

Shop Girl Diaries

EMILY BENET was born in London to a Welsh mother and Spanish father. Inspired by Brian Jacques' 'Redwall' series, she spent much of her childhood writing stories about talking field mice. Later she discovered point horror books and co-wrote 'Evil Eyes' with a school friend which she self-published in her exercise book.

She moved to Barcelona at 13 where she won her first significant prize for writing and was published in a short story collection. After gaining her A-levels and Spanish Baccalaureate she accepted a place on the highly acclaimed English and Creative Writing Bachelor course at East Anglia, where all the writers wore stripy tights. Unfortunately she didn't like stripy tights, neither was she enamored by Norfolk's flat landscape and windy weather.

She returned to South East London determined to write a novel. She tried out different jobs; she taught English in a language school, made a terrible secretary in an estate agents and temped in a catering firm. In the end she went to work in her Mum's chandelier shop. It was in the shop, amid the chaos of crystal beads and confusing customers that she began her Shop Girl Blog.

Emily's short stories have won awards, been selected for readings and are published online. She has a Diploma in Journalism but knows her first love will always be fiction.

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Shop Girl Diaries

June



Wednesday 25th June

I DIDN'T THINK I'D still be working in my Mum's chandelier shop at 24. I thought I might've gained some independence and be sharing a flat with someone who didn't wash their dishes.

I'd hoped to have published a novel too. Not a best seller; just something half decent.

I read a book called *Natural Born Winners* which said I was more likely to achieve my goals if I wrote them down.

So I did.

I wrote: I want to publish a book by 24.

Well, I'm 25 in 4 months and my book isn't written.

Instead I'm working in Mum's shop, where customers mostly come in for therapy and the occasional light bulb.

'A light shop?' People echo when I tell them.

'Yes, I bring light to the world.'

As if I've never said *that* before.

Then I try and make it sound cool.

I explain how we make the lights ourselves.

But in reality, the hard part, the moulding and plating, happens in the factory in Spain.

Mum and I just dress the frames with crystal, which we string together with pins, bead by bead.

It's a bit like knitting although I can't be sure of that because I don't know how to knit. My cousin, Rosie, tried to teach me on a coach to Wales and I thought I was going to be sick.

Some customers watch closely as we pin the crystal with our special tool.

It's actually just a small screwdriver with a hole drilled through it and not that fancy at all. They look on impressed and ask me if I have a qualification.

"That's a boring job you got there," Maggie said when she came in this morning. She's an Irish woman in her eighties who's always falling over. She only came in to talk to Mum and left when she saw she wasn't about.

It was dead today.

Two elderly ladies peered through the window for twenty minutes then pushed their trolleys on down the road.

Someone walked in but realising we weren't the bakers, walked out again.

I know things are bad when I'm clinging on to the regulars. They're the ones who offload for hours, with the exception of George, the retired road sweeper.

He remarks on the weather sometimes and leaves doughnuts on the counter.

“Slimmin’ cakes,” he calls them.

Mum’s been away at the factory and now the doughnuts are gathering at the bottom of the stairs. There are only so many you can eat in a day.

I was hoping George had a crossword on the go and would ask me a question. His quiz questions are the only ones I’ve ever been able to get.

“The capital of Canada?” he might ask.

And I write the answer on the back of a used price label.

But he didn’t have a crossword; he was only passing by because he wanted to put a bet on.

“I bet on a horse once,” I told him, because I wanted someone to stay and talk to me. “I only bet because the horse was called Emily, like me.”

“And did you win anything?”

“No, it didn’t run.”

There wasn’t much to say after that so he left the sticky paper bag of doughnuts on the counter and left.

Thursday 26th June

I SPENT MOST OF today wishing I could do something shop-changing, like pay for graffiti artists to spray paint the front of the building.

“Why don’t you renovate?” people ask, as if it were as simple as dusting the telly.

It would cost a fortune just to seal up the leaking roof. Each morning I'm surprised to find the shop still intact.

One shop fell down on this street.

It was the Christian book shop; called 'The Rock.'

They've moved into the old bakers now.

We do our own renovations and enlist the help of our neighbour Alfie.

Alfie is the King of DIY and is better stocked than B&Q. He repairs, rewires and reinvents. There is nowhere he can't put a lamp holder.

"If it stands still long enough then it can be turned into a table lamp," he says.

Mum and Alfie once drilled out real reindeer antlers for a light in a window display.

"It smelt horrible," he said.

"Like what?"

"Toe nails," he said, and later, "like burning hair."

Because our shop is such a work shop it's always in a mess. My old classmate Petra did a lot to give it a facelift when she worked part-time but there's only so much you can do on a low budget.

Friday 27th June

THE RUBBISH THING ABOUT working alone is that you have to keep locking the door if you want to go upstairs.

When you're pinning crystal you have to go upstairs all the time to wash your hands. There's no point using crystal if it's cloudy with fingerprints.

If you don't want to wash your hands then you want to go to the toilet. If you don't want to go to the toilet or wash your hands then you fancy a cup of tea. And of course, after the cup of tea you're guaranteed to need the toilet a few minutes later, and after the toilet, you really should wash your hands.

Today there came a point where I couldn't be bothered to go upstairs anymore. So I pushed the crystal to one side and opened the freebie magazine that had come through the door.

It was yet another dull eco-edition on carbon free holidays. Top 3 went something like:

- Camp in your garden
- Camp in your friend's garden
- Camp in your local park

N.B If you have no garden or local park, why not buy some seeds and plant flowers in your window box instead. Or why not plant a whole tree and camp in that when it gets big enough.

It's not that I'm not green. A few weeks ago Mum and I thought about getting a couple of chickens in the garden.

We even had names: Margarita and Clucky.

Margarita, because Mum used to make up stories about a chicken called Margarita when I was little and would always fall asleep half way through. Clucky, because we'd had a glass of wine and were doing chicken noises.

"But what about the foxes!" I'd suddenly cried.

They're as tame as dogs and forever sniffing at our patio doors.

We've got a lot of wild life because our garden isn't just overgrown; it's a jungle.

Our visitors include pigeons, frogs, a clumsy squirrel, a fat black cat, blackbirds, sparrows and blue tits.

"Oh how lovely to hear the birds!" an elderly friend recently exclaimed. I smiled, "Yes, isn't it?"

Actually it reminded me of living in my ex's flat; those early mornings being woken up by the incessant chirping of baby birds and myself at the window with an air rifle.

Good times.

Because that's the other thing about working alone for long periods of time, you begin to get nostalgic about all the rubbish.

Saturday 28th June

GEORGE BROUGHT IN ANOTHER two iced doughnuts this morning. Mum's still not back from Spain so I ate one to keep the numbers down on the stairs.

I can't pinpoint exactly when he started bringing us in cakes.

We've known him since the shop began. He cleaned our street back when it was lined with vegetable stalls.

As a sweeper, he'd done us the odd favour; taking away a black bag or box of scrap. He used to bring in old vinyls and paperbacks people had thrown away. Once he told us he'd found a whole goose. But he didn't bring

that in, thankfully. I don't think we would've known how to deal with a whole goose.

A rubbish collection works out too expensive for a small shop like us. 'Fifty quid a bag,' according to the dry cleaners.

I don't know what our neighbours do with their waste, unless of course they're the ones dumping plastic bags on the pavement outside our door.

I wouldn't be surprised; it's not like any of us are making big money round here.

I reckon the hairdressers' are recycling theirs into wigs.

They've a display of them, mainly in a dark reddish colour, except for one, which is bright pink.

"We could wear one each as part of our shop uniform," Mum suggested.

But we don't have a uniform, there's got to be some perks of working in your own shop.

Petra used to wear a lot of red and black.

Suicide Colours. The colours I'll be wearing when Spain loses tomorrow.

I'm talking about the football; the European Cup Final.

And when it comes to football I'm Spanish, like my dad. So is my brother. Even my Mum's Spanish when Spain plays and *she's* Welsh.

Supporting Spain has never much fun. In my memory they've always lost.

Not just lost.

"Robbed," Papa always says.

The pain of these losses might've been partly avoided if Papa wasn't always so optimistic. Every year he says we have the dream team and every year I believe him.

In 1996 I believed him.

England versus Spain, at Wembley.

I went to school and told everyone Spain was definitely going to win.

Then came the dreaded penalty shoot-out; Hierro hit the post and Nadal's shot was saved.

I remember crying in my bedroom and between the sobs eating a chocolate egg which didn't taste of anything.

Monday 30th June

I WENT TO A bar in Camden to see the final. There were supposed to be loads of us Spanish supporters meeting there but at the last minute half of them went to a different pub. Papa was going to come too but then decided he was more comfortable at home.

I stayed where I was with an old Spanish school friend, because the pub where we were had bigger screens. I didn't have the Spanish kit so I wore a red spaghetti strap and a yellow neck scarf.

The atmosphere was brilliant; such a buzz.

I'd brought old tubes of red and yellow watercolour paint. When Spain scored the people on the table behind asked to borrow them and they painted splodgy little flags on each other's cheeks.

I couldn't believe Spain was winning in a final.

“Oh my god,” my friend said, not the biggest party girl, “does this mean we have to celebrate?”

I shook my head at her in disbelief and broke into a chant with the girl beside me.

I’d been waiting for this ever since I was a little girl, watching football with Papa on the sofa, my legs too short to reach the end.

The referee blew the whistle, the long-awaited win was a reality and the pub erupted in cheers.

Meanwhile my friend slipped off home with the excuse of an early morning.

I turned to the *Spanglish* guy on the table behind; a *Spanglish* guy who, after a few more beers I started calling *my brother from another mother*.

“I’m coming out with you!”

“Of course you are! That lot over there are too,” and he pointed over at this bloke coming towards us.

A tall bloke in a shirt with his sleeves casually rolled up; dark tussled hair and a big smile.

I went over to meet him and thinking he was Spanish gave him a big, celebratory hug.

“*Colombiano*,” he corrected, after I’d kissed him on both cheeks.

We went outside and found the street full of people in red and yellow.

“*¡Los Ingleses tienen a Gibraltar pero los Españoles tienen a Camden!*” someone shouted.

(“*The English have Gibraltar but the Spanish have Camden!*”)

I was so happy, I couldn’t stop talking and smiling to my new friend with the tussled hair.

He was with a pretty, blonde, German girl; the only one in the group whose team hadn't won.

We went to Proud Galleries altogether and when she went to get a drink, I turned to him, and thinking I was being natural asked,

"Es tu novia?"

(Is that your girl friend?)

I blame the beer. I felt so comfortable around him. Even more so when he said, as naturally as he could muster without laughing, that no, she wasn't his girlfriend. That he didn't have a girlfriend.

Later he asked me what I did.

I gave him a different answer to my usual.

I told him I was a writer.

Then I quickly said I wasn't really a writer but that I wrote. And then I said that *really* I just worked in my Mum's lighting shop.

He was more interested in my first answer than my second.

He told me he was a freelance sound recordist. I didn't really know what that meant but it sounded clever and a lot cooler than working in Mum's shop.

Most of us could've stayed up all night celebrating but when Proud closed there was nowhere else to go.

He didn't want me going home on the bus with *my brother from another mother* and found me a taxi.

"So will I see you tomorrow?" he asked, as I was getting in the car.

"No!"

Tomorrow I'd be tired and would look awful.

"When then?"

“Thursday.”

It was the first day that came to mind.

When I got home, my head was swimming with all the excitement and beer.

“I think I’ve met someone,” I whispered to my shoes, as I pulled them off. “I think I’ve met someone.”

I whispered twice, because I couldn’t believe it. Neither that Spain had finally won the European Cup nor that I had a date.



July



Tuesday 1st July

MY DATE ADDED ME as a friend on Facebook and MSN Messenger. “To stalk you properly,” he said.

I gave him my website address too. I’d set it up a few weeks ago as an online collection of my writing, mainly short stories.

I wanted him to stumble across my travel piece on Colombia and the Lost City trek. To impress him, I suppose, and establish a connection.

“Maybe it’s not that I like *him*,” I said to Mum, “maybe it’s just that I loved Colombia.”

She tossed spring onions into a frying pan and the oil hissed.

“Maybe,” she said.

Really I was thinking about that catch up drink on the Southbank with Velvet back in June. Velvet and I went to school together and travelled together so she knows me pretty well.

She knows I lose bottles of water if they don't fit in my backpack, even when we are deep in the jungle with no sources of water nearby.

"So, is there anyone?" she'd said.

"No and nor is there going to be."

Then I swore to her I wouldn't go out with anyone for a whole year.

"I'm over relationships," I'd said. "I'm done."

It was time to be on my own and concentrate solely on writing.

"I give you three months," she'd said.

"I'm serious."

"Three months."

"Look," I'd said, starting to get worked up. "I bet you dinner it'll be a year before I have another boyfriend."

"You're going to lose badly," she'd said, smug as ever.

That was less than a month ago and I've already met someone I know I want to see again.

Wednesday 2nd July

WHAT WITH ALL THESE doughnuts Patrick's been bringing in, I couldn't really justify leaving the shop to buy a Sesame snap.

But it was lucky I did.

If I hadn't I wouldn't have learned of the approaching Apocalypse.

It was all over the papers.

'DOWN! DOWN! DOWN!' yelled the front cover of *The Independent*.

I went back to my shop and listened to the news on the radio.

'Buyers can't afford to buy! Sellers can't afford to sell! Expect shops to be empty!'

I looked around.

My shop was indeed empty.

Disaster lay heavily on the horizon and it was really bad-timing.

Every recent desire I'd had came flooding into my head all at once. My feet, bored stiff of flip-flops and sweaty ballet pumps, had been crying out for new sandals. I'd fancied a floaty dress to match my new sandals. I'd wanted to wear my new sandals and floaty dress to the park and for my date to see me in my new sandals and floaty dress in the park.

DOWN! DOWN! DOWN!

There was no way I could justify such frivolous spending now. A new era was upon us and it smelt of . . . drains actually.

It was the rain.

I went up to the toilet and poured bleach down the sink. Water was dripping through the ceiling. There was a puddle in the stock room and splashes in the window display.

There's something about rain in a lighting shop that doesn't feel right.

I tried to keep going with the crystal strings I was making but it was hard to stay motivated.

I was really hungry too. I kept pacing up and down the shop with my crystal pinning tool in my hand and one bead of crystal. But lunch was out of the question.

If I thought about it, a panini each day really added up.

If I multiplied a panini times five, then times the whole month, then doubled that for when Mum was in and the times we worked six days . . .

but I couldn't find the calculator anywhere. I looked for it for ages which made me hungrier and even more fed up.

I concluded that in view of the situation I'd have to make do with eating the bio-degradable foam pellets we kept for packing.

We get them with deliveries from a specific company.

Even if we only order a spare glass shade from them they'll still stick it in a massive box filled with these foam pellets.

They look, smell and taste like *wotsits*. They probably even have more nutritional value than *wotsits*. The downside is they've also probably been left lying around in several different warehouses and been peed on by vermin.

I was resigned to it all, almost.

As I brought the squishy yellow pellet to my mouth, I paused.

It dawned on me that this was not the way it needed to be.

It dawned on me that I'd been a victim of sensationalist propaganda.

My shop was NOT empty because of the credit crunch.

The real reason why my shop was empty was....

Well if I knew that I'd be a much more successful business woman.

Anyway, I bought a mozzarella panini in the end and it was really chewy.

Thursday 3rd July

ROSIE AND I BOTH had a date this evening.

Mine was the same one I'd met from the final of the Euro Cup.