

# Treading on Eggshells

## 2 - Ember

Pink was everywhere. Apple blossom pink walls, deep rose pink carpet, flowery pink bedding, cerise curtains and lamp shades. In the middle of it stood a dumpy girl with straight bob-cut, mousy hair which accentuated her plain, puffy features. She wore flat, blue, mary-jane shoes and striped socks in two tones of pink, which met the dusky pink of her full skirt at the fattest part of her calves. Her grey cardigan seemed moulded to her arms and chest, as though it had shrunk in the wash, and there was a large crochet pink flower pinned high on the right side of it, so that it touched her chin. She clasped a bulging denim shoulder bag across her tummy.

'Chrissy - she say I got to walk - but I have money for a taxi. I go in a taxi 'cos walking, it makes me hot and -' she rolls her head down so her chin is buried in the folds of the crochet flower, her voice goes small and whines: 'I don't like getting hot and sweaty.'

'How far is the college from here, Ember? Do you know?'

'Cavendish Road - miles and miles'.

Patience feigns surprise. 'Oh, I thought it was just around the corner, I'm sure my bus goes passed the college. Of course, if it is miles and miles you will definitely need a taxi. You know, you won't lose any weight if you go everywhere by taxi, will you?'

'Did Chrissy tell you what doctor said?' Ember's tone is defensive.

'No - just that you have been put on a special diet. Is that right?'

Ember's head and chin roll down again and Patience waits. She knows what Ember's physician has recommended - his letter is in Ember's file.

'Musn't drink fizzy.' Her voice is so small and buried in the pink flower that Patience has to strain to hear it. 'Eat too many chips and crisps.'

'Mmmm, and - ?'

'Exercise.' Ember spits the word out angrily.

'Well, let's see what tomorrow brings, shall we? If it is a nice day, it will only take ten minutes to walk to college. Perhaps if you wear a blouse, you won't get so hot? Let's not worry about it now. Do you want me to help you prepare your supper? What have you decided to have tonight?'

Ember fidgets with her shoulder bag. 'I got a salad and ham, an' Chrissy helped me get it ready this morning. Yoghurt for pud.'

'Right, well that sounds just what Dr Evans would like to hear you say.'  
Patience pauses, as though an after-thought has occurred to her: 'Shall we hang your bag up and then you can help me lay the table for your supper?'

'No, no my bag's alright - uh, got books and stuff in it. Don't need more help. 'Bye, Patience.' Ember plonks herself on the sofa, carefully setting the bag down and starts to rummage inside it.

Patience moves to open the 'fridge door before Ember's bulk can block the way. The girl is shouting now: 'Go, I said I don't want you any more.'

'But Ember, I haven't finished my duties yet - where did you say the salad was? Oh, look, there's some big bottles of Cola here... I can't see a salad anywhere?'

A strangled sound comes from Ember's throat and she sits down again, hugging the bag towards herself. Her chin is nestled once more against the pink flower as she studies her shoes.

'Ember, would I be right to guess that you have food in your bag? And that you are going to eat it when I have gone? Let's see now, perhaps the salad is in your bag or some tomatoes, or maybe some cheese? Crisps?'

Ember doesn't look up, she is pouting and her voice is small and high pitched: 'Don't like tomatoes.'

Patience sits down opposite Ember. As usual, she is calm but authoritative: 'Food goes bad if it is not kept cool - it could make you sick. How long has the food been in your bag?'

At this Ember stirs herself, gives Patience a long look, and then opens the bag and starts to take out a variety of packets: doughnuts, burgers, crisps, cheese strings - 'Think they're alright, got them this morning.'

'Ok, so let's see if we can make a healthy meal out of this lot and what you already have in the 'fridge'. With some cajoling Patience manages to involve Ember in grilling a burger and preparing some mixed vegetables from the freezer section of her 'fridge.

The following morning is damp and dreary and Ember takes so long to get ready that Chrissy, wanting to finish her night shift and get home, is about to telephone for a taxi as Patience comes in. Twenty years as a care worker doesn't make it any easier to cope with interrupted nights, and Chrissy is tired. First the lad upstairs started wandering about at 2am telling her he was Wellington, preparing for the battle of Waterloo. For heaven's sakes, what next? And then a bloody car alarm went off in the street at 4.30am. Patience hears her out and then suggests that she will walk to the

© Sue Fairclough 2016

The contents of this work are entirely fictional and do not relate to real events or persons, nor is any part of it referring to any real historical experiences or people.

college with Ember. At first Chrissy is reluctant to accede to the suggestion, pointing out that she will have to wait until Patience returns. Somehow though, she finds herself agreeing. What is it with this African girl? She is so polite, so sure of herself, so certain that she is right that you just have to go along with her. Oh well, it will give her some peace to catch up with her paperwork before Don comes in.

In the afternoon, Patience finds Ember waiting in the college reception for her. The girl is pale and seems agitated and anxious to go.

'How was the IT class? It must be a long day for you, Ember. Do you want to go home straight away?' Ember nods 'Yes, go home - now.'

'We could go into town and have a cup of tea, if you like?' Ember gives Patience one of her long looks and then, as though a sunbeam had just appeared from behind a cloud, her face brightens. Smiling she bolts for the door, calling back to Patience: 'Only if we can get a taxi at the rank down the road.'

At the café, Patience waits until Ember is settled with a cappuccino and a flapjack. Stirring her tea she tries to ensure her voice is conversational: 'The college called Don this afternoon. They are worried about you and think that some of the other students are bullying you. I believe your tutor - er, Mrs Spencer - has asked you about this before and you said there was nothing going on. Is anyone being mean to you, Ember? If they are, it would be better to talk about it and then we can come up with a plan to stop it, don't you think?'

Ember finishes her flapjack and dashes a napkin across her mouth; the chin drops down to the pink crochet flower and stays there. Just as Patience is considering how to continue with the conversation, Ember's head jerks up and her pale grey eyes are hard. There's an unpleasant, knowing smirk on her face: 'I already got a plan myself,' she says proudly. 'They won't try to get me to do wrong again. Not any more, they won't. I seen to it.'

If Patience felt uncomfortable about broaching the subject of the telephone call, this news was certainly not what she had been expecting. 'OK, Ember, I need you to help me understand this. What were they trying to get you to do?'

Ember is clearly in no hurry to tell her - she sips her coffee and spends a long time looking around at the other people in the café. At last, she sighs and turns to Patience: 'I know some of them were *pretending* to like me. They didn't really like me at all and they laughed at me. But they *said* I could go around with them if I took some money from another student and gave it to them. So I did. But *then* they said it wasn't enough money and I would have to get some more. I said I could get some from my bank account, but they didn't want me to do that 'cos the bank would tell Don. Anyway, they said I had to take money from Mrs Spencer, but I knowed that was wrong, even though it would be easy, 'cos she leaves her handbag in the staff room and sometimes there is no one there. Anyway, she's nice - that Mrs Spencer - she doesn't *pretend*, like they do.'

© Sue Fairclough 2016

The contents of this work are entirely fictional and do not relate to real events or persons, nor is any part of it referring to any real historical experiences or people.

Ember pauses, watching Patience to see what kind of reaction she is getting. Satisfied that she has Patience's full attention she continues: 'The girl I took the money from was very upset, 'cos when she found that she had *lost* her money she said she had to walk home and it was dark and she was frightened and her Dad would belt her one. The others just laughed and said she was a wizz, no wess - '

'Wuss?' interjected Patience.

'Yeah, wuss. Anyway, I said I would be her friend and she could share my taxi back and she thought that would be about half way to her house. So that's what we did.'

'Just one minute, Ember. When was this?'

'Oh, er - last week or was it the week before? Well sometime then. Anyway, what I was saying was, that I didn't like the others and that they ought to be paid back, so I waited. Could I have another cappuccino - it was very nice?' She smiles brightly at Patience, a sort of 'butter wouldn't melt in my mouth' kind of smile, confirming the view of her that Patience has been forming.

Once the cappuccino is placed in front of Ember, Patience restarts the conversation: 'What were you waiting for and what did you plan to do?'

Ember rolls her chin down and up again, stirs her coffee and screws up her nose: 'Didn't know really,' she answers unhelpfully.

Patience tries again: 'Why didn't you tell Mrs Spencer what had been going on?'

Ember regards Patience with a wide-eyed look: 'I didn't want Sally to find out it was me what stole her money, now did I? Anyway, today I overheard the others say they were going to go to Jezebels.'

'Jezebels?'

'The posh nightclub the other side of town. They're not 21, see? So - I took as much money as I could from them - it was a bit difficult because they have lockers in different places, but I did it. That's why we had to leave quickly tonight, in case they suspected me. They will be late getting home if they haven't enough money for the bus, won't they? Though I think some live near to college and walk,' she adds as an afterthought.

Patience is gripping the edge of the table: 'But Ember, how did you...? I think this isn't the first time you have taken things, is it? '

Ember gives Patience that long look of hers and completely ignores the question, finishes her coffee and gets up: 'I want to go home now.'

'Sit down, Ember. We don't go home until I have all the facts about what has happened today.'

Ember slowly seats herself, denim bag clasped tightly on her lap.

'Is the money in your bag?'

'What money?'

Patience's face is stern: 'I'm not playing games now, Ember. This is serious.'  
Ember shifts in her seat: 'I haven't got the money - I got rid of it, in case I was caught.'

Patience feels as though she has stepped into the quick sands down by the river that her mother warned her about. Her mind is racing. She should be making notes of what is being said, or marching Ember to the Police Station. At the very least, she should have taken Ember back to Tranquil House so that Don could have been party to this conversation.

'OK, Ember, please tell me where the money is? You realise it has to be given back, don't you?'

Ember's face brightens up again: 'Can't do that, it's been *donated*.'

'Donated...you mean you've given it to someone?'

'Yes.'

'Please, Ember, just tell me what you have done with it?'

Ember is clearly enjoying herself now - it is nice to feel like you know more than someone like Patience. She pauses for dramatic effect, takes a big breath and then rushes on: 'You know Mr Kelly? Well, he teaches me computer. He runs marathons. He wants people to sign up for a charity run. You have to give him money if you are going to take part, and then raise more. So - so I asked Sally to help me sign all of them up for the run, 'cos I couldn't understand the form and she knew how to do it. She was surprised that they wanted to go in for the run, but I said what Chrissy says: you can't judge a book by its cover. Chrissy is always saying that to herself. So I put the money in the box for their reg - registration.'

Patience was not sure whether to laugh or cry: 'So you mean that you have signed them up for a fun run with their own money? Oh Ember, oh dear. Let's go home, shall we?'

Ember shrugs and heaves herself up: 'I wanted to go home ages ago, but you just keep on chatting.'