

Miss Emily Dickinson Demands a New Maid

July and there is crisis. Father throws down his cutlery and says he will not eat one more burnt potato.

‘And I will not baste another seam,’ I say, glancing at Mother.

‘Margaret O’Brien is all but irreplaceable,’ Mother says, taking a sip of currant wine. ‘And there are only four of us, with Austin gone. We are a small household. Yes, Margaret may be missed, but we will manage.’

I think of Margaret, snug now in her marital chambers with her beloved Mr Lawler; a competent mother to his four orphans. The Lawler house no doubt gleams all around them and beautifully cooked potatoes steam on their dinner plates. I am silenced by Margaret’s defection. Because she toils no more here, I must toil. Am I put out? Yes, I am. Am I anguished? I find that I am.

‘Some of us miss Margaret O’Brien dreadfully,’ Father says.

‘House work is regularising, Edward.’

I stare at Mother. I do not wish to be regularised. Or regular. My desire is to be free to pursue the things that please me. And why say it to Father, anyway? He is only required to enjoy the spoils of others’ labour.

‘Well, replace the irreplaceable Margaret we must, my dear,’ he says. ‘Emily is permanently floured to the elbows, Vinnie is never without a sweeping brush, and you are becoming too often ill from the weight of the household. Even the hens refuse to perform their duty since we lost Margaret. I shall see about a replacement forthwith.’

I smile around at them all, from Father to Mother to Vinnie. My sister winks at me above the head of the puss she dandles on her lap.

‘Do not look so triumphant, Emily,’ Mother says.

I change my facial expression to a more Mother-pleasing one, but allow myself to feel exultant. I know that when Father decides on something he applies himself to its execution with vigorous care, and I have privately wheedled, cajoled and begged him to right the situation. Father lives and loves ferociously and, for me, there is little he will not do. We shall soon have our new maid-of-all-work. My shriven hands will look robust once again. No more hauling scuttles or trying, vainly, to get chicken and mushrooms and gravy to magic themselves ready at the same time. No more will I scrub, peel, milk, feed, wash, lift, scrape and polish. I will bake when the want overtakes me, not when Mother desires a rye loaf, or her callers an apple pie. And I will be able to write any time I please, for as long as I wish, not only in the dull snatches of time between this chore and the next.

I could rise from the table and kiss Father, here and now. Instead I eat the meal before me, knowing that soon we will sample beautifully cooked potatoes again.