

Performance Review

Somewhere in Pennsylvania

1936

Henricus Crain was a Hollow Man, an enforcer for Barrow Mineral Resources endowed with dark gifts and powers in exchange for his unwavering loyalty and his immortal soul. Hollow Men came from all walks of life, none of them virtuous, and Mr. Crain was no different. He had stolen the light from the eyes of countless men, women and yes, even children, who had stood in the path of his masters in one way or another. He was respected by many and feared by even more, but despite all the horrors that Mr. Crain had witnessed and perpetrated in the name of the Barrow family, this afternoon he found himself very nervous and, quite frankly, afraid. For today he stepped into unknown territory. He had ridden in this finely appointed limousine many times before, but he had never been in the backseat.

When his partner, the silent and nigh cadaverous Mr. Churchman, brought the Lincoln Model K to his doorstep that morning, he found the front passenger side door locked. His partner had looked at him with the strangest expression and motioned for Mr. Crain to get into the back, a place that was the exclusive domain of their employer. Crain had frowned at this unheard-of breach of protocol, but obliged, walking around to slide in behind his partner on the driver's side. Few things could rattle Henricus Crain, because in truth he was more than just *a* Hollow Man. He was no mere footsoldier for the company. He was one of *her* Hollow Men.

Crain served the most beloved and feared child of the Barrow bloodline directly. While other servants of the dark empire the Barrow family had carved from the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania to the southern Appalachian coalfields answered to supervisors and handlers, Mr. Crain and his partner reported directly to one Miss Polly Barrow. The same Polly Barrow who now slid into the backseat beside him, soft as a widow's sigh, lovely as a sharpened straight razor.

Today, her soft raven hair fell in gleaming waves to the shoulders of an exquisite white Chanel suit piped in black velvet. Miss Barrow set the black calfskin valise she carried in her lap and regarded him with a soft smile. He dared not speak first, unsure as he was what had prompted this morning's unprecedented change of routine. She turned her attention to her valise, opening

the case and beginning to shuffle through the papers within. The car was silent save for the slithering sound of paper being sorted and organized for a full minute. Then she shot an irritated glance at the front seat.

POLLY: Mr. Churchman? Drive.

The countryside slipped by as the Lincoln sped along the hot asphalt away from the home office in Barrow, Pennsylvania, and out into the more pastoral sections of Pennsylvania coal country, which is to say into the middle of nothing and nowhere. Crain noted that they had begun to head west two turns back. His mind raced through a list of potential destinations and what those could mean for him now that he was riding in the backseat of the car with Miss Barrow herself.

POLLY: Good morning, Mr. Crain. I suppose you're wondering why I've called you back here.

CRAIN: Ma'am. If I have done something to displease you, or if someone has spoken ill of me to you, I would hope that you—

POLLY: Relax, Mr. Crain. You aren't in any trouble. Yet. There's just the small matter of your performance review.

CRAIN: Performance review, ma'am?

Miss Barrow finished organizing the papers in her briefcase and finally met Henricus Crain's eyes.

POLLY: Standard protocol for all employees, Mr. Crain. We like to review your past work and conduct, make sure your... priorities... are clear.

CRAIN: With all due respect, ma'am, I have been nothing but a loyal servant to you and your father for—

POLLY: Yes, yes, yes. You've done a lot of admirable work for us, Mr. Crain. From the very

beginning, it would seem you've done your utmost to impress us with your work ethic. Why, your very first assignment — running those homesteaders off their claim. You showed real initiative there.

CRAIN: Thank you, ma'am. I... I do my best for the family.

POLLY: But mounting their church leader's head on a pike? Ooh! Haha... truly inspired thinking, Mr. Crain. I don't mind saying that got our attention. And then there was that moonshiner's camp outside of... oh, what was it called? That little backwater Kentucky.

CRAIN: Eagle Creek, ma'am.

POLLY: Yes! Yes, that was it. All those men, dead in the blaze. Tragic, but... *they* weren't supposed to be there, after all. Eminent domain. The county magistrate was so helpful, with the right motivation. You've always had a way with local officials, Henricus. Like in... Parson Falls? When that judge decided that the Butler family actually hadn't sold us their mineral rights and my worthless older brother had somehow misfiled the documentation, you took care of all of them. Didn't you? Set their house ablaze and when they all rushed out to the safety of their front yard, the shadows cast by their burning home rose up to strangle each and every one of them. You have such a talent with shadows, Mr. Crain.

CRAIN: Thank you, ma'am.

POLLY: Judge Osborne had how many children?

CRAIN: Nine, Miss Barrow. Four girls, five boys. So eleven Osbornes counting the Judge and his wife Brunetta. Oh, no... it was twelve. There was the grandmama as well.

POLLY: And she was how old, Mr. Crain?

CRAIN: Eighty-three, ma'am.

POLLY: That's right. Twelve! All screaming, choking and dying right there in sight of their own front porch. You know, so many folks say they *want* to die at home when the time comes. One could say you did them a kindness. Such thorough work, Henricus. Well done.

Henricus Crain basked in the praise of his mistress. Perhaps his worry had been an overreaction. He had always been a good and loyal servant of the Barrow clan, and Miss Barrow did seem pleased. He glanced out the window as the car rolled to a stop on the picturesque main street of a small Pennsylvania town. Cars vied for parking with horse carriages as the town folk and the local Amish population went about their business, shoulder to shoulder here in the deep green shade of the mountains. Mr. Crain's heart dropped a little as he realized where they were. Across the street a small cafe with tables on the sidewalk was opening for lunch. A middle aged woman moved amongst the tables, setting menus and wire baskets of condiments on each.

Polly Barrow eyed her most trusted employee thoughtfully.

POLLY: Welcome home, Mr. Crain. How long has it been since you've visited Bergholz?

CRAIN: I... I haven't been here since before I was Hollowed, ma'am. Long before.

POLLY: And yet money mysteriously arrives here each month. Paid to *that* woman who uses it to keep her little spaetzle haus open. Who is she, Henricus?

CRAIN: I.. I do not know, ma'am. I set up that trust to provide for my family years ago when I knew I could not return. It goes through so many hands that not even I can know who benefits from my... from my work. It has been this way since before I came to work for your family. The least I can do for those I left behind is to pay weregild — blood money — for the loss of their papa, for I am dead to them. I have killed the man I was, the man they knew.

POLLY: Well then, allow me to facilitate a... family reunion of sorts, Mr. Crain.

CRAIN: No, ma'am. Please! I do not wish to—

POLLY: Her name is Eva, Henricus. She is your great-great granddaughter. She is married to a

local man who services automobiles. They have two children, Klaus and Emma. They are the last of your line. They have a good life here. They are happy and successful. They are safe. For now. This. This is your reward for a job well done, Mr. Crain — confirmation that your blood still runs through this place and thrives.

CRAIN: Th-thank you, ma'am.

POLLY: However... if you ever hide anything from me again, Mr. Crain, I will have them torn into pieces, grind them into sausage, and feed them to each other. I will personally end your line and erase your blood from this world. You belong to *our* family, Henricus. You. Are. *Mine*. Do I make myself clear?

Henricus Crain did not blink, did not flinch, did not betray even a flicker of emotion as he watched the woman place flowers on each of the tables across the street and then turn to welcome the first of her customers of the day.

CRAIN: Yes, ma'am.

POLLY: Well then, I think that's all I have for you today, Mr. Crain. You may return to the front with Mr. Churchman.

Polly Barrow returned her attention to the various paperwork on her lap. Crain nodded and reached for the door handle.

POLLY: Oh! And Henricus?

CRAIN: Yes, ma'am?

POLLY: We know about your failure at Copper Ridge. Don't let it happen again.

Henricus Crain's blood ran cold again as he bobbed his head in a quick nod —

CRAIN: Yes, ma'am

— and fled from the back seat of the Lincoln, beyond relieved to return to the familiar territory of the front seat. As they sped away from the quaint hamlet that had birthed him, he vowed never to return again.

[“Pretty Polly” performed by Landon Blood and John Lee Bullard]

Today’s story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins and originally appeared on select dates of the 2023 Price of Progress live tour. The voice of Pretty Polly Barrow is Tracey Johnston-Crum. The voice of Henricus Crain and the narrator is Steve Shell. Our outro music is Jon Lee Bullard and Landon Blood performing their version of “Pretty Polly.” Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.