

# It Starts with Us

Every ending has a beginning (a summary by Pat Evert)

I go back to thinking about Atlas. And Ryle. And Armageddon, which is what the two of them in my brain at the same time feels like. My love life has finally been on a straight path with no bumps or curves, basically because it's been nonexistent for well over a year and a half, **but now it feels like there's nothing but rough terrain and obstacles and cliffs ahead.** Is it worth it? Of course Atlas is worth it.



*Dear Ellen, Guess who's back? Me. And Atlas. Both of us. I ran into him on my way to meet Ryle with Emmy this morning. It was so good to see him. I didn't realize how lonely I'd been feeling until those few minutes with him this morning. I decided my separation from Ryle should be permanent after giving birth to Emerson. When I held her in my arms and knew I would do whatever it took to break the cycle of abuse. **My choice helped me realize that sometimes the hardest decisions a person can make will most likely lead to the best outcomes.** It's difficult because I still have to interact with Ryle. He still possesses all the good qualities I fell in love with. I guess you could say we came to a compromise, even though there isn't an agreement in the world that would make me feel comfortable with sending my daughter off with someone I know possesses a temper. But all I can do is choose the lesser of two evils when it comes to custody and hope that Emmy never sees that side of him. I'll fake a smile until she's eighteen if it means I don't have to share custody and potentially expose my daughter to the worst parts of her father on a more regular basis. **I fear that a huge part of Ryle's cooperation rests on the notion that he'll eventually win me back if he's good enough for long enough.** I hope I end up moving on in Atlas's direction. It's too soon to know if that's a possibility, but I know for a fact I'll never move back in Ryle's direction, no matter how much time passes. Why does Ryle still occupy an entire wall in my many layers of thoughts? That's what it feels like—as if these wonderful things happen, but as they start to sink in, they eventually reach a part of me that is still making decisions based on Ryle and his potential reactions. **His reactions are what I fear the most. Ryle will always look at Atlas like he's the thing that broke up our marriage.** Ryle is the father of my daughter. Do I sacrifice what I know will make me happy for the sake of avoiding the inevitable disruption Atlas's presence would cause? Or will I always have an Atlas-shaped hole in my heart unless I allow him to fill it?*

How am I supposed to start something with someone new when my ex still brings me dinner and has a key to my apartment? I need to set firm boundaries with Ryle before I can even begin to entertain the idea of Atlas. “Are you seeing someone?” Ryle asks. There’s an edge to his voice now. **Any recently divorced husband asking his ex-wife if she’s seeing someone is making anything but casual conversation.** “I’d like my key back. I value my privacy.” It’s not going to be a huge change, but it’s one that needs to happen, or we’ll be stuck in this unhealthy routine forever. “Maybe we need to modify the custody arrangement,” he says. Those words infuriate me, but I somehow prevent my rage from boiling over. I stand and pick up my plate. **“Really, Ryle? I ask for the key to my apartment back and you threaten me with court?”** Calm down, Lily. He’s just reacting. I go to my room and pull the list out of my jewelry box.

1. He slapped you because you laughed.
2. He pushed you down a flight of stairs.
3. He bit you.
4. He tried to force himself on you.
5. You had to get stitches because of him.
6. Your husband physically hurt you more than once. It would have happened again and again.
7. You did this for your daughter.

I run my finger over the tattoo on my shoulder, feeling the small scars he left there with his teeth. If Ryle did these things to me at the highest points of our relationship, what would he be capable of at the lowest?

The next day Atlas brings me lunch at the flower shop. I didn’t know how rare men like Atlas were, so I didn’t know how lucky I was to have him in my life. I know now, which is why it terrifies me that I might screw this up. Or that Ryle might screw this up. Ryle is always going to be in the picture, considering we share a child. **“You shouldn’t allow your concern for Ryle’s feelings to persuade you to give up what could be the second-best thing to ever happen to you.”**

If this... us... becomes something, is it really going to be an issue for Ryle? Yes. He blames most of our fights on you. “I [Atlas], really hate that you’re stressing over his potential reaction to things that haven’t even happened yet. But I get it. It’s the unfortunate position you’re in.” He looks at me reassuringly. “We’ll take it one step at a time, okay? Someone has been vandalizing the restaurants. Both of them. I haven’t reported it to the police yet. I’m worried they might be in a similar situation to the one I was in back then. Destitute.” The tension in his eyes eases a bit. “And what if they don’t have a Lily to save them?” I didn’t save him. All I did was fall in love with him. I can see why I fell in love with him. **What owner is more concerned about the situation of the person vandalizing their business than they are with the actual damage being done? “Considerate Atlas,”** I whisper.

We went on our first date. **I know what a huge risk Lily is taking by going out with me tonight.** If things progress with us, that could impact her life in negative ways. She told Atlas that Ryle had read her journals and Atlas asked if he could read them. Lily began to give him her journals to read.

*“Have you ever been kissed, Lily?” I shook my head no and tilted my face up to his because I needed him to change that right then and there or I wasn’t gonna be able to breathe. I’d thought about my first kiss a lot. Where it would be, who it would be with. Never in a million years did I imagine it would feel like this. He pushed me on my back and pressed his hand against my cheek and kept kissing me. I don’t know how long we kissed. A long time. So long, my mouth started to hurt and my eyes couldn’t stay open. When we fell asleep, I’m pretty sure his mouth was still touching mine. —Lily*

It’s funny how, when you’re a teenager, you think you’re the only inexperienced, nervous human on the planet. **You think almost every other teenager has life figured out way better than you do, but it isn’t that way at all.** We were both scared. And infatuated. And in love. [Atlas] Reading her description of our first kiss brought back every feeling she pulled out of me that night. She could sleep through the rest of our date, and I’d still think this was the best date I’ve ever been on.

*For the first ten or so years of my life, my mother was stronger and faster than me, so I spent the better part of a decade hiding from her hand, from her cigarettes, from the lash of her tongue. It got even worse when she was on her third marriage. I was twelve when they met... four years of my life were hell on earth. When I was home, I was being yelled at. When I was at school, the house was being destroyed by their fights, and I’d be expected to clean up after them when I got home. She called me an asshole. Or ass whole, rather. She always said that word wrong. I remember thinking that I would rather be dead than back with her. It was as if she wanted nothing more than to erase me from her life, so I vowed in that moment to help her do just that. To feel so incredibly unwanted, unloved, alone. I had no one. Nothing. No money, no belongings, no family. Just a wound. But then I met you, Lily. And even though I was nothing, **when you looked at me, you somehow saw something.** Something I couldn’t see. You were the first person in my life to show an interest in who I was as a human. I stopped feeling like I was nothing. You made me feel interesting and unique. **Your friendship gave me worth.** — Atlas*

Atlas being vulnerable with me seemed to be the reset button I needed for our date to get back on track. Even with the hitch I put into our date by falling asleep, the entire night has felt easy and comfortable. Being near him is second nature. I’ve experienced the lowest of lows with Atlas, and he has never been anything but incredible and respectful to me. Yet, **the man I chose to be my husband somehow disrespected me in ways no one deserves...** all while we were at such a high point in our lives.

*“Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming...”* “You named our daughter *Dory*?” Ryle takes a step closer. “You chose my daughter’s middle name because of your connection with *that man*?” **Ryle can be angry, but that doesn’t mean I deserve everything that accompanies his anger.** I may not be perfect, but **I don’t deserve to fear for my life every time I make a mistake.** I do nothing that gives him hope for us other than foster a civil coparenting relationship. He’s the one always trying to push my boundaries and straddle the line of what I’m okay with, and I’m honestly tired of it. A manipulation tactic. He thinks if he treats our divorce like we’re being silly, I’ll eventually agree with him and take him back. His life would be easier if I took him back. But my life wouldn’t be easier. There’s nothing easy about fearing for your safety any time you make a misstep. Emerson’s life wouldn’t be easier. I’ve lived her life. There’s nothing easy about living in that kind of household. Divorce is overwhelming; being a single mother is overwhelming; running a business is overwhelming; **dealing with an ex-husband who still scares you is overwhelming. Anyone who has ever left a manipulative, abusive spouse and somehow stayed that course deserves a medal.** Nothing you have done and nothing you could do would excuse any man’s hands on you out of anger. Remember that, Lily. You made the right choice by leaving that situation. You should never feel guilty for that.

I get a text from Darin, informing me that my mother is at Bib’s. She looks worn. It’s only been about thirteen or so years since I’ve seen her last. “Josh. Your little brother. He ran away again.” Her kicking me out when she did makes so much more sense now. They had a baby on the way, and I no longer fit into the picture. “I have a brother? How old is he?” “He’s eleven. And yes, Tim is his father.” Her child has been missing for two weeks, and she’s more worried about being arrested than she is about him. He thinks I’m the brother that abandoned them. I’m sure he hates the idea of me. Hell, he’s probably the one who has been—*Shit. Of course.* This explains so much. **I would bet both of my restaurants that he’s the one who has been vandalizing them.** My phone rings and it’s Lily. “Things sort of went south after I went back to work. I’m fine, though.” She smiles, but it’s kind of sad. “Yeah, my night went south, too.” “Would a hug make you feel better? **Hugs take two seconds, and you’ll sleep so much better.** I’ll be back here before they even know I’ve left. What’s your address?”

Ryle took what little trust I had left in men thanks to my father, and he stripped me of it. I think this crush is a sign that **Atlas might be able to give back what my father and Ryle took from me.**

I still, to this day, feel like I owe her my life. I go back to reading the journal. In my mind **at that age, I felt like an inconvenience in her life. I had no idea how much she felt I brought to her life.** I remembered how cruel our childhoods were to us. I don’t think about it much anymore because I’m so far removed from the life I lived back then, but I’m being thrown back into those moments from every angle this week, it seems. But then there’s **Lily and her impeccable timing being back in my life. She always seems to show up when I need a lifeline.**

*Atlas was letting me know that I was the biggest wave he'd ever come across. And I brought so much with me that my impressions would always be there. I opened the bag and pulled out the best present I'd ever received. It was a magnet that said "Boston" on the top. At the bottom in tiny letters, it said, "Where everything is better." My father heard me in my bedroom talking to someone, and when he threw open my door and saw Atlas in bed with me, he was angrier than I'd ever seen him. He came down on him with a baseball bat. The sound of bones snapping was the only thing piercing through my screams. By the time the police got to my bedroom and pulled my father off of him, I didn't even recognize Atlas, he was covered in so much blood. My father said I'd shamed our whole family by giving the town something to gossip about. Until he comes back for me, I'm just going to keep pretending to be okay. —Lily*

I'm conducting a stakeout at Bibs. Someone eventually comes into view. A kid closes in on the back door. He's hoping to be caught. This is more a cry for attention than anything. Every emotion is running across his face as he studies me, from anger to fascination to betrayal. We both took after our mother. Same jawline, same light eyes, same mouths, down to the unintentional frown. It's a lot for me to take in. I've been resigned to the idea that I had no family, yet here he is in the flesh. It makes me wonder what he's feeling while he looks back at me. Anger, obviously. Disappointment. I've known him for half an hour. I've known of him for a fraction of a day. Yet I suddenly feel like I'll be protective of him for a lifetime. So I took him to my home.

Divorce is difficult. I knew it would be, but it's so much harder than I anticipated. And **navigating divorce with a child in the mix is a million times trickier. You're stuck interacting with that person for the remainder of your life.** You can't snap your fingers and be done with the person you married and divorced. You're stuck with them. Forever. **I don't want to allow myself to be happy about Atlas until I know Ryle isn't going to be furious over Atlas.**

Josh doesn't trust me, but I'll wear him down. I'm willing to bet he doesn't trust anyone, so I'm not taking it personally. I feel like such a dick bringing him back to her. But I have to do this the right way. I know if he stays here with her, he isn't going to have a chance in hell. I lucked out finding Lily. She saved my life. But I'm not sure there's enough luck in the world for both of us to be saved by a random stranger. I'm all he has. She blows up slapping and yelling at him. She's not going to ruin his life on my watch. I don't even have the energy to say anything to her at all. I just walk away, leaving her screaming at me like old times. I have absolutely no idea what kind of hell this kid has already been through, and I was about to send him right back into the fire.

Josh looks like a completely different kid from the one I met several days ago. He's wearing clothes that fit him, I took him for a haircut yesterday, and he's carrying a backpack full of books rather than cans of spray paint. I doubt Sutton would even

recognize him if she saw him. I bring Josh to the restaurant where he meets Theo who goes to the same school that Josh now goes to.

“I heard you tell the nurse he bit you, but I wasn’t close enough to see that...” Atlas pauses midsentence and swallows hard. He’s so upset, he can’t even finish his sentence. “Is that why he did it? Because he read your journals and knew you got the tattoo for me?” That’s exactly why Ryle did what he did, and I hate that Atlas will now forever pair my tattoo with that awful memory. Atlas is so angry, but this is an anger I’m not afraid of. I can understand the anger, but Atlas has absolutely nothing to feel guilty for. I wasn’t at a point in my life where Atlas could have said or done anything to change my views of Ryle. I had to get to that point on my own. And when he bit me on my shoulder... You’re right. It was because he read the journals and found out my tattoo was because of you, and that the magnet I kept on my refrigerator was from you.” He’s staring at the ceiling, taking everything in, frozen in his anger. “Every time I would doubt myself and think that what Ryle did to me was in any way deserved, all I had to do was think about you, Atlas. I think about how differently each scenario would have been if it were you, and **that helped me remember that none of it was my fault. You’re a big part of the reason I got through it, even though you weren’t there.**” He closes the distance between us and kisses me. *Finally*. He doesn’t kiss me with any trepidation. His mouth meets mine with confidence, and mine responds to his with relief.

Starting with this kiss that we can’t seem to stop. Every time we pause to look at each other, we go right back to kissing like we have to make up for all the lost time in this one kiss. “This is weird. Having you here. Not having a kid here. I’m not used to free time, or... guy time.” She walks toward her bedroom. “Come on, let’s take advantage of it.” I follow her lead entirely too quickly.

We make out in the closet for a few minutes, and it’s everything I remember about all the times we used to sneak make-out sessions when we were younger. The desire, the thrill, the newness of doing things you’ve never done, or in this case, haven’t done in a long time. **He treats this with patience and appreciation**—like making out is enough, and that it’s a privilege just to be kissing me. And then, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, Atlas kisses me while he pushes into me, and I feel every bit as loved as I did the first time this happened between us. Everything about this is so right.

**‘You’re stressing over things that haven’t even happened yet.’** Remember our first time? What happened after that night? After my father hurt you.” This is the first time we’ve been intimate since that night that ended so terribly. Now that she’s back, I don’t know that I could ever feel whole again without her.

Ryle moves past me, into the apartment, without being invited in. His voice trails off when he sees the couch. My T-shirt and panties are still tossed haphazardly over the back of it. “Did someone stay the night?” “We’re divorced, Ryle. You can’t ask me questions like that. Don’t shame me for taking a night for myself. And when I do take a

by Colleen Hoover

night for myself, what I do during that time is not your business.” “Is it him?” I can feel my heart catch in my throat when he asks that. Ryle moves forward and pushes me until my back is flat against the open living room door. His eyes are filled with fury when he slides his left hand to the base of my throat, applying pressure as if he wants to hold me in place and it scares me so much. **Sometimes people think if they love a broken person enough, they can be what finally repairs them, but the problem with that is the other person just ends up broken, too.** After he’s left I take a moment to pull Atlas’s letter out of my purse. I’m still reeling from my interaction with Ryle.

*Dear Lily, I like watching you sleep. I used to watch you sleep sometimes when we were younger. I liked how peaceful you looked, because when you were awake, there was always a quiet fear in you. I think that’s where the majority of my guilt stems from—knowing if I didn’t leave you, you never would have met a man who would end up hurting you the way your father hurt your mother. But no matter how we got here, we’re here. **I had to get to a point where I realized I was always worthy of being loved by you. Any other path wouldn’t have given you Emerson, so I’m grateful this is where we ended up. Nothing beats knowing I’m the one you get to be happy with now.** Love, Atlas*

Emmy has no idea the kind of chaos that surrounds her existence, because to her, I’m her entire existence. Every ounce of her trust is in me. She depends on me for everything, and she’s just sitting there happy and comfortable, as if I have it all under control. I don’t feel like I have it under control, but the fact that she assumes I do is good enough for me.

“I know I shouldn’t be bringing Emmy around Atlas yet, but I feel safer with her here than if Ryle tried to show up and take her today. I’m sorry, I just don’t want to be anywhere he might find me.” “He doesn’t deserve unsupervised visits. You need to take him back to court. You could have fifty ex-husbands who try to make our lives hell, but as long as I have you, I will be absolutely unaffected by anyone else’s negativity. That’s a promise.” I’m worried Ryle is a little bit like my mother, and that he’s going to retaliate by fighting for the sake of fighting, and for no other reason. He seems to hold grudges. And people who hold grudges tend to need retaliation. I could absolutely see Ryle making the decision to take her to court, simply to get back at her for being with me. And he would likely get what he wants. He’s never hurt Emerson, he’s never been reported for hurting Lily, he’s never been late on child support.

*You treat me like a monster I’m her goddamn father. I was happier before I met you.* I read through the barrage of text messages, knowing full well he was drunk when he sent them last night. The first one was sent at midnight, and the last one, from two in the morning, reads, *have fun fucking the homeless guy.* I have no idea what to do about it, but I know that this isn’t something I’m willing to tolerate. **I refuse to go the next seventeen years of my daughter’s life being abused in any way,** even through text messages.

It's after five, and we're just getting ready to close up shop so I can pick up Emerson from my mother's when Ryle walks through the front door. "Did you tell Allysa?" **"No, but I told a lawyer."** "I am a neurosurgeon. You work with *flowers*, Lily. Remember that before your lawyer does anything stupid to threaten my career. I pay for that fucking apartment you live in." I realize in this moment that the hardest part about ending an abusive relationship is that you aren't necessarily putting an end to the bad moments. **The bad moments still rear their ugly heads every now and then. When you end an abusive relationship, it's the good moments you put an end to.**

I [Atlas] don't just see anger in his expression. **I see a hell of a lot of pain.** "Whatever happened in your past helped make you a great neurosurgeon, and the world needs that side of you. But your past also—for whatever reason—made you a shitty husband. **This is our life now.** Yours, mine, Lily's, your daughter's. We have to deal with this. Forever. Holidays, birthdays, graduations, Emerson's wedding. All these things are going to be difficult for you, but **you're the only one who can make sure they aren't difficult for the rest of us, too.** Because none of us owes you our happiness. Especially Lily." "What are we, some kind of team now?" I hate that he's trying to make any of this sound beyond the realm of possibility. "A team is the only thing people should be when kids are involved." That hits him. If Lily had stayed with him, he would have spent the rest of their lives inventing issues in order to justify his excessive anger. Because I was never an issue in their marriage, and I never would have been. I thought I pitied him before, but he's fighting for a woman he barely even knows, which means he's just fighting for the sake of fighting. Maybe what Lily and I are going to have to do is learn to live our lives the best we can while occasionally having to deal with the ridiculous wrath of Ryle. But she's worth it.

We've circled around each other, pretending everything is fine in front of everyone, but Ryle is anything but fine. I can feel the tension radiating from him while standing across the room. I'm not going to discuss anything while we're alone ever again. **He's proven to me that I'm not safe when I'm alone with him, so that privilege is over.** I'm glad I still have Allysa. That would have been the most heartbreaking thing of all to have to lose in my divorce. I'm grateful she's so full of forgiveness and positivity. His dark side feeds off drama, and if no one gives him any, he makes it up. I do hope things between Ryle and I continue to get easier, but **I'm no longer letting his reactions control my happiness.** Ryle and I may never get to a point where we can be more than merely civil. But I'd be okay with civil. What I'm not okay with are the insults, the threatening texts, the outbursts. He's got a lot of work to do, and I'm finally willing to hold him to task.

The next morning my mother showed up demanding Josh. "The only reason you're doing this is to get back at me," she says. **If she knew me, she would know I'm not vengeful like she is.** "Do you miss him?" I ask her, my voice calm. "Honestly. Do you miss him? Because **if you're doing this to prove something to someone, just let it go. Please.**"



Atlas says, “You feel like taking a road trip today?” “Where to?” Josh asks. “I found your dad’s address.” *God, I hate this for him.* I hear Josh running toward his room. “He is going to be so shocked!” But knowing what they are about to face makes my heart feel like a piece of it broke off. I’m going to be thinking about him all day. I’m hoping they don’t find Tim, but if they do, I hope Josh makes the right decision.

I haven’t tried to talk him out of this because I know what it’s like to want to know your father. He’s going to live in this fantasy until he’s able to confront his reality. “Should I just go knock?” Josh finally asks. He’s scared, and to be honest, I’m not feeling the bravest right now, either. I went through a lot with Tim. I’m not looking forward to seeing him again, and I am absolutely dreading the potential outcome of this meeting. My biggest fear is that he’s going to choose to stay here. I don’t want to be the person he blames in the future for not having a relationship with his dad. He left and never looked back. There’s no excuse good enough to walk away from your son. “I don’t know what to do,” Josh whispers. He seems all of the twelve years old that he is right now. It kind of breaks my heart to see him so nervous. Josh’s eyes are pleading for truth when he looks back at me, like he needs me to guide him in this moment. “What kind of man could have a son and not want to know him? My father never sent a penny of child support. He never made an effort at all. My father never bothered to do a Google search, because if he had, he would have easily found me. **You’re a privilege, Josh.** Believe me, if I’d known you existed, I would have knocked over buildings to find you.” “He doesn’t deserve me, does he.” He says it like a statement rather than a question. Josh pulls at his seat belt and begins to fasten it. “They never said how big the family tree needed to be. I’ll just draw a baby seedling. They don’t have branches.” He pats the dash. “Let’s go.” I laugh hard at that. I wasn’t expecting it. “A seedling, huh?” I start the car and pull on my own seat belt. “That might work.” **“I can draw a seedling with two tiny branches. Yours and mine. We’ll be on our own brand-new, tiny family tree—one that starts with us. And we’ll do a much better job of keeping it alive than our shitty parents did.”**

“I really am going to my restaurant,” Atlas says. “I asked Sutton to meet me there. We need to have a serious discussion about Josh, and I’d like to do it when it’s just me and her.” “Wow. I’m actually on my way to Allysa’s to have that sit-down with Ryle I told you I wanted. What is this, problem-solving Sunday?” Marshall stares at him for a beat, and then leans forward. “Am I aware you lost your temper with Lily last week and pinned her against a door? Or am I aware of the texts you sent her? Or the threats you made when she said she was talking to her lawyer?” Ryle stares blankly at Marshall. His face reddens, but he doesn’t immediately react. He’s trapped in a corner, and he knows it. “A goddamn intervention,” Ryle mutters, shaking his head. “From this point forward, please know that Emerson is what matters to me. If you do anything threatening or harmful to me or our daughter, I will sell everything I own to fight you in court.” “And I’ll help her,” Allysa says. “I love you, but I’ll help her.” **I could cry for all the victims who don’t have people like them.**

I got here an hour before we agreed to meet. I've never cooked for her, so I'm hoping my making her a meal does something to her. Pleases her, puts her in a decent mood. Anything to make her less combative. I know she has twelve years on me with Josh, but I'm willing to bet I already know him better than she does. "I want you to sign your rights over to me. If you don't, I'll take you to court, and it'll cost us both a ridiculous amount of money that neither of us wants to pay. But I'll pay it. If that's what it takes, I will drag this in front of a judge, who will take one look at your history and force you to undergo a year of parenting classes that we both know you have no interest in completing." I lean forward, folding my arms together. **"I want legal custody of him, but I'm not asking you to disappear. I don't want you to. The last thing I want is for that boy to grow up feeling as unloved by you as I felt."** "Every Tuesday night we're going to have dinner here, as a family. You are more than welcome to come. I'm sure he would enjoy that. I'll never ask you for a penny. All I ask is that you show up one night a week and be interested in who he is, even if you have to fake it." For the first time, she looks like she might be experiencing an emotion other than anger or irritation. **There's a heart in there somewhere. Maybe no one in her life has ever let her know they're appreciative that it still beats.** You showed up tonight, and that effort is worth a thank-you." At home, on the table where Josh's homework is completed, even the family tree assignment. He drew a tiny seedling sprouting from the ground with two small branches. One says *Josh* and one says *Atlas*.

A note from Atlas.

*I had no idea you remembered that kiss, or all the times I kissed you in that spot after that day. Even when I read it in your journal, you rushed past it in a hurry to get to what you considered our actual first kiss, so I had no idea that it even meant anything to you until the moment I saw your tattoo. I want us to be an example for Josh, and for Emerson. Me and you, Lily. It's been six months. Move in with me.  
Love, Atlas*

"Do you need me to come home and give you a hug?" He nods. "I do, Lily. Come home."

Josh had signed up for tryouts. He made the team and has been giving it everything he has. Between Lily and I, we haven't missed a single game. I texted our mother his schedule, but so far she hasn't shown up to a game. She's only shown up once to the dinners we started having every Tuesday night. I was hoping she would want to be more involved, but I'm not surprised she isn't. I doubt Josh is surprised, either. **We don't focus too much on what isn't working out in our lives. We focus on what is, and there's a lot to be grateful for.**

Gen Z is a different breed. The more time I spend with these two, the more I think they're unlike any generation that came before them. **They're less prone to peer pressure and more supportive of individuality.** I'm a little bit jealous of them. "I gotta go—my dad's here." Josh is back in the living room. "You aren't staying over?" "I can't tonight; my parents are taking me to a thing in the morning." "I want to go to a thing,"

Josh says. "It's a parade." He says it quietly, but also like it's a warning. "A pride parade." "Can I stay over at Theo's tonight?" Josh's casual attitude about this monumental moment between the two of them reminds me so much of Atlas. Considerate Josh. I spend my alone time walking through rooms, looking in cabinets, familiarizing myself with my new house. "What a magnificent place for a garden," my mother says. "You think he chose this place on purpose, hoping you'd come back into his life?" I never told her Atlas was a friend from back in Maine. I just assumed she didn't remember him. She can see the surprise on my face, so she says, "It's a unique name, Lily. I remember him." I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though. My mother has always been a little hard to get to open up. I can't blame her. **She spent years with a man who left her no voice, so I'm sure it's been hard for her to learn how to use it again.** "I never told you this, but I spoke to Atlas once. Kind of. I came home from work early and the two of you were asleep on the couch. Talk about a shock," she says, laughing. "I thought you were so sweet and innocent, but there you were on my living room sofa asleep with a random boy. I was about to yell at you, but when he woke up, he looked so scared. Not scared of me, really, now that I think about it. He looked more scared of the possibility of losing you. Anyway, he left in a quiet hurry, so I followed him outside because I was going to threaten him and tell him never to come back. But he just... he did the weirdest thing, Lily. He hugged me," she says. You caught him with your daughter red-handed and he hugged you?" **It was like he carried this genuine sorrow for me, and I felt that in his hug.** And then he just... walked away. She gestures toward the house behind us. "And now look. You have him forever."

*Dear Lily,*

*I began to wonder, if humans are so often disappointing and so rarely successful at love, what can we do to ensure ours is a love that will stand the test of time? If half of all marriages end in divorce...*

*We're going to leave here today and face a journey together that's full of hills, valleys, peaks, and canyons. Sometimes you're going to need me to hold your hand down the hills, and sometimes I'll need you to lead me up the mountain, but **everything, from this point forward, we're going to face together. It's you and me, Lily.** In good times and bad, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in the past and for forever, **you are my favorite person.** Always have been. Always will be. I love you. Everything that you are. Atlas*