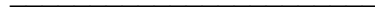


THE FABULISTS



A One-Act Play

PERUSAL COPY
PAUL LEWIS

TIME and PLACE

January 1981, in the lobby of the Greyhound station in downtown Spokane.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN (1F, 1M, 2 any gender)

EMILY, F, early 20s, sophomore in college, home for winter break.

MITCHELL, M, her dad, 50s. Tire retailer.

PETE and BILL (any gender)

Imaginary characters from stories that Mitchell used to tell his two kids. Spirited and vaguely vaudevillian

PERUSAL COPY
PAUL LEWIS

Lights up on EMILY standing in front of a row of several chairs — the barest suggestion of a bus station lobby. She speaks directly to the audience.

EMILY

This is a story about stories. It's 1981. Winter break is over, the sky is the color of lead, and my dad and I are sitting in the Greyhound station in Spokane, waiting for my Seattle-bound bus to arrive. It's been almost two years since my older brother Howie contracted meningitis during basic training, and died. The time I've just spent with my dad at his optimistically furnished, post-divorce apartment has been a bit sad. Restrained. There's a lot we might have said to each other— still could — and yet here we are, talking about tires.

She joins her dad, MITCHELL, who is on one of the chairs.

MITCHELL

Remind me what you have on that little Honda of yours.

EMILY

Not sure. Maybe Firestone?

MITCHELL

They must be three, four years old now, right? How's the tread?

EMILY

I'm not sure.

MITCHELL

You gotta check, then. When you get back to Seattle, please call me and let me know. Check for the wear indicators and the numbers on the sidewalls. And call.

EMILY

I'll do that.

(a beat)

How 'bout a Pete and Bill story while we wait?

MITCHELL

You want me to tell you a Pete and Bill story.

EMILY

The other way around, actually.

MITCHELL

Howie used to love those stories.

EMILY

So did I. Pete and Bill on the roller coaster, Pete and Bill and the Goomba, Pete and Bill on the submarine. You were quite the fabulist, Dad.

MITCHELL

Liar, you mean.

EMILY

Teller of fables. Pete and Bill and the hand car — that was a classic.

MITCHELL

They still have those, you know, in some rail yards — hand cars. Two guys on either end of a see-saw contraption.

EMILY

But, honestly... the premise of that one —the little deaf boy walking along the railroad tracks after school— Didn't his parents teach him anything?

MITCHELL

Honey, I don't know. It's just a story.

EMILY

Yeah, well, the kid's on the track, completely unaware of the runaway locomotive just a half-mile behind him. Then along come Pete and Bill from the other direction, pumping away on their hand car. They screech to a halt, lift the astonished kid off the track and start barreling off in the direction they came from, with the locomotive on their tail just inches away. Years later, I had to wonder how come, once Pete and Bill got the kid's attention, they didn't just yell at him to get the hell off the track.

MITCHELL

Well, honey, for a story with so many holes in it, you sure remember it pretty well.

EMILY

You're right. So, are you going to answer the phone? When I call you from Seattle to tell you all about my tires?

MITCHELL

I'm... still not doing great, sweetie. You probably haven't noticed, but—

EMILY

Dad, I've noticed.

MITCHELL

After Howie left us, and then the divorce... I just don't want to bring anyone else down, you know? So sometimes I don't answer the phone. But I'm getting better little by little, I think.

EMILY

That's good, Dad. I'm glad to hear that.

MITCHELL

Takes time, right? I'll try to be better about picking up the phone.

EMILY

If we don't talk to each other from time to time, how are we going to lift each other up? Anyway. Pete and Bill and the tree well is the story I want to tell you.

MITCHELL

What's a tree well?

EMILY

It's this thing they have in the mountains when there's deep snow. A recess forms around a tree trunk. If you fall in, it can be very difficult to get out of. And that's what happened to me just last month, as a matter of fact.

(moving to the front of the stage as she narrates)

I was up at a rental cabin on Mt. Baker with a few friends. There were a couple of feet of fresh powder. Soon after we arrived, I decided to take a little walk in the woods by myself. It was as peaceful as a snow globe, like something out of Peter and the Wolf. Soon I was lost, much more lost than I ever thought possible within the span of five or ten minutes. I could no longer distinguish my footsteps from random depressions in the snow. I began to panic, and slid feet first into what turned out to be the top of a tree well. I went down five feet or so. My feet happened to lodge on a loose tree limb, which at least temporarily kept me from going any further. There was nothing for me to hold onto. I called out for help, but this blanket of snow seemed to be muffling all the sound in the world. All at once I heard footfalls and there were a couple of guys running toward me. Oh, but then my heart dropped. 'Cause I recognized them right away.

PETE and BILL enter, standing on either side of her. They three of them stage a mini-play at the edge of the stage, looking out over the audience. EMILY remains standing, breathless, her facial expressions and stance telegraphing her dire situation.

EMILY

Pete and Bill?

PETE AND BILL

To the rescue!

EMILY

And you're gonna rescue me?

PETE

(uncertainly) Sure we will. Sure. But just so you know, we're a little out of our element here.

BILL

Why'd you decide to go down there in the first place?

EMILY

I fell in, okay? It's a tree well.

PETE

A tree well, huh?

Pete and Bill share a troubled glance.

EMILY

(a beat, then deciding to ignore Pete and Bill)

Help! Help—!

BILL

Listen, sister. There's no point in yelling right now, 'cause there's no one but us around. Save your breath for when you need it.

PETE

Ya see? We'll be the brains of this operation until an actual three-dimensional person comes by.

BILL

Preferably one with heavy equipment—

PETE

Now, if there were a Goomba or some other kind of imaginary monster chasing after you—

BILL

Oh, we'd chase that Goomba from here to Altoona . No question about it!

PETE

Or if this were an *imaginary* tree well type of pit, we'd get you outta there lickety-split.

EMILY

Please just fuck off, okay?

BILL

And leave you here all alone? Not a chance.

PETE

We were Korean War buddies, you know. Your dad Mitchell, and the two of us.

BILL

Fought together at the battle of Daejeon! Listen: don't keep looking down there. Honestly, there's probably nothing to see down there but snow. Just concentrate on this here conversation instead.

PETE

Have you heard the story about the hand car? And the little deaf boy?

EMILY

Yeah, I have.

PETE

If we hadn't zipped in on that hand car at that exact moment, it would have been a tragic day in the small town of Smalltown.

BILL

Do ya have time for another story?

EMILY

I'm actually not sure.

(footing begins to slip)

Oh!

PETE

Wait. Don't go anywhere. I think I hear actual people. Over in that direction.

EMILY

No! You're not going to leave me, are you?!

BILL

I'll stay here with you, honey. Pete's just gonna have a look-see.

PETE

Yeah, there's people over there, alright. Okay, time to start shouting for help again. As loud as you can!

She shouts for help.

PETE

Louder! ... Oh, shoot. They're yammering away and can't hear you.

EMILY

Can't you shout, too? Get their attention somehow?

PETE

Oh, but we're imaginary! Only *you* can hear us, ya see—?

EMILY

But I don't want to die! I don't want to suffocate in this tree well!

BILL

Listen. In the entire history of the universe, has ever there been a Pete and Bill story in which someone dies?

EMILY

Not that I know of.

BILL

Okay, then! But frankly an emergency whistle would come in very handy right now. One of those really loud, brass whistles.

PETE

The kind that Howie used to carry when he'd go off into the woods.

BILL

He was a smart cookie, that Howie!

EMILY

(to Mitchell)

And that's when I remembered that I once had just such an item—in my left upper coat pocket. I very, very carefully reached into that pocket, hoping it was still there and it was. Then Pete, or maybe it was Bill, reminded me of the S.O.S code.

(she whistles: three short tones; three long; three short)

Within a minute a group of actual people, a party from another cabin, arrived on the scene.

PETE AND BILL

(to audience)

And without a second to spare!

(they exit)

EMILY

Pete and Bill scattered like a pair of vaudevillians on the run from a debt collector. There were a couple of girls in the party and a big bruiser of a guy, and he and one of the girls lay down on the snow and pulled me up. Just like that. No heavy equipment required. They made sure I was alright, then walked me back to my cabin. I was scared, Dad. More frightened than I've ever been. I might have vanished without a trace there. But I didn't, Dad.

MITCHELL

Come here, honey. Come here. I'm so sorry that you went through such a scare. So sorry. For a father to hear that, it's ... heartbreaking.

EMILY

I wouldn't blame you if didn't believe a word I said.

MITCHELL

I can believe a lot of things. Sometimes I even believe in God. But mostly I believe in things that are concrete. Tangible, realistic things that I can see and feel. The stars in the night sky. Shadows on the ground. Not illusions, but actual shadows. Tires. After all these years, I still appreciate the smell of new tires. I can put my hand on a tire and feel its tread and know exactly what it was designed for. Now, as far as Pete and Bill— I don't remember ever telling you kids that they were Army buddies of mine, but I guess I must have mentioned that. They were real once, too, of course. They died bravely in Korea. But as far as them showing up like you described: I just... have a hard time understanding that part of it.

EMILY

So do I, Dad. And I was there.

(a beat)

How is it fair that I was rescued but Howie wasn't?

MITCHELL

(a beat)

It's not. It's not fair in any way. I just thank God with every cell of my being that you had that whistle stashed away in your pocket and that you made it out of there safely.

EMILY

It was Howie's whistle, Dad—the one he used to carry around in his Eagle Scout days.

MITCHELL

I remember that whistle—a red one.

EMILY

Yeah. I was hanging out in his room while he was packing up for Fort Benning. Out of nowhere he says, 'Take this, Sis. You might need it one day.' And he handed it to me... Are you okay, Dad?

Lyrical musical underscoring begins.

MITCHELL

(looking off into the distance)

Yeah ... I am. It's just that Were those his exact words?

EMILY

Yes, I think so —

MITCHELL

No, no, no, not 'I think so'. I'd like you to try to tell me his exact words, as you remember them. Please, honey.

EMILY

Those were ... his exact words. As I remember them.

Lights fade on Mitchell, who then exits.

EMILY

(to audience)

I know in my heart that I'm fairly truthful. I also know that I'm a fabulist. Sometimes you just have to connect the dots between the two of them. Everything I told my dad was true, except the part about Howie handing me his whistle. What happened was this. After we got the news that he had died, I went into his room and lay on his bed for a while. Then I saw it, shiny and red, on his bookshelf, and I slipped it into my upper coat pocket, simply wanting to have something that belonged to him close to my heart. Howie was an Eagle Scout. I am his sister.

(a beat)

I'm going to skip ahead here. My dad drove over to Seattle about a month after my winter break, and took me out shopping for a new set of tires, tires with superior traction. It seemed as if he had started to turn a corner since I last saw him. He traded tire yarns with the guys at Les Schwab. I introduced him to my girlfriend, Ollie. The three of us went out for bowling, we went out for beers. We traded more stories, stories that made us laugh. Even stories about Howie. For an hour or so, we were all fabulists.

(a beat)

One day, if I have kids of my own, I'll tell them stories, and who knows?, they may think I'm the greatest storyteller who ever lived. But these stories, the stories that our fathers used to tell, the stories that we tell each other— they're not so much about the exact words we say, but rather about lifting each other up. Up out of the deepest wells, and back out of the snowy woods.

BLACKOUT. END OF
PLAY.