

*The following short story is excerpted from Chad Gayle's short story collection **Second Coming**, available exclusively at Amazon.com.*

Emily

by Chad Gayle

There were never sweaters, never blouses with deep cuts, and even when she wore jeans, blue jeans that were barely blue, Emily, who was almost always Em, showed up in shirts that were long and loose, sleeves and tails that kept her secrets safe while the rest of the tenth grade posed and preened before magnetic mirrors that were tacked to the backs of their locker doors, so that the way that she seemed to hide herself inside those baggy clothes said something about what she didn't want or need, and since she wouldn't talk about kisses or crushes or who she would like to lean against in the parking lot behind the school, how could I be the one to change her, to bring her back into the fold when I was short and skinny and had no clique of my own, when my eyes turned down and my lips snapped shut if she happened to pass by in last period, the yearbook class where she arranged and re-arranged the pictures that I'd taken and the strips of clip art that she'd cut out with her deft but careful hands?

I did make an effort; there were moments when I tried, when a question she had to ask about a crop made my mumbling more important than it had a right to be, when the slight smile that swung lightly on her pale, often unpainted lips gave me a reason to think that she knew that I had a secret of my own, something I wanted to share, but we were not alone, and how could we be when my heart shrank each and every time I put it to myself to ask the kinds of questions that I would have to ask to reach such a stage, to carry the conversation past the girls who were standing sideways at the same table, giggling at some picture that they'd seen a thousand times before.

That was why I used the camera instead, why I aimed the lens her way, although I was always cautious, always aware of the danger of being caught as I put her in the frame and pretended to test the Canon's meter or practiced my fast focus while I was tucked into my corner of the room, panning and clicking as I looked forward to the last bell, the bell that would let me snag a few choice minutes in the lab across the hall, where I would have the trays to myself and the glossies would come out of the last bath in shades of grey that would be crude, that would make her reddish hair look black, but which would catch her just as she was about to grin, just as she stopped herself from showing something that she didn't want to show as she leaned across the table with her elbows pressed against the mocked up sheets.

After a few weeks, I had so many glances I'd stolen from her that I wondered if it was the camera or the way that I kept her in focus that made me see her as I did, as someone who didn't want to be seen, as a girl who was too humble to think that there was someone there who looked forward to meeting her in a dream, and this began to matter more and more as the months passed and the year was about to end, because summer would come between us, and short of becoming something that I could never be, some creature who could talk and talk and talk, I didn't see how I could change it all without coming clean, without spreading the news or writing some silly note that could be misconstrued, misinterpreted because of the way I'd arranged some words that I hardly knew how to use, so I forced myself to take a new tack, to ramp up the courage that I thought I would need to stop by her locker or to seek her out in the hall, and I got myself so wrapped up in how I was going to build up to that point that I didn't notice the binder that I'd left behind, the binder that was sitting in the corner where I'd stowed my stuff as I went out to the lawn at the front of the school to shoot another group of clubs, teams of teens who'd been pulled from their classes to pose while I snapped a roll for the book that would be theirs next year.

When I came back to class, back to the room that was buzzing, I saw Em standing in my corner beside the binder, and I saw the prints that were tucked between her fingers—the pictures of her that said out loud what I could never say—and I felt as if my legs had become two wooden sticks, as if the steps that I'd taken were dragging me back to the open door, so that I stumbled, tripped over an extension cord that was always tied to the projector at the back of the class; reeling, with my left hand clutching the camera that was slung across my neck, my right arm outstretched, I braced myself—by some miracle of unconscious control—against the side of the teacher's desk and managed not to fall flat against the floor.

Hearing the squeak of my sneakers on the hard tile, she turned to look at me and I saw something in her eyes that I'd thought I'd never see; I realized, as we stood there watching each other, waiting for the other one to make the next move, that I wasn't at fault, that words weren't really what she'd wanted, and when she smiled, with her blue eyes wide and bright, I knew without a doubt that it was a smile which was only meant for me.