

The fresh glow of a recent Florida tan notwithstanding, Christine Abetti was dead. The evidence of her vacation was a grotesque contrast to the white satin lining of her coffin, Lily thought as she stopped the line of mourners to observe her childhood friend. The pressure from the queue to move forward was subtle. No jostling or muttering was involved.

It must have been the suffocating sweetness of the flowers that made her head swim. Or the silly shoes her mother insisted she wear, unaccustomed though she was to any heel, making her wobble. Lily's knee sent up a finger of pain when it collided with the thin carpet of the funeral home. She had placed her hands on either side of the joint, prepared to right herself, when her father's suited arms pulled her up straight. She knew him by his aftershave before she turned to meet his eyes, red rimmed above his bright white shirt.

"You okay, kitten?" Lily shook her head with a quick movement and used his support to hobble to the side of the room.

"Turned my ankle a bit." The words came out with a croak. Tonsillectomy recovery not complete, she noted. Her operation, scheduled for spring break, had dimmed to the point of insignificance, though her throat disagreed.

"Sit to the side. I'll talk to the family." Father as caregiver was new. His retirement had coincided with his daughter's convalescence, but she hadn't adjusted herself to his worried looks and the bowls of hot cream of wheat he delivered to her bedside. Lily sank with gratitude into one of the black-seated stacking chairs that lined the wall, watching his square shoulders recede. The corpse was hidden from her view by the congregated grievers.

No one approached her. She had become a witness, an observer. She was separate from the event, with no company but her own thoughts.

It was her father who told her about the tragedy. He had wakened her with a shake of her shoulder and, unable to contain his emotion, said, “Christine is dead, Lily. Plane crash.” The news was so unlikely that Lily turned her face back into the pillow and closed her eyes.

The facts came with the next day’s newspaper, although the village gossip line had passed the story from lip to ear well before that. Only fourteen fatalities were involved, a low number pronounced “miraculous” in the headline story. Wind shears caught the plane while it was landing, a direct flight from sunny Florida to the dreary upstate airport where sooty snow lingered in late March. “It spun off our radar,” reported air control workers, “and crashed into a house on Edgewood Avenue.” Emergency workers were quoted, too. “A pile of bodies. We sorted through, separating the injured from the dying, and set up a temporary morgue in the damaged house.”

“Surreal” was part of her new college vocabulary, used indiscriminately by freshman, but Lily decided it applied to the scene in which she found herself. She shifted in her chair and scanned the perimeter for signs of a restroom. When long minutes passed and her father didn’t return, she ventured down a narrow hall. As she rounded the corner, she smacked into a large man whose pores exuded the stale odor of yesterday’s drunk. He grabbed her shoulders with a rough hand.

“Why, it’s little Lily!” Mr. Abetti pressed his face close to hers. His breath caused her to pull back, but she corrected herself before she thought he had noticed.

“Mr. Abetti, I am so sorry about Chris,” she managed to say before he roared out his grief.

“She’s gone! My girl!” Abetti pulled her into a tight embrace from which Lily couldn’t wriggle free. “Dead and gone! Oh, how can this be? What am I going to do now?” He hunched over her and doused her neck with snot and tears.

Lily could only mumble into the disheveled cloth on the chest pressed against her nose. She stood frozen as the big man shook against her, sobbing out raspy breaths. Her mind drifted to memories of the Abetti household she had known since she was five, the lingering odor of onions, garlic, and pepper sautéed in the kitchen, the dim light with floating dust motes in the closed up rooms, venetian blinds pulled tight, the hectoring voice of Mr. Abetti towering over his gray-haired wife. The foreignness of the place was what she recalled, so different from home with its bright windows and freshly starched white curtains, her cheerful mother baking cookies and her quiet father reading aloud the funnies from the newspaper.

“I’m so sorry,” she said as she took advantage of a pause in the torrent to push free. She fled to the ladies’ room, a refuge with its artificial flowers and striped wallpaper. Lily rinsed her face with cold water and slid the lock on one of the stalls. She needed a minute of quiet. Without pulling down her panties, she sat on the toilet and rubbed her ankle. She sank into her thoughts and stayed silent while another woman entered with high heels snapping against the tile floor. Lily listened as the other woman used the facilities, flushed, ran the water in the sink and blew the hand dryer. When she was alone again, Lily opened the door and scanned the empty room. She leaned in toward the mirror, smoothed her hair and looked into her own eyes before she exited. There was no one was in the hall.

There was no sign of her father. Lily returned to the chair where he had left her to wait. Her eyes traced the pattern on the carpet, circles within circles. A pair of scuffed black dress shoes appeared in her line of vision and stopped.

“It was my fault, you know.” Frankie was Chris’ little brother. A whiney pest four years her junior, he had trailed after them when Lily came to play and cried when they wouldn’t include him. She raised her eyes to look at him. An overlay of the child he had been clouded her vision as she watched his lips tremble.

“I had talked to her about how we never had vacations as kids. Everyone else I knew went on vacations, why couldn’t we? She had saved up money from her summer job, all her tips, so we could go.” Frankie looked miserable.

Lily examined him. His complexion was spotted, his hair swept back with shiny gel, and there was a broad swath of purple beneath one eye that showed he didn’t walk away from the crash without physical injury. She extended an awkward hand.

“She wanted to go, too, Frank.”

He straightened his slouch and shook his head from side to side, and then drifted away.

The semester ended in a haze, the new world of college a universe apart from everything that led up to it. When Lily unpacked her clothes in her girlhood bedroom and tried to stuff them into her old dresser, she was disoriented by the collision of realities. Her mother poked her head in to check on her progress. Lily waved away a flash of annoyance.

“When you’re finished here, why don’t you go say ‘hi’ to Mrs. Abetti?”

“Oh, Mom, no. I can’t do that.”

“It would mean a lot to her, I know.”

Lily flopped on the quilted surface of her bed. “Do you visit her?”

Her mother blinked. “Well, I ran into her at the post office. It was awful. She looks really bad.”

“So you haven’t been to visit?” Lily had never spoken such a challenge. Her mother hesitated.

“No. To tell you the truth, I feel guilty. You see, my daughter is still alive.” Her words caught in her throat.

Lily hopped up and threw her arms around her mother, who felt small and thin beneath her plaid shirt. “It’s okay, mom. It’s okay.” She stroked her mother’s back a couple of times and stepped back.

“Lily, people say she hasn’t changed anything in Christine’s room. She closed the door and left everything just as it was.” Her mother spoke in a whisper.

After lunch, Lily walked toward the old neighborhood on the far side of a strip of railroad tracks where trains no longer ran. She stood by the road in front of the duplex where she and her family had lived until she was in fifth grade. She stared at Christine’s family’s tidy white house across the street. The blinds were drawn and the flower garden where Mr. Abetti once tended gladiolas was filled with weeds. Nothing moved in the bright May sunshine.

A long forgotten birthday party came to her mind. Chris was turning six, and her mother had asked the neighborhood children to come for cake and ice cream. Eight or ten children crowded onto the enclosed front porch around a table covered with a printed paper tablecloth. That day, five-year-old Lily was fascinated by the bakery cake at the center of the table, big, white and covered with sugar flowers and vines. Her mother baked all the cakes in Lily’s house, and birthdays were always celebrated with bland “angel food” cake with thin drizzled frosting

and sprinkles. Chris's cake was a marvel, so beautiful, the thick frosting shining and perfect. Lily couldn't take her eyes off the store-bought treasure.

When her square of cake was placed in front of her on a paper plate with a white plastic fork, Lily's mouth watered. The rosebud on her piece was resplendent in pink with a cunning green leaf no bigger than her fingernail.

But when she filled her mouth with the white cake and its half-inch thick sugary topping, Lily almost gagged. It was like eating Crisco, the white shortening her mother used for pie crusts, tasteless grease. She closed her mouth and tried to chew, but it was no use. She couldn't swallow it. With no eyes on her, Lily pulled her small decorated napkin to her mouth and spit the cake into it. The sting of disappointment she felt that long ago day was still fresh.

Lily thought she saw a shadow moving behind the blinds in the Abetti's living room, and she willed her feet to move across the street in that direction. They refused to budge. She could picture the collection of ballerina figurines Chris kept on a shelf in her pink bedroom, china dolls Lily had once envied, untouched and covered with a fine layer of dust. She imagined Mrs. Abetti's hand, pausing on the doorknob, unable to enter. With a sigh, Lily turned toward home, letting the sun bake her face.