

STACY BARTON

LILY
HARP



A NOVELLA
(and other stories)


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IN MEMORY OF

Burt & Sandy
9638 Pieces of Eight Trail
Little Gasparilla Island

*...Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone...*
—Edna St. Vincent Millay

One

THE AIR WAS WARM as Grandpa and I drove away from Sarasota, following the long road to Englewood that hugged the coast. I was going home. I watched as my year away at art college disappeared into the side mirror like a tiny memory.

I had missed the feel of Grandpa's old pickup—the rumble beneath my seat was like the bay under the bow. I shifted my weight on the green vinyl bench and felt my belly swell my skirt. Without touching the curve of my stomach, I thought about what was inside; the nurse at school said it had fingernails.

I reached into my pocket and felt for Mamma's picture. It was there, tucked safe inside the folds of calico. I fingered its worn edges and said a prayer.

On the pushbutton radio Elvis sang, "Love me tender, love me true" over the rush of hot air through the open windows, but neither Grandpa nor I felt like singing along. I tried to gather my hair and tuck it into the neck of my shirt, but it kept slipping out and stinging my eyes. Finally I let it go and faced the wind, my hair flying back over the seat.

I closed my eyes and tried to smell our island, fringed with mangroves rooted in sand, but it was still miles away, sitting between the coast and the Gulf, with its white sand, squatty trees and Grandpa's stilt house.

Sarasota was far behind us by the time we reached the old citrus groves. Row after row of sturdy trees swept by the windows—their own sort of sea. When Grandpa turned the truck onto Englewood Road, he reached over and patted my leg. He looked like he wanted to say something, so I waited, but he turned away and kept driving instead. I watched his profile for a moment and wished he'd say something, anything, but he was a snook under the dock, just out of reach, and I was a fisherman hoping for a bite. When he didn't speak to me, I looked out my window and held Mamma's picture again. I rubbed my finger back and forth along its top edge. Back and forth, back and forth. After seven years, it was so soft it didn't even press against my finger.

The stop and go of Grandpa's shifter lulled me to sleep until we pulled into Aunt Vi's driveway. I heard the gravel under the truck tires and opened my eyes. Through the window I saw Aunt Vi on the porch surrounded by American flags; it was the Bicentennial. Even though July was two months away, her little plastic flags waved dutifully across the porch.

Her two-story bungalow stood up proud on the corner; three generations of Harps had resided inside. My chest grew tight at the sight of it. I took in my breath and slid off the seat, my peasant skirt sticking to the back of my thighs. I'd always been small, so I thought maybe I didn't look terribly pregnant, but when I stepped away from the truck, I saw in Aunt Vi's face the horror as big as if I was about to give birth.

"We're here, Vi!" Grandpa called, trying to be cheerful enough for all of us.

"Olin." Aunt Vi nodded as Grandpa got to the top step. She had quit calling him Dad when he ran off to the island after Grandma died. Mamma always said we should feel sorry for Aunt Vi because she got left all alone, but I wasn't sure.

Aunt Vi gave a nod to me too. "Lily."

She turned and led us into the front room—to the velvet chairs reserved for important guests and unwanted callers. She motioned toward them and turned for the kitchen.

"I'll get the tea."

Her wiry frame whisked its way back through the house, her head held

high and her heels clicking along the wooden floor; from the back, she looked like she was about to play for the choir.

Grandpa took a spot in the wooden chair near the piano while I wandered about, remembering another day when I had been left there against my will, the day of Mamma's funeral. That day, after sliced ham and potato salad, and too many neighbors in the parlor, Aunt Vi had cried alone, playing Chopin, while I had gone upstairs. I had stretched out on top of her yellow ruffled guest bed and pretended that Mamma had just gone away for awhile, that her VW bus was about to come rattling around the corner.

Before Aunt Vi returned with the sweet tea, I stepped around the coffee table and tried to make a breath, but the air in the parlor was thick—soaped and scrubbed and full of too many memories. During the school year, when the yellow bedroom was mine, I kept the window open just a bit so I could let in some of the outside. I looked at the parlor window and wondered if I dared.

Just then Aunt Vi returned with our refreshment. "Now, Lily," she started, "sit down and let's talk." She patted the seat beside her and I sat like an obedient child.

She prattled on about my living there with her and being discreet in my "unfortunate situation" and about how she had an appointment with Dr. Jergen for a week from Thursday and how he had found a very nice family for the adoption.

At that I blurted out, "I don't know if I can do that."

"Of course you can, Lily." She leaned in so close I could feel the puff of her breath. "There just aren't any other options if you want to live here with me."

"But . . . um . . . I don't want to live here." I looked at Grandpa.

Aunt Vi pressed her lips together, and for a moment I thought she might pop. Instead, she spoke like I was five. "Look, Lily, let's be realistic. You're not going to have a baby and live out on that island with a bunch of fishermen. It's just ridiculous. You can only get there by boat. It's a house on stilts for crying out loud!"

I said nothing.

Aunt Vi made a huffing noise and sat back. She looked at Grandpa and

seemed to decide on another approach. She sat up and continued, politely. “There’s a lovely couple over in Port Charlotte. They’re good people and very rich, but they can’t have any children. Dr. Jergen told me about them and said they would be thrilled to take the baby. You can live out on the island until it’s time, if you like, and then have the baby in the hospital over in Port Charlotte.” Aunt Vi paused to take a breath. “No one around here will need to know too much—the child will have a good home and you can still have a life.”

She smiled, proudly, like she had found the solution to a tough laundry stain. I looked from her to Grandpa. He glanced at me and averted his eyes. It wasn’t as though I hadn’t thought of it myself—I had—but hearing Aunt Vi speak like that—well, I couldn’t stand it.

“How could you suggest that I just give it away like that?”

I stood up and turned away from them both. I faced Aunt Vi’s sideboard. In the mirror that hung above her lace doilies, I saw my reflection. As I traced the bridge of my nose with my eyes, I wondered if I was beginning to look like Mamma and if the baby I carried would look like me. I pressed my hand against the outside of my pocket and felt the comfort of her picture’s flat square inside.

“Lily, honey, I—” Grandpa’s voice turned me around. I looked at him, desperately hoping that he knew what to do, but his voice trailed off beneath the weight of my gaze, and he picked at his trousers.

I felt Mamma’s death come again and closed my eyes. The parlor faded into the memory of her in Aunt Vi’s claw-footed tub, surrounded by red water. The bathroom light shone down from the magnolia wallpaper like always, but Mamma sank below the surface like a mermaid, her wet hair trailing around her like a halo. My feet were stuck to the linoleum while Grandpa and Aunt Vi came rushing in, lifting and struggling and yelling. Her body was like a fish left too long in the live well. Aunt Vi kept saying over and over, “Oh Rosemary, no.” Grandpa kept trying to put her breath back in, but she didn’t want it. Finally they stopped and held her quietly. I moved from the doorway and touched her hair. It was wet and cold.

I opened my eyes with my head down and watched as my ten-year-old feet melted into seventeen-year-old shoes. I looked up. “I don’t think I can do it, Grandpa.”

“But Lily, maybe—” Grandpa started, but he wasn’t listening; nobody was.

“You just don’t understand,” I interrupted.

“No, Lily, *you* don’t understand,” Aunt Vi spoke, her voice shaking. “You have absolutely no idea what it means to raise a child; you are too young and too inexperienced. Adoption is your only way out.”

“That’s not true—Mamma was only seventeen when she had me.” I looked back and forth between them, daring either of them to contradict me, but no one spoke.

Then Aunt Vi regained her composure. “Don’t you take that tone with me.”

I turned and fumbled with the door, but she reached out and grabbed my wrist.

“You will not just walk out on me,” she said. “I had enough of that from your mother.” I could feel the anger in her skin.

“I did, too.” I glared at her. We stood there a moment in some strange, shared pain. Slowly, she became aware of her grip on my arm and loosened her fingers. Grandpa stood.

“You can’t decide this for me,” I said to both of them.

In one move, I turned and left. Without stopping, I rushed off the porch and across the lawn to the truck, but I lost my footing on the gravel and fell. Grandpa was right behind me; I heard his feet come running on the rocks. I held my belly and looked up.

I could see his worry. “Does it hurt?”

“No.”

His face relaxed; he kissed the top of my head and gathered me up in his arms and lifted me into the truck.

“It was just a little slip,” he said and tucked me into the front seat. He patted my knee and shut the door and went back to Aunt Vi on the porch.

I wiped my nose on the back of my hand and realized the gravel had cut my palms. I fished around in the glove box for a napkin and pressed my hands together in a prayer to stop the bleeding. Grandpa and Aunt Vi spoke at the door. I heard them.

“I’m just trying to protect her,” Aunt Vi said. “I don’t want her to end up like Rosemary!”

“Hush, Vi,” Grandpa said, taking her shoulders. He turned and looked at me. I caught his eye and looked down. Through the open window, I thought I saw my mother’s face in the gravel. I blinked my eyes and she was gone; there was just an impression where my body had been.

Two

WE PULLED AWAY FROM AUNT VI'S and drove through the center of Englewood. The mismatched houses lined the way as we left, mixed up with dress stores and bait shacks and a five and dime. All the buildings sat huddled near the road and their A-frame signs stood on strips of grass, advertising beauty salon discounts, Friday night bingo or the lunch special of the day.

As we drove down Dearborn Street, I felt like all the shops and houses were staring at me through their open windows; even the loblolly pines seemed to lean down their heads and peek inside. Everyone in town knew my history. I was a Harp—the love child of Rosemary—the daughter of a hippy. They still talked about how we had camped in the mountains in Mamma's VW, selling her pottery to the tourists in Asheville.

At the intersection of Mango Avenue, the Junior League had stretched a banner across the road. In red, white and blue it read, "God Bless America 1776–1976." I looked up as we slipped under its swinging cheerfulness and felt like I had missed the blessing.

I was relieved when we finally turned onto Placida Road, because it meant the island was coming. Everything grew whiter as we drove: the houses, the rooftops—even the roadway. The pine trees were replaced by sea grapes and, except for the occasional palm, everything grew shorter and farther apart. After about fifteen minutes, we jolted around the last bend. A couple of bait stores and a marina signaled Placida Harbor.

Grandpa bounced the truck into Eldon's and we parked under the lone palm tree. Aunt Vi had been right about that much—you could only get to Little Gasparilla by boat.

Eldon's Marina sat crooked on the edge of the water, its brown boards climbing up to the tin roof that covered the house above the store. The sight of it comforted me. I had spent many poker nights up there with Grandpa and the guys. Eldon was Grandpa's best friend and the head of their poker foursome; I had known him all my life. The snook-shaped sign above his door read, "Eldon's Marina: Live Bait and Ice," but it was so much more. It was a slip in the boathouse, a parking space in the yard and the gateway to our island.

I didn't want to get into another conversation about my pregnant state, even with Eldon, and even though he wasn't much of a talker, I kept my head low as we came up the walk. Sure enough he was there, his small frame perched on a stool like a Norman Rockwell. He always sat near the door so he could catch a breeze through the screen until a customer needed him at the register or out back by the bait.

Grandpa raised his hand as we got closer. "Hey Eldon."

Eldon hopped off his stool when we came inside, but he didn't seem to know what to say. He smiled and nodded, his beaky nose bobbing with the rest of him. He took off his ball cap and wiped his forehead. "Hey, Lily." He put his cap back on and tried not to look down at my stomach. "It's good to have you home again."

"Thanks."

We stood there. All of us a little awkward. I had no idea what he knew, although by the way he was acting I was pretty sure Grandpa had told him everything. All at once he reached out his hand and patted the side of my arm. Three little pats. Then he pulled his hand back, folded it together with his other one and sighed. He smiled at me like he suddenly realized I was still Lily. "Real good to have you home, honey."

Then Grandpa rescued us—started chatting about the tides and tomorrow's bait and some new reel—and I was relieved the focus was no longer on me. I wandered about the store, taking my time, running my hand along the shelves of hats and lures and tuna cans. I hadn't been in since Christmas.

When I was little, I could always count on Eldon to give me some little trinket from his store. Candy bars and popsicles at first, but eventually he kept a whole section of hair barrettes and nail polish . . . just for me. He pretended it was “on account of the changing times,” but I think he ordered those pretty little things just to please me. Today wasn’t any different. He didn’t say much more than what he’d said at the door, nothing about my condition, of course; he just slipped me a 3 Musketeers Bar and a bottle of frosted peach nail polish and smiled sheepishly. I leaned over the plywood counter and kissed him on his leathery cheek and slipped outside before I could get emotional.

“See you Thursday!” Grandpa called.

We got in the runabout, and Eldon waved us off. Standing alone by the gas pump, his skinny legs made him look like an egret. It made me look twice. I had known Eldon all my life, but I had never noticed before how he looked like a bird. I turned and looked at Grandpa as he steered the runabout. He smiled, and I suddenly realized how blue his eyes were when he looked at me. So many things I had missed before.

Just then Grandpa hit the gas; the bow of the boat rose up, and the wind blew hard as we headed out across the harbor. The evening sun shone across the water, and when we came out on the other side of the bridge, the sun hung like a glowing orb over Gasparilla Pass. It was so beautiful it made my throat swell.

At the sand bar marker we turned toward a little piece of land barely noticed by the pirates who named it. The rise and fall of the boat and the salty smell of the waterway soon put me at ease; the roar of the motor meant no talking, and for a moment the tension from Aunt Vi’s fell away. To our left, the boats raced in from the Gulf; I watched the Grady Whites fly by on their wakes and knew the wide, clear blue they returned from, but I was happy to stay inside the narrow strip of water that stretched like a finger between the barrier islands and the edge of the mainland.

I sat up near the bow to feel the wet wind in my hair and bobbed with the rhythm of the boat as it rode against the current; the rise and fall of my belly made me think of Mamma again. I looked past Grandpa to the back of the boat and remembered her sitting cross-legged on the cooler, knees drawn up, head thrown back in the wind. I remembered wading in

the water with Grandpa and catching a fish so big that Mamma insisted we trace its form on the dock in permanent marker, and I remembered sunset picnics anchored in the pass, wading knee deep for pink conchs.

Mamma and I made a shrine out of those conchs on the south end of our island once, down near the pass where there aren't any stilt houses; it was beautiful. She loved altars and prayers and shrines but didn't much like church; Mamma preferred Mother Nature, the Virgin Mary and a little Greek mythology. As we drew closer to our dock, I looked back toward the pass to see if I could catch a glimpse of the spot where our shrine had been, but just then the runabout started to sputter, and I turned around. Suddenly the motor cut out. Grandpa tried to restart it several times, but it wouldn't turn over no matter what he did. He crawled back and lifted up the outboard. He checked the gas line, wiggled the plugs, but nothing happened.

"Damn it." He put the cover back on the motor, lowered it into the water and sat down on the bench seat. "I guess you better hand me the paddle."

I did, and he started rowing, the flat oar making a plunk with each stroke. We didn't have far to go, maybe fifty yards or so, but I knew he was irritated. I didn't say much; I just turned and faced our dock, inhaling the smell of the mangroves. Honestly, I didn't mind the slow paddle in; without the motor, everything was quiet, and I could hear the island welcome me home.

Stretching up long past the stilt houses and back toward the pass were the mangroves I had known ever since I could remember—rows and rows of stocky trees perched half in the water, half out. As Grandpa rowed us in, I watched those gnarled roots rise in trios around us, creating a nest of branches that framed our dock—a nest full of all the creatures that were born and raised in her forest of roots. I smoothed both palms across my middle and felt comforted by the mangrove's great maternity.

Grandpa finally got the boat alongside the dock, jumped out and tied us to the cleat. He held out his hand; I took it, and as I climbed out, my belly bumped his other hand. Suddenly there was awkwardness between us. We stood still a moment, quieted by everything that was different. I wanted him to say something, but I guess he couldn't; he just turned back

to the runabout without words. I watched his hands tether the boat with care, saw the attention he gave the ropes as he secured them to the cleats, and I wished for a moment that I could float like that.

I turned away and peered through the mangrove at our stilt house. Even though there were others along the bay, on our side of the trees she stood silent and alone, framed by green and sky. Her upstairs porch smiled at me through the chicken wire and screen. The last bit of sun reflected off a cloud and tipped her roof in gold. The downstairs porch, surrounded by the wide round leaves of sea grapes, sat nearly swallowed in the evening light. I was home.

While Grandpa got my bags from the runabout, I carried my cardboard box of art supplies through the mangrove; as I climbed the wooden steps of the stilt house, the canvases bounced against the mason jars of brushes. When I arrived on the landing at the top there was a breeze, so I stayed for a moment. I peered out across the channel at the mangroves on the other side. The sunset was fading, and as my eyes came back to the trees spread below me, I wished I could step out and walk across them, join them in their maternal certainty. If only I had more faith.

The fishermen were in for the day, the sun was already down on the other side of the island, and I knew it had turned the beach into a rainbow of gilded clouds. As Grandpa came up the dock with the bags, I watched a family pass by, piled high on a flats boat meant for a couple of men. Grandpa reached the top of the porch, and we stood together a moment before going inside. Pelicans dipped in the water, and I thought I saw a dolphin rise out by the sand bar. The island was silvered in grey, both water and sky, marking the end of a difficult day.

Three

I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING as though my year away at art school had never been. I stretched, breathing in the familiar crunch of Grandpa's line-dried sheets, the salt-air smell of our island home. Without opening my eyes, I turned my face to the sun and felt the trees scatter shadows across my cheek. It occurred to me that lying there, half asleep, I could be any age: five, Mamma lying beside me, the day about to begin; ten, lost in Aunt Vi's yellow bed; thirteen, waking up to the sound of Grandpa in the kitchen.

Just then the baby kicked, and I opened my eyes. Seventeen. I sat up on the edge of the bed and swung my legs over the side and looked down at my once-flat stomach; it pressed against my nightgown and forced me to pay attention, to choose a future for my child. I hadn't been able to choose abortion; the thought of killing something growing so innocently inside me had been more than I could imagine. I didn't know if I could give it away, but I didn't know if I could keep it either. I sighed and pressed the fabric taut against my belly and wondered if I could raise a child.

I smelled coffee from the kitchen and heard Grandpa with the skillet and knew the bacon was in the pan. I got up and pulled open a drawer and wiggled into an old two-piece. The trunks fit snug below my bowl of a belly, but who was going to notice or even care? Certainly not Grandpa. I pulled an old t-shirt on over top and slipped shorts on underneath; they rolled down at the waistband. My body was no longer my own.

Yesterday's skirt lay in a heap on the floor. I picked it up and laid it across the foot of my bed. From the side pocket I pulled the frayed picture of Mamma and held it for a moment. It was cool and smooth beneath my fingers. I carried it to the dresser, to the little vase that Mamma had made just for me. It was the last piece she had thrown. Cobalt blue—the color of a deep night sky—it had a rough terracotta rim that spilled over the edge like peach-colored tears. I reached out and smoothed its side.

I still held the picture. Grandpa had taken it the summer before Mamma died. It was worn around the edges, but the image was still clear. Mamma and I were sitting close together on the dock, our feet dangling out over the water. Her arm was wrapped around my waist, and we were turned to face the camera. You could see how in love we were, laughing and tan, our long brown hair parted just the same.

It was quiet except for the sounds of breakfast coming from the other room. I stood with the picture and listened for the tides. They were running just outside; in or out I wasn't sure. I propped Mamma against the side of her vase and headed into the kitchen.

"Morning," Grandpa said over his shoulder. The bacon hummed in the skillet. "Scrambled or sunny side up?"

"Scrambled please; I can't eat fried now, nothing runny." I shuddered.

Grandpa laughed, low. "Your mother was the same way when she was pregnant."

I thought about that for a moment; it felt strange to know something new about her.

"Was she here in the stilt house when she was pregnant?"

"Sure she was." Grandpa turned the bacon with a fork. "She lived with Vi, of course, but she used to escape out here and come fishing—just like you did." He winked at me.

I knew the misery of living at Aunt Vi's: ironed sheets and Sunday services with the Methodists.

"She can live out there for the summers," Aunt Vi had told Grandpa the day of Mamma's funeral. "But the child will come back here and go to school in the fall."

Like church, school had been an endeavor I merely survived, skipping grades to graduate early, but it was summers on the island I lived for. Oh

the glory of getting on the water once school was out. The boat ride itself was like flying to heaven in a chariot of fire.

I shifted my weight in the kitchen chair, my legs sticking to the seat. “What else do you remember about Mamma pregnant?”

He stood for a moment, his hand still on the skillet and said, “She ate bacon and biscuits nearly every day;” he paused again, “and milk shakes. She liked milk shakes. Chocolate ones.” He seemed pleased at the memory of it and pleased he had recalled it. We both sat in silence; there was so little she had left behind.

I whispered, “Grandpa, what am I gonna do?”

He turned and looked at me, the bacon still sizzling away. “You’ll know,” he said, and I saw pieces of Mamma in the blue of his eyes. His eyebrows ruffled over them in shades of grey, and his sun-wrinkled skin hung in deep lines. I waited for him to say something wise, to tell me what to do or at least what he thought, but he turned around and flipped the bacon.

After breakfast, Grandpa went downstairs to his boats, and I took a walk. I headed for the path through the island to the Gulf. I slapped off the mosquitoes in the woods and hurried through the sand dunes for the beach. The seaweed had been washed in thick along the water. I stepped around it and headed for the old overturned sailboat and sat down along the water’s edge.

I dug my toes into the sand and thought about Mamma, and how, like me, she’d had a baby without a husband. She always said that I was conceived in love under the white light of a silver moon, that I was a miracle sent to her from heaven, but she never talked about my father. I begged her to tell me about him, but she said that God was my father and wasn’t I special. I didn’t blame her. I never told anyone about the father of my baby, either.

I met him in sculpture class. We studied the human form and worked wet clay at the same wood table up in Sarasota. He flirted with me until he found out I was a virgin. After that he pursued me. I had never been pursued before. It was lovely; I felt powerful and alive.

Ringling School of Art was only a short trip up the coast from Englewood, but still far from my grandfather’s island and my aunt’s watchful eye. I didn’t know anyone else at college and so I let him in. He took me

on picnics and to the movies and laughed at my naiveté with men. He was fascinated by the story of my mother's suicide and my life on the island, and he thought it was cute that I wore a cover-up when we went to the beach. He was older than I and had a beard and chest hair, and when I finally let him kiss me it made me come loose inside.

He said he knew me and read me Walt Whitman in the sand. He said he just wanted to see how it felt so he could sculpt it better, and I let him touch my bare breast beneath my cover-up, beneath my swimsuit.

Then one night, near the end of the first semester, I let him take me to his apartment. He turned down everything but the lava lamp and said he loved me and that God and my mother wanted me to be happy. We kissed and began to undress each other and then I got scared, but I couldn't say no to the hope of love. It hurt, but I didn't scream or fight; I just felt guilty and small. I pretended to like it and asked him to take me back to my dorm for propriety's sake. It was one o'clock in the morning.

I thought maybe we could talk about it over breakfast, but he had an early class. I thought maybe he would read me Walt Whitman that evening, but he had to study. I thought maybe the next day we would laugh while we made clay bodies, but he sat at another table. Christmas came and went before I realized I was pregnant. I never told him.

I headed back to the stilt house, over the dunes and through the trees. As I reached the long narrow dock, hung with mangrove branches, I realized someone was out on the end with Grandpa. A man I had never seen before stood there on the dock, his johnboat tied up beside our runabout. His skin shone brown in the sun.

I stopped a moment in the shade of the trees, watching them. Grandpa turned and saw me. "There you are!" he called. "I want you to meet Miguel before he goes."

As I came closer, I realized the man was young; I felt suddenly self-conscious in my misfit beach clothes. Grandpa introduced us, but when he told me that Miguel had come to fix the stilts under the house, I crossed my arms over my belly.

"I didn't know there was anything wrong with the stilts," I said, louder than I meant to. Grandpa and I were just fine on our own.

"It's just maintenance," Grandpa said. He looked at me like I was being

strange. Miguel smiled, and his eyes were kind, but I stared back without offering anything. The three of us stood there awkwardly on the end of the dock. Finally Miguel spoke.

“Mister Harp said you are the artist.”

I hadn’t expected that; I reached up and tucked my hair behind my ears. I looked down and noticed that his boots and coveralls were worn but clean.

“It is good to make beauty,” he said, nodding.

I looked up.

His face was eager. “I try to make beauty too . . . with the wood. Even the stilts.” He smiled so genuinely that I almost smiled back, but before I could, he turned to Grandpa, his white t-shirt shifting on his shoulders.

They talked about when he would start—not for three weeks—and I watched his hands. They talked about when the wood would come—not for two—and I listened to the music in his voice. Then they shook hands, and Miguel climbed back inside his little boat. He looked up at me and smiled, longer this time, the sun hitting his dark hair so that it was almost blue. He sat down, back by the tiller, and shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand.

“It is good to meet you, Lily,” he said. “*Muy bien.*”

I smiled in spite of myself.

His boat was not a good one; its aluminum frame was chafed gray and white, and it was much smaller than Grandpa’s runabout, but he waved at us without shame as he steered his johnboat by hand and pulled away.

We watched him skirt the sandbar and head off to Eldon’s. After his motor faded, Grandpa said, “He seems nice.”

Four

AS MIGUEL DISAPPEARED, Grandpa started toward the boats. We had to tow the runabout to Hank's. Hank was the boat mechanic at Eldon's Marina and my favorite of Grandpa's poker buddies. When I was little, Mamma had called him my godfather. Truth was, none of us was that religious, but Hank had liked the designation. So had I.

Grandpa rigged up the ropes to pull the runabout behind the flats boat, and I climbed in and settled myself on the back deck to keep an eye on things. I was the first mate like always; I almost forgot I was pregnant.

The tow was slow and the sun was hot, especially for April. On the way, we passed the channel marker topped with an osprey nest. The mother had long since gone, and it had been taken over by half-a-dozen water birds. Sleek black Anhinga. They looked out of place perched on her pole. I rested my hand on my belly and hoped all the little osprey had made it.

We slowed up even more as we motored into the canal and pulled up at Eldon's. His marina sat like an old friend on the edge of the water. Grandpa tied off the big boat while I sat on the dock and held the runabout alongside with my heels like I was ten. While Grandpa went back to Hank's shop, I looked around for Miguel, but there was no sign of his johnboat.

Pretty soon, out came Hank, greasy and grinning and wiping off some kind of plug with a rag. He lumbered over with Grandpa following along, half a stride behind. Hank was huge and still sort of handsome. He wasn't

as old as Grandpa, and when I was little I used to wish Mamma would marry him.

“Well hello, princess!” he called to me before he arrived. His bearded face grinned at me like Father Christmas.

“Hi, Hank!” I smiled. “I saw the osprey nest on the marker was empty. Seen any of the chicks?”

“Nope. All grown and gone. But I haven’t seen any pelicans either!” he declared, proudly. “I think my latest contraption just might be foolproof.”

He grinned again like nothing was any different, and I loved him for it. Hank had inventions attached to the pilings on his end of the marina to keep the pelicans from perching and pooping right where he had to stoop and check out folks’ motors when they brought them in. There were bells and propellers and different-colored metals from engine casings on top of every dock post. Mostly his contraptions were made of motor parts—the bells and other little baubles were added when Hank’s customers brought him things they thought might work. He called them his “pelican displacers” and was proud of the name because he he’d thought it up himself. Eldon just rolled his eyes.

“Look what Noel brought me!” Hank said, his eyes bright.

Noel was the ferry captain that drove the barge back and forth from the mainland when you needed a refrigerator delivered or a load of shingles. He was the blackest man I had ever known, and he was the fourth in Grandpa’s poker set.

While Grandpa took the cowling off the runabout’s motor, Hank took me over and showed me his new treasure. It was a woman’s head, made of wood, ornately carved and softened by the tides.

“Bow sprite from an old ship,” Hank said softly. “Noel said she came all the way from New Orleans.” He reached out and touched her with reverence, and we were quiet for a moment.

“She looks like a goddess.”

Hank nodded. “Like she should be inside a shrine.”

He had already rigged Noel’s bow sprite on top of his most prominent piling and adorned her with a crown of gold propellers. She was magnificent. Her head was twice the size of Hank’s.

“Noel says she’s good luck,” he said. “Here, rub her.” He took my hand

and put it on her cheek and pressed it gently into her warm wood. My hand disappeared under his.

Just then Grandpa called for Hank, and he left me alone with the bow sprite. Her wood shone in the sun, and the tresses of her long hair were carved to look like they were pinned back with seashells. I rubbed her face with both my hands. Then I leaned in closer and set my cheek against hers; she was warm and musky and smelled like linseed oil.

While Hank and Grandpa started talking boats and motors, I noticed some words etched along the base of the bow sprite's neck, just above where she must have joined the ship. *D'aimer et d'être aimé*, it read, all the way around her neck. I reached out and ran my finger back and forth along the words. Without looking I could feel the letters and the spaces; I wondered what they meant. Finally I let go and headed inside Eldon's store.

The screen door creaked, and I stood still a minute to let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

Eldon came right over.

"A letter just came for you, Lily."

I took it, surprised at who would have written me, until I noticed it was from Port Charlotte. I opened it, dreading what was inside.

Dear Lily:

You don't know us, but we have spoken with your Aunt Viola through an old family friend of ours, Dr. Jergen. We understand you need a family to take the baby you are expecting. We know you are young and that a child would be a hardship on you. As we cannot have children ourselves, we would love nothing more than to raise your child as our own. Your Aunt thought it might be easier for you if we met, and so we suggested you all come over next Sunday after church. We look forward to it.

Sincerely,

Bob and Joan Harding

I looked up from the letter; Eldon had been watching me. I felt sick.

"You need to sit down?" Eldon looked concerned. I nodded. He helped

me into a chair and got me a Pepsi from the cold case and turned the counter fan so it blew on me. He swayed from side to side, nervously, in rhythm with the fan, but didn't leave. I could feel him watching me closely and was glad it was dark inside the store.

Just then Hank and Grandpa came in, laughing and loud. Hank had fixed some simple electrical connection on the runabout and was giving Grandpa a hard time.

"Well, you know, them wires is complicated stuff," Hank said and laughed.

When they saw me sitting down, with Eldon hovering around, they stopped and grew quiet.

"What is it, honey?" Grandpa came over.

I looked up; his face was older somehow. I sighed and handed him the letter. He would know soon enough. He took it and read it while Hank and Eldon waited. He finished the letter and motioned toward the guys. I nodded. They read it too, while I scuffed my shoes back and forth along the floor.

Hank finished the letter last, leaned back against the counter and broke the quiet. "Well, it's either a good idea or it ain't, Lily. No way of knowing till you meet the folks and see how you feel."

They all nodded and hummed in agreement. Then Eldon knelt in front of me and took my hand. His face looked even thinner with worry, and I knew he hoped I'd give the baby up. "Maybe . . ." he faltered, but that was all he could manage.

I waited for Grandpa to speak, but he didn't, of course. So I took the letter from Hank, folded it up and stuck it in my back pocket, but I didn't say anything because I was afraid my voice would give out.

I drove the runabout behind Grandpa all the way home. The wind in my face and the chug of the little boat along the water should have eased my pain, but instead of washing my worries away, they pressed against me and seemed to swallow my breath.

"Raise your child as our own," the letter had said.

Half a dozen gulls chased my wake on the way back, and although I took long sweeping turns through the channel, I couldn't shake them. Or my fear.

When we got home, I helped Grandpa wash out the boats. The work of it helped. My arms grew tired and so did my worries. By the time we hosed down the dock, I was spent. We cooked hamburgers on the grill and ate them right off the grate in buns I brought from upstairs; we didn't even use ketchup or plates. We just sat right out on the end of the dock and watched the sky turn pink.

Aunt Vi called just as we came inside. I picked up.

"Did you get a letter from the Hardings today?" Her voice streamed through the receiver without even saying hello.

"Yes."

"Good. I did too."

I didn't say anything.

"Did you show your grandfather?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

She made a little huffing sound.

"Wear that dress I bought for you—the pink one—and do your hair. This is important."

I waited.

"Lily." She took a breath. "I am trying to give you advantages your mother never had."

That night I lay in bed, high above the mangrove, and thought about my mother. Rosemary Harp. Grandpa said she'd been named for a jazz singer and a saint; she had been both to me. I smoothed my nightgown across my stomach and looked around the room, remembering how she would lie awake at night and tell me stories about the furniture.

The moon came in full, with no shadows, and fell across the dresser; it had been Grandma's from New Orleans—warm brown with little curlicues of honey-colored wood on the drawers and around the frame of the mirror. It was Grandpa's favorite, Mamma said, because it reminded him of Grandma. She died the year I was born. Mamma said she used to dress up in Grandma's jewelry and look at herself in that mirror when she was little. So did I. Even though I never knew Grandma, I had tried on her pearl-drop earrings and posed in her mirror.

The beds were Grandpa's, twin four-posters, almost black, that he had slept in as a boy on the orange grove in Ft. Meyers. The desk was mine. Mamma bought it new in Asheville and had it shipped all the way to Port Charlotte where Noel carried it to the island on his ferry. It was white, with Queen Anne legs and golden scrolls, and I loved it from the minute I saw it. I rolled over on my back and looked up at the ceiling; I wondered if there would ever be a piece of furniture that told my baby's story.

I rubbed my hands across the chenille bedspread and fingered the little pink balls in rows beneath my fingers and thought about the time we had bought them in town one day when Mamma was happy. She liked to buy things when she was happy. Expensive things.

"Let's get something fancy!" she had said. And so we had walked right into Field's Department Store and picked out the prettiest, most expensive bedspreads on the floor. Mamma had said they didn't have to match, and so I had chosen the fluffiest, pinkest, pom-pomiest chenille and Mamma had picked out one in white with long fringe. We had walked out of the store grinning at each other over the top of our purchases. Grandpa's face at the marina had been hilarious; he had not expected to ride home in the runabout with two giant packages.

Mamma. When she was happy, it was glorious; we all just orbited around her, but when she was sad it was as if all the stars fell out. Back then I didn't know there was a name for her manic-depressive roller-coaster of emotions; I only knew her summers were hopeful and her winters unbearably dark.

I leaned up on my elbow and looked at the picture I had propped up against her blue pot. I got out of bed and went over to the dresser. I pictured her hands on that little pot as she fashioned it out of the muddy clay, spinning and spinning and spinning around. She had to get the bubbles out, smooth its sides, build them strong. I held my arms around myself and turned slowly in a circle. I wanted to be that pot, just so I could feel her hands wrapped around me.

"Mamma," I whispered as I spun myself on her potter's wheel.

"Mamma," I said to the night.

"Mamma."

I stopped spinning and saw myself in the mirror on the wall above

Lily Harp

the dresser. My belly showed beneath my nightgown, but I still felt like a child.

Five

SUNDAY MORNING CAME and with it our visit to the Hardings. I woke up in the dark, well before dawn, and lay in bed pondering Aunt Vi's words and the Harding's letter. I couldn't sleep, so I got up, pulled on some old coveralls and pulled my hair into a low ponytail. Then, just as the sky was beginning to grey, I slipped outside. I closed the screen behind me and climbed down the stairs. It wasn't night, and it wasn't morning; the world was soft with sound: lapping water, popping fish—a world between. I walked down and sat on the end of the steps as the day peeked its way through the mangrove.

“Hail Mary, full of grace . . .” I whispered. It seemed like a day for one of Mamma's prayers. “Our Lord is with thee.”

By the time the sky had grown pale with light, I had walked out to the end of the dock. I said the prayer over and over out there, but I still wasn't sure what I was praying for. As I watched the day come, Grandpa came up behind me. “Beautiful isn't it?”

I nodded.

“Come on.” His voice was tender. “Let's go for a ride.”

He handed me a couple of egg sandwiches wrapped in wax paper and held our mugs of coffee while I stepped into the runabout. We ate breakfast from our laps as we headed out into the almost cool morning. The

shoreline was still and fresh, and when we drifted without the motor, the water was quiet. It was like a sanctuary.

Grandpa always said that every morning on the island was like the third step, turning your life over to a higher power. Even though he'd been sober since before I was born, he said those twelve steps kept him him going. So every morning before he even got out of bed, he looked out the window into the branches and breathed his life into the hands of God as he understood him. I thought about that as we skimmed across the water, and so I decided to imagine God as a mother, like the mangroves we passed, wide-armed, full-bellied and deeply rooted in the sand.

We headed up the Intracoastal with the sky somewhere between pale and blue. The sun hadn't yet burnt off the morning, and the wind blew cool.

"Look over there, Lily." Grandpa touched my arm and pointed off the bow. "Dolphin. Three of them."

He slowed the motor and kept his hand on my shoulder, and we watched a family of dolphins play. The two bigger ones kept the baby between them. I barely breathed while they swam in circles around us; I wanted my baby to have that so badly.

"They like the hum of our motor," he whispered. The dolphins played beside us, and I wished Grandpa would hold me, but I didn't ask. When they swam off, we headed for home.

Back at the stilt house, we got ready for the Hardings; Grandpa showered, and I changed into my pink maternity dress. I brushed my ponytail smooth and tied it with a ribbon and wondered if I was the type of girl they would want to have as the mother of their child. I looked in the mirror and tried to imagine what the Hardings would see. I was almost sure I didn't want them, but I didn't want them to not want me.

I felt nervous as we headed back out in the runabout to Eldon's. We left the boat in our slip and took the truck to the Harding's. By the time we drove the half hour to Port Charlotte, Aunt Vi was there, fresh from choir, her blue Buick in the drive.

It was a beautiful house, a mansion really, sitting out on a pretty green lawn. It had pillars—four white pillars—and a shiny red door.

Grandpa knocked and the door opened.

“You must be Lily.” A pretty woman smiled at me and held out her hand. “I’m Joan.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I shook her hand.

“Olin.” Grandpa shook her hand too. “Olin Harp.”

“Please come in.”

Her husband was right beside her. “I’m Bob,” he said and shook our hands too. Aunt Vi hovered behind them both in the entry hall. She smiled at me and sent worried looks to Grandpa.

We all went into the living room, and there was another woman waiting there; she was wearing a navy blue dress suit. Mrs. Harding hurried ahead of me and plumped a cushion in a flowered chair.

Mr. Harding started talking as we walked. “So your Aunt tells us you were studying Art on scholarship at the Ringling Art School?”

“Yes, sir,” I said and sat where Mrs. Harding indicated; everyone else stayed standing.

“That must have been so exciting,” she offered, smiling again.

I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t sure why we were talking about art school. The adults stood around me and looked at each other. I sat, quiet, and held my own hands. Finally everyone sat.

The husband took this as his cue. “Lily, we want you to know that your baby will grow up with every possible advantage we can provide. We are financially capable of taking care of everything.”

“And we will love it, too,” the woman said. “Oh Lily, we really will. I’ve wanted a baby for so long.” The woman looked like she was going to cry, but instead, she looked down and smoothed her skirt to compose herself. Then she looked up and directly at me. I saw in her eyes a woman who desperately wanted to be a mother, and yet there I was the one with the baby. She reached out and touched my knee. “Thank you,” she said. “For coming.”

I stared at her. Her eyes were a soft blue, fringed with un-painted lashes. I liked her.

“You’re welcome.”

She smiled.

Aunt Vi reached in and placed her hand on my shoulder. “I just knew you’d be pleased, Lily,” she said. “The Hardings are wonderful people.”

“Well, yes,” I said, looking from Mrs. Harding to Aunt Vi. “But—” I stopped there and looked down; anything else I had to say was too awkward. We sat quietly in the Harding’s pretty room, with my uncertainty between us. Grandpa shifted in his flowered chair.

The other woman popped up from the sofa. “Let me take this moment to introduce myself,” she said, taking over. In two steps, she was standing beside me holding out her hand. “I am Evelyn Bertram, and I’m the Harding’s attorney.” She waited for me to shake her hand before going on.

“It is important that you understand that the Hardings have completed a home study,” she continued, “and the State of Florida has found them to be a wonderful couple, ready to provide a loving home for a child.” She smiled, punctuating her remarks with a nod. She opened her briefcase and pulled out some papers and laid them on the coffee table in front of me. “This is the agreement I’ve drawn up for you and the Hardings. The final papers will be signed at the hospital, of course, after the baby is born.”

Her words and the sight of the papers on the table were more than I was prepared for. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this. I turned quickly to look at Grandpa and then Aunt Vi. They said nothing. The air in the room fell away. I tried to think, but everything was happening so fast. I looked around the room at the lace curtains and the chintz, at the perfect couple sitting in their Sunday best. It was a real home, a real family. My head began to buzz.

Suddenly I realized that everyone was staring at me.

“It’s for the best,” Aunt Vi said. Her voice came from far away, down a long a tunnel. “They can give the baby so much more than we could ever hope to.”

I blinked. Everything began to feel uneven, and I couldn’t breathe. I looked at Grandpa, and he nodded. The papers lay in front of me all crisp and white; I saw my name “Lillian Rose Harp” printed there. It seemed so official.

Mrs. Bertram handed me a pen, and everyone waited for me. The quiet was so loud that it pushed against my ears. The room tilted, and my hands shook from the inside. My body swayed under the weight of what

they wanted me to do, but I couldn't sign my name where it said "birth mother." I just couldn't.

The next thing I knew, Mrs. Harding was running smelling salts under my nose. I was lying across the flowered couch with my head on a pillow. As I came to, they were all gathered around, looking worried.

"Are you all right?"

"Lily?"

"Can we go home?" I whispered.

"Of course," Grandpa said. "Here." And he lifted me up by the arm.

My body felt numb; it only barely agreed to walk with me. The adults spoke in a hush at the door about how they'd give me some time to think about it, while Grandpa steered me into the truck. He was gentle, like always, but he offered no words; withdrawn and quiet, he kept his thoughts to himself. I wondered if he thought of Mamma.

I looked back at the white house on the lawn and couldn't stop thinking about the kind woman inside. I leaned my head back on the seat and closed my eyes. The wind was warm as we pulled away, and I could smell the jasmine blooming.