

Eric is changin' the World

"Darling, Eric came up to me and said he's going to change the world... And I thought 'twas down right silly... Well, until he started to. I mean, for God's sake, he's only ten! What was I doing when I was ten? Jesus... Watching toons on TV or playing shoot'em marbles.." Jesse eyes went as far as thirty steps away, in a grassy opening under a great tree, his son Eric was playing an imaginary battle. "I can't even believe that I'm here now... It's all because of him you know, otherwise I wouldn't really be here, and I know, it's a crappy thing to say, I should be visiting you more often, but I know you and I had a bit of a falling out but I'm here now, ain't I? Oh darling... I am here. We have a lot to catch up on, and it's best if I start from the beginning..." Scratching his head, "Geezwillis, where do I even start?"

Under the shadows of elderly tree, Eric found a piece of a broken branch that he chose to be his sword, his weapon of his choice against an imaginary beast that seemed to be oblivious to his swings.

"Two weeks ago, I got that old trucker ailment, do you remember that one? Why you give me those back massage... You always say you work as hard as I do, but on my body that is... And the last aching I had was the worst I ever had. I asked Aunt Ross give me a massage, but that woman got stubby fingers and she got no idea on how to give a massage right... Jesus, she got my back to be hurting so bad that I gotta call Dr Jones. You know, I got no liking for doctors... That Dr Jones, though, is different. I ain't liking them doctors with their needles and meds, and I told Dr. Jones that he better not be poking no needles nowhere where no man s'pose to see, you know what I'm saying?" He chuckled. "He tol' me to just stay in bed, ice it down... No needles or medicines... Just good ol' bed rest. Aunt Ross tried to help me out when I gotta do my business but I shoed her off telling her that I'll shoot myself rather than have someone wipe my ass."

Jesse paused for a moment, played a little with the flowers he had sitting next to him. "Me and Eric didn't talk much after you left, and John, we exchanged a few words but it was nothing much. I picked up more truckin' deliveries, and I was on the road most of the time... Them boys of ours were with Aunt Ross most of the time. When I come home, I went straight to bed or kept myself busy in the garden... I just couldn't face them, I felt that I got the blame for you leavin', the way they gave me the eye... I know they got no liking for me and I don't like myself either, hell I didn't like nobody! Me and Eric were good friends you remember? He was all smiles when I got 'im that toy truck, he said he's going to grow up like me... He loved you too, he said he's going to marry someone like you one day..." Jesse chuckled, "I was thinking 'Good luck, this gal is one of a kind' but I said nothing to him, don't want to be bursting no bubble, and darling you were one of a kind. You loved me like no other." Jesse wiped a tear that got away. "They were your boys, right dear? Especially John, he was yours and he took every thing you said to heart."

Eric's sudden outburst got Jesse's attention. Eric must've found a way to defeat the beast, raising his hand in triumph as he found a way to make the stick stuck on the ground.

Jesse continued, "Day after Dr. Jones told me to rest up my back, Eric came up for a visit in our room... 'Twas like the day he was still smithen with me when he was a youngin', and boy, that brought back a lot of memories. Remember when he used to sneak up between us in the middle of the night 'cause he got some dreamin' of a monster? I knew we shouldn't've let him watch that show that night... Anyways that first day of bedrest, he came up to me, and in a bold declaration, like a young man he said, 'Dad, I'm gonna change the world' and there was me just staring at him all funny, and I do not think that he was expectin' any answer from me. He just left as quiet as the way he came in.

"God knows how them kids are smarter these days than when we were them at those tender age... And Eric was the smartest of them all. Hear this hun, Aunt Ross tol' me that Eric tol' her, that while Eric wants to change the world, John wants to save it... Now me and Aunt Ross were not sure if 'twas something they saw on tv or part of your ideas made their way to their heads, you were a little bit on the hippie side when I met you, remember? Gosh, these kids are really something... The other day, I saw our boys hauling that red wagons of theirs... Aunt Ross said that they were collecting cans around the neighborhood... John wants to recycle, whatever that means, and Eric wants to exchange them for a bit of cash... He's smart you see, you can't go about changin' the world with no money in your pockets. They've been at it for days, for weeks maybe. You see, them boys are on their summer vacation... Some of their buddies went down to the lake, but our boys worked hard and collected cans, bottles, and at times, sold some lemonade... I just hear all these from Aunt Ross ya hear? She said one time she saw 'em hauling them toys of theirs in their red wagon right across our yard. Eric was pulling and John was just behind 'im. Eric must've gotten a rock in his shoe because he stopped to take it off, then John... Aunt Ross was peeking through the kitchen window at a time while washing the dishes... John went to pick out a toy in the bunch, it was that bear we got'im when the circus was in town. Eric looked back to 'im and told 'im he could keep it that if he wanna. But I reckon all that John wanna do was give the bear a proper goodbye... He gave it a hug and he put it back into the pile, and off they went to wherever was they goin'. They came home 'round supper time, and right when Eric came through that kitchen door, Aunt Ross almos' dropped that pot of soup she was making.. Pity it would've been, 'twas that chowder we love... when Eric came in, he was as dirty as a pig rollin' over mud all day, but that was not the bad part... 'Twas all those scratches on his arms."

Eric must've tired himself from the noble battle against the imaginary mythical creature, and now he's using a rock to mold the stick into another makeshift tool for his next imaginary adventure.

"I thought now, when Aunt Ross told me about this, that they must've gotten into a scuffle... You know boys, always roughing each other up or something. I told Aunt Ross to our boys to play nice or both will get a beating from me to set them straight... I ain't going to tolerate none of that rough housing, them are brothers... Brothers gotta love each other. But we have none to worry. We really got good boys. Eric got the passion and John got the heart... Good team they make." Realizing he was sidetracking from the story, he continued, "Anyways, Eric didn't want to tell nobody what happened, he kept a tight-lid on that one... And John was out on the porch, without a scratch or nothin'... He was just staring out at stars. Aunt Ross just shook her head 'cause nobody wanted to do any talking and she just understood that 'twas a boy thing.

"A week might've passed, my back was loosened up and I could go about the house then, though I was as slow as a turtle. The boys was gone most of the time at the house and one time I was home alone 'cause Aunt Ross needed to go grocery, and that was when Mrs. Pickler came knockin' on our door and when I opened it, there she was with one them chocolate apple pie... Dya remember them pies, darling? Remember them was good... Dya also remember she quit that restaurant she got after her son died in the kitchen fire? Awful thing to happen, awful for anyone... She used up her life savings in that place, and her son dying there... At the time, I reckon really don't know what I'll do if I was in her shoes..." He paused to check up on Eric, he was still in the process of making his tool. "I guess understand pretty well why she shut the world out like the way she did, when you lose someone that precious you really start seeing the world as a wrong place where everyone has wronged you one way or the other.

"Back by the door when she gave me that pie, I just stood there, I didn't know what the heck was going on there... Mrs. Pickler was a bitter shrew and then she was this nice lady giving me pie, and she gave it with a smile I haven't seen for ages. And what'was I suppose to say or do? I guess she was not expecting from me, she handed me that pie and left. When I came back to my senses, I ran after her and asked what in Sam's nation is going on here. We sat there at Mr. Jacobs swing set he bought for them kids of his, do you remember that one? The one he let everyone sits on.. For god knows his kids got old for that thing. Anyways, here's me mumbling again.. Mrs. Pickler told me she wanted to thank me for what I did that night," Jesse sighed.

"I know I didn't talk much about that night to you, but that night I tried to save that boy of hers you know. I saw that fire from the road coming home from the

truck station, got off the car and went to see what the hell was going on... And there 'twas, Pickler's restaurant burning down. Now you see, Mrs. Pickler was there bawling on the ground.. As old she was, it took three good men to hold her down so she not go into the fire. Her boy was there at the kitchen, and she was begging to let 'er go and save her boy.

"Darlin', we got two boys, and I know what she was feeling that night.. So that's why I rushed in, but Jesus! It was hell in there.. I saw her boy there, tried to get to him, but 'twas too much... The fire was everywhere and I couldn't breathe.. The firemen had to drag me out of there. When I was in the ambulance, I had a good look of Mrs. Pickler when they told 'er her son is gone. I know how bad I would be to hear such things... She hated everyone after that... One time, somebody tol' me that she was in church and jus' got up in the middle of the mass and cursed at God...

"Mrs. Pickler said she wanted to thank me for trying, I did what no one else did that night, and she tol' me that them pies were her son's mos' favorite thing in the world. He said that they're too damn good to be kept in the kitchen... Gotta share it he said, and that's how the restaurant started. After our talk, she went 'round the neighborhood, apologizing and thanking people.. And there were our boys with 'er, moving them pies in their red wagon... I dunno how many she made, but them was a lot.

"That night I had a dream about you and John.. you two was in that field we go to picnics to every summer, every time I took a step, you two go back 10 feet, another step.. 20 feet... And another 50... Then I woke up. That morning, 6 'twas.. I went down to that street... Remember that walk down to Jenkin's market to get some peanut butter? We never kept some around the house, you know the doctor told that John would get sick from eating nuts, and you got a craving for some... It must be a good 5 years since I went walking or driving or nothing there... And there I was, freezing my ass off walking there. On that curve, at that spot where it happened... I saw a fresh bouquet of flowers. Odd I thought since them was nothing local. Then it came to me, I saw them before at Mrs. Pickler's home when we was there for her son's wake. Her front yard was full of it, her son got a green thumb I hear. Her garden was the best in town, heard her son went to some city to get seeds or something and planted 'em 'imself for his mama. So 'twas no rocket science, I knew the flowers were from her. I wanted to know what them was doing there, so I waltz over there to her place...

"'Twas a good walk, and 'twas also bad for my back... But 'twas a'right... I had all these questions in my head to keep my mind busy from the hurting. When I got to Mrs. Pickler's home, sho'nuff them flowers was there... Glorious they looked. I kinda was not expectin' that, ruther I was expectin' some kind of mess

since her boy was not around no more. I stepped on her front door, and Jesus... I think she was waiting for me, she opened that door right when I was to go knockin'... Again, she was all smiles... It really lookit that I didn't rustle her feathers with me, I mean, me walking all the way from yonder at such an hour to see her. She let me in, and sat me down, asked me if I wanted a drink.. I asked for a glass of water... And when she saw them flowers still in my hand, she knew exactly what brought me there. From the way I looked, I reckon she knew I came there for answers... She sat down and started talkin'

" 'You got some mighty good boys, Mr. Jesse...'" Mrs. Pickler said. "Good heart they got, much like their mother. John was into recycling, and he tagged his older brother along, collecting cans or whatever they can recycle, but Eric has other things in his head. Them boys came walking here to my home, askin' for cans, or bottles, I now I was rude, but I tol' 'em to go away and don't be coming here no more. John moved along, but Eric stood still, then he said I got beautiful flowers and it was a waste not to take care of them... Then they moved along to the next house askin' for things to recycle. There was a time that I had some business in the city I had to take care of. I must've been gone for a week or so and when I came back... I couldn't believe my eyes. The garden, messy and weeds growin' everywhere was then all fixed up! I had no idea if I should be getting angry or whatsoever at first, then I started cryin'... I remembered my boy, after years of trying to forget him, and I felt bad, I shouldn't be doing that... And that night I figured it would be best to celebrate his memory, and the best way to remember him was with those pies he loved so much.

"The next day, I saw your boys bring some toys over to the orphanage a few blocks down... I called them over and I asked them what they are going to doing with those toys. Eric said he got no use for those toys, and that they are better off with someone who would make the most of them. Then after some chit chat, I went straight for the kill and asked them if they know something about what happened to the garden. Eric `fessed up straight, he said he hired Crazy Jones, you know him? That homeless guy who lives behind the dumpster at supermarket? Well, it turns out he's not crazy after all, just broke and miserable. Eric asked him if he wants job, and Crazy Jones said yes. Then Eric went to Jefferson's second hand store, and with the money he got from them cans and bottles and whatever else they did to earn some money... He bought some garden tools. Eric told him he could start his own business of gardening in town, and so he did. Now, Crazy Jones does not have to eat from the trash no more, he can buy it himself now... And as a token of his appreciation, Crazy Jones said he'll pay him back, but Eric didn't want no money... He wanted something more, and yes, he and Eric cleaned up my front yard while I was away. Eric did the minor tasks, but he still got cuts from moving branches and all. It was such a nice gesture, nicest I've had in years... It really touched me. As a token of my

appreciation, I give your boy flowers every now and then, I tol' i'm to give it to someone who matters to him most.' "

"That was all I need to hear, I said my thank you's, as you told me to when leaving someone's home, and I went home. That walk back... It didn't bother my back at all. Again, my mind was thinking of all sort of things, about Eric and John has horse sense... Got them from you fo'shure... All you hun. Then when I got home, I saw our boys having breakfast... From the way they lookit, them was just ordinary kids... Sitting on the dinner table chair, watching morning toons, and feet dangling... Them not tall enough still to reach the floor. And seeing them there... It brings me back to the days, dya remember when you used to make your mommy's pancake? 'Twas Sunday when you usually do it, then drive down to that field and have a picnic... The boys are all grown up, smart for their age, and I figure I think they'd love to go do that again. So I tol' Aunt Ross about it, she asked me if I'm down with a fever or something... And asking the boys if they want to go was like asking a fish if it wants water... And so it was decided, we all went." He paused and looked over at Eric who is now leaning back on the tree, just sitting. "It was a fun idea at the time you know... Like that time we went to that store for some silly peanut butter. On the way to the field, we took Jefferson Road.. Good neighborhood I thought... But Jesus... I remember a ball came out from someone backyard, and then a girl came after it... Eric yelled out, and I avoided the lil' girl then we hit a tree." He paused again. "We ended up in the hospital. I got a few bruises here and there, Aunt Reese and John too, but Eric... The doc said he broke a rib and the rib punctured his heart. Doctors said they could go fixin' his heart, but the way his heart was injured, he'll be bedridden for mos' his life..." He looked over at Eric.. "Them doctors made it sound as'f he was better off dead. I tol' the doc to put 'im in them list of theirs, the one for the heart... But Jesus, they said it'll take years before he could get one... The doc said them got people who need them more than he does..."

"Damn it darling, it rile me up thinking our boy not getting the childhood or the life he deserves... I cursed God that day... Our boy is good, done good, was gonna change the things... And them doctors was saying someone need it mo' than he does? Jesus... I hate doctors..." Jesse took some time to compose himself. "Darlin', our boys are good boys, them are good brothers... They surely look out for each other... John loves his brother, he does not say anything that he does, but he does... Down to his core. While I was talking to them doctors at the hospital, John went to Eric's room for a visit... If you see Eric then, your heart woul' be all torn up.. he 'as white as a ghost, and 'as so damn weak, he can't even lift an arm to feed 'imself. Eric tol' me about that day, he tol' me that John went up to 'im, tol' 'im:

"Eric, you was right about the world... What you did with Mrs. Pickler and Crazy Jones... I get it now. Eric, please take care of papa and Auntie... ' "

"You see darlin' John didn't think twice about what he was about to do.. He went to one of 'em vendin' machine and got' imself those chocolate bars with peanuts in 'em, and he started eating it... Eric saw 'im startin' to breathe wrong, can't breathe he said... He said he saw 'im turn purple then John fell on the floor... Eric's 'eart went poundin', you see he was connected to these wires and it tol' them doctors if somethin' ain't right... The nurse and doctors went rushing in, but hell... They done nothing right before and they done nothing right then.. God took John that night... There was nothing they could do, 'cept use his heart for Eric."

Eric walked over to Jesse, tired from playing. He said, "Pa, you done talkin' with ma?"

"I reckon you tired boy?" Jesse said.

"No sir, I just want to say a few words to them on my own too."

"Best to give them what you came 'ere for"

In the basket they brought with them, Eric took out a bouquet of flowers then divided into the two tombstones before him. He murmured a few words, and then Eric took out a toy that was dear to John. "Got your bear back, hope it'll do you good as it was from the boy who had him. He said thanks and thought it would be nice to return it to you."

Eric stood up and said, "It's getting dark, best if we get back. Pa, can we go back here again soon?"

"I'll be glad to," Jesse put his hand on Eric's shoulder.

Eric helped collect the items that they brought with them into the basket. Jesse took a moment before going to the car to reflect on how a lot has changed. He now understands that Eric's random act of kindness is changing the world one person at a time. Jesse nodded at his wife's and son's direction and he smiled at the fitting words chosen to put on John's tombstone... John's last words...

"To save the world, you have to change it"

END