

The Child Who Loved Emily Dickinson

by Bernard Glassman

*Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.
We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.*

*We passed the school, where children strove
At recess, in the ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.*

*Or rather, he passed us;
The dews grew quivering and chill,
For only gossamer my gown,
My tippet only tulle.*

*We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.*

*Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.*

Emily Dickinson

Unable are the loved to die, for love is immortality.
Emily Dickinson

“Because I could not stop for death...”

Penelope's little-girl voice was strong. And clear. And far older, somehow, than her six, almost seven, years. She was reading from her mother's dog-eared paperback of Emily Dickinson, but she knew the poem by heart.

“He kindly stopped for me.”

Silence.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Penelope,” I said, looking up from my laptop.

“Daddy, who is Immortality?”

“Not ‘who’ Pen, ‘what.’ You want to know what immortality is. Immortality means living forever. It means never having to die.” That last word caught in my throat.

“But Emily says that immortality is riding in the carriage with her and Mr. Death. If you ride in a carriage, doesn't that make you a ‘who’?”

I almost smiled. It was the closest I'd come to smiling in weeks. Or was it years? I honestly didn't know.

"Pen, do you remember in the car, riding back from Mommy's funeral? Do you remember how there was the driver and you and me?"

"Yes." Penelope's eyes filled, and so did mine, and I hated myself for choosing this utterly unnecessary and thoughtlessly cruel example.

"I'm sorry, Pen, it's not the right example for me to use. I don't know why I thought of it."

"It's OK, Daddy. Mr. Sadness was riding with us too, wasn't he?"

With those two short sentences, Pen had both forgiven me and nailed a difficult bit of rhetoric. Through my tears and the too-familiar tightness in my throat came a choked laugh. God, I was proud of this child. My child. No, our child. Because Gloria was still there, still in Penelope, still in my mind and oh, so present in my heart.

Right along with Mr. Death and Mr. Sadness and Mr. Immortality.

"It's getting crowded in our carriage, isn't it, Daddy?"

There was a time when, if one of my English department colleagues had made that sort of remark over a beer, I'd have smiled politely. Now, and coming from a child of six, those words frightened me. Frightened me because they betrayed a kind of insight that no child her age should ever have to live with. Frightened me because I had no idea how to be the parent of someone so prematurely wise. Frightened me because of their sheer elegance. And frightened me most of all because they sounded exactly like the sort of thing her mother, Gloria, my resident Emily Dickinson fanatic, might have said. Once upon a time.

Gloria, who so often seemed to read my unspoken thoughts, edit them and re-state them better than I ever could. Who could extract the essence of my tangled, meandering paragraphs and help me turn them into scholarly articles that were getting me published in journals that my fellow junior professors could only dream of.

Gloria, who had promised me that as soon as I got tenure she would give up running the all-night child-care center that she and a friend had opened across town. For the single moms and working couples whose schedules and lives were owned by Wal-Mart and the all-night drugstores and all-night gas stations, and the hospital down the street. Helping them keep their jobs. Their second or third jobs, usually.

She was determined to go back to finish her BA. Her BA! She was helping *me* turn out papers that had me fast-tracked toward tenure and she had never so much as finished her own Bachelor's degree.

"It's a trick, Jack," she'd say, "like wiggling my ears. Just like wiggling my ears. I don't know how I do it. I sure didn't learn it. I just know what it is you want to say. And it's only you, Jack, only you."

Once, perhaps trying to ease my guilt at getting my doctorate while she "took a brief leave" from her undergraduate work, Gloria announced that it was a good thing she wasn't carrying around "all that English-department jargon," because it would just get in her way. I said that if scholarship were truly the enemy of native talent, then I was begging her never to read any sort of advanced work on human sexuality. Because however good she was at explicating literature without formal training, nothing could compare with her ability, and her passion, for understanding what I needed, before I knew I needed it, in bed.

No, that's not accurate. Gloria knew what would be good for *us* and not just for her or for me; and she turned that knowledge into action, binding us into moments verging on the eternal (Gloria, this sentence is ridiculously overwritten. Help!) -- something that had me in near-religious awe of her.

"Us, Jack. It's us," she'd said. "It's us, speaking through my body. That's what it is. And you speak back, honey. I love that you think I'm some kind of sexual goddess, but that's only because together we are god and goddess. Don't you know that whatever you think I do for you, you do for me every bit as much? And as well? And as often? That's us, Jack."

As she said that, we cuddled in our mess of a bed, hand-me-down mattress exposed at one corner, early-morning light filtering through the bamboo shade, Penelope at her grandmother's. How Gloria could come home at 5:30, after a night of looking after kids as old as 8, after worrying about whether a child's mother would ever show up to claim her kid, and then make love as if we were still on our honeymoon, but more energetically, more creatively, I could not imagine. But again, she said it was us. Not her energy. Not my energy. Our energy. "We're a whole 'nother thing, Jack."

Gloria, who had not called one morning as she always did on her way home from closing the center. Who had not gotten home at her usual 5:30.

When she didn't show up, I hadn't panicked or even been particularly alarmed. It had been Halloween the night before, and Gloria and one of her assistants had borrowed a van to take the older kids trick-or-treating in a more promising neighborhood than the center's. This Halloween was a first for a lot of the kids. In their own neighborhoods it just wasn't safe to be out without a parent, and parents who work the kind of jobs these parents worked are not given Halloween night off for trick-or-treating. For some of the kids,

of course, Halloween must have just been more of the same -- walking the streets to try to frighten or cajole someone else into giving them money.

The center was only 11 months old. Gloria had already celebrated Christmas with the kids, and Easter, and the 4th of July, but this was their first Halloween. She'd called me at 8 or so that night to tell me everything had gone "just great" and that she had persuaded most of the kids to contribute some of their candy to a "general fund" for other occasions. By which she probably meant that she would make the most obesity-inducing stuff disappear, replacing it with fresh apples when the time came.

At 6 in the morning I had tried her cell phone. It rang several times, then went to voice mail. "Gloria, honey, I'm a little worried. Could you give me a call and let me know what's happening?"

"Jack?" I was shocked out of my reverie by Penelope's voice. Not just by her voice, but by her calling me "Jack." She'd never called me that.

"Pen, did you just call me 'Jack?'" I could hear the tension in my voice. I hoped Pen couldn't.

"No, Daddy. I called you 'Daddy.' I thought you might be asleep. Mommy always woke you up if you fell asleep with the computer on your lap. And you always would say, 'Thank you, Honey.'"

"Thank you, Honey."

"You're welcome, Jack."

This time I knew I'd heard it. I hadn't dreamt it. Penelope had called me "Jack."

"Pen, I think you should call me 'Daddy.'" More tension now than I could hope to hide.

"I did! Daddy, I did!" Once again her eyes welled up and once again I hated myself. Surely this was some kind of grief response. Some mental tic she couldn't understand any more than she could understand why her mommy had been taken from her. Any more than I could understand.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Maybe I'm just imagining Mommy's voice. I bet that's it. We both miss Mommy an awful lot, don't we?"

And together, and again, we succumbed to the terrible grief we had been fighting, and we sobbed until we were, as Penelope put it a few hours later, "all teared out."

"Daddy?" Her head was against my chest, my sweatshirt damp from her tears and her runny nose. "Daddy? It's Halloween next week. Know how I want to dress up?"

Next week? Surely not. Surely it had been only days. Surely it had been an eternity. How could Penelope be so matter-of-fact about this hideous anniversary? But of course anniversaries of deaths are a learned obsession, aren't they? Still, I'd have thought the prospect of Halloween would be terrible for her. But I was not about to make it terrible, not if I could help it. "Please don't say you want to dress up as Mr. Immortality, OK?" And I hugged her tightly to me.

Her answer, even muffled as it was by my chest, brought me up short.

"Emily. I want to go trick-or-treating as Emily Dickinson."

For some reason, I have never found a child's ideas ridiculous. A bit surprising, perhaps, but always worth serious consideration. If this was her way of honoring her mother's memory, so be it.

Was there a costume shop on Earth that had an Emily Dickinson outfit small enough for a little girl? Of course not. Was there even such a thing as an Emily Dickinson outfit? Almost certainly not, but surely there was a way to approximate one. So Pen and I curled up on the couch with my laptop, and we went searching for whatever it would take to make her into Emily Dickinson.

An hour later, after looking up all the pictures we could find of Emily Dickinson, and after some wonderful moments laughing about the difficulty of finding corsets for 6-year-olds, (I of course had to explain what a corset was and why we didn't believe in them any more) we had ordered a collection of items that we could get with 2-day shipping.

I was actually feeling enthusiastic for this project -- the first enthusiasm for anything other than sleep I had felt since Gloria's death. Certainly that lack of enthusiasm applied to household chores. I'd not done more than a load of wash a week, and often not that, since the funeral -- and even those were at Penelope's urging. I couldn't bear to look at the laundry-room notes in Gloria's handwriting: "Go easy on detergent. It's concentrated." "Lights with lights, darks with darks." She had organized our house so we could carry on while she was gone at night, and now all those notes, notes I used to smile at during a "laundry break" from my writing and grading, just slammed me in the chest every time I looked at one. But how could I take them down?

I can't recall all the details about the things we ordered for Pen. Most were from online vintage clothing stores, except for the velvet ribbon you see around Emily Dickinson's throat in the most widely used images. But for the gold brooch that is attached to that velvet

ribbon, a not especially well-made piece that was not much above costume jewelry for the era, we could not find a match. We spent quite a while on eBay looking for mid-19th century brooches, and found several -- a bird, something in a diamond shape, and finally one the seller called a "mourning pin brooch." The moment I saw the mourning brooch, matte black, a five-petaled flower (Forget-me-not?), I tried to skip past it. Dressing up as Emily Dickinson might be nostalgic and loving, but wearing a piece of period mourning jewelry was bordering on the morbid.

"That one, Daddy!" Penelope was pointing excitedly at my laptop's screen. "Pleeease! Can I have that one?"

I was fairly certain Pen had no idea what the word "mourning" meant. But I knew I didn't have the energy to fight with her about it, and that the Buy It Now price of \$29 was completely reasonable. A couple of clicks later, it was ordered and paid for, and soon after, I had all but forgotten the brief, but sharp, dread I'd experienced when I saw that it would be shipping from Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson's home town. If I had a nickel for every strange coincidence in my life, I could have blown off tenure long ago.

Dinner time. I called the local pizza place with its number on a refrigerator magnet and as soon as the fellow heard my voice he said, "The usual?" I started to protest that surely I wasn't ordering pizza all that often, when I looked at the boxes in the trash and thought better of it.

"Sure. The usual."

I looked around my place, as if for the first time.

The house looked as if it had hosted a 3-month fraternity party. Pizza boxes, paper plates, paper cups, beer cans (not many, so the fraternity analogy doesn't really work, does it, Gloria?), juice-boxes

(Pen's) and dirty napkins everywhere. All my mess. All mine. I tentatively put a hand to my face and felt the longest stubble or shortest beard I had ever grown. The part of me that is some kind of optimist, in a tiny voice, said "If you're noticing these things, maybe you're starting to come out from under your grief." But I was pretty sure that I'd had these bursts of consciousness, and conscience, before, gone on a frenetic cleanup campaign, and then let the place lapse into depressed clutter all over again.

But maybe this was the real emergence from grief. Maybe that's what the anniversary of a death is all about.

No matter. I was determined that, whatever the state of my grief, I would have the mess, and me, reasonably cleaned up before the pizza arrived. And I did. Ah, the joys of disposables. As I filled one garbage bag after another, I realized that back when she was 5, and her mother was still with us, Penelope would have ridden me mercilessly for not being "Mr. Green" if I had consumed disposables in those quantities. But not since the funeral. Not once. As far as I could recall. Which I couldn't. Then I saw Pen's tidy stack of empty juice boxes near the trash can. Pen was indulging her father. Pen had some priorities. Pen had compassion. Pen was already most of the adult I would have hardly dared dream I could raise, and she was not yet 7.

The pizza came. The delivery guy handed me the box, addressing me by my last name, and turned to go without so much as hesitating in hope of a tip.

"Haven't I been tipping you?" I asked him.

"No, sir, but I totally understand, sir."

I pulled a handful of singles from the billfold, my billfold, I supposed, I found next to the refrigerator. I had no memory whatever of leaving it there.

"Here. Keep it all. You've earned it," I said, biting off profanity, furious at myself.

I looked up to call Pen to the table and there she was, already sitting in her place, her hands still a little wet from washing. When had she started washing her hands without being asked?

We ate. Hardly a word passed between us, other than "more?" and "thank you" and not a word was really necessary. Then Pen looked at me and made that wonderful remark about being "all teared out" and I just shook my head in agreement, muted by fear I might prove her wrong.

The house filled with companionable silence while I cleaned up our dinner dishes. (I had insisted that we use real plates, much to my daughter's approval.) Penelope curled up on the huge, soft couch with Gloria's volume of Emily Dickinson. As I rinsed each plate, I could hear: Pen whispering the poems to herself, pausing at times to sound out an unfamiliar word; the grandfather clock in the living room; a dog barking somewhere; a truck downshifting up the grade on the state highway a mile off. The highway. I imagined putting Pen in the car and driving somewhere, or anywhere.

The highway. Where Gloria's car had been found on the shoulder, flashers on, doors locked. Empty.

The state trooper had knocked around 9 in the morning. Asked for Gloria. I told him I had no idea where she was. He asked if I wanted to sit down. I said "No." Told him about the child-care center and the trick-or-treating. Told him I'd called her at 6.

He told me about the car, then held out a cell phone.

"Is this her phone?"

"It looks like hers, yes. But there must be millions of these. And she would never let her phone get dusty and smudged like this. "

"That's fingerprint powder, sir. Don't you think you should sit down?"

"Yes."

Penelope had called down to me from her room, where she had been playing since 8 o'clock or so. "Daddy?"

The trooper must not have known there was a child at home. He looked stricken.

"Everything's fine, honey. Play a little longer up there, OK? Daddy is busy." I looked at him as if, knowing there was a child here, he could somehow change the truth.

He pointed to the phone's screen.

"Sir, here are the calls this phone has received this morning. Is this one from you?"

"Yes. It says 'Home.' This is Gloria's home."

"It says it's a missed call, sir."

"I can see that, officer. I told you I got her voice mail."

"Who are these calls from, like this one at 5:15?"

"I don't know. I don't know that number."

"They called her again at 6:10, sir."

"Yes, they did. But this is going nowhere. My wife is missing and we're looking at her cell phone."

"It looks like she answered this call, sir. Or someone did."

Or someone did.

"Any idea who that might have been?"

"No, officer, I have no idea! My god, how long are we going to just sit here talking?"

"There is only one set of fingerprints on this phone, sir. We believe your wife answered her phone at 6:10."

"Yes. I can see that must be the case. So whose number is it? Didn't you check that out?"

"JACK!"

The plate I'd been drying crashed to the floor and I grabbed at the kitchen counter, swaying. The memory of that awful morning was still playing itself out, much as a dream can linger, voices and glimpses, even after you awaken. I looked around for the trooper and caught myself. No trooper. No trooper. They'd been at my house months ago. The troopers were gone; Gloria had been found in a culvert a hundred yards from the car. Gloria, my Gloria, was dead. And buried. And not one useful clue about who had killed her. Or why. But she had just called to me again! No, not Gloria, my daughter! My heart pounded in my chest, and in my throat, and in my head. I turned toward the couch, no longer a father, just a

terrified man, ready to scream at Penelope this time for calling me Jack...and Penelope was gone.

In three steps I crossed the room to where she had been, thinking that I should look behind the couch. Absurdly, I wondered if she might be playing a game, maybe hoping to cheer me up a bit. But I knew better. This was no game.

I can't say what made me put my hand on the couch, the faux goosedown cushions still indented from the weight of her little body. Maybe some part of me thought she had become invisible, I don't know. But the couch was no more than room temperature.

My panic was total. First Gloria, now Penelope! I looked out the window into the deepening twilight; turned to race upstairs to her room...

"Daddy?"

She stood behind me, a dishtowel in her hands.

"Daddy? Did you want me to help you dry the dishes?"

Where she stood, there should have been a shattered plate. The floor was clean.

"Pen?" I was whispering because if I had not whispered I would have shouted. "Pen?"

"What, Daddy?"

"Pen, how long has it been since Mommy...?"

"It's been a year, Daddy. Well, about a year. You know it's been a year. It was last Halloween."

Until it happens to you, and I hope, and you should pray, that it never does, you cannot appreciate the consolation of believing that you are merely losing your mind. The voice calling me Jack; the too-real presence of the troopers long after they had finally left, and left us alone; Pen disappearing and re-appearing; the lost memory of months of pizza deliveries and then, the recognition that you have to help your child plan for a Halloween that is, in fact, the anniversary of her mother's death. I fell onto the cushions Penelope had abandoned and tried to understand. But Mr. Understanding is not in our carriage. There is no room for him. Only for Mr. Grief and Mr. Terror and Mr. Sadness and Mr. Death and, of course, Mr. Immortality.

"Jack? Jack, honey..."

__The End__

