

A Chick from My Dream Life · *Karen E. Bender*

I LOVED HELPING my sister Betsy hide her bad hand in the morning. By eight, she'd be standing on the side of the bathtub, looking at her body in the bathroom mirror. "Okay," she'd say. She would fling out her bad hand: "Make it fashionable." I'd flip through my tube tops, finding one the same color as her swimsuit. Betsy examined her tan lines or put on Sea Coral lipstick because she thought that was right for the beach. She ignored me when I pulled her bad hand—the one with no fingers—toward me and put a tube top over it. She liked tube tops because they hid her hand completely but made her look like she was carrying something bright. "Maybe tape it shut," I said. "Or paper clip it. And bunch it at your wrist. There." Betsy would hold the tube top up and examine it. "Cool," she said. I smiled, the expert. I wanted the tube top to look natural. I wanted to slip the tube top over her and see a good hand push through.

My parents were the ones who started helping Betsy hide her bad hand. After my mother hemmed the bottom of Betsy's coats, she would sew the extra material to one sleeve. Betsy always had sleeves that were too long for her; I thought all her coats looked like they were coming alive and taking over her body. My mother took forever with those sleeves. I hated watching her with Betsy. Because of her hand, Betsy possessed my parents in a way that I didn't. Sometimes when I played with Betsy, I pulled my coat sleeves down over my hands; but the sight of me with gigantic sleeves always seemed to annoy my mother. "You don't want to look like a waif," she said, and rolled up my coat sleeves all the way to the elbow.

Helping Betsy with her hand was the only thing I could do right that summer. Betsy was only eleven, a year younger than me, but had become pretty. The sun went into her skin and she held it easy, her hair, knees, glowing. Everyone knew her walk at our junior high school, a slow, watery step, her hair lifting and slapping her shoulders. Betsy understood something that I didn't, and as her older sister it was my job to stop this.

That was the summer when my father moved from his bed to the couch every morning and when my mother tried to figure out what was wrong with him. My father was tired. He woke up at night, cold, when it was warm outside. He had a little cough. All over the house I could hear him;

he always sounded as though he was about to spit. Part of the day, my father lay on the couch in the den. Wrapped in a blanket, he watched the news reports. Before he felt tired, I used to sit with him on that couch and watch Sherylline Rivers talk disasters: 3,000 evacuated after chemical spill. Tornado ravages Kansas. My father would say two things to me: "Listen Sally," or "This is sick." "Listen Sally" included countries being invaded and teenagers who were more successful than I was. "This is sick" included everything else. I wanted to sit on that couch until my father organized the world for me.

Now he didn't want us in the den, so we sat where the carpet turned from rust to brown and watched him. It was Betsy's idea to toss balls of paper with messages at our sleeping father. She wanted to see how far she could throw a ball of paper if it were placed on her bad hand. She said if the messages hit him, maybe he would feel better. We scribbled notes we thought might work: The Greatest Father In The Universe!, Smile!, Hugs and Kisses!, We Luv You! I crumpled up Smile! and put it carefully on her bad hand.

She reached her arm back and served Smile!, full force, into the den. The ball bonked our father on the forehead.

He opened his eyes. We waited for him to thank us.

I knew our father was different when he woke up after our message hit him. He didn't thank us, which he could have done; he didn't instruct us about the world, something he would usually do. He threw back the blanket and sat up.

"Enough, girls," he said. "Out."

Hearing our father talk that way sent Betsy all the way across the yard. She put her towel as far from the den as she could. She said she was going to make a project of thoroughly reading all of her *Seventeens*.

I couldn't decide where to sit. I didn't know what we had done. Sometimes I sat with her across the yard. Sometimes I sat on the edge of the den, like an anchor.

Our mother began to walk through the house. She walked hard through each room, as though into a wind. She was different, too. She wasn't in her face when she looked at us; she was with our father.

When my mother yelled at my father to go see a doctor, I ran to Betsy, who was involved in her *Seventeens*.

"What do we do!" I yelled at her.

She turned the page on a quiz on kissable lip gloss. “How should I know?” she asked.

I started to walk away until we heard our mother’s voice rise again, louder than I had ever heard it.

Betsy jumped up. She began to run, arms flapping. I ran, too. She turned on the sprinklers. “Doe,” she sang. “A deer. A female deer. Ray, a drop of golden sun . . .”

“Me, a name, I call myself . . .” We ran. We ran over the water, we ran as though we had practiced. I followed her around the yard, over the magazines, cover girls all wavy under the water.

We ran as far from the house as we could. We sang so loud their voices blurred. The house shimmered through the water. It almost looked beautiful.

Before my father got sick, he took us driving. He wanted to take us somewhere we had never seen. Sometimes he reached over the seat to us; his arm waved in front of our faces, and Betsy and I would decide what to put in his hand. “Guess what this is,” we’d say, giving him anything—a shoe, a comic book.

I hated the game the moment Betsy put her bad hand into his. My father would rub her bad hand gently, as though he was trying to erase something, and then his fingers would close completely over her. “It’s . . . a banana,” my father would say. “A croissant.” Betsy would fall onto the seat, giggling. “Wrong,” she’d say. “It’s a boomerang tip.” Sometimes I would also put my hand in my father’s. He would lightly lace his fingers into mine. “This is . . . um,” he would say, thinking. I waited for him to tell me something special I could be.

I had to be good at something. I was the older sister. That’s what I could do. My favorite older sister job with Betsy was when I was in charge of her bad hand. Before we played, she put her hand into my lap. I had so many ideas. We pushed it into Play-Doh to see the dents it made. We molded chocolate chip cookie dough around it to make a cookie that was full of air.

When Betsy was six, we were sitting in the yard and I was holding her bad hand, wondering what would happen if we put on a sprinkler, when she took it away and put it in her lap.

“Why is it different on me?”

“What? What’s different?”

“Tell me.”

I told her what our father had told me: You’re the same as me, you just can’t take piano lessons.

She began to bang her bad hand on the grass.

“Give me a thumb,” she said to me.

“What?” I asked.

“Come on,” she said. She put her bad hand into my lap.

I had no idea what to do.

I took her into our bedroom and we looked through our closet. Mr. Potato Head, Clue, nothing seemed right. Our 52-color marker set.

“Sit,” I said. I held her bad hand in mine and I began to draw. Bumps of aqua, olive green, burgundy. I wanted to find the color combination that would make her fingers sprout.

When I was finished, Betsy had five colorful fingers drawn on her bad hand. We had a good day. I carried her around the yard, we sang. I lifted her up, she giggled, her bad hand raised like a beautiful flower.

When she woke up the next morning, the colors had run. Her hand looked like it had been beaten up. “What did you do!” I shrieked. I was afraid I had deformed Betsy in a new, horrible way; now she would also be purple. But as soon as we had cleaned her off, Betsy turned around and put it in my lap.

“Do it again,” she said to me.

Betsy’s bad hand wasn’t exactly a hand. Her arm just ended in a point, like the tail end of whipped cream. I thought it looked like Betsy’s arm just didn’t want to stop when it entered the world. I thought her arm sensed something wonderful in the world and was shooting right out to meet it. Like Betsy. She seemed always to have some new way to leave me behind her. A few days after we had been sitting by the gate, she stood up and said, “I’m going to the beach.”

That was an older sister’s idea. She went ahead and stole it. Betsy headed out the next day. I couldn’t believe it. I sat in the backyard and waited; I was afraid of the world. I opened the gate and started walking, walked until I hit the busy street. At the intersection, I stopped, feeling the car wind on my arms. I stood there, hoping, lifted my arms. But I was grounded without Betsy. There was nothing to do but turn around and go home.

The next day, I let her pull me with her. We took the blue bus to Santa Monica. We dropped off the bus and looked. The sand rolled, sparkling, to the flat silver of the Pacific Ocean. Betsy pushed out toward the water so fast I thought she'd belly-down the air, skid toward the sparkling blue.

I was slower. The fear started from nothing sometimes. I felt it rise through my body. Betsy looked fine, flapping out the towel; all I could think of was our father pulling at me, trying to bring me back home. "The ocean's polluted, Sherylline Rivers said," I told her.

"It is not," said Betsy.

I started unfolding the bus schedule. Betsy chewed her hair, watching me. "Wait," she said.

She grabbed my arm and started walking. She led me past a few life-guard stations and up a hill. From the top of the hill, I saw a group of boys standing and pissing into a ditch.

"How incredibly gross," I said.

The boys were standing in a zigzag row along the ditch, which was shallow but dark with something I didn't want to think about. We were far enough away to lose the smell, but we could see the thin yellow lines go down into the ditch. We put our towels on the top of the hill and watched the boys walk up to the ditch. They unzipped themselves quickly and stood, hips forward, all aiming for the same place.

Betsy pointed at her discovery. "The one on the right could be named John," she said. "Beside him might be Gus and across could be Harvey." I was impressed; that was more information than I knew about any boy.

"Lay down," said Betsy, and we did; she said we could hold them on the lengths of our arms. She said that if we could get all the boys in our arms, they would be ours. We lay face down, fingertips touching, but we couldn't quite do it; there were a couple boys that kept getting away from us.

I breathed slow, my chest pressing into the sand. I decided that I needed these boys to turn all at once and call: Sally. I imagined their voices filling me until I rose above them all. But the boys just stood, holding themselves, looking into the air. "John's cute. Ted's a grosso, I don't know about Ed," said Betsy. Her good hand was in mine, hot and sticky. I could feel the air in my palm as she pushed toward them, let go.

We made it to the hill by ten every day; we could spend forever watching the boys. They came by twos or threes to the ditch and left quickly; after a few days we knew them all. "There's the cute guy we saw yesterday, the one who thinks he's James Dean," Betsy might say. "Okay. He's . . . I think he's . . . okay. He's going. He's going. God, what did he drink this morning?"

This was the fun part.

"Grape Kool-Aid," I said. "A gallon."

"Minutemaid, instant," said Betsy.

James Dean yanked his shorts shut. He was replaced by Fonz Wanna-be.

"Lemonade," I said. We watched, open-mouthed, as he went and went and went.

The hill was the one place in the world where I began to feel good. We sat for hours, waiting to see who would walk up next. Betsy and I made up things the boys would say if they liked us.

"You are a total foxy babe," said Betsy.

"You are one hunk o' woman," I tried.

"You are a chick from my dream life," she said.

Betsy and I rolled close to each other. For a second we owned the boys, all of them.

We looked at each other. Our faces were so close I could feel her breath.

"How do they not bump noses," I said.

She leaned over and quickly kissed me on the lips.

"Ow," I said, though it didn't hurt.

She kissed me again. She didn't bump my nose that time either.

"Ow," I said, again.

Betsy rolled away. I loved her.

"Ow," she said.

Up on the hill, Betsy and I never talked about our father. We did that only on the long block between our house and the busstop; then, we discussed our theories about what was wrong with him.

One day I told her I thought he wasn't doing anything because he was part of a contest. "Like how much TV you can watch," I said. "He's going to win the trip to Hawaii for four."

"No," said Betsy. "But maybe he's getting ready to go on a game show."

“He’s going to win the *car*,” I shrieked.

We hugged each other and jumped up and down. We were proud of our father. But the idea seemed strange when we got closer to the house. Our father was not going to Hawaii.

I moved close to Betsy. “There’s a bug on your shoulder!” I shrieked. “There is not,” she said.

“Yes!” I shrieked. I swatted an invisible bug off her back and left my hand there. She didn’t move.

We also had different theories about what would make our father feel better. That day I decided it was French braids. Betsy pulled her *Seventeen* from her tote bag and we sat on the curb, braiding each other’s hair. We marched up to the house, arm in arm, giggling. We looked nice. He was going to love us. I began to knock, but Betsy grabbed me, hard.

“He’s not going to like them,” said Betsy.

“Yes, he will,” I said.

“No,” she squeaked. “He’s not going to know who we are.”

I don’t know why I believed her, but it seemed better than believing myself. We destroyed our French braids, quickly and viciously. We stood by the front door, quietly. Betsy put her hand on my back.

“There’s a bug on you,” she said.

When Betsy was eight, I tried to suck her fingers out. We sat, backs pressed against old games of Clue and Candyland in our bedroom closet, legs tucked so our knees hit our chins. First I kissed her bad hand. I was delicate as a suitor; a circle of kisses around her wrist. “Eat it,” she said. Her bad hand was spongy and a little salty. My mouth rode it as though it were corn on the cob. I thought of fingers. I bent down and tried to wish them out of her, making us, finally, the same.

“What?” she asked, excited.

I wiped her on the carpet and inspected: nothing.

“What?” asked Betsy. She was three years from becoming pretty. She put her bad hand in my lap.

“Please,” she said to me.

It happened by the snack stand. Betsy was plucking straws out of the container while I held our drinks. A row of boys leaned against a wall that said in loopy, black writing, NO FAT CHICKS.

Betsy was struggling with the straw container. One of the boys, a cute one, walked right to her. He slapped a hand on the metal container. A few straws rumbled down. He plucked them out, very gently; then he held them out to Betsy as though they were a bouquet.

Betsy looked at the straws and, slowly, at the boy. He was just standing there, being a boy, but that was too much for me. I stared down at the sand. Betsy took the straw from him. And then she ran to me.

“What!”

“He said his name was Barry and he hung out at Station 5,” she said.

“Oh my God,” I said.

We ran across the sand, the ice in our drinks jingling.

“What does that mean?”

“He likes you,” I said.

She shrieked. “Do you think he’s cute?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” she said. She stabbed her straw into her drink top. The boy was still there, watching. It took too long for him to disappear.

Betsy and I both crawled into my bed at night. She liked to run her bad hand along my arms. Starting at my wrist, she slid it up to my elbow; then she stopped and slid back down again. We wrapped our legs around each other, Betsy smoothing me over and over, and often fell asleep like that, my mouth wet against her hair.

Sometimes, when we held each other, she would try to figure things out. “Daddy chopped them off when I was born,” she whispered. “He came into the hospital and chopped them with a knife.” Or, “Mommy shoved them back in when I was a baby. Probably when I was crying too hard.” Her imaginary good hand was destroyed by can openers or car washes; it was savaged by parents or music teachers; but it was never ruined by me. I waited for her to say it—“You, Sally, slammed it in a car door—” but, instead, she just looked at me, waiting for my answer. “That is totally whacked,” was what I usually told her. “Really?” she asked me. “You think so, Sally?” Some nights she leaned so hard against my body I thought she might empty into me.

After Betsy had been picked at the snack stand, I decided there had to be a change in our boy-watching. "The one who could be Jake looks too much like Donny Osmond," I said. "The one who could be Todd has weird lips." Now all I could see were the mistakes in the boys. Pat's tubby stomach. Bob's spindly legs.

Betsy seemed loosened from her body, able to fly out and away whenever the chance came. "The one who might be Fred is a total hunkola," she said. "The one who could be John has cool hair."

I told her she was blind. Or just sick. I was the older sister. I knew these things. She shrugged. Since the day of the boy by the snack stand, she was spending a lot of time looking in mirrors; I think she was wondering why she had been picked.

The day she went down we were debating the one who could be Earl. "The most disgusting thing on the planet," I said. "I mean, if I were born looking like that I wouldn't ever leave the house . . ."

"Oh, come on. He's not *that* bad," she said.

"Not *that* bad," I said. "Are you crazy? Are you in love with him?"

Betsy stood up.

"Bye," she said.

She turned and sailed down to the ditch. I leaned over the edge of the hill, as though I could reel her back, but she was already there, she was already walking. The boys saw her and a few comments came, like the first zippy pieces of popcorn that explode inside a pan:

"Hey."

"You have a name?"

"Nice day, sweetie?"

"Wanna come hold it for me?"

"Bitch," I said, quietly, into the sand. She stopped. I hoped she'd run then, make a break for the parking lot, but she didn't: she was brave. She zeroed in on one boy who had finished and was standing away from the others. He was thin-armed, freckled, pressing a boogie board close to his chest. Betsy walked right over and stood beside him. She kept the tube top wrapped tight around her bad hand. You couldn't see her bad hand, couldn't see that there was anything different about her. She was just a really pretty girl who was trying to make this boy like her. The boy kept his eyes on the sand and she kept talking. Then she leaned forward and touched his arm with her bad hand.

I thought he'd know it in a second, feel the bump through her tube top and run. I thought that would teach her, and all those boys would come running to me. But she had him. My sister made him like her. The boy toed the sand, practically smiling. And even though he wasn't a very cute boy, even though he was probably named something like Earl, I had never wanted so much to be her.

I flopped onto my back and closed my eyes so she wouldn't know that I had been watching. When I opened them, she was there.

"You know what," she said.

"What."

"I think he liked it."

"What? Speak English."

And she held up her bad hand.

"That?"

Betsy smiled.

"I think he did," she said.

That night, when our father fell asleep in front of the TV, we slipped in, low, flat, to sit beside him. Once we made it, once we were finally beside our father, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. Betsy sat, staring into the bright white of the TV; then she unwrapped her tube top and took out her bad hand. Her bad hand glowed in the light of the TV set. I thought it looked as though it entered the world more purely, simply, than a complete hand would. Betsy pulled my father's feet on her lap; then she began to rub her bad hand back and forth along them. "Idiot," I hissed. "What are you doing? What are you *do*-ing?" I thought, this was it. She was going to be Queen of the Hill; now she would cure our father in some sick mutant way.

"Fine. Fine," I hissed. "Wake him up. Just kill him, while you're at it." But nothing happened. Betsy stopped. "Bitch," she whispered, "I'm not doing anything." Neither of us moved from our father. We looked at him for a long time.

As soon as we got to the hill the next day, she announced, "I'm going to kiss a boy an hour and I'm going to tell them my name is Sally."

She ran down the hill; I followed. She put me against a truck. I started to go back to my towel but I stopped; I had to see what she was going to

do with my name. Betsy steered clear of the boy she had picked the last time and found one I thought was cute. Clutching the boy with her good hand, she led him over to the truck. She stopped about ten feet from me, turned him so he couldn't see me. All I could see of the boy was his pinkish back. She stepped close to him, fiddling her good hand in his hair. I stood against the truck, pretending to look at the seagulls circling. Then Betsy, my sister, reached up and kissed him.

I could almost feel it inside me when she did that, I could almost taste that boy. But I wasn't kissing him. It wasn't me. I was just there, in the shadows, trapped against a truck.

I wanted to say things. Tramp. Slut o' the Universe. Crazy Maniac of the World. Major Bitch. Of course, I didn't. There was nothing to do but stand quietly and watch my sister pull love out of someone else.

I left the beach early and headed for Sav-On. It was where our family went when we needed to fix things. I went down the Cosmetics aisle and thought of my mother. I thought hard about her, trying to make her stop yelling. I went down Toilet Seats and thought of Betsy. I tried to keep her from taking over the world. I went down Lawn Chairs and I thought of my father. I tried to make him well.

I found it by Gardening. A small bottle filled with bright blue fluid: Fern Encourager. In small print: Bring your thirsty ferns to life.

I think I had to take Fern Encourager because nothing else had worked.

I did something I never had done before: I put Fern Encourager in my pocket and went for the door. I walked out, past the girls ringing the cash machines, stepping right into the parking lot. I didn't stop walking for five blocks. In front of me the sidewalk rose up, shining.

I showed it to her in the bathroom that night.

She rolled up her bikini top, flashing her brown nipples, her tiny breasts. Then she ducked, knocking the bottle out of my hand.

"Are you insane," she said to me.

I watched her move into the mirror as though she were in love with it.

"I can make you sprout fingers," I said.

"Sally, you're such a geek," she said.

I swallowed. I stood so hard on the floor I hoped it would tilt, spill Betsy, my family somewhere.

"I can," I told her.

I went outside and sat with my father.

“Do you have cancer?”

He shook his head. “No,” he said.

I felt something, full as a balloon, shrink inside of me. “Do you have heart failure?”

“No,” he said.

“Well then, what?” I said.

He held out his arms. I stood inside them. They did not surround me the way I wanted.

“I get tired after I read the newspaper,” he said. “I get tired after I walk one block.” His voice swelled. “I get chills almost every night, and still no one says there’s anything wrong with me.” He rolled over. “Forget it, Sally. Go play with your sister.”

I didn’t know what to think. It wasn’t a contest. It wasn’t a fatal disease. It wasn’t that he just liked to lay around. My father had just stopped.

My father closed his eyes. He looked like he could just sink into the lawn chair and disappear. It wouldn’t take long for me to follow. I wouldn’t even have to try. I tried to tell one of the boys at the beach to come get me. The one who could be Craig, pushing open the gate and walking right to me, leaning over, knowing how to kiss.

That was the first time in ages that I sat right beside my father.

That night, I woke up, blinking into the dark. I moved down the long hallway to the kitchen. I stood in the doorway and scanned the utensils. The can opener wasn’t sharp enough. I didn’t know how to put together the Cuisinart. So I took the biggest steak knife, silver and heavy. And I put it against my left hand.

That knife was stubborn. I held it hard, stood there breathing; I thought of all the love I would possibly get. But the knife wouldn’t go down. It wouldn’t move.

I lifted the knife off my skin. I put it in the very last trash can in the garage. I dumped garbage over it—old TV dinners, soda bottles, banana peels—until I was sure no one would know it was there. In bed, my hands went slowly all over my body: my body, still ridiculously complete.

When I woke up, I told Betsy I wasn’t going with her to the hill anymore.

“It’s boring,” I said.

She was stepping into that day’s swimsuit; she stopped.

“How?”

“It just is,” I said.

Betsy slapped her arms at her sides. “Fine,” she said. “Be that way.” She whirled around. “What color do I wear?”

“I don’t care.”

“Pink,” she said. “I totally need pink.” She began to hurl shirts and towels. “Fonz Wanna-be looks like a fish when he kisses,” she said. “It’s really gross. You have to see.”

“No,” I said.

She zoomed out of the bedroom. I listened. She was running. She was also throwing: magazines, big pillows, chairs.

“Sally!” she yelled.

She was in the kitchen.

“You stole my pink one,” she said.

“I wouldn’t want it,” I said.

“Bitch,” she said. “You know you do.”

She grabbed a spatula lying on a counter. “You know you do,” she yelled, and went for me with the spatula. I leaped on Betsy. She whacked the spatula everywhere: into my chest, under my armpit, between my legs. I hit her all over; I didn’t want to miss a spot.

She shoved me off and ran to the den. I couldn’t believe it; she ran inside.

“Daddy!” Betsy yelled.

She began to jump all over the den. I did, too. We bounced up and off chairs, the card table. I pretended our father wasn’t sleeping. He wasn’t even there.

Our father opened his eyes. “Girls, out,” he said.

Betsy hopped, gently, on top of the TV set. Under her feet, a contestant touched a new Buick. Betsy was the tallest thing in the room.

Again, she had picked the center of the universe. She had found the best place to be. I wriggled toward Betsy, getting ready to push her off.

Our father was faster. He lifted her off the TV. Betsy started kicking. He was holding her, in the air, kicking. It was the first father thing I saw him do the whole summer. It was the first thing he did that made him look strong.

He gently set Betsy on the floor. I loved him then, instantly, ridiculously.

Now he would talk to us again; now he would tell us what to do.

But our father didn't say anything to us. He didn't even smile. He stepped away from us as though he thought we were ugly.

I let out a big breath. I wondered how our father felt, watching me and Betsy leave for the beach every day. I imagined how mad he must be, being tired when it was so beautiful outside.

Our father was alone in the den again and I had no idea how to save him.

Our father turned away from us. Betsy shot out of the room. I followed. When we made it to the bathroom, she began to cry.

She leaned into me, her whole face salty. I wanted to help her stop. I frantically scanned the bathroom. Blowdryers, lip gloss, a loofah sponge. The bottle of Fern Encourager was beside my toothbrush. I grabbed it and held it out to her.

"Oh, please," she said.

I poured out some blue on a paper towel and touched her bad hand with it. I knew the Fern Encourager wouldn't work. I knew she didn't think it would, either. But it was all I could think of then, in the bathroom.

"Idiot," she said, softly.

I kept pouring the bottle of Fern Encourager. I poured so the blue dripped off her onto the floor. Betsy squatted and rubbed her bad hand in the blue that was pooling around her feet.

I bet she thought I was stupid. I know I did. But it was just us then in the bathroom. Finally Betsy held her bad hand to me. And she shrugged.

"Do it," she said.

We didn't take the bus this time; we ran the whole way. Betsy dashed up the hill first, sand flying up from her feet like white sparks. When we got to the top, we turned to the sun and I lifted her arm.

She twisted away from me, embarrassed, but I held her arm there, hard. "Higher," I said. "On your toes."

The boys at the ditch turned toward us, but they were too far away, I think, to see anything but that she had kissed some of them by the parking lot.

"Hey," a couple of them began to call. "Hey."

Betsy was frozen in her salute, and the boys began running, slowly toward us. I stood behind her and held her arm so it was closer to the sun.

"Try," I said. "Push."

Betsy closed her eyes. It seemed like she was trying to fling her whole self into that hand. I wrapped my arms around her skinny waist and lifted her, kicking, to the sky.

“Push.”

The boys coming up the hill saw me holding Betsy and started slowing down. I squeezed my sister, tighter, tighter. I waited for something beautiful to come out of her; I waited for anything at all. Then Betsy started to cough and we fell, separate, on the sand.

Betsy was still. I took her hand out of the sand. She kept her face down as I shook the sand off. She must have known there was no difference. And, of course, there wasn't. Because when her hand was out, I could see that it was the same. It was still my sister's bad hand.

The boys began to rush the hill. And they began calling her by the name she had given them. Sally. Sally.

When she heard they were still coming, Betsy sat up, yanked her bad hand back.

“Oh, great,” she said. “Give me something.”

“What?”

“Don't be stupid. Your shirt.”

She snapped up my shirt with her good hand and then I was on the top of that hill in my bikini top, the wind touching my shoulders. Betsy wrapped my shirt around her bad hand in about half a second, whip-fast after years of practice. The boys were coming for us. They were coming. Betsy pulled me. “Let's go,” she said. She took my hand with her good one. Her good hand fit into mine perfectly. It had never fit so well.

“Come on,” she said. And we walked off the beach, all the boys calling Sally, Sally, the whole beach ringing with my name.