

STORYTELLER

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The spring weather felt nice on the day Eric Webb was released from prison. He headed for the gates with a guard strolling abreast of him. A shudder of excitement went up Eric's spine with every gate that opened. He and the guard came to the property room and collected his things, which were just his wallet holding thirty-eight bucks and his Georgia driver's license. Eric put the wallet into the pocket of his pants. He was wearing a cheap black suit he had worn to court five years ago. He signed the wallet and its contents out as another guard described them.

After passing through the last gate leading out of the prison, Eric squinted at the burst of sunlight that greeted him. His skin instantly became sticky by the muggy, humid air. A brief morning shower had recently dampened the area. At the security gate, the guard wished him luck and headed back in. Waiting for Eric inside his 1981 Buick was Eli Levi, nicknamed Post.

No one who met Post for the first time would ever believe Eli Levi was his real name. His mom thought it would be cute to have his name rhythm with the family's surname. Post thought differently, especially after the ridicule he'd received in school. Post began giving himself nicknames.

Eric got in and the Buick rumbled away, leaving a plume of exhaust fumes behind. The fact the car wasn't put out to pasture in some junkyard amazed Eric to no end.

He watched the prison grow smaller through the cracked side rearview mirror. The two friends said little to one another as they got onto Airport Road. Eric knew Post was nervous about being so close to the very prison he almost ended up in himself.

"Got any shades?" Eric finally asked as they drove over the ramp, merging onto I-85.

"In the glove compartment."

Eric shuffled through the crumpled papers, fast food napkins and straws until he found the pair. He held them by their only temple tip. "They're broken."

"So? They have both lenses," Post pointed out.

Eric put them on after cleaning the dust off with his dress shirt. The sunglasses sat crooked on his nose.

They rode in silence for a long while. The car rumbled like a jet plane. The *Rust Bucket* was what Eric always called it. It was the same vehicle that Post's uncle drove. The man used to drive Eric and Post to the movies or to their little league games when they were children in that Buick. The *Rust Bucket* had no shocks and could bounce its riders right off their seats when going over speed bumps. It always left oil stains whenever parked, like a dog pissing on the carpet. Every warning light stayed on, keeping the driver's side well-lit at night. The inside always smelled like a dive bar from years of being owned by chain smokers. The *Rust Bucket* had most likely lost its new car smell the day it rolled off

the lot. The only thing amazing about it was the fact that it somehow passed emissions, although, most likely illegally.

“You need a new car.”

“Uncle Nolan gave her to me,” Post argued mildly. “It’s a family heirloom.”

“And his uncle passed it onto his nephew as his father before him and so on and so forth,” Eric quipped.

“You’re an ass.”

Post was an average-looking guy with an average build. He had long, stringy, brown hair, and pale blue eyes that sat a bit too close to each other. He had a soft voice that hardly ever rose in volume. His attire was usually a typical flannel shirt and jeans. Faded if they were black.

Eric’s parents lived in Downtown Decatur, so they had time to talk business.

“Subject change,” Eric said, stealing a smoke from a pack in the console. “Is everything set up for next week?”

“Jeez, you haven’t been out for more than fifteen minutes and you’re already asking about this?”

“Don’t start,” he said, pressing in the car cigarette lighter. “This is serious.”

“Calm down. Just yanking your chain. Yeah, it’s all set. I’ll have the new combination for you when I know it.” Post chewed his bottom lip and asked warily, “Is that other guy still coming?”

Eric lit his smoke and rolled down the window. The lining on the car ceiling, which was held on by thumbtacks, flapped in the wind. Eric wanted to quit smoking, but in prison, there wasn’t much else to do.

“I have to call him,” he grunted. “Shit. What was I thinking?”

Harrison Bach, Eric’s ex-cellmate. Bach used to tell stomach-twisting stories about his family living in the Georgia Mountains and how they ate human flesh once a year for Christmas. Some kind of fucked up religious thing. Take from His body and all that. They’d pluck a local from town, kill, and eat them. Eric nearly puked when Bach described how the victims were slaughtered and claimed people didn’t taste much different than animal meat. Apparently, Bach’s clan had been practicing cannibalism for generations until 1974, when Bach was nine, and the authorities finally caught them. Bach lived in foster care until he was eighteen.

Eric never really believed him, especially since he’d only been locked up for armed robbery. The guy was scary enough to make Eric sleep with one eye open, though. Then one day, Bach saved him from another inmate named Trey Manville who had attacked Eric more than once. The last time he threatened him, Bach had killed the maniac. In gratitude, Eric took the blame, claiming self-defense. The warden bought it, aware of Manville’s bloodlust toward him. No extra time was tacked on his prison sentence, just a few weeks in solitary confinement.

Afterward, Eric trusted Bach enough to let him in on what he had planned after his release from prison. He regretted doing so shortly after, especially when Bach told him he

wanted in on it. Eric agreed, mainly because it would keep him quiet about the whole thing, and plus it was thought that Bach wouldn't be getting out for a long while. Then he was released a year ago on a fuckin' technicality. The charges of armed robbery were dropped.

"Dunno what you were thinking," Post sighed, taking his own cigarette. "From what you told me about the guy, he's not the type you want hanging around or doing a job with. We don't even need a third body for this."

Post lit his cigarette but didn't roll down the window. He never did. It drove Eric insane, being stuck in static secondhand smoke.

Eric rolled his window down all the way, thankful it was manual. Any kind of automatic luxury wouldn't likely work in the *Rust Bucket*.

"Look, he's just gonna take your job as a lookout, okay? Just to make him happy. His cut isn't going to be much. It's the least I could do after he saved my ass."

"You mean, it's the least you can do to *cover* your ass," Post deliberated.

Eric rejected that remark. "You weren't there. You have no idea what that maniac, Manville, would've done to me if Bach hadn't stepped in."

"Jesus, Eric. What if he bragged about it to someone and they told the cops, huh?"

Eric flicked ashes out the window. Post merely flicked his in an overfilled ashtray stuffed with crumpled butts.

"Don't worry about it," Eric grumbled. "It'll be fine."

"Subject change," Post said sharply. "How do you feel about seeing her? Y'know? In the flesh?"

"Nervous," Eric admitted. "I gotta make things right, Post. For her, you know?"

"I know, man."

The rest of the drive was a quiet one. Eric had much on his mind, but out of habit from years of being locked away, he kept those thoughts to himself. He occasionally listened to the radio music, commercials, and obnoxious rock jocks. It felt weird being free as if incarceration was a phantom limb that he felt all over his body.

They pulled up in front of Eric's childhood home. White smoke plumed from the *Rust Bucket's* grill. The engine was overheating.

Post patted the dashboard. "She's not used to long rides. I need to get her back and put some water in the radiator."

Staring at the house caused Eric's heart to lump in his throat. It slid back down and sank deep into his stomach when he spotted the For Sale sign.

"Why is that still there?" he asked, mostly to himself.

"Dunno. Probably to keep up the façade? It's been up for a year now."

To keep up the façade? Eric thought. *No. It's because Mom and Dad just aren't taking any chances.*

"Looks like no one has made an offer," Post put in.

Eric got out and looked back at Post. "Thanks for the ride. I'll call you."

"All right. See ya."

Eric went over to the For Sale sign as the *Rust Bucket* rumbled down the road. He pulled the sign out with some effort. The damn thing was staked into the ground pretty good. The neighbor, Mrs. Lockhart, who lived across the street, eyed him suspiciously while she stood with a hose over her colorful flowerbed. She didn't seem to recognize him. He offered a wave and went toward the door with the sign cradled under his arm.

Hope she doesn't call the cops.

He left the sign propped against the iron railing of the front porch and went in through the unlocked door. He already knew his folks were at work. His mom was at the diner, killing her feet to serve lousy tippers. Dad had surrendered his pride and got a job as a greeter at Walmart.

God, how Eric really screwed up. He couldn't believe how his one mistake had cost his family so much.

Eric entered the house where hardly anything had changed since his childhood. Same 70s green wallpaper with yellow and white flowers. Same mid-80s brown carpet that was laid out in every room. The aroma emitting from the Renuzit cones was sprinkled all over the place. Dad's worn-in recliner still faced the old Zenith TV with the ancient end table between it and the tacky plaid couch. The whole house was outdated. Nothing—not even electronics—had been replaced since '95.

Inside the ugly yellow tile kitchen hung the avocado-colored rotary phone next to the surprisingly still working retro Whirlpool fridge. It wasn't that his parents were lazy or cheap, they dismissed newer things in order to save for their son's college, which, due to his dad's gambling habits, those funds had dwindled. When his dad got help after nearly losing the house, they tried to save back up. By then, however, it was too late. Even so, it must have killed them to put the house up for sale. They loved the giant time capsule.

The house wasn't unoccupied. There was a cartoonish sound effect, like someone getting bonked on the head, followed by comical dialog coming from upstairs. Eric quietly crept up to his childhood room where Dazzle, his daughter, watched cartoons. She was in bed, her brunette hair resting over her shoulders, her big sea-green eyes barely blinking. She lay completely still. A child her age should be full of energy and untamable motion. Not her, though, not his Dazzle.

The volume was turned low enough for him to hear the occasional beep of her portable heart monitor sitting on the bed next to her. Seeing the machine locked the air inside his chest for a time.

I'm sorry.

As nervous as he was, he was ecstatic to finally see Dazzle in person. Never had he wanted her to visit him in prison, and his parents honored that wish. With the warden's permission, Eric's folks took pictures of him when they visited. He'd always throw on a big old smile, or a funny face, hoping it would make Dazzle laugh. He wanted to show her that he wasn't some mean, scary guy just because he was a convicted felon. Sometimes he'd have a recording tape of him reciting a children's book for her to listen to at bedtime. Other times he wrote her letters.

Eric wanted Dazzle to know his face and voice, and to know he loved her.

For a moment, he pretended he was a hard-working dad just returning home from his well-to-do job. His wife, healthy and alive, had greeted him from downstairs before he came up to check on his daughter who wasn't hooked to any monitor, but playing with her dolls or having a tea party with her plush toys. Wearing a suit helped with that fantasy. In truth, Dazzle was next in line for a heart transplant after years of being on the list. Since birth, she had needed medical care, costing Eric's parents thousands.

As if she'd sensed his presence, Dazzle rotated her head over to him.

"Daddy?"

His heart swelled with joy. She knew him!

"Hey, baby," he said, approaching her.

He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. His eyes burned with the tears building in them brought on by the first touch of her. He rose and just admired her. She was so thin and pale, like a weltering daisy.

"How you feelin'?"

"Okay, I guess," she uttered very softly. "A bit sleepy, though."

The hallway bathroom door opened as the toilet flushed, and out came a short, round woman. Mrs. Anna Dugan. She was a retired nurse who worked at the Southern Regional Medical Center where Eric was born. She was no spring chicken even back then. She was ancient now.

"Mrs. Dugan," Eric said pleasantly. "It's good to see you again."

She hobbled toward the bed without a hello or howdy-do. He couldn't decide if it was because she didn't notice him or was flat-out ignoring him. For Dazzle's sake, he hoped she was ignoring him.

He didn't know much about Mrs. Dugan, only that she'd lived alone in the house where her husband died in some twenty years back. They both had emigrated from Scotland when they first married. Mrs. Dugan used to bake Halloween cookies to give out to the trick-or-treaters when Eric was a kid. Now she cared for his daughter because a two-hundred-year-old nurse who may or may not be blind and/or deaf was all his parents could afford.

Mrs. Dugan checked Dazzle's heart monitor. Then she gave her a pill from one of two pill bottles set on a pink princess nightstand.

After helping Dazzle swallow the pill, Mrs. Dugan turned to him, pushing her glasses up her fat nose.

"It's time for her nap, Mr. Webb," she said in her old Scottish brogue.

Mr. Webb. It sounded strange coming from someone who used to call him a little cutie.

Eric gave Dazzle another kiss on the forehead and followed Mrs. Dugan downstairs.

"She'll be asleep till three," she explained as she slowly descended each step. "When she wakes, she'll need to take her Cardiac glycosides and antibiotics."

Eric took one step and stood waiting while she gradually stepped down the next stair.

"Afterwards, get her to eat something."

“Wait. Are you leaving?” He didn’t expect this.

“You’re home, eh?” she said between huffs. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

When they finally made it into the foyer, she grabbed her purse sitting on a small table next to the front door. “I left you instructions on how much medication to give her, along with her routine schedule on the kitchen counter. My number is also written on it.”

When she turned, her face was bright pink and glistening, as if she had just run a marathon. “Those stairs will be the end of me. I’ve told your parents this. You need to talk to them about moving her down here.”

“Mrs. Dugan, I can’t tell you how grateful I am you’re doing this.”

And he was, yet still he wished Dazzle had someone better.

“It’s extra money. You know, a child shouldn’t have to be made to suffer for their parents’ mistakes, eh?”

Her expression was hard and bitter when she spoke. Eric’s own face flushed hot. He held his tongue, though. It *was* his fault. All of it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. Webb,” she said, opening the door.

He held it open while she hobbled down the cracked concrete steps. When she reached the bottom, she said, “By the by, you ought to change the poor girl’s name to something more suitable rather than leaving her with that stripper name.”

“I’ll consider it, Mrs. Dugan. Goodbye.”

He shut the door and went to the kitchen for something to eat. He got a beer from the fridge that housed countless Chinese and Thai takeout containers, as well as a few pizza boxes.

He twisted the cap and drank. The malty taste blossomed within him, and he quickly took another drink. Resting on the countertop were envelopes from the hospital. He tore one open and cringed at the amount his parents’ health insurance didn’t cover. The house wasn’t worth the amount they owed. He knew for years it was a lot, but to actually see it made him lose his appetite.

He went out to the back porch for a smoke. There, he thought about things. Not on the events that led him to this dismal point. No good would come of it, and he did plenty of that in prison. Instead, he focused on what needed to be done to set things right.

He also thought about Abella, his late wife, and how he failed her too. He should’ve been there to keep her off drugs. He should’ve been able to prevent her from overdosing in the bathroom of that nightclub with a needle lodged in her arm. Eric had kept her clean and sober, not even touching a cigarette for the first trimester of her pregnancy, but then he got himself locked up and her old habits crept back. She had tried reaching out to him about it. At the time, however, he was too distracted with being in prison that he completely missed the signs. That was the worst time of Eric’s incarceration when he finally wised up to what was happening. The helplessness of not being able to stop the madness before it came to a head. And before he knew it, his wife was dead, his premature firstborn in the hospital, weighing no more than three pounds.

Eric was an exceptional thief. It started with shoplifting before moving to bigger heists. In his twenties, he and Post would drive to the next state and do smash-and-grabs at local stores. It was a smart move, they'd thought. They even had a dealer, a man whose name they never learned, who'd buy their hot items to sell off for a higher profit. Eric and Post were so good at being thieves that they even stole two Persian rugs worth thousands. They simply rolled them up and carried them out the back way to a van they'd also stolen. The store usually had only one person working, and no security system covered the rear loading area because the owner never expected someone would steal rugs in such a brazen fashion. That's what he had stated on the news when being interviewed about the robbery, anyhow.

With a baby on the way, Eric had done one last score before he planned to work at the GM plant in Doraville like his old man. He wanted to put his thieving days behind as much as Abella wanted to put away her own demons. In truth, they needed each other to become better people.

During his last smash-and-grab in Lexington, Kentucky, however, Eric wounded himself, leaving blood behind, which led to his arrest. The amount taken was enough to earn him a five-year prison sentence. Everything fell apart after that.