



DIVESTITURES

BY NANCY GESSNER

NANCY GESSNER was born in Santa Cruz, California and grew up in the Ozarks. By the time she was cast in her first play on her twenty-first birthday, she was living in Arizona, where she directed and acted in local productions for more than a decade.

Since moving to New York in 1999, she has produced, directed and starred in a one-woman play, and appeared onstage as a singer.

In recent years, she has added new rhythms to her artistic voice by studying drawing at the Art Students League of New York, and by writing.

She has found inspiration in the Heather Gardens at the Cloisters, on Neptune Beach, and dancing in the dining room with her husband Charlie. They live on Long Island.

Marie sat on her front stoop, smoking a cigarette, and listening to her husband's faint grunts from the backyard. Despite her objections, he was digging up the back corner for a vegetable garden and she was waiting to see if he would discover what was underneath the smooth topsoil. Although by now, there was probably not much to find. That part of the yard hadn't been touched by anything but a garden hose for more than seventeen years. Since the summer Sam was three years old.

She'd logged a lot of time on these steps back in those days, sitting on the stoop surrounded by cigarette butts and lackluster houseplants she brought outdoors with her for the light. She didn't know if these excursions did them any good, but it made her feel proactive while she practiced blowing smoke rings. Mostly she was just hiding out while Greg put Sam down for his nap. It had been the last year they could get him to take a nap. Greg liked to put him down on the weekends or whenever he was home, but it worked best if Marie stepped out. If Sam heard Mommy walking around, he'd never get to sleep, but would keep talking, keep

asking questions. That summer her son was three, the general theme was dogs: which of the neighbor kids had dogs, which dogs were having puppies, and why can't we get a dog?

Marie couldn't tell her three-year-old that he was more than enough for her all by himself, that he took every ounce of her care-giving capabilities and even though she gave him all she had to give, she still wasn't sure she was doing it right and she already spent way too much time praying he wouldn't grow up malnourished and deranged.

She couldn't tell his hopeful little face that even her droopy houseplants felt like a burden and a reproach, and with her infrequent attentions and cigarette smoke, they probably were heading for an early disposal. She couldn't tell her son what she hadn't even told his father yet, why she was so exhausted and cranky, and why she had tried to cut back on cigarettes until she decided it didn't matter anymore. A puppy was out of the question. But Sam wore her down until the day she finally told him to ask his father.

On that Saturday, Greg put Sam down for a nap while she waited outside, wondering if Sam was asking the big question. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she went inside. She entered her own house like a burglar, gripping the front doorknob and turning it until she heard the catch release, and silently stepping inside to find Greg standing there with his shirt off. Before she could wonder if he was hot-and-bothered or just hot, he said, "took the laundry downstairs for you, Hon," and disappeared down the hallway, his socks making no noise on the carpet runner. She took off her sandals and followed him, stopping on the way to peek into Sam's room. It was cooler in there, with an oscillating fan pointed well above his head. Marie kept meaning to get one for their room. Sam's face was turned toward the wall so she couldn't see if he was asleep, but he was still and his breathing was even. That was enough.

Down the hall in the master bedroom, Greg was lying on the bed. He'd taken his socks off and his slacks were already hanging neatly on a hanger on his side of the closet, leaving only his modest royal blue shorts. In his late thirties, his muscles had hardened and the hair on his chest had only a few hints of gray. His eyes were closed, and she sat on the other side of the bed, gently shifting and lowering herself to lie beside him on the blue chenille bedspread, leaving plenty of room for the air to circulate between them. They really needed to get that fan.

"So glad to be home," he said. "The office was crazy."

Whispering, she asked him, "Did you get a lot done today?"

He whispered back, "We got a lot of legwork done and we're in good shape for the meeting Monday. Sorry I had to go in on a Saturday,

but it couldn't be helped. But when Sam wakes up, we can all do something."

"Did you have anything in mind?"

"Not just yet-why, did you?"

"I wondered if you'd promised him a shopping trip or anything?"

He laughed and she immediately shushed him, "Greg, please!"

Whispering again, he asked, "The dog?"

"Yes, the dog-it's all he talks about lately."

"Well, we'll have to see about that."

"Greg—"

"Now don't worry, I didn't promise him anything. Yet. I told him we had to talk to you about it first."

"Oh, that's just great."

"What?"

"I told him to 'ask your father.'"

"His father doesn't have a problem with it-his mother, on the other hand..."

"It's a lot of work, Greg."

"He would love it, though."

"We really should talk about a few things before you go and—"

He rolled over and kissed her gently. She reached for him, but he'd already rolled back to sit on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to take a shower now. We'll talk about it later."

He went into the bathroom and turned on the little waterproof radio they kept there. It was tuned to a classic rock station they both liked, and suddenly a blaring My Sharona blasted her from the bed, hissing at him to "Turn that thing off now," as she lunged for the bedroom door.

Too late. She heard her cue: "Mommmyyyyyy," and went down the hall to answer.

That afternoon stood out in Marie's mind because that was the only conversation she and Greg ever, EVER had about getting a puppy, until he came home from work one day with a puppy.

She'd been excited all day. Greg had called from work and said he'd be a little late-he had a surprise for her. She thought it would be something she actually wanted-tickets for something, a babysitter, maybe even some opportunity to finally have the private mommy-daddy talk she'd been trying to circle around to for weeks now.

Marie was waiting in the living room when he got home. She'd been picking the dead leaves off the plants, but when they were almost bald she gave up and was just sitting on the edge of the sofa with Sam skittering around her, half playing and half watching her. She never had any idea a kid would watch her this much. Like he was studying her. Like he knew her secret. The sound of Greg's car out front released

them both and Sam started jumping and spinning around as Marie sank back into the cushions, glad the waiting was over.

She could hear Greg's footsteps on the stairs and he took longer than usual to unlock the door. Only when the series of jingles and clicks freed the door lock and the knob turned did it occur to her that she should have gotten up to unlock it for him. Greg was carrying a sturdy box with no lid on it, but as he reached back to push the door closed, he didn't even glance at his wife. Instead, he looked down at Sam and said, "Guess what I've got? Guess who's here to say hi to you? Do you want to meet him?" and carefully knelt down on the carpet and lifted out a black, brown and white short-haired puppy. Sam's eyes got big and he was almost panting in his excitement, staring at the best thing to happen to him in his whole life. Greg set the surprise down on the carpet, where he promptly peed. The surprises just kept coming.

"Honey, could you get us a towel? Hey, Buddy, let's take him out to the kitchen," and Greg gingerly lifted the leaky little puppy and walked away to the kitchen, with Sam trotting after him.

As she carefully knelt down and blotted at the rug with an old towel, she could hear Sam squealing, "I'm gonna call him IGGY! Can I? Can I?"

"He's your dog; you can call him anything you want."

Marie had a few things to call that dog.

Housebroken wasn't one of them, and a lot more of their towels graduated to "old towels" that first week, the smell seeping into everything, making her sick. She had no idea how to make a dog pee outside. They took Iggy for walks and he and Sam had a terrific time exploring, but other than saying, "C'mon Iggy, do your thing," Marie had no idea how to get him to get down to business. Eventually they'd go back home and then twenty minutes later she'd step in something, and try not to gag as she dug up another towel to desecrate.

And she and Greg still hadn't had their talk. When she called him at the office, he was too busy, and when he came home, he usually went straight into the living room after he got cleaned up so he could watch Sam and Iggy rolling around on the carpet. Eventually he would call to her to come out and join him. She'd put dinner on hold to go sit on the couch, where he would absently put his arm around her, and she'd wonder how two people could look at the same scene and see something so different. Greg lit up watching them play, cheering them on with a delighted laugh. Marie rested back from the scene, just happy both energetic unpredictable little creatures were together right in front of her and not getting into anything at the moment. And if they did, Greg could handle it.

After about a week of this, she asked Greg, "Did you have a dog

when you were a kid?"

"Sure."

Silence.

She asked him, "Are you going to ask me if I had a dog?"

"What?"

"Well, that's the usual mode of conversation, a little back and forth — don't you want to know if I had a dog?"

"Did you?"

"No."

He looked at her, "So then what was the point of that?"

"The point is that you didn't even care to know, want to know that about me. It didn't even occur to you."

"Well, I'm sorry. I guess I just figured you never had a dog or you'd know what a great addition they are to the family, how good it is for Sam, and I wouldn't have had to talk you into it."

She stared at him. "When did you ever talk me into it? You never talked about anything to me, just mentioned once to think about it on your way into the bathroom one time and then months later from out of the blue, now we have a puppy! What's talking about that?"

"Why are you so down on everything? Look at them, they're having a great time."

"They're having a great time NOW but what about at night?"

Nights had not been going well. Whatever the distracting frolic of the day, the night was big and dark and Iggy missed his mom. Or maybe he just missed his daytime playmate. Whatever the reason, he usually woke up around midnight or 1:00am and whimpered. A lot. Marie thought about going to him but she didn't want him to get used to company-on-demand in the middle of the night and she definitely did not want the dog to sleep with them. They had enough to deal with.

Greg said, "Oh, come on—he's just getting used to us," and he slipped off the couch to sit on the floor. Sam and Iggy were still tussling around, oblivious to their audience.

She replied, "I wonder if Sam would cry if we left him alone one night."

"I don't know."

"Want to try it?"

He looked up at her. "You want to make our son cry?"

"Of course not, just my way of saying maybe we could go away somewhere. Overnight. Just for one night."

Greg put his elbow up on the sofa to lean up toward her. She imagined that suddenly he realized their romance had been stuffed into a back closet with the box of baby clothes and it was time to take it out

again, when he opened his well-shaped lips to ask her, "What would we do with Iggy?"

She jerked herself to her feet and would have stormed over to the door but with all the toy, boy and dog in her way, it was more of a seething tiptoe.

Sam was watching her now-again-and Greg. Her path finally clear, she opened the front door and stepped out onto the stoop.

Swinging the door around to block some of the light, she stood in the dusky shadows and stared into the blackness, trying not to get teary. The autumn air was cool and she leaned against the railing, rehearsing the words she would say to Greg if she ever got the chance. At this rate, she'd probably end up cornering him in the shower with a "here's a fresh towel, I'm pregnant but I've made an appointment not to be pregnant, not sure what to do, you want eggs or Fruit Loops this morning?"

The appointment was next Tuesday.

Unfortunately, Marie and Greg had spent the majority of their entire dating career making out instead of talking about political or moral issues back when they still had the buffer of being general and hypothetical, so she had no idea if Greg would look at her plan as a practical option or think she was a monster plotting to kill his child. But there was no way they could dispassionately discuss this as a fetus or an inconvenience without sliding into thoughts of what Sam's little brother or sister would look like. And once they'd started thinking of the baby as a fourth in the annual Christmas photo, the whole discussion would go up in smoke. Maybe it was good she didn't talk to Greg, until she was sure.

It was probably out of her hands anyway.

The last time they'd even had dinner without Sam was about three weeks ago, but that was to meet two of Greg's associates and their wives for dinner. They were both from the regional office and their wives knew each other and all the men knew each other. They were very friendly and talked to Marie, but it was only on the ride home that she realized she didn't remember the wives' names but she knew the names and ages of all their children, along with their school projects and sports. Just like they probably left thinking of her as "Sam's mom."

The porch suddenly flooded with light and she turned around to squint at the outline of her husband in profile, as he said, "I went ahead and put the hamburgers on-everything's just about ready."

He walked away without waiting to see if she was coming.

She followed behind him into the kitchen.

Sam was already sitting up in his chair with his napkin tucked into the neck of his t-shirt, peeking over the edge of the table to watch Iggy eat. He didn't seem to notice when they came into the room, and

he didn't seem to notice that he was the only person either of his parents spoke to the entire meal.

Marie sat back and watched Greg and Sam focusing on the dog, and surveyed all the cleanup she was supposed to do for the dinner she couldn't manage a mouthful of. Nobody was looking at her, and she timidly rested the palm of her hand on her abdomen.

Surely Greg would have noticed she was pregnant if he'd bothered to look?

"You didn't eat anything much, you okay?" he said.

She yanked her hand away. For a moment she thought he'd read her mind or was on the verge of guessing, but when she opened her mouth to answer, he stood up. "Ready for a walk, guys?"

They rushed out, leaving Marie sitting by herself in the kitchen, almost alone and almost decided.

In the morning, she was sure.

Greg was in Sam's room trying to wrestle him into his clothes, but Marie was already dressed and Iggy was waiting by the front door. She'd better get the show on the road.

"I'm taking Iggy out," she called down the hall, before she grabbed the leash off the closet doorknob with one hand, and grabbed up Iggy with the other. Once outside, she walked down the front steps and sat down, watching the neighborhood come to life with morning commuters hurrying off to their cars and hurrying off down the road.

She looked down at the puppy in her hand, and felt his tiny heart beating through his thin skin and his fragile ribcage. It would have taken two seconds to click the end of the leash into the loop on his leather collar, but she didn't. Instead, she quickly lowered the dog to the sidewalk and flipped the back of her hand against his backside to make him trot across the sidewalk toward the street.

She saw the car coming, and saw clearly the inevitable fate of this little part of her family. Of this inconvenient pet. Of this creature who was more than she could deal with. The rapid approach of the car was forcing her to decide right now if this was what she had meant to happen, if this was what she wanted. Before she knew the answer, the car knocked Iggy onto the side of the road several yards away from her and kept driving. It didn't even slow down. It was all over.

Sam and Greg came outside just a few moments later. Sam wanted Iggy, and when they saw her standing there with only a leash in her hand, her shock and her hormones surfaced in instant tears. "I don't know what happened — I guess the clip wasn't on good. I was just coming to get you-Iggy ran off down the street," and she pointed in the opposite direction of where the lifeless dog made a small bump on the side of

the road. "You guys go start looking for him-I'm going to the bathroom. I'll catch up with you in a minute," and she watched them hurry up the street.

Ducking around to the backyard, she pulled a garbage bag and an old box from the shed and in less than a minute, Iggy was off the road and stowed behind the shed until Greg went to work and she could bury him.

Greg took the morning off work that day, and all three of them looked for Iggy. Marie felt positively buoyant and the search to her felt more like a freedom march. The three of them were together and united in a common purpose. It was enough.

That afternoon while Sam took his nap she dug up the corner of the backyard. When Greg came home, she said she'd been thinking about doing some gardening.

The three of them spent more time together after that day, beginning with their hours walking the sidewalks, talking to neighbors, and together convincing Sam that Iggy would turn up later, convincing him that maybe a nice family had found Iggy. This continued through the weekend. It was the most time they'd ever spent together in a row, united in their search. Marie felt like she'd already found what she was looking for.

Every now and then Greg asked her about her garden and she said she might get around to it someday.

Every now and then she thought about the talk she'd wanted to have with Greg that summer, and wondered what the outcome would have been if they'd decided together. As it was, she'd watched the appointed hour approach, when she was forced to decide. And when the time came, she quickly lowered herself to the table and waited for it to be over.

She was a better wife to her husband and a better mother to her son for keeping their household a size that was manageable to her. She never did get around to starting that garden, and as the years passed, the area she dug up grew to look the same as the rest of the yard, until she couldn't pinpoint the exact spot.

Just as she couldn't pinpoint why Greg decided today was the day to begin the garden, or why she was hiding out from it. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she stubbed out her cigarette and walked around to the back of the house, where her husband was standing with his shirt off.

The topsoil in the corner of the yard had been turned over and broken up in a nice square patch, very contained and orderly. He smiled at her. "We're ready now."

“For what?” she said.

“For anything we want to grow,” he said.

And together they walked into the house, leaving all the casualties of their marriage buried behind them.

Melissa Bryant ♦ Family Portrait 3

