

on CATASTROPHE

When he left, he said, "I love you." He hugged me from the passenger seat and got onto a plane that took him to a bus that crossed into Canada. Across the border, our old friends were waiting to drive him back to Kingston. I didn't release my seatbelt, but our embrace was not without warmth. It contained eight years, and I didn't even get out of the car. Eight years was long enough.

I cried during the forty-five minute drive home.

I texted Dorothy, "Chris left."

I texted Dorothy again, "I just took him to the airport."

And, "This is not a joke, LOL not LOL."

Still in awe, I went to Dorothy's house, and there, we celebrated the end of a terrible relationship.

Because this is how it all ends: with brutal resentment.

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If I hadn't failed my parents, I would be a medical doctor. I imagine this Other Lily, wonder if she'd be my size or trimmer or fatter, if she'd have bad skin like me, a head full of white hair like me, if she'd do something as shameful as smoke cigarettes. I imagine her friends. Would they look like mine? Does she dress like me? No, I decide, she doesn't. She would succeed in all the ways I have failed. She would not be a professor. She would not be divorced. She would be a good daughter.

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My dead sister's life became a catastrophe and then she died and passed the baton of destruction to her oldest son Justin. She gave him her addiction and her confidence game and they both have had their skin rubbed clean, worn Texas Department of Corrections uniforms, were assigned an inmate number. They both served their time. Justin has been in and out of jail and prison and Rehab for Felons since his mother died. It's been nearly three years. "It's like it's become normal or

something," he says to me. "Mayyyyn, that shit should never be normal."
This time, he's kicked the brown and his attitude is bright.
Tomorrow, he's moving back in with me.

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I had wanted to be a good wife, and for the most part, I was, but the fact that my marriage was a catastrophe doesn't change. Nor was it entirely my ex-husband's fault, but yes, he was crazy and violent and abusive. And then it was over.

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Inside his dead mother's Gucci fanny pack, among the debris and trash Justin abandoned in my room after the first time he left New Mexico because he couldn't score, I found used syringes, a bent spoon; the whole room smelled of burning.

I had given him my room and I slept in my study—because my selflessness is a flaw I inherited from my mother. I suffer very well; my altruism can leave bruises.

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He's been gone nearly four years now and we are divorced, and now I pay him alimony.

When he left, he said, "I love you."

And, "If I need it, can you help me out?"

I said, "Yes."

I thought, "I'll say anything, please, just go."

Then came the day that he wanted to make it legal—stipulated—and he doesn't claim his trust fund in the paperwork and I don't mention it either.

He's an anarchist, radically ethical, a feminist. He cares about Indigenous rights.

His dissertation—if he ever finishes it—is on utopias.

Here I thought he would have more integrity than to take money from a woman of color.

He calls it feminism.

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Dorothy texts, "LOL #AnarchistAlimony." She is talking about the book I need to write, my memoir.

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After his first battle rap, we are hotboxing my car with a friend he just met. Justin tells this stranger, "She's kind of like my mom now."
Weeks later, he says to me, "I want a family, the white brick fence or whatever. Don't you want to be a grandmother?"

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Chris forced me to be more responsible, more adult—to take care of him.

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Stability, I learned, is necessitated by fear.

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Weeks when even my cat is too much responsibility for me.

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Mother to a twenty-four year old with addiction and a dead mother.
We are all damaged.

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In his lyrics, I recognize myself, in his guise.

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When I was a wife, I ate three meals a day. We ate organic everything. Chris thought salt was unhealthy, so we took our food unseasoned. Now, I eat once a day to lose weight. Somehow, I am healthier, too. Or, at least I am happier now.

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At my dead sister's funeral, Justin's biological father came up to me, called my sister his wife; he said he can be a father to Justin now. He said his son was his responsibility. I looked at this man's face. It's ugly and sun-worn, tired and addicted. I remembered him putting a twelve-inch chef's knife against my sister's throat. Justin was just a baby, and I couldn't have been more than ten. We were both crying and screaming, but Justin didn't understand what was happening.

Yesterday, Justin called me hysterical, begging me to buy him a ticket back to New Mexico. His father and his whole family have failed him, again.

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Responsibility, health, double-knotting the laces of your boots before pulling.

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Once, there is a village and it is very peaceful. The people in the village are happy and every night there would be a dance in the town square where children would run rosy circles and teenagers would sneak quick wet kisses when adults turned their heads. But menace lurks just beyond these poorly fortified walls.

One morning the villagers rise with the sun as they always do and walk out to greet each other as they always do, and in the middle of the town square is a body—and it was lifeless! The throat had been ripped open, as if by massive jowls. The next morning, another body. And another.

Finally, after nearly ten moons have crested and fallen, a brave man steps forward and it is decided that he will venture into

forest without fear and capture the white tiger who did this.

But how did they know the tiger was white? The brave man has a family, and he kisses them good-bye, promising a swift return and a new tiger skin blanket to keep them warm during winter shows. "Shhh, shhh," he whispers to his wife. "I am the best marksman in the village." He puts a large hand around the base of her neck and pulls her in for a farewell kiss. She looks away afterwards, as if in embarrassment for the love she feels.

"And you," the man says to his infant son, "you are the man of the house now. Do you know what that means?" But the boy does not. The brave man laughs, gives the boy a quick pet, and leaves.

He never returns, but the white tiger stops killing villagers, and so everyone forgets, except the boy and his widow mother.

Many years later, the boy becomes a young man. His whole life he has trained for only one task: to kill the white tiger who killed his father.

Every year on his birthday, the young man asks his mother for permission to hunt the tiger who killed his father and every year his mother does not allow it. Finally, on the morning of his fifteenth birthday, the young man pleads, and there is a whining cadence to his voice that his mother remembers from infancy. *Would it be different*, she wonders, *if he had actually had a father?*

"Your father," she says, "could shoot a tin can filled with water off my head from a mile away and not spill a drop."

The young man fills a tin can with water and places it on his mother's head. He paces out a mile and turns around. His eyes are clear and his aim is taut, but he misses the can entirely. Recognizing his error, he begins to train again.

For three years, the young man works and he works and he struggles. Then, he says to his mother, "I am ready." Again, he fills a tin can with water and places it on her head. Again, he paces out a mile and turns around. This time, he takes a breath. He points the gun and shoots.

Over lunch, the mother says, "I am so proud of you, son. Your father would be too. Your skill has nearly met his."

The rice she has cooked is perfect: not too sticky, not too dry. She squeezes a wad of it into a tight ball and pops it into her mouth. "Your father," she says, "used to be able to shoot the eye out of a needle from

a mile away." She shakes her head. "I wouldn't expect you to be able to do that, but if the white tiger ate your father, he will surely eat you too."

Mother and son go outside. He places a sewing needle against a tree trunk and paces a mile out. He shoots and completely misses, barely makes contact with the tree itself, which to be fair is rather thin.

For three years, the young man works and he works and he struggles. Then, he says to his mother, "I am ready." Again, he places a sewing needle against a tree trunk. Again, he paces out a mile and turns around. This time, he takes a breath. He points the gun and shoots.

The mother looks at the needle. Its eye is perfectly gone. She is joyful and distraught. See: the boy's father was an excellent marksman but he never performed these impossible feats. She made them all up! She had hoped that she had derived such unreasonable tasks that he would recognize his folly, his lack of preparedness, and never leave, but alas, she must admit, "It is time."

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Other Lily doesn't fail at marriage, and her husband is Vietnamese. He respects her, too.

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So drastic is the shift in Justin that he seems to have drifted out of Ovid's pages. There was a time, before, when the pupils of his eyes were floodlit with evil. Heroin eyes. They were shiny and vast, oceanic, sublime. And now those same eyes are gentle and caring. He cries from those eyes when his family is cruel to him. He calls me and is no longer ashamed to weep.

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Catastrophic or not, we reach the same conclusion: Chris is gone: and I am OK, now.

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I've never been a news person. Too much catastrophe. Or, I just don't care enough about anything other than myself.

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But not all stories must end how mine did with Chris. Some stories really do offer ever after's brimming with happiness.

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Other Lily smiles and her teeth are white. She lifts a perfect little Vietnamese cherub. It pushes its small hands playfully against her face. Their skin is pure.

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A year ago, I was still paying Chris alimony. He wrote me an email entailing all the reasons I should take him back. He suggested long-distance polyamory. I understood then the function of alimony: I was paying him not to be in my life.

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Before work, Other Lily listens to *Democracy Now*. She donates money to PBS and NPR annually. She has it set up for automatic pay.

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Justin and I were never close. I don't interact well with children, and by the time I could find a language that might've opened up our communication, he was a brooding, angry teenager. He didn't want to hang out with his nerd aunt, and I couldn't blame him. I assumed

I would never have a relationship with my nephew and I was more or less fine with that. He'd grown into a thug with low hanging pants and gangsta signs. I didn't know him at all.

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Other Lily serves her family dinner. She sits down next to her husband. He feeds their baby soft carrots. Little Tommy is making airplane loops around the table.

I am the Little Match Girl standing outside and salivating at all that is not mine.

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I would take a million more black eyes and public bruises than the vitriol of Chris's manipulative and demonic words. They wielded power over me. I believed their heinousness, and sometimes, when I am least suspecting, the insecurity he drove into me still rises up to my skin in oil and I break out often.

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When Chris emails me, he says he's gone through a lot of therapy and all of his issues are under control now. His privilege—white and all the others too—is mighty. I wish I had that brand of confidence. Instead, I just don't reply.

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The young man travels through the village and into the forest and out of the forest and into another village. It sits inside a copse of trees, and the white tiger is known to live just beyond. The village is very small and the man makes his way to its only inn.

The innkeeper is a gentle old crone, and upon her very first glance of this young man knew immediately that he was the son of another very handsome young man who many years before had crossed this same threshold, looking for a warm room and a cold ale. "Many men

have travelled here before you," she says. She says, "You are not the first to go hunting the white tiger."

The inn is humble but not tragic. The thatched roof barely leaks and all of the glasses are clean. They shine. "Once, there was a young man who you resemble greatly, and he was the best marksman I have seen. He could shoot a grain of salt from a distance of three miles, and he did not survive the white tiger. Surely you cannot do this."

The innkeeper and the young man go outside. He places a single grain of salt on a tree trunk, paces three miles, and turns around. He shoots and completely misses. The young man asks the innkeeper for a room.

For three years, the young man has worked and he has worked and he struggles and now he is a man. Then, he says to his innkeeper, "I am ready." This time, he takes a breath. He points the gun and shoots.

"Splendid!" the innkeeper shouts. It is a beautiful day. Sunshine slates the scene with hope. "But," she says, "I remember he also used to shoot a shot so soft it could split a single strand of my hair right on my head and still have the strand remain in tact."

The man is tired. For years now, he has worked and he had worked and he has struggled. Finally, he says to his innkeeper, "I am ready."

This time, the first time, he fires and the shot is so soft that it divides a single strand of her hair without removing it from her head. She sighs and shakes her head. These feats she told the boy she remembered his father doing, well, she had made them up—for she did not want to see another young man fall prey to the white tiger, but still, she says, "It's time."

The man makes his way through the forest. The brush is dense and he has a good number of cuts along his arms and legs, but he is diligent. He will catch this white tiger, this ghost.

Although there are no roads or paths, an old crone woman crosses his way. She is very frail and hungry. The man shares a rice cake with her. "This is a dangerous place, and there is only one reason you might be here." She shakes her head. "Turn around. Go back. You will die in the jaws of the white tiger, I promise you."

Seeing her hunger, the man gives her another rice cake and she continues, "The white tiger is as cruel as lightning and just as fast."

If you see him, you will already be dead. To kill the white tiger, you must catch him from very far away. All you will see is a white dot. The moment you can discern that it is in fact the white tiger, you may as well slit your own throat. That's how dead you will already be." She shoves the last of the rice ball into her mouth and leaves.

The man sits quietly for many hours. He looks into the distance and clocks a map of the mountains and land. He memorizes each fold of the earth, each protrusion. He sits this way for many more hours. Soon, he has sat there for days and weeks pass and he is studying. One day, far in the distance, there is a change. There is a slow movement, a white dot raised against a geography he has blacked into his mind. He raises his pistol, closes one steady eye, takes a breath, and shoots. The landscape becomes stationary once again.

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Once, pushing her thumb hard against the kitchen table, Chris's grandmother had said, "Sometimes a husband dies," and she lifted her thumb, "and the widow just blossoms." Her hands shot out to indicate a bursting forth.

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At the hospital, Other Lily saves two lives and loses none. This is just another day.

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Days before I find his mother seizing on the ground, days before she dies, Justin and I share a blunt and suddenly we are friends hot-boxing his mom's garage. He shows me Gia Medley and we nod our heads to Kendrick Lamar.

And then his mother died: when he was addicted to heroin, he would text me and I would try to ignore it for as long as possible. I knew he needed me to wire him money immediately. It was never much. He wasn't greedy. Just enough to score. Forty here. Sixty there. His car ran out of gas too many times.

Three years later, he is living with me and clean. Caution signs strobe against my optimism.

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The other day over milkshakes, my friend Thomas tells me he had an "encounter" with Chris. He indicates the scare quotes with his fingers. In my head, I am freaking out that maybe he's come back into town and what if he tries to see me and what if he comes by the house and what will he do. It's not that I'm scared for my safety, but I am.

Chris, it turns out, started following him on Instagram.

"I think it's to see if there are pictures of you on my Instagram," Thomas says. "And there are. A lot."

I push at my lemon pie milkshake. It's late summer, but the evenings are cool in the desert. There's a strong wind and it blows the napkins off our table.

"So I clicked on his Instagram." Thomas is silent for a minute, waiting for me react. There's a childishness to him, an eagerness to please.

Relieving him, I say, "And what'd you find?"

"Mostly just pictures of him and his parents."

"Hm."

"Wait, unless he's just hanging out with people who look like his parents."

"Are they fat and white, vaguely miserable looking?"

"Yes."

"Those are his parents."

"Oh, and there's one with him next to a sports car, pretending like it's his."

Thomas, like all my friends, hates Chris. They remember the way he devastated me, not in his departure but during his presence.

"Chris doesn't have a sports car."

"Do you want to see them?" Thomas pats at his pockets. "Shit, it's charging in the car."

I don't want to see the pictures. I don't want to see Chris. Even a picture is too close.

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My friend Dylan says, "What's the catastrophe today, Lily?" We are eating orange tofu, and Dylan shakes his head every time I mention my boyfriend Harold. All of my friends, even the most patient and diligent, now urge me to end things, take care of myself, first. Mostly, they are sick of my obsession with Harold. They are sick of my sadness.

When we text about it, we call it Tofu Belly.

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Other Lily is out with her girlfriends. They clink their martini glasses and wink flirtily at each other. Men hit on Other Lily, but she is not the type to stray. More than loyal, she is in love. And all her loyalty and love is reciprocated, an equal distribution of desire and faith.

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Laughter cued like clockwork.

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Later, in the car, Thomas pulls out his phone and starts jabbing at the screen. "Weird," he says. He says, "What other screen name would he use? He's not under Chris." He controls the screen by moving his index finger up and down. When he lifts his finger, I see colors carousel like lace tracers. "I knew it."

"What?"

"He just added me to see your pictures. He's not following me anymore."

"Why would he add you on Instagram just to look for pictures of me when he can just Google image me?"

"Duh." Thomas has a way of inflecting tone that perfectly matches his emotion. It's aggravating and endearing. "It's not the same thing." I agree. It's not.

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I have no idea where Chris is now or how he is. I wrote him an email more than a year ago and he never wrote back. I told him I was going to stop sending spousal support. He was supposedly starting grad school again after taking a year to *psychologically heal* from the damage I inflicted upon him, and grad school carries with it a stipend that surpasses the annual income supported by our marriage settlement agreement. Furthermore, he has a trust fund. I hope he finds relief in his anger, I honestly do.

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The man walks a distance of five miles to reach the white tiger. It is a large beast, and its white is unadulterated. He touches it. Its fur is subdued against the enormity of the thing itself. As his hand passes its ribs, he feels a knocking. Then he hears cries for help, muffled and distant and clearly distressed. He opens the white tiger's mouth and climbs in. Inside, it is wet and dark, but there is only one clear path, and so the man makes his way into the white tiger's belly.

By the time the man reaches an opening, he is fully soaked in mucous and blood. A beautiful girl runs towards him. She is stunning in that way that silences a man. "You've saved me! You've saved me!" She throws herself into his chest.

"What's this?" a voice calls from a dark crevice. "Are we saved?"

The man whose voice had just called stands up. He uses the white tiger's intestinal lining for support. He is not old but he is not so young anymore either. The man who used to be a boy looks at this other man and sees in him a resemblance so keen as to be unmistakable. Yes, this was his father. The two embrace with the warmth of a sun flare.

The son returns his father to their home, and when his mother sees their approach, her screams contain uncontainable delight. Over dinner, his mother learns that the beautiful girl is the daughter of the king's highest counselor, and tomorrow, her son must bring her to the palace to reunite their family.

The son rarely returns to his house in the village now that he is married to the beautiful girl. The king, seeing in the man a bravery

and skill unmatched by any other before him, makes him commander of the army. They are terribly happy, to this very day.

As for the man and his wife, tonight, they sleep under the warmest white tiger fur blanket in all the lands.

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I am Justin's only family now.

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I was not some victim though. Our relationship was a map of hurt, and its scale was strictly emotional.

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Face the facts: there is no Other Lily, and I'm pretty satisfied with my life.

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Once, the tiger's wife became very ill. Although they lived in the wild, the tiger travelled through many lands to find a doctor who would treat his wife. "Treat my wife," says the tiger, "and I will not eat you." Many times, he had been forced to eat the doctor. And the tiger's wife became more and more ill. Until she died. The tiger was forlorn. He gathered kindling in his mouth, and splinters arched into his gums and tongue, but he pressed on.

Her funeral pyre was blazing. Taken with grief, the tiger joined his wife in silence. There were no grand trumpets, no cries of despair. Real sadness does not need a performance. He placed his body around hers, holding her gently amidst wild waves of fire. In the smolder of morning, the wind flitted away swirls of ashy particles and an incandescent white tiger stepped forward.