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Facing Forward

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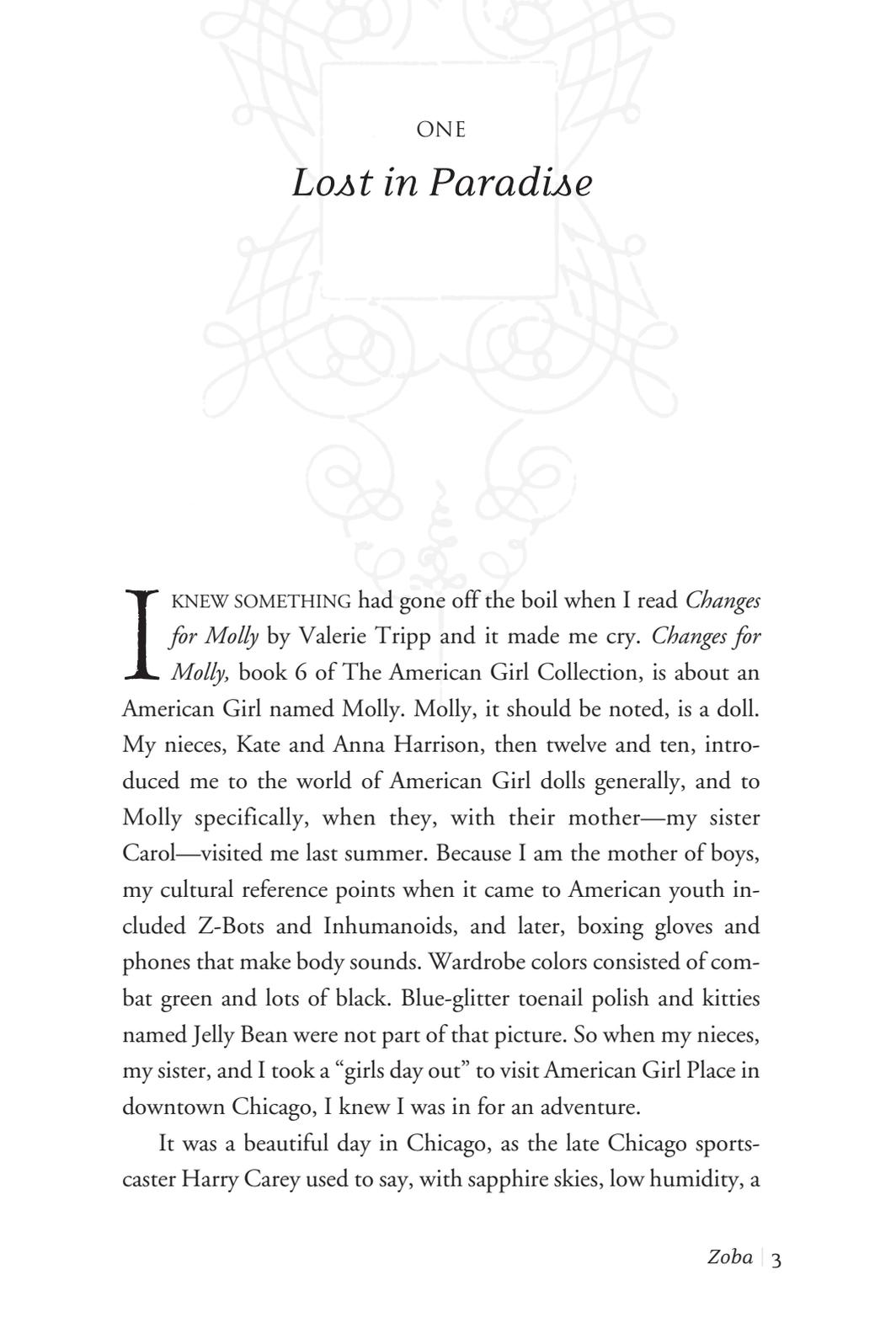
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ONE

Lost in Paradise

I KNEW SOMETHING had gone off the boil when I read *Changes for Molly* by Valerie Tripp and it made me cry. *Changes for Molly*, book 6 of The American Girl Collection, is about an American Girl named Molly. Molly, it should be noted, is a doll. My nieces, Kate and Anna Harrison, then twelve and ten, introduced me to the world of American Girl dolls generally, and to Molly specifically, when they, with their mother—my sister Carol—visited me last summer. Because I am the mother of boys, my cultural reference points when it came to American youth included Z-Bots and Inhumanoids, and later, boxing gloves and phones that make body sounds. Wardrobe colors consisted of combat green and lots of black. Blue-glitter toenail polish and kitties named Jelly Bean were not part of that picture. So when my nieces, my sister, and I took a “girls day out” to visit American Girl Place in downtown Chicago, I knew I was in for an adventure.

It was a beautiful day in Chicago, as the late Chicago sports-caster Harry Carey used to say, with sapphire skies, low humidity, a

cool breeze off the lake. Kate and Anna, tanned, delicate little birds with flaxen hair and cheery eyes, hailed from Asheville, North Carolina, and hadn't ridden in a big-city cab. I wanted them to feel relaxed and adventurous, so when I slid into the front seat of the taxi next to the driver, I handled the moment with panache that befits big-city navigation.

"So where are you from?" I asked the driver.

"I am from Ghana. Do you know where Ghana is?"

"Yes," I said. "My sons' youth group took a trip there a year ago."

"Where is it?" he asked.

"In Africa."

"Where in Africa?"

I paused. Its precise coordinates escaped me. I looked at the girls in the back. Kate, watching traffic out her window, wore an insinuating half smile, and Anna was perched forward, her chin slightly raised, awaiting my answer.

"Somewhere in the north?"

"No! No! Your sons went to Ghana, and you don't know where Ghana is?"

"My sons didn't go to Ghana," I said haltingly. "I said their *youth group* made a trip to Ghana. My sons went to Ecuador"—as if this would absolve me of not knowing where Ghana was.

"Why do you say you know where Ghana is if you don't?"

"So where is it?"

"This is Africa." He draws an outline of Africa with hand motions, which meant that for brief flourishes his hands weren't on the steering wheel. "Ghana is here"—he points—"I have been in this country twenty-seven years. What were you doing twenty-seven years ago?"

I looked at my sister. "How old would we have been?"

Neither of us were inclined to do the math.

“I can’t remember,” I said.

“See, I was in America *working* for twenty-seven years in this country. All my kids go to college here. My kids get paid scholarships because they keep their nose in the books. You have to put your nose in the books.”

“I have two sons in college.”

“Does your government pay for your sons’ college?”

I said a sheepish and muted no.

“Have you asked your government why they do not pay for your sons’ college?”

I didn’t answer.

“College should be free in America,” he said. “I am proud of my sons, but I do not tell them. Then they might not work hard. You have to *work hard*.”

“We’ll get out right here. Thanks.” I needed air.

Coming in on the train, each girl had sat with me a few minutes to brief me on their respective experiences with American Girl dolls. Anna has Molly, a World War II American Girl, frozen in time at age ten in 1944 and who, according to the literature, is “a lively, lovable schemer and dreamer.” She has auburn braids for “the long-hair look,” said Anna, and wears “a navy blue skirt and sweater and a little painter’s hat thing,” which I took to mean a beret. Molly is supposed to have glasses, but Anna doesn’t like Molly’s glasses, so her doll doesn’t wear them.

Kate has Samantha, “a Victorian beauty living with her grandmother in 1904.” Kate’s Samantha has brown hair, though she told me it is possible to have a blonde-, red-, or black-haired Samantha because “you can buy made-to-order dolls with clothes from any doll, and they have today dolls, too.” Kate keeps Samantha’s hair in

a braid because it “got messed up and ratty.” Kate also tells me she bought a Bitty, whom she named Susie. A Bitty is a baby version of an American Girl doll.

I ask my nieces what they do with their American Girl dolls, and Kate says, “We play house. We’re both the mothers.”

“I’m a nice mother,” Anna is quick to add. “I work at Chuck E. Cheese and Molly’s aunt”—that would be Kate—“works at Dairy Queen. We always go to Chuck E. Cheese and Dairy Queen.”

“Sometimes I read Samantha’s book to her,” adds Kate. “The dolls all come with a story.” The American Girl dolls represent different historical periods, and the accompanying books offer lessons in history along with girlish adventures. Kate adds as an afterthought, “They don’t make it all girlie. They, like, have sports dolls and stuff.”

So much to learn, so little time. We have a half day to walk the three well-organized levels of American Girl Place and then cap off our adventure with tea at the American Girl Café. On to American Girl Place!



They start you off with a photo opportunity on the sidewalk outside the entrance. We sit on a huge red couch thing that looks like a prop from *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure*. *Click. Click.* One more! *Click!* We move on in deference to the small horde of other visitors waiting to begin their day the same way.

The revolving door sweeps you into a display of books, school supplies, and other practical accoutrements connected with the seemingly endless array of American Girl personalities. Kate fondles a pencil holder associated with Amelia. It has a strip of bacon affixed to the top. I don’t know who Amelia is, but Kate says she’s not a doll. “Does Amelia like bacon or something?” Kate looks at me.

I don't know, I say.

"It seems funny to have bacon on an American Girl thing," says Kate, and I have to agree. In the same section there are books with titles like *More Games and Giggles* and *Again, Josefina!* I stumble upon an Amelia's Journal Kit and thus conclude that Amelia must have something to do with writing, what with the bacon pencil holder and now the journal kit. On another wall there are specialty items like varsity jackets, T-shirts, backpacks, and denim jumper outfits, all of which match American Girl dolls' outfits.

"Let's go down first," says Carol. We proceed down the escalator to the window displays where the dolls are presented in historical sequence. Felicity comes first, "a spunky sprightly colonial girl" growing up in Virginia in 1774. Her Christmas gown is satiny blue with lace ruffles, and her frilly hat looks like a doily. Felicity is carrying her own doll, similarly dressed, and is holding an invitation to a dancing lesson. Next comes Josefina, my personal favorite, "a girl of heart and hope." She is Hispanic, growing up in New Mexico in 1824, and her accessories include things like a chicken in a cage, hot chili peppers, an outdoor clay oven, and a goat. ¡*Viva la muchacha, Josefina!* Kirsten, "a pioneer girl of strength and spirit," lives in Minnesota in 1854 and is clearly "above average." Under a puffy red polka-dot bonnet she wears braids—oddly resembling hangmen's nooses—tied above her ears. Her cat's name is Missy, and Missy has a kitten. They are her "furry friends on the farm." Addy is an African American girl growing up in 1864, "proud and courageous," who made a daring escape from slavery with her mother. Addy carries a kerchief with the few possessions she escaped with and wears a cowry shell around her neck.

We come upon Samantha, a familiar face. I see a man asleep in a strategically placed chair, his arm dangling loosely to one side, his

jaw agape. “Hey, Kate, here’s Samantha!” I say, already knowing she is a Victorian beauty living with her grandmother in 1904. We turn a corner and it’s on to Molly, and there is a second man asleep in a chair. “Molly doesn’t look so bad with her glasses,” I say to Anna.

“Hmmpf. Whatever,” she says.

Kit is a new American Girl doll making her debut, kind of like a coming-out party. She is “clever and resourceful,” growing up during the Depression in 1934, and has a bouncy blond pageboy, like Hillary Clinton’s headband phase. Kate says she likes Kit’s hair.

I see a third man who has fallen by the wayside.

The next phase is a blur. I remember seeing Angelina Ballerina, who is a mouse, and her pink room. I remember standing by the display case where you can choose a customized American Girl doll. Kate asks, “Which one looks like me?” and I tell her I don’t know. There’s the Superstar Sleepover Kit and Coconut, a fluffy white little doggie who comes with a doghouse and yellow food dishes and a matching American Girl Picnic Time outfit. I remember the Bitty Baby starter set costs ninety-eight dollars, and I remember feeling numb and lost in a world of lavender and turquoise and Sweet Dream satin pillows and jelly phones.

Is that Yoko Ono? I see a doll with long black hair parted in the middle and wearing bell-bottom hip huggers, a tie-dyed shirt, granny glasses, and a headband—an American Girl doll with attitude! A closer look confirms it is not Yoko Ono. She is one of the Halloween American Girl dolls, a “60s hippie” with a “groovy flower-power costume.” Catwoman’s costume is skintight velour.

Carol and the girls get stalled at the Hair Salon, where a black woman is mercilessly yanking Kirsten’s well-worn rats. I meander to the sporty American Girls, the ones Kate says are not too girlie. There is a soccer doll, a basketball doll, a softball doll, a tennis doll,

and a cheerleader doll with red, white, and blue pom-poms. The martial-arts doll, “tenacious and spirited,” comes with white, purple, yellow, orange, blue, red, and black belts and a karate mat.

Back at the Hair Salon, Kirsten, her eyes bright and her dimpled smile forever fixed, remains unfazed by the pulling. The black woman sprays something on her hair, and Carol and I conclude it must be the secret formula that gives these dolls such good hair. My sister boldly asks, “What are you spraying?”

The stylist looks up. “Water.”

We look at one another and gape: Water!

We are near Doll Hospital Admissions, and Kate explains, “It’s for, like, if your doll’s head falls off. Or for people who want to get new heads or new bodies.” I should have known.

It is time for tea. We make our way to the American Girl Café and are asked to wait in a holding area where I am surrounded by little girls in clam diggers and spaghetti-strap tops and jelly shoes, sitting on laps of heroic fathers or bantering giddily with dewy-eyed mothers about this outfit or that doodad that adds just the right touch to their personal American Girl collection. Fathers hold hands and mothers remit kisses and hugs, and that’s when it came to me, sitting there outside the American Girl Café, that my girlhood was better defined not by what happened, though things did happen, but by what *didn’t* happen. What I saw waiting to go in for tea was a picture my American girl childhood did not include.

The marquee outside the theater showing *The American Girl Revue* displayed a quotation from a reviewer: “[A]udience members can feel they’re part of the celebration of girlhood,” it said. The premise of an American Girl childhood is celebration and promise. When I think of the young years I shared with my sisters, when we four were

more or less the age of these little girls, “celebration of girlhood” does not come to mind as a defining theme. That is not to say we did not indulge in the accoutrements of girlhood such as it was back then. My older sister Sue had Saucy Walker, a huge three-foot-high doll who bobbed left and right, taking tortured, stilted steps if you held her fat plastic arms just so and pulled her along. Carol (we called her Susie Homemaker) had a pink play-kitchen set with little pans and teapots and muffin tins and later, an Easy-Bake oven that made real cupcakes. Nancy liked animals, so stuffed dogs and kitties filled her play world. I tried my hand at Barbie and Ken and Skipper, but it never took.

It is not to say there weren't precious moments we treasure. I remember early on, when we were all under five, my father would sometimes tuck us in at night, and when he did, he always turned his head so we could whisper in his ear, “Buy Dots and KitKat.” He traveled a lot back then, and this ritual served to plead and remind him to bring us treats. Such special moments soon evaporated, however, when he started his new business in the basement of our house, the fourth child was born and the demands of life became acute, and the drinking took hold. Then “Buy Dots and KitKat” disappeared into the shadows.

When I was the age of the little girls surrounding me outside the American Girl Café, I went downstairs in our childhood home and discovered a lock on the liquor cabinet. A few days later I discovered the lock had been forcibly pulled off its hinge. I don't know what prompted the placing of the lock, and I don't remember what happened between that time and the time it was ripped off. I only remember feeling that something was very wrong and the world I lived in stood on the edge of disaster, and that somehow it was probably my fault. I carried that feeling into adulthood. And

when I looked into the faces of the primped and poised little girls before me, being coddled and caressed by their fathers and mothers, it occurred to me that for all I do remember about my childhood, I don't remember being coddled and caressed. Such a bond did not exist.

Not all American girl narratives are happy stories, which is why I cried when I read *Changes for Molly*.



Molly, being a lovable schemer and dreamer, hatches a plot to win the role of Miss Victory in the school program called “Hurray for the U.S.A.” Playing Miss Victory is a special prize because it means doing a solo tap dance during the grand finale and wearing a shiny red, white, and blue costume with a silvery star on the right shoulder and a star crown. Conniving with her friends Linda and Susan, Molly calculates the odds: Yes, Miss LaVonda, the teacher in charge, is fair in her judgment and would likely confer the starring role to the best tap dancer. But girls, being girls, know that when it comes to getting starring roles, being the best tapper may not suffice. “A lot depends upon how a person looks, not just how she sings or dances,” notes Linda amid the scheming. All agree that Molly holds pride of place when it comes to tapping, but her braids and glasses are a disadvantage when it comes to looks, lovable dreamer though she may be. Star crowns, they conclude, do not rest atop the head of one with average-looking hair. Molly needs curls.

The plan as they conceive it is to take next Saturday's movie money, twenty-five cents plus an extra nickel for popcorn remitted dutifully and kindly by Molly's willowy, helpful mother, Mrs. McIntire, and buy a box of Perma-Wave. Then the girls will go to Molly's secret hideout above the garage and have at the hair. With

Molly's unmatched tapping skills and her indomitable desire to win the role of Miss Victory, the curls will seal the deal, they feel sure.

In an added twist, Molly's father, a doctor serving in England, tending the wounded from World War II, has written a letter informing the family he will be home in a few weeks—just in time to see Molly tap the finale as Miss Victory!

The girls pool their movie money and purchase the chemicals. The smell turns their noses, but with the plan in motion, they press on. Molly senses some confusion on the part of Susan, the primary agent in the scheme, and has fleeting concerns about whether Susan knows what she is doing, which she doesn't, but she hasn't told Molly that. Then, at the precise moment the chemicals are to be applied, Molly's helpful and poised older sister Jill walks in and rescues her from certain hair disaster. A permanent wave will result only in "wrinkles and frizz," Jill warns. She offers instead to become Molly's personal hair expert, every night using crisscrossed bobby pins to pin her hair into coiled bundles that look like little cinnamon rolls all over her head. This, Jill explains kindly, will achieve the desired effect without the risk of frizz and wrinkles.

Molly gets the role. At the dress rehearsal she hits every step, winning the booming applause of onlookers. Miss LaVonda says, "Tomorrow night you'll bring down the house!" Her mother calls her Olly Molly.

In a surprise twist, Molly comes down with a fever after the astounding display at the rehearsal and collapses in bed, unable to rise and be the star the night of the actual performance. She is understandably crushed, but an even better surprise awaits her. Her father returns while the others are away at the show, and Molly gets him all to herself for those first precious hours, when they talk and hug and cry with one another.

The tears rose to the edges of my eyes, and my throat tightened. *No!* I wanted to shout to Molly, *This isn't how it works!* In real life, Molly's friends curl her hair with the Perma-Wave and ruin it, and Molly hisses at them for it, and her big sister mocks her, and her mother grounds her and puts an end to the movie money. No, Molly, there is no easy road to becoming Miss Victory! Little girls don't hit every step and hear the applause and get nicknames from their mothers and get precious, privileged special moments with their fathers. No, Molly, little girls must battle their way through their childhoods. They must take risks in order to wear the crown and win the applause. They must do all kinds of things to try to snatch a victory, and more times than not, they will never get the starring role! They become wives and mothers and coworkers and movie stars and carry wounds with them into adulthood and won't understand the price they've paid until it's too late and they realize they hate their fathers for not being there when they needed him.

Let it not be said that an American Girl doll book reduced me to tears. I pressed them back behind my eyes and said, "Good for you, Olly Molly." Still, I am left to wonder how many little girls reading that book will think this is the way it is supposed to be, that big sisters are helpful and kind and self-sacrificing and that mothers have soft hair and call their daughters nicknames. How many little girls will live out their lives thinking that having anything short of the title of Miss Victory and the star crown is failure?



Before my sisters and nieces returned home to Asheville, Anna and my eighteen-year-old son, Jon, engaged in a protracted discussion about the meaning of the little marshmallow bits in Lucky Charms cereal. Jon argued that without them, the cereal had no point. In

fact, he had been known to pour a bowl, pick out the dry cereal, and eat only the marshmallow bits. Anna demurred: “The little marshmallow things are not the point of Lucky Charms.”

They highlight the larger eating experience, she said, or something to that effect. They are the complement, the mouthwatering bits that heighten one’s sensory awareness of the overall product.

Maybe that heightened awareness is the promise these dolls hold out for little girls. Maybe American Girl dolls, their happy stories, their good hair, their cuddly bears and fluffy dogs, and their bacon pencil holders point to something higher than the narrative that more typically plays out in the real lives of lots of little girls. Maybe if Molly—a homely girl with average hair and eyeglasses—can become queen tapper and wear the crown, there is hope for us all. Maybe doting over Molly’s glasses or Samantha’s hair is a way of putting one foot in the world of promise and celebration, longing for it, believing it’s there, touching it, being close enough to feel its pull. Maybe the mothers who celebrate this world with their daughters are reaching for the promise too.

Dolls carry the hopes of little girls. And hopes are the wings that carry their hearts. Sometimes wings fail, and hearts lose hope. Sometimes hope must be kindled somewhere else, in other worlds, less happy, less well managed. Sometimes hope must be found under rocks and at the bottom of empty places. Some little girls who later become wives or moms or teachers or movie stars may spend their entire lives trying to find hope in these places, many times without realizing that is what they are doing.

Yes, the marshmallow bits are not the point. They add sweetness to an otherwise dry mix. They fill the empty places. I saw the day I went to American Girl Place that sometimes the worst that happens to a child can’t be drawn in primary colors, in bold shapes or black

lines. Sometimes the worst that happens is perceivable only in shadows and strange unanswered longings. Seeing it didn't fill those empty places that had for so long haunted me. But it clarified the nuances of this bewildering midlife journey.

Kate told me later that after that trip she'll never forget where Ghana is. She also said going to American Girl Place made her want to "clean up and fix" her doll because "I had neglected her" and she felt bad about that. Dolls do better when they are not neglected. But when they are, it doesn't mean the promise held out is less real or accessible. I came to see in my quest to regather the lost pieces of my youth that there is a promise for every little girl, even the ones whose life mix may not include marshmallow bits. God is especially predisposed to filling the empty places in those sad hearts, as noted by seventeenth-century preacher and poet John Donne: "And therefore how little soever I be, as God calls things that are not, as though they were, I, who am as though I were not, may call upon God. . . . I shall hear his angels proclaim the *Surgite mortui*, Rise, ye dead. Though I be dead, I shall hear the voice; the sound of the voice and the working of the voice shall be all one."