

PROMISES

They're on their bikes, Peggy riding behind Allison, following the last float of the Fourth of July parade down Main Street: red, white, and blue bunting strung on the eaves of every house, residents sitting on their curbs in patriotic finery. The alcoholic fumes rising from the red plastic cups in everyone's hands make Peggy dizzy. Everyone's looking at her younger sister of course. Allison's red hair is loose and wild; her white eyelet top drops slightly off one shoulder; her blue jean shorts are cut off at the exact curve of her hips. She's the perfect American Girl.

Normally Allison is shy and reserved to the extent that people assume she's stuck up, but today she's holding her head high, smiling and waving, turning her head from side to side and making eye contact, as if she is in the parade too, as if she's the one they all came to see. Some people call her by name even though this isn't their part of town, although Peggy doesn't really have a part of town, not one she feels comfortable in anyway. This is Huntington Beach High School territory, not Ocean View, where she just graduated. No one knows her here at all, thank god, but a lot of people seem to know her sister, due to the boyfriend, Kevin, who surfs the pier and gets written up in the *Daily Pilot* because he plays football and baseball and basketball. Kevin is popular, which means her sister is popular too.

Peggy wishes she'd worn a different pair of shorts that fit better and didn't stick in her crotch. She'd like to take off the plaid flannel shirt that she'd put on this morning over her bathing suit top, but the shirt conceals the roll of fat above her waist. She keeps her head down, trying to steer her bike around the steaming piles of horse shit left by the Budweiser Clydesdales. It's the biggest parade west of the Mississippi, her dad has told them every Fourth of July morning since she can remember. He used to stake out part of the Main Street sidewalk at midnight, writing their name in chalk in block letters as if they were celebrities. Today they couldn't find any place to park their bikes or sit down to watch the parade. They got here late, and they've had to keep moving.

They turn around at Pacific Coast Highway, where the parade ends, and ride inland three miles to their house. When they pull in the driveway there's an outline of rust where their dad's boat was parked. They put their bikes in the garage and go inside. Their mother's in the living room, pulling their father's dress shirts off hangers and throwing them in a

pile on the floor on top of winter jackets and swim trunks, CDs and golf magazines, socks and T-shirts and underwear. The fact that Brenda is dressed in something other than her sweats and has possibly combed her hair might be encouraging, if it wasn't for the manic gleam in her eye. Peggy can smell wine on her mother's breath. It's barely past noon. Even for Brenda, noon is early.

"Your father sold the boat," she says, struggling to open a black plastic garbage bag. "Pick out what you want. The rest of his crap is going in the trash."

"He was here?" Peggy asks.

"With that woman. Selling the boat was probably her idea."

"You can't just throw his stuff away," Allison says.

"What did he say about the check for Long Beach?" Peggy asks.

"You'll have to ask him," Brenda says.

"I don't understand why you want to live in a dorm with a bunch of stuck-up girls anyway," Allison says. "You should move into your own place. That's what Kevin and I are doing as soon as we graduate. One more year and we're out of here."

"If you graduate," Peggy says. "You still have another year of classes to flunk."

"Shut up. Just because you have to be perfect all the time doesn't mean you know anything."

"Both of you be quiet," Brenda says. "I have a headache. Decide what you want to keep. I'm tossing the rest."

The television is on, of course. The television has been on since the night of the party at Linda's condo where they watched the O.J. chase and realized their father wasn't coming home anymore. Brenda spends her day switching back and forth from the news to Court TV, from *Hard Copy* to the Entertainment Channel. The Channel 7 reporter on the screen is interviewing a dealer at a sports-memorabilia show at the Anaheim Convention Center. He holds up the latest O.J. trading card, a photograph of his mug shot. "I know it's sleazy," the dealer says. "But I might as well make money while I can."

"That is disgusting," Peggy says. "Who would buy something like that?"

"Your father used to collect baseball cards," Brenda says. "Do you guys know what happened to them? Maybe I could sell them and make some money."

"They aren't yours to sell." Allison slips a Swiss Army knife into the back pocket of her shorts and stomps up the stairs to take a shower. Peggy finds an old Springsteen T-shirt in the stack of clothes which all smell like her father's Brut cologne. She pulls it over her head, goes in the kitchen and calls him, and leaves another message on Linda's answering machine.

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After Brenda fills twenty trash bags and hauls them out to the street, she pours herself a glass of white wine. "Let's grill some hamburgers. I'm declaring my independence." She laughs too loudly for too long until she notices their worried expressions. "This doesn't have anything to do with either of you. It's about me and him."

"It's about you calling Linda a cunt at that party," Allison says. "You need to apologize."

"That's an ugly word and I should never have said it. And I *have* apologized." Brenda turns up the volume on the television. Geraldo Rivera explains that the grand jury is trying to decide if Simpson should stand trial or not.

"Obviously, he should stand trial," Peggy says. "Can we watch something else?"

"There's nothing else on," Brenda says. "And I think this is fascinating. Do you think O.J. killed them?"

"Who cares?" Allison says. "Do you even know how to light the barbecue?"

"I'm not helpless," Brenda says but of course, no hamburgers are grilled. No independence is declared. Brenda passes out on the couch before dark and Allison slips a twenty out of her purse. Peggy takes the keys for the BMW and they drive through McDonald's and bring home hamburgers and fries.

"Dad still hasn't called me back," Peggy says. She's pretty sure she knows why. Now that he's apparently going to stay with Linda he probably can't afford her dorm room anymore and she'll have to live at home. She should have given this more thought. She wonders if there is a bus

she can take to her classes. Calm down, she tells herself. Dad will come through. He always has.

When it's dark, she and Allison climb up on the roof of the second story and watch the neighbors on the next street over light fireworks. Every house around them is outlined in six-foot high cement blocks and some of the walls have been built up even higher, with wooden trellises and creeping fig. The explosions sizzle and pop and strobe-light the palm trees up and down the street, illuminating the mountain of black trash bags on the curb in front of their house. In between cherry bombs, a terrified fruit rat slinks across the aerial highway of electric and telephone and cable lines.

Allison shivers. "This time next month you'll be living in a dorm room and I'll be stuck here with Mom."

"Move in with Dad and Linda then." Her father would make room for Allison if she asked. She's always been his favorite. Peggy's not jealous; she's just realistic.

"I'm not moving to Torrance," Allison says. "It's too far away."

"You mean from Kevin."

The garage door lifts and Brenda wanders out like a sleepwalker. She grabs a plastic bag in each hand and drags them up the driveway.

"What are you doing?" Peggy calls down from the roof.

Brenda stares up at them as if she can't make out who they are. "This was a mistake," she says.

"We should go help her," Peggy says. Allison nods but they watch for a while before they climb down. None of us knows how to be anything different, Peggy thinks as they stack the plastic bags in the garage. We are all afraid of everything changing.

When they finish, Brenda asks if they've had any dinner.

"We bought you a hamburger," Peggy says. She gets out a plate and puts the burger in the microwave to warm. "You should eat something."

"Don't worry, Mom," Allison says. "Dad's not serious about Linda." She's standing in front of the mirror in the hallway, putting on lipstick. "She's not remotely pretty. He's coming home soon."

"Are you going out?" Brenda asks as a horn beeps in the driveway.

"There's a party," Allison says.

"Stay home tonight," Brenda says. "Spend some time with me and your sister. We could do facials. Watch a movie or something."

The horn taps again, longer and louder.

"I already promised Kevin I'd go."

"At least take a sweater," Brenda says, but Allison is already out the front door and halfway down the driveway.

"I don't like that boy," Brenda says, standing in front of the mirror now, examining her neck from different angles. "But if I tell Allison to stop seeing him, she'll just sneak around behind my back and see him anyway."

"So, you're not going to do anything?"

"I'm sick of you criticizing me."

"I'm on your side, Mom." Peggy takes the burger out of the microwave. "Do you want ketchup?"

"I'm not hungry." Brenda fills her wine glass. "You can have the burger. Although you certainly don't need the calories."

"I can't wait until school starts," Peggy says.

"Why? So you can pig out alone in your dorm room?"

"I'm going to bed," Peggy says. "You're a horrible person," she whispers as she goes up the stairs. "It is no wonder Dad left you."



Even when Peggy covers her head with her pillow she can still hear the electrical hum of her mother's vibrator down the hall. She turns on the light and picks up the Cal State Long Beach catalog of classes. She's planned every semester for the next three years, highlighted the classes she'll take in three different colors. Her future, mapped out like a spreadsheet. She'll earn the units she needs to sit for the CPA exam, graduate

early, go to work for an accounting firm for two or three years and then start her own tax practice.

It was the woman who spoke at Career Day her junior year who'd convinced Peggy she wanted to major in accounting. Megan Barnes, in her conservative suit, shiny blond bob, discrete pearl earrings and sensible pumps, had positively glowed with poise and confidence. "There is always a place in our field for meticulous, detail-minded professionals," Megan had said, looking right at Peggy. "Everyone says accountants are boring, but what's wrong with being boring?"

All the other kids had laughed, except Peggy. "What's wrong with being cautious and conservative?" Megan had gone on, "and keeping track of where the money is? What's wrong with stability and with being involved in all major business decisions of a corporation? What's wrong with making money?"

"Nothing," Peggy had said out loud, ignoring the other kids' smirks. She'd decided right then she wanted to be Megan.

Her mother thinks CPAs are the most unexciting people on the planet. Her father says he's glad someone in the family has a head for finance.

Her counselor at Ocean View had helped her make a list of business schools. Peggy knew private schools were out of the question. "There are loans," the counselor had said, but Peggy didn't like the idea of her father taking on more debt. "Berkeley's a great school," the counselor had added. "Your grades are good enough and your SAT scores are decent." She'd hated herself for being so timid, but Berkeley was a long way from home. She'd never even been on a plane before. "UCLA, then," the counselor had said, "or UCI. You could go home on the weekends." By then she'd done more research. A state school would cost less, in the long run. Fullerton or Long Beach were closer to home.

"At least live on campus," the counselor had argued, and when he'd raved about the experiences she would have, making life-long friends and connections that would serve her career, Peggy had agreed on Cal State Long Beach.

The closer it gets to September though, the more she finds to worry about. She's never made friends easily. She won't be able to study living with strange people. She'll end up spending all her time in the library like some hermit instead of her expensive dorm room. It seems like a big waste of money and she hates wasting money.

Her mother makes a low moaning noise down the hall. Peggy throws the catalog across her bedroom and puts the pillow back over her head. She's pretty sure Megan Barnes never worried about any of this.

"What did you guys do for the Fourth, Peg-a-Leg?" her father asks when he calls the next day.

Him using her nickname is a good sign. She's his Peg-a-Leg and Allison's the Alley Cat and he loves them more than anything. "We had hamburgers and saw fireworks." She doesn't mention the fireworks were the neighbors' illegal ones or the hamburgers were from McDonald's, because it somehow seems disloyal to her mother. Instead, she asks if he's sent the check to Long Beach.

He doesn't answer right away. She hears a screen door slide open and shut. He's probably outside on Linda's patio, lighting a cigarette. Taking a sip from his beer. Stalling for time. Her heart moves up into her throat.

"I was thinking maybe you could get a job," he says finally. "Help pay for some of this. You're going to need a car."

"Not if I live in the dorm." He's quiet again and she has a sick taste in her mouth. "You promised me, Dad."

"I'm sorry, honey. There are a lot of expenses I didn't see coming. And you don't seem excited about the dorm anyway."

"We already bought sheets and towels and everything." Her voice cracks.

"I can get you on at the post office. You could still take classes at Long Beach."

"You always said you didn't want us working there."

"Or maybe you could think about community college." He's talking faster now, and she wonders if this was his plan the whole time. "Community colleges are a lot more flexible. Golden West for example. You could get your basic units out of the way without spending much money. We're going to have to sell the house. Your mother will need help with the rent."

"Mom needs to get a job. None of this is my fault."

"I know," he says. "Just think about it, will you? Pick up a schedule from Golden West and see what classes you could get into. Will you do that for me?"

"I guess." It's irrational, this feeling of losing something important when she really didn't want to live in the dorm anyway.

"I knew you'd be reasonable. Come by this weekend. I'll have some money for you by then."

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"What if I dent it or something?" Peggy asks when her mother hands her the keys to the BMW Saturday morning. "Maybe you should take me."

"You're a good driver. You'll be fine. I just can't stomach seeing your father right now. He had no business telling you he's selling the house. I'm not moving anywhere."

He had no business promising her she could live in the dorm either, but there's no point in arguing anymore. She'll never know who her roommate might have been. She doesn't have to decide what to wear to the welcome night barbecue. She'll never use those extra-long twin sheets and matching comforter that her mother spent too much on and can't take back because she's washed them three times and written her name on the tags.

The waste of it all makes her angrier than anything, how her family is always so careless with money. It's not only the new sheets and towels; it's the extravagant cars her parents lease every two years. The expensive clothes in her mother's closet that she wears once and puts away. Her father's ever-expanding collection of golf hats and rock concert T-shirts. The little things too: lights left on in every room, food spoiling in the refrigerator, unfinished cans of soda losing their carbonation. The packs of cigarettes her father buys that cost more every year. It's impossible to believe she's related to these people. They don't even like the same kind of pizza. They order pepperoni, thick-crust while she prefers vegetarian thin. She hates the situation comedies they love. They can recite the weeknight TV schedule without consulting the *TV Guide*, which they subscribe to and never even look at.

If her mother's willing to risk her wrecking the BMW, she shouldn't care either, but she's still nervous as she heads north on the San Diego Freeway, expecting every mile of the way to slam into something or something to slam into her. When she finally gets to Torrance it takes her

a while to figure out which condo is Linda's since the buildings all look the same and there's no one outside to ask. It's hot and smoggy and the air smells like petroleum when she walks up the sidewalk.

Her father opens the door and holds out his arms. He's so glad to see her that she has to hug him back, even though she'd already decided she wasn't going to. "I appreciate how you've been so mature about all of this," he says.

"I have to pee."

His robe is hanging on a hook behind the door in the bathroom. The toilet needs scrubbing and the sink is speckled with beard hair. Linda's not much of a housekeeper. He must hate living here. He's used to freshly mopped floors, clean towels, polished surfaces. She opens the medicine cabinet. His cologne and razor and deodorant are lined up next to his toothbrush, as if they belong there. She slams the door shut and stares at herself in the mirror, streaked with what is probably his toothpaste. She looks awful. She shakes out a couple of tablets from a large bottle of generic ibuprofen and washes them down with a handful of water from the tap.

"Pretty exciting," he says, looking up from the sports page when she goes back to the kitchen, "what they're saying here about Kevin." He's wearing his usual day-off clothes, cargo shorts and a faded Tom Petty T-shirt, but something is different about his face. His hair is longer and there are a few more wrinkles around his eyes, but that's not it. He looks calm, she realizes, happy even, relaxed. Like he used to look when they went camping at the river.

"Kevin might have a real career in football."

"I don't like him."

He laughs. "How can you not like Kevin?"

"Allison just does whatever he says."

"Your sister could do all right with someone like Kevin. She's never been college material like you are."

And look at me, Golden West bound, she wants to say, but there's no point. She's already agreed to enroll there, to work at the post office, to help her mother with the rent, to save for a car. He got her a position on the two-thirty to eleven p.m. shift, with Tuesdays and Wednesdays

off. They'll keep her at least through Christmas, longer if she passes probation.

"Here you go." He holds up a credit card. "For your classes and books."

"That has Linda's name on it."

"I cut up all my cards. Linda wants to help. Golden West isn't going to be that bad. And your mother says you can use her car until you can afford one of your own."

He's right, of course. Golden West has the classes she needs. The units will transfer. Her plans are still on track.

"I wish you were happier about this, Peggy. I pulled strings to get you the job. There's a waiting list of people who want to work there. The pay's better than anything else you're going to find."

She shouldn't hate him as much as she does right now but it's too much, to be expected to act happy too. She picks up the keys to the BMW.

"Maybe this is for the best," he says. "Linda paid for her education herself. She got a scholarship and she took out a loan."

"This isn't really Linda's business." She should have applied for a scholarship or taken out a loan and gone somewhere far away instead of being timid and practical and accommodating. He holds out the credit card. She finally takes it and puts it in her purse. "I'll pay her back."

The heat slams into her when she opens the front door and heads down the sidewalk.

"Hey, Peggy? It's probably better not to mention Linda's credit card to your mother."

"Okay." She doesn't turn around.

"How about if I take you and Allison out for dinner sometime soon?"

She doesn't answer.

"I'll call you guys, okay?"

A yellow cat slinks out from under the shade of the back tire of the BMW and gives her a bitter look. She gets in and cranks up the air-conditioning until her hands are almost too cold to hold the steering wheel. When they'd camped at the Colorado River, she'd dug deep into the ice in the

cooler, retrieving endless cans of Budweiser. Her father had been tall and strong with an easy laugh. He'd opened his beer and watched her mother dry her hair by the water. She'd caught all the light in her white bikini, blond and suntanned. "Isn't she gorgeous?" he'd asked. "You'll look just like her when you grow up."

Another promise he couldn't keep.

He's watching her from the sidewalk in front of Linda's condo, waving goodbye. His hair has more grey now than red, and he's growing a watermelon-belly over those stupid cargo shorts. He looks his age.

She hates herself for raising her hand when she passes the condo, smiling at him as he grins back. She's already starting to forgive him. It's what she always does.