

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

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It would be so fine to see your face...

Second only to wind, mud was high on Emmie's list of least-favorite factors of weather and nature. Mud indoors was downright infuriating. There are a lot of reasons for a woman not to love, and sometimes those reasons come walking through the door, making little trails behind them, hanging heaviness on the doorknobs, and leaving a woman looking forward to their departure. But when a man is distinguishable from the dust of condemned past lovers, what's a little mess? So she goes to play some CD's and the Beatles have marched past the Bee Gees and are hanging with Earth, Wind & Fire. No big deal. Emmie realized that she had been making up reasons not to get too involved with Mark. Although "monoamorous," she was a raging commitment-phobe. Monogamy was a commitment to herself; however, she always drew the line at verbalizing or in any way formalizing committing to a man. And now she was in her mid-forties and up to her wavy purple flat-top in student loan debt. She couldn't fathom becoming some guy's ball and chain any more than she could imagine asking if he minded her eating burgers with the guys on a Saturday night instead of coming "home" to dinner.

Emmie's theory of pairing was simple: In most relationships there is a balloon and a balloon holder. Women usually hold the domestic-emotional strings, becoming the "sensible" and communicative balloon holders. Usually, men are the jerks--always floating off somewhere without a care in the world. Emmie, however, was the balloon in relationships, the non-communicative jerk. She knew it; men knew it. It all worked out just fine in most cases because when men find out a woman does not want babies, they do not press hard for a commitment. Besides, she was as easy to please as the average college kid. Food, beer, sex, football, Red Sox. If a guy had central air and cable, she was beyond content. What in hell was there to talk about?

Yet here she was, sleeping with the most commitment-oriented man on God's green Earth. She wasn't prepared to marry him *or* to wave bye-bye. So now what? She had just reached the point of saying "relationship" instead of "the 'R' word." *Damn, man, don't rush a girl* was her attitude, but it was a big act and Mark knew it. Moving in with a man "without benefit of clergy" had never been her m. o., but that was only fifty-percent of her reluctance since Mark would readily agree to her non-negotiable ring-on-hand fiancée arrangement. Emmie liked breaking things down into percentages and fractions rather than pros and cons. Her dread of being a financial disaster, a burden to a potential mate was quite real: twenty-five percent of the problem. The last twenty-five percent, tethered only to evil ghosts, was outweighed by the future realities of cohabitating and pooling finances, so she tried to reason that it was all quite moot, just ancient history. The past lurked, though. The idea of any man--even the wonderful, non-controlling man that Mark was--laying claim to her made her want to puke.

The very concept of a mate seriously freaked her out. The abusive sham that was called a "relationship" by outsiders barely mattered any more, it had been such a long time ago. Her emotional distancing had needed to be significant to downplay that crap and keep living her life.

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Socking away money to skip town. Training her mind to go elsewhere. The solution had been obvious. She would get away, or he would kill her. Now she remembered it as if it were some other woman's stolen past on a *Lifetime* movie, not part of her own ancient history. It was all rather surreal in her conscious life. But pretending it was not one factor in her commitment-phobic list would be kidding herself. Emmie. Never. Kid-ded herself.

Either way, "this too shall pass" had become her mantra for survival ever since, for when she had really come to believe that the disastrous chapter would eventually conclude, it had. She took little credit for her own choices in the matter, for despite a lack of religion and a disbelief in mere fate, she believed that a superior spirit did sometimes step in and decide that a person had had quite enough. That spirit had wanted her to grow up, to finish college, to be a teacher, to write. Maybe now that generous spirit really had brought her Mark just because she was still silly enough to wish upon a star on a beautiful icy eve and believe that her wish would come true because it was made on her birthday, The Epiphany yet. And here she was screwing everything up! Blessings should come with instructions.

Stop complaining Emmie told herself. Then she sucked in the view. It was snowing again.

Emmie transformed into the happiest adult in New England with precious little effort. Snow was second only to love on her list of nature's gifts. She could hear snow, feel the flakes fluttering from the sky and gently clinging together on the ground, providing nothing but beauty in the city where it served no practical use other than helping one drag home a Christmas tree. Even the ugliest areas on the East Coast were glorious in the snow dunes, people breaking out of "whatever" mode to sling snowballs at each other's wool-covered heads. Yep, even the most horrific memories seemed moot on a day like this. She watched the young men for a while, thinking that she hated to hand Mark all of her baggage. His unapologetic pursuit of happiness was part of what made them so compatible. He had a point though, *dammit*. It was unfair to give him the old "you're crowding me" routine instead of telling him why being labeled his girlfriend after only a month spooked her. Even if it had not come until next year, she'd be creeped out by a Valentine's Day declaration or proposal of any sort, so she might as well just stop stalling. Dirty dishes do not get better with age. Besides, all the hate and cruelty of the world hadn't destroyed her. Why should love?

Admiring the diamond tennis bracelet that sparkled on her wrist, Emmie decided to keep it.

She was no big fan of jewelry, yet she had daydreamt of owning a sparkly bracelet since high school had rendered her too old to wear the Boston charm bracelet her father had given her for her eleventh birthday. A raised-right Black lady simply does not accept expensive gifts from a suitor or a boyfriend. Maybe from a fiancé was acceptable though. She'd never thought of finding out before, and her father was dead, so he couldn't update her on the rules. What would B. Smith do? Great, now she was thinking about her father turning over in his grave that she had a Korean lover in the first place. *Time to panic*. Last time Emmie had felt this

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stifled she had skipped town for a month on her first vacation in a decade. This time she had actually hopped on an airplane for the first time in life... via a one-way ticket.

Coming home now on the train, Emmie was easing back toward "Marry me." It hadn't really sounded like a question, whispered quite clearly in the dark as her hand, resting on a wall of muscle, rose and fell with his breath. The proposal had sent her packing. *Hmmm?* She stared quizzically at an electrical outlet in the wall on the Amtrak. *What in hell do people plug in on a freakin' train?*

"It's foe-wah thu innanet," a teenager answered her unspoken question.

"Ya kiddin' me?"

"Nope. Fuh laptops," he explained. That was some Southie accent he had going! Man, she loved that, the fading blue-collar Boston accent reviving even as old race barriers were finally diminishing. Just ten years ago, even, a White kid from Harbor side wouldn't have spoken to her.

"Cool. Thanks." Damn, she was out of touch. She had never actually been particularly in-touch, but still. She felt like somebody's grandma, muttering to herself about what these young folks would think of next. Sure, a month into her mid-forties she was feeling fossilish, but wasn't a younger lover supposed to make her all re-groovified? Somehow, watching Mark draw and read html mumbo-jumbo on a computer made Emmie feel more middle-aged than ever. It was fascinating, but also entirely incomprehensible to a person who could not change the ring volume of her cell phone in less than a half hour. Forget about that crazy electronic address book. Technology, hell. It was faster to look up friends' numbers in her little pink address book, dial seven numbers and say, "Howdy."

Emmie looked down at her winter mocs and felt grateful to have met a down-to-earth guy for a change. Those metrosexuals she had dated in her thirties got on her last nerve with their eyebrow waxes and moisture-wicking microfibers. They gave her a complex about not obsessing over her appearance all the time. Mark was so different. He thought her short natural hair was sexy and appreciated the fact that she switched from a natty black pea coat to Land's End goose down at the first sign of snowflakes. Prissy never impressed him, nor would it occur to him to give other people unsolicited fashion tips. There simply wasn't an ounce of control freak, superficiality, or malice in him. Their first month together had been profoundly real, grounding, so much so that it made her twitch. Nor could she complain of being too tied-down, her social life and solitary writing schedule continuing as Mark liked to work Friday nights and never acted slighted if she hung out at the bookstore or library for five hours of research and drafting. It seemed like an amicable week, not almost two months of unabashed "I love you's." She had felt like a teenager; she had felt the need to run. Fast, hard, and far. An invitation guided her panic.

Emmie had jumped at the chance to fly to DC to visit an old friend. There had been five former drinking buddies in all, Vi, Kelley, Marisa, Ned, and Emmie. They had converged on Las Halles in DC from different locations via plane, train, automobile, and on foot. Vi worked there, so she simply walked around the corner; Ned was housed by his company

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at a nearby hotel for a convention, so he hopped a cab. Kelley took the Amtrak from her own convention in a nearby state. Emmie flew in from Boston, Marisa from New York. It was just like the good old weekdays at the sticky-floored, smoky International in Boston's financial district or Fridays at Fajitas 'n' 'Ritas on West Street. Booze, buffalo wings, and que-sadillas for dinner. The planned five days in DC had turned into a two-week pub crawl for Emmie and Vi, with breaks for Vi's job and Emmie's research during the day. Two weeks of partying with some of the original characters returning for cameos as well as others popping in for a night or two, lured by the tales of that last month-long vacation that had stretched from Reston, Virginia to DC to Georgetown ...labeled the pursuit of the best coleslaw in the Metro-accessible area. Red, White & Blues just edged out a sweet rib joint near the fortune teller in Georgetown.

Emmie needed to use up vacation time anyhow. She just had a feeling about the ol' budget. She still couldn't believe she'd flown down though. An adventure of its own. Her usual commute to the airport had taken an odd turn since she would be the one leaving. She had always been fascinated by airports. That fact, added to her native Bostonian status, had made her the official Logan Airport plane meeter and seer off-er from college right through grad school. A card-carrying man watcher, she always checked out businessmen getting on the Blue-Line at Airport. New blood! Emmie made up lives for them, fantasized about moving to their home states as they were far more interesting than the suits who lived in Boston. But this time she had compared them all to Mark and not one had stacked up higher or been remotely tempting. It had been fun watching the Harbor turn into a Monopoly village as the plane got farther and farther away, but she was glad to be returning on the Amtrak, to watch houses and towns and snowball fights glide by. Black guy groups from the '70s timbered in through her CD player.

In the time Emmie had been staring out the window she could have been writing something down for Mark instead of reading her own journal from 2002. What was there? Her last return from DC. Another career dead-end. Breaking up with a lover. More stupid roommate hassles. Now-defunct friendships. But she had written about visiting the Smithsonian too, the Iwo Jima statue, a day of research at the Folger Shakespeare Museum. *That* time she had come home and written a book, taught like it meant something again. This time it was nice to know that a train ride could still thrill her. Vaguely cynical, perhaps, but not entirely jaded. Good to know. Maybe she had something to offer a man after all that would not detract from her work or make her feel diminished in the least. There was a couple sitting across the aisle. Emmie had thought them strangers for four hours, until the woman's eyes got tired and she closed them, leaning her head against her husband's shoulder. He didn't budge, seemed not to notice her at all until she sighed, left, went to the dining car. He quit what he was doing, looked baffled until she returned to give him a sandwich and a king-sized packet of M&M's. The man slapped shut the computer, poured the candy into his hand and waited patiently as his wife picked out the colors she wanted.

Something made Emmie feel happy. It wasn't just riding through the dark tunnel into New York with the Stylistics. Yep, instead of a checkered past hers was hound's tooth and paisley. Nobody's perfect, especially in a

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system that gives abusers therapy and their survivors a label of “damaged goods.” So what if the palm reader had predicted she’d have two husbands and three kids by now? She had also said: “You don’t trust people who have injured or betrayed you, but you remain open to trusting others.” At that moment, no aspect of the past mattered. This time Emmie had only been away for two weeks, but it had felt like eons. She missed leftover take-out and watching bad movies on the Retro station; and she wanted her Patriots sweats; and she missed Mark so much it made her nauseous.

Come on, love poet, she thought, get with the program! Emmie took a big breath, then texted: *NYC. Will call from Back Bay. I triple dare you too, so there! I miss you madly. Love, Boz.* She spent the time it took to get to Back Bay Station writing a letter to Mark. He was indeed right. They were two peas from the same freaky pod, and everything *was* going to be better than fine. They had both been happy loners, Emmie believed, but it did not mean that they had to be a miserable pair. Like everything else, love is a series of choices. “All you have to do,” Mark had said, “is decide to come home with me for good. Come on, Em. Say *maybe*. I triple dare you to try to live without us now.” Well, he started it. Choosing to let a love proposal hang in the air unanswered would be bloody rude at the very least. Saying “no” to the best man that had ever happened to her would be a special kind of stupid. A big fat maybe wouldn’t kill her, would it?

Walking out of the station onto Dartmouth Street, Emmie looked down at the remnants of a kids’ party plate, smashed potato chips and pastel powder that had once been candy hearts. Left-over sweet nothings? How sad. The holiday was two weeks past, and why dwell? “Kiss Me” was no longer one of the messages in a twittering world. Everything moved a lot faster nowadays. So be it. Emmie looked up to see Mark leaping down from the jeep, his glowing face smothering relief and welcoming her simultaneously. Dropping the handle of her carry-on as well as her mask of self-control, Emmie leaped forward.

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