

Proper perspective

Charles sat with a blank look, leafing through documents he'd brought to the breakfast table, one hand on his treasured Employee of the Month mug.

"Intake-documents or psych-profiles, Charles?" Emma liked to tease him about his social services lingo.

"Mmm." This was his answer to any question when his mind was elsewhere.

Emma shrugged, stirring her steaming coffee. As she reached for the Half 'n Half, a stamp-sized flake of yellowed paint fluttered down from the ceiling and settled into her cup.

"Whoa," Todd said.

"Mmm," Charles answered.

Emma lifted the paint out with her spoon and flicked it into the trash basket.

"Charles, we have to do something about the cracked ceiling."

"Mmm."

"Are you going to apply for that promotion at work? We need the money."

"Mmm."

As she reached to pick up her coffee, there was a dull, ripping sound and a thick hunk of plasterboard crashed onto Emma's hand.

"Whoa," Todd said.

"Oww!" Emma held her hand to her lips.

"You OK, Mommy?"

Charles sprang up. "Emma, Emma. What's wrong?" He put his arm around her, gaping down at the sheet of plaster as if wondering how it got there. "Where does it hurt? Show me, Emma."

"I'm all right, I guess. The coffee was hot."

"Cold water. Here, let me take you to the sink."

"Yeah, Mommy," Todd put in. "That's what our teacher told us to do."

The pain was almost gone, but Charles insisted on holding her hand under the water anyway. She kissed him on the cheek. "Don't frown like that, Charles. I'm fine." She wiggled her fingers to show him.

Charles didn't seem convinced. After Todd had left for school, he declared, "I'll stay home with you today."

Emma chuckled. "That's silly. My hand's not hurting. Look, it's not even red any more."

There was a glimmer in his hazel eyes. "Still, I want to." He pulled her close.

"Oh. Oh, OK." She felt her face flushing. "My hand's fine, though. So—"

"Emma!"

He was stroking her back beneath her T-shirt.

She lifted her arms to let him pull it off. His fingers flitted across her bra. She clasped them to her, closing her eyes.

As they started to kiss, a chime sounded. Charles blinked.

“It’s your phone, Charles.”

“Mmm.”

“You’d better answer. Might be important.”

It was. “Domestic abuse,” he told her. “Ongoing. I think I need to go.”

Emma watched Charles hurry out, then managed to pull herself together. Coitus interruptus? She slipped her shirt back on and held her hands to her cheeks, turning to survey the mess on the table, then raised her eyes towards the gaping hole in the ceiling.

She poked the ceiling with a broomstick. There was a hole the size of a dinner plate, but the area around it didn’t seem in danger of falling. Cleaning up would give her something to do when Todd was at school and Charles at work. She knew the crumbling ceiling didn’t bother Charles. When she’d mentioned it before, he told her to keep things in perspective. At least they had a ceiling. One of his “clients” had been living in a car for the past couple of weeks.

She couldn’t blame Charles for letting things go. He really put himself into his work—probably too much. He would come home emotionally drained from counseling heroin addicts and children who were taken away from violent parents and put into foster homes. He got to know the families he worked with, fretted over them, and made follow-up visits on his own time. Sometimes when he told Emma about them, there were tears in his eyes.

Emma missed going to work herself. She missed talking about autoclaves and purity levels and acidic concentrations and mostly the feeling that she was doing at least something small to keep the earth safe for people to live on. She missed watching Charles smile when she told him about a project to remove carcinogens from wastewater or find a way to keep birds out of vineyards without poisoning them. It had been devastating when government funds were cut and Envirotech had to lay her off. Suddenly, the family income was cut in half.

Without a job, she felt obliged to do most of the mopping, dusting, and washing clothes. She kidded Charles about having to pick up the dirty underwear left all over the floor by her “two boys,” the third grader and the thirty-four-year-old.

With more time at home to notice dripping faucets, running toilets, cracked windows, and overgrown bushes, she’d started to feel overwhelmed. As long as she’d been working, none of this seemed important. Now, with time to hang around with PTA friends like Chip’s mom Britney who lived in million-dollar homes over in Nottingham Estates, she was embarrassed by her house’s run-down condition.

Emma finished cleaning up the plaster and went out to get the newspaper. A high school boy was supposed to deliver it on his bike. That sounded good when Emma subscribed. But after about a week, the boy quit and his mother had to take over the

route, driving along in her car and throwing the papers out the window. Emma eventually realized that kids didn't deliver papers any more. Their mothers did it for them.

Sometimes the paper was in the road in front of the house, sometimes on the sidewalk. Sometimes she found it in the forsythia along their driveway, and once it was high in a juniper near the front porch. Now it was out in the street again, black tire tracks running across it.

Employment

She always read that section of the *Shady Park Ledger* first. Of course, nothing. She only checked the newspaper for jobs out of habit, anyway. Newspapers were dying out. People hardly read them nowadays, at least the paper version. Any job she'd want would be listed in LinkedIn or Indeed.com.

She'd majored in Bioenvironmental Science. There were never any jobs in that field nowadays. The country was still recovering from a big recession, the news reports said. A lot of jobs with "enviro-" in their titles had been eliminated.

The only jobs Todd's classmates' moms talked about were things like making stained glass angels for patients in hospitals—volunteer jobs that didn't pay anything because they didn't need the money. Chip's mom made angels. Or at least she'd tried to make one.

Police blotter

Sometimes she found Charles's "clients" in this section.

Sports

Little League registration for eight- to ten-year-olds this Saturday. She couldn't wait to tell Todd. He'd wanted to play last spring but was too young.

There was plenty of time to kill before Todd and Charles got home. Emma made herself a second cup of coffee. She'd gotten into the habit of reading articles in the *Features* section of the paper.

"Getting the Promotion You Deserve"

"Ten Steps to Financial Independence"

"Current Trends in Haute Couture"

"Exotic Vacation Getaways to Enrich Your Life"

"Designing the Perfect Second Home"

"Finding a Contractor to Turn Your House into the Home You've Always Wanted"

Charles kissed Emma on the forehead. His early morning ardor had cooled.
"Hand OK?"

"It's fine. Spouse abuse case taken care of?"

"Yeah. Found a shelter for the mother and her kid." He dropped into the cracked leather chair his mother had given them ten years ago. Feet up on the hassock, he paged through the newspaper. Emma lingered beside him gazing at his gold-flecked eyes. In their

first days in the house, before Todd was born, they sometimes went straight upstairs as soon as Charles got home. These days he headed straight for his chair.

When they'd met at State fifteen years ago, she'd been swept away by his striking confidence that his mission in life was to go out into the world and help people in need. While most of her classmates chattered about devising "startups" they could sell off for millions to DuPont or Exxon or Somebody Big, Charles introduced her to the university's Social Action Force. After one date with this sincere man who seemed totally unaware of his good looks, Emma switched her major from chemistry to environmental science. It wasn't just his handsome face. He was polite, kind to others. A gentleman—that was her mother's comment when she met him.

Charles turned to the national and world news, which the local paper crammed onto page two. "Listen to this, Emma. Heroin use nationwide is up 60 percent in the past two years—people looking for a cheaper replacement for the pain medicine they're addicted to."

Emma put her hand on his shoulder.

"Hmm. Another school shooting in the Midwest. The parents are saying the teachers should carry guns."

As soon as he'd skimmed the world news summary, Charles would switch to the *Health* section.

"Gluten: The Danger Lurking in Your Favorite Foods"

"Preservatives: Are They Destroying Your Body?"

"Health Benefits of Sea Salt"

After putting the paper down and nodding to himself as if to verify he already knew about the food dangers of the day, Charles usually dropped contentedly to sleep in his chair until dinner. But this evening she noticed he was staring at a Zales ad for a diamond necklace. "What do you want for your birthday, Emma?" He gave her a childlike grin.

"A diamond necklace."

Charles's face turned scarlet and he folded the paper. "I wish I could get you one."

"Just kidding. How about a gallon of ceiling paint and some patching plaster?"

"Heh-heh. Yeah. Sorry. Some day I'll get you that necklace." He really seemed to believe it.

"Great. Does that mean you applied for the supervisor's position?"

"No. I couldn't."

"Couldn't," Emma repeated. "Uh-huh."

Charles went through the mail while she got dinner ready. She usually had everything prepared and ready to cook before Todd and Charles got home. It wasn't easy. Charles insisted she buy only organic food. He didn't seem to notice that food labeled organic costs more. He even insisted on organic eggs, for cripes sake. Organic eggs. What did that even mean? Charles was a good social worker, a good Psycho-Social

Interventionalist, as the county called him, but Emma doubted if he had ever passed a chemistry course.

The food thing was all his friend Andre's fault. He had preached to Charles about what should be eaten and what should not be eaten, and Charles believed it all with the zeal of a convert. Andre himself constantly jumped from one theory of life to another. Now he lived mostly on donuts and pizza and declared the most harmful thing for the body to be stress.

"Emma, look. Our real estate taxes went up." Charles handed her the notice. "Almost doubled."

"Doubled! Now how are we going to get my car fixed and replace that junker of yours?"

"Guess the cars'll have to wait."

Charles didn't care what kind of car he drove. Food additives. Pesticides. These things concerned him. He left Emma to worry about paying the bills, keeping the house in shape, sending Todd to school in decent-looking clothes. She waited until Todd was in bed before bringing the supervisor position up again.

Charles stood naked in front of the dresser, solemnly raising his precious "Eat Green" shirt from the drawer like a partisan flag. She couldn't help looking him over. The organic food certainly hadn't done his body any harm. And being home alone all day made her . . . whatever. She wanted to put her hands on him. But she forced herself to turn aside. "You promised you were going to think about applying for that position."

"Emma. I just can't do it."

"But why? The position's vacant now. It could be years before there's another chance to move up."

"Because supervisors sit in the office all day shuffling papers. It's not the kind of work I want to do. They're out of touch with the people we're trying to help."

She shook him by the shoulders. "Oh, Charles. You act like you worry more about drug addicts than you do about your own family."

"Emma, that's not fair."

"People do what they have to do to take care of their families, even if the job doesn't meet their idealistic criteria."

"When we got married, you said you liked my idealism."

"I did. I do. But, Charles, the kitchen ceiling's falling down."

"Come here." He pulled her close. "I love you, Emma. Don't worry about the ceiling right now. I'll fix it somehow. Those deep brown eyes still excite me. Can you tell?"

"You always end the discussion this way. It's not going to work this time."

It did, though. And she had to admit: maybe it did put things temporarily into a different perspective.

Dwelling improvement and other compulsions

Just as Emma was about to turn on the vacuum cleaner, their friend Andre knocked on the door. Typical Andre. Three o'clock in the afternoon, everybody else working, and he had just gotten out of bed and wanted to talk. Emma suspected he got away with it partly because of his pale blue eyes, year-round tan, and—maybe she was the only one who noticed this—the curve of his lips when he smiled.

Emma kept her hand on the doorknob. "I'm vacuuming. Charles doesn't get home till six."

"I don't mind waiting." Andre slipped in and leaned back in Charles's leather chair. "I guess Charles likes his job. You mean he works this late every day?"

"Yes. Most people do." Emma was too polite to switch on the vacuum while he was talking to her, and he seemed to know it. He kept talking. "It's a shame. You have to admit it. Nine to six, day after day. I guess it's hard to get out of that rut."

You seem to have managed, Emma wanted to say.

Andre asked if Todd, her third-grader, was around. It was clear he didn't know what time of day it was or what time kids got home from school. "I hope they're teaching them some of the important things they skipped over when we were in school."

Meaning how to survive on nothing but donuts, pizza, and tea, Emma presumed. That and how to use an occasional dull lower-back pain to get disability benefits.

"They should teach them about the government in Sweden. Don't you think? They know more about what's important in life there. Here you're expected to devote yourself to making some corporation rich."

"No big corporations in Sweden?"

Andre never answered questions that might interrupt his train of thought. When you asked Andre a question or said something to him, it was like a black fly landing on his face that he didn't notice. He went on talking. Then, later, the fly would bite and he reacted to your question. And so Andre was bringing an end to his disquisition on the advantages of a socialistic society when he stopped short and said, "What? Oh, those Swedish corporations aren't run the same way. Do you have any tea?" With a spoon of honey if she didn't mind, rather than sugar.

Emma hinted that she needed to do some housecleaning. Andre said go ahead. It wouldn't bother him. He would just drink his tea. It was interesting the way people felt the compulsion to improve their dwellings, wasn't it? The amount of time spent on this had to be phenomenal. And, really, how did something like that matter? It was absurd when you thought about it.

Emma had been to Andre's dwelling only a few times. He lived in the former fishing village of Riverside beyond the south end of the long, straight highway that led from what her friends, with a vague sense of dread, called "the City" at the north end

down to Shady Park and on towards the Piskasnet River at the south. Andre lived alone in a three-room house by the river that he inherited from his aunt. There he ate donuts, drank tea, and read about “important ideas.” Now and then, when his head was full, he paid visits to Charles and Emma without warning and poured out his observations onto them. One February, he atypically called ahead to say he was coming to visit. But when he poked his head outside, he immediately went back in. He called back and said he couldn’t come: the winter was lasting longer than he’d expected. Piskasany Andre, Charles called him.

Andre finally paused, and Emma saw her chance to switch the vacuum back on. It felt rude, but this was the only time she had to improve her dwelling. As she cleaned, she thought about Andre’s house. If you weren’t careful when you walked in, you might stumble over his dumbbells. One of his three rooms was devoted to trash, meaning pizza and donut boxes, moldy crusts, and dried-up tea bags. Andre’s mother bagged it all up once a week, according to Charles, and put it out with her own trash. His mother lived on the dirt road behind his house. She was the only woman in his life.

Emma had had a crush on Andre in her first semester at State. Compared to the rest of the straggly guys in freshman English, he looked like a movie star—clean-shaven, neatly dressed. He observed her with his head slightly cocked whenever she asked the professor questions, and he started following her into the hallway after class to talk.

She found it flattering that the most intelligent and well-read student in class was interested in her. Yet talk was all it amounted to. Talk at lunch, talk over a few dinners together. He walked her to her dorm every evening for maybe a week, talking all the way. One night she took his hand as they stood outside the entrance to her dorm—a signal for him to stop talking and kiss her. He didn’t.

“Don’t you realize that guy isn’t into women?” her roommate laughed.

Emma—naïve college Emma—was stunned. “That can’t be. He’s so, well, so manly. He sounds like James Earl Jones when he talks.”

“Talks. Right.”

It all made sense. Emma felt foolish.

But it wasn’t long before Andre introduced her to his friend Charles. Charles was handsome, too. Dark hair, sea-green eyes. Emma at first feared the worst. But it didn’t take Charles long to show where *his* interests lay. After the English class was over, she hardly saw Andre any more. Charles and Emma were inseparable.

Todd rushed through the door. “Want to play some catch, Mr. Andre?”

The fly of Todd’s question landed but didn’t bite. Andre asked him how old he was—he did this every time he saw him—and what his friends at school were like. Then the fly bit. “Oh. You’re really that interested in baseball? You don’t feel like it drains your time?”

Todd’s mouth formed a perfect O, but nothing came out.

Emma picked up his baseball. “We’re going out back for a while, Andre. Come out if you want. Charles will be home in *three hours* or so.”

Andre brought his tea out to the back porch to watch. He sat on the step with the pouty lips he got when ideas were swarming in his head and nobody would sit and listen. He was frowning, too. Emma wondered if something else was wrong.

“Throw it harder, Mommy,” Todd yelled.

“OK. Here goes.” She wound up and threw as hard as she could.

“Gosh, Mommy. Way over my head.” He stepped through the daffodils at the edge of the yard to get it, then threw a long shot straight into Emma’s glove.

“Ouch.” She took her hand out of her glove and shook it. “Good one, though. Let me try again.” She threw him another one that smacked into his glove.

Andre clapped his hands, the pouty look gone from his face. “Looking good, Emma. Really good.” His blue eyes beamed in the sunlight. His head was slightly cocked the way she remembered it from her freshman English class years ago.

“Andre was here.”

“Oh?”

“He stayed more than three hours. He didn’t leave until I said I had to get dinner ready.”

“Sorry.” Charles put his hands on his hips. “I know he makes bad choices sometimes.”

Emma was upset. “Choices? I’m sick of hearing people talk about choices. Deciding between vanilla and strawberry—that’s a choice. Dropping in and taking up half my day is an inconsiderate *act*.”

Charles pulled her to him and kissed her. A grin spread over his face.

“What?”

“Face it. What man wouldn’t want to spend three hours alone with you?”

Emma knew she was blushing.

Charles’s phone pinged. *Message from Andre Smyth*.

“What does he want?”

“It’s about that friend of his, the student teacher he met at the charter school.”

Andre had made several ventures into the world of work over the years. None lasted longer than about a week. The last was a job teaching social studies at the City Charter School, which didn’t require a degree in education. That “didn’t work out,” he told Charles and Emma. “Fixed curriculum. Too regimented.”

“He texted you about his friend Johan? What about him?”

“Says Johan broke up with him.” Charles stared at the phone. “Funny way to put it.”

“You think?”

Charles had known Andre even longer than Emma but had never come to the conclusion that he was gay. Emma had used the word now and then over the years, and Charles always objected. “The human sexuality spectrum is too complicated to assign labels like that,” he informed her.

“Anyway, I wish you’d tell Andre not to come by when you’re not here.”

“I will. I did.”

Of course, that wasn’t the solution. Andre scoffed at “scheduled living,” as he called it—meaning other people’s schedules.