

In a country that loves second chances, are some transgressions simply unforgivable?

Sisters Betsy and Avery have never met, but they have both spent their lives under the scrutiny of prying cameras and tabloid journalists. Their father was a charismatic senator and promising presidential candidate until infidelity destroyed his campaign and his marriage. In the aftermath, Betsy grieves her broken family, while Avery grows up estranged from her infamous father yet still exposed by the national spotlight. It isn't until years later, as their father's health declines, that Betsy and Avery are forced to face their complicated feelings about him and about each other. With delicacy and empathy, Nicholas Montemarano brings these sisters together in a parallel of grief and grace. *The Senator's Children* brilliantly distills the American family under pressure.

“This engrossing, brilliantly structured novel takes a familiar situation—the implosion of a presidential candidate’s career—and creates a thing of heart-breaking beauty out of it. In spare and evocative prose, Montemarano brings something to his family tragedy that’s become a rarity in Washington—empathy—and turns what could have been a simple story of heroes and villains, of power and disgrace, into a deeply moving story of human connection. By asking whether forgiveness can conquer blame, and whether we might even be able to treat strangers like family, *The Senator’s Children* feels like exactly the kind of novel we need.”

—ERIC PUCHNER, author of
Last Day on Earth

“Such an effortlessly written book that you can slip into it without noticing the deep and painful and complex alternate reality it represents. Nicholas Montemarano holds up a mirror to our times in this profound meditation on the human cost of politics—a novel that bears reading and rereading.”

—JESS ROW, author of
Your Face in Mine

“When it comes to melodrama, there are three kinds of writers: those who run from it, those who run to it, and those who transform it. Nicholas Montemarano is that last, most rare, most remarkable sort of alchemist, and his new novel, *The Senator’s Children*, is a most rare, most remarkable book. You might begin this novel thinking you recognize the politician and his family therein, but by the end they become something much more magnificent, more mysterious, more empathizable, than the real-life figures they may or may not be based on. Another one-of-a-kind book by one of our most talented fiction writers.”

—BROCK CLARKE, author of
The Happiest People in the World

“At once wise and completely absorbing. Montemarano weaves his characters’ lives gorgeously through time, balancing heartbreak and levity. A joy to read.”

—JULIA PIERPONT, author of
Among the Ten Thousand Things

The Senator's
Children

The

Senator's

Children

Nicholas Montemmarano



TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon & Brooklyn, New York

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Published by Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon, and Brooklyn, New York

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Montemarano, Nicholas, 1970- author.

Title: The senator's children / by Nicholas Montemarano.

Description: Portland, Oregon New York, New York : Tin House Books, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017010544 (print) | LCCN 2017013560 (ebook) | ISBN 9781941040805 | ISBN 9781941040799 (alk. paper)

Classification: LCC PS3613.O5484 (ebook) | LCC PS3613.O5484 S46 2017 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017010544>

First US Edition 2017

Printed in the USA

Interior design by Jakob Vala

www.tinhouse.com

“A line can be straight, or a street, but
the human heart, oh, no, it’s curved like a
road through mountains.”

—TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

For my parents

PART ONE

Sympathy Vote

1984–1985

OCTOBER 23, 1984

Danielle Christie wasn't hoping that her husband would lose, but she wouldn't be sad when it was over. It would be over soon—that is, if polls were even close to accurate. She didn't like playing the role of candidate's wife; she was just an academic. She certainly didn't like attending events and tried to stay away from the campaign as much as possible. But David couldn't be in two places at once, and there was low-hanging fruit ripe for the taking, as David's people put it, and he had asked Danielle to attend a fundraiser on his behalf.

She knew what to do: smile, be charming, make nice, say the right things, don't say the wrong things, stay on message, talk about what a great husband and father David was, how they'd met in college, how he'd

dropped Modern Drama, Danielle's favorite class, but kept reading the plays just so he could talk with her about them. People loved that story. But inside she was always dying a little at these events. She would rather be home in her robe and slippers reading *Amadeus* or *The Elephant Man*. A glass of wine. Maybe two.

Late October, a fundraiser on the Main Line. A mansion right out of *The Philadelphia Story*. Deep pockets. Old money. Low-hanging fruit. David's flight from Pittsburgh would get in a few hours too late for him to make it, and someone had to be there. So Danielle asked the sitter to watch Betsy until David arrived home and took Nick with her. She'd brought him to a few fundraisers before. He was sixteen and looked like his father. He was naturally charming; no need for *him* to fake it.

Soon, she kept thinking, we can go back to normal. She didn't like thinking that way, she knew how David hated to lose, but double digits two weeks out—it would take a miracle.

She drove down a long driveway to the front entrance, where one staff member took the car to park it and another led them into a grand foyer, up a sweeping staircase, and into a sitting room where everything was white—white chairs, white sofas, white fainting

couch, white people. The guests applauded when Danielle and Nick walked into the room as if they'd done something worthy of applause. It helped to have Nick there, to be able to introduce him to people, let *him* be the center of attention, he didn't mind, or to watch him across the room, already so comfortable in the world of adults.

People were talking, she could see their mouths moving, but she didn't really hear them. Why was it so hot? Why were there three fireplaces in the room? She imagined that everyone might disappear except her and Nick. She might enjoy her glass of wine—her second already—and ask Nick about the Stephen King novel he was reading, *Pet Semetary*. Any book that deliberately misspelled a word in the title *had* to be bad, she thought, but what the hell, she'd let him tell her all about it—dead cats resurrected as monsters, dead children—and then she'd tell him for the *n*th time that if he really liked horror, he should try Sophocles.

A woman who had just told Danielle her name, though Danielle had already forgotten it, asked how she felt about the possibility of being a senator's wife, would she continue teaching, and a chill went through Danielle even though it was much too hot in the room. She finished her wine, and when a server walked past

with a tray, she took another glass. “Well,” she said to this woman, “the only way I’ll know what it’s like to be a senator’s wife would be for David to win, so we have to do everything we can to make sure he does.”

God, she thought, when I tell David later, he’ll laugh at *that* line. They hadn’t had time to laugh lately, hadn’t seen each other nearly enough. Two more weeks, she told herself as she drank her wine quickly, and back to normal: Sunday brunch, pancakes and scrambled eggs, reading the paper, a drive to Valley Forge, a long hike or a bike ride.

She did have to speak. Not a speech, nothing scripted, but she had to say something. The wine would help. She was comfortable speaking to her college students about plays, but speaking at a political fundraiser was a challenge. Her goal, in practical and slightly crass terms, was to convince people, without directly asking them, to open their wallets. Maybe the money wouldn’t help as much now, two weeks from Election Day, as it might have two months earlier. But she had to try—for David.

She realized, as the hostess clinked a wineglass with a butter knife to hush the room, that this might be the last fundraiser she would ever attend, and therefore she wanted to say something new. In the classroom,

she spoke with authenticity about what she loved, and there was no reason in this setting to do otherwise.

“Thank you for welcoming us into your home,” she said. “David is truly sorry not to be here, but he seems to think that I’m better at this than he is. I can tell you in all honesty that I’m not. Maybe my son Nick is—he’s the handsome young man over there in the blue blazer, the one who needs a haircut.” Some laughter as everyone turned to look at Nick. “I promised myself that I would be brief, and I intend to keep that promise. We all know how much this election means, and I think we all trust that David would be a devoted senator, that he would represent all of us with as much energy and determination as he’s represented so many people over the years—people who were suffering and looking for hope. I want to make sure you know this about David: his practice as a lawyer has not been about personal success or financial gain. Those things have happened, but they’re by-products—I know this—of a deeper desire to help people during difficult times, when they’re dealing with grief or serious injury.”

Danielle paused, and the only sound in the room was the crackling in the fireplaces. “I’m thinking of one girl, seven years old, a beautiful child, who was

critically injured in an accident. I think of her often. A station wagon crashed at high speed into the side of the car the girl's father was driving. During the trial, David proved that the brakes in the station wagon were faulty, and the family received financial restitution. They were going to need those resources, and more, as their daughter recovered. She's had more than a dozen surgeries since then, and has learned to walk again, and recently started high school. But here is what I really want to tell you. One night a few months ago, I heard David on the phone. He was in his office at home, and the door was closed. There was something different about his voice, something softer, and, to be honest, I wondered who was on the other end of that call."

A few people chuckled. "When he came out of his office, he had this guilty look on his face," Danielle said, "and now I was *very* curious. But then he told me he'd been speaking to that girl, and to her parents. And that he calls them every year on her birthday. And let me tell you, she's not the only one he calls. He has a Rolodex, separate from the one he uses for work, with the names, numbers, and birthdays of dozens of people he got to know—and care about—by representing them, fighting for them. He never told me, or anyone, that he does this. He didn't want me to know. And

I'm sure he wouldn't want me to be telling you. He doesn't do things like that for personal gain or political reasons. Remember, he ran because he was asked to—many times, I should add—by people who believed he would serve the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with dignity and strength. And I believe that too. And I hope you all do as well, and will support David in whatever ways you can down the homestretch. Thank you again.”

Well, her students had never applauded like this. That was one perk of giving such a speech, and she had to admit, it felt good—especially when she looked across the room at Nick clapping proudly. It felt all the better because she meant what she had said. She celebrated with another glass of wine.

An hour later, as they were leaving, Nick said, “Can I drive?”

“Not at night.”

“What good is my permit if you guys don't let me drive?”

“Even your father says not at night.”

They got into the car, and Danielle started the engine.

But before she drove away, Nick said, “Mom, let's take a walk.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“I never said you were.”

“I’m fine,” she said, even though she had drunk her wine quickly—three or four glasses, she couldn’t remember—and hadn’t eaten anything for fear of getting food stuck in her teeth.

Nick said, “This property is huge, and look at those hedges, they remind me of this scene from *The Shining*.”

“No Stephen King tonight, okay?”

“Snob.”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s almost Halloween, it’s foggy, let’s just walk around.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Forget that,” Nick said. “I just don’t want to go home yet.”

Maybe it was Nick’s smile—he *was* charming—or maybe she really was tipsy, but suddenly she didn’t want to go home yet either. The campaign would be over soon, and she did enjoy some of this, especially the quieter moments when she caught David’s eye and just from a glance they exchanged an unspoken inside joke about the absurdity of political campaigns. David’s raised eyebrows said, *All this bullshit*, and her smile said, *Are we really doing this?* and his said, *As long*

as we do it together. Something about those moments, a shared secret with David, made her feel girlish. When they were seniors at the University of Pennsylvania and she still wasn't sure about David—how could he have dropped Modern Drama for History of the Supreme Court!—he had convinced her to sleep in a sleeping bag with him on the fifty-yard line of Franklin Field as a light December snow covered the grass around them.

Danielle felt that younger woman in her now, and remembered that feeling of being in the sleeping bag with David.

She turned off the car.

They walked along a narrow dirt path bordered by tall hedges cut into the faces of the Founding Fathers. “Now *those* should be in a Stephen King novel,” Danielle said, and Nick agreed. As they walked through an apple orchard, Danielle picked an apple and handed it to Nick. He wiped it on his pants as if about to eat it, but then threw it as high and as far as he could. The apple disappeared in the fog. Beyond the orchard was a formal garden, a small pond at its center, and past the garden, under lights, was a clay tennis court. Nick asked Danielle if she wanted to hit a little, and she said sure. Nick stood on one side of the net, his tie loosened, Danielle on the other side. Nick mimed a serve,

Danielle moved to her right and mimed a forehand return. They went back and forth like that, an epic rally with Nick doing play-by-play: “Christie with a powerful backhand, but Glass gets to it and somehow smashes an incredible winner that just catches the back line!” Nick dove for the invisible ball and then lay on the court, limbs spread, spent. It had been too long, Danielle thought, since she’d laughed like this, and years since someone had used her maiden name, Glass. Nick stood and jogged to the net to congratulate Danielle on her victory. She brushed the clay off the back of his jacket and said, “Okay, let’s head home.”

*

Betsy woke from a dream she couldn’t remember except that it must have been pleasant, because she felt safe and her body was heavy in a good way, lying within the outline it made on the mattress. She lay peacefully still in that perfect time just after waking and just before falling back asleep. The phone was ringing. She heard her father get out of bed and walk past her room, and then his voice, quiet: “No. No. No.”

When she heard him hang up, Betsy came out of her room. Her father stood by the hallway phone, eyes

closed, wearing boxer shorts, a white undershirt, black dress socks. His hair was ruffled. He looked like a boy dressed as a man, like that boyhood photo of Nick wearing their father's undershirt. She asked what was wrong, but her father didn't answer, he just hugged her, too long, and she started to cry even though she didn't yet know about what.

When he told her, she didn't believe him. He said *gone*, which left open the possibility of return.

Let it be Christmas Eve, Betsy thought as her father drove them to the hospital. Midnight Mass was the only reason she'd ever been up at this time, and if it were Christmas Eve then all this could be normal. But she was wearing slippers and a jacket over her nightgown. And it was October, not December. Chilly, not cold. No wreaths on doors, or blinking trees, but pumpkins on porches, ghosts and witches hanging from branches.

Her mother, with her bruised and bandaged face, her swollen lips, could have been wearing a mask. She was asleep, but the nurse used the word *unconscious*—a more frightening word, especially to a ten-year-old. As they stood beside her mother's bed, Betsy thought: We know, but she doesn't. She imagined her mother changing places with Nick. Her mother had lived

almost three times as long. She loved her mother, of course she did, but it didn't seem fair that Nick should be the one.

Her mother didn't wake. A man whose job it was to do things just like this, delicate things, took them to see Nick. The man was short and slim and had blue eyes and thinning gray hair. He wore a white shirt and a blue striped tie. Betsy thought it would be a nice tie for her father. They followed him into an elevator, which took them down a little too quickly and gave Betsy a sick feeling in her stomach.

The elevator came to rest, and the doors opened. Her father told her that she didn't have to see. It was the last thing she wanted, but she had to, otherwise she wouldn't believe. Her father said that he was going in first, and Betsy should wait. But she didn't want to be anywhere without him; she insisted on going in. The man led them into a small room, the viewing room, and there beneath a white sheet on a stainless-steel table was the shape of someone she still didn't believe could be Nick.

Her father stood beside the body, and Betsy stood behind him. Then he pulled down the sheet.

He blinked a lot, covered his mouth with his hand, closed his eyes.

Then Betsy looked.

There was a scratch on one side of Nick's face and a trace of blood by his mouth, but otherwise he looked alive. Only a few hours ago he was. He looked as if at any moment he might sit up and say, "Gotcha!" His neck was arched back, his hair mussed, his eyes closed, mouth slightly open. Her father touched Nick's hair, the scratch, his eyelids, and then Betsy did the same, in the same order, as if it were some ritual that would bring him back. Her father took off his sweater, rolled it, and put it beneath Nick's neck to prop up his head.

"You'll see him again," her father said. Betsy wasn't sure whether he meant she'd see the body at the wake or that she'd see her brother in some afterlife she was already trying to imagine.

That night, on a cot in her mother's hospital room, Betsy tried to sleep, but whenever she closed her eyes, Nick hovered above her, breathing white light against her eyelids. And every time she opened her eyes, he wasn't there, the light was gone.