

Excerpt from *Falling Through the Night*
By Gail Marlene Schwartz

It's raining, so we decide to watch *Jurassic Park* for the fourteenth time and make Hawaiian pizza and chocolate milkshakes.

I mix the flour and water and Jess chops the pineapple and ham. It's almost enough to distract me from thinking about Denise.

"Everything was going great until I told her about my *rich emotional life*. I'm sure she figured it out. I'm such an idiot." I stick my hands in the bowl and start mushing.

"Maybe she's going out with another woman from the ad. Maybe she met that woman first. Like you." Jessica pops a piece of pineapple in her mouth.

I ignore the reference to Cheryl. Jess is judgmental. I keep kneading the dough, knowing it would be useless to go there.

"How could it not be a rejection? I asked her out and she said she no. If you're interested, you don't say you're busy. You say, 'Not now, but how about next weekend?' If you're interested, you say what you're doing, like you're taking your Aunt Matilda to the Insect Museum, or you have to go watch your niece's miniature horse competition, but if you have a date you say you're busy, or that you have plans. She said she had plans."

"You're killing my fun, Meyerwitz," says Jess as she puts the chopped ham and pineapple on the counter and starts shredding the cheese.

We get the food made and eat and scream and cuddle up with the afghan. I do my best to push Denise into the recesses of my mind. I take my evening meds with my milkshake.

"Those the new ones?"

"Yup. But could be two weeks before I feel anything."

We stare at the screen as the guy on the toilet gets eaten by the T-rex. Then Jess pauses the movie and looks at me.

“You’re counting.”

“Sorry.” I give her a toothy grin.

“Shush. Does Denise want kids?”

“Says she’s open to it.”

Jessica clucks. I slap her arm. Then I remember.

“Hey, did I tell you I talked to Mom? She’s actually coming. Here. To visit me!”

“Really? Who’s going to watch the three-ring circus while she’s gone?”

“Freddy and Natascha. He has to do a few days of research in Albany, and she’s between jobs so they said they would come. For a whole week!”

We talk about the visit and some possible activities we could do when she comes.

“Ben ‘n Jerry’s? Too mainstream?” asks Jess. We check our phones. Lots of spring events, and I start collecting URLs. Lilac Festival. International Food Fair. Jess looks up. “What about a tour of independent bookstores?” I make a face. She sticks out her tongue. “This is for Martha, silly. You don’t even have to look at the books.” I know she’s right but I return to my phone. Buffet brunch by the students of the New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier. Art Hop in Burlington’s South End.

I look up. “It’s fine if you have other stuff to do. I don’t need a date to hang out with my mother.” The word “date” brings my thoughts back to Denise and I start counting again. Jessica squeezes my hand without taking her eyes off her phone. We find a few other possibilities for Mom’s visit and then return to the movie.

Before I leave, I remember that next week, the last week of June, is the second anniversary of Jess' brother Max's death.

"Are you doing anything with your family on Tuesday?" I try to sound casual, unintrusive. Jess gets up and starts clearing dishes.

"I wanted to go to the gravesite all together. Christopher is flying in, but just for one night because he has back-to-back shows the next day." She rinses her plate for way too long.

I get up and bring in the cups and napkins. "How about your dad?" I grab the sponge and start wiping the counter.

"He's got two pregnant cows who could give birth any minute now so he probably won't make it. If Dad doesn't need her, Eve will come. And of course Mom, well, being Mom, she hasn't returned my calls for at least a month."

I try to catch her eye, see her expression. She won't look at me.

"Anything I can do?"

Jess picks up the last slice of pizza. "You could come over and make my bath and read me *Ramona the Brave* like last year." She stuffs the triangle into her mouth with her head tilted back, a piece of ham dangling near her chin. I can't help smiling.

"Ramona, bubbles, whatever you want, I'll be there."

"That'd be good, Meyerwitz." Her words are barely coherent through the chewed pizza. She gives me a tiny smile, first with mouth closed, then wide open. I shriek and chase her around the island wielding a deadly pizza crust.