

Lily

by M.E. Proctor

Copyright 2018 © by M.E. Proctor. All rights reserved

THAT PARTICULAR SUMMER at the seaside sticks in my memory because it was the summer I met Lily. I thought we would be friends for life. Of course, we weren't. Looking at friendships through the years, I can rightly say that I never met anybody quite like her. I see her sharply still, as if some cleaning crew had regularly scrubbed my memories to make them last longer.

We always rented the same old mosquito-infested bungalow that smelled of the beach and suntan lotion. The place was too small for the five of us - Mom and Dad, Billy and me, and grandma. It would have been okay, I guess, if it hadn't been filled to bursting with banged up furniture and a freaky collection of porcelain figurines. To this day I don't know if the old lady who owned the house didn't care for them, or if she hoped we would smash them to bits so she could charge a breakage fee. It drove Mom crazy. The first thing she did when we moved in was collect the most exposed ornaments and pack them in our empty suitcases. Every year Billy and I were a little taller and she had to remove more; the higher shelves were no longer safe. That year my brother managed to break the legs of a constipated-looking shepherd that probably turned into a ghoul at night. Billy and I pooled our

resources and bought super glue. Nobody noticed the damage, and we carefully concealed the tube. It could come in handy before the summer was over. We wondered how many figurines had sustained similar injuries. “A whole hospital ward,” was Billy’s verdict. Billy was my twin. He could be insufferable at times, probably because we were so much alike. I saw through him and he saw through me. We didn’t hang together much during the vacations. We covered separate territories. It was more satisfying to range away from the all-knowing eye of the other. And we compared notes at night. No wonder so few of our friendships survived each other’s inquisition. Given more time I doubt even Lily would have lasted the distance. As it happened, she was never put to the test.

#

In the narrow entrance hall of the bungalow, light plays hopscotch over the crisp black and white tiles. As I walk out of the dining room, the picture is briefly frozen with the front door open on a sky that is a hard blue. Sound hits me like a wave when I get to the threshold - kids screaming, shrill piercing cries, bursts of laughter and the deep roll of skate wheels on the sidewalk pavement.

“You have your skates, Jen?”

The leather strips are worn, the screws are rusty and the wheels don't run smoothly. There's sand in the bearings. I don't think the skates will last much longer. I'll definitely need a new pair next year, unless Dad decides to get bikes for Billy and me. That's the thing with twins, everything comes in twos.

"Are you coming?" Lily completes a cool spin and comes to a dead stop. I catch a flash of suntanned legs and she flops down next to me. There's laughter in her brown eyes.

"Why did you put on your skates if you're going to just sit there?"

Why? Because the sun is warm on my knees, because the doorstep is cold, because I like to watch Lily glide so lightly she could be dancing on ice. She's up and away without waiting for an answer. Lily lives in a simple world where each *why* should only be answered by a definite and terminal *because*. She twirls like a ballerina, naturally confident. For the record, I'm not a total embarrassment on skates; I'm competent. Of course, I've taken a few spills, who hasn't. But Lily is an artist. Give her a yoyo, a hula hoop, a skateboard, whatever... and she'll master it with casual ease. It makes her the undisputed leader of our small band of summer buddies. She decides where we go, what games we play and

establishes the rules. Lily's world is always in bright daylight. Mine? I sometimes find all that glare blinding.

“We're going to the tennis club. You're coming?”

The whole group gets underway. Lily grabs the back of a boy's bicycle. He's thrilled to have been chosen. I doubt she knows his name.

“Faster!” Lily screams. “Go faster!”

He bends over the handlebars, straining to pull her. Lily laughs, encourages him. We're behind them working hard to catch up, in a racket of roller skates and playing cards pinned to bike wheels. I feel the hard vibration of the skates in my knees. The road is rough concrete with uneven slabs, cobbled together by strips of black bitumen that turn soft in the heat. We gather on the grassy slope between the tennis courts and the mini-golf. There's still laughter but subdued as if the surrounding quietness was contagious. All courts are occupied this morning. Club members in immaculate white raise little red puffs of clay. There's some sort of a match going on and we applaud the players, with serious faces, in imitation of spectators at major tournaments. The local pro is giving a lesson on the back court. He alternates forehands and backhands; balls clear the net with barely an inch to spare and miraculously land on the white lines. This afternoon Lily and I will try

to copy his precise ball placement, no red clay for us but the hard sand at low tide. We'll bring the two rackets bought at the beach store and the precious tennis ball we found in the bushes next to the club. With a bit of luck, we won't get it too wet and a dog won't run away with it.

"I'd like to take lessons," I say.

"They're expensive," Lily says.

We promise each other that one day we will cross over to the other side of the tennis club fence. There will be kids we've never seen sitting on the grass watching us practice, or cheering us when we compete in the local tournament. I believe I could win that one.

"I wish they'd let us in at the mini-golf," Lily says. "It's so annoying that we can't get a round without a grown-up."

"Even if we could get in, I don't have any money," I say. "Do you?"

Through the hedge, we contemplate the course, with its bridges and ponds, the little castle, and number 9, the hardest hole, with the cup on top of a small hill.

"That one, if you get it, it's plain luck," Lily says. "Either you get in right away or never."

"You've done it?" I say.

I know she's tempted to lie but she decides to tell the truth, with a shrug. "No. But every time I hope I will. I'm a total sucker for this thing."

"Last year, Billy got in on the first try," I say. "He wouldn't stop talking about it for weeks."

"Your brother is a pain."

Lily is an only child. Sometimes I envy her freedom. She's unique, no copy, no competition, no one to be compared to. Nobody to spill her secrets. Nobody to play with or argue with on rainy winter evenings.

"What do you do when it rains?" I say.

She's startled and frowns, troubled. She bends over to remove her roller skates.

"I don't know. What a weird question. What do you do?"

Predictably she's gone before I can come up with an answer.

#

After lunch, we're all at the beach, in our usual spot, next to the Red Cross dispensary. The parents cluster behind the windscreens. Grandma sits very straight in the striped lounge chair reading one of her romance novels. I can see them from where I'm sitting with Lily, by the beach cabins below the seawall. We're attracted by one of them, freshly

painted in white and yellow. We've never seen it open, not since the beginning of the vacations. What could be in there besides the smell of summers past? If the door opens, does a curse issue with the stuffy air, like from a pharaoh's long-sealed tomb?

"What do you have to do to get a cabin like this?" Lily says.

"Maybe people rent them," I say, "like houses, for the summer. Maybe nobody rented this one." I wonder why it has been painted if nobody uses it. Would Billy agree to come back at night with me, to observe? It's the kind of thing that would get him excited.

"It's so practical. You don't have to carry all the stuff every day. The chairs, the parasols... and you just go in there and close the door to take off your wet bathing suit, instead of using these stupid beach towels that always get in the way," Lily sighs. "If I were rich..."

"You would go somewhere else on vacation. To a place where it's always sunny and warm," I say. "To a deserted beach on a tropical island. Maybe you'd have a sailboat or a speedboat and water-ski." I'm sure she would be very good at it.

"Would you come with me, Jen?"

This time she waits for an answer. I close my eyes and lean against the cabin wall. It smells faintly of tar. It might be cool inside. A salty

coolness of dry algae and seashells. Lily gets up in a cloud of fine sand. Did I upset her? The truth is I know she wanted a positive answer and I don't want to lie. For some stupid reason, I wish Billy was here instead of her.

#

“Don't swim close to the breakwater!” Mom says.

We've all heard horror stories of kids playing near the breakwater that were dragged away to sea and drowned. Maybe the stories are true. The water is deeper there and the waves hit you sideways, bigger and stronger. You can feel the sand run fast around your ankles. Old slimy wooden poles crusty with sharp shells stick out; water is foaming in fast whirlpools around them. It is frightening to imagine being slammed against the piers. I've read about surfers being torn by coral reefs; nothing like that around here, you'd look silly trying to surf, but still... Even Billy, who pretends to be fearless, stays clear of the breakwater. I love walking down there when the tide recedes and leaves puddles behind, crawling with minuscule crabs and translucent shrimp. I find it intriguing that scary places are not scary all the time. Like that stone bridge near grandma's house. It's pleasant in the summer at midday, and totally terrifying after the sun sets. Especially when I'm there alone.

When I'm with Billy, we sing stupid pop songs very loud. That always does the trick, even if we run like mad to be out of the tunnel faster.

At a short distance from the breakwater, Lily floats holding her yellow innertube. She keeps her head up, cautious, lips pinched. Yesterday Billy told us, with relish, of all the things that lived in a mouthful of sea water. I almost call out to her to be careful. She's too close to the wooden poles and I doubt she can see them, with the waves covering them almost completely. The sea is receding, and I wonder if the current is strong enough to carry her away.

“Philip is waiting for his parents at the Red Cross station.”

It's the first call today and I squint to see if anybody is rushing to go claim little Philip. People don't seem to care. Does anybody listen to these messages? How long does it take for parents to realize they're missing a child? And what happens if nobody shows up? It has to happen sometimes. Does the Red Cross hand over Philip to a family who has lost a boy and never got him back, so everybody goes home happy and satisfied? It's really warm today and my bathing suit is almost dry. I don't think I'll go swimming again. Maybe I can convince Billy to go look for seashells with me. We haven't found anything interesting so far and we can't go back home without at least one

interesting keepsake. That would be bad luck for the whole coming year.

“Lily, your parents are waiting for you at the Red Cross station.”

I sit up straight. I must have heard wrong. Eyes can be fooled; ears must make mistakes too. Or it's another Lily. That must be it. I look for her. The sea is empty. No swimmers, no yellow innertubes and no Lily. She was there a minute ago, or so it seems. Did I fall asleep? The sun is definitely lower on the horizon. How much time has passed? I pick up my towel and walk back to the family encampment. Maybe Lily went back up the beach. Mom is folding beach chairs. Grandma has put away her cheap novel. Billy throws a beach ball at me and I catch it without thinking. I don't see Lily's parents. I'm certain they were right next to us, earlier today. Weren't they? My head is spinning. I've been in the sun too long. Things are kind of fuzzy.

“You look weird. Are you okay?” Billy says. “Tomorrow, if it's windy, we'll look for a spot in the dunes. It's a little more interesting, I think. There's a place I've never shown to anybody. You'll like it. It's totally creepy, but you have to swear to keep the secret.”

Have I ever betrayed any of Billy's secrets? Of course not. What we tell each other remains buried forever. I want to talk to him about Lily but I'm not sure what to say.

"You want to show me the bunker," I say, distracted. I'm looking at the beach. There aren't many people left. If Lily was still there, I'm sure I would see her.

"You know it? Have you been inside?" Billy is flushed, red under his freckles.

I shrug. The bunker is creepy all right, and kind of lame at the same time. "There's nothing in there," I say. "Garbage, that's all. I went inside with Lily. You remember her?"

"No. What does she look like, is she pretty?"

I sigh. My brother is such an idiot. "What? I don't know. I think so. Maybe?" Billy looks at me slyly, and I have a hard time not cracking up. "You're a moron."

Billy is not the least upset. "I think you're pretty," he says. "And you look like me, so... I must be pretty too!"

That does it. We're both in stitches. "Seriously," I say when I finally manage to stop giggling, "Listen for a minute. Lily was swimming, and then I looked up and she was gone. I think I fell asleep. It's weird that

she left like that, you know, without saying goodbye?” But then, doesn’t she always disappear without waiting for an answer? I don’t mention the message on the PA system; I must have imagined that.

Billy shrugs. “Are you like friends forever or something? She never takes a step without you?”

He’s right. We’re not that close. I don’t even know where Lily lives. We just meet in the morning, we roller skate, play on the beach, and that’s it. Does it qualify as eternal friendship?

“You must have fallen asleep in the sun,” Billy says. “You look cooked. It’s gonna hurt.”

I feel it too, on my shoulders. I’ll pay for that tomorrow. It’s always worse the next day.

“... your parents are waiting...”

I can’t hear the name this time. It could be anybody. It is anybody. The wind has picked up and drowns the PA message in the crash of the surf. A shadow passes over us and I shiver. The cloud lingers over the sun for what feels like a long time, then the light and the warmth return, with a blast of salty air.

“I guess I’ll see her tomorrow.”

#

The truth is I'm not sure. My memory banks might have been scrubbed a little too clean. I don't remember everything from that particular summer. Maybe I saw Lily the next day. Maybe not. Maybe Billy and I didn't have to wait another year for our bikes and we got them before those vacations were over. That would explain why I gave up roller skating, and never, ever, managed a decent spin.



M.E. Proctor worked as a communication professional and a freelance journalist for many years. After forays into SF, she's currently working on a series of contemporary detective novels. Her short stories have been published, both in Europe and in the U.S. She lives in Livingston, Texas.