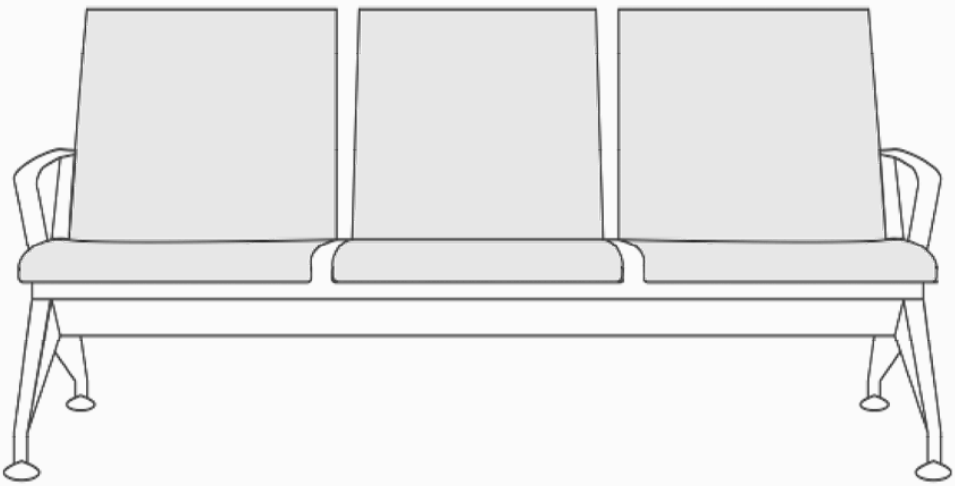

SEYMOURLAND

by Suzanne Freeman

IN the Athens airport, my father let us have whatever we wanted—French fries, baklava, Smarties. We were supposed to be changing planes here, but our flight to New York was already three hours late. The longer we waited, the more we asked for. My sisters got *Glamour* and *Seventeen*. My brothers got *Superman* and *Asterix* and *MAD*. I didn't want just something to read. I decided on a magic kit from the gift shop, but it turned out to be a bad choice. You needed an audience and none of them wanted to keep watching me make the tin coin vanish between my fingers or the paper flowers bloom before their very eyes.

"Dad," Abby said. "Can't you make her sit down?"

My father was working on files from his briefcase. His tie was flung back over one shoulder. "Gracie," he said, "come on, kiddo, give it a rest."

I didn't sit. I paced around, stepping over our belongings, which spilled out in every direction—knapsacks, tennis rackets, my brother Henry's transistor radio with its earpiece dangling over the rim of a chair. Henry was asleep, tilted sideways in another chair, his mouth dark from candy.

"Dad," Josh said. "Could I have some drachmas to play pinball?"

My father dug in his pocket. We were getting away with everything. That's what scared me. Usually we had rules. Henry and I were hardly allowed any sweets because we already had too many cavities. At home, my mother kept the boxes of cookies locked away in the pantry and rationed them out. She didn't know that every morning Henry and I took sugar cubes from the lidded silver bowl of the tea service. We hid in the laundry room and stuck cubes under our lips, like horses. Then we sucked until they fizzed away to nothing. We could smell our own hot, sweet breath in the tiny room. We could almost feel the new holes starting. It made us laugh and laugh, outsmarting everybody. But now, with nobody stopping us, it was different. I wished Henry would wake up. I kicked at the base of his chair.

"Cut it out," he said, not opening his eyes.

Above us, the information board clicked, the letters tumbling over. Next to our New York flight it now said CANCELLED in three languages.

"I called it," Abby said. "I said an hour ago that we'd be stuck here until tomorrow."

"Dad," Lee said, "if it turns out that we have to spend the night in Athens, can Abby and I go find that little shop in Monastiriki where they make the bikinis?"

"Ha, right, Lee," Josh said. He had returned from pinball, eating a cheeseburger. His chin was shiny. "What are you planning on using to hold up a bikini?"

"Dad!" Henry sat up. "We can't spend the night. What will happen to Bongo?" Bongo was our old, almost blind, springer spaniel. He was in a crate somewhere in the cargo area of the airport.

"Oh, Josh?" Lee said. She held up her middle finger.

"Everybody settle down." My father snapped his briefcase shut and stood up. "I want you kids to stay right here while I go to the ticket counter and sort things out."

We were on our way to visit our grandmother in Pennsylvania and then our other grandparents in Maine, something we did every summer. But, this time, afterwards, we wouldn't be going back to Beirut. Our apartment was being packed up. My mother had stayed behind to arrange everything, to supervise the movers. In August we would go to Cairo, my father's new posting. I watched now as he made his way across the terminal, passing through the dusty shafts of light from the high windows. He stood up straight, taller than everybody else. When he reached the line at the counter, he stopped and spoke to a woman in a red airline uniform. He pulled something from his pocket to show her. She unhooked the velvet rope and led him back, past the others in line.

"I guess they know he's famous," I said.

"Who's famous?" Abby looked up from her magazine.

"Dad."

Both of my sisters snorted. "Dad is not famous, Gracie."

"Then how come he's always on the radio in Beirut?"

"That's just part of his job for the embassy. Anyway, nobody listens."

"They do so," I said hotly. "Miss Hogan always tells me in school that he was good on the radio."

"Some fan club," Lee said. "Ho-ho Hogan."

"Fan club to many, I believe." Abby said. My sisters looked at each other and laughed. Their hair slid forward, like long silk panels, closing around their faces. Lee had to iron hers every morning, between two wet towels, to make it that way. I hated when they laughed like this, keeping me out. I turned away to look for my father, but he was nowhere in sight now. Everything was wrong today. My eyes filled up, but I didn't want to cry because it gave me hiccups. I sat down, a few chairs apart from everybody. That morning, when I woke up, the movers were already in the apartment and the air smelled like their tobacco and almond hair oil, not like us anymore. They stood in the kitchen, speaking Armenian to each other while they wrapped the china cups in squares of dull white paper and nested them in a carton.

One of them winked at me when I came in. "Hey, Miss." He had a creased face and ears that made me think of giant question marks. "For you." He folded one of the paper squares into the shape of a bird with spread wings.

"Oh," I said. "No, that's okay. No, thank you." I wasn't supposed to accept things from strangers. I backed out the kitchen door. He stood

there, holding out the bird. The other men laughed. I saw the curved rims of his ears go pink.

After that, I found my mother and started an argument over shoes. She had taken me to Hamra two days earlier to buy good sandals for the trip and now I refused to wear them. I said I wanted to wear my saddle shoes instead.

"Saddle shoes?" My mother made a face. "But, sweetie, it's almost July." She sat down on the edge of my bed and waited for me to give in. She cared about things like this. Clothes should match the seasons. Nobody under eighteen should ever wear diamonds or the color black. Quality should always trump cost. She had all our underwear shipped across two oceans, from Best & Company, because of the good cotton. My suitcase was open on the bed and my mother began to rummage through it, refolding the shirts and socks that I had stuffed along the edges. I stood across the room with my arms crossed, barefoot, frowning. The new sandals were set out on the rug beside my bed. They were nice sandals, deep brown leather with small, gold horseshoes on the straps. My mother clicked the suitcase shut, as if everything was settled.

"Wait," I said. "Why can't I wear what I want? It's *my* feet. And anyway, you don't even have to see them. You won't even be there. On the airplane. With us."

"Ah." My mother sat still on the bed. "I see. All this fuss is about something more than shoes."

"No," I said, looking down.

"Because, you know I'm coming in just eight days to meet up with you all at Nana's. Just as soon as I take care of everything here. You know that, don't you?"

I shrugged, not looking up. I could see her crossed legs, long and tan against my white bedspread. My father once told us that he had proposed on the spot the first time he saw those legs.

"Oh, Warren, honestly," my mother had protested. "You did not. I remember waiting months for you to ask me." We were all in the car then, on one of our drives across Pennsylvania, my parents in front. My mother twisted around on the seat and looked back at us, laughing. She had on the checkered kerchief she always wore to keep her short blonde hair from blowing. "And anyway," she said, touching the back of my father's neck,

"Shouldn't you be telling our children that you married me for my brilliant mind?"

"That too, kids," my father said.

It was always the best, riding in our station wagon, every summer, just us. We didn't have a house in America, we had the car. It was wide and low and heavy, white with brown sides, like a giant saddle shoe. When a door hung open you had to pull with both hands to close it. Outside were the slashed hills of Pennsylvania, the line of red taillights on the Tappan Zee Bridge, the thin, sharp pine trees along Route One in Maine. But when you pulled the doors shut, inside, it was our own place, our own country. Henry and I called it "Seymourland." Population: seven. Flag: the point of my mother's kerchief flapping in the wind. Mascot: Bongo. National anthem: my father singing "High-igh Hopes" and popping his cheek. Henry and I rode stretched out on the army blanket in the back of the station wagon, deciding these things. The rest of them didn't even know. We made Abby the teacher, the nurse, the cupcake-baker. Josh was the cartoonist and the baseball pitcher. Lee was sometimes the movie star, sometimes the toilet-scrubber, depending on if she was being nice to us. Henry and I were the lawmakers and also the outlaws. We stayed low, behind the back seat, so our mother would not see when we were chewing Juicy Fruit. Sometimes I

lifted myself up just enough to peer out over the seat and see the backs of their heads, the slopes of their shoulders, the contours of our country, the flag still flapping. I dropped back down, happy, almost dizzy. Here was everything.

Other places could become Seymourland too. When we filled the booth at a restaurant. Or stuck our striped umbrella into the pale, burning sand at Saint Michel beach. Henry and I would trade looks, just knowing. You could feel it, the way we claimed a space when we needed it. Because we moved so much, we were good at that. But, now, in the airport, it didn't happen. Even with our name spread everywhere around us, in black marker, in my mother's bold printing—*SEYMOUR* on the knapsacks and flight bags and tennis racket covers, *SEYMOUR* across two sides of Abby's clarinet case—we weren't a country, just a row of kids waiting in the hard, blue chairs.

"Gracie." Henry slid into the seat next to mine. "Let's go check on Bongo." Our arms, side by side, looked like one wide arm. Our skin matched. So did our hair, messy, the color of sawdust. He was eleven months older. Usually, I would go anywhere he said.

"Watch this." I snapped my fingers, made a fist, then turned my hand over and let it slowly unfold. "Oh," I said. "Wait. There's supposed to be a little butterfly."

"Yeah. You dropped it." Henry reached down and lifted it from the floor by one yellow cellophane wing.

"See this spring on the back," I said. "You squeeze it down and then when you open your hand the butterfly flies out. Here, I'll try it again."

"You just told the whole trick, Gracie."

"Okay, wait, I'll do a different one. I'll show you the mystic circles."

"Show me later. On the plane I'll watch all the magic stuff, I promise. But, come on, poor Bong, in that little cage. Let's get him out and walk him around for a few minutes. Come on." He stood up, ready. I sat, looking down at my feet, encased in their heavy, polished saddle shoes. The instant my mother gave in I had the stricken feeling that comes when you get your own way.

"Graceee." Henry's voice was impatient.

"But, Dad said to stay right here."

"So?" Henry said. "Nobody else is staying."

I looked. It was true. The other chairs were empty. My sisters were walking towards the restroom, their pocketbooks swinging. Josh was nowhere to be seen. Overhead, our flight was completely gone from the information board, as if it had never existed. I slumped lower in my chair. "It's our only rule," I said, miserably. "The only one we've had all day."

"So?" Henry said again.

"Just go, then." I covered my face with both hands. "You don't even get it, so just *go*." Between my fingers, I saw him hesitate, shifting his weight from one leg to another. Then he tossed his gray knapsack into the seat beside me and said, "Okay, watch this until I get back."

"Wait." I put my hands down. "You're going?" He was already headed for the escalators. "You can't walk Bongo," I yelled after him. "You don't even have a leash."

Without turning around, he pointed to his belt.

"Yeah," I shouted. "You'll be sorry if your pants fall down."

He stepped onto the escalator and I watched the back of his head sink below the horizon, gone. I shoved his knapsack onto the floor and kicked it a few times. My face was burning. Outside, it wasn't close to dark yet, but the light was flatter. An airplane started, one engine, then another, and you

could see the heat wavering in the air above them. I wanted to go back home, but it wasn't there anymore. I thought of my mother saying, "You know I'm coming in eight days. I am!"

The day she took me to Hamra to get the sandals, we also bought things for her: a boar bristle hairbrush, golf socks with small pompons on the back, and a paisley Liberty of London scarf that she tied around her neck. We walked in and out of the fancy shops, touching fabrics and smelling lotions. She tried on a green silk skirt, pivoting in front of the mirror and smoothing it down on the sides.

"It's pretty," I said.

"Yes," she said, "but it's not well-made." She turned it inside out to show me the mistakes in the seams, something I should always look for. She combed through my straggly hair with her fingers and fixed my barrette. "Let's go eat something delicious, Lady Grace," she said.

At the patisserie, I was allowed to have a maamoul with pistachios. We sat at a tile table, listening to the clatter of the small coffee cups and you could smell the Lebanese honey, made from thyme. My mother took her pen out of her bag so we could play hangman on a napkin. The category

was animal and I guessed her word quickly: "squirrel." But she couldn't get mine. Finally she had to give up.

"Ha!" I wrote it out for her triumphantly: "taranchula."

She laughed and dabbed at her eyes and hugged me, then wrote it down to show the correct spelling. She ordered another tiny cup of coffee and began to tell about the year she went to a progressive school in Boston where you could invent your own spelling. You could crochet a blanket for geometry and make a clay pot for science.

"I spent most of my time flamenco dancing," she said. "Somehow that counted as learning Spanish."

I watched her hands move as she talked. Her rings flashed in the light. She had told all these stories before, but today they were just for me. I took small bites of my maamoul, trying to make everything last.

After the patisserie, we walked down rue Bliss. Near the gate to the university someone called my mother's name and a tall, balding man with a large forehead was coming towards us, smiling. I recognized him from my parents' parties.

"Gracie, you remember Dr. Rasmussen," my mother said. "He and I are working on the library committee together."

He shook my hand. I had to squint up in the sunlight to see him. He appeared to be even taller than my father. "Ah," he said. "Two ladies with many packages. What is the term—a shopping spray?"

We laughed. "Spree, Hans," my mother said. "A shopping *spree*. But we don't have that many packages."

"I only have one." I waved the bag with the shoebox inside. I was giddy from everything—the sunshine, the sugar, the day.

"Well then, since it is not much, I can be the gentleman and carry everything." He took our bags and we all began to walk together, up through the gate to the campus, past the huge banyan tree where little kids were running in and out of the twisting roots, and in the direction of a gray stone building.

"Are we going somewhere?" I said.

"We're stopping in Dr. Rasmussen's office for just a few minutes," my mother said. "He and I need to go over some plans. For the library."

Inside, the building had a sharp smell of chemicals that singed my nose. We climbed the stairs and entered a large room, with several microscopes on the countertops. Only one person was there, a girl in a

white coat, sitting at one of the tables, busy, sorting through a stack of glass slides. She looked up.

Hello, Nadia," Dr. Rasmussen said, "meet Gracie, your new lab assistant."

I blushed. She nodded, not smiling, and turned back to her slides. He put all the packages down on an empty counter. "Gracie will stay here with you for just a bit while Mrs. Seymour and I go over papers in my office."

"For the library," my mother said. She ruffled the top of my head.

They went out the door and the room was silent, except for the clink of the glass slides. Every so often, Nadia squinted and stopped to write something on graph paper. Her head was bent in concentration, the precise line of her dark hair slanted across the collar of her lab coat. I wandered all around the room, not daring to touch anything I saw. It was mostly racks of clean test tubes and a blackboard with no chalk, but there was a radio I wished I could turn on for something to do. I began to rummage through our shopping bags, making the paper rattle.

After a while, Nadia looked up. "If you would like something to read, there is a *Herald Tribune* over on that table. Probably not today's. But, the only thing we have in English. Except textbooks."

"Okay," I said. "Anyway my mom will be back soon."

"Perhaps." She leveled her eyes on me. "Although, usually your mother spends a long time in with Dr. Rasmussen."

Something behind her mild voice confused me. "For the library," I said.

"Library?" Nadia kept her eyes on me.

"That's why. It's what they're working on."

"*Working.*" She twisted her mouth around the word. "Is that what you call it?"

Next to me, mounted on the wall, was a diagram of a frog with all its insides exposed. Somebody had unfolded a paper clip and stabbed it through the small, rosy disk of its heart. I turned away. The room felt darker, closer, hotter, like being caught in a box. I thought about outside, the bright day, the air lifting the branches of the date palms.

"Dr. Rasmussen is a very busy man," Nadia said. "An important man. He and I are completing a big study on how certain pathogenic bacteria—germs, you would say—are able to invade healthy cultures. That is the *work* he's doing."

"I'm going outside," I said. "I'll wait outside."

I stood with my back pressed against the rough, cool stones of the building. They had the smell of chalk dust, like a basement or a cathedral. I tried to take a deep breath but it wouldn't catch. It was how I felt when I looked at Bongo's clouding eyes, or when my sisters talked about leaving for college, or at any mention of the bomb, but I couldn't say what the reason was now. I decided to only think about later in the day, when things would be the same as usual. Henry and I would sit on the fIokati rug, playing slapjack—our own version where you had to slap certain cards three times. We would get louder with every game, shrieking and slapping until Lee yelled from her room, "Shut *up*, you little shit-brains!" Across the corniche, the sun would be a smear along the rim of the water, like something melting. My father would come home from work and put on his corduroy slippers that squeaked on the kitchen tiles when he went in to pour his bourbon. My mother would be there to tell me to set the table for dinner and I would circle, putting things down: fork, knife, spoon, fork, knife, spoon, the way we always had them.

It felt long, standing there. People passed by. Clouds formed new shapes overhead. In the distance I could hear kids laughing as they raced around the banyan tree and I wished I could just be them. "Fork, knife, spoon," I whispered. Finally, the door swung open with a rush of chemical

air and my mother stepped out, carrying our packages. She stood, blinking in the daylight, and she looked just the same, her freckled arms, the familiar point of her chin. I dashed out of the shadows and threw my arms around her waist, to keep her that way.

"Whoa," she said. "So, here you are. What made you come outside?"

I shrugged.

"What did Nadia say to you?"

"About germs," I said. "Invading."

"Oh, honestly. That stuff," my mother said. "No wonder you left."

We looked at each other and looked away. The swirling paisleys on her scarf, jewel-like before, now made me think of the frog's insides. So, it was true. Something had changed.

"All right," she said. "Let's go find a nice taxi. And, here, silly goose, you left your new sandals." She handed me the bag. "The whole purpose of our day."

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Everything began to happen fast. They couldn't get us on a flight to New York, but there were still seats on one about to depart for Washington. They were holding the plane. My father shoved passports and papers back into his briefcase while two women from the airline circled anxiously, one of them speaking into a buzzing walkie-talkie. Josh was suddenly there, wearing new, round sunglasses low on his nose, like Ringo Starr.

"Come on, get a move on. We're leaving!" my father called out to my sisters who were strolling back from the restroom. They had braided each other's hair and the braids slapped like ropes as they began to sprint toward us.

"Dad," I said.

"Four minutes, Mr. Seymour," said the woman with the walkie-talkie. "That's all they can do."

"We're coming," my father said. "Kids, grab your stuff."

I didn't plan it. I picked up the gray knapsack and the transistor radio and took them with my own things. Then we were running through the long passages, my father in the lead, the two airline women herding us on the sides, like collies. Our feet clomped on the hard floor and people cleared out of the way when they heard us coming. A security guard held

open a metal door, waving us through, and we were outside, crossing the sticky tarmac, feeling the blast from the engines. I looked back and the door swung shut. This is what happens, I thought.

On the plane we had to sit where they pointed. I sank down, out of breath, and the stewardess leaned over to buckle me in. My father was in the seat across the aisle from me. The others were scattered, somewhere further back. Right away, the plane turned around and began to move down the runway, bumping over the stripes of tar, past terminals, and then just open triangles of land. You could watch its long shadow glide over the grass, faster and faster. I thought about when would be the last minute that I could say wait. But, the engines suddenly made their opera noise and we lifted up and it was already past.

My father looked over and gave me the OK sign. "We made it, kiddo." His face looked relaxed for the first time all day. My ears popped. Through the little fingernail-shaped window behind him there was just clear sky.

They began to bring us things—magazines and warm towels and whatever drinks we wanted. "This is first class," my father said. "You and I got lucky." He twisted the top off his miniature bottle of Jack Daniels.

"Are we famous, Dad?" I said.

"You bet." He reached over and we clicked our cups together across the aisle. Hah, I wanted to say to my sisters, but they were out of sight, in back, separated from us by a pleated curtain. I drank down my ginger ale and had more, letting the thin, clear ice cubes slide on my tongue. I loved airplane ice.

"Dad," I said.

"Hmm?" He had taken his glasses off and seeing his bare face made me feel shy, the same as when I heard his voice come out of the radio in our living room.

"Do you want me to show you a magic trick?"

"I do," he said. He rubbed his eyes and leaned back into his seat. "But later. It's going to be a long flight, kiddo."

I leaned back too, but I couldn't sit still. The engines thrummed inside my chest, like something about to burst. Behind me, the pleated curtain skittered open. I turned and there were my sisters coming down the aisle, scowling, turning to look in every direction.

"Is Henry up here?" Abby said.

Lee grabbed my shoulder and dug her nails in. "Where is he?"

I tried to squirm away but she dug harder. Abby reached down and yanked the gray knapsack out from under my saddle shoes. She waved it in the air.

My face collapsed. "Dad said to stay right there," I said. "But I was the only one."

"Gracie!" Lee's fingers were like pincers.

"I told him to stay but he went to find Bongo."

"Oh Christ," my father said from across the aisle. He was just waking up. "Don't tell me. We forgot the damn dog."

"And *Henry*, Dad. Henry isn't here. And she *knew*. Gracie knew."

They all began to talk at once in frantic voices. My father put his glasses on and unfolded himself from his seat. I saw the grim line of his mouth. He didn't look at me.

"What in hell were you thinking of, Gracie?" Lee said. Abby dropped the knapsack onto my lap and the three of them went forward to speak to the stewardess.

"A germ got in," I said. But they were gone. We were all scattered now, on separate continents, in mid-air. Already, it didn't seem real that we ever lived together and had rules, that we ate at the same table and fought over

the prize in the cereal box. That every fall, before school started, we would line up with our new things, binders and pencil cases and protractors, for my mother to print our name on, one by one. The gray knapsack was heaped in my lap. I smoothed it out so I could see the lettering on top. We would stand there, watching, while she formed those letters, again and again, with the squeaking Magic Marker. Even my father would watch. We only wanted SEYMOUR the way she wrote it.

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