

# Sharon Blackie

The Long  
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Burning  
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Published in 2024 by September Publishing  
First published in 2008 by Two Ravens Press

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Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, [www.refinecatch.com](http://www.refinecatch.com)

Printed in the UK by CPI Books Ltd



ISBN 9781914613463  
EPUB ISBN 9781914643470

September Publishing  
[www.septemberpublishing.org](http://www.septemberpublishing.org)

The past clings to you, like a skin.'

That's what you told me, in that last letter you wrote. You remember: the one that arrived just before the news came. The news that forced me into this final pilgrimage across the ocean, from the deserts of Arizona to this water-logged land where you chose to make your home. Where you came with my father as a newly married woman, ablaze with your hopes and your dreams.

But I have my own take on skins. It's a simple one: they're there to be shed. Like the desert rattlesnake, which sheds its skin two or three times a year. To enable it to grow; to remove parasites. It's a process of renewal, you see. It rubs its nose along the ground until it pushes the skin up over its head – and then it just crawls right on out of it. And leaves it there: a ghostly, inside-out skin. There are millions of them, all over the desert.

A sea of shed skins.

It's just like your selkies, don't you see? – your mythical seal-women. Shrugging off their skin for one night each month, they become another creature entirely. Seal becomes woman; woman becomes seal.

You and your fairy stories.

The truth is that we humans are so much less efficient. We shed our skins piece by piece, flake by flake. Slowly, over time; slowly enough that we never even notice that it's happening. Did you know that we shed and re-grow the outer cells of our skin every twenty-seven days? I'm talking facts again now – did

you notice? I've always been more comfortable with facts. And I did some research, after that last letter you sent: by the age of seventy an average person will have lost one hundred and five pounds of skin. Seas and seas of shed skin.

'Golf Delta Charlie, cleared for takeoff.'

The voice in my ear startles me. The sounds and smells of the cockpit leap back into my consciousness; once again I'm aware of your presence beside me. You're unusually silent. Are you ready to go? I can't see your face but I can picture it clearly – that same old small smile, one thin dark eyebrow tilted in amusement. Judging me. Testing. *Come on, Cat – jump. Let's see what you're made of. Look – the other children can do it. Why can't you?* But you needn't worry, Mother – I'm really not going to lose my nerve.

'Cleared for takeoff, Golf Delta Charlie.' My voice cracks and my mouth is dry, but this time it's not from fear. I know you don't quite believe it yet, but I've mostly dealt with the fear.

A firm push of the throttle and the engine begins to roar. We're moving forward quite slowly now; we cross the line at the beginning of the runway and we are in a place of transition. But once we reach takeoff speed, throttle fully open – once I pull the yoke towards me and lift up the nose – well, then we're committed. There is no turning back: we are quite out of choices. We move on and move upwards – or we crash, and the chances are that we die.

And there it goes again: that same old flutter in my stomach as the small Cessna lifts herself gently from the runway. Yes, we're leaving the ground now – and do you see how it is? How all that's familiar – all that's known and understood – falls away there beneath as we hurl ourselves recklessly into this clear blue void. The earth recasts itself beneath us, it pitches and lists as we bank to the south and turn out of the airport traffic pattern. But it's no longer the earth that concerns us here: it's the cold crisp blue of the sky. We've transformed ourselves now:

we're creatures of air, and we'll swoop and we'll wheel and we'll soar.

'Golf Delta Charlie, clearing the zone en route.'

'Golf Delta Charlie, roger. Have a good flight.'

Communication ends with a decisive click. We're on our own now; we're heading out west and there's no-one out there to talk to even if we wanted to.

We were on our own for so long, you and I. *You and me against the world*, you used to sing. In the days before it became you and me against each other. And so here we are again – here, just the two of us; so very tightly strapped into the confined world of this tiny cockpit. Together again – now, when I finally get to show you that I've learned how to fly.

Such a perfect day. Do you see the firth down there below us? The water strangely becalmed after the night's wind and rain; sea in the distance merging with sky. Everything so very still. And you – you're so quiet over there; you seem quite relaxed. It's a morning worth relaxing into: on a blue-sky day like this you can see clear into forever. The mountains shimmer in the morning sun, hovering in the distance like a mirage. Currents of air rush by, tumbling around the propeller, slipping under and over the wings, constantly shifting, ever-changing. For a little while longer there's nothing to be done; nothing that will stop me from basking in the healing solitude of these high places.

You always loved planes, didn't you? Sunday afternoons watching the old war movies on TV – *The Battle of Britain*; *The Dambusters*. They were your heroes, you always said. *Pilots! Think how much courage they must have, Cat. To hover all the way up there, in those tiny, flimsy machines. Can you imagine how much courage it must take to fly like that? Taking their lives into their own hands?*

So does it make you happy now, to be flying with me? Did I finally make you happy? I never was too skilled at that. Perhaps

a better daughter might have succeeded, but I never could seem to do enough for you. So many ways I found to disappoint you. *For heaven's sake, Cat – smile, can't you? Oh, Cat – don't you have any emotions at all? Why won't you play, like normal children?* And sometimes I would think about the children you lost – all those babies that never were born. And find myself wondering if, somewhere among those lost children, there might have been the daughter you wanted.

I know what you're thinking – that I'm talking crazy. But you were the crazy one; I was the rock. You – ah, but you had no fear. You threw back your head and your red shoes glittered and you laughed and you swung and you danced. You danced, and it seemed that you would never stop. *You're so wooden, Cat. Relax, why can't you? Just close your eyes and let go.*

Let go. Time after time, you said it. You said it that day when you were teaching me to swim: when I slipped off the platform and gashed my face on the side of the diving board. But I wouldn't cry. Not once. Not once on the journey to the hospital; not once as the doctor put the stitches into my cheek. *Let go, you said, your face flushed and hectic, eyes brimming with anger. For God's sake, Cat – just let go now, and cry.*

But I knew what happened when you let go.

The past clings to you, like a skin.

The trick is to learn how to shed it.

# 1

## Cat

‘Jack – there’s no way I’m getting on that plane.’ We step off the moving walkway and I clutch at his left arm as if its warm, uncomplicated solidity is all that I need to keep me grounded. And to shield me from the small propeller-driven commuter plane that is just pulling up outside the gate area from which our connecting flight is due to depart. It stops and settles on the wet asphalt like an over-sized mosquito; the drone of its propellers drifts up through the open door that leads to the ramp. And then it happens. Ice-cold fingers creep around my neck and squeeze and let go, squeeze and let go, over and over.

Oh, dear God, not again.

‘Honey – we don’t have a choice if you want to get to Cornell in time for this meeting.’ I flinch as Jack’s cellphone shrieks yet again and he groans, stops, reaches into his pocket with his free hand. ‘What’s the matter with the plane? Wrong colour? Wrong brand?’ He flashes me a quick sideways grin and glances at the screen to check the caller ID. He exhales loudly, presses something that makes the ringing stop and thrusts it back into his pocket. ‘It’s Tom. Doesn’t your goddamn boss ever go away? He’s probably trying to get hold of you. Do you have your cellphone switched off again?’

‘It doesn’t have proper engines. Look – it just has those propeller things.’ My heart is pounding a deep bass rhythm and a grizzly bear is crushing my rib-cage in a death-grip. There’s something wrong here. I know there’s something wrong. I can’t

catch my breath. I can't seem to breathe in properly, and even when I do, I can't breathe out again.

The piercing tones that signal an announcement blare out from a speaker directly over our heads. I jump. A bored female voice announces the arrival of the incoming flight from Ithaca, and all at once I'm aware of my surroundings again. Aware that we're partially blocking the exit from the moving walkway. An elderly woman edges around us with a murmured 'Excuse me', and Jack moves to the side to let a small family group pass by. A little blonde girl with big dark eyes and a purple dress catches my eye and, seeing me stare, smiles shyly; she's holding on to one of her father's hands as he clamps a cellphone to his ear with the other.

'Cat, those "propeller things" *are* proper engines. And there are two of 'em, see? Now isn't that great? One to fly with and one for spare.' He pats my arm and detaches it from his own. He strides over to a row of empty seats that faces the plate glass windows through which the offending aircraft can clearly be seen, and shrugs his overnight bag off his shoulder.

After a few moments I follow him. I don't know what frightens me most: the thought of getting on that plane, or the persistent gnawing awareness that something is seriously wrong with me. But I'm not going to think about that. Not until I get back home to Phoenix. Not until I get the results back from the doctor on Tuesday morning.

I fix my gaze on the aircraft as if I can transform it into a jet by sheer force of will. But it remains resolutely itself, small propellers protruding from the wings like switchblades all set to bore bloody holes in the sky. A door opens in its side and it spews out a clutch of passengers who stagger, dazed, into the full force of the wind that is now erupting into squally gusts, tearing through hair and penetrating coats. They clutch at the handrail as they fight their way down the steps and onto the relative safety of the asphalt. Blue-black

storm clouds loom on the horizon and enormous drops of rain are just beginning to lash the windows. I try to swallow, but something is stuck in my throat. The spasms intensify, and helplessness sweeps over me like a dank grey fog. I start to shiver.

I can't do this. Please God, I can't do this.

'Come on, Jack.' My voice cracks. 'You've heard all the stories about those things. It's winter out there, Jack. It's raining, and it's cold. Don't you know that those blades can ice up in winter? And then do you know what happens? Well, I'll tell you what happens. What happens is that they get too heavy and the engine slows and the plane begins to lose altitude and eventually it crashes. That would hurt, Jack. It would hurt and then you're dead.' I'm shrill – too shrill. I try to take a deep gulp of air but something is stopping me and my breathing accelerates in a vain attempt to get more oxygen into my shaking body. I don't know what's happening to me but there's something wrong and I clench my fists tightly and grit my teeth but that only seems to make the spasms worse.

Jack takes back my arm as finally he grasps that I'm not joking. 'Cat, hon. You have way, way too vivid an imagination. Those guys up there in the cockpit, they're trained to fly those planes in all kinds of weather. That's their job. They know how to handle icy conditions. Hell, these guys fly all the time in rainstorms. This is the north-east. Normal winter weather. It's no big deal.'

Can he smell my fear? I can. The sharp, musky scent of a mouse caught in a trap, just when it realises it's out of options. Just before it dies. 'I just don't trust those things, Jack. What if something gets caught in the blades and stops them from going around? What if a blade breaks off?'

'Cat.' He rolls his eyes and sighs, running a hand through permanently dishevelled brown hair. 'Propeller blades don't just drop off.'

'Let's get on a different flight, huh? We'll tell them we missed the connection.' I lick ice-cold lips that seem to have lost all moisture. 'I can't believe Janie did this to me.' Janie is the perfect secretary; she's always very careful to check the aircraft type before she books. She knows I don't do turboprops. Why did she do this to me? I fold my arms across my chest in a vain attempt to stop myself shaking. The passengers are walking up the ramp now; some of them are even laughing and joking as they emerge through the door. A little bedraggled from their brief encounter with the elements, but seemingly none the worse for wear.

'There won't be any different flights. Most of the flights to Ithaca are turboprops. That's probably why Janie booked it.' The customary amused twinkle in Jack's rich brown eyes has been replaced by guarded perplexity. He looks so solid, standing there: so sure. Every inch the voice of reason. And it's just as well that it's Jack I'm travelling with; he's about the only person in the whole company that I trust. He's my friend. The best vice-president of research and development that Sanderson Pharmaceuticals has ever had – or so I'm told. His motto: the job comes first. You can fall to pieces all you like, but do it after you've got the job done.

So why do I feel as if I'm letting him down, as if he's judging me? Because I always get the job done, and I never fall to pieces. I don't even come close. He knows that.

This is just a blip. Just a momentary lapse.

He's watching me closely, appraising, and I can't seem to hold his gaze. I can't believe I'm doing this; I'm as bewildered as he is.

'Come on, honey. Get a grip. You know how much trouble we've had getting everyone's schedules to coincide for this meeting. Stein could be a really important expert witness; we don't want to irritate him before we've even got him signed up. And your New York lawyer buddies are flying up from

LaGuardia; they aren't going to be too happy if we mess up their flight schedules and waste their time. Hell, not at several hundred dollars an hour between them.' I've lost him again; he's rummaging in his overnight bag, extracting a battered plastic wallet overstuffed with documents. He settles himself into a seat with the wallet on his lap and glances back up at me. 'And weren't you just telling me the law department budget is about to go bust?'

He's right, of course.

I need to focus on the facts here. Facts are good. I'm a lawyer: we deal in facts. I concentrate on simply trying to breathe in and breathe out, and hold on to the fact that it took Jack a long time to persuade Joe Stein to meet with us. If it hadn't been for the fact that he and Jack shared a pharmacology lab for a while during their postdoctoral fellowships at NIMH, we'd have had no chance.

The disembarking passengers are dispersing now, drifting off into the airport. So many people, rushing from one place to the next. Everything in a state of perpetual motion. Giddiness sweeps over me but I clutch at another fact: we need Joe Stein for the trial up in Seattle. His recent work casts significant doubt on the claims that Calmate is addictive. And no matter how I feel about it, I don't really have a choice. I'm vice-president of litigation and this trial is my responsibility, and I'm supposed to be in control.

Fact: I can't possibly not get on this plane.

I attempt another deep breath and this time I succeed. My fists turn back into hands and my jaw slowly begins to unlock. Calm, Cat. Calm.

'Okay, okay. I know. But I'm still going to check with the desk before I decide I'm completely out of choices here.' I throw him what I hope is a reassuring smile before I turn away, but he doesn't look convinced.

Smart guy: neither am I.

With the disembarking passengers gone, it's quiet again here at the gate. I make my way over to the desk; a handful of people are clustered in the seats around it, reading newspapers, playing with electronic organisers. The father of the little girl is still hooked up to his cellphone, pacing up and down in front of her. She sits quietly, face grave, staring out of the window. I had a purple dress, too, when I was her age. I wonder what happened to it? I don't remember ever seeing it again after we left Scotland. After we left my father. I pass close to her; she's clutching her battered little teddy bear tightly against her stomach. I wonder what she's thinking. I wonder where her mother is.

The gate agent barely glances at me as I approach the desk. She's frowning down at the screen in front of her, thin red lips rolling from side to side as she silently chews her gum. She looks tired; dark brown bangs hang lankly against her forehead. She doesn't look as if she's having a particularly good day. You and me both, I think.

'Good morning. Can you tell me whether any of the other flights to Ithaca are on regional jets, or are they all turboprops?'

She doesn't answer; doesn't even flicker. My mouth purses and the muscles in my stomach clench violently. Am I invisible? 'Excuse me?'

'I'll be with you in just a moment, ma'am.'

She doesn't even have the courtesy to look at me. I tap my foot and drum my fingers on the grey melamine shelf below the countertop, straining just to keep breathing. What on earth is the matter with her? Is she being rude on purpose? She can't be much older than twenty. Nearly half my age. Doesn't she have any respect? Something is building up inside me and any minute now I'm going to explode. Now. Here and now. Look at me, damn you. Look at me!

Just in the nick of time she tears herself away from her keyboard. She aims an artificial smile at me but it misses and

lands in the empty space just over my left shoulder. ‘Can I help you?’

Swallowing. And again. Burying the monster that is erupting from my stomach. I repeat my question. ‘I asked whether any of the other flights to Ithaca are on regional jets, or are all of them turboprops?’

The gate agent – Tiffany, according to the embossed plastic label above her left breast – raises a pair of over-plucked brown eyebrows. ‘You want a regional jet?’

‘That’s right.’

A man who’s just walked up behind me is yelling loudly into his cellphone. I can hardly hear myself think. I turn and glare at him but he’s completely oblivious. It’s the little girl’s father. But where is she? Ah, there. Clinging on to the pocket of his khakis as if he might run away and leave her alone. Does he even realise she exists? She can’t be any more than four or five years old. Does he even know she’s there? She lets go and wanders a few paces away, her teddy trailing on the floor beside her, and he doesn’t even notice. She’s your *daughter*, I want to yell at him. Don’t you even care?

Stop it. Right now. I clench my fists, turn back to the desk.

‘You have a problem with turboprops?’ Tiffany blinks: a slow, incredulous blink.

I blink back. ‘That’s right.’

She raises her eyes to heaven, no doubt asking the good Lord to save her from all the crazy people in the world. One part of me wants to take her by the throat and shake the smirk off her face, another to sink down onto the floor and weep. Another announcement booms out from the overhead speakers and the gate area is beginning to fill with people – I can feel them pressing in on me – and right now I need be anywhere in the world other than here.

And the spasms in my throat won’t go away.

What do I have to do to make them go away?

‘There’s a later flight on a regional jet...’ she reels off the flight number and the departure time, ‘but I’m afraid it’s full.’ She presses her lips together in satisfaction and for a moment I hate her and the sudden force of that hatred shocks me. I try to swallow it down; force myself to shrug. Oh, well. The flight would’ve been too late, anyway. I guess I’m out of luck. And then she looks up at me with the kind of expression you’d expect her to reserve for an escapee from the local funny farm. ‘Turboprops are quite safe, you know, ma’am.’

I flush; the scary monster grapples with the weepy child and before one or the other of them wins, I bite down hard and turn away. The large man is still bellowing into his phone even as he pushes forward into my place, almost knocking me over with the laptop case that’s slung over his shoulder. He doesn’t even see me.

Am I invisible?

Rage, hot, incandescent, sparks in my belly and the monster roars in triumph as I swing round to face him and somehow it happens that I’m yelling ‘Excuse me!’ and out of the corner of my eye I see Tiffany’s head jerk up from her computer screen and swivel in my direction.

The cellphone man stops in mid-sentence and peers down at me in bewilderment. ‘Gee, sorry, lady. I didn’t see you there.’

‘Of course you didn’t see me. You weren’t even looking.’ Is that me shouting? ‘Can’t you put that damn thing away for a few minutes and just watch where you’re going?’

No. Not me. I don’t shout.

He stares at me, open-mouthed. There’s a movement behind him and the little girl catches hold of his arm. He reaches behind him and pulls her protectively to his side, looking at me all the while as if I’m a mad axe murderer.

Perhaps I am. Perhaps the monster has always been there inside me. Watching. Waiting. Hungry.

Around us there’s a sudden silence as conversations ebb and

die and the little blonde girl looks up at me with fearful brown eyes and the monster crumples and flees, wailing its sorrow into the empty air.

I know her. I've known her all my life.

Dear God, what is the matter with me? What am I doing? What am I *doing*?

'That's okay,' I mumble. I raise my hands. 'I'm sorry. I just –' I close my mouth and turn away. I want to fade, to dissolve into peaceful nothingness, just like I always used to do. I want to float up above it all where I can watch from a safe distance. But that doesn't seem to be an option now. In my shame I'm completely visible. My face is burning. I avert my eyes from all the curious faces and make a dash for the restroom. I head for an empty cubicle at the far end of the row, sink down onto the closed toilet seat and bend over, putting my head in my hands.

What the hell is the matter with me?

The little girl's frightened eyes; the look of utter bewilderment on her father's face as he drew her to his side.

What is happening to me?

I close my eyes and see myself as they must have seen me. A thin blonde-haired woman on the cusp of forty with a livid face and brown glittering eyes and an angry twisted mouth and as I watch the features thicken and coarsen and it isn't my face any more, it's my father's – so very alike, they said; you must be very proud of her – and I am that little girl – *stop your whimpering or I'll tan your hide, ye wee bundle o' shite* – I've always known her – and the voices have always been there, won't ever go away and I pull my hair until it hurts and oh, dear God, what is happening to me?

I'm losing it; I'm out of control and I can't be out of control. I can't. It's just not an option. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

Calm. I must be calm. I'm breathing rapidly – too rapidly; I'm light-headed and there's a strange tingling in my fingertips. Calm, Cat. Calm. I know how to be calm. Calm is my speciality.

The original cool, calm and collected, that's me. So very original. Trademarked. Copyrighted. I want to giggle but I'm not sure I'd be able to stop, so I breathe out and hold it and the fog in front of my eyes begins to clear and I will my heart to stop racing and I zero in on the featureless beige door in front of me and, little by little, everything starts to slow down. I focus on each one of the sounds I can hear around me – people talking and doors slamming and toilets flushing – and it's okay: everything will be fine.

Everything is fine.

I'm quite safe now.

This isn't just about flying: it can't be. I've always been a nervous flyer, but this is ridiculous. I close my eyes, try to breathe slowly. Try just to breathe. And it isn't only turboprops: I just don't like flying. Oh, I take flights – I have little choice, really. Phoenix is a long way away from anywhere, and I have to travel – it's my job. But I fly reluctantly, nervously. At every moment of the flight I am alert to the possibility of complete disaster. I am the kind of passenger that you see on every airplane if you look closely enough. The passenger who sweeps confidently on board, perfectly groomed, not a neatly bobbed blonde hair out of place, smartly dressed and complete with all the appurtenances of success: the briefcase, the latest-model cellphone, the laptop, the attentive subordinate. The passenger who sits quite still, with an expression of concentrated insouciance as the plane prepares for departure. The passenger who, nevertheless, gives herself away with little things. A slight drumming of the fingertips on her thigh as the plane waits to enter the runway. An occasional furtive glance out of the window to see what's happening, then a calculatedly casual return to whatever document she is pretending to review. Tension evident in every line of her body. A visible gritting of the teeth as the plane leaves the ground. A sudden brief clutching at the arm of the seat as the aircraft banks steeply to leave the

airport's traffic pattern. The passenger who never really relaxes, never really switches off.

But I've never reacted like this before. Not like this. No. This isn't just about flying. This is something else. I don't know what it is, but whatever it is, it's starting to happen to me more and more. I rub my eyes; I can't afford to worry about that now. Right now I'm still breathing and I seem to be able to see again and the shuddering tremors have gone away. I need to pull myself together and get back out there before Jack comes looking for me. I need to get on that plane.

Next week. I'll think about it next week. I'll see Dr Rubenstein and he'll give me the results and once I know the score, I'll deal with it. Just like I always do.

I stand up straight and tall and grit my teeth and walk out of the cubicle as if I haven't a care in the world. I hum a cheerful little tune as I stand at the sink and splash cold water on my face, smiling brightly at the mirrored reflection of the woman next to me. I hold my head high as I walk back to Jack, eyes fixed straight ahead to avoid the stares of anyone who might have seen the altercation at the desk.

Jack looks at me carefully as I approach, but he shows no sign that he was aware of what happened. He smiles, a brief upward quirk of his mouth. 'No luck?'

'Nope.' I lower myself into the seat next to him and force myself to look out of the window at the plane. A couple of men in brightly coloured rain gear are loading baggage into the hold; other vehicles swarm around in a carefully choreographed dance, feeding it with fuel and loading it with trolleys.

The rain is torrential.

He nudges me with his elbow. 'You going to be okay?'

I nod; try to smile. The sympathy in his voice makes me want to cry. 'Sorry. I lost it there, for a moment.'

He laughs softly. 'Bullshit. You're the least likely person to lose it that I've never known. You're a rock.'

I wince. A rock. My mother's voice reverberates in my head. *Cat, I don't know what I'd do without you. You're all that I have. You're my life, Cat. You're my rock.* But don't they know? Even a rock can get worn down eventually. Just like in the desert, back home in Arizona. Hundreds and hundreds of square miles of rock that's simply given up the fight. Turned to sand.

Minutes pass – or maybe hours – as I stare out at the teeming rain. Finally, I'm jolted out of my reverie by another jab of Jack's elbow. 'Come on, honey – buck up. They're boarding.'

And so I pick up my bags, grit my teeth and board along with everyone else. Please God, I think. Please do not let that man and his child be sitting anywhere near me. Please do not let me have to face them again. I avoid Tiffany's eyes as she takes my boarding card, passes it through a scanner and tells me tersely to have a nice flight.

But then I'm sitting down and I can't stop the terror as the storm rages around us and the wind buffets the body of the aircraft and we stumble and rock and fall through the turbulence, and I haven't a thought for the man or his child or for Tiffany or for anything else at all except for the overwhelming need to just hold on.

Jack looks at my hands, clasped tight on the arms of my seat, white-knuckled. My jaw aches from tension. 'You know,' he says, 'I've got just the answer for that.' I snort in response and he laughs quietly. 'The perfect cure for fear of flying. Dr Walker prescribes.'

'Really?' I say through gritted teeth. 'Do tell. Half a bottle of bourbon, perhaps? Or how about a general anaesthetic?'

He grins. 'No. What you need are flying lessons.'

'Flying lessons? Oh, that's a really good idea, Jack.' I brandish my shaking hands before another sharp jolt causes me to clutch at the armrest again. 'Flying lessons? Do I look like I'd be capable of learning to fly a plane? I've never heard anything

so ridiculous in my entire life. This plane is already too small for me, and it carries thirty people and has two engines – if that’s what those twirling things hanging from the wings are supposed to be. You are completely insane.’ There’s a high-pitched whining sound and the plane lurches to one side and my whole body is damp with sweat. ‘What on earth makes you imagine I’d ever in a million years manage to leave the ground in one of those tiny single-engine toy birds that people learn to fly in? I’ve seen them at Scottsdale airport.’ I shudder. ‘I’d scream. I’d have vertigo. I’d have a panic attack.’

He raises an eyebrow and his mouth twists in his trademark crooked smile. ‘Honey, I’ve worked with you for five years now. I’ve watched you approach situations in the boardroom that would cause most people to quake. I’ve seen you calm when everyone else is stressed out of their tiny minds, and I’ve seen you fire up the troops when everyone is sinking into apathy, convinced we’re going to lose a case. I’ve watched you tear a strip off someone who thinks he’s your superior because you thought he wasn’t taking you seriously enough, and because you do it with that oh-so cool-and-collected British charm the guy doesn’t even know he’s been had.’ He rests a dry cool hand briefly on mine; I resist the temptation to grab hold of it. ‘I think you could do pretty much anything you put your mind to, if you would just stop telling yourself all the reasons why you can’t.’

I produce what I hope is a crooked smile of my own. ‘Ah, but I’m only fooling. Deep down inside I’m the Cowardly Lion, all bluster and noise, searching for my lost courage. Bet you a beer I won’t find the Wizard of Oz hiding inside one of those miniature airplanes, holding it out on an emerald-green platter.’

‘Hey – get it right when you’re quoting great American literature, or stick to quoting your own. It wasn’t the Wizard who gave the Lion his courage. It was there inside him all the

time. He just had to find it.' He smoothes imaginary whiskers and grins toothily.

I shake my head and turn away. Because Jack doesn't know that the problem isn't just fear: it's that I don't really believe in the possibility of flight. Well, of course I accept that it occurs: I get on board a vehicle at an airport and we travel through the air and when we arrive and I disembark, we are somewhere else. And so logic tells me that flight must exist. But believing in it is altogether a different thing. Because how does it happen? At what point do several tons of earthbound metal transform themselves into a winged creature that can soar, that can glide, that can fly? At what point does the magical metamorphosis occur? At what point does the airplane itself come to believe that it can take flight?

I spare Jack these ramblings, resume my clutching and my hyperventilating and only just manage to restrain myself from kissing the ground when we arrive at our destination. I dismiss the suggestion as just another example of his off-beat sense of humour.

I don't think of it again.



We step out of the air-conditioned baggage claim area and even though we're on the lowest level, shaded, heat blasts us in the face. Good old Phoenix. I'm still dressed for Ithaca temperatures, and already the sweat is beginning to form in warm, sticky beads on my back. We're close to the end of October but the temperature is showing no significant sign of cooling down. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing in this arid hell-hole; sometimes I find myself longing for winter. Thinking of home. Bright, breezy mornings walking along the seafront and your ears hurt and your eyes water and it's enough to blow you off your feet but damn it, you're feeling; you're alive.

But I left home a long, long time ago. I can't go back now.  
There's nothing to go back to.

I trot after Jack, overnight bag slung over my shoulder and black winter coat over my arm. The place is crazy with activity; frantic travellers laden with luggage jay-walk around the terminal buildings. Taxi horns blare and their drivers gesticulate wildly at driving that doesn't meet their questionable standards. Cars stop and unload in all the wrong places, their apparent aim to cause as much inconvenience to other road users as possible. Shuttle buses swarm like parasites, pulling in and out of loading bays without bothering to indicate or wait for a gap.

Narrowly avoiding a taxi bent on homicide I follow Jack across the pedestrian walkway that leads into the multistorey parking garage. It doesn't take him long to locate his car; somehow he'd managed to find a spot enviably close to the terminal. I watch as he unlocks it and slings his overnight bag into the trunk.

'Drive carefully. Don't get anything caught in those propellers, now.'

'Very funny, Jack.' I fumble in my purse for my car keys – why is it that wherever I put them they manage to escape and work their way down to the very bottom corner of the bag? – and stick my tongue out as he slides into the shiny black Lexus, reverses smoothly out of his parking space, and zooms away with a wave and a grin. As always, he leaves me smiling.

Alone again. My shoulders sag and I exhale loudly. Thank God that's over. I didn't like the journey home from Ithaca this morning much more than I liked the journey there yesterday, but at least this time the weather was calm. And more importantly, so was I. Back to normal. A momentary lapse, that's all it was yesterday. Just a blip, and now everything's fine again. Everything's still.

I trudge on up the ramp and around the corner to the place where I parked the Jeep. A sharp press of the key fob and a

familiar, comforting clunk as the locks leap open. The standard-issue black overnight bag is loaded into the trunk; I peel off my navy woollen jacket and drape it over the back of the driver's seat. I've never discovered an elegant way of climbing into a Grand Cherokee wearing a skirt that stops just short of the knees; happily there's no-one close enough to see me struggle. But it's just a quick drive home from the airport – depending on the traffic on the freeway, of course – and then I'll be able to get out of this business suit and into something more civilised. Something loose, something sloppy. And then I'll shut up the mask of competence and efficiency in the closet along with the suit and slam the door and lock it tight.

And wish, just for a moment, that I could throw away the key.

I push the thought away and sink into the deep cushioned comfort of the driver's seat. One turn of the ignition and the engine purrs into life. Air-conditioning on: ah, that's better already. Not too cold, though: just a gentle, cool breeze. I pull out of the parking garage and make my way slowly through the usual Saturday madness at Phoenix Sky Harbour, curbing my impatience at the frequent stops and starts. Once I'm on the freeway I can put my foot down; I can build up speed and start to relax. The traffic's heavy, but it's moving. Heat waves dance off the burning asphalt; sunlight bounces off the hood and angles into my eyes. I can't seem to put my hands on my sunglasses. I switch on the CD player and press the 'play' button, taking my chances on whatever is loaded up. A male voice, thin, plaintive, fills the car. 'I'm gonna be a happy idiot, and settle for the legal tender...' Jackson Browne. Nope – I don't think so. 'The Pretender' really isn't what I need to hear right now. I press another button, try the radio instead. 'I Believe I Can Fly'. With a sharp burst of laughter I switch it off again; settle for the soft hiss of molten asphalt under my tyres.

A few minutes later, I'm turning north onto Scottsdale

Road. The streets are bustling. Saturday is a day devoted to worshipping the god of conspicuous consumption all across America, and Scottsdale is no exception. The roads are packed with cars heading from one fine 'shopping experience' to another; each store neatly wrapped and blandly packaged so as not to offend, so as to resemble the rest. In downtown Scottsdale the streets are lined with pedestrians exploring tourist traps in the Old Town and the prestigious 5th Avenue stores.

Heading north; manicured concrete and emerald-green lawns dotted with pools and artificial fountains protect residents from the reality of the desert, whilst the carefully placed saguaro cacti pretend to embrace it. I've lived here for ten years now, and still I can't work out why it is that people come to live in the desert and insist on trying to make it into something that it's not. Wasting precious water to maintain grassy verges and golfing greens. Subdivisions that advertise 'lakeside living' in the heart of the desert south-west. Go figure, as Jack would say. And each year the concrete virus multiplies. It constantly reinvents itself, gobbling the desert, encroaching on the mountains, soaking up the water. This is a comfortable place to live, but lately I have become aware that something dark lurks beneath the orderly, artificial façade. Something lies in wait for me, biding its time.

I shake off the fanciful thoughts and crawl on through the traffic. Turning, finally, into a street filled with sparkling stucco-clad houses that bask self-satisfied in the shadow of Camelback Mountain. Not quite Paradise Valley, but close enough to satisfy Adam's aspirations. One more turn and then here we are: another 'custom home', the glare of its white walls so bright that it hurts. Most of the exteriors around here are painted terracotta – supposedly to blend in with the desert landscape. But not ours. Ours is different. Ours screams. The Jeep swings onto the pristine asphalt driveway – and then I see it through the still-open door of the double garage. Adam's car.

Shit.

I'd expected him to be at work. Just as he's always at work on Saturdays – because there's never any rest for a senior partner in a big-city law firm. And I'd really been counting on having that couple of hours alone. To ground myself, before he got home. My shoulders slump as I pull up next to the gleaming white BMW and force myself out and through the door that connects the garage to the kitchen.

Icy conditioned air shivers over me. Too cold. I hate it when it's too cold. He's been fiddling with the thermostat again.

Adam is standing by the refrigerator with an unopened can of caffeine-free Diet Coke in his hand, his air of weary preoccupation lightening as he catches sight of me. I soften; I should be grateful to come home to someone who is always glad to see me. He is a good man; I'm safe with Adam. Safe here.

'Hey,' I say, offering my face for a kiss as he approaches. 'You're home early. Or didn't you go in this morning?' His cool, smoothly shaved skin briefly brushes mine and the faded smell of 'Polo' lingers as he retreats back to the fridge.

Is that it? No ardent embrace? No frantic murmurings between kisses, telling me how much he missed me? No seduction, no ravishment on the central island, sweeping the bowl of fruit and white china jars filled with utensils to the floor in the unstoppable throes of his desperate passion?

'Yeah – we finished up all the trial strategy meetings sooner than we thought yesterday. Went out to dinner. Late night; those guys from the Washington office don't know when to stop.' He runs a hand through short blond hair that is greying rapidly now. Grey-blue shadows under his eyes mar the evenness of his tan. He should take time away from work. Relax a little. 'So I just went in to clear up the urgent stuff this morning and then came right back home.'

I drop my purse and my car keys on the pale, uncluttered work surface; they clatter loudly against the cold tile, crashing

through the silence that is beginning to press into the room. I know his eyes are on the back of my neck. My hands grip the smooth, rounded edges of the counter. Beige. It hasn't really occurred to me before but there's no colour in this kitchen; everything is beige or cream or some tasteful, understated variation of it. Cream painted cupboards. Antique white walls. White ash veneer floors. It isn't the air-conditioning that makes me shiver this time. There's nothing out of place. And the cold air smells of nothing at all. Does anyone live here?

I close my eyes; a sudden pang of dislocation tugs at my chest. Do I really live here?

Two clicks, followed by the soft thrum of the refrigerator and the gentle hiss of the air as it swishes through the vents. The sharp crack like a rifle-shot as Adam pulls the top off his Coke.

'How was Cornell?' he asks.

'Oh, you know: it was a university. Like any other. Nothing special.' I turn around to him; fold my arms across my chest. Watch as he takes three or four small sips from the can.

'Witness work out okay?'

'Yup. All signed up.'

'Good job.' A pause. He puts his can down, walks over to me and, smiling, he reaches out to take me in his arms. That's better. Drawn to the warmth I let myself lean in towards him but then his hands touch the blouse that's hanging damp at my back and he screws up his nose and pulls away. 'You're kind of sweaty. What have you been up to?'

My whole body tenses. Sweat: a cardinal sin. Nice women aren't supposed to sweat, not even in the searing heat of the desert. I've always imagined that American women have some kind of neatness gene – something that bestows that enviable ability to look cool and well-groomed whatever the climate. Because if it's some other trick, then it's one that I've never managed to work out. I move back abruptly. Sometimes it would be nice just to be held – really held – sweat and all.

‘Sorry.’ Why am I apologising? ‘I’ll go and have a shower in a minute. It’s pretty hot out there, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

In contrast, Adam’s navy polo shirt looks just as crisp and fresh as it would have been this morning when he first put it on, his beige chinos neatly pressed and with a perfect well-defined crease running down the centre of each leg.

‘Where have you been?’

The noose tightens around my neck and I feel the muscles in my throat contract. I turn away, clamping down on the monster that so badly wants to be free. No more monsters. Not now. It’s a perfectly reasonable, friendly question, Cat. Chill. ‘Nowhere. I came straight home from the airport.’

‘Was Jack with you?’ His voice is sharper now; I can sense his body stiffen.

*Where did you go, who were you with, where are you going now, will you be back soon...*

I clench my fists as the weight of his need presses down on my head. I can’t bear it. I’m not his first wife – I’m not Joanna. There’s no need for this. ‘Jack didn’t need a ride today. He had his own car.’

The sound of the mailman pulling up outside breaks the tension and lets me off the hook. Adam strides off through the garage door and out to the mailbox. I reach for a glass from the cupboard above me and fill it with chilled water from the refrigerator door. I rest my forehead against the cool aluminium surface. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t tell him what I’ve been doing – I’ve absolutely nothing to hide. But I hate this claustrophobic feeling of having to account to someone for every minute of my day. He doesn’t really deserve my irritation, but I can’t seem to help it. It seems to be my normal state of mind right now.

I watch blankly as he returns, places the mail on the island in the centre of the kitchen and starts to flick through it, sifting out the usual handfuls of junk and stacking them into a neat

pile. His face brightens as he opens a large brown envelope and scans the contents. He flourishes a glossy booklet at me, grinning broadly. 'Hey – look here. I sent away for some holiday brochures about Scotland.'

It takes a moment to sink in. What? 'You did what? Scotland? Why?'

He shrugs. 'I thought maybe we could make a trip next summer, get away from the heat. You know I've always wanted to go, take a look at the Old Country. Maybe do a bit of digging into my family tree. And now that your mother has moved there, it'd be great for you all to see each other again.' He catches the expression on my face and sighs. 'Cat, I know you haven't gotten along too well over the years, but hell, you can't go on like this for ever.'

Haven't gotten along too well? That doesn't *begin* to cover it. A flush blooms and spreads hot pink petals across my cheeks. I stand up straight, shoulders back. 'Don't you think we might have talked about this before you decided?' My voice comes out sharper than I'd intended.

He throws his hands up in front of him and backs off towards the door. 'Whoa. I haven't decided anything. That's not how we do things around here. All I did was to send away for some information. Don't you think you're overreacting?'

Overreacting?

He's right. I don't do this. I don't get angry; I hate conflict. He's not used to me behaving like this. I'm not used to me behaving like this.

Why am I behaving like this?

I take a deep breath and move away to the dishwasher, placing my glass carefully inside. A 'cupboard for dirty things', my mother used to call it. She would never dream of using a dishwasher. The scent of lemon air-freshener spills out as I close the door; it mingles uncomfortably with the stale smells of dried-on food and old coffee. 'I'm just not sure I want to

go back to Scotland for a holiday. It's not like it's not familiar. After all, I lived there when I was a child.'

'Yes, but how long is it since you were back?'

Thirty-five years. I shake my head, firmly banishing the memories. Oh, no. I'm not going there, thank you very much. 'That's not the point. I'm just not sure I want to go and visit my mother right now, and I can't see how I can reasonably go to Scotland and not see her.'

He rests his hands on the countertop to take the weight of his upper body, and then lowers his head and sighs. 'Cat – you haven't seen her for – what must it be, three years now?' He looks up at me with weary eyes. We've been here before. 'On a business trip to London where you spent, if I recall correctly, precisely three hours in her company over dinner in the noisiest restaurant you could find, you said. So that you didn't have to work too hard at making conversation.'

'Once every three years is more than enough, Adam, thank you very much. You don't know my mother and you can't possibly understand.' Of course, my relationship – if that's the word for something so fragile – with my mother is a complete mystery to him. Adam has two older brothers and two younger sisters and they all adore each other; along with his Mom and Dad they're his best friends in the whole world. He runs back home to Atlanta to visit half a dozen times a year. And I have to admit that when I go along with him, I like the closeness that they have. Maybe I even envy it a little. But it's not something I ever had. It's not something I even understand.

'Well hell, Cat, I wish one of these days you'd explain it to me. You speak to her on the telephone once every couple of months and you come away tearing your hair out. Surely it can't be that difficult. What's the big deal? I've haven't met her once in the five years we've been together. On your annual telephone call on Christmas Day I maybe get to exchange a

dozen sentences with her, if I'm lucky and get to the phone first. And I gotta tell you, she seems quite charming to me.'

I throw up my hands and turn away from him. Stare out blindly through the kitchen window. The sun beats down relentlessly on the bleached wooden deck. There's no sign of life out there: it's too damn hot.

Yes, my mother has always seemed quite charming to other people. My school friends all adored her. *Oh, Cat – you're so lucky. Your mum's so much fun. She's so young. She's so pretty. I wish my mum was like her.* Yeah, right. I sigh; I don't want to think about this. Not any time, but certainly not today. 'Let's not talk about it now, huh? You're tired and I need a shower.' I turn; dredge up a smile intended to pacify. Please leave this alone. Please just leave me alone. 'We'll think about it tomorrow.'

'Scarlett O'Hara will never be dead while you're around. Always postponing the difficult stuff.' He means only to tease, but the sharp truth of the statement slices through me and deprives me of breath. Oblivious, he strolls over to me, smiles and cups my face in a large soft hand. 'Sorry, sweetheart. I didn't mean for you to think I'm railroading you. I just thought it might be something you'd like to do – show me where you grew up, and all. It doesn't matter.' He strokes his thumb over my mouth and I watch, cornered, as a light kindles in his eyes. 'But since I'm home early, we have some time to kill. How about we go fool around for a while?'

Fool around – I hate that phrase. Sounds like something a couple of teenagers might get up to in the back seat of a car. And right now it's the last thing I want to do.

I nod with as much enthusiasm as I can muster. Buying time, I rest my forehead lightly against his shoulder.

All I want is to find a quiet room where I can be by myself, where I can lie down and close my eyes and forget about all the stuff that's going on inside my crazy muddled head. But there

have been too many times lately when ‘fooling around’ has been the last thing I’ve wanted to do. And he doesn’t deserve that either. I have no doubt that Adam loves me. I ought to be grateful for it. This is just a phase I’m going through. Maybe it’s a phase all forty-year-olds go through. Maybe it’s something I’m going to have to get used to.

He breaks away, turns me around and pushes me towards the hall, patting me smartly on the backside.

‘It’d be good if you had that shower first, though.’

Sex has never been dramatic for me. Oh, it’s pleasant enough, but the expected transcendental experience has never occurred. No lights, no music. No misty merging of souls. Most of the time I feel clumsy, ill at ease. I have to have the lights out; I have to hide my face. I don’t seem to know how to turn myself loose. I focus; I analyse. I can’t let go.

Adam applies himself to my body with admirable enthusiasm, and I do my best to respond. I touch his shoulders, caress his face. And it’s the same old familiar routine. I can predict every movement, anticipate each touch. It’s as if he’s struggled to learn the steps – and is afraid to improvise in case he loses track of the dance. My eyes are wide open; I murmur my appreciation but inside I’m hollow. Telltale moisture gathers at the corners of my eyes; thank God he drew the blinds. I draw in a deep shuddering breath.

‘That’s right, come on now,’ he whispers, and I don’t want to hurt him; I don’t want him to feel that he’s failed. I turn my face away, inhale again, slowly, but the cool dry air catches in my throat and I gasp. The weight of my isolation presses down on my chest like an incubus.

I don’t want this. I don’t want it but I don’t know how to make it stop.

I let out a series of short ragged breaths and he doesn’t see – he doesn’t understand I’m not shuddering with pleasure.

I'm crying.

'Good girl,' he says.

And then his breathing is coming faster now – faster and I close my eyes tightly and clench my fists and he convulses against me, fills me.

Invades me.

I want to shrug him off but he's so heavy.

'I love you,' he says.

As he lies dozing beside me I reach across my bedside table for *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. I reach for Sei Shonagon whenever I can't shut off the thoughts that crowd out sleep. There's something comforting about her lists, the trivia, her preoccupation with the small details of life. The delicate clarity of the prose sweeps clutter from the mind and lulls me to sleep.

But today the magic doesn't work. Quietly, so as not to disturb Adam, I put it back.

Then I close my eyes and make some lists of my own.

*Three things that weigh heavily on the heart:*

- *A robin, dead under a tree as the first warm promise of spring gently ruffles its feathers.*
- *Having to tell someone that you love them when you don't love them any more.*

I pause.

- *Watching your mother cry.*