

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Judith Felsenfeld  
**The Gift**

### I

**THE GIRLS NEVER STOPPED TORTURING HER.** Hi Emma, Hi Emma. In the yard, in the coatroom. Forcing the “H” into the air. On the way to school. From school. Hiyemma. If five of them were walking together down the street it came five times. The child didn’t have a moment’s peace.

I saw her once coming from Gina’s, carrying some tomatoes, it looked like, a head of iceberg, her face soft (which was not usual, she was an anxious child), her thoughts floating toward the clouds—a trip to Bear Mountain perhaps, the happy ending to the story she just finished reading—when they spotted her. Hiyemmahiyemma. She turned herself into the smallest possible dot, like the period at the end of a sentence, and scurried into a shadow.

Every Saturday ten a.m., you could set your clock by it, on the way to her piano lesson, they were there. Even with her mother at her side, she who had complained to the principal last year about the lack of music appreciation in the classroom, causing him to bring in a radio and make everyone listen to thirty minutes straight of classical music. Only then the syllables slid out in singsong through pasted-on smiles. Hi Emma hi Mrs. Shein.

Then the game changed. New rules: from now on every-body was Emma. It’s clear in my mind’s eye: One morning Mona says to Ginger, with one of those eye-smiles, hi Emma, and Ginger says it right back, and by recess everyone in Grade 4A is called Emma.

Most days Emma herself came out late to the yard. She would stand blinking on the pavement, always a piece of hair twisting in her top teeth, and then walk over to the bench at the shady end where Catherine Fedoryko sat, recovering her strength after diphtheria. All these years I have never heard an explanation of where that poor child contracted a disease that had already been eradicated. Anyway, Emma would perch on the farthest end, push up her glasses with her nose, and open her book. She was always reading. Always. Walking to and from school. In the mornings before Mrs. Lynch came into the classroom. Once Mona saw her walking down the street reading, and when she bumped into a hydrant she begged its pardon. The other girls nearly died laughing when Mona told them.

When recess is over it starts again. Hiyemma, hiyemma. On line behind Mrs. Lynch, Emma twists her head to Ginger, who is constantly behind her, size place, like a hairshirt, and mutters under her breath to cut it out.

Ginger hisses like the snake she is, “Cut what out?”

Mrs. Lynch doesn’t take the trouble to turn her pinhead. “Do I hear talking?”

“Saying my name.”

“Your name? No one’s saying your name. It’s just a name. Emma. It’s a free country, right? Anyone can say any name they feel like, right?”

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Mrs. Lynch announces that someone in the class is going to stay after three o'clock if she hears one more word. Tight tears are oozing down Emma's cheeks. Her lips are twisted in and she's pressing down hard on them. I personally have seen that look on her face hundreds of times. Somebody whispers out loud, "Crybaby."

II

The gift problem went way back. You had to give the teacher a Christmas present no question, no matter if you were Jewish Christian Hindu. Also it made no difference if she was Jewish Christian Hindu whatever. A handkerchief or a bottle of Shalimar Eau de Cologne. What else could you get for a dollar fifty, which is what most children had to spend? In some families the mother would crochet a doily, but mostly it was the boring handkerchief or the boring cologne, year after year.

That December, S. Klein featured in its window a gorgeous silk scarf with golden threads pulled through, eleven ninety-five. Mona was crazy about it. So of course her friends were, too. They carried on about that scarf non-stop, passing notes back and forth on bits of paper torn from the back pages of their speckled notebooks. But where could any of them lay their hands on eleven ninety-five? Which Lindy reminded the others didn't include tax. Her father was an accountant.

Now here comes a crucial scene. The girls are bunched in a corner of the coatroom on Monday morning discussing their dilemma when Emma walks in to hang up her coat. All at the same instant, like the Rockettes, they drop their arms to their sides and freeze in place. A new torment. The latest addition to the repertoire. Maybe ten days old so Emma is already accustomed to it. In any case, she does not react. She removes a string of hair from between her lips and works it under the sidepiece of her eyeglasses. Shapes her lips. Re-shapes them. Says, "My mother had an idea. For the scarf."

Simultaneously they suck in their cheeks and look to heaven.

"Pray tell," says Mona.

"If everyone put their dollar fifties together there'd be enough money." Emma's face looks like it wishes it had nothing to do with the words coming out of her mouth.

"Cretin," says Ginger.

"Hmmm," says Mona.

Lindy informs the constituency that a dollar fifty times seven equals ten fifty.

Emma, so low you have to lean in to catch it: "I could put in the last dollar fifty if you want."

Ginger slants her face to a dangerously irritated angle.

"It was her mother's idea," Mona reminds them. They nod. This is true.

In the end they hiked it up another nickel to a dollar fifty-five, to cover the tax and also a nonreligious Christmas card, the majority of these children coming from Jewish homes, which they would all sign. Lindy was the money-monitor, hiding it in an envelope in her desk top, the bills all laid out perfectly flat, facing the same way. With the coins tucked in a back corner. Friday after school they would take the bus to S. Klein's to shop.

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Mona would keep the gift in her bedroom until Monday morning when all together they would present it to Mrs. Lynch. Amen.

And suddenly Emma is one of them. Mona invites her to Hi-Mark's for an egg cream after school. And when Emma can't come because she has to go home to practice, they all walk her to her corner backwards, lurching and giggling and falling into one another and taking up the whole sidewalk. And while they're waiting for the light to change, Emma tells them how much she hates practicing but there is no choice because she has a gift. And unfortunately it looks like her little brother might have the same gift. And that Catherine Fedoryko lives in a cellar on Second Street with no toilet. And her brothers and sisters stink even worse than she does.

So day by day the glorious week passes. The sun shines every single moment and not a cat yowls in fear or anger on the streets. The light from the sun setting on the Hudson meets the light from the East River, casting enchantment in the late afternoons, and breezes blow the fresh smells of the Second Street bakery throughout the neighborhood.

Friday Emma comes into school with her cheeks stained and behind her glasses swollen eyes. Her new friends bustle around her, pressing and patting and passing her Kleenex like a contest: who can show the most sympathy the quickest. Her mother, she of the brilliant chipping-in plan but ambitious for her child beyond reasonableness, will not permit Emma to miss the day's piano practice. Why is it necessary that she travel all the way to Fourteenth Street after school? Her money is handed in. The scarf is already chosen. The other girls will do the shopping. Emma has more important things to do. She must keep priorities in mind.

The girls are extremely sympathetic. They say again and again that Emma need not worry: she has handed in her money, the scarf is already selected, they will sign her name on the card. Ginger promises to teach her how to jump in, during recess.

Monday morning Emma arrives with her face lit up like a menorah on the eighth night. The present stands handsomely wrapped in the center of Mrs. Lynch's desk, with the card in its white envelope pasted on top. A piece of holly is stuck under the ribbon.

There is a stillness in the room. Emma finds the girls huddled near the blackboard.

"Hi," she says with an eye-smile that includes them and the present on the desk.

"Hi," they answer awkwardly.

There is shoving and some jostling. A slip of paper is passed hand to hand into Mona's, who is propelled from the middle into the space between them and Emma. She holds out an envelope halfway.

"Here. The scarf was marked down. To ten dollars. So we didn't need your money. So here."

Emma looks at her as if Mona is talking in tongues. From inside the group someone coughs.

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“We didn’t sign your name on the card. I mean, we didn’t use your money so—” Mona stops.

One by one the candles extinguish on Emma’s face. She twists a thread of hair into her mouth, extends a weightless hand for the envelope.

Lindy mutters under her breath, “I said we should’ve—”

Mona melts backwards into the girls, who are turning into a clump. With no eyes, no mouths, no shape.

You know, to make music is a wonderful thing. Often in my life I’ve wished I could play an instrument. A flute, perhaps. Anyway, that’s the end of the story. I heard that a few of the girls felt ashamed. Which probably made them act even meaner for a while. Some business.

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