

Her Name Was Olivia

Eric's eyelids felt like sandpaper as he attempted to clear the cobwebs from his vision. Every headlight that came at him from the opposite direction felt like a spotlight meant to seek him out personally. His eyes were red and swollen from a lack of sleep, and they watered now as they tried to stay focused on the road while the falling snow glistened in the beams of his headlights.

"I can't believe I lost to ten's over four's," he thought as he grimaced and turned his face away from another oncoming car, its lights glaring in and illuminating his pale skin. "I have to play smarter than that or I'm never going to get her back."

The lights from his pickup lit the country road in front of him and showed the drifting snow glide across the road like a snake in search of prey. It was early in winter and the first snow was coming down as a light mixture that beaded quickly on the warm windshield of his truck. Eric switched on his wipers and listened as the blades screeched along the glass and cleared the droplets. It had been cold out for weeks now, but this was the first real snow of the year and it was beginning to take hold in the empty fields, covering the plowed earth and coating it in a blanket of white.

Ahead Eric could see the early morning horizon changing from black to gray and he sighed heavily before taking a drink of coffee from his travel mug. He switched on the radio looking for a distraction, and found one when a familiar county song filled the cab of his Ford F150. He knew the song well, and quietly under his breath, he began to recite the lyrics. He

whispered the words plainly, without emphasis, his breath forcing each syllable out between his lips as if he didn't want to let them go. For a moment he was able to strangle the combination of thoughts that had tormented him for the past couple of weeks, but the reprieve did not last.

"How can her mother do this?" Eric thought to himself, his eyes tearing up.

The song went into a riff about some country boy's baby hopping up into the cab of his truck, and although the singer was talking about a different kind of baby, Eric pictured little Olivia hopping up into his truck. He could see her small hands reaching, grasping at anything she could find to pull herself up. When she would feel Eric's hands on her sides to help her she would turn and say "Olivia do it," in a soft determined voice that Eric could still hear above the twang coming from the radio.

"I miss her so much," he thought and switched the radio off, frustrated that everything reminded him of her.

Eric thought about the first day Olivia came to stay with him and his wife Mindy. It was their first experience as foster parents. Her face was so round he remembered, and her eyes were so blue, like two sapphires staring back at him. She was so friendly too, she came right up to Mindy and said, "Hi, I'm Olivia," in the sweetest voice Eric had ever heard.

Brake lights in front of him pulled Eric out of this thought, and he applied pressure to his own brake pedal. The road was starting to glisten with moisture as the snow continued to fall

and Eric realized he had better pay closer attention to what he was doing as the driving conditions worsened.

The car in front of Eric's truck made a left turn at an intersection, and Eric idled up to the crossroad and stopped watching in the distance for oncoming traffic.

"If only I was a better provider," Eric thought. "If I made more money maybe they wouldn't have taken her away in the first place. Maybe I wouldn't have had to..."

Again his thoughts were interrupted, this time by a horn from the car behind him. Eric hit the accelerator and his rear tires spun on the blacktop, and then grabbed hold propelling his F150 south, toward his shop.

"Back to the grind," Eric thought. "How did I ever expect them to give me a child on a mechanic's pay?" Eric pursed his lips, shook his head, and ran his hand through his thin short brown hair. "You were right dad. I should have gone to college. I should have gotten a degree. I could be designing cars by now, instead of working on these pieces of junk."

The wind howled outside and caused Eric to glance at his review mirror. In it he saw his father's eyes staring back at him. "You would be so disappointed dad."

Eric thought of how he wished he could go back in time, back to when he and his dad would work on the old Firebird out in his parent's garage. Ever since he could remember they had worked on that car, he grew up with it, and it was finished just in time for his sixteenth birthday when his dad handed him the keys.

“Man I loved that car,” Eric remembered. He thought of cruising through the school parking lot when he was a senior. He and his friends all sitting on the hood and defiantly smoking cigarettes before school started. He thought of parking out in farmer Colton’s field with Jodi, his high school girlfriend. He had lost his virginity in that car. Two awkward teenagers crammed in the passenger’s seat up against the door. Jodi accidentally grabbed ahold of the handle in the heat of the moment and they both spilled out onto the dew covered ground outside. They laughed so hard, lying there half naked in the weeds. But after Eric climbed back into the car, and helped Jodi in, the laughter stopped and it wasn’t so awkward anymore.

Eric thought about the day he sold it. He thought about that young, immature, selfish version of his former self that needed the cash more than the memories to pay off a gambling debt.

“I can’t believe I did it again,” Eric thought, and rubbed his eyes. “Mindy’s is going to kill me. So stupid.” But even as he was thinking of his wife’s anger he couldn’t get those ten’s over four’s out of his head, and how he needed a chance to redeem himself. Needed just one more hand, needed it like a smoker in need of nicotine.

The road seemed to be alive as the snow hovered across it and Eric noticed ahead that a maroon Ford Taurus had appeared in front of him. He wasn’t sure where the car had come from. He couldn’t remember if it pulled out in front of him or if he had merely caught up to it, but that conflict was quickly forgotten when his baby girl again popped into his head.

“I have to get her back,” Eric thought. “We have to get her back.” He was angry now. “How can they just take her from us like that? Take her and give her back to that...” Eric stopped himself mid thought. He told himself he would never speak poorly of Olivia’s mom. Not to anyone, not even himself, and certainly never to Olivia.

It drove Eric crazy thinking about Olivia being taken and given back to that woman. But then at the same time, “I guess who doesn’t have their demons,” he thought.

Eric’s demons went back to before he and Mindy were married. There had been some hard times for them when Eric wrestled with a gambling addiction that nearly tore the couple apart. Mindy would have none of it though. She knew Eric was a good man that had just lost his way. She stood by him while he got help and was his strength when he showed weakness.

It took years for Eric to feel fully free of his gambling obsession. And once he was the two were married. Things were good for Eric and Mindy for a few years after that. They thought their troubles were behind them until they ran into another obstacle and found out it may be difficult for them to have children. This time it was Eric who was Mindy’s rock, helping his wife deal with disappointment after disappointment. It wasn’t until Olivia miraculously came into their lives, that they thought their prayers had been answered, and they might at last have a chance for the family they had been longing for.

Olivia was this amazing little thirteen month old, blond-haired girl, with pudgy arms, and the cutest dimples you had ever seen. Her mother had been a drug addict who could barely take care of herself. One day after driving home high she left Olivia sitting in the sun on the

front porch still strapped into her car seat, and passed out in the doorway. Had it not been for the mail man coming around soon afterwards who knows how badly she would have been burned sitting out in the hot sun?

After that the mother said she couldn't take care of her little girl anymore, and said she didn't want her. Funny thing was Olivia had only mentioned her mother a couple of times while she had been with Eric and Mindy. She would get sad and the corners of her mouth would turn down and her eyes would start to well up. But then, as quickly as the mourning came on, she would get over it, almost as if she had forgotten what made her sad in the first place. Those were the times when Eric would look at Olivia and think of her mother, and think of how difficult it must have been to give up Olivia. The court had ordered Olivia's mother to six months of rehab, and that was what led Olivia to their front door.

Immediately upon her entering their house Eric felt like a father, it was a feeling that he could have never imagined. Like one minute thinking you were whole, and the next minute realizing what had been missing. For the next ten months Eric tried to spend every possible moment with Olivia. They played with dolls. They went to the park. They read books together. Everything was for her. Eric had even started working on restoring another old Firebird he had found, and every now and then when Mindy wasn't around he would take Olivia out into the garage to show her what he was doing and let her hold a wrench or a pair of pliers. Mindy thought it was too dangerous for her to be out there, but when Eric would let Olivia pinch his fingers with the pliers, "Ouch," he would say with a smile on his face, and she would giggle like little girls do and say "More, more."

Eric loved having Olivia out there watching him work, he loved talking to her about the car, explaining things to her as if she were one of his co-workers at his shop, but knowing that all she cared about was pinching his finger in the pliers and laughing. He thought maybe this was how he had started in the garage with his dad, and he wanted her to grow up with those same memories.

Olivia made their lives feel complete, and it didn't take long for the couple to determine they wanted to adopt her as soon as they could. Mindy told their social worker, Penny, that they wanted to start the paperwork as soon as possible.

Penny was a young girl, just starting out in a new career and she told Eric and Mindy that "there was always a lot of waiting when it came to foster kids" and that "the court system does everything it can to keep children with their birth parents". Her discouraging words sounded scripted to Eric and Mindy, as if Penny were reading them from one of her recently abandoned text books.

Penny was a nice girl, very professional, outside of the red tennis shoes that she always seemed to be wearing no matter when they saw her, but Eric thought that maybe they should see if someone with more experience could help them.

One morning Penny dropped by to see how things were going, and after seeing how happy the three of them were, Penny seemed to have a change of heart. She went as far as to tell them that Olivia's mother had said she didn't want Olivia anymore. She said, "You know what, I think there's a very good chance you will be able to adopt her." The statement gave Eric

and Mindy a sense of relief they hadn't felt since Olivia came into their lives. They felt empowered. Confident now that one day Olivia would be their daughter.

That confidence carried on for months until about two weeks ago when Eric was working in the garage. He remembered he was cleaning a manifold when Mindy came through the door that separated the garage from the house. She was ghost white and Eric knew immediately what was going on without even asking. He stopped what he was doing and wiped his scared knuckles on a dirty rag as he walked over to his wife.

"Olivia's mom is asking for custody back," Mindy rasped, her chestnut eyes staring straight ahead. "She's had a change of heart and wants her back."

Eric reached his wife just as her knees gave out. She collapsed into his arms and began sobbing uncontrollably.

"But I thought...how can she..." Eric couldn't finish a thought, his mind raced through everything he had heard about Olivia's mom over the past ten months, picturing Penny in her red shoes telling them how happy she was that Olivia was going to end up with such a loving couple. "But she's our little girl now," he was finally able to get out in a cracked voice.

The maroon Taurus in front of Eric veered slightly and for a moment wasn't parallel with the road anymore, but slightly askew. Eric refocused his attention and realized he was gaining on the sedan quickly now, "Shit!" the voice in his head shouted.

Through the windshield the Taurus increased in size, its maroon color standing out predominantly against the steel gray sky like dark red lipstick against a pale white face. Eric's

reflexes took over and he hit the brake pedal, his body going rigid as he anticipated the worst. Surprisingly though, the truck's tires grabbed the road and Eric never got closer than a few car lengths away. The Taurus quickly righted itself and continued on as if nothing had happened, its driver never knowing how it had caused Eric's heart to leap up into his throat.

"The roads are icing up fast," Eric thought catching his breath. "I'd better keep a little more distance."

He eased back on to the accelerator and slowly built back up the speed he had lost. Through the haze of the falling sleet he saw a sign on the side of the road that read "Imlay City – 15 miles" and he thought how from here it would normally take him another fifteen minutes to get to work, but on this day he knew it would take a little longer.

Eric thought back to when Mindy brought Olivia up to his work one day over the summer. He remembered how Olivia had flirted with Carl, the teenager with the slicked back hair that did the oil changes. Eric grinned, and then his eyes glassed over when he remembered the day when Penny came and took Olivia away from them. And he remembered thinking how if they were just a little more, "well off", maybe this wouldn't have happened. If they were a clear step above her biological mother, maybe the courts would see that she should be with them, and not her drug addicted mom who Eric was positive was going to hurt his little girl. It was that very night that Eric began to cave to his appetite and thought of picking up his old vice again.

Over the last several years Eric had been able to ignore that familiar voice in the back of his head. That devil on his shoulder didn't have the same pull as it once did. But the adversity he faced then stirred feelings that told him he already knew a way to make some extra money, a way to make some extra money fast. And all he had to do was get up and jump off that wagon.

It was not long after that when Eric found himself sneaking into the kitchen after Mindy had fallen asleep. He decided to see what gambling sites were still out there. It couldn't hurt to check out if any of the old sites he use to frequent were still around.

He sat at the kitchen table, his face glowing white from the screen and his fingers gliding over the keys effortlessly as if no time had passed since the last time he looked to get his fix. Once he found a site he was familiar with, almost automatically, he got up, retrieved his credit card from his wallet, and entered in the information. It wasn't until his cursor arrow was hovering over a bright green button with yellow lettering that read "ENTER" that he stopped.

"That was the moment I should have remembered how bad it was the first time," Eric thought. "But I really thought this would help, not put us more in debt. How am I going to explain to Mindy that I did it again? That I lost over thirteen thousand dollars again? She is never going to forgive me this time."

Eric thought back twelve years and pictured Mindy grabbing his laptop from the table and smashing it to the ground in an explosion of sparks and plastic. That would be all that was left of their relationship she had told him, if he didn't stop and get some help. The gesture was

so out of character for her that it caused him to realize how much his addiction was hurting her, and them, and it was enough to make Eric seek the help he needed.

And now, even as Eric thought of the pain he had put his wife through all those years ago, he felt the new itch continue to grow into something he couldn't stop. What had started off as a way to get his little girl back had transformed back into that addiction that occupied his thoughts almost as much as Olivia. "I should be at home trying to hit a hot streak, not crawling down this icy road to work. Maybe tonight's the night. Maybe tonight I can get myself out of this hole."

Eric checked his speedometer, and was surprised to see he was going just over fifty. He looked up at the road ahead, off in the distance, and again he saw the maroon colored Taurus. It was about half a football field in front of him when he noticed it start to wiggle. It was just a little at first, just enough to make Eric pay attention. And then the next three seconds happened so fast that Eric found himself on the other side of those three seconds in a daze.

In the first second the maroon colored Taurus went from a wiggle into a full spin. The car spun clockwise on the slick asphalt drifting over into the oncoming lane just in time to meet up with a box truck coming in the opposite direction. The front quarter panel of the Taurus lay out in front of the box truck like a hanging curveball, and the box truck delivered a mighty swing. The front end of the Taurus exploded as if a bomb had gone off under the hood and sounded like a shotgun spraying metal debris into the air in front of Eric's oncoming truck.

In the next second Eric found himself hitting this cloud of shrapnel, helpless, with his arms ridged on the wheel and his legs stiff trying to push the brake pedal through the floor. His truck did not react how he had hoped. It slid on the ice and snow taking him right through the scene of the accident.

Spinning in the opposite direction now, what was left of the Taurus slid past the front of Eric's truck, its twisted metal barely resembling a car any longer. Pieces from the front end slammed into Eric's truck like metal hail, denting and tearing holes in the sheet metal. Most of what looked like the throttle body from the Taurus' engine crashed through the windshield just to Eric's right and embedded itself in the passenger's seat scorching the fabric.

In the third second Eric felt his tires grab hold of the gravel on the road's shoulder and his truck come to a stop. His momentum shifted and his weight redistributed into the seat. Frozen now, Eric stared straight ahead at his shattered windshield and in that third second, he had no thoughts. His mind was blank, as if the incident had caused a reset, and it took his mind a moment to reboot.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there in that daze, it could have been three seconds, it could have been three minutes, but once he finally did come back online Eric had to decide if he was living or dead. He looked over at the passenger's seat, at where the engine part from the Taurus had embedded itself. A small trickle of smoke breathed out from the broken piece of metal. The white stream emanated seamlessly.

Eric ran his hand over the metal part causing a disturbance, and the smoke swirled in the air the same way the snow was swirling over the blacktop outside. He went to touch the metal to see if it was hot, when suddenly there was a pounding at his window. Startled, Eric shuddered and turned his head to see a short man with a two tone beard in a brown winter coat standing outside his truck. The man's beard was a mixture of light and dark gray, and Eric thought he looked like he probably rode a Harley in the summertime when the air was warm and the roads weren't covered with ice. The man was saying something, but Eric realized his ears were ringing and he had to really concentrate on what the man was saying, almost read his lips.

"Are you ok?" Eric finally deciphered and he shook his head yes in a roundabout way causing the man with the gray beard to hesitate before he ran off toward the back of Eric's truck. Eric could see the man in his rearview mirror running behind his truck and down into the ditch where a few other people were already starting to gather.

At that moment Eric's cell phone rang, and again he jumped. The vibrating in his coat pocket almost causing him to hyperventilate and Eric wondered how much more his strained heart could handle. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, he could see the display said 'Mindy' on it, and he slid his finger along the screen to answer it.

"What did you do!" was the first thing Eric heard over the ringing in his ears when he got the phone into position.

"Huh," he replied, confused and still unable to focus.

“What did you do!?!” Mindy’s voice rose. “I just got a call from Penny. She said she went to see Olivia’s birth mother and found her on drugs again. She said she thought there was a good chance we would be able to get Olivia back, but then they did a cursory check of our personal information again, and she said she found a \$23,000 credit debt split between our credit cards.”

The barrage of words sent Eric’s mind into a panic, and soon his brain began to empathize with his heart. The stress on both was becoming unbearable, and Eric could feel his face becoming flush.

Mindy continued, but she was losing steam as she went, “Penny said she had to call and check with me personally because that debt wasn’t there a few months ago. She figured it had to be a mistake. I said yeah, it has to be, but I knew right away what was going on. How could you do this to me?” Her momentum was almost completely gone now, and her next words were said through tears. “How could you do this to us?”

Eric said nothing. He opened his mouth and almost told his wife it was only thirteen thousand, and it couldn’t possibly be as much as she had said. It had only been a couple of weeks. But he realized that was not the part to focus on now. Slowly his mouth closed, and he could hear Mindy say, “Eric, are you there?” in a voice that was strained.

Eric again said nothing. There was nothing *to* say. He pulled the phone away from his face and pressed the “End” button on the screen. He couldn’t think right now, he needed air.

He pulled on the handle of his door and it creaked as it popped open and swung out, letting in the cold. Slowly he swung his legs around and forced himself out and onto the road. The falling sleet and crisp air slapped him in the face and his phone rang again vibrating in his hand. Eric hit "Ignore" and then placed the phone back in his coat pocket.

There was nothing to say. Had he really destroyed their one chance to get Olivia back?

"Twenty-three thousand?" he thought. Had he completely lost track of the damage he was doing?

He looked up and saw the box truck sitting motionless on the other side of the road. Its left side tires were parked on the white line that was veiled by the moving snow. There were people huddled around a tall thin man who was leaning up against the door of the truck. A woman was holding a towel to his head and a man with a green argyle scarf was placing a blanket around the tall man's shoulders.

"There has to be a way to fix this," Eric thought. "How can I fix this?"

The familiar smell of rubber and hot motor oil filled Eric's nostrils and mixed with the briskness in the air. He started walking to where he had seen the man with the gray beard run to, and he could see even more people now standing in the weeds next to the ditch. Smoke was rising up over their heads.

"If I can just get myself back to even," Eric began to rationalize. "If I can just make up what I lost, then everything will be ok. Mindy will forgive me. We'll get Olivia back. My God I miss that little girl so much."

“Hey weren’t you in that truck,” the man who had been helping the box truck driver came up and said to Eric, his green scarf blowing in the wind. “Are you alright man? You look kinda shaken, maybe you should sit down.”

“Huh. Oh, yeah. No, I’m ok. What happened to the red car?” Eric asked.

“It spun down into that ditch there,” the man indicated over by where the people were standing.

“I mean, is the driver alright?”

The man tightened his lips and shrugged a little, “I’m not sure,” he said grimly, “but from what I saw it didn’t look good.”

Eric put a hand on the man’s arm and nodded, and then he turned and walked toward the rising smoke. He felt compelled to see what had happened to the driver of that car, but all the while still thinking of Olivia and how tonight he would play higher stakes and fix this mess he had created.

At the edge of the ditch Eric could see the top of the maroon Taurus. It had slid off the road and landed in the tall weeds flat on its wheels. Most of the front end was gone, it lay in pieces covering the road and scattered down in the ditch surrounding the smoking wreck. Eric narrowed his eyes. To him it didn’t look as if there would be enough pieces to reconstruct the front end. “What had happened to the rest?” he wondered.

Next to the car Eric could see the man with the gray beard and another man he hadn't seen before standing in front of the driver's side door. They blocked his view and Eric still couldn't see the driver of the car. He pushed his way through the line of people standing on the shoulder of the road and made his way down the ditch embankment. Eric could hear the two men talking quietly to one another, and thought it was strange neither of them were trying to help the driver.

"Is the driver ok?" Eric questioned, searching the men's faces for answers. They turned and eyed each other and then the man with the gray beard looked back at Eric, and immediately he knew the answer.

"I don't think she had a chance," he said, only meeting Eric's eyes for a second before he looked away.

The men walked up the ditch bank past Eric, the man with the gray beard putting his hand on Eric's shoulder as he passed. Eric looked down at the car and could see the body of a young woman sitting limp behind the steering wheel of the destroyed Taurus. She was leaning back in her seat and slumping against the center console, her face turned away as if she were looking out the passenger's side window. She was wearing a royal blue uniform, like the kind a waitress would wear, but no coat, which Eric noted was odd for the weather they were having. Her uniform was covered in spots that seemed out of place. They were purple and scattered randomly varying in size and shape. Eric took a step closer and leaned in through the opening where the driver's side window had once been. He shuddered when he realized the spots were the woman's blood. He inhaled and felt the cold air fill his lungs and squeeze his heart. He

could see the woman's profile now. She was a pretty girl, young, probably no more than twenty-two or twenty-three, but there was no evidence of that youth left in her body. It was lifeless, motionless except for her yellow blonde hair that shivered with the incoming breeze.

Eric paused. He stood straight and brought his hand up and ran it through his short hair contemplating the moment. He could feel the moisture from the falling snow collecting on his palm as it ran over his head and down the back of his neck. He wiped his hand on his pants and looked back at the woman. He saw that she was wearing a nametag, black letters on clear tape that ran across white plastic.

"Hi, my name is Olivia," Eric read to himself, and his heart skipped a beat. At that moment the phone in his coat pocket began to vibrate again, and suddenly Eric felt dizzy. He took a couple steps backward up the ditch bank, and then fell into a sitting position looking in at the woman named Olivia.

"I'm never going to get her back," Eric said softly. "I'm never going to hold my little girl again." Tears filled his eyes as he stared blankly out into the icy field on the opposite side of the ditch. His vision was blurred and he wondered how he had gotten himself in this position.

He looked at the woman in the car again, this poor woman who was just on her way to work, and now her life was over. She probably had people who loved her. People she loved. People who would never see her again and it could have just as easily been him.

"I have to do something," Eric thought as he stood. "I have to find a way to fix this and get my little girl back." He looked at the girl in the car one last time, realizing that life wasn't

going to do him any favors. "Tonight," Eric thought. "Tonight all of it on black, then Olivia will be able to come home."