



Leaving
L.A.

Kate Christie

Leaving L.A.

by
Kate Christie



2011

Copyright © 2011 by Kate Christie

Bella Books, Inc.
P.O. Box 10543
Tallahassee, FL 32302

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
First published 2011

Editor: Katherine V. Forrest
Cover Designer: Linda Callaghan

ISBN 13:978-1-59493-221-2

*To Kris, Maggie and Corona—and to our much anticipated
player to be named later...*

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my editor, Katherine V. Forrest, for her invaluable suggestions on how to strengthen various elements of this novel and produce, I hope, a stronger, more personal story. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her.

Thanks also to Myra Lavenue for her generous assistance with the love scenes in this novel. She gave abundantly of her time and ideas, from big picture concepts to individual word choice. Myra, you rock!

And, as ever, thanks to my wife Kris, who supported me throughout the writing of *Leaving L.A.* The fact that writers can work from anywhere includes a corollary rarely mentioned: A writer's spouse can work on her wife's manuscript from anywhere, too. My love and appreciation is immense, and not merely reserved for last-minute revisions.

About the Author

Kate Christie was born and raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan. After studying history at Smith College, she earned a Master's in Creative Writing from Western Washington University. Currently she lives near Seattle with her wife and their two dogs. *Leaving L.A.* is her second novel.

CHAPTER ONE

Nestled into the Santa Monica Mountains at the northern edge of L.A., the Barclay School occupied twenty-five acres of gentle hills and grassy fields just west of the 405 freeway. Most mornings, Tessa Flanagan drove her daughter Laya the eight twisty, scenic miles along Mulholland Drive from their house in Laurel Canyon to the school, where she dropped Laya at the circle drive and watched until she disappeared into the building that housed Barclay's kindergarten classrooms. A soon-to-be first grader, Laya had recently begun to spurn being escorted into the building—"I'm not a baby" had become her favorite refrain of late.

This particular morning, Tessa parked her Ford Escape Hybrid in the visitor's lot and headed for the school entrance, Laya urging her onward. Her daughter's kindergarten teacher

had been put on bed rest with pregnancy complications, and Tessa was curious about the woman who had taken over the classroom for the last two months of the school year. Laya had barely spoken of anything else all week. Even her normal recess nature reports (featuring parrots, hummingbirds, raccoons and even, once, a coyote that school officials claimed was in fact a stray dog) had been lacking since Miss Chapin had entered her life.

They were nearly to the walkway when a jeans-clad man stepped out from behind a parked car. Automatically Tessa pulled her daughter behind her. Then she heard the click of the camera shutter, the brief sound all too familiar, and she loosened her grip on Laya's sleeve. Just another paparazzi cockroach who had somehow managed to find his way past security onto the grounds of her daughter's school.

"Come on, Mom," Laya said, tugging her hand again. "You have to hurry if you're going to meet Miss Chapin."

"There's plenty of time," Tessa said, ignoring the photographer documenting their progress.

The impromptu escort ended at the door. As they walked down the bright hallway, shoes squeaking on polished linoleum, Tessa wondered if the man would find any takers for his photos. It would have to be a slow celebrity news day for her and Laya to grace any of the usual rags. Since her official retirement from acting a year earlier, her paparazzi tail had steadily declined. Now whenever a man with a five o'clock shadow and ketchup stains on his shirt sprang from the proverbial bushes to catch her in an unflattering pose, she was more surprised than anything else.

Lila Van Arndt, Barclay's principal, waved at her from the front office, and Tessa waved back. She loved this school, which was as far from her own early educational experiences as any institution could get. Here the grounds included three playgrounds, two soccer/lacrosse fields, indoor and outdoor basketball and volleyball courts and a swimming pool. The classrooms were large, class sizes and student-teacher ratios small. One of the top K-6 private schools in L.A., Barclay offered its pupils access to every imaginable type of educational technology, from video-conferencing and programmable robots to labs where kids could build their own computers. Laya was still too young for the labs,

but Tessa liked picturing her daughter in an environment where thriving was the main focus, not merely surviving.

She herself had bounced around a series of overcrowded, underfunded schools on Chicago's South Side. Her last stop had been a gargantuan brick high school bordered by empty lots where tall grass grew out of cracks in the pavement. The asphalt in the outdoor basketball court was so uneven that sometimes a dribbled ball would careen suddenly in an unexpected direction, while in warmer weather the worn track behind the school harbored homeless people who preferred cinder to pavement. Class sizes and student-teacher ratios were large, technological and other resources negligible. She could remember walking to school from her foster mother's apartment along broken sidewalks littered with fast-food wrappers, pop cans and broken beer bottles. She'd stared at the ground as she walked, careful not to catch the eye of passersby. Fading into the background was the safest bet, she'd learned—an approach she worked hard to perfect throughout childhood.

Since her rise to stardom in her early twenties, she'd worked to keep the details of her pre-Hollywood history hidden from the panopticon of the press. When she left Chicago for L.A. at the end of high school, she hadn't planned to become famous. She had simply been impatient to leave her old life behind. Once she reached California, she changed her name and petitioned the state of Illinois to seal her juvenile record. Later, as her acting career took off, she polished her back story— orphaned at age nine, juggled between relatives in assorted cities, home-schooled by a religious great-aunt in Brooklyn before finally escaping to L.A. Overall, the story was sketchy. This vagueness had led some members of the entertainment media to postulate divergent theories on her “lost years,” but her agent and publicist, the people who stood to gain the most from her continued success, had managed to keep her childhood a closely held secret using tactics Tessa understood she was better off not knowing.

Her daughter's life, on the other hand, had taken place smack-dab in the center of the Hollywood fishbowl. Tessa didn't feel guilty for sending Laya to private school—public school wasn't an option.

Inside Laya's building, colorful children's drawings decorated the hallways while well-dressed students laughed and called out to one another. Walking through Laya's school always filled Tessa with optimism. These kids hadn't discovered the pills in their parents' medicine cabinets yet, or smoked their first joint out behind the neighbor's garage. Most were still just kids, eyes bright and full of hope. Like her own daughter.

Laya picked up the pace as they neared the classroom, pulling Tessa after her. "Miss Chapin," she called as they reached her room. "Miss Chapin, come meet my mom."

The teacher was standing beside a desk at the near end of the as-yet empty room, morning sunlight angling through the windows revealing gold highlights in her shoulder-length brown hair. Tessa squinted, trying to pick out features—freckles, creamy skin, a full mouth that needed no lipstick. This was her daughter's new teacher? With her athletic frame and girl-next-door smile, she looked as if she belonged on a beach, surfboard tucked under one arm, not in a classroom graced by orange handprints and cut-out paper flowers.

"Good morning, Laya," the woman said. Then she looked at Tessa, her smile slipping a little as their eyes met.

Belatedly, Tessa realized she was staring. "Hello," she said, stepping forward with a practiced smile, her hand extended. "I'm Tessa, Laya's mother. I've heard a lot about you."

"Eleanor Chapin," the teacher said, and squeezed her hand.

Tessa paused, looking for something to say. She hadn't expected her daughter's new teacher to be quite so attractive. Not that what Eleanor Chapin looked like mattered, of course. "I understand you haven't been at the school long?"

"No, but I've been a teacher for ten years." A bell rang in the hallway, and Laya's classmates began to pile into the room, reminding Tessa as they always did of unruly puppies. "I only moved to L.A. in January. Before that I taught at a private school in Boston."

Tessa realized that Eleanor had interpreted the question as a challenge to her teaching credentials. "I didn't mean—" she started, but was interrupted by a high-pitched scream.

"Give it back," a tiny girl with red braids was screeching at a

larger blond boy, who grinned malevolently as he held a stuffed bunny over her head.

“James and Alexa,” Eleanor said, her voice calm. “You have until the count of ten to get to your seats. James, bring the bunny up here please. One-two-three-four...”

Both children flew to their seats, the boy stopping only to deliver the stuffed animal as directed. “Thank you,” Eleanor said. Then she turned back to Tessa. “I’m sorry, but the day seems to be starting without me. Is there anything in particular I can help you with?”

Perhaps she should have gotten an earlier start that morning, after all. “No, I just wanted to introduce myself. Thanks for your time.” And she turned to go.

“Ms. Flanagan?” the teacher added.

“Tessa,” she corrected, glancing back.

“You’re welcome to stay and observe. I encourage parental participation.”

She was tempted, but she was cutting it close for her breakfast date as it was. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please do. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

The word *pleasure* caught Tessa by surprise, and she blinked, forcing her eyes away from the triangle of skin visible at the teacher’s throat. Such thoughts, and surrounded by milling children—it seemed illicit somehow. “You too.” And she turned again to go.

“Bye, Mom.” Laya waved at her from a table near the door.

“Bye, sweetie.” Tessa waved back and ducked into the hallway.

At least now she knew why Laya was smitten with her teacher. Eleanor’s predecessor, the very pregnant Mrs. Pierce, had been younger, shorter and prone to high-pitched laughter. This woman, with her firm handshake and self-possessed air, seemed more solid somehow. Or maybe it was just that she didn’t exude the overly-plucked, fake-tanned phoniness of native and transplant Southern Californians alike.

The photographer had already beat a retreat by the time Tessa emerged into the sunny California morning—probably he’d been forcibly removed from campus by security. She made

her way to her car, slid inside and sat motionless for a moment, elbows on the steering wheel. What had just happened? She closed her eyes and pictured her daughter's teacher again: that unruffled demeanor, the muscles in her forearms, the way her eyes had crinkled when she smiled. Not at all what Tessa had expected of the illustrious Miss Chapin.

In any case, she didn't have time to examine her reaction to a woman who would be in her daughter's life—and hers—for only a couple of months. She started her car and pulled out of the parking lot. Right now she had twenty minutes to get from Mulholland Drive down into Beverly Hills for a meeting with Jane and Elizabeth Byerly, elderly daughters of a long-dead L.A. business tycoon and partners in her latest venture—the formation of a charitable foundation.

A year had passed since she'd visited her last film set, and sometimes Tessa still couldn't believe how much her life had changed. For nearly fifteen years, she had moved from project to project, set to set, living away from home for months at a time. Since Laya's birth she had scaled back, but even though she worked primarily on smaller budget pictures with minimal travel demands, she was still forced to choose again and again between parenting and her career. After a decade and a half in Hollywood, she had finally grown tired of the profession that dictated what she ate and where she slept, the hotel rooms that blended one into another, her ghoulish paparazzi shadow. Tired of moving from one character to another, increasingly uncertain who she was herself behind the masks she was paid to wear. She had achieved more than she'd ever hoped to as an actor, and despite the groans the decision elicited from her agent, publicist and assorted studio executives, she was ready to be done with the business of making movies. So she'd retired from the film industry and focused on spending time with her daughter, catching up on her reading, and going wherever she wanted whenever she wanted—as much as any parent could do.

Not working while Laya was in school hadn't been all that satisfying, however, so she'd kept her antenna raised, on the lookout for what it was she should focus on next. Then, just before Christmas, she'd stumbled across a magazine article about

the Gates Foundation in Seattle, one of the organizations she supported. As she read the description of the Gates' endeavors, an idea had crystallized. A vocal critic (along with much of the rest of Hollywood) of the avaricious social, economic and environmental policies of George W. Bush's recently ended (thank God) reign, perhaps she should consider putting her money where her mouth was. She could invest some of the exorbitant fees her agent had managed over the years to extract from the studios—at the end of her career, her salary quote was \$10 million per picture, not including first-dollar gross or back-end revenues—and use the returns to fund charities whose causes matched her own interests.

She'd been giving away her money for years, and not just the amount her business manager recommended for tax purposes. But a foundation like the one the Gates had created was something that would continue giving unto perpetuity, provide jobs and, in theory, eventually run itself. It would also offer a chance for her to explore who she really was after all those years of playing other people, to figure out who she wanted to be. Besides, now she would have an official excuse to approach people with similar financial resources about giving to her favorite causes.

Her business manager had put her in touch with the Byerlys, who were also feeling the need to flex their wealth in a new way, and they'd officially joined forces a few weeks before. Her new career, unlike the old one, allowed her to continue to drop Laya off at school most mornings and pick her up in the afternoons. She was home for dinner more often than not, and she got to tuck her daughter into bed and read her a story (or two, or three) most nights. They finally had a normal life. Or as normal as life in Hollywood ever could be.

The notion of normalcy reminded her of Eleanor Chapin. She pictured the teacher's smile again, the pale skin at the base of her throat, the freckles that had gilded even her ears. The encounter had been brief, but in that short time Eleanor had seemed lovely and self-assured and possibly more genuine than anyone Tessa had met in entirely too long.

As she left the mountains for the flat, traffic-logged city, she watched the landscape change around her and pondered

the appealing smile of a woman who undoubtedly occupied a decidedly different world from her own.

Eleanor didn't have time to think about her encounter with Tessa Flanagan until mid-morning, when the children parked themselves on the plush rug at the center of the room for a round of Silent Sustained Reading. As they read to themselves from books they'd chosen from the wooden box under the window, Eleanor sat at her desk staring out at the bright green lawn, sunlit as usual on this late March day. But it wasn't the lawn she saw. Rather her mind was full of the dark eyes and sleek hair of the famous actress who had stepped into her classroom that morning.

She'd known, of course, who Laya Flanagan's mother was. Laya was one of the reasons the school had asked her to sign a nondisclosure agreement. The Barclay School took privacy very seriously, especially when it came to the children of celebrities. Eleanor tried to recall what she knew of the retired actress—in her mid-thirties, never been married, known for her progressive politics and championing of liberal causes. And, rumor had it, possibly on the down-low. But Eleanor didn't give much credence to those rumors. Probably they arose out of wishful thinking.

Meeting Tessa Flanagan had made her month, Eleanor thought, smiling at her own shallowness. She wasn't a huge fan of L.A. Though she'd visited Southern California many times over the years, this was her first extended stay in the Golden State. Now, after three months in Hollywood, she couldn't wait to leave the hot, smoggy confines of the city. She'd moved out west for a change of pace after her mother's long, ultimately failed battle with breast cancer. Sunny California was nothing like New England, where she had lived her entire life. L.A. seemed like the perfect escape.

And it was, at first. She'd moved in with her college roommate, Sasha, an attorney who leased a comfortable apartment at the foot of the Hollywood Hills, and set to work on completing her applications to a handful of carefully selected Ph.D. programs

in child psychology. But soon the constant press of people, the notorious traffic, the narcissistic culture of the city all started to grate on her. Before Sasha's cousin had hooked her up with the short-term position at the Barclay School, she'd been thinking of leaving L.A. as soon as she picked a graduate program. Assuming she got in anywhere decent.

Tessa Flanagan was the first celebrity she had met in the flesh. And what flesh. Eleanor had seen her films, of course, everything from romantic comedies to Oscar-winning dramas, but the big screen had not prepared her in the least for Tessa's real-life presence. She wasn't surprised that Tessa was stunning in person, even in jeans and almost no makeup. She just hadn't been prepared this morning to meet someone so—charismatic, that was the word. Some people just exuded sex appeal. Stood to reason that the movie star mother of one of her students would be one of the fortunate few.

Eleanor glanced out across the rug, making certain that her dozen miniature charges were all safely ensconced in literary exercise. Laya was as absorbed in her book as the rest, one hand curled under her cheek as she turned the pages of *Corduroy*. What was the deal with her father, again? Eleanor thought she remembered something about an anonymous sperm donor making headlines at the time of Tessa's pregnancy, news that had only fueled the rumors about her sexual orientation. Either way, at least Eleanor knew now where the girl got those long lashes. If memory served, Tessa was half-Irish and half-Filipino—a potent genetic combination, Eleanor thought, daydreaming about the actress's smile, the seeming warmth in her eyes.

Then she caught herself. Even if the rumors circulating through the lesbian community were true, Tessa Flanagan would hardly spare her a thought. On the contrary, Laya's mother had seemed mainly interested in her classroom experience. Tessa wasn't the only parent who had expressed concern over the sudden change in teachers. She was just the most notable one. Eleanor didn't find herself speechless very often. Tessa Flanagan, on the other hand, was probably well accustomed to the dazed reactions of the mere mortals she encountered in daily life.

Reaching for a stack of reports left behind by her predecessor,

Eleanor told herself to stop thinking about Hollywood celebrities and focus on her job, which on a typical day didn't afford her time to daydream.

"Guess who I met this morning?" she greeted Sasha that evening. Her former college roommate had returned from work just in time for a dinner of brown rice and tofu stir fry. Because Sasha wouldn't let her contribute to the rent, Eleanor insisted on buying groceries, cooking dinner and cleaning the apartment as often as she could. As a result, Sasha, who was straight, often referred to Eleanor as her wife.

"Let's see," Sasha said, kicking off her heels and coming to stand beside her at the stove, one arm around her waist. "Tessa Flanagan?"

"How did you know?"

"Easy, Elle. People dot com had pictures of her at your school this morning." She reached out and snagged a spoonful of broccoli and tofu. An entertainment lawyer, Sasha claimed that it was her professional duty to read the celebrity gossip dailies.

"How did she look?" Eleanor asked.

Sasha swallowed the bite and eyed her quizzically. "Um, gorgeous? How else would she look?"

"I don't know." She smiled a little to herself, remembering her first glimpse of the real Tessa Flanagan. *Gorgeous* didn't seem quite strong enough.

"Hold on," Sasha said. "I know that look. You want to get it on with Tessa Flanagan!"

"You'd want to get it on with her, too, if you met her."

"Probably," Sasha agreed, and headed for the hallway. "I've got to get out of this suit. I can't believe I actually wore a push-up bra to court today. Post-feminist, my ass."

Later, over wine and stir-fry, Eleanor rehashed her celebrity encounter. "I had no idea it would be so hard to act like a normal person. It's like I had no control over what I was doing or saying. I actually invited her to stay and observe class."

"Did she?"

“Of course not. I’m sure she’s busy, even if she isn’t acting anymore. I mean, she’s Tessa Flanagan.”

“To risk sounding trite, she’s also just a person,” Sasha said, wiping her mouth with a cloth napkin. In her work, she had told Eleanor, she’d come to realize just how fragile celebrities could be, especially the ones who believed their own press. PR was propaganda intended to keep a star in the limelight. The smart ones didn’t take the business of selling themselves too seriously.

“I know that,” Eleanor said. “I was actually surprised by how real she seemed. She was wearing jeans.”

“Duh, Elle, everyone wears jeans, even mega-stars. Ten years in Boston did little to exorcise the Northeast Kingdom, I see.”

“Last time I checked, Orange County wasn’t exactly the Entertainment Capital of the World.”

“Maybe not, but at least it’s close.”

They had met a decade and a half earlier as first-years at Smith College in Western Massachusetts, Eleanor recently liberated from a town of five thousand in the northeast corner of Vermont, Sasha from the southern edge of the Los Angeles megalopolis. For Eleanor, Northampton, a New England city of thirty thousand located in pastoral Pioneer Valley, represented a bridge to the larger world she was eager to discover. For her roommate, the ivy-bricked women’s college and small East Coast city were completely foreign and frighteningly homogeneous—where *were* the other black people, she frequently lamented. Sasha was so homesick their first year that Eleanor was convinced she would transfer. But by the end of the year, Sasha claimed to have grown used to lily-white New England. She would go back to L.A. after college, she said—a vow she’d fulfilled the day after graduation.

Eleanor had visited Southern California annually ever since, and Sasha had returned to New England for regular reunions. At Eleanor’s mother’s funeral the previous November, Sasha had invited her to L.A. for an open-ended visit. Six weeks later, motherless, unemployed and newly single, Eleanor had grabbed the chance to spend quality time with her best friend. Not to mention get some much-needed perspective. Shortly after the holidays, she packed up her Jetta and drove west, following the

southern route across the country. Her younger sister, Julia, took a break from her job as a graphic designer in Burlington to accompany her. They'd bonded along the way, but their mother's death had hung heavily between them. Eleanor had been relieved to reach L.A. and put her sister on a plane back to Boston.

These days, Sasha felt more like a sister than Julia did. In the past few months, they'd fallen back into the same easy routines from their college days. After dinner most nights they cleaned up the kitchen together and then went their separate ways, usually to pursue some form of homework. Tonight was no different—Sasha disappeared into her home office to work on a brief due the following morning, while Eleanor set up shop at the dining room table with scissors, craft foam, cardboard paper towel tubes, and other tools of the trade. She wanted to try out a crafts activity she'd discovered on a teaching blog. It was nearly the end of the year, so the kids should be able to cut and paste on their own by now. Still, she'd learned early on in her educational career that the better the planning, the more successful a lesson usually turned out to be. Especially when it came to arts and crafts.

As she drew floral designs on the craft foam, she considered the number of years she and Sasha had known each other: almost fifteen now. Roughly the same length of time Tessa Flanagan had been a Hollywood mainstay, if she remembered correctly. Her gaze strayed to the laptop perched on one side of the hardwood table, broadcasting an Indigo Girls mix on iTunes. She should keep working, she told herself even as she dropped the foam and pulled the laptop closer. In a new browser window, she typed "Tessa Flanagan" into the Google search box and hit enter. Immediately a search engine results page gave her the first ten hits out of millions of possibilities.

Scrolling down, she scanned the results, reading bits and pieces of a Wikipedia entry, an Internet Movie Database listing, multiple fan sites, and finally, a description of a People.com article with today's date. She clicked on the link, and after a moment the article opened in a new window. There on the page was a photo of Tessa and Laya walking up the brick walkway to the Barclay School. Tessa was holding Laya's hand and shielding

the girl from the photographer's lens as she looked back over her shoulder. Eleanor stared at the photo, noting the narrowness of Tessa's waist, the sheen of her hair, the neat clogs that poked out beneath her jeans. A picture didn't compare, she decided, closing her eyes and remembering the feel of Tessa's palm simultaneously warm and cool against her own.

"What have we here?"

Sasha's drawl from the kitchen doorway startled her, and she quickly minimized the People.com window.

"Too late, I already saw," her once and current roommate said as she entered the kitchen, empty wineglass in hand. "It's okay, Elle. It's not like I don't know all about your libido."

This could have been a reference to any number of incidents. In college first semester, when Eleanor was discovering that it wasn't the fact she'd known the boys in her hometown since nursery school that made them seem unattractive, Sasha had walked in on her making out with another girl in their dorm room. To her credit, Sasha hadn't asked for a new roommate on the spot, as some other Smith first-years might have done. She was fine with the gay thing, she said, as long as Eleanor didn't try anything with her. It took Eleanor months to forgive her for this crass remark, and nearly a year passed before Sasha officially took it back.

Or it might have been a reference to an episode a month earlier when Eleanor, believing Sasha to be pulling an all-nighter at the office, had invited a woman she'd met at a West Hollywood club back to the apartment. On that occasion, Eleanor had actually been relieved at Sasha's unexpected arrival because as the three vodka tonics she'd imbibed at the club started to wear off, she found herself remembering why it was she tended to stick to serial monogamy. As the key turned in the lock, she implied that the new arrival was her jealous girlfriend, and the stranger (Jen? Jamie? she couldn't remember now) had hightailed it out of the apartment.

Then again, it wasn't as if Sasha didn't have her own closeted skeletons. "Right," Eleanor said.

Her roommate wiggled her carefully shaped eyebrows. "What does the Internet have to say about your girlfriend? Plenty, I bet."

“Shut it.”

“Suit yourself.” Sasha refilled her wine glass and sauntered back to her office.

As she cut out foam flowers and attached them to the cardboard tubes that would serve as stems, Eleanor wondered if she should worry. Sasha had taken to polishing off a bottle of wine most nights while she worked in her home office. She also hadn't gone out on a date since Ben, her ex, had dumped her for an older woman (a phrase you didn't often hear in L.A.—or anyplace else, really—Sasha liked to point out), and she was working more hours than ever at a job she claimed to despise. Sasha, her best friend in the world, wasn't happy. Then again, Eleanor thought, was she?

Since graduating from Smith a decade before, neither of them had achieved the goals they'd set for themselves as dewy-eyed undergrads. Eleanor still hadn't started graduate school, and Sasha was unmarried, childless and stuck as a mid-level associate at a firm practicing the kind of corporate law she'd always claimed to detest. But law school loans forced many a would-be altruist to sell out. Sasha claimed she hadn't yet decided if she was fully committed to being just another law school cliché.

At least Eleanor got to work with kids. She'd wanted to be a child psychologist since her first psych class sophomore year of college. Midway through the semester, the professor had assigned them homework that involved a visit to a residential mental health center. They could choose from the local VA, a nearby substance abuse recovery facility or a children's hospital in Worcester, an hour east on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Eleanor and one of her classmates had decided to road trip to Worcester, a twist of fate she'd always considered providential. Not many of her friends had as clear an idea of what they were supposed to do with their lives. She was lucky in that regard, she knew.

Not so lucky in other ways. The summer after her junior year, when she might have been pursuing an internship at a children's clinic, she spent driving her mother to cancer treatments in Burlington two hours from where they lived in Newport, Vermont, just south of the Canadian border. She almost didn't

go back to Smith her senior year, but her mother was adamant. Her illness should not, could not, negatively impact the family.

As if that were even possible. But Eleanor hadn't wanted to upset her mother, not when she needed every ounce of energy to fight the murderous cells lurking in her bloodstream. Dutifully she returned to school and came home two weekends a month, while her father took time off from his architectural firm to care for his wife. Julia, Eleanor's younger sister, had just started her freshman year at the University of Vermont. Their parents took out a second mortgage on their 1920s bungalow in Newport, only a block from Lake Memphremagog, to help pay for their daughters' schooling, and life went on as usual. Except, of course, that it didn't.

Eleanor got up from the table and went to pour herself a glass of wine. It was a Thursday night, and back in college she and Sasha might have spent the evening hanging out in a dorm room with friends from Sri Lanka and South Carolina, drinking cheap beer or sharing a joint and debating the existence of God or democracy or some other American institution they'd implicitly believed in before beginning their intellectual journey toward adulthood in bucolic Western Massachusetts. She missed those days, missed the easy camaraderie of a women's college where girls becoming women could be themselves without worrying about what other people—their families, former acquaintances, men—thought. She missed the simpler, pre-cancer years when her future had seemed wide open, the path she would follow simultaneously exciting and predictable. Smith had spoiled her for four years by providing a secure environment in which to explore what she wanted from her life, not to mention who she might like to share it with. Sometimes she thought she was still trying to get over the rude awakening of leaving Smith and Northampton after graduation. No place since had ever felt quite right.

Turning back to the dining room table, she took a sip of wine and picked up her scissors. Though she didn't look at the People.com article again that night, she somehow still felt Tessa Flanagan's presence as she set about creating a colorful spring garden for her class.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

