



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:10:00

Emilia's Way

By Alan Goodchild

Emilia reads slowly, through the seeping mess of a mucus-filled head. She sneezes and lunges for a tissue sending a paper cup flying scattering pencils and pens. The ill-fitting wooden door cracking open, and the lash of an icy blast alarms her. It can only be him. She lowers the laptop screen and snatches for another tissue before sneezing again. It stings in her nose and throat, her eyes fill. The summerhouse is serving only to worsen her plight, and her cold.

Maxwell snarls: 'You look like shit.' He bangs the large bottle of pills she requested on the desk. She turns her head away. Her thoughts are with her protagonist, who too sits helpless in the scene.

She glowers out of the window as he leaves. He cuts a monstrous figure as she watches him walk away in the gloom of the evening, half hidden by the overgrowth in what was Emilia's pride and joy. Maxwell has neglected both garden and home these past two years of their married lives. He is her prenuptial jailor; writing is her only means of escape. Her punishment has run from months to years, and for what?

Paul Robinson, Sales Director for 'Knights Publishing,' was at breakfast at the Park Lane Mews Hotel, London, at 6.30am on a drizzly autumn morning in October 2017. Drops of water tracked down one small pane of an adjacent window affording him a fractured view of the oncoming day, a view that would hopefully improve. His choice of table reflected his mood. His reaction was involuntary, if a little harsh:

'Is anyone sitting here?'

'Yes.' He did not look up.

'Imaginary friend?'

He raised his head to look at her, said nothing, but then with an open hand, gestured her to sit if she wished.

'I hate being alone at breakfast, makes me look like a loose woman.'

'Are you?'

'Yes. Interested?'

'Not unless you take cards.'

She nodded vigorously and reached down into her bag. This stopped Paul in his tracks, he made to speak just as she withdrew her loaded hand and pulled the trigger, blowing imaginary smoke toward him.

'Ouch,' he said sitting back. 'So, why me?'

'I did wrestle with the choices.' She looked around, carrying Paul's gaze with her, to see just one yawning waiter replenishing yesterday's juices. Paul smiled and lifted a half cup of coffee in salute. She raised her empty cup in response and looked inside, head tilted slightly and lower lip in sad-little-girl protrusion. In a moment

however, she recovered the woman, replaced the cup, and extended her hand:

‘Emilia Costard, writer.’

‘Paul Robinson, coincidence, writers are my business.’

They shook hands.

‘I’m guessing you take it black?’ He said as he stood.

She nodded and as he rounded the corner, she took her phone. It opened to a WhatsApp message which read: ‘Contact.’ She pressed ‘send.’

A middle-aged man warbled his baritone version of ‘Casta Diva’ in the plush shower of a third floor Dorchester hotel room, just along Park Lane. His phone pinged. He left the bathroom to find it resting on the torso of a naked, nicely oiled young man spread on the Japanese embroidered silk bedspread.

‘Messagio per te!’

Bernard was pleased with the message and delighted with the delivery. Show, don’t tell, he mused. Pure theatre. ‘Perfect,’ he said as he looked down. ‘She’ll be perfect.’

The hall was filling for the annual Knights shareholder meeting. Paul Robinson stood with Geoffrey Simms, CEO, his boss of seven years. Geoffrey put his hand on Paul’s shoulder and turned him away from the attendees:

‘I have an issue Paul, one that could affect me personally and the company quite badly. I need your support. I will explain all, I promise. OK?’

‘Of course.’ He gave Geoffrey a reassuring pat on the back.

Paul’s view of the morning was becoming no clearer as the neat figure of Emilia Costard passed security. Alone, she moved through and took a seat next to the colourful Bernard Stratford, who welcomed and theatrically miss-kissed her. Paul tried to catch Emilia’s eye, but she would not be drawn from the wealthy Impresario and major shareholder.

He watched them. She was animated, bubbly, very different from the cool smart woman of the morning, a Chameleon thought Paul, invaluable in our industry, worth her weight in gold in sales terms. But why him? And why is she here? And why didn’t she say?

The Finance Director joined the two on stage and the meeting began. Paul’s presentation showed a good year with press and public acclaim for many published works. The forward sales projections were above original forecast. They were no longer drifting in a turbulent sea, all good news. The meeting finished with a last question from the floor:

‘Why are there police officers in the foyer?’

A mumble rippled through the assembly. The men looked back and forth along the line. Geoffrey took the lead:

‘We requested a meeting. The police are rarely and, in this instance unfortunately, pre-punctual.’

More mumbling. Geoffrey was clearly reticent. The FD stood to speak:

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I can assure you that if they dare to suggest any impropriety in the substantial dividends we plan to pay, we will fight them to the death. All those in favour say ‘Aye!’

A very loud 'Aye' topped the applause. The FD raised his hand:
'Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attendance.'

As everyone filed out, two policemen entered, Geoffrey waved them to wait. He turned to Paul and spoke in a whisper:

'Be very careful of that woman, she bites.'

'Who?'

Geoffrey turned and he and Bernard exchanged nods and fallacious smiles. Emilia laced her arm through Bernard's, outwardly challenging Geoffrey.

'Noted.' Said Paul.

Later that afternoon, Emilia leaned on a high stool at the quaint bar of the Mews hotel, her long legs in tight-fitting white jeans and sporting a loose mid-green silk top. Paul approached her.

'I've taken the liberty.' She passed him a scotch, adding a splash of water from a crystal jug.

'Thank you,' he said taking a sip, and suggested they move to the Chesterfield set furthest from the bar. They sat on adjacent chair and sofa.

'My boss is wary of you; now why would that be?'

'Old wounds.' she said.

Paul placed his glass and moved forward, but before he could probe further, with a 'Kooee!' Bernard Stratford appeared at the bar, hand aloft, heavily ringed fingers wiggling a greeting. He joined them, followed by the barman carrying a bottle of claret and three glasses.

'I'd just love to be mother' he said. He one-third filled theirs before raising his to toast:

‘To the Southern Oceans and the secrets they hold.’

Paul sat motionless waiting for a punchline. Bernard took a large glug before speaking:

‘Mr Plod’s visit was no surprise. Geoffrey’s wife is an unwell and a rather bitter woman of late. She’s currently residing in their home in the Maldives, where some unsavoury details of her husband’s historic nubile dalliances have been brought to her attention.’

Emilia handed Paul one sheet of A4 paper. It was an email detailing times, places and names. It also carried a transcript of an interview with a fourteen-year-old girl from the island. Paul skim-read it, then shot the paper back across the highly polished surface. He looked at Bernard before turning to Emilia:

‘Hell, hath no fury.’

‘He sowed, now he reaps.’ She said coolly.

‘Let us be frank,’ said Bernard. ‘The silly boy will be ruined, but the good name of the company must be maintained. We should be ready with an alternative, smart, dependable-.’

‘Woman?’ Said Paul to Emilia.

She offered no verbal confirmation, but Paul saw Geoffrey’s slam-dunk successor nestle back into the leather. He covered the rim with his hand as Bernard leaned forward to refresh his glass.

‘Think about it, Paul.’ Bernard stood to leave. ‘Equality is king, or rather queen, these days. My niece here is a victim too darling, granted, an extremely clever one in this case. It’s an ill wind, dear boy. Let’s not waste the blow.’

Bernard finished his drink, coiled a long silk scarf around his neck and smiled suggestively at the young barman as he left. Paul looked

at Emilia. She had morphed into the devious woman that Geoffrey alluded to.

‘Old wounds? Must have been deep. Affair I’m guessing?’ he said with as much disdain as he could. She left him puzzling both the sexuality of his boss and the mixed morals of the modern woman.

Two days later, Paul sat in the lounge of Geoffrey’s expansive Weybridge home. He looked around at the walls peppered with the kind of artwork he dreamt of owning. Geoffrey appeared with a whisky and one sheet of A4. Paul’s attempt to confess that he was already aware of an email was waved away as irrelevant, so he duly read this one from start to finish. He took a long slow sip and felt the warmth track down his throat.

‘They both have skeletons too you see,’ said Geoffrey. ‘My advice? Ensure Emilia falls with me. Bernard too.’ He tapped his mobile, Paul’s phone pinged.

‘There’s a soft copy of everything plus details of Maxwell Costard,’ said Geoffrey. ‘Their money’s all his apparently. Controlling type. Proud of his achievements, his name. Bullish. Could make for a difficult future. Show her for what she is Paul, he’ll hate it.’

Bernard was both surprised and delighted by the early invitation to Knights. He arranged to go with Emilia, herself invited separately by Paul. It all looked very positive for Emilia; Bernard congratulated her en route.

The two were chatting when the door of the oak panelled boardroom opened. In walked Paul with Maxwell Costard, Emilia’s towering husband and minor shareholder, stone faced. Paul had

decided, as a matter of courtesy, to discuss the news of Geoffrey's indiscretion and to supply the soon to be public information of the two further people similarly implicated, to those personally affected first. Emilia was rigid in silence. It would be Bernard's last public appearance. Maxwell's expression held fast throughout, he thanked Paul for his candidness, glared at Emilia, and left, alone.

Paul lingered in the Chairman's seat. He pondered the wisdom of his decision and its impact on them all, especially Emilia. Time would tell.

It's dark now, late. Emilia sits deathly still in the summerhouse, eyes closed. The screen sheds the only light onto her semi-conscious form. Her face lined with snot and tears; she dribbles as she breathes. The large empty pill bottle drops from her hand, one eyebrow lifts, she wavers in her stupor. Her head nods slowly back onto her chest, her mouth tipping open one side as she drifts away.

As night sets in deep, Maxwell returns to the garden. He cracks open the door to find Emilia in the pitch black, slumped in the chair. The police will record his emotional call in the morning as a matter of policy, and it will certainly show his grief to the court at inquest. He looks down at her crooked, beaten form and feels nothing at all. He leaves without moving her.

The summerhouse is a hive of police activity at 9am, following the call from Maxwell. Their attention centres on the deceased. A constable waits while a forensic team records the scene and removes the body. He carefully lifts her notebook from the laptop keypad and notices the small slowly pulsing white light in the on/off switch. He

presses it with his gloved finger, the screen illuminates, it's not locked. A word document carries the title; 'Emilia's Way.'

'Sir!' The constable calls to the Senior Investigating Officer. 'You better read this.'

They scroll through.

'Devastated you said? The SIO's face suggests a different story.

'Yes sir, he was. I'll go get him,' said the constable.

©Alan Goodchild 2020