

Upon hitting 50, Eliot Smith undertakes a solo journey to examine things done and left undone in this touching and humorous reverse coming-of-age tale. Meandering from family to long-lost friends, he finds others will enlighten him, for better or worse.

Eliot's Tale

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# **ELIOT'S TALE**

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# 1

There is no particular reason that I should have awakened on this particular day in the grip of what many likely will term a mid-life crisis. In fact, on this particular October morning, I am entering my forty-ninth year on the planet, which, assuming a reasonable life expectancy, puts me beyond the probable midpoint of my existence. Technically, it also puts me at the half century mark in 2000, the first year of the new century

My life, by most standards, is a good one, though not marked by any spectacular achievements or historic events of my making. Just a good life, enjoyed by a good person, which is what I perhaps self-righteously consider myself. Just as there are no great points to mark my life, neither are there any that I especially regret. I've done no real evil, though I'm aware of shortcomings and damaged feelings that I've left behind. But there are no deep, dark secrets waiting to be exposed, nor do I live in fear of the knock on the door. I've always found the Golden Rule to be worth following.

In fact, all things considered, God is in His heaven, if you accept that notion, and all is basically right with my world. Through the large window over the tub in the bathroom, which I can see from my spot in the bed, I note that the old maple has taken on a magnificent red tone. A moment ago, I heard the screech of the female hawk that haunts the woods behind our house, even though we're situated on a cul-de-sac deep in the suburbs of Richmond, Virginia.

The other sound of which I'm aware, as I lay on my side in the bed and look toward the window, is the quiet rustle of the sheets as my wife pleasures herself. She thinks I'm still asleep and, as in the past, I let her have her solitary fun. She keeps her breathing soft, but it quickens in rhythm to her fingers. There was a time in the past when I resented it. But I tried to put it in perspective and keep it there. After all, I still enjoy a fantasy tryst of my own from time to time.

But today, in my revised frame of mind and reference, I am suddenly bothered by it. So, I shift my position, blow out a deep breath and flop onto my back. The rustling stops. I consider reaching over and letting my hand run down her arm, replacing her fingers with my own and taking over. I know just how it would feel, her lips wet and receiving my touch gladly, responding to the slight pressure at that one exquisite place. I would enjoy making her climax, and then sliding onto and into her, experiencing that incomparable sensation as I glide inward and upward.

However, I know that my interruption would not be warmly welcomed at this particular moment. So, I settle back and, in a moment, the ever so slight movement begins anew. I consider taking my own wood in hand and sharing the experience. But I don't move again, and soon sense her hips tightening down onto the mattress as she reaches orgasm, hear that one sharp little intake of breath. I roll back over and again take in the view through the window.

When Hannah arises a few minutes later, I watch her through half-closed lids as she glides down the short hall and into the bathroom. Hannah has always glided. She has the grace that seems to come most often in long, lanky women. I admire her as she moves, her sheer gown revealing the taut muscles of her back, the thin hips and long legs.

I love Hannah, and she loves me. We make a point of assuring one another of this point regularly. I'm not, however, completely sure that she likes me at this point in our lives. Our physical contact has dwindled over the past year or so, with even the occasional hug becoming a curious event. When we've talked about our sexual desires, Hannah has simply expressed a lack of interest for which she has no particular reason. It just doesn't seem important to her any more, nor a pressing need. We both acknowledge that we've certainly been sexually active in our life together, participating in the physical realm more often than our friends, if the truth is being told. And she's not the only female among our counterparts and contemporaries who apparently has undergone such a change in desire. The conversation among the guys often dwells on just this topic, with some of us

expressing reluctant acceptance while others hint of seeking comfort in other quarters.

Wes Matthews, for example, confessed to me during a recent round of golf that he had become involved with a secretary half his age. As I watched Wes attempt to swing around the well-rounded gut hanging over his shorts, I found it difficult to imagine him atop a young girl.

"I hate it, and I love it," Fred said, taking a long swig from a sweating can of beer. "I hate that I'm cheating on Marie, who I dearly love and care for. But I love the heat, the passion. Hell, I think I even like the danger of getting caught. That might even make it better."

"Yeah, and what happens if you get caught?" I asked, not really wanting an answer, but at least putting the concept into play.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to deal with it, if and when the time comes," Fred responded, with quite a cavalier grin. "Actually, think about it. What can Marie really say? She stopped wanting to do the deed, found it unnecessary. I'm a red-blooded American boy who needs a little of the old in-and-out to keep plugging along. Goddamn, Eliot, I'm not going to leave Marie and marry this girl. It's just about pure old down-home fucking. Don't you ever feel that urge, to just screw the living shit out of some ready and willing woman?"

Actually, the latter holds no great attraction for me, though I was forced by evolution-mandated male behavior to smirk and snort as if I absolutely couldn't wait to screw the living shit out of some stranger. In fact, my one and only previous foray onto the wild side during my twenty-plus years of marriage had been, to say the least, a disaster.

Her name was Naomi, if you can believe it, and she had come to the public relations firm where I worked as a temporary replacement for an assistant on maternity leave. I was around thirty-five at the time, and she was pushing on thirty but looked much younger. I was a father by then, and Hannah and I were mired in the bliss of family.

But Naomi flirted with me, and I liked it. She acted as if she found me attractive and interesting. She would ask me questions and make a point of standing just close enough that there was occasional bodily contact. I remember specifically one instance when I was standing in

my office and she came in to ask my opinion on a grammatical point. Naomi handed me a sheet of paper and then pointed to the item in question. As she did, her breast pressed against my arm. It was firm and amazingly warm under her light blouse. I'm actually certain that time stood still. I know that I was conscious of her nipple hardening and, when I looked down at her, she gave me a shy smile. But her eyes spoke volumes. There was heat in them and, I swear to God, I almost swooned.

Comma placement resolved, Naomi left the office, and my eyes trailed after her. Just at the door, she glanced over her shoulder and smiled. Baited, hooked and boated.

A moment later, even as my brain still reeled, my telephone rang.

"Hi, Eliot. It's Naomi."

Trying to appear suave, I blurted something like, "So, haven't I seen you somewhere before."

But damn if it didn't work. She trilled a lovely little laugh.

"You are so funny, Eliot," she said. "I really like working with you. I'm sorry that I'm only here for a short time."

I agreed and admitted that she had brought some new vitality to the place, which, quite frankly, did have more than what seemed its fair share of older, hefty females (though there was a rumor that one plump oldster could and would provide amazing oral favors in return for any after-work outing involving rum and coke).

Naomi thanked me for the compliment and then suggested we have a drink after work some time. With the heat of her nipple still searing my bicep, I suggested that we meet that very afternoon. To my surprise, and pleasure, she agreed.

And meet we did in Barney's, an around-the-corner kind of place that was conducive to what amounted, in my mind at least, to a secret rendezvous. It was also not the kind of place in which I could expect to run into my wife, friends or even a mouthy co-worker. Nevertheless, there was sweat sliding down my sides when Naomi plopped down opposite me in the booth. She looked fresh and cool, and immediately ordered a Cosmopolitan from the lingering waitress who had just delivered my martini (gin, of course, shaken, not stirred).

We engaged in light chatter, as I recall, though I don't remember any details, except, of course, the inevitable discussion of my name.

"Your name is sort of unusual, isn't it? At least the spelling?"

I'm sure I nodded knowingly. "My mother was a great admirer of T.S. Eliot. In fact, she was always obsessed, for some reason, with 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' I was never sure why. She was, after all, only a high school graduate who thereafter devoted her life to her two children and a husband who wasn't particularly loving. But she always read Eliot, memorized chunks. Once when I asked her why, and why she had given me his name, she told me that it had just seemed right that I have a first name that gave my last name some meaning."

"Eliot Smith," Naomi uttered, giving my name a soft caress that gave me a chill. "I guess Smith is, well, you know, sort of common."

"Ah, yes, common is exactly what my mother felt. You see, her maiden name was Annette Mayweather, which was very lovely. So, as you can imagine, Smith was quite a disappointment, and this was long before a woman thought of keeping her own name. So, she was saddled with a name she disliked as she grew to dislike the man who had given it to her."

Naomi's big brown eyes were solemn. "That's a sad story. Are you close to your mother?"

I shook my head and told her that my mother had passed away a few years before, a victim of breast cancer that went undiagnosed too long. As I usually do, I'm sure that at that point I changed the subject, probably asked Naomi about her family.

I do remember that an hour or so later, after we'd each drained two cocktails, I walked into her bedroom. In memory, it seems as if we were transported there, both having somehow acknowledged what we found as inevitable, both helpless victims of lurking passion.

While I stood feeling disoriented by the strange surroundings and circumstance, she came to me and unknotted my tie, unbuttoned my shirt and pulled it off. With my hands on her waist, she pulled her sweater over her head and unfastened her bra. Her bare skin against mine was like a jolt of electricity, and I felt her nipples firm against my



chest. Her lips were so soft that I felt as if I were being kissed for the very first time. I was lost in her mouth, and the slight scent of her perfume filled my nose.

And it was that scent that yanked me away from the moment. The thought that streaked into my up-until-that-instant sex-addled brain was that Hannah would smell it on me as soon as I walked within twenty paces of her. Perfume lingers. I was fairly certain it even permeated your skin, lying hidden until the heat of fear reactivates it. And as a liar, I was a dismal failure. (Hence my longstanding difficulties as a writer of fiction, my fantasy goal, since, unlike Faulkner, there does not lurk within me "the heart of a pathological liar.")

Hannah, however, possesses a tool that Hemingway stated emphatically every writer needs: a built-in, shock-proof shit detector. With that weapon at her disposal, Hannah would analyze that whiff of perfume, however subtle, and immediately squash any story that I might present. Therefore, I was lost.

And, as I was lost, so was my once magnificent bone stallion that now galloped off into the sunset. Naomi sensed the change immediately, pulled back and looked into my eyes.

"Is something wrong?"

I honestly tried to lie. I babbled something about how much I wanted her, how desirable she was, but that I just didn't feel right about it. To my shock, she accepted my rantings, even applauded my guilt (she obviously failed to grasp the element of cold fear). She too, it turns out, had been uncertain, but decided to cast her fate to the wind. I'd always hated that song and, hearing it in the context of that particular moment, caused me to have extreme misgivings about Naomi. I found myself pondering what we would have talked about after sex, what kind of music she might have put on the stereo, what she looked like in an old bathrobe with fuzzy slippers.

To be honest, I was relieved, even buoyant. We dressed quickly, our backs to one another, and parted like chaste friends with a quick peck on the cheek. I was suddenly proud of my courage, my fortitude in the face of overwhelming sexual temptation. I was a man among

pimpily face boys obsessed with a meaningless poke in the whiskers. Or was I really just too moral for my own good?

That's an interesting question to ponder now, as years have slipped by and I find myself in this present state of uncertainty. My dear wife, just moments removed from her silent solo orgasm, might care not one bit if I came in reeking of perfume, might even welcome the opportunity to send me packing.

There's so much I know now, with fully fifty years behind me. But so much more that I don't know, including about things that passed years before that still trouble me. That's what seems important now. Not sweating the mysteries of tomorrow, but resolving the questions of yesterday. So, my midlife crisis is one of resolution, and with it, perhaps some form of redemption.

I think of two things that strike me as helpful in my new quest. The first is the song "In My Life" by The Beatles. I remember the song from those earliest days of Beatle euphoria when each new song was cause for celebration. However, it was not a personal favorite, nor, as I recall, a hit. Plus, at age twelve, there was very little life to reflect back on, not many good friends and certainly no real lovers lingering in memory.

But I happened across the song one day last week as I noodled through the channels in search of something worth listening to. For some reason, I not only heard the song as just music, which I most commonly do, but I actually followed the lyrics. And I discovered a profound new meaning, based on a perspective of age. There is a melancholy in that song, a longing for the past and for the warmth of memory. Maybe that's what I want right now, a safe haven where things past are no danger.

Probably more telling though to my current thinking is a line from the Book of Common Prayer used by the Episcopal Church. Though raised as a Baptist, I bolted through agnosticism, atheism, Buddhism, Taoism and variations thereof before settling into the cool dignity of the Episcopal Church, the location, according to T.S. Eliot of "God's frozen people."

Nevertheless, I can accept its philosophical approach to the spiritual world, and I find comfort in the rituals of the service. It's in the opening of the confession of sin that there is the thought that always makes me pause:

*Most merciful God,  
we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone.*

There it is, the things we have done and the things we have left undone. That is the sum of my existence at this moment in time. My current state of life is one of marching in place, looking for a place to cross to safety. The future is of little consequence because, when all is said and done, I have to accept there is very little I can truly do to control it.

But there are those things that I have done and those things that I have left undone that I can address, that I can pull into my sphere of influence and attempt to rectify. Or, at the very least, attempt to understand based on the experiences and knowledge that have come since. This is, I think, a noble undertaking that may ease my soul and color my remaining time in the mortal coil.

Therefore, I will identify those things that need to be examined, revisited and, if at all possible, resolved. That will be my mid-life quest.

So, exactly what does one do after having made such a monumental decision?

Get out of bed, of course, and into the shower. It is here that I do some of my best thinking as I deal with the housekeeping requirements of a white man's body. I will go on record as saying that I'm not holding up too badly. I work out, lift some iron, try to keep some tone to the muscle. As is the norm, I am retaining a roll of flab around my middle that seems to resist diet and crunches. But otherwise I'm reasonably slim and trim, with enough energy to make

it through the day. There's some gray creeping into my thatch of standard issue brown hair, but not enough to send me out for Grecian Formula.

Based on my recent physical exam, my blood pressure is acceptable, though it elevates under stress. No signs or symptoms of anything else threatening. My prostate is holding its own, though I informed Doctor Hankins that next time I want dinner and some foreplay before the exam, and a kiss afterward. I know women say that we guys have nothing to complain about when compared to the indignities they suffer and the tribulations of birth. However, that moment when the good doctor seeks out my prostate would be, in my estimation, difficult to top.

No voices in the shower this morning. For some reason, I sometimes think that I hear someone talking to me or calling me when I'm under the water. I have no clue why, except my long-standing worry about everyone and everything around me.

I worked with a woman once who went through a period when she could only take a shower with the bathroom door bolted and the curtains open. No glass shower doors—too foggy. As she told it, her fear went back to the time she lived in New York, in the days just after Hitchcock's *Psycho* when no woman wanted to take a shower. She had never considered herself fearful, she claimed, until one afternoon when she was enjoying a hot rinse and the curtains of her shower began to move. This was an immediate cause of fear since she knew the door of her small apartment was rigidly locked and the windows closed.

She backed against the wall, expecting at any instant a maniac with a flashing knife to join her. There was no sound except the water, no movement except the curtain's sway. She stayed there until the water went cold. Finally, she turned it off and listened for breathing, wondering if some madman was waiting just outside, relishing her terror. When nothing else transpired, she yanked the curtain open, ran dripping, screaming and naked through her apartment, out the door and down the hall where she caused an old lady to faint. A friend in another apartment coaxed her inside, settled her down and finally

helped her determine there was no one in her home. While I appreciated her unnerving experience, I've always secretly enjoyed a chuckle at the mental vision of this bone-thin female, bearing absolutely no resemblance to Janet Leigh, barreling down the hall, wailing at the top of her lungs. Had I been that old lady, I likely also would have fainted.

But I digress. And, as I towel off, I begin to formulate a plan to address things done and left undone, which should accommodate the past and influence the future. Immediately, there come to mind items with which I need to deal, beginning with reconciling with my own wife and daughter. There is no doubt that one objective of this plan must be repairing the love and desire of my wife. Another must be to reestablish meaningful contact with my daughter who, at seventeen going on twenty-nine, treats me like a loveable old dolt who exists only to complicate her existence and, of course, buy her things for which she has to express no appreciation.

And I know there are more issues yet to be determined with which I should grapple. These will come to light, I realize, as I examine my life as a retrospective.

Finally, I think of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, my personal favorite, and, in particular, three lines in "Burnt Norton" that have always intrigued me and that I have often chanted as a mantra. Today, now, they have become solid with meaning, like words ground into a gray tombstone by the workman's cold, relentless chisel:

*Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.*

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