

Keith Eldred
413 Bella Street
Hollidaysburg, PA 16648
red@thisis.red
814-505-7082

112,000 words

RUBRUM

by Keith Eldred

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

Guys used to come around Evan's garage, where he lived alone and rebuilt transmissions alone, to try to draw him into things: softball, cards, fishing, drinks. He wouldn't even grunt at the details. Those guys finally gave up on him. Evan's dead were more alive to him than they were.

Evan thought about everything that his dead did and did not do. They did not lie in their graves and look and listen. He would think this while lying flat on his bed staring up, hands by his sides in coffin-straight lines.

Evan had no reason to live other than that it was what you did. He certainly didn't live to restore transmissions. It was just something that he could do, and do well. He didn't need the money. He spent next to nothing, so his savings just kept mounting in his bank account. Then his nephew the lawyer offered to invest some of it for him, and it grew yet more. The monthly statements started to become obscene.

"Don't you want to spend any of it, Evan?" the boy said.

No, he didn't. He'd spent what he wanted to.

Evan still thought of his nephew as the boy, even though he was not only a lawyer but married. He had trained the boy (when he actually was a boy) not to call him "Uncle Evan" by not responding when "Uncle" was included.

The boy's name was Richard, and he went by Rick, but Evan still thought of him as Ricky. Not that he actually used the boy's name, but the name that he didn't use was Ricky, not Rick.

Sometimes Evan lost track of how he had begun to rebuild transmissions in the first place. How had it happened?

His father had worked on cars. That had been his living. Their living. If you could use the word living for their existence. Their continuing from one day to the next, working trapped together until sleeping again.

This garage that Evan owned had been his father's. Outside on framed boards above the upward-sliding sectioned door, in big blocky faded letters that had only ever been painted once, was their last name: EASTER. The apartment upstairs was where he had grown up with his father. Just the two of them. His mother, well ...

His mother. After all these years, Evan still didn't know how to think about her. He remembered her. Not how she looked. He remembered leaning against her. She was sitting in a chair. He would have been a toddler, only as tall as her knee, or not even. The whole length of him was against her leg, tipping into her. His strongest impression of her leg was that it wasn't his father's leg. His father's leg would have been higher, bigger, thicker, like a pillar, and he wouldn't have touched it, not ever. But his mother's leg ...

He might compare it to a young tree, strong but yielding, accepting his lean. And her light touch on his back, wanting him there. Jake, his father, had wanted him on hand only the way that he wanted his hydraulic lift, because it was a need for the work. The difference was that Jake hadn't despised the lift. He hadn't taken out his rage on the lift. He had reason not to: The lift had value, and it couldn't heal from injury. Unlike Evan.

Grown hulk that he was, Evan felt how wrong it was to lean against his mother's leg in his mind. He didn't take himself there, he actively tried not to. But he found himself there again and again.

Evan didn't even spend money to heat the garage. That just attracted laggards. He finally realized that the thermostat was his salvation one winter day when he got so lost in thought and work that he simply forgot to turn up the gas furnace. He didn't notice how cold it was until That Idiot Ross stopped in and commented on it with extremes of contradiction: "Blazes, man, it's freezin' in here!"

Ross went on blathering clouds of breath while Evan was warmed by this light bulb moment. No heat, no visitors. Hallelujah.

Evan came to rely more and more on his senses of touch and hearing while working on the transmissions. He was genuinely convinced that one day he'd be able to complete a rebuild blindfolded. He even had the blindfold ready—an old handkerchief that had bound its share of his wounds at the hands of his father. There were blood stains amid the black-and-paisley pattern.

The colder it was in the garage, the sharper the air and the better Evan heard the clacks that helped distinguish the metal parts. And the less he heard the other sounds in his mind.

As he worked toward working blind, Evan also stopped using lights. That choice seemed obvious after the fact, but as with forgetting to use the furnace, he had to stumble into it. When his flickering fluorescent tube finally gave up the ghost, he just left it dead in the fixture, so the garage would start to dim in late afternoon. That had been the most likely time for visitors: idlers like That Idiot Ross, Mormons spreading the Word, kids on fundraising rounds. When he started letting the garage go dark on top of providing no heat in the winter nor cooling in the summer, the flow of unwanted traffic trickled dry, and he was left alone to work.

Evan was as alone as could be. He would lie on his bed and think that and then realize that it wasn't true. He wasn't a castaway on an island, not an inmate in solitary, not a guru atop a mountain. Just imagine never seeing anyone. Never being able to. Never having to.

And if no one had to see him ... so much the better. The world didn't need him. The transmissions could go elsewhere. They wouldn't be fixed as well nor as quickly, if he did say. He did one rebuild a day, every day, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays included. So the shop owners who jobbed out to him might miss him, briefly. But soon enough, they'd forget him. Everyone would. As it should be. No loss.

Evan did need to venture outside the garage at times, for food and the occasional pair of new underwear. There were no elves to bring him supplies.

And some appointments he could not escape. Ricky, his lawyer nephew Rick, had come to keep a calendar for him. Ricky was the only person that Evan ever saw anymore, aside from shop owners and UPS drivers who dropped off parts, and the tool truck guy who came around once a month to see what he might need. Ricky was a take-charge guy—that's what had gotten him through law school—and he had more or less appointed himself Evan's caretaker.

"You ever see a dentist, Evan?" Ricky asked one day.

Evan held still, knowing what had prompted the question. His breath smelled.

He had just released a sigh, letting it puff out his mouth and flutter his lips, and there had been good reason for it. Ricky had asked, "Your buddy Ross ever come around anymore?"

Pfft, his buddy Ross. The proper title was That Idiot Ross. Surely everyone thought so. The guy had no job, he just flitted between gathering spots—the convenience store, the library, the doughnut shop, anyplace with captives behind counters or in line in front of them. He never shut up spouting conspiracy theories.

His buddy Ross? The only possible response was a breathy sigh of objection. Which made Ricky flinch and ask his question. “You ever see a dentist?”

Mmg. Evan gave the slightest shake of his head.

“No, you never see a dentist,” Ricky said, “or no, you don’t want to? Or both?”

Mmg.

“You’re gonna see a dentist, Evan,” Ricky said.

Evan was about to open his mouth and object, but ... his breath. And what was the use? Ricky would not be denied.

So Ricky started making appointments for Evan: Dentist, doctor, haircuts ...

Well, not haircuts. Evan saw a way out of those. During one session reviewing his calendar (His calendar. The thought made Evan roll his eyes. But there it was in the flesh—er, paper—on his wall, where Ricky made notes in handwriting wholly unworthy of a Juris Doctor)... during one review of his calendar, Ricky said that he was overdue for a haircut, and Evan was prepared.

He produced a pair of scissors and handed them over with a gesture that said, “Let’s go right now. Cut my hair.”

“Oh no,” Ricky protested.

Evan waited.

“I know you don’t care how you look, but I have to look at you. Think of me.”

Evan waited.

“Mugh.” The sound meant Ricky refused to barber him.

Evan placed a chair under a drop light and sat with his back to Ricky. A clean drop cloth and a small spring clamp just happened to be in reach.

“Mugh.”

But Ricky swirled the drop cloth around Evan and clamped it in place.

“Fine,” Ricky said.

Uncounted awkward snips later, Ricky paused to inspect his work.

“Mugh. Worst. Haircut. Ever.”

On the contrary, this snipping had saved Evan a trip outside. BEST. Haircut. Ever.

There was something Ricky didn’t know. Something he would have been shocked to learn. Something completely at odds with the rest of Evan’s life.

It was this: Evan never, ever left his apartment and the garage voluntarily. Except ... he did. About once a month. For no good reason. Unless you called a midnight snack a good reason. A midnight snack that would actually be consumed between 1 and 3 a.m. A snack that involved walking four miles round trip.

Up the road to the Sheetz convenience store and back.

CHAPTER 2

Evan himself was astonished that he had this secret. He could not trace its beginning.

Growing up where he did, everyone went to Sheetz convenience stores, “everyone” being a jot short of absolute truth. No one said “Sheetz convenience store,” they just went to Sheetz. It was the name of the family that founded and still ran the chain of hundreds of locations. Sheetz was the region’s answer to 7-11. There was one every few miles, or so it seemed, each open round the clock for gas and food, a traveler’s delight and a mainstay for locals to fuel vehicle and body.

And spirit? A Sheetz store was a colorful crossroads cultivating camaraderie among all who passed through its height-markered, never-locked doors. The typical site was well-lit, scrupulously cleaned (excepting the busiest of the travel meccas, ahem) and artfully designed with frequent remodels. It featured an expansive layout lushly landscaped and pop-soundtracked with premium speakers. It was somehow family-friendly while also offering cigarettes by the case, lottery tickets by the ream and unmentionable publications by the, uh, shameful, peeking from the top reaches of the magazine racks. The worst of foods were smack by the best: Powdered doughnuts, grilled chicken salad, jerky bites, protein smoothies, vats of nacho cheese across from bundles of low-fat string. Smiling crews in sporty uniforms button-flaired the newest drink-sandwich-combo-special-innovation.

Sheetz mounted naughty ad campaigns such as the one for the meatball sub (“Grab life by the you-know-what”) and the one for the chicken tenders (“Strip joint ahead”). This edginess was offset by ubiquitous sponsorship of community events, poster-quality ads appearing in every program, whether for kindergarten play or poker run. In its neighborhoods, Sheetz caused three acute conditions: awareness, affection and antipathy. The first was a universal affliction, the latter a rare malady.

Evan was like (very nearly) everyone else around him. He had been a lifelong customer of Sheetz. But only for gasoline, and his stops were rare because he did so little driving.

His affection for Sheetz surged when the chain became an early adopter of pay-at-the-pump. It was like a waking dream, that first time he had noticed someone on the other side of his pump swipe her credit card, pump gas and simply drive away. It made the sun rise in the dark night of his soul. No more having to talk to anyone? This changed everything.

When he pulled in moments earlier, Evan’s stomach had clenched at what he had expected to have to do after the pump was turned on for him and he finished filling up: He would replace the nozzle, grimly twist his fuel cap back on, swallow hard, then gravely turn toward the store. He would march as if to his own hanging, dreading an awkward moment at the door with someone’s holding it open for him, perhaps saying, “There ya go, Buddy.” Or he might realize too late that he should have held the door for someone else. He was still haunted by the time he happened to look back just as the door shut behind him, through the glass at the glare of a woman holding a newborn with one hand and clamping the wrists of two toddlers in the other. He would be forced to grunt replies to a clerk’s chirping questions: “How ya doin’ today?” “Where were you, Pump 4?”

But now ... there was the miracle of pay-at-the-pump. It made Evan weak in the knees. Now he could go to Sheetz ... without going to Sheetz. Finally, this was actual, complete self-service gasoline. Was that pinprick at the corner of his eye ... a tear?

So how could it be, mere months into the Pay-at-the-Pump Era, that he found himself waking up from a dead sleep flooded with desire for ... what? What???

A birthday-cake crème drink from Sheetz?

Evan saw the Sheetz posters and billboards in his mind as surely as if they were projected in the dark above his bed. The Birthday Cake Batter Creamz, Sheetz called this drink. The vivid image showed something like a milkshake, a frothing of milk, ice, air and, yes, birthday cake batter.

Even as all of this made Evan shudder, the thought of cake batter brought his mother to mind. Mothers bake cakes, right? Maybe fathers, too, but ... his mother. She would have baked him a birthday cake. One during each of the few years that she was with him in the apartment over the garage. He couldn't remember any of them, but he clung to a certainty of these cakes and the tiny celebrations around them. At the same time, he couldn't conceive of his father's even eating cake, much less baking a cake, much less baking a cake for him. Evan's father didn't belong in the same universe with cake.

No, not quite true.

Evan flashed on a memory of a plastic-wrapped pack of cakes—Twinkies, something like that—slapping him in the chest and falling to the floor. This happened in a Sheetz store, sometime during his later grade school years.

The Twinkies pack struck him before he saw it coming, and he couldn't react quickly enough to catch it. He tried, letting himself drop after it as if to overtake time. His father came

down on mistakes, and he would surely see this as a mistake. If the package burst, they would have to buy it, and surely his father hadn't meant to buy it. Or Evan would have to hide it on the rack behind the other cakes. Whatever he did, it would be wrong, and he could feel them coming: blows from his father, at home and in the truck, and a rough you-should-know-better grab on the arm while they were still in the store.

Along with the pack of cakes his father also flung words at him like knives. "Happy birthday, kid."

His mind clawed at the words. It wasn't his birthday. Does Dad not know my birthday? No, he knew. Or at least he knew that this date was not Evan's birthday. It was only a joke. These thoughts blurred with Evan's motion as he scooped up the pack and straightened to tuck it behind its clean mates on the snack rack.

The speed of this correction caught his father off guard. A beat passed before Jake sneered, "No, really, kid, take 'em, we'll get 'em. I'll split 'em with ya."

Evan hated that even the thought of this non-gift from his father brought a surge of feeling that propelled his hand again, now retrieving the mashed pack from its hiding place.

His father struck it from his grasp. "Not that one! I said we'd split it. You want me to have that mushed thing? Hell!" The pack hit the floor again, the package finally splitting.

This time, with hard-won reflex, Evan had not dropped to the floor, because now he was squared off against his father. He would have ducked into line with Jake's boot.

"Pick it up!" the order came. Evan did so, twisting to guard against a kick. In a small favor from the universe, the split package came up cleanly, the rupture on top held shut by Evan's pinch.

"Buy it," his father growled, stepping past him and out the door.

Evan froze. He had no money. His mind raced. Toss the pack in the trash and flee? Or ... ?

Just then he felt a tug on one breast pocket. Time slowed as a hand withdrew from the pocket, leaving behind folded dollar bills.

Now Evan perceived the arm with the hand, the body with the arm, a tall figure striding past. A gray and black uniform. It was a town police officer, coffee that he'd already paid for in one hand. He flowed on out the door.

The officer didn't confront Evan's father. He just got in his cruiser and drove off. Evan never did see the man's face.

The boy Evan paid for the split pack of cakes that day, and the grown Evan with the transmission shop ... he never charged for work on a town police cruiser, and he never would.