



VINTAGE

---

# LOCAL GIRLS

ALICE HOFFMAN

## **Contents**

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Alice Hoffman

Dedication

Title Page

Dear Diary

Rose Red

Flight

Gretel

Tell the Truth

How to Talk to the Dead

Fate

Bake at 350°

True Confession

The Rest of Your Life

The Boy Who Wrestled with Angels

Examining the Evidence

Devotion

Still Among the Living

Local Girls

Acknowledgments

Copyright

## About the Book

Told from Gretel Samuelson's sly and knowing perspective, *Local Girls* charts her progress as she navigates from childhood to the brink of womanhood, picking her way through the tragedies and absurdities of everyday life in a family which is rocked by divorce and disaster, bad judgement and fierce attachments. Her father has left them, her chain-smoking mother, Franny, is falling apart and refuses to learn the simple lessons of life, her perfect brother has fatal flaws, and even her best friend Jill - blonde, enviable and beautiful - is moving too fast into the unfathomable world of women.

## About the Author

Alice Hoffman is the author of thirteen novels, including *At Risk*, *White Horses*, *Turtle Moon*, *Second Nature*, *Practical Magic*, *Here on Earth*, *The River King* and, most recently, *Blue Diary*, many of which have been best-sellers in the USA and Germany, and she has also written screenplays. Alice Hoffman is married with two sons, and lives in Massachusetts.

ALSO BY ALICE HOFFMAN

*Property Of*  
*The Drowning Season*  
*Angel Landing*  
*White Horses*  
*Fortune's Daughter*  
*Illumination Night*  
*At Risk*  
*Seventh Heaven*  
*Turtle Moon*  
*Second Nature*  
*Practical Magic*  
*Here on Earth*  
*The River King*  
*Blue Diary*

For Children  
*Fireflies*  
*Horsefly*  
*Aquamarine*

*To  
Jo Ann Hoffman  
1950-1996  
In Peace*

# Local Girls

Alice Hoffman

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## Dear Diary

ONE THING I'VE learned is that strange things do happen. They happen all the time. Today, for instance, my best friend Jill's cat spoke. We were making brownies in the kitchen when we heard it say, *Let me out*. Well, we rushed to the back door and did exactly that. We experienced a miracle and now we're looking for more, although Franconia, the town we live in, is not known for such things. Jill and I have known each other our whole lives. One house separates our houses but we act as if it doesn't exist. We met before we were born and we'll probably still know each other after we die. At least, that's the way we're planning it.

My mother and I left for Atlantic City so quickly I didn't have time to call Jill. We told people we were on our way to visit an old aunt, but really our departure had something to do with love, or the lack of it, and the aunt doesn't even exist. I know other people whose mothers suddenly pack up when their fathers drink or scream, but for us this is more serious. My mother doesn't do things like go to Atlantic City. She doesn't order room service and cry. She once told me that anyone who gets married had better like herself, because there's nobody else in this world that she'll ever really know, not truly.

We stayed in our room in Atlantic City for three days, and didn't go outside once, thanks to room service. We ate like pigs and didn't even bother to brush our teeth until my mother's cousin Margot, who got a divorce last summer and changed the color of her hair to give herself an emotional lift, came to get us. She drove to New Jersey in the Ford



Mustang convertible that she refused to let her ex have, since he'd taken her very soul and raked it over red-hot coals.

"Get dressed right now," she told us.

We were wearing our bathrobes and watching an old cowboy movie, which, for some reason, made my mother cry. Maybe it was all those men on horseback who were so steadfast and loyal. Their own men had disappointed them, but somehow Margot and my mother both had hope for improvement. Frankly, I had more faith in the horses.

"I mean now, Frances," Margot said, and because she meant business, my mother actually dressed and put on some lipstick and we went to a Chinese restaurant where the drinks came with little paper umbrellas, which I kept as a souvenir.

*Listen to me, Gretel,* Margot told me when we'd gone back to the room to pack and my mother was finally out of earshot. *When a marriage breaks up, it's the children who suffer, so baby, hold on tight.* That's why Margot was relieved that she and Tony had never had children, although she became teary whenever she saw a baby.

"Margot is my best friend, but she's completely full of baloney," my mother whispered as we were throwing our suitcases into the trunk. "Take it all with a grain of salt. Maybe even a whole shaker."

Say what you want about the Mustang, it may be gorgeous, but it has very little trunk space. I had to sit in the back seat with the hair dryer and the makeup case on my lap all the way to Franconia, but that didn't stop me from keeping my fingers crossed and wishing we'd wind up someplace other than home.

We're in Florida for one week, the week when the turtles die on the beach and there are jellyfish in the ocean. As soon as we checked into the hotel, my brother, Jason, who likes to pretend he's not part of our family, went out to study tide

pools and no one has seen him since. My parents are here to try to revitalize their marriage, which seems a pretty impossible feat to all outside observers. *Gretel honey, don't get high hopes*, Margot had already warned me when she took me shopping for a bathing suit, a mission which can give anyone with a less than perfect body a complete nervous breakdown. *When it's over, it's over*, Margot told me, and I had the distinct feeling that she was right.

Long before the plane touched down in Miami we could hear our parents arguing, and at the hotel they locked themselves in their room. If you ask me, working so hard at being married can backfire. It certainly is making my father nastier than usual. Not that his bad temper affects me. I keep my own counsel. I go my own way. I order room service and eat Linzer tortes and shrimp scampi alone in the room I was supposed to be sharing with Jason, not that he was ever planning to show up. Even though I was across the hall from my parents, I could still hear them fighting.

I went out to the beach late, later than I'd be allowed to if anyone knew I was alive. That's where I met Jonathan Rabbit, who is now in love with me. He is known as Jack Rabbit, which makes me laugh out loud. Doesn't it figure that the boy who fell for me would be a rodent? He lives in Atlanta and is in the ninth grade, and frankly he's terribly boring. I let him kiss me once, but believe me, I did not hear bells. I only heard the jellyfish sloshing around in the water and the noisy beat of Jack Rabbit's heart.

Florida didn't do anything for my family, but at least it's starting to be spring. Jill and I are keeping our eyes open for miracles. Jack Rabbit calls me constantly and that is something of a miracle. He writes so often you'd think his fingers would start to cramp up. I bring his letters to school, so everyone is well aware that I have a boyfriend in Atlanta. They'll never meet him. They'll never know it's actually

possible for a boy to be so boring you'd agree to kiss him just to get him to shut up. I should get paid to listen to him when he calls on the phone. I should get a dollar fifty an hour. Minimum.

Jill told me that when you're really in love, you know right away I'm not exactly sure how this happens. Is it like a flash of lightning? Like an angel tapping you on the shoulder? Or is it similar to choosing a puppy? You think you're picking the cutest one, but really you wind up going home with the one who keeps insisting on climbing into your lap. That's how we got our dog, Revolver. We thought he was so crazy about us, but it turned out that Labrador retrievers adore everyone. Well, maybe that's what love is, a state of mind ready to grace anyone willing to accept it. Anyone who cares.

School's out. Hurray. Life, however, is still so boring that I'm writing to Jack Rabbit every day. I go to the pool with Jill and take along my notebook and write until I think I'm going blind, then jump into the deep end. We are not going on vacation because no one in my house is talking to each other, so going anywhere together is definitely out. My brother's on the summer science team at the high school, so he's never home. My father is on an exercise kick and has joined a gym, so he's never around either.

My mother and Margot and I spend a lot of time going to movies. It's dark and it's cool and no one knows if you're crying, except for the person sitting directly beside you. Margot buys me anything I want, even Jordan almonds, which are so terrible for your teeth. She's the kind of person who knows about love. She has men calling her in the middle of the night, but they're all no good, or so she says. Just like Jill, she insists she'll know when she meets the right man. But unlike Jill, she tells me exactly what love's evidence is. *I'll just want to kiss him till I die.* To me, this

doesn't sound like something to hope for, but people seem to hope for it all the same.

Jill is camping with her parents, and has sent me a postcard that it has happened. The miracle we've been searching for, the great event, the angel's secret. It's love, it really is. It's the boy in the tent next to hers who she sneaks out to meet after her parents are asleep. I sit on my front stoop while Jill is away and think things over. I've smartened up and am no longer waiting for the mailman. Jack Rabbit isn't writing anymore. He went to camp to be a junior counselor and I guess he broke his arm or fell in love with somebody new. Doesn't it figure that I would miss his letters like crazy? Sometimes I read the old ones late at night, and I wonder what was I thinking when I got them. How could I have thought he was boring? Well, I'm the boring one now. When Jill comes back I may have to lie to her. I may tell her Jack Rabbit died in a canoeing accident. My name was the last word he said, or so they tell me. My name brought him comfort with his last dying breath.

Jill and I are not in the same class at school. We never are. The administration doesn't want people who like each other to be together. They think it builds character when they stick people who hate one another in the same room, day after day, and nobody winds up getting killed or maimed. I'm not supposed to know that Jill's mother is seeing a psychiatrist, just as Jill is not supposed to know my parents are no longer sleeping in the same room. My mother spends her nights on a quilt on my floor, and she doesn't cry until she thinks I'm asleep.

Recently, Margot and I went out for ice cream. We had butterscotch sundaes with vanilla ice cream. Margot asked for my advice. She had spotted my father at an expensive restaurant, the kind he'd never take us to, with some woman she'd never seen before and she didn't know

whether or not to tell my mother. I have never been much of a tattletale myself, although I understand that there are times when the truth serves its purpose. This didn't seem to be one of those times. For all we knew, this woman could be some business associate, although Margot and I probably would have both been willing to bet our lives that she wasn't.

Don't tell. That was the advice I came up with. My mother was already crying and sleeping on the floor, what good would the truth do her now? Margot didn't eat any of her sundae, and when she offered it to me I realized I was sick to my stomach. I think I've pretty much figured out that in this world, it's better to stick to hot fudge.

On Halloween Jill wore all black and made ears out of felt which she glued to a plastic headband. She was a black cat. She had a tail that was braided out of three silk scarves. I borrowed thirty silver bangle bracelets from my grandmother. I was a fortune-teller. We should have suspected something when we saw the moon. It was orange and so big we couldn't believe it. It was like we could take one big step, and there we'd be: moon girls who had fallen off the rim of the world. My brother laughed at us. Weren't we a little too old for trick-or-treating? Well of course we were, but we didn't care. We went up and down the block, collecting candy; then we walked beyond the high school through the field so we could smoke cigarettes beside the creek. Jill had stolen the cigarettes from her mother's purse, and I had gotten the matches from my grandmother.

"As long as you're not smoking cigarettes," my grandmother had said to me, which pretty much ruined the whole thing. I couldn't enjoy a single puff. Grandma Frieda was visiting for the weekend and she had the ability to put a hex on any form of high jinks. She was sleeping on my floor too, and it was getting pretty crowded there in my room. I could never find my sneakers. I couldn't find my underwear.