

Hope is the thing

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.”
— Emily Dickinson

In the summer of eighteen eighty four, Emily Dickinson had a vision. “I see a great darkness coming.” She fainted while baking in her kitchen, remaining unconscious for hours. Weeks of ill health followed, never properly explained. Until now.....

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It was a gorgeous summer’s afternoon in Amherst, Massachusetts. It was the year eighteen eighty four and there might have been wars going on in faraway places, but life at the Dickinson family homestead was peaceful, tranquil to the point of drowsiness. He was late ! Young men always seemed to be late for everything, as if they had eternity at their disposal. If she’d been a pretty young thing, she was sure that Larry Scanlon would have been early. Emily knew she was rather plain and had a reputation for being something of a recluse.

“Truth Emily, be truthful with yourself at least. You’re a woman in her early fifties, with a reputation for constantly dressing in white and being rather strange.”

And talking to herself of course, something that was a necessity if you rarely saw other people. She spotted Larry, walking through the tree line and up towards the house. Still a few minutes away, she had time for her freshly baked cake to cool. There was also time for her to put a little of the blue powder into the cup, she intended him to drink out of.

“Not enough to harm him, just make him more relaxed.”

There had been two previous attempts to find someone worthy of knowing her secret, both attempts had been disastrous. They’d been serious academics of their day, ideal men to accept her proofs and digest the information.

“Pahh, one died of heart failure on the spot, the other kept on screaming until his neck was broken. A young man this time, with a bit of.... Bravado. It just might work.”

It had to be a man, it was still very much a man’s world. There was her younger sister Lavinia, an empty headed and unreliable creature at the best of times. No, it had to be a man and someone outside of the Dickinson family. Emily needed a chronicler, a custodian of her eighteen hundred poems. With luck, it would be the handsome looking man, now tapping on the back door.

“Come in Larry, you’re just in time to sample my home made cake. Nothing fancy, just a plain sponge, yet I think you’ll find it delicious.”

“I’m surprised you’ve forgiven me for editing your poems.”

“Edit, is that what you call it ?!”

She’d yelled at him, which wasn’t going to help him relax and he had to be calm for when she offered him the proofs of her story.

“I’m sorry Larry, I know you meant well, but cutting my poems about like that...”

“There are only so many times I can say sorry Miss Dickinson. You wanted your work published anonymously in the Springfield Republican. The paper would only print them, if the style and punctuation was more.....conventional.”

She wanted to run her nails down his face, punish him for turning her poetry into a travesty of its true form. He had managed to get her work published though, so she decided to leave him unscarred. Emily cut a slice of the still warm sponge and put it onto one of her best plates.

“Here, eat, eat, while I pour the tea.”

It was polite to feed him, few left the homestead without having at least a slice of cake, or some homemade biscuits. The sweetness of the cake would also mask the slightly sweet taste of the powder, which was dissolving into the tea. Emily carried the tea things on a tray, depositing it on a low table in the sitting room. She put his tea cup closer to him.

“Is the cake good ?” She asked.

“Marvellous Miss Dickinson.”

“Call me Emily.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly.”

“Yes you can, it isn’t even my correct name, as you’ll soon learn.”

Timing was crucial, he had to be gently relaxed by the drug in his tea, pleasantly anaesthetised to the full effect of what she intended to show him. Good, he picked up the cup and drank half of the contents.

“Oh, are you going to publish under an assumed name ?”

“Not really, I need to explain. I’d like you to hear the story of my life, the real inspiration behind some of my favourite poems. I’d also like you to be the custodian of my legacy, eighteen hundred completed poems.”

“But why me Miss..... Emily ? Surely you have a member your own family ?”

She laughed, loudly and for far too long. He looked embarrassed, but he had no idea about her true family, not yet. Murder and incest had only been the start of her family’s sins. Actually no, heresy, blasphemy and worshipping false gods, had been the actually start of their fall from grace.

“Sorry Larry, but you don’t know my sister that well. Vinnie is an angel and I love her dearly, but she’s an empty headed fool. She’d forget all about my work and leave it in a drawer for decades.”

“Are you unwell Emily ? I don’t see the need for haste in this matter, you’re not elderly.”

“Actually I intend to pass on this evening, in the most literal meaning of that phrase.”

Poor Larry, he looked horrified.

“No, please don’t think I mean suicidal thoughts, nothing could be further from the truth. You’re yawning Larry, are you tired ?”

“A little, it was a long walk here on a hot day.”

“Would you like more tea.”

“Yes, please.”

No more of the drug, it seemed to have worked well. Larry was relaxed and yawning, but he was still alert enough to hear her story. He drank the tea, almost as soon as she put the cup in front of him.

“I gave you something, a mild sedative. Nothing harmful Larry, I give you my word. I just don’t want you running away, or screaming uncontrollably, when I show you proof of what I’m about to tell you.”

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Emily left him for a few moments, to look out of the window at that perfect summer’s day. She was never going to return to Amherst again and wanted to take in every sound, every wild flower, every smell. It also gave her time to think through the right order to tell her story. She’d thought about it all for some time and knew her original plan was wrong. Give him her real name, show herself to him

too soon and drug or not, he might panic. Emily walked away from the window, away from the view she loved so much. She moved her chair slightly, to sit facing Larry Scanlon.

“What did you give me ?” He asked.

“Nothing fatal Larry, I promise. Some small blue berries that I once picked with my own hands. From a bush that once grew in great numbers, in Egypt. Sadly, I’ve heard the bush is now extinct. Ground up and mixed with a few local herbs, to make it gentler on the stomach. You’ll be fine, don’t worry.” Did it really matter where she began ? He’d either take it all in or he wouldn’t.

“I wasn’t always Emily Elizabeth Dickinson.” She said. “I only took over her physical form in eighteen hundred and thirty nine, when this body was still that of a child. I saw potential in her though and I am seldom wrong about such things.”

“Don’t hurt me Emily. I won’t tell anyone you drugged me, just don’t hurt me.”

“You think I’m mad of course, so did the others. I’ve tried twice before, to find someone to hear the truth, to be my chronicler. I inhabited the form of Mary Shelley, until her body began to suffer from bouts of paralysis and all those unbearable headaches. Others too, thousands of them, all gifted women of their age. Only ever women, I think he thought of that as part of the curse, always moving from woman to woman, never a man. Personally I love being a woman, constantly underestimated.”

“Who do you think cursed you ?”

“God of course, who else ?”

There was pleading in his eyes, the look of a man who thinks he’s at the mercy of a psychopath. Emily decided it was the time to tell him of her true lineage and give him the name she was born with.

“I am Awan, the cursed daughter of Eve.” She said. “My mother took a bite out of the forbidden pleasures, but I devoured every piece, with relish. Cain killed his brother, I fucked mine. Every kind of depravity, every wonderful form of defilement, I enjoyed them all. He never claimed to curse me for incest, just every other one of my multitude of sins. Cursed with immortality, cursed to have a thirst that only human blood can satisfy, cursed to move from one host to another, like a parasite.”

“You’re mad Emily, quite insane.”

He’d gone beyond the pleading for his life stage, good.

“I can still regain my original form, though only for a brief period of time. I think he saw that as part of the curse, allowing me to see myself in a mirror, as I once looked in his paradise. Well Larry, do you have the courage to look upon my true form ? The only surviving child of Adam, Awan the cursed daughter of Eve. Are you brave enough ?”

“Everyone at the Springfield Republican thinks you’re a crazy woman.” He replied. “To think that I defended you, pushed hard to get your poems published. Crazy Bitch !!”

There was doubt in his eyes, despite his words.

“I am grateful, or you would have seen my other side. I did mention the constant thirst for human blood. I need to undress for this, Emily’s bodily form is a little small and girlish, her clothes far too small to contain my true form.”

Undressing was easy, she only wore a plain white dress in the summer and white slip on shoes. Everything in white, it meant so much to her. There had been a place between his paradise and the world of men, where everything had been white. Her memories of that place were unclear, but those few fragments of memory meant a lot to her. She stood before Larry, completely naked and not the slightest bit embarrassed.

“Now Larry Scanlon, look upon me as I once was, look upon Awan.”

Her skin tone changed first, losing the pale pallor of Emily, who rarely ventured far in sunlight. Her hatred of his sunlight seemed to affect every woman she'd inhabited, often accelerating their decline into ill health. Awan's skin had the healthy sheen of burnished copper, not a single blemish anywhere. Pain, quite a lot of pain as her backbone lengthened, Awan had been much taller than the diminutive Emily. Muscles too, causing agony as they grew, becoming strong again.

"I don't mind the pain Larry, for you to see me how I once was."

Breasts filled out, pubic hair became thick, losing the awful patches of grey. Awan couldn't see her eyes, yet she knew they'd now be dark, dark as night, with a twinkle in them, as wicked as age old sin. Her hair was always last, turning black, dark as a raven's wing. Long too, her hair was once more her crowning glory. It would only last for a few minutes, before the agony again, as she returned once more to being Emily.

"Do you believe me now Larry ?" She asked.

"Yes, you're So beautiful."

"Did you expect a monster ? Yes, I think you did. You see before you Awan, as I was before the fall. Awan, who seduced her brother Cain and bore his children. Soon I will be Emily again, I can feel the change already."

The pain was worse returning from her original form. Muscles had to wither, bones had to shrink.

"Oh, the pain Larry ! I think this is why my hosts tend to age and die so quickly, it must put a terrible strain on their bodies. I need to occasionally see the real me though, to keep my sanity."

All too soon, it was poor sickly Emily, who was putting her white dress back on and the sensible slip on shoes. There was one last cup of tea in the pot, which she drank quite quickly. The change always seemed to dehydrate her. She went into the kitchen and returned with a sharp kitchen knife and an old towel, which she'd kept for just such a day.

"Last proof, then I'll tell you a story that will amaze you. I, Awan, have seen everything that has happened to mankind, every single day since the creation. Some of it was inspiring, though most of it darkened my soul even further. I will leave you to judge the history of God's creation."

Poor Larry, he looked so scared of the knife. He might now believe her, but his fear of her still remained, which might be a good thing.

"Don't worry Larry, I intend to use the knife on myself. The bodies I borrow become lame, sick and ruined, probably from housing my essence. I can do nothing about that, but he won't allow them to die, suicide isn't a way out for me. Poor Emily will be lucky to survive to see another summer, once I have left her. He won't allow her to die though, while I still use her body as my temporary home."

"Emily is still in there then ?" He asked. "Still sharing her own body ?"

Larry was fidgeting about, the drug was obviously wearing off. She hoped he didn't run off after she'd put so much effort into convincing him, suffered so much pain.

"Yes, Emily is still there, feeling what I feel, every piece of suffering I subject her body to. Mary Shelley too, was there right through my years in her body. The other too, all the thousands of women I've inhabited, helping to be more than they knew they could be."

"But ultimately Awan, you kill them."

"I have..... Never thought of it like that Larry. True, I do put demands and strains on their health, but my presence helps them become famous. Eventually everyone will read Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and think it to be a work of genius, my genius. Arete of Cyrene would never have written all forty books, if I hadn't....."

"You Awan, you're making you famous, your work, your literature. ! All you're doing for them, is shortening their lives."

"No, I see what you're trying to imply and it isn't true. Mary was there during the writing of Frankenstein, with her laudanum fuelled ideas. I admit that much of it was mine, but it was a true collaboration. Damo too, daughter of Pythagoras and Theano. So much of the philosophy attributed to her father was hers."

"No, yours Awan !" Yelled Larry. "Listen to yourself ! It's all about you achieving a kind of fame by proxy."

"You may have a point, but I can't and won't accept it. I know that Emily's poems will one day be an inspiration to millions of people. Isn't that worth a little shortening of her life ?"

He was glaring at her now, hate in his eyes, not fear.

"No ! They're your poems, not hers, even if a few words do come from what is left of her soul.

You're on an eternal ego trip Awan, nothing grand or noble about that."

"I've never had anyone to argue with before Larry, allow me a moment to ponder on your words. I did promise you another proof. It is a little theatrical, but proves the impossibility of any contemplation I might have towards suicide."

She placed the towel across the top of her chest, to catch whatever blood might spill from the wound she intended to make in her throat. Usually she bled very little, but she did intend to slice open her jugular vein. The pain was terrible as the kitchen knife went in, all four or five inches of steel, vanishing into her neck. Larry gasped, but she wasn't able to talk to him.

"Emily.... Awan, whoever you are, this is madness !" He said.

Enough blood to turn the towel red, which stopped flowing the instant the knife was withdrawn. It still hurt though, enough pain to stop her talking for a few minutes. She placed the knife on the tea tray, covering it with the bloody towel.

"Poor Emily will have a scar, but that will heal with time." She said. "When I was borrowing the body of Hypatia, an angry lover crushed my skull with a marble statuette. The pain was worse than you could possibly imagine Larry, yet I eventually recovered from that terrible wound. During the course of my long life, I have twice been consumed by fire. I won't even attempt to describe the pain of being burned alive. Yet I lived, eventually rising out of the ashes to be reborn. I have grown weary of my existence, but he has cursed me with immortality."

"Some..... actually most people, would think of it as a blessing." He replied.

"Then they lack the intellect and imagination, to comprehend the curse of living forever."

Her throat still hurt, she leant back in her chair and massaged it. Emily would be uncomfortable for weeks, perhaps unable to get out of bed. Awan would be gone by then though, her means of travelling to Washington, was arriving around sunset.

"My voice may be strange for a few minutes." She said. "But we should carry on. Did you bring a notebook ? I can provide you with paper, if you need it ?"

"You can't expect me to print any of this Awan. I'd be carted off to the local insane asylum. You've convinced me, perhaps too well. I now know you to be some kind of monster, but no one else will believe it."

He was right of course, she had always assumed her life story could never be published as fact.

"No of course you can't publish my story as a true history." She said. "As fiction though, an epic piece of literary fiction. You and I will know the truth of course and I can buy a copy, dipping into it at times, to bring back some very fond memories."

"Fond memories ! You've destroyed the lives of countless women, living off them like some kind of..... Parasite ! No, I will never print a word of what you've told me. Your secret is safe though, no one in their right mind would believe it anyway."

Not the reaction she'd expected. It had all been for nothing, or not quite for nothing, she had other needs.

"So it looks like my precious box of poems will have to be left in the care of my younger sister, Lavinia. She will probably forget all about them, but I'm sure they will be published eventually. She really is the most empty headed creature."

"I should go now Emily." He said.

"Yes, yes I understand. I would ask you one last favour. Let me walk with you for a short way and show you my roses. They look glorious at this time of year."

He actually held her hand, as if trying to make amends for refusing to be her chronicler.

"Yes of course, I'd be delighted to see them."

He probably already underestimated the physical strength, that she could give the frail form of Emily. Not for long of course and it would further damage her already poor health. For a few minutes though, she could give Emily the strength of ten men like Larry Scanlon. She deliberately stumbled near the rose garden, causing him to hold onto her.

"Are you alright Emily?"

"I soon will be."

Sadly her God had cursed her with a thirst, but no fangs to satisfy it. She'd picked up the kitchen knife though, while Larry wasn't looking. She had only one servant and she was out. Lavinia had been sent to visit one of her friends. No one was at home to hear Larry cry out, as she bent him over her roses and slit his throat.

"My needs are small Larry. Roses like blood though, their colours will be really vibrant next summer."

Half a pint of his blood was all she required, one or two large gulps, taking care not to get any drips on her clean white dress. Two large gulps of blood, would keep the thirst satisfied for several months, her roses could have the rest. Larry quickly stopped struggling, so she dropped his body onto the ground. There was a wheelbarrow nearby, she had planned for such an outcome to their meeting.

"Sad to go through all that for just a mouthful of blood." She muttered. "And Vinnie is certain to forget all about my box of poems. Still, what can't be fixed, must be endured."

Larry went into the wheelbarrow and then she raked over the soil, covering the blood. Even poor frail Emily, was capable of wheeling his body into the woods. There was a mine, or more accurately an airshaft leading down to a disused mine. She had no idea what had been mined, people seemed to have dug holes all over Amherst. There must have been something worth having down there once, but now the mine was just a danger to the local children and their pet dogs. She was sweating, by the time she reached the covered entrance to the airshaft. Weather had corroded away the bolts, holding the cover in place. Emily pulled the cover open, sniffing the air from below. No whiff of the two previous bodies she'd dropped down the hole, it was a very deep mine.

"Your disappearance will be a local mystery Larry. You might even get on the front page of the Springfield Republican."

Down he went, bashing the sides of the hole as he went, causing a crash as he hit bottom. Emily had once calculated the drop as a good three hundred feet, a deep enough burial for Larry to disappear forever. Another victim of a poorly fenced off hole in the ground. She trundled the barrow back to her garden and gave the ground one last thorough raking over.

"That will have to do."

She'd finished with Larry early, though she had hoped for a more amiable end to their meeting. Maybe it was a waste of time, her desire to share the story of a very long and eventful life. She'd already dismissed Larry's talk of her being a monster. Emily made more tea and waited for Julia Rivers to arrive.

"This one will be barely ruffled by it all Larry, no serious harm at all." She muttered.

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Emily had reverted to talking to herself again, probably safest in the long run. Julia arrived punctually, just as the sun was setting, causing the clouds in the east to glow like gold. Awan chose to treat it as a good omen.

"Julia, please come in. Perfect timing, I've just brewed some tea."

"I can't stay long Emily, it's my night to take the under sevens bible class."

Julia Rivers, wife of a prominent local businessman, pillar of the local community. Emily had been cultivating her for a number of years, or rather Awan had. Not as a new semi-permanent host, Julia had few skills beyond knowing most of the bible by heart. Mrs Rivers had money though and her own horse and carriage. She'd make a useful first step, to get away from Amherst and quite a way south, maybe as far as Washington itself.

"Come into the kitchen, we can talk while I tidy up." She said.

She'd rehearsed it in her mind, faking a fall, making sure that poor Emily wasn't seriously injured. Awan didn't feel compassion for those she inhabited, more of an obligation and gratitude for providing a safe home for her soul, her essence.

"Oh, I feel so strange."

Julia Rivers, leant down to help her and Awan swapped over. All done in less than a second and she was looking out of Julia's eyes. Careful for a while, until she became used to being taller, having legs with a longer stride. It would take days to fully acclimate to her new home, but a gentle stroll round the house would be enough for now.

"Then I'll head for Washington, though maybe just Pennsylvania will do for the first leg. Avoid New York of course, the stories one hears are bad enough."

Two times round the house and Awan felt ready to use Julia to reach Washington. It was close to four hundred miles, but she was in no hurry. There was money in Julia's bag, easily enough for a few weeks cheap accommodation. Then Washington and a host body she could use for some time. Awan was becoming bored with writers and philosophers, in need of a new challenge.

"There are women in politics now." She muttered. "Some gaining positions with genuine power."

That excited her, made her eager to find a woman politician with promise, someone young and full of energy.

"I think I'm going to enjoy a political life."

"Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality."
— Emily Dickinson

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~ The End ~

