

**Chris Eaton, a Biography**  
A Novel by Chris Eaton

FIRST EDITION

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**He would always be alone.** Like his parents. From childhood's hour, he felt, he dreamt, that he was not as others were, was drawn, from every depth of good and ill, towards some mystery that he could not quite reach. Could not even see. He had a purpose. Of that he was sure. But the finer details – or even the larger, vaguer ones – were beyond him. And such was his difficulty in trying to circumvent this ambiguous calling – so clear, he could not help but see right through it – that he looked on the rest of humanity, his acquaintances and friends and even the occasional circumstantial lover, as they chased the paths set out by their parents, or their likes and dislikes, or their economic station, with a heaping tray of contemptful jealousy. As if he existed outside the world in which they squatted.

He would never quite understand it until his final days, when suddenly his purpose would form like a cataract on his vision, or the hand of God, confusing but unmistakable, and close enough to touch, and then, and only then, would he see that everything he had resisted doing up until that point, for fear that any decisive course of action might unwittingly take him further away from his destiny, had been the straightest line he might ever have shot. From birth to this point, he'd acted as if his own life, and where he placed himself within the spectrum of it, did not matter. And he was never likely to make that connection with someone or something else that would change this.

So when the voice called his name, he said yes.

Then two sets of arms were fishing him from the water, and suddenly he was at war. Or at least in more physical training. The war in Iraq went longer than anyone could have imagined. When they'd first announced it at the academy in Lexington, everyone had expected Hussein's Imperial Guard to lay down their weapons and surrender. But US forces didn't actually march into Baghdad until April 9. And

there were still fierce pockets of resistance scattered throughout the country, in Fallujah and Ramadi, chiefly, but also in places less mentioned. His entire class was transferred to Fort Lewis, just outside Tacoma, Washington, one of the largest cities in the state although, in many ways, it didn't exist. It had its own bowling alley, fast food restaurants, movie theatre, bars. Gasoline without taxes. A city with a wall around it. Possibly to keep the protesters out, or even worse, the zealots. Because he was single, they placed him in a barracks with all the other single soldiers. The married soldiers were provided with separate homes, which was why so many of them got hitched so early, for the privacy. He salvaged a mattress another soldier had dropped to the curb – they received a pittance for food and entertainment, so why waste it on something as unimportant as bedding – and for the first few nights he had trouble sleeping, repeatedly woken not by the lumps or bedbugs but by low-flying helicopters and machine-gun fire from the training. Why they were training in the woods for a war in the desert, he was never sure. But he continued to wake every morning at four-thirty anyway, and shined his boots up for a tramp through the mud. It rained nearly every second day. On the other days, it was worse. And some nights the other soldiers joked about how great it would be when they were finally sent to Iraq, because at least it would be warm and sunny.

When he arrived over there, he realized he often drooled in his sleep. This had never been a problem before, but in Iraq if you drooled in your sleep, you woke up with mosquitoes sucking on the puddles around your lips. And you walked around looking like you picked up a swarm of cold sores from sucking a whore. The only thing worse than being gay in the army was admitting you like to go down on women. Anything besides vaginal intercourse was actually a crime, and it wasn't uncommon for women who were filing for divorce to say they gave their servicemen husbands an occasional blowjob. Thankfully, they were allowed to use scarves because of the blowing sand.

To make matters worse, his first task, which they assigned him not

with words but by handing him a shovel and a canister of gasoline, was latrine duty, officially called *latrine management*, a rite of passage for many when they first stepped off the plane because of the distasteful nature of the work, especially if it was their first tour, like fraternity initiation but without the luxury of inebriation. His unit's entire responsibility was to keep the camp sanitary by digging regulation shit pits, burning them when they reached capacity, and then digging more. Normally, this would have only comprised part of their duties, digging a latrine or two each week. But nearly half the company had contracted dysentery from eating chicken kebabs on their days off, and productivity was so high they had to punch a new series of holes and burn them every day. His shovel was never out of his hands, and his clothes were never without the stench of gas station washrooms, oil refinery sludge, farm machinery. The smell set up shop in his nostrils and it was one he was unable to successfully evict. The other soldiers called him shithead. And when they saw the sores on his face, they called him ass-hat, fudge-patrol, the rusty trombonist. His only saving grace was that he seemed the only one immune to whatever stomach issues were going around. Unfortunately, after he made one too many cracks about skid marks in their underwear, the other soldiers began to plot their revenge.

Still, all in all, it was better than fighting, digging toilets in the desert. And better than border duty, where busloads of explosives could roll slowly up disguised as children. Or as an ambulance. One day a child came up to one of Chris Eaton's friends with an injured dog in his arms. Both of them were crying. The soldier took the whimpering mutt from him. It was bleeding heavily from its stomach, its intestines spilling out into the boy's hands, from what he assumed must be some random shrapnel. He tried to hold everything in; as if the dog's insides were some kind of manifestation of his own repressed emotions; as if holding all of it together, like the Dutch boy with his finger in the wall, was akin to holding back the dam of his insanity; as if holding it together might even end the war itself. Like holding his

breath underwater just long enough to be rescued. If I can save this dog, he thought, all of this will have been worth it. If I can save this dog, he thought, I will understand what it all means. And I will end it. He thought, This boy must be dying inside. Like his dog. When I was younger, I also had a dog. I was allowed to name him and I called him Betty. He was my best friend. Then, one day, Betty got hit by a car. And I found him in the ditch with his head caved in. I was sure he was dead, but when I approached, he lifted his head. The only object close at hand was a brick. This poor boy is just like me. But when he looked up to console him, he saw that the boy had run away. And the dog exploded from the grenade the rebels had inserted into its abdomen, killing Chris Eaton's friend and three other men instantly.

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At the end of the week, they were removed from latrine duty and told to prepare to march on Fallujah. This thing had to end, his sergeant told them. And it had to end now. So if a bunch of ragheads wanted to make a couch-cushion fort out of this town, they'd just go in and kick the fucker down. They boarded the trucks to Fallujah, and his sergeant handed him a bottle saying, "Could be the last drink you'll have in a while." He downed the whole thing, despite the chalky aftertaste. Then the whole troop laughed at him for the entire two-hour drive to the outpost, the empty bottle of ipocac rolling around the floor of the transport. This was war, forced to live your life with a bunch of amateur adolescents. Bunch of fucktards. Most of them were backwoods hicks. And the rest not even Americans, just a bunch of illegal immigrants, mostly from Mexico, who were deemed unsuitable for citizenship but just dandy for helping the government avoid another draft implementation. Half of them were married at sixteen, their wives and kids stuck on the military base back in the U.S. with nothing to do except grow bitter. So they amused themselves by humiliating one another, even running the risk that their practical joke might actually

work, and they'd be forced to sit in that truck for the full two hours with another soldier who'd just shit his pants.

All the other soldiers grabbed seats close to the cab, to get as far away from the sand kicked up in the back, and from Chris Eaton, who stood at the rear, worried about the growing force in his bowels and how the resistance against that force might be changed if he were to even shift one muscle. Soon enough, most of them were asleep, and once he was certain he would offer none of them any satisfaction, he settled back with his pants around his ankles, alighting his *derrière* out the posterior flaps. Any time he tried to look past the flaps, the scenery was the same, a road going nowhere, although in this case, nowhere was the direction he'd already come from. So he kept his eyes pointed forward instead, into the increasing darkness inside the transport, like he was slowly passing out or fading. And for a moment, the world became nothing, which was especially soothing.

Then his silent non-existence was broken by the rhythmic trace of a sibilant hiss, what he suspected was a smuggled portable music player beneath the helmet of another soldier, and the hint of a recognizable tune – something he couldn't quite identify but definitely something he had heard before on popular radio – reeled him slowly back to reality. The other soldier, the origin of Chris Eaton's distraction from grace, was much older than Chris Eaton, in fact much older than anyone else in the regiment, which tended to make him stand out in the group more than any skin colour or body shape or personalized scarf. He was also not asleep, and unfortunately realized this fact at the exact same moment as Chris Eaton, their gazes unconsciously spooning each other for comfort before recoiling in embarrassment.

Worst of all, the older man took their eye contact as an invitation to something worse, conversation, launching into the unrequested story about his life, which Chris Eaton sank in and out of like a slightly rancid glass of wine, how he'd grown up in the country, shortly after the end of the second World War, pitching crab apples at hornet nests

and falling out of trees, playing in the dirt behind his grandfather's garage, lying in the tall grass between his home and the graveyard, smelling the birds and the clouds, pissing on dead raccoons, drinking alcohol out of abandoned dreams, always alone. There was something about his father. And a '45 (was it called "Banana Split"?) played on the wrong speed. And how his father always accused him of being sick with music, whatever that meant, always humming or drumming on tables or wetting his bed in the night. The army, his father said, was the only place for him, so he didn't try to avoid the draft and it came for him, just like that. Afterward, with the financial help of the Sidharrtha Veteran Co-op (an organization started in Chistorra, Nevada by another ex-soldier who, while fighting in Vietnam, had learned and accepted the ways of Buddhism), he opened up a store, following his love of music, focussing on 8-track stereos for cars and home, the failure of which was somehow the fault of the singer Billy Joel. When his old battalion was again called upon for the invasion of Grenada, he decided to re-enlist. And this time he stayed through the Honduran conflict with Nicaragua, some time in Libya, and Operation Harvard Chest (an umbrella code name that also included Operation Chard Harvest, as well as Operation Harsh Redact I to Operation Harsh Redact V), to the invasion of Panama in 1989. By then, fighting had essentially come to define him. He picked fights in bars. He argued with strangers in restaurants. No one would hire him because of his temper, and he was strong and brutish, so he took up boxing, until he realized he didn't like being struck, so he swung at the referee to disqualify himself without showing signs of cowardice, and he took a job that allowed him to hate people in private. He married a girl he thought would save him, who had a good job, and an effervescence that made his chest feel delightfully like it was full of the blowing grass of his youth, light and ticklish up high in his throat, and later, when money was scarce, or he'd been drinking, or he was bored, he beat her. They had children. And he watched them grow up and wondered which one would try to take him on first. So he re-en-



listed again. This time to Kuwait. The girl sent him letters. Sometimes with photos of his kids. He sent them drawings he had made, of their favourite cartoon characters, horribly mutilated by a bayonet to the stomach, or having their brains blown out at close range. They were quite accomplished. He felt bad for that. He stopped writing back. She did not. And this made it worse. He made a vow that when he was discharged again, he would find her and the kids and make an honest woman out of her. By then, however, they were both in their fifties. To avoid future problems with her bladder, her doctor suggested she have a complete hysterectomy, which he also suggested was a routine surgery and would lower her risk of ovarian cancer. But when they were stitching her back up, the surgeon perforated her colon, which no one caught until she had suffered so much internal bleeding and the wound was already so infected that there was nothing they could do.

He heard all this from her sister, who was now looking after the kids and never wanted them to see him again. When the twin towers came down, he enlisted again for the last time.

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The other soldier asked him if he liked music. Chris Eaton said he did. The other soldier asked what kind. And Chris Eaton said all kinds. Was there not one kind in particular? asked the other soldier. And Chris Eaton said no, there was not. What about country? asked the other soldier. What about rock? What about Christian music? Him? He liked only one band, that was how particular his taste was. And probably, when it came right down to it, just one album. It was *his* album, he said. It was the album he'd probably been searching for most of his life and didn't even know it. And when he finally found it, nothing else he listened to felt complete. It was the album that finally made him feel calm. It was *the* album, he felt, that might have saved his marriage, if he'd found it sooner, that might have saved the rela-

tionship with his kids. It was the album that might have made him happy. Chris Eaton reconfirmed that he liked all kinds of music, that he found them all interesting and appealing for a variety of reasons, and that he tried, whenever he could, to venture outside of his normal comfort zone, to seek out new auditory experiences. The other soldier suggested Chris Eaton had just not found the right one yet.

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The other soldier asked him if he'd killed anyone yet.

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The other soldier said the only thing worse than lobsters on your piano was crabs on your organ.

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The other soldier said he had once read an article in a magazine, written by a man, he said, or maybe a woman, from a part of the country where you wouldn't expect, where they don't normally have those kinds of people, people who don't have anything to do with their hands, people who think too much, not in some place like New York or Massachusetts or Rhode Island, or California, no, this person was from somewhere in the middle, and this was where he'd first come across the idea that each person had one album that was their musical soulmate. The premise, he said, was really just an expansion on the idea of Desert Island Discs, a radio program started in Britain shortly after the outbreak of World War II when the creator Roy Plomley was searching for some sort of entertainment-based distraction to raise national spirits, or rather a tighter focus on the idea, which had invited celebrities as varied as Welsh singer and radio host Tom Pwy, painter Schuyler Die, poet Fernando Quien and Italian sex-symbol

Elisabetta Chiunque to select their top eight records – and one luxury item – they could never do without. Most people tended to choose “Ode to Joy” and similarly obvious pieces, so as not to appear too low-brow, rather than choosing something as base and popular as “In Der Führer’s Face,” “Mairzy Doats” or “We’re Gonna Hang out the Washing on the Siegfried Line.” But the first few guests are most notable for interesting selections like Louis Jordan’s *Swimmin’ with the Fishes*, Chip Shorter’s *The Blackout Stroll*, or Louis Armstrong’s experimental jazz number, *A Prevaricated Horn Shot* (selected by Schuyler Die), in which the middle trumpet solo is actually just Armstrong trying to mimic the sound of his instrument with his lips alone. Pwy, for his luxury item, chose a bottomless bottle of Dalwhinnie. The American critic, from the magazine he’d read, had taken this premise one step further, suggesting people might be happy – happier, even – with just one, because this would remove the stress of having to choose between those eight every day. And the critic used, as an example, the life of someone the soldier was unfamiliar with, someone he had meant to look up but, as of yet, had not. In fact, he’d all but forgotten his name. Because the most interesting thing about this person, this happiest man, was not his name, but how he had started his own musical journey through life, and how it seemed to mirror the other soldier’s life so precisely, listening to his parents’ old jazz records (Chip Shorter, again, key among them!) on the wrong speed, thinking music was a plodding thing, heavy and thick, like gobs of batter falling from a spoon, being introduced to the music of Charlie Hardin, which broke everything wide open, obviously owing a nod to Elvis but without The King’s fattening showmanship, purchasing every Hardin record he could find, from what he thought was Hardin’s self-titled debut (a common mistake, and not made just by the two of them) to the third album, *The Grey Fog* (1959), even after the singer/guitarist died so prematurely and they continued to release greatest hits packages with smatterings of unreleased studio recordings for the next ten years. This led to his discovery of the British invasion – The Beatles and The

Rolling Stones – through an honest, hopeful mistake, a record by a band called The Hardins, who had no real connection to Charlie and were also not particularly good. The other man went to Vietnam, too. And opened a music store. And the soldier began to believe that the article had actually been written about him specifically. He thought it was a sign. And he began weeding down his own collection, as if by a message from God, immediately tossing any record he had not listened to in the last five years, then one year, then six months, then writing down very selective criteria that had to be met by the remaining hundred or so records to stay on his shelf, that it had to be influential in some way, and couldn't be simple to classify as a genre, and had to be somewhat obscure (because he didn't want his special disc to also possibly be someone else's) without being entirely pompous, and then he basically just decided to remove the half dozen classical records because how could they really speak to him when they weren't from his generation, and anything with a saxophone or banjo, until one day he was down to his traditional eight desert island discs, which he set up head-to-head in a tournament bracket until he had one winner:

- The Doors – *Narrative Chap* (1978; one of the three post-Morrison albums, which is all the other soldier would listen to because, as far as he was concerned, there was only room for one Morrison on the list; with an album cover that featured a photo of a private ranch – presumably Morrison's – that fit the title particularly well)
- Van Morrison – *Veedon Fleece* (1974)
- Charlie Hardin – *S/T* (1958)
- Chip Shorter – *Rave On Data* (1998; also a lesser-known later work, collaborating with a trio of young turntablists named Patree, Vitaro and Hersch)
- Stina Verda – *Charo* (1980)
- Tom Pwy (another coincidence) – *Hot Arsenic* (1939)

- Chet Nasario – *Hardtop Rev* (1967)
- Chris Eaton – *She Was a Big Freak* (1974)

His luxury item, he decided, would be a book of crossword puzzles.

And finally he was left with only *Charlie Hardin* and Chip Shorter (played, for old time's sake, on the wrong speed).

And he chose Chip Shorter.

And he found that the result was the opposite, that he was hungrier for new music than he'd ever been in his life.

And the next day he heard the music that was the last CD he'd ever buy, the CD he was currently listening to, and he'd never listened to another record again.

We're all searching for something, the other soldier said. I'm just lucky enough to have found it.

That's idiotic, Chris Eaton said, and shut his eyes to go to sleep.

And the next day he was dead.