

The Quarrel

By Lauren Holt

Emily stopped three stairs from the landing, her heart in her feet like an anchor. 24 hours since her father had slammed his door shut and not *once* had he opened it. This behavior was deeply concerning to Emily, for he usually left his door open -partly to smell his wife's wonderful cooking and partly to hear *her* approaching. He loved to stop Emily en route to her room, to ask about her life or praise the book he'd been reading. Sometimes, he recounted his most recent visit to the virtual museums of the world. Whatever his story, it was always told grinning, as he lived for the chance to derail her, and when he wasn't in bed, he was *more* inescapable, her exhausting and inexhaustible shadow. Sometimes, she would quicken her pace to escape him, hands to her ears as if blocking out gnats, thinking of everything she would rather be doing and *not* of how this made him feel.

Today, however, Emily's father had not chased her away or entrapped her with babble. *He* had escaped *her*, and Emily didn't know how to feel now the tables had turned. As far as she knew, his door only shut when he needed to dress for an obligatory gathering *or*, when Emily -his one child and daughter- had said or done something that hurt him. The latter was surely the reason today, as they had quarreled the evening before. He hadn't even finished the food on his plate before stalking upstairs to his room, nor had he snuck to the kitchen that night for a slice of the pie he had missed.

Emily ruefully gazed at his door.

This would never have happened if you hadn't spent all of Mom's savings on that horrible car...

Her mother had scarcely defended herself; he had known she would not all along. He picked on the meek, particularly his wife, who behaved as though he

were her master, though Emily wondered, today on the stairs, if her mother was just self-preserving. For years, she'd been trying to pass on the value of prudent self-restraint to her daughter, who, more the spawn of her hot-headed father, was far less receptive than peeved.

"Don't antagonize your father," her mother had pleaded the evening before in the pantry. "He's especially volatile. Today in *particular*."

"He's *always* been volatile, Mom..."

Emily resented these constant reminders, these clandestine meetings by the elderly fridge. Her father affected their lives -this she *knew*! His mercurial moods made their mealtimes unpleasant, brought tension to days that were otherwise nice. She simply preferred not to dwell on this fact until she couldn't dwell on anything else.

"You don't know him, my dear. Not like I do, at least."

Emily had helplessly scoffed. *Not KNOW him?! She had thought. How could she not KNOW him?! This man whose domain was so near to her bedroom, so close to the door she had closed countless times to escape both his humor and fury?! So close to the books he'd inspired her to read, and the scratches he had scolded her for putting in the hardwood, and the light switch he had flicked when he was trying to stop her from bawling her eyes out all night? It was under his strictures that she had grown up! At the foot of his speakers that music had seduced her! Because of his irascible temperament that she had become so untrusting of humans, and because of his ability to endear himself to her that she had mastered the art of forgiveness.*

She *knew* him alright. She quite simply refused to exist as though he were a minefield, to censor her opinions or suppress her frustration for fear it might make him explode.

Two home-cooked meals, Emily thought, shaking her head at the motionless door knob. *Two home-cooked meals and you're still in your room. And I know, without a doubt, that you've smelled them.*

Indeed, as he aged, both his nose and his tongue stole the strength from his ears and his knees. Once he had skied and played tennis and soccer. These days, he moved like a rusty old robot and struggled with *all* flights of stairs. He was seventy-five. Any day, he could die. She wondered if he already had, if she'd been standing on those stairs, recalling their quarrel when she could have been saving his life...

No. In her *gut*, she could sense he was living, sitting in bed with a book in his lap, though checking would require a knock on his door and she dreaded the sight of his face. Like his voice, it would speak of the hurt she had dealt him and she wasn't in the mood to apologize. Eventually, though, he *would* open that door. One day, very soon, an interaction would occur. And the fact of their quarrel would affect this encounter; they could never go back and undo it.

Emily gulped, a knot in her throat. *When a man starts avoiding both meals and his daughter, his heart has been terribly wounded...* And in thinking of the people who had wounded *her* heart, she realized she loved them all deeply. And what could this mean but that *he* loved *her* deeply, and how was this *still* an epiphany?

Oh, why did I have to say so much last night?!

Emily clenched with remorse. Sure, her old man had just purchased a car, *exactly* like *TWO* he had already owned, and sure, they had both been hysterically horrible, *NOT* the sort of cars one repurchases. So, from a factual standpoint, Emily had been right to have said he didn't learn from his mistakes. But who was she, *really*, to have pointed this out when she didn't learn from hers either?!

Take, for instance, their present situation. This was *not* the first time she'd felt miserably guilty after starting a fight with her father. From the day she had realized she had thoughts of her own -(thoughts that would often conflict with his edicts)- Emily had voiced disagreement *habitually*, regardless of how much she had cared. And so, though it felt at that *moment* unusual to see his door closed on account of a quarrel, this had -in fact- been a frequent occurrence, especially when she was a teenager. Like most adolescents, she had chosen *ALL* battles. She had fought with her father whenever she could. And she had always felt bad but she had never quite known how to process the guilt that arose. Then sometime in high school, she had started smoking pot and she had realized her father had feelings -feelings she flippantly hurt every day and feelings he shared by *not* sharing them. In the course of that year -(she now vaguely recalled)- a *number* of poignant realizations had struck her. One, that she had shouted "I hate you!" at her father at least once a week until the age of fourteen. Two, that these words had undoubtedly scarred him, despite his apparent forgiveness. Three, that whenever he'd sequestered himself, he'd been saving them *both* the embarrassment of witnessing the pain she had caused him that day. And four, that the way she addressed him in general was as cruel as he spoke to her mother.

Emily remembered she had vowed to be nicer, to show her old man some more mercy and patience, to keep her mouth shut when the fight wasn't worth it and stop being scornful and hard-headed. But now, here she was, after *years* of improvement, staring once again at his door.

What was the comment that started all this? Emily wondered, a bit self-defensively. Surely, her father had said something first... *He* baited and she merely *bit*... Still, she could only remember him saying he had purchased the car and then POUNCE! Not ten minutes later, he had stalked to his room, trailed by her scoffs and "Come ons!"

“*Whaaat?!*” She had snapped when her mother had sighed -a timid but disappointed exhalation.

“Nothing,” her mother had murmured in response, quietly stacking the dishes.

Emily turned and sat down on the stairs, her back to her father’s closed door. In a matter of seconds, she could be in her room, reading a book or staring off into space, but as much as she didn’t want to see him -(or *anyone*)- neither did she want to be alone. What she wanted was magic, a time machine, perhaps, a way to go back to before last night’s quarrel. And perhaps *further* back, to before their *first* argument, to before they had developed their patterns. She wanted to do their relationship over, to start kissing his cheek and saying she loved him, to stop always needing to be somewhere else, to sit down by his side and *enjoy* him. She wanted him to know that she craved him sometimes, that being with him could be a healing experience; that his stories were funny, and his observations compelling, and his view of the world like none other.

Except, perhaps, for my own, she then realized, recalling an evening that month. She had gone to a ball game with a couple of friends, and she had had a good time, sitting back eating nuts, but the thrill of the scene had escaped her. Everything about it had seemed like an advertisement -the music and the food and the merchandise. It was shallow, and repetitive, and absurdly predictable, but the fans were all *wild* with excitement. They were watching the pitches, and cheering the runs, and biting their lips, and singing the songs, and Emily had realized she was very unusual, *not* to be doing the same. Then she had thought of how her parents had raised her, how they’d always sought difference and questioned tradition, and she had suddenly missed them for all of their oddities -all that she’d once so resented.

That night, back at home, she had mentioned the game and her father had beamed with delight.

“You know, in my youth, I saw the great Mickey Mantle?! Won a ticket for delivering papers.”

“Delivering papers?”

“I had a paper route then and I delivered the most in a month. So they sent me to Cleveland, on a Greyhound, you know, and I saw Mickey play -WITH *THESE EYES!!* It was *somethin’*, I tell ya! Best bonus I’ve had! The smell of those hot dogs... My word!”

As he’d told her the story, the room had grown warmer, and Emily had wondered why he’d saved it so long. So many memories, beaten to death... Why had *this* story been spared? She hoped -(at least somewhat)- to hear a few more -not that night, but before he was gone.

“So how was the game? Was it fun? Did you like it?”

“Yeah, it was fun... A bit cheesy.”

“Oh, all of those sports are such phony baloney! The money they spend on that crap!”

In hearing her thoughts coming out of his mouth, Emily had realized how much he had raised her, and the things he had said when his mother had died had made so much more sense than before.

“Now I’m an orphan. No way to replace her. She knew me forever, you know that?”

Emily remembered she had wanted to leave, to slink to her room and be alone with her thoughts, but she had stayed on the couch as her father had rambled -impatient and ashamed to be so. Minutes of her father took hours to process. The longer she stayed, the more processing.

Now, on the stairs, she looked up at the curtains on the little square window across from the landing and she thought of her mother -(the woman who'd made them)- sighing as she cleared off the table. Emily's mother kept her woe out of words; in the place of legitimate complaint, she deflated. It was clear to the world that she longed for affection -for comfort, attention, and interpersonal warmth- but she rarely received it because her sorrow was routine, the way she was expected to be. And so, after years of *seeing* this sorrow, Emily was shamefully desensitized to it, while her *father's* emotions, concealed behind doors, consumed her with pity and concern. The unfairness of this left her suddenly weeping, the tears flowing harder than she could wipe them away, and in wondering *why* she was wiping them away when she was there on the staircase, completely alone, she imagined her mother, sensing her sadness and appearing in the stairwell below. And she realized, in praying that the stairwell stayed empty, that she, Emily, was *just* like her father. She hid her emotions from the people she loved for they would open up doors that would lead to conversations, and the more there was to process, the less peace of mind, and she needed peace of mind to be decent.

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The soft golden light of her father's old reading lamp eventually crept beneath the bottom of his door, and Emily turned as if to the sun, the darkening stairwell now brighter. She deflated with relief, just to know he was *living*, and smiled, wiping tears from her cheeks. She imagined his fingers, still releasing the switch, his old freckled arm now retracting from the lamp, his every last movement reduced to a crawl so his daughter would not hear him listening. And then, in envisioning the humorous image of her big-bellied father, attempting to tiptoe, she realized that his bladder might send him to the bathroom and she quietly rose to her feet.

With mischievous urgency, Emily scuttled down the carpeted stairs towards the living room, her heart in her throat like those nights in her youth when she had been the last one up to bed. The house was primarily lit with old lamps, most of which couldn't be switched from the walls, and the living room -which lay between the kitchen and the stairwell- was utterly bereft of a switch. Thus, in the night, she had not had a choice but to travel the distance in darkness, a journey she had always undertaken at a sprint, never once turning her head. Upon reaching the stairs, she would flip on the light and the ghosts at her heels would disappear.

Now, in pausing to gaze at that switch and recalling -with a smile- the thrill of those races, Emily remembered the switch in her bedroom and how her father used to flick it up and down. He had only ever done this when he had upset her - (the faster the flicking, the meaner he'd been)- and try though she would to stay stoic and offended, her cheeks would give in to the trembling. This had been her father's favorite form of apology: making a strobe light of her ceiling. Now, she wondered if he had never used words nor entered her room to remorsefully embrace her because he had known he would cry if he did and his feelings would have made her unbearably uncomfortable.

Shortly after Emily departed her post, her father was heading for the long-delayed bathroom when he heard her again, this time bounding upstairs, excitement in the pace of her step. Frozen at the back of his closed bedroom door, he listened as her footsteps approached him. He held in his breath as she set something down -(probably a basket of laundry for her mother)- and waited to exhale until he heard her bed creak, the rustle of pillows and bedsheets. The scent of the dinner he'd missed soon grew stronger and his stomach cried out in despair. He knew that his daughter was now in her room, in bed with her laptop and her big headphones on. She wasn't coming out for the evening again; he was safe from the

torture of facing her. But as for his wife, she could be in the kitchen, and he feared he would not treat her kindly... Still, he was *starving*, he hadn't eaten all day, and if he didn't eat anything, he would be up all night, and-

What day of the week was it anyway? If she was watching her program, he could sneak a quick plate, then retreat back upstairs to enjoy it. By the time she came up, he could be fast asleep, the plate with his socks in a drawer. Or maybe she would stay on the couch for the night... She *had* slept there the evening before...

Oh, shut up, already! Just go eat some food!

Very slowly, he opened the door. And there, on the carpeted landing before him, sat a bowl brimming high with spaghetti, steam rising up in soft curls from its peak where a fork had been stuck, like a flag.