

PATRICIA SCHULTHEIS

In the Ullage

Before his doorbell rang, before he saw the jacketless boy under his porch light, and before the boy told him “I think I’ve killed my mother,” Teddy Holbrook had been grading the papers of his English honors class and feeling regretful about his own student days at Putnam and regret’s steadfast companion, the urge to drink. The earnestness of his students’ papers had reminded Teddy of those sudden electrifying insights he had experienced at Putnam when he was certain that he would find some elixir for his adolescent inner turmoil in the World of Words, where every table was laden with poetic subtlety—plots, subplots, deliciously complex characters, and literature’s own nouvelle cuisine, creative nonfiction.

And every tidbit stewed in booze. Because somehow—and this began in Teddy’s Putnam years—brilliant writing had conflated itself with drink. Although the alcoholic titans of American letters, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, were all dead by the time Teddy went to Putnam, their shadows still fell across every blank sheet and screen, until creativity’s dark ink and booze’s amber blended in Teddy’s mind as naturally as Juliet’s name linked itself to Romeo’s. From Putnam, the association continued to Teddy’s blurred days at Yale, and then his hard-partying time in New York and his marriage to Penny, one child, two, three, and jobs at one magazine or another, assignments, deadlines met or missed. And then back home to Baltimore—“Away from the Maddening Crowd” as Penny had said—she, too, having been an English major, although not at Yale. He got a job at a pretentious little Baltimore rag, then a P.R. gig here, there, and finally, nowhere, the need for booze having drowned Teddy’s urge to write. And Penny at last executed the plan she’d been laying for fifteen years and took their daughters and son Lukas and left. Alone then and lost, Teddy had been searching for loose coins in the cushions of his ratty couch when he found a prancing plastic palomino, the Little Pony his daughter Amy had stroked and stroked and left behind the last time she visited him. And Teddy began to cry, to sob from the stab of sudden recognition: booze had become a burden, and if he was to lay it down he also must set aside, firmly and forever, his dream of being a writer. A struggle he overcame before dragging himself back to Putnam, in the faint hope that as a prodigal son, the school would let him teach. So, there he was, on that frigid Friday night, seven years, four months, three days sober, reading his students’ papers and recognizing in their freshness the backlit glow of his own erstwhile authorial dreams.

Then the doorbell rang. Teddy’s first thought was of his second wife, Lizzie, her shift in the E.R. ending soon, and the streets of Baltimore, slushy at noon, slick slaloms of ice by sundown. His heart full of dread—nothing good comes from a ringing doorbell late on a February Friday night—Teddy pushed himself out of his leather armchair, went to his foyer, and saw the jacketless boy under his porchlight. Teddy knew him . . . Willie Tate, Penny’s stepson, his own kids’ stepbrother. Plus, the boy was a freshman at Putnam and lived on the street below Teddy’s. Teddy opened the door.

“Mr. Holbrook?”

“Willie . . . what?”

“I killed my mother.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Holbrook, I think I killed my mother. She hit her head on the counter. I think she’s dead.”

“Come in,

Willie, come in.” But then Teddy noticed the red speckles on the boy’s shirt and stopped urging him inside.

The boy began to shake. “I have to get back, Mr. Holbrook. I’ve called the police. I think I’m going to be arrested. I just came to ask if you’d take care of our cat. She’s very old. Just until my father comes back. He’s skiing in Colorado. Hester is fussy about her litter box.”

The boy turned and started down Teddy’s front steps. “Willie, wait.” Damn! His phone was charging in the kitchen. Teddy raced down the hall, grabbed the phone off the island and then ran back to the front door. By the time he was down his steps the only thing he saw of Willie Tate was the boy’s descending head.

A century earlier, the developers of Dundee Park had laced the community’s steep hillsides with narrow concrete footpaths complete with iron handrails. When Teddy gripped the one for Poppy Path, the railing wobbled in its rusted setting and the cold pierced his palm like a whip lash. But he had to hold on. The steps might be slick, might send his feet flying out from under him and his skull crashing on merciless concrete. Sirens were sounding louder and louder, and between Dundee Park’s large houses blue and red lights strobed. The boy had reached the bottom, and Teddy saw him cross a flagstone patio and enter a set of French doors. When Teddy got to the last step, he saw a woman inside pressing a bloody dishtowel to her blond, matted hair. Teddy went in.

Willie Tate was glowing with relief. “Mr. Holbrook, my mom’s okay. She’s okay.” An ice cube escaped the woman’s bloody towel and skittered across the tile floor. A scarlet streak smeared the white counter’s edge, and three bottles, one of Chardonnay and two half-full of very fine scotch clustered near the sink. Teddy’s nose twitched toward them. He should leave. This wasn’t his problem. The woman seemed fine. At least she was standing. And Lizzie would be home soon . . . except the look of relief on Willie Tate’s face was the same Teddy’d seen on Lukas years before.

Lukas at fifteen, Penny, Amy, and Chloe high in the bleachers. The Maryland JV championships. The second half just beginning. And Teddy sucking Certs and willing himself steady, coming through the gym doors. Catching his son’s eye and seeing a sudden suffusion of relief flood his young boy’s face.

The police were pounding on the front door. “You stay with your mom, Willie.” At the door, Teddy tried moderating his voice to the tenor he had used back when he gave a rare reading, a reassuring, good-humored, self-deprecating tone. But the cops, huge men, one white, one Black, swaddled in metal and leather, didn’t buy it.

“We got a 911 call that someone was killed,” the Black one said.

“Nothing happened, officer. Just a little accident. I slipped, hit my head. Just a little Friday night accident is all.” Down the long hallway, Betsy Tate was leaning against the kitchen door jam, still pressing the bloody towel to her head. The police brushed past Teddy so fast they set the door’s ragged Christmas wreath tick-tocking on its rusted hook. When Teddy went back up the hall, he spied boxes

jumbled by the living room's built-in bookcases and a ceramic Christmas village stretching along its mantel. In the kitchen, the white cop nodded at the streak on the counter's edge.

His partner noted it. "What happened here?"

"Friday night happened, officers, that's all. You never heard of Friday night?"

When Betsy Tate transferred her dishtowel to her other hand, Teddy snuck a picture. Lizzie was an ER physician and he texted her. "Does this look like it needs stitches?"

The cop turned toward him. "Who are you?" "I'm just a neighbor. I live up the hill on Briarwood."

"I'll tell you who he is, officer. He's the son of a bitch whose wife married my husband. Complicated enough for you? Welcome to Dundee Park." "We got a 911 call someone was murdered."

S Willie's face went as pale as the marble island. "That was mmm..." And suddenly the boy's voice hollowed out, as if an air-sucking worm had fastened onto his lower lungs.

His mother smiled at the Black cop. "Now, officer, do I look like a corpse to you? I slipped, that's all."

Teddy felt humbled by the woman's easy fiction. He'd always assumed that Penny's fierce maternal protectiveness was unique to her. But here was drunken Betsy Tate, as instinctively as a vixen drawing an eagle away from an errant kit, trying to deflect the cops' attention from her son.

Lizzie texted back. "Yes, have it checked out. Where r u?"

"At Tates down Poppy Path. Someone fell."

The Black cop was telling Betsy that she really should have the cut on her head looked at, and she agreed to let him call an ambulance. He said something to the device on his shoulder and then the other cop's radio cackled. He turned to his partner. "Shots fired. Park Heights and Glen Avenue."

Teddy watched the pair shift into hand-off mode—Dundee Park domestic dustups were for kindergarten cops. Teddy followed them to the front door. "Ambulance should be here any minute," the Black cop said. A large yellow cat scooted in the opened door.

"Smart cat," the cop said. "Only fools are out on a night like this." When Teddy went back to the kitchen, Willie Tate was stroking the cat on the marble island.

His mother nodded toward him. "Pathetic. He could have been skiing in Colorado with his father. With your ex and my ex, he could have been having the time of his life. But, no. . . fourteen and he just wants to play with his cat." She got more ice cubes and wrapped them in her bloody towel. "So you live on Briarwood? I see your wife sometimes. I guess that's who that woman is . . . pretty, young, always in hospital scrubs. What's she? . . . a nurse? . . . doc?"

"Doctor. Emergency medicine." "Good for you! A pretty young thing to bring in the bucks, so you can work for peanuts at Putnam teaching the masterworks of dead white men. Whatever they wrote, totally useless, but interesting. I was a drama major, you know. Cornell, if you can believe it."

The cat leapt out of Willie's arms. Teddy wondered when the boy had eaten last. Lizzie texted: "Where r u now?"

“Still at Tates. Where r u?”

“Charles St. B home in 10.”

He thought of asking her to pick up a pizza, but she would be tired and the roads were icy. Besides, three years into his new marriage, he was beginning to appreciate how fundamentally selfish his young, smart, pretty new wife was. Eight hours a day, she labored to keep pulses beating in broken bodies. After that, her time was hers—“Mend ‘em and send ‘em on their way”—as she’d remarked more than once. Whatever necessities their household required, whatever sweetness their marriage needed, it was Teddy’s task to provide. He heard more sirens.

“Go tell the EMTs to come around to the back,” he told Willie. The boy went down the hall.

“I just wanted to teach him a lesson,” Betsy said. Teddy saw she was sinking into the melancholic sweet slosh at the bender’s ebb. He remembered that bittersweet receding as the source of some of his richest imaginings, the ones he stored away, always intending to bring them forth someday, always intending to express them in magnificent language in perfect correspondence to his unique insights. “I pretended to be dead,” Betsy Tate said. “He looks like an angel, but he has a smart mouth. He said something smartass, so I slapped him. And he shoved me. I hit my head and played dead. I wanted to teach him a lesson. At Cornell, I was quite the little actress, you know. Why’d he get you anyway?”

“The cat. He thought he’d be arrested and wanted someone to take care of the cat.”

“Christ . . . pathetic. Do me a favor, though?”

“What?”

“Call his father.” Her eyes roved the kitchen. “He’s in my contacts. My phone’s somewhere. Off the top of my head, I can’t remember the number.”

“That’s okay. I’ll call Penny.” “Right . . . my kid . . . your kids . . . my ex . . . your ex. What a frickin’ mess!” Out the window, he saw two Black EMTs wheeling a gurney across the flagstone patio. Still jacketless, Willie followed them inside. Above her COVID mask, the female EMT’s eyes executed a quick appraisal: crazy white people, concocting some hot misery so’s to feel alive on a frigid Friday night. Her partner examined Betsy’s scalp. “You really should get checked for a concussion, Mam, at the hospital. Concussions can lead to all kinds of problems.” But Betsy Tate looked at the gurney as if it were a coffin.

“Mam?”

“I’m okay. I’m okay . . . I don’t need to.”

“Mam, you really. . . .”

“Mom, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Betsy Tate glanced at her son, then at Teddy. “You’ll stay with him?”

“I’ll stay. Don’t worry.”

“I know all about you, you know. And how you’ve become one of those sanctimonious friends of Bill. I met your son Lukas, another friend of goddamn Bill. You all make me sick.” Teddy recognized that bitter

rage, the last redoubt of the collapsing alcoholic. He watched the EMT wrap a blanket around Betsy Tate and then fasten the straps until she lay swaddled and bound under the unforgiving light over her kitchen island. A drunken middle-aged woman going to have her head examined.

Willie started to follow the gurney, but the female EMT stopped him. “Sorry. No one but patients. COVID protocols . . . sorry.” So the boy stood there, while his mother was wheeled into the night. And then he went to the window over the cluttered sink to catch a final glimpse of her.

On the counter, a bottle of scotch winked at Teddy, but he looked away. “She’ll be fine, Willie. They’ll just check her out. She’ll be home soon.”

As though he could conjure a ghost mother from the February dark, the boy stared out the window long after the gurney was gone. “She’s not like this all the time, you know, Mr. Holbrook.”

“I know.”

“I told her I’d help her take down all the Christmas stuff. That’s why I didn’t go skiing with my dad. It’s past Valentine’s Day, and we still have Christmas stuff up. It’s embarrassing.”

“I told your mom I’d call him.” “You’re going to call my dad? What are you going to tell him?”

“That your mom’s in the hospital. That she hit her head. That she may have a concussion.”

Willie picked up the Chardonnay. “It’s all Mr. Chase’s fault.” “Mr. Chase at school?” The boy started to cry, but he kept holding the bottle. “Mr. Chase gives us these vocabulary words. We’re supposed to use them in our essays, so we can prep for our PSATs. Today’s word was ullage.”

“I have to confess I never heard of ‘ullage.’”

“Ullage.” The boy held the bottle by its neck, his arm straight out as if he were presenting a scepter. “See this empty space? It’s ullage . . . I’m sort of a word nerd. Vintners need to leave space in a cask or bottle so the pressure inside doesn’t make the wine burst out when it’s opened. I told my mom she lives in the ullage. I got pissed at her because she dropped our Christmas village’s general store, so I told her she lives in the empty space above the liquor.” He threw the bottle into the cluttered sink. Something broke, but not the bottle.

“Willie, oh, Willie.” Teddy hugged him.

The boy let himself stay in Teddy’s arms until the cat brushed against his leg, then he picked her up.

“At least I can tell my dad that I passed my last algebra test. And that I found my retainer. He was pissed when I lost it the last time. I should go put it in. It’s in my bedroom.”

He left Teddy in the kitchen with the cat. He called his former wife. “Teddy, have you heard?”

“Heard what?” “Amy! She’s engaged.”

Teddy tried to think. Amy, the quiet daughter, his youngest child, always with a pet, a box turtle, fish, parakeets, so brokenhearted when her rabbit died—Teddy hadn’t known how to build the creature a proper cage—his youngest child now a ranger at a state park and engaged! Impossible. There was some

guy, Justin, Teddy had met him once or twice, his family owned a nursery. At least Teddy thought they did.

"She just called, Teddy . . . maybe she couldn't get through to you. She's so over the top with excitement, I could barely make out what she was saying." So like decent Penny, trying to find some way to soften the hard fact that Teddy's daughter, his youngest child, hadn't yet called to tell her father that she was getting married. He deserved the slight. And more. He wandered into the living room and sunk into the couch. Pieces of a ceramic building lay scattered around the fireplace's brass andirons.

"Teddy? You still there?" "Yeah, still here . . . it's just that . . . well, you know these things are coming, but then, when they do . . . somehow, well, you're not prepared. At least I'm not . . . Amy engaged . . . Wow!"

"I agree. Wow!"

"Penny? Listen . . ." "What?" "I need to talk to Hank." "He's still on the slopes. He loves night skiing. Me? I'm pooped." "I need to talk to him. Ask him to call me when he gets in."

"Why? What's happened?"

"Betsy hit her head. She's in the hospital. She might have a concussion. I'm here with Willy."

"You?"

Maybe she didn't mean it, but he heard in the timbre of his former wife's voice the toll of his accumulated absences, all the years he brought less and less of himself home to his family until the lacunae he'd created in their lives scarred over with a scab so tough he couldn't penetrate it. "It's a long story, Penny, what happened. I just need to talk to Hank."

Willy came down the stairs. "I have to go now. Have Hank call, and it's great about Amy."

"Bye, Teddy."

The boy went to the fireplace, picked up a few ceramic shards and made a half-hearted attempt to fit them together. "You hungry, Willy?"

"I'm not supposed to eat with my retainer in. What did my dad say?"

"He was still skiing."

The cat wandered in, and the boy put the pieces of the broken building on the mantel, picked up the cat, and sat down beside Teddy. "How'd you come to name her Hester, Willy?"

"My mother picked it."

"Interesting."

"It's just that the general store was my favorite, you know, and that's the one she broke. I made up stories about the whole village. I called it Wilton, short for Willytown. I started thinking how it was weird to assume that all the people in that village stopped living just because we packed them away every year. I mean, that would mean that everyone would have to keep doing whatever they were doing forever. The people caroling would be singing even when they were in boxes, and kids would be skating

in August. And that would make Willytown a sort of hell. And ironic, too, you know, how the whole place looked so idyllic . . . that's another vocabulary word . . . when in actuality it was hell. And that would mean that every year we'd set up a sort of Christmas hell. So I made up stories about what the people did while they were packed away. I used an omniscient narrator."

"So Mr. Chase is teaching you about omniscient narrators."

"Sort of. That's what got me so pissed when my mom broke the general store. Mr. Potter, he owned the store, and he was the one who knew all the stories."

"Who better?"

"But now who's going to tell them?"

"Well, stories don't die, Willy. Neither did Mr. Potter, unless you want him to. After all, you created him."

"I didn't tell you everything. See, there's this boy named Walter. His mother's dead, and his father is building a railroad in Florida, so Walter has to go to boarding school. But at Christmas, he stays with his grandmother in Wilton because Florida is too far to travel. And every year, Mr. Potter update Walter on what's happened. Not everything, of course, because that would be impossible, but pretty much. Sometimes those stories are the best part of Walter's Christmas."

"So you're telling me that Walter comes back to Wilton from boarding school every year? He never graduates . . . never grows up?"

"Well, there are things I haven't worked out yet."

"That's okay, Willy."

He threw an arm over the boy's shoulder, and the boy settled in, but then Teddy had to shift when his phone rang—Lizzie. He kept his arm around the boy.

"Teddy, where are yo

He wanted to believe she was pissed about missing their Friday night ritual, her wild blonde curls all a-tangle on the sunroom couch, one arm flung over her blue eyes, and below that her freckled nose, generous lips. Her feet on his lap, her hospital clogs off, but not her socks—rolling them down, stripping them away was Teddy's job. Then the surprise of her painted nails, sometimes shell pink, sometimes scarlet, and his thumbs massaging the sweet hollow below her toes, then moving to her insteps, her ankles. His fingers summoning her reluctant smile. Then his hands traveling up the loose legs of her hospital scrubs—"Teddy Holbrook, you old sweet devil."

"Still down the hill at the Tates'. I might be a while."

"What's going on?"

He couldn't tell her, at least he couldn't tell her all the complicated interconnections undergirding the simple fact of Betsy Tate's bloody head. Lizzie wouldn't understand. Beauty and brilliance had combined in her so profoundly that she was blinded to her one flaw: an inability to empathize with human frailty. And that blindness, once Teddy realized its scope, kindled within him a great tenderness toward her, a

tribute she took as her just due, never realizing how he administered it in steady doses in the hope that when he was dead— he was fourteen years her senior—and she was alone with her fading beauty, she'd have cultivated just enough tolerance for the weakness of others that, beyond her dazzling brilliance, she'd see the brighter light of wisdom.

"Betsy Tate's in the hospital. I'm here with her son."

"So, you're going to stay there?"

"Lizzie, it won't be long. Just until things get sorted out. It won't be long. I'm waiting for a call from the boy's father."

"I guess I should go to bed, then."

"Lizzie?" "What?"

"I love you."

"Night, Teddy."

Beside him, Willie Tate's breathing had grown rhythmic, and the boy's head drooped. Teddy kept his arm around the boy and looked at the bookcase. It must have held hundreds of volumes, thousands of stories, millions of words. The thoughts beyond measure that those writers had conjured, the effort expended to express each thought with the perfect word, and to string all those words in exquisite sentences, and to nest each sentence in a well-proportioned paragraph. And finally, to link each paragraph to another, until the writer had created a story the writer hoped would illuminate some reader's mind. All that effort and solitary struggle . . . to express what? Some inner truth? Some blaze of insight? Or burst of originality? As though words, mere words, could express the astral explosion that sent the iron of Poppy Path's handrail to Earth, or the variety of snowflakes falling on a Colorado mountain, or the confluence of hurt and circumstance that brought his own children's stepbrother to his front porch on a frigid night. What were mere words against such mystery? Teddy looked at the books. He could almost feel their words beating like sealed dreams against their covers, the work of a solitary writer demanding to touch the mind of a solitary reader. He longed to take one down, open it, and escape, but he stayed on the couch, his arm around sleeping Willy, feeling the boy's deep breathing and the quiet soulful night gathering about them. PATRICIA SCHULTHEIS