

O.

Another Sun

Iris first heard about *Life on Nyx* on a freezing winter's night. She was at a pub in London, drinking with her work friends. Winter, pub, London, work – she never imagined that these things would seem exotic one day, but they do. It was a Thursday. Her mind returns to that night over and over again. It's like rewatching an old film, hoping its ending will be different but it's always the same.

She had heard of Nyx, of course, but not the TV show – it had only just been announced. She knew that Nyx was a terrestrial planet, much smaller than Earth. She knew that its solar system could only be reached via an underwater wormhole in the Pacific Ocean. She knew it had no moons. She knew that Nyx was tidally locked, so that, unlike Earth, it didn't turn on its axis. On one side it was always day and on the other, night. Its light side was a pale pink desert and its dark side – who knows? Iris had seen photos online. In most of them, Nyx looked like a pink Sahara. In some pictures, in the distance, there was an indigo lake surrounded by forest. Everything was untouched, like Earth had once been. Iris had read that Nyx's atmosphere wasn't conducive to human life, but a few people were already living there, inside a sealed structure called 'the Hub'. They were there for good. There was no way back.

Not knowing about Nyx was limited to the old, the insane and the cut-off-from-humanity, though a British anthropologist, Maria Temple, once visited a remote tribe in the Amazon rainforest, and even they had heard of Nyx, through word of mouth. They didn't fully understand what a planet was, or a solar system,

or the universe. A baby girl in the tribe was named after the planet. Dr Temple took a photo of baby Nyx with her phone. Two weeks later, after she uploaded it to Facebook, the photograph appeared in the *New York Times* and was shared by millions of people around the world. Iris had once seen it, briefly, while sitting on the bus to work, looking at her phone, but it didn't pique her interest, so her thumb continued scrolling.

The morning after the pub, she found the image again: a naked brown baby with tufts of black hair and a string of beads around her neck, adorably new and far away from civilization. And then she found what she was looking for. The *Life on Nyx* website was elegantly designed, with minimalist fonts and soothing, pastel colours. Iris worked on websites, so she couldn't help but admire it. The Nyx Inc logo was a discreet pale grey, almost hidden at the bottom of the page. The background was a photograph of some sand dunes, glowing pink in the sun. Another sun, not ours. A breeze whipped sand into the air. It wasn't a photo, she realized. It was a video. A button said 'Click for sound'. Iris clicked and heard the wind blowing on Nyx, this other planet, millions of light years away. Sssss, it went, both gentle and hypnotic. She was extremely hungover. Words appeared over the video, then disappeared and were replaced by other words:

a beautiful new planet

a meaningful new life

are you ready?

ENTER

Iris could taste bile at the back of her throat. She swallowed and took a few quick, shallow breaths. She was definitely going to puke – it was only a matter of time. But first, she clicked 'ENTER'.

There was a long, complicated application form. There were other videos. There was a list of funders, including several well-known billionaires. There was an architectural plan for the expanded Hub, where the *Life on Nyx* community would live: a central, circular building with eight long annexes – like rays of light emanating from a sun. There were computer-generated images of the Hub’s interior. Everything looked clean and new, light-filled, immaculate. An indoor farm, abundant with fruit and vegetables, ready to be picked. A cafeteria with tables, chairs and a counter, and ceiling-to-floor windows overlooking the landscape. A large room where people were exercising together, while others sat on sofas, reading. The CGI people were identically dressed in elegant, loose grey clothes, their faces calm and content as they walked down corridors, worked, ate meals and socialized. They had similar, ageless faces, but a variety of skin-tones.

Iris clicked ‘play’ on another video. You can still find it online, deep in the archives of the *Life on Nyx* website, but it might not be up for much longer.



A man in his fifties with longish silver hair sits in front of a control panel that’s covered with hundreds of buttons, switches, knobs and monitors. Above the panel, through a large window, you can see Nyx’s empty, pink landscape. The man’s face is open, earnest and ruggedly handsome, like an ageing movie star. In his youth, he must have been spectacular. His skin glows and his eyes are blue. He leans into the camera and smiles.

‘Hello there, I’m Norman Best,’ he says, in an English accent with a transatlantic twang. ‘I’m the director of the Hub, the future home of the *Life on Nyx* community. We’re very busy at the moment, getting ready for our big launch. We can’t wait to welcome you to our beautiful planet.’ Big smile. Norman has great teeth.

The film cuts to a montage of Nyxian scenes: pink sand, indigo lake, CGI rooms. Electronic music pulses in the background. The film returns to Norman.

‘We’re looking for a hundred tenacious, committed, hard-working team players from all walks of life – and from as many countries as possible – to be part of our groundbreaking programme. There’ll be room for all kinds of people – medical professionals, horticulturalists, cooks, teachers and makers – though there are some restrictions, which you can find in the terms and conditions at lifeonnyx.com.’ Small smile. ‘Above all, we’re looking for dreamers: people with vision, people who don’t want an ordinary life.’

Cut to images of packed train carriages in various cities across the world. People walking along streets, their heads down.

‘We’re looking for people who want to be part of a real, self-sufficient community, the kind that seems increasingly less viable on Earth. The kind of harmonious, close-knit society that humans lived in for thousands of years, before technology took over.’

The music takes a darker turn and becomes an ominous drone.

‘I’ve been living on Nyx for four years now. From what I hear, life on Earth has become even more difficult than it already was. Here, there are no wars, no conflict, no climate change.’

The film cuts to a group of soldiers dressed in camouflage gear, holding guns, walking down a yellow, bombed-out street; then to a polar bear on an ice floe, surrounded by water.

‘There’ll be no internet. No cell phones. No more living your life through a screen.’

Images of people gazing blankly at various devices – on public transport, at their desks, at dinner tables.

‘No TV, no shopping, no processed food – in fact, all of our meals will be delicious, healthy and entirely vegan. There’ll be no celebrities. No more comparing yourself to people you’ve never met.’

Television sets, designer stores, a greasy pizza, a montage of social media platforms. Kim Kardashian and her sisters walking down a red carpet, smiling grimly.

‘There’ll be no salaries. No taxes. No distractions. Just friendship, community and genuinely interesting, useful work. It’ll be a chance to learn new skills and enjoy your free time in a positive, enriching way. There’ll be various activities, thousands of books available in our digital library and a great selection of music, chosen by our community.

‘My team and I have loved every moment of our time on Nyx. Personally speaking, I haven’t missed Earth at all. The planet is even more dazzling in real life than it is on screen. Truly, you’ve never seen anything like it. We’re so excited about building our community.’

Cut back to the landscape, the dunes, the moonless blue sky. The calming sssss of the wind.

‘Eventually we’re hoping to bring many hundreds of people up here, to build a genuine alternative to life on Earth. But this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to join the pioneers – the first Nyxians. It’s a one-way ticket to an incredible new planet. A chance to make a difference, to make history and to live a better life.’

Norman appears. He smiles and raises an eyebrow.

‘Are you ready?’

Fade to white.



The sourness rose from Iris’s throat to her mouth. She closed the laptop, kicked off the duvet, ran to the bathroom and vomited. Afterwards, crouched on the floor, breathing into the toilet, she realized she was still wearing the previous day’s clothes. There were chunks of puke in her long dark hair.

Shit, she thought. I’m late for work.



And what of Nyx, the baby girl named after that inferior pink planet? Maria Temple, the anthropologist, never returned to the

Amazon, because she couldn't find a good job in academia – not even with her Master's, her PhD, her various postdoctorates and her brief viral fame. Finally, she received a job offer from a market research company, where anthropological skills were better remunerated. Some years later, another anthropologist visited the settlement where Nyx was born, but found it empty, abandoned, half covered by the quick, green jungle. No one knows what became of baby Nyx.

NYX

Seven Years Ago

I.

Everything Was New

‘Welcome, everyone; welcome to Nyx,’ said Norman into a microphone, over the hubbub of people entering the cafeteria, greeting each other. The room smelled clean and man-made, like a new pair of shoes. Norman was standing on a podium, wearing the same loose grey outfit as the other Nyxians, but looking a bit unreal, as celebrities often do, with his handsome face, silver hair and smooth, tanned skin that seemed incongruous for someone who had lived inside the Hub, away from the sun, for several years. Maybe it was natural – good genes and charisma. He waved and smiled, showing his straight white teeth.

Iris had recognized him immediately. Most people would. He had been the face of the *Life on Nyx* recruitment programme, the star of its online content. He had been denounced by politicians, journalists and scientists all over the world. A prominent astrophysicist had described him as ‘a modern-age pied piper, leading a hundred fantasists to their deaths’. Iris was star-struck.

‘Please take a seat,’ he said, ‘if you can find one, but I imagine that most of you are happy to stand, after your long trip from Earth.’

The audience tittered in agreement. Some of them stretched their stiff necks and limbs. They had spent most of the journey lying down, strapped to their beds for an entire week. There were a hundred of them, not counting the old-timers who had been on Nyx for several years. The new arrivals kept glancing at the walls where large black cameras hung, transmitting to Earth.

‘My name is Norman Best,’ he said, ‘and I’m the director of the Hub, your new home.’

Someone at the back whooped, then another, and then they all started clapping and shouting, a cheerful racket. Iris joined in. Her hair was still damp – she had just showered, with several other women, in Annex 2’s shining white bathroom. For the past hour or so, since arriving on Nyx, she had been smiling so hard that her jaw ached, but it was a good, blissful pain. The noise of the crowd bounced cleanly off the new walls. Everything was new: their home, their clothes, their white trainers, their electronic wristbands, their lives. They were new and Earth was old, and they would never see it again – thank God.

There was a touch of impatience in Norman’s frown, his pale eyes, his hands running through his hair, but he covered it with a smile as the clapping died down.

‘Thank you, thank you. I’m glad you’re excited! I am, too, and I can’t wait to get to know each and every one of you. My team is here for you. If you ever need anything, anything at all, you can send us a direct message through your tablets – which will be issued to you later today.’

There were a few excited whispers. The tablets would have no internet access, of course – and therefore no news, no emails, no podcasts, no photos of exes on their wedding days, no videos of puppies running in the snow, no think-pieces about modern love – but still, they were something to look forward to.

‘Soon you’ll be able to access our incredible e-book library and all of the music chosen by you.’

At the training camp in California, everyone had chosen one piece of music to take to Nyx. Iris had picked Frank Ocean’s ‘Pink + White’, a song she thought she might never tire of. Then again, it had only been in her life for a few years.

‘On your tablet you’ll soon receive more information about your various jobs and activities. If you’d like to run a class or a group, please do! We’re here to learn from each other. You’ll also be able to send messages to your fellow Nyxians, though this is

quite a small place, so I don't think you'll be doing as much messaging as you did on Earth.'

Iris was standing at the back. She turned and smiled at her friends from Block G: Rav from Birmingham, Vitor from São Paulo and her roommate, Abby, from San Francisco. They smiled back. Abby's brown, freckled skin gleamed with joy. In California, the group had developed a giddy bond, like new best friends at summer camp. Iris didn't really know anyone else. They had been kept apart, so that viewers could watch them getting to know each other on Nyx. Everyone looked bright-eyed and attractive; they were from various countries, but most were American, and in their twenties and thirties, apart from a few of the old-timers, like Norman. There were no babies, no children, no old people, though that was bound to change. At some point they would age, they would procreate, they would spend the rest of their lives together.

'This is an opportunity,' said Norman, 'to leave all that behind: the emails, the messages, the notifications, the constant communication with people you hardly know. Instead, you're going to enjoy a closer connection with the people and the world around you.' He spread his arms. People looked around at each other, nodding and smiling hello. 'Make no mistake: you are part of a great experiment, one of the greatest the world – no, the *universe* – has ever seen.'

Iris's right hand went to her pocket. She was reaching, unconsciously, for her phone, but the pocket was empty, of course. She twisted the soft material with her fingers. Her phone was on Earth. It now belonged to a chambermaid in Los Angeles – someone she had never met. A panicky emptiness came over her, a distancing from reality. The kind she felt whenever she gave up smoking. After a few months, when the distraction of longing reduced itself to a faint hum, she would pronounce herself cured and ask someone for a cigarette. That couldn't happen now.

'This is history,' said Norman, 'happening right now.' He

pointed at the ground. ‘This! This moment. The first human colony on another planet. Did you imagine you would see that in your lifetime? And that you would be a part of it?’

She would succeed. She was free. No more cigarettes. No more scrolling. She smiled. This was good. The emptiness was good – a sign that a deeper, heavier emptiness would soon dissipate, for ever.

‘This is the culmination of a lifelong dream,’ said Norman. ‘Since I was a little boy, I’ve had my head in the stars. Most kids grow out of it, but I didn’t. And neither did you!’

Applause. More whooping. Norman had tears in his eyes. So did Iris. Her cheeks were burning, her whole body burned, hot and bright like a sparkler. Earth was watching. Now they know, she thought. Now they know why I came here.

‘Whatever happens,’ said Norman, ‘remember that you are all brave, formidable souls. You will be remembered. This is history in the making!’

The crowd responded with a hysterical roar. People were jostling, screaming, laughing, crying with happiness. Iris could feel their sweat seeping through their new clothes, into hers.

‘Yes!’ said Norman. ‘Ha ha. Yes! Welcome home, dreamers. Welcome home! Thank you for making this boy’s dream come true.’

Everyone cheered. Iris clapped and clapped until her hands stung. Norman bowed like an actor and laughed coyly, pointing at people and waving at them. At one point, he seemed to look straight at Iris. She felt an explosion of warmth in her belly. Through the windows, pink sand dunes shimmered under a hazy sun; even more exquisite than they looked on the website. In that region of Nyx, it was always the golden hour – her favourite time of day. This is real, she thought, this is happening. She continued clapping. Her hands ached, but she couldn’t stop. Her face was wet with tears.

As Norman began to leave the podium, she joined in with the chanting:

‘Life on Nyx!’

'Life on Nyx!'

'Life on Nyx!'



Later, everyone from Block G joined a welcome tour led by a cheerful American woman called Amanda – one of the old-timers. They began in the cafeteria, where she gave them a speedy introduction.

'You might have already noticed that, from above, the Hub is designed to look like the sun – or even a flower.' She grinned. 'Everything radiates from the middle, from the heart.'

Most of the common areas were in the central, circular part of the building. Other than that, she told them, there were eight annexes: 1 to 5 contained Blocks A to Y, where most of the Nyxians lived; 6 to 8 contained the family quarters, the control quarters and the farm.

Next, she led them through the kitchen to an enormous store-room packed floor-to-ceiling with produce. They shivered in the walk-in freezer and peeked into a laundry stacked with industrial washing machines. The living room was still and pristine, with new sofas and tall potted plants. They flashed their wristbands at the entrance of each room, emitting a high, satisfying *beep*. After the tour, Amanda explained, access would be limited to certain areas.

'It's just a safety thing,' she said.

There was a workshop with hundreds of tools, waiting to be used. The medical consulting rooms were small, tidy and uninhabited; as were the family quarters, where couples and children would live together. Amanda led them past the control quarters, where the old-timers lived, but they didn't go inside. Instead, they went to the control room, where Norman was working with three members of his team. It was a semicircular space, with a vast view of the landscape. There were no cameras in there. As the group entered, he turned, stood up and smiled.

‘Welcome!’ he said. ‘This is where the magic happens.’

He shook each of their hands, listening attentively as they introduced themselves. Iris’s heart skittered when his blue eyes met hers. As Norman explained the various functions of the control panel, she gazed out of the window. Several metres away, two people in oxygen masks were taking measurements on the sand.

‘Why don’t you tell them what’s going on out there?’ said Amanda.

‘Of course. As you know, we’re eventually going to bring more people to Nyx. My colleagues out there are making preparations for our extension, Hub 2, which we’re going to start building in a few months.’

‘Awesome,’ said Amanda, before turning to the group. ‘OK, guys, I have one more thing to show you.’

As they walked into Annex 8, they were shrouded by a cloud of humidity. The air smelled green and ripe. The farm had the proportions and grandeur of a Victorian greenhouse – tall, lustrous plants and a domed ceiling; a thousand shades of green set off by the pink landscape, which could be seen through the glass walls.

‘It’s open to everyone on Sundays,’ said Amanda. ‘It feels so good to be around nature, don’t you think? The rest of the time, it’s a regular working farm. You’ll all get the chance to work here. We want everyone to get involved with growing our food.’

Iris and Abby strolled arm in arm, like visitors at a genteel botanical garden, listening to the hiss of the water sprinklers and noticing the changes in climate – from hot and tropical in one section to dry and mildly warm, like a good day in England, in another. There were strawberries, courgettes, tomatoes, pineapples, avocados, salad leaves, plants that were more ornamental than edible – orchids, ferns, cacti – and many more that Iris didn’t recognize. As they walked towards the exit, she reached out and let the plants stroke her fingers.

★

Afterwards, the group hung out in the living room. Iris sat close to Rav, leaning against his strong, solid body. He was a personal trainer with an easy demeanour, the youngest child of Indian immigrants. When they first met in California, Iris had felt a sharp, instinctive attraction to his form and scent, as if they were animals in the wild, but it had mostly worn off since then.

Everyone had a story and every story had the same ending – leaving Earth, coming to Nyx. Rav told them about his favourite aunt, who had died young and told him not to waste his life. Vitor, who was slight and clever, with a hint of steeliness, talked about being an A&E doctor in São Paulo, patching up kids with bullet wounds, and about his parents, who had no idea he was gay.

‘Maybe they know now,’ he said, ‘if they’re watching.’

A guy called Jonah bonded with Abby – both were Jews, from the San Francisco Bay Area. They spent a while figuring out if they had any friends in common, but they didn’t. Hans from Berlin said he had spent a year nursing his mother, who had lung cancer. After she died, everything had felt pointless.

‘That’s why I’m here,’ he said, beaming.

Elizabeth from Cincinnati, Ohio, told them she had dreamed of being a singer, but ended up working in HR. She wore her blonde hair in a long plait, like Iris’s mother used to.

‘God,’ she said, ‘I was so glad to leave.’

‘That was one of the best days of my life,’ said Iris, ‘when I quit my job.’

‘What was it?’

‘I was a digital innovation architect.’ She covered her face, laughing with delight at how far away she was from her old life.

‘What does that even mean?’ said Hans.

‘Honestly, I don’t know.’

‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ said Elizabeth. ‘None of it did.’



Over the following weeks, the summer-camp feeling continued, fuelled not only by the novelty of new people and surroundings, but also by the distant knowledge that millions of people were watching them on TV, learning their names and memorizing their faces. They became accustomed to the cameras; to never seeing the sun rise or set; to the automatic blackout on the windows; to always dressing the same; to waking, sleeping and eating at regimented times. There was a comfort to this regularity. Friendship groups quickly formed based on where people lived and what jobs they had, much like they did on Earth, but unlike on Earth everyone made an effort to be inclusive and open.

At first, Iris made friends with the other social media producers, but they didn't work closely together, so drifted apart. Their duties were limited: taking a few pictures, writing some words and hitting 'send'. Most of the content was created on Earth, in an office, but Iris couldn't see any of it. She bonded more with Yuko and Stella from her cleaning team and, of course, with the other inhabitants of Block G.

In their spare time, the Nyxians slept well, ate wholesome meals and attended Rav's exercise classes, but mostly they talked till their mouths were dry – about their lives, their countries and their old jobs, which no longer defined them. On Earth, these conversations were edited into digestible chunks of content: a syndicated daily show, short clips, blogs, images, tweets and memes. There was a livestream, too, for the die-hard fans who wanted to watch them in real time.

No one on Nyx seemed unhappy; everyone was content. Iris hadn't felt so good in years. Sometimes she thought of home, but she didn't long for it. She hoped her family and friends were all right, she wondered whether they were watching, whether they had already recovered from her departure. A tsunami might have surged over London, sweeping the city into the sea, and she would never know.

It hadn't been long. They probably hadn't recovered.

It was autumn in London. The temperature would be cooling, the leaves reddening and falling from the trees. Iris's mother would be taking her long black coat out of mothballs. Her old colleagues would be tapping away at their desks, writing reports and presentations. The city probably hadn't been swept away. In all likelihood, everything was more or less the same – for now.

Fridays were her favourite. In the mornings, she cleaned with Stella and Yuko, who talked as much as they worked, and in the afternoons, she had a shift on the farm with Abby, Rav and Vitor. On Earth, Iris could barely keep a cactus alive. On Nyx, she learned to grow salad, tomatoes, potatoes, beetroot, squash – anything. Together, they sweated under the glass dome, enjoying the heat of the alien sun as they sowed, pruned, raked and picked, following the instructions of the head gardener, Sean – an American with several faded tattoos on his arms – until they were second nature. Afterwards, she would have a hot shower and lie in bed for a while, listening to something soothing and familiar from the Nyx playlist – the Frank Ocean song or Debussy's 'Clair de Lune'. Later, she would meet her friends in the cafeteria. They would eat the food they had grown together and then talk until the end of the day.

