

The
Midnight
Library

Also by Matt Haig

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The
Midnight
Library

MATT HAIG



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To all the health workers.
And the care workers.
Thank you.

I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life.

Sylvia Plath

'Between life and death there is a library,' she said. 'And within that library, the shelves go on for ever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be if you had made other choices ... Would you have done anything different, if you had the chance to undo your regrets?'

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A Conversation About Rain

Nineteen years before she decided to die, Nora Seed sat in the warmth of the small library at Hazeldene School in the town of Bedford. She sat at a low table staring at a chess board.

‘Nora dear, it’s natural to worry about your future,’ said the librarian, Mrs Elm, her eyes twinkling.

Mrs Elm made her first move. A knight hopping over the neat row of white pawns. ‘Of course, you’re going to be worried about the exams. But you could be anything you want to be, Nora. Think of all that possibility. It’s exciting.’

‘Yes. I suppose it is.’

‘A whole life in front of you.’

‘A whole life.’

‘You could do anything, live anywhere. Somewhere a bit less cold and wet.’

Nora pushed a pawn forward two spaces.

It was hard not to compare Mrs Elm to her mother, who treated Nora like a mistake in need of correction. For instance, when she was a baby her mother had been so worried Nora’s left ear stuck out more than her right that she’d used sticky tape to address the situation, then disguised it beneath a woollen bonnet.

‘I *hate* the cold and wet,’ added Mrs Elm, for emphasis.

Mrs Elm had short grey hair and a kind and mildly crinkled oval face sitting pale above her turtle-green polo neck. She was quite old. But she was also the person most on Nora’s wavelength in the entire school, and even on days when it wasn’t raining she would spend her afternoon break in the small library.

‘Coldness and wetness don’t always go together,’ Nora told her. ‘Antarctica is the driest continent on Earth. Technically, it’s a desert.’

‘Well, that sounds up your street.’

‘I don’t think it’s far enough away.’

‘Well, maybe you should be an astronaut. Travel the galaxy.’

Nora smiled. ‘The rain is even worse on other planets.’

‘Worse than Bedfordshire?’

‘On Venus it is pure acid.’

Mrs Elm pulled a paper tissue from her sleeve and delicately blew her nose. ‘See? With a brain like yours you can do anything.’

A blond boy Nora recognised from a couple of years below her ran past outside the rain-speckled window. Either chasing someone or being chased. Since her brother had left, she’d felt a bit unguarded out there. The library was a little shelter of civilisation.

‘Dad thinks I’ve thrown everything away. Now I’ve stopped swimming.’

‘Well, far be it from me to say, but there is more to this world than swimming really fast. There are many different possible lives ahead of you. Like I said last week, you could be a glaciologist. I’ve been researching and the—’

And it was then that the phone rang.

‘One minute,’ said Mrs Elm, softly. ‘I’d better get that.’

A moment later, Nora watched Mrs Elm on the phone. ‘Yes. She’s here now.’ The librarian’s face fell in shock. She turned away from Nora, but her words were audible across the hushed room: ‘Oh no. No. Oh my God. Of course ...’

Nineteen Years Later

The Man at the Door

Twenty-seven hours before she decided to die, Nora Seed sat on her dilapidated sofa scrolling through other people's happy lives, waiting for something to happen. And then, out of nowhere, something actually did.

Someone, for whatever peculiar reason, rang her doorbell.

She wondered for a moment if she shouldn't get the door at all. She was, after all, already in her night clothes even though it was only nine p.m. She felt self-conscious about her over-sized ECO WORRIER T-shirt and her tartan pyjama bottoms.

She put on her slippers, to be slightly more civilised, and discovered that the person at the door was a man, and one she recognised.

He was tall and gangly and boyish, with a kind face, but his eyes were sharp and bright, like they could see through things.

It was good to see him, if a little surprising, especially as he was wearing sports gear and he looked hot and sweaty despite the cold, rainy weather. The juxtaposition between them made her feel even more slovenly than she had done five seconds earlier.

But she'd been feeling lonely. And though she'd studied enough existential philosophy to believe loneliness was a fundamental part of being a human in an essentially meaningless universe, it was good to see him.

'Ash,' she said, smiling. 'It's Ash, isn't it?'

'Yes. It is.'

'What are you doing here? It's good to see you.'

A few weeks ago she'd been sat playing her electric piano and he'd run down Bancroft Avenue and had seen her in the window here at 33A and given her a little wave. He had once – years ago – asked her out for a coffee. Maybe he was about to do that again.

'It's good to see you too,' he said, but his tense forehead didn't show it.

When she'd spoken to him in the shop, he'd always sounded breezy, but now his voice contained something heavy. He scratched his brow. Made another sound but didn't quite manage a full word.

'You running?' A pointless question. He was clearly out for a run. But he seemed relieved, momentarily, to have something trivial to say.

'Yeah. I'm doing the Bedford Half. It's this Sunday.'

'Oh right. Great. I was thinking of doing a half-marathon and then I remembered I hate running.'

This had sounded funnier in her head than it did as actual words being vocalised out of her mouth. She didn't even hate running. But still, she was perturbed to see the seriousness of his expression. The silence went beyond awkward into something else.

'You told me you had a cat,' he said eventually.

'Yes. I have a cat.'

'I remembered his name. Voltaire. A ginger tabby?'

'Yeah. I call him Volts. He finds Voltaire a bit pretentious. It turns out he's not massively into eighteenth-century French philosophy and literature. He's quite down-to-earth. You know. For a cat.'

Ash looked down at her slippers.

'I'm afraid I think he's dead.'

'What?'

'He's lying very still by the side of the road. I saw the name on the collar, I think a car might have hit him. I'm sorry, Nora.'

She was so scared of her sudden switch in emotions right then that she kept smiling, as if the smile could keep her in the world she had just been in, the one where Volts was alive and where this man she'd sold guitar songbooks to had rung her doorbell for another reason.

Ash, she remembered, was a surgeon. Not a veterinary one, a general human one. If he said something was dead it was, in all probability, dead.