'm reading your mind," she says, then she asks Rudy to get her another glass of that Austrian rosé.

Rudy goes, and Bill decides it's time to go to the bathroom.

"The seal is broken!" he announces, for the benefit of anyone who cannot read his mind.

The bathroom in the basement is still not renovated. There are por-

table toilets set up outside, twice as big as the type used by construction workers. They are hooked up to running water. An attendant sits next to them in a folding chair, supervising a stack of cotton towels.

Rudy returns with Harriet's wine, and Bill re-enters the party room from the hall. They both notice the young woman at the same time. Ella is standing by the hearth, next to the restored mural. Ella is extremely short. Ella has had the most success dressing in the style of the 1920s. She wears a loose slim dress, gray with a white collar, and a single long strand of pearls. Most importantly, she wears a cloche hat. Like Rudy and Bill, she is significantly younger than any of the other attendees at the reception, except for the waiters and bartender, and the waiters and bartender are all male.

After a few more minutes of conversation, Harriet says to Rudy: "Why don't you stop staring, and just go talk to her."

Rudy walks over to Ella. She's still scrutinizing the mural.

"It was just restored," he says. "We can't identify everyone, though."

The mural is of a party scene, caricatures of the Holder family and their close friends. Painted in the 1920s, when Mrs Holder was courted by many men but deigned to marry none of them, it was covered with geometric wallpaper in the 1950s, when Mrs Holder declared that looking at a mural with so many dead people in it was exhausting.

"Well, that's clearly Jean Lilly, the polo player," she says, pointing to a tall man with a big nose and mustache carrying a polo mallet over his shoulder. "My grandfather told me about him."

"Your grandfather knew the Holders?"

"Yes. His father was their attorney."

Ella has a pronounced gap between her top two front teeth. Rudy finds it fascinating, but tries not to stare.

They continue to talk about the people in the mural before moving on to talking about themselves. Ella is leaving the next day for Geneva, to get an early start on her JYA: Junior Year Abroad.

Bill Mills walks up with two glasses of champagne and tries to hand one to Ella.

"I never touch the stuff," she says. "I'm more of a scotch woman."

"Go get the lady some scotch," Bill says to Rudy. "The good kind."

Rudy does not budge. Ella suggests that they all walk to the bar to peruse the scotch selection.

"Rudy's the houseboy here, he should get your scotch," Bill notes.

They go to the bar and Ella chooses her scotch.

“Neat,” she says to the bartender.

“Neato!” the bartender replies.

Bill offers to give her a ride in his convertible after she finishes her drink. As he says this, he slugs back a half glass of champagne in one gulp. Ella says that she does not ride with strange men in convertibles.

“I’m not a strange man, I’m Bill Mills. Son of Ol’ Dick Mills.”

Ella laughs.

Rudy and Ella attempt to continue their conversation. Bill continues to talk about his car and about what a nice night it is and how great the stars look and the wind feels when you’re driving in your convertible at night.

“You’re in no condition to drive,” Ella says.

“She’s right,” Rudy adds, although he remembers more than one occasion when he rode in a car driven by a drunken and insistent Bill.

Bill is unaccustomed to so much disapproval, so he goes off to find more alcohol. Ella and Rudy step outside. They pass the tent and the croquet lawn, wandering through the gardens around the house. They walk slowly and look up to confirm at least part of Bill’s assertion: the stars do look beautiful.

Rudy learns that Ella attends Smith College. She will return directly to Smith after her European jaunt. She likes Smith, but complains about the lack of boys. In addition to Geneva, she plans to spend time in Prague and Berlin. She’s majoring in Environmental Science and Policy, but is considering law school.

Rudy reciprocates, talking about university, and about his summer with Holderhaven and Harriet Diamond. They pass through the pergola and into the terraced garden. Bill Mills is there. In the interim he has had four more glasses of champagne, and he has misplaced his top hat. He is urinating on the marble obelisk.

“Ella Minnow Pee!” he observes loudly, when he realizes who it is that has happened upon him. He zips up and wipes his hands on his pants.

Ella seems tolerant of Bill Mills, so Rudy follows her lead. The three of them sit together on a bench in the terraced garden. Inside Rudy is imagining fighting with Bill. Fencing with him. Throwing down his glove to defend the lady’s honor. He took fencing to fulfill his physical education requirement, but he wasn’t very good at it. Bill keeps staring at Ella’s chest, even though the flapper dress is neither revealing nor

form-fitting.

“Are you a shy boy, Bill Mills?” Ella asks. “Because it doesn’t seem you like to make eye contact.”

“Are those things real?” Bill asks. “I thought flatters had flap chests. I mean – ”

“Are you saying I have a flappy chest?”

Ella twists from side to side, sending the strand of pearls swinging. She and Rudy both laugh, but Rudy is worried that this will only antagonize Bill. Bill is already nodding off, though, and he does not respond.

Rudy leans in and whispers to Ella.

“I know where we can go,” he says. “I want to show you something.”

They go inside, slip behind the now-empty bar. Rudy clicks the mirrored panel open and then stands aside and says, “Watch your step.”

She climbs up and he follows. Halfway up he tells her to stop.

“Give me your hand,” he says.

“Don’t try anything stupid,” she says. “Or you will be filled with regret as you go tumbling down these stairs. Also pain.”

“Not stupid,” he says.

She gives him her hand and he traces the outline of the inscription in the secret passage.

They ascend to the master bedroom and plunk down on the floor, on the safe side of the velvet rope. Rudy removes the linen jacket, and she kicks off her heels.

“I found a photograph last week. I think it has something to do with those marks. That marker that Bill was peeing on? Didn’t used to be there. It used to be a statue of an extremely young, extremely naked girl.”

“Yes, that was her,” Ella says, staring at the bricked-up fireplace. “And now I guess we know that her name was Lizza. I’d always heard her referred to as ‘that poor girl’, never a name. It’s interesting that she was a cutter – she just cut the house instead of herself. My roommate freshman year was a cutter.”

“Wait, back up,” Rudy says, his mind on fire. “You know who left those marks in the passage?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea. Hello? My great-grandfather? Attorney to the family?”

“I have a lot of questions to ask you,” Rudy says. So he does. He offers to swear himself to secrecy, if she’ll just tell him everything she knows about Lizza. Ella laughs.

“I don’t care about secrecy,” she says. “Tell Harriet Diamond. Tell Bill Mills. Don’t bother telling Mary Holder Hodgson, because I’m sure she knows some version of the story, unless she’s in complete denial.

“Jorn Holder had always liked little girls, ever since he’d been a little boy. Nerissa Holder had mistaken his lack of ardor for gentlemanliness when they were courting, but clearly this became a problem after they were married. So instead of trying to dampen Jorn’s passion, she merely redirected it for her own ends. Allowed him to molest his favorite servant girl, as long as he – I hope this doesn’t offend your delicate sensibilities – made the deposit with Nerissa. Of course as time went on he got bolder. Thus, the statue of the nude girl in the garden. When the secret passage was discovered when they were restoring the house as a museum, well, anyone who knew the story could figure out what it had been used for.

“So this went on, Lizza acting as the catalyst for Nerissa to generate children. Then Jorn dies, under mysterious circumstances.”

“Lizza killed him!” Rudy says.

“I have no idea. I suppose it’s possible. The story I heard was that Nerissa killed him, because he’d gone insane and actually thought he could marry the girl. Maybe he really died of gastritis and exhaustion? My great-grandfather never saw the body. That was his story, as my dad told it to me one night when he’d had too many martinis: that Nerissa killed Jorn, and then had the servant girl and her mother paid off and sent far away. Clearly when Jorn dies, it’s right around the time of conception of the last child, Noelle. Nerissa then has the secret passage sealed off and begins the task of raising her brood. Anyway, that’s quite a discovery you’ve made there. The fourteen marks...do you think she was fourteen when her semi-conjugal visits ended? Do you think there were only fourteen of them? That can’t be.”

“No. I wonder if any of the platinum level patrons will notice them.”

“Hope not. You can bet that Mary Holder Hodgson will have them covered up if she notices them.”

“Can I ask you another question?” Rudy says. “It has nothing to do with Jorn Holder, Capitalist Pedophile.”

“The answer is no,” Ella says. “Because I’m leaving for Europe tomorrow.”

“That’s not the question. The question is, why didn’t you get braces?”

“Oh. I did have braces, when I was a kid. My teeth started moving again.”

“Is the answer to that other question still no?” Rudy asks.

“Come here,” Ella says.

Later she gives Rudy a printed card with her email address, and he scrawls his on the back of one of her cards. Ella leaves at midnight, as workers are packing up the chairs and tables and tents.

Bill Mills wakes up on the concrete bench, alone. He makes his way to his car only to find that the car keys are no longer in his pocket. He is briefly furious before he passes out again in the back seat.

In 1916, Lizza Bagge prepares for another night. She leaves the house where the other servants live, telling her mother that Mrs Holder has once again asked her to clean the mirrors behind the bar. Mrs Holder feels that this is a job best done at night. Lizza takes the wooden cleaning box and carries it up the hill, entering the house through the door to the swimming pool. The lights remain on in the pool area; the still water glows green. She walks down the hall, past the bowling alley and billiards room, into the party room and then back behind the bar. She sets the wooden box down on the floor. She removes her belt and her white dress and stands, wearing only her slip, examining herself in the mirrored panel. She will turn seventeen soon, but she still has the same face and the same slim build she has had all of her teenage years. Sharp cheekbones, bobbed nose. You’ll fill out, just you wait, her mother often says to her.

She opens the cabinet next to the icebox, moves items aside as she looks for one particular implement. There, behind the punch bowl and a stack of Bakelite ashtrays, she finds it. She looks back to see if anyone can see her, then she pops open the door in the mirror. She steps in and up, pulling the panel closed behind her. Then she’s climbing the stairs, ice pick in hand.

Later, she will go swimming.