

## EMILY

City life is so cold and alone compared with the village. My sole comfort though is the Mugg & Bean; I spend hours here.

This morning, as usual, I ordered my pre-breakfast coffee, draped my shawl over the back of the chair and opened my book. My clumsy arthritic fingers dropped my bookmark – a photo. Before I could bend to reach it, a passing attractive, young woman picked it up. She looked at it intently before handing it back to me.

“Thank you. At my age one gets clumsy.”

“My pleasure. Forgive me, my name’s Stephanie. I’m a writer and that is an unusual picture, I sense a story, a history. Is there one?”

I smile, “There may be.”

“Will you share it with me?”

“Of course. I don’t have many opportunities to talk to people these days. Sit down. I’ll order you some coffee.”

“Where shall I begin? Does the picture intrigue you?”

“Yes, it does. I can tell that it was posed from the hands. It’s very difficult to get their proportions right in a portrait. And the young girl is relaxed, photogenic and pretty.”

“You do know your photography. Let me explain. Her parents had recently arrived in the village and her father was a photographer. This picture of his only daughter, Emily, was one of his submissions to a photographic competition. I hadn’t seen it for many years until I found it last week. I was in the process of getting rid of the detritus that one acquires in a lifetime – I do not wish to leave the task to someone else when I’m dead.”

“It must mean something if you’re using it as a bookmark?”

“I am hoping it helps me to clear out memories just as I’m clearing out my living space.”

“Do you want to lose memories as you get older?”

“I can’t speak for others, but for me, yes. The past is dead. Why should I carry it as a burden? Possessions burden one as you age and memories more so.”

“Mmmm. And who was the girl?”

“One of those unfortunate ones cursed with both beauty and brains.”

“Why cursed?”

“She and her father were extremely close. Shortly after entering, and winning, the contest, her father was killed in a freak accident. I was the only one who believed it was no accident.”

“How?”

“That’s no longer important. Your question should be why? And I’ll tell you. Her mother was insanely jealous of her relationship with her father.”

“So what did her mother do after he died?”

“She basically ignored the girl; left her to her own devices. The local boys were drawn to her and they tended to look after her. But what really kept her going was one of her teachers, a Mrs Lamprecht, who virtually raised her. She was good at her schoolwork and a budding young pianist.

“The boys around her were both a blessing and a curse. There were two who were particularly fond of her, Paul and James. But even at that tender age, jealousy raised its head. One day things got ugly and there was a fight and James was killed. The story goes that what happened was an accident but, as with her father’s death, I also believed that it was no accident. Young people can kill as cunningly as anyone else.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes. Emily was pretty upset about it, but she concentrated on her school work and her piano lessons. The boy who survived the fight was always around her.”

“Surely someone had to investigate the death?”

“Small Karoo villages in the 1950s were closed communities. People protected one another. Everyone had some or other skeleton in their cupboards and no one was going to jeopardise their own life by finger pointing.”

“But the police—”

“The captain of the police and the doctor both led comfortable lives. If they could brush over a little matter like a murder why should they upset the villagers and their own lives?”

She shook her head, “That’s very unusual.”

“Not really. Crimes of passion are crimes of passion whether you are ten or eighty. In their eyes, justice had been served.”

She shook her head again, “Go on.”

“In a moment; more coffee?”

“Yes please.”

I attracted the waitress’s attention and placed the order.

“Where was I? Oh. Emily grew into an exquisite young woman. She did very well in her matric exam and Mrs Lamprecht sent her application to UCT, Wits and what was then RAU. Then disaster struck - one night she was raped. She could not identify her attacker. I suspect it was because someone paid off the Police Station Commander, Captain Rabie and Dr Booth, the village doctor. She fell pregnant and that scuppered her university ambitions. Only she and the doctor knew that she was pregnant when Paul rode in on his metaphorical white horse to save her. I ask you, how could he have known? Well, as you might know, in those years an unmarried woman or girl was cursed for life. Paul’s parents agreed that he could marry her and Emily’s mother was only too pleased to be rid of her. Ironically, three weeks after the wedding, she miscarried.

“Emily, of course, knew that she did not love Paul, and never had. She convinced herself that if they had a child she could bear a life with him. But during the procedure after her miscarriage, Dr Booth caused irreparable damage. She could never conceive again.

“But I’m getting ahead of myself. After trying for a baby for a year or two, Dr Booth persuaded them to have a fertility test. For his own reasons, Dr

Booth told Emily that Paul was infertile and he told Paul that Emily could not conceive again.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? I have my own theories. Possibly he did not want to let her know that he had bungled her miscarriage and – you know what men are – maybe he fancied his chances with her. Anyway, she decided to try and get pregnant by another man. She settled on one, Jan Botha, the eldest son of the dominee. As difficult as it was to carry on a clandestine relationship in a small village, where there’s a will there’s a way.

“Then one Saturday morning, some schoolchildren found Jan in the river bed. He had his revolver in his hand and a bullet through his heart. I ask you, how difficult is it to shoot yourself that way? Although everyone had their suspicions, it was deemed to be suicide. Case closed. And guess who did the investigation?”

“Captain Rabie and Dr Booth?”

“Exactly.”

“But that’s evil.”

“That’s village life.

“Many years later James Blunt, a handsome young bachelor arrived in the village and set up business as a financial consultant to the farming community.”

“It wasn’t long before he and Emily began a clandestine courtship, being careful to ensure that Paul did not find out.”

“After some months, she found a note waiting for her at the old oak tree where they shared more than just a few picnics. It said, *‘I’m sorry. I’ve been stupid. Some dreams mustn’t come true. I’ll always remember you. Love. James.’* She rushed off to his hotel only to find that he had booked out the night before.”

“And so, her dreary life with Paul continued until one evening she heard a frightened shout from her husband’s study. She tried to open the door but it was locked. She walked around outside of the house and peered in through the window. Paul was lying slumped over his desk. Taking her time she contacted Dr Booth who came around with, of all people, Captain Rabie. They broke open

the door and Dr Booth quickly determined that Paul had had a heart attack. Captain Rabie visibly relaxed at this message. If that had been a murder, particularly of Paul, the Captain's life could have become very complicated. However, he was barely alive; they carted him off to the hospital."

"Emily began tidying up the study. She found an old exercise book lying open on the floor. She picked it up and read the childish handwriting on the cover, 'My Emily'."

"She opened it and the first entry was, 'Emily came to our school today. She is mine. I'm going to marry her.' Appalled and fascinated, she read on. Paul described how he decided that James was showing far too much interest in Emily and that he must get rid of him. He detailed various ideas. The next entry said, 'I did it today and made it look like an accident. Those grown up fools all think it was an accident.' "

"He went on to record how devastated he was when her application to university was sent off and how he hatched a plan to prevent that. He wrote how he coerced another girl (most of the village girls hated Emily) to tell him when Emily's period was due. At what he judged was the right time, he disguised himself and raped her. He wrote, 'My plan worked. She's pregnant. She's definitely mine now.' "

"He was quite pleased when she miscarried as he did not want to share her with snivelling children. When Dr Booth told him she could not conceive, he confirmed that he had not told Emily. Paul was delighted and went on to record the prospect of frequent sex as she, desperately and unsuccessfully, tried to fall pregnant. She was bluffing, of course, as she wouldn't tell him he was infertile and he wouldn't tell her that she couldn't conceive."

"He recorded how he carefully watched her and Jan. Then he followed Jan around, knowing that he always carried his revolver with him. He arranged to meet him at the river, saying he knew about the relationship and wanted to discuss it without causing a fuss. As he was the Dominee's son, he agreed with alacrity. There Paul sneaked up behind Jan, grabbed him around the neck and held a rag full of chloroform over his mouth and nose. As soon as he became unconscious, he shot him with his revolver, and then pressed it into his hand."

"Lastly he recorded how he found out why her second boyfriend was in the village and what secret he was running from. Apparently he had been arrested for fraud and had jumped bail. Not wanting to become involved by

reporting him to the authorities he merely blackmailed him and forced him to write the note and leave at once.”

“After having read all the contents she called Dr Booth and asked him to come around right away. When he arrived, she gave him the exercise book to read. After having read it, he looked up with a concerned expression, ‘Emily we – note the use of the plural – we never suspected this.’ ‘Don’t worry, Dr Booth, this will be our little secret.’ She walked over to him, took the exercise book, and tossed it into the fire. Then she turned to him and smiled questioningly, ‘Of course, tonight my husband is going to have a second, fatal, heart attack, isn’t he?’ A relieved smile creased the doctor’s features, ‘Ah, of course. How did you know?’ The next day the village learned that, unfortunately, her husband had died overnight. That left Emily with only one concern – Dr Booth. The two of them were the only ones who knew the truth. Could he, would he, try to silence her?”

The writer was looking at me intently - an incredulous look on her face.

“Now you know why that picture means so much to me. It’s helping me to clear out subsequent memories.

She was still speechless, so I asked, “So Stephanie, would that not do for your next novel?”

Shaking her head she replied, “No, I think not. It is definitely too far-fetched.”

I smiled, “That’s the trouble with people isn’t it? They’d rather believe fiction than a fact, not so?”

It was obvious from her whole demeanour that she thought that she had just listened to the imaginary ramblings of a nutty old woman, so she indulged me with, “Forgive me, I don’t mean to be rude. That was an intriguing tale but my ‘doubting Thomas’ side has to ask, who could ever have told you all that detail about such an unbelievable story; how could you possibly know so much?”

“I’m Emily.”

**Raymond Hattingh**