

Molly and Mimi in the Southland

Molly's first sighting of Mimi: blue-black hair, wet and plastered to a pale neck; arms flung in a T against the concrete lip of the pool. Alone. Waving her legs slowly up and down in the water, a half-hearted calisthenics.

The late afternoon glow was pure Southern California, but the woman had an East Coast city mien: pouchy-eyed, deadpan, a magnificent frown. She deflected the light like a wedge of concrete. It was only when this other woman climbed out of the pool, chipped black nails adorning the hand that gripped the metal railing, that Molly grasped their shared condition.

They exchanged glances, seemingly blank. But how can a first glance between two blatantly pregnant women contain anything other than the universe?

Months later, Mimi appeared at a clothing swap at the house of a mutual acquaintance. She came late, vaguely apologetic, dark hair falling out of its high knot. So slight, this woman, this future friend, that when Mimi unbuttoned her jacket no one would have guessed that she was recently pregnant too, like Molly.

Molly took home a periwinkle-hued shift dress with a mandarin collar from the swap. She loved the color, and she figured the thing would zip all the way up eventually, when her boobs deflated. The dress was Mimi's.

The dress hung in Molly's closet for years afterward. It never did end up fitting the way she hoped it would, but for a long time she couldn't bring herself to dump it. Other things found their way to the Goodwill donation box sooner: maternity clothes, for sure. The pilling, moth-gnawed sweaters that she, a trailing faculty spouse with a vestigial master's degree in arts administration, had brought all the way from New York when she and her husband first embarked on *The Next Chapter of Their Life*.

The dress retained its aura till the day she disposed of it—in the natty fall of fabric from the plastic hanger, still promising some better, more beloved self, meant to bloom from beneath the rayon blend.

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Their sons were in the same grade at Linda Vista Elementary but had not yet been in the same class. So the two women didn't actually meet through the boys. They met for real, trading names and numbers, at the SmartArt workshop at the beginning of Reed and Arlo's third-grade year.

It was the lesson on Van Gogh. The two were seated together by chance—or not actually by chance, since Molly, appraising empty seats, perceived that this woman, even in profile, was a bluff rejoinder to the sunny bleached babes and power-suited strivers that mostly comprised the audience of mom volunteers.

The lady in charge of the workshop ran through slides and pointed out that, in *Starry Night*, the anguished Vincent captured the vista from his hospital room. His "hospital room," *ha*, said the woman next to Molly, barely muffling her voice. She circled her finger by her ear, miming crazy. The two of them laughed, quietly, but loud enough that a mom in front of them turned partway in silent reprimand. The point, said the workshop instructor, was to inspire the students to explore their world by means of, in this case, oil pastels. The volunteer parents had simply to show up to the classroom, dole out the art supplies, and follow the script.

It was only later that Molly realized Mimi was the pool mom, the clothing-swap mom. Of course, it was possible, probable, that they had crossed paths in the eight-plus years since those first sightings. Molly didn't remember that she remembered Mimi, until she did.

In the moment of remembering, brushing her teeth the night after their first neighborhood walk together, Molly fizzed, a wire sparking. When was the last time she had felt plucked by destiny for friendship? Not since her twenties, or maybe even since college. It was something like falling in love. It *was* falling in love.

Infatuation: a leap and soar into an unfurling panorama.

Infatuation: a conjuring trick.

Their second walk was also in the neighborhood. This time they ambled out the dusty, exposed trail that undulated casually behind the newest houses before it cut in past the backs of the oldest ones, the blocky 1980s extravagances. There was a kind of view back there, facing away from the neighborhood: out over the toll road and toward the basin of Los Angeles. Stark dusky mountains beyond. Mimi claimed she had once seen the Hollywood sign on a clear day.

"Some people get excited about that," Mimi said, and blew her blunt bangs out of her eyes.

Molly pressed her hand to a light cramp in her side. "I don't hate LA," she said. "I'm not saying I love it. But it's grown on me. A little, anyway."

“I can’t fucking wait to get out of here,” said Mimi. “I never thought we’d be stuck here so long.”

Her husband was applying for jobs—yet again, she said. In Massachusetts, New York, even Georgia. To be back home on the East Coast was the goal. His being tenured already meant fewer jobs to which to apply. But Mimi was portable and could work as a copy editor anywhere.

Mimi licked her teeth, then angled herself away to spit. You always accrued a thin film of dirt on your face, in your mouth, on these local trail walks, with no trees to break the wind and the soil particles it carried. Molly learned that within days of moving here, more than nine years before.

Molly clutched harder at her middle, felt the armature of her lower ribs, a reassurance. *Please please please don’t leave.* A dumb thing to think about Mimi. The two of them were barely even friends.

They followed the trail to its end, down a short, steep slope and past a stone fountain. Small hard oranges littered the ground where they had fallen from a nearby tree; you had to be careful not to slip on them.

The two women sat on the sole bench, a heavy wood Craftsman-type construction, facing the plinking fountain from under a trellis. Precious shade. Early October, and the sun glared remorselessly, the crystalline sky an oppression. They both swigged from their water bottles. They got up and said goodbyes once Molly noticed the used condom just behind Mimi’s heel.

Molly pocketed one of the small ornamental oranges and, trekking uphill to her house, lifted it to her nose. It smelled divine. A sense of possibility flooded her, exhilarating and unbidden, nostril to toes. California could sometimes cast a spell, briefly, when she least expected it. Even after all this time.

After the first and second walks, they texted about meeting up again soon. Molly proposed the nearby canyon, the one that abutted the gated subdivision where that basketball celebrity lived. She used to drive past the canyon every day on the way to Reed’s day care, when he was little.

Mimi: *then i gotta find my hiking shoes, thats a hike my friend*

Molly: *is that a hike?* [scratching chin emoji]

Mimi: *the trail goes up a ducking mountain*

Molly: *up a hill*

Mimi: *if its a canyon then thats a mountain* [mountain emoji, crying-one-tear emoji, poop emoji]

Molly took a screenshot of their conversation. A screenshot—and why? With that *click*, Molly saw herself plainly: a modern-day version of a Victorian scrapbooking shut-in.

Grasping and sentimental. But then she forgot about the screenshot till months later, when she was uploading photos for the end-of-the-year gallery of family pics. She deleted it then, no problem.

They hoped to meet up for trick-or-treating but it didn't pan out; the boys had no friends in common, it seemed. Weeks passed. Molly thought of Mimi but couldn't drum up anything to say, to offer. Molly's husband hadn't even met Mimi. He knew she existed—though Molly might have made Mimi up, like Mr. Snuffleupagus, for all it mattered to her everyday existence. These days all her other friends, essentially, were couple friends.

Then, just after Thanksgiving break, Mimi texted to ask if Molly wanted to go see *Lady Bird*. Molly drove, since Mimi didn't like driving at night. Her night vision wasn't great. And, she explained, as Molly pulled into a parking space at the Fashion Island multiplex, the ocean yawning endlessly in the dark at the bottom of the hills made Mimi feel like she was going to have a panic attack.

"I know what you mean," said Molly.

They surfed a cascade of comments and quips about the movie all the way back to the neighborhood, afterwards, and then sat in front of Mimi's house in Molly's Honda Civic for twenty minutes more. Talking, laughing to the point of tears, about nothing in particular.

Mimi opened the passenger door at last and then, before exiting, flung her arms around Molly. Molly squeaked as they squeezed each other, hard.

"So fun," said Mimi.

"Totally," said Molly.

On Monday, reaching for a bag of mangosteen in the dried-fruit section of the grocery store, Molly's eyes fell on a dark-haired woman at the end of the aisle struggling to push her cart around the corner. One arm up at a weird angle, elbow resting on the grip—her body curved awkwardly toward the cart to compensate. At first, because of the arm and the prematurely aged posture, Molly didn't recognize her.

"Mimi!" Molly called. As if it were an astonishment to run into a friend at Trader Joe's.

Mimi explained that she had fallen yesterday during the birthday party of one of Arlo's buddies, attempting a series of backward moves on roller skates. Her husband was out of town till Saturday.

"You should go to the doctor," Molly said. Mimi said she was too tied up with stuff, and anyway it was hard to drive. She had walked all the way down here this morning through campus to pick up something easy for dinner, along with a box of Arlo's favorite cereal.

"I'll drive you," Molly said. She suggested they drop off their respective bags of groceries and then head straight to urgent care.

“There’s Arlo,” said Mimi. Her son was waiting at the front of the store just past the registers, at one of the little tables set up for kids to color pictures on while their parents shopped. “OK if he comes with?”

For a second, Molly suffered a bright and terrible jolt of panic: Reed, where had she left Reed? But he was in school, of course, as he was meant to be. A big kid now.

The three of them piled into her car. Arlo, behind the passenger’s seat, squished his nose against the window. Looking over her shoulder while changing lanes, Molly noticed a faint slug trail of snot on the glass.

Molly suggested the hospital complex at Sand Canyon and Mimi agreed. Both boys’ pediatrician’s practice was over there, so it was a familiar jaunt on smooth broad parkways. But first, they passed the canyon where the two women had gone hiking not long ago. The brush was more vivid now after the first rainy days of the approaching winter, the ridge furred deep emerald and silvery-green. “A beautiful morning in the terrarium,” said Mimi. Arlo asked for cheese crackers and Mimi said not yet.

The morning sun bounced from the cars, from the walls of glass windows at the hospital complex. The pathway from the parking lot was lined by those giant artichoke-looking succulents that Molly had never learned the name of. It was a busy morning at urgent care—low-grade infections and bearable sports injuries waiting out the weekend for resolution. After half an hour, Mimi told Molly to go somewhere more pleasant than an urgent care waiting room.

Molly stood; Mimi took out her wallet, pressed a twenty into Molly’s hand. “Just let him get whatever he wants,” Mimi said. Arlo was sprawled in a shiny, stiff love seat nearby, headphones on, stunned with boredom. Molly looked at him, then back at Mimi.

“What?” Mimi said. “Jesus. Your face.”

“What?” Molly said back, laughing. She smiled forcefully, shaking her head. Whatever expression was showing—she didn’t know what it was—she shooed away. Then: “No problem.” Mimi pulled Molly back down into the seat next to her.

“School is a shit show this year. Ms. Larsen-Connelly is an idiot—you’re so lucky Reed doesn’t have her. She can’t deal with Arlo being smarter than she is. I get a million complaining emails from her every day and it’s making me nuts. He learns more outside of school, without even trying.”

“So...are you homeschooling him?”

It didn’t seem like the kind of thing Mimi would do. Mimi had made nasty fun of homeschooling parents, in fact, on one of their hangout ventures. And you’d think that Mimi would have bothered to mention this at some point, these last few months, as they were starting to get acquainted. It wasn’t *not* relevant.

"No, fuck no." Mimi winced, adjusting her injured arm where it lay propped on her bag. "I just let him stay home a lot."

"Oh." Molly was conscious now of the slightest twitch of her eyebrow and kept her expression neutral. But neutral wasn't the right response, either, was it?—she was Mimi's *friend*. She had driven Mimi to the hospital on a Monday morning, because that's what a friend does. She was Mimi's support system now. Molly nodded a few times, telegraphing sympathy, grooving on it.

"I'll text you when I'm in with a doctor," Mimi said. Her attention slid away; she worked her jaw, sighed, picked up her phone and swiped.

"Yeah," said Molly. "Sounds good."

At the closest Peet's, she found a semi-clean table back by the bathroom and then bought Arlo a hot chocolate. A little later he asked for a ham and cheese roll, and she got that for him too. She considered engaging him in chitchat about preferred games, favorite TV shows, but she was too tired, suddenly, to bother. She surely didn't want to ask him about school. Reed had had nothing much to say the one time Molly asked about Arlo—he squinted up at her, flipping through his mental file of schoolmates in other classes, and then shrugged. "One time at lunch he stabbed a carton of milk with a pencil till it leaked all over."

It was only now that Molly perceived, in full, the canvas she had been constructing from the first moment Mimi entered her life. That the boys would become friends—best friends. The two families vining together; a thriving, dewy, gorgeous tangle of mutual attention and care and concern.

Instead, here she was at a sticky café table off a highway, near a mall she didn't ever visit if she could help it. Tossed, empty and aching, onto the shore. Across from her, Arlo—greasy-chinned, innocent—thumbed through a thick manga volume. And Mimi hadn't yet thanked her for any of this help.

Mimi wouldn't ever thank her, would she? Mimi would ask for something else, probably, and soon. Ask for more and more and more, and not care whether it was Molly delivering or someone else—as long as Mimi got what she needed. Molly grasped this now with certainty.

She sipped her chamomile tea. She swallowed a curdled wash of indignity and waited for Mimi to text.

The sharp scent of sun-baked coastal sage—it pervaded everything outside. She found it almost unbearable when she and her husband first moved to the West Coast, years before. But then it became something she hardly noticed, except when returning home from visits to elsewhere.

Those several walks with Mimi, during their brief friendship in the autumn of Reed's third-grade year, re-sensitized her to it. Now she was permeated with its incense again. An ancient alien musk that was not meant for her, that she breathed and tasted but did not understand and could not understand. Less and less made sense, the older she became.

She vaulted into the bright blue with the move West, almost ten years ago—a wild, astounding launch. But Southern California had turned her dazed and supine and regretful. Before her, the sage-covered hills. Behind her, the scrim of snow-capped mountains—a shock to behold, even after all this time.

But it might be—couldn't it?—that someone else would emerge from the scrub, descend from the mountain, rise dripping from the eucalyptus-shaded pool. Reveal themselves to her, this time, to be a true familiar.

VOLUME 58.2, SPRING 2026

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The editorial board wishes to acknowledge the generous support of our patrons: Wayne K. Chapman and Janet M. Manson; John Idol, Jr.; Ronald Moran; and Dick and Doris Calhoun.