

Sugar and Snails: Chapter 1

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Halfway down the staircase, I sink to my haunches, hugging my dressing gown across my breasts.

Below me in the hallway, Simon reaches up towards the row of coat hooks along the wall. His hand hovers above the collar of his black fleece and then falls, combing the sleeve as his arm flops to his side. "This is ridiculous, Di. We should at least talk about it."

Can't he see this has gone beyond talking? "It's late. You've got a long day tomorrow."

"Come to Cairo, then. Whatever it is that's bothering you, I promise, I can help."

"We've been through all that."

"Yeah, and all you've given me is a string of excuses, each one more feeble than the last. Don't you trust me, Di? Is that it?"

Staunch as sculpted granite, Simon exudes reliability from every pore. Over the past five months, I've imagined it leading to him sharing my duvet, my toaster, my council tax bill. On good days, I persuaded myself I could summon up enough maternal sentiment to play mother to his kids. After tonight, I can't envisage a casual catch-up over coffee. Only those who've never left their beds think their dreams will come true.

Yet Simon rattles on, as if hope were a virtue: "Come to Cairo, Di. Come for a long weekend if that's all you can spare."

If I could explain, if I could open my mouth to speak, even, he would come to me. He would spring up the stairs and cradle me in his arms. If I could cry, perhaps, as other women can, and let my weakness make him strong. But tears don't come naturally to me: I haven't cried for thirty years.

I'm sandwiched between my parents in the back seat of a taxi, beetling along the Corniche with the Nile to our left. I'm fifteen years old and this is my first and only foray out of Europe.

We've wound down the windows but there's not even the promise of a breeze. The driver hits the horn with the heel of his hand. Every time he does it my mother flinches and he hits the horn almost as much as he curses other drivers, which is practically all the time.

My father takes a handkerchief from the pocket of his drip-dri nylon trousers to wipe the sweat from his brow. It's not too late to change your mind, he says. We won't think any less of you if you do.

My mother breaks off from raking through her patent leather handbag. Honestly, Leonard, she says. You certainly choose your moments.

I try not to squirm on the tacky plastic seat. I've heard the quiver in my mother's voice often enough, but I've never heard her call my father by his Christian name.

Our driver waves his fist and growls in throaty Arabic as he pulls past a camel cart weighed down with builder's rubble. I don't cry right then – crying is my mother's prerogative – but later, when she's flown home and it's just me and my dad, I weep the whole time. Those last few days in Cairo when all we're doing is passing time till I'm well enough to travel, I don't know how to stop. What's wrong? says my dad. What are you crying for? He speaks so gently, the tears come all the more.

I don't know why I'm crying. I don't even know if I'm sad. But I'm grieving for something. Perhaps it's that now my father's able to listen, I don't have anything to say.

The front door slams behind him. I rise stiffly and stumble down the stairs. Dragging my fingertips along the dado rail, I make it to the kitchen and flick the light switch on the wall. I

note the lustre of the sunshine-yellow cupboards and the chill of the tiles on the soles of my feet, but from a distance, as if I'm researching a stranger's home.

I pull out drawers and rummage through the contents. I select my best knives and rank them lengthwise along the worktop, the way a toddler might arrange her toys: breadknife, carving knife, the whole gamut of blades, right down to the fruit and veg knife with the yellow handle, still smeared with dried threads of pumpkin from our supposed romantic meal. Pushing back my sleeve, I test each one against the skin of my forearm. None of them up to the job.

Back in the hallway, I fumble in the cupboard under the stairs for the torch. I beam it around until it lights up the shoebox where I store my tools. I drag out the box, place it on the carpet and lift the lid. The Stanley knife is a work of art in its simplicity, with its green plastic casing and the satisfying heft of it in my hand. The blade looks sharp enough but it's freckled with dirt-coloured paint. I scrabble through the tools for a crossed-tip screwdriver to unleash the blade and swivel it round. When it's done, I have an artisan's sense of accomplishment as I examine the triangle of pristine steel peeping out from the sheath.

My ears are abuzz with white noise as I push back the sleeve of my dressing gown to the crook of my arm. I flex my wrist, the blood vessels revealing themselves below the surface like waterways on a map. With the pads of my fingers, I trace a raised blue-green vein through crossings of taut white scar tissue from the middle of my forearm to the base of my thumb where it branches with arteries and purple capillaries in a sanguineous river delta.

I locate a patch of clear skin amongst the tangle of old scars and apply the blade. At first, there's nothing more than a puckering at either side. As with sex, I'm sorely out of practice. I press harder, digging the tip of the knife so deep by rights it should reach bone. Still nothing. I try again and a tiny red bauble bubbles up around the blade.

Maintaining an even pressure, I scrape the knife along my arm. The bauble clones itself over and over, beads on a rosary that multiply and merge into a glistening red band. I drop the knife and bring my arm to my mouth. The vibrant colour, the taste like hot coins, the pain as sharp as vinegar: it spears the fug of nothingness with the promise of peace.

When Simon left, I was drowning. Now I'm floating on a sea of calm.

In the kitchen, I bind a folded tea towel round my forearm, gripping one end in my teeth to brace the knot. I'm as secure as a swaddled baby as I mount the stairs to bed.

Somewhere between sleep and memory, regret sneaks in. The jab-jab-jab of guilt, the rumbling shame. Part dream, part reminiscence, I look down on my ten-year-old self sprawled on the bathroom floor. Blue pyjama bottoms draped across the rim of the bath, blood pooling between my legs onto the chess-board lino. My mother screaming *What have you done? What have you done?*

Now it is my arm that's screaming. I cradle it with my body, hunching my shoulders and pulling up my knees. My mind wants to dive down to oblivion but my arm is pulsing me awake. I pat the pain beneath the bedclothes and my fingers come away sticky and damp.

The digital alarm shows three-seventeen. When I turn on the bedside light, my palm is streaked with red.

I steel myself to push back the duvet. The tea towel looks like it's been boiled with beetroot, and not only the towel, but the sheet, the duvet cover, my entire torso from my breasts to my pubic hair. Oh, Simon, if I could show you what your leaving means.

Before I lose myself completely, my practical side kicks in. I shake a pillow from its case and wrap the cloth around my arm. The night chill slaps my bare skin as I shuffle along the landing to the bathroom, fingers pressed on the gash. I fill the basin and, discarding the

makeshift bandage, submerge my arm. The pain makes my eyes sting as the water flushes pink. I lift out my arm and inspect the damage.

The wound doesn't gush, but it dribbles blood the moment I release the pressure. The sides cleave apart like the crevice in a cartoon earthquake, picking out layers of skin like bands of rock in cross-section. Much as I hate the idea, I'll have to get it stitched.

I daren't call for an ambulance. Even without the siren and blue flashing light, the neighbours would notice. I could cycle the two miles one-handed, but the exertion would pump out more blood. It's too early for the Metro and, besides, they'd complain if I stained the seats. I can't ask Venus to drive over without fielding a barrage of questions. As for Simon, even if last night hadn't happened, it wouldn't be fair to dump this on him only hours before he's due at the airport.

I patch myself up and ring for a taxi, hoping for a driver who isn't inclined to chat.

At first, the A&E department seems like all the others: the same weary people on the same jaded chairs. The same hiccupping lighting and ragged magazines. The tang of coffee and antiseptic that triggers the urge to pack away my feelings, to put them someplace the medics can't get to, safe from their condescension and distaste. But tonight there's an extra layer that, until I stop and analyse it, makes no sense.

Compassion. It greets me in the soothing voice of the triage nurse who takes my details at reception. I attribute it to youth and an unfinished apprenticeship in cynicism, and think no more about it. Yet it pops up a second time in the eyes of his grey-haired colleague, who lays a gentle hand on my shoulder as she ushers me through the swing doors to a couch in a curtained cubicle, apologising for the wait. It lurks again in the form of the bleary-eyed doctor, a petite woman sporting a crimson sari beneath her white coat, who won't move an

inch without first explaining what she's doing. It's as if they're too naive to realise they're dealing with a self-inflicted wound.

The grey-haired nurse helps the doctor ease her hand into a latex glove. She places my arm on a pillow and peels back the sodden cloths. Under the glare of the angle-poise lamp it looks like I've been attacked by a madwoman.

"We could arrange for you to talk to someone about this." The stick-on bindi between the doctor's eyebrows brings to mind that first bauble of blood. "Entirely up to you, Diana, but it might help."

I smile noncommittally as she shoots anaesthetic into my arm. I see no point in talking to anyone, but the doctor is so well-intentioned it would be churlish to argue. I soothe myself with thoughts of NHS bureaucracy: all those letters shuttling back and forth just to scramble onto the bottom rung of a very long waiting list. Simon would be back from Cairo before my appointment came through.

"It's a lady called Pammy," says the doctor. "They tell me she's very good."

"Tammy," says the nurse, handing her colleague what looks like a pair of slim-line pliers. "Tammy Turnbull. She's a psychiatric liaison nurse."

The doctor eases black thread through my skin with the pliers, double wrapping it round the tip to form a loop.

The nurse passes her a pair of scissors to finish off the stitch. "Don't let that put you off, though. There's no stigma in psychiatry these days."

"Comes on duty at eight, isn't it," says the doctor.

"Seven thirty," says the nurse. "Even less of a wait."

"You want me to see this liaison nurse here? This morning?"

The nurse strokes my knee. "Try and relax for doctor if you can, Diana. Won't be much longer."

When I was thirteen, my mother took me to Lourdes. "Don't let on what we've come for," she told me as we boarded the coach.

So many people, so many queues. Lining up for breakfast in the hotel. Pilgrims and penitents waiting to be dipped head-to-toe in the water, one queue for the able-bodied and another for the cripples. The candlelit procession weaving through the night-time streets. Buying holy water and souvenirs, always slightly anxious I'd join the wrong line.

"What have we come for?" I said.

"A miracle of course," said my mother. "Why else would I bring you?"

With my left arm in a high sling, I prepare to tackle the vending machine one-handed. I feed it some coins and punch a few buttons and the machine responds with some serious whirring and gurgling. I haven't decided whether I'm passing the time till Tammy Turnbull comes on duty or I fancy an ersatz coffee before I leave.

The drink almost scalds my fingers as I extract the styrofoam cup from the machine. I take it to a seat in the far corner of the room. I could walk to the university in ten minutes, be at my desk before my colleagues are out of bed. Another five would take me down to the Haymarket, three stops on the Metro and I'd be home with the milk float. Put the bedclothes in the washing machine and mop the blood from the bathroom tiles.

What would I say to a liaison nurse? What possible use could she be?

I picture an earnest woman positioning her chair at a nonthreatening ninety degrees.

What made you do it, Diana? Let's start with that.

I feel foolish even thinking about it. I take a sip of bitter coffee and leave her to guess. She may be a figment of my imagination but, if she wants to know my secrets, she's going to have to put in some spadework.

Boyfriend trouble, is that it?

I wouldn't have thought I had enough blood remaining in my system to blush, but I do. I'm forty-five years old for chrissake. Even my first-year students wouldn't be so gauche.

Simon is off to Cairo for six months and he wants you to go out and visit. Lucky you!

Doesn't feel so lucky where I'm sitting.

You don't want to go?

Of course not.

Sun-streaked hair parted down the middle, flower-power clothes: the liaison nurse I've created bears a striking resemblance to the social worker I was assigned to after Cairo. Yet Ms Thompson would have no need to ask why I can't go back.

You can't tell Simon the real reason but, if you don't, he'll think you don't care.

You're caught between two stools, scared of losing him if you don't go ...

And losing myself if I do.

The phantom Tammy Turnbull-Thompson looks pensive. Her bangles clatter as she pushes her hair back from her face. *I must admit, it's a tricky one, but if we put both our minds to it, perhaps we can find a way ...*

I come to with a jolt. My arm is throbbing and there's a coffee-tinged damp patch down the front of my jumper.

A middle-aged woman looms before me. "Diana Dodsworth? I'm sorry to startle you, but I believe you wanted to see me. I'm Tammy Turnbull. The liaison nurse?"

She looks nothing like Ms Thompson, in her sombre skirt suit and tamed hair. Her eyes are brimming with well-meaning confidence as she offers me her hand. She reminds me of those Home Counties girls at boarding school, raised on gymkhanas and tennis lessons and

tea on the terrace at half past four. They were always very jolly and willing to have a go, but real life with all its pain and contradictions would've sent them careering into a tailspin.

How could I be so naive as to imagine anyone could even begin to understand? *If we both put our minds to it!* What an ass to let my guard down, to leave myself open to perfidious hope. Like a dance-floor buffed to a silky sheen, hope is riddled with risk for the unwary: let yourself go and, sooner or later, you're bound to come a cropper.