

FRIENDSHIP

A ruddy drop of manly blood
The surging sea outweighs,
The world uncertain comes and goes;
The lover rooted stays.
I fancied he was fled,—
And, after many a year,
Glowed unexhausted kindliness,
Like daily sunrise there.
My careful heart was free again,
O friend, my bosom said,
Through thee alone the sky is arched,
Through thee the rose is red;
All things through thee take nobler form,
And look beyond the earth,
The mill-round of our fate appears
A sun-path in thy worth.
Me too thy nobleness has taught
To master my despair;
The fountains of my hidden life
Are through thy friendship fair.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

image info

Friendship Fair

Joe Kowalski

ENU WAS THE NEWEST MEMBER OF Happy Homes retirement center, a drab building made more so because of its sharp contrast to an impressive forest from which it was entirely separated by a fence. Dania Washington was the newest caretaker. "It's only a temporary job," Dania told herself and literally anyone who pestered her about it.

She soon found it wasn't really so terrible working there; she had suspected far worse. The days were long, and the decorations had to have been roughly thirty years old, but some of the old-timers made the job worth it. Enu was one of them.

Unlike some of the residents, Enu seemed to have most of his wits about him. Instead of asking for things, he sometimes offered her things.

"How you doin' today, Mr. Enu?" Dania asked as she opened the ancient shades and checked to make sure his pills were in place. He never touched them.

"Quite well, Dania. Quite well. It's a new day as they say! Say, dear, did you ever read anything by Ralph Waldo Emerson?"

"I can't say I have, Mr. Enu! Is he one of your favorites?"

"Oh yes! He's one of my favorites and one of . . . one of the greats!"

Enu took out a slim volume of poetry from underneath his pillow. He did this with a shaky flair. Dania shared a truthful smile, unlike what she normally had to wear all day. The whole thing was so overly dramatic. Of course he had

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it waiting there for her under his pillow instead of sitting on his bedside table.

Enu held out the paperback book, which bobbed from the rheumatism and his excitement. It was a beige object with nothing but large blocky letters on the front, probably published in the 1960s. It smelled musky. Faintly like her dad's shampoo or cologne. "Emerson. Well, Emerson is the key to understanding who we are. He connects you to the world around you in a way your soul would be hard-pressed to figure out on its own. Please give it a read."

"Aw! Thanks, Mr. Enu!"

She read a few poems on her lunch break. The language was a little dense and spacey for her taste, but she saw why Enu liked it. A few weeks later she tried to return it.

"Oh, no. That's yours now, dear!"

"I couldn't take it from you, Mr. Enu. You were talking before about how much you loved it."

But he refused to take it. "Nooo! No, that's yours now."

"Are you sure, Mr. Enu?" She didn't know what she would do with the book if she was forced to keep it.

He waved the thought away. "Nahhh . . . you keep it. Please."

Mr. Enu didn't have a lot of possessions, but his face told her he would not say no. She kept it. She even read a bit of it. Some of it was really good.

One day she came to work and Mr. Enu was not the same. "Hey there, Mr. Enu! How are you today?"

He harrumphed. It gave her pause.

“Bad day, huh?”

He turned around. “I don’t want any guests today.”

“Oh . . . I’ll leave as soon as I’m done. I have to make sure your room is clean.”

“No guests. I don’t wanna see you.” He shooed her with his hand.

Dania felt her heart lower a bit, which was an unexpected reaction for her. She just saw this place as a job but now realized that she sort of saw Mr. Enu as a friend. It didn’t sit right at all, so before she clocked out, she made a pit stop to medical records where information was kept on every patient in the home. She perused through a filing cabinet with a big dent in its center, names alphabetical.

“You looking for something?” droned a woman from behind her. She was a willowy, middle-aged woman named Larisa who was known to have a distaste for the younger employees.

“I was just looking up Mr. Enu’s medical records,” she said confidently. The last thing she wanted to do was give the impression that she was doing anything wrong.

“And why would you need those?” Larisa snatched a binder away from her but didn’t seem to know what to do with it, so she slapped it down on the table.

“He was acting weird today, and I want to make sure he’s getting his proper medication.”

“Don’t bother with Mr. Enu’s health,” Larisa sighed. “Just do your work and show some respect to the job and to your superiors. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and refuses to acknowledge it. That’s all you need to know. Enough sneaking around or I’ll have you fired.”

Dania’s tongue nearly said forty different things, many of them not proper for a workplace environment. She hastened away.

So that was it. She decided she would talk to him about it tomorrow.

The next day he was still not quite himself when she found him, only entering after carefully knocking on the door.

“You know, Mr. Enu, there’s no shame in looking after your mental health.”

“I’m not sick,” he grumped. “I’m perfectly healthy. We all get into bad moods. It’s the babies of this world who think their day-to-day feelings are oh so important.”

“Bipolar disorder is a big deal though,” she said wiping away dust from the TV in the corner. “I mean, I have friends who go through it. It’s not just a feeling. It’s a chronic issue.”

Enu sniffed. “I don’t need help. It’s not my fault the world is a barrel of crap, and I get a bit uppity about it sometimes. Now leave.”

She did, but he had tears pooling.

A few weeks later, Enu felt quite jovial and social again. He wanted so dearly to talk to Dania again. Kindly, she didn’t mention his prior outburst.

The sight of her made Enu tear up again, arms rising to greet her. “Dear friend! Here’s a five dollar bill,” he said. “Get yourself some chocolates. Someone so pretty and nice deserves a treat!”

This time Dania sat by the edge of the bed. “I don’t need it, Mr. Enu. What I’d really like is for you to start taking your medication. I know it would help at least a bit.”

“I told you, dear. I’m not . . . ”

“Try it for a month, and if it doesn’t help, I’ll let you buy me five hundred boxes of chocolates.”

Enu began to protest, but he stopped. His hand cautiously reached for the glass of juice on his table. Staring her down begrudgingly and with a cocky grin from Dania, he gulped down the medication. And he did so the day after that. And the day after that. Dania was actually correct. Things would prove to be better after enough time. Not perfect. But better.

Larisa was changing his bathroom toiletries one day a few weeks later when she finally noticed that the pills she set out every day were actually shrinking in number. She leaned down to Mr. Enu as he read some poetry and spoke to him with the sonics of a squeaky toy. She plastered on the biggest smile she could manage. “Hi there, Mr. Enu! Well, well, well, looks like your pills are all gone! Wow!”

He looked scornfully over the rims of his bifocals. “Yes,” he said, putting on an imitation of a toddler. “Yes, I made them go . . . bye-bye.”

She laughed. “Aw, aren’t you the cutest thing?” She walked out of the room purposefully until she found Dania, who was changing sheets in another room. “I need to speak to you. Right now.”

A confused Dania walked briskly out. “Where did his pills go?” the older woman demanded. “I . . . what?”

“Don’t play dumb, sister. Mr. Enu’s! You’re just telling me he up and started taking those pills one day? I don’t think so.”

“What are you . . . ”

“I remember you going through all the medical info. I should have fired you the day I saw you there, but I suppose my generous heart has failed me again. Just wait until I tell the administration that you’ve been popping our pills.”

“I . . . what?!” Dania crossed her arms. “I did not. I just treated someone here like a friend instead of like a prisoner for once. Simple as that.”

Larisa threw her hands in the air. “Oh, and now back talking too? You are going to be doubly fired, girly.”

As the furious woman marched down the hallway, Dania darted over to Mr. Enu’s room.

She hadn’t seen him in about six days

because they had her scheduled for a different ward that week. He waved hello, looking up from his book.

“Hey, Mr. Enu!” she smiled. “Word around here is either you’ve been taking your meds or we’ve decided to become drug kingpins.”

He laughed and patted the side of the bed for her to sit. “I never liked that woman,” he sighed.

“I think they’re trying to get me kicked out. I don’t want to go, but they seem to have a bit of a vendetta against me.”

His smile fell, and the book dropped sadly on the sheets. “Oh, damn them all! I’ll take the pills in front of them next time, just to show them. I feel bad now that I didn’t take them before. I was just being a stubborn old man.”

She held his cold hand. “Even if they make up some reason to get rid of me, I’ll still visit you, Gramps. They can’t stop me. I’ll climb in through the window or something.” They both laughed.

Mr. Enu adjusted his back to make it hurt a bit less. “Do you have grandparents? Do they live here at this facility?”

Dania shook her head. “They’re not alive anymore. Besides, cushy retirement homes are more of a white person thing.”

Old Mr. Enu patted her hand and continued with what seemed like a nonsequitur. “I’m glad you decided to work here.” He turned his gaze outside, to the blue skies whistling out above the ragged parking lot and sandy yellow brick of the retirement home. He adjusted his dentures. “Thy nobleness has taught, to master my despair,” he sighed, voice thick with time. “The fountains of my hidden life, are through thy friendship fair.”

“Emerson?” she asked.

“But of course,” said he. ❖