The Silver Lady

by Ivy Fleischer

Sunlight drifted through the shutters as Emma began picking up bottles that lined the bar. Saturday morning offered no remedies to her arthritis. Her back ached like always, her eyes were bloodshot as usual, and she was damned if her husband thought she'd pick up one more broken beer bottle, let alone, mop the floor.

"Chuck." No answer.

"Chuck!" Why did she marry him anyway. "Chuck, get your ass down here and clean up this mess!"

Emma had grown up in this "mess." Her family had always owned "The Silver Lady Lounge." From the times when it was the hotspot of Meacon, Ohio to now when the only customers were rowdies and drunks who had no place else to go, Emma had seen it all.

"Awwwww! I've had enough of this crap." She winced in pain from leaning too far across the bar. Coughing sporadically, Emma stopped her work to check her watch. 11:37 a.m. Digital watches, where would we be without them? Chuck had given her that watch just a few months ago on their anniversary. Thirty-five years together. Thirty-five years she'd put up with him. God, he was always drunk. He was never nice, and oh, his Meacon frame of mind! Ah, he wasn't such a bad lug. So what if he married her for what money she had, at least he was faithful. You can't ask for too much these days.

Emma rinsed a rag to wipe the countertop. Ashes and dust dotted the counter with puddles of beer mirroring the lines on her face. Emma gave a silent laugh as she stood mesmerized by the contortions her face made in the day-old beer.

"I remember when mama used to make me wash my face everyday. Hah! Noxema girl, she used to call me. What a pretty face I was." Her spontaneous smile transformed quickly to her standard, business-as-usual expression.

Lighting a cigarette, Emma yelled for her husband one more time. The silver-grayish smoke seemed to dance in narrow streams of sunlight slipping through the shutters.

Oh yes, Emma could remember her mother as if she were still there. The Silver Lady. That was her mama.

Her mother had been "the prettiest gal in Boone County." known all around the area for winning several beauty contests, but most importantly, qualifying for the State pageant. Her mother's soft grey eyes could turn almost any rowdie into an obedient child. Her mother had a smile for anybody, and her smile was a smile that could make your day. Emma could still hear her mama's crystal clear voice.

"What Mac—you don't look like you've had a hard day," she'd say. "Hal Your wife ain't that bad sugar. She just don't want to lose ya'. Why, I can't say I blame the woman for being a little jealous. Why look at all that muscular body of yours, and with your being gone all the time. Here babe, have a drink on me."

Something about her mama. Everyone loved her. She knew what to say and when to say it. When Daddy had opened the bar, he knew he could draw a crowd. No problem. All he had to do was to remind everyone that he was married to the Silver Lady, the lady who won queen contests and county fair
bake-offs. What a lady she was. She could handle anything.

People from all around came to the bar while she was alive, and the day she
died, you would have thought it was a national holiday, from the number of
people who showed up to mourn.

Emma felt a tear escaping her eye and quickly wiped it from her face,
resuming her work. It was only minutes before she sat down again. Emma ran
her fingers through her greyed hair. Her hand ran into several knots and her
course-textured mop reminded Emma only that she was forgetting herself
once again.

Pulling her hand down to smooth out the wrinkles in her cotton dress, she
tried to console herself by saying things weren't that bad. She wanted so
much to be like her mama. But something was missing. Her hazel eyes lacked
that special sparkle, and she never could really talk to the customers who
even entered the place anymore. More than often her pensive and
distracted gaze out the window irritated the customers as she'd forget they
were even there.

Emma walked to the beat-up old jukebox and put in a quarter. She dusted
off the machine with an edge of her dress, and then pressed button B-37,
three times. Sentimental Journey. It had always been her favorite song. Her
mother always said that the jukebox songs shouldn't be changed. It gave the
place a little more class and flavor, she'd say. Emma knew her mother just
wanted to save money.

"Gonna' take a sentimental journey. Gonna' set my mind at ease. Gonna'
take a sentimental journey, to renew of memmmmm-or-ies." She sang
along with the song, her voice cracking on the higher notes.

Emma had always wanted to leave this town. While she went to Meacon
High, she also worked at the Woolworth's on Hickory Street where all of the
East siders shopped. She knew she wasn't smart enough or even rich enough
to go to college, but she wanted to earn enough money to escape from this
suffocating town.

She could remember running away with Johnny Baker. Her boyfriend at
that time, Johnny and she had left school one day and driven clear to Dayton.
Yeah, they'd gotten suspended, but that wasn't the worst part of it all. People
said they'd been married, that Johnny had raped her, that she was pregnant!
They couldn't stop the rumors even though they were lies.

The thought turned in Emma's head as the record began to play a second
time. She let a short chuckle slip from her lips. How petty this town was.
There was so little happening in Meacon that no news became news. It had
to. The newspaper would have gone out of business.

Emma's mood began to lift. She found herself humming to the music and
chuckling more over recent news stories on lost dogs, the Green family who
saw the governor, and the mayor's recent "controversial" decision to install
a 60 second stoplight on the corner of Vine and Mill Streets. Why did she stay
here?

God, at least the Green family went to Columbus for a week in July. Better
than that, her best friend from high school, Susie Skinner, had gone clear to
Chicago. Of course, Emma didn't hear much from Susie anymore. Every
holiday she might get a Hallmark card, but Susie never wrote anything on the
card, and she never came to visit. She worked at a museum doing some kind
of job. She now signed her cards as Mrs. Susan Stafford. Yeah, she'd gotten
married too.

Emma put out her cigarette and moved to the tables placing the chairs
upside-down on them and picking up bits of trash that lay on the floor. Each
stoop for a cigar plastic wrapper or a stale peanut caused her left arm to
move to her lower back as she winced at the dull pain. Again she stopped her work. No wonder she never got much done. Chuck was right, she wasn’t good for much of anything, anymore. He was always telling her she spent more time daydreaming than she did working. He admitted she should leave him, but always added she had no one to leave with and no place to leave to. She didn’t have any friends. But, he only said these things when he was drunk. When they slept together she knew he loved her. He would talk sweet, caress her— he could make her feel good again.

Chuck walked into the bar, in his bare feet. His dirty white t-shirt hung over an old pair of black pants that he wore almost every day. Gray and black stubble masked his face, and his graying hair was styled in wind-direction. “You ain’t got the bar cleaned yet, huh,” he said in a low grumble. His right hand moved back and forth covering all of his over-sized belly. “Is dinner ready?”

Emma looked out the window. She hated him when he was like this. “Woman, don’t you ever listen to me? I’m hungry, and I have a headache. God damn it, when we eatin’? Emma turned around. Inside she felt a burning desire to throw something at her husband while at the same time being so very scared to do so. Yes, she was his wife, and yes, she had responsibilities, but when did she get a break… he could be so hateful.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you. I haven’t started dinner, and I’m not even done cleaning the bar. If Sam and Terry hadn’t stayed so late last night—” She thought he was going to slap her. “Jesus Christ. I’ll just go next door and grab a burger from Williams Restaurant. You can make your own dinner. I don’t want no lectures and I’m sick of waitin’.”

He left the room in an angry stumble. Emma looked out the window as it began to rain.

It was 5:30 and Samuel Jackson was coming through the door for his nightly dosage of Jack Daniels. He always said a little whiskey made his days go down a little easier. Or was it the other way around?

“Howdy, Emma. I’ll take a double tonight. Is Chuck around?” Emma, who was washing glasses, looked up at Sam with a blank stare. “I guess he’s in the back. He should be out here soon.”

“Well damn it. I sure do want to talk to him. You wouldn’t believe all the ruckus we’ve been raising down at the papermill. All the recent talk about unions is really giving our bosses a scare. Oh yeah, but we workers are gonna’ show them who’s really got control here. Shit Emma, don’t ya’ have my drink ready yet? Why, you haven’t even begun to make it. Are you feeling okay? You’re looking kinda’ pale… are ya’ sick? Chuck’s treating ya’ okay, ain’t he?”

Emma slowly looked up from her work. Things weren’t right, but what could she say? She didn’t know what was wrong.

“Chuck’s treatin’ me just fine, Sam. I’m sorry about your drink. What did you say you wanted?”

Chuck walked into the room. He was now clean-shaven with his favorite plaid shirt tucked into his black pants. The scent of his cheap after shave gave him a clean smell, though Emma could still see the dirt on his nails from working on the bar’s exterior earlier that day.

Sam greeted him eagerly as he came through the doorway. “Chuck! You won’t believe what Fred and those guys did today down at the mill. They’re
talking about a strike..."

Sam’s voice seemed to fade as Emma mixed his drink and began humming her song. She fixed his drink and fished for a cocktail napkin under the bar.

There would be more people here tonight, Emma thought, if the papermill really was such a hotbed. The Silver Lady Lounge was the closest bar to the mill, and Emma found that when people were angry, nothing could satisfy them like a little bit of liquor. Yeah, this would be a good night for business.

Emma was opening a new container of swizzle sticks when a large group of people bustled through the bar, rushing her with multiple orders for beer.

“I can’t believe those bosses. What do they want from us? Slave labor!”

“I’ll tell ya what they can do with their fuckin’ mill—”

“Man, I would love to tell them where they can go!”

A hubbub of angry conversation filtered throughout the bar. The stench of cigars and cigarettes permeated the room, and Emma seemed like a lost child in a crowd. Occasionally, she’d nod to answer a question and soon people were asking her what she thought.

She didn’t know what to say. Her uncle had been a boss at the papermill and she liked him an awful lot. He seemed like an honest man. She didn’t think he’d hurt anybody or take advantage. Of course, this only angered the customers and they soon kept to themselves, ordering more beers to calm their souls. At least she had told the truth. She hated to lie.

She looked over at her husband to see how he was managing. Lately, he’d been getting drunk earlier and earlier in the evening, and by the end of the night he’d almost be at a stage where he thought he could kill anything and anybody. She could see he was burning with rage like the rest of them.

Emma sat down to catch her breath as the smoke began to make her eyes burn and cause her to cough. She took a worn handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. She couldn’t tell now if the tears were from the smoke after all. She was tired. She closed her eyes to think of a happy memory.

Someone had put a quarter in the jukebox and her favorite song was blaring through the bar. She smiled as she hummed to the song.

Thoughts of her wedding day went through her head. She could see herself in her mother’s white linen dress. It was a gorgeous dress. And Chuck, he looked so good then. She didn’t want to open her eyes.

All around her, people were talking, allowing her daydreaming to go unnoticed. She didn’t want any part of them, and they didn’t take any part of Emma.

No one could know the hell she’d been through. The dreams that slid by. The hopes that were now hopeless. The song came to an end, and Emma opened her eyes. She was a survivor of sorts, and she knew that, but the tears rolled down her cheeks anyway. The smoke danced in a circle around her head as if to form a crown for a new Silver Lady.

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