AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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TITLE: LILY: HER STORIES

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I consider myself a child of the nineteenth century, from which came the books of my childhood. As an adult, my reading preferences have advanced in time only fifty years. This anchors my aesthetics in the Realism of the first half of the twentieth century with occasional forays into Naturalism and Surrealism. I prefer a gritty reality, from Dickens to my beloved Dreiser, that, when combined with a preconceived authorial stance or purpose, delivers an unmistakable message so skillfully woven into the piece as to be inseparable from it: a seamless art. Three short stories that do this well come immediately to mind:

"Free Joe and the Rest of the World" by Joel Chandler Harris

"Without Benefit of Clergy" by Rudyard Kipling

"Winter Dreams" by F. Scott Fitzgerald

In addition, the three short novels that follow bind message and plot seamlessly:

Ethan Frome by Edith Wharton

Miss Lonelyhearts by Nathaniel West

The Assignment by Friedrich Durrenmatt

In my fiction, I try to manipulate plot and character to fulfill my purpose. My province is the home, the microcosm of American society, where my stories of violence and initiation follow the tradition of the Bildungsroman. My style is conversational; I utilize the popular culture of the thirties and forties for motif, varying tone with narrator. Although most of my characters are flexible, optimistic, determined females, my work is not feminist so much as it is feminine. In the three Lily stories that make-up my thesis, I write of abuse and death experienced by a child, Lily, whose survival requires a creative courage that corrupts as well as saves her. I chose a child to express my viewpoint, for through a primal, reactionary, and unsophisticated figure, I can show the damage that we do to each other far exceeds that of Hardy's random, unkind happenstance. Lily responds in knee-jerk fashion to her life and accepts the opinions of important adults regarding who she is and why things are the way they are. In her progression through life (my thesis represents three developed stories out of twelve) she will construct her own reality and will find it, upon maturity, out of synchronization with the world in which she lives. Lily's interpretation of the truth in my third story represents the beginning of this process.

In addition to the authors I have already mentioned, the short stories of W. Somerset Maugham, Flannery O'Connor, John Cheever, and Alice Munro satisfy my dark vision and move me. I expect fiction to move me, to pick me up here and deposit me there, mentally shaken, emotionally renewed. Of contemporary writers like Coover and Barthelme, I find little in their spare prose that intrigues, too much of their content that obfuscates, and not enough in their closure that satisfies.

However, I have learned from these writers and my classes that my work lacks modernity and the pared-down purity that serves art today. I have begun to question the wellspring of my creativity: does it lie in a creative impulse that flows from inspiration and artistic inclination? Or does it lie in a crusty imperative that rises from a desire to influence behavior using a creative means of expression? To create art, I have concluded that I must look beyond my preconceived prejudices and purposes, harness subjectivity, and write lean, objective prose. Even more difficult, I must welcome these changes in my work if I am to grow as a fiction writer. Damned demanding, this business.

LILY: HER STORIES

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LILLY: HER STORIES

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Contents

1: Her Father

1. Her Father

Lily knew that above all else her father loved two things: music and sadness. He loved her, too, of course--she knew that--and never more than when she sat next to him in the big, broad-armed chair, somber and still against his shoulder while they recited together his favorite gloomy poem: "And while he was dreaming, an angel song / awakened our Little Boy Blue. / Oh, the years are many, the years are long . . ." Lily loved the soft music of her daddy's voice as he said the lines, tenderly, drawing out some words and quickly slipping over others so that they became a dance of steps and stops to a secret song. She tried to copy the timing, but she always got stuck when she came to the Angel. True, her daddy had told her many times that the Angel's song called Little Boy Blue away from his bed to heaven, and that to his parents he had died. Still, it didn't make sense. Dying, to her, was what happened if you got very sick, like Patsy Ann Borden, her friend down the block, who had scarlet fever and then got p-neumonia. Angels had nothing to do with it.

"What did the Angel say that made Little Boy Blue want to go with him?" she asked, not for the first time. Since she usually interrupted the poem at this point, her daddy raised his free hand, the one not around her waist, to

signal her not to break the rhythm, to hold her question for later. Often by the time they reached the end, Lily had forgotten to ask about the Angel. Sometimes, if she were permitted to interrupt, her daddy repeated what he had already told her; other times, he diverted the question to a grimly humorous song he had taught her. When he asked if she remembered it, Lily uncrossed and recrossed her legs which projected straight in front of her to the chair's edge, clapped her hands together and began with a giggle: "Hooray, hooray, my father's gonna' be hung! / Hooray, hooray, the dirty son-of-a-gun!" Her daddy smiled his small smile--he didn't have a wide one like she did--and hugged her tighter, in a tickle, and leaned close to rub his chin in her hair as they finished the song together. If her mother was within earshot, she scolded them both, and Lily's daddy said, "I guess she's right; it's not a song for little girls."

"But I'm not a little girl--you said so," Lily protested.

"So I did," he replied, helping her to the edge of the chair so she could stand down. "Bedtime, Lily."

Lily had a bedtime ritual. She undressed herself and put her dirty clothes in the green wicker hamper in the upstairs hall. Then she pulled her pajamas out from under her pillow where Sarah had put them when she did the beds and the upstairs each morning. After she brushed her teeth and was ready for bed, she leaned over the banister to tell

her parents. Her mother came upstairs first. She pulled the covers tight and anchored them firmly under the mattress as if Lily were a papoose. She left after a kiss on the forehead, and then her daddy came up to hear her prayers. As much as the taut blankets allowed, Lily inched to the opposite edge of the bed to make room for him to sit. Usually she tried one of two strategies to make him stay longer: she invented an impromptu secret for him to guess, or she asked him a question that she hoped had no answer or else had an answer that begot more questions. Finally, she folded her hands, closed her eyes and began what he had come to hear.

"Now I lay me down to sleep. / I pray the Lord my soul to keep. / If I should die before I wake--will the Angel wake me up?" she asked, opening her eyes because she was stuck on the Angel again. Her daddy never answered this question directly. Sometimes he said no, the sun would wake her up; other times he said Curly, her pup, would; and on Sundays, he told her, the musical chimes from the church tower would wake her.

"Or the Angel," Lily persisted, teasing. Her daddy didn't say anything. Instead, he smoothed back her hair from her forehead in the stroking gesture Lily loved and put his face next to hers into the pillow.

Lily's father wasn't outwardly a melancholy man, just a quiet one, but he combined the people and things he loved with sadness because he loved that most. He warmed himself

with gaiety from friends but held himself at the edge of things. He and her mother gave parties and went to many: parties with gardenias floating in the pool and a five-piece orchestra; parties where her mother wore slim, silky dresses which poured through lily's fingers like the water in an oily puddle; parties where her father, in his navy-blue suit with the two rows of buttons, merged with the band in a dark corner away from the laughter and the dancing. At his birthday party, Lily had seen him sitting by himself, rubbing a browned gardenia petal between two fingers, his bottom lip folded up and over his top one. By mid-summer, too hot for long dresses and suits, her parents' set gathered at the shore on the sloop anchored bayside. There her father worked over the clew lines or tightened the halyards a full boat's length from the deck chatter. Many evenings he stood on the cabin housing, his back against the spar, and spun his finger idly around the rim of his tall glass, deaf to her mother's calls from the galley. He was teased about these moods, called Captain Blight, and once, with great hilarity from the partying crew, he was set in the dinghy behind the sloop with a canteen and a blanket. He didn't smile his small smile; he hunkered over, elbows on knees, wrapped the blanket around himself and affected a scowl. The others laughed and pointed, delighted with the way he played his role, but Lily wasn't sure he was playing. She thought he looked sad and wondered if he ever cried. She decided to ask him that question at prayers.

Lily's father carried music with him wherever he went. While he shaved at the old, deep-aproned sink in the bathroom, he hummed. On sunny mornings, it was often "Whistle While You Work" from Snow White. Lily knew the words and whispered them along with him, swinging her hips in a hula as she dressed herself. On gray mornings when her mother had to yell him out of bed, he whistled "Intermezzo," a three-note tune Lily had picked out on the piano after she heard it played by an old man on a violin--her daddy had given him a dollar--in the Palm Court of the Claridge on Easter Sunday. Before her father tapped into his three-minute egg, cooling upright in the gold-rimmed cup, he chose a breakfast record for the phonograph. His choice affected Lily's feelings as much as it reflected his: a quiet one-finger insistence by Chopin or a popular tune stolen from Tchaikovsky's Sixth: "This is the story of a starry night. / The faded glory of a new delight . . ." Lily really liked this song. It soared up high like "The Star-Spangled Banner" and gave her an excuse to sing loud. It also had a line about prayers in it: "I pray that someday, / Love will in some way . . ." Lily knew the words to all the songs. Her daddy liked that.

The portable radios of the 1930's were as heavy and hard to manage as a beach umbrella in a wind storm. Yet, her daddy hoisted the tan-striped Emerson over the gunwale, down the deck, and into the cabin of the sloop; it rode tarp-dry in the aft hold all weekend. If the sailboat held

to a fast tack at a steep tilt, the monster radio growled with static, drowning Dorsey's Pied Pipers in the sunny swells of the Atlantic. But riding home late from the shore with the top of the convertible down, Lily felt cozy, if cramped, by the big silent box sharing the back seat with her. The lighted caramel-colored dial of the car radio with Benny Goodwin's clarinet doing "And the Angels Sing" created a snug, tight ship whose westward progress she traced in the wide night sky. At home, music dressed as a radio-phonograph in a glossy wooden console sat to the left of the front door. Clyde McCoy's "Toy Trumpet" or Connie Boswell's "Remember Me" hung on the spindle ready for her father's daily homecoming from work. Often Lily hid beside the console, squeezing into the space between it and the wall to wait for him. When she heard the doorlatch click, she jumped out with a "boo!" and just as often he lifted her up in his arms to hug her roughly, and then Lily pushed back and locked her elbows to gain perspective on his face, to gauge his mood. She coasted her fingers down the dipping wave in his yellow hair; she thought him handsome. In the winter, she knew that before he took off his tweed overcoat, he would raise the lid and start the turn-table. She loved to balance herself on her stomach over the rim of the open cavity of the console--and had, indeed, been scolded for it --to watch the curved arm that held the records pull abruptly away, to see the black disc drop down, and the needle-arm swing in to catch for a second on the ungrooved

edge, making a swishee-swishee sound before Connie began: "If somebody else / Should try to take / My place while we are apart, / If you love me then, / Remember me."

Her daddy forgot her momentarily as he listened to the music and folded his bottom lip over the top one. His eyes sought the window where the bare branches of the maple tree, black against the dimming sky, clacked together in the wind. Finally, released from his reverie by the record's end, he asked, "Where's your mother?" and without waiting for a reply, slid the scarf from his neck and started up the stairs, calling to her. He loved her, too, even if she were in a bad-mad mood.

Usually, Lily chose to stay by the music and wait for the next record. She liked listening to music by herself, for she was used to playing alone. She sang along and stole a chocolate from the gold-footed dish on the coffee table to help her listen better. If the spindle were full, Lily went to the top of the basement stairs to invite her spaniel pup for the long concert. If Curly arrived too delighted, Lily settled her down to a quiver with a chocolate. Sometimes, sitting cross-legged on the oriental, she pulled the dog's head onto her lap, lifted the matted ear to find the treasure of the soft, velvety place underneath, and stroked it as gently as she knew how through all the records.

Lily spent the afternoons after kindergarten--after her nap, that is--exploring the neighborhood. She loved to go riding on her chrome-plated tricycle with the round silver

bell on the handle-bars, but to pedal back and forth on the walk that curved around her house was boring. She preferred to ride on the sidewalk by the street. A flight of stone steps led from her yard to the paving, and her bike had to be carried down if she were to ride there. It was too heavy for her to do it herself, and with her daddy at work, she had to ask her mother or Sarah to help. "In a minute," they called in sharp voices. She didn't like to ask them, so she found another way to the street. If she squeezed her eyes tight shut and pushed quickly through the briar bushes that enclosed her yard, she could pull her bike through, too, and coast down the neighbor's drive to the sidewalk and freedom. The trick was to get through the scratching and hurting part fast. Lily tore jackets and sweaters; she tore socks; once, she tore her cheek on the thorns, but she did it anyway.

Soon even the sidewalk of the street palled; she wanted to explore farther. She knew she wouldn't lose her way as her mother had warned, nor would she be hit by a car, so she disobeyed: she rode her tricycle on the next block. The sidewalks were slate-smooth there, and the houses different than hers, with big porches and only one step. Her favorite house was a yellow one with an awning of orange and purple stripes shading the porch. Whoever lived there didn't wind the awning up at the end of summer--"They should," said her mother, "or it'll rot"--and in the winter it sagged with snow. Like a forgotten flag at an abandoned fortress, it

hung out in all weathers, its gaiety fading a little with each season.

On a dwindling November afternoon shadowed by a weak sun whose warmth came and went on the wind, Lily rode over to see the awning. She hadn't thought much about in the summer, but an early visit by Jack Frost to the windows of her kindergarten made her worry. As she pedalled around the corner to the smooth pavement, she chanted a new song she had learned in school: Over and over, to hold the tune, pretending she was an opera singer, she sang: "Bring back, bring back, / Oh bring back my Bonnie to me, to me . . ." She swung into the double drive by the yellow house and stopped to examine the awning. Right in the middle of the sag caused by last year's snow, right where the pine needles had left a brown stain, was a new tear. It wasn't very big, but Lily felt sad. She decided she wouldn't look at it anymore; the wide double drive was her favorite place to do her circle trick, one she had invented on her bike.

She began to pedal round and round, going in tighter, smaller circles. Soon the front wheel brushed against her foot pedal in the last turn: it was time to climb to the flat step at the back of her bike. Her trick was to do this without touching the ground. With her feet on the wide bar she could still reach the handle-bars to steer; and if she pushed with one foot, she could go faster and faster in tinnier arcs. The trick of circling in to meet herself reminded Lily of the pattern on seashells, snails' backs and

the parade of elephants in the tent circus: linked trunk to tail, the huge, silent beasts trod the sawdust in the main ring of the Big Top. As they wound inward toward the center, the lead elephant clambered upon a little stool to wave the flag in his trunk.

As she swung left to meet herself in the center, she hummed the song from "The Lone Ranger," and drew up short. A woman stood on the porch, examining the hole in the awning. She came to the railing and looked at Lily in silence, her arms wrapped around herself in the cold.

"I'm sorry you've got a hole," Lily said. "I like your awning. Maybe if you rolled it up, it wouldn't get holes."

"Maybe," said the woman, fastening with a white hand a piece of hair loosened by the wind. Lily thought she might be pretty if she'd get her hair done. Her mother got hers done every week, and sometimes Lily went along. If a hairdresser wasn't busy, she'd paint Lily's nail stubs to help her stop biting them. "Do you ever get your hair done?" Lily asked.

The woman tightened a muscle in her jaw and tilted her head. "Are you worried about my awning and me?" She asked.

"I don't know," Lily said, as she played with her bell. She wished she hadn't said anything about either one.

After a pause, she thought the woman said thank you, but she wasn't sure. When she looked up, she was gone. Lily searched for her at the windows, but the woman pulled down the shades at first one opening and then another. The

house had shut its eyes like a tired giant. Lily sighed and pedalled home. She would tell her daddy about it at prayers.

At the edge of her yard, as she struggled to pull her bike through the briars, a wheel caught on a root; suddenly, Lily felt a cry coming on. She left her bike in the bushes and went in the back door. The kitchen was dark; no delicious smells came from the oven; no potatoes were peeled and soaking in the pot; Sarah was gone. Lily pushed through the swinging door to the dining room and stopped. Her mother sat in the big-armed chair in the living room by the silent phonograph, mending. She had stuck pins in one arm of the chair and held a few between her lips. On the other arm lay a pair of scissors and three spools of dark thread. Lily paused to gauge her mood. Was this a bad-mad day? She tiptoed up to watch and marveled anew at the knot her mother could make by rolling a circle of thread off her finger and giving it a tug. After a long minute, her mother told Lily that her daddy had come home early from the office to lie down because he didn't feel well. Sarah had the afternoon off--"It's Thursday, remember?"--and they, Lily and her mother, would eat at The Tavern later.

Lily liked to eat out, especially at The Tavern. Everyone there knew her family, and they fussed over her and praised her manners. Besides, Ethel played the organ, and her daddy let her give the dollar to Ethel--or rather, put it in the soup bowl on the bench because Ethel's hands were

too busy to take it--and request a song. Lily had never been to The Tavern with only her mother, and she wondered if it would be as much fun. She'd have to be extra careful not to ask questions and not to be a pest.

In a few days, after a light snow blown out by noon, Lily thought of the awning again. When she got up from her nap, she went looking for her bike and found it still stuck on the far side of the briar bushes. She pushed it backward by the handle-bars and rode to the yellow house. As she approached the double drive, she hummed the song from "The Lone Ranger" to get herself going at a good pace. She zoomed up the slight incline, circled right to left and came to a stop with a flourishing turn of the wheel and a ring on her bicycle bell. Right before her was the awning: the hole was bigger; the pine needles had drained through it and lay in a soggy pile on the ground. Lily could see the ragged edges of the tear hanging down, but she was not surprised; she had prepared herself for a larger hole and wondered if the lady knew. Out of habit then, without much joy or energy, she began her circle trick. She climbed from the seat to the back of her bike easily without touching the ground. It was, after all, a boring trick, she decided. God probably thought so, too. She turned one more circle, pushing from behind, but didn't feel like singing. Maybe she'd just go home. She swung left, and suddenly, what had been a shadowy mass of nothing particular in the basement

window arranged itself in her mind's eye, registering as familiar but misplaced. Closer and clearer than the grey washtubs and hulking furnace, she saw something that wasn't right. She slowed her bike and wheeled nearer to the window. The lady hung there, swaying slightly in the dusty light, her head sideways like Jesus's on the cross. A long sash like those on Lily's dresses held her neck to a hook above an overturned chair. One of her shoes had fallen off; the other hung on her toes. Lily stared at the woman, taking in every detail of her queer predicament. She decided she must be dead because she looked uncomfortable hanging there. But this was a different kind of dead, not like Patsy Ann Borden's sickness. Perhaps this kind of dead was what happened when the Angel sang a song that made you want to go with him; maybe this was what happened to Little Boy Blue. She looked again at the lady hanging from the hook, moving gently in the grey air. She wondered if God was looking, too. She looked and looked until her stomach felt mushy. She knew she mustn't tell her mother; she'd get in trouble. In the first place, she wasn't supposed to be this far away, and she'd be whipped with a willow branch for it. In the second place, her mother wouldn't believe Lily really saw the lady with the sash around her neck. She climbed back on the seat of her bike, biting her thumbnail, and began idly to sing about Bonnie: "My Bonnie lies over the ocean, / My Bonnie lies over the sea . . ." She realized she was cold and had to go to the bathroom, so she

turned her bike slowly toward the street and began to pedal home, singing in a plain old chant, not like an opera star.

Once on her street, she left her bike at the steps to her yard. She took the risers, opened the gate, and walked to her front door. She opened and closed it quietly; then she squeezed into the tight corner beside the phonograph. She'd wait for her father.

Afterwards, Lily was never sure how long she waited. Perhaps she slept. When she heard the doorlatch click, she jumped out of her corner--bumping the phonograph--to catch his hand.

"Careful," he said, laying a steadying hand on top of the console.

"Will you come with me?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Well," he stalled, lifting the lid to start the records.

"You've got to," she begged. "Please." Connie Boswell began the familiar "Remember Me," and her daddy looked out the window. Lily tugged on his coat sleeve to get his attention.

"What is it, Lily?" he asked, squatting down to her level.

"I want to show you something. It's important." Her daddy stood up to turn on the light by the big chair and lowered the volume before he replied.

"Is it really important, Lily? I'm very tired."

"Yes, very," she repeated. He sighed and arranged his bottom lip over the top before he nodded.

Lily hurried to the door before he could change his mind. Using both hands, she turned the large knob and pulled. She pushed ahead of him out the door and ran to the gate before she turned around to see if he were coming. He reached over her to unlatch the gate and together, hand in hand, they went down the steps to the street.

"I can't go too fast," she said, instead of wait-for-me. Her daddy smiled his small smile and waited patiently at each step for her to catch up. He began to sing a slow, shy "Old Gray Bonnet," not the tempo she learned at school: " . . . with the blue ribbons on it, / While I hitch Ole Dobbin to the chaise. / Through fields of clover . . ." he sang, reaching for the high note, and Lily jumped with both feet from the last step to the sidewalk, landing hard and pleased.

"You left your bike out," her daddy said. "We'll pick it up on the way back. Where are we going?"

"This way," Lily said, pulling him by a finger. They took the first block together in silence, hand in hand. The wind sharpened as they turned the corner, and her daddy bent down to raise the hood of her jacket over her head and tied it in place. Lily started to protest that she wasn't cold, but changed her mind.

As they approached the yellow house, Lily's stomach started to get the mushy feeling again. She noticed that

the shades were pulled at the windows again; the house looked blind. She tightened her hold on her daddy's hand. A gutter in an eave, torn loose from its supporting strap, overflowed with pine needles and black leaves slimy from the rain. The paint had peeled on the porch swing, and it hung lopsided on its chain as it twisted and creaked in the rising wind. Lily pictured an invisible child doing a trick on it. She shivered inside her jacket and began to chew her thumbnail. She stepped ahead and tugged at her daddy. He moved to the basement window and followed her pointed finger with his eyes.

He squatted down, steadied himself with the fingers of his hand, and squinted into the gloom. Lily kneeled just ahead to study his face as he stared in silence at the lady hanging in the basement. He worked his mouth to its folded position and pressed his eyes closed with his thumb and middle finger. He asked Lily how she found the woman.

"On my bike," she said, lowering her head to pick at a button on her jacket.

"Down here, in this block?" her daddy asked, opening his eyes. Lily put one of the ties from her hood in her mouth and rolled it around in place of an answer. At last he stood up without speaking.

"Is she dead?" Lily whispered. "Did the Angel come?" Her daddy reached out to pull her close to him, and she fastened an arm around his leg. He rubbed her head with his hand and sighed.

"Was she sick?" Lily asked. "Was she bad?"

"No, Lily, just sad." He spoke slowly, his voice high and tight as if he had a cold. She stirred at his leg and pulled away to look up at him. She wanted to shout and ask him a thousand-thousand things, but she only asked him if the lady cried.

"Probably not today," he said. "Today she may have been happy." He shut his eyes and held the corners with his fingers. Lily's heart was beating like a Gene Kupra drum solo.

"We need to find a telephone," her daddy said at last in his regular voice. Together they crossed to the house on the other side of the double driveway. At a lighted kitchen window, an elderly woman peered into the dusk in response to the tap on the pane. She motioned them around to the back door and met them there, propping the door open with her foot as she dried her hands on her apron. Lily noticed that her apron was pinned with straight pins to the front of her dress and wondered if she sometimes stuck herself. The woman invited them in, backing to the table in the center of the warm kitchen. As Lily's daddy told her about the lady in the basement, she put her hand over her mouth and turned toward the sink. An old man in a sagging grey cardigan and bedroom slippers slip-slapped into the kitchen and leaned against the doorway, his hands in his pockets. Her daddy brushed past him to the telephone in the hall. In the silence of the kitchen, Lily heard the half-past bell of the

hall clock and wondered half-past what. The quiet rhythm of her father's words at the phone floated into the kitchen from the dark hallway. Lily, the man, and the woman listened as if for the first time to his story of the lady. No one looked at anyone else. Her daddy hung up--she heard the receiver return to its cradle--and came into the kitchen patting each pocket of his jacket, trousers, and overcoat in turn as if looking for his pipe or his keys. He sighed. Wordlessly, the old man reached behind the sink's skirting for a bottle, took two shot glasses from the dish-drainer, and poured a drink for himself and her daddy. Their eyes met in a silent toast; then they emptied the whiskey from the little glasses in one gulp in the same way Lily took her cod liver oil every morning. Still no one said anything, and Lily wondered if it were twenty minutes till the hour; if it were and people were silent, it meant that an Angel had flown over the house. She liked knowing that.

Soon the shy music of their silence broke upon a siren. A police car and a truck with a red cross on it rumbled into the driveway. A young officer sprinted to the ground-level window of the basement where she hung and cut the darkness with the beam of his flashlight. From across the street and down the block, neighbors gathered at the edge of the driveway in quiet, curious clusters. Lily's daddy tapped her shoulder to nudge her out the kitchen door. He paused to shake hands with the man and woman, holding their eyes with his as if he had known them a long time. The woman

crossed herself, but she didn't stick her finger on the pins.

Once outside, her daddy held her hand tightly in his as they walked toward home. Lily took several hitches in her steps to match his stride. The wind had caught a chill from the night and pushed from behind to hurry them along. Lily tried to get her daddy to sing one of their favorite songs by the Boswell Sisters: "What say, let's be buddies, / What say, let's be pals. / What say, how's about it / We'll keep up each other's morale. / I may never show it / But many's the time I'm blue / What say, how's about it . . ." She got all the way through before he squeezed her fingers in acknowledgment. Lily started over again, hoping he'd join in, but he wasn't listening.

At the foot of the steps, he picked up her tricycle, frosty from the night air, and carried it up the steps with one hand. He swung it over the gate and left it by the briar bushes. At the front door, her daddy turned to her and said, "Are you all right, Smalls?"

"Sort of," Lily answered, not sure.

"It's like sleeping," he said, opening the door into silence; the spindle had played itself out.

"Will I die if I sleep too hard?" Lily asked, remembering her bedtime prayer.

"Not for a long, long time," her daddy answered, lifting the records to start them over. "And then you won't mind. I wouldn't mind." His eyes traveled to the window

where the streetlight backlit the tangled branches of the maple tree. "The Story of a Starry Night" clicked into place, but her daddy rejected it for Clyde McCoy's "Sugar Blues." He rumpled her hair with his fingers and patted her shoulder.

"What song did the Angel sing to her?" Lily asked, sensing an opening. Her father withdrew his hand.

"I don't know," he said. "The Angel makes up a special song for each person. No one else can hear it." And there it was; now Lily understood. Dying was something of your own, a secret song between you and the Angel.

"I'll go and find your mother," he said. "She'll be wondering where we've been." He moved toward the stairs and started up before he turned around to Lily. "You're a big girl," he said. Lily smiled, and her daddy added, "You are." Still smiling her wide smile, Lily watched him until he turned at the landing.

Alone now, she helped herself to a chocolate from the crystal dish and went to the basement to find her dog. Curly lay wound in the rag rug at the foot of the stairs. Lily sat down on the bottom step by her and sought the warm, silky place under her ear to stroke, but Curly was more interested in the chocolate residue on her fingers than in listening to the music seeping down from above.

In a few years, Lily's father would take his life. He wouldn't be found in the basement, but in a rented garage near the house, asphyxiated by a system of hoses attached to the exhaust pipe of the convertible. The radio would be playing, tuned to a station at the shore. Lily would know he had been listening to the Dorsey Orchestra with the Pied Pipers, or Tchaikovsky's Sixth. She'd hope he was happy, for that would help her get through the hurting part faster.

In another year or two, around a camp fire in the Adirondacks, she'd learn a new song about buddies: "Nights are long since you went away / I dream about you all through the day," and she'd think of him. As an adult, she'd frequent the shore, for his pleasures would be hers now. On a friend's boat, when the freshening wind would clank the halyards against the mast, she'd remember watching her father untangle the lines; in the sea's wash, she'd hear the rush and rise of his voice in a poem; and coming home late, when the car radio would pick up an oldies station out of Wilmington, Lily'd smile and shift the drowsy child in her lap. She'd remember the big Emerson portable crowding her in the convertible's back seat; in the bridge of an old song, she senses her father clear and close; she still misses his music.

2. Her Mother

2. Her Mother

Lily prided herself on never being afraid. When her friends ran upbeach from breaking waves, or stayed on the path through the Wisahicken woods, or refused to get in a canoe with a slow leak, Lily said she'd do it; she wasn't afraid. The truth, however, had to do with the one thing missing in the ocean, the woods, and the canoe: her mother. Lily was terrified of her mother. In her person, Lily's mother was not fearsome: she was small, dark, energetic, and busy. It was in her weather--her climate of being--that she was as brutal as the Kansas whirlwind that blew Dorothy to Oz, as brooding as the shore's Nor'easter that hunkered down for days, and as unpredictable as lightning leap-frogging across the sky. Lily knew when her mother first tightened into silence that a storm hovered close; when, where, and how it would break, she never knew. To fight back, Lily invented a defiance that seldom crossed the line between what her mother called impudence and what Lily called giving-in. She practiced little tricks of procrastination, stubbornness, and hatefulness in bitter battles where Lily felt she got more than she gave. The rules were unfair. Her mother could do--and did--anything to Lily she felt like doing, but Lily was tied and gagged by her mother's insistence on respectful behavior. This put a

King's X on what Lily could do back. She made up for this by never forgiving her mother anything. Sometimes she pretended she was a prisoner whose crime was just being alive. She wasn't locked in her cell, but her presence so provoked her jailer that she beat her. She consoled herself with the fact that time--she would grow up some day and go away forever--would end her sentence. The hard part was sticking it out until then.

For three days now, her mother's weather had been glowering with pre-storm tension. Curly, the young spaniel, skittered under tables and behind chairs, anticipating shaming; Sarah kept to the kitchen, postponing cleaning chores that would take her into the main part of the house; and Lily, after eating a dishful of chocolates to feed her fear, lied about doing it and hid the dish under the sofa where her mother found it. She was spanked and banished as hopeless to her room. She had been there two days, coming out only when Sarah called her for meals which she toyed with alone--she couldn't eat--in the kitchen. Lily and her mother had not spoken once in these two days, and this was Saturday: her father had gone deep-sea fishing with Uncle Bob, whom her mother disliked; he'd be gone a week, and her mother didn't think the ocean had that many fish. She'd asked him what else he planned to catch, and Lily wondered, whales? Sarah had the weekend off, and she and her mother were alone in the house. Her mind, which followed all her mother's comings and goings about the place, assured her

that everything would be all right--that her mother had only slammed the basement door because it swelled and stuck in the dampness. This reassurance worked for a minute or two; it snuffed the tiny flame of fear that had begun to burn in her stomach. However, like those tricky birthday candles you can't blow out, her fear relighted itself, burning hotter, until Lily felt its heat radiate throughout her body.

Even her sleeping self kept an ear open to her mother's movements. Any unusual sound--swear words hurled at Curly, a scream over a dropped plate--burst upon her dreams, and her eyes flew open in an instant. She held her breath, tightened her body, and waited for her mind to explain the noise before she breathed or moved. Sometimes, suspended in the waiting, her stomach lurched.

She had tired of playing in her room a day ago. She had re-read Dickle and the Penguin and spent several hours tracing the pictures. She'd tried to mother her dolls, but it wasn't fun playing mother when that's all you had to do. This morning she'd lain in her bed imagining another life for herself, one where she wore a pink tutu and pink slippers, had a tiara of roses in her hair, and rode horses bareback in the circus while everybody clapped. When she got up, she made her bed and lay on the floor shooting, with her thumb and middle finger, pennies that she'd shaken from her bank. 1937 won twice; 1931, once; and 1935, not at all. Maybe 1935 was dirty. She put it in her mouth to clean it,

forgetting how bitter copper pennies taste, when she sensed her mother's presence at her door.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, looming there, one hand on her hip, the other wiping sweat from her forehead. Lily knew the tone of voice and braced herself: she affected a frozen stillness, waiting, moving only her lips in a silent, sullen murmur.

"What did you say? Get up," said her mother. She stepped into the room where Lily lay on the rug, her head propped on her upturned arm, and kicked her in the small of the back; Lily winced. She looked up and narrowed her eyes slowly as she'd seen them do in the movies. Taking her time, she focused glaring slits on her mother as she rose to her feet, lifting each limb as if it weighed fifty pounds.

"You're supposed to be dressed. Where are your clothes? You're also supposed to be outside." Her mother yanked free the loose tie of Lily's seersucker bathrobe, grabbed the collar an pulled the robe from her shoulders. "Get your clothes on, and get out of here."

"I didn't know I could go outside, and I don't know what to wear," Lily raised her shoulders and added helplessness in her voice in just the right amount.

"Then I'll choose for you," said her mother, walking across the room to the chest of drawers. Lily took advantage of her back to tighten her face and thrust out her tongue. Her mother pulled the hated twill shorts from the bottom of the pile where Lily had hidden them among the

neatly folded clothes. "You haven't worn these in a while," she said, turning. "Put them on." She threw the shorts at her hard, but Lily, her plump arms folded tight against her chest, let them fall to the floor, uncaught.

"I hate those, Mummy," she said, not acting for once. "They make me look fat."

"They do not," said her mother. "Wear them. And the shirt that goes with them."

"Please, Mummy," said Lily.

"Don't argue with me!" her mother said, coming across the room to strike her on the shoulder. Startled, Lily let fly her arms to catch her balance. When no further blows came, she refolded her arms and drew upon her practiced defiance. She tightened her mouth into her idea of disdain and concentrated on the floor. She said nothing, but inside herself the flame of fear burned higher and hotter.

"Pick you clothes up, and put them on," said her mother. Lily had no intention of picking up the detested shorts anytime soon. She strengthened her stance by projecting one leg forward and centered her weight without taking her eyes off the floor. She was hot.

"Move," said her mother. Lily drew her lips between her gapped teeth and dug in for the coming conflict.

"I said move," hissed her mother through gritted teeth. She pushed Lily hard, and she fell stiffly to the floor. Her mother kicked her from the back again, then stepped over her rolling, folding body to kick her from the front.

Although Lily was now a ball, a roly-poly bug, her mother's frontal kick caught her in the eye. It hurt; sharp violet arrows zig-zagged through her head.

"Get up, or I'll spank you, so help me," said her mother. Lily lay on the floor, shielding her eye which shorted-out in broken lines of color on the screen of her mind. The deeper shades--blue, purple, black--shot pain like dark lightning in three-second volleys. The lighter colors following each volley gave some relief. She sucked in her breath and counted the shots of dark colors. Her eye watered fiercely, but she decided to play this out; she won't make me cry, she vowed.

"Cut it out," said her mother in her normal voice. "You're not hurt. Get up, and come here." Lily had been waiting for this change in her tone. She knew her mother was worried about the damage she'd done. Served her right, Lily thought. She made a quick judgment of how loud to moan when intuition told her to sob instead. She gave out two or three accompanied by deep, gulping, breaths before she unfolded her small body slowly as if to stand up.

"Cut it out," her mother said again, in a bored voice. Lily unwound upward to her feet, but the violet-blue pain surged through her eye again, and she wobbled unexpectedly. Was it possible, she asked herself, that she really was hurt? The idea scared her, adding more fire to the flame of fear in her stomach.

"You're not hurt," said her mother for the second time, and Lily wanted to believe her. "Here are your clothes. Put them on. I'll stand here while you do." This was the greatest insult, for Lily hated to be seen naked. She guarded her body angrily from all invaders: doctors, nurses, baby-sitters, especially old Mrs. Fox, as well as her mother. She had bitten Mrs. Fox once when she persisted in undressing her and had not spoken to the old lady for a whole day another time when she sat on the lid of the toilet stool to watch her take a bath. She dallied now, hoping her mother would give up in exasperation. Slowly, she slid her pajama bottoms down over her backside and stepped in place two or three times to free her legs.

"Hurry up, I'm warning you!" said her mother. Lily undid the buttons of her green pajama top, pretending they were hard. She blinked more water from her sore eye and hoped she looked pitiful. She became aware that her mother was staring, not at her eye, but at her naked buttocks, so she swung her body to the left without moving her feet.

"Oh, stop it," said her mother with a sigh.

Lily pulled her arms free from her top and elaborately folded it and laid it on the bed. Her mother took it up, shook out the folds and gathered the discarded bottoms from the floor. She crossed the room to the closet and hung the night clothes on a high hook and returned to sit on the bed. She watched Lily try to stab her foot into the leg opening of her underpants, hopping on the opposite foot for balance.

As she concentrated, Lily sucked in her full lower lip and tasted the salty sweat below it. She was hot. She hated to be watched. She looked up quickly at her mother; her pants had rolled upon themselves as she tried to pull them up on her sticky body. They stuck just below her belly.

"Oh, for God's sake, come here," said her mother. She reached forward to pull Lily to her and Lily misunderstood the gesture: shrinking in fear, she curled herself downward, tucking her head in her arms.

"Don't you dare pull away from me!" said her mother. She swore at Lily and yanked the pants in place with a snap of the elastic at the waistline, and struck her in the face. Then she reached behind her on the bed and brought forward the hated shorts.

In spite of her vow, Lily was crying freely. "Please, Mummy," she said between chattering teeth, "don't make me wear those."

"You'll do as I tell you," her mother said, holding the shorts low, so she could step into them. Lily heard a warning in the voice, so she lifted one foot and tottered. Not wanting to touch her mother's outstretched arm to steady herself, she rested her hand on the bed. Her mother shook the shorts once and once again, holding her eyes shut. Lily lifted a fifty pound leg and put it into the opening.

"Now the other foot," said her mother. Lily withdrew her hand from the bed and steadied herself with the other on the opposite side of her mother. "Come on!"

"I am."

"Don't be impudent with me!" said her mother, striking her once again on the other side of the face. Lily's defense of defiance took wings and flew off to perch on the ceiling light. She saw it there as she crumbled into tears, and then even her bladder betrayed her: she wet herself.

"You're disgusting," her mother said. She grabbed Lily's wet leg and thrust it into the opening in the shorts. She pulled the shorts in place over her wet pants and legs, twisting Lily roughly this way and that to adjust the fit. She finished by working the sailor buttons at the sides.

"You'll wear them, wet pants and all," she said. "Stop your crying. These are good shorts."

Through her tears, her burning face, and her watering eye, Lily sensed an opening and took it. "I hate them," she said.

"You'll wear them." said her mother. "Now get a rag and clean up the rug. Then get outside."

Now alone, Lily postured before the mirror on the closet door, turning this way and that. She looked up and down her chunky body, appraising it: too fat. Her thighs, now sticky with urine, displeased her most, and the shorts showed everything. She couldn't go outside in them. She probably even smelled. It was like her mother to want her to smell bad and to make her wear something that made her look ugly. She was as mean as Snow White's step mother.

"She doesn't care how I feel," she said to herself, and she knew she was going to cry again. She stepped closer to the mirror to examine her face. Her one eye was swollen, but she watched herself cry. It added more puffiness to her large, dark eyes and more red blotches to her cheeks. She wiped away the sweat and tears with the back of her hand, looked at her hair and made a bad mouth. Her hair hung in small separated globs of curls, uncombed and unwashed. "I hate the way I look," she said. She thought immediately of Mary Lessert, the pretty girl at school, thin and light, with long, brushed blonde hair that didn't separate, but hung in loose sausage curls to the middle of her back. She was sure Mary didn't get sticky from the heat or from wetting her pants. She had dainty, thin legs and wore white socks and shoes with a strap across the instep called Mary Janes. She wasn't too big for her age like Lily, or chunky. The boys thought her pretty; the girls thought her nice; and the teachers thought her smart.

"I hate you," she whispered to the mirror. Making a tight fist, she struck herself fully on the temple; again and again, now with the other fist, and then with both, she beat her face and ears until her head rang. She sagged to the floor, wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth, moaning softly. "She's mean; she's so mean," she chanted between the quiverings of her jaw.

"What the hell are you doing up there? Get outside, I said," came the voice from the bottom of the stairs. Lily stopped in mid-rock, held herself tightly and made no reply.

"Lily, get down here. If I have to come up . . ." began the voice again. Slowly she got to her feet and crossed the upstairs hall to the bathroom. She stepped on her stool and hoisted herself on her stomach over the rim of the sink to put her chin under the faucet, letting the cool water soothe her raw face. She reached for the rag kept under the sink, wet it, and wiped at the stickiness between her legs. She gave her knee a quick rub, too, for it always looked dirty because of the wart. She dried herself with the white towel by the sink. As she was about to hang it up, she noticed it was smudged where she'd used it. She debated whether to fold it so the grime wouldn't show, but her name called again from below startled her. She rinsed out the rag and went to wipe up the spot she had made on the rug.

She tip-toed downstairs and stole toward the kitchen. The door to the basement was open, and Lily could hear her mother below, moving jars and humming. The storm had passed, but the thought of locking her mother in the basement--just shutting the door and sliding the bolt across--pleased her. She'd leave her there to beg for release, and no one would come. Lily would go away and never come back.

"But where would you go?" her sensible self asked. "And what would you do if you were hungry?"

"Well," she answered herself, "I can always ask at houses for food like a bum."

"But grown-ups would wonder why you had no home or orphanage to go to," said her sensible self. "They'd call the policeman who'd find out you'd locked your mother in the basement."

"So?" she answered, quietly opening the screen door to avoid the squeak and stepping outside. She held the door so it wouldn't slam and squinted up into the noon sun. If she kept her squint, the sun shining through her eye-slits made sparkly globules like the Christmas Star of Bethlehem on the willow tree at the yard's edge.

The willow tree! Lily ran to it, sliding carefully between the ground-stroking branches as if they were a fragile curtain. Once inside the drooping fronds, she stooped to press the cool, mossy carpet that surrounded the trunk and sloped slightly toward the streamlet. Her daddy had wanted this house because of this tree and the tiny ribbon of water that crossed their yard. "The water will never stop," he said. "It's from a spring." Lily was surprised at its coolness even on the hottest summer day. Barefooted, she loved to squish the thin grasses that grew in the stream bed.

She heaved herself up the forked crotch of the willow, aware that the branches dipped with her weight. She had

been told, of course, that willow trees were fragile, too fragile for climbing, and to stay away from this one; she'd wreck it. She was told often to stay away from things, like her baby sister, Sandra, for instance. She played too roughly with her. Sandra slept in the big bedroom by the big bed. Lily often heard her cry early in the morning, and she overheard the cooings that comforted her back to sleep. She was glad Sandra was a messy eater. Maybe she'd grow up to wreck things, too.

But here, in the inner circle of the willow tree, she forgot all that. She loved the willow, even though she was whipped for disobedience with its springy branches. Always, it was the same: she was told to get a switch, strip its leaves and be quick about it. Although her stomach lurched and felt mushy, and she was afraid she'd wet her pants, she stood before the tree and asked which branch to take, which one would the tree give up, which one would hurt her least. In her mind, the willow answered and chose for her.

Lily forgot everything in the magic green room beneath the willow tree. Here, she ruled over a rustling kingdom of birds and bugs. Here, she imagined herself a pretty child, fussed over by adults, or a queenly child, who lived alone and wisely without grown-ups. Invisible people sought her out to answer difficult questions about things, calling to her softly from the far side of the willow curtain to see if she were receiving callers that day. Sometimes she answered, sometimes she didn't: it depended on whether

she'd had rather a lot to do lately. Here, higher than the clothesline pole, rising tall and straight and thin, she balanced between the graceful trunks of the willow and shook the branches to flutter out the brown leaves, pretending she was the wind. She called to her imaginary subjects in a stern (but silent) voice, telling them to step forward and be heard. Today, however, her legions of subjects were silent.

Today, she felt mean in her heart. She hated it when she felt mean. Sometimes she hurt her baby sister when she felt like this, or she pulled the curly tail feathers of her spaniel pup until she yipped at her. God didn't love her when she was mean; she knew that. Besides, there was nothing to do when you felt mean. Nothing was any fun, not even going barefoot and stomping in the spring water.

Glancing down, she saw the basement light go off through the cellar window and knew her mother was coming upstairs. She skinned herself clambering out of the tree, but she didn't stop to look. She ripped through the frond curtain. In a hard run, she headed for the front yard.

As she paused for breath and wiped her still-watering eye, she thought she heard voices from the steps of the library across the street. She crossed diagonally to check. One voice sounded like Tony, her eight-year-old friend who had found a way to get into the library when it was closed. No one was on the library's side steps, so Lily circled the grounds to the back of the building, checking the basement

window-wells on the shady side to see if Tony or Jimmy Marvin were hiding there to scare her. Finding no one, and hidden now by the brick building from the watching windows of her house, Lily balanced herself on the concrete curbing that lined the parking lot and walked on it with baby steps--one foot directly in front of the other--even though she knew she could do it and had done it a thousand-thousand times. As she reached the end of the curbing and sat down in the sun on the hot cement, she reminded herself of James, the snail, in a poem she liked: "James went on a journey with the goat's new compass, / and reached the end of his brick."

She began to chant it over and over to herself, as she did sometimes when her mind stuck. She hated it when her mind got stuck. God thought it was dumb, too. She knew that.

She heard the voices again, on the far side of the bush next to her. She got up and bent around it, peeking. Three girls had organized a game of hopscotch on the library sidewalk.

"I can't," a red-headed one said. "I'll get dirty."

"You won't either," said a dark haired girl in a torn pinafore. "Here, I'll draw it and show you." She chalked in the squares and numbered them as a smaller girl with braids hopped along behind her, balancing on one foot until the square ahead was drawn and numbered.

"Look out, Merle. I'm not done," said the dark haired girl. The girl called Merle teetered, waving her arms as if she would fall a thousand-hundred feet if she lost her balance, and Lily drew closer. She sucked on her middle finger and made a sorrowful face as she had seen shy girls do successfully, hoping to be asked to play. No one spoke. Finally, Lily's real self couldn't stand it another minute.

"That one should be six, not seven," she said.

"How do you know?" asked the dark haired girl.

"I just know. I've played lots of times."

"Well, our game is different," said Merle, sucking the end of her braid.

"I can't play anyway," said the tall, red haired girl again. "I'll get dirty."

"Ah, c'mon, Sandra," said the organizer. "I've got it all drawn."

"I'll play," offered Lily.

"You're fat," said Merle, taking the wet end of her braid out of her mouth. "And you've got a wart on your knee."

"It's a scrape," said Lily.

"No, it isn't. My brother's got warts. I know warts," said the dark haired girl.

"I can't get dirty," said Sandra.

"Your dress is pretty," said Lily. She had never seen a white dress on a person before. She had seen one on a bride doll in Wanamaker's at Christmas, but she wasn't

allowed to touch it; the doll was sealed in a box with a cellophane top. Sandra's dress was white organdy and ruffled like a pinafore over the shoulders. It had a blue satin sash, and between the ruffles in the front and back, Lily could see her lace-edged slip embroidered with pink roses. When she moved, you could also see an occasional pink rose peeking through her skirt. Sandra's socks had a blue-piped edging on them where the cuff turned down to meet the strap of her white Mary Janes. Her skin wasn't freckled like other red haired girls'; it was pink and white as if she had just gotten out of the bathtub. Lily's looked that way once after she'd had a scented bubble bath at her grandmother's. Most of all, Lily noticed Sandra's hair. It wasn't orangey-red; it was a rusty-brown-red, like the soft spots on old apples, or the bottoms of new acorns, or like her birthstone, Sardonyx. Like a Sardonyx it shone as if polished by the sun, full of deep, rich glints that made you want to touch it. Someone had brushed it into long sausage curls that hung like coiled springs against her back, almost touching the blue sash at her waist. Lily had never seen prettier hair, not even Mary Lessert's. She wiped her palms on her shorts and stared. She wished she could touch it.

From an awninged porch a few houses down, an older woman in an apron called; Merle and the dark haired girl tossed their hopscotch stones in the grass and ran obediently toward her. For some moments, Lily and Sandra

stood in silence by the diagram drawn on the sidewalk until Lily asked if she lived here.

"No," said Sandra, "But we come on Saturdays sometimes. It's my grandmother's. She makes my clothes."

"Do you ever wear shorts?" asked Lily.

"Not much," said Sandra. "I don't play much. I've been sick." Lily was never sick except for colds now and then or a bout with tonsillitis. She often wished she would get really sick, so she'd get fussed over like her baby sister. She wouldn't have to eat a boiled egg for breakfast, and she could color in bed all day and listen to the radio. Her daddy had given her the red radio so she could keep up with all the songs; then they could sing them together.

"What did you have?" she asked.

"Rheumatic fever," said the red haired girl. "But I grew anyway. It's supposed to stunt your growth."

"Are you eight?" asked Lily, stepping closer to her.

"I have to go now," said Sandra.

"Why?" asked Lily, watching Sandra toe the hopscotch square with her white shoe. "Why can't you play?"

Sandra stepped daintily with one foot on the seven square of the game, executed a graceful jump and landed with both feet on the six and eight within the lines and walked away.

"Wait up, called Lily, as she jumped with one foot on the seven square and drew up to land with both feet on the six and eight within the lines and missed. Sandra kept on

walking. Lily ran up behind her, and resisting no longer, caught one of the glinting, red, sausage curls in her hand, and squeezed softly. The hair felt as silky as Curly's soft place under her ear and as springy as a willow sapling that whipped back into place after you let it go. Some of the strands clung to Lily's combing fingers like the wet gold thread around a new ear of corn. Lily smiled and squeezed the hair again tenderly. Sandra sensed her hair was caught and reached behind her head to free it, but Lily held firm. Astonished, the girl whirled around, the blue circle in her eyes suspended in the center of the whites. "What are you doing?" she said. Lily met her wide-eyed stare straight-on and deliberately narrowed her eyes to slits as they did in the movies. She tightened her hold on the hank of hair, and without taking her eyes off Sandra's face, she reached for another shiny curl with the other hand and began to pull hard backward as if they were the reins on a russet pony. Sandra started to screech, but Lily just clamped her teeth together and pulled harder. For leverage, she sat down to pull, using her backside as a weight. Sandra toppled like a monument; she twisted her ankle and dirtied her sock as she folded down. Soon she was on her knees on the rough pavement, her head tipped backward, throat up, blue-veined and vulnerable. Lily saw the vein in her neck throbbing just under her ear where her skin was whitest. Seaming her mouth to a fine line, Lily got to her feet and began to drag her, white dress and all, over the caked, dusty mud of the

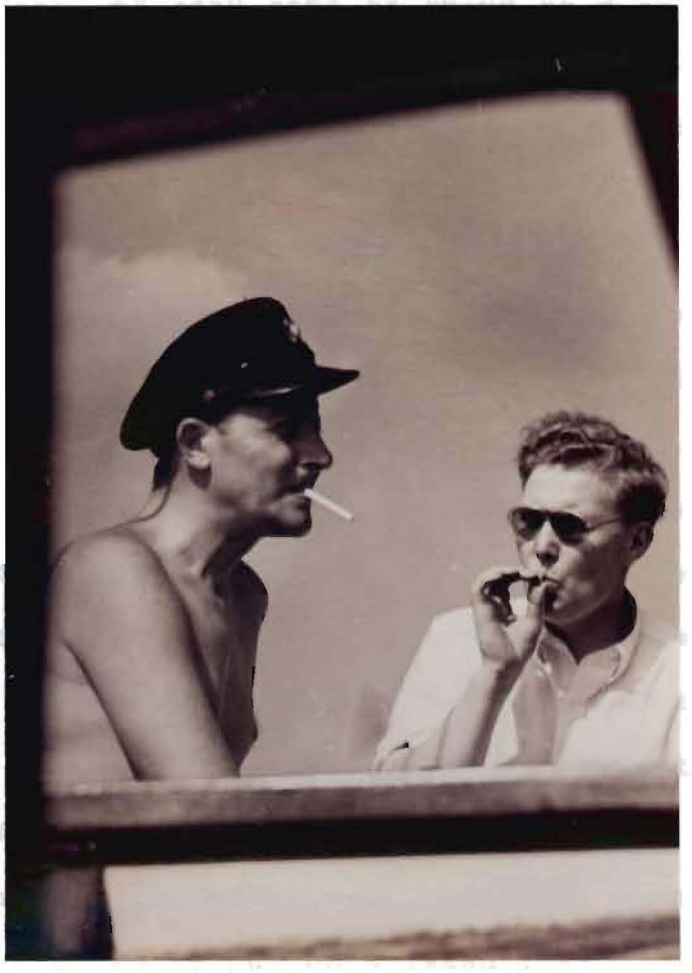
sidewalk crevice. She paused to put the reins of hair into one grimy hand, and with her free fingers, tore at the blue sash in fury. She gave herself over to the delicious agony of hurting someone as hard as she could, feeling bad and feeling good at once.

Sandra's cries brought the aproned woman out on the porch again. "Hey, little girl! You there! Stop that! You're hurting her!" she said as she rushed down the porch steps, headed for Lily. Lily flung Sandra's head forward by the hair and kicked her in the small of the back. Her head hit the sidewalk, and she lay still, quiet and still, while Lily's stomach swallowed itself. In a minute just short of forever, Sandra began to cry again. She lay like a damp tissue in a heap of soiled ruffles on the sidewalk. Soon she reached around to rub her back and raised herself up. She thrust her stomach forward and swallowed hard as if checking to see if everything worked. As she lifted her head, Lily saw her puffy eyes and her stained, red face. She saw how much she had hurt Sandra and wanted to comfort her, to say she was sorry, to help her clean up, but she stood mute.

Why'd you hurt me?" Sandra asked with wide dull eyes.

The woman in the apron was gaining, so Lily didn't answer but turned to run up the block. Around the library and across the street to her backyard she ran, to hide in the willow branches that shaded the moss and kept it cool. She shoved her way through the curtain of fronds and leaned

against the tree. She was out of breath, but she banged her forehead forward and back, forward and back, against the trunk. She slumped to the moss to roll her hot brow and cheeks in its spongy coolness. Clasping her arms around her stomach, she pulled her knees up and wound herself into a roly-poly bug. God didn't like her hurting people; she knew that; she knew that. The pain of it was all over her body. Her mind got stuck on knew-that, knew-that, knew-that. She hated it when her mind got stuck. She tried to change the chant and got stuck on the poem: "James gave the huffle of a snail in danger / And nobody heard him at all." Over and over it went in her head, a hundred-hundred times. She interrupted to beg God to make her a turtle with a big, domed shell. She'd pull her head in and never come out. Or she could be a snail like James, but she wouldn't leave a silver path when she moved; she wouldn't want anyone to be able to find her, ever. If only, she thought, if only I could lose myself.



3: Her World

3. Her World

When it really mattered to her, Lily lied about things, even true things. It took time to think of a good lie; if she were put on the spot, she told the truth. But she believed that true things grew more true when they were made over into lies, for the part she added was the most important part: it made the point she needed to make. When her sensible self protested that lies got her into trouble more times than not, Lily brought up Mrs. Fox and the silver dishes.

After Sarah, Mrs. Fox was Lily's most frequent babysitter before her baby sister was born. Sarah was used for her parents' short absences, afternoons or weekday evenings. If they were to be gone for a few days or over a weekend, Mrs. Fox came to stay. Lily had tried to like the old lady but found it hard. In the first place, she was old, older than Mrs. Ridgeway, who, when she went for a walk with her maid, had to be put on a leash like Curly, so she wouldn't wander away. In the second place, Mrs. Fox was grouchy. Mostly all she ever said to Lily was "I swear" or "mind-your-own-business." She hated questions, and that was part of the problem because she had many things wrong with her that Lily needed answers about.

Mrs. Fox had parts that came off, like the clowns at the circus who were very tall or very fat, but when they had to squeeze into the little car and you thought they couldn't, they just got rid of their legs, which turned out to be stilts, or their rear ends, which turned out to be pillows. In the circus, that was funny, but when it was your babysitter, it was creepy.

For instance, at night Mrs. Fox took her teeth out and put them in a jar with some fizzy water to clean them. The teeth looked bigger in the water, and the little pink gums attached to them turned white and waxy like the fake lips Lily had at Halloween. Also, Mrs. Fox wore trick glasses that changed the way her eyes looked. By day, her silver rimmed eyes were tiny and narrow, mean-looking. At night, without her glasses, her eyes were the same size as everybody else's, but she couldn't see anything. Once Lily tried on her glasses. She didn't put them back in exactly the same place, which upset old Mrs. Blind-as-a-Bat and resulted in a lot of frantic looking.

Mrs. Fox took off her hair, too, so it wouldn't muss, and put it on an upside-down bowl she brought upstairs from the kitchen. When Lily told her you weren't supposed to take kitchen things out of the kitchen, Mrs. Fox told her to mind-her-own-business. Her hair on the up-turned bowl wasn't as creepy to Lily as the little bits of hair left on her head. These looked like islands, little snowy islands, floating in a pink sea. Sometimes Lily thought Mrs. Fox

looked like Patsy Ann Borden's old dog that got the mange on his rump, and his hair fell out in patches. Lily wasn't supposed to touch him for fear she'd catch the mange, but when she asked Mrs. Fox if she had mange, the old lady got mad.

The funniest part, though, was her corset. By day, in her blue frieze dress, Mrs. Fox's body looked like Lily's grandmother's. She had large bosoms and a rear-end and a stomach. In her nightgown, however, her bosoms dropped down to the same place as her stomach, and she looked more like Humpty-Dumpty. The corset, made from cloth with sticks in little narrow pockets running up and down it, had laces everywhere like a hundred-hundred pairs of shoes. At night, it hung on the door knob or over the back of her mother's sewing chair, and it smelled bad, like towels put in the hamper damp and left for a week. Lily asked Mrs. Fox if she put it on by herself, but she never answered.

The scariest part was her hand, or rather her missing hand. Lily's curiosity about this was never satisfied. She knew that Mrs. Fox's car had broken down in the snow a long time ago, and that she had tried to walk to the nearest house but had lost her way. She had nearly frozen to death when somebody found her. One hand and was so badly frostbitten that it had to be cut off. In a long-sleeved dress, Mrs. Fox pinned a glove stuffed with handkerchiefs to the cuff, and you couldn't tell she didn't have a real hand, except when she borrowed a handkerchief from the glove to

blow her nose. In short sleeves, though, her arm ended in a pink stump that moved and twitched like a nervous goldfish. Sometimes she gestured with it and that was creepy. The bottom of the stump was wrinkled like Lily's fingers when she'd played in the bathtub too long. Her wrinkles went away, but those on the stump didn't. Mrs. Fox cleaned them with a toothpick and a dab of cotton; watching made Lily's stomach turn over even though that was how her mother cleaned her belly button.

Mrs. Fox didn't eat much either. She took pills instead, and lined them up on her table mat like toy soldiers. At breakfast, she added boiling water to her orange juice and took one pill from three bottles. She had a routine: after she opened a bottle, she took out one pill and put it in a soup spoon. Then she closed the bottle and laid it on its side, like a dead soldier. The pill from the last bottle, however, she crushed with the edge of the spoon and put it in her coffee. When Lily asked her why she did that instead of swallowing it whole like the others, Mrs. Bald-as-a-Ball told her to mind-her-own-business.

Mrs. Fox didn't like to play much. Cards made her eyes hurt, even Slap-Jack, where you only had to look at the pictures; reading made her throat sore; singing made her hoarse; and walking made her feet hurt. Lily privately thought that she didn't like children much either, and she knew she hated dogs, especially ones that went outside and got muddy and wouldn't always mind, like Curly. She liked

to sit and listen to the radio while she crocheted, holding the work against her bosom with her stump.

Since they didn't do much else, sometimes she and Mrs. Fox got into an argument over which one had the most things wrong with her. The game had started when Lily had said in a pique that she didn't have a wig, false teeth or mean-looking glasses, and Mrs. Fox had said well, no, but soon Lily would lose her teeth, and she had, after all, warts. Lily was sensitive about her warts: they looked dirty all the time if you didn't pick them off, and if you did, they bled. She had a doctor--not the kind that poked her; he didn't even poke her warts--who was helping. He had greenish-gray, square metal plates bigger than her hands with wart-sized holes. When he found a hole that fit her wart, he put that plate over it. Then a big machine with a green light zoomed down and ZAPPO--in two days, Lily would find the wart like a miniature rubber ball in her bed. She would rub it between her fingers and put it in her mouth to taste it. It tasted like fingernails. She imagined her whole body tasting like fingernails and warts.

Nighttime was the worst time for Lily when Mrs. Fox stayed with her. Ever since she was very little, she had gone to the bathroom by herself in the middle of the night if she needed to go. But when Mrs. Fox came, if Lily got up, Mrs. Fox got up to go with her and stood in the bathroom waiting for her to tinkle. If she were watched, Lily couldn't go. She'd have Mrs. Fox turn on the faucet to

prime her, but still she couldn't let it come down. The old lady thought she was pretending she had to go to the bathroom and got mad when Lily got back into bed only to get out again because she still had to go, and yet she couldn't go when she got there. Things got so bad that Lily hated to go to bed because she was afraid she'd have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, and she wouldn't be able to. She tried to tell Mrs. Fussy Feathers she could do it better by herself, but the old lady said firmly that she wanted to make sure Lily was safe.

Lily tried to tell her mother how grouchy Mrs. Mangey Head was, and that she wore fake hair and had mean eyes, but her mother just tried not to laugh and told her not to make fun of people. Besides, Mrs. Fox had a daughter who was a doctor, her mother said. That did it: Lily hated doctors; they made you take off your clothes just to look in your ears. Mrs. Fox had to go.

Lily began to work on a lie. She decided that if the old lady did something bad, her mother wouldn't ask her to babysit anymore. That had happened to Lily's favorite maid, the one who used to try on her mother's clothes, especially her evening dresses, when her mother was out. During Mrs. Fox's next two visits, Lily watched her carefully to see if she did anything wrong. But Old Corset Smell was a perfect goody-goody: she made the beds each day and put everything back where she found it and watched Lily every second. In fact, she took care of the house as if it were hers,

cleaning everything carefully. She picked up the shepherdess figurine, and holding it with her stump, she dusted it with her good hand, even around the tiny flowers in the apron pocket.

At breakfast one morning, Lily asked her if she could get the marmalade from the frig for her waffle.

"Marmalade on waffles? I never heard of such a thing," said Mrs. Fox. She said she never-heard-of-such-a-thing a lot.

"Sarah lets me do it," Lily said.

"Do you now where it is?"

"Yes. I'll get it," said Lily, sliding from her chair before she could object. From the refrigerator she took the little silver jam jar, its insides and lid lined in gold like the tiny spoon attached to the handles, and carried it into the dining room on its silver saucer with the balls around the edge.

"How pretty," said Mrs. Fox. "Where was it?"

"In the frig; I told you," said Lily.

Mrs. Fox looked at her for a moment, then took her napkin from the silver ring her mother saved for guests, and holding the jam pot in the crook of her stumpy arm, she rubbed the dampness off, shining it dry.

"Pretty little dish," she said again. "Where did your mother get it?"

"I don't know," said Lily. "We've always had it."

"Your mother has lots of pretty things," said Mrs. Fox. "You're lucky. We never had anything when Clara was little like you. I had to work just for our food." Lily had heard the story many times. Mrs. Fox's husband had been gassed in the war and "was never the same after that," everybody said. Lily wanted to know how he had changed, but Mrs. Fox was vague. "He just sat around," she said. If he did that, Lily thought, he wasn't much different than Mrs. Fox. She asked if he crocheted.

"Mercy, no. I swear, Lily, you ask the strangest questions, and you ask so many. You do try a body's patience," said Mrs. Fox. Eventually, the story went, her husband took his life.

"In the basement?" Lily asked.

"In the basement? What on earth are you talking about? I swear," said Mrs. Fox. Lily didn't answer. Mrs. Fox continued with her story: she had gone to work, and life was hard, and so on. She never added anything new, and Lily needed new word pictures so that the story would fill out.

But the jam pot had given her an idea. After breakfast, when Mrs. Fox had gone to the bathroom, Lily took the little silver jar with its golden spoon and threw it in the trash. Using a chair, she tore off some paper towels and crumpled them up to put them on top to hide it. On her bed at nap time, she was sorry she had done it. She'd miss the dish. Her mother used it for cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving. The deep red berries on the gold spoon looked

like Christmas and made Lily remember that Christmas wasn't very far away.

Her mother didn't notice that the dish was gone right away. In fact, it was Sarah who missed it. Lily pretended that she hated to tattle, but that Mrs. Fox loved pretty things, and maybe she'd taken it home with her. Instantly, all eyes were upon her. Sarah said, "Mrs. Fox?" Her mother said, "Are you sure?" Lily made her face as blank as possible and shrugged her shoulders as she'd seen them do in the movies.

"How do you know, Lily?" said her mother.

"She wouldn't do nothin' like that," said Sarah.

"Would too," said Lily, afraid Sarah would wreck her plan.

"How do you know? I mean, what makes you think she'd do something like that?" said her mother.

"Mrs. Bishop," said Sarah, "that ole lady wouldn't never do nothin' like that." Lily, who often thought she loved Sarah more than her mother, decided she hated her on the spot.

"Be still, Sarah," said her mother, who liked thinking bad of people. "Maybe the child knows something."

"Tha' chile knows somethin' all right," said Sarah. "Sometime that chile knows too much."

"Hush," said her mother. "Now, Lily, I want you to come over here and tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything," said Lily. She was pleased; she had planted the seed. It took two more trips to the trash with two other small silver dishes on two separate occasions, but Mrs. Fox went from good to bad in her mother's opinion, and she didn't come to babysit anymore. When Lily's sensible self told her that she thought what she did was terrible, Lily replied that it was the old lady who was terrible. It was only the reason she was terrible that wasn't true. Even her sensible self couldn't argue with that.

Still, Lily got in trouble for lying. One long, rainy Sunday, she was sent to her room because she had lied about taking Curly to bed with her. At suppertime, after the rain had stopped, her daddy asked her to come and sit in the big chair with him, for he had a story to tell her. Nestled in his arm, her legs straight out before her on the chair seat, Lily listened to "The Boy Who Cried Wolf."

He was the son of a shepherd, and he was just old enough to be put in charge of a flock of lambs in the pasture while his father took the other sheep to new grass on the hillside. The boy would be on his own for the first time. "Sure," the shepherd boy probably told his father, "I can do it." Lily would have said that, too. She pictured him about ten years old, with dark, smooth skin like Paul Moszuno, the handsome boy at camp, small for his age, but already, with his dark eyelashes, handsome. Lily had always tried to touch him until he told her to stop.

The shepherd boy had to stay awake through the night and guard the lambs from wolves who liked lamb steak for dinner because it was tender and juicy. If the boy saw a wolf, he was to yell as loud as he could for his father. The father would then hurry down the hill and shoot the wolf. The boy probably felt all right during the day, except maybe he grew bored surrounded by one-hundred-hundred bleating lambs, patting them to make them not miss their mothers too much, feeding the smallest one with a bottle just as Lily herself had done at the zoo once. He had to count the lambs every two hours. Lambs were never still, and the boy had to start over a hundred times. "One and two; two; one and two and three and four," he began because the sheep kept moving together, changing places like the circus clowns under a blanket pretending to be the body of a horse. "One and two and two . . ." It was hard. As night came on, the boy could see nothing but blackness outside the pasture. If he looked up, the sky went higher than the ceiling at church that went on forever until your neck hurt, and the stars were farther away than altar candles. The boy was frightened; he wished his father were nearby. He decided to call him the only way he knew he'd come: "Wolf! Wolf!" he called, again and again into the darkness. "Wolf! Wolf!"

On the hillside, the father thought he heard a call. To be sure, he listened closer. "Yes," he decided, "distinctly wolf." He rushed down the steep path to save

his lambs and his son. Probably, he ran all the way unless he had a donkey like Jesus did, or a horse. He arrived out of breath with the open face that adults have when there is trouble, like when Lily called through the bathroom door to tell her daddy that the ironing board had jumped on her and the iron had leaped from its resting plate to the floor. Open adult faces were scary: wide eyes, no blinks; open mouths, quick, short words; choppy gestures. "How did you do that?" "What on earth were you thinking of?" "Why weren't you more careful?" "Are you all right?"

Anyway, the boy's father came, and when he saw everything was all right, he said, "You cried wolf, and I came, and there is no wolf."

"I guess I just thought there was," said the boy. Lily knew he was lying. The boy did this two more times, and each time his father came running, arriving breathless, and each time there was no wolf, only a frightened boy. The father grew angry. He thrashed his son, which sounded much worse to Lily than being spanked or even being whipped by a willow branch. Finally, however, a wolf did come, and he ate all the lambs, fleece and all, while the boy screamed as loud as he could, "Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!" His father had heard him, but he didn't believe him, so he didn't come. In the morning, when he came down from the hillside, he saw that his lambs were gone and his son was dead. The last time the cry had been true. Lily understood the story, but she didn't understand why the father didn't know you might

cry "Wolf!" when there was none because you needed help and you were scared. Like the thing about Uncle Bob the summer she would always remember, the summer she skated every day, including Sunday.

For Christmas, Lily had gotten a pair of roller skates. She practiced on the sidewalk around her house, just as she had with her bike at first. Soon she tried the sidewalk along her street, but the cement stamped CCC 1933 was rough with added stones. The old slate ones that sounded hollow when you skated over them were the best, but they sloped down and collected mud and sticks in the corners or humped up over tree roots; Lily skated in the street. Usually she wasn't allowed to skate on Sunday or do anything that made noise; that was one of her daddy's few rules. It was a day of rest, he believed. She hated to rest; Sunday was boring. Sometimes she nagged about it, trying to get him to change his mind. To her surprise, her mother had helped her, arguing that he was old-fashioned. "People use Sunday nowadays," she said.

"That doesn't mean we have to," he had replied.

"The child's bored; she doesn't see the difference between Sunday and any other day of the week, and neither do I. Besides, don't you and Bob Barry go fishing on Sundays?" said her mother. Uncle Bob and her daddy's fishing trips were an unpopular subject: they happened too often and lasted too long; sometimes her mother didn't know where

they'd gone or when they'd be back. Sometimes her daddy brought roses home from them instead of fish; but that didn't make things better. On holidays, Uncle Bob wasn't invited for dinner like Uncle Jack and Aunt Dorothy, her parent's best friends, or Uncle Harry and Aunt Naomi, who lived at the shore. It didn't hurt Uncle Bob's feelings, for he'd drop in later anyway and bring his mother along with a new bottle of whiskey "to end the day right."

His mother, Aunt Maude, never talked. At Lily's house she huddled near the phonograph in the Regency chair no one ever sat in because it was small and delicate just like she was. Also, she wouldn't give up her coat when her daddy asked politely if he could take it for her. Lily wondered if she kept it on because she wore an apron underneath, so she asked her mother. "She probably has no clothes," her mother had replied. "Your Uncle Bob has robbed her blind to buy that damned boat." But Aunt Maude didn't even wear glasses; indeed, her black eyes rolled all about the room, missing nothing. Although her head didn't swivel, one side of her mousey face jumped in dits and dots like Curly's when she dreamed. It was a tic, her mother said. It fascinated Lily; once she had stood by Aunt Maude's chair and said tic-tac-toe over and over as if her mind were stuck; another time she had pretended she was a clock and said tick-tock over and over, moving her arms like a pendulum; each time she hoped to find out more about what a tic was, but Aunt Maude never opened her mouth. Occasionally, however, her

arm crept around Lily's waist, and her sharp fingers dug hard into Lily's side. Lily wasn't sure whether she meant to be fierce or loving, but she leaned against her coat-covered lap anyway.

Halfway through a visit, Aunt Maude shifted her position in the chair and reached for her handbag on the floor. Lily moved to help the old lady lift it when the gray fingers fumbled. The bag wasn't heavy, only large, almost as big as Sarah's weekend satchel. It opened with a snap of two tortoise-colored handles that twined around each other like a puzzle or a vine. Lily put her hands on Aunt Maude's once, to ask silently if she could work the handles herself. Aunt Maude clasped her hands in her lap and waited. Lily struggled, working the handle puzzles in and out of each other, up and down each other, but she never succeeded in getting them apart. Aunt Maude did it in a second and brought from the crowded depths of her bag a skeleton key or an All-Fit skate key on a blue cord; a half stick of gum or a wooden button shaped like a barrel; ("Roll Out the Barrel" was Lily's current favorite song) or a metal pencil with a hidden eraser--all just for Lily.

At Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, and her birthday, Aunt Maude wore flowers on her coat, usually gardenias--once, pink camellias. "Yes, the old girl can't get through it without a corsage. I get it for her, anything to please, you know," Uncle Bob explained, smiling. He talked that way: easy. Everyone looked at Aunt Maude, but she sat

still and mute although her eyes skated fiercely about. The room hung with silence, but it wasn't twenty-of or twenty-past the hour, so no Angel was flying over. Finally, Lily's mother said "How lovely," or "How nice for you, Maude," but the old lady said nothing.

At first, her not talking worried Lily, but her mother said she could talk if she chose. Lily finally decided that, like Curly, who could say things with her tail, Aunt Maude didn't need words. The old woman just knew things about you, and you knew things about her. For instance, she brought Christmas tins full of plump cookies on Mother's Day, a jar of chutney her mother liked at Easter, and home-made fruit breads anytime she came to the house with Uncle Bob. Lily knew she had a cozy kitchen, probably with a radio and steamy windows you could write your name on. She had seen it once.

On a scorcher of a July day, Lily rode with her mother through the heart of the city, a long ride; trucks and trolleys clogged traffic on rundown streets with no trees on curb or lawn. The breeze through the car window was sooty and hot; she stuck to the upholstery where she sat and needed a drink of water so badly she felt sick. Her mother had been in a bad-mad mood for two days, just about the length of time her daddy and Uncle Bob had been gone fishing. At last her mother parked in front of a house joined to other houses in a row, with no way to get to the backyard. Every other house had a porch; Aunt Maude's was

glassed-in. Her mother rang the bell and yanked Lily by the hand to make her stand still and stop hop-hopping on the steps. Her mother rang again, and Lily thought she heard soft footsteps, but still no one came to the door. Her mother began to beat on the glass door with her ringed hands when it opened suddenly on Aunt Maude. She stood there, her hands crossed in front of her, resting at the waist of her apron, frowning. Pulling her roughly by the arm, Lily's mother jerked her into the house, Aunt Maude stepped back only slightly and shut the door with both hands.

The living room beyond the glassed-in porch was a haven of coolness, deep and dark, like a cave. The dark green shades, one mended across with tape, were pulled down over the windows. The sofa and two chairs had summer covers on them, white, with white fringe at the bottom above dark ball feet, like a fat lady's brown oxfords below a bride's dress.

"Where have they gone?" her mother demanded. "You know, Maude. I know you know." Aunt Maude said nothing. She sat down in one of the white covered chairs, and inched herself to the back of it so that her skinny legs stuck straight out in front of her like a doll's. She smoothed the antimacassar on top of one arm and adjusted it, re-fastening the pins; then she examined the one on the other arm. Lily heard the clock tick.

"I'm thirsty," said Lily.

"Be quiet," said her mother. "I'm waiting, Maude."

"May I please have a drink of water?" Lily tried again. Without a word, Aunt Maude took two hitches forward to get off the chair and put out her hand to Lily as she rose. Lily followed her through a long narrow dining room with a black table running its length. She could see their reflections in the top as they passed. In the kitchen, Maude mounted a little stool at the sink, the same way that Lily did in the bathroom when she washed her hands and face. She turned on the faucet, ignoring Lily's mother's loud voice behind her at the kitchen door.

"I'm not leaving til you tell me where they are," she said. Aunt Maid put her hand under the water and turned it over, palm to back, back to palm, letting the water run over it. She let it run while she stepped down from the stool to reach under the wall cabinet's overhang to a caddy of glasses with gold roses on them.

"Don't use your best on the child, Maude," said her mother. "It won't help. You're in on this. Where have they gone this time?" Aunt Maude got up on the stool again and rinsed the glass. She refilled it and stepped down to hand it to Lily, drying the outside on her apron. She smoothed Lily's hot forehead with her hand, cool from the water, and ironed her curl flat. Lily drank in long, grateful gulps before she gave the glass back and asked with her eyes for more. The second glass went slower, but Aunt Maid used the cool backs of her fingertips to smooth the

heat out of Lily's red cheeks and carried the gesture down under her chin where the dirt always stuck in a crease.

"Damn it, Maude, I'm talking to you!" said her mother in a voice that scared Lily. Aunt Maude took the empty glass and set it in the sink. Then with two hands she did two things quickly: she plucked the top from a penguin cookie jar at the same time that she wrote something on a yellow pad. She tore off the top sheet and handed two things with two hands again: a cookie to Lily and the paper to her mother. Lily bit into a chocolate chip right off; it was better than the chocolates on the coffee table--no funny tasting centers.

Her mother whirled out of the kitchen, calling to Lily as she marched through the dining room. Aunt Maude held out her hand palm up, asking mutely for Lily's, and wiped each finger gently with a white cloth rinsed cool--then the other hand. She wrung out the cloth from her stool and hung it over the faucet. She ran her hand across the top of Lily's head down to her shoulders, and patted her gently. Impulsively, Lily spun around and hugged her, burying her face against the apron top. She squeezed the old lady twice before she ran after her mother, waiting on the glassed-in porch.

On a steamy August Sunday, Lily woke up early, sweating. She had slept in just her underpants because of the heat, and they had stuck in her crack. She stepped

wide, sideways, in a hitch to free them as she checked out the willow tree outside her window. Its dew-heavy fronds dragged the ground like a bride's train. A mist veiled the bushes in the yard up the street; it rolled in soft puffs over the lawns to the streamlet by the willow and wafted off in feathery wisps toward the Wisahickon. She reached for her pajama top to put on over her pants. She'd take three dog biscuits to wake up Curly who slept outside on summer nights, chained to her doghouse. "She has fleas," her mother had said. Lily missed her snoring on the floor beside her bed at night. It was one of the sounds she loved, like the old fan at church, groaning as it swept over the pews; or the click of traffic below her grandmother's fourteenth-floor apartment in New York City; or the locusts, whose droning told you the world hadn't burned up on hot, breezeless summer afternoons.

She passed the guest room on her way to the stairs and saw the door ajar. She tip-toed close to peek in. The room smelled like whiskey; someone was in there. Uncle Bob had spent the night. He was lying on his back with his mouth open. He gave little huffles on the intake of air, a long sigh on the outgo. His black hair was mussed and matted the way Lily's baby sister's looked after a nap on a hot day. His face and neck were tan like his thin arms; he was hairier than her daddy, with a large island of it on his chest, and you could see the white line from his bathing trunks around his waist. And a funny thing, his

tallywhacker, that thing boys had and girls didn't, was standing straight up. Lily stared at it. It reminded her of old Foxy's stump. Uncle Bob huffled unevenly as he turned over, and with one eye half-open, he saw her at the door. She pulled her pajama top around her, and backed quietly toward the stairs.

Curly was awake, wagging her tail, waiting for biscuits and freedom. Lily slid through the drooping branches of the willow and climbed high to straddle the fork. Standing tall and straight, she was a queen today, ready to talk to her subjects about tallywhackers.

At breakfast, she said little. It was too hot to eat; too hot for church, also, the adults agreed; but Lily didn't think it was too hot for skating. She left her pancakes half eaten and went to the basement to get her skates. In the cool darkness--she couldn't reach the light--near the coal bin, she thought she saw someone watching her. She froze in place, swallowed, and inched toward the shape. It was just her daddy's coveralls on a hanger with his old fishing fedora over the top; but ever since she had found the dead lady in the basement, Lily hated to go beyond the bottom step where Curly wound in the rag rug.

On the back steps, after fastening her skates with her new key from Aunt Maude, she scrunched her foot in her left shoe to try to wiggle out of the clamps; it couldn't be done; that was good. Going a hundred miles an hour and losing a skate on a stroke meant skinned knees and elbows

and peroxide, which stung bad. She adjusted the right clamp, tightened the strap, and tested it in the same way. Then, as she pulled the cord over her head and tucked the key in her shirt, she picked her way from the back door to the briar bushes. She decided to try the Mt. Airy hill today. Once out of sight, she tucked her skirt up into the legs of her pants, making blousy shorts, and rattled over the CCC 1933 walk, practicing her stroke. Rough pavement taught you balance, the older kids said. As she pushed one foot forward, she toed out a bit, holding the other foot in balance. The trick was to set it down at just the right moment, at the end of the first stroke, then push it up and out. She leaned her body into the change of feet, taken with the rhythm of it, and tried to add gracefulness, using her arms to help.

At the Mt. Airy hill, she readied herself for the steep climb, taking it in stages. The fast roll down would make it worthwhile, she told herself, wiping the sweat off her face with her arm. The wind rushing past would cool her off. She was half-way up the hill when a black coupe stopped beside her. She was stroking and didn't look up until she heard the voice.

"Hi, gorgeous. Want a ride up?" It was Uncle Bob, on her left, probably on his way home.

"You betcha'," she said, climbing on the running board, ready to hang on to the door the rest of the way up the hill.

"C'mon in and ride in style. Your old Uncle Bob's got style for you." He reached across to the door, and she stepped down so he could open it. Afraid she'd roll backward, she caught his offered hand and used it to hoist herself up into the seat eagerly, glad for a ride. Once she was in, he reached across her to shut the door and lock it.

"Can't lose my girl," he said. Lily never knew how to take his teasing, his gay manner. Sometimes it made her uneasy, like today.

"You got away fast after breakfast," he said. "I wanted a kiss goodby." Lily leaned forward to see how close to the top of the hill they were, and turned to tell him where to drop her off when she saw his tallywhacker, out of his pants, sticking up, almost touching the steering wheel. It was stiff and pink, a shiny round-topped stump. He saw her looking at it, but he didn't speak until she looked away.

"It hurts," he said.

"It looks like it does," said Lily.

"Would you like to touch it?" he asked.

"No," said Lily. She didn't like stumps and sick people.

"It would help if you did, sugar," Uncle Bob said. "It hurts so much. Please. Just touch it with your fingers." He pulled the car over to the curb and set the brake. He moved out from under the steering wheel to be closer to her, offering himself up.

"Just touch it with your magic fingers, honey," he said, "those sweet little fingers, and make it well. Please. Be a sweet, and help your old Uncle Bob feel better." Lily was moved by his tone, but she waited. He patted her back to urge her on. Gingerly, she slowly did as she was asked. It felt hot and silky-smooth. As she ran her index finger over its shiny, stretched top, a fluid oozed out.

"Is that pus?" Lily asked, yanking her finger back quickly.

"Yes," he said. "It's very sore. If you'd kiss it, it would get better faster. Doesn't your mommy kiss the place where you're hurt to make it feel better?"

"No," answered Lily; she didn't want to kiss pus. "I get well myself. I pretend it doesn't hurt."

"Oh, that wouldn't work for me," he said. "Will you just drop a kiss right here, on the top? Will you?"

Lily hesitated. She didn't know if her daddy ever had a big sore like this, but if he did, she would help him. She loved her daddy.

"Didn't you ever have a little girl of your own?" she asked. Uncle Bob smiled.

"No," he said. "I had to wait for you. I could only love you. I couldn't have anyone prettier or nicer. Will you help me?" He raised his body slightly, letting it plead for him, and Lily bent down to kiss the shiny top. Uncle Bob spoke softly to her, in a sing-song way, and laid his

head back against the seat, rolling it back and forth. "Give it a rub, give a stroke; there, sweet. Rub-a-dub. Ah, that's better." The pink stump twitched like a fish and emptied itself as Lily watched; she had barely touched it with her lips. Uncle Bob was quiet, his tallywhacker sagged, and he was still, as still as Sandra on the sidewalk when Lily had hurt her. God didn't like her hurting people, she knew that. She leaned forward to peer into his face, wondering if he were dead.

Suddenly, he came alive; he laughed and gathered her to him, skates and all. He nuzzled her face and rubbed his fingers in her hair and around her face in rough gestures. He blew in her ear and she felt goose bumps on her neck. He licked all around the rim of her mouth with his quick, stiff tongue, laughing.

"Pretty girl, pretty girl, so good to me, so good to me. We'll have good times, you'll see," he chuckled. "Now let your old Uncle Bob--"

Lily felt his finger in her crotch as he moved her panties out of the way roughly. She thought of the doctors trying to polk the thermometer in her when she had tonsillitis.

"No!" she screamed. "No!"

"Honey, honey, honey. It's okay; it's just your Uncle Bob. Hey, Hey, Hey. C'mon now. Sshh." He stopped his poking and comforted her until she calmed down. Burying his tongue in her ear with his hot breath, he began again to

touch her near her tinkle place, holding her tightly against the car seat and door, bent over her.

"No!" Lily screeched. She raised her foot in the skate and kicked him as hard as she could. Instantly he winced and grabbed his thing and his stomach. Tears began to ooze out from his clenched eyelids. He moaned.

Lily was too mad to care. She unlocked the door and threw herself out of the car, skinning her leg and arm.

"Wait," he called weakly, but she was off, and one skate was off; she limped like a dog with a stone in his paw, one skate on and one skate off, up the curb, through one yard and another to a cool emptiness that floated up from a damp stairwell to a basement. Skates clanking, she stumbled down the steps and flattened herself against the closed door, sobbing.

She slept; she woke up because she was hungry. Her dress was stiff from his pus in places as she pulled it out of her pant legs. She sat up and wiped his kisses off her face with her dirty arm and began to wretch. Nothing came up, just spit, which she let drop into a pile of soggy leaves caught in the corner before she sat down to undo her skates.

She tied them together and hung them around her neck as the big kids did. She cut through an alley toward her house and hoped no one would be looking for her. She needed a bath. At the worn path through the briar bushes, she felt

suddenly tired and wondered if she could make it through the stickers. Sarah had come back; she saw her at the trash can. That meant it was late; she'd be in trouble. She pulled in a deep breath and pushed through the hurting part quickly to go inside by the back door. As she started down the basement steps to put her skates away, she met her mother coming up.

"Where in hell have you been?" she said. "And look at you! You've some explaining to do, young lady." Lily's stomach heaved up, and she gagged.

"Don't start your play acting," said her mother. Tired as she was, Lily noted the softening in her tone. "Sarah, come wash her."

"I can do it myself, Mommy," Lily said, sitting down on a basement stair to rest.

"No," said her mother. "You need your hair washed. Then I want you to get a switch from the willow tree and bring it to me, you hear?"

"Is Daddy here?" Lily asked.

"He'll be back. Uncle Bob had to go to the doctor and he couldn't drive by himself."

The news stunned Lily. What had she done? Done, done, done, got stuck in her mind. She began to cry in deep gulps from her stomach that she couldn't control.

"Stop it," said her mother. "Get up and go with Sarah. You're in for it, sister." Her mother stepped around her on the steps leaving as much space as possible between them.

Sarah appeared at the top; she crouched down and waited in silence. Lily's sobs died away, and she lifted her legs--they felt as if they weighed fifty pounds--and made them take her up the steps.

"C'mon, honey," Sarah said. "We'll clean up. You want me to read?" Lily started crying again at Sarah's voice, and her offer to read made it worse. She nodded through her tears and started to laugh; her laugh broke into a cry and turned back into a laugh again. She wondered what on earth was the matter with her.

The water in the tub stung her scrapes. Lily let her bladder go and watched the yellow stream rush out to lie on the tub bottom before it started to blend.

"Oh, Lily," said Sarah, because she saw it. Sarah was the only person Lily didn't mind seeing her naked because she didn't stare at her like her mother, and she didn't pick and poke at her like the doctors and nurses. Instead, she asked politely if Lily wanted to be washed or dried. She let her know beforehand about each step of hair washing: the wetting, the soaping, and the rinsing that might get soap in her eyes. If Lily permitted her to help, Sarah patted her dry gently instead of rubbing her with a towel. She talked a lot about little things: she talked about Curly's antics during the day; how she wasn't sure her dessert had jelled; and what she did on her weekend off. Lily didn't even have to answer if she didn't want to.

Today she just listened, and found herself feeling better. After her bath, Sarah brought her some rice pudding and combed her hair, trying to be careful not to pull at the curls in snarls but to work them free, gradually. Lily sat at the little table and chairs in her room to eat her pudding, and Sarah sat on the edge of the bed. She read one of Lily's favorite poems beginning very formally with the title: "Lines and Squares" by A. A. Mil-ney. Milne, Lily corrected.

Lines and Squares

Whenever I walk in a London street
I'm ever so careful to watch my feet;
And I keep in the squares
And the masses of bears,
Who wait at the corners all ready to eat
The sillies who tread on the lines of the street,
Go back to their lairs,
And I say to them, "Bears,
Just look how I'm walking in all of the squares!"

And the little bears growl to each other, "He's mine,
As soon as he's silly and steps on a line."
And some of the bigger bears try to pretend
That they came round the corner to look for a friend:
And they try to pretend that nobody cares
Whether you walk on the lines or squares.
But only the sillies believe their talk;
It's ever so 'portant how you walk.
And it's ever so jolly to call out, "Bears,
Just watch me walking in all the squares.!"

Lily heard her daddy open the front door below. Somehow she waited until he came upstairs and walked past her room before she asked him if Uncle Bob was all right. Her daddy said he would feel better in a day or two, but that she was in trouble for being gone all day and worrying them.

"I know," Lily said. "I have to get a switch."

"Hurry it, then," he said shortly. Lily was feeling better; she felt a lie coming on.

"I couldn't come home," she said. "I was kidnapped."

"What?"

"I was kidnapped. A man in a car stopped and made me go with him."

"What?" again.

"He pulled me in the car to make me go with him, and he pulled down my panties."

"Lily!" her daddy was at her feet, squatting in front of her. "Lily," he said again. "Really? Really and truly?"

"Oh, yes," said Lily. "He stopped the car on Mt. Airy Avenue and made me get in. He had no clothes on, and he tried to make me take mine off."

"Just a minute," said her daddy. He hurried to the landing and called her mother. Sarah, on the bed, had closed the book and turned her face to the side. She chewed her lip and closed one eye. Her mother ran into the room, her eyes wide.

"What did she say?" she asked, looking first at Lily's daddy then at Lily.

"I said a man in a car kidnapped me," Lily said. She felt new energy in her legs and arms, and she wasn't hungry since she ate the rice pudding. "He had hairy arms and--and a gun." she finished.

"Where did he take you?" asked her daddy.

"I don't know," Lily said. "I kicked the door open and escaped. Then I walked and walked until I got back here."

Sarah got up from the bed and replaced the book on the shelf. She picked up Lily's empty dish, and without looking at her, she moved silently out of the room. Her daddy and mother were whispering. Her mother called Sarah back.

"Did she tell you all this?" she asked.

"No'm," said Sarah, from the doorway. "Nary a word."

Lily went to lie down on her bed. Her parents sat down, one on each side, and began to grill her with a question apiece, one right after the other like policemen and gangsters in the movies. By the time they were through, Lily couldn't remember what she had told them. It must have been good, though, for her mother kissed her on the cheek and patted her gently on the shoulder.

"We'd better call the police," she said to Lily's daddy. "You rest, dear," she said to Lily.

In a few minutes, Lily was called to come downstairs. She'd seen the police car pull up in front; its light lit up the gray dusk, making it rosy. Sarah came into her room. "Let's get your bathrobe," she said. As she fastened the tie, she spoke softly, "Don't you go makin' a mess down there, you hear? You knows what I mean."

"You don't think it's true," Lily said, sticking out her bottom lip.

"Lord, chile, I never know what to think about you," Sarah said.

"You don't like me," Lily said.

"It isn't that," Sarah began, making a part in the curls with a comb. A voice from below hurried them, and Lily started downstairs to talk to the policeman while Sarah climbed one more flight to her room on the third floor. The rain promised by the heavy dew earlier in the morning began to drip gently on the leaves. Lily knew her willow would spread its branches so they could drink it in, and the fronds would curl along the ground. The moss would swell up in little mounds, opening up to the rain like hungry birds in a nest, and if the rain kept up, the streamlet would gargle. A sudden gust of cooler air wrapped around the stairway from the open windows below and met Lily halfway down. She wished she could remember what she had told her parents; she wanted to tell the policeman the same story.

"This is Officer Hughes," said her mother. "Officer, this is Lily, our daughter." Lily looked at him where he sat on the footstool. He had black hair; a piece of it hung over his forehead as if he had been hurrying in the wind. He had thin arms, with hair on his fingers, but the rest of him overflowed the hassock like batter out of a waffle iron. She didn't like him. He wrote on a tin covered pad with a pencil attached by a dirty string. He wet it in his mouth and held it up, ready to begin.

"Tell me what happened," he said, looking at his paper.

"Don't be afraid, honey," said her mother. Lily felt confused at her tone and the "honey." She must have told them a whopper.

"Well," she began, "I was skating on Mt. Airy Avenue."

"Where she's not supposed to be," said her mother.

"She goes all over," said her daddy.

Officer Hughes looked at them both and drew in a long breath. He closed his eyes. "Let her tell it, please m'am," he said to her mother.

"Well," Lily began again, "I was skating on Mt. Airy Avenue when this car pulled up beside me and a man with no clothes on and a hook for a hand or maybe a glove opened the door and pulled me inside to kidnap me.

"He had no hand?" asked her daddy, raising his eyebrows.

"And no hair. He said he had mange," Lily said. She was perspiring and was almost too tired again to make up lies.

"You didn't tell us that part," her mother said. Upstairs, Lily thought she heard a door close, but she wasn't sure.

"Well, he did," Lily added, hoping she was finished.

"And?" said Officer Hughes.

"He made me kiss him two hundred times and hit me hard with his stump if I stopped or didn't do it right. His tallywhacker was out, and I had to hold on to it. I broke it off," she said, "so I could get away. He rubbed mange

from his head onto his finger and made me eat it so I'd get it too, and he spit water in my mouth and ears, cool water because I was thirsty. He said I could never go home again, and no one would miss me. He said I would have to stay and be his little girl, but I kicked the door open and rolled all the way down Mt. Airy hill before he could shoot me."

"Without your clothes?" said her mother quietly. "I thought you said he tried to take your clothes."

"He did. I fell out of the car without anything on but he threw them out the window at me before he drove away, so I crawled up the hill and got them and got dressed again."

"Anyone see all this?" asked Officer Hughes, closing his pad and running the pencil through the top.

"I . . " Lily began.

"Lily" said her daddy, sounding tired, "are you telling the truth?"

"Or," said her mother, "did you just want to get out of a whipping?"

"May I have a drink?" asked Lily. Her daddy rose and took her by the shoulder into the kitchen. He got a glass from the cupboard, one of the old jelly ones she used outside if she had a doll picnic, and filled it full. Some of the water sloshed out as he handed it to her.

"Don't spill it," he said. She swallowed a small sip; the water was warm. Instantly, she felt a cry coming on. She wanted to throw herself against her daddy, to hug him hard, to have him pick her up and carry her upstairs to her

room even though she was too big, and tuck her in next to Curly. She wanted to listen to her little red radio and sing songs with him before she said her prayers for Uncle Bob and everybody. Instead, after another sip, they went back to the living room, where her mother waited with a willow whip under her arm. Officer Hughes had gone.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

The poems quoted in Lily: Her Stories are reprinted here in the order in which they appear in the text.

1: Her Father--page 2

Field, Eugene. "Little Boy Blue." Anthology of American Poetry. George Gesner, ed. New York: Crown, 1983. 457.

Little Boy Blue

The little toy dog is covered with dust
But sturdy and staunch he stands;
The little toy soldier is red with rust
And his musket molds in his hands.
Time was when the little toy dog was new
And the soldier was passing fair,
And that was the time our Little Boy Blue
Kissed them and put them there.

"Now don't you go til I come," he said.
"And don't you make any noise!"
So toddling off to his trundle bed
He dreamed of the pretty toys.
And while he was dreaming, an angel song
Awakened our Little Boy Blue,--
Oh, the years are many, the years are long,
But the little toy friends are true.

Ay, faithful to Little Boy Blue they stand.
Each in the same old place.
Awaiting the touch of a little hand,
The smile of a little face.
And they wonder, as waiting the long years through,
In the dust of that little chair,
What has become of our Little Boy Blue
Since he kissed them and put them there.

2: Her Mother--pages 38 and 44

Milne, A. A. "The Four Friends." When We Were Very Young. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1924. 12-13.

The Four Friends

Leonard was an elephant, a great big fellow,
Leonard was a lion with a six-foot tail,
George was a goat, and his beard was yellow,
And James was a very small snail.

Leonard has a stall, and a great big strong one,
Earnest had a manger, and its walls were thick,
George found a pen, but I think it was the wrong one,
And James sat down on a brick.

Ernest started trumpeting, and cracked his manger,
Leonard started roaring, and shivered his stall,
James gave the huffle of a snail in danger
And nobody heard him at all.

Ernest started trumpeting and raised such a rumpus,
Leonard started roaring and trying to kick,
James went a journey with the goat's new compass
And reached the end of his brick.

Ernest was an elephant and very well-intentioned,
Leonard was a lion with a brave new tail,
George was a goat, as I think I have mentioned,
But James was only a snail.

3: Her World--page 74

Milne, A. A. "Lines and Squares." When We Were Very Young. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1924. 14-15.

Milne's poem, "Lines and Squares" is printed in its entirety on page 74.

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