A Game for All the Family

Also by Sophie Hannah

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SOPHIE

HANNAH

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For Karen Geary – thank you for looking after my books so brilliantly for a decade!

The people I'm about to meet in my new life, if they're anything like the ones I'm leaving behind, will ask as soon as they can get away with it. In my fantasy, they don't have faces or names, only voices – raised, but not excessively so; determinedly casual.

What do you do?

Does anyone still add 'for a living' to the end of that question? It sounds stupidly old-fashioned.

I hope they miss out the 'living' bit, because this has nothing to do with how I plan to fund my smoked-salmon-for-breakfast habit. I want my faceless new acquaintances to care only about how I spend my time and define myself – what I believe to be the point of me. That's why I need the question to arrive in its purest form.

I have the perfect answer: one word long, with plenty of space around it.

Nothing.

Everything should be surrounded by as much space as possible: people, houses, words. That's part of the reason for starting a new life. In my old one, there wasn't enough space of any kind.

My name is Justine Merrison and I do Nothing. With a capital N. Not a single thing. I'll have to try not to throw back my head and laugh after saying it, or sprint a victory lap around whoever was unfortunate enough to ask me. Ideally, the question will come from people who do Something: surveyors,

lawyers, supermarket managers – all haggard and harried from a six-month stretch of fourteen-hour working days.

I won't mention what I used to do, or talk about day-to-day chores as if they count as Something. Yes, it's true that I'll have to do some boiling of pasta in my new life, and some throwing of socks into washing machines, but that will be as easy and automatic as breathing. I don't intend to let trivial day-to-day stuff get in the way of my central project, which is to achieve a state of all-embracing inactivity.

'Nothing,' I will say boldly and proudly, in the way that another person might say, 'Neuroradiology'. Then I'll smile, as glowing white silence slides in to hug the curved edges of the word. *Nothing.*

'What are you grinning about?' Alex asks. Unlike me, he isn't imagining a calm, soundless state. He is firmly embedded in our real-world surroundings: six lanes of futile horn-beep gripes and suffocating exhaust fumes. 'The joys of the A406,' he muttered half an hour ago, as we added ourselves to its long tailback.

For me, the congestion is a joy. It reminds me that I don't need to do anything in a hurry. At this rate of travel – approximately four metres per hour, which is unusual even for the North Circular – we won't get to Devon before midnight. *Excellent*. Let it take twenty hours, or thirty. Our new house will still be there tomorrow, and the day after. It doesn't matter when I arrive, as I have nothing pressing to attend to. I won't need to down a quick cup of tea, then immediately start hectoring a telecommunications company about how soon they can hook me up with WiFi. I have no urgent emails to send.

'Hello? Justine?' Alex calls out, in case I didn't hear his question over the noise of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* that's blaring from our car's speakers. A few minutes ago, he and Ellen were singing along, having adapted the words somewhat: 'Stuck,

stuck in traffic, traffic, stuck, stuck in traffic, traffic, stuck, stuck in traffic, traffic *jam*. Stuck, stuck in traffic, traffic, stuck, stuck in traffic, traffic *jam*, traffic *jam*, traffic *jam* . . .'

'Mum!' Ellen yells behind me. 'Dad's talking to you!'

'I think your mother's in a trance, El. Must be the heat.'

It would never occur to Alex to turn off music in order to speak. For him, silence is there to be packed as full as possible, like an empty bag. The Something that he does – has for as long as I've known him – is singing. Opera. He travels all over the world, is away for one week in every three, on average, and loves every second of his home-is-where-the-premiere-is existence. Which is lucky. If I didn't know he was idyllically happy with his hectic, spotlit life, I might not be able to enjoy my Nothing to the full. I might feel guilty.

As it is, we'll be able to share our contrasting triumphs without either of us resenting the other. Alex will tell me that he managed to squeeze four important calls into the time between the airline staff telling him to switch off his phone, and them noticing that he'd disobeyed them and telling him again like they really meant it this time. I'll tell him about reading in the bath for hours, topping up with hot water again and again, almost too lazy to twist the tap.

I press the off-button on the CD player, unwilling to compete with *Carmen*, and tell Alex about my little question-and-answer fantasy. He laughs. Ellen says, 'You're a nutter, Mum. You can't say "Nothing". You'll scare people.'

'Good. They can fear me first, then they can envy me, and wonder if they might take up doing Nothing themselves. Think how many lives I could save.'

'No, they'll think you're a depressed housewife who's going to go home and swallow a bottle of pills.'

'Abandoned and neglected by her jet-setting husband,' Alex adds, wiping sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt.

'No they won't,' I say. 'Not if I beam blissfully while describing my completely empty schedule.'

'Ah, so you *will* say more than "Nothing"!'

'Say you're a stay-at-home mum,' Ellen advises. 'Or you're taking a career break after a stressful few years. You're weighing up various options . . .'

'But I'm not. I've already chosen Nothing. Hey.' I tap Alex on the arm. 'I'm going to buy one of those year-planner wall charts – a really beautiful one – and stick it up in a prominent place, so that I can leave every day's box totally empty. Three hundred and sixty-five empty boxes. It'll be a thing of beauty.'

'You're *so annoying*, Mum,' Ellen groans. 'You keep banging on about this new life and how everything's going to be so different, but it won't be, because . . . you! You're incapable of changing. You're *exactly the same*: still a massive . . . zealot. You were a zealot about working, and now you're going to be one about not working. It'll be so boring for me. And embarrassing.'

'Pipe down, pipsqueak,' I say in a tone of mock outrage. 'Aren't you, like, supposed to be, like, only thirteen?'

'I haven't said "like" for ages, actually, apart from to express approval,' Ellen protests.

'That's true, she hasn't,' says Alex. 'And she's frighteningly spot-on about her drama-queen mother. Tell me this: if you crave tranquility as you claim to, why are you daydreaming about starting fights with strangers?'

'Good point!' Ellen crows.

'Fights? What fights?'

'Don't feign innocence.'

'Not feigning!' I say indignantly.

Alex rolls his eyes. 'Aggressively saying, "Nothing" when people ask you what you do, making them feel uncomfortable by refusing to qualify it at all, or explain . . .'

'Not aggressively. *Happily* saying it. And there's nothing about Nothing to explain.'

'Smugly,' Alex says. 'Which is a form of aggression. Flaunting your pleasurable idleness in the faces of those with over-sensitive work ethics and over-stuffed diaries. It's sadistic.'

'You might have a point,' I concede. 'I've been particularly looking forward to telling the hardworking, stressed people I meet that I do Nothing. The more relaxed a person looks, the less fun it'll be to boast to them. And it's pointless bragging to the likes of you – you love your over-stuffed diary. So I'm just going to have to hope I meet lots of people who hate their demanding jobs but can't escape them. Oh, God.' I close my eyes. 'It's sickeningly obvious, isn't it? It's me I want to taunt. My former self. That's who I'm angry with.'

I could have escaped at any time. Could have walked away years earlier, instead of letting work swallow up my whole life.

'I literally cannot believe I have a mother who . . . homilies on in the way you do, Mum,' Ellen grumbles. 'None of my friends' mothers do it. *None*. They all say normal things, like "No TV until you've done your homework" and "Would you like some more lasagne?"'

'Yes, well, your mother can't go ten minutes without having a major, life-changing realisation – can you, darling?'

'Fuck off! Oops.' I giggle. If I've ever been happier than I am now, I can't remember the occasion.

'Aha! We're on the move again.' Alex starts to sing, 'End of the traffic, traffic, end of the traffic, traffic, end of the traffic, traffic *jam*, end of the traffic, traffic, end of the traffic, traffic *jam,* traffic *jam,* traffic *jam* . . .'

Poor, long-dead Georges Bizet. I'm sure this wasn't the legacy he had in mind.

'Excuse me while I don't celebrate,' says Ellen. 'We've still got another, what, seven hours before we get there? I'm boiling.

When are we going to get a car with air-conditioning that works?'

'I don't believe any car air-conditioning works,' I tell her. 'It's like windscreen wipers. The other cars want you to think they've got it sorted, but they're all hot and stuffy on days like today, whatever Jeremy Clarkson might want us to think. They all have wipers that squeak like bats being garroted.'

'Aaand . . . we're at a standstill again,' says Alex, shaking his head. 'The golden age of being in transit was short-lived. You're wrong about the seven hours, though, El. Quite, quite wrong.'

'Yeah, it's just doubled to fourteen,' Ellen says bitterly.

'Wrong. Mum and I didn't say anything because we wanted to surprise you, but actually . . . we're very nearly there.'

I smile at Ellen in the rearview mirror. She's hiding behind her thick, dark brown hair, trying to hang on to her disgruntled mood and not succumb to laughter. Alex is a rubbish practical joker. His ideas are imaginative enough, but he's scuppered every time by his special prankster voice, instantly recognisable to anyone who has known him longer than a week.

'Yeah, right, Dad. We're still on the North Circular and we're very nearly in Devon. Of course.' Big, beautiful green eyes and heavy sarcasm: two things I adore about my daughter.

'No, not Devon. There's been a change of plan. We didn't want to inconvenience you with a long drive, so . . . we've sold Speedwell House and bought that one instead!' Alex points out of the car window to a squat red-brick 1930s-or-thereabouts semi. I know immediately which house he means. It looks ridiculous. It's the one anyone would single out, the last in a row of eight. There are three signs attached to its façade, all too big for such a small building.

My skin feels hot and tingly all of a sudden. Like when I had

cellulitis on my leg after getting bitten by a mosquito in Corfu, except this time it's my whole body.

I stare at the house with the signs. Silently, I instruct the traffic not to move, so that I can examine it for as long as I need to.

Why do I need to?

Apart from the excessive ornamentation, there is nothing to distinguish this house from any other 1930s red-brick semi. One sign, the largest – in the top right-hand corner, above a bedroom window – says 'Panama Row'. That must refer to all the houses huddled bravely together, facing six lanes of roaring traffic immediately outside their windows.

The other two signs – one missing a screw and leaning down on one side and the other visibly grime-streaked – are the name and number of the house. I try to make myself look away but I can't. I read both, and have opinions about them, positive and negative.

That's right: number 8. Yes, it's called . . . No. No, that isn't its name.

Pressure is building in my eyes, head, chest. Thrumming.

I wait until the worst of it subsides, then look down at my arms. They look ordinary. No goosebumps. *Impossible. I can feel them: prickly lumps under my skin.*

'Our new house appears to be called "German",' says Alex. 'Ludicrous name! I mean, er, won't it be fun to live in a house called "German", El?'

'No, because we're not going to be living there. As if Mum'd agree to buy a house on a nearly motorway!'

'You know why she agreed? Because, in no more than ten minutes, we'll take a left turn, then another left, and we'll have arrived. No more long journey, just home sweet home. As the old Chinese proverb says, "He who buys a beautiful house in the countryside far away might never get there, and may as

well buy an ugly house on the North Circular and have done with it."'

'It's not ugly,' I manage to say, though my throat is so tight, I can hardly speak.

It's lovely. It's safe. Stop the car.

I'm not looking at number 8 Panama Row any more. I tore my eyes away, and now I must make sure they stay away. That won't be hard. I'm too scared to look again.

'Mum? What's wrong? You sound weird.'

'You look weird,' says Alex. 'Justine? Are you okay? You're shivering.'

'No,' I whisper. 'I'm not.' *Not okay. Yes shivering. Too hot, but shivering.* I want to clarify, but my tongue is paralysed.

'What's wrong?'

'I . . .'

'Mum, you're scaring me. What is it?'

'It's not called "German". Some of the letters have fallen off.' How do I know this? I've never seen 8 Panama Row before in my life. Never heard of it, known about it, been anywhere near it.

'Oh, yeah,' says Ellen. 'She's right, Dad. You can see where the other letters were.'

'But I didn't see it. I . . . I *knew* the name wasn't German. It had nothing to do with what I saw.'

'Justine, calm down. Nothing to do with what you saw? That makes no sense.'

'It's obvious there are letters missing,' says Ellen. 'There's loads of empty sign left at the end of the name. Who would call a house "German", anyway?'

What should I do and say? I'd tell Alex the truth if we were alone.

'Dad? Accelerate? Like, you're holding everyone up. Ugh! I said "like" again, goddammit.'

'Don't say "goddammit" either,' Alex tells her.

'Don't let me watch *The Good Wife*, then. And you two swear *all the time*, hypocrites.'

The car creeps forward, then picks up speed. I feel braver as soon as I know it's no longer possible for me to see 8 Panama Row. 'That was . . . strange,' I say. *The strangest thing that has ever happened to me.* I exhale slowly.

'What, Mum?'

'Yes, tell us, goddammit.'

'Dad! Objection! Sustained.'

'Overruled, actually. You can't sustain your own objection. Anyway, shush, will you?'

Shush. Shut up, shut up, shut up. It's not funny. Nothing about this is funny.

'Justine, what's the matter with you?' Alex is more patient than I am. I'd be raising my voice by now.

'That house. You pointed, and I looked, and I had this . . . this overwhelmingly strong feeling of *yes*. Yes, that's my house. I wanted to fling open the car door and run to it.'

'Except you don't live there, so that's mad. You don't live anywhere at the moment. Until this morning you lived in London, and hopefully by this evening you'll live just outside Kingswear in Devon, but you currently live nowhere.'

How appropriate. Do Nothing, live nowhere.

'You certainly don't live in an interwar semi beside the A406, so you can relax.' Alex's tone is teasing but not unkind. I'm relieved that he doesn't sound worried. He sounds less concerned now than he did before; the direction of travel reassures me.

'I know I don't live there. I can't explain it. I had a powerful feeling that I belonged in that house. Or belonged *to* it, somehow. By "powerful", I mean like a physical assault.'

'Lordy McSwordy,' Ellen mumbles from the back seat.

'Almost a premonition that I'll live there one day.' How can I phrase it to make it sound more rational? 'I'm not saying it's

true. Now that the feeling's passed, I can hear how daft it sounds, but when I first looked, when you pointed at it, there was no doubt in my mind.'

'Justine, nothing in the world could ever induce you to live cheek by jowl with six lanes of traffic,' says Alex. You haven't changed *that* much. Is this a joke?'

'No.'

'I know what it is: poverty paranoia. You're worried about you not earning, us taking on a bigger mortgage . . . Have you had nightmares about losing your teeth?'

'My teeth?'

'I read somewhere that teeth-loss dreams mean anxiety about money.'

'It isn't that.'

'Even poor, you wouldn't live in that house – not unless you were kidnapped and held prisoner there.'

'Dad,' says Ellen. 'Is it time for your daily You're-Not-Helping reminder?'

Alex ignores her. 'Have you got something to drink?' he asks me. 'You're probably dehydrated. Heatstroke.'

'Yes.' There's water in my bag, by my feet.

'Drink it, then.'

I don't want to. Not yet. As soon as I pull out the bottle and open it, this conversation will be over; Alex will change the subject to something less inexplicable. I can't talk about anything else until I understand what's just happened to me.

'Oh, no. Look: roadworks.' When Alex starts to sing again, I don't know what's happening at first, even though it's the same tune from *Carmen* and only the words have changed. Ellen joins in. Soon they're singing in unison, 'Hard hats and yellow jackets, hard hats and yellow jackets, hard hats and yellow jackets, *boo*. Hard hats and yellow jackets, hard hats and yellow jackets, boo, sod it, boo, sod it, *boo* . . .'

Or I could try to forget about it. With every second that passes, that seems more feasible. I feel almost as I did before Alex pointed at the house. I could maybe convince myself that I imagined the whole thing.

Go on, then. Tell yourself that.

The voice in my head is not quite ready. It's still repeating words from the script I've instructed it to discard:

One day, 8 Panama Row – a house you would not choose in a million years – will be your home, and you won't mind the traffic at all. You'll be so happy and grateful to live there, you won't be able to believe your luck.