

"BIG-HEARTED AND HILARIOUS." —SHELBY VAN PELT,
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES

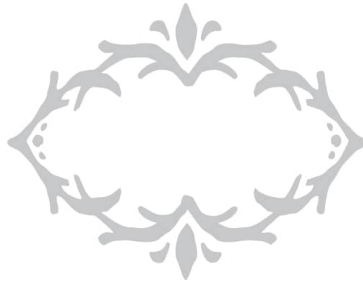
WOOD WORKING

A Novel

EMILY

ST. JAMES

WOOD WORKING



Emily St. James

Crooked Media Reads

A zando IMPRINT



**Crooked
Media
Reads**

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FOR ROBERTA

Whatever she might become she would never be static.

—*Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis

September

Erica

Monday,

September 12

ERICA DIDN'T KNOW ANY OTHER TRANS WOMEN. So when she learned Abigail Hawkes had called everyone in her current events class “a bunch of fascist cunts,” Erica switched detention duty slots with Hank DeWaard to be able to talk to Abigail one-on-one.

“Whatever, [REDACTED],” Hank said. Since she had chosen the name Erica for herself in a frenzy on a baby-name website, Erica’s old name had come to sound like it was enveloped in fog. It was very far away from her now, somewhere out at sea. Hank dumped three packets of salt into his steaming Lean Cuisine. “Go ahead! Take all my slots as far as I’m concerned.”

“I wouldn’t go that far!” Erica laughed collegially, trying to seem like she was the kind of man Hank could clap on the back and call “a real good guy” while they were out having a drink after work. Hank would never see her hiding in plain sight. In a town like Mitchell, South Dakota, she had to disappear before she was spotted.

Erica realized she had been laughing a second too long, at something that wasn’t even funny at all, something *she* had said, no less. She had the uneasy feeling lately that she was watching herself on a thirty-second delay. Everything moved so much more slowly now that she was aware she was trying to escape herself.

She had lost so much time already.

She managed to stop laughing. Hank ran a plastic fork through his beige tortellini, eyebrow raised in amusement. "This stuff tastes like crap, but the wife makes me eat it. Do you want some of it? All of it?" Hank's face tilted toward concern. "Oh, buddy, are you okay?"

Erica had lost track of her facial expressions. She replayed the last few seconds and found she was staring into the middle distance, an empty expression in her eyes. If she didn't fix this immediately, she was sure Hank would realize the truth. He would say, "You're looking awfully weird there, bud. Wait. Abigail Hawkes has detention today. Do you want to talk to Abigail Hawkes? Are you ... a transgender ... like Abigail Hawkes?" As soon as Erica had become incredibly, constantly aware of her own gender, she had also become convinced everybody around her had a full CSI team dedicated solely to figuring out what was up with Erica's gender. So dedicated was she to keeping anyone from examining her too closely that she missed everything else she was feeling. Her emotions were occurring in another room somewhere.

Hank's hand was now on Erica's shoulder. When had he stood up? "Hey, buddy, it's okay. You want to pray about it?" Erica only realized she was crying after Hank pulled her into a hug and her tears stained the shoulder of his shirt. "God sees your pain, [REDACTED]. He knows how hard it is to wake up alone every morning."

Right. Hank thought Erica's crying jag was all about the divorce. Well, great! She could salvage this situation yet!

"I guess I'm sadder than I thought I would be," Erica said, remembering to put a hitch in her voice in *just* the right place. "I miss Constance so much, and she's auditioning for *Our Town* tonight. I haven't seen her since we—"

"Oh, buddy," Hank said. "Feeling sad's only natural. Do you *have* to do the play?"

Erica nodded overzealously. "I promised Brooke I would."

The lounge was empty but for the two of them. Hank continued to hug her. She knew he would see this as just good, caring, Christian male bonding,

so she dutifully played the part of The Man. She was so good at playing him. “I just need to have strength. A prayer might be nice.”

Hank beamed, taking Erica’s hands firmly in his. She didn’t even hear his prayer. She looked, instead, at her nails and wondered what they might look like painted pink.

Abigail wasn’t the only student in detention that day, but she had by far the longest stint. Three girls in trouble for mocking a classmate were dismissed after a half hour, then a handful of boys in trouble for a variety of offenses at the hour mark, then someone else (Erica hardly knew who) at ninety minutes, and then there was Abigail, with a full hour left on her sentence, staring straight ahead. Abigail had transferred to Mitchell High from the nearby tiny town of Corsica a year prior, at the start of her junior year, and Erica had known Abigail was trans before she had known Abigail’s name. Erica had heard via Mitchell’s rumor mill that there was a sister Abigail lived with after her parents had kicked her out. Every time that same rumor mill coughed up the name Abigail had been given at birth, Erica’s brain simply refused to retain the information, which should have been Erica’s first clue something was up with herself.

“You can read a book or something,” Erica said.

Abigail startled at the sound of Erica’s voice. “Isn’t that against the rules?”

Erica shrugged. “It’s just us. You’ve got another hour, and I have papers to grade. I won’t say anything.”

Abigail leaned forward, and Erica briefly became terrified that trans people had a secret radar she didn’t yet know about, and that Abigail *knew everything*. But she only dipped down to her bag and withdrew a copy of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, then did her best to make reading look effortful.

Erica had often imagined what she might say if she ever talked to another trans woman. She always assumed she would be personable, smooth. She

would find a way to be, like, “Hey, we’re all trans here, right?!” then laugh blithely. Instead, she abruptly realized how little Abigail probably wanted her own teacher—her fucking *teacher*—telling her that, actually, she wasn’t *Mr. Skyberg* at all but was, instead—

Abigail cleared her throat and turned a page, furrowing her brow with great intensity. She wore, as always, the too-big army jacket that followed her like a ghost, and both of her shoes were untied. Her shoulder-length hair was dyed shock-white blonde, and her T-shirt advertised some band Erica had never heard of. Abigail looked to Erica like a series of conscious choices designed to irritate and confuse specific demographics, rather than a person with a coherent center. Erica decided she loved this about her.

“So I was thinking ...,” Erica said. Abigail looked up, and Erica regretted saying anything at all.

Abigail folded the corner of the page she was reading, deliberately, as if the act required ten to fifteen separate motions. She leaned forward into Erica’s long silence. “You were thinking ...?”

“Forget it.”

“No, go ahead. Ask. You’re in a classroom with a political dissident. What else is there to do except ask her embarrassing fucking questions?”

“But I don’t want to ask you—”

“Yes, you do! Everyone does! Pervert.”

“No! I— No!” Erica’s breath caught in her throat, and she stared down at her polish-less hands. They grew watery as her vision blurred, and she found herself imagining them as empty fuel gauges. She had run out of *man* to expend, and now she needed to refuel with something that would burn cleaner. She chased the metaphor around in circles, growing ever tearier, when she looked up at Abigail and saw the girl staring at her, clearly trying to figure out what Erica wanted from her. Erica winced, every thought in her head suddenly flapping away at once. “Okay. I have one question. What do I do now?”

“Huh?” Abigail said. “I don’t fucking care, do whatever you want. God.”

“No, what do I do ... now that I *know*?”

Something thawed inside Abigail's expression. Erica could *feel* her realize the link between them. "Oh," she said, and then, her voice filled with a seventeen-year-old's approximation of compassion, "*Oh.*"

The five-minute timer on Erica's phone had gone off three times already and was headed for a fourth when Abigail finally slouched out of the Super Walmart's sliding doors. She hovered in the glow of the store's front doors for a few moments, before disappearing into the gloom of the parking lot as she made her way to the farthest corner, where Erica waited in her car.

Erica blinked at the sudden incursion of light as Abigail opened the passenger door, a crooked smile spreading across her face. "So you sat here in the dark like a spy but forgot the interior lights would come on the second I opened the door?"

"Get in the car," Erica said, but Abigail was too overcome with laughter to do anything but let out great gulps of it. Erica was sure the entire world had turned its eyes toward the teenager and her teacher, who still had a mustache (oh God, why did she still have a mustache?), leaning across the center console and attempting to drag the girl inside.

Abigail plopped herself down in the car and closed the door. "Relax," she said. "Like *nobody* is here."

"People are here," Erica said, gesturing to the half-full parking lot. "*People are here.*"

Abigail sighed and withdrew a tiny bottle of nail polish from her jacket pocket, depositing it in Erica's palm, along with a nickel and a handful of pennies. "It was more expensive than I thought, but this is a good brand."

Erica turned the nail polish over in her hand, imagining being the kind of person who might wear it. "Okay ..."

"It's going to be okay." Abigail looked at her with a soft, even kind, expression. "If they haul me in for questioning, I'll tell them everything was aboveboard, and I was buying you nail polish because you're questioning

your gender.” Abigail smiled, then looked out the back window to where fast-food restaurants lit up the night. “Ooh, can we get Culver’s?”

“What do you think this is?”

“You asked me to buy you nail polish, and I did. Also, I’m hungry.”

Erica looked again at the nail polish. “Everything’s Rosy,” the label read, to delineate the infinitesimal differences between it and the other pink shades on the shelf. She had wanted this for as long as she had been alive, and she was just now realizing how much. Or, rather, she had been alive for thirty-five years, and she felt like she had only *existed* for about three weeks.

“Hey. Heeeeeey. Mr.—Ms.—Erica? I promise it’s okay! Nobody saw me walk across the parking lot. Nobody *cares*. They think they hate us, but they don’t even see us half the time.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Erica said, gulping back a sob.

“I guess it is,” Abigail said.

“I was watching TV one day, and I thought, *That girl’s dress is really cute*. I looked her up, and she was born two days before me. It was like I was seeing who I might have been. I caught myself off guard or something, because the next thing I knew, it wasn’t who I might have been but who I could be. Even with my ...” Erica gestured to her unruly lint ball of a body.

The words kept coming. She realized she had been waiting three weeks to talk about this with someone. “She was inside of me. I don’t know another way to put it. And she was pissed as hell. I kept—” Erica contorted her fingers, like their commands were being overridden by an unearthly force —“I would just be driving along, or teaching a class, and I would be twitching my fingers because I could feel her in my brain. Mad at what I had done with my life. With her life.” She noticed the clock with a sudden panic. “Oh my God, I need to get to auditions.”

“Nobody noticed.” Abigail sounded like she choked back a snort to let her most compassionate self out. “We think the rest of the world spends all its time noticing these tiny little signals we’re giving off, but they don’t think about this stuff. The cis are oblivious. Even I didn’t notice you doing the weird spider-finger thing.”

“I didn’t think anybody did,” Erica said automatically, almost before she realized she had said it. Lying to yourself made you very good at lying to everyone. Abigail started to speak again but Erica cut her off, concluding her shift away from herself, back into Mr. Skyberg. “Let’s get you your Culver’s, then take you home. I’m late as it is.”

Erica agreed to let Abigail out a few blocks from the house she shared with her sister, less because Abigail was worried and more because Erica knew that if anybody saw her alone with Abigail, even in a professional context, it would create gossip. A gust of wind slammed into a “TRUMP/PENCE 2016” sign in a nearby yard, causing it to bend, then snap back. Its presence did little to allay Erica’s anxiety.

“Look,” Abigail said, holding up her phone so Erica could see. “I saved you in my contacts as ‘Erica.’ Absolutely nobody is going to think that’s you. Text away.”

“What if someone gets curious and tracks my phone number back to me?” Erica knew she was being paranoid, but she also knew she would lose everything if her secret were exposed. Oh fuck, she had a secret that could be exposed.

“Do you want to pick a specific rock we can leave notes for each other under? That won’t be suspicious at all!” Abigail opened the passenger door, and the car flooded with light again. Erica instinctively dipped her head to hide from anyone who might be watching (almost certainly the entirety of the Central time zone). “Nobody is going to guess you’re trans unless you tell them. So fucking text me, okay?”

Erica swallowed but nodded. “I’ll text. If I need advice.”

Abigail nodded and started to close the door. Erica felt a stabbing loneliness. For a little under two hours, she had been a person, without caveats or qualifications, without having to add up all the hashmarks in her brain to find the answers to questions. She hadn’t had to perform. She had

just been Erica Skyberg. And the second Abigail shut the door, the light would turn off, and Erica wasn't sure if it would ever turn on again.

"Wait!" she said.

Abigail placed a single arm atop the car and leaned down to stare inside. She sighed heavily. "Look: I'm not your friend. I know who you are, but that doesn't make me your friend."

"I didn't say it did."

"I know baby trans girls, Erica. You're going to go home and write in your fucking diary about how you made a friend today. You didn't. We're on the same team. That's all. Friends, no. Teammates, sure."

"Go, team." Erica smiled, and Abigail rolled her eyes. "Seriously, what do I do next? I have no idea."

"I'm not your *coach*, either," Abigail said. "But fine, sport. Find some other woman to bother about girl stuff because I don't think you can pull *this* off." She gestured to the chaotic assemblage that was her own outward presentation. "Oh, and put on your nail polish and see how it feels. After auditions. Wait. Are you doing one of *Brooke Daniels's* plays?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Abigail made a disgusted face. "Good luck with that, *Erica*." She swung the door closed, and the light shut off.

Erica barreled into the theater, door slamming behind her. Her armpits were drenched with sweat. Some poor old man onstage, mouth half open, hand raised to gesticulate, turned his eyes toward her. "Excuse me!" he said.

Brooke sat in the center of the front row. She turned her shoulders and neck to look at Erica. She moved jerkily, like a stop-motion figurine, some of her movements lost between frames. "Mr. Skyberg. You're late." She faced the stage again. "Very hard to hold auditions without my assistant director."

Erica squeezed past a few hopeful auditioners on her way to Brooke. "Sorry. Lost track of time."

"Can I continue?" the old man said.

Brooke waved her hand. “Why don’t you start over, Paul? Since we’re all here now.” She looked at Erica, then shook her head before returning her attention to the stage.

Erica knew why Abigail thought working with Brooke was a bad idea. Brooke was part of one of Mitchell’s most powerful families—vastly rich, incredibly Christian, deeply conservative. Yet she and Erica had worked together in the community theater for years now, and Erica didn’t think she was *evil* (probably). They were friends. Maybe. At least something beyond a shared interest kept them working together.

As Paul rambled (badly), Brooke scrawled something on paper with a black Sharpie, then handed it to Erica. In large, block letters, she had written: “CONSTANCE IS PLAYING EMILY. IS THAT A PROBLEM?”

Erica gave Brooke a smile so confident that Brooke let out a skeptical laugh, cutting Paul off. Erica’s eyes blurred with tears as she folded Brooke’s message over once, twice, three, four times. She couldn’t understand if she was crying because she would be seeing a lot of Constance or because she had missed Constance’s audition and, thus, her one chance to see her that night.

When Erica left, it was nearly midnight. She and Brooke had spent almost an hour arguing over who to cast as the Stage Manager, when Erica knew Brooke would ultimately get her way and cast Lance Michaels, the large-animal vet who looked a little like Paul Newman if you had five beers and squinted. She always got her way. Shadows of clouds scuttered across the street. It was cold for September, which meant the cold bore a hint of worse to come.

Someone was leaning against the theater’s back wall, illuminated by the orange glow of a cigarette dangling from fingers, only lifting to lips after considerable pauses. Erica knew that arm. Constance stared at her.

“Oh good,” she said. “It’s you.” She had the creamy white coat Erica had bought her on their honeymoon draped around her shoulders. “Did I get the

part?” Her long, curly black hair framed electric pale skin, smudged red lipstick, and emerald-green glasses. She dropped the cigarette and crushed it beneath her heel.

“You always get the part, Constance. As you know, rehearsals are Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, so ... see you next Monday. Looking forward to it.” Erica *was* looking forward to it. She missed Constance terribly. But her smile died before it even started when she saw the expression on Constance’s face, one she knew too well. “Did you want to talk about something?”

“No,” Constance said, but she immediately shook her head. “Keep a secret for me? I haven’t told anyone, not even John.” The specter of Constance’s boyfriend, all corn-fed six feet of him, stepped into the darkness between them.

“Should I know this?” Erica said.

“No,” Constance said. “You’re right. Bad idea.”

Erica cleared her throat, then waved goodbye. As she got in her car, her eyes fell over the nail polish bottle sitting in her cup holder. What if she told Constance? What if she let her know the end of their marriage wasn’t entirely Constance’s fault?

When she looked up, Constance was standing just a few feet away. She sucked in her breath. “Fuck it. Do you remember that first Christmas we spent together? When your family insisted I spend the entire night watching your three-year-old second cousin? Because I exuded maternal energy? And on the way home, I said, ‘I’m *never* having children,’ and you said that was fine by you?”

Erica leaned against the car door, lest she fall over. Swallowing her desire to have children had been part of the bargain she made with herself to be married to Constance, cloaked in the guise of nonthreatening heterosexuality. But now ...

“You’re pregnant,” Erica said. She couldn’t see straight, so she looked away, her eyes finding the nail polish again. “You’re pregnant.”

“I’m pregnant.”

Abigail

Monday,

September 19

EVERYBODY ALWAYS ASKS ME the same three questions, so I'm going to answer those questions right now and pretend you're not fucking rude for fucking asking, even though you are.

"Abigail, how did you know you were trans?" One day, I just did. Maybe one day, you'll just know too. *Scary.*

"Abigail, how did you pick your name?" Why would I have picked a name *other* than Abigail?

"Abigail, are you having 'the surgery'?" Which one? Facial feminization surgery? Vocal feminization surgery? Breast augmentation? Something I read about on Reddit called "teeth reassignment surgery"? Or are you actually asking, "Are you going to have 'the sex change'?" like you think I'll be super validated by shoving my dick into a lawn mower?

(For what it's worth, it's called bottom surgery. See? You learned something!)

I would like the world to forget I'm trans for five seconds. I could pull it off. I look in the mirror sometimes, and I see a super-hot, super-cool teenage girl.

If nobody knew I was trans, I could sleep with so many guys. Just left and right.

But everybody here knows “my secret,” and they’re going to know until I leave Mitchell and go to Minneapolis or Chicago or somewhere. I’ll get my surgeries and change my name and never, ever tell anybody else again. I’ll be like any other girl you pass on the street. You’d never know. Yeah, my hands are a little big, but do you go around measuring the hands of every woman you meet? God, I hope not. Pervert.

From the second I got to Mitchell High, all anybody knew about me was that I was trans. Somebody found the last school picture I took in boy mode, printed it out with my dead name, and taped it up on my locker in my first week. I knew then that nobody was ever going to want to be seen with me, and even now, the people who are kinda nice to me want to know everything there is to know about being trans, like I’m not just some dumb girl who read a bunch of Reddit threads and half-assed her way to a life that made sense. (Actually, if I tell them that, they’ll think the internet transed me.)

That’s why I’m disappearing the second I can. I read about that on Reddit too. This old bitch made this post called “A Warning,” and she talked about how she grew up in Brazil but got her hands on hormones when she was sixteen (like I did!) and ran away to New York and completely fucking disappeared. Back then, in the 1980s or whenever, they called it “woodworking,” because you disappear into the woodwork. And she said, “It destroys you. You can’t pretend you’re not who you are.”

But just let me try, lady. I’ll run so far and so fast that you’ll never see me again. I’ll be hiding in the walls, trying to be any other girl, like in that one story with the yellow wallpaper Ms. Skyberg made us all read last year.

Yes, Ms. Skyberg. As you can imagine, my *English teacher coming out to me* has been hugely inconvenient, given my overall mood.

A couple months before he kicked me out, my dad took me fishing because his pastor said I “lacked positive male role models.” I think the idea was that I would hold a slowly suffocating fish and be like, “Okay! Manhood! I get it!”

My dad was excited when I kinda got super into fishing. We just sat there, and he wouldn’t talk, and I could keep planning out how to get feminizing hormones shipped in from Bolivia. Then, sometimes, I would catch a fish, and who wouldn’t feel a sense of accomplishment at that? During the four-hour drive back to Corsica (the shit-ass town I grew up in), my dad was so pleased that he let me listen to Mitski’s “Townie” on endless repeat. I don’t think he even noticed how often she sings, “I’m not gonna be what my daddy wants me to be.” Okay, I know he didn’t, because he slept most of the way.

My plan to get hormones from Bolivia worked, and when my mom found them, it was a whole thing. My dad was all, “No son of mine!” and I couldn’t stop laughing, because it was all so ridiculous. He said, “You laugh one more time, and you don’t have a bed to sleep in tonight, mister,” so I laughed one more time because Jennifer had already said she would take me in. He stood up and cocked his fist to take a swing at me, and my mom screamed, and I said, “I’m going, I’m going,” and I ran all the way to the quick stop, and I called Jennifer, and she came to get me.

Anyway, that’s why I live in Mitchell with Jennifer and not where I grew up.

Right, right, the fascist-cunts thing.

The class is called “current events,” so you can probably draw your own conclusions. But Mrs. King wanted to talk about the upcoming election, and who we would vote for *if we could*. It was just this endless lineup of dumbasses who were like, “Trump” or “Make America great again” or whatever, and when Megan Osborne said, “I like Hillary,” like a human bumper sticker, they laughed at her.

So I called them a bunch of fascist cunts, because I’m a lady, which means I get to say “cunt.”