

Supernova Girl

Lilith's hand falls into my lap then she jerks it back up again and clenches it to her chest. She lets it fall again. She does this a couple more times before I shift my position and wake her. Tear stained face, clenched fists, whiskey drenched Lilith. The knotty wooden wall our heads rest against comforts me more than knowing we are safe, indoors. The never-ending nights in Tahoe City always end with Lilith in tears, anxiety building in my stomach, and the sun rising in tones of burnt orange giving way to blinding light.

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Lilith picks fights with boys. She falls in love with them then she picks fights with them. That's what Lilith does—she falls in love and fights. She doesn't work, she doesn't eat, she doesn't watch television, she doesn't read, she doesn't write poetry or ride horses, she doesn't dream, she doesn't paint, she doesn't make music, she doesn't travel far. She skis sometimes. She loves and fights.

“Don't drag me into your misery,” I tell her the night I meet her.

She lifts her head off the bar, wipes away her tears, and smiles at me.

“I'm serious,” I say.

She pushes her drink away, tucks her chestnut curls behind her ears, and links her arm with mine. She pulls me out of the dark, dank bar into the bitter, cold Sierra night.

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Lilith braids my hair and tells me about Colin. I dig my toes into the white shag rug spread across our hard wood floor.

“He proposed to me once,” she says.

“Is that so,” I say and focus my eyes on the thick cluster of pines and their dark shadows hiding the cabin from the road.

She yanks hard on my hair.

“I’m still listening,” I say.

“Good,” she says and pats the top of my head like I’m a child or a pet. “It’s good to know someone cares.”

Do I listen to Lilith’s stories because I truly care or because we are each trying to fill an empty space left by others who have come and gone from our lives? Of all the people Lilith could have pulled out of the bar that night, why me? And all the people who have come and gone in and out of my life—how much of my life would alter if I hadn’t crossed paths with each of them? *Everyone you meet will affect your destiny.*

I shake my glass to hear the comforting clink of the ice, but the ice had already melted. I don’t remember the taste or if it burned my lips like cheap whiskey does, but I remember the blur of the glass and the drops of tears and Lilith’s voice echoing in my head.

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Ghosts blow in the wind across the desolate highway. The vast rocky terrain of Southern Utah in the winter isn’t a place to find comfort. I pull my car to the side of the road and turn off the engine.

“Is this where it happened?” I ask and keep my eyes on the lifeless landscape.

Lilith takes a swig from her flask and hands it to me.

“Sure as sugar,” she says. “He pushed me out of the car and left me for dead right in this spot. Asshole.” She opens the car door, makes a swooping motion with her arms, and bursts a

belly laugh.

I don't find her story all that funny, but her laughter is contagious and I laugh at her laughter—piggy-backing the funny so not to confront why I drove her 600 miles to re-live the most painful moment of her life.

We stroll along the shoulder and kick loose gravel.

“Two days and not a goddamn car drove down this stretch of highway.” She picks up a large chunk of pavement and throws it hard with her old pitcher's arm. “The dangers of trying to move away from Tahoe.” She spins out into the middle of the road, flipping it off in all directions.

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Lilith and I order drinks from the bartender and scan the rowdy crowd for a potential dance partner for Lilith. Since I arrived in Tahoe City, Lilith has made sure I go out with her every night she goes out which is almost every night—scanning the bars for men worthy of her attention. I'm still unsure why she attached herself to me so tightly. I was in the right place at the wrong time. When you permanently reside in a small tourist town, friends filter through along with the rain water and melting snow. Perhaps I should find it a bit disconcerting that in the few months I've known Lilith she's never asked me about my life, but for the most part, I'm relieved. She doesn't know where I've come from or what I do or where I'm going. She doesn't ask *why*.

Lilith's brother, Charlie, swivels his stool toward the dance floor and points to a guy whose dark Latin eyes and well groomed look overshadow his staggering in circles. Lilith smiles and heads toward him.

“He's probably Cuban,” says Charlie. “They have a way with Lilith.”

“Really? I thought all men had a way with Lilith.”

“You don't have to thank me,” continues Charlie. “Just buy me a shot and we'll call it even.” He slides over onto the bar stool Lilith abandoned and pulls his beanie down over his ears so his chestnut curls barely poke out from under it.

“I like your style,” I say and lift my shot to toast Charlie.

Lilith glides over to the bar, dark eyed Cuban boy in tote. His hand strokes Lilith's hair and moves down her back to her ass. And again, Lilith falls in love.

“Where's your ca-sa ?” Lilith asks, breathless.

He hiccups and points out the door. Linked hand in hand, we leave the bar and follow the Cuban's finger.

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The darkness, the whiskey, the cold, the door that wouldn't open, the mix of English and Spanish cursing—Charlie finally takes control and rams his shoulder into the door, and it flies open.

“Is this the right house?” I ask.

“Of course it is,” Lilith says in her best chime. “Rentals always have flimsy keys.”

“Flimsy...?” I echo.

Charlie heads straight for the liquor cabinet. The Cuban heads straight for Lilith's body. I plop down onto the counter stool and tell Charlie not to horde all the whiskey.

The lights flick on and my head spins. My head spins so hard I fall off the stool and knock it hard against the edge of the counter.

“I'm okay,” I shout.

“What the hell is going on here?” a man says in a deep, firm voice.

Not a sound. I close my eyes and try to find my center, but like a ship on stormy waters, my vessel can't steady itself. My body sinks heavy against the linoleum floor, and my chest struggles to expand like I'm breathing water. If I wait long enough, will I get lost in the waves of my mind never to find my way back, and when I open my eyes again, will I be in a different time, a different place? Every time the season changes I blink and I'm in a different time, a different place. If I could keep my eyes closed until the warmth of late spring, maybe I'll awake to new surroundings, a burst of fresh energy that opens my chest and surges through my body. I open my eyes, focus on the stool, and pull myself up to find a stand off between three rather large scruffy men and the four of us.

“We have early plans tomorrow,” another man says and crosses his arms over his wide chest.

Lilith sighs. “We didn't realize,” she says and links arms with her new friend and pulls him behind her. “Excuse me,” she continues and slides between two of the men.

Charlie lifts the full bottle of Jack he found in the cabinet and chugs it.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” the biggest man shouts at Charlie and grabs him by the neck and manually removes him from the kitchen and then the house. The other men follow in a huff and disappear. The light switches off and I'm left alone leaning against the counter top, unsure of where I am or how I got there. How *did* I get here? Disorientation. A hand on my shoulder.

“Door's this way, darlin’,” Charlie says and guides me through the darkness into the cold night.

“What now?” I say and wrap my arms around my numb body.

“I feel like going for a swim,” says Charlie and claps his hands together. “Which way to the lake?”

Again, the Cuban points into some trees and we follow.

I rip down the mountain close behind Charlie—Lilith and the Cuban not far behind us. Pine needles and fallen tree limbs snag my flip-flops and scratch my cold, exposed feet. We cut through private property and run down deck stairs of lake view cabins only losing the Cuban once to a stumble and tumble. Lilith nurtures his bruises with kisses and pulls him to his feet. We hurdle thick brush and slide down steep inclines until we finally reach the Lake. The full moon reflects on the still, glassy water—sharp and unreal. My breath crystallizes and I know it must be cold, but I can't feel anything. The Cuban strips his clothes off and takes a running leap into the Lake. Charlie and Lilith follow suit. I dangle my legs off the dock into the water. The three splash each other and romp around screaming and laughing uncontrollably—their wet bodies glistening in the moonlight. Sharp pain shoots up my legs and through my body—no longer numb. I stand, hold my breath, close my eyes tight, and fall backward into the piercing water. I imagine falling back onto ten swords. They don't stab me; I fall onto them—the ten of swords reversed. I let go, and my entire perspective of destiny changes again.

We walk back up the mountain in silence, wet and chilled. The first bright rays of sun poke up over the east edge of the lake and we stop to watch. A faint pulse reverberates off the distant mountains, and the white of the unmelted early spring snow blinds us.

We drop the Cuban off in front of a house, and I watch Lilith kiss him from my rear view mirror. The house wasn't the one we visited during the night.

I ask Lilith if she caught his name.

“I named him Raul,” she says and sighs, leaning her head out the window to watch him shrink into the past.

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Lilith and I sit across from each other at the cafe bundled in scarfs and hats, warmer than we've been all season. She takes a bite of her bagel and I stare at her. My untouched coffee steams between us.

“Charlie wants me to stay,” I say. “He sat in the bay window all morning begging the snow to stop melting or else I'd disappear too. I'm pretty sure he was wasted, but I've given it some serious thought.”

Lilith stops chewing her bite of bagel and leans against the back of the chair, arms crossed. She stares at me hard and furrows her brow.

“Do *you* want me to stay?” I ask, unsure I want to know the answer. Before I moved to Tahoe City, before I moved in with Lilith and Charlie, the option to stay was never an issue because no one *stayed*—a fact of living on the road, living by the season. Lilith and Charlie comfort me in the way I once found comfort back in college—walking to Perks every morning for coffee before class or meeting up with my friend, Meg, at O'Hooley's every Thursday for a whiskey night cap. They've become a rhythm in my life that transcends seasons or logic.

“What's going on?” I ask.

Lilith stands and knocks her chair over. She runs out the front door and I chase her around the side of the building. She presses her head against the red brick wall and pukes in a patch of dead plants.

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Lilith doesn't meet Elliot in a bar or at a party. She doesn't meet him in a cafe where she sips lattes and pretends to read books. He isn't her waiter in some fancy restaurant where she orders food that she doesn't eat. She doesn't meet him skiing or down by the lake.

“You know, if you're suppose to be watching after him, you really shouldn't let your brother drink so much,” Elliot says the night he brings Charlie back to the cabin. “The King family found him passed out in their garden last night. Not sure how long he'd been there. Lucky for him they called an ambulance instead of the police. Let him rest up, lots of fluids.”

“I know,” Lilith says and runs her hands through her thick hair, “this wasn't supposed to happen. We all thought rehab would really change his world.”

“Rehab,” I shout and look up from the book I'm reading. “What do you mean rehab?”

“That's why Charlie lives here with me,” she says and glances over her shoulder at me sitting in the window. “They sent him directly here the day he was released. I was supposed to keep him on the straight and narrow. But I'm not a straight and narrow walkin' kind of girl.”

Lilith giggles and takes Elliot by the hand. “May I offer you a glass of water, doctor.”

“I'm not a doctor,” Elliot says and takes a step back from her.

“You saved my brother,” she says and tugs on his hand. “One glass of water.”

Lilith pulls Elliot into the cabin and into the kitchen.

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I stand in the dim doorway hugging a pillow and listen for Charlie's breath.

“Lil,” he mumbles.

“No, it's me, Marty,” I say.



“Where's Lilith?” he asks and tries to prop himself up on his elbow.

“You shouldn't sit up,” I say and bring him the extra pillow for support.

“Lilith?”

“She's out with Elliot.” I hand him the pillow and step away from the bed.

“Who the hell is Elliot?”

“The paramedic who saved you, apparently. She's out...thanking him.”

“I bet she is,” Charlie says and smashes the pillow over his face.

“You know, everything's going so well around here I haven't really questioned any of it. I've bounced around enough to know it's never a good idea to know too much about anyone, but don't you find it a bit disconcerting how little we actually know about each other?”

Silence.

“Charlie?”

I lean over Charlie's body. His chest lifts and the pillow muffles a soft snore.

I leave Charlie and make my way into the empty living room. I pour myself a glass of Jameson over ice, crawl onto the layer of pillows in the bay window, and slip into something that's not quite dreaming, but not quite reality either.

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Lilith and Charlie's faces morph into one—their same chestnut hair, their same crooked smiles, their same green-gray eyes. Their extremities morph into one personality. Their voices dance in and out of one another. *It's okay, Mar. It's gonna be okay.* Years later in a sweat lodge high on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I have a similar vision only it's everyone I've ever known—their faces morphing and voices dancing, their arms stretching out into eternity. And I

am terrified—not that they are all there with me, but that they aren't and many of them never would be again.

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Lilith leaves me note on the kitchen table telling me to meet her for happy hour drinks, that she has dinner plans, but she wants to see me first.

Lilith has never had me meet her for happy hour. Unlike the party night crowd, the happy hour crowd isn't a crowd Lilith is interested in meeting. My eyes scan the bar—turtlenecks and fleece jackets, cheap well drinks and mixed nuts, a cacophony of loud voices and laughter. How many of them are locals? How many of them are seasonal locals? How many of them passing though on a ski vacation? When they are all shoved up to the bar, talking loudly into each others ears, nothing but that moment matters. Chances are none of them will change the course they are on—the locals will continue being local, the seasonal locals will pack up and move on as soon as the ski runs close for the season, and the tourists will eventually go back to their lives not in Tahoe City.

To *stay*. To stop moving. To wait. To remain still. To continue to be in a place or condition. *To remain in a certain state*. What is the difference between the house wife who never looks beyond the boundaries of her town and the globe trekker who never settles down? They are each in a state of constant, unwavering homeostasis of existence.

Lilith makes her way over to the bar and shoves herself between me and the next occupied stool. She wears dark sunglasses and a silky scarf over her head like some leading lady in a spy movie.

“What's up?” I ask.

“I'm incognito,” she says and glances around the bar.

The bartender stares at her.

“A cosmo,” she says under her breath and waves a peace sign at his face. “Two.”

He rolls his eyes at her and turns away.

“I don't drink cosmos.”

“They're for me,” she says. “It's Elliot. He's driven me here.”

“That bad, huh. You've known him two days and he's already caused you to double up on foo foo drinks.”

“Stop making fun of me. This is serious.” She pushes her sunglasses onto her head.

The bartender serves the two cosmos to Lilith like he knows this routine. He looks at the melting ice in my whiskey drink and tells me I'd better drink up.

“Elliot is such an ass,” she says. “Do you know what he told me last night? He told me that I ought to have my head examined.”

“What would ever make him say that?” I ask and shoot the rest of my watered down whiskey. An aching nauseous sensation spreads from my stomach to my head, and I cringe. A sensation at the time I mistake for a reaction to Lilith and her problems and the ever eminent fact that ski season doesn't last forever. A sensation that links me to where I've been and where I will go and what I will learn.

“If he thought I was moving too fast, he could have just told me so.” She shakes her head and stares over my shoulder at the wall of bar patrons.

“What did you—”

She cuts me off. “You know, I am just so sick of the men in this town. I need to get away.”

Head to the coast. Find some surfer boys.”

“That'll fix all your problems,” I say.

Lilith shakes her head and gulps down the first cosmo. I never find out what happened between them, but in the aftershock of Lilith's rage, she slams the martini glass down a bit too hard and shatters it on the bar. A round of applause and some drunken shouts rise from our area of the bar. Lilith slips off her stool, takes a bow, and exits the bar without another word.

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I tell my manager at the snowboard shop that I want to stay. He cocks his head to one side like he didn't quite understand what I had just told him.

“Stay,” I repeat. “For the off season.”

“We shut down during the off season,” he says.

Lilith and I climb a snow covered tree in our yard and try to throw snowballs at the passing cars.

“I'm going to stay,” I tell her.

“Stay?” she says mindlessly, her focus on the blue jeep heading toward us.

“Here, with you and Charlie.”

She focuses in my direction and throws the snowball hard at my face.

“I can't stay,” I tell Charlie the morning he finally crawls out of bed.

“You can do anything you want,” he says. “Stop being a victim of circumstance.”

“Stop being profound,” I tell him. “You're hungover.”

“There's a fine line between drunken epiphanies and spiritual awakenings,” he says, pulls a fist full of cash from Lilith's stash jar hidden in the stove we never use and leaves the house.

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I don't see Lilith or Charlie for three days—no sign that they've been home, no phone calls from them or for them, no sound of life around me. I call in sick to work. I don't bother to leave the house partially in fear that if I leave, I'll miss one of them slipping in and out, partially in fear that if I leave, I might run into one of them. The stillness becomes unsettling by the third day. I hear the ice melting in whiskey drinks that I make and don't drink. I sit in the window and watch the snow melt as the sun moves overhead. Everything that was familiar about living in Tahoe City, living with Lilith and Charlie for the past several months, suddenly begins to seem unfamiliar and strange—the empty wooden walls, the pots and pans that hang like icicles from the kitchen ceiling—pots and pans never used, never noticed, the kitchen faucet that never drips, the unnaturally clean and bright white shag rug covering the rustic hard wood living room floor, things that I did not notice because when Lilith and Charlie swept through, their energy filled the cabin with life.

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I blink my eyes a few times and slap my hand against the glass of the window to make sure I'm not dreaming. Lilith's voice echoes from the kitchen.

“...just a big rock floating around in space. If I had control issues, something like that would drive me over the edge.”

“Lilith.” I raise my voice above hers.

Silence.

Lilith and a boy who looks far too young poke their heads into the living room.

“Where is it?” she demands.

“Where's what?”

“My money.”

“What money?”

“My stash is gone and you're the only one who knew where it was.”

I push myself up and sit on the edge of my bay window bed. “I'm not the only one who lives here or who comes through here.”

She stands in the doorway now, blocking the boy, her arms crossed over her chest. “So I suppose it was one of your party friends you brought here while I was away.”

“No one has been here but me.”

“I found five watered down glasses of whiskey randomly placed throughout the house. Come on. I'm not stupid.”

My mouth falls open, but nothing comes.

“I want all two hundred back,” she continues, her stance unwavering.

“Charlie took your goddamn money, okay,” I say, the words falling into the air before I fully register their meaning.

“Charlie wouldn't steal.”

“Charlie has problems. Apparently problems you know more about than I do. Stop being in denial.”

Lilith squints her eyes and glares at me. She points her finger in my direction and walks toward me in at a slow, steady pace. “Rules—no stealing, no lying, and no parties I'm not invited to.” She stops in front of me and pushes her finger into my chest.

“Who are you?” I nod my head toward the kid now standing in the kitchen doorway.

“Jesse,” he says, his voice deep and gruff.

“Jesse, meet your worst nightmare,” I say and point at Lilith's head.

“Out,” Lilith shouts. Her breath hot on my face and full of whiskey.

I scoot away from Lilith and leave the room. I go into Charlie's room and lock the door.

The easiest thing to do in uncomfortable situations is to escape. Maybe my life is one big uncomfortable situation. Maybe my life is one big escape. I write in my notebook: my life—to stay in the constant state of escape.

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Melted snow and my job coming to an end indicate the onset of summer. Lilith trades her cashmere sweaters for sun-dresses and picks fights with Jesse out of boredom. Charlie continues not to return. Lilith continues not to care or not to notice his absence like it's happened hundreds of times before—she knows her part and he knows his. The morning Lilith throws a glass of orange juice at Jesse in a fit of rage, Jesse leaves and doesn't return. Lilith trades in her orange juice mornings for mimosa mornings and cries.

“You still have me to talk to,” I say in an effort to make some sort of connection.

“Ski season is over darlin’,” she says and gazes out the bay window, lost in her own thoughts. A girl dressed in a pink sweat suit jogs by the house—her image moving like a flip book through the trees. Lilith presses her nose to the window for a moment then bolts out the door after the girl. I follow her out the house and stop at the road. Lilith chases the girl down the road until they are specks of color on the horizon and the sun's brightness bursts them open and washes them away.