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Things We Don't Talk About

Taylor Davis

I hung up the phone, walked into the kitchen where my girlfriend was cooking dinner and said, "I'm going to hell."

Lily didn't look up from the tomato she was chopping. "You don't believe in hell."

"Yeah, but if there is one, my place is reserved."

Lily smiled. "You're a lesbian and an atheist. I figured that was a given." She put down the knife and tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. "What's wrong, love?"

"My grandmother's dead."

"Oh my god." Lily stepped away from the counter and wrapped her arms around me.

"That's not the bad part," I said, my face pressed against her shoulder. "That's why I'm going to hell. Because my grandmother's dead and that's not what I'm upset about."

I pulled away from her, grabbed some lettuce that was sitting on the counter and began to shred it. Lily picked up the knife again but didn't use it, her eyes still on me.

"I mean, I am sad, but...it was time. She'd been in a nursing home since I was in high school. She didn't know who we were anymore." I looked at Lily. "Promise you'll shoot me before that happens?"

She set down the knife, reached out and squeezed my hand. "Only if you do the same for me. We can sign a pact." She paused. "Also we'll have to buy a gun." I gave her a weak smile and went back to shredding lettuce. "So what are you upset about then?" she asked.

"I have to go to the funeral."

"So I assumed."

"Which means I have to see my family."

"We had dinner with your parents at Christmas."

Lily picked up one of the slices of raw tomato and bit into it. She offered me one and I shook my head. "Not with my brother."

"Ah, the mysterious brother."

I finished the lettuce and looked for something else to do. "Is this defrosted?" I asked, picking up a package of ground beef.

"Yes." Lily picked up the last tomato and started chopping it without looking away from my face.

"You're gonna lose a finger," I said, but she didn't stop cutting or staring. I opened the package of ground beef and emptied it into the pan I'd set out on the stove before the phone rang. "I've told you stuff about Gabe." I turned the stove on.

"You've told me you're twins and he paints. Other than that you just shake your head and act cryptic."

"Gabe has - issues." I shoved the beef around the pan with the spatula.

"See? Cryptic."

"You'll get to meet him soon enough."

Lily scooped the tomatoes into a bowl. "So you want me to go with you."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" I tore open a packet of seasoning and added it to the meat.

"I don't know. It still kind of blows my mind that you want me to meet your family." She carried the bowl of tomatoes and the bowl of shredded lettuce over to the table.

"I want to show you off. Plus I'm going to need all the support I can get." I stared down into the pan. "Does this look done to you?"

"I'll take care of it." Lily took the spatula from my hand. "You should go look up flights. Tickets are gonna cost a fortune with this little notice."

I groaned. "Can we just not go?"

Lily leaned over and kissed my cheek. "We've dealt with worse."

I couldn't argue with that, but it didn't make me feel better.

*

The small airport was almost deserted at six-thirty in the morning, the few people there wandering around with a dazed look I knew I shared. When we reached the sign demanding that we have our tickets and government-issued ID ready Lily stepped behind me. "Go ahead," she said.

I'd been so distracted by my family I'd forgotten how much she hated airport security. I squeezed her hand and handed the elderly man my driver's license and boarding pass. He glanced down and waved me on. I looked back at Lily as I removed my flats. The man was staring at her license, then back at her, his brow furrowed. Lily shifted her feet and started twisting the ring on her right hand, a habit I'd noticed the first day we met. I realized later she only did it when she was nervous. She saw me looking, gave me a quick smile and motioned for me to go ahead. I hesitated, but she waved me on again, so I lifted my bags onto the belt and kept walking. As I left I heard the man ask "Mr. Ellison" to step aside.

I was sitting in the boarding area with two coffees in hand when Lily finally joined me. "Have I mentioned how much I hate showing my license?" she said, dropping her bag at her feet.

I handed her the vanilla latte as she sat down.

"You have no idea how happy I'll be when it's finally fixed." She rolled her eyes. "They patted me down and went through my bags about four times. The man glared at me when he saw my pills."

I kissed her cheek and intertwined my fingers with hers. "I'm sorry. Thanks for doing this."

"My motives are mercenary. Really I'm just curious about the mysterious

brother.”

“I’m not trying to be mysterious. It’s just – not something I enjoy discussing.”

“Yeah, I got that far on my own.”

I glanced around at the other people in the boarding area. A mother wiped chocolate from her son’s face. Across from her an older couple was arguing over whether they needed to leave their IDs out, and a young woman in a pencil skirt glared at them as she typed on her laptop. None of them were looking at us, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were. “I’m sorry. My family doesn’t talk about it, so I never have.” I took too big a sip of coffee and burnt my tongue.

“You’re doing the thing again,” Lily said.

“What thing?”

“The thing where you’re thinking really hard so you start mumbling under your breath and no one can hear you. Want to try talking like a normal person?”

“Look, you’ll find out soon. Can’t you just wait?” I set down my coffee and pulled out my old copy of *Cat’s Cradle*. Lily didn’t mention the seven or eight times I’d read it already, just reached for the *New York Times* and disappeared into the Science section. I glanced over at her, but she didn’t look back.

Gabe answered the door. My stomach tightened when I saw him. He had always been thin, but he’d lost even more weight, and the dark circles under his eyes stood out against his pale skin. His brown hair stuck up at odd angles where he’d been running his fingers through it, and his black tie was crooked. He looked younger somehow. Like a teenager. A dying teenager. “Grace. Thank god,” he said, keeping his voice low. “You have to save me.”

“Gabe, this is Lily,” I said, stepping aside.

Gabe looked startled when I said her name, as though he hadn’t noticed someone else was with me, but he shook her hand before turning back to me. “I’ve counted four racist and two homophobic comments in the past half-hour, no one will let me work, and Mom has pulled out my altar boy pictures. I will slit my throat with my keys if I stay here any longer.”

We were interrupted by footsteps and my mother’s voice. “Grace? Is that you?” Gabe escaped into the kitchen before Mom entered the hallway. “Put off getting here til the very last second, didn’t you?” she said as she hugged me.

“I’m sorry. It’s crazy hard to get flights with this little notice.”

“Hello Lily.” Mom gave her a brief nod.

“Hi Mrs. Reilly.”

“Grace, you’re staying in your old room. Lily, I have you in the spare bedroom upstairs. Hurry and change. We’re leaving for the church soon.”

I gave Lily an apologetic smile as I dragged my suitcase to my old bedroom. Once the door was shut I stripped off my jeans and Led Zeppelin t-shirt and tossed them on top of the pink and white flowered quilt I’d had since I was a child. I was fumbling for the zipper on my black dress when Lily came in. She walked up be-

hind me and zipped my dress the rest of the way.

"Thanks." I turned around and kissed her. "You look lovely."

She wrinkled her nose. "My shoulders are too broad for this jacket."

"They are not. You're gorgeous." Lily looked away from me. "Sorry about the separate rooms," I said.

She shrugged. "I've decided to take a vow of chastity anyway."

"That should please my parents."

Lily bit her lip, and I could tell she was choosing her words. "Your brother..."

"Yeah. He's, uh...he's in pretty bad shape right now." I couldn't look at her.

"Withdrawal." I felt the need to explain, to tell her about Gabe's art, how he'd introduced me to Raymond Carver's stories, how he made peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches for both of us when we were kids. I couldn't think of Gabe in the terms other people used, couldn't stand for Lily to think of him as an "addict," "functioning" or not. I'd never been sure what those words meant in the first place.

"Girls! Let's go! We're going to be late," my mother shouted from downstairs, and for the first time I could remember I was grateful to be interrupted by her voice.

Lily squeezed my hand and turned to leave. I followed behind her.

I sat between Lily and Gabe at the funeral. Lily wasn't Catholic, and since I'd quit practicing long before I met her, she had never been to a Mass. She looked lost as she followed me through the old motions. Gabe fidgeted the entire service, rubbing or scratching his covered arms, and during the Eucharistic prayer I noticed his hands trembling and placed my hand on his. I had to put my other hand on Lily's knee to keep her from joining the line when it was time for communion. Gabe and I didn't go either, and I saw my mother giving both of us accusing looks as she stood up. My father didn't seem to notice. He hadn't spoken to me since I'd arrived. I doubted he'd spoken to Gabe either.

After Mass was finished and my grandmother buried we headed back to my parents' house. I went to my room to change, because I needed to get my heels off and because I needed a few seconds away from my family before dealing with a flood of sympathy from old ladies in heavy rose-scented perfume. Lily followed me. She pulled off her blazer, tossed her cell phone and wallet onto my bed and stretched out on her back, staring at the ceiling, while I put on a pair of ballet flats.

"How are we going to do this?" she asked.

I sat down on the bed beside her. "Force a smile, nod a lot and eat enough macaroni and cheese to keep Aunt Gloria happy."

"No, I mean - am I your girlfriend, or your platonic friend and roommate?"

I looked down at her. "Girlfriend," I said. "I'm not hiding anything."

I would have called her anything to see the smile she gave me at that.

"All right," I said, standing. "I guess we can't put off the suffering any

longer." Lily sat up, smoothed down her hair and followed me from the room.

The food was the typical fare served when my family got together – turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, green bean casserole. I thought it was strange that we ate the same food at funerals as we did at Thanksgiving.

My mother dragged Gabe and me around by the arm for at least two hours. "This is my daughter Grace and my son Gabriel," she said to streams of older people I'd never met before. "Grace is in graduate school" – never mentioning my field, because my mother and I had learned through years of arguments that the phrase gender studies should not be spoken in her house. "And Gabriel is an artist." Here was where the smile came. "He's been in several galleries, and his work has gotten wonderful reviews. Ground-breaking, they call it." My mother has never liked Gabe's paintings. She thinks they're dark and disturbing.

Lily was left alone in a corner, holding a plate of green bean casserole and not meeting anyone's eyes. I tried to get back to her as often as possible, whisper complaints about the other people there and squeeze her hand to let her know I was with her, but after a few seconds my mother would pull me away, and the routine would start again. Gabe's trembling was getting worse. It was no longer just his hands – his entire body shook, and the corner of his left eye had started to twitch.

"And do you have a boyfriend? Getting ready to settle down?" asked a woman my mother called Aunt Maggie but who wasn't my aunt. At least I hoped not, since I'd never met her before.

"Grace isn't very settled yet." My mother smiled.

I wanted to say something, but I was suddenly too aware of my tongue, of my lips, of every word they might form, like in elementary school when I'd considered calling out in class without raising my hand just to try it, but couldn't bring myself to.

"For Christssake," Gabe said.

"Gabriel!" my mother said. Somehow she was still surprised her son would take the Lord's pseudonym in vain.

"No, mom, fuck it, I'm sick, I'm just fucking sick of lying all the time." He didn't raise his voice, but every other conversation stopped, like when someone shattered a glass in the college dining hall and there was a moment of silence before everybody started applauding. Except there was no applause.

"She – " he pointed to Lily – "is Grace's girlfriend. Not her friend, or her roommate. And she's not gonna disappear if you don't look at her, it doesn't work that way." His voice grew louder, cracking with anger. "Grace is a lesbian. And I'm a junkie. A goddamned drug addict." He yanked up the cuff of one of his shirt sleeves and rolled the sleeve above his elbow, revealing the track marks across his skin.

My alleged Aunt Maggie gasped. Gabe turned to our mother. "I know you hate me right now, but trust me, it's nothing compared to how much I hate me right now. So..." He shrugged and looked around. I saw him sway on his feet and

crossed the room just in time to catch him before he collapsed.

"Get him out of here." My mother's voice had dropped to a hiss.

Lily had joined me, but I knew Gabe would be worse if he were with people he didn't know well, so I said, "It's okay. I've got him." I lowered my voice. "You're welcome to my room if you need to get out of here. I don't think anyone would notice." The room was still silent except for clearing throats and shifting feet.

Lily shook her head. "I'll be all right."

Gabe leaned against my shoulder as we left. I helped him into his room and lowered him onto the bed.

"Brilliant idea, saying fuck in front of senior citizens at a funeral lunch," I said.

"I don't care."

"All of this is hard enough without you trying to make it harder."

Gabe looked away from me. He started to fumble at his shirt, but his hands were trembling too badly to undo the buttons.

I knelt and helped him take the shirt off. He saw me look at his track marks and covered some of them with his hands.

"You should lie down."

He shook his head and mumbled something.

"What?"

"I'm gonna - " He clamped his mouth shut, and I realized what he meant in time to help him to the bathroom. He hadn't eaten, so nothing came up, only dry, racking heaves.

I brought him water to rinse his mouth out and helped him back to the bed. "I'm sorry," he said as pulled the sheets over his chest. I could have traced the bones of his ribcage. "I really am. You shouldn't have to deal with all my shit."

I sighed. "You're my brother." I owe you, I wanted to say. Because when I sat on the edge of your bed and said "I think I might be a lesbian" you nodded and said "Cool." Because for weeks in a row I heard you arguing with our parents, defending me, while I lay on my bed with my face pressed so hard into the pillow I couldn't breathe.

"Fucking withdrawal," Gabe said.

He started scratching at his scarred arms again, and I grabbed his hands and held them still. "I wish you would think about rehab," I said. "I could help pay -"

"I went, once. My agent insisted." Gabe gritted his teeth in pain and I squeezed his hand. "They made us pray every day. We had to keep a spiritual journal. Ask God to make us clean. Fuck that. I said if I got clean it would be on my own." I brushed his hair back from his forehead and didn't speak. "They say it's not God's fault you got on the drugs, but he gets the credit when you get off them? Pretty sweet deal for him."

"You could ignore the religious stuff." I looked down at his face, contorted with pain, at his thin, shaking body.

Gabe was silent for a moment. "Mom and Dad used to ask me to pray for you," he said. "Every night after you told them. Pray that you would make the right choices."

I blinked a few times and turned away so he couldn't see my eyes. "Please, Gabe," I said. "We can find a secular program or something." I touched his arm, avoiding the scars, and felt goosebumps. I pulled the blankets up to his shoulders.

"You shouldn't waste your time worrying about me," he said.

"I can't help it."

"I'm a bad person."

"No, you're not."

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I did a bad thing." His voice caught. "A really bad thing." He pushed himself up on shaking arms and started to fumble in the pockets of the dress pants he still wore. Finally he removed a wallet and held it out to me.

"I needed money," he said. "I saw it in your room and thought it was yours. I was gonna pay you back. I thought maybe you wouldn't even notice. But then I looked inside, and I - I couldn't do it. The money's all there."

I opened the wallet and my stomach twisted. Lily's driver's license, her student ID, her debit card.

Gabe lowered his voice. "Mom and Dad don't know?"

I shook my head.

"Do you have any idea what they'd say if they did?"

"Yes. Which is why I'm not telling them."

"Neither am I."

I looked at him and tried to keep my voice steady. "Thank you."

"I thought that was a given." Gabe gasped and bent over. I squeezed his hand. "Cramps," he said with a faint smile. "This is worse than usual. I almost never go this long."

I turned away so he wouldn't see my eyes were wet.

"You love her?" Gabe asked.

I looked back at him. "Yeah."

"Good. You need someone to love who might deserve it."

"Gabe..."

"It's okay, Grace." He smiled at me. "I'll figure out a way to get on my flight tomorrow, and you won't have to worry about me anymore."

"I always worry about you." I helped him lie down again and kissed his forehead. "I love you."

"Can't imagine why," he said. I stood and turned to leave, and as I reached the door he said "I love you too. I'm sorry."

As soon as I walked into the living room Lily joined me. She didn't say anything, just kissed my cheek and took my hand in hers.

I spent the rest of the day going back and forth between Gabe's room and

the living room until the last visitors had trickled out of the house and just my family and Lily were left. I was the only one who went into Gabe's room. My parents refused to go near him.

After I was sure my parents were asleep I snuck into the guest room. Lily was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a white camisole and blue pajama pants. She held a glass of water in her hand.

I waited for her to finish swallowing her pills, then sat down on the other side of the bed and kissed her.

"Affectionate tonight," she said.

I took a deep breath. "I wanted to give this back earlier, but things were so crazy and I didn't want to draw attention from my parents or one of my fake relatives." I held out her wallet.

"Did I leave it in your room?"

I nodded. "Gabe had it." I looked at her face, waiting for a reaction, but her eyes were blank. "He said he didn't take anything."

Lily's fingers drifted to one of her hands, searching for the ring she'd taken off. "So he -"

"He promised not to tell," I said.

She bit her lip. The fear on her face made my chest ache.

"Gabe never outed me," I said. "He wouldn't do that."

She looked at me. "You trust him?"

I nodded.

"Okay." She opened the wallet. "It's there. The money." She laughed. "Not that it's really my first priority, but...he told the truth about that, at least."

She set the wallet on the bedside table and stared at it for a moment, then lay down on the bed. I curled up next to her. "I'm sorry this was such an unmitigated disaster:"

She shrugged. "Family always is. My parents still think you're straight."

I could tell how hard she was trying to keep her voice casual. I reached out and brushed a strand of hair back from her face. "Let's not let our parents meet. Ever."

"Deal."

I kissed her. "Thank you for doing this. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"All I did was stand there and eat too much dessert."

I shook my head and ran my fingers down her pale freckled arm. "You're beautiful," I said.

Lily laughed. "You shouldn't lie."

"I lie about some things, but not that."

Lily didn't say anything, but she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

She fell asleep a few minutes later. Lily always fell asleep more easily than I did. I lay beside her, listening to the sound of her breathing. Tomorrow we would

be in our own bed and I would be pretending that I didn't have a family outside of that apartment. That I'd never watched my brother draw dinosaurs on the back of collection envelopes during Sunday Mass. That I didn't turn my phone's volume up all the way every night because I was waiting for a call from the police, or the hospital. I gazed at Lily's back and remembered the wallet in Gabe's shaking hands. "It'll be all right," I said. "I'll do something. I'm not letting it go this time. I'm not." Lily didn't move. I brushed her hair from her shoulder and thought of Gabe in the room below us, trembling with a withdrawal that meant nothing because it would end as soon as he got home. I held still and listened to the house creaking, the same sounds I'd fallen asleep to as a child, and I wondered if he could hear it too, if he too was lying awake, waiting for the morning.