

Passage 1 – Cinnamon

- 1 Cinnamon is one of the oldest known spices, native to parts of India and Sri Lanka – originally found only in the latter – but native also to Bangladesh and Burma. After the bushes have been growing for two years, the outer bark of the branches is scraped off to reveal the inner bark; this in turn is pinned out and, when dry, it curls into tubular rolls called quills or sticks.
- 2 Cinnamon was used in Chinese medicine and is mentioned in a medical textbook dated almost 3,000 years ago. About 1,000 years later, it was imported by the Egyptians, who used it as an embalming agent in their elaborate system of burial. Cinnamon had an important role to play in traditional Indian medicine, being seen as a cure for indigestion and colds. So highly-prized was cinnamon among ancient societies that it was considered a gift fit even for gods: cinnamon was offered to the Greek god Apollo, god of light and the sun, at his temple in Miletus, thus establishing a link between cinnamon and religion. Early Hebrew religious texts make several references to cinnamon: it was one of the ingredients of the oil used to anoint Hebrew priests and to bless specific articles in the temple, thus being linked to holiness. It was also one of the ingredients used to make the incense which perfumed the offerings in the temple.
- 3 Cinnamon was regarded as a luxury, a symbol of affluence, fit also for kings: the Roman Emperor Nero burned a year's worth of the city's supply at his wife's funeral. So prestigious was cinnamon that its sources were shrouded in mystery by merchants who wanted to protect their monopoly on supplies, so it is obvious that legends would grow up around it. For example, a Frenchman who travelled to Egypt in the thirteenth century reported that cinnamon could be found at the source of the Nile and caught in nets by fishermen. Because of its delightful flavour, cinnamon was used in cooking, and featured in many diverse cuisines throughout the world, such as Indian, Turkish and Persian.
- 4 When cinnamon was brought to Europe by Venetian traders, it became just as valued as a cooking ingredient, especially in the kitchens of the elite. Cinnamon was mixed with cloves and warm water and placed in the sick room of plague victims, because it was considered a cure for that deadly disease. The popularity of cinnamon was used by countries in Europe to gain domination over one another by controlling cinnamon production. Prominent among these were Portugal, Holland and Britain.
- 5 Cinnamon is no less popular or useful nowadays than it was in former times. Its use as a flavouring in the cooking of savoury dishes has continued down through the centuries. Additionally, it is used in the cooking of sweet dishes like apple pie. The Chinese were right all that time ago to think that cinnamon had medicinal properties, because the aromatic oils that come from the leaves and bark of the cinnamon bush have been shown to have antiviral properties. It helps prevent disease by being effective in killing mosquito larvae. Moreover, some people believe that it has an anti-inflammatory effect. They claim that cinnamon improves digestion, particularly of fruit and dairy products, and that using cinnamon in cooking, or even drinking cinnamon tea, is an ideal way to improve their diet.
- 6 Nowadays, pharmaceutical companies are considering the use of cinnamon in conventional medicine. It is possible that cinnamon may have powers which reduce cholesterol levels, thus addressing a modern day concern. Research which links consumption of cinnamon to lower blood sugar levels means that it is a potential treatment for diabetes, although the studies have been small and the findings need to be confirmed by bigger trials. This link to reduced blood sugar levels may prove beneficial in the war against obesity, another modern problem, especially in the West. An exciting breakthrough came in 2011 when scientists discovered that cinnamon might delay the onset of memory loss in elderly people, and that simply smelling the wonderful odour of this sweet spice can boost brain activity and thought processes.

Passage 2 – Esme and Kitty

(Two sisters, accompanied by their mother, travel to a new country to live with their grandmother.)

- 1 The ship, with its maximum capacity of passengers, was almost ready to leave harbour, vibrating and groaning. People crowded along the quay to bid farewell, waving flags and banners in the air. Esme turned towards her mother, standing next to her at the rail with one hand waving. Her wrist, protruding from her lace cuff, was thin, the gold watchstrap round it loose. Kitty put her arm through Esme's, keeping her eyes on the quay, watching as the great bales of cloth were loaded on to the ship. Her mother reached forward and patted Esme's fingers twice. Esme laid her head against her sister's shoulder. 5
- 2 Two days into the voyage, the ship began to sway, very slightly at first, and then to roll from side to side. Glasses slid along the tablecloths, soup slopped over the sides of bowls. People hurried to their cabins, staggering and falling as the ship bucked beneath them. The line of the horizon began to seesaw in the ship's windows, and the sea hurled itself at the glass. The crew were scurrying about the wet decks; everyone else had vanished. The realisation that she, alone among the passengers, did not feel seasick, made Esme feel both shameful and exuberant about her good health. 10
- 3 In the cabin Esme shared with her sister, Kitty lay crumpled on the bed. Esme bent over her deathly white face and was suddenly seized by the thought that her sister was desperately ill. Kitty opened her eyes, gazed at Esme without recognition, and then turned her face to the wall. 'I can't stand the sight of the sea,' she muttered. Esme brought her water, read to her and hung a towel over the window. When Kitty slept, she ventured out. The lounges and the dining rooms were deserted. She learned to lean forward into the angle made as the deck rose up in front of her like a horse taking a fence. She watched the foaming path left behind the ship and the grey, crested waves that they had passed over. 15 20
- 4 Eventually, Esme's first sight of the coast emerged from a shadowy, dank October dawn. The cold seemed to chill the flesh right down to the bone. Before disembarking for the journey to their grandmother's house, Esme and Kitty bumped into one another as they struggled to put on the few clothes they had, one garment on top of the other. Their mother tutted in disapproval. Were they really each wearing five dresses and two cardigans? Esme recalled memories of the home they'd left behind, of poking the yellow dust of the garden with her bare toe, of her mother bending over the garden table to pour tea into cups, her father beside her in a hammock, the edges of their white clothes shimmering. 25 30
- 5 A few days after their arrival, their grandmother announced that she would take the girls shopping in town. 'Grandma says she can't bear the shame of seeing us dressed like beggars,' said Kitty. Esme snorted. 'I don't think I'm going to like this place,' she retorted, 'if it's considered shameful not to own a coat.' The preparations for the excursion took up most of the morning. Their grandmother had letters to write, meals to plan, and then merely the threat of a headache cast a shadow over the plans for the day. The sisters waited and waited. 35
- 6 Suddenly the door flew open, and their grandmother stood there, resplendent in a fine wool coat, a capacious bag gripped in one hand. They were taken to a department store, where a man in a top hat held the door open for them, and an assistant accompanied them across the floor. Esme tipped her face back and saw a staircase sweeping up and up. Kitty felt for Esme's hand and squeezed it. The range of goods in the store was astounding. They were girls who had spent their lives in no more than a cotton dress, and here were vests, stockings, socks, scarves, coats, gloves, all clearly intended to be worn at once. Esme picked up a sweater and asked where it might be worn in the baffling order of things. The shop assistant looked at their grandmother, who shook her head. 40 45
- 7 'They're not used to living here,' she sighed in exasperation.

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