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The First Wife

Written by Emily Barr

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The First Wife

Emily Barr



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prologue

August

It rained all day, the day of her funeral. A few of her friends showed up for the service, but when it ended, they huddled under black umbrellas talking about who would be next, and wandered off together, and nobody went on to the crematorium but me.

The crematorium was familiar from the previous funeral. It was blank, boring and terrible at the same time. Confronted by rows of expectant seats, I sat in the middle of the front row. For once, there was nowhere to hide. I was out in the world.

Only a few weeks earlier, I had been here for his funeral; but that time I had taken her, leading her by the hand and trying to keep her from saying inappropriate things. She shouted out something about a baby as his coffin slid away, and she had no idea that she was saying goodbye to her husband. I had been her carer. She was, even then, my protector, in all her crazy randomness.

Today the world was new. Its edges were sharper. For a few disorientating seconds, I felt I was on a stage set, that behind these fake walls was darkness. The reality was worse than darkness: there was a world of which I knew nothing, in which I had no place. I gripped the edges of the seat with both my hands.

Sombre music was piped in from somewhere, and a man arrived and pretended he was speaking to a crowded room. I hardly heard his platitudes, because he had not known her, and nothing he said meant anything. I tried not even to think about her. I was glad we had decided on no hymns.

Her coffin was in front of me. I stared at it, imagining the body in there, knowing I should be displaying a few tears, if only to prove to the man in the suit ('Joy led a long and fulfilled life') that I really was her granddaughter.

I was a terrible person. Once I started crying, I could not stop, and he had to raise his voice to get his words to carry over my sobs. Yet I knew that my tears were not just for her. They were also for myself. The rain hammered on the flat roof.

The man in the suit did not mention my tears. He said she was a beloved mother, without remarking on the fact that her only child had not bothered to turn up. He did, however, seem to be very interested in muttering his way through the words as quickly as he possibly could, and walking out of the door.

I set off down the road, heading for home automatically. I was following the ancient family solicitor's advice: the cottage was going on the market in the morning, I would

pack up all my stuff, wait for the place to sell, and then leave.

At that point, my plan skidded to an abrupt halt. The two old people I had spent years caring for were dead. They had been my world: I had no friends. I knew I had no family any more; at least, I had to act as though I had no one. I had hardly dared to hope they would come back for this. I had written them a postcard, in my most careful calligraphy with my purple fountain pen. I was worried about scaring them off, so I just wrote this:

Joy and Ken both died this month. Please come home for a while.

I posted it to the last address Grandma had for them, a place called Mount Eden.

They would not have received it, booked their flights, and got back in time for the funeral. I had never expected that. I did half-hope that they would show up in the next few weeks, though, while I was still at the cottage.

They might come. I did not write my name on it, in case I scared them off. Even now, I half-expected that every person I saw on the street would be one of them. I lived and relived a scene in which they appeared from around a corner, looked at me, looked again, and smiled. It happened again and again, in my dreams and in my daydreams. I would know them at once, either of them, and I would forgive everything, in half a second.

I walked home, three miles, through the downpour. Puddles gathered as I watched, on our track, and I stepped straight through them, soaking my black ballet shoes. Rain cascaded down my face. My dress, which I had hardly had time to iron since the previous funeral, clung to my body,

cold and clammy. My hair turned to wet string and stuck to my neck and back. By the time I reached the cottage, I was soaked through. I looked deranged, but that did not matter, as there was no one to see me.

I had come to live in this cottage when I was a child, and it seemed inconceivable that I would ever think of any other house as 'home'. It was a pretty, deceptively large house, with thick stone walls and a climbing rose up the wall. There were four bedrooms (three upstairs, one down), a big kitchen with a table, and a sitting room filled with ancient furniture. Everything was old and made to last. It was a delightful, comforting time-warp.

I opened the heavy wooden door, and tried not to look at the spot at the bottom of the stairs where both of them had fallen – first him, and then, fatally, her.

Almost all our stuff was already packed away. Without telling either of them, I had been sorting it into boxes for years. Neither of them had been upstairs for a long time. In that time, every single thing up there, with the exception of the contents of my bedroom and bathroom, had been either thrown away, sent to charity, or boxed up. I had been so scared of them dying, for so long that, perversely, the only way to hold the terror at bay was by making horrible preparations for the day on which I would find myself alone. That had seemed to make it less likely to happen.

The fact that they *would* both die, one day, had always been there, though the three of us existed right up to the end by pretending that we would carry on the way we were for ever. It had seemed distasteful even to

think about what would happen to me when they were gone.

Ever since I was eight, I had lived with Grandma and Granddad in their cottage in this Cornish village. They were everything to me, my rock, my stability, and I loved them furiously, clinging on tight and never quite relaxing into the belief that they would not abandon me. And now, finally, they had. Grandma could have gone on for decades more, though she had been losing her mind for over a year. It had happened suddenly, unexpectedly, and it was all my fault. She must have wandered upstairs in the night. I had vaguely heard a cry and a bump, but had not properly woken. I would never know for sure, but I was certain in my heart that she had seen the upstairs rooms in her house – her old bedroom, the spare room that had housed her fabulous clothes, my mother's childhood room – empty and packed up in anticipation of her death, and had fallen down the stairs in horror and confusion.

My packing up to ward the moment off had made it happen.

When I contemplated the world outside these walls, I grabbed the table to keep myself upright. I had not the faintest idea of what to do.

I had been an anxious child, and when I came to live with them I was eager to fit in. I embraced every aspect of life in this cottage with gusto. It was only when I was eleven that I realised that my grandparents were the local eccentrics. When I had friends over, I saw that their habit of walking around naked was odd and apparently alarming and scary. They meant nothing sinister by it: it was just

what they did, just as they started each day with a cup of hot water with a chunk of ginger in it, and recited one of Shakespeare's sonnets before every meal because it was 'better than Grace'.

The friends went home and told their parents about the nudity, and after that, no one was allowed to come to play. I became the Weird Girl. Grandma and Granddad descended slowly into incapacity, and by the time I was fourteen I was looking after them more than they looked after me; helping them up the stairs, keeping the cottage clean. I managed to care for them when they needed it and do my GCSE coursework without too much trouble, until Granddad fell downstairs. That was the beginning of the end for him, and it marked the moment at which they both gave up.

And now they were dead. I skirted the fated tiles at the bottom of the stairs and headed to the kitchen, where I put the kettle on. It would take me a day to pack up the rest of the house, and I would sell it. I would take the money, and with my funds in the bank, I would do something.

Oh, I thought, yet again. If only I had the faintest idea what that *something* might be. The house was going on the market for three hundred thousand pounds. They would have paid the mortgage off years ago. With that money, I could do anything I wanted. I had already applied for a passport, just in case. It was simply going to be a question of working out what normal people did, how they did it, and doing that. It was a straightforward question of courage.

In the back garden, I picked some sprigs of mint from

the pot next to the wall. I rinsed the mint in the ceramic sink, and stuffed it into the teapot with a teaspoon of sugar, because we drank mint tea, rather than commercial rubbish that was crammed full of chemicals. We drank home-made herb tea, or proper coffee, or water. On Sundays we had a glass or two of sherry.

I hated being here without them. I could not stay here, living their life on my own. It was time for me to go out into the world, like one of the Three Little Pigs.

As I poured the boiling water into the hand-painted teapot, I allowed myself a few minutes to contemplate the hard truth of the fact that Grandma and I would never again sit in front of the roaring fire brushing each other's long hair. Granddad would never heave himself to his feet to declaim Edmund's soliloquy, from *King Lear*, ending with a triumphant: 'now, gods, stand up for bastards!' Those things were gone. Other things would fill the gaps they left, but I could not begin to imagine what those things might be.

I was on my own in the world. I was twenty, with a clutch of GCSEs and a pretty yet overgrown cottage to my name. I knew most of Shakespeare's sonnets by heart, but I had no idea how people lived. My hands trembled as I poured a stream of dirty hot minty water into my cup. There was no one to care whether I used a saucer or not. My days were no longer to be spent washing and cleaning and escorting elderly people to the loo. Time stretched ahead, blank and unknowable.

part one

chapter one

September

'Guys!' she yelled from the bottom of the stairs. 'Downstairs now! All of you!'

I stood up, remembered she did not mean me, and sat back down.

'Coming!' called a child's voice much closer to me.

'All right,' added another, and there was the sound of several sets of feet hurtling down the stairs. I tried to imagine a world in which children were called 'guys'; but in fact, I did not have to imagine it. I was living in it.

I had a bed, in a house. It was a tiny single bed with a Barbie duvet cover on it. I did not care about the size of the bedroom. It was clean and warm and I had no complaints. I sat on my bed, grateful for its softness, and rocked to and fro. I felt like a spy. I was not from this world, but I needed to pretend that I was. There was a time when I used to come to homes like this, as a child. Proper homes, normal ones, with strange rules that were

so obvious to everyone else that no one would ever explain them. There was a time when friends at school would invite me over to play. This could have been one of their houses: it was modern and clean and filled with people who did things differently. It had been strange enough visiting these places. Now I had come to live in one.

I was back from the precipice. It was important to get this right.

This was a family home, and everyone who lived here was already squashed before their lodger arrived. The two girls had moved into bunk beds so that I could have a room of my own, and the older one of them, Mia, had hung around as I arrived, shooting me fierce looks when our eyes met. I supposed she did not like me because I was taking up her space. The younger children did not seem particularly interested in me. Twins Jessica and Zac were eleven, and there was another boy, Tommy, who was six.

John was father to some of the children and stepfather to the others. The mother (of everyone except Mia) was Julia, and I liked her, which was why I had taken this room. In fact, I took this room partly because I liked Julia, and partly because I was absolutely desperate for a roof and some walls, and terrified of what might happen to me if I stayed where I had been for a moment longer.

I sat on the bed and stretched my legs out. There was a little fabric-covered wardrobe next to the window, and it tipped sideways into a rhombus if I so much as breathed on it. A couple of shelves higher up on the walls were empty at the moment, and there was no floor space at all.

When you opened the door, it hit the bed as soon as it reached a 90-degree angle.

I clenched my eyes tight shut, and told myself I was home. The room was, perhaps, one third of the size of my bedroom at the cottage, and that had not been particularly big. I allowed myself the luxury of going back there, just for a few seconds, just to draw strength.

At the cottage, I had slept on a lumpy double bed, high off the ground, with a brass bedstead. There was an old pinkish carpet, a varnished wooden dressing-table, two little windows, one looking to the front and one to the side. The side one looked over trees and grass, and the front window gave a view of a distant flat horizon of the sea. My clothes hung in an enormous polished mahogany wardrobe that just touched the ceiling. Along one wall, there were two huge bookcases, filled with books. When I was ten, I had cleared one shelf, and piled the books beside the bed to use as a little table for my clock and a glass of water. I liked it because I could 'read the table' whenever the fancy took me, and change its genre regularly.

The emptied shelf became a display place for my precious things: mainly, a picture of me aged about two, holding hands with both my parents.

Grandma would knock on the door and make sure I was awake for school. She would bring me in a cup of milky coffee, because from the age of nine I made myself like it, and she would set it down carefully on my book-table. Her blue fleece dressing-gown was fastened tightly over her white nightdress, and her morning hair was thick

down her back, just like mine. After her coffee, she would pin it up in a chignon, using hundreds of hairpins, which she would shed around the house over the course of the day. Wherever she went, they would fall on the flagstone floors of the downstairs of the cottage with melodic little tinkles.

'Good morning, Lilybella,' she would say with a smile, and she would open my curtains, the front window first and then the side window, and report on the weather.

'Glorious day,' she would say, or, 'Great weather for ducks!' or else, 'You know, I rather think these clouds are going to blow right out to sea.' Whatever was going on out there, she found its bright side.

I was clutching my head in my hands. Each hand was hanging onto a clump of thick curls. I missed them both so much. I had no idea what to do, and my grief was tempered with fury at them. I had been completely wrong about the money. When I accepted an offer on the cottage, Mr Jackson, the doddery solicitor, had sat me down and gently explained that there would be no money. There was only a black hole of debt that had to be paid with the proceeds of the sale of the cottage. I had no idea where these debts had come from, only that I had been left with nothing. Just a few hundred pounds from under my grandmother's mattress, which had got me this far. I was grateful for that, at least.

However hard I tried to make the sums add up, they did not. We had a little old Mini, that no one had driven for years. We never went on holiday: I had not left Cornwall once, not in my entire life. Grandma bought us nice clothes

and shoes, and we got new books all the time, but it was simply not possible that we had spent all that money, just existing from day to day. They had done something else with it. I was steeling myself to ask the bank to give me details of all the transactions they had made.

I wiped a tear from my eye and started unpacking the books from my box (I had had to select a very few of them to bring with me, and had chosen mostly poetry) and building my book-table, all over again. It meant the door would open even less.

I had moved to our nearest town: Falmouth. It seemed like the least worst of the limited options ranged in front of me. I needed a job, and there were hundreds of bars and restaurants and shops here, plenty of houses and schools that might need cleaning. It also had a university, and although I had failed miserably at my exams, I must have had enough qualifications to get me onto a course of some sort, one day, when I was settled. For now, I had applied for housing benefit and Jobseekers' Allowance, thanks to the advice of the only person I had met who seemed even slightly interested in me, a man called Al at the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

I met Al when I forced myself to cycle into Falmouth, and track down his office because I had it at the back of my head that the 'Citizens' Advice Bureau' was a place to go for help. I was a citizen, and I certainly needed advice.

The truth about my financial situation had knocked me out. The cottage sale went through, and I was unable to make any plans or do anything; because how can you do anything when you have hardly any money? The day arrived when the new people were due to move in, and

I had still done nothing. They were letting me keep our boxes of stuff in the shed for the moment.

When I walked into the CAB, my limbs were aching, I was horribly dirty, and since my hair was unwashed, it had formed greasy ringlets that gave me away at once as a rough sleeper.

I had woken in the dankness of dawn, in the dust and dirt of the shed that Granddad had liked to tell me he built when my mother was a little girl. The wind blew straight through it. I got up quickly, folded my old duvet, which still had its floral cover on it, and stuffed it back into the box. I had to balance the mattress back up against the wall and creep away, pulling the door shut behind me.

It was my lowest point. Today, I said to myself, you must make something happen. There is no alternative. If I did nothing, the house's new owners would spot me sneaking into their shed in the dead of night, or sneaking out at sunrise. They would call the police.

I edged into the Citizens' Advice Bureau, trying to look inconspicuous. A man with big black eyes and a tired face looked up at me, then smiled. Without a word, he ushered me into a room so small it was more of a cupboard, sat me down and did his best to disentangle my complicated situation. He made me apply for benefits straight away, and told me that I would be all right.

'People like you don't need to sleep rough,' he said, looking at me hard. He was mixed race, and his head was shaved. He was, I thought, somewhere in his thirties. 'Seriously, Lily. That's what we're here for, to stop someone like you slipping through the net just because you don't

know what to do. Believe me, my dear, I've been there. I slept on the streets in London for years. I did it so you don't have to.'

I stared at him. 'You slept on the streets in London?'

His eyes were warm. 'Can't recommend it, I'm afraid. But then you know that already. Is it a comfy shed?'

I looked down, feeling myself blushing, and shook my head. I liked him. I wondered whether I 'fancied' him. That was what people did, in the real world. I decided I probably ought to, but I didn't. He was hardly going to reciprocate, anyway.

'The new people said I could keep my stuff in there,' I said quietly, 'until I found somewhere to live. So I still have that key, and I've got all the old bedding in there. I just sit on the beach and read a book until it's dark, and then creep into the shed with a torch and make myself a little place to sleep.'

'Like a hamster.'

'Then when it gets light, I get up again, pack away the bed, and creep off before they wake up.'

'It's boring,' he said, 'isn't it? Waiting for hours to pass.'

'Yes!' The fact that he knew this made the wretchedness recede, a little. 'Waiting! Just waiting all the time. That's why I came here today, so I could go and sit in the library, because it's getting too cold for the beach. And also, today is kind of the deadline I set myself. For doing something.'

He nodded. 'Right. We can sort this out, you know. You've come to the right place.' He held out his hand, and I shook it. 'I'm Alan. You can call me Al. If I can call you Betty, that is.'

I frowned. 'Why do you want to do that?'

He laughed. 'Don't worry. It was a joke. Simon and Garfunkel. I was trying to get in there before you said it, but I see that was an unnecessary precaution.'

Al seemed to have so much experience of situations that were worse than mine that it was impossible not to follow his advice. Things changed rapidly. He told me to go for every menial job I could get my hands on, and save as much money as I could. He told me to cycle to the university campus and have a look around, to inspire myself and give me something to aim for.

'It's totally within your grasp,' he said. 'We'll torch the bloody shed. Metaphorically. You're young, you'll scrub up nicely, and you can get everything going your way. Have a look at the noticeboards while you're there. There'll be rooms to rent in houses. That's what you want. You probably won't get one in a student house, because of council tax. They don't have to pay if everyone in the house is a student. But there'll be families looking for a lodger, and I think that's the kind of set-up you want. A family situation will mean you're less lonely. While you're up there, pop into the gym or something and see if you can grab a shower.' He looked up at me and smiled. 'Go there right now before you think up reasons not to. I'd go with you if I wasn't needed here.'

It took me a while to realise that no one on campus was giving me a second glance. All around me, confident boys and girls of my own age were laughing, chatting urgently, making lengthy arrangements into phones. They looked as though they knew where they were going, both in the next ten minutes and for the rest of their lives.

They looked happy, and carefree, like people who had two ordinary parents. None of them sniggered or stared. None muttered complaints about the Weird Girl invading their space. If I had been here with my grandparents, they would have whispered about us. People always did. On my own, I seemed to fit. Slowly, I started walking tall, the way Grandma had taught me, with my head held high. I walked properly: shoulders back, chin up. I knew I smelled horrible, and my hair was worse than ever (it was perhaps, I thought, time to cut it off), but nobody noticed. Nobody could see that I was crumbling inside, that every step I took was a triumph. I did not dare seek out a shower, but I locked myself in a disabled toilet cubicle, and did the best washing I could, using the soap from the dispenser. I even rinsed my hair with soap: it was a start.

And when I found the accommodation noticeboard, buried amongst the student houses was this sign: *Small room in friendly family home. Avail immed. Reduced rates for babysitting*.

Without stopping to reflect, I wrote the number on my hand, found a payphone, called it, looked at the room, and moved in. Everything was strange, from now on. I did what Al wanted me to do, because he was the only person who had given me a plan. I knew I would always be grateful to him for that.

My new home was in the suburbs, half an hour's walk from the town centre. It was a boxy house with cardboard walls, on a street of similar houses. My window looked out on a tiny square of front garden, a road (a steep hill) and an identical house opposite. I knew I had done well

to get here, but this was only the first step. Tomorrow I was going to go out, again, and this time I would be looking for a job. I was properly clean now, wearing clean clothes, and I was as ready as I could possibly be to face the world.

There was a washing machine in the kitchen here. Grandma hated washing machines in kitchens: she said it was unhygienic, but I was going to have to get used to it. There were two televisions and a Wii. Nothing was quite the way I was used to things being.

There was a tap on my bedroom door. I made a noise that was supposed to be 'Come in?' but just came out as a scared grunt. The door swung open and bumped the book-table, and Mia, the teenager, stood there. She was slight and blonde, and was wearing a tiny skirt and leggings, with her white-blonde hair pulled across her face so it was half-hidden. As I understood it, John was her father, but Julia was her stepmother. One day, perhaps, I would find out what had become of her real mother. Motherless people were interesting.

'Hey,' she said sulkily. 'Julia says, do you want to come down and have a cup of tea?'

I shot her my best smile.

'Yes, please,' I said. 'That would be lovely.'

I sat up and tried to iron out my features, to make myself look normal. Smoothing down my hair, I looked at myself in the mirror. I, Lily Button, was about to start my new life.

I took a deep breath and headed for the stairs.