

*The Year She Disappeared*

*James A. Michener Fiction Series,*  
JAMES MAGNUSON, EDITOR

ANN HARLEMAN

T H E Y E A R S H E

*Disappeared*

A NOVEL

University of Texas Press  *Austin*

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Printed in the United States of America  
First edition, 2008

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University of Texas Press  
P.O. Box 7819  
Austin, TX 78713-7819  
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Harleman, Ann, 1945-

The year she disappeared : a novel / Ann Harleman. — 1st ed.

p. cm. — (James A. Michener fiction series)

ISBN 978-0-292-71747-3 (alk. paper)

1. Kidnapping—Fiction. 2. Grandparent and child—Fiction.

3. Life change events—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3558.A624246Y43 2008

813'.54—dc22

2007034386

*For Janet Hagan Yanos*



*The Year She Disappeared*





## One

It was her sixtieth year to heaven—the eighth of December, 1998—and Nan Mulholland had never expected to spend it on the lam.

“How long will it take?” She tapped the ticket agent’s map with a smooth oval nail. “Say if we—if I—fly to New York, then go from there to New Haven?” She saw herself, somewhat melodramatically, as laying a false trail. The first of many?

“How long?” she persisted.

“Lady! I was born right here in Seattle. Never been east of Minneapolis.”

The fragrant young man in line behind Nan stepped up to the counter. She breathed in: Obsession; Gabriel, her son-in-law, wore it. “What time a day you gonna get in?” He had trustworthy brown eyes and a New York accent. “It’s wicked slow, this close to Christmas.”

A second witness, besides the ticket agent. Nan was most definitely in luck today. Quickly, like knocking on wood, she glanced back to where her granddaughter, four-year-old Jane, sat hunched on their one small suitcase, her long brown hair falling over her face, both arms tight around a large stuffed animal.

“I’d take Metro North, I was you. Get the airport shuttle to Penn Station.”

“Thank you,” Nan said. Then, inspired: “I’ve burned my driver’s license, so I’ll probably do that.” That should embed her firmly in his mind for later, when he was questioned.

She paid cash—nearly eleven hundred dollars—for the last two seats on Flight 1066 to La Guardia, departing at noon (“That’s less than thirty minutes, ma’am”) from Gate 11-A. Clutching the tickets tightly—was

she really, truly going to do this thing?—Nan turned away. The helpful young man took her place at the counter and pulled out his wallet. For good measure she lurched against him. He jumped back, credit cards spilling onto the floor. She excused herself in pretty, dotty-old-lady confusion. He wouldn't forget her, or her supposed destination.

Heartened by this evidence of her newfound criminal mind-set—maybe she really *could* pull this off—Nan clicked across the shining expanse of the Sea-Tac terminal toward Jane. The smell of the place was heartening, too (an exquisitely tuned sense of smell was Nan Mulholland's own peculiar joy and sorrow)—pine-forest disinfectant, minty vinyl. The smell of newness. Of fresh starts. Why, she wondered, do they call them terminals, as in disease, when their whole ambience suggests beginnings? Remember the Plan, she said to herself. Her new mantra: Remember the Plan. Underneath her amethyst wool dress (she'd told Gabriel that she was taking his daughter to a matinee performance of the *Nutcracker*) she wore a silk half-slip bought years ago in West Berlin; its wide lace border concealed three zippered pockets. "*Versteckte Vermögen*," it was called. "Hidden Assets." Two thick rolls of hundred-dollar bills, her passport, and an extra vial of nitroglycerin thumped comfortingly against her knees as she walked.

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They made the plane with minutes to spare. Jane, tired now and sulky, cold-shouldered the welcoming flight attendants, and they were in: safe. None of the other passengers (Nan checked faces as Jane stalked ahead of her down the aisle) took the least interest in them.

Jane demanded the window seat, though there was nothing to see in the lozenge of smeared glass but evergreens and tarmac. Good, thought Nan, no one can try to talk to her. The middle-aged man in the aisle seat offered to put Nan's coat in the overhead bin; he folded it carefully, buff silk lining out, then clicked the bin shut. Seated again, he shook out a copy of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (the *Pee-Eye*) and occupied both armrests. His rolled-up shirtsleeves revealed forearms densely carpeted with sandy-blond hair. Squinting (she never wore her glasses in public), Nan read the largest headlines. CIA SEEKS LOOSER RULES FOR KILLINGS DURING COUPS. TACOMA COUNCILMAN TOOK OVER 100 BRIDES. She blinked. *BRIBES*.

Jane was watching the flight attendant step through the emergency-

landing ballet. Her intent face had a pinched look, and she rubbed her forehead with two fingers, the way she did when she was tired—her mother, Alex’s, gesture. What had Alex told her about the reason for this very sudden trip? Nan had had no time alone with Alex this morning, no chance to ask last-minute questions. Gabriel had come home from the hospital early.

The flight attendant held up a bright yellow oxygen mask and strapped it over her face. Nan felt Jane stiffen, and put her arm around her. Jane shrugged away. “First put on your own mask,” the recorded voice intoned. “Then assist your child.”

When Alex was little, all that traveling because of Tod being in the Foreign Service, Nan used to worry: Could she? Would she really be able to deny instinct, to watch Alex gasping, clawing at her throat, while she calmly fastened the strap around her own head?

The attendant tucked away the mask and waved a languid arm at each of the Exit doors.

“Nana! See that button?” Jane pointed to the round knob on her side of their shared armrest. “That’s the Inject Button. You press it, and it injects the person next to you out of their seat.”

You won’t get me that easily, my chickadee, thought Nan. She smiled down at her granddaughter, determined to be cheerful. For an instant, her heart-shaped face hardening, her chin as determined as her mother’s, Jane stared back. Her eyes, the bronzy-green of spoiled grapes, rested on Nan accusingly.

“Whose special girl are you?” Nan said. “Huh, Grape Eyes?”

But Jane turned back to her own reflection in the airplane window.

Nan sighed. This was new—this cold dislike. Up until now—until this very afternoon, this very trip, which Jane clearly didn’t want to take and which Alex apparently hadn’t explained to her—Jane had adored her grandmother. Nan, as Jane’s only living grandparent, had the field all to herself. The one, the only . . . *Nana!* And she basked in it. More: she needed it. In her occasional moments of stark honesty, Nan recognized this. Grandmothering filled the gaps that came with widowhood. Grandmothering gave her something to be good at. Grandmothering was what Nan, motherless since the age of four and raised by her own grandmother, knew how to do.

The flight attendant finished her demonstration, shook back her long blond hair, and went to take her seat. But the plane didn’t move.

What have I agreed to? Nan thought in dismay.

Alex had asked for help, and Nan had agreed to give it. But (Be honest!) the deal was that Nan would give up, for a while—a *short* while—her comfortable widowed West Coast life. It didn't include giving up her cherished grandmotherhood. They had their private jokes, she and Jane. They had their shared pursuits: finger painting; collecting wildflowers, which they pressed, as Nan's own grandmother had done with her, between the pages of Webster's Unabridged; riding all the roller coasters at Six Flags. They had their small conspiracies: roller coasters were strictly forbidden by Alex. Where had it (so suddenly!) gone—that mutually adoring comradeship? Without it, Nan realized, she had no idea how to connect with her granddaughter.

"Nana!" Jane whispered. "You're all red."

Nan laid her hand over Jane's, but she pulled away and wrapped both arms around her balding stuffed squirrel. Back inside her bubble of sullenness. So that was how it was going to be.

The captain's voice announced in a honeyed Southern accent that there would be a delay in taking off. Jane drooped; her eyes closed. She sank sideways against the wall of the airplane, her light brown hair—long and coarse and thick as a horse's tail, like her mother's—falling across her face. Nan took her own pillow and tucked it between Jane's cheek and the wall, then leaned back in her seat. The numbing flurry of preparations for departure that had filled the past two and a half days was over, leaving her face-to-face with the *reason* for departure.

What am I doing? she thought. What in the world am I doing?

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Why me? Nan had asked on Monday morning.

She and Alex were alone in Alex's old and calm and beautiful house, Gabriel already at the hospital, Jane at preschool.

Why don't *you* take her? Both of you just get clear away from Gabe, if—

*If what you say is true.* Nan bit back the words: what kind of mother would side with her son-in-law against her own daughter?

She's better off without me.

Alex! Surely not. She'd miss you terribly. She'd be losing both her parents at once.

Alex's face hardened. She looked down at her trembling hands and

folded one tightly over the other. Her knuckles turned white. He'll try to find Jane, she said. He'll come after you. You know what he's like—

Alex, honey, that's just what I mean. If I take her, it's—it's kidnapping. Abduction.

It'd be too easy to trace, Alex went on, as if Nan hadn't spoken. But you. You could do it. Nobody looks at an old woman.

My daughter can be cruel, Nan had thought—oh, she can.

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"Folks, this is your pilot speaking. Mighty sorry for the holdup. Shouldn't be too much longer before we're up and away."

Nan looked at her watch. They'd been sitting on the runway for half an hour. *Holdup. Holdup.* Inside her head the word pounded. She looked around anxiously, up the aisle, then down, half expecting to see uniformed policemen converging on her and Jane. But there was no one. The flight attendants were strapped into their jump seats, and the other passengers sat wrapped in the same heavy, thrumming cocoon of airplane noise as Nan. In the cloudy afternoon twilight Jane slept, wedged at an uncomfortable-looking angle against the cabin wall, a translucent bubble of spit coming and going between her lips. Nan reached out a hand to smooth her hair back from her face, then stopped, afraid of waking her. In front of Nan a shaved male head rustled a papery airline pillow; beside him an unseen mother told her unseen child, "Justin! If you don't behave, we won't go. We'll get off this plane right now." The man next to Nan, isolated in his yellow cone of light, opened his newspaper to the Wednesday Word Wizard, a list of nonsense words to unscramble and then use to fill in the blanks in the Grand Prize Sentence. The plane shuddered promisingly several times, then was still.

What if, after Nan and Jane had left this morning, Alex had had a change of heart? What if she'd told Gabriel about their conspiracy? What if the police were now holding all outgoing planes to search for Nan and Jane?

No, she thought. Alex wouldn't do that. Alex had never been given to changes of heart. Remember the Plan. A sound, well-ordered plan, like all of Alex's plans. Right down to Nan's awareness of being backed into a corner, backed into being generous. But there'd been Alex's face, white and despairing; Alex's voice, shaky, ashamed.

To distract herself, Nan peered at the newspaper over her neighbor's

sandy-haired arm, which reminded her of a bath mat she and Tod had had once (was it in Bucharest?). She read:

BULTAR  
LESCUM  
INGADE  
HESTOO  
BETHIL  
STYMIC

It looked like a shopping list in Serbo-Croatian. (Not one of Nan's languages, though she'd dutifully attempted the language of whatever country Tod was posted to, through all the downward moves—Bonn, Genoa, Warsaw, Bucharest.) After LESCUM Sandy Man wrote in MUSCLE; then his gleaming gold pencil tapped inquiringly beside INGADE. Nan tightened her lips against the whisper, *Gained! Gained!*

Her thoughts homed back to her own predicament. Yes—Alex could be cruel. An old woman, she'd said. And didn't Sandy Man, still in oblivious communion with his newspaper, bear Alex out? Even now, when her deepest desire was for this damned plane to move, for herself and Jane to depart unnoticed, Nan spared a moment to feel miffed. Leaning back in her seat, in her chic but feminine dress—brushing invisible grit from the skirt and smoothing the fine, soft wool over her knees—she looked (she knew) neither old nor sick. Her hair was, though by artifice, still blond; her skin, suffused with a heart patient's rosiness, still vibrant; her eyes, still a deep bachelor-button blue. Who was Sandy Man, to be so immune?

Sixty. I'm only sixty.

"I mean it, Justin!" The voice of the unseen woman in front of Nan was louder now. "We can get off this plane right now and go home."

Jane stirred. "Nana, I'm thirsty."

Nan offered her own plastic cup of ginger ale, the ice cubes nearly melted. Jane pushed it away. "I want Coke!" she said loudly.

"Shhh!" Nan grabbed her granddaughter's shoulder, about to shake it, then stopped herself

Jane squinted up at her. Nan could see her considering whether or not to burst into tears; luckily, she was too sleepy. She punched her pillow against the window and turned away, hugging Squirrel.

Damn Alex! Nan thought, and immediately felt better, anger being a more bracing emotion than fear.

After all, I don't *have* to do this. We can get off this plane right now and go home.

The captain's voice, honeyed testiness now after almost an hour on the ground, announced that they were third in line for takeoff. "Thank God!" Nan said, not realizing she'd spoken the words out loud. Sandy Man glanced up from his newspaper. A pretty black flight attendant paced the aisle with last offerings. Nan accepted a blanket, unfolded it, and eased the soft wool over Jane's curled-up legs and stocking feet. Her eyes flickered open, then closed again.

"Don't lie to me, Justin!" the invisible woman in front of them said in a low voice. "I don't like you to lie to me." An imperious arm came up to flag the flight attendant. "My son is sick," the woman's voice accused.

Nan caught the nutlike smell of vomit. Beside her, Sandy Man rose abruptly, flinging his newspaper into her lap, shoved past the flight attendant, and ran down the aisle. Nan looked down at the paper. In the blank next to BULTAR Sandy Man had printed, carefully, BUTLAR. Good, she thought, that's sunk him. He'll never win the Grand Prize now. The word he should have written echoed in her mind. *Brutal*. Was he that—Gabriel? The son-in-law whom (Be honest!) she adored?

Could Gabriel have done it? How *could* he have done it? And if he hadn't, what was Nan—a woman who always at first glance read the word in newspaper headlines as MOLE-STER (some kind of burrowing, earth-dwelling gangster)—doing here?

The roar beneath Nan's feet deepened. The plane shuddered. They began to move.

All the traveling she'd done in her life—the trains and planes and (in the early days of her marriage) ships with Tod—and still she wasn't used to it. The brashness of embarking. The suspension (like dying, surely?) between earth and water, earth and air. Nan's heart slipped into three-quarter time—The nitro, she thought. No, wait, count to five, remember?—then righted itself. *Remember the Plan*. But that was, at this moment, no comfort at all. She longed to unfasten Jane's seat belt and pull her onto her lap, longed to be anchored and comforted by the warm weight of Jane. Instead, she began to count silently in German, the language of order and calm.

*Ein . . . zwei . . . drei . . .*

Beside her, Jane sat up, brushing her hair out of her eyes with a brusque, grown-up gesture. Her legs caught in the blanket and she kicked to free herself. Her elbow jabbed into Nan's ribs. Nan looked—really looked—at her granddaughter. Her small bright teeth caught her bottom lip. She was trembling all over.

*Vier . . . fünf . . .*

Nan reached for Jane's hand and felt first Jane's fear, then her own. Their two palms were slick with sweat. The cloudy afternoon rushed in great gulps past the little oblong window.

*Sechs . . . sieben . . .*

She pulled Jane close, feeling her stiffen and resist, kept pulling until she yielded and buried her face in her grandmother's armpit. Nan laid her cheek against the small, warm head and breathed in the smell of Jane, sleep and sweat and the mild, sweet fragrance of baby shampoo.

*Acht . . . neun . . .*

Calmed, not stopping to think who was comforting whom, Nan watched the window. Abruptly the earth, with its tight flocks of blue and yellow lights, tilted downward. Liftoff: the moment between *yes* and *no*. Then the ground below them dipped and circled away.