

*Ida Ferdman*

## **Twisting the Knife**

I always do things I shouldn't, and never know why. So the fact that I'm sitting here in this boarding room, in the city by myself, does not surprise me. A person can't go on doing what they want or what they shouldn't do forever and expect not to pay or end up alone. I thought running away to the city would put the final laugh on them, but it only ended up being another thing I shouldn't have done. Loneliness doesn't suit me. Doing things I shouldn't does.

Like the time in the movie theatre. Five or six jabbering girls sat behind Mom and me, making too much noise for my nerves to take. I pulled a jackknife from my pocket, and flexed it round and round. Threatening. I wanted rays of light to flash off the blade like in the movies, but in the darkened theatre the shiny metal remained dull. I twisted it round and round as if it were nothing more than a tootsie roll. No one noticed, not Mom, not the squawking girls. I folded the knife and put it away. I didn't concentrate on the movie after that. But that's the way I do things. Not really thinking first; not knowing why afterwards.

Sitting here alone, looking back, it only seems natural that when Dreysdon Jones asked me to his dad's office I would say yes, even though his dad and mine are rivals, owning the two hardware stores in town. Because going with Dreysdon was like slapping my dad across the face.

I met Dreysdon that Saturday night in front of his dad's store. The windows advertised beating Dad's prices (step up and get everything Jansen has for cheaper), not with much zip, but he thought it cut deep enough to make his business better. It didn't. Dreysdon had keys to his dad's place, like I had keys to mine. He

pulled me down on the carpet, breathing hard, and I tried to figure out what I was doing and why. It made me sick to look into his greasy pimply face and have his slick wet hair brush against my forehead. Pus oozed out from the corner of his left eye from some infection he got tramping through the woods. That didn't make it any better. And the more he pushed down on me the sicker I got. His face got shinier when he pumped in and out of me, sweating all over. His body, wet and slimy, slid on mine and made terrible burping noises when our combined skin stuck and unstuck. Dreysdon's sweat. And after he finished he did burp as if he'd just had the best meal of his life. And maybe I was something for him to have or maybe I like to think that way. I slipped on my Levi's and t-shirt, leaving my underwear in the office because I wanted his dad to find out. I know now that the only reason I went with Dreysdon was to have the pleasure of doing something I shouldn't have done. Dreysdon tried to call after me, saying he wanted to cuddle a while longer, but I made it across the baseball field before he had time to pull his jeans over his big ass. The whole thing made me sick and I threw-up under our front porch before I went inside and showered off Dreysdon's sweat, hoping I'd never do that again.

At times like those I ran away to Grammy Hughes' place. She wasn't my grammy, and no one could remember exactly whose grammy she was. I once heard that her children moved away the year after her husband died, but no one can remember him either. Someone also told me she never married and never had any children, but had a torrid love affair with one of the mayors in town and never wanted anyone else after he rejected her for his own wife. But some said she moved here from Russia after the revolution and her whole family got killed over there and she never was the same after that. I don't believe that one. I think her husband deserted her during the depression and Alice Hidgens from the other side of town's really her daughter, but won't own up to it because Grammy does things different from other people.

Alice looks like her and so do her kids, all with the same pug-type nose and square jaws and straight blond hair like the kind Grammy had as a girl. She showed me a picture of herself wearing wide shirts and saddle shoes. In the picture she looks like Alice, except prettier. But that's just what I think. Grammy lives in a

house like plywood nailed together, over in the old town that got destroyed by a hurricane sometime in the sixties. She won't move into the new part of town. After the wind blew her house around she nailed it up and put new glass in the windows and kept on living there, by herself, away from everyone. But I like her and visit when things go crooked.

Here the closest thing to Grammy Hughes is the crotchety old bag upstairs on four. Mrs. Johnson. I tried being friendly with her when I first moved in, but she wouldn't have it. I marched up to her place with some cherries, thinking I'd teach her Grammy's pit-spitting-secrets.

"I don't like young people and I don't like cherries," She said right off before I could even put a cherry in my mouth.

"I just want to introduce myself," I said, already realizing that she wouldn't be interested in pit-spitting or Grammy Hughes. She never asked me in, only said, "We've met," and shut the door in my face.

I could feel her through the closed door listening to make sure I'd head down the stairs. I thought I even heard her breathing hard on the other side, waiting for my footsteps on the carpet-covered hardwood steps. I thought of Dreysdon breathing hard that Saturday night. I imagined her wrinkled face and droopy-bloodshot eyes squished up into themselves, and her ear pushed up against the door. Waiting. I never remember people in town waiting so hard for anyone to leave. I missed Grammy from the first, and shouldn't have run so far away this time. I still go up to the old bag's place even though she doesn't want me.

When I ran away that Saturday night with the smell of Dreysdon on me I headed for Grammy's, knowing she would smell him, but knowing she wouldn't bother me about it. She sat on her slated wood porch on a hardback chair with a bowl of cherries in her lap, chewing off the pulp and spitting the pits over the railing.

"Grammy," I said walking up the steps.

"Lily," she answered back, plain, with nothing intended in the tone of her voice. That's how it is between us.

I sat down on the cane chair next to her; it had rotten bits popping out in back. Grammy said the picture on the back of the

chair used to show a boy and girl kissing on a hammock under a cherry tree. I couldn't see it; it looked like twisted pieces of wood to me. But then again, I couldn't always see everything she saw, or tried to show me. I grabbed a hand full of cherries and crammed them in my mouth. Both of us tried to see how far we could spit the red-stained pits. They had more weight if we left some pulp on instead of sucking them dry. Grammy taught me that, along with how to make them fly farther.

"You have to puff out your cheeks," she said, "get a lot of air in, and hold the pit pursed between your lips, you get more pressure built up that way. Then shoot it out of your mouth like a pea from a shooter." It worked that way; it worked good.

I once tried pinning bull's-eyes to the trees beyond the house, "Let's make it a real contest," I said. But she said it would be no good like that.

"Take all the fun out of it. Why are you always in competition Lily?"

When no one found out about me and Dreysdon as I had expected, I kept on with him until someone did find out, but it wasn't easy letting people know. Dreysdon was scared his dad would kill him if he found out he was screwing a Jansen, because the only thing Mr. Jones hated more than communists or democrats was Dad, and I got swept onto that "b" list too; so I had to spread the news myself and by noon the next day everybody in town knew, including Dreysdon's dad and mine.

That night at dinner I walked into our kitchen and said Hi to Mom and Dad, smiling as if nothing had happened, but really smiling because they knew. Mom stood at the butcher block whacking a pork chop, beating it like she wished it were my head. I leaned over Dad and kissed his cheek. He screwed up his face like I had stuck a knife in him and twisted it round and round. One jab is never enough. I made him feel the point in his heart, which I had been breaking ever since puberty. He never did anything to me. But that's the way I do things. Always sticking it in and twisting it round and round.

"Hi, Lily, how's things today?" He knew me, and wouldn't give me the satisfaction of bringing up Dreysdon himself. I think

he wanted to give me the chance to fess up, to be honest. But that isn't one of my strong points.

"Everything's just fine," I said, pushing his paper away and sitting down on his lap as if saying you know I'm your little girl and you can't be mad at me.

Mom threw the pork chops on a greased-up pan on the stove, sending fat sizzling and spraying over the burners and the counter and the floor, muttering "Well it that don't beat all." She picked up the masher and beat down on some boiled potatoes in a bowl sitting on the counter.

"Something wrong Mom," I said, smiling all the while, sticking the knife in her too.

"If that don't beat all," she said again.

"Lily, did you happen to catch the baseball scores today?" No he wasn't going to give in; he wasn't going to mention Dreysdon.

"John, I swear you're going to spoil that child right out of existence," Mom said mashing those potatoes all the while. We both ignored her.

"Yeah I saw the scores, six to nothing, they had a good pitcher up today," I said.

"That's a shame," he said, "our team doesn't seem to have much luck this season."

"No, no they don't," I answered, fogging up his glasses with a hard breath, trying to wipe them clean with the palm of my hand, but smearing dirt on them instead. He took off his glasses and spit on the lens, then wiped them clean with a corner of his shirt.

"Why don't you both wash up for dinner," Mom said, finally giving in, "these chops are as fried as they're going to get." I kissed Dad on the lips and got off his lap, thinking I'd won that round and didn't have any more need for Dreysdon. At least not just then.

I was hoping I could get on better terms with Mrs. Johnson when she sent me to the corner the other day to pick up her tonic. I thought doing that errand for her would calm her down and make her like me more. But it didn't make her any more neighborly at all. When I brought up the tonic she was ready to slam the door in my face again, but I squeezed in through the doorway before she could.

"You sure have some pretty doilies on your furniture," I said,

pointing around her room at what seemed like hundreds of those things.

"Why don't you leave me alone," she said. "I don't trust you, and I don't know why either." I picked up a doily from the easy chair near the window. She'd tatted into it a picture of a girl holding a basket of flowers, but because of the lacy lines the girl's face looked as wrinkled as the old lady's in front of me.

"How do you make these pictures in here," I said. "I swear if each one doesn't have a different design." I know I should have left her alone, but I couldn't.

"Well I'm not real interested in telling you how I do it, and I want you to put that thing down before you get it dirty. Look at all the dirt under your nails," she said as she snatched the doily out of my hand.

I reached into my pocket and took out my jackknife. I chipped out pieces of the dirt and worked them into the palm of my hand. The old lady started breathing hard and put her blotchy hand over her mouth. I thought of Dreysdon again. I should've stopped then because I could see the whole thing scared her. But I didn't close the knife and put it away until I'd cleaned out from under every nail.

"Can I touch your doilies now," I said.

"You get out of here right now."

I left because I could see there was no talking to her, like there was no talking to Dreysdon. He had no sense.

Dreysdon wouldn't leave me alone. He kept after me to go with him to the lake since the office spot was found out.

"No, I told you once and I meant it," I said to him, leaving him standing in the diner, pieces of hamburger bun sticking to the corners of his mouth. He wanted me, but I didn't give. And he didn't let up. He showed up everywhere I went like a shadow, looking more faded and sickly every time.

I'd been dodging Dreysdon for two weeks when he stopped me that day on the baseball field. I tried to get around him, but he kept on.

"Lily, come to the dance with me, I don't care who knows about us. I love you." I wanted to laugh. He started sweating and his pimples went greasy again. He looked into my face like a sick puppy. I pulled my jackknife out of the back pocket of my Levi's and started cleaning dirt out from under my fingernails with the tip.



scraping it off on the front of my thigh.

"I'm not going to the dance with you," I said. I looked at a mound of dirt on the tip of the blade, then rolled it between my fingers and flicked it into the breeze.

"Come on, Lily, it'll be fun, you like me, I know you like me." He wasn't going to let up; I could tell that then.

He looked from my face to the blade and twitched when I twisted the knife round and round in my hand; both of us watched sun glint off the blade, sending streaks across his face. He went on again about the dance and loving me and not caring who knew. And I got more and more mad listening to him, seeing his pimply face bob up and down, looking shinier every time the flash of the blade whipped across his face.

Now I'm here in the city, alone, trying to figure it out and trying to make Mrs. Johnson into another Grammy Hughes. Some days I sit by the window and watch the rain fall and cover the concrete with slick sheets of water, turning it from white to gray. Some days I visit Mrs. Johnson, but she doesn't open the door since I showed her my knife. Other days I walk from block to block in this neighborhood looking for a friendly five-and-dime or a soda shop or a sign advertising a dance. But most days I sit up here in my room thinking, just wanting to go home but not wanting to at the same time, and knowing I'll have to when the money I took from Dad's cash drawer runs out.

That day I stood on the baseball field getting mad at Dreysdon I knew it was coming. I knew I was going to do something I shouldn't. I felt it welling up inside me. I tried to stop it, but it couldn't be helped. I held the knife by the handle, the blade end pointing straight down. Then I let the knife slip and watched it sink down into the middle of Dreysdon's left foot. One minute he stood with cool wet grass wriggling up through his bare toes, tickling him. The next minute he had my knife sticking straight up out of his foot like a fork in a thick bowl of chili. And it might as well have been for all the good it did me.

At first he didn't bleed. The knife went in clean and stuck hard with no place for it to move. But then Dreysdon jumped up and

down as if he just realized the pain. The knife slid back and forth in its groove; blood oozed out from the seams. When the knife finally popped up life spurted out of him in all directions, covering the small patch of grass we stood on. I saw his dad running toward us, scooped up my knife, and left Dreysdon hopping and yelling, knowing it wouldn't help any to hang around and listen to Mr. Jones tell me how bad I was, or say 'I told you so' to Dreysdon.

I ran, not really knowing where, but ending up at the lake anyway. Families sat near the shore having picnics. Couples kissed in the bushes trying not to be noticed. Children skipped rope and ran in circles catching butterflies. But I didn't care about them. I stripped off all my clothes and dived into the water, shutting out the picture that plowed through my mind of Dreysdon with the knife stuck in him. I still get shivers when I think about it. I swam until I made my toes touch the bottom. Then I crouched down and pushed off with both feet from the soft mud so that I came flying out of the water. I shot up and felt the cool wind wrap around me, naked for everyone to see.

I suppose after that last incident when everyone had had about as much of me as they were going to take and I'd made a fool of myself at the lake I should've gone straight to Grammy's instead of running here to the city. But I didn't sit long enough to think the whole thing out. I felt the cold air coming off the lake fast when I came out of the water and saw parents rushing their children away and some people laughing, and heard others saying I was crazy. Maybe the worst part was seeing Alice Hidgens there. I put on my clothes and ran past her and Alice had to say, "Well Lily Jansen this is just like you."

But I think after being away this long everyone will be happy to see me. I'll still have the keys to Dad's store, and Dreysdon will take up chasing me again. And I just know that before long I'll be sitting back on Grammy's front porch spitting pulpy cherry pits over the railing, aiming them at the last tree before the road starts, but never making it that far.