

HONORABLE MENTION

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The End of the Oxen

by Melon Wedick

At 4:30 PM the setting sun paints the kitchen in improbable technicolor rainbows, but the living room, where Lily paces, is a washed-out nothing gray. She presses her palms against her mug and lets steam condense on her chin, bearding it in droplets that cool too quickly, chilling her face while her palms scald. Outside, the world is gray and brown, or at least it looks that way through the film of grime that coats the window. Brown leaves clatter on the stunted oak opposite; dead already, they cling to its branches out of sheer spite. *Why not just let go?* Lily wonders. They're all going to fall, in the end.

"We should have washed the windows," she says aloud. Not for the first time.

Behind her, Jason says nothing. Tinny sounds of electronic combat seep from beneath the giant black headphones that have swallowed his ears. She turns to watch him, mesmerized by the spastic dance of clicks and taps he uses to control a collection of war-hardened pixels she can't see.

"We should have washed the windows," Lily says again, pitching her voice to a frequency she knows will resonate in the bones of his face.

"Why? Is there anything to see?" He doesn't look up. The whites of his brown eyes glow eerily blue.

She looks out. Trash bags hump along the sidewalk, some ripped open by animals, their innards lain bare. A rat's tail, unmoving, trails between two bags. The body on the corner lies still, bloated, the wind ruffling its purple heathered T-shirt. One of its hands is gone. Other than the T-shirt, nothing moves. Lily sticks her nose inside her mug and inhales deeply. The tea is mint, oversteeped.

“Not really,” she says, lifting her gaze to the death-rattling leaves, the motionless upper stories of other buildings. If there's nothing to see, there's no reason to look at it. Except that she's not blind, and has to look at something.

“Why don't you sit down?” Jason says, his game paused.

There's a bird on the fire escape across the way. Do living birds lie down like that? She doubts it.

Jason is watching her. “Lily,” he says. “Read something.”

“Like what?” She doesn't want to read. She wants to run, she wants to smell grass, she wants to step on a bee and get stung, she wants to feel anything other than this damp-straitjacket tethering. Behind Jason, the ethereal glow drains from the kitchen, shading everything colder. He gets up and turns on the light.

“I don't know, a book. Something with words in it.”

“Pick me one.” He goes to the shelves and Lily swallows hard against the fear in her throat. The fear is always there, hovering, like a nosy upstairs neighbor with one ear cupped to the floor, listening for the sound that means you can't take it anymore, that you're weakening, crumbling, flaking apart. Behind the fear lurks pure terror, a senseless, headlong-running, trapped-rat panic. But in front of all that there's Jason, who is here, and real, and deserves better. Lily grinds her fists against her hip bones and slaps on a smile before Jason turns, offering her a hardback as thick as her arm.

“Did you just pick the longest one you could find?”

He pushes his fingers into her hair, but they get stuck in its filthy tangle and he has to pull them out the way they went in. “So what if I did? Long doesn't mean bad.” He leads her to the couch, puts her tea on the table. “You want some music?”

Music will help,” he says, leaving her for his computer. In a minute, a frenetic guitar theme crashes out into the room; Jason retreats to his battlefield.

Lily tucks her feet up under a dusty afghan and sits with her back to the windows, lets punk replace panic. She opens the book and looks at it, at all the words inside. She’s read it before, and liked it, but now her eyes slide over the words like jam on glass, frictionless.

The too-short album soon surrenders to bloodless quiet. After years of freeway noise underpinning her every thought, Lily feels lately like her brain has curdled, gone from liquid to colloid, pudding trapped in bone.

She throws off her blanket and walks over to the desk. Jason hunches in the blue light of his laptop, shooting zombies. He seems OK. She pokes him in the shoulder, hard, and he jumps. “Can I play?”

“I thought you were reading.”

“Can’t concentrate.”

“Did you try?”

She gives him her flattest stare. “Really?”

“Come on, Lily, I can’t entertain you all the time.”

“Do you even notice how it smells in here?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Make some more tea.”

“We’re out of tea. That was the last cup.” She will not say ‘ever.’

“Can’t you use the tea bag again?”

“Let me play.”

“You suck at games like this.”

“I can’t think of a better time to learn.”

He sighs, but hands over the headphones. The chair and his knees creak in unison when he stands. Lily slides into the warm seat and hits NEW GAME. There's a tutorial, but she still asks him every few seconds what the controls do, and whether spacebar means shoot or jump, and why her character isn't automatically walking and looking in the same direction, so Jason stays behind her, bending over her and breathing in her scent, of scalp and sweat and just a tiny hint of fruity shampoo, leftover from who knows when. The apple smell of it nearly makes him drool. He crouches next to the chair and they play through the first chapter together, or sort of together, two minds guiding a single soldier as he lurches through an abandoned army base, killing zombies and munching ration bars.

Ration bars. Jason's stomach rumbles. He lifts his arm off Lily's shoulders and wanders into the kitchen to perform the ritual of counting. Two jars of peanut butter left. Three cans of sardines. A half-gallon of milk. Maybe a third of a five-pound cask of protein powder. Half a loaf of moldy bread. An open can of green beans. A third of an orange. He takes a swig of the milk, gags, spits in the sink, rinses the curdled film away. At least the water is working. He mixes up a glass of protein powder and water and breaks off two orange segments. He thinks back to the last of the meat, spicy lamb meatballs in a sauce with figs, leftovers of leftovers, long gone now. His mouth waters.

From the vacant lot beyond the kitchen window comes a sudden rattle, and Jason presses his face against the glass in time to see a feral cat perching on the chain-link fence, leaning hard against the wind. Jason forgets to breathe as he watches the cat, willing it to move. *Move*. He taps on the window and the angular face whips around to find him, green eyes flashing in the failing sun. The wind howls, gusting harder. Jason's blood thuds in his ears. The cat hunkers down, ears flat and eyes slits, but the wind pushes relentlessly until the cat falls to the ground like a stone.

Jason looks away.

"Looks pretty cold out there," he says aloud, shivering. "Nice and warm in here, though."

Lily doesn't hear him, maybe. She doesn't say anything.

Jason watches her as he drinks. Protein powder dissolves better in water than in milk, but it doesn't taste as good.

“The milk’s gone bad,” he says.

“Throw it out,” mumbles Lily, who can hear him after all.

“Maybe it’ll turn into cheese?”

“Don’t think it works like that,” she says.

Jason doesn’t think so either, but he leaves the milk where it is.

“You want to play a game?” he asks.

“I am playing a game,” she says.

True enough. He walks into the living room and picks up Lily’s book, but the words on the page are just words, not a story. He looks out at the body on the street. It’s turning slightly blue, or maybe that’s just the light. They should have bought blinds, he thinks, so they could shut this all out.

“I wish they would take it away,” he mumbles.

“Who, though?” asks Lily, standing at his elbow.

Jason’s eyes flash to the computer. “Are you done?” He can’t see the screen, but he can just make out the main menu fanfare.

Lily grimaces. “I died.”

He kisses the top of her head in mock sympathy. “Of course you did.”

“Can we—” Lily starts, but he’s already gone, spinning into the empty chair and clamping the headphones onto his ears.

Lily watches him play, her back to the frigid window. She does not look outside. It’s been over a week since the last message from the Mayor’s office encouraged people to shelter in place. Since then, nothing but silence. Were they stupid to stay? Was there any place they could have gone? Is it only here, or everywhere? There’s no news, no signal, no way to know. The electricity’s on, so someone somewhere must still be working. Unless there are fail-safes. Unless the power plants don’t need people to run them.

“Gotcha!” Jason says, frantically pounding the space bar. Lily’s mouth tastes sour, as if she’s been sick.

“Jason,” she says.

His eyes stay riveted to the screen.

“I’m hungry,” she says.

Nothing.

She goes to the kitchen, which reeks of sour milk. She wishes they could clean. Instead, she breaks off a segment of orange and puts it in her mouth, bursting the juice sacs individually with her tongue. The acidity makes her saliva glands cramp, a pain she savors.

A bulb in the overhead fixture dies with a “pop.” Lily jumps, and then blushes, although no one’s looking. She puts her cold hands to her hot face to warm them. Her stomach aches. She thinks, in a flash, about bicycles, about the year she got one for Christmas from her parents, green streamers stuck through plastic handlebar-ends, multicolored pop beads rattling in the wheel spokes as she flew down a hill after school in the spring. The thick perfume of mud and grass clung to her skin when she went to bed, and her illicit dirty feet smeared mud on her mother’s pristine sheets. The sheets always smelled of fabric softener; an intoxicating scent, like drunk butterflies.

Lily feels dizzy and sits on the floor. “Jason?” she says. Quietly, but he hears her and takes the headphones off. All the way off, on-the-desk off, not looped-around-his-neck off. She smiles, but only with her mouth.

“You want some sardines?” he says, padding over on socked feet.

“I want Thai food!” She dreams briefly of curries, of crispy duck and fried basil, thick coconut milk cloaking her tongue.

Jason smiles. “Well, Madame, tonight le bistro can offer an authentic sardine satay: room-temperature fillets of cold-water fish served with a chunky peanut reduction.” He grabs sardines and peanut butter from the cupboard, joins her on the floor.

“I’ll take mine plain, thanks.” She forks the fish into her mouth and wishes it were anything else, although her stomach grumbles in gratitude. “We’re almost out of oranges.”

“I think the multivitamin has C in it.” Jason stares at the sardine can, wondering if she will leave anything behind. Maybe a bone or two he can crunch between his teeth.

She passes him the fork. They eat in silence, trading the fork back and forth. He tries to eat less than she does, counting bites, making sure he doesn’t accidentally come out ahead. The darkness collects around their ankles like shed animal hair. If they could knit it into a blanket, it might help keep them warm.

“We could clean up,” she offers. “It might help with the smell.”

“I guess,” he says, knowing it wouldn’t. The trash rotting in the stairwell smells worse than the odor coming from the sink.

When the fish is gone, they suck the oil from their fingers. Jason mentally removes the can from their inventory, and tries to decide that he is full. Lily leans into him, all fish breath and elbows.

“Jason,” she says. “I’m scared.”

His stomach twists. He puts an arm over her shoulders. “I know.”

“Are you?” Lily tilts her head back, trying to read his face. All she can see is his chin.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says, as gently as he can. “Let’s play something.”

Lily blinks and pulls away slightly, so he can go back to his laptop. He tries out a light laugh.

“I mean let’s play something together. A game-game, a board game. Let’s play Scrabble.” He gives her arm a playful squeeze.

“You hate Scrabble.”

“Right? It’ll be fun!”

“How is doing something you hate fun?”

“I’ll make it fun.”

“You don’t have to humor me, you know,” she says. “This is happening to you as much as me.”

Jason closes his eyes and breathes out slowly, pushing up hard against the sinking feeling in his gut. He concentrates on the floor, how solid it is, planks of wood that don’t even creak beneath their feet. He is safe. He is not falling. Lily is right here. They still have food, the power and water still work. Later they will go to bed, and then the sun will come back and make everything warmer. Happier. He saw a cat today. It looked at him. It fell off the fence, but it might have walked away afterwards. Tomorrow there could be another one. *Don’t borrow trouble*, his mother used to say. Everything could still be fine.

Lily runs her hand over his cheek and he shudders. “I just said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yeah, but you must be scared, it’s—”

“Lily,” he says, his voice shaking. “This is not helping me.”

“Well, you patronizing me isn’t helping me, either!” She rears back to look him in the eye, defiant. His heart pounds. Nothing he can say will make it better. He loves her with all of his being, but he sometimes wishes she could be someone else.

When he does speak, the conciliation in his voice grates on them both. “Can’t we just play a game? Think about something else? Ignore it?” He dislikes pleading, but it’s better than fighting.

“And what is that going to solve?”

“Nothing, but at least we’ll feel better.”

“What’s the point in feeling better if nothing changes?”

“Lily,” he says. “Just stop, ok? Please.”

Lily opens her mouth to respond, then closes it again. She looks at the floor. Curls of old onion skin and hair stick in the greasy scum beneath the stove. Jason puts his hand on her shoulder and the pressure of his touch is intolerable, but how can she push him away? She lays her head on his chest and listens to his infuriatingly steady heartbeat, pounding away inside his chest. Hers must be doing the same, thumping on and on, oblivious to the world. In the new-normal, no-traffic quiet of heartbeats and lung rustles, she realizes that she has never actually experienced silence.

Jason rests his head against the wall and stares at the buckled acoustical tiles of the ceiling, stroking Lily's hair and trying not to think of anything. He hungers for his game, glowing blue in the other room. Lily stirs on his chest.

"Do you want to play Go?" she asks, by way of apology.

He smiles at the ceiling. "You hate Go."

The muscles of her face move against him in either a smile or a grimace; he can't tell.

"It'll be fun," she says. "I can make it fun."

"I love you," she says. "I want to help."

"Let's play something else," he says.

"OK, what?" Lily asks, not lifting her face from his shirt just yet. All of her muscles feel brittle, tense and tired. The sour taste is back in her mouth, like sucking on river pebbles. She doesn't want to fight anymore. Whatever he says, she will agree to it. They will have fun.

"Hide and seek!"

Lily looks at their tiny apartment, able to see most of it from where she lies. The thought of hiding, of seeking, is exhausting. She just wants to sleep. "OK," she says. "I get to hide first."

Jason grins, puts his hands over his eyes.

"But you have to go count in the bedroom."

He goes to the far end of the apartment, and shouts his count from behind the bedroom door. Maybe they can make enough noise to drown out the silence. Lily heads to the bathroom and looks at the tub. It's full of water, a pointless precaution; cold water they've got plenty of. She pulls the plug and strips off her socks while the water swirls away. The bathroom tile is achingly cold. The water gasps and gurgles as it drains, a dead giveaway if Jason is listening, but the tub is the best hiding place in the apartment — a four-room railroad whose every behind-and-under is crammed full of packing boxes held in reserve for the day they would leave this place for their real home, their real life.

“READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!” Jason bellows, and his footsteps stampede through the apartment. He runs unerringly to the bathroom, flings the shower curtain aside, and yells, “I found you!” His eyes don't acknowledge the missing water, and Lily laughs despite herself. She heads to the bedroom to count.

Jason hits “play” on his computer's iTunes, and a new punk album stomps into the night. He can't hear Lily's countdown, which is fine. He crawls under the desk and huddles there, like a kid in the 50s hiding from the bomb.

“Too easy!” Lily shouts, laughing. The lines around her eyes crinkle with delight like she's never been sad or afraid, like she's light-years away from crying instead of seconds. He is winning. He can hold this together, hold her together. He sprints to the bedroom to count.

Lily casts around for somewhere else to hide. Under the kitchen table? Too easy. Behind a curtain? Too dumb. She ends up back in the bathroom, staring at the shallow linen closet, crammed to the door with their stuff. As fast as she can, she hauls everything out and puts it in the wet, empty tub, then slides inside and shuts the door just as Jason comes charging out of the bedroom shouting “OLLY OLLY OXEN FREE!” When he finds her, she says, “How could you lose ALL the oxen?” and he laughs and kisses her.

Jason tiptoes into the bedroom and hides on the bed beside her while she counts. Lily pretends not to find him until she has searched the entire apartment and flung herself back on the bed in despair. She pokes and tickles him, wondering aloud what he could be. She remembers the pink-amber light beneath mounded blankets on her parents' unmade bed, how she angled her face toward any gap in the fabric that would let in fresh air to breathe, laughing and smothering in equal measure. Jason writhes and giggles, begging her to stop, stop, please.

Lily hides in plain sight, sitting in their living room chair with a blanket folded neatly over her head and a throw pillow in her lap. Jason hides in the empty fridge, with the door hanging open and the shelves stacked on the floor. Lily spread-eagles on the rug with shoes on her back and a book tented over one ankle. Jason hides under the open door of the dishwasher, which rests lightly on the backs of his thighs while the rest of him sticks out into the kitchen. He poses casually, propped on one elbow, apparently deep in thought. Lily can't stop laughing, and he rolls over and kisses her calves, drags her down onto the floor.

"This was a great idea," she says. "Thanks."

"It's your turn to hide," Jason says, kissing the tip of her nose before running away. He counts slowly, smiling at his reflection in the window. The bedroom is freezing, but he thinks of holding Lily in his arms as they go to sleep, of making their own heat, of waking to a bright beam of sunlight. Tomorrow everything will be better.

Lily lies on the kitchen floor, wondering where to hide. Her mouth feels stretched from laughing, and she wants nothing more than to go into the bedroom and tackle Jason onto the bed. "Enough hiding; more smooching!" she could say. But it's her turn.

The wind howls outside the window. Her chest aches with thinking of Jason, of his eyes, his smell, the way he looks at her. From the bedroom he shouts numbers so she'll know she's not alone. So she will keep playing. So she will be all right, and morning will come, and it will be tomorrow. And everything will begin again.

Lily thinks of one last hiding place.

She gets to her feet and pulls on her socks and shoes. From the bedroom Jason calls out, "forty-five, forty-four, forty-three..."

Lily finds a scrap of paper and uncaps a pen.

Dear Jason, she writes. Went out for milk. Love you. Lily.

She sticks the note to the door and puts on a hat and gloves.

Jason calls, "Thirty-six, thirty-five, thirty-four..."

Lily eases the apartment door open and shut, and tiptoes down the stairs, skirting the trash pile and covering her mouth against the flies. In the echoing silence she hears, “twenty-three, twenty-two...”

She takes a last deep breath and opens the door.

“Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen...”

Lily steps out into the night and nearly gasps. The air is frigid and unforgiving, a hard slap against her overheated cheek. Only the unthinking stars can see her now. She thinks of night swimming, years ago when it was warm, in a river by a bridge. Jason pulled her close and she wrapped her legs around his waist, and the algae-green water ran into their mouths when they kissed. She thinks pointlessly of tastes: of crispy onions on a thick steak, the cloying assault of cotton candy, the sourness of beer. She stumbles across the street so she can look back at their windows. There are more bodies out here than were visible from inside.

“Nine, eight, seven, six...”

Lily’s breath runs out and she gasps for air but encounters only emptiness. It burns her lungs and her mouth, and she retches sardines and orange pulp. Wasted. The concrete is bruisingly cold when she falls. Her body convulses, but she keeps her eyes trained on the window where she will see him one last time, when he runs out of the bedroom, eager for her, eager to delight in her next ridiculous hiding place, the idea she will offer him like a gift. Her gut writhes with regret, with pity, with love. Too late now; it’s already done.

“Five, four, three.”

Jason stops the countdown early. The ends of countdowns don’t interest him anymore. Did he hear a door shut? He steps out of the bedroom, calling her name.

“Lily?”

He walks past the mirrored window, into the light.

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