



When a star reaches the end of its lifetime, it explodes in this violent supernova. Sometimes the outer layer of the star blows off, leaving behind a small, dense core that continues to collapse. Gravity presses down on the core material so tightly that the protons and electrons combine to make neutrons, and they combine to make a neutron star. Something born from a death that ripples out from thirty-three light years away. The core of the star speeds up, and it spins faster and faster, up to 43,000 times per minute, so that eventually the universe just becomes this blur – a blur of time and space – where nothing can hurt you because you don't really exist. Not properly. You're just a floating cluster of subatomic particles, trapped in this perfect world.

Last summer, me and Nate went to the fair. We climbed on

to the Spin Master, one of those rides with the metal cages that catapult you forward, and Nate's face was all stretched out and weird. He kept shouting and yelling because he loved it so much. And, as the wind hit me in the face, I could feel the corners of my mouth lift and then I closed my eyes and thought, This is the closest I'll ever get to being a neutron star. Me and Nate, together in this whirl of colour . . . this rush of light and sound. Pulsating. Rotating. Orbiting. Lifting off the ground.

I held on to the metal safety gate and thought of the patterns that were all around. I thought of the Fibonacci sequence and how everything in life is made up of numbers. I thought about how you can time travel in your mind with your memories. You do it, without even realizing. It's called chronesthesia. I thought about Van Gogh leaving out the bars on the windows of his room in his Starry Night painting. I thought about how it can take ten million years for a star to form, but it can only happen once there's been the perfect gravitational collapse.

And I thought of me and Nate on the boxing-gym roof. Me and my little bro up on that roof, and my chance to tell him everything, but not being able to find the right words.

Then I sat back and prayed that the ride wouldn't stop. Because I knew that when it did I wouldn't be a neutron star any more. I'd just be Al.

Al who was nothing.

Al who wanted to disappear.

Al who wanted to be up there instead . . . where nothing can touch you and all you know is helium and nitrogen and dust.



One day, little bro, you'll see. It will happen and you won't even realize it. You'll look up at the sky, stare at all those stars burning hundreds and thousands of miles away, and you'll think: I get it now. I get all that stuff that Al was banging on about – I really do.

‘It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves.’
That’s what Al said.

It was the last thing he told me before he disappeared. He said it was from some play he’d been studying in English, and then he ripped it out his school book and tossed it to me. He’d scrawled all these drawings down the sides of the words, cramming his pictures into the margins. All these people with

no faces. I hated reading more than I hated school, so I screwed it up and flushed it down the bog. Then I told Al exactly where he could shove his poetry. I didn't care that he thought it was a good one.

At least I didn't *then* anyway. Cause Al was always coming out with crap like that. Talking to me about some book, or a fact he'd remembered, or going into one of his weird moods when he couldn't get a drawing right. He'd get all stressed out and start running a hand through his thick Afro, pulling at the tufts of hair. Then he'd screw the whole drawing up and toss it in the bin. His room was full of half-finished faces and half-finished things, all split in two and scattered round the place. He had proper sketches, but he'd never let me see them. He kept them hidden, locked inside one of his desk drawers.

Al was full of secrets, but that didn't stop our mum from loving him the most. Al would be the one to get out of Wythenshawe. Al would be the one to do something with his life. To end up in one of those posh university halls and make her proud. Al, Al, fucking Al. Mum loves my little sister, Phoebe, probably cause she's the only girl. She loves Saul, probably cause he's the oldest. But, with me, it's like she didn't have enough love left to give. Maybe she doesn't love me so much cause I look most like our dad.

I turn over in the dark and I wait for it to stop hurting. Not the kinda hurt when someone gives you a dead arm in school and you laugh your head off, pretending it doesn't sting, even tho it kills. This is a different hurt. One that seems to come from inside and pull down on me. Like all these different parts

of me are slipping away, and I can't do nothin to stop it. It's this hurt that takes over. That splits me right down the middle. That reminds me every minute that Al ain't here, and there's nothing I can do to change it.

I hear the muffled sound of the telly coming from downstairs, forcing its way through the cracks in the floorboards. Mum's probably fallen asleep in front of it again. Since it happened, she hardly ever goes upstairs. She doesn't even sleep in her room any more. She spends more time praying, tho, heading down to this crappy church round the corner from our house or bringing these old fogeys to ours. People who've never bothered with us before, who hold her hand, and bring her stuff, and tell her that '*Al is in heaven now*'. That '*at least he's with God*'. That '*he's in the best place*'.

Mum nods like heaven is better than our house, or Civic Town Centre, or the pop-up funfair. That Al's better off dead than necking as much alcohol as he can, or getting on the Spin Master or the Miami Wave. And all I want to do is tell her there's no point in praying to some idiot in the sky. That God is just a taker, like one of those idiots in your year, who nicks a new pair of trainers even before you've managed to break them in. God *took* Al. And, if anyone asks, that's all I'd say he is – a taker of brothers and trainers and really important shit. I never believed in God much anyway, but I believe in him even less now.

The floorboards outside my room creak. I watch as my bedroom door begins to open and the light from the landing floods in, making me cover my eyes. And, for a moment, he's there. Al. Standing in the doorway, his Afro blocking out most

of the light, his body leaning to one side, his dark shadow stretched. He shakes his head slowly, like he can't believe wot a fool I've been, and I think I hear him say, *'Got you!'* Like this is all a joke. One of the stupid tricks that he'd play when he was messin around.

'Al?' I whisper, and my throat tightens. 'Al . . . ?' But all I can see is a shadow.

'It's just me,' a small voice says. Phoebe.

The door opens wider and I suddenly feel stupid. Phoebe moves towards me, a bright yellow dressing gown wrapped round her, the end of her long plait slowly unravelling. She's clutching this old teddy. The thing looks like a rabid cat shoved into a small doll's dress. Al bought it for her one Christmas ages ago. I hadn't seen it for years, but the night it happened she came into my room with it. She didn't speak, she just lay there. Curled up on her side, with this teddy pressed to her chest.

'I can't sleep,' she says. 'I can hear Mum crying again.'

I move over and peel the covers back. I don't mind Phoebe coming into my room cause at least then I'm doing summat for her. At least then there's summat I can try to fix.

Phoebe climbs in next to me. 'It smells funny in here,' she says.

'Well, it was fine before you came in.'

'It's not my fault that you don't wash.'

'Nah,' I say. 'D'you want me to kick you out or wot?'

Phoebe goes quiet and, even tho she doesn't say anything, I can tell that she's thinking.

'Nate,' she says. 'Where do we go when we die?'

I shrug. ‘Heaven,’ I say.

‘I know *that* . . . but how do you get there? Do you just wake up and you’re there? Or does an angel come and take you away? Or do you just die and then . . .?’

She pauses, and I think of Al for a minute. Drifting upwards, so awkward and lanky that, if you do float up to heaven, he’d probably get caught on summat on the way up. Tangled round an electricity wire like the old socks or school shoes that people throw up there. The thought makes me smile for a minute, numbing all those bits inside me, but it soon stops.

‘Do you think it hurts?’ Phoebe says. ‘Dying . . . Do you think it hurt Al?’ She pauses. ‘Was he in pain?’

I look up at the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. Al got them from one of those crappy pound shops the day Dad left. He’d stuck them down, taking ages to get them in the right places. He’d said that when he didn’t understand life, or if things didn’t make sense, he’d just look up and, somehow, everything would just feel different. It would feel okay.

Then he started telling me that there was no point in having stars on the ceiling if they didn’t look like the real thing, and he kept going on about all these names. Saying how there was some star named after this guy called Ryan, and how everything was shaped like his belt.

And, when he’d finished, he just had this one thing left. A comet that he ended up sticking in the corner, at the far side of my room. He said that he didn’t know what to do with it, but that he could tell that it didn’t wanna be with the rest of the stars.

I think of how Al looked when I'd found him. The blueish tint to his face. The green-and-black school tie knotted round his neck. His silver prefect badge glinting in the light, and the stupid faded school motto on his blazer: *In Caritate Christi Fundati*. I could hear kids playing in the street outside: someone kicking a ball against a fence; the wheels of a bike skidding round a corner; the slapping of a skipping rope on the pavement; the *thud, thud, thud* of music from a car in the distance. The chanting of, '*Who are ya? Who are ya? Who are ya? Touch me again and you're dead.*'

I think of how me and Al had had a row that morning. How he'd called me after school and I'd cut him off. Ignored his call, then turned my phone to silent. All cause I wanted him to stop bothering me and piss off. All cause I was having too much fun, drinking and smoking in the park. All cause I wanted to stay with Kyle and these two fit girls we were with.

Al had always been there for me, but, when he needed me the most, I'd cut him off.

I feel Phoebe tug at the sleeve of my T-shirt and my eyes begin to sting.

'Nate, do you think it hurts?' she asks again.

I stare up at the comet, separate from all those other stars.

'Nah,' I lie. 'I don't think it hurts at all.'

I listen to the sound of Phoebe's breathing till she falls asleep, her head resting on my arm. I close my eyes and try not to think of Al, or how I'd let him down.

Afterwards, these two police officers had come round to get

me to give a statement to explain what happened. ‘*Routine,*’ they’d said. ‘*To establish that Al’s death was an accident.*’

An accident.

I didn’t tell them about the phone call. Or that before they’d pulled up, with their loud sirens and flashing lights, before they’d got out their car, or written down his time of death, or zipped him up in one of those white bags, I’d noticed summat.

I’d seen it on the floor when I’d found Al. It was resting beside the leg of his wooden desk chair. I didn’t know if he’d left it there on purpose, or if it was a mistake, but I picked it up anyway. A drawing. Al had drawn himself sitting in the corner. The face was all scribbled out, but I knew it was him cause of the Afro, and he was wearing his favourite navy hoodie. He was hunched over, his hands pressed over his ears, and there were all these people surrounding him. Towering over him. He’d scribbled out their faces, too, but there were loads of them covering most of the page. Then, towards the bottom, beside the tip of Al’s shoe, were two words. *Help me.*

I pull the covers back and get outta bed, trying my hardest not to wake Phoebe. I open the drawer of my bedside table. I move stuff around – my iPhone, a lighter, some old headphones – till my fingers brush over Al’s drawing. I pull it out and make my way to the bedroom window, pushing the curtain aside to let the light from the street lamp shine in. I unfold the crumpled piece of paper.

I must’ve looked at it a thousand times – probably more – each time hoping to find summat different. I dunno wot.

Maybe an answer or a clue. Summat to tell me why Al did it, or how to stop it from hurting, or wot I'm supposed to do now. How I'm supposed to just carry on . . . even tho Al's torn this hole right through me. And I'll never be the same.

None of us will.

I hold the drawing up against the window so the paper goes this weird off-white colour, and I stare at the picture of Al, scared and hunched over. I move my finger over the words. *Help me. Help me.* Wot if Al had been in trouble and I hadn't even known?

The screeching sound of car tyres coming down the road makes me jump. I hear the low beat of some rap music, and I watch as a dark blue Corsa pulls up outside our house. The car door opens and Saul stumbles out, the music getting louder. I see some of his mates, all crammed into the tiny car. Saul slams the door, pulling the collar of his leather jacket up. The driver presses down on the horn, beeping it in time with the song, shouting and jeering.

'Shut up, you bellend,' Saul says. 'You'll wake me mum up and that.'

There's more noise from the car, and one of his other mates sticks his head out the window, chucking a cig stub into the night.

'Oooh,' he says. 'Don't wanna wake Mummy up. When are ya moving out?'

The others laugh. I recognize most of them from our estate.

'Piss off,' Saul says. 'Your mum asked me to move in, but I ain't sure you wanna new stepdad just yet.'

There's more laughter from the car and Saul walks towards the house.

'In a bit!' one of them shouts. 'I'll come check for you tomorrow, yeah?'

Saul waves, and they rev the engine, turning the music up even louder and beeping the horn as they go. The car disappears down the other end of the road, and I see Saul shake his head. He must feel me watching cause he looks up at my bedroom window. He stares at me for a minute, scrunching up his face, and then he flicks me the V sign. I don't do it back.

Saul's key turns in the front door, and I hear the sound of his footsteps moving towards the kitchen. There's the noise of pots and pans banging, the microwave going. And I can't help but feel all this anger inside me. It's like Saul can just forget about wot happened and move on. Pretend that Al never existed. Our brother's only been dead for three days and Saul's acting like he doesn't even care. When our dad left, Saul just said, 'Shit happens,' and we needed to get used to it. Well, maybe having your dad walk out is normal, but it's not *normal* for your brother to kill himself. Is it? Not when he's seventeen . . . when he had all this stuff he wanted to do. Not when it's Al.

I fold the drawing and drop it back inside my drawer. Then I climb into bed next to Phoebe and stare up at the plastic comet. I look at it till the shape starts to blur and my eyes get heavy. I hear Al's voice inside my head: *'You wouldn't know it, but all stars, all of them, are in this constant conflict with themselves. Like, all the time. There's gravity and the mass of the star*

pulling it inwards, but then there's this other force pushing it back outwards against the gravity. Then, in the middle, where they meet, you get this fusion. That's where the energy comes from. The star collapses in on itself, and another one is born. Imagine that. Something in so much conflict all the time, so much pain, but it still creates something so . . . so . . . beautiful.'

There's this tingling feeling creeping up all over my body. I'm standing at the bottom of the staircase that leads to the attic room, the darkness closing in around me. I place my hand on the wall, feeling the coldness of it spreading through my fingers. I take one step at a time till I'm outside Al's door. His bedroom light is on. I walk in, staring at the walls covered in old Blu-Tack marks. I pass this map that Al had pinned up of the places he'd wanted to visit – the Atacama Desert, Death Valley, the Empty Quarter, the Brecon Beacons. Where he could go and see the stars. He'd drawn this route across the map that led out of Manchester and went right across the world. Like he wanted to escape, like he wanted to get as far away from this place as possible.

I look at Al's paintings, his revision notes, at an exam timetable he'd highlighted. His bed hasn't been touched, and his clothes are still neatly folded at the bottom. Above his bed there's a hanging mobile of stars made outta cardboard. I walk over to his desk, looking at his open sketchbook, and I see *that* picture – Al cowering in the corner, surrounded by all those people with no faces. My throat tightens and I turn the page and the bodies are there again, but the faces get darker. I flick

faster, going through page after page. It's like the drawings are coming to life, moving across the paper.

And then I see the words *Help me* again and again.

I can't stop myself from flicking through. Like I've got no control over my hand. The words get bigger:

Help me. Stop them. Help me. PLEASE.

I want to turn away, but I can't. I just keep going, and then I hear it. A sound from somewhere above me, so faint that it's almost a whisper.

'Nate,' I hear. 'Please . . . please . . .'

I move my eyes upwards and then I see him.

Al.

His green-and-black tie wrapped round one of the wooden roof beams. His desk chair placed just beside his feet, his skin pallid and waxy. I stare up at his body, at the way that his feet hang, at the laces of his school shoes that are undone – frayed and trailing down. His eyes are open, and he's kicking, struggling, like he's trying to move through water – or something thicker. Treacle. Quicksand. Tar.

'Help me,' Al says.

Blood pounds in my ears, and my breath echoes all around me, filling the room, pressing hard against my chest. It's like there's this balloon inside me that's being blown up and up and it's gonna burst any minute. My palms begin to sweat and I climb on to the chair, my legs trembling, reaching for Al's tie. I touch the shiny fabric, trying to undo it, but my fingers slide over

the knot again and again. I can see the air slowly leaving Al's body, his face tensing. I pull and tug, trying to undo the knot.

'Hold on,' I tell him. But it's wrapped too tightly, cutting into his neck, hurting him. I shout for help, pushing my fingers against Al's neck, trying to loosen the tie, slacken it, unravel it just a little.

'Hold on,' I repeat. I can feel my chest tightening and the tears starting to come.

I shout for help again, but no one's there.

Al struggles, his face turning this weird colour, his hands raised up towards his tie.

'Hold on!' I shout at him. 'Bro, you're gonna be okay. You've just got to—'

I pull and I tug, but I can tell that it's too late. That *I'm* too late. I shout Al's name. Trying to stop him somehow, trying to keep hold of him, and then I feel it. A hand pressing down hard on my shoulder . . .

'It's all right,' a voice says. 'Nate, I've got you, yeah?'

I open my eyes. My room is so bright from the big light that's been switched on that I have to shield my eyes. I'm drenched in sweat and the bedsheets are tangled and wrapped round me. Saul is there, his fade starting to grow back, a love bite on his neck. I pull at the edge of my duvet cover, wiping away the sweat. I shuffle myself upwards, resting my head in my hands.

'I couldn't save him,' I say. 'I couldn't save Al.'

'I know,' Saul says. 'I know.'

I start to cry. I feel stupid, fucking stupid, for crying, but

I can't help it. It's like summat's broken inside me and it won't heal. Saul sits down next to me, making the mattress sag beneath his weight, his muscles showing under his thin vest. He pulls me to him, wrapping his arms round me, and I close my eyes, breathing in his cigarette and aftershave smell. Wishing it would all go back to how it used to be. Wishing I'd just answered Al's call, or left school earlier, or fucking noticed that summat was up.

Wishing that I'd been a better brother.

I dunno how long we sit there, but I suddenly feel all awkward and it's like Saul doesn't know wot to do, either. I move away, turning to look at the tangled covers and the space in my bed.

'Where's Phoebe?' I say.

Saul cracks his knuckles. 'You started screaming, so she ran to get me. I put her back in her own bed.' He pauses and opens and closes his fist, watching his muscles tense. 'It scared her, y'know. When you started screaming like that. Saying those things . . . saying Al's name.' He stops. 'It's like you were possessed or summat.'

I stare at him. 'You think I started screaming for the fun of it?'

'I never said that,' he says. 'It's just . . . I'm worried. It's not the first time this has happened.'

'Well, we can't all be like you, y'know. We can't all just go around pretending like none of this happened. Like Al ain't gone.'

Saul turns to me, anger in his eyes. 'You fucking think I

ain't upset?' he says. 'That I'm not hurting. Fuck, Nate. Not a minute goes by when I don't think about him. When I don't wish . . . I miss him, too. Just as much as you do.'

We sit there, in silence, staring into space.

'Why do you think he did it?' I say.

Saul stiffens and shifts over on my bed. 'I dunno,' he says. 'How am I supposed to know that? How's anyone supposed to know?' He pauses. 'It ain't like he left a note or nothin.'

I think about the drawing and my throat tightens.

'I suppose,' I say. 'But don't you wanna find out? Don't you wanna know? Wouldn't you feel better if you knew the reason?'

'Al's dead, Nate.' Saul's words come out cold. 'It ain't like we can ask him, is it? And, even then, wot will it change?'

I shake my head.

'Look,' Saul says, 'I didn't mean it like that. It's just . . . wot difference will it make? Even if we did find out, it won't bring him back. Shit happens.'

I stare up at the comet on the ceiling. It's the same words as before, so I know he's not just talking about Al. He's talking about our dad walking out, too.

'You can spend all your life tryna to work out why someone does summat. Tryna find answers and, in the end, none of it matters. That's just people.'

I shrug. 'Suppose,' I say. But I don't mean it. It all matters. *Reasons* matter.

Saul gets up and walks over to my bedroom door. 'Try and get some sleep, yeah?' he says. 'It's almost three.'

I nod. ‘Right,’ I reply.

Saul pauses. ‘We’ll get through,’ he says. ‘Same way we always do.’ He stands there for a minute, like he’s gonna say summat else, but he doesn’t. He just gives me this weird smile, then switches off my light and closes the door. I lie back and I stare up at the dim shapes on my ceiling – the half-moon, the plastic planets, a shooting star with a curved bit at the bottom. I don’t like it when I’m left alone cause then it’s just me and all these thoughts. Me and all these feelings that I don’t understand.

Maybe Saul’s right – maybe there ain’t always a reason why people do things; maybe there ain’t always an answer. And, if I would’ve showed him Al’s drawing, then he would’ve said that it was just a stupid picture that I was reading too much into. But I know Al. He was one of the smartest people that I know . . . knew. And he wouldn’t have left that drawing there unless there was a reason, unless there was summat he wanted us to find out.

And wot else do I have?

I breathe out slowly.

‘Eh, bro,’ I say, and I dunno if I really think Al can hear me or not, but it feels good to say it out loud anyway. ‘I promise I’ll find out wot happened,’ I say. ‘I promise I’ll find out why.’