

Toby Wardman

Writing sample

Opening passage of *Emergence*, an unfinished novel

Emily Wright opened her eyes on darkness and lay utterly still, willing the terror spinning through her mind to fade.

After a few moments, she began to force herself to relax, one muscle at a time. Her shoulders ached, she discovered without surprise, and most of her back also seemed keen to make its discomfort known. Beside her she could hear Oliver's regular deep breathing, sound asleep. He was fine, as always.

Emily stifled a wave of resentment. Of course he was fine. And so was she, really. She'd been through this same experience night after night for the best part of a month, so it was hardly unfamiliar.

So relax.

She gradually became aware that her hand was resting on her abdomen. That, too, was no surprise. Sometimes in these moments she could convince herself that she sensed a slight movement within her. Once, she'd even thought she felt a heartbeat, tiny and feeble. But there was nothing tonight, nothing at all.

She slowly let out the breath she realised she'd been holding, tried once again mentally to ease the tension in her shoulders, found that it was impossible, and gave up.

On the edges of her vision, parts of the darkened room were beginning to coalesce into shapes now. Near the foot of the bed she could make out the looming shadow of Oliver's large grandfather clock, standing lifeless in the gloom. It didn't tell the time any more, of course; it had finally given up the ghost, according to Oliver, in his father's study when he was about ten years old. Still, it was a pre-Emergence design, so by her reckoning that meant it'd ticked along quite nicely for a good ninety years or so before finally succumbing to the inevitable. Not bad, all things considered.

About three years ago, Emily had asked him once why he'd kept it all this time. It had been a cold winter, fuel for the stove had been particularly hard to come by, and the thought of all that potential firewood standing solemnly and uselessly in the bedroom had been preying on her mind.

Judging by Oliver's horrified reaction, she might as well have suggested that they burn his grandfather. The clock was an heirloom. It had been in the Wright family for five generations and it wasn't going anywhere. One day, he'd said, when everything was back to how it used to be before the Emergence, there would be clocksmiths again, and whichever distant generation of Wrights were lucky enough to live to see that time would be able to have the clock repaired and restored to its former glory and it would keep time for them for at least another ninety years.

So there it still stood, a symbol of survival, awaiting better days.

Like the rest of us, really.

All right. Enough.

Emily rolled onto her side, away from Oliver, and sighed to herself. At least the terror had receded, and although her body still ached there was no harm in having another shot at a decent night's sleep. She closed her eyes and tried, once more, to relax.

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At the foot of the bed, the great clock watched her as it always had, dormant but not yet dead; and in her belly slept an innocent new life, the subject of the recurring nightmare that had visited her every night for the past three weeks.

Opening passage of *Seasons*, another unfinished novel

Prelude 1

When Tom was seven years old, he came closer to death than he ever had since.

But, curiously, the experience of nearly being killed is not what sticks in his mind from that day. What he remembers subsequently – in fact, the memory that comes to him immediately when he emerges from his nine-month coma, the one that is to haunt him for the rest of his life – is the first appearance in his life of the woman he later comes to think of as his guardian angel.

The recollections that adult Tom inherits from his seven-year-old self are generally hazy. He was on his way to school, he knows, so it must have been about eight-thirty in the morning. His mother drove him most of the way, but this particular morning she decided to let him walk the last hundred yards or so from the car to the school gates on his own. The last part of his route crossed a narrow road in front of the school gates, an adventure which little Tom undertook with pride and not a little trepidation; he was a cautious type, even at that age.

As he approached the kerb, lunchbox in hand, something made him look back over his left shoulder. A man and a woman, standing side by side, were watching him from the forecourt of one of the houses nearby.

Tom doesn't recall just what it was about the couple that caught his attention that day, and in fact he remembers very little of the man: the only details recorded by his seven-year-old eyes were that he was tall and skinny. But the woman's features imprinted themselves far more clearly on the small boy's psyche. She too was slender, with vivid green eyes and loose mid-brown curls around her shoulders. She was dressed in a long, one-piece dress, also a light green, that looked distinctive and unfamiliar.

Most striking of all was something that seven-year-old Tom had never seen before: the left side of her forehead was decorated with a tiny jewel which twinkled like a star.

With hindsight, Tom realises it's impossible that his breathless junior-school self could have taken in all those details in the brief instant before he stepped out into the road, into the path of the oncoming four-wheel-drive which would certainly have killed him if it had been travelling just two or three miles per hour faster. Probably he owes a large proportion of those vivid memories to the five subsequent occasions throughout late childhood and adolescence when the same woman appeared fleetingly on the edge of his vision – sometimes with the same nondescript man, sometimes alone – and watched him silently from a distance. And it's possible that some of the details are derived instead, he reluctantly concedes, from the fevered imaginings of his brain during the trauma-induced semi-consciousness following the accident – the nine-month period that he would later come to think of as simply 'the sleep'.

But in any case, he knew for certain immediately after he woke that he hadn't seen the last of the woman with the green eyes and the star on her forehead.

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Prelude II

This is the story of Josie and Tom.

The season is winter, but the year isn't important. What matters is that Josie is sixteen, and she hasn't met Tom yet—or at least, not in any way that matters.

There's a knock at the door. Josie is awake already, and she answers it in silk pyjamas. The postman blinks at her for a long moment before handing her a parcel, and she rewards him with a smile.

She takes the parcel into the living room, sits on the sofa and turns it over in her hands a few times. It's about the size and shape of a shoebox, and wrapped in brown paper and string, a combination that looks intriguingly old-fashioned. It's evenly weighted and doesn't rattle.

"I thought I heard you up and about," says her sister from the doorway. "Aren't you going to open it?"

Josie grins without looking up. "Morning, Amy. No, I'm prolonging the intrigue."

"So I see." Amy squints at the parcel with interest. "Expecting something?"

"I don't think so." The parcel is addressed by hand in an irregular, angular script. "The writing rings a bell, somehow."

"Get on with it, then. Now I'm intrigued too."

Josie glances up at her older sister, complete with fluffy pink dressing-gown and without her glasses.

"Maybe I want to take my time?"

"Hah. I know you better than that."

"All right, all right."

She fetches a pair of kitchen scissors and snips through the string.

Beneath the brown paper is a plain white box with a loose lid, under which lies a pile of loosely-crumpled sheets of newspaper.

"Your true love sent you yesterday's Telegraph, Josie," says Amy. "Must be a real romantic."

Josie ignores the sarcasm. "Yeah, well. Whoever he is, he's about a month early for Valentine's."

She reaches into the box and produces a small artefact from among the crumpled paper. It's a sealed glass cylinder, wide at each end but pinched together in the centre. One end of the hollow tube is filled with a light grey powder.

"What's that?"

"I think it's some kind of hourglass," says Josie, frowning. "But it doesn't work. Look." She tips the device upside down in the air. The sand rests stubbornly in the upper bulb, even when she shakes it vigorously. "Weird."

"There's no message?"

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"That's a point." With her free hand she lifts a handful of paper out of the box, revealing at the very bottom a small yellow envelope labelled in the same spiky hand:

Josie

She stares at it, suddenly apprehensive.

"Well?" Amy sits down next to her. "Come on, Jose, haven't you woken up yet? Maybe you *have* got an early Valentine. Don't you want to find out who it's from?"

Josie shrugs. "Yeah. I'm just sure I recognise the writing, that's all."

"There'll be a name inside."

"Right."

Puzzled by her own trepidation, she uses a fingernail to tear open the envelope.

Inside is a single sheet of writing paper, folded once, neatly. She opens it out and reads silently:

*Dear Josie,
I was wrong.
Life is short. Change whatever you can –
that's what it's about.
All the best for the "future" –
your
Tom.*

"That's weird," says Josie after a minute.

"Too right it is," says Amy, still peering over her shoulder. "Who's Tom?"

"I think..." She reads the note again, frowning. "I've got a feeling it's my guitar teacher."

Amy blinks. "Your teacher?"

"It's like his writing, I think. And I'm sure his first name's Tom."

"But..." She shakes her head. "Nah. Why would he send you that? He hardly knows you. Haven't you only been going to him a few weeks?"

Josie shrugs. "A month or so, yeah. But why would *anyone* send it?"

"Whoever it is, the letter makes it sound like he's leaving."

They sit in silence for a few moments. Josie empties the rest of the crumpled paper from the box, but it gives up no more secrets.

"I reckon it's a joke," says Amy at last. "That's the only explanation. The note's just strange. Someone's trying to freak you out."

"Well, it's not really freaking me out," says Josie quietly. "There's nothing... dubious about it."

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"I dunno. An old teacher sending a mysterious gift to his young female pupil? Sounds pretty dubious to me."

Josie glances at her sister. "He's not that old. Forty, maybe."

"Yes, and you're sixteen."

"Well, it's not like he's sending me lingerie or anything." She can feel herself getting defensive, and wonders why. "Anyway, I thought you said it was a joke."

"One way to find out."

Josie nods slowly. "I've got a guitar lesson after college tomorrow."

"Well, that's that. You can ask him then. And I reckon he'll be as surprised as you are."

"Maybe."

Amy takes a deep breath and stood up. "Time for breakfast before you go?"

"Put some toast in, yeah?"

As her sister disappears into the kitchen, Josie picks up the odd hourglass-like artefact and frowns at it again.

She's baffled. For one thing, both the hourglass and the message are thoroughly strange. And she doesn't know why, but she has an odd feeling that it *was* her teacher who'd sent the parcel. Even if there's some kind of sense to it which she can't fathom, she finds it hard to imagine why on earth Dr Walker would have posted it to her – to arrive today – when she'll see him tomorrow and every week anyway.

Absently, distracted by the smell of toast drifting through from the kitchen, she lies the hourglass on the coffee table and begins to think through the day ahead.

The following evening, Josie arrives on her teacher's doorstep with the strange hourglass stowed in the side pocket of her guitar case.

To her surprise, she's met not by Tom Walker but by a policeman, who quietly explains that in the circumstances it's probably best if Josie doesn't come inside. Stunned, she rides home in the back of a police car.

Dr Walker's memorial service is held three weeks later in the chapel of the nearby university where he works. By then, so much has happened in Josie's life that it doesn't even cross her mind that she should attend.