Fledgling by Hannah Bourne Taylor

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CHAPTER 1

Home

We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it.
George Eliot

Three thousand, eight hundred and seventeen miles south of England, stands my house in rural Ghana, a place so different it might as well be another planet. Ghana is the country closest to the geographical centre of the Earth, at the intersection of zero degrees latitude and longitude, made up of forests and vast stretches of low-lying vermilion plains.

There's a short cut through the molasses grass – a thin line of compacted dust weaving its way through the waist-high rustlings, the red bishop and indigo birds teetering in flashes of colour clashing with the soft sway of pink. Taller tussock grasses rise up behind, their stems merging together in a sea of green grassland that stretches for miles. The scrubland lies to one side, clumps of

sapling trees and bushes breaking up the dry earth. Seeds rattle in their cases, brittle greying twigs snap underfoot. Forty paces later, the great baobab tree dominates, its huge triple trunk bowing outwards as though trying to conquer the world. On one side of the baobab tree lies the village. The houses, made out of mud or cement blocks, are one storey high. They have corrugated iron roofs or are thatched with the fronds of the oil palms. Smoke rises up from in front of each house overflowing like a fog stream, binding the village together.

Next to the village is the school that my husband Robin runs, a sports development foundation with smart-grass football pitches. To the other side of the baobab flows the wide Volta River that keeps the pitches green. *Volta* is Portuguese for 'to turn', named by gold traders because the river carves a meandering line all the way down the length of Ghana to the Gulf of Guinea, a sea of strong currents famous for wrecking boats. The Volta's banks are lined with a hem of green trees – squat, dark oil palms and tall coconut palms, their fronds splayed against the blue sky. Reeds, water hyacinths and lilies sprawl across the river's surface and fishermen glide downstream in dug-out canoes. On the riverbank, next to a string of spindly coconut palms, is our little thatched bungalow, which sits on the edge of the grassland.

Looking out of the window at the sage-green river, I stand holding a jar of marmalade. Twisting open the lid, I reach for a teaspoon and dig into the shiny tungsten-orange surface before putting the spoonful

into my mouth. Dark, tangy, thick cut, I roll my tongue around a chunk of orange rind, sucking the sweet jam. For the seven years we had lived in Ghana, I had eaten marmalade like this, carefully packing jars in my suitcase between layers of clothes each time I returned from visits to England. I rarely had butter and the bread was too crumbly and besides, eating spoonfuls of anything always feels like an indulgence. A treat. I don't think Robin ever knew. It was my little thing, a small highlight in the middle of the day when he was at work.

My days were spent at home as a 'trailing spouse'. That's what they call 'us' – the people who follow their loved ones overseas, leaving their lives, their careers and in the process shedding all form of previous identity. As a spouse, I was not allowed to work, the word 'dependent' stamped on my residence permit so violently that the ink bled into the page like an irreversible stain. Trailing in my husband's wake, loitering, twiddling thumbs, wondering what on earth to do, I found tiny coping mechanisms to get me through the days. Spoonfuls of marmalade were one of my remedies for homesickness, like an edible comfort blanket. The sticky bitter taste triggering memories of England – my life in a jar, the years dissolving like the sugar on my tongue.

We left England for Ghana in the middle of summer, which meant when I visited my parents to say goodbye, I went straight to the garden that runs longways down the side of their Somerset house. I found Dad in the tall runner beans, wearing his old white bee-keeping overalls

and a broad smile that almost reached the bottom rim of his big square spectacles. Even on his knees in the vegetable patch with hands covered in soil, he still looked like an academic. A freshwater biologist, whose parents had lived in Nigeria, he was full of opinions about my move to West Africa. As he stood up and started restringing the beans, he began to share a lifetime of knowledge about the natural world. All the bad stuff. The stuff so scary even the little details are easy to remember. In fact, the little details were what encouraged my fingers to pulsate with electricity, what made my heart dance a disco in my chest.

'You need to watch out for the snakes, Hannah,' he said, his head peering out between the bamboo canes, a halo of bean leaves touching his badger-coloured hair.

'I'm moving to the capital city Dad,' I said, trying to reassure both of us.

'You can't be too careful. If I remember rightly, there are at least twelve species of snake that can kill you in Ghana,' he replied.

I swallowed hard. Snakes were animals I liked when separated from me by a pane of glass or television screen.

'Forest cobras – huge great, long, black things with smart yellow bands on their neck – they have neurotoxic venom that will kill you in about half an hour, paralyse your nervous system so once it reaches your lungs, well . . .' he paused, bending over to get more string before continuing the list – green mamba, boomslang, twig snake, carpet viper . . . the names and

descriptions of snakes rolled out of his mouth quicker and quicker, all in a matter-of-fact tone laced with twinkling enthusiasm.

I stood there imagining a forest cobra slithering towards my mother who was busy at the other end of the garden, refilling the bird bath in among the roses. Dad disappeared again behind the screen of beans and I walked over to Mum, stubbornly steadfast in excitement, brushing off the terror of the new information like batting away a wasp. It was almost impossible to imagine the risks among the hollyhocks and the love-in-a-mist. It was all so familiar, so English. All I could smell was cut grass, honeysuckle and sweet peas.

Mum had just finished deadheading the marguerite daisies but she didn't stop, not at this time of year. I followed her over to the sweet peas, which she started picking, making a posy for me to take in the morning. As her left hand filled with deep-purple, white and pale-pink flowers, she overflowed with similar warnings to Dad. Mum had been a nurse at St Thomas' – a nightingale. Her words were spoken clearly so there was no mistake. 'Have you had all your inoculations?' she checked, not waiting for me to answer, just like Dad.

I'd had all of them, asked the GP dozens of questions, searched online, read all the pamphlets, spoken at length to the travel nurse but that would not stop either of my parents worrying. As the sweet peas mounted up in her hand, the list of jabs filled the air, the words hanging like little needles trying to burst my bubble.

‘Yellow fever, rabies, all the heps – A, B and C – tetanus, typhoid . . . there’s no jab for cholera . . .’

Dad walked over, his white overalls distinctly brown as though he’d rolled in cocoa powder. ‘Obviously we need to talk about malaria – all four strains, two of which are cerebral. And dengue and tick typhus and bilharzia. There are so many ways to die out there. West Africa used to be known as “white man’s grave” after all.’

‘Dad!’ I said, rolling my eyes.

‘That is not very helpful at this stage Simon,’ Mum replied, her words clipped, shooting him a glare.

As the evening unfolded, so did the instructions, the worries, the advice. We sat in a row on the scruffy, white, plastic garden chairs my father refused to throw away, watching the birds put themselves to bed. It was a family tradition. Ever since my older sister and I were children, we would watch the birds. Dad would weave fact after fact into the sessions so we learned without knowing, collecting little nuggets of wonder that separated each species from the next. Before I could read or write, I knew that it was the male nightingale that sings, not the female, and could tell the difference between a great tit and a coal tit. I knew that robins lay cyan-blue eggs, the colour of swimming pools, and that the oystercatchers that we saw at the beach were brood parasites like cuckoos, often laying their eggs in other birds’ nests.

That night we watched all of the garden birds retreat into the shrubs and the trees, the walls and the chimneys, until only the swifts remained, wheeling in the sky.

Within one minute, a quarter of an hour after sunset, they vanished all at once. I did not understand then that this was the last time I would feel truly at home for years. The combination of my parents wrapping me up in cotton wool like they had always done, sitting in the English garden, and watching the birds was everything I had always known, too familiar to recognize how precious it was. Instead I was focused on the future, on the African adventure, like a magpie in search of something shinier. The next morning I said goodbye to my parents, Mum thrusting the posy of sweet peas into my hands, so the last hug was fragranced with the smell of an English summer.

Two days later, Robin and I sat in the departure lounge at Heathrow. The initial plan had been to move to Ghana for between three and five years. As I looked up at the screen for the gate number, I didn't know the whole thing would quickly feel like a prison sentence. I had no idea that we would still be in Ghana seven years later. That three houses and two jobs down the line, we would end up living hours away from the city surrounded by all the snakes Dad had warned me about.

The irony was, however, that no one had ever thought to worry about the other risks of the move. Dangers that were not diseases or venomous creatures, but the silent and lonely perils of being unable to feel at home. The unnerving feeling of being out of place latched onto me from the very beginning. I didn't like to dwell on it, kept my unease as hidden as possible, tucked neatly away in my pocket like a cotton handkerchief laced with lead.

If you google the words ‘meaning of home’, in 0.55 seconds, more than eight hundred and seventy-nine million options spring up, offering the definition: ‘the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household’. I had never questioned this before I moved to Ghana. I was used to moving house. As a child, my family moved around England almost constantly – eleven times before I left for university. The houses were different ages, different sizes, some were remote, others tucked into rows of terraces. Each time I had to begin again. But although I had left all my friends, starting new schools, the birds were always the same. I would say goodbye to a blackbird in one garden only to say hello to another behaving in the same way in the next. Although I was unaware of it at the time, the English countryside and the birds had turned into my anchor of home.

When I was eighteen, I rebelled from country life, lusting for London. Throughout the eight years I lived in the city, I had as many addresses, so by the time I was in my mid-twenties, my tally was nineteen houses and counting. But the word ‘home’ originates from the Proto-Indo-European root *tkei* – ‘to settle or dwell’. I had not understood that it is the element of settling that is vital in order to *feel* at home. That the term is not only literal, but is the crux of the true meaning of home and where its value lies. Until I left England, my foundations that were made – not from stone walls, but from gardens – had remained accessible to me wherever

I had lived. It had never occurred to me that by moving abroad, I would lose a sense of belonging within myself.

Out of the window, the view was changing, the colour of the river turning from green to charcoal as the wind picked up. I savoured my last spoonful of marmalade, sucking the tangy jam through the gap in my two front teeth, focusing my attention on the sky. I watched as the sun was quickly hidden by an envelope of darkening clouds. Ghana is the birthplace of some of the world's strongest storms, sitting in the equatorial region known to meteorologists as the Intertropical Convergence Zone. Here, mighty north-east and south-east trade winds meet, triggering a merging of windless weather and intense sun-baked heat from the ground, in turn spawning equatorial thunderstorms with clouds that can tower up to eighteen thousand metres. But this year the rains were late. Normally the rainy season lasts from mid-March through to November. It was June and the baobab rose like a grey skeleton, its arms stretched in the air, as though paralysed by the heat. The village crops were crisping up, the leaves like mummified hands. Every evening the sky painted itself pink without a care for the parched contents of the world below so the ground arched up, trying to plunge itself into the river. Every afternoon clouds would appear, swelling like enormous ink spills, charging the air with electrical storms that went on endlessly, crackling like popping candy.

It was a quarter past three, prime time for intense thunderstorms. As I watched the afternoon unfold, the

weather became cocky, threatening thunder with a smirk of drizzle underneath the darkening clouds. Putting my walking boots on and tucking my trousers into my socks to make sure no bits of skin could be targeted by mosquitoes, I went outside. The air smelt different. There was a low wind blowing, cold and fresh. Finally, the rain was about to arrive. I stood in the scrubland waiting, not just for the rain but for the swifts. The swifts were my strongest connection to home, far better than spoonfuls of marmalade.

The rain conjures the insects, which cues screaming parties of hundreds of little black anchors in the sky. Loud and frantic, watching the swifts here linked my mind back to the rose-tinted day each year when the swifts arrive in English skies all the way from Africa. A thrill. A natural high. A sign that summer is imminent.

The swifts' arrival in England tends to occur in the last days of April or the first days of May, when the hedgerows are white with hawthorn and the verges with cow parsley, and the fields are covered in buttercups. Wrapped up in their arrival is the promise that, for as long as they fly over little English villages and towns, fields and lanes, the days will be long and happy because they will leave only as the flaxen days of July dwindle.

Over the years, the birds had descended on every place I'd lived in England. In Cambridge, where the colleges are full of them, screeching over the May balls and graduations. In Sussex, where they spill out of the belfries of village churches, mirroring the youngest

parishioners after the Sunday service, who rush out into the graveyard at a pace. In Oxfordshire, my adult base, where the swifts nest in little holes in the tops of the stone cottages. But most vividly at my aunt's dairy farm in the rolling hills of the West Country where the summer days link together like daisy chains. As a child I loved it there. Space to roam where animals outnumbered people. A herd of jersey cows, caramel dots in a string of green pasture surrounding the long, flint farmhouse.

Layers of noise would build up around the farmyard. The mooing from the cows, the chirping sparrows in the clematis over the back door, the hum of the machinery, the thud of wellington boots being taken off tired feet. And in the summer, the swifts' happy screeches were added. Out of all the sounds, they hit the highest notes like the cherry on top of a knickerbocker glory.

From every window a streak of sound would dash past, each adding to the next so there was a constant scribble of shrieking around the farmhouse as though the birds were wrapping it up in a ball of energy. To my seven, eight, nine-year-old mind, it was contagious. They were calling out to me to join in their game. I would rush out of the house at their invitation, down to the end of the garden, past the rows of currant bushes, over the brambles at the back of the vegetable patch, climbing over the five-bar gate and out. Free. Head down, fists clenched, I would run in spurts along the fields and then stop, looking up, catching them again with my eyes. Pretending they were on invisible strings,

I would leap, willing myself to be pulled up into the sky. More and more would come as time ate deeper into the afternoon. It felt like a playground game, or a birthday party, except there were no other children. Just me. I would talk out loud to the swifts. Sing. Laugh. Copy them. Skipping and spinning, sooner or later I would feel dizzy and down I'd fall into a heap. Flat on my back I would point up at the sky, trying to count them, failing, counting again. Eventually someone would wonder where I was and I'd get called inside for bread and cheese, no tomatoes please.

As I slipped into my teenage years, I got better at socializing with people and my welcome to the swifts became more subdued. While the birds carried on half forgotten above my head, my mind chased boys and hockey balls instead. But the joy of the swifts lodged itself deep within me, like a splinter of magic, saved for a rainy day.

Twenty years after running with the swifts in Somerset, I was standing in the West African scrubland, waiting for that rainy day. I needed to see the swifts again. A reminder to be more like them – migratory birds, destined to live between places. I flitted between the two countries and yet I was unable to shake the feeling of being perpetually in limbo. The birds brought me to life, temporarily dispelling how hollow I felt. Little symbols of hope, of triumph in the face of adversity, they are miniature kings and queens of adaptation, renouncing the fixed territories of land. They live without restrictions,

overcoming huge obstacles despite their humble size. That's why I was out on the scrubland about to get soaked in a tropical downpour, waiting for my reward. The reward of feeling connected, a wisp of belonging found within the screeches of the swifts.

With a clap of thunder the rain came and within a minute I was drenched. The river looked like thousands of jumping pebbles as the rain punched and danced on its surface. Conducted by the wind, it turned to a sheet of silver then black, then back to silver like an enormous fish catching the light. The dark silhouettes of the palms threw themselves back and forth as the storm blew away all the colour, visibility narrowing to a fragment. The ground sat obediently at the storm's feet while the water pelted down with the velocity of an ocean wave dissected into single drops.

I stood still in the ambush, my head back, greeting the storm, as the rain slid down my body, welding my hair to my back and my neck. Soaked, my clothes stuck to my skin, the water pinning my eyelids down, making my nose and ears and chin into waterfalls. I wanted to be cold, wet from water not sweat, to have a break from the relentless humidity. I closed my eyes. I listened to the sound of millions of drops of water hurtling to the earth and I felt better. For those moments, standing in the storm made me feel present. I was not stuck thinking about the past or feeling homesick. I was basically not thinking or feeling anything at all, aware of nothing but the rain.

And then as quickly as it had come, it stopped, the view expanding as the clouds drew breath. A smell of hot, damp earth mixed with neem tree blossom rose from the ground. I breathed it in slowly, deeply. There is a sense of calm that accompanies the smell of damp earth. That particular smell has a name: ‘petrichor’. Although here the earth smelled different to the damp briar of England – of bracken and ferns, of brambles and gorse bushes – it had the same primitive depth of feeling that translated into some sort of profound relief.

Around me puddles that would only last an hour or so covered the land like shards of a mirror. A sense of calm grew from the smell and the stillness, taking over briefly before being replaced by the reunion of creatures and land. A single egret flew across the river as if lifting the spell. Then came the laughing doves’ straight line of low flight, followed by the goats who sauntered out behind one another sniffing the ground, the kids ebbing and flowing near their mothers. For a few minutes it was eerily silent. Then the insects came.

Once again there was a sound of millions of tiny movements in the air but this time they were alive like a biblical plague had descended. Flying termites, creatures with four wings the colour of old paint varnish and plump brown bodies like polished mahogany, filled the sky. About half the size of my little finger, the sound of their wings flitting through the air was sharp, a faster version of nails clicking together. A rattling, tapping noise that made my inner ear close up, my skin crawl.

Many of them dived right into the ground. Their wings trapped in the thin film of water and the puddles, they flapped helplessly, stuck out like the fancy-dress fairy wings little girls wear at parties. Purple and orange male agama lizards rushed out of their hideaways, smacking the insects up with their tongues, guzzling their delivered feasts, running to one after the other.

The sun appeared, feverishly drying my clothes, pretending that nothing had happened. With it, the birds arrived to gorge on the termites. First came blue-bellied roller birds in flashes of metallic cobalt and turquoise. And then the swifts, appearing from all directions just like a military airshow except these birds were the real thing – the very models that fighter jets had been designed from. These were 'little swifts', a species half the size of the common swifts that I had grown up watching in England.

The swifts screamed excitedly as though they were tearing the sky apart. Ribbons of sound fifty metres above the ground, they flew at break-neck speed, wincing out of the way from head-on crashes, descending to Earth in split seconds, in flights that almost grazed the ground. Their movements were reactive, twisting and diving after the termites, too quick for my eyes to keep up with, and yet they weren't out of control. They were fast, precise, a completely different rhythm and technique to that of a pigeon or a crow with their deep beats of flight.

Swifts compare better to fish in water than to other birds, like yellowfin tuna attacking a bait ball of sardines.

Quick as a flash, the swifts move, slicing into the air as they change direction, all with the slightest of adjustments. Their squat tails momentarily ease wider like rudders, while they dip their wings a fraction, a pair of tiny black sails being repositioned. So marginal, their shape hardly changes – the line of their iconic silhouette unfaltering.

There is something about the size of the swift that makes its dive more impressive than a raptor's hunting dive. They are so small, so unsubstantial compared to a hawk or an eagle, birds that seem more capable, sturdier. It feels more plausible that somehow they are following the tracks of an elaborate Scalextric set, or a gravity-defying roller coaster, whipping round bends that do not exist, like every movement is pre-programmed and playing from memory in fast forward. A graceful madness.

Hot now my clothes had dried, sweat started to creep in, replacing the fallen rain. I walked slowly, following a cluster as they moved in circuits towards the school. The only building in the area with a high roof, it was the breeding sight of the little swifts. All along the edges of the eaves were nests. They didn't look solid. They looked like a handful of straw and feathers had been thrown up to the corner of the wall and somehow got stuck in a vague mound. A precarious looking ledge of feathers and grass, decorated underneath with droppings splattered down the wall in whites and browns and greys like a Jackson Pollock painting.

Messy and unkempt if compared to the mud nests that swallows make, or the carefully sculpted cylindrical basket-like homes of weaverbirds.

But to know the secrets of these swifts was to stand and look at their nests in awe. Not only were they glued together and in place by the bird's own saliva, but every part of the nest had been caught in the air. Feathers, leaves, the fluffy seed cases of kapok trees, like dandelion clocks. Spiders' webs, cut blades of grass from the football pitches, human hair – anything light enough to be caught and carried by the wind. These swifts' nests are the only planned point of landing for their entire lifetime. The only twelve centimetres of Earth they would ever intentionally touch. A place to rest, to feel safe, to pause, these nests were also for life. The swifts who bred here would fly hundreds of thousands of miles, see sights I could not even imagine, only to return to the same feathered ledge to breed every season.

I looked at the chicks clutching on to the nests. They were abundant, some with their parents, some alone or next to a sibling. They were almost fully grown, another week or so and they'd be off. They looked both vulnerable and curious as they seemed to stare downwards at me. Many let out little trills and there were a few shrieks but most of them were silent. Soon, each young bird would wake up one morning and fledge, expanding its world infinitely in a single moment of instinctive courage. No goodbye, no warning, gone. It was hard to believe looking at them. For now, like me, they had

never experienced what it felt like to be free falling or to glide above the Earth.

I had been watching the swifts for two hours as they flew between my house and the school, zipping this way and that, rewiring my brain. Watching them gave me a surge of their energy as though they were somehow exorcising me from the past by giving me a piece of it, working like an anti-venom. With each dive my energy, built from wonder, grew. The more I watched, the more focused I became and just like standing in the rain, the swifts held my mind in the present. Busy, I concentrated on each moment as it merged into the next, my stare fixed, trying to keep tabs on the individual bird that I had picked to trace. As the swift nosedived the height of the baobab in a second, I felt invigorated, imagining the whoosh of air and when the bird soared so high in the sky it was just a dot. I felt like I was up there with it – lighter, uplifted. Free from the drag of the past and the dread of the future, I began to feel less tense, my shoulders inching lower as my body relaxed.

By half past five, the sun was a red disc in the sky, dropping behind the hills, which were smudged purple in the dimpsy light. As the strip lights of the open-air entrance hall went on, a cloud of termites amassed under the arch. Mesmerized by the glow, they became even easier targets for the swifts, who launched staggered assaults over and over again.

Equatorial sunsets are short. As the sun disappeared I turned around and started walking back to the house.

As I followed the edge of the school, a movement caught my eye. On the far side a man – one of the school's grounds staff – was holding a pole above his head, jabbing upwards over and over. I hesitated, lingering in the mounting shadows, wondering what he was doing. After a few more prods he stopped and walked off in the opposite direction.

Curiosity mixed with an uneasy hunch led me to where he had been. A breathless sinking feeling caught in my throat as I saw a little dark mass on the floor. There at my feet on the hard, concrete ground, surrounded by fluff and hay from its fragmented nest, lay a single swift.