

"Unerringly witty, joyfully droll stories of an English childhood from a beloved American story writer and spoken word artist."

—Carol Birch, storyteller and former Westchester County, NY librarian

Aunty Lily

and other delightfully perverse stories



Jennifer Munro

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition, 2016

2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 ... 6 ... 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Munro, Jennifer, author.

Title: *Aunty Lily : and other delightfully perverse stories* / Jennifer Munro.

Description: First hardback edition. |

Marion, Michigan : Parkhurst Brothers Publishers, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015049221 (print) | LCCN 2016001183 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781624910722 (hardcover : acid-free paper) | ISBN 9781624910739 (ebook) |

Subjects: | BISAC: FICTION / Humorous. | FICTION / Literary. | FICTION / Contemporary Women.

Classification: LCC PR6113.U67 A6 2016 (print) | LCC PR6113.U67 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92--dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015049221>

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Acquired for Parkhurst Brothers Inc., Publishers by: Ted Parkhurst

062016

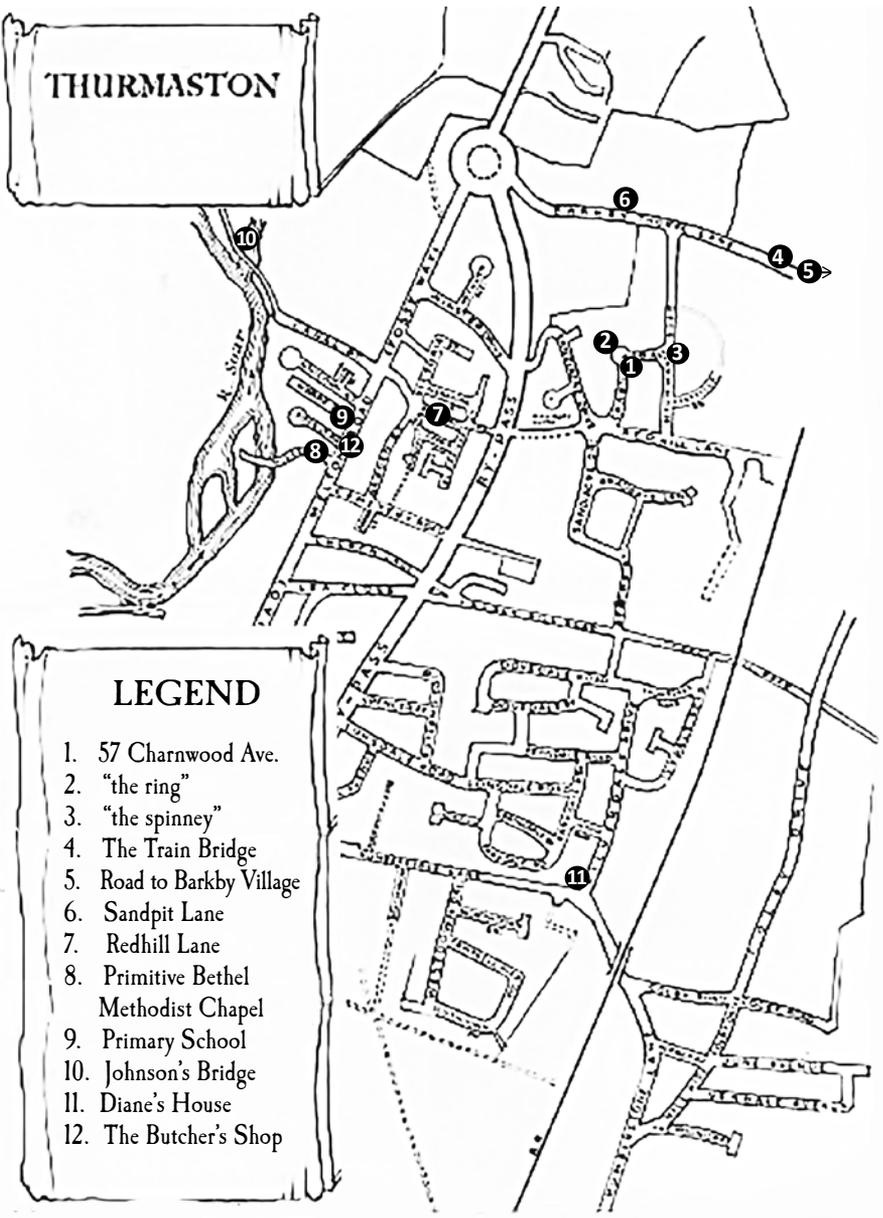
Preface

AUNTY LILY AND OTHER DELIGHTFULLY PERVERSE STORIES is a collection of fictional stories harvested from childhood memories, adult experiences, and the general flotsam and jetsam of family folklore. They are based on oral performance pieces: stories I tell before live audiences; therefore, their construction and form differ in nature from literary tales. The stories are written in the first person and are an artful blend of fact and truth, memoir and autobiography.

In looking back, memories and the family stories we traded as oral currency leap vividly to life in my mind. I remember them all in exacting detail, and it is from a combination of these real and retold events that my stories spring. The truths I am trying to share are not earth-shattering; they are straightforward insights, which I hope confirm what it means simply to be human.

As you read these stories, may you find yourself pausing to say, “Oh, that reminds me of when....” Stories trigger stories; I hope the memories they evoke bring an occasional tear and an abundance of smiles.

THURMASTON



LEGEND

1. 57 Charnwood Ave.
2. "the ring"
3. "the spinney"
4. The Train Bridge
5. Road to Barkby Village
6. Sandpit Lane
7. Redhill Lane
8. Primitive Bethel Methodist Chapel
9. Primary School
10. Johnson's Bridge
11. Diane's House
12. The Butcher's Shop



The Wicket Gate

I WAS TO BE IN MISS TURNER'S FIRST FORM CLASS at Thurmaston Church of England Primary School. Miss Turner was tall, imposing, and brown. Her brown hair was cut in two perfectly straight lines: one at the front and one at the back. What's more, it never moved. Whenever she turned her head, it moved with her like an obedient helmet. Her eyes were probably brown too, but we could never tell because she wore thick-lensed glasses that reflected the light, bringing to her face a look of constant, sightless surprise. She wore brown sweaters, brown tweed skirts, thick brown woolen stockings, and sensible brown walking shoes.

But the things that fascinated us about Miss Turner were her bosoms. At first glance Miss Turner appeared to be flat-chested. This was because many years since, her generous bosoms had dropped down to waist level where they were

prevented from further descent by a sturdy, brown leather belt. Just as her hair stayed still so it was that her bosoms, at the slightest provocation, delighted to roll and romp around her middle like two joyful, Jell-O® filled balloons.

I arrived at school that first morning breathless with anticipation. I was in the first form and I was going to learn to read. My debut in infant school the year before had not been an impressive one. I had not yet learned all of the letters of the alphabet and those I did know came out backwards, upside down and—despite all my efforts—insisted on working their way from the right hand side of the page to the left. But I had will power, I had determination, and I had Miss Turner. I decided she'd have me sorted out by lunch time.

When the bell rang, we formed a line and filed into the dark, cavernous stairway that led to the assembly hall. We trod upon the wooden steps, which were buckled like so many sway-backed horses by the countless generations of children who had trodden before us. We marched into the hall where after prayers and hymns and a speech of welcome from Mr. "Pop" Precious, the headmaster, we, the chosen few, followed Miss Turner's bouncing balloons from the hall. Miss Turner stopped at the classroom door and folded her arms above her bosoms, trapping them into a brief moment of stillness and waited while we stood behind our desks. I stood next to Sylvia Simpson. Sylvia was a tall, pale, quiet girl who liked to faint ... a lot.

Smiling, Miss Turner bounced into the room—her

bosoms released into an agitated state of excitement. “Sit down, my Pilgrims, sit down.” Miss Turner sat down in a large, comfortable chair at the front of the class, took out a huge book and began to read.

So I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where there was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and not being able longer to contain; he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, “What shall I do?”¹

Miss Turner paused and looked at each one of us pointedly. There was no doubt in my mind she saw each of us as that poor wretch standing before her with the burden of our own ignorance heaped upon our backs. I wriggled uncomfortably in my seat wondering if she could see at a glance that my burden was larger and heavier than most.... She did! She turned directly to me, pointed through the window, and said, “Pilgrim, do you see yonder wicket gate?” Her thick-lensed glasses directed her gaze straight into my heart, and I knew she was really asking, “Do you see yourself learning to read?”

I tried to imagine myself picking up a book. I tried to imagine the letters on the page behaving long enough to reveal their mystery to me, but I could see no such wicket

1 From John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, London, 1678.

gate. My face flushed an uncomfortable throbbing red. Not being able to contain myself any longer, I broke out with a lamentable cry saying, "What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?" In answer, she looked out of the window and pointed across the fields. "Pilgrim, do you see yonder shining light?" The sunlight reflected off her glasses, two beams of light stretching into the distance. Too awed to speak, I nodded dumbly. Miss Turner threw her arms and bosoms around me and cried, "Keep that light in your eye, and go directly thereto, so shalt thou see the wicket gate."

Just as I had expected! All this and it wasn't even lunch time yet!

After lunch, Miss Turner wrote in a beautifully neat hand all the letters of the alphabet, which we had to copy. It was then that the enormity of my burden was revealed. Miss Turner took one look at the delinquent efforts of my pencil, and her response was immediate. "Pencils down!" she roared. Everyone quickly obeyed except for Sylvia who did so, but slowly. She did everything slowly ... she even fainted slowly.

"Line up by the door."

We did so and Miss Turner took us outside and through the boy's playground. I'd never been in the boy's playground before; Sylvia almost fainted. Ms. Turner turned to me and said, "Jennifer, you're a fine sturdy girl."

"Yes Miss Turner."

"You will be the Sylvia Catcher. When Sylvia faints, you will catch her."