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Also by Matt Haig

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Evie and the Animals

The Truth Pixie Goes to School

Evie in the Jungle

A Mouse Called Miika

THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

MATT HAIG



CANONGATE

Honeymoon

As the water taxi sped across the lagoon, the two young honeymooners gazed ahead in awe.

Wilbur squeezed Maggie's hand and leaned into her as they sat at the back of the small boat, the sun glittering on the water in front of them.

'I love you, Mr Budd,' she told him, her words as natural as breath.

'I love you too, Mrs Budd.'

Maggie laughed, softly, at how funny and official that sounded.

They held hands as the boat chugged its way towards the city, their fingers intertwined like tangled roots. The ninth of August 1974.

Wilbur turned away from the view in front of him, towards the person he had known since childhood.

'We'll always be like this, won't we?' Maggie asked him.

He smiled reassuringly. 'Of course. Why wouldn't we?'

They kissed as the lagoon merged into the Grand Canal. 'I don't know. Time changes things.'

'But look at Venice. It's not changed in hundreds of years. This could be 1574 just as easily as 1974.'

She looked over towards the city. 'Aye. Let's ignore time. Let's be Venice.'

He watched as she held up her Pentax camera, a wedding present from her father, and aimed it towards the Doge's Palace, its pink and white stone facade and intricate arches rising directly above the lagoon like a Byzantine fever dream.

'For ever,' added Wilbur, laughing.

She put a hand through his tousled hair, which was just about the longest it ever got to. 'Yes, for ever and ever and ever . . .'

The boat slowed a little. 'There,' said the boatman, pointing towards a pretty but slightly decrepit terracotta building. 'Hotel Proserpina.'

Wilbur and Maggie had never been abroad before, and the sight looked exotic and full of promise. And neither of them, at that moment, could see the figure watching from the shore, the one who looked so much like Wilbur himself that it would have been impossible to tell the difference.

An hour later they were sitting in easy silence drinking wine in the shade at a café by the Grand Canal, watching the city unfold.

Wilbur was wearing the same sandals, flared jeans and short-sleeved green shirt with large collars that he had worn on the plane, and Maggie was in her orange jumpsuit. He told her she looked like a film star and she told him to stop being corny but she smiled all the same.

A vaporetto full of tourists chugged by. Maggie began reminiscing about the wedding.

'I've never seen your mam so happy,' she said. 'She didn't mention . . .' She paused, didn't want to taint the moment.

'Dougie? Aye, no. She didn't. I've not seen Mam like that. Not since everything that happened. I think the gin had helped. Your dad too . . .'

'Look at you,' Maggie said, smiling under the sun's glare.

'Look at me, what?'

'Sitting back in your chair like an emperor.'

'I'm just happy.'

'As you should be. You are on your honeymoon.'

Wilbur felt her study him a little closer.

'You're not thinking about the shop?'

He shook his head. 'No, actually,' he lied. Or half lied. 'Not right

now. I'm just thinking about you. And it's quite an occupying thought . . .'

And it was really nothing at the time, this contentment. It flowed through their open fingers like a stream, and they imagined it would always be like this, and that the stream would never dry up. It would just flow and flow and they would never have to think about where it came from. And never make the effort to scoop it up and drink it in, as if life could stay a honeymoon for ever.

After the wine, they walked towards the church of St John the Almsgiver. Maggie playfully sang a snippet of her favourite song, 'Bridge Over Troubled Water', as they spied the Rialto Bridge in the distance.

They passed smart Italian couples. Open shirts and glamorous dresses. A busker playing the accordion. An old American man smoking a pipe and talking to a companion about jazz.

'It feels so different, doesn't it?' Maggie observed.

She looked up and around. Absorbing the colours. Terracotta and pink, a dash of yellow, the deep blue shutters, everything in the sunlight looking like it had been brushed with honey.

'Different to where?'

'To everything we've ever known.'

He laughed. This was the very happiest he had ever felt. Happier than he once thought he could be, in the dark days. Just walking beside a canal, glancing at the woman he adored.

He turned to Maggie as she smiled a full-beam smile full of life. Her face was as open and pure as when he had first met her. And so was she. As tough as Sheffield steel and as warm as the sun. He was mesmerised by her. She could make him temporarily forget the wounds of his past and he hoped he did the same for her. He hadn't wanted to fall in love with her, or anyone. Love was a dangerous thing. But now it had happened, he was grateful. He felt whole with her, like a question that had found its answer.

Wilbur stopped Maggie for a kiss as they were about to go up the steps of the Rialto Bridge.

'We could move here,' he said.

Then, a few minutes later, as they passed a bookstall on the bridge, 'I could sell the shop.'

He was joking. They'd only just got there, after all. But also, in a way, he was being serious. Serious in the sense that he was connecting to something free and spontaneous inside him.

'What would we do?' Maggie asked, indulging the fantasy.

'You could be an artist . . . or do art tours.'

'And you could set up a little bookstall like that one back there on the bridge.'

It was then that Wilbur heard the whisper. Something up close in his ear. Cold breath.

You need to keep hold of this.

It caused Wilbur to brush his ear.

'You aill right, love?' asked Maggie.

'Oh, aye. Just a mosquito or something.'

And he thought nothing of it. Sometimes thoughts rang loud. That's all it was.

He held Maggie's hand, squeezed it. He felt a bit woozy and discombobulated amid the crowd in the heat, but still the happiest he'd ever been.

They kept walking, but there was quickly something else that captured Wilbur's attention. Something that couldn't be dismissed. Maggie gave him a concerned little look. Maybe she thought he was thinking of his brother. But no. Ahead of them under the portico, beside a little shop selling glass sculptures, there was a sight so odd it filled Wilbur with dread.

A man, rendered faintly in the air. Not transparent, but not fully *there*. It was the man who had watched them arrive, but this time he wasn't unseen. A man who looked uncannily like Wilbur himself. A doppelganger. The same sandals, flared jeans, short-sleeved green

shirt with large collars. The tousled hair and large sideburns. The lean, six-foot-one frame. The twenty-nine-year-old Wilbur of that August in 1974. The one with the world in his hands.

This other Wilbur seemed to notice that he had seen him, and waved, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Wilbur raised his hand slightly.

'Wilbur, you okay?' asked Maggie, concerned.

He didn't want to worry her. He shook his head. 'Aye. Just going a bit mad in the heat.'

'Come on, lad,' she said, in an exaggeration of her own accent. 'You need a nice spooky church and some Titian to gawp at.'

He laughed. But as he kept walking down the ramp, he heard something else.

A faint whistle, a rhythmical chugging.

Almost like a train leaving a station.

LBRIS

We know
books

Fifty-two years later . . .

The Thread

Wilbur Budd died around midnight, but he had trouble remembering the details.

He had been standing out on his gravel driveway saying goodbye to his piano teacher. 'Thanks,' he said, a bit breathless from the walk through the house. 'Have a good time tonight in Cambridge.'

The piano teacher opened the door to the car that was waiting for her. She was in her forties. Half his age. But already seemed to have life sorted out. She smiled in the afternoon sunshine as Wilbur's gardener drove by on the tractor-mower, attending to the lawns that rolled down to wild meadow borders. A Saturday in April. The sky was blue, the breeze light, and birdsong could be heard above the distant traffic. One of those bright, cool days that sprinkled hope throughout spring.

'I will. And thanks for the conversation. Remember what I said, don't try and rush it when you play. Take your time . . . Slow and steady. You'll get there in the end.'

'Yes,' said Wilbur. 'I suppose I will.'

He felt a bit light-headed. A bit nauseous.

Wilbur raised a frail arm, clicked the gates open and waved her off as she departed down the country lane, then walked the short distance back to the house.

He had been having piano lessons for two years, ever since he had seen an advert in the window of a music shop. His doctor had told him of the importance of learning new things now he was in his eighties, and he looked forward to his weekly lessons.

Once back inside, he walked over the flagstone floor and across the vast living room towards the piano.

He felt peculiar again. This time there was a pressure in his left shoulder, but it passed and he sat down and began to practise his study piece, remembering to take his time.

Music had a way of threading through decades like nothing else. A song, after all, was a needle pulling the thread of time, stitching disparate moments into something whole. It was bittersweet. The needle could hurt. And this piece had too many memories. Yet his life was what it was. He had the life he had.

He was about halfway through the piece, struggling to reach an E flat with his little finger, when the phone rang. The landline. It took him a while to get to the phone. His legs weren't what they were. Nothing was. He braced himself for a sales call, or one of those robot-voiced scams. They were just about the only calls he received nowadays.

But no. It wasn't a robot or a scammer. It wasn't anything to do with marketing or artificial intelligence.

'Hello, is that Wilbur?'

It was a voice he hadn't heard for a long time. For decades, in fact. It sounded a little fainter. A little weaker. But it was definitely her.

Maggie

'Maggie. Oh lord. Maggie, is that you?'

He stumbled slightly and lowered himself into the nearest chair. Across the room a wedding photograph perched above the fireplace, tucked amid trophies for British Business Person of the Year. Wilbur and Maggie walking out of the church.

'Yes, it's me.'

'How did you get the number?' Instantly, he cursed himself for asking. It sounded so defensive. He wanted nothing more than for her to have his number, and to call him, but it had come out all wrong.

'You gave me it, remember. You sent me a message on Facebook six years ago.'

'Oh. Oh yes. Oh yes, I did. I did. I thought you never saw that message.'

'I saw it. I don't do Facebook, but I saw it. I just didn't know what to say . . .'

Wilbur was feeling the pressure in his shoulder again. He stared at the wedding photograph through the distorted Perspex of one of his trophies. Maggie's laughter and Wilbur's uncomplicated smile. On paper their marriage lasted for twenty years. Though if he was honest, it died way earlier. But back then it was going to be for ever. 'Where are you?'

'I'm in Sheffield. What about you? Bedfordshire, right?'

'Yes. Clophill. It's a lovely little village.' He nearly added: *but it is lonely*. 'Maggie, it is good to hear from you . . .'

It was strange. After all these years, he didn't know how to talk

to her. It was as though the passing of time brought its own formality. How someone you once slept beside every night could become a stranger through years of silence. As though, except for brief interludes, the natural setting of humanity was to be impossibly distant from each other.

He tried again. 'I have things I've been wanting to say. To ask you. To make amends for . . .'

'Don't be silly, Wilbur. It's all water under the bridge . . .'

'It's so funny you should say that. I've started playing the piano.' He looked down at his time-weathered hands. The veins like a map to an unknown town. 'I have lessons every Saturday. And I've just been playing "Bridge Over Troubled Water", and remembering how you loved it. It did rather take me back.'

'The good old days.'

'Yes. The good old days . . .'

'Wilbur. *Wilbur*.'

That second Wilbur had a firmness to it. He realised he was just prattling on without asking about her. 'I'm sorry, Maggie. How are you? It's been so long. I saw on the internet that you had an exhibition for your art in—'

'Oh, that was years ago,' she said, almost shy. 'I hardly do it any more.'

He worried she was about to tell him she was dying. That did seem to be the prime reason people from his past contacted him. To tell him they were about to die, or that someone else he knew was.

'It's really silly.'

'What's silly?'

'This phone call.'

'It's nice to hear from you.'

'Well, I have no reason at all to phone you. In fact, I always told myself I never would . . .'

'Oh. Right. Yes.'

'Not out of spite, or anything. Just, it's a little bit sad, isn't it? But then recently I thought it would be – well, I wanted to hear your voice. Which sounds ridiculous.'

'No. Not at all.' And then he smiled. 'My voice is pretty special.'

Her small laugh ended with a sad inflection. 'Well, you still have some of your accent. Just.'

'Just.'

'I suppose I could have listened to you doing a speech on the internet. Or one of your telly interviews.'

'Oh, you don't want that . . .'

'I just wanted to hear you.'

He thought of sitting next to Maggie on a bench in the park as she drew a picture of the pond, a lifetime ago. 'I'm here. I've got so much to ask you. There's so much I want to know.'

There was a little silence. He imagined her thinking, *If only you had always been like that.*

He thought of all the things he didn't know about her. All the mysteries that had been created by their decades apart. Did she have a partner? Had she had one? Was she happy? Had she made new friends? Did she still have any of the old ones? What shows did she watch? How did she spend her days? How was her quality of life? How was her health? Could she still walk about okay? What did she think about the state of the world? What was the view from her window? Had she ever tried matcha? How *was* she?

'I don't know if I want to tell you anything at all, really,' she told him.

His mind felt foggy.

He stared at the wedding photo some more. Maggie's smile in that August sunshine as she stepped out of St Timothy's Church into a cloud of confetti. Such happiness. Their old friends framing the picture – Charlie, Claudette, Doreen. Just names now. People he didn't even know were alive. The fragility of the past.

'I just dreamed of you last night,' said Maggie. 'Of us. Not much

happened in the dream. But it was so vivid. It was before London. We were in the house in Broomhill, talking, as if no time at all had passed. But we were happy. Just so happy. It's so silly. I wonder why that, last night, was the—'

'Oh, Maggie. I dream of us too.'

'I don't ever remember dreams, but this morning I did. I'm sorry. I think I should go now. It's a little too much. I just needed to—'

'You've only just—' Wilbur stopped himself. He wanted her to stay on the line. It was torture to hear her for just a few moments, and then for it to be over. But he knew she didn't owe him anything at all. Life was as it was. No one could change what had happened. And so much had happened. That was simply what it was always meant to be.

Still, he couldn't help himself. 'I would like to speak to you again. Would that be all right?'

'Yes,' she said, in her frail and aged voice. 'I would like that.'

A Fragment

He put the phone down to find he was out of breath. As if having run a marathon. But he had the sudden urge to find something. He wanted her letter. Proof of their time as a couple, or rather, the first record of their separation.

He hadn't looked at it in years. It was under the eaves of the attic, behind a door. He went there and crouched down on his hands and knees to crawl deeper into the cupboard, passing a chaos of old bills and documents and Trade magazines. Motes of dust floated around his head like a miniature galaxy.

'What are you doing, Wilbur?' he muttered to himself. 'Silly old fool.'

Then he found it. Or at least one of its pages. The last page. He tried unsuccessfully to find the others, ignoring the fact he felt increasingly unwell. He was panting now and his head spun when he stood up. He gathered himself and went downstairs with the yellowed page in his hands.