



HONEYDEW

A short story

EDITH PEARLMAN

ART BY

AUBREY LEARNER

CALDICOTT ACADEMY, a private day school for girls, had not expelled a student in decades. There were few prohibitions. Drinking and drugging and having sex right there on the campus could supposedly get you kicked out; turning up pregnant likewise; that was the long and short of it. There was a rule against climbing down the side of the ravine on the west side of the school, where a suicide had occurred a century earlier, but the punishment was only a scolding.

Alice Toomey, headmistress, would have welcomed a rule against excessive skinniness. Emily Knapp, all ninety pounds of her, was making Alice feel enraged, and, worse yet, making her feel incompetent—she, Alice, awarded the prize for Most Effective Director two years in a row by the Association of Private Day Schools. This tall bundle of twigs that called itself a girl—Alice’s palms ached to spank her.

Emily: eleventh grade, all As, active member of various extracurricular activities, excused from

sports for obvious reasons. She visited a psychiatrist once a month and a nutrition doctor once a week, who emptied her pockets of rocks and insisted that she urinate before stepping on the scale. She had been hospitalized only twice. But according to her mother, Emily was never more than two milligrams away from an emergency admission.

She displayed other signs of disorder. Hair loss. Skin stretched like a membrane over the bones of the face. A voice as harsh as a saw. But her conversation, unless the subject was her own body mass, was intelligent and reasonable.

Alice had endured a series of painful meetings with Dr. Richard Knapp, physician and professor of anatomy, and his wife, Ghiselle. The three met in Alice’s dowdy office. The atmosphere was one of helplessness.

On one of those occasions, “I worry about death,” Alice dared to say.

“Her death, if it occurs, will be accidental,” said Emily’s father evenly.

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Ghiselle flew at him. "You are discussing some stranger's case history, yes?" Despite twenty-five years in Massachusetts, she retained a French accent and French syntax, not to mention French chic and French beauty.

Richard said: "It is helpful to keep a physician's distance."

Husband and wife now exchanged a look that the unmarried Alice labeled enmity. Then Richard placed his fingers on Ghiselle's chiffon arm, but it

was Alice he looked at. "Emily doesn't want to die," he said.

"That is so?" scoffed Ghiselle.

"She doesn't want a needle fixed to her vein. She doesn't want an IV pole as a companion."

"That is so?"

"She doesn't want to drive us all crazy."

"What *does* she want?" said Alice; and there was a brief silence as if the heavy questions about Emily's condition and the condition of like sufferers were about to be answered, here, now, in Godolphin, Massachusetts.

"She wants to be very, very, very thin," said Richard. No shit, thought Alice. "Achhoopf," snorted Ghiselle, or something like that. She herself was very thin, again in the way of Frenchwomen—shoulders charmingly bony, neck slightly elongated. Her legs under her brief skirt—too brief for fifty? not in this case—were to die for; Caldicott students would unimaginatively have said.

"She wants to become a bug, and live on air," Richard added, "and a drop or two of nectar. She thinks—she sometimes thinks—she was meant to be born an insect."

Alice shuddered within her old-fashioned dress. She wore shirtwaists, very long in order to draw attention away from her Celtic hips and bottom, and always blue: slate, cornflower, the sky before a storm. She wondered if this signature style would become a source of mockery. She was forty-three, and six weeks pregnant—in another few months the shocked trustees would have to ask her to resign. Perhaps it would be more honorable

to expel herself. "What can we do?" she asked.

"We can chain her to a bed and ram food down her throat," said Ghiselle, her accent lost in her fury. Alice imagined herself locking the chain to the headboard. Now Richard's fingers slid down the chiffon all the way to Ghiselle's fingers. Five fiery nails waved him off. The two younger Knapp daughters, their weight normal, were good students, though they lacked Emily's brilliance and her devotion to whatever interested her.

"Emily must find her own way to continue to live," said Richard, at last providing something useful and true; but by now neither woman was listening.

THOUGH CALDICOTT was not a residential school, Emily had been given a room to herself. It was really a closet with a single window looking out on the forbidden ravine. Mr. da Sola, jack-of-all-trades, had lined two of the walls with shelves. Mr. da Sola was a defrocked science teacher from the public schools who had seen fit to teach intelligent design along with evolution and had paid for that sin.

"I don't need another science teacher," Alice had said, wondering where he got the nerve to sit on the corner of her desk. What dark brows he had, and those topaz eyes . . .

"That's good; I don't want to be a science teacher," he told her. He didn't tell her that no other private school had agreed to interview him. "I want to return to my first loves, carpentry and gardening." So she took him on.

On Mr. da Sola's shelves Emily had placed her specimen collection equipment; the specimens themselves, collected from the ravine and its banks; and some books, including the King James Bible and an atlas of South America. There was also a box of crackers, a box of prunes, and several liters of bottled water.

Emily was permitted to take her meager lunch here and also her study periods, for the study hall nauseated her, redolent as it was of food recently eaten and now being processed, and sometimes of residual gases loosed accidentally or mischievously. So she dined among her dead insects, admiring chitinous exoskeletons while she put one of three carrot sticks into her mouth. Chitin was not part of mammal physiology, though she

had read that after death and before decomposition, the epidermis of a deceased human develops a leathery hardness, chitinlike it could be called, which begins to resemble the beetles who gorge on the decaying corpse and defecate at the same time, turning flesh into compost. The uses of shit were many. The most delightful was manna. Emily liked the story of Moses leading the starving Israelites into the desert. Insects came to their rescue. Of course the manna, which Exodus describes as a fine frost on the ground with a taste like honey, was thought to be a miracle from God, but it was really Coccidae excrement. Coccidae feed on the sap of plants. The sugary liquid rushes through the gut and out the anus. A single insect can process and expel many times its own weight every hour. They flick the stuff away with their hind legs, and it floats to the ground. Nomads still eat it—relish it. It is called honeydew.

Ah, Coccidae. She could draw them—she loved to draw her relatives—but unfortunately the mature insect is basically a scaly ball: a gut in a shell. It was more fun to draw the ant—its proboscis, pharynx, two antennae. Sometimes she tried to render its compound eye, but the result looked too much like one of her mother's jet-beaded evening pouches. She could produce a respectable diagram of the body, though: the thorax, the chest area, and the rear segment, segmented itself, which contained the abdomen and, right beside it, the heart.

RICHARD WAS PULLING his sweater over his head. The deliberate gesture revealed, one feature at a time, chin, mouth, nose, eyelids closed against the woolen scrape, eyebrows slightly unsettled, broad high brow, and, finally, gray hair raised briefly into a cone.

Alice and two Caldicott teachers lived on the school grounds. Their three little houses fronted on the grassy field where important convocations were held. The backs of the houses overlooked the ravine. In the wet season the ravine held a few inches of water—enough for that determined suicide a century ago. These days it provided a convenient receptacle for an empty beer can and the occasional condom. On the far side of the ravine was a road separating Godolphin from the next

town. The Knapps lived in a cul-de-sac off that road. Leaving his house, walking across the road, sideslipping down his side of the ravine and climbing sure-footed up hers—in this athletic manner Richard had been visiting Alice twice and sometimes three times a week, in the late afternoon, for the past few years. Sometimes he picked a little nosegay of wildflowers on his way. Alice popped them into any old glass—today the one on her bureau. She was undressed before his sweater had cleared his head. And so, reclining, naked thighs crossed against her own desire, she watched the rest of the disrobing, the careful folding of clothes. Sometimes crossing her thighs didn't work, and she'd surrender to a first bliss while he busied himself hanging his jacket on the chair. Not today, though. Today she managed to keep herself to herself like the disciplined educator she was, waited until her body was covered by his equally disciplined body; opened her legs; and then spinster teacher and scholarly physician discarded their outer-world selves, joined, rolled, rolled back again, each straining to become incorporated into the other, to be made one, to form a new organism wanting nothing but to make love to itself all day long. Perhaps some afternoon they—it—would molt, grow wings, fly away, and, its time on earth over, die entwined in its own limbs and crumble to dust before midnight.

EMILY DIDN'T DO DRUGS often. Her substance of choice—her only substance, in fact—was *bi-cho de taquara*, a moth grub found in the stems of Brazilian bamboo plants, but only when they are flowering. Mr. da Sola tended bamboo in one corner of the Caldicott glass-covered winter garden. He harvested the grubs, removed their heads, dried them, ground them up, and stored the resulting powder in a jar labeled "Rat Poison." Each year he produced about six teaspoons of the stuff; three times a year he and Emily swallowed a spoonful each . . .

The Malalis, in the province of Mines, Brazil, report an ecstatic sleep similar to but shorter than the unconscious state produced by opium, and full of visual adventures. Emily could attest to that, but she did not share her visions with Mr. da Sola, who enjoyed his own private coma



beside her on the floor of her little room. In Emily's repeated dream she was attending a banquet where she was compelled to crawl from table to table, sampling the brilliant food: pink glistening hams, small crispy birds on beds of edible petals, smoked fish of all colors ranging from the deep orange of salmon to the pale yellow of butterfish. And then: salads within whose leaves lurked living oysters recently plucked from their shells, eager to be nibbled by Emily; the mauve feet of pigs, lightly pickled; headcheese, the fragrance of calf still floating from its crock. And vegetables: eggplant stewed with squash blossoms; a pumpkin, its hat off, stuffed with crème fraîche and baked. And desserts: melons the color of peaches and peaches the size of melons, fig preserves in hazelnut cups; and, at last, a celestial version of *brie en croûte*, the croûte made of moth wings, for Mr. da Sola allowed a few moth grubs to hatch and mature and deposit their larvae before he gently pinched them dead and removed their new wings, and he caught butterflies too, in the outside garden, and sewed wing to wing to make several round fairy quilts and sugared and steamed them and laid them out on the carpenter's table and plopped into each a light cheese faintly curdled; and then he molded several croûtes and baked them. He did all this off-dream. Emily plunged into the pastries. When she awoke there was often white exudate on her teeth, which she removed with her forefinger. Then she rubbed her fingertip dry on the unvarnished floor of the room while watching Mr. da Sola awake from his own glorious adventure, whatever it was. She suspected Alice was its heroine.

THE REST OF HER TIME in the little room, Emily studied. She was master of the ant heart — like the hearts of all insects it was a primitive tube — and had now turned her attention to the complicated stomach. She was soon to give a lecture on the ant stomach to the middle school and to anyone else who wanted to listen. Caldicott students were encouraged to share their interests. Wolfie Featherstone had recently talked about utopian societies, and her sidekick, Adele Alba, had analyzed figures of speech and the power of syntax.

And so, one Tuesday, Emily stood on a platform beside an easel where her diagrams were propped.

"The abdomen is the segmented tail area of an ant," she rasped, pointing with her father's hiking stick. "It contains the heart, and would you believe it the reproductive organs too, well you probably would believe that, and it contains most of the digestive system. It is protected by an exoskeleton. And get this" — she licked her lips and let her pointer hang vertically between her pipecleaner legs until it touched the floor, making her look like a starving song-and-dance man — "the ant has not one stomach but two."

"So does the cow," drawled a fat girl.

"The cow's two stomachs only serve the cow."

"Serve the cow only," corrected Adele.

"Whatever. The ant's larger stomach, called the crop, is at the service of all. As an ant collects food and eats it, the nutrient is dissolved into a liquid and stored in the crop. When a fellow ant is hungry, its antennae stroke the food-storer's head. Then the two ants put their mouths together, together, together" — she controlled her unseemly excitement with the aid of the soothing smile Mr. da Sola sent from the back of the room — "and the liquid food passes from one to the other. And in addition to the generous crop, each ant has another, smaller stomach, its 'personal belly.'"

Alice, wearing a faded denim dress, said, "Then the larger stomach belongs to the community."

"Yes!" said Emily. "And if philosophers had brains in their heads they would realize that the ant's collective pouch is the most advanced device that evolution or God if you prefer has come up with."

"A soup kitchen," interrupted the fat girl.

"And the ant feeding her associates through her mouth out of her own belly is the fundamental act from which the social life, the virtues, the morality, and the politics of the formicary — that's the word for the ant as a society — are derived." Alice saw that Emily used no notes. "Compared to this true collective, Wolfie, Brook Farm is a sandbox."

A few girls were gagging or at least making gagging sounds.

"The ant is being exploited by her pals," said the irritating fattie. Her size six jeans were big on her and she wore her little sister's tee. A strip of pink flesh showed between the two, like a satin ribbon. "When does *she* eat?"

"She cannot be said to eat as we understand eating," said Emily severely. "She collects and stores and regurgitates. She is the lifespring of her world."

"So we evolved, and lost our second stomach," said Wolfie. "We got ourselves brains instead. A good deal."

"What's good about the brain?" said Emily. "*It* evolved to make money and war."

"Zeugma!" shouted Adele Alba.

PERHAPS IT WAS BECAUSE of the only moderate success of her lecture, perhaps because of her binge at the banquet—at any rate, Emily turned up at the nutritionist that week at an unacceptable weight. She was hospitalized. She was not forced, but her room's bathroom had no door, and while she consumed one pea at a time she was watched by a nurse's aide with baroque curves.

"Sugar, eat," coaxed the aide.

"Honey, do," mocked Emily. But she acceded to the regimen; her work was calling her. Soon she'd gained enough to be discharged, though she'd have to see the nutritionist twice a week for a while. She was released a day earlier than planned. Her mother drove to the hospital in a downpour. She brought a present: a long, black vinyl raincoat with a hood.

"Thank you," said Emily, unsurprised at the kindness of the gift. Her mother was everything a human was entitled to be: outspoken, attached to her particular children, unacquainted with tact. Ghiselle had no concern for the superorganism—but, after all, ever since the development of the spine, the individual had become paramount, the group disregarded. Ghiselle was only following the downhill path of her species.

"There's a candy bar in the pocket of the raincoat," said Ghiselle.

"Oh."

"Wolfie and Adele can split it. *Veux-tu rentrer?*"

"*Pas encore. Laisse moi à la bibliothèque, s'il te plaît.*" Emily was the only member of the family, Richard included, who had mastered enough French to converse with her mother in her mother's tongue.

Ghiselle parked and Emily got out of the car. The rain had stopped. The new coat concealed

Emily's emaciation, and she had raised her hood against the suspended mist that had followed the rain, so her patchy hair was concealed too. She looked, Ghiselle thought, like any serious modern girl—bound for medical school, maybe, or a career in science.

Emily crossed the modest campus and entered the library. Ghiselle blew her nose and drove away.

"EMILY IS THE HEROINE of the moment," Alice murmured into Richard's shoulder.

"Is she? They all love insects now?"

"No, they envy her monomania—"

"Polymania is more like it. Subway systems, for instance—she can diagram the underground of every major city in the world."

"And they associate it with her lack of appetite, and they associate *that* with free will. 'You can get a lot done if you choose to skip dinner,' Wolfie Featherstone told me. Richard, not eating will become a fad and then a craze and then a cult."

"Well, bulk the girls up ahead of time. Have the cook serve creamed casseroles instead of those stingy salads."

Alice groaned. "You are undermining Caldicott's famed nutrition."

"Screw nutrition. The body tends to take care of itself unless it's abused. All the girls except Emily are strong enough to beat carpets."

"Beat carpets? The maids do that once a year."

"Ghiselle does it more often."

"Ghiselle? I don't believe you. Ghiselle is a *grand dame*."

"On the surface. She's a peasant inside." He withdrew his arm gently from beneath Alice's shoulder, clasped his hands under his head. The watery light from the uncurtained window shone on him—on them both, Alice supposed, but she had lost all sense of herself except as a receptacle with grasping muscles and a hungry mouth. Only her lover was illuminated. His pewter hair swept his forehead, sprouted from his underarms, curled around his nipples, provided a restful nest

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for his penis, too restful maybe . . . she leaned over and blew on the nest and got things going again.

And afterward . . . well, this woman had come late to passion and had not yet learned restraint. “Do you love Ghiselle the grand dame or Ghiselle the peasant?”

“I love you, Alice.”

“You *do*?”

“I do.” He loved Ghiselle too, but he didn’t burden Alice with that information. He had come to

believe that monogamy was unnatural. He would like to practice polygamy, bigamy at least, but Ghiselle would run off to Paris, taking the girls . . .

“Oh, Richard,” Alice was lovingly sighing. Then there was silence,

and the room that had seemed so steamy grew cool like a forest brook, and she was as happy as she had ever been. They lay side by side in that silence.

“So you’ll leave her,” Alice ventured after a while.

“ . . . No.”

“No!” She sat up. “You are going to stay with the bitch.”

“She is not a bitch. We’re a bit of a misalliance, that’s all, fire and steel you might say.”

“Misalliance? A disaster!”

He kissed her left nipple, and the right, and the navel; and if she’d had any sense she would have dropped the argument and lain down again. Instead, “You’re going to stay with her for the sake of the children instead of divorcing her for the sake of yourself. And for the sake of me,” she cried. “But Richard. Children survive this sort of thing. Sometimes I think they expect it. I’ve noticed at the bat mitzvahs I get invited to, and I get invited to them all, the girls with two sets of parents and a colony of half-sibs—they’re the snappiest. Richard, come live with me, come live with me and be my—” He covered her mouth with his. “We belong together,” she said when she got her breath, and he did it again. “You are practicing probity,” she said, and this time he didn’t interrupt her. “You are a prig!” She began to sob in earnest. He held her until the sobs grew less frequent, and

they lay down again, and she fell asleep, and he held her for some time after that.

At five o’clock he woke her. Bleakly they dressed, back to back. Richard put on the clothes he’d folded earlier; Alice pulled on jeans and a wedgewood sweater. Then they turned. Her cheekbone touched his jaw. *We’ll meet again*. Richard left by the back door, walking carefully because the rain had made the earth slick. The air was cold now. Alice, standing at the doorway, crossed her arms in front of her waist and cupped her elbows in her hands. Women have worried in that position for centuries. She watched her lover make his slippery way toward the bottom of the ravine. Maybe Paolo da Sola would marry her. She could raise his salary.

Emily was now standing on Alice’s side of the ravine not far from Alice’s house. She leaned against a birch. She had just left the library where she had been reading about ants’ circles of death. Sometimes ants, for no apparent reason, form a spiral and run in it continuously until they die of exhaustion. What kind of behavior was that from so evolved a creature? Oh, she had much to figure out. But at the moment all she wanted to do was watch her father behaving like a boy. If he sprained an ankle it would put a crimp in his love life. Too bad he didn’t have six ankles. But with only two he did manage to leap over the little creek at the bottom of the ravine, land without incident, and start to climb the far side. He did not look up over his right shoulder or he would have seen Alice standing in her doorway, and he did not look up over his left shoulder or he would have seen Emily and her tree; he looked straight ahead through those binocular eyes embedded in his skull. Emily herself had compound eyes, at least some of the time—the images she saw were combined from numerous ommatidia, eye units, located on the surface of the orb. These eye units, when things were working right, all pointed in slightly different directions. In a mirror she saw multiple Emilys, all of them bulging, all of them gross.

Alice wrenched her gaze from Richard’s climbing form and looked sideways and saw Emily, aslant against a white tree, spying on her father. She was covered in a black, helmeted carapace. She looked as if she had attached herself to the

THERE WAS EMILY,
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PARASITIC GRUBS.

tree for nourishment. She was a mutant, she was a sport of nature, she should be sprayed, crushed underfoot, gathered up and laid in a coffin . . . Then rage loosened and shriveled, and Alice, in a new, motherly way, began to move toward the half sister of her child-to-be. She couldn't keep her footing in the mud so she had to use her hands too. She would bring Emily to her house. She would offer her a weed. She would not mention food. She would whisper to the misguided girl that life could be moderately satisfying even if you were born into the wrong order.

Having safely ascended the opposite bank of the ravine, Richard turned and squinted at the artful bit of nature below: two banks of trees slanting inward as if trying to reach each other, some with pale yellow leaves, some brown, some leafless; more leaves thick at their roots; and mist everywhere. It was a view Ghiselle would appreciate, she loved pointillism, though she had decorated their house in bright abstractions for no apparent reason. For no apparent reason one of his two promising younger daughters spent her evenings in front of a television screen and the other seemed to have sewn her thumb to her BlackBerry. Perhaps it was in the nature of people to defy their own best interests. Why, look, as if to validate his insight, there was his beloved Emily, oh Lord let her live, make her live, there was Emily, plastered lengthwise to a tree like a colony of parasitic grubs; and there was his Alice, intruding like the headmistress she couldn't help being, undertaking to crawl toward Emily not on hands and knees but on toes and fingertips, her limbs as long as those of a katydid nymph. And above her body, her busybody you might say, swayed that magnificent blue rump.

SOME OF WHAT Alice wished for came about. She and Emily developed a cautious alliance. Emily's weight went up a bit, though her future remained worrisome. Paolo da Sola said "Sure!" to Alice's proposal of marriage. "And I don't want to know the circumstances. I've been mad about you since we met."

Richard eventually replaced Alice with an undemanding pathologist who already had a husband and children. The baby born to Alice had Paolo's

dark brows and golden eyes—surprising, maybe, until you remember that all humans look pretty much alike. And when Caldicott's old-fashioned housekeeper discovered Wolfie and Adele embracing naked in Emily's little room, and failed to keep her ancient mouth shut, Alice summoned a meeting of the trustees and told them that this expression of devoted friendship was not in contravention of any rule *she* knew of. She adjusted her yawning infant on her pale blue shoulder. Anyway, she reminded them and herself, Caldicott's most important rules even if they weren't written down were tolerance and discretion. All the others were honeydew. 🍷

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Wild Onion

Allium canadense. Allium validum. Wild and smelly one, little sister of stinks. Broken, rubbed between two fingers

you linger like nostalgia, regret, grief. You grow anywhere, a garden, a pavement's crack, a verge beside the road.

In abused soil, acidic, starved, your white heart waits, white as loneliness—the first thing, Milton says, which God's eye

named not good. *Kha-a-mot-ot-ke-wat*, the one who seeks a poorer soil, your heart-bulb sunk deep beneath the sod.

Weed. No blade can cut you out. You are reborn each spring, green tongues from black earth. The Egyptians buried onions

with their dead, a circle within circles. Lonely, lonely, lonely is every layer around the heart. And I—each year more

lonely—will break your culms and rub my brow with your oil. I'll chew your white heart for cure. If that is no remedy,

I'll lie beside your white flowers and sleep, my wild sister, rhizome, root, my invasive, unstoppable loneliness.

—Janice N. Harrington