

NOTHING VENTURED

by Colette Sartor

The fire drill was Winston's idea. No way Marney would have done it alone. This was in '78, during summer break. She was ten, Winston eleven. Irish twins, their mother called them. Back then, Marney ached to be his actual twin. She settled for wearing his hand-me-downs and imitating his grin; she would do anything he suggested, as long as he did it first.

"Finish eating already," their mother, Gwen, begged the morning of their fire drill. Marney ate even slower and picked a fight with Winston about whether to bike to the creek by the horse farm later. Gwen lit another cigarette and checked her watch. "I'm going whether you're done or not," she said, gesturing broadly, scattering ash.

Her eagerness to leave was like another body in the room. In this mood she would be gone all day, then return smelling weird and mumbling baby-talk. Last week she'd fallen asleep holding a lit joint. Winston doused the smoldering couch cushion, then hid it from their dad while Marney watched, paralyzed. A fire. There could have been a fire.

But Gwen wouldn't stay that morning, even when Winston pleaded, "You could paint our portraits," and Marney showed what she'd written on her calendar: *Gwen stays home*. "You promised," she said, ignoring Winston's glare.

Gwen ground out her cigarette. "God, you're a stickler. I said I'd *try*. Your brother understands. Right, honey?" Then she smiled at Winston, only Winston. Always Winston.

At the front door she kissed them—“Do something worth telling me about”—and fled.

“You should’ve shut up,” he said, fists clenched, once their mother’s car was gone. “She listens to me. I could have stopped her.”

“You didn’t last week,” she said. “What if there’s really a fire this time?”

His fists unclenched. He chewed his lower lip. “An escape plan,” he said. “That’s what we need.”

His idea was to toss blankets onto the lawn, then jump into the pile. They carried a full laundry basket upstairs to Marney’s bedroom, which overlooked the back porch, the roof’s lowest point. He climbed out first, barefoot and dragging the basket. She watched from the window. Outside, the shingles stretched like a gray, pebbly beach. If Gwen had stayed, Marney would have tagged along while the other two chased each other with squirt guns or painted the garage walls with crazy symbols only they understood. Marney wouldn’t be having this adventure. Follow Winston’s lead and everything would be fine.

She climbed up on the window sill. “What if we get hurt?” she said.

He blew a raspberry at her from the roof’s edge.

The shingles prickled her feet. She sat and scooted to him, tar plucking at her shorts. The landscape swayed below. She shut her eyes, felt him stand, maybe to help her back inside.

“Easy peasy,” she heard him say.

When she opened her eyes, the blankets lay scattered on the lawn. It really wasn’t that far down. Still.

“Let’s just hang off the edge,” she said, “and drop into the bushes.”

“Do what you want,” he said. “I’m jumping.” He bent his knees, swung his arms; readied himself.

She couldn't let him jump alone. She wouldn't.

Winston keeps jumping into everything first: the first to go to college, the first to become successful, the first to move far from home for good, the first to stop speaking to their parents; the first to sleep with a man, to marry one, to get divorced.

Marney is successful too, as a developer of publishing websites, but her Chelsea loft is a short train ride from their childhood home in New Jersey, and she visits their mother often. Someone has to. Winston hasn't spoken to their parents since he came out after college and escaped to Los Angeles, where he produces highbrow, arty films that Marney rarely sees. His divorce is mere months old. He's forty-one and living alone for the first time in fifteen years. *Who knew I'd miss his clutter?* he emails Marney about his ex, Lou.

Email is how Winston communicates these days. God forbid he call or visit, although she used to visit him a lot until their fight two years ago. Since then, she's claimed to be too busy, either working or helping out their mother, who, she emails Winston, has started wandering the house sometimes, uncertain of her surroundings.

Flashbacks, maybe, Marney writes. *That acid she dropped when we were kids might finally be catching up.*

That was once, he writes back. *She's seventy-two. Forgetfulness comes with age. Speaking of, did I mention that Lou and I were thinking about having a baby when he left? We wanted a girl. I did, at least.*

She writes, *Maybe you're better off. A baby's a huge obligation, especially for a single parent. Gwen's enough work. I'm always there lately, the 5:55 from Penn Station to Westfield, then I cab it over. Same cabbie every time. No chitchat, and he's so Jersey chewing that*

toothpick. Mostly Gwen’s fine, but sometimes I have to remind her where the pantry is, or that the Newels moved away. Their dog loved to dig up Dad’s flower beds. They left a year ago, right after Dad died. Gwen’s tirade about how all that digging killed her husband may have influenced their decision.

Nothing that she writes about their mother is true.

Their mother still has a steel-trap memory that refuses to relinquish the most ancient flaw—except with Winston—and a teenager’s lungs despite her lifelong penchant for pot and cigarettes. And she no longer tirades, preferring carefully chosen barbs. “You’d make it an English tea garden, just like your father,” she said when Marney recently offered to tame the wilderness overtaking the backyard. They were sitting on the roof outside Marney’s old bedroom, where Gwen likes to smoke sometimes. “Winston would know what to do, if you asked,” she added, surveying the scruffy yard. Not a chance, Marney wanted to say. “Nothing wrong with tea gardens,” she said instead.

There are other things she doesn’t tell her brother, things he would know if he bothered coming home. She doesn’t tell him, for instance, that after she’s done visiting their mother, her regular cabbie is waiting outside to push open the front passenger door, take out his toothpick, and kiss her hello. “Whose place tonight?” he always asks.

His name is Dominic DiCorscia. A year of dating and it still thrills her to see his waiting cab. He’s thirty, ten years younger than she is, but looks older, his lean face heavily stubbled, the skin leathery from working landscaping jobs with his brother-in-law. Nights he cabbies. He’s saving for his own restaurant, which will be a small family place with a few signature dishes. On his evenings off, she takes the PATH to Hoboken to watch him play baseball in Sinatra Park by the Hudson River, or they pick up food at the Italian market run by his mother, father, and sister.

His mother—a small, elegant woman with a formidable chest and watchful eyes—fusses over them, offering the choicest pancetta or guanciale despite Dominic’s reminders that Marney doesn’t eat meat. Then he cooks for Marney in his kitchen with its crowded pot rack and professional range, so different from her own Spartan kitchen where she uses the stove for storage. He likes to feed her spoonfuls from the pan, food that fills her with a tingly warmth and leaves her wanting more.

“Time to up my cardio,” she says one night after second helpings.

He grins. “My mother thinks you’re too skinny.”

“So she’s told me.”

He toys with her hand. “Maybe somebody should feed you better. I’d cook every meal if we lived together.”

She stands to gather dishes. She’s lived alone since college. She likes uncluttered surfaces, cabinets and closets empty except for essentials. Her schedule requires solitude: up early for meditation and exercise, then hours in her office loft above the kitchen, building the intricate websites that have made her name in publishing. But this man, he makes her forget all that.

“So that’s your plan,” she says. “Fatten me up to make your mother happy. Strange tactic, but it could work.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a definite possibility.” She kisses him, then carries the dishes to the counter.

Dominic is helping his sister move boxes one evening at the market when his mother, Rose, corners Marney in the pasta aisle. Something about her tight, determined smile makes Marney

glad they haven't spent much time together.

“I thought you don't cook,” says Rose, her hands clasped.

Marney holds up a pasta box. “Just grabbing a high protein brand.”

“Pasta isn't meant to be protein. Let's find something Dommy likes.” She puts back the box and scans the shelves. “We still haven't met your mother. I keep telling Dommy to invite her to Sunday dinner, although lately he's too busy for us on weekends. With your family, I assume.”

“Actually, no. My mother doesn't get out much.”

“I'll go to her. We're almost in-laws with you and Dommy always together. Keep in-laws close, I say.”

“Like enemies.” It's out before she thinks. Dominic's mother stares. Marney feels herself flush. “You know the saying. ‘Keep friends close, enemies closer.’ Never mind. Dinner sounds nice.”

“Soon, I hope. Nobody's getting younger, including you.” Before Marney can respond, Rose hands her a crinkly bag of small, cup-like pasta. “Orecchiette, Dommy's favorite. ‘Little ears’ it means in Italian. My nonna used to shape them on her pinkie tip. She was nobility in Italy, did Dommy tell you? Became a milk woman here in New Jersey after my grandfather drank himself to death. They lost nine of thirteen children to flu. Delivering milk was the only way she could support the ones left. The women in our family will do anything to protect their own.”

“Ma, how many times can you tell that story?” Dominic says as he walks up.

“Mandy should know where we come from,” says his mother.

“You'll make sure of that.”

Marney waits for him to add, *Her name’s not Mandy*, but he doesn’t. Finally, she says, “It’s ‘Marney,’ not ‘Mandy,’ Rose.”

“That’s what I said.”

“You didn’t, actually—”

“No big deal,” he says and puts his arm around Marney. Placating her. She almost pushes him away but notices his mother watching, as if hoping for just such a reaction. Nope. She won’t give her the satisfaction. She smiles at him instead. His mother’s lips tense before she smiles too.

“What kind of name is ‘Marney’ anyway?” she says. “It sounds like something from those society pages with people named Buffy and Scamp.”

“Ma, come on—”

“Rose, leave her alone,” says a rumbly voice.

Dominic’s father stands in the aisle. A massive man, he wears a stained apron that strains across his wide chest. Marney has barely heard him speak until now.

“I’m joking,” says Rose.

He wipes his broad hands on his apron. “Stop.”

“For goodness’ sake—” She stops, forces a laugh. “I can’t have a friendly conversation without Gabe reading in nonsense.” She waves—“Don’t be strangers”—and marches off.

Dominic’s father rubs his face before following her.

Marney stares after them as Dominic hugs her.

“She means well,” he says.

There are other things Marney could write to Winston: *Gwen’s kept your room the same even after all these years. Mine’s an art studio now. She’s used it maybe once. Or: She still writes you*

letters that she hides in the old hat box where she used to keep her pot. When the box fills up, she piles everything in a trash bag and tosses it in the basement. Fifteen years' worth of letters takes up lots of space. Or she could write: When Dad got sick, that anger he wouldn't let go of, it morphed into regret. One afternoon near the end, when I was pushing his wheelchair in Tamaques Park, he tapped my hand and said, "I know you tried, honey, but I said some terrible things when he went gay, and your brother's not one to forgive. He's like his old man that way."

She could write about all those marathons they ran together after college, until veins stood out on their sculpted arms and people started noticing again how much they looked alike, the same small, stern features, the narrow torsos and piston thighs. Or about when they were kids, how she wore her hair chopped short like his and both their bodies were angular and rosy and as tawny as hazelnut shells; about their fire drill when the only casualty was her broken collarbone, or swimming in the creek by the horse farm, making forts from Gwen's discarded canvases, shooting cork guns at neighborhood cats. The late nights curled together on the basement couch, far from the fighting upstairs, when they would huddle under a blanket and chant "It'll be over soon" to keep from crying.

Instead she writes: *Gwen got stuck in the bathroom yesterday. She forgot how to unlock the door. Soon I'll be in diapers anyway, she said after I got her out. Then she laughed like crazy.*

Dominic is easy to love, like Winston used to be. Marney's mother adores him. Since Marney's father died last year, Gwen rarely leaves the house, preferring to spend her time painting murals on the walls. So Dominic comes by with bags of food that he prepares with a flourish. They eat what they can before Marney packs the freezer with carefully labeled leftovers.

“What a doll,” her mother says one night while Dominic is taking out the trash.

Marney can’t help smiling. “A regular Kewpie,” she says.

Gwen holds an unlit cigarette in one hand, in the other a drippy paintbrush that she dabs at the living room wall. Furniture huddles under faded sheets. At the hearth Marney lays a fire to ward off the spring chill. It’s frustrating, how drafty the house has gotten.

“This place is like a wind tunnel,” she says. “I could get the windows caulked.”

Her mother steps back to contemplate the mural. “Don’t bother,” she says, then adds, with some satisfaction, “The state of this place would kill your father if he weren’t dead already.”

“Christ, Gwen.”

“I’m kidding.” She sniffs her cigarette without lighting it. “Dominic certainly knows his way around the kitchen. It’s almost like having your brother home.”

Marney sits back abruptly, scattering kindling. “Winston can barely turn on a stove.”

Dominic walks in and crouches beside her. “The backyard needs work,” he says to Gwen as he collects the kindling. “Let me at least mow it.”

Gwen waves the paintbrush at him, flinging paint droplets everywhere. “How sweet. You really do remind me of Winston.”

“Who?”

Gwen flicks paint at Marney. “You haven’t mentioned your brother?”

Dominic keeps arranging wood. “She has, a few times. I’m bad with names.” Bless him for inflating a passing reference. “I’d like to meet him next time he’s here,” he says.

“Pigs’ll hula first,” Marney says as she stands to gather paint cans.

“You could ask him to visit,” Gwen says, “now that your father...well, you could ask.”

She stabs her paintbrush at the wall.

Marney focuses on stacking the cans. “We don’t talk anymore,” she says, which is technically true.

Dominic lights the kindling. It crackles to life. “You’ll regret it if you don’t try to make up. Believe me.”

“Maybe I should call,” Gwen says.

Marney stops stacking. “You’re kidding.”

“Why not?”

“Because he didn’t call even after Dad got sick. Because he skipped the funeral. Need more?”

Gwen raises her cigarette, lowers it. “He’s my son. We have to forgive each other eventually.”

It would feel so good to send the paint cans flying. Instead, Marney finishes stacking them.

“He wants nothing to do with you,” she says. “He told me so himself.”

This is what she should write: *It wasn’t my fault, that fight we had the last time I saw you, right after Dad got sick two years ago. All I asked was that you call him, just once. Instead you claimed either I was on your side or his, even after I pointed out it was ridiculous to still have sides. Then months went by without a word from you. Months of Dad dying, of Gwen spiraling, of my needing your help. I shouldn’t have had to email you Dad’s obituary for you to start talking to me again. You shouldn’t have ever stopped.*

Instead she writes: *Sometimes I catch Gwen talking to mirrors. Once, when I asked what*

she was doing, she pointed at her reflection and said, “Why’s that woman in my house?”

Gwen decides the living room mural can wait and has Dominic rearrange the dining room so she can start another one. She stops mentioning Winston and starts peppering Marney with questions about Dominic: what’s his apartment like, does he get along with his sister, is he close to his mother, how often does he see her? How long have his parents been married, are they still in love after all that time? “You can tell a lot about people from their families,” she declares.

“Then Dominic should run for his life,” Marney says, which makes Gwen laugh.

One night her mother asks, “What if he wants children?”

They are alone on the roof. Marney hugs her knees. The distance to the ground seems farther than it used to, farther, even, than when she jumped off the roof after Winston so long ago and broke her collarbone. Dusk mutes the yard below, the uncut grass and splintered sandbox, the flowerbeds overgrown with weeds. She’s never imagined herself a mother, a scheduler of music lessons and doctors’ appointments, things she used to manage herself since Gwen always forgot. But what if she moves in with Dominic? What if they have a child? He’s easy to picture as a father, repairing the sandbox without breaking a sweat. With him, maybe she could be different, someone who could have kids. Maybe her mother could be different too. Maybe she would toss her pot and cigarettes and greet her grandchild with focused eyes and outstretched arms. Maybe she would watch smiling as Marney pureed baby food or tested bathwater with her wrist.

“You’re too particular,” Gwen says. “Kids need flexibility.”

“Says the woman who uses ‘flexibility’ and ‘chaos’ interchangeably.”

Her mother inhales from the joint before offering it. “Sarcasm keeps you from getting

close to people.”

“So does self-delusion.”

“We’re alike that way.”

Marney takes the joint and stubs it out on her shoe, careful to keep ash off the brittle shingles. “No,” she says. “We’re nothing alike.”

Marney and Dominic start apartment hunting. On a quiet street in Tomkins Square Park, in a row of well-kept, prewar brownstones, they find a lower unit with two bedrooms, windows everywhere, high ceilings, hardwoods. Their footsteps echo in the empty space.

“It’s too perfect, and a steal at this price,” says the realtor, whose aggressive cheer normally would piss Marney off. But she’s right, this is what they want.

The second bedroom is small but airy and faces a sunny courtyard. Dominic paces its length, then opens the closet. “Finally, someplace for my stuff. No more carrying back and forth. And your desk would fit, plus a bookshelf.” He starts pacing again, so energetic and determined, so full of possibilities. So dear. There could be a cradle instead of shelves. She could rock it while working. Gwen would marvel at her efficiency. “Who knew?” she might say. “Parenthood suits you.”

“Maybe we’ll need this room for someone else,” Marney says.

Dominic stops pacing. “I thought you were barely ready for a puppy.”

“Puppy, kid. How different could they be?”

The realtor claps like a chipper seal. “There’s a preschool around the corner.”

“Hold your applause. I’m not pregnant yet,” Marney says and watches Dominic laugh.

That night, while her mother and Dominic rearrange the study (the dining room mural is on hold), Winston emails that he wants to visit. *Fence mending time, before she stops recognizing me.*

Marney sits in the living room skimming the brownstone’s lease application. Even the scattered paint cans and drop cloths haven’t ruined her good mood. Her brother won’t either.

Gwen’s herself lately, she emails back on her phone. *You don’t have to come.*

He answers immediately: *I want to. There’s something I should have told you but couldn’t figure out how. I’m gonna be a dad soon—*

“Everything okay?” she hears. Dominic stands beside her. With numb hands she slips her phone under the lease application.

Winston is going to be a father.

Her mother walks in. “Where’s my helper?” Paint speckles her hair.

“You look a little sick,” Dominic says to Marney. His forearms are blue-streaked.

“Finish with Gwen. And clean your arms.”

He studies her. “When we’re done,” he says before leaving with her mother.

Marney retrieves the phone and deletes her brother’s emails.

Later that night, after Dominic is asleep, she sits on his couch with her laptop and imagines sharing her brother’s news with Gwen, how excited she’ll be, how confident that Winston will be the perfect father, despite his years of silence. How much more she’s always believed in him than in Marney. Maybe Gwen’s right. Maybe he really will be a better parent. Maybe Marney won’t be able to raise a child without following his lead, like always. But she’s done being the worshipful follower.

She clicks open her email and starts typing.

I've been hiding something too, ever since Dad died. Gwen's actually fine, she's even getting stoned less often. I have a job that I'm good at, people I love. I'm happy for you, really, but we don't need you. Don't come.

She deletes the email and sits watching the night fade.

The Tompkins Square apartment turns out to be too drafty. Another is pricy for the size. She won't move back to Jersey into Dominic's place. She already lives too close to her mother.

“Maybe we should consider one-bedrooms,” she says loudly above the screech of subway wheels one Saturday afternoon. They've just toured a rundown two-bedroom that she swore smelled like cat pee though there wasn't a cat in sight.

He frowns, says something she can't hear. She leans closer until his breath is on her cheek.

“What about needing the extra bedroom?” he says into her ear.

This is where she should say, *I'm afraid to be a parent. I don't know how.*

“I changed my mind.”

She sits back. He looks at her, unsmiling. They're silent all the way to her place. Later, as they're cleaning up after takeout (he claimed he was too tired to cook), he says, “You're the one who brought up kids.”

She loads cartons into the trash. “I was just trying on the idea.”

“Seemed to fit pretty good.”

“It made me feel fat, like an old Italian momma.” She hates how serious he looks, like this could be a deal breaker. *I'm afraid. Help me learn.* Say it. But he looks so young, so untested. He's only thirty, after all. He doesn't know any more than she does. Maybe less. “Are

we back to making your mother happy?” she says, tying the trash bag. “Because you definitely need a better reason to knock me up.”

“Think about it,” he says. “That’s all I’m asking.”

Everything Dominic does starts driving her crazy: the way he jerks the car through traffic, stacks chewed toothpicks on the counter, ignores his mother’s barely veiled complaints.

“You could at least defend me,” Marney says one night as they’re driving away from his family’s market.

“From what?”

“Your mother. ‘A little weight would fill out those wrinkles, dear.’ It’s insulting when you pretend nothing’s wrong.”

He grips the steering wheel. “The more you react, the worse she gets.”

“Your father doesn’t seem to worry about that.”

“He’s got nothing to lose these days.”

“What’s that mean?”

He stares out the windshield, his jaw working. “Drop it, okay?”

She bites back a retort, which could cause a real fight, their first. She’s not ready for that. She still hasn’t answered Winston. She keeps writing responses and deleting them. Nothing fits her anger at the thought of a child cradled in his arms, making him smile, a child who will redeem him to their mother, prove that she’s right, he’s better at this too, even though he and Marney had the same childhood, the same bad examples. A child who will follow him everywhere, even if it means a broken bone.

Other people fight with their parents when they come out. Vicious fights like yours with

Dad after college, where awful things are said that can't be taken back. Last time I saw you, I asked you to forget all that ancient shit and just call him. For fuck's sake, Winston, he was dying. You got furious and said you couldn't pretend nothing happened the way I could, the way I had for years. How else could I still be speaking to him after what he'd said to you? How else could I ask you for the impossible? How could I betray you like that?

But I've never pretended that fight didn't happen. I remember everything he said. He called you beastly, diseased, a sin against nature. And worse. Gwen and I defended you as best we could, but we couldn't take sides. We wanted to keep being a family, even as fucked up as our family is. Was. We needed you for that. I needed you.

You're the one who left me alone to deal with them. Who left me without a family and started your own. You're the one who betrayed me.

Clattering in Dominic's kitchen jolts Marney out of her morning meditation. It can't be Dominic; he's already at work. She grabs his bat from the bedroom closet where he stores his baseball gear, then creeps down the hall to find his mother hanging a skillet on the pot rack with her back to Marney.

“You startled me,” Marney says.

Rose screams and swings the skillet, whacking Marney's shoulder, then puts down the pan. Her chest heaves. “I almost had a heart attack.”

Marney rubs her throbbing shoulder. “Jesus, Rose. What're you doing here?”

“Dommy's always gone by now.” She holds up a key and frowns, as if getting hit is Marney's own fault. “That needs ice.” She herds Marney into a chair and fills a dish towel. “Use this,” she commands, pressing the damp towel to her shoulder.

The espresso she makes in the old-fashioned stovetop pot tastes rich and strong. It usually tastes burnt when Marney makes it. Rose clicks efficiently around the kitchen, wiping counters, unloading the dishwasher.

“I like to surprise Dommy,” she says. “Clean, pick up laundry. Gabe says I spoil him, but you do for family.” She takes the drippy icepack and empties it in the sink. “This dish towel will take forever to dry. The new place will need a washer and dryer for all that extra laundry.”

Marney nearly drops her cup. “Dominic told you?”

“I knew it. ‘Marriage first would be better,’ I said to Gabe just yesterday, ‘but they probably should move in together before the baby comes.’”

“What? No. I’m not pregnant, Rose.”

Dominic’s mother leans against the counter. “At your age, it’s now or never.”

“That’s not your decision.”

“It’ll be my grandchild.”

Marney clenches the table’s edge. No, it would be *her* child. To care for, to guide toward some semblance of a good life, a balanced life. But how do you do that, help a kid figure out who to be when she grows up? Who to emulate? Who to love? All Marney knows is how to fight with family, and screw things up. She can’t face repeating history with someone she’s given birth to.

“It’s my life, and my body,” she says.

Rose stares at her. “I guess you told me.” She takes her coat and leaves.

You haven’t answered since I emailed I was going to be a dad. Maybe you didn’t get the message. Skye thinks you’re upset. She says it wasn’t fair to email you, that you deserved to hear

such important news in person.

Skye, I should tell you, is my co-parent. You must remember her, my closest friend from college. Maybe you also remember that Lou and I were talking about having a baby when he left. Actually, we had everything set with Skye, who's been chronically single for years. She and I used to joke in college that if we were still childless in middle-age we'd have a kid together. Well, we figured out we weren't joking. Having a baby with her and Lou felt natural, inevitable. Three parents and two households would be all our child knew. It would be normal.

Lou seemed game until we found out his sperm weren't viable. Mine were, so I pushed him. I wanted us to be a family. I wanted the sense of purpose outside myself that comes from parenting. One morning we were talking about the nursery. I was planning a zoo theme: man-size stuffed elephants, ceiling high giraffes. He worried that might scare the baby, but I told him he was being silly. “Your way or the highway,” he said. I thought he was joking. Then he asked whether I'd told you yet. I'm ashamed to admit I said it wasn't your business. How long until the baby wasn't his business? he asked. Never, I told him. This would be our child. “But only your blood relation,” he pointed out. “Marney's your sister. She was your best friend. If you can cut her out, you could cut me out too.”

I still wake myself up sometimes, reaching for him.

Skye and I decided to go ahead anyway. Two in vitros and she was pregnant. She's due soon, with a girl. Last week we picked out a name: Lucy Pearl Copeland-Hills. That made her real, more real than any 3-D ultrasound. She's going to have her own opinions, likes, dislikes; she's going to want to know where her parents came from, who helped us become who we are. She's going to want to be loved across generations.

It's been a long time getting to where I can completely forgive and ask you to forgive me.

I know it won't happen overnight, but I want my daughter to have the family that she deserves. And we can still be a family. No matter how hard I've pushed you and Gwen away, the love is still there. At least on my end.

Once Lucy is born, I'd like to bring her to meet you both. I don't want to confuse Gwen more than she already is, though, and I don't want to upset you. It's your choice. I'll wait for your reply.

Marney avoids Dominic all week. She's not up for parenthood, she'll have to admit when she sees him. That frontier was claimed before she could stake it out, and she's not up for learning by example anymore. Childlessness is her frontier. Nobody needs to teach her how to do that.

When she arrives at her mother's house on Saturday evening, she discovers that Gwen has called Dominic and invited them both to his baseball game in Sinatra Park. He's picking them up momentarily. Her mother stands with a lipstick by a full-length mirror propped against the dining room's unfinished mural.

“Nice that someone can get you out of the house,” Marney says.

“He said you two haven't talked. I told him you're probably sick. You've never liked anyone taking care of you, even as a kid.” She speaks quickly and avoids Marney's eyes.

“Did it occur to you that I need a break?”

Her mother watches herself apply lipstick. “What occurred to me is that someone should stop you from screwing up a good thing.”

“Says the queen of screw-ups.”

“Dammit, Marney—”

The doorbell rings.

“That’s him,” her mother says and hurries into the foyer.

Marney kisses Dominic’s cheek when he walks in but lets her mother do the talking. In the car, Gwen sits up front and exclaims about how well Dominic drives, how nice it is to be out on such a refreshingly chilly spring night. At Sinatra Park the baseball field is lit by floodlights and flanked by crowded bleachers. Her mother walks between them chattering until they reach the dugout, then goes to find seats. Dominic stands with Marney. “Gwen claimed this was your idea,” he says.

“She’s always had a questionable relationship with the truth.”

He laces his fingers in the chain link fence by the dugout. “If you want to end things, at least have the guts to say so.”

“That’s not it.” She takes a breath. “Let’s talk after we drop off Cupid.”

Marney joins her mother, who’s sitting by an aisle. They watch Dominic trot to third base.

“Playing third takes quick reflexes,” her mother says.

“Like you know anything about baseball.”

Her mother leans forward, still watching the field. “Your father played when you kids were young. I loved when he hit. He’d smile at me, point at the back fence, and that’s where the ball went.”

“I don’t remember you two enjoying anything together.”

Gwen squints at the field. “Marriage, kids, they change you. He thought we had to get serious to raise a family. We could still live a little, I said. He wouldn’t listen. So I did it without him.” She whoops when Dominic catches a line drive. “I just want you to be happy. Live a little.”

Marney allows herself to lean against her mother. “You mean well.”

Gwen clasps Marney’s hand. “Finally, we agree.”

After a few innings, Marney notices Dominic’s mother climbing the bleachers. Marney pulls her jacket tighter. An impromptu visit from Rose never bodes well.

Rose is slightly breathless when she reaches them. “Dommy mentioned you’d be here,” she says to Gwen, who looks mystified.

“This is Dominic’s mom, Rose,” Marney explains and watches Gwen’s face light with a polite smile.

Rose sits between them. “I keep telling Dommy to introduce us, but children always think they know better.”

Marney looks at the field, where Dominic is jogging to the dugout. He stops when she waves, then gestures as if waving back. When she turns around, Rose is facing Gwen.

“We should talk about this situation.”

Gwen scoots a little farther from Rose. “Situation?”

Dominic waves again. “Ma, come here,” Marney hears him call. His mother ignores him. He strides off the field.

“The age difference. I told Dommy, he wants things she can’t give. Her eggs are drying up as we speak. But he won’t listen, and now they’re moving in together.”

Gwen leans forward to look at Marney. “You are?”

“Nothing’s definite.”

“See, she can’t even commit to living with my son, much less marrying him—”

“This isn’t your business,” Marney says, but Gwen drowns her out.

“How dare you interfere!”

“Sons don’t think they need protecting, but they need it more than the girls. Not that you’d know.”

“I have a son.”

Rose smacks her knees. “Who can’t stand to even talk to you, from what I hear.”

Immediately she covers her mouth, then touches Gwen’s arm. “Wait, that wasn’t—”

“Stop it, Ma!” Dominic is in the aisle beside their row.

Gwen stands, clutching her purse—“Excuse me,” she says in a strangled voice—and hurries past him down the steps.

“What were you thinking?” Marney asks Rose.

She stares straight ahead, her face blotchy. “It came out wrong. But someone should be honest.”

“That’s always your excuse,” Dominic says. His mother tries to answer, but he cuts her off. “You already chased off Savvy, and probably Pop. Keep it up, I’m next.” He turns to Marney. “I’m sorry,” he says, but she pushes past him to follow her mother.

She checks the restrooms and calls Gwen’s cellphone, which goes straight to voicemail. Her mother could be anywhere. She could have gotten caught smoking and wound up stoned and disoriented in some police station. Marney is frantic by the time Dominic walks up.

“I sent my mother home,” he says.

“Just help me find Gwen.”

They roam around calling for her mother. Finally, they return to the emptying parking lot, where Gwen is leaning against Dominic’s car. Marney runs over.

“You couldn’t answer your cell?” she demands.

Gwen’s makeup is tear streaked. She pulls a cigarette from her purse. “I was talking to

your brother. Why didn't you tell me about the baby? And he treated me like I was senile, like I couldn't keep a thought in my head.”

Marney stands there, staring.

“Admit it,” Gwen says. “You lied to him, and me.”

“I was protecting you.”

“You were being a jealous brat.”

“Dammit, stop pretending he's a saint. I'm the one who's put up with your bullshit all these years.”

“Marney, don't,” Dominic says behind her.

“You're taking her side?”

“I don't want you saying things you'll regret.” His equipment bag is slung over his shoulder. Stubble is heavy on his cheeks. Hit this man with a brick and it wouldn't hurt him.

“What do you know about regrets? I'm your only blemish, according to your mother.”

Marney turns and runs through the parking lot, the baseball field. He catches up to her at the path along the river. She tries to shake him off, but he holds her arms and then lifts her chin to make her look at him.

“You think I've got it great.” He lets out a short laugh. “I have another sister, Savvy, who you haven't met. She just started talking to us again. It's been years. Sound familiar? Connie, my sister at the market, her husband left her last month to become a Buddhist monk. I've been helping with their landscaping business so she can pay the mortgage, but she'll probably have to move in with my parents anyway. If there's room. My father's been living in my grandmother's old basement apartment for months. Which nobody's talking about. Ma claims he just likes the TV down there. And my mother. You've seen what she's like.” He takes her hand. When she

doesn't pull away, he hugs her close. “You work with what you've got.” His voice vibrates gently against her forehead. “That's all you can do.”

Penn Station blares with voices and hurried footsteps. The 5:55 to Westfield leaves soon. Marney sits near the departure board. Gwen isn't expecting her. They haven't spoken in weeks, since the baseball game. Last Friday Gwen finally left a terse message (“Checking that you didn't die”), but Marney hasn't called her back yet. There's too much to say for a phone call, and she owes another answer first. She opens her laptop, tethers it to her phone for a hotspot. Then she opens her email and starts typing:

Remember, Winston, when we used to bike to the creek, how the horses whinnied by the split rail fence until we offered up the apples and cheese slices we'd brought for ourselves. Remember how icy the water felt streaming across our feet when we waded to where the rope swing hung from that old willow tree. Remember the slime on the rocks, how our toes disappeared in clouds of silt. The water under the swing barely reached my chest, and that bent plastic seat looked like it couldn't hold anybody. Try it, you used to tell me, go on. I did, once or twice, until the fire drill. After that, I was too scared. But you always swung out over the creek and leaped. You could have broken your neck in that shallow water, but you never got a scratch. I'm the only one who ever broke anything, the day we jumped off the roof. My collarbone hurt so bad, I thought I would faint. You held my hand and kept talking to me while the neighbors called an ambulance. At least you tried, you kept saying.

But I was only trying to be you. I wasn't figuring out how to be me. Even when I tried to do something I thought you'd never do, I wasn't figuring out me.

I'm trying now, Winston. Remember that when you get here.

Over the intercom she hears the initial boarding call for the 5:55. Once she clicks Send, plans will move swiftly, beyond her control. Plane tickets bought, mountains of baby gifts ordered. Marney’s fingers linger on the keyboard as she waits for the wince that usually accompanies such thoughts. But there’s nothing. Dominic will be there when she meets the baby, when she sees her brother for the first time in years, when she witnesses the reunion between mother and prodigal son. Dominic will be there, though neither of them is certain about their future together, and he will hold her hand and smile.

One click and the email’s on its way. Relief, and release. She closes her laptop, puts it and the phone in her messenger bag, alongside some listings for one-bedrooms. A new place still feels in order, even though it’s just for her. Something that can accommodate a little clutter, maybe even a pot rack over a working stove. “I’ll settle for some closet space,” Dominic said yesterday morning when he kissed her goodbye. “Baby steps.”

Another announcement, almost lost in the station’s noise: last call for the 5:55. She imagines boarding the train, riding miles through grimy cities and wetlands, suburbs of tightly packed townhouses giving way to larger, more widely spaced homes with shingled roofs to be conquered, trees to be climbed, creeks to be forded. Then the train slowing to a stop, herself stepping off and crossing the platform to the red-shuttered Westfield station. She will see through its windows the shiny cab by the curb. The faint scratch on the rear fender noticeable only to those who know to look.

And then she’s running to the platform, her thighs pumping, her bag thumping against her back, the train getting closer, closer still.