

**The lily**  
(short story)  
Aglaia Bouma

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## The lily

The heavy fragrance of the lily dispels the hospital air, takes possession of the quasi sterile smell and chases away the clouds that cover you in that bed. My sweet daughter. So still you lie there, innocent and serene, unaware of the crushed limbs that should have bulged the blanket. "Lost a lot of blood," the doctor had said, as if that logically explains why you won't wake up, while your pretty little head is clearly undamaged.

I picked the lily on the day you moved into lodgings, as an evaporating substitute for the stimulating perfume of your body odor. You always had reminded me of lilies. Especially that morning, when I chose the flower, not fully out yet, the ends of the creamy petals turned outward very slightly, as if you wanted to look carefully around the corner to see if you dared. You weren't even moving that far away. Only fifteen minutes by car. But it was time to stand on your own two feet, to detach yourself from your mother, the nourishing soil on which you had grown.

I dab your pale face with a damp cloth, talking to you, to the lily, and cut the stem slantwise again to make sure it can absorb enough nutrition. Palliative care out of undirected powerlessness.

The first few days you called me every night. Not because you needed it yourself, but to please me. The lily in the hallway, next to the telephone on the table, backed up your words with image and scent. While you told me that you got along very well with your new classmates, the petals started to open, virginal, with a slightly provoking aroma accompanying your casually added "especially with this one guy". And when you suddenly didn't call one evening and I saw that beautiful flower fully surrender itself to the world, longing, lustful, hot sweet-smelling, I knew how things stood. And I smiled. My little girl had grown up.

\*

When I came home a few days later and the toxic smell of a truck coiled past me through the open door, I felt there was something in the wind. The gas chilled the pleasant atmosphere in the hallway with a deadly, lung decomposing stench. I remember that I rushed disgusted to the kitchen and in passing rubbed against the lily, causing loose pollen to end up on my blouse. It's still there. Indelible, like the blood in your cut open clothes.

It was a strange impulse to bring the flower to the hospital. In all my panicking disbelief I forgot my bag, but the lily I brought. Without a vase, sure, but a nice nurse has given me one. It's too wide, but that's okay. The flower won't last much longer anyway. It can hardly suppress the combination of this malodorous hospital and, yes, I really smell it, the soft stench of rotting coming from your bed. It bows its head a bit already and its petals are becoming brownish and limp, listlessly at the mercy of gravity. I cannot help it. Nor you. You just lie there. Do you know I'm here with you? Can you hear me gently lie to you that everything is going to be all right, honey? Do you dream? Occasionally your eyelids move. Does your mind's eye see then how that huge

truck drags you along over a distance of fifty feet, and then leaves you on the street like a pile of half chewed and spit out meat? Do you feel pain? Can you smell the last bit of aroma the lily gives off for you?

\*

You suddenly stopped breathing, just like that. Quietly, almost secretly and without warning. I couldn't do anything. Your heart refused to do its work and a horrible beep filled the room. Surrounded by hospital sterility, people in white coats ran inside. They pushed me aside and looked straight through me, as if I were air. The lily, completely odorless now, dropped one of its brown petals.

Back home I picked a new one, in the delusional hope I could keep you with me for just a little longer, but this flower was different, it didn't represent you. Yet I put her on top of the coffin, lively white on the black of death, a subtle fragrance in a bitterly tough world, which would accompany you on your journey to the all-consuming fire.

\*

I was shocked by a nondescript item in the newspaper: 'Apartment completely burnt down, young woman died.'

Of course that second lily couldn't represent you – it was somebody else! The guilt about the death I so thoughtlessly loaded on my conscience hit me with jaw clamping nausea. Never again will I separate a flower from its roots.

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## About the author

In addition to being a writer, Aglaia Bouma (1970) is an entrepreneur, empathic misanthrope, emotional rationalist, light-hearted pessimist and a social *einzelgänger*.

Her Dutch novel 'De dwaling' was reviewed positively and her short stories often win in contests. The Dutch versions of 'Self-portrait' and 'Unleashed' were published in literary journals. 'Heaven on Earth' she read to the audience attending the presentation of an anthology the story was published in. Some other short stories were published in collections as well.

When writing, she tries to describe the characters roaming her fantasy in a way that the resulting story keeps hanging around in the head of the reader for a while. Because you, dear reader, is what it's all about!

If you enjoyed reading this story as much as I did writing it, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review at your favorite retailer.



## Connect with Aglaia Bouma

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