

# CALIFORNIA GIRL

MAY 1951–JUNE 1968



California, 1970.

*During her interview before the committee selecting new NASA astronauts, twenty-six-year-old graduate student Sally Ride, a native of Los Angeles, breezed through the standard questions about her college major, her PhD research, her interest in space. Her poise impressed everyone. Then they asked, “What do you like to do for fun?” Sally’s cool*

*self-confidence brimmed over. "Ride down the freeway, with the radio blaring," she said, grinning, "volume at full speed." NASA's Dr. Carolyn Huntoon, the only woman among the interrogators, quickly recognized a smart, attractive personality who enjoyed life, and jotted down—approvingly—"California girl."*

## ROOTS

The brilliant sun and laid-back living of Southern California were unimaginable to her forebears, generations of God-fearing farmers and preachers and shopkeepers and craftsmen who prospered amidst the frigid snows of Northern Europe and the often rigid confines of social custom. That modern descendants found their way to the wide open American West reflects the grit, idealism, and recurrent strains of rebellion on both parents' sides. Not to mention a preference for keeping warm. Sally would inherit much of that spirit.

The Ride family name reaches back nearly four hundred years to Derbyshire, a rural, inland county as close to the center of England and as far from the ocean as it's possible to get. Which, according to an early geographer, "made it for many centuries more or less inaccessible." It was, however, known for its beauty: craggy mountains in the north yielding to gentle hills and broad plains further south, with abundantly flowing rivers to keep it all very green. Swift horsemen hunted fox across the tall hedges and lush fields; tenant farmers tilled the rich land surrounding great estates where some Rides would be employed. Think Downton Abbey, but more remote, less manicured and a century older. Even older genealogically. In the tiny parish of Mugginton, within the thick-walled Church of All Saints—whose Romanesque, square stone tower dates back to the Norman Conquest—entries for Rides are among the earliest in the register, and the graveyard is thick with stones of ancient relatives.

One of the first to seek another destiny was John Ride, a young man

of “passionate and ungovernable temper,” according to a contemporary, so captivated by the fiery sermon of an itinerant Primitive Methodist preacher (a revivalist faction at odds with the mainstream church), John fell to his knees in his father’s frozen pasture and shouted, “Glory to God! He has pardoned all my sins!” To which his father (also John) responded, “The Methodists have driven my poor boy mad!” That was in 1807. Soon both converted to the new faith, and John Jr. became a traveling preacher himself. But hostility towards the daring new evangelists sent John and his family packing, making him the first Ride to reach American shores in 1820. His stay was brief, and after returning to England John Ride relocated to Australia. The Rides were on the move, progenitors of the “fierce spirit of independence” that would later characterize their California namesakes.

Three generations later, through the offspring of John’s brother William, the trek to America was repeated, this time for good. In 1880, at the age of twenty, William’s great-grandson William Ride sailed off, leaving behind the Wesleyan Chapel by the beechnut trees, the old wooden pump where he drank from the spout, and the blacksmith shop, touchstones of a community where mail was delivered by a boy on a pony. He also left his friends and family: hairdressers, domestic servants, wheelwrights, tailors, and undertakers like his brother, Sam, known for estimating villagers’ coffin size when he visited them on their sickbeds.

“It was a brave move for a young man at a time when foreign travel was practically unheard of,” reported a local newspaper of Will’s journey. “But he . . . believed a better life beckoned him in Pennsylvania.”

After a successful career as a carpenter and cabinetmaker in Jackson Center, a small Pennsylvania mill town near the Ohio border, William crossed the Rockies to Colorado, where he became a farmer in the early 1900s. Then he and his wife, Alice Irene Vernam, headed for the Pacific, settling on a small ranch in Escondido, just north of San Diego. California “is a fine place to live,” he wrote to a childhood friend back in Derby. “It seldom freezes, never snows, a wonderful place for old folk and children.” William Ride was sixty-eight, thankful for safe harbor as the

Great Depression began in November 1929. “This is a very extravagant country,” he told his village pal. “People live well, dress well, and do a lot of riding around. Automobiles are very common, nearly every family has one or more. You hardly ever see a horse on the road and seldom see anybody on foot. We have wonderful paved roads and thousands of miles of them, mostly made out of cement.”

William’s son, Thomas Vernam Ride, was by then living in Santa Monica with his wife, Jennie Mae Richardson. Her ancestors, who had left England even earlier for the New World, included a distant link to Robert E. Lee and direct ties to two patriots from the American Revolution, later making Sally eligible for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a straitlaced affiliation her liberal mother would preemptively reject. Tom and Jennie’s first child was a boy, Dale Burdell Ride, born in 1922.

## THE NORTHERN ROUTE

Through her maternal grandmother, Sally was descended from several generations of Dutch Mennonites: German-speaking Protestant dissidents who roamed Europe in search of a place to practice their faith without persecution. They found refuge in Russia when Catherine the Great offered the Mennonites land and security in what is now Ukraine. But in 1878, faced with conscription into the czar’s army—the same threat that powered great waves of immigrants from other parts of Eastern Europe—Wilhelm Rempel II, thirty-two, a prosperous grain farmer, and his wife, Anna Harder Rempel, sturdy folks with a severe demeanor, fled to America and made their way to Butterfield, Minnesota, near the state’s southern border, a dot placed on the map by the railroad line to help develop the prairie. With the population barely breaking three digits (the town’s first store had been razed several years earlier due to lack of customers), Wilhelm lured them in with hammer and nails, owning and operating the hardware store on Main Street. It flourished, as did his family, after a fashion.

Wilhelm and Anna's daughter Anna (Sally's ancestors on both sides recycled names the way she would later recycle cans of 7UP) fell in love with Sylvester Sulem, the son of nearby homesteaders from Lom, Norway, a quiet village in a verdant valley of arresting majesty: immense, snowy peaks, gentle reindeer, brilliant wildflowers. With dim prospects for the future, the Sulems had skied to the coast and steamed across the ocean to join countrymen in Minnesota. Problem was, Sylvester, thirty-eight, was nearly twice the age of Anna, twenty; worse yet to the strict Mennonite Rempels, he was Lutheran. When neither church would marry them, the couple sent a horse and buggy to Mankato, nearly fifty miles away, to find a justice of the peace, and held the ceremony in Sylvester's sister's home in St. James. He wore a snappy waistcoat, she a flowing veil. They later got even by helping found the local Presbyterian Church.

They also opened a dry goods emporium across the street from the hardware store owned by the Rempels, who refused to speak with their rebel daughter or new son-in-law. The family squabble did not extend to their ten children, the recitation of whose names, in birth order, would become one of the favorite parlor tricks of Sally and her sister: Ada, Ethel, John, Willard, Myrtle, Pearl, Martha, Marie, Chester, Vivian. Ada Sulem left school in tenth grade to change her siblings' diapers and work in the family store. Then she married Andy Anderson, the son of another Norwegian farming family, from Stavanger on Norway's west coast. When Andy didn't want his wife to work, she gave up her career as a Registered Nurse. They moved upstate to Detroit Lakes, the tourist town (with 425 lakes that swelled the population tenfold in summer) where he prospered as the owner of a bowling alley, a chain of movie theaters, and a golf course that remains popular today. Their older daughter, (Carol) Joyce Anderson, played saxophone in the high school marching band and skied or tobogganed all winter long from their house atop a hill. Andy retired early, at forty-seven, and tired of chilly Minnesota, moved his family to Santa Monica in 1941. That's where Joyce met Dale Ride on a blind date in 1948.

"He had this gorgeous dark red hair," Joyce recalls today. "Very ap-

peeling.” She was twenty-four, a diminutive brunette with a quick smile, a clever (if infrequently motivated) tongue, and a recent psychology degree from UCLA. He was twenty-six, a six-foot-tall, rangy World War II veteran who had landed at Marseilles to help liberate Eastern France, then crossed into Germany, Bavaria and Austria. The perilous trail of Dale’s combat with the 928th Field Artillery Battalion of the 103rd Infantry Division, like that of the entire war, had been tracked by his family with clippings pasted into a scrapbook: NAZIS CHASED OUT OF ALSACE, MANNHEIM FALLS, GOERING SURRENDERS. And finally, a triumphant strip of yellowed newsprint pasted diagonally across the entire page: GERMANY SURRENDERS. Dale came home with a Purple Heart, and got his degree from Haverford College, in Pennsylvania, on the GI Bill. Joyce met him when he returned to get his master’s in education at UCLA. Was it love at first sight? “I think so,” she recalls, which for her is very enthusiastic. They married six months later in a church ceremony with tossed rice, long, white gloves and flirty veils, the bride barely reaching the groom’s chin, even in high heels. Tradition stopped there: she wore neither white nor a long train.

That duality—dollops of nonconformity bubbling beneath the aura of custom—would characterize the Rides and their children into the next century. The rebellion of their ancestors and their search for new opportunities recombined beneath the Pacific sun to produce a family that would make its own distinctive way into postwar America. The newlyweds moved into a small starter apartment in Santa Monica, certified members of the Greatest Generation eager to live their version of the American Dream. Two years later, on May 26, 1951, they made their first contribution to the national baby boom. It was a girl. A California girl. They named her Sally Kristen.

*You don't remember Crusader Rabbit? To understand Sally, you must!  
She was the Rabbit and I was Rags the Tiger, his sidekick. She was like*

*that—the fearlessness. Throw yourself into danger’s way and your hapless sidekick will help out. Someone’s got to save the world!*

—Bear Ride, Sally’s younger sister

## CHILDHOOD

As a child of the television age, it is more than appropriate that one of Sally Ride’s earliest heroes appeared in the first made-for-TV cartoon—a black-and-white series starring a bunny in knight’s armor who charged across the plains (or the sea, or the jungle) to make the planet a better place. Some of his causes: battling Texans who wanted to rid the state of jackrabbits by shipping them to the North Pole; rescuing tigers whose stripes were being stolen to make India ink; foiling a plot by bloodthirsty pirates to rob New York City of its silverware. And always, aided and abetted by his loyal helpmate. The clever little Crusader was the perfect role model for a pragmatic child with an emerging sense of irony: he was tiny in size but took on gigantic missions; he had guts, but not superpowers. He couldn’t fly or stop trains, but he could run really fast. And he oozed the sort of upbeat optimism that moves mountains. Swap the shining armor for a flight suit, add even more focused brainpower, and you’ve got the real-life mind-set of Sally Ride. She also wanted to save the world—quietly—with plenty of best buddies along the way.

As an infant, she was both sunny and willful, from her pure blue eyes and corn silk Nordic hair to the tireless little legs that never seemed to stop moving. “Sally was a child who knew what she wanted,” Joyce says. “Her first word was ‘No.’” Contrast that to her sister, Karen, who came along just over two years later: brown bob, equally bright smile, but “My first word was ‘thank you,’” she says.

The siblings got off to a rocky start when Joyce was nursing the baby. “Sally came over and bonked me on the head with the telephone,” Joyce says; she was so jealous, Joyce soon stopped nursing. Earlier, when she was pregnant, “Sally would run at me and say, ‘Pick Sassy up!’” Little “Sassy,” as she called herself, also had trouble pronouncing “Karen” as a

child, so morphed “Kar” into “Pear,” and then finally “Bear.” The name stuck and the pattern of their sisterhood was set.

“Sally loved being in control,” Bear says, without rancor. “She always dictated what the game was going to be and what the television show was going to be, and it was fine.” Also, “she’d always win. She liked to win, and I learned how to be a gracious loser.” Bear shrugs off the role she was assigned, steering me to another favorite TV cartoon, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, with an intrepid flying squirrel and a loyal backup moose. “I think it was just the prerogative of being the older sibling. And having a younger sibling who would go along with it. Sally always struck me as being much braver and much smarter, so she should be Rocky to my Bullwinkle.”

It took a special sister to permit—and laugh off—such dominance; special parents, too. After Sally’s first spaceflight, a colleague approached Dale and asked, “Aren’t you proud of your daughter?” “Which one?” he responded. Bear would take her own road less traveled, inheriting her ancestors’ churchgoing bent to become a Presbyterian minister. Her gift for connecting the spiritual to the mundane was evident to everyone, including her mother, whose highest compliment tended to be, “That wasn’t half bad.” Joyce did much better in a letter to Sally some years later, writing about Bear, “Preaching I can take or leave, but she’s good.”

Bear also remembers being with her dad as a child when a friend asked, “Are you the tennis player?”—meaning Sally. Dale answered, “No, she’s the saxophone player.” Sally may have been the golden child, but the Rides always shared the glow equally. “Absolutely,” Bear says, “I never doubted that they loved me as much as Sally.”

By all accounts, love infused the Ride household. It just wasn’t something anyone talked about. Or had to validate. Sally later described her relationship with Bear this way: “The two of us always got along very well and we enjoyed each other’s company, but we were not real close as sisters.” Bear says it wasn’t a traditional closeness, but that they shared “an intuitive way of being connected. With one word or one look, we’d

totally get what the other was thinking.” Bear also lays it on the old country.

“Closeness is not a word that is often used to describe relationships in our family,” she explains, citing the DNA of her Norwegian forebears. “My maternal grandmother used to call our family ‘tight lipped.’ Our people were not overly demonstrative nor given to excessive chatter. I come from a long line of intuitive introverts whose conversations were by and large internal.” Joyce chalks it up to “generations of distant parents.” Her mother and father, Ada and Andy, she tells me, “did nothing but argue, and they never showed any affection to each other or to me, so I was not a terribly affectionate mother.” It is a stark confession, a rare moment of self-analysis and as close as I get to a “Rosebud” moment to explain Sally’s guarded manner. But Joyce says it evenly, with no apparent regrets, which is how things worked in their family.

None of Sally’s friends remembers a lot of kissing and hugging in her house. Or any at all. And no one ever heard anyone say, “I love you.” That wasn’t the way they communicated. “I taught more by example than by words,” Joyce tells me. Bear calls it “wordlessness, a lack of social skills, or something like that. Sally just picked it up, and I did too, to some extent, but I broke out of it. But I always assumed that my parents loved me.”

In a culture that took its cues from television, the Rides were neither the warm and fuzzy Nelsons nor the outwardly cozy Andersons, whose Father always knew Best. (Although Sally, as a high school senior, would have a single blind date with actor Jerry Mathers, the star of TV’s iconically perfect family in *Leave it to Beaver*. Bear peered out the window when Mathers arrived, announcing, “It’s the Beave!”) They were, however, good-natured, good-humored and undeniably loving—a “happy house,” one regular visitor recalls, where the girls felt cared for and where a solid, middle-class family enjoyed the peace and prosperity of the Eisenhower years.

With yet another difference.

Sally’s parents were free-thinking, open-minded, risk-taking indi-

viduals who raised their children to be citizens of the world, like the international visitors who often stayed at their house because Dale and Joyce were on a State Department list to host foreigners. An array of guests of various skin colors and ethnicities were also invited to the regular Saturday night parties where Dale would tend the bar and cook the desserts. “Sally grew up assuming that everyone was a potential friend,” Joyce says.

Dale, after teaching junior high school social studies and earning his EdD specializing in adult education, became a political science professor at Santa Monica Community College (SMCC). He was gregarious, genial, athletic and a committed Republican. Joyce likes quoting the reporter who described Dale’s “pleasantly ruffled face and tousled white hair. He sunburned easily,” she says. “Sally worshiped him and channeled his happy outlook, literally following him around everywhere.” He was the family extrovert.

Joyce, still succinct and arch at ninety, is both witty and guarded, favoring one-word answers. Sally fully appreciated Joyce’s quirky humor (her favorite holiday is Groundhog Day) and absorbed both her unorthodox approach to life and her politics. “I cheerfully went out and canceled Dale’s vote every time,” boasts Joyce. “I never voted Republican.” At UCLA, where she worked in the personnel office after graduating, she refused to sign the 1950 Loyalty Oath, an anti-Communist excess like many sweeping the country during the “Red Scare” tactics of the McCarthy Era (when red was the color of Communism, not Republican states). “I thought it was stupid,” she says today. When she left UCLA, she directed her considerable energy towards a variety of volunteer progressive causes, working mostly with women, especially the incarcerated, for the next half century. “Yes,” sighs Bear, “I told my own children: Grandma’s in prison again! She continues to be my hero.”

The family dynamic, says Bear, was simple: “Sally got my dad, I got my mom.” Joyce agrees. “Bear always knew where I was coming from and I always knew where she was coming from,” she tells me. As for Sally: “We were on a very friendly basis.” The casual—or removed—

nature of their relationship is evident in lines from two letters Joyce wrote to her older daughter. 1996: “There must be something new in your mundane life.” 1998: “All I really need to know is how’s your life, and as usual, I don’t know what to ask or where to start . . . I figure you’re taking care of the planet. Heavy responsibility.”

But for all the lack of intimacy, there was a loving strategy.

“We wanted our daughters to excel, not conform,” Joyce told a reporter. “We never patronized them or treated them like they were inferior to us. We never talked baby talk to them. We gave birth to persons, not possessions.” She calls it benign neglect. “We just let them develop normally,” Dale explained. “We might have encouraged, but mostly we let them explore.”

Theirs was an unusually enlightened approach during the *Mad Men* mentality of the 1950s. At a time when girls were supposed to get married, have a family and cook dinner every night in a kitchen with avocado-colored appliances, the Rides raised their daughters without preconceptions or gender constraints. “I guess I was oblivious to the fact that men were in any way superior,” explains Joyce drily. “Dale was good about giving a hand up to women on the faculty at SMCC. I just assumed that we were equal, and he failed to disabuse me of the fact.”

In 1985, after Sally’s two flights, Dale was offended by a print ad for financial aid to the nation’s colleges. It showed a picture of a little boy dressed in a spacesuit. “Help him get America’s future off the ground,” read the headline. Dale fired off a letter to the sponsor, lambasting the “unconscious (I assume) bias we have in education. . . . As a parent of the first US woman astronaut, I know firsthand that girls also aspire to math and science and we should encourage *her* [emphasis added] to ‘get America’s future off the ground.’ ”

That is one very hip dad, and the gift of equality from both her parents helped guarantee Sally a boundless future. Born into a world that paid women just over half of what men earned—for the same work—Sally saw her prospects through a positive lens. Or maybe the blinders of the invincible. “There was absolutely no sense—through all the years

growing up—that there was any limit to what I could do or what I could pursue,” she said.

## VAN NUYS

Life was good for the two little girls growing up in their new house on the pie-shaped lot on quiet Gerald Avenue in Van Nuys. Both sets of grandparents lived within babysitting range. Tom and Jennie—Dale’s parents—were in Santa Monica, in the stucco house with the Spanish tile roof that Tom had built himself in 1925 with lumber hauled on a donkey cart before Wilshire Boulevard was paved. He grew berries, kept bees and let the girls collect eggs from a coop full of chickens. Andy and Ada lived one community over, in Brentwood, where they played cards with the girls, and became Grap and Gada from their shorthanded names on the scorecard.

At home, Sally mastered the backyard trampoline and was “a terror on a tricycle,” according to Bear, rolling through the early years on an array of strollers, wagons, bikes and other modes of travel. “Any way she could get out and about,” explains Bear. Sally also swam, fished, skied, skated, kayaked, sledded and rode a pony, dressed in everything from snow pants to frilly dresses and one spiffy red gingham romper suit. One early photo that captures her climbing out of her crib makes you understand the futility of ever trying to fence her in. Or hold her back. As Mighty Mouse, Bear recalls, she would “launch herself from the front seat to the back” of the family Plymouth, Bear recalls, crying, “Here I come to save the day!”

Competition came with the territory. Dale helped football and basketball players transfer from SMCC to UCLA, adding coaches from all the teams to his wide circle of friends and bringing his daughters to practice sessions. He and Joyce were both diehard, miss-no-games UCLA Bruins fans, with season tickets for both the football and the basketball teams, the latter even before John Wooden made them champions. Sally inherited their love of the Bruins and would later cherish a

copy of Wooden's famous Pyramid of Success that she bought at auction. After hers became a household name, Wooden, by then a close family friend, absent-mindedly told a sports reporter that he once held little Sally Rand (the popular blonde stripper who both scandalized and enthralled audiences) as a baby—a slip of the tongue he quickly corrected: “No, no, no! . . . I meant to say Sally Ride, you know, the astronaut.” The Rand/Ride mixup was so common, Sally early included it in her own joke repertoire.

Sally also revered the Los Angeles Dodgers, those more recent immigrants to California, who became her personal obsession (she had boxes full of baseball cards) and an early thwarted career ambition. Playing shortstop for the Dodgers, Joyce would later say, was the only thing she told Sally that she could not do simply because she was a girl.

At five, Sally raced her father to the newspaper each morning to check the box scores, having learned to read from comic strips. At eight, she commemorated the Dodgers' 3–2 victory over the San Francisco Giants during a tight pennant race (“tighter than a pair of slacks on Aunt Fanny,” according to one colorful columnist firmly rooted in the '50s) with a crayon drawing of pitcher Don Drysdale (wearing blue) facing down all the Giants in the field (wearing red). The players, including Willie Mays and Orlando Cepeda, are neatly labeled. Bear is convinced that Sally's habit of analyzing batting averages and pitching statistics, which she memorized, got her hooked on math early.

At Hayvenhurst public school, followed by Gault Street Elementary, science and math came more easily than speaking out. “I was a quiet kid when I was growing up,” Sally said in 2006, “and so I didn't really like to be called on in class. I think that my most stressful moments were probably sitting in class, huddled down, hoping that the teacher didn't notice me and call on me. Whether I knew the answer or not, that was irrelevant.” She wondered whether she was “an introvert by nature.” Her mother says all the females in the family were, and that Sally was definitely “an ‘I’ [for Introversion] on the Myers-Briggs” psychological scale, the once-standard measure of personality types.

Introverts gather energy by being alone. They recharge their bat-

teries by turning inward and prefer the company of a small group of people. Their opposites are extroverts, who rev up in social situations, thrive in large crowds and tend to be more talkative and excitable. Being an introvert explains much of Sally's behavior as an adult. As a child it certainly didn't affect her academically. She skipped a year in grammar school and supplemented her education with a ravenous appetite for reading. Among the favorites: the *Nancy Drew* series (solving just about anything), *Danny Dunn and the Anti-Gravity Paint* (among others) and bedtime tales of Damon Runyon, because the vivid characters "kind of tickled" Joyce.

The Rides valued education highly but not conventionally. "[T]hey made sure," Sally said later in an interview, "that I spent plenty of time studying, but also trying to make it fun and trying to make it entertaining and trying to make me appreciate that it was a good way to get ahead in the world."

## EUROPE

In 1960, when Sally was nine and Bear seven, Dale and Joyce turned his sabbatical into a yearlong tour of Europe, global education on a grand scale. They pulled the girls out of school (with permission from the principal), sold the house on Gerald Avenue along with most of the furniture, then flew to New York and sailed to Holland on the S.S. *Rotterdam*. In Bremen, Dale bought a white Borgward Combi station wagon to explore the land of their forebears and the cities he had help liberate in the war. Along with the authorized schoolroom lessons that Joyce brought along, the girls were assigned hobbies and tasks to keep them focused. Both started stamp collections—animals for Bear; sports and Olympics for Sally, whose four albums would one day contain five hundred stamps and hold her attention long into adulthood. The girls were also directed to keep diaries of the trip. Sally's, in red leatherette, is a charming (if succinct) exercise by an astute (and often funny) young observer that begins the day they arrived:

Sept. 17 1960. Rotterdam (rain).

It could be an entry in the notebook of the grown-up Sally more than two decades later, a preview of her shorthand style, complete with her lifelong allergy to proper spelling. She writes of visiting the Hage, and the Hauge, never quite getting it right. And she records her first ferryboat ride in Denmark, her first snowfall (and snowman) in Austria, her first ski lesson in the Alps, where they spent Christmas. That's also where she taught Bear the truth about Santa Claus. "She dared me to stay awake to watch, and I did," Bear recalls, still amused. Sally also revealed the identity of the Tooth Fairy by telling Bear to look at the handwriting on the note and compare it to their father's.

In Germany, Sally wrote, "I met Wienersnitzel." No clarification, no adjectives. She meant dinner, not a person, because her first encounter with a breaded veal cutlet was ambrosia to her little palate, setting off years of seeking out German restaurants back home to repeat the thrill.

She also acted like a proper tourist.

Oct. 2. Oslo. Looked around.

Really, how much more do you need? Oslo was the gateway to Lom, where Sally met her Norwegian relatives for the first time. The next day, in Copenhagen, her parents picked out the elegant Danish modern furniture for their new California home.

It was, by all accounts, an outstanding trip to worlds present and past. In England, Sally and Bear obediently donned their itchy wool Norwegian outfits and posed for a photo in front of the Russell and Ride Memorial Chapel, dedicated to the memory of great-great-great-great Uncle John Ride. They kept the home fires burning, too. Sally regularly tuned in the Dodgers games on Armed Forces Radio (or Yankees, if that was the only alternative) and tore open Grap's letters with newspaper clippings from the sports pages. She also managed to find a bat and ball at the home of family friends in Paris.

In Spain that spring, Joyce Ride made a connection with life-

changing consequences. She put her nine-year-old daughter on a clay court and taught her how to play tennis. Sally liked it immediately—better than the two weeks of piano lessons she’d had in Vienna. For the rest of the trip, “I had her squeezing tennis balls and exercising her right wrist to make it strong,” Joyce recalls, rotating her hand to demonstrate. It was not the only harbinger of her future.

During the long road trips, Sally occupied the front seat of the Borgward with a map, the family’s official navigator. Bear and Joyce sat in back and sang, filling the car with lyrics of the catchy, child-friendly tune that Bing Crosby had made famous: “Would you like to swing on a star?”

*Dale and I raised Sally with a lot of help from our collie, Tsigane. The kids were her sheep, and nobody had better raise a hand to them. I tried once, when I was really angry. Tsigane gently took my wrist and said, “We don’t do that.”*

—Joyce Ride

## ENCINO

Back home in California, the Rides moved into a three-bedroom, two-bathroom ranch house on a quiet cul-de-sac in Encino, in the San Fernando Valley, the one that gave Valley Girls their name. For \$35,500 they were now authentic, middle-class suburbanites, and they had the barbecue, the hammock and the Rambler to prove it. Sally’s bedroom at 4926 Texhoma overlooked a backyard fragrant with a rose garden, a vegetable patch and a small grove of orange and lemon trees. Movie legend John Wayne lived a few streets over; TV star Dick Van Dyke lived around the corner. It may have been a development, but it was, after all, California.

It was September 1961, and while an ocean had separated them from

some major US developments during their European sojourn—the election of President Kennedy, the launch of America’s first astronaut, the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba—they plunged right back into the Left Coast’s embrace of civil rights and the counterculture. Joyce taught her Sunday school class to sing “We Shall Overcome,” and “was hauled before the church session to explain herself,” Bear says proudly. She later taught English as a second language to immigrants and got her class of Japanese students to sing “Red River Valley.”

Joyce also acquired the family collie, inspired by a dog they’d seen catching snowballs in the former Yugoslavia. The girls were so besotted, they adopted the dog’s name, Tsigane, which means “gypsy.” (With no idea that it was also the name of a dog launched, and recovered, on a Soviet rocket in 1951, the year Sally was born.) Sally and Bear were devoted to Tsigane, playing, wrestling and sleeping with her; as an adult, Sally would use “Tsigane” as her email address and password—usually dropping the “e,” a misspelling that I have corrected for consistency. With the dog in residence, Joyce ordered a collie-colored carpet to reduce her vacuuming time. And she was only kidding about sharing the discipline with Tsigane. “The girls behaved,” she tells me.

Sally and Bear were not raised to deal with conflict and never learned the consequences of fighting, Bear says, because their parents (unlike Joyce’s own) didn’t argue. As with most households of the early 1960s, their own little Camelot revolved around the mammoth hi-fi cabinet in the living room, where, starting at five each evening, Dale and Joyce would listen to Dixieland jazz during martini hour while nibbling on nuts or Triscuits. As Daddy graded blue books, Sally and Bear would spread out on the floor to do their homework, one hand on Tsigane’s rump. Dinner was some iteration of “Mom’s special tuna glop” or Swanson’s chicken pot pies. Or whatever anyone wanted, usually consumed in the living room. They rarely gathered around the dining room table, but when they did, grace was said. Then they’d reconvene in the living room to watch Walter Cronkite or Huntley and Brinkley deliver the news at seven. The girls had their own appointment shows: reruns of

Groucho Marx's *You Bet Your Life*, *I Love Lucy*, *Get Smart*. Over and over again. TV was important. As an adult, Sally's ringtone for Tam on her iPhone would be the sexy music from *Perry Mason*.

Weekends meant UCLA home basketball games, or Bruins football. Or occasional trips to Disneyland, where Sally appropriated most of the E tickets in the packet—the hottest rides on the fastest machines. She was one of the kids tucked into the toboggan at Tomorrowland when the Matterhorn roller coaster was new.

On Sundays, the Rides headed across the commercial corridor of Ventura Boulevard to the First Presbyterian Church of Encino, where Dale and Joyce both taught and served as elders. That's when Bear embraced the church and decided to make it her life's work.

Sally, on the other hand, announced in junior high school that she was done with church. Weekend junior tennis tournaments were a handy excuse, and no one objected. "Church is no good if you have to force someone to go," Joyce explains. She'd so disliked Saturday morning Lutheran church school during her Minnesota childhood, she once found a "Quarantine: Measles" sign and hung it on the church door. There was no class that morning.

As a nine-year-old, Sally had visited a German Sunday school and pronounced it "just a place to keep kids!" As an astronaut, she deflected every effort by reporters to turn her into an evangelist from orbit. Here's Tom Brokaw coming up against the indomitable Ride sisters before Sally flew:

Brokaw: Are you particularly religious?

Sally: My sister got most of the religion in the family.

Bear: She's her own person and she certainly has her own belief system  
and it doesn't have to fit into mine.

Brokaw: Will you see this flight in any spiritual way?

Bear: No [Laughter].

Brokaw: A triumph of man and technology?

Bear: Of woman and technology.

After Sally's flight, it got worse.

"There are a lot of people who have asked me since I've come back whether I found religion in space," Sally told Gloria Steinem in a TV interview, "or whether I had any mystical experiences up there. And no!"

She attended Encino Elementary, then Gaspar De Portola Junior High, where she barely stomached seventh-grade home ec classes ("Can you imagine cooking and eating tuna casserole at eight a.m.?" ) but gulped down more math and science. "People who like math like knowing that equations are going to balance. That something equals something," explains one of Sally's later physics colleagues. "It's an interesting kind of truth." Thanks to some gifted teachers, she also learned about her aptitude for long math equations, for the elements of physics, for the brain teasers in *Scientific American* magazine. Sally soon had her own subscription to *Scientific American*.

And a new favorite hero: James Bond, the dashing spy created by Ian Fleming during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Fear of atomic bombs led to a rash of backyard fallout shelters, where families thought they'd be safe. At school, Sally hid beneath her desk during duck-and-cover drills, and built a model of an atom out of wire and Styrofoam balls. Like every other kid in 1960s America, when the teacher wheeled a black-and-white TV into the classroom and adjusted the rabbit-ear antennae, she watched the snowy screen with fascination as the early astronauts launched us into the space age.

Her parents bought her a telescope—a 16-inch-long Bushnell Sky Rover as powerful as the one Galileo used to discover the moons of Jupiter three centuries earlier. As a young teen, Sally would carry the black and silver instrument out to the front lawn at night and focus in on Orion, her favorite constellation (because "I can find it so easily! It's prominent in the sky," she'd later explain). Or she'd locate Saturn and point out the rings to Bear. The telescope was a more successful present than the microscope, which went largely unused. The chemistry set, however, produced, as Bear recalls, "something stinky. We would have

fun dramatically setting up chemistry experiments, and we'd call ourselves 'mad scientists.' Apparently we didn't blow anything up."

Sally spent most of her time on the ball field—any ball, any field. The house on Texhoma dead-ended into a perfect spot for football and baseball, where Sally headed every day after school to play with neighborhood boys. She tossed a pigskin better than most of them. And when the kid next door tried to steal second while she was pitching, she threw the ball so hard to get him out, it broke his nose.

She was a gifted, graceful athlete who ran on her toes and always pushed harder. But do not make the mistake of calling her a tomboy. "I really don't like that term," Sally told a reporter many years later. "Tomboy, when applied to a girl, means a girl acting like a boy. As opposed to a girl acting like a girl." And the only problem with being a girl, she would say, was that girls' basketball was a half-court game with only three dribbles.

The sport that most engaged her was the one she'd learned in Europe. Joyce hired Alice Marble, the power-hitting Wimbledon and US Open tennis champion, to give Sally a few lessons at the Deauville Country Club in nearby Tarzana. It was not a match based on love. "Alice Marble found it hard to control Sally," according to Dale. "Sally's not controllable." Adds Joyce: "I remember Alice Marble saying, 'I'm fifty years old!' Because Sally was hitting the ball too hard." Marble's penchant for hyperbole—or her frustration with the independent-minded preteen whose athleticism she admired—seemed to grow in retrospect. From her retirement home in Palm Desert many years later, she claimed that Sally had tried to bat her in the head with the ball. "I had to duck like crazy. It wasn't that she mis-hit the ball. She had perfect aim. I was terribly amused she was chosen to be an astronaut," Marble said. "I think she probably had these aggressive feelings all her life." No one who really knew Sally saw her aggression as anything but spirited concentration on the athletic field. But a number of adults had the same reaction. Joyce, who usually beat Dale, stopped playing with her daughter when she realized, "I wasn't seeing the ball go by." The headmaster at

Sally's high school would recount the first—and last—mistake he made by showing off with her. “She looked at me, smiled rather malevolently and then fired . . . three successive drives aimed right between the eyes.”

Sally was soon playing in tournaments, in the pre-commercial world when racquets were wood and the balls white, the same color as their outfits. Girls' junior tennis was both competitive and fun, a way of life that would produce Sally's closest pals, her deepest love, her eternal support group. Some of us were lucky enough to go to summer camp, where we forged our best friendships and enjoyed our earliest athletic victories; some found adolescent outlets at the beach or in the mountains or maybe just the local YMCA. The girls on the tennis circuit learned about life while traveling the United States on muscles and speed. Every weekend during the school year, then all summer long, they played at public parks and tony clubs—in Los Angeles or around the country—stayed in affluent homes and sometimes fancy mansions made available by wealthy CEOs and governors and other supporters, and swung their racquets to advance to the next rung and take home yet another silver tray or trophy or double-handled cup. They spent day after day in each other's company, practicing and playing and sharing victories and losses, whiling away the downtime over gin rummy. Off the court, Sally often landed at the home of Ann Lebedeff in San Marcos, where she and the other fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds would put on the record player and merrily dance to Russian folksongs or the Beatles. “Sally was a bit shy, so one of us would grab her hand and make her dance with us,” Tam recalls. “But once she got started Sally got into it and had fun, too.”

In an era long before Title IX would level the playing fields and open up opportunity, scholarships and purse money for female athletes, tennis was Sally's entrée to the world beyond the San Fernando Valley. Her partners and opponents were the stars of Southern California girls' and women's tennis. They rubbed shoulders with tennis royalty: Pancho Gonzalez, Maria Bueno, Rod Laver, Billie Jean King. “Tennis,” says Tam, who was a top-ranked teen, “made us immune to celebrity.”

Sally learned well, a serve-and-volley player with a wicked backhand, a sneaky drop shot, and a forehand that always needed work. “Start low, racket shaft parallel to ground, butt of racket (as in ‘M’ or ‘W’) pointing toward oncoming ball,” Sally wrote in a ringed green notebook, using the shorthand of those playing with Wilson racquets. But the lessons only went so far. Sally bluntly said her forehand stunk, which may be more a comment on her own standards than on her ability. Whitney Grant, her first doubles partner and close friend, says she and Sally devised a unique system of hand signals. The net player would “alert the server of her intent to poach, to fake a move, or stay still,” whatever. They wrote up their rules in a limited edition of two reference manuals, bound in pink ribbon. “The final statement of the booklet said that we were sworn to keep our signals secret, and if either of us broke that promise we would be required to eat the book!” Whitney can’t find hers, and Sally’s has disappeared, but it is the sort of collaboration that Sally would enjoy forever, on and off the court. She always had a best friend, and she always preferred playing team sports like doubles to singles.

In 1963, when she was starting eighth grade, Sally was ranked number 20 in Southern California Tennis for Girls 12 and under. A year later, Whitney’s father, who informally coached Sally, suggested that she join his daughter at the private and prestigious Westlake School for Girls in Holmby Hills, where she could play serious tennis, get an excellent education and a major start on whatever future she chose. Mr. Grant helped arrange a partial tennis scholarship when Sally entered as a sophomore in 1965, to be supplemented by a class taught by Dale. It is hard to overstate the door this opened to Sally. In a trait that would carry her throughout life, she was ready and willing to sail through.

*Tennis Team Captain . . . sixteen and single . . . She thinks; therefore she is, or is she? . . . takes everything with a grain of salt . . . gross underachiever . . .*

—Sally Kristen Ride, from her senior year self-portrait in the Westlake yearbook, 1968

## WESTLAKE

“I used to think that Westlake was going to last forever,” confessed her best friend, Sue Okie, in the handwritten, two-page, yearbook farewell like those teenage girls have been inscribing to their closest pals forever. “I have never felt so . . . at home . . . [as I do] with you.” Sally’s inscription in Okie’s yearbook was considerably less impassioned. “I won’t be sentimental because it’s not in my character,” she began unnecessarily, sliding into her usual set of verbal winks and quips.

Sally and Okie joined forces the day they met. “She had a blinding smile, glinty blue eyes and gorgeous white teeth,” Okie tells me. “I found her really open and . . . no, not open. Sally could never be described as an open person. But she was very friendly and engaging, a no-nonsense person.” They were a Mutt and Jeff pairing (Sue was 6-feet tall) of super smart girls who each found comfort in another outsider among their privileged classmates.

The Westlake School for Girls, then an exclusive single-sex institution (and now the coed Harvard-Westlake), was an academically elite prep with a roster of famous alums, including Candice Bergen and Shirley Temple. The Spanish-style mansion with a great hall, elegant stairways and rich lawns, contained fewer than a dozen girls in a classroom; Sally’s graduating class numbered only fifty. Sally and Okie carpooled daily from the un-chic Valley, gossiping and giggling up and over Mulholland Drive and down the winding roads into lush Holmby Hills as somebody’s parent drove. A year later, when a third Valley classmate was old enough to drive her own car, they cranked up the radio with the Supremes or Jefferson Airplane (the scene she would describe to

the NASA board) and purposely took detours to get lost in the winding roads or to visit the swans at the Hotel Bel-Air. Anything to be late to assembly. They were California cool—nonchalant, irreverent, carefully cultivating a sense of irony. When Sally and her lab partner had to dissect a fetal pig, they named the cadaver Sir Francis Bacon. Sally's yearbook photograph—posed like Rodin's *The Thinker*—was accompanied by Jean-Paul Sartre's absurdist riff on Descartes: "I do not think; therefore I am a moustache."

Determinedly blasé, Sally sometimes put off studying until the car ride to school. "She could have gotten A's in every subject," Okie recalls, "but she didn't work to get A's in every subject. If she liked a teacher, she would work. But she could look really snide and roll her eyes, and the teachers could tell that she was kind of making fun of them. I mean, she could be obnoxious. She wouldn't come out and challenge them so much but she would, you know, just give this look." Bear calls it the Ride Glower.

Nearly a decade later, in college, one of her professors would give Sally an A on a paper with the added note, "your class participation was not sufficient to warrant more than a B."

Most of Sally's classmates recall her as an energetic, buoyant teen with total devotion to the school. As seniors, in their white blouses and navy suits, saddle shoes tied neatly, Sue and Sally were among a small group of students handpicked to take early-morning classes at UCLA to stretch their minds. As juniors, they reveled in Dr. Elizabeth Mommaerts's Human Physiology class, an unusually advanced course taught by a luminous scientist.

Mommaerts, born and educated in Hungary, was one of the few female PhDs in science, and brought her outrage over the unequal opportunities for women to her job at Westlake. She also brought a college-level examination of the human body—as a set of systems wondrously intertwined. When she taught the eye, she explained the chemical and neurological processes behind it. When she taught the endocrine system, she told the girls to imagine they were on a date,

sweating nervously. “What are the physical reactions?” “Are you getting colder?” “How did that happen?” The lesson on human reproduction meant lectures on love and emotional satisfaction. “She was just starry-eyed about the process of discovery,” Susan Okie tells me. “She’d talk about the kidney, and osmosis and how salts go through membranes and how the kidney works and what a miracle it is. And it wasn’t just, ‘Memorize the parts of a kidney.’ It was, ‘You have to understand what’s going on here and you have to be able to explain it.’ She was demanding.”

Mommaerts was especially fond of Sally and Sue, who, she said, had “glowing potential.” “My mother had a great admiration for people with a very clear-thinking brain,” says Edina Weinstein, Mommaerts’s daughter, “which in her mind was a very scientific brain. Sally and Sue were students who she thought were not only bright, but had the kind of brain that meant they could do something about scientific thinking. She wanted to impart a sense of appreciation for their potential and talent.”

Still, Mommaerts needled Sally, Okie recalls, because of Sally’s casual approach to exams. One test required students to draw a nephron—the functional unit of a kidney—and describe how it works. “And Sally could not remember what a nephron looked like. But she drew a circle and then another circle and then a bunch of little polka dots in the middle, and labeled it Nephron.” Okie, laughing at her bravura, recalls that Mommaerts never let Sally hear the end of it, saying, “Sally, that’s ridiculous, how could you forget what a nephron is?!”

Later, as a college freshman, Sally made sure Mommaerts knew about a dinner where “I was the only one at a table of seven Swarthmore students who was able to explain the structure and function of (would you believe) a nephron—I may not remember anything else from physiology, but I’ll never forget nephrons.”

Sally brought Mommaerts little intellectual puzzles that her teacher polished off instantly. “She could solve anything,” Okie says. “On the morning of the final exam we brought her the toughest puzzle that we could come up with”—a kind of Rubik’s Cube—“and she had it all done before we were halfway through the test.” Mommaerts also hosted a

series of Saturday night dinners for favorite students, introducing them to soufflés and ratatouille and other sophisticated food. “We were all just totally gaga over her,” says Okie. Sally called her “my ideal.” She was, Sally said, “the kind of person that I wanted to pattern my life after. She was very logical, seemed to be in control of her life and of her emotions and was just a brilliant person.”

Decades later, Sally would write an article that began, “Thank you, Dr. Mommaerts . . . If you hadn’t taken a personal interest in me in high school, who knows what career path I might have followed. . . . She challenged me to be curious, ask questions, and think for myself.”

One other teacher captured Sally’s attention: Janet Mennie, a newly minted Mount Holyoke graduate who taught Westlake’s first physics and calculus classes and would remain a close friend. She and Mommaerts “*were* the science department,” Sally later pointed out, having excelled with both. “Sally’s genius,” Mennie (now Janet Schroeder) tells me, “was in writing exactly one sentence for a chemistry essay.”

Sally attributed much of her ability as an excellent student to being at a single-sex school. “A lot of the things that can kind of come into play when you’re a fifteen-, sixteen-year-old girl with boys in the school and boys in the classroom just didn’t happen at Westlake,” she said. “It was easier to focus on academics.” Thanks to her teachers there, and a few others from her coed public junior high school, Sally would also say, “I didn’t succumb to the stereotype that science wasn’t for girls. I got encouragement from my parents. I never ran into a teacher or a counselor who told me that science was for boys.”

There was one, however, who said it wasn’t for her. According to several of her classmates, a certain senior-year English teacher, not one of the girls’ favorites, would occasionally go around the room telling students what was wrong with them. When she landed on Sally, she decreed, “far too science-oriented. No creativity.” For a teenager who was prepared to devote her life to physics, it must have been very painful. Sally started to cry. So did many in the class when the teacher

singled them out. Some months later, the teacher went at it again, this time telling Sally that she had a “first-rate mind, wasted in science.” The tears coursed down Sally’s face. Whatever sensitive nerve that touched, whatever vulnerability the teacher triggered, it is the only time any of her high school friends remembers seeing her cry. Few would ever see her do so again.

Sally had already decided she would major in physics—specifically, astrophysics, which made least one friend’s mother wrinkle her nose (“Astrophysics?! What are you ever going to do with that?”) and baffled her pals. Sally was undeterred. When a friend asked what it meant, Sally said simply, “It’s about space.” Which was not where she wanted to travel, not then. It was more about the big picture, says Okie, who shared her bff’s science passion and never questioned her choice. She and Sally used to have long discussions about “what’s out there” after sleepover dates watching *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek*. “What do you think happened at the beginning of the universe? How far is far?” they asked each other. “‘What does it mean that you go back in time when you are looking at the stars?’ She liked the abstract concepts.”

As captain of the Westlake tennis team, Sally also continued her education on the court. “Tennis taught me a lot about self-control,” she often said. “Self-discipline. How to maintain a kind of relatively cool demeanor even when you’re winning or losing by a lot—to be able to control my emotions and to kind of keep a cool head.” Bear remembers their father yelling “Don’t choke!” at the matches. Dale was the parent who took her to the tournaments, driving her around California and putting her on the planes that deposited her at the next court. He also dropped coins in a big jar at home to save up for her entry fees and plane fares. Several friends think Dale’s enthusiasm for Sally’s ascent up the tennis ladder pushed her harder than she liked. “I think there were always more rungs that he wanted her to climb,” Ann Lebedeff tells me. Another recalls Sally’s story about the day she and a girlfriend went surfing. “Her father said that she should have been playing tennis instead.”

Susan Okie witnessed the dynamic. “You’d go over to the house and Sally would be sprawled on the living room carpet with Tsigane, watching TV, and her father would say, ‘Why don’t you go run around the block?’” Okie pauses to chuckle. “Sometimes she would, but she kind of actively resisted working quite as hard as her father wanted her to. It was part of their relationship. She’d never talk about it, and you could tell she loved her father but there was a sort of a rebellious streak about how hard he was pushing her, and she didn’t want to completely knuckle under him, to do everything he’d say to the nth degree.”

Dale was also responsible for piling Sally’s tennis trophies onto the living room hi-fi set, an act of paternal pride that led to a typically eccentric *pas de deux* between him and Joyce. The cups and bowls and statuettes mounted up, cramming the furniture and leading Joyce, unimpressed with the second- and third-place knickknacks, to start removing the offending objects. Gradually, Sally said, “I started noticing trophies turning up as soap dishes, candy trays, flower vases, book ends and paperweights.” Sally, amused, would move them back; Joyce, unannounced, would relocate them to the bathroom or kitchen. The game went on. At one point Sally went east on the Junior Tennis Circuit. When she returned to California, all seventy-four trophies had been shunted away to the garage. Sally wrote to a friend that she found it very funny. When I ask Joyce the point of her clean-up exercise she says simply, “Ostentation.”

## COLLEGE BOUND

In June 1968, as the world mourned the murder of Robert F. Kennedy, following the April assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Sally was graduated from Westlake with honors in science. Because Sue had gotten interested in Swarthmore College, a top-ranked, small, coed Quaker institution outside of Philadelphia, Sally had applied, too. She interviewed with Fred Hargadon, the dean of admissions, who was vis-

iting the West Coast. As they sat in her yard in the California twilight, Sally pointed out the stars that she'd observed through her telescope. "It didn't give me any sense at the time about Sally's future," Hargadon says now. He was, however, impressed with her mind, as well as her performance on the tennis court. She was accepted to Swarthmore with a full financial scholarship. Dean Hargadon followed up with a letter to Dale: "Sally might also be interested in knowing that an alumnus has just agreed to foot the bill for resurfacing our entire field house. This will give us four indoor tennis courts."

And one fine tennis player. The California girl was headed east.