

First published 2019 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-5288-8

Copyright © Sara Barnard 2019

The right of Sara Barnard to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in
accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

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 (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for,
any author or third-party websites referred to in or on this book.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

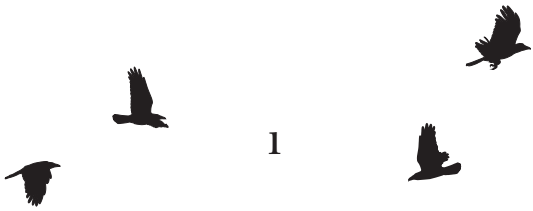
This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Dedication

‘There is freedom waiting for you,
On the breezes of the sky,
And you ask, “What if I fall?”
Oh, but my darling,
What if you fly?’



Erin Hanson



1

'Flames'
– David Guetta & Sia

I have lost my necklace, and it feels like a sign.

'What are you doing?' Josh asks, voice bleary and muffled.

'Nothing,' I say. I'm actually crawling around under the covers, my hands sliding over the sheets, searching. I brush his leg and he yelps. 'Sorry. Did you see my necklace earlier? I was wearing it, right?'

'What necklace?'

I shouldn't be offended, but I am. 'You're so observant – Yes!' My fingers close around the thin chain and I sigh with relief. I climb out from under the covers and lean over to switch on the light.

Josh yelps again. 'Christ, what are you doing now?'

'I have to go,' I say, pulling on my jeans with one hand and shaking out my necklace with the other. 'Oh, shit.' It's *broken*, the chain split a few links down from the clasp. I stare at it for a moment, half into my jeans, half out of them. The dove looks so lonely, set adrift on a broken chain.

'Should I get up?' Josh asks.

I roll my eyes. 'Don't put yourself out or anything. It's not like I'm leaving tomorrow. Or . . .' I pull my phone out of the pocket of my jeans and check the time. 'Today.' It's later than I thought. Or earlier, depending on your point of view. It had felt like a good idea to see Josh rather than spend my last night in Southampton not sleeping in my own bed, but now it's after 4 a.m. and I've got a broken necklace and what might be the beginnings of a

headache pressing at the base of my skull. Well done, me. Solid decision-making skills, as usual.

I wrap my necklace around my wrist so it hangs as a loose, tangled bracelet and dress quickly, glancing back at Josh as I open the door to leave.

'I'll see you,' Josh says.

'Sure,' I say.

He grins. 'Take care of yourself, yeah?'

I don't reply, just smile back and lift my hand as I turn to go in a wave goodbye. I head out of the building, taking the steps at a jog. The outside air is cool and I pull up the hood of my jacket, breathing it in. It's going to be a beautiful day in Southampton.

It's about a mile from Josh's to mine and I take it slowly, hands in my pockets. It's coming up to 5 a.m. and the streets are deserted, which is how I like it best. I take a detour along the harbour and allow myself a few minutes, pulling myself up on to the railing to sit and watch the the dawn break in pink streaks across the sky. It's quiet except for the seagulls and the soft, calming swish of the sea against the boats.

I know that when I get home, or what's passed for home for the last eighteen months or so, there'll be boxes in my room and packing to do and goodbyes to say. My foster parents, Christie and Don, will make French toast and we'll go through my transition plan for the thousandth time while we wait for Sarah, my aunt, to arrive to take me back to Brighton.

I close my eyes and listen to the seagulls, which sound exactly the same in Southampton as they ever did in Brighton. Maybe they're even the same seagulls, travelling from one coastal city to another when they get bored or restless. It must be nice not to be tied down like that.

I'm the queen of fresh starts, which is another way of saying I've lived a lot of failures. I've thought *things will be different this*

time more than once, but this time it's actually true, for good or bad, whether I want it or not. This time, I'm eighteen. I'm an adult. I'm legally independent.

This time, I'm on my own.

'Good morning, sunshine.' Don greets me when I come through the back door. He's sitting at the kitchen table, paper spread in front of him.

'Hey,' I say. I lock the door behind me and hang the key on its hook. 'You're up early.'

Don smiles. 'Look who's talking.'

I shrug. 'If I don't sleep, does it still count as my last night?'

'That is an interesting question,' Don says, pointing at me. 'Is sleep an essential component of the night? What, in fact, is night? Perhaps it is an illusion?'

I smile. 'I'll nap, OK?' I pause on my way out of the kitchen. 'You weren't waiting for me, were you?'

Don busies himself with the paper. 'They think it might get up to twenty-five degrees today.'

I rest my head against the door frame. 'I'm fine.'

'You should put that on a T-shirt,' Don says, glancing at me to smile. 'Save yourself some time.'

He's worried about me; they all are. All the people who've guided me through the last two years to get me to this place, my shot at independence. Outwardly, they're keeping positive, but I know what they're really thinking. They're thinking that I won't be able to handle this, that I'm going to fall apart.

I'm much more stable than I used to be, which is a lot to do with my medication and also, you know, actual stability, but that's the problem now; the ending of the stability part. Me moving on from Christie and Don – leaving the care system – to live on my own is pretty *un*stable. And I've got previous on falling apart. They've got good reason to worry. But I can't stay in this Southampton

limbo forever, and I've waited what feels like such a long time to have some kind of control over my own life. However scary this is, and however badly it might go, I have to believe that it's worth it. Otherwise, what's the point?

Here's where I should explain why they're worried; why I fell apart before, what that even means. This is the bit I hate the most, the bit where I give up any control over how people see me. I want them to look at me and see just that: *me*. If I say that I was abused, that I'm prone to severe depression, that I've tried to kill more than once, all of that falls away. When someone knows you've been broken, all they see is the cracks. The knowledge colours everything, an extra filter between me and the world. People look at me differently, and maybe I look out at the world a little differently, too.

That's the thing about trauma, the thing people on the other side of it don't understand. It isn't a bump on the road of your life, a jolt that'll take your breath away, but only for a moment. It's the double yellow lines snaking on either side of everything you do, trapping you on a track down a one-way street. You can't stop. You can't pull over and take a break. You just have to keep going.

That's the thing I still can't deal with. I want it to just be something that happened, past tense, but it's not. It can't ever be, even though I'm doing so much better now – everyone says so.

Two years ago, when I first started on this track – my last great fresh start – I thought I knew what it meant, getting better. It meant *being* better. No more climbing out of windows, no more sleeping around, no more drugs, no more hoarding pills, no more lies, no more pretending. No more fake smiles. All that crazy just therapied right out of me and nothing to stop my future happiness except . . . what, exactly?

Well, life. Me. My head. My history. Take your pick.

For the record, I managed it with some of the things. I don't lie any more, or at least, not like I used to, not about things that matter. I pretend . . . less. I don't hoard pills. I don't climb out of windows. Everything else . . . well, let's just say I'm a work in progress. And that's OK, right? You can't have everything.

And now I'm moving on again, and this time there's a plan to follow. Me, now officially a care leaver, returning to Brighton to learn how to live independently. I'll be living in a bedsit on the second floor of a converted Victorian terrace, the kind that's ten a penny in Brighton. I'll pay my rent with my wages from my job, housing benefit and my care leaver's allowance. It'll be tight, but doable.

And here's what's waiting for me: my favourite people. My best-in-every-sense-of-the-word friends. Sweet, loyal and goddamn *patient*, Caddy and Rosie. (I mean, I'll have them for about three months, before they both go to university. But still. I'll be fine by then.) They have this power, my friends, even after all this time, even though I don't deserve it; they're like lamp posts on midnight streets. Lights in the dark.

I would never have believed that I'd want to live in Brighton again, but the truth is it's the only place I've ever come close to feeling like I belonged. That's what I want, more than anything; to feel like I belong, even if that just means in my own life, in my own head.

I have to believe that, finally, that will happen now. I'm overdue some goodness.



2

'Home' – Hollow Coves

If I'd had the choice – and, you know, money – I'd be moving into a gorgeous two-bed flat right by the seafront in Brighton. I'd have a four-poster bed, the kind with those random curtains. A waffle-maker in the kitchen, because why not. A guest bedroom for my friends.

But I don't have the choice (or the money) and that's why I'm walking up the steps behind Sarah to the house on Ventrella Road that is now, officially, where I live. The building has been converted into six flats, one of which is mine. It's a bedsit, which means that it's just one room with a small kitchen on one side and a tiny shower room on the other.

It's small, it's dank, it smells like damp. When I walk in, I want to cry.

'Don't worry too much about how it looks now,' Sarah says, as if she can read my mind. She picked up the keys yesterday on my behalf and had a look around, so she's had time to practise this don't-let-Suzanne-spiral voice. 'Any flat looks a bit depressing when it's as empty as this.'

I nod and try to smile. I'm imagining – and trying not to – eating, sleeping, living here. My stomach turns over. Oh God, what was I thinking, coming here? I need colour and light in my life. I need other people. How can I live in this colourless *room*? By *myself*?

The feeling comes in strong, like a sweeping tide up to my heart. *I have made a terrible mistake.*

'You've already got mail,' Sarah says, trying, I can tell, to be upbeat.

I reach for the parcel on the counter, recognizing the handwriting on the label immediately. My brother. My heart lifts with hope and I open it to find that it's full of chocolate. I smile, unfolding the accompanying letter. *New home starter pack*, Brian has written. He's also included a playlist for me; twelve songs all with the same title: 'Home'. I skim the rest of the letter, which is mostly about how far I've come, that this is the next step of my life, that it's going to be fine. My brother is good at saying the right things, and I feel better when I put the letter down on the counter and turn back to Sarah, who's blowing up an airbed in the corner of the room.

'This is just temporary,' she says, seeing my face.

An *airbed*? Me, alone in an empty bedsit, trying to sleep on an *airbed*? My insomnia is bad enough as it is. 'Fine,' I say.

'I know it's not ideal,' she says. 'Honestly, I'd still rather you came back with me. At least until we get you some furniture. I know that you—'

'No,' I interrupt. 'I'm not staying with you. We talked about that.'

'Just for tonight, Suzie—'

'*No*.' I swallow, then carefully soften my voice. 'You promised that you'd let me do this by myself.'

I can tell she doesn't understand, not really. She probably thinks I'm just being stubborn, maybe even a bit petty. But it feels somehow essential to me that I start this new Brighton chapter on my own terms. If I don't, what's the point? Sarah was my legal guardian when I lived in Brighton last time, but this time I'm not her responsibility, just her niece. I don't want to be depending on Sarah. I don't want to be depending on anyone.

When the airbed is fully inflated, Sarah manages to find reasons

to fuss around for another hour. She worries about the lack of furniture, wonders if she should pop back to her own flat to pick up some more blankets.

'It's June,' I say. 'I'm not going to get cold.'

'I suppose not,' she says.

'I promise I'll tell you if I need extra blankets,' I say, reaching out an idle hand to open the fridge. 'Oh,' I say out loud, momentarily confused. The fridge, which I'd expected to be empty, is full of food. I glance around to see Sarah smiling a little sheepishly at me. 'Thank you,' I say.

'You know I can't bear an empty fridge,' she says lightly.

It's still another half an hour before she leaves and even then it's basically because I hustle her out the door, promising to check in with tomorrow to prove I've survived the night.

As soon as she's gone, I don't give myself time to think about being on my own. Before I've even closed the door behind her, I'm pulling out my phone and sending a 'READY!' message to Caddy and Rosie. It takes just ten minutes for them to turn up on the doorstep of the building, God love them. They're falling over each other, breathless and laughing, weighted down by sleeping stuff and a giant cardboard box. As soon as I open the door Caddy drops her load and launches herself at me for a hug.

'We've been waiting *all day*,' Rosie says from behind her. I look at her over Caddy's shoulder and she rolls her eyes at me, smiling.

'And now you're here!' Caddy releases me and takes a little step back, her eyes shiny but anxious, surveying me. 'Are you happy?'

'*Now* I am,' I say, and she beams.

'Can I say hi now?' Rosie asks from behind her.

'HI!' I yell, bubbly with happiness. My girls. My very best friends, here for me, like they always are.

'We brought stuff,' Caddy announces, stepping aside to let me hug Rosie (she lets me, even though she's not much of a hugger) and leaning down to pick up the box. 'Come see!' She bounds off into the building calling 'Which flat is it?' over her shoulder.

'Five,' I call back. 'Up the stairs.' I turn back to Rosie, who is grinning her trademark smirk-grin.

'Happy to be back?' she asks.

'We'll see,' I say, and she puts her hands on my shoulders to look me square in the eye.

'So long as you're being positive,' she says. She follows me into the building and up the stairs to my flat, where Caddy is standing in the middle of the small room, box at her feet. I catch the look on her face before she paints a smile over it at the sight of me. At best, she's thrown by this place, though who knows what she expected. At worst, she's actively judging it. And me.

There's a short silence as Rosie looks around and ends up standing next to Caddy. She turns to me. 'Is this it?' she asks, and Caddy gives her a shove.

'Uh-huh,' I say. I hear that my voice sounds a little flat so I add, more brightly, 'Bit of a fixer-upper, right?'

'Where's all the furniture?' Caddy asks, a slight, confused frown crinkling her forehead.

'I haven't got it yet,' I say. 'But it'll get sorted.'

They both look at me, dubious expressions on their faces. They just can't *fathom* having to live in a bedsit without any furniture, that no parent is going to come rushing in to save the day, and I almost hate them for it. I take a breath, swallow it down, let a smile fill my face instead.

'Real beds are so overrated.'

'I've heard that,' Rosie says. 'Also, tables.'

'And chairs. I mean, you can just sit on the floor, right?'

'We might have some spare furniture,' Caddy says thoughtfully.

Thought*lessly*. 'I'll ask my parents.'

'No,' I say, with more edge than I'd intended. *I am not your charity case*. 'I'll get it sorted. Can we drop it?'

She looks hurt. 'OK, fine.'

Oh God, this is going well. 'Listen,' I say, because sometimes you just have to say it. 'If this is too weird for you, I'd rather you just left, because it's hard enough as it is.'

'Don't be stupid,' Rosie says lightly. 'We came here to see you. We don't give a shit about how much furniture you have. Ignore Caddy, she can't help being a fixer.'

'I'd rather you didn't ignore me,' Caddy says. 'If that's OK.'

'Actually,' Rosie says, staring straight into my face. 'You know what you need to do?'

When she doesn't answer her own question, I prompt, 'What?'

'Cry.'

Not what I expected her to say. 'What?'

'That's what you need. You need to cry, and we need to comfort you, and then we'll all feel better.' She nods, satisfied. 'So can you get right on that?'

I try really hard not to laugh, but it escapes anyway.

'What we all *need*,' Caddy says in a surprisingly firm voice, 'is wine.' She reaches into her rucksack and pulls out a bottle.

'Oh yeah,' I say.

'Oh yeah,' Rosie echoes. 'I forgot we were adults now.'

'Weird, right?' I say.

She nods. 'So weird.'

'Come on,' Caddy says, waving the bottle a little and nudging the box with her foot. 'See what we brought you, Suze.'

'Is it furniture?' I ask, and Rosie laughs.

'No,' Caddy says. 'There are fairy lights in there, though.'

I feel my face break out into a genuine smile, and it's such a relief. 'I love you.'

She throws me a grin; earnest, full of affection. Total Caddy. 'I know.'

We use the blankets and cushions Sarah had left me to make a fort in the middle of the room, just big enough for three, and it's perfect. We're sitting so close our knees are almost touching, the box they'd brought in the middle.

'OK, are you ready?' Caddy's eyes are bright and happy again, her voice light, back on steady ground. ''Cause there's an order to this presentation.'

'So ready,' I say, grinning back.

It takes a long time to go through the contents of my welcome box, because they insist on explaining every item, taking longer and longer the more wine they drink. There's a Tupperware carton of crumbly and cracked macarons, garishly pink and stuffed with jam. A 'Welcome home' playlist that Caddy insists we play immediately. A fabric doorstop shaped like a bulldog. A recipe book for students. A bag of mint imperials. A box of condoms. A single mango. A thin silver bracelet with a wishbone charm holding it together. The last item Rosie produces is a framed photograph of the three of us, taken at Caddy's eighteenth. It's a candid picture; the three of us caught mid-laughter, Rosie's hand pressing teasingly against my face, Caddy hanging off my back.

Nothing is useful (except the condoms). Everything is perfect.

'This is amazing,' I say, clutching the photo frame and trying not to cry. 'You guys are just . . .'

'We know,' Rosie says cheerfully.

'We are so just,' Caddy agrees. They both laugh.

'So very just,' Rosie says, lifting her glass. 'To being just!'

We order pizza – they insist on paying – and drink the second bottle of wine they'd brought until we're full and happy. All of my doubt and hesitation is gone. Of course I should be here – how could I ever have thought I belonged anywhere else *but* here,

with my best friends, these people who love me? This was the right decision. Everything is going to be better now. This is the fresh start that will stick.

Because they are good people and they love me, they don't even complain when they realize that the airbed definitely won't fit three people on it. Rosie refuses to share it with either of us, so she goes to sleep in the fort, leaving enough room on the airbed for Caddy and me. The warmth of Caddy beside me and the sound of the two of them breathing sends me into an immediate, easy sleep.