



Also by Matt Haig

The Last Family in England

The Dead Fathers Club

The Possession of Mr Cave

The Radleys

The Humans

Humans: An A-Z

Reasons to Stay Alive

For Children

The Runaway Troll

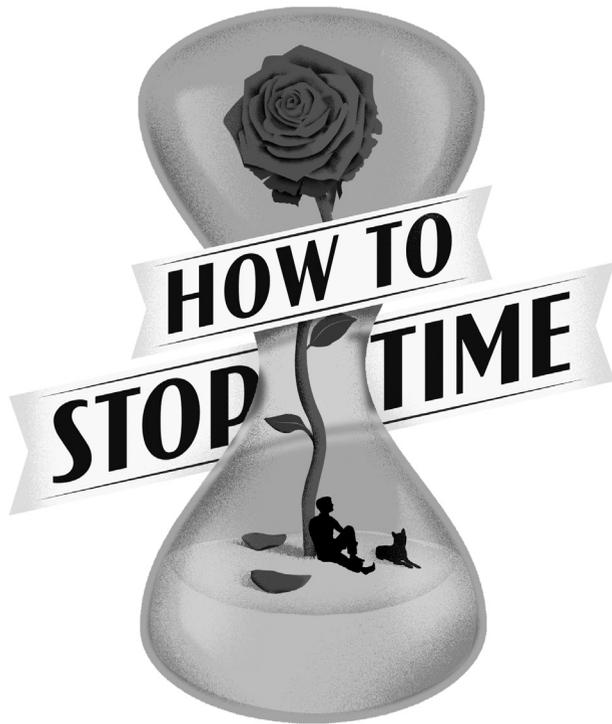
Shadow Forest

To Be A Cat

Echo Boy

A Boy Called Christmas

The Girl Who Saved Christmas



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CANONGATE

Published in Great Britain in 2017 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78211 861 9

Typeset in Minion 11/14 pt by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.



For Andrea

I often think of what Hendrich said to me, over a century ago, in his New York apartment.

‘The first rule is that you don’t fall in love,’ he said. ‘There are other rules too, but that is the main one. No falling in love. No staying in love. No daydreaming of love. If you stick to this you will just about be okay.’

I stared through the curving smoke of his cigar, out over Central Park where trees lay uprooted from the hurricane.

‘I doubt I will ever love again,’ I said.

Hendrich smiled, like the devil he could be. ‘Good. You are, of course, allowed to love food and music and champagne and rare sunny afternoons in October. You can love the sight of waterfalls and the smell of old books, but the love of people is off limits. Do you hear me? Don’t attach yourself to people, and try to feel as little as you possibly can for those you do meet. Because otherwise you will slowly lose your mind . . .’

PART ONE
Life Among the Mayflies

I am old.

That is the first thing to tell you. The thing you are least likely to believe. If you saw me you would probably think I was about forty, but you would be very wrong.

I am *old* – old in the way that a tree, or a quahog clam, or a Renaissance painting is old.

To give you an idea: I was born well over four hundred years ago on the third of March 1581, in my parents' room, on the third floor of a small French château that used to be my home. It was a warm day, apparently, for the time of year, and my mother had asked her nurse to open all the windows.

'God smiled on you,' my mother said. Though I think she might have added that – should He exist – the smile had been a frown ever since.

My mother died a very long time ago. I, on the other hand, did not.

You see, I have a condition.

I thought of it as an illness for quite a while, but illness isn't really the right word. Illness suggests sickness, and wasting away. Better to say I have a condition. A rare one, but not unique. One that no one knows about until they have it.

It is not in any official medical journals. Nor does it go by an official name. The first respected doctor to give it one, back in the 1890s, called it 'anageria' with a soft 'g', but, for reasons that will become clear, that never became public knowledge.

*

The condition develops around puberty. What happens after that is, well, not much. Initially the ‘sufferer’ of the condition won’t notice they have it. After all, every day people wake up and see the same face they saw in the mirror yesterday. Day by day, week by week, even month by month, people don’t change in very perceptible ways.

But as time goes by, at birthdays or other annual markers, people begin to notice you aren’t getting any older.

The truth is, though, that the individual hasn’t stopped ageing. They age exactly the same way. Just much slower. The speed of ageing among those with anageria fluctuates a little, but generally it is a 1:15 ratio. Sometimes it is a year every thirteen or fourteen years but with me it is closer to fifteen.

So, we are not immortal. Our minds and bodies aren’t in stasis. It’s just that, according to the latest, ever-changing science, various aspects of our ageing process – the molecular degeneration, the cross-linking between cells in a tissue, the cellular and molecular mutations (including, most significantly, to the nuclear DNA) – happen on another timeframe.

My hair will go grey. I may go bald. Osteoarthritis and hearing loss are probable. My eyes are just as likely to suffer with age-related presbyopia. I will eventually lose muscle mass and mobility.

A quirk of anageria is that it does tend to give you a heightened immune system, protecting you from many (not all) viral and bacterial infections, but ultimately even this begins to fade. Not to bore you with the science, but it seems our bone marrow produces more hematopoietic stem cells – the ones that lead to white blood cells – during our peak years, though it is important to note that this doesn’t protect us from injury or malnutrition, and it doesn’t last.

So, don’t think of me as a sexy vampire, stuck for ever at peak virility. Though I have to say it can feel like you are stuck for ever when, according to your appearance, only a decade passes between the death of Napoleon and the first man on the moon.

One of the reasons people don't know about us is that most people aren't prepared to believe it.

Human beings, as a rule, simply don't accept things that don't fit their worldview. So you could say 'I am four hundred and thirty-nine years old' easily enough, but the response would generally be 'are you mad?'. 'Or, alternatively, death.'

Another reason people don't know about us is that we're protected. By a kind of organisation. Anyone who does discover our secret, and believes it, tends to find their short lives are cut even shorter. So the danger isn't just from ordinary humans.

It's also from within.

Sri Lanka, three weeks ago

Chandrika Seneviratne was lying under a tree, in the shade, a hundred metres or so behind the temple. Ants crawled over her wrinkled face. Her eyes were closed. I heard a rustling in the leaves above and looked up to see a monkey staring down at me with judging eyes.

I had asked the tuk-tuk driver to take me monkey spotting at the temple. He'd told me this red-brown type with the near bald face was a rilewa monkey.

'Very endangered,' the driver had said. 'There aren't many left. This is their place.'

The monkey darted away. Disappeared among leaves.

I felt the woman's hand. It was cold. I imagined she had been lying here, unfound, for about a day. I kept hold of her hand and found myself weeping. The emotions were hard to pin down. A rising wave of regret, relief, sorrow and fear. I was sad that Chandrika wasn't here to answer my questions. But I was also relieved I didn't have to kill her. I knew she'd have had to die.

This relief became something else. It might have been the stress or the sun or it might have been the egg hoppas I'd had for breakfast, but I was now vomiting. It was in that moment that it became clear to me. *I can't do this any more.*

There was no phone reception at the temple, so I waited till I was back in my hotel room in the old fort town of Galle tucked inside my mosquito net sticky with heat, staring up at the pointlessly slow ceiling fan, before I phoned Hendrich.

'You did what you were supposed to do?' he said.

'Yes,' I said, which was halfway to being true. After all, the outcome had been the one he'd asked for. 'She is dead.' Then I asked what I always asked. 'Have you found her?'

'No,' he said, as always. 'We haven't. Not yet.'

Yet. That word could trap you for decades. But this time, I had a new confidence.

'Now, Hendrich, please. I want an ordinary life. I don't want to do this.'

He sighed wearily. 'I need to see you. It's been too long.'

Los Angeles, two weeks ago

Hendrich was back in Los Angeles. He hadn't lived there since the 1920s so he assumed it was pretty safe to do so and that no one was alive who would remember him from before. He had a large house in Brentwood that served as the headquarters for the Albatross Society. Brentwood was perfect for him. A geranium-scented land of large houses tucked behind high fences and walls and hedges, where the streets were free from pedestrians and everything, even the trees, looked perfect to the point of sterile.

I was quite shocked, on seeing Hendrich, sitting beside his large pool on a sun-lounger, laptop on knee. Normally, Hendrich looked pretty much the same, but I couldn't help notice the change. He looked *younger*. Still old and arthritic, but, well, better than he'd done in a century.

'Hi, Hendrich,' I said, 'you look good.'

He nodded, as if this wasn't new information. 'Botox. And a brow lift.'

He wasn't even joking. In this life he was a former plastic surgeon. The back story was that after retiring he had moved from Miami to Los Angeles. That way he could avoid the issue of not having any former local clients. His name here was Harry Silverman. ('Silverman. Don't you like it? It sounds like an ageing superhero. Which I kind of am.')

I sat on the spare lounger. His maid, Rosella, came over with two sunset-coloured smoothies. I noticed his hands. They looked old. Liver spots and baggy skin and indigo veins. Faces could lie easier than hands could.

‘Sea buckthorn. It’s crazy. It tastes like shit. Try it.’

The amazing thing about Hendrich was that he kept thoroughly of the times. He always had done, I think. He certainly had been since the 1890s. Centuries ago, selling tulips, he’d probably been the same. It was strange. He was older than any of us but he was always very much in the current of whatever zeitgeist was flowing around.

‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘in California, the only way to look like you are getting older is to look like you are getting younger. If you can move your forehead over the age of forty then people become very suspicious.’

He told me that he had been in Santa Barbara for a couple of years but he got a bit bored. ‘Santa Barbara is pleasant. It’s heaven, with a bit more traffic. But nothing ever happens in heaven. I had a place up in the hills. Drank the local wine every night. But I was going mad. I kept getting these panic attacks. I have lived for over seven centuries and never had a single panic attack. I’ve witnessed wars and revolutions. Fine. But I get to Santa Barbara and there I was waking up in my comfortable villa with my heart going crazy and feeling like I was trapped inside myself. Los Angeles, though, is something else. Los Angeles calmed me right down, I can tell you . . .’

‘Feeling calm. That must be nice.’

He studied me for a while, as if I was an artwork with a hidden meaning. ‘What’s the matter, Tom? Have you been missing me?’

‘Something like that.’

‘What is it? Was Iceland that bad?’

I’d been living in Iceland for eight years before my brief assignment in Sri Lanka.

‘It was lonely.’

‘But I thought you wanted lonely, after your time in Toronto. You said the real loneliness was being surrounded by people. And, besides, that’s what we are, Tom. We’re loners.’

I inhaled, as if the next sentence was something to swim under. ‘I don’t want to be that any more. I want out.’

There was no grand reaction. He didn’t bat an eye. I looked at his gnarled hands and swollen knuckles. ‘There is no *out*, Tom. You know that. You are an albatross. You are not a mayfly. You are an albatross.’

The idea behind the names was simple: albatrosses, back in the day, were thought to be very long-living creatures. Reality is, they only live to about sixty or so; far less than, say, the Greenland sharks that live to four hundred, or the quahog clam scientists called ‘Ming’ because it was born at the time of the Ming dynasty, over five hundred years ago. But anyway, we were albatrosses. Or albas, for short. And every other human on earth was dismissed as a mayfly. So called, because of the short-lived aquatic insects who go through an entire life cycle in a day or – in the case of one sub-species – five minutes.

Hendrich never talked of other, ordinary human beings as anything other than mayflies. I was finding his terminology – terminology I had ingrained into me – increasingly ridiculous.

Albatrosses. Mayflies. The silliness of it.

For all his age and intelligence, Hendrich was fundamentally immature. He was a child. An incredibly ancient child.

That was the depressing thing about knowing other albas. You realised that we weren’t special. We weren’t superheroes. We were just *old*. And that, in cases such as Hendrich, it didn’t really matter how many years or decades or centuries had passed, because you were always living within the parameters of your personality. No expanse of time or place could change that. You could never escape yourself.

‘I find it disrespectful, to be honest with you,’ he told me. ‘After all I’ve done for you.’

‘I appreciate what you’ve done for me . . .’ I hesitated. What exactly had he done for me? The thing he had promised to do hadn’t happened.

‘Do you realise what the modern world is *like*, Tom? It’s not like the old days. You can’t just move address and add your name to the parish register. Do you know how much I have had to *pay* to keep you and the other members safe?’

‘Well then, I could save you some money.’

‘I was always very clear: this is a one-way street—’

‘A one-way street I never asked to be sent down.’

He sucked on his straw, winced at the taste of his smoothie. ‘Which is life itself, isn’t it? Listen, kid—’

‘I’m hardly that.’

‘You made a choice. It was your choice to see Dr Hutchinson—’

‘And I would never have made that choice if I’d have known what would happen to him.’

He made circles with the straw, then placed the glass on the small table beside him in order to take a glucosamine supplement for his arthritis.

‘Then I would have to have you killed.’ He laughed that croak of his, to imply it was a joke. But it wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. ‘I’ll make a deal, a compromise. I will give you the exact life you want – any life at all – but every eight years, as usual, you’ll get a call and, before you choose your next identity, I’ll ask you to do something.’

I had heard all this before, of course. Although ‘any life you want’ never really meant that. He would give me a handful of suggestions and I’d pick one of them. And my response, too, was more than familiar to his ears.

‘Is there any news of her?’ It was a question I had asked a hundred times before, but it had never sounded as pathetic, as hopeless, as it did now.

He looked at his drink. ‘No.’

I noticed he said it a little quicker than he normally would. ‘Hendrich?’

‘No. No, I haven’t. But, listen, we are finding new people at an

incredible rate. Over seventy last year. Can you remember when we started? A good year was five. If you still want to find her you'd be mad to want out now.'

I heard a small splashing sound from the swimming pool. I stood up, went to the edge of the pool, and saw a small mouse, hopelessly swimming along past a water filter. I knelt down and scooped the creature out. It scuttled away towards the perfectly manicured grass.

He had me, and he knew it. There was no way out alive. And even if there was, it was easier to stay. There was a comfort to it – like insurance.

'Any life I want?'

'Any life you want.'

I am pretty sure, Hendrich being Hendrich, he was assuming that I was going to demand something extravagant and expensive. That I would want to live in a yacht off the Amalfi Coast, or in a penthouse in Dubai. But I had been thinking about this, and I knew what to say. 'I want to go back to London.'

'London? She probably isn't there, you know.'

'I know. I just want to be back there. To feel like I'm home again. And I want to be a teacher. A history teacher.'

He laughed. 'A history teacher. What, like in a high school?'

'They say "secondary school" in England. But, yes, a history teacher in a high school. I think that would be a good thing to do.'

And Hendrich smiled and looked at me with mild confusion, as if I had ordered the chicken instead of the lobster. 'That's perfect. Yes. Well, we'll just need to get a few things in place and . . .'

And as Hendrich kept talking I watched the mouse disappear under the hedge, and into dark shadows, into freedom.

London, now

London. The first week of my new life.

The headteacher's office at Oakfield School.

I am trying to seem normal. It is an increasing challenge. The past is trying to burst through.

No.

It is already through. The past is always here. The room smells of instant coffee, disinfectant and acrylic carpet, but there is a poster of Shakespeare.

It is the portrait you always see of him. Receding hairline, pale skin, the blank eyes of a stoner. A picture that doesn't really look like Shakespeare.

I return my focus to the headteacher, Daphne Bello. She is wearing orange hoop earrings. She has a few white hairs amid the black. She is smiling at me. It is a wistful smile. The kind of smile no one is capable of before the age of forty. The kind that contains sadness and defiance and amusement all at once.

'I've been here a long while.'

'Really?' I say.

Outside a distant police siren fades into nothing.

'*Time*,' she says, 'is a strange thing, isn't it?'

She delicately holds the brim of her paper cup of coffee as she places it down next to her computer.

'The strangest,' I agree.

I like Daphne. I like this whole interview. I like being back here, in London, back in Tower Hamlets. And to be in an interview for an ordinary job. It is so wonderful to feel, well, *ordinary* for once.

'I have been a teacher now for three decades. And here for two. What a depressing thought. All those years. I am so old.' She sighs through her smile.

I have always found it funny when people say that.

'You don't look it,' is the done thing to say, so I say it.

'Charmer! Bonus points!' She laughs a laugh that rises through an entire two octaves.

I imagine the laugh as an invisible bird, something exotic, from Saint Lucia (where her father was from), flying off into the grey sky beyond the window.

'Oh, to be young, like you,' she chuckles.

'Forty-one isn't young,' I say, emphasising the ludicrous number.

Forty-one. Forty-one. That is what I am.

'You look very well.'

'I've just come back from holiday. That might be it.'

'Anywhere nice?'

'Sri Lanka. Yes. It was nice. I fed turtles in the sea . . .'

'Turtles?'

'Yes.'

I look out of the window and see a woman with a gaggle of schoolkids in uniform head onto the playing field. She stops, turns to them, and I see her face as she speaks unheard words. She is wearing glasses and jeans and a long cardigan that flaps gently in the wind, and she pulls her hair behind her ear. She is laughing now, at something a pupil is saying. The laugh lights up her face, and I am momentarily mesmerised.

'Ah,' Daphne says, to my embarrassment when she sees where I am looking. 'That's Camille, our French teacher. There's no one like her. The kids love her. She always gets them out and about . . . Al fresco French lessons. It's that kind of school.'

'I understand you've done a lot of great things here,' I say, trying to get the conversation back on track.

'I try. We all try. It's sometimes a losing battle, though. That's

my only concern about your application. Your references are amazing. And I've had them all checked . . .'

I feel relieved. Not that she has checked the references, but that there had been someone who had picked up the phone, or emailed back.

' . . . but this isn't a rural comprehensive in Suffolk. This is London. This is Tower Hamlets.'

'Kids are kids.'

'And they're great kids. But this is a different area. They don't have the same privileges. My concern is that you've lived a rather sheltered life.'

'You might be surprised.'

'And many students here struggle hard enough with the present, let alone with history. They just care about the world around them. Getting them engaged is the key. How would you make history come alive?'

There was no easier question in the world. 'History isn't something you need to bring to life. History already *is* alive. We are history. History isn't politicians or kings and queens. History is everyone. It is everything. It's that coffee. You could explain much of the whole history of capitalism and empire and slavery just by talking about coffee. The amount of blood and misery that has taken place for us to sit here and sip coffee out of paper cups is incredible.'

'You've put me right off my drink.'

'Oh, sorry. But the point is: history is everywhere. It's about making people realise that. It makes you understand a place.'

'Right.'

'History is people. Everyone loves history.'

Daphne looks at me doubtfully, her face retreating into her neck as her eyebrows rise. 'Are you sure about that?'

I offer a small nod. 'It's just making them realise that everything they say and do and see is only what they say and do and see

because of what has gone before. Because of Shakespeare. Because of every human who ever lived.'

I look out of the window. We are on the third floor and have quite a view, even in the grey London drizzle. I see an old Georgian building I have walked past many times.

'That place, that place over there. The one with all the chimneys? That used to be an asylum. And over there' – I point to another, lower brick building – 'was the old slaughterhouse. They used to take all the old bones and make porcelain from them. If we had walked past it two hundred years ago we'd have heard the wails coming from the people society had declared mad on one side and the cattle on the other . . .'

If, if, if.

I point to the slate terrace rooftops in the east.

'And just over there, in a bakery, on Old Ford Road, that's where Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London suffragettes used to meet. They used to have a big sign, painted in gold, saying "VOTES FOR WOMEN" that you couldn't miss, not far from the old match factory.'

Daphne writes something down. 'And you play music, I see. Guitar, piano *and* violin.'

And the lute, I don't say. And the mandolin. And the cittern. And the tin pipe.

'Yes.'

'You put Martin to shame.'

'Martin?'

'Our music teacher. Hopeless. He's hopeless. Can barely play the triangle. Thinks he's a rock star, though. Poor Martin.'

'Well, I love music. I love playing music. But I'd find it a hard thing to teach. I've always found it hard to talk about music.'

'Unlike history?'

'Unlike history.'

'And you seem up to speed with the current curriculum.'

‘Yes,’ I lie, easily. ‘Absolutely.’

‘And you’re still on the young side of things.’

I shrug, and make the kind of face I think you are meant to make.

‘I’m fifty-six so forty-one is young, trust me.’

Fifty-six is young.

Eighty-eight is young.

One hundred and thirty is young.

‘Well, I am quite an *old* forty-one.’

She smiles at me. She clicks the top of her pen. Then clicks it again. Each one is a moment. The first click, the pause between the click, and the second click. The longer you live, the harder it becomes. To grab them. Each little moment as it arrives. To be living in something other than the past or the future. To be actually here.

Forever, Emily Dickinson said, is composed of nows. But how do you inhabit the now you are in? How do you stop the ghosts of all the other nows from getting in? How, in short, do you live?

I am drifting away.

It has been happening a lot recently. I had heard about this. Other albas had spoken about it. You reached the mid-point of your life, and the thoughts got too much. The memories swell. The headaches grow. The headache today isn’t so bad, but it is there.

I try to concentrate. I try to hold on to that other now, a short few seconds ago, where I was enjoying the interview. Enjoying the feeling of relative ordinariness. Or the illusion of it.

There is no ordinary.

Not for me.

I try to concentrate. I look at Daphne as she shakes her head and laughs, but softly now, at something she doesn’t disclose. Something sad, I feel, from the sudden glazing of her eyes. ‘Well, Tom, I am quite impressed by you and this application, I must say.’

Tom.

Tom Hazard.

My name – my original name – was Estienne Thomas Ambroise Christophe Hazard. That was the starting point. Since then I have had many, many names, and been many, many things. But, on my first arrival into England, I quickly lost the trimmings and became just Tom Hazard.

Now, using that name again, it feels like a return. It echoes in my head. *Tom. Tom. Tom. Tom.*

‘You tick all the boxes. But even if you didn’t you’d be getting the job.’

‘Oh, really. Why?’

She raises her eyebrows. ‘There’s no other applicant!’

We both laugh a little at that.

But the laugh dies faster than a mayfly.

Because then she says, ‘I live on Chapel Street. I wonder if you know anything about that?’

And, of course, I do know about that, and the question wakes me like a cold wind. My headache pulses harder. I picture an apple bursting in an oven. I shouldn’t have come back here. I should never have asked Hendrich for this to happen. I think of Rose, the last time I saw her, and those wide desperate eyes.

‘Chapel Street. I don’t know. No. No, I’m afraid I don’t know.’

‘Don’t worry.’ She sips her coffee.

I look at the poster of Shakespeare. He seems to be staring at me, like an old friend. There is a quote below his image.

We know what we are, but know not what we may be.

‘I have a feeling about you, Tom. You have to trust your feelings, don’t you?’

‘I suppose so,’ I say, though feelings were the one thing I had never trusted.

She smiles.

I smile.

I stand up, and head to the door. ‘See you in September.’

‘Ha! September. September. It will fly by. Time, you see. That’s another thing about getting older. Time speeds up.’

‘I wish,’ I whisper.

But she doesn’t hear, because then she says, ‘And children.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Children are another thing that seem to make life go faster. I have three. Oldest is twenty-two. Graduated last year. Yesterday she was playing with her Lego; today she’s collecting the keys to her new flat. Twenty-two years in a blink of an eye. Do you have any?’

I grip the door handle. This is a moment, too. And inside it, a thousand others come painfully alive.

‘No,’ I say, because it is easier than the truth, ‘I don’t.’

She seems, for a brief moment, a little awkward. I think she is about to comment on this but instead she says, ‘See you soon, Mr Hazard.’

I step out into the corridor that smells of the same disinfectant, where two teenagers lean against the wall, staring down at their phones as devoutly as old priests with prayer books. I turn back to see Daphne looking towards her computer.

‘Yes. See you soon.’

As I walk out of Daphne Bello’s office, and out of the school, I am in the twenty-first century but also the seventeenth.

As I walk the mile or so to Chapel Street – a stretch of betting shops and pavements and bus-stops and concrete lampposts and half-hearted graffiti – I am almost in a trance. The streets feel too wide. And when I get to Chapel Street I discover what I of course know: the houses that had once been there no longer are, replaced by ones built in the late 1800s, tall and red-bricked and as austere as the time of their design.

At the corner, where I had known a small deserted church, and a watchman, there is now a KFC. The red plastic throbs like a wound. I walk along with my eyes closed, trying to sense how far

along the street the house had originally been and I come to a stop after twenty or so steps. I open my eyes to see a semi-detached house that bears no physical relation to the house I had arrived at all those centuries ago. The unmarked door is now a modern blue. The window reveals a living room complete with a TV. Someone is playing a video game on it. An alien explodes on the screen.

My headache pounds and I feel weak and I have to step back, almost as if the past is something that could thin the air, or affect the laws of gravity. I lean back against a car, lightly, but enough to set off the alarm.

And the noise is loud, like a wail of pain, howling all the way from 1623, and I walk briskly away from the house, then the street, wishing I could just as easily walk away from the past.

London, 1623

I have been in love only once in my life. I suppose that makes me a romantic, in a sense. The idea that you have one true love, that no one else will compare after they have gone. It's a sweet idea, but the reality is terror itself. To be faced with all those lonely years *after*. To exist when the point of you has gone.

And my point, for a while, was Rose.

But after she was gone so many of the good memories were clouded by the last. An end that was also a terrible beginning. That final day I had with her. Because it is this day, the one where I headed to Chapel Street to see her, that has defined so many over the centuries.

So . . .

I was standing outside her door.

I had knocked and waited and knocked again.

The watchman, who I had passed at the corner of the street, was now approaching.

'It is a marked house, lad.'

'Yes. I know that.'

'You must not go in there . . . It is unsafe.'

I held out my hand. 'Stand back. I am cursed with it too. Do not get any closer.'

This was a lie, of course, but an effective one. The watchman stepped back away from me, with considerable haste.

'Rose,' I said, through the door. 'It's me. It's me. Tom. I just saw Grace. By the river. She told me you were here . . .'

It took a while, but I heard her voice, from inside. 'Tom?'

It had been years since I had heard that voice.

‘Oh, Rose, open the door. I need to see you.’

‘I can’t, Tom. I am sick.’

‘I know. But I won’t catch it. I have been around many plague sufferers these last months and I have had not so much as a cold. Come on, Rose, open the door.’

She did so.

And she was there, a woman. We were the same age, near enough, but now she looked like she was nearing fifty, while I still seemed a teenager.

Her skin was grey. Sores patterned her face like territories on a map. She could hardly stand up. I felt guilty that I had made her leave her bed but she seemed pleased to see me. She talked, semi-coherently, as I helped her back into bed.

‘You look so young, still . . . You are still a young man . . . a boy, almost.’

‘I have a little line, in my forehead. Look.’

I held her hand. She couldn’t see the line.

‘I am sorry,’ she said. ‘I am sorry I told you to leave.’

‘It was the right thing. Just my existence was a danger to you.’

I should also say, in case it needs saying: I don’t know for sure that the words I write were the words that were actually spoken. They probably weren’t. But this is how I remember these things, and all we can ever be is faithful to our memories of reality, rather than the reality itself, which is something closely related but never precisely the same thing.

Though I am absolutely sure, word for word, she then said: ‘There is a darkness that fringes everything. It is a most horrid ecstasy.’ And I felt the horror of her horror. That, I suppose, is a price we pay for love: the absorbing of another’s pain as if our own.

She drifted in and out of delirium.

The illness was taking further hold, almost by the minute. She was now the opposite of me. While for me life stretched out towards

an almost infinitely distant point in the future, for Rose the end was now galloping closer.

It was dark in the house. All the windows had been boarded up. But as she lay on the bed in her damp night clothes, I could see her face shining like pale marble, the red and grey patches colonising her skin. Her neck was swollen with egg-sized lumps. It was terrible, a kind of violation, to see her transformed like this.

‘It’s all right, Rose. It’s all right.’

Her eyes were wide with fear, almost as if something was inside her skull, slowly pushing from behind.

‘Soft, soft, soft . . . All will be well . . .’

It was such a ridiculous thing to say. All was not going to be well. She moaned a little. Her body writhed in pain.

‘You must go.’ Her voice was dry.

I leaned over and kissed her brow.

‘Careful,’ she said.

‘It is safe.’ In truth, I didn’t know for certain if that was true. I thought it was, but couldn’t know it, having only lived forty-two years on earth (and looking little more than the sixteen Rose first thought I was). But I didn’t care. Life had lost its value in the years away from her.

Even though I hadn’t seen Rose since 1603 the love was still there, exactly as strong, and now it was hurting. It was hurting more than any physical pain could try to.

‘We were happy, weren’t we, Tom?’ The faintest echo of a smile was on her face now. I remembered walking past Oat Barn carrying heavy pails of water, on some long-lost Tuesday morning, content in our chatter. I remembered the joy of her smile and her body, when it had writhed from pleasure not pain, and of trying to be quiet so her sister wouldn’t wake. I remembered long walks back from Bankside, dodging the stray dogs and slithering in mud, comforted by nothing but the thought that she would be at the end of the journey home, and be the point of it.

All those times, all those talks, all that *everything*, reduced to the simplest most elemental truth.

‘We were . . . I love you, Rose. I love you so much.’

I wanted to hold her up and feed her a rabbit pie and some cherries and make her well again. I could see she was in so much pain that she just wanted to die now but I didn’t know what that would mean. I didn’t know how the world would stay together.

There was also something else I wanted. An answer that I hoped dearly she would have.

‘Sweetheart, where is Marion?’ I asked.

She stared at me a long time. I readied myself for some terrible news. ‘She fled . . .’

‘What?’

‘She was like you.’

It took a moment to sink in.

‘She stopped growing old?’

She spoke slowly, between sighs and coughs and whimpers. I told her she didn’t have to say anything, but she felt she had to. ‘Yes. And people started to notice when the years went by and she didn’t change. I told her we would have to move again and it troubled her greatly, and Manning came to us—’

‘Manning?’

‘And that night she ran, Tom. I ran after her yet she had vanished. She never came back. I have no idea where she went or if she is safe. You must try to find her. You must try to look after her . . . Pray, be strong now, Tom. You find her. I shall be fine. I shall be joining my brothers . . .’

I had never felt weaker, and yet I was ready to give her anything, even the myth of my strength and future happiness.

‘I will be strong, my Rose.’

Her breath was a weak draught. ‘You will.’

‘Oh, Rose.’

I needed to keep saying her name and for her to keep hearing it. I needed her to keep being a living reality.

We are time's subjects, and time bids be gone . . .

She asked me to sing to her. 'Anything in your heart.'

'My heart is sad.'

'Sing sadly, then.'

I was going to grab my lute but she just wanted my voice, and my unaccompanied voice was not something I was particularly proud of, even in front of Rose, but I just sang it for her.

*Her smiles, my springs that makes my joys to grow,
Her frowns the Winters of my woe . . .*

She smiled a soft, troubled smile and I felt the whole world slipping away, and I wanted to slip with it, to go wherever she was going. I did not know how to be me, my strange and unusual self, without her. I had tried it, of course. I had existed whole years without her, but that was all it had been. An existence. A book with no words.

'I will look for Marion.'

She closed her eyes, as if she had heard the final thing she had wanted to hear.

She was as grey, now, as a January sky.

'I love you, Rose.'

And I searched her mouth, and the line between her pale, blistered lips for the slightest curve, the slightest response, but she was still now. The stillness was terrifying. Motes of dust were the only things moving.

I pleaded with God, I asked and begged and bargained, but God did not bargain. God was stubborn and deaf and oblivious. And she died and I lived and a hole opened up, dark and bottomless, and I fell down and kept falling for centuries.

London, now

I still feel weak. My head throbs. I walk. I think it will help ease the memories of Chapel Street. I walk to the antidote: Hackney. Well Lane. Now called Well Street. The place where Rose and I first lived together, before the years of misery and separation and plague took over. The cottages and stables and barns and pond and fruit orchards are long gone. I know it isn't healthy to walk around no longer familiar streets, looking for memories that have been paved over, but I need to see it.

I keep walking along. These must be among the busiest streets in Hackney. Buses and shoppers bustle past. I pass a phone shop and a pawnbroker's and a sandwich bar. And then I see it, on the other side of the road – the spot where we must have lived.

It is now a windowless red-brick building, with a blue and white sign outside. HACKNEY PET RESCUE SERVICES. It is depressing to feel your life erased. The kind of depressing that requires you to rest against a wall near the cash machine, causing you to apologise to the old man guarding his PIN number, explaining that you don't want to rob him, and deal with his stare as if he still isn't sure.

I watch a man with a Staffordshire terrier leave the building. Then I realise what I can do. How I can make a little peace with my past.

I can cross the street and go inside.

Every other dog in the place is barking. But this one is just lying in its undersized basket. It is a strange grey creature with sapphire

eyes. The dog, I feel, is too dignified for such modern garishness, a wolf out of its time. I related.

The dog has an untouched chew toy beside him. A bright yellow rubber bone.

‘What breed is it?’ I ask the dog shelter volunteer (name badge ‘Lou’). She scratches the eczema on her arm.

‘He’s an Akita,’ she says. ‘Japanese. Pretty rare. Bit like a husky, isn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

This is the spot, as far as I can tell. This kennel, this one with this beautiful, sad-looking dog inside, is where the room used to be. The room we slept in.

‘How old is he?’ I ask Lou.

‘Pretty old. He’s eleven. That’s one of the reasons it’s been hard to find a home for him.’

‘And why is he in here?’

‘He was picked up. He was living on a balcony to a flat. Chained up. Horrid state. Look.’ She points at a red-brown scar on his thigh where there is no hair growing.

‘A cigarette burn.’

‘He looks so depressed.’

‘Yep.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘We never knew his name. We call him Abraham.’

‘Why?’

‘The tower block where we found him was called Lincoln Tower.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘Abraham. It suits him.’

Abraham stands up. Comes over to me and stares up with those light blue eyes, as if trying to tell me something. I hadn’t intended to get a dog. That hadn’t been part of today’s plan. And yet, here I am, saying, ‘This is the one. I’d like to take him home.’

Lou looks at me in surprise. ‘You don’t want to see the rest?’

‘No.’

I notice the blotched skin on Lou's arm – crimson and sore – and in my mind it was that cold winter's day, in Dr Hutchinson's waiting room, amid the other patients, as I nervously waited for a diagnosis.