

Lilly

By Benedict Burgess

The beginning of a new school year at Murray High School is marked by a tidal influx of new students. Some freshmen new to high school, others upper classmen fleeing from unsatisfactory school's harmful to their personal learning process. Regardless, the annual twenty-five percent increase in the student body greatly changed the community, especially since each individual brought with them a whole host of talents, gifts, traits, and idiosyncrasies that would leave an indelible mark on the small school.

My sophomore year, there came one girl who would have a significant impact on the Murray High School community and my life. Like many students, she was an artist. She took beautiful photographs and constantly received acclaim once she had posted them online. She loved to sketch, paint, and draw with her best friend, Dorothy Sysling. She was a year older than I. She had shoulder length dirty blonde hair tinted by brown highlights. Her skin was slightly tanned. Her eyes were as wide and blue as the Heart of the Ocean. She was as beautiful as a flower. Her name was Lilly Ramando.

I was fortunate enough to have one class with her—literally ONE class period. At the start of the fall semester, I was in a class called English Through Leadership, a class that involved relationship, leadership, and Glasser Psychology training through an English lens. I spent that one class sitting beside Lilly. We exchanged pleasantries and she told me that she knew my sister from her previous three years at Albemarle High School, our base school.

In the middle of the class, our teacher, Ms. Wellen, initiated a partner exercise. Lilly and I were lazy and simply chose to partner up with each other. As instructed, we each grabbed a

colorful rubber band and twisted them together, holding the intertwined bands tight in our hands while standing a foot or so apart, creating a sort of rubber band bridge.

“This is your relationship,” Ms. Wellen said. “Now, interact with your partner with a compliment, or other kind of positive ‘yellow’ behavior. And, as you do so, walk towards each other.”

“You act well,” Lilly told me. We stepped in towards each other.

“You take pretty photos,” I said. We stepped even closer together. The rubber band bridge hung loosely in the air.

“Good,” Ms. Wellen continued. “Now, interact with negative ‘red’ behaviors.” Lilly and I complied.

“Your shirt is geeky,” she said.

“Your hat is ugly,” I countered.

“You look like you need a bath.”

“Your voice is really annoying.” Lilly looked a little genuinely taken aback by that comment. Our rubber bands were taut, straining under the pulling tension.

“This is how ‘red’ behaviors influence relationships,” Ms. Wellen explained. “They pull the relationship apart until the tension becomes too much and it breaks completely. Now, fix the relationship.”

“I didn’t mean what I said about your voice,” I apologized. “It sounds really nice.” We stepped in and the tension between the rubber bands lessened.

“Thanks,” Lilly said. “Your freckles are cute.” We stepped in and the tension lessened more. Compliment after compliment, Lilly and I stepped into one another, our relationship healing, until all we had to do manually untangle the twisted bands.

“This is how to fix a strained relationship,” Ms. Wellen illustrated. “You two act positively towards one another and in the end all that is required to heal the rift is a little work.”

The second day of the fall semester, at the insistence of my mother, I transferred out of the English Through Leadership Class into the chemistry class. I was a little disappointed, but, thankfully, it wasn’t the end of the world. I would still get to see my friends from that class in the halls every day.

A few days later, normalcy started to settle in at Murray High School. I went to all my classes, ate lunch, played volleyball in gym class, and checked out a book from the library. This time it was a graphic novel, *Persepolis*. However, as chemistry class was getting out, rumors of a fatal shooting in Charlottesville the previous night started bouncing across the room. I was disgusted.

“Really,” I said in disbelief. “This is why our country needs stricter gun laws.”

When school got out I settled into the rubber bus seat, pulled out *Persepolis*, curled my legs up, supported them against the chair in front of me, and continued reading. After a short bus ride from the charter school to the base school, I transferred to another bus, this one filled with friends from Albemarle High School, including my sister, Hannah, and returned to the same reading position. I laughed at the plight of the cartoon Iranian female artists “practicing” sketching a full body model dressed in a burqa.

“We nevertheless learned to draw drapes,” the book read.

Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder, tearing my concentration from the book. I turned around and saw my sister staring at me with curious urgency.

“Benedict,” she started to ask, “was Lilly Ramando at school today?”

I was puzzled. “I don’t know,” I thought, mentally skimming through my memory for any sign of Lilly. “I don’t have any classes with her anymore, so I didn’t notice.” I returned to my book, but I couldn’t concentrate. As the bus pulled out of the parking lot, I became aware of the buzz zipping around the bus.

“Apparently, Lilly wasn’t at school today,” my sister whispered to a concerned student. I tried to return to my book, but the gossip was fanning out like gunfire, firing across the bus, up and down aisle, and into the seats where it penetrated the minds of anyone with open ears.

“Lilly not at school...I knew him...He wouldn’t do that...I...he wasn’t at home when it happened...didn’t see her at school...Are they okay?...No.” Someone started to cry. I looked around the bus. Everyone’s face was cast with wide eyes and open mouths.

“My God,” someone said. The whisperings continued.

“What,” I inquired. I don’t think anyone on the bus told me. It wasn’t until I got off the bus and started up the driveway to my house that my sister told me the horrifying rumor making its way across the Albemarle County Public School System.

“Lilly was shot.”

I spent the remainder of that afternoon glued to a dining room chair, chewing through *Persepolis* in an attempt to keep from thinking. However, *Persepolis* is a relatively short read.

“I can’t believe this,” I thought. “She was at school. Or she was just absent. It happens.” It wasn’t until the nightly news that the truth was revealed.

Lilly Ramando, her younger brother Andrew, and their mother had been shot dead the night before by Lilly’s older brother. His mind snapped and he shot them all before committing suicide. One Ramando, the news did disclose whom, survived the shooting, but later died at the hospital. Only the father, Mr. Ramando, survived as he was out of the house at the time of the attack.

It was an emotional twenty-four hours. Facebook pages in tribute to Lilly and her family sprang up, creating forums where people could share their grief and memories of the family. Comments were passed around digitally, noting Lilly’s brilliant photography, Andrew’s good grades, and for the eldest Ramando child not to be overly vilified for the murder-suicide.

The next morning my sister and I swung by Kroger and picked up some flowers. We placed some at the makeshift memorial in the Albemarle High School lobby. I took a bouquet to Murray High School, which was in a state of solemn disarray. Many people were wearing black; nobody was speaking; a few people, including Dorothy Sysling, were crying; a grief counselor was holed up in the main office; and the whole school was covered in a fog of grief and depression, making work unimaginable. The classes were shortened. At the end of the day, a community meeting was held in the gym. Everyone in Murray High School, teacher or student, was afforded the opportunity to speak on how the incident affected them. The guy seated next to

me, Keats, could barely get his thoughts out into the microphone between the catches in his voice and sobs in his throat.

Despite the tragedy, the Murray High School community voted to proceed with the annual Beginning of the Year retreat. A week or so later, Murray High School arrived at Lake Monacan, a manmade lake with algae ridden water, canoes, kayaks, and inflatable water trampolines. It was fun. We played community games, swam in the cool lake water, or simply tanned on the beach.

Midway through the retreat, the entire school community gathered at the waterfront. Lily flowers were distributed and then tossed into the water, where they floated on the surface, while the English Through Leadership class released a bouquet of balloons with prayers and wishes to Lilly affixed to their tail strings. The balloons were intended to float up into the sky, taking our prayers with them, but they didn't. All the balloons, weighted down by the tension of the paper messages tied to their tails, fell into the murky lake water. I have a suspicion everyone's spirit fell with them.

Before Lilly, I had never dealt with immediate human death. I had been blessed with long living relatives. Even when my great grandmother died I wasn't terribly affected. She lived in Scotland, and I had only met her twice. However, with Lilly, it was different. She was practically my age, vibrant, kind, talented, healthy, and full of life. It is still hard to fathom that I will ever see her again. My life is just the same as it was before I knew her. She's not in it anymore. In the days following Lilly's death, I remember being horrified by the memory of the genuine hurt on Lilly's face during the "red" behavior "yellow" behavior exercise, leading me to worry that I had

made the first of Lilly's few days at Murray High School miserable. Weeks later, I was comforted by Mr. Ramando saying that during Lilly's brief time at Murray High School, she was the happiest she had been in a long while.

At that community meeting the day after Lilly's death, I spoke a quote from Rick Riordan's "The Throne of Fire." I forget the exact quote, but the gist of it was that as long as we remember someone's name, and all that it entails, a person never truly dies. There is plenty to keep Lilly's name alive: this memoir; the Facebook groups; the photo memorial beside the art wing of Albemarle High School; and Lilly's Garden, a small enclosure of fertile Earth in Murray High School's central courtyard. Every spring this garden is graced by the arrival of new white daises, yellow daffodils, and orange lilies.