

Lotte treasures these photographs of herself with her two cousins, Billie and Romy



## THE **best** **worst** OF TIMES

*As one of a trio of cousins as close as sisters, writer Lotte Jeffs describes how she found herself suspended between triumphant success and immeasurable loss*

The xx played *Stars* live at my cousin Billie's wake. Their debut album had become the soundtrack to her last few months - a horrific time, but one that brought me and Billie even closer to our other cousin, Romy, the band's lead singer. We listened to it in happy moments when Billie was feeling well, and had it on repeat in the hospital room where she spent her final days.

Billie liked *Stars* the best, so, for her funeral, each family member made a star and then we stitched them all together to make a patchwork quilt, which then covered the coffin. As The xx performed the song to a room packed with people who loved Billie, Romy singing the line 'Why go?' took on a whole new resonance. Romy didn't write that lyric about our eldest cousin, but there was a quality to her voice that spoke to our sadness. It felt like a song crafted especially for us.

In fact, 'cousins' doesn't really do justice to our little

trio - Romy, Billie and me. We were each the only children of three sisters, who were a tight unit themselves. We spent our childhood flitting between each other's London homes - there were joint family holidays, trips to each other's dance recitals, school plays and graduations. I was the classic 'middle' child and, in many ways, still am. As a young girl, I idolised Billie, following her around, longing for attention that she'd happily lavish on me. Aged seven and 10, we were both at the hospital when Romy was born, a beautiful baby with a shock of thick black hair. We carefully passed her between us, besotted. That bond between us only deepened when Romy was 11 and her mother, my aunt Vonnie, died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. I was an 18-year-old art student at the time. Billie had been out on a date but rushed over to be with us as soon as she heard. That night, we slept together in my room; Billie next to me and Romy

on a mattress by my bed. We woke up the next morning knowing that our world had changed forever. Romy moved in with us and we prepared for her inevitable breakdown, but it never came - she just quietly dealt with the enormous loss.

As a successful make-up artist for music videos, Billie was forever flitting across the Atlantic, hanging out with supermodels and pop stars. She always had a great anecdote up her sleeve, like the time Madonna tried to convert her to Kabbalah: 'You need faith in your life, sweetie, I can feel it,' she'd mimic, with the perfect droll delivery. Billie was an irresistible concoction of cool, steeped in Jean Paul Gaultier perfume and only ever a Selfridges store card away from a new pair of Louboutins.

Billie was the most glamorous person Romy and I could imagine ever knowing. She used to take me to London's hottest nightclubs - one of her many boyfriends would pick us up in a sports car and deliver us to front of the guest-list queue. I was an outsider at school, but my older cousin made me feel part of the cool gang. She bought me my first cocktail - a Long Island iced tea - and taught me everything I knew about fashion, music and fun. And then she taught me something completely unexpected: how to face death with humour, dignity and bravery. Because, at just 26, Billie was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

If she had any inkling something serious was wrong, she never let on. As the oldest, she always felt it was her job to protect us. I knew she'd been having headaches and that she'd been for a brain scan, but she made so light of it I didn't think to be concerned. At the time, Romy was a 16-year-old art student, who, we later found out, was secretly recording music in her bedroom (we only discovered she could sing through Myspace). I was a 23-year-old graduate just starting my first magazine job.

I was at work when the call came: My mum said, 'It's bad.' My aunt's death five years previously had taught me that terrible things could happen when you least expected them, but this was something else. I Googled 'brain tumour life expectancy'. The answer - six years for the kind she had - was like a violent punch in the stomach. I slipped out of work and phoned the person I always did when something major happened, Billie. 'You've heard then?' she said, laughing at the speed news always travels in our family. I tried not to cry as I told Romy, but failed.

What you don't expect, when you're given news like that, is that the very best and the very worst of life will coincide spectacularly. For Billie, what followed was five years of brain surgery, chemo and radiotherapy. For Romy, what happened next was a glittering music career with her band, The xx. In some ways, this was a great distraction, meaning that the three of us didn't have to talk about the scary stuff, focusing instead on the good. 'I know you know I know how bad this is' was as close as we ever got.

'How are you babe?' Billie would always ask, to avoid the same question herself. Because what could she have answered? 'How do you think I am? I've got six months to live, I've lost my hair, I'm fat from steroids and I can't walk.' She never once complained to us, but it must have been unbearable sometimes that, in the same half decade as her

diagnosis and eventual death, her little cousin went from singing in her bedroom to performing on the same bill as Beyoncé at Coachella. Billie, who had been forced to give up her fabulous life, had to watch her little cousin make her own way in a world she once knew so well.

After her second operation, in 2008, from which she seemed to recover well, and on the cusp of Romy's first album release, the three of us went to Paris. Romy and I, in our sensible shoes, half-carried Billie, who was wearing brand new Jimmy Choos, to dinner. We drank Cosmopolitans and, for the first time, felt what our life together *could* be like. There was still hope then, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this might eventually become a happy memory to cling to once she'd gone. After that brain surgery, the tumour grew back for the third time. It grew back after all five of her operations.

Billie was well enough to do the make-up for The xx's music video, *Islands*, in 2010. But, as she became increasingly sick, she started to miss out on big milestones: I was Romy's guest at the Mercury Prize awards that same year. Since we were teenagers, it had always been Billie who would 'do' my face - but, not wanting to bother her, I'd gone to a beauty counter for a makeover. Stepping out onto the red carpet with Romy, both of us in chic black blazers, I got that same thrill of being in the cool crowd. When The xx won, my beaming face flashed up on TV. Billie, who was watching at home, texted me: 'What HAVE you done to yourself? Waaay too much eyes!'

It's not that Billie's cancer meant I enjoyed Romy's success any less, just as the band's achievements didn't make it OK that Billie was sick. These two dramatically different trajectories just created a permanent *but*. I'm happy, *but*. This is awful, *but*. I could never just be in the moment, however hard I tried. I remember one day when Billie was in intensive care, I went to Habitat with Romy to buy things for her new flat. As we wandered around in a daze, putting lamps and saucepans into a trolley whilst knowing that Billie could die any minute, a kid stopped Romy for an autograph. I thought, 'If only you knew.'

I'd always thought of death as grand and romantic. The reality, for my beloved cousin Billie, was far more mundane. It took four long days for the end to finally come. She had lost consciousness and took her last pained breaths in a white room at the end of a bleak hospital corridor. Her perfectly manicured nails were the only hint of the woman we had grown up with. It might have been three years ago now, but I can still see that room's frayed spider plant and hear the merciless ticking clock.

Throughout it all, I was the middle child, parenthesised by two extremes. My role was to be the knot holding them together; my life just seemed distinctly unexceptional compared to theirs. Now there's nothing for me to hold together, I'm allowing the tight knot I'd become to slowly unravel. I'm starting to realise that not every good thing in my life must be tempered by bad. Recently, I watched Romy sing to 18,000 people at the Hollywood Bowl in LA, and I thought, 'This is happiness'. Then I felt the space where the 'but' used to be. That's not a bad thing any more, though, it's just Billie: present in her absence, watching over her two little sisters. Our star.

*'I couldn't shake the feeling that this might become a happy memory to cling to once she'd gone'*



Paris, 2008

Photography: Kristen Perman. Artwork: Phoebe Sing.