

Lily

The flashes from the dashed lines on the familiar road lulled Mick's concentration. His mind wandered as he held the smooth steering wheel and soaked up the smell of leather seats and his wife's shampooed hair. He glanced over; her head was turned away, he saw her carving whirlpools in the fog-drenched window.

"Dolores, are you going to talk to me tonight?"

"Mick, I always hated your stupid office holiday parties. And you drank too much."

Silence fell between them. Their loss hung over every interaction.

A flash of light caught the periphery of Mick's vision timed with a sharp impact. The squeal of tires and spin of the car to the right jarred Mick into action. He jammed the brakes and whipped the wheel back to the left, the tires howled and the acrid smell of burning rubber filled the air. They finally skidded to a stop in the loose gravel of the shoulder. Mick sat rigid.

"What was that?" Dolores grabbed his arm, sinking her red-tipped fingernails to the point of pain.

"I don't know, it was so fast. Are you ok?"

"I'm scared, I told you not to have that last drink."

Mick's hands squeezed the steering wheel, his knuckles standing out. "Why is that the first place you go?" He glared back at her as her face reddened and crumbled.

Mick fumbled with the door handle as he released his seatbelt. The door opened with a fluid motion and started chiming. Mick closed the door and the silence seemed unnatural after the chaos of the last minutes. He shivered in the damp fog of a California winter and began to shuffle with tense legs back down the road. The smell of burnt rubber lingered and red sparkles reflected off the damp road from the rear lights of the car. Dolores followed several steps behind, the click, click of her heels breaking the hush. The dread of what he might find closed off all his senses as if walking in a padded tunnel. When he reached the beginning of the skid marks, there was nothing to see; no animal ripped to pieces, no objects in the road, no crumpled vehicle. Mick and Dolores looked far into the underbrush, soiling their party clothes and still no evidence of a collision. Mick saw Dolores standing still with her eyes closed and lips moving. Looking up, Mick noticed the sign a few feet away, a place he knew too well.

"Santa Monica Children's Hospital - Main Entrance"

"You felt it, right?" Mick said.

"Yes, I think she pushed us." Dolores turned and headed back to the car.

"You need to stop, Lily is not with us. Lily is gone."

Mick followed and walked to the front of the car. No damage. The adrenaline rush now faded and Mick felt jittery and nauseous. He wanted the nightmare of the last year to be over so he could shed the weight of his guilt and grief. As he climbed into the car, he wondered how he and Dolores had fallen apart so quickly. She drifted into a remote place after the funeral, he tried in his clumsy, confused way to help, but day by day the distance grew. She meditated for hours and often spoke of communicating with their daughter. Mick could not deal with her spirituality mumbo jumbo. He wanted to focus on reality and move forward.

The drive home was desolate. The shock and fear of the accident bled away as they slipped back into the pattern of their broken relationship. Mick glanced at Dolores as she shrank back into herself like she did every day and every moment. It had been only three months since the end. Mick re-lived daily the images of tubes, needles, and masks intruding on the vibrant life of their ten year old Lily. Her pallid skin and blackened eyes a distant shell of the soul that captivated Dolores and him from the moment she entered their lives. Every time they pulled past the hospital entrance sign in the last months they wondered if it was the end. Mick navigated home and slid the car into the pristine garage. The pink bicycle still hung with two other bikes above the lawnmower.

Mick led the way from the garage and into the mudroom. Dolores noticed a flickering light in the entryway and walked through the kitchen towards the front door without

taking off her coat. Mick hung his overcoat and took off his muddy lace-up dress shoes. He followed the mud splats made by the high heels, resentful because he would be the one to clean up. Another change in his wife. She no longer cared about the practical aspects of living. Mick found her on her knees in the front hallway. The overhead light fluttered as he saw glass and pieces of wood strewn across the hardwood floor.

Dolores held a photo in her hand. Bending over her, he saw the other two snapshots in the set of three splayed on the floor. They had framed the set two years ago, a time far away. The picture in Dolores' shaking hand showed the three of them sitting on a beach towel in the blazing sun. Lily looked up at the parents and all three shared the oneness of genes and love. The genes that killed her. Mick remembered that trip, the laughter, the stories read by firelight, and the endless games of Uno. The three of them were as close as the fibers of a rope. Mick had forgotten the pictures existed. His world shrank to keep the pain and the memories away. Dolores's shoulders shuddered as she picked up the other two pictures off the floor. He could hear her murmuring her mantra, a constant refrain in the house. "Lily Love, Lily Love..." Mick shrugged and went to the kitchen to get the broom and dustpan. By the time he returned, she was gone and he could hear the bedroom door shutting. He cleaned up and turned off the light.

Mick walked up the stairs. He passed the room that had once been theirs. Dolores and he shared so much in that room; the conception of Lily, tender intimacies, plans for the future, their innermost desires and disappointments, and the joys of their small family.

That had all bled away. Both of them racked with guilt and profound grief. Mick's ancestors left behind a weakness in his genes that led to an all-consuming cancer that ravaged a little body. Dolores blamed herself for missing the early signs; the bruises, the clumps of hair in the sink, and the sallow skin. Those precious months meant the difference between life and death.

Mick passed the closed door of Lily's room. He had not entered the room in months. He could almost hear the happy sounds of a little girl playing on the floor with her Playmobil figurines as he paused, his head resting on the door. She would set up intricate villages with schools, houses, restaurants, and playgrounds. Sometimes, Mick and Dolores joined her. As they quietly played, they talked about their trips together, Lily's friends on the soccer team and at school, and what Lily wanted to do in the future. She asked them crazy questions that made them all laugh. Later, in their bed, Mick remembered the quiet whispering with Dolores on how blessed they were to have a child like Lily after all the years of trying. These episodes of remembrance hit him at random and crushed him. He wanted the memories to go away and to stay.

He opened the door to the spare bedroom, now his room. Mick moved "temporarily" one week after the funeral. Dolores said sleep was impossible with him in the room, every human touch pulled her back to holding her daughter's hand in the last minutes of her life. The temporary had morphed into the permanent. Mick resented Dolores's withdrawal to her inner life, reaching for meaning through meditation, therapy, and

communing with Lily; whatever that meant. Mick focused on the practical and the rational. He helped set up a scholarship fund in Lily's name from donations from friends and family, he got back to work within days of burying her, and he drank a few times a week for his version of therapy. The spare bedroom contained a few pieces of furniture but little to show that Mick existed; a few shirts hanging in the closet, two suitcases and a computer on the small desk. Mick stripped and threw the dirty clothes in the corner of the closet. He ran his hands across the suitcases as he pulled out clean underwear, a shirt and a pair of jeans for tomorrow. Mick stared at the ceiling for several minutes before turning out the light.

The next morning, Mick slept in. Saturday was the slow day. Sometimes it seemed infinite. Saturdays used to be Lily day. They would spend the day together to give Dolores a break. As he lay in bed, he remembered the simple joy of strapping her into her seat in the back of his car as she chatted away. She skipped along with him through the grocery store aisles always on the lookout for the next item on the list, always wanting to help. Later in the day, he often took her to soccer practice and watched his long-legged daughter run around with surprising aggression for such a gentle soul. Now Saturday was a long reminder of loss.

Mick dressed and carefully folded and placed the shirts once in the closet into the now open suitcases on his bed. He put on socks and a pair of his favorite black sneakers. At the bottom of the stairs, the light streaming through the big bay windows in the family

room drew his attention. Like smoky stage lights, the sun broke into sections as it passed through the curtains, the dust in the room shimmering. One ray landed on the coffee table shining on the three photos from the hallway. Dolores had arranged them in a circle with Lily on the inside and her parents on the outside in each frame. Mick stopped with his hand grasping the banister, his eyes focused on the vision. The knock on the front door shifted Mick's attention. He released the deadbolt and opened the door. Standing on the stoop was an apparition, a girl, with the sunlight beaming from behind, her wispy hair creating a halo of yellow and white. Mick leaned back and his heart skipped. He could almost hear Lily's voice asking him to come out and kick the ball around. The vision cleared and before him stood Olivia, one of Lily's soccer friends, wearing a green shirt with colorful patches. She shifted her feet as he stared at her.

"Hello, Mister Bourne. Would you like to buy some girl scout cookies?"

Mick looked away, angry at himself for feeling hope. "Sure, Olivia. Can I have three boxes of Thin Mints."

"I miss Lily, she was nice to me, especially when I broke my wrist." Olivia handed Mick the sheet to fill in. "She always talked about you and Mrs. Bourne. She never complained about anything, even when she got sick."

Mick's voice cracked. "Thank you, Olivia. Good luck with the cookie thing."

Mick closed the door. As he turned he saw Dolores standing on the last step of the stairs, tears tracked down her drawn face, her blue eyes clouded and bloodshot but she

had a vague smile on her pale lips. He did not engage. She would want to dwell on the presence of Lily, how she still touched us. He must be strong before he is pulled back into the vortex of their shared grief and guilt. Maybe apart, they could put back the pieces of their diminished lives. Together, Mick felt they would spiral into nothingness.

Mick brushed past her and back up to his cloistered cell. He closed the door. He pulled the final items out of the closet and placed them in the suitcase on the bed. Mick picked up the dirty pants in the corner and decided they could remain as a parting reminder. He put on the black windbreaker jacket hanging on the back of the desk chair and zipped it up. He sat at the desk and pulled a single sheet of paper out of the drawer and stared at it. Mick considered how to encapsulate twelve years of joy and heartbreak, gain and loss in a few pen strokes. He settled on writing just a simple note to explain that he could not stay and live with the ghosts of their life. He turned on the flex head desk lamp and reached over to get a pen. His elbow hit the lamp and it fell off the desk with a crash. Mick reached down to retrieve the lamp and noticed a spotlight from the fallen light. The radiant circle illuminated a hand-drawn picture on the wall by the door that he had not noticed. Six-year-old Lily had drawn a set of three stick figures in thick crayon strokes on a pink sheet of construction paper. A small figure occupied the middle with large eyes and a crooked smile. On one side, a tall man with black hair and glasses stood with a soccer ball in his spindly hands. On the other, a slender woman looked at the man with a smile and her hands on the girl's shoulders. Scrawled on the bottom in red were two barely discernible words - MY FAMILY. Mick stared, his

hands sweating in his lap. He closed his eyes and leaned back his head till he faced the ceiling. With a sigh, he wiped the single tear sliding down his cheek and stood up. He murmured in a slow cadence. "Lily Love, Lily Love..." He slipped the writing paper back into the desk drawer, picked up and returned the lamp and turned off the light. Mick removed his jacket and placed it on the back of the chair. He moved over to the bed and sat down and pulled off his sneakers. Reaching into the suitcase he pulled out his favorite slippers with soft fuzzy insoles and slid them on. He picked up the closed suitcases and put them down in the hallway outside of Dolores's room ... their room.

Mick turned left at the bottom of the stairs, knowing Dolores would be on the couch, with a hot tea. She would be physically there but not present, off in a world only she inhabited with her spirits. He approached the armrest, her black hair cascading on the pillow propped in the corner. Mick saw her fingers wrapping around the blue coffee cup adorned with white and pink flowers, lilies he thought. Mick went to one knee and bent over and put his lips to her forehead. The sun warmed skin blended with his moist lips. She smiled as she reached up and grasped his hand.

"Lily is telling us she loves us and forgives us." She said

"I know. She wants us to forgive each other. She wants me to forgive myself."

Mick said.

Dolores said. "Do you think we can?"

"I'm not sure."