

Mildred Tremblay / LILY AND THE SALAMANDER

Lily Sitter began her spring cleaning two weeks before Easter. She took out her rubber gloves and her Old Dutch. The red plastic pail was filled to the brim with hot, steaming water and hauled over to the cupboard. Grunting a little, she hiked her slightly plump body up onto the metal stool and began taking down the assortment of junk that always finds its refuge on top shelves of kitchen cupboards.

Twice a year now, for more than fifteen years, Lily had been cleaning her shelves in this manner. Nobody had ever noticed it or commented on this job of work. Not her husband nor, later, her children.

Nobody knew these intimate details of Lily Sitter's workaday life — how she washed behind the stove every Friday, or did the refrigerator on Wednesday and the toilet bowl on Tuesdays. Sometimes, she would try to communicate these activities but nobody had ever listened beyond the opening sentence. Why should they? It was terribly dull.

She took down all the chipped china cups with unmatched saucers, the stacks of old plates and bowls, two broken toasters, a collection of empty Nabob coffee cans, and a clumsy old popcorn popper nobody ever used anymore. When they were all down and arrayed out on the counter, Lily got down off her stool and stood there looking at them.

Suddenly, she couldn't remember why they were all arranged out on the counter like that. What was she doing with them? Slowly, she reached out a clumsy, rubber-covered finger and poked a coffee can.

— What? she said. What?

She picked up a cup with a gorgeous blood-red rose painted on it and turned it over in her hands again and again.

— What?

And at three o'clock that afternoon when Marvin came home from his bowling game, that's where he found her. She had in her hands a plastic Xmas bowl, painted with wreaths and berries.

— What? she was saying. What?

Marvin took the bowl from her hands and steered her over to the kitchen table and sat her down.

— Have you seen it? she asked.

— Seen what? Marvin stared at her dumbfounded

— My book, she said.

— What book?

— The one I was reading. She put her head down and stared at her hands, frowning. I can't remember what page I was on? Eh? About the middle?

Lily sat in the doctor's office awaiting a verdict.

The examination had been made difficult by the fact that Lily had been unable to tell the doctor how she was feeling. When he had said — Well, Mrs. Sitter, how are you?, she had been obliged to answer — I don't know.

She didn't seem to be feeling much of anything except perhaps shrouded in woolly grey dust balls on the outside and more of the same within. It embarrassed her not to have anything to report to the doctor, who had impaled her with a sterilized eye, and it crossed her mind to make up something, but she didn't have the courage.

Surreptitiously, she pushed her fingers hard into her stomach looking for a pain, an ache, anything, and at the same time she sent her mind scurrying the hidden paths within her body, but all she could feel were the heavy grey dust balls. They were swathed about her heart and lungs; they had crowded into her womb. There was a very large and woolly one caught in her brain just behind her eyes, it was difficult to think through it.

The doctor sat regarding her, considering possibilities. A twitchy, beige coloured moustache like a small scrub brush, sat under his nose and he picked at it reflectively as he stared at her. She saw that he considered her hapless and she didn't dare ask him about her book although she wanted to, quite badly.

She tried to look hapless. She tucked her feet under the chair. Her mind went to her clothes. What did she have on? The possibility that, under her coat, she was stark naked, occurred to her. With a quick, terrified glance, she looked down at her lap; but no, there was a skirt showing where her coat fell open, her good brown suit skirt.

The doctor rose and called Marvin into a small antechamber.

— Female disorder, he pronounced. Probably premature menopause. Should get her started thinking about her hysterectomy. He took out his pen and began a rapid scribble. Estrogen, he said. Mind she takes it twice a day. We'll take out the IUD and try her on birth control pills. And anti-depressants, just in case. He paused for a moment to shake the ink up. Valium on arising. And iron pills, by god, almost forgot the iron pills! The pen was out of ink and he began opening and shutting drawers looking for another one.

In the next room, a nurse appeared with a needle and shot Lily's behind full of a colorless substance.

— What was in that? Lily asked, but the nurse just smiled and didn't answer. I can't remember, Lily thought, hiking up her pantyhose, but I guess I'm the kind of person who always asks dumb questions.

When they got back home, Lily sat down at the kitchen table and took all the pills out of her purse and lined them up in front of her. She didn't know what they were or when to take them.

— I feel very strange, Marvin, she said. Will you sit down and talk to me for a minute?

— Well, said Marvin, if you hurry up about it.

— Well, Lily said, and her eyes looked wide and dark as burnt chocolate in her pale face, well, for instance, I know you're my husband, I know that! But I can't remember how I'm supposed to feel about you?

She looked down at her hands, twisting the gold wedding band around and around on her finger.

— For instance, do I love you?

— Well of course you love me! I'm your husband! Marvin snorted and shook his head in disgust. You've always admired me! He spoke loudly as if she had suddenly become hard of hearing. You've always looked up to me!

Lily considered this information gravely for a moment.

— But, she replied, lifting her head and frowning, I know lots of wives who don't love their husbands. My mother, for instance. . . .

— That's different! Marvin sat down at the table and leaned over towards his wife to make her understand better. Your father — well, shit! you know . . . he isn't quite the sort of man I am, now is he? When it comes to being smart, I mean that family certainly isn't known for its brains!

This thought almost made Marvin laugh, and he couldn't resist the temptation to elaborate a little.

— Just look at your Aunt Nettie for God's sake! And your old man, another thing now, d'you think women ever found him sexy? A little skinny jerk like that? How could you compare him to me. What kinda dummy are you anyway?

Marvin looked at her appealingly, inviting her agreement.

Lily didn't answer at once. She was staring at him now in an open and child-like way, almost as if seeing him for the first time. He creaked back uneasily in his chair and attempted a shrug.

— Not to sound conceited, he said, just all in the family, like.

— But Marvin, she said, frowning, you aren't very attractive. You are quite overweight, aren't you? And your hair is too thin and stringy. Didn't you used to have thick, blonde curls? And you have sort of a peevish look around your mouth — sulky! That's it!

She smiled, glad to have pinned it down so neatly.

— It's not nice at all, is it? she said.

She stopped suddenly. Marvin was standing over her. His usually pallid face was mottled and dark with anger.

— Oh, I'm sorry! she said. It's just so strange how I feel. Of course if you say you're attractive and I love you, of course I must! I'll try to remember it.

But she was thinking in a confused way — Marvin doesn't know who he is either.

When Marvin had left the room, Lily reached out and picked up one of the pill bottles. She began to think about the doctor. I wonder if he knows who he is? she thought. She sat for another minute and then she got up and took all the pills and shoved them back in a corner on the top shelf behind the coffee cans.

The back door opened and one of Lily's daughters came into the kitchen. She came in noisily, throwing her books onto the cupboard and without speaking to her mother, she went directly to the fridge and pulled the door open.

For a split second, the kitchen background faded away and the body and presence of the girl stood out very clearly to Lily: Vivien. It's Vivien. How chunky and strong her arms look. Vicious. She almost pulled that door off its hinges. She's ugly. Mean mouth. I don't like her. My Vivien. Deep inside of Lily's body, a tremor began; she felt she was going to faint.

— Nothing to eat in here! the girl began to complain, whining, but malicious too. Never nothing to eat in this house!

She slammed the fridge door shut and turned to confront her mother.

Confusedly, Lily thought of her other children. Who were they? What did they really look like? Surely they weren't all like this girl? Overwhelmed, she put her head down into her hands.

— Why are you sitting there like that, Vivien said. Why isn't supper started!

Lily peeked out through her fingers at this stranger, her first-born child.

— What do I usually make for supper? she said.

That night Marvin made out an activity list for Lily for the next day so that she could remember what she was supposed to do. Get car washed, he wrote. Phone T.V. man. Get supper. He sat for a moment chewing his pencil, trying to think. What did women do all day anyway? he asked Lily, but Lily couldn't remember. Suddenly he thought of something. What had she been mucking around in out there in the kitchen when he'd found her? Oh, the shelves. Finish spring cleaning, he wrote down. Well, that would have to do for a start.

Lily followed Marvin's lists as well as she could, although peculiar things began to happen around the house; for instance although meals were abundant and the T.V. always in good repair, dirt and dust piled up undisturbed in the most unlikely places. However, Marvin got better at the lists, so they managed for a while.

The younger children were sent to Aunt Nettie's. Dumb as she was. Marvin announced that it didn't take any brains to look after kids anyway, just give them a good clout on the head now and then to let them know who's boss. Lily cried when they left. She had discovered that they were normally loveable children, not cold and strange like Vivien, but she couldn't always remember what to do with them, and it became too risky leaving them alone with her.

And so they went along in this way for a while, but gradually Lily began to forget about the lists too. After Vivien and Marvin had left in the mornings, Lily would go seriously to work to look for her book. Clothes flew from drawers and closets, sheets were stripped from beds. Sometimes she would go out into the yard and look under the big rocks in the rock garden or lift the heavy damp arms of the big cedar tree and shake them about. Once she went next door to old Mrs. Lafleur's to ask if she had seen it. She stood patiently knocking and waiting on the porch for a long time, but the old lady would not come to the door, though Lily knew she was at home.

When she was not looking for her book, she took to sitting, unmoving, for long hours at a time in Marvin's big chair in the living room.

The room was of a medium size and it was furnished with an imitation Spanish chesterfield suite, with coffee tables to match. The coffee tables were decorated with elaborate, glued-on plastic carvings. They had purchased this furniture, not too many years ago, at a Simpson Sears sale and it had been an occasion of considerable excitement in their lives. But it had quickly lost its charm, and now as she looked at it, there seemed something almost evil about it — it sat there, day after day, looking back at her with a sort of mindless brutishness. There was a rug also — a green circular affair — she saw now that patches of its shaggy hair were falling out in clumps near the chesterfield, exposing a dirty grey scalp.

She wondered, as she sat there, who had been this woman, Lily Sitter, who had gone with this man, Marvin, this fat, blonde, baby-faced man, and purchased all of these things which now surrounded her?

Across from where she sat, placed on one of the ugly little tables, was a framed picture of herself — her wedding portrait. There she was, all veiled and satined and gartered, ready to be handed over to Marvin, supposedly intact. From out of the lace and lacquered curls, the round young face beamed idiotically into the future; into a living room of imitation Spanish furniture and moulting shag rugs. Sometimes she would pick the picture up and stare at it for a while, but she could find no sense to it. One day, walking past, she took it and put it away in a drawer.

In the long silences, she became aware of the presence of the house. It would start its communications shortly after Marvin left in the mornings; it was like a vast uneasy stomach, creaking and rumbling and farting faintly off in its depth. Sometimes though, it would suddenly become very quiet as if it had become aware of her sitting there and was watching her.

It occurred to her that the house had a voice, and that one day it might draw a great heaving sigh and begin to speak to her. It would speak her name — Lily, Lily! — and she waited in a sort of curious dread for this to happen.

Mostly though, it just rumbled about, carrying on with its life. One morning the fridge went on with such a loud belch that she went into the kitchen to look at it. It was getting old, it was losing its shine.

— How do I feel about you, fridge? she said.

She knew she felt something. Was it pity? Or hate? She couldn't decide. She stood looking at it for a moment, and then she reached her hand around behind it, groping, and pulled out the plug.

— I think I'll call that a mercy killing, she said, and laughed.

After that, she went around and pulled out every plug she could find. Her laughter rose up in torrents from deep within her belly and leapt, naked and wild, out into the room, out the door and down into the street.

All the plump, little, aproned women, in all the plump, tidy, little houses, stopped in their rounds and listened intently when they heard it.

Of course, when Marvin came home from work and found the fridge defrosted and water all over the floor, he didn't laugh, he was furious.

And who could blame him, really?

He took Lily by the shoulders and began to shake her violently, his fingers digging like knives into the soft flesh of her arms. She begged him to stop, he was hurting her, but this only seemed to enrage him further and reaching out, he took her by the neck and lifting her off the floor, began to throttle her. His weak blonde hair was falling every which way and his face, pushed up close to hers, had turned the colour of raw beefsteak.

— Crazy woman! he yelled, spit flying from his mouth into Lily's cheeks. Crazy woman!

Lily felt he might kill her and with fingers fluttering like dying butterflies, she picked weakly about his hands, trying to release their grip. She would have begged for her life if she'd been able to speak. From the other room, she heard excited footsteps and Vivien came bursting in. Lily reached a hand blindly out towards her, but Vivien

made no move, only stood there, watching, her eyes wide and alert. Lily's ears began to ring, she felt the approaching explosion of a crimson cloud ballooning up from the back of her skull, and Marvin's face, distorted, unreal, loomed and blocked out the whole world, but at the last moment, she was thrown across the room, skidding through the water and crashing up against the wall like a half dead, discarded cat. As if from a long distance, she could hear Vivien talking forcefully to her father.

— We've got to do something about her, she was saying, she's a ree-tard. The kids at school all call her a ree-tard.

Lily was afraid to get beaten again so she resolved to do better.

For two whole days, she didn't allow herself to look for her book, except for one quick peek in Marvin's bowling bag.

And she decided to take up jogging, it was said to work miracles, she'd read an article in one of Marvin's magazines. It had said also that sometimes, while jogging, you could have orgasms, (she looked the word up in the dictionary to make sure she hadn't misunderstood, for it seemed a strange thing). Lily was interested in orgasms for the same reason a poor man is interested in money — she never had any. Well, god knows maybe that's what's wrong with me, she reflected, and even though she couldn't understand how such a thing could be managed while running in public, she was willing to give it a try.

And so the next morning, all the plump little women with all their flat faced, large headed, peanut butter stuffed little children, were treated to the sight of Lily Sitter, wearing a turtle neck sweater to hide her black and blue throat, bursting out of her front door and galloping madly off down the street. Lily ran all the way down the street, turned right on the Avenue, ran one block down past the graveyard, jumped over the wall to look under a pile of wreaths on a new grave, jumped out again, and ran all the way down to the beach. By the time she got there, she was huffing and puffing a lot, but not from orgasm, she was just very short on wind.

She had conceived the idea that when she got to the beach, she would look for some suitable logs and stumps to use as furniture in her living room, for she had decided to get rid of the Spanish, which had been silently moving in closer to her, inch by inch, every day. However, the beach was covered with such a variety of large, interesting looking stones that she spent the rest of the day looking for her book.

Unfortunately, the jogging, in Lily's case, did not produce any miracles, and as she seemed unable to think of any other solution, she was soon back sitting in her living room contemplating the green rug.

Sitting there, with her eyes wide open, she began to have dreams. She dreamed of books — books with 1,000 pages, with 10,000 pages, and books with 12,375 pages, that is, one for every day of her life. She dreamed she found her book; it sat on a table, a strong light falling across it; it was black bound and hurriedly she ran to open it. But the pages were covered with undecipherable markings, thrown about on the white paper like wet, black tea leaves, and tears of disappointment streamed like rivers down her exhausted cheeks.

She decided to try out various roles, to see if by chance she might stumble on to something that would help her remember. After some long and careful thought, she decided it was possible that she was a young girl about 6 or 7 years old.

The more she thought about this idea the better she liked it, and one day, sitting there, a strange and painful shiver rushed through all of her bones and it came to her immediately afterwards that her name was Lily Marie Josephine Hoskins and she was six and a half years old. It astounded her that she could have forgotten such an important thing, and her whole being flooded with such a tremendous relief and happiness that she jumped to her feet, laughing and clapping her hands.

Down the street to play with Billy! and out the door she ran, calling back to the empty house — Be back for supper, Mamma! But running down the street, her feet felt too clumsy and looking down, she saw that her feet were not those of a child and, frightened, she went quickly back home.

Other times, she thought she remembered that she was an old lady and she went hobbling and wheezing about, with her nose thrust forward sniffing out odours.

— Smells like stale bread in here! she would say in her high cracked old lady's voice, or, smells like mice, or old apples, or whatever happened to catch her fancy. Smells like death, she said one day and spent the whole day jumping around quickly to catch her own death who stood behind her, but she could never turn about fast enough.

One day, she was sure she was a young mother in love with her new-born baby. She went up the steps to Vivien's room and took from its box under the bed, a salamander Vivien had imprisoned there.

She made some tiny blankets from scraps and wrapped it tenderly and carried it about all the day long. She bathed its bumpy little body, and at lunch time, she pushed mashed bananas into its stubborn little crocodile mouth. One lidless, reptilian eye gleamed out at her adoringly from a corner of the blanket when she rocked it and sang *Rock a Bye Baby and Bye Baby Bunting*.

When Vivien arrived home and saw what she was doing, she took the salamander away and flailing her short, chunky arms, she hit her mother about the head and shoulders with hard, mean punches, not stopping until her mother had fallen to the floor. She squatted, then, hunched over her for a long time, not allowing her to get up, and Lily, with her face pushed down, breathed in the choking dust of the green shag rug.

Easter came and went and the days moved on towards early summer. One day, Lily sitting in her living room, woke from a dream of a book with only one sentence in it. The sentence was "Nov schmoz ka pop," and it was repeated, page after page. She noticed that the sun, in its summer orbit, was streaming into the room with more strength. Pale lemon oblongs of light lay across the dark chesterfield and revealed new bare patches on the shag rug.

She sat for a while watching the sun patterns, when gradually she became aware of a new sound in the house, as of short, clean notes picked on a tight string. She listened carefully for a moment and then nodded her head in satisfaction — she knew what it was. The little salamander had escaped from Vivien's room and was coming down the stairs.

Its tiny feet picked their way down, touching against the varnished wood with fastidious little clacks. By now, the sun had reached Lily's chair and it fell in heavy warmth across her face. She closed her eyes, listening intently. The clacking grew louder, very close to her face now and strangely familiar.

Suddenly, she realized that somehow the salamander had curled its cold body in behind her ear, seeking fire from her brain. She reached up her hand to remove it, but could not, it had become terribly tangled in her hair. She began to pull and tug at it frantically and it opened its long, crooked mouth and began to scream. The screams were thin and far away, but yet intimately known to her.

Without warning, Lily's whole body convulsed into a taut, excruciating arch, as if it would explode, and then it was thrown violently back into the chair.

Memory flooded in in great roaring streams.
The last page, she had been on the last page.