

SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

PARADISE HAD

River Adams

Eve awoke lazily, taking the time to come into awareness before she opened her eyes. She felt the warmth of the morning on her skin, and, by sensing where it touched her, realized that her legs lay in the shade of a maple tree under which she'd fallen asleep the night before. Slowly she inhaled the familiar odors of her world—richly sweet drippings of candy birch juice, tangy aromas of sugar grass and honeysuckle that grew along the river bank, the cool breath of the river. Something tickled her toe, rolling down—a drop of syrup from the maple, probably the one that had awakened her. She raised her eyelids and allowed the sunlight to flood her mind, then sat up, folding her legs under, wiped the sticky drop from her foot, and licked it off her finger.

Adam was still asleep a few feet away. Half-hidden by the swaying grass, he spread his arms and long hair about him, face turned to the light like a glistening sunflower. His steady breathing and a barely audible splashing were the only sounds in existence. He would be up soon, but Eve didn't want to disturb him just then, so peaceful.

In a smooth and quiet move, she rose and half-ran, half-slid down the slope to the river, lingered a moment at the edge, bracing, then threw herself into its sparkling stream. The sudden cold knocked her breath out, but she recovered and started swimming across, swallowing some of the sweet, bubbly liquid as it flowed past her open lips. Once a distance away from the shore, she turned on her back and let the river carry her downstream. Pastel-colored meadows floated past her, gentle and bathed in their own freshness. It was another morning in Eden.

She must have drifted off into sleep again because next thing Eve knew, the stream had banked, washing her up on the shore, and tiny sugar crystals were scratching her back. Still dripping—and what a pleasure it was to feel the moisture evaporate off her skin—Eve wandered into the forest, thicker than what she was used to.

She had not until now come this far from home. Strange species of plants, tall as trees but with prickly narrow leaves, stood so close together that their foliage created a constant low murmur overhead. Strange breeds of animals looked down at her from twisted branches with unbridled curiosity. The air took on an unfamiliar, pleasantly spicy smell, and the light of day became more and more subdued as she moved inland.

Eve noticed that she had been slowing down for a while and now stepped with caution over thickly knotted roots. She almost wanted to turn back, though she couldn't understand what was stalling her, but the odd smell—it had

also thickened deeper into the woods—compelled her forward. She had to know what it was.

A new sensation came over her; she couldn't name it. Something inside was jumping, as if her very heart were unsettled in its cage, her hands trembled; quickening breaths came out uneven and shallow. Should she be here?

A quick slip on something round and cool, and Eve found herself hugging a tree trunk to keep from falling. It wasn't like anything she had ever felt before—smooth, black, and hard, but sticky, and it left smudges all over her arms, breasts, and knees—and on her right cheek, every place that had touched the bark. The smell that had led her this far became overwhelming. She had come to the source.

Mesmerized, she stood in front of the wondrous tree, stroked it with the palm of her hand, poked it with a finger, inhaled its head-spinning aroma, when through the rustling, up in the branches, a voice came down assured and soothing, "You've finally found your way here, Eve."

Eve raised her head to discover the eyes of the Serpent staring back at her, unblinking. She'd seen the feathered thing a time or two, but from a distance, and had never spoken to it. The Serpent cradled its elegant ten-foot body in the folds of the tree's sturdier limbs, balancing itself with its long-fingered appendages that did not look fully like hands nor like feet. It hung its head down to Eve's level, and though still unsure of herself, Eve was glad to see a familiar face.

"What is this place?" She asked. "I've never thought Eden could be like this."

"This is Eden, Eve," the Serpent assured her. "This is the heart of Eden. And I have waited centuries for you to discover it. Here," it gestured toward one of the small balls adorning the lower branches, the same color as the twigs around them—one of those she'd slipped on. "Here, you are looking for this."

"What is it?" Eve brought her face close to the ball but somehow didn't dare touch it.

"It is the fruit of knowledge." The Serpent's voice shifted low and oozed reverence as its forked tongue darted out toward the dark fruit—trembling, or caressing. Suddenly it slithered around her, enveloping her body whole, and whispered into her ear melting-hot words mixed with spicy breath, "This is Knowledge, child. It is the gate to awareness, the ultimate experience. The Truth. This is Pleasure incarnate. And it is called...*chocolate*."

Eve started and stumbled back, pushing out of the Serpent's embrace. She had heard the word before—once, a time so long ago that the memory of it had almost dissolved in the mist of the idyllic millennia of her past. The word was stirring a feeling—but why?

"Chocolate..." she repeated slowly. It felt tingly on the tongue. Then she remembered. "No. Elohim said we are not to touch chocolate! I shouldn't be here..." She turned to run, but the Serpent was blocking her way, its bottomless

eyes pulling in her gaze.

"Pluck it down and taste it, Eve. Then you will understand."

"I shouldn't..." She was losing words. "What kind of creature are you to tempt me so against Elohim's word?"

"I am *not* a creature."

"Impossible," she exhaled. "Everything in Eden is a creature of Elohim."

"But I am *NOT* from Eden!"

The Serpent raised most of the length of its body off the ground and spread its neck into an enormous hood, blotting out the sparse flickers of light from the sky, looming over Eve, and its voice boomed through the forest, "There is a world beyond your toy paradise, human, full of things you cannot imagine—eternal, uncreated, free! It is full of ecstasy and pain. It's real, it's life—and if you'd had any brains or guts at all, you'd have walked out of your sugar cage and into it a thousand years ago!"

The Serpent's power filled the air surrounding Eve and almost tangibly pushed her down and back, and dwarfed her, and choked her, until she found her chill-covered back pressing against the Tree of Knowledge and her sweaty palms shielding her eyes. Then the sound ceased. Eve lowered her hands and saw the Serpent curled up next to her, back to its tame, graceful shape, back to the soothing voice.

"Do not fear, child," it said. So this was fear then?

"Look," it said. "Look at the fruit. Can you not smell its intoxicating freedom, its rebellion? Can you not see that it is made for you? It is the color of your skin, your eyes. Don't you want to know its ecstasy—far beyond your syrupy pleasures?"

"But why would Elohim keep such ecstasy from me?" Her voice was shaking.

"Elohim made itself a toy," the answer came. "But you—you can choose to be a woman."

Eve reached up and plucked the fruit. It was cool, silky, and misty in her hand. In the last effort to stall the inevitable, she looked the Serpent one more time in the eye and whispered, "Why will this make me a woman?"

The Serpent's face contorted bizarrely, and it took her a while to understand that it was smiling. "Because," it said, "chocolate is *not* sweet."

It paused as Eve's eyes widened in disbelief, then explained, "You don't know other tastes yet, but you will—many tastes other than sweet. Chocolate is *bittersweet*, child, and when you taste it, you will know the taste of life. The world beyond your cradle."

She lingered, feeling the chocolate starting to melt in her hand. It had become so quiet that she could discern, just barely, the swishing of the river, from which she'd walked away innocent, less than an hour before. Beyond the gloom of this place, Adam was roaming the fields, sucking on sweet grass blades, looking for her—without an inkling that this day could be different from a

million others gone by. Paradise dusted his shoulders with sugar powder.

She closed her eyes, held the chocolate fruit before her lips, and asked the Serpent, "Will it be worth it?"

"It's to die for," the Serpent said.