

Chapter 8

“My Old Friend”

I first met Emma through my friend Dolly. Emma was a sweet, gray-haired lady whose house was at the top of the alley. One day, my friend Dolly took some of the neighborhood gang to Emma's back door. This was after telling us that if we sang for Emma she would give us cookies. Let me just say that with the word “cookies” in the equation, it took no persuading on Dolly's part to get any of us to accompany her to Emma's back door for a little song fest. Dolly rang the bell as we were discussing what song we should sing. We quickly agreed on “Jesus Loves Me” because we figured that one would really win over an old lady. She'd think we were little angels.

Sure enough, the door opened and there stood Emma with tightly curled gray hair, wire-rimmed glasses and the sweetest smile on her face. Suddenly, I felt guilty about our devious reason for being there and thought maybe we should just say hello and be on our way without singing a note and collecting the cookies. But with no warning Dolly launched into the song and we all joined in.

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong.” I noticed that even though Emma was smiling there were tears in her eyes as she looked down at us and listened to our song. “Yes, Jesus loves me,” we continued on, “Yes, Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.”

When we sang the last note, Emma clapped her hands several times. “How wonderful! That was just beautiful. But who do we have here? Who are all your little friends?”

Dolly pointed to each of us as she said our names, “This is Sharon, this is Kathy and this is David.”

“It’s so nice to meet you Sharon, Kathy and David, and you know I always enjoy a visit from you, Darlene.” She called Dolly by her real name, which got us all giggling. “Won’t you children come in from the cold for a little while?” Emma asked. “I’ll make you some hot chocolate to go with the chocolate chip cookies I just happened to make this morning. Now isn’t that a lucky coincidence?” she asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

I’ll say, I thought. This turned out even better than we had expected. Not only were we going to be treated to cookies, but hot chocolate too! That “Jesus Love Me” song worked like a charm.

I stepped into Emma’s kitchen for the first time. There was a white wooden table and chairs pushed up against one wall, a sink like none I’d ever seen because it had legs and a blue and white gingham skirt around it. There was also a rust colored rubber rug in front of the sink. It was the first time I had seen a rug like this and I commented on it.

“It’s actually called a rubber mat and it’s there to protect me from lightning,” Emma

said. It seems she was terrified of lightning and she had this notion that a thunder storm could come up out of nowhere while she was standing at the sink washing dishes and a bolt of lightning would come through her kitchen window and strike her dead. Her husband, Charles, told her, that if she was standing on a rubber mat it would protect her from such a fate, so he bought one for her. I didn't quite get the concept..

When we turned around from our inspection of the rubber mat, we saw that an even older, old lady had entered the kitchen. She eyed us suspiciously. "Oh Mother," said Emma, "I didn't hear you come in. You know Darlene. She drops by every now and then and sings for us, but today she brought some of her little friends. This is Sharon, Kathy and David. Children, this is my mother, Mrs. Smiley."

Mrs. Smiley's sour expression let us know that she didn't want us to be there.

"We're just about to have some hot chocolate and cookies, would you care to join us?"

"No!" she barked. "I just came out to tell you 'Queen for a Day' is about to start, but I guess you won't be watching it with Charles and me today, will you?" And then before poor Emma could even answer her she turned and walked out of the kitchen in a huff.

Boy, she gave me the creeps.

Emma was certainly the polar opposite of her mother. She was such a sweet lady! She turned her attention back to us after her mother made her hasty and haughty exit and said,

“Children, take off your coats and place them on the chair next to the cabinet over there,” as she pointed to the one chair in the kitchen that was not around the table. Emma got a bottle of milk out of her refrigerator, poured some into a saucepan along with some cocoa, and put it on her old-fashioned looking stove to heat up. The stove had legs too, just like the sink, and it was gray, not white like all the other stoves I had seen. Then she got cups and saucers with little colorful flowers around their borders out of the cupboard and placed them on the table. Next, she took a cookie jar in the shape of an apple down from a shelf and began taking cookies from it and arranging them on a big plate that matched the cups and saucers. Finally, she made sure there were enough chairs for all of us to sit at the table.

“Sit down, children, the hot chocolate is almost ready.” She said. When it was ready, she poured us each a cupful and passed around the cookies. We spent a cozy afternoon in Emma’s kitchen, eating cookies, slurping hot chocolate and regaling her with our childish tales.

“I’m afraid of clowns and midgets and especially of midget clowns. You have to be careful because if a midget touches you, then you’ll become a midget yourself.” I confessed to Emma.

This made Emma throw back her head and let out a girlish giggle that poured over me like honey from a comb.

We came back several times to sing for Emma. And I don't know why or how it happened, but I ended up coming back alone after my friends stopped coming to visit. When I came alone, it was not to sing, but to sit with Emma in matching wicker rocking chairs that sat in the bay window of her dining room where the big grandfather clock on the other side of the room loudly ticked away the hours. Charles was always in the living room watching TV or fussing over his bright green and yellow parakeet that had free flight all over the house. His name was Petey, and Charles had taught him to say things like "Hello!" and "Hey Baby!" which it just squawked out randomly. Charles would stop whatever he was doing and gave me his full attention when I was with him. He showed genuine interest in what I had to say. He always had a smile for me and he would do fun things like get Petey to sit on my finger or shoulder.

I would tell Emma about what was going on at school and with my family and she would tell me things about her life or about the latest story she had just read in the *Reader's Digest*. She always had a stack of them piled on a little table next to her wicker rocker. In fourth grade, my teacher asked the class to write a story about a friend and I wrote about Emma. My teacher gave me an A and had me read the story to the class. I took the story with the A on it and gave it to Emma. She cried when she read it and gave me the biggest hug. I only told Emma about the things in my life that made me happy. I never told her about getting hit with the strap or being hit by my dad so I didn't tell her about what happened last Sunday.

My dad had been down at the Third Ward all afternoon. The Third Ward was the beer

joint down the street from where we lived, and a lot of weekends my dad went there for the afternoon to drink beers and watch ball games on TV with his buddies. He usually came home a little drunk with a silly grin on his face and in a great mood. But on this particular Sunday, he came home with the scary expression on his face. He zeroed in on me. "Didn't I tell you not to play near the train tracks?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well then what the Hell were you doing playing near the train tracks on Wednesday?" he screamed at me.

I opened my mouth to answer him but he cut me off. "And don't even think of lying to me because Tom Lawler saw you and some other kids putting pennies on the tracks. Go get me the strap." But I didn't. I ran away from him. He immediately started chasing after me as I tore up the front steps with him in hot pursuit of me. I raced as fast as I could through the upstairs bedrooms and into the bathroom with him not far behind. I slipped down the back steps and into the kitchen where I sped to the other side of the kitchen table. My dad was now on the opposite side of the kitchen table from me and in one quick move he suddenly pushed the kitchen table into me, pinning me between the table and the wall between the kitchen and the closed in back porch.

I screamed in terror. Dad's face was contorted with rage as he bent over the table grabbing at me. When he finally got a good grip on me, my dad yanked me over the table

so that I was now on his side of the table. He threw me toward the kitchen sink. “Now get me the strap, damn-it!”

“Stop it Walt! You’ve been drinking!” screamed my mom.

“You might really hurt him.” She said as she continued to watch in horror.

“Please, she begged, “stop this now!”

My dad pushed my mom aside and screamed at me again. “Get me that strap!”

I opened the second drawer on the right side of the sink and pulled it out. Dad whipped the strap out of my hand and started viciously hitting me with it, letting the blows of the strap land wherever they chose to on my body. My mom tried to intervene and ended up getting accidentally slapped across the thigh with the strap as my dad frantically beat me. My mother yelled out in pain and this finally made my dad stop. He dropped the strap on the floor, walked out of the kitchen and went upstairs. I ran out the back door and just kept running until I fell to my knees at the bottom of the alley. My body ached from the blows of the strap. I felt like I’d been hit on every part of my body except my head and face.

When I finally came back home I found my dad watching a ball game on TV. Dad didn’t look away from the TV when I entered the room. I hated my father for treating me like an

animal and I wanted to tell him so, but I kept my mouth shut. The next morning when I came down for breakfast my mom came up to me, lifted up her housedress and showed me a huge black and blue mark on her thigh. “This is what I got trying to protect you, and I just want you to know that you better start behaving yourself, because I’m never going to get between you and your father again.” On my next visit with Emma, I didn’t tell her any of this.

Mrs. Smiley always sat in a chair in a corner on the other side of the dining room when I visited with Emma. She never said anything, just sat there watching us. One time Emma told me that she had a little girl once, a long time ago, but she got sick and died. She said it broke her and Charles’s hearts.

“Why didn’t you and Charles have more children?” I asked.

“We tried, but we couldn’t. It just wasn’t meant to be, I guess. But while we had her with us, we loved our little girl so much. She was such a pretty little thing.”

This was the only time I heard a sound come from Mrs. Smiley. She was softly sobbing on the other side of the dining room and I realized when Emma lost her little girl, Mrs. Smiley lost her only grandchild, for Emma was an only child. As much as I didn’t like Mrs. Smiley, I felt sorry for her.

Sometimes when I visited, I would sit with Emma and Charles and Mrs. Smiley in the

living room and watch “Queen for a Day” with them. It was this show that they all loved, and I got to love it too. Three women would come on the show and tell heartbreaking stories about their miserable lives. One would have a husband who died and left her penniless with six children to feed and no money to pay the rent. Another one would look all skinny and frail and say she had a bad heart and needed surgery immediately or she would die, but couldn’t afford to pay for it. The third one would come out in a wheelchair. She would just have stumps for legs and she would tell how she had been in a horrible car accident that killed her husband and son. She had lived but lost both her legs. She needed money for artificial ones and for physical therapy to learn how to walk again on the artificial legs. Everyone in the TV audience would be crying and so would Emma and Mrs. Smiley. Charles and I would maybe feel like crying too, but boys didn’t cry, so we wouldn’t turn on the water works.

After the women on TV told their sad stories about their horrible lives, the TV audience would vote on which woman they thought had the most miserable, pathetic life, and she would be crowned Queen for a Day. The show’s host would put a sparkly crown on her head and a velvet cape with an ermine collar over her shoulders. Then the latest queen for a day would be led to a huge throne where she would sit as she was handed a bouquet of roses. She’d get a cash prize to feed her six kids and pay the rent or pay for her operation so she wouldn’t die or pay for her artificial legs and physical therapy. She’d also be given other prizes like a new refrigerator and a washer and dryer. Tears of joy would be rolling down her cheeks and the TV audience would be wildly applauding with each new gift as it was revealed.

One day when I went to visit Emma, she surprised me. She was acting all mysterious. “I hope you won’t mind, but we’re going to have to visit in a new location today. Come with me.” She led me out of the house and took me to the garage that stood next to her house. She opened the garage door and there stood a black old-fashioned car, the kind with a running board. I had only seen this kind of car before in old movies. I was thrilled! Emma told me that Charles and she didn’t really use the car any more, but they had to go out to the garage every so often and sit in it while they ran the engine so that it wouldn’t die on them.

I climbed up onto the running board and into this beautiful old car with its huge plush seats that were gray velvet. We had a wonderful visit that day. The garage doors were open. The car had been backed into the garage, so we were looking out onto the neighbors’ yard with its blossoming pink cherry tree, fuchsia azalea bushes and bright green spring grass. The house was the parsonage for the Presbyterian Church, and the minister’s wife was out in the yard with her pure white boxer. All the neighborhood kids loved the minister’s wife because she was so nice to all of us. She’d told us that she would have loved children of her own, but she was unable to have them. Like Emma I thought, who had her one little girl who died, but then could have no more.

Sitting with my friend Emma in that old car of hers, I told her on that beautiful April day all about how my mom had just given birth to my new baby brother Billy and unraveled the events of the day and night before in vivid detail. The sun streamed through the

garage doors and bathed us in its warmth and amber glow. I looked over at Emma, sitting behind the steering wheel of this big old car and I thought how very beautiful she looked. The sunlight illuminated the blue of her eyes and the silver of her hair. It seemed only fitting that we were having this special visit in her wonderful car while I told her all about the arrival of Billy, my new baby brother. Emma was so happy to hear the news and was thrilled that she had unknowingly made our visit special that day by allowing me to accompany her as we sat together in her garage while she ran the engine of her magnificent old car. She never thought that I would or could be so excited by this, since it was a chore to her but to me it was magical.

The very last time I saw Emma, I was in the eighth grade and I hadn't been visiting her very much in the last couple of years. I got a phone call from my friend Dolly, telling me that Emma had a stroke and was taken to the hospital. A few weeks later Dolly's Mom told me that she'd heard that Emma was now back home, but that she wasn't doing very well. I decided to go up the alley and pay my old friend a visit. I had butterflies in my stomach and felt anxious as I rang the doorbell at Emma's back door. Instead of Emma it was Mrs. Smiley who answered the door. She acted so different from her normal way the old Mrs. Smiley usually acted around me. This huge smile was on her face when she opened the door and saw me standing there. She actually seemed like she was glad to see me, which really threw me. Suddenly her eyes welled up with tears and she grabbed my arm and started pulling me inside.

“Emma is going to be so glad to see you. Come on, come on,” she said in an excited yet

befuddled way. She began pushing me toward the doorway leading from the kitchen into the dining room where Emma and I had always had our visits. I looked over toward the wicker rocking chairs, expecting to see my friend Emma sitting there, but the dining room was empty and the loud ticking of the grandfather clock seemed even louder in this quiet room

She continued to push me with a great deal of determination through the dining room and on into the living room. I saw Charles first, sitting in his usual chair in front of the TV, but the TV wasn't on and he was facing in the opposite direction from the TV. He was facing the sofa that sat along the living room's back wall. Charles turned and looked at me and gave me a little smile, but, he had such sadness in his face and there were tears in his eyes. Then he turned his head back and faced in the direction of the sofa once again. I too turned my gaze toward the sofa and it was then that I saw her.

There on the sofa lay my old friend Emma, her head resting on bed pillows and her body covered with a blanket. She looked so weak and frail. But that wasn't the worst of it. The stroke had left Emma paralyzed on one side of her body, which made one of her eyes droop down and one side of her mouth droop down too. Her face made me think of an umbrella that's been damaged by the wind, with one side drooping down while the other side is still perfectly fine.

When Emma saw me she became excited and started to make these sounds. I realized instantly that she was trying to talk, but she couldn't. With her good arm she was

reaching out to me. Mrs. Smiley was once again pushing me, pushing me hard over toward where Emma was lying on the sofa until I was standing right next to her. Emma continued to make her strange sounds as I stood there frozen before her, not knowing what to do. Mrs. Smiley had scurried off into the dining room and quickly returned with one of the dining room chairs. She placed it right next to the sofa and frantically indicated for me to sit down in it, which I did.

Once seated, I took Emma's hand and this seemed to calm her down. She stopped making her odd sounds and was once again quiet. Her eyes said that she was happy to see me. I could feel Mrs. Smiley and Charles eyes both burning into me as I sat with my back to them and continued to hold Emma's hand. I sensed that they wanted my visit to somehow bring Emma back to her old self, the one that used to sit with me in the dining room's wicker rocking chairs, laughing and chattering away.

I finally looked into Emma's eyes. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much lately."

Emma started to shake her head from side to side and again started with the odd sounds of a paralyzed person trying to speak. I knew that she was telling me that I shouldn't feel guilty about not visiting her much in recent times, such was that bond between this woman and myself.

"I'm glad I came to see you now Emma, so that I could tell you how much I've enjoyed seeing you over the years. I can still remember the first time we met." And then I started

to softly sing, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so... “