

Lily Hamrick

THE CENTERFOLD CLUB

The Jurassic Café was a Taiwanese theme restaurant, a place where the waitresses dressed like Wilma Flintstone and you could eat Taiwanese bar food right next to a story-high skeleton of a tyrannosaurus rex. It was in a strip mall, in the City of Industry, one of those no-man's lands in Los Angeles where Emily's work in medical claims administration sometimes took her. Mark happened to be in Los Angeles too, and he met her there after his hearing in federal court on Spring Street.

Mark closed the menu and drummed a tattoo of impatient beats on its plastic cover. Emily ordered three appetizers: two vegetable dishes and one meat. Mark ordered Tsingtao, a beer he drank all the time at the Chinese restaurant near their house in Oakland.

A cute girl in a leopard-skin skirt put the first appetizer in front of Mark. He made a face and stabbed his fork into the heap of pulpy green leaves.

"This isn't food," he said, holding his fork up to the light. "It's mold."

He put his fork down and pushed the dish in Emily's direction. He drank his beer. Emily was still surprised, even after almost twenty years of marriage, that he was so unadventurous about food.

"This is an ordinary Taiwanese snack," she said. She put her fork into the mass of green. "It is a well-steamed, green, leafy vegetable." She took a bite and chewed. "It is also very good."

Mark waved in the waitress's direction and ordered a second beer. He liked for Emily to choose restaurants, but he could be grumpy after he'd spent the day in court defending drug dealers and embezzlers, especially when he had to fly down to Los Angeles to do it. Like most people who lived in northern California, he was contemptuous of the southern part of the state. The only thing that had cheered him up about this trip was that Emily had to be there at the same time.

Emily took a bite of the chicken appetizer. It tasted liked fried calamari, but better.

"I visited a cardiac surgeon today," she said.

She started on the other vegetable dish. The main ingredient in this one was obviously green beans.

“He told me one of his patients recently died of a broken heart.” Mark ate a green bean. “He was trying to get you to sleep with him,” he said.

Mark was jealous of other men. It was endearing, a little irritating, and entirely unnecessary.

“He was cute,” Emily said. “But not my type.”

On good days, Emily was pretty. The trouble was that she could never guarantee a good day. Most days, when she woke up and studied herself in the mirror, she felt a moment’s shame and understood all over again that she was the woman in Mark’s journal, the one she’d found, before they married, in a box on the top shelf of his closet.

In the back of the journal, Mark had made a list of women. Each of Mark’s women had a code name. Next to *Little Red Riding Hood*, Mark had written “Ugly but interesting.” That was the year Emily wore a red wool coat. She recognized herself at once, the way you know the sound of your own voice when you hear a recording of it. Slightly distorted, it still couldn’t possibly be anyone other than you.

Emily ate green beans for a while. “The medical name for a broken heart is ‘takotsubo cardiomyopathy.’” Mark looked interested. He liked facts.

Mark ate some chicken and made an appreciative sound. “Good pick, Em.”

Emily liked him all of a sudden. He was very attractive when he tried to be nice.

“It happens to people who’ve never even had heart problems. Then there’s some awful tragedy and their heart breaks. Literally.”

The cardiologist had spent a long time that morning telling Emily about his patient, the woman with a broken heart. The cardiologist said his patient’s son had been hit by a car on his way to the store to buy the patient some pasta and a jar of sauce. Two days later the patient was dead. When the cardiologist opened up her body and took out her heart, the heart looked as if it had tried to escape from itself.

Emily made a fist and wiggled her fingers. “*Takotsubo* means octopus trap. Part of the heart bulges out of itself, like it’s trying to escape from a trap.”

Mark ate some more green beans. “You have a great job, Em,” he said.

“You could change jobs, you know,” she said.

“But then we’d be poor,” he said. “And I wouldn’t be able to keep you in the style to which I’m accustomed.”

Mark had grown up in Mill Valley. His parents were rich and liberal. He’d been a public defender for a while, but it didn’t pay very well, so he went into private practice. People paid him a lot to defend them. They weren’t usually good people, but Mark didn’t care about that. Emily admired him for doing his job so well, even though she sometimes secretly thought his clients might not deserve Mark’s help.

Emily said, “You could let me keep you in the style to which I am accustomed.” Her family was different from Mark’s. Her dad was a bartender, and the only thing he’d ever taught her was how to play the out-of-tune piano in the back of the bar where he worked. The boys at her high school didn’t play golf. They didn’t ski. They played vicious basketball games in the drizzle on courts where the baskets didn’t have nets.

Mark laughed and shook his head. “No thanks. I like our life. I like being married to you. You’re the most interesting woman I know.”

If Emily could change one thing about Mark, it would be compliments like this. He never said, “You are the most beautiful woman I know,” “You look pretty today,” or “That’s a great dress.” She knew other men did say this kind of thing. She’d seen them do it in movies and had read lines of dialogue in books that contained compliments like that. She never talked to her friends about it, though. She was embarrassed to admit how much this bothered her. But every time Mark praised her for her wit or her brains or her roast chicken, she remembered what he’d written in his diary. She only remembered it for a second, and then she pushed it down. He had married her, after all, because it is more important to be interesting than to be beautiful.

When they came outside into the dark, the strip mall parking lot was full of cars. Mark pointed across the parking lot.

“Let’s go in there,” he said.

Maybe all the people who’d parked their cars in the lot were where he was pointing—inside the Centerfold Club, whose entrance was lit by an intense pink glow. Or maybe they were next door, where the glow illuminated the Pleasure Palace, a shop that, on closer examination, appeared to sell latex miniskirts, thin leather whips, and handcuffs.

"It looks new," he added, as though newness alone made something worth visiting. Emily saw right away that Mark was not pointing at a bookstore, the newness of which might really matter.

"I'm not going to a strip club," she said.

Mark appraised her the same way he looked at his windsurfer when he was about to launch it into the San Francisco Bay and he wanted to make sure he had the right sail for the day's wind conditions.

"I thought you liked exotic things," he said.

"I like interesting vegetable dishes," Emily said. "Anyway, those strippers aren't as sexy up close as you'd think. For one thing, they've got fake tans." She didn't think it was necessary to mention the fake breasts.

"I didn't know you and your friends talked about that kind of stuff." Mark sounded amused and a little flirtatious. He was smiling at her as though she was a woman he didn't know.

"We don't," Emily said. In reality Emily and her three best friends—women she'd known since college and with whom she went away for a week every year—talked about sex all the time. They'd go out and drink martinis and talk about what kind of sex they liked and what they hated. One night, after a lot of Manhattans, the four of them took a vote on their views about oral sex. Seventy-five percent of them agreed that they loved being good at giving blow jobs because it made men so grateful. Twenty-five percent of them said that no amount of gratitude could get her to put foreign objects in her mouth.

Emily said, "I read an article about strip clubs in a magazine once. The dancer in the picture looked like a rotisserie chicken. Bronze skin. Going around and around a pole."

Emily rotated her hand at the wrist and smiled back at Mark. She liked it when he flirted with her.

"Be fair," Mark said. "I went to that place you picked. Now you have to do something I want."

"Go without me," she said. "You can take a cab back." She knew she'd go with him, but she thought it would look bad to give in without any objection.

"Be reasonable," he said. "This is Los Angeles. There are no cabs."

He strolled in the direction of the pink glow as though he was certain Emily would follow him. He was wearing a crisp white shirt, and he'd loosened his tie. He still looked a lot like he had in college,

when he'd played football, some position where it helped to be tall and nimble and to have long, strong arms.

Mark's arms didn't pull in footballs anymore, but Emily had spent years admiring them as he sailed away from her on his windsurfer. She liked the proportions of his body, especially the way it narrowed from his shoulders to his hips. Even though she was a little nearsighted and didn't wear glasses, she could still pick him out in a group of people walking toward her by his stride—which was much longer than most people's—and by the way he swung his arms a little bit, like he was about to do something with them. Every once in a while, he ducked his head. He was shy about being so tall and beautiful.

Her favorite parts of his body were his hands, which were surprisingly sensitive and eloquent for a man who was frequently and frustratingly monosyllabic. Sometimes the piano pieces she composed in the upstairs room of their house in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Oakland imitated the way he paused and then never answered her questions. She caught up with him at the door to the Centerfold Club. "I'll give it an hour," she said.

"You're going to love this, baby," he said. He never called her names like that. Emily thought it might be entertaining to spend an evening pretending to be a woman whose husband called her "baby."

"We'll see," she said. She smiled so he'd know she wasn't mad at him. Some of the things Mark liked were fun. Skiing, for example. She wouldn't have guessed it would feel so good to be at the top of a steep hill on a cold, windy day. That was how she felt now, even though it was a warm fall evening.

The lobby of the Centerfold Club was not lit by pink light, but by badly placed floor lamps that failed to illuminate anything that mattered, such as the long front desk, split in half by a turnstile, behind which was a small arch that looked like the entrance to a cave. Two stocky men stuffed into dark suits and a girl who was not wearing very much were standing behind the desk. The girl's short skirt and stomach-baring top weren't very different from the kinds of things girls in Oakland wore when it was hot. Except for the shoes. Girls in Oakland didn't teeter around with stilts on their feet.

The men in the too-tight suits were quite young—in their early twenties—and something about the way they were huddled together around the front desk made her think that maybe they didn't get a lot of customers here. She greeted them the same way she said hello to

the guys in the grocery store who knew her name and were there to serve her, help her find the powdered sugar when they decided to move it to a different aisle, and recalculate her bill when it failed to show her Safeway Club Card discount. She liked how it felt to talk to young guys that way.

“There are two of us,” she said, sweeping a hand in Mark’s direction. Mark stepped forward with his wallet in his hand.

“You’re free,” the smaller of the two men said to Emily.

“What a nice surprise,” Emily said. She smiled warmly at the young men—and the girl too—wishing them well in what was apparently a struggling small business, one with too many employees and too few paying customers. Mark paid twenty dollars and followed Emily through the turnstile.

The strip club was a lot like the roller-skating rink where she’d spent most of her adolescence in the Pacific Northwest, in a small, grim suburb where it was always raining, even when it wasn’t. There was the same circle in the middle where the action took place, the watchers clustered around it, the music, and the people going around and around in circles.

Emily led Mark across the room to a plush, high-backed purple velvet love seat. There were plenty of these love seats available, but she chose the one farthest from the door because she wanted to be able to see everyone and everything in the room.

A girl stepped onto the stage. She swung her body around and around what looked like a fire pole in the center of the stage.

Emily inhaled. The strip club had the same scent of longing and physical exertion as the Tacoma Roller Bowl. Its top notes were the Johnson’s Baby Powder they sprinkled in all the rental skates. The dry down was sweat mixed with the spilled Coke no one bothered to wipe up.

The girl who had been revolving around the pole hopped off the stage. No one clapped. A man standing against a wall gestured to a group of girls dressed in lingerie who were sitting on the purple love seat closest to the entrance. One walked toward him and began to dance in front of him. A girl dressed in a thong that might have been in a leopard print strolled onto the stage. Mark took off his tie.

This new girl was about twenty years old, not very pretty, and without any charms beyond the novelty of being naked in a room where some people weren’t. Emily had never liked monologues, never liked it when only one person occupied the stage. Nor did she like the

look of the man against the wall or the woman dancing in front of him. He was wearing a trucker hat, and Emily thought he was probably self-centered and boring. Mark shifted in his seat and drank from his Coke, which was the only thing he had been allowed to order, because they did not serve alcohol in the club.

“She’s very athletic, isn’t she?” Emily said as the girl on the stage did the splits on the floor and then lifted her bottom up and wiggled it in their direction. She felt as though she were watching a weird Olympic floor exercise.

Before Mark could answer, a topless girl in pink underpants approached them.

“You guys want a private dance?” she asked. She might as well have been asking if they wanted plastic or paper. Emily decided if she ever took a job in a strip club, she would do it much differently than this girl, whose nipples, on closer examination, had been pierced with studs that completely obscured the flesh. Hers were the breasts of a robot, if someone ever bothered to give a robot breasts. Emily would not pierce anything when she was a stripper, she thought, although maybe a little tattoo to suggest how wild she could be might be okay. And she would be suggestive, playful. Plus, she would look the customer in the eye and make a connection. If she ever got bored with exotic dancing, as this girl clearly was, Emily would retire and go back to medical claims administration.

Emily pointed at Mark. “He does,” she said. “He works too hard.” Mark did work too hard, but until now the remedy had been windsurfing. She didn’t look at Mark to see how he reacted to her suggestion, because she was already out of the love seat. She reached her hand out to him, and he took it.

They followed the girl, who told them her name was Aubrey, to an alcove full of little private booths. In front of each alcove was a post that looked like a miniature stoplight. Aubrey flipped a switch, and the light turned green.

Aubrey took Mark by the shoulders and pushed him lightly onto the padded seat built into the alcove. She turned to Emily, and the green light illuminated her pierced nipples, making them look a little like the bulbs on a Christmas tree.

“We’d better get you a chair,” Aubrey said to Emily. “You’re going to want some of this too.”

Emily was not sure she wanted anything, but she thought it might be rude to refuse. She was pretty sure the girl’s name was not

Aubrey, so when she asked Mark and Emily what their names were, Emily lied and said her name was Candy. Mark laughed out loud and said his name was Steve. Emily was not impressed with his effort, but she let it go.

"You two married?" Aubrey said, pushing Emily down on the chair.

"We're old friends," Emily said. She winked at Aubrey, who winked back. Emily looked at Mark and wondered what it would be like to have an affair with him and whether he had ever been unfaithful to her. She was surprised to realize that she knew the answer to her second question and had known it for a long time.

The private lap dance involved a lot of turning around on Mark and a lot of leaning back from him and wiggling. Mark glanced over at Emily once. She wondered if she looked beautiful in this light.

Emily said, "Are you married?"

Aubrey snorted. "No way. I have two kids, though. My sister's watching them tonight." She put Mark's hands on her waist.

"How late do you work?" Emily asked.

"Three," Aubrey said. She rotated her hips on Mark's lap.

"That's pretty late," Emily said. Mark's hands stayed on Aubrey's waist. Emily thought he was supposed to move them around, but maybe he was waiting for permission.

Aubrey came over to Emily and stood in front of her. She turned around and presented herself to Emily. Over her shoulder she said, "Spank me."

Emily laughed. "I'm not going to spank you."

Aubrey said, "People like it. Give it a try."

Emily tapped Aubrey politely on her bottom. Aubrey turned around and took Emily's hands, which she placed on her thighs. She leaned toward Emily and shook her breasts close to Emily's mouth.

"Feel me," Aubrey said.

Emily ran the tips of her fingers over Aubrey's thighs. Her skin was dry and bumpy. Emily wondered why a woman whose job it was to have people touch her skin wouldn't put a lot of lotion on it, if only as a barrier between her and the customers. But maybe Aubrey didn't need a barrier, or maybe she had a different way of keeping what mattered about herself from this place.

Mark was not smiling, but he didn't look unhappy either. He was so handsome, Emily thought, in his white shirt, with his beautiful

mouth. She felt a surge of longing for him that was quite out of the ordinary.

"Thank you," Emily told Aubrey, even though the light was still green. She took her hands from Aubrey's legs. Mark got out his wallet and handed Aubrey several bills.

"You can stay until the light turns red," Aubrey said.

Emily knelt on the padded bench where Mark was sitting. She placed one leg on each side of him. For once, she was taller than he. She leaned down and kissed him. She let him put his hands under her clothes and on her body. And she did other things with him; things that might be complicated and expensive to do with Aubrey; things they didn't do at home very often; things she knew he liked from the way he closed his eyes and whispered her name. Or maybe it was not her name he was whispering. She wasn't sure, because she wasn't listening to him anymore.

They left the private area only when she was quite finished finding out what it would be like to have him as a lover. She thought it would be better than having him as a husband. And that was when she decided it was time to leave Mark.

Something in her chest swelled. The cardiologist had explained that there were no permanent injuries from broken heart syndrome. If you survived it, the heart went back to normal and the whole thing went away as though it had never happened. She could see him now, leaning toward her and looking into her eyes, watching her as he spoke. He'd said, with the confidence of a man who looks inside people's bodies every day, "The heart knows its correct shape." When he moved closer and kissed her, she didn't tell him to stop. When he asked for her phone number, she gave it to him.

In the parking lot, Mark put his arm around her waist. Emily could not remember the last time he had done something tender like that. Even when they were very young and he had not been so sure of her, he had always walked ahead of her, and she had hurried to catch up.

It is never very cold in Los Angeles, Emily thought as they walked toward the car. If you lived here, you wouldn't have to wear a coat. You could be free in your own skin.