

Numb

By Julie Rea

Emily tutored at a Philadelphia community college. One day, she rolled into the Writing Center after a break, and there was a red head in his wheelchair, a student. He was stabbing at a keyboard with pale fingers. The man's hair, freckles, and glasses gave her a jolt. He looked like Seamus. She pushed by in a cloud of disorientation.

For a while, Emily kept herself busy with students. One was a Liberian émigré with a devastating essay about how Charles Taylor's army killed her mother in front of her. The student cried some. Emily, dry-eyed, patted the student's arm.

She was reading when she heard the slam of the stapler and muffled cursing. Looking at the rows of computer screens, she saw that only the man in the wheelchair remained. She said to him, "Push down gentle. It should work."

He shook his head as he carefully pressed the stapler.

"You can try next door; they might have one."

He said, "Nah, got it," dropped the stapled papers into his lap, and looked at her, his hands on his wheel rims as if preparing to move. He said, "So, you work here as a -- a --"

"Tutor."

"You like it?"

"Sure. Gotta pay the bills."

"Uh, yeah." He said with an air of declaration: "I'm studying music and hear 'your future is poverty' every time my dad gets a chance."

She thought of her own father and his disapproval and said, "Only live once, right?"

He gave her a tight smile.

"I'm Emily, by the way."

"Jacob."

"I really like your chair. It looks brand new." It was a sleek, shiny affair.

"It is. My dad's a rich asshole."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Sorry. Long story."

She ran her fingers through her short hair. "Can I help you with something?"

"Nah. I'm good. Just workin' on transfer applications."

He remained where he was, staring at her, so she felt obliged to say, "You're not going to be around next fall, then."

"Hopefully I'll be in New York. I have a shot at Julliard, then there's Manhattan School of Music, Mannes -- what?"

She had made a small face. "Oh. New York's great. I moved from there last year."

“Oh, wow.” Jacob’s eyes widened as he tapped on the papers in his lap. “I so cannot wait. How long did you live there?” Something hard slipped out of him and he seemed younger than at first, maybe in his early twenties.

“Dunno – over fifteen years, I guess.”

He looked her up and down. As Emily sat behind a big desk, only the back of her wheelchair was visible. He said, “Were you in the chair all that time?”

“Nah.”

“Spinal cord injury?”

Emily took her hands off the desk and laced her fingers tightly in her lap. “Yeah.”

“You were like – how old?”

“Thirty.”

“That’s not very old.”

“Nope.”

“Did they tell you that it was better that it happened when you were young? They told me that.”

“Well. Something like that.”

“Stupid. I mean, that’s *really* stupid.”

“I think it’s about adaptability. Lot harder if you’re in your sixties.”

“Well, yeah.” He rolled his eyes. “But if you’re not an adult and you can’t --.” Shaking his head, he took off his glasses and cleaned them with his shirt.

She looked at his naked face and thought about what it would have been like if she had broken her back in her teens. She said, “I think I see what you mean.”

“Yeah, but you don't know my dad.”

She shrugged. “So tell me.”

Jacob put his glasses back on and cleared his throat. “My dad, yeah, he bought me this chair. But he only did it because he ended up in court. Custody and support battle over his bullshit when I was a minor. Taking months to build a ramp to the house. Trying to feed me on the toilet so I wouldn't crap my pants.”

“What? Still living there?”

“Oh, no. My mom got me out as soon as she could. My aunt is a lawyer, thank God.”

“So,” she raised her hands. “Things better now?” She felt like an asshole, but she wanted to get rid of him.

Jacob rolled his chair back and forth. The muscles below his t-shirt sleeves stood out as he pushed and pulled. He said, “Mom’s pissed at me because I trashed my room. I do that sometimes.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“But yeah, things are good. Can’t wait to go away for college, though.”

“Yeah, good for you. Be careful of the subway elevators. They’re broken half the time.” She began packing away her pencils.

He said, “I bet you’ve never heard a story as messed up as mine.”

“Huh?”

“You know. Why I’m --.” He thumped one of his wheels with the palm of a fingerless-gloved hand.

She could tell in the way he was leaning forward that his story was very important to him. So she reluctantly said, “What happened?”

His chair rolled back and forth. “I fell asleep in a truck.”

She looked at him.

"I wasn't driving."

"Uh -- sorry, not -- getting it."

"Some sort of birth defect. I was all twisted up while I was sleepin' in the front seat, takin' a break from the road. The birth defect cut off blood to part of my spinal cord. Woke up -- paralyzed." He stopped his chair close to her desk.

"How terrifying," Emily heard herself say.

"More confusing, like, 'Where's the rest of me! Oh -- it's -- here.' But my girlfriend, who was with me, totally freaked."

"Huh. I bet."

"Wild, huh?"

"Sure is," she said, head swimming.

"At the time, I thought it would get worked out. I mean, who goes to sleep and wakes up paralyzed for life? *You* hear of that?"

"No."

"Once they figured, you know, things were screwed, my girlfriend thought that I should try all these ridiculous things -- the last was some bullshit about this guy, Edward Cayce, and, I don't know, batteries or somethin'."

"Batteries."

"Yep." Jacob shifted his weight, a hand on the papers on his lap. "We broke up when I got really mad about it. I guess I have a temper. Especially when it comes to bullshit."

"You've had a rough time."

He lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I'm not pissed about my body. It's these people with their stupid ideas about God's will or fate or America's greatness or Edward Cayce. When it's all luck. That's it. Luck, luck, luck."

"Life is -- arbitrary? It's hard to see that sometimes."

He looked unimpressed.

"Maybe you've heard this before?"

"Yeah." He ran a wheel into her desk with a bang.

She jumped.

"So why are you in a wheelchair?"

"Car accident." She tried to steer her brain back to its default state: numb.

"And how was that?"

"It was straightforward."

"Hmm."

The clock was her salvation: closing time. She told him this.

He chewed his lower lip. "Right. Well, you always here? Maybe I'll drop in sometime."

"I usually work in the day," she lied.

Jacob nodded, gathered his stuff, and left.

Emily sat before her darkened computer, letting time spool out so she wouldn't run into him again. At the last minute, she sped out the door, reaching up to turn off the lights. Outside, she waited for the bus driver to lower the ramp, which made a loud *boop-boop-boop-boop*.

On the bus, Emily leaned her head against the window, wishing she could fall asleep. But the other riders were talking on their cell phones or to each other.

She looked at the street-light lit yards of wherever they were; she found everything outside of Philly proper confounding. The bus announced its stops: Westchester Pike and

Darby Road, Westchester Pike and Something Else Road, Westchester Pike and blah blah blah. She was a little sick to her stomach. And she was far away.

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She was an attorney. Her hair was long and she pinned it into a bun for court. She worked for Legal Aid. She called herself a workaholic but was shocked when the man she wanted to marry dumped her over it.

But she met somebody else, another attorney. Seamus, he of the red-hair, spectacles, and lapsed Catholicism. She represented tenants with eviction cases; he represented women in family court matters. They got married two years after meeting on the job.

At first, her approach to work didn't faze her husband. Like her, he was driven. But later on, he suggested that they slow down. And remembering the man before him, she agreed to take a vacation.

They decided to visit her home state, Oregon. They could drive down the coast. But Seamus had never driven in his life. She would drive, she told him. She was a good driver, she told him. And she wanted to drive, she said, she wanted something to do.

In the weeks leading up to their trip, she waited until he fell asleep and worked several hours more. Sometimes he would half-wake and call her name. Then she pressed her temples in frustration but turned off the lamp on her desk and found her way to him, throwing the blankets aside, rolling in, draping his arm over her as she felt his heat against her back and buttocks, sleeping a few hours before the alarm went off.

They got to the B&B at Cannon Beach without incident. For a week they slept, ate, walked on the beach, talked about when they were going to throw away the birth control, and had sex, once on a cliff over the Pacific. The next day he observed with alarm the bruises and welts on her lower back (she had been propped against a rock as he pounded away).

The two of them said goodbye to the West Coast the next morning. She took a picture of Seamus as he said *Pacific my ass*. They stood high above an ocean that crashed into the rocks farther out that stood like guardian giants of the bay.

Over the course of their stay, Seamus had acclimated to the ocean that, more forcefully than the Atlantic that he knew, negated the idea that people were lords of their domain. And Emily in her happiness had somewhat forgotten her father. He still lived in a tiny town in the desert in Eastern Oregon. He believed that she lived in the wrong place and represented the wrong kinds of people. Her mother's death seemed to have broken him in a way that Emily had tried to sympathize with until the day he announced that Emily had married the wrong guy.

Heading east on Highway 26, Emily and Seamus began their return trip to their walk-up in Flatbush, with its rooms painted different colors and walls of overloaded bookshelves. On the road they talked over the news brought by Morning Edition on the radio.

She asked him if he wanted to visit the Rose Garden in Portland after switching off the radio when the news lost to static. When he didn't respond she saw that he was asleep. A couple of turns later she unbuckled her seatbelt so that she could lean forward and the raw part of her back wouldn't scrape against the seat.

Not long later, the drowsiness -- from her late nights, from the morning sun -- came on strong, and in the time she knew she was in trouble, she refused to acknowledge it, other than to roll her window down for air.

There was the road with its curves and then the drop of her eyelids and then there was the road and then there was darkness.

She was awake again the moment the car's front tires left the asphalt and made a grating noise in the gravel at the side of the road. They were going too fast; maybe she had stamped on the gas pedal in some sort of sleep twitch.

They hit the guard railing and went over. She stayed in the car until the second time it flipped. A huge hand pushed her out the open window and she was flying and she heard the car thundering down the precipice. She had time to think (*that's it*) before her head hit something and then there was nothing.

Her body collided with a pine tree. Her spinal cord was crushed. A branch caught in her hair and partially scalped her. She swam into wakefulness in the back of the ambulance (one stroke of luck – a local had come upon the crash -- even her scalp had been rescued). Her legs were pinned by an invisible weight. She was in a net of pain that ended at her waist.

When she didn't see Seamus, she began to struggle, pulling off the oxygen mask and yelling *Go back, go back!* She had flown through the car window and survived. He had the seatbelt and the air bag and therefore was also alive. She had an animal certainty that her back was broken, but where was Seamus?

He had died when the gas tank exploded. They didn't tell her until her father arrived at the hospital in Portland. When he told her, she told him to fuck off. He came back with a social worker, and together they told her the same thing. She told them both to fuck off.

She drifted between sleep and a sea of pain. There was x-ray after x-ray, MRI after MRI, and two surgeries that she wasn't much interested in living through.

Her father offered to take her in, as did Seamus' parents in Florida. Panicked at both prospects, she pled her case to her friends: she would be best off back in New York City. Her friends put their heads together and somehow found her a studio in an elevator building, at a rent she could afford if she was working.

But back in New York, back on the job, the pain got worse. She took more pills, nodding off at her desk with an increasing frequency. She was angry with her doctors for not stopping the pain. She was angry at her supervisor for asking careful questions about how she was doing. She lashed out at her coworkers until everybody was wary of her.

She stopped working. Another surgery was scheduled to remove a piece of vertebrae lodged in the horsetail bundle of nerves that branched off from her spinal cord. The pain subsided after the surgery, but she had no job to return to. After many weeks of watching T.V. and contemplating suicide, she mentally shrugged. She deserved to exist.

She got on disability. She landed a few private tutoring gigs, ESL students, then college students. She left New York because she couldn't afford it.

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And now, here Emily was at the 69th Street Terminal in Philadelphia, the bus pulling up behind a line of others.

She wheeled to her apartment some six blocks south of the terminal, her hands wrenching her wheel rims so that her front wheels left the ground and fell back again in a thump-thump-thump.

She was shaking badly by the time she reached her apartment. She didn't turn on any lights until she wheeled into the room that contained the closet. She opened the closet and saw the three boxes stacked there. She was unsure when she had last touched the boxes. She had

asked a friend to hold onto them for years. The movers who got her stuff from Brooklyn to Philadelphia put the boxes in the closet, and here they remained.

She grasped the top box and pulled it into her lap. Opening the box, she saw things that had flown, as she had, out the car window. There was her camera. A friend had developed the photos, but Emily had never looked at them. Here they were, under a green wool sweater that had belonged to Seamus. She pressed it to her nose. She smelled only seven years' worth of cardboard.

The box shifted in her lap and then fell, pictures spilling out. She tumbled out of her chair and dragged herself to the pictures lying on the floor.

The Seamus looking at the ocean in the photo was seven years younger than she was now. But his face seemed more that of a father than a husband. Someone who would love her, no matter what.

She thought:

my fault I'm sorry I'm sorry all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault I'm sorry I'm sorry so sorry.

Then she felt/heard/thought something quiet and from far away, as if her body was receiving a transmission from outer space:

forgiven

She remained on the floor for a long time, her tears like rain.

Julie Rea is a graduate of the City College M.F.A. Creative Writing Program and the N.Y.U. School of Law. Her work has been published by *Atonal Apples*, *The Promethean*, and *Thoughtsmith* and has been read by Abington Theatre. She lives in the Philadelphia area with a couple of cats and writes about life in a wheelchair and many other intriguing things.