



POLLY HORVATH

*Author of the Newbery Honor Book  
Everything on a Waffle*

PINE  
ISLAND  
HOME

PINE  
ISLAND  
HOME

ALSO BY POLLY HORVATH

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PINE  
ISLAND  
HOME



Polly Horvath

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*To Arnie, Emily, Rebecca, Millie, Laddie, Bo, and Murphy.  
And to Keena, Zayda, Andrew, and Bonnie too.*



# Contents



<i>The Letter</i>	1
<i>Aunt Martha's Neighbor</i>	17
<i>Miss Webster</i>	31
<i>Al Farber</i>	46
<i>Mr. Pennypacker</i>	58
<i>Billy Bear</i>	74
<i>Donald Pettinger</i>	87
<i>Lost</i>	105
<i>Davy Clement</i>	127
<i>The Party</i>	162
<i>The Dance</i>	181
<i>The Boat</i>	197
<i>Another Happy Middle</i>	219
Acknowledgments	229





PINE  
ISLAND  
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## *The Letter*

THE McCready sisters, Fiona, fourteen, Marlin, twelve, Natasha, ten, and Charlie, eight, were raised in a missionary family. They had been happily and safely moving from pillar to post all over the world when their parents, taking their first vacation ever, having come into a small sum of money from an aging uncle who “felt it strongly” that they had never had a honeymoon, invited them to Thailand, where he ran a small hotel. The three of them and the hotel were swept away in a tsunami. The four girls were, at the time, living in Borneo, in a small cottage far back in the jungle without benefit of internet or phone service, being seen after by a visiting church volunteer who couldn’t continue to take care of them as she had other plans. So the church had a Mrs. Weatherspoon from Australia come to stay with them until someone in their family could step forward. That took a year.

Mrs. Weatherspoon sent out appeals to all the relatives she and the girls could find except for a great-aunt, Martha McCready, who lived off the coast of British Columbia.

The girls' mother, when opening Martha's annual Christmas card, called her "that peculiar woman hiding in the woods." Mrs. Weatherspoon said they would save her as a last resort. But surely someone more suitable would respond first. There were aunts and uncles in Tampa, Florida; Lansing, Michigan; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Kingsport, Tennessee. That was the lot. It took a while for the responses to Mrs. Weatherspoon's appeal to trickle in. The mail pickup and delivery in the jungle was unreliable and slow. After receiving the appeal, the relatives then had to think about it. These were their sister's or brother's children, it was true. But there were four of them. Fitting four children into an already-established household was no small matter. Some of them wrote to ask Mrs. Weatherspoon to write them if no one else had come forward. When Mrs. Weatherspoon did, they had to think about it all over again. This took time. And none of them had met the McCready children. Mr. and Mrs. McCready had become estranged from their brothers and sisters many years before when they had made what the siblings considered a "very weird choice," joining a church that none of them had heard of and of which, for some reason never explained to the girls, they all disapproved.

It was a very sad year but one made more interesting for the children by waiting to find out where they were eventually going to end up. Fiona, who felt herself in

charge of keeping up with family practices, remembered her father's dictum to never shy away from the difficult subjects. Talk about them.

"Where would you most like to go?" Fiona would quiz the others at dinner.

"Tampa, I suppose," said Natasha. "We could swim in the ocean."

"Is Tampa *on* the ocean?" asked Marlin.

"It's in Florida," said Natasha.

"Not all of Florida is on the ocean," replied Marlin.

"Sharks," said Charlie, who tended to see danger everywhere.

"Not on land," said Marlin.

"I'm sure they'd make us go swimming," said Charlie. "Everyone always wants to make you go swimming even if you don't want to. They will make us take swim classes."

"Swim classes are in pools and you've already learned to swim," said Marlin. "I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"They probably make you take your swim classes in the ocean if you *live* on the ocean and we will be eaten by sharks," said Charlie morosely.

Marlin could understand why Charlie would be afraid of the ocean, given their recent tragedy. But Charlie, she thought, was afraid of the wrong thing. She should be afraid of tsunamis, not sharks. She was going to point this

out but decided not to give Charlie any more cause for worry.

Mrs. Weatherspoon was always very quiet during these discussions. It pained her that the children had lost their parents and it pained her that they were left to such an uncertain fate. She would have taken them on permanently herself but she too had other plans and had to get back to Australia eventually.

“Not Lansing, Michigan, that’s for sure,” Natasha went on.

“Why not?” asked Charlie.

“It sounds the most boring,” replied Natasha. “What’s in Lansing? Nothing.”

“It’s the state capital,” pointed out Fiona.

“You just said that to show off,” said Natasha. “You don’t care that it’s the state capital.”

“I’m just stating a fact,” said Fiona. “Because I happen to know it. If you studied your geography as you’re supposed to you would know it too.”

Fiona was the quintessential big sister.

“Kingsport, Tennessee,” said Charlie. “I think that’s the best. It sounds like it’s full of castles.”

“Because it’s got king in the name?” asked Marlin. “You will be disappointed. It will not only be boring, you won’t be able to understand anything anyone says because they’ll all have those thick southern accents where it sounds like

people are trying to talk with a mouth full of marbles. And everyone there will be in love with Elvis Presley and probably wear big sunglasses and white jumpsuits.”

“That’s Graceland,” said Natasha.

“Graceland isn’t a city, it’s the name of Elvis’s house,” said Marlin.

“Where is Graceland?” asked Charlie.

Fiona didn’t know and after her geography comment she decided to change the subject.

“You’ll understand the accents better in Tennessee than you will in Shreveport,” she said. “I am stumping for Shreveport anyway despite the accents. There are bayous in Louisiana. I have always wanted to live on a bayou.”

“What’s a bayou?” asked Charlie.

“I don’t know,” admitted Fiona. “I just like the sound of it.”

“It’s something swampy and pelicans fly over it,” said Natasha, who liked birds and knew where different ones lived. “I wouldn’t mind living somewhere that had pelicans.”

Mrs. Weatherspoon usually started silently weeping at this juncture. Her great fear and the one she knew the girls hadn’t considered was that *no one* would want them and then what? These little hopeful discussions were like piercing arrows to her heart.

As it turned out none of those four sets of aunts and



uncles in those much-discussed destinations did. They were very sorry and regretful but even after so much consideration, and knowing no one else had stepped forward, they just didn't think they could do it.

Mrs. Weatherspoon was beside herself with anxiety as each declining letter arrived. As the end of her year with the girls approached she finally sent a letter to Martha McCready. Mrs. Weatherspoon had stayed on in the Borneo jungle, sure that at any second, someone in the girls' family would agree to take them. But the thing she feared most was now in play. She paced and shredded dinner rolls and generally lost control of herself while trying desperately to appear calm each time a regretful no arrived.

Fiona actually *was* calm. "What is going to happen to us now?" she asked after the fourth letter arrived.

"Social services," said Mrs. Weatherspoon through tears, "is (gulp, gulp, sob, sob) certainly a possibility." And she blew her nose into her ever-ready embroidered hankie.

"We still haven't heard from the peculiar great-aunt," said Marlin.

"No, dear," said Mrs. Weatherspoon, sniffing, "that's true but she's a bit old to be taking on four children. And I gather she's always been something of a hermit. I would not hang my hopes there."

"Then where can we hang our hopes?" asked Natasha.

"Again, social (sob, sob, gulp, gulp) services," Mrs.

Weatherspoon choked out. “You will not end up on the street but, oh my (attempt to stifle sobbing by putting a handkerchief to her mouth so the next part came out muffled), *social services* of all things!”

“What’s wrong with social services?” asked Charlie, unable to account for the depth of Mrs. Weatherspoon’s sorrow.

“I guess that means foster care,” said Fiona. “Well, that’s bad but not the end of the world. They’ll find someone to take all four of us, won’t they? They won’t split us up?”

“That’s just it,” cried Mrs. Weatherspoon. “I have seen it too many times. I very much fear that is exactly what *will* happen. You will be split up. Perhaps placed in homes all over the United States. Hundreds of miles from each other. Scattered to the winds!”

And Mrs. Weatherspoon lost it completely, lying right on the floor and heaving with sorrow. Fiona was disenchanted. She liked Mrs. Weatherspoon. She was grateful to Mrs. Weatherspoon for all she had done for them this year. And for taking a year out of her life and familiar surroundings to care for them. But she found this total loss of self-control unseemly.

Besides, Fiona could see that her sisters were nearly wetting themselves at this grown-up display of despair and the news that they might lose each other. They had hung on to their courage and hope all through that terrible year.

It seemed the height of unfairness that after being so brave they were now being asked to face something even more terrifying. This was especially so for Fiona because she felt strongly her need to care for and keep together what was left of their family. The idea of her younger sisters, especially little Charlie, going to some strange home maybe hundreds of miles from her where she couldn't even keep an eye on them was too awful for words. She began to plan an escape into the jungle for all four of them if it came to that. Better to take their chances with the snakes and be together than face alone the sorrow and terror of the day-to-day wondering of what had become of the others.

For a week Fiona suffered such worry she couldn't eat but the following week as they got off the school bus and approached the house they found Mrs. Weatherspoon dancing up and down the porch stairs as if she'd lost her mind, and waving a piece of paper. When they got closer they saw it was a letter.

"What is it?" asked Fiona as Mrs. Weatherspoon waved it merrily in their faces. Fiona did not even dare to hope it might be the fifth anticipated reply.

"My dears, my dears, you are *saved!*" Mrs. Weatherspoon cried happily.

The children sat down right there on the steps and Mrs. Weatherspoon read their great-aunt's letter to them a full eighteen times. Fortunately, it was short.

*Dear Mrs. Weatherspoon,  
Thank you for informing me of my great-nieces' predicament. I will take them. Of course I will. Here is my address, my email, and phone number for the girls when they reach civilization where such services are available. Send me their flight times and I will pick them up at the airport here on Pine Island, British Columbia. I live outside St. Mary's By the Sea but they will come in at Pine Island's only airport on the north side of the island in Shoreline and I will pick them up there. I look forward to it.*

*Yours,  
Martha McCready*

"She looks *forward* to it!" intoned Mrs. Weatherspoon over and over between readings as if she could not believe their luck. This began to make Fiona feel very undesirable indeed. But she saw Mrs. Weatherspoon's point. They were not just being taken in on sufferance. Someone wanted them.

When Mrs. Weatherspoon got tired of the letter readings she leapt up and went inside to bake a coconut cake. Mrs. Weatherspoon, who weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, thought cake the proper expression of all joy. The girls thought this one of her more admirable traits and encouraged it always.

Later as the sisters lay in their beds in their large shared bedroom, Fiona said, "It was nice of her to be so happy for us."

"Happy for herself just as much, I bet. She gets to go home now too," said Marlin.

"That's not very charitable of you," said Fiona, using a phrase their mother had used a lot. She found herself talking more and more as their mother had, as if to remember her with a lexicon of idioms. "She's been here a year. Of course she's glad to go home."

"And it's been such a sad year," said Natasha. "It must have been difficult to witness. For a while I cried almost every day."

"I still cry," said Charlie.

"Yes, but you cried before Mom and Dad died," said Marlin. "It is just your nature."

"I'm not a crybaby," protested Charlie.

"No, dear," said Fiona, "you are sensitive."

"Mrs. Weatherspoon cries too," said Charlie. "She cries all the time. She cried every night when we discussed where we might end up."

"She's sensitive too," said Fiona.

"She won't cry anymore now," said Natasha. "We are saved."

"I hope that's the end of all the crying," said Marlin.

"Yes," said Fiona. "Mom always said you can look at

the world and see all the suffering or you can look at it and see all the joy. Let us be glad for this adventure in Canada. Let us take the view of joy.”

“I want Mommy and Daddy back,” said Charlie.

They were quiet after that. It was not fair to pretend that they didn’t want this too and that Charlie hadn’t only voiced what they all felt. But Fiona vowed privately to try and put a cheery face on things for the sake of the other three whenever possible. She would lead in taking the view of joy. Then they went to sleep.

For the next month when Mrs. Weatherspoon wasn’t baking cakes on a tide of celebratory sugared frenzy, she was taking the Jeep on the long trek to the nearest city and having money transferred to Canada for the girls, getting Fiona a cell phone, making sure papers and passports were in order, and at home, helping Fiona pack. Mrs. Weatherspoon was staying behind to clean and close the jungle cottage before flying home herself. It was a busy time but finally with many instructions and warnings and Saran-wrapped cake slices, the children were put on the plane to begin their journey.

“Will there be pine trees?” asked Charlie. “It’s called Pine Island.”

“Big trees,” said Natasha. “I looked up British Columbia in the school encyclopedia. Firs and Sitka spruces and pines.”

“Ancient rain forests,” said Marlin, who had also looked it up.

“Full of wild beasts,” said Charlie. “I knew it.”

“Some actually,” said Natasha. “Wolves, bears, cougars.”

“I doubt they’ll come into town, Nat,” said Fiona. “I doubt they live in St. Mary’s By the Sea.”

“Aunt Martha said she lives *outside* town,” said Charlie.

“*Great-Aunt* Martha,” said Marlin.

“That’s too many words to say,” said Charlie. “I’m going to just call her Aunt Martha.”

“Me too,” said Natasha.

“All right, me too,” said Marlin.

“It will be beautiful, Charlie,” said Fiona. “It will be like no place we have ever been, you wait and see. Remember how you were worried about snakes in Borneo but you were never bitten?”

“Hmmm,” said Charlie, who was never so easily convinced, and opened her comic book.

It was many planes and many jet-lagged hours later that the girls arrived finally at the Shoreline airport. It was a small airport without even Jetways. The girls exited right onto the tarmac and walked inside. They had already gone through customs in Vancouver so they went straight to the baggage carousel, where their great-aunt had said she would meet them. But no one came to claim them. They

looked hopefully at any old lady who walked by but no one recognized them or came forward.

“She must have been held up in traffic,” said Fiona. “We will collect all our bags and sit here and wait. And call Mrs. Weatherspoon to let her know we got in okay.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until Aunt Martha arrives?” asked Marlin.

“No, let’s call now so that when Aunt Martha comes we can just leave,” said Fiona. “I can’t wait to be horizontal. Trying to sleep upright on planes is always so horrible.”

So Fiona called and Mrs. Weatherspoon said, “Well, my dears, I am glad you are having your happy ending. There is no branch of the church on the island but you can always write to me if you are in need of spiritual guidance. I will never consider it an imposition. Tell your aunt.”

“Yes, we will,” said Fiona.

“And call me if you need anything.”

“Thank you for everything, Mrs. Weatherspoon.”

“It’s been a pleasure, dear,” said Mrs. Weatherspoon, and they hung up.

After that the girls sat on chairs in the baggage area and waited an hour. They waited two. They phoned their aunt but got only an answering machine. Fiona left messages each time but none of her calls were returned.

“Fiona,” said Marlin, “what are we going to do?”



“We are going to take a cab to her address,” said Fiona. “I have plenty of cash. We will worry about things when we get there.”

They were all exhausted by the thirty-nine hours of traveling. No one argued except the cabdriver, who said, “That’s a long cab ride all the way to St. Mary’s By the Sea. It’s going to cost you.”

Fiona waved a handful of bills in front of him and he shrugged and threw their suitcases in the back and said no more. It was coming to evening. The road was busy at first and then became much less so as it wound around the island’s cliffside roads, the water stretching out below on one side and the pine forests stretching in a dense green blanket on the other.

“Pine trees,” Fiona pointed out to Charlie, but Charlie had fallen asleep.

“Beautiful,” said Fiona, watching two bald eagles circling, riding the thermals in spirals over the forest. “I knew it would be beautiful. Eagles, Natasha.”

But Natasha had fallen asleep too.

The sun left a rosy peachy trail across the sky as it headed on its own journey to the west to make its way around the corner of the earth, bringing a new day to other people, people the girls had left behind in Borneo and beyond.

“It will be all right, Marlin,” said Fiona to Marlin,

whose eyes were drooping, and then as her mother often said, “All things will be all right.”

But they were not so immediately. The cabdriver finally made his way through one end of the charming little seaside village of St. Mary’s By the Sea, all old clapboard shops leaning against each other, sidewalks trimmed with old-fashioned-looking streetlights and neat little hanging baskets spilling a profusion of greenery, out the other end and past the manicured little houses and lots surrounding it. Then they drove once more into the wilderness of long forested roads until finally they came to Martha McCready’s farm. After Fiona had paid the driver and he had taken off, they knocked on the door of the small two-storied house with its wraparound porch and then rang the bell, but no one answered.

“I don’t think anyone’s here,” said Marlin, stating the obvious and leaning on the door. She, like all of them, was on her last legs and almost crazy with fatigue.

“No,” said Fiona, looking for the first time too stupefied to figure out what to do next.

Marlin searched about the mat and doorway and finally found a key under a flowerpot.

“Good finding,” murmured Fiona tiredly, and opened the door.

The house was spic-and-span and empty. Upstairs there were four cots made up side by side in a large bedroom.

“Those must be for us,” said Marlin. “At least we know we were expected.”

The other bedroom was clearly their aunt’s but was empty.

Downstairs there was food in the fridge and cupboards so they made a quick meal of cereal and fruit, took showers, and got into the four beds. Fiona wrote a note to Aunt Martha and left it on the kitchen table in case she came back later.

“I can’t imagine what happened to her,” said Fiona.

“I don’t even care,” mumbled Marlin. “I’m just so happy to be lying down. I’m just so happy to—” Before she could finish the sentence she had joined Charlie and Natasha, who were fast asleep.

But Fiona stayed awake, tired as she was, and thought furiously. She did not know what to do about this new twist in their fate. She could think of no good reason for their aunt to have disappeared. Fiona thought and thought and thought and then she too gave up and slept.