

Bone, Breast, Burnt and Bright

Jack watched Lillian, his girlfriend. The pen was slipping out of her hand. She was working on biology homework, a take-home quiz that was three weeks late. Everything was excruciating: the pace she was going, the handwriting that looked like a drunk's.

Lillian had been diagnosed a year ago—two years after they had started dating. Now she had numbness in her fingers and extremities, and she used the same kind of thick rubber pen case Jack's sister had used to feign mastery over writing. But Lillian could get up and go to the bathroom as fluidly as any other person. She could walk down the street and pick up coffee. She wasn't like Jack's sister, who had long depended on a walker after her muscles had atrophied.

"First your sister, now me—fuck you, right?" Lillian chuckled darkly, the day they'd found out, after they'd spent the afternoon crying together in her dorm. She'd lifted the words from his head, like bits of cerebral scab. He couldn't believe it. Also, it was just like Lilli to beat him to the punch; he felt oddly grateful. Bowing his head into her chest, wrapping his arms around her waist, he briefly considered sex as a means of escape.

"Let me help you."

"Here's the bucket."

"When's your scan?"

He was twenty-two then, but all the words came back to him, all the phrases and smells and cloudy misjudgments he'd experienced as a fourteen-year-old, when Brooke was dying of a rare bone cancer. In their house, he and his sister had had separate bedrooms, but their parents never shut her door when she was home. He remembered never knowing whether he should leave his own door open, or closed, the better to protect her privacy. It was something of a sick kind of relief for him whenever Brooke was an inpatient at the hospital.

"It's not that bad. Breast, not bone," Lilli often reminded Jack. But, at least at first, everything felt the same: the putrid yellow puke buckets, the intractable chemo nausea, the sage green hospital recliners, and the wildly oscillating cell counts. The omniscient and gentle and harsh and dismissive nurses. In class: the round, studied faces virtually free of expression, just like the ones in eighth grade, when people had found out about his sister.

On her twenty-second birthday, just recently, Lillian happened to be able to come home from the hospital. The lump in her right breast had receded; a surgery from the week prior had been successful. It was almost, Jack thought, like Lilli was in a mini-remission. He drove her out to a restaurant in their college town to meet with people he considered to be fair-weather friends. None of them had ever shown up at the hospital to visit. Lilli's parents were there, too, looking delicate and aged. Her father had seemed to shrink from the stress. Just the sight of them made Jack seize up; he knew they wished he would just go away. He knew they thought of Lilli as childish, not old enough to have a serious boyfriend—and he knew that cancer somehow exacerbated, rather than mitigated this view.

“They’ll come to recognize you’re good for me, soon enough,” Lilli told him any time he alluded to his concerns. “You’re my home,” she would say quietly, and then in a half-mocking Barney sing-song voice: “*I love you and you love me.*” And he would roll over onto his stomach and hide under his pillow, which grew wet with tears.

She deserves more, Jack thought. I give her my all, but it’s not enough. Her “close” friends seemed to be failing her. But this was something that had long haunted Lilli, ever since her own sister had descended into prescription drug addiction, and moved to the other side of the country. They hadn’t seen or spoken to each other since Lilli was in middle school.

Every female friend Lilli made after that, as far as Jack could tell, was transient, floating in and out of her life, like pollen in the wind. If they didn’t drift away on their own, she always let them go.

After the birthday dinner, they picked up some wine on the way back to her dorm. Jack felt celebratory—not about Lilli’s birthday, but about the fact that he’d escaped her parents’ watchful gaze unscathed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, as they lay a blanket on the carpeted floor. He uncorked the bottle.

“Like I have *cancer*,” she said in a faux-dramatic tone with a slight smirk.

“Come on, Lilli.” He kissed her lightly on the lips.

“Sorry, *kidding*. I feel... Like I’m as old as I’ll ever be.”

“You’re horrible.”

She laughed and lay down. Her hair was gone, her chest would never be the same, and she had bruises on her arms where phlebotomy left its mark. But she otherwise looked like herself. Thin, but not gaunt or weak. Fair, but not sickly pale.

“I feel awesome. I mean, you know. I’m getting better. *Harder, better, faster, stronger.*” More and more, he could tell, she didn’t love talking about this. She scrolled through their favorite playlist, searching for the Daft Punk song she’d just quoted, and turned on the amp.

He squeezed her toes, then her fingers, one by one. “How’s the sensation doing?”

“Honestly, Jack, I think it’s improved. Happy birthday to me.” She had the kind of patient smile now that Jack loved, the kind that he knew she used to instill calm.

He tried to crack one of her toes, the way you crack a knuckle. She used to hate when he did that, but now she gave no reaction.

“And I’m not having any discharge anymore, you know,” she added.

“Great.”

The survival rate for breast cancer was pretty good—really good, relative to so many other types. And he was aware that her youth helped. But she had some pre-existing anemia that had worsened since her diagnosis. Before, she’d chalked it up to loathsome periods and a diet that needed improvement. Since starting rounds of chemo, though, her reproductive functions were obviously a no-go, and yet her iron levels kept dropping. Jack knew that it was her fatigue, and not her pain, that was giving her the most trouble these days.

When she was especially tired, or fed up with the numbness, she would sometimes dictate to him what she wanted to write or type—for a grocery list, for

homework, for a stream-of-consciousness burst of anger in a Facebook post (to be immediately discarded). No one could convince her to drop out of school for a while.

That's how she always put it, "drop out."

"It's not 'dropping out' if you're planning to come back," he admonished her. "It's called *taking a leave of absence*."

"Sure, sure. I just don't want to be that bitch, you know? Like, the whole 'self-care' thing. I mean, no offense to the people who need to do that, for whatever probably very legitimate reason."

He sighed. "You shouldn't be killing yourself to finish fucking pre-med courses. You should be taking your time. And more importantly, taking care of yourself."

"I'm telling you, I'm already taking all the time I need. I'm not that bad."

She had a lot of pride; it was something that kept stinging at him with renewed intensity. Ever since her diagnosis, any discussion that revolved around *her* was potentially dangerous. When she suddenly broke off from a conversation and started swiping through Instagram on her phone, he could often sense them teetering on the edge of a fight.

"You need to grab a break, now and then, dude," Aaron told Jack. They were in town getting a beer together at their favorite pub. Aaron was the kind of older friend who had known Jack his whole life. He also had the means and wherewithal to visit Jack at his out-of-state college—as well as afterward, when Jack started grad school. For a while, Aaron used to bring his girlfriend with him on these visits, but she despised the cold.

Eventually, Aaron dropped the pretense of facilitating a week of double dates, and instead took on the role of older brother coming over to check up on Jack.

“Yeah, it’s been a while,” Jack acknowledged.

Aaron was looking at Jack curiously. “I know the toll it’s taking on you, man.”

Jack looked up from the appetizer list. He remembered the actual highway toll he had utterly missed, a couple of weeks ago, while driving with Lilli to New York. They didn’t have an E-Z Pass, and he’d mistakenly driven in a lane without a booth. But maybe that’s what it really meant to feel that something was *taking a toll*: unobserved, unaddressed, meaningless significance—and then suddenly it’s too late and you’re shelling out a hundred dollars instead of five.

“Brooke’s been gone a long time; not everything is about Brooke,” Jack said in a low voice. “Yeah, it’s scary, but there’s no way twenty-two-year-old Lill’s going to die of fucking breast cancer. So okay—I’m okay, I’m doing better than you think.”

“Yeah, I get that, but –”

“Do you, though?”

“Yes.”

“You know,” he said, taking another sip of beer and feeling that he had the upper hand. It was yet another IPA variant capable of bottomless bitterness; Jack fantasized about pouring it down a drain. “I just feel so useless and lazy. Especially compared to her. Do you even know what that’s like, Aaron?” Which was he trying to do—reject sympathy or fish for it? He felt revolted by his own mixed messaging.

Aaron looked taken aback, but then he said, “You might be useless with a ball.” Jack raised his eyebrows, wondering if he really heard him correctly. “But dude, you’re definitely not useless to her. And you’re the hardest working guy I know.”

“Mmm, right,” Jack said with a snort, like he was suddenly too exhausted to form a sentence. He felt strangely embarrassed by (or maybe for) his friend, the way he sometimes did while talking to his mom on the phone. Basketball felt, at this moment, like some alien game he’d concocted in a nightmare. He knew he was good at staying in a defensive triangle. But he was terrible at a free-throw; he shattered under pressure.

“Called your folks lately?” asked Aaron, as though hand-picking from Jack’s thoughts.

Jack hadn’t called them, partly because he couldn’t stand the guardedness they exhibited lately, which was worse than that of his grad school colleagues. He’d begun an MFA in painting, and he couldn’t seem to hold a real conversation with anyone. He missed the rhythms, the camaraderie, and the sensations of college. When he wasn’t with Lilli, or an old friend, he felt numb.

Aaron waited a few moments, but Jack didn’t reply. So Aaron just said: “You’d be wise to.”

“Bev wants me to go to that Psi U party afterward,” said Lilli. They were standing in her room, which had its own private bathroom, but also mountains of Lilli’s clothes on the chairs, on the dresser, in bins. It was as though she was constantly preparing a massive donation to Goodwill.

They were getting ready to head to the termly semi-formal party together. Jack, already in a suit, fastened Lillian's bra one setting too loose, in order to prevent irritation and radiating pain around her breasts. He then went to zip up her dress from behind. With some difficulty, he finally got the zipper closed. He kissed her neck, and Lillian appraised herself in the mirror, frowning. From the side, it was obvious that the dress's seam was pulling into a zig-zag.

"Now it doesn't fit right, because you made my bra too loose and bigger-looking."

"Well, why don't you just wear a different bra? This push-up one is probably too much for this little dress." He was not about to guarantee her a physically painful night.

She glared at him, but agreed to change. Over her head, she tied on her favorite silk scarf. Secretly, Jack hoped she would eventually go for a wig, but he didn't dare suggest it.

"So are you gonna come with us to the after-party?" she asked then.

He paused. "Lilli, I don't think it's a good idea." The last part, *for you to go*, didn't need to be spoken aloud for Lilli to hear it. But she still pretended it wasn't what he meant.

"If you're too tired, that's fine. I think I need some time out tonight, is all." She applied blush just under her cheekbones, then mascara on her upper eyelashes. He watched her careful movements for a while.

"Okay, just... Do you really have to go?"

"Yes!"

"You know I just want you to be safe."

“Why don’t *you* come with me if you’re so worried about my safety?” Lately, “safety” had become their code word for “the ability to not collapse under the weight of cancer, chemo, and partying.”

“Whether or not I go, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you, is what I’m saying.”

“Slightly on the condescending side, don’t you think?” She was trying to wrestle herself back into her dress, feet first.

“Sorry,” said Jack.

The zipper was up, except for the final quarter inch. He reached over to finish it. For a moment, he thought she might stop him. But she kept her hands to herself.

“Beautiful,” he said finally, gently holding her by the shoulders.

“Jack,” said Lilli, turning around and cradling his face, “Try not to worry tonight. I really feel great, I just need to blow off some steam for a little bit.”

“Okay.”

“I can handle myself.”

“Fine.”

“Just wait for me here after semi.” They almost always spent the night at her place, huddled in her extra-long twin, because he wanted to do whatever was more convenient for her, and also because he loathed his own barren apartment. But she said this in a strange tone, like she was offering him a rare treat.

“Ready?” he said.

“Ready.” But of course she wasn’t. She still needed to spray a little perfume and put on some lipstick and make sure she had everything she needed in her purse, including a phone charger and an Epi-Pen.

When she was actually ready, they walked hand-in-hand over to the party.

After a few glasses of wine each and copious cheese and crackers, it was 10:30.

“Okay, you’re sure you don’t want to just come back with me to drink all of our provisions?” he said. It was true: they had plenty of alcohol right in her dorm room, under her bed and in the mini fridge.

“I’m just going to go out with Bev for a little while. I’ll be back soon.” Bev was a bisexual bio major with an old lady’s name, huge tattoos above her hip bones, dyed black hair, and inflammatory social media posts. She rushed in just then to throw her arm around Lillian.

“Okay, well, have fun!” said Jack, kissing Lilli’s cheek.

“Bye, love you,” said Lilli. She waved as they walked out. Two other girls trailed behind them. Jack didn’t know their names.

He went home—to the dorm. Then he thought, *Where did they actually go?*

He quickly sent Lillian a text: *You went to Psi U, right?* No response. He prayed that some idiot wouldn’t decide to call an ambulance as soon as they saw Cancer Girl trip and fall—which, he felt confident, would happen as soon as she had half of a drink while dancing on a floor slick with spilled Bud Light. He could easily imagine some asshole trying to take advantage of her when she got drowsy from a combination of alcohol, anemia, and lingering treatment drugs. And he could only hope that no one would try to romanticize her obvious condition—since he knew, deep down, that an ugly part of him inevitably did enough of that on its own.

As a feminist, he recoiled at the idea of going out and checking on her. She said she’d only stay out a little while, didn’t she? It didn’t really matter where she went,

because he knew that she was simply somewhere on campus. Right? And it couldn't *matter*, in any meaningful way, if someone hit on her.

In her absence, sitting on the bed, he suddenly felt furious at her. Was this the first night in months that one of them had gone out, and the other stayed behind? He had to admit to himself that it might be. Yet it was inconceivable that she could dismiss his desire, as her partner, to try to protect her during a serious illness. And it was *incomprehensible* that she could pretend to be invincible—that she, reckless Lilli, could act like she was the very source of level-headedness.

His anger had the same acrid, humiliating flavor as the bewilderment he had experienced as a teen, when his sister refused to let him push her in her wheelchair at the mall. He suddenly remembered the texture of those days, which was that of the air in free-fall: he was sure he was screaming, but no one seemed to hear.

Their parents had gotten her a wheelchair, much nicer than the ones at the hospital, after the old walker was no longer sufficient. He recalled lifting its complexly folded body out of the truck bed, like some enormous dead beetle, and setting it up for Brooke. He felt like an accomplice to the cancer, reinstating the horror of her life.

And then, to top it off: “Let me help you. Brooke, let me help.”

“No, Jack, I got it. I don't need anything.”

Brooke was already so alone, so isolated in her experience—or so it seemed to Jack. But the further away she became, the further she seemed to want to remain.

He got up and left the dorm room, locking the door behind him with his copy of the key. When he was almost to the side door of the building, he stopped, wondering

what the hell he was doing. He paced back and forth a little, debating where to go.

Finally, before he could stop himself, he was heading over to the fraternity house. He felt medium-confident she would be there—and if not, he had a ready list of places she could plausibly have wandered off to.

At the door to the frat mansion, he stood in line to be ID'd before heading down to the basement, where students were getting literally and figuratively sloshed. He spotted Bev dancing sex-adjacently with a girlfriend, but there was no sign of Lillian. So he went back upstairs and called one of his buddies, a guy who was still a senior living in the frat. Instead of answering, his friend—Ben—emerged on the upper stairwell leading to the bedrooms and hangout rooms above.

“Hey man,” said Ben. “What’s going on?”

“Hey dude, I thought Lillian would be down in the basement. Is there another ‘party’ going on upstairs?”

“Who are you, Safety and Security?” said Ben, smiling slyly.

“I’m serious, man.”

Ben blinked, visibly high. “Uh, yeah, so there’s a bit of a get-together in the ULR.”

Jack knew he meant the “Upstairs Living Room.”

“Oh really? Nothing happening in Burnt & Bright tonight?” He couldn’t believe he still knew the names of the rooms in a house he didn’t even belong to. (And yet—of *course* he still knew them.)

“Um, I dunno man. You wanna go check it out?”

“Yeah, yeah I do, actually.”

“Alright then.”

Jack followed Ben up the stairs two flights and down a corridor to a strange dead-end alcove, where there should have been a closet, or at least a window.

“You need a little something for the tour?” said Ben.

“No.”

“You sure?”

Jack looked around, and realized he was being a prude. He felt utterly sober, as his last drink had been more than an hour ago. “Yeah, fine.”

Ben had already lit a joint, and was taking a big drag. He passed it to Jack, who felt immediately relieved of something.

Jack wasn't sure precisely what he was afraid of. Lillian would never cheat on him. That much he knew. (If it were her assessment, she would sarcastically use the word “axiomatic.”) He simply couldn't rid himself of the sick feeling that her condition would worsen her vulnerabilities, in more ways than one. Was he really afraid that someone was antagonizing her? Harassing her? Assaulting her?

All of the above, he supposed, indulging in another toke. And why shouldn't he? Didn't he know men better than Lillian ever would?

Underlying these possibilities, he knew it was possible that she was simply passed out. She hadn't been off of her “chemo cocktail” for very long. And she wasn't one to hesitate with the drinks, you might say, when in strange company.

He trusted her judgment; he trusted her brain. He respected her agency over her body. He just didn't trust the cancer not to betray her, or so he told himself.

“Alright, man, so we’ll check the ULR first,” said Ben, interrupting Jack’s reverie.

Jack had already texted Lilli twice and called her once; he knew better than to call or text her again. He respected her too much—and he was also too scared to test his hypotheses.

Together Ben and Jack climbed another set of stairs, then turned left down a darkened hallway, and eventually approached a large apartment-style-space. The ULR was a high-ceilinged living room with four leather couches, life-size soft-porn posters lining the walls, and a gigantic television—plus a rather spacious half-kitchen with two refrigerators. Half the room was unshaven guys watching *The X-Files*; the other half were sweaty-looking folks throwing their heads back with laughter and plowing through bowls of popcorn and Cheetos as they slurped down Hard Mike’s and Long Trail and mysterious cups of punch.

“Okay, not quite Lillian’s vibe in here,” said Jack. Ben nodded.

“Let’s go, then.”

To get to Burnt & Bright, you had to cross the ULR, enter a bedroom on the far side (currently inhabited by one of Ben’s friends), go into its walk-in closet, and climb up another secret staircase, like the kind in old library rooms. Jack wasn’t worried yet—not to the extent that he would show it. But he desperately wanted Lillian to be in this room.

They opened the door to the sound of retching, and Miles Davis.

A dozen smiling attractive types, wearing outfits from the semi, along with perfectly intact makeup, drinking straight from bottles of cheap Prosecco. None of them

seemed very fazed by the vomiting noises. After all, he supposed, this was just another Friday night.

In the corner, finally, Jack spotted her: Lillian, alone.

He almost cried, seeing her here, without the yellow bucket that she owned expressly for this purpose. A Solo cup was hardly a vessel for vomiting. But he noticed that she'd still managed not to make a mess on the floor.

"Oh my god, Jack," she said hoarsely when she saw him watching her. She looked as though he'd struck a match right in her face. "I couldn't breathe." She bent over and put her hands on her knees, as though she'd been sprinting. "I couldn't fucking breathe." She clutched at her neck. The frequent vomiting was making her throat burn and constrict.

"You can breathe now, can't you?" he asked, rubbing her shoulder. "Can't you?"

She made a face.

"Let's get out of here, Lilli," he said, with a pleading look. He was suddenly struck with the memory of a very different context for this phrase. He held her hand, and was surprised to see her relent, if only slightly.

He carried her red cup full of refuse to the nearest toilet, which was, as Lilli put it, not intuitive to find. After a moment, she found him in the bathroom, flushing it away. She rinsed her mouth, spat violently, sat down on the bathroom floor and sighed.

Through a skylight, the moon was gorgeously bright. Jack waited a long time in silence, gazing up at it as though Lilli wasn't there. Then, finally, Lilli said she was ready to get up.

Downstairs, in the mudroom, they shared a ginger beer courtesy of Ben until Lillian announced that she felt better. Jack helped her into her coat, they slowly walked home without a word, and Jack undressed her in the darkness of her bedroom. He squeezed the tips of her numb fingers, ran his thumb across her clavicle. In the bed, they held each other, and her feet were disturbingly cold against his, just like they'd always been.

"You're good?" he asked her, as he kissed the tops of her eyelids.

A beat.

"Sure," she said in a husky Mae West voice. "*But when I'm bad, I'm better.*"

Jack groaned.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"And thank you for helping tonight, I mean, you know, all the time."

"Well... Thank *you* for staying alive."

"Like I say, Jack," Lilli said, propping herself on an elbow. "I—you—we might be as old as we'll ever be."