

## A Couple Called Ernest & Everest

1.

I once knew a man, went by Ernest. We all loved Ernest. He talked to us about our problems, and wanted to fix them with this or that remedy. Ernest toured 'Nam, but he weren't happy 'bout killing them folk. Drafted. Like the rest of 'em. He would sit in his booth in the bar and drink and tell stories about sneaking out and doing psilocybin mushrooms with the locals. They called it spiritual, he called it a damn good time.

He weren't religious in the typical sense. But he believed in a higher power—In Nature and Him (not the Him you're thinking). And Ernest would talk about these things, but only if you asked him. And he would talk about other things, if you'd ask him:

If you asked him 'bout politics he'd say he didn't know nothin' 'bout it. But if you really asked him, he'd say the American Empire is falling, and that the west will fall to fascism if nothing is done about it. You'd laugh and think it's just an old man off his rocker. And then you'd look out the window and see the west falling to fascism.

He'd talk of his two old daughters, getting married to god-knows-who from god-knows-where. Of the specific way he brewed his tea that squeezed the leaf for all it was worth.

Ernest didn't like conflict none too much, but if you came in here talkin' that neo-nazi, "pure race" stuff, he'd tell you what's what.

We all loved Ernest.

Ernest loved all type of people. Blacks, Jews, gays. He'd talk to 'em and ask "What's it like bein' a black gay Jew?"

If you asked Ernest what he was scared of he would say - "what's that thing Ben Frank used to say? 'the only things to be scared of are death and taxes,'" and then you might remind him that that is not the saying and he would give you a look that meant to stop talking.

He'd drink and he'd laugh and he would shoot pool with the rest of us. But we all seen the wisdom he had in him. Something deep like. He wore pants and a jacket in the winter, and Hawaiian shorts and sunglasses in the summer. He preferred the winter.

He was one of them old academics who didn't see themselves as an academic. Boy did he love to read.

Anything—

Time Magazine, one of them fancy academic journals, a fantasy book. Always talkin' bout how he wish he were an "Istar" (one of them wizard folk off those Lord of the Rings movies).

He loved Vonnegut. Kurt, that is. Whenever someone "met their maker" as Ernest often said, he'd reply "So it goes...", quoting that old Vonnegut book "Slaughterhouse Five". He always kept a copy on him. Y'know Vonnegut died walking his dog? Motherfucker fell and hit his head, went into a coma. So it goes.

Ernest died too. 9/11. Drunk driver took him out in Kansas. A driver, in the middle of bumfuck nowhere Kansas, swerved exactly at the time Ernest was passin' by. Ain't that a motherfucker. So it goes.

2.

He had a wife. Name of Everest. Mrs. Everest believed when things became too abstract they lost meaning and whatnot. That when things got too abstract it opened up too many possibilities. Too many, oh what was it she used to say?  
Too many avenues for the artist to go down.  
They end up not doing anything at all.

She used to say it was artists like these that had the most to say, though.  
Theirs was a tangled mess of confusion and brilliance, y'see?

She had a lot to say about a lot of things, but mostly she stayed quiet. Kind of the ponderin' type. Would ask you to move if the scene didn't call for you to be there at that time.

The bar was not her place. But she loved that it was Ernest's, so she'd attend sometimes and she'd drink and she'd joke, and she would shoot pool with the rest of us. She had this melancholy about her. Something real sad like. Battling with existential questions and the like. She'd sit with her soft drink and see us as an illustration. I always knew she thought we were bumbling idiots.

But she liked us. And we all liked Everest.

She really liked cats, though. And when she made tea, it was a 2 hour ordeal. Ernest liked her tea, though. They both liked her tea. Ernest said it was the only time either of them believed in magic.

She thought of the world through a Daoist lens, as though a balance ought to be struck between two energies. She thought Ernest was crazy for his belief in Nature and Him. Again, not the Him you're thinking. She used to say that type of stuff was for hokey pokey folk who wanted something to fix all their problems. And she said she would fix her problems, thank you very much. And she would. A real problem-solver, that Everest.

3.

They both liked their toast 3/4 toasted. Everest secretly liked it 4/4 toasted. She never says anything because they both toast their bread in the toaster at the same time. And it pops out of the toaster at the same time. And they eat at the same time. It has always been like this. So she stays quiet on the burnt toast front. They both like their bagels black. Everest picks the darker one. Her silent revenge. Ernest always let her pick the darker one. And he would smile. And she would return the smile.

Now that he's gone, Everest still toasts her bread 3/4 toasted. She tried to blacken it how she liked but she found herself only missing the old toast. The toast that tasted like sacrifice for companionship.

4.

Everest believed the right was full of people with too little words and too little worlds. Where just cuz was a just cause. And the left was full of people with too much time to think. Where a just cause fell through the sewer grate. She despised the right. She despised the left less. At least they were trying.

If she had her way none of them would be there. And Ernest and her would have been birds. And Ernest would have needed to dance for her. And she would have said in her bird language "I choose you. I like you the best."

But they weren't birds, uh course. They spent many nights together at this cafe that stayed open way too late.

You can see it, right? The scene looks a lot like that painting by Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*.

Ernest would eat a churro, and Everest would pull a piece off every now and then and help herself. And Ernest would say "help yourself!" rolling his eyes and laughing. And she would laugh through churro chomps that would spill onto her pants.

"You eat like a bird" Ernest would say in this moment.

"No I don't" Everest would reply in the same moment.

"Birds don't eat churros".

"Sure they do. You ever see a pigeon, it will eat anything" said Ernest.

"But it would be a lie of epic magnitude to say 'birds eat churros'"

"It would also be a lie of epic magnitude to say 'birds *don't* eat churros'".

"Alright, but if I were a bird I sure as hell wouldn't be a pigeon."

But she liked that he thought of birds, too.

"No... No you wouldn't" he pondered for a while.

She pondered for a while. They never could come up with the type of bird she was. It bothered Everest, right until the very end. The day before Ernest got hit by a drunk driver in Kansas, they had called. And Everest said "Ernest, I think I figured it out. I think I'd be a cardinal."

"I thought we agreed you were a pigeon?"

"No, remember, you said I wouldn't be a pigeon, and then we sat in silence and we were both thinking of the type of bird I would be."

He remembered now. She pauses for a minute, waiting for him to agree. She knew it might take awhile. He didn't agree with things as important as this without careful consideration. "A cardinal. Yeah. That's nice Everest."

And the Universe answered the next day. "You are not a cardinal. Try again."

5.

And Everest was an author. Much of her brain capacity was spent formulating her words in a way that inspired folk. She would rush to get her notebook out while she was saying a thought aloud repeatedly, rushing it.

Then, she would say "I just wrote one of the most beautiful lines in my head and now it's gone. And I will never be able to get that level of purity again."

And Ernest would respond "Yes you will".

And she would get frustrated because he was not understanding her frustrations. She would say don't you get it you nimwit I need you to be here with me. I love your positivity but I don't need that. I need you to see that that thought, in it's pure, most beautiful form, is lost to me forever.

Then Ernest would understand and instead of saying his spiel about how "thoughts always come back if they were good ones" he said "I'm sorry. Losing a thought sucks ass." And they hugged, and were both happy.

A couple months later, the line came back to her. It was something about tea and magic.

6.

Everest always wore clothes with a loose fit. She would say "if the occasion came to dance," she didn't want to be all tied up in jeans or a suit.

The occasion rarely came to dance, but when it did, she was relieved she wasn't tied up in jeans or a suit.

7.

Ernest loved magicians. He didn't believe in it, but he never wanted to know how it was done. Never asked the overly-excited man who wanted to go on his tangent about how "magicians never tell". He suspended his disbelief for a moment just so he could go "that was a neat trick" and move on.

8.

He also loved those damn ducks that would stop by the pond by their house. He fell apart when they stopped coming. And Everest did not understand. So she chose to ask questions.

And when Ernest could not answer them, she did not grow frustrated. She knew, then, that he did not know, either.

Every now and then, ever since then, Everest would bring up the ducks, and ask if the reasoning could have been this or that. And every time Ernest would ponder for awhile, as he typically did, and then say "No, that's not it."

9.

So, you probably think this story ends with Everest seeing the ducks come back. It does. She was sitting at the pond where Ernest spent so much time. And she saw the ducks come back. Waddling back from god-knows-where as if they went nowhere. And she knew it all connected, but she didn't have time to grab her notebook and scream out "I have figured it out!" to the ducks.

She had a heart attack. Ain't that a motherfucker.

She survived. And as soon as she woke up she told the nurse who had a perfect idea of Everest in her head—That she woke up at 8 A.M. every day, and did old-people-things until she went to bed, and maybe she bird-watched.

The birds!

Everest woke from her hospital bed, yelling at the nurse, quite dramatically shifting the nurse's perfect idea of her. She said Don't you get it? Don't you see how the pigeons, and the cardinal, and the ducks all connect.

And the nurse replied "No. I don- what are you talking about."  
And Everest said shut up. And thought for awhile.

She lost the thought. And she cried, thinking about ducks, and a man that would have seriously struggled not to tell her that "thoughts always come back".

"What type of bird do you think I am?" she finally spat out to the nurse.

The nurse thought for awhile, not in the way Ernest did. The way she liked. But in a way of not understanding. And she finally said "A blue jay. I think you'd be a blue jay."

She cried more, for she knew, she was not a blue jay.