

Trash

I don't know why I didn't think of someone like Miss Emily. It never occurred to me to imagine her. I guess you could say I lacked imagination. I married her son after knowing him for only five days. A whirlwind romance.

5 I was the cashier at the local supermarket. Her son came in on Tuesdays to shop, to get discounts. I thought he was someone who didn't spend lavishly even though he could. I could tell he came from good people. He always wore a nice suit, and he had this beautiful coat, the kind of fabric that made you want to reach out and touch.

10 Of course, I could never do anything like that. I am not that bold. And, anyway, we weren't allowed to behave that way with customers. I wasn't selling clothes. I scanned bar codes. We were instructed only to take the coupons and the cash, or to press the buttons for the credit-card machines. We don't accept personal checks anymore, we were told to say.

15 The evening I actually met Miss Emily's son, I was finishing up my shift when I saw him come in. He seemed real glamorous, and I hadn't seen someone like that before so close up, looking right back at me. He certainly was not like the kind of people I'd grown up around. The kind who cuss, grab their crotch, belch. If they didn't like you, you'd know about it and they'd say it to your face. There was no pretending. I helped him carry some things to his car, and we got to talking. I liked talking to him. He was funny and friendly and polite. That's all I really need to know about anyone. I remember now that it snowed. Large, fluffy, soft flakes that made you think of diamonds. That night, I went home with him, and the rest, as they say, is history. We got married.

20 I met Miss Emily not long after marrying her son, on a Friday evening. She took the earliest flight she could get to come see her son. She thought I was pregnant because of how sudden it was. I was not. She was so eager to meet me. She made her son drive her to the supermarket, and they waited in the parking lot for two hours until I finished my shift. I had been on my feet for eight hours, so I wasn't looking too hot or feeling that great about myself. But I didn't think of things like that, impressions – first
25 impressions – what they mean and how people don't change their feelings about you even years after. I was wearing jeans and a pair of old runners, and a sweatshirt several sizes too large. My hair was tied back in a low ponytail. I wasn't wearing any makeup. Like I said, I didn't think of things like that at the time.

30 I got into the back seat, where Miss Emily was sitting alone. She took my face in, all its details and pores, assessed what kind of skin care or serum I might need, and kept those thoughts to herself. She smiled politely, and told me she was so glad to meet me – the girl her son had married.

I was family now, she said, and it wasn't up to her to say anything about that. Her son was, after all, his own man.

35 For as long as she could remember, all she ever wanted was a family, too. Her husband had died a few years ago. Heart attack. Sudden. She had married him right after college. Gone to law school, made partner, owned her own practice. Had three children. Bought property. She could afford to travel and take vacations abroad.

She had bettered herself. She'd worked very hard for what she had, she said. She had been – at one point in her life, so she knows these things – what people called trash. She'd improved herself, she said. Moved

40 on up, pulled herself up by her bootstraps, got to work, and no one could use that word to describe her anymore. She made sure of that, she said.

Over dinner that night, at a restaurant, she told me loving stories of her son when he was a child. How he'd wanted to be a grass cutter at a baseball stadium in a big city when he grew up. His first girlfriend, his crushes and heartbreaks. His prom, and his pets. I loved hearing these stories. She made them so vivid
45 and funny.

The bill came, and she paid. I begged her to tell me one more story. She thought for a moment. And then she told one about a pigeon her son had picked up off the road in front of their house when he was about ten years old. She didn't know that what he had there with him was a pigeon. She thought that he had been injured, that there had been an accident somewhere, but he was smiling at her with all that blood
50 on him, and she was relieved to find out that he just had a dead bird. She said her son was always finding things like that – dead animals, caps and bottles, old books – and bringing them home. She said he always asked her to make something out of them.

When her son drove us back to his apartment, she asked me about my family. I said it was just me. My parents weren't around anymore. They died in a car crash. I should have left it at that, but Miss Emily had
55 spent all evening telling me stories, and she was so open and honest that I wanted to say more. My dad had been drinking and really shouldn't have got behind the wheel. He was speeding. Ran a red light. It was raining. The car, a cheap old thing, was totalled.

I was in my last year of high school when all this happened. My parents didn't have life insurance. The car insurance had expired and no one had bothered to renew it. There were no savings or anything like that.
60 So I had to quit school and get a job to pay rent. I wasn't in a position to spend a few weeks or months sending out résumés, going on interviews. I needed a job right away, and the supermarket gave me one. I didn't want to live with anyone and was proud to find a place I could have all to myself. It was across the street from a park. It had one window. Hardwood floors, a bathtub, toilet, a stove, and a fridge. I wasn't a person who needed much. I put up bookshelves and set a mattress on the floor. An actress, I was told,
65 had lived there. She gave up the place when she got a big break out in Los Angeles. I thought it was good luck to move into that space. Maybe I would catch a big break myself. I didn't know what, exactly, that might be, but it was something to believe in and hope for, too.

I was telling all this to Miss Emily, and when I paused she asked me if I might quit the job at the supermarket, now that I'd married her son. I told her I really loved the supermarket. I felt loyal to the
70 place. I had been there for fifteen years. I'd worked my way up, too.

It was a grand place. All those shelves of food. You didn't have to go very far to get anything. The eggs were near the steaks. You didn't have to spend hours making the perfect cake or rolling thin sheets of dough to make croissants. You didn't have to own any land or take out feed¹ or work up the nerve to kill anything that had a face. Someone somewhere did that work for you, and it was all there on display. Each
75 and every item was given a bar code of its very own, everything was kept track of. The feel of the cash-machine tray as it popped out and hit me on the arm was like an old friend checking in throughout the day.

But Miss Emily didn't see it that way. She wanted me to go back to school, get my diploma, go to college, and look for something better. These kinds of things cost money to have, I thought. I didn't say that to
80 her. I knew she was the type of person who wouldn't use that as an excuse for anything. She just wanted

¹ *take out feed*: to feed animals

the best for me, she said. It was exactly what my own mother would have wanted for me, if she'd wanted anything for me. I loved Miss Emily right away then. She was so ambitious for me. And who, really, had dreams for you that you didn't even know you could wish for all by yourself?

85 Miss Emily smelled like fresh roses. She was soft and warm. Miss Emily loved being a mother, and now I was one of hers. That weekend, she took me shopping for clothes. Just us girls, she said. Skirts and blouses, dresses, trousers, a trench coat. These were things I never would have dared to buy for myself. They were in fabric you had to dry-clean. You couldn't throw any of those clothes into a machine to launder. She was so wonderful to me, really. No one had ever taken that kind of time with me or cared so much for me. I was always afraid of troubling the salesgirls at stores like these. And they usually ignored me, knowing that I wouldn't buy anything, anyway.

95 With Miss Emily, the salesgirl was real attentive and friendly. Miss Emily was so at ease. Talking with the salesgirl, asking her to bring us things in a size that would be a better fit. Asking the salesgirl her opinion about what young professional women wore to the office these days. She told me that, since her son worked in an office, she didn't want me to feel out of place. I would never buy these things for myself, I said. I don't have that kind of money to spend, I told her. She said she would take care of it. She was so happy to be in a position to help, and all that mattered was that I loved the things I picked out.

100 After getting back to her son's apartment and putting away my new clothes, Miss Emily began finding other ways to be useful. I honestly thought she would be exhausted after all that shopping. We had been at the clothing store for several hours, undressing and dressing me, putting things back, changing our minds, wanting to see things in other colors before deciding. All that sifting, trying, directing, imagining was a lot of work.

Suddenly, what had been her sweet, warm voice turned hoarse and cold. She became frazzled, asking me to do something – anything, really – to clean the house. Pointing a beautifully polished nail at me. "You," she said. "You do something about this."

105 I didn't know what had upset her so.

She kept saying, "Can't you see this?"

I was honest with her. I didn't know what the big deal was, and, truly, I hadn't noticed all this before.

110 She brought items up to me as if they were dead animals, holding them with two fingers as she shaped her face into disgust. She brought me takeout boxes and containers, beer bottles, soiled clothes, ashtrays. Then she threw a toilet brush my way and said, "Start with this." I hadn't noticed the stains on the outside of the toilet bowl, or inside just around the rim. I didn't know things could get into those kinds of places, at that angle.

115 She talked about her son as if *she* had been married to him for twenty-five years and was now emotionally spent. She told me all the things that were wrong with him. How his hair needed to be cut, his toenails and fingernails needed to be trimmed, how he hadn't brushed his teeth for days. She said, "He snores at night! How can you not hear that sleeping next to him?" She then began to describe me with words like stupid and dumb. She kept telling me to think, think, *think*. She said her son had never been like *this* when she had him. She said, "What have you done to him?" She took a spray bottle and sprayed surfaces, and scrubbed and scrubbed. She didn't want to look at my face, she said.

120 I went outside to the front porch and sat on a step. I wondered where her son was. Why he had been

gone for most of the day, and when he would be back. I thought about a mother's love. The incredible generosity it required from you. Her son had taken in a stranger, someone else's child, and, whatever this thing was with the two of them, she felt that she, too, had to love and give everything she had, even if she didn't want to. I knew that, whatever she felt about me, it was true to her, and that there was some truth to it. I wasn't good enough for her, and I never would be. But I wanted her love. I guess it was like a child wishing to see a crowd of gold stars next to her name. Proof that she'd done good that day, and that someone had taken the time to see that. There isn't anything like that for you as an adult, and the feeling of wanting one star – any star – never does disappear entirely.

Just then, I saw a creature crawl toward me. I thought it was a lost cat, but this thing looked large and vicious – it was a raccoon. It reached out at the dark between us, at my little face, and when I flinched it stopped and turned back to where it had come from. I don't know what it thought I was, exactly, what it might have mistaken me for, out there, all alone. I wasn't trash.

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