

# Lily's Story

CURATED AND WRITTEN BY JESSICA WAHLSTROM

If you or someone you know is a victim or survivor and needs help, please reach out to us, we are here 24-hours a day.

**THIS STORY CONTAINS IMAGES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF ABUSE THAT CAN BE TRIGGERING.**

During the first flight she ever took, Lily noticed the person sitting next to her grab their armrest, knuckles white, as the plane took off. Lily wasn't nervous to fly. Now — years later — she remembers how much she enjoyed the way the gentle force held her in her seat as the plane sped on the runway, its wheels lifting. Lily remembers the time it took for it to rise above the rough air and bumps and to settle into its path.



Lily's first flight was a short one between an immigration detention shelter in Texas and a hospital. She arrived at the shelter after a yearlong journey she led for her younger brother and sister between Honduras and the United States border with Mexico. When they started that journey, Lily was eleven. Together, the three siblings traveled

thousands of miles by foot, boat, and vehicle. The pull to the United States was strong; their mother lived in New York. The push from home was stronger. Lily's mother migrated to New York when Lily was five years old, leaving the child with her boyfriend and his family. Unlike her two younger siblings, Lily was not the man's child. She was not treated as a member of the family. She was not allowed to sit with other household members while they ate. She was forced to cook and clean. She was isolated and ignored. Lily was abused daily — physically, emotionally, sexually, and psychologically — by adults in the household. She started harming herself at eight years old. Though her life had just started, she felt ready for it to end. The journey to the United States would be perilous but Lily did not know if she would survive if she stayed.

When Lily and her brother and sister eventually reached the border, they were detained by U.S. Border Patrol. Lily was separated from her siblings almost immediately because she did not share a last name with them. She was devastated. Her little sister was sent to New York to reunite with their mother. Her brother was held at a shelter in Texas for a short time before he was also sent to New York. Lily was held at an immigration shelter for more than a year before she took that short flight to an inpatient hospital facility where she stayed for several additional months receiving mental health and other treatment. During her time in the shelter and hospital,

while watching television and listening to music, Lily learned how to understand and speak some English. During that time she dreamed — sometimes in Spanish and sometimes in English — of healing and living with her family again in New York, going to school, playing with her siblings, sharing meals. At the age of fourteen — after nearly three years of separation from her siblings and nearly ten years after last seeing her mother — Lily was allowed to travel to New York.

When she first saw her mother again, when she touched her, Lily says that her heart started beating faster than it ever had before. They both cried, relieved to be together but also recognizing that in many ways they were strangers.

*After a few months of relative calm in her mother's house — the one she traveled so far and struggled so deeply to reach — Lily once again became a victim of abuse.*

One night, while her mother was working, Lily ventured out of her bedroom to check on her younger siblings. She discovered her sister sick and incoherent on the living room couch. Her younger brother was unresponsive in his bed. Lily ran into the bedroom that her mother shared with her new boyfriend for help.

*In that room, while her mother was at work and her siblings unconscious, her mother's boyfriend attempted to rape Lily.*

He was drunk and unsteady. She was able to fight him off before calling her mother and then the police. Her mother made it home before the police arrived and — to Lily's shock — helped the man flee before he could be arrested. Lily's siblings were taken to the hospital where she learned the man had drugged the children so that he could rape her. Lily was taken to a police station to file a report. On the ride home from the station, Lily's mother was furious with her for giving a statement about the attack. She felt that Lily sabotaged her relationship with the man. When the boyfriend was found and arrested the next day, Lily's mother and aunt pressured her to recant her story. Her mother became deeply depressed, refusing to leave her bedroom. As painful and terrifying as it was to deny what had happened to her, Lily was desperate to make her mother feel better and she agreed to return to the police. She remembers that

the officers seemed confused about her motivation for returning, giving her many opportunities to reconsider withdrawing her statement. Lily felt that she had no choice but to deny the truth. Her attacker was eventually released from jail. He was quickly detained when he showed up at Family Court for an unrelated case and was eventually deported.

Despite Lily's efforts to appease her mother, things at home became untenable in the months after the attempted assault. Lily's mother accused her of orchestrating the arrest that ultimately led to the man's deportation. She claimed that Lily had traveled to New York to "ruin her life." She told Lily she wished she was still detained in the immigration facility. She accused Lily of provoking the men who had sexually assaulted her. She withheld affection from Lily, only touching her to hit or hurt. Lily was neglected, she felt alone again. One cold winter night, Lily's mother kicked her out of the house. She was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. Not knowing anyone who could help or having anywhere to go, Lily slept in a car. The next morning, at school, she asked for help. It was then that Lily was first put in touch with Center for Safety & Change.

At the Center, Lily felt that she'd found a patch of solid ground, a place where she could land. [While in the Center's shelter and under therapeutic care, Lily experienced life without the threat of abuse.](#) She felt secure in a way that she hadn't before. Her daily routine was predictable. She slept more soundly. She focused more attention on school. She felt more steady. Given her young age, Lily was connected with Child Protective Services (CPS) to develop a plan for her long-term care. She stayed in the Center's shelter for several months before moving into foster care. Throughout this time, with the goal of Lily eventually moving home, she remained in contact with her mother. Lily returned to her mother's house periodically, where things were unpredictable. Life outside of her mother's house wasn't predictable either; in some of the foster homes where she was placed by CPS, Lily was treated poorly. In one, she was not given food or allowed to bathe regularly. She moved back and forth between her mother's house and foster homes regularly.

During a stay with her mother, Lily told her that she was gay. Though she was nervous about telling her, Lily hoped that her mother would hear her and see her. Lily hoped that her mother would accept her. Instead, she called Lily horrible names. Her mother told her that she was broken, that she needed someone to "fix her head." She told Lily that she wanted a "normal daughter." Despite the conflict, Lily wanted a relationship with her mother. With CPS, Lily attempted to improve the relationship but her mother was resistant to therapy. Lily began to

experience intense PTSD related to her history of persistent abuse and the other trauma that she was experiencing. One night she took a number of pills with the intention of ending her own life. She slept for two days. Her mother did not seek medical help for her during those days. Lily woke up alone in her bed.

Lily felt alone for much of her young life. Her mother told her, in many ways, that she was not wanted. She repeatedly told Lily that as a pregnant teen, she threw herself from a tree in hopes of ending the pregnancy. Lily was born a few months later. In the months following the attempt that Lily made to end her life, she turned again to Center for Safety & Change, reengaging with therapeutic and support services. She did not want to exist alone.

[With the support of the Center, Lily slowly and consistently grew to feel more connected to the world, to what was happening outside of the life that she had been told she could live.](#)



She gradually started to understand her value, to recognize the many places where she was wanted. Along with an incredible high school guidance counselor and Center for Safety & Change, Lily started to develop a vision for a future, looking forward, looking up, building and beginning.

Lily is very emotional when she talks about permanently moving out of her mother's home when she was a teenager. She knew that she needed to leave but she felt as if she was abandoning her siblings. Her mother didn't allow Lily to speak with her siblings after she moved. She made attempts to reconnect with them secretly. Initially, they weren't interested in a relationship; their mother told them horrible, untrue things about their older sister. As they've gotten older, Lily's brother and sister have gained insight into why she had to leave. Lily recently spoke with her brother on the phone. She was struck by how his voice had changed, how it had deepened. She grieves for the time she lost with her siblings. She is happy that they are no longer estranged. They are getting to know each other again, learning to understand how all of the traumas that they've experienced and witnessed have impacted the way that they look at the world, the way that they feel in it. She tells them – again and again – that she is

there for them whenever they need her. She tells them that she loves them with her whole heart. She is committed to serving as a model for them. She wants to lead them on another journey, pulling them toward a safer and more stable path, as she did when she led them through unimaginable circumstances from Honduras to their mother. Lily's instinct to protect them, the instinct that led her to step between her siblings and those adults in their lives who abused her, persists. As a child, Lily recalls wondering, "I take care of my siblings but who takes care of me?"



It wasn't until she connected with Center for Safety & Change that Lily felt cared for, safe. Lily's connection to the Center throughout the years has allowed her to navigate the turbulence and trauma in her life.

She has turned and returned to the Center for support, trusting that they would be there for her, constant.

Through the space and perspective that her time with the Center has offered, Lily has grown to understand how profoundly abused her own mother was and how that trauma was carried by her mother through her own life, across borders and through relationships.



She wishes that her mother had found a way to break the cycle that Lily works to recognize and break over and over again. Lily feels that her mother is stuck, tied to history and beliefs that keep her looping. She wishes that her mother had found a place to land, a place that felt solid beneath her, like Lily has felt over the years at the Center. As we speak, Lily recalls sitting in Elizabeth Santiago's office as a young teen doing homework. On the days when Lily studied late, Elizabeth would order dinner to be delivered to them and they would eat it together, in that space. Lily felt both lighter and more grounded there, eating sesame chicken, as she worked on math problems and essays, Elizabeth's steady breath a few feet away behind her own desk.

Lily's body — like any body — bears proof of what she has experienced. She shows me scars on her arms, marks of the physical abuse she endured.

She looks at her face in the mirror and tries to picture the father she never knew, whose name she has never heard but whom her mother invokes when she tells her, with disapproval, that she is exactly like him. She remembers the sound of her grandfather's voice, the man who was profoundly abusive to her mother in many ways. When we talk, as Lily shares her story, she says "my past can't be deleted, but I am learning to live with it." She is proud of the life that she is living, of what she is building. Her eye contact is direct when she speaks, her smile easy and voice clear. Lily walks tall.



Lily can't wait to fly again. She isn't sure when her next flight will be. When asked where she wants to travel, Lily lists a number of places. She wants to see Japan and Paris. She wants to travel to Atlanta and Colombia. Lily says that wants to swim on as many beaches on as many islands as possible. Over the past few years, her vantage has changed; she sees things more clearly, more entirely. The past is less potent. The people who hurt her look smaller, feel a little less significant. She feels how big the world is, how much it can offer beyond what she was told and shown was possible as a child. Lily says that it was at Center for Safety & Change where she was shown and reminded that she could get up again after she fell, that with support, she could refuse to be held down.

Lily knows that Center for Safety & Change will always be there for her as she continues to settle into her own path. She is not afraid. She is excited. Lily rises again and again and again, preparing to soar.

⇒ Listen to Lily's story in her own words.