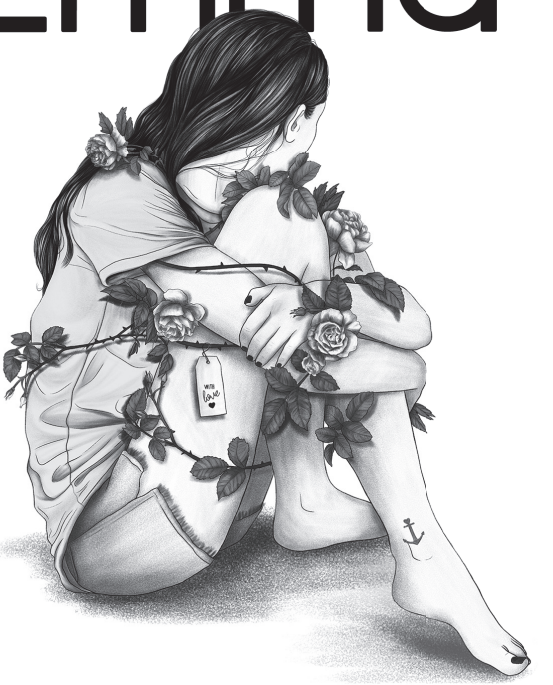
KISSING EMMA



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Dedicated to the memory of Nyousha Movagharzadeh,
the most wonderful, adored and talented young woman,
whose excitement was so catching
1/11/1995–30/7/2019

This story touches on some hard-hitting themes.
If you find yourself affected by them, there is a
list of resources at the end that may be helpful.

ONE

When your mum has been all over the internet, accused of murdering your dad, well, life changes.

We weren't the perfect family. My dad wasn't the sort who would put me up on his shoulders and call me his little princess. He was more the shut-your-mouth-or-I'll-knock-your-teeth-out type.

Not the whole time. He had his moments. Sometimes he took me to the pub with him. I'd only be little, about six, and he'd buy me a lemonade and pour a bit of his beer in it, which made it taste funny. I wouldn't show it on my face, though, because when I drank it, my dad patted my back and said, 'That's my girl!' That little bit of praise from him made me feel so happy. Proud. His mates would all laugh and say, 'Chip off the old block!' I know it doesn't sound like the most fun afternoon, but when I was little, it was one of the few times I had his attention for a *good* reason.

He'd drink and tell his mates stories that made no sense to me, but when they roared and hung on to his every word, he was a king in my eyes. That was my dad. Fun sometimes, then giving my mum a black eye sometimes. All dads were like that, weren't they? That's what I thought, anyway.

I'd see other dads: the ones down the park, laughing with their kids, talking to them, gently taking them off a climbing frame or carrying them on their shoulders. They'd give the mum a little kiss while the kids played. But they couldn't be like that all the time, I'd think. I bet at home they were all like my dad. I bet they were angry and shouted and made the mum cry – but when they were out and about, they were gentle.

I loved my dad. I honestly did. Even when he was off his head, shouting, and the woman in the flat below would bang on her ceiling with her cricket bat. (I reckon she had to stand on her dining room table to do that.) Sometimes he ran out of our place to tell her to 'shut up you mad old bitch', which gave me and Mum a bit of a breather.

We'd know, just from the way he walked into a room or came into the flat, what mood he was in. Just by his footsteps, we knew whether he was going to start on us or not. Mum would say, in a voice so low only I could hear, 'Go to your room, Emma.' Low and urgent. I would flee, no eye contact with Dad, and go straight to my room. I'd look nowhere but straight ahead, my legs moving despite feeling numb with

fear. I'd get under my bed and curl up as tight as I could, putting my hands over my ears to block out whatever noise my mum and dad were making. Shouts, cries, Mum begging. That was the worst. I'd wait for the air to go still, and then Mum would come and crouch by my bed, reaching her hand underneath it for me to hold. I'd take it and crawl out, without looking at her. It always seemed too soon to look. Instead I'd just press against her, and she would hold me. When it was safe, Mum would sort out whatever mess he had made of the flat and of her.

As I got older, there were more bad bits than good bits. Dad's stories and jokes all got swallowed up by a stream of ranting and swearing. He drank at home, then he went out and drank again. He picked on Mum even more. She was 'fat' and a 'hag'. Whatever she made for him to eat was 'a plate of shite'. Then he'd turn to me, saying I was just as big a waste of space, that I was always in his way. Eventually he'd storm out of the flat, shouting and swearing as he went. I'd hear him all the way down the stairwell, calling me and Mum names that drifted back up to us. When he came back, we never mentioned whatever row had gone on before.

For some reason, I never learned my lesson. Every time he came back and wasn't shouting, I would think that was it. Maybe it would never happen again. Maybe that was the last time he'd ever start on us. I thought that every single time. I'd be good. I'd be so good he'd never shout at me again.

But there was just no way of knowing. Sometimes he said to Mum, 'Put some slap on, you look half-dead,' so she'd do her face. But if she put on some lipstick and a bit of mascara without him telling her to, he'd scream, 'You look like a tart!' till she cried and took it off. No way of predicting it.

Really, the only good bits when I was little were when it was just me and Mum. 'You are not an only child,' Mum used to say to me. 'You're the *one and* only child!'

When Dad wasn't around, Mum was different. She was fun. 'Wanna dress up in my clothes, Emma?' I'd put on one of her dresses, wear her shoes and she'd put make-up on me. 'Go on. Do one of your impressions!' she'd say. I could really make her laugh. With bright pink lipstick and a pen in my mouth for a cigarette, I'd be Dora, the woman who lived above us and was constantly smoking on her balcony. Those cigarettes were always blowing on to ours after she'd flicked them out. I called her Mrs And-Why-Shouldn't-I?, because that's what she always said.

'Me husband' – I did her voice raspy and deep – *'says I smoke too much. And why shouldn't I? It's not 'is business. I don't moan that he farts so much I can't light a match in the house, do I? I like to sit on the balcony in the fresh air and shout at the kids down there playing. And why shouldn't I? I drive Mary downstairs mad with my shouting and my fag ends – and why shouldn't I?'*

Mum would laugh and laugh, telling me, 'I honestly wouldn't know the difference with my eyes shut, Emma! You got a gift! But keep it down, she'll hear you.'

Mum didn't like me playing on the estate with the other kids after school. 'You're a cut above, my darling,' she'd tell me. 'You've got *prospects*. You're intelligent, you're beautiful. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with them kids out there . . .'

I'd roll my eyes and smile. 'But you are, Mum.'

'I'm not. I just don't think they're going anywhere. This estate sucks you in if you let it, and I won't let that happen to you.'

I didn't mind not going out to play. I had Mum to do things with. We'd watch all the soaps together, and I'd do impressions of the actors. She'd get these magazines full of all the celebrities and we'd guess who'd had their lips done, who'd had their boobs done. I stared at these girls on the glossy pages, and the lives they led, all shiny hair and rich boyfriends. They holidayed on yachts and sparkled at parties. It was another world, but these were the sort of places Mum thought *I* could go one day. She said I was pretty enough, and sometimes I'd think that maybe she was right. But back then, Mum and I just got lost in dreaming.

*

'What do you want more bloody books for?' my dad moaned when Mum and I brought a couple back from the charity shop one day. 'You already got a whole load of 'em, taking up all the room in here!' He said it like we'd gone out and bought saucepans when we already had a perfectly good set in the cupboard.

'But I've read those ones, Dad,' I said carefully.

'You've read all them books?' Dad scoffed. 'Then you're *sad*, my girl. You need to get a life or you'll end up like your mother.' He pointed his beer bottle at Mum, and it sloshed a bit on to the carpet. I got away with it that time, my shoulders sagging in relief.

I kept my books so perfect. Tucked in beside each other, tallest to shortest. Mum called me a book worm. It made me smile to think of being a worm, burrowing into my books to escape. We'd go to the library sometimes, but there were some books I loved so much I liked to read them again and again, and you always had to give library books back. I liked having my own to keep.

Mum read me *The Secret Garden* at bedtimes. It was one of my favourites. I'd imagine there was a secret garden on our estate, behind the high grey wall at the end. There wasn't, of course. It was a samosa factory, but I'd still pretend. I had my books and a few toys in my little room that Mum painted pink for me.

When I was six, my absolute favourite toy was Speaking

Baby. She had shiny, dark hair like mine, and you pressed her hand and she went, 'Ma-ma.' She wasn't just a doll to me. She was real. She had feelings and she loved me. When my mum and dad were fighting and I was off under my bed, I'd take her with me, holding her close to me, protecting her. 'It's OK, Speaking Baby, I'll look after you,' I'd whisper to her. Every moment when I wasn't at school, I played with her. Rocking her to sleep in my arms, I sang her lullabies. I kissed her and tucked her in beside me in bed every night. I knew she could hear me. When I was sad or scared, I cuddled her close and she understood how I was feeling.

Sheila upstairs had given me Speaking Baby for my sixth birthday. She worked at the big supermarket, the one you had to get the bus to. She said to my mum, 'It weren't dear. I got my staff discount. I saw it in the shop and couldn't resist.'

Sheila lived with Mike. They were older than my mum and dad and didn't have kids. I was too small, then, to know you didn't just blurt out, 'Why haven't you got children?' at people.

'God didn't bless us with children, my darling,' Sheila told me.

For a long time I wondered why God didn't bless Sheila with kids. How could he have looked at lovely, kind Sheila and gone, 'Nope. Not trusting you with a baby,' but then looked at my dad and thought, 'He's fine, he can have one'?

Sheila and Mike's flat was my favourite place to be. It never smelled of fish fingers like ours did. It smelled of baking and Sheila's bowl of lavender potpourri. That bowl of dried woodchips, smelling of garden flowers, was to me the most sophisticated thing anyone could possibly have in their hall. Their flat was exactly the same size and shape as ours, but it looked so different – all plush, with their big, green, soft sofa and proper curtains, not plastic blinds like at ours.

'Can I go upstairs, Mum?' I'd ask almost every afternoon. Mum would nod with a mixture of relief and sadness on her face, then stand at the bottom of the stairs until she heard Sheila greet me with her warm, ''Ello, my darling! You wanna come in for some milk and biccies?' Mum would shout up behind me, 'That all right, Sheila? Just send her down when she's a nuisance.'

'You're never a nuisance, are you, my darling?' Sheila would say to me. 'Come in. Mike! We got our little visitor.' Mike would wave at me from his chair and carry on watching TV. Somehow there was always football on.

The day after my sixth birthday, Sheila sat me down at her little table in the kitchen and gave me Speaking Baby. She showed me how I could make it talk by giving it a little squeeze.

'Ma-ma,' the doll said.

'See?' Sheila said. 'You're her mama, and you got to look after her just like your mummy does with you.'

When I was back downstairs that night, I tucked up in bed with my new doll and told her, 'It's OK, baby. Everything will be OK.'

Then one night, more than a whole year after I got Speaking Baby, I heard my dad come in really late. His footsteps thumping into the flat made my heart beat so fast that my chest hurt and it was hard to catch my breath. And the moment he came in, he started a fight with Mum.

'This place is a tip!' he yelled. 'And you're off in the land of Nod? Get out here and sort it!' He must have woken her up specially to have the fight.

The screams and thuds sent me under my covers. I heard Mum say, 'Shut up, you'll wake Emma.' Dad shouted back a fiery reply, but it was muffled at first. Mum was saying, 'Leave her alone!' and then I heard Dad more clearly. 'I'm so sick and fucking tired of you and your fucking brat, sponging off me and making a bloody mess!'

Before I could move under the bed, my bedroom door crashed open and in came my dad, yanking my covers off. Mum ran in after him, holding her bleeding head.

Dad grabbed my arm and pulled me out of bed. He made me stand in front of him and he was bellowing in my face. I couldn't even understand what he was saying. It was a load of swearing and calling me horrible names, and he was shaking me as he shouted. I was crying; I didn't know what I had done wrong. My eyes stung from the alcohol on his breath.

He stumbled backwards a bit, tripping over something. Speaking Baby. But when I moved to pick her up, he stomped his boot down, kicking me out of the way. Then he grabbed my doll, still raging, and took two giant, wobbling steps over to my window. We were on the twelfth floor, but he opened it, holding up my doll by her arm.

'No, Daddy, no!' I begged him, sobbing. 'Please, Daddy!'

He looked at me for a second – then hurled Speaking Baby out into the darkness.

I stared at his empty hands as what he had done sank in. Then I let out a wail that rattled my skull. I didn't care if he got angry. I didn't care what he would do to me. The noise seemed to force him away, though. He stormed out of my room, hissing, 'Shut the fuck up!' but I couldn't. My side was sore from where he'd kicked me, but I didn't care about that either.

Mum could finally come to me and hold me while I sobbed for my doll.

'Can we go down and get her?' I wailed. 'Please, Mummy, can we go and get her?'

But Mum begged me to be quiet. 'Please, darling, we can't, we just can't. Not right now. She'll be OK, don't worry.' Nothing she said helped. All I could picture was my doll lying all alone on the filthy ground where I couldn't get to her. The thought gave me more pain than any of his kicks, punches or shoves ever could.

Mum put me in my bed and stayed with me until I finally got exhausted from crying and fell asleep.

In the morning, it took a second to remember the horror of the previous night. I scrambled out of bed and pressed my face to the window, wincing at the ache in my side. It hurt where he had kicked me. There'd be a bruise I would examine later. For the time being, I just looked desperately down on the ground for my doll, but I couldn't see her.

A big lump had grown beside the cut on Mum's forehead overnight. She held an ice pack to it, and I could tell she was desperate for it to go down before she faced my dad. None of us ever mentioned his rages once they had passed, and having visible injuries from the night before felt like mentioning it. We knew it would make him feel like Mum was taunting him. That's what he'd sometimes say when she limped around, bruised, fetching him breakfast after another rough night. 'Are you taunting me, Mary?'

Dad woke up and lumbered into the bathroom without a word. But Dad being quiet didn't mean safety. I had to be extra careful. I mustn't talk about the doll, even though I really wanted to go and look for her. We'd have to wait until he went out.

When Dad emerged, still belching last night's alcohol, Mum quietly served him his breakfast. She got my toast too, and set it down in front of me. I chewed on a corner, feeling tears building up again, but it was too dangerous to cry.

Dad pushed his plate away. 'I can't take being stuck in this flat with you two miserable bitches moping about,' he hissed, then grabbed his coat and went out of the door.

The minute it shut, my breath came back. The whole flat felt lighter. Mum and I looked at each other, waiting a few minutes to be sure he was gone. Then Mum got a cap and pulled it over her head, wincing as it touched her bruise. She got my coat, put it on me, and we rushed down the stairwell to find Speaking Baby. I insisted on the stairs, because the creaky old lift took for ever and always smelled of piss.

We looked all around the side of the building where Dad had thrown her – under cars, behind the bins, under bushes. Mum said softly that maybe someone had taken her, and my heart burst with hurt. The tears came again in a rush. I hadn't thought of that. What if some other girl had her now? Speaking Baby would never know that I came looking for her. We were too late.

'Please, my darling, stop crying. Stop making all this noise.' Mum was worried about Dad catching us. We couldn't let him see us trying to fix whatever he had broken. We went back inside, and I never saw my beautiful doll again.