

# The Salt Path

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The scrape of cutlery across plates was deafening. Dad grabbed the salt shaker and ruined his pie and chips, oblivious to the grains falling like snow on the faded green tablecloth. I met Mum's eyes and she frowned.

'I start next week,' Mum cast her words hesitantly into the laden silence and began to chew her thumbnail.

Dad looked up sharply from his plate. 'I told yer, you won't be able to do that. Work in a bloody school! You haven't worked in years,' he sneered, directing his attention back to his food.

The corner of Mum's mouth twitched. 'They think I can,' she said. 'And we need the money,' she added.

The metallic clatter made me jump.

'That's it, blame it on me,' Dad snarled, his face contorted. I held my breath, even though I'd seen this exchange a hundred times before. Like an old video stuck on repeat.

Mum picked up his knife and fork from the floor and placed them on the table, avoiding his eyes. I let out my breath.

Dad had taken the doctor's advice literally when he was told he wouldn't be able to work anymore. Years later I learned that his neck injury was common in builders and he could have taken a different job. Instead we'd existed on his apathy and Incapacity Benefit.

'And when are *you* gonna get a job?' His voice cleaved the air.

I stared at the glint of evening light on my knife and fork. Knife and fork. The only union this house had ever known. I'd learned to pause before sharing my truth. I'd savour the safety of the delay. With expectation suspended, hope shone brightly somehow.

I risked a shrug. What could he do? Dad grunted, while Mum ate quickly without tasting the meal. I turned over my plan in my mind.

Dad continued to eat slowly, the lines scored across his forehead in a perpetual frown, all thoughts of his daughter forgotten. I'd tried to gain his attention when I was younger. I'd cast a quivering line and hoped for something in return, but my past was littered with the shards of expectation. Was it any wonder I brokered no faith in others?

Dad had chipped away at my opinions and dreams until they were grains of salt. Tiny, insignificant. Beneath the hurt, I knew he was wrong. I knew that salt killed the fat slugs in our back garden and that salt made the smallest wound sting. Like the grit caught in your shoe, it was more than just a speck of dirt.

I pushed the food around my plate. One day I would get out. I'd direct my anger and upset like a river coursing over rock. Eventually I'd wear a path through.

Eventually, I smiled into the middle distance and pushed my chair back from the table. The unconditional offer from Liverpool University burned with promise in the back pocket of my jeans.