

Matt Haig

#1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

The Midnight Library



A Novel

The LIFE **IMPOSSIBLE**

"A wry and tender love letter to the best of being human."

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The Life Impossible

Matt Haig

VIKING

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Acknowledgements

About the Author

To the island and people of Ibiza

Reality is not always probable, or likely.

Jorge Luis Borges

When the angels from above,
Fall down and spread their wings like doves;
As we walk, hand in hand,
Sisters, brothers, we'll make it to the promised land.

Joe Smooth, 'Promised Land'

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 taints 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.