

chapter one

By Chance We Met

“Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.”

Anais Nin, Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. 1





Kathy Bird

“It is by chance that we met,
by choice that we became friends.”

ANONYMOUS

For more than thirty years, I have been friends with six women. We met in the autumn of 1981 as freshmen at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, and despite living in different states across the country, we have faithfully reunited for a long weekend nearly every year since graduation.

This year we all reached a milestone birthday, so we expanded our reunion into a weeklong beach celebration worthy of thirty-two years of sharing stories we know by heart but still make us laugh. Perhaps it was turning fifty, perhaps it was an introspection borne of suddenly living my life in the public eye, but this year I felt a keener understanding of just how powerful and precious these enduring friendships are to me.

Even though we are geographically scattered, we have remained in touch by phone, email and our treasured annual reunion since our graduation in 1985. Like all women, we have failed and succeeded, celebrated and mourned, and kept on going. We are from varied backgrounds and faiths, and we have different points of view on many things. But to each of us, our friendship is something sparkling and fine.

We have stood up for one another at our weddings, shared countless photographs of our beautiful children and families, and cheered our successes in career and love and life. We have sustained one another through life's hard and dark times—divorce, the alcoholism of a spouse, autism, difficulties with children and loved ones, disease, and the sudden loss of parents and a precious sister. Through it all, we have been a balm for sorrow and despair, or just made one another laugh, often at the same



time. Whether it's a cup of coffee, a casserole at the door, or a calm, trusted voice on the phone, real friends have an instinct for what is necessary in the moment.

I consider it one of life's greatest blessings to have true and constant friends, the kind that you both weather and savor life's seasons with. Over the past decades, the questions and topics have certainly changed—at eighteen the conversations usually began with “What do you think he meant by that?” and “Why hasn't he called?” In other words, it was all about the boys.

This was the 1980s, long before cell phones and social media. We had to make commitments for “real dates” well in advance, and wait for (or have the courage to make) phone calls on landlines, something our own children can't even imagine. There was no expectation of an immediate text response to a chance meeting or flirtation, and there was more patience and vulnerability involved for all parties. But looking back and, at the risk of sounding like an old lady, I'll say it: I think it was better then.

Our friendships helped make the drama of the dating game less

excruciating, and we soothed one another's broken hearts over pitchers of margaritas, chips and salsa, and lots of unkind laughter as we made fun of the cad's nose or how he really did look kind of funny when he ran (which was occasionally awkward when the couple got back together).

By our mid-twenties, the conversations had evolved into a heady, utterly self-centered mix of career aspirations and relationships, still heavily weighted toward romance because that's always more exciting to discuss with your girlfriends. We toasted new jobs and promotions, analyzed the smart but quirky guy we met at the airport, and the personality disorder of the terrible boss. We fixed each other up with cute coworkers and, in this category, I get to take credit for one happy marriage—okay, I was technically introducing Blair to Steve's *friend*, but they wouldn't have met without my Emma-like interventions!

“The older we get, the more we understand that the women who know and love us—and love us despite what they know about us—are the joists that hold up the house of our existence.” Anna Quindlen, *Lots of Candles, Plenty of Cake*

In our thirties and forties, kids entered the fray and we rejoiced and commiserated over the often-overwhelming experience of motherhood. We one-upped each other with graphic labor and delivery dramas and embarrassing potty-training disasters, gleefully scorned the hyper-competitive sports moms, and traded notes on how to secretly lurk on our teens' Facebook and Instagram accounts. Through it all, a great sense of humor and an appreciation of the absurd have connected us through our shared experiences. That, and knowing when to keep your mouth shut!

Speaking of maintaining a sense of humor, my husband Rand's campaign for the US Senate (after nearly twenty years as a doctor in peaceful Bowling Green, Kentucky) certainly required that of me. Raising a family amid the contact sport of American politics, I have had to call on reserves of strength and calm that I didn't realize I had, and I've leaned hard on my friends.

I've also found guidance and courage in my faith, my family, and even my history. As I grow older, I can feel the experiences of my mother and grandmother resonating in me, giving me a new sense of bravery and purpose. The lifetime of anecdotes, stories, and family lore passed down from my mother, aunts, and grandmother have become more meaningful and real to me now.

Just remembering my grandmother Julia's joyful smile as she greeted me with a merry "'Tis Herself!" in her musical Irish accent never fails to fill me with a sense of optimism and assurance. She was a small woman who lived a life that might appear hard and humble from the outside, but her heart and her hopes were huge, and they inspire me still. I feel a little flame of faith and hopefulness every time I remember her, and it makes me wonder if there are more than genes woven into the strands of our DNA—aren't the stories and inspiration of our loved ones, their pain and joy and wisdom, woven into us as well?

So this year, I asked each friend for a favor before we met for our reunion. Tell me a story, I asked each of them. Tell me about a woman who has influenced you, guided you, and fostered your sense of joy, of possibility, of courage. I love these women, my friends. They are each extraordinary. And after more than three decades of friendship, I wanted to find out just what was woven into their DNA. I had an unshakeable feeling that their mothers and grandmothers would have experiences and histories that were fascinating and inspiring.

I was right, and that is the genesis of this book. It is a tender salute to Julia O'Toole Wessell, my Irish immigrant grandmother, who had only an eighth-grade education and worked as a maid for most of her life, but who lived her American dream with an unsinkable optimism and verve that I feel in my very bones. I try to live my life in a way that reflects her faith and buoyant spirit. It is a toast to my dear friends, both those who appear in this book and others, whose lives have intersected mine and made it stronger, finer, truer. And it is a tribute to my beloved mother, Lillian Ashby, who is—always—my touchstone.

The women in these stories, while from a range of backgrounds



and cultural experiences, share traits of courage, faith, optimism and an unconquerable love of family. They are the Mississippi matriarch who, at age thirty, built a school for disabled children next to her home and helped to found a new church at eighty; the Turkish coffee girl who dared to sail across the ocean to define her own future; and the quiet mother who stayed up nights sewing a prom dress just like the one in the store her daughter dreamed of, but she could not afford to buy. They are our mothers and grandmothers: our first and most powerful sources of love and inspiration, the keystones on which we, so fragile at first, are constructed.

One of the wonderful surprises of writing this book was that, once I got the conversation started, each friend had a truly extraordinary and compelling figure in her life whose story begged to be told, even if on the surface she appeared to be just an everyday woman—a mother or grandmother, but nobody special.

To accompany each story, I've also selected quotes and poetry from some of my literary heroines, the writers and characters that have fueled my imagination since early childhood. I have been in love with books

*“Remember well, and bear in mind,
a constant friend is hard to find.”*

Laura Ingalls Wilder
Farm Journalist: Writings from the Ozarks

since I was a very young girl. Some of my earliest, sweetest memories are of my mother taking me to the library as a preschooler, and the way those books felt as I clutched them in my arms, their musty smell tickling my nose and hinting at all the secret worlds and beautiful pictures I would find inside.

My first literary heroine was Laura Ingalls Wilder, from whom I learned early lessons in bravery and resilience. In elementary school, I read and re-read her *Little House on the Prairie* books until the spines cracked. During Saturday sleepovers, my best friend Lally and I would create a cozy cabin in the basement of her house and play “Pioneer” for hours, rocking our baby Carrie by the fire in between dangerous treks into the Big Woods (a dark hall lined with old water skis) to help Pa fight off vicious panthers and bears.

I have included Laura Ingalls Wilder, along with many of my favorite writers, from Charlotte Brontë to Barbara Kingsolver, in this book. Like my friends, and like their mothers and grandmothers, they are diverse in outlook and experience but singular in that I have learned from, and been inspired by, them all.

I hope that these stories, poems and quotes will not only inspire you, but also remind you of a woman in your own life—a mother, a grandmother, an aunt, a sister or a friend. I believe that if we take the time to listen, everyone has an intriguing story to tell, a truth to unveil, or a lesson to teach. Too often we don’t recognize the significance of our teacher in the moment. Sometimes, her gifts are only revealed when we remember her.



Gennie Darisme

“... My parents, and librarians along the way, taught me about the space between words; about the margins, where so many juicy moments of life and spirit and friendship could be found.”

Anne Lamott
Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith