

THE SUMMER OF US

by

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Gincy: The Go-to Girl

May

The crisis was discovered at four forty-five in the afternoon. Fifteen minutes before ninety-nine percent of the staff hurried out of the building to enjoy their sixteen-hour vacation.

My boss, Mr. Bill Kelly, Kell for short, was frazzled. He didn't handle crises well. What he did do well was delegate responsibility.

He came tearing into the center of our office area, what little hair he had on end, plaid shirttails untucked.

"Listen up, people. We have a problem. The idiots at the copy shop lost our proposal and we've got to recreate it. Now. It's got to be at the printer's tonight."

I watched the predictable reactions of my colleagues.

Curran, the senior designer, slipped out of the room backwards.

Norton, the copy editor, suddenly found the piece of blank paper he was holding extremely interesting.

Vera, the administrative assistant for our division, feigned a sudden hacking cough.

"Kell," she gasped, "I wish I could help, but I think I'm really sick. If I don't get home and into bed soon..."

Kell turned to me. "Gincy, you'll stay, right?"

"It's gotta get done," I said, shooting my coworkers a look of disgust. "I'm here."

That's me. The go-to girl. Virginia Marie Gannon.

I guess I got my work ethic from my father, though our choices of work couldn't be more different.

Dad manages a hardware store, the small, privately owned kind that monsters like Home Depot have mostly put out of business.

I'm the senior editor of the monthly publication sent to subscribers of a public television station here in Boston.

Come to think of it, I'm not sure how much of a choice my father had when it came to a career. He didn't go to college. When I was about twelve I heard a rumor from a cousin that he'd never even finished high school.

To this day I don't know the truth about that. I'd never ask Dad straight out. It would embarrass him, and though my parents aren't my favorite people in the world, I treat them with respect.

It's what you do. Work hard and respect your parents. In that way, I'm a typical Gannon. In other ways? Not so much.

Anyway, the job got done and at six thirty-five I left our office on Bowdoin Street.

By the time I raced through the door of George, An American Café, it was almost seven o'clock. The place was a cemetery.

"Where is everybody?" I barked to the dimly lit room. "There's nobody here."

A dark-haired girl about my age stepped away from the bar. I noticed she had breasts the size of Pamela Anderson's. Almost.

How can you not notice something like that?

"Uh, hello?" she said. "We're here. Me and—Clare, right?"

Another girl, a blonde one, all clean and healthy-looking, like she could star in a soap ad shot at a mountain spring or something, slipped off a barstool and joined the first girl. She nodded and looked at me warily.

Okay, maybe she had a reason to. I'd caught a glimpse of my hair in the window before charging through the door. It was pretty wild. I think I'd forgotten to comb it that morning.

I had, however, remembered to wash it. Which was more than I'd done the day before when I'd been up since four A. M. working on a report for Kell the Inefficient. Next thing I knew it was eight-thirty and if I'd stopped to shower, I would have been late for a nine o'clock meeting.

You know how it is.

"So," I said. "I thought there was supposed to be a meeting here tonight. You know, to hook up with roommates. For a summer place. In Oak Bluffs."

"There was a meeting," the dark-haired one drawled, "but it seems it was over at, like, six-oh-five. By the time I got here at six-thirty, everyone had already hooked up."

She nodded toward the girl next to her. "Except for Clare. And me. I'm Danielle, by the way."

"Hey. Gincy."

"That's an unusual name," Danielle said flatly.

"Yeah," I answered flatly. "It is."

The one named Clare stuck out her hand and I stared at it. She let it drop.

"One girl told me all the good houses are taken," she said. She sounded apologetic. "I think you're supposed to rent them by February or March and then look for housemates. Not the other way around. I didn't know."

I propped my fists on my hips. What there was of them.

I tend toward the skinny.

"Crap," I said. "Well I didn't know, either!"

Danielle heaved this big dramatic sigh. "None of us did," she said. "I guess."

I was seriously disappointed. I really wanted the summer to be something special.

And then, inspiration struck.

"Wait," I said. "All of the good houses might be taken but that doesn't mean there aren't still bad houses to rent. Right?"

"I suppose," Clare said doubtfully.

"A bad house?" Danielle rolled her eyes. I noted she was wearing a lot of eye makeup. Personally, I'd owned the same tube of mascara for three years. "See, I don't like the sound of that," she went on. "That means, like, a bathtub but no shower, right? Ceiling fans but no central air?"

I guffawed.

Ms. Fresh Mountain Air tried to hide a smile. "It might be worth taking a look," she said. "I...I kind of had my heart set on this."

There was a beat of silence and then I said, "Well, what's it gonna be? Are we going to do this or what?"

"Well, I'm not spending the entire summer in the city," Danielle declared fiercely. "The grime is murder on my skin. And speaking of murder, I just read in the *Globe* that street crime had like, tripled from last year. And you know how they get in the hot weather."

I narrowed my eyes. "How who gets?"

Danielle looked at me incredulously. "Duh. Criminals?"

Okay, I thought. But I'm watching closely for any signs of bigotry.

"I'm allergic to cigarette smoke," Clare said suddenly.

I eyed her keenly.

"Well," she admitted, "not allergic, exactly. It's just that I don't like it. It gives me headaches."

Danielle nodded. "And cigarette smoke gets in my hair, not to mention my clothes. No smoking in the house. Agreed?"

I considered this.

Truth was, I wasn't a big smoker. I was a kind of social smoker. A wimpy smoker. It was the only thing about me that was wimpy. I could live with a no-smoking rule.

Still, I kind of hated to let things go.

I kind of liked to win. It was one of my more obnoxious traits.

"What about on the porch?" I countered. "If there is one. Or in the yard?"

Danielle and Clare discussed this with eye language and then Danielle nodded. "All right. But if the smell starts getting in the house..."

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Anyway, we're jumping ahead making house rules before we even have a house."

Clare didn't answer but checked her watch for about the tenth time.

"Hot date?" I asked.

She blushed and hefted off a barstool what I realized was a suit in a plastic dry-cleaners' bag. "Oh, no! I have a boyfriend. He's working late tonight. We live together. I just want to get home before he does. You know."

I didn't at all know, but shrugged. "Fine. We'll hammer out the rules later."

"Good, because I want to watch something on Lifetime at eight," Danielle said.

She suggested a time, date, and place for us to meet for an excursion to the Vineyard; we each promised to bring any rental listings we found and Clare said she'd make an appointment with an Oak Bluffs real estate broker.

After we'd exchanged phone numbers and e-mail, the odd couple left and I gratefully settled at the bar and ordered a beer and a plate of nachos. I hadn't eaten all day. The six cups of coffee I'd drunk were eating away at the lining of my stomach. I could hear them munching.

So could the bartender, who after a particularly loud growl gave me a funny look.

I smiled sweetly. "If you could hurry with those nachos?"

I'd always hated snobs.

Maybe because I grew up among people whose idea of culture was a monster-truck rally followed by super-sized sugar drinks at the local DQ.

I was pretty sure half of the residents of my hometown—which I not so fondly called Deadly Spore, New Hampshire—were related. I

guess for some people, inbreeding was a goal; incest something to kill the slow passing of rural time.

The evidence was clear, at least to me. Every single class in our local grammar school and high school had at least one member of the extensive Brown family.

Maggie Sullivan was a Brown.

Bobby Manigan was a Brown.

Petey Ming, who looked as Asian as his last name, was a Brown; I don't know how, exactly, but he was.

Basically, you threw a rock, you hit a Brown.

Note to the uninformed: Rock-throwing was a sport of choice in Pondscum, New Hampshire, as was name-calling, merciless teasing of anyone who ate whole wheat bread instead of Wonder white. And expert wedge-giving.

Not that I, of course, ever participated in any of these sports except as a horrified spectator.

I swear.

See, for as far back as I can remember, say from about the age of four, I felt different from the infuriatingly dim-witted morons—okay—do morons come in any other kind?—who populated the neighborhood where I lived from the time of my birth to the day I left Moose Droppings, New Hampshire for school in Boston, Massachusetts.

Addison University. Ah, the haven for wanna-be artistes. (Yeah, use the French pronunciation here.)

Also known as losers.

That's not fair. Not everyone who went to Addison was a loser.

Sure, some started out that way and just perfected the role over time. Everybody knew these kids. Every high school had them. Kids who blustered and swaggered about their Hollywood style future and somehow, in the end, came running home, proverbial tail between their proverbial legs, to take a job tending bar at the local dive. For the rest of their lives.

Other kids started their freshman year at Addison bright-eyed and truly, touchingly optimistic about preparing for a life in The Arts. Then they became losers, usually by the middle of their sophomore year, when they realized they had absolutely no artistic talent whatsoever.

Losers or posers, or a fascinating combination of both.

Me? I started at Addison as an eighteen-year-old combination of loser and poser. Pretty impressive, I'd say. Not everyone can pull off such a loathsome personality at so young an age.

Even more impressive—and rare—is that by the end of my four years of higher learning (you know, higher as in “wanna toke, man?), I was neither a loser nor a poser.

(See? I know how to use neither/nor, either/or. Losers don't know anything about good grammar. They spell grammar “grammer.” Posers don't give a crap about good grammar.

They have sycophants write their stories for them.)

So, if neither poser nor loser after four years of dopey seminars on the latest fad in acting methods (taught by people whose one and only claim to fame was a television commercial for deodorant) and ridiculously unhelpful internships at the tiny office of sadly illiterate neighborhood newspapers (whose staff always included a bored party boy at the switchboard) and far too many theme parties (such as, Come as Your Favorite Living South American Philosopher!), what, then, was I?

One: Highly unemployable and not proud of it. That made me not a poser.

Two: Possessed of a substandard college education and embarrassed by it. That made me not a loser. And explained my desire to teach myself the rules of grammar.

Still, I knew that if I had to do it all over again—what a joke—I'd probably be the same jerk I was the first time around. I doubted I'd be enrolled in Harvard or Brown or Northeastern, even knowing at eighteen what I now knew at the ripe old age of twenty-nine.

And counting. Thirty loomed.

Not that calendar year, but on the first day of the next. I missed being the first baby born in Worm Slime by three minutes. Nancy Harrison, married to a Brown, delivered a bouncing baby boy at 12:02 A. M. , to the eternal frustration of my mother.

I wasn't sure she'd ever forgiven me for being late, let alone for being born.

Anyway, turning twenty-nine had made me think. About age and accomplishment and roads not taken. Yet. The reality was that I'd been working since I was nine, baby-sitting, mowing lawns, running errands for elderly neighbors.

And then I'd put myself through college.

And then I'd gone on to develop a not-so-terrible career in public television.

Don't get me wrong. I loved to work, even if I didn't have any major assets, liquid or otherwise, to show for my dedication. Student loans ate most of my salary; rent ate another large portion.

The fact was that I was tired. Really tired.

And so I determined that in those last months of relative, if not starry-eyed, youth, I was going to have some fun. Meet a bunch of cute guys. Stay out all night. Sleep all day, at least on the weekends.

Before getting back down to work.

Sitting there all alone at the bar, sipping a beer, I determined to rent a house on Oak Bluffs even if it was the rattiest dump imaginable. And even if I had to share it with the odd couple.

The blonde one, Clare. She looked as if she'd stepped out of the pages of an Eddie Bauer catalog, all scrubbed and healthy. I doubted we had anything at all in common.

And worse, the Pampered Princess, Danielle. With her red nails and her gold necklaces. Seriously not the kind of person who could be my friend.

But then again, who was? I could count my female friends on a fingerless hand.

The nachos finally arrived. I dug right in, slopping guacamole on my shirt. My tummy quieted immediately,
Gincy, I told myself, *this is going to be one hell of a summer.*

Clare: She Can't Say No

I never say no to Win. I wasn't sure I knew how.

"So, get the low-fat milk," he went on, his voice slightly distorted by his speakerphone. "And Clare, sweetie? If you could also pick up my black suit, that'd be great. It won't be ready until five-thirty, but that shouldn't be a problem for you, right?"

Plus, I hadn't told him about the summer house. I didn't want to pick a fight over something as silly as dry cleaning when I knew a truly big fight was to come.

"Sure," I said, folding clean laundry while I held the portable phone between my shoulder and chin. "No problem."

"Thanks, sweetie. You know, with your afternoons free—"

"They're not free, Win," I replied, automatically. We'd been through this so many times. "I have to grade papers and review lesson plans and then there's housework and—"

Win chuckled his indulgent chuckle. "Okay, okay, I get it. Sorry, sweetie. Look, I've got to run. See you later. Oh," he added as if just remembering, "I probably won't be home until at least nine so grab some dinner for yourself, okay?"

Win lowered his voice; now it held a note of long-suffering. "I have to take this client out for drinks after work. You know how it is."

No. I didn't know how anything was.

But I was beginning to figure things out.

"Sure," I said. "Bye."

We hung up and I finished folding and putting away the laundry. The simple task always gives me a feeling of accomplishment. At least something in this world was clean, neatly folded and put away just where it had always belonged.

Like my so-called life?

I never could say no to Win, not even at the beginning of our relationship.

To be honest, Win had never asked me to do anything dreadful or dishonest or criminal.

He wasn't abusive. Not in any common sense of the term.

It was just—it was just that he was powerful and I was...

Not powerful.

But not stupid, either.

See, I'd finally come to understand that Win had power over me because I allowed him to have power over me.

I'd given it to him from the moment we'd met just over ten years earlier. I hadn't known what I was doing, not really.

And if I had?

At eighteen years of age I welcomed Win—a strong-willed, decisive, career-focused man—into my life with a sigh of relief. Not a literal sigh, you understand.

But having Win around made things easier for me. For example, in spite of my parents and professors pressuring me to think seriously about my future, I had no idea what I wanted to do or be until Win helped me to decide on a career in teaching.

I liked being a teacher, very much. What was more, I was a good teacher. I was dedicated and sometimes even inspired. At least, my fifth graders at York, Braddock and Roget seemed to like me.

Win, it seemed knew me when I didn't even know myself.

There were other reasons for my falling in love with Win Carrington.

I knew he wanted someday to be married and have a family, and I wanted these things too.

My mother, who'd never worked outside the home, having married just out of college, urged on our budding relationship. Maybe she recognized in Win something of my father, a man who was a stellar family man if you looked at it in terms of financial support.

My father.

Daddy had always loved me, in a formal, distant sort of way. But he never paid much attention to me for the simple reason that I wasn't a boy. James, five years my senior, and Philip, two years older, were his major concerns.

His heirs.

Daddy was so old-fashioned he almost seemed like a character straight out of a Victorian novel. But he was all too real. And quite early on he assigned me to my mother.

His two girls.

Mother chose my clothes and took me to Girl Scout meetings while Daddy brought my two brothers to his beautiful office at the University of Michigan Medical Center where he was chief of urology.

Mother attended my ballet recitals while Daddy took my brothers on fishing trips up north.

Mother taught me how to sew and knit while Daddy encouraged the boys to excel in school and sports.

Nothing changed this dynamic until I started to date Win. Suddenly, I became visible to my father. Suddenly I was worth his personal attention.

And the more Win achieved, the higher in Daddy's esteem I rose. At least it seemed that way to me.

When Win was accepted at Harvard Law, Daddy took us all to Chicago for the weekend.

When Win made Law Review, Daddy gave me a big fat check, as if I'd been the winner of a prize.

And when Win was offered a partner-track position at the law firm of Datz, Parrish and Kelleher, Daddy treated us both to a weekend at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires.

Everything was just fine.

Still, not long before that May evening when I committed myself to spending a good part of the summer with two strangers, and in spite of my father's gifts and approbation, something inside me began to change.

I felt as if I was waking up. I felt as if I was falling asleep.

And for someone who was known for her even keel, this was frightening.

I'd feel terribly restless, then lethargic; full of nervous energy, then barely able to get out of bed.

My favorite pastimes, like knitting and power-walking along the river, suddenly held no interest.

I started to screen all calls so that I wouldn't have to fake a good humor.

I lost what little sex drive I'd had.

Clare Jean Wellman. I'd always been the girl who was so pleasant and easy to please.

But suddenly, I felt all discontent.

And angry. But I wasn't sure why.

Sad, too, but I couldn't identify the source of the sadness.

Win didn't seem to notice my altered mood and behavior. At least, he didn't say anything to me about it. I guess I was grateful for that. Strange, but true.

I was grateful for his oblivion, or what passed for it.

I started searching out articles in popular women's magazines on mood swings and hormonal shifts, on something astrologers call the Saturn Return, and finally on depression.

But members of the Wellman family didn't go to therapy.

Besides, I asked myself time and again, why did I need therapy? I had a steady job, a good family, a nice home.

I had Win.

Maybe, I came to think, there's something wrong with me.

Maybe . . .

And then, one day while flipping through a magazine called *New England Homes*, I saw a promotional article about Martha's Vineyard and it occurred to me, just like that, that I could go away for a while.

By myself. At least, without Win.

Classes ended in mid-June and the fall semester didn't start until after Labor Day.

Why did I have to stay in Boston when I could be somewhere closer to nature?

I missed spending time in the country and being by the water. It wasn't my choice to live in a big city. But Win had made his decision, New York or Boston, and I'd chosen Boston as the lesser of two urban evils.

A summer in the heat of the city? Or a summer by the seashore?

Besides, Win worked such dreadfully long hours, and I knew he'd be starting a major case sometime in August, which meant we wouldn't be able to take a vacation together anytime soon.

The idea was tantalizing. Going away without Win.

I felt as if I had a dirty, thrilling secret.

For two days I did nothing more but fantasize about spending part of the summer without Win.

And then I saw a sign taped to a streetlight, a sign advertising the housemate event at George.

And there it was. Just like that I had made a verbal commitment to share a summer house in Oak Bluffs with two strangers.

What had I done?

I asked myself this question over and over again on the way home to our spacious loft on Harrison Avenue in the South End. It became a chant in my head, matching my footfalls: *What have I done, oh, what have I done.*

I passed a tiny, bustling restaurant called The Dish on the corner of Shawmut. It was a balmy evening and several diners were seated at the small tables on the sidewalk.

At one table sat a woman alone, her pug resting at her feet. She was about forty-five and simply dressed; she looked content and relaxed.

I could never do that, I thought. Eat alone in a restaurant.

Or could I?

I spent an awful lot of time alone for someone with a live-in boyfriend.

It would be nice, I thought, to work up the nerve to actually do more on my own, like enjoy a warm spring evening at a friendly local restaurant.

The woman caught my eye as I passed, and smiled. I returned her smile, awkwardly, and walked on.

Courage, Clare, I told myself. Taking this house for the summer is a step in the right direction. It's a step toward independence.

That's what you want, right?

Independence?

But what does Win want for you? A teeny voice questioned.

He wouldn't be pleased with my plan, that much I knew for sure. The real question was: Would I have the nerve to stand up to his desires?

In other words, would I have the nerve to say no to him and yes to me?

I stopped at Foodie's, a mid-sized market across from the big cathedral, for Win's milk and for something prepared for my dinner.

And as I waited for the plastic container of macaroni and cheese, I thought about the two women who'd likely be my housemates.

Danielle seemed okay. She was a bit flashier than most of the people I knew but she seemed like a nice person.

I liked nice people.

Niceness, I'd always thought, was an underrated quality.

Gincy?

Well, I was a bit worried about her. About how we'd get along. Already I could sense that she was a bit pugilistic. Kind of a trouble-maker. Kind of wild.

Maybe, I thought, I should reserve any further judgment until we all meet again.

I paid for the groceries and, juggling a white plastic bag and Win's dry-cleaned suit, headed over to Harrison Avenue.

All anxiety aside, I was excited. On some level I really didn't care what Win thought about my plan. And that brought a sense of freedom, something I don't think I'd ever felt before.

I took a deep breath and for a moment imagined I was on the beach, alone with the stars and moon and pounding black surf.

My life suddenly seemed very scary.

And quite possibly, very wonderful.

Danielle: She Likes Herself

It wasn't my fault that I was late for the meeting.

I mean, in the business world, what meeting ever starts exactly on time?

I'll tell you. None. Not many.

I'd been the senior administrative assistant at the Boston office of a large construction firm for seven years and I'd seen my share of meetings.

Not even engineers, known for being all precise and focused, are on time for meetings. Not always.

So who would expect a meeting of random twenty-and-thirty-somethings with some money to spend on a nice summer vacation—a

meeting held at a totally casual bar like George—to begin exactly at six o'clock?

Please.

Most people in my office, located near Northeastern's attenuated urban campus, didn't even leave the building until at least six-thirty. So they told me because I made sure to be out of there no later than five. I didn't make enough money to work until seven.

That was my husband's job.

At least, it would be when I found him.

Anyway, I left the office that day at five on the dot, per usual, giving myself plenty of time to take a leisurely stroll through the mall on my way from Huntington Avenue over to Boylston Street, almost up by the Gardens. It was a very nice day in late May and for a moment I considered avoiding a shortcut through the mall in favor of a bit of fresh air.

And then a disgusting bus roared by, belching thick black smoke, while I waited for a traffic light, and I thought: *What? I should destroy my lungs more than they're already destroyed by this foul city air?*

No thank you.

I suppose I didn't have to walk through the entire mall. It did take me out of my way.

And I suppose I didn't actually have to detour upstairs. But I did and that's when it happened. I saw the cutest pair of slides in the window of Nine West and they just called out to me.

"Danielle Leers!" they cried. "Look at us! Just imagine yourself wearing us to dinner at Davio's."

Well, as any self-respecting woman will tell you, when a pair of fabulous shoes cries out to you, you march right inside the shop and you try them on.

Of course, the slides looked spectacular on my feet, especially with the Raspberry Royale I was wearing on my toenails.

Sure, once summer came I'd be wearing Sassy Strawberry, but I was expert enough to know my color matches—without the help of *Instyle* magazine.

I bought the slides. And when I left the store, feeling that special after-purchase glow, I suddenly remembered that I'd forgotten all about the summer-house rental meeting.

I checked my watch to see it was already six and, with a shrug, headed off toward the closest exit. I figured it was better for me to stick to the streets if I were to make the meeting at all.

Which I didn't. Because by the time I got to George the meeting was over and everyone was hooked up with housemates but for me and two other girls who'd come in late.

Well, long story short the three of us decided to just go to the Vineyard and hope to find something decent to rent.

So there I was, committed to sharing a house—well, at least to trying to find a house—with two total strangers.

Neither of whom seemed anything like me at all.

Maybe, I thought, this was a good thing.

Maybe it would be fun to hang out with the one named Clare. She was okay. Her clothes were a bit bland but at least her hair was nicely, though simply, done. And she had a boyfriend, so she'd be no competition.

Though I did wonder why she was renting a house without said boyfriend.

The other one, Gincy? I wasn't so sure about her. The girl's hair was a disaster. And she hadn't been wearing any jewelry. Unless you counted ratty little silver studs in her ears as jewelry. Which I did not.

Still, she'd be no competition, either. No man I'd want to date would ever in his right mind want to date that mess of a girl.

In the end, it didn't matter how well I got along with my two housemates. I wasn't renting a summer house to make new girlfriends.

Actually, I'd never been much for girlfriends.

True, I kept in touch with a few girls I grew up with in Oyster Bay. That's on Long Island, part of New York. We e-mailed on occasion and I saw them whenever I went home to visit my family.

But I didn't have a lot in common with Amy and Michelle and Rachel. Not only because they were all married and I wasn't.

I'd kind of been different from the start.

Like, I was the only one of the group to leave home for college.

While Amy and Rachel attended a local community college and Michelle made the commute to and from New York University every day (her parents didn't want her to live in the dorms), I went off to Boston University and majored in communications with a minor in art history.

For four years I flew home to Long Island for holidays and for summers and, though I always had a nice time, I was always happy to get back to Boston and my own life.

Then, as graduation drew closer, it became clear that my parents assumed I'd be returning home to find a job in New York.

I rebelled against the notion.

I loved my family. But I didn't want to start my so-called adult life under their gaze. They'd given me enough grief about going to Boston for college, but I'd stuck to my guns. I needed to be alone, to grow.

And there was just no way I could go home after those four years.

My privacy had become too important.

Amy, Michelle, and Rachel were each married by the age of twenty-three.

My father hinted that maybe I might want to marry, too.

My mother wondered what was wrong with those stiff New Englanders that they couldn't tell a lovely young woman when they saw one.

Honestly, I was in no hurry to marry. At first.

Which brings me back to the summer house. I had chosen to rent a place in Oak Bluffs because I couldn't afford to take a house on

Nantucket or one of the super-expensive areas of the Vineyard, like Edgartown.

I knew I could ask my parents for money. They'd give it to me, but first they'd try to get me to drop the idea of a house and come home for a few weeks that summer.

And I didn't want to do that. Their love could be so overwhelming. I'd never stopped being afraid that I would get lost in their emphatic embrace.

And it was someone else's embrace that interested me.

I was taking a summer house in the first place because it was time to find a husband.

A husband worthy of Danielle Sarah Leers.

Who was Danielle Sarah Leers that fateful summer? Let me tell you a bit about her.

Height: five feet, four inches tall. Just right.

Coloring: medium olive complexion brown eyes, and perfectly arched eyebrows, thanks to Studio Salon.

Hair: thick and dark brown; I liked to wear it to my shoulders and it was always perfectly groomed.

Figure: some had called me voluptuous. Others said I resembled a young Sophia Loren.

Or a Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Or, on one of my best days, a Jennifer Lopez.

Really. People told me this. You can ask my mother.

Once a long time ago, a guy had the nerve to tell me I was a smidgen too fat. I told him to take a leap. What I looked like was my business and my business only. He tried to backpedal and claim he meant the fat remark as a compliment, but it was too late. He was history in my book.

See, I'd always believed that self-esteem was a very good quality to have. I owed mine to my parents. They taught me early on that I was beautiful and entirely worthy of happiness and love and social success.

They taught, and I listened. I might not have listened so well all the time at school, especially during geography and social studies—like I've ever had my day ruined by not being able to find, I don't know, Uruguay, on a map! But at home I listened very carefully.

It wasn't that I was full of myself. I'd known girls who were full of themselves and they were just insufferable. Insufferable was, is, and always will be unacceptable. But I did advocate feeling good about myself. Feeling worthy of good things.

Why not?

As my grandmother was fond of saying, "You're dead a long time." Think about it.

Anyway, I didn't worry obsessively about an extra pound or two. I knew I was beautiful with or without the pound.

And I didn't tolerate anything less than total gentlemanly behavior from men.

I went for regular massages and facials and had a manicure and pedicure every two weeks. Once, someone at the office asked me why I bothered to have my toenails done during the winter.

"It's not sandal weather," she pointed out. "No one sees your toes."

"Correction," I replied. "I see my toes. And I'm the one that matters."

Since high school I'd worn only yellow gold, never silver. Not that I hated silver; it's just that I'd decided to have a trademark, a signature style. And I'd learned early on that every woman should have a personal jeweler, someone she trusted.

Every woman, I believed, should have a lot of things all for herself. It all came back to self-esteem.

It made me want to scream when I saw women allowing themselves to be trampled by men who wanted them to pay for their own dinner, men who didn't call when they said they were going to call, men who wore sweatpants in public.

I thought: *What is the world coming to when this bad behavior is allowed?*

Here was the thing: You gave men an inch, they took a mile. You had to set boundaries. You had to make them play by the rules. And if they didn't want to play by the rules, they were out of the game. Period.

I considered myself a good person.

I donated the previous season's clothes to a homeless shelter. You know the mistakes, the pieces you just shouldn't have bought.

Not that I made many mistakes.

At the end of each year I wrote a check to the Women's Lunch Place.

"When you have as much as we do," my father often said, "you should give a little back."

Someday, I'd think, when I have children, I'll teach them what my parents taught me. I'll make sure they're proud and strong and generous, and then happiness and success will follow.

At least, that's what I was told should happen. Sometimes I had my doubts about the happiness part. Not that I talked about those doubts or anything.

Though I had doubts, I did have faith, of a sort. My family didn't keep kosher or go to synagogue, but on the high holy days we did gather for the special meals. The women cooked and the men sang and read some prayers.

Most of which I didn't understand because I'd never taken Hebrew in school.

Please. There was enough in life to keep track of, what with a job and a social life.

Still, I'd always felt that tradition was important and vowed that when I married, my husband and I would instill the importance of tradition in our children.

Back again to the topic of a husband.

I had a plan once, a long time ago, to meet Mr. Right by the age of twenty-five or so.

Maybe it wasn't so much of a plan as a felt certainty. I just never thought I wouldn't meet Mr. Right by my midtwenties.

But there I was, twenty-nine and single. And turning thirty that summer, August 10th.

Thirty.

I could hardly believe it.

Suddenly, I was very, very aware that many of the other women on the streets of Boston were younger than me. I took to scrutinizing them, the clarity of their skin, the thickness of their hair, the brightness of their teeth, the firmness of their flesh.

Rivals. Dangerous rivals.

Not that I'd lost confidence in myself, but. . .

Face it. Thirty is old for a woman.

Danielle, I told myself, *it's high time you got down to business. It's high time you tied the knot.*

Marriage was a sign of maturity, right? It said to the world, "Look, I'm an adult. I can talk about mortgages and gutters and snowblowers and property taxes and in-laws and school systems and life insurance with the best of them. With my parents.

Marriage was an end of childhood or a prolonged adolescence or something.

It was an end to something,

Well, I was ready to put an end to something.

I was ready to be an adult.

I was ready to join the club.

Now, all I had to do was find Mr. Right.

No big deal, I told myself. He was out there somewhere.

And he was going to love me in my new slides.

Clare: Nothing Can Stop Her

Win wasn't happy about the summer house.

I hadn't expected him to be. Still, his disapproval scared me a little.

Win would never hit me. It wasn't that. It was the look in his eye, the steely look, the look that seemed to cut me off from his consideration.

We were in the expensive, state-of-the-art kitchen Win had chosen for our state-of-the-art new home.

"If you're worried about the money," I said, "I'll pay for the house out of my parents' allowance."

The look intensified. "Don't ever doubt my capacity to support the both of us," he said, in a low, cold voice. "I'm the man in this relationship. Don't ever forget that."

What could I say? I turned away from him, picked up the dish towel, and began to dry the silverware.

"Clare, why do you insist on doing the dishes by hand?" Win sounded exasperated. "We have a Bosch to do that."

I whirled around. "You're always too busy to spend time with me anyway. What does it matter if I go away for a while?"

Or if I like to wash the dishes myself?

"It matters because—" Win stopped. Changed tactics.

Now his voice would be cajoling. Calculated to calm.

He came close and put his hand on my shoulder. "Sweetie, why don't you go home, spend the summer with your mother."

Why? So she can keep an eye on me?

"I'm taking the house." I moved out from under his touch. "You can't stop me from doing this, Win."

Win took a deep breath before delivering his prediction. "Mark my words, Clare, you'll regret this. But you know what? If you don't want to take my advice, fine. I'm just trying to stop you from making a big mistake."

You're just trying to stop me from living my life.

Win went back to his laptop, to some document he had to review for work. I went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed.

It occurred to me again that I was so alone. I had no friends other than the wives of some of Win's colleagues.

And they weren't really friends. Not the kind I remembered from grammar school, the close friends, the kind you giggled with, the kind who knew your family almost as well as you did, the kind who knew how you liked to eat ice cream straight from the container.

An hour later, Win came to bed. I was under the covers, still in my clothes. We didn't speak.

Don't ever go to bed angry. That was one of my mother's favorite pieces of relationship advice. She swore she and Daddy had never gone to bed without first making up.

I thought she was lying.

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