The Spark and Enduring Fire

by lionessvalenti

Summary

Betty has always denied this part of her, but living with Giselle has brought it to the surface

Betty lit the last of her wedding candles. It was one of the few remains of her marriage brought with her to New York, and now she was grateful for them. They were the only candles in the apartment and with the power out across the five boroughs due to a densely heavy snowfall, they were finally put to use.

The door opened and Giselle walked in, flashlight in hand, casting a bright light across the warm candlelit room. "So, the power won't be on until tomorrow evening, at the earliest."

"Says who?" Betty asked, thinking of all the busybodies in their building who could spin a tale based on rumor. They'd had a lot of unpleasant things to say about a divorcee and a Jew moving in together six months prior. They'd settled down on that subject, but Betty never could quite forget.

"Says the voice on Mrs. Merriweather's transistor radio. There's only so much they can do until it stops snowing, and that might not be for hours." Giselle flipped off the flashlight and sank into the sofa. She stretched her arms up over her head, pulling her sweater up her stomach to reveal her navel. With her short cigarette pants, it looked like all of her clothes were a size too small. Maybe they were.

Betty pushed Giselle's feet from the last third of the sofa, and sat down. Giselle promptly placed her feet in Betty's lap. They were cold from walking the halls barefoot, the chill seeping through the thin material of Betty's cotton skirt. "What do we do now?"

Giselle shrugged. "There's nowhere to go unless you want to trudge around the city in a foot of snow."
Betty shook her head. "No. If it wasn't seven-thirty, I'd just go to bed, but I'd never fall asleep this early."

"Me either. We have a couple bottles of wine and that chocolate cake. How does that sound?" Giselle raised an eyebrow, and in the flickering shadows of candlelight, she looked positively devilish.

Betty's stomach did a little somersault. She pushed Giselle's feet away and jumped up from the sofa. "I'll open the wine," she said, hoping Giselle couldn't see her flushed cheeks in the dim light.

Alone in the kitchen she gripped the sink with both hands and took several deep breaths, staring at her faint reflection in the window, from the candle perched on the stovetop. She swallowed hard and try to push down all the feelings the threatened to rise up and spill over. Feelings she hated, that couldn't be true, but she also couldn't deny. It wasn't the first time she stood before a sink, gazing into her own eyes, telling herself that she wouldn't be a lesbian. She wanted a house and a family. She couldn't have those things if she was a sexual deviant.

It had been easier to ignore when she allowed her mother to make the choices in her life: where she went to school, and who she was going to marry. She and Spencer barely knew each other, but had been pushed together by mothers who put more thought into "good breeding" than if they were actually compatible, or enjoyed each other's company. Perhaps he was always going to be cold and shut her out, or maybe Spencer sensed her forced interest and her desire for him to fix her, and that was why he lied and cheated. She may not have been unfaithful, but she had lied, mostly to herself.

Now, Betty had to tell herself daily to no longer be a lesbian, and most definitely not to lust after Giselle, who was a sexual deviant in her own right, but at least publicly heterosexual.

Betty opened the bottle and carried it in into the living room, holding two glasses by the stems in the other. She set down the glasses and poured for them both.

"Thank you," Giselle said. She was now sitting up on the sofa with a cigarette one hand. She glanced around and added, "I guess I should have gotten the cake."

"No, it's fine, I'll get it," Betty said. She started for the kitchen again, but Giselle reached out and took Betty by the wrist. Her touch was like a spark, and Betty almost jumped, but instead of retreating, she allowed herself to indulge in the heat of Giselle's skin against her own. It seemed, for an instant, almost natural, to be touching and enjoying it.

"Don't worry about it," Giselle said, pulling her hand away slowly, her fingers dragging against the back of Betty's hand. "Sit with me. We have plenty of time for cake. When was the last time we had a girl's night?"

Betty took a step back. "It's been awhile," she admitted. She lowered herself onto the sofa next to Giselle and reached out for her glass.

Giselle took a lengthy drag off her cigarette, and then blew smoke away so it wouldn't reach Betty's face. "So tell me everything. How's Joan doing?"

"Delighted," Betty replied, relieved to the change in subject. She took a sip of the wine. She'd never been much of a drinker as it allowed for a loss of control she'd never found comfortable, but it's not as if she was going anywhere. "She's going to be at that perfect pregnant look just in time for Connie's wedding."

"Are you jealous?"
Betty frowned. There was something about the way Giselle asked it, as if she knew what Betty was feeling, just from her inflection. It was possible Giselle knew her better than anyone, even before they were roommates. Even when Betty was insufferable, and yes, she knew she had been cruel, especially to Giselle.

"Yes and no," Betty said finally. "I thought we'd be doing these things together. But now she's in another state and she's leaving me behind. Once she's a mother and I'm not, she'll have the thing I wanted. The family and dreams I couldn't make work."

"Hey." Giselle leaned over to smash out her cigarette, and then turned to face Betty fully. "Spencer was a dick. Your divorce is not your fault. And don't forget: you're going to law school. You're doing the thing Joan turned down. You know there was a part of her that was jealous of you when you told her."

She was right, of course. Betty had seen it, just a flash in Joan's eyes before she offered her congratulations. It was more than Betty had given her when Joan was the one accepted to Yale. After that Betty dropped the subject and they spent the rest of Christmas talking about the baby.

"I have more things to be jealous of," Betty said quietly before finishing off her wine. She noticed that Giselle hadn't even touched hers yet. Was she imbibing too much? That couldn't look good.

Giselle chuckled, a low throaty noise that sent chills up Betty's spine, and picked up the bottle to refill Betty's glass. "You need this more than I do."

"Thank you," Betty replied automatically. She turned toward Giselle, pulling one leg up with her, leaning against the soft afghan that was stretched across the back of the sofa. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" Giselle finally picked up her own glass.

"Sleep with the men the way you do," Betty asked her voice dropping to barely a whisper, but without the sounds of traffic outside, and radios and televisions throughout the building, every word was clear.

"Oh." Giselle took a drink. "The way I see it, I'm just doing what men do, but I'm the one who gets called a whore, usually by the men I sleep with. They want it, and then they want to shame me for wanting it too. I like sex and I'm not going to be ashamed of that."

Betty nodded, but she must have still looked confused, because Giselle laughed and placed he hand on Betty's knee.

"You ready to get out there?" she asked.

"No," Betty said with a quick shake of her head. "I don't want to sleep with random men, I just want -- I want a normal family. I want someone who will understand me. Who will actually like spending time with me. I want a real partner. A friend, who is also... compatible."

"Well, there will be plenty of guys at Yale. I'm sure there are more than a few who would fight about the law with you all day. You'll have your pick of the litter."

"I suppose," Betty replied softly.

With a furrowed brow, Giselle leaned in closer. "Betty, do you even want a husband?"

"I want a family."
Giselle plucked the glass from Betty's hand and set it and her own aside. She took both of Betty's hands and looked her right in the face, the candlelight reflecting in her eyes. Betty was suddenly reminded of how handsy Giselle had been with Connie, how comfortable they were with each other, and how Betty could have never allowed herself to be that reckless with even her closest girlfriends.

"Tell me," Giselle said, breaking Betty from her train of thought, "if you really want to marry another man."

Betty froze. Her joints felt numb, and she couldn't move, the blood pumping loudly in her ears. She had been so careful, and Giselle somehow knew.

"Betty, it's okay," Giselle said, and the words were barely past her lips when Betty pulled away, the spell broken.

"No, it's not!" Betty jumped to her feet. She wanted to scream, but the whole building would have heard her. She wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go, trapped by the weather. Instead, she paced back and forth, but it did nothing to dispel the sense of the room closing in on her. "I did everything I could to get away from it. I tried so hard and -- how did you know? How could you have possibly known?"

Giselle's shoulders slumped as she looked up at Betty with something mixed with compassion and pity. "When you're an outcast to proper society, you see other outcasts. But you don't have to do this alone."

Betty shook her head, and the motion made her feel dizzy and ill. "If not alone, then another lie with another husband. There's no other way."

"Of course there's another way." Giselle stood and caught Betty in her arms, stopping her in place. Betty tried to pull away. She couldn't get lost in Giselle's touch like she had only minutes before. It was weakness, and Betty had built up walls to avoid weakness. Now that Giselle knew, it was possible Joan knew, and her mother. She would be more ostracized than she was already.

"Hey, I've got you." Giselle's voice was soft, but her grip around Betty's forearm was steadfast. With her other hand, she reached up and touched Betty's hot cheek, brushing the hair away from her face. "I've had you this whole time."

There was no time for Betty to react as Giselle leaned in and kissed her. If the brush of her hand had been a spark, Giselle's kiss was a wildfire, burning throughout Betty's body. Every candle in the room seemed to burn brighter and hotter around them, and Betty was lost the cigarette and wine taste of Giselle's mouth. She grabbed Giselle around the waist and pulled her closer, the consequences be damned. When they finally parted, Betty kept her grasp around Giselle, not letting her go.

"How?" Betty breathed, pulling only her mouth away. She rested her forehead against Giselle's, her eyes fluttering shut, and then open again. Was it possible to want to never close her eyes again, while also relaxing with them shut forever? "You were with all those men."

Giselle laughed and brushed her thumb across Betty's wrist, a gesture possibly more intimate than their kiss. "Haven't you read the Kinsey report? Sexuality is a spectrum."

Betty hadn't read it -- far too improper for her -- but she knew the general ideas behind, having listened to psych majors Giselle and Connie discussing it and its merits and criticisms.
"Why didn't you say anything?"

"You would have just denied it. I know you never -- you never approved of me, so I didn't know if telling you I felt the same way sometimes would even make a difference." Giselle sighed and smiled sadly. "You said you wanted a real partner and maybe I wanted to be that partner."

"But two women can't--" Betty started. She wasn't sure what she was going to say. Be partners? Be anything other than deviants? But then again, she'd always been closer to her girlfriends than she had ever been with Spencer, or even any man before that. Who was to say those relationships were less valid?

Giselle grinned, and despite having no idea what Betty was going to say, she replied, "Of course we can." She kissed Betty again, this time softer, but no less intense. "I've wanted this for months."

"Really? But I'd been so awful to you," Betty said.

"But you aren't anymore," Giselle replied. She pressed her lips to Betty's neck, just below her ear. Betty gasped softly, her hips jutting forward of their own accord. No one had ever touched her that way before. Giselle chuckled and lowered her hand to Betty's hip, toying with the buttons on her skirt. "So, what now?"

Betty could have been uncertain or afraid, but for once, she had never been more sure of anything in her entire life. "Show me what's so great about sex."

Giselle's eyes widened as she grinned. "Oh, I'm going to drive you crazy."

Betty laughed. "What's new?"

The candles were nearly out by the time Betty fell asleep on the floor, wrapped up in the blanket from the sofa and Giselle's arms. When she woke hours later, the power was still out and now she was alone.

Betty sat up, holding the afghan over her bare breasts. Standing in front of the window was Giselle, stark naked, holding a cigarette between two fingers. Her pale skin seemed to glow in the morning sun, highlighting every little hair on her body, and her nipples were hardened in the chilly apartment air. She reminded Betty of a painting. Katherine Watson would have been so proud of the paper Betty could write on the artwork that was Giselle Levy.

Giselle must have felt Betty's gaze on her, because she turned and smiled. "Hey."

"Hi," Betty replied. "Aren't you freezing?"

Laughing, Giselle shook her head. "Come here."

Betty got up and wrapped the blanket around her. Giselle might be comfortable standing in front of a window naked, but Betty still had propriety to think about. She leaned against Giselle and followed her gaze out the window.

"Oh wow," Betty breathed as the sunlight hit her face with a subtle winter warmth.

The sunrise was still orange, pink, and purple, and the untouched snow atop every roof sparkled in dazzling colors as far as the eye could see.

Betty pushed some of the blanket aside and took Giselle's hand in her own. Giselle looked over and they shared a smile.
Out of the corner of her eye, Betty saw one of the candles on the table was still flickering with the last gasps of life. Betty leaned over and unceremoniously blew it out. Smoke rose in soft grey curls before disappearing into the air. There weren't going to be anymore wedding candles. She had all the fire she needed now.

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