

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
LABOR DAY AND *THE GOOD DAUGHTERS*

JOYCE
MAYNARD

after
her

A NOVEL

after her



JOYCE MAYNARD

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*For Laura Gaddini Xerogeanes and Janet Gaddini Cubley,
also for Martha, and for Dana.*

This is not their story, but their story inspired this one.

And in memory of Detective Robert Gaddini, Marin County Homicide

Epigraph

Come a little closer huh . . .

Close enough to look in my eyes Sharona

—from “My Sharona” by Douglas Fieger and Berton Averre, #1 single by the Knack, 1979

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Prologue

A little over thirty years ago, on a June day just before sunset—alone on a mountain in Marin County, California—a man came toward me with a length of piano wire stretched between his hands and the intention of ending my days. I was fourteen years old, and many others had already died at his hands. I carry the knowledge of what it is to look into a man's eyes and believe his face is the last thing I will ever see.

I have my sister to thank that I am here to tell what happened that day. Two times, it was my sister who saved me, though I was not able to do the same for my sister.

This is our story.

NOTHING MUCH EVER HAPPENED ON the mountain where we lived, growing up, and we didn't get cable. We were always hoping for a little excitement. So my sister and I made up situations. All we had was time.

One day we decided to see what it felt like to be dead.

If a person's dead, they don't feel anything, Patty said. This was Patty for you.

I had a red sweatshirt, the kind with a zipper up the front and a hood and pockets to keep gum. I spread it on a patch of grass on the hillside behind our house, with the sleeves stretched out as if they were a person who'd been run over by a truck—the hood off in a different direction, so as much of the red part showed as possible, like a pool of blood.

Lie there, I told my sister, pointing to a spot in the middle, over the zipper part.

She might disagree, but Patty nearly always did what I told her. If she had questions, she kept them to herself.

I lay down next to her. Close enough so plenty of the red part showed on either side of our bodies.

Now what?

Don't move. Don't let your chest go up and down when you breathe.

Some people would have asked for an explanation, but not Patty. Letting her find out in her own time was part of my idea, and she understood this.

For a long time nothing happened. It was hot that day, but we just lay there.

My nose itches, she said.

Never mind, I told her. Just think about something else. Something interesting.

For me at the time, that would mean Peter Frampton, or the jeans I'd seen at the mall a couple weeks earlier, that were perfect in every way except the price. And the notebooks I wrote in, where I made up stories I'd read to my sister, that she said were better than Nancy Drew.

For Patty it would be Larry Bird executing a hook shot. Or some dog she liked. Which would be any dog that ever lived.

Did you notice that cloud? she said. It's shaped like a dachshund.

Quiet.

~~Who knew how much time passed. Ten minutes? An hour, possibly. Then I spotted it: a vulture circling above our heads. First one, then two more. They were high up still, but it was plain from where they'd positioned themselves that we were the target. The place they were circling was direct over the spot where we lay.~~

What now? Patty asked me.

Shush. Be still.

Two more birds joined the others. The circle was getting tighter, as if they were zeroing in. They were coming lower too, closer to our bodies.

What if they try to peck our eyes out?

No answer from me. Getting the vultures to spot us was the whole point. My sister should know this, and basically did.

The vultures were swooping lower now, dive-bombing, making this terrible shrieking sound. They were closing in around us. Shrieking not so much at Patty and me, from the sound of it, as at one another. They were fighting over who would get to eat our eyeballs, probably.

Then came one final shriek, not from one of the nearest birds, but one we hadn't noticed until now, a little farther off but zeroing in. He sailed down toward us, body like an arrow, beak and talons aimed at our faces.

I didn't have to tell my sister what to do. We jumped up screaming, running down the mountain toward our house. No time to claim my sweatshirt even—though later, when the birds were gone, we return for it, out of breath and holding each other, screaming. A person could scream as loud as she wanted on the mountain, and it felt good. We were always looking for excuses to scream.

LATER AGAIN, WHEN WE COULD catch our breath, we lay in our yard going over it all.

I could feel the feathers brush against my arm, I said.

I could feel the wind their wings made when they flapped, blowing over my face, she told me. Like hot breath.

Now you know what it's like being dead, I told her.

Or not dead yet, just about to be.

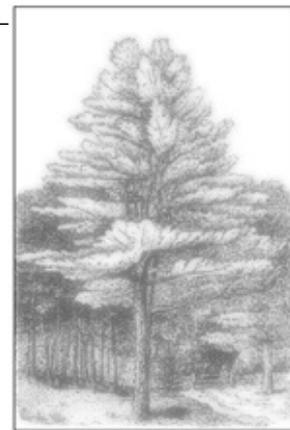
THIS IS HOW I REMEMBER it. I could be wrong. I had a big imagination when I was young. I was good at making up stories, and my stories were so good, I even believed them myself sometimes.

And I was always looking for excitement, until I found some.

PART ONE

My little pretty one, pretty one





Chapter One

The town where my sister and I grew up lay in the shadow of Mount Tamalpais, not far north of San Francisco. The aging housing development where we lived, on Morning Glory Court, sat just off an exit of Highway 101, eight miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Buses ran from where we lived to San Francisco—the bridge marking the entrance to that other world, though we also knew people came there to jump. But for us, the city might as well have been the moon.

Our father had grown up in the city—North Beach, home of the real red sauce, he told us. This was where the hippies had come for the Summer of Love and where Janis Joplin had once walked the streets of the Haight, and cable cars ran, and that crazy Lombard Street snaked past rows of pretty pastel Victorian houses, and where another Patty—Hearst—had walked into a Hibernia Bank one day a few years back, carrying an M1 carbine as one of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Later, rock stars started buying houses on the other side of the highway from where our house sat, but back in those days, it wasn't a fashionable place yet. The day would come when people built high walls around their property and posted signs alerting would-be burglars to the existence of the security systems. But those were still trusting times. Our yards flowed into one another, free of hedges or fences, so girls like us could run from one end of the street to the other without the soles of the Keds once touching asphalt. People moved easily among their neighbors, and few locked their doors.

Our house, number 17, was the smallest on the street—two dark little bedrooms, a low-ceilinged living room, and a kitchen the previous owners had decorated with green Formica and matching avocado-green appliances, none of which could be counted on to function reliably. The living room was covered in wood paneling, an effect meant to make the place seem cozy, perhaps, though one thought hadn't succeeded.

Our parents had bought the house in 1968, when I was two years old, shortly after my sister's birth—the best they could manage on a policeman's salary. My mother said Marin County was a good place for raising children, though our father worked in the city at the time—meaning San Francisco. He was a beat cop then, not yet a detective, and knowing him, he would have liked it that his work took him a ways from home, over that red bridge he loved. It was probably better that way, for a man like him at least, to be off on his own, with the three of us tucked away in that little bungalow while he was off saving people.

These days, nobody could think of building low-income housing in a spot like the one where our house was situated. The land that made up our development would be reserved for six-thousand-square-foot mansions with swimming pools and yards with outdoor kitchens and expensive patio furniture. There would be three-car garages, and the cars in them would be of European design.

But whenever it was (the 1940s probably, after the war) that the houses were constructed on Morning Glory Court and the neighboring streets (Bluebell, Honeysuckle, Daffodil, and my favorite—named for a contractor's wife probably—Muriel Lane), a premium had not yet been placed on proximity to open land and views. It was possible back then to have as little money as our family did and still find yourself in a house that backed up on a few thousand acres of open space. So that whole mountain was our playground. Mine and my sister's.

For the first five years of her life, Patty barely spoke, except to me. Not that she couldn't talk. She knew words. She had no speech impediment. She had strong opinions about a lot of things, in fact—not only dogs, and basketball, but also (speaking now of her dislikes) foods that were red, other than marinara sauce, clothes whose labels rubbed her neck, all dresses. She developed, early on, a hearty sense of humor, particularly concerning anything to do with body parts or bathroom activities. Burping never ceased to amuse her. A fart—particularly coming from a well-dressed woman or a man in a suit—sent her right over the top.

But if someone asked her a question—and this included other children besides me, her kindergarten teacher, and our own parents—she said nothing, unless I was there, in which case she would whisper her response in my ear, leaving it to me to convey to the outside world—the world beyond the unit that consisted of the two of us—what her answer might be. Young as I was, I didn't know for a long time that other five-year-old girls had a lot to say. I didn't know this wasn't how things went with everybody's little sister.

When we'd go to the bank with our mother, and the teller would ask what flavor of lollipop she liked, Patty whispered her choice in my ear and I would speak it for her. *Green*. She ignored it when the kids called her Bucktooth, because of her overbite, and on our street, if a boy came up and wanted her toy, she'd hand it to him rather than protest, though if any of these boys had teased me (about my outgrown clothes, my inability to hit a ball in our occasional neighborhood games), she would confront the offender (but silently) with one of our jujitsu moves, learned from our father. Once, when a boy took the seat she'd saved for me at a puppet show our mother had taken us to at the library, she jammed her elbow in his stomach and kicked him for good measure before magnificently sweeping me into the place next to her. All without words.

A person could have thought she was shy, but when we were in our room, Patty's true nature revealed itself, a secret entrusted only to me. This was when she'd break into her panty dance, imitations of her teacher, Mrs. Eggert, preparing the class for inspection of their bottoms by the school nurse during an outbreak of ringworm, or her particular favorite game of pretending to be a puppy, down on her hands and knees, with her tongue out and her butt wagging an imaginary tail.

My sister could be wild, leaping from the top bunk onto a pile of pillows she'd built for herself that proved to offer insufficient cushion for her landing. I saw the look on her face when she hit the floor and I knew it had to hurt, but she was never one for crying.

Sometimes speaking for Patty might require nothing more from me than explaining she wanted mustard on her sandwich, or what flavor of ice cream she preferred. She'd let me know in a surprisingly husky voice, so low only I could hear. I'd give voice to her words.

"Patty isn't that interested in dolls," I told our mother when Patty opened her Christmas present a Tiny Tears with a layette. "She says this one is really cute and she thinks I'd probably like it. But

actually, what Patty would like is a basketball or a baby pig.”

What she really wanted was a dog, of course. Our mother had ruled that one out.

But here was an interesting thing: as little as Patty said in those days, and as quiet as she remained even later, she had the biggest voice. Not high and shrill either, like some girls', but surprisingly low and resonant, and it carried, to the point where sometimes our mother said—times we'd be out riding bikes and having one of our discussions—she'd know Patty was coming home five minutes before she got there. According to our parents, she had been famous for this even as a baby.

“Rachel sounds like a normal kid,” our father said, referring to me. “But when Patty lets out a yell they can probably hear it all the way to Eureka. It's a miracle I still have my eardrums.”

A PICTURE OF MY CHILDHOOD does not exist for me (I'm speaking of my memory here, not photographs or albums, which our mother never got around to making) that doesn't feature Patty in it. Nearly always when an image comes to me of the two of us, we have our arms around each other, or her head is on my shoulder, or (because she grew tall, young) mine on hers. If the picture was taken after she was six or seven, it's a safe bet Patty's mouth will be closed over her teeth. But where I am likely to look worried in the picture, my sister will be smiling.

The term *depression* wasn't much used then, but I think we both sensed, even early on, that our mother was fragile—that no space or energy existed to deal with more than she already had on her plate. This was the period when our father had gone to night school, working on getting the master's degree that was his ticket to the rank of detective. From the beginning, when he first joined the police force, his goal had been to work in homicide. He had no interest in parking tickets or petty crimes and robberies. Maybe he'd seen some character of a detective in the movies—William Holden, Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum—and the image appealed to him. That would be like him: to model himself on a movie hero, only he'd be one in real life.

So he was working double time at that point—days on the job in San Francisco, nights at school—while our mother stayed home with Patty and me. No doubt the hours were tough for him, but it was glamorous too, learning about psychology and forensics, while our mother stayed home with the babies. And knowing our father, he wouldn't have come running home to her after class was over either. There were probably a few female students at the police academy. There would certainly have been waitresses at the clubs he went to after.

“Your father always liked making women happy,” my mother told me once. No particular harshness in her voice when she said this, just weary resignation, a statement of fact, and I knew that anyway. Maybe, in his odd way, I could see him feeling a responsibility to spread the happiness around. Many women. Made very happy. (For a while, anyway.)

The problem between our parents, maybe, was that of all the women, our mother may have been the only one who appeared immune to our father's romantic tactics, and for a man accustomed to charming the female population of the entire San Francisco Bay Area, this must have taken the wind right out of his sails. Our mother was smarter than almost anyone, for starters. She was also cool and resistant to the seduction of flattery. Honesty she liked. Sweet talk got you no place once you committed the offense of betrayal. Lie once and you lost her.

A scene comes to me from when we were very young: my father walking in the house, home from work, and twirling our mother around the kitchen, untying her apron and wrapping his hands around her waist to kiss her hard on the mouth. (Do I remember this? Or have I made up the picture, wanting it to have been this way once?) He pressed her close against his chest.

“Nice cologne there,” she said, pulling away. “New scent?”

She hardly looked up, just tied her apron back again with this weary look that seemed to say, *Don't waste your time.*

After a while he didn't.



Chapter Two

Our father had earned a few medals in his days as a police officer, but it was being a detective that he loved. It was all about psychology, he told us. Reading a person's character. This was what his own father had done, back in North Beach cutting hair and listening to his customers' stories. Not so different from what my father did, when he'd bring a criminal into the interrogation room with the goal of getting him to confess.

First you had to understand what made the person tick. Then you got inside, like a watchmaker.

Among the detectives in the Marin Homicide Division—and beyond that, the greater San Francisco Bay Area, and probably beyond that too—it was known that nobody was better at breaking down a perpetrator than Anthony Torricelli. “His own mother could have had this secret she swore she was taking to her grave,” his friend Sal told me once. “Ten minutes in the room with Tony, she'd be crying into her hanky that she had sex with the milkman. That's how good he was.”

Not just good. The best.

ONE OF THE SKILLS REQUIRED of a person if he or she is to be a first-class detective, our father told us (*he or she*, he said; that was like him), was the ability to pay close attention. You had to know the questions to ask, and how to listen well when the answers came. You had to recognize when the person you were talking to was handing you a line, and spot all the things he wasn't saying too.

But as much as anything else, you had to pick up on all the things besides the words he handed you (*he or she*; women could be criminals too after all, as well as objects of worship).

You had to pick up on a person's body language. Can they look you in the eye when they say where they were last night? What does it mean that their hand is on their hip, that they keep crossing and uncrossing their legs? Are they picking at their sleeve when they tell you they never heard of some guy named Joe Palooka that sold crack down in Hunters Point? Why is it their nails are chewed down to the quick, or past it? Widow Jones might be wearing black, but why is it that three days after the funeral she's got a hickey on her neck?

(That last observation of our father's was nothing he ever shared with my sister and me, actually. I overheard that one when he was cutting Sal's hair, and he was explaining to his friend how he broke a case in which the wife of some banker type got her lover to do him in for the insurance money. Wh

our father forgot sometimes, when we were around, was that at least one of his daughters had inherited the attributes of a good detective herself. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree: I pay attention.)

My father didn't stop paying attention when he went off duty either, if he ever went off duty, and doubt he ever did. Most of all, he paid attention to women, but not in that way some men have, turning their gaze to the breasts, or sizing up a woman's rear end and grinning. He listened to what every woman he talked with had to say and seemed to take it seriously. He might like to see her naked but he would also like to massage her feet or touch the skin on the inside of her wrist. He would ask about her children, if she had them, but he also made it plain that in his eyes, a woman was never simply a mother. She could be eighty, and he would still manage to locate the girl in her. I am not sure he ever met a woman he didn't look at without picturing how it would be in bed with her.

WE WERE AT A CONVENIENCE store one time. Buying cigarettes, his usual Lucky Strikes.

"Don't move," he said to the woman behind the counter, with a sudden urgency that may have led her thinking this was a stickup.

He reached over the counter toward the side of her face, and for a moment his hand seemed almost to disappear in her hair. When it emerged, he was holding an earring. So small you had to wonder how he had ever spotted it.

"The back must have fallen off," he said. "I didn't want you to lose it."

She just stood there then, with the small gold cross in one hand, the other reaching for her naked lobe.

"Don't expect to find a guy like him when you start dating," one of the waitresses told me one night when he had taken us out to Marin Joe's—our regular tradition. "Because there aren't many like that."

Our mother would have said this was good news.

HE HAD A GIFT FOR hair, inherited from his father, and he loved brushing ours. He cut hair like a professional—using his dead father's scissors.

"Sometimes I think I should have been a hairdresser," he said—though in fact he could never have settled for that. "A man could do a lot worse than spend his days with his fingers running through women's hair. Instead of chasing down a bunch of low-life mutts."

First came the shampoo in our sink. He'd test the water with his wrist before he poured it over us and when he lathered our heads, it was more like a massage. He used a special brand, with peppermint that made the skin on your scalp tingle. All my life I've looked for that shampoo.

He put a record on. Dino, probably, but it might be Tony Bennett or Sinatra, and he might sing along, though never when he got to the cutting part, where all his concentration was required. That and a steady hand.

He set a chair in the yard. When we were little, he carried out whichever one of us he was working on that day, with a towel around our shoulders. The way he stepped back to study us was as if he were an artist, and we were his artwork. Then he began to cut.

He could sing like Dean Martin, to my ears at least, and he knew all the words to the songs, including the Italian ones.

THERE WAS A THING HE did for us, a trick he could perform, that no other human being I ever met had known how to re-create. Something so strange and amazing, just describing it is difficult.

You'd be sitting on the couch next to him. The person sitting there would be me, or my sister

Maybe he'd done this once for our mother, but if so, that day was long past.

Then he'd pull a hair from the top of your head, so swiftly it never hurt. My sister and I kept our hair long from when we were little. So he had plenty to work with. And black, like his.

You never knew when he might do this. You'd be sitting there watching TV next to him, or reading, and there'd be this sharp little tug at your scalp, no more than a pinprick. Then you'd look over at him, sitting next to you, and he'd be twirling this hair between his fingers. They moved so fast I never understood how he could do this. But after a few minutes, he'd hold your arm out in front of you and on your skin—olive colored like his—he'd set this creation he'd made that looked exactly like a spider. Made out of your hair.

It never worked to ask for a spider. Months might pass that he didn't come up with one for you, and then he did. They were so tiny and delicate, it was impossible to hold on to one. Just breathing could make it blow away. Or when he exhaled his cigarette smoke.

The first time he made a spider and I lost it, I cried. "Don't worry, baby," he said. "There's plenty more of those in your future." For a surprisingly long time, that's how I thought my life would be—men would perform magic for me—and for a longer time, that's how I thought it should be, even when it wasn't.

Years later—in my twenties, when I met a man I thought, briefly, that I'd marry, I asked him if he knew how to make spiders.

"Spiders?" he said. He had no idea what I was talking about.

"You know, out of my hair." I actually thought for a long time that this must be something all men did for the women they loved. Their daughters or their girlfriends or their wives.

But it was only my father who did that. The only person ever who did that, in the history of the world, possibly.

PATTY AND I ADORED OUR father, simple as that. Young as we were back then, he taught us to wrestle and instructed us in self-defense moves to protect against the unwelcome advances of the boyfriend he told us would pursue us tirelessly all our lives. But he also ran us bubble baths and lit candles for us when we got in the tub. He put on Sinatra and taught us to slow dance, with our toes resting on his shiny black shoes.

If she had the right dance partner, he said, a woman should be able to close her eyes and let him take her anywhere. But steer clear of a man with a limp hand. You want to feel strong pressure on your back, and his hand pressing against yours, as he led. It's fine if he smells your hair—you want a sensual man—but not his hand on your rear end. And if he doesn't walk you back to your table after the dance, he's danced his last with you. Then again, how could a man ever stop dancing with either of the Torricelli girls?

Never let a man disrespect you, he said. You deserve a man who treats you like the queen of the world.

We were not yet six and eight when he told us these things. What did we know of love and romance then, or cruelty and rejection? We took his words in anyway, to file for later.

He never yelled at us. He never had to. If one of us had done something we weren't supposed to, he only took one look from him to stop what we were doing.

Often he worked late, but if he came home early enough, he was the one who'd cook for us. Garl was always involved—those large, beautiful hands of his finely chopping and sautéing it in good olive oil. He prepared his sauce from scratch, and pasta too, hung up all over the kitchen like laundry, with meatballs made following his father's recipe. He claimed to speak Italian, and sometimes spewed out

foreign-sounding words while he cooked, but at some point we figured out they were made up.

After the meal, if he had to yawn, he'd stretch his arms as wide as possible, open his mouth all the way, and let out a roar. We'd curl up on the couch with him to watch TV—*The Rockford Files*, his favorite—and he'd rub our feet. When we got tired, he'd carry us to bed, one in each strong arm, then sit in the dark and sing to us.

Our mother stayed home mostly, but on his days off, we'd pile in his car (bench seats, before he got the Alfa Romeo) so Patty and I could both snuggle up in the front—and take off on the most winding roads. He drove stick and took the curves like a race car driver, which made me want to be one.

“Don't tell your mother,” he said—his regular refrain—as the speedometer reached seventy-five. Of course we never did.

One time he took us to Candlestick Park for a Giants game. “That guy on first?” he said. “Number forty-four? Take a good look at him. For the rest of your life you can tell people you saw Willie McCovey play.”

Once, standing in line with our father at the supermarket, a man just ahead of us started giving his wife a hard time, or maybe she was just his girlfriend. “Shut your trap if you know what's good for you,” the man told her.

Our father stepped out of the line then to face him. “Does it make you feel like a big guy, bullying a woman like that?” he said.

“Listen hard to what I tell you here, girls,” he said after, in the parking lot. “I wouldn't normally use this language, but you need to hear this plainly: Never let any man give you shit. One stunt like that and you're out the door.”

He took us on the cable cars and out to dinner at some grown-up restaurant, not McDonald's or Chuck E Cheese. He brought us gardenias, or a 45 rpm single he thought we'd like, a ring with a birthstone. One time he took us to a double feature of his two favorite James Bond movies—*Thunderball* and *Goldfinger*. That was supposed to be a secret except that when Patty came home she told our mother she wanted to get a cat and name her Pussy Galore.

Our mother had been, briefly, the object of our father's adoration, but he moved on early, while she stayed in the same place. Hard to say which one of them gave up on the other first, but it happened and once it did, there seemed no way back for either of them. Our mother must have seen him slipping away—like a piece of an iceberg that breaks off and drifts out to sea to form a whole new continent—and there was nothing to do about it but stand there and watch him go.

HE MOVED OUT WHEN I was eight, Patty six. After that he lived in an apartment back in the city, with a hideaway bed for Patty and me when we came to visit, which we hardly ever got to do. We stayed at old number 17, with its small dark rooms and thin walls through which the sound could be heard of cars on the highway, and keeping a secret would have been impossible. It was through those tooth-thin walls I learned the reason for my father's departure. A woman of course. Margaret Ann.



Chapter Three

In the early years, when our father still lived with us, there was a set time when we ate dinner. Our father's cooking filled our house with wonderful smells: onions and oregano simmering in the tomato sauce, and garlic of course. Red wine on the table, and candles, even on weeknights. Music, always.

Our mother tried cooking for a while after he moved out, but she gave up on that early on. Then we were left to heat up frozen dinners or soup. The good nights were the times our father came to take us out to the restaurant we favored, Marin Joe's, where we had our special booth and the waitresses always knew what to bring us: a plate of spaghetti with marinara sauce, garlic bread, tiramisu.

Back on Morning Glory Court, there never seemed to be enough money. We got used to the fact that we didn't get TV at our house anymore. We owned an old Zenith, but its sole function was to hold a plant, and the piles of books our mother brought home from the library, the bills that came and sat mostly unopened, until their replacements showed up, with even bigger print on the front, in red: *La Chance*.

In those first days after they disconnected the cable, my sister had drawn a picture exactly the size of the TV screen, which she taped on the front where the pictures used to be, featuring a person who looked like a news anchorman with a bubble coming out of his mouth and the words "Traggic News" (The spelling is Patty's.) "The Torricelli Girls cant watch their favorite shows any more! Mean mother says USE IMAGINASHUN." Now even Patty's drawing was barely visible, since the philodendron leaves had wound their way over the front of the set, curling clear to the floor.

The notion of a life without TV had felt harsh, briefly, though in truth, we replaced it with better things. We invented a ritual called Drive-In Movie for watching our shows. When darkness fell—earlier in fall and spring; later in summer—we cruised the backyards of the houses along Morning Glory Court until we found a spot in the backyard of one of them where the TV set was on. This part was never difficult. Every house on Morning Glory Court featured an identical picture window, and at nearly every one the TV set had been placed directly in front of it, facing that hillside. All we had to do was find a set tuned to a channel we liked and hunker down low to look inside and watch.

Mostly we'd position ourselves in the yard of our elderly neighbors, Helen and Tubby. Their viewing habits weren't always to our taste, but they had the biggest TV, which made it easier to make out the faces on the screen.

We'd lay out a blanket—the one we'd used for picnics, in the old days when our parents were together, and we used to spend Sundays with our parents at Golden Gate Park. (Maybe we only did that once, but we remembered it.) If the evening was cool, as evenings tended to be by that hour, we huddle close to each other and wrap the blanket around ourselves. If there were saltines at our house those little packets of oyster crackers people buy to scatter into their soup (though for our mother those sometimes amounted to breakfast), we'd have brought those along to munch on while we watched.

Charlie's Angels was a favorite, but Tubby and Helen seldom watched that one. After Tubby died Helen's personal preference appeared to be *Little House on the Prairie*—a show that got on our nerves. But she also tuned in to *Brady Bunch* reruns. Eight o'clock every night, the show came on, and we'd be there on the hillside out back, waiting.

You had to squint to see the faces on the screen, from the outside, but we knew well enough who all the characters looked like that it didn't matter. There they'd be, the nine happy-looking faces of Mike and Carol Brady and their six children and housekeeper, each one occupying a separate box of the checkerboard displayed across Helen's TV screen. We couldn't hear the sound, of course, but we could get the basic idea and make up the rest.

"I think Cindy's in some kind of trouble," I told Patty during one scene. Not very big trouble. We always knew it would work out. In our version of the show, in which we supplied the dialogue to accompany the silent images flickering on the screen in Helen's living room, Mike could turn to Carol and tell her he was leaving her and running off with the housekeeper, Alice (this was so implausible as to be funny), or one of the kids needed a kidney transplant, and they had to figure out which of the others was a match. (Lots to choose from, luckily.) I made up a story where Marcia got pregnant, and one of Mike's sons was the father. Not a blood relative, so at least their baby wouldn't be retarded.

In some ways watching the show this way, without the virtually needless element of dialogue allowed for a level of entertainment that the real show—the one Helen was watching from the comfort of her blue Barcalounger—failed to deliver. Outside, Patty and I would be practically wetting our pants from laughing so hard, while in her living room, there sat Helen, knitting some sweater and taking a sip from her cup now and then.

What was in that cup anyway?

"I bet she's a wino," I told Patty. "She just pours her whiskey in a coffee cup so people won't suspect."

"She wouldn't need to hide it in her own house," Patty pointed out. "She's not expecting that we're looking in the window at her."

"So what do you think is going on?"

"Maybe the Bradys got a dog," Patty offered. She was always working hard to keep up with her own interesting contributions to our conversations, but sometimes it was hard for her thinking up ideas. One topic that held abiding interest for her, however, was dogs.

"Then what?" I said.

"They named him Skipper."

Other times, the story lines I thought up concerned the people whose living rooms we looked into rather than the shows on their television screens.

"Maybe Helen sneaks into people's houses when they're away at work and steals their jewelry and money," I suggested. "Maybe Tubby figured it out, and she killed him, and now she keeps his body in the basement. That's why she's always burning those vanilla candles. To cover the smell."

"She got fed up with him asking her to cook him dinner all the time, so she did him in," I went on.

“He was always wanting to have sex.”

In fact, Helen’s husband, Tubby, had been suffering from what my sister referred to as old-timer disease for years before he died, and he had mostly just sat in his chair for as long as either of us could remember. But the idea of anybody wanting to have sex with Helen was pretty funny. The idea of sex was funny, period—funny and terrible and thrilling.

AFTER OUR FATHER LEFT, WE liked it better outside of our house than in. Inside, things kept breaking, options narrowed. Every month we seemed to have less of everything but unopened bills and the smell of cigarettes. Inside, we could feel the sadness and disappointment of our mother, and as much as we loved her, we had to get away or we’d be swallowed up in it too. But beyond the four walls of our falling-down house, anything was possible.

We had a game called Ding Dong Ditch that required one of us—always Patty—to ring the doorbell of a house on our street. More often than not the door we’d choose was the one belonging to our next-door neighbor Helen.

Once she rang the bell, Patty would hightail it to a ditch, or some spot behind a hedge, where I’d be waiting already, watching for the great moment when Helen (or Mr. Evans down the street, or the Pollacks, or Mrs. Gunnerson and her retarded daughter, Clara, if it had been their doorbells my sister rang) would open the door and look out at the empty doorstep with a baffled expression. (Not so baffled after a while, no doubt. Helen in particular had to know it was us, we rang her bell so frequently.)

Sometimes we picked up rocks in the neighborhood—possibly decorative white rocks originally laid out as part of the edging for a flower bed—and painted them with poster paints, if we had some, or melted crayon wax if we didn’t. Then we sold them door-to-door, very possibly to the people whose houses they’d come from in the first place. We might get a nickel or just a penny. The idea was to save up the necessary funds to buy a Slurpee. Once we’d raised enough (probably just for one) we walked the mile and a half to the mall to buy it. Taking our time, as usual. There was nothing to rush home for.

But our main diversions lay beyond the neighborhood, to the wilder places beyond it. Morning Glory Court backed up on the outer reaches of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which included a network of hiking trails so vast it stretched from the park’s southernmost borders in San Francisco to a spot almost fifty miles north of that known as Point Reyes. Beyond that lay the entire Pacific Ocean. More than anywhere else—the bedroom we shared, our messy kitchen with its frequently malfunctioning refrigerator and broken oven, or the houses we didn’t go to of the friends we didn’t have—the mountain was where my sister and I spent our days.

For most children in our neighborhood, the vast expanse of open land abutting our houses had been off-limits, for fear of snakes or coyote attacks or, more likely, poison oak. But Patty and I rambled where we chose. Our only limits: how far our legs could carry us.

Sometimes we’d make ourselves a picnic—those saltines again, and peanut butter, or possibly just sugar. We’d take it, along with whatever book I was reading or the notebooks I took everywhere to write stories in (and, for Patty, a stack of *Betty and Veronicas*), and then spend the day out on the mountain. We might make our way to the Mountain Home Inn, at the base of a major trailhead to the mountain, where (at my direction) Patty would race in, bearing no possible resemblance to the kind of person who’d be a registered guest, and fill her pockets with peanuts from the bar, then race out again before anyone could tell her not to.

After, we might just sit there on the mountain, alongside the trail, or on a rock, splitting grass

two or imagining scenarios of things we'd do if one of us got on a game show and won ten thousand dollars, or (though this was my interest, not my sister's) analyzing photographs of haircuts we liked or John Travolta's crotch in teen magazines.

"You'd think someone as famous as him would be embarrassed to have his picture taken in pants that tight," Patty said. "He has enough money to buy a new pair if he's outgrown his old ones."

Some things I explained to her. Some not. At times we'd just lie there together not speaking at all, just breathing in the faint breeze carrying the smell of wild fennel, or we spit seeds to see whose went the farthest. We took our shirts off and lay in the grass, sun on our skin, checking for breast development. Mine negligible. Hers nonexistent.

Other times we hung out in an old rusted-out truck body abandoned on the hillside, with weeds growing up through the middle, whose presence in this spot formed the basis for endless speculation. We liked to believe we were the only ones who knew about the truck body, though once, when we settled into our spot there, we found a couple of old condom wrappers that suggested this was not so.

The truck body sat about a mile up the hillside from our house, tucked away off the trail. A little way beyond lay an outdoor amphitheater where, every summer, a local semiprofessional theater company staged a lavish production of some popular musical (*The Sound of Music* one year, *Brigadoon* the next), accessible only on foot. The cost of tickets for the Mountain Play exceeded anything our mother could have come up with, but during the period of weeks every summer when performances took place, we sometimes hiked up to the amphitheater. We had located a spot close enough to the actual performance site where we could spread out a blanket, listening to the music and observing the actors hanging around during rehearsals—changing costumes, smoking pot, necking, possibly—which was more interesting than the actual show.

Guys and Dolls had been our favorite. Patty and I had never actually gotten to see the show, but over the course of the weeks they'd performed it a few summers back, we'd gotten so familiar with the songs that from our post a little ways off, we sang along with them: "I Got the Horse Right Here," "Luck Be a Lady Tonight," "Take Back Your Mink."

Even better were the times when no rehearsal was going on, and the two of us could occupy the performance space ourselves, putting on our own shows. Shy as she was out in the world, up on the mountain with nobody seeing her but me and the occasional red-tailed hawk or deer, my sister was fearless. One time when she was seven or eight, out there in the amphitheater—against a backdrop meant to be the main street for *The Music Man*—she performed a complete and glorious striptease.

"We're like the kids in *Charlie Brown*," Patty said. Had anybody, reading that strip, ever seen those children's parents getting in the way of their adventures? From how it seemed in the comics, they carried on their lives without the least evidence of adult intervention.

I had read a book once about a boy who got lost in the forest, and some wolves found him and took care of him. (It would be a boy, of course, who got to have an adventure like that.) Still, I loved the story. I saw us running free over the hillside, unencumbered by parental rules or concern for danger. We were a couple of wolf girls—but with fashionable jeans, though really what we wore were just Levi's.

WE RODE OUR BIKES A lot. No destination in mind. But you never knew what you might find. Once riding around, we'd passed a Dumpster with a bunch of records stacked up next to it—someone's entire record collection from the looks of it, and not things like Mitch Miller or Mantovani either, or Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, which was the kind of music our neighbor Helen favored, or Jennifer Pollack's favorite, which we could hear out the Pollacks' window all day long, the

Carpenters.

For some unfathomable reason (though, as a girl who liked to make up stories, I invented a few scenarios concerning what had brought this about) someone out there had chosen to throw out his or her entire album collection. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, of course. Also Black Sabbath and the Moody Blues, Procol Harum and Led Zeppelin, along with folkier types of music too—Cat Stevens and Linda Ronstadt, Leonard Cohen, Arlo Guthrie and Judy Collins, Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Simon and Garfunkel. There was one unlikely component in the mix that Patty in particular loved: an album by Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner called *Burning the Midnight Oil*. It had two side-by-side images on the cover: one of Dolly, sitting by a fireplace, bursting out of an amazing red gown, with a heartbroken look on her face; the other of Porter, in a rhinestone shirt, raking his fingers through his yellow hair, looking equally devastated. My sister loved Led Zeppelin and Cream, but after finding that album, Dolly Parton became Patty's favorite singer of all time.

There were way too many records to fit in our bike baskets. We hid part of the stash, in case someone else came along and took them before we could get back for the next load. It took us three trips getting the whole collection home, and for the rest of that summer, our main activity was playing music on my tinny little monaural record player from when I was little, decorated with old Disney characters.

We memorized the whole of *Alice's Restaurant* and sang "City of New Orleans" and "American Pie" now as we rode our bikes. "*This'll be the day that I die, this'll be the day that I die.*"

We loved how Leonard Cohen sang "Suzanne," and though the words made no sense, we could tell it was a sexy song. We loved Donovan. We actually wore out the Crosby, Stills and Nash album with "Suite for Judy Blue Eyes." We turned the volume up to the loudest it could go for "Whole Lot of Love," but we liked more gentle music too. We knew Jim Croce had died young, tragically, which seemed to make it even sadder listening to the song about trying to call up his old girlfriend but he can't read her telephone number on the matchbook where he wrote it down. If there was one thing we loved about a piece of music, it was the presence of heartbreak, or better yet, tragedy.

"Every time I hear that song, I keep hoping he'll finally figure out the number and get another dime," said Patty. "You know if he did, they'd be together."

One time, after we first brought home those records, I had asked our mother what kind of music she'd loved when she was young, and for a second, a look came over her I'd never seen before. "There was never anyone to equal Elvis," she said. "But I'm over him."

It wasn't only Elvis she'd gotten over, but every man. After our father left, it was as if she'd drawn the curtains, and all she wanted was to be left alone, with as little opportunity for loss or sorrow as possible.

WE WERE WANDERING ON THE mountain one time—a little higher up, farther from home than usual—when we saw an amazing sight: a man and a woman running through the grass, totally naked.

We hung back, not wanting to embarrass them, but the woman waved in our direction. The two of them walked over to us, laughing—still without their clothes on, but acting as if there was nothing unusual about this. We tried hard not to look down, at the man in particular. Though neither of these people seemed even close to shy.

"Beautiful day," the woman said. "Can you believe these wildflowers?"

It was the season for California poppies. They were everywhere, like something you'd see on a postcard, though if this was a postcard, the naked people wouldn't have been part of it.

They held hands and walked off. Patty and I didn't say anything, even to each other. We knew each

other so well that even when something amazing happened, there was no need to speak. We just burst out laughing and held hands, running back down the hillside so fast we almost fell over ourselves.

One time we met a man playing a guitar and singing, with a long-haired woman with a baby on the grass beside him.

“I think that was Jerry Garcia,” I told my sister. I had to tell her who that was, before she got impressed, and even then, not all that much.

We were in the middle of some game one time—Charlie’s Angels, maybe, or just drifting along, as we often did, snapping the heads of timothy grass while reciting “Momma had a baby and her head popped off”—when we came upon The Thing. Patty spotted it first: the weird, hairless body of a small unborn animal—a deer fetus probably, still in the sac, with its spindle legs folded into itself and shut eyes with their translucent lids that were never going to open, ears flat against the skull, a map of blue veins threading just beneath the skin. Somewhere not far from this spot, we imagined a deer mother wandering, bloody and dazed. Within hours, you knew, the vultures or coyotes would have found the body of the doe. Tomorrow it would be gone without a trace.

Sometimes we pretended we were a couple of Indian maidens, the lone survivors of a slaughtered tribe, who roamed the foothills of some vast mountain range by day, trapping our food and hunting for game, returning to our teepee only at night to eat our cornmeal mush and gnaw on a little pemmican. We wrap our threadbare blankets around our rawhide shifts before another sunrise sent us back out on the range. I wanted to light a campfire and throw popcorn kernels in to watch them pop, but Patty wouldn’t go along with it. Fire made my sister nervous. The only thing that did.

There were a couple of horses on the hillside. They must have belonged to someone, but they just grazed there, so we could pretend they were ours. Sometimes we brought them carrots, if we had enough at home. We gave them names—Crystal and Pamela, because those were the names we wished we were called. They seemed to know us after a while, letting us come up alongside them, stroking their backs. With Crystal, especially, you could almost imagine riding her bareback, if there had been a way to get up on her, which there was not.

We played we were blind people, with our eyes shut, turning in circles five times, then walking fifty steps to see where we’d end up. We’d open to a random page of *My Secret Garden* (a book I’d seen in the bedroom at the house of our neighbors, the Pollacks, one night when I was babysitting, full of wild stories women had made up about sex, that I’d snuck home in my book bag) and read it out loud to each other. We pretended we were boys and peed standing up.

For us, back then, it was exciting enough, just speaking certain words out loud. Each of us assembled a pile of pulled-up grass or dandelions in front of ourselves and when it was our turn, we had to think up some forbidden word—tossing some of our grass in the air as we uttered it, though for us the list was frustratingly short because our vocabulary concerning the language of sex was limited: *Intercourse*, naturally. *Butt*. *Nipple*. *Vagina*. *Penis*. And the one that had become, for me that year, the scariest. *Period*.

Twice, in our rambles on the mountain, we came upon a couple making love in the grass—though on neither occasion did they see us. From years of playing detective, we’d gotten good at being stealthy, though later—safely home—we couldn’t stop laughing.

You might have thought some of our experiences would have discouraged further exploration, but it was just the opposite. The mountain opened up for us the picture of a bigger world than what we’d ever could have known in the safe confines of our tiny house and yard, and the fact that this other world had dead animals in it, and naked people, and predators, just made us want to discover more.

The days stretched out, one after another, vast and unbroken as the grassy landscape of that hillside

and the darkening sky overhead. Other kids had to go inside at dinnertime. We'd hear their mothers calling to them, though often they knew, without being called, when it was time to head in. For us there was never anyone calling, and no worry or guilt that our mother had worked all afternoon to make a steaming family dinner now left to cool on the table. Dinner was whatever cold cuts were located in the refrigerator, whenever we got home to eat them.

Going back outside after we ate, we might stay out until ten o'clock, just making up stories prowling behind the houses, looking in windows to see if anything interesting was happening, which never was. When we let ourselves back in, we'd hear our mother's radio in her bedroom and smell her cigarette smoke, call out "Good night, Mom," and head into our own room, where we'd set a stack of records on the record player. We'd lie on our beds and read out loud to each other—from a joke book, possibly, or one of the biographies I got from Scholastic Book Club, or another one of the wild stories from *My Secret Garden* (though these mostly baffled my sister)—and whisper to each other until one of us fell asleep. Usually Patty.

With the window open, you could hear the sound of crickets, or an owl, or a coyote howling, and on rare occasions, a mountain lion. You could look out to the mountain and see stars, and when the light came in the morning, there were the horses grazing—horses mating even—and hawks circling overhead.

It was the place we found out about everything, that mountain. Animal bones and deer scat. Bird droppings, flowers, condoms. The bodies of dead animals, the bodies of men. Rocks and lizards. Sex and death.

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