
ELIZABETH WELD

Good Fortune

Lily Tate was in love with life. It was serious. It manifested itself early in her childhood as weeping fits that occurred whenever a new school year ended or began and when she saw old people who weren't her grandparents, and it manifested itself later as a resolute satisfaction in all things, naiveté that was both stunning and surreal to friends and baffling to those in authority. She would stand stoic in front of them and not change her expression, or she'd passionately defend herself, choosing either role as calmly as a character, because that's what she was, a character, and her life was the movie.

Sometimes her life made her shiver, and it did just now, sending a cold grip up into the base of her skull and making her raise her shoulder blades and hike her book bag up higher onto her left shoulder and stop and close her eyes, just for one second. She and Mattie were hurrying down the sidewalk in front of Dover Glenn School toward the senior parking lot, where Vincent Maltrouse's red truck sat behind the live oak tree. There was all this accounting to do, accounting for herself and her time, like this afternoon, and the movie was about this, her character explaining herself to people and sometimes not, observing the world and joining sometimes, and often not. And this

was something she loved.

It was just after three, and the bell had rung, and their books were put away, and Lily and Mattie were free. She could see the seniors gathering to smoke and discuss their plans for later. Beyond the senior lot half the field was covered in thinly spread gravel that reached from the paved senior lot to the fence by the soccer field, and this was the underclassmen's parking area. You could get to the underclassmen's lot by going up the road and through the fence on the other side of the senior lot, and most students did, but Lily liked to walk through the senior lot and feel scrutinized as she scrutinized herself making her way along the earth.

It was cold, which was just how she liked it. Winter was good; winter was in the midst of things, with layered clothing and faces that stung with something that must be life, she thought, and in the winter no one looked toward the end of the year or back to the beginning. It was their time, and they were just as she pictured them. She thought her life had become more and more like a movie lately, and this seemed even more possible in the winter, when no one sweated and people generally looked their best.

She liked to have other people notice these things as well and was one to say a thing out loud as it occurred to her, which was what her friends liked about her even though they complained about it.

"Isn't this just like a movie?" she asked Mattie.

Mattie didn't answer. She was tall and had long strawberry blond hair she wore down all the time, and she wore clothes that her mother still bought for her at the Gap. When Mattie looked at the parking lot, her eyes seemed wet because they always did and she wiped her nose with the heel of her palm because this week she had a cold. "Aren't I in a movie? Doesn't this feel like it?" said Lily. "We've seen this before; we're the lighthearted teens on the way to the lot where trouble will occur. We're outsiders, but in a good way, the ones with good hearts. And the real outsiders are after us. You know."

"Shut up," said Mattie.

Lily said, "We're headed for trouble."

Lily was shivering because she'd refused to wear the same sweater twice in a row and didn't own a jacket yet this year. She thought she could see herself from the outside as she walked there next to Mattie. She must look like Mattie in a way, walking there, but also like herself, in jeans that were not new, but weren't old either, and a blue long sleeve tee-shirt, and with darker shorter hair that tangled in the cold, and with a

smaller frame with thin bones that caught the cold air in the marrow. In fact, the tops of her ears burned with cold.

But she loved the cold air. She loved the way it felt on her tongue and hardened the ground. The air was life! And here she was, walking out of school for the weekend, nothing in her arms but English which she liked, Mattie here next to her and Stewart somewhere nearby. She traveled a million miles from her fading detentions and physics and everything unpleasant. English was the only subject and the laughing weekend had begun. At times like this Lily felt tremendous relief and capable of anything. She felt like someone for whom great things would occur. She could see it. It was part of who she was. She was destined for something wonderful. It was part of her character. A wonderful life. "I'm telling you, this is a movie," she said.

Mattie shook her head. She was used to Lily. They'd been best friends since eighth grade, when Lily had first showed Mattie they were both destined for great things by very slightly directing the triangle on Mattie's Ouija board as they sat in candlelight in Mattie's walk-in closet. The great things hadn't arrived yet, but they were on their way, and anyone who spent time around Lily could tell she knew they were just around the corner.

They crossed the road and reached the senior

lot where they began to walk very carefully, books in right arms, left arms supporting, feet narrowly moving along, faces carefully focused on some unknown point in the distance. They both felt seniors watching them from both sides as they walked between the rows of cars, and this was true because they knew it was true. Above them the sun was thin and weak in a bright cold sky.

Mattie used her left hand to flip her hair into the air so that it fell free and silky back onto her shoulders.

When they were next to Vincent's truck, Lily turned to look at him. Vincent made her curious and confused, and he'd had a sexual experience with her. She wasn't very experienced sexually and felt oddly drawn to Vincent because of what had happened between them, which was touch, and Lily feeling it for the first time as something.

Vincent was her brother's friend but her brother was away at school. Vincent was a senior and she thought he might have taken part of her virginity away, and she wanted him to ask for more. She had no plan to give it away any time soon, but she felt it was part of his character to ask for more. Vincent wore corduroys and a pea green button-down shirt and carpenter boots and sat on the open tailgate of his truck smoking and watching them.

When Lily looked at him he squinted back as

if the sun were behind her, then he glanced up and down her body and she felt a chill. She and Mattie passed Vincent and got a few feet away and then he said, "So what's up, Mattie?"

They both stopped and turned around.

Lily felt cold jealousy playing into her stomach. She looked hard at Vincent and then at Mattie. Mattie wore a small smile. She said, "Nothing, I guess. Why?" She hugged her books closer to her chest and shrugged at Vincent.

Mattie was giving her virginity away to everyone at school. She could at least leave Lily Vincent, since Vincent and Lily had already had a sexual experience. If Mattie started her kind of sex with Vincent, Lily was through. Mattie was willing to do things Lily had never heard of, like oral sex, and more. Watching Mattie smile at Vincent the way she smiled at boys when she was drunk at parties, Lily felt explosive, like an object that was gathering pressure. She felt all of her body at one time and didn't like it. She felt the entire weight of her presence on this earth and hated this.

"Why are you hanging out with this little derelict?" Vincent said. He lifted his foot and pointed his toe at Lily.

Lily felt relief flood through her and fell back into her body.

"I'm not a derelict," she said. She loved the

sound of that word.

Mattie stepped back a step and looked at Lily and laughed, and Lily was glad to be friends again and laughed back at Mattie. They gave each other movie star grins.

"Sure you are," Vincent said. "You're trouble."

Lily loved it whenever anyone told her anything about her. The fact that it was Vincent made it all the better. Vincent stood up and tossed his cigarette on the ground and walked around the truck to the passenger side.

When he started getting into his truck they walked away. It wasn't until they reached the end of the senior lot that Lily could rise out of herself again, and watch herself.

The status of a tenth grader at Dover Glenn depended heavily on sexual experience, at least among the girls. Mattie and Lily were not equal. Mattie had a habit of performing oral sex on guys whenever she got drunk. She'd started last year with Robert and Marshal Taylor from the varsity basketball team and then she made her way around the two grades above them, much to Lily's horror.

The idea of oral sex terrified Lily. It didn't fit in her idea of sex, and what she thought it was, and it made her nervous about the possible existence of other unknown and possibly frightening sexual acts that could accompany the act of losing her virginity. Plus, she didn't

understand the mechanics of the terms. There was 'sucking' and there was 'blowing' and they were both the same thing, and this confused her. She wasn't about to ask Mattie about it, as Mattie was sort of an expert in the subject and a hero among the girls and might gloat over it. Lily was in tenth grade and should know. Plus she was on scholarship. Whenever she didn't know something everyone else did, it usually turned out to be because of the scholarship. She didn't like to bring it up.

The great fear among tenth grade girls was of growing old without losing your virginity. Lily was hoping she could just wait until later, and then maybe she and Vincent would end up like those characters in the movies, where the scene fades out with music and two people alone together in the back of a car. Her life seemed lined up this way, and without having to perform oral sex. Then she and Stewart would be together and she'd know how, because she and Vincent would have already had an experience. She felt like a well-meaning character heading toward the ending of a movie she herself had written.

Her experience with Vincent happened the summer before at the beach after Philip Monroe's party, where she'd been sitting drinking a beer on the hood of her brother's car watching the seniors and wondering which one she would be in two years, and then suddenly

everyone was climbing into their cars to go out to the beach and skinny-dip, and she was riding with Vincent Maltrouse. She said nothing in the car so she'd seem like she was thinking the right things, and he didn't talk either. And then at the beach no one would actually get naked, so the boys all wore their boxers and the girls wore various layers of clothing and everyone spread out up and down the beach in pairs.

Vincent stood next to Lily and hummed as she took off her shirt. That was as naked as she was willing to get in the full moon in front of Vincent Maltrouse and the flat sea. They walked down to the water together, him in boxers and her in jeans and her bra.

When they stepped into the water she looked out at the dark slant of the ocean and grew scared thinking about the creatures that came out at night. She grabbed Vincent's arm and Vincent reached around and used both hands to pick her up like a baby, so she wrapped her legs around his waist and put her arms around his neck and watched the beach over his shoulder. He put one hand against her back and one under her thigh and took crashing steps into the ocean. The moon was on her shoulders and back and his hand was on her spine above her waist and the water was just barely cooler than their bodies and the air. He was warmer than her. She kept looking down to see if her bra actually looked like a bikini, as he'd said it

would. The tide was low and the ocean was still and flat, tilting up away from them in the darkness. It was quiet and Lily was afraid of it. She liked the flat top of Vincent's shoulders and the feeling water made between their stomachs and ribs, tickling in and out as they breathed, and she liked the feeling of his hand under her thigh. She liked holding his neck looking backward at the dark land.

When they were deep enough for the water to be above her waist, he stopped and used both hands to hold her out in front of him. She kept her legs wrapped tightly around his waist. He wasn't talking as he looked at her, and she looked down at herself to see what he saw. She was breathing visibly, and her ribs were moving with it. His ribs were much bigger and he breathed loudly through his nose, then he wrapped both arms around her and pulled her toward him in sort of a hug. His hands roamed around her back, one at a time, and each nudged at the waist of her jeans while she held still against him. After about half a minute, he squeezed her tightly by the ribs, so that she coughed, and said, "Let's go."

"What?" she said, but he was already striding toward the beach, looking hard at the beach. He shifted her to the side and she slipped down off his hip. They didn't look at each other.

In the car, Vincent gave Lily his dry pants. "I have boxers," he said. "These are too big but you can still wear them."

For some reason, she wasn't shy in his car. It was dark inside the car and she kicked off her jeans while he backed up and turned around in the public beach access. She pulled off her jeans and when she sat up for his pants he'd pulled up to the stop sign by the road and stopped. He put on his turn signal. The air was on and she was cold in her underwear. Then he reached over and put his hand on her thigh. It was warm. He moved it to her stomach. She watched his hand and he held it flat and still on her stomach, and it moved gently as she breathed. He sighed. She felt her skin getting tight all over and a small rush moved up the insides of her thighs. She breathed in and clenched her stomach against it, but she knew she had lost part of her virginity to him, and he was sitting there with his hand on her stomach thinking about sex and she must not quite be a virgin anymore.

Since Mattie actually had tennis lessons every Friday afternoon, Lily met Stewart in the underclassmen lot. Lily and Stewart had been best friends before Mattie ever came to Dover and now they were dating. She liked them as friends but neither of them had a girl or boyfriend and it made sense to go together,

since everyone thought of them as dating anyway. He drove an old Volvo station wagon and was her favorite person in the world. He drove gracefully and fast and Lily relaxed completely in his car; it was one of the only times she could sit still without tapping her foot or jiggling her knee. She owned the seat next to his, had claimed it, had put Strawberry Shortcake stickers on the dash and glove box and strung a string of Mardi Gras beads around the handle on her side.

Stewart liked it when she did things to his car because he liked her, and she liked this, and combined with his skill at driving, this made the car their place to be together. This afternoon Lily rolled down her window all the way and held her arm out like a wing, her hand flat and sailing as cold air moved past. The air froze her fingers and arm and face and then Stewart yelled, "Hey!"

When she looked over he was turning up the heat. She rolled up her window and settled back into her seat and observed Stewart. Stewart thought she was a character. He was thin and easily chilled like her, but he didn't think the cold air was life; he just thought it was uncomfortable. He wore a thick coat all winter with soft cashmere scarves Lily liked to steal and wrap all around her head at lunch. He also had a pair of leather driving gloves his father had given him when he got his license. They were

in the glove box in a thin cardboard box. He never wore them. It would be stupid to wear driving gloves with the old family Volvo station wagon and driving gloves were pretentious anyway. But sometimes Lily pulled them out and put them on and admired them. They were thin and soft and yellow leather, and they felt papery cool over her hands, and the fact was that Stewart drove well enough to own a pair of driving gloves, and he cared about driving that much too. His dad knew this and so did Lily, and so even though he didn't wear them, she was careful to admire them sometimes.

The afternoon traffic was already lining up on the bridge to downtown. Stewart was tense and alert and happy. He pulled out of each lane before Lily could tell where he would fit, anticipating openings in traffic she couldn't see, and he did so gracefully enough to be able to move from lane to lane without annoying anyone. He wasn't cutting anyone off. Some days he explained to Lily the physics of traffic flow as he saw it, the reasons why it bottled up and opened up again and why certain lanes seemed faster and how the lights should be coordinated, and she'd lean her head back against the seat and feel what was surely happy and notice the wind or the heat on her face. She'd put her feet on the dash and watch him talk. He was her best friend of old and she knew all the contours of his face and the freckle

in front of his right ear and the ways his brown hair reacted to the weather. He was handsome and serious-looking with a wonderful laugh and she thought she felt happy there, in the car with him, and she could see them there together, and they both looked happy to her.

She would have liked to be in love with Stewart. But he hadn't taken her virginity like Vincent. She couldn't think of Stewart without feeling too much, everything else in her life, couldn't imagine something like oral sex in connection to him. She was caught between being happy with Stewart and aware that Vincent watched her moving down the halls thinking about things that had never even occurred to her.

Stewart's mother was waiting for them when they came in. She wore jeans and a black tee shirt that said 'introvert' in tiny white letters, a joke gift from her husband because she loved people so much. She was the perfect mother, like a character in a movie, and it felt wonderful to be around her. When they walked in she was baking cookies for the church picnic on Sunday, and as they sat at the table the heap of chocolate chip cookies doubled on the counter beside the oven as she shoveled the cool cookies off the wax paper and onto the pile. She put down a fresh sheet of wax paper and moved the hot cookies she'd just taken from the oven onto

the paper to cool, then she scooped globs of dough out of an old mixing bowl and into neat rows on the cookie sheets before putting them back in the oven. After she put the spoon down she licked the dough off her fingers and leaned back against the counter in front of the silverware drawer to look at them.

She got a wet glimmer in her eyes whenever she looked at Stewart and found him kidding around with Lily. Lily always felt like a young couple at her house and like two children with a wonderful mother. Stewart's mother maneuvered through motherhood and wifedom and her own private life they saw the edges of and of being host with perfect ease and great skill and what Lily thought must be some kind of magic. Her kitchen always smelled good and her house always neat and they never saw her cleaning.

When Stewart and Lily sat down she pulled a pale green Tupperware bowl out of the refrigerator and peeled off the Saran Wrap and balled this up and threw it away. She looked down into the bowl and jiggled its contents as she brought it over.

"Pears," she said, "and watermelon. You guys finish it or I'll have to throw it away."

They ate the fruit with their hands, sliding cool cubes and slices of fruit in slimy tracks up the sides of the bowl into their hands before they could get them into their mouths. The

watermelon was wintry and almost tasteless with cold, but the pear slices were gritty and deep and sweet. Stewart's mother brought over a plate of cheese and sliced off a few pieces before leaving the knife on the plate for them.

"It's smoked," she said.

Lily had never had smoked cheese before and it tasted musky and sweet and she couldn't stop eating it.

She didn't leave until dinnertime. Then Stewart walked her halfway down the block, which he always did. She only lived a few blocks away. Their neighborhood was still and quiet. At dinnertime the streetlights were just beginning to buzz and the cold air was close and still on the ground. They lived in a good neighborhood with houses designed to look dissimilar but tasteful, and at night the houses took on bizarre silhouettish shapes and lined the road in front of the darkening blue sky.

Stewart tried to race Lily to the end of the road, but after a few steps she turned and ran the other way, and then he stopped and stood still in the road and waited for her to return to him.

Lily walked toward Stewart. She walked carefully on her toes like a dancer. He watched with clear eyes. She laughed, suddenly afraid, and put both arms out straight at her sides as if she needed balance. Stewart stayed calm. Her

stomach drew together and pressed low into a knot. It was time to say goodbye.

Lily put her hands on his shoulders and looked at his eyes, and he looked into hers, as they did each night. Usually because they did this each night, there was never a surprise; they each knew each other and they knew what they'd see. Now his eyes looked too calm and serious. He put his hands on her sides just above her hipbones and she began to feel the pull of leaving, a jealous babyish ache she felt in her chest whenever people left to go home and be with their families.

Stewart's hands felt quiet and light. They looked at each other for about half a minute. His eyes were curious and kind and full of something that sparked fear in her. When she looked down, he pulled her toward him and she kissed him, and he wrapped both hands around her back.

Kissing Stewart was dangerous. He was awkward. He opened his mouth too much as if to swallow her, and his breathing changed immediately into relief as if he'd been dying before and was suddenly saved.

In Lily a feeling of slow joy was followed by intense pain, keen and lonely and searing from the heart. It flew into her face and carried with it what she feared must be a cleansing of her heart, as if to show its faults. She backed away from Stewart.

He shook his head. He looked sad.

She looked down. She wanted to be somewhere else.

"Hey," he said. "I'm not exactly teeming with diseases, you know."

"What?" she said, although she'd heard him. She crossed her arms and stared down, hoping this talk was almost over.

"You can touch me," he said, looking at her, closely. "I'm no worse than Vincent."

"What?" She looked up. Mattie must have told him.

There was nothing on his face but displeasure. And then he put both hands in his khaki pockets and stepped to the side of her. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, taking a few steps away.

Lily watched, abandoned, then she felt her heart seize with regret and terror. "But where are you going?" she said, her words too loud in the absolute chilled air.

He kept walking. Then he stopped. Then he walked away, heading down the road toward his house.

She watched him go and hated herself for making him go, for ending things this way, maybe forever, though probably not. She hated that she'd hurt him. She hated Mattie and Vincent, and herself, every decision she'd ever made and whatever it was inside her that was capable of choice, and always made the wrong

one. Regret was a quick, small animal rearing up against disappointment. She swallowed twice and let it stay. It kicked against her and tore holes that did not matter.

The street was quiet. She missed him. It lurched against her throat and breathing. She breathed carefully through her nose. She put one hand over her mouth and watched him, this boy. She watched the back of the boy her heart finally felt still around, that she'd pushed away because of nothing, because of something stupid, some foreign raining sadness. Lonely mistakes. She was sorry. He was thin and almost gone in the dark.

The sky sat quiet and lonely, the inside of a pupil full of regret.

The Amherst Public Library was open until ten o'clock. Starbucks and Port City were both open until eleven. There was the grocery store, Harris Teeter, open twenty-four hours and cold inside, but a good place to roam and pace, and the neighborhoods that sprawled around behind the main road were all good to walk except for during this season because her feet got numb and tired and she'd feel a dull itching at the bottom of her lungs from the cold air. There was a late night diner nearer to downtown but you needed money and the people in there were dressed differently. Lily loved to go in for a Coke-to-go, and then she'd study the people

laughing in the booths, college people in their own movies with many friends and nowhere to go that ever split them. She looked at these characters from the outside and felt a cold and lonely feeling, but she always felt better about it in a minute or so because this was her future, and they could never go back to where she was, to her own beautiful life right now. She had so much to look forward to that it hurt the edges of her throat and the top of her stomach. It hurt her heart when she breathed.

The sky at night in the winter was cold and bright with the moon and black without it, and hurrying along beneath it was a lonely life.

And walking slowly through the empty street beneath the sky was lonely walking, and the racing walk of when she heard someone behind her was lonely and sad and terrible, and when she finally found the courage to turn around and look, the street was dark as a river, houses silent witnesses to her presence among them. There was no other human, not one person following her on the road, or at the edge of the road, or in the woods, stalking her from behind the trees. And then she felt hurt and left out and the sky spited her, all the way home, because a teenager walking the streets at night should be a wonderful thing, something out of a movie, a scene delicious and slightly wrong with a lot of soul in it, but she couldn't manage this and so she felt about four.

Lily walked into things alone and moved from person to person without being sure she would hold to the earth. She walked into her house alone and passed the lonely row of light switches into the front room, and then the kitchen, dining room, front room, and front hall, and then she walked into the dark back hall of her dark house. At the end of the hall her mother slept in the large bed she shared with Lily's father. Lily did not check to see if she was alive. She passed the closed door and opened the door next to it to go into the wood-paneled den where an orange bulb in an orange globe lamp made the air colored and aquarium-like.

On the couch in the den were the remote and her brother Patrick's car keys. So he was home then; he came home some weekends and not others. Her father wasn't home but would be soon enough and he would read the paper in an armchair until he slumped over it in a snore, then he'd jerk awake after a few minutes and look around as if someone had accused him of something. He'd nod again within a minute and hang his head and snore until he grew hungry.

Lily walked to the door at the other side of the living room and called up the stairs, "Hello? Hello?"

She wandered back and sat down on the blue couch in a slump.

Next to Lily on the couch the remote stuck out from between two cushions. She picked it up and turned on the news channel. A woman in a puffy raincoat spoke somberly into the camera on one half of the screen and the pretty made-up woman in a suit behind the news desk nodded and smiled as she talked back on her side. The volume was all the way down.

Lily looked down at herself slumped on the couch. Her thighs stuck out in front of her and her jeans were low-cut and a little too loose, so they sat a few inches below her hipbones. Her blue shirt was thin and old; she smoothed it down the front of her stomach to tuck it in and saw her own stomach muscles outlined under her shirt, between her jeans and her ribs. On the TV the pretty newscaster wore a suit. Newscasters all wore suits with shoulder pads and they all had huge chests. Mattie said they got implants to get those jobs but Stewart said your chest just got bigger once you had children. They did wear special bras. Everyone knew that.

Lily put her right hand flat on her stomach the way Vincent had and a tinge of excitement passed down through her stomach. But this just made way for something sad, knowledge, because Vincent wanted his hands all over her and told her in the halls with his eyes, but Stewart wanted her too and would never tell her. But she already knew. It was just easy to

pretend she didn't because he was shy and felt different and afraid around her body and she knew he'd always be there. Vincent's hand on her stomach would never really lead anywhere except to Vincent's hand on her fly, and she wasn't ready.

She felt a heavy sadness because it would hurt Stewart, whatever Vincent did with his hand, even if she never told Stewart. She thought of Stewart's thin shy hand and knew she was losing Vincent Maltrouse somehow, right in front of this perfect-looking newswoman and woman with the raincoat and something beneath it puffing it out. There had been no scene; her virginity was just no longer at risk.

And her heart was lost and she felt heavy and worn.

On TV the newscaster was still interviewing that woman. Lily's mother had been sleeping for two days now. It was either pills or the need for pills or shock or disdain for all of them that took her away.

Lily smiled like a newscaster. She sat up straight and began pretending she was on TV, commenting on the show before her in a fake detective's voice. The woman patted the sides of her coat and Lily said, "Yep. She wore sadness under that jacket I could tell. We all saw it from a mile away, but no one believes me. Barney, I said—" She shifted sideways on the couch and crossed her feet beneath her. "You all know I

can spot it in a man, woman, or child. And that woman's wearing it."

The door to the stairwell opened and Lily's brother stuck his head out. He had greasy reddish hair from sleeping all day and he glared at her.

She looked at him calmly.

"Shut. The fuck. Up," he said. Then he shut the door again.

Lily frowned at the screen. She started quietly: "Barney, I tell you, I have seen a lot of things." She was speaking softly now, almost murmuring, in her detective's voice. "In my day." She shook her head regretfully.

If she could use the remote to fast-forward the movie of her life, she'd see a nasty turn. She'd see a scene destined to replay forever, in which Lily walks into the bathroom and encounters her mother and death and suicide, compassion and abandonment, and her heart breaks and she feels herself click and close inside as she backs away and doesn't scream. And she could have kept watching to see Patrick's military funeral with flags and music and her father there, slumped and gray and used up in his old unwelcome body. And there would be later, a life she'd have to rebuild slowly, and later, a man, eventually, and with him, a baby, this life huger than memory.

But of course she could not. She was fifteen years old. She'd just made her first decision

about a boy, and even this had mostly slipped her consciousness. What she felt was sadness formed as a newscaster and her childhood there on the couch. She felt the sharp death of the day, and the easing of this into night.

She knew tomorrow was Saturday, that she'd call Stewart, and that things were getting better. Part of her was lonely. Part of her was more comfortable on the earth.

