

"Mary is a whole lot more than Erin on *The Waltons*. This book shows how she's handled all the highs and lows with grace."

—GEORGE CLOONEY

# LESSONS FROM THE MOUNTAIN

What I Learned From Erin Walton

MARY MCDONOUGH



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MARY  
McDONOUGH



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*For anyone who has felt like  
they were not enough.*

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# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[“Caterpillar”](#)

[1 - IRISH LUCK](#)

[2 - WELCOME TO THE MOUNTAIN](#)

[3 - AMERICA'S FAMILY](#)

[4 - WHAT'S A “DINAH”?](#)

[5 - LESSONS IN LAUGHTER](#)

[6 - MOUNTAINS AND MOLEHILLS](#)

[7 - I FEEL IN-BETWEEN AND FORGOTTEN](#)

[8 - BUT ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS ACT!](#)

[9 - BOOBS IN, BOOBS OUT](#)

[10 - WHAT'S NEXT?](#)

[11 - NUTS AND SLUTS](#)

[12 - THE MOUNTAIN TODAY](#)

[\*A Special Note from Beverly Nault - MY VISIT TO THE MOUNTAIN\*](#)

[BEVERLY'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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## Acknowledgments

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Now . . . read it!

*In 1971, CBS aired The Homecoming, a Christmas movie written by Earl Hamner Jr., about a depression-era mountain family based on Hamner's own childhood in Schuyler, Virginia. The movie was a ratings success and inspired the dramatic series The Waltons, which aired for nine seasons. Even after it was retired from official production, the show inspired several reunion specials, and is still one of television's most celebrated and beloved series. To this day, The Waltons airs in syndication around the world, is sold on DVD, has its own museum, and is adored by members of its national and international fan clubs. In this first book written by a former cast member, Mary McDonough, who played Erin, takes us on a behind-the-scenes, poignant, funny, and sometimes heartbreaking journey up Walton's mountain and beyond.*

## Cast of *The Homecoming: A Christmas Story*

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<i>John Walton</i>	Andrew Duggan
<i>Olivia Walton</i>	Patricia Neal
<i>Grandpa Walton</i>	Edgar Bergen
<i>Grandma Walton</i>	Ellen Corby
<i>John-Boy Walton</i>	Richard Thomas
<i>Jason Walton</i>	Jon Walmsley
<i>Mary Ellen Walton</i>	Judy Norton
<i>Erin Walton</i>	Mary Beth McDonough
<i>Ben Walton</i>	Eric Scott
<i>Jim Bob Walton</i>	David Harper
<i>Elizabeth Walton</i>	Kami Cotler

## Cast of *The Waltons*

<i>John Walton</i>	Ralph Waite
<i>Olivia Walton</i>	Michael Learned
<i>Zebulon Walton</i>	Will Geer
<i>Esther Walton</i>	Ellen Corby
<i>John-Boy Walton</i>	Richard Thomas (1972–77)
<i>John-Boy Walton</i>	Robert Wightman (1979– 1981)
<i>Jason Walton</i>	Jon Walmsley
<i>Mary Ellen Walton</i>	Judy Norton
<i>Erin Walton</i>	Mary Beth McDonough
<i>Ben Walton</i>	Eric Scott
<i>Jim Bob Walton</i>	David Harper





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## Foreword

By  
Earl Hamner, Jr.

In the summer of 1971, an event came about that would change my life, as well as the lives of many others. I had written a script based on my book *The Homecoming*. CBS liked it and ordered it be made into a two-hour movie to be aired as a Christmas special. Fielder Cook, who had accomplished such distinguished work in “the Golden Age of Television,” signed on as director. This was a special stroke of luck, because in addition to his taste and talent, Fielder was also a Virginian. He knew the country I was writing about, and he knew the people.

We were again elated when Patricia Neal accepted the offer to appear as the mother, and equally happy when we were able to persuade Richard Thomas, a promising young film and stage actor, to accept the starring role of John-Boy Walton.

Several other adult roles were cast, notably Ellen Corby as the grandmother and Edgar Bergen as the grandfather. Then came an equally challenging task—finding competent young actors to play the roles of children ages six to thirteen. Pam Polifroni, our casting director, brought in teams of young actors. One exceptionally appealing group she had selected primarily because they appeared to be brothers and sisters. We hired that group, and one of those children was Mary Beth McDonough, the author of this book.

Mary Beth was a pretty little girl of ten when she was first cast. She had taken dance lessons, but she had never acted professionally. Little did she (or any of the rest of us) know that in time, she would be seen by as many as 50 million viewers on a single night.

Mary Beth was to play Erin, a character based on my sister Audrey. I was especially pleased by the casting because, like Audrey, Mary Beth was very beautiful, and had a winning smile. I saw some of Audrey in Mary Beth—also a middle child—with an outgoing, accepting, happy disposition.

During the weeks when we first started working together, I came to know Mary’s family—her strong, caring father; her pretty, patient mother, with her warm smile; her big, protective brother Michael and John; and her little sister, Elaine. You could sense the strength that Mary brought with her from such a family, whom she describes more fully in this book.

There is a cliché in the television industry. Even though there may have been fistfights on the set, and even if they hardly are on speaking terms, every actor, director, writer, producer, or crew member who worked on a feature film or television series will claim, “We were just like family.”

That they were, and are, a family is honestly true of *The Waltons*, because the actors were actual playing members of a real family. They are still bound together because of their experiences growing up as actors playing brothers and sisters. Compounding this equation is the fact that Michael Learned and Ralph Waite saw their responsibility as adult actors and gave the young actors caring and knowing support. Richard Thomas, too, realized the vulnerability of the child actors and assumed a supportive role that he filled during the filming and even to this day—that of the older brother.

Over the many years they worked together, they developed relationships very similar to those of the characters they portrayed. Even today, after the long run of the series is over, the actors still have familial feelings for each other.

When I first read Mary's manuscript, I was struck by the honesty with which she describes her early experiences. It is a revealing story that took courage and strength to tell. It is a story of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity at its finest.

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## Introduction

There are three questions we are always asked:

1. What was it like growing up on *The Waltons*?
2. Were you all as close as you seemed on the show?
3. How did you grow up to be so normal?

The short answers are:

1. Terrific and hard.
2. Yes.
3. Who knows?

Seriously, I've also wondered how we got through it all. I've always thought of writing a book about what it was like to grow up on the show, and joked it should be titled *I Haven't Robbed a Convenience Store . . . Yet!*

My friend Paul Petersen, who grew up playing Jeff Stone on *The Donna Reed Show*, said to be honest and tell it all. "The life of Hollywood kid actors was hard then, is hard now—and the more people know about it, the better."

Oh, but to tell the truth, the hard truth. Would anyone really want to know? Or, are they more comfortable believing the show and its cast of characters were in real life as they were on TV? If that's true for you, put this book down. The show does deserve its beautiful memories.

This book is about the kooky, wonderful, different, loving, harsh, confusing, fascinating, otherworldly way I grew up as Erin Walton, and how I came out the other side *not* having robbed a convenience store. Despite my lack of criminal activity, I did not escape totally unscathed, either.

The decision to write didn't come easily for several reasons. When people ask me why we haven't written a book about *The Waltons*, I joke that if anyone did and told the whole truth, the rest of the world would get together and kill them. So, if I disappear soon after this book is published, consider *The Waltons* family members key suspects.

Seriously, I hesitated to write in deference to my beloved cast mates. We have always regarded each other as family. There's a huge amount of respect for each other's privacy. We are dear friends thirty many years later; we love each other, and no one will ever break our bond. You don't grow up with ten extra family members over the course of nine seasons and *not* have a lot of life together. They are also why I believe we grew up, well, fairly "normal." But I'm ahead of myself.

I've learned the Universe has a way of confirming our paths to us, and one day the "book" message pushed me to complete this book. I was at work on *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, where I had a recurring role as Mrs. Wilhoite. I found myself in a conversation with Blair Underwood. (Yes, of a people! And yes, he is the nicest ever. And yes, the most handsome!) I was telling Blair, who played Mr. Harris, my funny stories of Walton-hood and being a mom, and now a "step monster," and he said, "Mary, you have to write these experiences and tips in a book."

Then, later on the set, Tricia O'Kelley (Marly) and Alex Kapp-Horner (Lindsay) were asking me about *The Waltons* and my years growing up in the business. They shared how much they loved the show and thought my stories were great.

"You should write a book! Look at us! Seriously, our mouths are hanging open wanting to hear more," Alex said.

Tricia agreed and said, "You have to write this."

Julia Louis-Dreyfus (who, yes, is the funniest, nicest, most talented, and most gracious woman

joined us and shared some of her own fond memories of *The Waltons*, and talked about how she and her sister, Lauren Bowles, used to “play Waltons” when they were kids.

The timing of these conversations, along with my desire to share my story and offer encouragement to others, confirmed I should write.

So, back I go, to my foundation, my friends, my Walton family. Back to her, the girl I tried to crawl out from under for years. The girl I had sealed away in a Tupperware container somewhere. Yeah, *he*. What a mixed bag for me, being Erin.

Establishing myself as Mary McDonough, separate from Erin Walton, had become important to me as it is for any actor or performer, whether they are associated with a particular character or just a public persona. I’ve been taught and had no trouble appreciating fans; yet I yearn for a sense of self, to be loved and understood for who I am, not the image of any character I’ve portrayed.

Rosemary Clooney, the beautiful singer and actress, was like a mentor-mother to me. She taught me about separating what’s important from what can be let go. I met Rosemary in 1982 after meeting her sons and nephew in Kentucky while shooting a movie. More about that later.

She embraced me and treated me like a daughter when I dated her son. I, like many, called her “Mama.” She had knowledge about the business that my mother didn’t. Rosemary knew better than most celebrities how to separate her private life from her public persona, without disappointing either one. I remember one year we were in a Christmas tree lot and the owner asked her to sing “White Christmas.” There, in the middle of the pine trees and fir, reminiscent of that fabulous setting for the movie, she graciously obliged. I know she made his holiday, as she does mine to this very day. I still cherish the Christmas cassettes she sent each year with a personal message to me.

One night after a PR event, she told me it was time to “take the singer off and hang her in the closet.” She described it as metaphorically taking off that persona, hanging the girl singer on a hanger, putting on a comfy robe, and surrounding herself with family. She literally knew how to “be” Rosemary, without feeling conflicted with who the world thought she was from the public image.

It would take me years to understand how to do that, but her example helped me learn to put Erin on a hanger and “be” Mary. Eventually I learned it was okay to be both—I didn’t have to get rid of Erin; I just needed to know when to wear Erin and when to hang her up.

I had been away from Erin for years, trying to leave her in that “closet.” Writing this book, I faced her again as I headed back to Warner Brothers Stage 26 in the shadow of the Cahuenga Pass, the familiar backdrop now recognizable as Walton’s Mountain.

At the age of ten, I had no way of knowing how that mountain would change my life. Nor would I know until decades later how the show, scripts, and the people would mold me forever. It became more than a place where I struggled to grow up in a world of contradictions, required to be a working “adult,” but treated like a child. I had good times and bad, and one of the most unique and amazing experiences a kid can have.

The mountain became a symbol of my life. My life had been trying to move my mountains of emotion, fear, pain, experiences, failures, and feelings. I believed if I could just plow through my mountains of life’s “stuff,” I could get to the top and be accomplished, successful, happy, and healed. If I worked hard enough, it would pay off. If I had enough indulgences, I’d get to heaven. (My Irish Catholic upbringing rearing its head.)

Over the years, I’ve hiked, run away from, cursed, climbed, screamed, and thrown my rage at my mountain. I’ve given up a hundred times and felt defeated by my life’s mountains. I’ve brought in huge earthmovers to drill through it. I’ve assessed and talked it to death and let others tell me how to move it. I’ve examined every rock, boulder, and pebble, and even had soil samples run on the blood-soaked thing—thinking if I understood it, I could conquer it. Hell, I would have eaten it if I felt that would be the trick. I just wanted to be better, whole, and done with it!

Then one day, exhausted, I sat down and decided . . . maybe . . . just maybe I could enjoy the view. In the stillness, a peace came over me as I realized I didn't have to move the mountain at all; I could just walk around it. I could even sit on my butt and slide down. I finally learned that embracing and accepting my mountain, and all its molehills, made all the difference.

These are my memories of forty-nine years of joy, struggle, loss, love, illness, pain, and pleasure. My fears and tears are just like everyone else's. All right, my experiences are a bit different. Once when friends were sharing high-school stories, someone commented, "Mary, you can't even share high-school memory because you weren't a real high schooler." Ouch.

But I grew up, too. I just happened to do it on television in front of millions of people. My solution then was to hide my struggles, thinking if I could be little Mary Walton, I would please all of you. So I kept my secrets until it almost killed me. I've always written, so this book seems a natural way to express my journey as I share the mountain of lessons I learned from the people I loved and the life I led on Walton's Mountain and beyond.

When I found this poem, I realized I must have known my life was changing when I got the show. This poem represents faith to me. Knowing that even though life may be hard, you should always trust and never give up.

The caterpillar symbolized me separating my reality from a kid's dreamworld. At a very young age I had profound sadness and empathy that often made me cry for strangers, animals, war, starving children, and even snails my dad killed in the yard. I told him it was a mortal sin to kill and he would go to hell for killing the snails. He said, "But these are just snails." They weren't just snails, to me. I guess my Buddhist leanings began early. I think that empathy ultimately saved me and is what makes me good at what I do.

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## “Caterpillar”

By Mary Beth McDonough (age 10)

*One day as I was lying in the grass,  
A caterpillar crawled in my ear.  
He traveled through the thoughts in my mind  
To see what he could find  
There were so many roads to take  
He didn't know where to go  
Up, down, to or fro  
So he decided to go down.  
There he found grey colors and  
In this world was not a sound  
No feeling or maybe it was all feelings  
He didn't know, so he went up  
There he found flowers and sunshine days  
And a lot of happy things in many ways  
He found experiences good and bad, but  
Something about this happy world  
Was sad  
This place was nice but he had to leave  
For soon he figured out it was all a dream  
It just wasn't as real as it all seemed  
Then he went to and fro  
There he saw dreams that could never come true  
This made him sad and blue, but realized  
This was a reality world  
How sad but happy he became, so that  
All the dreams seemed the same  
Yet, there was still hope  
He told me “not to give up, to try and cope.”  
Because ever yone's dreams can come true in life  
Although sometimes they may seem stifled and small  
Always try and keep building your wall  
Hold it together and don't let it fall  
After he had been up, down, to and fro  
There was something he knew that I  
Didn't know  
Then he crawled out of my other ear  
But he was a BUTTERFLY . . . and  
He flew away with all my hopes dreams and cries.*

## IRISH LUCK

I am the middle daughter of a working-class family. My parents were poor growing up, and both came to the “City of Angels” to find their gold. My father’s brother, Jimmy, was ill with what we now suspect was cystic fibrosis. His doctor suggested a warmer climate, so the whole family left the farm in Beemer, a very small town in Nebraska, and headed west to California.

My father Lawrence McDonough taught us all about life on the farm, devotion to family, God, loyalty to our Irish roots, and the Cornhuskers, of course. Once he told me about how the well-to-do in Beemer treated the less fortunate. Years later, after *The Waltons* was a huge hit, we visited Beemer. He was so happy to be invited to dinner at the homes of those who had shunned him as a kid. I wanted to be mean right back to them, reject them. I said, “Daddy, just tell them *no*. They weren’t nice to you when you were a kid.” I have a real sense of justice, and knowing my father had been rejected as a kid hit my fairness nerve, made me protective. Okay, if I tell on myself, maybe I wanted just desert comeuppance, to level the playing field, or even a little revenge.

He just smiled and said, “Now, Mary B., we’ll go and you’ll be nice.” I begrudgingly ate more fried chicken dinners on that trip than I could digest. As I watched him at all those dinners, I saw his integrity and learned lessons in dignity, grace, and respect. He was a true role model for me. To this day, I strive not to be negative and resentful. But I am only his daughter, I am not my father.

My daddy was my hero, and all I wanted was to make him smile and receive his adoring approval.

Early on in his California experience, he worked as a valet in Hollywood. He vowed that someday he would be successful enough to have someone park his car. He was employed at Lockheed before entering the navy. After his discharge, he worked for several companies before realizing he could help his family more with his own business, so he started an automatic transmission service shop with his brothers. So you can imagine how a television show for one of his kids would be *a dream never imagined*. My dad did get his car parked on more than one occasion, and later even escorted me to the Emmy Awards.

My father is the first layer of my mountain. This boy from the farm rose to every challenge. He instilled in me a rock-solid foundation of love, protection, political involvement, right from wrong, Catholicism, a fierce work ethic, and intense self-scrutiny, all essential foundations for life. He was demanding, but a hard worker who expected as much from me and everyone around him as he did himself. He started the transmission business with his brothers and eventually developed other investment properties. He was tireless in his work ethic and dedication to his family. He strove to raise our standard of living above his own poor beginnings. My brothers and I still talk about how we became who we are through his strength and personality.

A Kennedy Catholic, he instilled in us a political foundation based on our faith. If he had only known then that his little girl would grow up and meet a few Kennedys, it would have seemed impossible to him. I remember political debates he had with my friend Caren’s dad, our Republican assemblyman. I couldn’t believe he’d argue with my friend’s dad, but they did every time they sat down for a chat. I don’t think he could help himself. He was a man dedicated to change, even if it was just to change someone else’s mind.

Everyone loved him and the personal attention he paid anyone he met. He taught us all to drive, and

then a few years ago at a reunion, at least seven people told me he had also taught them to drive. I must have been driving an awful lot. I had no idea.

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Dad took all the kids in the neighborhood to ride horses, drive go-carts, fishing, camping, to the beach, and to ethnic restaurants. Anywhere he could, to give us an adventure. He'd load up the car and take whoever jumped in.

He always wanted us to try new things. At one time, he had heard about a restaurant where they made drinks in pineapples and coconuts. We got all dressed up and he drove us to a Polynesian-themed restaurant, complete with palm trees, torches, and Tiki carvings. I had never seen anything like it, so exotic, so different from Northridge, where we lived. Years later, I realized he had taken us to Trader Vic's—all the way to Beverly Hills for a drink! Such fun. My adventurous spirit was born in those excursions.

So, obviously, I was born and raised a daddy's girl. He used to sing "You Are My Sunshine," touch my red hair, and say it was the only gold he owned. Because of who he was, I adored him and desperately wanted his acceptance.

## LEAVING LA JUNTA

My mother Elizabeth Murray McDonough is the second strata of my mountain. She was beautiful always. She had a flair for fashion and wore the gloves, hat, and matching purse to prove it. She owned wonderful sets of jewelry from the fifties and sixties, with the coordinating necklace, bracelet, and earrings. Looking back at her in old photographs, I find it hard to believe how well she pulled herself and all of us kids together, picture perfect every time. She also came from a hardworking family, but she had a tougher childhood than Daddy did.

Mother's family was poor. She had escaped her abusive, alcoholic father from the small town of La Junta, Colorado, and came to California. She was kind and sweet. After all the horror stories we heard about her childhood, I couldn't believe she would still visit her father, and take us all back to Colorado so we would know our grandparents.

I once asked her why she was so nice to someone who was so mean to her. She said, "Grandpa was in the war, and he was never the same when he came back. Something happened to him over there." She took a moment and then continued. "I think that's why he beat us."

As a young girl, I remember her sense of forgiveness for her father. She had a sense of duty as a daughter that was passed on and had a lasting impression on me. She hated arguments and disappeared at the first sight of a confrontation. We were not allowed to yell in our house. I never heard my parents argue, and we never really learned how to fight as a result. Disagreements of any kind were to be uncomfortable for her. She would say, "Like snow, I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime." She found Catholicism and my father in the same church in Highland Park, and created a new life for herself.

She is the first "feminist" I ever met. She hated that term, because she somehow thought it meant giving up being feminine and a lady. No matter how much I told her she could be a feminist *and* a lady, she would say, "I still like to have doors opened for me and my arm through your father's." But she was truly the first person who taught me to be independent and to create my own life.

"Mary, play the field," she would say when I was little. "Then go to college, and play the field, then have a career, and play the field, then travel the world, and then *maybe* think about settling down."

Perhaps because she had to be dependent on my father, she wanted me to learn not to rely on a man for things. She told me I could do anything the boys could do, "and probably better than they can, too. I always did." I think she was better at sports than some boys, when she was young, but was teased for



being a tomboy. She didn't want me held back because I was female. She had survived adversity and wanted to instill independence in me. It worked.

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Once, when she was still living at home, Mother got fed up with the beatings and my grandfather's mood swings. She packed a suitcase and took it to school with her, intending to run away to her girlfriend's house. When my grandfather realized she was gone, he hunted her down and banged on her girlfriend's door and threatened—and no doubt also frightened—everyone inside. Her friend's mother let her go. My grandfather tied her to his truck with a rope, shoved her suitcase in her arm, and made her run behind the truck the four miles home. This is only one of the stories my mother shared with me after my grandfather died.

My mother wanted our childhoods to be different from hers in so many ways. She gave all of us the dance lessons she wanted for herself, and sat through more classes than I can count, to give me her dreams.

Her dreams became mine, and I soon found something I was good at. I don't remember my first dance class—it seems I always danced. I loved the pink tights, the black leotard, and wearing my hair in a bun. I loved my dance classes because I could express myself. My active little body loved to keep moving, and dance gave me an outlet combined with structure and discipline.

I went to Marge Patka's Dance Studio on Tampa Avenue and Sherman Way in Reseda. There were other dance studios with live piano players and fancier rooms, but for me, the simplicity of the hardwood floors, barres on the wall, and mirrors were enough. The record player sang out every tune we needed. I learned ballet, jazz, acrobatics, Hawaiian, Polynesian, and tap. I was never great at tap, which I attribute to my poor math skills. Ballet was it for me.

My favorite teacher was Stephanie—"a prima ballerina," my mother constantly called her. I didn't know what that meant. I just knew I loved Stephanie and was so happy to see her at every class. She gave me her joy of dance. Dancing felt natural to me, and gave me a sense of accomplishment and acceptance. It taught me discipline, which would help me later on the set.

Learning toe was a marker of growth for me. I struggled with the blisters, cramps, learning to stuff the perfect amount of lamb's wool in the shoes. I remember, once we had two shows at a recital and were told not to take our toe shoes off before the next show or our feet would swell. I didn't, but my feet swelled, anyway. When I finally took them off, my feet were bleeding into my toe shoes, which were forever stained with my discipline and hard work. Those shoes became a tangible sign of inner strength that helped me all through my life. Mind over matter, the show must go on, rise above it, put yourself above the pain . . . all those lessons.

Stephanie gave me solos in the recitals, and I felt special. My daddy took home movies and snapped pictures of me in my costumes. I loved my costumes and that we got to wear makeup and false eyelashes at the performances. I sensed my dad loved my dancing, so I worked hard to be even better. When I felt his approval and love, I wanted more. Dance brought me the attention and acknowledgment I craved from both my parents.

I still keep those toe shoes in my hope chest, and am still proud of my ugly feet. I tell people I earned them "when I was a dancer."

Both of my parents wanted us to have it better than they did. They worked for the American dream to give us everything they didn't have. Sound familiar? Yes, the parallel of my Walton family and my own is the foundation so much of my life is cemented on.

## SIBLINGS

Several years of marriage later, they fulfilled their own dream of a home in the San Fernando

Valley, with children to fill that home. First, my brothers arrived; a few years later, I was born on March 4, 1961.

After I was checked over and cleaned up, the nurse brought me to my mother and said, “Here’s your daughter, Mary.”

“How did you know her name?”

“We didn’t. We give all the newborns nursery names until the parents make their final decision. She just looks like a Mary.” So I guess it was meant to be.

They brought me home to meet my brothers, Michael and John. Michael was six years old, John was three. When I was three, my sister, Elaine, was born, making me a middle child, just like Erin.

Raised on a farm, my father had learned construction, and he could build or repair just about anything. He designed and built for his bride and young children a dream house at the end of a cul-de-sac, within walking distance of our new church and school in Northridge, California. Near completion there were still some finishing touches after we moved in.

They were laying the new floor in our foyer and I was in the kitchen with my mom. She told me, “Mary, now stay here and don’t walk on the floor. No matter what you do, *don’t* walk on the new floor.” She carefully took me to the back of the house and put me down, only to turn around a few minutes later to find me in the kitchen again.

“Mary, how did you get in here?”

“Don’t worry, Mommy,” I said. “I didn’t walk. I tippy-toed.” Ah, always a literal thinker. My footprints were in that floor until it was remodeled years later.

## VALLEY GIRL

Northridge is a small community in the San Fernando Valley, about twenty-five miles northwest of Los Angeles. It’s perhaps most famous for the 1994 earthquake, which was really centered in Reseda but once named, always associated. I can relate to that.

So yes, I’m a born and raised “Valley Girl.” In the 1960s and 1970s, Northridge was still filled with orange groves and empty fields, and we could ride our bikes through the parks and down the streets surrounded by the mountains. It was a great place to grow up. Our roller skates made their way around the school parking lot at the end of our street and kids roamed around the community.

There was a freedom and sense of safety for me in our little town. The Vietnam War was on the news, but it was on the other side of the world. I would run past the round television screen, unless one of my favorite shows—*Sea Hunt* reruns, *Get Smart*, *Bewitched*, *Family Affair*, *The Courtship of Eddie’s Father*, or *Laugh-In*—was on. The political unrest on the other coast in Washington D.C. never slowed me down, although I remember my father “discussing” the country’s future with the neighbors.

Most of our neighbors went to our church, and the community was tight. We spent many family nights at home or eating out along the “main street,” Reseda Boulevard, in family-owned shops and mom-and-pop restaurants. We’d ride our bikes to My Hero, a famous sub-sandwich shop, or Dad would take us to a family-style Italian dinner at Morigi’s, or for a “with six, you get egg roll” Chinese dinner. We’d also go to San Fernando to have authentic Mexican food. It was there I learned not to trust your brothers and let them put the “it’s not hot, Mary” hot sauce in your mouth.

My father made a lot of friends and contacts through his business. As I mentioned, he was a generous man, and I’m certain many of the meals we ate were trades for the work he did at his car repair shop. He once brought home half a cow. Mom said, “Larry, what are we gonna do with all this?” They bought a freezer for the garage and we had beef for dinner for what felt like years.

Our new house was next door to the Reynolds family—eleven kids, their parents, and Granny and Gramps. This was heaven for a kid, and a precursor for my future. For every McDonough kid, there were two Reynolds kids to play with. My Reynolds family member was Connie. I met her when I was three. We were the same age and in the same grade at Our Lady of Lourdes.

When the show started, I was already used to a large, extended family living under one roof. Mrs. Reynolds would watch us when our mother worked at the family business, and often took us on impromptu trips to the beach, which we loved. You've heard the expression "it takes a village to raise a child"—well, I learned about the "village" early on.

## EARLY THEATER

I had never really acted before, unless you count the plays I wrote and forced Connie, Claire, and Danny Reynolds to perform in our backyard.

These backyard theatrical productions always involved a Reynolds or two. Poor Danny had to play all the boy parts because we needed him, even though I suspect he would much rather have been playing with the older boys. But he was the youngest, so we dressed him up and told him where to stand.

Our plays were a mishmash of themes I can barely remember. Lots of "weddings" were performed. Usually, a little dance thrown in, since Connie and younger sister Claire took classes at Marge's as well. The girls would dress up in elaborate outfits from our moms' closets and our dance recitals costumes. I had learned that art from my cousins Curlie and Patty Hearne, who dressed me up, along with my cousins Bobby and Billy.

We would set up chairs from our dining room on the back porch and use sheets for curtains (my mom loved that, her clean sheets on the patio). Our stage was the patio with entrances and exits from the back door. It was great to have so many choices of actors for our plays. We had a built-in audience with my parents, Granny and Gramps, Mrs. Reynolds, and a few big brothers who heckled us from their seats on the lawn furniture.

As I grew up, I was kept real and humbled by the kids on our street. The open-door policy of families helping each other and being there for community is a big part of who I am. Many rocks on my mountain have the name Reynolds etched on them.

## ROSARY AND MALA BEADS

The rosary was a big part of my upbringing. When my parents were dating, my dad would end a date with a decade (a set of ten Hail Mary prayers) or two before dropping my mom safely at her doorstep. We often visited our cousins on weekends, and on our drive home those Sunday nights, we said the rosary as a family. Each of us would lead a decade. My brothers, of course, would poke me and each other to try to break us up, and we would get in trouble.

When each of us was born, my parents had our whole name engraved on the back of a special rosary cross. I still keep mine on my nightstand next to my mala beads. The rosary was modeled after mala prayer beads, so it's all come full circle in meaning. For me, it's about intention and focus, and connecting to Love and the Source.

Saying the rosary is a staple to Catholics. The prayer is a series of the Hail Mary bookended by the Our Father, with a few of what my father called the "Glory Be's" as well. My father loved saying the rosary, and his beads were all he asked for in his last days. I understand now how the repetition of prayers calms the mind. I used to say it when I couldn't sleep. Now my spiritual practices have

evolved. While I don't consider myself a religious person, I am spiritual. Today I use mala beads and chant different prayers, but my spiritual practices sprouted their roots during all those years of saying the rosary as a kid. Even today, when I pray for my Catholic family, I use my rosary.

With this prayer and my namesake, I joined the Legion of Mary at my school. We met each week, got on the floor on bended knee, and said the rosary. I wanted to be a nun and walked to school early every morning to go to mass before school. I'm not sure why I wanted to be a nun, since my experiences in Catholic school were tough. I went to a Catholic school until I graduated from high school. My cousins had a very different experience in their school; they learned about a loving God. That was not my takeaway from school.

I felt God was unyielding and unforgiving. Catholic school started the perfection issues I still deal with today. It seemed no matter how "good" I was, I would never be enough for God. I would never have enough indulgences to get anywhere, forget heaven. I was scared all the time. One teacher in particular made me feel imperfect. I felt shamed by her about my appearance, that I was not enough. I was. It was the beginning of trying to change myself to please others. Even then, I wanted to fit in and do the right dance.

### MISS PERFECTLY PULLED-TOGETHER

I felt judged by this second-grade teacher. The story is as vivid for me today as it was then. "Miss Perfectly Pulled-Together" had not a hair out of place. She was tightly wound, from her clenched fists to her underlying anger. No yelling, no raised voice, but she used the passive-aggressive noise of her high heels hitting the metal podium to control unruly seven-year-olds and instill mental fear as we waited for her punishment. She would stomp and wait. We would turn to look at her smiling face. She would wait until she had everyone's attention, staring back at us. One day, the perfect bow decorating her shoe fell off from the force of her stomping. As it lay powerless on the floor, we laughed; then the punishment came. Scolding, shame, and even more *Baltimore Catechism* questions for us to memorize.

She was responsible for one of the horrors that set me up for years of hypersensitivity and disapproval, letting me know I was not enough, not okay as I was. It's the hair. I've always had stringy hair. Every morning, I loved being in the bathroom with my mother. I brushed my hair; then she would pull it back as tight as she could into a ponytail. She would tuck in all the loose ends but by the time I walked to school, the "fly-aways" had already begun to escape. Then, at recess and lunch, when I would go outside and play so hard, my face would get beet red—and my hair. . . well, some of it was still in the ponytail. Back inside, we would put our faces down on the desk to rest. I could feel my heart beating into my hot face against the cool desktop.

One day, Miss Perfectly Pulled-Together handed out personal-hygiene pie charts with arrows that spun around pointing to each piece. One slice was marked for *shoes polished and clean*; others were for a clean face, brushed teeth, clean fingernails and hands, neat hair, or clean clothes. If you were especially neat and clean, you might get a star or two to put on your chart.

Another day after lunch, Miss Perfectly Pulled-Together decided to drive the pie chart lesson home. She started at the first row and, desk by desk, addressed each kid and how they were doing with their pie chart. "Carol, you have beautiful hair and already have so many stars on your chart in each category, very nice. Sam, your shoes are always clean, but maybe you could do a little better washing those hands after dodge ball. Adrian, you have lovely curly hair and you always wear a pretty bow with it. Patrick, your uniform is always ironed." She went through row two, then onto row three with more compliments.

Nick sat in front of me. I often stared at his scalp through his buzz cut, wondering if his skin got cold without any hair. “Well, Nicholas,” Perfectly Pulled said, “you don’t really have any hair, so your hair is always neat.” She smiled. I couldn’t wait to get my compliments. After all, I did wash my hands after recess and lunch, and I knew my mom always cleaned my uniform, and I had a few stars on my pie chart to prove my success. My ankles were crossed perfectly, my hands folded on my desk, and as she approached me, I sat up a bit straighter.

“Now, Mary. Well, your hair . . . I don’t know what to say. And as we all know, if you don’t have anything nice to say, you shouldn’t say anything at all, so I’m just going to skip you.”

I felt the red blush of embarrassment heat my freckled face. I reached to smooth the fly-aways back into the ponytail, but I could feel the stares. I froze in my guilt and imperfection. It devastated me, and it obviously still does, because here I am decades later, and it still makes me sad as I write this. I’m so outraged I allowed this idiot teacher to hurt me so much.

For years, when I went into her class with a note, or saw her on the playground, she’d pull me close and straighten my uniform. She would tighten my belt, tuck my tag in, push my hair down, pull on my collar, and smooth my skirt. She was a constant reminder that I was not okay; I needed changing and straightening. Her disapproval weighed me down like rocks of shame in my young mountain. Early on I knew I wasn’t enough. I felt I needed to change to please my father, my second-grade teacher, and eventually the wardrobe department.

### TICKET TO THE IRISH SWEEPSTAKES

Dance classes brought me to my first audition. Many of the other moms told my mother she should get me into acting. But we didn’t have the first clue how to start. My mom thought I would lose interest, so she waited. Several months later, I saw a girl on a Kool-Aid commercial doing a cartwheel, and I said, “Hey, I can do that. Why can’t I be on TV?” Never thinking about the acting element, I just wanted to be doing gymnastics in a commercial. To this day, I’ve never done a Kool-Aid commercial, my first dream of being on television.

I bugged my mom so much, she turned to the best place she knew to find a business: the phone book. She called some “agents” and “managers,” and we met with them. They turned out to be phonies, wanting money or a seven-year contract before they would “represent” me. My dad would have none of that. Eventually we found a legitimate agent named Mitzy MacGreggor. With a name like that, any Irishman would have liked her.

My first audition ever was a cattle call for redheaded kids. That’s how I slipped in. The hair, always the hair. It was for *The Homecoming: A Christmas Story*, based on Earl Hamner’s own life and family. We read with lines from the walnut-cracking scene.

My mom held my hands and told me I had my first audition, and we jumped up and down screaming with excitement. When we got to the audition, I remember seeing a lot of kid actors who I recognized from TV waiting their turn. I was starstruck and couldn’t believe I was in the same room with these kids. I didn’t know them, but I *knew* them from TV. Lots of kids all over the country wanted to act, but I was lucky. I just happened to be living in Los Angeles, in the right place at the right time with famous kids auditioning for a movie. Unbelievable.

After the original interview, I was called back several times to be paired with different combinations of kids. My mom wanted to cushion the blow, so she told me how lucky I was to get to come back so many times. She reminded me not to be disappointed if I didn’t get it. After all, it was my first audition. She took me back for several more callbacks, and we just enjoyed the wonder of it all.

Then I was called in with Jon Walmsley (Jason), Judy Norton (Mary Ellen), Eric Scott (Ben), Karen Cotler (Elizabeth), and David Harper (Jim Bob). We did the same scene one more time. Then Field Cook, the director, started talking to us. I don't remember everything he said, but he explained that we would be working with Patricia Neal and we needed to be careful around her.

I didn't understand, but I still listened. They dismissed us and we got up to leave, as we had many times before. But this time, it did seem a little different. As I walked out of the room, it finally dawned on me, and I turned to Eric. "Does that mean we got the part?" I think he laughed. He was a veteran.

This would not be the last time I didn't "get it" about the business, left to figure out what was going on in this wild world I was about to step into. I was ten years old when I was cast as Erin Walton. My dad said it was like winning the Irish Sweepstakes after buying one ticket. Turns out winning the sweepstakes, like getting cast in a movie, will change your life, and your family's, forever.

## NO RUBBER BOOTS

We filmed the interior scenes on the CBS Studios Radford lot in the autumn of 1971. It was so wonderful for me, yet scary at the same time. I had never really acted before, unless you count the plays performed in our backyard.

One of the first things I remember was being measured for our depression-era garb we wore while filming in L.A. Since all the action took place in one day, we had the same clothes for all the scenes. I had a dark blue wool dress with a maroon sweater, and for the outdoors, a hat, coat, and scarf. We would run to a post on the wall, grab our coats, and out we'd go into the L.A. sunshine.

Judy wore boots, and some of the other kids did, too. I thought, *I'm so glad I have these little leather shoes. It's so hot and I don't have to clunk around in big ole ugly boots.*

**Cut to:** Wyoming, late October 1971. When we finished the interior shots at CBS, we flew to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to shoot the exteriors for the snow. It was thrilling to go with everyone on a chartered plane to a small-town location. I loved that my parents took me shopping for warm clothes. I got a new coat, a snazzy plaid number—it was blue and bright yellow, with yellow trim around the hood.

We stayed in Jackson Hole at a small motor lodge that had a pool in the middle of the common area. Judy, Eric, and Jon were having snow fights and daring each other to walk on the frozen pool. Karen and I were less adventurous and made snow angels on the ground. We have home movies of it all. Such a great adventure.

**Picture:** The end of the walnut-cracking scene. We all leave the barn and traipse through snow to the house with the lovely smoke curling from the chimney. So cozy and warm-looking, right?

Well, I'm in the wool dress, tights, and those little leather shoes. After each take, they sent us inside to warm up. The snow caking on my shoes melted, and my shoes were soaked through. Another take was called, out we'd go, and my feet would refreeze.

There's a lovely scene where we followed John-Boy leading the cow across the pasture. You get the picture—my feet were frozen. I'm looking around and everyone else has boots on. Hey, how did that happen? Why can't I wear boots now? Lesson learned: What's worn for the inside scenes must match what's worn for the outside scenes. "Live and learn," as my mom would say.

My mom and Betsy Cox, the costume designer, took me in the honey wagon (the specialized trailer used for dressing rooms and bathrooms on location) and rubbed my feet in front of a coiled heater. My feet were so cold, they ached.

We still had to film the scene in front of the store where a missionary gives out presents to the kids.

who correctly recite Bible verses. My mom put so many pairs of socks on me that night, I barely fit into those shoes. If you watch closely as we walk past the broken doll Elizabeth gets, you can see my very thick ankles.

## ROCKING EDGAR

Next time you watch *The Homecoming*, notice how we kids run everywhere. We jump up and sprint to the door when Charlie Snead, played by William Windom, arrives. We run to see if Daddy's home, and we dash to the barn. When we're all gathered around the radio and Claudie (Donald Livingston) comes in to tell us about the missionary, we practically take out Edgar Bergen, who played Grandpa. Watch in the final cut, his rocking chair goes all the way back, and he's left scrambling in our dust. Fielder had warned us to be careful around Patricia Neal, who had just recovered from her stroke. But Mom didn't say anything about Edgar.

I'll never forget something that happened when we got to Wyoming. Edgar Bergen realized we missed trick-or-treating, so he called everyone to the lobby and we gathered in front of a crackling fire in the huge stone fireplace. He carried in a small suitcase; I couldn't imagine what was in it. My mom fidgeted and winked knowingly, her eyebrows raised in a "just wait and see" look. I was clueless. The anticipation grew until he snapped open the locks, lifted the top, and pulled out Charlie McCarthy. Right there, Edgar gave us our own private show. Watching him in awe, I knew this was a treat other kids wouldn't get for Halloween.

After the lobby performance, my mom urged me to ask for his autograph. I was so shy and feeble and dumb, but I brought out my little orange corduroy autograph book. Boy, am I glad I did. He drew a picture of Charlie in that little book, and he and Charlie both signed the page. It's a treasure I still have.

Years later, I was working on *Boston Legal* and told Candice Bergen this story about her dad, and how we stampeded him. I shared how he was one of my fondest memories of filming *The Homecoming*. Although I'm sure she'd heard a million of them, she graciously listened to my stories about her father.

Whenever the Waltons listen to the radio—when the broadcast wasn't part of the script, they often listened to the Charlie McCarthy radio show.

## LITTLE (CITY) GIRL WITH BIG (COUNTRY) BARN ALLERGIES

I have animal, grass, hay, and dust allergies. You can imagine what the barn scene was like for me before the days of Claritin. Oh, my eyes itched, my nose ran, and I tried to stifle sneezes. Later, we filmed a scene where we're all standing on the stairwell, and the camera pans up. I remember laying my hand on the railing, and then hearing Fielder tell the cameraman to follow my arm. I felt so special in that moment, like I had done something good and cool as an actress. But my nose itched from my allergies and I kept rubbing it. When I watch the movie now, I laugh at that kid scratching her nose.

The walnut-cracking scene became so familiar to me, I loved it. I didn't understand a reference about Mary Ellen's hormones or the laughter at Elizabeth's "I'm gonna have puppies" remark, but I went along, pretending to get it. I danced around it as best I could and tried to keep up. This became a pattern for me when I didn't know what was going on, and I didn't feel the permission to ask. I'm not sure why I felt so unsure and unable to ask, but there's a story my parents told about me from when I was a small child. My dad had the radio on, and I was dancing and dancing, and finally, out of breath, I said, "Daddy"—huff-puff—"can you please turn off the radio so I can stop dancing?"

For years, I kept dancing, never knowing when to stop.

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### YOU MEAN NOT EVERYONE IS CATHOLIC?

One of my first wake-up calls that I was not in Northridge anymore came in the schoolroom on the set of *The Homecoming*. All the kids were with our studio teacher, Betty King. I was memorizing my *Baltimore Catechism* questions, and she asked about my beliefs. (As Jon Walmsley observed recently, I was so young, I had a hard time defending myself.) The teacher told me she was Jewish, and about the differences in our religions. Eric weighed in, saying he was also Jewish, and someone talked about the “Big Bang” theory. I got so flustered. I had never known anyone who believed differently than I did. They asked me why I believed what I did; I had no answer of my own. I was raised in my church Catholic school, and parish. I hadn’t gotten out much.

I kept thinking, “*God is the Supreme Being who made all things.*” *Isn’t that the right answer? I got an A for that at home.* I only knew what the *Baltimore Catechism* said was true.

My head raced and I remembered my mother telling me that Jewish people didn’t believe in Jesus—imagine the trouble I had with that! They asked me how I knew God made the speck that made the Earth. *Oh no, what if I was wrong?* I started to cry.

Jon, always a dear one, pulled me onto his lap. I settled down and asked him, “Well, what are you?”

Tenderly he said, “I’m a Protestant.”

I burst back into tears and sobbed, “*Ohhhhh nooo!* My mother said we don’t even *like* each other!” Jon was so sweet; he calmed me down and assured me we could be friends despite our religious differences. My lesson from his gentle nature was one of pure acceptance. In that moment, the first glimmer of embracing the differences in people, instead of judging them, was born in me. Jon’s kindness taught me a deep acceptance I would not truly understand for years to come.



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