

The Distillery

Artistic Spirits of the South

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A Mother's Drum

Niles Reddick

Emma Peacock unlocked the passenger door for Emory, her grandson. Opening the squeaking driver's door, she climbed in, tugging at her dress. After several attempts, the Oldsmobile cranked, spewing drops of oil and clouds of black smoke from the tailpipe. Emma didn't have trouble backing the car out of the paved driveway because she knew her property like she knew her Bible. She wasn't accustomed to driving, however, so she stomped the gas pedal, missed the azaleas by a foot, but flattened the monkey grass lining the driveway.

Emma's daughter Ruth sat in the boarding house across the street and looked out the window. She noticed the smoke rolling upward from behind the house. "Oh my God," Ruth shrieked. Her hands flew up and covered her face. Sprinting toward the door, Ruth grabbed her purse off the bed. Slipping her feet into clogs, Ruth turned back momentarily, looked in the mirror, and patted her hair. "Lost her mind," she said, grabbing her poncho from the coat rack. "I better follow her, make sure nothing happens."

Emma had trouble seeing the line in the middle of the road because she'd forgotten her glasses. Horns honked as the Oldsmobile weaved in and out of the left lane. She became agitated and decided it would be best if she kept close to the curb. The scraping tires caused the car to lose the two right hubcaps. One flew off, hitting a jogger in the leg.

Even though Emma was only driving twenty-five miles per hour, she felt the car was out of control. "Lord, it's in your hands," she prayed. Her arthritic fingers were unable to grasp the wheel firmly. She turned the steering wheel, this way, then that way, her mittens slipping to and fro.

Emory watched his grandmother intently. Her eyes fluttered and she licked her lips. "It's okay," said Emory. Emory sat next to the door and bent his legs underneath the rest of his body, boosting himself so he could see over the dashboard. "We'll be all right."

The Distillery

Emma didn't see the yellow sign with the curve veering left, and kept the car in a straight line, crashing into a telephone pole.

Emma Peacock's arthritis had been bothering her. It always did when the weather turned cold and the ground was covered with frost. The widow Peacock rubbed a little cream on her hands. She'd been ingesting gin and raisins, a cure she'd heard about on the radio. It wasn't helping. The remedy would probably just take some time—Paul Harvey was never wrong.

She walked toward the front door, lifted the wool sweater off the coat rack, wrapped it around her shoulders, and opened the door. A biting breeze from the North blew in, wrinkling a knitted doily on the table where the black phone sat.

"Lord have mercy," Emma mumbled. She noticed the rumpled doily and walked back across the wooden floor to straighten it, leaving the dust underneath. Emma moved toward the door as she heard the mailman on the sidewalk. She had to get the mail before he pushed it through the mail slot because she couldn't bend over and gather it up anymore. She stopped and glanced in the egg-shaped mirror for reassurance.

The mailman approached the door. "Good morning, Mrs. Peacock." A ritual. The mailman had said this for fifteen years; the least inflection in his voice might send Emma complaining to the postmaster.

"Why, good morning," she said, unlatching the screen door and extending her hand.

"Doesn't look like anything important," the mailman said, "all third class." Emma's long, crooked fingers gripped the envelopes.

"Well," she said, "you never know." Emma withdrew her arm from the cold. She thumbed through the mail and stared at the shapes, sizes, and colors—she couldn't read a thing without her glasses. Emma said goodbye to the mailman and closed the door.

Artistic Spirits of the South

Walking heel to toe down the hallway toward the kitchen, her blue pumps resounded.

Emma heard a bump in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Her thin lips came together and crinkled. She'd talk to Ruth about killing her plants when she came down.

Emma laid the mail on the kitchen table, walked to the stove, and lifted the whistling kettle off the burner. She placed the kettle on a floral-patterned hot plate. The flowers looked alive, unlike her withered and brown coleus that were on the front porch. Because of Ruth, she thought. Emma reached into the drawer next to the sink and brought out a silver tablespoon, clean but tarnished.

She scooped the brown crystals and dumped them into the cup. Pouring hot water, Emma stirred and breathed deeply. She loved coffee, her only vice. The only commercials on television she liked were ones about coffee.

Emma could tell a lot about people by what they put in their coffee. She'd seen Ruth putting two spoonfuls of cream and four packs of sugar in one cup. Not sweet as she ought to be, Emma'd felt.

Emma sat at the wooden table, which wobbled because one leg was shorter than the rest. She reached in the pocket of her wool dress, which smelled of moth balls, and brought out her horn-rimmed glasses. Emma straightened the mail and took a letter opener out of the fruit basket on the table. She opened the first envelope and peered at the contents: sweepstakes. "Hooey," she muttered, as she moved it aside.

A bedroom door slammed upstairs; slow, patting footsteps came down the stairs. Ruth was flatfooted, like her father. Emma reached for the next envelope.

"Morning Mama," said Ruth. She walked toward the stove, turned the burner on, and reached for the kettle.

"It's already got water in it," said Emma. She forced the letter opener into a life insurance envelope and placed it on top of the sweepstakes form.

The Distillery

Ruth said, "Probably been in there all night." Ruth turned on the faucet, dumped the old water, and filled the copper kettle.

"I just filled it," said Emma. "No need to be wasteful. We *do* get a water bill." Ruth rolled her eyes. Emma shifted, crossed her feet, and tugged at her dress, a lesson she'd learned as a child so nothing would be exposed. "You need to cut out making all that noise up there," said Emma. "Might wake up Emory. He was up late—waiting on you."

"Any mail for me?" Ruth placed the kettle on the warm burner.

"Not as far as I can tell," said Emma. "Expecting something?" She looked up from the mail.

"Not really," said Ruth. When the kettle whistled, Ruth spiked a cup of instant coffee with plenty of cream and sugar and walked toward the kitchen table. She sat in the opposite chair, reached across the table, and pulled the discarded stack of mail toward her. "You throwing this one away?"

"It's trash," said Emma, sipping her coffee.

"You can't win if you don't enter. If you don't, I'll enter for you."

"Oh no you won't," said Emma. "It's not yours to decide on."

"What's wrong with you? Sometimes you act like a child," Ruth said abruptly. "It's impossible to talk to you."

Emma pointed the letter opener at Ruth. "I'm your mother. You won't talk to me in that tone of voice. I won't have it, you hear? This is *my* house and as long as you're here, you'll act decent."

"Calm down before you have a stroke or something."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Sell all my stuff, kill what few flowers I've got left." Emma's eyes teared.

"I wouldn't do that and you know it. That's downright silly." Ruth slurped her coffee.

Artistic Spirits of the South

"You don't respect me," Emma said as she walked to the sink. She looked out the window at her car parked under the carport; it had been there for two years, ever since Emma's license had been revoked for reckless driving. "But you'll respect the rules of this house or you'll find another place."

Ruth sat the coffee cup down hard on the wobbly table, creating a wave inside the cup, which spilled over in puddles on the table. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Emma turned. "You know what I'm talking about, and if you don't, it's too late." She walked briskly out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the telephone. Emma yelled back over her shoulder, "And don't you curse me!"

"Don't walk away from me," said Ruth, setting out after her. "You started it, finish it."

Emma looked at her watch. "Fannie should've called by now. It's two past nine. Hope nothing's wrong."

"This is...pathetic," Ruth said, crossing her arms.

Her mental dictionary has run out of words, thought Emma. "Criticize and judge. That'll take you far in life." When Emma crossed her legs, her navy dress rose and exposed stockings that stopped just short of her knees.

"I'm not being judgemental," said Ruth. "I'm trying to point out that calling your best friend every morning for years to see if she's still alive isn't normal."

Emma licked her lips. "Who are you to tell me what's normal and what ain't?"

"It just doesn't make sense."

"You're not always here," said Emma. "I can't count on you; I need somebody to see about me. And what about Fannie? She's got nobody after her boy finally married and moved off." Emma spoke rapidly, like she was nearing the finish line in a race, neck and neck.

The Distillery

"I'm here now," said Ruth, "and you can count on me." She jutted her neck.

"You won't be here long," Emma said. She reached into the drawer and pulled out a pad with important telephone numbers on it: police, fire department, preacher, Fannie. Doodled at the bottom of the page were cubes, smiley faces, and crosses.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Ruth.

The pad fell to the floor. Emma stood, with one hand on the table and the other feeling her forehead. "You killed my plants! Don't try to deny it."

"What?" Ruth walked to the stairway and stood on the first step, a few inches above Emma. "I didn't kill your plants. They died from the cold. It's natural."

"I asked you to bring them in," hissed Emma. Her eyes fluttered.

Ruth started up the steps, stopped midway, and looked down on Emma's bluish hair. "I forgot. Is that such a sin?"

Emma looked up and rapped, "Irresponsibility." She'd used the word for years; it was the coda of their conversations and she knew it infuriated Ruth. Emma picked up the telephone, took a pen from inside the Methodist hymnal, and inserted the pen in the rotary dial.

"I'm not apologizing," Ruth continued, "because you wouldn't accept it. This isn't about plants and you know it." Ruth's hand gripped the rail.

"I wouldn't accept it," echoed Emma, "because you wouldn't mean it."

"Whatever, Mother."

The line of conversation reached a dead end, so Ruth redirected it. "I'm gonna take Emory to the park."

"You leave that boy alone," Emma snapped. "He can stay here with me. I won't fill his head full of nonsense."

Artistic Spirits of the South

Ruth stomped her foot, a behavior to get her way. "Mama, you must've got up on the wrong side of the bed. Look, he's *my* son, and I promised to take him to the park."

"I don't care what you promised." Emma wasn't quick enough dialing the rest of the numbers, and the receiver emitted a quacking sound. A faint bell sounded when Emma slammed down the phone. "I won't have him influenced!"

"I see," sighed Ruth. Emma hoped she'd cry—that would mean victory. Ruth said, "It's my staying out late that bothers you. That and Mark."

"I'm not blaming you for the divorce. I knew that wouldn't work from the start. You should've married Fannie's boy."

"I didn't love him," Ruth snorted.

"No, but you should've," said Emma. "Can't judge a book by the cover. If I've told you that once, I've told you a thousand times. Instead, you married a man of no count."

"Mark wasn't *no count*, Mama. He was an artist."

"Don't believe in them."

Ruth clinched her fists and shook them. "Worry about your own life and stop meddling in mine!"

"My life was dedicated to you and look where it's got me, arthritis and dead coles." Emma lowered her head and cleared her mind. "You'll be in by ten o'clock, or you can find another place. Do you understand?"

"That's crazy. I'm too old to obey your little rules." Ruth's breathing quickened.

"Then get out!" shrieked Emma. She pointed the pen at Ruth and with a dramatic downbeat, drew an imaginary line from the top of the stairs to the front door. "You heard me. I can't make you go to church or live a clean life, but by God, I can make you act right under my roof. You can find another place to sin."

The Distillery

"You've got to be kidding," Ruth cackled. "I'm an adult!" Again, she stomped her feet, first her left, then her right, marching to the beat of her mother's drum.

Ruth wheeled on her heels and sprinted to her bedroom. The door slammed and something fell. Emma figured it was one of those silly splatterings that Ruth called art. "Lord," said Emma, "she's gonna wake up that boy yet."

Emma would have to wait to call Fannie; she was too upset to talk. She walked into the kitchen to cool off and poured a little bourbon into her coffee. Usually she drank when she felt a cold coming on. She placed the Norman Rockwell cup Fannie had given her in the microwave and stood on the other side of the kitchen while it warmed. Causes cancer, she'd said.

"Put on the gospel armor; put on each piece with prayer," she sang. When she heard Ruth's footsteps coming down the stairs, Emma shuddered.

"I'm leaving!" Ruth yelled from the foyer.

Emma refused to respond; there was nothing to say. She'd been nice enough. If she said something, she might be ugly. As the front door opened, Emma felt the cool air creep into the kitchen. "Shut the door behind you," Emma yelled. Her words journeyed down an empty hall.

Emma felt the chilled air. "Thinks only of herself," she whispered. Emma'd prefer freezing to death before closing the door but felt Emory might catch a cold.

She walked down the hall to the front door. Closing her left eye, the worst of the two, she peeped through a hole in the screen. Ruth's car was parked by the curb. Emma couldn't believe Ruth would've walked anywhere, and decided Ruth must have taken a room at the boarding house across the street, a place that would put up anyone. She closed the wooden door and walked into the living room to rest in her rocking chair.

Emma plopped down and looked out the window. When the wind picked up, leaves from the dead coleus danced in the air,

Artistic Spirits of the South

landing and getting caught where the ashen paint flaked. Emma felt frustrated and rested her eyes.

Hearing the pitter-patter of feet, Emma was roused. She scooted out of her chair and walked into the hall. Emma glanced in the mirror and noticed a red crease on her right cheek, the result of her face resting on the rocking chair's matted fabric. "Good morning, sleepy head," she said. "You ready for some breakfast?"

"Yes ma'am," yawned Emory. He followed behind his grandmother to the kitchen and sat in the chair his mother had been sitting in. Emory observed the puddles of coffee, stuck the palm of his hand in them, and smeared the cold liquid around and around.

While Emma took eggs from the pink styrofoam container, she watched Emory playing in the spilled coffee. "Stop that," she said. "That's your mama's mess—leave it for her to clean up." She turned on the burner, set a cast iron frying pan on the stove, and poured a dab of Wesson oil in it.

"Where is Mama?" Emory asked, placing his hands in his lap.

"Gone again," said Emma. She cracked the eggs, put them in a bowl, and beat them. She added a smidgen of milk and imitation cheddar cheese.

He scooted to the edge of his chair. "What time's she coming back? She's supposed to take me to the park."

Emma chopped a jalapeno pepper and tossed it into the mixing bowl. As she poured the contents into the smoking pan, she said, "I'll take you to the park."

"Mama promised she'd teach me how to paint," he said. "I want to be an artist." His mouth opened, showing a combination of baby and adult teeth. He looked like a jack-o-lantern.

"You can do that as a hobby," said Emma. "Me and your granddaddy, God rest his soul, wanted you to be a preacher. You don't want to disappoint us, do you?"

The Distillery

Emory dropped his chin down on his chest. "No ma'am," he sighed. Emma poured the contents onto his plate. He looked up at his grandmother. "What's a hobby?"

"Something you have to do on the side," she said, "because you can't make a living at it—like art." She scraped the fragments from the pan atop the scrambled egg pile.

"Oh," he responded. Emory picked up his fork and poked at his eggs. "What's these green things?"

"It don't matter," said Emma. "Eat 'em; they're good for you."

Emory picked around the pepper, but a piece made its way into an egg puff. When Emory bit into it, his mouth opened, and he breathed in and out, fast. "This is poisoned!"

"No it ain't. Just because it's a little warm doesn't mean it's poisoned. I'll get you some milk." Emma poured her grandson a glass full.

He gulped down the milk and said, "I'm ready."

"I need to finish up here," she said. Emory jumped on the counter, something his mama would've gotten spanked for doing when she was his age. Emma turned on the hot water, soaked the yellow sponge, and closed the drain. She squirted a thick stream of Palmolive. Toasty sunlight, coming through the window above the sink, created a rainbow in the suds.

"Where's your coat, hat, and gloves?" Emma asked as she washed the milk glass.

"I don't want to wear the hat 'cause I get electricity in my hair." He looked at Emma. "I don't have to, do I?"

"Heat escapes through the top of your head. Keeps you warm so you don't catch a cold."

Emory didn't question his grandmother's wisdom. He looked at the brown spots and bulging blue veins on Emma's hands. Her wrinkled skin and crooked bones somehow operated in unison. He said, "I hope my hands look like yours one day."

Artistic Spirits of the South

Emma smiled and turned off the faucet. She opened the drain, and the dishwater circulated, creating a funnel.

"We gonna walk?" he asked.

Emma dried her hands on a dish towel and looked toward the foggy window. "No, it's too cold. We'll go in my car."

Emory's eyes got big. "Mama said you couldn't drive no more."

Emma laughed nervously. "Of course I can drive. Been drivin' ever since I was twelve. I used to drive your mama to the park when she was your age." She looked up toward the ceiling.

"Can I drive?" Emory asked.

"In a few years. Don't speed your life up. It goes fast enough as it is." Emma looked at her grandson sternly. "Collect your things."

Emory jumped from the counter and landed on both feet. He grabbed his corduroy jacket and mittens and ran up the stairs to find his hat. Emma walked through the hallway to the coat rack and put on her shawl. She wrapped a scarf around her neck, placed her cap on her head, and slowly pulled her red mittens over her fingers, producing the illusion of healthy hands. Emory ran down the stairway, skipping the last three steps and landing on the wooden floor, and almost knocked Emma over. She said, "Mercy boy, you're gonna break your neck or something."

Emma's purse was hanging on the coat rack. Though her driver's license had been taken away, her car keys hadn't. She'd hidden them in a side pocket of her black vinyl purse.

Holding hands, Emma and Emory walked outside. As Emma looked toward the boarding house across the street, she whispered, "God help her."

"Huh?" Emory asked.

"I was just talking to myself," Emma chuckled. "That's what happens when you get old."

The Distillery

When Ruth arrived at St. Catherine's Memorial Hospital, Emory had already been checked by the emergency room staff. Though he had minor scrapes and bruises, he was upset they didn't have any Ninja Turtle badges. He tugged at the adhesive bandage on his left arm; it pulled his skin. "I don't like these Band-Aids," he said. "They hurt."

"Stop that," said Ruth. "Where's your grandmother?"

"I don't know," said Emory.

Ruth sprinted to the nurse's station and found that Emma had been admitted; she was stable. Beneath the cosmetic containers in her purse, Ruth found a quarter for the pay phone. She needed Mark to come and take Emory home since she felt obligated to sit with Emma.

Emma was asleep when Ruth and Emory tiptoed into the room. Ruth pointed to a metal chair with an orange vinyl seat, and Emory scooted onto it. Ruth's hands gripped the metal railing at the side of the bed. She watched the fluctuating numbers on the beeping monitors and looked at a picture on the wall. It was Giotto's rendition of Saint Francis of Assisi's sermon to the birds. "Save her," Ruth mouthed.

After a half hour, Mark walked in. Emory jumped out of his chair when he saw his daddy. Ruth whispered, "Nurse said she'd been drinking. Policeman said he'd take care of it—goes to Mama's church."

"It's all so surreal," said Mark, running his hand through his long hair. "Reminds me of a work by Dali."

Ruth said, "Why don't you take Emory to the coke machine? You'll get her worked up if she sees you here." Ruth clasped her hands together.

Ruth sat next to her mother and stared at the purple bruises on Emma's face, the swollen eye, the stitches from where pieces of windshield were removed. Emma opened her eyes and looked around.

Artistic Spirits of the South

"Mama?" Ruth whispered, pressing a button to raise the bed.

"What happened?"

"You had a wreck," Ruth said. She took her mother's hand. "You didn't see the curve sign."

Emma waved her other hand, dismissing the idea. "Sign didn't used to be there—Emory okay?"

"He's fine," said Ruth, rubbing her mother's cold hand. "You need something?"

Emma cleared her throat and motioned toward a plastic cup filled with water. "I bet I look a sight."

"Mama, I'm so sorry I fought with you. It's all my fault." "I know," Emma gurgled. Ruth put the cup to Emma's lips. Emma said, "You can move back in under two conditions."

"What are they?" Ruth sighed.

Emma sipped some water and swallowed; her adam's apple moved up and down under her thin skin. "First, you clean up that spilled coffee in the kitchen." Emma sucked in a deep breath from the tubes stuck in her nose, tapped on the railing and added, "Then, you root me some more coleus. It takes just a pinch."

Ruth nodded in rhythm, and Emma smiled in return. She knew her daughter would come to her senses sooner or later. Just a matter of time, she thought.

