

The
Midnight
Library

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- Group 4: The Classified

Also by Matt Haig
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For Children

The Runaway Troll
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A Boy Called Christmas
The Girl Who Saved Christmas
Father Christmas and Me
The Truth Pixie
The Truth Pixie Goes to School

String Theory

Nine and a half hours before she decided to die, Nora arrived late for her afternoon shift at String Theory.

‘I’m sorry,’ she told Neil, in the scruffy little windowless box of an office. ‘My cat died. Last night. And I had to bury him. Well, someone helped me bury him. But then I was left alone in my flat and I couldn’t sleep and forgot to set the alarm and didn’t wake up till midday and then had to rush.’

This was all true, and she imagined her appearance – including make-up-free face, loose makeshift ponytail and the same secondhand green corduroy pinafore dress she had worn to work all week, garnished with a general air of tired despair – would back her up.

Neil looked up from his computer and leaned back in his chair. He joined his hands together and made a steeple of his index fingers, which he placed under his chin, as if he was Confucius contemplating a deep philosophical truth about the universe rather than the boss of a musical equipment shop dealing with a late employee. There was a massive Fleetwood Mac poster on the wall behind him, the top right corner of which had come unstuck and flopped down like a puppy’s ear.

‘Listen, Nora, I like you.’

Neil was harmless. A fifty-something guitar aficionado who liked cracking bad jokes and playing passable old Dylan covers live in the store.

‘And I know you’ve got mental-health stuff.’

‘Everyone’s got mental-health stuff.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I’m feeling much better, generally,’ she lied. ‘It’s not clinical. The doctor says it’s situational depression. It’s just that I keep on having new . . .

00:00:00

At first the mist was so pervasive that she could see nothing else, until slowly she saw pillars appear on either side of her. She was standing on a path, some kind of colonnade. The columns were brain-grey, with specks of brilliant blue. The misty vapours cleared, like spirits wanting to be unwatched, and a shape emerged.

A solid, rectangular shape.

The shape of a building. About the size of a church or a small supermarket. It had a stone facade, the same colouration as the pillars, with a large wooden central door and a roof which had aspirations of grandeur, with intricate details and a grand-looking clock on the front gable, with black-painted Roman numerals and its hands pointing to midnight. Tall dark arched windows, framed with stone bricks, punctuated the front wall, equidistant from each other. When she first looked it seemed there were only four windows, but a moment later there were definitely five of them. She thought she must have miscounted.

As there was nothing else around, and since she had nowhere else to be, Nora stepped cautiously towards it.

She looked at the digital display of her watch.

00:00:00

Midnight, as the clock had told her.

She waited for the next second to arrive, but it didn't. Even as she walked closer to the building, even as she opened the wooden door, even as she stepped inside, the display didn't change. Either something was wrong with her watch, or something was wrong with time. In the circumstances, it could have been either.

What's happening? she wondered. *What the hell is going on?*

‘And when does each life end?’

‘It could be seconds. Or hours. Or it could be days. Months. More. If you have found a life you truly want to live, then you get to live it until you die of old age. If you really want to live a life hard enough, you don’t have to worry. You will stay there as if you have always been there. Because in one universe you *have* always been there. The book will never be returned, so to speak. It becomes less of a loan and more of a gift. The moment you decide you want that life, really want it, then everything that exists in your head now, including this Midnight Library, will eventually be a memory so vague and intangible it will hardly be there at all.’

One of the lights flickered overhead.

‘The only danger,’ continued Mrs Elm, more ominously, ‘is when you’re here. *Between lives*. If you lose the will to carry on, it will affect your root life – your original life. And that could lead to the destruction of this place. You’d be gone for ever. You’d be dead. And so would your access to all this.’

‘That’s what I want. I want to be dead. I would be dead because I want to be. That’s why I took the overdose. I want to die.’

‘Well, maybe. Or maybe not. After all, you’re still here.’

Nora tried to get her head around this. ‘So, how do I return to the library? If I’m stuck in a life even worse than the one I’ve just left?’

‘It can be subtle, but as soon as disappointment is felt in full, you’ll come back here. Sometimes the feeling creeps up, other times it comes all at once. If it never arrives, you’ll stay put, and you will be happy there, by definition. It couldn’t be simpler. So: pick something you would have done differently, and I will find you the book. That is to say, the life.’

Nora stared down at *The Book of Regrets* lying closed on the yellow-brown floor tiles.

She remembered chatting late at night with Dan about his dream of owning a quaint little pub in the country. His enthusiasm had been infectious, and it had almost become her dream too. ‘I wish I hadn’t left Dan. And that I was still in a relationship with him. I regret us not staying together and working towards that dream. Is there a life where we are still together?’

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Elm.

you would have been if I hadn't turned up at the wedding?'

'Wow. Really? You have yourself in quite high esteem there, Nora.'

'Shouldn't I? I mean, shouldn't everyone? What's wrong with self-esteem? And besides, it's true. There's another universe where you send me WhatsApp messages about how messed up you are without me. How you turn to alcohol, although it seems like you turn to alcohol *with* me too. You send me texts saying you miss my voice.'

He made a dismissive noise, somewhere between a laugh and a grunt. 'Well, right now, I am most definitely not missing your voice.'

She couldn't get beyond her shoes. She found it hard – maybe impossible – to take off another item of clothing in front of him.

'And stop going on about my drinking.'

'If you are using drink as an excuse for screwing someone else, I can go on about your drinking.'

'I am a country landlord,' scoffed Dan. 'It's what country landlords do. Be jovial and merry and willing to partake in the many and manifold beverages we sell. Jeez.'

Since when did he speak like this? Did he always speak like this?

'Bloody hell, Dan.'

He didn't even seem bothered. To seem grateful in any way for the universe he was in. The universe she had felt so guilty for not allowing to happen. He reached for his phone, still with his laptop on the duvet. Nora watched him as he scrolled.

'Is this what you imagined? Is the dream working out?'

'Nora, let's not do this heavy shit. Just get to bloody bed.'

'Are you happy, Dan?'

'No one's happy, Nora.'

'Some people are. You used to be. You used to light up when you talked about this. You know, the pub. Before you had it. This is the life you dreamed of. You wanted me and you wanted *this* and yet you've been unfaithful and you drink like a fish and I think you only appreciate me when you don't have me, which is not a great trait to have. What about *my* dreams?'

He was hardly listening. Or trying to look like he wasn't.

'Big fires in California,' he said, almost to himself.

'Well, at least we're not there.'

freeing about that. To be existing without any expectation, even her own. As she walked, she googled her own name and added 'Sydney' to see if it brought up anything.

Before she scanned the results she glanced up and noticed a man walking on the path towards her, smiling. A short, tanned man with kind eyes and long thinning hair in a loose ponytail with a shirt that wasn't buttoned correctly.

'Hey, Nora.'

'Hey,' she said, trying not to sound confused.

'What time you start today?'

How could she answer that? 'Uh. Oh. Crap. I've totally forgotten.'

He laughed, a little laugh of recognition, as if her forgetting was quite in character.

'I saw it on the roster. I think it might be eleven.'

'Eleven a.m.?'

Kind Eyes laughed. 'What've you been smoking? I want some.'

'Ha. Nothing,' she said, stiffly. 'I've not been smoking anything. I just skipped breakfast.'

'Well, see you this arvo . . .'

'Yes. At the . . . place. Where is it again?'

He laughed, frowningly, and kept walking. Maybe she worked on a whale sight-seeing cruise that operated out of Sydney. Maybe Izzy did too.

Nora had no idea where she (or they) lived, and nothing was coming up on Google, but away from the ocean seemed the right direction. Maybe she was very local. Maybe she had walked here. Maybe one of the bikes she saw locked up outside the pool café had been hers. She rummaged in her tiny clasp wallet and felt her pockets for a key, but there was only a house key. No car keys, no bike keys. So it was a bus or by foot. The house key had no information on it at all, so she sat on a bench with the sun beating hard on the back of her neck and checked her texts.

There were names of people she didn't recognise.

Amy. Rodhri. Bella. Lucy P. Kemala. Luke. Lucy M.

Who are these people?

And a rather unhelpful contact titled, simply: 'Work'. And there was only one recent message from 'Work' and it said:

Where r u?

probable that in this life Nora hadn't gone to Bristol University. And even if she had, she wouldn't have been doing the same course. It was a *bit* humbling to realise that, even though *this* Isabel Hirsh might never have met Nora Seed, she was still doing the same thing she was doing in Nora's root life.

She also checked in on Dan. He was (seemingly) happily married to a spin-class instructor called Gina. 'Gina Lord (née Sharpe)'. They'd had a wedding in Sicily.

Nora then googled 'Nora Seed'.

Her Wikipedia page (she had a Wikipedia page!) informed her that she had indeed made it to the Olympics. Twice. And that she specialised in freestyle. She had won a gold medal for 800m freestyle, with a ridiculous time of eight minutes and five seconds, and had a silver for 400m.

This had been when she was twenty-two years old. She had won another silver medal when she was twenty-six, for her participation in a 4 x 100m relay. It got even *more* ridiculous when she read that she had briefly been the world record-holder for women's 400m freestyle at the World Aquatic Championships. She had then retired from international competition.

She had retired at twenty-eight.

She apparently now worked for the BBC during their coverage of swimming events, had appeared on the TV show *A Question of Sport*, had written an autobiography called *Sink or Swim*, was an occasional assistant coach at British Swimming GB, and still swam for two hours every day.

She gave a lot of money to charitable causes – namely to Marie Curie Cancer Care – and she had organised a fundraising charity swimathon around Brighton Pier for the Marine Conservation Society. Since retiring from professional sport, she had swum the Channel twice.

There was a link to a TED talk she had given about the value of stamina in sport, and training, and life. It had over a million views. As she began to watch it, Nora felt as though she was watching someone else. This woman was confident, commanded the stage, had great posture, smiled naturally as she spoke, and managed to make the crowd smile and laugh and clap and nod their heads at all the right moments.

She had never imagined she could be like this, and tried to memorise what this other Nora was doing, but realised there was no way she would be able to.

she hadn't sung in a long time. *The sky grows dark / The black over blue / Yet the stars still dare / To shine for—*

But then the person Nora was sitting next to – a smartly dressed business woman in her fifties, and the source of the musky perfume smell – leaned in and whispered, 'I'm so sorry about what happened to you. You know, the stuff in Portugal . . .'

'What stuff?'

The woman's reply was drowned out as the audience erupted into applause at that moment.

'What?' she asked again.

But it was too late. Nora was being beckoned towards the stage and her brother was elbowing her.

Her brother's voice, bellowing almost: 'They want you. Off you go.'

She headed tentatively towards the lectern on the stage, towards her own huge face smiling out triumphantly, golden medal around her neck, projected on the screen behind her.

She had always hated being watched.

'Hello,' she said nervously, into the microphone. 'It is very nice to be here today . . .'

A thousand or so faces stared, waiting.

She had never spoken to so many people simultaneously. Even when she had been in The Labyrinths, they had never played a gig for more than a hundred people, and back then she kept the talking between the songs as minimal as possible. Working at String Theory, although she was perfectly okay talking with customers, she rarely spoke up in staff meetings, even though there had never been more than five people in the room. Back at university, while Izzy always breezed through presentations Nora would worry about them for weeks in advance.

Joe and Rory were staring at her with baffled expressions.

The Nora she had seen in the TED talk was not this Nora, and she doubted she could ever become that person. Not without having done all that she had done.

'Hello. My name is Nora Seed.'

She hadn't meant it to be funny but the whole room laughed at this. There had clearly been no need to introduce herself.

mad and scream. They have sensitive hearing. They're like cats. Nine times out of ten, the noise scares them off.'

'And the other time out of ten?'

He nodded down at the rifle. 'You kill it. Before it kills you.'

Nora wasn't the only one with a gun. They all had guns. They were armed scientists. Anyway, Peter laughed and Ingrid patted her back.

'I truly hope,' said Ingrid, laughing raspily, 'you don't get eaten. I would miss you. So long as you aren't menstruating, you should be okay.'

'Jesus. What?'

'They can smell the blood from a mile away.'

Another person – someone who was so thoroughly wrapped up it was impossible to tell who they were even if she had known them – wished her 'good luck' in a muffled far-away voice.

'We'll be back in five hours . . .' Peter told her. He laughed again, and Nora hoped that meant it was a joke. 'Walk in circles to keep warm.'

And then they left her, walking off over the rocky ground and disappearing into the fog.

For an hour, nothing happened. Nora walked in circles. She hopped from left foot to right foot. The fog thinned a little and she stared out at the landscape. She wondered why she was not back in the library. After all, this was definitely a bit *shit*. There were surely lives where she was sitting beside a swimming pool in the sunshine right now. Lives where she was playing music, or lying in a warm lavender-scented bath, or having incredible third-date sex, or reading on a beach in Mexico, or eating in a Michelin-starred restaurant, or strolling the streets of Paris, or getting lost in Rome, or tranquilly gazing at a temple near Kyoto, or feeling the warm cocoon of a happy relationship.

In most lives, she would have at least been physically *comfortable*. And yet, she was feeling something new here. Or something old that she had long buried. The glacial landscape reminded her that she was, first and foremost, a human living on a planet. Almost everything she had done in her life, she realised – almost everything she had bought and worked for and consumed – had taken her further away from understanding that she and all humans were really just one of nine million species.

'If one advances confidently,' Thoreau had written in *Walden*, 'in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has

Expectation

Nora had always had a problem accepting herself. From as far back as she could remember, she'd had the sense that she wasn't enough. Her parents, who both had their own insecurities, had encouraged that idea.

She imagined, now, what it would be like to accept herself completely. Every mistake she had ever made. Every mark on her body. Every dream she hadn't reached or pain she had felt. Every lust or longing she had suppressed.

She imagined accepting it all. The way she accepted nature. The way she accepted a glacier or a puffin or the breach of a whale.

She imagined seeing herself as just another brilliant freak of nature. Just another sentient animal, trying their best.

And in doing so, she imagined what it was like to be free.

‘We have to do “Howl”,’ said the other band member. A turquoise lead guitar strapped around her. ‘We always do “Howl”.’

Nora had never heard of ‘Howl’ in her life.

‘Yeah, I know,’ she bluffed, ‘but let’s mix it up. Let’s do something they aren’t expecting. Let’s surprise them.’

‘You’re overthinking this, Nora,’ said Ravi.

‘I have no other type of thinking available.’

Ravi shrugged. ‘So, what should we do?’

Nora struggled to think. She thought of Ash – with his Simon & Garfunkel guitar songbook. ‘Let’s do “Bridge Over Troubled Water”.’

Ravi was incredulous. ‘What?’

‘I think we should do that. It will surprise people.’

‘I love that song,’ said the female bandmate. ‘And I know it.’

‘Everyone knows it, Imani,’ Ravi said, dismissively.

‘Exactly,’ Nora said, trying her hardest to sound like a rock star, ‘let’s do it.’

The two Brazilian podcast guys took a few moments to set up their equipment. And Nora sunk herself into the vast sofa in the living area as Joanna – attending to a few rogue crumbs around her mouth with a heavily manicured finger – explained that their music podcast, *O Som*, was the most popular in Brazil.

‘Great demographics,’ Joanna enthused. ‘And the numbers are stratospheric. It’s totally worth doing.’

And she stayed there, watching like a hawk mother, as the podcast began.

‘When he and Ravi decided they wanted to be rock stars, Mum and Dad bought Joe a guitar and then an electric piano.’

‘How did that go?’

‘The guitar bit went well. He could play “Smoke On The Water” within a week of getting it, but he wasn’t into the piano and decided he didn’t want it cluttering up his room.’

‘And that’s when you got it.’ Mrs Elm said this as a statement rather than a question. She *knew*. Of course she knew.

‘Yeah.’

‘It was moved into your room, and you welcomed it like a friend, and started learning to play it with steadfast determination. You spent your pocket money on piano-teaching guides and *Mozart for Beginners* and *The Beatles for Piano*. Because you liked it. But also because you wanted to impress your older brother.’

‘I never told you all this.’

A wry smile. ‘Don’t worry. I read the book.’

‘Right. Course. Yeah. Got you.’

‘You might need to stop worrying about other people’s approval, Nora,’ Mrs Elm said in a whisper, for added power and intimacy. ‘You don’t need a permission slip to be your—’

‘Yes. I get it.’

And she did get it.

Every life she had tried so far since entering the library had really been someone else’s dream. The married life in the pub had been Dan’s dream. The trip to Australia had been Izzy’s dream, and her regret about not going had been a guilt for her best friend more than a sorrow for herself. The dream of her becoming a swimming champion belonged to her father. And okay, so it was true that she had been interested in the Arctic and being a glaciologist when she was younger, but that had been steered quite significantly by her chats with Mrs Elm herself, back in the school library. And *The Labyrinths*, well, that had always been her brother’s dream.

Maybe there was no perfect life for her, but somewhere, surely, there was a life worth living. And if she was to find a life truly worth living, she realised she would have to cast a wider net.

Mrs Elm was right. The game wasn’t over. No player should give up if there were pieces still left on the board.

perfectly balanced with the echoes of charcoal’.

Each life she had experienced had a different feeling, like different movements in a symphony, and this one felt quite bold and uplifting. Eduardo was incredibly sweet-natured, and their marriage seemed to be a successful one. Maybe even one to rival the life of the couple on the wine label of the bottle of ropey wine she’d drank with Dylan, while being licked by his astronomically large dog. She even remembered their names. Janine and Terence Thornton. She felt like she too was now living in a label on a bottle. She also looked like it. Perfect Californian hair and expensive-looking teeth, tanned and healthy despite the presumably quite substantial consumption of Syrah. She had the kind of flat, hard stomach that suggested hours of Pilates every week.

However, it wasn’t just easy to fake wine knowledge in this life. It was easy to fake *everything*, which could have been a sign that the key to her apparently successful union with Eduardo was that he wasn’t really paying attention.

After the last of the tourists left, Eduardo and Nora sat out under the stars with a glass of their own wine in their hands.

‘The fires have died out in LA now,’ he told her.

Nora wondered who lived in the Los Angeles home she had in her pop star life. ‘That’s a relief.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ she asked him, staring up at that clear sky full of constellations.

‘What?’

‘The galaxy.’

‘Yes.’

He was on his phone and didn’t say very much. And then he put his phone down and still didn’t say much.

She had known three types of silence in relationships. There was passive-aggressive silence, obviously, there was the we-no-longer-have-anything-to-say silence, and then there was the silence that Eduardo and she seemed to have cultivated. The silence of not *needing* to talk. Of just being together, of *together-being*. The way you could be happily silent with yourself.

But still, she wanted to talk.

‘We’re happy, aren’t we?’

‘That sounds good.’

‘But you don’t have to have this worry for a very long time. You are going to have a life full of exciting adventures. There will be so many happy things.’

‘Like camping!’

A burst of warmth radiated through Nora as she smiled at this sweet girl. ‘Yes. Like camping!’

‘I love it when we go camping!’

Nora’s smile was still there but she felt tears behind her eyes. This seemed a good life. A family of her own. A daughter to go on camping holidays with.

‘Listen,’ she said, as she realised she wasn’t going to be able to escape the bedroom any time soon. ‘When you have worries about things you don’t know about, like the future, it’s a very good idea to remind yourself of things you *do* know.’

‘I don’t understand,’ the girl said, snuggled under her duvet as Nora sat on the floor beside her.

‘Well, it’s like a game.’

‘I like games.’

‘Shall we play a game?’

‘Yes,’ smiled her daughter. ‘Let’s.’

the Nora he had fallen in love with and married, and so, in a way, that was the Nora she was becoming.

around and the river just behind, refracting light, she marvelled at it as if she were seeing it for the first time. *It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.*

Driving back to Cambridge cocooned in her expensive Audi, smelling almost nauseatingly of vinyl and plastic and other synthetic materials, weaving through busy traffic, the cars sliding by like forgotten lives, she was deeply wishing she had been able to see Mrs Elm, the real one, before she had died. It would have been good to have one last game of chess with her before she passed away. And she thought of poor Leo, sat in a small windowless cell at a Bedford police station, waiting for Doreen to come and collect him.

‘This is the best life,’ she told herself, a little desperately now. ‘This is the best life. I am staying here. This is the life for me. This is the best life. *This* is the best life.’

But she knew she didn't have long.

The Other Side of Despair

‘Life begins,’ Sartre once wrote, ‘on the other side of despair.’

It wasn’t raining any more.

She was inside and sitting in a hospital bed. She had been put on a ward and had eaten and was feeling a lot better. The medical staff were pleased, following her physical examination. The tender abdomen was to be expected, apparently. She tried to impress the doctor by telling her a fact Ash had told her, about a stomach lining renewing itself every few days.

Then a nurse came and sat on her bed with a clipboard and went through reams of questions relating to her state of mind. Nora decided to keep her experience of the Midnight Library to herself because she imagined that it wouldn’t go down too well on a psychiatric evaluation form. It was safe to surmise the little-known realities of the multiverse probably weren’t yet incorporated within the care plans of the National Health Service.

The questions and answers continued for what felt like an hour. They covered medication, her mother’s death, Volts, losing her job, money worries, the diagnosis of situational depression.

‘Have you ever tried anything like this before?’ the nurse asked.

‘Not in this life.’

‘And how do you feel right now?’

‘I don’t know. A bit strange. But I don’t want to die any more.’

And the nurse scribbled on the form.

Through the window, after the nurse had gone, she watched the trees’ gentle movements in the afternoon breeze and distant rush-hour traffic shunt slowly along Bedford ring road. It was nothing but trees and traffic and mediocre architecture, but it was also everything.

It was life.