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Cookie

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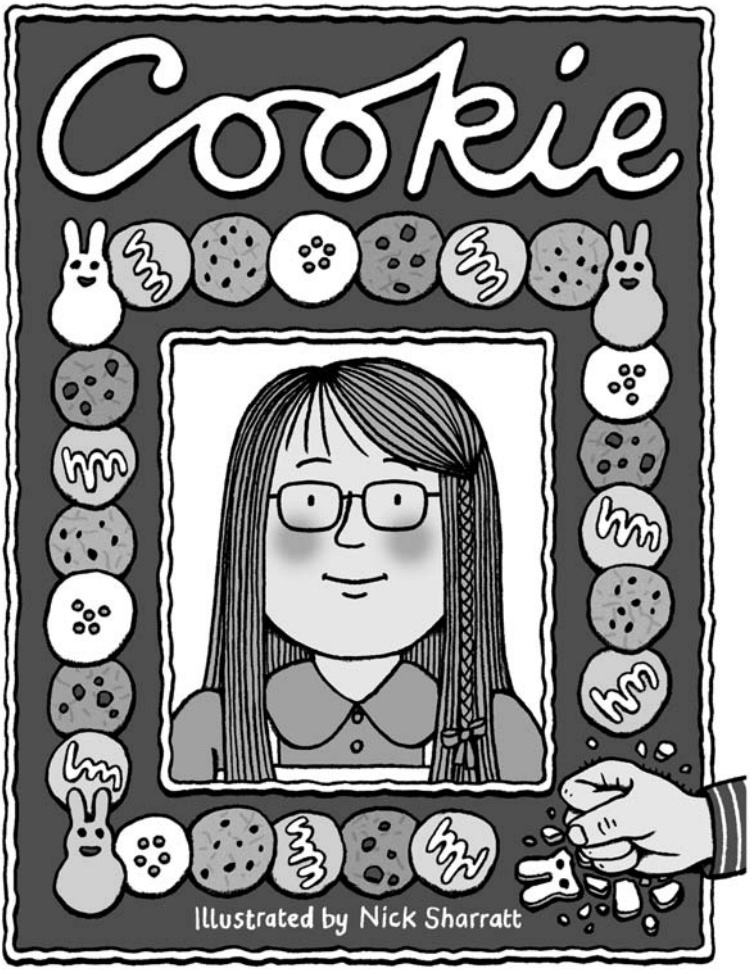
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Jacqueline Wilson



CORGI



One

I turned on the television. I timed it perfectly. The music was just starting. I saw the cartoon picture of Sam and Lily spinning round, Sam waving, Lily delicately nibbling a carrot. They whirled faster and faster while a voice sang, '*Who do you want to see*?'

Little children piped up: '*Sam and Lily in the Rabbit Hutch*!'

I sang it too, but very quietly, just mouthing the words. There was only Mum at home and she was out in the kitchen. She wouldn't mind a bit if I wanted to watch a baby programme like *Rabbit Hutch* but I still felt embarrassed about it. Imagine if some of the really mean snooty girls at school, Skye Wortley or Emily Barrington or Arabella Clyde-Smith, came barging through our front door and caught me watching a programme for five-year-olds. They teased me enough anyway. I could hear them screaming with laughter over Beauty and her lickle bunny-wunny friend in the Rabbit Hutch.

I shut my eyes tight.

'Hey there!' said a soft gentle voice from the television.

I opened my eyes. There was Sam smiling at me, the real man, not the funny cartoon picture of him. I smiled back at him. I couldn't help it. He had such a lovely funny grin. His brown eyes shone and he ducked his head a little so his soft shiny brown hair flopped across his forehead.

'How are you doing?' Sam asked.

'I'm fine,' I whispered.

He nodded and then looked down at Lily. He was holding her close against his chest. He needed both hands because there was a lot of Lily. Her lop ears brushed the collar of Sam's checked shirt, while her back paws dangled past the belt of his jeans. Sam held her firmly so she felt safe. She relaxed against him, slowly blinking her blue eyes. She knew he would never ever drop her.

'I wonder what you've been doing today?' said Sam, looking at me.

'School,' I muttered.

'Which one?' Sam asked.

'Lady Mary Mountbank. I started there last year,' I said, sighing.

'Is it that bad?' said Sam sympathetically.

I considered. It wasn't *all* bad. Rhona Marshall had asked me to her birthday party. She'd given my arm a special squeeze as she gave me the pink invitation card and said, 'I do hope you can come.'

I liked Rhona a lot, even though she was best friends with Skye. Rhona never ever joined in the horrible Beauty routine. She just looked embarrassed and raised her eyebrows at me and once she whispered, 'Take no notice.' This was sweet of her, but how could I *help* noticing when they were chanting stuff right in my face.

Miss Woodhead had been kind to me too. She specially liked my Roman project. I know this sounds as if I'm showing off, but she said I was a joy to teach. She said it quietly just to me and I went bright pink I was so pleased. But one of the others heard her and by break time half the class were muttering it and then making vomit noises. Skye made such loud vomit noises she nearly made herself really sick all down her school skirt. That would have been great.

I didn't have time to gabble all this to Sam so I just shrugged my shoulders. He'd understand.

'Lily likes *her* school,' he said. 'But her lessons are easy-peasy. One lettuce plus one carrot plus one cabbage equals one big bunny snack! Just so she doesn't get *too* fat I've made her a new rabbit run in the garden. Do you want to go and do your exercises, Lily?'

She nodded.

'Shall we go and watch her?' Sam asked.

I nodded.

Sam carried Lily outside into the garden and gently lowered her into her new run. He'd put carrots and cabbages and lettuces at the very end of the run. Lily spotted them straight away and gambolled off like a greyhound, her ears flapping.

'Would you run like that if your mum put your tea at the end of the garden?' Sam joked.

Mum and I often did have tea in the garden, special picnics. Sometimes we even put our coats and scarves on and wrapped rugs round us and had *winter* picnics.

'You bet, Sam,' I said.

Mum always made us magic picnics. She didn't *cook* anything, she didn't ever really cook, but she made each picnic special. She sometimes chose a colour theme, so we'd have bananas and pineapple and cheese pasties and custard tarts and lemonade, or tomato quiche and apples and plums and Kit-Kats and raspberry juice. Sometimes she'd choose a letter of the alphabet and we'd have sausages and sandwiches and strawberries and shop-bought sponge cake carefully cut by Mum into an S shape.

When I was little she'd lay places at the picnics for my dolls and teddies, or she'd let me dress up in my Disney princess dress and she'd serve everything on the best china and curtsy every time she spoke to me.

I loved loved loved my mum. Sam understood. He said the word 'mum' softly, knowing it was a special word.

'I wonder if you miss your mum, Lily?' said Sam, squatting down beside her.

Lily nibbled a lettuce leaf, not really listening.

'Remember when you were really little, Lily, just a weeny newborn baby rabbit?' said Sam.

He looked at me. 'Do you know, she was only *this* big,' Sam said, cupping his hands and holding them only a little way apart.

I cupped my hands too, imagining a little fluffy baby Lily quivering under my clasp.

'Do you remember when *you* were just a weeny newborn baby person?' said Sam. 'I bet you weren't much bigger. Do you have a photo of you when you were a little baby?'

I nodded. Mum still had that photo inside her wallet, though it had got creased and crumpled. Dad had the same picture in a silver photo frame on his big desk at work. It was so embarrassing. I was big and bald and I didn't even have a nappy on. My belly button was all taped up and you could see my bottom.

'I bet you looked cute then,' said Sam, chuckling.

I didn't smile back at him. I nibbled my lip miserably. I didn't look remotely cute when I was a baby, but at least I was cuddly. Mum said

she held me all day and half the night too she was so happy to hold me. She said she cried because she was so thrilled she'd got a little girl.

Dad cried too.

Most dads don't cry, especially very very very fierce dads like mine. My dad actually cries a lot. He cries at films on the television, even children's cartoon films like *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*. He cries at the news on television, when a little child is rescued in an earthquake or when a man with artificial legs runs in a race. He cries heaps whenever his favourite wins on *The X-Factor* or *Search for a Star*. He said I was his little star with that special X-factor the day I was born. He scooped the newborn baby me out of Mum's arms and cradled me close.

'Just what I wanted! A little girl at last,' he crooned. 'And such a beautiful little girl too, with those chubby cheeks and big blue eyes. Just wait till your hair grows, my darling. I bet you'll be a little blonde like your mum. You're going to turn into a perfect beauty.'

Then he let out such a yelp I started crying.

'I'll take her, Gerry,' Mum said anxiously.

'Beauty! Don't you get it? That's her name, our little sweetheart's name! We'll call her Beauty,' said Dad. 'Isn't that a great name for her, Dilly?'

Mum promised me she thought it an *awful*

name, but you didn't dare argue with Dad, even in those days.

I was christened Beauty. It's a ridiculous name. It would be a silly show-off shallow name even if I just magically happened to be beautiful. But I am so *not* beautiful. I don't take after Mum, I take after Dad. I am small and squat, with a big tummy. My blue eyes turned green as gooseberries when I was still a baby, and you can't really see them anyway because I have to wear glasses. My hair's mouse, long and lank. Mum tries to tie it up with slides and ribbons but they always fall out. You can see why Emily and Arabella and Skye tease me so. I am a laughing stock because of my name.

I wasn't laughing. I had silly baby tears in my eyes now, safe with Sam and Lily.

'Hey, don't cry,' said Sam.

I sniffed, ashamed. 'Not crying,' I mumbled.

It seemed to be raining inside my glasses. I poked my finger up and tried to make it work like a windscreen wiper.

'Why don't you clean them on the corner of your T-shirt? Your glasses will get all smeary wiping them like that,' Sam said softly. 'So what are you *not* crying about?'

'My silly name,' I sniffed. 'Beauty!'

'I think Beauty's the most special name in all the world.'

'No it's not. And it doesn't suit me,' I said tearfully. 'Skye Wortley at school says I should be renamed Plug Ugly.'

'Silly old Skye,' said Sam. 'I expect she's so mean because she's jealous of you.'

'Oh, Sam, that's the first time I've ever heard you say something stupid,' I said. 'As if someone like Skye would ever be jealous of *me*. Skye's got lovely long wavy fair hair and big blue eyes – *sky* blue – and she's clever and she's great at dancing and she's got Rhona as a best friend and – and—'

'Well, you've got sand-coloured hair and great green eyes and you're even cleverer than Skye and who cares about dancing and you've got Lily and me for your best friends,' said Sam.

'Truly? You and Lily are really my best friends?'

'Absolutely definitely, aren't we, Lily?' said Sam, bending down and scratching her head. She stopped nibbling the cabbage, looked up, and nodded her head so vigorously her ears flapped forwards.

'Well, you're my best friends for ever ever ever,' I whispered rapturously.

We smiled at each other, the three of us.

'See you tomorrow, Beauty,' Sam whispered.

Then he raised his voice.

'Nearly time to go now. Time we were getting back to the hutch, Lily. You've had enough tea now.

Maybe it's time for *your* tea? I wonder what you're having? Lily's favourite tea is raw cabbage, as you can see, but somehow I don't think raw cabbage is *your* favourite best-ever food. Still, maybe your pet likes it. Why don't you send me a painting or drawing of *your* pet's favourite food? Send it to Sam at the Rabbit Hutch, OK? Bye then.' He waved, then picked up Lily and helped her waggle her paw.

'Lily's waving goodbye too,' said Sam.

'Bye, Sam! Bye, Lily!' I said.

Rabbit Hutch faded, and the cartoon Sam and Lily whirled round and round and the voice said, 'Who have we just seen?'

'*Sam and Lily in the Rabbit Hutch*,' I sang.

'*Sam and Lily in the Rabbit Hutch*,' Mum sang too, coming in from the kitchen. 'Do you want a little tea-time snack, sweetheart? I've bought a couple of those little pink iced buns, the ones with jam inside.'

'But Dad said I wasn't to eat them any more,' I said.

I'd had a pink iced bun when we were all going round the Flowerfields shopping centre. I'd bitten into it and jam spurted all down the front of my best blue frilly top. Dad had knocked my hand hard so that the bun flew out onto the floor.

'Don't you ever buy her that pink jammy muck

again,' he'd hissed at Mum. 'Look, she's ruined her best little blouse. She didn't ought to be stuffing her face anyway, she's getting ginormous.'

Mum had meekly promised not to buy me any more buns and had whipped me into the ladies' toilets to sponge all the jam off. I'd cried a little bit and she'd given me a hug but begged me to cheer up because I'd make Dad worse if he saw me with a long face. I'd done my best, though I'd felt particularly mournful as the pink buns were my favourites.

'Dad won't know if you gobble it up now,' said Mum. 'Hang on half a tick.'

She disappeared into the kitchen and came back with two pink buns on her best little green-leaf cake plates.

'Here, I'll keep you company,' said Mum.

We both sat cross-legged on the furry white hearth rug, eating our buns.

'Yum, yum,' I said.

'Yep, yummy yummy,' said Mum.

'I'd better not spill jam all down me again,' I said.

'Me too!' said Mum, licking the icing on her bun as if it was an ice lolly.

We munched companionably.

'M-u-m?'

'Yes?'

'Mum, why do you think Dad gets so . . .' I couldn't think of the right word.

'Cross?' Mum suggested.

Dad didn't just get cross. It was way way way more scary. He was like a volcano. You never quite knew when he'd erupt and explode and engulf you in molten lava.

Mum wriggled forward on her bottom until her knees nearly touched mine.

'I don't know why he's like that,' she said. 'I used to think it was just me. I know I can be a bit silly sometimes – Silly Dilly, OK? But you're not silly, Beauty, you're the smartest little kid ever. He's got no reason whatsoever to yell at you the way he does. I wish I could figure out a way to stop him. I've tried talking to him about it but that just makes him rant even more.'

Mum looked so miserable I felt awful. I crammed the last bit of bun into my mouth and then put my arms round her.

'Don't worry about it, Mum. Dad's not cross *all* the time,' I said. 'Sometimes he can be the loveliest dad in the whole world.'

Sometimes.

Very very rarely.