

Lily

Clara Anderson-Cameron

I'm all hazy when I wake up. I can't make out the numbers on my alarm clock, but I can hear them, the upstairs neighbors. Stomping, jumping, dropping heavy things that roll. Bass pounds through the vents. The ceiling is trembling. Little flecks of popcorn flaking drift down like snow. My nose crinkles up and I sneeze, reveling in the release that comes with it. The loss of dust that was building up in my airway. I reach a hand up—having to think hard to claim it as my own, ghostly pale and dimly lit as it is—and swipe at the watery snot streaming down to my upper lip.

They carry on this way for a long time. Long enough that I eventually return to a half-asleep state, feeling my thoughts slip out of my grasp like water as I do. I like it when this happens, when I lose control. Makes the anger feel less personal, the guilt less acute. Nothing sharp can pierce me here. So, I stay perfectly still and pray that it lasts.

The morning comes slowly. In layers. My blinds are never really open but they're cheap and do a shitty job of keeping light out. Lines of sun burn across my comforter, so of course I wake up sweaty. My least favorite way to wake up. Last night was my second favorite way to wake up, straight into another person's universe. (I won't admit it to myself, but my first favorite way would be not waking up at all.) Never mind, scratch that. That sounds dramatic and bitchy. I don't bitch or whine anymore. It never

worked well. Never changed anything.

The sun crawls across the sky. I track it by the dashes of light that stretch and bend across the lump of my body under the covers. I stay hot, but I don't feel like pulling the blankets down. Instead, I just feel the sheets start to cling to my skin. Fragments of the Before peck at my mental walls like hungry birds.

Hungry . . . I think I'm hungry. But it doesn't matter.

When I open my eyes again it's back to blackness in the room. My mouth is so dry that I force myself to press two feet into the nubby carpet floor and stand. I sway once, twice. Everything looks weird from this angle. I don't think I've been upright in a while. When the blood finally fills out the lower part of my body and my head adjusts, I shuffle across the room and out into the hallway.

There's a light on in the kitchen. I open a cupboard without noticing Her sitting there. Pull a glass down. Stare, eyes glazing over, at the chip in the rim. It's pretty sharp. I fill the glass at the sink and drink slowly. When I pull my mouth away, I taste hot iron. Funny, I didn't feel the rough edge cut me. The tiny wound clots almost instantly. This disappoints me.

When I turn around, I finally see Her. On a stool at the counter. Her hair is long like it used to be. Before she broke down in my arms and begged me to find the kitchen scissors. Before I snipped and shaved until her heart was pieced together again and the tears had stopped falling. I remember holding her, after. But all of that was Before. Before, Before! Not now. She's not sitting there, not really. That little halfway smile that creases into a dimple on the fullness of her left cheek. It's just in my head, which is pounding. The glass slips out of my hand, and it hits the tile and shatters. My knees give out and I sink to the floor.

I can't see her from here, real or not. Which I'm starting to question. Maybe the last week has been a bad dream, and I've just woken up. Or maybe She's real and I'm not. Maybe I was the one who the police found that night. Maybe I'm a phantom haunting Her home. It's not my house after all, not without Her here in it too. I reach for my face and slap my cheeks, alternating sides until they go all buzzy and warm. I can still taste blood in my mouth. I smell it too.

My knees.

There's something dark spreading across the white tiles. I think for a wild moment that my blood is black instead of red, and my head spins.

I'm outside before I remember standing, moving, opening the front door. I can't remember if I saw Her on my way out or not. All I know is that I can't go back in right now. Not for any reason. Even if it's just a hallucination, which it probably is, it's too fucking painful. It's a sick joke. She was right there, but I couldn't touch Her. Just like at the open casket with the cranky old aunts and uncles forming a long line to see what was left of Her. Just like at the front of the church with the stained glass and the holy water and shit. I can't breathe. My lungs pinch tight in my chest until I'm gasping for air.

It's hot out, and I'm sweating again. Slowly I become aware of my knees. They hurt so bad. Pain slices through the skin with every step I take.

I'm climbing a set of stairs. My brain pulses with the bass line from last night, the one that poured from the vent in the ceiling. The one that soothed me back into a state of unconsciousness.

I knock on the busted red door with a metal number 112. There's no music playing tonight. At least not that I can hear. No sound comes from the other side for one, two, fifteen panicked breaths. My knees have started to burn and ache now. I must look like a zombie apocalypse survivor. Or maybe one of the zombies themselves. I'm wearing only loose boxers and a tank top. A wife beater, or as She called it, a "wife pleaser". Less misogynistic that way. More gay. I think I have a tiny, demented smile on my face at the memory when the door finally opens.

"Oh my god."

It's a woman. She must be older than me, but not by much. She smells like vanilla and peppermint. Her braids are swept into a high bun. Her eyes are darting over my body, too wide and unblinking.

"Um," I start. My voice creaks with disuse. "I think..."

And then I'm swaying again. I'm falling until strong arms steady me against the threshold. Someone yells a name and footsteps come pounding from inside the apartment.

I close my eyes, just for a second, just to get my wits about me. I have to tell them that something is terribly wrong. That someone is supposed to be six feet underground, but they were just in the kitchen.

Well, really they're supposed to be above ground, alive, in bed with me.

I'm leaning up against something soft and cushy. My legs are half-numb from the waist down. I climb slowly, reluctantly into the conscious plane.

Soft voices bounce around above my head.

"Who do we even call though? Paramedics?"

"Well, we don't want to get the cops involved, do we? It's got to be the fire station or the hospital. Do they have specific numbers? I'll Google it."

"I don't know. Maybe she'll be alright in a few minutes."

"Kay, we can't pull every glass shard from her goddamn knees like they can. She might need stitches."

"Just give me a minute."

I feel someone tugging at the skin around my kneecaps. It doesn't hurt, it just feels like pressure. I peel my eyelids apart to find the mystery woman bent over me, poking around the wounds with a pair of tweezers. There's a soft gasp from above me.

"She's awake." I think it's a man speaking.

The woman whips her head up to meet my eyes. I try really hard to focus on her face. It's soft and round and she has eyes like black holes. I need to say something, anything.

"What song was that last night?" I murmur.

She just stares, jaw slack. The second person in the room crouches next to her now, and I see that it's a bearded guy with glasses. He frowns at me.

"Are you," he starts. "Do we know you?"

The woman turns to scowl at him.

"Now why would you ask her that? Does it matter?"

He looks sheepish immediately.

"No, but like, maybe someone sent her here."

"Dameon, what the hell?"

He moves to a cross-legged position on the floor.

"Fine, you talk to her then."

She sits back on her heels, right in front of me, so that I can't help but watch her mouth open, close, open again, mouthing silently around words she can't get out.

"Is someone," she clears her throat. "After you right now?"

I can't help it. I laugh, short and rough and with zero humor.

She looks confused.

"Just my dead girlfriend, I think," I grind out. "No violent people though, no living people, I mean."

The two people in front of me go stock still. I listen to their breaths

puff out unsteadily. Shit. I've spooked them. I need to change tactics.

"Ouch," I mumble.

The woman shakes her head a little like she's clearing it of thoughts.

"I'm sorry?"

"The song you guys were playing. There was a party. I could hear it from my bed."

The man turns to the woman and she looks back, incredulous. Then they both look at me. I try to smile encouragingly, but I think it comes out all wrong because what shades their faces now is something like pity.

"I mean," the man says. "We were playing lots of songs."

"Sorry about the noise," the woman adds quickly.

"Yeah, we'll keep it down next time."

"Next time!" I laugh out. My whole body is heavy. I think I'm gonna sink straight through the floor and back into my own apartment. No. I can't. I'm alone there, with Her.

"I think I need help."

Suddenly my eyes are full of tears, and it burns more than my knees. I can't cry now; I need to focus. But then the woman is reaching out and putting a hand on my shoulder and its weight breaks me into a million little pieces.

I'm sobbing in these people's house. I'm sobbing and clawing at my chest and bleeding all over their perfectly nice floor. The hand moves from my shoulder to my upper back and then I'm being pressed into someone's body. It's warm and I smell peppermint again. I think I'm losing my mind, I think it's dripping out of me drop by drop onto this nice woman's hoodie. It's dark and wet. It's a necessary loss, maybe.

It must be minutes later—I don't know how many—when a voice rumbles against my damp cheek.

"Dameon, go start the car."

I sniffle. The door opens and closes with a slam. The doors in this building never shut nicely.

"Where are we going?" I ask in the most pitiful voice imaginable. I don't recognize it at all. I've never been this undone before in my life.

"Well," the woman answers gently, "I think we should go speak with a doctor about your legs. There's glass in them. Wanna tell me how that happened?"

"Dropped a glass. Fell."

She nods against the top of my head. My hair probably smells really

bad. All of me probably does. I can't make myself care right now. I'm too warm and empty.

"And your girlfriend?"

"Hallucination."

"Okay then, that's okay. We can fix this."

We. So easily I've become a part of a We.

"Are you an angel?" I ask, unthinking. She doesn't answer. "No, that's stupid. I'm not religious. You're my neighbor."

She's shaking slightly and I think I've said something wrong until I hear a soft release of breath and realize that she must be laughing. I've made her laugh.

"You're funny," she whispers. "A little fucked up right now, but funny."

I'm in a moving car. Streetlights flash past outside the window and I lose myself in the view of the city. The woman is back here with me, in the middle seat. She has one arm around my shoulders and one holding a washcloth to my right knee, which is bleeding more than the left I guess. It won't quit. The man, Dameon, is driving. Music is playing quietly from the speakers. It's a radio channel because a voice keeps interrupting the soft classical and mumbling about American public media and donations.

I'm not sure where they're taking me.

"What's your name, baby," the woman asks, right by my ear. I flinch without meaning to and she looks at me with concern. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine," I assure her. "My name is Lily."

"That's a beautiful name."

I never used to think so. Not until I heard it from the lips of a certain woman in the corner of a certain bar. Later from a taxi seat next to me, then in a dark bedroom, breathy and holy and innocent. Then it became beautiful. It meant flowers and sweet things and soft lips.

Now, it feels hollow in my mouth. I mutter it a few more times under my breath, testing this new situation. Everything has drained from it, it's just a shell. I curse Her for daring to say my name for the last time. How unfair, how rude. Tears want to start again but I'm all dried up.

"No, it's not," I mumble.

The engine hums serenely in harmony with whatever symphony is playing.

"It will be, again," the woman says, as if she knows. Maybe she is an

angel. My angel.

Dameon cranes his neck to look back at us and tells the woman that we're five minutes away. The streetlamps are closer together now, and buildings grow taller out the window. Somewhere downtown, I think.

The woman starts to hum along to the main line of the song. It's haunting and low. It makes me shiver. Then the song stretches up into the sky and winks from star to star. I feel the vibrations through the woman's arm and tilt my head into the crook of her neck. I close my eyes and pretend that breathing is as easy as this, as easy as the pulse that thrums against my forehead. I pretend that my knees aren't all broken up and my girlfriend isn't dead.

It feels a bit easier, every second. I think I'll spend the rest of my life pretending like this.

Clara Anderson-Cameron is a third-year English and French major. She enjoys writing and reading, although it becomes difficult during the semester. If she's not doing either of those things, she's probably listening to music or playing rugby with the UND women's team. Her goal is to work with words throughout her life, in any capacity.