

# PRIORS

*stories*

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*For my hometown*

The days are stacked against  
what we think we are.

—Jim Harrison, *The Theory & Practice of Rivers*

# PERIPHERALS

**D**uring the summer we both turned nine, Eric Lyberg destroyed my right eye and tied our lives together up until he departed this world last Saturday. Because neither of us left the small northern city where we grew up and still had to nod passing hellos, Eric and I were never allowed to become true strangers. Just as certainly, we weren't friends. If life were the job it so often feels like, you might call us coworkers. Not without history, but always professional.

When I saw Eric running east along Glacier Avenue near the Breakwater Inn that Thursday, pulling over to ask if he needed a ride seemed like the right thing to do. In jeans and boots better suited for kicking down doors than jogging, I didn't recognize him at first and almost drove past. He looked like someone much younger. Though many of our generation now exercise to minimize the years, Eric's undisciplined strides suggested an urgency most men have already outrun by the age of forty-one.

Eric flinched at my slowing Explorer, preparing to make for some bordering spruce trees, but then recognized me and was in the passenger seat before I could finish a proper offer.

“Jesus, it’s good to see you.” He looked directly into my good left eye, the way he had since wrecking the other one. I always appreciated this, as most people bounce between the operative and the prosthetic before finally settling undue attention on the bridge of my nose.

My question of where he was headed received a shrug.

“Y’know, just out and about.”

So I simply drove. September showers had been rattling around the Gastineau Channel all day and Eric’s soaked denim jacket raised beads of perspiration on my heated seats. He asked how was my state job and the family and I said good on both counts, explaining that Linda had left today with the boys for a weekend cross-country meet in Wrangell. Any inquiries about his life or his family would have required him to regurgitate things I already knew via rumors and police reports published in the *Juneau Empire*. Eric hadn’t put out anyone’s eye since mine, but most folks would have kept on driving.

“I was planning on hitting McDonald’s on the way home for dinner,” I said. “Bachelor food, right? What do you say? My treat.”

His eyes ricocheted between the Explorer’s interior and the lanes around us as another curtain of drizzle overtook Egan Drive.

“Sure,” he said. “Can’t turn down an offer like that.”

And that is how we came to share a bagged dinner at my home, where—by invitation—Eric Lyberg laid low for the next day and a half. We never discussed or even broached the subject of what trouble had started him running. He never asked for the three hundred and eighteen dollars I gave him, and perhaps I was naïve or pretentious to think Eric’s problems could be solved by what money I could scrape together without Linda noticing. Though I knew plenty of people, this was the first time I had felt like anyone’s friend in quite a while. This went beyond professional courtesy.

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I can't help but wonder if the incident with my eye was a harbinger of Eric's life to come or the point at which everything swung in that direction. My parents forgave his family but often grumbled about the Lyberg boy being headed down a hard road. Eric wasn't pointing himself down that road, I would think to myself by never say aloud. He wasn't steering at all.

The accident itself—and it truly was accidental—bore that same haphazardness. A group of us had biked across the JD Bridge to Sandy Beach where some pale junior high smokers occupied the lone shelter, forcing us down to the driftwood piles for a round of stickfight—I won't insult anyone's intelligence with an explanation of the rules. Eric Lyberg, until then only an incidental classmate, landed what on any other occasion would have been a dream hit. The water-softened piece of spruce exploded dramatically against my cheekbone, save for a tight knot that punctured and drained my right eye. Even then, Eric took most of the impact. He crumpled to the ground and began shaking his head and crying while other boys yelled pointless warnings about no headshots. One of the girls above us dropped her cigarette and began to puke. All this left me to simply walk a serpentine path in the sand, feeling an odd absence of pressure while a liquid thinner than blood ran down my cheek. The world was now—and would always be—half the size I had known before.

Flying me to the doctors down in Seattle would have been a waste of money, and the summer passed in a collage of bandages, get-well cards and ocular specialists visiting from Anchorage. By the time school started my bruised dark half was learning its dimensions and I knew whatever life was going to throw at me would come from the right. Though possibly mere coincidence, for the next nine years this was where Eric Lyberg chose to sit during our shared classes—in my blind spot. I always sensed he was there, though, and he

was. Whenever upperclassmen were giving me shit about my goggle eye or I wanted some beer for the upcoming weekend, Eric waited in the shadows ready to help. Juneau has no roads out and despite holding the obscure and questionable title of longest state capital, it is also the narrowest, dropping to little more than two lanes wide in places where the road clings to a thin shoreline at the base of the mountains. Eric and I could never be more than forty-odd miles apart, and were bound to bump elbows or make eye contact in the tighter spots.

Attending Gonzaga Law after UAS was my only honest effort to break free, but I married a girl from Sitka who'd been bitten by the Outside during a stint at Western Washington University and saw Juneau's theaters and fast food and anemic mall as suitable middle ground. I cannot claim our return was an unhappy one. My job with the State Attorney General's office is challenging and grants me as much prestige as someone who wears a tie can hope to earn in this city.

I have to think Eric made his own escape attempts. There were long stretches of time when he was absent, but I only noticed he was gone in the same way that you don't feel the weather turning until the jacket you wore all summer no longer keeps you warm. Then we would cross paths again—he might be delivering a neighbor's new appliance, or maybe we were both at the Breeze In buying doughnuts. Eric's face would bear a new bruise, his smile inevitably missing yet another tooth, but he never failed to assure me that things were looking up.

My mother was first to call with the news of Eric's death, and several high school acquaintances followed suit over the course of that Sunday afternoon. Linda and the boys were freshly home and unpacking so I took the phone into the cluttered space we originally deemed my study but now call the computer room. Where Mom said *suicide* the others said *lethal combination* but

the phone lines swelled with implications. Everyone threw around cop show claptrap like “mainlining” and “hot dose” as if we weren’t people with 401k’s and Costco memberships and nothing stronger than some expired 222’s in our medicine cabinets. No such verbal posturing was present when Eric’s younger brother Mark called soon after to ask if I would be a pallbearer that coming weekend.

“He considered you a friend,” Mark said. “It would have meant a lot to him.”

How could I not agree? Mark thanked me and offered an unprovoked review of his brother’s last week alive. There had been recent run-ins with what he called Juneau’s shadier elements and another vague incident that had the police looking for Eric, but even Mark could admit that it had just been the combined weight of forty-one years that pushed the needle into his brother’s arm and left him to be found on that long weathered staircase climbing a hill near the Governor’s mansion. Most passersby assumed him drunk or asleep until some kids noticed frozen vomit.

Aside from mandatory interest in finding Eric’s supplier, the police weren’t really looking into the affair and Mark assumed the mystery of his brother’s last forty-eight hours was probably best unsolved. Even over the phone I could sense him staring at me, right into my good eye. I hadn’t seen Mark in years but knew about his own scrapes and time in Lemon Creek before turning into one of those whiplash Christians whom too much early fun has damned to a life of eternal seriousness. I told myself his stare would not be searching for any particular sin, just the ones he knew lay behind everyone’s eyes.

“I’ll be there,” I said before hanging up. “And thanks for thinking of me.”

I rejoined Linda and the boys in the living room, where only a few nights earlier Eric and I ate bulk corn tortilla chips and drank a two-liter of store-brand cola while watching a TBS

block of John Hughes movies from our youth. The versions were edited but the truly funny parts still carried through. I wondered if Eric also felt tricked by these films and their images of high school and growing up that hadn't meshed with our six hours of direct sunlight and ankle-deep slush. I neglected to ask and we didn't say much. An innocent evening, really, and that afternoon I honestly felt no guilt for not mentioning it to Mark.

My oldest noticed me and despite my grin asked if I was okay. I told them someone I knew had died. Linda covered her mouth and my youngest asked "A friend?"

"Someone I've known a long time," I said.

I was eighteen before giving up hope on the implied consolation prize for losing a sensory organ—a heightening of some other faculty. I waited, expecting one day to hear more or smell more or somehow taste more. Nothing. Maybe this was due to only losing partial vision, though my remaining eye even failed to step up and by twenty-four needed a contact lens to do its job.

If I was disappointed I still never felt gyped or short-changed. Many of the things my Cyclops status disqualified me from or put me at a disadvantage for would have been a challenge with both eyes. By nine I had shown no athletic inclinations, but now any time I was forced onto some curriculum-required playing field or court the bar was set so low I couldn't help but exceed expectations. I was allowed to avoid organized team sports without derision or mockery, and the coaches for the solitary activities I went out for—swimming, cross country and such—attempted to concurrently treat me no different but still cut me some slack. The beautiful Sitka Blacktail I shot at sixteen on Admiralty Island, where my father had dragged me along as a glorified pack mule, was pure luck and a godsend. I think I even closed my good eye