

Eat Drink and be married

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Chapter One

Beyond the dingy darkness of the precinct there is life, a life that lies tantalizingly on the fringes of my own. While I stand here, smelling of fish, the good-time people are somewhere out there, living it up, basking in bright lights, indulging in a temporary upper before the onset of Monday-morning blues. My week is topsy turvy: peaking on a Monday, dipping at the weekend. My Saturday night is a squirt of eau de Chip Oil, a blue gingham overall, waiting for the stroke of midnight when I turn from pumpkin into person.

I work weekends at Tony's Fish Bar. Tony's my dad. He was baptized Adonis Georgiou Papamichael, in a ceremony that gained him considerable notoriety. Baby Adonis yanked at the priest's facial hair as he was lowered into the font, pulled out a fistful of white beard and waved it triumphantly in the air. He smiled when they poured water over his head and lathered him in olive oil, earning himself a reputation for resilience and physical strength. These have served him well in life. Tony is the strong and silent type, believing words are cheap and should be used in moderation. His verbal reticence is complemented by his wife's love of talking.

Mum took the name of her grandfather Constantine. She has a noble lineage, a long line of predecessors named after Constantine the Great. Her name has, for the sake of convenience, waned in grandeur, shrunk from a statuesque Constantina to a stunted 'Tina' or 'Teen'. Tina is a self-professed open book. She is what she is, she says what she thinks, she talks without thinking, take it or leave it. She is not as hard as her uncompromising views might suggest. When the metaphorical chips are down she capitulates, gives up where Tony would fight like a bull to the death. Thankfully, these days, there is little cause for bull-headedness, allowing Tony to fade into the background and enjoy the status of henpecked husband. Tony and Tina are a formidable duo behind the counter, quick and nimble. 'The lid rolled and found the saucepan,' Tina says of their compatibility. 'Your papa is the lid,' she adds, 'he did all the chasing.'

Tina fills up the salt pots and sings one of her favourite songs, her voice competing with the din of the extractor fan and crackle of the chip pan. 'Nikoli, Nikoli, capetanye ntertili. . .' she sings in a highpitched warble, a song about a seafaring captain called Nikoli, who is asked to reveal all he knows about kissing. A kiss in Athens is cheap and quick to get, he replies, but in Crete and Mani it is paid for with a wedding crown. Tina has the voice of a tone-deaf Edith Piaf but sings with gusto regardless.

I wipe down the counter in time to her singing and join in the chorus, infected by Tina's joviality. My mother is not demoralized by her profession. She enjoys her work and takes great pride in providing a good service. The shop is a means to an

end and the end she has in mind is a return to the Arcadian isle, where the sun always shines and bystander apathy has not yet taken hold. Where elderly parents are cared for by their children and the weather is kinder to aging bones. Where the smell of jasmine and honeysuckle float thickly in the air and mingle with the aroma of meat juices dripping on smouldering charcoal. It is a land of incongruous bedfellows. Of fasting and feasting and barbed-wire partitions separating a community that yearns to be one. Of topless Swedes wearing G-strings within sight of the armed troops who patrol the dividing line, an arbitrary schism across which deserted Cypriot towns and villages can be viewed. And there lies a depressing vision of crumbling façades and warped wooden shutters, of old stone houses left to ruin - a physical manifestation of political intransigence. 'One day, I'm going back to my village,' Tina says with utter certainty, though peace talks have so far floundered miserably.

Three girls dressed for a date with pneumonia stand outside the shop, rubbing their naked arms, stamping their goose-pimpled legs. Fairfield women like to bare their sun-starved skin on Saturday night, irrespective of the weather, irrespective of their size. They brave the bite of freezing wind to flaunt their charms. On a mission to turn heads they leave nothing to the imagination. They warm their insides with chips and pungent foodstuffs and stand on the forecourt, shivering like plucked chickens, while Tina looks on, beseeching God to give them sense.

The need to expose naked flesh is a concept alien to me. I cover up, rain or shine. I am too tall and ungainly to prance about in skimpy tops and skirts above the knee. I have bits that rub together when I walk, that gently concertina when I sit down, that quiver when I run. I hover on the brink of acceptable largeness. A gentle calorific push would have me plummeting over the edge into territory rife with prejudice and intolerance. For Tina, my size is a source of great pride. 'My daughter, she's tall enough to be a model,' Tina says pointlessly, since I have no other modelling prerequisite. My size engenders false impressions. 'Big' suggests I am also 'strong' and emotionally selfsufficient. My size masks my sensitivity and my need to be enveloped like a child in arms stronger than my own.

I wasn't born big. I came out of my mother's womb weighing 5.5lb. I was the tiniest baby on the maternity ward and as expected my growth curve followed that of a 'small baby'. I was, for a time, below average for height, weight and head size, until friends and relatives began commenting on my smallness and Tina convinced herself the evil eye was stunting my growth. She enveloped me in a cloud of incense, hung a tiny blue stone around my neck and fed me at every opportunity. Her efforts had the desired effect. I grew and grew, in height and girth, like a recalcitrant marrow.

The girls on the forecourt gawp unashamedly through the shop window at Andy, watching him battering fish and dropping it into the frying pan. Girls are drawn to my brother with fanatical intensity. They loiter outside the shop, wearing next to nothing, hoping to catch his eye and hook their catch - patient fisherwomen casting for red mullet in a sea of whitebait. Andy is dark enough to be exotic and light enough to be acceptable. He bears a striking resemblance to Tony-the-youth, before time overzealously pulled out clumps of his wavy hair. Andy's face is angular, his cheekbones chiselled, thick lashes frame eyes like molten chocolate, flecked with

mint-green specks. His sexual magnetism is boosted by an armoured phallus, parked within viewing distance of the shop: a metallic-silver Capri that draws the eye like an oil-basted bodybuilder in a room full of wimps, arousing envy, resentment, covetousness and admiration.

My brother has simultaneous girlfriends who inhabit the periphery of his life. I see them fleetingly, like birds flying across the horizon, flitting through the back door into or out of the potato room, climbing into the Capri at the end of the night, to be driven to a club or a quiet country lane. Andy doesn't talk about his love life and I don't ask. I believe it to be active and densely populated.

Tina views her son's promiscuity as a natural part of a young man's life before he settles down. The more girlfriends he has now, the less likely he is to stray in future, the better husband he will be for the dark-eyed daughter-in-law who inhabits her dreams. Tina chooses to ignore Andy's predilection for blonde hair and blue eyes. She is convinced he will return to the fold, even though events close to home should have taught her not to count her chickens. Andy has failed to nip Tina's dreams in the bud, allowing them to flourish, branch out and cast a shadow over both of us.

The 'Anna dream' and 'Anna's dream' share little common ground. The 'Anna dream' would have tenpound notes trailing the hem of a bulbous wedding dress followed by a life of simple domesticity. 'Anna's dream' is of escaping the shop, breaking the mould, absconding to a place of higher education. The odds are stacked against me. The shop saps my energy, swallows up my time and provides no food for thought. Moreover, Tina has threatened to jump off Stretley Bridge if I leave home to study. She believes a woman should only leave the parental home for a fully furnished, four-bedroomed house with a BMW parked in the driveway. The best education a woman can get, she insists, is in the home and not behind a desk. 'What good is a woman who she no cook?' Tina says, as if culinary skill and a formal education are mutually exclusive.

Tina-the-child played in a fertile backyard with her sisters Mirianthy and Stavroulla, within a rectangular oasis where geraniums and oleander grew in terracotta pots and a sprawling jasmine dropped tiny white flowers like scented confetti. A prickly pear tree, punctuated with spiky fruit, grew alongside a vine, laden with heavy bunches of crisp black grapes. The girls played koumeres - maids of honour. They made tea-towel dolls and acted out the roles of housewives and mothers. They played hopscotch and rolled almond nuts at one another instead of marbles. They cartwheeled, skipped, plaited each other's hair and visited the homes of neighbours, whose doors were always open.

They watched their mother making halloumi in a small wooden outhouse. Heating goat's milk in a large copper pan, throwing in the rennet-rich stomach of a baby lamb and spooning out curds to be squeezed, wrapped in cheesecloth and set beneath a stone slab. Their stomachs rumbled in anticipation of the soft, white, ricotta-like cheese called anari that floated to the surface of the whey, which was served up warm with a spoonful of sugar and a sprinkling of cinnamon. Tina says nothing has or ever will taste better than the freshly made anari of her childhood. She makes her

own version by heating milk in a large saucepan and adding lemon juice to produce a crumbly white cheese. She eats it with relish but admits it is a poor imitation.

Many of Tina's childhood neighbours were employed in the production of traditional foodstuffs. Her aunt was renowned for making soujouko, a rubbery sweet made by threading almonds onto a length of string and dipping the string into grape juice thickened with flour and flavoured with cinnamon, rosewater and mastic gum. Tina loved to watch her aunt dipping the strings, over and over again, and hanging them from the ceiling of her kitchen to dry. If she sat for long enough beneath the sweet-smelling rows that hung like knobbly brown salami, her aunt invariably offered her a slice. The sugary delicacies of Tina's childhood have nurtured a sweet tooth.

In spring time and early summer, when the dry earth gave way to a bounty of wild and cultivated produce, the village was a hive of culinary activity. Hard green olives were crushed with a flat stone and preserved in brine. Orange and lemon blossom was picked to make fragrant waters, used to flavour sweets and pastries. Women sat on their doorsteps shaping macaroni from a mixture of semolina and water. Orange peel, young walnuts, cherries, small aubergines and many other fruit and vegetables were simmered for hours in syrup to make preserves called glyka.

'Your usual, Elvin?' I ask, reaching for a tray.

'Yes please, duck,' he replies, delving into the deep pockets of his musty trench coat for change.

Elvin is the embodiment of lovable ugliness, as wrinkled and rubbery as a plastic troll, his teeth like shattered ramparts. He is otherworldly. A tall, spindly leprechaun. A creature to be swaddled in a fleecy blanket and spoon-fed rice pudding. His earthly manifestation lives on a staple diet of chips and peas and sometimes loses its grip on reality. On occasion, Elvin confuses the shop for a bus station and stares patiently out of the window, waiting for the 602 to Sherwood Forest. 'The poor man she's lost her marbles,' Tina says, shaking her head sympathetically, confusing the listener with her jumbled pronouns.

'Y'all righ, Elvis?' Tina shouts across the counter, her slip of the tongue elevating Elvin to a rock 'n' roll legend. I have tried to teach Tina the correct pronunciation, through repetition and word association, but she refuses to learn, casually shrugging off her linguistic errors.

Elvin takes his tray of food and hands me a toffee, flat and round, in shiny gold wrapping. In his roomy pockets he keeps fudge for Tina, humbugs for Tony and strong mints for Andy, his humble offerings one almighty thank you for the simple acts of human kindness bestowed upon him. For the occasional tenner that Tony slips discreetly into his hand, for that bottle of sherry at Christmas, for the free piece of haddock every Friday and the genuine smile that greets him when he walks through the door.

Elvin sits down on the shop bench, his favoured perch for killing time. He spears chips with a tremulous hand and chews like a ruminant, his tongue cleaving to the

roof of his mouth, a crusty green tidemark forming around his lips. Tina takes him a handful of serviettes and says, 'Eh Elvis, wipe you mouth,' which he does. Tina's forceful tone leaves no room for argument.

Tina can be very abrupt at times. Her natural tendency for plain speaking ('I say what I think, I not hide behind my thumb nail') is confounded by cultural quirks, abrasive to English sensibilities. Tina adheres to the following rules of social etiquette: personal comments are permissible ('You lookin fat today'); modesty is a waste of time ('This is MY shop. I'M the boss'); threats of decapitation and murder can be used affectionately or in jest ('you get back in the queue or I cut your head off'. . . 'if you don be quiet I kill you'); speaking loudly need not be an expression of heightened emotion ('YOU WAN SAL AND VINEGA'). Tina's rudeness provokes surprise, shock, amusement, but never anger.

Mrs Collins hurries across the precinct towards the shop, walking at a pace that would tax a person half her age and twice her height. Small and robust, she is carried on stumpy legs propelled by plump calf muscles. Tina, who admits to liking only a handful of people outside the family, is very fond of Mrs Collins. She likes the speedy way Mrs Collins moves, the slavish care she bestows on a sick husband and her expertise in the kitchen. A visit to Mrs Collins' house for afternoon tea clinched Tina's whole-hearted admiration. She was won over by the abundant array of homemade sponges and pastries. She stooped down to kiss Albert in his wheelchair and remarked on the fresh smell of his hair. 'What hospitality, what cleanliness,' she commented after the event, 'in that house I didn't mind putting a teacup to my mouth.' Tina has repaid the gesture a thousand times over, regularly plying Mrs Collins with her own cakes. Though she often gripes about the niggardly and inhospitable nature of the indigenous population, Tina cites Mrs Collins as the exception. Calling her a nigogira, a description used only sparingly to denote the most 'houseproud' of women.

'Y'all right, Elvin luv?' Mrs Collins asks, walking briskly to the counter.

'Welcome, Mrs Collie, I make you acapa tea,' Tina says, heading for the kitchen.

'Poor man,' Mrs Collins whispers, 'not a soul in the world to call is own. Makes y'realize just ow lucky you are, dunt it? So ow are you, Anna duck?'

'Fine thanks,' I reply, my feelings of self-pity suddenly dwarfed by the magnitude of Elvin's problems.

'You're better off in ere than out there,' she says, as if my only options are working in the shop or perishing in the cold.

Tina returns with a mug of tea and piece of kateifi.

'Y'spoil me, duck, really you do,' Mrs Collins says, eyeing up the cake.

'Someone he's goda spoil you, isenit?'

'It looks like shredded wheat,' Mrs Collins says.

'Is call KA-TE-YF-I, Mrs Collie. I make it miself.'

'I dint think you bought it from Poundstretcher. How d'you find the time, luv? Workin ere and bakin cakes.'

'Where there's a willies a way.' Tina can transform the most innocuous statement into a double entendre.

'I couldn't agree more,' Mrs Collins says, starting to reminisce about the halcyon days, when women baked their own cakes, made their own jam and pickles, when no one had more than anyone else and wished for no more than they had. When a clip round the ear kept children in line, when her Albert still had two legs, before consumerism spread like cancer and cancer spread through Albert. Before pensioners started getting mugged for their milk money, before the local cigarette factory employing half the men on Fairfield estate closed down. When finally she pauses to swallow a clump of kateifi Tina takes up the gauntlet, eulogizing her childhood in the village, glorifying the simple life, a life of bread and olives, kinship, camaraderie and decency. Tina's life before the war, before division, before she came to England. The word England, synonymous in Tina's mind with immorality, sends her spinning off at a tangent.

'These gels they no av mathers.'

Mrs Collins, who has become attuned to Tina's wavelength over the years, knows the 'gels' in question to be the girl mothers - the growing number of teenagers on Fairfield estate, raising fatherless babies, who parade their children on the precinct like pampered poodles or drag them round the shops, snotty-nosed and screaming. Every morning the girl mothers gather beneath the Poundstretcher awning, sharing cigarettes, sporting love-bites. Fairfield's older generation walk past them, shaking their bluerinse heads, avoiding eye contact. The girl mothers don't like being looked at. The most innocuous of glances can unhinge the 'fuck off' that teeters on the tips of their tongues.

'It's those little uns I feel sorry for,' Mrs Collins says.

They examine the whys and wherefores of teenage pregnancy, apportioning blame, disparaging and condemning, without an iota of compassion or understanding. A child is a means to a council house, they both agree, spouting the party line. When their flood of critical commentary wanes, Mrs Collins turns to me.

'Hear your mum's tryin to fix you up with some Greek fella.'

'That's news to me,' I say, glaring at Tina.

'I don say that, Mrs Collie, you don understand me . . . is my Engleesh is no good.'

'Mum, how many times do I have to tell you? I'm not interested.'

'I know you don't find me interesting,' Tina replies defensively, curling her upper lip into a disdainful snarl.

Mrs Collins taps the plastic box behind her earlobe.

'Sorry, luv, I thought you said sumthin about a lad from Birmingham.'

'Bermiam? I don't rememba sayin that. I must be getting old, Mrs Collie, these days I don't remember nathin.'

'Got the same problem miself, luv.'

They discuss the trauma of memory loss, Tina confusing senility with invention, while I seethe at the indignity of having my future discussed across the counter. I have tried to nip the 'Anna dream' in the bud, by stating quite categorically that I will find my own husband. Yet Tina continues to try her luck and my patience, biding her time, believing I will grow out of my wayward sensibilities and forget that silly notion of falling in love. An inflated, overrated emotion, claims Tina, a zenith from which there is only descent and divorce. Start from the other end, 'grow to love someone', and the only way is 'up, up, up', she says. Up to where? A comfortable plateau with the peaks tantalizingly out of reach. I'd rather fall from a great height than nurture a seed that might never germinate.

'Cheer up, Anna, it's not like you to be so miserable,' Mrs Collins says, remembering the Anna who used to inhabit this body, the Anna who enjoyed working in the shop, who felt grown up standing behind the counter buttering bread rolls, who thought achievement was polishing the buns until they shone like a new penny, before the shop became a ball and chain. These days dark, dank apathy and worse nestle behind my eyeballs, at the pit of my stomach, in my bone marrow. I look at photos of the 'happy Anna' cavorting in front of a camera lens, doing cartwheels with her knickers showing, smiling openmouthed, flashing the teeth with the skewed incisor she has grown to hate. I don't recognize myself in her. I don't recognize the girl for whom happiness was a Mr Whippy with a flake and chocolate sauce. I know she didn't vanish overnight. She wasn't traumatized by a specific event. She trickled away, little by little, leaving only the memory of her existence. In the space she once occupied she left a restless gerbil on its play wheel, running nowhere, dreaming of escape.

I run from cameras nowadays, from Tony's indiscriminate snapping, Tony who ignores any pleas to please point his lens elsewhere, who likes to take natural shots, immortalizing grimaces and flared nostrils. Tony frames these pictures and hangs them on the living-room wall, charting my development from Cabbage Patch baby to uninspiring teenager. Above the television is a black-and-white picture of Tina-the-adolescent, nubile and buxom, with luminescent hair and bee-stung lips. She was enviably pretty though never thin. In her day being thin was a disadvantage, it meant you were too poor to eat. Tina had a sizable bust, hips and a fleshy midriff, body parts now obsolete, waiting for the Rubenesque figure to make a comeback. Tina's curves have swollen, drooped, amalgamated. A tight corset keeps her loose

bits reined in. Her face, though neglected and tired, is still pretty. Tina could have been - should have been - anything she wanted, something other than a slave to the counter.