

Harriet Riley

Uncharted Territory

*"We are volcanoes. When we women offer our experience
as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There
are new mountains."*

—Ursula K. Le Guin

I have always loved maps. Road maps, sailing charts, aeronautical maps, satellite maps. Sitting and staring for hours, I devour maps like other people read novels. Maps transport me to far-away places. Maps help me understand where I am in relation to the world. And I like to know where I am standing and see where I am going.

That's why when I set out that April Sunday morning to go on my daily run, I knew where I was going. It was perfect spring weather—the sun shone, but a light breeze pushed out the humidity. My husband and I had just celebrated our fourth wedding anniversary and spent a wonderful day together. We were secure in each other and finally feeling like our blended family was actually truly merging. With one of my daughters happily away at her first year of college ten hours away and the other busy with her high school social life, I was feeling good as a parent. My husband's two grown children were thriving in their careers in other cities and his youngest, age 11, spent most weekends with us. Both my 15-year-old and his young son were sleeping upstairs as I set out on my Sunday morning running route.

About 20 minutes into my run, my husband pulled up beside me in his car and changed everything in our lives with just a few words. My road map was torn up, and I was plunged into

unknown territory. I knew something was wrong when I saw him roll down his window. He told me the shocking news. "Honey, Taylor and Laura and her sister died in a plane crash in Mississippi this morning."

My knees felt like they would buckle as he calmly asked me to get in his car. My ex-husband's plane had crashed early that morning on approach to the runway in rural Mississippi. The plane, piloted by Taylor with the two passengers, had been about three miles from landing. All we could find out was that witnesses heard a sputtering sound and then a loud explosion. I got all this information when I returned the call to his neighbor after getting home. At the end of the call, I said, "What do I do now?" to this total stranger. He could provide no answer. And no one else in Taylor's family knew this news. I was the first to be called.

This was one of those moments when I realized I was The Adult. There was no one else to turn to. I was on my own. I took a lot of deep breaths. The maps I had been given wouldn't help me now. I had to depend on dead reckoning.

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'I'm Not Your "Girl"'

"A feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men."

—Gloria Steinem

No one has ever been allowed to call me his "girl." I used to have a bumper sticker on my car in the early 1980s that brazenly declared these words: *'I'm not your "girl"'*. I was a proud feminist—an admirer of Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and a subscriber to Ms. Magazine. At twenty-two years old, I knew I was reaping the benefits of the women who came before me. Those women formed consciousness groups, burned their bras, and marched for the Equal Rights Amendment.

At the time, I was working for my Southern Democrat hometown Congressman in Washington in the early eighties, I was a congressional assistant. I was this old white guy's "girl" in the office. Yes, I fixed his coffee most mornings and was groped by Congressmen at the lobbyists' parties on the Hill every evening. We went to the parties for the free food and knew that mostly the Congressmen were harmless.

I still considered myself a feminist in spite of being my boss's "girl." I went to an ERA rally and read my copies of *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Second Sex*, and *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. I believed a woman could do the same work as a man. I felt like women needed to be in control of their own bodies and make their own choices. I never wanted to be a stay-at-home housewife and knew I would always support myself.

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Our daughters watched us shatter glass ceilings and saw our marriages break up. They watched us working way too many hours and witnessed how tired we were at the end of each day. They saw us pushing constantly to stand alone and be strong, while inside our hearts were breaking from loneliness. They—these daughters of today—know they want something different. They don't want to "have it all." They will have more balanced lives. They won't struggle alone—they will be willing to accept a partner. They will accept the term feminine but not feminist. But they won't be anyone's "girl!"

But they agree that a woman should make equal wages to a man and should never be dependent on a man. So I raised them right. But why has the term *feminist* become offensive to these young women?

Now, three and a half decades and many jobs later, my opinions have not changed. They have probably become stronger and more defined. But there's a difference today. I am the mother of two strong, young adult daughters, who do not call themselves feminists. The word *feminist* repels them, they say. It makes them think of angry, obnoxious women. They dislike that I chose to keep my birth name rather than taking on the last name of my second husband. They plan to take their husband's last name and be a Mrs. rather than a Ms.