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For the original Emily, my lovely Pook

– BR

For two little monsters, Amelie and Artie

– LT

‘The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve:
Lovers, to bed, ’tis almost fairy time.’

– WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Act V, Scene I



The quarter bell woke Emily in the night as Big Ben's chimes sang across the river to Lambeth and in through her bedroom window.

The street lamps outside bleached the room a faint orange. On the wall above her bed three black glass hares chased each other in an endless circle, glinting in the light. Both her pillow and Feesh, her cuddly crocodile, were damp with tears. She levered herself up then groaned at the red numbers on her alarm clock. Quarter to midnight, seven hours since being sent to bed for ever, and she was starving.

She flopped back down on the pillow, and nuzzled

poor, soggy Feesh (who she only kept as a joke, and definitely didn't snuggle every night). How had this happened again? How? As blinking always, her mum was the problem. There was just something so infuriating about her that it kept turning Emily into a human firework of foot-stamping rage. Light fuse, stand well back. Whizz bang pop, giant row, grounded. It was totally unfair. She'd been well within her rights this time too. Billy Jenkins from school had seen her helping her mum get something out of a skip, and had told everybody she lived in a bin. It had made her cringe so hard there was a medical possibility that she'd never uncurl, and it was *all* her mum's fault.

According to their neighbour's most recent complaint to the council, her mum was 'a mad Irish art woman who made noise at all hours'. Emily didn't disagree, but would have added 'deeply shameful'. If her mum didn't keep dragging her out on 'special missions' to get 'important art materials' *from bins* to make crazy sculptures, then none of this would have happened. She wouldn't have been totally shamed at school, and she wouldn't have got so angry that she'd run home and ended up screaming at her mum in the kitchen about everything embarrassing she'd ever done (highlights of which included weeing behind a bush at sports day, rescuing a lobster from a fish tank at a fancy restaurant, and once getting on the bus dressed as a horse). Emily wouldn't have made her mum cry either. The last bit

had been . . . pretty horrible. In fact, she had maybe said some things she really sort-of regretted. Now she was grounded so hard by her dad she'd probably have to be homeschooled.

She would admit, if she was forced to by, like, a truth potion or something, that her big mouth hadn't helped matters. Her mum called it the 'family gob', as if it was an inherited disease. If so, Emily totally had a bad case of it. When she was annoyed, or embarrassed, the gob had a mind of its own, and her mum was annoyingly embarrassing *all the time*. And that was why she hadn't said sorry, and that was why she wasn't allowed out of her room until Christmas.

Lying in the dark, the white-hot anger had faded and left behind a horrid aftertaste. Could she just lie here and not have to talk to her mum ever again? Maybe if she slipped into a coma? She was pretty hungry though. Colossal barneys undoubtedly used a lot of calories. What if she raided the fridg— SNAP! The loud squeak and clatter of the big brass letter box opening and snapping shut downstairs interrupted her plans for food piracy. Who on earth was posting things at this time of night?

There was a groaning creak from the unoiled hinges on their front gate. She sat up to peer out of the window. Leaving the garden was a figure so big it was going out of the gate sideways and still struggling to fit. The hulking

form was holding a small black umbrella, which cast a shadow over its face. Emily pressed her nose to the window as the enormous shape squeezed out of the gate and strode off down the street with a hip-swaying walk, fancy broolly still held high. It wasn't even raining either. Weirdo.

She was still staring when a familiar noise chimed up from downstairs; the light, metallic almost-ring of a bell. Someone had come out of the living room and brushed past her dad's bike in the hall. He kept his big, black, bone-shaking bike there to ride to work at the post office. It was impossible to walk past it without the old brass bell dinging. More brassy notes sounded now as somebody else came into the hallway. Oh god, what was she going to say if they came up to lecture her?

It was a good time to be asleep again. She arranged herself into a very-definitely-asleep-possibly-even-comatose position and waited. The sound of an urgent conversation drifted up from the hallway, but no one came up the stairs. She lasted a whole minute, then, as a very curious person (desperately nosy, according to her mum), she slid out of bed. She picked her way through the obstacle course of books and clothes on the floor and inched the door open. She crept out on to the landing, avoiding the creaky board, snuck her head round the top of the stairs, and peeked down.

Her mum and dad were in the hallway below at the foot of the stairs, by the front door. Her mum was sitting on the

bottom step wearing her long, thick coat, and pulling on the big pair of spray-painted army boots she used for skip missions. Emily's dad was standing over her, frowning. He was holding a letter written on a sheet of thick, cream-coloured paper. He had the envelope too, a heavy, khaki-coloured thing with two big, black, old-fashioned stamps in the corner. This must be what broolly giant had posted. Double weirdo.

'But it doesn't make any sense, Maeve. Who delivered this? It's not midnight yet, so it can't be from the Night Post.' He tapped the envelope with a stiff finger. 'There's stamps on it but no postmark. It's most irregular.'

Her mum looked up and grinned. 'Oh, and doesn't that make it all the more fascinating?' She still had a rich Irish accent despite living in London for Emily's whole life.

Her dad redoubled his frown. He read from the letter.

'I have been asked to write to tell you that Patrick, of your clan, finds himself in grave difficulties, and would request your immediate assistance, by the code of fealty.'

Her mum pulled a full eaten-something-sour face.

'Grave indeed! It's worrying about him what put Great-Auntie Aoife in hers, everybody knows it.' She shook her head. 'I'd best go and have a look. I'm the only one who can get any sense out of the eejit, anyway.'

'But why ask *you* to come in? Surely the whole point is that you stay out? The man's a . . .'

He waved his hands, lost for words.

'Family's family, eh?' her mum said, with a shrug.

Emily's ears were on fire. This was a red-alert gossip alarm going off. Her mum never, never talked about her family. *Ever*. Emily had done SO much nosing about it, and all she'd been able to get out of her was that 'they didn't get on'. What was that supposed to mean? Her mum just wouldn't talk about it though. Which was unusual in itself, because she never normally shut up.

Her dad held the letter up to the light and squinted at it.

'It just doesn't smell right. The wrong post, anonymous letter, *Pat*,' he said that last word like he was swearing, 'wanting you to go there after all these years.'

He gave her what Emily recognized as his most serious stare. 'Are you sure it's not something to do with *her*?'

Who were they talking about? Emily was afire with curiosity (and massive nosiness).

'Ah, we saw the last of that wagon years ago,' said her mum, still bent over the complicated laces of her big boots. Not somebody they liked then. 'Wagon' was one of those words her mum shouted at the neighbour she was feuding with.

'Even so, it's highly suspicious. We should send a letter to the Night Watch and report it.'

'Oh, we definitely should. Absolutely.'

'I note you're still tying your boots up,' said her dad,

crossing his arms.

‘Yup.’

‘No sign of getting a stamp.’

‘Nope.’

‘I see. Why don’t I go instead when I’m at work tomorrow night?’

Her mum bounced to her feet and grabbed the letter. ‘Love, don’t do the face, please. If Pat’s in fierce trouble then I should be there. If it’s . . . something else, then we need to know. And . . .’

Her mum grimaced, and turned to look upstairs towards the bedrooms. Emily ducked back round the corner and her whole body jangled as an electric shock of nerves jolted through her. That was too close.

‘I could surely do with a run right now, eh?’

Her dad let out a long, pained sigh.

‘I suppose so, but you haven’t been back since Emily was born. Don’t let earlier . . .’

Emily inched round again. Back where? Ireland?

‘It’s not just that. I miss the old country sometimes, miss the job too.’ Her mum sniffed as she zipped up her coat. ‘I even miss the clan a bit.’

Her mum had a job? How had that worked? She didn’t normally get up until lunchtime.

Her dad didn’t say anything, but his hand squeezed her mum’s arm. She looked away.

'I'm clearly not wanted round here anyway.'

'That's not true, and you know it! Think how you were at that age. The stories you've told me!'

'Ah, I was a right mare, I suppose.' Her mum's usually cheerful face dropped into a dark frown Emily hadn't seen before. 'I'm just not cut out for all this. I don't fit in here and I'm doing it all wrong.'

'You're not. There's no right way. She's just at a difficult age.'

Emily bit her knuckle so as not to give herself away by growling.

'Yeah, me too,' said her mum. 'Right, I'm going to stretch all my legs, find out what's going on with that eejit, and I'll be back before ye know it.'

Her dad, tall against her mum, reached to open the door. He paused.

'Wait, what about the you-know-whats?' He gestured at her chest.

Eh? Was this a sports bra conversation?

'Ah, they'll be fine. I'll be in and out in three shakes of a pony's tail. I can't leave 'em here, can I?'

'Hrrrrmmm,' her dad grumbled.

'Shhhh.' Her mum cut him off with a finger on the lips. 'I am famously uncatchable. It'll be fine.'

'I caught you,' he muttered past her grubby finger.

'Ye did, didn't ye? And now ye're stuck with me. Come

here,' her mum said, and leant into her dad.

The distinct sounds of smooching followed. Emily ducked her head back round the corner. Some things could never be unseen. She gave it another thirty seconds to be on the safe side, then inched her head back.

They'd finished, thank goodness, and her mum was just ducking under her dad's arm to go out the door.

'If I leg it now, I can make the door at the old church before the bongs.'

'Have you got your shadow key? And—'

She turned a withering glance on him, and he stopped talking, raising his hands in surrender.

'Just because I've retired doesn't mean I've gone daft.'

She stepped into the night, then turned back.

'Keep an eye on the lesser horror, eh?'

Hmmph.

Her dad nodded once more and then she was gone, without a goodbye. He held the door open for a long time, just watching the dark where she had been. Emily stayed too, until the cold air made her shiver and creep back to bed. She crawled under the covers just as Big Ben started to chime again, and the deep, resonant notes sang across the river marking the midnight hour.