

Becoming Gaby

Every corner of her life now demanded inspection. Her mind was sending more signals than an air-traffic controller's screen at rush hour.

Why did she live on Cape Cod? Why did she marry Bill? Why did she end up with a cleaning company? Had imagination played any part in building her adult life? She couldn't see how, and that stung.

It stung to realize her world was confined to sixty-five by twenty miles. She was born here, her parents lived here, her brothers were anchored here, Bill's family too. The idea that she could live somewhere else felt unreal. She'd never even allowed her thoughts to go there. But now, imagining something beyond the familiar was starting to chip at the walls around her.

Bill, her brothers' drinking buddy, the guy down the street, had been the practical choice. Tall and strong, "built like a man," her father had said. That alone made him eligible, especially since she wasn't a beauty queen. Her face had never seen any Maybelline or L'Oreal and fancy manicures would've been wasted after five minutes in her line of work.

They dated briefly, kissed, and before long, he proposed. He didn't seem to mind her lanky frame. They married and bought a place with enough land for a junkyard, just like Bill's father. Then she was pregnant, which somehow confirmed they were right for each other. It was like using proper grammar: she did what the rules said, without ever questioning who had written them or whether they made sense.

There had never been passion between them. Maybe he'd had urges at some point, but not necessarily for her. More for the act itself. The intimacy went down as quickly as his drinking went up. She never refused him, but too often he came to bed too drunk to move. And when it worked, she didn't have to endure it long. She lay silent until he finished. It was, she

assumed, a wife's duty.

There were times he tried and couldn't, then fell asleep giggling, as if proud he was too drunk for sex.

She never missed it. Why miss something that wasn't enjoyable? Could she remember even one pleasant moment? Nothing came to mind. Now she knew, somewhere deep inside, that there was more to intimacy than what she and Bill shared.

She hadn't known what she was choosing when they traded rings. Until recently, she hadn't cared. They barely spent time together, and when they did, he was usually too drunk to ask much of her. But why she was still with him sent a burn through her stomach. She didn't have an answer. She didn't even know if she wanted one.

As for her social life, she'd never jumped on any bandwagon, mostly because she never had a band. She'd always been working. Her social life was as deserted now as it had been when she was growing those gangly limbs.

But she loved her job. Always had. Given the choice between sweeping a floor, something she excelled at and got paid for, or going out with a bunch of girls, unsure what to say, wearing makeup she hated, her choice would be the same today. It was like choosing between ice cream and a dead cockroach.

At work, the truth was brutally simple: for more than thirty years, her life had followed the equation—more clients meant more money. The realization taunted her. She was forty-three, living the life her twelve-year-old self had designed.

Had she been a good mom? She had poured every ounce of energy into work. She'd been a good provider, believing that was the whole definition of parenthood. How could she have known that meeting everyone's needs could hurt them, and

her? How could good intentions yield bad results?

"Gangly!"

Dolores's scream jolted her. A crash followed: the sharp shatter of a vase hitting ceramic tile.

"¡Por Dios, Gangly, don't move!" A rapid stream of Spanish burst from Dolores, far too fast for Gangly to follow. "I'll get the vacuum! Don't move!"

Gangly froze among the shards, breath caught in her throat. Dolores hurried over, sweeping up every fragment before letting her take a step.

"Ay, Gangly. You never break anything before," she said, running the vacuum over the floor for the third time. "No eres tú misma hoy. What's wrong?"

"I'm fine. I need to call Mrs. Martin and pay for the vase."

"Wasn't new. Wasn't even nice."

"Doesn't matter. It's my fault. I'll pay for it."

Her body was on cruise control while her mind roamed new mountains and valleys.

Of course, she broke a vase.

She walked out of her last cleaning job and was startled by the sudden drop in temperature. In barely two hours, the weather had turned bitter and stormy. A sharp gust scuttled leaves across the parking lot and nearly carried off her cleaning supplies. She shrugged and let the wind tangle the hair she hadn't bothered cutting in months. Rain began in earnest and