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ANCHORS

By Kaitlyn Christopher

The last dregs of natural light, but certainly nothing Lily would call sun, filled the kitchen through its bay window. After an afternoon spent reading by candlelight in her bedroom, even the drabness of the kitchen seemed blinding to Lily. Her mum and Nana Mary sat at the table, gossiping with sour faces. As Lily hesitated in the doorway, her mum's eyes, closer to black than brown, fixed themselves upon her.

"It's almost dinnertime and I need you to help out," she said, "Your sister is in bed."

Lily couldn't pout; according to her mum, only someone as heartless as Lily would find a way to complain about chores that her bed-ridden sister hadn't the ability to do. Still, she couldn't help but suspect that her older sister Reenie only felt a high fever and aches in her joints whenever the chores didn't suit her.

"Who did you expect me to meet while scrubbing floors?" her mum asked Nana Mary, reverting to their gossip like the conversation had never ceased. Both women already seemed to have forgotten Lily.

She watched as her mum took an angry sip of Tetley black tea, steeped for precisely four-and-a-half minutes ("Lily, don't pour me nothing but bloody boiling water next time") in her white cup with the triangular chip on the rim, and legions of leaf stained scratches.

"Well, not a sailor," said her Nana Mary, perched on the other side of the table. "Now look at you," the old woman went on, "Widowed. Though I do suppose that you treat these vagrant boarders as if they were proper husbands."

Lily's father died over a year ago, but her Nana Mary never quit her tirade against him, even after they found out the Nazis bombed his ship and he would never again fill the house with the scent of shaving cream or light all of the candles at dusk with the tip of a cigarette.

Lily knew that she was supposed to feel sad about her father, but she never had once. It had felt romantic at first, to lose a man at war, and instead of crying she took to practicing her acting as she told her story to the other girls in Standard Four.

"My father had the salt of the ocean in his blood—as good a sailor as anyone. When his ship went down the Nazis had already captured him. Oh, don't worry, Julie, he'll never spill what he knows to the Germans. He will always serve England and the Queen."

Oftentimes, during her production, she cried.

Lately, it felt heavy, and if she thought about the image of her tan, round Pa wearing his uniform and cursing as the ship blew up in cartoonish fanfare, the hunger in her stomach could change into an overwhelming anchor of weight.

The last time she saw her Pa, a year ago, when she was only eleven, he had forgot her name.

Instead of correcting him, "I'm Lily Mary Lloyd, Pa, Lily Mary Lloyd," she waited until he started to snore before reaching into his chest's pocket to take his cigarettes.

She had darted across the backyard, ignoring the pricking of bark and weeds not yet trampled smooth on the dark dirt path to their outhouse. The wind shook the warped wooden door in the darkness, and she had to force it shut behind her, anticipating the rich orange flame of the tips. With the swipe of a match, the pack of Player's Navy Cut appeared, with its gruff mascot, a sailor man with a thick beard and muscles. Lily dumped the cigarettes onto her lap and leaned back against the damp wood, ready to smoke the rest.

She could inhale them smoother than air, and exhale with the flair of an actress.

When they all shriveled into filters, she placed them on the edge of the wooden toilet, a peace offering of sorts to her little brother Stanley.

On her way to bed that night, she placed the empty package on top of Stanley's toy fishing boat, averting her eyes from the sailor on the logo staring upward in vigilance.

"That damn boy," she heard her Pa say the next morning, as he prepared to head out to meet his ship at the harbor for the last time.

"Stanley will smoke a twig, for God's sake," said her Mum. She was in the kitchen, staring at the rations of margarine, an empty measuring cup tapping a pulse against her hip.

"I saw the boy picking up butts the minute he could crawl, the little bastard," said her Pa, a corner of his lips upturned.

Lily kept her mouth shut, and let them blame her little brother Stanley. No one would give him trouble for smoking; when her father's friends visited they found amusement in blond, little Stanley smoking a fag and tripping over his feet after a single glass of whiskey and water. That approval was enough for her Pa. A gawky eleven-year old trying to bum a smoke only pissed them off. Not to mention she was supposed to be a lady.

"Stanley didn't smoke your pack," her sister, Reenie, had said, back to her old, conniving self, just past the worst of her Rheumatic

Fever. "It was Lily, of course."

"Like hell, I did, Reenie," Lily said, her face burning white.

"You still smell like smoke, take a bath," said Reenie, unphased by Lily's coarse language.

"Why don't you go back to your dirty bed and die," Lily said.

The room fell silent.

Pa spoke up, finally, "If you don't want to look like a fucking gypsy anymore than you already do, why are you smoking, Lily?"

Lily stood still, and in her mind she looked as tough as a soldier.

Pa kissed Reenie on the cheek as he left, a silent acknowledgement of the sickness. Lily's mum crossed her arms, still tapping away on her hip with the measuring cup, without rhythm, without a word. As Pa disappeared from view, Lily wondered if he forgot her name more often than he did Stanley or Reenie because she didn't look like a part of the family. She could join the gypsies and no one would notice.

A year later, in the same old kitchen, Lily could still hear Pa's last words to her. She shivered them away, along with the strangeness of death.

"Come on, I told you to help me with dinner, will you, Lil," her Mum said, standing up and gathering the empty tea cups to wash.

"We have the roast tonight, Nana Mary," Lily said, excited for the chance to eat as well as the boarders that they housed did. There was never enough food to go around anymore. And since Lily and her brother and sister didn't pay rent like the two boarders, fat, grumpy Bert and the new one, Ronnie, they would never have first right to eat. After the boarders had their fill, Reenie would say the magic words, rheumatic fever, and then Stanley, the baby, would pout for his couple of mouthfuls of potato. Tonight Lily felt the anticipation of seconds and thirds and leftovers.

The roast cost less than the others because it was so large that no one wanted to buy it at the going price. Yesterday the butcher offered her mum a deal, and wrapped it up for her in white paper to take home.

Lily tore off the paper violently, ignoring creases and care, like a bratty child on Christmas.

She ran her finger along one of the indentations of muscle on the meat, a turnip-y color, but nothing rancid enough that baking could not fix it.

"Don't put your dirt all over our paying guests' dinner," said her mum. She pushed Lily to the side with her hip and picked up the roast to season it.

“Oh my God,” Lily shrieked, earning her a darting glare from her mum.

On the bottom of the meat she could see what she hoped were chunks of butter, but as the bits of white moved, she felt all of her hopes of leftovers turn to nausea.

“Oh,” mouthed her mum, taking in a swallow of breath.

She put the roast in the sink, and turned on the faucet, letting it run over the glistening flesh and the squirming maggots. Lily and her mum both glanced at Nana Mary, but she was engrossed in a snag on her ratty housedress, trying to pull enough thread out to make a clean seam. Lily’s mother swiftly raised a steady finger to her lips to silence any protest Lily might make; she had never seen her mum look so cruel.

“Why don’t you grab the spices for me,” said her mum suddenly, cheerfully.

Lily walked to the pantry and picked out the salt, pepper, sage, and rosemary. Her mother was washing the roast with the vegetable brush, shaking off the maggots like they were no more than a nuisance—a loose thread to pluck off a dress.

Nana Mary stayed for dinner because she wanted to have a reminder of how well she had taught her daughter to cook before it became less of an art and more of a series of strategies.

“A little burnt,” Nana Mary said, after a few bites.

“Lily, if you don’t like being such a stick, then why do you keep on pushing your food around,” Reenie said, looking for a fight. Lily noticed that Mum had given Reenie the best part of the roast, the bit where the meat had been red and maggot-less.

The boarders kept quiet, as they did when Nana Mary came round. Even the new boarder, Ronnie, who rarely spoke, had trouble ending a conversation with the woman once she set off on a tangent.

Lily took a piece of crisp meat into her mouth and swallowed it like a fistful of pine needles. She felt too aware of its movement as it dropped to the bottom of her stomach in a shaky crash. Imagining the chubby beige maggots treating her empty stomach as a home made her cough upward in disgust.

“Off to the loo,” she said quietly, standing up and running out the door to the outhouse.

“Stupid girl,” she thought she heard Reenie say to the table.

Stupid girl. Lily heard Reenie’s whiny voice echo in her mind as she vomited.

After dinner and the blowing out of candles, Lily lay in the

leaden darkness of her bed, willing herself to sleep. She had trouble telling if her eyes were open or shut, as she blinked away their heaviness. From her window she could see neither moonlight nor the faraway lights of town.

“Awake?”

Lily nodded to her mother’s voice, straining her eyes at the enormous candle her mother held up.

“We are going to town, the doctor for Reenie,” she said too loudly.

“I want to walk in the moonlight,” said Lily, sitting up. “Let me come.”

“Stay here with your brother. Bert is going to help me into town with your sister,” her mother said, already walking away.

The night stayed dark, and Lily did not get out of bed, and she did not sleep, and then it was suddenly the washed-out grey of early mornings. She went outside to check for any sign of her mum or Reenie or even Bert. Only the cries of birds and air that tasted too fresh and dewy to breathe lay beyond the porch.

“Lil, you understand what’s happening,” said the new boarder, Ronnie, behind her. He lit a cigarette with a lighter, not a match.

“The sun is rising,” she replied, with a dramatic gesture toward the sky, pretending for a moment that she was onstage, though it looked a light grey without a sun at all.

“I...,” Ronnie started, and then stopped.

Lily forced his cigarette from his fingers into hers and took a quick succession of drags until it whittled down into an end that began to burn her thumb.

“I have had friends, friends who have died, Lily. From TB. From the fever. Your sister will never get better,” he said. He spoke as though Lily still attended Standard One, like she didn’t know about things like death.

“Ronnie,” said Lily, patting him on the back. She was trying to think of a good story to prove her maturity. “You know Ronnie, my friend Lucy died during one of the bombings, actually.” Lucy might as well have been a friend of hers, after all, her classmate Julie had known a Lucy that died. It was close enough.

Ronnie nodded, looking at Lily with dark brown eyes like her own. She suddenly didn’t want to look at his face anymore.

“I see,” he said.

“Reenie will survive, most unfortunately, Ronnie, thank you very much.”

He shrugged at her and went back inside the house.

Shivering in the cold, Lily fixed her eyes on the street, waiting for Mum and Reenie, followed by chubby Bert. They would arrive with some trinket from the jewelry store or a new blouse. Her mum would eagerly tell her not to be selfish, Reenie deserves nice things.

Her mum and Reenie did not return at all that day, although Bert did, quiet and whiter than usual. The door to his room stayed closed.

When her mum came back alone the next day, Lily knew.

“Please, don’t talk to me,” said Lily.

Listening to her expressionless mum try to explain words like acute heart failure and complications and infections to a little boy like Stanley, even if he could roll better cigarettes than her, made Lily sicker than the maggots on the roast.

The house suddenly became very full, the way it did after the news of her Pa. There was food again, sitting out on countertops, turning bad and gathering maggots, she imagined. Everyone cried. She saw tears in the eyes of her Nana Mary, heard the sobs of her mother at night, wiped away the sniffles of Stanley with a tissue.

The funeral took too long, and she wondered if there might be something wrong with her because she did not cry. As everyone stood up and paid their respects to her mum, Lily ran outside, desperate for a better place to collapse.

Here it is, she thought, as she struggled to breathe, preparing to burst into the mighty sobbing that currently scored her home.

Instead she could feel herself begin to laugh; unstoppable and uncontrollable laughter. It felt sick, and she tried to think about the maggots living in her stomach to end the laughter, but the more she worried about them, the worse the laughter became.

When it finally stopped, she went back inside and pretended to cry, like she was a girl who still felt surprised by the weight of death.