

# **Lily**

**A Love Story**

**by**

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Lily is sitting on the bench where they always meet, overlooking the beach. It's one of those seaside affairs inside a little shelter. It's cold so she is wearing her best blue coat and has her blue suitcase beside her. She is looking out to sea, but she is remembering another time. Around her, people are walking along the seafront and just below on the pebbles; they are sitting in ones and twos or in small groups. The light is sparkling off the surface of the water, and the white disk of the sun hangs in the grey-blue blanket of the sky. Seagulls are crying and wheeling above her little gazebo like untethered kites, and the air is filled with the smell of the sea and the comforting warmth and vinegar of the nearby chip shop. Lily is not seeing any of this. Her mind is elsewhere and the smell that she is remembering is the smell of Billy's skin. She always loved the scent of him. He did his hair with that stuff from the barbers that made him look like Clark Gable, and sometimes, if they were going dancing, he wore aftershave but that isn't the smell she's remembering now. It's the smell that was underneath all those things, his own smell like the scent of a favourite scarf. At least, that's how she described it to herself, but in truth, it was uniquely his. She never said that to him, of course, because she thought it sounded queer to like the smell of someone's skin, but that was one of the things she had fallen in love with.

She was only nineteen when they met, and he looked so handsome in his blue suit. It was at the Majestic Ballroom, where she'd gone with May and June. Lily smiles as she remembers her friends and how their two perfectly sensible names became ridiculous as soon as they were said together. "And don't tell me," he'd said, "Your name would be April?" She'd blushed when he asked her this as if... Well, she didn't know as if what. She just felt so embarrassed when he spoke to her. She could barely speak and didn't make any sense when she did. But he was such a gentleman and he put her at her ease. They danced, and he did all the talking to start with. He was so funny, and he really did look like Clark Gable, only taller and, she thought, more handsome because he wasn't so handsome. She'd said that to him on that first evening that he was more handsome than Clark Gable because he wasn't so

handsome. He laughed it off, but she could tell that he was a little hurt by being called "not so handsome". That made her feel protective like he was just a little child in some ways. And that, in turn, made her feel good to know that she was able to protect him and that he needed her to look after him. That's when she stopped feeling nervous around him, just excited to see him instead. They used to go to the Majestic, of course, but they went to the pictures too and went out for walks on Sundays. It seems strange to her now that they only really went out for three months when she thinks of everything that has happened since.

The war had started by then, but she didn't know that he'd already signed up. Everything seemed so much bigger during that time before he left. Perhaps it was because, at some level, they knew he might not come back. *Well of course it was*, she thinks to herself. *It seems crazy now to think that we never really talked about it. Just carried on as if it wasn't happening.* But all of that was back at the beginning of the war before anything *was* really happening. It hadn't seemed real to her back then. She thought it would all just blow over. She knew Billy was going away; of course, she did, but it was his going away that mattered, not that he was going to war or anything like that. She couldn't even imagine the war in the beginning. Back then, she'd thought, it wouldn't be like the last one with trenches and mustard gas and all. *People wouldn't be so stupid again, would they?*

The day he left in his uniform had just felt dreary. Everyone said the boys looked so splendid in their uniforms, but she didn't think he looked splendid. He just looked smaller somehow, as if the thing didn't fit him properly. She went to the station to see him off but it was such a madhouse there, with everyone jostling and crowding onto the trains. And his mum and dad were there too and his sister, so she couldn't get a word in edgeways and what with them all watching and everyone else around, they didn't even kiss goodbye properly. He just gave her a peck on the cheek and promised to write to her.

So it wasn't until she got home that she really felt it. Felt his absence like a terrible empty feeling in her stomach. It seemed like she didn't stop crying for those first few weeks.

But he did write, just like he said he would, and she wrote back at first. His letters were all about the other boys that he was billeted with and about the Sergeant Major and all the silly things he made them do, like crawling for miles along freezing cold ditches and peeling mountains of potatoes if their boots weren't shiny enough. And she sent him news about home and about her job at the factory. But everyone had to be so careful back then, so you couldn't really say anything about what you were really doing, and when he got posted, the letters came less often. He was in Africa in the desert, and there was lots of talk about the terrible food and the flies, and about the latest Glenn Miller tunes that they heard on the radio. He always said that he missed her, but it all just started to feel so far away and nothing to do with her real life.

Real life was getting up at six o'clock in the morning in the cold and going to work on the bus. Real life was the girls at the factory and the day-to-day talk of boys and the latest films and ration cards and air raid warnings, and having to make her one remaining pair of good shoes last. Real life was just about getting through the days. By then, everything was difficult to come by, and Dad couldn't work anymore because of his lungs, so she had to provide for the family. That was just her and mum and dad now but it was a lot of responsibility. And when they started bombing the cities, things started to feel so much darker. So she stopped answering his letters. She just left it longer and longer before replying each time until she didn't reply at all. He sent her a few more after that, but they all reminded her of the time when he'd looked so hurt about being called "*not so handsome*," and now that just made her feel irritated. She felt guilty about not replying, but she was surprised that she didn't feel so guilty that she needed to write back. In fact, her feelings of guilt just made her resent him even more. Eventually, he stopped writing to her too, which was about when she met Philip. He was a bit older than Billy and seemed so much more able to look after himself. She didn't need to be like his mother the way she did with Billy. In fact, he barely seemed to

need her at all, which was fine with her. She already had mum and dad to worry about, not to mention the entire war, which everyone was supposed to feel responsible for.

So when the war finished, and Billy came home, she was still seeing Philip and although she heard that Billy had got married, it wasn't something she'd thought about very much. But now she is thinking about the day that Philip told her that he'd met someone else and about how furious he looked as if it was her fault. She never missed Philip. She just felt angry and humiliated.

Those years after the war were the most difficult, especially after Dad died. She felt sometimes back then that everything was hopeless and even though the war was over, nothing seemed to get any better. She still had to go to the factory every day, and all the shortages stayed the same. And as she remembers it now, it seems that it never stopped raining back then. That's why meeting Billy again had seemed like the sun coming out for the first time in years. She bumped into him in the street, and he looked every bit as handsome as she remembered him but taller, maybe. Seeing him again, she realised that back before the war, he had only really been a boy.

They went into the Dolphin on Victoria Street and ordered a pint of beer for him and a cherry brandy and soda for her. The place was packed with people talking, and someone was playing the piano in the corner. It smelled of beer and cigarette smoke, but when someone pushed past her, and she squeezed up against him, she could smell Billy's skin, and it smelled like being in love. They'd talked all afternoon, and she told him about all the things she hadn't written to him. And although he didn't say much about his time in Africa or later in France, she knew that the war had hurt him. She felt the familiar need to protect him, but it no longer felt like an imposition. For the first time in an age, she felt she was making a choice. She was choosing to love him again.

That's when they had started coming down here to meet up. At first, they said that it was just to talk about old times, but they both knew it was more than that. She'd tell her mum

that she was going away for the weekend with her girlfriends, and he'd make some excuse about work to his wife. They always caught separate trains and met here on their bench by the sea. They stayed in cheap hotels and promised that no one would ever know. But one time, they passed Mr Hislop from the paper shop, walking down the promenade with his wife, and they had to duck into a penny arcade to avoid him. So when Billy said that he'd leave his wife and that they'd go away together, she didn't feel as if they were doing something wrong. It felt like a relief. It felt as if her life could finally begin. He would be here at two o'clock, and they would spend a few days before deciding what to do next.

Lily glances at her watch and at the suitcase beside her. The clouds are lifting slightly and the sea glitter is filling the shelter with light. Someone appears through the shimmer and sits down on the bench next to her. It isn't Billy. "Hello, Lily; I thought I'd find you here." It is a woman's voice, and Lily feels that it is familiar, although coming from somewhere far off. She looks up but doesn't respond, "It's me, Annabelle; we wondered where you'd got to, so I came to look for you."

Annabelle has a kindly face, and Lily feels she can confide in her. "I have to wait for Billy," she says.

"I don't think Billy's coming today, darling."

"He said he'd be here at two o'clock." Lily thinks that this is something she's said before but is unsure why.

"Why don't you come back with me? Everyone's worried about you. We'll make a nice pot of tea and have some cakes, and there's bingo later."

"I don't like bingo," says Lily

"Well, you don't have to play, but why don't you come back anyway?"

Lily's eyes begin to fill with tears. "I have to wait for Billy."

Annabelle takes her hand and strokes the paper-thin skin on her forearm. She does not want to say that Billy will not be coming, nor promise that he will come tomorrow, even

though she knows that this will be lost in time with all of Lily's memories almost as soon as it has been said. "Well, it's four o'clock now, so let's go back and get a nice cup of tea, shall we?" She stands up, and Lily stands up slowly with her. "You came all this way without your stick? You'll be dancing next." Anabelle puts Lily's hand on her arm, picks up the blue suitcase and gently guides her from the shelter and back along the seafront. "Come on, lovely," She says, "No need to cry. We'll have a lovely cup of tea when we get back."