opening extract from

The Summer That Changed Everything

written by

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The Summer That Changed Everything

ANN BRASHARES

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For Nancy Easton, with love
and gratitude for your friendship
through many children, many
books, and many miles.
Thanks for listening to my
thoughts about trees.

And for my beloved three,
Sam, Nate, and Susannah.

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Jacob Collins, my children, Sam, Nate, and
Susannah, and my parents, Jane and Bill Brashares.

THE SMALLEST SPROUT SHOWS
THERE IS REALLY NO DEATH.

WALT WHITMAN – 'SONG OF MYSELF'

The roots of
the willow tree
are remarkable
for their strength
and tenacious
hold on life.

One

The last day of school was a half day. Tomorrow the entire eighth grade would pile back into the gym for the graduation ceremony, but that was just for an hour and their families would be there. The next time Ama went to school, it would be high school.

Everything is changing, Ama thought.

Usually she took the bus home, but today she felt like walking, she wasn't sure why. She wasn't sentimental. She was purposeful and forward-looking, like her older sister. But it was an aimless time of day, and she wasn't hauling her usual twenty pounds of textbooks, binders, and notebooks. Today she felt like treading the familiar steps she'd walked so many times when she was younger, when she was never in a hurry.

She couldn't help thinking about Polly and Jo as she walked, so when she saw them up ahead, waiting at the light to cross East–West Highway, it almost felt like they appeared out of her memory.

Ama was surprised to see Polly and Jo together. From this long view, she was struck by the naturalness of the way they stood together and at the same time, the strain. She doubted they had started off from school together. These days Jo usually left school with her noisy and

flirting group of friends to go to the Tastee Diner or to the bagel place round the corner. Polly went her own way – taking for ever to pack up her stuff and often spending time at the library before heading home. Ama sometimes saw Polly at the library and they sat together out of habit. But unlike Ama, Polly wasn't there to do her homework. Polly read everything in the library except what was assigned.

As Ama got closer, she considered how little Jo looked like she used to in elementary school. Her braces were off, her glasses were gone, and she devotedly wore whatever the current marker for popularity was – at the moment, pastel plaid shorts and her hair in two braids. Ama considered how much Polly, in her long frayed shorts and her dark newsboy cap, looked the same as she always had.

'Ama! Hey!' Polly saw her first. She was waving excitedly. The walk sign illuminated and Ama hurried to catch up to them so they could cross the highway together.

'I can't believe you're here,' Polly said, looking from Ama to Jo. 'This is historic.'

'It's on her way home,' Jo pointed out, not seeming to want to acknowledge the significance of the three of them walking home together on this day.

Ama understood how Jo felt. The history of their friendship was like a brimming and moody pond under a smooth surface of ice, and she didn't want to crack it.

As they walked they talked about final exams and graduation plans. Nobody said anything as they passed the 7-Eleven or even as they approached the old turn.

What if we turned? Ama suddenly wondered. What if

they ran down the old hill, past the playground, and stepped into the woods to see the little trees they had planted so long ago? What if they held hands and ran as fast as they could?

But the three of them passed the old turn, heads and eyes forward. Only Polly seemed to glance back for a moment.

Anyway, even if they did turn, Ama knew it wouldn't be the same. The creaky metal merry-go-round would be rusted, the swing set abandoned. The trees might not even be there any more. It had been so long since they'd tended to them.

Ama pictured her younger self, running down the hill with her two best friends, out of control and exhilarated.

It was different now. People changed and places changed. They were going into high school. This was no time for looking back. Ama couldn't even picture the trees. She couldn't remember the name of the hill any more.

Polly

When I think of the first day of our friendship, I think of the three of us running across East–West Highway with our backpacks on our backs and our potted plants in our hands. I think of Jo dropping her plant in the middle of the street and all of us stopping short, and the sight of the little stalk turned on its side and the roots showing and the soil spilling onto the asphalt. I remember the three of us stooping down to put the plant back into its pot, hurriedly tucking its roots back under the dirt as the walk signal turned from white WALK *to blinking orange* DON'T WALK. *And I remember Ama shouting that we had to hurry,*

and seeing, over my shoulder, the cars pouring over the hill towards us. I remember the rough feeling of the asphalt scraping under my fingers as I swept up the last of the dirt, the stinging feeling of my knuckles as I tried to gather it in my fist. I think it was Jo who grabbed my arm and pulled me to the sidewalk. And I remember the long, flat swell of the horns in my ears.

Ama

We met on the first day of third grade, because of all the 132 kids in our grade, we were the three who didn't get picked up. I was spooked, because my mom had never failed to pick me up from school. She'd never even been late before.

We didn't talk to each other at first. I was embarrassed and scared and I didn't want to show it. They put us in the maths help room with the see-through walls. We stared out like a zoo exhibit waiting for our parents to come.

That was the day they gave out the little willow tree cuttings in plastic pots in our science class. We were supposed to take care of them and study them all year. I remember each of us sitting at a desk with our plant in front of us. Polly kept poking at hers to see if the soil was too dry. She hummed.

Jo put her sneakers up on the desk and leaned back. She said her plant probably wouldn't last through the week.

I couldn't believe how casual the two of them were about being left at school. I was freaked out, but later on I learned that my mother had a really good excuse for not showing up that day.

Jo

I guess it was my idea to run away from school together. We'd been waiting for like an hour and a half for our parents and we were bored and hungry. Me especially. They'd moved us to the

chairs outside the principal's office, so we felt like we were getting punished. Ms Lorenz, the principal's assistant, tried to track down our parents, while all the other teachers went home.

Ama had to go to the bathroom, so Polly and I went with her. We started poking around in empty classrooms and stood on the tables in the cafeteria. It was kind of fun being in school when it was empty and the lights were off. As we walked past the back doors I dared Ama and Polly to walk out of them, and to my shock they did. So there we were, standing outside the school. We hadn't meant to leave, but once we had, I just couldn't go back in there. Freedom's a one-way street, and we were already on it.

'Let's go,' I said. It felt like summer and I knew the way home.

Ama was the one who hesitated.

'We'll get you home,' Polly promised her.

We ran through the backstreets to the 7-Eleven. I had a twenty-dollar bill in my backpack for emergencies, so we gorged on blue Slurpees and Cheetos and Butterfingers. Then it started to rain, to really pour, so we sat in the front window and watched the steam rising in the parking lot and the sky darken practically to night. We wanted to play Dragon Slayer, the old arcade game they had there, but it had yellow tape strung across the front.

The air was cool and sparkling when we left. We ran home across East–West Highway. I remember running with our plants. A plant is one of the few things you can't stuff into your backpack. I remember my little stalk swaying and trembling as I ran. We nearly got killed when I dropped it in the middle of the street.

We took Ama home first. We walked to her building and up

to her apartment, where her father was frantically calling school. That's when we found out about her brother, Bob, who was born that afternoon.

On the way to Polly's she was doing that little skip-step she does when she's happy. We went up to her door and she said her mom wasn't home but that was OK. She said her mom always lost track of time when she was working in her studio. I saw Dia's sculptures for the first time on the front porch – big bare winter trees made out of broken wristwatches and old cell phones. We went round the back and I watched Polly expertly push open a window and climb through it, like that was the regular way into her house.

'I never had a friend take me home,' she said to me through the open window.

Polly

There are moments in your life when the big pieces slide and shift. Sometimes the big changes don't happen gradually but all at once. That's how it was for us. That was the day we discovered that friends can do things for you that your parents can't.

On the bus ride home from Grace's house two days after the end of school, Ama felt shaky with nervous excitement. Her dad had called her on her cell phone, telling her that the letter had finally arrived. He'd offered to pick her up on his way home, but she knew he'd show up in his taxicab, so she opted for the bus. It wasn't that she was ashamed of his driving a cab. That wasn't it. She just didn't like people trying to flag them down as they drove by. She wanted them to be able to drive along in privacy like a regular family and not like they were for hire.

And her dad was really nice, so if it was someone old or disabled hailing them down, he would usually stop, even if he was off duty, and sometimes he wouldn't make them pay anything.

To her parents' great pleasure, Ama had won a summer study grant from the Student Leader Foundation, which meant her entire summer was paid for, including travel. It was a big honour. Only two hundred students across the country got the grants, and nobody in her school had gotten one since her sister, Esi. Esi had won the grant four years in a row.

Now it was just a question of which programme Ama would get into. Ama's first choice was the summer school at Andover, where her friend Grace was going. That was a very popular first choice, she knew, so she probably wouldn't get it. Her second choice was working for school credit at an office of Habitat for Humanity in Virginia. That would look good on her transcript – at least, that was what Esi told her. Her third choice was an academic camp run by Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Her five-year-old brother, Bob, was standing at the door, flapping the fat envelope, when she walked in. Her parents joined them in the hallway. 'I will guess it's Hopkins,' her mother pronounced.

Ama sometimes felt self-conscious about how involved her parents – and even her brother – became in her academic life. Jo used to joke that her mom didn't know her homeroom teacher's name and her dad didn't know what grade she was in.

'That's because the Napolis are rich,' Ama's mother

said to her once. 'They don't need to care as much as we do.'

'I guess it's Habitat,' her dad said.

'Can I open it?' Bob shouted.

'I told you, you have to let Ama open it,' her mother scolded.

'You can open it,' Ama said to Bob. Bob had an irrational love of opening mail, and he almost never got any. 'Just don't rip it.'

Bob nodded seriously. He opened it with great care, handing the pages to her one at a time. Ama's heart was speeding and her eyes were flying around for the part that mattered.

She studied one page and then the next and the third.

'Which one is it?' her mother prodded.

'I don't see it. I think it's—' Ama turned one of the papers over. 'It's . . . I don't get it. It says *Wild Adventures*.' In vain she scanned for words like *Andover* or *Johns Hopkins*.

Her mother looked doubtful. 'Let me see.'

'The address is in Wyoming. It looks like some kind of outdoors trip.' Ama went back to the first page. 'They must have made a mistake. I didn't sign up for that.'

'Wild Adventures?' her father said.

'That's a mistake. Hold on.' Ama tried to locate her name to make sure she hadn't gotten somebody else's assignment. No, it did have her name and address right.

Bob was continuing to pull papers out of the envelope. One of them fluttered to the floor. Ama's mom picked it up. 'This is an airline ticket,' her mom said in wonderment. 'To Jackson, Wyoming.'

'A plane ticket?'

'This says money!' Bob proclaimed excitedly, flapping yet another item.

'Hold on,' Ama said, grabbing it from Bob. It did say money. It was a cheque for $288. It said 'equipment stipend' on the stub. It came from the Student Leader Foundation and was made out directly to her. 'They sent me money?' She didn't even have a bank account yet.

'Let me look,' her father said.

'Can I have a dollar?' Bob asked.

'No. Wait. Hang on.' Ama was getting that overwhelmed feeling, and she really hated it. She gathered up all the papers and put them in order. She read them carefully, passing each sheet to her father when she was done with it. *Yosemite*, *the Grand Tetons*, *Wind Cave*, *the Badlands*. The Badlands? What kind of programme was this?

Bob had by this point moved on to bending a paper clip that had fallen off the papers.

'It looks like they messed this up,' Ama finally declared. 'It looks like they gave me a scholarship to this outdoor trip where they have you hike and climb mountains in national parks.' She looked at her parents. She shook her head as though the foundation had mistakenly sent her a pet skunk. 'This is all wrong. I'm not going to do it.'

Ama

Our plants did survive third grade. Even Jo's. She tried to act like she couldn't be bothered to take care of it, but I could tell she could. I spent a lot of time at her house with her and Polly that year, even though my parents disapproved of going to friends'

houses when you had homework. My sister, Esi, never did that, they reminded me. So I know Jo played her violin to her plant and even got it some special food.

The plants magically turned from cuttings to actual tiny trees, and the roots grew and wound all up. There was barely enough soil in the pots any more, so we had to put them in bigger pots. You had to water them practically every day.

Polly had the idea of planting them on the last day of school. She found the perfect spot in a little woods with a creek behind a playground at the end of my street. It was the woods at the bottom of Pony Hill, the best sledding hill in the world, where we used to play a lot. There was a clearing where we planted all three in a row with enough space between them to grow deep roots. We dug with our fingers because we forgot to bring a trowel. We pulled out the rocks and tried not to disturb the worms too much because Polly insisted we needed their help. We carefully undid the root balls. It was like untangling hair. We tucked them into the dirt.

It was weird taking the plants from the tiny world of soil in their pots and putting them into the ground, connected to all the other things in the earth. They looked kind of shy and vulnerable, and it was hard to leave them. They didn't seem like they belonged there. Jo looked like she was going to cry when we walked away.

We checked on them a lot that first summer. Jo often brought her violin and the plant food. And in fourth grade, we met up almost every day after school. Sometimes we got Slurpees and candy bars at the 7-Eleven and checked on our trees on the way home.

Two

Polly

Jo was really good at violin back then. She practised with her dad, who also played, but she quickly got better than him. He was really proud of her and said she could be a professional if she worked hard.

She could play along with Top Forty songs on the radio. Even rap songs, which was really hilarious. She could figure out almost any tune. She played so loud she could blow your ears out.

Jo

For some reason, Dia, Polly's mom, got a tattoo when we were in fourth grade. It was a spiderweb that went all around her belly button. I thought it was very cool. I thought it would be awesome to have a mom with a tattoo.

Polly slept over my house that night, and when we were falling asleep she was crying and said she wished her mom hadn't gotten it. I couldn't understand that at the time, but as I get older I think I do.

Jo hoisted her duffel bag onto the pile of her stuff accumulating in the front hall. Her mother's suitcases were lined up in the corner, neatly topped by a couple of sun hats and several shoe boxes. They weren't leaving until

the next day, but it was a big job to pack for the whole summer.

Her mother drifted into the hall to survey the progress. 'Jo, what's with all this junk? I wish you'd clean it up. Do you really need your skateboard?'

'It's not junk. It's my stuff. Anyway, we're just going to pack it in the car,' Jo said. Her mom did not like messes or disorder of any kind. Not even the temporary messes that were unavoidable when packing or moving.

'Where's Dad's stuff? Where are his golf clubs?'

Her mom plucked a straw sun hat from atop her suitcase and began restoring its shape.

'Mom?'

'I guess he'll bring it when he comes out,' she said.

'When's that? I thought he was coming with us.'

Jo's mom lowered the hat and looked at her. 'He's not.'

'Why not? Is he on call?'

'Yes.'

'All summer?'

'Jo, please.'

Her mom didn't want to talk about it, and that made Jo need to talk about it.

'So when's he coming, then?'

'Why don't you ask him yourself?'

'Why, because you two can't talk to each other?'

Her mom averted her eyes even more quickly than Jo expected her to. Her voice got quieter. 'You should discuss it with your dad.'

Jo tried to remember when exactly it was that her mom had stopped calling him 'Dad' when she spoke of him to Jo and started calling him 'your dad'.

'Really, you should talk to him before we go. You should ask him about his plans,' her mom said again.

What's that supposed to mean? What are you trying to tell me? Jo wanted to say, but she closed her mouth. Was torturing her mother really worth torturing herself? Did she really want to know?

'I can talk to him when he gets to the beach,' Jo said blithely, turning away and running up the stairs. 'I can talk to him all summer.'

Jo

Ama's sister, Esi, got into Princeton when Ama and Polly and I were in fourth grade, and she went there the next year. That's a big reason the family moved to the United States from Ghana in the first place. They wanted Esi to go to the best possible college without having to send her across the world from them. So it was a really big deal when Esi got in, and her family had a celebration and everything. Ama's mom is an incredible cook. I should know, because I ate dinner there almost every night in fifth grade and even probably a lot of sixth grade too. My dad was working a lot then, and my mom wasn't in much of a mood to cook.

Esi started college when she was sixteen, because she skipped two grades. You'd think that would take the pressure off Ama a little, having her genius sister gone, but if anything that made it worse.

Polly

Jo's older brother was Finn. He had wavy hair and turquoise eyes. He tried to teach us how to skateboard. He died at the end of the summer, right before fifth grade. He was going to be in eighth grade.

Finn had a problem with his heart. Two times before he died he'd blacked out. Once when he was ten and the second time at the beginning of the school year when he was twelve – the same time Jo and Ama and I met. He'd gone to the hospital, and they'd done a bunch of tests but hadn't figured out what was wrong. It didn't seem like a big deal back then.

The week he died is a blur to me, but I remember the burial. Jo left before it was over. She was supposed to pour a shovelful of dirt on the coffin after her parents, but instead she put the shovel down and just walked away. Ama and I followed her. We sat on the hood of her uncle's car in the parking lot, throwing pebbles at a metal sign. I can still hear the clink clink clink of the stones when they hit.

It was really lucky that the three of us were in the same classroom that year, because Ama and I could stay close to Jo. She didn't talk about it and we didn't ask her anything. We were her friends; we knew what to say and it seemed like nobody else did. I felt like we made a wall around her. That was what she needed us to do.

We knew how it was at Jo's house, so the three of us spent most afternoons and a lot of weekends at Ama's, even though Ama's parents made us do our homeowrk all the time. I never got so many As as in fifth grade.

Ama promised she wouldn't skip any grades because she wanted to stay with us.

Jo stopped playing the violin because she said it was too loud.

Two or three times a year Polly went to visit her uncle Hoppy at the old-age home a mile from her house. Sometimes when he felt spry, they walked to the diner round the corner and ordered soup.

Hoppy might not have been her uncle. She wasn't precisely sure what he was. But he was some kind of much older relative on her dad's side – the only relative she'd ever met on her dad's side – so it seemed important to stay in touch. Hoppy might have been her great-great-uncle or her third cousin five times removed. He was very hazy about the family tree, and Polly didn't want to press him too hard on it. It was just nice to think there was someone.

That was why when other kids were packing up and heading off to camp or to the beach, Polly was sitting in a red Naugahyde booth in a greasy-spoon diner across from a very old man with hair fluffing out his ears.

The two bowls of chicken noodle soup arrived, and Polly held up her spoon. 'Hey,' she said. 'They really do have greasy spoons here.'

'What's that?' Uncle Hoppy's face creased up on one side and he leaned towards her.

'My spoon is actually greasy,' Polly said buoyantly. She didn't want to say it too loudly in case she hurt the employees' feelings.

'Your spoon?' he barked. 'Your spoon is what? Do you need a new spoon?'

Polly put it down. 'No, it's fine.' She wondered if the ear hair was getting in the way of Uncle Hoppy's hearing.

'How's your mother?'

'Very well, thanks.'

'She still making those . . . ?' Hoppy cocked his head like a Labrador. 'What are those things she makes?'

'Sculptures.'

'What's that?' Hoppy put his hand to his ear.

'Sculptures! Yes. She still makes them.' Polly nodded broadly to help with the hearing problem.

'Very pretty girl, your mother,' Hoppy said.

Polly's mother had spiky black hair and a pierced nose, but Polly didn't argue.

'You too.' He sized Polly up through squinting, cloudy eyes. 'You're a very pretty girl.'

'Thank you,' Polly said. She didn't put huge faith in his eyesight, based on the amount of help he needed with the menu.

'Very pretty. You could be a model.'

Polly laughed. 'You think so?'

'Yes. Your grandmother was a model, you know.' He bobbed his head at the memory. 'Now, there was a very pretty girl.'

Polly swallowed her mouthful of soup without chewing the noodles. 'My grandmother?' Those were normal words to most people but startling words to her. She'd never had a grandmother. Dia hadn't spoken to her mother since she left home at seventeen. 'I don't know if she's alive or dead and I don't really care' was pretty much all Dia had ever said about her mother. Polly had never heard a word spoken of her father's mother. She forgot that there had to have been such a person.

'She was a looker, all right.' Hoppy waggled his eyebrows suggestively. He was just too old to be really offensive. 'Your grandmother looked like Sophia Loren. You probably don't know who that is.'

'Yes I do,' Polly said with a touch of pride. Polly knew her movie stars, especially the old ones. In fact, his words

struck Polly. Of all the truly beautiful and glamorous movie stars, the only one Polly had ever secretly believed she resembled was Sophia Loren. And also maybe Penélope Cruz a tiny, tiny bit.

'You look like your grandmother,' Hoppy pronounced. 'Like a model.'

Polly was fascinated. She wished Hoppy could hear better. 'You mean she was, like, a professional model? Like in magazines?' she nearly shouted at him.

'What's that?'

'Was she in *magazines*? Do you have any *pictures*?'

Hoppy knocked his bowl around in its saucer. 'Yes. All the magazines. She was in all of them.'

'Really? Do you *have any pictures of her*?'

'Do I have them? No. I don't think I have them. That was a long time ago.'

Polly nodded, her mind flying, her heart swelling. She had a grandmother and her grandmother had been a model. She had a grandmother who was beautiful and she looked like Sophia Loren.

Polly watched as though from a distance, a floating perch near the ceiling, as Uncle Hoppy wrestled with the bill and means of payment. It became such a confusion that Polly eventually had to come down from her reveries on the ceiling and settle it herself with her own ten-dollar bill.

She walked with Hoppy round the corner to his senior residence, bouncing along beside him. She knew with the traffic rushing along Wisconsin Avenue he wouldn't hear a word she said, so she didn't try.

A part of her was burning to ask him whether this

grandmother was still alive, and how her life had gone, and what her name was. But another part of Polly was content to stay dreamily quiet.

This knowledge was a gift, shimmering like a cloud in front of her eyes. She was afraid that if she tried to hold it in her hands she would be left, again, owning nothing.

Mrs Sherman, assistant director of the Student Leader Foundation, was admirably patient with Ama on the phone when Ama finally reached her a few hours later. Almost too patient.

'Ama, as I said, this is not an error. This is your placement. It's an excellent scholarship. In fact, it's one of the most valuable we offer.'

'But it's not valuable to me. I don't really like the outdoors. I'm not outdoorsy. I'm more . . . indoorsy. I really didn't – this really isn't what I was hoping for.'

Mrs Sherman sighed for about the forty-fifth time. 'Ama, not everyone gets one of their top choices. Our committee members think long and hard about what will be the best fit for our leadership scholars.'

'But this is not the best fit,' Ama said imploringly. 'This is the *worst* fit. Anyone who knows me knows that.'

'Ama, maybe you can keep an open mind about this. I hope you'll realize that it represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'

Ama couldn't keep an open mind. She didn't have an open mind. She didn't even want an open mind. She wanted Andover! She wanted books and libraries and classes where she could get good grades! She wanted A-pluses and gold stars and extra credit.

'I need credit,' Ama said, trying to sound practical. 'I need a programme that gives high school credit.'

'Oh, this gives credit,' Mrs Sherman said triumphantly. 'It gives full course credit. Read the description. You'll see.'

Ama felt herself shrivelling and shrinking. She hated being wrong, and she hated being wrong on account of poor preparation even more. 'Oh . . . really?' Ama said quietly.

'Ama, I know it's not what you wanted, but it's a fantastic programme. One of our best. I know it doesn't seem like it to you now, but you are very fortunate to get it . . .'

Ama stopped listening. She just waited for Mrs Sherman to finish. 'But do you think, for personal reasons, I could change it?' Ama asked finally.

'Not without a valid medical condition. Of course, you could forfeit the scholarship altogether.'

No she couldn't! This scholarship was a big prize. It would go on her school record. Colleges would see it. She couldn't forfeit it. Anyway, her parents would never let her.

'Do you have a valid medical reason?' Mrs Sherman asked.

I'm scared of heights. I hate bugs. I can't live without my flat-iron and my hair products. Were any of those valid medical conditions?

'I don't know. I'll have to think about it,' Ama said defeatedly.

Ama tried to be polite with her goodbyes and thank-yous. She hung up the phone and went to find her

mother. 'The woman from the Student Leader office says it's not a mistake.'

'I know you're disappointed, *chérie,*' her mother said.

Ama cast her eye on the cheque clipped to the front of her papers. She'd never gotten that kind of money before. Miserably she looked over the long equipment list. She couldn't believe she was going to spend the only easy money she'd ever gotten in her life on hiking boots and a sleeping bag, wool pants, and something called a carabiner.

I don't want to go, I don't want to go, I don't want to go. 'I guess I have to go' was what Ama said out loud.

She looked at her mother, irrationally hoping that she would disagree and grab the phone and make calls and demand changes on her daughter's behalf.

But her mother didn't. Her parents trusted the system. It had done well for Esi and it would do well for Ama. 'You're a good girl, Ama.'

Ama nodded, both happy and unhappy, as she often was with that reward.