RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Bitter In The Mouth

Monique Truong

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About the Book

Growing up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in the ’70s and ’80s, Linda Hammerick knows that she is different. She has strong, almost paralysing associations between words and tastes; she doesn't look like everyone else; and she isn't popular at school. She finds her way through life with the help of her great uncle ‘Baby’ Harper, who loves her and loves to dance, and her best friend fat-thin-fat Kelly with whom she has been exchanging letters since they were seven. But then a tragedy and a revelation will make her question everything she thought she knew about herself and her family.

About the Author

Monique Truong was born in Vietnam and moved to the USA in 1975 as a child, shortly before the fall of Saigon. Her first novel, *The Book of Salt*, was shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award, was a *New York Times* Notable Book and was critically acclaimed (‘a rich poetic feast’ *Guardian*; ‘a tart delight’ *Scotland on Sunday*; ‘recalls Ishiguro or Pat Barker’ *The Times*; ‘highly original’ *Spectator*). *Bitter in the Mouth* won the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Literature. Monique Truong lives in New York.

ALSO BY MONIQUE TRUONG

The Book of Salt

For my mother

MONIQUE TRUONG

Bitter in the Mouth

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

“An’ they chased him ‘n’ never could catch him ‘cause they didn’t know what he looked like, an’ Atticus, when they finally saw him … he was real nice. …”

His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover, tucking it around me.

“Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”

—To Kill a Mockingbird

CONFESSION

. . . August 3, 1998

Chapter 1

I fell in love with my great-uncle Harper because he taught me how to dance. He said that rhythm was allowing yourself to feel your blood coursing through you. He told me to close my eyes and forget the rest of my body. I did, and we bopped our nonexistent selves up and down and side to side. He liked me because I was a quiet child. He showed me photographs of himself as a boy. He referred to himself in the third person. This here is Harper Evan Burch, he would say. The boy in those photographs was also a quiet child. I could tell from the way that his arms were always flat by his side, never akimbo or raised high to the North Carolina sky. We were both compact, always folding ourselves into smaller pieces. We both liked music because it was a river where we stripped down, jumped in, and flailed our arms around. It was 1975 then, and the water everywhere around us was glittery with disco lights. My great-uncle Harper and I, though, danced to Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Fats Domino. We twisted, mashed-potatoed, and winked at each other whenever we opened our eyes. My great-uncle Harper was my first love. I was seven years old. In his company, I laughed out loud.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I have tried to find him in the male bodies that I lie next to and that I see him now only when I turn off the lights. His bow tie undone, hanging around his shirt collar—modest isosceles triangles, considering the fashion at the time, his pants cuffed and

creased, his graying hair cut the same as when he was a boy, a wedge of it hanging over one eye, the other one a blue lake dappled by the sun.

My great-uncle Harper wasn't where I thought I would begin, but a family narrative should begin with love. Because he was my first love I was spared the saddest experience in most people's lives. My first love and my first heartbreak were dealt by different pairs of hands. I was lucky. My memories of the two sensations, one of my heart filling and one of it emptying, were divided and lodged in separate bodies. I can still recall the feeling that came over me when my great-uncle Harper first placed the record needle onto a spinning 45. It happened right away. I felt that everything deep within my body was rising to the surface, that my skin was growing thin, that I would come apart. If this sounds painful, it wasn't. It was what love did to my body, which was to transform it. I would come apart like a fireworks display, a burst of light that would grow larger and glow, and make the person below me say, "Ah!" I remembered saying my great-uncle's name aloud. This memory of my first love was then safe from all that was to come.

I'll tell you the easy things first. I'll use simple sentences. So factual and flat, these statements will land in between us like playing cards on a table: My name is Linda Hammerick. I grew up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. My parents were Thomas and DeAnne. My best friend was named Kelly. I was my father's tomboy. I was my mother's baton twirler. I was my high school's valedictorian. I went far away for college and law school. I live now in New York City. I miss my great-uncle Harper.

But once these cards have been thrown down, there are bound to be distorting overlaps, the head of the Queen of Spades on the body of the King of Clubs, the Joker's bowed legs beneath a field of hearts: I grew up in (Thomas and Kelly). My parents were (valedictorian and baton twirler).

My best friend was named (Harper). I was my father's (New York City). I was my mother's (college and law school). I was my high school's (tomboy). I went far away for (Thomas and DeAnne). I live now in (Boiling Springs). I miss (Linda Hammerick). The only way to sort out the truth is to pick up the cards again, slowly, examining each one.

My grandmother Iris Burch Whatley died on February 14, 1987. She had never told a lie, and the fear of that had kept our family, a shrinking brood, together. As her health began to fail, we began to show our true colors. When she passed away, we bloomed like the petals of an heirloom rose, which then faded and fell to pieces. Iris was my mother's mother and my great-uncle Harper's older sister.

For a woman on her deathbed, my grandmother Iris looked remarkably pulled together. Her eyebrows had been freshly drawn in. Her lips were a frosted coral. Her gray hair had just been done in a modified, somewhat modernized bouffant. She had a visiting nurse and a visiting beautician. They were some of the perks of dying at home.

What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two. Those were the last words that my grandmother ever said to me.

Bitch, I said back to her in a voice as calm as if she had asked me for the time and I, standing by her bedside, had replied, Noon.

My great-uncle Harper let out a single hiccup, which was his way of suppressing a laugh. My grandmother's milky blue eyes closed and didn't open up again, according to my great-uncle, until a full minute later. DeAnne (that was what I called my mother by then) took that time to whisper, Hush your mouth, Linda. Then she pointed an

outraged finger at the door, which I slammed shut on my way out.

For DeAnne, that exchange was a final excruciating example of what her seventy-four-year-old mother and her nineteen-year-old daughter had in common. My grandmother Iris and I were both speaking the truth, and DeAnne couldn't stand to hear it.

DeAnne had called me home from college to say my goodbyes:

Take a plane, Linda. For God's sake, don't take the bus again.

Are you sure this time? I've three exams next week—

I'll pay for the ticket.

Fine.

That was the longest conversation DeAnne and I had had in months. I loved my mother from the age of seven to eleven. That was four good years we had together, which was longer than most marriages. I would learn that bit of statistics in my sophomore psychology class, The American Family at the End of the 20th Century: Dysfunction, Dysfunction, What's Your Function? During my four years at Yale, I would gravitate toward classes with the word "dysfunction" featured prominently in the title or repeated at least several times in the course descriptions. I also would wish with every bone in my body that my father was still alive so that I could share with him what I had learned.

When my father died (he preceded Iris, to my great regret), he and DeAnne had been married for almost twenty-five years, many of them happy. The "happy" part was also according to my great-uncle Harper. I saw only the other parts. There was no physical violence or sobs or expletives. There was only unhappiness. I had no older brothers and sisters to report to me of better times: Mom and Dad used to give each other a kiss between saying "good" and "morning"; Dad tied on an apron every Sunday night and made grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup

from a can; Mom stayed in the kitchen with him and flipped through a magazine. All of that, if it took place, was lost to me.

I don't know why but I knew that my father was going to leave me too soon. So I missed him even when he was alive. Every time he left town on business, usually just an overnight trip to Raleigh, I would catch a cold. When he came back home, I would get well. For his part, my father never thought about missing me. Of course, he would be there to see me graduate from high school, attend his alma maters, enter the profession that nourished him, live in the city that he shared with me at bedtime in lieu of a fairy tale.

My grandmother Iris's funeral was delayed by a week because of the flowers. After her second heart attack, Iris had told us that she wanted magnolias on her coffin. Boughs and boughs of them, a cascading river of glossy green leaves with brown suede undersides, creamy blossoms the size of soup bowls floating among them. Iris didn't go into such details, but that was how my great-uncle Harper had envisioned the flowers when his sister told him what she expected. But in the middle of February, there weren't any magnolias to be had in Boiling Springs or anywhere else in the state of North Carolina. The florist in nearby Shelby had to special-order them from a wholesaler in New York City, who had to wait for a midweek shipment from somewhere in South America before the branches could be overnighted to Boiling Springs in a box almost as large as my grandmother's coffin. Baby Harper (*that* was what my grandmother had called her little brother since the day he was born, and that was sixty-three years ago by then) made all the funeral arrangements, and he would be the first to say that the flowers were the most complex and challenging part of it all. He took copious notes. Do's and don'ts for when his day came:

* Do have the wake at the Cecil T. Brandon Home of Eternal Rest; ask for the “Dignified Departure” package.
* Don’t waste money on real flowers; one dead thing is enough.
* Do use a caterer from Asheville; see folder labeled “Victuals” for phone numbers and addresses.
* Don’t place an order for the deviled eggs; they are delicious, but the old people will pass gas.

My great-uncle made a folder for his notes, showed it to me, and then alphabetized it in his personal files under *T* for “The End.”

Before his retirement my great-uncle Harper was a librarian at Gardner-Webb Baptist College, the intellectual hub of Boiling Springs. At work his methodology was conventional and efficient, but that wasn’t the case in his own home. His books were shelved in alphabetical order but not by titles. *A* for “Acerbic,” *B* for “Buy Another Copy as Gift,” *C* for “Cow Dung, as in This Stinks,” *D* for “Devastating,” *E* for “Explore Further,” *F* for “Foreign” (foreign meant that my great-uncle couldn’t relate to the characters in the book, not that the author was from another country), and so on. He would explain the system to me and give me typewritten pages identifying all twenty-six categories. This and his “The End” folder would be the closest documents to a will that Baby Harper (he had admitted to me long ago that he liked being called *that*, even when his sister, Iris, wasn’t around) would ever prepare. When Iris passed away, my great-uncle had never left the continental United States, and the acquisition of the magnolias for her coffin made him think about places in the world even more southern than where he was born and raised. That thought sent him to the bookstore, where he

bought a couple of travel guides and a novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Baby Harper filed these books under *E*.

My grandmother Iris was what her doctor called a “brittle” diabetic. During the course of a given day, her blood sugar levels would spike and then plunge precipitously. This roller-coastering exerted a tremendous amount of stress on her internal organs, especially her heart. She was lucky to have lived so long after the onset of the disease. The diagnosis of her diabetes had coincided with the fifth anniversary of the death of her husband, Walter Wendell Whatley. I have no memories of my grandfather, or Judge Whatley, as the rest of the county called him. Fifteen years my grandmother Iris lived on in Boiling Springs without him. After the first ten on her own, she told me that she wasn’t lucky to have lived so long. She knew that I was the only one in her family who wasn’t unnerved by her honesty.

Sadness attacked my grandmother at the weakest point of her body—her mouth. She loved her husband, but she had always lusted for sugar. While Walter Wendell was still alive, she stayed away from sweets, particularly the doughy and fried variety, in order to keep his eyes on her figure. Her dress size, a respectable eight, and her hairdo, a shoulder-length froth that required twice-weekly visits to Miss Cora’s Beauty Emporium, had remained unchanged from the day that she had met Walter Wendell. Once he passed on, there was no good reason for her to stay the same. She cut several inches off her hair, setting her short locks in hot rollers by herself unless it was a special occasion. She also crammed herself with jelly doughnuts, apple fritters, cinnamon twists, and chocolate-covered crullers. The closest Krispy Kreme—she liked the one-stop shopping—was across the state line in Spartanburg, South Carolina. My great-uncle Harper told me that during the first year of Iris’s solitary life in the green-shuttered colonial on Piedmont Street, she drove the thirty-eight

miles between Boiling Springs and Spartanburg so often that she could do it in the darkness of the predawn with her eyes closed, dreaming of Walter Wendell.

As with most addicts, my grandmother Iris liked to share the experience. She was the one who gave me my first full bottle of Dr Pepper, straight from the fridge, not even bothering with a glass. I was seven at the time (already dancing with my great-uncle Harper), and I thought it was the beginning of something great between my grandmother and me. Iris took out a bottle for herself, and with three swigs she emptied every drop of its molasses-colored liquid.

Don't tell anyone, she said as she dabbed the corners of her mouth with a paper napkin.

About the Dr Pepper? I asked.

No, you little canary, she replied. About how I let you drink it straight from the bottle.

I remembered looking down at what was cold in my hands. There were sweat beads rolling down the glass bottle, just like in a television commercial. The bottle was still almost full. The initial rush of carbonation had burned my tongue, so I was trying to sip it slowly. Thanks to my grandmother Iris I had learned an important lesson: The difference between a fact and a secret was the slithery phrase "Don't tell anyone." I felt like pouring my Dr Pepper into the sink. I went out to the backyard of my grandmother's house and soaked the roots of her dogwood tree with it instead.

My grandmother's doctor had told her to stay away from the soft drinks. They will kill you even faster than those doughnuts, he had warned her. Presented with her options, she often joked that she chose Dr Pepper over Dr. Peterman. She had known Dr. Peterman from the time that he was little Artie Peterman in grade school with her daughter, DeAnne. He was smart and a know-it-all back then too, Iris told me, but also a nose picker and a bed

wetter. No fancy medical degree could change those facts, my grandmother declared. Another important life lesson had been imparted and learned: The past was an affliction for which there was no cure.

I was fourteen when my grandmother Iris had her first heart attack. The second one occurred a week into my freshman year of college. That was when I had caught the Greyhound bus home. I had packed an overnight bag and headed to the bus station, but I couldn't get my body to board the bus. I returned to the station every day until I could hand the driver my ticket. DeAnne couldn't believe it when I showed up in the hospital room a full week after we had spoken on the phone. I walked into that fluorescent-lit room humming with monitors, and I too was in a state of disbelief. My grandmother Iris was still alive.

You might as well have walked home, DeAnne said to me, her voice muffled. She had dropped her head into her hands—the left one held her relief, the right one her despair—after I had greeted her with a casual lifting of my chin.

Next time, I said.

A quick glance at the hospital bed had told me that there would be another chance to disappoint DeAnne. My grandmother Iris was still about a size fourteen, and I knew that she wasn't going to Heaven while she was still a plus size. Her husband, Walter Wendell, wouldn't recognize her, and all the fuss of dying would be for naught.

My grandmother had reached her apex at size twenty (or an eighteen at the Dress Barn in Belwood), but she had been losing weight steadily over that past year. Dr. Peterman thought he was finally getting his message across to his patient, but I knew she wasn't dropping the pounds to get better control of her diabetes and to put less strain on her heart. She had told me that she didn't need little Artie Peterman to tell her that more than a decade of consuming the equivalent of a pound of sugar a day had

damaged her body beyond repair. My grandmother Iris was simply getting ready for the next stage of her life, in the same way that most brides would prepare for their wedding day.

Five months later, what was left of our family gathered in my grandmother's dining room, which had become her bedroom ever since walking upstairs became impossible for her. This time it wasn't after a heart attack but before one. Iris could feel that a third and final one was coming. She didn't consult with Dr. Peterman. She just told her daughter, DeAnne.

DeAnne had been reading a self-help book entitled *Mothers Who Don't Know How to Mother*, and she was pages away from the last chapter, "Aging and the Inevitability of Kindness." Upon hearing her mother's self-diagnosis, DeAnne must have gone up to the second-floor bathroom of her childhood home, turned on the faucets, and cried. (I was very familiar with DeAnne's belief that the sound of running water could hide grief.) After that was when DeAnne had called me and told me to take an airplane home.

I found DeAnne's book—a dog-eared page told me where she had stopped reading—in the kitchen garbage. (I was also familiar with DeAnne's belief that the trash could make things disappear.) The book was waterlogged, as if DeAnne had tried to drown it. She might have. Or she might have just dropped it, her hands clumsy from grief, into the overflowing tub. I knew that she was ashamed that she had bought the book in the first place. My father would have told her it was rubbish. No one can tell you how to live *your* life, DeAnne! Personal accountability was my father's religion. Southern Baptist was just his social circle. When my father had passed away, my great-uncle Harper and I thought that DeAnne would turn into another Iris. But

so far, there had been no change in hairstyle, no weight gain. On the outside, DeAnne had stayed exactly the same.

On a bright February morning, I stood with DeAnne and Baby Harper by Iris's bedside. Is this all, my grandmother must have asked God as she looked up at our three faces. DeAnne, widowed. Alone. Baby Harper, never married. Alone. Linda … and that was when my grandmother said the last thing that she would say to me, her only grandchild. Iris's words—*What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two*—slipped out of her mouth, uncontrollable and unstoppable, like how all those fried pieces of glazed dough had slipped into that same hole.

My grandmother died the following morning. Valentine's Day would never be the same for us, the two Hammericks and the one Burch who remained. The red puffy hearts that decorated the shop windows and the Hallmark cards would remind us of the seventy-four-year-old one that had constricted and failed. For us, the fourteenth of February was from then on Iris's Day, and she wasn't even a saint.

About a month after my grandmother's funeral, I was in the middle of a freshman literature seminar, Dysfunctionalia: Novels of Misspent Southern Youths and Their Social Context, 1945 to the Present, and I was trying to focus on the discussion of the lesbian subtext in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, when the tears began to fall. I was crying not out of regret for what I had said to my grandmother but for not staying longer by that old dying woman's bedside. Another minute and her lids would have opened and her lips might have followed. Another minute and a little skeleton key might have fallen out of her mouth, rejected at last by a body ridding itself of what it didn't want to take to the grave. But now several feet of Carolina dirt and an air-locked coffin had turned that minute into something immeasurable.

I excused myself and walked out of the seminar room. The room was an aviary-like space in a Gothic Revival tower, one of many architectural pretensions that lent a sense of history to the Yale campus. The other eleven students and the visiting professor all saw the wet streaks on my face, and I knew each of them wondered who had brought me to tears. Making another student cry, while in a class, that is, with a particularly brilliant or cutting comment was a badge of honor on that campus. One of the rules of the game was that one couldn't self-congratulate. Credit for the act had to be bestowed and acknowledged by those who were present in the classroom, usually with a casual lifting of the chin.

As I walked down the spiral of stone steps that led from the crenellated tower to the vaulted main floor of the building, I thought about my father and how he had wound his body up and down those same stairs. Two generations of Hammerick men had preceded Thomas at Yale, and now there I was, a modern, slightly modified representative of the family.

I pushed open a set of heavy wooden doors and faced the month of March in New Haven, Connecticut. My head dropped and my neck retracted into my coat and scarf. My grandmother Iris had told me that the weather up North was going to break my spirit. She said that it would feel like wearing a wet wool coat during the winter months and the rest of time like sitting in a Turkish bath. I knew that she had never been to New Haven, never worn a wet wool coat, and never even seen a Turkish bath. But, of course, what Iris Burch Whatley had said was no lie. My grandmother also told me that I couldn't leave my family behind like a pair of shoes that no longer fit. What's wrong with going to Gardner-Webb Baptist College, she had asked. I remembered hearing a single hiccup after she said this to me, but I didn't remember my great-uncle Harper being in the room.

I walked to my room on Old Campus and climbed into bed. When I pulled the sheet and blanket over my head, it was only half past three in the afternoon. In that artificial darkness, I said a word softly to myself. I drew out the “Ham,” lingered on the “me,” and softened the clip of the “rick.” I repeated the word, and with every slow joining of its three syllables, the fizzy taste of sweet licorice with a mild chaser of wood smoke flooded my mouth. A phantom swig of Dr Pepper. This one’s for you, Iris. I closed my eyes and said goodbye to my grandmother, who seemed for a moment not so far away.

Chapter 2

My first memory was a taste. For most of my life I have carried this fact with me not as a mystery, which it still is, but as a secret. The mystery had two halves. The halves had within them other chambers and cells. There was something bitter in the mouth, and there was the word that triggered it.

I'll begin on the side of taste:

It was bitter in the way that greens that were good for us were often bitter. Or in the way that simmering resentment was bitter.

I have not yet found a corresponding flavor in food or in metaphor. But such a "match," even if identified, would only allow me the illusion of communication and you the illusion of understanding. I could claim, for example, that my first memory was the taste of an unripe banana, and many in the world would nod their heads, familiar with this unpleasantness. But we all haven't tasted the same unripe fruit. In order to feel not so alone in the world, we blur the lines of our subjective memories, and we say to one another, "I know exactly what you mean!"

The other side of the mystery is the word:

For me, the few words that *didn't* bring with them a taste were sanctuaries, a cloister in which I could hear their meanings as clear as my own heart beating. The rest of my vocabulary was populated by an order of monks who had broken their vows of silence and in this act had

revealed themselves to me. Not their innermost feelings of sadness or ecstasy. Not the colors that they wore underneath their robes. But what they last placed in their mouths.

When I first moved to New York City, I wrote to Kelly that I had made a mistake. That I should have gone back to North Carolina for law school, that I missed her, missed Baby Harper, even missed Boiling Springs, our emphatically named hometown. That was in the fall of 1990, when email was just beginning its takeover of personal communication, starting with university campuses nationwide. The e. e. cummings of the written word was only months away, but Kelly and I hadn't and wouldn't succumb to the lowercase, the off and on punctuation, nor the flights of fancy spelling and syntax. From the earliest days of our friendship, we have relied on carefully written letters to keep each other informed of our inner lives. We behaved like characters in a Jane Austen novel long before either one of us knew what that meant. Kelly sent the first one, dated July 11, 1975.

"My name is Kelly. I am seven years old. I live in the red brick house. Welcome to Boiling Springs!"

The letter wasn't particularly elegant or inviting of a response, and at the time I didn't understand what she meant by the last sentence. But I admired her use of the exclamation mark. Worse letters of introduction have been written by hands much older than Kelly's and on stationery not nearly as pink. A red strawberry at the four corners of the sheet.

Kelly was advanced for her age in many ways. She took to grammar, capitalization, and punctuation early on. Her mother, Beth Anne, told her kindergarten teacher that no one taught Kelly these rules and regulations and that her

daughter had picked them up from reading the newspapers. When asked who taught Kelly how to read the Shelby *Star* at such an early age, Beth Anne had replied that Kelly was born knowing how. In the first grade, Kelly memorized the contents of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. She also committed to memory the "Forms of Address" chart at the back of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, handy for anyone planning to write a letter to a foreign ambassador or to a chancellor of a university, for instance.

At age seven, Kelly was also awkward, fat, and shy. These traits, as much as her intellectual precociousness, accounted for her chosen form of communication. I, also seven years old, showed her letter, which I had found on our hallway table, to my father. I had nominal reading and writing skills for my age, so I needed an older pair of eyes to guide me. My father asked me if I wanted to write back. If yes, he would deliver my letter. The omission of a last name and "the red brick house" being the closest thing to a mailing address would have stumped some fathers, but not mine.

Kelly's father, Carson Powell, Jr., worked for my father, Thomas Hammerick. I didn't know this back then. Nor did I know that these two men, lawyers by day, had just begun their second jobs as postmaster general and mailman for a very small country. The only other address in this land was "the gray and blue ranch house." The colors I provided, and my father contributed the architectural classification. For the first dozen or so letters, the correspondents were Kelly, my father, and me. I listened and nodded as he spelled the words out for me so that I could slowly print them—my vowels three times as large as my consonants—onto the sheet of paper. Pale yellow with a red and black ladybug at the upper right corner. Restrained design choice for a girl of seven, my father must have thought. He had taken me to Hudson's department store in Shelby so that I could choose

my own box of stationery. His was plain and white, watermarked to show its quality, and DeAnne's had pink spray roses on it. Neither was suitable for a girl of seven.

That summer of letter writing—Kelly and I wrote to each other every day—made an impression on my father. He told my great-uncle Harper that he would never forget how I had answered the first question that Kelly sent to me. In letter #3, Kelly asked, "What is your favorite color?"

Fire, I told my father, was my answer.

He asked me if I understood the question.

Yes, she asked what color I liked—

And your answer is "fire"? Do you mean the color red?

I like red and yellow and orange and blue….

I listed for him all the colors that I had seen in a flame and that I knew the names for. My father understood then the response as I had meant it. Another child, with similar preferences, might have said a "rainbow," but I had never seen a rainbow in real life.

According to my great-uncle Harper, my father also never forgot that I showed to him the first letter that I had ever received. That the receipt of something sealed, meant only for my eyes, was shared with him, unsolicited and unprovoked.

At the end of that summer, my father suggested that we invite this "Kelly Powell" girl over to the house for a sleepover. The look in my eyes made him stop talking in midsentence. I hadn't told him about my secret sense. When I heard or said the word "Kelly," I tasted canned peaches, delicious and candy-sweet. This, however, was the first time I had heard anyone say "Powell." The word was a raw onion, a playground bully with sharp elbows shoving all other flavors aside. Luckily for our friendship, little girls didn't often call each other by their full names.

"I'm the one still here in Boiling Springs," Kelly began her letter back to me. "You didn't make a mistake. I did. At the

risk of sounding like a DP song, I've made so many mistakes in the past few years that it's now a habit I can't kick," she continued. Kelly wrote that she had even thought about overnighting her letter to New York City, given the forlorn tone of my five pages to her. But she didn't. The main reason we both loved this ritual of pen, paper, and stamps (the philatelic design announced the writer's mood: My letter had been posted with two Grand Canyons, and Kelly's response featured a Niagara Falls) was the waiting and the eventual receipt. It was one of the few examples in our young lives of patience rewarded.

The "DP" in the fourth sentence of Kelly's letter was a reference to our mutual childhood obsession, one that we now laugh and swear never to tell another living soul about. From the time we were eight, Dolly Parton has been our Madonna (the original one, not the "Like a Virgin" one who would be made famous in our teens by MTV), but being Southern Baptists, we didn't fully understand the role that Dolly was playing in our lives. She was a beautiful mystery to us. Her voice. Her hourglass figure. Her white-blond tresses. Her glossy teeth, ringed by her glossier lips. Each of her outfits was a rhinestone miracle to us. We wrote fan letters to her and sent them to each other to read. We thought that if we ever met her in person she would recognize our inherent goodness and take us home with her. We weren't sure where she lived, but we thought it was probably near the Grand Ole Opry. We cut her pictures out of *TV Guide* and cried when her specials came on past our bedtimes. When my mother found the hagiography (all three of us thought of it then as merely a scrapbook) that Kelly and I had made out of construction paper and masking tape, she told us that Dolly Parton had a beautiful voice but that she was trashy. My mother didn't have a knack for speaking with children. The first question that tumbled out of our small mouths was always "What does that mean?" DeAnne, unsure most of the time of what