*EMILY FOREVER*

Maria Navarro Skaranger

Translated sample, pages 7-30 (the novel’s beginning)

Translation © Rachel Rankin

First published: 2021, Forlaget Oktober  
Original title: Emily forever

Genre: Literary fiction/novel

Pages: 183

Foreign rights by Oslo Literary Agency, Henrik Francke  
henrik@osloliteraryagency.no

\*

POOR EMILY

Winter. Dark pretty much all the time – in the mornings almost until ten o’clock. Emily (Em? Or Emma, maybe?) wakes with the sun. It’s late for her.

Look at her, lying with a pillow between her legs and one hand on her stomach, looking at the window, out of the window – it’s a grey day today. Emily – what a sad name to have, so laden with rain that an old auntie would have stroked her hair and said oh, my child, are you here in the flat all by yourself? You have to get up now, Emily, the old auntie would have said, and so she gets up. The bedsheets smell like something or other, something that’s not just her, and, because of her stomach, she twists out of bed, slowly, slowly – her body is almost like a brick now. She feels like a square: fat, broad back, ankles filled with fluid, her face too flat and too round.

She looks in the mirror and sees her father in her nose, her skin, the width of her wrists, her mother in her hair. Emily doesn’t want to think about that. She pulls on a jumper and some trousers.

Her flat is quite small, just enough space for two people and no more. A little living room, a bedroom – there’s the bed, and underneath it are drawers for her clothes, which are currently lying in a pile by the wall because she can’t bring herself to fold them (her clothes are always crumpled these days, which makes her look dirty, even though she’s clean). A little kitchen, a little table with two chairs, several walls which separate the rooms from each other, a washing machine in the basement. In the depths of the dark nights, she will lie in bed, the minutes turning to hours as she stares at the wall and up at the ceiling, and since she sleeps so little, she spends hours upon hours watching TV on the days she isn’t at work. She switches on the TV as soon as she wakes up, and it’ll stay on all day with the volume turned up to thirty-three, which means that she doesn’t have to think – the chef frying a large piece of white fish on the breakfast programme sends her thoughts jumping off the balcony, where they land on the asphalt with a clang before disappearing.

Now she’s looking at her phone and it says that MUM has phoned three times and that MUM sent a message one minute after the third call: HELLO ARE YOU AWAKE, CAN YOU GIVE ME A SHOUT WHEN YOU SEE THIS. You can’t go around being scared of your mother (the way mothers are scared of their daughters) when your mother is the only person you have – because the thing is, Em doesn’t have anyone else apart from her old mother now – but the hairs on her arms are standing on end and she knows that she has to reply straight away so that her mother won’t worry. She calls back, knowing that her mother picks up the phone late on purpose, and if Emily hangs up before her mother has managed to pick up, her mother will say: But if you hang up so quickly, I’ll start crying.

Only after thirty seconds – Em counts while it rings – does her mother answer.

Em asks why she phoned, and her mother says that she was thinking about heading out today and wondered if Em needed any help, if she should buy some things in for her. Em asks what she’d need help with – not to be rude, even though it comes across like that – and her mother says: Eh, well, I don’t know, and Emily thinks about what she could use some help with. She’s not sure – changing the lightbulb in the bathroom, maybe. She says that her mother can come around four o’clock if she wants, and her mother agrees to see her then.

\*

Such a poor thing, this girl called Emily. As of today, she’s been pregnant for seven whole months, and now it’s only the two of them – Em and her growing belly, Em and the baby – since Pablo disappeared to set some things straight, as he put it. Yes, that’s what happened – he disappeared. Or is that what actually happened? I’m going to sort something out, Pablo had said, locking himself in the room for two hours. Em had sat on the couch and watched TV, fallen asleep, woken up again, Pablo still in the room before he walked out the door, a black bag slung over his shoulder. Emily had looked at Pablo before he left, and Pablo had looked at her, and Emily had wondered what Pablo was thinking, where he was going, and Pablo had winked at Emily and closed the door, locked the door, and Emily had kept watching TV.

For the first few days, she’d spent the evenings sitting and waiting, listening out for someone using the lift out the hall or using the stairs, or for a car stopping outside the apartment block. Then she’d phoned again, and it rang and rang and rang until he finally picked up, his voice flat, and she’d asked “what’s happening?” and Pablo had said “nothing”, his voice completely uninterested, and Emily had repeated what he said – “nothing, what do you mean?” – and Pablo had said “I don’t know”, then a long pause, then “I need some time alone” and “I need to set some things straight with Ousman.” Emily had drummed her fingers on the windowpane and said “alone, what do you mean?” and Pablo had said “I think it’s best if we’re apart for a bit” and she couldn’t understand this, that he was breaking up with her. Or maybe she didn’t want to understand it? No – she didn’t understand it. She’d thought that he’d set some things straight with Ousman and then sooner or later he’d call her, but who knows.

In that moment, Emily understands that she’s been left, but it’s just for a moment. If you’d seen her then, you’d have noticed her eyes, big and dark and tired (being left makes you so awfully tired). She looked utterly unhappy. But when she finds twenty thousand kroner in a plastic bag under a pillow in the bedroom and counts it all, her eyes light up again.

The old auntie would have said: But my child, that’s just the way it goes, and she would have held Emily and rocked her from side to side, and Emily would have fallen asleep again.

Then she’d wake up, and you’d look at her again and want to ask her: so what do you want to be when you grow up?

One time, Em’s mother told her that she had to start earning her own money if she wanted to buy hairbands and makeup like the other girls (her mother was always so broke in the weeks leading up to payday that whenever Em was home alone, she had to phone her and ask if she was allowed to take some food). Em went into a supermarket with a print-out of her CV and a job application, and that was how she got her first job.

\*

New, black asphalt has been laid outside the apartment block, a dark path with a railing leading from Emily’s door right down to the metro stop. This is where she takes the tram to work. Emily leaves earlier than early (it’s almost impossible to leave the flat without somebody looking at her) and holds onto the railing all the way down to the platform so she doesn’t slip on the ice, earlier than early so she can get to the shop and get everything ready: open up, get the tills and the instore banking service up and running. Marewan logs into the computer, makes a smoothie and goes to the toilet while Em boils the kettle and makes herself a cup of coffee. Em carries stacks of newspapers, putting out *VG* and *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten* and a few other, smaller newspapers. Marewan places a chair behind the apple crates, and Em sits down and exhales. It’s time for the thing Em enjoys most about her job: checking the fruit. She looks for small imperfections: notches in the apples, blemishes on the bananas, too-soft avocados – some customers squeeze the avocados until they’re completely flat so they can take advantage of the shop’s double refund offer on bad produce. She makes a pyramid of oranges. She plucks some leaves from the cabbages and some from the basil and the tomato vines, and then she sits down again.

Em could check and check all day long, up until the yellow light on the ceiling tires her eyes out, up until Marewan asks her to take out the leftover food and go to the till.

At some point before her break she’s by the newspaper stand, arranging the newspapers in the shape of a square, when she sees a tiny little photograph in the corner of one of the front pages: Pablo’s friend Ousman. She opens the newspaper. It says – just a small report, really – that the police have raided the home of a central person in the Oslo criminal scene – Ousman – and that they’ve found a badly injured person – almost a coma situation – in a bed, as well as a load of gear. It says that if anyone has any information then they can call them.

She reads with wide eyes and an open mouth; she looks so stupid. It doesn’t feel uncomfortable – it’s exciting, as though she’s in the paper as well. Marewan says: What are you up to? Em says: Nothing, and makes sure to put the paper to one side so she can read it again later. In the toilet, she phones Pablo, but he doesn’t pick up.

\*

It’s early and the shop has just opened when Marewan, the boss, checks the other franchise shops, what their prices are – some of them have almost four million in sales. Marewan has met some of these owners: young men, ambitious, usually gay, who have chosen to postpone their studies because they can earn up to several million *kroner* a year as an assistant – or acting – manager of a supermarket branch. Personally, he has a lot of sales, but not that many – he’d love more, but the shop has so many thieves and Marewan is fed up with thieves, fed up with the days that come one after the other, fed up because he’s still not managed to finish his smoothie. The corner of his eye is stiff with sleep. He prints out three sheets of paper – photos of the thieves – and hangs them up on the fridge door. He takes a marker pen and writes on an A4 sheet: Kurdish mafia, thieves, exclamation mark. The Kurds are the ones who are stealing, according to Marewan – some of them fill their bags with jars of jam, and others fill their bags with beer, and the Romanians also steal, but so do the Bulgarians – they don’t necessarily have to be from Romania. Marewan has seen BG written on the big four-wheel drives that line the street. The Pakistanis might not be thieves, but they’re everything else – you have to keep an eye on them too, Marewan thinks.

He hangs up a note about the staff party, which is also a leaving party for Emily before she goes on maternity leave. He’s booked bowling for everyone. They’ll meet by the shop, then drive down to the centre for the bowling, and afterwards they’ll drive back up to the shop and park the car before walking to a nearby restaurant, a nice one, with good food. It’s important to RSVP in plenty of time, Marewan has written on the note.

Emily is currently sitting out on the shop floor, sticking security tags on the bottom of all the beer cans. She’s sitting on a chair wearing cooling gloves and will sit there pasting tags for several hours.

Marewan feels a kind of responsibility for Emily – not as a father or as a brother and maybe not as a partner, but rather as a responsible boss, or something like that? That feeling of responsibility, whatever it entails, comes sneaking in when a male customer Marewan recognises as a bit of a rogue comes into the shop and asks Emily if she can show him where the sugar is, and even though Emily struggles to walk, or has to walk slowly, swaying from side to side, she has to take him over to the second row of shelves, all the way at the back of the shop beneath a sign advertising baking products. She bends down to pick up a packet of sugar and hands it to the customer, who says to Emily that she’s just as sweet as the sugar. Then Marewan comes and takes over. He helps the customer, and afterwards, at the till, when Emily is buying some cola and crispbreads, she says: You really saved me there, Marewan. And Marewan really wants to use her nickname, Em Em Em, just like Tina does. He just doesn’t know how.

Before Marewan leaves for the day, he takes a look at the accounts. The first few days – Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday – were quiet, apart from after working hours when a lot of money came in, but it went up at the weekend and they landed on 601. This is good, as their budget is 558, which means that sales will settle on 600 from now on. But Marewan also sees that the employees have been putting through returns for Cif and other expensive products – in the last month there was one instance where eight punnets of blue grapes at almost 50 *kroner* each were returned, as well as several air fresheners. It’s Emily – though she’s not the only one, and she’s just so nice because she’s pregnant – who has given the money back to the customer. He goes into the shop and tells Emily, who is closing up today, that this was a scam and that from now on all the goods in the green guarantee should be approved by him, even if it’s under a hundred kroner. Emily says that it was one of the angry ones who was almost certainly headed to the dole office and that she didn’t know what to do, she was the only one there because Jørgen who works on the till was on his break. Always phone me, Marewan says. It’s a technique that junkies use, taking things straight from the shelves and asking to return them. That’s why you must always ask for a receipt, and check it carefully, Marewan says. The rest of the time passes as usual: Emily will take out the bread and the baked goods in the last half hour and take them to the bins, she will ask the person at the till to move goods – toothbrushes, etc. – to the front, she will put the papers away and fill up the snus and cigarettes. Marewan also writes up the Super Tidy-Up Task of the Week. It’s to set up the specialty foodstuffs shelf with him.

Then Marewan is in his car, in a queue of traffic on Trondheimsveien, on his way home to his apartment block, or on the E6 home to Lørenskog or somewhere else out there, Ellingsrud maybe, home to his wife, home to dinner and a shower and bed and lights which are turned off.

Emily sends him a message late at night, after the end of her shift – past one in the morning. She writes I CAN’T COME TO THE PARTY. Marewan replies straight away BUT IT’S YOUR LEAVING PARTY, and Emily replies I HAVE A FAMILY GATHERING. HAVE FUN.

\*

You might think that Emily is an obvious strong female figure, but no. Emily is not just weak, but *weak*: her body, because she is pregnant (and she’ll soon be signed off work too), and her legs, not just thin but *thin*, and her head, look at how it hangs forward. She also has a weak disposition – she is sapped of energy, utterly sapped, and that’s why Marewan has put out a chair for her at work.

She has to sit on the chair all day because of her pelvis. She sits in the chair and daydreams, thinking about…not sure, probably nothing, until a customer appears in front of her face and asks if they have pavlova, and Em asks if he means the frozen kind, but the customer doesn’t know, his wife has just given him a shopping list. They walk over to the frozen goods counter, her in front, him behind, and she bends down to check, her belly touching the edge of the counter. She can’t see any pavlova. I don’t think we have it, she says. One of the day’s other memorable customers wonders why she always looks so sad, or so angry (the customer can’t tell the difference between angry and sad). It’s like she’s not even happy to see the customers, not even the loyal customers who shop here every day – she should smile a bit more.

A few days ago, Em fell asleep during her break, across the table, head in her hands, or just her cheek resting against the tabletop, her belly under the edge of the table, and after forty minutes Marewan came in. He shook her by the arm and told her that her break was over.

\*

It’s much quieter than normal – just the sound of the water running. That’s when it gets much worse. When it’s quiet, she is forced to think in long stretches, thoughts upon thoughts upon thoughts piling into a queue behind each other, never letting up. She soaps her crotch and the back of her neck and under her arms and under her breasts, then rinses herself and turns the water off. Now she’s soaking, and the bathroom is cold, and water is leaking from the shower cabinet onto the floor. She steps right into a puddle on the floor and thinks a sudden, sorrowful thought: she’s going to have a baby who will grow up in a home where the shower cabinet leaks, a home with foundation smeared across the door frame. Oh no.

Does she feel betrayed? At first, she cried loads, then she’d cried so much that she no longer knew why, and then it was all just a bit vague. But could it be that he’s something she can scratch away, like the hard, dark scab of a mosquito bite?

*Is her inner world so much bigger than the one that surrounds her?*

Yes, she’s thinking about Pablo’s face: its yellow hue, the mole on his cheek.

At night, she dreams about faces and about bodies and about being tucked up nice and close, and sometimes, if she lies there long enough with her eyes closed, she’s able to conjure up the feeling that Pablo is actually there with her. Em can feel it, that Pablo is actually there.

At the start, Pablo held her stomach – her flat stomach – and stroked circles around her navel. There’s a Pablo Junior in there, Pablo said, absolutely certain that it was a boy.

But now you might say that Emily has to move on. You might say that Pablo is probably never coming back, but how can you end it with someone when you can’t even get in touch with them? It’s not possible. A note? A message?

\*

There are things Emily knows nothing about, things about Pablo. There are things out there that don’t concern her. She is not to dig deeper into this.

Pablo phones and says that nobody – not Em, not Em’s mother, not Pablo’s family, nobody – should explain themselves to the police, nobody should speak to the police at all. The pigs try to act like your pal so you’ll talk, Pablo says. They’ll take you, not help you, Pablo says. Ask for a lawyer, Pablo says. But what have you actually done? Em asks. Nothing, Pablo almost shouts from the other end. And that’s why, in her first meeting with the policewoman, Em will ask for a lawyer, even though they’re sitting in two armchairs, a low table with a plastic plant on it between them. The policewoman will laugh softly to herself because it’s like Em is saying something she’s seen in a film. We’re sitting here having an informal chat, but you say you need a lawyer, the policewoman will say. I’m a bit surprised by that. You almost have to tell me what you know.

\*

Emily, as grey and wet as the concrete apartment blocks up in Romsås – how is she meant to look after a baby? Will she be able to hold a child? Will it come naturally to her, or will she be stiff and awkward?

There are always some families who don’t manage. In some families, misfortune is hereditary – it lurks in the genes, incubating there. There is confirmation of this everywhere Emily goes; it’s like a cross on her personal health record. After three check-ups at the clinic without the baby’s father, the midwife had to write “alone with baby” in the column along with all the other information. Yet her belly swells as it should, her baby’s heartbeat is normal. There’s also the doctor, who says that pelvic pain during pregnancy is something that can make many people sad and depressed. You aren’t able to move around enough. It’s important to move, he says, because it’s particularly important to be active when you’re pregnant. It’s important you come back if you feel down. It’ll get better after a while, the doctor says, and as early as nine o’clock the next morning, family services (or whatever it’s called now) phone and say that they’ve spoken to Em’s doctor and that they’re prepared to show up at short notice if needs be. It’s a service that should be easy to access and it won’t demand too much of you, says the lady on the phone, if you need someone to talk to. And even though the lady on the phone makes her voice as friendly and smiley as she can, the lady on the phone knows that it’s just a matter of time before this pregnant woman caves in on herself like a cheap chair. Em replies that everything is fine and that she feels fine – something she often does.

She has put on several kilos in one week and the midwife at the clinic will soon say that Em is big and if she doesn’t start to get a grip she’ll be induced before her due date because her pelvis is so narrow – no, because it can be dangerous with babies as big as this (but that’s got nothing to do with the pelvis, so I don’t know why she says this to Emily?).

Em has grown outwards and takes up more space that she expected. Her thighs hang over the side of the chair; she takes up two seats on the tram. But now the idea of the baby has become something she’s comfortable with. The baby in my belly is waiting for me, Em says. It’s nice, the midwife says, that you’re making space. She asks Emily to lie down on what Emily would have called a board, but what is actually a kind of bed, over which the midwife has put down paper. The paper rustles when Em lies down, and the midwife – warm and friendly now – warms the gel in her hands and spreads it over Em’s stomach, then scans in different places – not here, but there. There is the baby’s back, the midwife says, pointing at the right-hand side of the ultrasound probe, and here are the feet, the midwife says, and she presses the apparatus gently into the stomach a few times so that the baby moves, rolls over. Afterwards, she measures the baby with a measuring tape and says: so biiiiiiiig.

Yes, at first the midwife is warm and gentle, but afterwards she’s serious, typing away with her thin little wrinkled fingers, nails painted pink – it’s like flicking a light switch. She’s spoken with Em’s doctor and she’s spoken with family services and she’s spoken with a social worker about follow-ups – on Wednesdays they can set up appointments for her, or else they can phone, so that she can have someone to lean on. So that you can have a kind of backbone, the midwife says. And watch your sugar – don’t eat sugar, and keep your legs elevated.

In addition, she should be signed off work completely. The midwife wonders why this hasn’t already been done (but dearie, sweetheart, petal). Doesn’t her boss know that she’s pregnant? She can’t be working full time in a shop when she’s heavily pregnant, and in her third trimester, at that (!). But Emily probably doesn’t know that – she just took fewer shifts at work because she felt exhausted and queasy. Ach, I suppose, the midwife says, it depends on how much child benefit you get.

\*

Like a guardian angel, a neighbour comes dashing towards Emily’s mother, who is standing outside the entrance to the apartment block. He is running towards her, Emily’s mother, who is an older lady and who is holding an almost-empty plastic bag and isn’t wearing a hat or a scarf. Let me get that for you, the neighbour says, and her mother smiles, and he unlocks the door and holds it open for her. She goes in and stamps the snow from her shoes on the mat in front of the post boxes. Well, aren’t you quite the ladies’ man, her mother says, then starts walking upstairs. The neighbour asks if she wouldn’t rather take the lift, and her mother says: The lift? No, I never take the lift. I’ve been waiting outside for a long time, you see. My daughter lives on the top floor and she never hears the buzzer, she continues. I don’t think she wants to hear that I’m ringing the buzzer, so now she’ll probably be surprised that I managed to get into the stairway, her mother laughs. The neighbour walks behind her and humours her, alternating between *well naturally* and *is that right*. It takes some time because her mother places both feet on one step before continuing. When they reach the third floor, he says goodbye and tells her to send his wishes to Emily, and the mother of the girl called Emily waves.

Her mother comes over to fix the lightbulb. Em had finally managed to send her a message saying that it had blown (and lied, saying it blew the night before when really it’s been dark for two weeks) and that she needed someone to keep an eye out as she stood on the chair to change it in case she went flying.

What a place, her mother says; she has almost never been in the flat. Oh, she probably thought it would look more…spotless (?) just because it’s a young woman’s flat. She stamps the snow off her shoes on the doormat (again) and puts her shoes neatly beside each other. What a place, yep, exactly, thinks Em. But then she thinks that, in many ways, this is something her mother says because she wants to straighten things out. I mean, it’s not that bad here, she says to her mother, and her mother shakes her head – not in agreement, more like she doesn’t understand what Em means. It’s not that bad? You do have to clean, you know! Her mother finds a glass from the cupboard, which she washes before filling it with water and drinking from it. Then she settles down on the couch and turns on the TV with the remote and asks if there’s anything else Em needs help with apart from the light. Em replies that she’s got most things under control, and her mother looks around, searching for something that’s missing, and Em says: Mum, stop looking for flaws.

When her mother gets frustrated, she purses her lips and her face turns red. This time (she doesn’t understand what she’s done to be spoken to in this manner) her mother turns particularly red, the colour spreading down across her neck, and her lips tremble and the water trickles out the sides of her mouth when she drinks.

When Emily’s mother gets angry, she purses her lips together for a few seconds and thinks shameful thoughts that a mother should never think, but which disappear as quick as anything – poof, now they’re gone. Her mother, in contrast to Em, in contrast to Pablo, is able to control her anger – she puts it in a square box and places it at the back of her mind. She doesn’t call her anger forth more than a few times a year, and when it bubbles over, she can say nasty things (one time, she’d thrown money at her daughter, just like you’d do to a filthy whore).

Em’s mother was the kind of person who had to do everything herself, the kind of person who thought that if she put too much squeezy cheese on Em’s sandwiches then child services would come and take Em away from her.

And the kind of person who frightens, who says that Em tells family services or the midwife or the health visitor too much, that child services can use whatever she says against her at a later point.

When Em climbs onto the chair to change the lightbulb, her mother holds the chair steady at the bottom, right down by the legs – she’s on all fours and holding it as tight as she can. Em looks down at her back. While she’s holding the chair, she talks about a TV programme where some lady visits a maternity ward. The small, narrow back of her mother, the slightly protruding backbone…If she stumbles, Emily thinks, she can use her mother as a step, and then her mother would break something or other and not be able to get up again.

Her mother thinks that there are so many flaws and messes in your own home, flaws and messes that you don’t notice, but other people do: that the chairs are different, that the floor is scratched, that the kitchen cupboards haven’t been wiped, that the windows aren’t clean, grease stains and shit becoming visible when the sun shines in through the windows of the flat. After they’ve eaten – a few rolls she’d brought with her in the bag – Emily goes into the living room, turns on the TV and lies down on the couch. Her mother often wonders if Emily is completely depressed and not able to look after herself anymore. Emily looks so exhausted, her face round and shiny, her hair pulled into a greasy ponytail. But Emily, nothing is in order here, she says. Are you down in the dumps, or what? Em doesn’t reply. Em lies on the couch, a woollen blanket covering her.

Her mother says: You have to clean up after yourself, and her mother says: You have to get your life in order. It’s just like Emily is a teenager again. Her mother makes a gratin for dinner. Her mother says out loud to the empty kitchen: Can’t you at least hang up a calendar, and afterwards her mother puts the dish on the table, shouts on Emily, and they both help themselves. Em comes only after a few minutes (her mother wants to shout on her several times, but you can’t shout and shout and shout in such a small flat, what would people think?) and she looks at the food and picks at it for a long time. Sausage gratin, Em says. This isn’t sausage gratin.