

A M B I V A L E N T L Y B L O N D E

Having nurtured her inner brunette all her life, an Orange County native and natural blonde finally learned how to stop worrying and embrace the fair-haired side of life BY MARIA ARENA BELL

THERE IS A PICTURE of me when I was 14 or so in a bikini, hugging Sunshine, my uncle's golden retriever. Newport Bay is in the background and Sunshine and I had the same hair color and the same openmouthed grin. We also look like we have the same IQ. Looking at this photo, which I stumbled across at my grandmother's house where it was taken, one might think, "There's another one of those California blondes with a big-toothed grin; some chick always combing sand out of her hair." I look like that quintessential Orange County girl: someone defined by convertibles, hanging ten, shopping at South Coast Plaza and making out with surfer dudes. But was that me? No way.

In a land of gorgeous surfer gals, I was a bookish, arty nerd. All the golden girls around me had waist-length, sun-streaked hair and a perfect tan—so did I—but inside me burned the tortured soul of a writer. I was a dreamer who wanted to see the world beyond the unbelievable brightness of Newport Beach. I craved something darker and grittier, something passionate and tumultuous. But who would believe me? I looked like the Breck Girl. The sun glinted off my preternaturally white teeth with one of those cartoon twinkles. I was a fraud, and I never felt like a real California Girl until I finally got out of California.

Call me the reluctant California Girl. This is my story.

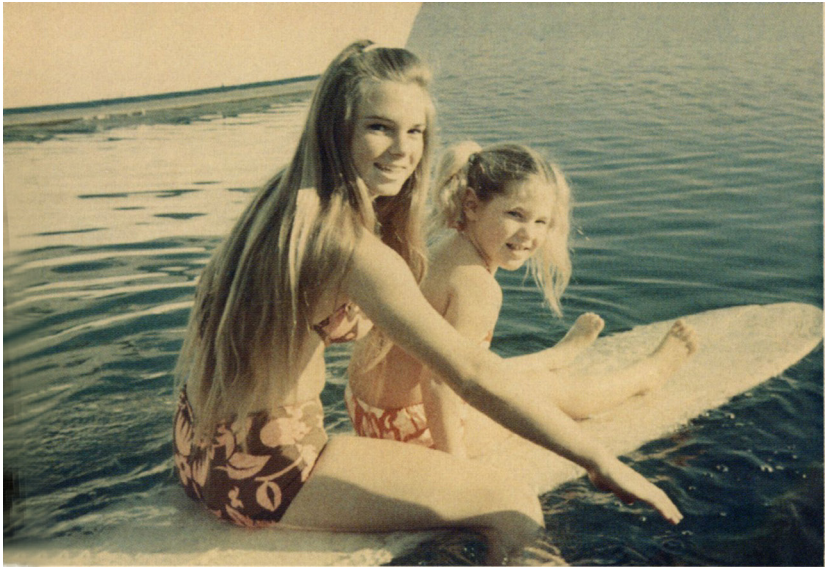
What makes a tanned California blonde (other than a bottle of Sun-In, a reflector and some baby oil)? What is it about this singular image that is so maddeningly adorable? You know her: Sandra Dee as Gidget (not Sally Field—too brunette); Christie Brinkley in the red Ferrari. She is the

stuff of a thousand *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues. She is cute—not beautiful. Less sophisticated than the Bain de Soleil girl but a lot more friendly. Why does she smile no matter what the situation? Why is she so sunny inside and out? In Orange County, being blonde and tan and thin is a requirement for citizenship. Trust me. Go down there. It's like Sweden with better beaches. My own family tree is branched with one blonde bombshell after another.

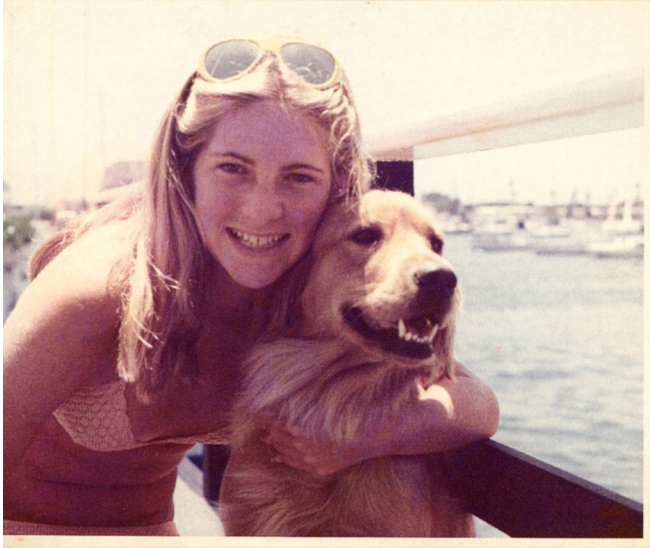
I spent my childhood buried in books, hiding out indoors and asking myself, "Why am I here? How did this happen?" I was supposed to be Sabrina, living over an estate's garage in Connecticut and in love with Humphrey Bogart. I was supposed to roam the moors looking for Heathcliff. Instead, I lived *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. My blonde, tan mother would roll her eyes, close my book and push me outside to get some sun. I plotted my escape and got straight As and high SAT scores while my peers scored really good fake IDs and got high as often as possible.

It was during college in Illinois, my first foray outside of the Golden State, when I finally beheld the power of the light locks. Inside, I was Audrey Hepburn, but outside I still looked like Debbie Boone (literally, I was mistaken for her constantly). Suddenly my smiley friendliness and my California-ness were intriguing and exotic. I had fought the image, tried to be the smart, serious one in a land of airheads. What was I thinking? Being a California babe was fun! For one thing, guys raised on midwestern winters were ready for a little sunshine. Girls responded to a friendliness I just couldn't seem

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Do blondes have more fun? With sandy beaches, longboards and itty-bitty bikinis, snapshots from Maria Bell's past reveal a tow-headed portrait of California's golden and sun-soaked lifestyle. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Maria and her Aunt Anita go for a paddle in Newport Bay; Maria on the beach at 13; Mom, so blonde, taken in the late 1970s; Maria and her Aunt Viki, a Garden Grove native; Maria and golden retriever Sunshine.



to hold in. I tossed my hair the way the cheerleaders had in high school. I was voted social director of my sorority. In California, I had baked brownies on date night. In college, I gave a beach party in the dead of winter and took a boogie board into Lake Michigan in the spring. There was power and positive energy and success in this California beach thing. All was golden.

I came back from college believing I was a California Girl after all. (So I smiled. California girls are always smiling.) In Orange County, folks smile and apologize if someone steps on their foot or shoves past them in line. Sometimes this eternal cheer isn't a good thing. My aunt was one of those perfect ones. Voted "Best Looking" at Newport Harbor High School (how could one ever choose a best looking

when everyone at that high school looked like Heidi Klum), she gave me some sage advice before a trip to New York. "Don't look people in the eye on the street and smile; they will think you are insane," she said. I had already traveled quite a bit but realized instantly she was right. People just don't flash their teeth and dimples at strangers when they buy the paper in London or buy a macaron at Ladurée in Paris. I spent a lot of years working on my traveling frown. Despite my best efforts to scowl and turn away, a smile would creep up and blow my cover.

I also became a born-again brunette. My colorist was perplexed—having never been asked to make mousy out of natural blonde highlights...but she did it. People hated it. My own father passed me on the street without recognizing me. It inspired actual anger in friends that I would forsake my blonde roots for

the dark of the masses. Never in my life did people feel so free to say: "You look like hell."

So I gave up. On all of it. I went back to blonde. You can take the girl out of California but I guess you really can't take the California out of the girl. I can't help but be friendly. I can't make myself aloof, alluring or mysterious. I am too eager to chat. I wish I possessed the cool of a New Yorker, the ooh-la-la of a Parisienne, even the no-nonsense brainy vibe of an Ivy League academic. Instead, I look like someone ready to lead a tour at Disneyland. Clearly we are short on street smarts growing up at the beach in Orange County. But I did learn how to macramé a bikini and make a great cheese dip with Velveeta and salsa, so it balances out in the end.

What can I share from my experience with other young girls in beach towns down

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our coast who may at this moment be thinking about chopping off their long blonde locks, donning all black and smoking cigarettes in coffee houses? Good luck, but no one will ever buy it. Yes, I know, Dita Von Teese is from Orange County, and so is Gwen Stefani, and you know what? I saw Dita Von Teese at Marc Jacobs in Las Vegas, and she

smiled at me. And she doesn't even know me. What does that tell you? I was introduced to Gwen once; she smiled, too. A lot.

So leave the angst to others. If you're the kind of girl they write songs about—lots of them—it can't be all bad. I am a nice blonde from Orange County. I have been known to overuse the words "cool" and

"dude." I have caught myself saying "gnarly." I toss my hair even now that I am very grown up. I know better, but I just can't stop, and now I think I am finally at peace. Inside I feel like the smart brunette on "Charlie's Angels." But on the outside, it's Farrah all the way. So what? How can I not smile to count myself among "some of the cutest girls in the world." ●