

ADVANCE READING SAMPLE

The Good Dead of Partridge

Chapters 1 through 3, by M.E. Hollis

FOR REVIEW AND MEDIA CONSIDERATION

A darkly funny supernatural mystery about murder, mandatory redemption, and one town where nobody stays dead.

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO PARTRIDGE

The sign outside Partridge, Missouri, had been shot eleven times.

Jerry counted every hole while steam rolled from beneath the hood of the Buick.

“Somebody missed the town,” he said.

Roxanne stood beside him with her arms folded. “Eleven times.”

Jerry looked at the sign again.

WELCOME TO PARTRIDGE.

POPULATION 2,814.

WHERE NEIGHBORS BECOME FAMILY.

Three bullet holes formed a crooked line through the word family.

“Maybe they were aiming for the sentiment,” Jerry said.

Roxanne did not answer.

The Buick hissed.

A thin stream of green liquid crept across the pavement and disappeared into the gravel.

Jerry opened the hood. More steam rose into his face.

He stepped backward, coughing.

Roxanne watched without sympathy.

“Well?” she asked.

Jerry stared into the engine as though it might become embarrassed and repair itself.

“It is overheated.”

“I gathered that from the heat.”

“We need water.”

“We have water.”

“We need water for the car.”

Roxanne glanced toward the cooler in the back seat.

“We have six bottles.”

“That is drinking water.”

“The car looks thirsty.”

Jerry sighed.

They had been together for three years. During those three years, Jerry had learned that Roxanne believed every problem had one obvious solution and every person who failed to see it was wasting her time.

He had also learned she was often right.

He poured two bottles into the radiator reservoir.

The Buick released a tired metallic groan.

Jerry patted the frame.

“Come on, Loretta.”

Roxanne hated that he had named the car.

She hated more that the name suited it.

Loretta was twenty years old, green, dented along the passenger door, and smelled faintly of wet carpet and peppermint.

The trunk contained a shovel, two plastic tarps, a roll of duct tape, a tire iron, three pairs of gloves, and a canvas bag Roxanne referred to as emergency equipment.

Jerry referred to it as evidence.

Neither description was entirely wrong.

A pickup truck slowed beside them.

The driver leaned across the passenger seat and rolled down his window.

“You folks need help?”

He wore a white cowboy hat, although there were no cows nearby and no reason for the hat to be white.

Jerry smiled.

“Radiator got hot.”

The man looked at Roxanne.

Roxanne looked back.

The man’s smile weakened.

“Station about half a mile ahead,” he said. “Benny will take a look.”

“Thank you,” Jerry said.

The truck pulled away.

Roxanne watched it disappear around the bend.

“You frightened him,” Jerry said.

“I looked at him.”

“That is what frightened him.”

They waited until Loretta cooled enough to move.

Partridge appeared beyond a row of sycamore trees.

The town had one traffic light, two churches, a courthouse with a cracked clock, and a diner shaped like a long silver box.

A banner stretched across Main Street.

PARTRIDGE SUMMER KINDNESS WEEK.

Jerry read it aloud.

Roxanne stared at the banner.

“That sounds threatening.”

“It sounds pleasant.”

“Organized kindness is rarely pleasant.”

They rolled into Benny’s Service Station at twelve miles per hour.

A teenage mechanic came outside, wiped his hands on his pants, and looked under the hood.

“You blew a hose,” he said.

Jerry nodded as though this confirmed a private theory.

“How long?” Roxanne asked.

“Couple hours. Maybe three.”

Roxanne looked down Main Street.

“We will walk.”

Jerry followed her toward the diner.

Mabel’s Diner was crowded with farmers, courthouse employees, construction workers, and three elderly women sharing a piece of lemon pie.

The air smelled like coffee, onions, and old upholstery.

A handwritten sign near the register read,

BE KIND OR LEAVE HUNGRY.

A woman behind the counter looked at Roxanne and Jerry.

She was short, broad shouldered, and wore her white hair in a tight braid.

“Sit anywhere,” she said. “Except table six. Table six wobbles and I am tired of hearing about it.”

Jerry chose table five.

Roxanne sat facing the door.

She always sat facing the door.

Mabel brought them two menus.

“You passing through?”

“Our car is being repaired,” Jerry said.

“Then you are trapped.”

Mabel poured coffee into two thick ceramic cups.

“Cream is on the table. Sugar is in the jar. Sweetener is against my religion.”

Jerry smiled.

Roxanne picked up the menu.

A woman near the window began crying.

She tried to do it quietly, with her head lowered and one hand covering her mouth.

A little girl sat beside her, coloring a horse blue.

A man stood over them holding a folded piece of paper.

He was in his late sixties, with silver hair, polished shoes, and a stomach straining against his belt.

“You received three notices,” he said.

The crying woman looked up.

“My furnace stopped working again.”

“That has nothing to do with rent.”

“It is thirty-eight degrees at night.”

“You have space heaters.”

“One caught fire.”

The man shrugged.

“Then do not use that one.”

Mabel stopped pouring coffee.

Every conversation in the diner softened.

The man placed the paper on the table.

“You have until Friday.”

The little girl looked at him.

“Where will we live?”

He did not look at her.

“That is a question for your mother.”

Roxanne lowered her menu.

Jerry saw the change in her face.

“No,” he whispered.

Roxanne picked up her coffee.

“I did not say anything.”

“You made the face.”

“What face?”

“The list face.”

Roxanne took a small black notebook from her purse.

Jerry reached across the table.

“Roxanne.”

She opened to a blank page.

At the top, she wrote,

PARTRIDGE.

Underneath it, she wrote,

EARL PICKETT.

Jerry looked toward the man.

“We do not know him.”

“We know enough.”

“You promised we were taking a break.”

“We are taking a break.”

“You are writing a name.”

“Writing is restful.”

Earl Pickett turned away from the woman and walked toward the register.

Mabel stood behind it.

“You fixing her furnace?” Mabel asked.

Earl placed several dollars on the counter.

“She owes me fourteen hundred.”

“That was not my question.”

Earl looked around the diner.

Nobody met his eyes except Roxanne.

He noticed her notebook.

“What are you writing?”

Roxanne closed it.

“A reminder.”

“About me?”

“Yes.”

Earl laughed.

“Do I know you?”

“Not yet.”

Jerry shut his eyes.

Mabel looked from Roxanne to Earl.

Then she poured herself a cup of coffee.

Outside, the cracked courthouse clock struck one.

Deep beneath Partridge, something old heard Earl Pickett’s name.

And began to wake.

CHAPTER 2

THE RED TOOLBOX

Earl Pickett left Mabel's Diner at one fifteen.

At one sixteen, Roxanne followed him.

Jerry remained at the table long enough to leave cash beneath his coffee cup and apologize to Mabel for reasons he could not explain.

By the time he reached the sidewalk, Roxanne was half a block ahead.

"You cannot kill someone before the mechanic finishes the car," Jerry called.

Roxanne kept walking.

"That is poor planning."

She stopped beside a hardware store window.

Earl stood across the street, speaking into his phone.

"You heard him," Roxanne said.

"I did."

"He is throwing a woman and her child into the street."

"He is a terrible landlord."

"He told a little girl her homelessness was her mother's problem."

"That part was especially unpleasant."

Roxanne opened her notebook.

Earl Pickett's name sat beneath the word Partridge.

She drew a line under it.

Jerry looked toward the service station.

"We could leave when the car is fixed."

"We could."

"That sounded like agreement."

"It was acknowledgment."

Jerry shoved his hands into his pockets.

"What happened to observing people first?"

"I observed him."

"For seven minutes."

"Some people reveal themselves quickly."

Earl ended his call and entered a brick building marked PICKETT PROPERTY MANAGEMENT.

Roxanne crossed the street.

Jerry followed because he always followed.

Inside, the office smelled of dust, carpet cleaner, and cinnamon candy.

A young receptionist sat behind a desk.

Roxanne smiled.

It was not her real smile.

Jerry knew the difference.

The real one appeared only around puppies, damaged antiques, and people falling down in ways that did not require medical attention.

“We are looking for a rental,” Roxanne said.

The receptionist handed her a clipboard.

“Mr. Pickett has several available.”

“We need something private.”

Jerry looked at Roxanne.

The receptionist did not.

“We have a house on Juniper Road,” she said. “It is outside town.”

“That sounds ideal.”

Earl emerged from the back office.

He recognized Roxanne.

“The woman with the reminder.”

“The landlord with the personality.”

Earl smiled without humor.

“What do you want?”

“A house.”

“Buying or renting?”

“Temporary.”

Earl studied them.

Jerry smiled pleasantly.

Roxanne did not.

“I have a place,” Earl said. “Needs work.”

“Do you often rent homes that need work?” Roxanne asked.

Earl took a ring of keys from a hook.

“You want to see it or debate housing regulations?”

“I would love to see it.”

The house on Juniper Road stood behind a row of dead cedar trees.

Its porch tilted toward the ground. One window had been covered with plywood. A rusted child’s bicycle lay in the weeds.

Earl unlocked the door.

“Previous tenants left a mess,” he said.

Inside, black stains covered the ceiling.

The kitchen faucet dripped brown water.

Jerry touched the wall near an electrical outlet.

The plastic plate was warm.

“This wiring is dangerous,” he said.

Earl shrugged.

“You an electrician?”

“No.”

“Then it is an opinion.”

Roxanne walked through the rooms.

There were no curtains.

No neighbors.

No traffic.

No view from the road.

It was, she thought, almost considerate.

Earl opened the back door.

“Rent is nine hundred. First month and deposit.”

“For this?” Jerry asked.

“People need places to live.”

Roxanne removed her gloves from her purse.

Earl noticed.

“You cold?”

“No.”

Jerry stepped between them.

“Roxanne, perhaps we should discuss this privately.”

“We have discussed it.”

“We have not.”

“We discussed it in the diner.”

“You made statements. That is not the same thing.”

Earl laughed.

“You two married?”

“No,” Roxanne said.

“Yes,” Jerry said.

They looked at each other.

Earl shook his head.

“I do not care. Do you want the place?”

Roxanne looked toward the warm electrical outlet.

“How many people have lived here?”

“Plenty.”

“Children?”

“Some.”

“Did you repair anything between tenants?”

Earl’s face hardened.

“You are wasting my time.”

He turned toward the door.

Roxanne picked up a heavy brass lamp from the floor.

Jerry saw it.

“Roxanne.”

Earl turned.

The lamp struck the side of his head.

He fell against the wall and collapsed.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Then Jerry knelt beside him.

Earl was breathing.

“You did not kill him,” Jerry said.

Roxanne handed Jerry the lamp.

“Then you should stop complaining.”

“I am not finishing this.”

“You always say that.”

“One day I will mean it.”

Roxanne removed a narrow cord from the emergency bag.

Jerry stared at her.

“What?”

“You brought the bag?”

“I bring the bag everywhere.”

“We walked here.”

“I carry a purse.”

“That is not a purse. That is a portable crime scene.”

Earl groaned.

Roxanne crouched beside him.

“You rented unsafe homes to desperate people,” she said. “You knew they had nowhere else to go.”

Earl opened one eye.

“You are insane.”

Roxanne considered this.

“Possibly.”

Jerry walked outside.

He stood in the dead grass and watched a hawk circle above the field.

When Roxanne joined him eight minutes later, she was carrying Earl’s red toolbox.

“Why do you have that?” Jerry asked.

“It has his name on it.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“It is evidence.”

“You usually leave evidence.”

“I am changing methods.”

Jerry looked back at the house.

“Is he dead?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I checked.”

“That is new.”

They waited until dark.

Jerry drove Loretta down an abandoned quarry road while Roxanne sat beside Earl’s body in the back seat.

The mechanic had replaced the hose and warned Jerry about the brakes.

Jerry had paid in cash.

Roxanne had said nothing.

At the edge of the quarry, they wrapped Earl in one of the tarps.

The limestone pit below was filled with black water.

“You picked a dramatic place,” Jerry said.

“It was nearby.”

They dragged Earl down a slope covered in loose stone.

His red toolbox slid behind them.

Jerry stopped.

“We are not throwing the toolbox in.”

“Why?”

“It is a good toolbox.”

Roxanne stared at him.

“What?”

“You want to keep a murder victim’s toolbox.”

“It has socket wrenches.”

“You own socket wrenches.”

“Not this many.”

They left the toolbox beside the road.

Earl went into the water.

There was one splash.

Then silence.

For a moment, the quarry began to hum.

It was a low vibration, too deep to be heard clearly.

Jerry felt it in his teeth.

“Did you feel that?”

“No.”

“You did.”

Roxanne climbed the slope.

Jerry followed.

Behind them, small circles spread across the surface of the quarry.

Far below the water, Earl Pickett opened his eyes.

CHAPTER 3

EARL COMES HOME

At seven the next morning, Earl Pickett climbed out of the quarry.

He moved slowly. His right shoe was missing, his shirt had torn along the shoulder, and a pale line circled his neck.

He stood at the water's edge and listened. The humming surrounded him. It came from the limestone walls, the trees, and the ground beneath his feet.

He looked down at his hands. His skin had turned gray. He touched his chest. There was no heartbeat.

Earl considered this for nearly a minute. Then he walked up the quarry road and collected his red toolbox.

At seven forty-five, he reached Juniper Road. He entered the unsafe rental house and examined the warm electrical outlet.

At eight thirty, he arrived at the hardware store. Benny Lark was unlocking the front door.

"Earl?"

"I need wire."

Benny stared at the red line around Earl's neck. "You look terrible."

"I need twelve-gauge wire, three junction boxes, two outlet plates, and a breaker."

"Did you fall in the quarry?"

"Yes."

"You want me to call someone?"

"No."

"You need a doctor."

Earl looked at his gray hands. "I do not think a doctor will help."

At nine fifteen, he knocked on Angela Morris's door. She looked through the window and did not answer.

"It is Earl."

"I know."

"I am here to repair the furnace."

Angela opened the door three inches. "What happened to you?"

"I died."

She began closing the door.

"I am not here to hurt you."

"You gave me an eviction notice."

"I was wrong."

Her daughter Lily appeared behind her. "Your face is gray."

"I know."

"Are you sick?"

"I am dead."

Angela shut the door. Three minutes later she opened it holding a fireplace poker.

"You have ten minutes."

Earl repaired the furnace in eight. He spent another hour replacing two damaged outlets, then walked through the house making a list.

"The bathroom pipe leaks. The back window does not lock. The porch step is loose."

"Why are you doing this?" Angela asked.

Earl looked at Lily, whose sweater sleeves covered her hands. "I should have done it before."

Across town, Roxanne sat in a motel room watching the local news. Jerry slept in the second bed.

A reporter stood outside Angela's house. Behind her, Earl carried rotten porch boards toward a truck.

Roxanne increased the volume.

"Residents are trying to understand the apparent return of local property owner Earl Pickett, who was reported missing last night."

Jerry woke when Roxanne threw the remote at him.

"What?"

She pointed at the television.

"Is that Earl?"

"Yes."

"He looks dead."

"He was dead."

"Then he looks appropriate."

Roxanne stood. "Going back."

"No."

"He cannot be alive."

"I agree."

"I killed him."

"I also agree."

"Now he is repairing houses. He is making us look ridiculous."

Jerry watched Earl tighten a porch rail. "I do not think anyone knows it was us."

"We know."

At Angela's house, a crowd had gathered. Sheriff Nadine Bell stood near her patrol car.

Earl stepped off the porch. Sheriff Bell blocked his path.

“Where were you last night?”

“At the quarry.”

“Why?”

“I was murdered.”

The crowd became silent.

“By whom?”

Earl turned. His eyes found Roxanne immediately.

Jerry whispered, “We should leave.”

Earl lifted one gray hand. Roxanne reached inside her purse.

He waved.

Then he picked up his toolbox and walked toward the next rental property.

Sheriff Bell followed his gaze across the street. She looked directly at Roxanne and Jerry, then started walking toward them.