

Darcy Eastland

by Daniel Harris

He was the oldest person attending the wedding and reception. His brother Nick, the groom's father, was only ten months younger than himself. His youngest brother Jack, five years his junior, was still the third oldest person there. Except for the groom's extended family, the majority of the attendees were equally split between twenty-somethings and early-middle-aged relatives of the groom's mother. To him the younger women, contemporaries of the bride, all sounded as if they were breathing helium. In addition to high inarticulate voices, their conversations were filled with up-talk, conjunctions conjoined to conjunctions and OMG's in various flavors.

He was not drinking. He had been dry for three months and this was his first social gathering. He'd flown in from Paris, not so much for the wedding, but to be together with his brothers for probably the last time. The previous time they had all been together was fifteen years ago at their mother's funeral.

He had a thimble of coke and half an ounce of primo weed he'd scored in New York City. They were his survival kit, a first aid kit he hoped not to have to use. He knew if he indulged, he would drink. Even though it was a wedding reception, there would not be enough alcohol to slacken his thirst. The drinking would lead to loud speech, groping of women, and political arguments. He was too weary and unwell for arguments or women.

The wedding and the reception were held on brother Nick's horse farm, a once flourishing enterprise that had had twenty brood mares. Now only three family favorites were stabled and pastured near the house. If the horses were miniatures, they would have been house pets.

The walnut tree he stood under was in the horse pasture, planted with heirloom prairie grasses, which were knee high. When the ranch was thriving, the ponies were delivered to Colorado to be trained for polo. The horse whisperer who trained them said they

were the slickest and soundest ponies she worked. She credited this to their diet of traditional prairie grasses.

One of the horses, an old mare of twenty-five summers, nuzzled his pocket. He patted her muzzle and took an apple from his pocket for her inspection. She gently removed it from his hand with her lips and leaned her shoulder into his.

—Don't step on my feet, he said. You horses love to step on my feet.

She nuzzled his pocket.

—Sorry, old girl, that's all I have.

The mare stepped back, turned and neighed as she ambled across the pasture.

Suddenly, a woman in her late twenties ran past him and entered the woods. He could hear her choking, crying and vomiting. She stumbled out of the woods and fell on the grass not fifty feet from him.

Not a good place for a woman to pass out, he thought. There were feral dogs in the area; they would be a problem if they discovered her. He walked to where she lay.

—Are you okay?

There was no answer. The woman was crying.

—Excuse me, but do you need some assistance?

He didn't recognize the woman. She was drunk. Obviously she was upset about something, but she was not communicative. Maybe she had been groped or insulted in some way. Sometimes at weddings feelings ran high, especially if there were old boyfriends or divorced parents present.

—Are you all right? Do you need help?

—Leave me alone.

—This is not a good place to stay. There are stray dogs and bears in the woods. They will attack a person they think is injured or disabled.

—Oh my god, is that true?

—A farm hand passed out drunk last Sunday and was mauled by a bear in the field on the other side of these woods.

—You're trying to scare me.

—I don't think so.

Her dress was an old—style flounce skirt held away from her body by some absurd crinoline undergarment. He could see that she had lost her panties and a shoe.

—I'll get a chair for you. You can sit in the horse pasture. The dogs are afraid of the horses. Everyone else is too drunk to visit the horses.

—Leave me alone.

He left her and returned with a folding lawn chair he set up under the walnut tree. He found her on hands and knees dry heaving. He went into the house and returned with a bottle of cold water and a dozen paper towels. He took an apple from the fruit bowl on the dining room table.

—There's a chair under the walnut tree and here is a bottle of water and clean paper towels.

—Help me up.

He lifted her from the ground and carried her to the chair. She probably didn't weigh a hundred pounds, but she was a dead weight.

—You should wipe your face and drink this water. You'll feel better.

She wiped her face and drank half the bottle of water.

—Thank you. I needed the water.

The old mare returned and nuzzled his pocket. He held the apple for her.

—Amazing how this old mare knows when I have an apple, he said.

The old mare sniffed the woman's hair and backed off with a nicker.

* * *

He sat on the porch watching the party. The DJ was playing music he didn't know. His life had been in a small corner of the music world that was experimental and cutting edge. Audiences thought

his music either *outré* or genius. There was enough demand for his music to cobble together a life.

He had a desultory relationship with a Titian-haired Czech actress, ventriloquist, and playwright thirty years his junior. Etch was her professional name. There was a large audience for her one-woman plays depicting the plight of beaten, tortured, and abused women. Etch's anti-Soviet political activities had caused her to be imprisoned, where she had been tortured, raped and abused. Some of her plays were so graphic and explicit, that she performed them only in private venues to small select audiences for high fees. He would provide music, visuals and frequently first aid for her self-inflicted wounds.

Etch didn't drink, smoke or use drugs. He indulged in all of these. Their sex life involved long discussions *cum* arguments that evolved into role-playing sessions of bondage and dominance, improvisations on her life of abuse and neglect that became grist for her plays. One of Etch's sculptress friends made a life-sized puppet of a male with a tiny head and grossly enlarged genitals. Etch called the puppet Klikou, Czech for crank. She would control the puppet with her hands, sticks or strings. This puppet served as aggressor and victimizer in her plays.

Since the chemotherapy treatments, his mind played tricks on him, confusing vivid imagined scenes with ones he witnessed. Was the woman he saw on her hands and knees in the pasture vomiting, or was he having sex with her? Did he remove the woman's panties or did she take them off? A scene from one of Etch's plays flashed before his eyes. Etch was naked on all fours convulsing in deep rhythmic bursts as the puppet sodomized her. He recalled a stirring in his loins when he saw the woman in the pasture on her knees with her hips elevated, her crinoline slip framing her naked sex, which convulsed rhythmically with her retching. He could see clearly that her parts were engorged and inflamed. In his confusion he checked his belt, fly and shirttails, all seemed to be in place. Immediately he became confused, had he just checked his clothing, or had he just pulled his trousers on after sexually using this woman? Time seemed

stopped in an instant. His mind was in two places at once. His mind was a crazy photon of starlight that was at both the star and the earth simultaneously. He tried to clear the repeating images from his mind. A bright over-exposed scene of Etch on all fours with the mare plucking an apple from her vagina would morph into the image of the woman in the pasture being raped by a man with a giant erection holding a stick. This hypnotic loop played before his eyes like one of those cheesy 8mm porn film loops one bought on Times Square back in the 70's. He was overcome with vertigo and delirium. He grabbed the arms of the chair and tried to stabilize his body and mind, but the loops kept flashing: now in scratchy black and white; now in vibrant electric colors, sometimes one loop in one eye and the other loop in the other eye simultaneously.

—David. Are you okay? asked his brother Jack. You are sweating and shaking the chair.

He realized that a distant voice was talking to him.

—Did you say something, Jack?

—Are you okay? You're sweating like a pig and shaking the chair.

—I'm okay Jack. I think I was having an acid flashback. Harmless, but a little scary.

—I've got some 15 year-old Glenlivet in my car. Do you want to start on that?

—I'm good for now Jack. Maybe later.

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It was midnight when he and his two brothers finished cleaning the grounds.

—There was a woman, he said to his two brothers, who was sick in the woods. I gave her a chair in the horse pasture with a bottle of water.

—Is she still there, asked Nick?

—I don't know. Since I'm not drinking, my mind doesn't work like it use to after dark.

—I told you that sobriety was a bad idea, said Jack. Keep drinking, but drink only the best.

David hadn't told any of his family he had been diagnosed with cancer. He was dry because drinking and chemo didn't mix. He would stop in Boston on his return to Paris and receive a final guess on his life expectancy.

David had to see if the woman in the flounce dress was real. He walked to the walnut tree. The woman was asleep in the chair. The mare stood asleep beside her. He could hear the woman's quiet breathing as he approached.

He put his hand on her shoulder. She snapped awake and slapped his hand.

—You should go inside. You will catch a chill from the night dew.

—Wha? she said. Then: Oh My God. What time is it?

—About midnight.

—Where is my husband? Oh my god, I have to go. Help me.

He helped her stand.

—Where is my other shoe?

—I think I saw it with some other orphans on the porch. It is not easy to walk over this uneven ground. I will carry you to the porch. Hold your shoe.

She seemed lighter than before; still he walked as rapidly as he could. When they arrived in the circle of light around the stables, Jack, who was bigger and stronger, took her from him.

—Where is my husband? she asked, struggling with her shoes.

—What is your name? asked Jack.

—Darcy Eastland. My husband is Henry Eastland. People call me Dar. We farm in Jefferson County, twelve miles south of here.

In the porch light, the two brothers could see her tear smeared make-up. She sat alert like a deer that had heard a twig snap. She was the paragon of the skinny, neurotic farmwoman who dreamt of life in a gentrified urban setting.

—Your husband is in the kitchen helping pack the glasses for the caterer, said Nick walking onto the porch with a bottle of wine.

—Oh my god, if he knew what happened.

—What happened? asked Jack.

—I don't remember, but there was, like, this man with an apple. The three brothers looked at her in anticipation.

—And ...? asked Jack.

—I think he raped me.

—Naw, said Nick, we would have heard something.

—I can't drink champagne and I was very drunk. Oh my god, like, it was awful. I couldn't scream. As sure as Jesus died on the cross, I felt something enter me.

—Are you sure? Or are you imagining things?

—Oh—My—God, why am I talking to men? I need a woman who understands. I, you know...actually...I remember a horse mounting me. Oh-my-god, it was powerful.

—That's ridiculous, Darcy, said Nick. All the horses are mares.

—Darcy, enough with the histrionics, said Henry Eastland drying his hands on a dishtowel. Past time to take you home.

—Henry, save me.

—I already have, my pet, said Henry taking her hand.

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David sat on the porch with his two brothers who were sharing a joint. They watched the geese migrating across the full moon.

—That Darcy is one crazy woman, said Jack.

—Tell me about it, said Nick. The woman's got an active imagination. Fucked by a mare. Come on.

As he listened to their banter, a confusion of memories enveloped him. The film loop would alternate between double speed and slow motion.

They could hear the roar of a pick-up truck coming up the county road.

—Somebody's in a big hurry, said Nick. They must have forgotten something.

The truck turned into the long driveway to the ranch house. It was Henry Eastland's pickup truck. He was moving fast. He drove up to the porch.

From the gun rack on the rear window Eastland grabbed a rifle and jumped from the cab.

—That son of a bitch there raped my wife, he said, pointing the gun at David his face flushed with vengeance.

—Hold on there, Eastland, said Nick. Let's not be judge, jury and executioner.

—Eastland, give me the rifle and sit down, said Jack standing and pushing the barrel of the rifle toward the yard. We'll call the sheriff, if that what's required, but don't do something stupid.

—Give me the rifle, Henry, said Nick.

Eastland reluctantly gave the rifle to Nick, who emptied the chamber and the magazine. He put the bullets on the side table that held the lone lamp.

—I'm trying to figure out what happened, said David.

—I think you know what happened, said Eastland.

—Here sit down Henry, said Jack. Have a toke.

Eastland refused the joint and glared at David.

—So, help me god, you are going to pay for this, said Jack.

—Eastland, he said, I couldn't possibly have raped your wife. I've been in chemo off and on for three months. A sack of Viagra couldn't get my pecker up.

The two brothers stared at him.

—Chemo for what? asked Jack.

—Prostate cancer, grade four, he said.

—Jesus, said Nick, why didn't you tell us?

—So, that's why you're not drinking and shaved your head, said Jack

—Yes, said David, and I didn't want to dump my morbid problem on a happy occasion.

—So, just what the hell *did* you do to my wife? said Eastland rising out of his chair and threatening David with his fists.

—Easy Eastland, said Jack standing and nudging him back to his chair.

David told them about seeing Darcy run into the woods. He told them about her vomiting and her missing panties and shoe. How he helped her to a chair in the horse pasture and gave her water and towels to wipe her face.

—That agrees with what Darcy says, said Eastland. Then what did happen to my wife? Her privates are rubbed raw.

—She was very upset when she ran past me on the way to the woods, he said. Something must have happened earlier. She was crying and throwing up at the same time.

—When was this? asked Eastland.

—There was still light in the sky, said David, probably just after sunset, around seven.

—Eastland, did you see Darcy at dinner? We served dinner at six, asked Nick.

—We didn't eat together. I ate with the Forest brothers. I'm trying to contract them to harvest my soybeans in a couple of weeks.

—The first time I saw her was when she ran past me, said David.

—I saw her come through the receiving line and later square dancing in the barn before dinner, said Nick. Afterward she was talking to the fiddler.

—Square dancing was the last time I was with her, said Eastland. That Jackson boy sure can fiddle.

—Not many can fiddle like that, said Jack.

—Something's not right with him, though, said Nick. He's a savant of some kind. Can't read or write, but he can pick up a tune on one hearing. One day I was working on the tractor and listening to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. He stood there listening. The next week I saw him in front of the Saint Augustine church playing the bejesus out of the Vivaldi. He's an amazing talent, but a sad case. Heard a gypsy raped his mother when she was on a college trip to Chicago.

The four men sat in silence.

—Henry, no one's going anywhere. Why don't you go home and take care of Darcy, said Nick.

—Maybe you should take her to the hospital, said David. They can tell if she's been raped and treat where she's hurting. Maybe collect DNA samples. The police will come to the hospital.

—She refused to go to hospital, said Eastland. She was in a warm bath when I left.

—Eastland, said David, if I were you, I'd go home and comfort her. If she was assaulted, she needs emotional soothing as much as physical care.

—I found this on her dress, said Eastland, pulling a coil of hair from his shirt pocket.

—Let me see it, said David.

Eastland walked over and handed the hair to David who examined it. It was a horsetail hair broken on both ends and covered in rosin. The length and the rosin would suggest a violin bow. He handed the hair back to Eastland.

—Well, asked Eastland.

—Nothing, said David, but Darcy was in the horse pasture. The oldest mare was standing asleep beside her when I woke her to come to the house. But you should give it to the police. They might discover something.

—I guess that explains that, said Eastland. Sorry for the alarm. Accept my apologies, David. I wasn't thinking clearly what with Darcy being hysterical during the drive home.

—Apologies accepted.

—I'm going to check on Darcy, said Eastland. You've got a beautiful night for sitting outside.

—There's plenty of food, drink and smoke, if you care to stay, said Nick.

—I should go. Goodnight, men. I apologize for losing it.

—Goodnight Henry, said the three brothers.

—Don't forget your rifle, said Jack handing him the gun.

—Thanks. Thank god I didn't shoot one of you. That would have been a mess. But I still have to find out what happened to Darcy. A man doesn't take easily to another man hurting his wife like that.

—Between the sheriff and Darcy, I think you'll get an answer, said Nick.

Eastland drove slowly down the driveway. In the still of the night they could hear his progress down the county road for a long time.

—That was fucked up, said Jack. Henry Eastland tries to shoot David whom he thinks raped his wife, and then David lays this cancer shit on us.

—I was keeping it to myself until I saw the doctors in Boston next week, said David. They can tell me how long I have before I shuffle off this mortal coil.

The film loop stopped in David's head as if the projection bulb had burned out. The image of Darcy on hands and knees with her hips elevated and sexually aroused melted like a burning film frame. He blinked his eyes and saw his brothers with a clarity he'd never experienced. For the first time in his life he thought how much he loved his brothers and how little time they had spent together or ever would.

—Jack, said David, break out that bottle of Glenlivet. You joining us Nick?

—Bourbon for me, said Nick.

They sat drinking, watching the moon, and listening to the night sounds of a country preparing for winter. A doe's breeding bellow was answered by a buck's grunt. An owl hooted in a nearby tree. Long trails of geese honked overhead.

Sitting on the porch looking at his brothers he could feel the bonding of brotherhood. It permeated the brothers' thoughts. No one would mention it, or tell the others that they loved each other. No one would say anything. They were not that kind of a family. But sitting there they all knew it.

—That horsehair was from a violin bow, said David. I would bet cash money on it.

—How would you know that? asked Nick.

—Rosin. There was rosin on the hair. Wasn't from one of Nick's mares. Luthiers only use stallion tails for bows. Mare's piss on their tails and weaken the hairs.

—You think the Jackson kid raped Darcy Eastland? said Jack. You know folklore claims that savants are built like farm animals. He could have ripped her up pretty bad.

—Or maybe fiddled her parts raw with his bow, said Nick

—Only Darcy can answer those questions, he said sipping his Scotch. He knew sleep would not come. Darcy Eastland would keep him up all night.

