

THE BEST POLICY

by Donna Hopkins

CHARACTERS

PENELOPE (PENNY) -- in her mid 30s, recently widowed wife of
Robert (Bob) Dupont

ROBBIE -- Robert and Penelope's eldest son, a lanky teenager who slouches

OLIVER (OLLIE)-- their younger son, about 10

"UNCLE" STEVE -- a long-time friend of the family, and Bob's co-worker

DOLLY WALESKI -- a hairdresser, Penelope's big-haired, big-hearted
neighbor

ANDREW MacGREGOR -- Bob's boss at Fidelity Insurance

SCENE I

The living room of a middle-class home in a mid-sized town in the Midwest, maybe Wisconsin? It's decorated in shades of brown with blue accents. Early dusk. A jack-o-lantern is grinning eerily in the picture window.

As the curtain rises, "Uncle" Steve, in shirtsleeves and loosened tie, is putting a brown cardboard box down on the coffee table.

PENELOPE *gestures to him, inviting him to sit down.*

PENELOPE. Thanks for cleaning out Bob's desk. I just haven't felt up to it.

STEVE. No problem. If there's anything else I can do, *anything*... Everyone at Fidelity sends their condolences....How are you holding up?

PENELOPE. I'm managing. I think I'm still kind of numb. It still doesn't seem real. The boys are keeping me busy. I'm trying to keep things as normal as possible. You know, Bob's sister, Claire, came down from Toronto. She's a psychiatrist. She's been telling me what to expect. What to watch for. I know she means well, but now I'm noticing, and obsessing over every little thing. If I'm not careful I could drive myself crazy. Claire says Robbie may feel that he has to be the man of the house, and may feel that he has to take charge. And Ollie may suddenly become more rigid and inflexible---*or* needy. It's all pretty scary.

STEVE. Tomorrow's Saturday. Why don't I take the boys out for a couple of hours? Maybe play some mini-golf. Give you some time to yourself, a chance to --I don't know--get your head together, recharge your batteries.

PENELOPE. That *would* help. I could *use* a bit of a break.

STEVE. Consider it done. Where *are* the boys?

PENELOPE. They're in Robbie's room, playing their video games. ... Boys! Look who's here--Uncle Steve.

ROBBIE *and* OLIVER *enter.*

ROBBIE. (*A bit dejectedly.*) Hey, Uncle Steve.

OLIVER. (*The same*) Hey, Uncle Steve.

STEVE. How're you boys doing?

ROBBIE. Okay.

OLIVER. Okay.

STEVE. So, what are you guys doing for Halloween? Hey, did you know your mom and dad *met* at a Halloween party? Your dad was an expert at bobbing for apples.

OLIVER. What's *that*?

STEVE. You fill a big washtub with water and drop in a bunch of apples. Then everyone tries to pick them up *without* using their hands. Does that sound like fun?

ROBBIE. It sounds *unsanitary*.

PENELOPE. That was the first time I saw your dad. His head was soaking wet.

OLIVER. (*Excitedly*) Dad was dressed like a knight, right , Mom?

STEVE. Right, but your mom *thought* he was supposed to be the Tin Man.

OLIVER *giggles*.

ROBBIE. (*A bit angrily.*) You never told us that!

PENELOPE. (*Defensively.*) He had his helmet off!

STEVE. So are you boys going trick-or-treating?

OLIVER. Robbie's taking me. I'm gonna be a pirate! Robbie's gonna be Jason. He's gonna wear Dad's old hockey mask and--

PENELOPE. Oh *no* he's *not*. (*To Robbie.*) I don't like the idea of your using your father's things for something like that...

ROBBIE. If I have to go I oughta at least be able to go as what I want. And anyway--

STEVE. I still have some of Bob's shirts in the car. Why don't I go get them?

PENELOPE. Ollie, why don't you help Uncle Steve.

STEVE *and* OLIVER *exit*.

PENELOPE. (*To Robbie.*) How did your *day* go? You didn't say anything. How was your first day back?

ROBBIE. It was weird. Everyone was acting all weird. Nobody would look at me. It was like I was invisible--like I was the Invisible Man. Only Mrs. Humphrey said anything. And she was all sugary and understanding. She wants me to make Dad some kind of stupid altar for this stupid Day of the Dead thing they're doing at school. She was all *cheery* about it! It was creepy.

PENELOPE. I'm sure she meant well.

ROBBIE. But you're supposed to put personal stuff on it. That stuff's *private*.

PENELOPE. I'm sure Mrs. Humphrey will respect that...

STEVE *and* OLIVER *return, bearing the shirts*.

STEVE. Here they are. Four *identical* true blue button-down shirts--all still in the dry cleaners bags. ...I could drop them off at the Goodwill if you'd like.

PENELOPE. (*Pulling them away from his hand*) No, not yet.

STEVE. Well, I guess I'll be going then.

PENELOPE. Say goodbye to your Uncle Steve.

ROBBIE. Bye, Uncle Steve.

OLIVER. Bye, Uncle Steve.

STEVE. Bye, guys. *Exits*.

PENELOPE. (*To Robbie*) Before I forget. Don't you have some slip for me to sign--for those after school French classes--remember?

ROBBIE. I think I've sort of changed my mind about that.

OLIVER. *(Spilling the beans)* It's only girls are gonna take that class. Everybody already thinks he's weird for putting mayonnaise on his fries!

ROBBIE. I don't care about that.

PENELOPE. Well, it's up to you. I'll sign just in case. It *would* be nice if you could talk to Dad's relatives in Quebec.

ROBBIE. Okay, I'll think about it. Oh, I almost forgot. Dolly called earlier.

PENELOPE. You mean "Mrs. Waleski" --or "Tim's mom."

ROBBIE. How about "*Ralph's wife*"?

PENELOPE. Funny.

ROBBIE. She said she's going to stop over some time tomorrow.

PENELOPE. Oh, right. I promised her I'd lend her that box of Halloween decorations for the shop. It's on the top shelf of the closet. Could you get it down for me?

ROBBIE. *(Reaches for the box then stops.)* You sure you want to do that?

PENELOPE *looks at him quizzically.*

ROBBIE. You won't have any more *skeletons* in your closet!

CURTAIN

SCENE II

Curtain rises on PENELOPE waving at the window.

PENELOPE. Have fun. Be good.

As she turns away from the window her whole demeanor changes. Warily reaches for the cardboard box. Removes a lopsided, handmade mug, framed family photos, a brown cardigan sweater which she inhales deeply and holds against her chest. Feeling something hard, she winces then reaches into pocket of the sweater and removes a small gold filigree box. She looks at the box, opens it, takes out a ring. She examines it closely, stifles a gasp. Holds the box limply on her lap and stares into space.

The doorbell rings. She hastily hides the box, shoving it far back into a desk drawer.

PENELOPE. Hi. Come on in.

DOLLY *enters.*

PENELOPE. Um, thanks for watching the house during the funeral. I would've asked Steve--but he and Bob were like brothers and I knew he'd want to be one of the pallbearers. And after what happened last year I didn't want to leave the house empty.

DOLLY. Last year?

PENELOPE. A year ago we were burying Bob's father, remember? The day of the funeral someone broke into his dad's house and robbed the place.

DOLLY. They saw the death notice in the paper?

PENELOPE *nods.*

DOLLY. *(Shakes her head.)* What kind of heartless monster robs you when you're at a funeral?

PENELOPE. They didn't *get* much. But they did take a cigar box filled with silver dollars. His dad had been saving them for the grandkids' education. That and some savings bonds--and a trophy, one of those old-fashioned loving cup things. Bob won it as a boy playing hockey. Bob felt bad about losing *that*. He said his dad was real proud of him the day he gave him that. Hockey was the one thing that they had in common.

DOLLY. I don't think I ever *met* Bob's father. What was he like?

PENELOPE. Pierre. His father's name was Pierre. Very dignified. Courtly almost. Bob was always trying to get him to loosen up, to let his hair down. And *he* was always trying to get *Bob* to *cut* his. And to stand up straight. It drove him crazy how Bob always slouched.

PENELOPE. (*Hesitates. Then reaches into the desk.*) Look at this. Look at what I found in Bob's sweater. I don't want to jump to any conclusions but...

DOLLY. Maybe it's just a costume piece.

PENELOPE. In a fancy gilt box? And look at it. No. I'm a jeweler's daughter. I know the value of things.

DOLLY. So did *Bob*. And he would never have risked losing you. You and the boys were his whole life.

PENELOPE. (*Doubtfully*) People *have* secrets.

DOLLY. Not that kind of secret. Not Bob.

PENELOPE. But this isn't the kind of gift a man gives his wife. We don't *spend* money like that. Even for our tenth anniversary we just went out to dinner to Olive Garden. (*Pause*) And he *did* give me a little silver compact mirror-- engraved.

DOLLY. What did it say?

PENELOPE. It doesn't matter.

DOLLY. (*Gently but insistently*) What did it say?

PENELOPE. "I love you to the moon and back." (*Smiles at the memory*)

PENELOPE. Where would he *get* that kind of money? Anything extra went into the boys' college fund.

DOLLY. There. See?

PENELOPE. But there's a name. See? Jacqueline. (*With a French accent*) Jack oh LEEN.

DOLLY. Maybe it's a brand name or something. Like Jennifer's Sofabeds...
Or, uh, Aunt Jemima.

PENELOPE. I think I can bear Bob's death--for the boys' sake. But not if...
if it wasn't real.

DOLLY. *Of course*, it was real. How could you doubt that? *I know it was real. I saw the way he looked at you. I wish Ralph looked at me like that. He doesn't look at me at all. This morning I was trying on my Bride of Frankenstein wig. I'm not sure why--it's not like my head grows. Anyway, you know I wear it to the shop every year and honest-to-God - - Ralph didn't even notice! ...Bob worshipped you--*

The phone rings. ..."Bob's" voice: You've reached the Dupont household. Leave a message and Pen and I'll get back to you.

RUTH. Hi honey. It's Mom. I'm just calling to see how you're doing. I was just out doing my shopping. You should see the traffic. There must be a full moon. All the crazies are out. Oh--and if *you* go to the market, watch out for that Mr. Habib -- you know -- the hairy one at the butcher counter. He was already asking about you. I just don't like the looks of him. And don't forget to check the boys' candy. Every year they find pins and razor blades in some kid's candy. Especially in candy apples--and don't let 'em take popcorn balls from *anyone*! Now don't worry, I'll be over on Sunday to help out. Take care. *Click.*

DOLLY. Why didn't you pick up? I could've come back. Don't you want to talk to your mom about this?

PENELOPE. She'd make it my fault. She'll say, "Well, you could've dressed a little nicer--and it wouldn't have hurt to put on a little more makeup once in awhile." ... Maybe she's right. What could he have seen in me? Even my name is pathetic. Penelope Pinsky. --*What were they thinking?!* I've always hated my name. Penny. So worthless people don't even bother to bend over to pick one up on the street.

DOLLY. Oh, honey, names don't mean a thing. *You* know that. And mine isn't exactly a prize. In fact, it's a doozy!

PENELOPE. Isn't your name Darlene?

DOLLY. Try Sybil. ... And what do you mean, what could he have seen in you?...

Those beautiful copper curls of yours? My clients would *kill* for hair like yours. And trust me, Bob knew what a beauty you are, inside *and* out. ... And brainy! A computer science major *and* an expert at web design?!