

Lily, Jessie and Maisie

by Rachel Escott, 2007

Names written on the board. An introduction. Or explanation, perhaps. Jessie Mitchell, Maisie Palmer, Lily Turner. Identities, a 'this-is-who-I-am'. Lilted, musical names, their tip-tilted endings marking the optimism of a new century. *Jes-sie*, *Lil-ly*. Names called through open doors and down streets, reeling in their spirits.

Her wide, blue eyes are milked over and just now are dull, distracted. Across the room one of the old women places the rubber ends of the frame another inch ahead and shuffles to keep up. Her face is still with concentration, her world a reduction to this one challenge. She's wearing blue velveteen slippers, new. Her body lurches downwards on the right step, upwards on the left. Jessie watches, frowns.

"*Jessie*, *Jessie*! Your Mam says you've to get home straight away. She's brought eels."

Jessie looks up from the rope she's turning, hitches her top lip above a small white tooth. "Oh Hobbie, give over telling me what to do."

"It's not my fault they catch me; you're all so fast out the doors. Anyway, you like eel pie."

"But I don't like chasing the things round the kitchen to get it. And I *hate* having to hold them down while Mam chops their damn heads off."

"**Jessie!**"

"Oh don't be daft, no one heard."

"I did," says Lily from the other end of the rope.

"Well you're not going to tell."

"Anyway, you've to go," decides Maisie as she puts her hand out for the rope.

"What're you going to do? You can't play rope with just two, not you."

"We'll tie it to the gate, of course. Now get off, your Mam'll be all over the shop with those creatures by now. Give us a shout when you're taking it to the baker's oven."

Maisie - Hobbie - comes up with her scooping walk and takes the rope from her friend's hand. It's always her that's caught to pass on the errands on account of the limp that slows her down. Hop-along – clod-hopper – hoppie – Hobbie. It makes sense, so she accepts it.

A mottled hand rises in front of the milky blue eyes and claws at the air, as if to grasp back something that is escaping.

When we go to visit, Granny is twisted in her chair, her upper section slumped down and to the left though her feet are flat on the floor. Her face is turned from the lights. She looks like a sleeping child that has outgrown its buggy. As we adjust our perspectives to the ward, she shifts back to the size of an adult.

The tiny nurse has a freckled face and a single pantomime-boy plait of black hair. She puts her bright face in front of Granny's grey and sunken one, and gently calls her back to life.

“You've visitors, see? Nice son and daughter.” Actual relationships remain hazy for the staff. It can't help clear the minds of their charges. Granny's eyes feed on the nurse's face and respond with sparkles and a clearer blue. She has given this stranger all her trust and hope, she who has become so insular in recent years.

We fetch the plastic visitor chairs and crowd around her, pinning her to the wall. Visiting is hard; she can only hear whoever is closest, and often doesn't grasp our meaning. But she knows enough to hide it, with a grand mime of pleasure, surprise, approval or sympathetic tutting. And we over-enunciate, our faces close, swapping seats from time to time. She seems to understand but she doesn't remember, so we repeat the same phrases, the family catch-words and anaemic commentary so hard-wired over the years that now they are the few things her brain can recognise and repeat back. The rest is spaghetti. I'm aware that looming so close to her is our affectation, not hers. Only a fortnight ago, before this latest turn, she could see perfectly well to wave us down the path from the sitting room window. Perhaps we just need to know she's paying attention, we've come so far to visit her.

I see how her eyes are easily distracted from my sentence to the movement of other people across the room. I fall silent; may as well save that comment for later, when I've run out. Instead, I turn my head and follow where her attention has gone. The one they call Lily is out of bed today and sits in the chair in a flimsy cotton nightie with yellow roses all over, tied with a ribbon at the neck. Her hands are raw with bruises as they scrabble at the hem of the nightdress, raising it to the top of her legs where she can pick at the plasters

holding the tubes in place. The nurses must have given up on the ones in her hands, she pulled them out so often. I glance back at Granny's face, but the prudish disapproval I expect to see directed at Lily's exposed, Auschwitz-like legs isn't there. Just wonder.

"I wish I could swim as good as you, Lil'. You should've seen her this mornin', Hob. Are you going to be in the club team next year Lil'?"

"'Spect so. I was faster than anyone in our class today. Miss Hamilton wants me to, she says I've to ask Mam and Dad if I can. If I am will you come and cheer me?"

"Of course we will! We'd be dead proud, wouldn't we Jessie?" Maisie's face flashes from stillness to glowing love, and back again. She swings the heels of her boots against the wall, beating rhythms out of the different densities.

"Maisie Palmer, stop with that! You've only just got those new boots. You can't go getting scrapes on them already. The Charity won't give you a new pair for at least a year and your Mam'll be mortified."

Maisie blushes and bites her lip. "Sorry Lily, it's a habit."

"I know it is. You've been banging out those ditties ever since you got your first pair of boots, I swear. Drives me quite barmy sometimes. I go home at night and there it is, that banging still going on in my head."

"Least I can still swing my legs," Hobbie responds placidly. "Yours are so long you'd knock out half the class if you swung them." Lily holds her legs out straight and points her toes to make the calf and ankle muscles tighten. She hitches her school skirt above her knees, proud of the sight.

"Why don't you come to the Pools anymore, Hobbie?"

"Oh, you know... it's the way the little ones laugh at things now." She almost kicks her boots again, but stops herself in time.

On the other side of Lily, Jessie knocks her elbow against her friend's and frowns, shakes her head. Lily looks at her a moment and sighs.

She hasn't been eating well. We show her the box of cakes we've brought and her mouth smiles, her head nods. Her lips form a slack 'thank you', but we know she doesn't understand. Her eyes haven't said so. She's running on learned responses again. The trouble is, she hasn't seen this wrapper before.

We undo the box and tilt the many-coloured tiny macaroons towards her. “Look, they’re cakes, aren’t they sweet?” It’s the colours that do it. What could they be, nestled in bite-sized rows of green, yellow, pink and coffee, but sweets? The glint is back in her eye and their blue deepens as her attention is concentrated on the box. She flicks one look of glee up at us, with so much youth and life. Not a ninety-four-year-old’s look but a ten-year-old’s. But we only see it for a second, before her eyes drop again to the box and her fingers lift one creamy and melting macaroon after the other into her mouth. Even her hands look younger now. The skin is softer and more plumped than the other day. Where it slopes around the thumb joint it is lightly tanned, free of the brown liver blotches. Scarcely older-looking than my own hand. When she has finished the cakes I hold her hand and stroke the skin there softly with my thumb, while multicoloured saliva tracks from the corners of her mouth where her teeth don’t fit so well anymore. She grins at me guiltily, happily. Quite self-aware.

Jessie Mitchell, Maisie Palmer, Lily Turner. The names chalked up on the board by Miss Hill, the headmistress. These are the ones who have passed the School Certificate. Now they’re leaving the school.

“Mam’s given me two shillings to get fancies to take home for tea, to celebrate. Come on to the confectioners with me to choose.”

“She must be right proud of you then, letting you go near the cake shop with all that much money.”

“I’ll get one for you too, if you like, she won’t mind. What do you want?” They lean their heads against the shop window and point out the iced fancies, pink and blue, with tiny sugar flowers in the centre of each square. “Look at that éclair, did you ever see so much cream?” Jessie can feel the water collecting at the edges of her tongue.

“You’d eat everything in this window, wouldn’t you Jessie?” laughs Hobbie. “I don’t know how you stay so tiny. Even Lil’ with all her tennis and cycling couldn’t stay fit if she ate the sweets you do! Why don’t you get a job here, you’d be in heaven?”

“Dad won’t let me, he says it’d kill me and I’d get so fat he’ll never get shot of me.” Jessie mourns. “My sister’s got me an interview with her manager in the department next week.”

“Your Dad’s right, haberdashery’s safer for you. You’re handy with keeping things nice. I’d like a job there. What you see in cakes, I reckon I see in rolls of ribbon and thread. All those colours.”

“But you’re too clever to be a shop girl. When you’ve finished at the Secretarial College you’ll have your nose up in the air and money rattling in your purse and you won’t even talk to us anymore.”

“Well if I do, you can always kick my foot from under me to bring me back down to earth.” Hobbie pauses while they push her for going on about her leg. “Or if I’ve so much money in my purse I can take us all out to tea in Lyons up in town. You could have as many cakes as you like.”

“What about you, Lily, have you heard back from the trams yet?”

“Yes, the entry interviews aren’t till next month. I’ve a whole three weeks’ holiday. My auntie wrote to Mam to ask if I want to go down to Bournemouth with them again.”

“Lookin’ after the kids?”

“Yes, but they’re getting older, it’s not so bad. We can swim loads and there’s tennis courts where we stay. When I’ve started work I don’t know how much time I’ll have for that.”

They’re in the front bedroom at Lily’s house, her mother’s bedroom. It’s been spring-cleaned for the occasion. Lily’s hair falls down her back, straight and pale.

“You’ve always had hair like a baby’s, Lil. Soft.”

“Still tangles, though. Ouch.” Lily closes her eyes and lets her friend comb the lengths. “Calms me down, that does.”

“You getting nervous, then?”

“A bit. Big day and all that. Wonder if Frank is nervous too?”

“Frank isn’t nervous of anything, he couldn’t be frightened of you!”

“Oh, I don’t know about that!” Lily jokes, but shakily. “You have got a nice touch, though, Hob. You should be in a hair salon, shouldn’t she Jessie?”

“She couldn’t take the standing up all day, could you Hob, with your leg? It half kills me still to be on the shop floor all day.”

“I suppose it does make my back ache more when I stand for long,” Maisie says gently. “The typing office is better, but I miss the chat. Miss Peters is damn strict about us talking. You must get to rattle on all you like with the customers, don’t you, Jessie?”

Jessie laughs, “Oh yes, it’s fatal when they get me going, they’d better watch out!”

“Thanks for getting me these ribbons, though. They’re beautiful.”

“It’ll be strange when you’re married, Lily,” Maisie sounds again like she used to, when Lily was her heroine and Hobbie suddenly got self-conscious about her short leg. “You will talk to us after, won’t you?”

Lily spins round and catches an arm round the shoulders of the other two. “Don’t be daft Hob, course I will! What’s a Frank compared to my Jessie and Maisie? We’re always going to be friends and nothing’s going to stop it. I promise.”

Jessie's tired again. All the doctors asking her questions and that young girl wanting her to say the same words over and over again, just as if she didn't understand and it was a foreign language. And the boy who took her to walk up and down the stairs. What was the point of that? Fiddle-arsing about with the damn frame.

The ward is deadly quiet. Jessie puts her hands over her ears to check, feels her wiry hair curling there. I'd better make tea; the hairdresser will be here soon.

Only the nurses make noise, almost shouting to pretend everyone is cheerful. The wall opposite is empty. What used to be there? What's happened to her with the wonky walk?

In the silence the crack of a plastic comb on the tiles makes her jump. Her eyes are milky and dull, but after a few seconds they wander from the bare wall to the curtains and sheets either side and locates the source of the noise on the floor beside the next door bed, just before the one with her clipboard picks it up and puts it on the table a few inches from the other woman's hands. “Stop that Lily. I shouldn't even give it back to you, should I?”

Lily doesn't move. The nurse turns away. After ten minutes, Lily wakes again and reaches for the comb. She strokes it through the thin grey strands falling straight from the failing ponytail. “Comb my hair? That's lovely, that's nice. Why isn't it like it was? Why can't I go back? Comb my hair? Comb my hair?”

The muttering goes on gently, then she thrown the comb on the floor, shattering the quiet.

We say we must go, the bus will be coming, we have to be home before it's too dark. Granny nods and smiles, "Good idea, yes." Sometimes the words come out as they are meant.

"We'll come again on Thursday, in two days. Dad's coming tomorrow isn't he? You look after yourself and we'll see you soon."

Her thin voice saves itself for this moment. "Don't leave me. It's all strangers here!"

We reach the windows at the end of the ward and turn to wave, the ritual since childhood. She waves back and gives her big smile as we turn and leave.

The End

Lily, Jessie and Maisie

The right of Rachel Escott to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. This work should not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the author's prior consent.

Rachel Escott
Flat 6
56-58 Lambs Conduit Street
Bloomsbury
London
WC1N 3LW

Tel: 020 7242 5373
Mobile: 07752 900 950
Email: info@rachelescott.co.uk