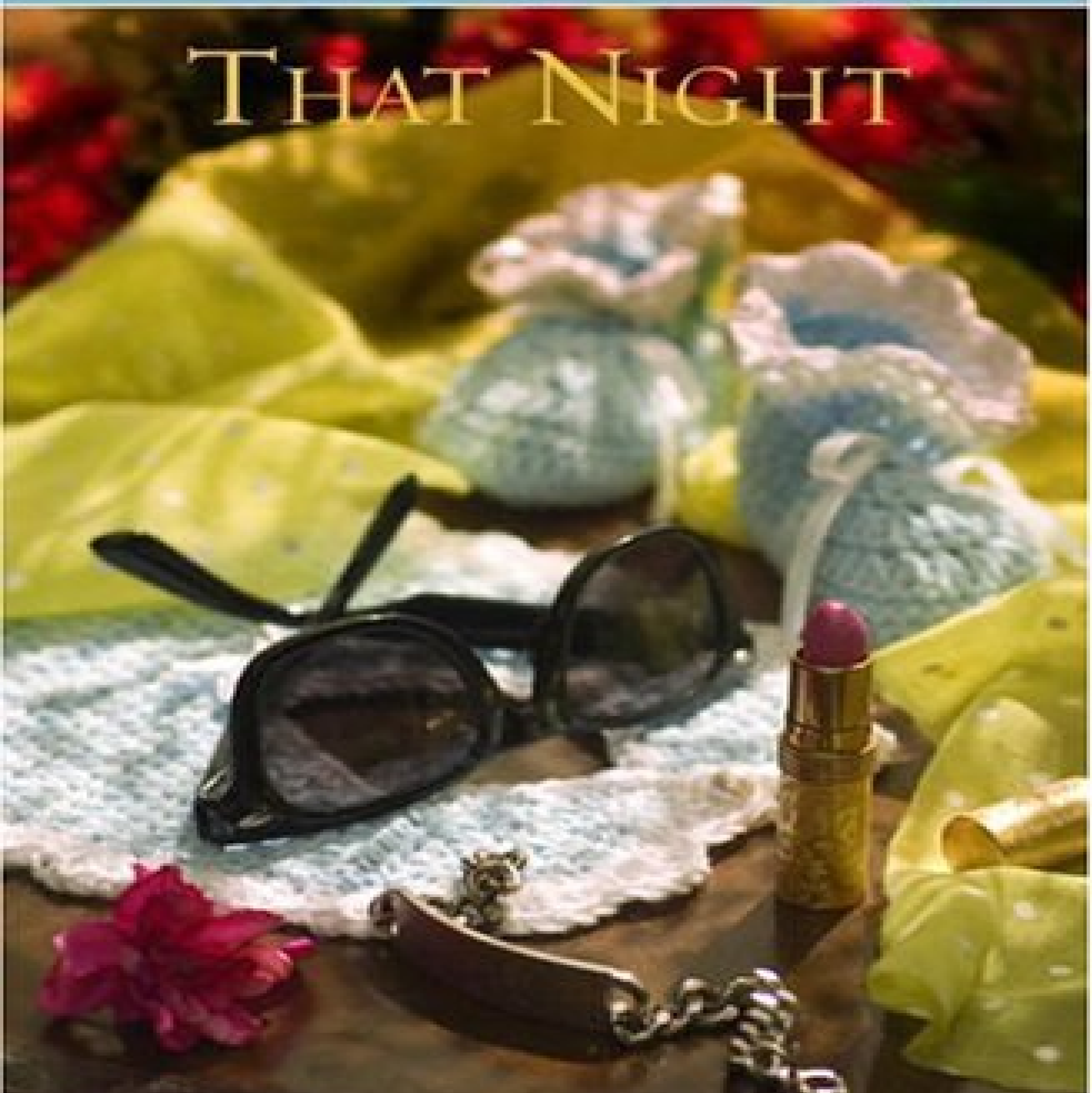
Alice McDermott

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Child of My Heart*



"A novel that is, at once, mythic and personal—a novel that possesses the ability to make us remember our own youth and all that has vanished since."
—Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

THAT NIGHT

ALICE MCDERMOTT

Alice McDermott’s A Bigamist’s Daughter, published when she was twenty-eight, won exceptional praise. That Night its remarkable talent for evoking a world and its inhabitants, and its subtlety and artfulness in telling a story—is an equally memorable achievement.

Alice McDermott was born and brought up on Long Island and now lives in La Jolla, California, with her husband and son. She teaches at the University of California at San Diego and is at work on a new novel.

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Also by Alice McDermott

A Bigamist’s Daughter

ALICE McDERMOTT

THAT NIGHT.

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For David and in memory of Paul Briand

ONE.

That night when he came to claim her, he stood on the short lawn before her house, his knees bent, his fists driven into his thighs, and bellowed her name with such passion that even the friends who surrounded him, who had come to support him, to drag her from the house, to murder her family if they had to, let the chains they carried go limp in their hands. Even the men from our neighborhood, in Bermuda shorts or chinos, white T-shirts and gray suit pants, with baseball bats and snow shovels held before them like rifles, even they paused in their rush to protect her: the good and the bad—the black-jacketed boys and the fathers in their light summer clothes—startled for that one moment before the fighting began by the terrible, piercing sound of his call.

This is serious, my own father remembered thinking at that moment. This is insane.

I remember only that my ten-year-old heart was stopped by the beauty of it all.

Sheryl was her name, but he cried, “Sherry,” drawing out the word, keening it, his voice both strong and desperate. There was a history of dark nights in the sound, something lovely, something dangerous.

One of the children had already begun to cry.

It was high summer, the early 1960s. The sky was a bright navy above the pitched roofs and the thick suburban trees. I hesitate to say that only Venus was bright, but there it was. I had noticed it earlier, when the three cars that were now in Sheryl’s driveway and up on her lawn had made their first pass through our neighborhood. Add a thin, rising moon if the symbolism troubles you: Venus was there.

Across the street, a sprinkler shot weak sprays of water, white in the growing darkness. Behind the idling motors of the boys’ cars you could still hear the collective gurgle of filters in backyard pools. Sheryl’s mother had already been pulled from the house, and she crouched on the grass by the front steps saying over and over again, “She’s not here. She’s gone.” The odor of their engines was like a gash across the ordinary summer air.

He called her again, doubled over now, crying, I think. Then he pitched forward, his boot slipping on the grass, so it seemed for a second he'd be frustrated even in this, and once again ran toward the house. Sheryl's mother cowered. The men and the boys met awkwardly on the square lawn. Until then, I had thought all violence was swift and surefooted, somehow sleek, even elegant. I was surprised to see how poor it really was, how laborious and hulking. I saw one of the men bend under the blow of what seemed a slow-moving chain, and then, just as gracelessly, swing his son's baseball bat into a teenager's ear. I saw the men and the boys leap on one another like obese, short-legged children, sliding and falling, raising chains that seemed to crumble backward onto their shoulders, moving bats and hoes and wide rakes that seemed as unwieldy as trees. There were no clever D'Artagnan man mid-air meetings of chain and snow shovel, no eye-to-eye throat grip pings no witty retorts and well timed dodges, no winners. Only, in the growing darkness, a hundred dumb, unrhythmical movements, only blow after artless blow.

I was standing in the road before our neighbor's house, frozen, as were all the other children scattered across the road and the sidewalk and the curbs as if in some wide ranging game of statues. I was certain, as were all the others, that my father would die.

Behind us, one of the mothers began to call her husband's name, and then the others, touching their throats or their thighs, one by one began to follow. Their thin voices were plaintive, even angry, as if this clumsy battle were the last disappointment they would bear, or as if, it seems to me now, they had begun to echo, even take up, that lovesick boy's bitter cry.

They had first appeared just after dinner. Three cars-hot rods, we were still calling them then (not one of us imagining the phrase to be more than descriptive, never considering it somewhat obscene)--turning onto the north end of our block, moving slowly, steadily. I had just joined my parents on the front porch. I saw my mother raise her chin to look over the wrought-iron railing and the rhododendron bush as each car stopped at our corner, one waiting patiently for the next, like cars carrying beauty queens in a stalled parade, and then, just as slowly, carefully, they turned to the right.

We could see they were full of teenagers; there was an impression of black

leather elbows at each window, black hair, sunglasses. No radios were playing and so only the sound of the straining, impatient motors seemed threatening. Like a big man snoring, I thought, or a dog growling in his sleep. I can't recall at all the cars' colors or their makes. A Chevy of some sort, no doubt, say turquoise or sky blue, then a dark one, say a dark green Ford with tinted windows (and the tinted windows must be true because Sheryl's boyfriend was in that second car, pressed into the back seat between two others, and none of us saw him until the cars, after who knows how many slow circuits of our street, suddenly turned with a sound like an explosion and drove onto her driveway and up over her lawn), the third perhaps a white Buick with one long red stripe that ended in a pitchfork or maybe a devil's tail.

When they approached a second time, about ten minutes later, again turning onto the far end of our street and still maintaining that patient, creeping speed, my mother said, "Uh-oh."

As the last car once again rounded our corner, making a left this time, I saw Sheryl's neighbor, Mr. Rossi, standing at his front door. He wore a T-shirt and suit trousers and held a folded newspaper in one hand. His short, thick arms were both stained with darkening tattoos. He turned away only when the low rumble of their engines, which did not change even after they'd left our block, had faded completely.

I once thought they had been wise to maintain this slow speed even after they'd left our street, to slowly cruise a dozen blocks, to spread suspicion up and down the neighborhood, dissipating it, but now I wonder if they would have avoided suspicion altogether if they'd taken off, backfired, burned rubber.

This was not an especially rough town, but by then its residents must have simply resigned themselves to hoods and gangs and hot rodders, to teenagers in trouble, the way the first frontiers people must have resigned themselves to an occasional Indian raid, an occasional outlaw who shoots up the saloon. At that time, in our town at least, it was a given that hoods bombed around, intimidated the band members who tried to get past them into the pizza parlor, drank beer. Word was that some of them poured gasoline over stray cats and set them on fire, screamed "Fung-goo la" into old ladies' bedroom

windows in the middle of the night, smoked reefer—that one had pulled and used a knife on a geography teacher (something I recalled only years later, when our university announced it was cutting the entire geography department), that another had run his car into the dry cleaner's window, but essentially, they were innocents. When they got out of hand the police could be called and, without nightsticks or tear gas, scatter them.

On the night he came for her, it was the uncharacteristic speed, the calm, that made us take notice. It was their order, their odd control (they all sat still inside their cars, looking straight ahead) that made my mother say as they passed a third time, "This is ominous."

My father looked over his newspaper.

Next door, Mrs. Evers had brought her garbage to the curb (her husband would later carry the lid like a shield into the battle) and now stood with her hands on her hips, watching the cars as they passed, one, two, three, through the stop sign and, this time, down the next street.

She turned, saw my parents, and slowly climbed our steps. She was a big woman, freckled, pot-bellied, her belly split like a backside by her caesarean scars. She was famously homely around our neighborhood, not so much because of her looks, which were plain enough, but because of her husband's. Mr. Evers was exquisite, handsome in that chiseled Hollywood way that could make even the oldest mother suddenly shy, and it was the speculation regarding why a man who looked like that would have married a woman who looked like this that had transformed poor Mrs. Evers from not good-looking to our very code word for ugly.

She had four sons, one my age, the others younger, all of whom later swelled into monstrous adolescence, went on to become bouncers and third-rank football players and, my brother sometimes said, retaining walls. It was Georgie, her oldest, who had cried so terribly beside me as the fighting began.

She had dark hair and a wide, pitted face. It amazes me to think she was only about thirty then.

"What are those kids up to?" she asked us.

My mother shrugged. "They just keep driving past."

“Joyriding,” my father said, his tone indicating that it would be silly to make any more of it. Once, in order to illustrate how one bad habit can completely destroy your good name, he had told me how he had happened to see Mrs. Evers push her fingernail up into her nose, examine it, and then put it into her mouth. I myself had already seen her do this any number of times—stretched in her chaise by their aluminum pool, reading the newspaper with one hand—but now the gesture took on the significance of his moral and I could no longer look at the woman without disapproval.

Mrs. Evers stared at the street as if the three cars were passing once more, although—and I had begun listening for them now—they were nowhere near.

“They’re going so slow,” she said.

“Maybe they’re teaching each other to drive,” I offered. I used my father’s “Why worry?” tone, hoping he’d catch my disdain.

I suppose they ignored me. Mrs. Evers again looked down the street. “I just hope,” she said, scraping a piece of her dinner from between her teeth with yet another fingernail, “it doesn’t have anything to do with Sheryl.”

I caught my mother’s look: a pinch between the eyes, her mouth shriveling to the size of a dash. I saw her wrestle for a moment with her desire to protect me from what she considered the sordid details and her desire to gossip.

“He knows she went away?” she whispered, the whisper a kind of compromise, I suppose. “Doesn’t he?”

Mrs. Evers shook her head, but said, “I don’t know. They had to have their number changed. He was calling.”

My mother put her hand over her heart and looked at Sheryl’s house across the street and three houses over. It was much like all the rest, brick and shingle, no front porch like ours, but four front steps and, under the front window, an odd hedge, dead in spots and in need of trimming. At that time, everyone in our neighborhood was painting their bricks red or white, or, in a scattered kind of hounds tooth a little of both, but Sheryl’s house still had plain dull brick color bricks—they looked somewhat dusty in comparison-and I took this as an outward sign of her household’s one distinction: Sheryl’s father had died the spring before; she, her mother and her grandmother lived there alone, as everyone put it, meaning without a man in the house.

Their front door was wide open that night behind the aluminum screen door, as were the front doors all up and down that side of the street on this, on every, warm summer evening. We could see just faintly the white stair steps beyond the door. There was a window fan, a blur in the front upstairs window.

My mother put her hand to her heart and looked at the house, and I looked with her. It could not have seemed more forlorn, more unprotected.

“I’m sure they told him she’s not there,” she said.

“I hope they told him,” Mrs. Evers said, sucking her teeth. “He’s a troublemaker.” She nodded emphatically at the word, for Sheryl was indeed “in trouble” and surely he had made it.

My mother shook her head. “None of those cars is his.”

Mrs. Evers was halfway to her own side door when the faint guttural sound of their approaching engines came upon us again. Now curtains in other windows began to stir. Mr. Carpenter, our neighbor across the street, paused while setting a sprinkler out on his lawn. His wife appeared in the window behind him.

I noticed this time that when the first car stopped at the corner, the second stopped just past Sheryl’s house, the third just in front of it. No one in the cars turned to look at her house, at any of our houses, and yet it was easy to imagine that despite what seemed a steady forward pace, it was before and around Sheryl’s house that they lingered.

When they had passed, my mother mentioned this. My father, who this time had watched the full progress of the cars down our street, the paper for once forgotten, said, “You could just as well say they’re interested in our house. All their cars stop in front of us, too.”

I saw that the young childless couple who lived next to the Everses—they had what the other women in the neighborhood called “the unlikely name of Sunshine” (always tagging the accusation with a mouthed “Jewish,” as if that both explained the name and made it even more unlikely)-were now out on their driveway and that Mr. Meyer, who lived on the opposite corner, was already on his porch.

I looked again at Sheryl’s house. There was only the spinning fan, the pale

shadows behind the thin screen door.

The sun by this time was just below the houses across the street, but not yet low enough to give any real hint of darkness. Since it was a usual night except for the cars, other children had begun to come out. I remember the Meyer twins tossed a ball on their front lawn. Billy Rossi crossed the grass between their driveways and was admitted through the Carpenters' side door. Jake, the little retarded boy from the end of the block, rode his bike up our driveway and then, as he did every evening, called for help until my father went down to turn him around. From here and there, the sound of lawn mowers rose like the staccato drill of locusts.

I don't remember hearing any arguments that evening, none of those strained, echoey exchanges between husbands and wives, parents and children, that made us turn to one particular house as if to a radio, raising our noses as we listened, as if strife were a scent on the air.

And as far as I can recall, no neighbors went out looking showered and flushed and, the wives especially, unusually polished, for anniversary dinners or wakes. (Whether these were really the neighborhood's two most common social engagements, I can't be sure. I'm relying now only on my mother's comments. When we saw the wives emerge in silver blue dresses or sequined tops, my mother would say, "It must be their anniversary." If they left the house on a weekday night dressed in simpler Sunday clothes, my mother would say, "They must be going to a wake.") Except for the cars, a usual evening. My parents, as usual, keeping vigil from behind the rhododendron bushes. Enough, too much, has already been said about boredom in the suburbs, especially in the early sixties, and I suppose there was a kind of boredom in those predictable summer evenings. I suppose boredom had something to do with the violent, melodramatic way the men later rushed to Sheryl's mother's aid. But I remember those nights as completely interesting, full of flux: the street itself a stage lined with doors, the play rife with arrivals and departures, offstage battles, adorable children, unexpected soliloquies delivered right to your chair by Mrs. Evers or Mrs. Rossi or whoever happened to climb our stairs. It's nostalgia that makes me say it, that most futile, most self-deluding of desires: to be a child again, but there was no boredom in those suburbs, not on those summer evenings, or at least not until this one. For after this, after the cars and the sudden spinning onto her lawn,