GIRL ON A PLANE

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This book is a work of fiction based on the author's own experiences.
The names and identifying characteristics of individuals are entirely fictional.
Though based on a real-life hijacking, dialogue, characters and incidents have been fictionalised, and some time frames have been compressed to convey the story.
Please read the postscript on pages 262–263 for further information.

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For my family and in memory of my father and mother

The vastest things are those we may not learn.
We are not taught to die or to be born
Nor how to burn
With love.
How pitiful is our enforced return
To those small things we are the masters of.

Mervyn Peake

1

Tuesday 8th September 1970

Bahrain - 14.00 hrs

A Forces child, that's what they call me.

It's all I've ever known: living in rented houses and moving every few years to a different country. So being here in Bahrain, on this small teardrop of an island in the Persian Gulf, feels normal.

Moving so often means leaving friends, starting new schools halfway through term and being the new girl over and over again. Catching up with schoolwork can be a struggle too, so when I was eleven my parents decided to send me to boarding school back in England. Now I travel out to see them in the holidays, when they can afford it.

My dad's in the army. And my mother, who I've always called Marni, is a primary school teacher.

It's the last day of the summer holidays, and tomorrow I'm leaving Bahrain for ever because we're moving again. My two younger brothers are travelling back to school a couple of days after me, and my parents will go at the end of the week.

Dad's been stationed back in England for a while. We won't be coming out to Bahrain again.

I'm meant to be packing, but I refuse to engage. I'm staying put, right here on the roof, lying in the shade next to Woofa, our dog, and stroking his golden ears. He is looking at me with puzzled, toffee-coloured eyes that say, *So how come* I'm *suddenly allowed up here?*

The house roof is flat with a chest-high wall round it. It's where we all come to catch the breeze. And on unbearably hot nights we're even allowed to sleep up here. Then the light in the pink sky, and the doves cooing in the date palms and the muezzin calling everyone to prayer wake us early. By seven the sun's so hot you have to go back inside anyway.

The walls were once painted a blinding white. Now they're smudged and pockmarked from the blows of endless cricket balls and footballs, especially around the goalmouth and the stumps my father painted on for the boys. The only things left up here now, stacked against the wall, are two green sunloungers. When you open them up, the sharp cogs pinch your fingers and the metal frame burns your bare skin.

Woofa is sending me waves of sympathy, like only dogs can. He knows that all I have to look forward to now are school and exams. He knows we're leaving. He's known for a while. He attached himself to our family after being abandoned by his previous one, so he's seen it all before.

I lift one of his ears. The inside looks like curled pasta. 'You'll be all right, Woofa,' I say. 'You only have to move next door this time, to live with the Adelmans. They're really nice.' Mrs Adelman is American and once taught me how to make cookies, half plain, half chocolate, in a roll that you cut slices off and then bake.

'Anna!'

Oh dear. Marni. I put my arms round Woofa's neck and bury my face in the thick fur of his ruff, but then, hearing my mother's footsteps on the stairs, I get up quickly.

'There you are!' Her eyes slide down to rest on Woofa. 'Oh, Anna,' she says. Woofa sidles guiltily past her and down the stairs. '*You*,' she says to me, 'are very naughty.' Her frown is disapproving, but her dark eyes don't mean it.

'I know.' I smile at her. 'I am.' She puts a firm arm round my shoulders, turns me and gently guides me down the stairs in front of her.

But I still don't go to pack. I sit down at the dining-room table beside Sam, my nine-year-old brother. He's drawn what I think is a hippo and is colouring it in purple.

'Anna?' Marni says, as I settle down next to him.

'I'll go in a minute. I promise,' I say. 'That's really good, Sam.' He carries on, concentrating, the tip of his tongue between his lips. The overhead fan whooshes the smells of woodchip and furniture polish around the room and flutters the pile of newspapers that Marni's using to wrap up the glasses. She picks up a water jug, rolls it in Arabic newsprint and packs it carefully into the silver foil-lined crate. She's done this so many times before. Her brown hands move quickly, her engagement ring catching the light.

'At the party last night,' I say, 'they said loads of planes have been hijacked.' My words hang in the air. The date-palm fronds finger the windowpane, like they're trying to get in.

Marni rips a sheet of newspaper in half. 'Ignore them,' she says. 'They're just trying to unsettle you before you fly.'

'No, Marni, they really have,' I insist. 'Everyone was talking about it. They were all teasing me, saying it'd be my turn tomorrow. It was quite funny really…'

Marni looks straight at me, her eyes intense. What Dad calls her *still waters run deep* eyes. 'Well, *you* aren't going to be hijacked.'

She reaches for the yellow-and-terracotta vase they bought in Venice on their honeymoon and starts wrapping it.

'No, you're right, I probably won't be.' I turn to Sam. 'Maybe you will instead.'

'Anna!' Marni shoots me a look.

'What does hijacked mean?' Sam pipes up, pulling a black crayon from the box and scribbling on a whiskery tail.

'Anna's being silly, darling. It hardly ever happens, and usually no one gets hurt.'

'But what *is* it?' he insists.

'It's when people hold up a plane to make it go somewhere else,' she says. Then she turns to me. 'Now, have you got enough envelopes to write home with?' I don't respond to this unsubtle attempt to get me to pack. I want to see if she'll say, *Anna, it's time to gird up your loins*. Or her favourite: *Anna, I'm going to have to put a bomb under you.* But it's neither. She just says, 'How much pocket money do you think you'll need this term?' And that's when I know she's heard about the hijackings too. She's thinking that we all have to fly this week, and doesn't want us to be worried about it, especially me, as I'll be travelling alone. Anyway, she said it hardly ever happens, so I suppose I'll probably be fine.

She tries another tack. 'You know Dad brought your school uniform back from the cleaners when he came home for lunch?' She pauses. 'It's on your bed, ready to pack.'

That's hard, really hard. Now *it's* here, I can't pretend any more, and she knows it. Now I have to face the facts.

I really am leaving tomorrow.

I wander into my room. And there it is, lying under transparent plastic: one brown tweed skirt – box pleats, regulation knee-length – matching brown regulation sack coat with horn buttons, fawn cardigan, itchy woollen games culottes, specially designed to give you nappy rash. I stuff it all out of sight, right down at the bottom of my case next to my granny-style school shoes. I'm not wearing *that* stuff on the plane. I'll change into it at the last possible moment, probably in the back of the taxi going to school from the station.

I put my travelling clothes out on my chair instead: a cream wrapover miniskirt, bronze T-shirt and the wide black silver-buckled belt I bought in Chelsea Girl last term. Then I slump down on the bed. I can't bear it. I won't see my family again until the end of term, fifteen whole weeks away, and that'll be in yet another new place where I won't know anyone at all. Again.

I roll over and curl up. A wave of homesickness washes through me, and just when I'm feeling *really* desperate I hear Woofa's tail wagging against the end of my bed. He comes alongside and leans his snout sympathetically on the edge of the sheet. 'Oh, Woofa,' I say. 'Please think of something that will stop me having to go back to school.'

He nuzzles my hand, but there's nothing he or anyone can do to stop the inevitable.

2

Wednesday 9th September 1970

09.00 hrs

They're loading my case into the car.

I dash up onto the roof to have one last look over the balustrade, across the wasteground stretching to the blue-domed mosque with its two white minarets. I will never ever live here again. I will never lie here with Marni, slightly tipsy after the Adelmans' Pimm's party, crying with laughter at something neither of us can remember the next day.

I clatter downstairs and out into the front garden to find Woofa. He's lying in the shade under the old palm tree, near where we found the abandoned litter of puppies. I hug him one last time, choking back my tears, seeing his sad eyes saying he knows it's the end. Then I run through the blurring house, past my parents' bedroom where once Dad flung out his arm and smashed the bedside lamp while having a nightmare. Into the hall, past the open airing cupboard where the fresh towels lie in rounded stacks, past the bathroom where the dodgy light with the loose connection electrocuted me. Past the cutlery drawer in the hall lined with baize and smelling of lacquer, under the arch into the sitting room, where Dad's new tape deck blasts out Harry Belafonte, and the chorister at Christmas always sings, 'Once in Royal David's City'. Past ghost marks on the wall where the pictures used to hang. Finally I say goodbye to the tall cream fridge that hums and wheezes all through the night.

I close the back door. The mosquito frame bangs shut behind me. Marni is standing by the Peugeot wearing her turquoise shirtdress and a matching silk scarf. She ties the scarf in a knot at the back, but it never manages to contain her coppery curls. The boys are already bouncing around in the back of the car. Dad pointedly revs the engine. Marni and I climb in.

She glances down at the man's watch she always wears halfway up her arm. 'You'll have to put your foot down,' she says, 'or we'll miss the flight.'

'*Anna's going to miss her flight!*' the boys chant over and over until Marni hushes them. We judder down the potholed dust track and out onto the tarmac road. And we're off under the blue Bahraini sky, tilting as we circle the roundabout to take the airport road to Muharraq.

The hot wind, smelling of goats, drains and exhaust fumes, buffets in through the open windows. Marni's scarf tails dance wildly, as if struggling to escape. The king palms lining the road shiver and toss their heads, trying to shake off the sea breeze. Suddenly there's a whiff of cardamom, reminding me of the glasses of tea the shopkeepers offer in the souk.

'Must be well over a hundred degrees out there already,' Dad shouts above the noise of the broken exhaust. And I feel beads of sweat gathering. They trickle down my spine and pool in the small of my back.

As we cross the causeway to the airport, everyone in the car goes quiet. I know this quiet. It's full of dread, the dread of us being separated. We're all thinking the same thing: it's all change again. None of us wants it, but what can we do? I feel a terrible heaviness, the sort you get just before tears come.

When we finally park, Dad grabs my case and we run in a straggle across tarmac softened by the intense heat. And I think how the impression of my footprints will be the only thing left of me in Bahrain.

Marni pulls open the swing doors to the departures hall, Dad heaves my case inside and I feel a cold blast of air conditioning. We slow to a walk, stop panting and start to fit in with the quieter throng milling about on the concourse.

'*Salaam alaikum*.' Dad greets the man wearing a turquoise BOAC uniform at the check-in desk. Marni passes over my ticket. The man tears out the duplicate flight page and gives it back. I watch my case being weighed. I'm here and not here, in a daze, feeling condemned.

'Now, don't you go losing that, will you?' Dad says, handing me the ticket. His teasing is meant to raise my spirits. When I don't answer, he looks down at me again, his grey eyes questioning.

'I'm fifteen, Dad. Done this loads of times,' I say flatly.

'I know.' He smiles and puts his arm around me. 'But you'll always be my little girl.' I can smell his Old Spice aftershave. I look for the patch under his bottom lip that he always misses when he shaves. There it is.

The boys stand on either side of Marni, solemn as statues.

'You're lucky, Anna,' Mark says. 'You don't have to wear a stupid *Unaccompanied Child* label any more, like we do.'

'No.' I ruffle his sun-streaked hair. 'I'm a big girl now.'

'*Unaccompanied Child*.' Sam says it slowly, looking up at Marni. 'Like we're *orphans*.'

She's stung. 'Well, you aren't, and you know you aren't. You all know exactly why this is necessary – and how horrible it is for all of us.' Her voice breaks slightly.

'Come on now, you boys.' Dad is all forced bonhomie. 'Let's wave Anna through the gate.'

A blonde girl in front of us, older than me, clings to her mother, weeping. Her mother pats her back once, very quickly, as if she mustn't, as if it's no longer allowed. They move, walking as if through deep sand, towards the gate where her sister stands palely by their father.

I hate this next bit more than anything. Marni says to do it very quickly. No point dragging it out. So I walk up to her. She puts her arms round me, and for a moment I'm in that soft, safe place where I can always be just me, with the smell of her, her lipstick, her Pond's cream and Je Reviens perfume.

'Stay safe, my most precious girl,' she says, stroking my head instinctively just above the ear, as she always does. Then she kisses me and pushes me gently away. I turn, tears streaming, to hug the boys. They come both together, their arms tight round my waist. Then I hug Dad quickly, and walk away.

I turn once; see the boys' tears, Dad's frown and Marni's terrible distorted smile. And for a moment I waver.

'Go!' she says. But I stay, trying to absorb them, burning them onto my mind's eye. Then I turn away and walk, holding up one hand, waving without looking.

The tall boy in front of me in the queue waiting to board looks constantly back over my head. He's ashen-faced with tension. I hand my ticket to the man at the gate, show my passport, heft my shoulder bag and walk past the neat, smiling air hostess.

My bag thumps against my thigh as I walk out across the tarmac to the waiting plane. It's a white VC10 with a high tail and 'BOAC' written in huge navy-blue letters down its body. I've never flown completely alone before, not without the boys, or a friend. Anxiously I recheck the ticket in my hand. 'BOAC', it says across the front. *All over the world, the British Overseas Aircraft Corporation takes good care of you.*

3

10.30 hrs

A camel just beyond the perimeter fence wobbles in the heat as the plane's engines rage briefly. There's a surge as we begin to move forward, then I'm thrust back in my seat as the tarmac races. I feel the slant and lift as the front wheel, then the back, leave the ground, and I imagine them spinning as the earth falls away.

The plane circles over the grey-gold desert spotted with date palms and climbs into the blue. When it drops in a pocket of thin air everyone gasps – then there's a ripple of nervous laughter.

I think of Marni standing below in her silk scarf and dark glasses. She'll wait till the plane is a tiny speck, then she'll take the boys' hands. They'll ask for a Pepsi on the way home, and she'll say yes because she'll be waving them off soon.

I sit back, resigned to being on my own for the next seven hours. It'll be early afternoon when we land. London's two hours behind Bahrain. The pretty air hostess who greeted us as we boarded comes to offer the little boy on my right a child's pack of crayons and a colouring book. Her badge says *Rosemary.*

They've obviously put the kids travelling alone all together. I'm about four rows back from the curtain into first class, between two boys. On my other side is the one who was in front of me in the queue. It's not ideal, but better than on the way out, when I was squeezed next to a massively overweight man with bad breath.

I pull the safety card from the seat pocket in front and look at the diagrams: the emergency position, how to break open the windows, how to slide down the chutes into the ocean, only, obviously, after removing your high heels. I shove it back in my seat pocket and stare out of the little round porthole at the empty sky. God, I really am on my way. No going back now. No more bikinis and flip-flops. No more water-skiing or skinny-dipping off dhows, or barbeques on sandbanks in the middle of the sea.

But this is grim. I need to think about something uplifting. Marni has a habit of throwing negative thoughts away. Literally. She did a classic yesterday after I'd packed. She came into my room jangling the car keys and said it was time to go shoe shopping, compensation for going back to school. I jumped up and followed her to the car. 'Imagine just having to wear my hideous school lace-ups for the next three years,' I said as we drove.

'Awful,' she agreed. 'They really wouldn't look out of place on a parade ground. But, come on, let's not think about school lace-ups, let's throw the thought of *them* away.' So we both wound down our windows, and threw the imaginary shoes out. It's what Marni always does to get rid of troublesome things:

like coughs, annoying thoughts, bad-tempered people.

Not easy in here though . . .

I pull the flight magazine out of the seat pocket and start flicking through it.

'It's full of crap,' the boy on my left says suddenly. 'I just looked.'

I smile quickly at him. *Glossy brown hair, sporty, seventeen?*

'Going back to school?' His voice is almost a drawl.

'Yes. Just to catch up on some sleep.'

He laughs. *Strong white teeth.* Not sure I want this right now.

'Which school?' he says, pushing his fringe out of his eyes.

I grimace. 'St Saviour's, Barchester. All *gels*.'

'Sounds great.' His hands lie relaxed on his thighs.

'For you, maybe,' I say. *I've met ones like this before. A charmer.*

'Mine's all boys, in Bristol.' He brushes the end of his nose with his fingers, as if a fly just landed there.

'Nice.'

I look over at the small boy on my other side. He's about nine, the same age as Sam, wearing an *Unaccompanied* badge and staring out of the window, a big square cake tin cradled on his lap. I nod at the tin. 'That your tuckbox?' It has holly and a snow scene on it.

He looks up at me with solemn brown eyes. 'No. It's my terrapin.'

'Really?'

'Yes.' His nose is sprinkled with freckles and he has short ginger hair with an off-centre cowlick.

'You taking it back to school?'

'Yes.' He says it quickly before looking back out of the window.

'Can I see it?' I ask gently.

He hesitates, then prises off the lid. Inside, in a slop of water filled with pondweed, is a little striped green-and-yellow terrapin about the size of his hand. It tilts its pointed snout and stares crossly at me.

'Oh,' I say. 'Nice markings.' The boy looks up at me gratefully. There's something fragile about his heart-shaped face.

'Will it be OK in there?'

'There are holes in the top,' he points to them, 'so he can breathe. Dad made them.'

I smile. 'What's his name? I mean the terrapin, not your dad.'

'Fred.'

I lean down. 'Hello, Fred,' I whisper at the fierce little snout. Fred slowly lifts one striped leg free of weed, his slit eyes brimming with disdain.

'You're so lucky,' I say. 'I wish I could have my dog here on board. I had to leave him . . .' I trail off, overwhelmed.

But then, not wanting to upset the little boy, I pull myself together. 'Did anyone say anything when you checked in?'

'Dad asked them. They said it was all right.'

'That's good. I saw an Arab at the airport once with a bird of prey on his arm, you know, with a hood on, and a bell . . .'

'Christ!' The older boy next to me is staring rigidly ahead. The curtain between first class and the main cabin has been thrust aside by a young Arab.

He's holding a gun.