

FAMILIES ARE FUNNY

"Lily," Sarah yells up the stairs. "Come down now! We'll be late for Mommy Dede."

Sarah swears she can almost see the sound waves leave her, swelled with anxiety. But it's too late, they bump up against Lily. Her slight, five-year old body poised for impact, half way down the stairs.

"Don't yell Mama. I'm all ready."

"Then where are your shoes? You don't even have socks on. Come on Lily. This is important. I don't want to be late."

Lily sits at the bottom of the stairs, patient as ever, waiting for the tying up of her shoes. Lily's stillness amazes Sarah, inevitably lulls her to the desired effect; a release of breath, her caged panic. Nothing, no one else, has ever been able to do that.

"Do you think Aunt Dede will like me?" Lily asks quietly.

"She loves you already, silly," Sarah says as she smooths over Lily's hair and scoots her daughter out the front door, blanket trailing behind her. "Oh, Lily! Where is the hair clip I just put in five minutes ago?"

The highway entrance is only a mile from the house. Sarah drives down the entrance ramp and almost immediately into a traffic jam.

"Damn! There's no way we can make it now."

"Mama, don't say that word."

"I'm sorry sweetie. That's a dollar into the swear jar."

"Won't Mommy Dede just wait for us?"

"I'm being silly; of course she'll just wait."

Sarah turns on the upbeat children's music, music she and Lily have listened to so many times it no longer registers; turns up the volume to eliminate break-through questions from the back seat. She is free to ruminate about traffic and Deirdre's certain, huffy annoyance when they arrive late. How she is going to make it through a four day visit?

Sarah realizes she's not been anywhere requiring a trip to the airport since she went to meet Lily for the first time. On that day, right before she left her apartment, Deirdre had called to say she couldn't be there for Lily's homecoming. Something important had come up at the office.

Sarah had worked so hard to make the day happen. Endless filing and phone calls, interviews and letters from friends and professionals attesting to her ability to give Lily a great life as a single parent. At some point, all that was left to do was wait and worry about what else she might have done. The stress of those months, that floppy state of anticipation, had stretched Sarah's heart to the breaking point. She'd not breathed deeply in months, had not fully oxygenated her patient organ, and then that rent, caused by her sister's indifference. Her heart would need mending, though through some miracle, it continued to pump. Her brain had trussed her jangly anxiety into a tight, if messy, path to hope and happiness. It was finally "The Day:" The not quite to be believed culmination of her wishing and waiting; a rare occasion when something so good finally comes so close to happening that you think you would rather die than bear the wait even a few hours more.

Of course her parents had been with her at the airport. They would've handled everything if she'd collapsed from failing to breath. And her brothers too. Kevin, because he happened to be back from London for a conference. But still, he'd come. And Lily's plane had

already flown so far from where it departed, nothing could've stopped the miraculous fact that her daughter was coming home.

Sarah had decorated the waiting area with balloons and streamers. She'd clutched special presents that'd taken weeks to pull together: the world's squishiest stuffed animal, a doll with perfect Asian features, a baby soft blanket with her daughter's picture printed on it, the tiny picture the agency gave her, that she'd enlarged as much as possible without distorting the image beyond recognition. She'd slept with the blanket those last weeks, waiting for final permission to bring her daughter home.

Other people shared the airport, even perhaps anticipating reunions. But as Sarah glanced around, the-space-of-waiting-for--Lily was so different, separated and defined by its expectation. Maybe they had made a bit of a scene, her family tended to do that, but inside its invisible boundaries she'd felt the air practically purr. And afterwards, they would each mention to Sarah that they'd barely remembered leaving the airport. They must have passed people coming and going, but Sarah and her family seemed to float above, transfixed as they'd been by the deceptively shy smile of a three year old stranger.

Now Sarah is heading towards the airport again. This time to pick up Deirdre, at Deirdre's request, so Sarah doesn't see how Deirdre can weasel out of the visit. It is funny to think of her only sister being as much of a stranger to her now as Lily was those first few days.

She glances back at her daughter. Lily grasps her worn and much abused blanket in one hand. She's wrapped it around her arm with just enough left at the top so that she can rub her ear against its remaining silky border. Lily is safe now, always with her, attached at her hip, her mother would say. Everything Lily needs is in that car.

It's crazy that Dede has still not met Lily. Something, inevitably, has come up with Deirdre's work or obligations. She reminds Sarah often that their life is extravagantly busy: Both her's and Jack's job have travel and long hours. Their eight year old daughter, Alexis, has a battery of extracurricular activities, and a frequent changing of the nanny guard. They've earned social capital that she and Jack must spend for it to be worth anything. Sarah jokes with her friends that her sister's life sounds like a dose of anxiety wrapped in stress and served with a side of exhaustion.

But in the late evening, when the unconfined needs and restless joy of a young child are finally, begrudgingly put to bed, Sarah feels the pain of her sister's snubs. The jokes to her friends are just attempts to hide the humiliation of Deirdre being MIA at another important event in her's and Lily's life. It drives Sarah mad that while Deirdre cannot manage to travel the thousand or so miles back home, Sarah can easily summon her, hears her voice as if she's patted the edge of her bed and invited Deirdre to come and sit there.

"I am sorry I've not met Lily, really I am, but we've been busy, and, honesty, it's a little hard to take seriously this whim of yours. I mean, you're barely making it. Can you really call writing freelance from your couch a job to support a family, and doesn't that little girl deserve a father? Oh and that blanket, I know, i know, it's special but it's just so...filthy."

"But Lily doesn't like me to wash it." Sarah has almost said the words aloud, Deirdre has felt so present in the room.

She suddenly toys with the idea of exiting the highway, heading back home, but she won't. Deirdre will come home with them today, bringing her Blackberry and her lancing looks. She will manage to corrupt the few toys, the tea set, the comfortable, shabby furniture, all the evidence of their life -- as a real family -- Sarah and Lily.

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Her brothers cannot get enough of Lily. On family vacations, Kevin seems to spend more time with Lily than his two wild boys. And Sean practically lives with them these days. Sleeping on the couch every weekend, whipping up pancakes, helping Lily learn to ride her bike, raking the leaves into enormous trampoline-like piles, over and over again. Sean had been over last weekend when Deirdre called Sarah to announce her visit.

"Dede's coming in for a conference next week. She wants to stay with me."

"Why doesn't she stay with Mom and Dad?"

"She wants to stay here. She wants to meet Lily."

"I don't know, Sar, you sure? She'll treat you like her assistant. Is she bringing Alexis so you can baby sit too?"

"She's coming alone. I know she'll be busy, but she's promised to make time for Lily. I mean...isn't it just...unacceptable that she's never met Lily?"

"Um, yeah. So let her stay with the parental units."

"But I don't understand. Why hasn't she even tried to meet Lily? She made it all the way to London when Kevin's wife had her babies."

"She and Kevin have always been tight."

"So."

"Look. Dede was almost five when I was born. She loved being the only child. I was already her nemesis when Kevin was born. She wised up with him, made him her co-conspirator — well, mostly her scapegoat, Kevin always missed that part. They still think it's us against them."

"How can she hold that against Lily? Lily needs to know that she is part of this family."

"Please don't tell me you doubt that Sar. Lily is the best thing that ever happened to us; Lily with her wise old soul. We couldn't love her anymore than we do."

"Not Dede."

"Dede is Dede. Since when do you care what she thinks?"

"I'm her little sister. Her only sister! We should be mothers -- mothers of daughters -- together."

"She never wanted a sister. She never wanted Mom to have another baby. You were the last straw. You made us a big family. We started taking up too much room, made too much of a scene when we arrived anywhere. And you were the worst, way too cute, with two indulgent big brothers egging you on. No one ever tried to rein you in. It drove Dede crazy."

"But can't we all just act like grown ups now."

"You know it doesn't work that way Sar. The minute you step back into wherever you call home, with even just one little toe, no matter how much time you've spent away, your that kid again; the worst of that kid again."

"Well I'm gonna be the grown up. I'm gonna tell her she's being an ass to Lily."

"My point exactly."

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The exit for the airport is on the right. She made it quicker than she expected. If she's lucky, Deirdre's plane will be held at the gate and she won't even know Sarah was late. Sarah and Lily move easily through the light foot traffic in the terminal. Sarah stops quickly at a newspaper kiosk. She'd promised Lily some sugarless gum. Its sticky longevity still fascinates her. Then they join those waiting on the you can keep your pocket knives and shoes on side of

the security line. Some kids are running, arguing, trying to make a game of hopping through the tile pattern on the floor. Sarah would have been the leader back in her day, would've stepped in and corralled the group into order. She encourages Lily to join them, but Lily just slides farther behind Sarah's legs.

"Is she always so shy?" The man standing next to her asks. "I can ask my kids to include her."

"That's nice of you. Probably she's happier just watching." Sarah is growing more and more comfortable letting Lily be Lily.

"What flight are you waiting for?" Sarah asks to take the spot light off her daughter.

"From Chicago."

"Me too."

"Last I checked it was on time. They should be out soon."

Sarah smiles weakly. The man reminds her of her daughter's father-less-ness. Maybe that explains Lily's shyness around other families.

An announcement interrupts her thoughts: "IF YOU ARE MEETING PASSENGERS ON FLIGHT 678 FROM CHICAGO, PLEASE COME TO THE INFORMATION KIOSK IN ARRIVALS."

"That's accommodating," the man says, "usually they just post the flight delayed message on the arrival screen and let you figure out the rest."

He gathers his kids. Sarah takes Lily's hand and they head to the information booth. An airline official is waiting, and as people approach the counter he directs them to a room around the corner. It's quickly crowded and people smile politely and apologize for stepped on toes. An airline official comes in and closes the door.

"May I have your attention?" It takes a few seconds for the room full of strangers to quiet down. He waits for the last tentative approaches at conversation to end.

"I am sorry to have to tell you...there is no good way to tell you this. There was a catastrophic failure on Flight 678."

Sarah hears a collective gasp. Her own mouth is shut tight, not breathing.

"The plane broke apart in mid air. It's not possible for there to be survivors."

The room implodes. So much individual shock, grasping for any small bit of the room's oxygen, it's as if every last morsel of air instantaneously is sucked from the center. Then the reverse, anguished cries expelled. Sarah holds Lily against her belly to protect her from the literal weight of the collective grief but still, it feels dangerous. She turns her and pushes them out the door.

People are rushing towards them abuzz; hints of the crash must already have spread through the building. Sarah's feet feel heavy as cement; it's all she can do to lift one and then the other. She feels like she is swimming in slow motion, pushing against the tide of bodies moving in the opposite direction. They want to get closer, close enough to breath a genuine whiff of disaster, safe in the knowledge that it will not touch them directly.

Sarah stumbles through the automatic door, grateful for air. She bends down to look at Lily. She looks so perplexed.

"Lily, sweetheart, do you understand what the man just told us?"

"Not really. Did something happen to Mommy Dede's plane?"

"Yes, my love. It crashed. The crash....it killed Mommy Dede and everyone else on the plane."

But...that means...." Lily says. Her delicate features look crumbled when seen through a curtain of tears (Lily's? Hers? She cannot tell.) "She'll never know me."

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Somehow Sarah makes it to her parents' house. She cannot remember finding her car in the parking lot, or the drive home. She had to keep it together; no place for thoughts or tears; get Lily back in one piece. Before she can pull into the driveway, her parents rush out to greet her. Somehow they already know. Her mother scoops up Lily from the car seat. Her father takes Sarah's elbow and leads her inside. Sean is there. Sean is always miraculously there. Her mother is on the phone already, presumably gathering facts, informing family, managing the logistics of a death.

Sarah wishes her mother would stop. Now that she can think again, it's so obvious that there must be a mistake. There's no way Deirdre was on that plane. Her plans always change, two or three times at a minimum, if they're lucky. Something always comes up at work, or with her "important social commitments." (Who even talks like that!) Deirdre always disappoints them, breezing in late, if at all, and without an apology. The shock would be that Deirdre actually made that flight.

"Sarah, honey, are you listening?" Her mother is off the phone.

"Deirdre changed her plans..." her mother says. Sarah smiles. Okay, really, is there nothing her sister will not do to make her life more dramatic?

"So what flight is she on?" Sarah annoyance comes through. "Please don't tell me I have to go back to that airport again *today*."

Her mother looks at her strangely.

"Sarah, dear, Deirdre was on the plane that crashed."

"But, you just said..."

"Yes, she changed her plans. They decided Jack would come with her."

Sarah looks at her. Confused.

"Jack was on board the plane. Jack is gone too."

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"You can't say no, Sar." Sean is sitting with her, in her small kitchen, drinking coffee out of one of Sarah's hodge podge of mugs. Lily and Alexis are in Lily's room. It was the first time all week that Sarah had brought Alexis back to her and Lily's small apartment. Alexis' nanny had flown with her from Chicago a couple of days after the accident. The nanny had waited for Sarah's parents to tell Alexis, who seemed not to truly believe that her parents were gone, or to fully comprehend her relationship to Sarah or Sean. The nanny went back to Chicago before the memorial service to tend to her own kids.

Today, Sarah had made it through the service and most of the reception but the, she had to get away from the oppressive formality of mourning that had taken over her parents' house. It took too much stamina to politely welcome guests. And it was awful to look at Kevin, walking around like he just lost his best friend. Or to see Alexis, polite but at a loss to find her place among so many grownups crowding her out of the grief. She was a little worried about what Alexis would think of their place.

"Why exactly, Sean? Tell me why I can't say no?"

"Because Deirdre asked you to. It's what she wanted."

"And I wanted her to act like my sister, and make me feel like I had place in her world."

"Isn't she pretty much telling you that now in big capital letters?"

Silence.

"I can't raise their child."

"Why? Because you had a school girl crush on Jack and acted kind of stupid about it, like, fifteen years ago."

"No! Because Deirdre has always made me feel....I don't know."

"Didn't the rest of us perform headstands on the front lawn in nothing but our underwear if you asked us to?"

"Yes."

"So...?"

"I hear Deirdre telling me I'm not good enough."

"Sarah, I get you think Deirdre wasn't always nice, or the best sister, but the thing she seems to be saying, said in her will, so it's public and well, kinda final, is that she wants you to be Alexis' mother.

Silence.

"She could've asked first." "She could have asked Kevin, or even you."

"Maybe she knows you're braver than us."

"It's not fair to Alexis. She's used to nice stuff and play dates and both her parents showing up for the school play. I'm scraping by alone, and I have a daughter who acts like she might just break if you glance at her funny."

"You both seem fine the way things are."

"Sean, stop."

"Think about it."

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Alexis is sleeping over at Sarah's and Lily's apartment. She choose it over her grandparents' house. Sarah offered her Lily's room. Lily can sleep with Sarah. Right now the two girls are playing on the living room floor. Lily is showing Alexis her favorite things. It is a small collection: her blanket, a stuffed animal, a doll. Still Sarah can't quite believe it. Lily does not usually talk to strangers, even other young girls. It has taken months for Lily to consider a play date with another girl from Kindergarten. But she is talking to Alexis as if she somehow knows that her small steady voice will help Alexis feel less alone in the world. Sarah wonders -- worries -- what in Lily's short past has etched her with such a profound sense of empathy. And Alexis seems strangely calm; incredible when there are so many big questions pushing awkwardly through the door ready to jostle for the best spot in the room. Where will Alexis live? Who will raise her? Will she ever see her friends, her house, her nanny again? Can her parents really be dead?

When Sarah and Lily tucked each other into bed that night, Lily spoke to Sarah for what seemed like the first time that day.

"You look like Alexis' mommy."

It was something Sarah had noted herself that day; that if there were a man in her life, and if they had conceived a child, and if it was a girl, Alexis looks like what that child might have looked like. So many ifs.

"I think you're right Lily. I do look like Alexis' mommy. Do I look like your mommy?"

"Yes"

"And how is that sweetie?"

"Because you're always holding my hand."

"I couldn't have said it better. Now go to sleep."

~ ~ ~

"Alexis looks like me."

"Is that a problem?" Sean asks.

"Lily and I have only just settled into being a family. I really don't think it would be fair to ask Lily suddenly to share her mother with someone who looks more like my daughter than she does."

"I don't think Lily is insecure about your being a family."

"Don't you get it Sean? Even dead Deirdre gets her say in my life! Like my adopting Lily's not legitimate. Like I need some Gallagher blood around here to make it all real."

"Really, Sar?"

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A few weeks later Sarah is driving to the airport again. The airline required signatures for some kind of paperwork and it seemed cruel to make her parents go. Lily and Alexis are at her apartment with Sean, which is good because her sight is dangerously blurry from crying. Sarah's not even sure what the tears are for; she's still busy being angry at Deirdre for denying her the opportunity to present all her grievances.

At the terminal, the departure doors slide open and with them, apparently, her blinders. More than seeing, she finally feels it, like a punch in her gut. She will never walk with her sister back through that door. Suddenly, she requires the walls to keep upright. Somebody takes her

arm and leads her the last few feet into the room that's been set up for them. It is the man from the other time. The father of the raucous kids.

“Sit down,” he says to Sarah as he sits down next to her. “It is a lot to come back here.”

“Thank you, really, I’m sure you have enough to worry about.” She notices his tired and red-rimmed eyes.

“A part of me is thankful to be here; at least to be by myself for a bit. Everyone is trying so hard. My parents, the neighbors.... The kids and I are all sleeping in the same bed.

“Yeah. I know how that is.”

“I can't get my head around it. We were a mother and a father, two kids and a dog. I can't change the picture. I see my kids waiting for me to say the things their mom used to say to them.”

“Maybe they’re just waiting for you to say the things.” Sarah offers.

“And your daughter's not looking expectantly at the door for her father every night?”

“She doesn't, didn't have a father.”

The man looks confused.

“I assumed it was your husband on the plane...”

“It was my sister, and her husband. Their daughter was at home in Chicago.”

The man shook his head. “And here I was thinking my kids had it the worst.”

“I need to go,” she says.

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It's too quiet when she walks into the house. Sean's asleep on the couch. He has been doing double duty, helping their parents with the stuff that needs doing after one buries a child, and helping Sarah with the girls. He's not asked her again about Alexis.

She finds the girls in her bedroom. Lily is showing Alexis her baby book -- it's the PC, adoption version without all the right questions. But really, what are those when a child's first three years are a mystery and, you suspect, at least dotted with neglect; when the family you made for her looks incomplete when compared against some ideal scrapbook version? Still she and Lily have forged ahead, making up stuff when that was the best they could do. It's something only she and Lily share. Sarah is surprised Lily even knows where she keeps it. And they've yet to have the "talk," letting Lily know that the circumstances of her birth and adoption are her personal information and strongly suggesting they be shared sparingly and after careful consideration. It was like Lily had already decided; and knew Sarah would agree.

Sarah joins them in the room and sits cross legged in front of them. It is the first they notice her. She holds each of their hands and they make a circle.

"There's only one way I know how to do this girls."

"Do what?" Both ask.

"Be a family."

Lily smiles her knowing smile.

"Alexis, Lily and I would like you to come live with us."

Alexis seems to breathe for the first time in weeks.

"But there's a way that Lily and I do this. You should know before you answer." Alexis nods.

“We don't have a lot of, well, the kind of things your used to, mostly...we try not to compare,” Sarah pauses to remember their only other rule. It was Lily’s idea after they witnessed another family, strangers, hurl towards an ugly, public melt down.

“Second, at any point, on any given day, we can each call “do over.” Whatever's happening stops, we start later from the top -- all is forgiven.”

Lily and Alexis look at each other shyly and then they start laughing. They're laughing at her! Maybe her rules are dumb, they sound silly out loud. Or is she being outflanked? It’s already happening, the opening and shifting, enlarging and reconfiguring. It will be different; she's betting it will be better. There's only her sister to blame.