

THE ERNEST CARTER SAGA

Episode 1: The Brief Tragedy of Ernest Carter

by

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3/22/2015

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WHITE ON BLACK TITLE CARD:

"Time makes more converts than reason" - Thomas Paine

EXT. RURAL PARK - EVENING(BEFORE SUNSET)

A dirty Impala is parked near a thin line of pine trees that shade one side of an uninhabited county park. The driver's side door abruptly pops open and WILL (40s), steps out. His apathy for his appearance is obvious. His clothes are filthy, his face a yellowed combination of sweat and dirt. At a clip, he goes around to the passenger side door, opens it and drags a YOUNG WOMAN (19) from her seat. His grip around her arm is tight. She is crying. He pulls her to the front of the car and down to the ground. They will be hidden there by the trees--a calculation he made long ago.

He kneels beside her, intimately close.

WILL
Sweetheart, let me hold you.

He tries to get her to look at him but she has pulled her knees to her chest and bowed her head. He cannot see the excessive eye makeup that has begun to run down her cheeks.

WILL (CONT'D)
What's my name? Say my name to me.

His hands shake as he reaches for her. He grabs the back of her neck and moves close. His mumbled pleas for her to say his name become stifled by her thin shoulders.

EXT. RURAL PLOWED FIELD - EVENING (BEFORE SUNSET)

CLOSE ON dirt bike tires racing across an unplanted field. The motor's high whine fluctuates as the bike bounces over dirt and rocks.

EXT. RURAL PARK - EVENING (BEFORE SUNSET)

ECU. The young woman shudders as her abductor's face moves close to hers. His cheek touches hers. His hands on her shoulders tighten. He breathes in her muted sobs.

EXT. RURAL DIRT FIELD - EVENING (BEFORE SUNSET)

THE RIDER presses on.

EXT. RURAL PARK. - EVENING (BEFORE SUNSET)

The sound of an engine howl becomes faintly audible. Its unsteady moan now louder than the gentle rustle of the pine trees. She hears it before he does. She looks up and out to the edge of the parking lot. He notices her glance and then the sound. He stands and looks around. She quickly gathers herself and scrambles towards the row of pines. The rush induces a heaving sob which slows her pace. He quickly apprehends her, escorts her back towards the car, opens her door and shoves her in. He tries to pinpoint the source of the engine noise--now very near. He figures it's best to just get in the car and drive away. He opens his door. The bike engine's pitch rises sharply. He looks west into the setting sun.

Projecting off a hill, the silhouette of a man on a dirt bike shoots into the air--The Rider's eyes fixed on a filthy redneck standing next to the open driver side door of a rusty brown Impala. Within a breath, the rider dismounts from the bike and reaches for a stretched leather pouch slung over his shoulder.

The rider pulls from it two halves of a meticulously crafted ivory pool cue which he deftly puts together without breaking the pace of his hellbent march towards Will. Frozen in a state of indecision, Will does not move nor do much thinking.

The Rider is upon him. Will's confused squint breaks into an expression of despair as his assailant's shadow covers him. The Rider grips the thin end of his weapon, cocks it back like a zealous Little Leaguer, swings, and strikes his target squarely on the side of his head. Will drops to the ground, his head propped against the runner of his car. Blood pools at the bottom of his eyes, wells up, and spills over, running down his face and meeting the crimson streams trickling from his nose and ears. A full recovery is doubtful.

The air left vacant by the now fallen Will leaves The Dirt Bike Rider a clear view of the abducted young lady. She has stopped crying and is staring at the portions of Will she can see from her side of the car. She is realizing now that her heavy staccato breathing is quite loud and she tries to settle herself. The rider walks slowly to her side of the car, opens her door and holds out his hand to her. She turns to look at him.

To her, he looks average. His longish hair is tucked under a trucker's cap advertising Fluffy Stuff Brand Biscuits. He sports a laundered and pressed thin plaid shirt, worn but clean blue jeans and an understandably threadbare pair of 1987 series III Air Jordans.

He appears strong but has none of the synthetic bulges of one who had too often been to the gym. His strength has come from the repetitious lifting of heavy real world things and is woven deep inside him. She has never seen him before. As her eyes meet his he nods. She takes his hand and is lead out of the car. He holds her hand all the way to his bike and helps her onto it. Grabbing the handles and sitting there on the bike in front of her, he reaches back and takes both her hands and pulls them around his chest. The engine sputters to life and is soon a faint high whine disappearing across the rural terrain.

EXT. COUNTRY SCAPES AND EVENTUALLY RURAL HOMES - EVENING TO NIGHT

The Rider takes the young woman home.

NARRATOR

(as they ride)
He'll take her home and leave her
there to tell the story to her
family and eventually the McMinn
County Police who will find,
several hours from now, the
semiconscious, bloody and filthy
body of Will, several yards away
from his car...

EXT. RURAL PARK - NIGHT

Will has crawled away from his car and now lies awkwardly on the pavement. He breathes like a fish taken out of the water. He stares at a small weed.

NARRATOR

...his head on the pavement,
staring and directing his gasps
toward a small weed that has grown
through the paved parking lot. The
object his swollen brain
understands to be his only hope.

The red and blue of police lights flash on his face.

BEGIN PICTURE MONTAGE:

Relevant photographs of stated events play over the following Narration (unless noted). The pictures are grainy and askew and never show the direct action--always a remnant of the action, as if from a photographer who always shows up too late.

NARRATOR

This type of thing has not happened as far south as McMinn County yet. And due to the naturally skeptical approach a Police Department must take when dealing with an apparent vigilante, the Monroe County PD (the county of origin of the vigilante acts and, until now, the only place where this had happened) had said nothing formally about it to their neighbors, though rumors and speculations were no doubt prevalent.

So far, there had been four incidents: a domestic dispute involving a couple in their fifties, wherein the belligerent husband was subdued using a pool cue and bound to his kitchen table with packing tape until Monroe County's finest arrived and diffused the situation.

The second incident occurred following a Monroe county varsity football game but was not a PD critical situation (though by lunch time the next day the news had been fully circulated through the highest ranks of the MCPD and a small top brass meeting was held regarding: A. The department's approach to vigilante activity; B. Community perception; and C. The upcoming McMinn County PD vs. Monroe County PD Fall Softball Classic.)

The third instance was a notable escalation. A meeting between Caldwell Real Estate and some private riverfront homeowners broke out into a serious fight regarding an upcoming riverfront land auction. The company, rarely a loser in any fight was said to have, during the meeting, produced a handful of large men who were promised to assure the fairness of the deal.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The always ornery Robbie Hopper, riverfront property owner and unofficial leader of the opposition to the deal rushed at these men and was subdued by one of them with a severe blow to the face. The other riverfront property owners, now officially feeling threatened, then stood and headed for the exit. The large men pursued and the group was met at the door by a plain looking but strong man in a Fluffy Stuff Brand Biscuits hat carrying a pool cue. That man proceeded to apply his pool cue to the proper people until the room was satisfactorily quiet again and the citizens were allowed to leave like they had wanted to.

The fourth episode had come to be the most talked about. A rare bank robbery was staged and executed at the Valley Employee's Credit Union. The Monroe County officers quickly arrived and settled in for what would apparently be a lengthy negotiation process. One hour of silence was broken by a call from inside the bank to a cell phone there among the gathered crowd. The distraught woman, no doubt close to one of the trapped Credit Union patrons, ran to the nearest officer yelling "It's over, they're safe!" in a hysterical fashion until the officer was obliged to take the phone from her and speak to the person on the line and then go hand the phone to his superior.

Accounts from among the crowd at the bank reported that the vigilante responsible for the prior incidents was there among the hostages that day. And as the bank robbers burgled a back office he had slowly moved from his place of unexpected detention, and dispatched them. He then went back to his spot among the crowd and waited until the curious hostages grew impatient and investigated the whereabouts of their assailants.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

One of those curious hostages found the unconscious bodies of the robbers and quickly called his ex-wife, Frances. Credit Union videotape later confirmed this account.

Nobody could put a face with what all that happened until that tape could be reviewed. AND Since the scene at the bank was soon a mess of relieved families, local news, and police, it was some time before the Monroe County officers had set up parameters and had full control of the area. So they can't really be blamed for not seeing Ernest squirrel out the back door. But that's the sort of mistake McMinn County catcher, Ron Baker, will bring up to the better part of the Monroe County line up to effectively upset the delicate task of hitting a softball.

(Shaky dated video of rec league softball game.)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Therefore, the Monroe County brass decided to submit no statement, formally, regarding the incident to anybody.

(Video of EXT. Video shop)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The security tape assessment took place at Star Video where proprietor Matthew Pyle had the requisite monitors and playback machines. However, shortly after its commencement, the assessment was stopped when a call from Monroe County's main precinct informed those present that an I.D. on the vigilante had been obtained from an interrogation of the two alleged bank robbers. The two insisted that their

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)
assailant was a former Vo-tech
classmate named Ernest Carter, and
although they had not seen or
associated with Ernest in many
years, they supplied police with a
street where they supposed he might
be found. The two also stated that
Ernest was neither a standout nor a
slacker at school and had not been
involved in any sports or clubs.
His place of employment was assumed
and later confirmed to be Boyd's
Machine Rentals where he worked as
a mechanic. A brief interview with
his employer confirmed that Ernest
was a competent worker, on time,
thorough, and effective. However,
he added, in a curious and
unprompted statement, that he
regarded Ernest as neither standout
nor slacker and half of the time he
forgot that Ernest was even there.

Loud rivet noise brings us back to present.

INT. MCMINN COUNTY POLICE PRECINCT-DAY

A COUNTY SHERIFF on the phone in his office. His voice has a
bold southern quality.

MCMINN COUNTY INVESTIGATOR
(on phone)
Name of the Victim?... Kelly
Whitman.

He writes this down.

MCMINN COUNTY INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)
And the assailant?

He writes...

MCMINN COUNTY INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)
And what's his condition?... and
how long until he can talk to us?
Jesus Christ. Lawyers involved? Any
word on his attacker?

More writing.

MCMINN COUNTY INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)

Yeah. I've heard of that fella. A call over to the Monroe county boys would be a start. No, I'll call them. I've got to sort through exactly what I got here first. Yeah. Bye.

Hangs up.

RESUME PICTURE MONTAGE.

The pictures become more static, centered and legible.

NARRATOR

The street name given by the two bank robbers did help 'em find Ernest. His home, where he had lived all his life and alone now for three years, was the neatest of a row of poorly built unpleasing houses. The sheriff had ordered that a substantial party be present at his arrest but it proved unnecessary. Ernest answered the door and was taken without a saying word. He wasn't really led to the police car but walked there on his own, waited for the door to be opened and then took his seat. Though it was a sunny Saturday morning, and the collection of police vehicles all had their flashing lights on and the Sheriff's car had sounded a siren as he pulled into Ernest's driveway, the event had not drawn a crowd. The dozen officers in attendance were the only witnesses to his arrest save two small neighborhood children playing in a toy-littered yard several houses away. The curiosity of the neighborhood residents' disinterest in his arrest bent the reflexive Ernest towards melancholy. It was not the glory of his apprehension that he wanted the neighbors to celebrate but he felt desperation...

COLOR PHOTOS OF ERNEST IN BACK OF SQUAD CAR. One CU PHOTO cuts into:

I/E SQUAD CAR - SUNNY AFTERNOON

Ernest is driven away in a squad car.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)
for a people that were not
interested in 7 police cars, 12
uniformed officers and an arrest
taking place on their street--a
desperation for a people severely
affected by a blend of apathy and
laziness... and a common enthusiasm
for a television program that aired
at that particular hour. Ernest
turned his mind towards the
questions he would soon have to
answer.

INT. MONROE COUNTY POLICE PRECINCT, OFFICE - DAY

Ernest sits across from a MONROE COUNTY INVESTIGATOR in a paneled office. The Investigator wears a tie and a short sleeve shirt. He is in his mid 40s. He has a pleasant demeanor.

Ernest, in sunglasses, glances about the room. The Investigator just stares at Ernest--he is interested. Ernest is cuffed.

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR
Son, you are a curious thing.

Ernest is attentive.

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)
Truth is we don't really know what
to do with you. We were initially
just concerned with knowing who you
were.

The two sit in silence.

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)
Anything you want to say?

ERNEST
Am I in a lot of trouble?

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR
Well, I'm not too sure yet. A
couple of scrapes ain't nothing to
put you in a whole heap of trouble.
(MORE)

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)
But I doubt we'll invite you to
keep on with all of your
activities.

ERNEST
Really?

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR
Christ, yes, really. We can't have
inordinate crime fighting entities
out there doing as they please.
It's hard to manage. Can't say I
didn't admire a couple things you
pulled off, though.

The phone rings. The Monroe Co. Investigator answers.

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR (CONT'D)
Hello.

CUT BETWEEN:

INT. MCMINN COUNTY POLICE PRECINCT, OFFICE - DAY

Monroe Co. Investigator on the phone.

MCMINN COUNTY INVESTIGATOR
Charles?

MONROE CO. INVESTIGATOR
Herb. How ya getting on?

HERB
I'm doing all right, doing all
right.

CHARLES
What can I do for ya?

HERB
Got a question about some vigilante
activity that I've heard a little
about over in your neck of the
woods. It seems yesterday a little
drifted our way.

CHARLES
Go on.

HERB

I got a guy in the hospital here who could be there for about 6 more weeks and they tell me and I got a witness, a young lady, who says some fella just showed up and beat the holy hell out of this guy, saved her from being touched on real bad, but still put this guy in the hospital. And it all sounds like that guy who was at the bank there that day. So I was calling to see if you guys had any leads on who he is or what exactly he's after.

CHARLES

Herbie I happen to have the fella sitting right here in front of me. Want me to ask him if he knows anything?

Herb pauses to think. Then..

HERB

Sure.

Charles passes the phone to Ernest.

CHARLES

(to Ernest)

You know anything about a young lady and a gentleman who was beaten into the hospital yesterday?

ERNEST

I do.

CHARLES

(into phone)

Herbie, I think I got your guy.

HERB

When can I have him?

Off Charles looking at Ernest.

INT. MONROE COUNTY POLICE PRECINCT, OFFICE - DAY

Ernest sits in Herb's office. Herb is behind his desk tapping a pencil. Charles sits in a chair off to the side of the desk facing Ernest. Also, on the other side of the desk sits a LYLA RICHMOND (mid 40s), a striking woman in business attire.

She sits with a wry smile on her face and a focused attention on Ernest.

HERB

You'll understand that you put a man in the hospital and damn near killed him. He's never going to be quite the same anyhow.

Ernest nods.

HERB (CONT'D)

I think I know what you was trying to do or rather what you did do. You saved that poor girl from getting touched and all that but you'll have to understand we have to deal with you. Now what I'm afraid of is after this fella gets out of the hospital and gets his head as right as he can get it he's going to have a heap of hospital bills and he's going to be looking for someone to pay them. Now, if his lawyers get wind that we just let you off because you happened to be doing a nice thing at the time you were putting this young man in the hospital then I think what they'll do is come looking for the county to pick up some of that tab.

He let's this soak in. Lyla studies Ernest.

HERB (CONT'D)

So I was wondering about all that and wondering about what I was going to do with you when a pretty tidy solution knocked on my door. And I've talked to Charles about this and I think Monroe County and McMinn County are on the same page here.

Herb stands and walks around to the front of his desk and sits on the edge of it. He readies for his pitch.

HERB (CONT'D)

County Police ain't the only ones after you, Ernest. I got a visit from Lyla Richmond a few days ago. Do you know who she is?

Herb nods towards Lyla.

She is the CEO of Caldwell Real Estate. She wanted to know if we knew anything about a fella going about town playing champion of the people. And she asked me to call her if we found out anything about it. So today I called her and told her the whole situation and she offered a solution. She asked me if she could promise a substantial sum of money enough to protect me, enough to protect Chuck, and his people, and really Ernest, enough to protect you. Trade is you have to work for her. Now, this is not a request. I want you to understand that up front. We are currently working this out among the proper legal authorities and instead of leaving this room and going to jail you are going to leave this room and go to their offices and you're going to see what they want you to do.

Lyla stands and approaches Ernest.

LYLA
Welcome aboard.

EXT. POLICE PRECINCT - EVENING

Ernest, unhandcuffed, is led to a shiny black Mercedes in front of the precinct by two uniformed officers. As they reach the car, Lyla politely acknowledges that she will take it from there and gracefully, by the arm, leads Ernest around to the passenger side door. Ernest sits in and she slams the door shut.

INT. CALDWELL INC., SNACK ROOM - NIGHT

The room is dated and bare. The fluorescent light flickers. Ernest sits in a folding chair across a table from Lyla. Behind Ernest is a very large BODYGUARD. A clipboard with a contract is on the table. A pen sits in front of Ernest. Lyla is playful, coy.

LYLA
I need you to sign this for me and it will all be finished up. You're off their hook and onto mine.

Ernest takes the clipboard and begins to look it over.

LYLA (CONT'D)
This is not an optional thing,
Ernest. You have to sign it, honey,
or you will go to jail.

Ernest looks over and signs it. Lyla smiles.

MORE STILLLS HERE:

Ernest along side some corporate types in suits. Pie charts and sales graphs in the background. Photos look like they are posed for the company news letter.

INT. HOTEL CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

ONE ANGLE, camera in the back of the room, CORPORATE VIDEO LOOKING

A SUITED MAN, flanked by Ernest, is scanning the room for questions from a small collection of working class men and women in the audienece.

SUITED MAN
Any questions?

After a pause, a BIG MAN, casually dressed, speaks up in the back of the room.

BIG MAN
Partner, I don't think I'm alone
when I say hell no on this. What
you're telling us is bullshit and
the figure you're talking about
ain't close to what we were
thinking.

SUITED MAN
I think if you take the time to
look at the information we been
kind enough to provide, you will
see that the offer is adequate.

BIG MAN
The offer is not adequate. That's
what I am telling you.

SUITED MAN
Sir, to be frank, I don't know if
you have much of a choice.
(MORE)

SUITED MAN (CONT'D)

Caldwell and its interests have already gone through all legal channels to make your objection moot. This information was less about asking you and more about telling you what is going to happen. The small amount of properties you at this meeting represent are simply a portion of a greater development plan. And that plan has been approved, paid for, and it has commenced. This meeting was a courtesy.

BIG MAN

(desperate)

Sir, we are not selling our homes.

SUITED MAN

Then they will be taken from you. Such is the price of progress.

BIG MAN

The hell they will.

SUITED MAN

The hell they will, indeed. Ernest, show our friend the door. This meeting is over.

Ernest looks at the suited man. Waits. Thinks.

Ernest steps forward and grabs the Suited Man and slams his face forward into the podium. The man squeals and pops up. His nose starts to gush blood. He looks at Ernest, confused and unsteady. He tries to focus his attention and then falls to the floor motionless.

Ernest looks at the Big Man in the back of the room. Nobody speaks. Nobody is really sure what to do.

INT. CALDWELL INC., SNACK ROOM - NIGHT

The fluorescent light flickers. Ernest is seated in a chair across a table from Lyla and her Bodyguard. Ernest is in trouble.

LYLA

When you first started this whole thing, the vigilante thing, what was the reason? What did you expect?

ERNEST

It seemed like a good thing to do.
To help people.

LYLA

It is good, yes, but what did you
expect?

ERNEST

I can't say that I expected much. I
was frustrated at some things the
way they were going and I expected
doing something about it would make
me feel better.

LYLA

Ok. And did you think about how
others would feel? The people you
helped or the people you hurt?

ERNEST

I did think about that a little.

LYLA

And what did you think about when
you thought about that?

ERNEST

I thought maybe the people I helped
would be pretty glad about being
helped and the people I hurt, I
thought maybe I would change their
minds maybe about the way they
wanted to do some things. That
maybe they would realize what they
were doing was hurting people.

LYLA

And why did you think it was up to
you to make them change their
minds?

ERNEST

Nobody else was doing it.

LYLA

I see.

Ernest is clubbed on the head by the bodyguard. His head hits the table and stays down. His eyes are wide and shaking as he tries to focus his thoughts while the concussive effects swell. A bit of blood drips out of his nose. The bodyguard's massive hand comes down hard on Ernest's head. Ernest's hands are pulled back and zip tied together.

He tries to stand, kicking the seat back from under him. The concussion grows. The body guard handles him and forces his head back onto the table. Ernest is awkwardly on his knees, his head resting on the table. Lyla walks around the table and kneels to his level. Her beautiful face is close to his.

LYLA (CONT'D)

I get you, Ernest.

She pauses, smiles mechanically at Ernest, then:

I do real estate. You know that.
But I don't do real estate like any
little freeway-trailer-office
shithead.

She pauses even longer, her smile vanishes as something possesses her.

Where do you think all this comes
from? The offices, the men, the
clothes, the money? Do you think I
just rode around on a goddamn
dirtbike and took what I wanted? I
had to do things for people,
Ernest. We can't just-

I had to do things for people. The
world is this big machine, honey.
And it's all the time turning its
gears and blazing and spitting out
steam. See, if you want to get
anything done, we've got to reckon
with the machinery. You'll get
burned, Ernest. You'll get crushed
and bruised and fucked, but that's
the only way to do it. How have
you made it to-how old are you?
30? How you've made it this far
without getting that... bless your
heart. You must've had a
chickenshit daddy.

Ernest's eyes turn a fierce red. His face contorts into an
fervent expression of rage. The bodyguard tenses up.

People threw the rules in your face
over and over until you got sick of
it.

(MORE)

LYLA (CONT'D)
You tried to beat down the heavy
gates of heaven with a pool stick,
honey. Well, all that's over now.

Ernest leans forward, raging, ready to pounce.

Lyla's cold expression cracks. For a fleeting moment she looks concerned. Without looking she addresses the bodyguard.

LYLA (CONT'D)
Cut his eyes out. I don't ever want
him to look at me again. And then
we'll find something for him to do.

Lyla walks out of the room, leaving Ernest as the bodyguard grabs him and jerks him to the floor. The Bodyguard puts his knee on Ernest's chest, pinning him as he pulls a switch blade from his front pant pocket. He opens the knife and presses the sharp point against Ernest's closed eyelid.

Though a man of strength, fortitude and resolve, Ernest cannot help but to scream as the switch blade begins to cut out his eyes. He is primal now and his screams are the deep velar screams of an animal being caught and consumed by a bigger beast--part pain, part despair.

INT. CALDWELL INC. MAILROOM - DAY 18

Ernest is alone. His feet are shackled to a chair in a windowless basement mailroom. He has bloodied gauze taped to his eyes. The bottom of the gauze is wet from tears. He is surrounded by an overwhelming stack of letters and packages. He runs a letter through an antiquated zip code reader. On a separate mechanical part of the device by Ernest's left hand the zip code numbers pop up in relief. He runs the fingers of his left hand over the raised numbers. He fumbles with a sheet of stamps, peels a stamp off, places the stamp on the letter, and drops it into a bin to his right. He repeats the process. He repeats the process. He repeats the process.

WHITE ON BLACK TITLE CARD: To be continued...