

***Note from the author*

This story grew out of a true experience that my grandma had while living on a ranch in Wyoming. It is not the same story nor are the characters at all representative of any real people, but it is my poor attempt to understand what it might have been like for my grandmother during her first Wyoming winter after following my Grandfather to a different state to be a rancher.

Facing Winter

A city stands by a salty lake. It is a metropolis. It is a place filled with congenial people and surrounded by mountains which have, by no fault of their own, been given—slope and soul—to the giddy thrill of tourism.

Somewhere on the fifteenth floor of an apartment building in the heart of this city lived Emmaline Anders. She was not Emmaline Anders yet; but because our story does not really start until she is, or nearly is, we will rush quickly over all but two points regarding this time in Emmaline's life.

One: in second grade, Emmaline had once brought home a third grade worksheet. After struggling alone through the first twenty-one questions, she had asked her father for help.

"No, Emmaline," he had said, "I have my work, and you have yours."

So she did the best she could on her own. When parent-teacher day came, Emmaline's teacher presented the worksheet to Emmaline's parents. It had a ninety-seven percent mark at the top of the first page, circled by a star. Emmaline was congratulated on doing it all by herself.

And two: having never ventured west of 45th nor east of 108th, the closest that Emmaline got to experiencing the nature which surrounded her lakeside city was once when her mother borrowed a popup tent and they camped between their drab, brown sectional and the flat screen tv, complete with bags for sleeping in and Bently's freeze-dried meals-ready-to-eat.

Then, she met him.

They met in a college chemistry class. She was studying to be an engineer of the chemical variety, and he was studying because education seemed like a useful thing to have. She sat in the front row every day; he sat halfway back and four seats in. She raised her hand in class and got above ninety-six percent on every test; he got a passing grade.

They probably never would have even talked had they not been paired for the group project. In between splicing aminos and determining the covalent reactant in exothermic hydrogenation—or whatever it is that college chemistry projects consist of—they found time to gaze into each other's eyes and say things like "I think you got that polarity wrong" or "I grew up in Wyoming. How about you?" or "Wasn't Carl supposed to be in our group?" or "I'll pick you up at seven."

Six months later, they were married.

At first, Emmaline Anders' life did not change. That is, other than the fact that she was now Emmaline Anders and no longer Emmaline Habensnatcher—an improvement, she thought, though she had nothing in particular against the Habensnatcher name. She continued to go to school, as did he. She continued to achieve excellent grades, and he continued to trudge along with Cs and Ds.

As graduation loomed, however, they began to look like people possessed. They slept little and ate less and sometimes talked about plans and sometimes were silent over the uncertainty of it all. Emmaline completed an internship, only to realize that she detested chemical engineering as a job, with a passion that belied the easy grace with which she had slipped into good grades and a declared major. The day she slammed the front door, crying that she could not stand the thought of going to work like that every day for the rest of her life, was the day he fiddled with a button on his shirt sleeve and said, "I was thinking...that we could...that is, I thought you might like...but only if you wanted...well, what I mean to say is I grew up in Wyoming."

She knew it for a fact.

“And...well, I grew up...on a ranch in Wyoming.”

This, too, she knew, having visited the family on said ranch at least three times before their wedding.

“It’s just that I thought...or, well...I’m mighty fond of the idea of being a rancher myself,” he said. “I had wondered whether...you might like it, too?”

At first, Emmaline didn’t know what to say. The idea of her living on a ranch was laughable. But then, she thought, the idea of being an engineer made her want to cry. So, thinking that she would rather laugh than cry, she said yes, what a good idea that would be.

He let out a breath that he had seemed to be holding for the last three weeks and said, “I think you’ll really like it.”

And so, together they looked at land, and together they tethered their temporal welfare to the ugly girth of 8.03 percent interest, and, the day after graduation, they packed their bags and moved to Wyoming.

The claustrophobic, tin walls of a sheep-camp sheltered them from the nightly howling of coyotes and the near constant push of wind while they built the ranch house. Perhaps it was because of the comparison that, when the house was done, Emmaline fell so in love with it. It was her palace, her Taj Mahal, stretching and spacious with a sprawling upstairs and a garage underneath, though she questioned the placement of the laundry.

Emmaline and her husband worked side by side, putting up fences and seeding hay as much as cleaning toilets and sweeping floors. When she was not busy with branding or riding Rockefeller (a quarter horse which quickly became Emmaline’s favorite, despite her questionable ability in the saddle), the domain that she absolutely claimed as her own was the kitchen, or as she called it, the food laboratory.

Here she rediscovered the wonder that had led toward the study of chemical engineering in the first place. Flours and yeasts transformed under her expert hands into breads and cakes.

Reductions, broths, and dairy of all types became sauces and soups as she guided them through their various life cycles. Now and again, jealous of the attention that she gave the range over himself, Emmaline's husband would venture in to try his hand at beef bourguignon, without the burgundy, which just made it beef 'gnon,' or as Emmaline said, "beef gnonsense."

"Be careful," she would say. "You'll dull my favorite knife."

"The amount you sharpen it, I'm surprised there's any knife left to dull."

Then, they would laugh and eat their dinner and talk about everything inconsequential and nothing at all.

They bought livestock, stored food, and worked the land.

In the evenings, they would sit on their porch to gaze over the dusty valley to the soft tan hills opposite. They were beautiful to Emmaline. They tamed the wild Wyoming waste in a comforting way.

Sometimes, as the sun set low over the prairie-dog landscape, Emmaline thought, *I never saw the world before*, and then she would stare and stare until her eyes began to water and she would grab his hand and press her eyes closed and feel the calluses on his palm with the calluses on her fingers and think, *He is Adam, and I am Eve, and this is paradise*.

The arrival of fall in Wyoming is a curious thing. As the young couple had not been there but a single summer, there were no trees on their ranch which could herald the autumnal arrival with russet triumph. Neither was there the familiar turning of ads and store windows as pumpkin spice was added to milks and chocolates and cakes and cookies—a nostalgic process which Emmaline was used to seeing in the city. They had a small pumpkin patch of their own, which, by virtue of being well irrigated, had produced several grotesque monstrosities of the orange fruit. These, in addition to the ever deepening chill of nights—which had never been more than three degrees above frigid, even at the height of summer—were the only indication that Emmaline had of the changing season.

Then, early one morning, Emmaline entered the garage to find shimmering curtains of conjoined ice spears stabbing the floor and reaching back up to the water pipes which ran along the ceiling.

She called for her husband, who had been out early to feed the cattle, and he whistled as he saw the sight.

"Looks like winter's here," he said. "Right on time, too. Just wish I'd thought to leave the taps dripping."

As he worked to fix the pipes, Emmaline established her first acquaintance with the beast known locally as the Wyoming winter. The first time snow quilted the landscape, muffling nature and—it seemed—freezing time, she squinted against the brilliant white of the valley, thinking there might not be a single particle that had ever been tainted by the burning of hydrocarbons or processed by the greedy lungs of another human. But then she breathed in, and the cold bit her throat and stabbed pins into her cheeks, even as it steeped through her fingers; and she wondered whether a person could survive a fury so frightful as the stillness of thirty below.

"The road. Where is the road?" Emmaline said on the second day of the first snow.

"I reckon we've seen the last of it for at least five months now," her husband said.

"But. The neighbors...the town?"

"They're all still right where we left them, forty miles to the west."

"Already, that seems like nowhere at all."

"Sorry, what was that?"

There was an infinitesimal collapse of Emmaline's posture. "Nothing."

"I'll tell you what the real shame is," her husband said. "The snow will make it almost impossible to finish laying the phone line. Have to wait til spring, now. Sure wish we had some reception out here."

"That's okay," Emmaline said in a broken staccato. "A little solitude never hurt anyone."

Her husband chuckled and ate his dinner.

Emmaline stopped riding Rockefeller. She retreated inside and left the work of caring for the cattle to her husband now. He never seemed to mind the cold—indeed, Emmaline began to wonder whether he even noticed it. Instead, she spent more time in her kitchen, cooking pies and breads and soups and meats. She thought that maybe if she cooked long enough, the heat of the stove and the comfort of food could fend off the cold, which she found lurking at every window and creeping in through the door jam and even running down the chimney—fire or no. But not even hot pastries and salty broths could combat the chill.

As the days grew shorter, Emmaline imagined that the cold was some sort of beast or malignant spirit which waited to attack her. Its bulk covered the sky, and its shadow stretched nights into weeks and shaded what was left of the days with an emotionless gray. She wore sweaters all the day and sometimes wore a coat over that, even while she was cooking, but still, she felt the ice boring into her. She stopped going outside at all, stopped even looking outside, opting to stay as far away from the windows as possible. She played music by *The Beach Boys* about California and surfing, thinking that, perhaps, if she once pushed the idea of cold out of her mind, she could rediscover the paradise that she had lately known. Still the cold pressed on and the darkness drew in, and everything that had been good or beautiful about the life they had built over the last nine months was systematically extinguished in Emmaline's psyche.

Her husband was outside—always outside. The work on a ranch was never done.

Sometimes, Emmaline would start to speak, then she would glance around at the empty room, full of cabinets and chairs and a dusty phone which never had been used, and a small sort of hiccup would squeak in the back of her throat. Then she would turn away, muttering, "Snow."

Soon, the winter deepened, and the days disappeared. Emmaline no longer smiled. Eventually, she began to frown. She wouldn't do it when he was there, of course. She didn't

want him to worry. So when he was there, she would paste an expression onto her face that wasn't exactly a smile, and they'd talk about the cattle and about the weather and about their plans for next year. Then Emmaline would think, *Next year? I won't even make it through this year. I can't.* Then she would lift the corners of her mouth with the effort of a great weight and say, "Yes, and trees. I want lots of trees all the way down the driveway."

"I've got to make a trip into town," her husband said one day over dinner. "One of the cows has been a bit listless. I need some medicines for her, or before long we'll find her frozen in the field."

Emmaline wanted to scream. She wanted to weep. She wanted to beg him not to go or, if he must, to take her with him—anything but leave her alone in this cold.

Instead, she heard her own voice saying, "Of course, dear. When do you plan to leave?"

"I reckon if I leave tomorrow after first feeding, I should have time to make it out and back again before nightfall." He paused to look at her. "Will you be alright?"

Emmaline opened her mouth to say that, no, of course she wouldn't be alright. How could anyone be alright by themselves in weather like this? She hadn't been alright in months. And now he wanted to leave, and he expected her to be alright?

"Of course," she said.

Good as his word, he left the next morning after feeding.

She passed the time reading by the fire. Somewhere during their move to Wyoming, a copy of a book called *Lost Face*, by Jack London, had fallen into Emmaline's possession. Now, as she read it, she thought that it may have been a facetious gift from a well intentioned, but poorly actioned friend.

Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers. It was the last line of a particularly disheartening story.

“Words,” Emmaline said, shivering. “Just...words.” And she stood to seek comfort elsewhere.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon, she misread a recipe, causing her to add three times the required amount of salt. That’s when she realized that the room had grown dark—too dark to comfortably see.

She flipped on a light, then thought, *Lights? at three o’clock in the afternoon?*

She glanced out the window and stumbled back with a gasp: heavy storm clouds hung low, covering the sky.

Not more snow, she thought. *Not now. Not before he gets back.*

But even as she thought it, she saw the first few flakes of crystalline condensation tumbling toward the ground.

Oh, hurry, she thought. *Please hurry.*

She intentionally looked away from the window.

“I’ll just make up a big, warm batch of rice pudding,” she said to herself. “And by the time I’m done, he’ll walk through the door, and we’ll eat a bowl together and laugh at this crazy weather.” Her voice broke as she said the word “laugh,” and she hurried on before she could feel too much.

One large pot of rice pudding—into which disappeared liberal amounts of both sugar and cinnamon—later and no husband had appeared. She mixed up a whole gallon of hot chocolate. Still, he did not come. She toasted some raisin bread. The door remained lifeless in its place, admitting no husband. Occasionally, an eddy in the whitewater rapids of wind—in which the house lay drowning—rattled the door. At those times, Emmaline would look at the entry, leaning forward with wide eyes and a quick breath...and then cringe away just as fast when it refused to open.

Eventually, she could not resist the siren song of the storm, and with a sort of macabre interest to know how bad her situation was, she peeked out the window.

The falling snow had her penned in. It was the frantic swirling of damned souls. It was the inevitable collapse of a universe.

Alone. So alone, she thought. If only I could see the reservoir or the road...or the driveway. Then at least I'd know there was still something out there. That there was still anything out there.

She swayed back and forth, as if by looking from a different angle she could see farther, but it was no use. Three feet away the world simply vanished.

"Oh, oh!" she cried. "Oh, I can't!"

And she fled to her bed. Emmaline's white knuckles gripped the covers and pulled them tightly around her huddled figure.

Only then, cocooned in two quilts, a throw blanket, a weighty afghan, and an electric blanket, did she allow her body to shake as great tears dampened her cheeks, spreading to the coverlet.

Hidden between racking sobs, moans of despair, and gasping breaths were the garbled words, "I can't. Oh, I can't."

In this way, darkness stole the consciousness of the room and suppressed her tears with sleep.

Emmaline awoke with scattered lines from her reading the day before fragmenting her mind.

Day had broken cold and grey, exceedingly cold and grey.

She turned her head toward the window.

"Exceedingly," she whispered.

She searched around herself, thinking that her husband might have returned while she slept, but she found no evidence that he had come and gone again or ever been there at all.

“Just as well,” she said. “If he’d come, he’d have frozen since I have every blanket.”

But her audience did not appreciate the joke. Another line ran through her mind.

He compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go.

I am the man, Emmaline thought as she managed to push the covers off and stand up, *and I am the dog*.

The air bit at her, tempting her to crawl back into the pseudo warmth of her fibrous cave and hide from the lonely horror that was promised by the still audible, banshee-like storm. She folded her arms and shivered.

Man, dog—neither of them was any good, not to each other, not to anyone else.

She hugged herself as she crossed to the main room where the fireplace resided.

All summer long, they had collected wood from the neighboring hills until they had a stack that Emmaline had thought would surely last them the next ten years. Now, looking at it, smaller already than some of the snowdrifts lumped around their property, Emmaline realized that they would be lucky if it lasted till spring.

Her hands, once clumsy at such activities, danced in the act of arranging the fire; they had learned their job quickly when it became apparent that the life of this fireplace was the only thing which stood between their fingers and the black flaking skin of frostbite. She arranged the wood in a neat pile with adequate ventilation and the proper positioning of tinder, kindling, and fuel—all the while hearing the title of the story which had haunted her all day roll through and through her mind.

To build a fire. To build a fire. To build a fire.

She struck a match.

To build a fire.

She watched her match flare to life and held it to the paper at the base of the tinder. It flickered out.

To build a fire.

She focused on her breathing as she carefully removed another match from the box.

To build a fire.

This one, too, went out.

To build a fire.

She lost composure. The box fell to the hearthstone. She scraped her hand as she frantically snatched it back up. Her fingers trembled, trying to grab one stick from the box of many, causing them to spill. She grasped at the fallen matches, nails raking the stone. Her breath was coming in quivering gasps now.

The fire-provider had failed...had failed...to build a fire....failed to build a fire.

Yet another match struck and thrust forward into the heart of the fire. This time, her fingers touched the cold ash from the day before.

Damp, she thought. It's damp. That's why it won't start.

She clung to this thought. It had seemed, for a terrible moment, like the cold was really a living thing, mocking her, letting her strike each match so that the pyroclastic glow could kindle hope within her, and then sucking the thermal energy away before that hope could be realized. Now she repeated to herself over and over that it was the storm. The storm had blown snow down their chimney. She had drawn too close to the damp ashes.

She held the next match higher than the last two, nearly above the paper, though still close enough for the chemical blaze to spread. This time paper browned and blackened and curled and crumbled to inaudibly hiss on the damp ash beneath.

Emmaline let out a shaky breath as the fire passed its critical point. The wind would not stop it now. But even so, it would take perhaps an hour before heat could reclaim the house.

"In the meantime—" Emmaline said, but never finished her thought, for at that moment, she had looked toward the dreary kitchen to see the rice pudding and the chocolate and the raisin toast, all untouched where she had made them the day before.

He never came.

A lump pushed at Emmaline's throat.

She glanced back at the fire. It called to her, promising safety and warmth if only she would stay near. Still, the thought of those forgotten dishes was a taunt...or a threat. They seemed like proof that the cold could claim her, as well.

Perhaps he wasn't coming back at all.

She wouldn't.

She wasn't any good to anyone. If she could leave her own self, she thought, she would.

"Of course he'll be back," she whispered. "He's not untempered. He knows what the winters are like. He knows how to handle them."

The rice went first. Truthfully, it had frozen during the night. It was almost certainly still good. But the seed of youthful tradition in Emmaline's mind told her that food left on stoves could not be trusted. And so it went, pudding and all, down the drain in what would prove to be a costly mistake. The rice was followed by the chocolate, and the toast was unceremoniously tossed into the trash can. Emmaline was not usually in the habit of throwing out food, and she found the experience somehow empowering. It made her feel, a little, like she had a fresh start. This semi-euphoria, if such a weak attempt at emotion can claim that title, lasted as long as it took to get out the ingredients for a new pot of hot chocolate. Then the feeling of renewal was replaced by that of wastefulness, which, being an emotional Trojan horse, quickly again opened the floodgates to despair.

The fire crackled in Emmaline's ears. It no longer seemed a hopeful sound. It was the din of a losing battle. The cold here was too strong; it would consume everything—had already consumed.

I wish I could call him, she thought.

She lifted the dusty phone from its place on the wall and pressed the cold plastic to her ear.

Silence. Oh, I hate silence.

Emmaline glanced at the kitchen knife. Frozen steel contemplated the dull gray light.

Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

Emmaline understood that now. One could, for example, die alone.

A tear fell on the marked wood of the countertop. Before she could think, Emmaline had clutched the knife and put it to her left wrist. Dying alone was a terrible thought. But it couldn't be worse than living like this.

Her arm from pinky to elbow prickled as she felt the carefully maintained blade touch the sensitive skin encasing the carpal bones. Tendons involuntarily contracted. A chill enveloped her body.

The hand holding the knife quivered just a little, causing the edge to bite through the epidermal layer of skin. A thin ridge of blood pushed up through the shallow cut. It stung. It felt like ice or fire or electricity, stabbing into her wrist and brain.

It's a terribly unsanitary thing to do in a kitchen.

Her shoulders shook. Her vision blurred.

A crash sounded from the garage below her.

She inhaled a sharp lungful of air and nearly threw the knife across the kitchen so that it came to rest on the far end of the counter, spinning slowly.

Emmaline stared at it with wide, horrified eyes.

He's home.

She tried to breathe normally, but her lungs were unwilling partners as she took a step in the direction of the garage.

The stairs nearly proved treacherous as she stumbled down them, alternately crying and laughing as she went.

Opening the garage door was not always easy. It was a heavy slab that sometimes stuck in its frame. She threw her shoulder against it as she turned the knob—forced it open.

Standing in front of her with half a pair of trousers hanging out of its mouth was a humped-back, white-faced, medium-sized, red cow.

She screamed and fell backward onto her bottom.

Emmaline scrambled to her feet and stood for almost a minute, staring at the creature. Then, it decided that an open doorway was as good as an invitation.

A wizened pair of ladies had once used the term, “stubborn old cow.” Emmaline hadn’t thought much of it at the time. Now, it came to mind clearly as twelve hundred pounds of Hereford beef set its mind to the grand exploration of the rooms above.

Emmaline tried to push it back into the garage, but she may as well have been trying to plug a volcano with a screw-top jar lid.

The cow pushed past her.

“Get back here!” Emmaline cried weakly as it moved across the landing toward the stairs. “I mean it! Get back here!”

The cow continued, pant leg dragging on the ground.

Emmaline got ahead of the cow to push from the front. She put her arms around its neck and pulled from behind. She pulled and pushed and coxed to no avail.

“Well, if you must come upstairs,” Emmaline said, “at least stay out of the kitchen!”

The cow paused long enough to look at her and moo. Then it walked up the last few steps and immediately turned the corner into the kitchen.

“Oh no you don’t!” was all the warning the cow got before Emmaline was ahead of it—with the first weaponized wooden spoon that came to hand—and was mercilessly beating the bovine’s back and rump and sometimes head, though her own soft heart and the doleful eyes of the invader did not allow Emmaline to hit the head all too hard.

The only reaction that the cow exhibited to this assault was to raise its tail out of the way and drop a warm, wet, patty of post-processed cud onto the hardwood floor.

Emmaline squealed. “You didn’t!”

The cow turned its head slowly and looked into Emmaline's eyes. The two occupants of the kitchen stared at each other with a stillness that pulled all the fury of the storm and held it hostage in the peace between animal and woman.

"Oh," Emmaline said.

The cow grunted and walked into the living room where it flopped in front of the fire.

After a hesitant moment, Emmaline placed her spoon on the counter next to a large, steel kitchen knife and followed.

It was 2:00 in the afternoon when a door slammed and her bundled husband, with snow on his hat and shoulders and scarf and gloves, entered the room. He stopped with a shake of his head, which sent small flurries to puddle on the ground.

He cast an amused glance at Emmaline, who was lying on the side of the cow as if it were an overstuffed beanbag. She had her feet toward the fire and a book in her hand. Her eyes drooped lazily. Then he looked at the pile of dung which still graced the kitchen floor.

"I see you're not the only one in this house who knows how to make pie."

Emmaline stuck her head up from her furry red nook of Hereford, looked at her husband, and laughed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I suppose I should have cleaned that up already."

He shrugged.

"If you don't mind, then I suppose I don't mind either."

"Mind?" Emmaline smiled, wrinkling her nose. "I kind of like it. It's earthy, warm—reminds me of spring."

Her husband looked again at the still slightly steaming pile and sniffed the air. "Oh, it's warm, alright," he said. "I prefer the dried variety myself, but I suppose I can see the appeal."

"Oh, hush, you," Emmaline said. "Come over here and tell me about your trip."

She patted the ground next to her.

"I suppose old Bessie is big enough for the both of us," he said. "You know, I've been looking for her for the last hour. Got stuck in town with the storm. Finally had to borrow Mrs. Madsen's snowmobile to make it back with the medicine. But by the time I got here, Bessie, there, was already chilled through in the field. Led her into the garage to thaw, but when I returned from feeding, she was gone. I thought she'd wandered back outside. Darn near froze my ears off looking out in the west fields."

Emmaline laughed softly. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

"Trouble? It wasn't any trouble at all. Though, it may have been, if that medicine wasn't so strong. In all my years ranching, I never seen a range cow so docile as all this."

"You know," Emmaline said, glancing out the window to see that the storm had relaxed into a light snowfall, "I think I might help with the evening feeding." She took a deep breath. "And, George, there's something we need to talk about."