

# DISORDERS

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## Making the Bed

THE BODY OF FOUR-YEAR-OLD Tim is all soft curves. His back is swayed, giving roundness to a perfect belly. His skin is as silky as bread dough powdered with flour. He stands in a sea of bath-time bubbles and plastic: a tugboat, a waterwheel and pail, a tiny dolphin with a tail that flicks when its crank is wound.

Just home from work and still in her cosmetician's smock, Lily leans against the vanity and says, I had a call from headquarters today. I'm being considered for that buyer position I told you about.

On his knees at the edge of the bath Henry makes no comment, just nods and pushes the tugboat through the bridge formed by Tim's legs.

She folds her arms, then a moment later points to a dark brown fleck on Tim's thigh that looks like a bit of dirt. Henry pinches the fleck between the nails of his thumb and index finger. The tick hangs onto Tim's skin, pulling it taut, then comes away. On Tim's thigh a bead of blood replaces dark brown. She takes a Band-Aid from a small box behind the mirror, says, You get Lyme disease from ticks.

Henry crushes the tick, cuts it in half with his thumbnail, drops it into the toilet bowl, flushes it away.

Henry and Lily used to talk about work. She knows that in his head he can picture a connector block—a tangled mess of wire, an unmade puzzle with an ill-fitting piece waiting to be discovered and replaced. Even for the messiest of jobs a once-loose copper wire will solidly wrap its terminal—telephone lines will be restored—in ten minutes or less.

And Henry, threading his way through Toronto's east-end streets to his next call, used to choose routes that passed by the Ultra Mart Drug at Danforth and Greenwood, the store where Lily was promoted to Head Cosmetician a year ago. He liked to see her in action, to hear her say, You've got to test foundation colour on your jaw line, in natural light too. Or: A couple of drops of Alpha Keri in the bath will soothe even winter skin.

Women listen to her. He says it's because she's a beauty: eyes as large as a child's, thick lashes, a wide brow tapering to a small chin, near-black hair swooped up into her latest creation. She's trim too. After Tim was born it was only a couple of weeks before she was back in a size four.

She tries to remember the last time Henry dropped by the store. Three months ago? At least. She wonders if he ever hesitates in the store parking lot, thinking he just might stop in before continuing on his way. She wonders if maybe she should stop picking up extra shifts. But it's so much easier to be at work where she's capable and praised, where there's little time to contemplate.

As he has each day for the past three weeks, Henry inspects Tim's thigh and lays a palm on Tim's forehead. Then, seemingly doubtful of his ability to detect a degree or two increase in temperature, he places a thermometer in Tim's mouth.

Well? Lily says.

Again today, the final day of the incubation period for Lyme disease, there is no malaise, no fever, no telltale ring of inflamed skin, the bite like a bull's eye at its centre.

He's fine, Henry says.

He tousles Tim's hair, surprises her when he presses his lips to hers and lingers a little longer than for the usual goodbye. She feels a calmness similar to the one she savours after she and Henry finally collapse, one of them on top of the other. Spent. Satisfied. Almost convinced that she loves him the way she should.

The calmness reminds her too of the months following her vow of *I will*, the months when she set up house. In the mornings she rearranged the two chairs with orange vinyl seats that she bought second-hand, the card table Henry found behind a building and mended with a length of dowel, the coffee table and couch the previous tenants left behind. She napped in the afternoons,

tired as she was with the extra weight and sleeping on her side rather than her front. She would get up in time to whip up the tuna casserole he loved, or the Shake and Bake chicken she made when drumsticks were on sale, sometimes even a dessert. Pudding or tinned fruit. Jello layered with whipped cream.

Once Henry is off, down the hallway toward the staircase and the Bell telephone van parked at the curb, she pulls her son into her arms and tickles him as he wriggles loose. She makes a show of lunging for him, fingers grazing his backside as he escapes her reach. From the bathroom doorway he eyes this lighthearted mother, uncertainty plain on his face.

Alone, she sits on the edge of the bathtub. She holds herself still in an attempt to prolong what she makes out to be hopefulness. In her second interview for the buyer position she was told the job was hers. She had held off celebrating. Happiness is elusive, fleeting, like water in cupped hands. But with the possibility of Lyme disease gone, she lets herself think for the first time of a nameplate reading *Lily Harcourt* and an orderly desk where she could do something admirable, where she could do something exactly right.

Back in high school, she and her girlfriends would burst through the doors of the Eastdale Collegiate cafeteria, arms looped around each other's shoulders, heads thrown back in high-pitched laughter. Her eyes seldom strayed to Henry Harcourt, always leaning against the radiator, always watching, always there just outside the cafeteria doors. She was out of his league.

At six foot two he was among the tallest boys at Eastdale, nearly as tall as Nick Staikos, the boy she used to go out with. The likeness went no further. With his pale blue eyes, his nondescript nose lightly dusted with freckles and his sandy-coloured hair hanging a little long, Henry could have passed for a skinny surfer or a member of a rock band. Nick was the opposite. His eyes were so dark that the boundary between the iris and the pupil was difficult to make out. And an extra twenty pounds was sculpted to his shoulders, biceps and pecs. His lips were fuller too. *Elvis lips* was what she said.

Their senior year of high school she spent the bulk of the Valentine's Day dance in a locked stall of the girls' change room. Elbows on her knees, face pressed to her palms, mascara smeared beneath her eyes, she sat on the lid of a toilet and wondered at Nick daring to bring that mopey girl to the dance. If he was trying to make her jealous, well, he just couldn't. She wouldn't put up with that.

She washed her face, reapplied her mascara, glossed her lips, powdered her nose and chin. Just as *Stairway to Heaven* began to play she stepped into the gym. Her eyes lit on Henry, the only boy of any consequence near the change room door.

As she had expected, he was surprised she knew his name and eager later that evening when she placed his hand beneath her blouse and guided it to her breast. Only the twinge of guilt she felt, as he held her hand and said he would call, was different than she had thought when she asked him to dance.

He did his best to please her. He lifted weights. He waited by her locker, sometimes tucked red licorice, *Flare* magazine, or cards with puppies, cupids or rainbows inside. For her birthday he planned a nighttime picnic at Cherry Beach. Waves rocking. Stars twinkling. A tea-towel-covered six-quart basket filled with candles, cupcakes, Moody Blue and a small velvet box. The birthday picnic was cut short. She had promised to meet up with friends. Henry slumped. But on joining the others, she proudly showed the fine gold chain with floating heart he had earlier fastened around her neck. Girlfriends sank into their seats, arms crossed, bottom lips jutting forward. He pressed back his shoulders and straightened his spine, as the girls said, He's just so sweet.

The two of them sat that night, Henry with his hand on her thigh, Lily with her temple resting on his shoulder and so full of hope that she might come to want what the others seemed to see.

She wore the necklace each day, the small heart in plain view just beneath the hollow at the base of her throat. Often, her fingertips flitted to the necklace, slid along the fine chain, then lingered at the heart. Often, Nick was approaching in the school hallway, his eyes on her until he had passed.

For nearly a year Lily has overseen the cosmetics buying for the Scarborough region of Ultra Mart Drug. Her skirts are longer

than they used to be. And she carries a briefcase too. Her boss says she has got real instinct about items to double stock, that inventory has never been so bang-on with demand.

Henry has been willed his grandmother's place, an apple orchard and farmhouse with a wrap-around verandah. The farm is on the south side of Vineland, just over an hour from Toronto if the traffic's not too bad.

Lily is sitting in the kitchen chair she just moved out to the narrow porch of the house they rent, a newspaper open to the *Real Estate* section of the classifieds spread on her lap. Henry and Tim till the strip of earth alongside the porch. As the sun filters through the thin, spring leaves of age-old trees giving the air the faintest hint of yellow-green, she thinks of a house with an attached garage, a linen closet and maybe even a small office. With the proceeds from the sale of the farm, they could easily buy.

As Tim's fist opens dropping sunflower seeds onto the soil, Henry leans his chin against hands clasped on top of the butt end of a hoe. I've made an inquiry, he says.

She marks the position of a listing for a bungalow with her finger.

There's an opening in the service department of Bell's St. Catharines office, he says. It's just fifteen minutes from the farm.

For a moment she wonders if she simply assumed he would sell. He spent quite a bit of time fixing up the place. But he called all the painting and the new roof *investments*. She's certain he did.

No way, she says. I'm not living in that old place. The basement floor is dirt. And where am I supposed to work? The cosmetics counter at the rinky-dink St. Catharines store?

Tim stands up from his crouching position at Henry's feet. Henry looks at her as though he dares her to say another word, as though, if she does, she'll be sorry she did. But Tim lifts his chin to speak. My school is a castle, he says.

She almost ignores the statement, almost dismisses it as a non sequitur of a child speaking aloud a game played in his head, but Henry glances away from her too quickly, too quickly turns his attention to the soil at his feet.

Once she is standing, Henry, his eyes still lowered, tells her that he took Tim to the open house for kindergarten students at Vineland Public School, that he thought he should check it out before raising the possibility of a move. He says that Tim grinned

from ear to ear when he saw the kindergarten room, the cardboard drawbridge at the door, the golden crowns covered in macaroni, the tinfoil-wrapped shields hanging on the wall, each with a construction paper coat of arms.

She wants to yell, to say that Henry can't stand that she has a career, that her paycheque is bigger than his. She even goes so far as to open her mouth. But like a fish she silently gapes. The way he looked at her a moment ago has made her uncertain of what an onslaught might set loose. Thinking better than to hurl accusations, she closes her mouth.

It's best to sit in silence, the newspaper trembling ever so slightly in her hands, wondering if Henry, solemnly poking seeds into soil and tilting a watering can, is thinking of the note he found in his locker just after her birthday picnic at Cherry Beach, the note he crumpled into a ball once she had dismissed it with a shrug, the note with hearts floating above each *i* on the page, the note that read *Lily is a cheat*.

It's best to sit in silence trying not to regret that she slouched in her seat, a smirk on her face, as Mrs. Newton stood at the front of the classroom lecturing, holding up a package of small pink pills and a foil square with a distinctive circular ridge.

By mid-August the sunflower seeds have drunk themselves to seedlings and the seedlings have swelled to thickset stalks supporting heavy buds. The day the flowers finally bloom a squirrel squats on the porch, its seed-filled cheeks stretched taut, its paws holding a sunflower head while yellowed teeth pry loose a seed. When Henry's knuckles rap the inside of the front room window, the squirrel drops the flower and scampers away. After dinner, Henry places a mothball at the base of each stalk. But when Lily complains that the stink reminds her of itchy childhood sweaters brought from the attic at the first hint of cold, he takes the mothballs from the garden, places them in an empty mayonnaise jar and screws the lid tightly closed.

So now the stalks are headless. And, standing at the front room window, his nose just meeting the sill, Tim begins to wail. His cries soften to whimpers only when Henry comes in the door from work and scoops Tim up into his arms.

Lily's arms are crossed, polished nails pressing into her skin. I was handling that, she says. You don't give me a chance.

He lowers Tim to the floor and nudges him toward her. But Tim clings to Henry's thigh, as she knew he would.

When Tim was conceived, Lily's and Henry's names were melded together, pronounced in the Eastdale Collegiate corridors as a single word: *LilyandHenry*. That she sometimes went to Cherry Beach, that she sometimes lay there with Nick under the stars or in the back seat of his father's car, was a shameful secret she told to no one. By the time she knew she was pregnant, Nick hadn't spoken to her in weeks. She couldn't have told him that it might be his child. Any claim would have been tentative, utterly humiliating, impossible to say so long as she had a shred of pride. And what would have come of telling him anyway? He wouldn't have married her. That baby inside her belly, it belonged to Henry. She hoped. She prayed. She wanted it to be that way.

Lily scoots up the steps of the porch in stockings and a suit, still too warm, although the sun has set. She had dinner with two brand managers and a sales rep from Revlon. And she's late getting home once again.

In near darkness she makes her way toward Tim's bed but finds no child amid the nest of swirled sheets. Despite the pajamas lying on the bed, the toys strewn about the floor, the overflowing laundry basket beside the chest of drawers, despite all the evidence that her son continues to inhabit the room, she can think only of the overlong hours she keeps at work and the ease with which she lets Henry pick up the slack at home. And for an alarming moment she wonders if he and Tim are gone.

As she hears them coming through the front door, she remembers that Henry hadn't got up with the alarm that morning, that he and Tim almost always drive to the farm on his days off. The relief is sudden and intense, like the cold slap of a lake on a summer day.

While she helps Tim into his pajamas, she catches snippets of his trip to the farm: a nest in a tree, a stepladder to get it down, a feather in his pocket, a basket of apples he picked by himself, a worm way inside the one he found with a hole in the skin.

Once Tim quiets, she sits on the edge of his bed counting the few weekends that Henry hasn't worked in recent months. He hasn't complained to his supervisor that he has been shortchanged in his allotment of weekends off, that his days off too often fall midweek when she is at work. Nor has she said a word. She'll talk to Henry. A weekend at the farm just might do a world of good.

In the front room she stops just short of the empty chair where he usually sits. Listening for the creaking floorboard that will tell her where he is, she catches a glimmer of movement in the window and sees him stooped, uprooting the headless stalks alongside the porch.

The screen door swings its way shut behind her as she steps onto the small square of lawn. Her heels sink into soft earth like they do in the dreams where she tries to run but cannot easily lift her feet.

Standing up straight now, Henry seems a shadow, vague except for eyes flickering reflected light. I enrolled Tim in kindergarten in Vineland, he says.

Even as she says, I'm not moving, she knows he has not asked her to, that they are leaving her behind. Swallowing, blinking back tears he wouldn't see in the dark, she thinks that this moment has always been lurking, unstoppable, a step or two behind her back. It was cast that first night, in the gym, when she placed herself in Henry's arms and cared only whether Nick saw.

She feels she must offer up something that will become the official explanation, something that will tidy up those stray bits of endless surmising that can't possibly do any good. Work is really important to me, she says.

When he says, We'll have weekends, she knows it's because he is gentle, because he heard her snuffle, quiet as it was, because giving up all at once is hard for him too.

She nods in the dark.

When she told Henry she was pregnant she felt the warmth, the stability of the arms holding her. She had already told her mother. You lie in the bed you make, was all that she said. And that only after she slapped Lily hard across the face.

He stroked her hair, said they would work it out. He would get a job. His uncle, a foreman at Bell, might help.



And she thought that with a bit of luck everything would be okay, that with a little remaking, the bed could be tidied, the rumpled sheets pressed flat.

Her wedding dress, once intended for the prom, was tight across her belly and, because it was a morning in the early months, nausea made her pale. As she turned toward Henry to say her vows, she took in the borrowed suit, the pressed back shoulders, the devotion in his face, and for a moment, until she made a solemn promise to be a good wife, the words *I will* remained lodged in her throat.

The evening before Henry and Tim are set to move, she collects Tim's few remaining books from the front room floor. She slips into his room, hears his shallow breathing, lightly touches a flushed cheek. Sitting on the edge of his bed, she reads to her sleeping son.

*Goodnight room*

*Goodnight moon*

*Goodnight cow jumping over the moon*

*Goodnight light and the red balloon*

*Goodnight bears*

*Goodnight chairs ....*

She closes the book, feels the sting of coming tears. She pulls a flannel sheet to just under his chin, leans close to tuck a stray curl behind a tiny ear. His arms reach for her neck. His lips soft as a whisper brush her cheek. These lips are full, cherub-like.

Elvis lips, in fact.

