

## Three Short Pieces by Jo Salmon

### A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

A dark red room. A heavy room. I wear this room like a monstrous topcoat in a hot and stifling summer. It is a locked room and one from which, I fear, I will never be permitted to leave.

Here I have been since the day of my wedding which, by my reckoning, is four years past. I knew not then that this was the life my husband, Aaron, had planned for me.

Sometimes, the notion of rescue or escape enters me. What must mother and father think has become of me? Do they believe me dead or gone abroad? I do not know what my rights might be. I know that, as his wife, I am the property of Aaron, listed as one of his goods and chattels. And did I not, in the presence of almighty God, promise to obey?

I have before thought of alerting a passer-by, even a constable to my fate by knocking on the window. But what punishment might await me if it were to transpire that Aaron is within his rights to keep his wife just as he so pleases?

His study is situated directly above this room and I often hear his footsteps. I also hear the arduous tick of the mantle clock and the carriages that pass along the cobbled street outside my window.

On top of the grand piano-forte are sepia photographs of my husband's relations that I whisper to in an effort at a conversation. Sometimes, I fancy, they whisper their most unfriendly replies. I am forbidden to touch the keys of the piano-forte lest I disturb Aaron at his work.

There are no means by which I might amuse myself. I have no book to read or embroidery and so I stare and listen to the mantle clock mark the passing of my time.

Sarah, the maid, brings me a meal and clean clothes and changes the chamber-pot once a day but even she is under instruction not to exchange even the briefest of pleasantries with me.

Occasionally, but not often, Aaron comes. Even then I must utter no sound at all. I have had no bleed since his last visit and now my breasts are tender, my waist thickening and I fear I am with-child. I do not know what will happen if this proves to be the case. Will my child be confined with me or will he be destined to spend his young life all alone, locked away separately from me? Will I ever be permitted to see him, even on a rare occasion, say, to give him a kiss for his birthday? Will he be taught to hate me or allowed to know me?

I wait. I whisper. I listen. I listen to the footsteps of Aaron, the tick of the mantle clock and the cruel whisperings from the photographs on top of the piano-forte.

I feel my child swelling within me and dread what might follow his silent birth into this dark red, heavy room.

### **INAPPROPRIATE**

"Did I know? Did I know all along? If only I had taken notice of that dream I had with Lizzie and the dwarf.

I had that dream. Does that mean that my subconscious knew all along what was happening? Does that mean that I knew what was going on and could have stopped it?

Waking up and him not being in bed next to me. Having the feeling that something was not quite right. Should I have analysed that feeling further at the time? Got to the bottom of it? The anxiety I felt when going out, leaving them alone together but not being able to quite put my finger on anything.

I should have known. Did I know? Did I know all along?

It started to dawn on me not until some time after Lizzie had told me, that all these feelings were connected. They were all connected and I should have made all the links and connections long ago. But I didn't. All the links and connections were not made until after all the damage was done. When it was too late. If I had made the right links and connections I would have known. Would have put an end to it. Was I told?

I remember being in a training session at work and there being a list of symptoms that children will show. 'This is rubbish,' I thought, 'my kids have most of those symptoms.' Was I told? Did I ignore what I was being told and carry on because the truth was too difficult to deal with? Did I need to perpetuate the inner myth of normal, functional family life to such an extent that I ignored what was going on in front of me?

What would I have done if I had been told earlier? When he was still living with us. What would I have done? Would I have believed her? Did she tell me with tears and unexplained side pains?"

Lizzie comes downstairs and tells her she cannot sleep. Lizzie's Mum has drunk part of a bottle of red wine and feels mellow, open, talkative. 'Come sit with me a while.' she says and, 'What did you do at school today?'

Lizzie says that they did sex education but there were still things she didn't understand, didn't like to ask.

'like what?' she asks and readies herself for the role of Mother handing down ancient feminine wisdom. Lizzie wants to know about appropriate behaviours.

She takes a deep breath and a deeper gulp of wine and tells Lizzie that the important thing is that she feels comfortable with what she does.

'If you don't think you are ready, don't do it. The boy you are with should understand and if he doesn't, then maybe you shouldn't be with him'. She wonders if she is being too liberal. Does a girl of eleven need firmer guidelines, boundaries. But she doesn't want to create taboos. Should she be having this conversation under the influence of wine?

'One thing that would be inappropriate would be if an older man wanted to go to bed with you,' she says, 'an adult knows it is wrong to go to bed with a child. He would know that it is against the law. Is morally wrong.' 'Does that mean that all the times that Dad got into bed with me, that was inappropriate?' asks Lizzie and suddenly the alarm bells ring so loudly, causing butterflies and a pounding of the heart. She knows. She knows that she is not going to be told that he got into bed with her for any innocent, fatherly reason.

She says calmly that she doesn't know, that it depends on what he did on getting into Lizzie's bed. Lizzie blushes painfully and says 'nothing'. She thinks that Lizzie wishes she had said nothing.

She tells Lizzie that it's alright, that it is safe to tell.

'I think he thought that I was you' says Lizzie.

She knows. She knows for a fact that he never thought for a minute that Lizzie was her. BASTARD! SLIMY FUCKING BASTARD!

He would slide into Lizzie's bed. He would let Lizzie think that he had fallen asleep and then he would touch her, stroke her, caress her.

She herself feels abused. Her daughter knows things about her own sexual experience that she has no business knowing. She feels naked and exposed in the presence of her daughter. Lizzie starts to cry and says she's really sorry. She holds her daughter and strokes her hair, though now their contact has been soiled, sexualised, made inappropriate.

She tells Lizzie that she has done nothing wrong, that she was right to tell. She feels strange when Lizzie says she did do something wrong, that sometimes it felt nice. Other times Lizzie went to bed in knickers and pyjamas to make herself difficult to touch.

'You are not to blame,' She chants 'You've done nothing wrong.' She asks why Lizzie didn't tell before.

'I did' says Lizzie.

SHE TOLD HER? WHEN? WHEN DID SHE TELL HER? SURELY SHE WOULD HAVE REMEMBERED? HAD DONE SOMETHING. DOES SHE JUST THINK SHE TOLD HER? DID SHE

HEAR HER? DID SHE IGNORE HER? WHEN? WHAT KIND OF MOTHER WAS SHE?

Lizzie pleads with her not to tell anyone but she knows that the knowledge is too much for her alone. She has to tell. She knows they will both need help. A crime has been committed. A serious offence. He may have done this before. He may be doing it again. They will only talk to those who need to know. Caring, sensitive, trained, professional people. People who'll know what to do. People who'll know how to cope.

Lizzie is calmer and a little more reassured and she needs to be alone. She sends Lizzie up to bed and opens another bottle of wine. She paces up and down the living room, muttering through gritted teeth, 'BASTARD. DIRTY FUCKING SLIMY BASTARD.'

For the first and only time in her life she phones the Samaritans. She needs to talk. The knowledge is too big. It helps. She feels calm enough afterwards to be able to fall asleep in the chair.

Two years on and Lizzie has changed from child to surly adolescent.

Two years on and the guilt is still growing.

She is the woman who chose to marry a man who would make her daughter dirty.

She has made her daughter dirty.

Two years on and they have talked to the police, the social services, counsellors and family therapists and the guilt and dirt won't go.

Two years on and it is all still her fault that she didn't heed the signs.

She ignored the dreams.  
She didn't make the links and connections in time.

Two years on and the judge directs the jury to find him 'not guilty' on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

Six years on and the guilt still grows.

He has moved on.

## I DO

I was always lonely here. Even as a child, it was always my parents' house and I was always lonely. No-one to talk to about it all. No-one to go to, to cry it all out, to tell how unhappy I was. To be unhappy was to be ungrateful and to be ungrateful was to be guilty and outside. An outsider. An unwelcome guest in my family's home.

Sometimes, I had my own room but always with the knowledge that this could change at anytime depending on new circumstances. New babies. Foster children. These rooms were never really private places. After my mother found a song I wrote and asked me accusingly if this was how I felt, there was always the knowledge that the room could be searched for evidence if I went out. Evidence of unhappiness. Ungratefulness. So I didn't keep a diary. All my unhappiness I kept inside and if my face betrayed me and looked "so bloody miserable", I said I didn't know why. I still do that.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know.'

And often I don't. Or do I? Is it just that I have never been allowed to express my unhappiness, never learned how, been conditioned to hide it, to keep it to myself? I don't want to be or seem ungrateful.

I was always lonely here. I am lonely everywhere. Any time that I am unhappy I am lonely because I can never speak about it. Am I guilty of ungratefulness?

I climb the stairs of my parents' house to the room I am to share for the night with my sister. Although my urge is to spend the night crying the unhappiness out of me, I won't. My sister might hear and ask me why. I would have to answer, 'I don't know' and I might seem ungrateful.

My wedding dress hangs on a hanger near the window. It's hideous ivory beauty mocks me, frightens me. From tomorrow and that day forward I must be a grown-up. The cars are booked, the flowers arranged, the buffet has been paid for, the presents bought, the hen-night has been performed and the church has been cleared of God. Everything is ready. Everything meticulously prepared. The build-up to The Big Day has taken of everyone's precious time and hard earned money.

And I have changed my mind.

'This time tomorrow you'll be a married woman.' Says my sister.

'I know. I'm so excited' I reply.

'Good-night.' We say to each other.

I curl up in the single bed in a foetal position with my head under the covers and I suck my thumb. I want to feel safe and protected and loved but I don't feel any of these things. I feel exposed, abused, raped. I pray to God to be my loving Father and for him to grant me comfort. He strokes my head and does his best to reassure me, telling me that everything will be alright. But this makes me feel even more like a frightened, vulnerable, abandoned child and I start to cry under the covers, quietly so my sister won't hear. I am so lonely. So frightened. So unhappy. I cry myself to sleep.

I wake up early the next morning and the house is quiet. The sun shines cruelly through the window, forcing into me the memory that today I must be bright and cheerful. I lay in the bed and stare at the ceiling, willing time to stand still and not to stir the rest of the house into life or the

chaos of a wedding day.

To other people, it is all about The Wedding. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Horseshoes and chimney sweeps. Timing. Who gets in what car at what time with who. The Perfect Day. The Wedding Day.

I want to run away.

I want to be all alone on a ship, to stand on deck and look out at the vast horizon.

I must not make a sound. I must not wake the house. Today is the day that they hand me over to another and the day that I sign to say that I agree to give myself to a man who is also a member of the Thought-Police. Who asks 'What are you looking like that for?' 'What do you mean by that?' I still won't be able to keep a diary.

'He's SO good for you,' they say.

'He gives you self-discipline.'

What do they mean by that? When has there been a time that I didn't have self-discipline?

The telephone rings downstairs and I hear my mother's muffled, ruffled tones. The Wedding Day has begun. It has been agreed that the time to put The Dress on will be two 'o' clock. So I dress in jeans and t-shirt, put on my bright and cheerful face and go down to find my mother in the kitchen. 'But you MUST eat SOMETHing!' she says, 'You've got a VERY busy day ahead of you.'

'I'll have something when I get back.' I tell her. I have insisted on going for a walk on my own, much to mother's horror.

I cross the road to the park and again find myself aboard a ship that carries me off, far away. I feel a calm melancholy and resign myself to the ever-present sadness. Early dog-walkers are worlds away from me. For them there is no Wedding Day. Nor is there for the geese on the lake, the morning mist or the wind that whispers through the leaves.

'Where have you been?' Demands my mother. I think she suspects my feelings of wanting to disappear from the whole boiling. 'The hairdresser will be here in a minute. Go and have a bath and put your dressing gown on. You don't want to ruin your hair by taking that t-shirt off later. And don't forget, when your hair's done you're NOT TO MOVE'.

I do as I am told.

Panic and chaos ensue. The flowers are late and one of the bridesmaids has a chip in her nail-varnish. The hairdresser tousles and pokes the sharp end of a metal comb into my scalp. I close my eyes and see the horizon, hear the cry of seagulls and the comforting hum of the ship's engines. My mother makes sandwiches. The telephone rings. Dad wanders about, not sure where to put himself.

My hair is finished and I feel as if I have been tied up. Dad is watching the lunchtime news. I don't know what to do now. I feel as if I ought to be joining in the flouncing and flustering, losing things and finding them, helping. I am afraid of my having to sit still. I am afraid my face might give me away. I might look unhappy. I might look ungrateful. If I sit still I might cry and then my eyelids will puff up and go red and mother will say 'That's the whole day RUINED!'

I do my make-up. My mother does her make-up. The bridesmaids do their make up. Dad flicks through the channels looking for more news while we swap and share lipsticks and eye-shadow.

We have another coffee and it occurs to me that a most of the rushing, hurried business of the day has all been centred around the making and drinking of coffee.

'This will be your last one. You don't want to get coffee on your dress.'  
My mother has always had a way of telling me what I do and don't want.

And now it is time to put on The Dress. The Dress. That my mother chose and I spent months and months paying for. The main reason that I am still going through with this journey into a deeper level of Hell. I am alone while I put it on over tight basque and suspenders. I look in the mirror and see a woman in a marshmallow straight-jacket. My mother comes in and tells me I look lovely and puts my head-dress and veil on me. As she does this I close my eyes. I find myself walking towards the rail of the ship.

My mother calls my sister in to take photographs. I feel as self-conscious and as conspicuous as I would had they been taking pornographic shots. My Dad comes in, wearing his suit and tells me I look lovely. He does as he's told and stands next to me so we can have photographs taken together. I have an idea that he also feels self-conscious and just for an instant I feel a connection with him. We are united in our over-exposure.

We all sit in the chintz living room in chintzy clothing, stinking of perfume, too stiff and made-up to move and we wait for the cars.

'Not long now.' Says my mother from under her big hat.

'No, not long now.' Says my beflowered sister.

I close my eyes and stand improbably poised on the rail of the ship, my arms outstretched, feeling the wind, feeling alive.

Now my mother and bridesmaids have gone. My Dad and I stand awkwardly silent, waiting for our car. I climb in carefully so as not to crumple The Dress. The ribbon tied to the front flaps about and inside smells of air-freshener and the flowers that have been laid on the parcel shelf. I feel nauseous.

'Alright?' Asks Dad.

'Yep.' I lie.

On arrival at the church, I stand at the entrance with my arm through my Dad's, waiting to hear the Bridal March, my cue to go in.

I close my eyes. They move from the horizon and look down into the depths of the cold, black sea. I jump.