Backpack

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Extract

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chapter one

On the day we buried my mother, I deduce, I have poisoned myself with alcohol and drugs, and woken up in hospital. I console myself with the knowledge that it's what she would have wanted.

This must be a hospital, mustn't it? I'm in a single bed, strapped in tightly by sheets. I can't move, any more than my mother can. I'm in my own coffin. Nothing is particularly sore except for my stomach. I feel sick, but I haven't got a discernible injury. One of my legs feels bruised, and I am suddenly scared that it's a phantom pain on an amputated limb, but there is a leggy bump under the sheet. I think I'm intact. I have a blinding headache, and I feel fuzzy, much more so than on a normal New Year's Day.

This place smells of disinfectant, but not in a reassuring way. Half disinfectant, half sick. I'm attached to a machine. It must be hospital. This is alarming. The only thing I want to do is to burst into tears. I try to remember why. I should be happy. I force myself to be happy. It's only the comedown that's making me sad. I was happy last night. I was relieved.

I don't think I even made it to midnight. What a way to greet the year: passing out and probably forcing some doctor to inspect the contents of my stomach as the clock struck twelve. I wish I was at home, nursing this monstrous hangover. Mum was ill; I'm not. I

don't want to lie here and do nothing. I can get up and go. That's all I need to do. I'll get up in a minute and find my clothes.

I have a hazy memory of being in an ambulance – a quick flash of lying down, driving fast, drifting. Someone with me, trying to make me sick. Shouting at me to wake up. I couldn't do it. I went back to sleep. Now I feel, appropriately, like death. I will get up in a minute – I have to – but I'll just have a rest first. I've always wanted to go in an ambulance. I'm half-heartedly cross not to have been awake enough to appreciate it. I suppose most people aren't. A broken leg or something would provide the optimum ambulance experience.

Cars swerving out of the way, me storming through the red lights, lots of people concentrating only on me, and all because I took a line too many of coke, or had one too many vodkas, or both. I can't believe I missed that.

I often feel like I do now, but not so dramatically. I know if I drank enough water and juice and coffee, and filled up on carbohydrates, I'd be all right by tonight. I need a full English breakfast at the café. The very thought makes me heave. I wonder how to call a nurse; I don't think I've got much of a voice.

I can't remember how, exactly, I got into this stupid state. I know yesterday was the funeral. I certainly didn't collapse then. I made a supreme effort to be as dignified as possible, and I think I carried it off extremely well, though it appears that the dignity didn't last until the sun set. That's unfair; it probably did, since that would have been at about 3 p.m. But not much beyond.

It was a hypocritical service at the church in Hampstead, an establishment I happen to know Mum last attended on Christmas Eve twelve years ago, and then she only went to get a glug of Communion alcohol. 'Ghastly!' she exclaimed on her return. She banned us both from attending in future. God lost her soul by serving bad wine. He must be gutted.

Yesterday, the ban lifted, I sat in the front pew, smelling the old musty smells, and I rejoiced. I sang the hymns I'd chosen for her:

Lord of all hopefulness, Jerusalem, All things bright and beautiful. These are the hymns you know if you don't go to church. I sang them loudly, discarding my self-consciousness. I was glad she was dead. Glad for her, glad for me, and glad for the fact that my boyfriend, who left me three weeks ago, came back to comfort me. Tom sat next to me, looking suitably sombre. His presence beside me electrified me. Tom always dominates any space he's in. He is a big man, and in the past few years his waistline has taken on a life of its own. The same thing has happened to all his friends. Boys don't have to care when their lifestyle catches up with them. Girls do. Life isn't fair.

His dark hair and rosy cheeks had been shampooed and scrubbed respectively. He looked sensitive and full of regret. But he was still my Tom, and he still knew Mum. His solemnity, like mine, was just for show. Together, we looked handsome, and that knowledge bolstered me further. God knows what I must look like now, in a hospital gown and crinkly knickers.

Yesterday, I was wearing a black scoop-necked dress I bought months ago in New York with the funeral in mind, a black fur coat that I'd taken from the back of Mum's wardrobe, and killer heels, with deep red lipstick. I enjoyed the bimbo-widow look. Tom, who never wears a suit, was wearing a black one he'd had made in Hong Kong, years ago when he was lithe. He couldn't have done the jacket up if he'd tried. His hair was shining. He looked completely unlike his normal, dishevelled self, and I loved him for doing that for me. My brother Will was on my other side, and I was proud of him too. He looks like Mum did in her heyday: tall and blond and striking. The same as me really. The vicar talked about her for a little bit, which was risible. He didn't know her. She didn't know him, and if she had she wouldn't have liked him. He said she had 'touched the lives of those around her', which must be the catch-all, bottom-of-the-barrel citation. He must have to bury unrepentant infidels all the time. I bet they outnumber the faithful.

Oh God, here we go. I grab a strange, kidney-shaped plastic container beside my bed just in time to vomit into it. A radioactive green liquid comes out. This should make me feel better, but it doesn't. I try to remember that my underlying state is happiness, but for now the nausea has penetrated all other feelings, and grown there, like cancer. Where is Tom? Where is Will? Where is my scoop-necked dress?

I can picture the burial, and it is unreal, like a film. It was, of course, freezing, though I was snug in my dead minks. The sky was slatey, the grass was that bright green it goes just before it rains (a toned down version of my sick). Towards the end it began to drizzle. There were very few people. Dad was there, and Lola had made sure he brought a child with him, lest he should enjoy being alone for a moment and leave her. Poor Briony was standing, three years old and bewildered, at the burial of a woman whose name may not be mentioned in their house. She behaved admirably. A few of Mum's horrible family had turned up. She was always coy about why exactly she never saw them and they never sent more than a terse card at Christmas. I know the reason, now. They were all beautifully dressed, rich, so-called Christians from the country – the kind of people who not only go hunting, but host the hunt ball and rub foxy gristle on their children's faces – and looked satisfied to see her finally lowered into the ground. I hated them all.

Will skulked at the back, where they had to turn and stare if they wanted a quick look at him. He had the air of someone furtively having a fag, but of course he wasn't. He was just hiding from the people he's always wanted to meet.

I remember Tom behaving appallingly. While all the ashes to ashes stuff was going on, and I knew it was my moment to be sad, the only one I was allowed, and I was feeling dull and empty instead, he started moving his arm down my back, slowly, until he was stroking my bottom highly inappropriately. I found this horribly funny. Mum would have too, but only because of all her

relatives, and her ex-husband, standing around looking pompous and hypocritical, like Prince Philip at Diana's funeral. I tried hard not to laugh, but it got worse and worse. Tom was straight-faced. How dare he? That was my mother, in that box. It seemed so stupid. Mother in the box. Jack in the box. I felt a huge snort of hysteria coming, and whipped out my orphan's handkerchief in time to bury my face in it and pretend to cry. My hair was blowing everywhere. I pictured us all in a long shot from far, far away. Maybe an aerial shot. We were archetypal mourners, yet I don't think there was a single person there who was genuinely pained that she was dead. I couldn't believe it had finally happened. Will was sad, but that was only because he hadn't met her. Nothing surprises me now about my family. They are too bizarre to make up. Still, it probably makes me more interesting than someone who had a boring old crappy normal childhood.

I am becoming agitated. I really want to cry, but I mustn't start or I might not stop. My tummy hurts. Being here is intolerable. I should be at home with Will and Tom, watching telly and making resolutions. I don't like being ignored. I find a button with a picture of a 'toilet' lady on it, and press it. I want someone to take away my green sick, apart from anything else, and bring me a glass of water. There is no discernible sound, and nothing happens. I bet everyone's hungover. Perhaps all the nurses have called in sick. I wish the curtains weren't drawn round my bed. There are noises in the ward, but I don't seem to have the energy to get up and have a look, or, indeed, to whisper for a passer-by. Hospitals are full of farting, shouting men, and I don't want to invite one, inadvertently, into my boudoir.

Will pissed me off when he phoned, last week, the day after I found her on the floor. When I picked up the phone, he said, 'Hello, who's that?' I hate people who ring you up, forcing you to stop whatever you were doing and answer the phone, and then demand to know your name. They could be anyone. They have to tell you their name before you tell them yours; that's the rule. So I

said, 'More to the point, who's that?' He said his name was William and he needed to speak to Anne. I told him he couldn't. Then he said that, although I didn't know him, he was my brother. I'm still shocked. I wish I'd known I had a big brother. I'd have made Mum see him. As it was, he was writing asking to see her, and she was saying she couldn't face the trauma. She was so weak, that woman.

I have a niggling feeling when I think of Will now. I hope I didn't say the wrong thing to him yesterday, because the wrong thing could be completely, disastrously wrong. I don't expect I did.

After the service, all the strangers stomped around my home as if it was a village hall or a pub. They complained that there was no loo roll left, and asked where we kept the bottle-opener. Everyone was there, except for the one person who had barely stirred from her comfy chair for fifteen years. Now, that was strange. We'd got loads of nibbles in from Waitrose. It cost me a fortune but, I reasoned, I don't need to worry about money now. I thought we'd have masses of food left over, but we didn't. The mean relatives not only ate everything I'd bought, they also found Mum's store of chocolate treats. She certainly doesn't need them. Tom and Kate and I had a secret stash of vodka, which they didn't find. We made everyone else drink the cheapest wine in the shop. I owed Mum that much.

I think the vodka is where the day's drinking began, but I wasn't necking them back, just keeping my courage up. Cunningly, we had them laced with Coke, and all the oldsters thought we were on soft drinks. One lecherous relative bought into the whole 'innocent kids' act and slipped me a fiver, presumably unaware that I'm £250,000 richer now. I stumbled a bit in my amusement, and grabbed the table to stay upright. I wandered off, found Briony painting my old Tiny Tears with nail varnish in my bedroom, and gave her the money.

'Buy a nice toy,' I suggested. 'Something that makes a big loud noise.'

'A BIG LOUD NOISE!' she agreed enthusiastically. 'I'll buy it with money.'

'Like a trumpet,' I told her. I don't know why I bother, she's hardly going to be visiting the shops on her own. She seemed keen on the trumpet, so maybe she'll nag until she gets one.

At one stage I was sitting on the stairs with Tom, drinking a very strong 'Coke' and watching in amusement as the horse-faced wankers who'd disowned Mum for having the misfortune to get pregnant at sixteen nosed around her house. Thank God we'd had the professionals in to clean up. They'd have loved it if it had been as encrusted as she liked it. It was her Miss Havisham house.

'Do you promise to be nice to me now?' I pestered Tom. He always gets annoyed when I talk like this and I only do it by accident, when I'm drunk. I forestalled his protest, however, with my killer punch. 'I'm an orphan now, you see.'

Unfortunately, my father was within earshot. 'You are not a bloody orphan!' he hissed furiously, trying not to attract anyone's attention, and thus attracting more. Tom laughed loudly. Dad was livid.

'Not technically,' I conceded, taking Tom's hand for moral support. 'I just mean, I half am. More than half really; I've never lived with you.'

'You've got me and you've got your stepmother,' he said. 'That's as many parents as most people get. You are twenty-seven, you know. You're not a child.'

I glared, and downed the rest of my vodka. My father is a twat, and he doesn't even know it. I was dying to tell him many, many things, but it would just have delighted the onlookers, who ignored Mum for thirty-two years and then flocked in from the country to nose around her house. It's their fault she turned out like she did. She hardly had a fair start in life, being turfed out by Tories when she was just a child.

Sniffling a little, I remind myself sternly of my position on Mum, from which I am not allowed to deviate. It is as follows:

she messed up my life when she was alive, so now that she's dead I'm not allowed to mope around. I've got to see that the sun starts shining right now. It is symbolic that we buried her on New Year's Eve. I hope it is less symbolic that I woke up to greet my new life in a crappy NHS hospital with yellow paint peeling off the walls. Me, the sad drunks, and the cute children with leukaemia, tragically hospitalised over the holiday period. If I tip my head even slightly, I can feel everything inside it washing around. It is agony. I shall make a resolution. By this time next year I will have radically changed my life. Tom will have realised that his future is with me. I want us to go travelling. Somewhere hot, to start new lives and have fun, and not be stressed.

'That is a splendid coat!' exclaimed an arse-faced woman, nodding towards my fur, which I had hung up conspicuously, savouring the glamour. Even though she was just saying it as an excuse to stand around me waiting to see if I continued arguing with Dad, I do agree with her. I shall tell everyone except these wankers that it's fake. And I'll never see this lot again. 'You know,' she continued, 'I rather think I remember Anne in this. Lucinda gave it to her when she had the, um, embarrassment.' She looked significantly at William.

Will, meanwhile, was shifting from foot to foot while an elderly man, possibly my grandfather (yes, that is how close my family is) talked at him.

'She never even told us!' the old git was explaining. 'We just noticed one day. She took that coat off, and there it was, clear as day. Threw her out, of course. Not impressed with bastards. She never did make anything of herself.'

Will's expression is murderous. I wonder whether this fat old twat knows he's talking to the bastard. I think he probably does. Will probably wishes he'd just stayed an orphan, like me. I can't wait to get to know him properly. We'll look after each other, form a new, non-dysfunctional family.

The curtains part and a woman ambles in. She's not a nurse.

Next to this lady I am fragrance itself. She's wearing a hospital nightie which gapes open so I can see her knickers. She's quite old and clearly confused, as she first walks all the way over to my bed and then starts climbing into it.

'My bed!' I rasp crossly. My mouth is dry. These are the first words I've uttered. She ignores me, so I haul myself into a sitting position (ouch), untucking sheets as I do so, and push her back. She sits down abruptly on the floor, still looking glazed. I would call a nurse, but I can't seem to get the impetus. I leave her sitting there, and snuggle back down, and try to remember how I came to this. After the house, memories are fuzzy.

There is a scene of impossible glamour. I am in a gorgeous bar with Tom and Will and Kate and Guy. It is dark outside, but it's early. Everyone is wearing black and grey and deep red, the colour of my lipstick and of my second favourite coat, which I am now wearing (I wouldn't take a fur into Soho). It is very squashed but we don't mind. We are actually sitting on the floor, at my instigation, but we are still the epitome of cool. I am sipping elegantly at a glass of vodka. Outside it is cold, but nobody minds that, because we have come together into this warmth to escape the climate. People smile and talk. I look at my dearly beloved boyfriend, who is cradling me in his strong arms, and I look at my brother. I don't really know him but I love him. Kate is my best friend. She's beautiful. I've always envied her Asian blood. One Indian grandmother, it seems, is all it takes, and you end up with a year-round tan, huge dark eyes, and glossy hair. Kate's lifestyle will never catch up with her, but I can't resent that. I love her.

Guy is saying that he's going to be looking for a new flatmate soon. I rouse myself sufficiently to ask if it can be me. I realise I can leave the Hampstead house for ever, now. We will sell it. I will live here in Soho with the beautiful people. I look at Guy, waiting for his answer. He always claims his hair is 'sandy', but we all know ginger when we see it. He's shorter than me – shorter

even than Kate. He knows how to party, and he's horribly untidy. We'll be good flatmates.

'Can't see why not!' he replies.

I feel loved and wanted. Outside, there are no homeless people, only smiling, lovely people. At the bar I decide to buy a whole bottle of vodka to stop myself having to go back again. I wonder why I've never done that before.

'My mother has died and I'm happy,' I announce, beatifically, to the barman.

I repeat it when I get back to the others. It is my little haiku.

'That is a fucking horrible way to be talking,' Will bursts out after I say it for the fourth time. 'Even if you felt that you should never bloody say it.' I remember that I must ask Will about what his life was like in between being adopted and meeting me last week. I've been meaning to ask him but I always forget.

'With respect, mate,' says Tom in his mockney, 'you don't know how hard the past few years have been for Tans. Make allowances, yeah?'

Everyone loves me. I am happy indeed.

Then I am walking around in the cold with Will. I don't know where Tom and Guy and Kate went. This frightens me a little, but I keep talking. I hear my voice, but I don't know what it is saying. 'The thing with working in the media is, you mix with the sort of creative people you might not meet elsewhere and that means you live a different kind of life. I think I live quite a bohemian life, and that has to be a good thing for me as a person . . .' and so on, and on. I must have had some coke. One of the others must have given it to me. Will stops me talking.

'Tansy,' he says. 'Tell me about our mother. Tell me what she was like. Please. You're the only connection to her.'

Urgh. This is the last conversation I want to have. We have reached some park gates. It's Regent's Park. I think I'll climb over.

'You don't want to know,' I tell him. 'Come on.' I start trying to climb the gates. William pulls me back.

'For fuck's sake. Come back here and tell me. Of course I want to know.'

'She was a terrible woman. She was drunk all the time, and she never admitted she had a problem. But she's gone now.' I found a little package in my pocket. 'Why don't we have some more coke? I will anyway.'

'Come and sit down,' says Will, 'and talk to me.' So I do.

All I have after that is a flash of the interior of the ambulance, and a niggling bad feeling. I'll have to ask Will, try and get him to tell me whether I said anything I shouldn't have said. Will I be able to ask him in such a way that if I haven't told him, it won't matter? I will when I'm sober, I expect. I can be a clever girl sometimes.

I have the thick feeling in my head that comes from coke. I have the throbbing that comes from alcohol. I have the shakes and the misery that always follow such happiness. I have an old woman sitting on the floor by my bed. I want to see a doctor, yet I don't want to, because I know they'll tell me off. But I have the perfect excuse for using the NHS's resources to clean me up after my self-indulgent excess. I can pretend, convincingly, that I was so upset about Mum that I had to seek oblivion. I can present it as a halfway suicide attempt. They'll never know that I'm glad she's dead and it was just normal high spirits. I think I'm going to be sick again, and there's no other receptacle. I untuck acres of sheets, and get out of bed, on the side where the woman isn't. I wobble alarmingly. I quite like the perverse aesthetics of this regulation gown. I remind myself of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or maybe a Channel 5 drama about anorexia, not that I'd be a convincing anorexic. Perhaps I'm one of those girls who gets sent to a mental ward by her cruel family who don't understand her and make her have a lobotomy, and I'm battling bravely to get out, while learning about life from the other inmates who

really are mad. Dad may not think I'm an orphan, but I do. I'm a sick orphan. These paper knickers are classic. I feel dizzy. And extremely sick. I stumble.

Within moments, I'm back in bed, and the smelly old lady has gone, and my curtains have been opened to reveal that I'm on a mixed ward – gross – and that I am by far the youngest, prettiest person here. What a bunch of shuffling, hacking losers.

'What happened?' I ask the nurse who accomplished all this, assuming poor-little-orphan persona.

'What do you think happened?' she snaps as she fills in some charts. 'You took an overdose, didn't you?'

'Did you pump my stomach?'

'Not personally, no.'

'It was my mother's funeral.'

'We know. Your brother explained. You were lucky to have someone responsible to look after you.'

'Well, I haven't got my mother any more, have I?' I say sharply, and look at her with eyes that are as big and as hurt as I can make them. She doesn't know any different.

A bit later, a doctor fills me in. 'You could have died,' she says. 'Do you know that? We're not here to preach, but hard drugs are extremely dangerous, and I think you should perhaps consider some treatment for your dependency.'

'That's just silly,' I tell her. 'I've never done this before. My mother just died. I won't do it again. I'm not dependent – it was a one-off. I'm sorry for wasting your time.' I am being as nice, and contrite, as I possibly can. I think she's just staying and chatting to me because I'm so much more wholesome than the other people, with their papery skin and their sunken eyes. Normally an insult such as 'dependency' would have me bristling, but today I can't be bothered. She says I can go home this evening. Because I'm fine, you see.

I'm happy now. My worries have vanished. As I sit in my rumpled bed with tears streaming down my cheeks, I know,

for the first time in my life, that I'm going to be uncomplicatedly happy. I'm going to go somewhere hot with Tom, to get away from arse-faced people and the NHS, and we'll have adventures. My new life will begin very, very soon indeed.