

Count *the* Ways

A
NOVEL

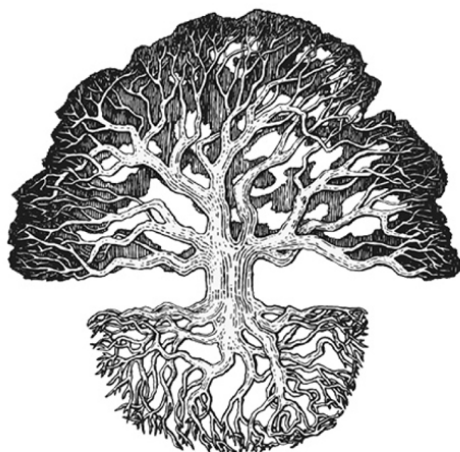
"Rich and complex,
beautiful and heartbreaking,
just like life."
—ANN HOOD

JOYCE MAYNARD

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LABOR DAY AND AFTER HER

Count the Ways

A Novel



Joyce Maynard

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Dedication

*For A., C., and W., who continue to instruct me well in the occasional heartbreak and lifelong joy of being a mother.
And for C. and S. The next generation.*

Epigraph

I'm sorry.

I love you.

Thank you.

Please forgive me.

—Ho‘oponopono prayer, phrases spoken in any order, for reconciliation and forgiveness

And how can you not forgive?

You make a feast in honor of what

was lost, and take from its place the finest

garment, which you saved for an occasion

you could not imagine, and you weep night and day

to know that you were not abandoned,

that happiness saved its most extreme form

for you alone.

—Jane Kenyon, “Happiness”

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnet 43

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Acknowledgments
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Author's Note

When a writer chooses, as the basis of her novel, elements that resemble experiences in her own life, it's not surprising for readers to imagine that the book in their hands may not be a work of fiction so much as a fictionalized account of real-life experiences. The better a writer may do her job, the more a reader is apt to suppose that the events unfolding on the pages of a book may have actually occurred.

The characters whose story I chose to tell here are people who emerged from a place I love: my imagination. What is real are the themes I've returned to many times over the course of my long career: home, the making of a family, the costly experience—for children, and for their parents—of divorce and its aftermath.

A writer is apt to tell many stories over the years, but it may well be that her themes change very little, if at all. Long ago, in a novel I wrote called *Where Love Goes*, I explored a marriage and a divorce, as I have done once again in these pages. In a few instances, actual scenes that take place in that early novel appear, in somewhat different form, in this new piece of work.

I didn't know I was revisiting those scenes until a reader of a draft of this novel pointed out a certain resemblance to that earlier one. I was surprised, myself, when I learned that I'd returned to such apparently similar territory. What differs most profoundly between that work—written when I was just past age forty—and this one, written more than a quarter century later, are not simply the characters and events, but the author who created them. Same person. Altered perspective.

My central character this time around, like the author who chose to bring her to life on the page, is a woman who finally—not without struggle—comes to understand the meaning of letting go of old grievances and bitterness. At the end of the day, this is a novel about the importance of

asking forgiveness, and offering it. It's a lesson that comes with age, perhaps—an invaluable lesson no matter when it is acquired.

Prologue

Toby was just a baby—Alison four years old, Ursula not yet three—the first time they launched the cork people. After that it became their annual tradition.

Eleanor had always loved how, when the snow melted every spring, the water in the brook down the road would race so fast you could hear it from their house, crashing over the rocks at the waterfall. A person could stand there for an hour—and in the old days before children, when she would come to this place alone, she had done that—staring into the water, studying the patterns it made as the brook narrowed and widened again, the way it washed over the smaller stones and splashed against the large ones. If you felt like it, you might trace the course of a single stick or leaf, some remnant of last summer, as it made its way downstream, tossed along by the current.

One time she and the children had spotted a child's sneaker caught up in the racing water. Another time Alison had tossed a pine cone in the brook and the four of them—Eleanor, Alison, Ursula, and baby Toby—had watched it bob along, disappearing into a culvert but showing up again, miraculously, on the other side. They had followed that pine cone along the edges of the brook until it disappeared around a bend.

“If only we had a boat,” Alison said, looking out at the racing water, “we could float down the stream.” She was thinking about the song Eleanor used to sing to them in the car.

“Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,” she sang now, in her sweet, high voice.

Life is but a dream.

When they got home, she was still talking about it, so Eleanor suggested that they make a miniature boat and launch it just below the falls. With little passengers along for the ride.

*“We could make them out of Popsicle sticks,” she said. “Or corks.”
Cork, because it floated. Cork people.*

Every year after that, usually on the first warm weekend in March, Eleanor laid out the craft supplies on the kitchen table—pipe cleaners, glue gun, string, pushpins, Magic Markers, and corks saved from a year’s worth of wine, which wasn’t all that much in those days.

They constructed their boats out of balsa wood, with sails attached made from scraps of outgrown pajama bottoms and dresses. For Alison, the future engineer, it was the boats that occupied her attention more than the passengers. But Ursula took the greatest care drawing faces on the corks, gluing on hair and hats. Even Toby, young as he was, participated. Every cork person got a name.

One was Crystal—Ursula’s suggestion. She had wanted a sister with the name but, failing that, gave it to a cork person. One was Rufus—not a cork person, in fact, but a cork dog. They named one Walt, after their neighbor, and another was named after the daughter of a man on their father’s softball team, who got cancer and died just before they went back to school.

When they were done making their cork people and the vessels to carry them, the children and Eleanor carried them down to a spot they’d staked out, flat enough for all four of them to stand, and one by one, they would lower their boats and the passengers they carried, attached with rubber bands, into the fast-moving waters.

Goodbye, Crystal. Bye, Rufus. See you later, Walt.

They were on their own now, and there was nothing anyone could do to assist them in the perilous journey ahead.

It was like parenthood, Eleanor thought, watching the little line of bobbing vessels taking off through the fast-moving waters. You made these precious people. You hovered over them closely, your only goal impossible: to keep them out of harm’s way. But sooner or later you had to let the cork people set off without you, and once you did there would be nothing for it but to stand on the shore or run along the edge yelling encouragement, praying they’d make it.

The boats took off bobbing and dancing. Eleanor and the children ran along the mossy bank, following their progress. They ran hard to keep up, Eleanor holding tight to Toby’s hand. Toby, the one who could get away and into trouble faster than anyone.

The journey wasn't easy for the cork people. Some of the boats in which the children had placed them got stuck along the way in the tall grass along the side of the brook. Some disappeared without a trace. If a boat capsized, bearing one of her precious cork people, Ursula (the dramatic one) was likely to let out a piercing cry.

"Oh, Jimmy!" she called out. "Oh, Crystal!" "Evelyn, where are you?" "Be careful, Walt!"

Some cork people never made it through the culvert. Some fell off the vessel that was carrying them on a wild stretch of rapids farther along. Once an entire boatload of cork people capsized right before the stretch of slow, gentle water where, typically, the children retrieved them.

One time, as they stood on the shore watching for their boats to come dancing down the brook, they had spotted a cork person from the year before—bobbing along, hatless, boatless, naked, but somehow still afloat.

Toby, four years old at the time, had leaned into the shallows (holding Eleanor's hand, though reluctantly) to retrieve the remains of a bedraggled cork person, and studied its face.

"It's Bob," he said. Named for one of Cam's teammates on his softball team, the Yellow Jackets.

Ursula pronounced this a miracle, though to Toby there seemed nothing particularly surprising about the unexpected return of an old familiar character.

Cork people went away. Cork people came back. Or didn't.

"People die sometimes," Toby pointed out to Ursula (older than him by a year and a half, but less inclined to confront the darker side). Not only people whose songs you listened to on the radio and people you heard about on the news, and a princess whose wedding you watched on TV, and a whole space shuttle filled with astronauts, and a mop-topped rock and roll singer whose songs you danced to in the kitchen, but people you knew, too. A neighbor from down the road who showed you a gypsy moth cocoon, and a guy who came to your parents' Labor Day party and did an imitation of a rooster, and a best friend who took you to a water park one time. And dogs would die, and grandparents, a child to whom you once offered your last mozzarella stick at your father's softball game, even. And even when those things didn't happen, other terrible things did. You had to get used to it.

But here was one story you could count on, one that never changed. Spring, summer, fall, winter, the water flowed on. These rocks would be here

forever—rocks, among the things in the world Toby loved best, and as much as Toby had considered the losses around him, the thought that he and the people he loved best would ever cease to exist was beyond his imagining.

In Toby's mind, their family would always stay together, always loving each other, and what else really mattered more than that? This was the world as they knew it. This was how it seemed to them then, and maybe even Eleanor believed as much, once.

Part 1



1.

A Familiar Road

The sound reached them all the way down to the field where the chairs were set up—so loud that if Eleanor hadn't been holding Louise as tightly as she had, she might have dropped her. A few people screamed, and someone yelled, "Oh, shit!" Eleanor could hear the voice of one of the assembled guests begin to pray, in Spanish. Louise, observing the scene, burst into tears and called for her mother.

The noise was like nothing she'd ever heard. A crash, followed by a low, awful groaning. Then silence.

"Oh, God," someone cried out. "*Dios mío.*" Someone else.

"We'll find your mama," Eleanor told Louise, scanning the assembled guests for her daughter, Louise's mother, Ursula. Eleanor herself took in the event—whatever it was—with a certain unexpected calm. Worse things had happened than whatever was going on now, she knew that much. And though the piece of land on which she now stood had once represented, for her, the spot where she'd live forever and the one where she would die, this place was no longer her home, and hadn't been for fifteen years.

It was impossible to know, at first, where the sound came from, or what had caused it. Earthquake? Plane crash? Terrorist attack? Her mind went—crazily—to a movie she'd seen about a tsunami, a woman whose entire family had been wiped out by one vast, awful wave.

But Eleanor's family was safe. Now she could see them all around her—dazed, confused, but unhurt. All she really needed to do at a moment like this was to make sure that Louise was all right. Her precious only granddaughter, three years old.

At the moment they heard the crash, Louise had been studying Eleanor's necklace, a very small golden bird on a chain. "You're okay," Eleanor whispered into her ear, when they heard the big boom. All around

them, the guests in wedding attire were running with no particular sense of a destination, calling out words nobody could hear.

“Everybody’s fine,” Eleanor said. “Let’s go see your mother.”

Cam’s farm—she was accustomed now to calling it that—lay a little over an hour’s drive north of her condo in Brookline. She had made the trip to bear witness to the marriage of her firstborn child, Ursula’s older sibling, at the home where she once lived.

After all these years, she still knew this place so well that she could have made her way down the long driveway in the dark without benefit of headlights. She knew every knot in the floorboards of the house, the windowsill where Toby used to line up his favorite specimens from his rock collection, the places glitter got stuck deep in the cracks from their valentine-making projects, the uneven counter where she rolled out cookie dough and packed lunches for school, or (on snow days) fixed popcorn and cocoa for the three of them when they came in from sledding. She knew what the walls looked like inside the closet where she’d retreat, holding the phone she’d outfitted with an extra-long cord, in a time long before cell phones, when she’d needed to conduct a business conversation without the sounds of her children’s voices distracting her.

And more: The bathroom where her son once played his miniature violin. The pantry, shelves lined with the jam and spaghetti sauce she canned every summer. The record player spinning while the five of them danced to the Beatles, or Chuck Berry, or *Free to Be . . . You and Me*. The mantel where they’d hung their stockings and the patch of rug, in front of the fireplace, where she spread ashes to suggest the footprints of a visitor who’d come down the chimney in the night.

Eleanor knew where the wild blueberries grew, and the lady’s slippers, and where the rock was, down the road, where they’d launched their cork people every March when the snow thawed and the brook ran fast under the stone bridge. The pear tree she and Cam had planted, after the birth of their first child. The place in the field where cornflowers came up in late June. Just now starting to bloom. A shade of blue like no other.

And here she was, attending the wedding of that same child. In another lifetime, they’d named that baby Alison. They called him Al now.

There stood Eleanor’s old studio, and Cam’s woodshop, where she would sometimes pay him late-afternoon visits and they would make love

on a mattress by the woodstove. The crack in the plaster over the bed she'd chosen to focus on while pushing their babies out into the world.

How many hundreds of nights—a few thousand—had she stretched out on the bed, her children in their mismatched pajamas with a stack of library books, the three of them jostling for prime position on the bed (three children, but there were only two sides next to their mother)? Downstairs, she could hear Cam in the kitchen, washing the dishes and whistling, or listening to a Red Sox game. Outside the window, the sound of water running at the falls. Moonlight streaming in. Her children's hot breath on her neck, craning to see the illustrations in the book. *Just one more. We'll be good.*

Sometimes, by this point in the day, she'd be so tired the words on the page she was reading would no longer make sense, and she'd start speaking gibberish, at which point one of them—Alison, generally—would tap her arm, or Toby might pat her cheeks.

“Wake up, Mama. We need to know how it turns out.”

They were all grown up now.

Older people (the age she was now herself, midway through her fifties) making small talk at the grocery store, back in the days her cart overflowed with breakfast cereal and orange juice—when there was always a baby in the front and someone else scrunched up among the groceries—used to tell her how fast your children grew up, how quickly it all passed. At Stop & Shop one time, Toby got so wild—sticking carrots in his ears and pretending he was a space alien—that she'd abandoned her cart full of groceries, there in the middle of the aisle, whisking the children out to the car until her son calmed down enough that she could resume their shopping. Bent over the wheel of her late-model station wagon while her three children cowered in the back, she imagined hightailing it to someplace far away. The Canadian border, maybe. Mexico. Or half a mile down their dirt road, to spend one entire morning with her sketch pad and pencils, just drawing. Only there were the children to think about. There were always the children, until there weren't.

All those small injuries, sorrows, wounds, regrets—the hurtful words, the pain people inflicted on each other, intentionally or not, that seemed so important once. You might not even remember anymore what they were about, those things that once made you so angry, bitter, hurt. Or maybe you

remembered, but did any of it matter, really? (Who said what? Who did what, when? Who hurt whom? Well, everybody had hurt everyone.)

Now here you were at the end of it all, opening your eyes as if from a long sleep—a little dazed, blinking from the brightness of the sun, just grateful you were there to wake up at all. This was Eleanor, returned to the home of her youth on the wedding day of her firstborn child. Concentrating on the one thing that mattered, which was her family, together again. Beat up and battered, like a bunch of Civil War soldiers returning from Appomattox (whatever side they'd belonged to, it made no difference) but still alive on the earth.

Earlier today, when Ursula introduced her mother to her daughter, her voice had been polite, but wary—the tone a parent might utilize when overseeing her child's first meeting with a new teacher, or with the pediatrician in preparation for receiving her shots.

"This is your granny, Lulu," Ursula explained to Louise, who had shrunk back in the way a three-year-old does with a stranger. Then to Eleanor, "How was your drive?"

"I missed you," she said, getting down low, studying her face. Memorizing it. She could see her daughter in that face, but mostly what she saw was a whole new person. "I was hoping I'd get to see you."

This was when Louise had noticed her necklace. Amazingly, her granddaughter had climbed into her arms to study the small golden bird more closely.

Eleanor could see, on Ursula's face, a look of caution and concern. She studied her daughter's face now—her middle child, now almost thirty-one years old—for some familiar reminder of the girl she used to be, the one who liked to start every morning singing "Here Comes the Sun," the one who arranged her vegetables on her plate in the shape of a face, always the smiling kind, the one who'd sucked her thumb till she went off to first grade. At which point she herself had begged Eleanor to paint her thumb with the terrible-tasting medicine, to make her stop. (Eleanor hated doing this. It was Ursula who had insisted. Ursula, so deeply invested in fitting in.)

Ursula was the one who, when Eleanor tucked her into bed every night, liked to say, "I love you more than the universe. More than infinity." If you

left the room before she got a chance to say the words, she'd make you come back.

It was three years since Eleanor had seen Ursula. Easy to keep track, because it had been three days after the birth of Louise. They were in the kitchen of Ursula and Jake's house; Ursula had just finished nursing the baby. Eleanor was holding her when her daughter had stood up from the table. She took the baby from Eleanor's arms.

"Don't come back. Don't plan on seeing your granddaughter ever again." Those were Ursula's words to Eleanor as she sent her away that day. Then three years of silence.

"I love our family," Ursula used to say.

Our family. She spoke as if the five of them, together, constituted some whole entity, like a country or a planet.

This would have been in the mid-eighties, when the children were all in single-digit ages. She had been so busy with the children, most of all Toby, that she hadn't noticed her marriage to their father unraveling. But her younger daughter did. Sometimes back then, observing Eleanor's worried expression, Ursula had placed her fingers—one from each hand—in the corners of Eleanor's mouth to form her lips into a smile.

At the time, Eleanor was always playing the same one song on her Patti LaBelle album, "On My Own." She was always worried about money, worried about work. Mad at Cam. That most of all.

Ursula was just eight at the time, but already she had designated herself the family cheerleader, the one who, through her own tireless efforts, would make everyone happy again. Ursula, the one of Eleanor's three children who had, for a while, refused to read *Charlotte's Web* because she'd heard what happened in the end and didn't want to go there, though in the end she did. Ursula, the perpetual peacemaker, the optimist, the girl committed above all else to the well-being of everyone she loved (possibly ignoring her own feelings along the way). Sensing trouble between her parents, she was always thinking up things they might do to bring them all together.

"I call family hug!" she'd announce, in that determinedly cheerful tone of hers.

Who wants to play Twister? Let's build an igloo and go inside and sing campfire songs! Tell us the story again, Dad, about how you met Mom.

Now their endlessly hopeful younger daughter had a second child of her own on the way, evidently. Her first—whose birth had been followed, three days later, by Eleanor’s disastrous visit—nestled into her grandmother’s arms as if she’d known her all her life.

Ursula had known the comfort of those arms herself. But she’d forgotten, to the point where the simple fact of Eleanor’s ability to hold a three-year-old in her arms without eliciting screams had seemed to surprise her.

“It’s okay, Lulu,” Ursula said to Louise, when Eleanor bent to pick her up. “She won’t hurt you.”

Why would anyone ever suppose otherwise? Least of all her own child.