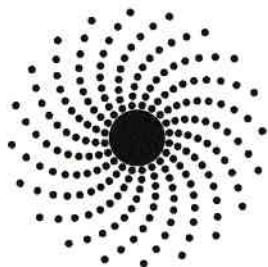


LBRIS

We know
books

THE LIFE IMPOSSIBLE



MATT HAIG



CANONGATE

Dear Mrs Winters,

I hope you don't mind the email.

You may remember me. You taught me mathematics at Hollybrook. I am now 22 years old and in my final year at university. I am studying mathematics, you will be pleased to hear!

I bumped into Mr Gupta in town in the Easter break and I asked after you and he told me all your news. I'm sorry to hear about the loss of your husband. Mr Gupta said you have moved to Spain. I had a grandmother who moved back to Grenada, which she hadn't visited since she was seven, and she found happiness there. I hope you are happy with your move abroad.

I too have experienced grief recently. My mum died two years ago and after that I fell into despair. I don't get on with my father and have found it hard to focus on university work. My sis (you may remember Esther) needs even more support now. I let my girlfriend down and she broke up with me. There have been other things too. At times I have found it very hard to carry on. It feels my life is already written at this young age and everything is known. I sometimes can't breathe with all the pressure.

I am in a pattern, like a number pattern, a Fibonacci sequence – 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 etc. – and like that sequence things get less surprising the further I go on. But instead of realising the next number is found by adding the two before it, you realise that everything ahead of you has already been decided. And as I get older, as I pass more numbers, the pattern becomes more predictable. And nothing can break that pattern. I used to believe in God but now I don't believe in anything. I was in love, but I messed that up. I hate myself sometimes. I mess everything up. I feel guilty all the time. I am drinking too much, and it screws up my studies and I feel guilty for that too because Mum wanted me to try hard.

I look at what is happening in the world and I see that our whole species is on a path to destruction. Like it is programmed, another pattern. And I just get fed up with being a human, being this small tiny thing that can't do anything about the world. Everything feels impossible.

I don't know why I'm telling you this. I just wanted to tell someone. And you were always kind to me. I am in the dark and I need a light. Sorry. That sounds melodramatic. I just need to be a good role model for my sister.

Please don't feel obliged to answer this. But anything you can say will be greatly valued. Sorry for the long email.

*Thank you,
Maurice (Augustine)*

Dear Maurice,

Thank you so much.

I am not in the habit of getting back to emails, not that I get a great many of them. I don't really 'do' the internet at all. I don't have social media. All I have is WhatsApp and I rarely even use that. But with your message I felt I must reply, and reply properly.

I am so sorry for all you have been through. I remember your mother from parents' evenings. I liked her. I remember her as serious, but with a little smile twisting the corners of her mouth when she spoke about you. You clearly cheered her up. Just being you. And that was a real achievement, especially for a teenager.

I started writing a response to you and it just grew and grew, far beyond a little email.

I have been meaning to write this all down for quite some time now, to be honest with you, and your message was the perfect prompt.

What I am about to tell you is a story even I find hard to believe. Please don't feel any obligation to take my word for anything. But know that nothing in this is made up. I have never believed in magic, and I still don't. But sometimes what looks like magic is simply a part of life we don't understand yet.

I can't promise that my story will help you believe in the impossible. But it is a tale, as true as any, of a person who felt there was no point left in her existence, and then found the greatest purpose she had ever known, and I think I have a duty to share it. I am definitely no role model, as will probably become clear. I have felt a lot of guilt in my life. And in a way this is a story about that. I hope you find some of it valuable.

Please find it attached.

*Very best wishes,
Grace Winters*

Sob Story

Once upon a time there was an old woman who lived the most boring life in the universe.

That woman rarely left her bungalow, except to see the doctor, help at the charity shop, or visit the cemetery. She didn't garden any more. The grass was overgrown, and the flowerbeds were full of weeds. She ordered her weekly shopping. She lived in the Midlands. Lincoln. Lincolnshire. The same orange-bricked market town that she had stayed in – apart from a stint at Hull University centuries ago – all her adult life.

You know the place.

And it wasn't so bad, but its streets were less welcoming than they used to be. It was hard to see half her fond memories covered in chipboard and ripped posters.

She sat and watched daytime TV and read the occasional book and did crosswords and Wordle to keep her brain in gear. She watched the birds in the garden, or stared at the small empty greenhouse, as the clock on the mantelpiece kept ticking. She had been an avid gardener once, but not any more. She was only seventy-two, but since her husband passed away four years before, and her Pomeranian – Bernard – shortly after, she had felt completely alone. In fact, she had felt alone for more than thirty years. Ever since April 2nd 1992, to be precise. The date she lost her entire meaning and purpose and never really found it again. But the loneliness had become a deep and literal reality in the last few years, and she felt approximately one hundred and thirty-two. She hardly knew anyone. Her friends had either died, or moved away, or retreated. She only had two contacts on her WhatsApp – Angela from the British Heart Foundation and Sophie, her sister-in-law, who had moved to Perth in Australia thirty-three years ago.

But of all the sad moments of the past, it was still that April date

long ago that reverberated most profoundly. The death of her son, Daniel, had been the hardest and most devastating, and when a tragedy is as large as that it leads to other sadnesses and failures, the way a trunk leads to branches. But life went on. She and her husband Karl eventually moved into a bungalow and tried to make the best of things, but that hadn't really worked, and so they'd sat in mutual silence, watching television or listening to the radio. Her husband had always been very different to her. He had liked hard rock and real ale but had really been a fundamentally quiet soul. The trouble with tragedy is that it tarts everything that comes after. On occasion they'd been comforted by the sharing of their memories, but when Karl died it became harder because the memories had nowhere to go. They just stayed, growing stale, inside her head. Which was why, whenever she saw herself in the mirror, she only saw a half-life. A slow-falling tree in an unseen forest.

She was also in a bit of a pickle with money.

Her life savings no longer existed. Ever since a scammer with a comforting Scottish accent had pretended to be a NatWest security advisor, and – with her foolish help – stole the £23,390.27 she and Karl had put away together. It was a long story, full of cunning characters and one ridiculous old fool (hello!), but much to your good luck it is not the tale being told here.

So anyway – this particular lady – she just sat there, with her aching legs, trying not to answer any emails from strangers, and letting her crumpled life drift like an empty crisp packet down the river. Her only spark of interest was the sight of a chaffinch or starling at the bird feeder in the small back garden, as she inhaled old memories and faded dreams.

Apologies

Sorry. That was a bit grand and melancholy. Talking about myself in the third person. I am just *setting the scene*. It's going to be fun, despite that introduction. And, like so many of life's fun things, it will begin with minimally invasive radiofrequency-based vein ablation surgery.

The Inability to Feel Pleasure

I was upside down when I decided to go to Ibiza.

The surgery bed I was lying on was tilted so far back I thought I was going to slip off. There was a mirror on the wall. I looked at my unkempt grey hair and tired face and hardly recognised myself. I looked like a faded person. I avoided mirrors, where possible.

They were trying to reverse the blood flow in my legs, you see. I was more covered in blue veins than a chunk of Gorgonzola and I needed to get them done. Not because of how they looked, but because they were making my calves itch and giving me sores. My aunt had died of a blood clot which broke free and achieved the lofty status of a fatal pulmonary embolism, so I wanted to get the varicose veins sorted before a clot of my own arrived with similar ambitions. I am sorry if this is too much information. I'm just determined to be as honest as possible with you, so I am starting as I mean to go on.

Truthfully.

So, as I listened to the radio, the vascular surgeon injected me multiple times with local anaesthetic along the length of my left leg – the final injection she fondly but accurately named the ‘bee sting’. Then we got to the main part where, she told me, a catheter would be inserted into my calf to blast my great saphenous vein from the inside with 120°C of ‘sauté-an-onion heat’.

‘You should be able to feel something . . .’

And I did feel it. It wasn't pleasant, but it was something. The truth was that I hadn't really felt much for years. Just a vague lingering sadness. Anhedonia. Do you know that word? The inability to feel pleasure. An unfeeling. Well, that had been me for some time. I have known depression, and it wasn't that. It didn't have the intensity of depression. It was just a lack. I was just existing. Food was just there to fill me up. Music had become nothing more than patterned noise. I was simply, you know, *there*.

You should be able to feel something.

I mean, that's the most basic and essential form of existence, isn't it? Feeling. And to live without feeling, then what was that? What *was* that? It was like just sitting there. Like a table in a closed restaurant, waiting for ever for someone to occupy the furniture.

'Think of something nice . . .'

And for once, it wasn't very hard to think of something. And the main thing I was focusing on was a letter I had received from a solicitor's office less than two hours before.

Pineapples

The letter had been an unusual one.

It had informed me that I had been left a property in Ibiza, Spain, belonging to someone called Christina van der Berg. This Christina van der Berg had died and left me her worldly goods. Or some of them, at least. Another scam, I thought. You see, when people have stolen from you, it is hard not to see the world as a den of thieves. But even if I hadn't been scammed, it was ridiculous to imagine that someone I had never known would bequeath me a house in the Mediterranean.

It took me a while to understand that this is not exactly what had happened. Or, to put it another way, it took me a while to realise Christina van der Berg was not a stranger. Not exactly. The trouble was that the name had rung precisely zero bells. The Dutch element – van der Berg – added a kind of grandness that seemed fictional and unfamiliar, and it had thrown me off. Luckily, though, the letter from Nelson and Kemp Solicitors gave some further information, including a fleeting mention of this Christina's maiden name: Papadakis.

Now, that did ring a bell.

Christina Papadakis had been, for a very short while, a music teacher. We had worked at the same school together just before I got back with Karl. (We'd been together at university, but he had been in too much of a rush, so I'd called a hiatus.)

I must admit I didn't know her very well at all. I remember her as a very beautiful and shy young woman, with an air of glamour, which was a rarer quality back in 1979 than it is now. She had a heavy fringe and long dark hair and wore beads. She reminded me of the singer Nana Mouskouri, but without the glasses. Her father had emigrated from Greece as a young man just after the war. Apparently she had never been to Greece, but she seemed the epitome of Mediterranean sophistication to my provincial land-locked brain. And she did miss the food

she had known growing up amid the Greek community in London – the first time I'd ever heard the word 'halloumi' in my life was out of her mouth. She always ate a lot of fruit. For instance, she would produce these elegantly crafted pineapple slices – not chunks – from her lunch box and that always impressed me. I once walked past her door while she was singing 'Rainy Days And Mondays' and the class were all open-mouthed in awe. Her voice was on a par with Karen Carpenter (another singer from Triassic times). The kind of voice that seems to still the air and time itself.

Anyway, one evening close to the Christmas holidays I had stayed late at school, adding tinsel to a display on trigonometry, and – on the hunt for more staples – I found her at her desk. She was sitting there, picking at her nails.

'Oh, don't do that,' I said, intrusively, as though she was a pupil rather than a colleague, 'you'll chip them.' I liked her nails. They were a warm-hued terracotta. But I felt immediately bad for saying that, especially when I saw her thousand-yard stare. I was tactless, socially. Always had been.

'Oh. I'm sorry,' I said.

'Please, don't be,' she said, suddenly looking at me and offering the most strained of smiles.

'Are you all right?'

It was then that she poured her heart out. She had been off school for a week, which I had barely noticed. She was having a crisis. She hated Christmas. Her now-vanished fiancé had proposed to her on Christmas Eve the year before. Being a relatively new arrival to the area, she didn't have any family. So I told her she could have Christmas Day with me.

And that is what happened. She came around and we watched the Queen's speech, *Goldfinger*, and Blondie on *Top of the Pops* singing 'Sunday Girl'. It was then Christina said she wanted to sing in front of crowds. We drank several bottles of Blue Nun, which was never the best mood stabiliser, and I apologised for the lack of pineapples. We talked late into the night.

She was feeling entirely unable to cope with things. A feeling I know more now than I did then. She was struggling with teaching, wondering

if she was in the wrong career. I told her everyone at Hollybrook felt like that. At one point she mentioned Ibiza. We were on the very edge of a new decade and the Spanish package holiday boom was going strong and she'd heard of a new hotel over there looking for singers and musicians.

I was intrigued. I found her to be a mystery, and I probably asked her too many questions. It is a maths teacher trait. The value of the unknown variable must always be found.

'I feel like I have a life inside me that needs to be lived and I am not living it.'

Those probably weren't her exact words. But they capture it. And she said, 'I know it doesn't make any sense. I am Greek, not Spanish. There are enough Greek islands. I should go to one of them. Because I can speak the language. Kind of. And I don't know any Spanish and I really think it is good to know the language if you live somewhere.'

'You could learn Spanish. You should do it if you want to. You should.'

'It doesn't make sense.'

And then I said something very un-me. I said: 'Not everything has to make sense.'

She had a fire in her eyes at the prospect of getting a job over there, so I told her to go for it if she wanted to, and not to worry about what people thought. I am pretty sure that's what I said, because I remember giving her a necklace I'd had since I was a child – and on the pendant was St Christopher, patron saint of travellers. I was a lapsed Catholic and associated it too much with my upbringing but had never been able to throw it away. Giving it to Christina felt right.

'He'll protect you,' I said.

'Thank you, Grace. Thank you for helping me. With this decision.'

She sang 'Blackbird' at one point. She sang it solo first. Very unfestive but very beautiful. There was a bittersweet quality to her singing that made me cry. She tried to teach me. 'You just need to become the song. Be inside it. Forget that you exist. It's the easiest Beatles song to sing,' she reassured me. 'Well, after "Yesterday". And "Yellow Submarine".'

It turned out it wasn't an easy song at all to sing. But we'd had enough wine not to care.

She explained her love of music to me.

‘It makes the world bigger,’ she said, eyes glossed with alcohol-infused sentiment. ‘I feel like I am trapped in a box sometimes and when I am playing piano or singing, I break out of that box for a while. Music to me is like a friend that comes in just when you need it. A bit like you, Grace.’

Anyway, we went for a walk. One of those cold Christmas walks where you smile at every stranger you pass. Well, you certainly did back then. And that was it. There really wasn’t much more to it than that. She went back to school for a few months and then she was gone. She never came around to my place again. We did speak in the staff room, although she seemed a little embarrassed in front of me. I didn’t understand it. How this lovely, talented person who wanted to sing in front of crowds was embarrassed about needing some company at Christmas. And one day – possibly the last time I saw her – she came up to me in the car park and said quietly, with tears glazing her eyes: ‘Thank you. You know, for Christmas . . .’

Just that. I can’t emphasise enough how much of a nothing I had thought it to be. That was all I did. Gave a person a place to be on Christmas Day decades ago.

And then, decades later, out of the blue, I get this letter. And it told me that Christina had died and that she had given me her house in Spain for ‘an act of kindness long ago’. It also made clear I could sell the house, or rent it out, if moving there was too ‘impractical’.

It was a surprise, to say the least. And one that left me feeling like I had lost more than I had gained. A friend I never really had from a time that felt like a distant dream. I had no plan to move there. As you get older, patterns become harder to break. And you don’t want them to break. My pattern had been broken various times in the past. When I retired. When my husband keeled over in his greenhouse. Even losing our dog, Bernard, had thrown me off balance. And, of course, when Daniel got hit by a Royal Mail lorry while riding his bike.

And nowadays, while I was craving the old married pattern I’d once found too much, a new pattern had formed. Feed the birds each morning. Food delivery on Monday. A morning voluntary stint at the British Heart Foundation charity shop on Friday. Cemetery on Sunday. And

eternal guilt and grief and emptiness. There were only the most minor fluctuations. I had settled into the pattern called Increasingly Elderly and I had not really thought about it.

But that was all about to change.

An Ongoing Situation

‘Sorry if this is too direct,’ I told the solicitor. ‘But how did she die?’

‘I thought you knew,’ she said. Mrs Una Kemp. A voice like it had only just come out of the fridge and needed time to soften.

‘No,’ I said. ‘It stated that she had died, in the letter, but it didn’t say how. So I would like to know how she died, if possible.’

‘She died at sea . . .’

This wasn’t, I realised, a direct answer.

‘I’m sorry. *How* did she die?’

A crackle of breath on the line. ‘Oh. That is an ongoing situation.’

Ongoing situation.

‘Sorry. In what sense?’

‘In the sense that the Spanish authorities are still looking into the precise circumstances in which she died. They are very thorough. The only thing that we know for certain, the only thing that we have been told, is that she died at sea.’

It only occurred to me a good five minutes after the conversation had ended that this ambiguity seemed rather peculiar. Why were the facts so mysterious? According to the solicitor, her will had been recently changed to include me as a beneficiary. This, combined with the general bizarreness of it being left to me, filled my mind with questions.

And I had always been the type who couldn’t see a question without pursuing an answer. Wherever it took me.