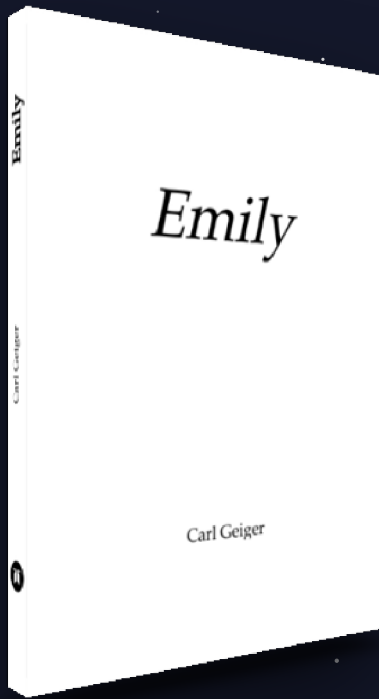




READING SAMPLE

Emily

Carl Geiger

*A moving, intimate love story about love in later life –
about time, mortality and the starry sky.*

01 The New World

I remember it as though it were yesterday. How, after our first train journey together, our walk by the lake and, above all, our first kiss, we walked back to her hotel together. Emily had taken me by the hand.

Even after all these years, that is still the first location in spacetime my thoughts carry me to, whenever, as today, I have trudged through unfamiliar streets after a workshop at one of our branches and sit, as I do now, in a hotel room where the air hangs stale and heavy.

I smile to myself. No more worlds of imagination, no more wild thought experiments, the kind I once favoured most in moments like this, in all the years before Emily. Instead, Emily and I on our first night by the lake.

I hear myself draw a deep breath. Then I get up and wash my hands and my face with cold water in the bathroom. I left the first day of the workshop early today, on the pretext of a headache. The least I ought to do is prepare the presentation and documents for tomorrow before I go down to dinner. But instead, I lie down on the bed and consider whether to switch on the television. Inconveniently, the remote sits on the cabinet the television stands on and is out of my reach.

The following day, Emily and I made up for the dessert I had promised her that first evening we spent together. Rather than breakfast at the hotel — for which we'd got up far too late anyway — we shared an assortment of sweet temptations over coffee at a patisserie near the promenade. Not that I really care for coffee; I only drink it when I'm tired and determined to stay awake.

I can still see us at a small table by the big front window, the busy Saturday morning going about its business to the left and right of us — people pausing here and there, perhaps, for a curious glance, before stepping back into their own morning. But none of it touched us. It wasn't wilfulness, our ignoring the

rest of the world; there are simply limits to how much attention one can spare. I can only speak for myself, but Emily's presence alone was already overwhelming enough, in the loveliest way.

'Best breakfast of all time, George.'

'Against every shred of sense, and every nutritionist's advice.'

'And exactly what I've always forbidden my children.'

We both bite, with relish, into a pastry filled with vanilla cream.

'Emily, if aliens ever came to visit us — or we visited some other, inhabited world — there'd surely be some kind of protocol for that, wouldn't there?'

'Good heavens, have we run out of every other topic already? Am I boring you?'

'No, no. You've misunderstood — I put that badly. I mean: once this wonderful breakfast is over — what's the protocol then?'

. . .

Emily smiles at me. She reaches for her cup, takes a sip, and sets it back on the saucer. Then she folds her hands together on the table before her and leans her upper body slightly forward, whilst not for a moment taking her eyes off me.

'We do have a protocol for alien visits. This, I think, is something the two of us will have to work out for ourselves.'

I nod in silence and begin sliding a piece of pastry back and forth across the plate between us.

'Ideas, George?'

She pushes the plate of pastries to the edge of the table. My hands need a moment to work out where they'd like to settle.

'Well' — I clear my throat — 'perhaps "protocol" isn't quite the word. But a few ground rules, or rough guidelines to steer by, surely couldn't hurt.'

'Such as?'

‘Perhaps that someone ought to take the lead here. Preferably someone with experience. So — you, rather.’

‘That much we can discuss, yes. Go on.’

‘That this leading role would call for a good deal of willingness to explain things, and where necessary, to instruct. And a great deal of patience — at the start, at least.’

‘Sounds reasonable. Anything else?’

‘I’m sometimes told I get too caught up in discussions. That I become intense. Never — not once, not for any reason, not because of what I say, not because of my questions, not my tone, not my body language, not my gestures or my expressions — never should you feel even the faintest hint of being caught off guard, uncomfortable, or worse, threatened, intimidated or afraid. I couldn’t live with that. Please remind me early on that I told you this — better once too often than once too few. Insist that I hold to what I’ve said here, without exception, without condition. It’s possible that, carried by the momentum of an argument, I won’t be able to come down at once. If that happens, please give me room, and time enough to draw two breaths. Will you give me your word on that?’

She looks at me for a moment.

‘I promise. And I’d like a similar promise from you in return.’

I nod.

‘Promise me you’ll never let me overwhelm you. I don’t lecture, I don’t correct — I only share my views, my knowledge. I want to fascinate you, not instruct you. I give no advice, I hold no truths handed down from on high, I possess no absolute insight. I’ll explain my point of view to you, but it’s only that — my opinion. Worth exactly as much as yours. No more, but no less either. Please promise me you’ll demand explanations of me the moment anything I say or do stops making sense to you.’

‘Promised.’

‘Good. Also — I’m a workaholic. I lose myself entirely in my work, because I love it, because it means a great deal to me. Only my children matter more. They came first, they come first, and they always will, whatever their age. I’m moody sometimes too, for no reason anyone could point to or explain. I also happen to like romcoms, and I let the tears come freely when I watch them. I don’t expect that to be understood or felt the same way by anyone else — but it is what it is, and if it can’t be helped, it will simply be accepted without comment, thank you very much. I also care a great deal about eating healthily. And because I’m no good at resisting temptation, those around me sometimes suffer under my culinary regime. And — should it ever come up — spa weekends, or vouchers for them, are not a good gift for me.’

‘Understood. Noted.’

‘Anything else you’d like to tell me, George?’

‘No. All that suits me fine.’

‘Why are you smiling like that, behind your cup? Is there something more you want to say on the subject?’

I finish my coffee.

‘We met at your spa weekend. Your unfinished, overdue article is lying somewhere in your hotel room. Your children, it seems, are getting along perfectly well without you — neither they nor you have called since last night. And you’re eating pastries for breakfast. Here. With me.’

Emily looks straight into my eyes. And smiles.

I stayed with her the whole weekend, back then.

Of course I’d been in love with Emily from the very start. It was lovely, and thrilling — especially since I had very little experience of being in love, not, at least, with a person who existed outside my own imagination. In those first weeks, every day felt like a new adventure to me. It wasn’t always easy. But Emily made me happy from the beginning. And she taught me to drive.

I keep speaking of the beginning. Though, as Emily always says, it wasn't a beginning at all — it was our first meeting. An event within the flow of our time. An extraordinary event. I used to call such moments — when one's entire picture of the world, or some part of it, changes all at once — 'waking moments', because that's how they felt: as if what had been blurred suddenly came into focus, or as if one had woken into another life altogether. Mostly they were a kind of startling shock. As a child, such waking moments came mainly when I had to return from my daydreams and worlds of imagination back into what was called the 'real' world around me, into the here and now. Later, they came in those moments when one's grasp of life and the world made something like a quantum leap — at university, say, growing slowly into an adult's world, or at work, when a colleague's behaviour caught you entirely off guard. Meeting Emily was, for once, a wonderful waking moment. And everything before it had to happen exactly as it did, for that moment to be possible at all. So it was, in truth, anything but a beginning, when I first met Emily.

I get up and fetch the remote. Holding it in my hands, without using it, I sit down on the bed.

But there was another beginning — for me, at least. One I keep in careful silence in my memory. I'm a little afraid of it. Because it was the most beautiful moment of my life.

Emily and I hadn't been together very long when my birthday came round. For years I'd made no particular fuss over my birthdays any more, neither for myself nor for anyone else. I invited no one and let no one invite me. It was a day like any other, except that I got more phone calls, more texts than usual — which I always found rather nice, and which pleased me. But for decades, nothing more had been needed.

That year, though, I would gladly have gone out with Emily to a fine dinner somewhere. But she insisted on cooking for me instead. So we spent the evening at her place.

While she saw to the last preparations for the meal, I sat at the prettily decorated table and answered a few of my texts. Emily brought through a carafe of wine and a plate piled with starters. Her glowing red lips smiled tenderly at me, while her wonderfully brown eyes — skilfully rimmed in a smoky style and framed by long lashes — sparkled seductively along with them. I poured us both a glass and watched her disappear back into the kitchen. She was wearing her little black dress. Innocently off-the-shoulder, it clung like a second skin to Emily's hips with every step she took in her elegant pumps; just below the hem, it offered my gaze — already nearly devoid of will — an unobstructed view of her legs — athletic yet wonderfully, delicately shaped — towards which I reached out in my mind, helpless to resist, letting myself be intoxicated not by imagining her touch, but by the memory of it. If she wanted to, Emily could turn herself, with total ease, into a temptation with the force of nature behind it — before which I would gladly have fallen to my knees. She knew it, and she enjoyed it, every time. She deserved to. And, it should be said, she didn't do it only for herself. I tried to appear as composed as I could manage, while inwardly cursing myself for still being in my work suit, having failed even to change. I never liked wearing my work uniform at home.

When we'd finished eating and were clearing the table together, she asked whether I'd like a short break before dessert.

'What is for dessert, then?'

'You'll have to wait and see.'

I probably grinned like a Cheshire cat at that. Or my face went white as chalk — looking back, either seems plausible. In any case, I told Emily I'd like to go and change first, if that was all right. She looked me up and down for a moment, then let me go, with a nod.

I hurried, giddy, into the bedroom. I'd already left a few suits at Emily's, since by then I spent most of my time there, and I prayed I'd find something at

least reasonably smart among them. Nearly tripping over my own feet, I threw open the wardrobe.

And froze instantly.

I didn't dare move. I must have seen it on the pillow the moment I walked in. And now I could see it out of the corner of my motionless, staring eyes. A yellow pencil lay on the pillow, the one on the side of the bed where I usually slept.

In that moment I remembered telling Emily about it once. I'd told her about my sister, my brother, my parents, the sawmill I'd more or less grown up in. We'd talked about our childhoods, our school days — about how, because of all those people, all those things, we'd become who we are and ended up where we are: the two of us, together, now.

I'd told her, too, about 'the old man,' 'silver boy,' and 'the freak' — all my nearly forgotten nicknames from years back. Plenty of children get nicknames, I'd told Emily. My hair is nearly dark now, but I was born white-haired, on account of albinism. A defining fact of many decades of my life. And children are only honest — brutally honest. I told Emily that was all long behind me.

I'd also told her about one particular experience from my youth that would stay with me forever — one that had to do with this yellow pen.

Back when I was still at school, there came the great age of the Pepsi Challenge. 'Take the Pepsi Challenge,' it said, everywhere. The idea was simple enough: first you ticked a box on a form for which you preferred, Pepsi or Coke. Then you were given two cups, one with a mouthful of Pepsi, the other with a mouthful of Coke, without being told which was which, and after tasting both, you had to say which you liked better. Only then were you told which cup had held what. As a prize, you got one of those yellow Pepsi pens.

One morning, on my way to school, I saw a few people setting up a Pepsi Challenge stand, and stood there a moment, frozen, watching them. I felt intimidated and thrilled, all at once. I knew that today, after school, I would fi-

nally get to take the Pepsi Challenge. I was so wound up in lessons that I could hardly concentrate; the day seemed to last forever. When school was finally over and I dashed to the stand, it was already surrounded by a whole horde of teenagers. I had to join the queue in front of one of the two women working behind the counter. Tirelessly they handed out slips to tick, filled cup after cup, and — most important to me — handed out, at the end, the yellow Pepsi pen. I was excited and impatient; I probably shifted my weight from one foot to the other the whole time, and may well have muttered to myself, quietly, at how slowly it was all going. I talked to myself a good deal, in those days. Playing among the piles of wood chips and stacked timber at the sawmill, or working through my theories and thought experiments, I often fell into conversation with myself.

I stood in that queue and forgot that other people existed around me — or rather, I ignored the people around me, and assumed they were doing the same to me — until my eyes snagged, suddenly, on someone else's. An older boy, somewhat bigger than me, was staring at me. He stood in the other queue, in a small group that clearly belonged together. He stared at me, whispered something to the others, laughed with them, and stared again. I stood there, motionless, while the two queues shuffled forward, unevenly. At some point the boy came level with me.

'You're a bit slow, aren't you, freak?'

I stared at him.

The joyful excitement in me collapsed all at once, and with it my whole body. What had been pulsing energy inside me shot out through my feet and drained away into the ground beneath. Somewhere in the distance I thought I heard laughter, but it was far away. Everything was far away, as I simply turned back around and waited, in silence, in the queue for my turn to take the Pepsi Challenge. I threw my yellow pen into a bin on the way home.

And now, here it lay, on my birthday, in Emily's bedroom, as a gift on my pillow. An original Staedtler Pepsi pen. Yellow, with red lettering: 'Take the Pepsi Challenge!'

I let go of the wardrobe door, stepped over to the bed, and stared down at the pillow. At last I reached slowly for the yellow pen and lifted it, held carefully between thumb and forefinger, in front of my face.

Even now, after all these years, sitting here in this hotel room, I can live through that moment again exactly as it was, back then, in the bedroom, that pen in my hand. My whole body still answers to the memory. I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck, feel goosebumps spreading across my forearms. I feel everything in my head begin to spin; my field of vision narrows. I take a few deep breaths and clench my buttocks together — a trick I picked up for stretching after hard training runs, supposedly good for stopping the blood draining downward when you feel faint, so you don't lose your balance, or worse, black out.

Back then, in the bedroom, I was overwhelmed. I don't know how long I stood there. At some point I could hardly make out the yellow pen between my fingers any more, because my eyes had grown so watery and tears were running down my cheeks.

Without changing, I went back down to Emily in the living room. I stopped in front of her, my fist clenched so tightly around the Pepsi pen that my knuckles had gone white. Emily looked at me. She smiled. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't. Before I could try again to open my trembling lips, Emily reached up and stroked my cheek gently with her hand and kissed me tenderly. Then she turned and disappeared into the kitchen. She understood. She knew what I'd meant to say. She understood everything.

In that moment I felt Emily's love for the first time. For the first time, that shell of a word, 'love,' meant something to me. I understood in that moment what this word meant. Which is to say — I didn't understand it at all. But ever

since, I have *known* what this word means. There aren't enough other words to explain this one. You simply feel the knowledge of its meaning. There's nothing more to say about it.

Sitting motionless on the hotel bed, I stare out of the window with my slowly drowning eyes, trying to hold back the storm building in my chest and in my head. Eventually I get up, go to my suitcase, go to the window, pace in a circle, and finally disappear into the bathroom. I give the face in the mirror a few minutes to slowly calm down again and look at me indulgently. I watch it until at last it manages a gentle, head-shaking smile. The only thing more embarrassing is when, watching one of Emily's romcoms together, I find myself fighting back tears just as she does.

Dessert, that birthday, turned out to be Emily's chocolate cake. It's my favourite.

And every birthday since, she's given me a Pepsi pen. A different one each time — a different colour, a different shape, decorated differently. Once as a keyring. Once even made of metal. I keep them all in a preserving jar.

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