

A Better Life *(By Mac Mckechnie)*

Emily stood on the narrow balcony of her cramped flat, the city sprawling out beneath her like a vast, concrete ocean. The neon lights flickered in the distance, casting a surreal glow over the evening haze. She had lived in London her entire life, but it had never felt like home. The flat was all she could afford following paying back debts after Jim's death, and the weight of her daily routine, the monotony of her job at the call centre, and the suffocating sense of confinement gnawed at her spirit.

Tonight, though, something was different. Tonight, she would escape.

The plan had been forming in her mind for months, a fragile idea slowly solidifying into a determined course of action. She had saved every penny she could, avoided unnecessary expenses, and meticulously plotted her departure. The destination was a small town she had read about, nestled in hilly country far from the noise and chaos of the city. It promised tranquillity, a fresh start, and the freedom she yearned for.

Emily picked up the photo of her and Jim, and studied it carefully, Jim had passed away following a short illness five years ago, Emily had struggled to get over the loss, that both her and the children felt, Jim had been a good man, and wonderful husband and father, and tears pricked her eyes as she wondered for the hundredth time what Jim would have thought of her decision. She sighed heavily as she slid the photo into her packed bag.

Emily glanced at the packed bag and suitcase lying on her bed, a mix of excitement and anxiety churning in her stomach. She had left a note on the kitchen counter, explaining to her children that she needed to find herself again, to break free and escape the chains that bound her. She knew they would worry, but Emily also knew that she couldn't stay any longer. Not if she wanted to live, really live.

Taking a deep breath, she slung the bag over her shoulder, picked up the suitcase and stepped out into the hallway. Her heart pounded as she descended the stairs, every step taking her closer to the unknown. The streets were quieter than usual, the buzz of the city muted as if it sensed her imminent departure.

The bus station was a twenty - minute walk from her flat. As she approached, the imposing structure seemed both a beacon of hope and a reminder of the enormity of her decision. The digital display board showed the departure times, and she spotted her bus - leaving in thirty minutes. Perfect timing.

She purchased her ticket, her hands trembling slightly as she handed over the money. With the ticket safely in hand, she found a quiet corner and sat down, her mind racing with thoughts of what lay ahead. Would she find the peace she craved? Would she be able to build a new life? The questions were endless, but she pushed them aside, focusing on the sense of liberation that had carried her this far.

A few minutes before the scheduled departure, Emily boarded the bus, finding a seat near the back. She settled in, her suitcase in the rack above, and her bag clutched to her chest,

and stared out the window as the engine roared to life. The cityscape began to blur as the bus pulled away from the station, and Emily felt a rush of exhilaration. She was finally leaving.

The journey took several hours, the scenery changing from urban sprawl to rolling hills and dense forests. As the bus wound its way through the high hills, Emily felt a sense of calm washing over her. The towering trees, the crisp air, and the distant hills all seemed to whisper promises of a better life.

By the time the bus reached its final stop, the sun was beginning to set, casting a warm, golden light over the quaint town. Emily stepped off the bus, taking in the picturesque surroundings. The town was small, just as she had imagined, with charming houses, cobblestone streets, and a slow, easy pace of life.

She made her way to a modest B & B she had found online, where she had booked a room for the first few nights. The landlady, a kind elderly woman named Mrs. Harris, welcomed her with a warm smile.

“You must be Emily,” Mrs. Harris said, her voice gentle. “Welcome to our little town. I hope you find what you’re looking for here.”

“Thank you,” Emily replied, her nerves settling somewhat. “I really hope I do as well.”

The room was simple but cozy, with a window that offered a stunning view of the high hills that surrounded the town. Emily unpacked her belongings, feeling a sense of relief as she settled into the space. She had done it. She had escaped.

The following days were a whirlwind of exploration and discovery. Emily wandered the town’s narrow streets, visited the local market, and marvelled at the beauty of her new surroundings. The townspeople were friendly, always ready with a smile and a kind word. She found herself drawn to the local café, a charming little place with wooden tables and a view of the town square. It became her favourite spot to sit and write in her journal, capturing her thoughts and dreams.

One morning, as she sipped her coffee and watched the townspeople go about their day, a man approached her table. He was in his early sixties, with greying hair and a warm, inviting smile.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked, gesturing to the empty chair across from her.

“Of course,” Emily replied, curious about the stranger.

“I’m Joe,” he introduced himself as he sat down. “I’ve seen you around town the past few days. Are you new here?”

“Yes, I am,” Emily said. “I just moved here from the city. Needed a change of scenery.”

Joe smiled. "I know the feeling. I moved here a few years ago for the same reason. Best decision I ever made."

They chatted for hours, sharing stories of their pasts and their hopes for the future. Emily found herself drawn to Joe's gentle nature and genuine kindness. Over the next few weeks, they spent more and more time together, exploring the town, going for long walks in the surrounding hills, and enjoying each other's company.

Emily's new life began to take shape. She found a part time job at the local bookstore, a quaint little shop filled with the comforting scent of old books. The owner, Mrs. Jacobs, was a kind woman who appreciated Emily's love of literature. She quickly became a part of the community, her days filled with meaningful work and genuine connections. Emily was happy to work part time, she didn't need much, and staying with Mrs Harris was relatively inexpensive.

Emily found out the town had a small but thriving u3a, an organisation for older people with shared interests, and working part time was able to join the u3a Literary group which she started to thoroughly enjoy, as she shared her love of literature with a small but enthusiastic group of likeminded members on a Tuesday afternoon.

Joe became a constant presence in her life, their bond growing stronger with each passing day. He showed her hidden gems in the town, introduced her to his friends, and supported her in every way possible. Emily felt a sense of belonging she had never experienced before.

One evening, as they sat on a hillside overlooking the town, Joe turned to her with a serious expression.

"Emily, I know you came here to escape your old life. But I want you to know that you've built something beautiful here. You've become a part of this town, and you've made a place for yourself. And...I care about you. A lot."

Emily's heart swelled with emotion. She had found more than just an escape; she had found a new home, a new purpose, and someone who truly cared for her.

"I care about you too, Joe," she said, her voice filled with sincerity. "I never imagined I could find this kind of happiness. But I have, thanks to you and this wonderful place."

As they watched the sun set behind the mountains, Emily felt a profound sense of peace. She had escaped the confines of her old life, but more importantly, she had found a life worth living. She knew Jim would have approved. The town, the people, and Joe had given her a second chance, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Emily's journey had been one of courage and self-discovery. She had taken a leap of faith and found something extraordinary on the other side. And as she sat there, hand in hand with Joe, she knew that having escaped from the city, this was just the beginning of a beautiful new chapter in her life.