



leaving...

With so many good reasons urging her on, can Sally finally overcome her terror and step onto the plane?

By Gillian Harvey

The letterbox flapped, sending a shiver of cold air into the hallway before the envelopes hit the doormat with a thud.

Sally sighed. Receiving cards at Christmas had used to feel special – opening them up, catching up with old friends, dotting them on the mantelpiece or hanging them on ribbons on the wall.

Now, the only thing she saw when she opened each card was what wasn't there. His name.

She'd been warned that the first Christmas without James would be difficult – but the actual pain of noting his absence time and time again at the top of each card had taken her by surprise. The only thing that was worse was when a well-meaning friend from the past had addressed the card to the pair of them, as if nothing had happened at all. As if the cancer hadn't spread. As if his side of the bed wasn't empty and cold.

When she picked up the pile of slightly damp envelopes, there was one that brought a smile to her face. Sarah's.

The stamp showed the face of a man she didn't recognise, and the postmark read "Perth, Australia"; it had been posted almost two weeks ago, but she still raised it to her mouth and kissed it, feeling a connection to something her daughter had touched.

The pleasure at receiving the card was marred by pain. Pain of knowing how far the card had had to come. Pain of feeling the gulf between them – not as agonising as the longing in her heart to see James again, but a feeling of loss nevertheless – of not knowing when she

would ever hold her daughter, or little Esme, in her arms.

Padding back into the kitchen, she placed the cards on the breakfast bar and flicked on the kettle for a coffee. She set about opening each card – saving Sarah's until last, like an indulgent treat.

Ripping open the paper, she took out the large card with its luxurious gold writing wishing her a Merry Christmas. However when she opened it, another, slimmer envelope slid from its folds and skittered onto the marble countertop.

“Come on, Mum. Honestly I know it's scary, but you can do it”

She knew what it was. Her heart thumped and she felt her hands begin to sweat slightly.

Sure enough, when she slid her finger along the envelope's fold, tearing it open, a shiny booklet with a picture of an aeroplane dropped into her hand.

Opening it, she read the information she already knew. It was a ticket to Australia, leaving in just over a week's time, on December the nineteenth – Sarah had paid for her to come over for Christmas.

As if stung, she dropped the envelope to the counter, where it slid across the shiny surface. Because this gesture – this wonderful, expensive gesture – filled her with the kind of dread she had only felt when James had received his diagnosis, or when she'd heard Sarah was moving to the other side of the world. The fear

– irrational though it was – gripped her heart like a vice.

She couldn't fly. She just couldn't.

It wasn't a fear of dying. Since James' passing – so peaceful at the end; that look of serenity on his face – she was no longer afraid of death. The fear came from a more primitive part of her; a fear of being trapped, of being up high, of losing control. Of... of something else that she couldn't quite name.

“For heaven's sake,” she snapped to the empty kitchen. “What's wrong with me?” There was no-one there to answer.

Come on, Mum. Honestly, I know it's scary, but you can do it!” Her daughter's voice, already seasoned with an Australian twang, sounded distant and unfamiliar. “You just have to face the fear – I've read all about it!”

“You know I want to, I just...”

“Oh, Mum, please! Esme is dying to have you over at Christmas. And you know we can't come to you, not really. It's so important for children to be at home for Christmas – you always said that yourself!”

“I know, but...”

“Come on, Mum, think of Esme. Get yourself a nice book, glass of wine – whatever. It will be over before you know it!”

“Perhaps you're right...”

Sally could hear the uncertainty in her own voice, but it seemed to escape Sarah's notice.

“Of course I am! That's the spirit! You always said 'home is where the heart is'! You know, like Nana's embroidery in the kitchen. You need to come home for Christmas!”

“But this is my home, I've always...”

Her eye strayed to the embroidery hanging next to the spice rack. Home had always been so important to Mum – but family had always come first.

“And you have Mike and Esme, you don't need...”

“I just mean that we all love you, and I know how much you love the house, and miss Dad and all that...” Sarah's voice was quieter, gentler now. “But honestly, Mum, if you could just do this, we can all be together. And if Dad is with us, he'll be there too. He always said he'd be watching over us! Imagine all being together... it's been too long.”

“OK.” She couldn't believe the word had escaped her lips.

“Really? Really, Mum? You really, actually mean it?”

The relief, even thousands of miles

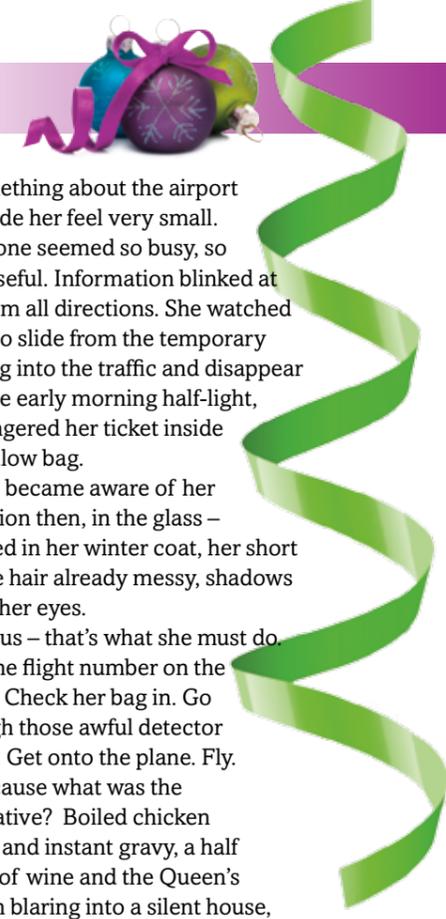
across the ocean, was almost tangible.

“Really.”

Yet when she hung the phone up, its click almost echoing in the empty hallway, she wasn't sure whether she'd meant it at all.

It felt vaguely ridiculous when, a few days later, she began to pack. Summer dresses – slightly musty from under-use – sandals, even a bathing suit! Part of her didn't really believe she'd need all of these things – surely she should pack a few jumpers just in case?

Not that she didn't relish the prospect of escaping from the grey drudgery of the weather, which had settled into its familiar pattern of darkness



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and dampness. Yet the difference in temperature just emphasised to her how long the flight was going to be – how far she was actually going.

In the wardrobe, James' summer clothes hung untouched. They had never made it to Australia together because of her. Now, the thought of going without him made her feel slightly sick. Why couldn't she have been brave then?

It was easy to think these things.

"I miss you," she whispered to his grey trousers and blue plaid shirts. They hung there, impassive.

Half an hour later, she hid her packed case inside the wardrobe, and closed the door firmly, padding downstairs for another cup of tea and to hopefully forget about it all for a while.

"Thank you for this," she said for the fifth time that morning, as Jean negotiated the empty roads and pitch darkness in her small Renault Clio.

"It's nothing, honestly."

"I know, but you being here. It's going to help. I know it is."

"You'll be fine." Jean's hand lifted from the gearstick and briefly clutched her own. "You will, Sally, honestly. Just think about that darling little one of

yours, waiting to meet you."

"I know."

The sick feeling was still there, churning deep in her stomach, but she tried to ignore it. She ran through the essentials in her head. Passport – front pocket of yellow bag; tickets – in envelope inside yellow bag; books – two small paperbacks, tucked in behind the tickets. She would buy a couple more in duty-free.

It had been a long time since she'd been in an airport. The last time had been when she'd seen Sarah home after James's funeral. Esme hadn't come.

Sarah made things seem effortless – she always had. She'd breezed in – dressed comfortably, long brown hair tied back efficiently – knowing exactly which screen to look at, what she needed, where to queue.

To Sally it was always utterly terrifying. Going through metal detectors, being asked questions about your luggage – which only served to remind her of all the things that could

Something about the airport made her feel very small. Everyone seemed so busy, so purposeful. Information blinked at her from all directions. She watched the Clio slide from the temporary parking into the traffic and disappear into the early morning half-light, and fingered her ticket inside the yellow bag.

She became aware of her reflection then, in the glass – huddled in her winter coat, her short blonde hair already messy, shadows under her eyes.

Focus – that's what she must do. Find the flight number on the board. Check her bag in. Go through those awful detector things. Get onto the plane. Fly.

Because what was the alternative? Boiled chicken breast and instant gravy, a half bottle of wine and the Queen's speech blaring into a silent house, when she could be sitting with Esme on

She'd let her uncertainty build up into something much worse

go wrong – then that moment when you stepped into the aircraft itself. That moment of handing your life to someone else for safekeeping.

She mustn't think about it.

Instead, she tried to remember that trip to the South of France, twenty years ago now. The plane ride had been fun – she hadn't thought about being trapped, or worried about anything at all. In fact, she had – if anything – enjoyed the sensation of being lifted up into the sky, with James at her side. It was only later that this fear had crept up on her. As she got older, she supposed. Yet it wasn't just that. She had let it build up from a little uncertainty to something much worse – all those years of avoiding, of saying she preferred to stay in the UK for holidays; that one adventure on the Eurostar. All lies, really. All hiding how she really felt.

All hiding the fact she was a coward.

"Are you alright?" Jean's voice piped up in the darkness, making her jump.

"Fine – fine, thanks."

her lap, singing songs about Santa and feeling part of something again?

Four rows down on the black screen, her flight number flashed up in amber. *On time* it read. *Gate 22a*.

So that was it. She had to do it.

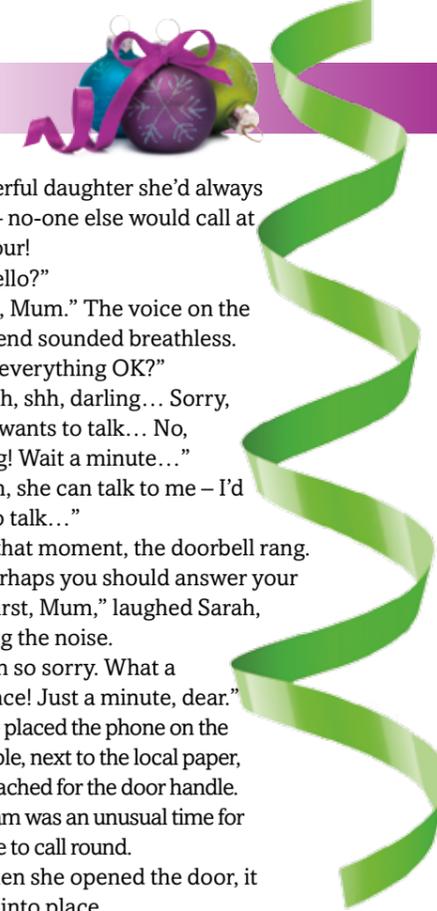
The worst thing about it, she thought afterwards, had been the waiting. If she had only been able to get on to the plane straight away, it would have been different.

Instead, eating bloated bacon and eggs from a cold plate, washing them down with over-strong coffee, then walking around Boots debating whether to buy travel shampoo or whether to just ask Sarah for some.

Then seeing her gate number and walking with those crowds, being jostled left, right and centre. All those corridors. Then more waiting, the ticket clutched in her perspiring hand.

Watching the man rip the end from the ticket, hand her back





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the stub, taking the first steps on that awful corrugated metal. Everyone being in such a hurry.

She had stopped. Simply stopped. People walked past her, desperate to find their seat, desperate to get “settled in”, all ignoring the small woman clinging to the wall and already knowing that Christmas would be cold this year.

In the taxi home, she had tried to hold it all inside, but the minute she walked through the front door, knowing that she had broken her promise; that she had chosen a Christmas in her empty house because of fear; that she had denied herself the chance to hold that beautiful girl, she felt wretched.

Then she'd had to phone Sarah. Hear

she'd left behind after the South of France. The house, as always, looked on impassively. There were no arms there to comfort her.

Two days on, the summer clothes were, once again, hung in the wardrobe, nestling up to James' flannels. She was in her winter jumper, warm slippers and heating on full as the rain slapped coldly against the window.

She'd forced herself to get the tree down from the loft – the tired, tinselled thing – and resurrected it, lopsided as always, on the small coffee table.

Jean had invited her for Christmas dinner. She hadn't been sure at first – Jean's family would be there, she didn't like to intrude – but Jean, pragmatic and practical, had insisted.

She felt certain it was Sarah; who else would call so early?

that disappointment; be ticked off for costing so much money. The abrupt placement of the phone – a cold goodbye followed by a dialling tone.

That's when she'd cried. For a while she wondered whether she'd ever stop: crying for James, for Esme, for the self

Sarah had rung back the next day to say that she understood – although Sally wasn't sure she really did – and that she loved her, and that maybe next year they'd work something out.

“I thought you were just a bit nervous, Mum,” she'd said. “But maybe it's more serious than that.”

It was true; she'd never tested her fear before – never tried to face it down. Never failed. Perhaps Sarah was right. Perhaps it was something serious, something she needed help with.

Walking into the kitchen, she looked at her mother's embroidery: *Home is Where the Heart is*.

She felt the weight, suddenly, of what she had done. She had broken her daughter's heart, Esme's heart.

“Enough is enough,” she said suddenly. “Never again.”

It was still dark when, the next morning, the phone trilled in its cradle. She felt certain it would be Sarah, checking she was OK, being the

wonderful daughter she'd always been – no-one else would call at this hour!

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mum.” The voice on the other end sounded breathless.

“Is everything OK?”

“Shh, shh, darling... Sorry, Esme wants to talk... No, darling! Wait a minute...”

“Oh, she can talk to me – I'd love to talk...”

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

“Perhaps you should answer your door first, Mum,” laughed Sarah, hearing the noise.

“I'm so sorry. What a nuisance! Just a minute, dear.”

She placed the phone on the hall table, next to the local paper, and reached for the door handle. Eight am was an unusual time for anyone to call round.

When she opened the door, it all fell into place.

Before she had time to react, a tiny bundle, wrapped in layers of woollen coat and scarf and smelling of strawberries, flung herself into her grandmother's arms.

Esme.

Behind her, looking tanned and tired, was Sarah, and over her shoulder was her wonderful son-in-law Mike, smiling broadly, holding two large suitcases.

“But how? Why?”

“Oh, Mum! We couldn't spend Christmas away from home,” came the answer. “Not when our hearts are here, with you.”

As Sally gathered them into her embrace, tears pricking at her eyes, she felt a strength that she hadn't felt for months. As though anything was possible.

Later, once the tears had subsided and they were planning their Christmas together, she passed the local paper to Sarah, a red ballpoint ring highlighting a therapist's phone number.

“Next year,” Sally said, firmly, “we'll all be in shorts at Christmas time.”



THE AUTHOR SAYS...

“Living in France, it's easy to feel distant from family, especially at Christmas – but what if travelling became difficult, and family were even further away?”