

CHASING EVE

A Novel

by

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Chasing Eve
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Walt Whitman, To You, 1856 (Public Domain)

*You have not known what you are, you have slumber'd upon yourself all your life,
Your eyelids have been the same as closed...*
Walt Whitman, *To You*

*Love lifted me, love lifted me
When nothing else could help, love lifted me...*
James Rowe and Howard E. Smith, *Love Lifted Me*

For my dear friend and bellasista Constance Crosby, who has my back and my heart.

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Prologue

THE DREAM WAS always the same, announcing itself first only with sound. Crushing, nerve-stripping sound. The blast and roar of it was all the more terrifying since it was accompanied by a darkness so absolute that she felt blinder than her cat Jezebel, trapped in a world absent the dimension of vision, absent of light.

Inevitably, the blackness yielded to patches of misty irradiation, like the pale tinting of lacework that announces the end of a migraine. These mysterious visual hintings resolved themselves into streaky clouds whose ephemeral forms whooshed from front to periphery, suggesting she was in motion, propelled at great speed.

Fight or flight, a voice seemed to say. Her eyes traveled from her bare lap to her fingers, white and nervous, frantically twisting the knobs of an instrument panel. The unbearably meaningless wall of sound resolved itself into the strivings of an engine, and comprehension dawned suddenly as she felt her head craning, her eyes squinting at the panoramic window of the plane she was flying, unable to penetrate past the clouds that would not get out of her way.

Her terror was absolute. This plane would crash, or something would crash into her, if she could not manage to see.

One

ARIEL THOMPkins WAS dying for a change. She just hadn't gotten around to admitting it yet. At seven a.m. that particular spring morning, she was aware only of emerging from one nightmare into another as she took a flying dive off her bed onto her dust-bunny-carpeted floor. Her hasty descent was unintentional. Slamming her hand against her retro clock radio wasn't. Anything to silence some troglodyte shock jock's self-congratulatory laughter at a crude play on words involving a particular part of the female anatomy.

From her undignified pose, cheek to floor, she eyed the evidence of last night's lapse of judgment. Just inches from her nose, an almost-empty bottle of Merlot stared back at her. An anarchy of dripped burgundy swirls and greasy smudges from a Grubhub-delivered Fatburger blurred the wine label into the shape of a giant winking eye. She looked away, but took its insinuation to heart as her chest burned with acid.

Last night had been a mistake. The Fatburger was an all-too-frequent indulgence, but she hardly ever drank. Certainly not this much. And never alone. Not a good sign, she knew. But she'd been unusually bored last evening, nothing worth watching on TV, wary of web-generated ennui, and too wiped out to venture into the night to Starbucks or Book Soup. The word she was avoiding threatened to burst in on her, but she held the door fast. A single young woman who allowed herself to acknowledge the depth of her loneliness might just as well put out a welcome mat for its inevitable hangers on: self-pity and despair.

Pivoting her head to the right, she met Jezebel's cataract-clouded eyes. Her own wild lunge at the radio had obviously catapulted the cat out of bed. Ariel had a vague recollection of her twitching fingers tapping Jezzie's silky white belly—as if the otherwise pitch-black cat were the instrument panel in her recurring airplane nightmare—until that crude voice had broken in like the hijacker from hell.

She sat up, gingerly exploring what felt like a bruise on her cheek, and put her face right up to Jezebel's nose. "You little stinker. I'll bet it was you brushing against the radio last night that changed the station. Honestly, some of these creeps are even worse than Howard Stern." The cat blinked back at her.

Ariel lifted Jezebel to her shoulder and scrambled back into bed with her, reclaiming the still-warm spot bearing the impression of their two bodies. "I forgive you," she whispered, planting a delicate kiss on the cat's nose. She slipped in and out of a delicious half-sleep until the insult of someone's car alarm broke through.

Half an hour later, she was altogether unaware of the intriguing picture she presented, her elbow resting on her small kitchen table, her chin propped up by her palm as she leaned intently over a spread-eagled copy of the *Los Angeles Times*. Her loose, light brown ringlets cascaded across the page, while her still unshaven, strong and shapely legs pretzeled themselves into a nearly perfect figure eight. A small article captioned "'First Eve Bones Discovered in Africa?'" caught her attention. As the smoky halo of the day's first cigarette lofted over her head, she unhooked her left foot and excitedly wiggled her toes within their cozy white gym socks as a child might do while Jezebel crunched away at her dried Friskies with the gusto of a much younger cat.

"You know, I almost named *you* Eve."

No response, not even a slight twitch of her ears. Ariel laughed ruefully. "You're right. That

did *not* dignify a response. Only crazy people talk to their animals.”

She picked up the newspaper again. Jezebel took a moment to stretch her ebony limbs before launching into a full-out self-cleaning campaign. The kitchen faucet offered its own punctuation to the cat’s wet licking sounds in the form of a steady drip into the bottom-burned pot that had recently simmered up Ariel’s soft-boiled eggs. Ariel glanced at the counter, where haphazard piles of dishes and a tower of opened cartons of frozen dinners offered evidence of a week’s worth of solitary meals. She averted her eyes and returned to the article.

“New genetic evidence supports the claim that all modern humans are descended from a single woman who lived in southern Africa 140,000 years ago, a woman who has become known as the Mitochondrial Eve or ‘the mother of us all.’ That finding does not mean that only one woman was alive then, but that all other women’s lineages eventually died out. Descendants of that woman began migrating out of Africa 75,000 years ago.

A UCLA researcher announced today that the anthropology department has taken particular interest in the recent discovery in Ethiopia of a 140,000-year-old, nearly intact human skeleton, dubbed ‘Eve’ by her finders since her age approximates that of the Mitochondrial Eve. ‘The fossil is of a young woman, but the teeth are worn right down to the gums,’ said the researcher. ‘This appears to be the oldest human specimen yet found.’”

Ariel laid the newspaper down over her dish, now garnished with dried egg and marmalade-smearing toast crumbs. As she lifted her coffee cup to her lips, the smell of sour milk assailed her nostrils. Grumbling, she shuffled to her ancient refrigerator and peered inside. Its minimalist stock included a couple of eggs, the offending pint of non-fat milk, and a suspicious-looking container of what just might be months-old tuna salad.

She nearly jumped as a series of loud crashes sounded from somewhere in the apartment. Trembling, she rushed into the living room. “Are you okay?” Jezebel crouched tensely beside a shabby, floral upholstered chair in the corner, her rump raised as Ariel stooped to stroke her until the cat calmed down. “My poor darling. Getting blind as a bat, aren’t you?” She flicked her eyes up to the ceiling. “Lord, let me win the lottery so I can pay for your operation.”

She bent to pick up the books Jezebel had knocked off her bookshelf, a makeshift affair of boards and bricks left over from college. What was she supposed to do with this mess? It was a precarious set-up. The shelves were filled to overflowing, most of the books stacked on their sides in piles two or three deep. Many of them had hastily torn slivers of paper nosing out of them as bookmarks.

Ariel sneezed three times in quick succession as the accumulated dust of over half a decade got up her nose. She tried wedging a handful of books back onto one of the shelves, but the space was too narrow. She was left with one paperback still in her hand. Turning it over, she saw it was Colin Turnbull’s *The Forest People*. It had been assigned reading in the one anthropology class she’d taken. She smoothed her hand over its green and black cover. This one had been too good to dump with her college textbooks into one of the giant trash bins behind her apartment building the day after she graduated. It had been a miracle she’d been able to even approach those hulking steel containers. She’d been wary of them ever since the night she’d crammed for her Art History exam. High as a kite on a manic mix of caffeine and Adderall from a friend with actual ADD, she’d

convinced herself they were part of some dark cosmic design—malevolently lurking behind apartment buildings, rolling into the middle of alleys while the city slept, so that when you were already late for school the next morning, you'd be trapped in Alley Hell.

Shaking her head at her lunacy, she plopped down cross-legged onto her living room's threadbare carpet. Jezzie cautiously ventured out from under the chair and settled beside her. Ariel pushed the book's spine along the cat's silky back, reassured to hear the deep, steady motor of her purr.

It was all coming back to her. Turnbull had caught her imagination back then. Hooking her on the lives of his beloved Congo pygmies, despite the fact that they were completely primitive, or as her classmate Ryan Bell had put it at the time, "too fuckin' weird, man." To be fair, at first they'd struck her as weird, too. She couldn't imagine how anyone could walk around stark naked in the forest, bugs and snakes everywhere, and not have the constant heebie-jeebs.

Stroking Jezzie hand over hand, pulling her fur sleek from head to tail, Ariel recalled that the BaMbuti pygmies had a sacred song for everything—waking, eating, watching the sun go down. She felt a heaviness descend on her. Here in the so-called civilized world you couldn't write songs sweet enough to make people drop to their knees in gratitude without somebody cannibalizing them in commercials to sell cars and junk food.

Jezzie moved away in a huff, her tail aloft like a black mast, and it occurred to Ariel that she'd probably gotten a little intense with her petting. She riffled through the pages of the dog-eared paperback, and then paused at its mid-section. She hadn't remembered these photographs, reproduced in grainy black and white, capturing Turnbull's forest people in the midst of their daily lives. Men with arrows, men playing music, a group of men setting off for the hunt.

She resumed flipping through the pages, then stopped and went back, catching the tip of her tongue in the slight gap between her teeth. A mahogany-skinned woman was crouched on her haunches, her hands clasped together with her elbows resting loosely on her muscular thighs. Her shoulders rolled forward ever so slightly, and she held her head a little bowed, her expression solemn. An older woman, standing at her side, was smearing something on her forehead that Ariel suspected just might be blood.

It was the younger woman's breasts, though, that really got her attention, hanging down her chest like two widened brown bananas, pointy-nippled with the points aiming in opposite directions. And the large handful of flesh on her otherwise taut body, the roll of fat at her midriff supporting two unbearably alive-looking breasts.

Ariel's thoughts turned to her mother Emily, gone so many years now that few actual memories of her survived. Not that her living presence had made that much of a dent. "Died of insignificance," Ariel had said at the time to her best friends Terry and Jasmine, taking a perverse pride in their shock at her cavalier attitude at being orphaned just a few days before her eighteenth birthday.

Of course, that had been sheer bravado. She never told them how haunted she'd been by her last image of her mother, breathing laboriously in her hospital bed while *Wheel of Fortune* droned from a television suspended overhead. Ariel had kept her eyes glued on the long thread of spittle that dangled from her mother's chapped lips to her grayish-white sickroom pillow. Anything to distract her from her mother's diminutive breasts, laid bare from her body's twistings inside the faded pink and blue flowered hospital nightie tied skimpily at her navel.

Ariel wondered if there had ever been a fullness to those embarrassingly bared breasts, their nakedness all the more shameful as their wearer had no knowledge of her exposure. Barely more than nubs—Ariel had clearly inherited her own more generous versions from her father’s side of the family—they’d never had anything as substantial as milk in them. Her mother had once confessed apologetically that a post-natal infection had prevented “all that.”

Compared to Emily Thompkins, Turnbull’s bushwoman had breasts full of presence—breasts with personality. Ariel snorted. Brushing past the sagging arm of the easy chair whose shredded upholstery bore witness to the chronic application of Jezebel’s claws, she burst into singing what she remembered of Lloyd Price’s “Personality” on her way to the shower. She and Terry had first heard the song on oldies station K-Earth 101 when they were thirteen or fourteen, and they’d fallen for its unabashed enthusiasm.

“Charm!” Breaking into a bouncy dance step, she grabbed a towel from her hall closet. “Love!” She flung her coffee-stained robe from her body as she approached the bathroom mirror, glancing momentarily down at her own breasts, palely pendulous, with their large and darkly stained nipples. Her grin was wide and her brown eyes shone as she brought her face close to the glass, burbling the substitute lyrics she and Terry had made up, both of them sprouting tits and rear ends in adolescence like ripening fruits on summer trees. “And, plus you’ve got a great big aa-aa-as!” She soaped her glistening skin with delight at the memory of how bawdy and bad they’d been.

Less than twenty minutes later Ariel caught sight of her new neighbor Benjamin Doyle, looking intimidatingly attractive in his sockless black penny loafers, skinny jeans, and white T-shirt as he trudged up from the laundry room just as she was preparing to exit her apartment. She hastily tucked the gray shirt of the U.S. Postal Service into her matching shorts and shoved the door closed with her hip. As they passed each other on the staircase, Benjamin opened his mouth as if to say, “Good morning,” then closed it when Ariel shyly averted her eyes and slipped past him on her way down the stairs. Which was why she missed seeing his eyes gleam with interest as he took in the loose curls that bounced with her every step; the pink flush spreading across her broad cheekbones and nearly perfect Grecian nose; the turquoise butterfly tattoo on her left wrist; her generous curves defying the anonymity of her uniform. He reluctantly tugged his eyes away as his overflowing laundry bundle claimed his full attention. He struggled to fish his key out of his pocket and open his front door, socks dropping right and left at his feet.

Nearing the sidewalk, Ariel flicked her eyes upwards just once as she heard Benjamin swear. She knew his name; she’d seen it when she’d looked for the new name for unit 312 in the West Hollywood building’s communal mailbox. No second, female name: just Benjamin Doyle. But who was she kidding? With his trim build, perfectly sculpted biceps, and those brooding blue eyes under a slicked-back head of dark hair, he was way out of her league. She banished him from her mind with a fatalistic shrug.

Opening the dented door of her Toyota Corolla, she prepared to apply her best efforts to getting the car started. For the first time in ages, the motor turned over on her first try. As soon as she turned on her car radio, the sultry sounds of Kehlani’s “Butterfly” snaked into the car. She sang along to the suggestive lyrics; they almost made *her* feel “brand new.”

She opened all the windows. It was going to be one of those perfect L.A. days. Not too hot or smoggy, with the wispiest of clouds flirting with the sun. This was the kind of weather that made

delivering mail feel less like a dead end than a way to fully enjoy the perks of living in southern California.

I'm a lucky woman, Ariel thought, signaling to make an illegal left turn into the post office parking lot. Not like all those lemmings in suits, cooped up in dead-air offices. They call them sick buildings. And no wonder. They make you sick.

Just as she began to make her turn, another driver—her silver head barely visible over the wheel of a much newer, undented Toyota—approached from the opposite direction. The old woman frowned anxiously at Ariel's car and slowed to a crawl, as if unsure whether to continue to drive forward or let Ariel complete her turn. Darting a glance in her rearview mirror, Ariel decided she could spare a few seconds and, with an air of largesse, waved her through first.

As Ariel's front wheels hit the driveway, the sound of a siren blasted her serenity, then just as quickly whined itself into an ominous I-know-it's-close-by dead silence. She stiffened, preparing herself for the certain ticket. Instead, her head whipping first to her rear left, then right, to locate from which side the policeman was approaching, she spotted him. Oblivious to her, he was stepping out of his vehicle on the other side of Beverly Boulevard. His hand resting on his still-holstered nightstick, he walked toward a weathered-looking black man who'd just jaywalked his shopping cart across the street.

She let out a guilty but relieved breath that the cop wasn't coming after *her*. She hurriedly parked and—darting a quick glance back at the two of them to reassure herself that no gun was pointed at the homeless man—locked her car before heading into the Bicentennial Post Office to sort her day's worth of mail.