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# One Day

David Nicholls



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VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

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## ACCLAIM FOR *One Day* BY DAVID NICHOLLS

"Big, absorbing, smart, fantastically readable. . . . Brilliant on the details of the last couple of decades of British cultural and political life. . . . The perfect beach read for people who are normally repelled by the very idea of beach reads."

—Nick Hornby, from his blog

"A wonderful, wonderful book: wise, funny, perceptive, compassionate and often unbearably sad. . . . The best British social novel since Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!*. . . . Nicholls's witty prose has a transparency that brings Nick Hornby to mind: it melts as you read it so that you don't notice all the hard work that it's doing."

—*The Times* (London)

"Just as Nicholls has made full use of his central concept, so he has drawn on all his comic and literary gifts to produce a novel that is not only roaringly funny but also memorable, moving and, in its own unassuming, unpretentious way, rather profound."

—*The Guardian* (London)

"[Nicholls] has both a very deft prose style and a great understanding of human emotion. His characterisation is utterly convincing. . . . *One Day* is destined to be a modern classic."

—*Daily Mirror*

"With a nod to *When Harry Met Sally*, this funny, emotionally engaging third novel from David Nicholls traces the unlikely relationship between Emma Morely and Dexter Mayhew. . . . Told with toe-curlingly accurate insight and touching observation. . . . If you left college sometime in the eighties with no clear idea of what was going to happen next, or who your lifelong friends might turn out to be, this one's a definite for your holiday suitcase. If you didn't, it still is. . . . The feel good film must surely be just around the corner. I can't wait."

—*Daily Mail*

"A totally brilliant book about the heartbreaking gap between the way we were and the way we are. . . . The best weird love story since *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Every reader will fall in love with it. And every writer will wish they had written it." —Tony Parsons

“The funniest, loveliest book I’ve read in ages. Most of all it is horribly, cringingly, absolutely 100 percent honest and true to life: I lived every page.”  
—Jenny Colgan

“The ultimate zeitgeist love story for anyone who ever wanted someone they couldn’t have.”  
—Adele Parks

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a sharper, sweeter romantic comedy this year than the story of Dex and Em.”  
—*The Independent* (London)

“We may have found the novel of the year—a brilliantly funny and moving will-they, won’t-they romance tracing a relationship on the same day each day for two decades.”  
—*Heat*

“A moving and feel-good read. Nicholls is an expert at capturing that essence of young adulthood, first love, heartbreak, and the tangled, complicated course of romance. . . . Deserves to be the must-read hit of the summer.”  
—*News of the World*

“I couldn’t think of anyone who wouldn’t love this book.”  
—BBC Radio Five Live

“Nicholls captures superbly the ennui of postgraduation. . . . The writing is almost faultless, there’s a great feeling for the period and it’s eminently readable.”  
—*Herald* (London)

“As a study of what we once were and what we can become, it’s masterfully realised.”  
—*Esquire*

“Perfect for the beach or summer in the city.”  
—*In Style*

“A delicious love story.”  
—*Sunday Herald*

“I really loved it. . . . It’s absolutely wonderful . . . just so moving and engaging.”  
—Kate Mosse

# One Day

*Also by David Nicholls*

Starter for Ten  
The Understudy

To Max and Romy, for when you're older.  
And Hannah, as always.



‘What are days for?  
Days are where we live.  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in:  
Where can we live but days?’

Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats  
Running over the fields.’

Philip Larkin, ‘Days’

# Part One

1988–1992

## *Early Twenties*

‘That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But, it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it and think how different its course would have been. Pause, you who read this, and think for a long moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on that memorable day.’

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*



## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Future*

FRIDAY 15 JULY 1988

*Rankeillor Street, Edinburgh*

'I suppose the important thing is to make some sort of difference,' she said. 'You know, actually change something.'

'What, like "change the world", you mean?'

'Not the whole entire world. Just the little bit around you.'

They lay in silence for a moment, bodies curled around each other in the single bed, then both began to laugh in low, pre-dawn voices. 'Can't believe I just said that,' she groaned. 'Sounds a bit corny, doesn't it?'

'A bit corny.'

'I'm trying to be inspiring! I'm trying to lift your grubby soul for the great adventure that lies ahead of you.' She turned to face him. 'Not that you need it. I expect you've got your future nicely mapped out, ta very much. Probably got a little flow-chart somewhere or something.'

'Hardly.'

'So what're you going to do then? What's the great plan?'

'Well, my parents are going to pick up my stuff, dump it at theirs, then I'll spend a couple of days in their flat in London, see some friends. Then France—'

'Very nice—'

'Then China maybe, see what that's all about, then maybe onto India, travel around there for a bit—'

'*Travelling*,' she sighed. 'So predictable.'

'What's wrong with travelling?'

'Avoiding reality more like.'

'I think reality is over-rated,' he said in the hope that this might come across as dark and charismatic.

She sniffed. 'S'alright, I suppose, for those who can afford it. Why not just say "I'm going on holiday for two years"? It's the same thing.'

'Because travel broadens the mind,' he said, rising onto one elbow and kissing her.

'Oh I think you're probably a bit too broad-minded as it is,' she said, turning her face away, for the moment at least. They settled again on the pillow. 'Anyway, I didn't mean what are you doing next month, I meant the future-future, when you're, I don't know . . .' She paused, as if conjuring up some fantastical idea, like a fifth dimension. ' . . . *Forty* or something. What do you want to be when you're forty?'

'*Forty*?' He too seemed to be struggling with the concept. 'Don't know. Am I allowed to say "rich"?''

'Just so, so shallow.'

'Alright then, "famous".' He began to nuzzle at her neck. 'Bit morbid, this, isn't it?'

'It's not morbid, it's . . . exciting.'

"Exciting!" He was imitating her voice now, her soft Yorkshire accent, trying to make her sound daft. She got this a lot, posh boys doing funny voices, as if there was something unusual and quaint about an accent, and not for the first time she felt a reassuring shiver of dislike for him. She shrugged herself away until her back was pressed against the cool of the wall.

'Yes, exciting. We're meant to be excited, aren't we? All those possibilities. It's like the Vice-Chancellor said, "the doors of opportunity flung wide . . ."'

"Yours are the names in tomorrow's newspapers . . ."

'Not very likely.'

'So, what, are you excited then?'

'Me? God no, I'm crapping myself.'

'Me too. Christ . . .' He turned suddenly and reached for the

cigarettes on the floor by the side of the bed, as if to steady his nerves. 'Forty years old. Forty. Fucking hell.'

Smiling at his anxiety, she decided to make it worse. 'So what'll you be doing when you're forty?'

He lit his cigarette thoughtfully. 'Well the thing is, Em—'

"Em"? Who's "Em"?

'People call you Em. I've heard them.'

'Yeah, *friends* call me Em.'

'So can I call you Em?'

'Go on then, *Dex*.'

'So I've given this whole "growing old" thing some thought and I've come to the decision that I'd like to stay exactly as I am right now.'

Dexter Mayhew. She peered up at him through her fringe as he leant against the cheap buttoned vinyl headboard and even without her spectacles on it was clear why he might want to stay exactly this way. Eyes closed, the cigarette glued languidly to his lower lip, the dawn light warming the side of his face through the red filter of the curtains, he had the knack of looking perpetually posed for a photograph. Emma Morley thought 'handsome' a silly, nineteenth-century word, but there really was no other word for it, except perhaps 'beautiful'. He had one of those faces where you were aware of the bones beneath the skin, as if even his bare skull would be attractive. A fine nose, slightly shiny with grease, and dark skin beneath the eyes that looked almost bruised, a badge of honour from all the smoking and late nights spent deliberately losing at strip poker with girls from Bedales. There was something feline about him: eyebrows fine, mouth pouty in a self-conscious way, lips a shade too dark and full, but dry and chapped now, and rouged with Bulgarian red wine. Gratifyingly his hair was terrible, short at the back and sides, but with an awful little quiff at the front. Whatever gel he used had worn off, and now the quiff looked pert and fluffy, like a silly little hat.

Still with his eyes closed, he exhaled smoke through his nose.

Clearly he knew he was being looked at because he tucked one hand beneath his armpit, bunching up his pectorals and biceps. Where did the muscles come from? Certainly not sporting activity, unless you counted skinny-dipping and playing pool. Probably it was just the kind of good health that was passed down in the family, along with the stocks and shares and the good furniture. Handsome then, or beautiful even, with his paisley boxer shorts pulled down to his hip bones and somehow here in her single bed in her tiny rented room at the end of four years of college. 'Handsome'? Who do you think you are, Jane Eyre? Grow up. Be sensible. Don't get carried away.

She plucked the cigarette from his mouth. 'I can imagine you at forty,' she said, a hint of malice in her voice. 'I can picture it right now.'

He smiled without opening his eyes. 'Go on then.'

'Alright—' She shuffled up the bed, the duvet tucked beneath her armpits. 'You're in this sports car with the roof down in Kensington or Chelsea or one of those places and the amazing thing about this car is it's silent, 'cause all the cars'll be silent in, I don't know, what – 2006?'

He scrunched his eyes to do the sum. '2004—'

'And this car is hovering six inches off the ground down the King's Road and you've got this little paunch tucked under the leather steering wheel like a little pillow and those backless gloves on, thinning hair and no chin. You're a big man in a small car with a tan like a basted turkey—'

'So shall we change the subject then?'

'And there's this woman next to you in sunglasses, your third, no, fourth wife, very beautiful, a model, no, an *ex*-model, twenty-three, you met her while she was draped on the bonnet of a car at a motor-show in Nice or something, and she's stunning and thick as shit—'

'Well that's nice. Any kids?'

'No kids, just three divorces, and it's a Friday in July and you're heading off to some house in the country and in the tiny

boot of your hover car are tennis racquets and croquet mallets and a hamper full of fine wines and South African grapes and poor little quails and asparagus and the wind's in your widow's peak and you're feeling very, very pleased with yourself and wife number three, four, whatever, smiles at you with about two hundred shiny white teeth and you smile back and try not to think about the fact that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to say to each other.'

She came to an abrupt halt. You sound insane, she told herself. Do try not to sound insane. 'Course if it's any consolation we'll all be dead in a nuclear war long before then!' she said brightly, but still he was frowning at her.

'Maybe I should go then. If I'm so shallow and corrupt—'

'No, don't go,' she said, a little too quickly. 'It's four in the morning.'

He shuffled up the bed until his face was a few inches from hers. 'I don't know where you get this idea of me, you barely know me.'

'I know the type.'

'The type?'

'I've seen you, hanging round Modern Languages, braying at each other, throwing black-tie dinner parties—'

'I don't even own black-tie. And I certainly don't bray—'

'Yachting your way round the Med in the long hols, ra ra ra—'

'So if I'm so awful—' His hand was on her hip now.

'—which you are.'

'—then why are you sleeping with me?' His hand was on the warm soft flesh of her thigh.

'Actually I don't think I have slept with you, have I?'

'Well that depends.' He leant in and kissed her. 'Define your terms.' His hand was on the base of her spine, his leg slipping between hers.

'By the way,' she mumbled, her mouth pressed against his.

'What?' He felt her leg snake around his, pulling him closer.



‘You need to brush your teeth.’

‘I don’t mind if you don’t.’

‘S’really horrible,’ she laughed. ‘You taste of wine and fags.’

‘Well that’s alright then. So do you.’

Her head snapped away, breaking off the kiss. ‘Do I?’

‘I don’t mind. I like wine and fags.’

‘Won’t be a sec.’ She flung the duvet back, clambering over him.

‘Where are you going now?’ He placed his hand on her bare back.

‘Just the bog,’ she said, retrieving her spectacles from the pile of books by the bed: large, black NHS frames, standard issue.

‘The “bog”, the “bog” . . . sorry I’m not familiar . . .’

She stood, one arm across her chest, careful to keep her back to him. ‘Don’t go away,’ she said, padding out of the room, hooking two fingers into the elastic of her underpants to pull the material down at the top of her thighs. ‘And no playing with yourself while I’m gone.’

He exhaled through his nose and shuffled up the bed, taking in the shabby rented room, knowing with absolute confidence that somewhere in amongst the art postcards and photocopied posters for angry plays there would be a photograph of Nelson Mandela, like some dreamy ideal boyfriend. In his last four years he had seen any number of bedrooms like this, dotted round the city like crime scenes, rooms where you were never more than six feet from a Nina Simone album, and though he’d rarely seen the same bedroom twice, it was all too familiar. The burnt out nightlights and desolate pot plants, the smell of washing powder on cheap, ill-fitting sheets. She had that arty girl’s passion for photomontage too; flash-lit snaps of college friends and family jumbled in amongst the Chagalls and Vermeers and Kandinskys, the Che Guevaras and Woody Allens and Samuel Becketts. Nothing here was neutral, everything displayed an allegiance or a point of view. The room was a manifesto, and with a sigh Dexter recognised her as one of