

Prologue

1989, London and Tunisia

When you were nine you had a pink coat that you loved so much you wore it all the time, even on the early morning flight to Tunisia. It was long and thickly padded and made you look like a flamboyant Michelin Man, wedged into your window seat, the coat zipped right up under your chin. Mum bought it when it was too big for you and now it was too tight, but none of us could imagine a time when you would stop wearing it, however crazy it looked.

You didn't take your coat off until we were in the hotel room. You were sharing with Mum and Dad, sleeping on a camp bed in their room. You always shared with them. You didn't like to be alone.

You changed into your pink bikini, your tummy round and chubby, your chest still flat; Mum looked for your goggles and suntan lotion. You wanted to go for a swim immediately.

We found our holiday rhythm fast. Mum and Dad had their preferred sun loungers, and you would spend all day in the pool, white stripes of lotion on your cheeks. My friend Anya and I usually got up later so missed breakfast. I would order a pancake smeared with Nutella from the man who set up his stall at 11 a.m. every day – the aroma of the frying batter mingling with the seaweed smell of the sea. Sometimes you would see me queuing and join me, your bikini bottoms dripping with chlorinated water, thick wet curls stuck to your neck. 'Get me one too,' you would say, and you would stand there eating your pancake rolled like a cigar, the melting chocolate sliding down your fingers, handing me the greasy paper plate and running back to the pool, your wet footprints evaporating in the heat.

Sometimes we went to the local town. It had been smartened up for tourists and there were stalls selling brown leather shoes with curled toes and fluffy toy camels. We would walk along the middle of the dusty market road, you holding Mum's hand, Dad checking out every stall, me and Anya being propositioned by stall holders, offering five hundred camels, a thousand camels, a thousand camels and ten sheep.

'Five thousand camels and this one's yours!' Dad would shout, and I would punch him on the arm, furious.

'Ah, she has spirit,' the stall holders would say.

But mostly we sunbathed.

'This will set us up for the summer,' said Dad, comparing his mahogany-coloured forearm with my pale pink one, blotchy with sun rash.

In the late afternoons we would go back to our hotel rooms. You would have a nap, still in your damp costume and neon-green sunglasses. While you slept we would shower. I would wash off the suntan lotion, watch it spiral down the plughole, the steam billowing in clouds that filled the bathroom. Afterwards we would apply aftersun and get dressed.

Every night we ate dinner in the brightly lit hotel restaurant, crowded with shiny sunburnt people from all over Northern Europe. You would pile your plate with all sorts of mismatching things: sausages and pasta and coleslaw and a great mountain of chips squirted with ketchup. You would leave most of it, but you always finished your pudding; you even went back for seconds of doughnuts, ice-cream and pink cakes with nuggets of candied green fruit.

There were entertainments in the evenings: bingo, shows, live music, a disco. One night Dad took you on to the dance floor. The DJ was playing songs by the Beatles. Dad held your hands and moved you left and right, beaming at you as he lifted one of your arms above your head, twirling you around, pulling you to him. You laughed because you thought he would tickle you, but he didn't, and you both kept dancing. Mum, Anya and I were watching. Mum was clapping. It was the first time you and Dad had danced together, they said afterwards.

When you came back to the table you were flushed and excited.

'Dance with me,' you said, your brown eyes hopeful.

'No,' I said.

I was self-conscious and it was your bedtime. Soon afterwards Mum took you up.

Later that night, past midnight, I was in bed reading, the hotel quiet, my little lamp illuminating the pages of my book. The sheets on the bed were cool and thick. The maids tucked them under the mattress every morning so every night I had to kick them free.

There was a knock at the door. I didn't answer quickly enough so someone started turning the handle up and down loudly, as though they might break it.

'Gavannndra!'

It was Mum. She was shouting.

'GAVANNNDRA!'

I got out of bed, walked to the door, my feet bare on the carpet. I opened the door.

Mum was in her blue cotton kaftan. Her face was pale, even though she had been sitting in the sun for a week. 'Candy's sick.'

I assumed it was a cold, a cough, a tummy bug, something like that. I couldn't understand why Mum had come for me. Maybe you'd asked for me, maybe you wanted us all to tend to you, our baby.

I walked the short distance to the room you shared with them.

I stood outside. I could hear coughing.

I held the door handle. I hesitated.

I opened the door. It was bright in there; all the lights were on. Dad was in his underpants, sitting on the double bed, his arms outstretched. You were running, one way and then the next, as though you were being hunted and you didn't know the way to safety. You were choking as you ran. A trickle of phlegmy blood dribbled down the side of your mouth, making a zigzagging trail of red spots on the carpet. Dad was trying to grab you, but you kept slipping from his fingers, as if you knew that if you stopped it would be over.

I was standing in the doorway. I didn't want to move, but I felt Mum's hand on my back, pressing me into the room.

'I'm going to get help,' she whispered.

She went, shutting the door behind her. It was just the three of us.

Dad tried to catch you. 'Candy, my darling, you're gonna be all right. Candy. You've got to stop.'

Eventually he managed to grab you. You were slowing down, tiring, and he put his strong, brown arms around you and held you and you fell into him. He scooped you into his lap, cradling you like a baby, his legs wide apart. Your body was limp and floppy, your arms falling back over your head, your feet pointing downwards, and for a moment it looked like a sculpture, but Dad was howling, a noise tearing from his stomach, and I wanted to put my hands over my ears and close my eyes but I couldn't.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't stop watching.

Mum came back. There was more blood on the floor now, your body in Dad's arms, his contorted face, my frozen one, the scene so much worse than the one she'd left.

'There's a taxi,' she said.

Dad stood up, holding you, and walked, one solid footstep after another, bearing your weight.

'Hurry up,' said Mum.

In the back of the taxi Dad gave you the kiss of life, but this did not work. You were unconscious when you arrived at the hospital. A tracheotomy was performed but this made no difference. You did not regain consciousness. You were killed by a rare airborne virus that shut down all your organs like lights going off in a house until everything went dark. After the autopsy they said that you could have caught the virus in London, it could have been working in your veins, hiding, multiplying, even as you got on the plane, wearing your pink coat.

They had to leave your body in the hospital. Mum and Dad said it was an awful place, you covered by a dirty blanket on a tiled floor. The staff tried to stop Mum kissing you goodbye, but she insisted.

The next morning Dad got out of bed, put on his holiday T-shirt and his holiday shorts. He walked down to the bar of the hotel where the photographs that had been taken by the hotel photographer of the night before were routinely laid out. He found all the pictures of you, pictures of you clapping and dancing, and put these in his pocket. Then he took a bottle of Scotch whisky from behind the bar. He had not drunk proper alcohol for five years, not since giving up heroin, not since rehab, but the morning after you died he walked along the carpeted corridors swigging whisky. The alcohol slid down his throat and burnt his heart, making it sizzle. He opened the door to the room, your bikini still hanging from the hook in the bathroom, your sunglasses still on the dressing table. He sat at the end of the bed and finished the

bottle. He burped once and then fell backwards. The bottle rolled from his fingers. Mum got out of bed, picked up the bottle, placed it on the side table.

Dad slept that whole day. Passed out.

Mum did not return to drink. Instead she went to the beach and she howled. Then she cried out to God. 'You'll have to help me because I can't deal with this!'

The day ended and a new one began as though nothing had changed. Normal things continued to happen, like sleeping and going to the loo and getting dressed, hunger and thirst. But we now understood that nothing was normal. We understood that the world is crazy because it is a world in which people exist one minute and do not the next.

Mum asked Anya to help fold and pack your clothes, because such things still needed to be done. I tried to help by floating in the swimming pool, wearing sunglasses, filling my plate at the dinner buffet with inappropriate things, squirting the lot with tomato ketchup, trying to show Mum and Dad that I could be both of us. I wanted to fill the gap left by you, even if it was just for this moment, so we could get through the impossible days.

It didn't work. They didn't even notice.

When the plane landed at Gatwick I wanted London to be grey, damp, cold. I didn't want to feel the sun on my skin any more. But when we touched down I saw the heat haze rising from the smooth black tarmac and I knew that it was not over, that nothing would make this feeling go away.

That night, when we turned on the television, the film *Don't Look Now* was showing. Donald Sutherland was staggering with the weight of his drowned daughter, who was wearing her favourite red raincoat. We turned off the television.

Your body came back to England a few days afterwards and was taken straight to a funeral parlour on the Fulham Road.

'Here she is,' said the man, opening the door to a room in which the lights had been dimmed.

A coffin was balanced on a plinth.

Mum and Dad were tense and formal walking into that room, their muscles ready for some fresh terror, but their bodies softened the moment they saw you, their little girl, funny, childish, loving, artistic, wilful, curious, sleeping deeply.

'There you are, my baby,' Dad said, and he cupped his hand gently to your cheek, which was not really a cheek any more, because it was cold and solid with embalming fluid. Mum gripped the edge of the coffin and said, 'Candy,' as though you were alive, as though you were lying there alive, looking beautiful.

I could not do that. I looked in, glimpsed your face, saw the strange softness that comes just before decay. I saw all the artifice, the make-up, the smile made by men in white laboratory coats pushing at the corners of your mouth, a child transfixed in a plastic moment, dead but not dead, hyper-real, rouge on your cheeks, pink lipstick on your lips, your eyes shut, your long brown eyelashes brushing your cheeks.

I found a chair in the corner of the room where I sat straight-backed, my eyes open but my sight turned inwards so that I did not see, my ears closed over so that I did not hear.

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A week later we had your funeral. The windows were open so that the hotness of the city, the swirling dust that they said had come all the way from the Sahara, blew into my room along with the smell of rotting food.

I wore a long blue skirt and a blue jacket, new clothes that Mum had bought for me. I went into the hallway where they were waiting. The sight of them was so awful: Dad in his suit with a pink handkerchief in the top pocket, his hair newly washed and brushed back, his skin already sweaty at the temples; Mum all in black, black patent high heels, painted fingernails, but no mascara on her short, blonde eyelashes.

We walked down the steps, a family reconfigured, three instead of four. Outside there was a long black hearse which gleamed like a freshly groomed horse. You were in the back, in your own special place, with wide windows so everyone could see you, packed away in your little coffin. There were two

wreaths, one in the shape of a teddy bear made out of pink roses, another of white roses, spelling out your name. *Candy*.

Two men in smart suits and black caps were waiting, ready to open the car door for us.

I had not realized that death was so grand.

I was very aware of you behind my head, that this was the last time you would be with us. After this we would never travel in a car together again, we would never do anything together again.

We arrived at St Mary The Boltons, which was like a village church, with its low stone wall and flower beds. We stood in a line and greeted the people who arrived, all the familiar faces, and it couldn't help but feel like an exciting social occasion, except that everyone I said hello to, everyone I hugged and patted on the back, everyone was crying, every face was blotched with tears, and some of them stayed in my arms and their shoulders shook, as if I could help them, me, sister of a dead girl. And I didn't cry, I don't know why, but the leaves fluttered in the trees, raining their golden droplets of sun, and the air was warm and my tears didn't come. I didn't even feel a tightness in my throat or a heaviness in my eyeballs. I thought that there must be something wrong with me that I felt nothing, and this was a terrible secret that I could not share.

Eventually everyone arrived and we walked into the church. Organ music was playing and sunlight was streaming through the stained-glass windows, making bright beams of yellow, blue and red. There were huge bunches of flowers tied with thick, trailing white ribbons at the end of each pew. The place was packed. I had been to weddings in this church before and never seen it so full.

We walked all the way to the front. Once we were seated they brought you in, carried on the shoulders of four men provided by the funeral company. You were placed on a little wooden stand so everyone could see. Mum was sitting between me and Dad. She reached for our hands and she gripped mine so tightly that her fingernails broke the skin of my palm.

The priest talked and then we sang 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', like at a school assembly. After that your school friends read a poem. I don't remember what the poem was; I don't remember any of the words that were spoken, only the looks on the people's faces, the flowers and the colours.

You left first, carried out of the church. We walked behind, our eyes lowered, watched by everyone. Our next destination was the crematorium, a magnolia-painted room with lots of empty chairs and the metal runners on which your coffin was carefully placed. Only a few people joined us there, family members, a couple of friends, one of the waiters from the Italian restaurant where we went for lunch every Saturday and some Sundays too, who had known you all your life.

We sat in our uncomfortable seats and listened as the machine whirred into life. We watched as your coffin moved towards the red curtains and passed through them into the furnace beyond. I was sure I could hear the roar of newly fed flames, even though the song '(I've Had) The Time of My Life' from the film *Dirty Dancing* was playing very loudly.

We got back into the hearse for the final drive home. There was nothing in the boot of the car now; the wreaths were burnt along with you.

The car pulled up outside our mansion block. It was lunchtime but I didn't feel hungry. The thing we had all been dreading, anticipating, planning, was done and now we were expected to get on with our lives.

One of the funeral company men opened the door for us and we got out, my father, my mother, me. The other man approached us. He was holding a rectangular wooden box – your ashes, I realized, and I wondered if they were still warm, like a freshly baked loaf of bread.

The man stood in front of Mum and held the box out for her to take. She looked at him, looked at the box, seemed confused at first, and then her face crumpled into pink wetness.

Dad stepped forwards. He took the box, tucked it under one arm and placed the other hand on the smart funeral man's shoulder. 'Thanks for everything you've done today, mate.' He handed over a pre-folded twenty-pound note.

'Come on, my darling,' he said as he walked towards the front door, you snug under his arm.

Mum and Dad bought a beautiful Chinese box made from golden lacquered wood inlaid with floral patterns. The box was waist height and had a big bronze key with a silky red tassel. They filled this box with all the things of yours that they could not bear to lose: your favourite soft toys and the hood of your pink coat.

They put the box containing your ashes on the mantelpiece in the living room and they kept the Chinese box in their bedroom.

We put you in wooden boxes, Candy. We locked you away.