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Lily

Lily was not a pretty girl. I'd known that ever since she was born. She was quite a hairy baby, very dark. She was born with bushy hair, with eyebrows that almost met over her nose and that never thinned out. Her eyes were quite small, but over time they began to gleam. She had long, delicate little fingers and toes, with curved and shiny nails that were never sharp, even when I cut them. Jovan kissed them all the time. Although he would have preferred a son, when he saw Lily, his face lost all its authority, all its sternness, becoming round and soft. His eyes misted over whenever he saw her. He'd take careful hold of her little fingers and toes, gently kiss them and nuzzle his face in them. *Liliana, Lily, Lilikins*, he cooed while kissing her.

She was meant to be called Petra, after my mother, and if we'd had a son he'd have been named Risto, after Jovan's father. But Jovan started calling her Lily, after his mother, when he first laid eyes on her, and we never discussed the issue of her name any further. Lily stayed Lily, after his dead mother.

Jovan didn't like my mother at all. She reminded him of poverty and illness. After my father died, she lived alone in the village, poor and quite sick. She couldn't get up out of bed. We sent money to my brother, and he and his wife went to see her and looked after her as much as they could. The rest of the time she just lay there alone with a sour smell that clung to her, the smell of slow death. Every now and then a neighbor went over to help her. Jovan wouldn't let me go and look after her. That's why he regularly sent money for her instead. Before Lily was born, I'd wait until he was away on business and then I'd take the train to her place. I'd bake her some bread, cook her something, stroke the back of her bony hands, kiss her forehead, and take the last train back home at night. Whenever I showed up there, the neighbors shot daggers at me. They looked at me as if I were some kind of murderer. My brother stopped liking me as well, and his wife refused to have anything to do with me.

Jovan found out once that I'd left the house when I was pregnant. "Do you want to get sick?" he yelled, even though my mother wasn't suffering from anything contagious. "Do you want to kill my child?" he shouted, turning red with rage.

Since Lily was born, I've never managed even once to take her to my mother's so she could see her. I waited for Lily to spring up and start walking, so that we could sneak off to the village when Jovan was away on business. But Lily was a bit slow. She started walking late, and when she did start, she walked like a young fawn. She wasn't like the other children, with a strong, lumbering gait. Her steps were tentative, fearful, and she was frail. Jovan felt like crying whenever he looked at her, and the whole time he just carried her in his arms and kissed her. Then she'd laugh a little, although Lily didn't laugh much at all.

When we took her out for a walk in the stroller, the women in the neighborhood would stop to look at her, as they did with all the other little children. When she turned one, she didn't look like a girl at all. Her hair was still short, with thick black curls. She looked more like a boy. "May your little son live a long and healthy life," the neighborhood women would say. Jovan would get very angry. "She's a girl, her name's Lily," he corrected them. "Then put a hair clip on her so that people know she's a girl," shot back one of the bolder women.

When Lily turned one and a half, and she was walking more confidently, I decided to get her ears pierced. At first, I was afraid to tell Jovan. But he immediately approved because he felt slighted

whenever people said that Lily was a boy, and when they didn't say that she was pretty. I took her to get her ears pierced. After that she cried for the rest of the day, and I with her, her little earlobes red and swollen. When Jovan came home, we were both exhausted from crying. Lily was hiccupping. I felt bad for hurting her, and was afraid of what Jovan would say. But he just took her in his arms, planting kisses on her face and on her fingers, and Lily calmed down.

A month later, I took out the earrings that her ears had been pierced with and replaced them with the gold earrings that my mother had given me when I last went to see her, back when I was pregnant. "Your belly is round like a ball, which means it's going to be a girl," she said to me, and gave me the gold earrings in the shape of flowers with red precious stones in the center. They were the earrings my mother wore when she was young. I remember hugging her and nuzzling into her neck, her earrings gently brushing against me.

Jovan came home and saw Lily's earrings. He smiled. "They're really beautiful," he said. "Did you buy them?" They were quite old-fashioned. I would have had to lie about where I got them, but I wasn't sure I could pull it off. What if he checked at the shop and discovered that they didn't sell that type of earrings there? "They're my grandmother's," I said. "Who gave them to you?" he asked. "My aunt gave them to me before she left for Australia," I lied. "They're very beautiful," he said once again. He touched Lily's earrings gently, and kissed her on the nose. I could hardly wait for Jovan to go away on business again. Then I could take Lily to my mother's so she could see her with the earrings.

It was September and we were making ajvar. I made it the way my mother had taught me. My sister-in-law's ajvar was never as good as mine, nor the one my mother used to make. I made it together with my friend, Kristina. Jovan didn't know how much ajvar we made. He also loved to eat it. He said it was the best ajvar he'd ever tried, even though it was based on my mother's recipe. I told him once that it was my mother's recipe and he didn't say a thing. He just kept eating.

Kristina and I were sitting out front of our apartment building, roasting and peeling peppers, stirring the ajvar, and chatting. Lily was playing with Kristina's daughter on the lawn. Kristina's daughter was four years old. She treated Lily like a doll because Lily was slow and fragile, but Lily never cried or caused any trouble. Occasionally, we'd let them peel a pepper, or help them stir the mixture with the wooden spoon.

Kristina was a close friend, and knew about the situation between Jovan and my mother. I told her that I'd make some extra ajvar and that I planned to take at least six jars to my mother, something that Jovan didn't need to know. I also told her that Jovan was going away on business the following week, and that I was going to go to the village with Lily to see my mother. It would be the first time my mother ever saw Lily, I told Kristina, and Lily was going to wear my mother's earrings. My mother doesn't have long to live, I said to Kristina, watching the ajvar bubbling slowly.

Jovan was at work when we filled all the jars with ajvar, so he wasn't to know how many there were for us, and how many would be left over for my mother. I put the six jars that I'd set aside for her into a box, and the box into a plastic bag. The bag was quite heavy. Not only did I have to carry Lily and the box, but a bag with all of Lily's things. I didn't take the stroller because it would have meant extra weight. I carried Lily in one arm, propped against my hip, and her bag and the box with the ajvar in my other arm.

We got on the train last, barely managing to find a compartment with a free seat. There was nowhere for me to put my belongings, so a man helped me put the box and the bag with Lily's things in the rack above the seat. I sat Lily on my lap and we set off. Lily didn't cry, didn't complain. She played quietly with a toy—a little white lamb. When the compartment emptied out a bit a few stations farther on, I sat Lily on the seat next to me. Two elderly women were sitting opposite us. "What a sweet little girl," they commented. "Look at how quiet and well mannered she is. *Ptu-ptu-ptu*," they cooed, smiling at us. After that they started asking a lot of questions: where was my husband, did I work, where did we live, where was I going alone with the child. I didn't want to tell them anything because I was afraid they might be from the same or a neighboring village, and that word would get around that I'd come with Lily, and then Jovan might somehow find out that we'd gone to see my

mother. I didn't know how to avoid their questions, so I just kept silent, which came across as rude. Soon the old women began staring suspiciously at me, with their jaws clenched in protest, casting curious glances at one another. They got off at the station before ours without saying goodbye.

We were left alone in the compartment with a man who dozed the whole time and who seemed rather unsociable. He was unshaven, unwashed, and stank of cheap salami. He was wearing a checkered jacket, which was frayed at the sleeves and had a large grease stain on the collar. Under his jacket he wore a jumper that had small holes around the neckline and a larger one at his gut. His hands were rough, and he had black dirt under his fingernails and in the wrinkles in his hands and palms. A couple of times he opened one eye and stared at us. When we arrived at our station, he got up and left the compartment without offering to help me.

I got up to get the box of ajvar and the bag with Lily's things from the baggage rack above. I stood on tiptoes and tried to drag the bag with the box of ajvar down toward me. Just as I thought I had it in my hands, the train suddenly jerked forward, sending me sprawling backward. I fell to the ground and saw the bag with the ajvar fall on top of Lily's head and then land on the ground. The box inside the plastic bag immediately broke open and I saw something red leak from it. Lily collapsed onto her side, lying over the armrest of the seat.

Her eyes were closed and she was unconscious. I began to shake her and call out her name. I checked her head and saw that there was no blood anywhere. After that Lily slowly began to open her little eyes. Her gaze was somewhat absent, unfocused. One eye seemed to be moving to the right while the other kept still. Then her mouth suddenly crumpled and she began to whimper softly. "Bam-Bam," she said, and grabbed her head. People passing through the carriage looked into the compartment, but no one stopped to help. I hugged Lily, lifted her into my arms, and grabbed the handles of the bag containing the box with the ajvar. It was very heavy and I realized that it would soon break. A red, oily liquid had gathered at the bottom of the bag from the broken jar.

I got off the train. Lily was whimpering. At times she would start crying louder, but then quickly quiet down, as if she didn't have the strength to cry. "Bam-Bam," she repeated, holding her head with her little hand. The bag was getting heavy in my left hand and I was leaving a trail of red oily spots in my wake. It was at least another fifteen-minute walk to my mother's house. As I was walking, the bag broke. I saw that two of the jars were broken. I left the jars, the box, and the broken bag on the side of the road. I put two jars into the bag with Lily's things, and the other two jars I held in my hand. It began to drizzle. My hands and feet were shaking, my back was stiff, and I was drenched in sweat. Several people passed me but I didn't say hello because it was as if I didn't see them.

We arrived at my mother's place. She was asleep with the television blaring. When we went into the house, the sound smacked me in the face and I turned the volume down because Lily was beginning to cry even louder. Inside the house it was dark and smelled moldy and sour. My mother was fast asleep, snoring lightly with her mouth open.

I sat down on the small wooden stool beside her and put Lily on my lap. I began feeling around Lily's head, gently pressing it to see whether it was sore, or if there was a bump, and if she was bleeding anywhere. But Lily didn't react. Her gaze was empty and it seemed to me as though one of her eyes was moving a bit to the right again. She whimpered and cried for a bit, then stopped. She would say, "Bam-Bam," then stop speaking. I thought about putting her to bed and placing an ice pack on her head, but then realized that my mother didn't have a freezer. And I didn't want to put Lily to bed in my mother's house that smelled of death. All I wanted to do was leave and take Lily home. I just wanted to lie down together with her, wake up the following day, and kiss her on her little nose and her little mouth. I'll never lie to Jovan again, I said to myself, and I'll never go to visit my mother ever again.

I wished that my mother were dead so that none of this would have happened. I looked at her snoring steadily with her mouth open. From it spread a stale, fetid, rotten stench. I looked at her and

hated her for being alive, for not dying, for making me cause Lily harm. I had brought Lily here because of her, to this place that reeked of death.

I left the jars on the table, put Lily on my hip, and went out. I ran all the way to the station to catch the first train back. On one of the shabby benches on the platform that smelled of piss, I held Lily tightly and stroked her head. She had stopped whimpering, and was calm and breathing evenly. But she wasn't the same Lily. I could sense that, even though I couldn't say why.

Instead of going straight home when we arrived, I went to Kristina's. Her husband and her children were home. She was making pita. She was covered in flour up to her ears. She took fright when she saw me. Goodness knows what I must have looked like. She pulled me and Lily into the kitchen and closed the door.

Once the door was closed, I started crying. I held Lily tightly, but she was limp and showed no interest in anything. The whole time she looked sad and lost. Even when I began to cry it didn't seem to upset her the way it normally did whenever I cried or argued with Jovan at home. Now she just stared at me and let out a small whimper, so I cuddled her and she stopped. I told Kristina what had happened.

"You have to take her to the hospital," Kristina said to me, gently stroking Lily's short black curls.

"What do you mean take her to the hospital? Jovan can never find out about this."

Kristina kept silent. I was silent too.

"It's nothing," I tried to assure myself. "She's probably just suffered a slight concussion. I'll put her to bed early."

"Lily, Lily!" Kristina called out to her. Lily raised her head and looked toward her.

"Fine, it doesn't look as if it's anything serious. But she looks dazed. I don't know what to say to you. Perhaps you should still take her to the hospital."

"What do I tell Jovan? No matter whether I was at home alone, or at your place, it would still end up being my fault that Lily got hurt. He'll kill me. He can never find out."

Again Kristina said nothing and we both sat silently.

"Don't worry. You only see the bad side to things. Come on, it'll pass, she's a kid. Children are forever falling over and getting hurt then jumping up again," she said to me, trying to summon a smile.

"Yes, she'll get over it. It's nothing. Isn't that right, Lily? Does anything hurt, darling?"

"Bam-Bam," Lily said again, and grabbed her head.

We went back home and I thought it best to let Lily sleep and rest. I put her to bed and then lay down on my own bed, which was next to hers. Kristina had tried to calm me down when we were at her place, but it hadn't worked. I waited for Lily to fall asleep and when I heard her breathing steadily, I took a pill, then fell asleep.

I woke up around midnight. Jovan was standing over Lily's bed and he was kissing her. "My little ducky," he whispered, kissing her fingers. Lily flinched slightly, but stayed asleep. After that, Jovan lay down beside me and fell asleep.

Jovan's screams woke me in the middle of the night. He was screaming like a banshee, holding Lily in his arms and shaking her, but Lily wasn't moving. I managed to call the ambulance somehow, although I felt as if I were in a dream and I couldn't dial the numbers properly. After that we got into the ambulance and we all went to the hospital. It was daybreak when they told us that Lily had died. The doctors began to ask me questions. How was the child behaving the previous day? Had she fallen over or been hit by someone perhaps? I told them that everything was as usual, like every other day. I told them that Lily had hardly cried at all, nor had she behaved strangely. We'd been at home the entire day, and in the afternoon we'd gone to visit my friend—Kristina, I said, and glanced at Jovan. She behaved normally there as well, I told them.

The doctor asked us if Lily had had any health problems, and whether there were any hereditary diseases in our family. I shook my head no, while Jovan was biting down on his clenched fist and squeezing his eyes tight. "I had a brother who died of stroke when he was a baby," he said. I

didn't know about that. The doctor simply nodded, and concluded that it was most probably due to this same cause.

Around midday I rang Kristina to tell her that Lily had died. I told her that the funeral would be held at noon the following day. And I told her that Jovan knew nothing. If anyone asks, Lily and I came to visit you in the afternoon and Lily was her normal self. "Okay?" I asked. Kristina said nothing. I heard her sniffing on the other end of the phone. I hung up because I didn't want to hear her crying.

It was particularly painful for me to look at Kristina and Jovan at the funeral. But they were around me the entire time, howling with grief. Kristina just kept staring at me with a fixed gaze, her mouth half-open and wet with spit, emitting a vague moan. She didn't even try to use a handkerchief so we wouldn't all have to stare at her slobbering mouth. Jovan wasn't himself and looked a terrible sight. The whole time he held on to my sleeve, pulling me down. I could barely stand upright myself anyway, and I felt like just getting down on the ground and crawling. I didn't need his extra weight. At one point we both tumbled over and the mourners broke out into a cry. Someone grabbed me from behind so roughly that it left two bruises on my arms. I tore my pantyhose and my feet got muddy because it had been raining all that day. Some stupid relative said that the heavens were crying for Lily and then just patted me on the back. A shiver of disgust ran down my spine.

After that, Jovan changed dramatically overnight. His face fell, his eyes became permanently teary. He went bald and gray. All that was left of his hair was a band around his scalp and a white tuft above his forehead. From a big solid man, he turned into a small and meek one. Even his demeanor softened, which disgusted me. He stopped going away on business trips so much, and began going to bed the same time as me, which kept me from falling asleep. He'd lie down beside me and hug me. He'd begin snoring as soon as he was asleep, and after a while he'd stop snoring and start tossing and whimpering and groaning. I'd wake him and he'd burrow even closer into me and start hugging and stroking me. He'd whimper quietly, and then fall asleep again. The first month I was too afraid to move or say a word. But I soon realized that I didn't have to be afraid of him. I kicked him out of our bed. "Please, just don't make me sleep in a different room," he pleaded. So we slept on separate beds in the same room.

After a time I noticed that he'd also begun to soften his attitude toward my mother. The first time he mentioned her, he said that Lily looked a bit like her. This observation seemed to me to be in poor taste as he was probably alluding to her eyebrows, which met above her nose. When Lily had been alive, he always said that she looked like his mother. Now all of a sudden, according to him, Lily began to look like my mother. That also galled me, but I didn't say anything. After a few days he mentioned her again, while we were having lunch. I had cooked a vegetable and meat stew. While chewing away, he said that I was the only person who could make such a delicious stew. Then he just swallowed and stared at me. His mouth was covered in grease because he never remembered to wipe his face with a napkin. "Your mother taught you to cook well. It's a pity that she got sick." Again I said nothing. "How's your mother?" he asked, cutting another thick slice of bread. I just shrugged my shoulders. I didn't feel like talking about my mother. I hadn't been to see her since Lily died, and her life was just an added burden on me. "Have you heard from your brother?" he continued to ask me. "No," I lied. My mother was the same as she'd always been. Sick, poor, and immobile.

But Jovan wanted to keep on talking about her. One day he suddenly asked: "When are we going to your mother's?" No doubt I gave him a puzzled look because his teary eyes widened visibly. He wanted to say something, but nothing came out. "I'll go alone," I said to him. But I didn't go, as I didn't want to. I was sick of my mother and of him, and at times I wished them both dead.

But Jovan didn't let up asking when we would go to my mother's. "There's no reason for you to go to my mother's. You've never visited her before. She never saw Lily, and now you want us both to go. Don't mock her even further," I said to him.

He bowed his head so that all I could see was the tuft of hair. He was like an old child. "Okay, just go alone," he said to me. He took some money out of his pocket and gave it to me. There was quite a bit.

"Don't go by train. Take a cab instead," he said to me. "We have the money."

I took the money and the following day, after he left for work, I put it in my pocket and went out. I didn't want to go and see my mother. I headed toward the shopping center downtown. At one store I bought myself some leather gloves, from another a silk scarf. I could easily hide them until I told Jovan that I needed some money to buy a scarf and gloves. I put them in my bag. I could hardly wait to sit down somewhere so that I could admire them, feel how soft they were, savor their smell of newness. Then I decided to go to a restaurant. I sat down in a corner so that no one could see me. I didn't feel like eating, but I didn't have anything to do, and I'd never been to a restaurant alone before. For starters I ordered pindjur with bread and cheese, even though I wasn't hungry. But when the food arrived, the bread was warm and the cheese was soft and the pindjur refreshed me. After I'd eaten, I felt better. Then I ordered a burger with a side dish of boiled vegetables. I also ordered a glass of red wine. Before the food arrived, I unpacked the gloves and the scarf and smelled them, gently rubbing them against my cheek. I felt good. I didn't feel like crying anymore. That's when the food arrived and I ate all of it. I ordered baklava for dessert, and then an ice cream. I took out the gloves and the scarf once again and admired them. As I still had time, I went to the cinema. I didn't care what film I saw. It was some sort of historical film. I dozed off in the big theater chair and once the film finished, I went home.

"How's your mother?" Jovan asked me when he got home from work.

"The same as always," I said. Suddenly I burped up onions. I was worried the smell might give me away.

"What did you have to eat there?" he asked me, as if he knew what I'd been doing.

"I made her some hamburger patties with onion. I bought some meat before I went to see her." I was surprised at how quickly I made something up.

"Mmm, delicious," Jovan said, smiling at me. He then came over and gave me a big hug, while I just stood there like a pillar. "Go there again next week," he said to me.

"If you say so," I agreed.

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My mother passed away six and a half months after Lily died. It was a relief to me, but Jovan was visibly shaken. He followed me around and stared at me all the time. He'd ask me if I needed anything, make me coffee, buy me sweets, and the following day, without asking, he prepared dinner for us both. He paid for the funeral, the plot, and the gravestone, but I managed to persuade him that we needn't go to the funeral itself. I told my brother and my sister-in-law that we couldn't deal with another burial. They just sighed on the other end of the phone. Kristina also came over when she found out. Ever since Lily died, I'd been avoiding her.

We sat opposite one another in the kitchen, at the breakfast table. That was where I used to drink coffee with her and with my other friends, before Lily died. She was staring at me, sniffing and nervously picking at the skin around her fingernails.

"How are you?"

"All right."

"You've put on some weight," she said.

I didn't respond. I didn't care if I was fat or thin, and I didn't think it was any of her business. After that she started talking about my mother—what a lovely woman she'd been, what a hard life she'd had. She also said something stupid to try to comfort me, something along the lines of my mother having two children of whom she could be proud.

“What pride are you talking about, Kristina?” I couldn’t help myself. “I left her lying sick at home and didn’t go to see her for two years. When I went to see her with Lily, I didn’t wake her up. She died without having seen her granddaughter. I didn’t name my child after her.”

“That’s because of your circumstances,” she said to me. “I’m sure she understood. Your father was a difficult man, too.”

We both sat there silently. Suddenly she took my hand and squeezed it. I don’t know how or why, but all at once I burst into tears. She started crying too.

“You’ve got to tell Jovan,” she said.

“Tell him what?”

“Well, you know,” she said.

“I’ve never heard anything more stupid,” I replied. “Why should I tell him such a thing? Do you want me to die as well?”

“You’ll die from your conscience. Secrets can eat at you from the inside,” she said to me, and started crying again. “I have nightmares every night. I think that if you don’t tell him, something terrible will happen.”

“What could be worse than what’s already happened? Stop talking nonsense.”

“It’s not fair on him. Don’t you see how he’s changed? All he does is run after you. As if he thinks it’s his fault.”

“It *is* his fault,” I said to Kristina.

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When Jovan and I went to bed that night, before he fell asleep, I heard him crying from his bed. “What is it now?” I asked him.

“Forgive me.”

“For what?”

“For your mother.”

Silence fell between us.

“I was afraid of her illness. I thought that something might happen either to you or to Lily if you went to visit her. The thought of her and her house and her village and everything frightened and disgusted me. I wanted to take you out of all that.”

I said nothing. He tried to steady his voice.

“But in the end Lily died because of me. Her illness came from my family. It’s all my fault,” he said, and burst out crying.

It’s your fault, I wanted to say to him. *You’re to blame, and no one else. It’s your fault, your fault, your fault*, I kept saying to myself, while aloud I told him to stop talking nonsense, to let me get some sleep, and to stop giving me a hard time because it was *my* mother who’d died, not his.

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That night I dreamed that Kristina and I were sitting out in front of our apartment building, stirring ajvar. The ajvar was thick and unnaturally red. We were laughing and chatting like we used to. I liked being with Kristina and I felt relaxed around her. But then suddenly a hush came over the whole neighborhood. The quiet enveloped us. We fell silent and continued to stir the ajvar slowly. Our hands and nails were red from peeling peppers. It got harder and harder to stir the ajvar with a spoon. I looked at Kristina. Her eyes were red and swollen. I’m going to tell him, she said. I’m going to tell him, she repeated. You won’t say anything, I said to her, and somehow I knew that my words would be hypnotic and that she would do whatever I told her to do. All of a sudden the spoon got stuck in the pot. I looked inside. The ajvar was glowing red and was as smooth as water. The spoon was caught on something. I could barely manage to lift it out. On the tip of the spoon were black, wet curls. I put the spoon back into the pot and then pulled out a black hair from my mouth. Just as I took it out, I felt that there was another one in there, and I pulled out a whole handful of curls. I looked at Kristina worriedly, but instead of her, opposite me I saw my mother wearing Lily’s earrings. She was stirring

the ajvar and smiling at me, and her mouth smelled sour and reeked of decay. I opened my eyes and saw Jovan standing in front of me. His mouth smelled like my mother's and he was shaking me awake.

Translated from the Macedonian by Paul Filev