

After All This Time - Jess Amy Dixon

2014

When I wake up on the morning of my wedding day, it's still dark. The bright green numbers on the bedside clock-radio indicate it's 6:42 AM. The alarm won't go off until half past eight, but I know I won't get any more sleep. Lying still, I listen to the sound of Rose's breathing. I close my eyes again for a moment, and match mine to it.

After a couple of minutes, I sit up, lean over to kiss my sleeping fiancée's forehead, then slip out of bed, pull on my robe, and go to the kitchen. I switch on the coffee machine and, while the pot fills, pop two slices of bread into the toaster.

I'm munching my breakfast and reading my book when Rose appears in the kitchen doorway just after seven.

"Hi, Sweetheart." I get up to pour her a cup of coffee. "Couldn't sleep either?"

She shakes her head. "No." A small laugh. "Anyone would think we were nervous!"

"Well," I say. "This has been a long time coming."

She smiles more broadly, and I fall in love all over again. So many times over the years, I have been sure this day would never come. When we met, the very idea was unimaginable.

Rose never stopped believing that things would change and that when they did, we'd still be around to see it. She always was the more optimistic of the two of us. "I don't care if we're a hundred before it happens," she said once, sometime in the mid eighties. "One day, Lillian, I will marry you." It didn't take quite as long as that, as it turned out, though I'm 71 now and she'll be 70 next month.

A few years ago, when the Civil Partnerships Act passed, we talked about whether we should settle for this small win and tie the knot. I said I thought we should, for the legal protections it would afford us if nothing else. With both of us in our sixties by then, so it wasn't like we had forever to wait. But Rose was adamant.

"No," she said then, when I raised the subject over dinner. "It's the principle. We should have fully equal rights under the law, and until then we shouldn't condone this half-arsed attempt at placating us."

When the marriage equality bill was finally signed into law last year, we just held each other and cried tears of joy. On Christmas Day, I took my grandmother's diamond ring out of the drawer where it had been waiting for decades, and asked Rose to marry me.

We help each other get ready. Rose zips up my dress for me, then sits facing the mirror while I braid her long hair. My grey eyes meet her blue ones in the mirror and, just for a moment, I feel like I am nineteen years old again.

“Remember the first time I did your hair?” I asked her.

“The night we snuck out of College after curfew to go dancing with the boys from Trinity?” A grin spreads across her face. I wonder if she, too, is remembering creeping back into Newnham past the Porters’ Lodge at three in the morning.

“They were all over us but even then, I only had eyes for you.”

She lets out a snort of laughter. “Pity it took you another two years to tell me,” she teases.

The memory is still electrifying in its vividness. We were in our final year, with just weeks to go until our last exams. We were studying together in my room in College, me sitting on the bed and she cross-legged on the floor. I still can’t pinpoint exactly what possessed me to tell her, to try to give voice to the unnamed feelings.

“Rose?”

“Mm?”

“I’m going to miss you so much.”

She looked up and smiled at me, running a hand through her waist-length dark hair. “Silly thing,” she said. “I’m not going anywhere. We’re just graduating, that’s all. We’ll still see each other all the time.”

My heart was pounding so hard I thought I might faint. But I had to get the words out, because if I didn’t tell her now, I never would. “I don’t know what it means,” I garbled, tripping over my own words in an effort to get them out before I lost my nerve. “But I feel like I just... want to be with you. Always.”

I dropped my eyes back to my book as the air grew very still. After a moment, I heard Rose put down her book and cross to the door. I closed my eyes when it clicked shut.

That’s it, Lillian, I told myself. You’ve blown it and now she’s probably going to tell everyone you’re a freak and never speak to you again.

She said my name, and I jumped as I realised she was still there. She came over and knelt on the floor by the bed, in front of me. She took both my hands in hers and then, somehow, her lips were on mine and I knew that I was lost.

Fifty years later, and I still wake up each day and thank the universe I took the chance on telling Rose the truth. It hasn’t always been easy, of course. My parents didn’t speak to us for five years after we began living openly as a couple. They eventually relented, but my relationship with my

father never fully recovered and when he died, I learned I'd been left out of his Will. Rose's parents were progressive and welcomed me into the family, but they both died when we were in our early thirties. We would have loved to have children, but of course it was far more difficult for two women back then. Then there was my brush with breast cancer five years ago.

But throughout all of this and so much more, we've propped each other up and had each other's backs. We've travelled, had successful careers, built our own chosen family out of the friends we've made. An ordinary life, in so many ways, but one underpinned by an extraordinary love.

I swallow the lump that has suddenly risen to my throat and tuck a stray tendril of hair behind Rose's ear. "You look beautiful," I tell her. And she does. Just as beautiful as the eighteen year old girl I first saw across the Newnham College library in Michaelmas Term of 1962. The girl who would later sit down next to me in the dining hall, introduce herself, and become my best friend. The girl who turned into this woman, the love of my life.

She stands, and folds me into her arms. I can feel her heartbeat.

"The car will be here any minute," she says. "Shall we go and get married?"

"That's the best idea you've had in fifty-two years," I tell her.

An hour later, and we're facing one another, her hands clasped in mine, listening to the celebrant tell the room our story. My dress is white, hers the same blue as her eyes.

"Rose and Lillian met at Cambridge in 1962 and became firm friends. By the time they graduated, they realised they had fallen in love and wanted to spend their lives together. They have been together ever since and they say they are still as happy now as the day they met." Rose's eyes are shining and I feel tears pricking at my own. I take a moment to look around at our assembled friends and what's left of our families— just my brother, my niece and her daughter, and two of Rose's cousins.

"When Rose and Lillian first met, the idea that two women would someday be able to get married was a far-off dream. But they never stopped hoping and today, after more than fifty years together, they're thrilled to finally be able to say "I do." A wedding is a celebration of love, and what could be more worthy of celebration than a love that has endured for decades even when the world did not want to recognise it? I hope you'll join me in wishing our beautiful brides many more wonderful years together."

I've chosen to read our favourite poem during the ceremony. *The life that I have is all that I have, and the life that I have is yours...* We read our vows to one another. In keeping with the way we've always done things, we wrote them together. I reach out and brush a tear from Rose's cheek,

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before I realise that mine have spilled over, too. Our hands both shake very slightly as we slip the rings onto one another's fingers.

And then it's done, papers are signed, and we're declared married. I think our family and friends are applauding us, but all I can see is her. We're laughing and crying and part of me still cannot believe we lived long enough to see this moment.

I kiss her, this woman I've loved for most of my life. *My wife, at last.* After all this time.