

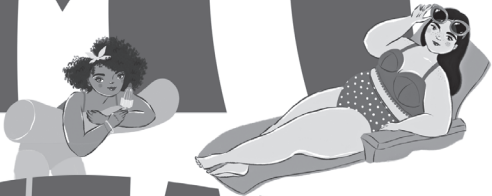
MELT MY HEART



Other books by Bethany Rutter

No Big Deal

MELT MY HEART

An illustration of two young girls lying down. The girl on the left is sitting up, leaning against a large, light-colored heart shape, and holding a small object. The girl on the right is lying on her side, propped up on one arm, wearing a polka-dot swimsuit and a headband. They are positioned between the words 'MY' and 'HEART' of the title.

BETHANY RUTTER

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



First published 2020 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5290-4116-3

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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For Charlie

CHAPTER ONE

New things! New things! New things! I chant in my head as my feet pound the pavement. I have no idea how Daisy does this. My chest hurts. My calves hurt. Even my actual bum hurts. I try to distract myself by taking in my surroundings but without making eye contact with passers-by. My lungs are burning and there's that metallic taste in my mouth. I definitely don't feel stress free and relaxed. Please, where are those endorphins I hear so much about? But it's a new thing so it must be good, right?!

I let myself slow down to a jog as a flock of seagulls wheel overhead, squawking raucously, swooping towards the ground, scouting for a few discarded chips. The picturesque seaside scene is usually enough to distract me from anything, but today my anxiety is sitting on my chest like a lead weight.

Go running, they said. *It'll be fun*, they said. Famous last words.

'If you're feeling stressed you should go to the gym or something,' Daisy had said to me only yesterday. That's

the kind of thing Daisy says semi-regularly. 'I'm thinking of taking up wrestling at uni to battle the first-year stress.'

'What are you on about?' I'd asked her, incredulous, before realizing that Daisy's zeal for trying new things is less weird than my tendency to stay firmly within my comfort zone.

It's the first week of July and I can already feel the summer slipping away from me. So I'm trying to prepare myself for the fact that at the end of the summer I'm going to university hundreds of miles away, and I'll be meeting so many new people and doing so many new things. I'm not ready. Not yet. But maybe I can become ready. I can start challenging myself to shake up my life a bit before I get there. Say yes to things. Try stuff I've never tried before. I have no doubt it'll be good for me. Even if sometimes it makes my bum hurt. A summer of new things, if you will.

Bloody hell. I dare to take a look at the timer on my phone and immediately want to dropkick it off the end of the pier when I discover I've been running for a mere two and a half minutes. The honk of a horn from a passing car pulls me out of my anger. I can't tell what they're saying because I've got my headphones in but I *can* tell a group of lads is leaning out the window and yelling at me. Fat girl jogging. It must have simply been *too* hard for them to resist. Heaven forbid that a non-skinny, non-athletic girl could want to go for a run in

peace (or whatever kind of peace this new sweaty hell is).

I suppress an eye roll and look away and try to focus on running running running, but as soon as I do, I feel something make brief but solid contact with my shoulder and bounce off it. Clattering to the ground in front of me is a can. A literal can. It's not even empty: it rolls around at my feet, spraying its sticky, brightly coloured contents over the pavement but mercifully *not* on my trainers. I look up, my general anxiety transformed into specific fury, and yet I'm unsurprised. It doesn't matter what I think about my body, how generally at peace I am with it, I still have to put up with this ludicrous behaviour from the outside world.

That's it. If I was looking for a sign that I should give up, here it is. I tried running, I didn't like it, and the universe didn't like it either. So I accept that I have ground to a halt and instantly feel better, the air returning to my lungs. My name is Lily Rose and I don't really know who I am, but I know I'm not a runner.

And anyway, there are other, less humiliating ways to push me out of my comfort zone. I'm sure of it. But maybe I need someone to keep me accountable so I don't just give up on *all* of them the way I've given up on this . . .

I head back along the pavement that runs by the side of the pebbly beach. It doesn't take long for my breath to return to me, but I'm still sweating by the time I turn off

the road that follows the coast and get to the petrol station by our house. What can I say, I'm a sweater! I come from a family of sweaters, plus I've got what someone might euphemistically call 'extra insulation', so there was really no hope for me. I push open the door of the shop, eager to get myself a hard-earned gleaming tinny of cherry Coke to quench my thirst, swipe one from the fridge and head up to the counter to pay.

The dude behind the till raises his eyes from his phone and realizes it's one of his regular customers. They change the staff here pretty often but he's been around for a few months now, and he's friendly whenever I come in. His badge tells me his name's Jay. 'Hey!' he says. 'All alone today?'

'Yeah.' I smile, fishing in the tiny zip pocket at the back of my leggings for some change.

'Where's your friend?'

'Which friend?' I ask, even though I automatically assume he means Cassie, since she's essentially the only person I know who could be described as a friend. Also, she's pretty memorable.

'You know who I mean! The girl you're always with! The pretty one! She's got that same long, dark hair as you,' Jay says, gesticulating in exasperation as if I'm being deliberately stupid.

Ah. There it is.

‘My sister?’ I reply, raising my eyebrows and setting the coins down on the counter.

‘No, not your sister,’ he replies instinctively. ‘She couldn’t be your . . .’ Jay trails off, realizing he’s very much put his foot in it.

‘Twin sister, actually. Thanks!’ I shrug it off breezily even though, frankly, I hate it when this happens. I put time and energy into not comparing myself to her, into honouring our same-but-different-ness, but there’s always that little niggling reminder that Daisy is the desirable twin and I am . . . well, just me. I accept my change and zip it back into my pocket. As I trudge out of the petrol station, I crack open my icy-cold cherry Coke and let it hit my tongue. It’s exactly what I need to take the heat off this embarrassing exchange. I peek back and see Jay standing behind the counter looking perplexed and slightly awkward. Poor dude.

The thing is, guys would never shout at my sister from a passing car. Actually, that’s not true: they really would, except they would be yelling something more . . . sexually suggestive, and it wouldn’t be accompanied by a projectile. It’s not Jay’s fault for not realizing we’re related, let alone twin sisters. The truth is, we’re identical in every way . . . except she’s thin and I’m fat. That’s it. We both have long, dark, straight hair that we wear with a middle parting.

Dark, heavy eyebrows. Light skin. Freckles on our faces and arms. Eyes so bright green that they almost look fake. But that difference in body shape, or rather body *size*, is enough to have people scratching their heads.

I sip my drink as I walk back round the corner to our little house and let myself in. Our candy-pink cottage covered in creeping ivy is more picture-book cute than the rest of the conservatively coloured houses on our street. When Crystal, our fluffy white cat (and the latest addition to the Rose family), is sitting in the window, it looks even more adorable. Like it's a serene seaside residence for discerning ladies.

'Hello, baby,' Mum yells from the living room. 'Where have you been?'

I slouch in, nonchalantly. 'Nowhere.'

'Have you been . . .' She squints at me, surveying my trainers and my probably still-pink face. 'Running?'

I sit on the sofa with a sigh and wriggle my feet out of my trainers. Deflection seems like the best option here. 'I have no idea what would give you that impression.'

'Because you know you're perfect as you are, right?' Mum says. It's sweet that she thinks this. I know not all mums are quite so chill.

'Mum – let's be real here. I'm not running because I've suddenly decided I need to be a size eight. Just felt like

trying out something new.'

'Oh . . .' She frowns. 'Why wouldn't you go with Daisy, then? She's always out running.'

'Exactly,' I say, a bit sullenly.

'Oh . . . ' she says again. A good thing about our mum is that she knows not to probe too far into the mysterious ways of the sisters.

She doesn't need to know how quickly Daisy would get frustrated with how slowly I run, or how I gave up after a couple of minutes. She absolutely doesn't need to know that while Daisy has always been like a machine that won't quit, I've been struggling to keep up. But I guess if I had gone with her, I wouldn't have been pelted with a can of Red Bull. You win some, you lose some.

'Where is she, anyway?' I ask.

'Where do you think she is?'

I head through the kitchen where the smell of Mum's cooking is perfuming the air wonderfully, push the back door open and lean against the white-painted frame to observe my sister at work in the garden, crouched down on the ground with her headphones in. As if she can sense that I'm there, she raises her head, the change in position making the sun glint off her identically shiny hair.

My sister's outdoor pursuits are a mystery to me. I like to watch her work, just to see what she's up to. I can ask her

what she's been planting or what she's been using to make things grow, but I don't really understand it. The only part I do understand is the quiet dedication I see when she's out here in the little square garden – or as our mum calls it: Daisy's domain. The garden is to her what a canvas is to me: pure potential. The start of something beautiful.

'Lil, are you spying on me?' Daisy asks with a smile as she pulls her headphones out. She's the only person who calls me Lil. I don't really like it but I can tolerate it from my twin sister.

'Maybe a bit,' I say, snaking my arm back into the kitchen and dunking the empty Coke can into the recycling bin without looking. 'What you got there?'

'Check this out!' she says, gleefully revealing a small pile of slim carrots. 'They're going to be so sweet and delicious even on their own, I just know it.'

'I'm excited to reap the rewards of your hard work.'

'Oh, it wasn't that hard.' She smiles modestly.

'I'm excited to reap the rewards of your easy work.'

Daisy laughs, wiping some sweat from her brow and leaving a brown streak of soil in its place. That's the other reason guys like her – she's the perfect girl next door. She knows she's pretty and doesn't care. She's at ease in the world. She's not a tangle of stress and fear like me. Maybe she would have been a good influence on me if we'd stuck

to our original plan, and decided to go to uni together. As it is, I don't know how many more delicious Daisy-grown carrots I'll get to eat come September. 'Hey, make sure Crystal doesn't get out.'

'Oh, shit, you're right. I keep forgetting about that.' Crystal has to be kept indoors for reasons we're not entirely clear on but accept none the less because Mum knows best.

Daisy stands and brushes the soil off herself, gathers her carrots from the ground and surveys me. 'How come you're wearing workout gear?'

I gasp in mock offence. 'As if I never work out!'

She rolls her eyes. 'You don't.'

'Just trying out the ol' athleisure trend,' I lie. I used to tell Daisy everything – there was a time when we were inseparable. But things change, I guess . . . we changed. Or the ways we were always different became more pronounced. Anyway, now that I've got Cassie, who just takes me as I am, no judgement, I don't really have the energy to take on any more of Daisy's assumptions. So I decide not to tell her about my three-minute 'run'. She'd probably read something into it, like I'm going on a mad pre-uni transformation to get skinny over the summer so I can rock up at Leeds as a whole new Lily. At some point, she'll finally get that I like my body the way it is, and maybe then things will go back to the way they used

to be. But I'm not going to hold my breath.

Daisy dumps the carrots in a colander in the sink and heads upstairs to shower while I set the table for dinner, which turns out to be Thai.

'How was work?' I ask my mum once we've sat down, blowing on my spoonful of tom yum soup, which, as with everything my mum serves, is absolutely boiling.

'Oh, fine, nothing much to report,' she says before gulping down a huge mouthful with no regard for the inside of her mouth.

'Did you have to . . .' Daisy raises her eyes from her bowl. 'You know . . .' She grimaces and mimes injecting the air with a syringe.

'No, not today, thank god.'

'Phew!' Daisy and I say in unison. We know our mum would never volunteer information about having to put a pet down because it makes us too sad and yet we can't help but ask about it, like morbid little ghouls.

'But!' Mum says, raising a finger to silence us. 'Tom Greenwell and his dad were in with their cat today.' She sips her soup. 'He was asking about you.'

'What a clever cat,' I say.

I don't even need to look up to know Mum's comment was directed at Daisy, not me. I shift in my chair, grudgingly reminded of one of many times Daisy liked the same guy as me.

I always had a little bit of a crush on Tom, but last summer I'd made the mistake of whispering it to Daisy, my tongue blue from the Slush Puppie inching its way up the straw as we walked home from the beach. She said that she liked him too, and announced that she was going to ask him out. She never did, of course – it's not really her style to be the 'asker' rather than the 'asked' – but she had marked her territory, which was enough to put me off. Tom was in *her* league. And I was very much in mine.

'What was he saying?' Daisy asks, eagerly. To be fair, Tom Greenwell is very cute. What can I say, I have good taste.

'Oh, nothing much,' Mum says. 'Just wanted to know what you were up to this summer. I told him he could find you at the garden centre if he was particularly desperate.' This makes Daisy squeal a little bit before grimacing.

'But my work uniform is so *ugly*,' she moans.

'Yeah, but you're not,' I say with a shrug. 'I'm sure Tom can see past a sick-green shirt and weird pinstripe trousers to your true beauty.'

'The garden centre uniform is not *that* bad,' says Mum. 'My school uniform was—'

'Yes, Mum, we know!' Daisy and I groan in unison.

'Brown wool blazer, fawn wool jumper, beige shirt, green tie, dark brown pleated skirt and brown tights,' I

continue, holding up a finger for each item.

‘Oh and flat, brown lace-up shoes,’ Daisy finishes for me.

‘It was awful!’ says Mum. ‘No chance of meeting boys in *that*. That’s how they wanted it. Anyway, what about the boy at the cinema you said you liked? I feel like we’ve been hearing about him for months.’

Daisy furrows her brow. ‘I don’t know, I haven’t been in a while what with exams and stuff. I should see if he’s still there. He’s even cuter than Tom. Nice blue eyes. Cool accent.’ She has a determined look in her eye, like it’s never occurred to her that anything might stand in her way. Assured.

‘I can’t even think of the last time I went to the cinema,’ says Mum.

‘Me neither . . . maybe I’ll see if Cassie wants to go after work one day,’ I say.

‘*Work*,’ says Mum, raising her eyebrows. ‘It’s funny hearing you two say that. You’re just tiny babies to me.’

‘Yeah, if I have to work it might as well be scooping ice cream with my best friend.’ My phone vibrates. ‘Speak of the devil.’

It is Cassie, even if it doesn’t say it’s Cassie – I saved her in my phone as ‘Ice Queen’ to reflect her status as heiress to Weston Bay and Seaforth’s premier ice-cream business.

It works even better because she's the least frosty person I know.

I have two words for you

Which are?

Chocolate orange

That's gonna be a HIT

My dad's been working on it for ages trying to get it just right. Make sure your scoopin' arm is feeling **STRONG** tomorrow

My **SPIRIT** is going to be feeling strong tomorrow. I am sincerely so hyped I get to spend the summer with you even if we're working

It doesn't feel like work when you're there tbh

We've been working on the ice-cream stand for a few days now and, I've got to say, she's not wrong. We've hit our stride. The days pass pretty quickly. *And* we're getting paid for it.

Idk if I'm actually fun enough for that to be true 

DO YOU UNDERSTAND THERE IS LITERALLY NO ONE I WOULD RATHER TOIL WITH THAN YOU????

I grin and turn my phone face-down on the table.

‘Little custard tart things for afters?’ Mum asks.

‘Always,’ I say. A firm favourite of ours since we were little. Daisy used to eat the tart then bite on the silver cases they came in, leaving tiny toothmarks in the mangled foil.

‘Not for me,’ says Daisy. ‘I’m being good.’ I roll my eyes.

‘It’s your choice but I think you’re being ridiculous,’ says Mum.

Daisy sighs, disgruntled. ‘I just want to look optimally hot when I get to uni, is that a crime?’

‘Your optimal hotness is whatever you look like right now. I promise.’ Mum is good at reassuring Daisy. Better than I would be, anyway. To be honest, she’s good at reassuring both of us.

I don’t say anything. I don’t think Daisy has figured out how these comments affect me. At least, I hope she hasn’t. It’d be worse if she was saying them knowingly.

‘We’ll wash up,’ I say once the tarts have been reduced to shortbread crumbs on the plate, volunteering on behalf of Daisy.

‘Good girls,’ Mum says, winking at us. ‘Well, since you’re taking care of this, I’m going to watch back-to-back episodes of *Four in a Bed* if you would care to join me

when your domestic labour is done.'

Daisy and I turn the radio on and dance to cheesy music while she washes and I dry, careful not to drop bowls in a fit of Phil Collins-induced mania.

Our mum's voice cuts through from the living room into the intro of another eighties masterpiece. 'Lily!'

'Yes?' I call back, turning the radio down.

'I forgot to tell you – there's a letter for you from Leeds.'

It feels like a fist has tightened around my heart.

'Oh, OK . . .' I say, hopefully loud enough for her to hear. 'I'll open it when I'm done in here.' Daisy inhales sharply and twitches her nose, her universal symbol of disapproval. I guess she's a bit annoyed about us not going to uni together anymore. She doesn't notice my shaking hands. I was meant to be going to Bristol, same as Daisy. That's what we had talked about. But when the offers came through and Daisy accepted hers straight away, I felt like maybe it was time for me to separate from her a bit. Go my own way. That's the plan I deviated from. Now, of course, I don't know what I was thinking. What I *do* know is I feel like I'm thinking about it all the time.

When I start feeling like this, I don't feel like I can make my body do *anything*. It's like a tightly wound spring: all tension. I barely hold it together while we finish the washing-up and then I slip upstairs, swiping the letter

from the little table in the hall.

Daisy's world may be the garden but my sanctuary is upstairs, in my room at the back of the house. Our small bedrooms are crowded together up here: Mum's is painted a soothing mint green, Daisy's a sugary lilac, and then . . . there's the quiet chaos of mine.

It's not just the *stuff* – books stacked everywhere, art supplies overflowing from every surface, canvases leaning against the walls and the cupboards – it's the walls. I'm not saying my mum was wrong to let me have free rein on my bedroom, but if she ever wants to sell the cottage my bedroom is going to need a complete makeover.

The two walls that make up the corner of the room by the door are painted a flat, neutral white, with my bed pushed against the side that shares a wall with Daisy's room. But the other two are a riot of colour and pattern and nature and leaves and vines and flowers in lush greens and vibrant blues and juicy pinks, like you're deep in the jungle on another planet. I suppose letting me do what I want with my room is like letting Daisy do what she wants with the garden. 'It's your home, too,' Mum always says.

As usual, just being in my space takes a little of the tension away. I can breathe here. But the letter in my hand is weighing me down. More than anything, I do not want

to go to university in September. I do not want to leave my home. I do not want to leave my family. I do not want to leave comfort and familiarity. I absolutely, one hundred per cent, do not want to leave Cassie. But it's too late.

I flop down on my bed, my heart pounding against my ribcage. I take a deep breath and slide my thumb into the envelope, tearing it open in jagged waves. When I wriggle the letter free, all the words jumble together in a nauseating haze until I finally unscramble them. An accommodation letter. *What kind of halls do you want to be in? Catered or non-catered? How many people to a bathroom? How far from the campus? Do you mind sharing a room if push comes to shove?*

I let out a groan, close my eyes and take another deep breath. At this point I've had to accept that the whole university thing – the whole future thing – is hanging over me like a black cloud, and most of the time I can keep a lid on it. But every so often it becomes uncontrollable and I have to confront the fact that at the end of this summer I'll have to leave my home.

It's such a dark thought that I haven't shared it with anyone, but I'm clinging on to the possibility that I might not get the results I need, and then I won't have to go away. Results day is in forty-one days – I counted them on the calendar. That's when it's real.

Until then, I'm going to enjoy myself. I've only got one summer left. The last summer.

One summer to get my head around all the ways my life is going to change.