

RUTH WARE

In A Dark,
Dark Wood

VINTAGE

*In a dark, dark wood there was a dark, dark house;
And in the dark, dark house there was a dark, dark room;
And in the dark, dark room there was a dark, dark cupboard;
And in the dark, dark cupboard there was . . . a skeleton.*

Traditional

I AM RUNNING.

I am running through moonlit woods, with branches tearing at my clothes and my feet catching in the snow-bowed bracken.

Brambles slash at my hands. My breath tears in my throat. It hurts. Everything hurts.

But this is what I do. I run. I can do this.

Always when I run there's a mantra inside my head. The time I want to get, or the frustrations I'm pounding away against the tarmac.

But this time one word, one thought, pounds inside me.

James. James. James.

I must get there. I must get to the road before—

And then there it is, a black snake of tarmac in the moonlight, and I can hear the roar of an engine coming, and the white lines shine so bright they hurt my eyes, the black tree trunks like slashes against the light.

Am I too late?

I force myself down the last thirty metres, tripping over fallen logs, my heart like a drum in my breast.

James.

And I'm too late – the car is too close, I can't stop it.

I fling myself onto the tarmac, my arms outstretched.

'Stop!'

1

IT HURTS. Everything hurts. The light in my eyes, the pain in my head. There's a stench of blood in my nostrils, my hands are sticky with it.

'Leonora?'

The voice comes dim through a fog of pain. I try to shake my head, my lips won't form the word.

'Leonora, you're safe, you're at the hospital. We're taking you to have a scan.'

It's a woman, speaking clearly and loudly. Her voice hurts.

'Is there anyone we should be calling?'

I try again to shake my head.

'Don't move your head,' she says. 'You've had a head injury.'

'Nora,' I whisper.

'You want us to call Nora? Who's Nora?'

'Me . . . my name.'

'All right, Nora. Just try to relax. This won't hurt.'

But it does. Everything hurts.

What has happened?

What have I done?

2

I knew, as soon as I woke up, that it was a day for a park run, for the longest route I do, nearly nine miles in all. The autumn sunlight streamed through the rattan blinds, gilding the bedsheets, and I could smell the rain that had fallen in the night, and see the leaves on the plane tree in the street below, just turning to golden-brown at the tips. I closed my eyes and stretched, listening to the tick and groan of the heating, and the muted roar of the traffic, feeling every muscle, revelling in the day to come.

I always start my morning the same way. Maybe it's something about living alone – you're able to get set in your ways, there's no outside disruptions, no flatmates to Hoover up the last of the milk, no cat coughing up a hairball on the rug. You know that what you left in the cupboard the night before will be in the cupboard when you wake up. You're in control.

Or maybe it's something about working from home. Outside of a nine to five job, it's very easy for the days to get shapeless, meld together. You can find you're still in your dressing gown at 5 p.m., and the only person you've seen all day is the milkman. There are days when I don't hear a single human voice, apart from the radio, and you know what? I quite like that. It's a good existence for a writer, in many ways – alone with the voices in your head, the characters you've

created. In the silence they become very real. But it's not necessarily the healthiest way to live. So having a routine is important. It gives you something to hang on to, something to differentiate the weekdays from the weekends.

My day starts like this.

At 6.30 exactly the heating goes on, and the roar as the boiler starts always wakes me up. I look at my phone – just to check the world hasn't ended in the night – and then lie there, listening to the pop and creak of the radiator.

At 7 a.m. I turn on my radio – already tuned to Radio 4's *Today Programme* – and I reach out and flick the switch of the coffee machine, pre-loaded with coffee and water the night before – Carte Noire filter grind, with the filter paper folded just so. There are some advantages to the size of my flat. One of them is the fact that I can reach both the fridge and the coffee machine without getting out of bed.

The coffee is usually through by the time they've finished the headlines, and then I lever myself out of my warm duvet and drink it, with just a splash of milk, and a piece of toast with Bonne Maman raspberry jam (no butter – it's not a diet thing, I just don't like the two together).

What happens after that depends on the weather. If it's raining, or I don't feel like going for a run, then I shower, check my emails, and start the day's work.

Today was a beautiful day though, and I was itching to get out, get wet leaves beneath my trainers and feel the wind in my face. I'd shower after my run.

I pulled on a T-shirt, some leggings, and socks, and shoved my feet into my trainers where I'd left them near the door. Then I jogged down the three flights of stairs to the street, and out, into the world.

*

When I got back I was hot and sweating and loose-limbed with tiredness and I stood for a long time under the shower, thinking about my to-do list for the day. I needed to do another online shop – I was nearly out of food. I had to go through the copy-edits on my book – I'd promised them back to the editor this week and I hadn't even started them yet. And I should go through the emails that had come through via my website contact form, which I hadn't done for ages because I kept putting it off. Most of it would be spam of course – whatever kind of verification you put on it, it doesn't seem to deter the bots. But sometimes it's useful stuff, requests for blurbs or review copies. And sometimes . . . sometimes it's emails from readers. Generally if people write to you, it's because they liked the book, although I have had a few messages telling me what a terrible person I am. But even when they're nice, it's still odd and uncomfortable, someone telling you their reaction to your private thoughts, like reading someone's opinion on your diary. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that feeling, however long I write. Maybe that's partly why I have to gear myself up for it.

When I was dressed, I fired up my laptop and clicked slowly through the emails, deleting as I went. Viagra. A promise to make me 'satisfy my woman'. Russian cuties.

And then . . .

To: Melanie Cho; kate.derby.02@DPW.gsi.gov.uk;
T Deauxma; Kimayo, Liz; info@LNShaw.co.uk; Maria
Tatibouet; Iris P. Westaway; Kate Owens;
smurphy@shoutlinemedia.com; Nina da Souza;
French, Chris
From: Florence Clay
Subject: CLARE'S HEN!!!

Clare? I didn't know any Clares except . . .

My heart began beating faster. But it couldn't be her. I hadn't seen her for ten years.

For a minute my finger hovered irrationally over the delete button. Then I clicked, and opened up the message.

HI ALL!!!

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Flo, and I'm Clare's best friend from university. I'm also – drum roll – her maid of honour!! So in time-honoured fashion I will be organising her HEN-DO!!!

I've had a word with Clare and – as you can probably guess – she doesn't want any rubber penises or pink feather boas. So we're going to have something rather more sophisticated – a weekend away near her old college stamping ground in Northumberland – although I think there may be a few naughty games snuck in under the radar!!

The weekend Clare has chosen is 14th–16th November. I know this is VERY short notice, but we didn't have a lot of choice between work commitments and Christmas and so on. Please RSVP promptly.

Love and kisses – and hoping to meet old friends and new very soon!!!!

Flo xxx

I sat, frowning uneasily at the screen, chewing the side of my nail, trying to figure it out.

Then I looked again at the 'To' list. There was one name on there that I recognised: Nina da Souza.

Well, that settled it. It must be Clare Cavendish. There was no one else it could be. And I knew – or thought I remembered – that she'd gone to university at Durham, or maybe Newcastle? Which fitted with the Northumberland setting.

But why? Why had Clare Cavendish asked me to her hen night?

Could it be a mistake? Had this Flo just plundered Clare's address book and fired off an email to anyone she could find?

But just twelve people . . . that meant my inclusion could hardly be a mistake. Right?

I sat, staring at the screen as if the pixels could provide answers to the questions shifting queasily in my gut. I half-wished I'd just deleted it without even reading.

Suddenly I couldn't sit still any longer. I got up and paced to the door, and then back to my desk, where I stood, staring uneasily at the laptop screen.

Clare Cavendish. Why me? Why now?

I could hardly ask this Flo person.

There was only one person who might know.

I sat. Then quickly, before I could change my mind, I tapped out an email.

To: Nina da Souza
From: Nora Shaw
Subject: Hen???

Dearest N, Hope you're well. Must admit I was a bit surprised to see us both on the list to Clare's hen night. Are you going? xx

And then I waited for a reply.

For the next few days, I tried to put it out of my mind. I busied myself with work – trying to bury myself in the knotty minutiae of the copy-editor's queries – but Florence's email was a constant distracting presence in the back of my mind, like an ulcer at the tip of your tongue that twinges when you least expect it, the ragged nail that you can't stop picking. The email got pushed further and further down the inbox, but I could feel it there, its 'unreplied' flag like a silent reproach, the unanswered questions it posed a perpetual niggle against the background of my daily routine.

Answer, I begged Nina in my head, as I was running in the park, or cooking my supper, or just staring into space. I thought about calling her. But I didn't know what I wanted her to say.

And then, a few days later, I was sitting having breakfast and scrolling idly through Twitter on my phone, when the 'new email' icon flashed.

It was from Nina.

I took a gulp of coffee and a deep breath, and clicked to open it.

From: Nina da Souza
To: Nora Shaw
Subject: Re: Hen???

Dude! Long time no chat. Just got yr email – I was on lates at the hospital. Christ, in all honesty it's the last thing I want to do. I got the wedding invitation a while back but I was hoping I'd escaped the hen. R you going? Shall we make a pact? I'll go if you go?
Nx

I drank my coffee while I looked at the screen, my finger hovering over 'Reply' but not quite clicking. I'd hoped Nina would answer at least some of the questions that had been buzzing and building in my head over the last few days. When was the wedding? Why invite me to the hen, but not the wedding? Who was she marrying?

Hey, do you know . . . I started, and then deleted it. No. I couldn't ask outright. It would be tantamount to admitting I hadn't the first clue what was going on. I've always been too proud to admit to ignorance. I hate being at a disadvantage.

I tried to push the question to the bottom of my mind while I dressed and had a shower. But when I opened up my computer there were two more unread emails in my inbox.

The first was a regretful 'no thanks' from one of Clare's friends, citing a family birthday.

The second was another email from Flo. This time she'd attached a read-receipt.

To: info@LNShaw.co.uk
From: Florence Clay
Subject: Re: CLARE'S HEN!!!

Dear Lee,

Sorry to chase, but just wondering if you got my email the other day! I know it has been a while since you saw Clare, but she was so hoping you might be able to come. She often talks about you, and I know feels bad that you lost touch after school. I don't know what happened, but she'd really love for you to be there – won't you say yes?! It would really make her weekend complete.

Flo xxx

The email should have made me feel flattered – that Clare was so keen for me to be there, that Flo had gone to such trouble to track me down. But it didn't. Instead I felt a surge of resentment at being nagged, and a sense of invaded privacy at the read-receipt. It felt like being checked up on, spied upon.

I shut down the email and opened up the document I was working on, but even as I got down to it, pushing all thoughts of the hen determinedly from my mind, Flo's words hung in the air like an echo, niggling at me. *I don't know what happened.* It sounded like a plaintive child. No, I thought bitterly. You don't. So don't go prying into my past.

I had sworn never to go back.

Nina was different – Nina lived in London now, and she and I ran into each other occasionally around Hackney. She was as much part of my London life as my Reading one now.

But Clare – Clare was resolutely part of the past – and I wanted her to stay there.

And yet a small part of me – a small nagging part, that pricked at my conscience – didn't.

Clare had been my friend. My best friend, for a long time. And yet I'd run, without looking back, without even leaving a number. What kind of friend did that make me?

I got up restlessly and, for want of anything better to do, made another cup of coffee. I stood over the percolator while it hissed and gurgled, worrying at the side of my nail with my teeth and thinking about the ten years since I'd last seen her. When at last the machine had finished I poured myself a cup, and carried it back to my desk, but I didn't start work again. Instead I opened up Google and tapped in 'Clare Cavendish Facebook'.

There were a lot of Clare Cavendishes, it turned out, and the coffee had gone cold before I found one that I thought might be her. The profile picture was a snap of a couple in Doctor Who fancy dress. It was hard to tell beneath the straggling red wig, but there was something about the way the girl was throwing her head back and laughing that made me stop, as I scrolled down the endless list. The man was dressed as Matt Smith, with floppy hair, horn-rimmed glasses and a bow-tie. I clicked on the picture to enlarge it and stared at the two of them for a long time, trying to make out her features beneath the trailing red hair, and the more I looked the more I thought it *was* Clare. The man I definitely didn't recognise, I was sure of that.

I clicked on the 'About' tab. Under 'Mutual friends' it said 'Nina da Souza'. Definitely Clare. And under the 'Relationship' header, it said 'In a relationship with William Pilgrim'. The name made me do a slight double-take. It seemed familiar in

some indefinable way. Someone from school? But the only William in our year had been Will Miles. *Pilgrim*. I couldn't remember anyone called Pilgrim. I clicked on the profile picture, but it was an anonymous shot of a half-full pint glass.

I went back to Clare's profile picture, and as I looked at it, trying to work out what to do, Flo's email echoed inside my head: ***She was so hoping you might be able to come. She often talks about you.***

I felt something squeeze at my heart. A kind of guilt, maybe.

I had left without looking back; shell-shocked, reeling, and for a long time I'd concentrated on putting one foot in front of another, keeping going, keeping the past firmly behind me.

Self-preservation: that was all I could manage. I hadn't allowed myself to think of everything I'd left behind.

But now Clare's eyes met mine, peering out flirtatiously from beneath the red wig, and I thought I saw something pleading in her eyes, something reproachful.

I found myself remembering. Remembering the way she could make you feel like a million dollars, just by picking you out of a crowded room. Remembering her low, gurgling laugh, the notes she'd pass in class, her wicked sense of humour.

I remembered sleeping over on her bedroom floor aged maybe six, my first time away from home, lying there listening to the soft purr of her night-time breath. I'd had a nightmare, and wet the bed and Clare – Clare had hugged me and given me her own bear to cuddle while she crept into the airing cupboard to get new sheets, and hid the others in the laundry basket.

I heard her mother's voice on the landing, low and groggy, asking what was going on, and Clare's swift reply: 'I knocked over my milk, Mummy, it made Lee's bed all wet.'

For a second I was back there, twenty years ago, a small

frightened girl. I could *smell* the scent of her bedroom – the fustiness of our night breath, the sweetness of the bath pearls in a glass jar on her windowsill, the fresh laundry smell of the clean sheets.

‘Don’t tell anyone’ I whispered as we tucked the new sheets in, and I hid my wet pyjama bottoms in my case. She shook her head.

‘Of course not.’

And she never did.

I was still sitting there when my computer gave a faint ping, and another email popped up. It was from Nina. *What’s the plan then? Flo is chasing. Yes to the pact? Nx* I got up and paced to the door, feeling my fingers prickle with the stupidity of what I was about to do. Then I paced back and before I could change my mind, I typed out, *Ok. Deal. xx*

Nina’s reply came back an hour later. *Wow! Don’t take this the wrong way but gotta say, I’m surprised. In a good way I mean. Deal it is. Don’t even think about letting me down. Remember, I’m a doctor. I know at least 3 ways to kill you without leaving a trace. Nx*

I took a deep breath, pulled up the original email from Flo, and began to type.

Dear Florence (Flo?)

I would love to come. Please thank Clare for thinking of me. I look forward to meeting up with you all in Northumberland and catching up with Clare.

Warm wishes, Nora (but Clare will know me as Lee).

PS best to use this email address for any updates.

The other one is not checked as regularly.

After that the emails came thick and fast. There was a flurry of regretful reply-all 'nos' – all citing the short notice. *Away that weekend . . . So sorry, I've got to work . . . Family memorial service . . .* (Nina: *It'll be a funeral for the next person who abuses the 'Reply all' button.*) *I'm afraid I'll be snorkelling in Cornwall!* (Nina: *Snorkelling? In November? She couldn't think up a better excuse? Man, if I'd known the bar was that low I'd have said I was stuck down a mine in Chile or something.*)

More work. More pre-engagements. And in between, a few acceptances.

At last the list was set. Clare, Flo, Melanie, Tom (Nina's reply back to me: ???), Nina, Me.

Just six people. It didn't seem many for someone as popular as Clare. At least, as popular as she'd been at school. But it was short notice.

Was that why she'd invited me? To make up numbers, on what she knew would be a barrel-scraping do? But no, that wasn't Clare, or not the Clare I once knew. The Clare I knew would have invited *exactly* who she wanted and spun it as soooo exclusive that only a handful of people were allowed to come.

I pushed the memories aside, burying them under a blanket of routine. But they kept surfacing – halfway through a run, in the middle of the night, whenever I was least expecting it.

Why, Clare? Why now?