Curtis Sittenfeld is the author of two previous novels, *Prep*, which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, and *The Man of My Dreams*. She is married and lives in the USA. For more information about Curtis Sittenfeld and her novels, please visit her website at www.curtissittenfeld.com

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Praise for *American Wife*

'This is such an accomplished work of fiction. Becoming far more than a Bush administration equivalent to Joe Klein's *Primary Colors*, this is a thoughtful and compelling examination of the mechanics of family and marriage. Numerous scenes – a family car outing, the body language of a failing marriage, the decline of an elderly relative – display a shrewd universality . . . Knowing and knowledgeable, yet also inventive and original, *American Wife* is a thrilling combination of history and surprises'
MARK LAWSON, *GUARDIAN*

'A quietly riveting parable . . . thought-provoking, entertaining and full of subtle reflections on class and marriage'
HEPHZIBAH ANDERSON, *DAILY MAIL*

'A powerful, utterly compelling and strangely moving fictional account of a First Lady who bears more than a passing resemblance to Laura Bush. The real revelation here, though, is how the past so utterly shapes the future – and determines true happiness'
DAILY MIRROR

'Sittenfeld's accomplishment is the skilled and sensitive depiction of how Alice navigates her way through the complications in her marriage, the evolution of American womanhood through the second half of the twentieth century and into the 21st, and the challenges of dealing with an uncontrollable, often malevolent world . . . this is one of the finest American novels of 2008'
NEW STATESMAN

'Thoroughly enjoyable. The plot is beautifully paced, the writing quick, clear, absorbing. It is also a heady brew: a damaged heroine, a dashing but flawed beau, tragedy, violence, unrequited love and a lesbian grandmother – all the ingredients for a sweeping saga . . . As an insight into the fishbowl of contemporary politics, it is remarkably sagacious. Sittenfeld is far from blindly sympathetic, but she is very insightful'
THE TIMES

'Not so much a *West Wing*-style exposé as a sympathetic and nuanced portrait of an intelligent woman who has ended up implicated in possibly the worst US presidency in history . . . Sittenfeld has created a provocative picture of the complex relationship between public and private life. It is a testament to her art as a novelist that the reader never loses a sense of affection for Alice, even while wishing her quiet integrity could have been more forceful'
OBSERVER

'Embellished with lost love, abortion, blackmail and even a lesbian grandmother, it's daring and unashamedly commercial . . . Alice Lindgren is sympathetic, light-footed and convincing . . . a humanising rather than humiliating examination of a conflicted woman and her career-defining marriage. It steers clear of becoming a political polemic but still manages to ask pertinent questions'
SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

'As a portraitist in prose, Sittenfeld never deviates from sympathetic respect for her high-profile subject . . . Curtis Sittenfeld surely did not intend to create, in this mostly amiable, entertaining novel, anything so ambitious – or so presumptuous – as a political/cultural allegory in the 19th-century mode, yet *American Wife* might be deconstructed as a parable of America in the years of the second Bush presidency: the "American wife" is in fact the American people, or at least those millions of Americans who voted for a less-than-qualified president in two elections – the all-forgiving enabler for whom the bromide "love" excuses all'
JOYCE CAROL OATES, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

'It is not easy to write fiction inspired by current events, especially if those events involve politics. The stage is too grand, the spotlight too bright. Our public life already is ridiculously flagrant, far too obvious and overwrought for good fiction. And so, all too often, political novels descend from satire into cheap farce. Such books can be entertaining and sometimes cathartic but usually not very nourishing. *American Wife* is something else entirely – the opposite of a political satire, in fact – with a languorous pace and a fierce literary integrity: Alice and Charlie

are complete creations, unique in their humanity – Alice especially . . . Sittenfeld's audacious gamble is that she can make the reader understand why someone as civilized as Alice would fall for this force of nature and stay with him despite grave misgivings about his public persona. And it is Sittenfeld's triumph that we do . . . Curtis Sittenfeld has provided a plausible secret history of an American embarrassment – and a grand entertainment'

Joe Klein, *Time*

'Sittenfeld writes in the sharp, realistic tradition of Philip Roth and Richard Ford – clear, unpretentious prose; metaphors so spot-on you barely notice them'

Time Out New York

'I read *American Wife* in just two or three delicious sittings, struck by the granular clarity of the author's descriptions and the down-to-earth believability of the story, bewitched by the charming, frustrating woman at the centre of it'

New York Observer

'Smart and sophisticated . . . At its core, this is a story of marriage, any marriage, and the compromises that chip away at dreamy love to keep the union alive . . . Sittenfeld has an astonishing gift for creating characters'

Washington Post

'Curtis Sittenfeld is an amazing writer, and *American Wife* is a brave and moving novel about the intersection of private and public life in America. Ambitious and humble at the same time, Sittenfeld refuses to trivialize or simplify people, whether real or imagined'

Richard Russo, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Empire Falls*

'My favourite book of the year'

Kate Atkinson

'I was utterly absorbed in this story of a political marriage and a wife who has her own reasons. Curtis Sittenfeld has thrown a powerful light on small town America and its misunderstood values'

Linda Grant

Curtis Sittenfeld

AMERICAN WIFE

A Novel

BLACK SWAN

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For Matt Carlson,
my American husband

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American Wife is a work of fiction loosely inspired by the life of an American first lady. Her husband, his parents, and certain prominent members of his administration are recognizable. All other characters in the novel are products of the author's imagination, as are the incidents concerning them.

AMERICAN WIFE

PROLOGUE

June 2007, the White House

HAVE I MADE terrible mistakes?

In bed beside me, my husband sleeps, his breathing deep and steady. Early in our marriage, really in the first weeks, when he snored, I'd say his name aloud, and when he responded, I'd apologetically request that he turn onto his side. But it didn't take long for him to convey that he'd prefer if I simply shoved him; no conversation was necessary, and he didn't want to be awakened. "Just roll me over," he said, and grinned. "Give me a good hard push." This felt rude, but I learned to do it.

Tonight, though, he isn't snoring, so I cannot blame my insomnia on him. Nor can I blame the temperature of the room (sixty-six degrees during the night, seventy degrees during the day, when neither of us spends almost any time here). A white-noise machine hums discreetly from its perch on a shelf, and the shades and draperies are drawn to keep us in thick darkness. There are always, in our lives now, security concerns, but these have become routine, and more than once I've thought we must be far safer than a typical middle-class couple in the suburbs; they have a burglar alarm, or perhaps a Jack Russell terrier, a spotlight at one exterior corner of the house, and we have snipers and helicopters, armored cars, rocket launchers and sharpshooters on the roof. The risks for us are greater, yes, but the level of protection

is incomparable—absurd at times. As with so much else, I tell myself it is our positions that are being deferred to, that we are simply symbols; who we are as individuals hardly matters. It would embarrass me otherwise to think of all the expense and effort put forth on our behalf. If not us, I repeat to myself, then others would play this same role.

For several nights, I've had trouble sleeping. It's not going to bed in the first place that's the challenge: I feel all the normal stages of weariness, the lack of focus that becomes more pronounced with each half hour past ten o'clock, and when I climb beneath the covers, usually a little after eleven, sometimes my husband is still in the bathroom or looking over a last few papers, talking to me from across the room, and I drift away. When he comes to bed, he cradles me, I rise back out from the sea of sleep, we say "I love you" to each other, and in the blurriness of this moment, I believe that something essential is still ours; that our bodies in darkness are what's true and most everything else—the exposure and the obligations and the controversies—is fabrication and pretense. When I wake around two, however, I fear the reverse.

I am not sure whether waking at two is better or worse than waking at four. On the one hand, I have the luxury of knowing that eventually, I'll fall back to sleep; on the other hand, the night seems so long. Usually, I've been dreaming of the past: of people I once knew who are now gone, or people with whom my relationship has changed to the point of unrecognizability. There is so much I've experienced that I never could have imagined.

Did I jeopardize my husband's presidency today? Did I do something I should have done years ago? Or perhaps I did both, and that's the problem—that I lead a life in opposition to itself.

PART I

1272 Amity Lane

IN 1954, THE summer before I entered third grade, my grandmother mistook Andrew Imhof for a girl. I'd accompanied my grandmother to the grocery store—that morning, while reading a novel that mentioned hearts of palm, she'd been seized by a desire to have some herself and had taken me along on the walk to town—and it was in the canned-goods section that we encountered Andrew, who was with his mother. Not being of the same generation, Andrew's mother and my grandmother weren't friends, but they knew each other the way people in Riley, Wisconsin, did. Andrew's mother was the one who approached us, setting her hand against her chest and saying to my grandmother, "Mrs Lindgren, it's Florence Imhof. How are you?"

Andrew and I had been classmates for as long as we'd been going to school, but we merely eyed each other without speaking. We both were eight. As the adults chatted, he picked up a can of peas and held it by securing it between his flat palm and his chin, and I wondered if he was showing off.

This was when my grandmother shoved me a little. "Alice, say hello to Mrs Imhof." As I'd been taught, I extended my hand. "And isn't your daughter darling," my grandmother continued, gesturing toward Andrew, "but I don't believe I know her name."

A silence ensued during which I'm pretty sure Mrs Imhof

was deciding how to correct my grandmother. At last, touching her son's shoulder, Mrs Imhof said, "This is Andrew. He and Alice are in the same class over at the school."

My grandmother squinted. "*Andrew,* did you say?" She even turned her head, angling her ear as if she were hard of hearing, though I knew she wasn't. She seemed to willfully refuse the pardon Mrs Imhof had offered, and I wanted to tap my grandmother's arm, to tug her over so her face was next to mine and say, "Granny, he's a *boy*!" It had never occurred to me that Andrew looked like a girl—little about Andrew Imhof had occurred to me at that time in my life—but it was true that he had unusually long eyelashes framing hazel eyes, as well as light brown hair that had gotten a bit shaggy over the summer. However, his hair was long only for that time and for a boy; it was still far shorter than mine, and there was nothing feminine about the chinos or red-and-white-checked shirt he wore.

"Andrew is the younger of our two sons," Mrs Imhof said, and her voice contained a new briskness, the first hint of irritation. "His older brother is Pete."

"Is that right?" My grandmother finally appeared to grasp the situation, but grasping it did not seem to have made her repentant. She leaned forward and nodded at Andrew—he still was holding the peas—and said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. You be sure my granddaughter behaves herself at school. You can report back to me if she doesn't."

Andrew had said nothing thus far—it was not clear he'd been paying enough attention to the conversation to understand that his gender was in dispute—but at this he beamed: a closed-mouth but enormous smile, one that I felt implied, erroneously, that I was some sort of mischief-maker and he would indeed be keeping his eye on me. My grandmother, who harbored a lifelong admiration for mischief, smiled back at him like a conspirator. After she and Mrs Imhof said goodbye to each other (our search for hearts of palm had, to my grandmother's disappointment if not her surprise, proved

unsuccessful), we turned in the opposite direction from them. I took my grandmother's hand and whispered to her in what I hoped was a chastening tone, "*Granny.*"

Not in a whisper at all, my grandmother said, "You don't think that child looks like a girl? He's downright pretty!"

"Shhh!"

"Well, it's not his fault, but I can't believe I'm the first one to make that mistake. His eyelashes are an inch long."

As if to verify her claim, we both turned around. By then we were thirty feet from the Imhofs, and Mrs Imhof had her back to us, leaning toward a shelf. But Andrew was facing my grandmother and me. He still was smiling slightly, and when my eyes met his, he lifted his eyebrows twice.

"He's flirting with you!" my grandmother exclaimed.

"What does 'flirting' mean?"

She laughed. "It's when a person likes you, so they try to catch your attention."

Andrew Imhof liked me? Surely, if the information had been delivered by an adult—and not just any adult but my wily grandmother—it had to be true. Andrew liking me seemed neither thrilling nor appalling; mostly, it just seemed unexpected. And then, having considered the idea, I dismissed it. My grandmother knew about some things, but not the social lives of eight-year-olds. After all, she hadn't even recognized Andrew as a boy.

IN THE HOUSE I grew up in, we were four: my grandmother, my parents, and me. On my father's side, I was a third generation only child, which was greatly unusual in those days. While I certainly would have liked a sibling, I knew from an early age not to mention it—my mother had miscarried twice by the time I was in first grade, and those were just the pregnancies I knew about, the latter occurring when she was five months along. Though the miscarriages weighted my parents with a quiet sadness, our family as it was seemed evenly

balanced. At dinner, we each sat on one side of the rectangular table in the dining room; heading up the sidewalk to church, we could walk in pairs; in the summer, we could split a box of Yummi-Freez ice-cream bars; and we could play euchre or bridge, both of which they taught me when I was ten and which we often enjoyed on Friday and Saturday nights.

Although my grandmother possessed a rowdy streak, my parents were exceedingly considerate and deferential to each other, and for years I believed this mode to be the norm among families and saw all other dynamics as an aberration. My best friend from early girlhood was Dena Janaszewski, who lived across the street, and I was constantly shocked by what I perceived to be Dena's, and really all the Janaszewskis', crudeness and volume: They hollered to one another from between floors and out windows; they ate off one another's plates at will, and Dena and her two younger sisters constantly grabbed and poked at one another's braids and bottoms; they entered the bathroom when it was occupied; and more shocking than the fact that her father once said *goddamn* in my presence—his exact words, entering the kitchen, were "Who took my goddamn hedge clippers?"—was the fact that neither Dena, her mother, nor her sisters seemed to even notice.

In my own family, life was calm. My mother and father occasionally disagreed—a few times a year he would set his mouth in a firm straight line, or the corners of her eyes would draw down with a kind of wounded disappointment—but it happened infrequently, and when it did, it seemed unnecessary to express aloud. Merely sensing discord, whether in the role of inflictor or recipient, pained them enough.

My father had two mottoes, the first of which was "Fools' names and fools' faces often appear in public places." The second was "Whatever you are, be a good one." I never knew the source of the first motto, but the second came from Abraham Lincoln. By profession, my father worked as the branch manager of a bank, but his great passion—his hobby,

I suppose you'd say, which seems to be a thing not many people have anymore unless you count searching the Internet or talking on cell phones—was bridges. He especially admired the majesty of the Golden Gate Bridge and once told me that during its construction, the contractor had arranged, at great expense, for an enormous safety net to run beneath it. "That's called employer responsibility," my father said. "He wasn't just worried about profit." My father closely followed the building of both the Mackinac Bridge in Michigan—he called it the Mighty Mac—and later, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, which, upon completion in 1964, would connect Brooklyn and Staten Island and be the largest suspension bridge in the world.

My parents both had grown up in Milwaukee and met in 1943, when my mother was eighteen and working in a glove factory, and my father was twenty and working at a branch of Wisconsin State Bank & Trust. They struck up a conversation in a soda shop, and were engaged by the time my father enlisted in the army. After the war ended, they married and moved forty-five miles west to Riley, my father's mother in tow, so he could open a branch of the bank there. My mother never again held a job. As a housewife, she had a light touch—she did not seem overburdened or cranky, she didn't remind the rest of us how much she did—and yet she sewed many of her own and my clothes, kept the house meticulous, and always prepared our meals. The food we ate was acceptable more often than delicious; she favored pan-broiled steak, or noodle and cheese loafs, and she taught me her recipes in a low-key, literal way, never explaining why I needed to know them. Why *wouldn't* I need to know them? She was endlessly patient and a purveyor of small, sweet gestures: Without commenting, she'd leave pretty ribbons or peppermint candies on my bed or, on my bureau, a single flower in a three-inch vase.

My mother was the second youngest of eight siblings, none of whom we saw frequently. She had five brothers and

two sisters, and only one of her sisters, my Aunt Marie, who was married to a mechanic and had six children, had ever come to Riley. When my mother's parents were still alive, we'd drive to visit them in Milwaukee, but they died within ten days of each other when I was six, and after that we'd go years without seeing my aunts, uncles, and cousins. My impression was that their houses all were small and crowded, filled with the squabbling of children and the smell of sour milk, and the men were terse and the women were harried; in a way that was not cruel, none of them appeared to be particularly interested in us. We visited less and less the older I got, and my father's mother never went along, although she'd ask us to pick up schnecken from her favorite German bakery. In my childhood, there was a relieved feeling that came over me when we drove away from one of my aunt's or uncle's houses, a feeling I tried to suppress because I knew even then that it was unchristian. Without anyone in my immediate family saying so, I came to understand that my mother had chosen us; she had chosen our life together over one like her siblings', and the fact that she'd been able to choose made her lucky.

Like my mother, my grandmother did not hold a job after the move to Riley, but she didn't really join in the upkeep of the house, either. In retrospect, I'm surprised that her unhelpfulness did not elicit resentment from my mother, but it truly seems that it didn't. I think my mother found her mother-in-law entertaining, and in a person who entertains us, there is much we forgive. Most afternoons, when I returned home from school, the two of them were in the kitchen, my mother paused between chores with an apron on or a dust rag over her shoulder, listening intently as my grandmother recounted a magazine article she'd just finished about, say, the mysterious murder of a mobster's girlfriend in Chicago.

My grandmother never vacuumed or swept, and only rarely, if my parents weren't home or my mother was sick, would she cook, preparing dishes notable mostly for their lack of nutrition: An entire dinner could consist of fried

cheese or half-raw pancakes. What my grandmother did do was read; this was the primary way she spent her time. It wasn't unusual for her to complete a book a day—she preferred novels, especially the Russian masters, but she also read histories, biographies, and pulpy mysteries—and for hours and hours every morning and afternoon, she sat either in the living room or on top of her bed (the bed would be made, and she would be fully dressed), turning pages and smoking Pall Malls. From early on, I understood that the household view of my grandmother, which is to say my parents' view, was not simply that she was both smart and frivolous but that her smartness and her frivolity were intertwined. That she could tell you all about the curse of the Hope Diamond, or about cannibalism in the Donner Party—it wasn't that she ought to be ashamed, exactly, to possess such knowledge, but there was no reason for her to be proud of it, either. The tidbits she relayed were interesting, but they had little to do with real life: paying a mortgage, scrubbing a pan, keeping warm in the biting cold of Wisconsin winters.

I'm pretty sure that rather than resisting this less than flattering view of herself, my grandmother shared it. In another era, I imagine she'd have made an excellent book critic for a newspaper, or even an English professor, but she'd never attended college, and neither had my parents. My grandmother's husband, my father's father, had died early, and as a young widow, my grandmother had gone to work in a ladies' dress shop, waiting on Milwaukee matrons who, as she told it, had money but not taste. She'd held this job until the age of fifty—fifty was older then than it is now—at which point she'd moved to Riley with my newlywed parents.

My grandmother borrowed the majority of the books she read from the library, but she bought some, too, and these she kept in her bedroom on a shelf so full that every ledge contained two rows; it reminded me of a girl in my class, Pauline Geisseler, whose adult teeth had grown in before her baby teeth fell out and who would sometimes, with a total

lack of self-consciousness, open her mouth for us at recess. My grandmother almost never read aloud to me, but she regularly took me to the library—I read and reread the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, and both the Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys series—and my grandmother often summarized the grown-up books she'd read in tantalizing ways: *A well-bred married woman falls in love with a man who is not her husband; after her husband learns of the betrayal, she has no choice but to throw herself in the path of an oncoming train . . .*

Such plots infused my grandmother's bedroom with an atmosphere of intrigue enhanced by her few but carefully chosen belongings, my favorite of which was a bust of Nefertiti that rested on her bureau. The bust had been given to my grandmother by her friend Gladys Wycomb, who lived in Chicago, and it was a replica of the ancient Egyptian one by the sculptor Thutmose. Nefertiti wore a black headdress and a jeweled collar, and she gazed forward with great composure. Her name, my grandmother explained, translated as "the beautiful woman has come."

Beside the bust were framed pictures: a photograph of my grandmother as a girl in a white dress, standing next to her parents in 1900 (so very long ago!); one of my parents at their wedding in which my father wore his army uniform and my mother wore a double-breasted sheath dress (though the photo was black and white, I knew because I'd asked my mother that her dress was lavender); a photo of my grandmother's deceased husband, my grandfather, whose name had been Harvey and who was caught here squinting into the sun; and finally, one of me, my class picture from second grade, in which I was smiling a bit frantically, my hair parted in the center and pulled into pigtails.

Beyond her books, her photos, the Nefertiti bust, and her perfume bottle and cosmetics, my grandmother's bedroom was actually rather plain. She slept, as I did, on a single bed, hers covered by a yellow spread on which she heaped plaid blankets in the winter. There was little on her walls, and

her bedside table rarely held anything besides a lamp, a book, a clock, and an ashtray. Yet this was the place, smelling of cigarette smoke and Shalimar perfume, that seemed to me a passageway to adventure, the lobby of adulthood. In my grandmother's lair, I sensed the experiences and passions of all the people whose lives were depicted in the novels she read.

I don't know if my grandmother was consciously trying to make me a reader, too, but she did allow me to pick up any of her books, even ones I had small hope of understanding (I began *The Portrait of a Lady* at the age of nine, then quit after two pages) or ones my mother, had she known, would have forbidden (at the age of eleven, I not only finished *Peyton Place* but immediately reread it). Meanwhile, my parents owned almost no books except for a set of maroon-spined *Encyclopaedia Britannica*s we kept in the living room. My father subscribed to Riley's morning and evening newspapers, *The Riley Citizen* and *The Riley Courier,* as well as to *Esquire,* though my grandmother seemed to read the magazine more thoroughly than he did. My mother didn't read, and to this day I'm not sure if her disinclination was due to a lack of time or interest.

Because I was the daughter of a bank manager, I believed us to be well off; I was past thirty by the time I realized this was not a view any truly well-off American would have shared. Riley was in the exact center of Benton County, and Benton County contained two competing cheese factories: Fassbinder's out on De Soto Way, and White River Dairy, which was closer to the town of Houghton, though plenty of people who worked at White River still lived in Riley because Riley, with nearly forty thousand residents, had far more attractions and conveniences, including a movie theater. Many of my classmates' parents worked at one of the factories; other kids came from small farms, a few from big farms—Freddy Zurbrugg, who in third grade had laughed so hard he'd started crying when our teacher used the word *pianist,* lived on the fourth largest dairy farm in the state—but still,

being from town seemed to me infinitely more sophisticated than being from the country. Riley was laid out on a grid, flanked on the west by the Riley River, with the commercial area occupying the south section of town and the residential streets heading north up the hill. As a child, I knew the names of all the families who lived on Amity Lane: the Weckwerths, whose son, David, was the first baby I ever held; the Noffkes, whose cat, Zeus, scratched my cheek when I was five, drawing blood and instilling in me a lifelong antipathy for all cats; the Cernochs, who in hunting season would hang from a tree in their front yard the deer they'd shot. Calvary Lutheran Church, which my family attended, was on Adelphia Street; my elementary school and junior high, located on the same campus, were six blocks from my house; and the new high school—completed in 1948 but still referred to as "new" when I started there in 1959—was the largest building in town, a grand brick structure supported in the front by six massive Corinthian columns and featured on postcards sold at Utzenstorf's drugstore. All of what I thought of as Riley proper occupied under ten square miles, and then in every direction around us were fields and prairies and pastures, rolling hills, forests of beech and sugar maple trees.

Attending school with children who still used outhouses, or who didn't eat food that wasn't a product of their own land and animals, did not make me haughty. On the contrary, mindful of what I perceived as my advantages, I tried to be extra-polite to my classmates. I couldn't have known it at the time, but far in the future, in a life I never could have anticipated for myself, this was an impulse that would serve me well.

FOR A FEW years, I hardly thought of that day at the grocery store with my grandmother, Andrew Imhof, and his mother. The two people who, in my opinion, ought to have been embarrassed by it—my grandmother, for making the error about Andrew's gender, and Andrew, for having the error made

about him (if any of our classmates had caught wind of it, they'd have mocked him relentlessly)—seemed unconcerned. I continued going to school with Andrew, but we rarely spoke. Once in fourth grade, before lunch, he was the person selected by our teacher to stand in front of the classroom and call up the other students to get in line; this was a ritual that occurred multiple times every day. First Andrew said, "If your name begins with B," which meant his friend Bobby could line up right behind him, and the next thing Andrew said was "If you're wearing a red ribbon in your hair." I was the only girl that day who was. Also, I was facing forward when Andrew called this out, a single ponytail gathered behind my head, meaning he must have noticed the ribbon earlier. He hadn't said anything, he hadn't yanked on it as some of the other boys did, but he'd noticed.

And then in sixth grade, my friend Dena and I were walking one Saturday afternoon from downtown back to our houses, and we saw Andrew coming in the other direction, riding his bicycle south on Commerce Street. It was a cold day, Andrew wore a parka and a navy blue watch cap, and his cheeks were flushed. He was sailing past us when Dena yelled out, "Andrew Imhof has great balls of fire!"

I looked at her in horror.

To my surprise, and I think to Dena's, Andrew braked. The expression on his face when he turned around was one of amusement. "What did you just say?" he asked. Andrew was wiry then, still shorter than both Dena and me.

"I meant like in the song!" Dena protested. "You know: 'Goodness, gracious . . .'" It was true that while her own mother was an Elvis fan, Dena's favorite singer was Jerry Lee Lewis. The revelation the following spring that he'd married his thirteen-year-old cousin, while alarming to most people, would only intensify Dena's crush, giving her hope; should things not work out between Jerry Lee and Myra Gale Brown, Dena told me, then she herself would realistically be eligible to date him by eighth grade.

"Did you come all the way here on your bike?" Dena said to Andrew. The Imhofs lived on a corn farm a few miles outside of town.

"Bobby's cocker spaniel had puppies last night," Andrew said. "They're about the size of your two hands." He was still on the bike, standing with it between his legs, and he held his own hands apart a few inches to show how small; he was wearing tan mittens. I had not paid much attention to Andrew lately, and he seemed definitively older to me—able, for the first time that I could remember, to have an actual conversation instead of merely smiling and sneaking glances. In fact, conscious of his presence in a way I'd never been before, I was the one who seemed to have nothing much to say.

"Can we see the puppies?" Dena asked.

Andrew shook his head. "Bobby's mother says they shouldn't be touched a lot until they're older. Their feet and noses are real pink."

"I want to see their pink noses!" Dena cried. This seemed a little suspect to me; the Janaszewskis had a boxer to whom Dena paid negligible attention.

"They hardly do anything now but eat and sleep," Andrew said. "Their eyes aren't even open."

Aware that I had not contributed to the conversation so far, I extended a white paper bag in Andrew's direction. "Want some licorice?" Dena and I had been downtown on a candy-buying expedition.

"Andrew," Dena said as he removed his mittens and stuck one hand in the bag, "I heard your brother scored a touchdown last night."

"You girls weren't at the game?"

Dena and I shook our heads.

"The team's real good this year. One of the offensive linemen, Earl Yager, weighs two hundred and eighty pounds."

"That's disgusting," Dena said. She helped herself to a rope of my licorice though she'd bought some of her own. "When I'm in high school, I'm going to be a cheerleader, and

I'm going to wear my uniform to school every Friday, no matter how cold it is."

"What about you, Alice?" Andrew gripped the handles of his bicycle, angling the front wheel toward me. "You gonna be a cheerleader, too?" We looked at each other, his eyes their greenish-brown and his eyelashes ridiculously long, and I thought that my grandmother may have been right after all—even if Andrew wasn't flirting with you, his eyelashes were.

"Alice will still be a Girl Scout in high school," Dena said. She herself had dropped out of our troop over the summer, and while I was leaning in that direction, I officially remained a member.

"I'm going to be in Future Teachers of America," I said.

Dena smirked. "You mean because you're so smart?" This was a particularly obnoxious comment; as Dena knew, I had wanted to be a teacher since we'd been in second grade with Miss Clougherty, who was not only kind and pretty but had read *Caddie Woodlawn* aloud to us, which then became my favorite book. For years, Dena and I had pretended we were teachers who coincidentally both happened to be named Miss Clougherty, and we'd gotten Dena's sisters, Marjorie and Peggy, to be our students. As with Girl Scouts, playing school was an activity Dena had lost interest in before I did.

Dena turned back to Andrew. "Tell Bobby to let us come over and play with his puppies. We promise to be gentle."

"You can tell him yourself." Andrew pulled on his mittens and set his feet back on the pedals of his bicycle. "See you girls later."

THAT MONDAY, DENA wrote Andrew a note. *What is your favorite food?* the note said. *What is your favorite season? Who do you like better, Ed Sullivan or Sid Caesar?* And, like an afterthought: *Who is your favorite girl in our class?*

She didn't mention the note before delivering it, but when a few days had passed without a response, she was too

agitated not to tell me. Hearing what she'd done made me agitated, too, like we were preparing to sprint against each other and she'd taken off before I knew the race had started. But I wasn't sure feeling this way was within my rights—why shouldn't Dena write Andrew a note?—so I said nothing. Besides, as three and then four days passed and Andrew sent no reply, my distress turned into sympathy. I was as relieved as Dena when at last a lined piece of notebook paper, folded into a hard, tiny square, appeared in her desk.

Mashed potatoes, it said in careful print.

Summer.

I do not watch those shows, prefer Spin and Marty on The Mickey Mouse Club.

Sylvia Eberbach, also Alice.

Sylvia Eberbach was the smallest girl in the sixth grade, a factory worker's daughter with pale skin and blond hair who, when I look back, I suspect had dyslexia; in English class, whenever the teacher made her read aloud, half the students would correct her. Alice, of course, was me. Surely, to this day, Andrew's answers represent the most earnest, honest document I have ever seen. What possible incentive did he have for telling the truth? Perhaps he didn't know any better.

Dena and I read his replies standing in the hall after lunch, before the bell rang for class. Seeing that line—*Sylvia Eberbach, also Alice*—felt like such a gift, a promise of a nebulously happy future; all the agitation that had consumed me after learning Dena had sent the letter went away. Me—he liked me. I didn't even mind sharing his affection with Sylvia. "Should I keep the note?" I said. This was logical, my ascent over Dena clear and firm. But she gave me a sharp look and pulled away the piece of paper. By the end of the school day, which was less than two hours later, I learned not from Dena herself but from Rhonda Ostermann, whose desk was next to mine, that Andrew and Dena were going steady. And indeed as I left the school building to go home, I saw them standing by the bus stop, holding hands.