

## A Second Chance at Humble Oaks

by Nola Kane

There were two names left in Emma's contacts, not including any of her children or her grandson Morrison. Although it was one of those inevitabilities as she and the people around her grew older, all it did was remind her of when her parents started reaching this age; with every year, more names would be blacked out in their address books than not, more family friends and obscure strangers referred to only by their first names never to be called or sent letters again, until finally there was no one left. Emma remembered clicking around more in the last ten years herself, watching old numbers that she'd never call or text again blink away as she hit "delete contact." So many of these people she thought would be there forever, or at least until her time came. Her cousin Jessie, her best friend Mikayla, her other best friend Shannon...but time and disease had taken almost everyone, leaving her with only two acquaintances she hardly ever talked to anymore.

Although she wasn't completely alone, it was only her children and sometimes Morrison and the other grandchildren who would come to visit. These were sparse occasions, maybe once or twice a month, making the short time since she came to Humble Oaks Retirement Home seem much longer. Her grandchildren would half-listen to the stories she had to offer, being too young to really appreciate them, and her children would smile, the corners of their lips pinched with a sadness she never saw in them before. Had it not been for the two falls she had taken in the last year, she would still be at her and her husband Sam's old home, tending to her many plants or visiting the public library when she felt like it. It was getting increasingly more difficult to live alone, and her eyesight had gone too much, rendering driving unsafe. The years were getting shorter, and she wanted to spend the remaining years with as little stress as possible.

Her sister helped her find the place, but it left her with a lot less excitement, which she didn't have much of to begin with. By now her daily

routine at Humble Oaks was as familiar to her as the routines she had when she was living alone, then when she and Sam moved in together, and then after Sam passed a decade ago, when she suddenly had more free time than she knew what to do with and spent much of it at first wishing the disease hadn't taken him away. In this new life, the day would start with breakfast at 8, and she would spend the next few hours reading in the garden if it was nice, or in the reading room if not, but always by the windows so she could watch the rain. After lunch she might chat for a little while with Jerome, who had problems with his kidneys, or Maggie, who couldn't hear or see very well, but these were mostly conversations of politeness. She felt bad sometimes being here, watching people not much older than her 76 years deteriorating, or dealing with health concerns far greater than the comparatively minor concerns she had, but she tried her best to socialize and make friends. Every other day, she would go to the gym and spend a little time on the treadmill, or the elliptical if she was feeling ambitious, enough to keep her conditioned but not so much that her joints started to ache again. Then dinner would roll around, and a couple hours later she would be tucked away in bed so she could be ready to do the same thing all over again at 8 the next morning.

Although she enjoyed her new life, it seemed as though all she was doing now was passing the time. And although she tried to think about the nice things she had to wait for, such as these occasional visits from her family, she didn't like to think about the real thing she was waiting for.

It was one day when Emma had been reading one of her books in the reading room, the pattering of the rain on the glass soothing her into the world of Shirley Jackson, that she heard someone say, "Hello." She didn't look up at first, since it was an unfamiliar voice, and she wasn't sure if the person was talking to her. Maybe they were talking to someone else in the room, or maybe somebody got lost.

"Hello," the person said again. Emma looked up, and an old man with thick, square rimmed glasses perched on a crooked nose looked down at her. He wore a short sleeve, neon green button up, unbuttoned over an old My Chemical Romance shirt, and a pair of loose black jeans. The brightness of his shirt hurt her eyes to look at. It looked like something a former emo kid might've worn. Most people her age, both in and out of Humble Oaks, dressed not much different than their parents at this age, although you would get the

rare Billie Eilish or the Weeknd t-shirt, faded from countless washes over so many years. Thinking about this too much made Emma a bit sad.

"Hi," she said, holding her place in the book with a finger. "Can I help you?"

"Don't know, do you work here?" The man winked at her, and Emma tried not to wince. The blinding neon grew on her, but even friendly winks always felt ever so slightly creepy. "I'm new around here, and I thought I'd introduce myself to everyone. I'm Ashton Andrews."

He held out a pale, gnarled hand, and Emma took it, giving it as firm a shake as she could manage having been caught off guard during her reading time. He didn't look like an Ashton. He was almost completely bald and stooped over. Even in old age, Ashtons are supposed to have thick hair, even if it's receding a little, taking a stately step back from the temples. Even in old age, Ashtons are supposed to stand tall, and if they carry a cane it's supposed to look like an accessory as they loom over it. They're supposed to have broad muscles that, while weathered, still show the strapping young man they once were hidden somewhere underneath. They weren't supposed to be so scrawny and crouched over and pale and...old.

Emma cringed. No one ever called anyone a "strapping young man" even when she was young.

"What book are you reading?" he asked.

She showed him the cover: *the Haunting of Hill House*. She had been in her early twenties when she first discovered the book after the Netflix show premiered, and it became a comfort read she pulled out whenever she needed to get away from her own family's drama. It was funny to think how the problems she had didn't seem so simple when she was living through them, but all the problems she was worried about back then were all just stories for her to remember now as she revisited these pages. Or to share with someone else, if they were willing to hear. "Nothing you'd be interested in."

"Well, you don't know that," he said, his gray eyes glittering over his hipster glasses. "Maybe I like my share of ghost stories, too."

Before Emma could come up with something clever to say, Ashton waved a hand, drifting out of the reading room. Somewhere down the hallway, he called, "Hello!" to someone else. She listened for a minute as he chatted them up, trying to figure out who it was, and when she couldn't she opened her book back up. He was a bit odd. But not a bad odd. Emma made a note to

herself to keep an eye out for him while he made himself the man about town at Humble Oaks.

The next few days passed by with little incident. Sometimes Emma would see Ashton when she went to have breakfast or dinner, but he was usually talking to somebody else. Although he was animated and Emma could hear his croaking voice across the room, he didn't create a great upheaval like Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or otherwise make too much of a spectacle of himself. One day he gave Emma another wink as he passed her spot during lunch, and she winced internally again, but not as hard as she did before. It was just a quirk, and she had picked up a few herself over the years.

That night she stayed up late reading another one of her books, *the Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern, another old favorite. She let herself be consumed by the mystique of the circus in the book, of circuses in general, reminding her of how enchanted she was as a child by a seemingly unattainable dream. So few of them remained even then, although she was glad that those that remained had long stopped abusing the animals who people used to clap and laugh at. It was a fantasy she could indulge in when she wanted to escape for a little while. Nothing more.

When she finally pulled her gaze away from the pages open in her lap, the clock up on the wall was ticking past 9 o'clock. Well past her bedtime. Even though she didn't have many commitments nowadays, she liked to keep a regular schedule. Whenever she slept until noon when she was younger, she always felt like she had wasted the day, and she didn't want to get into any funk like that at this stage of her life.

As she walked down the forest green hall, a calming shade that was welcome compared to the ugly yellow or bleak gray that seemed common to places like these, she could hear electronic sounds, cheerful music and *pings*, coming from one of the rooms at the far end. She figured someone was in the rec room, playing at the old pinball machine or even at one of the video game consoles. It wouldn't be the first time. In the first month Emma stayed at Humble Oaks, one of the residents, Olivia, set up a console and held an impromptu Guitar Hero night. The following night Scott, who used to be in a band, brought his acoustic guitar in from his room to treat anyone who would listen "to some real music." Although she just sat and watched the others play, using her arthritis as an excuse, Emma thought that night could have been the

beginning of her having a bit of a social life, but these occasions fizzled out when Olivia got sick and left for a facility that would accommodate the level of care that she needed.

Ordinarily she avoided the rec room, feeling it was too soon after Olivia's departure to try scooching in on any game nights, or trying to hold one for herself. But despite herself, Emma stood at the corner of the door and peered in. It was just Ashton in there, playing alone, cocooned in a baggy black hoodie. Everyone else had probably gone to bed by this hour. He was really going at it, too, pulling the controller almost to his shoulder, his thumbs jabbing away at the buttons. Watching him sparked a memory within Emma of her own grandmother, a sunny afternoon when against the older woman's protestations to go outside and enjoy the nice weather Emma begged her to play one of her adventure video games with her. She thought she would enjoy the unique storyline and the cheerful fantasy world in which Emma spent hours and hours running around just in the year she got it. But no matter how she tried to explain the controls to her grandma, she couldn't grasp the concept. Occasionally her grandma would push at the joystick to make her character move forward an inch or two, but then would stop, and ask Emma what happened next. In hindsight Emma wondered if she wasn't just trying to make an excuse for them to go outside together, and she didn't quite blame her.

Her heart quivered. How many years had passed since she last saw her? When she looked back, it didn't feel like it was so long ago, when really it was more than half a century in the past, in a completely different world. What would she think of the old woman her granddaughter had become? If she were to look deeper at her reflection in the mirror, past her mother's features she slowly took on, the little button of her nose that slowly grew more bulbous over the years, the lines around her thinning lips like a Cupid's bow being whittled away by time, would her grandmother start to come to the surface? Just by looking in the mirror, could she glimpse someone she thought she would never see again?

"I see you there," Ashton croaked. Emma looked at the screen, and even though her vision was a little blurry, she could tell by the layout of the screen and bright colors that he was playing Mario Kart. Her eyes scanned for a hidden enemy or a Blue Shell or something unsavory he had scoped out. But instead, he turned to face her, pulling down his hood so she could see the

wavery little grin on his near nonexistent lips. "I see you there," he repeated. "You wanna join?"

Emma stepped forward from behind the paneling, over the threshold to the door. She thought about making an excuse about how it was past her bedtime, but sleep couldn't have been further from her mind. She couldn't remember the last time anybody asked her to play a video game with them.

Ashton paused the game and exited the race as she took the open seat next to him on the couch, then clicked through a few more menus to set the game to two player mode. Once they were back to the select screen, he reached forward and handed the controller to Emma. "First choice," he said.

"Oh, how kind of you," Emma replied, a coy smile creeping across her lips.

When she cycled through the screen and clicked on Shy Guy, Ashton arched an eyebrow. "Shy Guy?"

Emma shrugged. "I liked ghosts a lot as a kid. I always picked him. He's so cute and looks kind of spooky."

Ashton took a little more time, cycling through the selection of characters at least twice before finally landing on Princess Peach.

"Princess Peach?" Emma asked, mirroring Ashton's eyebrow lift.

"I always thought princesses were pretty."

As they waited for the race arena to load up, Emma refamiliarized herself with the buttons and joysticks of the controller in her hands. "If you really want to speed up, you have to hold down the A button while pushing the joystick," Ashton said as the sunny racetrack appeared on the screen.

"I remember," Emma replied, readying her thumbs over the respective buttons, the screen pinging out curvy white letters: "3...2...1... GO!"

And with that, they were off, bumping past each other down the digital racetrack. After the first lap, she cycled through her power-ups and made her character toss a banana peel behind her, right into Ashton's path, sending his character careening in circles. "Hey!" When she looked at him, there was an exaggerated frown on his face, and she was surprised to feel the smile on her face almost hurting the corners of her mouth.

As they dashed down the racetrack, she wondered what kind of a kid he was when he first started playing. If he was a casual gamer who played with his brothers but spent most of his time outdoors or on the ball court. If he shut

himself inside either alone or with other, nerdy friends and spent hours every day playing. "Do you remember how you got into video games?"

Ashton leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he zeroed in on the game, the action on the screen reflecting off the lenses of his glasses. "It was my brother Owen," he mused. "He started me on gaming. He bought my first games when I was seven for Christmas. We spent all that day playing together. We'd get stuck on the same levels and just waste time making our characters jump on each other's heads and laughing until Mom called us up for turkey."

Emma tried to gauge by his tone whether Owen was still around or not. He didn't sound overly emotional, but his voice sounded far away. "That's funny. My big sister got me into gaming around the same time, too."

"What'd you all play?" he asked. When Emma was younger, even though lots of guys were cool with her playing, she always had that sneaking suspicion that someone would suggest that she and her sister just played house, digital edition, or one of the old Barbie video games. Sometimes they did. People got better as she got older, but there were always jerks around. He, however, seemed genuinely curious.

"Mostly the Sims, a few movie tie-in games, Mario of course. We tried playing Zelda but I got freaked out by the giant spider monster and hid behind the couch and watched her beat the rest of it."

"Well, I don't tell a lot of people this, but when my brother and I played some of our old games, the Game Over music would freak me out so much that I wouldn't pick up the game for months afterward, knowing I'd fail again. Literal months. These weren't even horror games." The way he talked reminded Emma of her father, how he would tell stories, how his pace grew slower as he got older while remaining no less animated, lulling Emma deeper into the story, taking her back in time with him to memories of her that she had never considered from his perspective. He scratched the back of his head, through the sparse bristles of what remained of his white hair. "I don't know why I'm so embarrassed. There aren't really a lot of people to tell anymore."

Emma thought about the contacts list in her phone, the only numbers left those of her two remaining acquaintances and the remaining members of her family. She felt something in her heart quiver again. "Ashton..."

He waved his hand in blithe dismissal. "Just call me Ash, I fucking hate Ashton." The word 'fuck' coming from his mouth was a bit jarring.

Although swear words were occasionally dropped by residents and staff alike at the home, they were seldom tossed into conversation so casually.

But it wasn't as jarring as what Emma caught on the screen next: a small, blue object covered in spikes rocketing down the track, headed directly for her character. Her mouth dropped open. "You did NOT just Blue Shell me!" she shouted, tossing the controller down in her lap, as her character spun in a dazed circle in place, unable to move.

Ash just shook his head, a smug look on his face. "All's fair."

Emma scowled and crossed her arms, waiting as she watched Ash's character speed along the racetrack, gaining on her character frozen in their little buggy of a car. In moments he would be in first place instead. "All's fair, but you're still evil," she said out of the corner of her mouth as Ash passed her, laughing through his nose. When the effects of the Blue Shell wore off, her character picked up and began to move again. She gained on Ash until they were almost neck and neck, headed for the black and white checkerboard of the finish line, an inch or two's distance from each other as they crossed over.

The words YOU WON!! burst out of the screen, Emma's character jumping for joy as Ash's character hung her head in defeat.

Ash beamed at her and presented her with the knuckles of his right fist. "Good game!"

Obliging, Emma curled her fingers to a fist and tapped her knuckles to his. It took her a little longer than it would normally for her to uncurl them. "I think I need a break," she groaned, flexing her fingers and rubbing at her knuckles. Maybe her grandma hadn't been making excuses at all. She knew video games were hard on her arthritic hands, but she thought she'd be able to get through more than just one game.

"That sucks," Ash said, a frown creasing his already heavily lined forehead, his fingers straying to the knuckles of his other hand in sympathy.

Emma let out a small laugh. "Happens to the best of us." Her gaze fell into her lap as she continued to work at her fingers, flexing them to try and get them to loosen up. "It's strange. When I was a kid I couldn't imagine all of us old and gray, like our grandparents, or even our parents, hunched over our bingo sheets or our Mary Higgins Clark novels."

Ash gave her a blank look. "I don't think I've ever heard of her."

Emma shrugged. "She was more our grandparent's generation. Think *Gone Girl* before *Gone Girl* was a thing."

“So, *Gone Girl* for Boomers?”

A cackle burst through Emma, and she had to take a moment to catch her breath. “Yes. I think. I never read Mary Higgins Clark. I only read the back covers of my mom’s old copies.” She paused. She couldn’t remember the last time she had bantered with somebody like this, either. “But all of those things seem to belong to a different world. I mean, can you imagine playing bingo?”

“Maybe in elementary school for Halloween or Christmas or some other holiday. I don’t know.” He held out a hand, indicating the paused screen, Emma’s character still cheering in midair. “I guess this is our bingo.”

She sighed. “All the years seem to get shorter as they pass. Shorter than ever. Looking back, it feels like I wasted so much time doing nothing but playing games as a kid.”

Ash said nothing at first. She wondered if she had the right to take the conversation in this direction. In fact, it seemed stupid now that she said it. She had no idea how much time Ash had left. She had no idea if he had survived anything, if he might be fighting something that she didn’t know about. Olivia had seemed fine...until it turned out she wasn’t. Some of these problems didn’t come up until a fifth or tenth conversation with people around here, or sometimes never. But he placed his controller on the sofa, unfazed, resting his elbow on the arm rest. “But you enjoyed playing them, didn’t you?”

Emma thought, and as she thought she studied Ash’s face, wondering what parts of him grew to resemble his parents over time, and in which ways. She wondered what things he might have accomplished as a young man, the dreams he had as a child, things he wanted to do with the time he had left, whether he could do these things or not. She wondered if he would ever share these things with her, or if he was the type who smiled and didn’t talk about things like that. “Well...if I could do it differently, I’d spend a little less time gaming so much. I’d still do it, but I’d go find other things to do, too.”

It wasn’t that Emma hadn’t done other things with her time, things she had wanted to do, from visiting Ireland and Japan to getting to participate at a Renaissance Faire in the next town over every year with Sam, until it was just her dressed up in her velvet and headdresses mingling with all the new faces come to experience the spectacle. But looking back, she remembered spending more of her time being sad or stressed out, and less of it doing the things she really loved. Only now was she realizing how little time she had had then. She didn’t usually let her mind go there, but there really was so much she

hadn't gotten around to doing that she had wanted to. It felt as though she had so much time back then, even if it seemed to have passed so quickly. Looking back, the years that she and Sam had together in particular seemed so short, and they spent almost three decades together before he got sick. Meanwhile, the time she had was now almost up, and the physical potential that came with her youth was gone, where now she could barely play a video game or use the elliptical machine in the gym without hurting.

As though hearing her thoughts, Ash cut in, "But your life doesn't have to be over. It might be harder, but it's not like you have to just give up. There are plenty of things you can do. No one has to stop you."

Emma let Ash's words sink in. That wasn't necessarily true. Years and years before, she had wanted to work at a haunted house, but after daydreaming about it and talking about it with people for some time, a coworker told her about how her daughter got punched in the face by a customer who got scared and panicked. Emma never understood why anyone would do something so reckless, knowing that they were visiting a haunted house so people could scare them. But after hearing this story she decided to fold up that dream and place it in a drawer somewhere deep in her mind to pull out and remember occasionally during the Halloween season, but to move on from otherwise. She supposed working at the circus wouldn't be much different with all the hazardous, death-defying stunts, either.

But even though she had to take breaks for her hands and other joints, she could still do quite a few things. She did still use the elliptical machine from time to time as a challenge, even though overusing it would make it difficult to move, her knees and elbows creaking painfully. She just opened herself up to playing video games with someone for the first time in ages, probably since her children had been young, even though her hands hurt and if she continued too long her eyes would probably start hurting from the glare, too. And despite all the losses she faced over the years, she wanted to know more about this person who just ran a race with her, regardless of how much time he may or may not have left. She hadn't even been sure that she would have a friend to trade stories with, to share secrets with, to play video games with, ever again. To imagine the other things she could do again...

So she would have to take precautions. So what? There were still things that she wanted to do. It was like Ash had said: no one would have to stop her. If someone tried, she'd find a way around them. She was still in

