



GREAT  
CIRCLE

— a novel —

MAGGIE  
SHIPSTEAD

Author of *Seating Arrangements*



ALSO BY MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD

*Astonish Me*  
*Seating Arrangements*

# Great Circle



Maggie Shipstead



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*For my brother*

I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.  
I've been circling for thousands of years  
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,  
a storm, or a great song?

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, *The Book of Hours*



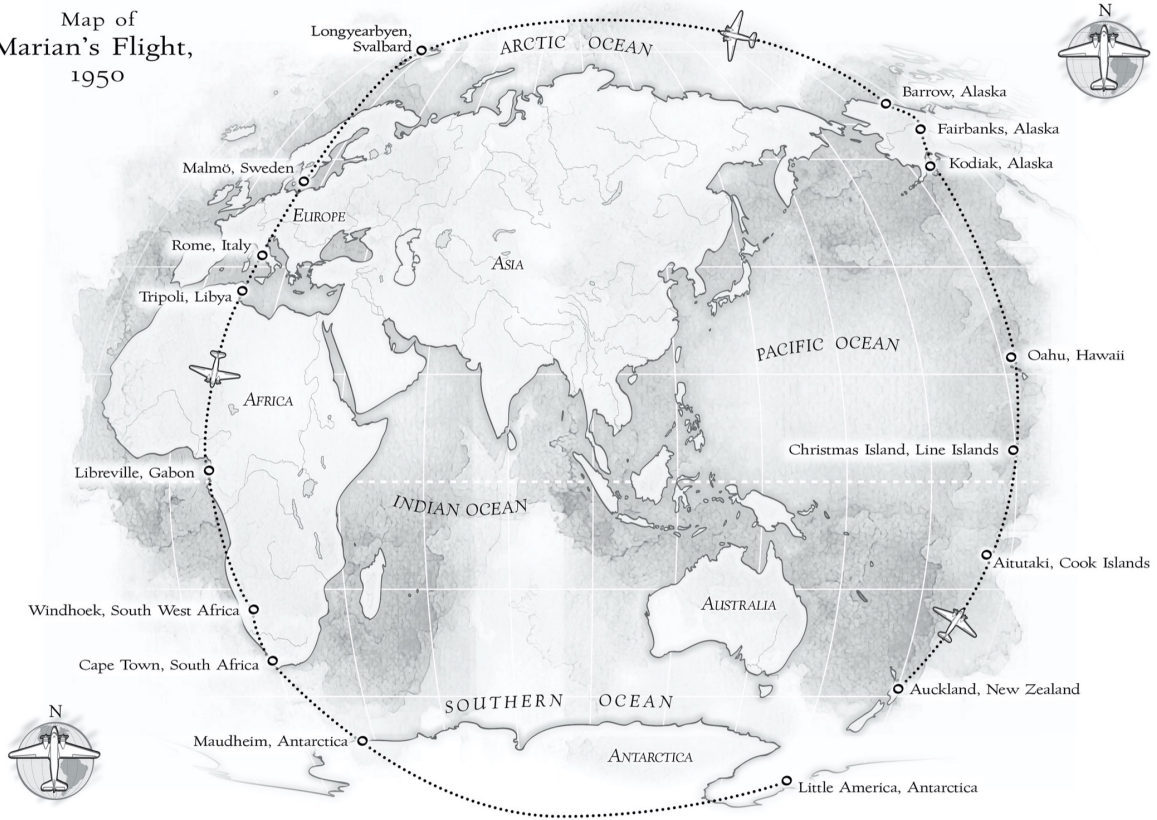


**I**f you were to put a blade through any sphere and divide it into two perfect halves, the circumference of the cut side of each half would be a great circle: that is, the largest circle that can be drawn on a sphere.

The equator is a great circle. So is every line of longitude. On the surface of a sphere such as the earth, the shortest distance between any two points will follow an arc that is a segment of a great circle.

Points directly opposite each other, like the North and South Poles, are intersected by an infinite number of great circles.

Map of  
Marian's Flight,  
1950



*Little America III, Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica*  
*March 4, 1950*

I was born to be a wanderer. I was shaped to the earth like a seabird to a wave. Some birds fly until they die. I have made a promise to myself: My last descent won't be the tumbling helpless kind but a sharp gannet plunge—a dive with intent, aimed at something deep in the sea.

I'm about to depart. I will try to pull the circle up from below, bringing the end to meet the beginning. I wish the line were a smooth meridian, a perfect, taut hoop, but our course was distorted by necessity: the indifferent distribution of islands and airfields, the plane's need for fuel.

I don't regret anything, but I will if I let myself. I can think only about the plane, the wind, and the shore, so far away, where land begins again. The weather is improving. We've fixed the leak as best we can. I will go soon. I hate the never-ending day. The sun circles me like a vulture. I want a respite of stars.

Circles are wondrous because they are endless. Anything endless is wondrous. But endlessness is torture, too. I knew the horizon could never be caught but still chased it. What I have done is foolish; I had no choice but to do it.

It isn't how I thought it would be, now that the circle is almost closed, the beginning and end held apart by one last fearsome piece of water. I thought I would believe I'd seen the world, but there is too much of the world and too little of life. I thought I would believe I'd completed something, but now I doubt anything can be completed. I thought I would not be afraid. I thought I would become more than I am, but instead I know I am less than I thought.

No one should ever read this. My life is my one possession.

And yet, and yet, and yet.

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Final entry from *The Sea, the Sky, the Birds Between: The Lost Logbook of Marian Graves*. Published by D. Wenceslas & Sons, New York, 1959.

*Los Angeles*  
*December 2014*

I only knew about Marian Graves because one of my uncle's girlfriends liked to dump me at the library when I was a kid, and one time I picked up a random book called something like *Brave Ladies of the Sky*. My parents had gone up in a plane and never come back, and it turned out a decent percentage of the brave ladies had met the same fate. That got my attention. I think I might have been looking for someone to tell me a plane crash wasn't such a bad way to go—though if anyone actually ever had, I would have thought they were full of shit. Marian's chapter said she'd been raised by her uncle, and when I read that, I got goose bumps because *I* was being raised (kind of) by *my* uncle.

A nice librarian dug up Marian's book for me—*The Sea, the Sky*, etc.—and I pored over it like an astrologist consulting a star chart, hopeful that Marian's life would somehow explain my own, tell me what to do and how to be. Most of what she wrote went over my head, though I did come away with a vague aspiration to turn my loneliness into adventure. On the first page of my diary, I wrote "I WAS BORN TO BE A WANDERER" in big block letters. Then I didn't write anything else because how do you follow that up when you're ten years old and spend all your time either at your uncle's house in Van Nuys or auditioning for television commercials? After I returned the book, I pretty much forgot about Marian. Almost all of the brave ladies of the sky are forgotten, really. There was the occasional spooky TV special about Marian in the '80s, and a handful of die-hard Marian enthusiasts are still out there spinning theories on the internet, but she didn't stick the way Amelia Earhart did. People at least *think* they know about Amelia Earhart, even though they don't. It's not really possible.



The fact that I got ditched at the library so often turned out to be a good thing because while other kids were at school, I was sitting in a succession of folding chairs in a succession of hallways at every casting call in the greater Los Angeles area for little white girls (or little race-unspecified girls, which also means white), chaperoned by a succession of nannies and girlfriends of my uncle Mitch, two categories that sometimes overlapped. I think the girlfriends sometimes offered to take care of me because they wanted him to see them as maternal, which they thought would make them seem like wife material, but that wasn't actually a great strategy for keeping the flame alive with ol' Mitch.

When I was two, my parents' Cessna crashed into Lake Superior. Or that's the assumption. No trace was ever found. My dad, Mitch's brother, was flying, and they were on their way to a romantic getaway at some friend's middle-of-nowhere backwoods cabin to, as Mitch put it, reconnect. Even when I was little, he told me that my mother wouldn't quit fucking around. His words. I'm not sure Mitch believed in childhood. "But they wouldn't quit each other, either," he'd say. Mitch definitely believed in taglines. He'd started out directing cheesy TV movies with titles like *Love Takes a Toll* (that was about a toll collector) and *Murder for Valentine's Day* (take a wild guess).

My parents had left me with a neighbor in Chicago, but their last will and testament left me to Mitch. There wasn't really anyone else. No other aunts or uncles, and my grandparents were a combination of dead, estranged, absent, and untrustworthy. Mitch wasn't a bad guy, but his instincts were of the opportunistic, Hollywoodian variety, so after he'd had me a few months, he called in a favor to get me cast in an applesauce commercial. Then he found my agent, Siobhan, and I got consistent-enough work in commercials and guest spots and TV movies (I played the daughter in *Murder for Valentine's Day*) that I can't remember a time I wasn't acting or trying to. It seemed like normal life: putting a plastic pony in a plastic stable over and over while cameras rolled and some grown-up stranger told you how to smile.

When I was eleven, after Mitch had stepping-stoned from movies of the week to music videos and was white-knuckle climbing into the indie film world, I got my proverbial big break: the role of Katie McGee in a time-travel cable sitcom for kids called *The Big-Time Life of Katie McGee*.

On set, my life was squeaky-clean and candy-colored, all puns and tidy plotlines and three-walled rooms under a hot sky of klieg lights. I hammed it up to a braying laugh track while wearing outfits so extravagantly trendy I looked like a manifestation of the tween zeitgeist. When I wasn't working, I did pretty much whatever I wanted, thanks to Mitch's negligence. In her book, Marian Graves wrote: *As a child, my brother and I were largely left to our own devices. I believed—and no one told me otherwise for some years—that I was free to do as I liked, that I had the right to go any place I could find my way to.* I was probably more of an impetuous little brat than Marian, but I felt the same way. The world was my oyster, and freedom was my mignonette. Life gives you lemons, you carve off their skins and garnish your martinis.

When I was thirteen, after the *Katie McGee* merch had started selling like crazy and after Mitch had directed *Tourniquet* and was rolling around in success like a pill-popping pig in shit, he moved us to Beverly Hills on our shared dime. Once I wasn't stuck out in the Valley anymore, the kid who played Katie McGee's big brother introduced me to his rich dirtbag high-schooler friends, and they drove me around and took me to parties and got in my pants. Mitch probably didn't notice how much I was gone because he was usually out, too. Sometimes we'd bump into each other coming home at two or three in the morning, both messed up, and we'd just exchange nods like two people passing in a hotel corridor, attendees at the same rowdy conference.

But here's a good thing: The on-set tutors for *Katie McGee* were decent, and they told me I should go to college, and since I liked the sound of that, I weaseled my way into NYU after the show ended, with substantial extra credit for being a B-list TV star. I was already packed and ready to move when Mitch overdosed, and if I hadn't been, I probably would have just stayed in L.A. and partied myself to death, too.

Here's something that might have been good or bad: After one semester, I got cast in the first *Archangel* movie. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if, instead, I'd finished college and stopped acting and been forgotten about, but it's not like I possibly could have turned down the colossal amount of money that came with playing Katerina. So everything else is irrelevant.

In my blip of higher education, I had time to take Intro to Philosophy and learn about the panopticon, the hypothetical prison Jeremy Bentham came up with, where there would be one itty-bitty guardhouse at the center of a giant ring of cells. One guard was all you needed because he *might* be watching at any time, and the idea of being watched matters way more than actually being watched. Then Foucault turned the whole thing into a metaphor about how all you need to discipline and dominate a person or a population is to make them think it's *possible* they're being watched. You could tell the professor wanted us all to think the panopticon was scary and awful, but later, after *Archangel* made me way too famous, I wanted to take Katie McGee's preposterous time machine back to that lecture hall and ask him to consider the opposite. Like instead of one guard in the middle, you're in the middle, and thousands, maybe millions, of guards are watching you—or might be—all the time, no matter where you go.

Not that I would have had the nerve to ask a professor anything. At NYU everyone was always staring at me because I'd been Katie McGee, but it felt like they were staring at me because they knew I didn't deserve to be there. And maybe I didn't, but you can't measure fairness in a lab. You can't know if you *deserve* something. Probably you don't. So it was a relief, too, when I quit school for *Archangel*, to go back to having a million obligations I had no choice about and a daily schedule I didn't decide for myself. At college I'd flipped through the course catalog, as fat as a dictionary, in complete bafflement. I'd drifted through the cafeteria, looking at all the different foods, at the salad bars and the mountains of bagels and the bins of cereal and the soft-serve machine, and I'd felt like I was being asked to solve some monumental, life-or-death riddle.

After I'd wrecked everything and Sir Hugo Woolsey (*the* Sir Hugo, who happens to be my neighbor) started talking to me about some biopic he was producing and pulled Marian's book from his tote bag—a book I hadn't thought about in fifteen years—suddenly I was in a library again, looking at a slender hardback that might hold all the answers. Answers sounded nice. They sounded like something I wanted, not that I could ever quite unravel what I wanted. Not that I even really knew what wanting meant. I mostly experienced desire as a tangle of impossible, contradictory impulses. I wanted to vanish like Marian; I wanted to be more famous than ever; I wanted to say something important about courage and freedom; I wanted to *be* courageous and free, but I didn't know what that meant—I only knew how to pretend to know, which I guess is acting.

Today is my last day of filming for *Peregrine*. I'm sitting in a mock-up of Marian's plane that's hanging from a pulley system and is about to be swung out over a giant tank of water and dropped. I'm wearing a reindeer-fur parka that weighs a thousand pounds and will weigh a million once it gets wet, and I'm trying not to let on that I'm afraid. Bart Olofsson, the director, took me aside earlier, asked if I really wanted to do this stunt myself, given, you know, what happened to my parents. *I think I want to confront that*, I said. *I think I could use the closure*. He'd put his hand on my shoulder, done his best guru face. *You are a strong woman*, he'd said.

Closure doesn't really exist, though. That's why we're always looking for it.

The actor who's playing Eddie Bloom, my navigator, is also wearing a reindeer-fur parka and has waterproof blood makeup on his forehead because he's supposed to be knocked out by the impact. In real life, Eddie usually sat at a desk behind Marian's seat, but the screenwriters, two aggressively cheerful brothers with Hitler Youth haircuts and Hitler Youth faces, thought it would be better if Eddie came up front for the death dive. Sure, fine, whatever.

The story we're telling isn't what really happened, anyway. I know that much. But I wouldn't say I know the truth about Marian Graves. Only she knew.

Eight cameras will record my plunge: six fixed, two operated by divers. The plan is to do it once. Twice, at most. It's an expensive shot, and our budget was never enormous and has now been exhausted and then some, but when you've come this far, the only way out is through. Best-case scenario, it takes all day. Worst-case scenario, I drown, wind up *In Memoriam*, wind up like my parents except in a fake plane and a fake ocean, not even trying to get anywhere.

"You're sure you want to do this?"

The stunt coordinator is checking my harness, all business as he digs around my crotch, feeling for the straps and clips among bristly reindeer hair. True to type, he's got a leathery face, a leathery wardrobe, and a stop-action way of walking from a few imperfect repair jobs.

"Totally," I say.

When he's done, the crane lifts us up, swings us out. There's a scrim at the end of the tank that makes a kind of horizon with the water, and I'm her, Marian Graves, flying over the Southern Ocean with my fuel gauge on empty, and I know I can't get anywhere other than where I am, which is nowhere. I wonder how cold the water will be, how long before I'm dead. I think through my options. I think about what I've promised myself. *A gannet plunge.*

"Action," says a voice in my earpiece, and I push on the fake plane's yoke as though I'm going to fly us down into the center of the earth. The pulleys tip the nose, and we dive.