



## Chapter One: Me, My Mother and Ava Gardner

According to my mother, air travel used to be glamorous. "People dressed up to go on planes," she said.

Back then, she showed me a few black-and-white photographs of herself looking like Ava Gardner in tight-waisted dresses and vertiginous heels carrying a little square box with a handle, which was referred to as a vanity case and was taken everywhere as well as a handbag, and in some of the pictures she was wearing a little boxy hat, with a veil. "Oh yes," she said airily when I asked her about it, one rain-and-wine-filled Sunday afternoon "We all looked like that in those days. You made the effort."

At the time, we were sitting in the drawing room of the old house, the one I grew up in, the one before before the horrid bungalow, and before the residential facility, which she referred to as the 'home for retired gentlefolk' although there was nothing gentle about her, or indeed the other folk with whom she shared a sitting room and a small over-tended garden. She was still making the effort then, in a silk shirt with a bow at the neck, and the inevitable pearls.

She looked at my uncomfortable teenaged body, in its cord trousers and baggy sweaters and flat boots, and my unwashed hair tied up in a bundle with an elastic band, and sighed. "God knows

what happened to you Joanne,” she said, “I just don't know where you get it from.”

What would she think if she could see me now? Doing this. She's been dead for six years and I can still hear her, having a go. “What?” she would say, “What? I'm just saying.”

I can't imagine what would happen to a hat, boxy or otherwise if it had to go through what I have just had to go through. I know what would have happened to a vanity case because my handbag has just been screened, scanned, rummaged about in, emptied, zipped, unzipped, and photographed. My handbag, if it was a person, would now be very sure it didn't have any sort of disease, or abnormality, in fact it could be confident that it is in radiant health, but it might want to go home and have a bath and put on a dressing gown and lie on a sofa for a while. In passing, I find it strange that an arm or a leg, broken in a road accident, or a sports match, and taken to Casualty, can suffer several hours of waiting painfully in a corridor before it warrants an X-Ray, but a piece of hand luggage can qualify for half a dozen complete scans in the course of a single transit through from Departures to Airside.

But my mother's vanity case wouldn't fit under the seat I'm now sitting in. I know that because nothing at all fits under this seat. I tried stuffing my own squashy, capacious and supposedly flexible bag under there, but it protruded and represented a hazard to other passengers needing to exit the aircraft in an emergency apparently. As this is a window seat, and I am sitting in it, I can't imagine how anybody else would be at risk of becoming entangled in my handbag unless they decided to haul me across their lap in order to sit in this seat, so as to better watch the drama of our crash landing in the sea before attempting an emergency exit, but there you are.

This seat is numbered 60A Window. It is fairly near the front, that is the front of the back, the front of the Economy section, and is distinctly behind (and as this is a Boeing 747, *below*) Club Class and very distinctly behind the First Class. I am about half a mile away from the pilot, but satisfyingly close to the loo. The Galley is behind the loo and so the convenience of that will depend on whether the crew decides to start from here and work back or vice versa. But the key question is obviously, how close am I to disaster?

Somebody told me once that the safest place to sit on a plane is on the black box because it always survives. But the problem with this

is that a) nobody seems to be able to tell me where the 'black box' is situated and b) it conjures up a disturbing image of me, floating alone in the sea for weeks, clutching a black box waiting to be eaten by sharks. Still, at least my loved ones and the flight investigators would have a record of my death, complete with crunching sounds, one imagines, which would be something.

Getting through an airport and onto a plane reinforces my view of myself as ultimately worthless, and not-elegant. I didn't need the airport to make me feel like this, I still have the memory of my mother.

Tucked tidily into my seat, I find there is around me, an air of tension. There is excitement, anticipation, even joy in places. A five year old boy is already driving his own model 747 through other people's personal space, running up and down aisles, tangling his Boden anorak cord in the seat mechanisms and trapping people against other people. But I can also feel that the atmosphere of general thrillingness is cut through with more sinister overtones, apprehension, even fear, and claustrophobia, irritation and frustration, and excesses of many human scents, intentional and unintentional, mingled with hydrocarbons.

For a glorious few minutes I thought that the seat next to me was going to remain empty. Lines of people battled their way onto the plane, brandishing briefcases, and blankets and inflatable pillows and those wheeled cases which are apparently allowed on the aircraft even though I would struggle to fill one even if I packed everything I ever owned, and which trail behind their owners like small cars, weaving their way unheeded into the paths and ankles of unwary followers, who, no matter how hard they try to keep an appropriate distance from the person in front, consistently fail to allow for the half a metre or so of plastic handle length necessary. Coats and scarves and pillows and cases are stowed wildly into overhead lockers before their owners remember that the thing they most want most urgently having taken their seat, is the thing furthest inside the overhead locker.

Right above my head, my own poor bag is now stuffed right at the back of its locker, behind everybody else's plastic carrier bags of gin. I have managed to liberate my book, my reading glasses and a small bottle of water but if I need anything else it will have to wait until absolutely everybody else has collected their stuff and got off the plane. By which time, my linen-mix jacket will be crushed beyond recognition and I will have no time to brush my hair or

apply a light dusting of makeup and will be the only person in the line to enter America who actually looks like she has just spent eight or so hours in a washer-dryer on full spin.

And still the seat beside me remained unoccupied.

What a break that would be. A first for me I thought. Getting lucky is not something I am used to.

“You make your own luck in this life Joanne,” says my mother, in my head.

I concentrate on trying to make the seat next to me remain empty. Or, better still, I decide, the stewardess will come over and whisper quietly to me that I’m not to make a big deal of it, but if I would like to gather my things and follow her, I can be Upgraded. Upgraded to the soft, music-filled lounge of Club Class passengers, where magazines are new and shiny, and bright green apples sit in bowls on console tables, where champagne is served in real glasses and nobody needs to sit down until they are absolutely ready to do so.

Club Class where there is room to cross one’s legs, or sit at an angle, or read a book at the same time as eating a meal, where there are two visual distances instead of only one small one, and one’s bifocals are required, because not everything is a maximum of nine inches in front of one’s eyes. Club Class where....well never mind. Minutes tick by and my hopes continue to rise.

He arrives, just as the stewardesses are moving down the aisles securing the overhead lockers, telling people off for their protruding handbags and not-absolutely-vertical seat backs.

He is tall, but not offensively so, and well built but not in an overflowing-into-my-seat way. He is wearing a suit, which is good because he looks nice, and bad because it means that if, at the last minute anyone should be upgraded it will be him and not me. Close up, the suit is worn, a bit shiny at the elbows and the cuffs show signs of fraying but although I am close enough to notice it, the Upgrading stewardess will probably not be.

He looks at me. I am not looking at him, but I know he is looking at me because it’s his turn to stare, and he has just arrived and it’s what I would do if I was him. I can feel his eyes on the top of my head. What is he thinking? I know what he is thinking.

“She is small, which is a good thing, and clean, which is a very good thing. Her clothes are soft, and pastel- coloured, so she is not a businesswoman. She is the wrong generation for a portable electronic device which will vibrate in my ears, and she has a very fat and serious looking book in her lap so she will read and not wish to talk. She looks very tired, so she will probably sleep. If either of us is to be upgraded it will be me.”

All in all, I pass the test and when I look up, he smiles.

And there it is. At first I feel pleased. And then I am angry. Why should I feel glad because he thinks I am acceptable? All at once I decide that I no longer wish to be acceptable. All at once, I realise that I have been striving for acceptability all my life. That's what got me into this situation in the first place. That's why I am here, because I have had enough of worrying about whether or not I am acceptable. So I decide that I shall, in fact, be unacceptable. The whole way over the Atlantic. Yes, that is what I shall do, that is what I shall be.

I start by smiling back in what I think is an ‘are you single, or looking for an adventure?’ kind of way. I might even be doing a little hum. “Hello” I say, in a starting-a-conversation sort of way.

He makes a sort of grunting sound and within a split second has opened a newspaper blocking me out of his line of vision completely. I decide his name is Malcolm, just to spite him, and also to put me off him, just in case.

The doors are closed, the crew is belted into little jump seats, knees together, hands resting in laps, reassuring smiles fixed firmly in place. I feel as though I have been sealed up in a tin, where the air has been sucked out and is being replaced with something altogether more sinister which begins immediately to infiltrate my body, weaving its way into my hair and my ears and working its way into my lungs. I will believe. I will believe in the power of this 400 or so tons of 21st century velociraptor to carry 400 people across an ocean and away, away to a foreign land. I will believe a plane can fly.

Beside me, Malcolm turns the pages of his newspaper, and buries himself in an article about Dave Gilmour of Pink Floyd and how he has invested his massive millions. Malcolm is probably looking for tips about investments rather than about rock music. He pretends

to be oblivious. I look at him incredulously. How can anyone not be excited about this? My heart is beating fast, and my hands are gripping the armrests as the plane taxis along the runway, gathering speed, the flat green fields and neat hedges rush past faster and faster, and I can feel the heave and surge as the great lump of a thing lifts, completely improbably, into the air. There is a noticeable outflow of four hundred people's breath, and we are off.

And I, I am off too. Off for good.

Half an hour passes, and to be honest nothing much happens.

Flying is a curious combination of exciting and boring. The engines hum, a dull rumbling, as the air heats up gradually, being cycled and recycled, filtering through four hundred strangers' bodies, each one taking what little they can from it, until there is no goodness left in it at all. All this conspires to turn even the most intelligent and motivated person (which, incidentally, I am not) into some kind of lemming, following the crowd, mindlessly doing what everyone else does, and scarcely noticing. Most of us, with the exception of Malcolm, spend a pleasant enough half hour working out how the in-flight entertainment systems works while gleefully accepting tiny packets of salted crackers and miniatures of gin from the cabin crew. Malcolm rattles the pages of his newspaper and says no to the crackers, although he does accept two miniatures of whisky.

The TV is activated and three episodes of an American sitcom called *My Pal's Penfriend*, later, I can almost stir myself to care about what happens to the main character, who is called Henderson, and his friend Jack's Cuban correspondent, Rita. Yet again I had pledged to use these eight or so hours of inanimate time, of enforced sitting, to read *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I've always meant to read it, yet somehow it remains, stubbornly unread. Copies sit fatly in dusty corners of my life, waiting to make me feel guilty if I open a copy of anything more modern and, frankly, more inviting. And there it was, my latest copy (the Vintage Classics Edition, for those who wish to look for a good copy of their own) stuffed into the seat pocket in front of me, a third of a yard in front of my own nose and as unopened as a rosebud, as raw as a plucked chicken, its several hundred pages of tiny black text as untouched as a Victorian china doll on a high shelf, or in fact, as untouched as I have been for a very long time. Pages which have never even seen daylight. Also rather like me. Up until now.

I am impatient for something to happen. Malcolm is not cooperating. I do what I always do and choose an imaginary world instead of the real one.

In my dreams, a man is sitting three rows behind me. He is wearing an Armani suit, and he is a film director.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my mother says. “A film director in an Armani suit would be sitting in First Class.”

Nevertheless, there he is. And for some reason, he has decided to sit here, in Economy. In fact, he says he likes being amongst real people actually, enjoys mixing with all levels of society. He feels it connects him with his audiences, inspires his work whilst keeping his roots firmly on the ground. His struggle, for he is a tall man wedged uncomfortably tightly into an aisle seat beside a very large Jamaican lady in full ceremonial dress, who is eating a pie, is essential to his work.

And, he is thinking about his current project, which is a fabulous new adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, an eighteenth century novel by an English writer Acton Bell, who was in fact a woman, and who was also in fact a Bronte, and if there’s one thing Americans love more than Jane Austen, it’s a Bronte. And it’s going to be filmed in upstate New York, where there are orange woods and blue lakes, and wide skies, and it’s all set up. He has Rufus Sewell and he has Tom Hollander and he almost has Colin Firth. With all this manly box-office candy, his concept, pitched at least four years ago now, to a panel of producers and money men round a table in a surprisingly nasty building in Hollywood, permits an unknown female lead. The money men love that idea, as do the box office idols who won’t have to share their billing. Critics are already saying it is brave, media types say it’s madness, and he, Will Dunstan (Oh look, suddenly he has a name) has faith in his own absolute brilliance. But that was four years ago, and now, in this plane, on his way to the early set build and extras castings and wardrobe fittings, he is sweating a bit because he still hasn’t been able to find his Helen Graham.

And little does he know, that just a few rows in front of him, a pale, wide eyed Englishwoman with an inner core of steel, and the sort of (quite bland) face which works so well on camera, is sitting, deep in contemplation of that very literary character. How alike they are, this English woman and Helen, how in tune their feelings, their intuitions, their motivations are, and how time has stood still,

up here, 35,000 feet above the ground. Right now, down there, it is possible to imagine it is the eighteenth century all over again. What an extraordinary co-incidence it is, that in an hour or so, he will get up, in order to stretch his legs and thus avoid deep vein thrombosis, stride elegantly up and down the aisle in his English hand-made shoes, and as Ms Bronte would have it, chance upon me, Joanne West, woman of an uncertain age, unknown, mother of one, his Helen.

So I turn reluctantly away from the small-screen Henderson and Jack and Rita, and heave *The Tenant* out of its pocket again.

Across the aisle, Marvin Colton, fifty five, almost 240 pounds, in old Levis and a stolen leather jacket, sweats his way through the miles with the help of repeated shots of Jack Daniels from the trolley. He looks at the fake Rolex on his wrist every half hour and puffs with impatience, as if doing so will make the journey faster.

On the screen in front of him, Jack Nicholson is breaking down doors with an axe and women in nightdresses are screaming with blood running down their faces. It is the kind of film Marvin likes, but he can't concentrate. In just a few more hours, he will face the last hurdle. He will get off this plane, stride nonchalantly into the terminal, across the concourses and wait patiently in line to pass through immigration. He will try not to draw attention to himself, a feat of invisibility which is near impossible, given his size and the fact that his shirt is soaked through with his fear. Salt and sugar stick to his front as he packs nuts, crisps and chocolate biscuits into his mouth, as if to keep every muscle, every orifice, every cell busy at once.

He will hand over his passport in a carefree manner, make brief eye contact with the immigration officer, to show he has nothing to worry about, and declare himself an international businessman with a few days to spare for the sights of New York. He may even risk a question such as the best way to get to the Empire State Building, or the overall acreage of Central Park, to demonstrate his complete fascination with the tourist trail.

Then, the immigration officer will grunt, sigh, burp, and stamp the passport, which is so new it could have been forged last week, and wave him through, already steeling herself for the next weary, grey-skinned hopeful in line.



And Marvin Colton will be in. Within half a day he will be across town and across the Hudson River and among new friends, where he will lie low for quite a while.

But that is Marvin Colton's dream, not mine. What will actually happen is quite different I'm afraid. Because Marvin is a murderer. Behind him, east of the east end of London and some way into Essex, is a bungled burglary, at the home of a famous footballer who came home at exactly the wrong time, and got a sawn-off shotgun round in his head for his trouble. And, I'm sorry Marvin, but as if that wasn't bad enough, the footballer, a promising young striker by the name of Precious Adeweybe, was at that very point, being signed by the Russian oligarch who has just bought Hampton Rovers. So if Precious Adeweybe was upset at being murdered, Argon Kristeyvitch was rather more so at being deprived of the inevitable profit he would have made on selling the star player on at the end of the season. And Argon is not a man to let a little thing like that go.

So as Marvin cracks open the little lids of the Jack Daniels bottles with his shaking, sausage-shaped fingers, he has only the faintest idea that at the bottom of the steps which will be wheeled up to the aircraft on arrival at JFK, will be half a dozen of NYPD's finest. And what *they* don't know, as they take the calls to get to the airport, divide up their respective roles, check their weapons, and stuff the last of their doughnuts and egg rolls into their mouths, is that as Marvin Colton stands at the top of those aircraft steps, and looks down and sees them, he will die of a heart attack on the spot. Which I suppose, will be some kind of justice. Although it would not have happened to Jack Nicholson.

I congratulate myself on being able, despite my concentration being repeatedly interrupted by dreams of my fellow passengers, to get some way into *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. At least you can escape the stresses and strains of real, modern life with great literature. I've got as far as the bit where Gilbert, ignoring the scandalous gossip about his new lodger, takes it upon himself to beat up a man he believes is after her. In my dream, I am completely ready for my close-ups, imagining myself standing beside a stream out in the wild countryside (all copied faithfully in a back lot in a studio in Boston) praying that the size of my bottom in its crinoline costume doesn't eclipse the scenery completely, and am waiting to hear Will Dunstan's sigh of approval, when in reality, I discover that far from the wild, brilliant magnetic character we had imagined Helen to be, we find that she is yet another women

taken in and ruined by a seductive philanderer. God, men really are all the same aren't they?

At the back of the plane, Doctor Michael Stevenson is working on a ground-breaking paper he is about to deliver at a conference in New Jersey. The paper is on the latest developments in his work on identifying and isolating the gene which causes Parkinson's disease. At almost forty, he is considered to be the world's second-most respected expert in the field. When Professor Wilkins McKenna of Stanford dies, Michael Stevenson will be the world's leading expert. Wilkins McKenna is seventy eight.

Michael has already refused a drink and a snack in order to concentrate on his work. In a minute however, Michael will have to put his paper aside, because you-know-what will happen again. It will start with a sort of rustling, a light disturbance of the droning static atmosphere in which we are all trapped, like flies in a jar. The movement is way ahead in the distance, about sixty rows or so, but he can feel that already people are standing up, looking round, scrambling to their feet. Overhead lockers are opened, things pulled hurriedly out. Someone walks quickly forward, pushing past the aisle exercisers, film director Will Dunstan amongst them, who are rolling their ankles round and round and pressing their clasped hands upwards. Then Dr Stevenson sees a flash of red nylon, and then another, and he knows that several crew members have been summoned. He puts the cap on his fountain pen and carefully clips his papers together. It may be some time before he can get back to them. He fishes behind him to the hook where he has hung his lightweight waterproof jacket, tucks his pen into the inside pocket and curses because he has forgotten that at 35,000 feet, even the most expensive fountain pens leak. Then he takes off his reading glasses and replaces them with his walking-about glasses. He drains the bottle of water that he has brought with him, and puts the empty bottle in the seat pocket. Then he waits.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain, Steve Carlton," says a chocolate-filled voice, all calming reassurance and caramel overtones. Is that our Captain's real name? It is certainly a name to inspire confidence, unlike, say Brian Biggs, or Gordon De'Ath, both of which belonged to boys I was at school with. It is certainly a relief that neither of them is piloting this plane.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this point," continues my Captain Carlton, "but I wonder if we could call upon anyone with any

medical experience to make him or herself known to the crew by pressing the call button located in the panel above your head.”

Michael Stevenson presses the button and Shane, in red trousers, a navy and white striped slim-fit shirt and a clip-on tie comes skipping gratefully down the aisle towards him. Returning back up the aisle behind Shane, Michael feels sixty rows of eyes, eight pairs to the right three pairs to the left in every row, row on row, running the gauntlet of blinking worried, interested faces, until he gets to the point just a dozen or so rows ahead of me, where impoverished Park Avenue matron May Wilson, who has already had to endure the indignity of discovering that having spent her entire fortune at the gaming tables, she is now forced to travel economy class, now finds herself falling on even harder times by discovering that she has stopped breathing. Jamie Jones, a very beautiful child-prodigy saxophone player allocated the seat next to her, has stood up and is waving his arms.

As the doctor passes my row, he will look from left to right, and his bedside-brown eyes will catch mine. “I wonder...” he will say, “you look as if...” and he will break off, and I will rise from my seat, climb nimbly over Malcolm (in a most acceptable manner) and roll up my sleeves.

“Of course,” I shall say in my most calm and confident manner, “I should be glad to help you. Now, what should I do?”

Together we will save May's life. We will lift her from her seat and carry her through the magic curtain, flanked by grateful crew, to Club Class (oh, those apples, those sparkling glasses, the *space*) and we will displace a sleeping oil magnate in order to lie May flat so we can work on her airway, completing an emergency tracheotomy with the plastic outer bit of a biro which I happen to have with me, and Michael Stevenson will look at me in awe and ask me however I learned to do it. And I will smile enigmatically and I will not talk about my hours watching *CSI* or *Midsomer Murders*.

And the crew will smile and relax and open a bottle of champagne for Michael and me, and he will give me his business card and tell me that if I have any interest in his top level conference and if I would like to get involved with his vital research, he would be glad to find a place for me on his team. So we'll sit in Club Class for the rest of the journey and if Malcolm misses me back in Row 60, it will be entirely his own fault for patronizing me on takeoff.

I look at my watch. We've only been flying for an hour and a half. Seven hours to go. I return to *Wildfell Hall*, but I can't concentrate. On the TV screen in front of me Henderson is trying to persuade Rita to cross the Mexican border at the dead of night to meet Jack in a taco restaurant. The hilarity comes from the fact that she claims there is a better taco restaurant on her side. It's the air. Really, it's the air.

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