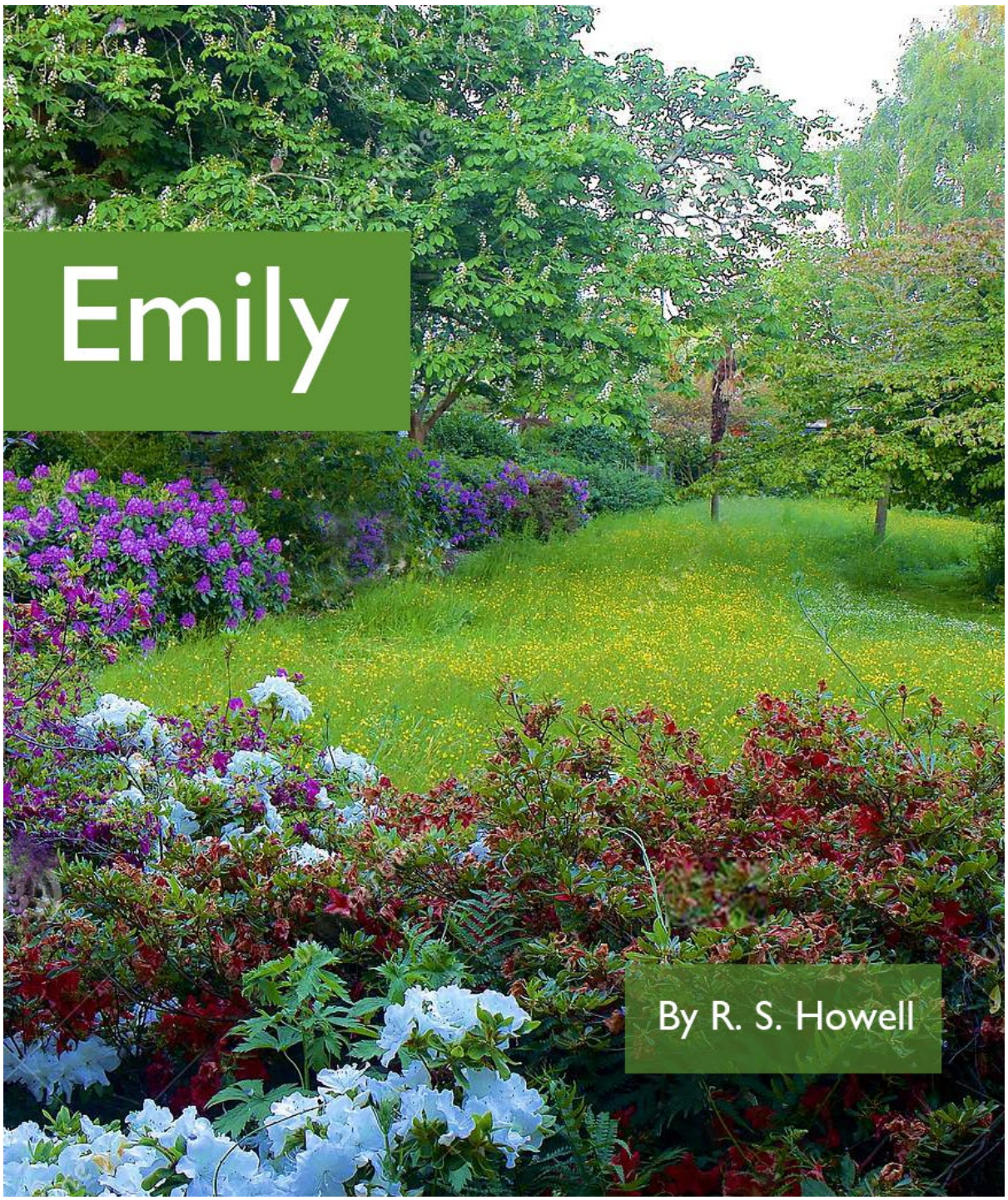
Emily by R. S. Howell



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Emily

Part 1 of 5

"Why did old Fred never marry?" Those gossips flocking like greedy starlings outside the supermarket 'chacker-chacker-chackered', as they picked through the tender titbits of other people's lives.

He had his reason, and no wish to stop and share it as he skirted the flock to head towards the park. As for being old, he was not as old as they believed. He was merely worn of tread and thread and occasionally heavy of heart. Approaching the park's tall, ornate gates, he acknowledged the reminders of the town's grander days with a polite, subtle nod. Something about that encounter, maybe his respect for the craftsmanship or for memories stirred, softened his expression and lifted his steps as he entered the park.

From there, mothers with prams, morning joggers, or the old-timers sitting on their favourite benches, lost in dreams, might have noted Fred eagerly pass up the drive. Then, on by the weed-filled beds that he hardly ever glanced at any more. He preferred to remember the flowers that once glowed and flowed in assorted rich colours, lending the park a sense of renewal. From there, he followed an oblique path up to the tennis courts. Then, onto his special place, a hidden patch of grass, squeezed between the occasionally pruned ornamental shrubs and a bank of sassy pink and while flowered Azaleas. Together, the evergreen foliage separated his beloved spot from a once thriving but now scraggly woodland on one side, and the park's reeking, leaky duck pond on the other.

The park gardeners had left the Azaleas to eat up the path, until it was almost swallowed from view. But he knew where the entrance lay, as he always would and squeezed through the almost invisible gap. Good, his smile suggested, the grass hasn't been cut. Whether it was due to good eco management or laziness, the grass was allowed to grow taller, therefore greener and healthier. Left un-mown during late spring and summer, the rich green was beautifully studded with daisies, dandelions, forget-me-nots. Best of all, were the decorative flushes of charming wild viola. Those little piccolos of nature's orchestra, he fancied, whenever he watched the cheeky flowers turn their multicoloured heads towards the sun. In spring, cyclamen and snake's head fritillary arrived in the far corner of his spiritual spot, adding a welcoming exotic touch.

While this part of the town had succumbed to the lure of profit before people and forced to wallow in the misery of neglect, not so his special patch. That has changed little since his first visit thirty-two years ago. Although he notes sadly, changes have occurred around it. Birdsong is rarer. Their once sweet tunes are muted and less hopeful. The squirrels that charmed his younger self have turned quarrelsome since the grand trees they frolicked in disappeared. Apparently removed for frivolous health and safety reasons; their roots are damaging the path. Or the trees have been wrecked by the increasing numbers of violent storms. Some were toppled by disease, but mostly, pollution chokes them to death. That problem was always there in the air; the park had sprung from the industrial age because of it. But since Fred, as a gifted lad, armed with hope and new wood chisels, set out to carve his name, the signs of pollution have grown less obvious. Yes, he reasons, and is more dangerous because of it. But happily, not so in his spot, not yet. As if charmed, it was still vibrant and beautiful. While thanks to the shielding woodland and the Azaleas, the spot remained secluded and quiet. It was the perfect place for those memories stirred at the park gates to come out to play.

Others with similar memories might be embittered and crushed by their weight, but not Fred. He cared for his friends. Even when they let him down. There's a reason for everything; his spirit has sighed many times over the years. And we aren't always meant to know the why of it. Are we? So now, as he did in the past, he placidly embraces fate and everything it cares to throw or take from him. It can also give, too.

His new chisels, now worn down but still loved, have carved him a career as a much-lauded sculptor. His old studio off the main street he works from once proudly served as the town's bakery. To his horror, almost overnight, supermarkets saw off the bakery's centuries of service and tradition. When the bakery, like the birds, fell silent, he just had to move in to save the ghosts. Now, when his eyes fall where the counter once stood, his ghost of the past waits with another to be served. He'll sigh, and for a moment, his strong heart will beat with less hope than once it did. But beat it does, and never more happily than when reposing in his spot.

Other than the loss of decent bread, Fred, to those who knew him, seemed content. On the surface, he was. But not beneath the soil that grows his soul. Restlessness would best explain why, each day, weather permitting, he visits his spot. There he dwells for a few reflective hours, planning his next work.

Sometimes he'll pen a short story, but always and best of all, he'll write a love note. When he finishes, he tenderly folds it. Then, with a silent wish, he takes out the note he left the day before in a certain spot in the Azalea's foliage and inserts the new one. Afterwards, and on dry days, he'll put aside his writing pad to lie back and enjoy the familiar embrace of the grass. With a soft smile, he closes his eyes and drifts off into his past. But never does he mix the past with the future. Doing so will only bring the promise of more longing and loneliness.

Part 2

A few hours later, buoyed by memories, tinged with regret, Fred retreats to a nearby cafe. Carrying a cup of tea over from the counter, he heads for his seat by the window. Through the years, he has sat there watching the living and ghosts pass by. Then it's onto his rooms overlooking the park for a quick brush-up before setting off to the studio. Inspired by a certain smile, he works through to the early hours of the morning. Occasionally, he rests and glances up at the skylight. With a heart hoping another is doing the same, he watches the moon and stars circle by.

While he works happily away, his spot bathed by the moon dons a sombre, but inviting, funereal suit. The ethereal texture soaks up the day's sound until all that remains is a settled hush. Even worms might be heard dragging a leaf beneath the surface. Or in their stoic way, ploughing through that underground world of past civilisations, where forgotten hopes lie. That place few humans will ever see while living. Other than those rare few forced to lie and cry their painful goodbyes, like a certain one, Fred fears on his darkest days, may well have done.

For some couples, as the moon smiles, his spot with its turned-up collar of Azaleas and shrubs, becomes their secret nook. A place to cuddle and snuggle beneath an intoxicating blanket of perfume, gifted by the Azaleas when in bloom. He has never witnessed others there, but if he ever did, he would not begrudge them their moments in the place where he once lay in the arms of his eternal joy. His beloved Emily. The one for whom he still leaves a love note tucked carefully amongst the lower Azalea branches. Just as he had many years ago, for her to find and read, in case he was delayed for their tryst.

It became one of their little games.

Sometimes, instead of waiting in their spot, he hid behind a tree. Peeking out, he watched her float along the path. In his mind, it was strewn with rose petals to guide her lightly placed ballerina steps, while blessing her bewitching, upturned little nose. Some petals might fall to decorate her long hair, playfully teased by the breeze. Together, with the tilt of her beautiful head and demur, faraway smile, they sang her praises for the day. But mostly her song proclaimed her love for him and, of course, his love for her.

Having arrived in a flush of emotion to find her Fred not there waiting, she enacted her part in their game. He was allowed thirty seconds to appear. But never any longer. Oh No! Never! Patience has its limits, even with angels. He would smile when, with barely concealed excitement, she searched the Azalea bush for her treasure. There was always a catch of breath and a skip once the note was found. Then dramatically, clutching it to her heart, she would sigh for the lover lost at sea while sinking gracefully to the grass. Kissing her chest of jewels, she slowly opened it. As she read his loving words, her ever-widening blushing smile sang proudly, I am blessed, for I am truly loved.

Part 3

They hugged often and long, contented and snug in their patch, which they thought of as their first home together.

The white and soft pink Azalea flowers that matched her blushing cheeks, and the odd rogue red bloom, which beautifully reflected her lips. Plus a few pale lilac interlopers (the exact shade of her favourite dress), where together they made up their home's wallpaper. The ever-changing patterns of the flower-spotted grass happily played the part of their carpet, while the low, but not too low, dense shrubs served as their beloved window boxes.

"Oh, we must have lots of window boxes…" she often enthused, in between tender moments, "…in our real flat when we get one. And that will be soon, won't it, my darling Fred," delightfully declared with little bird-like nods.

"And once you've made them…"

At such a point, she might pause and adopt the flustered excitement of a puppy about to be walked and swelled with the joy of her telling. "...And you will make sure they're prettily carved and not just plain old boxes, right? And you can paint them white. Then I'll fill them with rich, loamy soil. Together we'll plant them up with begonias and miniature pink and yellow roses, won't we?"

Then she might utter a long "mmmm" as if anticipating that day, before saying wistfully. "Whenever the window is open and we are leaning on the sill together listening to the delightful birdsong coming to us from the trees surrounding the park, we'll fall under the flower's intoxicating spell. Afterwards, my darling, we'll make love. Won't we?" With an embarrassed but eager giggle, she might add, "And in our later years we'll drink tea while we talk about our children."

In her many reflective moments, he was charmed by just how abruptly she might stop talking and drift off into a cloud of fancy. After such moments, she would look at him and say earnestly.

"Fred. We must always live by this park…" Then, imploringly, with bright hazel eyes and keen, animated, excited, delighted childish fancy, that was always wonderful to behold, she would exclaim. "...Mustn't we!"

Charming and breathtaking, too, was the secret but satisfied twinkle in her eyes when, after their special moments in the grass, she righted his tie and twilled like a tuneful little wren. "This is our park. Our place, my darling. Isn't it?"

Sometimes, as if suddenly uncertain of that fact, she would beseech, "It's ours… ours only… isn't it, Fred?" Before changing her manner to say firmly, though lightly. "And don't you ever dare bring anyone else here!" Which she duly delivered with a series of little gentle pats to his more than happily accommodating, flushed cheeks.

Or occasionally, as if an audacious ant had crawled into her always clean underwear, she might suddenly leap up and almost sing in her cheery, bright way. "I want to dance now, Fred. Come on, let's go to the bandstand."

Grabbing his hand, she would pull him along as if he had become the puppy.

"Oh, Fred, please carve my name here." She once begged, waving her delicately pointed pink painted toenails inches from his face, before turning to step barefoot, ballerina style, up and down the wooden slatted bench that ran along one side of the stand.

"And then we'll know this is our place. Won't we?" She said from the far end. Then, skipping lightly back, she flopped down beside him to say lightly. "And whenever you miss me, you can come here… can't you?"

Then more earnestly, she suggested. "And while I'm trapped inside that silly old office shuffling their stupid, dirty papers about, I can imagine you in our stand sitting beneath my name. So, please carve it, Fred."

When he failed to answer immediately, she placed her hand softly upon his thigh, which she knew he loved. Looking wide-eyed into his face, she simpered with a barely disguised grin.

"Oh, please, Fred. Do it for me. Please."

Part 4

"You know, sometimes when your mind goes a wandering, I miss you even when I'm with you."

Fred declared with laughter, as he weakly tried to dismiss her request. But when she sulked, which she did so well, he was compelled to explain. "I'd love to carve your name for all the world to see. I would. And one day I promise, I shall," he said, swimming in his own pool of earnestness. "Just not here. I can't. It's defacement, and the council won't stand for such a thing, you know," he argued with a heart that yearned to give in. And maybe one day I will, he thought, but not yet and not here. When and wherever I carve it, it has to be a surprise. I so want to see her gorgeous eyes light up when I unveil my declaration of love.

Her counter-argument started as a soft little pout, which quickly became a determined jut of chin as she pleaded. "But it's our council and our park, Fred. So please carve my name here."

Then, in true feminine guile, which in the remembering still raised a smile, she goaded. "And if you love me, as you say, then you will want to do this little thing for me. Right, my darling, Fred?"

She got her way, of course; he smiles whenever he relives the memory.

Beneath a moon bright and high, Fred set out on a mission of love. Daringly, he scaled the park's perimeter fence. Fortunately, he managed it easily. Landing softly between the sentinel trees, which in Emily's fancy guarded their park, he kept to their covering shadows, for as long as he could. At the top end of the park came the dangerous bit, having to sneak across the hazy, moon-silvered open grass to the bandstand. Or as Emily would say, "Our bandstand, Fred, because it was built just for us, wasn't it?"

If only it were, he thought, as visions of a police cell, a court appearance, and maybe even jail dogged his footsteps. Fortunately, the only things that spotted him were an owl and a few moths, a couple of which followed him into the stand

before quickly losing interest. Alone, with just the moon for company, he unrolled the canvas bag that held his wood carving chisels and set to work.

Climbing on the bench, he stretched up and began carefully carving or rather, creating a scribed plaque on the roof's wide support beam. When he finished, it simply read, Emily. But as skilfully done as it was, to his eye the unadorned word was not yelling, 'I love you, Emily' as he so wanted it to do. Suddenly, inspired by an image of his Emily, he picked up the chisels and set to work again. Early morning found him dozing on the bench beneath the finely carved 'Emily'. But now it was wreathed with fantastic miniature roses and topped with a fine pair of little darting swallows. Their arrival in spring always delighted her, his very own little swallow, so how could they not be included?

Just like swallows do, she too had arrived in his life in a thrilling, delightful display of swoops and dips and chirps one fantastic spring. But unlike the swallows, she, in her loving cling, remained by his side for several wonderful winters. Only to vanish without a word or a trace. Either then or since. But that has not stopped him from looking for her. Even death would not stop that longing search for his beloved.

Part 5

Some evenings, after the children have rushed home for tea and the air falls quiet of human sound, Fred visits the bandstand. There he sits for a while beneath Emily's plaque, thinking about her. But never for too long. Unlike their spot, the memories of her there are too overpowering and heartbreaking. In his mind's eye, he still sees her dancing up and down the long bench. Or they are clasped in each other's arms, and he is humming a line from the song he wrote for her.

"I'd love to see you dancing across the floor tonight with me."

Some evenings, the memories are so vivid she sings gaily along as they twirl to the music of their hearts. Yes, he will smile, accompanied by her imaginary band, like, she said, the one which played in the café scene in The Lady and the Tramp.

"You remember that moment?" She would say, bright-eyed. But just in case he couldn't, because men don't remember the important things, do they, she would remind him in a lover's tease. The one designed purely to embarrass and please. "It was when you squeezed my hand, my love, in the cinema, and whispered to me only. You're my very own special lady."

One evening, as he approached the stand, a young girl skipped happily out. Just like Emily used to do. She even called back to her lover, sulking in the shadows. "I've got to go, but I'll meet you here again under Emily tomorrow, and that's a promise."

For a second, the young girl's light words both thrilled and cut Fred's heart. One autumn evening when the grass was becoming too wet to lie on comfortably, Emily suggested they meet the next night in the corner of the stand, beneath her plaque. "I might have some exciting news for you, my darling, tomorrow." Except, his darling Emily never appeared again, other than as a ghostly memory.

Sometimes, while sitting beneath her plaque, those ghosts arise like angered poltergeists. In a foul temper, they hurl his placid acceptance of loss hard against the back wall, while his troubled spirit mutters. "Why did she go? Where did she go?"

In such moments, tears shroud his vision as they tumble in a torrent of torment

from his youngish, but old eyes, worn out from seeking his lost love. There are times, though, when the stand provokes good moments, raising a besotted smile and his fondly whispered words.

"May your God bless you, Emily… wherever you are."

One evening, taking a break from carving, he sank slowly down on the bench. Before he had a chance to turn up his collar against the intruding fingers of the cooling air, his memories of Emily gushed out.

"Oh, come on… come on, my darling, Fred. Join me in our happy times. Let's dance together like once we did."

How could he refuse his love? He could not and would not.

Gladly, he hummed their tune. "I'd love to see you dancing," and dreamt of her singing along as they caroused the floor in perfect rhyme and step. Lost in his lover's arms, he whispered. "Oh, my Emily, My Emily, I'd love to hear you laughing," and never noticed a woman approaching the bandstand. Or chance to see the way she discreetly slipped something back into her bag. Or even note her widening smile as she caught his words.

"Erm. Excuse me." She said softly, although still managing to jolt him back remorsefully to the present. "I wonder, would you mind if I joined you here?"

"There's plenty of room," he suggested, with an expansive but rare, irritable wave of his hand. "See, help yourself," he offered, while quickly wiping his tear-dampened eyes.

"Well, actually, this might sound rude of me. Or even strange." She said carefully, while looking closely, but kindly, at Fred, as if to make sure to take in every detail. Instead of moving away as he hoped, she settled gracefully beside him.

"I've come a long way and I would like to sit exactly where you are… if I may. Beneath Emily. That plaque, my father carved many years ago."

Caught in a sudden surging swoon, Fred collapsed, cutting short her long rehearsed speech.

"Yes… you… My father carved from the heartwood of your love for my dearest, dearest mother. Whom I've only recently met, because your Emily's family forced her to give me up. Sadly, she was traumatised for a long time. Too long. But now that she has met me and finally recovered, my mother wants only to be with you, here… if you'll still have her."