

Lily's New Home

"All done?" James hovered impatiently over the bonnet of his idling roadster, careful to avoid dinging the chrome marquee. His expression was equally divided between fatherly irritation and concern.

"Sure," said Lillian. She walked calmly, and refused to bring the sleeves of her white shirt down against the salt breath blowing up from the river. Her nerves were taut, tensed from the brief bout of violence. She did not revel in the aftermath cocktail of hormones and adrenaline; she'd seen what a person could become if they submitted to the melee. That joy was a line she would not cross.

James opened his door, landing in the driver's seat a moment before Lily sat herself. "No problems?"

"It was fine, James. Routine. Although if you're after details..."

James looked at Lillian's grin, and turned away. The handbrake disengaged. She knew he didn't like hearing about her work, but the embarrassment on his face pushed her on.

"He resisted at first. They always do when I come alone. But his finger, well, that didn't resist so quickly. I think it was this one," she said, wiggling her right ring finger under his nose.

"Lily..."

"It made this sound when it cracked, like when a schoolteacher whips her cane on a table."

James made a disgruntled sound, and shifted in his chair. The roadster lurched forward, freed from parking gear custody, and happily rolled along the deserted road. Lillian looked at James face, intent on the street before them, and she knew she had pushed too far. She waited a few moments - past three islands of dull glow from the low streetlamps - before speaking up again.

"Hey James, what do you think Mary's cooking tonight?" The twitch from the corner of his mouth told her she'd trodden wrong once more. Reluctantly she remembered the brief bout of raised voices and slammed doors that left James the defeated of yet another morning bout with his

wife. He'd forgotten Lily was in the garage, and was halfway down the breezy west Spread block before braking, waiting for her to catch her ride down to Forchester. She wasn't sure what they had argued about this morning; more than likely, her again.

"Something good, probably. Always is when we're late."

"Shit, I'm sorry James. This whole thing, we could have left it."

"It's fine."

"No, I could have come tomorrow. It's not like Foster's going to pay up until the end of the week anyway, especially now he's got a broken finger to get seen to."

"It's fine."

"Sure."

Lily folded her hands in her lap. A distracting repetition tapped on the vinyl floor. More streetlamps passed, growing taller as they steered away from the Witellman. "Foster will be fine. It was just his finger."

"I know."

"And he owes us. A lot."

James grunted; it was likely that Peter Foster, for having the tenacity to own a cigar importing concern on the south of Forchester instead of the north, now owed the Scarpaglio operation in excess what they both earned in a good year.

"He's good for it," Lily felt inclined to add.

"I'm sure he knew what he was getting into," replied James.

Lily knew James didn't mean for it to come out so harsh. It was more likely an ambiguous statement on pursuing entrepreneurship in Grand City. Regardless, the words hung between them, allowing the silence to gain traction. Eventually Lillian shifted to lean both arms on the open window frame and watched the buildings of the Spread grow wider. The further west they travelled, the more room the homes and cornershops had to grow and breath. The sidewalks bulged to allow for lawns and fencing, and the roads transformed into suburban single lanes. As they approached the land-grab rush of Grand City's south-west border, a residential haven of picket fences and Sunday barbecue breakfasts that seemed an entire world away from the cramped tar-stench of Forchester, Lily had an aching for

home.

It was not that she considered the Killinger household, where she had now slept in the relative shelter of the garage for two months, as home. And it wasn't the effervescent ambitions of homeownership, of pleated aprons and homebaked contentment, that sat bubbling in her chest. There was no scope for housewifery in Lillian's plans, structured and abutted to her ambitions of, despite the romance of the notion, out-and-out thuggery.

What it was that she felt was not an ache nor a longing, but a physical discontentment; the sense of belonging that she did not have. Of clanship, of mutual respect, perhaps even of the antagonism between the bookends of the garage's daily openings between James and his wife.

It wasn't love. She'd lied enough about love in her life.

Not partnership neither. What she shared with Matthew would suffice for that definition; strict business peppered with meditated violence.

She wasn't sure what it was, although she was certain that whatever it was, it didn't require any one else. But as the garage door threatened to roll back down on James, cursing beneath his breath in the bright spotlights of his car's theatre, she knew deeply, she needed it.

Lillian had the urge to tell James then, to let him know that she would leave soon, tonight; to be out of his hair and stop being the epicentre of his recent marital spats of disaffection. Surely she could find a hostel, a loft, an attic she could afford tomorrow.

The blinking mirage of Bethany, sitting cross-legged in the dark, equipped with her text book and flashlight, interrupted any chance of this admission.

"Bethany Willow Killinger!" James had the extended name rehearsed to a vaudeville patter. "Are you hiding from your mother?"

"Yes, dad."

"Again with the cooking set?"

"Yes, dad."

The twelve year old girl's look of guilt was at odds with the ease that this conversation came to the father and daughter. Lillian had been an audience to this exact exchange at least a half dozen times in her short tenure in the Killinger household garage.

“You know Janie doesn’t like you playing with her spoon set,” said James, sliding back into the car. He didn’t close the door fully as the tall roadster shuffled in with some automative grunting beside the sleek, polished coupe that James used for work. Bethany had stepped aside, and allowed a small smile for Lillian before embarking on her plaintive defence.

“It wasn’t the spoons, dad. I needed a drink, and mom was cleaning the glasses, so I used a cup from her stupid set and she-“

“Bethany, I’ve told you before. Don’t use your sister’s play kitchen.”

“But I-“

“Don’t even touch it. You’ll make life easier for all of us.” The roadster’s engine stopped, and Lily allowed the pair a moment of privacy to embrace as she reached for the large garage door. “Especially me.”

“Yes dad. So, Lily...” Lillian turned to be greeted by the mischievous enthusiasm of a twelve year old girl whom had her father tightly wrapped around her finger. “Did you kill a guy today?”

“Bethany!”

Lily allowed herself to blush, if only as an apology to James for her continued imposition on his home life, and smiled back at the girl. “Now Bethany, you know you can’t ask questions like that.”

“That’s right,” echoed James.

“In front of your dad,” she added, to the girl’s furtive delight. She watched James play at the aggravated and despairing father, and disentangled himself from his eldest. Lily respected the boundaries James laid around his family and his work; she wouldn’t really give Bethany anything that would inspire the seemingly rampant rebellious teenage nature that beleaguered parents and disciplinarians the city over.

Lily liked to think she was encouraging a general sense of curiosity, one that would serve the girl well into independence beyond puberty. Not enough to get her into real trouble, hopefully.

A kitchen clanging signalled the start of dinner. Since Lillian’s incursion into this atomic cluster, Mary and young Janie had stopped greeting James out the front of the house, his bright waves and hugs degenerated now into desultory pecks and the flick of potato mash onto his pre-emptively empty

plate. James assured Lillian that his work hours had more to do with this downgrade in affection, but Lily knew the strain she placed on James' relationship.

The driver, assuming his regular hang-dog expression, nodded lightly to Lily and left the garage into the sliver of household light. Bethany smiled at her, long hair and school dress blending in the dark. "I can bring leftovers, if you want."

"No, Beth. Thank you, but you'd better get inside now."

"What'll she do, ground me? For a fourth time?"

"I'm fine, really. Go, before you do get in trouble."

Bethany swirled and burst into the Killinger house. The door closed behind her, leaving Lillian in the dark of the garage. The two cars, one still warm, the other cool with improbable reflections in the dark polish, were regular bunkmates for Lillian. The familiar pops and wheezes as the roadster's engine cooled comforted Lillian. She navigated around the larger coupe - a mobster car if she'd ever seen one, what was Hallaran thinking? - and opened the narrow blinds of the high window. Moonlight shone through the very specific glass square in the wall, and did little to light the room.

It was enough to find her way through the clutter of the garage. She found the grimy coverlet bunched in the corner by her few nomadic belongings, and sat down. Her stomach grumbled. Maybe Bethany would bring her some of the family's leftovers under the cover of taking out rubbish? Lillian's appetite secretly hoped for a teenage girl's defiance against her mother.

She looked at the sum of her domestic life her in the Killinger's household. Two shirts and a handful of underwear. A handbag, stolen from her previous boss, larger than she'd have liked. Two envelopes that pretended at being unopened, though Lillian could recite their contents like lines of a small-town stage monologue, internally, her guilt her own audience.

She reflexively reached for one, the less stained of the two, and opened it. Inside was a brief sheet of paper, greasy and turning translucent in the corners. The writing scratched at the paper, sentiment clawing to escape.

She'd found this letter returning to her home - her mother's home - wedged beneath the support slats of the swing she had spent the better part of her childhood on. It was in the same place she found the first, undoubtedly a hopeful sequel once Mrs Dover had discovered the disappearance of the first, the suburban equivalent of her wishes and farewells wound tight in a bottle and launched into the sea. Lillian had never returned to see if a third or fourth were waiting for her.

The words did not mean too much to her, but there was a reason she could not find it in herself to throw these two scraps of sentiment away. She didn't feel a loss of connection to her mother; that distance had become irredeemable when she had left that house twelve years ago. She had only been a girl, around Beth's age, looking for an escape from a stay-at-home whore and the string of abusive men that cycled through. They were all embarrassed, ashamed; she got that.

Her mother never was, until this second letter. Lillian wasn't sure what frustrated her more; that the woman had held her hostage to the life of moll's daughter for fourteen years, or that she thought finally she could find redemption at the whims of a second scratchy letter hidden under a broken playset. She hadn't known - couldn't have known - that it was Lillian who had found the first; what made her think the second would find its intended target?

Lillian quickly shut down the inside voice that reminded her of the standing offer from that second letter of a bed and breakfast whenever she needed it.

She wasn't that low yet.

The letter was reunited with its partner. Lily took her handgun out from her pants, checked the safety, and hid it under the crumple of shirts. Her head soon followed, lying back on the car coverlet. She stared at the darkened roof and idly scratched at the traditional itch on her neck that followed indulging in any bed that wasn't her own.

Thoughts, as they often do in darkness, turned to tomorrow. There was going to be some action with a set of dockers at Forchester at some stage. She wasn't sure when. Donny had been vague to Matt about what was needed, other than a terse "You'll be there", and dramatic about-face that

the half-Irish boss was so good at. All he'd needed was some polished black boots and an officer's visor cap, and he would have fit right into those war parodies that had started showing at the theatre in Midtown.

Matthew had simply nodded at his dad and left the room as well. The air was getting thicker between them. It wouldn't have surprised Lillian if Matt had already known, tipped off by his mother at some convenient moment earlier in the day.

That whole thing between the father and son was getting nastier. She wondered what some of the others were thinking. James kept to himself, unable to say anything critical of either boss or son. What about Waylan? Surely someone like him wouldn't sit idly through all this drama?

A sliver of light appeared, and a familiar silhouette stepped through the open door. Bethany closed the door behind her and navigated around the cooling roadster to Lillian's makeshift bedding.

"I brought chicken."

"That's not yours, is it?" asked Lillian skeptically. "You have to eat too."

"Mom must have slipped me one of dad's pieces. It's like rubber."

"Sounds appetising," said Lily. Her stomach betrayed her sarcasm with an audible growl.

"I filled up on potatoes. You have it."

Lillian smiled gratefully at the girl. "How is it inside?" she asked between mouthfuls. The chicken really wasn't that bad.

"Awkward. They're not talking, Janie asked Dad why he's upsetting Mom."

"Ouch."

"She's so dumb," said Bethany.

"She's only seven, Beth. Things are more direct when you're that young." Flashbacks of the swing swept past Lily. She used to get so high she could see over the fence, until she was scolded for being a peeping nancy. Nevermind that the Thompson boy would peek back through the broken pickets when her mother was with a client. No one ever scolded him for being a little pervert.

It was only fair that his big bug-eye, framed by the wooden grain between the pickets, got poked by a stick she'd broken from the tree. She

couldn't sit properly for a week for the whooping she'd received for that.

"So what are you doing tomorrow?" asked Beth, interrupting Lillian's mental cinema. "Anything fun?"

"Not really. You?"

"It's a school day."

"So no, then." Lily considered how much of the dock strikes the girl would be aware of. Probably not so much that it'd mean a thing to her one way or the other. "I'll be working with Matthew again tomorrow. I think we'll be at Forchester mostly."

"So is Matthew your boss?"

"No," said Lillian. From inside she could hear the general muffled post-dinner recitations of dishes and running water, accented with three brassy rings of the Killinger phone. "We're partners, more like."

"As in... boyfriend and girlfriend?" Bethany broached the question with a paradoxical teenage reluctance and conciseness.

"Nothing like that," Lillian said, laughing despite herself. "Perhaps I should have said business partners."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

"Well, I just thought..." The girl hovered, for a moment unsure of whether to go ahead or not. "I thought maybe you could be like that, y'know, that Miss Parker."

"Bonnie Parker? Beth, she ended up with a bullet through her forehead."

"But they died together! It was so--"

The girl was interrupted from her wistfulness by a polite cough. James' silhouette stood in the doorway, blocking the light from inside. He stepped into the garage, his features drawn down into seriousness. "Back inside, Beth. Your mother needs help with the clean up."

"That was your job tonight."

"I have to go out for a while." James pulled his daughter in as she sulked past and kissed her on the forehead. "Sleep well, and don't razz them too much."

Lillian waved goodnight to the girl, and said, "Wasteful, is what it was."

"I was going to say romantic," said Bethany, and she closed the door

behind her. There was the now-familiar steely scrape as James hauled up the garage door. Outside, the night sky had truly settled its dull, hazy blanket, enveloping the cricket calls and overwhelming fog of Mary's peonies perfunctorily lined in their low beds.

Lily helped James with the last stretch of the garage door. "What's happening? Where are you going?"

"We're going to Forchester," said James, shuffling to the driver's side of the roadster. He opened the door and slid into the seat in one smooth motion, despite the hunch of his shoulders and squish of his belly against the wheel.

"At this time of night? The markets would be closed now—"

"It was Rosa was on the phone. Matt's had trouble on the waterfront."

Lillian landed in the passenger's side, forgetting her letters and her gun. "Go," she said, and they left the Killinger household behind.