

EMILY TOMKINS, GIRL OF LETTERS

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MORRIGAN

ONE

Emily Tomkins was not a morning person.

When she was on holidays from school, (as she was), and when it was raining, (as it was), she was not really an afternoon person either.

She was a bed sort of person.

“Emily, I don’t want to come back here at lunchtime and find you still in bed,” Mum had warned.

“Um ll ggg,” Emily had replied, pretending to be asleep.

“Goodbye Emily,” Mum had said.

“Bye Emily,” Graham had said.

“Blb ll gg,” Emily had said.

Graham was Mum’s boyfriend. Or, at least, that’s what Emily’s Mum called him. Emily herself had doubts about the word *boyfriend* being applied to a forty three year old bloke wearing a cordoroy jacket. And being a schoolteacher.

Dad had gone to Australia with the barmaid from *The Flag*.

“These things happen,” Mum had said.

A very practical person, the reason why she had married Dad was a great mystery to Emily. Why Dad had run away to Australia with the barmaid from *The Flag* was not a mystery at all to Emily. He was devil-may-care and liked beer and barmaids with low cut dresses.

Graham the boyfriend was not like that at all. He was very intense and intellectual and knew about wine. The opposite of devil-may-care, he made lists about things. Emily supposed that he wasn’t interested in barmaids at all. But all things considered she and he got on reasonably together in the difficult circumstances. He took an interest in her homework and generally looked at her thoughtfully.

“Can I not have my own room in the hotel?” Emily had asked back home in London.

“Ireland is a very expensive country,” Mum had explained, “we’re not made of money you know.”

“Well it’ll be creepy, you in bed with Graham beside me.”

“You will have your own bed.”

“Well I’m very glad to hear that,” Emily had said.

“And Graham and I will have sex very very quietly.”

“Mum stop trying to gross me out.”

Mum had laughed. As well as being very practical she had a misplaced sense of humour and liked to think of Emily as a best friend. The feeling was not entirely reciprocated.

Emily liked to think of Mum as Mum.

She lay there now in her own bed pretending to be asleep, listening to Mum and Graham leaving, the door closing behind them.

Give them about five minutes, she calculated, that should be enough.

After that she got out of bed, went across to the door, opened it, hung the do-not-disturb sign on the outside, closed the door again and went back towards the bed.

Before getting in to it she looked out the window.

It was a grey day out there in the West of Ireland.

Emily hoped to brighten it up with colourful dreams.

She got into bed and lay there, planning a dream. It involved a certain boy in London who really did fancy her but was not yet aware of that fact. Granted, she admitted, it was quite difficult for him to be so aware because the reality of her existence seemed to have passed him by entirely. Yes he must know that she was there, if only in the sense that he knew a lamp post was there. Part of the street furniture, something that one avoids walking into automatically. It was her task to convert herself from lamp post to an object of desire.

Svelte and sinuous.

With a touch of mystery and a hint of hidden sorrow.

This was going to take some dreaming.

She closed her eyes. And that was when she heard it. Faintly. She opened her eyes again, and didn’t hear it. There is something, she realised, some system of sensory compensation, in which the blind have better hearing and the deaf have better sight. Applying this understanding to the situation she closed her eyes again. And heard it again.

Clickety tick, tickety tap, clickety clickety click.

She opened her eyes.

Nothing.

Nothing in the room.

Closed her eyes again, then opened them really quickly to locate the source of the tappetty noises. Yes it was over there by the door to the balcony. Over there by the table. Over there where she'd left her laptop the night before.

She sat up.

The balcony door was open and there was a big white seagull pecking at the keyboard of her laptop. As if there were something to eat there.

Oh My God, thought Emily, with long pauses between the *Oh* and the *My* and the *God*. That laptop was quite new and expensive and a special pink colour and here was a gigantic seagull walking all over it, pecking. Walking all over it with big flappy feet and pecking away with a big sharp beak.

"Shoo shoo shoo," she said, waving her arms.

The bird looked at her, as if to say "well I'm not scared of you."

"Shoo shoo shoo," she said again, waving her arms and making little I'm-going-to-hit-you gestures, I really am!

The seagull didn't look very impressed at all.

Emily jumped out of bed and the bird opened up its wings and flew away. It looked huge. Yes Emily knew it was a seagull, but she thought albatross, that sort of huge. It flew out through the open door and landed on the balcony rail.

There it stood, looking back in at her.

That look said *hah!*

Emily glared at it warningly. You just stay there, her own look said.

She inspected the computer for damages.

All seemed in order.

Whew, she thought, this laptop was expensive, and a Christmas present from Graham. He hadn't actually said it was expensive, but he knew and she knew and he knew that she knew, it was that sort of understanding. A wordless one. Much like the sort of understanding they had on the occasions when she noted him looking at her...thoughtfully...too thoughtfully.

The expensive gift had been quite embarrassing really because she'd only given him a mechanical Santa Claus made in Taiwan from a pound shop. Mind you it did light up and say *Ho Ho Ho* and had in fact cost more than a pound. Why on earth call it a pound shop, Emily had wondered, when lots of

things in there cost more? The retail industry could really not be trusted, she felt, it was all advertising and publicity.

“Thank you very much,” Graham had said at the Santa Claus, though he obviously hadn’t really seen the joke. Not that he would’ve seen it anyway, even if Emily had written it out in big letters with explanatory notes...Graham didn’t really do jokes. Although in retrospect Emily herself wasn’t quite sure what the joke was, but she did know there was one in there somewhere.

The two of them had watched the Santa Claus lighting up and going *Ho Ho Ho*. But they hadn’t watched for very long, really, there’s only so much entertainment in that. After that she had opened her own present and, although not *entirely* surprised, had certainly been surprised. A big flat pack like that very well have turned out to be a big flat box of chocolates. The present opened and oo’hd and aaa’hd she had given Graham a generous hug in thanks. He held her quite tightly and a bit too long because he was a bit creepy like that but Emily supposed most men were. Creepy came natural to them, like the need to shave.

Emily had certain views on the nature of men. And in her own personal circumstances she considered that this was quite understandable, in the psychological sense, Dad having run away three years ago when she was twelve. Run away with a barmaid with a big chest. That is precisely the sort of thing that could cause psychological trauma, with ultimate effects as yet unknown. In the meantime, Emily felt, men were to be watched, carefully. Particularly as she had now reached a stage in life where they were watching her, equally carefully.

“You’re a very pretty girl and growing up,” Mum had said when Emily had complained that men were looking at her. And that she found this attention extremely irritating indeed. This response of Mum was no help at all because Emily didn’t actually think she was very pretty and if she was then why didn’t a certain boy in London notice her?

But even so Mum was hardly going to say you’re quite plain, Emily reckoned. Mothers don’t say things like that to daughters, it’s bad for their self esteem. And she also reckoned that ‘growing up’ was Mum’s polite way of saying we must get you a bigger bra. It was all a language one had to interpret. Being sixteen was, Emily supposed, rather like living in a foreign country. People spoke differently there.

Emily had never actually lived in a foreign country, but she had been

in Italy and France and in her previous school in London she had been the only white girl in the class. That school had been a daily world trip through different cultural models and experiences. After the knife issue Mum and Graham had discussed the whole matter and come to the conclusion that although they did read the *Guardian* and were committed to the multiracial model of society this was all quite ridiculous.

“I mean to say,” Mum said, “I’ve nothing against Somalis but...”

“But what Mum?” Emily had asked, “but their cousins are all pirates back in Africa?”

Mum had laughed and Graham had said the British Empire was founded on piracy.

Mum and Emily had looked at him.

Graham said things like that. Not that most things Graham said had any effect really because Mum was the ultimate source of all authority. And Mum had decided that Emily should move school...so move school she did. The new school was a Roman Catholic institution, and the move was only recent, so Emily was still in a mild state of ongoing shock.

“You’ll find a different ethos there,” Mum had said.

Emily certainly did.

Many of the girls were Irish gypsies wearing big hoopy earrings but all of them, gypsies and non alike, had regular inspections of the lengths of their skirts. One inch below the knee. Otherwise they were sent home.

“They’ll have me in a burkah next,” Emma had complained.

“There’s a lot to be said for Islam,” Graham had commented.

Mum and Emily had looked at him.

Graham said things like that.

It hadn’t been easy at all getting in to the school but Mum and Graham were both schoolteachers and Mum had been brought up a Catholic and say no more, a nod is as good as a wink, you scratch my back, and so on and so forth.

All this went through Emily’s head now in the hotel room in the west of Ireland. It was as if the laptop she examined contained the story of her life. And in many ways it did. Certainly most of her friends and much of her social life lived in there in digital form.

She inspected it carefully for damages.

Things seemed in order.

The screensaver had come on and Emily shook the mouse to get rid of

it. I really must find something to replace that, she thought, I feel I've grown out of lesbian vampires. This thought frequently occurred, but the bother and effort of changing the screensaver struck her as, on balance, far more irritating and worrisome than the actual ridiculous screensaver itself. Life is essentially a question of priorities and sensible time management.

The shake of the mouse got rid of the lesbian vampires...and good riddance to them too, Emily decided. Forever looking into each others eyes in that dopey fashion, blood trickling down their throats...get a life! Trickle trickle trickle, that was the moving bit of the screensaver. Very red blood on very white throats. If I were Somali and my family were pirates back in Africa, Emily had often thought, well then I'd be quite offended at this racial stereotyping. And if I were a black lesbian vampire I'd probably be quite offended indeed.

The screensaver gone, a document appeared. A WORD document.

Emily started at it for a moment, it didn't look very familiar. In actual fact it didn't look familiar at all and she realised it was nothing to do with her. It was just a file of one blank page with one sentence written across. One sentence in capital letters.

I AM WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS.

She looked at it, bemused. And then looked around, as if there were an answer somewhere in the vicinity. There was, because the seagull was still sitting out there, and when she caught its eyes it started to nod its head, up and down, emphatically. She pointed at the screen, and then pointed at the bird, then pointed at the screen again. And at that the seagull nodded even more emphatically.

Emily Tomkins was very surprised indeed.