

Emily's Grave



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by

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EMMA LEE BROWN lived in a trailer next door to the cemetery.

Her living situation was meant to be temporary, a brief landing spot while she fled her father's burgeoning violence. But it turned out she liked the trailer. She liked that it was small, at once easy to clutter and easy to clean, sometimes in a daily cycle. She liked eating at the picnic table under the striped awning, and she did so most days, except in the most inclement weather. She liked how Mr. Matsuo, her best friend's father and the trailer's owner, shared maintenance duties with her so she wouldn't feel guilty for living rent-free.

And she loved living next to the cemetery.

Most mornings and evenings, even in inclement weather, even during the school year, she climbed down the cramped, metal steps of the trailer and strolled across the yard to the gate in the far corner.

The gate was secured by an old padlock. Mr. Matsuo had—somewhat reluctantly, she thought—given her the key shortly after she'd moved in. He'd explained that he'd replaced the lock because the cemetery staff were always leaving the gate open, and he hated people wandering into his yard. "People actually came into your yard?" she'd asked. "No," he'd said, "but they could have." He'd answered with such emphasis that she'd looked up in surprise and found him watching her intently, as if to be sure she understood the gravity of his trust.

The key worked the first time she tried it, but only with a lot of effort. The lock had been hanging untouched for months, maybe years, and it was rusted and gritty. She took it back to the trailer and watched a couple YouTube videos about how to clean a padlock. She spread newspapers and paper towels out on the picnic table, and, despite what the videos said, cleaned it with WD-40.

Now, the lock snapped crisply open as, most mornings and evenings, even in inclement weather, and even during the school year, she stepped through the gate and into the cemetery grounds.



THE CEMETERY SEEMED pretty big to her. It took a bit over 45 minutes to stroll the perimeter. Not as big as the Old Money cemeteries she'd seen on TV, but bigger than the fenced graveyards connected to churches in the small, Southern town where she'd grown up. She'd tried, once, to calculate its area, but had given up; its irregular shape exceeded her mathematical patience.

A paved driveway led from the front gate to the center of the cemetery's newest section, splitting into a wide circle, with a statue of an angel at the far end, its arms and wings spread wide, watching over rows and rows of evenly spaced graves.

The front gate—a wrought-iron affair, hung between two tall, brick columns—was rather basic, consisting of simple posts topped by fleurs-de-lis. An arch spanned the columns as well, announcing the cemetery's name: Redwood Memorial Gardens. She found the name amusing. Gardens? There was grass, and there were trees, but there were no

flowers or decorative plants to speak of. What were they growing here? What do you get when you plant corpses? Zombies?

The gate was just uphill from a sharp curve on an otherwise leisurely winding, two-lane road. Drivers often took that curve too quickly, drifting into the opposite lane, but there hadn't been any accidents there. At least, she hadn't heard of any, though she'd once seen a tricked-out Porsche fishtail wildly, a frenzy of squealing tires and smoke. The skid marks had remained for months.

Every morning at 8:00, a beat-up old pickup truck would wheeze down the hill and swing a wide U, easing to the side of the road. A bent old man in jeans and a cowboy hat would limp around to unlock the gate. He'd push each leaf inward, fastening it to its post, then limp back and drive off, his truck coughing and grinding up the hill. Each evening, also at 8:00, he'd return to reverse the process. Depending on the time of year and the status of Daylight Saving Time, Emma Lee might be wandering the grounds when he arrived. But he never looked at her. Indeed, he never seemed to look around at all. She wondered if he'd ever locked someone in for the night.



UNLIKE MANY OF her peers, Emma Lee woke early. This had been true even before she left home at nearly seventeen, before she had moved into the trailer. Now, she woke even earlier, to make time before school for her early morning walks among the dead. In winter, when the days were short and the mornings near freezing, she'd shrug into her faux-fur-lined parka and make her rounds, sticking mostly to the main road and well-worn paths. In summer, though, she'd weave among the gravestones, worn and tilted and water-stained, and she would solemnly read, sometimes even aloud, the names and dates and epitaphs.

Her best friend, May—Mr. Matsuo's only child—never understood any of it. She hated getting up early, hated going on walks. Well, she hated any exercise, to be honest. And the cemetery just creeped her out.

She didn't like the trailer much, either. Too many annoying trips as a child, before her parents had split up. But she'd been glad that it was available for Emma Lee when she needed it, when Emma Lee needed to escape her father's drinking, and her mother wouldn't, or perhaps couldn't, protect her from his increasing temper.

May had been fierce: the first time Emma Lee couldn't hide the bruises, May had dragged her—protesting, grieving, afraid—to Mr. Matsuo's house. He'd listened, silent and nodding, with an empathy and sadness that almost broke Emma Lee's heart. It had been too long since anyone had listened to her that way.

They discussed options. May lived with her mother and a roommate, and there wasn't enough room for Emma Lee to join them there. May's father's place was no better: it had a big yard, but the house itself almost qualified as a tiny home.

But he had the trailer, so he aired it out, hooked up the electricity and propane, filled up the water tank. He handed her a ring of keys: to the trailer, the garage, and the back door, so she would have access to a bathroom. He added the gate key later.

May spent the first few nights in the trailer while Emma Lee learned to be less jumpy. It was summer, so she didn't have to worry about her parents showing up at the school. But she was certain they'd call the police, who would find her and drag her home, maybe even arrest Mr. Matsuo for helping her. She left a message on her mom's cell phone, just to let her know she was safe, that she wasn't running off to the city to become a homeless waif, and then she took the battery out of her phone so no one could trace it.

They stopped by Emma Lee's house, when her parents were certain to be at work, and picked up some clothes and a laptop, packed some toiletries and books—Jane Austen, mostly—and left a note where only her mother would find it, to emphasize that she really was safe.

When a week passed and the cops hadn't shown up yet, her fear shifted from the authorities to her father. She couldn't believe that he would just let her walk out like that.

It took him another week to find her. He entered Mr. Matsuo's yard, shouting her name, his speech slurred and sloppy. May wasn't there; Emma Lee shrank back into the corner of the bed, alone and trembling, as her father slammed his palm on the door, rattled the doorknob, yelled for her to open up.

She heard Mr. Matsuo, then—a single "Hey!"—and her father turned his drunken rage away from the door. She closed her eyes, imagining her father, all six-foot-two of him, storming toward the small, Japanese man, towering over him, spittle spraying as he shouted.

He really was shouting, too: insults, threats, accusations of interfering in family matters, of kidnapping, of pedophilia, of statutory rape. She wanted to die from shame.

But her father suddenly gave a sharp cry and fell silent. She heard Mr. Matsuo speaking in a low, calm voice. She held her breath, listening hard, trying to hear his words, but she couldn't make them out.

A few moments later, her father started up again, but his voice was distant, more tremulous than threatening. He was walking away, she realized. His vague threats faded as he left the yard.

Mr. Matsuo knocked quietly on the door. She stumbled over and opened it, staring down, wide-eyed, into his placid face. "Are you okay?" he asked her. She nodded. He smiled and nodded back.

"I'm sorry?" she said, not sure why she intoned it as a question.

He shook his head. "You have nothing to be sorry for," he said.

"Will he be back?"

"I doubt it."

"But ... police?"

"I doubt that, too."

She lowered herself to the floor, her feet on the trailer steps. "What did you say to him?"

He smiled and gave a subtle bow, but he did not answer.



DESPITE MR. MATSUO'S reassurances, Emma Lee expected her father to return, fortified by whiskey, or bolstered by friends with baseball bats or tire irons or guns. But he never did.

The cops never showed up, either.

Within a few weeks, Emma Lee received a letter from her mother, who wrote that she had tried to text but wasn't sure the messages were getting through. Emma Lee's courage and example had given her the strength to get away as well, to borrow money from friends and fly back to her own mama's home in Alabama.

Emma Lee didn't feel courageous, but she was glad for the news.

She dug her phone out of the drawer, replaced the battery, and plugged it into the wall to charge up. She turned it on, expecting that her father would have canceled the number. Apparently, he hadn't; the phone found a signal immediately.

The messages from her mother pinged for several long seconds.



SOMEHOW, THE CEMETERY had earned a reputation of being haunted. Emma Lee figured this must be true of every cemetery, to some degree, but Redwood Memorial Gardens had made its way onto a few lists of creepy cemeteries: "The Five Scariest Cemeteries in the Sierras," "The Top Ten Most Delightfully Haunted Cemeteries in Northern California," and "California's Most Haunted Cemeteries."

None of the things that the websites claimed a visitor might encounter matched with Emma Lee's experience. She'd never felt the "general dread"; she'd never seen the restless gravedigger with his bloodied shirt, nor the stern woman in the tattered wedding dress. In fact, in her time living next to the cemetery, she'd experienced only two things she couldn't readily explain.

One night, after a rare winter snow, curled up on the bench seat by her window, she noticed movement somewhere outside. She laid her book on the table and shut off the overhead light, to cut the reflection in the window, and watched as a strange, ethereal light bobbed among the distant trees. She assumed that someone had hopped the fence and was dancing around in the snow with a flashlight or, perhaps, given the eerie quality of the light, an LED lantern. Something like that. She didn't find it too unusual. It was cold out, sure, but she'd seen people out on late-night strolls plenty of times.

When she went for her walk the next morning, though, she saw no new footprints in the snow—weird, since she knew that it had not snowed overnight: her own footprints from last evening's walk were still perfectly visible, frozen like a crime scene investigator's plaster cast.

Another night, as she strolled the grounds under a pale moon, she heard a long, mournful wail. Too perfect, she thought, just like in old ghost movies. She decided it must be the wind, perhaps blowing through gaps in the run-down, brick mausoleum. Perhaps. But there was no wind to speak of, and the sound was coming from the wrong direction.

Anyway, she'd never heard the sound before, and she never heard it again.



"WE SHOULD HAVE the party next door," May told her.

May sat, typing furiously into her phone, across the picnic table from Emma Lee. May had been talking about a graduation party for weeks already, mainly as an opportunity to invite some guy or other. Emma Lee didn't pay too much attention, since the guy changed every few days.

"The cemetery?" Emma Lee asked.

"Hell, yeah," May said. "It'll be perfect!"

"You hate the cemetery."

"I don't."

"I think you called it 'creepy as fuck'?"

"That's why it's perfect!"

Emma Lee shook her head. "It'll be dark. You can't have lights, or the neighbors'll call the cops. It'll be cold."

"It'll be fun," May insisted. "Mike likes the idea."

"Mike who?"

"You know Mike. Tall? Nose ring?"

"And since when do we care about Mike's opinion?"

"Ah, c'mon. He's cute!"

"Mmm," Emma Lee said. "Flavor of the week."

"Fuck you," May laughed.



THE GRADUATION CEREMONY—as tedious as it was significant, Emma Lee supposed—was held on the football field under a cloudless, mid-morning sky. It ended, a murmur of soaring mortarboards, a good hour before noon. May had parked her old Civic a few blocks from the high school because, she said, she wanted to be able to get away quickly. But, as Emma Lee predicted, May had to hug pretty much everyone before they left. By the time they got away, the parking lot and the streets were basically deserted.

They spent the rest of the day gathering things for the party: blankets to spread out on the dirt, lights and candles, snacks and ice. They got friends' older siblings to buy beer and cheap liquor. May perfected her Halloween playlist, complete with eerie sound effects, and made sure her phone and Bluetooth speaker were fully charged.

Just before sunset, Emma Lee and May hauled an ice chest between them, headed for the far corner of the cemetery. The chest was heavy, packed with ice and bottled water and beer, and stacked high with folded blankets. They stopped to switch sides often, giving their hands and arms a rest.

They froze halfway across the circle drive as the wheezing pickup made its U-turn and chattered to the side of the road. The bent old man eased himself around the back of his truck and made his way to the open gate.

“Shit,” May said.

“He won’t look up,” Emma Lee said.

He freed the leaves from their posts and pulled them closed, wrapped the chain around them, and snapped shut the padlock. He paused, sending Emma Lee’s heart to her throat. But after a moment, he simply turned, made his way back to his truck, loaded himself in, and pulled away.

“Shit,” May said again. Emma Lee laughed, relieved.

They carried the ice chest behind the mausoleum, where they figured they’d be least visible, especially from the homes across the street. It was in one of the older parts of the cemetery, at the top of a rise that looked over crooked rows of tilted tombstones and broken concrete curbs separating family plots. It looked like the undead had tried to push their way to the surface but hadn’t quite made it.

“Creepy,” Emma Lee said.

“As fuck,” May agreed.

It took three more trips from Mr. Matsuo’s house to the site of the party: more blankets, a couple bottles of cheap liquor, cheap plastic lawn chairs, plastic cups, LED lanterns, candles, flashlights. The darkness deepened, a pale crescent moon suspended just above the mountains. Friends began to trickle in from various directions, the guys always sneaking in, appearing suddenly in the midst of the group, causing starts and shrieks. The lanterns were harsh and cast long shadows among the tombstones. Everyone made spooky noises and laughed, and toasted each other on their graduation.

Within an hour, everyone who was going to show up was there. One of the guys had hit the Jack Daniels a bit too quickly and couldn’t keep his voice down. Another kept shutting off the lights, which drew curses from the others. It really was a creepy place, even moderated by good company and alcohol.

Emma Lee zipped her jacket against the slight chill and slipped away, melting through an invisible gap in the hedge along the far wall of the mausoleum. She figured no one would notice, except maybe May, though even that was doubtful: while nose-pierced Mike was old news—he hadn’t been invited, in the end—her new object of desire, a jittery drummer named Taylor, was there, and May was already focused on keeping his attention.

So Emma Lee crossed the grounds, the sounds of the party growing distant behind her. She slipped through the gate, breathing a whispered apology to Mr. Matsuo as she left it open, and climbed up into the welcome warmth of the trailer. She poured a glass of water from the Brita pitcher, lit a pair of candles on the table, and settled onto the bench seat by the window.

She stared out into the darkness, letting her mind wander. She was good at that, comfortable with silence, with herself, with the random twists and turns of thought: scenes from Jane Austen, whose entire *oeuvre* she was again working through; replayed conversations with May; plans for replacing her tutoring income during the summer; speculation about her future; snippets of Kailee Morgue or Sylvia Plath.

Her reverie was broken by red and blue lights spilling across the cemetery lawn. She heard distant shouts and laughter and, a few moments later, a gaggle of graduates spilled

through the gate into Mr. Matsuo's yard, hushed and hurried, and whisked out the back gate and down the driveway.

There was a quiet knock, and the door opened. May slipped in, closed the door behind her, and blew out the candles. "Sorry," she said.

"Where's Taylor?" Emma Lee asked.

"Fucker saw the cops and ran. Didn't even help me up. Not even a good-bye!"

"Chivalry is dead," Emma Lee said.

"Fuck me," May replied.

They watched as dark shapes roamed the cemetery, the long, tight beams of powerful flashlights dancing ahead of them. Radios crackled faintly.

One shape began to move in their direction.

"Did you lock the gate?" Emma Lee asked.

"Yep," May answered. "Won't stop them, but I thought it might slow them down."

The officer found the Matsuo gate. For a moment, the flashlight pointed downwards—checking the lock, Emma Lee guessed—and then the beam swept across the yard. May ducked as the light briefly lit up the trailer. "Shit," she said.

"They don't care," Emma Lee said. "Someone called them and they had to come."

"You know they want to arrest somebody."

"If they wanted to arrest somebody, they wouldn't have shown up with their lights flashing."

As if in confirmation, the cop turned back and headed, as did the others, toward the front gate. A few minutes later, the frantic red and blue lights shut down. May peered out the window. "I can't see anything."

"There's nothing to see," Emma Lee answered. She grabbed the lighter off the windowsill, relit the candles, and sat back to regard her friend.

May noticed her gaze. "What?"

"Nothing," Emma Lee said.

They sat without speaking. Emma Lee enjoyed the quiet, but she knew May wouldn't be able to stand it for long. Indeed, May was the first to speak: "Was your dad there?"

"At the party?" Emma Lee asked.

"At graduation. Stupid."

Emma Lee laughed. "I'm kidding," she said, and paused. "I didn't see him. But who knows? Maybe it'll be like the movies: someday, maybe on his death bed, he'll send for me and tell me he was there, standing in the back. Proud of me."

"I'm sorry," May said.

Emma Lee crossed her arms. "I didn't invite him, so I can't expect him to show up, right? Even if all the mail still goes to the house."

"Have you seen him? I mean, lately?"

Emma Lee shook her head. "No. Not since you got me out of there."

"Do you miss him?"

Emma Lee watched one of the candles flickering as it burned down to the base of the candlestick, a mere wick on glass. "I don't know," she answered. "I mean, I miss my dad ... growing up? But he changed, you know? It doesn't feel like he's the same person. So ... yeah, I guess, but no?"

"I'm sorry, Emma," May said again.

Emma Lee shrugged. "It's okay," she said. "I've got your dad now."

May laughed. "Yeah, well. He's not perfect, but he's predictable."

"He's great," Emma Lee said. She yawned and stood up. "I'm going to bed," she said. "Long day."

"They wouldn't be so long if you didn't get up so early," May said. "I don't know how you do it."

"It's a gift," Emma Lee said. She refilled her water glass and walked it to the back of the trailer.

"Hey," May asked, "can I stay here tonight?"

"Sure," Emma Lee said. "You know how to set up the bed." She set the glass on the window ledge and walked to an overhead cabinet. She opened it and paused. "Oh," she said.

"What?"

"The blankets... they're all..." She nodded toward the window.

"Ah, shit," May said.

Emma Lee snapped the cabinet shut. "You can sleep with me. Not *with me*," she added hurriedly. "You know what I mean."

"Girl, you're cute, but you're not that cute," May laughed.

"Just keep your clothes on," Emma Lee said.

"I'll try," May said, and laughed again.



EMMA LEE MANAGED to get herself untangled from the sheets and out of the bed without disturbing May.

She slipped out of her pajama bottoms, pulled on her jeans from the night before, and, after a tall glass of water, zipped up her white hoodie, laced up her shoes, and stepped quietly outside.

It was still early, still a little bit cool. But the sun was starting to clear the trees, and she could tell it was going to be a warm day.

She stopped by Mr. Matsu's bathroom, then headed to the garage to grab a couple large trash bags. A few moments later, she was ambling across the cemetery lawn, smiling faintly into the warm breeze.

The scene of the previous night's festivities was about as chaotic as she'd expected. Everyone had pretty much dropped everything when they'd run off. The blankets were all bunched up, presumably from people scurrying to their feet. Most of the chairs were on their sides, with beer bottles and chips strewn in all directions. A near-empty fifth of Jack Daniels lay

at the base of a tombstone. Two of the lanterns were open but dark, their batteries dead. May's Bluetooth speaker had fallen behind the ice chest.

And there was one black Nike sneaker. Emma Lee smiled, imagining a person—Taylor, in her mind's eye—limping off with only one shoe. She laid it atop a headstone so it would be visible if its owner returned for it.

She started putting the garbage into a trash bag. The loose chips were too hard to pick up, so she decided to leave any food for the squirrels and birds. She rounded up cans and bottles, candy wrappers and half-full bags of pretzels. She found a lighter and a cheap bong hidden in the shadows of a precariously tilted headstone, and decided just to toss them in with the rest of the trash.

The cheap plastic chairs stacked nicely, off to the side, against the wall. The ice in the ice chest had all melted, so she tipped it over and watched the water rush out and pool against the cracked cement curbing around the nearest plot. She used one of the blankets to wipe out the chest and set the lanterns and half-burned candles and May's speaker inside. She closed it and began folding the blankets and stacking them on top.

As she shook out the last one, she heard the old guy's pickup truck, clattering and wheezing in the distance, but drawing closer. She peered around the corner of the mausoleum and saw the truck making its way up the driveway, onto the gravel road, and then across the lawn, slipping among the flat grave markers.

She finished folding the blanket and hugged it to her chest. Should she try to slip away, to sneak around the side of the mausoleum as he rounded the corner? It wouldn't be a big problem, but she wasn't sure how she'd stay out of sight after that. If it were night, the shadows along the fence might provide cover, but she didn't think she could remain hidden for long in daylight.

The truck turned around and backed up to the edge of the building. The engine shut off, rattling and coughing for a few seconds before falling silent. The door creaked open, then slammed. Emma Lee let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, and stepped over to lay the blanket on top of the others.

The bent old man turned the corner and paused. She thought he was surprised to see her, but she wouldn't have been able to explain that impression. He hadn't stopped suddenly, as someone who was startled might do. He hadn't straightened up; he hadn't frozen in his tracks. She wasn't responding to an expression on his face; he didn't seem to *have* an expression. Still, she thought he seemed surprised.

She was sure that *she* looked startled, though. She'd never seen him close up before, and was taken aback by just how old he looked: leathery face, dark eyes squinting out from beneath the brim of his hat. He was even more bent than she had realized, too, stooped dramatically forward and a bit to his left. He wore dark blue jeans, a large turquoise-and-silver belt buckle, and a faded, button-up jeans shirt, the sleeves rolled up across tight, wiry forearms.

At some point, the silence became too uncomfortable even for her, and she felt she needed to say something: "I was walking by and saw the mess"

The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened and his mouth turned down a bit, but it seemed like he was amused. At least, that's what she hoped. "Just happened to be walking by," he said.

"I live over there," she said, pointing toward the trailer. "I walk here most every day."

"I've seen you."

"You have?"

His smile, if it was a smile, broadened. "I'm old, not blind," he said. He nodded toward the trash bag. "Trash?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. He limped over, picked it up, and hauled it, glass clinking loudly, to the back of the truck. He tossed it into the bed much more easily than his posture would have predicted.

He turned and nodded toward the chairs and ice chest. "You want some help with that?"

She hesitated. Part of her didn't think she should acknowledge that these things belonged to her. But in the end, she couldn't think of a denial that wouldn't sound lame. Or, worse, a denial might encourage him to pack everything into his truck and drive it away.

"Sure," she said. "Thanks."

He lowered the tailgate, and they loaded the chairs. They carried over the ice chest with its pile of blankets. She couldn't lift her side high enough, so they set it on the dirt and stacked the blankets in separately. He lifted the ice chest himself, slid it forward, and slammed the tailgate shut.

He walked back to where the party had been and wandered among the tombstones, returning with a half-full bag of Doritos that she had missed. That was it. He nodded, sticking out his lower lip. "Nice job," he said. He limped back toward the truck, pausing to stare at the single shoe Emma Lee had placed on the tombstone.

"I know," she said. "That's not disrespectful, is it?"

The old guy grunted. "They're dead. They don't care."

He headed for the truck, motioning for Emma Lee to go around to the passenger side. The door was unlocked. It screeched even louder than his door had.

The clutch creaked as he pushed it in to start the engine. The shifter was on the steering column; Emma Lee didn't think she'd ever seen that before. They bounced in low gear across to Mr. Matsuo's gate.

The old guy dropped the tailgate again, and they set the chairs and ice chest and blankets next to the gate. Emma Lee started to reach for the trash bag, but he grunted. "I'll take that," he said. "Unless you want it?"

"No, that's okay." She paused. "Thank you," she said.

"No problem," he said. He jerked his chin toward the house. "Tell Matsuo I said hi," he said.

"You know him?" she asked.

He just grunted and raised his old, rugged hand in a vague wave and climbed back into his truck.

She watched him jostle back to the main driveway and down to the gate. He pulled out into the street just as a dark sedan pulled in. It parked on the far edge of the circle, and a woman and three kids stepped out onto the pavement. The kids were loud, laughing as kids do, as they ran off across the lawn. The woman stepped around the front of the car and wavered a moment, steadying herself with her hand on the hood, head bowed as the kids chased each other across the grass. After a moment, she lifted each foot in turn, slipping off her heels. She squared her shoulders and set off to join them.



EMMA LEE WORKED her way down a line of flat grave markers, bronze or granite or both laid flush with the ground. The day was wondrous, the bright sun tempered by a cool breeze, the air full of the smell of freshly cut grass.

Today, as she sometimes did, she was reading the inscriptions aloud. She read out the names of a collection of O'Connells, all of whom had died a half-century before. Three of them—a father and two young children, judging from the dates—had died on the same day. An accident? The fourth, probably the mother, had died less than a year later. Had she been in the accident, and just taken longer to die of her injuries? Had she died of grief? Had she taken her own life?

She paused, letting her thoughts settle, and stepped to the next stone in line.

"Emily Brown. June" She broke off. She felt strange, a pressure on her heart, a knot in her stomach.

"Emily Brown," she repeated. Emily Brown.

Emma Lee Brown.

She knelt down and wiped a thin film of mud and cut grass off the marker. It was a simple bronze plaque on gray slate, letters and numerals in an old, serif font. No epitaph. Just a name and dates:

Emily Brown

June 26, 1942

June 28, 1961

She stood and searched the neighboring headstones. There were no other Browns nearby. She couldn't remember having read out any Browns earlier, either; she was pretty sure she'd have noticed if she had. Maybe there would be more elsewhere in the cemetery, somewhere she hadn't read out yet?

For now, though, it seemed Emily Brown was alone.

She returned to Emily's headstone and sat on the cool grass. She stretched her sweatshirt sleeve over her wrist and wiped the plaque clean.



MAY AND EMMA LEE sat next to each other at the picnic table, in shorts and sandals and loose T-shirts, looking out over the cemetery. A funeral was in progress, a fairly small knot of people in dark suits and dresses, spread out around a mahogany coffin at the edge of a dug grave.

"So weird," May said, breaking a long silence.

"What is?"

May nodded toward the funeral party. "I have no idea who died over there, but I still feel kind of sad."

"Yeah," Emma Lee agreed.

"I've been to, like, two funerals. One tried to make a big deal about being a celebration of life, but they were both just ... sad."

"I know," Emma Lee said. "A better place, right?"

"I don't think anyone really believes that shit. I mean, they talk a good game, but"

"Yeah."

May turned and looked at her friend. "You okay?" she asked.

Emma Lee stared at her hands for a long moment. "I don't know," she said. "I think I'm going to die soon."

"What?" May's eyes opened wide. "What are you talking about?"

Emma Lee shrugged. "I don't know," she repeated. "It's nothing. Never mind."

"For fuck's sake, Emma!" May said. "You don't say, 'I think I'm going to die,' and then say it's nothing! What the fuck?"

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just..." Her voice trailed off. "You're going to laugh," she said.

"I do not feel like laughing right now," May said, and waited—not patiently, but silently.

Finally, Emma Lee said: "I was walking in the cemetery yesterday."

"So far, so normal," May commented.

"I found a grave with my name on it."

"What?"

"Yeah," she said. She swiped her phone and pressed at the screen. "And she died on my birthday."

"Okay, that's weird," May said.

Emma Lee set the phone on the table and slid it across.

May looked down at the picture of Emily's grave. "That's not your name," she said.

"Well, it is, kind of. Listen: Emily. Emma Lee. They're homophones."

"Homowhats?"

"Homophones. Words that sound the same. They're, there, and their. It's and its. Emily and Emma Lee."

"First of all, they don't sound the same. *E-mily*. *Emma Lee*."

"Emily, Emma Lee. It's pretty much the same."

"And anyway, your first name's Emma, not Emily," May continued. "Emily probably has her own middle name."

"There's no middle name on the headstone," Emma Lee said. "But anyway, my name is Emma Lee."

"Your name's Emma. No one calls you Emma Lee."

"No one in California calls me Emma Lee. That's just because teachers called me Emma and I got tired of correcting them. My parents call me Emma Lee. Everyone back home calls me Emma Lee."

"And anyway, those homothings *sound* the same, but they don't *mean* the same thing, right? Emily means 'dead girl.' Emma Lee means 'girl talking crazy shit.'"

"But she died on my birthday!"

May looked down at the phone. She tapped and swiped to get back to the picture, zoomed in. She frowned. "You weren't born in 1961."

"Obviously."

"So it's not your birthday."

"June 28 is my birthday!"

"But not 1961! You were born in ..." She broke off, face crinkled in thought. "Don't make me do math. 2000?"

"2001," Emma Lee corrected.

"Whatever," May said. "She didn't die on your birthday. You weren't born yet! If anything, you were born on her death day."

"Oh, that makes it better," Emma Lee said.

"Whatever," May repeated. "I mean, sure, a couple weird coincidences here. But I don't get why you're saying you're going to *die*."

"She died two days after her nineteenth birthday."

May just looked at her.

"June 26, 1942, to June 28, 1961," Emma Lee said, pointing at the phone. "Nineteen years and two days."

May gave her best *I'm not following* expression.

"She has my name. She lived here—she must have, right, since they buried her here? She died on my birthday, two days after she turned nineteen." She shrugged. "I turn nineteen next year. It just feels like there's a ... connection."

May pushed the phone back toward Emma Lee and turned to watch as the funeral party began to break up.

"I didn't know you want to be called Emma Lee," May said.

Emma Lee shrugged. "It's no big deal."

"I've never really liked May much," May said.

"Your name's not May?"

"Mayumi," she said.

"That doesn't even sound like May."

"White folk."

"Mayumi," Emma Lee said.

"Emma Lee," Mayumi said.



EMMA LEE HADN'T REALIZED that she was superstitious. Yet for days after discovering Emily's grave, she felt a dull dread that made her feel somehow hollow, like the aftermath of an adrenaline rush. A headache lurked behind her eyes, unnoticeable most of the time, but always there when she'd sit down to read, or lie down to rest. Her mouth was often dry. Her hands sometimes trembled. She had trouble focusing on her books, so she'd switched to lighter fiction: YA, humor—even romance, for heaven's sake.

In the hopes that "more data" would ease the dread, Emma Lee searched for information about, as she called her, "my homonymous friend."

She found a national gravesite registry on the web. Emily Brown was listed, with a photo of the grave marker. But where other entries often named parents, spouse, siblings, and children, or referenced old newspaper articles or obituaries, Emily's page was blank, aside from a "virtual flower" left by "G.G.," one of the contributors to the site.

There were no other Browns listed in Redwood Memorial Gardens.

G.G.'s bio pointed to a local library that housed the town's historical records. G.G. had apparently spent hours upon hours there, working with one of the "WONDERFUL volunteers, my good friend NANCY" to transcribe mortuary lists, to restore old maps and books, along with a long list of other clearly time-consuming activities, all on her own time.

Emma Lee followed the link to the library and found a list of historical documents: various hospital birth records, church marriage rosters, mortuary indexes. The library offered access to tax records, draft registrations, personnel files from defunct companies. Proceedings of the Freemasons. Commitments of the insane.

She clicked through one of the only live links in the list, for an ancestry site. After a frustratingly long hunt for her library card, she managed to log in. She struck out with the U.S. Census; Emily had been born after the latest available records allowed by privacy laws.

She clicked on an Obituary Index and entered Emily's name, date of death, and the county where she was buried. Over 18,000 results—unlikely, Emma Lee thought. She fiddled with some sliders, and narrowed the search: Exact name, 1961, lived in California. She found two entries from a nearby county. It turned out that they were for the same 57-year-old sister of seven, mother of two.

She held off on the Seven-Day Free Trial for viewing the actual obituary, since this clearly wasn't Emily.



SHE GAVE UP in about two weeks, much more quickly than she'd have expected. After all her work, she still knew nothing more about Emily Brown than her dates of birth and death and her place of burial. She wasn't sure if she'd exhausted every avenue, but she'd certainly done everything she could think of doing herself.

Well, almost everything. She had dropped by the historical library, but had discovered that it was only open by appointment. Several times, she'd started an email requesting to meet, but she'd always clenched up. She couldn't figure out how to explain why she was interested.

She could have said that she wondered if she and Emily were related, she supposed, but she knew they weren't. Brown was a common enough name, but she knew her ancestors hailed from the South, and that her family had been the first (and only) of the clan to move West. She couldn't bring herself to lie. She certainly couldn't bring herself to waste a volunteer's time on what she knew to be superstitious nonsense.

She'd considered hiring a professional genealogist, at one point, but even the cheap ones were expensive. Not a luxury for the infrequently employed.

Besides, the tension had, thankfully, started to fade. This didn't make sense to her; she figured the tension would increase the longer she went without learning anything. But, as with most everything else she'd experienced, her body could only hold onto the stress for so long. Things eased back to normal.

Mayumi never brought up Emma Lee's premonition, though she didn't change the subject when Emma Lee would complain about her fruitless research. And she agreed to accompany Emma Lee to the grave both times she was asked, leaving yellow roses they'd clipped from their neighbor's unkempt rose bush, which hung over the fence and dropped petals into Mr. Matsuo's yard.

Emma Lee trimmed the grass around Emily's gravestone with pruning shears, and used a small dust broom to sweep the cuttings aside. She wanted to clean it more deeply, but the Internet was filled with warnings against that. She lay on the grass, head next to the gravestone, a long-stemmed rose between the name and dates, and took a selfie with her phone.

She continued wandering the cemetery, reading names and dates and epitaphs, but she ended each session settling in the grass next to Emily's headstone. She would sit for long periods, watching as individuals or families would park in the driveway and trek across to visit a loved one's grave. They would lay out bunches of flowers, or toys, or pinwheels, stones, seashells, candles, small flags, angel figurines. She knew that Emily didn't feel anything; "They're dead," the bent old guy had said, and she believed that. Yet she still felt sad that no one else ever visited Emily's grave.



EMMA LEE MET her first ghost hunters toward the end of that summer.

They pulled into the cemetery early one mid-week morning, parking their nondescript, white Subaru wagon in the first quarter of the circle, pretty much directly in Emma Lee's path as she returned to the trailer. She thought of changing course, avoiding any contact at all, but in the end, she couldn't think of a real excuse to do so.

Two guys and two girls, right around Emma Lee's own age, spilled onto the pavement, stretching and walking stiffly around the car, obviously recovering from a long drive. It was an amusing dance, almost ritualistic. It ended with them gathered around the open rear hatch of their vehicle.

Emma Lee didn't pay much attention. She hadn't seen them before, but that was no surprise. There was a handful of "regulars," as she liked to call them—people who visited the grave of a loved one more or less on a schedule—but she saw most visitors only once or twice.

It was a little surprising, though, when they started passing around different electronics: black boxes with speakers and telescopic antennae; voice recorders; a device that looked like a TV remote, but with an array of lights across the top. There was a silver box with a big black dial and a meter, and another with a big LED screen. She found herself slowing, almost against her will, certainly against her better judgment, to watch as they fiddled with knobs and buttons.

One of the girls looked up and caught Emma Lee looking. "Hey," the girl said.

Emma Lee smiled and raised her hand in a brief hello, then lowered her head and tried to hurry on.

"Excuse me," the girl called. Emma Lee stopped and sighed—not too visibly, she hoped—and turned to face them.

"Hey," Emma Lee said.

The girl walked over, holding out her hand. "I'm Kaitlyn," she said.

"Emma Lee."

"Emily, nice." Emma Lee felt a brief constriction in her chest as Kaitlyn turned to her friends. "Hey, guys, this is Emily."

The others joined them, introducing themselves and shaking her hand.

Bryan (with a "y," she later learned) was taller than he was comfortable with. He had a goofy grin. He dropped Emma Lee's hand and draped his arm across Kaitlyn's shoulder. The poor girl seemed to squirm under the weight. She didn't look comfortable.

Emma Lee wasn't sure if the other two were a couple. Sam was an almost translucent wraith; her waist-long blond hair spilled out from under a tie-dye-inspired knit cap. Myles (also with a "y") was stocky and rumped, with a floppy fisherman's hat and a deeply serious expression.

"You from around here, Emily?" Bryan asked.

Kaitlyn elbowed him in his side. "That sounds creepy," she said.

Emma Lee laughed at this. "It's okay," she said. "Yes, I'm from around here. I take it you aren't?"

"We're ghost hunters," Bryan said.

"Paranormal investigators," Myles corrected, an exasperated edge to his voice. He handed her a card that had, as far as she could tell, materialized from thin air. It said, "Spooky Gang" in a purple-and-orange typeface that seemed familiar. She cocked her head, trying to recall what it reminded her of.

"Spooky Gang," Bryan said. "Like Scooby Gang, only Spooky?"

Kaitlyn elbowed him again. Emma Lee wasn't sure if these were meant to be light-hearted, but Bryan withdrew his arm from her shoulder and rubbed his side.

Just below the hippie typeface, and between two orange, cartoon daisies, were the words "Paranormal Investigations," along with a cell number and URLs for their blog and YouTube channel. "O-kay...," Emma Lee said.

"This place is listed as haunted," Sam said, holding up her phone to display a web page. Emma Lee recognized the picture.

"Ah," she said. "Yes, I've seen that site."

"Have you seen any of the weird stuff they talk about?" Bryan asked.

"I'm sorry, I really haven't. But," she added quickly, when she saw Kaitlyn's disappointed look, "maybe I'm just not here enough."

Myles stepped off to the side and held up his device—the TV-remote-looking thing with the row of lights—and turned a slow circle. He tried to shade the lights from the sun, but it was apparently too bright. "Can't see anything," he muttered.

"So, you haven't seen anything weird?" Kaitlyn asked.

"Well," Emma Lee said, "some weird people, I guess. Funny names. Some people leave weird gifts. But I don't think that's what you mean."

"No creepy feelings? Feelings of *dread*?"

Emma Lee shrugged. "I mean, it's a cemetery, right? So I think it's a little creepy by definition. But, no, nothing serious."

"No woman in white?"

"Ah," Emma Lee said. "I read about her. No, no woman in white. No gravedigger, either." She paused. "But, like I said, maybe I'm just here at the wrong time."

"Right," Sam said. "The weird stuff probably happens at night."

"Right!" Emma Lee said.

They spoke a bit longer. Myles tried to talk "Emily" into an on-camera interview for their blog and YouTube channel, but she managed to bow out. Before long, they drifted off, Myles and Sam in one direction, Kaitlyn and Bryan in the other, muttering welcoming phrases to the ghosts they were certain were waiting to communicate with them. "We're not here to hurt you," she heard Myles say, and she tried to imagine what possible harm he could inflict on a ghost, even if such a thing existed, and even if he wanted to.

She made her way down the driveway and out the front gate so they wouldn't learn that she lived next door.



SHE SAT AT the picnic bench to watch as they finished their rounds of the cemetery. Either they were true believers, or they were making a good show of it. They often stopped to hold up a phone for a selfie. They filmed each other like TV journalists reporting intrepidly from the field, standing before a worn tombstone, or the chained gate across the pitted door of the mausoleum, or the polished granite of the veteran's memorial.

They left after a couple hours. Emma Lee moved a chair into the shade of one of the old redwoods—much cooler than the heat emanating from the canvas awning—and settled in with a tall bottle of water and her well-worn copy of *Mansfield Park*.



THAT NIGHT, JUST as she'd closed her book and blown out the candles, she saw movement out her window. For a moment, she thought she was seeing that dancing light again, and felt bad that the ghost hunters weren't there to see it. She soon realized, though, that she was seeing two flashlights, close together, darting back and forth across the cemetery.

She smiled. They were back.

She shrugged into her white hoodie and zipped it halfway. She wished it were a white dress; that would be much more dramatic. But she figured this would do. She covered that with another sweatshirt, this one a plain black, which she zipped up to the neck, making sure it completely hid the hoodie. She laced up her hiking boots, grabbed her keys, and slipped out into the night.

Even with the moon close to full, she was a shadow among shadows. She knew the cemetery well, knew all the places she could hide: wide cypress trunks, tall tombstones, benches, flowering bushes. She even knew about a cracked slab of cement that opened into a large, underground space from where, she liked to think, an actual zombie must have escaped. She had no problem drawing close while staying out of sight.

She could make out most of what they said; they weren't trying to be stealthy. Like before, they walked as two couples; unlike before, the couples stayed close together. Two of them swept flashlights across their path while their partners fiddled with knobs and switches on electronic devices. Sam was narrating their adventure into a fancy-looking voice recorder. She had a nice voice.

They alternated between semi-confident requests for the ghosts to "manifest" themselves ("What's your name?" and "You can manipulate these lights if you want to communicate with us") and nervous laughter, punctuated with yelps ("Was that you? Don't *do* that!" and "Did you hear that?").

Emma Lee saw a vase of dead roses at the base of a nearby tombstone. She dumped the flowers—alleviating her guilt by muttering, "They're dead, they don't care"—and threw the vase high and far behind the gang. It landed in the grass with a muted *thump*. All four of them jumped and turned and moved in the direction of the sound.

Brave of them, she thought; maybe they are true believers.

She sneaked across the open lawn to the mausoleum without being seen. She crossed the front of the building, pausing to rattle the chains hanging from the door's security gate. The noise was loud enough that it startled even her.

Once through the hidden gap in the hedge, she hurried around toward the rear of the building. She knelt down and peered around the corner.

The gang stood tightly together, in conference. The flashlight beams shifted nervously toward the front corner of the mausoleum. One of them, probably Myles, stepped forward, a gadget held out in front of him like a ward. He cried out when the light briefly flitted from green to amber.

Emma Lee looked around. From this point, at the top of the rise, she was slightly above them, but she knew she'd be out of their line of sight once she moved over the rise, into the gravestones behind her.

So she did that, staying first behind the building, and then crawling quickly to a headstone she liked: broad, waist-high, next to a much taller monument. The matriarch next to her patriarch, she thought.

She peeled herself out of the black sweatshirt—not easy, it turned out—and laid it in the dirt. She zipped the white hoodie to her neck, lifted the hood over her head, and pulled the drawstring tight. “Okay, ‘Emily,’” she whispered. “Let’s do this.” She rose, slowly, slowly spreading her arms, spreading them wide like the statue of the angel at the head of the driveway.

She glowed in the moonlight.

They didn’t see her at first, but, even at this distance, she could tell the exact moment they did. One of the guys gave a stifled shout and pointed, and the others spun in her direction. A flashlight dropped to the ground; the other remained motionless, pointed off in an irrelevant direction.

Emma Lee brought her arms across her chest as she slowly bowed down behind the gravestone and, once out of sight, grabbed her black sweatshirt and hustled, keeping low, until she was again behind the building. She jumped up and headed for the gap in the hedge, struggling into the darker sweatshirt. By the time the ghost hunters had conquered their shock, she was huddled in the darkness, heart thumping in her throat as she made sure the white hoodie was completely hidden.

She crept along the fence, pausing to watch from the deep shadows of a broad cypress. They were whooping and high-fiving, sweeping the flashlights in wide arcs, looking for any evidence of what they were sure they’d seen.

Emma Lee returned to the trailer. She watched the dance of flashlight beams until the adrenaline ebbed and she was tired enough to slip into bed.



AT LEAST ONE of the ghost hunters hadn’t slept that night: the written version of their escapade, accompanied by a couple eerie, night-vision photos and a promise for a video later that day, was posted on their blog when Emma Lee checked in the morning.

By evening, as promised, they had updated the post with a surprisingly well produced video that covered most of their day, culminating with a wonderfully vague few seconds of the actual “sighting.” At least one of them had been filming, and had managed to catch Emma Lee as she was dropping down behind the gravestone. At that distance, in that light, and with the hill between them, it looked like the figure, glowing and hazy in the moonlight, simply melted into the ground.

“I’m a ghost,” she told Mayumi, and handed her the phone, open to the Spooky Gang blog.

“What?” Mayumi said. She glanced at the blog, scrolled quickly—and then frowned and read more closely from the top. She scrolled up again and hit play on the video. The wavy Spooky Gang logo zoomed into view, to be replaced by a night-vision look at the cemetery gate. “What is this shit?” she asked.

“Go to about 7:30,” Emma Lee said.

Mayumi turned the phone so it would go full screen and tapped a few times. She found the spot, as instructed, and watched. Her eyes widened. “Wait. What?” She tapped at the screen and watched again. She looked up at her friend. “That’s you?”

Emma Lee put her hand on her chest, eyebrows raised in mock innocence. “*Moi?*” she asked. Mayumi watched again, from the top. By the end, she was laughing hard. “You are fucking *evil*, Emma Lee.”

Emma Lee smiled and took the phone back. She tapped and scrolled and watched herself melt into the ground.

“You know they’re all going to come here now,” Mayumi said.

Emma Lee’s smile broadened.



BY THE END of summer, Emma Lee had settled into her life quite comfortably. She’d turned eighteen, so she’d been able to trade her under-the-table and unpredictable income for an actual job within walking distance of home; her morning and evening walks across the cemetery became part of her “commute.”

Mayumi tried to get her to sign up for classes at the local community college; they’d registered during their senior year and just needed to build their schedules. To both of their surprise, however, Emma Lee just wasn’t interested. She went to the campus with Mayumi—for moral support, she said—and sat reading in the grass while Mayumi met with her counselor. But she refused to set up a meeting herself. She wanted to take a year off.

“You’re going to end up flipping burgers your whole life,” Mayumi said.

“I’m not flipping burgers,” Emma Lee said. “Besides, it’s just a year.”

“My mom says people who take a year off never go back.”

Emma Lee shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

“This is weird,” Mayumi said. “I’m going to school and you’re not? Who’s going to make me study?”

“It’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.”

And it was fine, at least through Christmas, when Emma Lee started to feel a little antsy. She toyed with the idea of signing up for the Spring semester but decided against it. Sure, her job was just data entry—the office version of flipping burgers, she supposed—but it paid fairly well, and she liked being able to pay rent to Mr. Matsuo, even though he insisted it wasn’t necessary.

So, she decided, she’d keep working for now. She’d build her savings a little. Maybe she’d get a car so Mayumi wouldn’t have to shuttle her around town. She had plenty of time before she needed to bow to the pressures of early morning classes, homework, assigned readings, contrived essays.



THEN THE CORONAVIRUS HIT.

For Emma Lee, it felt like running downhill too fast, like those times, as a child, when she thought she was finding her footing, that her lengthening strides and flailing arms were going to avert disaster—until she found herself pitching face-first into the dirt.

She found the news hard to believe at first. While the number of cases, and the number of deaths, rose exponentially across the nation, not to mention the world, the numbers in her relatively isolated county remained low: only a handful of cases, no hospitalizations to speak of. Only one death.

Still, most people understood that this was temporary. (At least, Emma Lee hoped it was most people; the unbelievers were loud and, at times, seemed everywhere.) Pretty much everything closed down. For the first few weeks, Emma Lee was allowed to work from home, but the company's workload dropped so dramatically they ended up laying her off. She wasn't surprised; she even understood the decision. She appreciated her boss's praise for her hard work, and the promise to hire her back once things were back to normal. But as she watched the news, especially the news coming out of New York, she wondered if things would ever actually get back to normal.

The college closed its campus just a few weeks into the new semester, shifting to "distance learning." Emma Lee was glad she'd procrastinated. She knew she'd have done just fine, but watching the way the college floundered through the transition made her feel sorry for the students—especially for Mayumi, who was, if nothing else, a social animal. It wasn't clear that she'd make it through the rest of the semester, even with Emma Lee's help.

The more The Plague (as Mayumi called it) closed its grip on the world, the more grateful Emma Lee became for how little her life changed. And her life really hadn't changed that much at all, certainly not enough to explain the low-level but insistent anxiety she carried with her: the tightness in her chest, the elevated heart rate, the difficulty concentrating or falling asleep.

To counteract the anxiety, she spent more time among the dead. It seemed to help. Part of it was the exercise, she knew, but part of it was the fact that she never read the names and dates and epitaphs silently anymore; she read them all aloud now, solemnly and patiently. She started again in the northeast corner of the cemetery and moved systematically, pausing before every monument or headstone or lawn marker, determined to pass over no one, to recognize every death represented by these slabs of granite or marble or slate, these brass or bronze or stone plaques.

She always ended the session at Emily's grave, sitting or lying quietly in the grass as she processed the day's ritual.

And it had indeed become a ritual, *her* ritual—as devoid of meaning as any, she supposed, yet she felt something stir in her: a coming to terms with mortality, perhaps, at a time when mortality was demanding attention, and in a way that she had only rarely experienced before, in a small handful of her books.

She figured mortality was probably a good thing to come to terms with.



MAYUMI AND EMMA LEE sat "socially distanced," at opposite corners of the picnic table. Mayumi's semester had ended a couple of weeks ago, but she was still complaining. She'd made it through, but it looked like the next semester was going to be taught online as well.

"I hate it," she said.
"Yeah," Emma Lee said.
"Are you signing up for next year?"
Emma Lee shrugged. "I don't know."
"Maybe I should take a year off," Mayumi said.
"These are hard times," Emma Lee said. "I wouldn't blame you."
Mayumi turned herself sideways on the bench, half facing her friend.
"Tomorrow's graduation, you know," Mayumi said.
"At the high school?"
"Sucks for them."
"It really does," Emma Lee agreed.
"Taylor was wondering if we're having another party next door."
"Really?"
"I know," Mayumi said. "Everything's so fucked up. I think he just wants something normal."
"Yeah," Emma Lee said.
"Not that a graveyard party is normal," Mayumi said.
Emma Lee laughed.



THE FEVER STRUCK the night before her birthday. She went to bed early, skipping her evening walk, and wrapped herself in her sheets. She managed to sleep, but fitfully, waking often, simultaneously shivering and sweating, mouth parched.

By morning, she'd added a sore throat to the symptoms list. She couldn't believe this was the result of a virus, especially not *the* virus. She couldn't figure out where she'd have caught it. She had no job, she had few friends, and social distancing was in her DNA. When she did brave the public—she needed food occasionally—she always wore her mask. She'd been careful.

And then the cough kicked in, slowly at first, but building in both force and frequency. Her chest felt heavy, and she heard a whistling wheeze in the moments between coughs.

She called the local urgent care clinic and, in a surprisingly short time, met with a doctor via video conference. She sat in front of the floor fan, cooled by the air blowing across the sweat on her face.

The video conference went as expected, which is to say that it felt a little inconsequential. The doctor was understandably most interested in symptoms that would indicate COVID-19. Fever or chills? (Yes, though the ibuprofen had brought it most of the way down.) Cough? (Yes—dry and hacking.) Difficulty breathing? (A little bit of a wheeze, and coughing if she inhaled too deeply, but she wasn't sure if that counted as difficulty breathing.) Fatigue? Aches? Sore throat? (Yes, yes, yes.)

Loss of taste or smell? She had to think about that one. Her mouth tasted gross, so she figured that was okay. She grabbed an orange, dug her thumbnail into the peel, and held it to her nose. It smelled good.

Nausea? Vomiting? Diarrhea? (No, no, and no.)

Had she been exposed to anyone with the virus? (She couldn't imagine how.)

For the most part, the advice was what she expected. Self-quarantine, above all. Lots of rest and fluids. Ibuprofen, cough suppressant, lozenges. But they also wanted her to come in for a test.

She left a message for Mayumi, begging a ride to the clinic, then managed a shower in Mr. Matsuo's house. Despite the heat, she dressed in sweats. She slipped into her sandals, closed the trailer door behind her, and shambled down to unlock Mr. Matsuo's gate. She paused, surprisingly tired from the brief walk, but slipped on through, leaving the gate open while she shuffled under the trees toward the open lawn.

The cemetery was empty today. There was no funeral, no mother removing her heels to join her children at their father's burial site. She was glad for that, glad for the cemetery's respite from grief.

At Emily's grave, she cautiously lowered herself to the ground. She sat for a long time, cross-legged, head bowed, wet hair warming in the sun. "I don't know how you did it," she said, finally, "but you got me."

She was surprised at how unconcerned she felt. Her nineteenth birthday. She thought she'd feel something deeper—fear, perhaps, especially given her reaction last year. Or maybe rage: "rage, rage against the dying of the light." Or a sense of injustice, or of bemusement in the face of superstition. She didn't expect this sense of empty peace.

Probably another symptom of the illness, she thought. Just too tired to feel deeply.

She sat there until the heat from the sun made her think the fever might be creeping up again. Part of her had been waiting for some kind of acknowledgment from this long-dead girl, this girl who had died two days older than Emma Lee was now. No, not a girl—a woman, buried alone, with no ascertainable family, no record of parents or siblings or spouse. No obituary, no story in the paper about her life, about her birth or childhood or how she died. A name and a date of birth and a date of death. On her own. An independent woman.

Emma Lee kissed the tips of her fingers and laid them on the gravestone. "I hope you don't mind if I try not to die," she said. She struggled to her feet and headed unsteadily back toward the trailer.

Mayumi rose from the picnic bench as Emma Lee stepped through the gate, pulling it closed and locking it behind her. "I should have known," Mayumi said, and started down toward her.

Emma Lee held up her hands. "Let me get my mask," she said.

Mayumi stepped back and let Emma Lee pass by to the trailer. "I'll be right out," Emma Lee said.

A few minutes later—after a long bout of coughing, an ibuprofen, and a tall glass of water—Emma Lee sat in the doorway, her forehead in her hands. Mayumi leaned forward from the picnic bench and held out a bag. "Happy birthday," she said. Emma Lee took it and looked inside. Cough suppressant, cough drops, vitamin C tablets, zinc, Nyquil. Things she'd asked for, and some things she hadn't.

"Thanks," Emma Lee said.

"How you feeling?" Mayumi asked.

"Like the bottom of a shoe," Emma Lee said. "Trodden upon."

Mayumi raised her eyebrows. "You still *sound* like you, at least," she said.

Emma Lee smiled weakly, then remembered she was wearing a mask. "Yeah," she said.

"When do you need to be at the clinic?"

"Ah, the clinic," Emma Lee sighed. "They said I could go over pretty much any time. I'll probably have to wait, but they want to give me a COVID test."

"You really think you have it?"

"I have something."

"Should we go?"

"Give me a few minutes. That walk tired me out."

"Emily's grave?"

"Stupid, huh?"

Mayumi shrugged. "I'm not going to claim I'm not weirded out," she said.

"Yeah," Emma Lee said, and coughed into her mask.



THE CLINIC HAD set Emma Lee up for a parking lot visit, so they sat in Mayumi's car, heads nodding to one of her tamer hip-hop playlists. They kept the engine running, air conditioner on high to counteract the heat from the open windows. Emma Lee tried to keep her face turned away. She really didn't want Mayumi to catch it, whatever it was.

Mayumi said she didn't care. "That's what friends do," she said.

"Friends don't get friends sick," Emma Lee protested.

"Sometimes they do," Mayumi said.

They'd expected to be there a long time. They didn't have an appointment, and it was late in the day. Mayumi's mom, a professional with first-rate health insurance, had been forced to wait close to an hour in her personal physician's parking lot. An urgent care center? Without insurance? Hours, they were sure.

But it was only fifteen minutes or so before a tall man in a clear face shield and blue PPE—blue paper smock, blue latex gloves, blue surgical mask—stepped into the sunlight, located their car, and headed toward them. His name was Ian, he told them, and he was a ... well, Emma Lee lost his exact title in the haze of her illness. Physician's assistant, maybe. He had a syrup-smooth Southern accent that made her feel homesick on top of everything else.

He took her temperature and blood pressure and blood-oxygen level, and asked her the same questions they'd asked on the video conference. He poked a long cotton swab up her nose. It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't painful, either, as she'd expected from all the horror stories she'd heard.

They'd have an answer in two or three days, he told her, depending on the backlog at the lab. They were giving a lot of tests. In the meantime, she should do as she'd been doing, and get herself to the ER if things took a dramatic turn for the worse.

She also learned, to her relief, that the government was paying for the tests. She might die, but at least she didn't need to worry about overdrawing her checking account.

Half an hour later, Emma Lee was back in her trailer, sweating and miserable in her bed, alternating between chills and overheating. She drank a lot of water, which resulted in a lot of trips to Mr. Matsuo's bathroom. She took a cool shower on one of those trips, which seemed to help. She took the towel with her so Mr. Matsuo wouldn't have to worry about germs.



THE NEXT DAY was more of the same, only foggier. Emma Lee half-remembered Mayumi turning up with a concerned expression and a thermos of ginger tea and honey from her mother. She'd have dismissed it as a hallucination if she'd not found the thermos on the countertop and a glass soaking in the sink.

She slept when she could and sat outside when she couldn't. Though the awning radiated heat, she still preferred sitting at the picnic table, looking out over the cemetery. It was peaceful, she thought. All those souls resting in peace.

Emily.

The sun set in a cloudless sky, a vague, pale, orange-to-yellow band across the deepening silhouette of the mountains. She watched as the gathering dark overtook the old cypress trees' long shadows.

When there wasn't much left to see, she dragged herself back into the trailer, downed another ibuprofen, and collapsed on her bed.



SHE AWOKE TO a loud vibration on the shelf over the bed. She struggled to extricate herself from the tangled sheets and found the phone. She unplugged it and slid her finger across the green circle just before the call went to voice mail.

"Hello," she mumbled.

A man with a Southern accent said, "May I speak to Emma Brown?"

She found herself disoriented for a moment, the accent placing her back in Alabama, but the "Emma" placing her in California.

"Emma Lee," she said.

"Emma Lee Brown," he said. "My apologies."

"No problem," Emma Lee said. "This is Ian?"

"You remember me," he said.

You transport me, she thought. "Yes," she said.

"I was calling to let you know we got the results from your test."

"Yes?" Emma Lee leaned against the back wall of the trailer and closed her eyes, waiting.

"Yes," Ian said. "We just wanted to let you know that your test came back negative."

Emma Lee let her head fall back against the window. "Thank you," she said.

"Of course," Ian said. "How are you feeling, though?"

Emma Lee paused, touched her forehead. "I think the fever broke," she said, surprised. "I might just live."

Ian's voice seemed to convey a smile. "Now that is good news," he said. "You contact us if you think you need to, you hear?"

"Yes," Emma Lee said again. "Yes, thank you."

The trailer was starting to warm up, but without a fever, it wasn't too uncomfortable. She kicked her way out of the sheets and sat on the edge of the bed to take stock.

A little tired, but she'd just been awakened by the phone. No headache. Her throat felt a little raw, but not sore. She took a deep breath: still a hint of a wheeze at the end of the inhalation, but no cough. And when she forced a cough, it felt fake.

She *was* going to live, she decided.

Fresh clothes in hand, she made her way to the house for a proper shower. She dressed quickly and stepped out into the still heat, enjoying the coolness of her wet hair.

She climbed up into the trailer and turned the fans on full. She dropped her dirty clothes into the bin in her closet, slipped into her sandals, grabbed her keys, and headed for the gate.

There was a funeral in progress, way off to the left, visible only as she stepped through the gate. It was in the second oldest part of the cemetery, where tall tombstones leaned in all directions. Old family, she thought. The funeral party was small, which kind of depressed her. She wasn't sure if it was just a small clan, or if there weren't many who cared about this death, or if people just weren't willing to brave the pandemic.

She settled down next to Emily's grave, facing the funeral, participating from a distance. The minister read from a book, indistinct words floating across the lawn. Two couples—husbands and wives, Emma Lee thought—stood evenly spaced, emulating a stoic detachment. A third woman, possibly older than the others, stood close to the casket, head bowed. Another girl, maybe a teenager, maybe younger, stood with her back to the ceremony, chin almost too defiantly high, surveying the cemetery. Emma Lee couldn't tell if the girl was actually looking at her; she was too far away to be sure. But she felt her, somehow. She sent thoughts her way.

Whatever that meant. She really was becoming superstitious.

She kept her eyes up, witnessing the funeral, as she let her hand drop to the grass and slide across to find Emily's warm gravestone. She sat like that until the funeral had ended, until the family had turned themselves inward and trudged to the row of cars parked in the circle.

Emma Lee watched as they drove away. The girl raised her hand as they passed, and Emma Lee did the same. She didn't know what it meant, but she hoped it might make a difference.

She turned and knelt before Emily's gravestone, reading the familiar raised letters and numbers with her eyes and her fingers. "Nineteen years and two days," she whispered.

She tried to imagine Emily, to imagine what she might say. She listened. But in the end, there was only silence, as she'd have expected, if not for the strange coincidences.

The sun gradually became too hot to bear. She kissed her fingers and touched them to the headstone. She stood, took in the browning grass, the rows of graves, the tall redwoods and wide oaks, the angel on its pedestal, and headed back toward Mr. Matsu's gate, smiling.

About the author (that's me!)



Close-to-retirement English prof. Occasional musician, blogger and writer. Mildly introverted, mostly harmless.

You can find my blog at <https://ohick.com>.

About the artist



Multi award-winning artist/ animator/filmmaker John David Irvine is known for his unique style of handcrafted animation and darkly surreal imagery. His cryptic work explores identity, queerness, and generational trauma, wading into the everyday horrors that undulate beneath the veneer of the mundane. His award-winning short film COMMON MONSTERS is currently being expanded into his feature film directorial debut.

Check him out at <https://thejohnirvine.com>.



You can enjoy “Emily’s Grave” in a few different formats. You’ll find links to all of them at my blog (<https://ohick.com/emilys-grave>):

- **Videobook (YouTube):** I commissioned my friend and former student John David Irvine – now an award-winning artist! – to create an atmospheric animation to accompany the audio version of the story. (He also created the cover art for this document.)
- **Audiobook:** Recorded by the author (that's me!). You can listen to it on the blog, or you can download it directly to your device.
- **Text version:** You can read the story as a series of blog posts, or you can view or download a PDF of this document.



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