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Emma James and the Future of Butterflies

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Emma James and the Future of Butterflies

1. What you need to know about Emma James

‘Listen,’ people would sometimes say to Emma James out of the blue, ‘there’s something I want to ask you.’ Right away Emma James knew what they were on about. It was her name. Emma James was a girl, but her middle name was obviously a boy’s name, and an English name at that, and many people found that weird. If her name had been Emma Gerlinde or Emma Amalia no one would have thought twice about it. Emma James didn’t think there was anything unusual about her name, after all she’d always had it, ever since she was born, and that was eleven years ago. But why she’d been given the name she hadn’t known herself for a while.

She remembered exactly when it was that she asked her mother about it not so long ago.

It was late August, the summer holidays, and they were sitting one morning on the balcony of their flat where there was just enough room for two chairs and nothing else, not even a flowerpot. Her mother had put the newspaper aside, tipped back her sunhat and Emma James realised that she enjoyed saying what she was about to tell. ‘When I was expecting you your father and I didn’t know whether you were going to be a girl or a boy. That’s why we chose a girl’s name and a boy’s name. So if you turned out to be a girl we decided we’d call you Emma. And if you turned out to be a boy, James.’

Emma's mother went on to say that during her pregnancy she grew so fat and round that she looked as if she'd swallowed one of those giant gym balls, and she and her husband became very fond of both the names.

'So much that we didn't want to give up either of them when the baby arrived. Obviously Emma had to be the first name, so that people would know right away that you were a girl.'

Remembering what her mother told her, from then on Emma would use more or less the same words to answer people who asked her about her name.

'D'you mean that if your parents had had a boy, he'd be called James Emma?' people then asked after they'd thought about it a bit. Some people took rather a long time thinking it over, and then Emma James would worry that perhaps they were a bit feeble minded.

'Exactly,' said Emma James. 'And what's more, both my parents happen to love England.'

Emma's brother was called Rainer Maria. He was five years younger than her, six, that is, and he was the reason why Emma James's parents were often tired. During her second pregnancy their mother had stayed very thin and the baby she then gave birth to had been tiny and unwell. Up to now things hadn't improved - Rainer Maria was very skinny for a six-year old. He suffered from severe asthma, an illness that makes it difficult to breathe. Instead of breathing normally he had to cough a lot, making it look as if he was going to choke at any moment. That's why he hadn't started school yet. And although Emma James said to him, 'Hey man, you're so lucky!', he whined about it.

The parents spent a lot of time taking Rainer Maria to new doctors, which meant there was less time to pay attention to Emma James, but she'd got used to that. For the moment Rainer Maria was feeling more or less OK, and he often lay on his bed listening to CDs, while Emma James's parents were working, each in their own room, one at either end of the apartment.

On the day this story begins Emma James got up and was packing the things she needed for school that day. Normally she did that in the evening, but on a Monday school started later. It had been a lovely weekend, and she was singing softly to herself, as she organized her schoolbag, fitting her biology book, her paint box and maths things into it. Then she walked to the bathroom to find a plaster. 'What do you need a plaster for?' asked her mother who came rushing across the corridor in her usual hectic morning rush. 'Have you cut yourself?'

Emma James shook her head and said: 'Mia is going to fall over during break today, and that'll make her knee bleed.'

'Oh, right,' said Emma James's mother and went back into her office. You might find that a fairly laid-back reaction to what Emma had just said about what was going to happen *later*. But first you have to know that Mia was Emma James's best friend, and everyone knew that Mia was always falling over or breaking something by accident. And secondly,

Emma James's mother had got used to the idea that her daughter was able to see ahead a bit into the future - mostly one or two days ahead, very occasionally a week. So far she'd never managed a month ahead. Up to now there had just been little things that Emma knew before they actually happened, such as what the weather was going to be like or that she would lose her new red beanie, or that Mia would graze her knee, so that

it bled – no more than that. When it was about to happen her head started to ache for a while, and then Emma knew something she hadn't known before. She saw what was going to happen like a little film running in front of her eyes. It was as simple as that. Emma James called her special talent her 'dreams', because it was a bit like the dreams you have while you're asleep. But her 'dreams' were far more exciting because in fact they went on to actually happen. There was always something that Emma James needed to organise – plasters, an umbrella, something to play with in case she came across a cat. Strangers never asked Emma James about tomorrow, because they couldn't see this special talent of hers, which was a relief for Emma James because she already had enough explaining to do with her name, and was only too pleased not to have to deal with any other questions.

It had been a bit of a problem at first with her parents. They were always asking Emma James things, such as who would win the presidential election in America, or whether Mrs Thingummy liked her

new holiday apartment in Switzerland, or what the numbers in the next lottery draw were going to be, as that might turn them into a millionaire family.

But Emma James hadn't known the answers, and ever since she once burst into tears at the supper table, her parents left her alone. One time she heard her father say to her mother; 'She's bound to grow out of it.' What her father meant was that Emma James was changing all the time, she was getting taller, learning more, every year she could run and swim faster, and there were also other things where the opposite was happening - being afraid of the dark for example, which she wasn't any more. But as far as her 'dreams' went, there he was mistaken. By now Emma James was eleven and she still had this special talent. She'd got used to it, just

as she had to her parents being the only ones who believed her – or at least acted as if they did. They were well-mannered people, after all. One thing her parents did insist on was that if something really bad was going to happen, then Emma James had to tell them. So far though that hadn't happened.

Emma James's best friend Mia wasn't that easily convinced.

'Rubbish,' she said when Emma told her she sometimes got a headache, closed her eyes and then saw something that was about to happen shortly. 'You're just trying to show off.'

'But I knew I was going to get an A in Geography,' said Emma James, 'I told you I would, and then I did.'

'That's only because you know all the rivers in Europe off by heart. That's why you got an A.'

Emma James thought for a moment. 'But I know what I'm getting for my birthday as well. I know a day before and then I can look forward to it.'

'I know much further ahead than that,' said Mia. 'Because there's a secret drawer where my mother hides presents, and I found out where she keeps the key. She sometimes buys up special offers, and then that's *months ahead.*'

A few weeks after they'd had this conversation back in November, she took a carrot and two bits of coal to school, because she knew that there'd be so much snow after school was over, that they could make a snowman. She showed Mia proudly what she'd brought with her and said, 'Look. I know it's going to snow, I dreamed it.' At that Mia looked at Emma James as if she wasn't quite right in the head.

Then she asked 'You didn't happen to watch the weather forecast by any chance?'

‘No!’

But Mia carried on giving her a funny look – as if Emma James was a toaster that had stopped working and let the breakfast toast pop up frozen, instead of hot and crispy. After that Emma James stopped saying anything. If people couldn’t get their heads around her secret, well then, tough. It wasn’t her problem.

There was just one time when Emma James still believed she could convince Mia of her talent. It was a Thursday and all the children were in the art room, messing about with clay, when the headmistress’s secretary popped her head round the door to say there would be no games lesson as the teacher still had ‘flu.

‘And I specially brought my new jogging things, and gym shoes, and towel and shower gel and stuff,’ Mia burst out in disappointment.

Emma James, who hadn’t brought any games kit with her, cleared her throat and was about to say how convenient it was to be able to see into the future a bit, when a lump of clay came flying across hitting her in the back and distracted her.

2. Mia trips and falls

So on the day this story begins Emma James had taken a plaster to school. When the bell rang for break time Emma James said to Mia she didn’t feel like going outside, but wanted to spend the time indoors snuggled up on the new sofa in the day room. Of course she was hoping that Mia would stay with her, so that nothing could happen to her knee. Actually Emma James knew that wasn’t the way it worked, but at least she wanted to try.

‘I don’t feel like sitting on the sofa,’ said Mia

‘I want to slip out to the baker’s on Forest Road and buy a Danish pastry.’

‘I’m not in the least bit hungry,’ lied Emma James.

‘Then I’ll run there on my own and I won’t bring you anything.’

Better not, thought Emma James, slipped the plaster into her pocket and trotted along beside Mia. Worriedly she fixed her eyes on her friend’s thin brown legs emerging from her shorts. So far so good.

They dashed out of the school grounds, which was actually against the rules. Break time only lasted fifteen minutes and the children were supposed to stay in the playground, but escaping on the sly made these little outings all the more exciting. There were always good reasons, such as that the flaky pastries from the bakery on Forest Road tasted so much better than the rock hard wholemeal biscuits from the school’s baker.

Emma James tried to stay close to Mia, so that she could catch her if she fell. But Mia was wheeling about; she circled and zigzagged and ran on ahead. ‘Wait for me,’ called Emma James, ‘Don’t run off without me!’ Mia said ‘OK’, but kept on hopping about.

‘Hello Mia, hello Emma James,’ said the woman in the bakery and sold them Danish pastries with sultanas. She was one of those people, who’d thought long and hard about the explanation of Emma James’ names,

but her Danish pastries were really, really delicious – soft and golden yellow, packed with cinnamon and covered with thick white icing. They took huge bites out of the pastries as they made their way back.

‘Actually, why is this street called Forest Road? There’s not a forest in sight anywhere,’ said Emma James as she chewed. ‘Names often go back a long way,’ said Mia, ‘maybe there was a forest here at one time.’

As they turned into the main road, a boy walking three striking looking dogs came round the corner.

‘Paul!’ exclaimed Emma in delight.

Mia said nothing, but eyed the dogs nervously. One was almost the same height as the boy, with long thin legs and a tiny grey head. The whole of its body looked strange and shapeless, as if someone had stuck it in a press and closed the lid to flatten it. It could have squeezed through a gap in a door only open the width of two fingers. The second dog was a bit smaller and had long brown hair, the same colour as Emma James's. The third was a tired-looking poodle that was having difficulty keeping up with the others. Paul had been at the same school, a year above Mia and Emma James, but had been absent so often because of all his out-of-

school activities, that the headmistress told his parents he would be better off at a boarding school. Paul told anyone who asked (as well as those who didn't): 'I was chucked out of school' and wasn't the least bit ashamed about it. But the search for a school was taking a long time because Paul insisted on a school where he could learn to ride and play tennis, and these had long waiting lists.

In the meantime Paul had been given a certificate by his doctor, and kept himself busy – he organised sales, selling clothes he'd grown out of, as well as films and books that he didn't want any more. He also dealt in small, crocheted shoulder bags, made by his grandmother in a care home, when she was bored with the TV, which was very often. He was good at all kinds of business – he did a roaring trade with the shoulder bags, which were such a hit with the girls in the upper school, that a second grandma in the home was also crocheting now. The dog-walking was the latest project and had also got off to a good start. Paul had invited Emma James for an ice-cream several times this summer. As Emma James stood facing Paul she began to blush, not a lot, but you could see it. 'Hello Emma James!' he said raising his hand in greeting. As he did so

unfortunately he let go of one of the leads and the giant skinny dog made for Mia like a shot.

‘Waaah,’ screamed Mia.

She tried to run for it but her legs got into a tangle and she went crashing to the ground. Plaster in hand, Emma James patched Mia up helped by Paul, while the greyhound happily gobbled up the remains of the pastry Mia had dropped.

‘I’m really sorry,’ said Paul, ‘the dogs are actually quite friendly. Very well behaved. Would you like an ice cream?’

‘No thanks,’ said Mia crossly, ‘we have to get back to our lessons. We’re not the ones who’ve been chucked out. And as far as I’m concerned, I don’t intend to let that happen!’

Paul shrugged his shoulders, winked at Emma James and disappeared with the dogs. Emma James was so thrilled about the wink, that she handed Mia her pastry or at least what was left of it. All the same Mia was in a bad mood for the rest of the day. ‘Oh don’t pull such a face! After all I did have a plaster on me!’ said Emma James.

‘Oh great’ grumbled Mia. ‘Would have been *even* better if you could have seen around the corner and warned me about the dogs.’

After school Emma James walked home lost in thought. She couldn’t get what Mia had said out of her head. She did have the plaster with her, but she hadn’t been able to prevent Mia from falling. Had she tried hard enough? What more could she have done, apart from putting the plaster in her bag? Warn Mia? But Mia didn’t believe in the business of her ‘dreams’ at all, she would only have made fun of her.

I am able to see into the future a bit, Emma James said to herself, but if I see something I don’t like there’s nothing I can do about it. If I see it’s going to rain next day, it will rain. If I know I’m going to get a C minus

in Geography, then even if I learn where any number of German rivers are it won't help, as I'm certain to get asked something I don't know.

Deep in thought, Emma James opened the front door.

Deep in thought, she opened the fridge door to see what there was to eat; deep in thought she poured dressing over the small bowl of lamb's lettuce, and warmed up the macaroni cheese in the microwave. It tasted so good she forgot about thinking. When her mother came home with Rainer Maria and asked how Mia was, Emma James said she was fine and she actually meant she herself was too.