

Little Things

The library books were overdue, but that was not unusual and perhaps no reason to speed down the road. Stories about peanut butter, class trips, deaf friends and school days sat in an uneven stack, cheerful and thin. She would pay the fine to the disapproving librarian, the one that is cinematically depicted as the cliché schoolmarm in her mind, all browns and grays, but was actually a sweet brunette who wore quirky dresses with music notes or skeletons (or both) printed on them, and be on her way to the next rushed enterprise. It was morning and already hot. Her windows were rolled down because she was alone in the car, which meant she was free even to drive without the cold blast of air conditioning. Such air stiffened her joints, early rigor mortis in a zooming tomb.

As children, she and her brother would have to walk the books a mile back to their musty home. The books were always hers, and her brother was always annoyed. Once a neighbor, seeing them miserably plod down the sidewalk in the summer sun, offered a ride. They prayed for such fortune, even if it came in the form of Fran, the obese woman with the bulging blue eyes. Everyone admired her eyes. She was young, and her weight subjected her to the condescending clucks of “What a shame. Such a pretty face, but that body! She should look into drinking one of those shakes you see on commercials. They work. I mean, look at Tommy Lasorda.”

“Hey!” she yelled over the dying muffler of her orange Escort. “Where you guys going?” The car sagged on the driver’s side.

“We are going to the library. Lily’s books are late.”

“Well, get in. I’ll take you there.” Her brother hopped into the passenger side, and she attempted the rear door, but it was rusted and heavy. Fran rolled her beautiful eyes.

“I’ll get it,” she pushed her body out the door, and the car popped up in relief, revealing Fran’s pastel-pink, button down shirt and teal cotton pants.

“I thought you were supposed to be a strong girl,” she joked to cover obvious irritation. The hinge croaked an ancient moan as she pulled the metal door open. Fran stood by like some awkward chauffeur.

“Let’s go, Lily,” her eyes widened with sarcasm. The car smelled of old velour and cigarettes; dirty coffee mugs, actual ceramic ones, littered the stained carpet. They clinked when the car moved, celebrating life at the foot of the backseat.

Lily remembered her brother’s profile as he and Fran traded jokes. She knew better than to join the match of wits. For Lily, it was a continuous game of monkey-in-the-middle, and she was the perpetual monkey, arms outstretched, missing the ball each time.

One evening, when Fran had come to their house to chat over coffee with Lily’s mother, she made an attempt to comment, but Fran’s face appeared through puffs of smoke like some bloated Cheshire cat: “You’ve always got something to say. Marie, your daughter is some chatterbox.”

So when Fran offered to pay the fine that day, Lily did not utter a syllable. She knew the amount would be higher than usual, but she stood back like a little mute.

“Five dollars for books?” It was the eighties, and that was high cost. Lily shrugged her shoulders in Fran’s glistening face. There was nothing to say.

Today, Lily was on her own, speeding down a tree-lined country road, thinking about her history of fines, anticipating the universal library scent of pressed pulp, captured words. The rabbit was not a part of her fantasy. An ill-placed tangible example of animation flung, unbidden, into her lovely, airy world of movement. A rust-furred dart screaming, “Pay attention!” She should have been paying attention. She was always being told to pay attention. It ran out of the bushes, and she didn’t have enough time to swerve entirely, although her wheels turned in unison with the slight bump. Lily kept driving, glancing into her rearview mirror just to see the half-crushed body with one of the hind legs still frantically pushing in an attempt to escape a fate it had already suffered, its last moments of life framed in an oval lens. Thank goodness the library was nearby. The smell of torn meat nauseated her. She closed the windows and turned up the air conditioning, but she swore that some flesh had somehow gotten into her engine, had been flung up in the violence of it all, and now her car wreaked like a butcher shop. She envisioned cutting boards, cleavers and bits of bone and flesh seeping into all of that white, the dirty apron of the butcher. The mechanics of her car had been merciless to the sweet animal. Her grandfather used to keep rabbits when her mother was a girl, and Lily would listen to stories of how the creatures would be adored as pets, and then slaughtered and consumed. Thankfully, her mother could never eat the rabbits. Lily could not bear the idea of her mother biting into Peter Cottontail, and picking his mischief from the gaps between her teeth with a dirty fingernail.

When she pulled into the library parking lot next to a maroon minivan, she noticed the window decal of seven stick figures drawn in computer-generated white chalk, each with a smiling face, some with straight-lined long hair, others with none, a poorly illustrated dog at the end, collectively announcing that this vehicle transported five children and an animal and they were all ecstatic. Happy times in the good ol' minivan. Lily sat in her freezing meat locker thinking of the splattered blood, imagining the youngest of the minivan kids pointing out her negligence to the grinning mom with twiggy arms and stringy hair, or perhaps smelling it from the kids' section, randomly standing up from between the bookshelves and crying as a small green book fell from her hands. Beatrix Potter.

The day was warm, one of those summer days that drags nostalgia from sidewalk corners, or baseball fields. Lily had to go into the library at some point, so she turned the engine off, but memory grabbed her with its usual clutches of surreal paralysis. The air seemed to have been sucked back into the vents, the machine taking back its gift.

She thought of Missa, the demon child who lived next door, and the caterpillar. When Lily was five, she enjoyed sitting on the red brick steps of her porch. She had few friends, and could be found chatting with insects.

"What is that thing saying to you?" spat Missa through a mouth cornered with spaghetti sauce.

"You would not understand."

"You are so weird."

Her mother had taught her to say, "Thank you" in answer to that usual observation, either that or "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," but even at Lily's age, she knew that would inspire further abuse. In response to her shallow gratitude, Missa grabbed the caterpillar and ran, before Lily could whine her dissent, before she could attempt saving the delicate larva. Its thoracic legs and prolegs searched senselessly for steady ground as it was whisked into premature flight.

Missa stopped her sprint at the two white lines dividing the street, and dropped the creature beside them. Her canvas sneakers moved quickly, powered by yellow venom that would, on a different day, prompt her to swing Lily head first into a stop-sign pole. She ran to the sidewalk with her back facing the crushing car, but she didn't have to look to see what had happened. Only Lily bore witness to the death, to the tender collapse of that exoskeleton that wanted nothing more than to protect the potential for color. It could have flown and lived among her mother's Distant Drum roses.

"You're welcome, freak. What's it saying to you now? Probably not much, huh? Not much." She skipped away.

To the passerby, she was a child frolicking in the sun, enjoying the innocence of youth, just as today, Lily was a lady sitting in a parking lot, about to return her overdue library books, slowly melting in her leather seat, taking her own breath away.

She wondered if the rabbit's leg still pulsed, if the hopeless course of blood had finally ceased the slippery stream through the thin labyrinth of movement as

the rooks made their cautious descent, famished mourners waiting for a warm morsel. She had stopped its little heart; that she knew for sure.

Lily was at the center of a mandala. The bud of a flower spinning with solid circles, empty crescents and repeated points, black and white, separating and pressing. She had to submit to the punishment that the universe was doling out because she had taken away children, had razed subtle paths to clear her own. Euripides could not save her now with his deus ex machina. Besides, she would probably refuse the ride. Who could trust a chariot drawn by dragons? Much too convenient for her taste.

It was becoming hot in a sealed oven sort of way. There was a story in the news about a father who had accidentally left his three-year-old son in a locked car for hours. The city was experiencing a heat wave when the father had made his mistake.

Lily's mother lamented the cruelty, "That son of a bitch knew exactly what he was doing. How could he forget that baby? I don't believe it for one second."

The boy's smiling face, an all American blond, was a regular on the TV, his name scrolling at the bottom of the screen on loop. Lily closed her eyes, sweat, tears joining hands in their free fall down her face, while she tried to channel the boy, to feel his spirit, but it was no use. He was an innocent, a sacrificial lamb and she was a criminal, extinct in the muck of her own actions.

Years ago, she had sat in a blue plastic chair with heavy legs, answering questions about her period and sex life. She had to promise to use birth control after this time. She had to sign papers and read pamphlets that had no pictures of smiling

women. It was all simple. Everyone was kind except for one nurse who reminded her of the heartbeat: "It has one now, you know."

When the anesthesiologist came in to put her under, he joked with the doctor and nurse before turning to her and asking, "So Lily, if you could vacation anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?" Before she could say "Hawaii!" she felt herself being dragged in by a delicious sea of disappearance. She evaporated into a million bits, scattered as ash would be in the wind at night, that light and that dead. She never wanted to return. That dip into nothingness, that dive into Styx had captured her affections like some gray paramour.

A nurse woke her up in a different room and offered her apple juice and graham crackers. For a moment, Lily felt at home, like the nurse was the mother of some friend giving her an after-school snack after a long day of multiplication. She asked Lily if she wanted more, but Lily refused because the stench began to make her sick.

"Why does it smell like raw beef?"

"I don't smell anything. "

"Are you sure? Is someone having lunch?"

"A raw beef lunch? That would be odd. No. I don't think so. Are you okay?"

Lily only smelled blood, but she thought it would seem a strange admission, so she changed the subject.

"I'm feeling a little sick to my stomach. Is that normal?"

"Yes. Do you need a bag, or trashcan?"

"No, I'm fine. I just need to get out of here."

She kept on smelling blood, and seeing the kicking legs. She resented the nurse's gentleness. She wanted the other nurse, the one who reminded her of the heartbeat.

Lily's best friend met her in the waiting room, then held her hair as she vomited into the garbage pail on the curb, in front of the protesters who held signs "Jesus forgives."

She lifted her head and whispered to the crowd, "You did this to me. Make no mistake."

In the car, in the parking lot, beside the library, there was no one to ask her about vacations, and the books would not return themselves. She opened the door, and let herself breathe, the summer air pitying her with relief. *How could you be so selfish?* She chided herself. Lily had children at home who expected fun at the community pool, and here she was wasting time.

On the way home, she shunned the sight of the bunny. There was no point in looking at it anymore. Lily had already ingested its soul, taken the nervous hippity-hop for nourishment.

"I would not let you go for the world, little one," she murmured, feeling the little legs kick inside her.