

EVE

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This Is
A Work Of Fiction
A Work Of Violence
A Work Of Sex
&
A Work Of Love

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EVE

Things never start when you say they do. I'm sure it started the day I was born. There was no need to wait until they brought me home from the hospital.

I can't remember much from before I was six or seven. I'm sure them educated doctors would say I was repressing something, holding something deep and dark in my subconscious. It doesn't seem likely. I've got all sorts of memories that fog my mind and cloud my judgment. At night they keep me company like age old friends.

They're not much of stories. Just sort of images, snapshots. A woodpile in the fall. A mountain cabin... more like a shack. Going fishing with an uncle. Getting a piece of candy from a social worker. And lying on my back, staring up into the sky, and watching the clouds go by as the shadows crawled by on the ground.

There is more to remember; like fetching water, taking too long, and slipping... or being tripped. Then there would be the lecture, the beating, the appeasement, and finally... the brothers, uncles, friends, and relations... anybody who cared to drop by and set a spell. We might have been poor, but we were happy to share what we had.

I'm sure I'm imagining things, making stuff up. It doesn't matter. Fact is, I don't spend much effort recalling the details. One time behind the woodpile or a thousand; one punch or more; what's the point in remembering, in counting the blows, or recalling where, with what, and who was doing... whatever exactly it was they were doing?

What I do remember are the clouds floating by, a leaf falling on my hand, a snowflake falling in my mouth, a cool breeze, and the warm sunshine; glimmering with a mystical intensity as if the world had been touched for a moment by the grace of God.

By city standards, I'd married young. He was a good twenty years my senior and smart enough to promise me the stars and moon, talk to me sweetly, and never once hit me... until after the honeymoon that is.

It was a familiar pattern; yelling, blows, appeasement, and then... more yelling, more blows. In time the appeasement part

stopped. I think both of us were happy to put the lie behind us. All the same, I never grew to hate my husband. He was a man. It was what men were like.

I have memories of this time as well; whiskey bottles, knitting baby clothes, drying diapers, twin boys, and later a girl.

We had visitors and my husband was the generous sort. These things are done without love or malice, but when his brother moved in, I slipped away into the night with my baby girl... she'd already seen too much.

I gave the road a try, but it was more of the same. The bruises were fresh on my face... and everywhere else when I first met him in the truck stop.

He didn't bother to say hello, whisper sweet lying words of comfort, or try to coddle up to my baby... He ignored my baby. I was happy for that. Instead he traced the bruises on my face... like he was counting the blows. When he was done with my face, I could tell he was trying to decide... whether he wanted to continue the count over the rest of my body.

While he did this, I waited patiently. I couldn't have done otherwise. I felt like he knew me, like he knew of my pain, my emptiness, like maybe he had been there all along and had watched helplessly.

He led me to his pickup truck where I slept. When he was done with his business, he drove into the night taking me with him. Hours later we... We turned off the highway and slept. At first light we continued down the game trail until the way all but disappeared. At the end was a small camp. I recognized the shack, its type, its class. The chickens in the yard, the goats, the girl that came out to greet us.

The girl, his sister, took my baby and smiled up such a storm of happiness, I didn't feel it could be real, but she kept it up all day. She fed us, rocked my girl, read from the book, and when the day was over she held me close and whispered sweetly into my ear, "I

always wanted a sister,” as her brother held me close as and echoed the same sentiment in the way that men do.

I wondered if in time, the scars of my childhood would heal, but even if they did not, I had finally come home, to a family, the way the good Lord had always intended.

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JAKE

Eve was fucking insane; just balls to the walls crazy in a spooky sort of way.

I work construction, road, bridges, dams, railroad stuff; even put time in on an oil rig for a while, but I didn't care for it. Typically you'd work two, three, eight weeks straight and then get a week or two off. Most of the guys would run into town, drink, look for whores, but I had a place. I'd load up on provisions and spend the week alone, working on my future.

I was just tying down the load when I met Eve for the first time. She just walked up to me in the parking lot with those big empty eyes and holding onto to a rolled up blanket like it contained her life, but the blanket or her eyes weren't the first thing you'd notice.

What you'd notice first was somebody had just gone and beat her all to hell, pounded her to shit... I mean I can see why, she probably caused it. Make no mistake, she's a fucking nutcase... but beating her would be like beating a dog that didn't know no better.

She was talking, if you want to call it that. I hadn't gotten used to her way yet, so she was making no sense. I didn't bother trying to listen to the words or make rhyme or reason out of it. I just traced the lines of damage on her face, wondering why someone would do that, wondering if she really was as beautiful as I thought she'd be when she finished healing up.

After a while she must have realized I wasn't listening and right there she just up and decided there were other ways of convincing me to take her along to where ever it was I was going.

Before I even knew what she was up to I was convinced thoroughly and completely... not that I'm saying we didn't take our times about it right there in the parking lot.

My stretch of land is remote, far removed from the city... and civilization. On the way there I started to make some sense out of her tales. If you were to believe her, she'd been beaten even in the womb, come into this world covered with bruises that never did heal. Of course, if you were to believe her, I was alternately her father, brother, savior, or total stranger while she changed her name like the wind.

When we finally got to my homestead, I was surprised to learn how many folks were there waiting for us. Let's just say, before the end of the second day, I don't think there were any incest taboos left for us to pretend to break... and I was in love with my psychotically fallen angel.

When my week was up, I knew I couldn't take her to the jobsite... the yelling, screaming... you'd never seen so much drama... from tears to laughter to despair in only moments as the story unfolded. Taking her with me was out of the question. I was surprised how anxious she was to stay by herself.

"Don't worry, she's in good hands," assured the voice I had come to recognize as belonging to my supposed sister. I didn't see how she could possibly be in good hands when I was leaving her alone, so I only drove a mile up the road before scrambling up a hill to look on back to see Eve watering one of the fruit trees we had planted together that week. Through the scope of my rifle I thought I could hear her mouth the words to a song she said she had sung as a child.

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Holly

You never really know anyone. I thought I knew my brother, I thought he was a God fearing man, but the desert heat must have cooked what little brain he ever had. Once he brought Eve home to live with us he was a changed man, things never were the same.

That first week was like a honeymoon, all three of us living together, one big happy family. The sun shone bright, the stars glittered in the sky, and all you could see on the horizon was a big blue sky; but it didn't stay that way. By the time he came back for the second week, something had changed in him. It was like the polish had worn off, like the honeymoon was over.

He had bought us all hats. Unless I was wearing this Easter Bonnet he'd bought me, he'd pretend he didn't recognize me, his own sister. He got Eve a cowboy hat to match his own, and if she didn't wear it, or wore one of the dozens of other hats he'd bought, he pretended not to notice her either and would go down a whole list of names... people I'd never heard before... pretending to try and guess who she was.

Out here in the desert, people go their own ways... lose sight of the main trail. It's no big thing. So my brother wouldn't recognize me unless I was wearing a special hat, it seemed a small thing, but then he started changing the hats he wore. He expected us to know what the different hats meant. If we didn't, there was usually hell to pay, hand delivered, up close and personal. It was a deceptive thing. His temper had grown gradually... at first it almost seemed like play and like everything else, it all started with the hats.

When he was gone one of the fruit trees he'd brought back and planted recently died. Anyone would have expected a few of them to die. That only one died gives witness to the care Eve doted on them. All the same, once it started turning brown you could see the fear in her eyes. She was afraid of what would happen to her when he came back, when he found out what she'd

done. I told her not to worry... maybe make a walking stick or a bow out of the dead sapling to hunt the rabbits... He'd never notice. So the first thing she did when he returned was show him the stump and the bow she was working on. She was so fearful he'd beat her. You could see her just shake when she told him the story.

Now I know he didn't hurt her none that first time. He could see where she was going with the story and he just tapped her cheek to let her know that would be it. You could see once he got a taste of it though, it felt right in his hand. He took it into his mind that she had made a switch out of the sapling and he bent her over and tapped her a time or two. She screamed and hollered like he was really letting her have it, but anyone could see that he was holding back.

It was during that second week that they started playing their games. He'd pretend to slap her and she'd go flying, crawling back on her knees, begging forgiveness anyway she knew how and Jake just taking all she had to give, but a girl like Eve is fragile. Kindness is an illusion easily lost on her. It might have been a game to Jake, but you could sense it becoming real for her. If you looked ahead, it wasn't hard to see where it was going.

He had brought some baby chickens for us that second week and any fool would know one or two of them would die before Jake returned that third time. It was like a set up. When he did return after an eight week stint, he didn't bother to say hello or give a hug. Right away, he got this mean look in his eyes and grabbed an ax handle out of the back of the truck. Eve tried to explain. How three of the chicks had died, but it would have been worse if she hadn't nursed two back from death and slept with the flock every night to keep them warm and the predators at bay. Jack just cursed, flipped down the tailgate to the truck, and pushed out a rolled up blanket. Who would have known how far he'd veered. He put Eve's hat on the rug, like the rug was supposed to be Eve or something, and pounded the rug till a cloud of dust filled the air and he was dripping with sweat. All the time Eve cried in

hysterics, she didn't know if he was making an example, letting her know what her future held, or he'd just gone completely insane.

When he was done, he put her hat back on her head, and kissed her crying eyes. It was a familiar story. Eve knew the score. It was time for appeasement.

Time flew by... as time does. It started to feel normal. Jake beating the hell out of a rolled up rug or blanket every few hours whenever he was around. He'd brought back so many hats, dresses, and outfits, even he couldn't keep all the roles straight. It all made a sort of twisted sense as long as he was playing along to Eve's stories... but then he started making up his own stories.

He'd bring back sleeping bags, he called hitchhikers and pillow cases stuffed with rags he called run away girls... The games got out of hand. Him and Eve started a cemetery up on the ridge where many the down comforter was buried. You could see Jake was starting to question himself. More than once he'd confessed to digging up a grave just to assure himself that all he'd find there were rags.

Finally, I'd guess he'd gone too far. He put a baseball cap on backwards and called himself his long lost brother John who I guess was gonna stay for a while, while he put a bandanna on Eve and explained how she was her teenage daughter Cicely... If you'd been listening to Eve's stories, it sort of made sense... but Cicely, or was it Eve, didn't want to play. She tried to run away, drove the truck into the ditch before anyone knew what she was doing.

One thing was sure, it was Eve who walked back from the truck... she put on her cowboy hat, took John's hat off of Jake and handed him his own cowboy hat. It was the first time she'd ever done anything like that. When she was sure she was Eve and he was Jake, she wrapped her arms around him and started to cry up a storm. "Cicely's gone! I know you didn't mean anything by it," she looked up at him. "You wouldn't have let nothing happen to my baby," and then she held him close and cried.

Hours later she said, “We can’t let nothing happen to her... She don’t know the ways of the world. How good of a father you’ve been to her...” and then, “We got to go after her.”

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Cicely

I didn’t dare walk on the road. I knew he’d come after me. There weren’t no way he’d just let me walk away, so I kept to the side. Scrambling in the brush and hiding in the dirt whenever they drove by looking for me.

He was a mean, bad man. There was no doubt about that. Every few hours he’d stop by where I was, as if he had some kind of uncanny tracking ability and yank my ma out of the cab by her hair. “Where is she?” he’d demand. She’d be looking right at me, but she didn’t say a word and always took the ensuing beating in silence.

When I started out I didn’t have a destination, a goal in mind. I’d lived my whole life, or all of it that I could remember, down at the end of that dirt track. I’d heard the stories my ma told about the outside, paved roads that led to places called cities full of hateful people doing the devil’s bidding. It didn’t seem like much of a place to run to, so I just stopped at the end of our road, a little ways off from the highway. Now and again a big truck would drive by, screaming it’s evil into the sky for all to hear as it passed.

I snared rabbits, found a spring and before I knew it I was waiting... waiting for Jake, waiting for my pa.

He was gone a long time. The moon came and went twice, but I could wait. There were plenty of rabbits, lizards, and snakes... I’d grown up out here. This was my land. Even out by the highway it seemed like home.

I could recognize pa's truck anywhere. I heard it coming down the highway miles away. I was waiting for him when he turned off the track... but I needn't have. It was his custom to take a nap, eat a snack, and shake off the city before he drove the rest of the way home.

Pa didn't seem surprised to find me out here. Didn't shake him at all. He just looked down the highway, got this sad, mournful look in his eyes, and asked if he could give me a ride somewheres. Poor pa. I tried to explain, but he's never been the quickest... even had us wear special hats so he could tell us apart.

I figured that's what I was doing wrong. In my excitement and relief I was mixing it up, doing things wrong, so I backed up and started over.

I put the bandana on that pa liked me to wear, hugged him hello, and dropped to my knees like I hadn't seen him in months, and hadn't just been talking to him moments before. I suppose that measured the pace of my words, and I realized in a sudden flash when it always was that ma and pa seemed to communicate best. His mind would speed up... and hers would slow down... and in the middle somewhere they'd meet.

"Brother?" he asked finally understanding. "I ain't got no brother." And then, "You mean John?"

I nodded, explaining how John had moved in, started running things... making demands.

You had to hand it to pa, once he saw the problem, the solution came to him right quickly. We waited till night and drove the truck back slowly in the dark with no lights on and stopped worlds away from home, but pa knew what he was doing. He unlocked his tool box and took out a hunting rifle. The mere sight of it scared me. He didn't have to tell me never to touch it.

He told me to be quiet, not to make any noise, as we crawled up a ridge that overlooked home. I noticed the path was worn. At the top he rested the rifle on a pile of rocks that someone must have set there. He aimed the gun and scoped out the camp.

“Is that him?” he asked.

I looked through the sights. “Yeah, pa.”

I couldn’t help but scream as pa killed John. Shaking, he led me back into camp. There was nothing left of the hat, but a few holes... and them bullets must have been blessed by the Lord himself, cause they’d turned Jake into a rotted log. Pa said we should throw the body into the ravine, but I knew we had to bury it... or John would haunt us forever. Then, when we were done, I got down on my knees again, thanked pa for being such a good man, rubbed my belly, and explained how soon there would be another mouth to feed.

I knew I didn’t show yet, but pa smiled like he’d been waiting for that kind of news for a long time. He went to one of the locked compartments on his truck and got a wrapped package. He made me open it like it was my birthday. It was a baby’s blanket.

Now, I would have been happy to end it there, tears of joy in my eye, but there are times with pa when you think he understands, and then just takes things a step further, when he ought to have let things well enough alone. He took the blanket, rolled it up, tied it with a bow, and put a baby’s bonnet on it, asking, “What’s her name?”

I didn’t point out that I didn’t know if it was a girl or boy yet and wouldn’t know for seven months... but we could work that out at the time. The important thing was pa would except my child as his own, and in seven months, as long as I remembered to put the right hat on each of us, pa would recognize both me and the boys... for some reason, I was expecting twins.

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2020-09-10

This is as I would write... always... and forever.

Brett Paufler

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