

Claudia Beck / EMMA LOU

Emma Lou Vaugh! Pay attention! You hear me?

This voice snaps in my ears and I know it's Sarah Vaugh, my great grandmother, dead twenty years before my birth. Her voice smacks at me with that clipped twang, to places where I have choked back lumps of hurt. You oughta screw up your courage and fess up to the feelings you had before you decided to just up and shut your family out.

I am Emma Vaugh, still listening for my muse. In her place intrude balky bits of my girl self, Emma Lou. My father named me with his history. Emerson Vaugh was his grandfather and Louis Vaugh was his father. Yet the chant of Emma Lou rang with my mother's lilt and caw. My parents, Charles Pilgrim Vaugh and Loretta Jean Wheeler, grew up along the Old Michigan Road. Their families had been in Indiana since the 1820s. She was a farmer's daughter and CP was the brilliant hope of a family troubled by hard times, or so their stories clung to me.



I was born into kin of talkers who, when they heard the rattle tree of emotions in their midst, turned stone deaf or mute. What they usually did was change the subject and keep talking. Emma Lou had grabbed onto the world as it touched her body. She knew how she felt when she was happy or mad, sad, hurt and brave. Her mouth got around those places inside her and out came the words. The trouble was her words didn't always fit how other people felt.

CP had savoured telling tales to Emma Lou about his youth, wound through with his grampa Emerson and the verve he held in my father's life. Emma Lou ignored Emerson, since he was dead. She wished CP would talk about who she knew or who she might resemble, if he was always going off to family way back when. Neither heard the feared failure of parents turned to

charactered grandparents. I suspect my fabled warp of priss and guts hit on my great grandmother Sarah and my grandfather Louis like lightning to a rod.

Loretta's only, and incessant, silence was about grandma May's death, and (from nowhere) it scarred Emma Lou's memory. Emma Lou had played tone deaf to her mother and, by dint of connection, to Loretta at the piano. I still hear Loretta's arthritic fingers now valiantly play in romantic and spirited keys. My mother's protection strangely bequeathed me her loins of remorse. A slough of memory ruptured our voices. She was May's daughter and I am Loretta's.



I grew up in a time of mind over matter. During air raid drills we'd jostle quickly and almost silently out of our classrooms into the hall to the wail of a siren. We were shown how to crouch down in front of our lockers and cover our heads with our folded arms. This was fun but it made no sense as we peeked and giggled, huddled along the floor. I was more afraid of hurting myself when I fell out of trees or off my bicycle. The big scare was when Philip ran across the street to play with us and got hit by a car. He just lay there like he was dead. His mom told us he had a concussion, but after a week he was out playing again. For a while we treated him like a hero, because the car hadn't marked his body or killed him after all. We were secretly dazed and glad it wasn't us. I grew up in New Jersey to the incantations of adult fears. I still fight my sucked breath of throaty panic that came to muffle my simple pleasures and curiosities.



Every summer Loretta Jean would return with Emma Lou to the country lives of families, forever in Indiana. My grampa Louis and grandma Katherine Vaughn lived in a country town near what once had been the old Vaughn farm; my grandma May and grampa Simon Wheeler lived a brief car ride away on their farm. I get

whiffs of memory — frying fats and steaming vegetables greasing my skin in the prickly heat of already hot days; breezes fluttering my hair and eyes, flying high in a swing; sweet sour manure, soft then icky between my toes; nubbly cool stings on my arms and legs plunked in grain piles; night wafts of roses and lilacs to lull my dreams.

My sense was warm and strange, Indiana family pulls against my more favored home. Indiana belonged to them as familiar and I was a girl whose curiosity almost killed a cat. Emma Lou! Let that cat go! I had been spied repeatedly throwing a barnyard cat into a horse tank. Each time it swam to the edge I'd grab it and fling it back in, gleeful at my test of the saying, cats can't swim.



Emma Lou liked to tag along with her grampa Louis. His eyes crinkled up in a happy look while his mouth didn't move with smiles or much talk. It was a far-away look and it got her to jabber away. He stood tall like the beanpoles in his garden, only he had large hands and feet. Underneath his clothes she knew his body was stick-like, just like the people in her drawings.

Emma Lou dressed for make believe or to show off all the jumpers and pinafores her grammas and aunts had given her. Grampa changed his clothes for chores, jobs and the weather. For special occasions he wore a dark suit and vest, a starched white shirt and a tie, and to her fascination and envy, his gold and chained pocket watch. This dress-up would mean he'd be taking her along on a visit or a drive. No matter what the occasion, grampa never left the house without a hat.

The order of his days charmed her and she felt her own eagerness in his company. In the mornings grampa was the first one up and she'd pop out of her bed to see him leaving the bathroom in his white underwear suit. She'd follow him into the kitchen to his washup sink next to a cupboard where he kept his polishes and shaving stuff. All his personal paraphernalia was at the front of glassed fruit and vegetables gramma had put up. There he'd slip into coveralls to do his morning chores. In sum-

merit time he wore a straw hat and it had that smell. Then out they'd go into an early morning cool, through dewy grass to tend his vegetable garden. She would still be in her pajamas and barefoot, but if she were going to work with him he made her bring her shoes. He'd given her a set of small garden tools so she could dig the earth and chatter away by his side.

Sometimes Emma Lou visited her grampa in winter when the mornings were dark and cold. Then he'd put on an old jacket and felt hat and go down to the cellar to fire up the coal furnace. For this chore he didn't like her underfoot or getting black with coal. So she'd run to stand over the floor register in the living room and wait, shivering to the clangs of his work until he made fire blow hot air up her pajamas.

Grampa always washed up with a black tar soap that appeared to wash away dirt, but its sharp smell linked her grandfather indelibly to her. After breakfast, before he changed his clothes to go off to work, he shaved. Emma Lou liked the schsh click the knife made up and down along a strap, the swooshes of the brush around the soap cup, and the knife's scritch across grampa's face with the magic of smooth, no-blood skin.

The only job Emma Lou remembered for Louis was as the butcher at Chew's Grocery, across the road and two blocks down. For this, he put on dark green pants and a shirt that Emma Lou had watched her gramma wash, starch, and iron. Instead of his pull-on hightop shoes for the garden or cellar, he'd put on his everyday lace-up hightop black leather shoes, and clap on his workaday brown felt hat. Maybe you'll come down and see me today, Emma Lou. If she went with gramma that would mean she couldn't dilly dally.

Once Emma Lou was old enough to understand that she could be killed crossing the road, someone would walk and lecture her across with her tricycle. Louis got this trike for her visits and he had seen nothing dangerous about her riding around the block. How could she get lost? Her grandparents knew everybody and everybody knew who she was. Going to the store by herself was an adventure. Sometimes she'd pedal real fast to get to grampa. Sometimes she'd pole along — looking into gardens,

watching the tractors and wagons pulling into the seed mill, chatting with people who she couldn't quite remember if she'd met.

Chews wasn't like any grocery store she went to in New Jersey with Loretta Jean. She believed it belonged to her grandfather. Inside was a dim, cavernous room with rows of shelves which didn't have much on them. She could never just sneak up and surprise grampa because, well, looky who's here, announced the lady at the front counter. Still, she'd tiptoe down a side aisle toward the brighter lights and lively words at the back, where mainly ladies came to chat with her gramps. He worked behind a big wooden table and wore a bib apron over his clothes. She listened and watched as his saw sounded through bone and his cleaver or knife thumped and whispered through flesh. Animals died, and to her these red and white creatures seemed beautiful and not at all frightening. Grampa was cutting the legs and bodies of farmers' dead, naked cows and pigs. Pretty soon he'd look up, then she scoot to him across the sawdusted floor, and he'd pat her on her head. Emma Lou, say hello to Mrs. Lybrook and Mrs. Fellows, as he wrapped the cut red pieces in brown paper so the ladies could take them home to cook and eat.



I was staring at Louis Vaugh all done up in his good dark suit. This time he wouldn't be taking me off for a ride in his shiny black bullet Studebaker. He'd never go out hatless. Everyone was quiet and sad. Maybe that was the way Louis had really been all her life. No! and I was angry. I was eighteen and my grandfather's death was no surprise; he'd been almost as good as dead for ten years. If anyone had asked me then, I'd have said, disease, deceit, despair describe this dead dead man. And it was his deceit that made me cry. Despair was hidden from my childhood.

Neither of us had aged gracefully. We both knew for sure I wouldn't hang around except on visits. I couldn't sit still and he had stopped his wonderful sense of everyday rituals. He sat in his chair and he smoked. He suffered moaning headaches and

drugged himself into addiction. He got cold because he didn't move, so he stoked up the furnace to unbearable heat and airlessness, even on summer mornings. He sucked on his pipes and cigarettes and breathed out a smoky fog, like veils against our life. Since he took so long to leave, he should have said goodbye to me.



Emma Lou had her very own, very large bedroom in her New Jersey house. But she would only fall asleep with the light blazing. She knew hobgoblins wouldn't hurt her, but they were large and made strange noises. They came in the dark and wooed her with eyes almost shut to tiptoe to her windows. Roaming in the garden she could see panthers and tigers and shadow monsters. If she didn't switch on the light one of them could spring from the mulberry tree to the lilac bush below her windows, sail through the screen and snatch her away forever. Occasionally a beast would slip through and lurk in the shadows of her room, stealing her drift in sleep, until the hobgoblins shoved them out. But the real reason for the light was the hobgoblins crowded up her room with feelings of sadness and sometimes the sound of crying.



On a book shelf I have set a stuffed red hen — a pincushion. It has survived four generations, passed from mother to daughter. It once belonged to Emma Lou's gramma May. Loretta Jean made the story of May feel like henny penny the sky is falling, and it had escaped my mother without words.

May was alone for the day. Her children were grown, away and married with children of their own. She thought of calling, but her telephone was on a party line. Simon had taken a load of corn to the elevator. She went out to the shed where she kept the tools for her labour and pleasures in her garden. She had already spade and hoed the stalks back into the earth before the ground had frozen. She'd left the pumpkins on the vine for the color they

laughed against dumb fields.

In the shed she hummed a tune, but her voice cracked without the chorus of Loretta Jean's fingers on the piano. It was the time of year when the earth fell dormant and time felt stretched and empty. She eyed the rat poison which she used under the chicken house. For years, actually for her married lifetime here, the egg money had been hers to do with what she wanted. She'd bought fabric to make dresses for her daughters and herself. When they and Henry were older, she'd slipped them some bills so they could go to town with friends. Some of it she had saved up for Loretta Jean's piano lessons. May loved the music of song and laughter.

And there was a piece of rope, like what they had used to hang the swing for the grandchildren in the front yard. Those kids would swing so high like they could fly, over the wrought iron fence and into the grassy ditch by the side of the black highway. She remembered when it had been gravel, and the threshing machines chugged along in summer and in winter the huckster wagon made its calls.

She took the rope. With everyone away from home they only used the rooms on the main floor of the big brick house. She made him search for her. He found her in the stairwell to the upstairs bedrooms. Her throat now strangled, her voice shunned family, time breathed out and gone, away from her fecund ground and work for 55 years.

In her bedroom in New Jersey Loretta Jean howled like crazy, people came and went. CP drove Loretta Jean alone, straight though the day and night. Gramma May disappeared from Emma Lou. Nothing marked her passing but a curdling silence.

Silence gulped down my memories and left me inexplicably sad. I stopped speaking to my family about the places inside me. If some things were so terrible to speak, then I would keep my terrors to myself. I left my family out. There were some feelings we never could get our tongues around.