

Blackberry Promises

by

Jan Moran Neil

'Promises and pie crust are made to be broken.'
Jonathan Swift

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Dedication

For Muriel, Jimmy and Linda and the cast and crew
of the same name for keeping their promises.

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Prologue

The Old Bailey – January 1960

Lily Lee's Story

Footfalls in the corridor; time to tell her story.

"Miss Lee," the usher says, "you're called for witness now."

Lily Lee stares at the usher's polished shoes - *you could see your face in those shoes* - she hears her father saying. She follows the shoes up the short corridor which leads to the number one courtroom. Lily's pony tail, colour of a new thrupenny bit, thrupenny bit, price of a newspaper, swings seriously in time with the beating of her heart. "*He'll swing for this,*" they have said. All that unbuttoned gossip on the main street; pigeons' beaks snapping at crumbs on the pavement. *Snap, snap, snap*, all day long: tittle tattle. And the squawking stillness rises in volume as she approaches the courtroom.

He would swing for it: had it been with a gun, yes. But not with a knife.

"*This isn't going to be a hanging offence,*" that nice solicitor has told her.

Getting closer now. "*Don't you listen to all that tittle tattle,*" her mother has snapped. "*Just you tell the truth the way you saw it, Lily. And if you ask me he deserves no less than he's given. He never was quite the ticket.*" Cecilia's knitting needles has stabbed out the verdict in painful synchronicity. "*He'll serve,*" knit one, "*the rest of his time,*" pearl one, "*inside,*" knit one, "*and it'll,*" pearl one, "*serve him right.*" Knit one, Cecilia. Castle of strength, Cecilia. Moats on all side of her, Cecilia. Powerful Cecilia: lips pulled hard at the edges like an archer's bow, hands stretching wool as tight as her splayed nostrils. Knitting God knows what for God knows whom, but Lily's mother was a busy woman who believed that idle hands did evil work. Cecilia: the Patron Saint of Lily's Virginity. Her mother was medieval.

"Where will the murder ..., I mean where will the defendant be sitting?" she asks the polished shoes when they stop at the courtroom door.

"Straight ahead as you enter - at the far end of the court. He will be facing the judge. He will be sitting in the dock. When you go into the

witness box, you will be facing the jury. The defendant will be at the end of the court to your left. He'll be sitting in the dock." For some reason the usher repeats this fact.

She nods and then he adds, "Don't catch his eye."

But she catches the usher's eye. He doesn't know it, but she knows she could go down for 'perverting the course of justice'. If she lost her bottle - *don't lose your bottle, Lily* - how can you lose your bottle? - if she lost it now, she could go down for 'perverting the course of justice'. Where do sixteen year olds go when they are sent down?

Where do defendants go when they get taken down? Down steps. Seen it on the telly. The courtroom door opens. Lily does not expect this. She is strangely expecting a courtroom to be in black and white because she has only seen courtrooms on *Armchair Theatre*. But this courtroom is in colour and she is not sitting in an armchair. She is about to enter a witness box *because I witnessed it – didn't I? Didn't I?*: the gowns and wigs as audience; some willing her to say the right thing, others wanting her to trip up. Then there is the earnest public gallery of neighbourly and newspaper reporter faces above and behind the witness box; her mother's three sisters flown east like birds in distress across the Atlantic: high-heeled and chignoned, a chorus of cashmere moulting mink and BOAC flight bags for this is national news. The vigilant 'twelve good men and true' sit opposite, but there are women sitting there too ... and then him ... he would be at the far end. But she could not lock eyes. Not yet. *It's your choice, Lil. It's your choice. Make up your mind. Never could come off the fence. Don't lead me on. I'm not leading you on.* All those chatterbox voices in her head. Little Miss Chatterbox. Lily's Miss Chatterbox is typing out two stories in her head on two different walls in two different back streets and she is not sure which one to tell. How on earth will she not be able to tell the right story?

"*You're the prime witness,*" that nice solicitor has said.

A wigged, gowned and stout man was talking to the judge now. The judge is bony and as old as these walls. And above him, on the wall is the Sword of Justice. Her father Gordon knows all about The Law as he reads the newspapers daily and he says that the courtroom dealing with the most serious crime of the day will carry the Sword of Justice. *This is serious. This is very serious, Lily.* Her father said this last Wednesday August 26th – the date burnt to the front of her fringed forehead - when the black Ford Anglia police car drove away from the pavement; the light from the street lamp making a furnace of the numbers chalked out for hopscotch.

And now they are all sitting beneath the Sword of Justice. Her parents, Gordon and Cecilia are in the public gallery for they have given evidence for

the prosecution, whilst Lily is about to give evidence for the defence. The judge's wiry fingers are making slow notes with his left hand as if he is practising his best handwriting. The skin on his hands is translucent. She thinks she can see his bones whilst the barrister speaks in sing song velvet tones, which cracks just now and then, indicating that this has been a long trial. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," and Lily looks across to the jury: twelve good men and women true, wearing serious faces and matching suits, "With my Lord's leave I seek to call Miss Lily Lee ..." and Lily watches the defence barrister's red moustache move up and down with these words. This barrister has the velvet voice of God, would look like God if his bits of reddish hair didn't show beneath his white wig. Wig. La perruque. *Sounds so much better in French, don't you think? Cicatrice. Cicatrice.* French for 'scar'. Scar on my leg. Scar on his face. Oh that deep and rutted scar on his face; it is never going to fade in her head.

This is the Queen's Counsel. Her father has told her that the barristers are QCs and 'take silk'. She thought he said 'take milk'.

The usher places a hand on her shoulder and propels her gently in the direction of the witness box. She takes a sharp, nervous intake of air and feels the weight of courtroom eyes rest heavily upon her. *That jury has made up their mind from square one. You can tell by the way they look at him sitting there in the dock.* Her mother has said this looping the wool over the left knitting needle. *Stab, stab.* Where did her mother think square one was? On one of Hudge's Snakes and Ladders' boards?

"Would you take the Bible in your right hand and repeat after me ...?" the usher says. "I promise before almighty God that the evidence which I shall give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," he says, slowly, calmly and with grave resonance.

Help me, almighty God. Don't look ahead. God give me strength, as Aida would say, to do what I need to do. To say what I need to say. "I promise to tell the truth ..." Bibles make her think of Aida and the way Hudge's mother folded and wrapped their words like her pastry: pastry filled with rich dried fruit and thumb prints touching half remembered edges.

She cannot help but look up towards the defendant for the first time. Is he really smiling? Does she keep her promise or does she tell the truth? The whole truth and nothing but ...? Lily Lee is suddenly not so sure ...

"Can you speak up so that the judge may hear you?" the usher says.

And the bony judge with skin like papier-maché and a robe a much brighter red than the colour of blood, for she has seen the colour of blood, cocks his head to the side. Lily is aware that a woman is typing every uttered courtroom word. Her father has prepared her for this, but all the same the

cluck of the typist chatters to the same beat as the words which scatter like bird seed in her head. Pick a grain here, pick a grain there. Nothing but the truth.

“I promise,” she says – she has been told to say *I promise* – for she is only sixteen and under age and need not say ‘I swear’, “to tell the truth, by almighty God, to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” she says mixing up all the words. Please help me, God. Lily Lee’s heart is swinging, just as it has always done, from the one version of the truth to another altered version.

And the mighty barrister with the red moustache and the red bits sticking out of the side of his perruque leans on his pedestal and asks, “Can you give your full name to the court?”

“Lily Lee.”

She then hears the barrister telling her to speak ‘nice and slowly’ and to direct her answers to the jury. He gives a small smile and tells her to watch the judge’s pen moving if she thinks she may be speaking too quickly as the judge must take down her words. He continues. “And where do you live, Miss Lee?”

“My parent’s grocery shop on the Pennington Road.”

“And does the shop back on to the cul-de-sac - Alpha Road?”

Lily’s heart is a dull thud on hearing the innocuous names of places she has known all her life become somehow shameful. “Yes, sir,” she says.

The barrister’s reddish moustache continues to rise and fall with each word spoken. Her father Gordon has talked about these wigs or perruques being barristers, because they go to the bar. Where’s the bar? The barrister gives the jury time to consider the map and the scene of the crime whilst Lily considers with a shiver the other tagged exhibits lying cold and impersonal in plastic bags on the table below: that knife, his leather jacket and thank the Lord there was no overall because she has dealt with that ... then Lily suddenly sees it ... that camera. But he lost that camera. Why is that camera being used in evidence? *The photos. Oh almighty God, what photos have been taken with that camera?*

For the second time she turns her head slightly towards the dock. She hasn’t seen him since the funeral. The camera is a surprise. What is that camera doing there and will this change things? That camera was a silent witness for the camera never lies, does it? But his head is down. She catches only the nape of his neck before she looks back at the red moustache and wig, who is speaking again. “Miss Lee, were you able to gain access to the Oddy’s yard by coming the back way through your parents’ grocery shop yard and into Alpha Road?”

“Yes, sir.” Lily is confused by the presence of the camera. Members of the jury are consulting maps because the fact that Hudge could never cross busy main roads has been so important. Then she looks up to the gallery and she swears that she can see Bessie Fenchurch shaking her peroxidized head. What has that woman said?

“And are you or were you a good friend of the defendant?”

God give me strength. She looks to her left. He has lifted his head. And there he is. And she looks into his oh so familiar and beautiful eyes. For a moment, the courtroom disappears and they are alone together as they had been at the funeral. Lily smiles not only with her lips that will tell but with her salty eyes because she wants to give him reassurance that she will keep the promise. But she is not sure that she can. She would like to tell him that she has been able to get rid of the blood stained overall; carefully incarcerated in the Brambles’ disused stables. Getting rid of the blood stained overall was very important. It was incriminating evidence, after all. There was so little time to talk at the funeral and it was the only time they let her near him since ‘it all happened’.

“Miss Lee, could you answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question? Would you say you are or were a good friend of the defendant?”

She replies with a disembodied voice but without hesitation, surprising herself, looking back at the barrister and his very large moustache, “I would consider myself to be a very good friend of the defendant.”

“Then Lily, could you give us your version of the events which led up to the stabbing which took place in the Oddy’s yard last Wednesday 26th August?”

This is Lily Lee’s story: the whole truth.