

GIVING THANKS

“What do you want to do for Thanksgiving?” her father asked.

It was their first holiday season as a broken family. Lily Wheaton wasn't sure how to navigate this. Her mother Helen already put her foot down. She said that they would have dinner, just the two of them, without her father Greg who had moved out nearly three months ago.

Their home had never been a happy one. Greg always managed to find something to be unhappy about, and Helen's job was to 'do it right' next time so that he wouldn't be upset. One time, it was the way she parked the car in the garage. Another time, it was the way she organized the contents of the refrigerator. Lily recalled an Easter where her mother was making chicken cutlets and something happened — she still didn't know what — but she heard a loud bang and saw all the chicken spilled on the counter and into the sink. Greg hadn't said anything. He just shook his head in disgust and walked into the home office shutting the door behind him. Lily had looked at Helen who said, “I'm sure we can still eat these. I'll just put them back in for a few minutes.”

Lily recalled how broken Helen looked. Her smile looked like a woman trying to show an emotion she probably didn't even recognize anymore. All of Helen's emotions in the last 22 years centered around Greg and his feelings. She was an emotional hostage, and Lily was her fellow prisoner. Together, they tried to survive.

When he moved out there was a mixture of relief and...sadness? Like, if it was all going to come to this, why did they waste so many years trying to appease a ruler who would never be satisfied? And the reason he decided to leave was his happiness. The focus of the family. They had failed and it was their fault he had to leave. If Helen had been a better wife, he would've been a better husband. If Lily had been a better daughter, he would've been a better dad. No one ever said it, but that was the subtext of their family unit.

For all eighteen years of her life, Lily had depended on her father's input. Every decision made in the house started with, “Let's ask Dad,” or “Let's see what Dad thinks.” No item was purchased without his consent. No plans were made without his direction. No emotion was safely felt unless it was clear he didn't object.

If anyone asked her, she would say she was independent and free spirited. She looked at Helen and saw a weakness she never wanted to emulate. But when Lily looked at her young life and the decisions she'd made they'd all been centered around one man. And his approval, as much as she hated herself for it, meant absolutely everything to her.

Which is why she wanted to make time to see him on Thanksgiving even though the phone call wasn't going well. Lily could tell he was annoyed and they'd been on the phone less than five minutes. He'd asked her what she wanted to do for the holiday and she didn't have an answer. She wasn't sure what to suggest that would be convenient, cheap, and easy. Those were usually her three requirements when she thought about spending time with Greg.

“Is there anyway you could meet me somewhere?” her father asked. “I don't want to get caught up in holiday traffic if I don't have to.”

Lily and her mother still lived in the family home in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Greg had moved closer to Boston to be near work. Her parents grew up in Newburyport and had gone to high school with a lot of the parents of students in Lily's class. Greg's move was another way for him to show he'd moved on.

"Sure," she said. "I did tell Mom I'd be back in time for dinner though. So, I'd need to make sure I'm home by three o'clock."

She heard Greg laugh scornfully in the phone.

"Yeah," he said dismissively. "Sure."

"I can meet you early to make sure we have a good amount of time together," she said.

"Yeah, okay, Lily," he said shortly. "It's just anything she can do to put limits on me."

"Dad, I don't think—" she started but he cut her off.

"Anyway, Lily, let's see here," he said. That was his way of indicating he was done with the conversation and ready to move on to the next one. "How about instead of halfway we meet at the beach?"

Lily paused for a moment. She couldn't remember the last time they'd gone to the beach together. As a child, they'd gone to nearby Plum Island a number of times. Lily loved the beach. Every summer her olive skin turned dark and her dark hair lightened. She would spend hours in the water on a boogie board or racing the waves up the sand. Her favorite childhood book was called 'Beach Day,' which Greg would read to her every night. She couldn't remember the author or the plot, but there was a scene when the family got ice cream together. She remembered the little girl in the story picked a lemon flavor and sat with her parents eating it at the beach. The illustration of them all eating together was one of Lily's favorites.

But it had been years since her father had gone with her. Greg hated traffic and crowds, and going to the beach became more stressful than fun. One of the last times they went as a family, Helen was getting the cooler together and Greg was yelling at her for her lack of time management skills. She was apologizing for taking so long while Lily waited in the car trying to avoid the fight. The whole car ride there and back had been tense for everyone.

"Yeah, I can do the beach. Like, where we used to go?"

"Yeah, we can go for an early run and some breakfast," he said. "At Roberta's."

Roberta's Diner was a greasy little spot just off the beach. It had been there for decades. Helen said she and Greg used to go there with their friends in high school. Her parents were such townies. They knew everyone and everyone knew them. That's what happens when you never leave the place you grew up.

And Roberta knew everyone too. She was about 70 years old now and still ran the diner herself. She only closed one day a year — on her parent's wedding anniversary — but kept the place open even on Christmas Day.

“That sounds good,” Lily said. She was surprised. She felt almost excited when she hung up with him. The beach was such a special place for her, and for them as a family despite recent years. She was happy he picked it. Maybe the separation had been good for him. If this finally made him happier, there was a chance they could work towards a normal relationship.

Two days later, Lily stood in the parking lot just a few yards from the water. It was a gray, gloomy day in New England. The blustery wind mixed with a misty rain meant they would both end the run cold and wet. She heard a seagull call overhead and looked up. The bird landed in the water several yards away. The wind made her shiver slightly. The beach wasn't that big and their run would be short, which was good since her light gloves weren't doing anything to keep out the cold. She could feel her fingers tingling already.

“Hi,” said Greg when he pulled up. He pulled Lily into one of his usual one-armed hugs. Their greetings had become more detached as she grew up. As a child, she would hug and kiss him. They would lay down together as he read to her or watched a movie. Seeing him here brought her back to those times where she felt safe and cared for. Rather than being the one who had to take care of her parents. Helen had been so emotional lately. She hoped Greg would eventually decide to come back. Lily heard her praying out loud in her room most nights. Helen always ended her prayers with a quiet sob.

She shook her head to clear it and tried to focus on today. She wanted today to be a good memory after so many difficult ones. It was a good sign that he picked the beach, and an activity they could both enjoy.

They both took a moment to stretch in silence. Lily thought about asking him how his week had been, but she didn't want to push a conversation right away. They needed time to settle into each other's company.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

They took off together from the parking lot to the boardwalk. They jogged over the splintering wood walkway and on to the coarse, grainy sand. It was packed down a little from the rain. They moved towards the water to reach the firmer sand that was better for running. Lily was a little ahead of her father as they both found their pace. She gazed at the water and saw the gray-green waves crash on the shore. A few more seagulls circled overhead as she blinked the mist out of her eyes.

Every inhale stung her lungs a bit. The wind whipped so fiercely her hat nearly flew off. She reached up and tugged it down without losing her stride. She ran closer to the water and tried to outrun the wave back in just like when she was a child. She did that a few times and felt her heart rate pick up. Endorphins flooded her body. She had a good feeling about today.

She looked over and saw Greg a few yards behind her so she continued on. The wind picked up and she nearly lost her step. She looked down and saw crushed seashells and a small crab claw. A seagull called again. Probably with the rest of the crab in its mouth. Poor little guy.

She was nearing the end of the combed beach. Beyond that was a wild nature preserve. The sand wasn't groomed and harder to keep a stable footing on. Lily started to double back and Greg followed her.

They ran in pace together for a while. Lily's ears were so cold they felt hot. Her fingers were now totally numb. Yet, when she looked over at Greg and saw him in pace with her she felt her chest warm. They were spending time together and it was going okay. He seemed better than he had in a while, and that made her happy.

Once they were back at the cars she looked down at her sneakers and saw sand everywhere. Her leggings from the knee down were covered in wet sand. She was surprised she didn't notice before.

"Dad, we're going to get this all over the car," she said.

"Don't worry about it. Brush it off as best you can," he said. "I'll drive us to Roberta's. We can pick up your car on the way out."

Lily was surprised. Her dad was normally pretty uptight about that kind of thing. Everyone's dad seemed to be anal about sand in the car. She worked as a beach parking attendant in the summer and heard multiple dads yell at their families to brush the sand off before they got in. The same dads who went home and vacuumed it all out that night anyway. Although most dads probably didn't give their family a lecture about how ungrateful they were to make him vacuum all that sand.

She brushed her leggings and kicked both feet against the car before getting in. Her fingers were still pretty numb, though. Only her index finger was starting to tingle back to life.

They drove to Roberta's Diner and parked. It was a small, white clapboard building with an empty parking lot. During the summer, you had to arrive before sunrise to get a parking spot but today they had their pick.

Walking in, Lily smelled a mix of coffee and pancakes. The air was warm and almost humid compared to the sharp wind outside. She could hear it whip against the building and rattle the cheap windows.

Lily sat down on one of the metal stools with a red leather bottom. Greg sat across from her. The white vinyl table was scratched with decades of use. They both looked out towards the water. On a clearer day they would be able to see the beach, but today it was just gray mist.

"Well, look who is here," said a voice from behind the counter. "My only two customers on Thanksgiving morning."

Greg said hello and stood to give her a one-armed hug. The only one he knew how to give anymore.

"I knew you'd be open for a bit," he said.

"Bad one out there," said Roberta as she poured Greg coffee. "Anything to drink, dear?"

“Just water,” said Lily.

“And to eat?” she asked.

Lily ordered an egg combo plate, and Greg ordered an omelet. Roberta left to put in their orders and they sat in silence a few minutes. Lily took another sip of her water. The silence was almost comfortable as if they’d run out all their tension and left it on the beach. She smiled to herself a little and looked up to try and say something when Greg spoke.

“You know I’m dating,” he said.

Whatever conversation Lily was going to start died in her throat. She wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly. She felt her heart drop to her stomach. The water she’d just swallowed churned like the waves outside.

“What?”

“I’m dating,” he said. “She’s nice. You may have met her. Her name is Carol. We went to high school together.”

“Dad,” Lily started but then stopped. She didn’t know what to say. It had only been three months since he’d left. Her mother was still crying every day hoping he’d return. She couldn’t process what he just said with what she lived every day. The hurt this news would cause was too much. She didn’t think even her father was capable of being so callous.

“Does Mom know?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I wanted to tell you first.”

“Why?”

“Because, Lily, you get it,” he said. Greg took a sip of his coffee and looked out the window. “You know she’s a nightmare.”

‘She’ always meant Helen.

“But Dad, you’re not even divorced,” she said. “It’s only been a few months.”

“Only because she won’t see reason on this,” he said. “And because she won’t leave the house.”

“The house?” Lily asked.

He looked back over at her. His dark eyes flashed with anger. They matched her own eyes perfectly.

“I pay for that house, Lily. I make sure the mortgage is paid on time and the landscaping is

done. I can handle that kind of home. Your mother can't. Plus, Carol said she's always liked the house."

Carol. That name again. It was the second time her father had mentioned her in the few sentences they'd spoken since sitting down. Carol liked the house. And that was important to him. It was more important to him than his family still living in that home. She wondered where they would go and if Greg even cared. Lily was so lost in her thoughts she barely heard Greg's voice. It was as if he was speaking from far away.

"It's just a place to live," said Greg. "You can't go getting all attached to the place. It's not that big of a deal."

Her father had just confessed that he had a girlfriend, and he was kicking them out of the house, but he didn't seem to think either revelation was big news. Lily just nodded at his comment. She didn't trust her voice enough to speak.

Roberta came at that moment and brought their food.

"Anything else, loves?" asked Roberta.

"No, thank you," said Greg. He'd already picked up his fork to eat, but Lily felt sick to her stomach. The condensation from the warm egg on the cold plate ran into her breakfast potatoes on the side. She felt her stomach turn.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Greg asked as he finished a bite.

Lily looked up at him. He looked slightly annoyed that she wasn't eating anything. There was no appreciation of the fact that he'd just said he was removing her from the only home she'd ever known so that his girlfriend could be happy.

"Dad, please don't do this," Lily pleaded.

Greg sighed and put his fork down.

"Lily," he said. "Don't you want me to be happy? I'd want that for you."

Lily just looked down at the table to swallow down her emotion.

"You haven't even asked me about Carol," he said as he took another bite. "She's nice. She likes to be outside. She likes to run too."

He took another bite as Lily watched him.

"She's excited to meet you. I'd like to try and get us all together before Christmas if we can. I know she's pretty busy during the holidays. She's a decorator."

Lily noted that his first thought of consideration wasn't for her feelings or her school schedule, but for a new woman. She decided not to respond and tried to take a bite of her food. As soon as she started to chew she felt like gagging. She wondered when he expected them to move

out, if she'd get to go to the same school, if she would be near her friends. Worst of all, she wondered how she would tell her mother this news.

"I drafted an email to your mother about this," Greg said as if reading her thoughts. "So she'll know too."

"Did you send it yet?"

"No," he said. "I won't plan to send it until later today or tomorrow."

"Could you just tell her in person?"

"And deal with that mess? No," he said. "I'm not going to ruin my holiday to deal with all that."

Lily didn't understand it. All the work her mother put in to this marriage, all the work Lily had put into their relationship, and he never seemed to care. Nothing was ever right. And when it was wrong it was a very big problem for all of them. No one was allowed to be happy if he was unhappy.

Yet, in the three months since he'd moved out he'd found a woman whose happiness he not only valued but also prioritized. He was already defending her and wanted to move her into their family home.

The thought made her stomach burn with anger. All the emotional turmoil he'd caused throughout her life. All the pain he'd brought her mother. And his complete indifference to it all. In that moment, she hated him. Her whole life she'd been afraid of upsetting him, or afraid that pushing too hard would push him away completely. He'd made her and her mother emotional prisoners, and they'd obeyed his every order. But it was never enough.

And now she was ready to be free.

Lily got up and walked out of the diner. She heard Greg call after her asking where she was going, but she didn't stop. She didn't even pause. Fuck him.

As soon as she got past the parking lot, she started running. No one was out today so she had the road to herself. She crossed over to the beach access point near the diner. The smell of stale ocean water filled her lungs. She thought of the watery eggs on her plate, and Greg's words.

The wind picked up and the mist turned to rain. Her face was wet, and her hair stuck to her face. She wiped her eyes quickly without losing a step and she realized she was crying. That made her even more angry. No more tears. Not over this. She picked up her pace until she was nearly sprinting.

As she ran, she felt her emotions work through her body: anger, betrayal, sadness, and a deep hurt she couldn't name. It's an unnamed feeling that happens when you realize someone you loved never even gave you a thought. Maybe a sense of worthlessness. Whatever it was she wanted to run from that too.

She could still feel tears running down her cheeks and angrily wiped them away. So many tears. When would it ever be enough.

“Lily!” she heard a shout behind her. She turned and saw her father jogging to meet her. “Lily!” he shouted again.

She turned and kept running. She knew she was done for today. She didn’t have anything else to offer him. He’d taken everything she had and given nothing back. Lily picked up her pace again. She knew she could beat him back to the car.

“Stop, c’mon,” he said. His words were drowned out with a violent wind and a crash of the water on the sand.

Lily kept running up the beach and around the last bend until she could make out the tiny parking lot where they’d started their day. She almost laughed when she remembered how she felt a few hours ago. The hopefulness she’d been so eager to believe. What a joke.

She saw the faint dot of her car in the distance. The only one left in the parking lot on Thanksgiving Day.

She didn’t hear Greg’s voice again, and she didn’t turn around to check where he was. Her heart was in her throat and her legs couldn’t keep going. Once she was within a few yards of the parking lot she collapsed on the sand. Her hands and knees felt the grainy, wet, sand of New England. Similar to the people, it was coarse and rough. Another particularly violent wave crashed again and the water carried all the way up to where she was on all fours still trying to catch her breath. She felt the shock of the cold water drift over her feet, legs, and hands before pooling around her knees. It actually felt good.

Her fingers were red with cold and the tips were turning white. She hadn’t bothered putting on her gloves again. In fact, she thought she might’ve left them in the restaurant. Lily sat back on her knees and looked out at the water. The white caps crashed into each other and on the shore again. The water came within a few inches of her and receded back to the ocean. She wished she could follow it.

“Lily,” a voice panted behind her. It was Greg. He caught up after all. “What are you doing?”

He was standing up next to her with his hands on his hips breathing heavily. He bent down to put his hands on his knees and catch his breath. “Shit,” he gasped.

She brushed her hands together to get the sand off then got up and started walking to the parking lot.

“Lily,” he said. “This is fucking ridiculous. What is this?”

She didn’t turn around or speak. She just kept walking to her car. Anything she said would turn into a fight. Angry words, a shouting match, more tears. She couldn’t do it. Not today. She was done for today.

He followed her to the parking lot as she opened the car. She hadn't said a word to him since the diner. She opened the door to the car.

"Well, how am I supposed to get back?" he asked.

"What am I supposed to tell Mom?" she shot back. "You found someone else?"

"I didn't want to be married to her anymore," he yelled back. "It's my fucking life. It's my happiness."

"Everything is your happiness," she screamed back. "Everything."

The tears came again. She hated herself.

"Everything I do is for you," he yelled. "The job I hate. The commute. Do you know how much I hate my life? Do you? No, and you don't care."

"I care because you make it impossible not to," she said. "I'm 18-years-old and my father's happiness is only thing that is allowed to matter. We do everything to make you happy. Everything. Do you realize what you turned Mom into? Do you realize what you're doing to me? Do you even care?"

She'd never spoken to her father like this in her entire life. The years of emotion were bubbling over. The rain picked up and she was sure her fingers would never regain feeling but she couldn't stop yelling.

"Lily, it's my fucking life. I'm 57-years-old and I haven't been happy since the day I married your mother," he said. "The only—"

His voice cut off and she looked at him. The rain had turned back into a mist and the wind quieted to the point that she heard him let out a small sob.

"The only thing that has brought me any happiness is you," he said. "You are the thing that has brought me the most happiness in my life."

Lily felt tears in her eyes again. Her heart was in her throat and she couldn't swallow it down this time.

Greg wiped his face and turned to the water then back at her.

"I know," he started then stopped. "I know this is a fucked up household. I know that our marriage wasn't what it should've been and what I want for you. But I hope you know that I do love you. I just—" he stopped again. "I just — I did my best."

She felt herself shake. She didn't know if it was from the cold or holding in a sob. Greg looked at her and then turned and walked towards the parking lot. Lily stayed on the beach and watched the waves. The weather seemed to mirror their emotions. A lull in the wind settled as the yelling

subsided. She heard a car start and looked to the parking lot. She took a couple steps towards the boardwalk and saw only her car.