

Where Do You Go When The Lights Go Out?

a short story by Mark Chadbourn

"Don't ask me questions, Frank. It'll only end in tears." More than the words, it's her expression I remember most; I could never tell if it was threatening or fearful, but that was Eve: she loved being a mystery. It's almost thirty-five years since I heard her make that statement. I've got lines on my face, grey in my hair, and after the exertion of yesterday my muscles ache like an old, old man. But as I watched Eve through that plexiglass door, hammering and screaming for her life, I could see she was still as young and beautiful as the day we met. In the first instance, I loved her. Then, over time, my emotions coalesced into a cold, focused hatred hardened by a wasted life, a third of a century frittered away with despair, endless searching and sickening not-knowing. There, at the end, with Eve pleading silently and impotently for help, I don't know what I felt. And today... Today I finally understand what it was all about.

Eve walked into the coffee bar in Old Compton Street like someone who had been cast adrift, moving through the hissing steam of the cappuccino machine with an intense, searching expression. She reminded me of Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday, that odd combination of vulnerability, confidence and aloofness, so noticeably out of place among the competing skiffle groups and rock 'n' rollers with dripping quiffs pretending they were in Memphis. When she laid eyes on me she broke into such a warm, open smile I shivered; it was as if she had finally found what she was searching for. It was the early sixties and there was a sense of optimism in the air. Back then, before I'd been worn down by events, I was bright and confident, filled with hopes of making a name for myself as a painter. "Don't sit on your own in a strange place. I'll keep you company," I said, jumping to my feet as she neared the table. "And I'll even buy you a coffee." I half-expected her to say no, but she slipped in opposite, still smiling. "I'm Frank Morgan," I said, holding out my hand. She nodded in a strange, slow way and there was something about it which seemed to be filled with an awful sadness. "Eve Kendall," she replied. Her hand was cool; I felt a faint tremor in her fingers when our skin touched.

I guessed she was a little older than me - I never did manage to pin her down to an exact date. She was new in town, straight off the bus from the south coast with no money, no job, not even any luggage. That should

have

set alarm bells ringing straight away, but I was awash with hormones, already under her spell. She wasn't like any of the girls I knew; she seemed wise beyond her years, and she appeared to know everything that

was

happening in the world. Even now I can hear her talk about the Bay of

Pigs

and Kennedy and Krushchev after she'd heard some news report on the

radio

on the counter. Of course, I'd heard all about it - who hadn't? - but

Eve

knew all the detail, much more than the shop girl she professed to be.

Or

was that me being chauvinist? We weren't very enlightened in those

days.

She looked up suddenly when the clock struck three and what happened

then

seemed funny at the time, almost romantic in a stupid way. Her right

hand

was just an inch away from mine and as the clock finished its chime, a blue spark crackled from the tip of her index finger to mine; I jolted backwards. We laughed, joked about sparks flying, but as we were about

to

leave I noticed a large black stain in the table top where her arm had been; it almost looked like it had been burned into the wood.

We walked slowly up to Charing Cross Road. I chanced slipping my arm around her waist and then asked her back to my place. When she said yes

I

almost stepped out in front of a bus. Yet she wasn't easy like some of

the

girls hanging out around Soho at that time. It was as if she was in control all the time; her emotions and motivations were too complex for

me

to read.

We were barely through the door of my dingy old bedsit above a strip

club

in Greek Street before we were making love on the bed in broad

daylight,

with the grimy sounds of the city floating in through the open window.

She

was so intense, almost desperate, it felt like she was trying to eat me up.

Somehow she never left. Even more amazing, for me, at that age, I never wanted her to. I don't know why I fell for Eve - why do you fall in

love

with anyone? - but after the initial bedazzlement of her humour and intelligence and beauty, there was always the mystery. Trying to get inside her head was a big adventure, a complex Chinese puzzle that occupied my mind and time. That's what set her apart from other women; that's what made me want her; and, I suppose, that's what eventually turned my love into obsession.

There was some stiffness in the relationship at first. I got the

feeling

she was expecting it all to fall apart, as if I'd wake up one morning

and

throw her out. Sometimes I'd look up from my sketching and catch her watching me intently, but she'd never tell me what she was thinking.

And

there were times when I thought I'd never get to the heart of her. She

told me lots of things about herself, but it was all too vague to really pin her down. But her strangeness dominated everything. One night I'd been out with some friends for a few drinks, and I came back to find Eve sitting on the sofa with her knees tucked up under her chin, staring at the clock on the mantelpiece like it was going to leap off and kill her if she looked away. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "Clocks are just so damn dangerous," she said bitterly. Trying to get some sense out of her was like talking to a stone. In the end, my irritation got the better of me and we went to bed in silence for the first time since we met. When I woke the next morning the clock had been smashed in the middle of the sitting room floor.

Those inexplicable aberrations happened irregularly, but it didn't do anything to slow us down, and by the end of the year, she had me completely. I remember her saying, "You and I are linked for all time." Like an idiot, I thought that was a good thing. And then I proposed to her on a wet Sunday morning in Hyde Park and although for a moment I thought she was going to say no, she finally relented. Eve was beautiful and sad and screwed up and strange, a closed book that made her even more intriguing. I only really discovered how strange about two years after we met. I'd been planning to visit my brother in Brighton for a few weeks. Eve seemed convinced, for some reason, that it wasn't going to happen, but as the day drew closer the more anxious she got. Finally she said, "You can't go. Something terrible will happen if you take that train." I told her not to be so silly; Eve burst into tears, a reaction too extreme to put down to a simple bad feeling or premonition. After spending my hard-earned cash on the ticket, the last thing I wanted to do was back out, but Eve was adamant. She wasn't happy until she took the ticket from my wallet and tore it up. I was furious and sulked like a child. Eve was simply relieved. And then on the Saturday, just as I'd convinced myself that she'd made a complete fool of me, the news of the crash came in. My train had ploughed into a stationary engine just outside Brighton. Twenty dead, at that time one of the worst disasters in British transport history. The queasiness I felt wasn't simply due to my near miss or the number of tragic deaths; suddenly Eve disturbed me. It affected me so much that I rose early and spent the day on my own, but in the end an unaccountable guilt overcame me and I hurried back to take

her out for a snack at the cafe in Old Compton Street. Afterwards we made love with a passion that dwarfed anything that had gone before. It was a sign, I suppose, if only I could have seen it at the time. Afterwards I drifted off into a lazy sleep and when I awoke Eve's absence was illuminated by the streetlight though the window. I found her in the toilet, shaking like she was trying to kick a smack habit. There was an odd golden sheen to her skin, almost like light was forcing its way out of her pores, and her hair was lank with sweat. "If you think I've done something bad tomorrow, you've got to forgive me."

Her eyes skittered across my face with an emotion I couldn't recognise. "I'm sick of all these cryptic comments, Eve." My concern came out as irritation because I already knew she wouldn't let me help her. "Just forgive me," she said, taking my hand tightly. "I'm not bad. It's all out of control. I wish you could see." "Then tell me." She shook her head, the weight of her unspoken words too painful to comprehend. I led her back to the bedroom and drew the curtains. In the dark I could fool myself that some day I would find out what was going on in Eve's head. We fell asleep in each other's arms, Eve's hands so tight on my back it reeked of desperation. And when I woke in the morning, Eve was gone.

That was the moment my life turned sour. It wasn't as if she had simply left me; that would have destroyed me emotionally at first, but I guess I'd have learnt to cope with it. It was the not knowing. All her clothes remained in the wardrobe, her shoes too, her make-up on the dresser, her shampoo on the edge of the bath. Nothing was missing. Apart from Eve. At first I thought she might have gone off in a huff for some slight I hadn't recognised. I stayed in all that day, awake through the night.

Then I called all our friends. After a while I went to the police who laughed me out of the station. No note. It's a free world. We weren't even married. After two weeks I started to imagine all sorts of scenarios: that she'd thrown herself into the Thames, that she'd stepped out for a walk and been abducted, raped and murdered. I phoned every hospital in the vicinity so many times they eventually stopped taking my calls. I took to walking the streets, showing a photo to anyone who'd look. In the end, although I hated myself for it, I stated to hope that they would find a body. At least then I could put the thing to rest. Instead, it remained to torment me, infecting my mind with its horrible virus.

Many times I thought I saw her around London, but it was always someone just like, eyes too close together, lips too wide, a trick of my mind borne of desperation. I hated myself for chasing after them. But I

always

did it.

And then I did see her. It was in the early seventies when I was working

as a freelance magazine photographer. I was standing on the tube platform

at High Street Kensington, slipping a fresh film into my bag. It was 4.30pm and already the rush hour crowds were starting to build. I glanced

up at the big clock they had there, and there she was, on the other platform, staring at her hands like she couldn't believe they were hers.

I

thought my heart was going to stop. I dropped my camera bag, yelled her name. And as she looked up at me, and her eyes widened, I saw it was really her. And she saw it was me.

A second later the train rolled in. Anxiously I watched to make sure she

didn't get on one of the carriages, but when it pulled away she was no longer there. I must have seemed like a maniac the way I ran over to

the

other platform, yelling to everyone in the vicinity, but the few who remembered seeing her had no idea where she went.

It was too much, the ultimate act of cruelty. Up till then I'd fooled myself into thinking sooner or later I'd forget her. Suddenly she was

back

in the forefront of my thoughts, ruining every day. It was even worse knowing she was still alive. I could no longer believe the decent Eve I loved had been carried away by a random act of fate. It had been conscious. She simply didn't care.

Time is supposed to heal, but it only made it worse. The irritation that

was Eve had become encysted in my head, and almost every waking moment

I

found myself probing it until it grew and grew and suddenly that was

all

there was.

I found myself revisiting all the places we went to during our time together, trying to find a perspective that never came. Through it all, somehow I managed to hold on to my life. I traded in my work on the magazines for the broadsheets, snapping violent industrial disputes in

the

era of secondary picketing, following the trail of the Black Panther. Interesting work, good photos, but I didn't enjoy a moment of it.

Away from the job it was all Eve. I hired a press clippings agency to search for any mention of her name in the media. A contact on the force delved the depths of the police computer. She had no record, no

passport,

no driving licence. I even employed a private detective on an irregular basis to hunt for any sign of her. He got rich sifting through

supposedly

secret DSS records and credit agency lists, but it was as if Eve didn't exist.

It was the week after Thatcher had led the Tories back to power in 1979.

I

was at a photo call at the Commons to snap a collection of the new

input

of MPs, a bunch of braying jackanapes and barrow boys made good in too-expensive suits. There was an odd smell coming off the Thames, like

rotten apples, and it seemed to reflect a greater sourness worming its way into life. I could have cared less.

And then I turned to change my film and I saw her, wandering forlornly near the statue in Parliament Square. I almost convinced myself it was another of the Eve doubles who had haunted me at every turn, but I knew instinctively this time it was her. I dropped my camera into the bag on the floor and ran, weaving through the traffic, not daring to take my eyes off her.

Before she could slip away again, I grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and yelled with the pent-up rage of years, "You bitch!" It was all I could think to say.

She let out a scream and tried to fight me off, but then she seemed to see something in my face and calmed instantly.

"Who are you?" she said.

I don't know what I'd expected - lies, anger, tears, some kind of manipulation - but it certainly wasn't that. "Come on, Eve..." I stuttered, but it was there in her wide, innocent eyes and the quizzical turn of her expression; she really had no idea who I was.

Some suit and tie dropped an Evening Standard in a bin and Eve dashed over and recovered it as if I wasn't there. She glanced at the front page, then tossed it away. "Let's go somewhere and talk," she said.

We went to a pub in Whitehall where I tried to make some sense of what was happening, like I'd been trying to do ever since we'd met.

"You're telling me you don't remember me, the flat in Soho, the two of us living together, the wedding proposal...?" She shook her head emphatically; there was a glimmer of fear in her eyes. "You don't remember what happened to you that night when you disappeared?"

"If I did, Frank, I'd say."

Her lack of memory seemed real enough, but there was still something she wasn't telling me; it lay guiltily on the edges of her expressions.

"And look at you," I continued. "You don't look a day older than when we were together." I subconsciously rubbed the first signs of middle-aged spread bulking my midriff.

Astonished by the realisation as soon as I'd said it, I reached out unconsciously to touch her hair; she pulled away.

"I'm sorry--" she said, seeing the hurt in my face.

"I know, I know. As far as you're concerned, I could be some creep off the streets."

She took my hand gently; she always did have a way of soothing me. "I'm sure you're great. I wouldn't have stayed with you if you weren't."

All that anger and bitterness of years had withered away in a couple of hours. There was a little voice in my head screaming, "Sucker!" but at that moment all I cared about was that Eve was back.

"So how are we going to find out what happened?" I asked.

"Do we have to?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just want to get on with my life, Frank. We're not here for long. I don't want to waste it on things that aren't important. I want to live for the moment."

"But I need to know... I've got to get it straight..." My voice trailed off.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, Frank. Although I can't remember the ins and outs of what happened, I know in my heart it wasn't intentional. I would never consciously do the things you said."

"So what do we do now?"

She leaned back and gave a smile I couldn't quite read. "Have a drink, talk..."

"Where are you staying?"

She shrugged.

"What about your things?"

"I'm sure I've got a glorious penthouse apartment somewhere, but--" She shrugged again.

I recalled the first time we met in Old Compton Street and wondered how many times Eve's slate had been wiped clean, but the thought soon drifted away with all the meaningless years we'd been apart. She was right; live for the moment.

I spent the rest of the evening going through our previous time together in minute detail, the holidays in Minehead and Norfolk, the night I got so drunk I was sick on her shoes, my astonishment at her premonition about the train crash; for some reason that seemed to amuse her. And by last orders we were back together again. It was as simple as that.

For a while I felt like I was living someone else's life. Suddenly I was sleeping peacefully, appreciating my job, enjoying my leisure time. For Eve, everything about our relationship seemed fresh. I had regular, sweeping feelings of *deja vu* as conversations and insights emerged from the mists of time, but I was happy to be returning to the only truly happy period of my life.

Things took an odd and disturbing turn during a night out in Soho, revisiting some of our old haunts. Eve had been down all day, repeatedly refusing to tell me what was wrong, and from the moment we reached the first pub she was drinking too much, too quickly. By the end of the evening trying to keep up I was pretty stewed myself. I'm a romantic fool when I'm drunk, mouthing the kind of stuff that would embarrass a Mills & Boon writer.

"Let's get married," I blurted. "We were nearly there before. We're no different now--"

Eve burst into tears. "I knew it would come to this!" she raged. There was such brittle fury in her face I couldn't begin to comprehend it.

"We're not going to get married! If that's what you want you better get out of here now!"

"Okay, we won't get married--"

"No! You've got to think about it! Seriously. Because I could be out of

here in the blink of an eye, just like before. You've got to know and accept that if you want to carry on."

My pathetic, dewy-eyed drunkenness ebbed away in an instant. "I thought we'd put all that behind us."

She shook her head hysterically, knocked her glass to the floor; people turned to stare. "Do you think I have a choice?"

I swallowed hard, but the bitterness of all those years apart was starting

to strangle me. "You've got to come clean with me, Eve. It's not--" "It's not fair?" She laughed, shook her head again, sadly this time. "I wish, I wish, I wish. But that's not enough. I don't know the repercussions, don't you see? Everything might fall apart." Her voice trailed off into some drunken rambling I couldn't quite hear. After a couple of minutes she raised her head to look me in the eye. "There are things about me you can never know. If you can accept that, we'll do

fine.

If you can accept it might all end tomorrow, without any explanation,

if

you can live for today...but that's life, isn't it?"

I nodded. "That's life."

"So do we have a deal?" she asked pitifully. "Because I don't want to

lose

you."

"Deal," I lied.

That night I woke every hour to reach out in the dark. For reassurance, mostly; it didn't do me much good.

And in the morning I phoned Mercer, the private detective, and told him

to

re-assume his irregular duties.

That act ruined what I had. Our relationship, now infected with deceit, lay heavy on me.

Several weeks later, a couple of days before Christmas, Mercer rang.

His

voice, always a little sneery, sounded like it was coming through a

wide,

clenched-teeth grin.

"Hello, Frank. Guess what? I've found Eve Kendall."

"I know where she is," I replied sourly. "That's not what I--"

"Only trouble is, she's only three years old," he continued, then burst into a bout of sniggering laughter as if it was the funniest joke in

the

world. "Sorry, Frank, couldn't resist it. After all this time searching for info on your mystery woman, I got a little over-excited when I

finally

came across her name."

"Where?" I snapped.

"Some police report from Bournemouth. A three-year-old had gone

missing.

Eve Kendall. They thought she'd been snatched by some pervert. Anyway, they found her a little worse for wear down a well with her head split open after she'd wandered on to some derelict property near her home.

Her

family are at the hospital bedside. I checked with them in case she was named after some other Eve Kendall. No-go."

"Thanks for sharing that with me, Mercer," I said uncharitably.

"Happy Christmas to you too, Frank."

I pushed the boat out for New Year. Two tickets for a party at a posh

West

End hotel. Eve got a new dress, I hired a DJ. Our first New Year bash together for nearly eighteen years. That brought it home. I still couldn't

understand how she looked so damn young.

"So where's the fountain of youth?" I said with mock-sarcasm when she walked in looking like a picture with her hair up and her make-up and jewellery on.

"I suck the life energy out of men," she replied with a kiss. And that

I

could have almost believed.

It was a good party. Lots of booze, we danced like it was going out of fashion. Not long before midnight I got stupid-romantic again and

started

nuzzling the back of her neck. As I traced my tongue round to her spine,

I

opened my eyes and noticed a pink scar running up under her hairline.

Normally, with her hair down, it would have been invisible.

"How'd you get this?" I asked, running my finger along it.

"Kids do stupid things," she replied.

I didn't get the chance to ask her any more. The MC cut the band and primed us for the chimes of Big Ben that were going to be piped over

the

sound system. Eve took my hand and led me to the dance floor where I sneaked a kiss before the countdown began. The lights dimmed when the chimes started, and all we could see was the glint of the mirrorball spinning slowly high above our heads. I remember thinking: nights like this should never end.

At the final stroke, the lights flashed, the streamers flew and the poppers exploded in a carnival atmosphere. I turned to give Eve a kiss

to

carry us into the New Year, buoyed with hope and optimism. And I turned and I turned, but I was alone in the cheering crowd.

Eve was gone. Again.

It was a little like dying. The pain coming from somewhere I couldn't explain, the incomprehension, the inability to find any perspective.

How

could I even begin to explain it? Had Eve planned leaving me there, in

the

dark, on the cusp of a new age, or had she been whisked away by supernatural forces beyond my understanding? During the months and

years

that followed, I sought out all kinds of explanations, no matter how bizarre; in desperation you'll grasp at any straw. For a while I even entertained the notion that all the people who disappear each year

simply

fall through a rift in space to another dimension. It was easier to

accept

than the idea that Eve had been so callous for the second time.

This time there was none of the frantic searching; my acquiescence to

fate

was weak and pathetic. And the years turned, and the eighties became

the

nineties, but the sheer craziness of Eve's departure made it impossible

to

tether it to a memory to forget it; it floated around in my head, affecting everything. I knew perfectly how those parents of

undiscovered

victims of serial killers could have their lives destroyed by the not-really knowing; you need a body to lay things to rest.

I had other girlfriends, but they got little attention and eventually walked away. I drank a little too much. I eventually moved to Paris in the feeble hope a new place would mean a fresh start. But Eve was always a few steps behind, out of sight. At least with the growing influence of the European Commission, there was a demand for more news from the continent. I travelled widely and my photos appeared everywhere, as if it mattered. Then, just two days ago, I was watching a science report about research being carried out at the Cern Institute. Some breakthrough had been made at the Joint European Torus project which had been looking into nuclear fusion since the eighties - I did some photos for a Le Monde piece on it once. Now the eggheads at Cern were hoping to use the JET findings for some kind of demonstration, or experiment, I didn't get the details. I was too busy looking at the team they'd assembled, experts from all over Europe. And there, at the back in a white coat and holding a clipboard, was Eve. At first I thought I was fooling myself, but I got on to the TV people and they faxed me a photo. Unmistakably Eve, and still as young as the day we met. My vista on to the face of the unknown brought a moment of vertiginous panic, and then suddenly there was action, no wondering about the terrible whys and wherefores; everything I had was focused on getting to her again.

I checked with Cern. She was still using the name Eve Kendall, an Oxford post-grad allowed to join the team as an associate. The PR guy said she was tipped as one of the most brilliant theoretical physicists of her generation. And I was an astronaut. I had no idea what she was doing there, but I couldn't shake the overwhelming feeling of dread that came over me the moment I saw her face again. I drove up there early the next morning. It took me all day to get accreditation, but finally they allowed me a pass. I had too many dreams that night and overslept, and when I sprinted into the institute in the morning it was already obvious things were going wrong; wan, disturbed faces, people running around, yelling into phones. The alarm started soon after and then everything went crazy. Somehow I found my way to the heart of the complex; everybody had evacuated by then. Everybody except Eve. She was still in what was obviously the danger zone, sealed behind an unbreakable plexiglass security door. I was on the other side of my own door, watching her, watching me, and the moment I looked into her eyes any thought she had anything to do with it fell instantly away. Her face was filled with terror; she hammered at the door, pleading silently with me beneath the scream of the alarm. And once again she had no idea who I was. And that was how it ended for us, separated by just a few feet, unable to get to the heart of the enigma; a metaphor for my whole life. There was a sound like metal rending, then a flash of pure white light, and Eve was

gone, this time for good.

Strangely enough, that was also the start of my coming to awareness, as if

I wasn't allowed to grasp the mystery until Eve was finally gone. I don't know exactly what was happening at Cern - the investigative team used the national security blanket to keep everything under wraps - but I was given a full medical check and everything was fine. I could tell they expected

me to glow in the dark.

That night I dreamed of Eve sitting in our Soho flat saying: Clocks are just so damned dangerous.

And the next morning everything had fallen into place. I caught the first

plane back to England and tracked down her parents in Bournemouth, offering my sympathies, claiming to be a friend, not lying at all. We sat

and looked at photos. There was one of her in hospital after they'd brought her out of the well. The gash was in the same place I'd seen the

scar on the adult Eve that New Year's Eve so long ago. When she was only three.

Eve knew what was happening to her all along; she was smart, the best theoretical physicist of her generation. All those cryptic comments and odd asides I'd never understood finally falling into relief; I wish she'd

told me so I could give her some kind of comfort, but as she'd said, the repercussions were unguessable. How lonely she must have been.

Don't ask me to explain the physics - I'm just a photographer. But I know

they say some sub-atomic particles can travel through time. Quarks? The Quantum Field? It's all jargon, but I know this: Eve and I were living our

lives in opposite directions; the last time I met her was the first time

she met me. For the first twenty-odd years of her life, she was moving in

the right direction, but the explosion at Cern threw her backwards; for that brief period in 79 she existed simultaneously as a child and an adult, a paradox I couldn't begin to grasp. But like a bad radio signal she could only stay in tune for a while before fading out again,

heading ever backwards. And she knew, and she knew; that's the horrible thing. What must it have been like for her to realise she could only cling on

to things for a moment before being sucked away again? And all she was concerned about was my happiness.

Why did she keep appearing to me? I like to think we were linked forever

by our proximity in the blast, our wavelengths aligned down the years. Or

is that me being stupid-romantic again?

I'll never see Eve again, at least not this side of death. And what of her? Will her relentless, unforgiving journey continue to the dawn of time?

There's one more thing. Last night my sleep was disturbed, not by dreams, but by memories. I was five years old, on holiday with my parents in Norfolk. Somehow I'd got separated from them and I was wandering along a deserted expanse of beach, sobbing. I remember the seagulls screeching, the crash of the waves. From the dunes came a beautiful woman, a fairy godmother, a magic princess, her hair black, her eyes dark. She knelt down next to me, dried my eyes and gave me a warm, loving hug that made everything all right. Then she took me by the hand and led me back across the sand to my parents. I remember turning as my mother and father led me away, seeing her standing there, a small, dark figure on the empty beach, growing smaller as we headed back to the car. She stayed watching me until I crossed the lip of the dunes and was finally out of sight. I remember the sun shimmering above her head, and her smile, sad and caring. I remember her beauty and her mystery. Goodbye Eve. I love you.

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