

CELIA

(Passes sketches to ANNIE.)
I've a feeling the Miss Wilsons probably shower with their clothes still on.

CORA

Jess?

ANNIE

No, I was never..I wouldn't.

(Looking at sketches.)
Doin' something like this is a very different deal for a woman who's - a woman with - a woman of Jess's...

JESSIE

'Age'?

(They swing to see JESSIE at the door.)
Was 'age' the word cowering at the end of that row of dots?
(It was.)

ANNIE

Actually 'generation' I was going to / say -

JESSIE

I keep telling you, my dear. By the time I was compelled to retire I had been a teacher nearly fifty years.

ANNIE

Precisely! That's what I mean. So you have a reputation / to -

JESSIE

Had I finished?

ANNIE

Sorry Mrs Raistrick.

JESSIE

Being a teacher is a very singular profession. You watch the years advance with lengthening legs and shortening skirts in a relentless calibration of time passing. And what, you may ask, does it make you?

(No takers.)
An expert at being old.

ANNIE

Jess I really was just / meaning -

JESSIE

And the thing is girls -

MUSIC 17: WHAT AGE EXPECTS

HOW SILENTLY IT BEGINS.

(JESSIE has formed a small class.)

HOW SOFT COMES THE FIRST ATTACK
THE HAND RAISED TO HELP YOU STAND
THAT HOVERS AT YOUR BACK
NEXT THE GIRL WHO DOES YOUR HAIR
TALKS LIKE TWO OF YOU ARE THERE.
'SHALL WE' THIS, AND 'SHALL WE' THAT
SLOWLY CLANGS THE BELL OF DOOM
AN OLD GIRL'S IN THE ROOM

SO FIGHT, GIRLS, TO CLIMB THE STAIR
DON'T USE THE LIFT BECAUSE IT'S THERE
DON'T ACT THE COLOUR OF YOUR HAIR
ACT THE COLOUR OF YOUR HEART.

DON'T MAKE THE GREAT MISTAKE
BELIEVING THE NUMBERS ON YOUR CAKE
CUT DOWN THE FOOLS WHO BID YOU DO
WHAT AGE EXPECTS OF YOU

ANNIE

(Puts her hand up.)
Mrs. Raistrick what I -

JESSIE

(Gently puts Annie's hand down.)
SOON, FACED WITH HARDER DEEDS
SOME HELPFUL BUGGER INTERCEDES
AND GRADU'LLY YOU LET THEM DO
THINGS THAT ONCE WERE ASKED OF YOU
BUT GOD HELP THE AGED LEARN
TIME ONLY LEAVES A FRICTION BURN
AGE IS A FLESH WOUND ON THE SKIN -
NOT THE HEART, GIRLS, NOT THE HEART

SO DON'T MAKE THE GREAT MISTAKE
BELIEVING THE NUMBERS ON YOUR CAKE
CUT DOWN THE FOOLS WHO BID YOU DO
WHAT AGE EXPECTS.

SO WAKE AND BEWARE THE DAY
WHEN LIFE STARTS ARRIVING ON A TRAY
FACE FATHER TIME AND FOLLOW THROUGH!
FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT! TAKE UP HIS SCYTHE

AND CUT DOWN THE FOOLS WHO BID YOU DO
WHAT AGE EXPECTS OF YOU!

(She climaxes with an air of Wesleyan zeal, as though the lesson ended up being personal to the teacher. And it has helped her reach a decision.)

ANNIE

Sorry, Jessie. Just to clarify -?

JESSIE

No front bottoms.

(Beat.)

I'll do your calendar as long as there's no front bottoms. That's a sight I've reserved for only one man in my life.

ANNIE

Right. D'you think your husband will mind?

JESSIE

Good god, love, it wasn't my husband.

(The girls fall about, bumping into MARIE who is entering.)

CHRIS

Whoa my god!

ANNIE

Marie!

CHRIS

Sorry about th-

('Marie's here!')

Girls?

ANNIE

You alright Marie? You in to do paperwork?

CHRIS

We did warn y'! Never volunteer to be chairman!

MARIE

(Watches them remove chairs.)

No no no! I'm just - passed Ruth outside the Co-op, asked where she'd been and she told me what you were all doing in here!

(CHRIS and ANNIE swap looks.)

Could almost see her thinking 'should I tell her, should I say?' But she can't lie, can she, Ruth? So accommodating. But then isn't everybody round here? This 'gang'. This poor little beaten-down group who've lived their entire life in the tornado path of your great ideas.

(By now everyone has stopped.)