

How Many Pages Do You Love Eric Montana?

By Nicholas R. Solari

Eric Montana died at 3:00 PM on September the fourth, 2015, and it was the only event in his life that he never wrote about. He died on a warm Autumn day, when the leaves had only just begun to turn. Heart attack weather, the neighbors had said. And the neighbors were right.

It was 5:05 PM when his son found his body there, stiff and upright in his favorite chair. He was 5 minutes late picking him up for dinner, and of course he blamed himself. He could have saved him, he told his girlfriend over the phone, thirty seconds after he hung up with the ambulance. And it's true he might've, if he'd arrived two hours and fifteen minutes early. But it wasn't fair for him to blame himself. That's what his girlfriend said. Girlfriends are good for saying these kinds of things.

Like a good only son, he made all of the necessary funeral arrangements and called up a lawyer to handle the estate. But when he finally owned his father's San Francisco studio apartment and woody Packard Station Sedan, and stocks and accounts and bills and debts he had no idea what to do with them. Especially the with papers. He was really at a loss for the papers.

His father hid behind his pages. It was one of the things that everybody knew about him, and one of the complaints that made his son's mother leave. It was rare that one ever got a straight answer from Eric Montana, especially about the important things, and much more common to receive a stack of pages from his big calloused hands and the words, "read this," often followed by the word, "son."

But Eric's son, and wife, and friends, and neighbors did not have the time for reading that he had for writing. They did not receive disability checks. They had not completed their professional lives. There were women to take to dinner and mortgages to pay. So Eric's papers piled up in his office.

To read more, or to offer publication, email: contact@nicholasrsolari.com

But now Eric was dead, and they were no longer Eric's papers, and they were not piled up in Eric's office. They were his son's papers piled up in his son's office, and his son had them packed into startlingly heavy cardboard boxes. He did not like to look at them - they called to mind his father's big and calloused hands and accused him of having more free time than he knew he really did. He found a tidy place for them beneath the basement stairs and had them tucked away two days before the funeral. Like his remains, his father's work had been preserved, thank God, and he would not have to read a single word.

Alice Wells was a slush reader for the Mill Valley Red Fish Publishing Company, and she hid behind her round red glasses. It was one of the things that everybody knew about her, and one of the complaints that ended several of her short-lived relationships. The other thing any friend of Alice knew was that what she really wanted to do was write. But writing was hard to live on, what without collecting disability and all, and so she sold her time by reading things. Sometimes, when she woke up especially brave, she took her bright little Volkswagen over the bridge and worked through her pages at San's in the Marina. On days rarer still, she even slipped her tiny green notebook out of her deep pocketed floral dresses and jotted down some quiet words, before wondering if anyone had seen her and worrying someone would muster the courage to ask her what she was she was writing.

Alice read well-crafted stories and terrible ones. She read painfully long stories and mysteriously short ones. She read the ones that she was supposed to forget about entirely because the font was wrong or the length fell outside of the page limit. This is why her boss thought she was slow. But Alice was not slow. Alice was very smart and very thorough. And Alice read beautiful stories that were written in the wrong font. Alice read dark stories and sentimental ones. She read sensible stories

To read more, or to offer publication, email: contact@nicholasrsolari.com

and ridiculous ones. She read true stories that she couldn't believe, and stories that she wished were true but knew deep down were not. And, of course, infrequently, she also wrote. But when Alice scribbled thoughts on the faded pages of her notebook, she did not write about these kinds of stories. Alice wrote about their authors.

Daniel Rechter seemed just the kind of creep to write up a sci-fi BDSM and ship it out to every journal in town. Alice wasn't surprised by that. And before finishing even her first paragraph she'd pinned Cara Winter as a young girl up to her neck in cliches and in desperate need of swimming lessons. These writers left Alice pitiful and almost guilty. It was unfortunate, but she had experienced these things before. She was much more interested in, say, what had drawn Alec Le Mill so powerfully to hedgehogs. She never expected to lose herself in so many paragraphs about the spikey creatures, and it was one of the pleasant surprises she knew she'd remember. Alec had lost his son, she decided. She could tell from the way the little "Charles" balled himself up to the outside world. And Deborah Vaughn, what bothered her so much about her neighbor's hanging lingerie to dry across the street? It was obvious. Deborah had loved a man who could never love her back, no matter what she wore to bed. Alice knew. It was like seeing it in her eyes. Clear as day. That's how she would have described it.

If you asked her, Alice probably wouldn't tell you she was a slush reader. A translator, more likely. She read what others wrote and wrote what others meant, and she loved her job very much. All I have is gratitude, she often said, but it hard to believe with the sad smile that followed after. But only the most observant ones would notice that. Alice was tired of waiting for the observant ones.

Alice was tired of the slush piles and her readership of one. She was tired of the Daniel Rechters and the Cara Winters. Quite frankly she was sick and tired of fighting the sea breeze that turned her pages too soon and the beating sunlight that sent her scurrying around to every side of the

To read more, or to offer publication, email: contact@nicholasrsolari.com

table just to stay under the umbrella at San's. She was having one of those particular days where all she really wanted was an air-conditioned room with enough privacy and silence to do some serious writing.

She thought about the library, but only briefly, because she knew it would be closed on a Sunday. Churches were the kinds of places that were open on Sundays, and they were often quiet and air conditioned. Alice remembered. She used to go with her mother as a girl. She thought about her mother, but only briefly, because she knew what she really ought to be thinking about was air conditioning. She was really at a loss over the air-conditioning.

Thus, on September the thirteenth at 11:35 AM, Alice Wells pushed herself through the great gothic doors of St. Dominic's Catholic Church in the Western Edition and made her way to the nearest empty seat. She quickly noticed that she was the only one not wearing black.

...