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Opening extract from

Anna Hibiscus

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Published by

Walker Books

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First published 2007 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

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This book has been typeset in StempelSchneidler and Lauren

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-0655-2

www.walkerbooks.co.uk

For the children of Fachongle
A.

For Paul, Lizzie and Alice,
my family and friends
L.T.





Anna Hibiscus on Holiday

Anna Hibiscus lives in Africa. Amazing Africa. She lives in an old white house with balconies and secret staircases. A wonderful house in a beautiful garden inside a big compound. The trees are full of sweet ripe fruit and the flowers are full of sweet juicy nectar because this is Africa, and Africa can be like this. Outside the compound is the city. An amazing city of lagoons and bridges and roads, of skyscrapers and shanty towns.

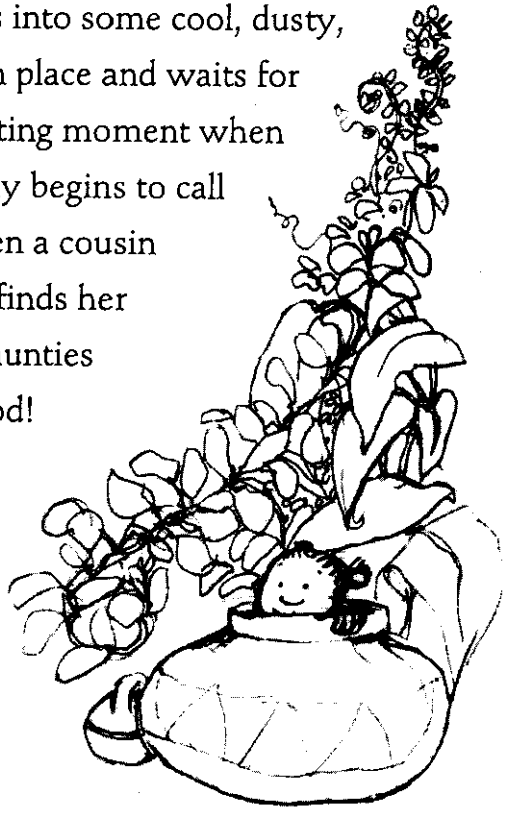
Anna Hibiscus lives with her mother, who is from Canada; her father, who is from Africa; her grandmother and her grandfather; her aunties and her uncles; lots and lots of cousins; and her twin baby brothers, Double and Trouble.

There are so many people in Anna's family that even she cannot count them all.



Anna Hibiscus is never lonely. There are always cousins to play and fight with; uncles and aunties are always laughing and shouting; and her mother or father and grandmother and grandfather are always around.

To be alone in Anna Hibiscus's house you have to hide. Sometimes Anna squeezes into some cool, dusty, forgotten place and waits for that exciting moment when her family begins to call – and then a cousin or uncle finds her and her aunties thank God!



One day, Anna's mother told the family that in Canada she grew up in a house with only her mother and her father.

"What!" cried Auntie Grace. "All alone? Only the three of you?"

"Yes, and I had a room all of my own," Anna's mother said wistfully.

Anna's grandmother looked at her. "Dey made you sleep alone?" she asked.

"It was not a punishment," Anna's mother said. "It was a good thing to have my own room."

Anna Hibiscus and her cousins looked at each other. Imagine! Sleeping alone. Alone in the dark!

"Nobody likes to sleep alone," said Anna's grandmother.

Anna Hibiscus laid her warm brown cheek on her mother's white arm. "Don't worry, Mama," she said. "You have all of us now. You will never be alone again."

But the next week, Anna's father said, "Anna Hibiscus, we are going on holiday. Your mother and myself with you and those brothers of yours. We will stay in a house on the beach."

"Only us?" asked Anna. This was incredible.

"Only us," said her father. "A quiet holiday."

Anna Hibiscus's mother smiled.

"But, Papa," said Anna, "who is going to cook and shop and clean and ... everything? Who will take care of Double Trouble? What about me? Who will I play with?"

"I will help your mother to organize everything," Anna's father told her. "You, Anna Hibiscus, will take care of your brothers. You can play with them."

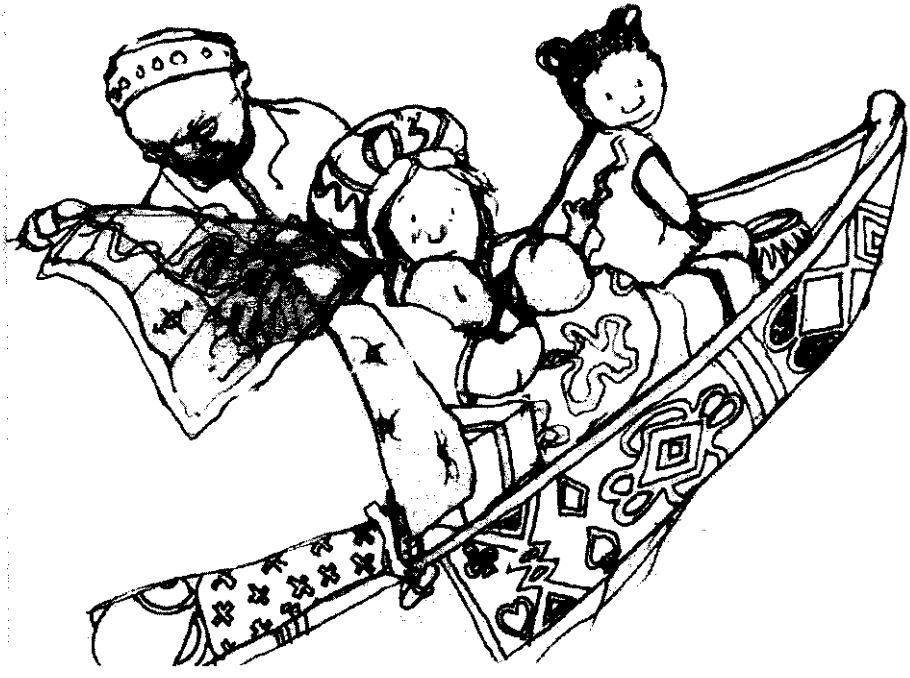
"But they are babies!" wailed Anna.

"Exactly!" said her father. "Now, enough problems. Let us pack."

One week later, Anna Hibiscus, her father, her mother, Double and Trouble *and* all their boxes and bags crossed the road to the lagoon and squeezed themselves into a small canoe. The whole family waved them off.

"Don' stay long!" they shouted. "Come soon!"

The lagoon ran under and alongside busy roads and huge skyscrapers; it ran through markets bigger than towns. For the first time, Anna Hibiscus saw how big the city was. It was gigantic.



Then it was gone.

Suddenly it was not buildings but trees that crowded the banks of the lagoon. Trees so tall and growing so thick together that Anna could not see into the dark rainforest. Only once did she see some people looking tiny on the bank.

Morning turned into afternoon turned into evening as they went slowly-slowly. Then Anna could see the island! A white sandy beach with small trees and, behind them, an open wooden house, painted white.

It was late by the time they got all their boxes and bags off the boat and up to the beach house. Anna Hibiscus's father lit lanterns and her mother warmed up food. They were all so tired from breathing sea breezes and carrying boxes and bags that they went straight to bed. Even Double and Trouble slept right through till morning.

When Anna and her family woke up, the beach house seemed dusty and dirty. It was full of cobwebs and dead cockroaches. Their boxes and bags were still packed. They were hungry. There was a lot to do.

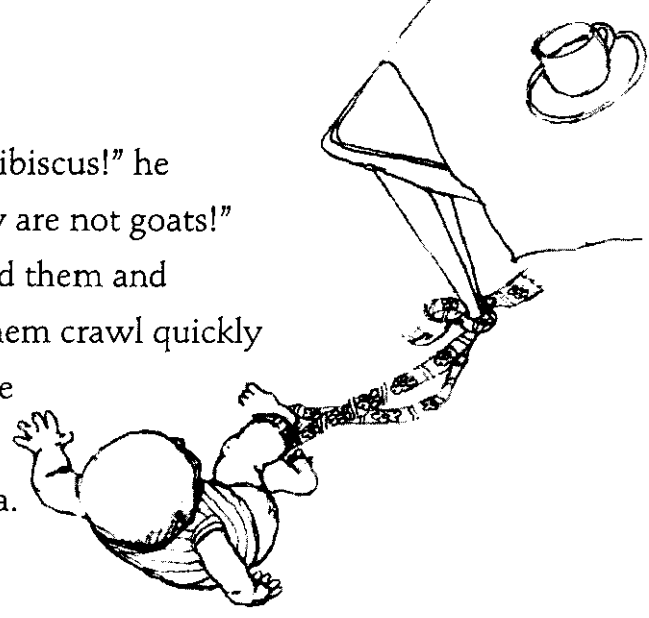
After breakfast, Anna was put in charge of Double Trouble. They stayed downstairs on the veranda where it was cool and shady, but the boys kept crawling towards the edge. There were no doors for Anna to shut. She ran backwards and forwards grabbing each of her brothers in turn and putting him back in the middle of the room.

She was hot and sweating when at last she attached the boys to a table leg with her mother's scarf. They yelled and screamed. Anna's father came running.



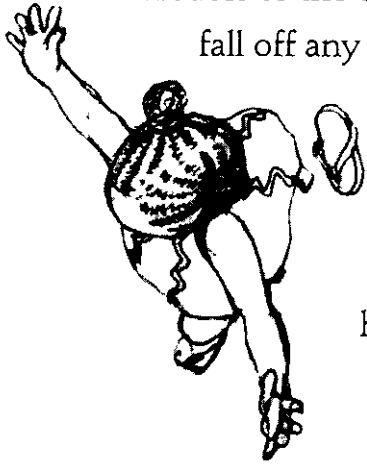
"Anna Hibiscus!" he said. "They are not goats!"

He untied them and watched them crawl quickly towards the edge of the veranda.



"I see." He sighed. "Double Trouble!"

He called to Anna's mother. "I'm taking Anna Hibiscus and Double Trouble to the beach. Where they cannot fall off any edge."



Anna's mother appeared in the kitchen doorway. There was a smudge on her face and cobwebs in her hair.

"OK," she sighed.

At the beach the boys wanted to crawl into the sea. The waves shot up their noses and splashed salt water in their eyes. They spluttered and choked and coughed.

Anna's father took them to play under the trees. "You go and splash yourself, Anna Hibiscus," he said. "I will stay here with your brothers."

Anna was not at all sure about splashing in the sea by herself. What if one of those big waves came along and drowned her? There would be no uncle or auntie to save her.

