

Family Ways

When they talk about Lily running away from home, her mother says, "You kept on doing it." She leans back in the nursing home bed and nibbles peanut brittle. "You keep on and on," she says, as though Lily were still a little girl.

"It was only once," Lily insists, but her mother, her hair barely streaked with grey, is certain and this makes Lily uncertain. It is why she dreads these visits, but once here is unable to leave. She begins to see the fear in everything she does.

It's there in her shadow on the wall, chasing her up the stairs at night, till she turns off the last light and pulls up the blankets. There were travelling salesmen and Jehovah's Witnesses knocking at her door, while she hid in the curtains watching. At sixteen she'd been braver, or running away had been easier. It meant sneaking out her window at night, crushing pansies in the flower bed. It meant running down the sidewalk in bare feet, then stopping by the park to put her shoes on. It meant watching for Dick to come round the corner, first his shadow, then him, moving towards her under anxious trees.

Lily thinks of Dick in perpetual motion. He probably drives a big truck now with lots of gears to be changed and knobs to be adjusted. At nineteen he screeched around corners, jerking the steering wheel with graceful defiance. He took Lily for rides with the windows all down, the music blaring. It was his idea to go for a ride late at night when everyone was sleeping. It was Lily's idea to never go back again. She has to admit it was impulse. The notion to run away came over her like a revelation. She left her parents a note that said she was never coming back, and good-bye, but explained nothing. (Lily thinks explanations come later when there's nothing else to do.) Instead of wasting time on a note, she folded up her clothes, as though putting her room in order, and packed a small suitcase which she left behind on the bed when she climbed out the window.

That suitcase is something Lily has never lived down. Her mother found it very annoying that Lily could forget it. She was not sensible about it, as her mother would point out years later about everything she did. "Do what you want," her mother would say. "I give up!" and she'd throw up her hands, but keep them clenched in a most determined way. It was because of her the family had survived as well as they had. They could thank her for getting them moved into those low rental units. They were ugly grey places with flat black roofs, and drains that always seemed plugged, but still you needed a place to live. She was a practical woman who could fix a toaster or change a tire. She could flush newborn kittens down the toilet without flinching, at the same time refusing to bring flowers into the house, no matter what the occasion, because they died too soon. Maybe she would have been different, softer, if Lily's father had been around more, but he was away on business most of the time. Always important jobs with different construction firms, though exactly what he did was never clear. He could have been famous if he put his mind to it. Lily believed that then. Her mother said he spent all the money instead of supporting the family, but there was more to it than that. He had a dream of giving them everything. There was always a new city, sometimes a distant country figuring in his plans, where their suddenly-transformed family was casual about chandeliers and roses.

"Face facts," Lily's mother used to say. "Get a steady job. No more *this time... next time*"... Her face beneath the kitchen light was stupid and flat. It reminded Lily of a plate.

"We've got to get out of this hole," her father would say, and curse, and Lily, washing the dishes, felt her body tighten. She knew an argument was coming. Her mother would bring up the coloured television and the new car— he'd been excited about them at first, they'd given him hope. Now the television needed repairs, the car payments were due. Lily would be crying into the dish water, her father would be shouting, her mother would shout back.

Now, at the nursing home, there's no need to shout, or even talk loudly. Her mother's voice has become deeper, coarser. She has to clear her throat a lot. With her hair in a braid, her teeth out, she looks like a monkey. You couldn't help laughing at her, even the nurses do it.

"Your father always wanted to be a big wheel," her mother said one day. "I suppose he did his best." She dismissed him with a shrug.

Lily can't admire her, feels she drove him away, though her mother would say she always accepted him back. She thinks her memory is good. Little details like whether the lamp was working or not, and the colour of the kitchen walls are just as important now as her husband's return. There were always slight variations, yet each home-coming was

the same. Lily remembers things too. They might have been having weiners and beans for supper, her mother and her, eating in silence around the woodgrain arborite table when her father came in with a bottle of champagne. There would be kisses and hellos. He would insist they have a drink. Lily might run up stairs and put on a new dress he'd brought her. It was ghostly the way he suddenly materialized out of the night. They were never really surprised to see him, but he could startle them much the way a bird hitting the window pane makes Lily jump—then all resumes as before — back to the classifieds, the simple ad in the personals she runs periodically just in case he still exists or needs help. You could never be sure that he wouldn't reappear again, just as he used to. Her mother would watch him feed weiners to the dog, then begin slicing mushrooms and frying thick steaks. She just kept on cutting and frying while he refilled the glasses with champagne that looked like silver. Her mother was like that, never asking where he'd been, or why, though it might have been months.

Lily wondered sometimes where he lived when he was away from them — what he had for dinner, if he did crossword puzzles at night, as he did at home. You read in the paper about men who led two lives, with families in different cities. That could have been him, but Lily feels sure he was alone, because that's how she remembers him, sitting at the kitchen table after they'd all gone to bed, or slipping out of the house late at night. She thinks of herself leaning in doorways watching him gaze into space, or stare at himself in the mirror, rubbing his chin with one hand. She remembers she used to sit on the edge of the bath tub watching him shave. The white lather was like a mask all over his face, his eyes very blue, his lips thin and red. Every now and then the eyes in the mirror would glance back at her where she sat on the hard edge of the tub. Her mother might come round the corner, and he'd talk about the deals and contracts and piles of money to be made. There were always the promises to each of them, to himself.

"You'll be able to go to finishing school this fall," he told her "You are old enough now."

"What?"

"He means boarding school," her mother said in a tone that meant she didn't believe it. (Years and years later, her mother in a tightly made hospital bed, says she made sure there was enough money for Lily to go to boarding school. "After all that business with Dick I thought it would be good for you." "Dick had nothing to do with anything," Lily says in a huffy voice, but her mother doesn't believe her. "Besides, my fees were never paid. I was kicked out. That was why I left." "No, no," her mother says. "You were sent home because you got sick. You went on that starvation diet.")

Lily had stood in the bathroom imagining boarding school as an uncomfortable place with hard beds. She began thinking about her clothes and how shabby they were and how out of place she'd be — how strange, how unlike home it would be. It was the first time she'd questioned one of her father's schemes. He was humming some song about the last waltz as he went on shaving. Stroke by stroke his face emerged from the thick white lather. When he turned to take the towel from her, the skin was amazingly pink and vulnerable. His eye was watering. He'd got a bit of soap in it. "Give me a towel, quick, quick," he was saying, and his voice was urgent, dependent. She knew she'd go to that school, refusing to go would be mutiny. His eye twitched and tears ran out of it. Lily felt immeasurable panic.

"You never wanted to grow up," her mother tells her now.

Lily explains it differently. Listening to his dreams was one thing. Being swallowed up in a dream was another.

"Come down to earth," her mother says, and shakes her head, as though Lily is a lost cause, always was a lost cause.

Lily has tried to prove to her that she can be a success in her own way. She runs the antique shop. She sat on jury duty last week. It's a sign she's respected in the town. Still her mother insists she needs something, she's too pale, she ought to wear rouge, small boys are afraid of her.

It makes Lily think her mother just has a knack for spoiling things. She used to complain about Dick's car because it was loud. She called him 'that boy' and said she didn't trust him. Though her mother always seemed to be watching — her eyelids were too small, her eyes seldom blinked — she never really looked at anything. She was always so sure she knew what things were. Lily knew her mother was wrong, wrong especially about Lily herself, but it was easier sometimes to act the part her mother had chosen for her. It gave Lily satisfaction to sneak off with Dick. It was not just for herself that she did it. It was something her mother would disapprove of, yet seemed to expect.

Lily's hands were clammy as she drove that night in the car with Dick. She held them cupped in her lap so that the moist palms weren't touching. She watched the road come up shiny and black under streetlights, then turn to gravel when the streetlights ended. The ocean appeared intermittently closer and closer beside them.

She was looking out the window, looking through her own reflection. Now and then the eyes in the glass caught hers, but it was like seeing another person, not an image of herself. There were her father's question-mark eyebrows. There was her mother's mouth, two straight lines that looked buttoned tight. The features came together, blurred

and ghostly, yet seemed to be separate from each other, like pieces of a puzzle that she might try to fit if she took the time.

She turned away from the window and sat sideways in her seat watching Dick drive. He was whistling with the radio, his hands balanced one on either side of the steering wheel. He was a good driver. You could trust him, she thought. When he slowed down in the gravel and took one hand off the wheel, Lily moved over so that he could put his arm around her. She hadn't told him yet that she was running away, and she began wondering now just where she would go with no money and no possessions. It seemed to her then that marrying Dick would have solved everything. It was years before she realized that many men had served similar purposes in her life. They remained acts of defiance or means to various ends, but never became people. Still, she gives herself credit for maybe really feeling something that time, the edge of his fingers against her cheek was enough to make her feel dizzy. There was something perfect about it. Those kinds of things don't happen every day. They were so young, it's enough to make Lily cry.

Dick pulled off onto the sand, parked the car, turned out the lights. You could smell the red vinyl seats and an earthy, musty smell that Lily always associates with old cars, and with Dick.

They talked very little before he began to kiss her, cautiously, almost formally, as though he were wading into cold water. She told him not to do it but secretly admired the raspberry splotches on her neck. In the dark they were wet and tingling, in the mirror tomorrow oval-shaped, reminding her of his mouth. Now, when she winds her hair in a bun, twisting it up off her neck, she can hardly believe it, the way she unbuttoned her blouse and took it off. She reached toward someone as easily as raking the lawn or picking a flower, though even then if she happened to think about her mother it was spoiled. Sometimes she was even scared. That night she was jumpy even for her. She guessed that her parents might try to find her, but not that it would happen so quickly, before she'd even gotten away.

Dick and Lily sat up as headlights came down the road, lighting up their faces, and making the corners of the car dark and hulking. A policeman stared in the window, and Lily refused to get out. Then she got out and ran in the gravel, ran and fell, and the policeman grabbed her arm as Dick's car cruised past. His face was narrow and pale. Their eyes met for a second, and she felt him look beyond her. He stared at the road, as though afraid of hitting a pot hole.

She's tried to make excuses for the way he left her like that. No doubt he was scared, and the policeman probably told him to clear off. Still, she feels he betrayed her, took something away from her. She never spoke to him again, and even if she'd wanted to, her mother

always told him she wasn't in. And then of course they moved again, moved many times after that. Lily supposes it was all for the best. And not knowing whether he loved her or not (she never did tell him she was running away, or that she wanted to get married) means she can believe whatever she wants.

It was silly in a way. You could call it an adolescent crush. Her mother would never believe that. She kept screaming that Lily would get pregnant out till all hours of the night in a car with that boy. All the lights were on, every light in the house was blaring and shrill, like her mother's voice. Lily's stomach was knotted, like the shadows in the far corners of the room. Her mother seemed upset out of all proportion. Big ideas, she was saying, and sneering, making fun of Lily's note, and the suitcase she'd left behind on the bed. Lily began to feel she'd done it all wrong, that she'd be closer to being right if she did get pregnant. Her mother was always making everything ugly, Dick was to be avoided, men were alien — her mother was married and she knew. She now complains bitterly that Lily is a spinster. Lily has thought seriously about getting married a few times in her life, but always decides against it. Years ago it was small personal details that troubled her — a receding hairline, or overly inquisitive nose. Now it's because she's too busy, she plans to expand, she may move to a distant city. These aren't plans like her father's. For one thing they can really happen. For another, she has no illusions about happiness.

Then, when her father looked at her and said what a beautiful girl she was, Lily could believe him, and when he said she'd go to boarding school and that everything would be better, that they would make a princess of her, she willed herself to believe with fairy tale pictures of crowns and castles. It wasn't the way he meant it, but that didn't matter.

"But why, Lily? Why did you do it?" her father asked. He was waiting on the porch for her when the police car pulled up. Her running away bothered him, perhaps because he sensed a confusion like his own when he slipped out of the house late at night on some money-making scheme. Lily didn't answer. She was standing in the circle of light cast by the porch light. A flurry of moths and fuzzed insects bumped around it like a thousand heartbeats.

"You've got to trust me," he said, as though he thought she might have been running away from him. His arms tightened around her. He was holding her against him as much for his own protection as hers. She began to cry, though she wasn't sad or happy, just tired. She felt then that she'd run away for this moment of being close to him, of feeling trapped and safe all at once. But she didn't do it for attention as her mother said. She really did mean to run away, that would account

for the feeling of failure when he said her mother was so angry she never wanted to see her again. It would also explain the urge to break away and run down the street when he said, "It's not that bad here, is it?" as though he thought she were calling him a no-good. All his energy, all his plans seemed to shrink. His voice was flat, uninspired, ready to quit. He was holding onto her for strength.

"Come on inside you two," her mother called out, and Lily felt fear all over her like pinpricks as she walked into the living room behind her father, but there was no need. Her mother angry was the same woman Lily confronted every other day.

"And don't come to me if you're pregnant," she shouted. It was like the punctuation mark for everything she said.

"She isn't," Lily's father said shortly, as though it were out of the question.

The living room was in chaos. Once again they were in the middle of packing up and preparing to move. There were half-filled boxes everywhere, overturned chairs, and piles of books and papers.

"I always hated this place," her mother said suddenly. She was staring at the curtains she'd made for the front window. They were still hanging and pulled close against the night. Tomorrow morning they would have to come down. Tomorrow the moving would begin whether she was ready or not. Tomorrow her husband would drive off, promising to meet them in a month's time, and maybe he would, maybe he wouldn't. Lily watched her mother, whose slippers were all grey and knocked down at the heels, and dragged at her feet as she paced the floor. Her father was saying something, she can't remember the exact words, but the tone of voice comes back to her. He must have been saying they should forget all this, that they would start fresh.

"How many chances do we get?" her mother asked. It was something that Lily wondered too. Her mother's raised voice said she already knew the answer, though the rest of her wanted to hope. If he'd reached out to touch her then, she would have let him, or so Lily likes to think. If her mother had shown more faith in him, or could at least have shown that she loved him — or maybe if he'd touched her anyways, just because he wanted to — everything might have been different for all of them. Maybe he would have come back. Maybe he never would have gone. Maybe it was Lily's fault too. Maybe if she'd been in bed they would have kissed, or if she'd never run away at all, maybe her father would have felt he could come home and face them, no matter what happened. That was what they all needed. Somewhere to go no matter what happened, yet none of them trusted each other enough. They were all silent, their faces tightly stretched under the lights. Very soon they went to bed.

In the morning Lily and her mother stood on the top step of the porch waving good-bye to her father. Her mother wasn't dressed yet because she wasn't feeling well. She held her housecoat tightly at the neck and refused to smile. Lily was smiling for both of them. Her feet were bare, her toes were curled over the edge of the step. Her father was freshly shaved and wore a beige windbreaker. Lily could tell he wasn't thinking at all about them. He was already on his way to wherever he was going. It always seemed easy for him to drive away from them. He was almost relieved as he reached into his pocket for the car keys. There was the excitement of a new chance in the way he walked jerkily across the lawn. He beeped the horn at them as he drove off. Movement and change were still possibilities for him, but she and her mother remained on the steps, rigid and inert until he was out of sight. It wasn't the last time they saw him, but Lily remembers that careless horn beeping as though it were the final word. When they went back into the kitchen, Lily's mother rushed around making chocolate milk. She pretended it was just for Lily, but she sat down at the kitchen table and had a glass too.

"He's probably a rubbie on some street corner," Lily says now. "Goddamn rubbies. I hate them." She feels like crying. She's standing by the window in her mother's room, looking down at the road where everyone has gone home for the night. Every once in a while she gets feeling like this — like there's a black hole inside her, and that her father was shiftless, a bum. She comforts herself by thinking that her mother and she are united, that they are alike. They both hate men.

"You shouldn't talk that way about your father," her mother says.

"You always do it," Lily says angrily. No matter what she says, her mother contradicts it.

"Well I hope he's alright." Her mother sits in bed with two pillows behind her back, looking very strong. She turns the dial of her transistor radio. It's her way of saying the visit is over. "I'll bet he made it," she adds.

Lily reaches for another piece of peanut brittle to prolong her stay. "Do you think so?" she asks. She stares at her mother. She can come out with the most unexpected things. Sometimes she seems like a stranger. Lily hopes that this time they are talking about the same person, that there might be a common truth for both of them. She wants to believe that her mother is right.