

ETERNAL BELOVED

by Thom Bennett

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“Eternal Beloved” is a story inside the book “Promises
and Other White Lies”

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Also by Thom Bennett

The Death Merchants

13 Tales from the Dark

Ravens Cliff

The Christmas House (12 Tales of Holiday Magic)

The Man With Hemingway's Face



PART 1: THE INVITATION

The last time I saw my grandfather alive was on Christmas Eve, 1999, and he had something important to tell me. It's not that we didn't keep in touch—we usually spoke on the phone every week, and we'd have dinner together almost every month. It was the gentle sense of urgency in his voice that had brought me to his century home in the country on that blustery winter night toward the end of the last century. He had made the request, and I was happy to answer the call.

By that time, Grandfather was well into his 80s, and although still as sharp as the proverbial tack, he was slowing down considerably. Since the death of my grandmother, he had lived alone in the Ontario farmhouse, just outside the village of Rockwood, and with the exception of myself and a housekeeper (who would appear three times a week to perform her cleaning magic), visitors were few. Very few.

He was not to be pitied, however, for he had a plethora of friends—friends who had attended decades of his classes over the years and who kept in touch with him through the modern miracle of personal computers. Grandfather delighted in the use of emails, as well as the marvels of the Internet.

“My Lord, Eddy,” he would say to me, “the research I could have done, if I’d had this bewitching contraption 30 or 40 years ago!”

On the night of our last dinner together, the streetlights were just going on when I pulled into his driveway. The day had been clear and bright, but now there was a distinct chill in the air, and it was just beginning to sprinkle with snow as I trudged up the walkway. At the door, I gingerly moved aside the giant holiday wreath and, finding the brass door knocker, signaled my arrival with several authoritative clanks. As the sound reverberated throughout the house, I wondered, once again, what could be so important for me to visit this evening, when I would be seeing him the next day for our family Christmas dinner. However, I didn’t have long to ponder the mystery, for no sooner had the echoes of the door knocker died away into deathly silence than he was opening the door, relieving me of my winter coat and scarf and receiving me into the rich warmth and security of his den.

A welcoming fire was already blazing in the hearth, and as I settled into the soft comfort of an armchair, Grandfather busied himself with pouring us drinks. Looking around, I was enrapt, as usual, with a deep sense of shelter as I gazed at the dark walnut paneling and the towering bookcases that held a lifetime of research and study. Even the dark red, velvet curtains seemed to act as a buckler, shielding the inhabitants from the worries and anxieties of a troubling world without.

“*Sláinte*,” said my grandfather, in his usual Gaelic toast, as he handed me our traditional libation in a glistening cut-glass tumbler.

“Cheers,” I responded, and then settled in to wait for his customary small talk before getting down to the business I felt would follow in due course.

We slowly sipped our drinks and exchanged pleasantries about the most recent political shenanigans. I then brought him up to date on

university events over the last few weeks. I had followed him into the world of academe, majoring in Ancient History instead of his field of English Literature. In point of fact, I had received my professorship at the same college as he had, traveled the same roads he had, but begun my trek some 50 years after he had commenced his long and illustrious career.

The university was located in a major southern Ontario city, only some 45 minutes' drive east of the original family homestead, which was located in a charming community on the banks of the River Blair. He had moved to Canada from the British Isles when just a babe in arms, and had spent most of his life within a 100-mile radius of the Blair. It was only after his retirement from the university that he left the banks of the Blair to relocate in the quaint shelter of the Rockwood farmhouse.

It had always been a mystery to me why he had moved, so late in life, to the tiny farming village, but a sense of gratitude, mingled with a touch of avarice, compelled me to stop any attempt at protest. Happily, he had sold me the family homestead on the Blair well below its market value.

"So, Eddy," he was saying, "what do you think of the onrushing century?"

I responded, "Aside from the possible threat to computer clockworks at the moment of Y2K, I figure it will be business as usual."

"Very wise of you, my boy. The day after the first day of the 21st century will be pretty much the same as the day before. With one personal difference, I suspect."

"What's that, Grandfather?"

"To be honest with you, Eddy, I don't believe I'll see much of the new millennium."

"Don't say that," I protested, fixing him with a look that couldn't begin to convey the depth of my hurt. "Please, Grandfather, don't say that."

"It's true, son. I believe that I haven't much time." As he set down his glass, he heaved a small, tired sigh, raised his hand in a somewhat curious sign of benediction and concluded, "That's why

I've asked you to come this evening. I have something to tell you that really can't wait."

I sat in stunned silence, waiting for him to continue but not really wishing to hear what he had to say. I believed, at that moment, that he really was speaking the truth, and this evening would be the last time I would see him alive.

"Very well, Eddy," he continued, "do you wish to hear it now, or shall we wait until after dinner?"

"If it's all the same with you, Grandfather, I think I'd like to hear it now." Then, in an attempt at levity, I said, "I've suddenly lost my appetite."

"Excellent, my dear boy," he chuckled, "*Now*, it will be. Let us draw near to the fire, enjoy our drinks, and I'll tell you a story that may not change the course of your life, but will definitely be a dark winter night's entertainment."

With that, my grandfather, the man whom I had loved and emulated throughout my life, told the following story.

PART 2: GRANDFATHER'S TALE

I've always loved this home, Eddy, ever since I first laid eyes on it. And I've loved it for a number of different reasons. It is architecturally perfect in its symmetry, evocative of the land and its geography, and is located just off the main highway where it is hidden away in a secret, rural embrace. It is also near to the Rockwood church, which, in my heart of hearts, I believe to be the most perfect little kirk in all of southern Ontario. Of course, it was also the home wherein *she* lived.

When I first started teaching at the university, I'd stay in residence during the week, like many of the students, and would then drive home on the weekends—back to the old homestead on the banks of the Blair. In those days, the trek by car took much longer than it does today, and so I would often turn off the highway here, purchase a cold nickel Coke at the general store, or pull off to the side of the dirt road that wandered up to the old churchyard.

One auspicious day, I even fell asleep, leaning up against a tombstone that marked the final resting place of an entire family of Rockwood denizens. In retrospect, I should have felt embarrassed to be discovered there that early autumn day at the beginning of my second year of teaching at the university.

But I must admit that I wasn't. For it was *she* who found me, lying there in all innocence, oblivious to the gathering dusk, my mouth wide open and evidently snoring up a storm.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?" she demanded in a low voice that appeared to be colored with anger, but held a delicious hint of devilry.

Standing above me was a robustly healthy young woman who possessed a head of thick, dark hair clipped back in a French knot that belied her age—she must not have been a day over 20. She appeared to stand almost as tall as I and was blessed with a pair of beautiful

eyes that were neither gray nor green, but had a startling luminescence that shone out from slightly turned-down lids that were softly characteristic of English stock. Her full lower lip pouted sensuously below a cupid's smile that told me she was not too upset by my late afternoon intrusion into what must have been her private retreat. I stammered some kind of inadequate apology, and her smile turned into a full-blown grin.

Within 10 minutes, I learned that her name was Elizabeth Main, that her parents had come over from the old country to start up a beef farm in southern Ontario, and when not attending to farm chores, she acted as caretaker for the Rockwood church.

I also realized that I was hopelessly in love with her.

Each Friday throughout the fall term, I returned to the Rockwood cemetery, where Elizabeth and I met to exchange pleasantries, and where I'd help her with her autumn raking. While we attended to her chores, I'd bring her up to date on the news of the outside world. Although her parents owned a Viking floor model radio, which was located in the receiving room to the right of the front hall, it was only used on Sunday evenings after church service. And then, it was felt by her sire that world news, even if it was available, was not nearly as important as spiritual music. Thus, it was my pleasant duty to inform the quick-minded Elizabeth what went on in the world at large. I was not only proud to show off my mundane knowledge, but also enjoyed feeling like the courageous Cyrano as he furnished his beloved Roxane with his weekly gazette.

Some Fridays, the work would go quickly, and then we'd drive the short distance to the general store, which looked somewhat like a transplant from the American southwest, with its wooden sidewalk out front and its pillared balcony above. As we sipped our Coca-Colas, I could almost imagine hearing an old honky-tonk piano plinking away inside. There, she would listen to my news reporting, as well as numerous tales told out of school about the latest skulduggery my

rascally students had perpetrated upon their instructor, who wasn't quite as naïve as they thought. Then she would laugh, a full-throated sound that was neither vulgar nor artifice, but pure joy.

It was not too long before she invited me to her home and introduced me to her parents, who were fine folk indeed. I declare the Mains to be *fine*, not only because they were God-fearing, hardworking citizens of the soil, but they immediately took a liking to your most grateful grandfather. They welcomed me into their home without reservation. It was as if they had long envisioned a particular individual who would be the perfect mate for their daughter, and I was *he*. Casual handshakes and polite salutations soon became extended conversations and, then, invitations to stay to dinner. Before the leaves were all off the oak and maple trees that gathered about the Rockwood church, I was being invited to stay the weekend; and as the first frosts of autumn nipped at our cheeks, I was joining Elizabeth and her family in the little stone kirk to celebrate the binding rituals of Harvest Home.

By then, my love for her was a sweet ache that infused every fiber of my body. At times, I could hardly breathe when I looked upon her, and the touch of her hand, as we walked though those late autumn woods that surrounded the churchyard and encompassing property, sent an electric thrill throughout my entire being. I felt, then, as I still do to this day, that we were companions of the soul, born at different times and places, but destined to be wed in eternal togetherness.

“But Grandfather,” I interrupted as he sat before the fire finishing his glass of pre-Christmas cheer. “She was not your wife. When did Grandmother come into the picture?”

"Patience, my boy," he said. "You're getting ahead of my story. At the time of my romance with Elizabeth Main, I didn't even know your grandmother. I would not meet her for another five years."

"That's reassuring, but what happened? Did you stop seeing the young woman? Did something prevent you from marrying her?"

"You might say that, Eddy. Indeed you might." Then he struggled out of his reading chair and shuffled over to an occasional lamp that stood in the corner of the den, where two bookcases met. By this time, the room was becoming gloomy in its artificial twilight, and he commenced to enhance the dying firelight by turning on several room lamps.

"How do you feel now," he asked me. "Are you hungry yet, or do you think another drink is in order?"

"Perhaps another one," I said. "Just a small one, though. The story is most intriguing, and I don't wish to dull my senses."

"I should hope not," he replied. "I have a way to go yet, and I believe the wait will more than justify your patience." Slowly, but quite methodically, he finished his circumnavigation of the den until the room was lit to his satisfaction. Then, returning to the drinks tray, he busied himself over a cut crystal decanter and its matching stopper.

"May I help?" I asked, moving to get out of my chair, but Grandfather waved me away.

When the drinks were replenished, Grandfather moved slowly, but with a sense of determination, over to his desk, opened one of the drawers and brought forth an old book that, at first glance, appeared to be well over 100 years old.

"This was hers, my son," said the old man. "I found it years ago, when I first moved into this house. It was sitting over there on the mantle, as if it were waiting all that time, just for me."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It was her Bible, the one she was to carry with her on our wedding day. Now, it contains all that you'll need to know after I am gone."

"Grandfather..." I began, but I realized it would be futile to protest.

"It contains my last will and testament," Grandfather

continued. "It also leaves instructions for my burial in our little cemetery, as well as one particular document that I'll let you see before you leave this evening. In fact, it will supply the last paragraph of my little story."

"What...?"

"Later, my boy. First, let me finish the tale of your grandfather and his beloved Elizabeth."

We had set the date for our wedding for the last Saturday of November, 1937. It was exactly four weeks before Christmas, far enough away that our nuptials didn't interfere with the holiday celebrations, but close enough to take advantage of the decorations and joy of the season.

The autumn semester had already finished, and I had spent the previous two days marking term papers at the university. When I arrived in Rockwood in the middle of the afternoon on the Friday, Elizabeth and I met at the church door, where she was already hanging boughs of holly. We moved inside the tiny narthex, where she and I embraced. I could taste the cool nectar of her lips, as we held each other close and whispered our undying love. All of our plans were coming together, and in twenty-four hours we would be man and wife.

As we moved inside the nave of the tiny kirk, I noticed that the interior was already warm. She had lit the small stove several hours before, in expectation of our joyous reunion and the decorating work, yet to be finished. Walking down the short center aisle, she proudly showed me the gay ornaments that she had placed on the ends of each pew. In keeping with the season, there were bright red bows, festooned with sprigs of holly and berries. Above the four lancet arched windows on each wall of the nave, as well as the two on the western wall beside the entranceway, my darling had hung lush garlands of pine boughs, intermingled with more ribbons and bows. Nestled within each, as if the decorations were specially made for their abode, were miniature

families of seasonal birds that she had fashioned out of paper and cloth, and framed with scarlet berries and various kinds of pine cones. At the base of each garland, a sprig of mistletoe impishly dangled, one of which suddenly appeared in her hand and was thrust over my head.

“Would it be too improper of us,” she teased, “if we stole one more kiss within this house of God before tomorrow?”

“I’m sure that the good Lord won’t mind,” I replied.

And we hurriedly consummated the deed, followed by a youthful attack of the giggles.

Later, after having finished decorating the chancel and either side of the tiny transept, we sat down in the back row and admired our handiwork. Then, knowing that the evening ahead, as well as the morning of our wedding day, was going to be hectic, I recited my gazette to her. Events were not going well in Europe, although there had been some good news—the World’s Fair in Paris had just finished yesterday, and there had been a reported 31 million visitors.

“That’s an awful number of people,” my dearest one said, as a slight smile played about her lovely lips.

“Indeed it is,” I agreed, trying to sound solemn, but not making a very good job of it. “Then there are the rich and famous. Yesterday was Lewis K. Rockefeller’s 60th birthday.”

“Which one is he?” she said. “I always get those Rockefellers mixed up.”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, “but I do know that today is the 330th day of the year, unless it’s a leap year. Is it a leap year?”

“No, my darling. Last year was a leap year.” And with that, she leaned over, took my face in both her hands and kissed me deeply.

I returned the kiss and said, “Oh, my beloved one, I love you so very much. You will always be the love of my life.”

“And you mine,” she said. “I will love you throughout all eternity.”

That was the last time we ever spoke to each other of love.

The next morning, I was up, bathed, shaved and breakfasted by nine o’clock.

My future father-in-law had arranged for me to pick up the plants and fresh-cut flowers

for the church. They had been ordered from a merchant in the nearest town, which in today's parlance would be referred to as a bedroom community of the university city in which I taught. I set out shortly after 9:30, dropped off my wedding garments at the church in case I was late returning, and then drove to the highway, where I began what was normally a 15- to 20-minute journey.

The trip to town was without incident, and I arrived at the florist's shop shortly after 10 o'clock. I then spent a pleasurable half hour or so picking up the flowers, packing them in my car, and then visiting the Saturday morning farmers' market, which was already bustling. It was my plan to shop for a little something extra for my bride-to-be, whose beautiful likeness and declaration of love in the church yesterday haunted my thoughts. In observance of the ancient ritual, she had kept discreetly closeted that morning, and I only had those gentle images of the previous afternoon to satisfy my hungry imagination. Only those images would have to satisfy me until we met later that day before the church altar.

By the time I was finished at the market and back on the road again, it was nearing 11 in the morning. Although not a cause for alarm, as I had two hours before the service was to begin, I felt a need to be on my way and not dally. All went well for the first five minutes or so, the time that it took me to exit the downtown core, drive up the treacherous rock cut that abutted the town limits and attain the summit of the surrounding escarpment. It was there that I encountered the fog.

What should have taken me only 15 minutes suddenly became a challenge that set my heart pounding and forced me to grip the steering wheel with extraordinary pressure. What started out as a light mist gradually, mile by mile, became a dense curtain of gray, and my mind chilled, thinking that a sudden blizzard of snow would have been more navigable. Nevertheless, I pushed on, searching through the thick gloom that sat resolutely in front of my car's hood, creeping along the

road at speeds barely quicker than walking. I drove as if by instinct, my hands remembering the way of the well-traveled highway more acutely than my mind. I risked a glance at my watch, noting to my horror that an entire hour had slipped by. My mind pitched, urging my body to commence a rocking motion that, in its rhythmic lurch, attempted to urge the vehicle forward.

At one point in time, I thought I heard the voice of my beloved Elizabeth calling to me, urging me on. But the sound of her voice faded in and out, now soft and plaintive, now roaring like the sound of my own blood coursing through my head. Indeed, I wasn't sure if this was real or simply a part of my fevered imagination. In any event, I traveled onward, foot by foot, yard by yard, in that almost impenetrable fog.

I do not know, even to this day, how I made the journey. Whether it was due to blind luck, divine providence or some inexplicable supernatural intervention, I was able to pull off the highway. The fog was dissipating into wisps of white vapor to reveal the Rockwood church up ahead. I frantically pulled off the side of the road by the kirk's parking lot, pulled up the hand brake, and shut off the engine.

My watch read almost one o'clock. The wedding was to begin at any moment. However, there was no other car, or vehicle of any kind, in the parking lot. The lot was empty. And when I ran up to the church door, I found that it was locked. So was the only other door, the one on the south transept through which the minister might enter or exit. However, no minister would appear that day.

Indeed, no wedding would take place on that last Saturday of November, 1937.

"What happened?" I cried, after a moment of breathless silence.

"I waited," Grandfather said. "Hoping and praying that they

would come. That she would come. But after 10 or 15 minutes, I realized that something was horribly wrong and that no one was coming.”

“What happened?” I said again. “What did you do?”

“I drove to their home. This home. I knocked on the door, and waited for what seemed to be an eternity. I knocked several times, each time more loudly, more frantically. When I was about to give up, the door slowly opened, revealing an old man. Not recognizing him, I asked him who he was, where the Mains were. But he only blinked his rheumy eyes and muttered something that was completely unintelligible”

“For the love of God, Grandfather, you must have been frantic. What happened to the Mains. What happened to your Elizabeth?”

With that, Grandfather tentatively rose from his chair and moved once more to the desk. This time, he picked up the Bible, turned it slowly over in his gnarled hands and gently shook his head. After heaving a deep sigh, he gently removed a card from within, set the holy book down upon the desk and shuffled over to me. Thrusting the card at me, he once again took his seat by the slowly dying fire.

Looking at the card, I said, “What is this? I don’t understand it at all. Is it some kind of joke?”

“It is no joke, my boy. It is what it appears to be. No more, no less. You may shake your head in consternation, but the crux of the mystery lies before you. Right there, in your hands, on that invitation card.”

That Saturday afternoon, the one when I was to take my vows of marriage, I stood in front of this house, begging the old man who appeared to live here to tell me what had happened to the Main family, what had happened to my beloved one. All he could do was shake his head in bewilderment. I asked him if there was anyone else in the house who could answer my questions, but he just shook his head, let

a tear roll down his weathered face and mumbled something about a pity, a tragic pity.

Eventually, I gave up and drove into the village, where I stopped at the general store to find a solution to my dilemma. However, when I got there, I didn't see any familiar faces. I didn't recognize any of the handful of customers; the clerk behind the counter was a complete stranger. When I asked about the Mains, and young Elizabeth Main in particular, he simply shrugged his shoulders and replied that they had not lived in the old farmhouse for almost a quarter century. Overhearing our conversation, one of the customers completed my growing sense of horror, and informed me that the unfortunate daughter of the family had died years ago, sometime very early in the century. Local rumor suggested that she'd died on or around the day that she was to have been married. The mother was believed to have followed her, dying of a broken heart, and the father eventually sold the house to his older brother and family, and then moved out of the area.

It was shortly before the death of the brother's only child that I bought the house near the end of the 1970s. I've been living in it ever since, Eddy. First, with my wife, your grandmother, then alone since her death. Perhaps I should amend that and say *almost* alone.

You might very well ask, my boy, what it is that I mean by *almost alone*. You see, after all these years, *she* has come for me. Go ahead, my boy. Look at the card again. Read our wedding invitation. Read where it says that the wedding service will take place at one o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, November 27...1909!"

PART 3: FAREWELL

I never saw my grandfather alive again, as he died that same night. He'd had a good, long life, was honored and respected by many, had married well and raised a fine family, and, of course, had a love affair that went beyond the bounds of nature. On that final evening, during the dinner that followed his story, we hardly spoke about the variance between the wedding date set in his lifetime and the one that had been arranged during the life of Elizabeth Main. Whether it was all a dream in the mind of a young, overworked scholar, a rip in the fabric of nature's time-space continuum or some macabre joke of providence will never be known. Whatever the explanation, it is insignificant now. He is at peace.

In the spring of the first year of the 21st century, my grandfather's body was laid to rest beside my grandmother in the little cemetery of Rockwood. Above them, a modern stone proclaims their dates. Beside his resting place, a much older grave, a much older marker. On it, the name of his eternal beloved: Elizabeth Helen Main, Born—1889, Died—1909. It is as it should be, and I am content.

For when I left him that December evening, I carried with me her Bible with all of Grandfather's personal instructions inside. I carried it out of the house, the home that he had loved so much, and I waved to him a final farewell. He stood at the downstairs window, the one where he kept his den to the left of the entranceway. I waved to him, knowing that he'd never be alone again. For above the front door, in the center window on the second floor, I could see the curtains move and the shadowy figure that stood behind them.

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About the Author:

Thom has published five plays, including his most performed work “Dark Rituals” and the thrillers “Club Dead” and “Ravens Cliff”. Others include a stage version of the Anthony Hope classic “The Prisoner of Zenda” (co-authored with Elizabeth Ferns), and his popular family fantasy “Return to Wonderland”. Book publications include “The Death Merchants”, the illustrated Halloween collection “13 Tales from the Dark”, and “The Christmas House, 12 Tales of Holiday Magic”.

Look for “The Man With Hemingway’s Face”, a sequel to “The Death Merchants”, featuring the enigmatic detective Cass Gentry.

A former teacher, Thom has a PhD in Educational Systems Development and is a recipient of the Canada 125 Award.