

CHAPTER ONE - Andrea's story

Is it possible to tell the difference between a dream and a premonition? Or is a premonition just a dream that life later adds meaning to, so that we convince ourselves that we have the power to see into the future?

My family lived with my mother's mother who, it was whispered, could change the course of history with the use of a simple phrase, so concepts such as these do not seem so very extraordinary to me. Although she was oblivious to the extent of her powers, Nana's sentences that began 'Mark my words' were the kiss of death. She thought that she just had the uncanny knack of always being right.

"Mark my words! That boy will never amount to anything!" She would cast her opinions carelessly and a future of misfortune and underachievement would now be a certainty for her poor victim rather than a vague possibility. When she aimed her comments at one of us, we were quick to cross our fingers for luck, the traditional family method of preventing her from sealing our fates. "Mark my words, Andrea, you're going to regret having seconds later," she scolded when I insisted on another spoonful of shepherd's pie. "You won't have any room for rice pudding." As I had to sit and watch the others eat my favourite dessert, she couldn't resist raising her eyebrows and saying, "What did I tell you?"

As a child, I had a recurring dream. In that dream I was falling in a rolling motion, gathering momentum all the way. The green of the grass, the brown of the earth and the blue of the sky became blurred, but provided clues of which way was up and which was down. Eventually, I would have to close my eyes when dizzying nausea overtook me.

I associated that dream with a heady feeling of excitement and anticipation in the pit of my stomach. The point where the familiar meets the unfamiliar; the solid ground of the gentle slope giving way to the sheer drop. I felt drawn to activities that induced that feeling. Somersaults, cartwheels, spinning in circles; being blindfolded at the start of a party game; rolling down grassy, daisy-speckled banks, arms folded over my chest. Sliding down slopes on tea-trays in the fresh snow, riding the big wheel when the fair came to town. Handstands on the side of the swimming pool, legs hovering aloft, waiting for the moment when the water reaches up to swallow you. I would jump into my father's arms from a height, safe in the knowledge that he was there to catch me. The pause at the top of the slide before letting go translated into the hesitation at the top of the ski slope before digging in the poles and pushing off. On my first holiday alone, I tried bungee jumping from a suspension bridge.

"That girl has no inbuilt sense of fear," was Nana's reaction. "She doesn't know when to stop. Mark my words, she'll come a cropper."

"Weren't you scared of falling?" My mother, a vertigo sufferer, asked with genuine wonderment when I showed her the photos.

"It's the feeling of falling I enjoy," I tried to explain. "It's the only thing that makes you feel free."

"Oh, I couldn't." She shuddered. "I'd be the one standing at the top refusing to jump."

"It's not the fall you want to worry about, love," my father joked. "It's landing that'll kill you."

"Oh Tom!" Nana tutted, convinced that others were capable of bringing bad luck into the house.

It seemed to me that my parents had always played it safe. Semi-detached in suburbia, room enough for me and, because she couldn't cope on her own, for Nana. Nine to five. Fish-and-chip takeaway on a Friday. Sunday roast. Ford Escort. Two weeks' holiday in the same hotel in Spain every summer. God knows they deserved it. The truth is that I had long since outgrown the safety of the semi, but like so many of my generation, I lacked the means to buy a property of my own and the inclination to rough it in the sort of bed-sit that my wages would have afforded. I led a charmed life, although I would have taken great offence at anyone who suggested as much. Our very average family was illustrated by a family tree that I had drawn as part of a school project at the age of 11. It hung in the hall among some family photographs, something that I passed several times every day and took little notice of, but I would have been embarrassed to admit that it was my handiwork. I can remember being criticized Very harshly by my teacher for failing to make an entry for my paternal grandfather.

"But my daddy didn't have a father," I protested, repeating what he had told me over the years. (I enjoyed this small piece of information - as I grew older it was the only thing that made me think that there might be a story behind my family that was actually worth hearing.)

"Of course he had a father," the teacher insisted. "Everybody has a father."

When I asked my father about this, he told me that my diagram was one hundred per cent accurate and that he was more than happy with it. "Who does she think she is?" he asked with genuine annoyance. "You would think that I would know if I had a father or not." I knew better than to push him any further on the subject. I could twist him around my little finger, but there were certain subjects that were simply not up for discussion. "My mother loved me enough for two," was all he would say. This did not prevent him discussing the matter with my teacher. I was humiliated to learn that he had paid a visit to the school and told her that neither he nor his family would be forced to fit into whatever outgrown idea of a family they had in mind.

"But what did you say?" I asked miserably, trying to prepare myself for whatever sarcastic comments might pass my way.

"Nothing for you to worry about. I simply told her that I may not want to be a tree and that I can be a twig, a bush or a herbaceous border if I chose."

"You didn't!" I squealed.

"Now I come to think of it, I shouldn't have stopped there. I might like to be a family triangle, or a family rhomboid or a family flow chart. Or even a family Venn diagram."

"A Venn diagram?" I was horrified.

He sketched a series of three interlinking circles for me. "Yes, that works just fine. That's Mummy, that's you and that's me. You can tell Miss Whateverhernameis that from now on we will be a Venn diagram."

"Andrea, don't listen to him, love," my mother sighed. "Tom, she's just trying to teach them about where they have come from. This isn't personal."

"They should be trying to teach children to think, not to stick ridiculous labels on people."

You can guess who won that debate by the fact that the family tree found its way into a frame and on to the wall.

"This is nice, isn't it?" my mother would habitually say as we settled round the dining-room table for Sunday lunch. The question was serious enough, and she looked around the table searching, almost as if she expected someone else to appear, sometimes challenging us to disagree, checking that we were all satisfied with our individual lots. Occasionally, I felt that she

was trying to convince herself that this was what she worked so hard for every week. The chance to have her family around the table and share a home-cooked meal. It seemed such a small reward. I knew that I could never be satisfied with the life that she had settled for.

“Smashing, love,” my father replied as he carved. “You’ve done us proud again.”

“Oh, yes,” Nana would agree, frowning at the pink centre of the meat and the crispness of the vegetables which were not to her taste. Steamed, for goodness sake! ‘The roasties look marvellous. Done to a “t.”’

My mother beamed at this, the ultimate compliment. “You must have taught me well, Mum.”

It was the same routines that I found so tedious at times that made us feel safe, made it possible for us to go out into the world, to be who we were and do our own things. Without those routines, for that one meal of the week when the television was turned off, we didn’t always have enough to say to each other. My father would comment, “It must be good, love, it’s all gone quiet. You could hear a pin drop in here.”

It was in the silences that my mother would take the time to look at us in turn and smile “This is nice, isn’t it?”

And then it all changed. All the routines were taken away, and I can hardly believe that I miss them the most.

To celebrate my parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, my father surprised my mother by arranging a weekend away. He had let me in on the secret, of course. I was needed to stay at home to look after Nana, otherwise he wouldn’t have put it past my mother to refuse to go. Or to want to take Nana with them. But he had planned for that.

He kept one surprise even from me. That Friday evening he arrived home from work in an open-topped Austin-Healey 3000, sleek in black and chrome with red leather seats. Only two red leather seats. It had been a dream of his to own one, a dream which had been whittled away gradually and demoted to a dream to drive one. Even so, the grin on his face told me that it was not a disappointment, although the luggage I had so carefully planned had to be downsized to fit in the boot.

“One hundred and fifty brake horse power.” He rubbed his hands together.

My mother became a teenager again when she saw the car. Any reservations that she might have dreamt up at the thought of being whisked off at a moment’s notice were quelled. Normally, she wouldn’t have even contemplated the idea of a weekend away before completing a full inventory of the freezer to ensure that there were enough single-sized portions of homemade cottage pie to feed Nana and me for a good few weeks.

“I wonder...” She paused outside, tapping a finger against the side of her mouth and narrowing her eyes. Then she turned and ran into the house.

“Laura!” My father called after her. “We’ve got to get going. The traffic on the motorway is going to be chock-a. Oh, it’s no good.” He looked momentarily deflated. “Once she’s got an idea in her head...”

“Ta-da!” She appeared wearing a pair of red sling-backs that looked as if they had seen far better days under her jeans and clutching a red dress, which she was trying unsuccessfully to fit into her handbag.

It seems that those shoes had much the same effect on my father as the car had done on my mother, and he looked ten years younger as he opened the car door for her. “Your lucky shoes! Now you’re talking.”

I stood at the end of the path to watch my parents disappear down the road, their eyes aglow, hands touching thighs and laps, feeling that I was intruding. Feeling strangely parental. Shouting, "Keep your eyes on the road!"

Nana knocked that out of me quickly enough by commenting, "Mark my words, that thing looks like a death trap."

The news came about four hours later, delivered by two policemen who arrived on the doorstep just as I was about to go to bed. It was without any outward sign of emotion that I heard that my parents had been driving in the middle lane of the M6 when a foreign lorry driver had pulled out and clipped the edge of their car, sending it into a spin. In all likelihood, the car would have been too low on the road for the lorry driver to see in his mirrors. My mother had been at the wheel. She tried to correct the unfamiliar vehicle but veered to the left at speed, crashing through the barrier before the car rolled down the bank. There was talk that her red sling-backs had become caught in the pedals, causing her to lose control. At that point, there was quite a steep drop and the car would have bounced before rolling several times, giving alternate views of steel, lights and sky. Steel, lights and sky. My mother wouldn't have seen much of the blurred view or felt the nauseous feeling of anticipation in her stomach for long. She was decapitated, possibly as early as the first roll of the car, her body thrown clear of the wreckage, fuelling speculation that she hadn't been wearing a seatbelt. My father's neck was broken, but witnesses say he was still alive in his position trapped upside down under the vehicle, facing my mother's head, where it had come to rest in the ditch.

"Oh, my love," he was heard to say, "I always said it's not the fall that'll kill you."