



# Georgie's BIG BREAK

*a short story by* MONICA DRAKE

**G**eorgie saw the notice on a listserv online: the upcoming citywide book festival, Lit Expedition, needed volunteers to introduce speakers. Perfect. It would be a perfect way for Georgie to keep her hand in during a long maternity leave. She had a semester plus a summer off from her teaching position at the university. This year the festival had an environmental bent: “Eco-Tours in the Life of the Mind.”

It was a big deal, this literary party the city hosted. Georgie held the warm bundle of her baby daughter to her shoulder and turned the idea over. There’d be no travel involved; she lived in town. Other than a little research and the writing part, being a volunteer would take only a few hours. Maybe an afternoon. She patted Elana’s back. It’d be a reason to put on makeup, get out of the house, see colleagues, maybe friends from grad school.

Her department chair, her boss, Dan, had joined the Lit Expedition advisory board the first year it was established. By now it was his baby, his hobby, his creative outlet. Dan wrote

Georgie’s annual evaluations.

She sent her name in.

The organizers e-mailed back. They’d love her help — that’s what they said; they’d love it! They were desperate for volunteers, but they were still making assignments and wouldn’t have hers until the day of the festival.

“So how will I have time to research and write the introduction?” Georgie e-mailed. She wanted to put her skills to use. Show off, maybe? Sure. She’d prove that her mind hadn’t gone with motherhood; she was still part of the dialogue, the discourse, the academic dream.

An e-mail came back: “Well write it.”

What did they mean, *Well write it?* She was missing a crucial piece. Elana spit up ever so softly on her shoulder, and Georgie shifted the baby to her other arm. She dabbed the patch of white dribble with a wet cloth, then pecked on the keyboard with one hand: “Sounds good. I’ll gladly write it once

I know who I'm introducing. OK?" She tried to put a smile in her words without sinking to emoticons.

It was a full day before an e-mail came back. "We'll write it," this one said, more clearly. "All you have to do is show up and read it onstage." Signed with a smiley face.

OK. Georgie could handle that, no problem. Less exciting, but fine. It was still a way to keep her hand in.

Georgie hired a neighbor girl to come along and hold the baby while she mingled with adults. Elana would be eight weeks old when the festival opened. Georgie's husband, Rick, wouldn't be able to stay home with her baby. He ran his own computer-programming company and was on call when computers crashed or somebody changed over a system. As Rick said, the self-employed are never off work.

Georgie wanted to keep Elana close. The baby would still be so young. When she put her down, the absence of that weight in Georgie's arms was like a phantom limb. She wouldn't leave her wallet with a stranger; why would she leave her nearly newborn daughter?

From the day Georgie signed on until the day of the event — as she changed diapers and sang songs and read board books; as she got up three times a night to nurse Elana back to sleep and then sat around in a daze, eating too many chocolate-chip cookies, reading the *New Yorker*, and letting the baby tug on her tit — she'd daydream about who she might be assigned to introduce: a writer, an editor, a theorist, a filmmaker. Johnny Depp was coming to talk about Paris and sustainability. He'd probably be there for about five minutes. Al Gore was a keynote speaker. He'd be shuttled in and out in a swarm of bodyguards. Joyce Carol Oates was reading and signing books. Those were the biggest names. Maybe Georgie would introduce an academic she already knew; maybe her department chair, Dan. Even that would be all right. Once she went back to teaching, her goal was to become a tenured faculty member. Dan was on the committee. His vote could be key.

**T**he day of the festival, while Elana napped, Georgie squeezed into a prepregnancy skirt. She let her shirt hang loose to camouflage the snug waist. It was a gorgeous shirt: indigo blue and made of spun hemp and silk. A lucky, luxury shirt.

The baby sitter walked over from down the block. She was a plain noodle of a girl with beige hair, muddy eyes, and a brand-new septum ring. The girl thumbed the ring, tugging at the spot in the middle of her nose. Georgie couldn't look at her; she didn't want to watch her flick, and flick, and flick the ring, like a miniature door knocker. The girl was so plain she could've started crafting her hipster uniform with her hair, not her nose — chop the hair short, dye it pink. Then get a tattoo, for color. Georgie smiled, ushered the baby sitter in, and went back to gathering diapers, wipes, three changes of onesies. "I'm almost ready."

"Cool," the girl said. She followed along, flicked her septum ring, and blended in with the paint on the walls. The baby sitter was small, but her T-shirt was smaller, like it was meant for a toddler. Her jeans had a yellow wash like a permanent urine stain. She asked, "Now, what are you doing, again?"

"Introducing a speaker," Georgie said. "Part of Lit Expedition."

The baby sitter's face was blank.

"The book festival?" Georgie said. It was hard to live in the city and not hear about the event. There were banners hung from every lamppost. There were temporary public sculptures — giant books, painted by local artists — chained to newspaper boxes.

"Huh. Introducing somebody famous?" The baby sitter picked up a postcard on the counter and turned it over as if the mail were for her.

"Could be," Georgie said. "They're all pretty big in my world, anyway." She packed picture books, a pacifier, extra blankets, a rattle, and a soft toy — anything to calm a screaming baby. Mostly, at eight weeks, the answer was nursing: boobs, boobs, boobs.

The whole point of the day was to let Georgie feel like a person, a brain, not a milk dispenser. She put a bottle of frozen breast milk in a side pocket of her diaper bag. The baby sitter leaned on the arm of the couch and watched TV as though the TV were on, even though it was off.

"Do you have plans for college?" Georgie asked. Maybe she could be the girl's mentor, a role model of some kind, pick her up from the empty world of consumer culture and chaperone her into the never-ending party of big ideas, the century-old conversations.

The baby sitter shrugged, then bit a fingernail and spit it on the floor.

**T**he festival was in the coliseum. The parking lot was so big Georgie had to park practically at home. They took a shuttle from the car. The three of them sat in two sideways-facing seats, the folded stroller jutting into the aisle, the diaper bag crouched on the floor like a seeing eye dog.

In the stuttering light of the shuttle bus, Georgie smoothed the dark, silky swirl of her daughter's hair, looked down, and saw a mark at the edge of her own lucky shirt. It was a milk stain, or a water mark. It was almost invisible, but no, there it was. Had that been on the shirt when she put it on?

Then she saw another one, higher up. And a little splatter. Breast milk or toothpaste? The shuttle-bus lights, with their hint of green, brought the stains out like subliminal patterns.

In the coliseum Georgie put Elana in the stroller and broke into a power walk to keep the baby from screaming. Elana hated being in the stroller and cried if she was left standing still, but movement usually kept her quiet. The baby sitter loped along at their side. They found the volunteer coordinator in a lone, free-standing booth. The woman handed Georgie an envelope and a name badge. Inside the envelope was a form letter:

Thank you for volunteering. Your guest today will be Mr/Mrs/Ms CLIFFORD. Please meet Mr/Mrs/Ms CLIFFORD in the Green Room at least one hour before the assigned time of the event. . . .

There was a map, a schedule, and a coupon for a cup of Starbucks.

Mr. Clifford? Georgie's heart picked up. James Clifford was a brilliant anthropological theorist. But there'd also been an Anita Clifford at Georgie's university, briefly. Maybe she was here.

"Get somebody cool?" the baby sitter asked. She twisted back and forth, her legs wrapped around each other, a skinny girl doing her little noodle ballet. Elana yawned and blinked, a bubble of spit on her lip.

"I think so." Georgie scanned the schedule of events until she found the name "Clifford" highlighted. The start time was less than an hour away. She was already late. She hoisted the diaper bag onto her shoulder and put her hands on the stroller. "He's an interesting man. You'll meet him."

Where was the Green Room? She turned again to the volunteer coordinator, but the woman was busy with somebody else.

They'd stood still too long. Elana gave a fussy cry, trying it out. Then it grew. While Georgie waited her turn, Elana burst into full song, screamed, and spit up on her own hands. Her tiny fingers were dripping and shaking. The baby sitter wandered off to feed coins into a Coke machine ten steps away. Georgie picked Elana up and found a wipe in a bag to clean those darling starfish hands, even as those sweet baby hands grabbed Georgie's clothes, smeared puke on her best effort to dress up. "There, there, sweets. You're OK," she whispered.

Finally the volunteer coordinator was free. "Excuse me?" Georgie cut in. She bounced Elana on her hip. "Where is the Green Room?"

The woman showed her on the map, marking the spot with a big X.

"How will I recognize my guest?"

The woman took the form letter from Georgie's hand, read it, and gave it back. "You'll see him," she said.

**A**s soon as Georgie pushed open the Green Room door, she saw him, right next to a tray of salami and havarti: Clifford. She saw the red hair on his back, his giant head as it swung her way. His big, cartoon-character eyes and ever-present smile.

"Clifford?" Georgie said.

The dog bobbed its massive head.

The baby sitter let out a guffaw. Georgie shook the dog's stuffed paw. She was ready for full retreat — time to go home, hit the couch, cuddle with her kid, and forget about work, career, networking. Forget about the world. It was time to drink the glass of wine she'd been denying herself since even before she got pregnant, take those pain pills the hospital sent her home with. They had forty-five minutes to pass with a big red stuffed animal. Her job was to introduce a person in a dog suit.

**G**eorgie was assigned to the Children's Lit Stage. The children's stage was practically baby-sitting. Another volunteer handed her the scripted introduction. It began, "Hello, kids! Who's your favorite big red dog?" There was a game: guess the names of Clifford's three best friends. Then Georgie would host a toddler party and hand out Clifford-shaped erasers.

Clifford shuffled his big feet at her side.

"OK," Georgie said to him. "Let's go find your place."

**E**lana screamed when she was back in the stroller. Georgie offered her blankets, pillows, a rattle with a Martiansque bobbly head, but the baby kept crying, and Georgie broke out in a sweat. Then she gave in and carried Elana. The baby sitter pushed the stroller, full of blankets and toys, through the wide, crowded concourse like some kind of high-school project on teen pregnancy.

Right away they passed a group of three faculty from her university. Georgie smiled and kept walking. She saw a former student, who looked glad to catch her eye. She nodded back, adjusted the baby in her arms, and didn't break her clip.

Who wants to mingle when your date's a guy in a dog suit?

Then she saw Brian Watson. Maybe Brian Watson saw her first. She saw her ex. The married professor, her professor, the man who never left his wife for her after all. That had been so many years ago. It should've been forgotten. It was forgotten. They'd grown up, grown out of it, both of them. Still, she lurched, stumbled against the carpet.

His rock-star curls were silver — they'd been half gray before — and still fabulous. He was a Fulbright scholar, an award winner. His skin was tan and weathered like a cowboy's.

Georgie held the festival paperwork up to her face in an attempt to hide.

"Georgie!" Brian Watson called. His social skills always had been better than hers — particularly if you counted fucking around as a social skill.

She said, "Brian!" and hoped it sounded spontaneous.

He said, "Look at you, you haven't changed at all."

She knew this was wrong: her hair was thinner, her ass was bigger, and she had toothpaste on her shirt. She hadn't changed her clothes, was more like it.

He said, "You brought your family."

"Family?" Georgie kept a smile on her face and followed Brian Watson's gaze. There was Georgie's crew: The baby sitter looked ready to pick her nose as she played with her septum ring. Clifford stood with his hands on his hips. The stroller was full of blankets, rattles, a stray pacifier, and the Martiansque bobbly toy, and there was something demented about pushing a stroller with no baby in it. Georgie tried not to slouch and not to stick her hip out under the weight of tiny Elana and the massive diaper bag. As a family they were a hodgepodge of creatures pulled from the toy box. She said, "Sure. That one's my husband," and pointed to the big red dog. "And that's our latest addition" — the empty stroller. It seemed funny, like a kid's game, until she said it out loud.

Brian Watson, the smartest infidel in academia, the most gracious of liars, leaned forward readily and offered a hand to the person in the dog suit. He said, "Nice to meet you. You've got a gorgeous family." How did he come off as sincere?

His sincerity made Georgie feel like the cad, like she'd set him up, told him a lie.

Clifford's smile never faltered. It couldn't — it was sewn on. Clifford shook Brian Watson's hand and nodded his big, fuzzy noggin. It was like the person was half deaf in that outfit. Who was in there? Georgie wanted to rap the dog on its head. *Knock, knock.*

She said, “Really, only the baby is mine.”

Brian Watson tipped his chin up, like he was working out a philosophical angle, sinking into brainiac musings.

Georgie said, “The dog, Clifford, is a social signifier employed in this context to convey that interstitial terrain between childhood and adulthood, marking the locus between television, the great equalizer, and the individuality inherent in fantasy, as seen through the eyes — yes, plastic eyes — of an almost human form intended to elicit a sympathetic response while gratifying basic urges through purporting to know what we can never know, the mind of animals and the mind of the *other* . . .”

Georgie was looking for the end of her own sentence. Brian Watson watched her, hand on his chin. Maybe he was thinking about a new paper on how humor disguises hostility. Maybe he thought Georgie was a jerk. Either way he held a relaxed, pleasant look. He didn’t laugh. When a tall, thin woman half his age ran her arm through his, Brian Watson shook his silver hair and said, “Listen, take care, OK? Don’t be a stranger, kid.” He tapped Georgie with a rolled-up program.

The dog turned its big head Georgie’s way, and for the first time she saw a second set of eyes: not the cartoon eyes up above, but another pair lower down, behind sheer black screens hidden in the dark recess of the animal’s mouth. Those eyes — did they look at her with pity? Georgie couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman inside. An androgynous, mute judge. Did this outfit, this Halloween joke, this toddler celebrity, really need an introduction?

Princesses at Disneyland made cavorting with cartoons look so much easier.

Georgie walked. The baby sitter with the empty stroller fell in line. Clifford too.

*What kind of parade have I become?* Georgie thought.

She avoided everyone until she saw Dan, the department chair, her advisor, part of her tenure committee. “Hello, Dan,” she said.

“So, you found your guest.” Dan rocked up on his toes.

“Can you believe it?” Georgie whispered. She turned away from Clifford, afraid he would hear and sure he could read lips. “Out of all the visiting stars, the professors, the writers, I get a stuffed dog.”

Dan said, “I thought you’d be thrilled.”

“You knew about this?”

“Sure,” he said. “I set it up. You’re perfect.”

Georgie felt her face grow hot. Her fingers were trembling. She needed to sit down. Why was she suddenly “perfect” to introduce a cartoon character? This didn’t look good for tenure.

She wanted to put Elana down, to walk away for a minute and pull herself together. She wanted to be in charge of herself and no one else, just for now. Her arms were weak and strong at the same time — it was like there was no weight to them, no blood, but like she could swing, could hit something and pack a punch. She wanted to jog, run, get off the planet.

“Because I’m a mom?” she asked.

“Sure, and it’s fun, right?” Dan snapped his fingers down low, a habit he had.

Georgie called to the baby sitter, “I need your help.” The

sitter took the baby, and Elana screamed immediately, the child giving voice to the mom; Georgie wanted to scream too. She reached for the stroller to steady herself. She turned too fast and bumped into a group of men coming up on one side. One man’s shoe hit the side of her wedge heel and knocked her leg out from under her.

She fell. As she went down, she saw the group was a pack of frat boys, strong men in slacks and T-shirts. They had square heads and bodybuilder arms. They had Bluetooth headsets. It was frat boys knocking down intellect, knocking down the academy, the faculty — or just her: Georgie. She landed on her hip, still padded by baby weight. *Oof!*

She wanted to cry.

But one guy in the middle of the crowd, a man with a lighter build, was different from the others. He had a nicer suit. He leaned toward her. He had long hair and tucked a wayward strand behind his ear as he bent down. His eyes were wide and brown and kind. His mouth opened as though to say something. He licked his lips. Reached out a hand. It was Johnny Depp. The frat boys — they were bodyguards or handlers. They were security.

Georgie reached back. Her fingers were inches from his, from Johnny Depp’s hand. Then she felt herself lifted. Two fuzzy red paws took her by the armpits and helped her up. They pulled her away from Johnny. The brown-eyed man — *was* it Johnny Depp? — disappeared so quickly. Big, manly bodies closed in like doors and cut him off from the masses.

Clifford’s paws beat against Georgie’s lucky shirt, her tight skirt, to dust her off. She couldn’t see around the dog’s stuffed and swinging cranium. Where was Mr. Depp? Where was her angel? Johnny.

Clifford picked up the diaper bag and tucked the scattered onesies back inside. Instead of handing the diaper bag over to Georgie, the big red dog put it on his own shoulder. The bag looked at home there. He pushed the stroller out of the way, bent for the fallen rattle, and rested the rattle on the stroller’s tray. Baby Elana still screamed in the sitter’s arms. Clifford reached for Elana. The sitter handed her over like a bag of laundry. The dog bowed its massive head over the baby’s tiny one and swayed back and forth in a clumsy, big-footed waltz. Elana quit crying. She closed her eyes, wrapped in the plush folds of red polyfibers.

Georgie knew then who was inside that costume: a mom. Somebody unemployed, maybe with a graduate degree. Maybe it was a writer-mom with a book in progress, an agent in New York City, a dream as big as all Manhattan. Whoever it was knew how to sling a diaper bag and push a stroller and not miss a beat. It was someone who could take care of a baby without being sidetracked even by Johnny Depp in the flesh. This, she thought, this dog, is how we dress a mom. Her own head felt like a puppet’s head then, big and fuzzy under fluorescent lights, hiding another person deep inside. ■

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