

Eric's Saving Grace

by Rosally Saltsman



From the author of:

*Finding the Right Words ★ Parenting by the Book
Soul Journey ★ A Portion of Kindness*

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One

Life is a circle. Each action sets off another, which goes around and comes back to us, like ripples in the water of a lake, bubbles in an aquarium and waves lapping the shores of a distant tropical paradise. Ripples and bubbles and waves that seem to resound through eternity.

Life is a circle.

A circle has an area of π . π equals 22 divided by 7, an infinite number. In the area of our lives, our potential is infinite. We can have, in the rather limited time we are here, a completely limitless impact on the world, influencing it indefinitely, infinitely, and for all eternity, with every action, at any given moment.

This revelation gives us pause for thought. But if we pause too long to think, we may lose the moment and its inherent potential for eternity.

Two

Eric Mittleman worked at a bank in the foreign securities department. He had a knack for numbers and a knack for languages and would translate between them for his customers. His customers liked him for he was patient and soft spoken and seemed to understand the ineffable universe of foreign investments.

Eric liked order, routine and lack of complication. He lived alone. He was friendly to the people he worked with and the people he interacted with but all on a very superficial albeit affable plane. Eric smiled at everyone and everyone smiled back. He was charming and pleasant and intelligent. Humorous even. But there was no glimpse of any depth of emotion. And the quiet stillness of his apartment echoed like the ocean in the shells of remote and exotic beaches he dreamt of visiting; Beaches inviting because of their solitude as well as their beauty.

The closest Eric ever got to visiting those beaches was a large conch he kept at his desk which he had ordered from a mail-order catalogue some years earlier. It served as a paperweight in his in-tray.

The one concession that Eric had made to commitment or emotional involvement was an aquarium he had recently bought himself for his 32nd birthday. It was quite large and impressive and the quiet murmur of its filter and the darting motion of the fish, back and forth in its depths, gave Eric the illusion that he wasn't alone after all. And fish, to be honest, require very minimal emotional attachment, surrender or revelation. They too prefer to be left alone. And so Eric and his fish lived side by side contentedly.

Eric drove to work. He lived quite a ways from the bank. He could have put in a request to transfer to a branch nearer his home, or move, but preferred the separation between them. He also enjoyed the slow drive to and from his work during which time he would think deep thoughts or listen to pleasant music, humming along absent-mindedly, while his mind was out doing other things.

It was on one of these drives home from work when his mind realized he was out of fish food and that he had meant to go out and buy some during his lunch hour but had been waylaid by a rather distressed grandmother who wanted to send some money as a

present to her granddaughter studying Renaissance History and Art in Prague.

His mind then rejoined him in the car and prodded him to stop off at the nearest pet store, which was in a shopping precinct in a quaint trendy area. It was dusk and the old fashioned street lamps glowed amber on the sidewalk as Eric parked his car and strode purposefully into the pet store.

The first thing Eric noticed was that the store was empty and there was no one behind the counter. The second thing he noticed was the sound of a rather pathetic and weak whining interchanged with yelping. Eric followed the direction of the sound to the back of the store and found what looked like a small veterinary clinic. A little black Labrador puppy was lying on the examining table in a strange position with what looked like blood near its legs. A tall, blond-haired man with a white coat was stroking it, trying to calm it, while attempting to fill a hypodermic needle at the same time. Eric hovered uncertainly for a moment.

"Um, excuse me," Eric said to the man standing with his back to him tending the dog.

The man half turned to Eric and said, "Sorry, the sales clerk went out to the bank machine. He'll be back in a few minutes if you want to wait."

"What's wrong with the dog?" Eric asked unable to tear his gaze away from the pitiful creature.

"He appears to be a stray. Looks to be a purebred. Some irresponsible adult probably bought it for one of their kids and then found it was more trouble than they expected and just tossed it out on the street. Unfortunately it happens a lot." He paused as he squirted something out of the needle. "Looks like she was hit by a car. Some kids found her and brought her in."

"What are you going to do?" Eric asked. Had he been paying attention he would have been a bit puzzled at his sudden interest in a stray dog but as his mind was thoroughly taken up with the small bundle on the table, he didn't notice.

"There doesn't seem to be a lot I can do for her. I think I may have to put her to sleep."

As he lifted the needle to inject the dog, Eric suddenly and very uncharacteristically shouted, "No!"

The doctor jumped and looked at him surprised. "I wasn't going to do it now. This is to help with the pain." The doctor peered at Eric for a moment, then reassured he wasn't going to shout again, injected the dog. The dog whimpered. "Do you know her?"

"What?"

"The dog, do you know the dog?"

"No." Eric frowned. "But it seems a waste to put her to sleep when she's so young. She's just a little puppy. I mean... isn't there anything you can do?" Anyone listening to this exchange who had any superficial knowledge of Eric - and that was basically what anyone had - would have found it strange. But Eric, the doctor and the dog were alone.

"Maybe. But treatment costs money and she'd need a lot of care to nurse her back to health even if she does make it which at this point..." He shrugged. The dog whimpered again and looked from the doctor to Eric with a worried expression.

"That's okay," Eric said. "I'll pay for it." And he took out his wallet to take out some cash. He opened it. There was a fifty-dollar bill inside. "Look, take this,"

he said handing the vet the bill, "and take my card and I'll come back tomorrow and bring you the rest of the money. I promise. Just do whatever it takes to save her."

"Look, I can't guarantee anything," the vet said in a measured tone.

"I know, it's okay, just help save her."

The veterinarian looked at him appraisingly. "I'll do what I can. She's a real mess," he sighed. But I'll do what I can." He gave Eric a smile of wan encouragement. "Look," he said waving away the money, "don't give me your last dollar, I'll send you a bill."

Eric nodded his thanks and left the store. He took a deep breath and let it out as if he had been holding it for the last few minutes. A cool wind blew in response. He wrote down the name and address of the store, *Creatures, Pets*, and got back in his car. It was only when he was a few blocks from home that he realized he still didn't have any fish food.

Three

Eric spent the whole next day trying to understand what had suddenly possessed him to try and save the little dog. He vacillated between regret, half hoping the doctor couldn't do anything, and remorse for having such thoughts followed by a silent prayer that the dog would be okay. He didn't understand why the mutt (no, the doctor had said she was a purebred) was suddenly so important to him. And this lack of understanding, more than anything else, worried him.

"Can I help you, sir?" a very young, gangly sales clerk looked up when Eric entered the pet store later that evening.

"I'm looking for the vet that was here yesterday."

"Oh he's not here. I mean," the clerk quickly continued seeing Eric looking very annoyed, "His clinic is on the next block. You must be the gentleman who was here about the dog while I was out yesterday. Dr. Baker comes in to look over the animals every other day and if there's a serious case, he takes it back to his clinic. He said you should meet him

there. It's on the next corner," the clerk said pointing left. Eric was about to ask how the dog was but bought a packet of fish flakes instead.

Four

Betty and Leo Holtz were an estranged couple. They were estranged from their children, estranged from their neighbors, estranged from each other. To their credit, it was actually quite a feat to spend 24 hours a day together and still manage not to exchange a single word.

Betty and Leo never greeted their neighbors but when Eric moved into the building, he had met their intrusive stares with a pleasant smile and a “Good morning” or “Good evening”, whichever was applicable. They would furrow their brows at him as if he had been insolent or had said something rude but Eric kept offering a greeting and eventually the ice thawed and one or both would nod in response. After a few months, they smiled back unenthusiastically and eventually, they would even mutter something incoherent in return. It’s not that Eric was so determined to have good relations with his neighbors. It’s just that Eric’s lack of emotional intelligence, or the wall that he had erected to keep it confined, caused him not to actually notice if people responded to him or not which ironically made him one of the

friendliest people in the neighborhood, sort of a social idiot-savant.

Eric had been so preoccupied with the dog that he had had trouble falling asleep, which meant that he had had trouble getting up and snoozed through his snooze button. This in turn made him late for work. Which is why that morning, for the first time in two years, when Eric left for the bank, he passed by or rather dashed by the Holtzes without so much as a feeble acknowledgment. This of course took them by surprise, used as they were to him holding the door for them and smiling indulgently. And for the first time in a long time, the Holtzes exchanged a brief look of bewilderment, one of the rare exchanges of communication between them. It's too bad that the apartment building lobby was empty at the time and so no one saw it.

But they expressed even greater bewilderment when 10 days later, Eric showed up at the Holtzes' door (He had never come there before) holding what looked to be a very sad-eyed little dog with bandages on its legs and an expression that spoke volumes. Mrs. Holtz understood that look and her heart melted. The Holtzes were so in shock with the unexpected visit

and the unusual sight on their doorstep that they actually spoke.

"What are you doing with that dog?" asked Mr. Holtz.

"Well, um, you see, it's kind of a long story," Eric stammered simultaneously trying to stroke the dog and pretend it wasn't really there. The dog wagged her thin tail tentatively.

The foursome stood on the threshold staring at each other and finally Mrs. Holtz opened the door wider and said, "Well, maybe you'd better come in then."

The Holtzes' apartment looked like what older people's apartments generally look like. Thirty-year-old furniture that had hardly been sat on, many photographs in a pastiche from different eras featuring the Holtzes, the Holtzes' children and aged photographs of relatives from bygone days, knick-knacks and crystal which had never been drunk from.

Eric entered the new territory gingerly as the black fur ball in his arms sniffed the air in a weary sort of way and wagged her tail limply when Eric looked at her, apparently for support. He sat down on a settee that

Mrs. Holtz gestured to while she and her husband sat on a sofa opposite him at either ends so that the three of them formed a triangle.

"Well, it's like this..." Eric told them the whole story from the time that he realized that he was out of fish food to this evening when Sheba, for that was what Eric had named her, had been given a clean bill of health. He then related that because of his schedule it was not possible for him to care for a dog, which although wasn't the real reason was credible enough. The doctor had suggested that perhaps she would be a good candidate for seeing-eye-dog training since she was a Labrador and the breed favored for this calling.

Eric had received this news very enthusiastically until the doctor informed him that dogs in the program had to live with people for the first year of their lives, people who would be with the dog most of the day.

"I thought," Eric said carefully, "that perhaps you would be willing to adopt her for a year until she's ready to be trained. Look," he said charging on before they could refuse, "she's very sweet," he said holding her in the air towards the couple. He first held her out to Mr. Holtz, then to Mrs. Holtz and then settled on

the space in between them before drawing her back to his chest where Sheba snuggled contentedly. She sighed. And so did Mrs. Holtz. It was hard to say which sigh held the most longing.

Eric didn't really believe that the Holtzes would take the dog. He was already considering the next possibility, approaching someone at the bank although this went against one of his cardinal rules of mixing his personal life (of which he usually had little) with his professional life. Just as he was about to give up and murmur his understanding of the imposition, they looked first at the dog and then at each other and said to Eric in unison, "We'll take her."

Five

With the dog crisis over, Eric returned to his normal routine. Only now when he saw Mr. or Mrs. Holtz in the morning, usually walking Sheba, they were a lot, well, perkier was the only word that fit. Eric of course didn't notice this subtle change but after he greeted Betty or Leo, he would bend down and pet Sheba who would sniff his hand affectionately and wag her tail. She had almost completely recovered from her ordeal and she too seemed to be acting the way a puppy usually does. The other tenants in the building liked Sheba too, especially the transformation she had affected on the grouchy sexagenarians. They now could be seen talking to the dog and sometimes even with each other, if only, through the dog in third person.

Eric for his part, well his part was over. Aside from the morning pat on the head and the occasional doggie bag he brought for Sheba, for which he got some homemade cookies in return, Sheba and Eric led separate lives.

Eric turned 33. He got a card and a bottle of wine from the bank, a pat on the back from Jerry, his

colleague at work, and he bought a few new fish for his aquarium at the pet store where he had found Sheba.

It was one day about a year later, when he was opening the door for Betty Holtz that he noticed two things. The first thing was that she was more loquacious than he had ever remembered her.

"Oh good morning, Eric dear... Sheba stop drooling on Eric's shoes." For Sheba had wagged her tail in greeting and then sat down between them with her mouth resting on Eric's right black patent leather shoe. "Oh dear I will miss her so," Mrs. Holtz lamented. And that's when Eric noticed the second thing. Mrs. Holtz's eyes were red.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. Holtz?" Eric asked gently, genuinely concerned.

"Oh, dear, you don't know?" She gave a watery smile. "Today the people from the guide dog school are coming to take Sheba. She has to go through a few months of training first with them and then with the blind person they'll be matching her with. This is her last day with us." She sniffled.

Eric suddenly felt a tautness in his chest that he was unfamiliar with and a need to clear his throat. But he quickly recovered.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye then Sheba.” And Eric bent down to pet the dog and then impulsively crouched down and gave her a hug. He cleared his throat again; she sniffed or sneezed it was hard to tell; and then with a perfunctory good bye, Eric left the two females and without looking back drove to work.

Eric spent a good part of the morning feeling sad. He knew he would miss Sheba. Ironically it was the only regular relationship he had enjoyed for a long time. Moreover, he knew that the Holtzes would miss her too. He looked over at Jerry. He was serving an old Chinese man who was trying to tell him in what sounded like Chinese that he'd like to transfer some money from Hong Kong. But it was really just heavily accented English.

Eric thought he'd like to do something for the Holtzes. After all they had looked after Sheba for him for a whole year. Jerry was getting more frustrated. Eric remembered one day when Jerry's wife, Debbie, was furious at him for buying a car without her

permission. In an inspired moment, Jerry had sent her a large bouquet of flowers and a note telling her that the car was in fact an early birthday present and he had wanted to surprise her. It must have worked because the next day Jerry came in looking very cheerful and with a big smile on his face, which only started gradually fading at around noon.

So at seven o'clock that evening, Eric rang the Holtzes' doorbell carrying a bouquet of wildflowers including some dogwood blossoms thrown in for good measure. Mr. Holtz answered the door, thanked him for the flowers and informed Eric that his wife was out shopping and he would give them to her.

A couple of hours later, Eric answered a knock at the door. Mr. Holtz was standing there looking a bit ruffled and decidedly sheepish. He explained to Eric that when his wife had arrived home, she had seen the flowers and, assuming they were from her husband, first stood there in shock and then assailed him with hugs and kisses made infinitely more emotional by Sheba's still fresh leave-taking. She had misinterpreted the flowers as evidence of her husband's newfound loving insight and understanding. The fact was, however, that her

husband did demonstrate insight and understanding by not correcting her misassumption and was now asking Eric to please do the same as it would undoubtedly hurt both her and their newly convivial relationship were she to be enlightened of the truth.

Eric looked at his shoes then gave Mr. Holtz an embarrassed half smile and assured him that as far as he was concerned, the flowers were from Mr. Holtz. Eric put the incident from his mind, as he tried to do most emotional interactions, and was only reminded of it a week later when Mrs. Holtz tapped on his door with her mailbox key informing Eric that she and Leo were taking a week's cruise, a second honeymoon type thing, and would he please be so kind as to pick up their mail. Eric graciously agreed, wished her a good trip and offered to water their plants as well. Mrs. Holtz smiled coyly and told him it wasn't necessary as they were all plastic. She then turned on her heel and humming some tune from the 1960s, went back to her packing.

Six

Claire Johnson was born in the 1960s into a situation that did not bode well for her future.

She was born black, she was born blind and she was born poor. But Claire discovered early on that life is what you make it not what other people predict it should be. So, in the 1970s, Claire did something that was extraordinary – she taught herself to read Braille. And in the 1980s, she did something wonderful, she started meticulously recording her readings of every Braille book she could get her hands on and donating the tapes to her community’s public library. When the librarian tried to kindly point out to her that no blind people came to the library, as it was for people who read books, Claire said, undaunted, “Well, now they have a reason to.” Not only that but she encouraged the librarian to offer the tapes to anyone who was having trouble reading regular books: new immigrants, children with learning problems or dyslexia, or older people who had trouble making out the print because of their failing eyesight.

As soon as people heard the recorded books were available, they were in such high demand that the no

longer skeptical librarian asked Claire to make several copies of each recording to meet the growing demand, which she gladly did.

Claire extended her voluntary library activities to story telling for young children once a week and a writing workshop for students. These activities were so popular that the library eventually hired Claire on a part-time basis and it wasn't long before she was invited to give her story hour at libraries all over the city. Claire won several government grants and awards and was invited to lecture in several states. By the age of thirty, her talents were in such high demand that she had to hire several assistants to help her.

Because of Claire's higher mobility and her desire to stay independent, she decided to get a seeing-eye dog. Beauty was a loving golden retriever who led Claire from library to government funding office, from awards dinner to lecture hall, all with the same indefatigable devotion that empowered Claire in her myriad activities. Claire loved Beauty both as a staunch companion and loyal guide and the two were often photographed together smiling.

It was therefore with great reluctance and a heavy heart that Claire realized it was time to reward Beauty for all her years of faithful service and retire her as Beauty's step faltered, her breathing became labored and her own eyes dimmed. Claire gave her to a loving family in the country whom she felt sure would make Beauty's last days happy and provide a dignified and fitting end for all her hard work and dedicated service. That decided, Claire contacted the school from which she had bought Beauty and asked them to find her another dog.

It was six months after Claire had finished her training with her new canine attendant that she was crossing the intersection in the quaint part of town when suddenly, her dog stopped for a moment then bolted in the opposite direction both pushing and pulling Claire out of the way. Claire fell back and hit the pavement. It was only when Claire heard a screech of brakes, a light thud and a yelp that Claire realized that Sheba must have pushed her out of the way of an oncoming car and been hit in the process.

She heard someone rush out of the car and run over to her.

"Oh my God, are you alright? I didn't see you." The anxious man gently tried to help Claire to her feet.

"I'm alright," Claire said regaining her balance. "But I think you hit my dog."

Sheba sat on the ground wagging her tail weakly at the man she intuitively felt was coming and looked up into Eric's deep blue eyes with her soft intelligent brown ones trying to communicate how happy she was to see him even though she would have preferred a more gentle reunion under less dramatic circumstances. She struggled to get up and managed lamely to stand on three wobbly legs holding the fourth gingerly.

Eric immediately recognized Sheba and his calculating mind overrode his sense of impinging despair.

"Come," he said leading Claire. "There's a vet nearby, I'll take you and Sheba."

Claire was so disoriented and worried about her dog that she didn't register the fact that Eric knew her dog's name. He drove the three of them over to Dr.

Baker's nearby clinic, praying under his breath that it wasn't too late in any sense of the word.

Dr. Baker was thankfully still at work and after communicating to his receptionist that this was an emergency, the motley trio was led into the examining room.

"Why, Mr. Mittleman, how nice to see you again," Dr. Baker greeted him pleasantly.

"Sheba's been hit by a car," Eric said overriding the pleasantries.

"What again?!" He said as Eric lifted her up onto the examining table. She whimpered then licked his face.

"Who hit her?"

"I did."

"You did?"

"How do you all know each other?" Claire piped up.

"How do you both know the name of my dog?"

"Your dog?" Dr. Baker looked at Claire.

"Doctor, could you just have a look?" Eric said impatiently and they all turned their attention to

Sheba who had been watching the exchange as patiently as she could seeing how she had just been hit by a car (again) driven by her former knight in shining armor.

"Well," Dr. Baker said after a few minutes. "It doesn't look serious. She'll be limping a few days and should stay off her leg. I think she'll be okay after a few days of bed rest. I'll give her a shot for shock and I'll give you some pills to give her for the pain. "Do you want to fill me in on how this happened?" Dr. Baker asked looking from Eric to Claire.

Eric then supplied the story of how he had taken the doctor's advice and donated Sheba to the Guide Dog Association after having found her the foster home at the Holtzes and that apparently Claire had received her from there.

"Well, then I guess I should thank you," Claire said when he'd finished. "Sheba just saved my life and since I have you to thank for saving Sheba..."

"You also have me to thank for needing to have your life saved," Eric pointed out to her honestly.

"Actually," Dr. Baker added. "It seems like she was repaying her debt to you as well, Mr. Mittleman." Eric looked at him bemused. "After all she saved you from being responsible for hurting this nice lady. And if you had, a lot of people would have been very upset. This is Claire Johnson and she does a lot of wonderful work for many, many children and youth nationwide."

"Do I know you?" asked Claire, not recognizing the voice.

"Well, we've never spoken," said Dr. Baker but my four-year-old daughter never misses your story hour at the library. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am for all the work you've done for blind children like Gabrielle. You see, Mr. Mittleman," he said turning to Eric, "the reason I recommended you donate Sheba as a seeing eye dog was because I have a blind daughter and I had been in contact with them recently asking how old a child needed to be before getting one. She has a few years yet but I'm glad my suggestion was beneficial to you in some way Ms. Johnson, I am so terribly grateful to you."

"It's Claire," she said, offering the doctor her hand and a warm smile. "And it's you I have to thank for all the joy your daughter and others like her have brought to my life. Well," Claire sighed, "the only thing left now is to figure out how I'm going to get around the next few days."

"Let me help you," volunteered Eric. "After all, it's my fault."

"No, please don't feel like that," Claire reassured him. "Anita, she's my assistant, is always telling me that it's dangerous for a black woman dressed in dark clothes to be walking around with a black dog in the dark. She always says I should wear light clothing and carry my stick. But dark is all I know," she said with a smile, "and I don't like carrying my stick. It's not your fault you didn't see me. Hey, I didn't see you either," she quipped and let out a throaty laugh that palpably lifted the tension from the room and floated it out into the cool night air. Sheba gave a bark in response.

Eric insisted that Claire let him drive her and Sheba home and that she allow him to chauffeur her around for the few days it took Sheba to get back to herself.

He assured her he could take the time off work (having lots of unused vacation time) and that it would give him a chance to visit with Sheba whom he admitted to have missed, suddenly realizing this to be true.

A few hours later, when Eric finally entered his building exhausted, he ran into Mrs. Holtz who looked younger than ever being pulled by the leash by a very large, energetic puppy. A St. Bernard puppy to be exact.

"Oh good evening Eric," she said breathlessly. "This is Heathcliff. We just got him yesterday."

"Isn't that...?"

"Yes, a St. Bernard. Isn't he adorable?"

"He's quite, um... large. Don't St. Bernards need a lot of space? You know, like the Alps?"

"Oh, well, we're not keeping him for long," she explained as Heathcliff jumped up on Eric excitedly, leaving paw prints on his shirt. "We're raising him for the Augustine Monks."

Eric shook his head as if to clear it. Mrs. Holtz continued unperturbed. "You see, the Augustine Monks had sold the dogs that were up in the St. Bernard Pass in Switzerland because they didn't want to take care of them anymore. However, not to lose the tourists that came to the area to see these special canines," she was sounding just like a travel brochure, "they requested that buyers bring the dogs back every year so that the ancient tradition isn't interrupted. Well," and here Mrs. Holtz took a breath, "it seems that not enough dogs were brought back and now there is a St. Bernard shortage in the St. Bernard Pass and the Swiss just couldn't have that. Imagine Switzerland without these wonderful dogs, it would be awful!"

During Mrs. Holtz's monologue Eric was tiredly nodding his head trying to follow her while Heathcliff was intermittently circling around them snorting and licking Eric's shoes.

So Leo and I, after reading about this in the newspaper, decided to buy a St. Bernard puppy from a breeder, raise it for a year and donate it to the monks in Switzerland. We will of course expect them to pay for his plane ticket."

"Of course," Eric concurred, finally finding his voice and somewhere in the conversation to interject it. "Well, good night Mrs. Holtz, and you too, um Heathcliff." Eric nodded to the dog and strode to the bank of elevators, banks being the only place he didn't feel wrong-footed lately.

Seven

The Almog Winifred Arts Center for the Blind was ironically quite a sight and Eric blinked up at in wonder. An unusual combination of Art-Deco and Colonial architecture making it look like the Haunted Mansion from Disneyland takes a vacation, it was painted a warm white and had glass windows which looked in on rounded metallic staircases and long hallways. It encased three marble floors which housed a library, an audio-non visual center, an arts and crafts studio, a recording studio, several offices, a Braille reading room, a cafeteria, a tea-room, a boardroom, a lecture hall, two playrooms, a music room, a music library, a children's activity corner which is where Claire gave her daily story hour, a doggie lounge and a reception area.

The receptionist greeted Claire and gave Eric a visitor's tag. Claire introduced Eric to Anita, her assistant, and asked her to give Eric the grand tour and VIP treatment. Anita's well-rehearsed speech, which she usually gave to visiting donors, celebrities and visiting potential donors, rolled off her tongue as she pointed out the different features and highlights

of the center. She explained that the center employed both sighted and non-sighted individuals; had all manner of state-of-the art devices and was designed to make those who were visually impaired feel comfortable. There was no carpeting except where the children played on the floor so that people would hear each other coming on the tiles. There were fresh flowers in many of the rooms giving off a heady aroma. Each room had its assigned bouquet so that regulars could identify the room by its fragrance. Near the cafeteria, the delicious scent of fresh muffins and coffee wafted tantalizingly in the air, lingering in the hallway. The acoustics were designed to limit too much reverberation and everything seemed to be made with a different fabric, metal and texture so that visitors could easily differentiate between the buttons on the elevator, the different doors in the hallway, even the walls. It was a cornucopia for the senses and Eric was impressed if a bit inundated with sensory detail. Finally, after sampling the muffins and coffee, he arrived back a bit dizzy at Claire's desk.

"Quite a place, you've got here," he said appreciatively.

"We like it," she smiled back.

"Morning, Claire," a pretty, petite, redheaded woman swept by, laden with a carpetbag overflowing with books, papers and tapes.

"Oh, hi, Faith. Come here I'd like you to meet someone. This is Eric he saved my life by almost running into me, yesterday."

"Excuse me?" Faith looked at her quizzically then shook her head. Claire laughed.

"Hi," Eric said giving her a small wave.

"Yeah, hi. Any friend of Claire's..."

"Well, I guess I'll let you ladies get to work. Claire, don't forget, you call me the moment you want me to come and get you," Eric turned to leave but was stopped by the voice of Faith.

"Wait, what did you just say?" Faith had turned to him, her eyes wide and hopeful and a small smile starting to curl the corners of her mouth.

Eric tried to think what he could have said to trigger such an odd reaction. "I said I'd come pick Claire up..." his voice trailed off uncertainly as Faith started circling him.

"Oh, no Eric," Claire said. "I think she's marked you for prey."

Eric started to stammer having no access to anything appropriate to say.

"Did anyone ever tell you, you have a very mellifluous voice?" Faith said walking slowly towards him like she was indeed about to pounce.

Claire was enjoying herself tremendously but the pregnant pause, which followed that statement, cued Claire that an explanation was in order. "Eric, don't be alarmed. Faith is in charge of our recording studio. She makes tapes for our clients of books that are unavailable in audio format and fills special requests. She's very sensitive to voices."

"Your voice is perfect for recording, really nice timbre, slow, articulate, smooth..." Faith continued as if analyzing a voice sample she had come across.

"Uh... well...um..."

"Could I add you to our voice bank?"

Ah, bank. Now there was a word Eric could relate to. A voice bank must mean she had a registry of voices she used.

"Um, sure," he said. "Why not?"

"Great!" Faith leaned back or at least stopped leaning forward. And Eric's nerves relaxed.

"Could you come in on Thursday, say 6:00 p.m.?"

"Well, I...uh... Claire..." He hadn't expected her to ask for his services so soon and considered it strange that this woman should think him articulate.

"I'm sure Sheba will be fine by Thursday, Eric," Claire reassured him. "Where Faith is concerned, it's easier to just relent."

"Sheba? What happened to Sheba?" Faith asked concerned, looking around having just noticed she wasn't at Claire's feet.

"It's a long story, Faith. Well, Eric?"

Eric gave an awkward smile, sighed and nodded his head in submission.

Faith squealed letting Claire know that she had hit her mark as if Eric had ever stood a chance.

Eight

Eric dropped in for a few hours at the bank that afternoon. He wasn't very good at being on vacation.

"Hi Buddy, I thought you were taking a couple of days off," Jerry greeted when he saw Eric.

"I just came in to check a few things."

"I think you miss the point of being on vacation."

"Perhaps," Eric noticed Jerry's smile wither as he turned back to his desk. "Something wrong?"

"Oh, no, you know, just had an altercation with Deb."

"Was it serious?"

"I don't know. She keeps insisting I don't love her," Jerry paused. "I'm starting to believe her." He smiled humorlessly.

Since Eric's experience with women was limited to a handful of very short, bad relationships in which the women claimed that Eric was a social misfit, the last of which had ended three years earlier but not soon enough for Eric, Eric did the only thing he could do

when Jerry spoke of his marital problems. He listened sympathetically. And Jerry was extremely grateful.

Nine

The whole way back to his apartment, Eric couldn't get rid of the niggling feeling that he had seen Faith somewhere before. He had this amazing sensation of déjà-vu when he had seen her and once the adrenaline rush of fight or flight had abandoned him after their rather unorthodox meeting, or more precisely her appealing offensive and his surrender, it irritated him no end that he couldn't remember where he had seen her before.

As he entered the building, he ran into Mrs. Holtz. He almost didn't recognize her as she was sans dog and he couldn't remember seeing her canineless in ages. Something about Mrs. Holtz jolted his neural pathways and he connected her with his attempt to figure out where he had seen Faith before and it irked him so much he did something atypical, he engaged Mrs. Holtz in conversation.

After the usual pleasantries about the weather and inquiry as to her and Mr. Holtz's well being, Eric mentioned that he had been to visit the Center for the Blind.

"Oh, perhaps, you saw my daughter, there," Mrs. Holtz brightened considerably. Her name is Faith, she works in the audio center recording people."

Bingo! Eric had seen a picture of Faith on the Holtz's breakfront. "Yes, I've seen a picture of her in your apartment. Does she visit you often?"

"Well, now, thank goodness. Well, what I mean is..." Mrs. Holtz stammered. "I actually should have told you before because it is thanks to you but things have been so busy what with Heathcliff and everything." Eric noticed that she was carrying a bag of dog food. Large cans of dog food.

"You see," she continued uncomfortably and blushed, "we, that is my daughter and I, had been sort of alienated from each other the last few years. When you brought us Sheba and mentioned she would be a guide dog, well I thought somehow this would be a good opportunity to make it up with her, this being her field of expertise so to speak. So I started taking Sheba for walks near the Center and one day Faith saw us and I guess her curiosity was piqued, she's a very intelligent girl, you know. Anyway she came over to us. I told her what we were doing and she

seemed pleased, that is she seemed taken aback but then she seemed pleased." Mrs. Holtz blinked her eyes a few times in succession and cleared her throat. "I started walking by the Center regularly and one day we went out for coffee. That is for drinks, Faith hates coffee. So anyway, she's visited a few times and...and I really should have thanked you," she finished apologetically.

Eric modestly brushed off her thanks while trying to process this new bit of information.

"You see," and Mrs. Holtz got a dewy far-off look in her eye, "It took Leo and me a while to have children. The doctors said that it might be difficult for me but Leo said that we have to have faith. He kept saying it over and over again and finally, well, when we were blessed with a little girl, Leo said, 'Look, it's because we had faith,' so..."

"You named her Faith," Eric finished gently.

"Yes." They shared a look of understanding. "Well," Mrs. Holtz said with a sigh, "Heathcliff will be wanting his dinner. Leo too for that matter," she laughed nervously. And she slowly turned, leaving

Eric with a grateful smile, which made another chink in the slowly eroding wall of his defenses.

Ten

“Okay,” Faith said adjusting the microphone in front of Eric and plopping down a manuscript before him. It was Thursday at 6:15, Eric had been late getting there and Faith didn’t seem too happy at having her schedule thrown off. She struck Eric, despite giving the impression of being very impulsive, scatterbrained and messy, to actually be very efficient. And starting fifteen minutes late was not efficient.

It was unfortunate that Eric was not self-aware enough to notice the acuity with which he had just read her. Which is just as well because at that particular moment Faith did not want Eric reading her, she wanted him to read from the script in front of him.

“Now, please,” she said into a microphone, calling his attention back to the warm booth in which he sat separated from Faith by a glass wall. “Just say something into the mike while I adjust the frequency.”

“Wh...What should I say?” Eric asked nervously.

"Just recite the alphabet." Faith gave him a reassuring smile.

Eric obediently recited the alphabet although he felt foolish. He hadn't recited the alphabet since first grade. She glanced at him for a minute, gave him a lopsided smile and said, "That was great, thanks. You can have milk and cookies after."

Eric chuckled. That was odd. Eric didn't usually chuckle. They recorded for two hours. Faith would have him stop and repeat phrases; she'd play back a bit so he could hear himself; make suggestions for tone and phrasing or ask him to speak slower or clearer. Eric took nervous sips of water but after about an hour he relaxed into it and Faith needed to stop him less frequently.

They recorded portions of a history book for a mainstreamed high school student having her matriculation exams. Then Eric read out the lines for a 6th grader who was learning his part in the school play. At 8:30 Faith stretched, reminding Eric of the feral feline he had originally associated her with, and said they should call it a night.

Eric was strangely invigorated. He had worked all day and had been sitting in the same spot in deep concentration for two hours but he was suddenly feeling restless. He looked over at Faith. She seemed sapped of energy like a flower when its petals close for the night.

"Too bad she doesn't like coffee," he thought to himself disappointed, as if he had asked her out and she had rejected him when all she had done was sling her heavy bag over her slender shoulder. He decided he was tired after all. Maybe milk and cookies wasn't such a bad idea.

"Eric," she said as they left the Center, "thanks, it was great for a first time. I'll see you on Monday?" she asked rhetorically. Eric had agreed to come twice a week. Eric nodded.

"Do you need a ride?" Eric asked as casually as possible.

"No, I'm fine," she said with a smile of thanks. "Well, g'night." And she strode gracefully and purposefully into the shadows of the concrete jungle leaving Eric looking after her to make sure that she made it safely as far as he could see her.

Eleven

Eric settled into the routine of going twice a week to record at the Center. He also came up with a solution to the problem of his desire to ask Faith out for coffee after every session and his impeding fear that she would say no. He started bringing coffee in. Well, he'd bring coffee for himself and juice or tea or cola for her. He also began accessorizing the drinks with Danish or muffins or bite-sized sandwiches. When Faith laughed that she had gained four pounds since Eric had started his recording sessions but still took a cookie from the bag he proffered her, he felt elated. Although later, when he was home sitting and staring at his aquarium, he wondered if perhaps there weren't a better way to win her favor than by making her fat. But in any case, he felt it was a positive step forward. Although where he was headed, he had no idea.

Twelve

“I have something special for you tonight,” she grinned one evening. “I hope you’re a romantic at heart,” she said in what sounded like a teasing voice. Eric’s heart skipped a beat. He started to panic. What did that mean? And what was he afraid of? Didn’t he want her to think he was romantic? But Eric wasn’t romantic. At least he didn’t think he was. No woman he had ever dated had given him that impression. Faith was talking again it was best to pay attention.

“There’s this really sweet man in my building...” Was she going to tell him something about her and this man? Now he didn’t feel good. He prodded himself to keep listening.

“Anyway, it’s his and his wife’s 50th anniversary and he wanted to do something special for her,” Faith was still smiling at him in a nervous sort of way. “He asked me if I would take his wife’s favorite poems and record them for her so she could play them whenever she wanted. Her sight’s been failing for a number of years and she can’t read them. He made

me a list of her favorites. I thought your voice would be the best one for the job." She smiled encouragingly.

Faith held out a sheaf of papers and Eric took it from her. Her perfume seemed to hover in the air between them. Eric licked his lips and tried to focus on the words in front of him. They went through the familiar routine of getting an acoustic balance.

"Now remember, this is romantic poetry," Faith sighed like this was going to be an onerous task. "So put emotion into it," she finished. Eric looked at her for a long moment. She was looking back. He wished he knew what she was thinking but he thought it rude to ask. "Start with the sonnet, okay?"

"The what?"

"Shakespeare. The sonnet. First page."

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Eric read. "Thou art more lovely and more temperate." He gave an ironic smile. "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May..."

Faith stopped him. "Could you, um, perhaps do it a bit more, uh," she sighed again unable to find the term she was looking for. "Like you're in love."

"In love?"

"Yes."

"Like I'm in love."

"Yes."

"Okay. " Eric loosened his shoulders. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Eric began again. Eric closed his eyes and imagined how it would feel to say this to a woman he had known and loved for 50 years. "It must be wonderful to love someone for 50 years," he thought with longing. He let his mind wander to thoughts of meadows and spring and freshly cut grass and love "...So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Eric finished but didn't look up. Faith hadn't said anything. He looked up at her. She had tears in her eyes. She stared at him a moment then looked away then cleared her throat.

"Um, yes, fine. That was okay," she said riffling some notes. "Let's continue."

They continued that night and the next session. It would take one more session to finish the tape. Faith tried not to stop him too frequently. She said she didn't want to break the mood. With poetry it was important to flow, she had explained. Eric knew what the poems were going to be so the day before the last recording session, Eric decided to learn the poem by heart. It was Marlowe's poem, *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*.

"Come live with me and be my love, And we will all the pleasures prove," Eric intoned to the Xerox machine at the bank.

"What are you doing?" Jerry came up behind him. Eric jumped and held his notes fast to his chest. "Why are you reciting poetry to the copy machine?"

"Er... I'm rehearsing."

"Rehearsing?" Jerry raised an eyebrow. "Hey, you finally got yourself a girl?"

"No, no... it's um, you remember... I told you I was recording at the Center?" Jerry nodded. "Well, it's for that."

"Uh, uh." Jerry furrowed his forehead. "Do you think that um maybe that could help me? You know, with Deb. She's been mentioning the D word lately."

Eric felt sorry for Jerry. He must really be in a bad state if he was asking Eric for romantic assistance. Then he remembered how Faith looked at him with a dreamy look in her eye every time he read a poem. She even fogged up the glass once. Of course Eric knew it was because she liked the poetry, nothing to do with him. Still... Eric shrugged. "Sure, Jerry, just read her some Browning and she'll melt."

"Where do I get some of this stuff?"

Eric looked around as if he was hoping some minstrel would come strolling by at any moment.

"'Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove...' This doesn't even rhyme," Jerry said looking at the sheaf of papers Eric was holding.

"Yes, it does. You're just not reading it right," Eric said.

"Hey, maybe we can just copy those," Jerry gestured to the papers.

Eric turned around. He was trapped between the hopeful look of his colleague and the Xerox machine.

"We're not allowed to do personal photocopying at work," he reminded his friend in feeble protest.

"This is work related," Jerry protested. "If my wife is unhappy, I'm unhappy. If I'm unhappy, my work performance suffers. If my work performance suffers, I'm not an asset to the bank."

Eric sighed. If anyone had told him that he would be photocopying love poems at work, he would have sent them for therapy. But somehow, the way his life had been going, this seemed like a normal thing to be doing. And had he stopped to think about it, this observation would have worried him.

Thirteen

Eric was glad to be home. It had been a long day and he wanted nothing more than to sit in his cool, air-conditioned apartment, eat something light and stare at his aquarium. But as he opened the door to his apartment building, something unexpected caught his attention. Faith. Faith was standing in the lobby, arm in arm with a tall, good looking, blond man who looked to be a few years younger than her. Something in Eric's chest constricted and it wasn't from the exertion expended from getting from his car into the building in the summer heat. Faith was fixing her hair in the mirror and turned around when she saw Eric's reflection, a nervous smile on her face. She was wearing a lovely chiffon dress and a string of pearls and an angelic expression. Eric very much wanted to sit down but there were no chairs in the lobby. They had been removed because of the traffic of slobbering dogs.

"Hi Eric," Faith ventured.

"Faith," Eric nodded completely ignoring her escort.

"What a surprise!"

"It's my birthday," she said tentatively. "My parents invited us for dinner."

"Oh, well, Happy Birthday!" Eric tried to muster the necessary enthusiasm.

"Thanks. Oh this is, Harold."

Eric automatically extended his hand in a formal gesture and shook hands with the younger man.

"He's my brother," Faith added.

Eric suddenly gripped Harold's hand as if he were an old friend he hadn't seen since high school. Harold returned his unexpected warmth if a bit taken aback.

"Yeah, it's a family reunion," Harold said dryly. "We haven't been together for 5..."

"...8..."

"...10 years."

"Oh," Eric was once more at a loss for words.

"But Faith said that if she could put the past behind her, I could too and come give her moral support on this very special birthday."

"Say, why don't you join us?" Faith asked impulsively.

"Oh, uh, well... no, I couldn't. This is a family gathering kind of thing..." Eric stammered.

"No, no, please," Faith cajoled, suddenly transformed into a little girl. An endearing little girl. "It's my birthday."

"How old are you?" Eric asked teasingly.

"Thir..."

"26," Came a strong voice from the hallway. "Faith, Harold, I'm so glad you could come," Said Mrs. Holtz with a strained, cheery calm. "You're just in time, dinner's ready."

"Hi, Mom," Faith said going over to her mother and giving her a quick peck on the cheek. Her mother closed her eyes and smiled. "I was just asking Eric if he'd like to join us."

"Oh, yes, please do," Mrs. Holtz said with obvious sincerity apparently hoping to recruit Eric to her side of the family... reunion.

Eric thought of about 12 reasons why he shouldn't agree.

"Okay," he said. "Thank you. I'll just go upstairs for a minute and change. Don't wait for me to start."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Holtz in a no nonsense voice. "We'll wait."

Ten minutes later Eric was back at the Holtz's apartment. It seemed like they were waiting for him not only to begin eating but to begin talking. The atmosphere warmed up considerably (not an insignificant thing considering they were in the middle of a heat wave), when he entered. Everyone was relieved when he did, most of all Faith who looked at him gratefully throughout dinner and gave him a flirtatious wink before making her wish and blowing out the candles on the cake.

Fourteen

Jerry fairly danced into work a few days later, grabbed Eric in a bear hug, which wasn't easy to do since Eric was a lot taller and broader than him, and squeezed.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," he whispered earnestly. "It worked, the poetry worked," he said releasing a speechless and breathless Eric. "I can't get over it. She finally believes I love her just because I spewed some stanzas. You should have seen her," he continued walking around his desk, putting his briefcase on it and taking off his jacket. "Actually, better you didn't. She was overcome with emotion! And I have you to thank for it," he said grabbing him again.

"Well, I, um... I'm glad it helped."

Jerry sat down and sighed deeply. "Thing is, I'm not exactly sure why it worked but... I'm glad it did."

"Me too," Eric agreed having nothing better to say.

Then Jerry opened an expensive cigar case and handed Eric a cigar.

"Thanks, I don't smoke."

"Doesn't matter. Take one anyway. I'm going to be a father," he said beaming.

"Congratulations!" Eric jumped up and grabbed his hand. "That's wonderful! When?"

"I don't know."

"Sorry?" Eric's face reflected his confusion.

"You see, Deb's agreed to try and have a baby," he explained taking a seat opposite Eric. "All these years, she's been hesitant because she never felt secure in our relationship. But the poetry, Eric, buddy, the poetry did it, now she's ready to have a family. I just don't know how to thank you."

"Well, that's terrific. Really. Congratulations! I hope it's soon. I may even smoke this thing," he looked askance at the cigar.

"Thanks. Maybe you'll start a family of your own soon." He paused meaningfully. "So how's it going with the girl from the audio place? What's her name again?"

"Faith."

"Right. So how's it going?"

"I'm not sure. I, I like her. She seems to like me but..."

"Of course she does. What's not to like?" Eric stared at him uncertainly. "Well, I'm sure it will work out. Just believe in yourself. You're great at this romance stuff! A real natural! You've just got to have faith," he said and guffawing at his own joke lit a cigar only to extinguish it seconds later in a cloud of spluttering, coughing and smoke.

Fifteen

Eric was sitting opposite Faith, separated from her, as usual, by a wall.

“Okay Eric, you know what to do,” Faith said bending over the mike. Eric had undone his tie and taken off his jacket. It was hot in the recording booth or maybe it just seemed so. The air conditioning was working and the evening air outside was cool.

Eric had taken to amusing them both by spewing bits of famous monologues, imaginary news headlines and sports commentaries while Faith, paying more attention to the acoustics than the content, adjusted the controls. It helped him loosen up and get into the mood. It didn’t hurt making Faith laugh occasionally either. Only this time, Eric didn’t do any of that. He sat frozen in place, his breathing shallow.

“Eric? You okay” Faith looked concerned.

“Uh, yeah, fine, thanks, sorry.”

“Go ahead, then.” Faith eyed him carefully.

Eric took a deep breath before plunging. Then he said, softly and deliberately, in a slow, measured voice,

“Faith. I know that I cannot live without Faith. I know that as well as I know anything. I love you, Faith. I don’t want there to be a wall between us anymore. Come live with me and be my love. Marry me. Please marry me, Faith.”

The words hung in the air hovering either side of the glass partition. Faith had slowly looked up while he spoke, her jaw dropping in slow motion, her eyes wide, her whole expression frozen in wonder. Time was suspended like in a photograph. Faith gaped at him for a moment. A very long moment.

“Please say something,” Eric pleaded. The truth was, he hadn’t intended to say it. He had thought about saying it for weeks while he stood in the shower, while he drove to work, while he stood by his aquarium feeding his fish, while sitting opposite her in the studio. He had taken to avoiding the Holtzes fearful they could read his mind.

Now that he had said it, he couldn’t breathe. He was taut as a coil.

A small smile played itself tentatively on Faith’s face.

"Are you serious?" she asked. He nodded. "You know," she said slowly, "you can't change your mind. I've got you on tape."

Suddenly, somehow, there was more air in the recording booth, and the hot lights were like a thousand suns. "Is that a yes?" he dared.

"That's a yes," she confirmed. And she smiled a genuine, warm smile, which wafted over Eric like a summer's breeze. A summer's breeze carrying a light, promising rain to the parched desert of his lonely existence.

He smiled back. They said nothing. Although they were in a recording studio, no words were necessary.

Sixteen

Faith was lying in the back seat of the car clawing at the upholstery and moaning. Eric was taking shallow breaths trying desperately, for once, to keep his mind completely focused on the road and not let it wander. Especially not to his wife in the back seat.

She let out a yelp.

“Just hold on,” Eric told Faith, we’re ten minutes from the hospital.

“I don’t have ten minutes,” she said urgently, breathlessly and with a sense of immediacy that Eric couldn’t ignore.

This was not the kind of situation Eric was good at handling. But since one of them had to remain calm, it was up to him. He was stopped at a light and cast a furtive and frantic look in the streets around him. He was looking for a miracle. Hope billowed in his chest as he saw one.

“Sweetheart, I’ll get you to a doctor in two minutes.” Eric cut across two lanes and turned right. Thankfully,

there weren't many cars on the road; a road which seemed to have been leading Eric to his destiny over the last few years.

He parked in the parking lot of the small clinic. "Don't move, I'll be right back," he told his young, whimpering wife unnecessarily as she screamed again.

He ran through the empty reception area and burst in on the doctor treating a patient.

"Dr., you've got to come out to my car, it's an emergency, my wife's giving birth."

Dr. Baker looked up from the Pekinese on his table. "Mr. Mittleman I'm a vet, take her to a people hospital."

"I can't, there's no time, please," he said in desperation tinged with hysteria.

Dr. Baker secured the Pekinese and ran outside after Eric.

"Oh my goodness!" he said. The baby wasn't waiting around for anyone. Faith was breathing hard, Eric

was sweating and Dr. Baker took a few steadying breaths and said a silent prayer.

"It's...it's a girl," Dr. Baker proclaimed with happy relief, less than five minutes later and all three of them burst into tears. Then Dr. Baker remembered that the baby should be crying too and gave her a pat on the backside for a job well done. After all it's not easy to be birthed by a vet in the back of a Pontiac.

Dr. Baker put the baby on Faith's stomach and told Eric to watch them while he went to get some clean blankets, water and a few medical instruments. Watch them? Eric couldn't take his eyes off them. And as Eric carefully drove his wife and daughter to the hospital, 15 minutes later, he thought that he had never been so happy.

Seventeen

“Oh they’re beautiful!” cooed Faith as she took the bouquet of pink and white roses from her beaming husband who kissed her and his daughter on the forehead.

“No, you’re beautiful, both of you!” he said.

“Deb called, all excited to give me some tips. The big expert, two months ahead of me,” Faith smirked.

“Where’s your mother?” Eric asked expecting to see the doting new grandmother in her usual place, fussing over Faith.

“Oh, she and Dad went on an emergency shopping trip to buy the 76 things we didn’t think of. I guess now she has a granddaughter, she’ll have someone else to keep her busy besides dogs.”

Eric smiled. That is his smile deepened. He hadn’t stopped smiling for the last couple of days except in the few hours which he slept.

“I think maybe we should decide on a name,” Faith said looking at her baby adoringly. The baby yawned.

"I don't think there's a name that could do her justice." They both stared at her a moment in silence. "How about Grace?" Eric offered in a moment of inspiration. The baby opened her eyes and looked at Eric. "Look, she likes it."

"It suits her," Faith agreed. "Hi Grace," Faith cooed. "Say hi to your dad."

Grace didn't say hi to her dad just then. She closed her eyes and fell back to sleep in her mother's warm embrace. In fact she didn't say anything intelligible until she was about 10 months old and her first word was "A-da". Unfortunately she wasn't referring to her father. A- da was her word for dog or a dog to be more precise and she said it first and thereafter to refer to Sheba when Claire visited. But Eric didn't mind. He knew that he owed a lot to Sheba. Especially since she sat stoic uncomplaining whenever Grace pulled on her ears, which was quite often. Sheba would just look at Eric complacently and wag her tail and Eric would pat her head fondly and gratefully. He had so much to be grateful for.

Eighteen

Life is a circle. Each action sets off another, which goes around and comes back to us, like ripples in the water of a lake, bubbles in an aquarium and waves lapping the shores of a distant tropical paradise. Ripples and bubbles and waves that resound in harmony through eternity.



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