

Eternal Return

The door slammed shut with an echoing thud. John crossed the room, sat down, folded his handcuffed hands and smiled.

“So, you came for a visit, finally. It’s good to see you again.”

“Likewise,” replied Luke, taking a gold case from the pocket of his suit. He opened it and held it out. “Cigarette?”

“No thanks. I gave up smoking. You could spend every waking moment in here smoking.”

“You’ve given up one of the only pleasures available to you?”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to turn into a chain smoker.”

Luke nodded, took out a matching gold lighter and lit his cigarette. He took a long inhale and let it out slowly. “You’re looking well John. Surprisingly well.”

“Thank you.”

“After your sentencing I was expecting you to be a wreck.”

“I was at first. But, things change. I have to say though, you’re actually looking a little rough around the edges.”

Luke sat back. “Ahh, well, Katarina is divorcing me. And she’s very vindictive.”

“Why?”

“Oh you know, things ended up,” Luke waved his cigarette, “complicated.”

“Another complication.”

“Life is full of them, as you know.”

“Who is she?”

“Ivana.”

“Not Ivana, Katerina’s daughter?”

“We fell in love. It happens.”

“I guess it does. So, you think that this relationship, out of all of them, this time, with your wife’s daughter, you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

“Soon to be ex-wife. And you know how I am, I’m eternally hopeful. I’ve been hopeful all my life that I’ll find the right woman.” Luke finished his cigarette and ground it out in the ashtray. As he lit another, he examined John; his eyes looked clear and serene, as though he were back at the country club, relaxing with a drink, looking out over the water. “And how are you coping in here, with none of the pleasures you were used to before?”

“At first it was terrible. It was like, the stream of sensations that I was used to, that got me through life, were suddenly snatched away. At first, it was torture.”

“I can imagine. The lack of women alone. Remember that last one you were dating?” he shook his head. “She was gorgeous.”

“Jessica. Yeah, she was amazing looking. But like I said, things change. And what happened between you and Katarina? Remember that dinner we had, after you two first got together? You said that she was the one and you were finally happy.”

Luke nodded. “I remember. I think at the time she fulfilled a certain need in me that made me believe that. But in the end, what we had between us just wasn’t enough.”

“But think about it. You become dissatisfied in every relationship, and you always move on to the next woman.”

“I just hadn’t found the right girl yet. But after all I’ve been through, the gods have finally smiled on me.”

“But don’t you think leaving one woman for another has something to do with why the relationship always falls apart in the end?”

Luke took a long inhale. “You’re looking at it from the wrong perspective.”

“Five marriages, girlfriend after girlfriend....”

“The search for love isn’t easy. No one ever said it was.”

“Did you ever think your compulsion to go to the next woman is remorse? That you’re trying to escape feelings of remorse? Think about it, Marlene was a wreck for a long time after you left her for Katarina. Maybe that’s part of why your relationship with Katarina fell apart and wasn’t the fairytale you thought it would be.”

“Well, I’ll admit that I did make a mistake in marrying Marlene. I got caught up in her beauty, but in the end there really wasn’t much there between us.”

“But the point is, she was struggling for a long time after you left her. I know you, that wasn’t easy on you. Now you’ve left Katarina for her daughter, remorse will creep back up, remorse you can never alleviate.”

Luke took a pull from his cigarette. “Well, I have to say, this sort of talk is very amusing coming from a man who’s been convicted of stealing millions of dollars.”

John smiled. “I know, I know, it sounds like hypocrisy. But, if anyone should know about remorse, it’s me. I know more about it than most people.” He looked around. “This luxurious place will be my home for the next ten years.”

Luke ground out his cigarette and let out a low, growling laugh. “Don’t tell me you’ve been born again in prison, you’ve accepted Jesus into your heart, and now you’re free of all guilt.”

“Oh well, I wish it were all that simple.”

There was a buzz; the guard entered the room. “Time’s up, let’s go.”

“Well, it’s been a very interesting visit,” said Luke, standing up. “I’ll come back next week. We need to finish this conversation.”

“OK, same time, same place, next week.”

Luke got into his car and started the engine. At the end of the prison driveway he turned onto the tree-lined road, cracked the window and lit a cigarette. He took a long inhale; what a strange thing it was that John had judged his love life. John, the man who had scammed hundreds of people out of their mortgage downpayments for five years, who had pled not guilty and maintained his innocence until definitive proof was found by the prosecutor. Proof he couldn't deny. John had actually sat there, in his orange clothes, hands shackled, lecturing him. But still, Luke was intrigued. Something was different about John, and he wanted to hear more about what his life was like in jail.

He accelerated and merged onto the highway, then reached over and turned on the radio. A soft saxophone line floated over slow brushes on the drums, surrounded by light, languorous piano chords. The music's soft sweetness reminded him of

Ivana's eyes—with their, bright sapphire-streaked irises—in her rare, unguarded moments, when the sparkling mysterious gems softened and were shot through with warmth, and Luke felt as though he were part of a radiant summer day. A little while longer and he would be with her, huddling in her tiny apartment, drinking a glass of wine, watching her talk about her day, looking at her smooth, translucent skin, seeing, every now and again, that smile that lit everything up play over her face; he would lose himself in the loveliness of her beauty, flowering in the unrepeatably blossom of youth.

The thing that John didn't understand was how Luke felt about Ivana; what the moment had been like when he knew he was in love with her. That fateful night, when he and Katerina had yet another fight, and she had stormed out of the house and driven away in her convertible. Luke had gone out to the pool.

He stood there, smoking a cigarette, looking out over the water onto the expansive view of hills dotted with houses.

There was a sudden splash; Ivana popped up out of the water. “Hey Luke,” she said. “Just getting my laps in.”

Luke always stayed inside when Ivana did laps; there was no use letting his eyes wander to Ivana in her bikini. After all, he had Katarina, who was gorgeous. Yes she was forty-five, but with a little help from her aesthetician she looked almost as young as Ivana.

“Good evening Ivana.”

“I heard mom leave.”

Luke let out a deep sigh. “Yes, we had another argument unfortunately.”

Ivana climbed up the ladder and stood on the deck. “You wanna talk?”

Luke went inside and got a bottle of wine and two glasses. They sat, looking out at the view, holding their glasses full of garnet liquid.

“What have you been up to lately? You haven’t been home much,” said Luke.

“The show is taking a lot more work than I thought. The artist keeps changing his mind about which pieces he wants to show. I’ve been there late every night.”

“So you’ve been neglecting Tommy.”

“No. We broke up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We broke up because I have feelings for someone else.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, for quite some time.”

“Let me guess, it’s Ralph. You did hire him based on his looks, right?”

“Oh no, I don’t go for young guys like that. I like distinguished men.”

Luke nodded. “Well, when you grow up without your father, you look for that.”

“Yeah, but the one I have feelings for...well, it’s complicated.”

“Oh?” Luke turned to her; her eyes said it all. In an instant a smoldering fire rose up and engulfed Luke’s heart; the very moment itself felt as though it were weighed down by passion,

as though passion shot through the air between them, uniting them.

He reached over and touched her hand.

Katarina hadn't taken it well. Luke had narrowly missed getting a concussion when he told her; she had picked up the crystal ashtray from his desk and pitched it at his head. He ducked at the last second and it flew into the glass curio cabinet behind him and shattered it.

Now he was embroiled in another divorce, but he didn't care. He would do anything, give up anything, for the woman he loved. And John was wrong, he had been able to deal with Katarina's reaction. Yes, it had been hard that night she came to the house, banging on the front door in an old tee-shirt and pajama pants, her hair tangled and sloppy and her eyes red and

swollen. She was weeping, and Luke didn't know what to do so he put his arms around her.

“How could you do this to me? I'm humiliated. And with my own daughter.”

He held her for a long time. But when the weeping subsided, she pulled out of his arms and spat in his face. “I curse the day I met you. I hate you. Do you hear me? I hate you!” She smacked him across the face and stormed out of the house.

He didn't understand why she had taken it so hard. She had two divorces behind her, she knew that sometimes things simply didn't work out. The heart wanted what it wanted; what good would it do to stay with a woman he didn't love? Is that what Katerina wanted? To stay for the rest of her life in a loveless marriage?

Luke turned onto Ivana's street. As time went by, Katarina would see that it was all for the best. She should know passion often overcame reason; after all, she herself had fallen in love with Luke while she was still married to her second husband. He pulled up to the curb; Ivana was waiting for him. He ground out his cigarette and climbed the stairs to the apartment.

The sound of the bars closing echoed through the cell block, dwindling to silence. John lay down on his bunk and put his hands behind his head. He knew how things would turn out between Luke and Ivana; after a year or two, when the newness faded, and what Luke had done began creeping back up on him, the relationship would fall apart.

Of course it was ridiculous of John, of all people, to analyze someone else's life. But he knew, more than anyone, what Luke was doing. The self-deception, the denial. When John had been scamming people, somewhere inside himself he had known it was wrong, but he didn't let that knowledge come up to the surface of his consciousness. He had the parties, the women, the round of social events to keep him occupied. As a result the current of his mind was serene, like a calm, glassy lake.

Except sometimes in the dark, still night, when he lay awake, alone, muscles tense, heart pounding, the thought of the latest person he had stolen from would course through his brain as though it were a high voltage surge of electricity with no off switch. He would shoot up out of bed, go down to the kitchen and pour himself a whiskey neat. He would stand at the kitchen

window, looking out at the shadows of his vast backyard, trying to talk himself out of it. He only stole from wealthy people, and OK, lately, because he had so many payments to make, he had stolen from a few elderly people, but those were only isolated incidents. The people he stole from were those types of guys all over the country club—arrogant, entitled, born with silver spoons in their mouths.

He had hated those guys growing up, those guys who came from the rich part of town, who ran his high school. Even the teachers had favored them. Every day when John walked home from school to the tiny house with the grey paint peeling around the door, he knew exactly what would happen. His mother, her eyes riveted on the TV, would say, “how was school?” He would look at her, in her shapeless dress, as she took an inhale from her

cigarette; at her worn, colorless face, the mouth starting to droop on the sides, her eyes dull and lifeless.

“It was fine.” He would trudge up the stairs to his room, dreading the moment his father came home after a long day of pipefitting, when his voice would float up the stairs, dripping with sneering anger, sounding to John as though it were some sort of poison rolling out of him and spreading throughout the house. When his father went into the kitchen to get his first beer of the night his mother would set about making dinner, banging the pots and pans in protest of the angry words he had showered on her when he came in.

When John had become wealthy, it had lifted a great weight from him; the grinding feeling of inferiority had lifted away. Now he was the one in control, he was the one with the money and power, he was the one to choose who was his equal

and who wasn't, he was the one who was friends with the mayor, he was the one who was admired and respected. His parents had looked at him as though he were a god. He had lifted them up to where they had always wanted to be; he bought them a big house and fine clothes. His mother's dream of having a big house had come true; she puttered around it all day long, cleaning, dusting, sweeping; she even scrubbed the kitchen tiles herself once a week. "If I want it done right I have to do it myself. You know how it is."

But then, of course, he had brought disgrace onto his parents. When he was arrested, he denied everything; in the trial he pled not guilty. When the evidence came out and he was convicted, he had been shocked. And the sentence. It was a new DA who was trying to be tough on crime. Ten years.

The first few days in jail had been torture. Alone in his cell, the long night stretching before him, nothing to think about but what he had done. Then the nightmares began; he would wake up drenched in sweat, filled with dread, staring into the darkness of his cell, feeling like there was something in there that was going to suffocate him. Night after night the nightmares plagued him. He spent his days lying in his bed, staring up at the cracked ceiling, suffering.

The remorse began to haunt him. As he walked down the cellblock to the cafeteria, he was convinced he saw one of the old men he had stolen from glaring at him from the shadows of a cell. At night, when he closed his eyes, there was the old man, his eyes like pinpoints of burning fire, scorching John's being with shame.

One night he woke up from another nightmare; as he stared into the darkness he knew that remorse was going to eat him alive for the rest of his life. He wondered, for the first time, if there was something else, something besides his needs and experiences, his wants and his life. His mind had traveled out of the jail cell, up into the black night sky peppered over with pinpricks of light—what was it all? Why was anything even here? How had it all come about?

A few years before John had a conversation with Luke as they had been having drinks at the outside bar at the country club. Luke had drunk more than usual; as he had fingered his glass and looked out over the water, glowing silver-grey under the moonlight, he had said, in a low, even voice, that he felt that life was only a series of meaningless moments that led to death. John had been taken aback; Luke gave off the image of an

urbane, sophisticated man, he had a dry sense of humor and was very personable and upbeat. A moment later Luke had laughed it off. “Just one of my meaningless ramblings,” and he had gone on to talk about his golf stroke.

Now John believed that Luke’s view of life was incomplete. He remembered the many conversations he had with Luke at the club, all the golf games; after all that had happened Luke had still come to visit him in jail. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift. It was late afternoon now, outside the sun was getting lower in the sky; he imagined the dimming light slanting onto the lawn around the prison yard; his mind united with the sunshine, he felt it as it began to fade and the western sky was overtaken with radiant orange light. As his mind floated, he put out thoughts of hope for Luke, that he would find the love and

meaning he was seeking; John's thoughts merged with the light, and spread out with it, illuminating the horizon.

Luke pulled into the parking lot. In between moments of bliss with Ivana, he had thought about what John had said. About the trail of broken relationships he had left behind leading all the way back to his first wife Bridget. She was never the same after he left her. Years later he saw her again: thin and severe, her youthful charm completely vanished, leaving only a drawn, serious face.

But what John didn't understand was that Luke's whole inner life was turned towards finding love. The other relationships before Ivana, they weren't real; when he looked at

Ivana they disappeared behind him, under the mist of the past.

The night before he had reread one of his favorite poems by E.E.

Cummings:

Love is a place

and through this place of love

move (with brightness of peace) all places

That was what love did, it subsumed the past, transmuted it, so that everything from the past was contained within it and cleansed. As Luke went through security and was led into the sterile visiting room he realized that John didn't understand what his love for Ivana meant to him. John saw her as another link in a chain of lovers; he didn't get that she was the culmination of his long and arduous search.

There was a loud buzz, the door opened and John entered.

“Luke, good to see you, thanks for coming,” he said, sitting down.

“Of course.”

“How are things with Ivana?”

“Wonderful. How are things in here?”

“Not bad, could be worse.”

Luke lit a cigarette. “How? How could it be worse?”

“I could be the way I was before.”

“What changed? I’ve been very curious.”

John unfolded his hands and leaned back in his chair. He began to speak, looking past Luke, his eyes gazing at some distant thing....

John had been lying in his cell trying to fall asleep to get away from his thoughts. To stop seeing the old man who had

come into his office, a web of wrinkles spreading over his face when he smiled, telling John he was a veteran, and how much the new home meant to him. How John had still gone ahead and stolen from him. He couldn't even have a drink to try and escape from it; it burned and twisted into his brain, burrowing deeper and deeper.

He was trying to remember what Jessica looked like, to at least have the distraction of seeing her in his imagination, when someone cleared their throat loudly. John opened his eyes; someone was standing outside his cell, wearing a black suit and white collar. A priest. The last person in the world he wanted to see. The last thing he needed to hear was how evil he was, how stealing was a violation of the Ten Commandments. "I'm not interested."

The priest cleared his throat again. “You marked off that you were Catholic. We’re having a penance mass tomorrow. You can confess anything. Think of it as your get out of jail free card, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Get out of jail free card?”

The priest nodded. “Your chance to confess and receive forgiveness. For anything.”

Why did this guy think John needed forgiveness from some mythical God looking down at the world and allowing wars, famines, and abuse? But, at the same time, John was intrigued. What sort of being offered free forgiveness? To criminals no less. All he remembered about church when he was a child was going with his mother, and afterwards she would gossip about everyone she had seen there. “Did you hear, she never cooks for

her husband? And oh yeah, so-and-so's husband was out late at night with the neighbor. And....”

“The first saint was a criminal. You remember the story of the thief on the cross?”

John sat up. “No, I don’t.”

“He was one of two thieves being crucified with Jesus. One of the thieves said to Jesus, are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. The other thief, Saint Dismas said, we’re condemned justly, we’re receiving the due reward for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong. He turned to Jesus and said, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said to Saint Dismas, today you will be with me in paradise.”

John stood up and approached the bars. “So Jesus forgave him just like that? In spite of his crimes?”

“Yes, that’s the mercy of God.”

“I’m a thief too,” said John, quietly.

“Well, then, you’re a perfect candidate for the penance mass. Will you attend?”

For the first time, John looked up and into the priest’s eyes.

“Yes, I’ll go.”

As John sat in the auditorium, watching the old ritual that hadn’t seen since he was eighteen, he examined the priest. Would he be able to confess to him? What sort of man was he? What would he think of John’s confession? As the time for penance got closer, he found that his heart was pounding. At one point, he decided to leave; he had even stood up, but then he remembered what waited for him back in his cell—the torture of endless remorse. So, he sat back down, and when the priest asked everyone to get in a line, with trembling legs he stood up.

When his turn came, he stared at the priest; he was young, black hair, caramel skin. He said with a thick accent, “what are your sins?” John closed his eyes; all he could see was the face of the old man, he knew that was all he would ever see when he closed his eyes for the rest of his life. He opened them and looked at the priest. “I stole fifteen million dollars, and many of the people I stole from were elderly.”

The priest held up his hand, and as he traced out a cross in the air he said, “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. God loves you, go in peace.”

At that moment John felt something new enter him; something he at first couldn’t make sense of. To lay bare to another human being what he had done, and then, after that, to hear words of love and forgiveness—the moment marked a total

change for him. Something before unknown to him invaded his being; it filled with life the emptiness and the degradation; in a moment a new perspective opened up to him, an unknown universe.

He made the sign of the cross and returned to his seat. After the service he went back to his cell, and when the guard closed the bars, he felt free. Freer than he ever had, when he was chained to his need to get money at any cost, chained to his past, chained to his own desires. If he hadn't gone to jail he wouldn't have repented; he would have always been a slave to his desires and his compulsions, pursuing them forever, never knowing how to end it, always thinking happiness was on the horizon—he just had to steal one more time and then he would find what he was looking for, what he needed, what would complete his life. He

had looked around at his jail cell; now it was all over and a new life awaited him.

Luke puffed on his cigarette. “So, now you feel you have forgiveness from a mythical sky father, and so now you’re free from your past?”

“Think about it Luke, you look for absolution with each new woman. Woman after woman you think you’ve found the one and she’s solved all your problems, you’re absolved from your past, it disappears, but it never lasts. When I stole it was a compulsion. Every time I stole, a part of me would know it was wrong, and because of that, I was compelled to do it again, to prove to myself that it wasn’t wrong. *I* could do it, *I* could get away with it, it was OK for *me*. But I was a slave to it.”

“Well, that’s certainly interesting,” said Luke, even as he thought to himself that it was all out of desperation. What else did John have, sitting there in his jail cell? It was kind of like how the poor in the third world were attracted to the Church; it was all they had.

The door buzzed and the guard entered. “Time’s up.”

Luke smiled and held out his hand. “I’m glad you told me, it’s very interesting. It was good to see you. I’ll be back again soon.”

John smiled. “You take good care of yourself. And I hope things with Ivana work out.”

“Oh yes, they will, I’m sure of it.”

Luke shook John’s shackled hand and stood up. “So good to see you. Really.”

“You too. Bye Luke. Thank you for coming.”

Before Luke left the room he looked back; John was smiling at him.

Luke pulled out of his parking spot and headed down the driveway. He wondered what would happen to John over his ten years in jail. Would he persist in this newfound religiosity, or would he see through it and face what his life really was? It would be interesting to find out.

His mind wandered back to Ivana. It was true, last night she had been a little out of it, not quite herself, not filled with her usual effervescence. But what did he expect, after all she had had a phone call from her mother.

But that would pass, nothing would cloud their love; his future stretched out before him, a vision of serenity and

happiness—yes, the gods had finally smiled on him. He switched on the radio and turned onto the narrow, tree-lined road.