The Holding Room

So, this is where he landed. Stepping from the taxi, Aggie pulled her jacket close

across her throat against the wind. It wasn’t too late to walk away, even now, even here on his doorstep. Still, she’d come this far. A neon sign outside the Royal Palace Residential Hotel pulsed “rooms by the day, week or month.” The Victorian building had once enjoyed a more refined life, but with time its four-story façade had faded from red to salmon, the stone surface gnawed on by weather and hard times. Chipped white paint sloughed like dandruff from the bay windows. Just the place for an old salt like Chief. Grabbing her suitcase, she crossed the unswept sidewalk to the entrance. A woman, cocooned in a tattered sleeping bag, slept away the morning in a corner of the covered alcove. “Excuse me,” Aggie whispered as she leaned in to read the names on the mail slots. The woman didn’t move. There he was: Rob Wenneker, Room D.

It had been twenty-five years since her father fled their San Francisco duplex while she and her mother slept. One day he was sitting on their front stoop spinning tales of life at sea and the next day he was gone, his duffel bag filled with what possessions he needed to start a new life. He left a note on the kitchen table saying they’d be better off without him. Better off without him; those words had been hard to take in. She always thought that should have been for her and her mother to decide. She had been eleven at the time--gawky, bespectacled, unlovely.

For the first few years there’d been the occasional postcard sent from small towns up and down the west coast. He would always live close to the ocean. The postcards stopped when her mother married the groundskeeper at the veteran’s hospital where she’d worked in housekeeping for more than a decade. That man became Aggie’s father in almost every sense. He taught her to drive a stick shift in the Sears and Roebuck parking lot and cheered her on at high school swim meets. When the time came, he walked her down the aisle to marry Stan Huxley. It was her stepfather who consoled her when her mother died in a traffic accident. Through it all Aggie continued to long for the father who had vanished. She looked for him on holidays, listened for his knock at the door. On her birthday she watched the mail for a present or a card. As recently as her mother’s funeral, she’d hoped he would show.

She was in San Antonio at a conference for event planners when her Aunt Tippi called. Her father’s sister had been the only conduit to Chief after the postcards stopped. No-nonsense Tippi in her Birkenstocks and striped socks, serving up burgers at a joint in Oakland. From her, Aggie had learned about his times in jail, followed by stints in rehab, falling off the wagon and drying out, the pattern repeating with the change of seasons. Aggie’s mother called the drinking the monkey on his back. He was born to it, she said, he and Tippi both. At some point he figured out how to stay sober for good, putting down roots in San Diego, a Navy town, of course.

Tippi jumped right in when Aggie answered the phone. “Your father has lung cancer. It’s bad. Thought you should know.”

After the shock of the call, Aggie wasn’t surprised about the cancer. She had long thought the drinking was his ball and chain, but it was the smoking that would take him out. Her father had always bought Salems by the carton, starting the next one from the stub of the last. As a child she had enjoyed lighting his cigarettes when she had the chance, scraping the matchhead across the striker and holding the flame to his lowered mouth. Made her feel grown up. Because this might be her last chance to see him, she changed her return flight to San Francisco to include a stop in San Diego. She’d give him the eight-hour layover and not a minute more. She wouldn’t do it for him, she’d do it for herself, for the little girl who got up one day to find her father missing. He owed her answers.

She sidestepped the body in the entryway. The front door stuck and she had to lean in to gain entrance to the windowless vestibule. Inside, an unadorned bulb gave scant light to the small space. Someone had shoved a plastic ficus into a corner. No furniture, not even a straight-backed chair. A smell of cooked cabbage permeated the dusty air. Three closed doors led to rooms marked A, B and C. Choose a door and take your chances, like on a television gameshow. No winners here, she thought, not in this sorry relic of a building. She climbed a narrow staircase to the second floor, the landing a replica of the floor below, minus the ficus. With a weighted breath she knocked on D.

Her father opened right away, as if he’d been waiting. For a long moment he stared at her, his arms to his side. His fitful fingers made her think he might reach out and grab her.

The man before her looked desperately, achingly old, although she calculated him to be in his early sixties. He wore cargo shorts and a frayed T-shirt, which allowed her to see the emaciated body beneath, a body down to sinew, with veins like winding rivers on a roadmap. His torso seemed to have lost its air, as if a balloon had deflated inside his chest. She remembered him as robust, although short in stature, with forearms like Popeye and a strong chin that jutted in stubbornness. All he had ever needed was a corncob pipe to complete the picture. But this man, if they’d passed on the street, she wouldn’t have recognized this wreck of a man who once upon a time meant everything to her. She wondered how much of his current diminished self was due to the cancer and how much to a hard life. “Chief.” She couldn’t say the other name. “It’s been a long time.”

“Chit.” His voice scratched like heavy grit sandpaper.

She winced at the nickname but let it go.

“I knew you right off,” he said, shaking his head, “just like your mother.” He held the door wide. “Come in.”

She stepped into a deep, narrow room as he closed the door behind her. It was the strangest living space she’d ever seen, no more than eight feet from side to side and three times that in length. Like a hallway almost. The sour smell from below permeated the room. Everything, by necessity, was backed against the walls. A narrow pathway divided the room down the middle. The one inside door, half open, led to a bathroom. No windows. The little natural light came from an opening onto a fire escape at the far end. A space heater midway down the wall glowed red overheating the enclosed space. Next to where she stood, a floor lamp offered an indistinct cone of saffron light. Even in midafternoon the room felt cloistered.

“I’m real glad you’re here,” he said, sliding past her to circle in front. “I hoped this day would come.” His words came out slowly, doled out like precious coins.

Before she could speak, he started to cough, raw sounds that hurt to hear, raking sounds that buffeted his fragile body. He held up a hand, asking for a minute. She took the opportunity to study him up close. His generous shrub of hair remained, the only abundant thing about him, but it had gone cauliflower white. One of his front teeth was black or nearly so. Jowls and eyelids swagged like curtains. She recognized the gnawed fingernails as he cupped his mouth to muffle the hacking sound. The old ramrod parade-formation posture was the same, though. She remembered that about him. Wherever he walked he'd always been at attention.

She waited until he gained control of the coughing. “I hear you’ve been under the weather.”

He looked down. “Tippi don’t know when to keep her mouth shut. I’m okay as far as that goes. Doing okay.” With a wave of the hand he motioned her to sit on the couch. Backed up to the long wall left of the entry, its brown Naugahyde surface was cracked and shiny with age. She left her suitcase near the door and perched on the edge of a cushion, her back stiff and straight. He nodded approval and sat at the opposite end, giving her room. Neither spoke for a moment. How do you start a conversation decades in the making?

“You want milk?” he asked. “I got milk.”

“No, thank you.”

“I remember you always liked milk, is all.”

He stared as if memorizing her, forcing her to look away. What did he see through his watery eyes? What was left in her of the little girl he’d known? Would there be a gesture or characteristic he’d recognize, maybe the way she tossed her hair back from her face, or the ears that stuck out further than she would have liked. He and she had that in common—ears of distinction. At thirty-four, she had started to thicken at the waistline. She wore a long black dress under the denim jacket, her favorite rope wedgies on her feet. She wondered if she was what he’d envisioned.

Covertly she glanced around the room, looked to see what it had to say about the person down the couch from her. On the opposite wall, within arm’s reach almost, he had cobbled together a shelf system of old bricks and weathered planks. On the top board an aluminum coffee pot rested on a hot plate next to a small microwave oven. There were a few dishes and a frying pan. Utensils sat upright in a mug. A portable television with foil-covered rabbit ears was on, the sound turned down. He’d been watching football before she arrived. Several library books in their plastic jackets were stacked at one end of the shelf, along with a framed picture of her at high school graduation. That was a shock, seeing herself there. Sent along by Tippi, no doubt, or her mother in a moment of grace. Next to her picture was a bronze medallion with a large X in the middle. Aunt Tippi had shown her a similar one once when she visited her in Oakland. “Unity, service, recovery” girded the embossed Roman numeral. His clothes were folded in neat piles on the bottom shelf in order of socks, underwear, shirts, pants. Everything shipshape, as he would have called it. Adhered to the wall behind her was a display of random tea saucers in the pattern of a starburst. No cups.

“Interesting place,” she said. “Where do you sleep?” He patted the couch. “Folds out to a bed. Real comfortable.” He seemed pleased to have something to talk about, despite the effort it appeared to take. He held his hand on his chest as he spoke. “The building used to be a funeral home before it was converted into rooms for rent. This floor and the one above was the holding rooms, just big enough for a casket and a few visitors standing vigil or stepping in to view the deceased.” Living in a room that used to house coffins. She wondered if he had known the history of the building when he moved in. Of course he had. He knew the history of everything. His sea bag had always been half books. “It doesn't bother you? Spirits of the dead and all that?” He shrugged. “It's kind of peaceful thinking about the people that moved on to their reward from here,” he said. “They keep me company bad nights, them and my books.” “You always liked your history and trivia.”

She remembered a game they played when she was little. She would try to stump him with obscure questions. Like the time she asked him where they would end up if they dug a hole through the middle of the Earth to the other side. The question hadn’t slowed him for a second. He’d run up to the attic and retrieved an old globe, the surface marbled with time. Together they used a string to locate the spot halfway around the world from San Francisco. Somewhere in China, they decided, and vowed to visit together one day. “It took a lot to stay one step ahead of you,” Chief said. “I bet you didn’t know I chose books according to what you studied in school--California history in fourth grade, U.S. history in fifth. We used to have some fine conversations when I was in port--at home. I looked forward to them.”

“If you cared so much, why did you leave?” There it was, out in the open, the question she had waited to ask all these years. She could hear acid in her voice. It burned her throat. Was this strange room with its shabby furniture, this shabby piebald life better than what he had with her and her mother?

A fly settled on a faded anchor tattooed on his wrist. He flicked the fly away. “Looking back, Chit, it just seemed like the best thing for everyone.”

“Don’t call me that,” Aggie said. “You lost the right when you left. I hated you, you know, for a long time.”

The heater made a sizzling noise, like some speck of dust floating in the air had landed on a coil and been fried into nothingness. She took her jacket off and laid it between them. She’d forgotten to remove the imitation bronze nametag from the lapel: Aggie Huxley, Association for Catering and Events (ACE). She unclipped it and dropped it in her purse.

“I thought it was my fault, that I had done something wrong.”

He plowed his thick hair with shaky fingers. “It wasn’t anything to do with you.”

“And then the postcards stopped.” That had been the worst, losing that lifeline.

He nodded. “I stopped writing after your mother’s wedding.”

Tippi had told him about the wedding beforehand. He’d wound up in jail that night, caught driving drunk down the 101.

“I guess when your mother remarried, I thought you’d be better off with a clean break. Less confusing. Thought the new guy would be a better dad to you. Was I right?”

That’s how he’d justified it in his mind. “I could count on him to show up at least. Good man. Salt of the earth, I guess you could say.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Though I wasn’t much of a father, I did love you.” He glanced at the wall behind her head.

Aggie followed his eyes. “That’s an interesting collection. Where are the cups?”

“No cups,” he said. “I think they’re pretty just the way they are. I bought some at the thrift store to brighten up the place. Then friends started giving them to me. If someone broke a cup they’d give me the saucer. The display sort of grew. Do you like it?”

She wasn’t ready to be generous. “What I think,” she said, “is that it’s silly to have saucers with no cups, even if they are pretty. And it's lousy you have this life with all these people who know you better than your own daughter.” Before he could respond she stood and walked the middle passage to the fire escape. She opened the low casement and ducked out onto the metal landing. The cool air soothed her hot face. He had turned the small space into a miniature balcony, with a red geranium in a clay pot next to a white plastic Walmart chair. An old Folgers coffee can, half-filled with sand, brimmed with cigarette butts. He followed her out and leaned next to her against the railing.

“Still smoking, I see, despite everything,” she said.

“Only so much a man can give up.”

She looked down to the street. Someone had pushed an overflowing trash can to the curb. The homeless person from the entry was asking a couple for change. They shook their heads and hurried on. From down the street a mariachi band played “Vaya Con Dios” at the entrance to a Mexican restaurant.

“After you left, I asked Mama why, what had we done wrong. She said it was complicated and the sooner I learned that nothing’s simple under the sun, the better.”

The death of Aggie’s mother was still raw. She suddenly felt cornered on the tiny landing. “Mama took your leaving hard for a long time, by the way, like she wondered if she could have done something different.”

“It was me, Aggie. All me. Your mother was a good woman. I never could be tied down, is all.”

He jingled coins in one of the pockets in his shorts with a nervous hand.

“And we tied you down.” The words sounded final, the dénouement at the end of a long, dramatic story.

The jingling stopped. “Your mother was right about nothing being simple.”

A man walked by below holding a baseball cap tight to his head. The wind had an opinion about the day, some say-so. Something about the resolute way the man leaned into it reminded Aggie of Stan. No-nonsense Stan who went to his job as a computer programmer like clockwork, who could be counted on to come home at six sharp every night, who worried about the economy and the hole in the ozone layer, who kissed her cheek before falling asleep. Life was good with Stan.

It had been good with Chief and her mother, too, until it wasn’t.

The summer before her father left that final time, they had gone on a vacation in his old pickup truck, Aggie on the bench seat between her parents. He had pointed out places of interest as they toured the state, a castle on a hill with zebras roaming the grounds, a massive volcanic rock that served as a navigational aid for mariners, seals sunning on boulders, lighthouses on promontories along the ragged coastline. They drove through the middle of a sequoia tree, the truck just fitting, and descended a sheer cliff to the base of a waterfall. They sang children’s songs as they went along, Row Row Row Your Boat in rounds, going faster with every repetition. It was one of the few times she heard her mother laugh out loud.

“I remember good times,” she said. “I guess not enough to convince you to stay.”

Chief looked pensive, clasping his hands palms together in front of his face, keeping his voice even. “Did you ever hear the tale of the organ grinder and his monkey?”

She dropped into the plastic chair, drained. “One of your stories? Enlighten me.”

He spoke with an urgency that willed her to understand. “Well, while the organ grinder played his music the monkey walked around with a tin cup--to gather tips from the crowd, you know. Day in and day out. One day the organ grinder took the monkey to the zoo. The monkey saw other monkeys in cages with swinging ropes and trees to climb. People were feeding them fruit and scraps of bread through the bars. This is a fine life thought the organ grinder’s monkey. These monkeys don’t have to work for their food like I do. That night he slipped away and went to the zoo. The zookeeper let him live in the monkey cage. The rest and free food were okay for a few days, but the organ grinder’s monkey got tired of such a life. He wanted to go back to the organ grinder, but he was locked in. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s what it felt like for me.”

“So living with us was like living in a cage.”

Chief shook a cigarette from a new pack of Salems he took from a pocket. He put the cigarette back when he saw her expression. “I developed some bad habits in the Navy that carried on when I came home. This old sea dog needed to let loose after all them rules and regulations. Every petty thing got blown up between your mother and me. I admit I was a coward, taking off like that in the middle of the night. I never been good at good-bye.”

Aggie had heard all she needed. She stood abruptly, knocking over the flimsy chair. “I’m sorry you’re sick, but I’m sure your saucer friends will take good care of you.”

He stepped aside as she lunged back into the overheated room, headed for her suitcase and the door.

Chief followed behind. “Don’t leave yet. A few minutes more. Please, can’t you?”

She turned to face him. “You promised to take me to the movies the day you vanished. I got up that morning all excited.”

After a moment, he held out a hand. She ignored it, afraid that if she touched him, she’d lose her anger. “You remember when I started calling you Chit? You were about two years old.” He spoke fast now, as if he could convince her to stay by sheer will. “You would ask me to give you a ginger snap. I would say, ‘Do you have a chit to pay for that?’ Just like when I was in the Navy. You needed a chit for everything. ‘Member me telling you that? After a while you started saying, ‘Cookie, Chit.’ Or, ‘Banana, Chit.’ Whatever you wanted, Chit.” She remembered. “Let's go for a walk,” Chief said. “How ‘bout that? How long you staying in town? Let me show you the old part of town before it disappears. The city is redoing near everything. It’s a shame, I think, erasing history like that.” She hardened herself to the want in her father’s voice. “My plane leaves at nine. I stopped on my way home from a convention in Texas for event planners. That's what I do, by the way. Plan events for other people.” She tried not to sound bitter.

“I heard. Tippi tells me what's happening with you. And your mother, with the car wreck. I was sorry to hear about that.”

“Drunk driver.” The irony of it had not struck her until now.

He seemed eager to keep their interaction going. “Your job sounds interesting, though.” “Yes,” she said. “Choosing color palettes, and tuna or egg salad for happy life moments keeps me busy.”

Aggie set her suitcase back down, mad at herself for exposing the pain she still carried. “Okay,” she said, “let's take a walk.”

He led the way down the dark stairs. The homeless woman was back in her cubby when they stepped outside. Chief gave her a handful of change. “Get something to warm up, Penny.”

“Thank you, Chief. The cold has penetrated my insides today.”

The wind had gone into overdrive, blowing little whirlwinds of dust between the parked cars. The sidewalk was mostly in shade, the afternoon sun making odd geometric shapes on the tall buildings across the street. Those structures under renovation looked exposed, their fronts naked of original fretwork, although heavy scaffolding protected the delicate gables to be saved. Chief would probably be gone before this known world was completely transformed. Aggie followed him down the block. He walked slower than she remembered. Neither spoke until he stopped at the main intersection of town.

“The First and Last Chance Saloon used to stand right there.” He pointed across the street. “They kept a black bear chained up outside to guard the entrance and to discourage law enforcement from butting in. Now sidewalk cafes everywhere you look, pushing out family barber shops and neighborhood bars.” He rubbed his chest. “Hurts to see the loss.”

“You know your history, as always.”

“When I first came, I worked in a public parking lot. People was always asking where was this and where was that, so I studied up at the library. After a while I started giving tours myself. Concierge at the Grant Hotel sets them up for me.” He shrugged at the absurdity of life. They crossed the street when the light turned, walking side by side now. It was like bone memory to Aggie, him taking her places, teaching her things.

Everywhere they went people called out to him. He knew store owners, greeters outside restaurants, homeless people, cab drivers waiting at lights, a cop directing traffic around a fender bender. Everyone. As they walked, he talked about the city in its early days, spun yarns about dirt streets filled with horses and drunken sailors, railroad yards that stretched clear to the harbor. He described the busy waterfront, fish canneries, and all the beautiful beaches, wished they had time to visit the ocean.

His pace, already slow, slackened further as they walked. The plastic sun visor he pulled over his eyes made his skin look sallow and his upright stance seemed to come at a cost. He started to cough but stopped himself by force of will.

Aggie took his arm, the first time they had touched. “Are you sure you feel good enough for this? We can sit and have a cup of coffee somewhere.” “I'm fine,” he said. “This may be my only chance to show you around and I don't want you to miss anything.”

“Looks like you made a good life for yourself here.”

“I always wished I could’a been there for you.”

What was there to say? “Maybe we should head back. It’s getting late. I have to call a taxi.”

They had stopped in front of a high-rise bank building. He looked up. “Three hundred and eighty-eight feet tall. From the rooftop you can see the whole city. Come on. I have a key to the elevator. The security guard is a buddy.”

“If it’s quick.”

At the top they emerged onto a large roof expanse. They followed a maintenance walkway to the railing. The street below seemed far away, the people dots, the cars like toys. She could see rooftop gardens on other tall buildings and the airport landing strip in the distance. The air was sharper than ever up that high and Aggie shivered. Chief didn't seem to notice the cold as he pointed out landmarks.

“Look,” he said, “over there, to the west, the 'Star of India,' an old sailing ship. Look at those masts. They take it to sea one day a year to keep it in working condition. I got to be part of the crew a few years back. That was something.” His words floated, like feathers on a more benign wind. He put his arm around her, warming her, and she didn't pull away.

It felt bittersweet. This was his world and for a tiny bit of time she was part of it.

“Who's there?” someone called from the elevator door. A man in security garb hurried toward them. “No one's supposed to be up here.” He paused midstride. “Oh, hi Chief. I didn't realize. You're fine.” “Hi, Walt. I'd like you to meet my girl, Chit—I mean Aggie.” “*The* Chit?” Walt asked. “No kidding. A pleasure. Chief has talked a lot about you, about how smart you are and all.” He turned to leave. “You folks enjoy the view. Stay as long as you like.” Chief turned back to the panorama. “I'm glad you got to see this.” “I am, too,” Aggie said, surprised that she meant it. “There's one more thing I want to show you,” he said, without looking at her. “It's at my place.”

They strolled back to his room, the former coffin room, Chief pointing out more sights along the way. He knew it all, every structure, every person, every bit of life. Penny was gone when they reached the building.

“Look on my saucer wall,” he said, once inside. “Look and tell me what you see.” “I see saucers,” she said, after a time, “pretty, but missing their better half. What else is there to see?” “Look closer.” Chief crossed his arms across his chest. He had all the time in the world.

She saw it then. She saw it. The tiniest saucer. How had she not noticed it before? It was clearly the center of the display, Polaris in a galaxy of stars. Doll-sized pink rosebuds on a tiny white dish with delicate fluted edges. She reached across the couch to touch it.

“Oh, Daddy.”

“It was my first,” he said. “I picked it up on my way out the door. You had your tea set all arranged on the kitchen table. This saucer was to the side--an extra, I thought, or maybe its cup got broke somehow. Delicate as paper. I wrapped it in a flannel shirt so it wouldn't break.”

Chief died at home later that same year on a red sky night. In the interim months, Aggie visited often. She did what she could to make him comfortable, shared stories of her life, watched sports with him on television, read aloud tales of the sea, to which he listened with closed eyes. After his funeral, she cleared the coffin room of his belongings. When she pulled the rosebud saucer from the wall, the heavy adhesive caused it to break in two. She wept at the loss, wept for the first time since his death. Before heading home to Stan and her life in the north, she took a taxi to Chief’s favorite beach. Holding her skirt above her knees, she walked into the surf. The two halves of the saucer bobbed on the surface of the salty water like tiny boats. As she watched, the receding tide took them out to sea, headed toward China most likely.

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