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AFTER THE RAIN

NATÁLIA GOMES



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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For Scott and Eilidh xx

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Note on the text

To ensure Jack and Alice's chapters are completely authentic to their voices we have matched the spelling to their backgrounds. Therefore Alice's chapters use American spelling and Jack's use British spelling.

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Alice's Playlist

Smith & Thell – 'Alice'
Of Monsters and Men – 'Wild Roses'
First Aid Kit – 'It's a Shame'
Juke Ross – 'Shadows in the Dark'
Phoebe Bridgers – 'Georgia'
Birdy – 'People Help The People'
First Aid Kit – 'Emmylou'
Joy Williams – 'Ordinary World'
Gabrielle Aplin – 'Home'
London Grammar – 'Strong'

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Jack's Playlist

Dermot Kennedy – 'After Rain'
Imagine Dragons – 'Birds'
Lord Huron – 'The Night We Met'
The Head and the Heart – 'Another Story'
Seth Talley – 'New Day'
The Collection – 'Beautiful Life'
Vance Joy – 'Mess is Mine'
The Head and the Heart – 'Lost in my Mind'
AHI – 'Ol' Sweet Day'
Of Monsters and Men – 'Human'

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‘The whole world is divided for me into two parts: one is she, and there is all happiness, hope, light; the other is where she is not, and there is dejection and darkness . . .’

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

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Alice

There's nothing like the smell of a library.

A combination of dust, musk and ink.

Many of the books found in libraries, especially in the UK where they tend to be pre-nineteenth century prints, use materials like cotton, linen and groundwood pulp to make the pages. Even though it smells a bit like coffee and cigars, it's really cellulose decay we're smelling when we get to the heart of a library space. Most position their study tables here, right in the middle, to allow its most devout booklovers to bask in the smell whilst being surrounded by stacks and pillars of reading material, most of which they'll never get through in their lifetime. Because a human lifetime is too short to read all the amazing books in the world. Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Twain, Joyce, Woolf, Orwell, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Hemingway, Austen, Dickens, the Brontë sisters.

The best libraries have all of the above.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not a book snob. I read pretty much anything, and I am a self-proclaimed sci-fi and fantasy geek. I'm not ashamed. I would just as easily pick up a Tolstoy book (if I had months to spare to get through one) as I would a novel by Wells, Bradbury, Tolkien, Brooks, Gaiman or Martin.

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To me it's all the same. It's not the material, or how high it ranks in the bestseller lists or whether it's featured in Cambridge University's handbook of Faculty Recommended Texts issued by their English department each year. It's much simpler than that.

For me, it's the act of reading. The process of picking a book that you really want to jump into immediately, then the finding of the perfect space in which to do so. Now, the latter is much more difficult than the former. Finding the right book has never been a problem for me. I know what I want even when I don't know. I'll browse the shelves at the library, occasionally shifting between floors, genres, and alphabetical collections. But when I spot a title, I just know. The search is over. Most people have stacks of books by their bed; TBRs, book bloggers call them – To Be Read. But me, I've always had just one sitting on my bedside cabinet. A sole literary journey. That one book I commit to until I'm done cover to cover and need to choose another. Then I keep going. I keep a log of all the books I've read and each year try to beat my record. Stephen King reads eighty-four books a year. I've yet to beat him. But I will one day.

So the perfect reading space. It has to be quiet enough where you can really immerse yourself in the story world being presented to you by the author, but not so quiet where the world gets invaded by your own wandering thoughts – Do I feel like another latte? How many have I had today? What's worse for you – a muffin or a Danish? What did Mom say she was making for dinner tonight? What's that tapping sound, who has a laptop here?

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So the perfect amount of background noise to assist you, then the perfect temperature. If the space is too hot, you get restless and pulled away from the pages of your book, and if it's too cold you get preoccupied with trying to warm yourself with additional clothing, hot drinks, and maybe a blanket if you have access to one. Then the seat you're on – not too soft where you melt into it and suddenly feel a nap coming on, and not too hard where backache strikes you at a pivotal moment in the narrative. Yes, this sounds like an impossible task – finding the right space to read in. But considering how much I've moved around in my rather short lifetime, I've always found one. In Texas, it was this little book nook in their local library, on the East Coast there were many coffee shops to choose from, usually around the Harvard or MIT campuses. Those students are also searching for the perfect space, but to write scientific essays in or jot down philosophical musings. Having only lived in London for three months, I have already narrowed it down to two spaces – the library on St James's Square and a coffee shop in Southwark.

Today, being a Saturday morning and a popular time for coffee and brunch with friends, I chose the library. My corner has a comfy weathered leather armchair underneath a large window that looks onto the square. After this, I'll take a walk towards Leicester Square and see if it's dry enough to find a bench to sit on and a tree to shelter under from the rain.

I climb up on my knees and gaze out the library window. The trees billow in the rainy breeze and stretch their

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branches long. Although wet from the rain, it was still fairly warm when I left the house this morning, by British standards, of course, maybe a little chilly by American, but I brought a fleece-lined raincoat today. I pull the collar of my cardigan across my throat and breathe in its warmth. This, what they call 'summer' here, is more like fall to me. I don't get it. How can people go outside in shorts and camisoles in weather like this? I lean in and spot a runner in the square. One foot in front of the other, he dodges strollers, couples, friends, dogwalkers, fellow athletes, even the rain.

Ugh.

Another thing I don't get – voluntary torture in the form of running.

Why?

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Jack

There's nothing like the first step of a long run.

The moment your foot hits the ground and you're propelled to the next step. The initial shock to the muscles as the impact shoots up the ankle to the calves, knees and to the thighs. You feel it everywhere, in your belly, your chest. When people ask me to describe what running's like, I always say the same thing – 'It's freeing.' Because that's exactly how I feel when I step outside – free. When the air hits your face – free. When your muscles warm and your momentum builds – free. When you pass cars stuck in traffic and clusters of people huddled in long queues standing at bus stops, tube stations and outside quaint local cafés – free. Everyone's static, sedentary, but you, you're free.

I used to run to music. I used to need motivation to get moving, to go faster, but not now. Now I run without headphones, without playlists, without the suffocation of noise to drown out what's really important to me on a run. The freedom. You can't get that exhilarating feeling from a perfectly crafted playlist that builds from a warm-up music sequence to a series of high-paced beats aimed at synchronising your stride. That point where your muscles don't ache

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anymore, where your lungs don't want to burst from your chest, where that small part within you urging you to slow or begin your cool down early finally silences and accepts what you've known all along. That running is incredible.

I reach Covent Garden as the rain gets heavier, passing a bride holding a white umbrella standing next to her groom as they pose for photos by the Seven Dials clock, and continue on to Leicester Square. The crowds are overwhelming here. Tourists with extended selfie sticks posing in front of the Shakespeare statue, families feeding the pigeons, kids throwing coins into the fountain, couples huddled into each other in shop doorways sheltering from the rain. I know so many other run routes away from the hustle of central London, but sometimes I love coming here. I love cutting through the crowds, sidestepping to avoid the drones that flock here like the hungry pigeons. I love the challenge of dodging the obstacles of city life. It gives me a thrill. I only run in the city on Saturday mornings, before squash games or breakfast with the guys. The rest of the time I run near my house in Surrey taking in the quieter routes – the river trails, parks, woodland areas. Sometimes I love the silence, where it's just you and nature. Where the only sounds surrounding you as you speed up are those of the trees in the breeze, the rain on their leaves, the birds overhead, and the pounding of your feet on the ground.

It's like a drum. You're creating your own music.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

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Free.

No burdens. No responsibilities. Just me. My runs are my own, I don't share them with anyone.

Except Strava.

I have to post my runs otherwise I won't get kudos from my 492 followers. Speaking of, what's my pace like so far?

'Hey, watch it!'

I turn and see a girl bent over, her books and a yellow polka dot umbrella scattered on the ground around her. Did I do that?

'You just ran right into me, jerk!'

Damn, I forgot to hit 'pause', my Strava post is already ruined. My pace is way down, and now I'm barely jogging on the spot. I'll still get the kudos, I always do, but now it looks like my pace is slower than yesterday's. People will think I'm getting tired.

I glance down at the phone still in my hand, raindrops on the screen, and hit 'pause'. Then I take a step towards her to help with the books.

'No, don't bother,' she yells at me. 'Clearly your phone is more important than watching where you're going.'

She's American. I know her from school, I think. A recent transfer, perhaps. I open my mouth to say hi but an empty coffee cup rolls by her feet, the milky brown contents spilled out on a couple of book covers. I close my mouth; maybe not the time. The rest of the liquid is down her coat. Her cheeks are burning red like her curly hair and she looks like she's about to go off again so I start edging backwards. She looks angrier now. She either wants my help or she doesn't.

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I don't think she even knows. So I turn around and hit 'resume' on my run. I'd be all the way around the corner by now if it wasn't for her, probably onto the next segment of my run. That two-minute exchange cost me my PB pace. My legs are seizing up from the abrupt stop.

I feel the heat before I hear the noise. It strikes my face, my shoulders, my bare shins. It burns at first then it erupts, a dirty fog engulfing me and I don't feel pain anymore.

I don't feel anything.

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Spring Awakens

PART 1

A bird's first song,
A bud's first bloom,
Raindrops on my hand,
Seedlings under my feet,
The sharpness of its birth is on my fingertips,
Nothing is as new and raw as spring,
Nothing is as temporary,
For its beauty will eventually wilt and die,
Leaving us to wonder, what will remain after?

Alice Winters

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Alice

The car alarms.

They throb and vibrate against my ear drums. That's all I hear since I left the hospital an hour ago. The ringing. Everything feels different. The air around me, the mattress underneath me, the quilt on my fingertips as I drag them into a fist. My toes turn inside my new trainers and make a triangle. The white is almost too white. They're too clean, too new, too pure. I hadn't expected to have to take them out of the box so soon, but I didn't have anything else to wear. When I arrived at the hospital, I was missing one completely. Now these shoes feel tight on me. My toes are crushed against the front. I squirm, the fabric stiff around my ankle crease. I need them off. I tuck one foot behind the other and gently ease one off then I bend down to yank the other one. A sharp pain stretches across my spine. I place a hand over my mouth to stifle a cry, wondering if I just split the stitches. I'd hit something sharp on the ground when I fell backwards with the second blast. I think that's when I lost my shoe.

'Alice?'

My mom stands in the doorway, a mug of tea in one hand

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and a plate of sandwiches in the other. All I see is lettuce sticking out the sides.

'I'm not hungry.' My voice sounds gravelly like I have a bad cold.

'You didn't eat anything at the hospital either.' She puts the plate and mug down on my desk then hovers in the doorway. 'Do you want a hand getting into a bath?'

'I probably shouldn't take a bath because of the stitches, so I'll just take a lukewarm shower.'

She wants to help so badly. I know that feeling, of needing to do something, anything, but also knowing that whatever I do isn't going to be enough. I didn't help people. I didn't guide the old lady onto the steps by the casino. I didn't usher the little boy and his mom to the side to let the police pass. I didn't signal to the paramedics that the vendor who saved me had glass in his face and needed medical assistance. I didn't hold the hand of the woman across the street that had blood all over her, whose purse lay about two metres from her, beside what I think was her left foot. I didn't do any of that. I just stood there and looked across the road. For him. For the runner.

'Alice?'

'I'm fine, Mom.' I slide past her, being careful not to touch her with my ripped clothes, cut shoulder, bloody knees. When I get to the toilet, I lock the door quickly before she insists on coming in with me. I turn around to switch on the shower to let it warm slightly, and stop. Who is this person in the mirror? I look like an extra from a post-apocalyptic movie. I look like I've been knocked down by a

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furniture delivery truck, got back up and been run over again. I look like – I look— It even hurts to cry. The tears scald my scratched cheeks and burn my fingers when I wipe them away. I take a deep breath and let the air fill me, every inch of me. Then I unzip my skirt and tug it down my hipbones. Eventually it loosens and drops around my feet. The T-shirt and bra is much harder to get off. My whole body is on fire.

My face is blackened by ash, my hair clumps at the side and sticks to my hairline, my mascara streaks across to my temples. My bare skin tingles against the air, then the glass disappears in the steam and the face that I see, the body, the dried blood, distorts and blurs. And just like the boy I killed today, I disappear in a dense cloud too.

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Jack

I hear a voice. An American voice. In my dream I look up and see a girl in front of me. She's got long wavy red hair, and it sticks to her coat in the rain. She's looking down at her shoes and all around her. Scattered books. A spilled coffee cup. And an umbrella. A yellow polka dot umbrella that's spinning on its point like someone is flicking it with their fingers, never letting it slow, never letting it stop.

It spins.

And spins.

I feel dizzy. Nauseous. I need to sit down. I am sitting down actually but I don't remember how I got down here, on the ground, amongst the books and the spinning umbrella. The girl stands above me, looking down at me. She parts her lips and says my name. But now she sounds like my mum. A sliver of bright light appears from behind her and I gaze into it. The ground beneath me fades as I slowly wake. White fabric envelops me, encasing every part of me. I'm in a room. My mum and dad both stand beside my bed. On the other side are strangers – strangers in navy and white, like uniforms. Nurses. Doctors. I'm in a hospital. Why am I in a hospital?

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The girl with the spinning umbrella and red curly hair is gone.

But the pain. The pain hits me hard. My mum's hands are on me. Her touch is gentle but her fingertips sting my skin. Her mouth is open like she's speaking but I can't hear her. I can't hear anything in this room. All I hear is ringing in my ears. It's so loud. The nurse is over me shining a bright light in my eyes. Her breath is on my lips. She's talking, but again no words are coming out. I don't understand what's happening. I'm scared. I try to break free but now hands are on me. I try to push them off then one injects something through a long plastic tube that runs into me. I'm so tired. I can't keep my eyes open anymore. The darkness, it's everywhere again.

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Alice

The next couple of days are a blur. I close myself off in the bedroom and try to forget. Every second I'm awake I think about it. I feel the blast upon my skin, feel the trembles of the ground beneath me. The ringing in the ears is fading now but other sounds fill my head. The doctor thinks I'm suffering from 'post-traumatic stress' like a soldier returning from war. When did the streets outside our house become a war zone? When did the world change and become –this?

So I sleep. And when I wake, when I remember, I sleep again. And that's how the days go. I'm either in a hazy fog of lucid dreams, distorted reality, flashbacks pieced together by the sounds that still vibrate inside me, or I'm huddled in the corner of my bedroom like a frightened stray animal, waiting for a storm to subside. I have no idea what time it is, what day it is. The doorbell rings, the neighbor, the mailman, a representative from a new gas and electricity company. The only people who ask about me are my nana in Boston and the neighbor who I sometimes help with her bins on collection day. I don't know anyone who goes through that much cardboard. It's like an Amazon warehouse next door. My mom checks in on me every hour or so, makes

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sure I'm still breathing. Sometimes she knocks, sometimes she doesn't. I thought crises were meant to bring people together but I all want is to be left alone.

I awake today face down on my bedroom floor clutching a pillow to my chest. The carpet is damp beneath me and I can't figure out if I've just woken up in a pool of sweat, or urine. That's when I decide to finally leave the room. Not because I'm ready to talk or because I crave intimacy and affection from people but simply because I'm hungry. And I definitely need a shower. My mom stares at me at the bottom of the stairs, almost like she's forgotten I'm up there then eventually clears her throat. 'Good morning.'

'What time is it?' I croak out.

'It's um . . . oh I don't know.' She checks her watch. 'Two ten. So I guess I should say good afternoon.'

I slump down the stairs, my muscles still aching. My limbs feel tight, constricted.

'Are you hungry?'

I nod. 'I'm going to make a grilled cheese, I think.'

'I'll make it. You sit.' She scoots off into the kitchen, happy to finally feel needed. At least I helped one person this week.

I slide onto the dining-room chair. We've moved so many times in my life that after a while houses start to merge together. Living rooms look the same, and my bedroom always seems to be beside the stairs. Backyards usually consist of a tiny wooden shed in the corner and a rusty swing in the center. Kitchens occasionally differ. Some have a center island or a hanging pot rack, others have a subway backsplash and a separate fridge freezer. One kitchen had

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yellow cabinets and Spanish tiling. That was back in Texas. I miss the food there. Tex Mex is the best. I'm so hungry.

I inhale the sandwich. It barely touches my tongue. When I'm done I resist licking the plate which still sparkles with butter and oil. My mom sits down opposite me. I wonder what she thinks about this house. We never talk about the moves. We just say 'OK', pack, and get on with it. It's never a question of whether we want to move because no one ever asks us. I'd thought maybe West Coast or Midwest as we'd jumped around the South and East Coast already, and Asia. Then Dad was offered an opportunity to contract with the British Army for a while and our move turned out to be 5,483 miles across the ocean. And once again, I moved schools. Like houses, schools are all the same, especially high schools. I'd like to say not making friends is because of constantly moving around – I don't want to get attached to one place or one person and then have to say goodbye. But even if I'd lived in one town my whole life, I'd still have difficulty making friends. It'd still just be my mom and I. Navigating friendships and social situations have always been hard for me. Textbooks, novels, science experiments, chemistry models, essays – now that makes sense. There's a clear structure for that. A mutual understanding between the learner and the material. But people and their conversation, as brief and trivial as it often is, can be unpredictable and lack structure.

'It's nice to see you out of your room. We were worried about you.'

'Did I miss Dad's call?'

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'He Skyped briefly this morning. I didn't know whether to disturb you or not.'

I see Mom's handbag and keys on the table. 'Have you been out?'

'Just getting groceries. I'm going to try Dad's famous Texan pulled pork burritos tonight. Your favorite,' she smiles.

A flicker of light hits the glass cabinet behind my mom's head. I turn and see the TV muted. 'Were you watching the news?'

She stands quickly and hurries over to the set.

'No, leave it. Please,' I ask.

'The nurse thought it was best to not let you see the TV updates. She thought it might add to the – the . . . anxiety.'

'I just want to see what I've missed the past few days. I won't watch for long.'

She sighs and cradles the remote in her hand. She increases the volume, one bar at a time, until a female voice fills the kitchen and adjoining living room.

'. . . ending a four-day manhunt for the suspected terrorists. This comes only a week after two homemade pressure-ooker bombs detonated 42 seconds and 190 meters apart at 10:55 a.m. near Leicester Square, killing 22 people so far and injuring over 40 others . . . the Metropolitan Police confirm a third bomb was dismantled near Covent Garden . . . the UK is now on red alert, with major airports in London grounding most flights, especially those bound for the US . . .'

Images disperse across the screen. I hold my breath as faces of smiling victims fill the TV – I'm not ready for this,

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I can't look; I close my eyes and try to block them out. Their faces. Their futures. All gone. No, please stop. I can't stop the cry that escapes my lips. When I blink my eyes open I see them, all 22 of the victims. Their photos side by side, like they all knew each other, like they were friends or work colleagues. My mom jumps up and grabs for the remote control.

'No, wait!'

My mom freezes, her hand so tight on the remote that her knuckles turn white.

'Wait. These are all the people who died?' I get off my chair and walk closer to the screen. A blonde-haired girl, a redheaded male, a child, an elderly man, a middle-aged businessman, a woman in her thirties with long wavy brown hair . . . but no blond-haired runner of my age. He's not there on the screen which means he's not dead. He's still alive.

I didn't kill him.