

Magpies

April sat in the passenger seat and stabbed at the chunky radio buttons, switching between two top forty stations, both blaring commercials, until she heard the first few bars of Stevie Wonder's *Signed, Sealed, Delivered*.

June approved the song with a tip of her chin.

For April to be sitting in the front seat of the family's new Delta 88, with her older sister June, a newly minted driver, at the wheel was a real promotion. Usually she was relegated to sit alone in the back, unable to hear anything, while her mother and June nodded and chatted in pantomime. She'd wedge her head between them and say "What? What'd you say?" But they never repeated themselves, they just took turns scolding her, "April, sit back!"

But on this day, April squirmed happily in the passenger seat, the whole wide world opening in front of her.

"*Here I am baby. Signed, sealed, delivered—I'm yours!*" April shouted out the window and June laughed.

April bent her arm and rested it on the door and let her hand rise and dip in the rushing air. She had to stretch her arm up to reach the window ledge, which caused a cool breeze to blow up her t-shirt sleeve and freeze her armpit.

Regardless, she persisted in her pose and hoped someone from school would see her, singing, hanging her arm out the window, riding shotgun with her cool, older sister at the wheel. She was going to be 12 in less than a week and lately how people saw her, what people thought of her mattered more than any stupid, old, icy armpit.

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April had big ideas about being 12. Twelve was solidly in the double digits, not like 10, which was practically the same as 9, or 11, which was double digits, but just barely. Twelve was respectable, almost 13, a teenager for goodness sakes.

April also had a secret-super-special-calculation that would go into effect the day she turned twelve. It was secret because she knew in her heart it was childish; and it was 'super special' because those words gave it the proper weight, at least to her when she had devised the formula in the years after her father died.

On the morning of April's sixth birthday they were all rushing around getting ready for the party. Her mother was icing the cake, her father was giving the lawn a quick cut and April and June were squabbling over the paper party hats. June waved a gold, crown-shaped hat above her head while April leapt at the gleaming ring and shrieked: "It's *my* birthday!"

"Quiet, you magpies!" their mother shouted. "I can't hear myself think."

And that's when they heard the sound of the lawnmower engine change from a muffled, grass-clogged racket to an open throated roar as it ran, unmanned, across the driveway and then hit a tree. When her mother pulled back the curtains, April saw him lying in the fresh-cut grass, flat out like a starfish on a bright green sea.

The ambulance arrived and, just seconds later, so did the pony ride man. That's what April remembered from that day— the pony ride man and his skinny boy getting out of their truck to gape at the paramedics kneeling by a prone figure. She remembered that, and the pony's big, lustrous, black eye through the wire mesh in the trailer. She wondered what color the pony was and then felt bad for wondering such a thing, the color of a pony, at such a time. But it wasn't like she expected the party would go on, that the pony would be backed out of the trailer, fitted with a saddle and that the yard

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would fill with kids all clamoring for their turn to ride the pony. She just wanted to know; was the pony white or brown or black, was it spotted or all one color?

They put her father in the ambulance and one of the neighborhood men yelled at the pony ride man to back his “Goddamn truck” down the driveway; they argued and the neighbor shoved some money at the man. The pony truck and trailer inched down the drive, followed closely by the ambulance and then her mother in the family car. April and June stood on the front yard staring at the empty drive for a long while. Later, June fended off the neighbor ladies who came by and tried to push in and make them supper. That night they ate April’s birthday cake for dinner, which made them both feel a little sick. In the morning, their mother, dazed and exhausted, was sitting in the kitchen, smoking, alone.

April was 6, *exactly* 6, the day her father died.

And next week, on her 12th birthday, it would be six years to the very day, which meant she had lived six years *with* a father, and soon six years *without* a father. Each year without him had gotten a little bit better, a little bit less heavy with sadness. So, according to her secret-super-special-calculation, this year on her birthday the balance would tip and “thunk,” like a seesaw plank hitting the hard packed earth, it would be over. She could climb off, get on with her life, be happy again.

“Okay, here’s the list,” June said, digging a folded piece of white lined paper from her back pocket.

“Sleeping bag,” April read. “Mess kit, flashlight, canteen, poncho, swim suit—

“I got a swim suit,” June said. “See the checkmark? Just read the ones without checks.”

“Mosquito repellent, water shoes—“

“I got my old tennis shoes, put a check by that,” June said.

April carefully spread the paper on her leg and put a faint check in pencil next to ‘water shoes.’

“Well, it looks like it’s the Army Surplus store for us,” June said. “Don’t you think?”

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“I do,” April said, as though the Army Surplus store wasn’t their destination all along, as though the two of them had just spontaneously discussed and agreed on a course of action. June had lately been in a rare mood of treating April as an equal, a confidante, as someone she actually liked rather than an irritant, someone to ‘tsk’ at and roll her eyes about.

The Army Surplus store was only three miles away, just down the hill, in Sharpsburg. Sharpsburg was a small river town that had been stepped over, like a puddle, by the newly affluent suburbanites, who had built their colonial houses on ¼ acre lots, added flagstone patios and barbeques, and then dubbed their new neighborhood Buckingham. Each weekday they commuted from Buckingham on an elevated bypass, high above Sharpsburg, to their jobs in downtown Pittsburgh. As suburban girls, April and June rarely went into Sharpsburg, mostly because there wasn’t much there, but also because there was a subtle friction between citizens of Sharpsburg and the denizens of Buckingham. The townspeople thought that ‘those suburban people’ thought that they were better than everybody else. And they were right, they did.

June with her new license had been free to drive on Buckingham’s curvy two lanes roads, but this was her first trip out of the leafy confines of the suburbs and into the town. Admittedly, Sharpsburg was a small, sleepy place with only two traffic lights and one main street, which was even actually called Main Street, but still.

When June came to the first stop sign she wasn’t absolutely sure that she had arrived first, so she sat and waited for the oncoming car to move. It was a standoff, both cars sat immobile for too long, then, when the car behind June honked, she lurched forward at precisely the same moment as the opposing car. June slammed on the brakes; April was thrown forward, catching herself on dash. The car behind them honked again, this time a long, irritated blast.

“Oh, fuck that guy,” June said and moved through the intersection.

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April's eyebrows shot up at the obscenity. She blushed. She'd recently learnt what 'it' meant and found it deeply embarrassing. But she loved that June would talk that way in front of her, use a word like that as though April was just as worldly and fierce as her sister.

'Flinty' that's what their mother called June. When April asked what 'flinty' meant her mother said: "Flint's a rock, when you hit it, sparks fly. That's June all over."

After a long pause April said: "I'm Play-Doh...ey."

On Main Street they cruised past the Army Surplus store and peered in. A dingy open sign hung on a piece of cord. They circled the block and were driving by again when a car pulled out of a spot just up ahead.

June pulled up parallel to the car in front of the empty spot and turned on her blinker.

"Here we go," she said turning in her seat, sitting as tall as she could and craning to see the end of the car.

April stuck her head out the passenger window.

"Watch the front part, up there," June said.

She hit the gas a little too hard the car lurched back and up onto the sidewalk.

"Oops," she said and pulled out into the street without looking. A car swerved around them and honked.

Back in position, parallel to the spot, she turned the wheel more sharply and applied the gas gently; the car eased back into the space. She pulled forward and the boat of a car was docked.

"That was really good, June!"

June gave April some dimes to put in the meter. April was still young enough to enjoy shoving the coins into the slot, hearing the muffled chink as they fell and turning the dial. The red violation disk disappeared and a black arrow popped up.

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Outside the Army Surplus store was a torpedo painted bright yellow with “Malinowski’s Army Surplus, Main Street, Sharpsburg, PA” in thick blue paint. April ran her hand along the cigar-shaped torpedo and felt the bumps from the blue paint, automatically counting the letters.

“44,” she whispered.

June paused at the door, holding it open and waited for her.

Inside the store was dim and smelled of rubber and musty canvas. A bell jangled and announced their arrival.

Behind the long counter a curtain opened and the store proprietor, Joe Malinowski, emerged.

“Ladies, what can I do you for?” Malinowski asked. He put both hands on the counter and slouched into his shoulders, letting his belly sag below the edge of the counter.

June put out her hand and April laid the list in her palm.

She looked down at the list as though she was looking through half glasses just like her English teacher Miss Ida Burnite did before reading an important passage of text.

“I need some equipment for an extended stay in the wilderness,” June said.

“The wilderness!” he said. “Where you goin’? Konokwee?”

Konokwee was the local Girl Scout camp where every 6 to 10 year-old-girl in area spent a week during the summer. It was just a little patch of woods surrounded by cornfields a few miles up the road. Even April was way beyond Camp Konokwee.

“Actually, no,” June said, for her the word “actually” was like a verbal tic, used to underline her disdain and as a precursor to a frosty correction of fact.

“Actually,” she said again. “I will be in the Adirondack Mountains for three months, so...”

The Adirondacks were truly rustic, known to still have bears and, for the east coast, just about as much wilderness as you could get.

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“Uh huh,” Malinowski said and took the list from June’s hand.

He rubbed his chin and scratched the gray stubble that ran down his neck.

“Awright, the sleeping bags are down there, the mess kit and canteens are over there,” he said gesturing with a tired wave around the store. “This here mosquito stuff I gotta get for you in the back.”

Alone in the store June and April looked for the sleeping bags. They walked down the narrow aisles lined with metal shelves reaching up to a peeling, pressed tin ceiling. The shelves were packed full of cast off WWII equipment. A pile of green canvas tent pieces had slid off a shelf and blocked part of the aisle. June ran a few steps and leapt over the pile; April edged around it, pressing her hands on top of the pile as though holding it down.

By the time she looked up again; June was gone. She found her at the very back of the store standing at a rack of green fatigue jackets, sliding her fingers along the sleeve of one. Suddenly June pulled a jacket from the rack and put it on.

“What do you think?” she asked pulling the jacket open on one side, hand on hip, jutting out her left leg.

“You look like a protester!” April said. Protesters got sprayed with fire hoses, hit with batons, and dragged off to jail.

“Yeah, right!” June said and turned to flash the back of the jacket at April. “I’m gonna put a big peace sign on the back, it’ll be so cool.”

And it would be. June’s ideas were always cool. They seemed to fall from the sky like white feathers and land on her shoulders, light, fresh, natural, free for the picking. April instantly wanted a jacket just like that one. She reached up to check the sizes; June wagged a finger in front of her face and hissed: “Don’t even think about copying me.”

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June kept the jacket on as she picked out a sleeping bag and a poncho in a pouch that was folded up like a letter. The mess kit and canteen clanked together, making a tuneless, hollow noise, as they walked back to the counter. From the flashlight display near the counter April selected one with a rugged, rubbery case and a lamp that rotated 90 degrees. June accepted it with a nod.

“Jesus, look at you,” Malinowski said when he saw June in the green jacket. “All you need is a brain bucket and a bayonet you’re ready to ship out and fight for America, eh soldier girl?”

He leaned heavily on the counter while he wrote up the order. He hummed, at varying tempos, the Notre Dame fight song as he totaled up the sales slip.

“87 dollars and 48 cents,” he said.

April scanned the slip, totaled the numbers, applied the state tax, and got \$87. 74. He’d added the state sales tax wrong. She could calculate columns of numbers as quickly and easily as most people could scan them, but rarely did anyone appreciate her piping up about errors. When she did, people would say something like, Aren’t you a smart little girl? but not in a nice way, so unless she was getting gyped she kept it to herself.

June pulled the signed check their mother gave her from her pocket.

Malinowski frowned.

“Let me see that,” he said.

June handed it too him and stared out the store’s front window as though something fascinating was happening on the street.

“Are you Jack Murphy’s girls?” he asked.

April jumped a bit when he said her father’s name and then stood still with her mouth open, waiting. June, though she tried to act indifferent, leaned forward, bending her straight back just a tick.

“I knew your dad.”

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Any mention of her father thrilled April. Her mother never talked about him, never mentioned his death or seemed to look back at all. Sometimes April felt as though she'd dreamed him, and now the dream was fading; shredding and crumbling. It was like trying to hold onto a burnt up page from a glossy magazine; the colors stripped away by the flame, the images all black, gray, and white instead of red, blue, and yellow, and all the while the paper is collapsing into an oily ash that clings to your fingertips.

Any snippet of information about him; she snatched at like a magpie plucking up a shiny bit. And June did it, too. They picked up these gleaming bits eavesdropping, rummaging through trunks in the attic, and 'making themselves useful' by fetching beers for their uncles at family parties. Since he died they learned that he liked Frank Sinatra, war movies, and his shirts with heavy starch. That he drank Manhattans, never wore short-sleeve shirts or shorts, and in high school he wrote funny stories under the name 'Le Wag' for the student paper. They learned that he hated fixing stuff around the house, though June kind of remembered that, and that one Christmas when their mother gave him a toolbox, he opened it, saw that it was empty and said: "Thank God! I was worried there were tools in there."

Sometimes at night June would let April crawl into bed with her and they would rifle through their cache of stolen treasures and share in the exquisite pain of trying, and failing, to conjure him back to life.

"Now wait a minute," Malinowski said. "Where you going? The Adirondacks? What for?"

April saw a rib of muscle rise on her sister's cheek as June set her jaw, determined to stonewall this guy, rebuff his incursion into her life. But April knew that unless they chatted up this guy, played the role of charming fatherless girls, he wouldn't tell them anything.

June was not in the mood for acting.

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April could feel the treasure, whatever treasure this man had to share, falling away, sinking like a string of pearls to the bottom of ocean.

She made a grab for it.

“She’s goin’ to be a counselor at the Fresh Air Camp,” April blurted.

“Fresh Air Camp? What the hell’s that?” he asked.

“It’s a summer camp for inner city negro kids,” April said.

“Negro kids!” he said. “Oh brother, I doubt your dad would go for that.”

“Does this have DDT in it?” June asked holding up the bug repellent. “DDT kills birds.”

June’s brought up DDT to distract the man. It worked. He erupted into a rant about ‘some egghead lady scientist’ and how thanks to her, you can’t sit on your goddamn stoop in the evening without gettin’ half eaten alive.

“So, no, there ain’t no DDT in that,” he concluded, angrily grabbing the can from June and slamming it on the counter.

April waited until the angry flush on Malinowski’s cheeks faded a bit and said:

“So, you knew our dad, huh? Jack Murphy?”

“Oh yeah, yeah, I knew your old man. Old ‘Lucky Mick—”

“Mick?” April asked.

“It’s... slang for Irish,” June said. “It’s not nice.”

“Ah come on now, it was all in good fun,” Malinowski said, smiling as he looked at June, haughty and tall, standing almost as tall as him. “Lucky Mick sold the City their very first snowplow, then as ‘luck’ would have it, Bam! 27-inch snowfall not two weeks later and the city orders 10 more snowplows. Lucky Mick, the Snowplow King!”

April straightened up, pulled her shoulders back so proudly the blades almost touched in the back.

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“The City was my account, but I gave up on those corrupt jagoffs, told your old man he could take a whack at cracking those rotten eggs.”

“And he did!” April said.

June flushed and reached up to scratch her eyebrow.

“Yeah, it took a lot cocktails —a lot— and who knows what else, but he did it,” Malinowski said.

“That’s how he got the name ‘Lucky Mick.’ Course you know what that made me?”

“No,” April said delighted.

June tore at her cuticle.

“A dumb Pollack, that’s what!” Malinowski said and laughed but not happily. “That what he called me from that day forward: Dumb Pollack.”

April was confused, they weren’t allowed to call people names, their mother forbid it, but he was laughing, so she smiled and nodded.

“We gotta get going,” June said.

“Oh yeah, yeah,” Malinowski said. “I just got one more story about your dad.

He looked at April, “You wanna to hear it?”

“Yes!”

“This one’s got negroes in it,” he said and clapped his hands.

June laced her fingers together and wrung her hands until her joints were white and her fingers were twisted and clenched into a mass of angry bones.

“Well, me and your dad were working for Hennessey Heavy Equipment, and Hennessey, the big boss, said, ‘Boys this weekend I want you all to come in here, bright and early, no exceptions and wear your painting clothes cause we’re goin’ paint this place, top to bottom!’ And your dad, the Snowplow King, cock of the walk, you know, he said: ‘Bob, you go find some nonwhite men to do this work.’”

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“Uh huh,” April said.

“Saturday rolls around, we’re all there standing around with our coc—, well standing around and Lucky Mick’s nowhere to be seen. Then two of the biggest Negro fellas you’ve ever seen walked in and said: ‘Mister Murphy sent us on over to paint for you all.’ We all skipped out of there. ‘See ya, Hennessey! We’re going to go see the Buccos play.’ Har! Har! Har! Har! !” Malinowski barked out laughing. And April laughed too but felt uneasy like when Julie Barnes pointed at her shoes and said that saddles shoes were for babies but then said, “But your hair’s real pretty!”

She looked to ‘flinty’ June for help, but June seemed to have shrunken. The fatigue jacket was way too big now; her slim shoulder were doing no more to fill it out than a hanger, and now instead the defiant protester of a moment ago, she looked like a waif draped in soldier’s jacket, like she’d been pulled from a bombed out building in Prague or somewhere.

June wrote out the rest of the check, shoved the sleeping bag at April and they left.

Out on the street, April balanced the sleeping bag on her head and dawdled along.

“Come on,” June snapped.

April ran a few steps, dropped the sleeping bag. The bag bounced once then rolled towards the street, April raced after it, caught it just in time. When she got to the car June was sitting with her hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead. The passenger door was locked.

“Hey! Let me in! June!”

June scowled, then reached across the seat and unlocked the door. April wrestled the sleeping bag into the front seat with her, it crowded her and she couldn’t see over the puffy bag, she punched it down and laughed.

June released a mighty “Tsk” and said, “Put it in the back, for God sakes.”

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April shoved the sleeping bag over the seat and gave June a good loud “Tsk” too. June turned the key in the ignition, but the car was already on and the engine screamed. She pulled forward, and then back and then forward again and worked her way up onto the sidewalk. April was about to offer some advice when June pounded the wheel and yelled: “Goddammit!”

Finally, they haltingly pulled out of the space and onto Main Street. They came to a light, June stopped and put on her left blinker, but traffic kept coming. She gave up and drove straight through the intersection.

“That was the turn,” April said.

“There was too much traffic!” June said. “I can’t turn left, it’s too hard.”

“Well, you’re goin’ halfta...eventually,” April said.

“I know!”

They drove out of town and the road got narrower and the traffic thinned out. June turned on her blinker, looked all around, and then slowly pulled into a warehouse parking lot where she made a big loop. She stopped before pulling back on the road and shook out her hands. As they drove past the Army Surplus store April said; “Lucky Mick, the Snowplow King, ha!”

“Shut up.”

April turned on the radio.

June turned it off.

April slumped down in her seat and watched the trees go by as they crept up the hill. The wind from the open window was cold now; she cranked the window shut. She felt tears burn in her nose and she looked up to try and stop them by watching the telephone wires rise and fall as they reached from pole to pole. But she was no good at not crying, tears spilled down her cheeks. She pulled her shirt up and mopped her face. When she rolled the tear and snot-soaked shirt back down, it felt cold and clammy

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against her chest. She tried to suck the snot back into her chest as quietly as possible, but a gurgle of mucus betrayed her.

“What are you crying about?”

“I, I, I, I,” April said and began sobbing.

June made a quick left into the grade school parking lot at the top of the hill.

“What?” June asked more kindly.

“I don’t know what I did!” April said. “Why do you hate me soooo much? Everybody hates me.”

“Oh my God,” June said. “I don’t hate you, you’re my sister so just shut up about that. What do you mean ‘everybody hates me?’”

“At school, some of the girls, they make fun of my clothes and, and, and...”

“Don’t pay any attention to those 7th grade bitches. Your clothes—we can fix, don’t worry about that.”

“But you’re leaving—”

“Just for the summer. What else?”

April thought about the new dad stories. She’d grabbed at them, gobbled them down and now they sat heavy in her stomach and churned. Was he a cheater? Did he bribe those city guys? But he was the Snowplow King! What about saying ‘hire nonwhite guys’ as though they were lesser people? That’s not right... But, thanks to Lucky Mick, they all went to the ballgame!

“I didn’t understand those stories about Dad.”

“I did.”

“Was a he a good guy or a bad guy?”

“He was just a guy.”

“No, no, he was a good guy, that man, he could be lying—”

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“No, it’s true, I feel it,” June said.

April crumbled back against the door, exhausted.

“And what’s it matter anyway?” she said. “It’s almost over.”

“What’s almost over?”

April shared her secret-super-special calculation. She stuck out her arm, cocked her wrist, her fingers pointing up and then ticked her fingers down in five measured clicks until her arm was level. She paused there for a moment, then clicked her fingers down one more time and dropped her arm into her lap.

April stared into June’s eyes, begging her to agree, to say that it would be over; it would end. That it would not just go on and on, refreshed by every big thing—driver’s licenses, birthdays, graduations, proms, weddings. That every milestone would not be like banging the tip of your finger right on that cut you’d almost forgotten about, the wound you thought was healed suddenly splitting open, bleeding again.

June said nothing but stared out onto the empty ball field. Her tongue flew up to the roof of her mouth, cocked and ready to launch the biggest most disdainful “Tsk” of her life.

“I’m sorry June, ‘cause you were ten, and now you’re just 16,” April said and patted June’s arm.

“You still have four more years to go.”

June’s anger deflated in small, soft exhales at each pat from her sister’s hand, until she was empty.

“I’ll be okay,” she said. “I can do four more years, easy.”

Over the next week, June closed herself up in her room, shooing her sister away, calling her a pest. And then on her birthday, she presented April with a big box.

Inside was the green fatigue jacket, a peace sign painted on the back, and the name “Murphy” his name/her name stenciled on the left breast pocket.

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“Wear this, that will shut up those 7th grade—” June looked at their mother and said, “Witches.”

It wasn't until after June had left for the summer that April found, embroidered in the pocket, a tiny seesaw, one end firmly on the ground, and footprints disappearing into the seam.

END