

## **New beginnings**

He found me on a bench in Greenwich Park; the kind that people dedicate to their dead relatives. The one I was sitting on had a brass plaque which said, 'For Lily - who liked to sit and think.' It was right at the top of the hill.

By the time I'd walked up there I was exhausted, and I didn't really care much about anything to be honest, let alone some dead woman whose family had enough money to buy a bench for her. But the longer I sat there looking around me, the more I appreciated the particular spot that had been chosen in Lily's memory. If she had been alive, I was sure she would have loved it.

I started to wonder whether Lily liked to sit and think alone, or did she have a Bill, or a William, or even a James, who had sat and thought beside her. The small print told me that she had died the year before; almost exactly to the day.

I wondered how Bill, or William or James, was coping on his own. Had he pulled himself together yet, or did he wish that his life had ended at the same time as Lily's? Was he angry? Did he still want to scream every day till he had no more breath left in him, then curl up in a ball and hide from the well-meaning know-it-alls who told him that time was a great healer.

I still remember the heat of that day. The sun was brighter than normal. The sky was bluer than normal. The grass was greener. It had been getting hotter and hotter every day for about a week, and people were starting to behave as if summer had finally arrived. Mums chased children with factor fifty sun cream. Dads chased everybody with super-soaker water

pistols that had appeared from the depths of their dad-sized backpacks. Couples held hands and laughed at something that one or other of them had said. Everybody was happy.

Everybody, who had someone to be happy with.

Across the water I could see the Dome. I never did get used to calling it the O2. Even now, it's the Millennium Dome to me. It's where I met Paul. We were both there on school trips; him from Gravesend and me from Dartford. We met in the nasal passages of the life exhibit and we swapped phone numbers.

My friends had teased me mercilessly, but I didn't care. I knew he would phone. He said he would, and he did. We talked and talked till his battery ran out, and then he phoned me back on the landline in case I thought he'd hung up.

I couldn't look at the Dome without thinking of Paul, but I still had to force myself to look away. To look at anything that wouldn't make me think. To the left, Japanese students and American tourists were posing for photographs in front of the Royal Observatory, capturing moments that they'd probably not remember any other way. Far off on the horizon, the familiar London skyline seemed to reflect the endurance of the city. The green domes of Victorian rooftops and the glass and steel of modern buildings jostled for attention, shouting out, loud and proud, 'We're still here. We're still alive. We're not going anywhere.'

Despite the heat of the sun, a shiver crept up my spine, and I reached into my bag. Paul had bought me a pashmina to go with the dress I wore for my twenty-first. The dress had long since gone, but I kept the shawl. It was such a cheery colour. Not quite orange; somewhere between sunflowers and autumn leaves. I didn't know if there was a name for it. All I knew was that it was warm and soft and comforting, and I pulled it across my shoulders, and I closed my eyes and tried to remember what it felt like when Paul wrapped his arms around me.

'Do you mind if I join you?'

The question came out of nowhere. I had to squint when I opened my eyes, but I still couldn't make out anything more than a hazy outline.

Given the choice, I'd have said, 'Yes, I do mind. I'd rather you sit as far away from here as possible. I'd rather you just go away and leave me alone, and don't even bother trying to have a conversation with me.' But I didn't. I just said, 'No, it's fine.'

I looked over at the tourists in front of the Observatory, and pretended they were the most interesting thing I'd ever seen. I looked over at the O2. I followed the line of the path down the hill, passed the laughing families, passed the happy couples, and I pretended that the Maritime Museum at the bottom, was even more interesting than the tourists.

'It's a lovely spot here, isn't it?' he said.

He sounded like an old man. Late sixties, maybe seventies. I couldn't be sure. I've always been a bit rubbish at guessing ages and I don't even try anymore, for fear of offending. His brown shoes were polished to within an inch of their life, and his brown corduroy trousers were well pressed. I could see that much without having to look up, and I reckoned he was harmless enough. He sat down at the far end of the bench, almost as if he sensed my reluctance to share.

'Lily loved this park,' he said, and he looked down towards the Maritime Museum and out across at the skyline, as if they really were as interesting as I had pretended they were.

I wondered if this was Bill, or William, or James, and I sneaked a closer look at him. He had gentle eyes. Shiny shoes and gentle eyes. Gran would've liked him.

'Was Lily your wife?' I asked.

He carried on looking down the park. I thought maybe he hadn't heard me. Or maybe he had, but he didn't really want to talk. Maybe he hadn't been talking to me at all; just thinking out loud.

When he turned to face me, there were tears in his eyes, and I looked away.

‘Lily was my granddaughter,’ he said.

I said I was sorry, because that’s what you say when you don’t know what to say; when it’s just too awful and no matter what you do say, it’s never going to be good enough.

He started talking, and it didn’t seem to matter that I didn’t join in.

Lily was seventeen years old. She was ever such a thoughtful girl. So talented. She wrote poetry. Played guitar. Painted. She had a lovely singing voice, but she was too shy to let anybody hear it. She was beautiful and funny, and sometimes, she was a little bit stubborn. She loved her mum, and her dad, and her little brother. She went to London one day. She got on a train, and she didn’t come home.

I watched a squirrel. It was watching Lily’s grandad. Its paws were like tiny little hands snatching at crumbs and seeds. It ran along the length of the bench opposite, down the other side and scuttled off. I watched another squirrel run along the back of another bench. I watched a dad pick up a tumbled toddler, wipe her tears and kiss it better. I watched Lily’s granddad.

‘What train was she on?’ I said.

‘Aldgate,’ he said. ‘The Circle Line.’

‘Me too.’

I didn’t realise at first that I’d said it out loud.

I had spent twelve months numbed up on tramadol and diazepam and vodka. I’d spent twelve months shutting down conversations that brought back memories. I’d spent twelve months pushing everything and everybody away. And there I was, gripping the edge of a park bench as the old man’s hand, reached out to mine.

*There were two hands side by side on a train. Both young. Both healthy. Both holding on to the grab rail in a packed carriage. Two arms at full stretch. Paul threatening to tickle my armpit.*

*'Don't even think about it,' I said.*

*'Or what?' he said.*

*'Or else,' I said.*

*He laughed. And I laughed.*

*And then there was noise, a jolt, a shudder, a screech, a fall. I couldn't see Paul. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't move. And then, there was nothing.*

*When I woke Paul was gone, and I screamed and I cursed and I cried. And then I stopped.*

I told Lily's granddad about my handsome boy from Gravesend. What he liked, what he did, how he laughed. How he cried at old films and made me promise not to tell his mates. How we talked about one day being married, having babies. How he filled my life and made me believe that anything was possible. I told Lily's granddad about hospitals, about skin grafts, about rehab and prosthetics and endless physiotherapy.

I just kept talking and he didn't say a thing. He didn't need to. I told him about the man at work. The one who said that he liked me and wanted to take me out on a date. I told him that I couldn't replace Paul. That I didn't want to replace Paul.

'You never will,' said Lily's granddad. He took a fresh handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to me.

I mopped up tears and snot that I didn't know were there. I must have looked a mess. But I realised just how good it was to be talking. It was odd that I'd been able to say so much to this gentle, old man, when I clammed up with everybody else.

Lily's granddad told me that his name was Bill. I smiled. He told me that he walked over to the park most days. He like to sit on Lily's bench and watch the world go by.

'You see everything here,' he said. 'It helps.'

As if on cue, a yellow frisbee soared, sputtered, and landed at our feet, followed closely by a sappy-looking dog. It sat, panting, waving its tail like a flag. It stood, barked once, pawed at the yellow disc, and then sat down again. Bill picked up the frisbee and the dog stood up, barked twice, and waited.

'I think he's trying to tell us something,' said Bill. He stood up and prepared to launch the frisbee, but before he could let it fly, a young boy appeared, red-faced and puffing.

'Sorry about my dog,' he said. He ruffled its silky black ears. 'He's called Bruce, and he's bonkers for his frisbee.'

'Nothing to apologise for,' said Bill, and he handed the frisbee over to the boy.

I watched the boy throw it, and I watched Bruce set off in pursuit, followed not so closely by his young owner.

'That's what I was talking about,' said Bill. 'As long as I can still smile at a boy and a dog and a frisbee, then I know I'll be alright.' He sat back down beside me and he patted my hand. 'You will be too.'

Families spread blankets out on the grass and unpacked picnics. Dads rounded up the children, and mums pinned them down with wet wipes before letting them loose on the sandwiches. Bruce sprinted past, carrying his frisbee like a smile, and the boy ran along behind.

The sun was high and hot in the sky. So hot, that I could feel sweat collecting under my ponytail. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, listening, yet not listening, to the quiet buzz of the park. The tourists and the students were still clicking their cameras. A radio played somewhere nearby. Voices and laughing, and barking and music, all kind of merged

into one, and for the first time in a year, I felt okay. Being alive didn't feel quite so awful as it had done.

'Lily's mum tried to kill herself.' Bill's voice was barely a whisper.

I stayed exactly as I was. Eyes closed. I couldn't look at him. The sweat chilled on the back of my neck.

'I've thought about it,' I said.

'Just thought about it?' He squeezed my hand, and I felt compelled to face him.

'Yes. Just thought about it,' I said. But I was lying.

'Good,' he said. 'Good.' He produced another handkerchief from his pocket and he wiped his eyes and said that he could do with a cup of tea. Did I want to join to him?

I said, thanks, but, No. I said there was something I had to do. I watched as he got to his feet. 'I'm glad we had this chance to talk,' he said, and I said I was too, and then I watched as he started to walk away.

'Bill,' I called, and he stopped. 'How's Lily's mum now?'

'Getting there,' he said. 'Getting there.' He waved, and he walked away.

I just sat for a minute, watching Lily's granddad disappear over the crest of the hill, then I reached into my bag and took out my phone. I dialled nine, nine, nine, and I asked for help.

'I've taken something,' I said.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I really am.'

'I shouldn't have done it,' I said. 'Can somebody help me?'

The voice at the other end told me not to panic; to stay on the line. She asked where I was, and I told her Greenwich Park. I told her I was on Lily's bench. She asked what I could see, and I told her I could see the O2. She asked what I was wearing, and I told her about the pashmina, and how Paul bought it for me and I told her it wasn't orange. She asked what I

could see, and I told her about the Observatory and the Maritime Museum and the green roofs and the glass and the steel. She asked what I could see, and I told her I was tired and she said you have to try and stay awake and I told her about the Dome. I told her about the boy from Gravesend and I told her about the train and I told her about Bruce and Lily and the tourists with the cameras and I told her about Lily's granddad. I told her about the man on the motorbike, with the green and white jacket and she said I was going to be okay.

The bike stopped and the man in the green and white jacket got off and he said hello. He said he was a paramedic and I said I was sorry. He crouched down in front of me and said there was nothing to be sorry about. He said his name was Martin, and it was going to be alright. He lifted my hand and he looked into my eyes.

'Lovely spot here, isn't it?' he said.

'Yes,' I said.

It was.