

Justice Rides

by Saddletramp1956

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Brown's Mill

Elijah Jones, Eli to his friends and family, wiped the sweat off his forehead with an already-soaked bandanna. The southern states were beautiful but sweltering in summer, nothing like his native Indiana. It was nothing like the dry heat in south Texas, where he lived with his wife, parents, and two brothers for several years.

He pulled out the metal case Lizzy gave him before he left Indianapolis and read the inscription on the back: “To my dearest Elijah. May God keep you safe and bring you back to your one true love. Your loving wife, Elizabeth.”

Eli opened the case and pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette. Lighting it with a stick from the small campfire before him, he took a drag as he looked at the picture inside. It was a photo of him and Lizzy taken during happier times. He thought of the last time he saw her, the last time he felt her soft, smooth skin against his.

He smiled as he recalled their last tryst. Lizzy was always so prim and proper in public, but she was a wildcat in bed. He loved running his hands through her long blonde hair as he immersed himself in her scent. He missed kissing her sweet face as she wrapped her long smooth legs around him, pulling him deeper into her.

Eli especially loved kissing and fondling her breasts and her sensitive nipples. The same breasts that once nourished his two young sons gave him so much pleasure. He loved how she moaned as he licked and sucked on her enlarged nipples.

Smiling at the memory, he finished his smoke, then saw to his equipment and his steed when he got word the column was heading back to meet up with the army. They had spent most of the last two days raiding supply and communication lines south of Atlanta. That accomplished, they were supposed to meet up with Gen. Stoneman’s cavalry before moving on to Andersonville, where they planned to free the Union soldiers held captive there by the Confederates.

But for some reason unknown to him, Stoneman never showed up. So, after destroying hundreds of supply wagons and tearing up railroad lines, Gen. McCook ordered the column to turn around and head back. Elijah understood the need to disrupt the enemy’s supply line. Still, it seemed to him that McCook liked destroying civilian property just a bit too much.

Eli was more than a bit uncomfortable with McCook’s cavalier attitude, encouraging the men to go after civilian private property. He thought they were supposed to be soldiers, not common bandits, remembering the sentiments he expressed in his last letter to Lizzy.

“This war will be over one day,” he wrote. “And we’ll need to welcome these people back into the Union. But I’m afraid winning the peace will be much harder than winning the war with the tactics we’re being encouraged to use. What will these people think of us in a hundred years? Will they hate us, or will they see us as liberators?”

Such was the nature of his correspondence with Lizzy. Sure, they always exchanged sweet, loving endearments. Still, they often waxed philosophic about current events, just as they did when he was back home. Nothing was off the table – they discussed everything from politics to religion and even recipes as they sat in their parlor at the end of the day, enjoying the fire with a golden toddy and, at least for him, a cigar.

He missed that almost as much as having her in his arms in bed. In several of their letters, they talked about how the war was dividing families. So many had soldiers serving on both sides in this conflict. He felt sad about that, and it hit home when he got word from her that his brother, Travis, was now with a rebel unit out of Texas.

He wondered if he would be able to face off against his own brother if their units came against each other. Then he heard Travis’ outfit was marching north into New Mexico. The Confederacy already had a hold on the southern half of the territory, so marching north and possibly west made sense to Eli. But he also had a feeling the war was nearing an end.

At least Bill, his other brother, would be spared the horrors of this God-awful war, he thought. Bill had been shot in the leg by a weasel from New York named Jackson Abercrombie. As a result, he couldn’t walk very far or very long and used a cane to get around. He still helped their father on his farm in Hard Rock, Texas, but it was a challenge.

Eli snapped out of his reverie when the word went out, and the cavalymen mounted their horses. Things seemed relatively quiet until they reached a point just a few miles south of Newnan, Georgia. Then all hell broke loose as they came under attack by Confederate cavalry. Being part of McCook’s advance guard, they were all exhausted but continued on to Newnan.

Early on July 30, they noticed the road was blocked by a trainload of Confederate soldiers. They dismounted and crept up to see what they were facing.

“How many you reckon they got, Sergeant?” an officer asked quietly.

“I’d say at least 500, Lieutenant,” Eli said after scouring the area. “Probably a lot more behind them as well.” Then they heard a loud, high-pitched whistle coming from the train.

“Shit,” the lieutenant said. “We’ll be up to our necks in rebs before you know it. We’d better take them out now while we can.”

“But we’ve only got two companies,” Eli said. Two companies of the 8th Indiana Cavalry, D and E Companies, were McCook’s advanced guard and numbered less than 200 men. They were all excellent troopers, but the rebels had far more men in front of them.

“But we’ve got the element of surprise,” the lieutenant said. “Let’s go.” The cavalrymen mounted their horses, and before Eli knew it, the two companies of the 8th Indiana Cavalry were charging over the hill. The startled Confederates grabbed their rifles and met the incoming Union soldiers with a withering fire.

Eli felt something slam into his chest with enough force to throw him backward, off his horse. He fell to the ground, knowing that he had been shot. So, he thought, this is how it ends. On the side of a road in Georgia. As his lifeblood left his body, he felt weak. His final thoughts were of his beautiful wife in Indianapolis, Elizabeth, and their last night together.

It was the most intense night of lovemaking he could remember. But the intensity of their coupling made him wonder if she had had a premonition and was saying goodbye, or giving him a golden memory to ease his passing. Or just a wife laying claim to her husband’s fidelity and warning him off any hapless or accommodating southern belles - though she had nothing to worry about on that score, no other woman could hold a candle to his Lizzy.

He chuckled as the pain ebbed with the faltering of his heart, leaving a few bloody bubbles on his lips. Strange what thoughts flashed through one’s mind, dying on a field sown with carnage. He vaguely sensed, rather than saw or heard, the scuffling of men and mounts around him as the color drained out of his vision and darkness began to close in.

“I’m sorry, Lizzy,” he whispered as the darkness began to take him.

He couldn’t move a muscle. Apparently, the bullet fragments must have torn at his spine. He was amazed at the damage a Minie ball could inflict on a human body. He mumbled the Lord’s Prayer as he eased into death, getting as far as, ‘forgive us our trespasses’ before his soul could no longer hang on to its earthly shell.

The next thing he knew, he was floating over his body as it lay on the ground. He felt nothing, physically. He watched the battle rage around his now lifeless body, almost as if it wasn’t there. Then he felt as if he was being sucked up into a strange white tornado.

Strange New World

Eli opened his eyes and sat up, looking at his new surroundings. He was in a white room bathed in a light that seemed to emanate from all around him. The couch he was on felt strange, like no material he had ever seen before. There was only one other piece of furniture in the room, an oversized white chair that sat at an angle in front of the couch.

Eli remembered the charge and recalled being shot. But he didn’t know if someone had found him and taken him to a field hospital. Eli brought his hand to his chest and felt a deep depression where the Confederate bullet pierced his body. His attention was diverted when he heard a door open.

He saw a somewhat older man in a strange white suit enter the room. The man looked at him and sat in the chair.

“Well, I’m glad to see you’re finally awake,” the man said.

“Wh... What happened? Where am I? Who are you?” Eli asked. The man chuckled before responding.

“You may call me Joshua,” he said. “And I’m surprised that a man named after one of God’s prophets doesn’t know where he is. What is it the Scriptures say? ‘To be absent from the body...’”

“‘And to be present with the Lord.’ Second Corinthians 5:8,” Eli said, surprised that he recalled that easily.

“I see your mother did a good job teaching you the Word,” Joshua said.

“So, I’m... dead?” Eli asked.

“Only your physical body,” Joshua said. “That which makes you Elijah Jones – call it your soul, if you will – lives on.”

“And you’re...”

“God? Oh no, not even close,” Joshua said with a wide smile. “I only work for Him.”

“And this is Heaven?” Eli asked, looking around the stark white room.

“Well, just one small piece of it,” Joshua said. “Probably not what you were expecting, is it? You probably expected to see a long line of people in robes standing around a large gate or something. We were able to bypass that in your case.”

“What happened to my boys? Were they successful?” Eli asked.

“I’m afraid they weren’t,” Joshua said. “Your Gen. McCook was thoroughly defeated and lost over 1,200 men. Not his finest hour, to be certain.”

“My wife? My children? What will become of them?” Eli asked.

“Your wife is an extraordinarily strong woman,” Joshua said. “We will watch over her and your two sons. They will mourn, but they will be fine. We will see to it.” Eli nodded his head. “But you’re probably wondering why you’re here, in this room with me. Aren’t you?”

“It had crossed my mind,” Eli said.

“We have a job for you,” Joshua said. “If you are willing to accept it.”

“A job?” Eli asked. “What kind of job?”

“We would like you to help balance the scales of justice for those who ask for it,” Joshua said.

“Don’t you have angels for that sort of thing?” Eli asked.

“Yes, we have legions of angels,” Joshua said. “But none of them have walked in your boots, so to speak. They do not have your experience and they have not dealt with the things that tempt the human heart.”

“I see,” Eli said. “And what if I said no?”

“You have free will. No one is forcing you to accept. Your eternal destiny remains the same. Someone else will be offered the job, and you will miss out on some very unique blessings,” Joshua said. “But you are a man of justice, and I doubt you would want to disappoint the one who formed you in your mother’s womb.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Eli said. “Let’s talk about this... job.”

“Very well,” Joshua said. “But why don’t we talk about it in more... familiar surroundings,” he added with a wave of his hands. As Eli watched, the room shifted and changed. He found himself sitting in what looked like the parlor of the Indianapolis home he shared with Elizabeth and their two sons. The chair he sat in looked just like the one he used, and Joshua sat in a chair that was Elizabeth’s favorite.

“Much better, don’t you agree?” Joshua asked. “Quite cozy and comfortable. I can see why you liked to spend so much time here with your bride and sons.”

“I always liked spending our evenings here,” Eli said. “So, what is it you need from me?”

“Your country is facing a challenging time right now,” Joshua said. “When this war is over, it will face an even darker time of reconstruction. Old hatreds will remain, and unscrupulous individuals will do their best to line their pockets at the expense of others.

“Even after reconstruction, things will only get worse as human hearts grow even darker. The evil in men’s hearts will only get worse with the passage of time. Many will try to even things out on their own, but they will only make their situations worse. Sadly, only a few will think enough to ask for justice from the one who hung the sun in the sky,” Joshua said. “And that is where you will come into play.”

“And how long would this job last?” Eli said.

“As long as necessary,” Joshua said. He continued when he saw Eli’s eyes widen. “You forget, time is meaningless here.”

“One day is as a thousand years,” Eli said quietly, remembering the verse from 2 Peter. “And a thousand years as a day.”

“Yes, exactly,” Joshua said.

“So, how does this work?” Eli asked.

“As you know, we receive a number of requests every day. After reviewing those requests, I will call upon you to... deal with the ones we feel require your assistance,” Joshua said. “You will have access to everything you need to do the job. If there is anything you need over and above that, simply ask, and it will be provided.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Eli said. “Just one question, though.”

“Yes?”

“Will I ever see Lizzy again?” Eli asked.

“Yes, in due course,” Joshua said. “Oh, you mean...”

“Before she dies,” Eli said, finishing Joshua’s question.

“That is normally not allowed, but I think we can make an exception, provided you do not abuse the privilege,” Joshua said.

“Thank you,” Eli said. “I just want to make sure she’s all right.”

“Of course,” Joshua said. “So, are you in?” Eli thought for a moment before answering.

“Count me in,” he said.

“Then welcome aboard,” Joshua said, extending a hand. Eli accepted, and the two shook hands. They talked for a while longer as Joshua explained some of Eli’s abilities and restrictions.

“That’s a lot to take in,” he finally said.

“You will learn more as you progress in your job,” Joshua said.

“So, where do I stay?” Eli asked.

“Right here, of course,” Joshua said. “This is your home, is it not?”

“Well yes, but...”

“But nothing,” Joshua said. “These are familiar surroundings for you, so it is only natural you would want to live here. Feel free to change or remodel as you see fit.”

“Thank you,” Eli said.

“You are welcome,” Joshua told him. “Well, I must go now. I have work to do. But I will be in touch very soon.” Eli stood and saw him to the door. After Joshua left, he turned and took in his surroundings.

He felt comfortable here and, to his surprise, didn’t feel alone or sad. He walked around, taking everything in – the grandfather clock that stood in the corner, the portraits and paintings on the walls, the books, and knick-knacks Lizzy had arranged just so...

He went back into the parlor and looked at the floor. He remembered a floorboard had given him nothing but trouble from the day they moved into the place. No matter what he did, the thing creaked every time it was stepped on. He put all his weight on the board but heard... nothing. Well, he thought, that’s one thing I don’t have to worry about.

He walked to the large family portrait on the wall and took it in. It was a painting Lizzy had done when they moved back to Indianapolis from Hard Rock, Texas, in the ’50s. Eli took in his wife’s lovely face and wondered what she was doing at that moment.

He saw the familiar cigar box he had brought out from Texas. It was a present to him from his brother Bill, who had made it himself. He opened the box and saw it was filled with what looked like his favorite hand-rolled cigars. Curious, he held one to his nose and sniffed it. It smelled right, so he grabbed a match from the matchbox and lit it up.

He was amazed at how smooth it smoked. Typically, the first few puffs were always rough, but this seemed perfect. As the smoke swirled around his head, he looked back at the portrait and thought of his life with Lizzy. Suddenly, it seemed as if the room mysteriously changed.

“What the heck just happened,” he thought as he looked around.

Elizabeth

Eli heard voices coming from what sounded like the dining room. He recognized one voice as being that of his wife, Lizzy, and the other was that of a man’s. Had she already found someone to replace me, Eli wondered. He wasn’t precisely jealous – he was dead, after all – but he was concerned and a bit... sad.

He put the lit cigar in his old ashtray. Lizzy didn’t mind if he smoked in the parlor, as the smoke would get pulled up the chimney by the massive fireplace, but she frowned upon him smoking in the dining room. He avoided the loose floorboard and made his way down the hall to the dining room.

He peeked in and saw Lizzy, wearing a long dress that buttoned up to her neck, sitting at the table with a man. Not just any man, but Horace Johnson, the president of the bank they did business with. They met Horace shortly after returning from Hard Rock and had become good friends with him. Horace’s wife passed away a few months before he enlisted in the Army.

It appeared to Eli that the two of them had just finished eating. He looked around and wondered

where the boys were.

“That was a wonderful meal, Mrs. Jones,” Horace said, wiping his mouth. “I don’t know how you do it. Help your mother with the family store, keep this big place up by yourself, raise two wonderful boys. Where are they, by the way?”

“They’re staying with my mother tonight,” Lizzy said. “They’re going to help her with a few things around the house tomorrow, so I let them stay over.”

“And how are you holding up, Mrs. Jones?” he asked.

“I manage,” she said. “I have my good days and my bad days. It hasn’t been easy with Eli gone, but we make do.”

“Well, I think you’re an amazing woman to handle all that by yourself, Mrs. Jones,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson,” she said.

“Please, call me Horace, Mrs. Jones,” he told her.

“Well, I don’t know if it would be right to get so familiar,” she said. “I still consider myself a married woman, you know.”

“But your husband has been dead for some 14 months,” Horace said. Has it really been that long already, Eli wondered? That would make this... September 1865. “It’s just not right for a woman of your stature to be alone. I’d hate to see you become a spinster at such a young age. I know how hard it is to be alone.”

“I may be ‘alone’ as you say... Horace, but I’m hardly lonely,” Lizzy said with a chuckle. “Not with two strapping boys running around.” Good girl, Eli thought as he watched them interact.

“The nights are the hardest for me,” Horace said. “Being in that big old bed by myself. How do you manage it?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think it would be right for a lady to discuss such things, Horace,” she said.

“Of course not,” he said. “Please forgive me.”

“You’re forgiven, Horace,” she said with a smile. “I’d better get these dishes into the sink,” she added as she stood. Horace stood as she began collecting the dishes.

“Please, let me help,” Horace offered. They took the dishes into the kitchen, and Lizzy washed them as Horace dried.

“Thank you,” she said when they finished.

“Well, I suppose I’d better be getting back before the neighbors start to wonder,” he said with a sideways smile. “Thank you again for the wonderful meal, Mrs. Jones. If there’s anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“Thank you, Horace,” she said. “You’ve been a wonderful friend.” She escorted him to the front door and leaned against it after he left. Eli saw the tears falling down his wife’s cheeks. Then she looked down the hall as the cigar odor hit her. As Eli watched, Lizzy headed for the parlor. He felt a strange sensation as she passed right through him.

He turned around as she stopped to turn, a confused expression on her face. Then she turned back around and went into the parlor, Eli following her. When she entered the parlor, she saw the lit cigar in her husband’s ashtray, a long ash hanging off the lit end. She gasped, her eyes wide, her hand going to her mouth. She felt a shiver run up her spine, but she wasn’t scared.

“Eli?” she asked, looking around. “Are you here, Eli?”

“I’m right here, Lizzy,” Eli said, but she never heard him. She frantically looked around the room, tears falling down her face. Horace had never been in the parlor, and she knew the ashtray was empty and clean before he arrived because no one ever smoked in the house except for her husband.

“Eli, I know you’re here,” she cried. “I can’t see you, but I can feel your presence. I should probably be frightened, but I’m not. How could I be scared of the man I love?” She sat in her chair and stared at the cigar, hot tears freely falling down her face.

“Oh, Eli, I’ve missed you so much, my love. Please say something. Tell me you’re here,” she begged. Eli knelt in front of her and tried to brush away a tear, but his hand went right through the wet teardrop.

“I’m here, Lizzy. I’ll always be here for you. It’ll be okay. Trust me,” he said, kissing her cheek. She stopped crying and brought a hand to the cheek he kissed.

“You probably saw me with Horace,” she said. “He’s been trying to court me since the day we learned you were shot. It’s a bit funny, actually. He’s been a good friend to us and I’ve had him over for dinner a time or two, just for adult company.”

Eli felt a bit sad, but he understood she had needs. He didn’t fault her for seeking out companionship but felt terrible and somewhat guilty that it was because of his death. Maybe, he thought, I should give Horace a good haunting...

“But I promise you, my love,” she added. “No man other than you has ever touched me. And no man ever will.” She held up her left hand, and Eli saw her rings. “See? I’m still wearing your rings. And I will until the day I die.” Eli believed her words. Next to his mother, Lizzy was the most moral and upright woman he had ever met. One could bank on her promises.

“I can’t help but think you’re probably still out there, somewhere,” she added. “Fighting the

good fight for justice. Don't worry about me and the boys. The good Lord has taken very good care of us, and I know He always will. But it would be nice to see your face, for real, just one time before I die."

"I've learned recently that pretty much anything is possible where I am now," Eli said. "I don't know if this is a good idea or not, sweetheart, but I'll do my best to look in on you, from time to time, and offer what comfort my shade can, cuz I know the other side is Love, and love can reach across any gulf." Lizzy, however, never heard his words. He reached up with one hand to caress her soft cheek, but the room shifted again, and he found himself kneeling before an empty chair.

"Lizzy," he cried out as he hung his head. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.