



Instagram

Photo: A pink suitcase stands in a narrow, shoe-filled hallway.

Filter: Clarendon.

Possible captions . . .

Option one: Off on an exotic adventure **#myglamorouslife**

Option two: My dad just bought me this new travel bag. He doesn't know me at all, does he?

Option three: My whole life fits into a single suitcase. My mum's ashes fit perfectly on to the mantelpiece.

Option four: I committed a crime and now I'm being sent to a place of eternal punishment for the wicked.

Actual caption . . .

So long, and thanks for all the fish.

♥38

Chapter One

Hannah

As soon as the plane lands I take out my mobile. There's a message from Daisy.

Miss you already!

There's also one from Dad.

Got held up at work, will be around twenty minutes late.

Of course he will.

Dad had insisted on picking me up from the airport. I'd said I was fine with taking the bus. I always take the bus. But this time isn't like all the other times.

The plane is taxiing slowly on the icy tarmac towards the terminal. It skids a little. No one seems bothered. Compared to the violent turbulence during landing, caused by gusts of wind pounding the plane like the invisible fists of a giant boxer, this is a breeze.

The woman in the seat next to me keeps glancing at me and smiling. She's trying to engage me in conversation; I know she is. I stare down at my phone. *I don't want to talk.* I should have

it printed as a slogan on a T-shirt, I've been saying it so frequently for the past three weeks, two days and six hours.

Notifications from different applications pop up all across my screen, numbers inside red bubbles, like traffic lights giving me an order: *Stop whatever you're doing and click on me.* I get a familiar rush of emotions; an addictive mix of expectation, excitement, dread and validation. I know I shouldn't feel those things. I know I'm being taken advantage of by greedy corporations out to improve their click-through rate and their bank balance. But under the circumstances it's a welcome relief from wanting to lie down and wait for the force of time to wipe me out like chalk from a blackboard.

I scan the numbers inside the bubbles, the never-ending appraisals that ebb and flow, as indifferent to our existence as the sea is to the shore: *How valued are you today? How loved, how sought after? Does anyone like you? Got any new friends? How about followers?*

I start by clicking on Gmail. Excluding promotions and notifications from various social media applications I've got two new emails. One is from someone called Stacey Callaghan. I've no idea who that is but I've got a pretty good idea what the email is about. The subject is 'Condolences'. I move it to the 'Read Later' folder with the rest of them. The other is from Granny Jo. She refuses to learn how to use messaging services and keeps sending me short messages in the subject line: 'Pick up milk on way home'; 'Working late, order pizza'. This time it's 'Call me when you've reached your dad's house'. I click on it expecting the body to be empty as usual. But it isn't.

My darling girl. I hope you've landed safely. I just want to ask you – beg you – not to ignore what I said to you this morning. You're not responsible for anyone but yourself now. Let yourself be free. Please, Hannah, I can't take another life wasted.

Love,
Granny

I try not to burst into tears.

It's less than five hours since I said goodbye to Granny Jo. Somehow it feels like an eternity.

I'd expected a talk from her before I left. But I wasn't prepared for what she had to say. She was asking too much of me. I'd told her I couldn't just start over as if my life was a story written in Word and all I needed to do was delete the old document and create a new one. Of all people, she should know that.

I press the home button on my mobile and Granny's message disappears. I'm digitally burying my head in the sand. I can't think about this right now.

As a distraction, I open Facebook. The only thing there for me is a single friend request from someone I'm pretty sure isn't a real person but a bot. Desperate for a fix of some digital love, I switch to Instagram.

That's better. The photo of my suitcase has thirty-eight likes and one comment. The comment is from Daisy: 'What gorgeous luggage!'

I get a slight buzz. Thirty-eight is good. Better than average.

The woman next to me is leaning into my line of vision. She's radiating a desperate need to talk; like a balloon that will burst if she doesn't let some air out. I pretend not to notice her. But some people just can't take a hint.

'I'm here to see my grandkids,' the woman chirps. She's so close I can feel her breath on my cheek. It smells of garlic and menthol.

I try to devise an answer that is just polite enough to keep her from thinking I'm an anti-social psychopath but curt enough to make it clear that I'm not interested in having a chat. 'That's nice.'

Either the woman is socially tone deaf or she simply decides to ignore my signalling. She offers me a Strepsil. 'Want one?'

I shake my head.

She puts the cough sweets into a weathered backpack along with her glasses and the book she's been reading. It's one of those Nordic noir crime novels, the latest accessory you have to have in your handbag to be considered on trend. It has the mandatory snowy landscape on the cover, tastefully peppered with drops of blood. It's murder, minimalistic chic style. Why do people like reading about fictional horror in their spare time? Isn't there enough awfulness in the world as it is?

The woman puts the backpack on the floor, straightens in her seat and flashes me a set of yellowing teeth, a threat of more small talk to come.

'Is it your first time here?'

I put my phone back in my pocket. It has failed to provide me with the solitude I crave. 'No.'

'Are you here on a holiday?'

A slight snort escapes my nostrils. I don't understand why anyone would come here on a holiday. Why would you travel willingly to the freezing cold end of the earth? I should say, *No, I'm not here for a holiday.* I should say, *I'm here as a punishment; I'm here as a prisoner of my own crappy fate.* But I simply say, 'Sure.' No one wants to hear the truth – even if they say they do. The truth makes even the so-called professionals uncomfortable – I found that out almost immediately.

The day after Mum died, the vicar from the church up the street came knocking on our door. I don't know why – one of our neighbours must have told him about us. We'd never been to church and neither I nor Granny Jo had ever before seen this man standing on the cracked pavement outside our house.

'Are you from Ocado?' Granny Jo asked, looking the man up and down. He looked young-ish, despite a receding hairline, and wore jeans and a big down coat to ward off a sudden burst of September cold. He could easily have been one of the delivery men who brought us our weekly groceries.

'I'm Dominic Johnson,' the man said, managing the perfect balance of not smiling while still giving off the vibe that he came in peace. 'I'm from Christ Church. Can I come in for a little chat with you and your granddaughter?'

Granny gave a loud, purposeful sigh. Saying that she was not a fan of all things God related would have been an understatement.

I followed as Granny took the poor man through to the living room, feeling curious as well as apprehensive. It was no coincidence that she had him sit down on her reading chair by

the bay window. On the bookshelf right above the man's head was one of Granny Jo's favourite books – her Bible, you could say if you wanted to annoy her – grandly displayed in hardback, with the commanding title: *The God Delusion*.

Granny glanced down at the grey sweatpants she only wore around the house. She ran a hand over her shoulder-length hair, smoothing it out. It was grey with auburn strands – it used to be the other way around not that long ago.

It wasn't only the God thing that was irritating Granny, she also didn't like surprise visitors. With the exception of Daisy, she wanted to know in advance if we were having company. When people came over she always made an effort; ditching the sweatpants for suit trousers and a shirt, or even a dress, and making sure we had nice biscuits in the house. The other reason used to be Mum. Granny wanted us to appear normal, like any other family; mother, daughter and grandmother living happily under one roof. Mum, however, was to normalcy what an airport runway was to a quiet cup of tea. You never knew what state she'd be in if the doorbell rang at random.

Granny sat down on the sofa opposite the vicar. 'Hannah,' she barked at me. 'Get the man some tea.'

'There's no need,' the vicar said, still wearing his down coat. 'I don't want to intrude . . .'

'Well, you already have.'

I disappeared into the kitchen, happy to escape the awkwardness. But to my surprise, when I returned, the two of them were discussing the proposed redevelopment of the north-east corner of Highbury Fields, our local park, and they were in full agreement: the council's plans were the usual pandering to

developers who thought of nothing but concrete and money, and the park should be left as it was.

I sat down next to Granny.

‘So, how are you, Hannah?’ the vicar said after his first sip of the tea.

Granny straightened, turning up her nose, alert but wary like a hyena that had just got a whiff of a carcass.

I shrugged. I didn’t want to talk.

The vicar leaned forward in his chair, exposing a bald patch on the crown of his head. ‘Even though she’s gone, she will always be with you—’

‘I’m sorry,’ Granny Jo interjected. ‘I hate to be rude.’ (That was a lie; she loved putting people off their footing with her brusque manner and tell-it-like-it-is philosophy). ‘But I’m afraid I can’t allow such talk in my house.’

The vicar shifted his eyes from me to Granny, raising his eyebrows. He didn’t appear at all fazed. ‘And what kind of talk is that?’

‘Talk of things, destinations, that don’t exist.’ Granny Jo’s face turned hard. ‘Look, Reverend—’

‘Call me Dom.’

‘Dom. Here we don’t trivialise death by pretending it’s anything but a final parting. Death serves a purpose; “it is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are to see anything”, a wise man once said.’

I’d heard her say this more times than I could count – and I knew what was coming next.

‘The finality of life is what makes it precious,’ Granny continued. ‘It puts things into focus and gives you the urgency

you need to live life to the fullest. Why go on an adventure today, why go on a holiday, why learn a new language, read a book, fall in love today if you're going to live for ever? In endless time, all things can be accomplished. Thus, all things can wait.' Granny Jo sucked in her cheeks, suppressing a smirk. She was clearly pleased with herself. 'So, I will not have you belittle death in my house.'

The vicar smiled. 'That was a good speech. I bet you read it in a book somewhere.'

Granny's lips parted with an indignant gush of air. She looked as if she'd just been slapped. Granny Jo had worked as a librarian at Islington Central Library for thirty-two years. If I'd had to venture a guess, I'd have said around seventy per cent of our conversations were about something she'd read in a book.

The vicar struggled to raise himself up in the cushy reading chair. He took one more sip of his tea, then placed his cup and saucer on the coffee table. 'Let me tell you this, and I speak from experience: Death is so much more complicated in practice than in theory.'

Granny pouted her lips. She was a notoriously sore loser. 'Yes, well. I'm sure we'll figure it out. It's not like we have a choice.'

The vicar bowed his head; he was bowing out.

He got up. 'I'll leave you ladies in peace.' He reached into his pocket, took out his card and placed it on the coffee table next to his hardly touched tea cup, looking in my direction. 'Some of your neighbours were wondering if you'd be interested in having a little remembrance service for Ellen up in Christ Church. Feel

free to get in touch if that's something you'd want. I'm just around the corner.'

Granny got up from the sofa to show him out. But she wasn't rid of him yet. Her back curled in disappointment when the vicar stopped in the living room doorway.

'Hannah,' he said and turned to me. 'Your mum sometimes stopped by at the church for a chat. I know she battled her demons, but on a good day she could really light up a room.'

A familiar feeling of mortifying embarrassment took over my entire being and I wished with all my heart that I would be swallowed up by the sofa cushion. To the outside world Mum's highs were endearing. Only to Granny and me, they served as a flashing siren in the darkness of her messed-up reality. Ecstasy/ agony: with Mum they were two sides of the same coin.

'I'm sorry for your loss, child. May God be with you.'

That last thing was what tipped Granny over the edge. If he'd only skipped that last bit, he would have got out unscathed.

'Let me tell you what God is. God is a meme – you know, like those silly pictures you see on the internet – with highly infective power. God is a cultural virus that is hard to eradicate. I prefer Darwin to your virulent meme, thank you very much.'

Then she literally pushed the vicar out the door.

The plane stops in front of the terminal building. The woman next to me is banging on about taking her grandchildren to the pond to feed the ducks. I can't listen to her any more. It's nothing personal. It's just that hearing about other people's glorious mundanity makes it hard for me to breathe. It's the grief, I guess; grief for what I've lost, but even more for what

never was. My greatest aspiration in life is normalcy. I can only hope for the mind-numbingly mundane. To me, boring is perfection.

I reach for my phone again to try to shield myself from the woman's chatter. I don't care if she thinks I'm rude.

Looking at my Instagram account, people might assume the following things about me:

I've got shiny, straight red hair and perfect skin.

I like cooking.

I'm into nature.

I love going out with my fun-loving girlfriends.

I'm normal.

They'd be wrong on all counts.