

# The Ex

*by* Jim Breslin

Aaron turned the corner and sprinted down his street, only slowing to a walk once he passed the imaginary finish line that was his neighbor's driveway. He looked down the quiet lane at the tidy single homes, each aligned symmetrically on their small lots, with manicured lawns and small gardens. He thought back to his early jogs shortly after moving into the neighborhood. He would often have to stop and walk; wheezing, trying to catch his breath. He reflected on how his perseverance had slowly paid off, how he could now run the distance at a respectable pace. He looked up in delight at the crisp blue autumn sky.

As his heart rate slowed, Aaron noticed the patch of woods behind his house, the woods ran the length of the street, and he saw the leaves were fading from green to yellow, with speckles of red and orange starting to reveal themselves. The days were growing shorter; he sensed the approaching of the first frost.

When he walked in the kitchen door, his wife Missy yelled down from the bedroom. "Aaron?"

"Aaron," she called again. "Check the phone. You have a message."

He grabbed his water bottle out of the refrigerator and took a drink, then wiped the moisture from his forehead. His heart was quickly settling down. He didn't want to listen to any messages. He'd just cleared his mind. After a few moments of peace, he walked over and pushed the 'play' button.

"Aaron," the woman's voice said playfully, "Hey honey, I'm in town for a visit. I'm having drinks this afternoon with a few friends and I was thinking of you."

He shook his head when he recognized the voice. It sounded as though she'd had a few. He could hear background noise, the clinking of glasses or dishes, as if she was in a bar or restaurant.

"I'm staying at the Holiday Inn. Call me." She gave a phone number and then, he heard a garbled sound as if she dropped the

phone. He heard background noise for a few seconds and then the message clicked to an end.

Aaron shook his head and drank his water. Missy walked in carrying a basket heaped with unlaundered clothes.

"Can you believe that?" Aaron asked.

"Why is she calling you?"

"I have no idea."

"Does she really think you'd want to go out for a few drinks with her?" Missy paused. "Doesn't she know you've put that life behind you?"

Aaron laughed as he opened the basement door for her. "I don't know. I don't understand her. Nobody understands her."

As he filled his water bottle, he wondered what would prompt her to call him. They hadn't spoken since the divorce five years ago, when they had agreed to finality. They'd agreed to go their separate ways. He'd pushed it all to a dark corner of his mind; the murky details felt like a past life, or someone else's life, hazy memories of his alter ego. As he stood at the sink, life with Eve came slowly trickling back; living in the city, the urban couple they'd been in his past life, constantly out and about, barhopping, dinners and drinks, parties all weekend.

He climbed the steps and turned on the shower. A tune popped into his head and he recalled one night dancing stoned in Eve's apartment. She moved gracefully, swaying with a wine bottle in her hand, and after a bit he sat on the couch, exhausted, and watched as she continued to dance softly to the music, with her eyes gently closed. She looked so lovely and radiant as she moved in rhythm to the music and then she opened her eyes. She whirled over to the sofa, wrapped her legs and arms around him, and gave herself to him.

Aaron jumped in the shower, washing the filth and sweat off his body. He let the water wash over his head and breathed in the steam. He thought of how he'd cleaned up his act, how he reluctantly pulled himself away from those days. He'd instilled discipline and order in his life, continually pushing the chaos away.

He had gone to the edge too many times, finally stumbling onto a new path.

He heard a rapping on the bathroom door. "Aaron, she's here." Followed by another knock. "Aaron?"

"Oh no," he said softly, then to Missy, "Are you serious?"

"Yes. I'm serious."

"I'll be right out."

He quickly shut off the water and grabbed a towel. He dried himself off and wrapped the towel around his waist.

"Aaron!" Missy was calling rather tensely.

He came out of the bathroom, planning to quickly cut across the hall to the bedroom and change, when he heard Missy from the bottom of the steps. She was standing at the front door. "He'll be out in a minute."

"You're not going to let me in?" he heard Eve say.

Aaron made his way down the steps in his towel. "Eve, what are you doing here?"

Eve looked him over through the screen door and smiled. "Aaron, you didn't have to get dressed just for me."

"Eve, what is it you want?" he asked. He held his towel up with one arm and placed his other arm around Missy.

"Listen dear, I just wanted to see you. I'm in town, you know, and I thought it would be rude of me not to say hi. After all, we do have some history, we did have some good times, didn't we?" She swayed a bit as she stood on their front stoop.

Aaron looked at Eve's blue eyes, and her tanned complexion framed with thick blonde hair. Maybe it was her tanned skin, but she hadn't aged as much as he had thought. She wore jeans and a white t-shirt that made him recall her graceful curves. She was dressed as though she was still twenty-one, as though she came to take him for a pub-crawl, a night on the town. His heart was overwhelmed with melancholy.

"Eve, would you like to come in for some coffee?" Missy asked.

Aaron came down dressed in jeans and a polo shirt. Missy and Eve were standing in the living room, with their backs to him. They

were both silently looking up at an oil painting Missy had just finished in her art class. The still life showed a wine bottle, a water pitcher, a bowl of fruit and a crusty baguette. The late afternoon sun shone through the windows, giving the room a glow.

"How are you Eve?" Aaron asked. He resigned himself to the fact that she was in his home, and he just hoped the visit would be short and cordial.

Eve walked over and hugged him generously, and whispered into his ear, "I'm so sorry." He could smell whiskey on her breath.

"It's okay," he said. "Sit down. Let's catch up."

He sat on the couch with Missy, and put his hand on her leg to soothe her. Eve sat across from them in their leather club chair. He felt it was odd to be sitting in the formal living room, a room they rarely used, with the sun streaming in.

"So what have you been up to?" Aaron asked.

"I'm living in Virginia, Roanoke actually. I'm up here for Deanna's baby shower."

"Deanna's having a baby?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Eve smiled. "Deanna as a mother?" She laughed. "Do you believe I'm spending my weekends at baby showers now?" She shook her head.

They caught a whiff of the coffee brewing, and Missy excused herself to escape to the kitchen.

"Aaron," Eve started. "I'm so sorry things didn't work out for us. I behaved so badly at the end. I was totally reprehensible."

Aaron tried to brush it off. "Don't worry about it. I wasn't necessarily a saint either. We both made our share of mistakes."

"It took time, but I think I understand why you left."

"I just couldn't go on that way..." he said. "I realized it was going to end — one way or another. I just had to walk away."

"I just want to say, I'm happy for you. Missy seems like a great gal." She looked around the living room, "and you've got a beautiful little suburban house, just like you dreamed about." She picked up a framed picture of Aaron and Missy on the beach and looked at it.

"What beach is this?"

"Avalon," Aaron replied. "Her parents have a place there."

"You look happy," She said, placing the picture back on the side table. "Do you remember when we stayed in that high-rise condo at the beach?" she asked.

"Yeah, Ted's folks place," he said. "That was a nice condo."

"The view was incredible, wasn't it?"

"Twenty-first floor."

"Yeah, and we had that argument on the beach."

"Eve, we'd been drinking all afternoon," he said.

"More than just drinks from what I recall," she said.

He nodded. "And you disappeared on me."

"Yeah, things were falling apart at that point," she said. "That night, after the fight, when I came back to the room, you were out on the balcony, and I came out. You didn't say anything, you didn't ask where I'd gone, and you didn't ask for an explanation, you just held me."

Aaron shifted nervously in his seat. He hadn't thought about that night in a long time, but it came washing over him now. He recalled they didn't talk at all, but after holding each other, embracing each other on that little concrete ledge; that little ledge he'd almost walked off of into the darkness; they made love in the darkened room with the sliding door open, and he recalled hearing the waves washing over the beach, and how they held each other through the night. He hadn't wondered or particularly cared where she'd been or what she'd done or whom she might have been with. He recalled the smell of the salt air, the sand in her hair and the greasy feel of the suntan lotion. It struck him how that night was different than all the others; he was surprised, shaken actually, at how vividly he recalled that one night.

Missy walked in with a tray and set it on the coffee table. She set out a plate with fig cookies. Eve fidgeted a little, and Aaron smiled at the thought of Eve drinking coffee during the cocktail hour.

"How long have you lived here in Paradise?" Eve asked.

"We moved here two years ago," Missy replied.

"Do you miss city life?"

"Not much, really," Aaron said. "We like it out here, it's peaceful, serene. We have a little garden in the back."

"I'd like to see it."

The sun was setting quickly, casting an orange glow as the two of them walked across the backyard. He opened the little hinged gate and Eve walked into the garden.

"This summer, the tomatoes were excellent. We'd planted way too many. We had to give them away." He showed her the cauliflower, the broccoli and the butternut squash.

"Oh, look at the pumpkins!" Eve said. "They look magnificent!"

"Is that an apple tree?" she asked, swinging out the gate door before Aaron could open it for her. He glanced back at the house, and saw the kitchen light flicker on. Missy was moving about in there, starting dinner.

Eve walked over and looked up at the tree. "This isn't an apple tree, what is it?" she asked. He watched her slim body as she reached up on her toes and took hold of a fruit. She twisted it in her hand until the stem broke off. She turned to him and smiled when she realized he was looking at her.

"It's an Asian pear," he said. "Have you ever had one?"

"No," she said looking at it in her hand. It was the shape of an apple, but the skin was a bronzed shade of russet, and it glowed in the setting sun.

"Go ahead, try it."

She bit into the pear and juice flowed down her cheeks. She laughed and wiped the juice with the back of her hand.

"Wow! They are sweet," she took another bite and smiled, "This is delicious." Then she held the pear up to his mouth. "Here, take a bite."

He looked back to the house and saw Missy standing at the stove, with her back to them, working on dinner.

He opened his mouth and took a big bite and let the juice roll down his chin as Eve studied his face. He smiled and wiped his chin as they started walking back to the house.

"Let me ask you something, are you totally clean now?"

He was confused for a moment. "I just showered."

"No," she laughed. "I mean, well, when's the last time you drank, or got stoned, or tripped?" She twisted the pear in her hand and took another bite.

"It's been a long time," he said as they started walking back to the house. "I still enjoy a beer, or a glass of wine. But I've cut the rest out."

"Is it tough?"

"At first, yeah. It was hell. I'd be lying if I said it was easy. But now I take each day for what it's worth." She looked at him. She had eaten the pear down to the core.

"Do you still crave it?"

"Eve, I've tried to shut it out. Sometimes I'll think back to those days and I feel as though only a thin thread is holding me together, and it could unravel at any moment. I try not to think back to those days much."

Missy fixed her Sunday night dinner, and they ate in the dining room. As she was setting the table, she was surprised to see Aaron emerge from the basement with a bottle of wine.

"What do you think made her drive out here?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "She said she wanted to see how I was."

"I don't like her."

"I knew you wouldn't."

"Why would she want to see you after she left you like that?"

He shrugged her question off. "Did you want a glass of wine?"

She shook her head. They ate quietly in the dining room, listening as the wind kicked up outside. He helped her clear the table and load the dishwasher. She washed the pots and he dried. They discussed their schedule for the upcoming week.

After supper, he sat in the den as Missy started a new painting. He started to read, but quickly grew bored and put the book down. He watched Missy working at the easel; she slowly dipped the brush and methodically painted a background in autumn shades. She was so calm, relaxed, stroking fluid movements on the canvas, content in

creating her own serene world. He looked around the room and was struck with the thought of how his evenings now ran together, a string of uneventful, forgettable nights. In his mind, he could hear Eve's voice, *"We had some good times, didn't we?"* He flipped on the television, surfed through the channels, but nothing held his attention. He scanned through the paper, restless, until it was bedtime.

Throughout the evening, the wind began to howl and the trees stirred in their back woods. For the first time this autumn, he heard the furnace kicking on in the basement. He leaned over in bed to set the clock for the workweek, and felt the cold chill seeping in through the windows.

Missy walked in wearing pajamas. "I caved in and broke out the flannels." She looked like a pale child, her thin, petite frame covered in a floral flannel print.

She climbed into their bed and lay down, pulling the covers over her.

"Good night dear," she said.

"Good night."

He reached out and searched under the covers until he'd placed his arms around her thin frame. She was so light, so wafer thin he thought she'd float away if she were out in this wind. He held her tightly and listened to the creaking house and the seeping winds. He wanted to be held tightly, to be saved, as he had been that night years ago. They listened as the first drops of rain hit the roof, slowly at first, then as a surge of wind came on, the rain pelted their windows. He rested his head on her chest and closed his eyes. He could hear a neighbor's dog barking. As the storm swept in, he held onto her for life, praying with all his heart that she might have the strength to protect him.

