

A Boat with No Leaks

Emily Painton

The last time Grace had reached out to him, he rejected her with a terse note. He regretted his words as soon as he dropped the postcard into the mailbox. He was angry at her, for loving him, for showing him what love could be and then taking it all away, and for marrying that other guy so quickly after things between them fell apart. He hated her for the way she had cracked him open, shone a light on his imperfections and then abandoned him when it turned out he was broken. Broken like she should have known he would be and like he always would be.

More and more he felt sure that she had never loved him. Maybe she had deserved his angry words. Of course, he'd been the one to suggest an open relationship, hadn't he? He'd also been the one who stopped talking when talking got hard. When she screamed and cried, he shut down and became distant and cold, but she had moved on so quickly and effortlessly. Fuck her for silently slipping away from him, for finding someone new, and then asking him for an affair. Offering just a sliver of herself to him when he had always given her everything he had. Didn't she understand he could never settle for less than all of her? What he hadn't discovered just yet, was that even part of her would always feel like more than all of anyone else he would ever meet.

In those six short sentences he'd written to her on that vintage postcard, he called her cruel things, "deceitful", "a leaky boat", and said he didn't want any part of it, or of her for that matter, but none of that was true. She was the most honest woman he'd ever known. Direct about her desires and her feelings from the start. It had scared the hell out of him but he wanted her. He wanted everything about her, even the difficult things, down to his core, and yet he'd rejected her, called her damaged goods. He was the damaged one, the one who couldn't be honest, not with her, not with anyone, least of all with himself.

Maybe he did want her to hate him, to leave him alone because being loved by her had been scary and painful. From the start, she had asked for more from him than he felt he could ever give to anyone. She had believed in him, what he was capable of. Believed in him in ways he would never have believed in himself if it wasn't for her. She was patient with him and yet wouldn't accept his excuses. Ever since he'd gotten away from her, life had felt easier, less excruciating, but he also felt less alive.

His abrupt rejection of her offer had worked. She'd moved away. He never heard from her again, but she was always on his mind. Every woman he dated he compared to her. He wanted someone to finish what Grace had started. Someone to tear him apart.

Jack was forty-one now and it'd been close to nineteen years since he'd written that shitty note to Grace. Jack had finally figured out there was no such thing as a boat without leaks. He also realized that he liked the way Grace had leaked. He had enjoyed how messy their love was. How it dripped and oozed all over everything, his writing, his art, his every thought. He hadn't understood at nineteen that what he had felt back then was joy, and sure there was also pain but in retrospect, even the pain felt good with her.

Nowadays he felt nothing. The high paying career he hated, the responsibilities and monotony of marriage and fatherhood had worn him down, made him numb. Sometimes it felt like he was wishing each day away, wishing his life away. Counting down to the weekend, his next vacation, retirement, when the boys go off to college, when the boys finish college, when he could finally relax again, maybe even get back in touch with himself.

Nineteen years had flown by. He could hardly remember some of the most important events in his life. The wedding, his promotions, the birth of his three sons, their first days of school, were mere blips on the speed train that had become his life, but each second of that brief year and a half spent with Grace—meeting her, falling in love, moving in with her, living together, losing her—was burned into his mind, etched onto his heart.

He dreamt about her often. Early on in his marriage, he would feel guilty when he woke up disappointed the dream wasn't real. It felt a bit like cheating like he was being disloyal to his wife who was sleeping next to him in bed. As the years passed, his guilt waned, and he grew increasingly sure that Grace had really been there, that she had somehow visited him in the night, in his subconscious. That they were still connected in some deep and meaningful way that no one else would understand. He referred to them as his seasonal Grace dreams, but they weren't limited to any particular time of the year.

Soon he could simply close his eyes and see her there. It felt like it was only yesterday that they walked home from class together through the snow. Her small mittened hand held firmly in his so he could catch her should she lose her footing. A random snowflake gently fell and landed in her hair. She giggled as their breath crystallized in the air. A block away from their apartment she gave him a mischievous grin and dashed behind the church. He sprinted after her, and when he turned the corner, he found her lying there, on her back, smiling up at him with her long wool coat spread out to insulate her from the deep snow. With a glint in her eyes, she began to wildly swish her arms and legs back and forth making an angle in the snow. He knelt in front of her. She grabbed at him and began to wrestle with the buttons on his coat. She slid her snowy arms inside his jacket and pulled him close. He looked into her blue eyes, then he fell upon her, kissing her cold cheeks and soft mouth. He buried his face into the warm crook of her neck, where she smelled of cinnamon and cloves. He breathed her in. The sweet smell of her made him feel desperate and greedy. He needed to know her, to belong to her, to somehow understand her more completely than he knew would ever be possible.

Author Bio:

Emily Painton is a painter, photographer, librarian, and unpublished writer who lives in New Orleans. She grew up in Oklahoma and earned a BFA from the University of Oklahoma, an MA in Art History from Tulane University in New Orleans, and an MLIS from the University of Texas at Austin.