

Mona Houghton

Trapped in the Heart

Lily and Hank

Lily opened her eyes. The shadows on the pull down shade that covered the glass front door loomed over her, like they did every night. Roses that were red in the day, camellias that were pink, now the bright flood light along the path of the courtyard apartments magnified the parts, reduced them to dark, distinct shapes, each leaf, each petal.

Lily glanced at the clock on the floor. 2:18 AM. She looked back at the door. Three minutes later Hank's shadow joined the others. She watched as he raised his arm and softly tapped his knuckles against the glass.

Lily got up and opened the door as wide as it would go, without undoing the chain. "Hi, Hank."

"Open up," he said.

"Why?" Lily asked.

"So I can come in there and drown myself in those big bosoms of yours, that's why," Hank said.

Lily could smell him, the beer on his breath, the stale sweat coming through cheap after-shave. It turned her on.

Hank leaned up against the door frame. Lily reached out and ran her fingers up and down the front of his pants. He grabbed her hand and held it tight up against himself.

"Open up," Hank said, "and you can have it all."

After giving him a squeeze, Lily pulled her hand back and undid the chain.

Lily and Hank had known each other a long time, but the kind of knowing had changed almost a year before, after a Christmas

party where they both had happened to turn up. It was a big party. Lily had come alone. She had planned to leave alone, but her car wouldn't start. Someone had told her Hank always carried a set of jumper cables. She had found him in the kitchen working on a bottle of vodka, and he would have been glad to help except his cousin had borrowed his cables earlier that day. Hank offered her a lift home. Lily accepted the ride, but she didn't want to go home. She wanted to go to church to hear the singing. Hank had shrugged. He had thought midnight mass would be a gas. They had left the party together. That had been the beginning.

Hank kicked the door closed after he came into the room. Lily slinked around behind him and slipped the chain back into place.

"You locking me in or locking them out?" Hank pulled his sweat shirt up over his head.

Lily didn't answer. She never did. She never said a word once Hank actually came into her room, not until much later. Oh, occasionally a whisper would escape, something that would let him know how much she wanted him, but that didn't count, not to Lily and not to Hank, because it was as much a part of the loving as any kiss or caress. Afterwards, though, Lily couldn't shut up.

But before Lily started talking, she'd leave Hank in bed wrapped up in the sheets and the blankets and run a bath that had almost no cold water in it at all. If any sample bubble bath had come through the mail she'd throw that in too. And while the tub filled up, Lily would set out a big soft towel and lather up a wash cloth with Ivory soap and pour them each a shot of something strong. Then, when everything was just right, Lily would go get Hank out of bed. He'd usually be asleep, but she would wake him up anyway, gently. With her teeth, she would nibble on his side, or she would tickle his eye lids with the tip of her tongue.

Hank never minded being awakened. He loved Lily's baths. He liked the way she guided him through the darkened room and the way the bottom of his feet wanted to run away when they hit the cold linoleum on the bathroom floor and the way he kind of ached up inside and tingled at the same time when he lowered himself into the almost too hot water.

Once Hank settled in, that was when Lily would start. She would kneel down beside the tub and in the dark she would wash

Hank and tell him a story, give him a piece of her self, a beginning and a middle and an end. As far as Hank could remember, Lily had never repeated herself, not in the nine months since they had been seeing each other. And except for the first two times they spent together, that being Christmas Eve and New Year's Day, the routine had never varied.

This night Lily said, "Lean forward."

Hank did as she asked and Lily started to wash his back.

Christmas Eve--New Year's Day

Lily had done some research earlier in the morning. She had found out the Catholics over in Taft had the biggest choir around, so once she convinced Hank she should be the one behind the wheel, that she hadn't had much to drink, Lily pointed his pick-up truck north into the desert and drove out of Maricopa on highway 33.

A silver moon sat over on the horizon to the west. The stars were bright and the Joshua trees stood out, silent and still. To Lily, the party, the music and the voices and the blinking lights strung up around each room, didn't seem like part of the same evening, not now. She glanced over at Hank.

He smiled and said, "Not often I let somebody drive my truck."

"I'm honored," said Lily.

"I'm drunk," Hank said. "I'm drunk and I'm going to church." He laughed and gave Lily a sidelong glance. "I'm cold, too." He explained about the heater being broken as he snuggled up against her.

The night air did hold enough chill to make the move logical. It surprised them both, though, when that wanting feeling came through, wild like a March hare. There had been an attraction, but the being close opened it up into something bigger. Lily took deep, calming breaths and kept her eyes on the white line and pretended she didn't feel Hank pressing his thigh tight to hers. She didn't want it to go too fast.

When they walked into the church Hank giggled a little, but Lily's icy response made him keep his opinion to himself. She enjoyed being in church. The formality absorbed her. She had always wished she could discover the comfort in religion that she

guessed real church-goers experienced. With all the Christmas fanfare Lily could actually feel like the man in the white robes in front of the altar represented a conduit between herself and some pure and hypnotic state. But these sensations didn't last long. She'd glance over at Hank and before she knew it some other idea of ecstasy pumped through her mind, and the images were not powder puff voids, they were concrete and luscious. Still, that night, with the booming organ music and the big voices in the choir, Lily did tie in to the clean feeling of sinlessness.

After the final blessing, Lily and Hank headed for home. It was late and the moon had set and they were both silent as they traveled through the dark desert. By the time they got to Maricopa the town had closed down. Someone had even turned off the green neon sign above the Shamrock Bar and Grill.

When Lily saw this she said, "That's a first."

Hank said, "You should stay out late more often."

Lily said, "You'd be surprised."

"Would I?" Hank asked.

Lily nodded.

She drove straight to the Courtyard Arms, the bungalow style apartments where she rented the smallest unit available. She pulled the truck into the spot where she usually parked. She said, "I have some tequila in the freezer."

Hank said, "Good."

Contrary to his expectations, though, Hank only heard a story on Christmas Eve. What Hank did not know, and never really would, was that what he heard that night was Lily's first story. In it, Lily told about her dog and how he got the name Sidewinder.

Hank liked the story. He laughed a lot, especially at the end.

Lily poured them each another shot of tequila. She said, "About four years later old Sidewinder got hit by a train." Lily stared off and kind of shook her head. "Funny how a person can feel about a dog."

"Yeah." Hank moved from the chair to the couch and sat down next to Lily. He put his arm around her, but Lily kind of scooted away. "Come on, honey," he said.

But Lily wouldn't have any of it, not then.

She let Hank spend the night, but they both slept in their

clothes.

For the next seven days Hank couldn't keep his mind on much else but Lily. He wanted her in the worst way. He felt mesmerized. He kept replaying that night in her apartment over and over again, in his head, the way she sat in the dim light talking about that dog, the way she wrapped her hand around the neck of the tequila bottle and gripped it until her fingers turned white before she poured, the way their bodies fit together even with the jeans and the slacks and the turtle necked sweaters. Lily confused him.

Hank tried to reach Lily. She never seemed to be around when he dropped by her apartment or telephoned. He left a note thumb tacked to her door. She never got back to him. By New Year's Eve, Hank gave up on Lily. He got drunk by himself and went to bed early.

The next day while Hank was sipping beer and watching the Rose Bowl game he suddenly felt like he was not alone. He looked up. Lily was standing outside the screen door staring in at him.

Hank said, "Where have you been?"

Lily didn't say anything.

Hank said, "Come on in."

Lily opened the screen door and let it flap closed behind her.

Hank stood up and stepped over the coffee table. "Are you okay?" he asked, as he moved close to her.

Lily nodded.

Hank reached out and touched her hair.

Lily put her index finger on the metal button on Hank's jeans.

Hank and Lily made love right then, right there on the throw rug in front of the television while Sam the Bam Cunningham made football history with his fourth goal of the game.

Afterwards, Lily held Hank close and watched the sun play the leaves of the pepper tree outside the front door.

Hank and Lily

Initially Hank tried to be conventional. He called Lily and asked her out to dinner.

She said, "I'd rather not. But why don't you drop by after you've eaten."

So Hank ate dinner by himself, then drove over to Lily's place. He knocked on the door. Lily only opened it as wide as the chain

lock would permit.

"Hello, Hank," she said.

Hank thought maybe it would be nice to go out for a drink so he asked her if she'd like to walk down to the Shamrock. They had a new group coming in that night.

"You go on alone," Lily said, "And then come back, later." She smiled.

Hank wasn't one to insist on doing things his way, so he followed Lily's leads. It seemed she had a definite plan in mind.

By the beginning of February their internal clocks were in sync. Hank would be out there in the dark, after midnight, three, sometimes four nights a week, knocking on the door. Lily would always let him in. They would make love and Lily would give him a bath and tell him a story. In ways, Hank had never felt so complete. The loving mystified him. It took Hank outside himself into a light he had never before seen. He spoke about it, a blue green forever. Lily enveloped him. Her body always stayed with Hank, the touch, the smells, and her voice, somehow she made the words wrap around him.

Lily said, "Lean forward."

Hank did as she asked and Lily started to wash his back. She rubbed the sudsy cloth up and down his sides and around his neck and behind his ears. A gentle nudge encouraged him to rest his back against the cool porcelain tub. Lily reached under the water. She ran the washcloth between his toes and up his legs and she started to tell her story. What Hank did not know, and would never really understand, was that he was hearing Lily's last story. In it, Lily told about the woman who had no bottom lip.

Hank didn't laugh at the end. Instead he asked Lily for another shot of Tequila.

A couple of nights later when Hank knocked on the door, Lily never opened it up. His senses told him she was in there. He knocked louder. He felt cheated. He felt betrayed.

He came back the next night. He had started drinking early and had been drinking hard. He knocked. Nothing happened. With his fist Hank pounded on the door.

From inside, from the bed, Lily watched the shadow on the pull down shade. She couldn't move. She couldn't get up. She couldn't

let him in.

Hank hurt. He yelled out Lily's name.

Lily's first and last stories

Originally the dog had been called Bert, short for Fierce Albert. Bert was seven years old when Lily was born. When Bert was fourteen, he had a stroke. The vet had wanted to put him down. Lily screamed. If they killed Bert she would kill herself. Bert stayed alive. And Lily kept all the promises she had made at the pet hospital. She devoted herself to the dog. For weeks she would run straight home from school and drag that poor animal out into the sunshine so he would get his vitamin D and she would massage him with her little hands to increase the circulation and she would mash up his food so it would be easy for him to get it down his throat. And slowly the old dog did get better. About a month after his stroke he could actually limp around the backyard on his own and lift a hind leg and piss on the weeds and rusted lawn furniture. And about two months later he was pretty much the same dog as he had been before the blood vessel popped in that big head. Pretty much. There was one residual side effect. When he sneezed, the left side of old Bert's brain would go into a tail spin and he would just flip around like a snake does if a person steps on its head. That caused Bert's name to change to Sidewinder.

Lily's last story was about something she had seen.

When Lily was fifteen, her parents got so crazy she had to go live with her uncle and his wife. At first they seemed like straightforward people. He went to work everyday, a state employee. And the wife, she kept books for several small businesses in the suburb where they lived. The aunt had an office in the house. Her clients would come by and they would work there in the room that used to be the den. By that age, Lily had seen a lot and heard more. It didn't take her long to figure out that the aunt did more than take care of the businessmen's books. Lily didn't care. She had hoped, though, that she had landed somewhere that would stay still long enough for her to grow up. It didn't turn out that way. The uncle finally caught on and he did care. Lily found this out one afternoon when she came home from school and found him in the living room, sitting on the couch, holding his knees with the palms of his hands. His face was

bright red. The door between the living room and the den was closed, but that did not stop Lily, like her uncle, from hearing the grunts and groans of the aunt and one of her lovers. Lily only had a moment to speculate as to who was with the aunt. The uncle stood up. Right in front of Lily this big man started to take off his clothes. By the time he undressed, the sounds on the other side of the door had subsided. But that did not discourage the uncle. His wife's unfaithfulness not only made him angry, it apparently excited him. Lily had never seen a grown man's erection. The uncle went into the den. He raped his wife and in his frenzy he bit off her bottom lip, the whole thing. Lily found it on the floor, under the arm chair. She wrapped it in a piece of plastic and gave it to the man who drove the ambulance. A doctor tried to sew the lip back on. It didn't work. The last time Lily saw her aunt she had no bottom lip, none at all.