

LIANE MORIARTY



here

one

moment



FROM THE AUTHOR OF *BIG LITTLE LIES*

About Here One Moment

If you knew when you were going to die, what would you do differently?

It all begins on a flight from Hobart to Sydney. The flight will be smooth. It will land safely. Everyone who gets on the plane will get off the plane.

But almost all of them will be changed forever.

Because on this ordinary flight, something extraordinary happens. 'A lady', unremarkable until she isn't, predicts how and when many of the passengers are going to die. For some, death is far in the future; for others, it is very close.

A brilliantly constructed story that looks at free will and destiny, grief and love, and the endless struggle to maintain certainty and control in an uncertain world. Liane Moriarty is a modern-day Jane Austen who humorously skewers social mores while spinning a web of mystery and asking profound, universal questions.

Also by Liane Moriarty

Three Wishes

The Last Anniversary

What Alice Forgot

The Hypnotist's Love Story

The Husband's Secret

Big Little Lies

Truly Madly Guilty

Nine Perfect Strangers

Apples Never Fall

For children

The Petrifying Problem with Princess Petronella

The Shocking Trouble on the Planet of Shobble

The Wicked War on the Planet of Whimsy

LIANE MORIARTY

**here
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moment**



MACMILLAN
Pan Macmillan Australia

For Marisa and Petronella

'I have noticed that even people who claim everything is predestined and that we can do nothing to change it look before they cross the road.'

Stephen Hawking, *Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays*

'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.'

Samuel Johnson

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chapter 1

Later, not a single person will recall seeing the lady board the flight at Hobart Airport.

Nothing about her appearance or demeanour raises a red flag or even an eyebrow.

She is not drunk or belligerent or famous.

She is not injured, like the bespectacled hipster with his arm scaffolded in white gauze so that one hand is permanently pressed to his heart, as if he's professing his love or honesty.

She is not frazzled, like the sweaty young mother trying to keep a grip on a slippery baby, a furious toddler and far too much carry-on.

She is not frail, like the stooped elderly couple wearing multiple heavy layers as if they're off to join Captain Scott's Antarctic expedition.

She is not grumpy, like the various middle-aged people with various middle-aged things on their minds, or the flight's only unaccompanied minor: a six-year-old forced to miss his friend's laser-tag party because his parents' shared custody agreement requires him to be on this flight to Sydney every Friday afternoon.

She is not chatty, like the couple so eager to share details of their holiday you can't help but wonder if they're working undercover for a Tasmanian state government tourism initiative.

She is not extremely pregnant like the extremely pregnant woman.

She is not extremely tall like the extremely tall guy.

She is not quivery from fear of flying or espresso or amphetamines (let's hope not) like the jittery teen wearing an oversized hoodie over very short shorts which makes it look like she's not wearing any pants, and someone says she's that singer dating that actor, but someone else says no, that's not her, I know who you mean, but that's not her.

She is not shiny-eyed like the shiny-eyed honeymooners flying to Sydney still in their lavish bridal clothes, those crazy kids, leaving ripples of goodwill in their wake, and even eliciting a reckless offer from a couple to give up their business class seats, which the bride and groom politely but firmly refuse, much to the couple's relief.

The lady is not anything that anyone will later recall.

The flight is delayed. Only by half an hour. There are scowls and sighs, but for the most part passengers are willing to accept this inconvenience. That's flying these days.

At least it's not cancelled. 'Yet,' say the pessimists.

The PA crackles an announcement: passengers requiring special assistance are invited to board.

'Told you so!' The optimists jump to their feet and sling bags over their shoulders.

While boarding, the lady does not stop to tap the side of the plane once, twice, three times for luck, or to flirt with a flight attendant, or to swipe frantically at her phone screen because her boarding pass has mysteriously vanished, it was there just a minute ago, why does it always do

that?

The lady is not useful, like the passengers who help parents and spouses find vanished boarding passes, or the square-shouldered, square-jawed man with a grey buzz cut who effortlessly helps hoist bags into overhead lockers as he walks down the aisle of the plane without breaking his stride.

Once all passengers are boarded, seated and buckled, the pilot introduces himself and explains there is a 'minor mechanical issue we need to resolve' and 'passengers will appreciate that safety is paramount'. The cabin crew, he points out, with just the hint of a smile in his deep, trustworthy voice, are also only hearing about this now. (So leave them be.) He thanks 'folks' for their patience and asks them to sit back and relax, they should be on their way in the next fifteen minutes.

They are not on their way in fifteen minutes.

The plane sits on the tarmac without moving for ninety-two horrendous minutes. This is just a little longer than the expected flight time.

Eventually the optimists stop saying, 'I'm sure we'll still make it!'

Everyone is displeased: optimists and pessimists alike.

During this time, the lady does not press her call button to tell a flight attendant about her connection or dinner reservation or migraine or dislike of confined spaces or her very busy adult daughter with three children who is already on her way to the airport in Sydney to pick her up, and what is she meant to do now?

She does not throw back her head and howl for twenty excruciating minutes, like the baby, who is really just manifesting everyone's feelings.

She does not request the baby be made to stop crying, like the three passengers who all seem to have reached middle age with the belief that babies stop crying on request.

She does not politely ask if she may please get off the plane now, like the unaccompanied minor, who reaches his limit forty minutes into the delay and thinks that maybe the laser-tag party is a possibility after all.

She does not demand she be allowed to disembark, along with her checked baggage, like the woman in a leopard-print jumpsuit who has places she needs to *be*, who is never flying this airline *again*, but who finally allows herself to be placated, and then self-medicates so effectively she falls deeply asleep.

She does not abruptly cry out in despair, 'Oh, can't someone *do* something?' like the red-faced, frizzy-haired woman sitting two rows behind the crying baby. It isn't clear if she wants something done about the delay or the crying baby or the state of the planet, but it is at this point that the square-jawed man leaves his seat to present the baby with an enormous set of jangly keys. The man first demonstrates how pressing a particular button on one key will cause a red light to flash and the baby is stunned into delighted silence, to the teary-eyed relief of the mother, and everyone else.

At no stage does the lady make a bitter-voiced performative phone call to tell someone that she is 'stuck on a plane' 'still here' 'no way we'll make our connection' 'just go ahead without me' 'we'll need to reschedule' 'I'll have to cancel' 'nothing I can do' 'I *know!* It's unbelievable.'

No-one will remember hearing the lady speak a single word during the delay.

Not like the elegantly dressed man who says, 'No, no, sweetheart, it will be tight, but I'm sure I'll still make it,' but you can tell by the anguished way he taps his phone against his forehead that he's not going to make it, there's no way.

Not like the two twenty-something friends who had been drinking prosecco at the airport bar on empty stomachs, and as a result multiple passengers in their vicinity learn the intimate details of their complex feelings about 'Poppy': a mutual friend who is not as nice as she would have everyone believe.

Not like the two thirty-something men who are strangers to each other but strike up a remarkably audible and extraordinarily dull conversation about protein shakes.

The lady is travelling alone.

She has no family members to aggravate her with their very existence, like the family of four who sit in gendered pairs: mother and young daughter, father and young son, all smouldering with rage over a fraught issue involving a phone charger.

The lady has an aisle seat, 4D. She is lucky: it is a relatively full flight but she has scored an empty middle seat between her and the man in the window seat. A number of passengers in economy will later recall noting that empty middle seat with envy, but they will not remember noting the lady. When they are finally cleared for take-off, the lady does not need to be asked to please place her seat in the upright position or to please push her bag under the seat in front of her.

She does not applaud with slow sarcastic claps when the plane finally begins to taxi towards the runway.

During the flight, the lady does not cut her toenails or floss her teeth.

She does not slap a flight attendant.

She does not shout racist abuse. She does not sing, babble or slur her words.

She does not casually light up a cigarette as if it were 1974.

She does not perform a sex act on another passenger.

She does not strip.

She does not weep.

She does not vomit.

She does not attempt to open the emergency door midway through the flight.

She does not lose consciousness.

She does not die.

(The airline industry has discovered from painful experience that all these things are possible.)

One thing is clear: the lady is a lady. Not a single person will later describe her as a 'woman' or a 'female'. Obviously no-one will describe her as a 'girl'.

There is uncertainty about her age. Possibly early sixties? Maybe in her fifties. *Definitely* in her seventies. Early eighties? As old as your mother. As old as your daughter. As old as your auntie. Your boss. Your university lecturer. The unaccompanied minor will describe her as a 'very old lady'. The elderly couple will describe her as a 'middle-aged lady'.

Maybe it's her grey hair that places her so squarely in the category of 'lady'. It is the soft silver of an expensive kitten. Shoulder-length. Nicely styled. Good hair. 'Good grey.' The sort of grey that makes you consider going grey yourself! One day. Not yet.

The lady is small and petite but not so small and petite as to require solicitousness. She does not attract benevolent smiles or offers of assistance. Looking at her does not make you think of how much you miss your grandmother. Looking at her does not make you think anything at all. You could not guess her profession, personality or star sign. You could not be bothered.

You wouldn't say she was *invisible*, as such.

Maybe semi-transparent.

The lady is not strikingly beautiful or unfortunately ugly. She wears a pretty green and white patterned collared blouse tucked in at the waistband of slim-fitting grey pants. Her shoes are flat and sensible. She is not unusually pierced or bejewelled or tattooed. She has small silver studs in her ears and a silver brooch pinned to the collar of her shirt, which she often touches, as if to check that it is still there.

Which is all to say, the lady who will later become known as 'the Death Lady' on the delayed 3.20 pm flight from Hobart to Sydney is not worthy of a second glance, not by anyone, not a single crew member, not a single passenger, not until she does what she does.

Even then it takes longer than you might expect for the first person to shout, for someone to begin filming, for call buttons to start lighting up and dinging all over the cabin like a pinball machine.

chapter 2

It's been forty-five minutes since take-off and the atmosphere on board is quiet, stoic, only a touch aggrieved. The delay, when time slowed and stretched and thinned so that every minute lasted its full quota of sixty seconds, is in the past. Time is once again ticking by at its usual brisk invisible pace.

A 'light snack' of almonds, pretzels, crackers and salsa has been served in the main cabin. The five business class passengers have enjoyed a 'light meal' (they all chose the chicken) and quite a lot of wine (they all chose the pinot).

In the main cabin, most rubbish has been cleared and most tray tables are back up. The baby and toddler are asleep. So is the bride, while the groom taps at his phone. The unaccompanied minor energetically plays a game on his device. The frail elderly couple bend their heads over separate crosswords. The crew chat in low voices about weekend plans and next week's roster.

People make use of the toilet. They put shoes back on. They eat breath mints. They apply lip balm. They see the next steps of their journeys rolling out ahead of them: collect bag from baggage claim, line up for taxi, order an Uber, text the person picking them up. They see themselves walking in the front door of their homes or hotels or Airbnbs, dropping bags with weary thuds. 'What a nightmare,' they will say to their partners or pets or the walls, and then they will step right back into their lives.

The lady unbuckles her seatbelt and stands.

She is a lady about to get something down from the overhead locker. Or a lady about to head to the toilet. She is of no consequence, no concern, no interest, no danger.

She bows her head and presses a fingertip to the tiny brooch pinned to her blouse.

She steps into the aisle and doesn't move.

One person notices.

That person is a forty-two-year-old civil engineer with heartburn and a headache.

Leopold Vodnik, never Leopold, just Leo to everyone except his maternal grandmother who is dead and an old university friend long gone from his life, is seated in 4C, directly across the aisle from the lady.

Theirs is the first row in the main cabin. They face a wall declaring *Business class only past this point*. A curtain is discreetly drawn across the aisle to conceal the luxury lifestyle on offer just a short distance away.

Leo looks like he belongs in business class. He is an olive-skinned man of medium build, with a large, definite nose and a high forehead that ends abruptly in a shock of mad professor grey-speckled dark curly hair. One of his sisters recently sent him an article about scientists discovering the gene for 'uncombable hair syndrome'.

He wears a blue linen shirt rolled up to the elbows, grey chinos and suede boots. His wife says

he dresses better than her. (Not hard. Neve mostly dresses in the heedless, mismatched manner of someone who recently survived a natural disaster.)

Leo has spent the entire flight chewing antacids, massaging his forehead with his fingertips and checking and rechecking the time.

It's all over. He must face facts. His eleven-year-old daughter's school musical is due to begin in five minutes. He will not be there because he is here: thirty-five thousand feet in the sky.

'Obviously I'll be home in plenty of time for *The Lion King*,' he'd told his wife when he'd first raised the possibility of flying down to Hobart to take his mother to a specialist's appointment.

'Unless your flight back is delayed,' Neve had said.

'It won't be,' said Leo.

'Knock on wood,' said Neve, without knocking on wood.

It kind of feels like the delay is her fault. Why even mention the possibility? He is meant to be the pessimistic one in their relationship.

Who could have predicted a *two-hour* delay?

Neve, apparently.

Leo checks the time once more. Right now, he should be shivering in his daughter's school hall, hissing at his teenage son to put away his phone and support his sister, exchanging good-humoured banter about the arctic air-conditioning with the other parents, whispering to his wife to please remind him of Samira's dad's name, telling Samira's dad they must have that beer soon, which they both know will never happen, because, life.

His head pounds with remorse. The lights are going down *right now*. The curtains are opening *right now*. He leans so far forward in his seat he is virtually in the brace position.

There is no-one to blame but himself. Nobody asked him to do this. His mother said please Leo, don't waste good money on a flight for just one day. His three sisters had not been grateful to him for taking on this familial duty. The opposite. They'd accused him of martyrdom on the family WhatsApp group.

But he'd had a strange strong feeling that something was not right with his mother's health and that he should be there to hear what the specialist said.

When his dad first got sick two years ago, he'd been distracted. He'd just started at his current position and work had been all-consuming. It's still all-consuming. He doesn't know how to stop it consuming him.

And then: the strident ring of his phone ripping him from sleep at five am and his mother's voice, so loud, assured and awake. 'You and your sisters need to get on a flight right now.' She the grown-up, he the mumbling, half-asleep kid. 'What, Mum, what, why?' He hadn't even properly processed the fact his dad was seriously ill, let alone the possibility he might die, which he did, that day, while Leo and his sisters waited at the carousel for his middle sister's bag: she'd *checked* a bag.

Ever since, he's felt as though if he'd just concentrated more, if he hadn't been so focused on his work, he might have saved his dad. He is the oldest child. The only son. He is determined to get everything right with his mother.

So much for strange strong feelings. The specialist took five minutes and charged three hundred dollars to announce that Leo's mother was in perfect health.

Leo isn't *disappointed* by his mother's good health.

Of course not.

Look, truthfully, he *is* kind of annoyed by his mother's good health. It would have been

gratifying if she'd been diagnosed with something serious but curable.

Also, painless. He loves his mother very much.

'Oh well,' Neve said when he called about the delay. At that point he'd still thought he'd make it, just a little late. He'd seen himself sprinting from the gate, queue-jumping at the taxi rank – he would have broken his own moral code for his daughter! But then the plane continued to sit sullenly on the tarmac, while the pilot made his infuriating intermittent 'apologies, folks' messages and Leo lost his damned mind.

'There's nothing you can do.' Neve didn't say I told you so. She never did. That was her power move. 'Bridie will understand.' He could hear Bridie in the background: 'That better *not* be Daddy saying he's running late.'

He has been helping Bridie rehearse for weeks. 'It's a small but significant role, Daddy,' she'd told him solemnly when she first came home with the script, and Leo had avoided Neve's eyes because Bridie is sensitive to shared parental smiles. She is playing 'Zazu' (now, right now). Zazu is 'a prim, proper hornbill bird' and the way Bridie instantly embodied the role was miraculous. She has gestures! Prim, proper gestures! She is Meryl Freaking Streep. She is that objectively good. Forget Mufasa. Forget Simba. Zazu will be the shining star of tonight's performance. Leo fully expects Bridie to receive a standing ovation. And he is missing it.

This is the sort of mistake people regret on their deathbeds.

He exhales noisily, sits back in his seat and clicks the buckle of his seatbelt open and shut, open and shut. The woman next to him lifts her head from her magazine and Leo locks his hands together. He's being annoying. It's the kind of thing his fourteen-year-old son would do.

His heart jerks at the thought of his son. For months now, he's been promising Oli they will do that beautiful national park walk they love, next Sunday, but it's always 'next Sunday' because Leo so often needs to work on weekends, and this Sunday he'll need to catch up on everything he missed doing today, which does not, by the way, make him a 'workaholic', just a guy with a job.

His boss believes it's important to achieve a healthy work-life balance. 'Family always comes first, Leo,' she said, when Leo mentioned he'd be taking today off, but one of Leo's key performance indicators is his 'utilisation rate'. This is a measure of how many billable hours he logs each week, compared to how many hours he has worked. His utilisation rate is always in his thoughts: it's a buzzing mosquito he's not allowed to kill. Sometimes he works a fourteen-hour day but only bills eight. It's tricky. Life is tricky. He just needs to get a handle on time management. His boss, who has an interest in the topic, gives him book and podcast recommendations, as well as useful tips. He's been working for Lilith for three years now. She's an impressive, inspirational woman in a male-dominated profession and he's trying to learn from her the way he learned from his very first boss, who would return Leo's drawings covered in red ink, which drove Leo crazy but ultimately made him a better engineer. Lilith recently told him the first step to improving productivity is a 'comprehensive time audit', but Leo hasn't had time to do one.

Oli doesn't even look disappointed anymore each time Leo says, 'Maybe we'll do the walk next weekend.' He just responds with a cynical thumbs-up like he's dealing with a retailer's recurring broken delivery promises.

The woman in the middle seat clears her throat delicately and he realises his left leg is jiggling up and down as if he's been electrocuted. He puts his hand on his thigh to still it.

He hears his wife's voice: *Do not spiral, honey.*

He couldn't believe it the first time she called him honey. The sweet feeling of that moment.

He smiles tightly in the vague direction of his seatmate, which he hopes she will take as an unspoken apology but not an invitation to chat.

Her name is Sue and her husband, in the window seat, is Max.

Leo knows this, and a lot more about them, because during the delay on the tarmac he had no choice but to overhear as the pair made an astonishing number of phone calls: 'Wait, Sue wants a word!' 'Let me give you back to Max!'

Max and Sue are a jolly, exuberant middle-aged couple just back from a trip driving a campervan around Tasmania. It was a blast! Sue is tiny, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed and big-bosomed. A silver bracelet loaded with charms jingles as she gesticulates. Max is tanned and white-haired, with a big firm proud tummy. Like Santa Claus back from his summer break. He has the same confident masculinity as the foremen Leo works with: strong, loud men who know what they're doing and have no difficulty managing their time.

At first, Sue tried to chat with Leo but gave up when he answered in barely polite monosyllables. He knows he could have told her about missing Bridie's concert, and he knows she and Max are the type to have offered instant sympathy and interest (he gathers from all the calls that they have grandchildren – 'Grandpa and I can't wait to see you!') but he'd been too tightly wound up to chat.

He looks again at the time. Bridie is on stage right now.

Stop thinking about it.

His stomach growls. He is starving. He refused the 'light snack', because, and this is so stupid, he didn't want to slow things down. He'd been irrationally annoyed by all those people happily snacking on their nuts and pretzels. He wanted everyone to *focus* on getting to Sydney.

The lady across the aisle from him unbuckles her seatbelt.

She stands.

Until now, she has been a blurred figure in his peripheral vision. If asked, he could have described her as a small lady with silver hair, but there is no way he could have picked her out of a line-up of small silver-haired ladies.

She moves into the aisle, right next to him, facing the back of the plane.

She doesn't move.

What's she doing?

Leo keeps his eyes politely on the seat pocket on the wall in front of him. He reads the top line of an advertisement on the back cover of the in-flight magazine: *What are you waiting for? Book your Jewels of Europe River Cruise today!* 'We'll know we're old when those river cruises start to look attractive,' Neve always says. Leo has not confessed that the idea of a river cruise already seems attractive to him.

The silver-haired lady is still not moving. It's too long. She's kind of crowding him. Kind of bugging him.

He glances down. Her shoes are small, brown, well-polished and neatly laced.

She says, in a quiet, clear voice, 'On the count of three.'

chapter 3

Well, I once loved a very tall skinny boy with the most vulnerable of necks who gave me the courage to go to parties and dances when I thought I might pass out from shyness.

‘On the count of three,’ he’d say while my heart pounded and my vision blurred, and he’d take my hand in his. ‘One. Two. Three.’

And in we’d go.

That could explain why I counted myself in: I was thinking of him.

chapter 4

On the count of three, what?

Leo studies the lady. Her face is pale and blank. She seems bewildered. Possibly distressed. It is hard to be sure. He checks over his shoulder to see if people are blocking her way, but the aisle is clear.

He looks back up at her. She is the same age, height and body type as Leo's mother except that Leo's mother would not be seen dead wearing sensible shoes. (Literally. Leo's mother wants to be buried in her Jimmy Choos. Leo's youngest sister said, 'Sure, Mum, we'll do that,' while mouthing *No way* at Leo and pointing at her own feet.)

Leo's mother doesn't like it when people 'patronise' her. Would it be patronising to ask this lady if she needs assistance?

He notices a silver brooch pinned to her shirt.

His parents ran a jewellery store in Hobart for forty years, and although neither Leo nor any of his sisters had any interest in carrying on the business, everyone in the family automatically clocks jewellery. The brooch is small, possibly antique? It's a symbol of some kind. An ancient, old-world-y symbol. He can't quite see it without leaning forward, which would be inappropriate, but something about the brooch is distractingly familiar. It is somehow strangely related to *him*. It gives him a sense of . . . ownership. Vague pleasure? It must be something to do with Vodnik Fine Jewels, but what?

Or, is it the symbol itself that means something? Wait, something to do with school? No. University? Thoughts of university lead inevitably to one of his most painful memories, himself on a street, outside a pub, shouting like he'd never shouted before or since, nothing to do with this symbol, although, wait, he nearly has it –

'One,' says the lady.

Will she burst into song on the count of three? Is she in pain, perhaps? Trying to psych herself up to take a step forward? Neve's grandmother suffers from terrible foot pain, poor thing, but this lady is much younger than her.

Leo's dad always said that after September 11 he was 'ready for trouble' whenever he travelled. 'I crash-tackle anyone who behave even a little suspicious,' his dad would say in his Eastern European accent, so earnestly, even though he was a five-foot-four, benign, dapper-looking city jeweller, a sweet man who never did crash-tackle anyone in his life. 'I not hesitate, Leo.'

Would his dad have crash-tackled this woman by now?

I not hesitate, Leo.

Jesus, Dad. She's a harmless lady! You would so hesitate!

'Two.'

She's harmless! Of course she's harmless.