

## Not for Me

When I was in high school, Leila used to take me to the movies. Afterward, we would drive around downtown Spokane with the windows cranked down and the radio cranked up, singing “All I Wanna Do” and “I’ll Stand by You” as loudly as we could. I always got embarrassed when people looked at us, but Leila would laugh and wave at them.

“They’re looking at you, Enid,” she would say, nudging me. “I can’t take you anywhere!”

That was back when Leila and my brother, Tom, were first married, when Leila would still grab my hand and squeal, “Isn’t he handsome?” every time Tom walked into the room. I used to worry about what would happen to Leila if Tom died before she did. I pictured her clinging to his hand, refusing to let go of the corpse, literally following him into the grave and blocking our handfuls of dirt.

I don’t know why my father never liked Leila, but he started his campaign to drive her away before she and Tom were even married. Dad insisted on serving shrimp at the rehearsal dinner, even though Leila had told us all that she hated bottom feeders. Smelling the shrimp made her so sick to her stomach that she and Tom had to leave their own rehearsal dinner early. Dad blamed Leila for that.

He also blamed her for “encouraging” my oldest brother, Robert. We’d all known about Robert for years, but Leila was the first person with the guts to come right out and say it. She called Robert our “third sister” and made a point of asking for his opinion about fashion and

home decor. The two of them used to make me laugh so hard that I would go home with an aching stomach and a sore jaw.

Then there was Camille. From the day my niece was born, my father made a point of celebrating the fact that Camille is “one hundred percent Marsh.” Marsh is an English name, but we look either German or Scandinavian, depending on who you ask. Leila is half-Italian and she has the kind of coloring that people compare to delicious things like olives and coffee with cream. Dad was so ecstatic that Camille inherited our fair skin and pale eyes that Robert decided our Aryan looks must date back to Anglo-Saxon times, making us “essentially German, which explains dear old Dad’s social views.”

My father talked Tom into sending Camille to St. George’s preparatory school, even though Leila thought it was important to support the public school system. Dad scheduled family brunch on Sundays when Leila wanted to go to church. He complained about Leila and accused Tom of being “pussy whipped” until Tom began to take our father’s side against his wife and Leila had no choice but to leave.

When I found out she was gone, I couldn’t eat for three days. Camille couldn’t stop crying for three days. Tom started drinking, but didn’t stop after three days. Even Robert, who had moved to Seattle by then, kept calling me to ask if Leila had come home yet. The only person who wasn’t upset about Leila’s departure was our father.

“This will turn out to be a good thing,” he said. “Tom can do much better, and this way that woman won’t have any more influence over your niece.”

I knew, though, that there would be consequences, for all of us, but especially for Camille. So I took her out to ice cream the first time she brought home straight As. I went to

every performance of her elite, audition-only choir. I congratulated her repeatedly on continuing to be both kind and responsible throughout junior high, the time of life when Robert had made prank calls, I'd taken up smoking, and Tom had been invited to leave two different schools.

The other shoe finally dropped when Camille was sixteen. It was Friday afternoon and I was sitting in my office at Brumbaugh & Berger, editing and proofreading a motion to suppress evidence that my boss was hoping to file on Monday. That kind of task usually takes me all afternoon, since Mr. Berger is known for his vehemence rather than his logic.

When my phone buzzed, I was annoyed at first. I knew it would be Camille, wanting something. Everyone else knew better than to contact me at work. I tried to keep working, telling myself I would answer the text after work. It only took me about five minutes to cave, and when I saw Camille's message, I was glad I hadn't waited.

Camille:

E, I need help and u r the only 1  
I can trust with this

Enid:

What's up?

Camille:

I skipped my period

I told myself to stay calm. Camille knew better than to put her health or future at risk. There was no need for an adrenaline rush or any other auntly panic response. I reminded her that it's normal to skip a period once in a while, especially at her age.

It took Camille ten minutes to text back. It usually takes her less than thirty seconds. By the time she responded, I had watered my African violet, reorganized two stacks of files, and cleaned out all of the drawers in my desk.

Camille:

I think I need a preg test  
will u buy it 4 me?

Enid:

Yes. I will pick you up after work.  
You can spend the night and do it  
in the am

I knew those things were most effective first thing in the morning because I had already been through this once, with Leila. I was only fifteen when Leila asked me to buy a pregnancy test for her. She said it would be bad luck for her to buy it herself, she didn't want to get Tom's hopes up, her family all lived three time zones away on the East Coast, she couldn't trust this to anyone but me.

I didn't want to do it. Carrying a pregnancy test up to the register would attract a lot of attention and I was so embarrassed about buying anything even remotely personal back then that I'd charged Robert with buying my tampons for me. He loved it because it gave him the chance to perform. "I've just been feeling a tad under the weather," he would announce, placing the box on the counter at Bates Drug Store. The next month, he would put on a shrill falsetto and ask the clerk at Albertsons, "Does this box make me look fat?" When I was with Robert, I was too busy laughing to care who stared at us.

I couldn't take Robert with me to buy the test for Leila, though. Having Robert come out with a line like, "But Alastair promised me I couldn't get pregnant!" would have been inappropriate on such a solemn occasion. So I went to Payless alone. When I made it to the

counter, the clerk didn't just stare at me, she rolled her eyes and said, "Let me guess. It's not for you." My face turned so red and stayed red for so long, I felt like I'd been sunburned.

I wouldn't put Camille through that kind of ordeal. She shouldn't have been going through any of this. I found myself wishing my father were still alive to see the situation he'd created. How would Tom react if the test came out positive? Would he pressure Camille to get an abortion? What would Leila say, if she were here?

I tried to get back to work, but couldn't concentrate. I paced my office for a full fifteen minutes before I gave in, called Robert, and told him everything. Robert's attitude toward the family being what it was, I shouldn't have been surprised when he laughed.

"How can you laugh about your own niece facing a teenage pregnancy?" I asked.

"Sweetie, I haven't seen this kid in years."

"That's not her fault. You know she's going to drive over to see you the second she turns eighteen."

"I hope not!" said Robert. "You know my 'aberrant lifestyle' is contagious."

I ignored his sarcasm. "Tom is going to freak out if this thing comes out positive."

"Ooh, you really think he might?" Robert sounded fascinated by the possibility.

"Robert!"

"Oh, calm down, Enid. You know Leila took Tom's balls with her when she left. She's probably still got them hanging from her rearview mirror and all of her neighbors in Maryland, or wherever she is, are wondering why she's driving around with a pair of raisins in her car."

That made me laugh. I didn't need to feel disloyal to Tom, not after he'd let our father destroy the family.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Camille’s never really stepped out of line before. It’s hard to predict what Tom would do. Regardless, we’ve got to find Leila. If Camille is pregnant, she’s going to need her mother.”

“‘We’? What’s this ‘we’?”

“I need your help. At least, you’re always claiming to be the God of the Internet. I’m just a paralegal.”

“I am the God of the Internet. But it’s Friday and I have plans.”

“Robert! Please!”

“Enid!” He mimicked my pleading tone. “No!”

I gave up on Robert and spent the afternoon online myself. Of course, there were several Leila Marshes on LinkedIn and Facebook, but none of them was our Leila. What if she had gotten remarried and changed her last name again? I tried variations, but didn’t feel confident in any of my results.

When five o’clock finally rolled around, I drove straight over to Tom and Leila’s house in Spokane Valley—Tom’s house now—to get Camille. Tom hadn’t changed the locks since Leila left, so I still had my key. I unlocked the front door, pushed aside the broken screen, and picked a path through the piles of books and papers scattered across the living room floor. Was Tom finally trying to get organized? No, there was a pile of books on day trading. Another one of my brother’s grand plans? Great.

Camille came out of her room and hugged me. Her hugs are as bone-cracking as Leila’s.

“I’m so glad you called me,” I said. “Texted. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

I waited in Camille's room while she stuffed make-up and a Bloomsday t-shirt into an overnight bag. I looked at the pictures on her desk so that she wouldn't feel awkward with me watching her. Camille on last year's choir trip, standing in a group of thirty girls wearing identical green robes. Camille with two friends she'd managed to hold onto since elementary school, sitting in camp chairs in front of some pine trees, mouths open and stuffed with marshmallows. They looked silly and happy, the antithesis of any depiction of beauty you'd find in a teen magazine. I wouldn't let anyone take a picture of me like that now, let alone when I was in high school.

And, still, the framed eight-by-ten of Leila in a red dress and high heels, her smile wide. If the shutter had snapped a millisecond later, her head would have been thrown back and her eyes closed in a laugh, the laugh I'd heard so many times when she was teaching me to sort my laundry, to put on make-up, to change a diaper.

By the time Camille was ready to go, Tom had come home and we could hear the babble of Fox News from the living room. I walked down the hall quickly, hoping to avoid talking to him. Tom was lying on the couch, a laptop on his stomach and a glass of brown liquid leaving a ring on the coffee table next to him. Leila had loved that coffee table.

"Hi, Dad!" said Camille. "I'm going to spend the night at Enid's."

"I thought your choir was performing at the old folks home tomorrow," said Tom.

"I'll get her home in time to get ready," I said, staring over Tom's head at the framed, abstract print on the wall: "Woman 1." I was pretty sure our father had given it to Tom back in 2006, right before Leila left. They had some man-to-man joke about the distorted woman in the painting, with her horsy teeth and square breasts.

Camille bent to kiss Tom on the cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon, Dad. I love you!”

Tom smiled the same besotted smile he used to give Leila. “Love you, too, cupcake.”

Tom and I didn’t say anything else to each other. I led Camille out to the car and tried to think of something appropriate to say as I backed out of the driveway.

“Do you want to tell me how this happened?” I finally asked.

I could feel Camille looking at me. “Did you seriously just ask me that? I mean, I know you haven’t dated for a while, but come on.”

Did Tom and Camille talk about my love life, or lack thereof, when I wasn’t around? Did Tom say things like, “You don’t want to end up over thirty and single like your aunt”? I wished Tom would say it to my face, just once, so I could tell him it was better to be a spinster, to use Robert’s word, than divorced.

“You know what I mean.” I said to Camille.

“Yeah, I know. But it’s not your job to lecture me. You’re not my mother.”

When we got to Rite Aid, I told Camille she could wait in the car and went inside alone. Fluorescent lights glared off of the linoleum and my steps echoed. Was I the only person in the store? It took me a minute to find the right aisle. It seems like they’re always changing the labels they give these things. Today’s label was “Family Planning.”

I found Rite Aid’s other customers, all three of them, trying to pay for a bag of Lindor truffles at the register. While I was browsing the tabloid headlines— “FBI Captures Bat Child!” “Oregon Man Changes His Name to Captain Awesome”—they decided it would be a great idea to sign up for a Wellness discount card. This, apparently, was an involved process requiring at



least ten minutes of discussion. Then my fellow patrons walked off with their new card, but without their chocolate, so the cashier had to call them back for more chit chat. The entire time, I stood there with the Scarlet Letter box in my right hand, my left hand hidden in my pocket, pretending to be fascinated by Tim McGraw and Faith Hill's marriage crisis, "Destroyed by Jealousy!"

When it was finally my turn, I started a conversation with the cashier about the brace on her wrist, hoping to forestall any comments about my purchase. Carpal tunnel? Ouch, so sorry to hear that. No, thanks, I don't need a receipt.

"OK." The cashier smiled, handing me the bag. "I hope it comes out the way you want it to!"

"Would you believe me if I said it wasn't for me?" I asked. I realized I'd taken my left hand out of my pocket when I pulled out my credit card.

The cashier laughed. "I think I've heard that one before."

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Camille and I had pepperoni pizza for dinner. Then I suffered through "I Know What You Did Last Summer" and "I Still Know What You Did Last Summer" before we were both too tired to stay awake any longer. I woke up early the next morning and paced the living room, trying to think of what else I could do to find Leila, and wondering why Robert had been such a brat when I asked him for help.

When Camille finally got up at ten, I handed her the stick and set the timer. Then we sat on the couch in our pajamas and waited.

"I wonder if the baby would look like my mother," Camille said.

I didn't point out what Camille must already have known from studying her Punnett squares in biology: if Leila's genes for dark hair and brown eyes had made it to Camille, we'd be looking at them every day.

Camille sighed. "Probably not. Davis is almost as pale as we are. He's Irish, though, not German."

To distract her, I said, "Oh, Robert's decided that we're not descended from the Anglo-Saxons after all. His latest theory is that the Marshes got their start when, 'Viking invaders ravaged Celtic maidens in sacred groves, giving rise to a line of exceptionally charming and virile descendants with Nordic good looks.'"

Camille laughed. "I miss Robert!"

The timer beeped. I looked away from Camille as she jumped up and ran into the bathroom. Silence. Was the test defective? Was the result unclear?

"Negative," I heard Camille say. The tone of her voice should have surprised me, but it didn't. I was disappointed, too.

"OK, so you're in the clear," I said. Now I needed to muster up some auntly advice. Maybe "I hope you've learned your lesson," or "I'm sure you know better now than to put yourself in this kind of situation again." Everything that came to mind sounded too much like my father.

"I know it's stupid." Camille wandered back into the living room and sat down again. "I know it's the most ridiculous idea ever. But I sort of thought, if it came out positive . . ."

"I know," I said, hugging her. "I thought about that, too."

That was when Camille started crying, crying until her hair stuck to her cheeks and her nose ran and her sobs became wails. I tried to hand her some tissues but she pushed them away. Then she pushed me away.

“No!” sobbed Camille. “It’s your fault she left! You took her seat at Christmas and then she left!”

I stared at my niece. She couldn’t really blame me for the rift our fathers had caused. No, she was so upset that she was being irrational. That last big fight at Christmas had been the result of years and years of tension. Leila was already upset before I took her chair because Dad had rented that condo near Schweitzer and taken us all skiing, even though he knew that Leila hated snow. She’d had to spend the afternoon of Christmas Eve Day by herself while the rest of us were on the slopes.

Camille was eight then, and Tom was so excited to finally get her on a pair of skis that he told her, “Good job!” every time she fell down. Then he would explain to me that he didn’t want Camille to get discouraged. After a while, I started laughing every time he cheered and Camille laughed with me. Tom got mad when he figured out that Camille was falling on purpose, but we were both so giggly by then that we only laughed harder.

When we got back to the condo that night, Leila had lasagna in the oven and was talking to her mom on the phone upstairs. She was still talking when the food was ready, so we sat down and waited. After another ten minutes, my father told Tom, “Get your wife off the damn phone or we’re starting without her.”

Tom scurried upstairs looking nervous, but he was smiling when he came back to his seat. “She said to go ahead.”

“I don’t know why that woman can’t call her family some other time,” my father said.  
“We’re trying to sit down to dinner.”

“Oops!” Robert dumped the basket of rolls on the table. “Aren’t you going to cheer for me, Tom? I’m feeling really discouraged.”

Our father frowned at Robert, but it turned into a smile when he saw Camille and me looking at each other and laughing. “I think we should get a picture of these girls together.”

So I moved over to Leila’s chair to be next to Camille and Robert grabbed his camera off the coffee table. Leila must have walked right into the flash.

“May I have my seat back, please?”

“Oh, yeah.” I got up, blinking the blots of red out of my vision. “We were just taking a picture.”

Leila didn’t look at me as she sat down. She and Tom whispered to each other while the rest of us passed around the pan of lasagna.

“What are you two whispering about?” Dad asked.

Tom looked down at the table.

Leila looked up at my father. “I was saying that if there isn’t room for me at this table then maybe I should just leave.”

“Don’t be so dramatic!” My father threw his napkin onto the table. “Everything isn’t always about you.”

Leila looked at Tom. “Are you going to let him talk to me that way?”

“Uh . . .” Tom looked at Leila and then at our father.

“Fine!” Leila stood up. “If you aren’t going to stand up for me, Tom, then I’m done with you.” She looked at the rest of us. “I’m done with all of you.”

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After I took Camille home, I microwaved a bag of popcorn and lay on the couch to watch a week’s worth of recorded Days of Our Lives episodes. I’d only been there for about half an hour when the phone rang. I really didn’t want to talk to anyone. After the last twenty-four hours, I just wanted to disappear. It was Robert, though, so I answered anyway.

“Well?” Robert said. “Is our darling niece expecting?”

“No. The test came out negative.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Now I’ve wasted my weekend for nothing!”

“What?”

“I found Leila!” Robert said impatiently.

“You did? Robert, you really are an internet genius! You are a gentleman, a scholar, and the best brother in the world!” I had to get a pen. Where was there a pen? I stumbled around my apartment, smearing the butter-like substance from the popcorn on my purse, my desk, my t-shirt. “Where is she? What is she doing? Oh my God!”

“You’re not still going to call her?”

“Yeah . . .” I heard my voice trail off. “You don’t think I should?”

“Sweetie,” Robert said gently. “You’re a Marsh.”

“So? Leila loves me. She’s always loved me.” I realized I was crying. I picked one of the rejected Kleenex off the floor, but, instead of wiping my eyes, I just stared at it. Camille blamed me. Camille blamed me and I blamed our fathers. I blamed our fathers, but Leila was

the one who left. She had left and she hadn't come back. She wasn't going to come back, not for a grandbaby, not for Camille, and certainly not for me.