

Leaving Sullivan Street

by

Mandy Huggins

I have my grandfather's penknife with me, the one I showed you that time, with the yellowed bone handle and the broken blade. The knife he carried with him in the trenches. I like the thought of it in his pocket, rubbed smooth with handling, and I never stop wondering how the blade broke. Did he try to cut a fellow soldier free from some barbed wire; did it save someone's life? Did he ever face the enemy up close, and stare into the eyes of a boy his own age, a boy of only sixteen?

And I have brought the tacky flamenco coaster, the one you stole from Don Pepe on the night you proposed. You reached across a pan of Juanita's paella, holding a tiny green box containing an antique ring. It was a small rose-cut diamond set in platinum, with art deco shoulders. It was the ring I didn't even know I wanted. I thought I wanted modern, emerald cut, at least a carat. I'd even told you, even though it was all a fantasy, and you'd laughed.

I don't really know what we thought we were doing back then. I guess we were just intoxicated with the heady scent of our new love. You proposed to me that night, even though you were firmly and steadfastly married. You still are. But I will always wear that ring. It's perfect.

Our time is up though. Nothing will ever change; you haven't the courage to take what you really want, to admit who you really are. It's just a few words.

'I'm in love with someone else.'

Those few words must echo round the world in a hundred languages every day. But they are too big for you to say.

My ten years with Joe are up too. I haven't left a note. Or a mess. The house looks exactly the same as when he went to work this morning. I suppose if I change my mind before I get to the train station I could come back, put the rucksack in the hall cupboard unnoticed, and drop back into life on Sullivan Street.

But it's a rare and perfect summer's day, and I'm pretty sure I won't. The ten minute walk to the station will be the hardest part of my journey. The walk down our street - the road I have taken into town a thousand times.

The Highland terrier with the dirty beard is barking in the garden two doors down. The woman watches me as I swing by with my rucksack. We don't speak. She did speak to you that one time if you remember. She came and rapped on your car window because you'd parked in her parking space when you dropped me off. It was only once, you were only there a minute, and she doesn't even have a car. But she thinks she's got something on me now, because she saw me kiss you, and even though the kiss could have been just between friends, I could see in her eyes that she knew different.

The council gardeners are cutting the grass. The fresh scent of the clippings makes me think of spring at my parents' house. We lived up at the far end of the street - the posh end - where the verge is edged with cherry trees. In May, the paper-thin blossom would fill the street with a cloud of confetti; a sign to herald the Whitsuntide holiday, and then the warm summer.

Further down the street, Ann calls out hello from the cafe doorway. The Kwik Bite, one of those crazy half-derelict buildings that survives even though all around it have been bulldozed; a peeling sign, a menu board with the usual glut of spelling mistakes, and a bead curtain depicting, of all things, a German shepherd dog. She calls it her guard curtain. Faded paper butterflies are tacked inside the windows, and outside on the street there's an optimistic bistro-style table and chairs. Ann has a Lambert & Butler on the go - snuck between fry-ups. None of her customers ever sit outside to stare at the factory opposite, so she always has the table to herself. In the centre there is the large, cracked bowl that serves as her ashtray. She often forgets and leaves it outside to turn into a slimy grey stew in the rain.

On the waste ground below the cafe, the travellers have taken up residence for the third time this year. At this time of morning they are still all asleep inside their caravans. There's a lone brown dog sat out in the early sunshine, and a small girl's face appears at a window. Lathe-thin and tow-

haired, she reminds me of the gypsy family that used to call at our house when I was a child. The woman wore a dark red headscarf and carried a willow basket full of pegs, and her daughter would cling shyly but wide-eyed to her mother's skirt. She would hold out a peg dolly for me. Tiny black eyes, and a crimson rosebud mouth, a scrap of blue gingham for a dress.

Outside the butcher's there's an old delivery bike propped up against the window, its basket now used to display pot plants. It conjures up memories of the Frenchman that used to visit the street, delivering onions on the handlebars of his bike. As a child, I never stopped to consider it odd that we had a pukka French onion seller in the heart of West Yorkshire. The onions were hung in the shed, threaded together on straw twine, and lasted us all through the winter. My mother would send me up the garden to fetch one for her gravy or her soup. The cobwebs would brush the top of my head like ghosts when I went inside. In winter I would reach my hand round the door and snap on the light before the bogeyman could get me.

Just down from the butcher's the builders are at work on the new house, building a large bungalow around an existing one, entombing the smaller building within. They have nearly finished and I can no longer see what's going on inside. You said it reminded you of San Clemente. You and I, walking the streets of Rome, hand in hand, with our guide book and our wonder, exploring the church within a church within a church. And at the Capuchin Crypt we read the inscription reminding us that the skeletons were once as we are now, and that soon we will join them. You whispered to me. You said this was why it was right for us to steal this time together. That this was all there was, and we would get no second chance.

Mr Singh waves at me from outside the corner shop and flashes me his gap-toothed grin. He is washing his windows. His shop smells delicious, of warm curry and rich spices, but his biscuits are always out of date. His wife is small and timid, with slender hands that flap around the shop like the wings of tiny birds. She likes to tell me a story, usually something the school kids have done, or about a programme she has watched on the portable TV behind the counter. Her stories cascade like a waterfall, words tumbling over each other before someone can interrupt.

I kid myself I'll miss this street, these people, this walk to town that I've done a thousand times. But I won't. It will all just disappear and it won't matter. It's not blood, it's just water. And as if to confirm my decision, the pub by the train station is boarded up, and the hanging baskets are a tangle of dead weeds.

Inside the station, the world is realigned. There is order and brisk bustle, and the familiar tiny knot of anticipation in my stomach. There are the measured tones of the train announcements, the click and fall of the clock numbers as they turn, and the flurry of orange as the indicator boards refresh, showing endless possible destinations.

As I look up at the board, Mrs Gladstone appears at my side. She takes in my rucksack, and knows that I'm not just popping into Leeds for a day's shopping.

'You going on a trip my love?'

'Just visiting friends,' I say, and pick up my bag to move off.

'Well remember, wherever you're going, you'll be taking yourself with you!'

I walk off with a wave and a shrug, and then pause at the train door, one foot on the step. I think of you for a second. Those few words you can't say.

'I'm in love with someone else.'

But it's not those few words that are difficult. It's the extra words you'd need; your answer when asked, 'Who is he?'

'It's not another man, it's another woman.'

I think of Joe. It would be easy to just go back to Joe and carry on the same, like you do with your own husband.

'Are you getting on this train?' asks the woman behind me.

And I swear to you now, if she hadn't spoken I might have jumped off. But I hate looking indecisive, and I mutter my apologies and climb onboard.