

Her

A Short Story by Author: Anthony Escobar

She's sitting with her back against the headboard, the short nightgown exposing well-shaped legs. Her glasses sit low on her nose as she studies the screen on her phone. I've seen her like this a thousand times. The door's blaring ding dong startles me! I look to see her expression, but the bed is empty. The illusion of her memory fades into the shadows of the bedroom. There are plenty of shadows with the curtains closed against the intruding sunshine. The door blares again, scattering my thoughts and dreams of her. I consider ignoring the door, but the intruder is sitting on the doorbell as if it's a park bench.

"Shit!" I mutter as I move down the hall. You'd think they'd see the black wreath and leave me alone with my dreams and memories. Memories that are more real than the day-to-day business of life. Loneliness and sadness, my recent companions, accompanied me down the hall to silence the doorbell. I jerked the door open, ready to blast the infernal intruder.

"Emily! What are you doing here?"

"Really, Robert! You don't remember? I'm supposed to go through her things. We talked about this after the funeral.

“Yes, yes, of course, I...asked you to wait a couple of weeks, and it is what she would have wanted.” I said, “Please come in, Emily. Excuse the mess.”

“Robert, it’s been months! I tried to call, but you never answer my calls or texts!” she scolds as she starts into the house.

Months! Had it been that long? It seems like just yesterday I said my final goodbyes to her. Months and the wound is still fresh, bleeding uncontrolled emotions into my waking hours. My eyes begin to burn, and a familiar lump in my throat starts to grow, threatening to choke me. I swallow the lump and move aside, motioning her best friend to come in.

Emily stands in the living room, her jeans and bright top contrasting with the swirling mass of scattered dishes, dirty clothes, wrappers, and a host of things that collectively constitute the mess that is my living room. I can see her head move as she scans the condition of the room. I move to snag up an old pair of underwear from the hassock before she sees them. I don’t think I succeed; never-the-less, the drawers are safely bundled up behind my back. Blankets and pillows are scattered on the couch and floor where they’ve fallen.

The recliner seems to be in a permanent laid-back position with a deep indentation suspiciously shaped like my butt. Yeah, I spend plenty of time on that backbreaker. I fell asleep on it last night, just like every night. I hadn’t slept in our bed since she died.

I made the bed the day the ambulance came for her. I made it so it would be neat and inviting when she came back home, but she never came back home, and every time I tried to pull the covers back, I broke down. So, I just stopped trying and left it alone.

“Look, Emily, why don’t you go into the office and start on her things there, and I’ll straighten up a bit in here?”

She looks at me with huge rounded eyes, no small feat for her slightly slanted almond ones.

“Robert, She would never approve of this mess and would never forgive me if I left it.

Why don’t you take a shower, and put on some clean clothes! God knows how long you’ve been wearing those sweats.”

I looked down at myself and realized it had been a while since I’d changed clothes. There didn’t seem to be a reason to. I went to the bedroom, got some fresh clothes, and went to shower.

The shower woke me up, and hid the tears as I thought of her again. Emily’s arrival seems to have reopened the wound in my heart. That’s unfair; I just hadn’t healed yet. I couldn’t seem to keep my mind away from the void that occupied the center of my being. I regretted Emily’s coming here and disturbing my . . . loneliness? I refused to see any happiness or sunshine. Since my joy had been taken away, I found solace in the silent bleakness of a dark house. I wanted to hide from a world without her.

I step out of the shower and hear music softly playing through the door. Oldies! It was our favorite genre. We three, her, Emily, and me, had been together for years. The music reminds me of the first time I saw her, them. She and Emily were never far apart.

Almost fifteen years ago, I was on a city bus headed across town feeling miserable. I’d just finished a consultation with my academic advisor. I was failing half my courses, and my scholastic career was headed for the toilet. I was ready to quit.

I was sitting in one of those seats that face the aisle, deep in a pool of self-pity, when a leather sandal kicked my sneaker. I looked up into the greenest kindest eyes I’d ever seen. Fluffy auburn hair framed a beautiful smiling face.

"Hey, can we share your seat?"

I scooted over to let them have one end of the bench seat, but she motioned me over, and they sandwiched me between them. She stuck out her hand and introduced herself.

The other, "Emma, my friends call me Emily," did the same.

"So what's your trouble, little bubble?" she asked me.

I've always been shy around women. They make my mouth dry, and my hands sweat.

They make me feel clumsy. How to interact with them has always been a mystery. But her openness and genuine interest opened me up like a shucked oyster. I found myself telling her my problems and my dreams.

We got off the bus way before my stop and ended up at a little coffee shop that served great coffee and played Motown. She listened to my sad story, pooh-poohed the seriousness of my situation, offered me free tutoring, gave me great advice, and promptly changed my life forever.

After one last look in the mirror, I headed out to deal with Emily. The Temptations crooned out a sweet love song, and the living room looked like a living room. I was a little piqued. I had grown used to the homeless look in my living room. A delicious odor came from the kitchen, food, real food!

I peeked into the kitchen. Emily was stirring a pot of something on the stove. I couldn't help but notice her form. Emily is a beautiful woman, perhaps not as beautiful as my wife, but they sometimes had been confused for sisters. Her jeans accented her shape, and my mind noted her attractive assets. I closed my eyes in confusion. What the hell was I doing? She's my wife's best friend, and I am checking her out!

I turned away, hoping she wouldn't notice me, but it was too late!

"Come help me set the table," she ordered.

I felt a little put off, and if it hadn't been for the smell of what was cooking, I probably would've turned my back on her, fine derriere and all. Damn! I needed to stop noticing her femininity. I moved quickly to the cupboard and got some bowls for the soup.

We sat across the table from each other. She had opened some beef soup and made sandwiches. It wasn't much, but it was more than I had done to care for myself. I was ashamed that her friend found me in this condition. In between bites, she explained that she had taken time off to come and help me sort through her things.

"Robert, I need a favor. I came here without making hotel accommodations. I need a place to stay. Just until I can get a hotel room."

She had spent countless times at our place and never stayed at a hotel. I couldn't, wouldn't let her stay at a hotel now. She was our friend, her best friend.

"Emily, you've never needed to stay at a hotel whenever you've visited in the past. I don't see why you need one now, But where's your luggage?"

"At Ruby's."

"Ruby's? What's your luggage doing at my mother-in-law's house?"

"Well, I didn't know if you would let me stay here. I wasn't even sure you were going to let me in. You haven't exactly been a social butterfly, you know."

I knew. I'd always been shy, but without my wife, I felt so incomplete. I had avoided everyone, in-laws included. They'd call, and most times, I wouldn't answer, just send a quick text, "I'm good. I'll call later.", but later never came.

“Will you take me to pick up my suitcases?”

Suitcases? That didn’t sound like a short visit to me. I looked at her across the table and found it impossible to resist her smile.

“Sure. When do you want to go?”

“After I do the dishes?”

There was that smile again, “While you do the dishes, I’m going to make sure the car still starts, or do I need my truck?”

“The car will do.” She came to me and hugged me, “Thanks, Rob.”

We were back to nicknames. It felt good, comfortable even, having her back in my life. It didn’t quite fill the void, but it helped.

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An hour later, I was pulling up to my mother-in-law’s house. My brother-in-law, Harold, came out of the garage smiling.

“Hey, brother-in-law,” he said, hugging me.

His hug for Emily was a bit tighter and lasted a little longer than I liked, but hey! She’s old enough to push him away if she doesn’t want the contact. She did move away after a moment.

“Come on in. Mom will be happy to see you, Rob.”

We followed him inside, and there was Ruby! A five-foot-tall tornado. She squealed when she saw me and jumped into my arms.

“There’s my long lost son!” she said, squeezing the breath from my lungs.

I felt guilty for avoiding her, "I'm sorry, Ruby, I know it's been a while, and I should've come over sooner."

"Well, you're here now, and that's all that matters to me."

The short visit to pick up two large suitcases lasted three hours and would have lasted longer if Emily hadn't pled exhaustion from the trip. I figured she was probably tired from cleaning the house and washing dishes. During our visit, Harold invited me to the garage to drink a beer and talk.

He asked, "How you holding up, bro?"

"It's been rough, but things seem to be getting better, you know."

"Yeah, I know." He glances at Emily's suitcases just outside the door, then back at the house, "Mom spends a lot of time in the woods. You remember that's what they would do, walk in the forest."

"I remember.", I said, trying to end the conversation. I didn't want memories to bring on a crying jack, not now. I turn to walk back to the house when Harold asks.

"You fucking Emily?"

I spin around to look at him, "What! Are you crazy? We're friends. She's...was her best friend!"

"Yeah. Well, she ain't around anymore now, is she? If you're not fucking her, I want to ask her out. Do you mind?"

"We're friends not...fuck buddies. If she wants to ...be with you, that's her business." I turned and went headed back inside, trying to reconcile the feelings swirling in my head and heart.

When I stepped inside the door, Ruby was talking.

“...so they never really leave us. We’re just not aware of them, but they’re there, watching and trying to help us.”

“What’s up?” I ask.

“Ruby was just explaining some things to me.” Emily says, “You ready to go?”

I nod yes.

“I think it’s time we go, Ruby. I’m tired, and I don’t want Rob to have to carry me in.”

Ruby laughs and walks us out. As we walk to the car, Harold calls Emily over, and they have a whispered conversation. Ruby and I watch them; we can’t hear the conversation, but Emily shakes her head emphatically, and when Harold reaches out to touch her, she jerks her arm away.

“Hmm, I don’t think that boy can have that one.”, Ruby says. “She’s a lot like my daughter, you know.” Looking at me, she says, “You be nice to her.”

“Yes, ma’am!” is my automatic response.

Ruby hugs me and makes me promise to come over more often.

She whispers, “You know, she wants you to be happy.”

Tears threaten to rise in my eyes, and I feel a release. I nod and kiss her cheek.

“Thank you, Ruby!” I whisper back.

We’d left Ruby’s about ten minutes back when she spoke.

“Can you stop at a grocery store? I want to buy something for dinner. How does a steak sound to you?”

I look over at her, “That sounds great! I haven’t had a steak since—” I was going to say the last time we were all together, but I never got the words out. Hot tears start flowing. I pull over. I can’t see the road, and the lump in my throat is choking me.

I realize she’s holding me as I fall apart. Emily holds my head to her shoulder and rocks me gently.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay to cry, Rob. It’s okay to miss her.”

Her voice cracks, and I know she’s crying with me. She holds me as I cry my eyes out for a lost love; something inside me breaks open. I feel another release, and the tears and sobs flow as Emily holds me.

We whirled through the grocery store, neither of us wanting to spend more time there than necessary. Besides being hungry, I think we’ve found ourselves in our own little world. We share a state of grief, a loss, a dark commonality.

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Sitting at the table watching her move around the kitchen, I realize she brightens up the kitchen, not just the kitchen, but the whole house. She’d turned on the music when we came in, and the music was sending warm fuzzy vibes through me.

“Hey! Are you any good at cooking steaks?” I asked her.

“No, you volunteering?”

“Hell, yeah!”

We moved around the kitchen like we were dancing. Back and forth, sometimes we’d touch a hip or back. When the ‘Bump’ played, we bumped each other as we swayed and moved to the old song. We laughed at ourselves as we cooked, gyrating in and out of each other's space.

The dishes and the kitchen were cleaned up when we took our places on the couch. She placed a bowl of popcorn between us and searched for a movie. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Her lips were full when she pursed them as she searched for a movie. I wondered how they would taste. Then I thought of Harold's question. The crude and audacious way he asked it made me angry. Was I protective of Emily or jealous? Was it too soon for me to be interested in another woman?

Hell, I couldn't get through the day without crying for her. No, I wasn't ready, but Emily was near and looked very good. I swallowed and tried to concentrate on the chick flick she picked. I hear her sniffing, and a soft sob escapes her lips.

Then I remembered the movie. It was their movie! The one they'd watch every time Emily came to visit. I looked at her wondering, what the hell was she doing? Then it hit me. She misses her too and is still grieving. She had reached for a treasured memory: a movie they shared.

What a selfish idiot I'd become. Emily had known her longer than I had. They'd been close before I ever met them. I knew they loved each other. I remember her telling me, "Emily and I are closer than sisters." I had been so caught up in self-pity. I'd failed to see the hurt everybody else was feeling, especially Emily.

I set the popcorn on the coffee table, turned, and pulled Emily into my arms. I thought she might pull away, but she buried her head in my chest and snuggled into my embrace. What a fool I've been; she'd left Emily too! I knew she would want, no, demand that I comfort Emily. I did not doubt that.

Emily wrapped her arms around me and held on. I realized at that moment that I was the closest thing to her that Emily had to hang on to. I held Emily, feeling the soft sobs and the quiet heaving of her crying. I smoothed her hair and rocked her gently, understanding and caring. I could almost feel her there with us, smiling at our mutual support for each other. I remembered how she would collect strays and always try to heal or fix broken animals and people. Her heart had garnered so many people; her funeral was packed. Some I knew, and many more were strangers to me; her love had touched them all. Many people were missing my wife tonight, missing her love and acceptance for everyone.

I reached for a throw and covered us. We slept that night on the couch together. We were holding each other, giving and receiving comfort like only those who share a common loss can. It was the best sleep I'd had in weeks.

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I woke up to the smell of brewing coffee and frying bacon. I peek through the kitchen doorway. Emily is busy at the stove; before I can say good morning, she turns to me.

"Take your shower. I'll have your coffee and breakfast ready when you come out."

"Well, good morning bossy!"

Her smile is enough of an answer. I head to the bedroom for clean clothes; rifling through the closet, I find my favorite jeans and a comfortable t-shirt. The shower is wonderful! I shave while the warm water covers me like a blanket. When I turn the off the water, I hear muffled voices, almost angry sounding, coming through the walls.

I slip on my flip-flops, wrapping a towel around my waist; I hurry out of the bathroom. A man's voice, Harold's voice, is coming from the living room.

"I know what you're doing here. You're here for the insurance money! You going to fuck Rob out of that money, maybe fuck him for real, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. If there's any insurance money, That belongs to Rob." Emily answers. "I've got my own money; now, what else do you want here?"

I step out of the hall and see them standing at the open front door. I see him grab her wrist and twist it behind her. She yelps as he yanks her to him.

"I want you! Before that wimp gets that pussy I figure you owe it to me and yourself to have a real man first."

He forces her against the door jam of the doorway and pins her with his larger body. She growls and struggles against him. He holds her wrist locked behind her back. She can't fight him off. She struggles, but she's no match for his bulky size. Her struggles increase when his free hand cups her vulva through her baggy shorts.

I move on pure instinct. I cross the distance in two leaping steps and strike Harold with my shoulder. It's enough to push him off her and out the screen door. I follow him out, throwing wild punches at his head. He falls backward off the porch. He lands on the grass with a groan. He jumps up, looking at me in surprise.

"She's a god-damned whore!" he shouts, pointing at Emily.

"Leave, or I'm throwing your ass in jail!" I shout back.

He's breathing heavily, his broad chest heaving as he fills his lungs with air. He turns and stomps to his truck. He flips us off as he careens around a parked car. That's when I notice all the neighbors staring. They all came out to watch Harold at his finest.

"What are they all staring at? They've never seen a domestic dispute before?"

"I'm sure they've never seen their neighbor naked on his front porch.", she said, chuckling as she tugged my arm and pulled me into the house.

"I'm not completely naked. I still have a flip-flop on."

She followed me to my clothes hanging in the bathroom, trying to explain what Harold was talking about. She stops at the door.

"I'll let you dress, and we can talk about this when you finish."

"It's too late for me to be shy. You and the neighbors have already seen me naked. Tell me, why is my brother-in-law asking about insurance money, and why's he so intent on getting into your pants?"

She blushes. "How much about her business do you know, Rob?"

"Well, not much. I know she had an online counseling business. I don't think she made much money from it. But, you know, she handled all our finances? I just had my checks deposited."

"And how much do you know about your brother-in-law?"

"I've known him since I married his sister. We're not close" remembering our conversation at Ruby's, "and probably never will be. I don't think he works, but I don't know. Emily, you know we never had much to do with him."

She scoffs, "He doesn't have a job unless you count sponging off Ruby. He's always looking for a quick buck—especially one that doesn't include work. Ruby told us this the last time I was down here, before...well, some time ago.

I understood it was before her death.

“Okay, I get that he’s looking for some easy cash, but why’s he so set on having sex with you? You’re sexy and attractive, but he seems too keyed into you?”

“I don’t know. He’s always tried to be with me. I turned him down when we were still in school. He’s hard-headed. I guess.”

“What about my wife’s business?”

“Her business was very profitable. It was worth several million dollars before she died, and I know she has a generous insurance policy.

“How do you know? I’m her husband, and I never knew that!”

“Rob, I’m the executor of her will.”

Just then, the doorbell rings, saving my jaw from hitting the floor.

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It was almost an hour before the police left. They said they responded to a domestic dispute and an indecent exposure report. Emily smiled through most of it and laughed at the indecent exposure report.

“He was wearing a flip-flop!” she exclaimed.

Fortunately, the two officers thought that was funny. They ignored my mooning the neighbors in light of my interference with Harold’s unwanted attention toward Emily. She told them Harold smelled of alcohol.

Neither of us was willing to bring Ruby more grief by signing a complaint against him.

We spent part of the day collecting business records. We decided to take advantage of the warm afternoon and the pool.

Emily sits between my legs as I apply sunblock to her dusky skin. The oil makes her skin shiny and silky smooth to my touch. My hands glide over her skin, and sometimes my hand ventures near her more intimate parts. She scoots back and snuggles against me at one point, then she gets up and dives into the pool.

My erection is painful. I follow her into the water, hoping things will ease. I lap the pool until I'm tired; exhaustion cools my ardor. The rest of the afternoon is frustrating and confusing. I don't know what's right. I want Emily, but is it wrong? After all, her death hasn't been that long ago. Emily adds to my confusion; sometimes it seems she wants me, and sometimes not. I don't know.

It was early evening when we quit the pool. We ordered pizza, ate, and settled in front of the tv. Emily took up her usual spot, not the one with space between us, but the way it was before when the three of us occupied the couch. She laid back and threw her legs on my lap.

Back in the days when I had Emily on one side and her on the other. They would throw their legs on my lap, and I would massage their feet, sometimes tickling them and starting a three-way wrestling match I always lost. Tonight her leg settled on my erection, and I was afraid to move.

Would she think I was a perverted creep? Was I breaking some taboo? How can I know when enough time has passed? I'd always found Emily attractive but not enough to ruin our friendship or theirs either. My erection has no qualms about making his feelings clear.

I started rubbing Emily's foot. The one closest to my stomach and sitting on my hardening organ. I moved her foot off my hardness as I massaged her, and then, she moved her other leg up to rub my erection. Well, even an idiot like me can figure out things have changed. It

was just the two of us, two lonely people, not strangers, friends. My hand drifts up her leg and finds her warm center. She moans her encouragement, and I answer her call.

I moved her legs off me, set them on the floor and stood up. I pull her to a standing position and capture her lips. She tastes like honey; an exquisite sweetness floods my mouth and senses. Emily is all I can think of. My tongue moves between her lips, and our tongues wrestle, first in her mouth, then in mine, sending shivers up and down my back. I pull back, looking into her eyes.

“Bed?” I ask.

Her nod is all I need. Arms locked around each other; we negotiate the hallway. We stop at the bed in the guest room and I remove her clothes. She turns to the bed, but I’m not ready for the bed yet. I stand behind her and pull her close. I smell her hair. I pull her hair back and begin to nibble on her ear lobe. My tongue refuses to be still, and I begin to lick and nip her ear. She shudders in my arms, and I kiss her neck down to her shoulder. She turns in my arms, and our lips lock. I push her to the bed.

Before she could lie down, my sweats and t-shirt hit the floor. We make slow, easy love.

We are new lovers touching, tasting, and exploring each other. Our slow exploration becomes a raging storm ending sweeter than it began.

I wake up to the smell of coffee. I put on my sweats and walk into the kitchen, where a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon waits near the microwave. There’s a yellow tablet sheet taped to the microwave door. I pull it off and read.

Warm your plate and eat; her letter is on the table. She wanted me to give it to you if certain things happened. You have my number if you want to call me after you read it. No, I don't know what she wrote.

I sit at the table with her letter. I recognized her writing, bold lilted script with flourishes.

I used to tease her about her penmanship all the time. I'm afraid to open her letter. Last night is still very fresh in my mind. The taste of Emily is still on my tongue. Carefully, I cut the letter open and draw out the page. I unfold the page and read.

Dear Rob:

If you've opened this letter, there is so much I didn't have time to tell you. My darling husband, my time has come, and I've left you alone. I failed to tell you how much you mean to me and that my love for you is strong. You've been the man that I've needed these years that we've shared. I know you love me. I also know how you think and brood. That's why I've asked Emily to help me with you. I can't be there for you, but she can; you two can be there for each other. You need to go on together. She's been in love with you since we met you; we both have. I know you've always cared for her. Don't argue, Robert. I know you love me, and we'll all be together again someday. But for now, you need someone, and I want it to be Emily. She knows my wishes and has my will. I've made her the executor of my estate. She knows where all the documents are. I surprised you, didn't I? Lol, that little business of mine did well. It was to be my gift to you, early retirement, and a trip around the world. Now you two must make the trip that I'd planned for three. I hope you can love each other as much as I love you. Take care of Emily.

With all my Love

Your Wife

P.S. I left you everything and left you to Emily.

Love you

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I didn't call Emily; I didn't have to. I knew where she was.

I pulled the car up to where the cab was parked. I didn't think I'd remember where it was,

but my feet took me right to it, and there they were, both of them. I walked up to stand next to

Emily. I reached for her hand and read the tombstone.

Helen Carter; Beloved Wife, Daughter, and Friend.

The Beginning

