

Are We All LEMMINGS & SNOWFLAKES?

Mum looks sad for a moment. “Oh, Olive, you’re not mad. You’re just...”

“Happiness challenged?”

“No...”

“Coming down with a touch of insanity?”

“No...”

“Mentally high-maintenance?”

She laughs at that one. “Just open the door already.”

WELCOME TO CAMP RESET

Are We All Lemmings and Snowflakes? is a work of fiction but it deals with many real issues including suicidal behaviour, mental health conditions including depression and mania, and discussion of sexual assault.

Links to advice and support can be found at the back of the book.

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USBORNE

1

*To falling down seven times,
but getting up eight*

There are too many people.

They clutter the pavements. They let their stupid children scream as they run under the garden hose. They chat outside until late. They play music at barbecues. They don't seem to care that they're killing me. They have loud, pointless building work done on their perfectly adequate houses. *Crash crash crash* of the scaffolding going up. Builders yelling over the blast of their radio. *Ping ping ping* goes my phone. People sharing their noise. Here's my ENDLESS NOISE. I exist. I am one of the too-many people and I need you to know I exist by screaming out my loud stupid noise.

I just want it to be quiet.

To not have to listen to the damn noise.

All.

The.

Damn.

Time.
I just need peace.
But the noise is *everywhere*.

2

A scrape of the chair being pushed back from where it's wedged under the door handle.

Mum's voice. "Olive?"

I hear the creak of her footstep on the floorboard. I wince. Close my eyes and squeeze my hands over my ears.

I feel light on my closed eyelids.

"Olive?"

Her breath hits my cheek. I'm going to have to open my eyes. I peel one open, jerking back as the light floods my vision. It takes a moment until I have the energy for the other eye.

Mum's worried face comes into vague focus. "What are you doing under here?"

If I wasn't so tired, I would probably care about the wobble in her voice. But it's like every single muscle of my body has a weight tied to it with a gift ribbon, pinning me down to the carpet.

Because I am on the carpet.

I am under my desk and my desk is covered with two duvets.

My mouth feels stitched shut. But if I don't answer her, she won't go away and leave me alone. And all I want is to be left alone.

"Olive? Please? You're worrying us sick. Talk to me."

I close my eyes again to give myself the energy required to open my mouth.

"I'm just resting."

"Resting?"

I gulp from the effort of talking. "Yes."

A sigh. It makes me open my eyes to see her pinching the top of her nose. I have let her down again. I am ruining everything again. I am so worthless. I hate humans. I hate that they're everywhere. But the human I hate most is me.

The

Human

I

Always

Hate

Most

Is

Me.

Because it makes Mum's face look like that.

"You have to let some air in."

"No..."

But she doesn't hear me whimper. Her feet pound across my room. No no no. I cower before it's even happened.

"You've got to let the world in, Olive. Look, it's your dad's birthday and you've not even wished him a happy one. Try. Please. For him. Come on, pull yourself together."

She tells me to pull myself together the moment she pulls open the curtains. She does the one thing that will ensure I do the opposite. The light hits me like bullets. She flings open the windows and the world comes rushing in – loud and brash and, God, I hate summer. I can smell the meat of barbecues. I can hear the lawnmowers roaring. I can hear the birds squawking and the buzz of insects and the fun that everyone else in the world is having. It overloads me. I desperately rummage back under my blankets. Even though the air is heavy with heat. Even though I'm sweating so much I've not needed the bathroom all day. The world is drowning me and the blankets are my oxygen mask.

"We're having your cousins round for a barbecue at six," she says. "I want you up, showered and dressed by then, please. Just...try. Please, Olive. Maybe we can do it together? How about that?"

I try to bury further under my covers but Mum claws them away.

I would cry if I knew how.

I've forgotten how.

"Olive, you're scaring me." Her voice is soft again. "Whatever is happening right now, don't let it win. Okay, darling? Come on, get up. You were fine last week."

I can't have been fine last week.

I can't remember what fine feels like.

“I’m going to come and check on you in twenty minutes.”

She is closing the door. She is leaving me alone.

God, I am so tired.

A plane flies overhead and the noise of the engine makes my body feel like it’s been plugged into an electric current.

I don’t think I can handle this much longer.

Four hours later

Oh thank you, thank you, thank you for raining.

The sky has ripped open, chucking fistfuls of water from the clouds in giant clumps. They splatter against my head. My hair is already plastered to my face.

I’ve remembered how to cry.

I sob as I run through the woods up the road from our house, my gold ballet pumps slipping in the new mud. Lightning spasms across the sky and thunder belches around me.

It drowns out my screaming.

No one is around to hear it anyway. The windows are closed. The barbecues are rained off. The rain has driven everyone inside and I am the only one here in the clearing, screaming up into the sky.

Screaming because I’m so scared.

Screaming because I can’t believe it’s happening again.

Screaming because it’s so much less life-threatening than what I really want to do.

My top is plastered to my body, my jeans are heavy with rainwater. I run and scramble and tumble through mud. My heart feels like it’s been sliced down the middle and every painful thing that’s ever happened is oozing out of it. Leaving a slimy trail behind me. I’ve got to keep moving. I’ve got to keep running.

Running away from myself.

Running away from what I want to do.

I keep going and going, down little paths through the trees, losing my bearings. I have to keep running. Keep moving. Until, until...

I come to the top of one of the clay cliffs.

I stop.

The drop is sheer enough. I slow to a walk, moving closer to the edge. The rain is softer under the canopy of trees. I hug the trunk of an oak tree and think about things I shouldn’t.

I want to do this so much.

I want this feeling to end so much.

And I’m not sure what happens next, and I’m not sure how much time has passed, and I’m not sure of the sequence of things, but the drop is still below me and I’m crying and standing on the edge of it but I’m still holding onto the tree trunk, but then...then... Several men in uniform are walking slowly out towards me through the storm, their hands outstretched, the rain bouncing off their helmets.

And they’re saying:

“Olive?”

3

Okay, so it doesn't look good.

I'm thinking of all the things I need to explain.

1. The shattered glass of our old greenhouse from where I kicked in the window
2. The blood all over it
3. The fact Mum found the blood, and the glass, and I'd vanished
4. The several eyewitnesses who saw a distressed girl running through a storm
5. The fact I was found, by police, standing at the top of a cliff
6. Because my mum had dialled 999...

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," I tell the psychiatric nurse. The adrenaline from the whole darned mess still pumps through me, making me capable of defending myself. I have to clear things up before the numb and exhaustion return

– their arms wide open, saying, "We meet again, Olive," like a James Bond villain.

Mum and Dad sit next to me in the plastic hospital chairs. Dad's leg is shaking and Mum leans forward to interrupt.

"We found blood all over the greenhouse," she says hysterically.

And a tiny part of me laughs at how middle class that sounds.

The nurse's name tag says *Jake* and he isn't impressed by my mother. Or any of us, to be honest.

"Maybe Olive should be the one to explain?" he says. I see him glance at his watch.

I sigh and shake my head. "Okay," I start. "So I kicked in the side of the greenhouse and cut my foot. But I wasn't trying to..." I can't go any further. Not with Mum and Dad here.

Jake nods his head towards my parents. "We can talk alone if you'd like, Olive?"

Mum straightens up, ripples of rejection radiating off her. "Oh, yes. Of course," she says. "Olive? Would it be easier if we left?"

An impossible situation which I'm too drained to think through properly. Mum will take it personally, but I can't say what I need to say when she's here.

I find her eyes. "Maybe, just for a minute?"

She blinks.

Dad murmurs, "Of course, sweetheart."

Jake stands as they stand. "I'll come get you in a bit," he tells them.

The legs of their chairs screech across the floor and my entire body winces.

It comes rushing back.

The noise, the endless noise of outside, of my cousins arriving, of music floating up the stairs, of people having fun while I was screaming inside.

I couldn't stand the noise any more.

"We'll be right outside, Olive." Dad's voice is gruff. I can sense his anger, boiling just under the crust of his skin. I've ruined his birthday. I've made it about me, yet again. But he can't admit he's angry. You can't tell suicidal people that you're pissed off at them for being suicidal, no matter how much that is true.

Not that I'm suicidal.

Which is what I tell Jake the moment the door closes.

He ignores me and digs in his desk drawer, pulls out a questionnaire. "Maybe just start by filling this out for me?"

I read through the familiar questions that greet me like long-lost friends. I used to have to fill this out before every pointless therapy session I had last winter.

Over the last two weeks, have you had:

Little pleasure or interest in doing things?

Not at all

Several days

More than half the days

Nearly every day

Well, I mean, how are you supposed to answer that? Last week I had ALL the pleasure and ALL the interest in doing things. Life was a basin of water to plunge my face into. I'd soared through almost all my exams, drunk till I was sick, kissed Rick Macaby at the Freedom party in the park and dragged him into a bush to do more than kissing. I'd laughed and twirled and danced and connected and treated each moment like a lemon to squeeze until there wasn't a drop of juice left and then I'd even eat the lemon rind, thank you very much, as long as I didn't have to go to bed. But then this week? This week my primary activities were burying my head under two duvets to drown out the sounds of the world existing, and staring at my hand until I wasn't sure if it was real or not. And before both of those extremes, I was pretty usual. So what the hell am I supposed to answer?

I circle *Several days* and move on.

Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much?

Why wasn't there an e) I *would* sleep if only everyone would just SHUT UP AND LET ME SLEEP?

I pick *Several days* for most of the survey, because I know that will protect me from getting sectioned. And I can't get sectioned by someone who looks as bored by the idea as Jake.

What a job it must be, being a psychiatric nurse in an A & E department. Imagine if assessing suicidal people was as commonplace as a barista making a flat white. I push over my finished sheet and watch as he counts it up in his head. Then he puts it down and doesn't tell me my score because they never tell you your score.

"We've not got as long as I'd like, I'm afraid," Jake says. "But why don't we start with talking through your history? Your mum mentioned you've had episodes of feeling very sad before? Why don't we—"

I interrupt him. "Look," I say, "I didn't want to come here. I didn't mean to cause all this fuss. I'm fine. Really I am. Well, I'm not. Obviously. But I'm fine in that you don't have to worry about sending me home with a *not-a-danger* sticker and then I go jump in front of a bus and you get called in for a difficult meeting."

Jake makes a note of what I've just said. Because you can't mention jumping in front of a bus without them having to write it down. Even if you're promising not to jump in front of one.

"Thank you for your concern, Olive, but it's up to me to worry about you. Not the other way around. It's up to me to decide if you're safe."

"But it's not what it looks like."

"So, what is it like?"

And I tell Jake about how, actually, tonight just demonstrates how *well* I'm doing. Because me hanging onto a tree trunk is a GOOD sign. And, actually, I was only up

there because I wanted to *live*. Because I was trying to protect myself.

"I did want to die," I tell him and just that is enough for the tears to come. "Because I wanted the noise to stop. But, I didn't want to die for ever, if that makes sense? I just wanted to die...temporarily? So I could have a little break."

He lowers his nose. "You wanted to die *temporarily*?"

"Look, I know that's not possible," I say snappily. "But it was so noisy, and Mum made me come down for this barbecue because it's my dad's birthday and there's only so long they can be understanding before they get pissed off. And my younger cousins wouldn't stop screaming. Then the rain started and we all had to go into the living room and there were too many people and it was so loud and it hurt my head so...so...I ran down the garden into the greenhouse. Just for some quiet."

Jake is nodding, so I plough on.

"Anyway, then I was there and the storm was there and I realized just how *not normal* it was that I'd run out into the garden. And my head felt like it was burning and screaming and full of insects that were exploding one by one behind my eyes..." Another tear bubbles up and jumps down my cheek. "And I realized that I'm not very well again," I gasp, needing more air. "And I'm not sure I can go through that again. And, then, well, I'm not sure what happened but there was glass all over the floor and I'd cut my foot and there was this big shard and I kept looking at it and thinking

that I just wanted everything to go away..." I really cry then. "And thinking..."

Jake leans forward and looks the least bored he's looked since I met him fifteen minutes ago. But, even with my enraptured audience and all, I can't go there. I blink ten times, shake my short hair out and look determinedly at my sweaty hands. The thought is too big, too overwhelming...

"But I didn't," I tell him. Because that's the important bit. "Even though I knew I could. And I knew I needed to get away from the glass and away from the noise and just get away until it passed. So I went up the common for a walk."

Jake digests this. He sips a glass of water. Eventually he says, "So you were up in the woods because you were trying to save your own life?"

I nodded. "Yes! But you see, I can't explain that to Mum and Dad. I say the word 'suicide' and they totally flip out and won't listen to anything else. All they hear is me saying 'I want to die'. They don't hear me when I say, 'But I tried really hard not to.'"

He looks at my test sheet again. "Your scores are quite high, Olive."

Jake taps on his computer, pulling up my records. His fingers are clumsy and slow. He double-clicks, reads, doesn't seem to mind that he's keeping me there waiting. "So, you say you've had periods of feeling very low before?"

I nod slowly. "Yes. Umm, last winter everyone got a bit worried about me. And then a year before that. But I've been feeling okay the last few months." I think... I mean,

I'm not always like *super sane*. But then, who is? But I hadn't felt the Nothing in ages. I really thought...*hoped* it had gone for good.

Jake double-clicks and brings up a box on his screen. "Ahh," he says. "And I can see here on your records that a psychiatrist assessed you last year and said—"

"STOP!" I shout out. "Stop it, I don't want to know!"

He looks up.

"I don't want to know my diagnosis," I'm practically yelling. "That should be in my notes. Don't tell me."

He is unmoved by my outburst and scrolls down. "Ahh, yes. It does say here. I apologize."

"I don't believe in labels," I tell him. Oh God, I sound like I want to be a freaking HIPSTER psycho.

"Fair enough." Jake doesn't press the point. He asks me some more basic stuff about my moods, my behaviour, my feelings, how I rate things out of ten. I can feel the adrenaline leave my body and the heaviness snuggle back in, complaining that its spot was taken on the couch. Jake starts yammering on about how it's okay to talk about how I'm feeling, and how it's IMPORTANT to let the people who care about me know what's going on. He suggests a course of antidepressants, warning me that they take a few weeks to work.

"How do you feel about medication, Olive?"

I'm so tired now I'm not sure I feel anything. "Sure. Whatever." I blink and it takes longer than a blink should. It takes a lot of effort to open my eyes back up again.

“We can see how you get on with them. Shall we bring your parents back in? Give them an update?”

“Huh? Yes, okay.”

My fingers are so heavy, my wrists are so heavy, my arms are so heavy, my shoulders are sinking down, down, down into my ribcage.

Mum’s at the door. Dad is world-weary and behind her. They screech their chair legs along the floor again and I close my eyes, trying to suppress what it triggers.

“Olive is aware that she gave us all a scare here,” Jake tells them. “But I don’t believe her to be in any danger right now.”

“How can you say that?” Mum shrills. “She tried to...”

“Olive has explained what happened this evening, and I repeat, I don’t believe her to be in any danger.” His stern delivery temporarily shuts her up. “You can take her home now. I’ve prescribed some SSRIs. These are a standard antidepressant that should help with Olive’s low moods. I know she’s not taken medication before, but I think, considering what happened this evening, it will be beneficial for her. Here’s a leaflet about them.” He hands over some brightly-coloured pamphlet and Mum grabs it out of his hands. “I’ll write a letter to your GP, and you can book a follow-up appointment with them to talk through her further treatment options.”

Mum is not taking this well. I can feel her angry vibes, shooting off her like arrows.

“She needs a bed,” Mum says. And she doesn’t mean a

nice new one from Dreams. She means a bed in a psychiatric ward.

I poke my fingers into my eyes. “I don’t need a bed. I just need double-glazing.”

Dad tuts. “Olive, we’ve gone through this. You can’t shut out all the noise. You’ve got to learn to COPE with the noise.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, I’m sorry. I forgot. Whoopsie. Silly me. I’ll just start coping now. Cheers for the reminder.”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

It’s his birthday and I’m being a dick and I’ve not even said sorry, and I’m too tired for this. I sink into my chair. I let my muscles crumble into dust, my brain turn off, as Jake and Mum and Dad discuss me like I’m not there. And I

Just

Keep

Wishing

That it would

Please

Stop

Happening

...

But it seems like the Nothing is back again.

And I don’t have the words to tell you how much I wish it wasn’t.