

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

*Jane McCauley*

### **The Bee That Broke Her Foot**

**E**mma sat on the exam table for her follow-up appointment. The nurse came in, looked at her chart, then said in the form of a statement rather than a question, "You got stung by a bee and it broke your foot."

"Can bees do that?"

She looked up, incredulous.

"I don't think so," the nurse answered without looking at her.

Emma studied him hard, so he could feel it and said loudly, "Then why did you say that?"

He sat facing the computer and, in a matter-of-fact tone said, "That's what your chart says."

After the nurse left, Emma sat silent, softly swinging her booted broken foot off the edge of the exam table. The doctor came in smelling of menthol and peppermint, smiled and sat at the computer.

"It says here that you got stung by a bee that broke your foot."

"Yes," followed by a long sigh.

The doctor came over and removed her walking boot. He pushed on the most swollen part of her foot. "That hurts!" she yelped. He thoughtlessly lowered her foot (which also hurt) and said the bone was healing nicely.

After two weeks, the swelling hadn't improved. One doctor put her on antibiotics. After two unsuccessful rounds, another doctor x-rayed her foot and found a broken bone near her big toe. The doctor claimed the pain and the swelling were caused by the broken bone, not the bee sting. The sting on your toe was a coincidence." She put a black walking boot on Emma's foot for stability and told her it would take another month to heal.



Emma laughed as her friend El, dressed in her favorite bohemian skirt and tee, bounced up to the front door carrying a pizza box.

"Surprise!" El sang. "How about a movie night?"

It was always planned, never a surprise, but El loved to pretend.

Emma got plates and napkins, sat on the couch and spread-out place settings on the coffee table in front of the TV. El set the pizza on the table, opened the box and flipped the top underneath it. They examined the bubbly crust, cheese, arugula, and lemon. Emma opened a bottle of wine, customary for movie night.

"What do you wanna watch?" Emma asked, her mouth full of pizza.

El looked at Emma's foot and the black boot she was wearing. "What happened?"

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Emma's eyes followed El's. "I'm not sure. I was eating dinner with Tom and Becky on the patio of The Lakefront Bar when I got stung by a bee. The swelling wasn't going down after a couple of weeks so I went to the doctor for an Xray. They discovered a broken bone. The bee sting and the broken foot together were a coincidence." Emma laughed when she told El what the nurse had said.

El asked, "How can a bee sting break your foot?"

"It can't," Emma answered. "But it doesn't mean the little bugger didn't try".



Winter came. Wind, blinding snow, bare trees. A whistle of air came in through a small crack in the window frame, which Emma imagined made her house colder. She lit the wood in the fireplace and sat close, rubbing her hands together.

The phone rang. It's her ex, Jack, asking if there's anything she needs to stay warm – has she checked the furnace, changed the filter, have the ducts been cleaned? At first, she thought he was referring to warmth as in him in her bed. But no, it was just about the furnace. It was important to them that, after the divorce, they remained friends. Maybe as a way of softening the sadness.

When the weather got cold, Emma's broken foot ached. No one had figured out how or why it broke (she didn't feel it break) or why her elbow broke a couple of months later. It was quite possible, she told El, that a bee DID break her foot. The thought made them laugh, but only a little.

Soon after that, Emma was diagnosed with a mild form of Osteogenesis Imperfecta also known as brittle bone disease. She had none of the classic symptoms beyond two mysterious bone breaks. With her left arm in a sling, she managed reasonable independence. She attended physical therapy twice weekly, building muscle to further protect bones. For now, that was the only required treatment. The doctor told her that it was likely she'd have a normal life span, and that these might be the only bones she'd ever break. He also warned that it could worsen with age but, as of now, he didn't predict that. She saw no reason to worry about that now anyway. She was managing. She could be more careful and would adapt.

While Jack had always been reasonably attentive without being overwhelming, she sensed a newfound commitment from him. To be there. To occasionally perform tasks he didn't think she should do. The help and friendship were great, but underneath the surface bubbled some reservation. The rhythm of their time together was familiar and, for now, helped regulate her life. At the same time, she wasn't interested in rekindling their romance.

She shouldn't have told him about her diagnosis. Worried about an undue show of attention she wasn't ready for, she didn't tell El just yet. El constantly questioned how a person could break a foot and an elbow both in a twelve-month period.

"I'm special," Emma answered, smiling.



By spring, Emma felt strong again and was looking forward to spending time outdoors. Even if it came in the form of yardwork and gardening. The neighbor kids were helping their mother clean out flower beds in front of the house. Emma smiled and waved while she gently raked up moldy debris from the post winter grass. Later Jack pulled up in her driveway. Thinking he was going to help she smiled and walked to the car. He stepped out onto the grass and gave Emma a hug.

“I came to talk to you about something,” he said looking serious.

“Of course,” she replied motioning him to sit on the steps.

Jack looked straight into her eyes almost to her soul and said, “I’m getting married.”

Emma felt a wave of unexpected nausea. She squeezed his hand and said, “Congratulations, Jack. Who is she?”

She should have known he’d been holding something back. After all, she was married to the man for almost ten years. But this felt more like a confession than an announcement. As it turned out, he was marrying a woman he worked closely with in the early years of his design firm. Emma remembered her. And, what’s more, she had an eight-year-old son. A son that, he slowly admitted, was biologically his. The woman had suddenly quit when she got pregnant. Now she knew why.

“But we were married eight years ago,” she whispered. He nodded and she wondered why he had to confess. He could marry someone with an eight-year-old son and never tell her a back story to taint their marriage. But he knew Emma would recognize his wife to be should they meet.



El made herself comfortable in Emma’s living room.

“That bastard,” she repeated, angrier each time.

Emma didn’t know how to feel. When she left Jack several years before, did she sense something? Maybe she had been wrong about their love all along. When they first met, Jack had been so loving, holding her in public, whispering secrets in crowds, making frequent, passionate love to her. They laughed. They cried. She thought it was love. Over time, life pushed them apart. Jobs, goals, even values seemed to separate them. Then, numbness took over making it clear it was time to move on. Emma broke the icy silence by asking for a divorce.



Of course, his sudden hand of friendship was inspired by guilt. While she’d been spared the pain of that guilt grinding down her soul over the years of their marriage, she now caught the bomb just as it exploded. Flesh and bone scattered everywhere. Jack promised Emma that he had not known about the child until a year ago. That it was just once. The lie was tearing her up inside, pain felt with such pulsating intensity that she couldn’t find the words to capture the immense weight of it.

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Her heart healed more slowly than the broken bones. But in time, and like all other parts of her body that had broken, healing came.



Summer arrived. She and El were meeting friends for lunch. Emma sat down on the patio, away from the potted flowers and plants that attracted bees. She turned into the breeze and, for a moment, closed her eyes facing the lake and the sun to absorb warmth and smells of flowers, water, sand. El stood up to hug their friends, Teresa and Marin, as they approached the table, laughing. It had been a few months since they'd all been together. They ordered wine and Teresa turned to Emma and asked, "Isn't this where you were eating when you got stung by the bee that broke your foot?"

Emma laughed. She shared the details of that story and all that happened since. Jack's wedding, the son he didn't know he had during their marriage and her brittle bones. When she finished, she looked around the table, feeling self-conscious for causing the stunned silence that followed.

They sipped wine in silence. El spoke first. "And to think it all started with a bee sting on this patio." El reached for her hand under the table and squeezed it. "Listen," El insisted. "We'll simply come up with gentler alternatives to all the things we love to do together."

Teresa and Marin nodded emphatically. "When we ski, we can pull you behind us strapped into a padded sled."

"Or" Marin piped in, "We'll carry you around in a palanquin to keep you safe. We're not going anywhere without you."

Emma laughed at her friend's suggestions. She wasn't going to wallow in self-pity and she knew her friends wouldn't let her.



It is the intersection of summer and fall. The top layer of air is still warm, despite the cool underside. Emma sat at her desk looking out the window at the few leaves changing color early. The windows were open and a light breeze whirled around the room.

Emma opened her journal and began writing. The story she told would be twisty, as she began to organize thoughts on the page. The ending would be a good one, strong and resolved, committed to life and love and to a way forward.

Emma bent low over her journal as leaves blew in the gentle breeze outside her window, rustling ideas in her mind. She wrote about the bee sting that broke her foot and all the ways it freed her.