

War, calamity, and Ebola shatter the lives of two brothers.

THE EBOLA CONNECTION

by Paul D. Ellner

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A NOVEL



PAUL D. ELLNER

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First Edition

In the year 1976, evil emerged from the African jungle as a deadly disease. After killing many people, it disappeared only to reappear many miles away. Like a panther, the disease crouched in the bush knowing that the time to pounce again would come.

1

Hartford, Connecticut, Saturday May 20, 2006 6 p.m.

Howard Frazer snapped the textbook shut with a sense of finality and slid it into his backpack. *I hope this is the last time I'll have to deal with French irregular verbs.*

His brother Frank entered the room they shared and flung himself onto his bed.

"Tennis is a quaint sport," he said. Frank had been watching a tennis match on the TV.

"Quaint?" Howard said.

Frank's vocabulary was considerably more advanced than that of a typical 15-year old.

"What do you mean?" Howard said.

"Well, for one thing, they keep score by fives. Instead of one, two, three, it's five, fifteen, thirty, and so on. And for nothing, they say 'love'. It doesn't make sense."

"Why does that bother you?" Howard asked.

"I don't know. Why couldn't they say, 'zero' or 'zip'?" Frank said.

Howard laughed, shrugged, and regarded the tuxedo laid out on his bed. *It looks something like a uniform. Well, in a way it is the uniform of people who have succeeded. For me, I succeeded in graduating high school. I would like to succeed . . .at something more.*

Frank had accompanied Howard to the rental store.

"I like the colored ones," Frank volunteered. "I'd get one of those."

Howard shook his head. "I'll stick to the regular black."

Howard also rented a pair of shiny leather shoes. At home, he told his brother, "I'm going to shower," and hurried down the hall to the bathroom. As he stood under the warm spray, he thought, *finally, the Senior Prom and a date with Cathy*. Although thoughts of Cathy always produced a stirring in his loins, Howard considered the Senior Prom to be more important than a date with Cathy. The prom symbolized the end of high school for him and the beginning of real life.

He knew there was no money for college. *I don't care, I'm not sure I'm bright enough, but maybe Frank will be able to wangle a scholarship.*

Back in the room, he toweled himself dry. Frank had gone back to the living room and the tennis match. Howard found clean underwear in a drawer and dressed in the tuxedo. He tied the laces on the black shoes, looked in the small mirror on top of the dresser, and combed his straw-colored hair. It took him three times to get the part right. Finally, he clipped the bow tie to his collar and satisfied with its appearance, stopped at his mother's room where there was a full-length mirror on the back of the door. He glanced at his reflection and smiled. *Cathy will be blown away when she sees me.*

He bounded down the stairs to the kitchen. His mother was at the sink chopping vegetables for tomorrow's beef stew.

"How do I look, Ma?" he asked.

Clara studied her son. "Very handsome," she said with a smile. She dried her hands on a dishtowel,

adjusted his bow tie, which was askew, and kissed him on the cheek. She could detect stubble, not yet visible, but refrained from making a comment. *No girl would consider Howard handsome.* She knew her seventeen-year old son's muscular, 5' 8" frame could be considered formidable, but those clear brown eyes peering from an open and friendly face would belie that impression.

"Don't forget Cathy's corsage," she said.

"Thanks, Ma," he told her. He kissed her, collected the flowers from the refrigerator, and started for the door.

"Have a good time at the prom. Drive carefully," she called after him.

Clara watched her son leave. *I wish I could hug him, but he wouldn't like that. He looks so much like his father. Michael would have been proud that Howard finished high school. Michael was a good man, a good husband, and a hard worker. He always brought his wages home, never showed up drunk, gambled, or played around. He was happy when Howard was born and overjoyed when Frank came along. It was only a few weeks later after Frank was born when my poor Michael fell off that high girder. Both boys knew the story of their father's fatal accident. His safety harness didn't work. The damn lock failed. The \$750,000 from the company's and Michael's life insurance sounded like a lot at the time, but over the years, it barely covered raising the two boys. Howard tried to help part-time after school. He started working in the hardware store when he was 16. Frank was too young to work. I wish Michael could be sitting with me at the graduation ceremony.* Clara sighed and went back to chopping vegetables.

Replete in his rented tuxedo with corsage in hand, Howard's excitement grew anticipating the prom and his date with Cathy. He started out in the family's 2001 Toyota, and after thirty minutes pulled up in front of Cathy's apartment house. She lived in a section somewhat more upscale than his. It occurred to him he had never been inside her apartment nor had he met her parents. *Maybe they don't like her going out with me. Maybe they think I'm not good enough for her.* He blew the horn once. *I remember when I brought her home. Mom liked her. She said she seemed like a nice girl. She is a nice girl. Frank thought she was pretty.*

Howard recalled how they met six months ago. *Cathy, 16 and a junior, was strolling down a corridor with a group of girls, chatting with them, oblivious to all else. The corridor was lined with student lockers, one of which had an open door. I saw she was heading for a collision, took her elbow, and steered her clear of the obstruction. She looked surprised, and her girlfriends giggled. She thanked me and asked my name.*

This encounter led to a date. They had a good time and began to see each other regularly. He was dependable, and she felt safe when she was with him. Cathy liked him. For his part, Howard liked dating an attractive girl who was bright and popular.

Cathy came out and walked to the car. She wore a lavender knee-length prom dress. Howard got out and held the door open for her. He felt awkward and self-conscious in the tuxedo and stiff shoes.

"You look beautiful," he said. He could not help noticing the strapless top revealing the cleavage of her young breasts.

"Thank you," she said. "You look great."

When they were both inside the car he handed her the wrist corsage.

"Oh, it's gorgeous," she said and slipped it on her wrist.

They drove to the banquet hall, listening to popular songs on the radio. Students began to arrive, mostly in small groups. Howard and Cathy joined other couples walking into the hall. Cathy seemed slightly nervous. "This is the first Senior Prom I've ever been to," she confided.

"It's my first one, too. Don't worry, we'll be fine," he reassured her. Inside, they heard music provided by a disc jockey.

"Let's get our picture taken," Cathy said, and they joined a queue of other couples waiting to be photographed. When it came their turn, they posed side by side.

"Say cheese," the photographer urged, and both managed to smile.

They found a table and sat down. A waiter appeared and asked, "Which meal did you select?"

"I'll have the chicken," Howard said.

"Same here," Cathy said.

"And to drink?" the waiter asked.

"Pepsi," they chorused.

"Do you want to dance?" Cathy asked.

"I don't know how to dance," Howard said.

"It's easy. I'll show you. C'mon."

She took his hand and pulled him. Howard reluctantly stood up and followed her to the crowded dance floor. He tried to follow her by mimicking the same contortions of others around him.

"I really don't know what the hell I'm doing," he said.

Cathy grinned at him, "You're doing great."

Howard thought the music would never end so they could sit. He saw the waiter delivering their drinks, and he used this as an excuse to return to the table. They sat, each having nothing to say, watching the dancers. "C'mon, let's dance," Cathy urged, dragging Howard back to the dance floor. After a time, he relaxed and started to enjoy it.

"Are you having fun?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's cool."

When the music stopped, the D.J. announced, "I'm going to take a break so you can all enjoy your dinner. Don't forget to vote for your king and queen of the prom."

After Howard and Cathy finished eating, she said, "Let's go vote." They voted and returned to find dessert waiting, a marbled cake with ice cream along side.

"That was yummy," Cathy said. "Let's dance."

Eventually, the D.J. played a slow dance, and Howard took Cathy in his arms. He did not know any steps, but he held her close, and they swayed to the music. Howard was stirred by the fragrance she wore. When the song ended, Howard asked, "What do you say we leave now?"

"But we won't find out who got to be king and queen," Cathy said.

"I don't care who they are," Howard said. "Do you?"

"Not really. Let's go. Let's find a place where we can be alone."

Howard was encouraged. He felt she was looking forward to a session of lovemaking. He drove to the boat ramp parking lot near the Connecticut River and parked facing the water. It was the darkest and most inconspicuous location he could find. For a while, they

sat listening to the radio play current songs and watching the lights on the water. He turned the engine off but kept the radio playing.

"How did you like the prom?" he asked.

"It was a lovely evening, and now we can have some private time together." She turned and gave him a lingering kiss.

"Would you like some vodka?" Howard asked displaying a small bottle purchased for him by an older friend. He unscrewed the top and offered it to Cathy.

"I don't want any," she said. "I don't like that stuff."

"Yeah, it's too strong." He closed the bottle and put it away. "I have a joint we could share," Howard offered, producing a marijuana cigarette.

"O.K.," she said.

He lit the joint and took a drag before passing it to her. "Don't wet it," he cautioned.

She took it from him and inhaled some of the smoke. Cathy had done this on other occasions. They continued to share the joint until it was consumed. He tossed the stub out the window, looking around to make certain they were alone.

"Come closer," he said.

Howard put his arm around Cathy, drew her to him, and kissed her. Her tongue darted into his mouth. They continued kissing, each kiss becoming more heated. As she expected, Howard tried to fondle her breast, but the thick material of the dress interfered. Cathy unzipped the bodice freeing her breast. He bent and kissed it, taking her nipple into his mouth. He felt her shudder as it hardened. They were both aroused. Cathy reached over and felt his hardness trying to escape. She unzipped his fly, freeing his erection. She bent down to take him between her lips. Cathy knew

Howard liked it. They had done this before. Her best friend, Selma, had told her about oral sex. "It's called a blow job. You can't get pregnant or catch a disease. A lot of the girls do it."

After a few minutes, Howard finished with a sharp intake of breath, an orgasmic "Aahh", and smiled. Cathy handed him a tissue she had ready. They continued to fondle each other. Howard moved his hand up her thigh and felt the moist heat between her legs.

"Let's do it," Howard whispered. "I really want to."

"I do, too, but I don't want to get pregnant."

"Aren't you on the pill?"

"No, my father wouldn't permit it," she lied. She would not dare bring up the subject of birth control with either of her parents.

"I've got a condom," he told her. Like many other high school boys, Howard kept a condom in his wallet in the hope someday he would have the opportunity to use it.

A year ago, Cathy had sexual intercourse several times with a former boyfriend, and she liked it. Now she wanted to do it with Howard.

"O.K.," she said, "but let's get in the back seat." Other than the oral sex with Cathy, this would be Howard's first sexual experience involving someone other than himself.

Afterwards, he helped her to zip up her dress, and he rearranged his clothing.

Cathy asked, "What time is it? I've got to be home before midnight."

"Or else you'll turn into a pumpkin," Howard joked, now more confident.

"More likely pumpkin pie," Cathy said thinking of how irate her father could get.

He started the engine and drove away. In front of her house, he got out to open the door for her.

"That was awesome," Howard whispered, thinking of the sex.

"Goodnight, Howard," she said and kissed him, glancing to see if anyone was watching. "I had a lovely time."

Early the next morning Howard pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt, tiptoed downstairs and outside to sit on the front steps. The neighborhood was in an older section of Hartford, along Blue Hills Avenue. The street was quiet, not many people moving about on a Sunday morning.

Howard thought about the previous evening. His thoughts turned to Cathy, and he smiled. *I did it—we did it. It felt good—I think she liked it, too. I feel like a real man—we can do it again if she wants now that I've crossed that bridge.*

Frank came downstairs and sat next to his brother. "How was the prom?" Frank asked.

"It was O.K."

"What did you and Cathy do afterward?"

"Nothing much. We just drove around for a while, and then I took her home," Howard said. He knew Frank wanted to ask if they had sex. But he was not about to tell him.

Frank looked at him knowingly and smiled.

2

Friday, June 16

Clara Frazer put on her best dress for Howard's graduation.

"It pisses me off to have to pay for the cap and gown," Howard remarked. *Why should I have to pay for an outfit for graduation? The school should supply them.*

Howard drove Clara and Frank to the high school. They were able to get seats near the aisle so Howard would pass close to them as he marched to Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* toward his place with the other graduates. Howard's name was not among those receiving various prizes and awards. He had been an average student, collecting mostly B's with only occasional A's and C's.

Clara and Frank cheered when Howard's name was announced as he crossed the stage to receive his diploma. The applause for him was modest compared to the response accorded more popular students. Clara beamed with pride. *If only Michael could see him now.* Rather than participating in extracurricular activities, such as clubs or sports, Howard had elected to work at a part-time job to help the family finances.

When the ceremony was over, Howard drove his family home stopping only to return his cap and gown. In their backyard, the boys lit the charcoal in their small Hibachi, and Clara grilled hot dogs and hamburgers for them. They drank lemonade and ate

slices of the chocolate cake she baked for this special occasion.

While Clara busied herself cleaning up, Howard and Frank sat watching the coals of the grill die from embers to ashes.

"So what will you do now?" Frank asked.

"I'm trying to figure out where I go from here," Howard said. "I'd like to be someone important. Someone who helps people, like a lawyer or a doctor, but that takes college. We don't have any money for college."

"I'm going to go to college," Frank said.

"How will you manage that?"

"I'm going to try to get a scholarship to some college. My grades are pretty good," he added, leaving Howard to reflect on his own mediocre academic performance.

"Right now, I think my best bet is to learn a trade so I can make a decent living," Howard said.

"What trade interests you?"

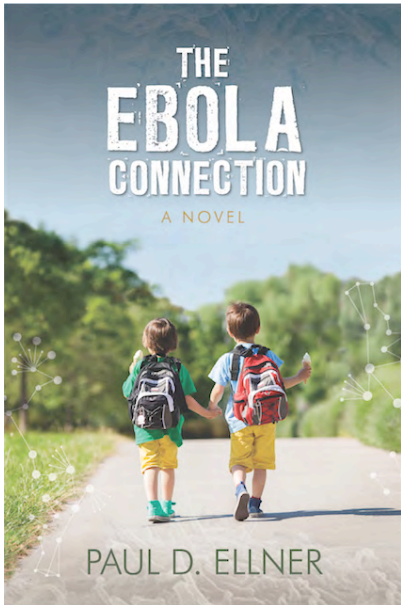
"Maybe a mechanic, an electrician, or a plumber—something like that. A service people will always need regardless of what it costs."

"I suppose that's a good idea," Frank told him without much enthusiasm.

Clara looked out the kitchen window where her sons sat talking. She reflected on the graduation ceremony. *Howard was only three when Michael died. He never had any time with his father. When I graduated, my father wasn't there either, but at least I had the benefit of knowing him. I remember when I was a young girl, not yet in high school, he used to explain science to me. He used to tell me about those Ebola outbreaks in Africa. A terrible disease. I wonder if they have found a*

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cure yet. I hope to God that disease stays in Africa so that my sons or other Americans can never get it.



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