

"When Kelly Corrigan writes, she makes you want to come home."
—JACQUELYN MITCHARD, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean* and *Still Summer*

the middle place



KELLY CORRIGAN

The Middle Place

Kelly Corrigan



*Most everything I do these days is dedicated
to Edward and the girls,
but this book is for Phoebe,
who wouldn't let it go.*



The thing you need to know about me is that I am George Corrigan's daughter, his only daughter. You may have met him, in which case just skip this part. If you haven't, I'll do what I can to describe him but really, you should try to meet him.

He's Catholic. That's the first thing he'd want you to know about him. Goes to church many times a week. Calls it "God's House" and talks about it in loyal, familiar terms, the way the Irish talk about their corner pub. It's his local. When he was seventy, he became a eucharistic minister, so he helps Father Rich hand out the host a couple times a week. Sometimes, a parishioner named Lynn looks at him with a certain peace in her eyes, and when my dad tells me about it, he gets misty.

You also need to know about the lacrosse thing. He's in the Hall of Fame, partly because he was an all-American in 1953 and 1954 but mostly because now, in his retirement, he marches up and down the field of my old high school, Radnor, side by side with a guy thirty years his junior, coaching the kids who want to be lacrosse stars. I've watched a hundred games sitting next to him; both my brothers played for years. Not being an athlete myself, I am amused by how attached he is to the game. He remembers every play and can talk about a single game for hours. The words don't mean much to me, but the emotion needs no translation.

And he's a Corrigan. He was one of six loud, funny kids who broke out of a tiny house on Clearspring Road in working-class Baltimore. All athletes, except Peggy, who was a beauty, and Mary, who was a comic. The others, the four boys, played ice hockey in the winter and lacrosse in the spring. The house had three bedrooms—one for the parents, one for the girls, and one for the boys. There was a single bathroom where they bathed, one kid after another, in an old tub of lukewarm water once, maybe twice, a week. My uncle Gene, who made a career out of college athletics, often joked that the real appeal of sports were the hot showers and new clothes once a season.

And I guess it helps to know that my dad was a sales guy. He sold ad space in women's magazines for fifty years, before there were sales training programs, Excel spreadsheets, and cell phones. He just settled into the front seat of the Buick with a mug of Sanka in his hand, a map on the passenger seat, and a list of his accounts in his head. He kept a box of fresh magazines in his trunk all times, always prepared to turn a casual acquaintance into a new account. He'd call in to the office from pay phones along I-95 to tell his secretary, the nearly bionic Jenny Austin, how many pages Noxzema signed up for or ask her to send the Folger's people a mock-up of next month's magazine or see if the guy from Stainmaster Carpets called back yet. People loved him.

Toward the end of his career, he changed jobs and got a new boss, a well-trained MBA who favored e-mail and databases. My dad didn't type. He didn't show up for weekly meetings. He couldn't tell you the address of his buddy at Cover Girl and didn't know exactly how to spell his last name. But some months, he sold a quarter of the ad pages in the issue, so who could complain? Despite his billings, he frustrated this particular boss every day for five years, until finally, at sixty-nine, he retired, writing "Bye Gang!" in the dust on his computer screen.

So there are a few people out there who don't like George Corrigan. That boss is one. I think

another might be Bill, his neighbor. Bill yells at his kids, really berates them. Weekends, holiday snow days, it doesn't matter. I think my dad finds this unforgivable. Or maybe it's that Bill is unamused by my dad. He may even think my dad is nothing but a joker, what with that huge easy chortle of his that floats over to Bill's backyard in the summer when we're out on the deck having Bud Light.

But the neighbor and his last boss are really the only two people I can think of offhand who don't like my dad. So for thirty-some years, I have been stopped at the gas station, the farmers' market, the swim club, to hear something like: "You're George Corrigan's daughter? What a guy. What a wonderful guy."

I think people like him because his default setting is open delight. He's prepared to be wowed—by your humor, your smarts, your white smile, even your handshake—guaranteed, something you do going to thrill him. Something is going to make him shake his head afterward, in disbelief, and say to me, "Lovey, what a guy!" or "Lovey, isn't she terrific?" People walk away from him feeling like they're on their game, even if they suspect that he put them there.

He does that for me too. He makes me feel smart, funny, and beautiful, which has become the job of the few men who have loved me since. He told me once that I was a great talker. And so I was. I was a conversationalist, along with *creative*, a notion he put in my head when I was in grade school and used to make huge, intricate collages from his old magazines. He defined me first, as parents do. Those early characterizations can become the shimmering self-image we embrace or the limiting, stifling perception we rail against for a lifetime. In my case, he sees me as I would like to be seen. In fact, I'm not even sure what's true about me, since I have always chosen to believe his version.

I could have gone either way. As I said, I was not an athlete, and just an average student. I was a party girl who smoked cigarettes, a vain girl who spent long stretches in front of the mirror, cutting my own hair, as necessary, before parties. More than once, I stole lipstick or eye shadow from the pharmacy. I used my mom's Final Net Ultra Hold Hair Mist without permission and to outrageous effect. I was suspended from high school for a week as a sophomore for being drunk at a semiformal dance. I had fallen down the staircase, baby's breath in my hair, new suntan panty hose ripped up the back. A wreck of white polyester.

My dad came to pick me up. As I recall, he was unruffled. It would've been ludicrous for him to say something like "I am very disappointed." He wasn't disappointed, or even surprised. This kind of thing happens every so often with teenagers.

My mother, on the other hand, was truly beside herself. She had grown up in a strict German household, where behavior of this sort would have merited a month, maybe two, in the cellar. She had put in a lot of long hours making sure I was not the kind of girl who'd do something like this. I remember hearing my parents argue the morning after the dance.

"Mary, you can't ground her for a month. She's going to be so embarrassed at school, you won't have to punish her."

"You *must* be kidding me. Are you telling me you think it is *okay* for our fifteen-year-old

daughter to get drunk at a school function?”

“Mary, come on.” He laughed as he said it. “You think she was the only one there who had a few beers before the dance?”

“Absolutely not. I am sure that ninety percent of those kids had something to drink before the dance but Kelly *fell down the stairs*, George. She didn’t have *a few beers*. She was *drunk*.”

So what I heard my dad say is: she’s fine, a normal kid. What I heard my mom say is: she’s wild and getting wilder.

The truth was that I was wild but on my way to being fine.

About twenty years later, having become fine, I called my parents from the maternity ward and cried through the following: “Mom, Dad, it’s a girl, and Dad, we named her after you. We named her Georgia.”

Three years after that, almost to the day, I called home to tell my parents that I had cancer.

And that’s what this whole thing is about. Calling home. Instinctively. Even when all the paperwork—a marriage license, a notarized deed, two birth certificates, and seven years of tax returns—clearly indicates you’re an adult, but all the same, there you are, clutching the phone and thanking God that you’re still somebody’s daughter.

George Orwell once said something about
how childhood necessarily creates
a false map of the world
but it's the only map we've got
and no matter how old we are,
at the first sign of trouble,
we take off running for those
fabulous countries.
It's like that for me.

Chapter One

monday,
august 2, 2004

August is a terrible time to be born.

I aspire to be the self-actualized person who no longer needs or even wants her birthday to be noticed. I fight the urge to plan something. *It's so self-serving*, I tell myself. But this one—thirty-seven—this one is shaping up to be the most mundane, uninspired birthday to date and I'm not sure I can leave it alone.

To: The Ladies

Re: Lunch

Date: Monday, August 2, 2004

As I'm sure you've committed to memory, my birthday is August 16. Mine and Georgia's and Madonna's and Menachem Begin's. But this year, I just want to celebrate mine. Could I talk you into meeting me for lunch in San Francisco? Maybe somewhere with a deck that serves an icy noontime cocktail? Lemme know if you can sneak out on Sat August 21 and I'll get back to you with a locale.

Love,

Kel

PS People bearing gifts will be stoned to death.

Oh well, I think, noting that my childish need for birthday-ness won again, *I tried*. I hit send and start my routine: pull on yesterday's yoga pants (I don't actually do yoga), pair them with a new green T-shirt from Costco, toast frozen waffle for Claire, smear bagel with cream cheese for Georgia, watch down juices for both, strap girls into car seats, drop girls off at preschool, come home to move things (dishes to shelves, cans to recycling, socks to laundry basket, bills to pile, shoes to closet). By 11:30 A.M., after I've lost the whole morning to a couple dozen five-minute tasks, it's time to head out for pickup and begin the afternoon routine, which is as dull and typical as the morning routine, so I spare you.

Edward, my husband of four years and the father of these girls, is in Philadelphia for work. He usually bathes the girls; it's his time with them at the end of each day, and based on what I overhear, generally starts out pleasant, quickly becomes trying, and then, by lights out, circles back around to be delightful. The fact that he puts the girls down "after a long hard day at the office" makes my mother adore him. As she should. He's full-service.

On this particular night, after washing the crumbs of chicken nuggets off their plates and successfully negotiating a trade of ten lima beans for a handful of chocolate chips, I take the girls up to the bathroom. Georgia likes to wash my hair. She likes to be the mommy. She'd like to wash her little sister's hair too, but Claire won't have it. When Edward is away, I often find that I've been talked into the tub so the girls can pour too much shampoo on my bushy brown hair. This night is such a night, except on this night, as I brush past my breast to get some soap out of my eyes, I think I feel something hard, just there, under the skin. I touch it once, pressing it lightly with the open palm of my hand, and then, after a flash of shock passes through me, I force my full attention to bathing the girls.

My girls are good—one chubby, one scrawny, both funny. Claire is a year and a half old, and Georgia will turn three next week. They seem older, but for different reasons. Georgia regularly confounds me with questions like "Does *wrecked* mean *ruined*?" and "What means *language*?" Claire is topping out at the hundredth percentile for height, weight, and head size. They love Van Halen and Play-Doh and fighting over old rubber bands and barrettes they won't keep in their hair. I love them madly and hope they will be older sisters to more kids just like them.

As I dry myself off, I know I have to touch it again, just to be sure I'm wrong. But I'm not and I start moving at a manic pace, directing the girls in that weird, strained way mothers do in movies when they find out a bomb is about to go off in their basement, right below where their children are blithely playing with their Legos.

"Georgia, honey, I need you to get in your pajamas right now and meet me at the top of the stairs. Claire, pick up that nightgown and bring it straight to me. Let's go, sweetheart. Right this minute."

As I give them their instructions, I dial my ob-gyn at home. Dr. Birenbaum is also my friend Emily, and she lives about ten minutes away. She answers, and I can hear her ten-month-old babbling in the background. Emily is happy to have us come over and give me a quick feel.

It's late, dark outside. On the short ride over, we listen to the *American Idol* CD that Georgia's friend left in our car. The girls are thrilled to be riding around in their pajamas instead of going to bed. I tell them we are having a dance party at Emily's.

“Mommy? Mommy? At Emily’s? When we are having the dance party, Claire can’t dance on the table because she could fall and be in a cast. Right, Mommy?” Georgia asks. I had recently impressed Georgia with a story about a boy who broke his leg by jumping on a bed. He had a cast on for several weeks. “Because she will cry and have to go to the hospital and get so many shots. Right, Mommy?”

I had emphasized how unpleasant hospitals are.

Then I hear myself say, “That’s right, Peach. Doctors, hospitals, lots of shots.”

Emily gives me an exam on her sofa. We joke about her husband coming home to find me topless on his couch, arms over my head. I say I was hoping he would be there so I could get a two-for-one. Georgia and Claire are terribly charming, asking if Emily will tickle them too and then trying breast exams on each other. It’s probably a cyst, Emily assures me. I leave Berkeley twenty minutes later, relieved to have a doctor involved. Emily will line up a mammogram for me in the next couple of days, just to be sure.

I come home, carry the girls to their beds one by one, and wait for Edward to call from his business trip. He works for TiVo, and he’s gone to Philly to negotiate a deal with Comcast. When he calls, he runs through the highlights of his day—the contract’s coming along, stuck on one issue, one of the guys is a real prick. We tell each other how tired we are. He mentions a sore throat.

Then, in a carefully controlled tone, I say, “So, when I was in the bath with the girls, I was, you know, washing myself, and I found a lump.” As I talk, I touch it again and again, like you would a loose tooth or a canker sore, each time, surprised to find it still there. “It’s hard as a rock. It’s so *right there*. You won’t believe it.”

I tell him everything Emily told me; that it is hard, which is bad, but it is movable, which is good, and that in younger women, lumps tend to be cysts.

“Okay, that’s good. And you have no breast cancer in your family, so that’s good. And hopefully you can get a mammogram tomorrow or the next day and we can be sure,” he says, in character. He is a man of reason, my husband. He does not buy into worry. “It’s gotta be a cyst,” he adds. We hang up a few minutes later, both projecting optimism.

Alone in my room, though, I feel the onset of alarm. I lay my whole body across it, to muffle the earsplitting sound. To fall asleep, I read a long article from a ten-year-old *National Geographic* about Hurricane Andrew in Florida. On the cover, there’s a dirty, sticky, sunburned Marine holding a new, homeless toddler. The guy who wrote the article says that over the course of ten days the hurricane revealed itself, starting as just a patch of thunderstorms, then becoming a tropical storm, and eventually showing its true colors as the unstoppable hurricane it was. A local TV reporter named Bryan Norcross stayed on the air for twenty-two hours straight, “talking his listeners through the most horrifying hours of their lives, telling them how to find safe places in houses that were blowing apart. I don’t usually last for more than a couple of pages at night, but tonight, I keep going until I finish. I have to follow the arc from panic to toil to renewal. I have to get to the end, to the part where the devastation gives way to rebirth. I read this one sentence over and over again, until I am ready to turn out the light:

“Seven weeks after the storm, there are signs of recovery. Many trees are flush with new growth. Power has been restored. It will be a splendid place once again.”

Chapter Two

I grew up on Wooded Lane, just a mile from Villanova University, in the suburb of Philadelphia. Wooded Lane has about thirty houses on it, and every one of them is exactly the same; if you knew where the bathroom was in the Wilsons' house, you could find it at the Walshes. Our house, 168 Wooded Lane, is the last house on the street, one of the original four. It has classic brown shingles on the face, but the other three sides are aluminum siding, which made it an affordable choice for my parents' first and only home.

I have two older brothers, GT and Booker. In some ways they're hard to tell apart. They both live for sports and tell a good story and make every party they go to louder and better. They'll eat whatever you put in front of them, neither of them will ever retire, and they cry when they give a toast.

In other ways, it's hard to believe they are related. GT is a born worrier and Booker appears to be sliding through life like it's a giant water park. GT is savvy and ambitious and always busy. He's been to the symphony and owns a tuxedo and knows the difference between a pinot noir and a cabernet. Booker, a Bud man, may well do the same job forever—he's a gym teacher and a high school lacrosse coach—and would never ask for anything more than a few free rounds of golf a year and a winning season for the Flyers.

Anyway, after Booker was born in a last-minute cesarean, the hospital counseled my parents against another baby. But, the lore goes, my dad wanted a girl so much, they snuck me in. I suppose it's possible they could have had another boy, but it never seems like that when my dad tells the story.

My brothers shared a bedroom, but I had my own, a pink gingham wonderland behind a hollow door from Sears that was covered with Wacky Packages stickers like Shot Wheels race cars and Cap'n Crunch cereal. Later, I removed them and covered the stubborn bits that wouldn't peel off with James Taylor quotes, which I copied from the album liner onto thick paper, using a calligraphy pen that didn't make my handwriting look any more like calligraphy than a Sharpie would have. Because I was very deep, I even burned the edges of the paper.

From my desk, you could look out on the backyard, which must have been the reason my dad wanted the house. It was a big, flat rectangle, with a drainage gully marking one end zone and a small

garden marking the other. The yard became known as Lambeau Field, after the stadium where the Green Bay Packers play—I think the Connor brothers named it, or maybe it was the Kelly brothers—but anyway, a thousand games of Shirts and Skins were played back there, and I watched many of them from my bedroom. More than once, I came down to the sidelines carrying lemonade and Nil Wafers (after changing my clothes many times, fixing my hair, and glossing my lips with a touch of Vaseline). On a good day, when the light was right, before college added things to my body that laziness has created a permanent home for, someone might have called me pretty. Most days, I was just considered one of the many fine girls in the neighborhood.

Lambeau Field was also home to my dad's tomatoes, which he grew every summer.

"No photos today, men! No autographs!" he'd call out to the guys on the field as he crossed the end zone with an armful of stakes. (Celebrity Seeking Respite from Fans was one of his favorite roles. I've seen him play it for Japanese tourists on street corners in New York and little old ladies in the supermarket parking lot, startling and confusing every one of them.)

"Need a hand, Coach Corrigan?" the boys would say, referring to my dad's prized role as head coach of the local youth ice hockey team.

"No, thanks, men. Play on!" My dad would never interrupt a game.

They'd go back to playing, and he'd start positioning his plants and I'd keep tabs on it all, while working on one of my many projects, like making a new *K*E*L*L*Y* sign for my door, or cutting the collar off another T-shirt at just the right *Flashdance* angle.

"Aw shit," I heard my dad say one day, creating a pause in the game.

"What happened?" Booker asked. And then I heard six guys cracking up.

"Hey! Up here! What happened?" I called down from behind my screen window.

"Dad's tooth flew out!" Booker called back. "He sneezed out his front tooth!"

By the time I got outside, all the guys were poking around in the dirt, looking for the tooth, and my dad was explaining that his dentist/friend, Punchy Peterson (or was it Ironhead Keating? there were so many nicknames), warned him that if he didn't get a partial plate, one of these days something like this was bound to happen.

"I'm just glad it happened out here with you knuckle-heads and not at a business meeting. Can you imagine old Greenie shooting a tooth across the desk at a customer?" He often referred to himself as Greenie, or the Green Man, which is a nickname his brothers gave him way back after a long-crammed car ride when a case of bad gas reputedly turned the air around my dad green.

The neighborhood guys were kicking around in the garden, laughing through a relaxed search. I was leaning into my dad, who had his arm around me.

"Keep going, men! There's a dollar in it." At the time, a one-dollar reward could have bought

three or four Cokes.

Some guys dug around the dirt, some fingered the grass. I just stood with my dad, since I couldn't get a dollar off him anytime, for nothing. Minutes passed. Commitment waned.

“Men! Let’s take it up to two dollars! Two dollars right now for whoever finds the tooth!”

“Coach, what kind of teeth do you have, anyway? I mean, how did it just shoot out of your mouth?”

“Oh God, Timbo. You can’t believe the way they used to do things—I mean, I think I had about twenty cavities by the time I was ten years old, and braces for—God—I’m guessing seven years. The guy’s office was over a garage. He probably didn’t even have a degree—” he explained, sort of. “Men,” he called out to the guys who were still in the hunt. “Let’s go for five! Five dollars for the tooth!”

That stepped up the action for a while, but after ten minutes, the hunt was declared hopeless.

“I guess I better call that guy and see if I can get in there today. Carry on, men! Lovey, ride over with me. He’ll take better care of me if he sees you,” he said.

When we got to the dentist’s office, my dad made a big deal out of introducing me to the secretary, whom he himself had just met.

“Candy, this is my daughter, Kelly Corrigan,” he said, like I was someone Candy would want to know, someone she would remember meeting.

“Hi, Kelly,” she said, playing along.

“Hi.”

“Well, Mr. Corrigan—”

“George! Please, Candy, call me George!”

“Well, if you wait here, George, I think we can get you in, but it might be an hour or so.”

“Tell you what, Candy!” he said, like he was about to announce something exciting. “Why don’t Kelly and I go run some errands and we’ll be back here in forty-five minutes?”

“Are you sure?” she said, looking at his six-year-old smile.

“Yeah,” he said. “Who’s looking at an old Billy Goat like me?” When he wasn’t referring to himself as Greenie, or The Green Man, my dad referred to himself as “an old Billy Goat.”

Candy and I made eye contact, and I think I was able to convey to her that although most adults wouldn’t bomb around town with a missing front tooth, it was well within the general operating procedures for George Corrigan. Off we went.

After a swing by the Coastal gas station, where my dad hollered a compliment to Pete, the proprietor, about the new flower boxes by the front door, we headed to the farmers' market. The first person we ran into was Frank Tolbert, who was in line at the deli.

"Lefty Tolbert! How you doing?" my dad said, laughing and chomping down on his lower lip like a beaver.

"Good God, George! What happened?"

"Lefty, you wouldn't believe it if I told you! But it's nothing that's gonna stop me next week on the court, so you better work out that kink in your backhand!" Then he turned his attention to the high school girl behind the counter and said, "You should see this guy try to return my serve. How's the roast beef today? I love that roast beef you guys have."

She said the roast beef was good, same as always. She tilted her head and raised her eyebrow impatiently, totally uninterested in the story behind the missing tooth, the fact that Lefty had trouble protecting the alley, or that my dad favored this deli's roast beef over all others.

"Um, there's a line," she said.

"Aw, God, sorry! You're a hardworking gal!" my dad said. "I'll have one pound of your best roast beef!"

Such was my dad's relationship with the world that he paid more attention to the good stuff than the bad and effortlessly forgave almost all—the peevish girl at the deli, the kids destroying his lawn with their cleats, the daughter who cut her brand-new shirts to look like a Juilliard student.

When I was a high school freshman, GT was a senior and Booker was a junior. That year, my dad took over the morning routine from my mom, whose reign involved the usual nagging—time to get up, your breakfast is on the table, don't forget your biology book, I said time to get up, you're not wearing those jeans to school, is that mascara I see on your eyelashes?

With my dad in charge, things changed.

"Lovey," he'd call out as he pulled the plastic shades and flipped on the light. "Let's get to it! It's gonna be a great day!"

If I waited for a moment, he'd be gone, doing the same drill next door with GT and Booker. He personalized his appeal with little add-ons like, "Booker, The Book Man, Citizen Book! Today's the day you're gonna ace that math test!" or "G, big game tonight! I'm seeing a hat trick!"

When his usual ruckus failed to get feet to floor, he'd walk down the hall to his bedroom and throw open the window. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he'd call out:

"HELLO, WORLD!"

And then, playing back to himself in his one-man show, he'd flip to the role of World: "Hell Georgie!"

"I'M COMIN' OUT THERE TO GET YOU, WORLD!"

To which World would respond, as of course World would, "I'm waitin' for ya, Georgie!"

And then he'd turn around and head back toward our bedrooms, making a certain kind of mer battle cry.

After a couple years of this, I could only deduce that the world was a safe place. In fact, according to my dad, the world was beyond safe—it had a sense of humor, it knew your name, it was waiting for you. Hell, it was even rooting for you.

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