

## **The Absence of Emily**     *Jack Ritchie*

When I married my second wife, Emily, I went to live in her house in northern California. It's a big house with a lot of land around it, just outside a small town. The next house is almost exactly the same, and that belongs to Emily's sister Millicent.

Millicent and Emily. Sisters. But completely different in looks and in character. Millicent is tall and rather thin. She is very strong-minded and likes to control everyone around her including Emily. She wasn't at all pleased when I came and took Emily away from her influence.

Emily is rather short, and – well, fat. As she says, she weighs eleven or twelve kilos too much. She doesn't claim to be very clever, and usually she does what other people want. Not always, though.

For three weeks now, Emily had been away. But Millicent had been watching me closely. She was with me now, drinking coffee in our sitting room.

The telephone rang, and I answered it. 'Yes?'

'Hello, dear, this is Emily.'

'Emily – er – what is your surname?'

'Oh, really, dear. Emily, your wife.'

'I'm sorry, you must have a wrong number.' I put the telephone down.

Millicent was watching me. 'You look as white as a sheet. You seem frightened. Shocked. Who telephoned?'

'It was a wrong number.'

Millicent drank some coffee. 'Oh, Albert, I thought I saw Emily in town yesterday. But that's not possible.'

'Of course it's not. Emily is in San Francisco.'

'Yes, but where in San Francisco?'

‘She didn’t say. She’s visiting friends.’

‘Emily doesn’t have any friends in San Francisco! I know all her friends. When will she be back?’

‘She wasn’t sure when it would be.’

‘I’ve heard, Albert, that your first wife died in a boating accident? She fell out of the boat and died in the water?’

‘I’m afraid so. She couldn’t swim.’

‘And you were the only witness to the accident.’

‘I believe so. No one else ever came forward.’

‘Did she leave you any money, Albert?’

‘That’s nothing to do with you, Millicent.’

In fact Cynthia had fifty thousand dollars of life insurance and one sailing boat. Poor Cynthia. She had taken her boat out alone that day. I had seen the accident from the boat club, and rushed out in another boat, but it was too late to save her.

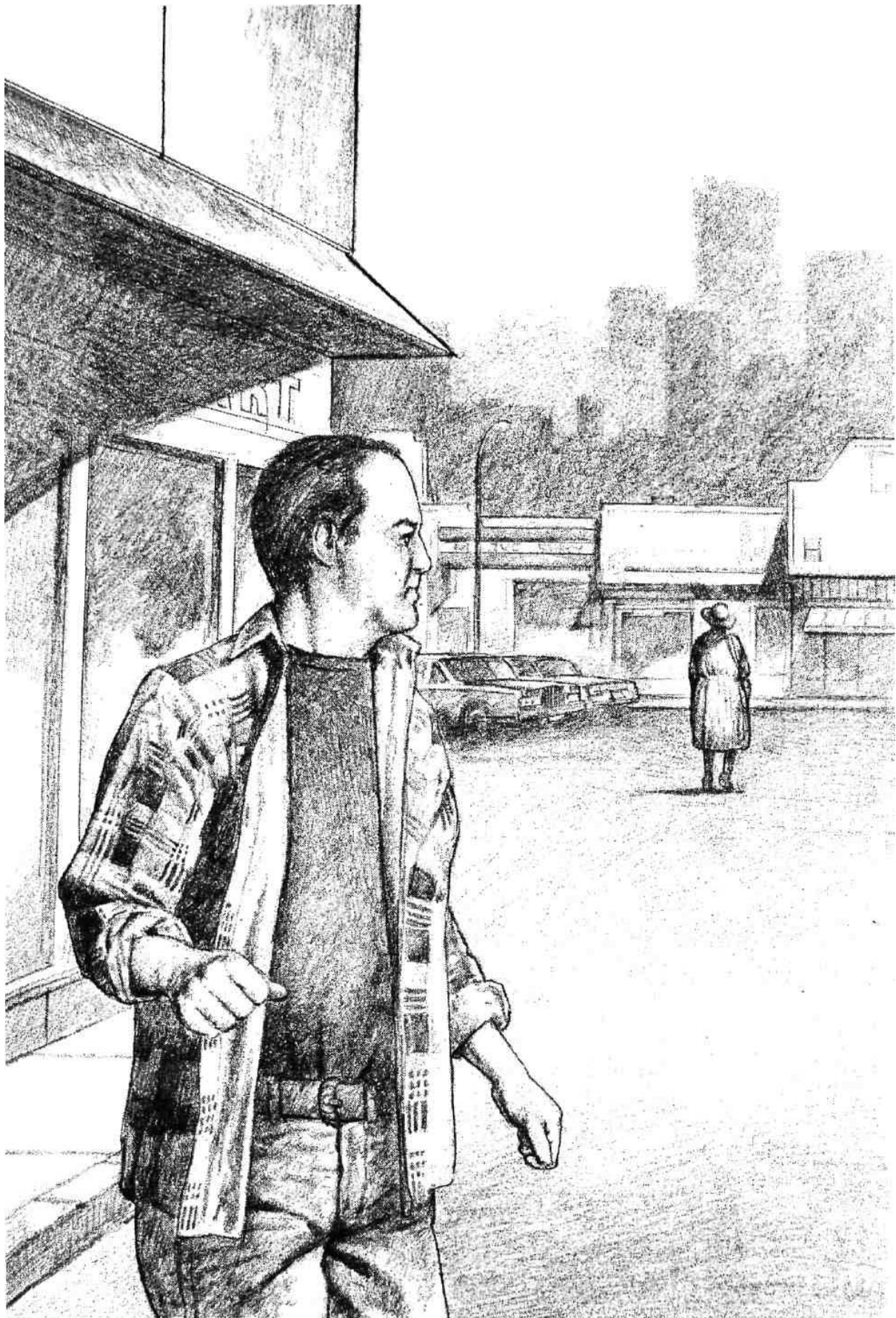
Millicent finished her coffee and left.

When she had gone, I went for a walk through the woods behind the house. I walked to an open space between the trees, which had a little stream running through it. How peaceful it was here. Quiet. A place to rest. I had been coming here often in the last few days.

I sat down on a fallen tree near the stream and thought about Emily and Millicent. Their houses and land were very similar, so you would expect them to be equally rich. But this was not the situation, as I discovered after my marriage. Emily owned her house and the land around it, but she could not afford to employ people to look after them.

Millicent, on the other hand, employed a lot of people in her house, and even a lawyer to look after her money. She must have a million dollars, at least.

On Tuesday afternoons I usually go to the supermarket in town. Today, in the car park, I saw a small, rather fat woman across the street walking away from me. She wore a purple dress and a



*I saw a small, rather fat woman across the street walking away from me.*

brown hat. It was the fourth time I'd seen her in the last ten days I hurried across the street. She turned the corner and I started to run. When I reached the corner she was nowhere in sight.

I was standing there when a car stopped beside me.

It was Millicent. 'What are you doing, Albert? I saw you running – I've never seen you run before.'

'Oh, I was just taking a little exercise.' I was still breathing hard as I walked back to the supermarket.

The next morning, when I returned from my walk to the stream, I found Millicent in the sitting room, pouring some coffee for herself.

'I've been in the bedroom looking at Emily's clothes,' Millicent said. 'I didn't see anything missing.'

'Why should anything be missing? Has there been a thief in the house?'

'Don't tell me that Emily went off to stay with friends in San Francisco without any luggage!'

'She had luggage. Though not very much.'

'What was she wearing when she left?'

'I don't remember,' I said.

That evening, as I prepared for bed, I looked inside Emily's cupboard. What could be done with her clothes? Perhaps I should give some away?

I woke up at two in the morning – bright moonlight was shining on my face. I dressed, and went out to the hut in the garden. I needed something for digging a hole.

I chose a spade with a long handle, put it on my shoulder and began walking towards the stream.

I was nearly there when I stopped. I shook my head slowly and returned to the hut. I put the spade away and went to bed.

The next morning Millicent came to see me while I was having breakfast. She brought in the morning post, which had just come. It included one small blue envelope addressed to me.

The writing seemed familiar. The postmark was our local town.

I opened the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper.

Dear Albert,

I miss you so very much. I shall return home soon, Albert. Soon.

EMILY.

I put the letter and the envelope into my pocket.

‘Well?’ Millicent asked. ‘I thought I recognized Emily’s writing on the envelope. Did she say when she’ll be back?’

That is not Emily’s writing. It’s a letter from my aunt in Chicago.’

‘I didn’t know you had an aunt in Chicago.’

‘Don’t worry, Millicent, I do have an aunt in Chicago.’

That night I was in bed, but awake, when the telephone beside my bed rang.

‘Hello, my sweet. This is Emily.’

‘You are not Emily. You are someone else.’

‘Don’t be silly, Albert! Of course this is me, Emily.’

‘You can’t be Emily. I know where she is, and she couldn’t telephone at this time of night.’

‘You think you know where I am? No, I’m not there now. It was too uncomfortable. So I left, Albert.’

I got out of bed and dressed. I went downstairs to the study and made myself a drink. I drank it slowly

It was nearly one o’clock in the morning when I went to the garden hut again, and took out the spade.

This time I went all the way to the space between the trees. I stopped beside the highest tree of all.

I began taking big steps, counting at the same time. ‘One, two, three, four . . .’ I stopped at sixteen.

Then I began digging.

I had been digging for nearly five minutes when I heard a

shout, and suddenly there were people all around me, shining lights in my face. I recognised some of the people who worked for Millicent, including her lawyer.

Now Millicent herself stepped forward. 'So you wanted to be sure she was really dead, Albert! And the only way to do that was to return to the place where you buried her.'

'I am looking for old Indian knives,' I said. 'There s a belief that if you find one in the light of the moon, it will bring you good luck.'

Millicent took no notice of this. She pointed to some people I didn't know. 'These are private detectives,' she said. 'They have been watching you twenty-four hours a day, ever since I guessed what really happened to Emily.' She pointed at a small, rather fat woman. 'That's Mrs Macmillan. She was the woman in the purple dress, and she copied Emily's writing. And this is Miss Peters. She is good at copying voices, and she was the voice of Emily you heard on the telephone.'

There were also two detectives, who had brought their own spades. Now they began digging in the hole which I had started. 'We knew you were getting worried, Albert,' said Millicent. 'You almost dug her up last night, didn't you? But then you changed your mind. That was lucky, because last night I didn't have so many people to watch you. Tonight we were ready and waiting.'

The detectives dug for about fifteen minutes and then paused for a rest.

'This ground is very hard!' said one.

They went on digging until the hole was two metres deep.

'Nothing has been buried here!' said the other. 'The only thing we found was an old Indian knife.'

I smiled at Millicent. 'What makes you think I *buried* Emily?'

I left them and returned to the house.



*'What makes you think I buried Emily?'*



I had guessed from the beginning that Millicent was responsible for the false ‘Emily’ that had appeared to me in different forms. It was all part of her plan. What had been her aim? Well, she believed that I had killed her sister. So she wanted to frighten me until I broke down and said, ‘Yes, yes, I killed her!’

I had been playing a game too: I wanted her to think I was frightened. And, of course, I wanted her to think I had buried the body in that place in the woods.

Now I was in a strong position. She had called me a murderer in front of all those witnesses – I could take the matter to a court of law, and demand a large sum of money from her. But she wouldn’t want to let that happen: she wouldn’t want the world to know she had been stupid. She would prefer to pay those people to keep silent. Would that be possible? Well, it would help if I supported her story, and said that nothing had happened at all.

And I would do that for Millicent. If she gave me some money – a large amount of money.

At the end of the week, my telephone rang.

‘This is Emily. I’m coming home now, dear.’

‘Oh, great.’

‘Did anyone miss me?’

‘They certainly did!’

‘You haven’t told anyone where I’ve been these last four weeks, have you, Albert? Especially not Millicent?’

‘I told her you were visiting friends in San Francisco.’

‘Oh dear, I don’t know anybody in San Francisco. Did she believe you?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well, I couldn’t tell her I was going to a health farm, to lose weight! I would be ashamed! And I wasn’t sure that I would manage it. But I have, Albert, I have! I’ve lost fourteen kilos! My



figure must be as good as Cynthia's now!

'Well done, Emily! That's great!'

Why is Emily jealous of my first wife? They each have their place in my heart.

'Yes . . . but now none of my clothes will fit me. I'll have to get a lot of new clothes. Do you think we can afford it, Albert?'

Ah, we can now. With some help from Millicent.