

EMILY TRIES... BUT MISUNDERSTANDS

Mathew Klickstein



'The trick is not to care,' says Mark with a slight understanding of what he preaches. 'All these kids who dye their hair and wear ripped clothes and everything else? They haven't yet grasped the fallacy of their blatant rebellion, the fact that opposition to something is merely a confirmation of its existence.'

Bobby crosses his lanky legs (adorned in tight green pants) under the table. His eyes are not fixed on Mark, but on the minutia of the world surrounding him in the coffee shop. He listens with some modicum of indifference.

'Take Wendy, for example. She was always dyeing her hair and changing it around and wearing all these weird clothes just to try to prove to everyone what a rebel she is and how much she 'Doesn't care what they think' and all that crap. But, really, think about it: if she didn't really care, she wouldn't make such a big spectacle out of everything. She would just wear whatever and go out and not care. To do all that stuff to your hair, to put on all those clothes, to make such a big deal about it all: that's not *not caring*, it's doing exactly what you're doing *because* you care so much about what other people think.'

Mark sips his chai tea out of the white paper cup encircled in a flimsy cardboard wrap-around. He leans back in his chair. Bobby perks up, eyes on Mark. 'How long has it been since you've seen her?'

'I don't know.' Mark thinks about it for a moment, his blue eyes elsewhere. He pulls his long, wild, brown curly hair away from his anemic face. 'Jesus, like nine months. It's funny, I just saw Cameron for the first time in a few months, and I realized that the last time I saw him was at one of Wendy's shows. I thought it had been maybe three months ago or something, but it's really been like almost a year.'

'Jeez.'

'Yeah, we're twenty-five now, dude. Crazy.' Bobby sets his elbow on the table, rests his chin on his inward-turned fist. 'Twenty-five.' Slowly, Bobby's chin slips down his fingers, now being held up by the bottom of his palm. 'Have you talked to her at all?'

'We went back and forth over the phone and email a couple of times, but then I was gone on all those trips and everything, got back without having talked to her for about two months, and she sent me some email apologizing for 'Not being a good friend' and not contacting me or whatever.'

'What'd you say?'

'I emailed her back. 'Things are good. Very much the same.''

Bobby unfolds his legs, shifts in his seat a bit, rubs his back up against the front of his white-painted wooden Adirondack chair. 'Yeah?'

'It was difficult, dude. I mean, we knew it wouldn't last from the start. She's *nuts*. And that was fun for a while... then it just got old. I never knew what to do.'

Bobby guzzles down the rest of his blueberry drink in a plastic clear cup. 'She definitely had some problems.'

'Well, yeah. She's a girl. But, this one was something else. She would throw things all over her house, break everything. And for no reason. It wasn't because of me or anything; she would just suddenly take to throwing a bag of

Cheetos across her small little art-shack, and the bag would go clear through the glass window. People could've been down there on the bottom of the street, with shards going all over the place down there.'

'Did anyone ever get hurt?' Mark asks without any real interest.

'No. I mean, she would knock over her tables, and she'd be in the kitchen and I'd hear all the clamor of dishes breaking and windows and pans on the floor and everything. Her poor cat is running all over the house in a frantic panic, and I don't have the heart to tell her how much when she does stuff like that it just turns me on even more.'

'I thought you said she wasn't doing it because of you.'

'Well, yeah. But, it's like what I was talking about before, where I think she was always just *saying* that but really *was* doing it because of me, even though she told me when we first got together that she did stuff like that. We used to lie in bed together when we first got together and fantasize about what it would be like when we'd eventually fight: how she'd throw me down the stairs and I'd say things to her that would totally hurt her and all that stuff.'

'You're *both* nuts.'

'I'm always attracted to these pixies with broken wings. These girls who are totally gone and interesting and are all fucked-up.'

Bobby takes a deep breath, lets it out, re-crosses his legs. 'Then what was the problem?'

'She was just too destructive, and too damaged. More than I could handle, I guess. She's pretty much the reason why I smoke now. We'd go through like a pack or two every day. And then we'd have at least a bottle or two of wine or liquor and a few beers. I have no idea how she stayed so skinny.'

'She didn't eat.'

'That's true. And *that* was annoying, too. For someone who always talked about how much she didn't care about anything, she was so fucking persnickety that I never knew what to do. We could never eat *anything*, especially out and about. And it wasn't just because she was a vegetarian.'

'I *hate* vegetarians.'

'Dude, yeah. Besides, vegetarianism is so decadent. What a ridiculous thing. There are people starving all over the world, and we have all this fucking food: fucking eat your steak, you know?'

'Well, yeah. But, it's not really "Decadent," Bobby -chin still on his fist- shifts in his chair, leans toward Mark. 'What about countries like India that are pretty much completely vegetarian? They don't have a lot of food, but they're still vegetarian.'

'Yeah,' Mark considers without really considering it at all, 'I don't know what to tell you.' He sips his chai, sets down the cup. 'But, Wendy wouldn't even eat tomatoes or avocados or pretty much *anything*. She wasn't anorexic or anything, she'd just never want to eat anything. We'd go somewhere, and I'd spend forever making sure it was a place that she would probably like, and then she'd either not get anything at all, or maybe would just get something small that she would just kinda pick at. Then maybe she'd start crying and wouldn't tell me why. One time, she left the restaurant all together. I didn't know what to do.'

'Weird.'

'I was always walking on eggshells around her. The best way to explain the relationship by the end was that when I would come home, if I brought her a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of wine, she'd get mad at me for buying her things. If I *didn't* buy her wine and cigarettes, though, she'd get mad at me for not bringing home wine and cigarettes.'

Bobby leans back against his chair, puts his fingers behind his black-haired head, and stares up at the three ceiling fans that line the faux-brick ceiling as they slowly oscillate with silent smoothness. He takes another breath, lets it out in a quick spurt.

'We knew it wouldn't work from the start. We both sabotage everything, we both break everything. We even made a deal in the beginning that neither of us would sabotage the relationship for at *least* a little while.'

'When did you guys move in together?'

Mark scratches his nose, looks down at the brownish-white wooden table under his elbows. 'Uh, like three months after we got together. *That* was a mistake. We had already broken up once, and then that was it. I left it alone: 'Well, no more of that.' But then she called me like a week later, told me she had made a mistake, and I thought, 'Eh, might as well.' I mean, whatever, right? Sex is sex, and it was a place to stay. Plus, she made really good food for someone who never ate. After I lost the job in LA, I moved in with her in Long Beach. I think she only let me do it because she felt some weird sense of obligation toward me. In the end there, I don't even think she liked me. I think she *hated* me, actually.'

'Sucks.'

'Well, you have to understand: this is a girl who had been dating thirty-year-olds when she was sixteen. The boyfriend she had before me was *fifty-three*.'

'Fifty-three?'

'Yeah. *Fifty-three*. I think she was like twenty-six when she started dating him. They were together for almost three years, almost got a house together where he grew up in some bumblefuck town in Idaho or wherever. Then she chickened out, came back to California, and he went to Austin with the rest of the aging hippie burn-outs. She was supposed to go down there with him, but she didn't for some reason, we ended up getting together, and that was that. The guy she's with now is some forty-five-year-old drunken loser computer programmer who, of course, plays music at night in some of those Long Beach punk dives to all the *rest* of the computer programmer drunken losers down there who play music at night and still live with roommates in shitty little apartments like they were frat guys or something even though they're all like fifty. It's pathetic. They're all so elitist, too. Way more than up here. I've never felt more uncomfortable with a group of people.'

'I've never really been down to Long Beach before.'

'Well, that was the easy thing about breaking it off with Wendy. I never really *have* to see her again. I never really knew about Long Beach before, and now that we're not together anymore, why the hell would I go down there? It's fuckin' *Long Beach* for fucksakes.'

'Did she ever cheat on you?'

'Yeah. At first, I wasn't sure if I would care. I always thought I didn't believe in monogamy. But, it got to this point where she was always telling me what a whore she was and how she was never faithful to her boyfriends, and yet here she was dating me, this *younger* guy -something she *never* does- and kept making such a big fuss about how amazing it was that she wasn't cheating on me. She kept bringing that up over and over again, making me feel special. Then this one day, I brought it up with her how great it was that she hadn't, and she just looked at me and extended two fingers. 'What's that mean?' I asked her. 'Twice,' she says. Actually, two guys: one of the guys she did it with twice. The other guy was the dude she's with now. The part that really got me is that they had known each other for like five years before me, and he had always tried to get her to fuck him -in fact, one time even making her stop playing music with him and stop being friends with him because she wouldn't. But, it wasn't until she was with *me* that she finally had sex with him.'

Mark looks away from the table, away from his drink, away from Bobby, out through the glass window to the empty streets beyond the coffee shop in the sun-bleached day. 'It's whatever,' he interposes without a waver. 'I think she was really just using me to make him jealous the whole time. Just fucking with him for whatever reason. Whatever.'

Turning his head back to Bobby -who adroitly tosses his plastic cup into a nearby trash receptacle with the prowess of a basketball player- Mark mentions, 'You know who the most punk rock guy I've ever met is, probably?'

'Who?'

'Jeremy. He was the only person I ever met who seemed to really not care about *anything*. He just didn't care. Would do whatever he wanted, would wear whatever he wanted, never to make people mad or think he was weird, just because it was comfortable. Probably *still* doesn't know what punk rock even *is*.'

Bobby scrunches his eyes, rubs the bridge of his nose. 'You know that Jeremy's in a cult now? They expel demons from people, I guess.'

'*What?* Was that before or after he asked his dad for an early ten thousand dollar inheritance, even though his parents have like no money?'

'I think before.'