



Becoming DINAH



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ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Prologue

Cut your hair off? Not as easy as you think. You need the right stuff for a start.

Electric shaver? No. Proper scissors? No. If you haven't got them, you'd better think hard. Think fast.

First thing, get rid of the weight, get it from long to short. And if your hair lies the whole length of your back, as thick and heavy as a blanket, this could take forever. So make a start.

Grab a great big hank of hair, wind it around your hand and pull it upwards, away from your scalp. Go carefully with the redhandled scissors, the ones that you took out of the kitchen drawer that your mum uses for cutting coupons out of newspapers or cutting the string off a parcel. They're not sharp and the blades are bent but it's all you've got.

So get in close as you can. If you'd thought about it you might have bought a hair cutting kit from somewhere but you didn't think and anyway the nearest shop is seven miles away and this is

happening right here, right now, and it's too late for wishing what you might have done . . .

You cut. And you cut. You have to do this over and over again, cut and cut and cut, hair on the left, hair on the right. Chop into the top sections, pulling and cutting and trying not to leave any long bits as you go. Ignore the tremble of your fingers and the bump of your heart asking over and over if this is the right thing to do. Because you know it is. You know it is.

The back of the head is the hardest because you can't see. Balance a mirror behind you, hang it off the hook on the bathroom door. Try not to block out your own reflection or get in your own way as you snip and cut and scratch. It's hard to make your hands do the right thing when you can only see them in reverse and it takes forever and the muscles in your arms ache and the muscles in your shoulders ache and it's the biggest thing you've done so far in your whole life. Well, it was until yesterday. But you don't want to think about yesterday so you carry on.

Then when it's as short as you can get it, you stare at the new you in the mirror and you see yourself for the first time. You look like someone you don't recognise. And it's not good. But you look different and that was the point, wasn't it? All that's left where your beautiful hair used to be is clumps and wisps and wavy tufts sticking up at strange angles, and painful scratches where the dull blade of the scissors caught your skin. And even though you're tired there's still more to do.

So you fill the sink, bend over and dip your head in the water. Add a squeeze of shampoo. Make a lather on the tufts, all white

and soft as a cloud, and you look like an advert on the telly for someone having a really good time in the shower, except you're not having a really good time. Tough. It's too late to turn back now. You make the suds thick and creamy and you're just flying blind now because you don't really know if it will work but you've got no choice.

You get your mum's razor, the one she's been using under her arms and on her legs for months, the one with little rusty bits on the corners, the one that's been sitting on the side of the bath forever, the one you have to hope is still sharp.

You start by making long tracks along the great curve of your head and the razor keeps snagging and getting clogged up with your tufty hair. The soap stings and the blood turns the suds to pink like no advert you've ever seen.

And you really know now, you're more certain than ever that you should have had a better plan.

You rinse the razor under the tap to make it clean again and you keep going even though it hurts with all the tangles and pulls and you feel like you're on the verge of tears but you choke them down. It wouldn't take much more to make you cry. Not today.

It seems to take forever. Your arms hurt even more than before. As the suds and the lather disappear you see that your scalp isn't as brown as your face. It's not even brown at all, it's the same colour as your mum's face in winter, white and pale. Your stomach lurches. You're going to look ridiculous with non-matching skin with cuts and scratches all over the place and your eyes red from not sleeping

all night, or like someone who's had cancer, like someone who's dying not someone on the brink of a new life. But you stick with it, keep making tracks with the razor until the tracks take over and suddenly there are no more tracks to be made.

You rinse your head under the tap and feel the tickle of the water like cold fingers dancing on your new skin. Then you stand up and dry your face. Then you look. Look again. Look again and keep looking because it's worked. There you are. You're not boring old Dinah any more. You're someone completely new. Or you will be.

But there's no time to stand admiring your new self in the mirror. You have to clean the silky, black, wet tufts out of the plughole, pick the long tresses up off the bathroom floor, and make sure you don't look too hard because you'll wonder at the colour of your hair, like the bark of a tree, and the shine of your hair, like the sleek coat of a cat, and you'll remember the weight of your hair and the feel of it, soft and heavy against your skin, warm on your back. And you might remember all the times people said they loved it and how they wanted to touch it and how it made you beautiful and how it made you feel.

And you think about putting your hair in the bin, but you realise you can't and you don't know why so you bundle the tresses into a small, soft pillow and you take it downstairs with you and put it in a carrier bag. And you put the carrier bag in your rucksack and you put your coat on and say goodbye to the only life you've ever known.

Now it really is time to go.

1. Dinah

The nearest way for Dinah to get from New Bedford to the main road is down Tanners Lane, through the gate, over three fields, skirt the industrial estate where they make tyres, where the black smoke stings her eyes and settles like soot on the trees, under the bridge and across the island. That's the way to go. There'll be loads of vans and lorries going to Newcastle, to Sunderland, to Durham, and then south, someone's bound to stop.

But the rain has been lashing the cottage all night, spring comes slowly to the valley and great black shadows sit like ghouls on the landscape. So after crossing the fields, she'll have to make sure she scrapes the mud off her shoes before she gets into anyone's car. Start as you mean to go on, Dinah. Quiet and polite.

If she'd kept quiet, kept her feelings to herself, she wouldn't be in this position. If she'd been polite, she wouldn't be running away.

She stuffs her things into a bag. Everything is squeezed into something else: her clothes in a ugly holdall, her money into her jeans, her head shoved into a woollen hat that feels too big and baggy now. And her heart, too big for her chest, pressed up against her ribs, beating wild and hard. But Dinah has been awake all night waiting for the right time and this is it. She has to go but it's such a big step. What if it all goes wrong?

Not a sound inside the cottage. Not a sound beyond. Just the endless calling, one bird to another, the wind tearing new leaves from the trees, and somewhere far off a farm dog barks, whoops of delight at being released into the open, let loose, dashing across the land, miles to cover. If Dinah could, she would bark as loud and long as any animal. Louder.

Last thing of all, she goes into the kitchen. Twice now she's nearly fainted from not eating. It seems unimportant these days with so much going on inside. One jam sandwich, one cheese, a carton of milk, a packet of biscuits. There's no space in the rucksack so she shoves it all in a carrier bag and then stands at the front door. Get on with it, Dinah. Turn the handle, Dinah. Come on, come on. Time to go. For ever.

And to make sure she means it, to make sure there is no way back she takes her phone out of her pocket and throws it on the stone floor. It cracks and splinters. A shard of black plastic flies off and hits the door.

And then *crack!*

A bang on the other side of the wooden door makes her jump.

‘Open up!’

And again, the crack of wood on wood. It’s Ahab.

‘Open up!’

Her heart’s pounding again but she doesn’t want to look scared. She makes sure her hat is covering the whole of her head and quickly kicks the broken phone under the table, out of sight.

She takes a deep breath and opens the door just as he raises a broom to bang again. He almost falls on to her as he pushes past. His long hair is matted, his trousers wet and his one leg shakes. He could be a hundred years old by the look of him. Hard to believe he’s less than half of that.

His top half is all muscle. Dinah’s seen him in the summer with his shirt off, tattoos up his arms and on his neck, faded cryptic messages and a rose that used to be red, a name too, ‘Caroline’.

Dinah wonders if she’ll get a tattoo once she’s far away. She’s seen beautiful white ink ones, as fine and delicate as lace, that would look good against her brown skin.

Ahab tries to lean against the banister in the hall but slips, falls off his homemade crutch and on to the stairs.

‘Christ! Your mother, where is she?’ The empty leg of his

jeans is soaking and black with mud. He wears one boot, the laces trailing along the carpet like garden worms. He's staring at her. 'Where's Anne?'

Dinah reluctantly puts her bags down. 'Sacred Women.' 'What?'

'The retreat. She's doing a workshop at the Sacred Women Retreat in—'

'Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.' He kneads the stump of his knee, as he mutters one word after another like he's reading a shopping list.

He motions for the broom but as soon as he starts to stand, his leg shakes again, as if it's about to buckle under the weight of his body. He folds himself back on to the step and bangs the wood hard on the floor. 'Where the bloody hell is she? Why didn't she tell me? "Might be going away," that's what she said. "I might." *I might*. Not definitely. She should have bloody well told me. I need her.'

Dinah's not sure if he's angry with her or angry with her mother or just angry with the world as usual.

He holds his dirty hand out and Dinah has to take it. It makes her wince.

'Hold still,' he says. He flips the broom upside down and slides the matted bristles under his arm. He puts his other arm around her shoulder. He smells of the earth, of the pitted track where he must have fallen, of oil and grease and the enormous, dark farmhouse no one ever visits.

‘Home,’ he says as he hops to the front doorstep. ‘Not fast neither,’ and Dinah barely has time to throw her bags on the floor before he’s shuffling and nudging and shouldering her up the track.

‘Why haven’t you gone with her?’ he asks between his panting breaths. He steadies himself on the broom, hops on his one good leg, sways into her, hops again, and all the while Dinah bears the weight of a six-foot man on her shoulder and the slippery feel of the mud he’s smeared on the back of her neck. This isn’t what she wants to be doing. She should be on her way by now.

‘Did you fall over?’ she asks.

‘You try hopping half a mile downhill,’ he says. ‘See how you get on.’

Then silence all the way up to his house. Silence, apart from his grunting and swearing, apart from the squelch of three boots in the black, gritty sludge, apart from the everlasting rain, bouncing off the tin roof of the barn making everything twice as slippery and twice as slow.

They get to the front door. It’s wide open.

‘Help me in,’ he says.

Dinah has to grab him round the waist to get him up the three stone steps and into the long hallway. It feels strange to hold a grown man like he’s a baby. He nods towards the kitchen and she manoeuvres him past a wooden bench as narrow as a church pew that’s covered in bits of metal and

car parts, along the grey carpet that used to be red, that used to have green and blue thistles and a golden diamond pattern down the middle. They shuffle through another door and finally into some warmth. A kettle steams on a big black range, chairs scatter around a square wooden table and instead of a tablecloth, layers of newspaper and more bits of metal, an enormous cog and a rusty dial. It might be warm but it's not welcoming.

He drops into a chair. 'Pass me a cloth,' he says.

Dinah picks a tea towel off the kitchen table and hands it to him.

'Wet it,' he says.

His voice rumbles deep in his chest like an old engine. He doesn't ask, just commands, and no matter how she tries, it's hard to answer back. It's hard to say no when you've always said yes.

She turns on the tap, and notices then on the deep windowsill, a bird's wing, soft velvet black with flashes of deepest blue, beautiful and out of place. She wonders what happened to the bird, how it died or who killed it. One minute it was flying free and the next? She imagines the bird falling to earth, crashing into the ground and lying still. If she had time she would say a prayer for it and she hasn't prayed for a very, very long time.

'Peace,' she whispers but that word just reminds her of the mess she's in.

Why does everything feel so wrong? Dinah's whole world is upside down, dead things and angry men and cuts all over her head that are beginning to sting.

She hands him the damp cloth and as he wipes his face, his eyes appear, his nose, his lips. He becomes human again. Just.

If she hadn't messed about making sandwiches she wouldn't have been in when Ahab knocked on the door. She would be halfway across the field by now, she would have got away.

'Will you be all right now?' she asks, walking towards the door.

He looks at her and makes a half-laugh. 'Do I look all right?' He slaps his leg, the one that ends at the knee, and waves the empty muddy cloth where his calf should be. 'Does this look all right to you? Does it?'

It's the sort of question that doesn't want an answer and anyway Ahab is the sort of man you don't answer back. One day, when she's far away, Dinah's going to stand up for herself and tell people like him what she really thinks. Not long now.

'Where is the . . . I mean, shall I get it for you?' she says.

'My leg? Where is my bloody leg? Is that what you're trying to say? Well I'll tell you where it was until yesterday.' Grabbing the table and then the work surface and then the back of a chair, he hops and stumbles to the window and points to one of the outbuildings that litter the yard.

‘In there. It was in the workshop in the back of a white split screen.’

She follows his gaze but can see nothing. ‘A split screen?’

‘A van!’ he says, turning to her. ‘A 1967 T1 Split Screen Volkswagen Campervan in Whale White. My leg is in that bloody van!’

‘OK,’ says Dinah. She takes one step towards the door and then he’s shouting again.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To get it for you.’

‘It’s not there now, you bloody idiot! They came and took it, didn’t they? Disappeared, drove it off. Stolen. I’ve been working on that bloody van for six solid months, nearly finished it was. My sodding knee was killing me, still is. So I just took my leg off for half an hour. Came home. Fell asleep. Someone came and took it and I know who it bloody well was. With my leg lying under the back seat. Do you think I would have fallen all the way down the bloody track to your house if it was still over there?’

His words slap her one by one. His swearing and shouting. He’s been like this for years, shouting and demanding. Nearly every memory she has of him is the same, firing his snarling, sarcastic words like arrows aimed at everyone in his way. He used to be the boss, the big man, in charge of everything, owner of everything. Well, that was then. Things have changed for Dinah. As soon as she

made her plan, something clicked and shifted and this time, and for the rest of her life, Dinah can just walk away. She's got bigger problems than him. She turns and walks off.

'OK. Bye, Ahab.'

He holds his hand out towards her. 'Wait! Wait! Don't go!'

She keeps walking.

'You can drive,' he shouts. 'I've seen you! Wait!'

Dinah is off down the hallway. She thinks about going back for the bird's wing, to rescue it from him. If she had wings she would be far away by now, two black wings on her back taking her up high away, from everything she's done wrong and from angry men and angry girls and the shame and embarrassment of her mistake.

'Wait! Please!' His voice has desperation in it. She stops but doesn't turn.

'Two hundred pounds!' he shouts. 'I'll give you two hundred pounds.'

Dinah stays still, her new naked scalp prickling against the rough wool of the hat.

'Three hundred pounds,' he says. 'All you've got to do is get me south, drive me to Dorset.'

She goes to speak.

'I know, I know. It's a long way. I've got another van. You can drive, can't you? I know who took it. I know where they

live. But we've got to go now. They can't have gone that far. That van can't go over sixty. We might even catch them up. Three hundred pounds. Three fifty.'

In the front pocket of her jeans, Dinah has two hundred and seventy-four pounds and some coins. She has no idea how much money she's going to need. She'll need to eat, she'll need to find somewhere to live. It might take her weeks to get a job.

'Four hundred,' she says and they stand looking at one another, the rain running down the window, the wind whipping branches against the glass.

'You used to be shy,' he says.

'I need some clothes,' shouts Ahab. 'Go on. Quick. Trousers and two shirts. Couple of jumpers too. Might be May but it's chilly at night. Need the right clothes for a night on the road. First door on the right.'

The stairs are wide and deep and covered in the same faded red and green carpet. Dinah takes them two at a time.

He calls after her, 'And some underwear.' Dinah nearly misses a step and stumbles.

The room smells stale, fusty and sour. The bed is a mess. Dinah doesn't really want to go in but she has to. Two thin, flowery curtains are half open and a dirty light sifts through the small, low windows. She didn't realise how bad the

house had become since he's been living alone. She feels sorry for him all of a sudden.

Dinah's mother used to clean the farmhouse, she used to bring his washing down to the cottage and put it in with theirs, iron it afterwards. Once or twice, Dinah had to take it back up to the farmhouse and leave it in a black plastic bag outside the door. She would see him sometimes, at the same kitchen table with a screwdriver or a hammer or bent over a plate eating bread like a starving man.

But then the laundry stopped and instead Dinah's mother became 'Anne O'Neill, Virtual PA', doing all Ahab's ordering online, stuff for the van repairs, paying bills, all his accounts, answering the phone, anything and everything that involves the outside world.

But all the same, he should open a window occasionally, pick all his clothes up, change the duvet cover, put things away. Vacuum once in a while. He doesn't care about himself and he doesn't care about anyone else either.

There's a pile of clothes on a chair. Dinah grabs a few things and then gingerly picks up two pairs of boxer shorts. They look clean but who knows. Dinah has lived on her own with her mother for years and years. There's no man in the house, no boys, not even visitors. She'd been all alone stuck out in the middle of nowhere and then finally she got to go to school and what does she do? Ruins everything. Breaks her world apart. Typical Dinah.

She bundles everything up in a bedspread and brings them downstairs.

‘My coat,’ he says, gesturing to a peg on the back door.

Dinah watches him pull a hat over his hair, still mud-caked.

‘I need a piss,’ he mutters.

Dinah shudders at the word and the way he speaks. He makes her feel sick, the way he smells, the way he shouts. She walks backwards towards the door. ‘I’m going to get my stuff,’ she says and runs down the track back home. Everything’s still there waiting, obviously. No one comes this far up the lane. She picks up her bags . . . but wait.

She doesn’t have to go back. She didn’t promise anything. She could just take off across the fields; she’d be gone in a moment and Ahab wouldn’t have a chance of catching her. Not with one leg and a broom for a crutch. But he is going south at least. And she’d get four hundred quid. And she wouldn’t have to hitchhike.

By the time she walks back up the hill, he’s locked his front door and is waiting on the top step. ‘Where are you going with that lot?’ he says, gesturing to her holdall. ‘Two days at the very most. One, if you drive like you mean it.’

Dinah says nothing. She doesn’t have to answer. She just stands so he can lean on her shoulder as he hops down, one, pause, two, pause, three. He’s heavy and she groans under the weight.

‘You should get some muscles on you, girl. All you lot do is play on your phones all the bloody time. I tried to get me an apprentice a few years back. Did anyone apply? One half-witted little runt the size of a badger. Ran off after I asked him a few questions. Couldn’t look me in the eye. Told the woman at the Job Centre not to send me any more narrowbacks. So I do it all myself.’

They shuffle over to the barn and Dinah pulls the door open. She hasn’t seen inside since she was a child. It was different then. There was an old, green caravan with no door with all the stuffing ripped out of the seats. Dinah and the other children used to climb inside and play house, long summers jumping on and off the rickety table watching spiders spin their cotton wool traps. The whole place was a mess then with nooks and crannies for hide-and-seek, with nests in corners where wild cats hissed and scratched and birds swooped down from the rafters. And there was a massive, wide brown American car that somehow took six adults and five children with room to spare.

Dinah’s not just leaving home, she’s leaving New Bedford and everything it stood for, all of those memories, all of the things she grew up with. But it’s too late now.