



Mary Monk's story of

Lily Rose



When I was a teenager, alone with my boyfriend in the drawing room, we would suddenly hear Mother singing the Christian hymn “Rock of Ages” in her glorious contralto voice—a warning that we had to behave ourselves before she entered the room.

My mother, Lily Rose Eaton, was born on Christmas Day 1892, in London, England. She had beautiful skin all her life, and thick red hair. She was the youngest of two girls and three boys, and she was always considered the baby of the family. Her father was a “job master”: he owned a fleet of carriages and horses for hire, which in time became a branch of Daimler Hire (a company that still rents cars today). They did weddings and ferried debutantes to be presented at court.

When Lily was eleven, a new family moved in across the street, including an attractive fourteen-year-old boy named Arthur. The Davies family had just moved back to Britain from the United States, after several years abroad. Young Arthur would lead Lily’s pony to school in Cockfosters, North London.

In 1912, Arthur went off to Canada for health reasons; once there he found work as a cowboy for rancher Dick Price in Stettler, Alberta. Before he left England, he asked Lily to marry him. A year later, he returned to England because his father was terminally ill. Young Lily didn’t have much time to enjoy her fiancé’s return, however, before the war broke out in 1914, and Arthur enlisted with the Canadian Army. Despite having been born in the United States, his loyalty was to Canada, and he joined the Fort Garry Horse Regiment in England.

Lily, it must be noted, was also very adept with horses, riding sidesaddle as was the custom for ladies at the time. From an early age she could drive a four-in-hand—a large carriage drawn by four horses. During the Great War, Lily graduated from horses to motor vehicles and became chauffeuse to self-made tea magnate, provisions millionaire, and yachtsman Sir Thomas Lipton.

Although the war separated Lily and Arthur, it could not dampen their affections for one another. Lily always remembered coming downstairs in November 1917, to open the curtains in the front room, imagining the wonderful moment when she would see her fiancé again later that day. Instead, she fell over a body on the floor. It was Arthur. He was filthy, having come straight from the trenches. And she was in her oldest dressing gown and curlers. What a reunion!

They were married a few days later, and, in March 1919, my sister Peggy was born. I followed on November 11, 1920, and my brother John in 1927.

Through my mother, Arthur was offered the job of manager of Sir Thomas Lipton’s Canadian ranch following the war. Lily, however, refused to leave England. Although she could be fearless about many things, she was terrified of leaving family and familiar territory, and never once travelled abroad.

While we were growing up in Ashford, Middlesex (where my father owned a bakery), we were often subjected to the various fads that Lily espoused. One of these was Baber’s Shoes, which resembled nothing less than banana skins and cost a small fortune. Unfortunately for us at the time, Father used to agree to Mother’s whims and went his own way, leaving us powerless against her will.

Mother had a trained contralto voice, which she used to great effect in amateur concerts—solo and with a baritone—and at church events accompanied by an organ, which she easily overcame with the power of her voice. Her favourites included Bach’s “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” and selections from the opera Samson and Delilah.

In addition to spending her free time singing, Lily served on a number of committees and as president of the Inner Wheel, the women's branch of the Rotary Club. As Lily and Arthur were very involved in their community, it seemed they were always attending various social functions and doing their best to help out others. At one Rotary dinner, sensitive-skinned Lily was horrified to see a long hair on the ample bosom of Mrs. Justice, a Rotarian wife. Imagining how ticklish this must prove, Lily leaned over to brush off the offending hair, only to discover it was growing there.

Not even the Second World War could slow down Lily's social calendar. In her late forties at the outbreak of the war, Lily threw open the doors of her large house to officers and enlisted men alike. When the air raid siren went off, there would be people taking cover in the air raid shelter and under the stairs. She was a favourite of the many visitors we had at that time, and often could be found sitting at the bottom of the staircase, flirting like mad.

As a teetotaler, Lily never drank at any of her parties, but she did allow drink in the house for special occasions. On the first Christmas I took my future husband home in 1945, he deliberately spiked her lemonade with gin. "Oh Harold," she said, "I've never tasted such good lemonade. What about another one?"

In the 1950s, Mother had the first of two strokes. It left her with a limp, and forced her to give up her presidency of the Inner Wheel. It paralyzed her right side, but even it could not deter her. She taught herself to use her left hand for writing, typing, and other tasks. At sixty-four, she nursed Arthur while he was dying of cancer, and afterwards kept what the family called "Mother's Squirrel Box." In this file box, she kept every document relating to home and business. Right up until her death on January 31, 1966, when she had her second stroke at the age of 73, she was in charge of my father's holding company, and knew where every penny went.

I miss my mother terribly, and only wish she had seen me on stage, but she never approved of my acting ambitions.

When I look back over her life, there are moments that still transcend time and space, and bring me back to what it was like to have her as my mother. One of these moments happened during my sojourn in the Women's Land Army, an agricultural labour force organized to help out with the war effort. I had a disagreement with the woman I was working for, and went home for the weekend upset. I was 21, but Mother came to tuck me in. She smelled of lavender and Coty face powder, and remember saying to her, "I'm so glad you're my mother."

And I always will be.