



friends for life

Female friendship, the story goes, must be
fraught with fighting and jealousy.

Ann Patchett tells another story: one of a sweet,
supportive bond that's nearly 50 years strong.



Illustrations by Gracia Lam



While I was hiking alone in Utah last summer, a chicken crossed my path. She turned her head, pretending not to notice me, but didn't run off. I'd never spent time in Utah, and I didn't know if loose chickens were common at high altitudes. I pulled out my phone and called my friend Tavia.

"You can't take a picture, can you?" she asked, knowing full well the only phone I have is a 15-year-old flip phone that I save for things like hiking alone in Utah. It doesn't take pictures. I am, however, perfectly capable of describing a chicken. I told her it was a mottled brown, full-size, some white spots around the neck. I asked if it could be a prairie chicken.

"Almost impossible," she said. "They're extremely rare." After a few more questions—what was my altitude? What did her head look like?—she told me it was a grouse, maybe a sharp-tailed, maybe a sage. Then, since we were on the phone anyway, she asked how my mother was doing.

If I were on a game show, Tavia Cathcart would be my lifeline. There is nothing in the natural world she doesn't know. She has hunted for wildflowers in Patagonia and led groups of people straight up the side of a mountain in Mexico to see millions of monarch butterflies. She runs a nature preserve in Kentucky, writes plant-identification guides, and hosts a gardening show on Kentucky Educational Television that was just nominated for an Emmy. She is the polymath of plant life. We've been best friends since we were 7.

Tavia says the first time she saw me ("The first time I really saw you"), we were in a dance class. She says I was trying to hide behind my mother's knees. I don't remember this, but that doesn't matter, because Tavia and I share our memories: She remembers half and I remember half. What's certain is we were born in Los Angeles in the month of December in 1963. We both have one older sister. Our parents both divorced around the same time. My mother got custody of me and my sister and moved us to Nashville. Tavia's father got custody of her and her sister and moved them to Nashville. That was where we met, in Catholic school, in second grade.

These would be fairly eye-popping coincidences for an adult, but for children they were a call to be soul sisters, a fact that pleased our parents, since they relied on each other for help. I think half of my childhood was spent in Tavia's apartment and half of her childhood was spent in my house, or in the houses of our two grandmothers, who lived a few blocks from each other

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ANN PATCHETT



Above, left: The author (far left), Tavia (center), and friend Pam in 2005. Above, right: Tavia (blue jacket) and the author (red jacket) with friend Trudy in 1971. Right: The author (left) and Tavia in 1973.



and very near our school. In the summer, the two sets of sisters would fly to Los Angeles together to visit our missing parents. Of all our friends in Nashville, I alone knew Tavia's mother, and she alone knew my father. That in itself would have been enough to bond us for life.

Still, for all the parallels, we were an unlikely match. Tavia, the most beautiful child in the world, grew into the most beautiful girl. She was wildly popular, captain of the cheerleading team ("Do you have to say that?" she asked when I told her I was writing about her), sweetheart queen, sorority president. Boys trailed behind her like a tail on a kite. When she laughed, she bent at the waist, her auburn curls falling forward. I remember once, when we were shoe shopping, my mother told Tavia that if she laughed and bent over one more time she was going to kill the poor guy who was trying to put a shoe on her foot.

As for me, well, I was not that girl.

"If I was writing about you," Tavia said, "I would write about your remarkable talent, and your quiet and determined ways to create art." Which, in high school, felt like a nice way of saying there were no boys outside my window. The reader may be tempted to think she was the pretty one and I was the smart one, but that would be a fairy tale. Tavia is scorching smart.

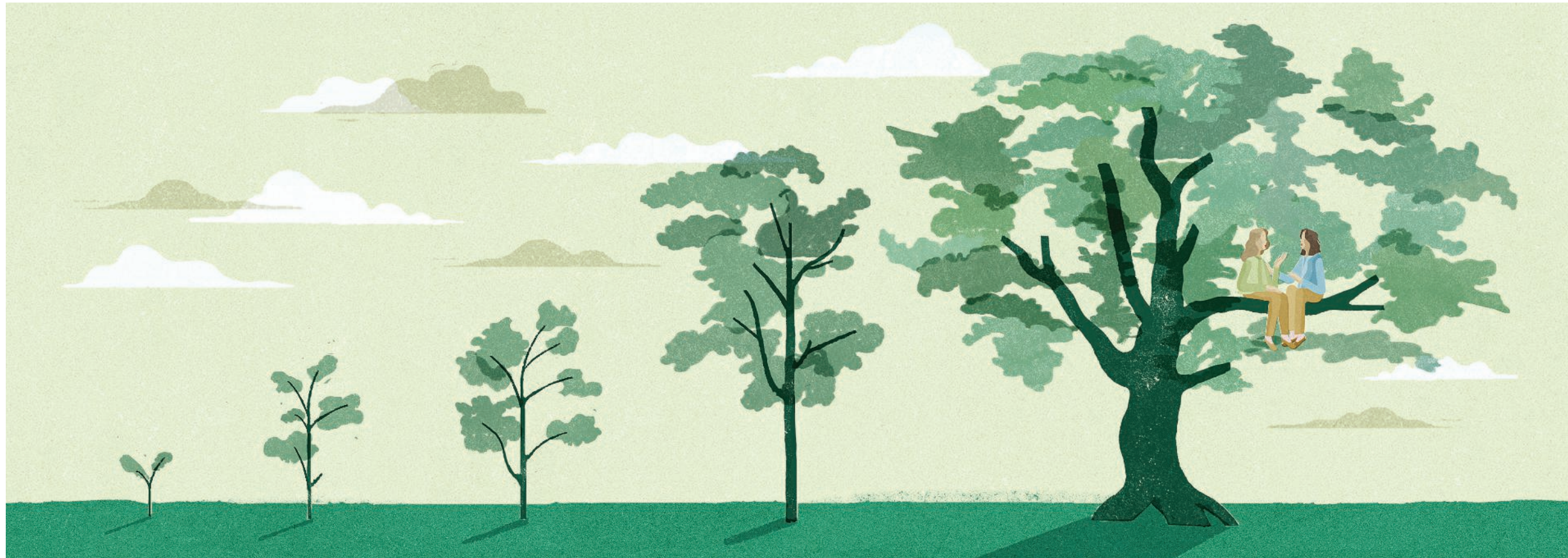
Fairy tales are where we get so much of our information about girls, including the notion that girls must be jealous of other girls, that girls select their friends based on their similar social strata, that girls fight with one another. All these things can be true and all these things can be false. For Tavia and me, they were false. Maybe that was due to the bedrock of our family connection, or maybe we found each other amazing. Maybe we just loved each other a lot.

We graduated, moved away, got married too young and then divorced, though Tavia held on longer than I did. Neither of us had children. For a while we lived in different parts of California, then we moved back to Tennessee. "I don't remember a single bad word between us," she said. "But that would be my selective memory, so who knows?" I do remember her expressing such sadness when I lit a cigarette while we were walking on the beach in our 20s. "All this beauty," she said, holding her hand out to the ocean, "and you're smoking?"

Eventually I stopped smoking. I became a writer. Tavia had some luck as an actress, went to San Francisco and made money in the early days of tech, and then just stepped away. My bombshell best friend moved off the grid and into the Sierra Nevada mountains, wrote poetry, studied plants and birds and insects with a worshipful hunger. Tavia had found her calling, and I watched her reinvention with awe.

I read an article recently about friendships that die over time. It said we shouldn't feel bad about it. People change, after all, grow in different directions. Nothing lasts forever. I've lost a few friendships over the years—everyone has—but Tavia and I are in this life together. Some years we're very busy and all we manage to do is exchange birthday cards; other years we talk on the phone while she's driving to work; other years we see each other all the time. We don't question it. I never wonder if she might be mad at me or if I've been neglectful.

As we come up on 50 years together, I would say ours is a friendship full of trust and elasticity. We continually adjust. We were the



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girls who left school early to go back to my mother's apartment and listen to Margie Adam records. ("It felt so cosmopolitan," Tavia said.) We once weathered a tornado together in my cousin's basement. I remember when we were in our 30s, both living in Nashville, and Tavia's mediocre boyfriend gave her a Valentine's card he hadn't signed—not his name, not hers. When she called to tell me, we laughed ourselves sick ("Did he think I was going to save it and give it to someone else next year?"). She helped me come up with every plant in my novel *State of Wonder*. She has a key to our house and stays here when she comes down from Kentucky to visit her father. We are both happily married now, another marvel, and our husbands talk and talk while we slip away to walk our dogs. We always have dogs, Tavia and I, just like we always have each other.

"We became friends because we were the lucky ones," she explained to me years ago. And maybe that's true, except I've never really thought of Tavia as lucky. As much as

she has taught me about the natural world, I've learned the most from her indefatigable good cheer, her conscious decision to lead a happy life. She was the girl every girl wanted to be, even though she had to work two jobs after school, even though she's spent her life saddled with type 1 diabetes. No matter what hand she was dealt, she made her life seem effortless, glamorous. If she's driving a bush hog or running a chain saw on a nature preserve, she's wearing lip gloss. She was born on New Year's Eve and seems to exist in a perpetual spritz of golden champagne bubbles, not because it just happened that way, but because she made it happen.

Last winter, she told me how to save the enormous beetle who had tried to hibernate by stuffing half his body into the window sash outside my office where I write. It was 20 degrees and the bug had blown loose in a storm and been thrown into an abandoned spider's web. She told me to build him a cave by putting a mason jar on its side, filling it halfway with dirt, and covering it with leaves. I carried the bug outside and nudged him into his new home. He seemed to take to it.

And that's Tavia. She knows how to save a beetle and will take the time to talk me through it. Together we saved him. Together we save ourselves.

Ann Patchett's most recent novel is *The Dutch House*.

HOW TO NURTURE YOUR OLDEST FRIENDSHIPS

Those she's-got-your-back soulmates are the best. In fact, studies have found that good pals don't just make us happier; they keep us healthier. But maintaining friendships can be hard as our lives evolve. Here, some advice to keep the spark alive with longtime pals.

You're navigating long-distance.

Random reminders of how much you care fill in the cracks between calls and get-togethers. "Small acts celebrate your connection," says Deborah Tannen, PhD, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University and the author of *You're the Only One I Can Tell*. See a pillow she'd like while browsing Etsy? Send it. Love a new podcast? Share it. Says Shasta Nelson, author of *Frientimacy*: "Remember how easy friendship was as a kid? That's because consistency was automatic when we were in the same camp cabin or class," she says. "Later, we have to create the consistency."

You're a frequent texter. She's a social media poster.

If you and your pal aren't on the same page about how to communicate, start a conversation about the logistics of keeping in touch. "One friend can feel close just seeing Facebook updates, while another might feel rejected without regular calls," says Tannen. Make a plan and stick to it.

You've been out of contact and want to rekindle your bond.

"Reconnecting with old friends can be so rewarding," says Nelson. Her advice is to be the first to call or email. Be a little vulnerable. Tell her you miss her and share what prompted you to reach out, especially if she might be caught off guard. For example, says Nelson, maybe you were dropping your kid off at college and remembered your time as roommates. Tell her you regret falling out of touch. "We can pick up and rebuild this incredibly meaningful relationship that would be hard to replicate if we were just meeting someone new," says Nelson. —Sharlene Breakey