

UNFURLING LILY

Liesl Wilke

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For Jeff, who reminds me to live in color

## ONE

Homework: Define the following:

1. A really bad day
2. The last thing you want to hear on a Friday
3. Home (Compare and contrast 'where you are *from*')

On a foggy morning in mid-December, Lily Sweetwater found herself grading homework papers for her son's geography class. The teachers at his school were, as all public school teachers are, underpaid and overworked. Housewives, being used to the ultimate in low wages, could often be counted on to chip in. Lily was the kind of mother you could count on, a homemaker who herself had no sense of home.

She was raised in North Carolina, but liked to pretend that she was not *of* the South; that she had escaped everything wrong about her past by marrying a nice Jewish doctor from Seattle and by limiting her visits back east to those her son demanded. Lily and David agreed, ostensibly, that Matthew was entitled to see his grandmother. Lily hoped that he might not know how she really felt about her mother if she arranged these visits on a regular basis, but he was old enough now to know plenty. And there was Peri, Lily's sister, who Lily missed like a child of her own. When Lily moved across the country, Peri was the one thing she regretted leaving behind.

Lily hadn't made the trip to Carolina herself in years. Matthew had traveled by himself last summer, and before that, Lily had convinced Peri and her husband to come to Seattle for a visit. They went to Pike Place Market and ate salmon and rode bikes all over town and Peri said, "Lily, you know Mama's getting old," and Lily just nodded and smiled. Perhaps it was because she had no plans to return any time soon that home came to her.

Lily's mother, the inimitable Beverly Sweetwater, called from across the almost 3000 miles and when Lily saw the number displayed on her phone, her first thought was: *shit*. Mama only called during the day to make trouble. Otherwise, she called to talk to Matthew and for her son's sake, Lily pretended to welcome the call.

"Lily honey?" Beverly's voice was tight and high, like she'd had too way much iced tea.

Lily used to think her name was both words together: *Lilyboney*. She said, "Mama. What a nice surprise."

"Oh Lord, here we go again."

Lily began to doodle with her red pen, a felt tip, her favorite. She was generally unable to sit still when her mother called.

"Lily?"

"I'm here. What's up?"

"You're busy."

"You always say that as if you're surprised. I have a full, busy life, Mama."

"Well of course you do, Lily. Of course you do."

They both sighed in unison, which should have been funny, but they had long given up on accepting amusement from one another.

“How’s Matthew? David? The hospital? Are you painting?”

Lily pressed one hand to her temple. “Matthew’s great. David’s working hard. Hospital’s still standing and, yes, I still volunteer there.”

“And?”

“And what, Mama? You didn’t call me to talk about painting. You know I haven’t painted in years and so what? What’s the world need another painter for?”

“Well, I just don’t see how you could walk away from something you’re so talented at. It’s a shame, that’s all.”

Lily tapped her pen frantically now. “That’s never all.”

A low sort of whistle and another “well,” as in, *who taught you to be so cold?* “Lily, I have something to say to you.”

“Not the first time.”

“Jesus, child. This is not a Groucho Marx movie. Can’t you just listen? Don’t I deserve at least that much?”

Lily just wanted the call to end; discussing what either of them deserved never led to anything good. “Of course you do, Mama. Go ahead.”

Beverly had a unique, rhythmic way of clucking her tongue. Lily waited. When her mother started with the clucking, the only thing to do was to wait for her to finish walking in circles and working out whatever she was stewing on. Her little smacking sounds marked time, slower than the movement of sound across all those miles.

“Lily, I have a tumor. In my head. It looks like cauliflower, if you can imagine that. Cauliflower. Just about the only vegetable I don’t care for. I think it may be karmic. Truly.”

“Whoa.” Lily held out one hand like a traffic cop. Nothing stopped. The room tilted a few inches to one side and Lily clutched the desk. “Go back. The tumor. Go back to that.”

“Well, shoot, Lily honey. It’s a nasty one. You know I’ve been to all the right people. Dr. Garrison down at the Nalle Clinic, he got me right in, professional courtesy and all, plus I think he’s still hoping I’ll sleep with him. I don’t have the heart to tell him that was a different time. I mean, it’s not 1972 any more is it?”

“No, Mama, it’s not.”

“That was a rhetorical question, Lily honey.”

Lily slapped the hand that had been at her temple onto the desktop and sent the red pen flying onto the carpet, topless, leaving a red line in its wake. “Mama, quit with the Lily-honey. I mean Jesus Christ, I’ve asked you at least a thousand times.” As if naming her Lily Freesia Sweetwater wasn’t bad enough. Lily, unlike Peri (Periwinkle Jasmine Sweetwater), had never come to love her name, so like an off-brand perfume that she greedily took her husband’s surname when it was offered to her.

“I know you’re upset,” Beverly said in her soft, endearing voice.

“Yeah.”

“I’d like for you to come home.”

Lily stood and began straightening the desk, which was already tidy. “Well, okay. I’m sure I can do that at some point.”

“I need you to come now, honey.”

Lily did her version of the thing all people do to calm themselves without making a sound (in her case, a sort of rhythmic counting of her fingers) while she came up with an excuse that might just sound reasonable. “Mama, it’s a busy time here. We have Hanukkah coming up. You have Christmas. Mid-terms at school for Matthew, and Hebrew School. Why don’t we look at January?”

Beverly cleared her throat and tried again. This time, her voice was thinner and grainier. “Lily, I’m dying. This tumor is a serious one. I want to see you, and I’m not going to ask again. You call me when you’ve decided what you want to do. My head hurts.” She laughed. “That’s funny, isn’t it? Well, I think it is anyway. Good night.” Beverly began to hang up the phone.

“Mama,” Lily said with urgency she didn’t expect. “Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Eat your vegetables.”

“I always do. Except for cauliflower, I mean.”

“And sleep. You need to sleep.”

“I’ll be getting a great deal of rest when I’m dead.”

“Mama.”

“Sorry. It’s been a hell of a day. I cleaned out my office and had a goodbye party and the whole nine yards.”

Lily gasped audibly and wished she’d been quieter about it. Mama leaving work was a big fucking deal. Beverly Sweetwater was a Nurse Practitioner known all over Charlotte, North Carolina for her no-nonsense approach to women’s GYN issues. The affluent and the trailer park women alike appreciated her way of calming them, helping them talk about such private things as an itchy vagina or trouble inserting a diaphragm. (A good southern girl can’t even say the word vagina, much less talk about her own.) Beverly had broken through a lot of barriers and helped a lot of women. This was the one thing about her mother that Lily admired, truly and without bounds.

“I can’t imagine you not working.”

“Me neither. But I started to forget things. It’s just not right to keep on as if it’s all fine. I can’t do it. Can’t risk making a mistake and letting one of my ladies down. Can’t do it.”

“So how long have you known about this?”

Beverly chose not to answer.

“Does Peri know?”

“Of course Peri knows. She’s the one that’s been taking me to the clinic.”

*Of course Peri knows.* Peri, who’d be just slammed by all this. “Well why didn’t she tell me?”

“I asked her not to.”

“Wow. What an obedient child. If only both of your girls could be so manageable,” Lily spat.

“This is foolishness, Lily. I’ve had enough of your bitterness, so you just call me when you know what you want to do.” The phone slipped easily into dial tone and she was gone.

Lily returned the phone to its holster and wiped her hand on her sensible khaki pants. Her palm was sweaty; her fingers slightly numb from clutching the handset too tightly.

“Shit,” she said, and then far louder: “Shit, shit, shit.” She crumpled up someone’s class paper with one hand. The squeezing of it, the power to destroy, was something she needed.

Ruth Stern was not.

But up she scurried from the guest room. “Lily? Did you scream? What’s wrong?”

Lily called out, calm as she could: “Nothing, Ruth. Sorry about that. It’s fine.”

“Lily, what is going on?” She was at the office door now, in all her over-tanned, fresh-from-Florida, mother-in-law glory. Heavily jeweled hands on her narrow hips. Lipstick freshly applied in a shade of coral to match her silk twin set. Hair sprayed into submission and curled under at the ends for that bit of youthful, Jackie-O, ‘what, this old thing?’ flair.

Lily couldn’t look right at her. She reached for the pen on the floor. “It’s my mother. She’s sick. Cancer, it sounds like.”

Ruth fell deep into her Brooklyn accent. “Oh my God, Lily. That’s just terrible. Terrible. I am so sorry to hear this. Good God. She’s so *young*.”

Lily glanced up. Ruth held one hand splayed out on her leathery chest. One hand and four garish rings. “What can I do? Anything.” And now her hand moved out to one side, sweeping the room as if to underscore the graciousness of her offer.

Lily snapped the top back on the felt-tip. “I wrote on the rug,” she said in a small voice.

“I’ll get a towel.”

Ruth hurried back toward the kitchen.

Lily sat and waited for her. Of all people to tell first, her mother-in-law was the least nurturing of Lily’s small circle of friends and family, but she was there, as undeniable as the puddle of pink dye Lily’s pen left behind on the impractical cream-colored carpet.

Ruth was blotting at the stain with a damp towel when Lily heard Matthew’s bus sputtering up the hill. Her son, her real family, was about to walk in the door and she was terrified. Ruth looked safe in a way she never had. Lily could see that her hair was beginning to thin and she muttered Yiddish curses under her breath as she worked at the stain.

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Matthew, sweaty and almost thirteen and slipping away from her daily, stormed into the house, slamming the door behind him, throwing his backpack down on the floor, collapsing dramatically onto the couch.

“Long day?” Lily asked.

He shrugged. “Sort of.” He stood up quickly and stretched. He was as tall as Lily now and when his tie-dyed tee rode up she could see a downy line of new hair running from his belly down.

“Your bubbe is in the kitchen.”

His eyes lit up. “I almost forgot.” He was all light and air, a child again as he moved into the kitchen to receive his grandmother’s adoration.

She hugged him and made much of his longer hair and height. Lily listened but did not look. She found it difficult to accept the warmth between them when there was such distance between her and Ruth.

She picked up Matthew’s backpack. He had drawn all over it with a Sharpie. He was good. Dragons and skateboard logos and a snowboarder in mid-air came to life.

Lily kept the hard liquor in the cabinet next to the television. She and David generally drank only wine like all good northwest couples. They’d purchased a wine refrigerator and driven over the Pass to Washington wine country more than once. On these wine-tasting trips, Lily often drank a little too much and David would say, later, how different she seemed, how much fun he had, which meant, clearly, that ordinarily, she was no fun at all.

Lily fished out a bottle of vodka and swiftly disappeared into her bedroom. She turned on the shower but did not get in. She sat on the marble floor and tipped back the bottle. She spilled some vodka on her blouse and stared at the spread of the liquid. She poured a little more onto her chest, the vodka darkening the blue cotton fabric in the shape of a river flowing down to her navel.

She hadn’t ingested enough vodka to explain this behavior; not like her at all. She wore the blouse into the shower to wash away the evidence and as it darkened in the water, she thought of long days on warm Carolina beaches. Mama and blue crabs and sand dunes and beach spurs.

~

Lily warmed herself with a new sweater and the hairdryer. David made it home by seven. Lithe, dark, purposeful, he swept into the kitchen and the air became charged with energy and possibility. He had always been like this, always known his path. He'd known in college that they'd marry and move to the West Coast. She had loved his knowing and sureness; would never have guessed that he wasn't sure she'd say yes. He was dazzled by her pale beauty, the lilt of her North Carolina accent, the gift of artistic talent which, to a linear thinker like David, was a sort of magic.

"How was your day?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You don't want to know."

This meant that he'd failed to save one of the children. There were limits to what medicine could do for a child with cancer. For anyone with cancer, cauliflower or otherwise.

Ruth joined them. David kissed his mother, and she looked at Lily expectantly.

Lily sighed. "David, Mama called today with some bad news."

He relinquished the mail he'd begun to thumb through. "Oh? What is it?"

"Cancer. Brain. I can't quite tell how serious it is, but she asked me to come home."

David spread his hands out as if to wave her out of the house. "Well of course you have to go. Family is crucial for the patient. You'd be surprised what a difference it can make." He walked to Lily and put his arms around her. She stiffened. He sighed. He patted her back and let her be, stepping back to the mail. "Have you told Matthew?"

"Not yet."

"Are you ready?"

"Not really."

David nodded. Ruth excused herself. Lily called Matthew down from his room.

She found she could not look at either of them and keep herself together, so she talked down into her hands. "Mama's sick. She's asked me to come to Carolina as soon as possible."

"What kind of sick?" Matthew's voice was thin and high.

Lily frowned, without meaning to. It always caught her off guard the way Matthew cared about Beverly, with his whole heart open. He didn't know the damage she could do.

"Mom," he prodded.

"Sorry. Well, it's not good. They think it's a tumor, in her brain."

Matthew lay back on the couch and stared at the ceiling as if it held the answers to life's big mysteries. "Man."

Lily nodded. "So I should be there with her. Do you think you and Dad can manage without me?"

"Why can't I go?" Matthew asked.

Lily looked at David with frank desperation. David shrugged and Lily wanted to punch him. All of his charisma and medical knowledge were useless to her.

She put one hand on Matthew's. "I'll think about it, okay?"

He pulled his hand away.

"Matthew, I need to get there first and see how she is, what she needs. Then I'll call you guys and we'll see when you should come. Okay?"

"I know how you feel about her, Mom."

Lily's face warmed. "All that's my problem, Matthew. You know I don't like to talk about it, and that's for your own good too."

"Just be nice to her."

His words felt like a punch in the gut and it took a moment for Lily to find her voice again. "Be nice to her?" She stood, the southern inflection of her youth taking over her speech like a virus. "Don't talk to me like that, you hear? You have no right to accuse me. You know nothing."

Matthew seemed to fold up like he'd been hit in the stomach too, and then he stood, grabbed his backpack and stormed out of the room.

"He feels powerless," David said. "Why don't you let him go with you?"

Lily held her arms tightly. She didn't want him to know she was shaking. "I just can't."

He studied her. "Fine," he said. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

She didn't move and after a long few minutes of silence, he left her alone. She'd successfully alienated her entire family in less than fifteen minutes, and she thought, *damn her*. She felt ugly for the thought and stupid, because she didn't know exactly what she was angry about, and yet the anger lingered and festered.

Lily skipped dinner and hid out in the garage, furiously wrapping Hanukkah presents for Matthew. She fumbled in an old shoe box for her stash of cigarettes, though she knew they would blacken her lungs until they looked like sinister mushrooms. But hell, didn't you deserve to smoke a cigarette on the night you found out your mother was dying? Lily smiled ever so slightly at the thought that her mother would be furious if she knew Lily was smoking. Mama who used to smoke pot like it was a vitamin supplement.

Later, when Lily went back inside, she was droopy and guilty and queasy from the nicotine. She went to find Matthew but he had gone to bed already. She gently pushed open his door and crept through the darkness toward the low rush of his breathing. A bit of moonlight slipped through the blinds. His hair was lighter than his father's, his build the same. She could just make out the jungle scene on the wall behind his bed. He'd want to paint over it soon, she imagined. She had painted it as a surprise for his fifth birthday, a tangle of green leaves, a leopard, monkey, three snakes and a macaw, and he had been ecstatic. She still loved the mural, but her boy was growing up and out of the realm of painted monkeys. She bent and kissed his forehead, just as she had done nearly every night of his life.

She climbed into bed after midnight. When David turned over and reached for her shoulder, she flinched a little, not expecting his touch. It was dark in the room and he should have been asleep. But he kept his hand there, cupped around her shoulder joint.

"Lily, you okay?"

"Sure."

"Were you smoking?" Not as an accusation, exactly, more surprised.

"No. Yes. I do sometimes, in the garage."

"Oh."

"To clear my head."

"Oh. How often?"

"Not often. Sometimes I can't sleep. You never hear me get up. I'm very quiet."

"I guess you are." He paused. "I can't help if I don't know what you need, Lily. I had no idea you were struggling enough to need to smoke in the garage." As if she was accusing him of something.

"You're usually not home to help, honey. It's okay. I know you're busy. Someone's got to do good in the world, right?"

He withdrew his hand, turned on his back. "If you're being sarcastic, I don't need it. You know half the time I do no good at all. I just watch those kids decompose into nothing."

She bit her lip, mildly chastened by his mention of the children. "Look, I admire what you do, David, you know that. I'm just dreading this trip, and I only booked the ticket an hour ago."

"You really hate her that much?"

"What? God, no. I don't hate her." Her heart beat fast, in a panic, as if someone might have heard his accusation and not believed her denial. "There's a lot of history you don't know, David."

"But she's still your mother."

Lily sat up. Maybe she should have told him more, but she'd always worried he'd think less of her, by association. His idea of her, she thought, began in college, where she had remade herself into a nice sorority girl who provided sketches for the campus paper.

"Does Matthew know you smoke?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not. In light of today, of my job. Obviously, I don't need to tell you about lung cancer."

"Don't use that condescending tone with me, David. You don't have to go to medical school to know about lung cancer." She stood up beside the enormous bed. They had chosen it together nearly ten years before, both impressed by the softness of the leather headboard and the sturdy, hand-carved legs. "I don't want to fight. It's been a shitty day, David. My mother is dying. I smoked a fucking cigarette."

"Just tell me you won't let Matthew see you smoking. That's all I want."

"Should I take back the carton of Merits I bought for him last week?"

"Funny."

"Not everyone is as perfect as you are, David."

"Okay, enough. I realize you had a terrible evening, and I'm sorry. Come on. I've got an early morning. Enough."

Enough. Yes. Lily watched him turn his back to her and arrange his pillow, folded the way he liked it.

She left him alone to sleep and wandered back downstairs, past the gallery of photos of the three of them skiing, horseback riding, touring London, all during David's infrequent vacations. The house was hers. If she wanted to smoke, or paint the walls purple, who the hell was he to say a word? First it was med school, then residency, then the new children's hospital, each phase a new challenge they faced together, or so the story went. Lily supported him by running the house and giving Matthew enough attention that he wouldn't notice when his father didn't come home for dinner.

She *was* proud of David, shining among the other students and interns. A gifted young man, the old doctors said. And then he was made head of the Oncology Clinic, and a new phase of overwork ensued. All to prove that he was indeed ever so gifted, and so giving. Written up in *Seattle* magazine for his ceaseless efforts, devotion, and compassion.

They weren't wrong, the journalists. He had compassion. She cozied up on the couch under a cashmere blanket, a gift from Ruth for their tenth anniversary. Lily had compassion too, she hoped, staring out the picture window at the lights glimmering around the rim of Lake Sammamish, down the mountain from her stately home, a place of good fortune.

She refused to admit that she kept David at a distance by not telling him more about her childhood, both her mistakes and Beverly's. She told him just enough. That Beverly had once been too busy partying to parent; that they just couldn't get along; that it was better for everyone if they didn't try to pretend they were one big happy family. Which was exactly what Lily had been doing out in Seattle for nearly fifteen years. Pretending.

## TWO

Peri called early the next morning. Peri was so pure, so sad about Beverly, so excited that Lily was coming, all of it like a funhouse mirror highlighting Lily's ugliest thoughts. Peri was running on coffee, talking a mile a minute, as Beverly always said. She and Craig had had a fight about the baby they both wanted, eluding them for years now.

"It was my fault, but I just think it's stupid to act like this will definitely happen, you know?"

"I guess so." Lily began to compulsively flip magazine pages. She did not want to discuss Peri's infertility - the thought of her sadness and disappointment and Lily's powerlessness.

"We went last week to see the newest fertility guy in town - as if, just because he's new, he might know something secret and extraordinary, right - and he just shook his pointed head at us and said it doesn't happen for some people, no matter how much they want a baby. Especially after all the IVF we've done. You should have seen the sad, patronizing look on this guy's face. I wanted to smack him. So then Craig says this little project of his is just a decorative box for linens. Total bullshit. I saw the blueprints. TOY BOX in big block letters. Does he think I'm an idiot?"

Lily laughed. "No way. Not a chance of that. But he might wish it a little."

"No shit. You're hitting on it, Lil, and you don't even know it. He wants me to be more batty, stay home, pump out the kids, stop being such a pain in the ass. I want that too, sometimes. But . . ."

"But you've seen me do it and it doesn't look that great?" Go ahead, Lily thought, agree with me. I can take it.

"What? No. Your life is great. You're a great mom. You're always there for your family. Like a good southern girl, actually. The Junior League would be proud."

Lily's eyes glazed over a little, making the sharp edges of the kitchen counters and cabinets soft. Sure, she was always there for Matthew, but he needed her less and less. Matthew's friends brought him home from soccer, or he rode his bike, insistent on being on his own. He made his own snacks most afternoons, took showers alone, dressed alone, all marks of the self-sufficiency she wanted for him, tools for later, heading off to college, out into the bright, big world to do impressive things. She just never thought she'd find herself so alone when he was merely twelve. She thought she'd have a little more time to prepare herself, and to encourage David to cut back his hours, maybe, to go on trips and talk about foreign policy or gardening, whatever. Jesus, they didn't even have a Junior League in Seattle, did they?

"Lily?"

"I'm here. Just thinking. Listen, I hope you guys make up tonight. Open a bottle of wine." Lily thought of the vodka with a dulled sense of shame.

"Oh, we made up. On the basement stairs. I've got two parallel bruises on my back to show for it."

"Ouch."

Peri went on, completely unaware of her good fortune: "Yeah, but it was worth it. What else do I have to offer, right? A little snatch and a good salary."

Lily laughed, gave her flight information, traded goodbyes and professions of love. She glanced at a childhood photo of Peri, ostensibly happy. But Lily could not make sense of her sister's easy smile, not in that setting where so many memories haunted Lily. The tree was only twenty feet or so away from the old shed, the keeper of lost innocence, the place where Wayne betrayed them all. She could almost see the shed in the photo, along with Mama's hippie friends dancing in the sun in their tube tops and peasant skirts.

Lily asked herself again if perhaps she had imagined all of the craziness. She read an article once about children and impressionability and how in court it was important not to suggest the truth to a child because the child might latch on to it and make it real and once that happened, whatever truth the child knew beforehand would shrivel and turn to dust and fly away. She had been a child then, not quite a woman. Having refused to talk of these memories for so, so long, she did sometimes wonder if they were real.

### THREE

As Lily packed, Ruth was devoted and unusually kind. She had a second pot of coffee ready for mid-morning.

"I'm sorry I'll miss Hanukah," Lily said.

"Pish. Hanukah is nothing, Lily. When David was young, we made some latkes, had a family dinner, put out the candles, that's all. Just to keep him busy while the Gentiles were on their school break." She looked rather gently at Lily. "I know you like the decorations. But you'll do that with your mother this year."

Lily looked around at the house. Ruth was right, she did like the decorations. And not every Jewish family even used them. "I guess I'm more attached to the old Christmas traditions than I thought."

"Maybe so. But anyway, we'll make latkes tonight, have gifts, and you will get packed and ready for your trip. You'll need your energy, Lily, for your mother. You can't go there with no sleep. You keep that in mind."

Why did she always find something to scold Lily about? Lily would take a sleeping pill that night and sleep just fine. Her family doctor had given her the prescription, not David. He was not a fan of sleep aids and Lily didn't want to have the long conversation about addiction and the more esoteric points of pharmacology. She just wanted to sleep.

Ruth asked if Lily had heard about the danger of Tupperware in the microwave. Lily said yes, she said.

Ruth said, "Well, good. I know how you like to heat up your leftovers for lunch."

"Ruth, do you have everything you need? Towels, shampoo?"

"More than enough." She sniffed. "I should tell you, though, that you're wasting your money on those sheets of yours. Anything over 300-count is a scam."

"Ah," Lily said, picturing herself running out to buy some burlap for the guest bed. She prepared herself for a kitchen emptied of all plastic when she returned. But what was she to do? Ruth was generous to stay and help.

Lily packed, took her suitcase to the garage, her palms sweating around the leather grip, and placed it securely in the back of the car. She had one more gift to wrap for Matthew, a watercolor set. She let her fingers run across the small metallic tubes of paint, reading the lovely names to herself: Ochre, Cerulean, Madder, Crimson.

A lost world. Lily worked slavishly to bury memories of herself as an artist, of the joy she felt when she finished a drawing or a painting and she saw that it was good. She'd been told she had talent in grade school; won a prize for a drawing when she was fifteen, but she left for college determined to chart a traditional path for herself - the antithesis of her childhood.

She was a child psychology major, planning to become a counselor. But something had tugged at her as she thumbed through the course catalog, looking for an elective course. She thought, why not? She didn't have to end up like one of her mother's misfit friends. So it began, the long hours in studio, far less attention given to her hair, her nails broken from the work of building stretchers and stapling canvas, and the heat of the overhead lights and the smells of oil and sawdust. She had never known a smell so perfect, as if she was meant to be immersed in the grubby business of oils and turpentine and charcoal sketching pencils. All of it she peeled off like old skin once things went to hell in a handbasket. Her first real love, a painter (much older than Lily, and a secret), left her alone and pregnant. That he didn't know she was pregnant was of no help. No one knew. If she spoke of it, of what she had done, she feared the reality would destroy her. Keeping

secrets? Not so hard, she thought. She had no idea the damage she'd do to herself with mere silence, shame like acid in her soul.

David did not know that Lily found him an oasis in the desert she wandered after she left painting behind, that she had fallen for David because he had nothing to do with the flamboyant world of art, color, and longing. She didn't know that the artist in her was part of what charmed him. And indeed, why would he imagine any danger there?

David was smart and kind, calm yet sharply ambitious. He took her nice places, bought her gifts. She loved him, but she never told him what she left behind. Now, married nineteen years, she could not think how to tell him why she never painted anymore.

Mama had prodded over the years, and Peri, but Lily insisted the art was nothing, easily left behind. Wasn't her life now better than it would have been struggling to break into the New York art scene, paintings stacked up in a loft in SoHo where she worked, alone and slightly insane?

Enough. Matthew's paints were wrapped, done. Having mastered the art of filing away uncomfortable thoughts, Lily did just that. She returned to the house and shut the door behind her. David would be home early, and Matthew. They would eat salad and Ruth's latkes and pineapple cake and they would not talk about Lily's troubled relationship with her mother. They would hug her and tell her to have a safe trip and trust her to do what was needed and expected, to love her mother with as much grace and honesty as she could bear.

## FOUR

The flight was long, marking the distance like a gentle slap; a shaking of the shoulders. She watched for the first signs of Charlotte, North Carolina, the land of madras and golf pants so unnaturally green they make your teeth hurt. Lily did not miss the false friendliness of the country club set. She did not miss the lingering racial tension, fences never mended. But she found herself longing for the flat, tranquil landscape as the plane descended. The tremendous, jagged mountains of the Pacific Northwest were fundamentally different than the Charlotte piedmont. The southeastern green, grayed down somewhat because it was December, was dotted with little pine trees alongside wide lawns planted with magnolias and rhodies. She found beauty in the subtlety, accessibility in the scale of things.

People in Charlotte worked hard on their lawns. They had big, relatively flat pieces of land to work with. They had the pressure of Southern Living Magazine. They spent all day at the nursery, choosing new plants, and then back at home they pushed broadcast spreaders over their acres so that they would not have the chickweed problems of those white trash sort of people who just could not be made to take pride in their land.

Peri had been known to rant on the phone about her neighbors, the fat ones with the plastic porch furniture. They did not belong in Myers Park, a neighborhood of old, stately homes and dramatic deciduous trees that arched over the avenues, forming leafy tunnels in summer. The kids Lily had run with in high school lived in Myers Park. Their parents had huge kitchens with bright yellow walls, collectible porcelain hanging in attractive arrangements, dens of dark wood and austere striped upholstery. Nothing subtle about a Myers Park home. Yet there were always a few stragglers, passed down a house and not sure what to do with it.

The plane touched down on dry tarmac. The sun shone low but full and everything looked new. She could have been anywhere in the United States and not known the difference - just an airport and a jet-way and bags to carry. But when Lily saw Peri, she knew exactly where she was. Peri wore a gray suit, a pale blue blouse, tight like a tee shirt but of some fancy material, black heels and smooth, straight brown hair cut into a perfect wedge. Men in front of Lily turned to look at Peri from behind, after they passed. Peri stood with one hand on her hip and the phone to her ear looking perfectly comfortable conducting business in the corridor. A small black bag dangled from one arm. Peri looked terrific, hips a little wider maybe but she radiated athleticism and strength, as if she had not only survived their childhood but because of it grown tougher, impermeable to fear, open and full of light.

When she saw Lily, she folded up the little phone and began to rush forward, stopping just short of the security desk and wriggling her fingers impatiently. "Come on, already. I've been waiting forever."

Lily smiled though her hand ached from pulling the carry-on she had overstuffed. She moved a little faster. Peri pulled her into a tight embrace and rocked her side to side, repeating her name, Lily, Lily, Lily.

Lily wanted to drop her bags, cradle her sister, kiss her forehead, the kind of affection she so rarely used anymore, but she hesitated as was her sad habit and ended up sort of limp, thinking she was just a little shell-shocked by the intensity of Peri's hello.

Peri's voice was unusual, raspy. Lily had always admired her voice; the way men would call Peri back on the telephone just to hear her talk a bit more, even her opponents. Peri wiped her eyes. "I can't fucking believe you're here."

Lily winced and nodded toward the children passing by. "I'm here. I'm tired and smelly, but I'm here."

Peri rolled her eyes. Made a show of sniffing around Lily. "You're fine. You know, they have fragrance misters here now so everyone can drive into town smelling like a magnolia blossom."

"They do?"

"No. But I think it would go over here. Mama's not alone. People in Charlotte are truly obsessed with flowers."

"Yes. I guess they always were."

Peri took hold of Lily's bag and pulled it, seemingly without effort, toward the parking garage. "We just planted three new hydrangeas because the Carlsons added a rose garden and Craig will not be outdone."

"Well, good for him. Maybe you'll get your picture in the Living section someday."

Peri laughed. "Wouldn't that be grand? But no, not for me. I don't like for my clients to know where I live, nor their evil spouses. Better to keep a low profile."

Lily nodded. "I suppose that makes sense." David had refused an unlisted number. He said he would never have anything to hide from his patients. If parents of dying children became enraged and couldn't stop themselves from calling during dinner, so be it. It was the least he could do, he said. And Lily had vehemently agreed and told him what a good person he was, just in case he needed to hear it.

Lily appraised her sister. "You look good, Peri. Are you still playing tennis?"

"Racquetball. All the big lawyers play racquetball, Lily. And I've got a new supplement routine. Mama's started Craig and me on it. Lots of antioxidants, Omega-3's. You should try it."

"I hate taking pills. How many hours you work this week?"

"Well, this is no ordinary week, Lil. I didn't go in at all on Tuesday."

Lily nodded. Whatever it took to get Peri to work a more moderate week.

Peri was quiet as they crossed the parking lot and found her sleek black BMW convertible (whichever series was the fastest and most expensive). Like people and their dogs, the car and Peri were a perfect match. Peri heaved Lily's suitcase into the car. "Do you want to drive?"

"Not hardly. I'm a Volvo woman, a slave to suburbia. Wouldn't want me getting used to a sports car, Peri."

"No, certainly not." Peri turned suddenly and unusually quiet.

"Thanks for picking me up, Peri."

"Sure." A small, forced smile. "It's good to see you."

Lily took a moment to find the right words. She could not undo the lack of visits, nor expect Peri to understand that her proximity to their mother worked like two magnets, making it difficult for Lily to come to Charlotte even to see Peri. Her excuses seemed pathetic now.

"I'm sorry I'm not more, I don't know, chipper. I don't feel like I can just be happy to see you. The occasion seems too big, too wrong. Just don't think that I'm not happy to see you, because I am. Only I'm not happy, and I guess it shows."

"You're not happy at home? With David?"

"No. I am. Well, sometimes. What I meant was that I'm not happy about the circumstances of this visit. About Mama. Obviously."

"Obviously." Peri reached for Lily's hand and gave it a squeeze. "It's okay Lily, I'm sad and worried too."

Lily sat stiffly, as if having her hand touched had paralyzed her. What if she could no longer be the cozying, warm person she wanted to be with Peri? If Lily could not adequately express affection, Peri would feel less loved. They had established this truth over the years since Lily left home.

Lily was steadily chewing through the cuticles on every finger as they drove into Myers Park, where both Peri and her rigid, wealthy in-laws lived. Lily tried to focus on the houses, the road signs, the old neighborhood where she had not lived, but had spent most of her childhood, in the gracious homes of children from school, watching their perfect, well-groomed parents in awe. And Peri had actually married one of them, insisting that no, she did not worry that one day her mother-in-law would turn to her and say: You don't really belong here, now do you dear?

Peri took them down a bit of King's Road to see the stately old trees, majestic even without their leaves, and then they drove out Providence Road, farther south. As they neared the old neighborhood, Peri said, "Check out the new shopping center up here at Four Corners. Remember the farmer's market they used to have here? And the pumpkins? All gone now."

Lily watched in amazement as the full length of the new strip mall came into view, a Food Lion at the center and everything suburbanites need on either side: Liquor store, drug store, Hallmark cards, bank, florist. It was too bad about the pumpkin patch. Beverly had taken them every Halloween, without fail, one of few true traditions she and Peri shared with their mother. So many others holidays and rituals changed every year depending on Mama's sobriety, job, boyfriend or girlfriend, and her mood. Some years, she just was not in the mood to make a turkey. Felt bad about killing and flaying the bird, she said. They would have tofu and explore other cultures and wasn't that really what America was all about? Then the next year, they'd be eating meat again because Beverly had read something about kids and protein and having failed to get enough chick peas into the girls, had begun to purchase meat again.

Peri asked about Matthew and David. Lily said they were fine. She didn't say that Matthew was still angry and that David hardly kissed her goodbye.

Peri said, "Mama wants you stay with her at home, I guess."

Lily nodded. Home. Would it feel like home now? How old would Mama look? Lily worried that she might fail to hide her dismay if Beverly had changed as much as the neighborhood.

"What color's the house now?"

Peri laughed. "You'll see."

"Do you . . . do you think she's lonely?"

"Beverly Sweetwater? Not until this. She's a tough broad, right? Years without a man now, and I think she's kind of proud of it."

Lily couldn't imagine living in her house alone, but then again, she hadn't lived for all those years with the house full of misfit friends, life a constant party. She hadn't been left by her husband when her kids were young. Lily's father had a thing for blondes and folk bands and left with one when she was nine. Died soon after and they'd done just fine without him, Beverly always said.

Another world back then, Peri insisted, everything quite normal now. Maybe not a bread-and-butter house like Lily's. No one smoked pot on Lily's street, she was pretty sure. But if they did, what delicious gossip! The normal housewives, just like Ruth Stern, must have had a ball back then talking about that Sweetwater woman blasting Led Zeppelin songs in the middle of suburbia. And truth be told, there was something of a glint in Ruth's eyes now when she spoke of Beverly, just a hint of "bless that Lily's heart, her mother a circus freak and all."

Lily said, "It's good that you've been here with her."

"She misses you."

"Well, I'm here, come what may."

Peri paused at the end of their old street. "You'll behave, you hear me?"

“I will. Best as I can.” Strange to hear Peri scold her, she thought, but she’d only just begun to measure the changes around her.

## FIVE

For all its elegance, the imported car still kicked up gravel like a truck would as it pulled into Beverly's driveway. And there it was: Mama's house, the siding a gleaming turquoise blue, peacock showy against the white trim of the long porch. And the rhododendrons were enormous now. They had planted them together, Mama and Peri and Lily, one summer when it was oppressively humid. Mama had sent each girl to water the new transplants, taking turns, several times each day for five days in a row. And they were rewarded with explosions of purple and red each spring. Lily wished they were blooming now so she could confirm that the colors were as vivid as her memory.

Lights were on inside the house. Mama was home, waiting for them. They could have been pulling up on their bikes, pockets full of bubble gum from the stop-in market. But no, they were two women, Peri in a lawyerly suit and Lily long absent from this place.

Lily insisted on getting her own suitcase. Peri let her, but threw up her hands as if this was the final straw, though Lily could not recall having done anything to raise Peri's ire. Lily stopped at the edge of the walkway, a path of stepping stones which included several hand-made mosaics the girls had done. She stepped on her handprints and could see herself making the imprint, feeling the gritty cool of the cement on her hands and trying to shake the hair out of her face though it never would stay put, so slippery, always hanging down into things like cake batter and cement. Peri walked in front and did not stop. She had not forgotten these stones; she was here all the time.

Beverly came to the door before they made it up the front steps. Her face was older and pale, her middle softer, but her hair looked the same, wild, long curls pulled back in a clip that only little girls should use, the kind they sell at the drug store. It must be the wig, Lily thought. Peri said Mama had planned ahead and had a woman make the wig from her own hair, cut before it could become brittle and fall out in her thin hands. She didn't look brittle yet, she looked beautiful. She had a dishtowel draped over one arm and smiled with such genuineness that Lily thought and nearly believed that this was no more, and no less, than a happy reunion.

Beverly shrieked and clapped her hands together. "Oh, y'all are a sight for sore eyes. Get on up here, girls."

Peri went first, let Beverly squeeze the tar out of her and Lily braced herself for the same. She hauled her suitcase up the stairs and stopped in front of Beverly, who was still smiling. Lily tried to smile, too, but sadness and fear pulled at her until Beverly wrapped her up in the same big hug and Lily smelled her vanilla smell. It made sense to drop the suitcase and return the embrace. It made sense and she dropped the damn thing and closed her eyes and didn't want to be let go, not until she had herself under control and could be sure she wasn't going to cry.

Finally, Beverly let Lily step back, though she kept one hand on her eldest daughter's shoulder. "Let me look at you. Well, you're older, Lily-of-mine, but still just beautiful. A porcelain doll's face, isn't it, Peri?"

"Yes, she's a doll. But she smells funny."

"Peri." Lily pretended to mind, but jokes were welcome.

Peri stuck out her tongue. "Sorry. Are you feeding us, Mama?"

"Does a chicken lay golden eggs?"

"That's a goose."

She frowned. "True. Well, anyway, I only made lemony tuna. Needed something simple. Lily, I'm not sure what you like these days, but we can go over that later." She put one hand to her temple and pressed it there.

“You okay, Mama?” Lily let her concern bubble to the surface now. Wasn’t it time to ask, to see what she needed, to know?

“Just a headache. Par for the course, I’m afraid.”

Lily started to ask one of many questions, but Mama had set herself in motion and made it clear that they would not be talking about her physical ailments just yet. She spun into the kitchen and glasses clanked, the refrigerator slammed open and closed, and she began issuing orders. Peri looked at Lily and raised her eyebrows. At least there would be no uncomfortable silences like in Edith Wharton novels – women sitting with their hands folded in their laps and gazing pointedly at the floor. The Sweetwater house was not that kind of place, not any more. Once, when it was first built, they might have gone in for that sort of thing. But now, three generations later (and all men cleared from the venue), Beverly had Jimmy Buffet playing on the CD player stuffed into a corner of the pantry, the sound a little hollow as it made its way out of the closet.

Lily left her suitcase in the front hall and looked around quickly. Chintz sofas, bamboo end tables, an old steamer trunk as a coffee table, like some mismatched resort hotel’s cast-offs, but the effect was warm enough. Above the fireplace hung a painting, one of Lily’s. She stepped closer. Beverly had installed a small light above it so that the indigo sky of the landscape glowed. Lily knew the painting, but could hardly remember painting it. She won second place in the City ArtSmart Festival when she was fifteen with that painting. Beverly had taken it to work at her first nurse practitioner job and hung it above her desk. But at some point, she had moved it back home.

Peri turned back and poked at Lily’s belly. “Come on. You can admire your painting later.”

“I’m not. Stop it.”

“I saw you.” Peri stopped at the door to the kitchen and leaned on the doorframe, one hip jutting out. “Whatcha doing, Mama?”

“I’m making margaritas, as you might expect. Lily, why don’t you take your suitcase down to your room? It’s half-full of my sewing junk, but I piled all that to one side so you can settle in.” She tied an apron on over what she had always called her ‘work-dresses’, which were bargain frocks with little flowers all over them, nothing to swoon over, which was the point since they could get peed on or worse at any point during her days at work as a nurse practitioner.

“Thanks, Mama.” Lily hesitated. “But you shouldn’t be moving things around like that, should you? And what about the margaritas? Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Beverly threw her head back and chuckled. “No, it ain’t a good idea at-tall.” Why she said the ‘t’ twice no one had ever known. “Neither is exposing yourself to radiation, but that’s just what I’ve been doing for weeks now, isn’t it?” She turned and stared hard at Lily. “You think I haven’t managed all this time on my own?”

Lily stared back. “I’m sure you have.” And they stayed locked like that for a long few beats.

“Well, I just think you can wait to start bossing me around until you really understand what’s going on with me, and I told your sister the same thing, though she went and got on the Internet and can’t stop herself from bringing me articles.” Beverly sighed and clucked her tongue and motioned to Lily again. “Go on now, like I said.”

Lily moved, almost tripped over her own feet, as if Mama’s pantomimed shooing had actually created a draft of air and an undeniable force. She went back up to the front room for her suitcase and the wheels rolled across old oak floors to her room. She did not take the time to look around her room, not now. She didn’t want to be left out of what was said in the kitchen. The kitchen was now, as always, the place to be.

The kitchen wallpaper they hung when Lily was ten was still in good shape, creamy in the background with thin red stripes and vines of strawberries winding through them. Lily’s favorite color had been green, and Peri’s red, so they had settled on that paper as a compromise. And Beverly had not been bothered in the least that the countertop was robin’s egg blue Formica and the floor yellow and white linoleum squares. Not then, and not since. The strawberries still bloomed on the walls and the counters still shone from polishing

and the little flecks of silver embedded in the blue. Fairy dust, they had called it as girls. Now, it was tacky, but that was also irrelevant.

Lily stepped from the dark hall into the bright light of the kitchen. Beverly stood up tall and sniffed at the pitcher full of lime juice, tequila, triple sec and crushed ice. "My smeller isn't what it used to be." She stuck one finger in and sucked the juice off and smiled. "Ah, but the recipe's still in here." She tapped her head with the same damp finger.

Peri looked away and caught Lily's eye. She seemed angry somehow, at Mama, but it wasn't in her voice. "Want me to work on some food, Mama?"

"Well, how much time do you have?"

"Craig's not expecting me until later. I can eat. And Lily looks like she needs some food."

Beverly nodded knowingly. "She sure does. But you know, she's always been like that. Never really had a pudgy phase, and even when she was pregnant she didn't eat much."

"Hey, I'm in the room," Lily said.

Mama went on: "She was so frail then, with Matthew, and I kept sending her recipes and I tried to cook for her but she wouldn't have it. So stubborn."

Beverly handed Peri a full glass. The lime juice's sharp scent harkened to summer. Being December, they should have been drinking eggnog, but Mama was all about margaritas. Peri licked off the salt, thin and mild compared to restaurant-salted glasses, and tested the drink. Good, as always.

Beverly turned to Lily. "Your libation, my dear." Beverly handed her a glass with a flourish and a small curtsy.

"Thank you. But I'm not really in the mood. Thirsty from the flight, but for water, I think." She was still irritated at Beverly's description of her pregnancy.

Peri glared meaningfully at Lily, pouring on the guilt.

Beverly just stood there, holding an aqua-tinted margarita glass out at arms length until Lily could no longer handle the discomfort and took the damn glass from her.

"Delicious." Lily smiled a little, but her free arm was crossed over her belly, guarded in her usual way.

Beverly drank half her margarita in two gulps. "Come along, girls. Let's sit down in the alcove and get this talk over with."

They followed like young cows, heads hung. The alcove was set just off the kitchen with built-in bench seats along three sides and a perfectly square oak table in the center. The cushions had always been blue and white batik, for as long as Lily could remember anyway. One of them was darker, having been flipped over when a glass of red wine left its mark, while the others had faded in the sun. Tall, thin windows were black and ominous tonight, and the old fixture bled that sort of cold light that makes a person squint, seems to bend the air into little light-waves, radiating outward until they crash into the flatness of the walls. Peri held on tight to her drink and scooted in to the back of the bench, which had been Lily's seat, long ago.

Lily smirked. "That's my seat, you know."

"Not anymore. You have to occupy it now and again to keep the claim."

"Ha." Lily said this a little too loudly. "It doesn't matter. I'll sit here." But she believed that the other was still her seat. She had claimed it long before Peri was born.

"Girls, are you done bickering? Feels like old times."

Lily took two big sips from her drink. "It does, somehow. I'm surprised."

"Well, the oldest thing here is me, and I'm beginning to show my age, I'm afraid. Lily, I told you on the phone that the doctors found a tumor in my brain. Peri says it explains how I've been acting lately." She laughed into a snort and shook her head. "I think it's been there a long, long time. I've always had the oddest feeling of pressure inside me, unwelcome, you know, and I wonder if it all gathered in my brain."

Peri looked dumbstruck by her mother's jokes and Lily agreed. This was not at all funny. Once they looked at each other, their eyes rimmed red and tears pooled.

Beverly took one of each of their hands. "Now, girls, don't be so sad. You've had a few days to get used to the idea and you knew I wouldn't last forever. I have to tell you, I'm relieved. I've been forgetting small things, just spacing out, looking at charts I dictated and yet could not remember the patient's face, and that has never happened to me, no matter how busy I've ever been at work." She shook her head. "I've never wanted to live a shitty, pathetic life. Anyway, I'm done with work now, which is the worst part I have to say. But I couldn't be there half-assed, making mistakes. Who knows, if there's some kind of miracle, maybe I'll go back."

Lily's stomach pulled taut. It was hard to imagine Beverly as a housewife, even harder as a patient in some hospital. When she talked to her mother over the years, it was almost always about her week at work, or some conference she had just attended, or a new menopause treatment she was excited about. And all those years in this house, Beverly coming home with her white lab coat still on, the one with 'B. Sweetwater, RN/FNP' embroidered on the breast pocket. And all the stories she told, the women she helped. Lily had been proud of her for the first time in their lives, once Beverly finished the degree program and started practicing and, praise the Lord, stopped smoking pot. Lily was fifteen then and babysat for Peri every day after school. Peri grew up always knowing that her mother was a healer, while Lily had watched, anxious and skeptical, as Mama walked out of the days of hashish haze and into her lab coat.

Peri shook her head against the words. "I can't imagine you not being a nurse practitioner, Mama."

"Me neither." Lily cleared her throat. "I haven't been around much. I won't apologize; that's just what I needed to do, to get away from here. But I will be here for you, Mama. What ever you need. I want to be here."

Beverly let go their hands and held hers over her face and wept. She had never liked for the girls to see her cry and now it clearly alarmed Peri. "Mama, please. It's okay."

She held out one hand to shush Peri. "It's better than okay. Thank you, Lily." She blew her nose on an embroidered hankie and fished out a piece of paper from a stack of mail and junk on the empty chair. "Here's the worst of it. Won't mean much to you, but I'll translate. It's a Glioblastoma Multiforma. Usually gets the men, but not always, obviously. I have weeks or months, not years. I'm doing the radiation, but it will only buy me some time they tell me, and I insisted Katz tell me straight, no bullshit, what my chances were. Well, these bastards are serious, unforgiving."

Peri tried so hard not to cry, but tears rolled quietly down her cheeks. Even Lily was shaking, holding herself with her arms, looking down at the paper. Glioblastoma. Grade IV. Prognosis: Terminal. The words swam a little on the page as Lily finished her drink, for better or worse. "How can they grade the things, as if it's some kind of achievement to grow so big? I don't get it."

Peri half-laughed. "It's sick, isn't it? Doctors have to label everything, create their own little language so we won't understand it."

"You girls sound a bit paranoid."

"Well shouldn't you be, too?" Peri sat up, ready to lecture. "I've been on the Internet every night reading about all kinds of brain tumors and the different treatment options and alternative medicine and studies at Johns Hopkins. We have to go over all this material, Mama. And I want to talk about why you're only doing radiation, and how many weeks?"

Beverly had a way of closing up her face and pursing her lips that said she was now closed for business. "Not tonight, honey. I've read all I need and more, you should know that. And I have good doctors. We're done with this for tonight, you hear? I want to enjoy having my two girls here at long last, just the three of us. We'll talk about girl stuff. It'll be great fun." She slid out of the banquette, fluffed the pillow she had leaned heavily on, and went into the kitchen.

They heard her banging pots and pans around, filling one with water, for the egg noodles. Mama had made lemony tuna since they were small. Some kind of depression-era recipe her grandma gave her, pure comfort food and not a bit of green in the whole thing.

Lily said, "Peri, do you actually eat lemony tuna anywhere else but here?"

"Only here. It doesn't seem right to make it for myself, plus I don't think Craig would eat it."

"Does she still braid your hair for you and cut up your meat?"

"No. Don't be nasty."

"I'm going to need another margarita." Lily stood and folded up the paper.

"Here, I'll put that away. Don't think we need to read it more than once." Peri sniffled and wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

Lily reached across the table for a napkin for Peri. "That's gross, you know."

"I know."

Lily made it into the kitchen first. "Can I help, Mama?"

Beverly was not there, though water boiled and sauce simmered. Little bits of tuna floated in the milk, thickened already with flour and seasoned with black pepper and lemon juice. Lily stirred the sauce. She and Peri waited in silence for Beverly to return, to rescue them from their thoughts.

Peri gave words to her frown. "Where is she?"

"I don't know." Lily's eyes were wide, as if they might have lost their mother at the zoo and were now just standing there, useless.

Peri walked softly down the hall to Beverly's room. Lily followed. They found her sitting at her dressing table, brushing her hair, as if it were real hair that needed to be brushed to stay healthy. Peri put one hand on Mama's shoulder. "Do you want to put on your cap, Mama?"

She looked up at Peri, confused. Her eyes were younger, oddly bright, but her face was old. "No. No, I'll keep my hair on. I don't like the look of my scalp and those red patches." She shuddered and then quickly composed herself. "Oh dear, there's dinner on the stove, isn't there? I forgot for a minute."

"We'll finish it, Mama, but come with us. We all need to eat."

"Yes we do." Her blue eyes sharpened and she was whole and with them again. She walked them back to the kitchen with one child on each arm. "Shall we use the apple dishes, Lily's favorites?"

"Sure," said Lily. "I'll set the table and you and Peri can dish up the food."

Lily found the Franciscan Ware dishes in the breakfront and took out three plates and three bowls, because the bowls were pretty on the table, even if they did not use them. Her fingers traced the raised pattern of the apple vine, the deep green of the leaves and the rose of the apples. Yes, she still loved these dishes. Someone had lovingly painted each leaf, each fruit, until no plate was quite the same as another. How often in the age of mass-production were the oddities of handiwork appreciated? Not nearly enough, she thought.

She added silverware and Mama's crocheted-edge napkins which were, somehow, still white. Lily had never been able to wield a container of bleach in the same way as Beverly, who could get stains out of anything. Lily had taken to tan and brown linens because they hid spots so nicely, but the white napkins here, on this dark night, were so luminous as to feel redemptive. She drank another half of her second margarita and began to think of it as juice, friendly juice which she would keep with her, her new pal.

Peri brought in three bowls full of noodles with the sauce already distributed on top in the proper proportions. She had sprinkled them with paprika, trying to class up the dish, which just wasn't possible.

Lily took her rightful seat this time and glared at Peri, who gave up and sat on the other side, facing the dark dining room. Lily said quietly, "I can't believe you still eat this stuff."

Peri rolled her eyes. "It's better than it looks, you've just forgotten. Too much fucking sushi, Lily. It's a good thing you came home."

Lily smiled. Her brash sister would have to clean up her mouth if she got pregnant, lest her children march up to their preschool teachers and blurt out: “fuck” while holding up a torn bit of paper. Lily took some pride in having steered Matthew clear of profanity. Sure, he heard it all at school or in the movies, but not from her. “Are you aware that you say fuck once every five minutes?”

“Lily!” Came Beverly’s admonishment, either real or thrilled to hear Lily use such a colorful word.

“Mama, I’m just saying. You can’t run around saying shit and fuck all the time with a young family. The kids pick up everything you say.”

Mama replied from the kitchen. “Well now, I suppose that’s true. I used to sing Helen Reddy for you girls at night, and you’d sing ‘I am woman, hear me roar’ to your teachers and nearly start a union uprising. Still, I believe they enjoyed it.”

Peri shook her head. “Well, I ain’t pregnant yet, is I? No need to change my God-damn nasty ways.”

They all laughed. Lily took a bite of the infamous Lemony Tuna. Tangy. Warm. Not bad, really, and now suddenly she was hungry. Earlier, as she saw her mother crying, looking suddenly twenty years too old, Lily had lost her appetite and not expected it to return; as if she were the cancer patient.

Beverly sat down with them and smiled at the family scene before her.

“Did we really sing that song to our teachers?” Lily asked, imagining herself singing, unbidden, in a room full of children.

“Yes, Ma’am. And Peri would say something like ‘mumblers too big to adore’ which was all the more precious.”

They laughed, as usual, at Peri’s antics, then as well as now. She stuck her tongue out at Lily, poured them two more margaritas and Lily did not argue. Lemons in her tuna, limes in her drink, a tropical panorama for the senses. Lily pictured a Latin woman with fruit on her head. She might be that woman by the end of the night

“This is good, Mama. Thank you for cooking.”

“I’ll always cook for you, Lily. You’re my child. Always. Course I had to get cancer to drag you home.”

“Mama . . .” So much for playing nice, Lily thought.

“No, don’t say anything. I’m just being snippy. I just missed you, Lily. That’s all.”

Lily nodded and let it go. She dug into her dinner, letting the slippery noodles dance on her tongue and imagining that if she did not chew them, they would swim down her throat like little egg eels.

Peri was eating at a frenetic pace, which meant she was uncomfortable. She motioned to Beverly. “Mama, tell Lily the jam story. It’s so funny.”

“The jam story?” Lily asked.

“It’s just what we need tonight,” said Peri.

Beverly smiled. “Okay, then. It was a doozy, that’s for sure.” She wiped her mouth carefully and sat up taller, light in her eyes now, a laugh. “Just a few months ago this young thing came in to see me at the Health Department. I work there one day a week doing women’s health stuff, whatever they need. Anyway, this girl is all blue eye shadow and a miniskirt and cracking her gum a mile a minute while I look over her chart. I do her exam and everything looks basically fine, though she complains of an O&I that comes and goes. That’s an odor and itch. So I ask her about any changes in birth control and nothing comes up and I can’t find anything wrong with her except maybe a reaction to her spermicidal jelly, so we’re talking about that a little. She has a diaphragm, you see, but she’s a little slow so I try to explain everything clearly as I can. She nods and smiles like a prom queen and then just as she’s on her way out she stops and asks me if I recommend the grape or the apricot jelly because she finds the little bits of apricot ‘kind of icky.’”

Lily spat out a laugh and as little food as possible. “Kind of icky?”

Beverly nodded. “Yes’m. So, I check the chart again and thankfully I wasn’t the one who fit her for the diaphragm and failed to explain the jelly well enough. It was all I could do to keep a straight face. But I’m

proud. I did it. I explained about sugar and yeast and vaginal irritation like I was a talking textbook and I gave her a sample of the right stuff and sent her on her way. Still, I think we should all pray for her. She's an accident waiting to happen."

Peri shook her head. "Dumb little biddy would probably abort it."

"Peri." Mama's voice held surprise and disapproval.

"Sorry. I'm just a little bitter. It seems like if you're thirteen you can get pregnant from rubbing elbows, but not me. Not me."

"It won't help to feel sorry for yourself, honey. Trust me."

And she held the floor with that one. Mama had the relevant experience, the dramatic misfortune and the means to shut up even Peri.

Peri held up her hands in surrender. "Fine. But I think you should have sent her back for the pepper jelly. That would have been funny."

And with great seriousness, Beverly leaned forward and said "Oh, no, Periwinkle. Pepper jelly would burn and numb the perineum and dampen her pleasure, to say the least."

"I know."

Beverly mimicked Peri, rolling her eyes. "I know, Mama. I know everything."

"I know more than you, that's for sure. I'm a lawyer."

They all three laughed now, easily, at the expense of the jam girl and each other and then they wiped their eyes and gasped and drank some more. It was, in the end, a fine and welcome story.

Beverly had eaten very little, but she sat back in her chair and pushed her plate forward. "So, Lily, tell us what's new in your life?"

"Well, not too much. Matthew's soccer team was all-conference this year, so we're all over the state every weekend for games and practices. He's also into skateboarding. David is up for a big award for some genome research he's been doing on the side, as if he has extra time for that."

"And you?" Beverly asked.

"I'm great." Lily made direct eye contact, which was important when one was trying to convince Mama of something, or to get her to back off. "I still really enjoy being available for Matthew when he needs me. I'm taking a cooking class about olive oil and Mediterranean ingredients. It's challenging." She felt a sort of spinning, sinking feeling as she spoke her usual words here, to her ill mother and loving sister, the two people in the world least likely to believe her bullshit.

Beverly nodded but said nothing; a small favor.

Lily turned to Peri. "So how's work going these days?"

Peri stirred her noodles. "Not bad, I guess. I should be a partner soon."

"You don't sound too thrilled about that, Peri. I thought it was your big goal."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"No. I'm serious. What's there to be sarcastic about?"

Peri sighed. "Shit. I don't know. I mean, with lawyers, there's no shortage of sarcasm, but that's not what we're talking about. I used to think all I wanted was to make partner, but the closer I get, the more I wonder if it will be enough. It's probably just that weird thing that happens when you approach a goal and can already feel the anticlimactic phase afterwards."

Lily nodded, as if she understood. But there hadn't been much in the way of goals, nor climax, for Lily in the past years. She had taught Matthew to read before first grade. That was something she was proud of. She was the PTA president one year. But that was just work, too many telephone calls and the perkier of all the other mothers, crammed into conference rooms with the best of intentions, except for Anna-Marie, who was nothing more than a stone, cold bitch in designer shoes.

Beverly reached for Peri's hand. "Maybe it's time for a change."

Lily found it difficult to listen to Beverly's suggestion. Wasn't she being a bit cavalier? Peri was a born lawyer with a hard-fought advanced degree, not the sort of thing you just walk away from. Lily said, "No, Peri, I disagree. You're just in a little slump. Think how long you've worked for this. You'll get the big office, right? And your choice of clients?"

Peri nodded and continued to move noodles around on her plate. "I have my choice of clients now. Whatever good it does them."

Beverly cleared her throat and got up. "I'm going to take me a bath, girls, while you visit. You can tuck me in later."

"Sure, Mama. I'll get the dishes," Lily offered.

"Thank you, Lily, that would be nice."

And Lily felt that sort of glow and pride at having done something to please her mother. She would enjoy cleaning up later, making the kitchen neat and tidy, doing her part. But for now, Peri was still playing with her food. "Wait, so now you're doing no good at all for your clients?"

"No. I'm exaggerating. I don't know what's wrong with me. There's only one client I'm struggling with, really."

Lily lowered her voice. "I do know what's wrong with you. Your mother is sick and it's going to affect you, every day. Ya'll are so close, there's no way it won't affect you." Lily could see Peri afloat alone on a warm ocean, drifting, with no Mama to reel her in, wrap her up in a dry towel, listen to her stories. Peri was the kind of person who came alive around other people.

Peri pointed at Lily with her fork. "You said ya'll."

"So."

"I'm just saying. Some things around here are contagious. I bet by tomorrow you'll be back in love with the Bev. Mark my words." Peri checked to be sure their conversation was not heard, but the sound of the shower running could be heard down the long hall.

Lily smirked. "You said 'mark my words.'"

"So?"

"So, that's what Mama says when she's mad."

"Hey, I never claimed not to be like her."

"Okay, but are you wearing underwear?"

Peri looked down, pretending contrition. "No."

"Oh, lord. This is bad. She has completely corrupted you, Peri." Lily covered her face with her hands.

"Actually, Craig likes it."

"Ah."

"Do you really think it's weird?"

Lily looked past her sister, into the quiet kitchen. "No, not really."

In fact, it was sexy. Something Lily didn't do: Sexy. Her armpits would sweat just thinking about it. She reflected that one nice thing about David was how gentle and quiet he was about sex, not expecting her to contort herself or try new orifices or anything. She just couldn't do all that. And if he found her refusal to go without panties disappointing, he had never said as much.

"I think Mama's going to have to come live with us," Peri said.

Lily's attention swiftly left the sexual realm behind. Back to Mama, the one they should be thinking about. Lily naively hadn't thought of where Mama would stay, if things did indeed get worse quickly, but of course Peri was right. "Is Craig okay with that?"

"Sure. He thinks she's a kick."

Lily stood to clear the table. "Well, that she is." She turned on the water in the old sink. The grout needed repair, but what would be the point? Some other family would take over this place after nearly 100

years of Sweetwaters. Lily looked around the kitchen as if she were taking snapshots, could already see them tucked into an album. The old house. She would show Matthew's children one day and tell them about the good parts of an old house in the once-rural country outside of Charlotte, North Carolina.

"Peri?"

Peri closed the refrigerator, a mustard-colored Sears relic, still cold somehow, and came to stand with Lily by the sink.

"I need to bring Matthew out, don't I?"

Peri's eyes began to tear up. "Shit. Yes. We can't be sure how long we have."

"No, we can't." Lily put her arms around Peri and held her tight. Her hands were wet from the dishes and she worried they would be cold, but Peri tucked in and a few moments later, her crying settled. It was a great relief to Lily that she was still able to comfort Peri. Phone conversations, in which Lily was more real than any other time in her daily life, still weren't quite enough to convince her that she remained the adored big sister, and that Peri would tell her if she needed more than Lily offered.

Mama's strength had never been more apparent than now, planning ahead for everything and so calmly explaining to her daughters that she would soon die. The next day would be hard work, but they would continue the process of preparation for Beverly, with Beverly. So organized it baffled Lily. Wasn't this the time in Mama's life to say 'fuck it' and get stoned? Not when she had young children to protect. But no, now her Mama was the picture of organized death management. Damn impressive, really.

## SIX

The house was unnervingly quiet once Jimmy Buffet finished his set. Lily called back home to Seattle and talked to Matthew. He said he was fine and Lily promised that she'd arrange for him to come in the next couple days, that she'd set it up with David, which seemed to make Matthew happy. Peri got on and they discussed a new band Matthew was really in to, something about a peacock and Matthew promised to send Peri a copy of the new CD. Their relationship, kept alive solely by phone for many years, was nevertheless quite extraordinary and Lily took a moment to appreciate Peri's youth, and youthful spirit. She thought perhaps she should try listening to Matthew's music more, or go without underwear, or buy a fucking BMW. Or just say fuck, every now and then. See what happens. See if she could get her eyes to sparkle like Peri's.

Peri suggested that they watch a movie in the den, like old times. They sat on the old sofa and ate ice cream with Kahlua drizzled otop. Lily spilled a little and it wiped right off as if the fabric was newly treated for stains. The old naugahide was scratchy but tough as nails, imbedded with flowers in colors like mustard and rust and olive green. There was once a deep shag carpet with the exact same colors in this room. Lily had rolled there with Buck Sweeney as a junior in high school, back when kids used to kiss for hours, until their lips were swollen and tingly. Peri was ten then, sleeping with a Barbie doll, far too young to think of grinding hips or satin underpants.

Lily looked over at Peri, finding her smile in the memory of her sister as a girl, pudgy and freckled. But Peri sat with her arms crossed, scowling at the television, and her foot was tapping nervously.

"Peri? What is it? Don't tell me – you have a brain tumor."

"That is so not funny."

"Sorry."

Peri rolled her eyes. "Listen, I know it's selfish of me, but I'm freaking out about the infertility. I can't stop thinking about it, rethinking, brooding."

Lily sighed. "I wish I could make it happen. And I don't blame you for thinking about it all the time. You've been working on this for, what, five years now?"

Peri nodded. "Five fucking years."

"Well, at least you've been fucking."

"Hmm. I guess so. Never thought about it that way."

Lily stared at Mama's fig trees out back, trees that always bore fruit. The girls had hated everything about the figs, though Beverly tried so hard to make them palatable.

"Did you really hate being pregnant? I mean, why didn't you guys have any more kids, really?"

"What?"

"Well, you always kind of said it would be difficult after Matthew's birth, but then I don't think I've ever asked you again."

This was not one of the topics Lily enjoyed discussing. "I . . . Shoot. You know, with Matthew it was hard because I was so sick and on bed rest, and David was so not helpful about all of that, that I thought I'd be crazy to do it again. Then years passed and we stopped talking about it, thank God." Lily laughed, sharply. "So I guess that means I don't think I would do it again. Strange, but I haven't thought about it for so long." Her body had tried so hard to reject Matthew. The doctors and their medicines won the battle, and he had been born just perfect. As if she deserved that. Any woman who has an abortion at nineteen should expect little. She was lucky to have gotten pregnant again at all, but Peri knew nothing of Lily's first child.

"Do you think I should give up?"

“I can’t answer that.”

“I just mean that if you wouldn’t have any more, does that mean that you, on some level, kind of wish you hadn’t had any?”

Was she serious? Good Lord. Lily’s arms crossed and pulled tightly against her chest. A silence fell between them, welcome, so that only the noise in her head required her attention. She loved Matthew. What a ridiculous question. Lily picked at a piece of lint on her pants, rolling it into a ball, talking herself out of panicking.

“I have never regretted having Matthew. Never. But it’s almost impossible to look at life the same way once you’ve already had a child. I can’t fully explain it, but its like I can’t imagine him not existing. He’s too real, too permanent, too important. But for you . . .” Peri’s life was good now. Lily had never said as much out loud, but she often thought Peri might regret leaving behind the world of business lunches and sleek wool suits. A child was just another person in the house to take care of, some days, not a new friend or a savior.

When Lily looked up again, Peri was staring at her, brow furrowed. “What are you not saying, Lily? Jesus, just tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“So, what if you never know what you’re missing? I mean, if you don’t have a child, you won’t ever know, and maybe you won’t feel this big hole. Maybe you’ll have a fabulous, transcontinental life with Craig and have lots of sex in fancy hotels.”

“Ha. It’s too late, Lily. I already feel the hole.”

“Ah. Okay.”

Peri shook her head. “I even thought about asking you if you’d consider surrogacy, but I know that’s crazy. You wouldn’t want to be pregnant again.”

Lily nearly choked on the suddenly thin air between them. “Peri, I’m nearly forty.” Lord, it would be so hard to say no to Peri if she really asked such a question. To refuse to do something that would make her sister happy, fix what was wrong. So damn hard to say no.

“I know. So I didn’t ask. I know better. It’s not the kind of thing you’d go for, anyway.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Fine.” Lily reached for their empty bowls. She stood to clear the dishes.

Peri stopped her from carrying them back inside by grabbing her forearm. “You always get busy with dishes when you’re mad. Just like Mama.”

Lily paused, looked at her sister, for a long moment as the rush of sharp anger passed. She saw the first lines at Peri’s eyes, the thinning of her brown hair, ever so slightly revealing the pink of her scalp. On the side of her jaw, Peri had scratched at a pimple and left a nasty welt. Lily wanted for a brief moment to take her in her arms again, as she had in the kitchen, to tell her to relax, to be happy, to feel loved. But her hands were full of sticky ice cream bowls now. Peri’s hand slipped from her arm easily and Lily stepped into the cool blue light of the kitchen, alone.

Peri sniffled a little and was quiet. Lily peered down the short hall at the back of Peri’s head, lowered, sad. Shit, she thought. She had messed up a perfectly nice movie night with her sister.

She went back to the den. “Peri, it’s just a lot to take in with everything with Mama too.”

“I know. I’m sorry. You’re right. Pretend we didn’t have this conversation, okay? We can start over tomorrow.”

Lily nodded. “What does Mama say? And Craig?”

“I’m not sure he’s given up on us yet. But I have. It’s just not going to happen for me. I can feel it. Mama has worked all her new-age magic and lectured me till she’s blue in the face about tending to my flower.”

Lily suppressed a bitter laugh. Her mother and the damn flowers. The incessant gardening and flowers on all upholstery and clothing was enough, but she had to take it farther, all the way south to genitalia. Lily had always wanted to corner one of her mother’s patients and ask if she’d sprinkled herself with Weed-n-Feed, cause it was getting late in the season, but she had never had the nerve. The truth was, all of those sad women seemed to really love Beverly and her flower-isms.

And here Lily was trying to talk to Peri and finding herself tempted to slip into Beverly’s world, her secret codes known only to shy southern women, or to run outside and plant something and not talk at all. It wasn’t that she didn’t think Peri deserved a child, and she wanted to be sure Peri understood that part. But there was always a piece of Peri that crept into their conversations about children, a ‘maybe-not’ piece, a wondering.

Peri yawned and stretched with an excess of drama, as if to say she had waited long enough for Lily to speak and smooth things over. “I should go. Deposition at seven-thirty. Look, I’m sorry if I messed up your night.” She stood, smoothing her skirt, picking off bread crumbs. “I’m going to use your toothbrush. I’ve got tuna breath laced with something milky.”

Peri’s smile took Lily’s breath away. She leaned against the doorframe after Peri swept by, leaving the smell of green apples behind.

When Peri returned, Lily hugged her tight. “You didn’t mess up my night. Just keep your mind open. Be patient.”

“Sure. I will. It’s fucking Margo that messes me up. She’s so perfect, and she’s never approved of me being a lawyer, never. I sometimes believe, really believe, that she’s engineered my infertility as a punishment for having this career. Like I should have known better, because you just can’t have it all.” Margo, Peri’s mother-in-law, was as much of a challenge as Ruth Stern.

“What about the adoption idea? What happened to that?”

“I’m looking into it. But it’s not the same, is it? Not a real Hollingsworth, from my body.”

“So you think Margo and family would disapprove of adoption too?”

Peri shrugged. “Maybe. Probably. Craig would be disappointed. That much is true.” She ran her freckled hands through her hair, fluffing the energetic cut. “And what if the child has problems due to poor prenatal care, or the hospitals in China or Russia or wherever? I’m just not sure it’s worth that risk.”

Lily told her to go home, they’d talk later and figure this all out. Later. Peri nodded and sniffled some more, which nearly created in Lily the urge to have another damn child. Peri could cry, as a child, and get things from Lily no other sister could manage. She’d let her borrow clothes, try on makeup, anything for one of Peri’s smiles that said life was perfect and whole and they were happy.