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Being Emily

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Published by Canongate Books

Extract

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Through in the livin room Patrick was paintin the fireplace while Mona and Rona practised their line dancin. *Silver bells and golden needles they won't mend this heart of mine.* Step two three, cross two three, turn. *It's threads, no bells*, says ma da, weavin his way through their routine.

Mona and Rona are twins. At first the doc thought it was gonnae be triplets and Da wanted tae call them Mona, Rona and Shona. Mammy says she's thankful for small mercies – ah'm no sure if she means havin two babies at once insteidy three, or if it's the name. The neighbours doonstairs have a dug called Shona, it's a sheltie.

Patrick's on the nightshift at the bakery, and when he gets hame the back of six he's wired up, cannae sleep for hours. That's when he paints the fireplace. He's done it three times – first white but that was too borin, then dark red, but Da said it hurt his eyes. Noo he's tryin a marbled effect wi lilac and pink through the red. When everybody else gets up, we have cornflakes and Patrick has bacon, egg and tattie scones, then he goes tae bed and we go tae school. Except this was the first day of the summer holidays so we werenae.

Ah was at the sink in the kitchen, washin the dishes wi *Spirit of Haworth* propped up behind the taps, practisin bein Emily Brontë. Ah'd read that she baked the family's bread and learned German at the same time, book in fronty her. Since then ah'd developed a new interest in housework, so long as you could dae it while you were readin. Up till then ah thought if you were gonnae be a poet you had tae float aboot in a dwam or lie on a couch all day.

I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vale and hill

If you're a poet it's dead important tae know how tae use apostrophes when you miss out bits of words to make it scan. Last year ah wrote a poem for the school magazine that started: 'I wander'd 'mongst the flow'rs fair'.

Mammy put a knife in the soapy watter.

Watch you don't get that book all wet, Fiona.

D'you think ah could start bakin our bread?

Your brother brings hame three loaves fae his work every day. If you've spare time on yer haunds there's plenty other jobs round the hoose.

Usually ah skived aff at this point but since ah'd discovered Emily, ah just smiled and said, *Okay, Mammy.*

Da was pointin out the windae. *Oh my God – would you look at that!*

Mammy and me followed his finger but all ah could see was Mrs Flanagan next door hingin out her washin in her yellow velour tracksuit. It looks as if she's stuffed it wi newspapers, lumps and bumps jigglin round as she bends and pegs.

What?

Can yous no see thon pig, over there, just up above the roof . . . look at its wings flappin.

Very funny.

First time ah've heard Princess Fiona here volunteerin tae dae a tap round the hoose.

Well, be thankful. Everyone is gonnae have tae pull their weight this holiday. Ah don't know how these weans have tae get six weeks aff anyhow.

The first day of the summer holidays Mammy always does her spiel aboot how they're far too long and we get intae lazy habits. Da sloped aff tae his work efter the first sentence. Ah trailed ma haund in the soapy bubbles, cairried on readin ma book. Miss

Hughes had lent me it for the holidays. She was ma English teacher last year, first year of secondary, and she was the wan that got me interested in Emily.

Ah done the hooverin wi the book in wan haund then went and made the beds wi it stuck up on the headboard. Patrick's room's dead neat and when he started work he bought hissel a new downie cover – navy blue wi a cream stripe through it. When ma granny was alive she'd say he should join the forces he's that tidy and Mammy'd get really mad at her.

They have tae fight, you know – it's no a fashion parade.

It's a good life for a boy. He's that good wi his haunds too, he'd learn a trade.

Have another cuppa tea, Gran, said ma da. *Patrick's no really the type.*

Patrick never said anythin, just went on wi his jigsaw or his model makin or whatever he was daein wi his long fingers. He looks dead different fae the resty us; fair straight hair and skin that pale and thin you can near see through it, while we're all brown and curly-haired. *Like tinks*, ma gran'd say when she was in a bad mood.

Patrick appeared at the door.

You finished? Ah want tae go tae bed.

Our room's a guddle of Barbies and scrunchies, My Little Pony and Animal Hospital toys, hauf of them broken or twisted fae bein left on radiators or ootside in the rain. The wardrobe door was hingin open and a long red scarf ah'd started knittin in Primary Seven and never finished, still on its needles, trailed out, wrapped round one of the twins' pleated navy school skirts. The three beds are hunched thegether wi only a few inches between them. Ah don't know where they'd of put Shona if she'd arrived. Mona's bed has a Princess Barbie cover, Rona's has a Horse Riding Barbie cover and mines has a purple and lime green Groovy Chicks one with a shiny blob on it where ah spilled some glittery nail polish. Mammy was really mad at me.

That cover's split new, Fiona.

She'd scrubbed it for ages but the stain never came aff. Ah quite liked it but; at night when the twins were asleep and ah was readin in bed, the mark glinted in the light of the torch.

Ah climbed over the other two beds and sat on mines, the wan nearest the windae. Emily would of liked the purple background; purple was her favourite colour and she had a frock that was purple wi lilac lightnin patterns on it. She had a room of her ain but, a toty wee wan just big enough for a bed; she'd sit there in the cauld of winter wi her notebook on her lap, writin *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* is the best book ah've ever read, but Emily was a poet too and ah'd learned some of her poems aff by heart.

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere

Fiona, are you finished?

Nearly.

Will you bring the washin through, hen?

Mammy stuffed the washin in the machine afore she went out tae her work. She does part-time in Boots, starts at ten three days a week.

Don't forget tae take that washin out when it's done. She opened the fridge and put in the mince she'd just cooked. *That's for the night. And make sure the twins eat fruit for their lunch.*

Although the twins were in the next room ah knew they were makin the silent vomitin noises they always done when the word fruit was mentioned.

And keep them quiet while Patrick's sleepin – take them tae the swing park. You could read your book while they're playin.

Aye that'll be right. See, she thinks the twins are wee angels

and when Mammy's around they nearly always are, but the minute she's out of sight they turn intae monsters. You can almost see the change comin over them as she puts on her coat, like the way you smell thunder in the air afore the storm actually breaks, then when the door closes behind her the devils dance out their eyes and they start. The number of times she's come hame tae an upside doon settee, earth fae a plant spilled all ower the carpet, and turnt tae me and said, *Fiona*, in that voice. *How could you let the twins make such a mess?*

And they're climbin up her legs like squirrels, cuddlin her and sayin, *Mammy, you're hame.*

They're nearly as bad wi ma da, but he puts on that helpless look and Mammy says *Bobby*, but no in the tone she says *Fiona*, mair like, *well what d'you expect, he's a man.*

As usual, the second the door slammed Mona started haulin the cushions aff the couch in the livin room. *We're tigers and you're our prey.* She growled and clawed at me.

Let's go tae the swing park, ah said.

Don't want tae go tae the swing park. Want tae kill wur prey. Rona bit ma leg through ma jeans.

Hey, pack it in. Ah've got Smarties for yous.

The twins'll dae anythin for chocolate and Patrick'll dae anythin for a quiet life so he gies me money tae buy sweeties.

Gimme, gimme.

After we've been tae the park.

At the swing park the twins climbed up the chute the wrang way while ah read ma biography of Emily. Her brother and sisters and her all lived in this hoose on the edge of the moors; they went out for long walks and made up their ain imaginary world. Their brother Branwell got a box of toy soldiers so they each picked wan and made up stories aboot it, wrote them doon in wee booklets.

The wumman next tae me on the bench said, *Are they your wee sisters?*

When ah looked up Rona was hingin upside doon fae the chains on the swing and Mona was shovin a toddler aff the baby chute. Ah shut ma book.

C'mon, we're gaun hame.

How?

Dinnertime. Anyhow, it's startin tae rain.

Later in the efternoon, ah got out paper and felties and scissors. Ah cut the paper intae squares and folded them so they were like wee books, then sat Mona and Rona doon at the table.

Are we playin a game? said Mona.

We're gonnae write stories about your Barbies.

But we've got stories about them. In the Barbie comic.

Ah know, but new stories, wans we make up wursels.

The twins have got loadsa different Barbies but they each have a special favourite they drag aboot wi them. Rona's is called Bendy Barbie because, due tae some accident, she has a big bit missin fae her leg and it bends round as if she's double-jointed. Mona's is called Bubbly Barbie cause she's always greetin.

Ah'll dae the writin. You just tell me the words tae put doon.

The twins looked at each other then Rona said, *Okay.*

Ah'll start, ah said. *It was the first day of the summer holidays.*

Bendy Barbie went tae the park, said Rona. *She was playin on the chute.*

Ah printed the words, dead neat.

Along came Bubbly Barbie. She pushed Bendy Barbie aff the chute. Mona whacked Rona's Barbie wi hers. *Bendy Barbie started greetin so she was Bubbly Barbie noo.*

Are you sure this is what you want in the story? ah said.

Rona hit Mona's Barbie back, then the two of them started batterin each other. Just then Patrick appeared in his stripy jammies.

What's this – Blue Peter?

A zebra, a stripy zebra. Tigers kill zebras! shouted Rona.

She and Mona stood up on their chairs, started clawin at Patrick and growlin.

Then suddenly a miraculous change came over the twins' faces. They smiled sweetly, sat doon and started tae cuddle the dolls. They must be like dugs, can hear things humans cannae, for the next second there was Mammy.

Clear that stuff aff the table, would you, Fiona?

The twins rushed to switch on their music.

Just because we're married
Don't mean we can't fool around.
Let's walk out through the moonlight
And lay the blanket on the ground.

Should they be listenin tae that? said Da, who'd just come in the door.

What? said Mammy, stirrin the mince.

Never mind, said ma da.

Efter tea Mammy took the twins tae their line dancin. They're the youngest in the class but they're stars. For the displays they wear cowboy hats and waistcoats wi shiny fringes; it's like watchin wan person, as they step and birl, turn and clap, spot on the beat.

It was dead quiet without them. Patrick, ma da and me sat in a row on the couch. There was a decoratin programme on the TV and a guy in an orange tee shirt was witterin on aboot paint effects. Patrick watches this every week and Da just sits in fronty anythin that's on the box. Ah looked up from ma book.

Da, what's consumption?

Consumption no be done aboot it?

Da?

Whit, hen?

It's the Brontës. There was six of them at the start and the two big sisters died of consumption. Whit is it?

It's a disease.

Ah know that – whit kind of disease?

Some kind of pneumonia or that. They'd all kinds of diseases in they days we don't really get noo. Your granny had scarlet fever when she was wee. My God, would you look at the colour he's puttin on that wall.

Pistachio, said Patrick.

You'd need tae be well pistachio-ed tae paint yer livin room like that.

Ah could hear Mammy and the twins outside. If ah got out the road quick ah'd miss their bedtime. Ah slipped through the close, away tae the far endy the back court and hunkered doon at the wall. Mrs Flanagan's washin was still out, her enormous great drawers and her man's gigantic tartan boxers saggin fae the line. Ah think if ma bum was as big as that ah'd dry ma washin inside. In the bin shelter the Jacksons' grey cat slithered round the edge of a wheelie bin, its tail skitterin against the plastic.

Ah leaned on the wall, took *Wuthering Heights* out ma pocket and opened it at ma favourite bit.

'My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath, a source of little visible delight, but necessary.'

Patrick came doon the path carryin a plastic binbag.

Mammy's wonderin where you are. Better get inside.

Okay. Patrick, are there any moors round here?

Moors?

Aye. Emily used tae wander aboot the moors.

Ah don't think you want tae dae that. You might get consumption.

Consumption no be done aboot it?

Patrick stood leanin against the washin pole, swingin the bag

fae side tae side. The grass was all worn and patchy under his foot.

If you like, ah'll teach you tae bake bread.

Really?

Ah'll bring hame some yeast the morra. Mammy's no workin so you won't have tae watch the twins. You can watch yer dough risin instead.

Patrick lifted the lid of the bin and chucked the binbag inside. Then he went out the gate and doon the lane. The last of the sun was vanishin over the roof tops and the back of the buildin looked like a castle, big grey blocks a sandstone risin out the earth. Deep recessed sills. Mammy would of liked a new house wi wur ain garden, but Da loved tenements. *Solid,* he'd say. *Built tae last.* He was a tiler tae trade, done bathrooms and kitchens maistly, but he loved the tiles in our close, the subtlety of their colours, even the wee cracks that ran through them. *They don't make them like that noo.*

Our flat was two up and at the back bedroom windae the curtains were drawn. With a bit of luck the twins would be lyin next tae their scabby Barbies, sleepin like wee angels, breathin deeply and dreamin about line dancin. Ma and Da would be sittin on the couch thegether, watchin TV.

The grass felt sticky wi damp and deep grey settled round the back court. The fluorescent light in our kitchen flickered then snapped on, and Mammy's face was at the windae, peerin out. She spotted me and smiled, made a T sign wi her index fingers. Ah gied her the thumbs-up, lifted ma book, and heided inside.