Something Borrowed

Emily Giffin

Chapter 1

I was in the fifth grade the first time I thought about turning thirty. My best friend Darcy and I came across a perpetual calendar in the back of the phone book, where you could look up any date in the future, and by using this little grid, determine what the day of the week would be. So we located our birthdays in the following year, mine in May and hers in September. I got Wednesday, a school night. She got a Friday. A small victory, but typical. Darcy was always the lucky one. Her skin tanned more quickly, her hair feathered more easily and she didn't need braces. Her moonwalk was superior, as were her cartwheels and her front handsprings (I couldn't do a handspring at all). She had a better sticker collection. More Michael Jackson pins. Forenza sweaters in turquoise, red and peach (my mother allowed me none - said they were too trendy and expensive). And a pair of fifty-dollar Guess jeans with zippers at the ankles (ditto). Darcy had double-pierced ears and a sibling - even if it was just a brother, it was better than being an only child as I was.

But at least I was a few months older, and she would never quite catch up. That's when I decided to check out my thirtieth birthday - in a year so far away that it sounded like science fiction. It fell on a Sunday, which meant that my dashing husband and I would secure a responsible babysitter for our two (possibly three) children on that Saturday evening, dine at a fancy French restaurant with cloth napkins, and stay out past midnight, so technically we would be celebrating on my actual birthday. I would have just won a big case - somehow proven that an innocent man didn't do it. And my husband would toast me. 'To Rachel, my beautiful wife, the mother of my children and the finest lawyer in Indy.' I shared my fantasy with Darcy as we discovered that her thirtieth birthday fell on a Monday. Bummer for her. I watched her purse her lips as she processed this information.

'You know, Rachel, who cares what day of the week we turn thirty?' she said, shrugging a smooth, olive shoulder. 'We'll be old by then. Birthdays don't matter when you get that old.'

I thought of my parents, who were in their thirties, and their lackluster approach to their own birthdays. My dad had just given my mom a toaster for her birthday because ours broke the week before. The new one toasted four slices at a time instead of two. It wasn't much of a gift. But my mom had seemed pleased enough with her new appliance; nowhere did I detect the disappointment that I felt when my Christmas stash didn't quite meet expectations. So Darcy was probably right. Fun stuff like birthdays wouldn't matter as much by the time we reached thirty.

The next time I really thought about being thirty was our senior year in high school, when Darcy and I started watching the show Thirtysomething together. It wasn't one of our favorites - we preferred cheerful sitcoms like Who's the Boss? and Growing Pains - but we watched it anyway. My big problem with Thirtysomething was the whiny characters and their depressing issues that they seemed to bring upon themselves. I remember thinking that they should grow up, suck it up. Stop pondering the meaning of life and start making grocery lists. That was back when I thought my teenage years were dragging and my twenties would surely last forever.

Then I reached my twenties. And the early twenties did seem to last forever. When I heard acquaintances a few years older lament the end of their youth, I felt smug, not yet in the danger zone myself. I had plenty of time. Until about age twenty-seven when the days of being carded were long gone and I began to marvel at the sudden acceleration of years (reminding myself of my mother's annual monologue as she pulled out our Christmas decorations) and the accompanying lines and stray gray hairs. At twenty-nine the real dread set in, and I realized that in a lot of ways I might as well be thirty. But not quite. Because I could still say that I was in my twenties. I still had something in common with college seniors.

I realize thirty is just a number, that you're only as old as you feel and all of that. I also realize that in the grand scheme of things, thirty is still young. But it's not that young. It is past the most ripe, prime child-bearing years, for example. It is too old to, say, start training for an Olympic medal. Even in the best, die-of-old-age scenario, you are still about one-third of the way to the finish line. So I can't help feeling uneasy as I perch on an overstuffed maroon couch in a dark lounge on the Upper West Side at my surprise birthday party, organized by Darcy, who is still my best friend.

Tomorrow is the Sunday that I first contemplated as a fifth grader playing with our phone book. After tonight my twenties will be over, a chapter closed forever. The feeling I have reminds me of New Year's Eve, when the countdown is coming and I'm not quite sure whether to grab my camera or just live in the moment. Usually I grab the camera and later regret it when the picture doesn't turn out. Then I feel enormously let down and think to myself that the night would have been more fun if it didn't mean quite so much, if I weren't forced to analyze where I've been and where I'm going.

Like New Year's Eve, tonight is an ending and a beginning. I don't like endings and beginnings. I always prefer to churn about in the middle. The worst thing about this particular end (of my youth) and beginning (of middle age) is that for the first time in my life, I realize that I don't know where I'm going. My wants are simple: a job that I like and a guy who I love. And on the eve of my thirtieth, I must face that I am 0 for 2.

First, I am an attorney at a large New York firm. By definition this means that I am miserable. Being a lawyer just isn't what it's cracked up to be - it's nothing like LA

Law, the show that caused applications to law school to skyrocket in the early Nineties. I work excruciating hours for a mean-spirited, anal-retentive partner, doing mostly tedious tasks, and that sort of hatred for what you do for a living begins to chip away at you. So I have memorized the mantra of the law firm associate: I hate my job and will quit soon. Just as soon as I pay off my loans. Just as soon as I make next year's bonus. Just as soon as I think of something else to do that will pay the rent. Or find someone who will pay it for me.

Which brings me to my second point: I am alone in a city of millions. I have plenty of friends, as proven by the solid turnout tonight. Friends to rollerblade with. Friends to summer with in the Hamptons. Friends to meet on a Thursday night after work for a drink or two or three. And I have Darcy, my best friend from home, who is all of the above. But everybody knows that friends are not enough, although I often claim they are just to save face around my married and engaged girlfriends. I did not plan on being alone in my thirties, even my early thirties. I wanted a husband by now; I wanted to be a bride in my twenties. But I have learned that you can't just create your own timetable and will it to come true. So here I am on the brink of a new decade, realizing that being alone makes my thirties daunting, and being thirty makes me feel all the more alone.

The situation seems all the more dismal when my oldest and best friend has a glamorous PR job and is freshly engaged. Darcy is still the lucky one. I watch her now, telling a story to a group of us, including her fiancé. Dex and Darcy are an exquisite couple, lean and tall with matching dark hair and green eyes. They are among New York's beautiful people. The well-groomed couple registering for fine china and crystal on the seventh floor at Bloomingdale's. You hate their smugness, but can't resist staring at them when you're on the same floor searching for a not-too-expensive gift for the umpteenth wedding you've been invited to without a date. You strain to glimpse her ring, and are instantly sorry you did. She catches you staring and gives you a disdainful once-over. You wish you hadn't worn your tennis shoes to Bloomingdale's. She is probably thinking that the footwear may be part of your problem. You buy your Waterford vase and get the hell out of there.

'So the lesson here is: if you ask for a Brazilian bikini wax, make sure you specify. Tell them to leave a landing strip or else you can wind up hairless, like a ten-year-old!' Darcy finishes her bawdy tale, and everybody laughs. Except Dex who shakes his head, as if to say, 'What a piece of work my fiancée is.'

'Okay. I'll be right back,' Darcy suddenly says. 'Tequila shots for one and all!'

As she moves away from the group toward the bar, I think back to all of the birthdays we have celebrated together, all of the benchmarks we reached together, benchmarks that I always reached first. I got my driver's license before she did, could drink legally before she could. Being older, if only by a few months, used to be a good thing. But now our fortunes have reversed. Darcy has an extra summer in her

twenties - a perk of being born in the fall. Not that it matters as much for her: when you're engaged or married, turning thirty just isn't the same thing.

Darcy is now leaning over the bar, flirting with the twenty-something, aspiring actor/bartender whom she has already told me she would 'totally do' if she were single. As if Darcy would ever be single. She said once in high school, 'I don't break up, I trade up.' She kept her word on that, and she always did the dumping. Throughout our teenage years, college, and every day of our twenties, she has been attached to someone. Often she has more than one guy hanging around, hoping.

It occurs to me that I could hook up with the bartender. I am totally unencumbered - haven't even been on a date in nearly two months. But it doesn't seem like something one should do at age thirty. One-night stands are for girls in their twenties. Not that I would know. I have followed an orderly, goody-two-shoes path with no deviations. I got straight As in high school, went to college, graduated magna cum laude, took the LSAT, went straight to law school and to a big law firm after that. No backpacking in Europe, no crazy stories, no unhealthy, lustful relationships. No secrets. No intrigue. And now it seems too late for any of that. Because that stuff would just further delay my goal of finding a husband, settling down, having children and a happy home with grass and a garage and a toaster that toasts four slices at once.

So I feel unsettled about my future and somewhat regretful about my past. I tell myself there will be time to ponder tomorrow. Right now I will have fun. It is the sort of thing that a disciplined person can simply decide. And I am exceedingly disciplined - the kind of child who did her homework on Friday afternoons right after school, the kind of woman (as of tomorrow, I am no longer any part girl) who flosses every night and makes her bed every morning.

Darcy returns with the shots but Dex refuses his, so Darcy insists that I do two. Before I know it, the night starts to take on that blurry quality, when you cross over from being buzzed to drunk, losing track of time and the precise order of things. Apparently Darcy has reached that point even sooner because she is now dancing on the bar. Spinning and gyrating in a little red halter dress and three-inch heels.

'Stealing the show at your party,' Hillary, my closest friend from work, says to me under her breath. 'She's shameless.'

I laugh. 'Yeah. Par for the course.'

Darcy has always upstaged me, but I've never really minded. I have no desire to be the focal point of a room and, frankly, I enjoy watching her as much as the next person. She entertains; I make a good audience. This is my role in our friendship, and it is one that I have long acknowledged and often embraced. But tonight, for some reason, perhaps because it is my thirtieth birthday, I feel a flicker of irritation.

Darcy lets out a yelp, claps her hands over her head, and beckons me with a come-hither expression that would appeal to any man who has ever fancied girl-on-girl action. 'Rachel! Rachel! C'mere!'

Of course, she knows that I will not join her. I have never danced on a bar. I wouldn't know what to do up there besides fall. She screams my name again. I shake my head and smile, a polite refusal. We all wait for her next move which is to swivel her hips in perfect time to the music, bend over slowly and then whip her body upright again, her long hair spilling every which way. The limber move reminds me of her perfect imitation of Tawny Kitaen in the Whitesnake video 'Here I Go Again', how she used to roll around doing splits on the hood of her father's BMW, to the delight of the pubescent neighborhood boys. I glance at Dex, who in these moments can never quite decide whether to be amused or annoyed. To say that the man has patience is an understatement. Dex and I have this in common.

'Happy birthday, Rachel!' Darcy yells. 'Let's all raise a glass to Rachel!'

Which everyone does. Without taking their eyes off her.

A minute later, Dex whisks her down from the bar, slings her over his shoulder and deposits her on the floor next to me in one fluid motion. Clearly he has done this before. 'All right,' he announces. 'I'm taking our little party-planner home.'

Darcy plucks her drink off the bar and stomps her foot. 'You're not the boss of me, Dex! Is he, Rachel?' As she asserts her independence, she stumbles and sloshes her martini all over Dex's shoe.

Dex grimaces. 'You're wasted, Darce. This isn't fun for anyone but you.'

'Okay. Okay. I'll go . . . I'm feeling kind of sick anyway,' she says, looking queasy.

'Are you going to be okay?'

'I'll be fine. Don't you worry,' she says, now playing the role of brave little sick girl.

I thank her for my party, tell her that it was a total surprise - which is a lie because I knew Darcy would capitalize on my thirtieth to buy a new outfit, throw a big bash, and invite as many of her friends as my own. Still, it was nice of her to have the party, and I am glad that she did. She is the kind of friend who always makes things feel special. She hugs me hard and says she'd do anything for me, and what would

she do without me, her maid of honor, the sister she never had. She is gushing, as she always does when she drinks too much.

Dex cuts her off. 'Happy birthday, Rachel. We'll talk to you tomorrow.' He gives me a kiss on the cheek.

'Thanks, Dex,' I say. 'Goodnight.'

I watch him usher her outside, holding her elbow after she nearly trips on the curb. Oh, to have such a caretaker. To be able to drink with reckless abandon and know that there will be someone to get you home safely.

Some time later Dex reappears in the bar. 'Darcy lost her purse. She thinks she left it here. It's small, silver,' he says. 'Have you seen it?'

'She lost her new Chanel bag?' I shake my head and laugh because it is just like Darcy to lose things. Usually I keep track of them for her, but I went off duty on my birthday. Still, I help Dex search for the purse, finally spotting it under a bar stool.

As he turns to leave, Dex's friend Marcus, one of his groomsmen, convinces him to stay. 'C'mon, man. Hang out for a minute.'

'Yeah, you should stay for a while,' I say. 'She'll be fine.'

So Dex calls Darcy at home and she slurs her consent, tells him to have fun without her. Although she is probably thinking that such a thing is not possible.

Gradually my friends peel away, saying their final happy birthdays. Dex and I outlast everyone, even Marcus. We sit at the bar making conversation with the bartender/actor who has an 'Amy' tattoo and zero interest in an aging lawyer. It is after two when we decide that it's time to go. The night feels more like midsummer than spring, and the warm air infuses me with sudden hope - this will be the summer I meet my guy.

Dex hails me a cab, but as it pulls over he says, 'How about one more bar? One more drink?'

'Fine,' I say. 'Why not?'

We both get in and he tells the cabbie to just drive, that he has to think about where next. We end up in Alphabet City at a bar on Seventh and Avenue B, aptly named 7B.

It is not an upbeat scene - 7B is dingy and smoke-filled. I like it anyway - it's not sleek and it's not a dive striving to be cool because it's not sleek.

Dex points to a booth. 'Have a seat. I'll be right with you.' Then he turns around. 'What can I get you?'

I tell him whatever he's having, and sit and wait for him in the booth. I watch him say something to a girl at the bar wearing army green cargo pants and a tank top that says 'fallen angel'. She smiles and shakes her head. 'Omaha' is playing in the background. It is one of those songs that seems melancholy and cheerful at the same time.

A moment later Dex slides in across from me, pushing a beer my way. 'Newcastle,' he says. Then he smiles, crinkly lines appearing around his eyes. 'You like?'

I nod and smile.

From the corner of my eye, I see Fallen Angel turn on her bar stool and survey Dex, absorbing his chiseled features, wavy hair, full lips. Darcy complained once that Dex garners more stares and double-takes than she does. Yet, unlike his female counterpart, Dex seems not to notice the attention. Fallen Angel now casts her eyes my way, likely wondering what Dex is doing with someone so average. I hope that she thinks we're a couple. Tonight nobody has to know that I am only a member of the wedding party.

Dex and I talk about our jobs and our Hamptons share that begins in another week and a lot of things. But Darcy does not come up and neither does their September wedding. Our conversation is easy and natural as it always is, although it has been a long time since we were alone, uninterrupted.

After we finish our beers we move over to the jukebox, fill it with dollar bills, searching for good songs. I push the code for 'Thunder Road' twice because it is my favorite song. I tell him this.

'Yeah. Springsteen's at the top of my list, too. Ever seen him in concert?'

'Yeah,' I say. 'Twice. Born in the USA and Tunnel of Love.'

I almost tell him that I went with Darcy in high school, dragged her along even though she much preferred groups like Poison and Bon Jovi. But I don't bring this up. Because then he will remember to go home to her and I don't want to be alone in my dwindling moments of twenty-somethingness. Obviously I'd rather be with a boyfriend, but Dex is better than nothing.

'When's the last time we hung out alone?' I ask, remembering when Dex and I became friends during our first year in law school. I think of how we used to meet for coffee or lunch in the student lounge, or go for strolls around Washington Square Park between classes. That was before I introduced Dex to Darcy. After they began to date, my friendship with Dex changed somewhat, although we continued to do things alone, in the context of law school. But after graduation, even the chats over coffee ended, and our friendship only involved Darcy. She filled it up, like she does everything else. I accepted the new order, barely notice it anymore. Yet I am aware of how peaceful it is now, without her.

Dex looks at me intently. 'It's been a while, hasn't it?'

I feel a quickening of my pulse as I nod, hold his gaze.

'Too long,' Dex says, his green eyes shining in the glow of the jukebox.

'Too long,' I echo, identifying a nervous feeling in my stomach. It is the way I felt when I first met Dex, when I was so conscious of his good looks and vigilant not to fall for him. But after a while, he was just Dex, my friend. Safe ground. And then he became the boyfriend of my best friend. Even safer ground.

'We had some fun times while being tortured in hell,' Dex says fondly. It is how we always refer to those years in law school. They were excruciating, yet also rosy and exhilarating. With every day I was one step closer to becoming a real attorney - my dream that hadn't yet soured. Dex and I would always share a bond from those memories. Memories that have nothing to do with Darcy.

It is last call at 7B. We get two more beers and return to our booth. We talk and laugh and reminisce. My nervous feeling is gone. I am only happy, and wish that the night could last forever.

'Happy birthday, Rachel,' Dex says, after a stretch of comfortable silence. He smiles, his whole face warm and luminous.

'Thanks, Dex.' I smile back at him.

'Was it a good night?' He leans across the table, closer to me, waiting for my answer.

I feel my smile stretch wider. 'Yes,' I say. Nothing more. We both know what has made it good. Big parties aren't my thing. I prefer one-on-one interaction - real conversation rather than drunken whooping it up. I prefer this moment, right here.

We finish our beers and soon afterward we are in a cab again, going North on First Avenue. 'Two stops,' Dex tells our cabbie, because we live on opposite sides of Central Park. Dex is holding Darcy's Chanel purse, which looks small and out of place in his large hands. I glance at the silver dial of his Rolex, a gift from Darcy. It is just shy of four o'clock.

We sit silently for a stretch of ten or fifteen blocks, both of us looking out of our respective side windows, until the cab hits a pothole and I find myself lurched into the middle of the back seat, my leg grazing his. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, Dex is kissing me. Or maybe I kiss him. Somehow we are kissing. It is surreal, made more surreal in the hazy aftermath of too many drinks. I am watching myself, hearing my inward Stop! and then a more urgent Don't stop! And so I don't. My mind goes blank as I listen to the soft sound of our lips meeting again and again.

At some point, Dex taps on the Plexiglas partition and tells the driver, between kisses, that it will just be one stop after all. We arrive on the corner of Seventy-third and Third, near my apartment. Dex hands the driver a twenty and does not wait for change. We spill out of the taxi, kissing more on the sidewalk and then in front of José, my doorman. We kiss the whole way up in the elevator. I am pressed against the elevator wall, my hands on the back of his head. I am surprised by how soft his hair is.

I fumble with my key, turning it the wrong way in the lock as Dex keeps his arms around my waist, his lips on my neck and the side of my face. Finally the door is open, and we are kissing in the middle of my austere studio, standing upright, leaning on nothing but each other. We stumble over to my made bed, complete with tight hospital corners.

'Are you drunk?' His voice is a whisper in the dark.

'No,' I say. Because you always say no when you're drunk. And even though I am, I have a lucid instant where I consider clearly what was missing in my twenties and what I wish to find in my thirties. It strikes me that, in a sense, I can have both on this momentous birthday night. Dex can be my secret, my last chance for a dark twenty-something chapter, and he can also be a prelude of sorts - a promise of someone like him to come. Darcy is in my mind, but she is being pushed to the back, overwhelmed

by a force stronger than our friendship and my own conscience. Dex moves over me. My eyes are closed, then open, then closed again.

And then, somehow, I am having sex with my best friend's fiancé.