

# Niamh's Ark

by Kenzo Evans

*Hope is everything but virtue: it is silencing the voices of reason, purpose, and fear, biting the bullet, and tirelessly pushing yourself forward when every atom in the universe has given up on you.*

She was pulled out of her dream by a loud thud from the living room. Ever since Bo suffered a stroke two years ago, he had developed a condition that manifested in abrupt, strong, uncontrolled shaking of his body in his sleep, which often caused him to push himself off whatever surface he had chosen to fall asleep on. Was it increased muscle tone, some kind of nervous disorder, or exorbitantly vivid dreams translating into his limbs, she didn't know; still, rarely did a day pass without him having one or two of those falls. A quintessential feline, he refused to sleep in the cradle she made for him, giving preference to his own choice of sleeping spots. Not all his choices were safe, which is why the floor of her house was covered with decorative pillows, rugs, piles of old blankets, and awkwardly positioned pieces of soft furniture that migrated every now and again following changes in his in-the-moment preferences.

This time he fell from a narrow windowsill of the massive old sash window, draughty and leaky, which whistled and rattled with the lightest breath of wind. No wonder all these amenities made it one of Bo's favourite sleeping spots. He made it to a soft landing on the row of pillows she had put there for him, yet the noise generated by the weight of the uncontrollably falling body was still loud enough to wake her.

The cat appeared in her bedroom doorway, visibly shaken but unharmed. It was approaching seven, and, despite it being Sunday, she decided not to go back to sleep. The wood burner had run out of fuel a few hours earlier; the lashing rain added to the

challenge. After a second of hesitation, she pulled herself together and, in one sharp movement, threw back the blanket, climbed out of bed, and wrapped herself in her fleece robe.

The cat followed her to the kitchen. She opened a bottle of water and poured herself half a glass. He waited patiently while she drank. After putting the empty glass on the table, she pulled out an unopened tin – his allowance for today – from a stack of large multipacks in the corner. She popped it open, spooned about a third into his bowl, and put the rest away in the cupboard.

Gone were the days when the cat had been passionate about food. Once, it would take him less than a minute to wolf down a serving before asking for more, but today he had to gather all his enthusiasm just to push himself to the bowl and begin his breakfast. The cat was approaching twenty, which equates to almost a century in human years. It took him a good fifteen minutes to deal with his morning allowance with what remained of his teeth, eyesight, and energy. All he was now truly proficient in was sleeping – the rest of his activities merely supported that primary one.

She looked at him sympathetically as he ate. He looked genuinely old, but not pitifully so. He was fully aware of his age-related limits, yet he embraced them – without hopelessly striving for what had slipped beyond his reach, and without rejecting what hadn't.

He reminded her of her late grandad. The old man lived into his late nineties, suffering from heavy dementia and becoming almost entirely blind in his final years. That didn't stop him from being a keen walker, the one activity he put above all others. Every Sunday he would put on his walking suit, as he called it – which to her looked more like

a space suit: heavy-duty coveralls with attached knee and elbow pads, enormous walking shoes, and a thick knit hat. Falling was not unusual for him, so he needed protection. He then embarked on hours-long walks with Dexter, a border collie, his faithful partner since his wife had passed away. As the years took their toll, his pace became slower and his walks shorter; still, he never saw that as a reason to stop. He died at ninety-nine from acute Covid, having completed an eight-mile walk the day before.

Having finished his food, the cat turned to the water bowl. He drank just as leisurely as he ate, slowly and methodically – as if staying hydrated rather than quenching thirst. When he was done, he backed a few steps away and proceeded with his morning wash-up. She cleaned his bowl, topped up his water from the butt, and followed his lead.

When she returned to the kitchen, washed up and changed into comfortable, warm loungewear, the cat was asleep on a chair. He was quiet, but just in case she carefully moved the chair closer to the wall to guard him from falling. She opened the cupboard and retrieved a box of cereal, a sack of dried cranberries, and a can of milk powder, mixed it all in a bowl, and topped it up with water from the bottle she had opened earlier. She gave it a good stir and started eating.

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The day was in full swing when she returned to the living room. She pulled the thick curtains apart, and scant, dull daylight grudgingly filled the space. The wind had calmed slightly, making the surroundings look like one of those late-autumn days – nameless and endless – that she remembered so vividly from her northern childhood.

On either side of the window stood two tall, narrow racks, each stacked with about half a dozen Petri dishes. The bottom of each dish was layered with dampened filter paper, with a handful of seeds scattered on top. She studied the contents carefully, topping up those that were close to drying out.

She stood there for a few more minutes, watching the rain falling steadily to the ground. Then she sat at the writing table, took a blank sheet of paper, and began to write.

*“My dear Esme,”*

She found incredible enjoyment in writing letters. All the modern ways of communicating that civilisation had developed – emails, texts, group chats, voice messages – reduced conversation to an exchange of depersonalised, carefully worded, spell-checked facts. They were good at conveying the *what*, but utterly useless at conveying the *why*. It was the uncompromising unforgiveness of ink soaked into paper, she thought, that forced you to think twice before letting your mind out, helping you reveal subtle feelings you were not yet aware of.

*“The weather is positively getting better. The wind is down to fifteen knots, and I haven’t observed any gusts for a few days now. The rain is still with us, but I’d say it’s not as intense as it was last week. I can see the horizon again today, and that is an improvement.”*

She lifted her eyes to and through the window. There was no suggestion the rain would stop anytime soon. A ceiling of low, thick grey clouds stretched as far as she could see. She had grown used to the rain, but the violent gusts – so plentiful in recent weeks – made her worry. The roof tiles had withstood them so far, but she wasn’t sure how long they could carry on. Their old cast-iron weather vane had been blown away before her

very eyes, as if carved from cardboard, and she could imagine what the roof had been dealing with. She wasn't keen on welcoming the rain indoors.

*“The seeds show no progress so far – any of them. The book says it may take a few weeks for them to germinate, even those that are supposed to be quicker, so I’m keeping my fingers crossed.”*

*“Bo keeps doing his falls thing. I seem to be more concerned about it than he is, though. Surely it can’t go without consequences for whatever he’s still got left inside that shabby body of his? I can’t think of anything else I could do about it – the house already looks like a Japanese castle with all those pillows. It’s funny how he always looks totally unshocked when he finds himself on the floor, so gloriously cool. He gets his bearings and jumps back up to his spot – only to do it again a short while later. “*

She smiled. Silly old Bo. Many of his falls started in vivid dreams, with all his paws pushing back frantically, as if he were vigorously chasing someone. The old Bo, who fell almost every day from his bed; Bo, who walked like a punter who'd had one too many drinks on a night out; Bo, who occasionally chewed his tray pellets because he couldn't tell them from his dry food granules – that old, blind, toothless Bo was still a young backstreet cat in his dreams, a dangerous, merciless predator and a menace to the neighbourhood. Wasn't that reincarnation worth all the falls in the world – and the reason he wanted to get back to sleep as quickly as he could?

She continued writing for a little longer, then signed and dated the letter, folded the sheet in half, and placed it on a dedicated shelf in the old, heavy-as-hell oak bookcase.

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It was time for her daily exercise. She changed into her sports outfit – old, faded and unpresentable – yet she didn't expect much attention from the public, except perhaps from Bo, and that was only if he bothered to half-open his eyes. Even then, his failing eyesight ensured her questionable style choices were safe from critique.

She started with dynamic stretches, circling her arms and swinging her legs, squatting and doing light jumps. Once she had warmed up, she moved to the far corner of the room, occupied by what looked like an oversized spinning machine protruding from an ugly black metal cupboard. She sat down and placed her hands on the handlebar. She began pedalling slowly – the resistance was noticeable – but gradually increased the tempo to her usual eighty RPM. She worked the pedals vigorously for almost an hour, taking five-minute breaks after each ten-minute stretch. After completing the fourth round, she stood up and pressed a towel to her sweat-soaked face.

Once her breath had returned, she sat on the floor for some final stretches. She attended to each muscle group meticulously, listening to her body respond to every tiniest move she made, enjoying the unmatched feeling of calm, empowered, confident lightness that conquering oneself – both physically and mentally – rewards you with.

She spent much of the remaining daylight with a book in a beat-up burgundy leather armchair that came with the house and dated back to 1790, as was etched on a barely readable manufacturer's label. She had fallen in love with reading – hopelessly and unconditionally – ever since she learned to read. Where other kids spent long hours online or hung out aimlessly, she explored the hidden treasures of her local library. Dickens, Exupéry, Verne. Huckleberry Finn, Lee Scoresby, Winston Smith. Meursault, Buendia, Montag. Novels, short stories, and poetry; documentaries, biographies, and travellers' notes; old and modern, acclaimed and panned, classics and debutants. She let

in book after book after book, living through thousands of wonderful worlds she discovered in each of them.

*“The best books don’t teach you anything new”, she once said to Peter. “They just help you uncover the truth you have always known.”*

Twilight was well under way when she folded the corner of the page and set the book on the adjacent coffee table. She changed back into her sports attire, did a few quick jumps and squats to wake her stiffening muscles, grabbed the towel from the drying rope, and climbed onto the black machine. She finished another hour of exercise in complete darkness.

When she entered the kitchen, the cat was already there, sitting next to his bowl and patiently waiting for it to be refilled. She took the tin from the cupboard and emptied the remaining contents into the bowl. Then she grabbed a can of shredded meat for herself, mixed it expertly with beans, and joined the cat in his feast.

Then they sat there for a while – she and the cat – looking at each other and quietly unwinding after a long day. She sipped her drink, and the cat lazily washed his time-battered face.

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The sharp trill of the alarm clock woke her the following morning. The cat was sitting in the doorway, staring at her. He looked better than he had the day before, and she found herself thinking again that the falls were doing him no good.

She walked into the kitchen, poured her morning glass, and opened a fresh can of shredded beef for the cat. She watched him distractedly as he ate. There is a strange charm radiated by old, rusty, worn-to-the-bone organisms that makes us feel an irrational, almost physical attraction to them. Often, we attribute it to their perceived wisdom, acquired through their lengthy presence in the world. This, of course, couldn't be further from the truth. Bo was old, but he certainly wasn't wise. No – it isn't their wisdom that attracts us, she thought. It's their persistent ability to battle fate despite all the losses they've suffered, to keep holding ground that every single one of us is eventually bound to lose.

After checking on the Petri dishes, she stood by the window for a while, curiously watching raindrops spawn thousands of concentric ripples on the surface of the pond. If she didn't pay attention, the ripples seemed to come and go, but if she focused on a particular one, she could see it keep expanding outward for a good while – some even reaching the edge of the water – but only if she had the patience to follow it without being distracted by the hundreds of new ripples striking the surface in the meantime.

*And as I watch the drops of rain  
Weave their weary paths and die  
I know that I am like the rain  
There but for the grace of you go I.*

She knew better than anyone that the greatest poetry is never written by the poet. It is the reader who writes it, each and every one of them, by throwing the words assembled by the poet into the waters of their own realm and observing the ripples that follow. The poet's mastery is defined by their ability to find and bind together the words that generate the strongest ripples and let the readers discover their reach for themselves.



That was precisely the case with her love for Paul Simon's lyrics – yet the ripples they induced in her mind were nothing like Simon's own.

Love that drained Simon gave her reason to conquer herself every single day.

Solitude that cost Simon his competence gave her strength by making her ultimately responsible for her entire world.

Doubt that caused Simon to lose his beliefs reinforced her own, as only the strongest beliefs can survive doubt.

Wasn't it ironic, she thought, that they had been so obsessed with searching for water in the lifeless sands of Mars or beneath the frozen crusts of Europa and Enceladus, while here on Earth it existed in tremendous abundance, right on their doorstep – unnoticed, unvalued, and unneeded? They had it all, yet chose instead to chase enticing shadows, much like a family man lured by something younger, fresher, and finer than his faithful but habituated woman. And just like the woman who learns of the affair, the water battered them now with all the might and mercilessness of a betrayed lover.

These thoughts occupied her mind for the rest of the day. They circled as she ate breakfast. They followed her through the house as she tidied rooms and conquered the ugly black machine. They teased and crawled as she sat in the armchair, reading, until twilight began creeping in.

The cat slept through the evening and was waiting patiently for her in the kitchen when she came in for dinner.

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Yesterday marked four weeks since Peter told her he was leaving.

They both knew it was time. They understood there was no alternative. Re-living that day in her mind, again and again, she kept arriving at the conclusion that his leaving had been the best possible option – for her, for him, and above all for Esme.

And yet it was one of only a handful of times in her life when her common sense suffered a catastrophic defeat. A quintessential nerd, she excelled at listening to reason and keeping her emotions on a short lead, but that Sunday – the first day the wind became noticeably weaker – her self-control was crushed like a paper cup beneath the feet of a rush-hour crowd. It was too volatile a mix of feebleness, fear, and sadness; too real a threat to the foundations of everything she had and everything she had been.

She lashed out at him like never before. She shouted, cried, hit him with both hands, paced the room, and collapsed on the sofa. She appealed to his reason and to his feelings. She sent him to hell and begged him to stay. She knew none of it was his fault, yet she still manipulated him in the ugliest of ways, attacking his deepest weaknesses, using every means possible to say the two words – the two stupid words – that, once spoken, merely emphasize the inevitable, irrevocable end: “don’t leave”.

He took it all calmly, without saying a word. When her emotional storm finally burned itself out, he drew her closer and kissed her on the forehead. If one day I realise that I am never going to see you again, he said, looking deeply into her eyes, I don’t want to remember our last moments like this.

He was right. He always was. She kissed him back. For a few hours they stood there, holding each other, desperately trying to live through all the moments they were never going to have.

Then she helped him pack, and with the first glimmer of dawn he was on his way. She hasn't heard from him since.

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*“Dear Esme,*

*I am so glad this day has finally come, and that I can write to you. This has been a miserable week, and I desperately needed to talk to you.*

*Bo had a nasty fall on Wednesday and injured his left paw. He's limping, and I'm hoping it isn't a fracture. I am giving him the painkillers we kept from the time of his stroke, but there's only so much I can give him. He's coping bravely. At least he can't reach the most dangerous sleeping spots anymore, and I hope he uses the opportunity to settle somewhere safer.*

*The seeds are bloody useless. I dumped the first batch and planted a fresh round, but I'm no longer sure the whole thing makes sense. I admit I might simply have been unlucky with all the candidates I picked so far – although that would be one hell of bad luck.*

*The weather has worsened again – so much for high hopes. It's bloody miserable. What worries me most is that I noticed traces of water on the kitchen ceiling. I wiped them off and haven't seen any since, but I'm dreading the thought of a leak.*

*Could it be worse, I thought. And you know what? It bloody could! I managed to choose the most appalling book in the universe. If you ever think of laying your hands on “Blood and Chocolate”, for God’s sake, don’t. It will only waste your time, and that’s not something we have in abundance, is it?*

*Please forgive me, my darling, but I opened the box of chocolates we were saving for the day we’d welcome you here. I resisted until the very end, but I really couldn’t take my eyes off it for the past two weeks, and all the chaos of this week didn’t help either. I only took ~~two~~ three – they are wonderful! – and I promise the rest will wait safely until the glorious day comes.*

*Take care of yourself, darling. It won’t be long now until I finally see you – counting the days!*

*Love,*

*Mum”*

\* \* \*

April came, and shortly after, May. It grew quite warm, but the rain kept falling. The weeks flowed past like carbon copies of one another. Her letters to Esme grew shorter, as there was less and less to say. She got tired more easily, and often fell asleep in the armchair with a book still in her hands.

She planted two more rounds of seeds, each time altering the process slightly. None of them worked. Perhaps the lack of sunshine was to blame, but she suspected the seeds had simply hibernated in the box for far too long.

Bo's paw healed, and he returned to his signature drunkard's walk. He still fell now and again, but he chose his sleeping spots more responsibly, and she stopped worrying about it. He looked fine for his age – fulfilled and content – and that was enough for her.

There was still no word from Peter. She tried her best to keep him out of her thoughts, because that inevitably led to thinking about his whereabouts – and to the only possible conclusion, – but his silhouette kept coming back, reappearing in every secluded corner of the life they had lived together.

Who knows where or what she would be now if it hadn't been for him – but she knew for certain she wouldn't be here, in what used to be known as Pharos Cottage: an old coaching inn, and before that a Roman outpost at the top of the Serpent Pass.

It had been Peter's perseverance and unshakeable conviction that the Strike would happen one day that brought the two of them here, to this house, with reserves of bottled water, tinned food, and firewood sufficient to carry on for a while. It was his willingness to endure ridicule from friends, neighbours, and at times even from her, that now left her sheltered from wind and unending rain, with a pedal-powered generator, a beacon he installed in what had once been a watchtower and later a belfry, and a small programmable radio transmitter she hoped might one day help her find someone else in this now lifeless, endlessly flooded world. It was also his selflessness that made him leave shortly after – to set sail on an inflatable dinghy, as he said, to search for others, but as she realised far too late, to cross himself off the list of consumers of their vast, yet still limited, supplies.

The Strike came quickly. Many didn't even have time to change. Peter, she, and Bo spent two weeks in the cellar as the storm that followed raged above their heads. When the fiercest winds finally died down, they unbolted the hatch and climbed out.

What they saw hit them hard. Their house – once in one of the highest points of the Loscoe Hills – now stood in the middle of a patch of muddy land barely four acres wide. Everything beyond, as far as the eye could see, was covered in water: yellowish-brown, swirling, threaded with countless small currents, carrying tree branches, cladding, plastic packaging, and other debris. Gusts of wind slapped rain into their faces.

Thankfully, although visibly battered by the storm, the house was dry inside and largely undamaged. The stockpile they had assembled in preparation for the Strike would sustain them for a while. They moved back in. Peter activated the beacon in the belfry and programmed the transmitter to broadcast distress calls. They took turns on the ugly black machine to generate electricity for their daily needs. They were hopeful it would take only a few days for the authorities to locate them.

Sadly, that hope proved unfounded.

The days passed, but there were no signs of life around them. The rain never stopped. Before long, Peter began to question how sustainable their situation was if their isolation lasted longer than anticipated. He realised that longer workouts meant higher food consumption, so they reduced their efforts to generating only the minimum energy required. Portions were rationed carefully to match expenditure. They reduced their use of bottled water by collecting rainwater in butts. That helped stretch their supplies for a time, but it still wasn't enough for Peter. What if they weren't found for months? Years?

He never voiced those fears, but it would have been naïve to believe they didn't trouble her as well. His decision to leave hit her affection hard, yet it hardly came as a surprise for her reason.

After Peter left, she refined her routine to prolong her time in the house as much as possible. She planned food consumption carefully, experimenting with seeds found in an old cupboard drawer in an attempt to establish a basic cultivation cycle. She raised the water butts to supply the bathroom by gravity, rather than pumping or carrying water by hand. As it grew harder to work the spinning machine at her former pace, she aligned her daily routine with daylight hours, which also reduced her use of torches, candles and firewood.

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That morning, she stood by the window for a while, habitually gazing into the inanimate distance through the streaks of rainwater on the glass. Bo padded over and rubbed his body against her ankle. With some effort, she squatted down and carefully lifted him. She held him gently against her chest; even the lightest embrace could now cause him pain. He closed his eyes and nestled into her arms.

As she stood there stroking his head, a strange sensation surfaced at the back of her mind – a negligible distraction, a tiny imbalance in her universe, a distant, barely audible tinkling, like the feeling you get when trying to recall something without knowing exactly what it is you're trying to remember.

All at once, the tinkling filled her head. She set Bo down clumsily on the sofa and rushed to the front door. A sudden gust of wind shoved her back inside for a second – but what difference did that make now?

Not quite believing her eyes, she stopped at the top of the porch, breathing in the fresh, warm, humid air, and for the first time in many months feeling no urge to retreat indoors. The sea had calmed, and she could see farther than she usually could. It was so quiet she could hear Bo's steps behind her as he followed her outside and sat beside her, equally startled by the change.

She remembered every single moment of the endless rain: the early days of solitude, when it felt like little more than an inconvenience; the day they realised it would last far longer than expected; hateful denial, followed by almost animal longing for a glimmer of sunshine that never came. Every morning that she rushed to the window, desperate for something different, only to see the same scene again and again. Fleeting hope every time the rain showed signs of slowing, crushed soon after as it regained strength. Eventually, acceptance – and finally, sheer indifference.

None of it mattered anymore. Their new life was about to begin.

*"It stopped, Esme! The rain has stopped. Can you feel it? I know you can – I can feel that you do. You're safe to come now."*

Back inside, on the racks by the living-room window, a handful of young shoots sparkled brightly on their filter-paper bedding.