

ALARM GIRL

Hannah Vincent



Myriad Editions

Published in 2014 by

Myriad Editions
59 Lansdowne Place
Brighton BN3 1FL

www.myriadeditions.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Hannah Vincent 2014
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-908434-45-6

Printed and bound in Sweden
by ScandBook AB

AT THE BEGINNING the air was so thick I couldn't breathe it properly. When we got off the plane I had to hold on to the handrail like an old person. I was afraid my rucksack would tip me over. The air stewardess's shoes clanged on the metal steps and Robin told me to hurry up. We were walking so fast we had to run. Robin's arms were flapping and the light was so bright and glinty my eyes went weird. Through some doors it was suddenly as noisy as the swimming pool. A big crowd was pressed up against the barrier. There were posters for Nelson Mandela and a man was wearing a T-shirt with his face on. Another man in a suit was holding a piece of cardboard with a funny word that had lots of 'o's. A woman had a turban that made her the tallest out of everyone.

I saw Dad straight away but the stewardess kept going, whizzing our suitcases along on their noisy wheels with her high heels clicking and clacking. She looked like she would click-clack past all the people waiting, past Dad, and out the other side of the airport, keep on click-clacking until she came to the sea.

He was wearing a white T-shirt and a denim shirt over the top. The shirt was open and the T-shirt was so white it made his eyes look extra blue. It had the words Taylored Travel written on it. Luckily Robin couldn't tell I was crying, because we were both squashed up in his

hug while he kissed us and pressed us into him and said Welcome to South Africa. Every time we see him I forget the smell of him, then I remember it again.

The stewardess wrote down the number of Dad's passport. He asked if she wanted his phone number as well and she laughed and tipped her head so far back you could see the edge of her make-up. He said What do you say, babies? I knew he wanted us to say thank you to her for looking after us, but I pretended not to understand. I said bye instead. Robin said Thanks for looking after us and the stewardess called him a gentleman but really he was just a bum-licker. It was very nice to meet you, Indy, she said, and I had to say Nice to meet you too. She said to Dad She's got quite a stare, hasn't she? She was talking about me. Then she said for us babies to have a good holiday and she was gone. Robin is twelve and I am ten and three-quarters. We are not babies.

On the way to the car park Dad asked if I wanted to take off my hoody. I told him it was cosy and he laughed. You want to be cosy, do you? In this heat? I couldn't see his eyes because he had sunglasses on. His car was bigger and posher than Grandad's but there were golf sticks in the boot that he forgot to take out so there was barely any room for our bags. They got shoved right in. Dad said What have you got in here, a dead body? Robin saw me twisting my scarf and I could tell he was annoyed. Dad gave the car park man some money and took the ticket off the man without saying anything, not even thank you. We drove away from the airport so fast my body felt like

Alarm Girl

it was travelling too far forward for my brain to catch up. I had to shut my eyes until I came back all together again. You've had your hair cut, Indy, Dad said, and I said yes and he said it suited me short. Then he asked loads of questions, about the plane journey and about school, about our friends, about Christmas and about what we wanted to do while we were here. When he said How are Val and Doug he meant Nan and Grandad. Robin said Okay and nobody said anything after that.

Once I said to Nan Do you like Dad? She said Of course I like your dad, Indigo, he's your dad, isn't he? If I say something like that to Robin he tells me I'm shit-stirring and being a girl.

Soon there were lots of houses that all looked the same, and washing drying in the sun. Some was spread on the ground and on bushes. Nan wouldn't like that. Birds sat in a crowd on the top of a tree, like big white hankies, as if Nan had washed some of Grandad's and they got blown away by the wind. I saw some kids playing football, but not with a ball – with a clump of something all bundled up with string. They didn't wear shoes and some didn't have any tops on. Some wore T-shirts so big they reached down to their knees like dresses. Then there were falling-down sheds and Portaloos, all slanting among bits of metal and planks of wood. Dad and Robin were going on about football but Dad kept looking at me in the little rectangle of the driver's mirror so I closed my eyes. The sun flickered in stripes across my eyelids, bands of darkness in between

the bright, like stripes of a zebra, stripes of wires criss-crossing the sky. The car engine hummed and I wished we could stay driving and never stop. Never stop and get out and walk and speak and live. Never do all the things Robin and Dad talked about doing, the things Dad had planned for us like shopping and surfing and football and safari, just stay driving with the sun flickering.

THE STADIUM WAS FILLED with extravagant costumes and painted faces. Ian turned up the volume on the television and the tiny living room filled with the noise of triumphant horns, vuvuzelas and drums.

‘It’s too loud, turn it down,’ Indigo complained.

‘It’s the World Cup, Indy!’ Ian cried above the din.

‘It’s the World Cup!’ Robin shouted.

‘I was having a nice peaceful time,’ the little girl said, turning to Karen.

‘I know, puppy,’ Karen said. ‘Show me what you’ve made.’

She had stuck an entire pack of sequins to a picture of a mermaid. The paper sagged, threatening to fall apart with the weight of the glue, and the mass of green and turquoise shiny discs caught the light, setting emerald and blue phantoms dancing across the living room walls.

‘Beautiful,’ Karen said, kissing her child’s head and breathing in her biscuity smell.

Alarm Girl

'It's starting,' Ian said.

She joined him on the sofa. The commentator compared the atmosphere to the thrill of a child on Christmas morning.

'It makes me feel homesick,' she said. 'Homesick for Africa.' She lifted Ian's arm and placed it around her shoulder.

'You can't be homesick – it's not your home,' Robin said.

'No, you're right, I'm being silly,' she said.

Somewhere they had visited before the children were born came into her mind – a clearing among trees, not significant in any way, other than the fact that it occurred to her now, randomly, as they waited for a televised football tournament to begin. They had travelled to so many countries in the years before their marriage and, as much as she recalled the landmarks and monuments recommended in the guidebooks, it was these incidental places she remembered most often.

It was announced that Nelson Mandela was not at the ceremony.

'Oh no, that's tragic,' she said.

'What's tragic?' Indigo asked, not looking up from her picture.

'Nelson Mandela's granddaughter died in a car crash.'

'But what's *tragic*?'

'Tragic means something sad,' Ian said.

It was possible to forget how much children didn't know. When they were on holiday a few years ago,

Robin had thought they would be living forever in the cottage they had rented. He was only young, had no notion of holidays, and they hadn't realised they needed to explain what it was. There were probably countless misconceptions their children carried around with them.

Ian's weight against hers was comforting. His heart-beat ticked in his chest, signalling to her through the chamber of his body, reminding her of his constancy. She knew that some of the places they had travelled to would have changed, but it was possible there were others, like the clearing she remembered, that hadn't altered at all. What was happening when they passed through – light playing on leaves, insects moving around in grass – could be happening there now as they sat on their sofa far away.

She lifted her legs on to Ian's lap and he gathered her to him, like a bundle of sticks. Their children had inherited her tallness, their sleeves and trouser-legs always too short. The sight of Robin's skinny arms poking out of his nylon football shirt as he sat transfixed by the television drummers and dancers made her feel as if her heart might break. She had to work hard not to allow the feeling to skid out of control.

A passer-by glanced in at them through their front window, which opened directly on to the street. The movement startled her – it was a surprise that not everyone was watching the World Cup as they were. Her younger self would have been horrified by the scene. She had assumed her life would be more interesting than the

Alarm Girl

life her parents lived and yet here she was, indoors on a sunny day in a terraced house in small-town England.

Images of South African wildlife flashed up on the screen.

‘Definitely take the kids on safari one day,’ Ian said.

‘Definitely,’ she said.

‘Could buy some land out there, even,’ Ian said.

‘When our boat comes in, you mean?’ Karen said. She stroked his head. His hair had grown curly during the years they had spent travelling but he wore it cut short now. There was some grey in it already.

‘Our life assurance is worth a few hundred thousand,’ he said. ‘Maybe we could have some kind of accident.’

‘Something not too bad but just bad enough,’ she said.

‘What are you two stupidly talking about?’ Indy asked, and Ian laughed, told her they were messing about.

‘Can’t you get cancer?’ he whispered in Karen’s ear, mock-romantic, and quiet enough so Indy couldn’t hear.

Karen laughed. ‘Can’t you?’ she said.