

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.

‘I’m so sorry.’

Nora had a familiar sense of grief. Only the sertraline stopped her crying. ‘Oh God.’

She stepped out onto the wet cracked paving slabs of Bancroft Avenue, hardly breathing, and saw the poor ginger-furred creature lying on the rain-glossed tarmac beside the kerb. His head grazed the side of the pavement and his legs were back as if in mid-gallop, chasing some imaginary bird.

‘Oh Volts. Oh no. Oh God.’

She knew she should be experiencing pity and despair for her feline friend – and she was – but she had to acknowledge something else. As she stared at Voltaire’s still and peaceful expression – that total absence of pain – there was an inescapable feeling brewing in the darkness.

Envy.

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 second-hand 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 . . . situations. But I haven’t taken a day off sick for it all. Apart from when my mum . . . Yeah. Apart from that.’

Neil sighed. When he did so he made a whistling sound out of his nose. An ominous B flat. ‘Nora, how long have you worked here?’

‘Twelve years and . . .’ – she knew this too well – ‘. . . eleven months and three days. On and off.’

‘That’s a long time. I feel like you are made for better things. You’re in your late thirties.’

‘I’m thirty-five.’

‘You’ve got so much going for you. You teach people piano . . .’

‘One person.’

He brushed a crumb off his sweater.

‘Did you picture yourself stuck in your hometown working in a shop? You know, when you were fourteen? What did you picture yourself as?’

‘At fourteen? A swimmer.’ She’d been the fastest fourteen-year-old girl in the country at breaststroke and second-fastest at freestyle. She remembered standing on a podium at the National Swimming Championships.

‘So, what happened?’

She gave the short version. ‘It was a lot of pressure.’

‘Pressure makes us, though. You start off as coal and the pressure makes you a diamond.’

She didn’t correct his knowledge of diamonds. She didn’t tell him that while coal and diamonds are both carbon, coal is too impure to be able, under whatever pressure, to become a diamond. According to science, you start off as coal and you end up as coal. Maybe that was the real-life lesson.

She smoothed a stray strand of her coal-black hair up towards her ponytail.

‘What are you saying, Neil?’

‘It’s never too late to pursue a dream.’

‘Pretty sure it’s too late to pursue that one.’

‘You’re a very well qualified person, Nora. Degree in Philosophy . . .’

Nora stared down at the small mole on her left hand. That mole had been through everything she’d been through. And it just stayed there, not caring. Just being a mole. ‘Not a *massive* demand for philosophers in Bedford, if I’m honest, Neil.’

‘You went to uni, had a year in London, then came back.’

‘I didn’t have much of a choice.’

Nora didn’t want a conversation about her dead mum. Or even Dan. Because Neil had found Nora’s backing out of a wedding with two days’ notice the most fascinating love story since Kurt and Courtney.

‘We all have choices, Nora. There’s such a thing as free will.’

‘Well, not if you subscribe to a deterministic view of the universe.’

‘But why *here*?’

‘It was either here or the Animal Rescue Centre. This paid better. Plus, you know, music.’

‘You were in a band. With your brother.’

‘I was. The Labyrinths. We weren’t really going anywhere.’

‘Your brother tells a different story.’

This took Nora by surprise. ‘Joe? How do you—’

‘He bought an amp. Marshall DSL40.’

‘When?’

‘Friday.’

‘He was in Bedford?’

‘Unless it was a hologram. Like Tupac.’

He was probably visiting Ravi, Nora thought. Ravi was her brother’s best friend. While Joe had given up the guitar and moved to London, for a crap IT job he hated, Ravi had stuck to Bedford. He played in a covers band now, called Slaughterhouse Four, doing pub gigs around town.

‘Right. That’s interesting.’

Nora was pretty certain her brother knew Friday was her day off. The fact prodded her from inside.

‘I’m happy here.’

‘Except you aren’t.’

He was right. A soul-sickness festered within her. Her mind was throwing itself up. She widened her smile.

‘I mean, I am happy with the job. Happy as in, you know, satisfied. Neil, I need this job.’

‘You are a good person. You worry about the world. The homeless, the environment.’

‘I need a job.’

He was back in his Confucius pose. ‘You need freedom.’

‘I don’t want freedom.’

‘This isn’t a non-profit organisation. Though I have to say it is rapidly becoming one.’

‘Look, Neil, is this about what I said the other week? About you needing to modernise things? I’ve got some ideas of how to get younger peo—’

‘No,’ he said, defensively. ‘This place used to just be guitars. String Theory, get it? I diversified. Made this work. It’s just that when times are tough I can’t pay you to put off customers with your face looking like a wet weekend.’

‘What?’

‘I’m afraid, Nora’ – he paused for a moment, about the time it takes to lift an axe into the air – ‘I’m going to have to let you go.’

To Live Is to Suffer

Nine hours before she decided to die, Nora wandered around Bedford aimlessly. The town was a conveyor belt of despair. The pebble-dashed sports centre where her dead dad once watched her swim lengths of the pool, the Mexican restaurant where she'd taken Dan for fajitas, the hospital where her mum had her treatment.

Dan had texted her yesterday.

Nora, I miss your voice. Can we talk? D x

She'd said she was *stupidly hectic* (big lol). Yet it was impossible to text anything else. Not because she didn't still feel for him, but because she did. And couldn't risk hurting him again. She'd ruined his life. *My life is chaos*, he'd told her, via drunk texts, shortly after the would-be wedding she'd pulled out of two days before.

The universe tended towards chaos and entropy. That was basic thermodynamics. Maybe it was basic existence too.

You lose your job, then more shit happens.

The wind whispered through the trees.

It began to rain.

She headed towards the shelter of a newsagent's, with the deep – and, as it happened, *correct* – sense that things were about to get worse.

Doors

Eight hours before she decided to die, Nora entered the newsagent's.

'Sheltering from the rain?' the woman behind the counter asked.

'Yes.' Nora kept her head down. Her despair growing like a weight she couldn't carry.

A *National Geographic* was on display.

As she stared now at the magazine cover – an image of a black hole – she realised that's what she was. A black hole. A dying star, collapsing in on itself.

Her dad used to subscribe. She remembered being enthralled by an article about Svalbard, the Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. She'd never seen a place that looked so *far away*. She'd read about scientists doing research among glaciers and frozen fjords and puffins. Then, prompted by Mrs Elm, she'd decided she wanted to be a glaciologist.

She saw the scruffy, hunched form of her brother's friend – and their own former bandmate – Ravi by the music mags, engrossed in an article. She stood there for a fraction too long, because when she walked away she heard him say, 'Nora?'

'Ravi, hi. I hear Joe was in Bedford the other day?'

A small nod. 'Yeah.'

'Did he, um, did you see him?'

'I did actually.'

A silence Nora felt as pain. 'He didn't tell me he was coming.'

'Was just a fly-by.'

'Is he okay?'

Ravi paused. Nora had once liked him, and he'd been a loyal friend to her brother. But, as with Joe, there was a barrier between them. They hadn't parted on the best of terms. (He'd thrown his drumsticks on the floor of a rehearsal room and stropped out when Nora told him she was out of the band.) 'I think he's depressed.'

Nora's mind grew heavier at the idea her brother might feel like she did.

'He's not himself,' Ravi went on, anger in his voice. 'He's going to have to move out of his shoebox in Shepherd's Bush. What with him not being able to play lead guitar in a successful rock band. Mind you, I've got no money either. Pub gigs don't pay these days. Even when you agree to clean the toilets. Ever cleaned pub toilets, Nora?'

'I'm having a pretty shit time too, if we're doing the Misery Olympics.'

Ravi cough-laughed. A hardness momentarily shadowed his face. 'The world's smallest violin is playing.'

She wasn't in the mood. 'Is this about The Labyrinths? Still?'

'It meant a lot to me. And to your brother. To all of us. We had a deal with Universal. Right. There. Album, singles, tour, promo. We could be Coldplay now.'

'You hate Coldplay.'

'Not the point. We could be in Malibu. Instead: *Bedford*. And so, no, your brother's not ready to see you.'

'I was having *panic attacks*. I'd have let everyone down in the end. I told the label to take you on without me. I agreed to write the songs. It wasn't my fault I was engaged. I was with Dan. It was kind of a deal-breaker.'

'Well, yeah. How did that work out?'

'Ravi, that isn't fair.'

'Fair. Great word.'

The woman behind the counter gawped with interest.

‘Bands don’t last. We’d have been a meteor shower. Over before we started.’

‘Meteor showers are fucking beautiful.’

‘Come on. You’re still with Ella, aren’t you?’

‘And I could be with Ella *and* in a successful band, with *money*. We had that chance. Right *there*.’ He pointed to the palm of his hand. ‘Our songs were *fire*.’

Nora hated herself for silently correcting the ‘our’ to ‘my’.

‘I don’t think your problem was stage fright. Or wedding fright. I think your problem was *life fright*.’

This hurt. The words took the air out of her.

‘And I think *your* problem,’ she retaliated, voice trembling, ‘is blaming others for your shitty life.’

He nodded, as if slapped. Put his magazine back.

‘See you around, Nora.’

‘Tell Joe I said hi,’ she said, as he walked out of the shop and into the rain. ‘Please.’

She caught sight of the cover of *Your Cat* magazine. A ginger tabby. Her mind felt loud, like a Sturm und Drang symphony, as if the ghost of a German composer was trapped inside her mind, conjuring chaos and intensity.

The woman behind the counter said something to her she missed.

‘Sorry?’

‘Nora Seed?’

The woman – blonde bob, bottle tan – was happy and casual and relaxed in a way Nora no longer knew how to be. Leaning over the counter, on her forearms, as if Nora was a lemur at the zoo.

‘Yep.’

‘I’m Kerry-Anne. Remember you from school. The swimmer. Super-brain. Didn’t whatshisface, Mr Blandford, do an assembly on you once? Said you were going to end up at the Olympics?’

Nora nodded.

‘So, did you?’

‘I, um, gave it up. Was more into music . . . at the time. Then life happened.’

‘So what do you do now?’

‘I’m . . . between things.’

‘Got anyone, then? Bloke? Kids?’

Nora shook her head. Wishing it would fall off. Her own head. Onto the floor. So she never had to have a conversation with a stranger ever again.

‘Well, don’t hang about. Tick-tock tick-tock.’

‘I’m *thirty-five*.’ She wished Izzy was here. Izzy never put up with any of this kind of shit. ‘And I’m not sure I want—’

‘Me and Jake were like rabbits but we got there. Two little terrors. But worth it, y’know? I just feel *complete*. I could show you some pictures.’

‘I get headaches, with . . . phones.’

Dan had wanted kids. Nora didn’t know. She’d been petrified of motherhood. The fear of a deeper depression. She couldn’t look after herself, let alone anyone else.

‘Still in Bedford, then?’

‘Mm-hm.’

‘Thought you’d be one who got away.’

‘I came back. My mum was ill.’

‘Aw, sorry to hear that. Hope she’s okay now?’

‘I better go.’

‘But it’s still raining.’

As Nora escaped the shop, she wished there were nothing but doors ahead of her, which she could walk through one by one, leaving everything behind.