

# Everything Humanly Possible

This is a happy story, more than it is sad. Emma fell in love with Burton because he was funny, and she had never laughed that hard before. Before she met Burton, she had gone through the Depression by herself and had done difficult things; her eyes had gone flat, as if there was nothing in the world that could ever surprise her, until she saw a tall man with blond hair, looking at her, observing every movement she made as she was taking an order for a family with eight kids. At first, she started to get his waitress, since he wasn't sitting at her station, but he shook his head no. That had been the only reason anybody stared long and hard at her.

So when they danced at the Coliseum, then played shuffle board under bright lights, and Burton made her laugh, not just feminine giggles that didn't show her teeth, but open-mouthed, side-hurting laughter that made her clutch her side in a sweet kind of pain, Emma's eyes came on again, hearing about his postal route, how he knew the people by their mail: the dirty laundry a grown man attending Emory mailed home for his mother to clean, the brown packages a church secretary got from Frederick's of Hollywood. "You gals think bra straps hurt, but nothing can dig into your shoulder more than a mailbag," Burton complained, wheeling his shoulder around like a pitcher warming up.

Later that night, Emma remembered what Burton had said, and she surprised and scared herself by asking this man she barely knew to sit on her bed. And he did sit down. They were both slightly bewildered as she unbuttoned his shirt and told him to lie on his stomach. The way he said, "Thank you," sounded as if feeling her hands rubbing his shoulders was the nicest gift he had ever gotten, like he had carried this quiet pain for a long time, years maybe.

At first, before they made love, one of them did some small act of kindness. If Emma had a hard day, he'd massage her feet, or wash her hair, or count her change for her, punching the coins in red, blue, and green paper tubes. Seeing Burton count out the change, making big announcements every time a tube of coins made enough for bills, made her love and envy him at the same time — to see him find such child-like enjoyment over such a simple act; before he ever finished counting, they often wound up on top of the kitchen table, making love, silver coins dinging on the floor.

The sound of change falling was what Emma thought of as she listened to the rain on the tin roof of their trailer. She couldn't sleep, but it wasn't because Burton's snoring reverberated through her head as she lay on him. She had made a promise to him that morning that she wasn't sure she could keep.

Burton and Emma had made a worst-case-scenario pact while having breakfast outside on their patio. Burton softly karate-chopped the *Miami Herald*

to stay open as he read aloud to his wife, a habit she first hated but had come to appreciate as a favor since cataracts had marbled her eyes. Emma grunted in disbelief as she listened to Burton reading about a couple's bad ending in Palm Beach. "Seventy-six year old Roswell Gilbert was arrested and jailed Monday after fatally shooting his wife in the head. Gilbert told police officers that it was an act of love. His wife had come down the elevator and walked into a meeting downstairs in their condominium, hunting for him because she thought he had left her. Gilbert said that he told his wife, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease and osteoporosis, "No, Sweetheart, I wouldn't desert you." Then she asked her husband to please kill her to stop the pain. She asked him this in front of a room full of witnesses, people who knew him well and her only slightly.'" Burton wiped his mouth and read on: "Mr. Gilbert said he would come up in a while after the committee had decided what contractor's bid they'd accept for a new seawall, and that she should take her medicine and rest until he came up. Later, that afternoon, he did the horrible thing she had asked him to do, even though that morning he had dressed her in a blue and red plaid dress, combed her hair, and smudged lipstick on her lips with his little finger as she gazed up at him — even though he had thought the day would be like any other."

"Would you do that for me?" Burton asked. Emma had just popped some French toast in her mouth, so he waited for her to answer.

"I don't know. Would you for me?"

"If you were suffering — yes." He said this simply, as if he just accepted cream for his coffee.

Emma threw down her fork in mock anger; often she blustered at him, but they both understood she wasn't really angry, just startled at how easily he could say yes. Emma stood up and began clearing the table, not wanting to imagine herself in such a dilemma.

"Say I became somebody else. What if I wasn't who I am now?"

She walked inside with the dishes. When she reappeared with a dishrag to wipe the table, Burton asked her again, "I'm asking you now, Em, that if my brain ever becomes mush and I can't crap on my own, or for Christ's sake, if I can't recognize you, I want you to pull the plug. Wouldn't you do that for me?"

"It would depend on the set of circumstances."

"I just told you the circumstances." Burton folded up his newspaper and scraped his aluminum chair backward for room.

Emma kept wiping the table even though it was clean. She had been a waitress for twenty-six years at the Kapok Tree, when they lived in Clearwater, under George-the-Terrible, a tyrant maitre d' who didn't like her fraternizing; she wiped clean tables to look like she was working while she talked to customers.

"Stop." Burton took the rag out of her hand and pulled her hefty body onto his lap. "I'm serious. I don't want everything humanly possible done for

me. Do you? What if we became different people?"

Emma squirmed as Burton locked his arms around her. She could have gotten up if she wanted to, but she acted like his arms were strong enough to hold her, knowing his power pleased him. "Baby, we are not the couple in the newspaper. We are not going to become them." She kissed him quietly on the lips, thinking that would shut him up.

"Make this promise to me now, Emma, and we won't ever say anything more about it."

Having no children, just each other, she promised him, with the understanding that no one really knows what they will do until they are in that particular situation. Like the time the restaurant was robbed. Her soft spoken manager had told everybody that their lives were worth more than money and to hand over everything if the Kapok Tree were ever robbed. But when this Jamaican coke addict came in wielding a long knife at George's throat, demanding money, Emma shoved through the stunned crowd and broke a chair right over his dreadlocks. For weeks all the other girls could talk about was how they couldn't understand Emma saving George-the-Terrible, of all people.

A line of squalls moved in from the Atlantic, whipping the palm and banana trees into a loud ruckus. "This is the only time I hate living in a trailer park," Emma thought, picturing a water-spout picking them up and tossing them some place different. The weather sounded dangerous enough to wake Burton up, maybe check their flashlights, or even go to the community center. But they were in the dark anyway, and Burton was in snoring bliss.

She caressed his forehead, admiring the depth of his sleep, even in cymbals of thunder. She looked carefully at him; his mouth lopped open, and it didn't take great imagination to picture him in a coma. Emma knew she could never kill him. Even if he became an animal, like he said, in terrible misery, she'd still see Burton and feel it was him. If it weren't raining, Emma would have left a note to say she'd be back, not to worry, and she would have driven to the beach to walk and to think of the promise she made. If she believed in a listening God, she would have prayed right there, cooped up in the trailer with Burton's snoring. Today was the first time in forty-three years of marriage that they had ever discussed death and their own dying.

Emma had seen it before; they both had, but they were silent about what they had seen. Every weekend they went to Vero Beach to collect shells for Emma. Burton leaned over in the surf and pulled out a women's halter top. "You never know what will wash up on the shore — could be anything," Burton said. And they laughed, imagining nude lovers taking a night swim. Then, after they strolled farther down the bend, they saw dead bodies, dozens of them, what Burton and Emma thought were mesquite tree limbs, bent, contorted, sticking straight up, finger twigs, stiff and reaching. They were beautiful people, wet

and black, the wet parts shining a soft blue. All of their mouths were open as if the drowned Haitians sounded the word “oh” as they gently drifted ashore.

The paper had an account from a survivor who said that the day wasn't even stormy; one easy, slow roll and a boat turned over and so many dead, like a careless spill of milk. They would, too, die, Emma thought, but maybe not so easy, not with something good in their hearts to live for. She had seen a lot of her friends go badly, widows sell their belongings to only the sentimental, significant objects, move into a small room somewhere out of touch, never to be heard from again.

All she had said to Burton was “Are they coming?” when Burton got back in the car after phoning the Coast Guard. Both had said nothing about it; except they made love that night and held each other in the dark.

As thunder rolled away, Emma felt for Burton's wrist and felt his pulse beating strong. Half asleep, she thought of the time they were separated. Burton's brother needed him upstate for three weeks to help save his orange groves from the freeze. Her body forgot the feel of his weight. Their voices fenced in a night sky. She hung on to the phone receiver, drifted to a boat in a tree-lined inlet preparing itself for sea; the moorings tugged like a child pleading to be lifted by his mother. She remembered thinking how fragile their connections were, a voice in one ear. He came home, and the slap of their skins sounded like the lapping waves of a gentle bayou, and he lifted from her.

Every parting, even in dreams, had been a preparation for the next month, when Burton would keel over after planting a hibiscus in the shade. Emma was bringing him a glass of water, sipping it a tad so as not to spill it on her hand as she walked. She knelt, wanting him, pounding on his heart as if it were a door. Her breath tried to enter his mouth.

After Burton died, everything made half-sense. Years may have passed as Emma laid in bed, watching T.V.. Alice Bemford, a retired schoolteacher who did laundry with her on Saturdays, came over a lot to say things like: “Emma, you ought to slap on some Coppertone, step out of this trailer, and let the sun kiss your cheeks.”

Emma opened the screen door for her friend and said, “I need more than color.”

“Well, then, come to church with me and meet some men.”

Emma smiled and waved her hands like she was shooing a fly away. She had said no to her, and said no to her again. “I'm not ready yet.” Then Emma went back to her bedroom with the book Alice brought her, thinking she would never be ready. She wanted Burton and wondered where he was, if he really didn't exist, except as dust. He always clattered in late from watching the Yankees spring training. It was hard to imagine that he wasn't someplace and wouldn't be back.

The sprinklers were making slow and syncopated circles. Emma laid down and opened the book to the page Alice had marked with red magic marker. She had asked her what it was, but Alice told Emma she would have to read it herself.

Last week, while they were folding clothes, Emma had asked Alice, a widow too, if she believed that a couple could mate again in heaven. They talked a long while about it and came to no conclusions, having no proof, except unreliable stories in the *Enquirer* about people who had seen themselves die and float to a bright light, but neither had heard anything about meeting a lover again and making love on the other side.

That's why Emma became excited as she read Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the part where Adam asked Raphael if angels have sex, why she sprang to her feet to look for the phone book. She phoned a priest and asked him to come to her house, telling him only that it was an emergency. Milton had lived four hundred years ago, and she wanted a more current expert, someone living with possible proof.

Burton and Emma were not religious. They had never been in church together, having been married in a civil ceremony, except one time when they went on a trip to St. Augustine to see the fountain of youth. "A gyp," Burton said, "Ugh." The fountain was small, made of ugly tiles, and the water tasted of copper coins. "We shouldn't have come. It was better imagined."

The cobblestone streets kept twisting their ankles and limited their sight-seeing. It was hot and Em's feet hurt, so they stepped inside a Spanish church and sat down in a pew to rest. Burton thumbed through a hymnal like a deck of cards, looking for a misplaced offering, and put it back in the wooden slot. He always checked payphones, Coke machines, and his own sofa for change. Emma was usually amazed at how quickly Burton's found money added up to something big.

The church had no air conditioner or ceiling fans, and the windows were soldered glass, most of the pieces, cool greens and blues that made up the robe of Mary who was holding baby Jesus, old enough to stand on her lap and point up to the ceiling. There was no fresh air circulating, but the sun cast through the glass a blue light on the pews where Burton and Emma sat, and they believed they felt cooler for having stepped inside.

The priest looked too young. The minute she laid eyes on his smooth face she realized her idea was stupid. They sat down and had coffee and Key lime pie. And Emma read aloud the parts of *Paradise Lost* that interested her. "Right here, Adam asks Raphael if angels make love," Emma said, pointing to the book. She looked up to see his reaction; he intently sipped his coffee. "Raphael says, 'Let it suffice thee that thou know'st us happy, and without Love no happiness. What ever pure thou in the body enjoy'st... we enjoy.'" Emma looked at him again; he smiled. "...and obstacle find none of membrane, joint,

or limb, exclusive bars: easier than Air with Air, if spirits embrace.” Just then the dishwasher went into its loudest gear, and Emma flickered it off. “Where was — ? Here. ‘If spirits embrace, Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure Desiring; nor restrain’d conveyance need as Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul.’” Emma turned the book around and handed it to him to read. “Is this true?” The priest turned down his plate and fork, and glanced over a few pages. She was beginning to lose patience, watching him pat his mouth with his napkin for no reason.

Finally, he said: “Angels don’t eat fruit or blush. They have no bodies.” He cut a forkful of pie. “There cannot be lust; a couple cannot mate again in heaven.”

“Well,” Emma said, not saying more but letting him know that the subject was closed.

“Tell me about your husband. Can you think of one word that would have described him?”

Emma rolled her eyes at the ceiling; she thought of all sorts of wonderful adjectives to say but instead she said, “cheap, cheap, cheap.” They both laughed. Emma explained that Burton liked to throw good money after bad; meaning, the way he saved usually wound up costing more. She told him about the time Burton insisted that he could give her a Toni perm himself, and that it would cost five dollars less than at the beauty parlor. Even though she earned her own money, he controlled the purse strings; she had to beg for the smallest luxury. That time he said no; he wanted to do it.

“You don’t trust me?”

“Of course I do,” she said, “Do I have to prove it?”

“Yes.”

So Emma sat still and let Burton burn her hair into crispy green little waves.

“It looked like something you’d scrape out of the bottom of an oven,” Emma said, laughing, touching the shoulder of the priest who laughed, too. They had to buy a wig for her for over twenty dollars, which gave her a migraine and never stayed on straight. Emma didn’t speak a word to Burton for the entire time it took to grow her hair out. Just when it got long enough to be cut in a brown pixie, Burton got a good idea a month late. “He came to the dinner table wearing the most horrendous crew cut— green as grass. His head looked like a miniature golf course. I never laughed so hard in my life,” Emma said, gasping to catch her breath.

Emma touched Burton’s hair in disbelief. They held onto each other, laughing, stumbling around until they fell onto the floor. And Emma whispered to Burton that she wanted him inside of her everywhere.

“With that green hair, he was the ugliest looking man I had ever seen in my life, and I never loved him more.” The priest looked her directly in the eye,

smiled and nodded as if he understood. As Emma brought their dishes to the sink, she kept thinking about that day, waking up together in a bathtub of cold water, green from Burton's hair dye. Burton kissed her and said, "If one month of giving me the silent treatment will do this to you, I'll go to Guam until Christmas." Emma burst out laughing, and she picked up her dishrag to wipe the table.

"What's funny?" the priest asked.

"Nothing. Just remembering." Emma said, sighing to control her laughter. Even though the priest had not given her the answers she had wanted to hear, she felt better for telling him about the time she had been mean to Burton for so long, not as much as a good morning.

Just before he left, the priest prayed aloud for Emma, placing his hands over hers, which were resting on the table. It was the first time a man had touched her since Burton died, and she felt sad being touched. But the priest's eyes were closed, so he couldn't see Emma's face as he thanked God for the forty-three years of marriage of Emma and Burton, for Burton's quick and merciful death, and for the blessing that Emma did not have to live up to the promise she had made to Burton. He then asked for God to give her peace in her moment of transition. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen." When he opened his eyes again, he handed her his card and said she should call him if she had any more questions. He thanked her for the pie.

Emma undressed to her slip and got back in bed. "I Love Lucy" was on, the one that Lucy and Ethel bungle a job in a chocolate factory, while Ricky and Fred try to be housewives. Emma stared at the set, Lucy on the speeding assembly line, hiding chocolates in her hat, but she wasn't really watching. She kept hearing what the priest had said, that a couple cannot make love again in heaven. Despite the words, she continued to picture her heart beating tight as a bud. She only understood the knowledge of her mouth blooming. Its passion was as timeless and new as fresh leaves. The memory of riding into sleep on the gentle waves of Burton's breathing turned Emma's face to the blue window, and her last thought fell like a red, brainless kite.

-Caryn Russell