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Anthropology of an American Girl

Written by Hilary Thayer Hamann

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"Remember what it feels like to be seventeen? Eveline Auerbach sounds like somebody many of us knew —or were. . . . A realistic, resonant, and universal story."
—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

HILARY THAYER HAMANN

ANTHROPOLOGY OF AN AMERICAN GIRL

RANDOM HOUSE READER'S CIRCLE

A NOVEL

"As vast and ambitious as the country itself."
—Carolyn See, *The Washington Post*

ANTHROPOLOGY OF AN AMERICAN GIRL

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For Vee, Emmanuelle and Rainier.

And for Maman

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

T. S. ELIOT

OPAL

Autumn 1979

High school is closer to the core of the American experience than anything else I can think of.

KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

1

Kate turned to check the darkening clouds and the white arc of her throat looked long like the neck of a preening swan. We pedaled past the mansions on Lily Pond Lane and the sky set down, resting its gravid belly against the earth.

'Hurry,' I heard her call through the clack of spokes. 'Rain's coming.'

She rode faster, and I did also, though I liked the rain and I felt grateful for the changes it wrought. Nothing is worse than the mixture of boredom and anticipation, the way the two twist together, breeding malcontentedly. I opened my mouth to the mist, trapping some of the raindrops that were just forming, and I could feel the membranes pop as I passed, which was sad, like breaking a spider's web. Sometimes you can't help but destroy the intricate things in life.

At Georgica Beach we sat on the concrete step of the empty lifeguard building. The bicycles lay collapsed at our ankles, rear wheels lightly spinning. Kate lit a joint and passed it to me. I drew from it slowly. It burned my throat, searing and disinfecting it, making me think of animal skins tanned to make teepees. Indians used to get high, and when they did, they felt high just the same as me.

'Still *do* get high,' I corrected myself. Indians aren't extinct.

'What did you say?' Kate asked.

'Nothing,' I said. 'Just thinking of Indians.'

Her left foot and my right foot were touching. They were the same size and we shared shoes. I leaned forward and played with the plastic-coated tip of her sneaker lace, poking it into the rivet holes of my

Tretorns as the rain began to descend halfheartedly before us. In my knapsack I found some paper and a piece of broken charcoal, and I began to sketch Kate. The atmosphere conformed to her bones the way a pillow meets a sleeping head. I tried to recall the story of the cloth of St Veronica – something about Christ leaving his portrait in blood or sweat on a woman's handkerchief. I imagined the impression of Kate's face remaining in the air after she moved away.

'Know what I mean?' she was asking, as she freed a frail charm from her turtleneck, a *C* for Catherine, lavishly scripted.

'Yes, I do,' I said, though I wasn't really sure. I sensed I *probably* knew what she meant. Sometimes our thoughts would intertwine, and in my mind I could see them, little threads of topaz paving a tiny Persian byway.

My hand sawed across the paper I was sketching on, moving mechanically, because that's the way to move hands when you're high and sitting in an autumn rain. Autumn rains are different from summer ones. When I was seven, there were lots of summer rains. Or maybe seven is just the age when you become conscious of rain. That's when I learned that when it rains in one place, it doesn't rain all over the world. My dad and I were driving through a shower, and we reached a line where the water ended. Sun rays windmilled down, and our faces and arms turned gilded pink, the color of flamingos – or was it flamencos?

'Flamingos,' Kate corrected. '*Flamenco* is a type of dance.'

I remember spinning around in the front seat of the car to see water continuing to fall behind us on the highway. That was the same year I learned that everyone gets eyeglasses eventually and that there's no beginning to traffic. That last thing bothered me a lot. Whenever I got into a car, I used to think, *Today might be the day we reach the front.*

The rain let up. I stood and gave Kate my hand. 'Let's go to the water.'

She stood too, wiping the sand off the back of her pants, half-turning to check herself, stretching one leg out at a five o'clock angle, the way girls do. We walked our bikes to the crest of the asphalt lot and leaned them against the split rail fence.

The sea was bloated from the tide. It was dark and thick on top: you could tell that underneath there was churning. A hurricane was forming off the coast of Cuba, and Cuba isn't far from where we lived on the South Shore of Long Island, not in terms of weather. Surfers in black rubber sat slope-backed on boards near the jetty, waiting for waves, steady as insects feeding off a deeply breathing beast, lifting and dropping with each wheeze of their massive host. I stripped down to my underwear and T-shirt and left my clothes in a pile. Kate did the same.

The sand closest to the shore was inscribed with drop marks from the rain, and there were springy bits of seaweed the color of iodine gyrating in the chalky foam. I pushed through until I couldn't see my calves anymore. The water was purplish and rough, and it knocked against me, setting me off balance. It felt good to succumb – sometimes you get tired, always having to be strong in yourself.

Dad said that in Normandy during World War II soldiers had to climb from ships into the sea and then onto shore. They had waded through the ocean with packs on their backs and guns in their arms. He hadn't fought in Normandy; he just knew about it because he knows lots of things and he's always reading. He said the men had to get on the beach and kill or be killed. I wondered what those soldiers had eaten for breakfast – scrambled eggs, maybe – all the boys lining two sides of a galley's gangling table, hanging their heads and taking dismal forkfuls while thinking about what was awaiting them on the shore. Maybe they were thinking of getting one last thing from their lockers, where they kept pictures of their families or of their girls, or maybe just Betty Grable pinups.

It's one thing to *say* you're willing to die for your country, but it's another thing to have to do so when the moment actually presents itself. I could not have imagined Jack or Denny or anyone from my class dying to defend America, though everyone said that war was coming again, and also the draft, just like with Vietnam. *The Russians are crazy*, people said. *This time it's going to be nuclear. This time we're all going to go in one atomic blush.*

Kate came alongside me. 'God, this water is black.'

My mother refuses to go into the ocean. She respects it, she says, which is basically the same as saying she's afraid. I go in *because* it scares me, because certain fears are natural and it's good to distract yourself from unnatural, more terrifying kinds. For example, the ocean can kill you just like a bomb can kill you, but at least the ocean is not awful like bombs or surreal like overgrown greenhouses, or alarming like the barking sounds that flushing toilets make.

In elementary school we used to have emergency civil defense drills. The lights would go out, and we would rise in synchronized silence, obeying hushed orders and furtive hand signals, rustling like herds of terrified mice – if in fact it can be said that mice manifest in herds rather than as random runners. No one ever told us which particular emergency we were drilling to avoid. Probably Russians then too. The thought of Russians attacking eastern Long Island seemed unlikely, though it is true that East Hampton has beaches like the ones in Normandy. Beaches are a threshold.

I asked Kate if she remembered yellow alerts.

She said she did. 'And red ones.'

'Didn't we have to kneel under our desks for one kind, like this?' I put my head to my chest and locked my fingers around my neck.

'And with the other type,' Kate said, 'we had to do the same thing, only in the hall.'

'Right,' I said with a shiver. 'That is so fucked up.'

She cupped her mouth and imitated an implausibly tranquil public address warning. It was like a European airport voice, like the one we heard at Charles de Gaulle airport when we went to France with the French Club – sterile and cybernetic, glassy and opaque, like rocks at the bottom of a fishbowl. Kate was good with voices.

'This is a yellow alert. This is a yellow alert. Remain calm and follow the instructions of your teacher.'

'Which is which?' I asked. 'Like, what do the colors mean?'

'Bombs, probably,' she said. 'Different styles.'

'But a bomb is a bomb. We wouldn't have been any safer in the hallway than in the classrooms. Why not just stay at our desks?'

There was a rush of water. Kate lost her footing.

I continued to speculate. 'They must have moved us out because the classrooms had something the halls didn't have – *windows*. And the only reason they would have wanted us away from windows was if something was outside, like, coming in.'

Kate said, '*Christ*, Evie!'

'A land attack. Gunfire. Grenades. *Red* alert. Death by blood. Yellow meant gas. Death by bombs. *Nukes*.' Jack was always talking about the *massive radiation release* that was coming.

The rain had passed; all that remained up above was a series of garnet streaks. The sea slapped ominously, confessing its strategic impartiality. The sea is an international sea, and the sky a universal sky. Often we forget that. Often we think that what is verging upon us is ours alone. We forget that there are other sides entirely.

Kate and I waded quickly back to shore. As soon as we could, we broke free of the backward pull of the waves and started running. We dressed, yanking our Levi's up over our wet legs, one side, then the other. Sand got in, sticking awfully.

'Shit,' she said as we scaled the dune to the lot. 'I'm never getting high with you again.'

At Mill Hill Lane Kate cut left across Main Street, and I followed. The lane was steep and tree-lined. As we rounded the bend making a right onto Meadow Way, Kate's foot lifted from the pedal, and her leg swung straight back over the seat, parallel to the ground, making me think of fancy skaters. She hopped off in front of a brown ranch house – her house – lying low, like a softly sleeping thing beneath a custodial cover of tree branches. A small sign marked the rim of the lawn – FOR SALE. LAMB AGENCY. Kate bent to collect fallen leaves and twigs from around the crooked slate walkway, which seemed like a lonely project. Once when we were little, maybe about nine, Kate swore she had the distances between the slate pieces of the walkway memorized. At the time I called her a liar, not because she was one but because that's the sort of thing to say when you're nine. But Kate had skipped to the first tile, closed her eyes, and continued along the twisting, broken path, never missing a step, never touching grass.

'Hey, Kate,' I called. She turned to me, her face tilting into the half-light. 'Remember walking on the slate with our eyes closed?'

'Of course,' she said.

'Can you still do it?'

'Sure.' She set down the sticks she'd collected and she did it like it was nothing. When she was done, she said, 'You try.'

I couldn't exactly say no, since it had been my idea in the first place. My bike made a thumping sound when I dropped it. I went to the beginning and closed my eyes, trying to imagine the path I'd taken hundreds of times before. My neck felt vulnerable with my eyes closed, as though some famished thing might come and bite it.

'No grass,' I heard her say. I raised my right leg, and while considering where to step, my foot fell, landing inches ahead, slightly to one side. 'Whoa,' she said. 'You just made it.'

I only had to decide where my foot was going to go before I lifted it. I only had to imagine the next step. I stepped again, and life moved to greet me. I felt particulate, like pieces matching pieces. I heard the benign crinkle of the trees as the wind swept into the branches, and the music of birds popping to life like individual instruments singled out from an orchestra. I'd gone over ten pieces of slate; four more remained. I half-swung my right leg to the right, then lowered it. My heel left a pulpy impression.

'Grass!' Kate shouted. 'I win!'

I opened my eyes to a flare of light. All that endured of the dark was a nostalgic radiance, like when you shut off a television and the shadow of the picture lingers like a minuscule ghost on the screen.

Kate and I sat on the front step of her parents' house, watching the orphan moon elude the embrace of the trees. She was silent. I wondered if she too was waiting for the yellow porch light to click on, for the screen door to creak open from inside, for her mother to say, *On rentre, mes cheries*. Come back in, my loves.

The last time the door opened on us, Maman didn't smile. That was May. Maman's birthday is in May, *was* in May – I'm not sure how it goes with birthdays, whether they die when you do. Her arm

unbended with difficulty to prop the door; when it snapped back on her, I caught it.

'*Bon soir,* Eveline,' she murmured.

When Kate's mother said my name, she did not say *Ev-a-line*, the way most people did, but *E-vleen*, the first part coming from her mouth, the last part escaping from the cage of her throat. We embraced. Her shoulders floated waifishly within the vigorous circle of my arms. I wondered*, When did she get so small?* Kate and I followed her from room to room, and the floorboards grunted. In the dining room, her fingers skimmed the keys of her husband's piano. He'd died one year before; immediately after burying him, Maman had become terminally ill. Sometimes you hear of people who are so much in love that they die together.

'I did have this piano tuned yesterday, Catherine,' Maman said in hobbled English, 'in case you do ever wish to play again.' *Ca-trine*.

I adjusted the armchair Kate and I had moved to the kitchen weeks before, when the side effects of the chemotherapy had started to become severe. We lowered Maman down by the armpits, the way you bring a toddler to a stand, only in reverse. I tucked the chair under the table, inching her closer until she sighed, *'Ah bien*.'

Kate prepared dinner, and the room came to life with daunting pops and sizzles. It's shocking sometimes, the grief-stricken noises of food. I drew a chair alongside Maman's. I hoped it was a somewhat happy birthday with us there, and all her treasures from France – linen and glass and those plates with painted peasants. I wondered what treasures I would keep when I got older. No one in East Hampton really made anything, at least not in the specialty manufacturing sense. I'd probably have to settle for an old map of the bay or a jar of sand. Kate and I once bought these clamshell dolls in Sag Harbor, an undersea barbershop quartet, but they were not exactly keepsakes. They had clipped feathers for eyebrows and mussel-shell shoes and crab-claw hands. They were funny for about a week, then they got really depressing.

On a slender strip of wall near the window to Maman's left was a

tiny oil painting, my first. She kept it in an elaborately carved frame without glass, with just a hole on top for a nail. The painting looked nice that way. I liked to prop things I drew or painted against the posts in the barn behind my mother's house, or else thumbtack them to the shelves around her desk. My dad would always stick things I gave him into the sun visor of his car or into some book he happened to be reading. 'Pretty good,' he'd say, 'but off-center.' According to him, everything I did was *pretty good but off-center*. Unless it was a photograph, in which case, he'd say, 'Pretty good, but you cropped the head. *And* it's off-center.'

The painting I'd given to Kate's mother was an oil of a white rose, overblown and beginning to withdraw. Maman had the same quality of a flower receding. There was something eloquent about her admission of resign, something august about the inalterability of her position. I squinted to make her young again. If she could no longer be called beautiful, she possessed something better – a knowledge of beauty, its inflated value, its inevitable loss.

Maman spoke that day of the sea. In her velvety drone, she recalled sailing by ship to America. 'The sea is generous,' she said. 'She is there when you need her. Like a mother.' Her dying voice was a black sonata; it defied time. Though it was May, I could think only of the coming autumn, of a world without her in it. *'Ecoutez,'* she said. *'La mer, et la mère. Eh?'*

I heard Kate say something. I looked across the kitchen, but she was not there, the kitchen was not there, not the food, not Maman. Everything had disappeared. The sweet castle of my hallucination had gone down, vanished. We were still sitting on the porch, Kate's knee knocking against mine. Our eyes resisted communion; they scanned the new jet sky, contemplating the black, wondering whether heavens, whether angels.

2

'Big John's coming over tonight,' my mother said. She was next to me, wiping the kitchen counter, her thin arms making sweeping circles on the blade- and burn-scarred Formica. 'He's Powell's friend from the Merchant Marines. Did I mention that he's an expert birder?'

I was eating my usual dinner of spinach out of a can, and, as usual, green juice dripped onto my shirt. My mother rubbed the spots with her sponge. 'Hold still,' she said, somewhat exasperated. Softly she added, 'Be sure to ask John about his duck decoys.'

Later that night, Big John's voice cut past the opened windows and into the yard. I was outside, moving my things from the barn, where I'd stayed for the summer, back to the front house for the school year, and every time he let loose with another bird whistle I could almost see the breeze from his breath in the leaves. He kept going on about *ducks* this and *ducks* that – *coots, broadbills, ringnecks, widgeons*.

I ventured into the kitchen at eleven o'clock. Mom perked up when she saw me. 'Hi!'

Big John waved. He was a beefy, black-bearded man. Everything he did was loud. He talked loud, he breathed loud, he even sat loud. His chair creaked and moaned as gross spurts of wind shot out of his nose before getting recalled through his teeth. People who amplify like that are scary, especially when they do so at the beach or on a public phone or in your kitchen late at night.

'Big John's telling me about—' My mother faltered elegantly. She turned back to him. 'What is it that you're telling me about?'

'ATVs,' he said with a giant sniff.

'All-terrain vehicles,' she said experimentally. 'Fascinating.' She patted the seat next to hers. 'Come. Join us.'

I went to the sink for a glass of water. 'No, thanks. School starts tomorrow.' My back was turned; I could hear a match burst to life.

'Oh,' she said, drawing in on her cigarette. 'Right. And when is Jack back from Oregon?'

'What's he doing up in Oregon?' Big John interrupted.

'Eveline's boyfriend does Outward Bound,' Mom said. 'River rafting. Mountain climbing.'

'I'm not sure when he'll be back,' I said. 'I haven't heard from him.'

She tilted her head and squinted, smoking, lost in thought.

Big John cleared his throat, and my mother and I startled. 'My brother runs a Harley dealership in Hauppauge,' he shouted to no one in particular. 'He's got ATVs, dirt bikes, mopeds, bicycles, skateboards – the whole gamut, basically.'

'Let's just say John's brother is *into wheels,*' Mom joked lightly.

'Basically.'

'Well,' I said. 'Kate told me she gets up at six. I'm going to turn off the stereo.'

'Six?' Mom said. 'We're a ten-minute walk from the school!'

'I guess she has to do stuff.'

'What kind of stuff?'

'I don't know – hair, ironing.'

'Ironing? I don't know if we even have an iron.'

'I think she brought her own,' I said.

My mother seemed blue. Maybe she was upset about Kate's not having a home anymore except for our ironless one. Maybe she was worried about where Jack had disappeared to and what trouble he might be in. Most likely she was dreading the prospect of hearing Big John's voice without the muffling accompaniment of the stereo or without me as a distraction. I took the electric fan from the top of the refrigerator.

'Hot?' John inquired.

'No, not at all,' I said. 'It'll just cut down on noise.'

'Okay, then, night,' he offered, waving again. His hand knocked the edge of the glass table. There was a nasty *crack.*

Mom lurched across, examining the table. 'Is it broken?'

'Nah.' He looked at the glow-blue school ring throttling his pinky finger. 'It's fine.'

'I meant the table,' she said.

He inspected it. 'Oh, *that.* Just a small scratch.'

*

As I set the fan on my desk and plugged it in, the 11.07 passed, filling the bedroom with light. The Long Island Rail Road ran fifty feet from the side of my mother's house. The windows rattled and the furnishings skidded and the pictures cocked sideways when trains passed, but it was a quaint intrusion, a topic of conversation, more amusing than threatening. The LIRR travels between the farmland of the East End of Long Island through the sprawling cemeteries and housing projects of Queens, into the center of Manhattan. In the middle of the ride there are identical houses with identical yards. Each lawn indicates nature. Each box indicates home.

'It's not dying that scares me,' Jack would say whenever we went to my father's apartment in the city. 'It's Levittown.' He planned to live in the mountains with guns. 'The Rockies probably. You coming?'

'Yes,' I would lie. I could never live on the toothy tip of anything, but it wasn't good to make Jack sad. When Jack felt sad, he hung his head and you couldn't lift it if you tried. I preferred the apocalyptic terrain of cities – the melting asphalt, the artificial illumination. Unlike Jack, I looked forward to the future. At least when things are as bad as they can get, they can't get worse. The future would be untouchable, hypervisual, and intuitive, a place where logic and progress have been played out to such absurd extremes that survival no longer requires the application of either.

'Notice how all it takes is the Force to blow up the entire Death Star?' I would tell Jack. 'The future won't be jet packs and space stations; it'll be aboriginal. The language of the physical will atrophy. Our minds will coil inward, and our eyes will grow large to see beyond the seeable. No one dies in the future. We'll all preserve ourselves to be reconstituted.'

'That's the whole fucking problem,' Jack would say. 'I don't *want* to live forever. I'm having trouble with the idea of Tuesday.'

I held my face close to the air from the fan and said 'Ahhh,' with my voice going choppy. In the mirror on the desktop, I could see my hair blowing up. It wasn't a lot of hair, but it felt like a lot in the wind. I was squinting, so my eyes looked like cat eyes.

'They're the color of absinthe,' my father likes to say, which is an odd compliment, since the definition of absinthe is *a green drink of bitter wormwood oil* – whatever that is.

My eyes are pointed at the ends like cartoon flames or the acuminate tips of certain leaves. Beneath the green are smoldering circles. They mark the place my skin is thinnest, and so my soul the closest. Mom's boyfriend, Powell, says that the soul is contained in the body. He says if instruments are made from your bones when you die, the music tells your story. Powell got his bachelor's in anthropology from Stanford and his master's in engineering from Columbia, then he joined the navy before moving on to oil rigs. He goes away for months at a time to places like Alaska or the Gulf, where he reads meters and plays harmonica. Powell can play 'This Land Is Your Land' on harmonica better than anyone.

One disorienting fact about staring into a mirror is that the person you see is the opposite of what you truly look like. I tried to explain it once to Kate. She was playing with her hair, looking in a mirror, changing the part from left to right.

She said, 'It looks better on the left.'

'Actually,' I said, 'though your hair is parted on the left of your true head, it's parted on the *right* of your mirror head. What you mean is, *It looks better on the right*.'

'That's *not* what I mean.' She probed her scalp. 'It's on the left of my head *here*,' she said, holding the spot, 'and it doesn't switch places *there*.' Kate tapped the mirror.

'You have to *inhabit* the image,' I explained. 'If you inhabit the image, the part is on the right. But, if we were in the world, looking at the girl in the mirror—'

'We *are* in the world,' she interrupted flatly, and by her voice, I knew she was done. Kate could be reluctant to explore topics that require a detachment from vanity.

'Anyway,' I sighed. 'What you see is the opposite of what everyone else sees.'

Kate brushed steadily. 'No, Evie. What *you* see is the opposite of what everyone else sees.'