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Where We Belong

Written by Emily Giffin

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where we belong

emily giffin



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marian

I know what they say about secrets. I've heard it all. That they can haunt and govern you. That they can poison relationships and divide families. That in the end, only the truth will set you free. Maybe that's the case for some people and some secrets. But I truly believed I was the exception to such portents, and never once breathed the smallest mention of my nearly two-decade-long secret to anyone. Not to my closest friends in my most intoxicated moments or to my boyfriend, Peter, in our most intimate ones. My father knew nothing of it—and I didn't even discuss it with my mother, the only person who was there when it all happened, almost as if we took an unspoken vow of silence, willing ourselves to let go, move on. I never forgot, not for a single day, yet I was also convinced that sometimes, the past really was the past.

I should have known better. I should have taken those words to

heart—the ones that started it all on that sweltering night so long ago:
You can run but you can't hide.

But those words, that night, my secret, are the farthest things from my mind as Peter and I stroll down Bleecker Street following a lingering dinner at Lupa, one of our favorite restaurants in the city. After several stops and starts, winter seems over for good, and the balmy spring night is made warmer by the bottle of Barolo Peter ordered. It's one of the many things I admire about him—his fine taste coupled with his firm belief that life is too short for unexceptional wine. Unexceptional anything really. He is too kind and hard-working to be considered a snob, shunning his lazy trust fund acquaintances who accomplished “nothing on their own,” but he's certainly an elitist, having always traveled in prep school, power circles. I'm not uncomfortable in that world—but had always existed on the fringe of it before Peter brought me into his vortex of jet shares, yachts, and vacation homes in Nantucket and St. Bart's.

“Ah! Finally. No slush on the sidewalks,” I say, happy to be wearing heels and a light cardigan after months of unseemly rubber boots and puffy winter coats.

“I know . . . *Quel soulagement,*” Peter murmurs, draping his arm around me. He is possibly the only guy I know who can get away with musing in French without sounding insufferably pretentious, perhaps because he spent much of his childhood in Paris, the son of a French runway model and an American diplomat. Even after he moved to the States when he was twelve, he was allowed to speak only French at home, his accent as flawless as his manners.

I smile and bury my cheek against his broad shoulder as he plants a kiss on the top of my head and says, “Where to now, Champ?”

He coined the nickname after I beat him in a contentious game

of Scrabble on our third date, then doubled down and did it again, gloating all the while. I laughed and made the fatal mistake of telling him “Champ” was the ironic name of my childhood dog, a blind chocolate Lab with a bad limp, thus sealing the term of endearment. “Marian” was quickly relegated to mixed company, throes of passion, and our rare arguments.

“Dessert?” I suggest, as we turn the corner. We contemplate Magnolia’s cupcakes or Rocco’s cannolis, but decide we are too full for either, and instead walk in comfortable silence, wandering by cafés and bars and throngs of contented Villagers. Then, moved by the wine and the weather and a whiff of his spicy cologne, I find myself blurting out, “How about marriage?”

At thirty-six and after nearly two years of dating, I’ve had the question on my mind, the subject one of speculation among my friends. But this night marks the first time I’ve broached the topic with him directly, and I instantly regret my lapse of discipline and brace myself for an unsatisfying response. Sure enough, the mood of the night instantly shifts, and I feel his arm tense around me. I tell myself it isn’t necessarily a bad sign; it could just be poor timing. It even occurs to me that he could already have the ring—and that his reaction has more to do with my stealing his thunder.

“Oh, forget it,” I say with a high-pitched, forced laugh, which only makes things more awkward. It’s like trying to retract an “I love you” or undo a one-night stand. Impossible.

“Champ,” he says, then pauses for a few beats. “We’re so good together.”

The sentiment is sweet, even promising, but it’s not even close to being an answer—and I can’t resist telling him as much. “*Sooo* that means . . . what, exactly? Status quo forever? Let’s hit City Hall tonight? Something in between?” My tone is playful, and Peter seizes the opportunity to make light of things.

“Maybe we should get those cupcakes after all,” he says.

I don’t smile, the vision of an emerald-cut diamond tucked into one of his Italian loafers beginning to fade.

“Kidding,” he says, pulling me tighter against him. “Repeat the question?”

“Marriage. Us. What do you think?” I say. “Does it ever even . . . cross your mind?”

“Yes. Of course it does . . .”

I feel a “but” coming like you can feel rain on your face after a deafening clap of thunder. Sure enough, he finishes, “But my divorce was just finalized.” Another noncommittal nonanswer.

“Right,” I say, feeling defeated as he glances into a darkened storefront, seemingly enthralled by a display of letterpress stationery and Montblanc pens. I make a mental note to buy him one, having nearly exhausted gifts in the “what to buy someone who has everything” category, especially someone as meticulous as Peter. Cuff links, electronic gadgets, weekend stays at rustic New England B and Bs. Even a custom LEGO statue of a moose, the unofficial mascot of his beloved Dartmouth.

“But your marriage has been over for a long time. You haven’t lived with Robin in over *four* years,” I say.

It is a point I make often, but never in this context, rather when we are out with other couples, on the off chance that someone sees me as the culprit—the mistress who swooped in and stole someone else’s husband. Unlike some of my friends who seem to specialize in married men, I have never entertained so much as a wink or a drink from a man with a ring on his left hand, just as I, in the dating years before Peter, had zero tolerance for shadiness, game playing, commitment phobias, or any other symptom of the Peter Pan syndrome, a seeming epidemic, at least in Manhattan. In part, it was about principle and self-respect. But it was also a matter of pragmatism, of thirty-something life engi-

neering. I knew exactly what I wanted—*who* I wanted—and believed I could get there through sheer effort and determination just as I had doggedly pursued my entire career in television.

That road hadn't been easy, either. Right after I graduated from film school at NYU, I moved to L.A. and worked as a lowly production assistant on a short-lived Nickelodeon teen sitcom. After eighteen months of trying to get lunch orders straight in my head and not writing a single word for the show, I got a job as a staff writer on a medical drama series. It was a great gig, as I learned a lot, made amazing contacts, and worked my way up to story editor, but I had no life, and didn't really care for the show. So at some point, I took a gamble, left the safety of a hit show, and moved back to New York into a cozy garden apartment in Park Slope. To pay the bills, I sold a couple specs and did freelance assignments for existing shows. My favorite spot to write became a little family-owned bar named Aggie's where there was constant drama between the four brothers, much of it inspired by the women they married and their Irish-immigrant mother. I found myself ditching my other projects and sketching out their backstories, until suddenly *South Second Street* was born (I moved the bar from modern-day Brooklyn to Philly in the seventies). It wasn't high concept like everything in television seemed to be becoming, but I was old-school, and believed I could create a compelling world with my writing and characters—rather than gimmicks. My agent believed in me, too, and after getting me in to pitch my pilot to all the major networks, a bidding war ensued. I took a deal with a little less money (but still enough for me to move to Manhattan) and more creative license. And voilà. My dream had come true. I was finally an executive producer. A showrunner.

Then, one intense year later, I met Peter. I knew his name long before I actually met him from the industry and snippets in *Variety*: Peter Standish, the esteemed television executive poached from another

network, the would-be savior to turn around our overall struggling ratings and revamp our identity. As the new CEO, he was technically my boss, another one of my rules for whom not to date. However, the morning I ran into him at the Starbucks in our building lobby, I granted myself an exception, rationalizing that I wasn't one of his direct reports—the director of programming buffered us in the chain of command. Besides, I already had a name. My series was considered a modest hit, a tough feat for a mid-season show, so nobody could accuse me of using him to get ahead or jump-start a stalling career.

Of course at that point, as I stood behind him in line, eavesdropping as he ordered a “double tall cappuccino extra dry,” the matter was completely theoretical. He wasn't wearing a ring (I noticed instantly), but he gave off an unavailable vibe as I tapped him on the shoulder, introduced myself, and issued a brisk, professional welcome. I knew how old he was by the press release still sitting in my in-box—forty-seven—but with a full head of dark hair, he looked younger than I expected. He was also taller and broader than I thought he'd be, everything on a larger scale, including his hand around his cup of extra dry cappuccino.

“It's nice to meet you, Marian,” he said with a charming but still sincere tilt of his head, pausing as I ordered my own tall latte, even lingering as the barista made my drink, telling me I was doing a hell of a job on my show. “It's got a nice little following, doesn't it?”

I nodded modestly, trying not to focus on the elegant cut of his suit and the cleft in his clean-shaven, square jaw. “Yes. We've been lucky so far. But we can do more to expand our audience . . . Have you ever watched it?”

It was bold to put your boss's boss on the spot, and I knew the answer in his hesitation, saw that he was debating whether to admit he'd never seen my show.

He sheepishly told the truth, then added, “But I will tonight. And that’s a promise.” I had the gut feeling that he really *was* a man of his word—a reputation he had earned in a business full of lecherous, egomaniacal slicksters.

“Well, at least you know it’s on Thursday nights,” I say, feeling a wave of attraction and suddenly sensing that it wasn’t completely one-sided. It had been a long time since I had felt anything close to chemistry with someone—at least not someone so eligible on paper.

The next morning, to my delight, we both showed up at Starbucks at 7:50 A.M., once again, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he had done it on purpose, as I had.

“So, what did you think?” I asked with a hint of coyness—which wasn’t my usual style, especially at work. “Did you watch it?”

“Yes. And I loved it,” he announced, ordering his same drink but this time opting for whipped cream, proving he could be spontaneous. I felt myself beaming as I thanked him.

“Tight writing. And great acting. That Angela Rivers sure is a pistol, isn’t she?” he asked, referring to our up-and-coming, quirky, redhead lead who often drew comparisons to Lucille Ball. During casting, I had gone out on a limb and chosen her over a more established star, one of the best decisions I had ever made as a producer.

“Yes,” I said. “I can see an Emmy in her future.”

He nodded, duly noting. “Oh, and by the way,” he said, an endearing smile behind his eyes. “I not only watched the show, but I went back and watched the pilot online. And the rest of the first season. So I have you to thank for less than four hours of sleep last night.”

I laughed. “Afternoon espresso,” I said as we strolled to the elevator bank. “Works like a charm.”

He winked and said, “Sounds good. Around four-thirty?”

My heart pounded as I nodded, counting down the minutes to

four-thirty that day, and for several weeks after that. It became our ritual, although for appearances, we always pretended that it was a coincidence.

Then one day, after I mentioned my love of hats, a package from Barneys appeared by messenger. Inside was a jaunty, black grosgrain beret with a card that read: *To Marian, the only girl I know who could pull this one off.*

I promptly called his direct dial from the network directory, delighted when he answered his own phone.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he said—with what I could tell was a smile.

“I love it,” I said, beaming back at him.

“How about the card? Was ‘girl’ okay? I debated ‘girl’ versus ‘woman.’” His second-guessing confirmed that he cared—and that he could be vulnerable. I felt myself falling for him a little more.

“I like ‘girl’ from *you*,” I said. “And I love the beret. Just glad that it wasn’t raspberry.”

“Or from a secondhand store,” he deadpanned. “Although I would love to see you in it. And if it was warm . . .”

I laughed, feeling flushed, a churning in my stomach, wondering when—not if—he was going to ask me out on an official date.

Three days later, we flew to Los Angeles for the Emmys on the network jet. Although my show hadn’t been nominated, we were getting a lot of great buzz and I had never felt better about my career. Meanwhile, Peter and I were getting some buzz of our own, a few rumors circulating, clearly due to our coffee break repartee. But we played it cool on the red carpet, and even more so at the after-parties, until neither of us could take it another second, and he sent me a text I still have saved on my iPhone: *That dress is stunning.*

I smiled, grateful that I had not only overspent on an Alberta Ferretti gown but had opted for emerald green instead of my usual

black. Feeling myself blush, I turned to look in his direction as another text came in: *Although it would look better on the floor.*

I blushed and shook my head as he sent a final text: *I promise I won't try to find out if you meet me upstairs. Room 732.*

Less than ten minutes later we were in his room, finally alone, grinning at each other. I felt sure that he'd kiss me immediately, but he showed a restraint that I found irresistible, increasingly more so with every glass of champagne we poured. We grew tipsier by the hour as we talked about everything—the state of television, our network, my show, gossip about actors, and even more drama among the executives. He told me about his thirteen-year-old son Aidan and his ongoing divorce proceedings. Despite the fact that he jokingly referred to his ex as “the plaintiff,” he didn't make her out to be the villain, which I found to be a refreshing change from the few other divorcés I had dated. We talked about places we had traveled, our favorite hotels and cities, and where we hoped to someday go, both literally and in our careers. We were different in some ways—I preferred the Caribbean or traditional urban trips to places like Rome and London, while he loved exotic adventure, once pedaling through the Golden Triangle in Thailand, another time trekking up the Pacaya volcano in Guatemala. He had also taken more risks in business, which of course had paid off, while I generally avoided conflict and preferred to stick with something if it was working, even a little. Yet at the core, we had a common sensibility—a belief in striving for excellence and never settling, a love of New York and all that came with it, a sense of conservatism with a core philosophy that we should all live and let live, whatever our political or religious beliefs. He was handsome, confident, intelligent, and thoughtful—the closest I'd ever come to perfection.

Then, as the California sky showed its first streaks of muted pink, he reached over and took my hand, pulled me onto his lap and kissed

me in a way I hadn't been kissed for years. We said good night a few minutes later, then laughed, and said good morning.

Within a few weeks, we were an established couple, even having the conversation about no longer wanting to see others. One evening, we were photographed dining together, our picture appearing in a blurb on Page Six with the caption: "Powerful Love Connection: TV Exec Peter Standish with Producer Marian Caldwell." As the calls rolled in from friends and acquaintances who had seen the press, I pretended to be some combination of annoyed and amused, but I secretly loved it, saving the clipping for our future children. Things would have seemed too good to be true, if I hadn't always believed I could—and *would*—find someone like him.

But maybe they *were* too good to be true, I think now, squinting up at him as we turn the corner, hand in hand. Maybe we had stalled. Maybe this was as good as it was ever going to get. Maybe I was one of those girls, after all. Girls who wait or settle—or do some combination of both. Disappointment and muted anger well inside me. Anger at him, but more anger at myself for not facing the fact that when a person avoids a topic, it's generally for a reason.

"I think I'm going home," I say after a long stretch of silence, hoping that my statement doesn't come across as self-pitying or manipulative, the two cards that never work in relationships—especially with someone like Peter.

"C'mon. Really?" Peter asks, a trace of surrender in his voice where I'd hoped to hear urgency. He was always so controlled, so measured, and although I usually loved this quality, it irritated me now. He abruptly stops, turns, and gazes down at me, taking both of my hands in his.

"Yeah. I'm really tired," I lie, pulling my hands free.

"Marian. Don't do this," he meagerly protests.

"I'm not doing anything, Peter," I say. "I was just trying to have a conversation with you . . ."

"Fine," he says, exhaling, all but rolling his eyes. "Let's have a conversation."

I swallow my dwindling pride and, feeling very small, say, "Okay. Well . . . can you see yourself getting married again? Or having another child?"

He sighs, starts to speak, stops, and tries again. "Nothing is missing in my life if that's what you're asking. I have Aidan. I have you. I have my work. Life is good. Really good. But I *do* love you, Marian. I *adore* you. You know that."

I wait for more, thinking how easy it would be for him to appease me with a nonspecific promise: *I don't know what I see exactly, but I see you in my life.* Or: *I want to make you happy.* Or even: *I wouldn't rule anything out.* Something. Anything.

Instead, he gives me a helpless look as two cabs materialize, one after the other, a coincidence to which I ascribe all sorts of meaning. I flag the first and force a tight-lipped smile. "Let's just talk tomorrow. Okay?" I say, trying to salvage what's left of my image as a strong, independent woman and wondering if it's only an image.

He nods as I accept a staccato kiss on the cheek. Then I slide in the cab and close my door, careful not to slam it, yet equally careful not to make eye contact with him as we pull away from the curb, headed toward my apartment on the Upper East Side.

Thirty minutes later, I'm changed into my oldest, coziest pair of flannel pajamas, feeling completely sorry for myself, when my apartment intercom buzzes.

Peter.

My heart leaps with shameful, giddy relief as I nearly run to my foyer. I take a deep breath and buzz him up, staring at the door like my namesake Champ waiting for the mailman. I imagine that Peter and I will make up, make love, maybe even make plans. I don't need a ring or a promise of a baby, I will say, as long as I know that he feels the way I do. That he sees us sharing a life together. That he can't imagine us apart. I tell myself it isn't settling—it's the opposite—it's what you do for love.

But a few seconds later, I round the corner to find not Peter at my door, but a young girl with angular features, a narrow face, and small, pointed chin. She is slight, pale, and almost pretty—at least I think she will be in a few years. She is dressed like a typical teenager down to her oversized backpack and peace sign necklace, but she has a composed air, something telling me that she is not a follower.

"Hello," I say, wondering if she is lost or has the wrong apartment or is peddling something. "Can I help you?"

She clears her throat, shifts her weight from side to side, and asks in a small, raspy voice, "Are you Marian Caldwell?"

"Yes," I say, waiting.

"My name is Kirby Rose," she finally says, tucking her long, dirty-blond hair behind her ears, which are a little on the big side or at least at an unfortunate angle to her head, a trait I understand too well, then glances down at her scuffed black boots. When her eyes meet mine again, I notice their distinctive color—bluish-gray and banded by black—and in that instant, I know *exactly* who she is and why she has come here.

"Are you? . . ." I try to finish my sentence, but can't inhale or exhale, let alone speak.

Her chin trembles as she nods the smallest of nods, then wipes her palms on her jeans, threadbare at the left knee.

I stand frozen, anticipating the words I have imagined and feared, dreaded and dreamt about, for the last eighteen years. Then, just as I think my racing heart will explode, I finally hear her say them: *“I think you’re my mother.”*