



The Eyes of

Ellis

Carver

Connie Chappell

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By Connie Chappell

God gave the town of Sabbath a man named Ellis Carver. And more than once, God put Ellis Carver in Catherine Paulsen's path.

When in motion, Ellis appeared to wade through oatmeal. His walk and six-foot-six frame were recognizable when Catherine drove up behind him in her twelve-year old minivan. Catherine paled in Ellis's company and not necessarily due to his caramel-colored skin and towering stature. At thirty-five, he possessed an oversized heart. As far as she knew, he had no employment, but received some type of assistance. Ellis Carver was watched over by someone or some agency.

It was a glorious Saturday in Sabbath. The scene through her windshield revealed a postcard-blue sky that hovered over a newly asphalted road. The double-striped centerline matched the hue of a long, long line of goldenrod daylilies flanking the main street from slightly mounded, recently mulched flowerbeds. The big block-of-a-man passing in front of the trumpeted blooms was weighted down with a week's groceries. Handles from plastic bags were looped over a giant forearm up to his elbow.

She wrestled with the idea, but couldn't bring herself to pass him by. The sun's rays were hot on that summer afternoon and tilted at an angle that pushed Ellis Carver from behind. She checked trailing traffic, found it lacking, then set her turn signal to chirp steadily as she steered the minivan to the curb.

"Ellis," she called through the window still creaking down,

“can I give you a ride home?”

He lumbered over. Sweat beads dotted his forehead and bald pate. Under one arm, Ellis Carver carried a watermelon.

“Why, thank you, Miss Catherine,” he said, his usually absent expression showing visible relief.

He got himself, his bags, and his melon in with relative ease, considering.

Catherine’s only frame of reference with regard to Ellis was his faithful dedication to his “work.” A relative term. One that was more correctly characterized as a charitable undertaking. Ellis felt compelled to see that the hungry in the world were fed.

That compulsion brought him into City Hall and Mayor Leonard’s office. For two decades, Catherine assisted Mayor Leonard. Several times over the winter, she arranged appointments for Ellis with the mayor. Ellis spoke in his painstaking drawl about his calling. She likened him to a metronome, a busy device that itself never moved from its location. Ellis’s work seemed stagnant in the same way—just keeping time with itself.

On Ellis’s second visit, he brought reading material for the mayor. Ellis authored a rambling plan to fight world hunger. A tiny ribbon of white framed each of the twenty-five typed pages.

Obviously, Ellis owned intelligence. He’d been properly schooled, but he didn’t make eye contact with those to whom he spoke. Catherine didn’t find the trait particularly disturbing, but it was a mark by which society judged him. He didn’t seem uncomfortable speaking with Catherine at City Hall. At all times though, his dark eyes were leveled above her head. His unwavering gaze equal to a yardstick, measuring her height against the doorframe outside the mayor’s office.

At the conclusion of their latest meeting, Mayor Leonard leaned his shoulder against that same doorframe. In his pockets, his

hands rattled change. His weary eyes watched Ellis's slow plod down the corridor. He provided background on Ellis, ending with an answer to a question Catherine had yet breathed to ask.

“His grandmother was an honored and respected member of the Democratic party. Locally, of course. The first time we met, he introduced himself to me in those terms, anyway. She might have raised him; I don't know. I bet Ellis has been medicated for depression most of his adult life.” When Catherine thought the mayor was done, he tacked on: “His family has probably gotten tired of dealing with him.”

The mayor ducked back into his office and Catherine back into her thoughts. She could see depression being Ellis's problem. Depression had taken him to a place that resonated with those who hungered for food. She wondered if Ellis was taught to take up a cause by his politically active grandmother. Was she his guardian? Or had she, too, abandoned her longsuffering grandson?

Catherine had, over the years, mastered the art of piecing people together by stories garnered from their various sources. Those that filtered through the mayor's office rarely gave bloom to the sunny daylily.

Catherine eased the minivan away from the curb with Ellis and his overwhelming presence crammed into her passenger seat. His gaze was interminably fixed on the horizon when he answered her first obvious question.

Ellis Carver lived on The High Street. He'd called it that. The High Street. An expression she'd never heard used. “The High Street at Wilton Place” were his exact words. It sounded pretentious. And since he hadn't looked at her, he could easily have been directing a chauffeur, which, of course, at that moment, she was.

Catherine knew those two streets intersected in the oldest part of Sabbath. “You walk over a mile for groceries? You should go to Econo-Foods.”

Ellis expressed very plainly he was not a fan of Econo-Foods, so he bypassed the grocery truly within walking distance for the one at the edge of town. And so, their conversation went. The proud daylilies watched them go, waving collectively with the breeze.

Catherine found Ellis stubbornly regimented to a Saturday afternoon shopping routine, one from which she could not pry him away. She made suggestions, thinking that perhaps he didn't breach protocol simply because he hadn't considered the options. She tossed out weekdays, during business hours, when the buses ran. He shook his head. Catherine offered a compromise that the man could make with himself: If his preferred store was open around the clock, early-morning trips made sense, especially in hot months.

The mention of hot temperatures spurred Ellis into a debate. "The long walk and frozen foods are a problem," he admitted. "I do like ice cream, but that would never work." His matter-of-fact tone softened like the frozen dessert when dished up on a sultry day, and he sighed. "And popsicles. I like to have popsicles for the neighborhood kids."

Back when Catherine opened the car door for Ellis, she feared he would lead the conversation to his world-hunger campaign. The last idea Ellis pitched to Mayor Leonard included a nationwide telethon, broadcast from Sabbath. Ellis proposed a hostess and asked Mayor Leonard to, please, make the call to Oprah.

It was Ellis's use of the words, "neighborhood kids," though, that tamped Catherine into silence. They brought the reality of hunger home better than all of Ellis's winter meetings at City Hall.

The van crept up the severe incline assigned to Wilton Place and stopped. Ellis pointed across The High Street, and down a bit, to a once-grand Victorian. The structure was flaking paint. Ellis's grandmother crossed Catherine's mind. She wondered if this was the family home. Did his grandmother provide a place for him here?

Getting him to that home required a left-hand turn. She inched the van forward and twisted her neck to see beyond the bridge abutment, just one of the sight obstacles at that intersection. Thinking she had clear passage, she moved her foot to the gas pedal. Just then, the roof and hood of a compact truck seemed to rise straight out of the bridge decking itself. It whipped by them. After the one false start, she safely delivered Ellis to the far curb.

Looking through the van windows, she grinned at three boys roughhousing in the shady side yard. A younger, fourth, popped up from the bottom step of the Victorian's wooden porch. "Look. It's Ellis," he called to the trio.

He darted forward. Behind him, Catherine noticed the number of mailboxes lined up on the wall beside the door. A wave of disappointment washed over her. She'd made the wrong assumption. Ellis lived in an apartment house.

The boys charged the van, yipping like pups. On a whim, she blurted, "Hey, Ellis, why don't you take your groceries in, then let me drive you to Econo. You can run in for popsicles."

The suggestion incited an unprecedented response. Ellis's head swung around. His eyes glanced off hers.

The kids had, by then, wrenched the door open. "C'mon," she said, with a head jerk. "Let's do it! I don't mind."

"Okay. Okay!" he said, more spirited.

He handed the watermelon off to the tallest boy and a bag to each of the others before climbing out. "Hey, guys," he began when his feet hit the front walk. The rest was lost to Catherine as they swarmed him. Then a cheer went up. On a bet, the boys could not have prevented their reactions. Four pairs of eyes, like polished black pearls, shone back at Catherine. She didn't look away. God put faces on the neighborhood kids.

Leaving the boys jumping and hooting on the sidewalk, chauffeur and patron buzzed over to Econo-Foods. Ellis went in. Catherine waited in the van while regret slid in next to her on the bench seat. Her thoughts about good deeds and punishment were interrupted when a woman came out of the store, carrying a decent-sized, soft cooler in yellow that zipped closed. She walked past a handmade advertisement posted to the store window. It boasted the cost of the cooler at “JUST \$1.”

Catherine was ready to yank her keys from the ignition; her thought, to purchase one for Ellis, thereby heaping one good deed upon another. He could add the cooler to his Saturday grocery-shopping regimen. But before she made a move, Ellis hurriedly exited the store. He set a pace she never witnessed in him. He adopted the walk of a man carrying frozen food.

Catherine pulled the van up to the curb at the apartment house to let Ellis out. Uncharacteristically impolite, Ellis talked over her departing phrases of: “Take care” and “Have a good evening.”

“Lamar,” he said to the youngest boy, who ran to meet them, “invite Miss Catherine to stay.”

Wide-eyed, Lamar gawked into the van. Catherine’s mouth gaped. The punishment, just as she expected.

Little Lamar, all of six, with Ellis deserting him up the walk, turned shy. He did Ellis’s bidding, though. He forced a jack-o-lantern smile and begged a simple, “Please.” Ellis blindsided her with a tactical maneuver and a surrogate invitation she could not refuse.

On the railed, planked, and roofed porch, the boys arranged themselves by height and sounded off: “Anton.” “William.” “Tee.” Lamar grasped Catherine’s hand as soon as she stepped over the curb. He held it still and took his place at the end of the line.

In a similar refrain to the one the mayor recounted, Ellis introduced Catherine in the context of her relationship to Mayor

Leonard. The boys were impressed. Impressed with Ellis Carver, too.

The bulky man slid a finger under the top flap on the popsicle box and began a well-practiced litany. “What should we always do with our food, even if it’s not enough?”

“Share it with someone,” the boys responded.

“If someone comes to you hungry...”

“Feed him.”

“Or her,” eleven-year old Anton adlibbed. He walked the first cherry-flavored treat out of the box to Catherine.

The High Street at Wilton Place was a withering remembrance of Sabbath’s old charm. Puzzled stares from onlookers, if any existed in that people-present neighborhood, weren’t noticed by Catherine, a woman easily marked as out of place. The initial discomfort Catherine felt faded as quickly as the time it took to sit on one of the bricked half-walls that shored up the porch’s three cement steps. She felt a sublime peace in the porch setting with the cadre of bare-chested, bare-boned, and barefooted boys clothed adequately in Ellis’s daily sermon.

When the slurping was finished and everyone stuck out a red tongue, Ellis’s band of popsicle-stick warriors adopted fencing stances. They dueled as best they could without the capes they begged for, but Ellis refused to provide. Catherine pictured the boys, anyway, with unfurled bath towels and pillowcases draping their slight shoulders. Over and over, they laughed.

Before the visit became too battle-worn, Ellis, with Lamar cuddled in the bend of his arm, interrupted the play. “Tell Miss Catherine goodbye, boys.”

They did. The sweet chorus rang in her ears for some distance down The High Street. While the magic yet lingered, she drove to

Econo-Foods and purchased a cooler for Ellis.

A new workweek began. The cooler lay on the floor beneath her desk. Whenever her foot nudged it, memory of the boys' antics danced to life. She expected Ellis to come into City Hall. But days passed, and Catherine rushed headlong into a mainstream of duties without a peep from him. The porch visit drifted away, like a distant candle's flickering flame, ready to extinguish itself, having absorbed all the available oxygen that gave it color and heat.

One morning in the middle of the next week, Mayor Leonard asked her to run an errand. Her mind mapped out the route. Completing the errand would take her down The High Street. Ellis permanently stitched that long-lost Sabbath dialect into her fabric now. She grabbed up the cooler on impulse. She'd take a minute, stop by the apartment house, and hopefully find Ellis at home. The cooler was a practical solution. It equaled just a small alteration to his deeply embedded shopping routine.

The minivan rolled into the neighborhood. Her heartstrings began to strum with pleasant memories. Up ahead, though, traffic seemed stalled. Farther up, she saw the reason why. An old fruit truck with high wooden side rails sat crossways in the road. Catherine imagined crates of apples and oranges spilled and rolling like marbles on the bridge.

She soured at the thought of a detour. Time did not permit a detour, and the stop at Ellis's, and the mayor's errand.

The sound of an approaching siren interrupted her recalculations. She edged the van over so the emergency squad could squeal past. The squad took its place next to the fruit truck. The delivery driver wasn't hurt. He met the first paramedic who climbed down from the squad.

Then an awful thought jolted her. Was one of the boys hurt?

She cut the van's engine, left the van parked haphazardly where it was, and raced toward the bridge, stumbling once, but

catching herself.

Human nature crooked its curious finger and coaxed pockets of stunned people to line the bridge's narrow walkway. The squad's bulk shielded Catherine's view of the reason it was summoned.

Suddenly, like an air-piercing javelin, Anton shot toward her out of the crowd. Tears streamed his cheeks. His horrified face overwrote all the giggling and innocent child's play she remembered.

The popsicle-stick warriors minus one, she thought.

Which one?

Several yards behind Anton, still stationary, but turned to follow his path were the wet faces of William and Tee.

A panic began to rumble when she didn't see Lamar.

The three, stripped of their boyish energy, gathered around her. Each choked out a bit of the story. As they spoke, her wild eyes frantically searched the sidewalk. She dared not look in the street, dared not see a small broken bundle there.

"Thursday is laundry day," Anton began. "Ellis found five dollars when he was turning out pockets."

"We were going to celebrate the last day of summer vacation." The weakening voice was William's.

Then Tee spoke. "Tomorrow, school starts."

Catherine's search of the crowd ended. From the other side of a stout black woman, Lamar slipped his hand free of hers and scuffed into view. At seeing the boy, Catherine's heart expanded nearly to the point of bursting.

Lamar walked over lethargically and leaned into her. "Ellis

went to the Econo for popsicles,” he said, barely audible. “It’s all our fault.”

“No. No, it’s not.” Catherine spoke around the lump in her throat. Realization dawned. “It’s mine.”

Catherine was visited again by regret. Regret hardened to guilt by the time her gaze crept over to the sheet-draped body. Left uncovered to stain her conscience forever was a rivulet of blood-colored liquid flowing from a popsicle box. The wending current stood out in stark contrast with the concrete bridge. Her hand and chest clenched simultaneously. She was suddenly aware she carried the cooler.

She stood motionless while memories collided, random and painful, in which Ellis Carver starred. She scorned herself for not delivering the cooler sooner. With the cooler, maybe he’d have taken more time before hurrying out into the street. Maybe the cooler would have overridden his narrow, straightforward focus.

Much later that day, Catherine Paulsen remembered the one time Ellis Carver’s eyes reflected in hers. Delight was something that stored itself in the smallest of things.

The next Saturday afternoon, in honor of Ellis’s timetable, Catherine bought up all of Econo-Foods’ one-dollar coolers. She took them to the town’s food pantry and asked that they be distributed with one caveat: only to those who walked to the pantry from the surrounding neighborhood. A seed of optimism had been planted in Catherine’s soul through Ellis Carver. She expected something to grow to watermelon size.

When she felt an inner nudge to visit his grave at the cemetery, she complied. There, she pieced together that Ellis was buried next to his grandmother. Elizabeth Carver passed the preceding fall, a month or so before Ellis’s trips to City Hall began. Ellis, missing her watchful guidance, sought out another’s in Mayor Leonard.

She saw evidence the boys had visited Ellis. They wrote

personal notes. Their words of love and longing were printed in crayon and decorated with stickers. Catherine smiled down at the colorful tributes. They were speared to the ground by popsicle sticks.

The End