

## *Getting Lost*

Once when I was walking past the Union Gospel Mission a scruffy old man asked me if I was lost. *God, I hope so!* That was what came to my mind, but I didn't say it. I didn't say it because I don't talk to scruffy old men – or men at all, for that matter. I don't talk to them, and I don't look them in the eye. So I just shook my head, and quickly went on, making a note to myself not to go past the mission again.

You see, getting lost is not quite as easy as some might think. I've been working at it for nearly a year now, and there are times when I think I've succeeded. Nobody in Portland knows my real name, and many don't even know I'm a girl. I feel pretty proud of that. I watched *Boys Don't Cry* four times before I left home, studying how Teena did it. I watched the way she walked and dressed and carried herself. There were other scenes that were too hard to watch. I just fast-forwarded through those.

Of course, she was a *lez*.

I'm not a *lez*. I just don't trust men. So a few days ago I noticed one was following me. They do it all the time, ever since I took to the streets of Portland. They do it because I'm pretty, I guess. Sometimes I think of ways to become un-pretty. One girl I know just became fat. She ate everything she could get her hands on. I don't really think I could do that, though. First of all,

## Getting Lost

I'm not sure I could get my hands on that much food anymore, and the Baptist church only lets you have seconds if everyone else has been fed. Besides, I don't like how I feel when I'm fat. One time before I left home I developed a little bit of a paunch, and it scared me. I couldn't eat anything for two days.

Anyway, the guy who was following started to scare me because he had that look in his eye. Yeah, the one my father used to have when Mom wasn't around. But I don't want to think about that.

To be fair, sometimes I meet women who have that look in their eyes, too. Like there was this older *skank* down at the YWCA who watched me taking a shower. She told me I looked like a young Phoebe Cates, whoever that was. I guess they filmed her naked taking a shower in some movie. Anyway, I finished my shower really fast and put my guy clothes back on. Like I said, I'm not a lesbian.

The guy had followed me for a while and so I started running toward the library. I knew my street family hung out there. No guy was going to try to jump my bones with my street family around me.

So, the reason I know I'm not a lesbian is when I think of Art Alexakis I get all hot. You know, the lead singer from *Everclear*. I wouldn't mind him watching me in the shower. Yeah, sick, I know – he's as old as my dad, but I used to listen to his music all the time when I lived at home. Whenever I felt I needed a good cry, I would listen to *Father of Mine*. He knew what it was like to have a father who wasn't a father, and he's a really good father himself. A friend and I saw him playing with his little daughter in a park once. But the song that would get me all hot was *I will Buy You a New Life*.

## Getting Lost

I turned the corner and was starting to run up the stairs to the library when a hand grabbed my shoulder from behind. It was the guy who had been following me. I screamed.

He looked around nervously. "I...uh...I just..."

"I ran from you!" I shouted. "I showed you my 'Don't try to talk to me' face! So why are you trying to talk to me? What do you want from me?"

"I'm sorry. I saw you dancing around Pioneer Square and I thought you looked cute. I--"

"Well, stop! Stop talking to me!"

I turned and ran up the steps into the library.

I should know better than to dance, but it's one of the few pleasures I allow myself. When music is playing somewhere, my body starts to dance. The way I move, I know people can tell I'm a girl. Sometimes I even feel I have to toss off my ball cap and my overcoat to be able to move freely, and then people really know I'm a girl. I've got to stop doing that.

The library is the place where my street family gathers when it's cold. Except we have to be careful, because we like talking to each other, but the librarian keeps wanting to "shush" us. I saw them all sitting at a reading table. I went over to a magazine rack, grabbed the current issue of *People*, then pulled up an empty chair beside them.

James, an old black dude with a gray, scraggly beard, leaned over and whispered to Maria. "Hey! Isn't that one of the Kardashians who just sat her little white ass down across from us? Kim, ya' think? Or maybe Kourtney?"

James is my street dad, and maybe the only man I trust, probably because he's gay. Maria, an illegal from Mexico, is my mom. She used to take care of kids in a real home before the government tried to get her deported.

## Getting Lost

“*No, es imposible!*” Maria said, also in a whisper, “ain’t no Kardashian as street tough as dees girl. *Es verdad*, Princess Leah?”

Maria had used the street name of the one I called my little sister, who sat to my right. She is 15, while I am 16. We call her Princess Leah because she always seems to be off on another planet.

“I saw some TV actors once,” she said, “they were filming by the courthouse. Does anyone hear a bird? I thought I heard a bird. They probably don’t let birds in the library. Hey! You know what? I found a dollar coin near the MAX line track this morning. I should get a candy bar—“

“Damn, Princess Leah!” injected my black sister, Camille, “how many people ya’ got in that little noggin o’ yours, huh girl? You jes’ keep up that conversation with ya’self, ‘n the rest of us, we goin’ to talk some more about our little Miss America Emily here, okay?”

Princess Leah didn’t seem offended at all. She smiled at us, and then her eyes drifted off toward the ceiling. Nobody wanted to ask what she saw up there.

Camille looked at me. “So, *what up*, Emi-lou?”

Okay, my name is Emily, not “Emi-lou”, but Camille likes to call me that. Actually my family is the only one around here who even knows my name is Emily, so just keep that part to yourself, okay?

“I had to get in here off the street because some guy was hassling me again. Real pain in the ass.”

“What?” said James, raising his eyebrows. “Some guy trying to put his hands where they don’t belong? I swear, I may be an old queen, but--” He was getting up from the table.

“No, Dad. Nothing like that.”

## Getting Lost

“What, then?” he said again. “Tryin’ to pull you down some dark alley? Talkin’ to you as if you were some cheap little tramp?”

“No, not exactly.”

“What then?”

I had been trying to focus on my magazine, but I could see that was useless, so I shut it. “This guy, you know...*looked* at me. Then he followed me all the way from Pioneer Square, and he told me, well, that he thought I was cute when I dance.”

“Ay, *Carumba!*” said Marie. “Such a devil should not be allowed to live!”

James sat down and started laughing, which was the last straw for the librarian, who came over and told us if we did not quiet down we would all have to leave.

After she went back to her desk, James looked over at me and shook his head. “Oh Emily, Emily!” he whispered. “Was the guy at all good looking?”

I sought to recollect the face. “Yeah, I guess. Blue eyes, strong jaw. About six inches taller than me. Nice smile.”

James cocked his head in a questioning manner. “And what exactly about that offends you?”

I shrugged.

“You could’ve at least put in a good word ‘bout me to him, ya know.”

Maria slapped him on the shoulder. “Right! He chasing dees beautiful young girl because what he really want ees old black gay guy. What do you think, *hombre?*”

Maria now looked across the table at me, took my hand and patted it. “Emily, *mi hija*, are you certain you are not – how you say? – dee lesbian?”

## Getting Lost

“No!” I said, catching myself before raising my response to a shout, “I am not ‘*dee lesbian.*’”

“You are sure? ‘Cuz you know we still love you anyway, *verdad?*”

“I’m not a lesbian!”

“She wants Artie the Old Fartie,” said Camille, shielding her words with the back of her hand, as if it were a secret even from me.

“Who?”

“Artie the Old Fartie – Art Alexakis, the lead singer for *Everclear*. She has the hots for him. He’s like a zillion years old.”

I bristled. “More like 50.”

“Too old for this chick,” said Camille, “and I’m five years older ‘n you!”

“Emily, Sweetheart,” said James, flicking his wrist at me, “far be it from me to get into yo’ bizzness, but didn’t ya leave home ‘cause the old dad was jumpin’ ya bones?”

I nodded.

“So, now that yo ‘free at last! free at last!’, are yo loins really achin’ that much for someone who is ya dad’s same age?”

Princess Leah stood up quickly, swept her hand palm down across the table and shouted, “Safe!”

The reference librarian had us heading out the front door in less than thirty seconds.

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Normally when the Space Princess says something we smile and roll our eyes. But my street family took her library pronouncement as something rather profound. We were sitting on the cold steps in Pioneer Square, huddled together watching some break dancers down below.

## Getting Lost

“I gotta hand it to you, Princess Leah,” said Papa James, “you just may have hit on something there, back in the library.”

“No way!” I said. “Who knows where her head was?”

“Nope. Sorry, Miss America, but she nailed you with that one. It’s pretty safe lettin’ yo’self get all hot over someone ya ain’t never goin’ to have. While lettin’ yo’self get interested in someone standin’ right before ya, someone who might hurt ya, someone who might stomp yo little heart into a bloody pulp, that’s scary as hell.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I had a boyfriend once,” said Princess Leah. “He kissed my knee when I skinned it falling off the jungle gym. I don’t play on jungle gyms anymore, but I can climb trees. I like the trees they planted around the square. I wonder if anyone tries to climb them? I wonder if librarians have ever climbed trees? Maybe I should get a book on trees when they let us back in the library!”

“Hell yes, Princess,” said Camille. “You go, girl!” She turned to me. “Me, I don’t think there is a scarier creature on God’s green earth than a good-lookin’ dude. ‘Cuz the good-lookin’ on the outside is just cover for all the poison in his weasely little brain. So, I changed my mind. I think you were smart stayin’ away from that dude.”

James had turned reflective. “My longest affair was with Tom Cruise. It lasted from the time Jerry left me in 2002 to the time Mister Mission Impossible dumped on Brooke Shields on TV cuz of her post-partum blues in 2005. Probably wouldn’t have lasted quite as long had I ever really met him. So, you’re right, Camille. Us good-lookin’ dudes, we all just poison inside.”

## Getting Lost

“*Mira, Chiquita,*” said Maria, “we not the ones you should talk to ‘bout dees. Me, I never choose well da men. Last one, he beat me. Before that, he do da drugs. But that don’t mean you no find *tu amor verdadero*. You are so...so beautiful...*muy hermosa.*”

Just then I discovered the tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Oh no, girl,” said Camille. She put her arm around me. “You don’t need to go there with the tears ‘n all. Hell, Maria there’s right. You flat out gorgeous, girl! Course I gotta admit I’m as jealous as hell. Every dude I get even a little interested in, I gotta make sure he don’t see you without that hobo coat ‘n dime store ball cap, cuz if he do, hell, all I can do is put a bowl under his mouth to catch the drool, cuz he ain’t lookin’ at me no more.”

The tears were now dripping off the end of my chin, and I was sniffing every few seconds to keep my nose from unloading its goo into my mouth. Maria gently wiped my face with some tissue.

“Beauty hurts,” I said.

The thought had been forming in my head for weeks, hell, maybe for most of my life, but it had never found expression in those two simple words. “It does. It hurts.”

“What do you mean, Emi-Lou?”

“It just does. It makes you a fuckin’ target – you’re a target for every guy in the world who thinks that your being pretty is some kind of come-on to them to paw at you and put their filthy hands on your crotch, and...and...tear off your pajamas when you’re in bed, and you just want to be safe and sleep in your safe bed, but you can’t because your mother is gone, and he wants to stick his hairy thing in you, stabbing over and over like he’s trying to kill something, and you keep telling him to stop, but he won’t, even though you’re crying, and when you’re

## Getting Lost

crying he's supposed to hold you and comfort you – isn't he? Isn't he supposed to comfort you when you're crying?"

I became aware that I was now flailing at everyone around me, although my eyes were so blurred by tears that I could hardly tell who anyone was. Even so, I knew who the arms belonged to that grabbed hold of me and held me so tightly I knew I could never break away. I knew the smell of the cheap perfume. I knew the voice that at first only expressed her own wailing, but then started to form words. Princess Leah, though no bigger than myself, rocked me like a child, and as she rocked she now gave voice to the message we both needed to hear:

“Safe! Safe! Safe!”

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For three days my street family would not leave me alone. Wouldn't leave Princess Leah alone either, for that matter. We hadn't known about her father.

When they were finally convinced I was not on the verge of slitting my wrists, they let me go my way. I needed that. I knew they cared, but I needed to get away from their constant watching, like I was some fragile glass vase getting ready to fall off the shelf.

It was raining hard that day in Portland. It almost always is raining, but the rain is normally a gentle one that tickles your face and arms, like pebbles thrown by a friend at your window. This rain was a street-flooder, driven by the harassing wind, not at all a friend, pushing against you like it doesn't want you there. Normally in such a rain I would go into the library or hide under a canopy, but today I had to walk. I had to walk, not to get somewhere in particular, but to pump blood to my brain and focus my mind.

I found myself down by the First Congregational Church and noticed the sanctuary door was unlocked, with a sign encouraging people to come in and pray. I don't normally go in

## Getting Lost

churches -- well, except to eat, I guess. My mother used to take me to church as a child, and as I reached my adolescence, it was a chance to escape my father. Even there the men, including the ministers, were looking at me with those eyes; and I knew it was not a place where I could hide and feel safe. But this would be an empty, or near empty, sanctuary. I pulled the door open and went inside.

My clothes were sopping wet and I didn't want to drip water all over the floor and pews, so I took off my coat and ball cap, and hung them up on the coat rack. The moisture had made it through to my shirt and jeans, but at least they were not dripping, and the sanctuary was warm.

Again, I was hoping for an empty sanctuary, but as I walked down one of the center aisles I became aware that was not the case here. A man sat toward the front on the outside aisle; and I recognized him as the man they call the Peacemaker, a homeless older man, perhaps in his late 40's or early 50's. I could tell, however, that he had not noticed my entrance, and he was fully absorbed in the sanctity of the moment. I sat down quietly and looked around.

The pews of the church wrapped around the front stage, where there was a pulpit carved out of dark oak. The organ pipes fanned out across the front wall, and appeared as a series of large pencil boxes, prepared to write a story in music. Large stained-glass windows were to either side, featuring characters from biblical times. While beautiful, I did not recognize any of these characters in my own life, and so I focused on a simple wooden cross rising above it all.

The cross was something I could feel.

After gazing at this cross for some time, I noticed the man had moved to the center of the sanctuary and had fallen to his knees, raising his hands toward the cross and weeping.

I tried to think back and consider whether I had ever seen a man cry. I hadn't -- well, except on television, and that doesn't count because there they are always trying to make what is

## Getting Lost

strange and unreal seem real. Here a man was crying, and for all I could see, it was because of a deep spiritual pain, a pain like mine that was tearing him apart. His eyes were lifted up, gazing on an empty cross. His tears seeded my own.

Now the Peacemaker had prostrated himself fully on the floor, with his hands stretched out in front of him toward the cross. I looked up at that ancient emblem myself, and for a moment an image flashed in my mind of my own form upon that cross, and the pain on my face was the pain I had seen a thousand times in the mirror of my parents' home, the blood being the blood where the crease of my hips met the middle of my naked thighs. And then in a moment the form changed, and the blood of my thighs trickled down off the soft-tufted beard of an ancient man's chin. And I cried as I had never cried before.

I don't know how long I had been looking up at that cross, but I know what drew my eyes away. Down the aisle next to me, walking with his head down, preoccupied, was the Peacemaker. When he reached a point three rows in front of me, he noticed me and stopped. For a moment I could see the look in his eyes, the look I had seen in men's eyes so many times before. For some reason it didn't frighten me as much this time, but it did cause me to be reminded that my shirt was wet and form-fitting and I wore no bra. I crossed my arms in front of my chest, but all the while I kept my eyes fixed on his. It was the transformation in those eyes which I found fascinating. For a moment he looked away, closing his eyelids and scrunching them up. But when he opened them again and looked back at me, they transitioned from sadness to compassion to shame and back to sadness again, all within seconds.

"I hope it was okay that I was watching you up there," I said. "It helped me a lot."

"I didn't think anyone was here," he said quietly.

"Your pain – I felt it. That is what helped."

## Getting Lost

He shook his head slowly and closed his eyes again. "I'm glad that it helped you. But you should not look to one such as me for help." When he opened his eyes again, they were looking away, toward the exit. "The pastor here is a woman. Talk to her. That is all I can say."

He ran to the door and left me there alone.

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One thing about the rain in Portland is that when the sun does come out in a cloudless sky it is renewing to the soul. All that is green appears freshly created, and people linger on every corner, exploring the wonder.

That is the kind of day it was the morning after my encounter with the Peacemaker. I walked all the way up to Washington Park, and surveyed the beauty down below that hill, the beauty of Portland when it is effused with sunlight. It was a five-mountain day, a day when you can see all five volcanic peaks on the city's horizon. Still, even a beautiful day couldn't keep me away from Pioneer Square for long. My street family always reconnected there. It was a place where you could meet a total stranger and make up stories about her or him in your mind. It was the place where sometimes you could see the movers and shakers of the city sitting on benches or steps like normal people. It was where you could feel the pulse of life.

I think it was for reflection that I came on this day. I hadn't gone to talk to the woman pastor the Peacemaker had recommended to me. Maybe I just wasn't ready yet, or maybe I already knew at some level what I needed to do to find my peace.

When I reached Pioneer Square, I noticed straight ahead of me a section of stairs where no one was sitting, and I started to walk in that direction when something drew my attention to a bench about twenty yards to my left. There, sitting by himself was the dude who had followed me to the library steps. He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, looking down at

## Getting Lost

the sidewalk, not allowing himself to be distracted by the persons passing on every side. An old boom box was on the seat beside him, but it played nothing.

He actually was kind of cute. Tall with blonde hair, a strong jaw and blue eyes. He reminded me of a young Brad Pitt, except that Brad Pitt always seemed confident and in control, while this guy showed nothing of the sort.

I felt a strong urge to look for other choices, and indeed as I looked to my right I saw my street family kicking a Hacky Sack around on the sidewalk. I really like playing Hacky Sack. So when I sat down on the bench next to the “Oh, I just love your cute dancing” dude it was as much of a surprise to me as it would have been to them, had they been looking my way.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” I said as he looked up into my eyes, “we can hang out sometimes when I’m not with my street family, and you can play songs on that antique box of yours, and maybe if I feel like it, I’ll dance a little—”

“Yeah, that’s—”

“I’m not done! Did you hear a pause? I’ll dance a little and if you want you can dance too, but if you watch me, I don’t want you watching my ass, okay? – Answer with your head, not your words – okay?”

He nodded.

“And sometimes we can talk, too, but I don’t want you thinking you can talk me into anything I don’t want to do, and NO TOUCHING! Well, no touching yet, anyway, because I’m still figuring some stuff out, okay?”

He nodded again.

“You can talk now.”

“Oh!” he said. “Uh...that’s all okay, I guess. I’m Kyle. You gotta name?”

## Getting Lost

He was pushing it, and I let him know with my eyes.

“I mean, you dance great and all, and I like the idea of hangin’ with each other, but I need to know what to call you, don’t I?”

I said nothing.

“I gotta admit, I was feeling pretty bummed, not only because...well, you weren’t exactly nice to me in our first encounter—”

I looked down at my hang nail, and started picking at it.

“Yeah, and, this whole city has been crapping on me ever since – nothing like Hays, Kansas, where I was raised – but now I get this great opportunity to hang with Hot Dancing Girl, and I don’t want to call her just Hot Dancing Girl, so—”

“Emily.”

“Your name is Emily?”

“No. I just have this weird disease where I blurt out the name ‘Emily’ every now and then. What do you think?”

He looked down at the sidewalk in front of him again. “It’s a pretty name. I like it.”

“Yeah, it would be still be my name even if you didn’t like it.” I really don’t know why I was being such an asshole. *Don’t judge me!*

I shifted my gaze back toward my street family. They had stopped playing Hacky Sack and were all looking my way. I smilingly gave them my middle finger and returned my attention to Kyle.

“So, what brought you all across the country from Kansas?”

## Getting Lost

“As good of a place as any to get lost,” he said. “When I’d had enough of my dad beating the crap out of me, I spun around in a circle, picked a direction, and headed as far away as I could. Turned out to be Portland.”

I looked into his eyes to see if I could find any trace of the scariness I had earlier fled. All I saw was a younger version of the Peacemaker.

I pointed to his boom box. “Got any CD’s for that thing from *Everclear*?”

“Yeah.”

“Got any songs of theirs you think I might want to dance to?”

He smiled, leaned over and pulled out a CD case from under the bench. He thumbed through his collection, and quickly found the one he was looking for, which he surreptitiously placed in the CD player. He pushed the number without having to look at the song list. Then he smiled at me again, and motioned toward our little brick dance floor.

The smile grew across my face before I even heard the first strumming of the acoustic guitar. Somehow I just knew he knew what the right song was, and I was dancing and twirling when it came:

*“Bum, bum, bum, bum-bum-bum-bum (ooo-ooou).*

*Bum, bum, bum, bum-bum-bum-bum. (Yeah!)”*

My body gyrated, and slithered, and my head was bangin’ as the first words came ringing across the square; and as Art Alexakis reached the chorus, Kyle stood and joined me in the dance:

*“I will buy you a garden where your flowers can bloom...”*

And indeed the blooming we shared lifted our hearts to heaven as our feet danced in celebration. But then when the song reached the crucial words, the words which had pulled me

## Getting Lost

alive from the wreckage of my early adolescence, the words which time and again had been the light shining in the pit where my father had thrown me screaming, I could no longer just dance. Rather, I stood with my arms reaching toward heaven and my joy penetrating the sky, while my lips mouthed the words.

*“I will buy you a new life,*

*Yes I will!”*

I’m not sure how long it was from the time the song ended, and the time it stopped echoing in my heart. All I know is that when I finally looked down, I looked down into eyes filled with my tears streaming down a young man’s cheeks. And I know one more thing. At that moment he could not help himself, and he reached out and touched my hand.

I didn’t even scream.