

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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Is there a fate worse than death?

Aunt Libby thought so . . . and so

did the desperate man in her home

CRIMINAL

AT LARGE

LARRY HOLDEN

Through the eyes of a child, we can view evil and good in new perspective, sharper focus. Horror somehow seems intensified, and courage ennobled. Which is probably why Larry Holden arranges for us to peer at these violent events from the juvenile point of view. The author claims to have had considerable experience with suspense, being not only a writer, but a Nokomis, Fla., fisherman. The big suspense every day, he tells us, is whether forty cents invested in shrimp bait will bring him an equal return in edible sea life. But that's just niggling, picayune suspense, he admits, compared to the kind in which Aunt Libby's nephew finds himself.

But my Uncle Steve was in a Paterson hospital with his appendix, and that's where we were coming from.

You've seen my Uncle Steve in the newspapers. Steve Moynihan. He's the one who showed the police where Howie Russ was hiding in the burned-out barge on the Passaic River, across from our house. Howie Russ is the man who killed his wife

IT WAS raining so hard that my Aunt Libby had to lean over the steering wheel so she could see the road ahead. Ordinarily, we would not have been out on a night like this.

with a Stillson wrench. He was hiding in this old barge, and Uncle Steve noticed him two or three times coming on deck for air. Then my uncle got curious and looked at him

with binoculars and recognized him.

A whole army of police came after Howie Russ, because he's a big man and dangerous. They were on the river in launches with Uncle Steve and a fleet of cars lined up on the Lyndhurst side. They captured him, all right, but he yelled at my Uncle Steve that he'd get him before he went to the chair.

My Uncle Steve laughed even before the police told him not to worry. People with freckles, like my Uncle Steve, never seem to worry about anything. Even in the hospital with his appendix he laughed and joked with us. My Aunt Libby was worried, though. I could tell by the way she was biting her lip as she drove through the rainstorm.

When we turned down our driveway toward the garage, the water spurted on either side of us, it was that deep. With newspapers held over our heads, we splashed into the house. My aunt was laughing when we burst into the kitchen with the newspapers plastered down on our heads and the rain running from our faces. Our feet made puddles on the blue linoleum. She winked at me as we shook out our coats and hung them on the porch to drip.

"Enough storm for you, boy?" she asked.

I grinned back at her. I was almost grown up. I was twelve. "Not enough thunder," I said.

I kept on grinning. But my aunt was standing with her curly wet head tilted to one side, listening.

"Aaaaah," she said with dreary patience, "It's pooped out again."

I knew what she meant. The sump pump in the cellar. We live so close to the river that whenever it rains hard, the water comes up in the cellar. We have to keep a pump going.

She opened the cellar door and snapped the light switch. The pump was off, all right, and there was an easy ten inches of water down there. In the quiet, we could hear the stealthy whisper of it as it came through the stone foundation.

"Well," she said, "it's fix it or float, I guess."

And she could fix it, too. She could fix anything. Last Spring, when the level-wind on my reel jammed, she fixed it in nothing flat, and still got more trout than Uncle Steve and me.

I pulled on my high rubber boots. Aunt Libby hiked up her dress and pulled on hers, then put on a pair of heavy red rubber gloves, so she wouldn't get electrocuted fooling around the wires on the pump. We went down into the cellar. The water came up to my knees, and even the coal was floating.

The pump squatted in the center of the floor, and she bent over it, tucking her skirt into the tops of her waders. I stood next to her, holding Uncle Steve's tool box.

She reached for a screwdriver, then looked at me and said, "Almost put it over, didn't you, boy? It's time for bath and bed, and this doesn't count as a bath." She splashed water with her hand.

"But I have to hold the tools for you, Aunt Libby. You can't put

them down in the water. Somebody's gotta hold them."

"Got to," she corrected. She looked around, then pointed to a small keg beside Uncle Steve's work bench. "Bring that over here and set the tool box on top of it. It'll do pretty well, and I won't have to worry about it taking a bath and going to bed."

You can't win with my Aunt Libby. I set up the keg, kissed her good night and climbed up the cellar stairs as she bent over the pump again.

I closed the cellar door, then tiptoed over to the refrigerator. I opened it slowly so it wouldn't creak. We'd had baked beans for dinner, and there's nothing I like better than a baked bean sandwich. I was just taking the first bite when I heard the footsteps.

The rain was sweeping across the windows like a wire brush, and the wind roared in the trees outside, but the footsteps upstairs were just as plain as if they were inside my ear. I stood stiff with my mouth full of bread and beans. The footsteps came again—cautious, but with weight on them. They were in my room over the kitchen. I knew my room with my eyes closed. The footsteps went around my bed to the closet, to the window, back around the bed and out into the hall. Then they came down the stairs, slow and sneaky.

My heart seemed to swell up and, leaving the refrigerator door open, I dived for the cellar door and clattered down the stairs, breathing hard.

"Forget something?" asked Aunt

Libby, raising her eyebrows.

My mouth opened and closed. I felt it open and close. I swallowed the beans. I pointed at the cellar door above us.

"There's a man," I finally managed. "There's a man up there. I heard him!"

She didn't make fun of me. She didn't laugh the way some grown-ups do. She stood and put her pliers back in the tool box.

"We'll take a look," she said calmly. "Give me your hand."

Together, we climbed the cellar stairs. She pushed open the door, and her hand suddenly tightened around mine. For just at that moment, coming through the doorway from the hall was Howie Russ.

Nobody could ever forget Howie Russ. Tall and heavy, with a thick mouth that ran right across his face and faded little blue eyes that kept blinking. He had no shave.

They faced one another, my Aunt Libby and he, both so surprised they didn't move. Then my Aunt Libby gasped, slammed the door and shot the bolt. There was a rush of heavy, clodding feet and the door creaked as he threw his weight against the other side of it and viciously rattled the knob.

"Okay, sister," he said, "stay down there. I'll wait right here for *Mister* Moynihan, and I can wait all the damn night."

Aunt Libby held me tight against her and watched the cellar door. It was only a little ten-cent bolt. We heard his footsteps cross the floor and stop.

Aunt Libby muttered, "Now what's he up to?"

"I think," I whispered, "he's up to the baked beans."

We heard him set something down on the porcelain-top kitchen table, then rattle the knife drawer. When he spoke again, his voice was thick, as if his mouth were full of food.

"In case you're thinking of yelling when he comes home, sister, you can't hear ten feet in this storm. And anyway, I'll be waiting at the door for him!"

He meant Uncle Steve. He was going to kill Uncle Steve, just as he had yelled he would when the police caught him on that barge.

I stammered, "He . . . he escaped from prison, Aunt Libby!"

She said, "I guess so."

"Does . . . does he have a gun?"

She squeezed my arm. "Probably. But he's not after us, Timothy. He's after your Uncle Steve, and we can't let him hurt Uncle Steve, can we? We can't let him find out Uncle Steve's in that Paterson hospital, can we? He might sneak in!"

Her hand was shaking, and her face was strained and white, but there was nothing scared about it.

Then her hands tightened and she closed her eyes the way you do when you don't want to see something. Or think about something.

"Go down, boy," she said suddenly in a voice that sounded all flattened out, "and pull down the switch that turns off the electricity all over the house, the one on the right of the fuse box. Know which one I mean?"

"Yes. It curls over like the handle

of a scissors."

"Go ahead, then."

I splashed over to the meter board and pulled down the switch. The lights went out, and the storm seemed to get louder. Upstairs, Howie Russ yelled something, then he understood. "Go ahead, sister," he jeered, "turn 'em off. It's all the better. I'll get him in the dark. He'll never know what hit him."

Aunt Libby didn't answer. I heard her pliers going click-click, and something made a ripping noise. She was working at something.

Maybe it was the dark that made me think of all the police it had taken to capture Howie Russ on that barge; and here we were alone with him. Uncle Steve wasn't coming home from the hospital for five days, and Howie Russ wouldn't wait that long. Sooner or later he was going to come down into the cellar, and that ten-cent bolt wasn't going to hold him back. I felt so scared I must have made a noise, trying to reach through the darkness to the safety of Aunt Libby.

She said soothingly, "Shhhhhh . . ."

But I was shaking and wishing Uncle Steve were there. Uncle Steve would know how to take care of Howie Russ.

Aunt Libby said softly, "Turn it on again, Timothy."

I pushed up the handle of the switch. Nothing happened. It stayed dark.

"Now," said Aunt Libby, "get up on the bench. Stand on it. Don't touch anything. This is important! Now do as I say."

I scrambled up on the bench and stood there. I don't know why she made me do this, but if Aunt Libby said it was important, it was important. My heart was going so fast that just breathing was like being sick.

I heard the stairs creak a little as she went up. She pushed back the bolt, and an oblong of yellow light from the kitchen, with her shadow in the middle of it, shot into the cellar as she threw open the door. I heard Howie Russ's chair scrape the floor as he jumped to his feet.

Aunt Libby said, "Stand where you are, Russ. I want to talk to you!"

"Talk to me?" he said heavily. "Talk me out of it? Don't make me laugh, sister!"

He sounded as if he had never laughed in his life.

"My husband won't be home tonight, nor tomorrow night, nor the night after. He's out of town."

"Sure."

"I want you to get out of my house. I'll give you five minutes' start before I call the police."

"*You'll give me!* Don't kid yourself, sister. You won't give me nothing. Waaaait a minute. You say the hero's out of town?"

"Yes. It's the truth."

"And you're all alone with the kid. Well, ain't that nice. I just thought of something that'll maybe hurt worse than plain killing. Suppose the hero comes home and finds the kid with his neck twisted? And his wife—" I heard him laugh, then. He could laugh, all right. He said, still laughing, "You're a cute little trick, at that!"

Cute? Why, my Aunt Libby is beautiful, anyone can see that.

"Really worth a man's time. And when your husband finds out—wouldn't that be too bad, now? Wouldn't that be a shame?"

What was he talking about, I wondered.

Aunt Libby said fiercely, "You'll get life for this—you wouldn't dare touch me—"

"Life! I'll get the chair, if I'm caught," he snarled, "Aaaaa . . ." and he must have lunged at her, because she jumped down a step, slammed the door, and ran down the rest of the way. I heard her splash in the water, just before the door opened again, shooting its oblong of light down into the cellar. He hesitated on the top step, probably looking, but he couldn't see Aunt Libby because she was standing beside the furnace to the left of the stairs.

I saw his foot take the first step. The cuff of his pants was frayed. Why do you remember a thing like that? I remember his frayed cuff and how thick his bare ankle looked. He took another step, then a third and fourth, and stopped . . . waiting, poised to leap back or forward. He still wasn't sure that Aunt Libby might not have a gun or something, I guess. He came down another step, his foot reaching slowly for the tread.

I made out the gun in his hand as he splashed off the stairs into the water. It was a short gun, hardly any barrel at all. He couldn't see me standing stiff on the bench; I was in the dark corner. He splashed an-

other two steps, and my Aunt Libby cried out desperately.

"That's far enough. Come another step and I'll kill you!"

In the oblong of yellow light, I saw him swing around toward the sound of her voice. He still hadn't found her.

"Come on, come on," he sounded mad because she was making him look for us. "You're just making it tougher for yourself, sister. Where are you?"

Aunt Libby said shakily, "Put down your gun, Russ. I'm giving you a chance."

She seemed to be pleading with him, begging him almost!

He turned toward the furnace. He had her spotted now. He stood up straight and I could see his teeth when he grinned and threw up his head.

To my horror, Aunt Libby stepped out from behind the furnace with nothing in her hands to defend herself but a thin three-foot brass curtain rod. Her face looked awful.

She cried hysterically, "I'm warning you, Russ. I'm warning you . . ."

But the rest was lost in the splash- ing surge he made toward her.

My Aunt Libby screamed, and there was a cracking blue flash from the curtain rod.

She hadn't pushed it at him. She'd just held it in front of herself, and he'd grabbed it. And electrocuted himself. When she moaned and dropped the rod, I saw the wires from the cellar light attached to the other end of it, and when he'd grabbed it with his bare hands, the juice went right into him. And, standing in ten inches of water, it killed him.

Aunt Libby was all right because she had been wearing rubber gloves and waders. And I was all right because Aunt Libby had made me stand on the bench, and I was wearing waders, too. But Howie Russ had been standing in ten inches of water.

The next day, the newspapers all said she was a hero, but I remember how she sat in the kitchen, shaking so hard she couldn't stand, with the tears running down her face, even after the police came.

