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Annabel:

An Unconventional Life

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Introduction

All my hopes for immortality were severely shaken in December 2000 by an incident which nearly wiped out three generations of my family. As usual I had spent Christmas at Ormeley, my home near London on the edge of Richmond Park, with all my five children and three grandchildren, and had planned to celebrate the New Year in a safari lodge we had rented in Kenya. On the evening of 28 December we were to fly to Nairobi and we were all in a merry mood as our large group, consisting of myself, Jemima, my younger daughter, with her two small sons Sulaiman and Kasim, their nanny Rose, Benjamin, my youngest child, and his friend James Sevier, and my niece Cosima and her two children, Lyle and Romy, checked in at Gatwick for the evening flight. Zac, my first son with Jimmy, his wife Sheherazade and their daughter Uma were spending the New Year in Mexico. The plane was delayed and we finally took off at ten at night and Jemima, her boys, Ben and James (who had been upgraded from their economy seats) and I were all in first class, and Cosima and her two children and Rose were in economy.

I usually find it hard to sleep on a plane but on this occasion I was so tired that I dozed off around midnight. I was excited about our forthcoming holiday and Jemima was looking forward to being reunited with her husband, Imran Khan, who was flying in from Dubai with his friend Jonathan Mermegan. Sulaiman fell asleep at once but Kasim took a long time to settle. I remember two early bouts of turbulence and I

wondered if Jemima was all right as she was so afraid of flying. Round my neck I had been wearing the cross that Jimmy Goldsmith, my second husband and father of Jemima, Zac and Ben, had given me many years before. It is a particularly beautiful cross with rubies set in the middle and I feel rather superstitious if I am ever without it. That night for some reason I took it off and put it in my purse, but as I removed it the thought flashed through my mind that this was an unlucky thing to do as I had never taken it off on an aeroplane journey before.

In the early hours of the morning I woke up very suddenly to feel the aeroplane shaking violently and the noise of the engines stalling. I could feel the plane falling, but most eerie of all was the sound of grown men howling, not a sound I had heard men make before or one I shall ever forget. There was a short silence and then the waking nightmare started all over again. The plane plunged downwards as much as 10,000 feet, and there was a shuddering as if the pilots were trying to start the engines. Two huge hands seemed to be trying to wrench the plane apart and as it went into the last final dive I felt pure feral terror, as I knew with absolute certainty that we were all going to die, realising that this is how whole families are wiped out. There was a moment of silence, followed by renewed howling. I could hear Benjamin agitating behind me when suddenly he grabbed my hand in terror and said, 'Mum, we're all going to die.' I remember saying to him in a strange slurred voice because my mouth was so dry, 'No, Ben, we're not going to die.'

Behind him were Jemima and her sons, and because I wanted us to die as a family with our arms round each other, I wanted more than anything else to reach them, but as I struggled to undo my seat belt I realised that because of the steep angle of the plane I was pinned down and could not move. I looked at my children and grandchildren whose lives had just begun and thought, *You are all so young and there is nothing I can do to save you.*

Then I heard Jemima, telling everyone to shut up and pray. She has described the alarm she saw in Sulaiman's eyes:

> Sulaiman was clinging to my neck, staring into my face. He was panicking but his eyes were focused on mine, waiting for any sign of alarm in my face. All my life I have been a coward, especially on planes, yet when my worst fears were realised I was strangely calm. Death seemed inevitable so screaming was pointless. But more than that, it was the power of the maternal instinct which enabled me to retain my composure and repeat like a mantra to my terror-stricken child, 'It's all right. Everything is OK. We are going to be fine...' while all the time I was thinking *very soon we are going to die. Please let it be quick. Please don't let his last minutes be filled with fear or pain.*
>
> It was only then that I thought of praying and I started shouting 'Everyone pray'. I heard my brother praying 'Oh God help us'. And someone behind me praying in Arabic. Then I heard myself loudly deal-making with God: 'Oh God help us. Don't let us die now. Please save us!'

Suddenly everyone seemed to have heard Jemima and started praying aloud as the plane went into another dive and we waited for the impact. Not one person on that flight believed that they would live. The whole episode had only lasted minutes, but to us passengers it felt like hours. Then there was a lull and the captain's voice came over the speaker, shaking, almost tearful (sounding, Jemima thought, because of his Scottish accent, exactly like Sean Connery). He told us that a madman had tried to kill us all but that they had managed to regain control and that he would speak to us later when he had pulled himself together.

My first thought was relief on hearing that it was a man's doing rather than mechanical failure and then we all cried and hugged each other. I remember undoing my seat belt and going

back to look for the rest of the family. I saw Rose holding Kasim tightly, with tears pouring down her cheeks and then Cosima, white-faced, with her arms round her two children. The cabin crew were unbelievably brave and good to us, because they must have thought they were going to die too.

On arrival at Nairobi the police arrested the man, a Kenyan student called Paul Mukonyi, and when I watched him leave the plane handcuffed I saw that he was a giant. I was amazed to learn later that after a short stay in the local hospital under psychiatric observation, he was allowed to fly back to France and continue his studies at Lyon University.

As planned we went on to our ranch at the foot of Mount Kenya where Imran was due to meet us. After most near-death experiences one can sometimes find something that, despite the trauma of it all, makes one laugh and today I can laugh about Jemima's reunion with Imran.

On landing at Nairobi airport from Dubai he ran into Lucy Ferry who had also been on our plane with her husband Bryan Ferry, the rock star. Still in a state of shock, she told Imran about the horrific events that had just taken place.

Imran is one of the calmest and most laid-back people I have ever met in my life. He believes that death is predestined and that if your appointed time is not up you will be spared. He also knows that Jemima and I are prone to exaggeration, although in this case no amount of imagination could have done justice to the appalling experience we had been through.

On his arrival at the ranch, Jemima flew to greet him but before she could tell him about what had happened he said, 'Well, baby, I hear you had a little turbulence. I have always told you it is better to fly PIA.' (This last remark referred to the ongoing dispute between them over whether it is better to fly British Airways or Pakistan International Airlines.)

At the time, Jemima and I were not amused. In fact, we were furious with him.

Although parts of that holiday were wonderful, most of us dreaded the return journey. We had all lost our nerve and since then flying has never been the same for any of us. Jemima finds it so traumatic she will only fly when she has to and Ben suffers as much. Even Zac, who was not even on the plane with us, now finds flying impossibly difficult because he has never recovered from the shock of nearly losing all his family in one go.

After we returned to London I met Captain Hagan, and Mark Birley, my first husband, and I arranged for him, his family and Flight Officer Philip Watson to have dinner at Annabel's, the nightclub in Berkeley Square that Mark had founded and named after me. Those two brave men were responsible for saving our lives. Had they not done so it would have been one of the worst accidents in aviation history and the world's third largest in terms of fatalities. That we survived at all was due to the courage of Hagan and Watson.

Captain Hagan described later in detail what had actually happened.

> In the early morning of 29 December 2000 a British Airways jumbo jet with a total of four hundred and seven passengers and crew on board came within a whisker of crashing. In the early morning hours, as daylight was breaking, an intruder had burst into the cockpit of the Boeing 747 on route from London to Nairobi. The aircraft was over the Sudanese desert at the time. Most people on board the aircraft were still asleep and only one pilot was at the controls of the aircraft. The suicidal intruder had entered the cockpit in an attempt to seize control of the aircraft, intending to crash it. He placed his body between the solitary co-pilot and his controls in such a manner that the co-pilot had limited access to the control column. He was unable to reach the throttles and his view of his instruments was almost completely obscured. The intruder took control of the aircraft. He

> grabbed the control column of the aircraft so aggressively that the autopilot dropped out almost instantly. The aircraft started climbing and banking very steeply, and as the co-pilot struggled against the intruder it subsequently entered a steep dive.

Captain Hagan had been taking his rest at the time in a bunk next to the cockpit but on being disturbed by the noise, he rushed into the cockpit and tried to attack Mukonyi from behind, but because of his huge size he found it impossible to move him away from the controls. In his desperation, Captain Hagan suddenly remembered his small son asking him when they were on holiday in Australia, what he would do if he swam into a shark near the Barrier Reef. Captain Hagan had replied, 'I suppose I would go for his eyes.'

Inspired by his own advice, Captain Hagan jabbed his fingers into Mukonyi's eyes and, in momentarily stunning him, was able to wrestle Mukonyi to the ground. How Philip Watson managed to right the plane none of us will ever understand because it was about to flip on to its back and go into an irretrievable tailspin from which nothing could have saved it. For Captain Hagan it must have been an added horror to know that his wife and two children were also on board. Afterwards the passengers campaigned for locks to be put on all cockpit doors and I have wondered more than once whether the adoption of such a basic security measure might have prevented the actions of those on the more successful suicide mission of 11 September.

Bryan Ferry has said that his survival has made him anxious to get on with his life and to get things done. It made him aware that there isn't much time. After such a dreadful experience I too felt that I had to re-evaluate my life and try to make myself a better person.

For a while I found that things that had once mattered suddenly seemed quite trivial, but whether I have changed

fundamentally I am not sure. I am certainly more frightened of flying, but I will not put my life on hold by refusing to get on an aeroplane just because of the insane actions of a deranged individual.

Before the incident I would not have believed that I would come to love and value my family even more than I did already. Shortly after the incident, with an awareness of how close my children and their children came to being denied their future, an understanding of the fragility of my own hold on life and a profound appreciation for my own past, I decided to write this book.