

# What to Keep

by Rachel Cline

Lily wakes up with a cupcake hovering before her eyes. Denny holds it there, has held it there for a while in fact, waiting for her mother to (1) wake up, (2) make a wish, and (3) blow out the candle. Not so hard, you would think, but it is for Lily. She stares blankly at the tiny flame, and Denny, who at twelve and a half is nearly too old for this sort of thing, is forced to intervene. “Mom,” she says, dropping the word into a second, disappointed syllable as Lily’s eyes blink, again. “Mom, make a wish. Happy birthday.”

Ordinarily, Lily would be the one waking Denny up, so Denny is surprised to find her mother as hard to retrieve from sleep as she is. But that’s just how it is. Since her parents’ split two years ago, Denny has been in charge of their domestic reality—the here and now of social perception: what other kids’ parents are worrying about, what’s worth watching on TV (*Little House*), whether or not there is lipstick on Lily’s teeth, and when it’s safe to turn left on Broad Street. In return, Lily makes money, buys groceries (by proxy, but more on that later), drives the car, and tells Denny when to turn off the TV.

Lily and Denny Roman live in Bexley, an amiable suburb of Columbus. Unlike the way most suburbs relate to their cities, Columbus has grown around Bexley in concentric rings of shopping centers, parks, hospitals, universities, institutes, and bedroom communities. Every ten years or so, the latest ring seems to degrade into slum. Bexley itself is only a mile or so from the old, original downtown (and state capitol), but it somehow retains its beauty and its property values. Its houses are large, its schools are excellent, and its trees are immense, forming a canopy over the broad streets. Some of the streets are so wide they have their own grassy median. It’s a very old suburb but it has a faint theme: the street names have a Brittanic sound, and many of the houses are distinctly manorial. The Romans’ house at 2424 Sherwood Road—just two blocks from Main Street—lacks cupolas and sleeping porches and isn’t as large as many in the neighborhood, but it isn’t small, either. It is built of gray clapboard with white trim, black shutters, and one little dormer window, on the third floor, looking out at the vast Ohio buckeye tree in the front yard. It is a fine house, built in 1907, and has never needed major repairs.

As Lily rubs her eyes and fumbles for her glasses, Denny nibbles at the pink-frosted cupcake. It’s a Hostess Sno Ball, a coconut-flecked demi-globe of pink marshmallow that surrounds a wad of chocolate cake. Inside the cake is a tiny inner bolus of something called “creme.” In short, it’s a food that would give pause to almost anyone over the age of sixteen.

“Perhaps a Sno Ball is not the perfect breakfast food?” asks Lily.

Denny shrugs but halts her attempt to tear off a flag of marshmallow flesh. She stares at the cupcake, replacing it on the plate with its twin as Lily blunders into the bathroom, now awake to the day.

“They're like tits,” says Denny, though Lily can't hear her with the shower running. It's not a remark likely to reach Lily's sense of humor, anyway. Denny picks up the two cupcakes and holds them, breastwise, up to her own largely featureless chest. She steps to the mirror as Lily sticks her head out of the bathroom to ask something that she instantly forgets at the sight of Denny's pantomime.

“Look, I developed!” says her daughter, slyly.

“I see that,” Lily replies with a nod. The doorbell rings.

Denny raises her eyebrows.

“I have no idea,” says Lily.

Denny goes to the bedroom window and looks down. “It's Dad.” She's still holding her cupcakes at the ready.

“Go offer him a Sno Ball,” says Lily. “And, for God's sake, don't tell him where it's been.” This cracks Denny up. Lily returns to the bathroom, not sure she was making a joke. She looks at herself in the steaming mirror and remembers that she has a nine a.m. haircut appointment at Lazarus, downtown. For most of her life, Lily has studiously ignored her appearance—she was pretty enough in her teenage years to take it for granted that she didn't have to fuss. However, since turning forty she finds herself taking a more careful look: She is far too pale, and verging on bony; her wispy blond hair is neither long nor short, and the layered cut that—if properly blown dry—was supposed to look like a less trashy version of Farrah Fawcett's has never been, and will never be, properly blown dry. Moreover, her eyeglasses have worn a pair of purple indentations into the sides of her nose and a formerly inoffensive beauty mark on her cheek has become, decisively and seemingly overnight, a mole.

Denny opens the front door for her father, who looms in the doorway. Charles is tall and slender and mostly bald, prematurely so. His eyes are light brown and crinkly but so far above Denny most of the time that she feels like she never sees them. He wears wire-rimmed glasses but not the John Lennon kind. His are rectangular. Usually he wears turtlenecks under his tweeds, but today he is wearing a shirt and tie. Denny knows he was once physically close to her, she even vaguely remembers it. Now he looks down at her and forgets to smile.

“Mom's in the shower,” says Denny. “Want a Sno Ball?”

“Isn't she going to Chicago today?” asks her father.

What Denny doesn't know, and Lily doesn't remember, is that Lily is supposed to go to Chicago today, on her birthday, because it's also the annual meeting of the AAN (American Academy of Neurology) and Maureen paid Lily's \$500 deposit long ago. The whole point of having someone else manage this type of thing for you is so that you don't forget, even if it is your forty-first birthday and you are feeling strangely petulant and vulnerable. Unfortunately, sometimes even Maureen's systems break down.

Maureen is Lily's gateway to the world. In some respects, Maureen is Denny's erstwhile Dad—the second opinion that makes being a single mother bearable for Lily. Maureen is a small business that began four years ago as an answering service and grew with the times. Mostly, she works for doctors (her father was an endocrinologist). Now she not only fields calls but acts as a travel agent, bookkeeper, personal shopper, UPS drop and pickup site, contract post office, appointment secretary, and dispatcher of taxis, ambulances, and messengers. Maureen does not do pet care. Maureen and Lily sometimes speak several times a day, as do Maureen and Denny, as do Maureen and Charles (another client). No one really grasps the full extent of Maureen's involvement in this stubby little former family, except Maureen and, maybe, Denny.

“No one else in my class has a Maureen. Why not?” Denny asked, when she was eight.

“Well, there is no one else like Maureen, Denny. Just like there's no one else like you. Put your shoes on.”

“You're not answering my question. Does it have something to do with religion?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“I don't know. Sometimes that's why people's families are different.”

“Well, we're not that different. Come on, let me tie that. Lots of the other people in the neighborhood use Maureen.”

Denny retrieved her sneakered foot from her mother's busy hands, wanting to tie her own damn shoe, though that is not what she said. She simply performed the task, somewhat laboriously, while formulating her response to her mother's statement, which was:

“We don't 'use' Maureen. We 'have' Maureen. That's what you always say. I think it's different.”

Lily didn't know what to say to that observation, and anyway, it was time for school.

And it is time for school, again.

Charles stands awkwardly in the kitchen that used to be his, waiting for Lily to finish her shower and for his suddenly alarmingly chic-looking daughter to go upstairs and get dressed. Denny is a little bit short for her age and has enormous black-brown eyes. When

she flips her long blondish hair back from a fully bent-over position, it transforms her into a sex goddess for about forty seconds. Then the hair flattens back down and she is a small girl with big eyes, weird coloring, and a defensive stance. The sight of her in her nightgown (a worn black J.Geils Band T-shirt that clearly never belonged to either of her parents) reminds him that Dolores Haze-a.k.a. Lolita-was also about twelve. Coincidentally, on the way over, he had just been thinking with relief that his daughter was finally old enough to be left alone in the house for one night, adequately provisioned with foodstuffs and phone numbers. Now he is thinking she might also be too old for any such thing.

“How's work?” asks Denny, swirling her orange juice.

“Fine,” says Charles. “How's school?”

“Fine, too. We're doing dissection this year in biology.”

“What are you dissecting?”

“Well, first we did a clam. I think next we get an earthworm.”

“Not much to see in a clam.”

“No kidding.”

“Do they give you a cat eventually?”

“Dad!”

“Some kind of mammal?”

“Is a pig a mammal?”

“Of course. You know that.”

“At the end of the year we get a fetal pig.”

“That's good. Pigs are much closer to humans than you might think.”

Denny's not sure that closer to human is good, in her book, but that's how things are talking to Charles. “Yeah, I guess so.” She washes her orange juice glass and puts it in the drainer. “I better get ready for school.”

Denny's room still harbors most of the toys, games, and books of her early childhood, a condition that she is on the verge of doing something about. Returning to this domain after that typically unsatisfying exchange with her father, she sees it anew as the room of a child. Even the collection of clippings from the Dispatch that are taped to the wall over

her desk, which only recently seemed to her to lend that corner a serious, newsroom quality, now seem to broadcast the childishness of their subject matter: the fate of the Columbus Zoo's orphan polar bear, Otto. Today, the headline can otto survive adolescence alone? sounds as dopey to her as before it had sounded antic and clever. Denny can't yet deep-six Otto, but, possessed of a ruthless new attitude toward childish things, she instead collects the row of trolls that are lined up on her windowsill and drops them individually into the bottom drawer of her desk ("Good-bye, Lolly; sorry, Skee-zix; see you later, Lance"). She scans the room for more victims, but can't figure out what to do with all those picture books about talking animals beside her bed. Among those books, however, is the white leatherette diary that Maureen gave Denny on her last birthday. Denny takes the diary from the shelf and opens it, using the little brass key that is tied to the lock with a matching white grosgrain ribbon. The pages are blank. When Denny received this gift, she had more or less ignored it, but suddenly it has appeal. The idea of the lock is particularly compelling, although she doesn't know from whose eyes she'd be locking it, really. She selects a purple Flair pen from the collection of markers in a mug on her desk and sits down on her bed to write.

She rejects the convention of beginning "Dear Diary"; diary sounds too much like diaper. Her book will be more like an official record, like the Captain's Log on Star Trek. She writes the date at the top of the page, then:

Today is Mom's birthday but I'm not sure she cares. I care, though. I got cupcakes but she didn't eat them. Then Dad came over. He was dressed up for something. We talked about dissecting mammals. Yuck.

Lily comes downstairs and finds Charles standing in the middle of the kitchen doing absolutely nothing.

"Do you want some tea? We have Earl Grey."

"Oh-

"Oh?"

She measures two spoonfuls of loose tea into the pot without waiting for his answer. Charles doesn't usually stop by at this hour, but when he does stop by it is always without prior warning-there are still some joint investments that need her signature or a book that's his but still on her, formerly their, shelves.

"I thought I could read your paper on the way to Chicago."

Lily's brain swims to the surface: paper, airport, Chicago! She feels as though she's been kicked-and, in a way, Charles looks like he has kicked her.

"It's at the lab."

“Aren't you coming on the same plane?”

“No.”

“Isn't your talk at three?”

She turns off the soon-to-scream kettle and empties it into the teapot. She thinks, He has no idea it's my birthday and that I've suddenly gotten old-he can't know how humiliated I feel to have forgotten this conference. As though she believes that “forget?” is what she did.

Charles does know it's Lily's birthday, but that's not what's on his mind. Someone he knows reviewed Lily's paper and told someone else he knows that she was on to something interesting, possibly even big. Her research is about the events that finally differentiate brain cells from other cells as they develop in the embryo; it's long been established that neurons are the only cells the body never makes more of and Charles assumes Lily's analysis will help explain why.

Lily did not completely forget the conference or the paper, she just ignored them so furiously that it had almost the same effect. She doesn't want to stand in front of all those smug, bespectacled men and feel her face turning red with the effort of not weeping. Though she has spent the past two years fantasizing about how one day she would triumphantly present this research, her calm certainty has now deserted her. Lily suspects this is because she's pregnant. She didn't expect to be, she's not sure she wants to be, but she is.

Charles has been watching her think, an old habit.

“So?” he now asks.

“Excuse me?”

“So what's in your paper?”

“It moves,” she says.

The fetus is not old enough to move. This is a reference to Galileo's supposed last words about the earth relative to the sun. Back then, the idea that the earth could move was heresy. Charles resists the reference because he, himself, is too mired in the current orthodoxy of no new brain cells, ever.

“What moves?”

“Nothing.”

“I hope you're not talking about neuronal reproduction.”

“Don't you have a plane to catch?”

“Because that would be career suicide, Lily.”

If Charles wasn't so substantial visually (he's not just tall, he's dark and handsome), you might have to call him an enigma. Lily, of course, knows Charles intimately, but she's not convinced that that ever did her any good. Most of the time, the part of her brain that deals with Charles supplies the message Oh, that's just Charles to any and all behavior the man enacts and that's the end of it.

“No, trying to be a neurosurgeon and a mother at the same time-that was suicide. This is just research.”

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