Fairfax Morrison

DOI
https://doi.org/10.32393/jlmms/2025.0018
Published on
Mon, 05/05/2025 - 16:01

This short story is based on Chapter 3, “In the Watches of the Night,” in L.M. Montgomery’s *Emily Climbs*. It features Fairfax Morrison with his skill of collapsing and embodying past, present, and future all at once.

The day was hot. There would be thunderstorms later; he could feel it in his bones. It wasn’t always pleasant to be able to predict the weather, but he was used to it by now. He’d had this skill ever since he was a boy. “Fairfax, go see about the sky,” his mother told him, and he would run as fast as he could to the little hill next to their house and look up until his head was spinning. No need to do that now. A quick glance was enough, sometimes not even that. It was like all the weather—past, present, and future—was in his body, so that his bones told him what was coming, or his blood remembered how it had rained two weeks ago. He could have helped a lot of farmers, but, for some reason, they didn’t want his help. Didn’t think anyone could predict the weather. They just snickered and shook their heads. He had never been able to understand what they were laughing at. Nothing funny about weather.

It was too hot for church. He didn’t like it, but Annie would have liked him to go. Church was important, prayer meetings, greeting your neighbours, putting on your Sunday best. His mother had been the same. What was so appealing to them about following these social rules? As a child he was happy with his mother and father, their only child, shy from the beginning. And, later, he loved nothing better than spending all of his time with Annie after they met and fell in love. It was easiest that way, since other people could be confusing. “What if you grow tired of me?” Annie had asked teasingly, and he had said “Never” so seriously that she had burst into laughter that still pealed in his ears. Right now he could hear it, like the church bells

that rang every Sunday.

The meeting was beginning, he was inside the church, there was no turning back. He was already sweating in his heavy black coat. Annie would have shaken her head for him wearing that ugly old thing to church, but somehow he couldn't remember where the rest of his clothes were. The coat comforted him; it was as familiar as his own hands, although things kept falling off it.

"Well, what if I grow tired of *you*," Annie had also said, and it was this memory that made him realize that he had somehow forgotten where she was. Somewhere on the way, he had mislaid his heart, his love, like she was just a pile of clothes. Mother always said that he was sloppy with things. Good with weather and books, but bad with remembering where the key to the cellar was or his comb that was missing a couple of teeth. "Keep better care of your things, son," his father had said and slapped him in the face, not unkindly, but just the way he did when he got frustrated. Fairfax never felt frustrated. He was good at sitting still and waiting, and one day it happened that his father died and went to heaven, and then it was just him and his mother, and then, later, him and Annie.

He never hit Annie. It wasn't in him to hit a woman. But he almost had when she said that she might grow tired of him. "Don't you ever say that," he said solemnly, and Annie's smile vanished, and she ran into his arms sobbing wildly. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," she whispered wetly into his ear, and he wiped it with his hand and wasn't sure if it was Annie's tears or his own sweat. His hands suddenly missed the feel of his bride's body, and he realized that she wasn't there. Only the hard wooden bench of the gallery where he sat. The minister said something about hellfire—like any of them knew anything of hell. He touched the head of his dog to fill his hands with something. The dog gave a little whine and licked his palm.

A month later they were married. Sometimes, when he was looking at his wife, during those first few weeks, he felt a giddiness rise up in his body so that he didn't have a choice but to jump up from the chair and dance wildly around the kitchen. Annie would pause her cooking and shout, "What's gotten into you!" and Fairfax would grab her and twirl her in the air. "You're mad as a hatter," she scolded him for having ruined their dinner, but they ate it anyway. Or, looking at her sleeping next to him, tears started to run down his cheeks, involuntary, silent, because she was so beautiful, and he was so happy, and the feeling was too enormous to bear at night

when he was alone and the house around him so quiet. He kissed her cheek gently, or her temple, the softest spot of her, and it was a kiss but also a blessing. *Keep her safe, keep her close*, to the darkness around him, to ward off any evil that might linger by.

It was dark now, except for the silvery moonlight coming in through the windows of the church. Everybody was gone, and he was sitting alone with his dog. Not long before the storm now; there was electricity in the air. “The Prince of the Power of the Air,” he muttered to himself. “He who rules the wind and the storms that will come.” At that moment the first lightning struck. A great big bang that woke him up. Where was Annie? They had agreed to meet at church, but he had tarried again as was his custom, and she would be looking for him. Lost in daydreams, the one thing she didn’t like about him. She couldn’t be outside, not in a storm like this, and Annie had always been afraid of thunder, even though he had tried to explain what caused it and how unlikely it was that a person be hit by lightning. She would have remembered that inside the church was safest, since the lightning would hit the steeple and not the building. But this wasn’t their church, not the Derry Pond church with the church bells and the tall steeple, but a small white one that could easily be burnt down by a strike. “Annie, I’m coming!” he whispered, not wanting to scare his bride.

The dog followed him silently when he got up, and he gestured it to go down the gallery stairs. He had to check the gallery first to see if Annie might be there, looking for him. She knew he liked to sit high up, above the congregation, closer to heaven. There was no sign of her. He felt like hitting himself. His father had been right. He was careless with his things. He had misplaced Annie and could not forgive himself. There was another flash of lightning, and he could see the bottom of the steps for a second. That was all he needed.

There she was! Her hand reaching out for the head of his dog. Her dear hand that he knew so well. The hand where he slipped the ring the day they were married. The hand that took his that time he gathered enough courage to ask her to walk home with him from church. The hand that caressed his face on their first night together and traced the outline of his profile. “Mr. Morrison, you have a Grecian nose, did you know that?” “No, Mrs. Morrison, I did not know that.” The memory of that conversation made him laugh. The hand he had kissed and kissed. He knew it so well he could’ve drawn it in his sleep.

It was wonderful to stand here and know that Annie was below him. Even in the dark he could see her. He gave another low laugh, full of pleasure, and took a few steps down toward her. Not long now and they would be united. He would bear her scolding, he would explain the mistake, and they would wait out the storm together and then walk home. Neither of them was afraid of the dark. And the world always smelled so delicious after a summer storm. Smiling, he put out his hand in anticipation, when another bolt of lightning illuminated the church.

“Teddy! Teddy! Teddy! Save me!” someone shrieked just below him.

Not Annie, it couldn’t have been Annie. She didn’t know anyone named Teddy, and she would never have screamed at the sight of him. The storm was playing tricks on him, and he started to get angry. This was between him and Annie. If there were other people in the church, sheltering from the storm, they should leave him alone and let him comfort his wife. He heard footsteps inside the church, between the aisles. The darkness that engulfed him made it easier to hear. Everything was quiet now. Whoever had shouted had probably left. He drew a deep breath to calm himself. That’s what Annie had told him to do if he got angry.

Footsteps again. Suddenly he understood. Why hadn’t he realized it before? It was so like Annie to play games with him, to be mischievous even in a frightening situation. His wife was playing hide-and-seek, in church of all places. The ludicrousness of the thought made him laugh, but he was happy again, he was himself again, and he put himself gladly in the game. “Here I come!” he almost shouted but didn’t want to give her a head start. If she wanted to play this game, she would have to play by the rules. Slowly, he started going through the pews, one aisle after another. Lightning flashed, not showing anything this time. He was tired. He had been doing this for so long. He just wanted to find Annie and go home. Why had his wife hidden herself so that he couldn’t find her? Why was she always so hard to find? He couldn’t remember what had happened. He just knew he was tired and that it would take all night to go through each of the pews, and then he would have to start all over again, because he couldn’t leave without her.

“I’m coming, don’t be afraid,” he whispered while his hands, being his eyes in the dark, brushed between the pews.

And then, just when he at last reached her—she was just behind that door, but the damn knob wouldn’t turn—someone was shouting again.

“Emily—Emily—are you there?”

“Teddy, I’m locked in the church! And Mad Mr. Morrison is here—oh, quick—quick—save me—save me.”

“The key of the door is hanging up in there on a nail at the right side. Can you get it and unlock the door? If you can’t I'll smash the porch window.”

He had to get to Annie before these people found her. He pushed the door with all his might and tried to grab her dark hair.

“Oh, Teddy, take me away—quick—oh, don’t let him touch me, Teddy—don’t let him touch me.”

It was Annie, she was sobbing, she was clinging to a young man, but no, it couldn’t be Annie, not his Annie, in the arms of a stranger. He stepped forward on the stone step outside the church. The air was fresh, the moon was out again, and he looked around him as if for the first time. The young girl was still crying. She had dark hair, but it wasn’t Annie. He could see it now. Similar, but not her. Nobody ever was.

“How dare you frighten her so?” the young man demanded.

He had been young once and in love. The thought made him sad.

“I want Annie,” he mumbled. “Where is Annie? I thought I had found her in there. I only wanted to find my beautiful Annie.”

“Annie isn’t here,” the young man said, clutching his sweetheart’s hand.

“Can you tell me where Annie is?” he entreated, wistfully. “Can you tell me where my dark-haired Annie is?”

“No—no—I don’t know where she is,” the young man said gently, “but I think you will find her sometime.”

Mad Mr. Morrison sighed.

“Oh, yes. Sometime I will overtake her. Come, my dog, we will seek her.”

Biography: Vappu Kannas holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her dissertation examines the journals of L.M. Montgomery and the depictions of romance in them. She has published articles on Montgomery in *The Looking Glass*, *Reading Today*, *L.M. Montgomery and Gender*, *Children and Childhoods in L.M. Montgomery*, and the *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies*. She is a novelist, translator, and poet. She has published a collaborative chapbook, *As an Eel Through the Body*, co-written with Canadian poet Shannon Maguire (Dancing Girl Press, 2016); a poetry collection, based on Montgomery's life, *Morsian* (Ntamo, 2018); and three novels, *Rosa Clay* (Kustantamo S&S, 2020), *Kirjeitä Japaniin* (Kustantamo S&S, 2021), and *Kimalaisten kirja* (Kustantamo S&S, 2023).

Work Cited, with Adaptations

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