

Excerpts – A Conversation with Emily and Other Stories

A Conversation with Emily.

Yesterday afternoon I found Emily in a corner of my mind. She was sitting on a stool by the window, watching the rain. There was something old-fashioned about her. Perhaps it was her dress. It was navy-blue and high-waisted and looked too big for her. Or maybe it was the way her hair, tied with red ribbon, tumbled down her back, curling at the ends. It was the kind of brown you knew would shine gold in the sun.

When she heard me approach, she turned. ‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

I felt a little affronted. ‘Who did you expect?’ I asked, but she shrugged and went back to staring out of the window.

‘Did you think perhaps I was your mother coming to fetch you?’

Emily sighed. She shifted her stool so she sat facing me, but she did not look at me. Instead, she played with the folds of her dress. I saw now that it was beautifully hand-smocked across the bodice. Her hair fell forward, shielding her. I longed to brush it aside but I knew she did not want me to touch her. ‘I haven’t met your parents yet,’ I said.

‘I know.’ Then she brightened. ‘I was wondering. Do you think I could have a brother? Just an ordinary one. I’ve planned him all out. He’s about twelve, with freckles and a thatch of brown hair that hangs over his eyes. Barney, that’s his name. He’s got one of those black and white dogs, a fox terrier I think, called Toby and . . .’ She paused for breath.

‘Oh, Emily, I said helplessly, knowing already I could not refuse her. ‘What sort of a name is Barney? I’m sure children aren’t called that now.’

She set her mouth stubbornly. ‘I can’t help that,’ she said. ‘It’s his name. Oh, he’s going to be such fun. He’s in the shed now making a bow and arrow. He’s even going to make a little one for me. As soon as it stops raining, we’re going to hunt the magpie.’

‘Hunt the magpie?’ I repeated, wondering if I had heard her properly. It sounded so odd. Hunt the dragon, the dinosaur, even the wild boar. But the magpie . . . ?

‘Yes,’ Emily explained seriously. ‘There’s a pair of magpies nesting in the gum trees by the gate. They keep swooping on us. Yesterday they nearly got my little sister Alicia.’

‘You’ve got a sister too?’ I asked, a little put out. After all, this was my province.

Emily looked uncomfortable. ‘Well, I’d like one. A baby one that has just started to walk. Oh, she’s so sweet with dimples and curls and . . .’

‘I think you are forgetting a few things,’ I interrupted. ‘I am the writer. I am the one who decides.’