

INTER & Other Stories

REFERENCE



Richard Hoffman

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTHING TO LOOK AT HERE

The bikes buzzed past trooper Larry Powell in the unmarked car, three of them, then another two, and then after a moment one more, all of them going ninety, maybe more, weaving in and out of the three lanes of interstate traffic, so he hit the blue light and siren and pursued. Ahead, he saw several drivers swerve as they became aware of the sudden noise and color of the bikes whizzing past them—a dangerous set of circumstances, goddamn it, somebody could get killed. He was on the straggler quickly, moving right up behind him, holding steady, until the green and yellow crotch rocket, a Kawasaki, a “rice-burner,” they would have called it at the barracks, slowed and pulled over just beyond a fenced overpass festooned with American flags and a sign: “Welcome Home Pfc. Bruce McHale”. Powell radioed his whereabouts and action as he rolled to a stop on the shoulder about ten yards beyond the bike.

He put on his troopers hat and walked back to the rider. “Dismount, please.” No response. “Get off the bike, sir. Now.” The rider dismounted. “And remove your helmet, sir.”

The rider was a young man, maybe eighteen, maybe younger. Sir. Ha. He held the bright enameled shell of the helmet under his arm. Dark eyes. Eurasian features.

“License and registration.”

“Officer, can I just say—“

Powell raised his hand so quickly the young man flinched. “Don’t,” Powell said. “Let’s have it. Right now.” His hand moved from the stop to the give-me position; he even snapped his fingers. “Remain here. You understand? You seem to have a little trouble following simple directions“

Powell returned to the car, ran the computer check. Holder, Lee. Date of birth, 9/18/87. Clean. The bike was, of course, a rental.

It took another moment before the date registered: Holder had been born on the same day as Powell’s late son, Franklin, though he was three years younger than Franklin would now have been. Powell watched the young man in the rearview mirror and thought his posture arrogant, arms crossed over his chest as if to say to passing drivers that it’s worth the price of a stupid ticket once in a while to have some fun. Not like the rest of you losers. The young man ran the toe of his sneaker back and forth in a little half-moon in the ground, and Powell took this to mean he was disinterested and impatient to get this over with and be on his way.

Well, let him wait then, Powell thought, let him stand there shifting his weight back and forth. This is what his girlfriend Didi would call a teachable moment. A school psychologist, she would have weighed in here on the value of consequences, and on the necessity of spelling out the connection between action and consequence. No argument

from Powell. When Franklin hit the bridge abutment and broke his neck, he'd been going eighty, and the autopsy showed a blood alcohol level of 0.25, making it questionable whether or not Franklin had even been conscious when he lost control of the car. Even so, just days after his burial, his friends had held a night-time party on his grave, leaving behind a copy of the yearbook, a dozen beer cans, and an empty quart of Jim Beam. Somebody'd puked, too. Some memorial. It seemed fair to say that they had trouble connecting actions to consequences. The difference between him and Didi—aside from the aggravating fact that she didn't think they should be married—was that she was ready with explanations having to do with the slow maturation of the pre-frontal lobe, where the kind of cognition that weighs actions and consequences occurs; for Powell, it was just needless stupidity and it made him angry. The other difference, of course, was that Franklin was not her son.

Franklin's mother, Liz, who was raised and still had family in Minnesota, moved there even before the divorce was final. Whenever he thought about it, Powell chose to keep it simple: the marriage did not survive the death of their only child. Period. It was true that she'd said he was too hard on their son and blamed him for the boy's defiant wildness, which she saw as the cause of the accident; and it was also true that Powell had never managed to talk himself out of his conviction that Liz was no good at setting limits and that if she couldn't handle the boy's defiance as he got older, then she should not have interposed herself between him, the stronger disciplinarian, and their son. But those mutual recriminations were much too painful to revisit, and—even more painfully—irrelevant now.

“So why don't you want to get married, Miss Texas? Don't people get married down there where you grew up?”

“I already told you. I don't see why.”

“Because it's a commitment.”

“Larry, I'm not going anywhere. What is with this marriage thing? Right now I think it's great having a lover. And you're a great lover.”

“Oh throw me a bone, why don't you?” Powell smirked, but he was pleased to hear she thought so. “I thought women were supposed to want to be married. “

“Darlin', sometimes you are one big beefcake bimbo, you know that? Let me tell you something. There are only two things you need to remember about women. The first is that we're just like you. And the second is that we're different creatures entirely because we're always having to contend with what you men imagine us to be.”

“Is that supposed to clarify things?”

She raised herself onto one elbow and pinched lightly at his left nipple. She often played around with his nipples, something no woman had ever done before. He didn't find it unpleasant, but it didn't do much for him either. “Darlin', marriage is just the next stop on the bus you're on. But you know what? It's a tour bus. It goes in a circle. So, no thanks. I want you in my life, Larry. I do. But marriage? No thanks.”

Powell made a face at her that he hoped was an equal mix of disappointment and reproach, a look that would say he was hurt but that she'd blown it, that it was her loss, and brushed her hand away from his chest.

His helmet under his arm, the young man was approaching the car now, no doubt to ask if he could have his ticket and be on his way. Powell watched him in the rearview mirror for a moment and gathered himself for the display of power and authority called for in this situation. It was straight out of academy procedures and it always worked. He stepped from the car, wheeled, and pointing at arm's length as he strode toward the youth, he yelled, "You will return to your vehicle, sir, and remain there!" The young man, stunned, stumbled and almost fell as he double-timed it back to the bike.

Powell returned to the car but this time left the door open and one jackbooted leg outside for emphasis. The few times he'd had to use this maneuver before, he'd enjoyed it: the rush of adrenaline (after all, an individual approaching the car from behind could be dangerous), the outsized and theatrical quality of it, the legally sanctioned bullying it involved. This time he noted that the young man was taller than he and though still lanky, he had begun to fill out; that, and the startled fear on the young man's face at Powell's sudden ferocity, had instead disturbed him and he felt a momentary regret at the way the whole interaction was unfolding.

It had been the third time Powell spent the night at her place that Didi told him that she had known Franklin. They were lying in her bed, awake in the dark, the headlights of passing cars making the bright ghost of the window slide across the ceiling and down the wall.

"I didn't want to tell you right away. Because."

"Because?" But what Powell was thinking was that she was a school shrink and she had known Franklin and here she was dating him so he couldn't have been the dad from hell who drove his kid right over the edge, right?

"Well, lots of reasons, I guess. I didn't want you to think I was feeling sorry for you. Of course I was. Feeling sorry for you. But not just that."

"What, then?"

"Oh, Darlin', I don't know! I was drawn to you. Not everything can be explained."

"Ah! I like that. 'Not everything can be explained.' May I quote you?"

"What is with you, tonight?"

"I don't know." Powell had now heard two things that made him feel better than he had in a while. He thought he should probably quit while he was ahead. "Go on," he said.

"I don't know, I said. I liked your dignity. Your resilience."

"And all along I was thinking you just wanted to get in my pants."

"We call that projecting, Darlin'."

“I just called it hoping.”

She slapped at him affectionately.

“So did he ever, you know, talk to you? Franklin?”

“I know who you mean.”

“Well?”

“This isn’t right, Larry. I can’t.”

“You brought it up.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I hadn’t. It was inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate. Now there’s a shrinky-dink word for you.”

“All I said was that I knew him.”

“Yes, but he talked to you. You as much as said so.”

“I did not.”

“Well you didn’t deny it. You could have said no. That you didn’t know him like that. You could have just said he was in your teen health class or something.”

“Let me tell you something, Larry.” She put her hand on his face, turned it toward her. “I will never lie to you. I promise you that.”

He tried to turn his head away; she was surprisingly strong.

“If I ever think there is anything your boy told me that you need to know, I will tell you. Now, good night.” She kissed him and rolled away.

Powell watched the window’s bright white negatives patrol the wall and ceiling until he fell asleep.

The day of the accident he’d been working the turnpike at one of his favorite spots. He parked on the shoulder and aimed the doppler gun at a rise that kept him invisible. As cars gained the rise, the gun read the highest speed so the first one to come into view was his mark. He’d been writing tickets all afternoon. He received the news from dispatch. “How bad?”

“I’d get there right away. Larry, I’m sorry.”

So he knew immediately. And putting that information in a safe place inside himself, he turned on the lights and siren and headed as instructed for the North River Family Clinic, the nearest healthcare facility to the accident. Next thing he knew he was looking at a poster of Big Bird, his long orange legs with some kind of red quoits around them he had never noticed before, and on the wall behind him on his left Bert with his tufted head shaped like an egg right next to walnut-headed Ernie, so that he looked right away at the wall over to his right as if it were a complete this series problem—wait! Who did he expect to see there? Grover? Cookie Monster? Elmo? The Count? Anything, ask any question, look anywhere, anywhere but at the body of his son there on the butcher’s paper

of the examining table against the wall in front of him.

And that had been the astonishing thing to him, a fact so wondrous and filled with hope he felt a stab of joy: this isn't my son, this can't be my son, why, this is the body of a grown man!

Someone asked him if he wanted a chair, which he refused with a gesture as he leaned over the body and placed one hand on each shoulder. The smell of alcohol was overpowering. There was no blood. He wanted to sit the boy up, to gather him in, but all he could do was stare and shake his head from side to side. Then he patted the boy's shoulder quickly five times with his hand as if consoling him: Don't worry about it; there's always next time. Then he straightened, about-faced, and strode from the room.

Liz had been notified and was waiting at home for him. Her friend, Donna, was there, along with their minister, Tom Emery, and Captain Whalen, his boss. As he embraced Liz he already knew from the way he held her and the way she held herself back from him that the marriage would not survive. He always wanted to ask her afterwards if she had already known, too.

And this young man, Lee Holder—what was to be done with him and his whole pack of maniacs with their undeveloped pre-fucking-frontal common sense? He looked up at the rearview mirror and finally set about writing the summons. Speeding, yes. Driving to endanger, yes. Reckless driving, yes. DUI, no—no indication of alcohol at all. But he didn't check any of the boxes; instead he took the clipboard with him and walked back to where the youth stood by the bike, looking down now.

“Mr. Holder.”

“Yes, sir.”

And then they both heard them, the steadily gaining hum of the others as they approached on the other side of the Interstate, returning, tamed now, just below the speed limit, to look for him. Clearly they had spotted him because they got off at the ramp and massed on the overpass, straddling their bikes and watching from behind the cyclone fence.

“Your friends came looking for you.”

Just the slightest nod from the young man.

“Mr. Holder, I am authorized by the commonwealth to cite you for speeding, for driving to endanger, and for reckless driving. All three are moving violations. The first requires payment of a fine of one hundred dollars plus ten dollars for each mile beyond the speed limit. I have entered your speed here at ninety miles per hour. Do you know what the speed limit is on the interstate?”

“Fifty-five.”

“That is correct. The remaining two violations require appearance before a magistrate of the court who may demand surrender of your license to operate a motor vehicle, or mandatory attendance at drivers school, or both.” Powell was watching the young man's

face intently as he said this, although what he was looking for he could not have said. He looked up at the colorful band of onlookers for a moment, then he checked only the speeding box on the citation and handed it to the young man.

A semi hurtled past, its wind shear almost tearing the ticket from Holder's hand. They both raised their hands to their faces as the wave of gritty air broke over them.

"In the future, please exercise more caution, Mr. Holder. Good day now." He turned to go back to the car.

"Officer?"

"Yes?"

"Can I say something? I mean, may I?"

Powell turned back to face him, and noted again the bright gallery assembled on the overpass.

"We were being stupid. Sorry."

Powell kept a stern look on his face, but he was too near the edge of his grief now to even chance meeting the young man's eyes. He touched two fingers to the wide brim of his troopers hat and strode back to the car double-time, as if he had somewhere to go and was late.

"But why not? I still don't get it."

They were at Powell's, in his bed, which he preferred to Didi's because it was a king. Because every three months he worked the eleven-to-seven shift, he'd bought room-darkening shades for all the windows, and usually he slept well here, another reason he preferred his place to Didi's.

"Because Darlin', I don't want to be a piece of furniture, okay? Let's see. I need a sofa, some chairs, a table, and oh, yeah, a wife. Hmmm. This one looks pretty good. How soon can I have it delivered?"

"What?"

"Look, a little perspective wouldn't kill you, you know. Studies have been done, and ___"

"Oh! Studies! Studies have been done!"

"Yes, and you know what they found? That cops have the highest rates of divorce of any profession, but hold on, Darlin', here's the good part—they also have the highest rate of remarriage. It's like ninety percent. Ninety percent!" She got out of bed. "I'd rather be the woman in your heart, Larry, okay? Not the new marriage that proves to the guys at the barracks, and to your ex, and to yourself that you're fine." His hat was there on the chair next to the phone on the nightstand—round and brown and chin-strapped and dented just so—and she put it on and slipped into a loud, deep, officer-at-the-accident voice: "It's okay folks. Everything's fine here, folks. Nothing to look at here. Keep it moving." Naked except for the hat, she gesticulated at imaginary rubberneckers, her breasts bobbing and swaying with the movements of her arms. "Nothing to look at here. Keep it moving, folks. Nothing to look at here."

Powell felt his face flush, blood and anger and shame all coming to the surface. He whipped the covers off and stood and glared at her across the bed. How dare she? He had imagined the scene a hundred times before he managed to lay it to rest: the cruisers, the lights, Tom Whalen and troopers Stern and Korofsky on the scene, Franklin's Nissan crumpled in the weeds, his boy, unbloodied, who would get no older. And one of them, probably Korofsky, waving the traffic on by. He moved his mouth but nothing came out.

"Oh my god, Larry. That's not what I meant. I didn't think. Oh my god, I'm sorry. I'm such an idiot! I'm sorry!"

"Out," he managed. He pointed to the door. "Get dressed and get out." He turned and sat on the bed with his back to her, struggling with himself.

"Larry. Darlin'. I'm so sorry."

He could hear her approaching around the bed and he stood and wheeled and pointed, something like the maneuver he'd used with the Holder kid. "Go!" he said, "Now!"

He watched her shrink and back up two steps before he turned away. He sat back on the bed and listened to her gather up her things and dress in the other room. Even before he heard the front door close, he'd changed his mind, but he couldn't call out to her.

Though he already knew he would not sleep, he turned out the light. But tonight the dark was not friendly, and he lay in a box of black, a weight on his chest and bedlam in his head. He was not so much thinking as suffering thought: it came out of the opaque emptiness from all directions and converged on him. Memories and fears and anger and recriminations. Faces and voices. Liz, Franklin, Didi. No single thought that he might fix and consider. Consciousness itself a black cascade.

All the alternatives to simply lying there letting the torment continue were available—he could put on the light and read; go into the other room and look for a late night movie on TV; he could pour himself a bourbon, just two fingers; he could dress and go out for a walk; he could get in the shower and let the hot water hit the back of his neck and shoulders while he leaned forward, palms 011 the tile wall—but he refused them, because he trusted some sense he had that he was moving forward. It was like driving at night through a blizzard of regrets and bad faith and lies he'd been told or had told himself. There was nothing to do but try to stay on the road. Later, looking back on this night, he would think that it was a lot like dreaming—the whole process going on without any direction from him, as if his mind were deliberating without him.

Well into the night, he realized he'd been crying, the tears running down across his temples and into his ears, and after that he slept.

Usually, upon waking, he needed two strong cups of Maxwell House before he would attempt anything like conversation, but as soon as he opened his eyes he knew what he needed to do.

Just as her answering machine picked up, Didi answered.

"Hello?"

“Hi. It’s Larry.” *Hello. You have reached the home of Didi Magruder...*

“Oh for godsakes, this damn thing. Wait. Let me turn it off. How do you turn the damn thing off?” *I can’t answer your call right now, but if you’ll please leave a message...* “I’m not sure how to do it without cutting you off. You want me to call you back? It’ll be done in a minute.” *...after the long beep, including your number, even if you think I already have it, I’ll return your call just as soon as I can. Thank you.* “Larry? Larry, I am so sorry for what I said. I had no right. I was up all night just sick with shame. I never meant to hurt you, Darlin’. I am such an idiot sometimes. I had no right to get sarcastic.”

Powell cut in. “Didi, stop. Stop. I was the one. I was way out of line.”

BEEEEEP.

“So you forgive me for being so insensitive?”

“Done. I guess you hit a nerve.”

“Larry, I want to tell you something. But now I’m a little afraid I’ll say the wrong thing. Listen, I want to tell you something Franklin said to me one time, when he’d come to see me.”

Powell moved the hat from the chair next to the bed and sat down. He wasn’t sure he trusted her now. Did he want to hear this?

“You said you didn’t want to talk about that. And you know what? I can respect that.”

“Larry, listen. Oh, what is it with this connection. You sound so far away. Listen. I’d asked about his parents. I didn’t know you yet. And he told me he loved the both of you. And when I asked about his dad—and this is what I believe you need to hear now, Darlin’, or I wouldn’t tell it—he told me that he was not afraid of you. And I believed him, not like with some of the other boys, pumping themselves up so you know the truth is just the opposite; no, I believed him.”

“Didi, you don’t have to say this stuff. It’s okay. Thanks, but it’s okay.”

“Now see here, Darlin’, I’m not finished yet. He said to me, ‘My dad gets really mad at me sometimes’—as I recall he said pissed off and then apologized and changed it to mad—‘but one thing I know for sure; no matter what I do wrong, no matter what kind of stupid stuff I pull, he’ll always forgive me.’ That’s what he said, and I know he was telling me the truth the way he saw it, at least at the time.”

There was a short beep after which the phone connection was sharper.

“Oh for godsakes, this stupid thing was on the whole time. Are you still there, Darlin’?”

Powell felt like he’d swallowed an ice cube that was melting, painfully, in his chest, and he could barely breathe.

“Larry? Darlin’?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’m here.”

GUY GOES INTO A BAR

“What’ll it be?” asks the bartender.

Guy looks over the bartender’s shoulder in the mirror and sees the clock behind him ticking backwards. He scans the bottles. “I’ll have the two broken marriages, three fucked-up kids, esophageal bleeding, bankruptcy, white railroad scar from knee to groin from the car crash, the disbarment, three long nights in jail and several hundred hangovers.”

“Right-o,” says the bartender.

Twenty years later, Guy stands up and stumbles out the door. “No joke,” he says when anyone asks him. “I feel like Rip Van Fucking Winkle.”

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