

*Seduction, prejudice, and the need to control prevail in **Small Lies**, a collection of award-winning short stories by Catherine Gentile. Motivated by the desire for a more authentic life, the characters unshackle themselves from past hurts to propel past the falsehoods they have created to find hope and resiliency.*

Small Lies

By Catherine Gentile

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SMALL LIES

A Collection of Short Stories

Catherine Gentile

Praise from Readers of *Small Lies*:

This beautifully written collection of short stories profoundly touches on many aspects of the human experience. The characters are so well described that they jump off the pages and make you feel and identify with their growth, struggles, joys, prejudices, and triumphs. Catherine Gentile's story telling ability is seamlessly coupled with the exploration of the essence of the characters. The timeless nature of the issues, emotions, and relationships are penned in a thoughtful, sensitive, poignant and sometimes raw manner that grab your attention and won't let go long after the end of the story. I thoroughly enjoyed and highly recommend this collection.

—Richard Rudnansky, USA

Small Lies is a collection of short stories whose imagery and imagination surround you with hope as the characters master the challenges they face. Their stories will captivate you, will have you thinking about their courage and determination for days, and provide the reader a way to tap into their own resiliency. Catherine Gentile is a compassionate and articulate writer whose style draws you in and keeps your attention throughout.

—Sarah and Harvey Berman, USA

Small Lies

Catherine Gentile has given us carefully developed characters who launch themselves within situations that span a heart-capturing range of themes and settings. Her thought-provoking collection of short stories is a joy to read and think about.

—Joan Erickson, USA

Small Lies is the most tender and beautifully written short story collection that I have ever read. Catherine Gentile puts her heart and soul into conveying her characters' innermost feelings, their weaknesses, their strengths, and their secrets. In each and every story, you discover subtle meanings and words of wisdom that make each of them complete and fulfilling. Do yourself a favour—read it!

—Ida Egede Winther, Denmark

Do you remember a single defining moment that changed the course of your life? It was a moment you built upon years of existence. It was the moment you decided to be your true self. In *Small Lies*, Catherine Gentile has given us stories of these moments, very much like a butterfly escaping its cocoon. Her writing is descriptive; it sweeps the reader along as if riding a tide. These tales evoke many emotions, among them admiration, anger, love, and also astonishment at the failings of some people. Catherine has a command of words that is at times lyrical and poetic. Her grasp of different cultures, times

and places is impressive to say the least! Savor these glimpses of humanity. You will not regret it!

—Judith Matthew, USA

Small Lies is a collection of short stories, beautifully written by Catherine Gentile. It gives us a mature and realistic account of human relationships within the social hardships and sometimes intolerance. Each story is different, thought provoking, and reflects her sensibility and perceptiveness. The book is a fascinating and intellectual read, which results in understanding many attitudes.

—Pamela Milne, Portugal

Deception is a shroud used to hide from painful truths. Catherine Gentile's use of engaging and believable characters and cultures in *Small Lies*, carries the reader on a journey of exploration in how such deception complicates and enslaves rather than provide protection from discomfort.

—Marcia Dedekian, USA

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SMALL LIES

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THOMAS'S BENCH

Thomas stands at the edge of his wife's Zen garden surveying the damage. A downed birch has gouged the earth, spilling leaves, flattening newly planted rhododendrons, creating chaos. Garden mold, once secured beneath a carpet of landscaping paper and pebbles, breezes upward, curls his broad nostrils into a sneeze. Thomas turns toward the window to see if Millie's watching, then lifts the hem of his T-shirt, wipes his nose, wishes he didn't have allergies and asthma. Between the two, he snuffles constantly. This annoys Millie; it always has. She likes her people well-mannered and things tidy, in order, like the flow of grainy lines she keeps so carefully raked. Not like this mess.

But the randomness of the granite nuggets appeals to Thomas, delights him even, although he isn't about to let on to Millie. With the guys in his support group maybe, the one he has yet to tell her about. Unemployed Executives, or RPM, as the guys dubbed it. Recovering Power Men. My reality, he thinks, running his fingers along a branch that's jammed into the fieldstone wall, is more like this than Millie suspects.

Sweat glistens on his round face, glasses glide toward the bulb of his nose, his wide biceps contract. He begins the work of disconnecting the branch from its trunk, knows the only merciful thing to do is to cut the once-lofty birch into pieces. If it sits on the damp ground, the stringy yellow interior will gorge itself with moisture, then rot. He saws, exploding the first burst of tension and positions himself to jump out of the way before he severs the branch. Otherwise, it'll spring back and slap him hard.

“My beautiful garden,” Millie says, from the other side of the patio doors. The sun has yet to filter through the sagging spruce boughs, and the morning light shadows her honey-colored skin. “All that work—I hate starting over.”

Thomas lifts his wire-rimmed frames, wipes his face with his handkerchief, while moisture from his thick chest wicks into twin stains on his shirt and his damp belly presses against his belt. “I’ve called McEnnary’s Nursery. They’ll cut the trunk and haul it away. But don’t let them touch these.” He points to the branches he’s stacked by the wall. “I want them for a project,” he says, with an easy confidence he hasn’t heard since he was a boy, long before Grandma Betsy insisted he lose his black Southern drawl. “You can’t talk that way if you’re going to fit in,” she said, dabbing at his soft, round sounds, soaking them up and away.

What would his exacting grandmother say if she were alive today? Determined to prove himself an exceptional first black CFO, he screwed up big time, let the expansion he directed

outpace cash flow. Almost blotted Winston-Harding Financial Services of New England out of existence. Fortunately for the company, an underling, jealous of Thomas's success, reviewed his accounting practices with the CEO. Shortly after, she reassigned Thomas to the satellite office on the other side of town. Corporate gulag. From there, he read her smoke signals: Temporary lapse in hiring judgment...Recovered senses, maneuvering for same to happen with losses...Highly delicate, must not, repeat, not cause alarm with investors or within black community. Within two weeks, he shoved his severance package, along with his belongings, into his trunk. That was exactly one year ago today. From then on, he had filled his days with new activities. And never told Millie.

"You're going to be late for work," Millie says, her small head bowing to meet her coffee cup. "I've got a busy day, too."

Their large house had that empty quiet the kids leave behind after they've packed and gone to camp. There'd been a time, not long ago, when Millie and Thomas would have come into the kitchen to make coffee only to chase each other giggling up the stairs, hop on their four-poster bed, ride it 'til it creaked. Until they produced the same brazen sounds that had drifted from the whorehouses behind Melton Street where Thomas had lived with his grandmother in Atlanta.

"Feel good to work outside?" Millie asks, pouring him coffee.

He holds up the blister on his right hand and nods. "I have one of these to prove it." His voice has a fullness to it, so

different from the hollow CFO noises he's made these last five years. He closes his eyes and slurps his coffee, feels her studying him.

"What are you going to do with those branches?" she asks, her words coming out fast, jockeyed perhaps, by her next thought.

"Build a bench for your garden." He watches Millie grimace as if he'd fed her an aspirin.

"A homemade bench in a formal garden. You think that'll work?"

"Does it have to?" The more he thinks about it, the more he likes the idea of testing his concentration, craftsmanship and honesty. In two of the three, he scores off the charts; about honesty—he isn't willing to say just yet.

"McEnnary's Nursery sells benches. Why don't we buy one?"

"I said I want to make it." He quickly adds, "I haven't done any woodworking in a while. It'll be relaxing." He watches her eyes for a flicker, one that recognizes his apology, doesn't take offense. He isn't disappointed.

"I have a design in mind, like the benches my grandmother and I used to sell to our neighbors." He pauses for a moment. "Remember when we were that poor?" Thomas's voice fades; he wheezes, pulls out his inhaler and squirts it in his mouth.

"I'd rather not." Millie rolls up the sleeves on the white silk robe he'd bought two years ago when he was in Tokyo on business. As soon as he landed a salaried position, Thomas

started buying her presents. Little things at first: flowered notepaper, a box of licorice, a silver necklace with a butterfly. Later, as his degree from Wharton began paying off, a trip to the Swiss Alps, a BMW, their twelve-room home in the Berkshires. Each an antidote to the memory of Grandma Betsy handing him his first pair of new leather shoes the morning he left for college.

“I can’t believe you’re going to fool around with that old tree, but if that’s what you want, it’s okay with me. Don’t forget my editor is expecting me to send her my chapters this week. I won’t have time to help if you need a second pair of hands. You do remember my deadline, don’t you?”

“How could I forget?” By the time he showers and comes downstairs, sports coat over one shoulder, Millie is in the study, clacking away at her keyboard.

A few hours later, Thomas’ silk sports coat lay heaped on the table in the Westfield Library. Here, two towns over from his home in Thurston, he feels safe. No one he knows comes here, especially during the day. The library is small, simply furnished with comfortable chairs, scuffed with use, but lovingly polished. He unpacks his laptop, pushes the case under his sports coat, fingers the gash where he’d cut out the Brooks Brothers label. Already, the threads are unraveling.

Wednesdays are Thomas’s favorite day. Not because the workweek is mercifully coming to a close, but because this is the day he’s assigned to observe the library program as part of the university course he’s taking: *Introduction to Teaching for*

the Transitioning Professional. He sits so his six foot two doesn't frighten the little people— some only knee high— gathering around the librarian, anxiously waiting for her to read. Her silvery hair is pulled back from her affable face in a chignon. Dressed like Mother Goose, in a bonnet with loose flowing ties, her full-length white apron falls in gentle folds around her ankles. A dark lad shyly fondles the fabric. No one seems to have cajoled him into coming here, and the little guy's not clamoring to be the biggest, the best. He is simply and fully here. With nothing to prove.

Thomas feels as if he's learning, as these children are, to become a human being, not a human doing. Sure, there's a certain amount of "doing" to his day, starting each morning with his Unemployed Exec meetings, a kind of twelve-step program where, a few hours earlier, he stood before a half dozen white guys confessing his resume writing efforts were halfhearted at best. Then networking with the other 'ex-ecs,' as they call themselves, looking on as they furiously studied Web-sites for postings of new "positions." Not jobs but positions. Not what he wants.

Afterward, while waiting for his appointment with his counselor, he looked forward to speaking openly with someone who was, until not long ago, a perfect stranger. Perfect in that he was doing exactly what he wanted, living exactly where and how he wanted, dropping *r*'s all over the place, braying his *a*'s and sounding unabashedly like a true and improper Bostonian. "Damn, I'm jealous," Thomas had told him. This long, skinny

bearded fellow listened, his chin resting on his hairy knuckles, his unassuming shirt rumpled around his waist.

“What’s stopping you, Thomas? Land a couple of interviews, use that jive. See how people respond.”

But Thomas didn’t want an interview. Sure, he’d finished his resume, he had to, it was part of his new program. But he used small font and listed his academic background last. No summa cum bullshit. Not anymore. He opens his notebook, turns on the computer, then stops to watch the robins flitting in and out of the cherry tree on the other side of the bay window. He envies their freedom, savoring his own, stolen though it may be. One of these days, he’s going to have to tell Millie, and, as he told the long-legged counselor, that was his greatest fear.

“What do you think she’ll do?” the counselor asked.

“I call her my blue-blooded black woman; she likes her work at the university, but loves the idea that she’s doing it because she wants to, not because she has to.”

“So you’re worried she’ll balk when she finds out you want a job teaching instead of a corporate position? What’s the worst thing she would do?”

Thomas paused for a second, his eyes becoming filmy. “Know I’m a fraud.”

He stares at his keyboard, until a woman’s voice interrupts. “Having trouble with your laptop?”

Thomas’ sports coat falls limp on the floor and in his rush to pick it up, he knocks his chair over. “You scared the sh ...”

he starts to say, then seeing Mrs. Worthington's shocked face, "Sorry, you startled me." He rights the furniture, retrieves his jacket.

"I'm just as surprised to see you. What are you doing, research for your office?" With an amused smirk, she cranes her flaccid neck, peers at his notebook. Thomas reaches out, slams it shut. She raises her silvery eyebrows, and repositions her glasses with a swift movement like the one Grandma Betsy used to make. Thomas is astounded, entranced. But it's her attitude that gets to him. Aloof, withholding, judgmental. He wheezes, once, twice, feels the old humiliation washing down the back of his throat.

"How's Dr. Clark, that impressive wife of yours? I apologize, but I seem to have forgotten her first name. I was hoping she'd accept my invitation to join the Junior League. Diversity's our theme this year, and it would have been so..." An angry flash registers on Thomas' face, and her voice trails off.

"Millie. Her name's Millie," he says in a rush. "I don't know where she'd find the time. She's so busy. Writing a textbook, working on a grant, driving into Boston to teach..." He stops blathering, notices the Grand Dame of Thurston staring at his Franklin planner, at his ten-thirty counseling appointment, the only thing on the page. Thomas tosses his sports coat over the planner. He's thirteen years old again, incensed at his grandmother for checking his homework. "Not

good enough,” he recalls her saying. “Make it your best, nothing less than your best. Then I’ll be proud.”

Mrs. Worthington glowers, seems to understand he has a lot to hide. “My meeting’s about to begin. Just think how delighted the regional board will be to hear that the financial community finds our little library so useful.” Thomas says goodbye, folds his hands to stop them from shaking.

He isn’t sure what makes him do it, but as Mrs. Worthington turns to leave, he shouts after her. “Why can’t you be honest enough to ask what I’m doing here, with all these wonderful children?” Isn’t she impressed that he’s preparing for his future, in spite of what happened to him at Winston-Harding? Doesn’t she know that other execs in his group are on heavy dosages of anti-depressants and he’s doing okay? “Not one pill. Can you hear me, Mrs. Worthington, damn it?” he screams as she inches away from him.

The librarian corrals the terrified children and in a shaky singsong voice leads them out of the room with, “Let’s pretend this is a fire drill, children. Who remembers which door we use?” Thomas slumps into his seat, head in his hands. Within minutes he’s alone. An eerie silence floats through the library until it’s broken by the distant wail of sirens.

Thomas takes the long way home, parks his car in the garage, places his briefcase in the foyer and listens for Millie’s keyboard. He envies her focus and industriousness, even though it’s fueled by fury. By now, Mrs. Worthington has called; he’s sure of it. Millie’s typing has that “if you think I

believe you for an instant, you're an idiot" rhythm. She's right; he's an idiot and a liar.

The grandfather clock in the study chimes seven. Friday, August fifth is outlined in red on Millie's desk calendar. In less than three days her chapter's due. Millie's one of a team of researchers writing a medical textbook that promises to revolutionize doctors' training. Make it more holistic. Once it's published, Millie will be invited to lecture at med schools throughout the country, and Tufts will surely offer her the department chair. It's Millie's turn; her star's about to ascend. And leave him behind.

Thomas closes his eyes, rests his head against the doorjamb.

"You okay?" Millie asks, approaching him with cautious curiosity, one that maintains a respectful distance.

He stares down at her. She's a good six inches shorter than Thomas and half his weight. So, what is it about her that makes him quake? Perhaps it's her unwillingness to see that his high-powered position has made them wealthier and poorer at the same time. Left her thinking they deserved all they had. He can smell her sense of entitlement. A sense he no longer pretends to share.

He loosens his tie, unbuttons his white shirt and steps further from her. "I'm tired. Today was exhausting," he says, then sorry he's mentioned this, comes closer, pecks her cheek.

"I haven't made dinner."

“That’s fine. I’m going to work in the garage for a while. I drew a sketch; nothing fancy, but I think you’ll like it.” Thomas opens his briefcase, hoping to distract her, and takes out a paper scratched with numbers and little arrows.

“A sketch of what?”

“The bench I’m going to make.”

She rolls her head back, laughs. “So that’s why you’re home early. I figured you wouldn’t get home before midnight—it’s the second Wednesday of the first quarter—isn’t this when you have your dinner meeting with the board?”

Thomas doesn’t answer.

“Am I mumbling again?”

“I rescheduled the meeting to early morning, just for the summer months,” he says, annoyed at the cute reminder she uses whenever he doesn’t respond.

“Those Daddy Warbucks obsessing about the stock market?”

“With five percent unemployment, they can’t help but worry,” he says and starts up the stairs. Halfway up, he turns wondering if she’s buying this line. “Can you help me...for just a few minutes?”

She glances at the study door, back at Thomas, her expression wooden. “Okay, but I won’t have time to make dinner. You’ll have to settle for sandwiches.” Sandwiches. A feast as far as he’s concerned.

By the time she changes into a pair of cut-offs and an old top, Thomas is in the third bay of the garage. His paint-

spattered workbench runs the length of the outside wall, overflows with coffee cans and artichoke bottles filled with nails and screws. A spider has spun its web from the drill press to the leg of a chair wedged within a small vise. Scattered across the bench are cords, switches, stiff paint brushes.

Thomas' radial arm saw makes a whiny sound that becomes higher, more intense as the blade labors through a knot in the birch. His safety glasses dangle from a nearby nail and sawdust clings to the lenses like iron filings to a magnet. He gives the wood an extra push toward the blade, slicing the branch in two, letting it clatter to the floor.

When he turns around, Millie's reading the mail, scowling. "What's this about?" she says, handing him a letter from the bank. "The last time I looked at the accounts we had plenty of money. This can't be true—I'm mortified."

Mortified? That's nothing compared to how he felt after this afternoon's scuffle with Mrs. Worthington, Thurston's local broadcasting system. Thomas glances at the letter, clears sawdust from his throat. Sniffles. "That damn bank's always making mistakes—they've confused our account number with someone else's. I'm playing golf with the president tomorrow, I'll take care of this."

He takes the letter from Millie, stuffs it in his back pocket. "I don't know why they sent this here—I've asked them to send everything to my office. All our files are there." He gathers the logs, heaps them into her arms. "The two smaller pieces are for the arms, the others, the seat."

She stands, pressing the logs to her chest. “But all our checks are stamped ‘insufficient funds.’ This doesn’t make sense.”

Thomas turns towards his workbench and rattles through boxes, cans, wires. “Where’d I put that damn thing? Millie, can you see the paper with my notes?”

She squats, lowers her arms and drops the logs. She stacks them, the two longest together, the next size, then the next. She rests for a moment, her forearms on her thighs, wrists dangling from her knees, marionette-like. Exactly the way Thomas felt as a kid. Exactly how he feels now: taut, suspended by a woman. Always a woman.

Beginning with his grandmother, strong, tall as a mountain, someone who never missed an opportunity to remind him he was carrying the banner for the rest of his kind. Not wanting to disappoint, he earned a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, then one to grad school at Wharton, and a fellowship at Oxford. Grandma Betsy had been right; it came naturally for Thomas, this ability to cash in on his gift. But somewhere along the way, it stopped feeling like his, seemed more a part of his grandmother’s iron hand, the one that twitched beneath her velvety glove.

For a moment, Thomas can’t bring himself to look at his wife, who flattered him into taking the position at Winston-Harding. Said being its youngest, smartest, first black chief financial officer was a coup. But it’d been a bitch.

“There’s your sketch, by your foot,” Millie says.

He glares at her. “You knew where it was all along—you made me look for it.” He tosses a hammer that ricochets off the drill, clatters to the cement.

Millie jumps back. “For God’s sake, Thomas, what’s going on?”

Satisfied that he’s blamed her for his chaos, he starts to drill, bearing down on the rotating bit, sinking deeper, deeper into a branch until it pops through the other side. “Shit!” he shouts, and throws the drill on the floor. “I ruined it. I was fine until you started asking questions. Now I can’t concentrate. Shit!”

Millie’s eyes narrow. “When did you move our files to your office?”

Thomas shifts his jaw from side to side, wheezes and takes a couple of deep breaths. “Remember when we first moved here?”

“Why?”

“I hated dragging you through that first black family in Thurston, the hidden jewel of the Berkshires crap. Being referred to as a family of color, as if we were part of some sociology prof’s experiment. The champions of political correctness drew straws to see who would invite us to their home first. But after their leader, Mrs. Worthington, saw me walking toward her on Main Street, and tightened her grip on her purse, I knew I was a living lie.”

Thomas stares at the ruined branch, hands on his hefty hips, shirt half unbuttoned. “She was amazed at your freckles, green

eyes and credentials. Just think, a doctorate in occupational therapy, Grand Dame Worthington said. Imagine what she would have said if..." Thomas switched to his shoe shine boy accent, "I'd come out 'o my mama a deep dark molasses, a real colored boy, like my granddaddy."

"Has someone at work said something to you? That's discrimination, you know."

He shakes his head, points to the log by his tool chest. "Hand me that piece of wood. I pushed too hard. I'll be more careful this time."

His fingers circle a knot on the branch. Blackened and wrinkled, it reminds him of his scruffy elbows, when he was a boy. Beyond it, jagged scars intersect the whiteness of the bark, cut across the horizontal stitches that seem to fasten it to its tree.

Thomas asks Millie to hold the pieces in place while he screws them together. They repeat this until they've fastened the arms to either side of the seat and the legs beneath.

He steps back, studies his bench, runs his hand over the slight bow in the arms, thinks it artistic. But the arms seem, when compared to the legs, with their knobby knees and flat feet, too classy for this furniture. Clunky and amateurish are the words that come to mind. Not what he intended.

"I have work to do. Need anything else?" Millie asks.

"If you hold the back upright against the seat, I'll drive in the screws."

Millie places her feet shoulder width apart, and positions her small round hips as if she were about to lift a three hundred pound patient from his hospital bed. “Wood’s wet, it’ll get lighter when it dries out,” he says, the bark bristly against his palms. Squatting beside her, Thomas holds the back in place with one hand, and drills with the other. With what he imagines to be the force of a powerful magnet, the boring screw draws the back from their grip, releases them from its awkward weight.

Millie tucks her hands into the pockets of her jeans, cocks her head to one side. “Reminds me of a newborn calf.”

“Imagine that. All four feet actually touch the floor.”

She puts one hand on each arm of the bench. “Dare I wiggle it?” He chews his lip and nods.

Not only does it wiggle, but it groans, one branch grinding against the other. Millie jerks around, as if to hide this mess from Thomas. He gasps, pulls his inhaler from his pocket, sticks it in his mouth and squirts.

“Guess I’m not as good as I thought. Something’s got to change,” he says with a growl. A trickle of salty liquid rolls down his throat and he knows he can’t go on this way. What would Millie think if they sold this house and he took a job in Boston teaching poor white and black and tan kids? Math, perhaps. Self-respect, for sure. It has a certain appeal although he isn’t sure he’s what they call a role model. What’s to respect about someone who lets others use screaming yellow highlighter to map out his life from one ivy tower to the next,

from one influential cocktail party to the next charity fund raiser, where the folks in the we've-got-it-all crowd mill about, congratulating themselves on having lots to share?

“What do you have in mind?” Millie asks, her glasses dangling on a pearl chain that rests on her small breasts, peering into her heart.

“Remember when we used to play charades?”

“We haven't done that in ages. Getting sentimental, Thomas?”

“You haven't been doing that, but it's been different with me.”

“I'm not following you. With this and lots of things.”

“I'm not surprised.” Thomas' heart is exploding, terrified by the truth he's about to spew.

“I'm thinking of donating this bench to the Salvation Army, taking it as a tax write-off.” This notion entertains him, and he smiles until he sees the intensity on Millie's face.

“Hello? Earth to Thomas, this is your wife speaking. You're not making any sense. What's going on?” Her voice is brittle. Demanding.

“Mars to Millie, Mars to Millie, you mean to tell me you haven't noticed anything unusual?”

“Goddamn it. Thomas, you aren't having an affair, are you?” Her mouth twists into an agonized frown.

Thomas throws his head back, hoots with laughter, doubles over and slaps his haunches again and again. “Why didn't I think of that? Me? An affair? Hell, who would have me? The

guy who specializes in wobbly benches.” His hooting slips into uncontrollable, hysterical laughter. Tears run down his cheeks. He sucks air in and out, until it gets caught in the emptiness deep inside him, and he chokes and coughs. Coughs until he can’t stop. He’s on his knees now, one minute face down on the cement, the next, head up, gasping for air, any amount of air.

“Thomas, use your inhaler. Stand up so we can get it out of your pocket. I’m calling 911.” Millie’s full moon eyes protrude, nostrils umbrella as if she were trying to take in air enough for them both.

He shakes his head. No. Waves his hand—no 911. He hadn’t counted on scaring her like this, figured what he had to tell her would be terrifying enough. He follows Millie’s trembling directions, “Sit up. Squirt. Breathe in, gently now, one, two. Breathe out,” and she counts and counts until he gets hold of himself. He can almost taste the relief.

He grabs her hand, kisses it. “Sorry, I’m so sorry,” he says, and with that, pulls her towards him.

“Thomas, tell me what’s happening.” Millie tucks his fuzzy head beneath her chin, squeezes it, as if to keep it from exploding.

“This is the freest this black boy has ever been,” he says.

And he does what he should have done long ago. Tells her what it felt like to be the most sought-after CFO the company had ever had: speaking engagements, pricey consultations, talk of becoming the next CEO. And from a lofty perch, a terrible fall. His humiliation. The degrading satellite office, colleagues’

averted gazes, his severance and with it, the realization that he never truly belonged. He tells her he wants to recreate his life, shapes his words to sound as if this was all part of his plan. As if he were in charge.

“How could that be? You just rescheduled your board meeting.” Millie sits on his bench, waits for its jittery swaying to stop, her jaw suspended, eyes unblinking, seemingly struggling not to let his words sweep her away. Seeing her vacant stare, he imagines her taking refuge on high ground, far, far from him. Begins to understand the impact of his subterfuge. No, of his lies.

He becomes aware of the bottom of his sneakers on the cool cement, arms lightly touching the thinning denim surrounding his outer thighs, diaphragm against his shirt, blood spurting through his heart and into the circumstance he created, forcing him, for the first time, to a new kind of pain. Someone else’s. Many minutes pass. Silence.

With one incredulous blink Millie’s consciousness reenters the room. Thomas imagines her returning after the storm, to the site where her home had once been, to find it swept away with only the foundation remaining. “A whole year?” are the words she whispers. “And you’re telling me now when I’m so close to the end of my project? You waited a year, but you couldn’t hang on a few more days? Are you trying to ruin me too, Thomas? Is that it? One goes, we both go?”

“I meant to tell...” He stops mid-lie. I never meant to tell her a thing, otherwise why the ruse? So elegant. So smart.

“You didn’t think I would help you. Didn’t trust me. It’s as simple as that,” Millie says, her beautiful face crinkled in disbelief.

Her tone shifts and in one frozen breath sends Thomas’s thoughts skittering toward their kids, wondering about the yet unspoken: joint custody, visitation schedule, court-ordered family life. He decides, this very moment, if that’s what’s to happen, he won’t bother with an attorney, doesn’t want a thing. I’ve had the best of the best, your honor, he imagines saying. A grandmother who promoted me, a wife who supported me, a CEO who gave me the chance of a lifetime. All of them trusted me. Until I drilled too far, and tore through their tender limbs. He runs his tongue over his teeth, gums, the roof of his mouth, and recognizes it at last. Relief, profound and delicious.

These thoughts make him giddy and scare the shit out of him. From somewhere in his past, he hears Grandma Betsy’s voice, chiding him for using language that’s common. “Shh,” he whispers.

Millie looks up at him as if he were speaking to her. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Take your time,” he says in the soft drawl he hasn’t used in years. He moves closer, extends his left hand. Perhaps Millie will reach out for it, touch it because it’s his. He waits, floating on the delicacy of this moment. When she doesn’t move, he draws his fingers along the graceful curve of the birch arm, and stubs his toe against the monstrous foot. Such a hideous creation. He starts to wheeze, but stops himself. He wipes his

nose with his shirt, doesn't care if she sees him. It doesn't matter now.

Millie shifts and the bench quivers with what Thomas hopes is a signal for him to sit beside her. He peers anxiously into her small face, sees no welcoming glimmer, but decides to sit, uninvited. After all, he's spent a lifetime in places where he's not welcome. Squeezed against her warm haunches, he finds an odd comfort in the way the bench presses against his ribs. Reads it as the truth of their lives: they manage to fit together, even though they'd each be more comfortable alone. Millie squirms. In the precarious moments that follow, Thomas sways in a barely perceptible dance, adjusting and counter-adjusting his weight, while his bench wobbles and threatens to collapse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Lesley MacVane

Catherine Gentile's fiction received the Dana Award for Short Fiction, and achieved finalist status in the American Fiction Prize Contest, The Ledge, and the International Reynolds Price Short Fiction Award. Her short fiction was chosen as semifinalist in the Boston Fiction Festival, and the New Millennium Writing Competition. After publishing in *American Fiction*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *The Chaffin Journal* and others, Catherine ventured into the world of the novel.

Small Lies

Her debut novel, *The Quiet Roar of a Hummingbird*, achieved finalist status in the Eric Hoffer Novel Award for Excellence in Independent Publishing.

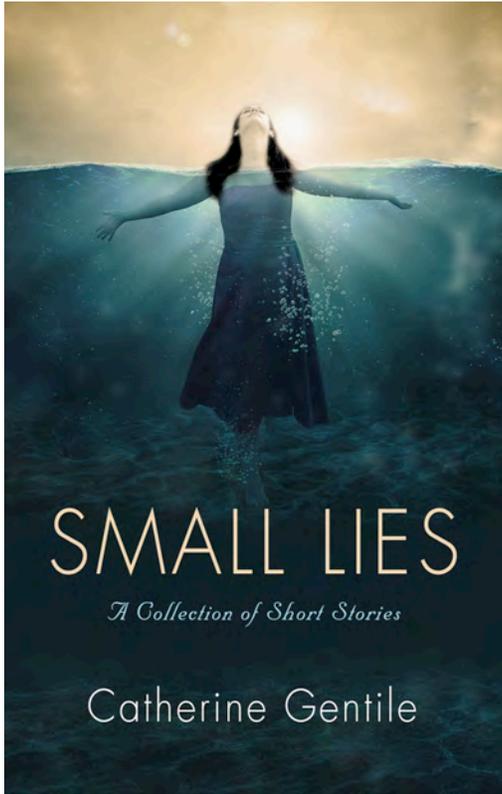
Catherine's non-fiction has appeared in *Writers' Market*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Down East*, and *Maine Magazine*. She has contributed to numerous online publications including: *Garden Write Now!*, *Ezine.com*, and *Portland Trails Newsletter*, and has published a non-fiction ebook, *The Caregiver's Journey: Tools, Tips, and Provisions*.

Catherine currently edits a monthly newsletter entitled, *Together With Alzheimer's*, which has subscribers throughout the United States.

Her second novel, *Sunday's Orphan*, is scheduled for publication in fall, 2021.

A native of Hartford, Connecticut, Catherine lives with her husband and muse on a small island off the coast of Maine.

Catherine invites you to explore her website: www.catherinegentile.com. She welcomes select invitations for readings and speaking engagements. Contact her via email: catgen207@gmail.com.



*Seduction, prejudice, and the need to control prevail in **Small Lies**, a collection of award-winning short stories by Catherine Gentile. Motivated by the desire for a more authentic life, the characters unshackle themselves from past hurts to propel past the falsehoods they have created to find hope and resiliency.*

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