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Lily

by Mary Brannigan

The shop was small, and so was the house. Eithne loved going with her mother to buy groceries from Lily O'Neill. She always gave the child a lollipop while she played with the shopkeeper's eight year old son. Lily had been widowed when the boy was a year old, and the little shop was her only source of income. It was next to the two up two down house where Lily was born. The father had run the shop till it passed to the daughter on his death. It was situated in a poor part of the city and the customers who came had a struggle to keep body and soul together. Being one of them, Lily tried to extend their credit in weeks when money was shorter than ever. She was a popular figure in the neighbourhood due to her soft heart.

When Eithne was eleven she began to help the shopkeeper with small tasks. Lily welcomed the girl's company for both herself and her young son. A favourite task of Eithne's was weighing up the sugar into two pound bags, feeling very important as she did so. This state of affairs continued during the civil war of nineteen twenty two twenty three, helping to take the girl's mind off the increasing horrors overshadowing her young life. Her father never spoke of the war in her presence, but was often away from home in the early hours of the morning. Sometimes he disappeared for days at a time without explanation. Eithne's mother would say, "Daddy's visiting grandma in the North." But slowly, the child began to sense the tension at home, and her mother was glad of the normality given by her visits to help in the shop.

As news of brother killing brother became more widespread, and gunfire was often heard at night, Mrs Corrigan began to worry about her daughter leaving the house alone. So, she began to accompany Eithne to and from the shop, in order to have these times of relative normality continue.

The war worsened, and sometimes Lily told the girl not to come on the usual days. She always gave some reason, like "it's going to be too busy tomorrow, we'll do it next week." The child was disappointed at these times, and her mother sometimes wondered if the shopkeeper was getting tired of the arrangement. But then she'd put it down to the uncertainty they were living through.

During the early months of nineteen twenty-three the war escalated and arrests became widespread. When the women gathered to buy their few groceries at the small shop, the talk was of husbands at risk and families torn apart. In the middle of this, Lily was a calm presence bent on soothing their fears, and they clung to her as a last vestige of peace in the midst of chaos. Her son had been sent to boarding school the previous year, in order to keep him away from the constant talk of war.

Then came the day that took even this small source of kindness from the little community. The first they knew of it was when they arrived at the shop to find it closed and shuttered. Lily was nowhere to be seen. They knocked at the door of her house, but got no answer. Where could she be? Perhaps her son was ill at his school and she had to go to him. It was two days later when they heard the truth. The shopkeeper was under arrest and was now languishing in Kilmainham jail. It didn't make sense. Lily had nothing to do with the war.

Eventually, the full story emerged. Lily's brother had emigrated to America many years before and often sent her money to help with her son's education. It seems, that hearing of his country's plight, he had returned the year before with arms and money to help the fight for freedom. Lily had been harbouring him in the small stockroom at the back of the shop, under the noses of both the neighbours and the authorities. The previous week he had been betrayed by a comrade in the pay of the English. "Ireland first last and always," he shouted as they dragged him away to be shot at dawn. Lily and her little shop were the collateral damage.