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A NOVEL

Michelle Huneven

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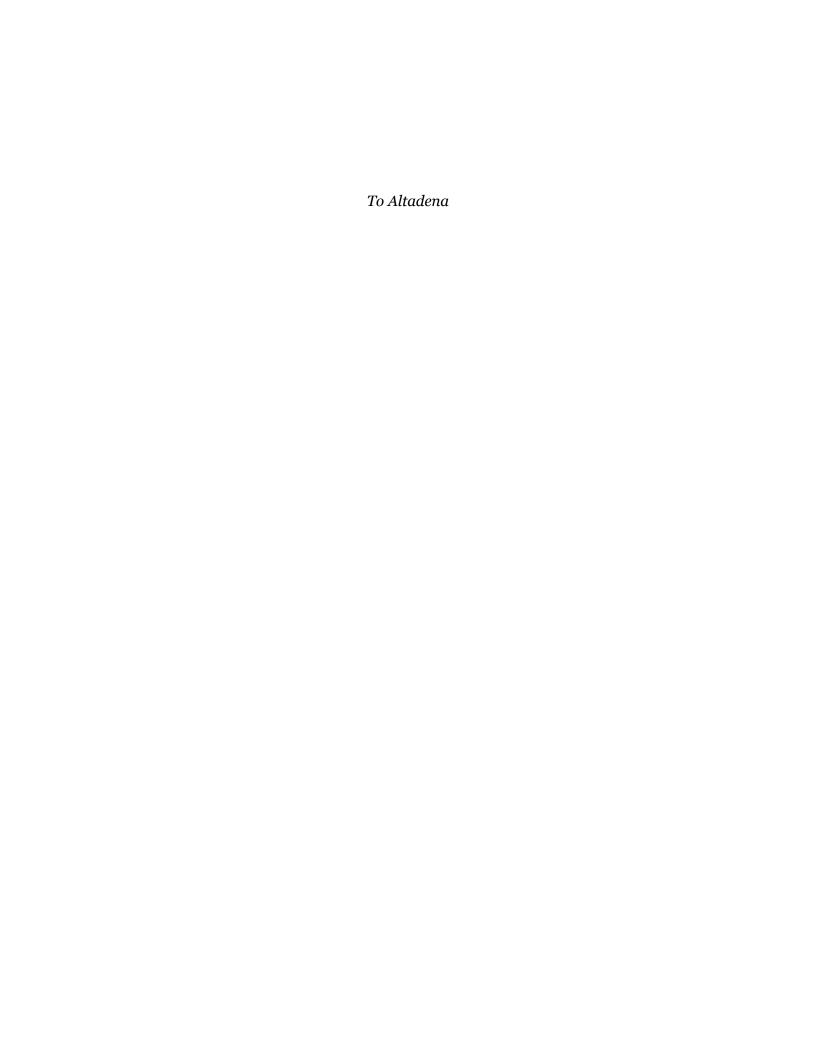
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About the Author



Bug Hollow



The summer when Sally Samuelson was eight, her brother Ellis graduated from high school and a few days later, he and his best friends, Heck Stevens and Ben Klosterman, drove up the coast in Heck's '64 Rambler American. They promised to be back in a week. Sally was the only one who went outside to see them off. She waved a dishrag and dabbed at pretend tears, then one or two real ones. "Bye, little Pips!" Ellis yelled from the back seat—he called her Pipsqueak, with variations. "See you in the funny papers!"

Ellis had thick, curly yellow hair long enough to tuck behind his ears and he wore a baseball cap to keep it there. He'd lately grown incredibly tall and skinny; his pants rode so low on his hip bones, they seemed about to slip off. Sally's sister, Katie, who was fourteen, called him El Greck after they saw El Greco's *Christ on the Cross* at the Getty; even their parents confirmed the resemblance.

His last two years in high school, Ellis had a girlfriend named Carla, who was also tall and blond and liked to show off her stomach. In front of Ellis, she would say hi to Sally. Sometimes Ellis would come into Sally's room when she was drawing on the floor; he'd sit by her and talk about his last baseball game or his weird calculus teacher, and sometimes he'd wonder how much he liked Carla and if she was even nice. Sally somehow knew not to say what she thought. Anyway, Ellis spent most of his time playing ball with Ben and Heck. For their trip, they packed Heck's old Rambler with sleeping bags, the small smelly tent the Samuelson kids used on camping

trips, and a cooler full of sodas. After ten days, when Ellis hadn't come back, Heck showed up at the Samuelsons' front door with the tent. Sally answered his knock.

"Ellis decided to stay away for a few more days," he said.

"Stay where?" Sally's mother said from behind her.

"With some girl he met," said Heck. "Not sure where, exactly."

"Well, where did they meet?"

"On a beach around Santa Cruz."

That was all her mother could get out of Heck. "Some girl has snagged Ellis," she told Sally's father when he came home from work.

"Good for her," he said.

"How can you say that, Phil?" her mother cried. "El's such an innocent. What if she's trouble?"

Hinky, their Manchester terrier, cocked her head at one parent, then the other; she followed conversations—they'd tested her by standing in a circle and tossing the conversation back and forth. Hinky shifted her attention to each speaker in turn.

"What if he doesn't come back in time for his job?"

Ellis was supposed to be a counselor at the day camp he'd attended since first grade.

"Let's worry about that when the time comes," Sally's father said.

The camp's start date came and went. Carla showed up one night after dinner and wept noisily on their sofa. She also hadn't heard from Ellis. "He was supposed to come with me to my cousin's wedding," she wailed.

"I knew we shouldn't have let him go off like that," Sally's mother said after Carla left. "One fast girl on a beach and he's a goner!"

"I'm sure he's fine," Sally's father said. "It's high time he gave us something to worry about."

Ellis was a straight-A student and a star pitcher, and had a perfect score on the math SAT. He always set the table, and never shut his door, even when Carla or his friends were over. Alone, he listened to sports or studied. He loved baseball above everything and turned down Cal and the University of Chicago when UC San Diego and Ole Miss offered him full baseball scholarships. Their parents regarded the South with what Ellis had called "irrational liberal loathing" and tried to talk him into San Diego. He chose Mississippi.

"What if this girl's a Moonie?" Sally's mother said. "What if he can't get home? He only had seventy dollars."

Hinky looked from one parent to the other.

"Hell, I was younger than he is with only a quarter to my name and I hopped freights all across the country," her father said.

"Oh for god's sake, Phil. Don't start," her mother said.

At sixteen, Sally's father had ridden boxcars from Denver to Boston. He told stories of his hobo days so often that her mother now refused to hear them.

A postcard came showing Monterey Bay.

Dear Mom and Dad, Katie, Peeps, and Hinky,

Hope you're all well. I'm doing great! I've decided to spend the summer up here. I have a wonderful place to stay and a job. I'll call soon.

Love, E.

Every time the phone rang, everyone froze, then Sally's parents raced to the extensions, with Hinky leaping and barking. *Answer! Get the phone! It might be him!*

The family was supposed to go car camping on the Oregon coast, but now they couldn't, in case Ellis called.

Sally's father went to work in a suit; he was a project manager at Parsons Engineering. Sometimes, he went to Argentina or Saudi Arabia for a few weeks, but he'd put off his next trip till they knew more about Ellis. Her mother taught fourth grade and had the summer off. She lay out on a chaise in shorts and a halter top getting very tan, reading mystery novels, and drinking Hawaiian Punch from a green plastic tumbler. When it got too hot, she moved inside to her bedroom. Sally would peek in at her. "Stop lurking, Sally," she'd say.

Katie stayed in her room and read books except when she practiced piano or went over to her friend Christine's house.

Sally drew pictures in her room or went to play under a row of shaggy eucalyptus trees on the corner of their block. She and a neighborhood girl had built a village of tiny bark huts with a network of tunnels below, digging until their gritty fingers tangled underground. Because the neighbor girl was older, she no longer came as much, so alone, Sally maintained the village, which was often scattered. At dusk, when someone bawled her name, she'd go home.

Her mother was at the grocery store when Ellis phoned. Katie was practicing scales on the piano, and Socorro, their housekeeper, was vacuuming. Belly-flopped and coloring on her bedroom floor, Sally was the only person who heard the phone ring. She answered the hall extension.

"Is that you, Pips? How you doing?"

"It's Ellis!" she screamed down the hall. "ELLL-ISSSS!" Then, into the phone, "Are you coming home?"

"Not yet. But tell me, Pips. How mad are Mom and Dad?"

"Pretty mad."

"Is Mom there?" Ellis asked.

"She's at the store. Hold on." She yelled, "Katie!" at the top of her voice. "She can't hear me," she told Ellis.

"That's okay, Pips. Just tell me, what do Mom and Dad say about me?"

Sally sat on the floor. Hinky planted herself in front of her. Being the one to talk to Ellis felt too important. "Mom thinks you've been kidnapped, and

Dad thinks you're having fun." She tried to ESP with Katie—*Come here now!*—but Katie's fingers kept cantering up and down the keys. Sally thought of running to get her, but what if Ellis hung up? Her parents hadn't said what to do if he called when they weren't there. "They really want you to come home, El," she said.

"I can't. I have a great job. Guess what it is, Peeps. I work in an ice cream shop."

"Oh." She touched Hinky's curved black toenails.

"And the place I live? There's a swimming hole just out the back door. But real quick, Peeps. How're you and Katie? And Hinky?"

"Hinky's right here," Sally said. "Say hi." She held the receiver to Hinky's ear until her little black brow wrinkled. "Just come home, El," Sally said into the mouthpiece. "Mom's getting mean. And we can't go camping...."

A clatter of tumbling coins and an operator's canned voice said, *Three minutes*. "Got to go," Ellis said. "Tell Mom and Dad not to worry. I love you, Pips."

Love? When had Ellis ever said he loved her or anyone? (Maybe he'd said it to Carla but Sally never heard.) In their family they never said I love you to each other. If Sally kissed or hugged her mother, she would draw back and say, "What brought this on?" Sally smoothed Hinky's ears back and kissed the two tan dots of her eyebrows. When the front door whined open and she heard the rustle of grocery bags, Sally ran into the kitchen. "He called! He called!"

Her mother sat on a kitchen barstool still holding a bag in her arms. Hinky leapt around her. "Is he all right? What did he say? Did you get his number?" she said.

"He works in an ice cream store," Sally panted. "He says don't worry."

"So where is he?" her mother said, still embracing the sack. "Did you find out?"

Katie came into the kitchen. "What's up?"

"Is he coming home? What about college? Did you ask him *anything*?" Sally stood there.

"Goddamn it, Sally. What's wrong with you?" Her mother heaved the sack of groceries off her lap. A muffled crack, and a pale pink liquid leaked through the bag and spread on the kitchen floor.

Katie left the room. Sally began to cry. Hinky leapt on her mother's lap, but she pushed her off. Sally ran out of the house then, and around the corner to the eucalyptus trees. She curled against one shaggy trunk and vowed never to go home. She'd steal towels off the neighbors' clothesline for blankets and live on the pomegranates and guavas growing in the abandoned sanitorium up the street. Sleepy from crying, she pulled a large shard of bark over her face to make it dark. She woke when Hinky pawed her shoulder. Her father lifted the bark off her face. "Come on now, Sally," he said. "Let's go home."

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope Pips told you that I'm doing great and not to worry. I've decided to spend the summer here in a big house with eight other people. The rent is very cheap. We take turns cooking. I'll make my famous tofu-mushroom burgers for you someday. My job is a lot of fun and my boss already wants me to be manager. I told him no because of Ole Miss—and yes, I am training every day. A girl here has a great arm and catches everything I send her way.

I would say where I am, but you might come and try to take me home. I'm extremely happy here, so please don't worry. I'll be back in time for college.

I think of all of you all the time. Tell the Hink that the dogs here are big galumphing woodsy dogs and not prancy-dancy smartypants like her.

I'll call soon.

Much Love to Everyone, Ellis

Much Love! Again, Sally had never heard him say that to anybody before.

Katie said he had to be in a cult, because he had to be brainwashed to cook. The Ellis they knew ate Pop-Tarts right out of the box because he was too lazy to toast them.

Their mother said, "Not sure a cult would let him take a job out in public. But something's fishy." Their father said nonsense, that Ellis was separating, which was natural. "He's making his way in the world."

Carla must have gotten a letter too because she came over and cried again.

Ellis's letter had a postmark: Los Altos, CA. Sally's father phoned the sheriff's office there, but they wouldn't look for Ellis—this was in the mid-1970s and there were far too many runaways for law enforcement to take on. A desk sergeant told Sally's father to run a classified ad in the local small-town papers.

Missing since June: Our son, Ellis Samuelson, 17 years old, 6'2", blond hair, brown eyes, athletic, smart, funny, and greatly missed. Reward.

The ad went in six different small-town papers, and now when the phone rang it was even more of a shock. Sally's mother wept to her best friend. "We're on pins and needles here!"

Sally's mother had become a yanker: She yanked the phone when she answered it; she yanked open doors and drawers to rummage madly, then slammed them shut. She yanked Sally into the car, to the table, away from the comics display at the market. Sometimes, she yanked Sally to her and held her, kissing her head and wetting her hair with tears. Blue bruises in the shape of her fingertips dappled Sally's upper arms.

Katie said, "Just stay out of her way."

But Sally couldn't. She had to see where her mother was, and if she was okay. Now, her mother refused to leave the house in case Ellis called, so

Sally's father did the shopping, and the fridge filled with new brands of cheese, lunch meat, mayonnaise, juice. The fancier brands.

Two days after Ellis's eighteenth birthday on August 8 this came:

Dear Mom and Dad, Katie, Pips, and Hinky,

I saw your ad in the paper. Please don't do that again. It embarrassed me. I'm eighteen now and can live where I want. I miss you too. Please don't worry about me. And don't try to come get me because I really can't leave till Aug. 25 because

- 1. I promised my boss I'd stay till then.
- 2. I am saving money for school and won't hit my goal till then.
- 3. I am very happy in this house with my friends and the dogs.
- 4. I am training very well. I now run an eight-minute mile. Flat. Everyone in the house comes out for pitching and batting practice every night.

I'm sorry to worry you and hope you aren't too mad at me, but I am really truly okay and happier than I have ever been.

Please pet Hinks for me. I'll see you soon. I love you all very much!
Ellis

"I don't understand why we just don't drive up there and go to every ice cream store we can find," Sally's mother said at the dinner table.

"I would if I felt he was in danger," her father said. "And he's right: he can live wherever he wants now."

"You just won't lift a finger," her mother said.

The air stilled. Sally studied the tiny beige, tan, and white hexagons in the Formica tabletop until her father said, "Here, Sally, let's finish these tater tots."

A woman phoned at dinnertime. She'd been wrapping china in newspaper and happened to read the missing-persons ad. She was Ellis's neighbor in the woods near Boulder Creek in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Ellis—"a darling boy"—had done some weed whacking for her. She supplied an address—"I have a son myself, so I know," she said—and refused the reward.

Early the next morning, they loaded the VW camper van with duffels and pillows and snacks as if for any weekend jaunt. "What if Ellis won't come home with us?" Sally asked.

"He won't have a choice," her mother said.

"We'll play it by ear," said her father.

They drove up to Northern California on freeways through yellow driedout hills and sometimes along the crinkled sea. They ate hamburgers in the car, driving, driving in the summer heat with the windows open, which made it too loud to talk. Not that Katie would've talked to her. Katie took the middle seat and read her book the whole time. Sally, in the far back seat, colored on a newsprint pad, but mostly she stared out the window and imagined living in different houses they passed. Or she looked at the backs of the others in the car and thought, Who are these people, and why aren't they nicer? For as long as she could remember—from her very first remembered thought—she'd had a sense of coming from somewhere else, a place of kindness and good humor and justice, where people weren't so grouchy and annoyed and quick to anger. She'd learned to keep an eye on her mother to see what was coming, while at the same time she tried not to irritate her. And ever since Katie started junior high, she couldn't stand Sally, so Sally steered clear of her too, mostly. Only Ellis was kind. The best. Her father, when he was home and not working, was also kind and even interested in what Sally did—he liked watching her draw her "cartoons," as he called them. Her mother was hardly ever that nice. She used to be, when Sally was very little and didn't yet bother her so much.

Boulder Creek looked like mountain towns they'd seen on camping trips: a short main street whose wooden buildings had tall fake fronts. Sally spotted a log-sided burger stand called the Kandy Kone that had a big soft-serve ice cream cone on its sign. "Hey," she said, "maybe that's where Ellis works." But nobody listens to the eight-year-old, and then the town was behind them.

"We're looking for a row of mailboxes," her father said, and there they were, a straggling line of them, some with their mouths open, tongues hanging.

They bumped down a narrow gravel road. Bushes brushed the camper's sides. The road ended in the dirt yard of a huge, shingled house the black-brown color of telephone poles. Crumbling concrete steps led to a wide deep porch with several slumping old sofas on it, and sleeping on those sofas were various dogs, very large dogs who, hearing the van, sat up, stretched, then bounded down the steps barking. Five dogs.

Hinky sprang window to window, front seat to back, clambering all over them and barking back.

Hi! Hi! Come out of that car and let's smell you, the big dogs said.

Nobody opened a door. These were big shepherd mixes. One Doberman.

Two young women came out the front door, both in cutoff shorts and peasant blouses. One was tall with long rippling red hair and the other, even taller one had smooth brown hair in a swishy ponytail. They waded through the rambunctious dogs calling, "They're friendly! They don't bite!" The ponytailed young woman came to the driver's side and Sally's father rolled down his window. "We're the Samuelsons. Ellis's parents."

"Ellis is at work," the young woman said. "He'll be home in an hour. I'm Julia. That's Randi. Why don't you come in and wait. I just made some iced

tea."

She and Randi held what dogs they could as the family got out of the van. Then it was a smell-for-all, snouts all over everyone as they headed to the house. Randi, at the top of the steps, turned and said, "Welcome to Bug Hollow."

Inside, the hot, dark house smelled like old smoke. Sally knew right away why Ellis liked it here: the front room with its log rafters, fat saggy sofas, and tatty taxidermy looked like their favorite mountain lodge, the one near Yosemite where, after camping for a week, they'd spend a night to take showers and eat a dinner their mother didn't have to cook. The big, bearded, laughing lodge owner served the kids huge slices of blackberry pie à la mode, and gave Hinky her own scoop.

Julia asked if Sally and Katie wanted to cool off in the swimming hole. Their mother came out to see if it was safe. Dammed with rocks and logs, overhung with thick-limbed oaks, the pool was dark and calm. Water spiders rippled its surface. Half a dozen inner tubes had stalled against the opposite bank. "It's only really deep by the boulder there," Julia said.

Sally and Katie could wear their T-shirts and panties, their mother said. "And no swinging from that." She pointed to a thick rope you had to climb the boulder to reach. She left then with Hinky, yanking the leash every time Hinky tried to sniff something.

Sally waded into the cool water. "I bet Julia is Ellis's girlfriend," she said. "She's nicest."

"No way. The other one's so much prettier," Katie said, still on the bank. "This water looks kind of scummy."

Sally could see rippled sand and pebbles on the bottom. "It's clear here," she said.

Katie came in, bit by bit. They hauled sun-heated black tubes over their heads, then drifted and kicked around the swimming hole for a long time and nobody checked on them. "I wonder why Ellis likes it here. It's so hot and that old house smells," Katie said, then gave a little scream.

A man with a yellow beard stood on the path. Who knew how long he'd been there. "Oh my god, it's El Greck," Katie cried and started slogging out of the water.

He gave them both one-armed hugs. "I missed you toads," he said. "What have you been doing all summer?"

Katie said, "Wondering where *you* were, dumbo, and never going anywhere but the backyard in case you might call."

"Jeez, Katie. Thanks for the guilt trip," he said.

"You should feel guilty," she said. "So which one is your girlfriend?"

Ellis, looking around, called softly. "Julia?"

She came up the path and slipped her arms around him.

"I just wanted to say hi to you guys before I get into it with Mom and Dad," he said. "But I better get it over with." He squeezed Julia and turned toward the house. "Cover me, God, I'm going in."

Katie grabbed her shorts and ran after him. Sally walked back to the house with Julia, who answered all her questions: Yes, she was in college, at UC Santa Cruz; she was majoring in art to become an artist. And yes, she was older than Ellis, two years and two months older.

"Wow," said Sally. The boys two years younger than her were just starting first grade, very small and dopey. She couldn't imagine liking any one of them.

"Ellis is very mature for his age," Julia said. "He says that you like to draw. Shall we draw some pictures together?"

They sat at the long wooden dining table with some thick paper and Julia's big box of oil pastels. They could hear the murmur of El and the parents talking above them, on the second floor, but not what they were saying. At Julia's suggestion, they drew squiggles for each other. Of the two long narrow loops Sally gave her, Julia made an alligator with a wide-open pink mouth and gross yellow teeth. Of Julia's wiggly, vertical balloon Sally made a tree with birds in their nests. "El's right," Julia said. "You are a good artist. Is that what you want to be when you grow up?"