



Mixing The Colours

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Women Speaking About Sectarianism

Edited by Rachel Thain-Gray



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PREFACE

Mixing The Colours: Women Speaking About Sectarianism is the result of a project conducted by Glasgow Women's Library as part of the Scottish Government Action on Tackling Sectarianism.

Told in the stories and poems of fifteen women, including specially commissioned pieces by Magi Gibson, Denise Mina and Eleanor Thom, the book provides a remarkable insight into the experiences of women that have historically been overlooked.

Women's historical and contemporary experiences of the traditionally male-focussed issue of sectarianism have, until now, been marginalised and excluded from the social history of Scotland. Frequently, women are seen in a stereotypical way as passive 'victims' of sectarianism; the casualties of domestic abuse after football matches.

Seeking women's voices has widened our awareness dramatically, empowering women in the communities where we have worked and making us reassess everything we previously knew about the impact of sectarianism on the people of Scotland.

The project has enabled and captured the voice that women have not had, telling both overt and subtle stories of bigotry and violence that were not spoken or asked about previously.

By including women we have challenged and diversified their identity and addressed their exclusion from previous research and societal dialogue. Most importantly, the project has validated women's experiences, raising confidence levels and fostering women's active citizenship.

Throughout the project we have gathered accounts of overt acts of discrimination, the direct result of religious bigotry against Catholic and Protestant. We have also heard how sectarian bigotry intersects with transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, racism and hate crime experienced by LBT and BME women.

Defining the experience of sectarianism was of key importance for some participants, who questioned whether their experiences could be considered sectarian since they themselves were not the direct victims of discrimination or violence.

This leads us to believe that the experience of sectarianism is much wider than an issue of "victimisation driven by discrimination against

a religious ‘other’.”¹

Sectarian behaviour at home and in public spaces affects women as control and fear, both in the legacy of their childhood and in the present day. Within this there are different kinds of sectarianism and its by-products being experienced. These include private emotional or psychological control of thought, values and behaviour, carried out by both male and female family members, and overt control of public spaces through fear, intimidation and territoriality, generally undertaken by men.

The emergent themes of the project show a need for a new contextualisation of the term ‘sectarianism’ and a wider understanding of how it is experienced.

Within the public spheres of their communities some women told us that they would be unlikely to challenge sectarianism on the street for fear of violence, hesitant to challenge it at home for fear of family conflict and reluctant to challenge it on social media for fear of misogynist abuse.

Participants said the key way women could address sectarianism was by participating in workshops and writing about their experiences.

This publication came out of suggestions from learners in 2012 who said their engagement would be better supported by a dedicated publication of women’s stories.

Throughout the project we shared the growing collection of stories and poetry with workshop participants. This allowed both Catholic and Protestant ‘sides’ of sectarianism to be seen and appreciated. It gave rise to increased understanding and encouraged women to share their fears and prejudices and, most importantly, to find solutions collectively.

Women said that collective contributions, using creative methods, gave them a safe and powerful voice. A significant aspect of the work has been collective action. Public and private personal safety is a key concern. This fits within women’s wider experience of general safety in

¹ Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland Independent Advice to Scottish Ministers and Report on Activity 9 August 2012
15 November 2013 p.18 Working Definition paragraph 3.9

their homes and on their streets in a context of anti-social behaviour, hate crime and gendered violence. Working as a group they found power in numbers.

The *Mixing The Colours* publication is a tangible outcome of women’s collective action. The look and feel is something special: the beautiful result of the project and the women who participated that gives weight and importance to their words and experiences.

It is a starting point for the future, a seminal anthology of the legacy of sectarianism.

A film of the same name accompanies this publication, as well as a permanent public reference resource housed at Glasgow Women’s Library, with the aim of increasing societal and multi-agency understanding of women’s experiences.

This project is funded by the Scottish Government.

Rachel Thain-Gray
Mixing The Colours Project Development Worker
Glasgow Women’s Library

I hadn't long started as Scottish Book Trust Reader in Residence with Glasgow Women's Library when I was asked, did I know of writing by and about women on the theme of sectarianism in Scotland? Right away, I could think of writing on the theme of sectarianism – novels, short stories, plays . . . But by and about women?

Yes, there was Rona Munro's *Bold Girls* – but that was set in Northern Ireland. And Theresa Breslin had written the much-needed children's novel, *Divided City*, but that had two boys at the heart of it.

Despite having edited for several years new writing magazines *Pushing Out the Boat* and *Ironstone*, despite being a keen reader of contemporary Scottish fiction, and having sat for many years on the Scottish Arts Council committee for grants to publishers – not to mention having judged numerous short story and poetry competitions – I could not recall coming across a story or poem dealing with the female experience of sectarianism in Scotland.

Did that mean these stories didn't exist? I doubted it.

After all, they were in my lived experience, growing up as I did in a mining town with an Orange Lodge. As a child I'd been dragged away by my mother when the Orange Walk drummed and whistled its way down the Main Street. As a teen I'd been warned about the dangers of falling in love with a boy 'from the other side'. There were stories, all right. Stories told in back kitchens. Women's stories you heard when you were deemed old enough.

So why were these stories not written down?

Or maybe they had been written down, but hadn't been brought to a wider audience through publication?

After all, a landmark anthology of Glasgow poems from 1900 – 1993, (published 1993) managed to feature a mere four women poets alongside forty-three men, with seventy-two poems by men and only nine by women.

While another anthology, published in 2000, and focusing on Irishness in modern Scottish writing, had eleven women alongside thirty-four men, with most of those women writers only being included after the Scottish Arts Council insisted on more women contributors as

a condition of their funding.

Perhaps it wasn't so strange that I hadn't come across women's stories and poems on the theme of Scottish sectarianism. Perhaps they simply were not being published.

So when I was asked to be part of the *Mixing The Colours* project as a workshop leader and as an editor, I jumped at the chance.

In the workshops I encouraged participants to delve into their memories, to take real events from their lives, stories they'd been told, incidents they'd witnessed, and turn them into poetry and fiction. But most of all, I encouraged each woman – and the women encouraged each other – to have confidence in her own unique voice.

Women came to the workshops from all walks of life. Some with degrees and doctorates, others who'd left school and gone straight into the workplace. Workshops were held in many different areas of Scotland, and in many different settings, from Glasgow Women's Library itself to a community centre in Brora, to Cornton Vale Women's Prison. We also collaborated with the Scottish Federation of Writers and the Scottish Writers' Centre.

Each workshop unfolded in its own fashion. Sometimes discussion grew passionate. At other times there were tears as women remembered feelings of hurt and pain. But there was always genuine appreciation of the work created and shared. And there was laughter. Lots of laughter.

One thing is incontrovertible; the women were full of stories and poems just waiting to be written. These are now archived digitally at Glasgow Women's Library, with a smaller selection collected in this book, so that future generations will be able to gain insight into women's experiences of sectarianism in Scotland in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century.

Some themes occurred regularly. Women from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds write of being bullied on the way to and from school. Some write of work-place discrimination. Featured here, Emma Mooney's story, *The Shortcut*, explores the divisions caused between childhood friends when they go to different schools.

Julie Robertson's story, *It's Always A Car Crash* illustrates how violent sectarianism affects middle class as well as working class lives. Pauline Lynch takes us into the life and dilemmas of a teen girl who has never particularly thought about 'the divide' until she experiences it first-hand.

Ellie Stewart's and Leela Soma's witty poems add a multicultural element, while Jillian Joyce's poetry sequence *Remnants Of A Catholic Girlhood* takes us from an innocently dancing child to a scene of violence on a school bus. Yvonne Dalziel's "Just Give Me The Girls" captures from a child's perspective the tensions a 'mixed marriage' creates in a family. And in Morag Smith's *The Colour Of The Song* a Glasgow woman outgrows her father's Orange heritage, but can he leave it behind? While Nicola Burkhill in *No More Sectarian Scotland* has created an anthem that will speak straight to the heart of every woman who wants a positive future for her children in Scotland.

At last we have women's stories and poems written down. On the record. All they need now is to be read.

Magi Gibson
Author

Short Stories

“Just Give Me The Girls”

Yvonne Dalziel

The priest would come to the house, infrequently and always unannounced, to see my mum, and we girls would hide in the cold lobby. The lobby was the place in the house with the holy water and the picture of the sacred heart of Mary, and we would peek through the living room door, giggling and shoving each other.

This one was new. He sat in Dad's chair with his back to us. A strange, scary presence; a man dressed in a black suit apparently welcome in our house even though he made my thin, plain mother excited and nervous. We watched as she scuttled from the living room to the kitchen trying to find a cup that was both not cracked and clean enough for his tea.

She apologised for the state of the house, the small amount of milk available, and the few biscuits. We watched the plate of biscuits. He ignored her protestations and said firmly, “Eileen, it isn't the tea I came for. Have you spoken to your husband again about the girls?” She avoided his question, and looked at us hanging halfway out of the door, giggling.

“No, no, Father,” she eventually said. “I haven't. Not yet. He's been on nightshift.”

“But Eileen, if it is to happen it would soon be time, you know. First Holy Communion for the bigger ones.” He turned round in his chair to face the giggling mob and, pointing at my big sister, asked if she was the one called Kathleen. His voice warmed. “Kathleen, ah, a grand name,” he said to no-one in particular. We heard that his mother was a Kathleen and she was from Galway and was a wonderful woman.

Turning back to face my mother, he asked what the rest of us were called. Ashamed now of our behaviour, my usually placid mother called sharply, “Come now, and say hello to Father. He has come all the way from Castle Douglas to see you. Behave yourselves now.”

Not the oldest, but often the boldest, I left the sanctuary of the lobby first and led the others into the living room. We sat on the armchair opposite Father; all four of us huddled together for protection. His face was round and red and blotchy and was what my mother would describe later as a face that was fond of the bottle. Viewed from the front there seemed less black, but he was no less scary. He looked at me with his very blue, penetrating eyes.

“Now, you, what do they call you?” he asked.

“Yvette.” I whispered.

“Yvette! In God’s name what kind of name is that, Eileen?” he asked, turning his gaze on my mother.

As she started to apologise again the feeling I could call upon when my mother needed protection pushed me to say primly that it was French and that I was called after a ballet dancer.

“Oh indeed!” he snorted. “And can you dance?”

Suddenly crushed, I whispered “No, I never tried yet.”

He was not impressed and moved onto the other sisters with more hope. Yes, that one was Jean. “Named for my husband’s mother.” said my mother as a way of explanation.

The little one was Maureen and was called after her youngest sister in Ireland. My mother smiled as if she had done something right for the first time, then left the room to make the tea.

“So you’ve not spoken to your husband?” he called through to her. We watched him resettle his large frame into the uncomfortable chair and he stared at us through bushy eyebrows. Faced with him square on we were now too scared to giggle.

From the safety of the kitchen my mother replied, “It’s not easy Father. He is set in his ways. He doesn’t want the girls to be Catholics. He doesn’t go to church himself but he wants the girls to be the same as him. It’s his family you know. His sisters are . . .” She struggled to find the best word. “. . . Freemasons.”

“Now Eileen, I know it isn’t easy but there are obligations on you as a Catholic mother. The church expects you to bring them up in the faith, you know.”

He continued to stare at us bunched together with no identity.

“I never see them at church with you,” he added, giving us a look that suggested that if he had the choice he would prefer not to have any of us in his church.

We watched mother carry the tea pot back to the table. “No Father . . . it’s the distance and only the one bus a day there and back.” She paused and added as if it was a reasonable explanation. “They go to the Sunday School every week. The Reverend Weir is very nice. He doesn’t make a difference with them. Kathleen sings in their choir. Don’t you Kathleen?” My mother had procured a suitable cup and milk and tea and even a saucer. She looked at the door before she handed the hot drink to Father. We followed her glance.

We often looked at the door, often listened for the sound of the boots on the gravel. We knew what that sound meant. Jean who was the giggler picked up the fear and giggled. This time there was no collusion and she was elbowed in the stomach to shut her up. We knew what unwanted sounds from us meant in that room where silence from little girls was the order. But there was no sound from outside, just the stirring of our brother asleep in the pram, and we resumed watching Father. He was offered the biscuits and we watched as he took two custard creams. One he laid on the edge of his saucer and the other he moved towards his mouth. We watched him moving the biscuit. We endured the sweet sound of crunching. We looked at the one biscuit left and prayed that my mother would not offer him that one too.

“He won’t agree Father. I don’t think he will agree. Father Brennan before you, he didn’t mind. Said the girls would come to it later if I showed them the way. Robbie liked him.” My mother was speaking very fast now.

“Ah Father Brennan. God rest his soul. A saintly man but not one to change the world, I am afraid,” he interrupted. “Now Eileen, you’ve got the four girls, and the wee lad, and another one on the way if I am not mistaken.” We watched my mother, as her pale thin face reddened and we recognised her discomfort and saw the tears come into her eyes. She moved her gaze to her son asleep in the pram, to the shabby room and

to the scared girls, and although we wouldn't recognise it until much, much later we were seeing the things that trapped her in this foreign country where she was at once deeply bedded through love and hate and obligation, and yet was not part of. She was strangely foreign, even to us who had known and loved her all our lives, and although it seemed unlikely, she was probably less foreign to him than to us. When they spoke their voices had the same lilting sound, the same words; they shared a language and rituals and secrets that we knew nothing of. Yet he frightened her and there was little of the connection for a fellow countryman she must have longed for.

It was impossible for our young minds to fully understand and make sense of her plight, but even then we knew she was different. Her ways not the ways of other mothers, her voice and the words she taught us to use not like the ones our friends used. We loved the novelty of holy water and pictures of saints and the Virgin Mary, fish on Fridays and going to mass in Ireland but we also knew that Uncle John, the policeman, only came into the house when Dad was here. If Dad was working he returned to the car unable to visit his brother's Catholic whore of a wife. That was what Auntie Meg, Dad's sister, called her. Uncle John's snooty wife who never even left the car. Frightened, my mother would say, that she would pick up a germ from breathing the same air as a Catholic.

Father was speaking again. Under the absorbed gaze of the four hungry little girls he sipped tea and wiped crumbs from his thin lips. "We are not asking for much. If the church could just have the girls, that would do. Take them into the family of God. Give them a chance. The boy will find his way to the Holy Catholic Church, please God, in his own time."

Half of the second biscuit had now disappeared and he spoke again. He was asking about something called catechism and whether mother taught us and did we know our prayers? We watched the panic cross my mother's face. She looked at us expectantly, no doubt longing for one of us to be clever enough to know something about a word we had never heard before. He pounced on Kathleen demanding to hear

the Lord's Prayer. We stared at Kathleen; three of us turning round to where she sat pressed into the back of the chair trying to hide behind us. We waited for an answer. She started to cry. We looked at our mother for help.

"Hush girl. Father isn't going to harm you. She's shy, Father," she said helplessly.

Stirred on by that strange urge to action that arrived when mother needed me, I piped up that I knew it and before I could be stopped I rattled off, "Our Father which art in Heaven. Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come and I can't remember the rest." Followed by a brazen laugh. The rest joined in the hysteria. Mother looked crestfallen.

"Would you take more tea, Father?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, I must be off. But before I go I might say a few prayers, Eileen." He stared at us with the blue eyes and then added with a slight sigh. "These girls look like they need it."

He stood up and handed her the empty cup with half of a custard cream lying on the edge of the saucer and positioned himself with his back to the empty fireplace and closed his eyes. He made the sign of the cross. My mother signalled us to do the same. We stood up and did a self-conscious sign of the cross and he started slowly reciting the Lord's Prayer followed by a Hail Mary.

Jean started to laugh.

The mirth was quiet and muffled to begin with but soon the strain became too much and she broke into a strangled mixture of tears and giggles. Mother sighed and said she would get the holy water and went to the lobby to bring the little silver crucifix with the well at the bottom. He took a sprinkling of the precious liquid and dropped it in our direction reciting another prayer, blessing the house and its occupants. The laughter became more subdued as we became mesmerised by the process of being part of a strange and mysterious ritual. The early warning sounds outside were missed. The gravel crunched. And with no time to prepare, the door opened and my father came in.

"Ah-ha! What's going on here, then?" he said in the voice, and with the staring look, that we knew meant trouble.

My father was a big man, tall and muscular. He was handsome with strong features and pale blue eyes. It was clear that he wasn't in the mood for visitors of any kind, least of all this unwelcome priest in his shabby black suit praying over his daughters. He looked at us standing with our hands clasped in prayer. The sniggering stopped mid-air to be replaced by a new kind of fear. We stood with our mouths open but no laughter came.

"Robbie!" my mother stuttered, her quiet voice sounding even more Irish than usual. "This is the new priest from Castle Douglas, Father Fitzpatrick."

We looked from Father to Dad not sure what was meant to happen next. Father Fitzpatrick was stopped in the middle of his blessing, his hand suspended with no place to go. We saw his surprise and noted how he was the one who was the stranger now, out of his depth and a bit scared.

He stooped and picked up his black hat from the corner of the shabby chair and fixing it quickly over his wispy grey hair muttered to Dad, in his strange Irish but without really looking at him, "How do you do, eh . . . M . . . eh . . . Robbie? I am just leaving, just saying a few prayers. No harm done. Well, I will be off. Goodbye now, Eileen. Goodbye girls. Behave yourselves. God bless you."

We all watched him move to the door, turn the handle and leave. We never saw him again.

Paddy

Ethyl Smith

Paddy wis a wee, goldie haired dug, wi the saftest broon een, an a big, wavy fan fur a tail. He wisna ma dug. He bid in the hoose upstairs wi Eddie an Mrs McArthur. Bit he wis ma freen.

He wis richt clever. Didna need a lead when oot fur a walk, cud gie ye a paw fur a sweetie, then roll ower an play deid if ye offered him anither yin. Whit fun we hud. In fact he wis a near perfect dug excep fur ane thing. A passion fur peas. Fresh peas in a pod.

In the month o June he'd aye be sneakin up the back gairden, keep-in an eye on the peas, watchin them growe an fatten. Aince they wur ready he wis in amang the stalks, nippin a pod aff wi his teeth, slittin it open wi a claw, then sookin up a moothfu o juicy peas. He wis that guid at it he ate mair peas in the summer than we did.

Ma mither didna mind. Eddie an his wife didna mind. Bit ma gran aye got richt het up. Aw summer she'd be lukin oot her upstairs windae, watchin fur Paddy. If she spied him in amang her peas the windae shooched up then she'd lean oot an clap her haunds, or wave a duster, an shout at the dug. He aye seemed tae tak the hint an creep awa. Excep he didna. He jist bid oota sicht till gran shut the windae, an then cam sneakin back fur anither go.

Ane day Paddy daured a bit mair an went intae next door's gairden. The peas wur fair hingin so ah suppose he cudna resist it.

He'd jist gotten a pod in his mooth an wis settlin doon tae a guid munch when oor neebor, Wull Scott, spottit him.

Wull belts up the path shoutin an sweerin. Worse than that he wis flingin stanes. Richt awa Paddy jooked unner the fence, back in his ain gairden tae scrabble amang the tattie shaws.

Ah jist happened tae be sittin on oor tap green, dain ma hamewark, an the sicht o Wull's beilin face hud me coorien doon fur fear he'd stert shoutin at me as weel.

He flung ane or twa mair stanes intae the tatties. Paddy didna cam oot an Wull got in a richt lather. ‘Dae that agane, ya dirty, thievin, Fenian bastart an ah’ll huv ye.’

Ah froze, mair feart fur Paddy nur masel. Ah cud see the tip o his tail stickin oot ablo a thick clump o rhubarb stalks. He’d be seen ony meenit so ah forced masel tae staund up an face Wull. ‘Mr. Scott. Whit’s a Fenian bastart?’

Wull jumped as if he’d been stung. ‘Whit ur ye dain up here?’

‘Ma hamewark. Ah aften sit here dain it.’ Ah tried tae luk mair brave nur ah felt.

‘Oh dae ye noo.’ He gied me the awfiest glour. ‘Weel, nivver mind yer skilwork, it’s time ye learnt somethin about the real world. They Fenians ur no jist bastarts thur the scum o the earth. As fur that dug, he canna help thievin. Luk whae he belongs tae.’

We stared at ane anither. Wull still mutterin an sweerin, me as much confused as feart, an no darin tae utter a word in case the stanes stertit fleein agane. It seemed an age afore he gied up an stamped back doon the path tae his hoose.

As ah stood shakin, an starin aifter Wull’s angry back it felt lik somethin terrible hud happened.

An so it hud.

When ah coaxed Paddy oot frae his hidin place, an taen him back tae his hoose ah cudna stoap masel frae askin Eddie if he wis ane o they dirty, thievin, Fenian bastarts Wull Scott hud been shoutin aboot.

Eddie didna answer. He jist gawped at me, an his een filled wi tears afore he turned awa an shuts the door on me.

If only ah’d kept ma big mooth shut. But ah didna. An it’s no as if ah’m ony the wiser . . . fur whit is a Fenian bastart?

The Shortcut

Emma Mooney

We usually walk the long road home through the park and past the bowling green. But not today. Today I use the snow as an excuse to come home this way. I run my finger along the red brick wall that marks the shortest route between school and home and wonder if he’s on the other side. I heard that his family have moved back to town.

Pamela nudges me in the ribs. Hard. ‘You’re not listening to a word I’m saying.’

The snow is falling as soft flakes, drifting lazily from the sky above me. ‘Am so,’ I say.

‘Well go on then,’ she says, ‘guess who asked me out?’

‘Who?’

She rolls her eyes. ‘You’re supposed to guess.’

I shrug my shoulders. Pamela’s always got boys chasing after her. Last week a boy in fifth year asked her out. He took her to the Wimpy in town and all the other girls in our year were jealous. The boys don’t even know my name.

‘I’ll give you a clue,’ she says, ‘he’s in our geography class.’

I take a wild guess, ‘Billy Weir?’

‘Billy Weir,’ she laughs. ‘That wee bastard wouldn’t dare. I haven’t spoken to him since Charlotte told me she’d seen him kissing that slut Kerry Wilson at the Christmas party.’ She grabs my arm. ‘Why did you think it was Billy? Has he been asking about me?’

I shake my head.

She scowls. ‘Guess again.’

A single snowflake lands on my navy blue blazer and I watch it fizzle and disappear.

She gives up waiting for an answer and clutches my arm. ‘John Robertson,’ she giggles. ‘Can you believe it? And guess what?’

‘You told him no.’

‘Said no? To John Robertson? Are you off your head? He’s the cutest guy in the whole school.’

Last week the cutest guy in the whole school was the fifth year boy, the week before that it was poor Stuart Duffy. He didn’t last longer than one date either.

‘Guess what he did when I said yes.’

‘I give up.’

She pouts her lips. ‘You’re no fun,’ she says but then she’s grinning again and she leans close even though there’s no-one around to hear us. ‘He kissed me,’ she says and then she squeals and I swear she sounds like a guinea pig in pain.

The only boy I’ve ever kissed is Thomas O’Flannigan and that was three years ago.

Thomas was my next door neighbour growing up but his mum never wanted us to play together so we used to meet in secret down by the burn at the back of our houses. I remember the summer we caught the minnows. It was a sweltering hot day and we rolled up our jeans and stood barefoot in the burn with our fishing nets. We caught loads of minnows and carried them home in the washed out jam jars I’d pinched from Mum’s cupboard. She was furious when she found out but Dad managed to calm her down and he gave us his big red bucket instead, the one he used for washing his car every Sunday morning. Thomas and I filled it with stones and pebbles and bits of pond weed that we’d brought home from the burn. I wanted to give the minnows names but he just laughed at me for being a girl so I kept quiet. The next morning, he sneaked round to my house and he was all dressed up in his Sunday best ready for the morning service at the chapel. As usual, my mum and dad weren’t up yet. Sunday morning in our house means keeping as quiet as you can to let them get a long lie. Thomas and I tiptoed into the kitchen and slipped the garage key off the hook by the back door and went to check on the minnows. I can still see them. They were floating on top of the water, all bloated with blood seeping out from their gills. I couldn’t help it, I burst into tears. I expected Thomas to laugh at me but instead he put his arm around my shoulder and we stood in silence next

to the bucket until we heard his mum calling on him. My dad washed the minnows away and told me not to worry about it, we hadn’t meant any harm. But I knew that it was our fault. The red bucket still sits on a shelf in the garage.

I look at my watch. The big hand is almost pointing straight down which means their bell is going to ring any second now. My stomach churns and I imagine a shoal of tiny minnows darting around inside me. I stare at the large brick wall that divides us and wonder if Thomas ever thinks about the big red bucket. The rusted iron spikes on top of the wall punctuate the white sky like giant exclamation marks on a blank sheet of paper and I stretch onto my tiptoes hoping to see over the top.

‘Come on,’ says Pamela, tugging at my sleeve. ‘We need to get a move on. I told you we shouldn’t have come this way.’

I slow down, hoping to catch a glimpse, but she pulls me forward. ‘Let’s get home before they get out.’

‘Wait a minute,’ I tell her and pretend to tie my boots. If I can just hold on a few seconds more . . .

We were twelve when his mum caught me in their house. I’d been pestering Thomas to let me see his new ZX Spectrum but he kept making excuses. He never said anything but I knew his mum didn’t want one of my kind in her house so I waited until he was alone and raced over. Inside, the kitchen was just like ours with a pile of unwashed breakfast dishes heaped by the sink but there was a statue of a woman in blue on the windowsill. I asked Thomas why she looked so sad and he said that this was the Virgin Mary and she always looked like that. I told him that was a rubbish answer but he just told me to stop asking dumb questions and did I want to see his computer or not. I didn’t really but I was desperate to see what his bedroom looked like. I was disappointed. It wasn’t that different to mine, except his curtains and bedcovers were blue instead of pink and where I had cuddly toys he had Lego models. And then his mum came home and all hell broke loose.

None of the girls from our school have a boyfriend that goes to St Mary’s. Fenians. That’s what Pamela calls them. I roll the word around my mouth like a giant gobstopper. Fenians. I hate it. I remember the

day Thomas moved away. I'd spent the morning watching all of their furniture being loaded into a removal van. Then there was a knock on my bedroom door and it was him. He'd sneaked out and come to say goodbye. He brought me a teddy bear clutching a red love heart as a kind of goodbye present and I felt really bad cause I hadn't got him anything. Outside a car horn beeped and he said he'd better go. He stood up to leave and that's when it happened. The kiss. If I close my eyes and squeeze them shut really tight I can imagine we're both still in my bedroom and I can almost feel his lips touching mine.

The bell rings and I stop pretending to tie my shoe lace and stand up. My heart beats faster. It's half past three. I twist my neck and stare up at the tall grey building merging into the sky above me. The large metal gates within the brick wall burst open and they pour out on to the pavement in front of us. Black trousers, black shirts, black shoes . . . green ties.

Pamela looks scared. 'Quick,' she says, 'let's get out of here.'

She starts running but I stay put and watch her denim jacket weave its way through the crowd before it disappears around the corner. I'm alone. That's okay, I tell myself, nobody's going to hurt a girl on her way home from school. The snow is falling heavier now, large flakes racing to the ground. I squint to see in front of me, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. I've imagined this moment for weeks now but in my dreams it was never snowing. I picture him walking through the gates. He stops and looks at me. 'Lizzie,' he says, 'is it really you?' We laugh at the coincidence that brought us together and we share stories about school as he walks me home. He's smart, studies all three sciences, but he's not a geek or anything. Well, not in a weird way. His arm brushes gently against mine and then we're holding hands and it's a perfect fit.

A bunch of girls barge into me and knock me out of my daydream and I feel my bag being yanked from my shoulder. It falls to the ground and one of the girls kicks dirty snow over it. 'Sorry,' she laughs, 'didn't see you there.' I bend down to get my bag and look around me. I'm the only one wearing a maroon scarf. Shit, I need to get out of here. Fast. My chest feels like it's going to explode and I realise I'm holding my breath. I force myself to blow out and a cloud of warm breath fills the air. Dragon

smoke, my dad calls it and I suddenly wish he was beside me. He'd laugh and tell me not to worry. Nobody's going to hurt a girl. Are they?

I stuff my gloved hands deep into my pocket, lower my head and start walking. I count each step. One, two, three. This is fine. I'll probably be home by the time I reach a hundred. Four, five, six. I see the group of black shoes ahead of me and stop. The gang of boys are blocking the pavement and they're piling up snowballs.

'Going somewhere?' A boy with red hair stands in front of me, tossing a snowball back and forth between his hands. He steps towards me and I can see his face is covered with spots. 'Shouldn't you be home by now?'

'I'm waiting on my boyfriend.' My words are meant to scare him off but he just laughs.

'She's waiting on her boyfriend,' he mimics. 'What's his name?'

'Thomas,' I say, 'Thomas O'Flannigan.'

His grin disappears and he spins on his heels and turns to face the gang. 'What the fuck!' he shouts, 'Have you been sniffing around proddie bitches?'

At first I don't understand what's going on but then I see him. Thomas. It's been nearly three years since the day he kissed me but I'd recognise him anywhere. He's standing at the back of the group and I try to catch his eye but he's staring at his feet. 'Thomas,' I say. 'Thomas. It's me, Lizzie.' He doesn't look up.

The boy with the red hair drops the snowball and I watch it fall to the ground and break into a hundred pieces. 'Looks like your boyfriend doesn't want to know you,' he laughs and his hand reaches for my hair. I freeze, expecting him to yank it, but instead he twirls it around his fingers. He leans in close and I can smell stale cigarettes on his breath. Then he whispers so that only I can hear, 'I've heard that proddie girls like to suck dick.' He presses himself against me and I try to pull away but the strand of hair is still tightly wrapped around his finger. 'Is that true?' He turns to his audience. 'Is that true Thomas, eh? Has this pretty little proddie whore sucked you off?'

Thomas lifts his head and our eyes meet. 'Help me,' I whisper.

He looks away.

Glasgow Talent

Pauline Lynch

The building is short, square, and pebble-dashed ugly. The thrum of the taxi's diesel engine disappears into the night. Julie stands at the foot of the path stretching up to the sinister grey doors of the lodge, which are ominously closed, revealing nothing of what goes on inside.

They're not nice people, Julie.

The October chill wraps itself around her but all she feels is heat in her tummy. Her jaws feel watery even though her mouth's drier than the sawdust on a butcher's floor. Her body lurches forward and Julie's dinner presents itself to the pavement.

'Fuck's sake, Julie. Don't do that.' An arm wraps itself around her and moves her out of sight of the grey doors. 'You alright, hen?'

Through damp eyes, Julie sees her cousin, Marie. Julie shakes her head and smacks her wet lips together. 'What a total minter. You got a hanky?'

Marie unwinds a navy scarf from around her neck and hands it over. 'Your ma called my ma. Told us you were singing here the night. Told us about the fight with your da and all. Feeling better?'

'Aye,' Julie nods, as she wipes her mouth with the scarf and hands it back.

'Keep it, hen,' says Marie. 'I don't want a fuckin boaky scarf, do I?'

A car pulls up alongside them and five women tumble out. Julie recognises her mum's sister, Moira.

'Thanks, driver!' Moira calls, as the car pulls away at speed amongst the drunken cackle of Friday night women.

'Think we scared him off,' says one.

'Away! He loved it. Could have been worse. Wait till he sees us at the end of the night.'

Another cackle of Glaswegian laughter fills the air until Auntie Moira spots Julie for the first time. 'Alright, hen? I hear your da's not

happy about this the night.'

Julie can only shrug. She doesn't want to remember.

'That's a sin, eh?' Moira continues. 'Never mind. How you feeling? You nervous yet?'

'She just spewed her ring,' says Marie. 'Mind your step going in.'

They hustle her past the vomitty ground and up the path.

'Catholic detector no working the night?' says one of Moira's pals as they sail through the grey doors without incident. The group sniggers. Vodka and Irn-Bru all round leads to more jokes about the 'broken alarm system'.

Julie's uncomfortable. The hall's half empty and Moira's clan make up a large portion of the punters. She sits with a hand wrapped around her drink. She doesn't even like vodka but she took it anyway because she couldn't think what else to have. She scans the room looking for someone in charge, and eventually a balding man in a white shirt and brown trousers makes his way over.

'You Julie?' he says.

She stands up, knocking her drink over. The orange liquid swims over the edge of the table onto Moira's lap. Her white jeans soak it up.

'It's alright,' she insists. 'It's alright. It's under control. I've got it.'

As she stands, her round thighs nudge the table and another drink goes over. The women descend into snorts of laughter, except for Julie, who's looking at the face of the man who asked for her.

They're not nice people, Julie.

'Yes, I'm Julie,' she says, over the noise of her drunken fanbase.

He looks down at his notebook. 'Aye. Julie McDonald. That's what I've got.'

They'll call you McDonald and pretend it's an accident.

Julie takes a large swig of the nearest vodka and Irn-Bru. One of Auntie Moira's pals chucks a pile of blue paper towels over the mess on the table.

'Look at the state of me,' Moira says, as she tries to rub the stain from her jeans. 'I look like a fuckin orange Mivvi.'

'Yous'll keep it down when the singers are on, won't you, ladies?' the

man says, sourly.

The friend with the spiky-tipped hair gives him a leery grin.

'Aye, aye, no worries, big man.'

Moira throws her arm around Julie, squeezes her neck too tight. An affectionate headlock.

'We'll be cheering for this one the loudest but. That alright?'

He ignores Moira and returns his focus to Julie.

'You're on fifth. What's your songs?'

Julie wriggles free and tells him. He shakes his head.

'Naw, you can't do Flashdance. Michelle's already doing it.'

Soon as they hear McDonnell they'll screw you over.

'What else you got?' he wants to know.

Not much.

They're not nice people, Julie. Not nice people.

'Pearl's a Singer?' Julie offers.

Moira claps her hands and points right at her, like she's just got the word right in Give Us A Clue.

'That's it! That's the one! Pearl's a fucking Singer.' She points to the man's notebook. 'Write that one down. She'll do that. Pearl's a Singer.'

The woman with the spiky-tipped hair sways from side to side.

'Pearl's a Singer . . . sewing machine . . .' she sings and then bangs the table. 'Sewing machine, get it? Singer sewing machine? Aw, forget it.'

The room fills quickly. Vodka's drunk and replaced, drunk and replaced. Auntie Moira's friends are noisy but a good laugh, and Julie's glad they're there. After she's sung her three songs and sat back down, folk come over to tell her what a smashing voice she has. She begins to relax. Even the vodka starts to taste alright.

A guy squeezes in beside her.

'I thought you were the best,' he shouts in her ear.

'Aye, right.'

'Naw, naw, I mean it. Haw, Gibby!' he calls to his pal. 'Come and meet the star of the show.'

When he turns back, he says, 'My name's Malky, by the way. Do you

mind if I get you a drink?’

Not nice people, Julie.

Gibby comes over but he only has eyes for Marie. Julie’s amused that he’s so blatant about it. Marie, who’s sitting on the other side of the table, blushes.

‘Aye, go on then. I’ll take a drink,’ Julie replies.

I don't want you going there.

A smile plays on her lips as the vodka slips smoothly down.

The eighth and final singer is a man in his fifties who’s obviously a big Neil Diamond fan.

‘That’s a mistake,’ says spiky-tipped hair woman. ‘Three Neil Diamonds in a row’s always a mistake.’

Sure enough, he’s only half way through his second number and the chatter is rising.

‘Ssshhhh!’ someone hisses at them.

Julie thinks it’s out of order. They’re not the only ones talking. Besides, Gibby and Malky keep asking questions, winding her up. They think she’s posh. She hadn’t felt particularly posh until they’d said it. And she does wish her auntie’s pals would keep it down a bit. Marie and Moira are whispering about something. Her cousin lets out a massive snort and Moira’s shoulders heave with silent laughter.

The man with the notebook is sitting at the bar, and now he slaps his notebook down, glaring at them. The judges down the front turn round to see what’s going on. Sweet Caroline comes to a merciful end and spiky-tipped hair woman stands up, puts two fingers in her mouth and whistles.

‘Brilliant, my man. Pure brilliant.’

She claps loudly, and the others follow her cue.

Julie feels the danger pass, but then Malky leans in to her. ‘You want to meet me outside?’

He’s so close she can feel the heat coming from his skin. A direct question like that means she can turn to look right at him for the first time. His cheeks are prickled with strawberry blond stubble the same

shade as the ring hanging from his ear. A faint whiff of Kouros sails up her nostrils, making her dizzy. She likes his blue, hopeful eyes.

‘Why not?’ she dares.

As she shimmies out from behind the table, Notebook Man takes to the floor with a microphone. Auntie Moira pulls her back down.

‘Where you going?’ she hisses. ‘He’s about to announce it.’

Malky slips back in beside her, closer than before. She feels his hand wrap around hers, a gentle squeeze on her fingers.

‘Here we go, eh?’ he smiles.

Julie doesn’t expect to win anything. She’s just starting out, after all. She focuses on the bar mat in front of her. Tennent’s. Her dad drinks Tennent’s. Malky’s thigh presses up against hers. She doesn’t hear it when her name’s announced. A nudge from Malky brings her back to the present.

‘Julie McDonald,’ he said. ‘On you go.’

Julie looks up. All around her are beaming faces. Auntie Moira’s standing up, clapping and somehow ushering Julie to her feet at the same time.

‘I’ll say it again,’ says the miked voice. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, let’s hear it for Julie McDonald!’

Everyone in the room is cheering. Even Notebook Man’s smiling as he urges her to ‘Come on up and collect your third prize of fifty pounds.’

She turns her face to Malky. Suddenly something else is more important.

‘My name’s McDonnell,’ she says. ‘Not McDonald.’

‘Aye, aye,’ he says, moving aside to let her pass. ‘Whatever. Go and get your money. Next round’s on you.’

She makes her way through the tables to the front of the room and takes her place beside Michelle Boyle (First Place, £250), and John McCusker (Second Place, £150). Notebook Man hands over a white envelope addressed to Julie McDonald.

‘Well done, hen.’

‘Thanks very much,’ she smiles, shyly. Her auntie’s friends drum the floor with their feet. What a racket. What an embarrassment. But

still, her smile does grow that wee bit wider, even as she thinks of her parents lying on their respective couches, watching Family Fortunes or Dempsey and Makepeace or whatever it is that's on on a Friday these days. Wait till she goes back and tells them. Tells him.

See? They are nice people, Dad.

Not everyone thinks the same as you.

Not everyone's bigoted like you.

Bigoted? She's never thought of him like that before. She's not daft. She knows it exists. She remembers having to run past the Protestant school just to avoid the stones that came flying towards her and her pals as they headed to the Catholic school at the other end of the street.

What team do you support?

How many times has she been asked that?

A gang from the Protestant high school ran riot through her school a couple of years ago.

Fenian bastards!

The police were called and everything.

So she knows it exists.

On their side.

But not her dad.

Never her dad.

He's never even said a word about it.

She laughs along with the rabble of drunk Protestants as they cheer her back to her seat. Gibby's got his arm around Marie. Fast work. Moira's at the bar and some of the women must have gone to the toilet because there's Malky, sitting on his own, trying not to notice the two lovebirds beside him. On a whim, she changes direction and heads for the door. She stops and waits for him to notice her, which he does, and then he moves towards her.

The bite of the cold night air almost takes her breath away. Malky pulls her in close and they begin to snog. His tongue winds its way into her mouth and swirls round hers the way a Mr Whippy cone comes out the machine. His hands are on her bum, and hers on his. She loves the smell of Kouros and wonders if he likes her Giorgio Beverly Hills.

His hand slides from her bum up her back and runs along the catch of her bra. She waits for his hands to move round the front. She's already decided to let him. She's her own person now, doing things on her own terms. And then his hand's under her top and she pulls back.

'Am I going too fast?' he says, concern written large in those blue eyes.

'No, no. Just cold,' she says, without looking at him.

He turns her round so he's behind her and leans against the wall, pulling her back on him. She rests against him easily, enjoying the weight of his arms on her shoulders as he wraps them around her.

'Feel like I've known you for ages,' he murmurs in her ear. 'Julie McDonald.'

She breaks free and faces him.

'It's McDonnell,' she says.

'What is?'

'My name. McDonnell. Julie McDonnell.'

'Oh, right. Sorry. Julie McDonnell.'

His cheek glows in the overspill from orange streetlights, but his eyes are in shadow. They're hard to read.

'It's Catholic,' she says.

'Is it?' He seems surprised. 'I've a pal with that name. He's the orangest bastard you'll ever meet.'

The doors to the hall burst open and Auntie Moira's pal with the spiky-tipped hair rushes out behind a torrent of vomit. Julie and Malky skip to the side just in time.

'Oh, thank fuck, that's better,' Spiky says. 'Oh, Jesus, sorry. Did I get any on you? Oh fuck, here I go again.'

Julie and Malky exchange a glance and silently agree to go back inside.

'Classy pals you've got,' Malky teases, as spiky-tipped hair pal shambles in after them.

Auntie Moira's on the dance floor, giving it laldy with her pals. Marie's face appears to be stuck to Gibby's.

'Oi! Put him down!' spiky-tipped hair pal gives Marie's blouse a

friendly, if over-enthusiastic, tug.

Marie smiles shyly and moves away from her pull. Malky sits at the end of the row, Spiky at the other, and Julie squeezes between Gibby and Marie.

'Just to keep things decent,' she grins, though she's hardly fit to judge. Her whole body shakes from her encounter with Malky, and she's sure it isn't just the cold that's done it.

Then the DJ announces the last song of the night. Malky gives her the look and they're up, swaying to Ben E. King's Stand By Me, doing that dance people do when they don't move their feet, but they still hold tight to each other as though they might fall over.

That place is the snake's nest, Julie.

Her Catholic head rests on a Protestant shoulder, his Protestant hand touches Catholic skin, Catholic and Protestant lips find each other while, above them, the glitter ball spins round and round.

A hand grabs her arm. Marie's eyes are red-rimmed, her cheeks stained black with mascara.

'We need to go.'

Julie looks over her shoulder at Malky as Marie drags her towards the table to collect their bags.

'What's the matter?'

'Gibby's the matter. Called me a cock-tease 'cos I wouldn't give him the tit.'

'Bastard. Let's get out of here.'

Moira's smoking at the table with spiky-tipped hair pal unconscious on her shoulder. When Moira sees her daughter's tear-stained face she says, 'Aye, it's not long between first love and let's-just-kill-the-bastard, is it, girls?' She takes a long draw on her fag and nods towards spiky-tipped hair pal, unconscious on her shoulder. 'I'd have a word but I'm a bit stuck.'

'It's fine, Ma. Just getting my coat,' Marie shouts over the noise of the drums now coming out of the speakers as Julie scrabbles for her bag which has fallen under the table.

Suddenly an angry commotion surrounds them, Auntie Moira's

voice soars and sinks into the wash of voices, indistinct in the extravagant swell of music. Julie crawls back up from the floor, bag in hand, and discovers a group of eight or ten people blocking in their table. Notebook Man pulls Moira's arm but she bats him off. Spiky's still crashed out beside her.

Long live our gracious Queen

"Stand up, you ignorant woman you!"

"Get your hands off me, you proddie bastard!"

Long live our noble Queen

"Stand up! Stand up! Stand up!"

"I'm doing it . . . I'm doing it . . . Jesus Christ!"

God save our Queen.

Between them, Julie and Auntie Moira somehow pull Spike to her feet and wedge her between them while the anthem soars on around them. Julie feels the hostile eyes of the room upon her. Notebook Man is only feet away. His hand, still welded to the notebook, lies solemnly over his chest. His chin wobbles as he sings, but his stare is steady and locked onto Julie.

Oh Lord our God arise

Scatter her enemies

And make them fall

Confound their politics

Frustrate their knavish tricks

On Thee our hopes we fix

God save us all

There's no denying who's the enemy in this room. The music plays for years, verse after verse after verse. When it dies down Moira turns to Julie and hisses, 'Taxi. Quick.'

Between them, they manoeuvre Spike, who's a wee bit more conscious by now, to the door.

'Mind that sick,' says Julie, as they steer her outside.

'Over here!' a voice calls.

Marie's standing at the open door of a waiting Hackney cab.

'Thank fuck for that,' mutters Moira.

'Julie! Wait!'

It's Malky.

'You just going without saying goodbye?' he wants to know.

Julie and Moira exchange a look.

'It's alright,' Moira nods. 'I can manage this one on my own. We'll wait for you.'

Julie and Malky watch in awkward silence as Moira guides Spike to the taxi. People spill out of the club into the street.

'You're a decent wee crooner, hen,' says someone as they pass. 'Well done,' says another.

'You're famous,' Malky nudges her.

'Ah, shut it.'

'You okay?'

'Aye,' she says.

'They're alright really, you know,' he says. 'Can I get your number?'

Behind him, Gibby emerges from the club with his arm around the waist of an attractive blonde girl. Julie hopes Marie's not watching from the taxi.

'Haw, Malky!' shouts Gibby. 'C'mere!'

'A minute!' Malky shouts back. 'So what do you think?' he says. 'Can I see you again?'

He's shivering in his shirt sleeves, hands in his jean pockets, eyebrows raised in hope. He's a nice smile. And those eyes.

She sighs, and looks up at the foggy night sky. He follows her gaze.

'Mad, innit,' Malky says. 'All they stars up there, and we can't even see them.'

'Do you know what, Malky? I don't think it would work out.'

Her heels click-click all the way over to the waiting taxi, leaving Malky alone at the foot of the path. He stands and stands, until the thrum of the diesel engine disappears into the night.

The Session

Eleanor Thom

It's my last chance to see the place. I don't know what made me, but I'm standing here at the top of the steps, the railings wet with rain, looking down through the window at the narrow tables and the corner where the musicians sit. They are pressed in by the drinkers. Some listen and some don't. I remember the feel of it: fiddles, pipes, whistles and elbows all edging and jutting like a cage of chickens, bows flicking round beer glasses, squawking notes. Under the table there was a nest of instrument cases. Feet found a footing where they could, a solid place to tap a beat. It was a comforting thing to be part of, especially sitting beside an accordion player, like huddling behind a pillar.

"You could survive a bomb blast behind that," I'd said once. The accordionist shrugged and I wondered if I should have picked a different kind of disaster, an earthquake, a train wreck. Or maybe it just wasn't the right time to strike up a conversation. Maybe he preferred playing to talking. Sometimes it felt like you weren't meant to talk at all, but as far as I knew, there wasn't a rule about it. Not unless someone was singing. If a song started the talkers would be instantly shooshed. If the singer was good, the bar staff stopped serving.

It's not too late to change my mind. Through the window, a few of the players are still picking out the last tune, trying to remember how it went before the next set starts. There are less of them than there used to be. If I keep walking I'll be on the beach in a moment or two. I could dip my toes into the cold, black sea.

I have the fiddle with me but I've left it in the boot of the car. I go down the steps and push the door, moving out of the drizzle and into the orangey-lit room. Straight away I look over at the place where the man sat. I can still picture him there, hands in fists, tattooed knuckles resting on wood, his back curved, nose pointing to his pint. There were two women with him, both dressed for a night out. Mother and daughter

maybe, or perhaps they were both involved with him. There was something about the way they stood by, the two of them doing all the talking. The women watched the music. They didn't listen. They just watched.

The barman looks at me only a second longer than he would have if he'd never seen me before. He doesn't mention my disappearance from the place.

"What can I get you?" he says.

I give him the right change and my drink is handed to me in a dark brown bottle. I take it to a stool further along the bar and sit down, swivelling so I can see the players. They are still on a break, smoking and tuning, plucking strings and staring into space. One or two of them see me and nod. Still not a talkative lot.

"You're not playing tonight?" says the barman.

I shake my head.

I look up at the telly, an excuse to turn away from him. I don't want to have the conversation again, about how I am leaving town, going over the sea to care for a sick relative. The television is off.

"It's broken," he says.

"Of course," I say.

They used to keep the telly on all the time. Even during the Saturday session they'd let people watch it on mute. It was broadcasting over our heads the night the man was here, pressing his knuckles on the bar, the two women at his side. No one was watching it till one of the women shouted at us to shut up, the fiddles coming to a stop, the whistle players lowering their instruments, the piper's kit left whining into silence. When the room was quiet again, the man pointed over our heads with a remote control and turned up the volume for a news item. Crowds were outside the Vatican, women fingering rosary beads, and a man in a white robe preparing to deliver a message. The director switched cameras, views of a building, all in darkness except for one room. Three windows in the top right corner were illuminated.

"Well, that's that. The Pope's dead. He took his time," laughed the man.

"Two tears in a bucket," said the older women, shoving a crisp into

her mouth. The younger one smiled.

There was a loudspeaker crackle, and a second later they made the announcement in Italian. The newsman confirmed it, and the bell started tolling.

"Bong!" the man at the bar said. He held up his nearly empty glass and banged it with the side of his mobile phone. "Bong! Bong! Bong!"

He ordered another drink, a half and a whisky, not caring, but the two women kept staring at the screen. No one had cut the sound off, so we were listening to the stream of words, all in Italian. We started to put our instruments down. One of the session regulars, a guitarist, began taking everyone's order. The bar did free drinks for players.

Then the young woman shouted out.

"Do you do requests?"

She was talking to the guitarist but he didn't reply, so she shouted it again, and still nobody answered.

"Are you not talking to us then?" she said.

The man took his fists off the bar. He walked over, thumbing the inky skin over the knuckles of his left hand. One side said L.O.Y.A.L. The other said R.O.Y.A.L.

"Play something lively," he said.

His women giggled. One took a long gulp of her drink.

"Play a jig for the Pope," he said, and behind him the women clinked bottles.

I never knew the girl's name. She was a player who was quite new, a local I think, but she kept to herself. It took me by surprise when she put her fiddle up on her shoulder. She was sitting right beside me and I couldn't see the look on her face as she started playing a lament, a little nervous at first but then smooth, confident. I could see the players opposite. One of them put his face down to his hands and hissed at her quietly to stop. Another one discretely drew his finger across his throat. Most of them looked at their drinks.

She played right to the end, all on her own, while the man watched. None of the rest of us played, bunch of chickens that we were. She was a good player, sure she was, but I felt like I'd swallowed a rock. The man

had walked slowly back to the bar and sat down, still watching us, sucking on his lips. He was taking in each face, waiting to see what we would do next, deciding on his next move. The women beside him looked like they'd lost a bet, backed a bad horse on the last leg of a race weekend.

"You better not be taking the piss out of my woman," the man said eventually, his voice quiet.

No one answered. The barman came over to clear glasses from the table next to ours.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, hen," he whispered, leaning in towards the girl who'd played the tune. "Sorry."

She was already packing up, putting her fiddle slowly back in its box, like she may not see it in a while. She wiped the dust away from the bridge and shined the wood with the cloth before covering the strings, loosening the bow, and slotting it back in the lid. I heard her swallow hard as the lid closed and she flicked the clasps. She stood up, lifting a dark green coat onto her shoulders and downing what was left of her drink. She squeezed past the rest of us, and then she disappeared out of the door and up the steps to the street.

The man watched her go and turned back to his drink, wrapping his hands, Royal and Loyal, firmly around his glass.

"Won't you go after her?" the older woman asked.

He shrugged.

"Are you no going?"

"Not for that daft wee bitch."

"How's that?"

He took a long sip. The women stood behind him, quiet.

"I don't hit lassies," he said at last.

"Well you might not, but I do," said the younger woman. She grabbed her coat and strode out of the door, slamming it behind her. The other woman went out after her, but the man didn't budge. He sat drinking quietly.

"Play something fast?" the guitarist suggested.

This time we did. No jigs, just back-to-back reels, the kind that go crazy. I used to like the feeling of that, playing faster and faster till we

were skipping notes. Half of the set were Irish tunes but the man was none the wiser. Soon he was in a better mood, diddle-dee-dee-ing along with the music.

On the telly above us, the pious prayed for Jean Paul II.

What a night.

I take a sip out of the bottle. I'm still not sure why I came back here. To look for the girl, I suppose. I still remember the slow, sad tune she played. I learnt it note for note.

It's Always A Car Crash

Julie Robertson

There had been a Big Game on that afternoon and the girls had been dancing around their handbags for most of the night. Ten minutes before the end, the glitter-ball twirled, the slow music came on and the boys came out of the beer bar.

Knights in White Satin! My favourite.

“Your luck’s in tonight.” said Izzie, nudging me.

I turned to see the boy walking towards me. He looked as if he came from a posh school, where they wore blue blazers. My brothers came from a similar one, where they wore dark green ones. Both groups kicked with different feet, as my mother would say, laughing. Sometimes, the two would meet and play cards on the train but did not socialise beyond that.

I had noticed the boy coming in earlier with a crowd. I had never seen him before but he had the same look. Tall, well-fed boys who swaggered when they walked. Alpha males of the time, bound for careers in medicine, law, accountancy, dentistry. Everyone had walked past the sign at the door of the University Union – “Football Colours are banned”. Patches of blue and green peeked out from the pockets of denim jackets.

The boy motioned with his head to the dance floor. I nodded and left my handbag with Izzie. She winked at me.

A posh boy, a handsome one. So what if he came from a snobby school? So did my brothers. I was the rebel. My best friend at primary had been Jimmy Reid’s niece. I had insisted on going on to the local Catholic comprehensive with her while my brothers went to a private school.

So what if he was a Protestant? So was my Dad until he became a Catholic to keep my mum happy. There was never any hassle in my

family. We never even spoke about it, only joked occasionally using silly phrases like – bluenoses, wine grapes. All that stuff didn't affect me. It only lived on in silly football songs and TV footage of Northern Ireland – bombs, barricades, and soldiers.

I was at art school and had my own ivory tower, one that I carried around with me in my head. My friends and I pored over art books, wandered around exhibitions, smoked dope and listened to the Grateful Dead. But I was tiring of cold flats, posters of Che Guevara, boyfriend spouting Marxism. I fancied a house in a tree-lined street, children, a Labrador and a husband with an expense account. I did not fancy the starving in the garret lark some of my friends had opted for. So the cheesecloth and patchouli was out and the Farrah Fawcett look was in.

From the bar my brothers and their crowd watched us as they downed their pints. The boy led me on the dance floor under the glitter-ball, silver spots danced over us. He looked like an elfin knight with muscle definition. More of a tennis player than a rugby player judging from his arms. I flicked my hair over my shoulder.

“What is your name?” I asked as we swayed to the music.

“Colin,” he said. He did not ask me what my name was. I told him anyway.

“Bernadette,” I said.

“What do you do?”

He leant forward, his mouth close to my ear.

“I shoot Catholics.”

As he pulled me close to him, a beer glass hit my cheek. I was blinded with blood. I could hear someone screaming over the lyrics of the song.

In front of me, moonbeams moved over a scrum. My partner had gone and was part of the giant crab on the floor. In the lilac light my blood looked black. The glitter-ball span around as Izzie held a towel to my face. The lights came on and the boys vanished before the police arrived. I was lucky that there was a plastic surgeon in the hospital on a

Friday night. He did a good job – it is only in certain lights that you can see the scar. Over the years, lovers, a husband and children have run their fingers over it. Tonight, in a different country in a city wreathed in fog even though it is summer, a grandchild lies beside me. Small brown fingers caress my cheek. He always asks me the same question. I always give the same answer. It is always a car crash. Never a brother.

The Colour Of The Song

Morag Smith

The girl behind the counter in the Winter Gardens cafe is wiping a glass food display unit with one hand and texting with the other. Maureen breathes in the warm tropical dampness and the aroma of ground coffee and microwaved apple pie. Her dad wipes the steam off his glasses. Above them, palm trees and the creeping tendrils of exotic vegetation soar up towards the glass roof, wrapping themselves around the Victorian pillars and metalwork. There are only two other tables occupied – one by a couple with a baby dressed in a miniature Celtic strip and tiny green and white trainers, one by a middle-aged couple who sip their tea glumly with hats and scarves still on and coats fully buttoned despite the tropical temperature. Her dad sits at a table near the back, just on the edge of the network of condensation-drenched narrow pathways that lead into the jungle of plants while she orders coffee for her, a mug of tea for him and a packet of ham sandwiches, because she suspects he hasn't eaten lunch. When she sets the tray back on the table, he gets his wallet out and holds out a five pound note.

“It's okay Dad, really.”

“Just take it.”

She puts it in her purse.

“So?”

He looks at her blankly, his eyes big and watery behind the new glasses.

“What?”

“Have you thought about it?”

He looks puzzled for a moment, then winks.

“Only kidding, yes, I thought about it, told you I would.”

She can hardly believe her luck.

“So you fancy the flats, then?”

He looks at her in total astonishment.

“Course I don’t. That place is full of old people – and I like where I am.”

“Do you not think it’s a bit big for you now Dad, you don’t even get up the stairs anymore with your arthritis and your heart . . .”

“Ye forgot my blood pressure . . . listen, it’s fine – I was upstairs just last week – thought I’d check everything was okay after the men fixed the roof.”

“You managed alright then?”

“No problem at all. I made myself a flask of tea and some sandwiches just in case I got stuck. It was quite an adventure . . .” He winks. She gives him a deadpan stare, till he shrugs and starts fishing in his coat pocket.

“I found something when I was up there . . . look . . .”

He hands her a dog-eared photograph. It smells of old wardrobes, mothballed best suits and shoe boxes filled with crumbling love letters. He’s smiling and waiting.

“Remember? That day?”

She looks at it for clues. Her dad stands in the foreground, looking unbelievably youthful, sporting thick black hair and dressed in his standard holiday outfit of smart trousers and a spotless white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His legs are planted wide apart and his arms hold Maureen’s bare legs as she sits on his shoulders. She guesses she’s about five years old, for her hair’s blonde as it was when she was very young and there are gaps where her front teeth should be. She’s wearing denim shorts and a bright yellow t-shirt. The top of her head is slightly cut off, so she knows it was her mother behind the camera.

“Well?”

He stabs at the top right hand corner with his finger.

“What does that look like?”

She recognises the ornate castellated roof line of the Templeton’s factory building and in front of it the expanse of Glasgow Green, filled with people lying on the grass, women in flowery dresses, men in white shirts and blue trousers with white flashes down the side, the shape of a large drum and in one corner a small blurry figure in a dark suit with

an orange sash across his chest.

“It’s the Walk, isn’t it?”

“Summer of ’72. Brilliant day that, it was one of the hottest days of the year . . . Ah know yer mother didn’t approve of the drinking and all that, but they were good times.”

“It’s an Orange Walk, Dad . . .”

“Aye, ah know, but they were happy days . . .”

“Not for the Catholics who lived on the routes . . .”

“Naw, but, ah mean for us, as a family . . .”

“I can think of better family memories . . .”

He reaches over, takes the photograph, slips it back in his pocket.

“I’m just going to the gents . . .”

He stands abruptly, staggering slightly.

“Dad, are you okay . . .”

“I’m fine, you’re a fuss just like she was.”

She watches him shuffling away and takes a bite of the sandwich. It’s exactly the sort of unadorned white sliced and packet ham affair her mother would have made a dozen of for their July outings – accompanied of course by a bottle of ginger, boiled eggs that no-one would eat and Golden Delicious apples. They’d pack it all in the big tartan shopping bag, catch the bus to Bath Street in the city centre then pick up the walk and follow it to its end at Glasgow Green. He used to lift her up on his shoulders above the crowd, so she could see everything. Some of them were neighbours she recognised, but they looked different on this day – happier, and more colourful with their uniforms or their Sunday best clothes and ribbons everywhere in orange, white, red and blue. They’d follow them to the green where her mother would spread out the blanket on the grass then they’d sit and listen to the strands of music from the different bands while her dad wandered off, looking for other men he knew, chatting and drinking a bit, though not as much as some. As the sun went down and it got too rowdy, they’d start to pack up but he would grab her Mum by the waist and say, “Come on darlin’ a wee bit longer . . .” She’d keep packing quietly, smoothing her skirt down, saying, “It’s time John, you know it is” and they’d walk to the bus stop, him

still humming tunes, swinging her up onto his shoulders and dancing a jig on the pavement as they walked to the bus stop, while she screamed with delight ignoring her mother's voice in the background, "Careful, careful, watch the lassie . . ."

This was how it was always – her mother in the background and him full of jokes and songs. When he got home from work most nights Maureen would wait patiently while he took off his boots, then fetch the penny whistle that he'd played in the bands when he was younger. His repertoire included folk songs, strange elaborate versions of hits by Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, and songs from the musicals. Occasionally he'd slip in band songs like Derry's Walls – she couldn't remember ever learning the lyrics, but she'd dance and stamp around the coffee table singing "We'll fight and not surrender...", swinging an invisible mace around in the air until her mother shouted, "Don't you start with those bloody orange tunes, Jim . . ."

He'd shrug and laugh, "Ach its just a song", then she'd stand in front of him, hands on hips, her face pink with fury, "It's no the song that bothers me it's the colour of the song . . ."

He'd be doubled up helpless with laughter, but would change anyway to something less inflammatory. He'd do magic tricks as well, twirl coins through his fingers, or produce them from the back of her ear or her mother's hair, for which he always got hit with a fish slice or whatever other domestic implement was at hand. Maureen's favourite was when she'd stand behind the wall in the L-shaped room far back from his chair holding something, a favourite toy, or a book and he'd always guess what it was, even with his back to her. He knew when she was standing behind him no matter how quiet or how far away she was. It was just some way he had of pretending to look straight ahead, but actually sliding his eyes around, but it seemed like magic to her. She'd ask, "How did you know ah was there?" and he'd say, "Remember darlin', I'm the man who can see round corners . . ."

A few years later, she'd worked out all the tricks and the July parades through the centre of Glasgow had become embarrassing. By the time she was fifteen, they argued about everything – newspapers (his),

clothes (hers), politics, religion, and the ethics of eating sausage, egg and chips for dinner. This last one was usually the worst, with him thumping the table with his fist, her tipping the contents of the plate in the bin and her mother retiring to the bedroom grim-faced, saying, "Just let me know when the pair of you have finished . . ."

When she went to university they reached an uneasy truce. In her second year she moved out into a student flat. She still went home the odd weekend for Sunday dinner, but although she was only twenty minutes away, it felt like she was on another planet. Then after her degree, she took a job in London. She still came home every Christmas, bearing expensive presents – a designer handbag for her mother, a rare malt whisky for him, which sat in the cocktail cabinet half empty for years afterwards.

Then one summer her friend Caroline sent her an invitation to her wedding in Edinburgh. She caught the train to Glasgow, a few days early, thinking she could visit home and surprise them, then head east afterwards. It was early afternoon when she got to Central Station and on a whim, instead of getting a taxi, she took the side exit and walked up Hope Street. It was a Saturday in July and the sun was shining, so the streets were filled with pale people in shorts, young guys stripped to the waist, crowds sitting drinking at tables which had been set up on the pavements outside dark shadowy bars, chatting and laughing, oblivious to the noise and smell of the double decker buses wheezing their way towards Cowcaddens. As she walked slowly up the hill, thinking it was nice to be back, she was stopped by a crowd of shoppers gathered on the pavement. In front of them were the flashing lights of a police car. She thought at first it was an accident, but then realised the cars were moving while behind them, coming slowly closer, was the faint sound of a drum banging out a rhythm. Even fainter behind that was the sound of tin whistles and she recognised Derry's Walls. Through the gaps in the crowd she could see teenage boys in crisp white shirts and blue trousers with orange stripes down the sides, marching up the hill, their shoulders held back, pride and the rhythm of the drum in every step, blowing away in unison on their whistles. Then came a group of four girls in blue

miniskirts playing snare drums. A man in his twenties, with bare chest and blue military trousers was swinging the mace twirling it round and dancing about. He got a few cheers from the crowd, but most of them stood silently, waiting for it to pass. A group of older men and women brought up the rear. She'd just edged forward to the front of the crowd and was wondering whether she should buy her mum some chocolates, when she saw him, right in the middle of the last row. He had on his best suit, the one he'd worn to her graduation and over it was the sash. He was limping slightly on the left leg and flushed with the effort of keeping up, but he held his head up proudly, his chin jutting forward, staring straight ahead. The breath went out of her body. She wasn't sure if she'd actually said, "No, Dad" or just thought it but the woman standing beside her said, "You alright hen? They're a right bunch of eejits aren't they?"

She shrunk back, trying to get away from the front before he saw her, turning and pushing her way through to the back of the crowd where she ran into the first shop door she reached then walked up and down the aisles, staring blindly at sets of holiday luggage and discount raincoats while outside the bands played on, one fading away and another coming up behind them, time after time, tune after tune. When the drums were a distant rumble, she went outside again and called Caroline. She arranged to travel through to Edinburgh that afternoon and after the wedding, went straight back to London. For years afterwards she kept her home visits to Christmas and her mother's birthday in October.

"It might never happen darlin' . . ."

He's sitting back at the table again, smiling at her over the top of a mug of tea.

"You were far away."

She shrugs, saying nothing. The cafe has filled up with a Sunday afternoon crowd – a pensioners' coach party, cyclists in fluorescent Lycra tops, families with young kids running round the steamy pathways that lead into the undergrowth of the greenhouse and, at the table next to them, an older couple, a man and woman sharing a pot of tea. The man's

hands are lumpy and swollen with arthritis. The woman lifts the teacup up and gently places his fingers on the handle, supporting it while he takes a sip, then letting it down again on the table. Her Dad watches them.

"I still miss her you know . . ."

"I know you do . . ."

"It should have been her that lived longer . . ."

"Don't, Dad . . ."

He stands up, fumbling in his pockets, taking out wallet, keys, a packet of Polo Mints.

"We can get a taxi outside back to the house then you can take it back to the station. You've got a family to get back to . . ."

"You haven't even finished your tea . . ."

But he's already shuffling towards the front door. The couple with the baby are still there. He stops at the pram, smiling. The baby waves its arms and legs, gurgling ecstatically. The parents watch quietly while he tickles its stomach.

"Come on Dad . . ."

The woman has a strained smile on her face, but he's oblivious.

"Yer a wee smasher aren't ye? Ye gonna play for Celtic when yer a big boy then? Yer dad got ye down for trials already?"

Behind him the man says, "It's a girl." Her dad straightens up, turns round to him nodding sagely.

"And a wee stunner she is too . . ." She takes his arm.

"Come on Dad."

When they get to the taxi rank, she says, "I thought he was gonna thump you – you should've seen his face when you had your back to him . . ."

"Ach ah was just being friendly, poor wean. And I knew fine well what his face was like. Remember darlin', I'm not that old and daft. I can see more than you think . . ." He gives her a sharp look. The taxi pulls up behind him. Without looking round, he says, "Your carriage awaits Madam."

He's silent for most of the journey. Then, just as they turn into his

street, he says, "Maybe I'll go on that waiting list for the flats after all."

"Are you sure?"

He nods, "I just didn't want to give up the house for it's all I've got left of her. But you have to change and move on sometimes, don't you?"

"You've got the memories Dad."

He gives her a look and snorts with laughter.

"Memory is treacherous. Who said that?"

"No idea."

He sniffs, "Ah thought you were an intellectual...it was Jean-Paul Sartre."

She nods dutifully.

"I'm impressed . . ."

He strokes his hair back as though he were still slicking it with Brylcreem.

"History of Philosophy Part 1 at Milton Community Education Centre – see, ah don't just sit there drinking whisky . . ."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. "Don't come in, Joseph's coming up tonight for a wee dram and you have to get back. Here . . ."

She accepts the proffered ten-pound note, knowing better than to argue. She makes him promise that he will only get a half bottle of whisky for Joseph and him and this time if Joseph turns blue he'll call an ambulance rather than pouring him another glass. He's just about to close the taxi door when she sees it lying on the seat, the picture he'd pulled out earlier.

"Dad, you dropped this."

She holds it out to him, but he shakes his head, "You keep it. I don't want it anymore". Their eyes meet. He winks, "Ah changed my tune in 1985 . . ."

"What do you mean?"

He doesn't reply, just shuts the door, and opens his garden gate, waving over his shoulder. The driver says, "Central Station is it?" The taxi driver pulls off without waiting for an answer.

She unfolds the picture and looks again at the flashes of orange,

the bright green grass of the park, the deep blue of the sky. She remembers her mother telling her that he'd given up the marching. At the time she'd said coldly, "Good", not bothering to ask why, not thinking it had anything to do with her. But it would have been about 1985 – just after the summer of Caroline's wedding in Edinburgh. She hears the old songs playing in her head again, the ones she'd danced around the coffee table to and she's back there again, at the corner of Hope Street and Sauchiehall Street, with the band thumping its way through Derry's Walls. Her Dad is walking in time to the music, his chin held high, looking straight ahead and she's shrinking back through the crowd, thinking he hasn't seen her. The streets of her childhood flash past outside the taxi window, and she realises then it's her who's daft, it's her who's forgotten that he is, and always was, the man who can see round corners.

In These Transgressive Spaces

Denise Mina

Katherine was coming out of the anesthetic when she heard the accent from home. She was groggy, she thought it was the nurse speaking but it wasn't. It was the only other woman in the recovery room.

"Not too bad," the woman had said. "Thanks."

The nurse looked at Katherine and smiled with practiced kindness, "And how are you feeling?"

Befuddled, Katherine considered doing a Birmingham accent as a disguise but she didn't really know that one. Or London? The nurse was waiting for an answer, eyebrows rising slowly, watching for complications from surgery, bubbles on the brain. Maybe a mad, badly delivered accent was a bad idea.

Katherine spoke in her own voice, "I'm awful sore."

The other woman twitched in recognition. They were from the same place. Not here, not Guildford, but Glasgow. And they were from very near each other, the same small mining village, judging from the peculiar rounding of the vowels.

"Where is it sore, darling?" The nurse was from Guildford or London, not home anyway. "Does it feel like a period?"

Katherine nodded, "But times ten."

The nurse tipped her head sympathetically, "That's normal. It will be sore. We'll get you some paracetamol when we get back to the ward."

"I'm the same," said the other woman, a little breathless from the throbbing pain.

"We'll get you some too." The nurse went off into the next room.

Katherine ordered herself not to look at the woman but then she did.

No one in here made eye contact. There was no idle chat in this clinic on the outskirts of suburbia. The only people who wanted to talk were the campaigners outside and they really wanted to talk. All the

patients were women and they all kept their eyes down. The exception was the woman who was months gone, showing. Something wrong with the baby. She wasn't shy at all and neither was her husband. They were angry. In a small room of six beds, all getting ready, stowing their belongings in paper bags, changing into paper gowns and hats, all the while listening to them tell the cleaner, the nurses, the doctors, that they didn't agree with abortion but they actually needed a termination for medical reasons. They stopped short of calling the rest of them feckless whores but the implication was there. No one objected. Even when the wife started crying loudly about being put in this predicament, they all just kept their eyes down and pretended that they weren't there. They were each in their own bubble of shame, wishing the day past.

But this woman in recovery did meet Katherine's eye and she smiled, "Ye all right?"

"Aye, not bad. Yourself?"

"Not bad, aye. Glad it's done."

"God," said Katherine, almost savouring the confirming waves of pain, "Me too."

They were whispering, as if the whole village, the whole West of Scotland was there, arms crossed, pinched-mouth, watching them both, lying there in their gall, not dying of shame.

The hospital gowns and caps were made of paper and they rustled as they moved. Their outfits made Katherine think of them as temporary things, throw-away things that would melt in rain.

The woman smiled. She was handsome, older than Katherine by a good ten years. She had round cheekbones and long lashes.

"Anybody from home here with you, pet?"

Katherine balked at the mention of home. But maybe not. The woman was here for the same thing as her and she might just want to know whether Katherine's mother and father and fiancé were going to be upstairs when they got back to their beds. They made you take off your jewelry, Katherine's crucifix was in her shoe upstairs, and so the woman couldn't know the impossibility of Katherine telling anyone where she was or what she had decided to do.

"No. I'm just down myself."

A distant clang down a corridor ricocheted against the outside wall and Katherine suddenly thought, what if she was in for a medical one? Maybe her family would have come to offer their support? And then, when they got back home, Katherine would be seeing them in the street, in the Co-op, in the chapel, maybe, even-

"You?" She asked anxiously.

"No! No, no. Nor me," the woman shook her head reassuringly. "It's okay."

Exhausted, they lay back and looked at the ceiling of the recovery room. There was nothing to look at.

"I'm actually a bit surprised," said the woman, "Because they're so sensitive. I'm surprised they put us together. I mean-" she glanced at Katherine, "Well, we know . . ."

Their accents were so close that, through the slowly lifting anesthetic fog, it felt as if the woman's voice was in Katherine's own head.

Katherine told the ceiling, "Ah, but - I lied on the form. I said Paisley."

"Being secretive?"

"Yeah. That went well, didn't it?"

They looked at each other and had a little chuckle. The door opened. A porter came in and said a few pleasantries as he kicked off the brakes on the other woman's bed - hello - just moving you upstairs now - it's a lovely sunny day outside - back in a bit for you, my love - then he rolled the bed out through swinging double doors into a bright corridor. The woman's face came past her bed and she looked at Katherine.

"Goodbye," she said, blinking slowly and nodding, as if she was making a solemn vow never to see her again.

The bed passed, the doors were closing behind it and Katherine called goodbye back. And then she waited, adrift on waves of pain rolling up from her uterus, crashing on the shore of her tender breasts.

The pain was reassuring and cleansing. She had done it. Taken her courage in her hands and averted disaster. She had not broken her mother's heart and would not spend the rest of her life being an object

of pity to the women of the parish. She would spend eternity in hell for it though, because she didn't think she would ever be repentant. She might pray for the willingness to pray for the willingness to repent this sin, but she still wouldn't be sorry. She knew in her heart she had done the right thing for everyone. Under the covers, she flattened a hand on her abdomen and thanked whoever that would have been for leaving so graciously. Hope to see you again, she told them. Sorry we couldn't be together.

The porter arrived back, said substantially the same nice things to her as he had said to the other woman while he rolled her bed out of the bay. The nurse said goodbye, the doors opened to the sunshine and, suddenly, Katherine was in the afterwards.

Along corridors, into a big industrial lift, out, turning in a tight corner and then a room. Sunny day outside, just as he had said. He parked her by a window, kicked the breaks on the bed. Then a different nurse brought her a cup of tea and some biscuits and some paracetamol.

She sipped and looked out of the window. Guildford was a pretty, leafy place. Yellow spring sunshine played on budding leaves on tree tops below, pale and promising. The biscuit wasn't enough. She hadn't eaten since the night before, but the pain from her stomach swamped the hunger pangs. She'd get a bag of crisps when she got outside.

She was lying back, thinking about crisp flavours and which she would have, when the nurse brought her belongings to her. Now, she said, are you sure you won't be alone? Because I notice that no one has come to pick you up.

Katherine was from Paisley: she had a friend in London that she would stay with tonight, in case she had an adverse reaction to the anaesthetic. Great, said the nurse, and gave her details of what to do if the bleeding became heavier or her pain got worse. Call this number immediately. You have to go and see your GP when you get home, for a check up in a week or so. Doctor – she read the form – Kelly, is it?

Dr Kelly, yes, agreed Katherine and the nurse went away.

Dr Kelly's rheumy eyes. Dr Kelly's scapula worn over his clothes, a ragged scrap of sacramental cloth on a dirty bit of string. And how often

have you been taking the blessed sacrament? As if it was a conversation and not a judgment. She wouldn't be going to see him.

“Hello again, though.”

The woman from the recovery room was in the bed across from her. They had been sipping tea and filling forms and hadn't noticed each other. And she had a bag of belongings on the end of her bed and a pair of shoes under the bed and they were both leaving.

Katherine had a moment of blind panic. They would leave and not talk at the bus stop. They would sit on the bus, near but not together, all the way to Victoria. They would get on the bus to Glasgow, full of Glaswegians. Awkward, shedding the kind anonymity of London, becoming who they were supposed to be again. And they would arrive in Buchanan Street Bus Station late tonight, fully themselves, in the paralyzing web of home, suspicious of each other, divided by their proximity. She imagined the woman's face on the bus to the village, bitter, leaning on a window, malevolent eyes sliding to Katherine's reflection.

She looked up and saw from the woman's eyes that she was frightened too. She glanced at the bag on the end of Katherine's bed, imagined the journey back. She was more scared than Katherine. She began to cry.

Katherine slid her legs over the side of the bed. She stood up on the cold linoleum floor, legs weak from lying down for hours, and wobbled over to the lady's bed. She sat down, slipping unsteadily on the giant sanitary towel slung like a hammock between her legs to catch the blood, and put her hand on the weeping woman's hand.

“I've got three kids. . .” the lady said between sobs. “I just, I can't . . .”

Katherine gave her a tissue from the side cabinet and waited until she was calmer. “I would never . . .”

“I know.” But the woman clearly hadn't known that and she was reassured. She blew her nose and gave a little shudder. “You have to be responsible . . .” she said, but Katherine felt she was telling herself more than Katherine.

Then she looked at her. “You're young.”

She wanted Katherine's story. In fact, she should know Katherine's

story, because they were from so close to each other. She should recognize her face, or know her family from the village. It was a small, small place and everyone knew everyone else or at least who they were belonging to.

Katherine didn't give her story. She patted the lady's hand and moved the box of tissues near her hand and got up and went back to her own bed.

They looked at each other across the room, hoping for a promise not to tell, not now, not in the future, not if something else came up or they had a fall out or anything, but somehow neither could give that reassurance, or ask for it because they were both sneaky traitors. By definition they couldn't be trusted.

Katherine pulled the curtains around her bed and got dressed. She took her crucifix out of her shoe, ran the chain and the gold image of Our Lord across her palm. Jesus was compassion. He would understand that she couldn't sacrifice her mother's dignity to this. Jesus forgave.

She dressed and sat for a private moment with the lovely yellow view over Guildford. She said a prayer of thanks for the day and then an entreaty to her savior about the woman across the room. Dear God, I do not know what to do about this woman. I do not know how to love her because she will know my mother and may tell her that I have done this thing, or tell my father, or my brothers. I cannot love her because I am afraid of her. Help me. Please God help me.

She pulled her coat on, took a breath and pulled the curtain back.

The woman was there, wearing her own coat, ready with her own bag.

They looked each other up and down and smiled.

Katherine's heart swelled with love of God and she gave thanks for a prayer answered at a hard time. She knew then that God was with her, holding her hand and she did not have to seek forgiveness or pray for the desire to pray for repentance because the woman was wearing a Royal Blue woollen coat with a poppy on the lapel and had a union jack bag for life. She saw Katherine's green puffa, and her crucifix and her earrings that were the kind that only the Catholics in the village wore.

Their people were separate. Four hundred years of animosity and mistrust stood between them. No one they knew would know anyone they knew. It was safe.

The woman, still smiling, nodded at her. "You heading home tonight, pet?"

"Aye," grinned Katherine, "Yourself?"

She nodded. "Bus?"

Katherine nodded back.

The woman crooked her arm at Katherine, "Well, come on, we'll go together."

Mixing The Colours

A Dramatic Monologue

Magi Gibson

LIGHTS COME UP ON A HOTEL BEDROOM. WE HEAR CEILIDH DANCE MUSIC FROM THE WEDDING RECEPTION DOWNSTAIRS. LIZ, A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN, ONE LEG IN PLASTER TO THE KNEE, HOBBLER IN ON CRUTCHES, WEARING A MOTHER-OF-THE-BRIDE OUTFIT. SHE SINKS INTO AN ARMCHAIR

Lucky it's just the ankle. That's what Bill says. He's having a ball right now, downstairs in the bar, regaling everyone with action replays, making me sound like one of those wee Russian gymnasts – forward flip, triple twist . . . then whack, flat on my back on the lobby floor.

Should think myself lucky, Bill says, landing just short of the glass door like that. It could've been worse.

They made me spend the night in the hospital. Talk about a stooshie when I discharged myself this morning! 'Why all the fuss?' I protested. 'It's just a broken ankle.' 'It's not the ankle we're concerned about,' the doctor said. 'It's the black-out, you taking it so sudden at the top of the stairs like that.' Then he turned to Bill. 'Your wife's blood pressure's on the high side, Mr Thomson. We'd like to –'

'Too right my bloody blood pressure's on the bloody high side!' I exploded, and honest-to-God, I do not usually swear. 'My boy's up from London to get married, my ankle's in a stookie, and I'm supposed to be all dolled up and at the Registry Office by one o'clock!' Honest! They put a stethoscope round their necks and think it gives them brains.

(She puts her head back, closes her eyes for a moment, opens them again, smiles.)

Anyway, Anya's just lovely. A better daughter-in-law I could not have hoped for. Of course, with them both being down in London, we'd only met her the once before. She looked gorgeous at the Registry Office. Really beautiful. I always hoped I'd have a girl sometime, a wee lassie to dote over, but after Alan, well, it just wasn't happening.

'How come we had Alan so easy?' Bill used to say that, every time another month came and went. In the end, I let him think it was me, you know, with the problem. 'The doctor says it's my ovaries,' I lied. 'All dried up. Nothing to be done.' He stopped asking after that. He's not the type to talk about women things. Well, what man is? Female plumbing, Bill calls it. Then gets out fast.

Look at me, blethering about women's plumbing, and my son downstairs right now, in the function suite – the Glencoe, no less, all tartan carpet and purple thistles – with his lovely bride, Anya.

(The ceilidh music from downstairs has grown fast, loud foot-stamping thumps can be heard, wild hee-euchs!)

Would you listen to that? Sounds like a Strip the Willow! Och, when I was younger, I just loved Strip the Willow. See at the High School Christmas dances – we used to spin the wee skinny boys right off their feet, whack them into the walls. Not that my Bill was ever wee or skinny. Oh no, not Bill. Built like a man when he was fourteen. Alpha male to his wee toe. Sporty as anything. Would you believe it? A Rangers scout came to watch him in a school game once. Bill was everybody's hero that day. They never signed him though. Said he was too hot-headed.

Bill Thomson! Quite the school heart-throb, he was. When we were in fifth year his mates used to come up to me in the corridor and say, *Billy says hello*. And I'd go, 'Oh really? Tell Billy I say hello too.' Then at the Christmas dance he scooted straight over, asked me up. Very near killed me in a Dashing White Sergeant – him and that big lump, Bobby Wilson – birling me round and round till I was so dizzy you'd've thought I'd been on the Buckie. Oh, and he tried to kiss me! Lunged in. I kind of side-swerved. He missed. Kissed my ear. Not very pleased, Bill wasn't, not with all his mates gawking.

Looking back, I suppose I was the envy of every girl there. But I

was going to the uni in the summer. I had big ideas, ideas that did not include the likes of Bill Thomson.

Anyway, that's all water under the bridge. He got me eventually. Four years later. A girl with a university degree... and a broken heart. Not that *he* knew about the broken heart.

WE HEAR A KNOCK AT THE DOOR. LIGHTS DOWN.
LIGHTS UP. LIZ IS LOOKING THROUGH PILE OF PHOTOS ON HER LAP.

Isn't that lovely? Our Alan's just brought me up a whole pile of wedding photos. That boy's a gem. The photographer's got a printer set up in the bar so the guests can see all the photos and order what they want right away.

Och, will you look at this one! Anya's so photogenic. I just wish Bill didn't look such a misery. Of course, he was not at all pleased when he heard they'd organised a Registry Office wedding. 'It's no a' proper wedding unless it's in a church,' he said, in that voice that's supposed to brook no argument.

'Since when were you last in a church?' I said. 'I bet you don't even know the name of the minister.'

'The Reverend Ross,' says he, quick as a flash.

'The Reverend Ross? The Reverend Ross,' I told him, 'passed through the Valley of Death into the Arms of his Maker ten years ago. We've had three ministers since then.'

'How come you know so much?' he asked. 'When were you last near the church?'

'I keep up with things,' I said. 'The current minister, I can reliably inform you, is English.'

'Nothing wrong wi' being English,' he said.

'And a woman,' I added.

'A minister should be a man,' he said.

'Well your current minister is a woman, which is probably just as well, as she gets her hair dyed ash blonde every three months.'

'I still say our Alan should be married in the church,' he insisted. 'Make it properly legal.'

'It *is* properly legal,' I said. 'It's a Registry Office! Anyway, it doesn't matter what you want. Alan and Anya have planned what *they* want, and they want a Registry Office wedding.'

The photos are lovely, so they are. Anya's tall. Kind of willowy. Her hair's almost white it's so fair. Of course, our Alan's hair's that dark it's almost black. And his eyes, well, they're green. Bill used to joke he'd have to trade him in for a blue-eyed boy. 'We cannae huv green eyes in this family,' he'd say. Och, that was just when Alan was wee, right enough - not when he was old enough that he would've got upset. Bill can be stupid, but he's not cruel. Not when he's sober, anyway. And he only comes away with that kind of crap when his football pals are round. All that stupid banter. Winding each other up. Like the night daft Shuggy Muirhead started his teasing. 'Hey, Billy, ma man, ye don't think yer wean's got a touch o the Fenian aboot him?' Not the kind of thing you say to a true-blue man like Bill. Not if you want to live. But daft Shuggy had sunk a few cans too many.

'He looks like his dad,' I butted in. 'Spitting image. Everyone says so.' God knows, it wasn't exactly a lie. 'It's in the bone structure,' I explained. 'He's a wee stunner.'

Bill picked wee Alan up and spun him round. 'Aye,' he said, 'he'll break the ladies' hearts this one. Just like his dad.'

He'll break the ladies' hearts this one. Just like his dad.

I've always remembered that. The way the fear clenched my gut and the blood rushed from my head and I thought I might black out. It's stayed with me, so it has. *He'll break the ladies' hearts. Just like his dad.*

These wedding photos fair take me back though. Me and Bill, we had a bit of a whirlwind romance. When I first realized I'd missed my period I was scared to tell Bill. Terrified. He can have a right temper on him. We'd gone a walk up the glen, were sitting in the wee stone shelter up there. I'll always remember the stillness in the air, the sound of the burn gurgling over the stones. All the way up, Bill kept asking what was wrong.

I think he thought I was going to chuck him. Anyway, when I told him, he just went right quiet, then he cupped my face in his hands, kissed me really gentle, said, 'In that case we'd better get married, hadn't we?'

Four weeks later I went sailing up the aisle in a big white dress, the Reverend Ross beaming at us both. Then Bill was slipping the ring on my finger. *For better or for worse. In sickness and in health.*

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR. LIGHTS DOWN. LIGHTS UP
ON LIZ SITTING WITH A TALL GLASS OF GIN AND
TONIC LOOKING VERY AMUSED.

Look what Bill just dragged himself away from the bar to deliver! My favourite tippie. Double G & T, a splash of ice, a sliver of lemon.

'That should help take the edge off the pain,' he said. 'Is it awfy sore?'

I didn't answer. Let him squirm.

I almost felt sorry for him, standing there in his stupid Rangers kilt. He got his way on that, and the colour scheme for the wedding, when he said he'd pay for the whole shebang. He's always been a true blue. I knew that right from the off. He was just fifteen when he got the Red Hand of Ulster tattooed on his arm. Very colour sensitive is Bill. My grampa was the same. Wouldn't eat a Penguin biscuit if it had a green wrapper. 'Take it away, hen,' he used to grump. 'I want a blue one.' My gran once knitted him a green jumper. She'd got the wool in a sale. She never could resist a bargain. Knitted it up as a surprise. He was surprised all right! Threw it on the fire. Right there in front of her. Pushed it on the flames with his foot.

It was that right fine wool too. Took her ages to knit. She'd put wee blue stripes round the collar and cuffs. And, like she said after, it wasn't even an Irish green. More an Eau de Nil. But you know the odd thing, see the flames from that green jumper, they were orange and blue.

It became a hilarious family story, of course. One the women told when the men were down the pub. Funny the way women laugh at things that aren't funny at all. Not really. Not if you think about it. *If ye didnae*

laugh, ye'd greet – my granny used to say – if ye didnae laugh ye'd greet.

Bill doesn't suit a kilt. He's not the right shape. I'll tell you another thing he doesn't suit. Guilt. Well, he wouldn't, would he? Guilt's more of a Catholic thing. I know that's why he brought me this. *(She raises her glass.)* Slàinte mhath! The happy couple!

(She drinks, looks thoughtful for a moment, like she's remembering.)

Of course, Bill wasn't my first love.

Not that he knows.

On my very first day at Glasgow Uni I hitched up with Sean. Sean O'Neill. Working-class like me. Out of his depth like me.

I knew the minute he said his name, of course. Not to mention the school he went to. If I hadn't added it up from that, the wee gold crucifix on the chain round his neck was a dead give-away.

I used to play with that wee crucifix, run it through my fingers when we were lying in bed, when we should've been at our lectures. His pal had a room in the student residences. Used to let us have the key for a few quid. Ach well, we were young. It was exciting. Everything seemed new, anything seemed possible. And Sean was so different from any of the boys back home. We could talk about anything – music and philosophy and politics. I was crazy about him. We were crazy about each other. But it couldn't last, could it? I couldn't exactly bring him home and say to my dad – my dad who liked getting drunk on a Saturday after the match and singing the Sash at the top of his voice – say to him, *Hey Dad, this is Sean. Sean O'Neill. We're going to get married and have lots of wee Catholic babies.*

And I didn't want to have lots of wee Catholic babies anyway.

I wanted a career.

I wanted to travel, to go places, not end up stuck in a council house with an endless string of stinkin' nappies and runny noses.

In the end, when I plucked up my courage and told my mum, she broke down and wept. We were in the kitchen and she was sitting at the table greeting her eyes out, dabbing at her face with a tea towel, sobbing, *what have you done, what have you done.*

'I haven't done anything,' I said. Which wasn't quite true. Because I

had done something. I'd fallen in love with a Catholic boy.

'I want to marry him,' I said.

Mum straightened up and took a deep breath. 'You know that's not going to happen. You know that would kill your father.'

'It's not about him,' I said. 'It's about me.'

'It's not that we have anything against Catholics,' she went on, folding the tea-towel and smoothing it over and over. 'We're not like that in this house.'

I gave her a look.

'Och, so your father sings the Sash sometimes. But he doesn't hate Catholics. *We* don't hate Catholics. Mr and Mrs Gilligan two doors down are Catholic and better neighbours you could *not* get.'

'So why can't I marry Sean?' I challenged, like I was five years old and asking for a treat I knew I didn't have a hope in hell of getting.

'Because he's Catholic and you're not,' Mum said.

I rolled my eyes.

'Because he'll want you to marry in the chapel, and when you have kids they'll have to be brought up Catholic, and you'll have the priest at your door every other day if you don't, wearing you down till you give in.'

'That's my business,' I said.

'That's exactly what your Auntie Lily said.' Mum stood up and started filling the kettle. 'Your Auntie Lily, bless her soul, my wee sister, married a Catholic, and it killed her. Killed her!'

'I thought she had cancer,' I muttered, confused. I was only wee when she died, but I was sure that's what I'd been told.

'She did not have cancer.' Mum snapped. 'Not unless you call the priest a cancer coming round, always on at her, eating away at her, grinding her down. That man killed her as surely as if he'd tied the noose himself.'

'She hung herself?'

'Hanged,' Mum snapped. 'Hanged. So much for your university education.'

Mum went quiet. That kind of tense quiet that stretches the air

thinner and thinner, until you think there won't be enough oxygen for the next breath.

The clatter of the front door opening made us both jump. We heard Dad come thumping into the lobby. Mum threw me a look. I knew exactly what it meant. I'd seen it amongst the women in the family often enough when one of the men came in. The subject was closed.

I brought it up with Sean, right after our final exams. We were lying in his pal's bed, watching the rain trickle down the windowpane, talking about what we'd do, once we graduated.

'I've been thinking,' I said, 'maybe we could get married.'

I had my head on his chest and he was stroking my hair. He stopped stroking. I listened to his heart, steadily beating.

'So what do you think?' I asked.

'I don't,' he said. 'I don't think anything.'

'Well, I want you to think something,' I said.

He took a deep breath. 'It would have to be in the chapel,' he said.

'Why?' I asked, sitting up to look at him.

'Is that not obvious?' he asked, like he really thought it was.

'It's not obvious at all,' I said. 'What's wrong with the Registry Office?'

'I'm Catholic,' he said.

'So what? I'm Protestant,' I said.

'But that's different.'

'What's different?'

'You don't actually go to church,' he said.

'And you only go to Mass because you're scared,' I said.

'Scared of what?' he asked, swinging his legs out the bed.

'I don't know... Scared of your mother? The priest? The big bad fire?'

He went all sullen, stood up, started pulling on his t-shirt.

'You always moan about having to go,' I muttered.

'But that doesn't mean I'm not Catholic,' he said.

'Well, just because I don't go to church every Sunday doesn't mean I don't care and I can just become a Catholic.'

'Nobody's asking you to become a Catholic.'

'So what if we have kids?' I asked.

He was zipping up his jeans, his back to me.

'What school will they go to?' I said.

'I don't know? Does it matter?' He turned and stared at me for a long time. 'Of course our kids will go to a Catholic school,' he said at last. 'Until they're old enough to make up their own minds. In any case Catholic schools are good,' he said. 'Better than the proddy ones.'

'They're not Protestant schools,' I snapped. 'They're non-denominational.'

That was our first argument. We agreed not to talk about it again. Just to go on the way we'd done before.

But after that we seemed to disagree on everything. Whether to stay in or go out. Whether to have pizza or chips, to walk or take the bus.

We split up just before we graduated. Right after, his pal told me he'd gone to America. I kept the wee crucifix though. Kept it hidden away all these years.

And Bill? Well, I bumped into him the weekend after. In the co-op. At the off-sales counter. Went from a good Catholic boy straight to a Gers fan with the Red Hand of Ulster tattooed on his arm.

And when Bill wanted to come to my graduation, I thought, why not? Me being brainy was always a big thing for Bill. Gave him some kind of kick. I wouldn't call Bill stupid, but he's better with his hands. Does anything round the house I ask. Always has done. Puts up shelves, builds fitted wardrobes. Last year he refitted the whole kitchen. Solid oak worktops. And when we got married he found us a total wreck of a wee bungalow and he worked all the hours God sends, fixing it up, so we could have a place of our own and not have to live with his mum and dad when the baby came. It was ready – complete with nursery – when wee Alan was born, even though he was four weeks early.

Did I say four weeks early?

Truth was, he was more like two weeks late.

I wasn't surprised he was such a wee mite. I was worried sick the whole pregnancy. Could hardly eat. You know, sometimes I think I

ought to be religious, because I must have had a Guardian Angel fixing things up for me.

(She looks thoughtful.)

I could never have had an abortion. I couldn't imagine not having Alan. And let's face it, Bill never was going to have any other kids. Not his own. It never was women's plumbing was the problem. So, in a funny sort of a way, maybe I did Bill a favour.

And Sean? Well, he made his choice, and it wasn't me. He went to the States for the summer, made a new life there.

Alan's birthday was always hard on me though. Especially when he was wee. I would get the guilt, be forced to cover it up with a few G & Ts. But the more time went on, it was like Sean, I don't know, had never really existed, like he'd been an imaginary boyfriend. If it hadn't been for Alan's shock of dark hair, his green eyes, the way he looked at me sometimes, I might even have convinced myself he was Bill's boy all along.

LIGHTS DOWN. LIGHTS UP. LIZ IS TAKING FASCINATOR
FROM HAIR, CHANGING FROM HIGH HEEL INTO FLAT
SHOE AS SHE SPEAKS.

Of course, I didn't actually fall down the stairs last night. That is, I did fall down the stairs, but the bit about the black out, well, that wasn't quite true.

Me and Bill were having an argie-bargie. He'd just found out down the Legion that Anya's Catholic. 'I thought everyone knew Polish folk were Catholic,' I said.

'So why didn't you tell me?' He almost spat the words.

'Because I didn't think it mattered,' I said.

'Didn't think it mattered?' he spluttered, his neck bulging, the veins standing out all purple and ugly.

'It's not like they're getting married in the chapel,' I said, trying to calm him down. 'It's not a big deal.'

'Not a big deal!' he exploded, following me out the bedroom and onto the upstairs landing. 'It is a big deal. It's a bloody big deal! We will

not have Fenian blood in this family!' He was shouting, his face going that black way, like all the blood, the bad blood, was flooding it.

'Anya's not Fenian,' I said quietly. 'Fenian means Irish. She's Polish.'

It's daft the things you think when someone's screaming in your face. Flowers. That's what I was thinking. All those flowers ordered for the wedding. Big white lilies. And roses, dozens of red roses. And blue delphiniums. If Bill has a heart attack and dies they won't go to waste, I was thinking, we can put them on his grave. The colours would be perfect.

'WILL YOU LISTEN, WOMAN!' he was screaming.

Then his fist hit and that was me, blacked out, doing my wee Russian gymnast bit, head over heels, triple twist... and wham on the lobby floor. Inches from the glass door.

I was lying on the trolley, waiting to go into the operating theatre, when I decided I wouldn't tell anyone. It wouldn't be fair on Bill. Alan marrying a Catholic – even a Polish Catholic, in a Registry Office – och, that was a big shock for him.

My Alan's got a kind heart. He's bright too. Bill's that proud of him. Takes his brains from his mum, Bill likes to joke, his beauty from his dad. When Bill did his speech at the wedding dinner you could see he was just bursting with pride every time he said, '*My son, the doctor*'.

And he should be proud. He's been a good dad. Even got over Alan's total lack of interest in Rangers.

I bet if you were to ask Bill, so what would you rather, your son was a season-ticket, card-carrying blue-nose, or a Doctor of Biochemistry, he'd choose the Doctor – even though he's got that stupid Red Hand of Ulster burnt into his forearm. Burnt in like a curse.

I nearly split up with him when I saw that tattoo. It was the first week I was going out with him. He must've been daft about me. Said he'd have it cut off as long as I didn't chuck him. You can't cut off a tattoo, I said. He looked so desperate I told him to forget it. I could live with it.

I know Bill shouldn't hit me. My mum has her suspicions, but she

knows better than to say anything. That's what women do. Keep their mouths shut.

It was Alan talked me into leaving. Och, he's been trying to get me to go for years. A mother does her best to keep things hidden, but even when he was just a wee boy Alan knew fine well what was going on. Not that it happened often. Old Firm Saturdays were worst.

For a long time I thought I'd tell Alan one day who his real father is. Or maybe I should say *biological* father. Because Bill's been a real father to him. Always been there for the boy. Nobody can fault him on that. Paid for him to go through uni without one complaint.

Maybe Sean would have been a good father too. Who knows? Maybe we could have resisted all the pressures, made a go of it. Maybe if we'd gone to America together, we could've got away from all this... this stupidity. But Sean never asked. Just buggered off.

He got in touch with me on Facebook a couple of months ago. Totally out the blue. It really shook me up. Like hearing from someone you thought had died. I didn't recognize him from his photo. *Just wondered how you were*, he wrote. *I see your son's getting married. Handsome lad.*

Turns out he stayed on in the States. Been there for almost thirty years. Teaching at a university in Boston. A professor no less. His hair's not dark anymore; it's white, totally white. Nothing stays the same.

I thought of sending him his wee crucifix. For years I had this romantic notion, that as long as I had it, maybe we'd get back together. He's coming back to Scotland for good this summer. Suggested we meet up. But I said no. You can't change the past, no matter how much you wish you could, you can't go back.

I did wonder if I should tell Alan the truth, especially now he's married. Give him the wee crucifix. But Bill doesn't deserve that. It would kill him. Okay, he's not been a perfect husband – but let's face it, I've not been a perfect wife either.

In the end, I gave Sean's crucifix to a charity shop in Glasgow. You wouldn't want to do that kind of thing round here. The whole town would know before you'd even made it home.

It was good to get rid of it. Christ knows it's weighed me down long enough.

So now I'm doing what Alan's been saying for years I should. I'm making a clean break. Oh, no pun intended! Alan says he'll help me get a wee flat in Glasgow, and that made me think, maybe I could even go back to the uni? Who knows, I might meet someone new. And if I don't, who cares? I quite fancy being on my own for a while.

SHE PUTS HER COAT ON. PICKS UP CRUTCHES.

After all, like Bill said when I took that fall last night – next time I might not be so lucky.

BLACK OUT.

Penny For The Guy!

Marie-Therese Taylor

Gran thumped her armchair and slopped her whiskey. A spill stain formed on the upholstery, but I could see she didn't care.

'Catholics do not do Guy Fawkes!' she growled at her son, Brendan.

Uncle Brendan was actually fifty-eight, but through his Mammy's carelessness and her stubborn refusal to call the midwife who was from Ulster, has remained forever a child of five. Sitting on the low stool at her feet, he hugged his knees and rocked back and forth sobbing, 'Penny please, Mammy . . . Penny for the Guy!'

'Heathen!' she narrowed her eyes and aimed her sharpened stare at him, 'Eejit!'

My boys scowled at Gran. On this they were with Brendan. They knew the sound of her venomous pronouncements, but had been spared the worst extremes of her blinkered prejudice, unlike her daughter Nora. She had disowned Nora when she married a Protestant.

The infallible Father O'Donnell, disapproving of their mixed marriage, refused, as was the custom, to bless their union at the altar, offering them a side show in the vestry. Such was his hold over Gran, that she would no more have thought of defying him than allowing Brendan to bring home the friend he had made at the day centre after, in his innocence, he had let slip that this lad had a great time at the Boys' Brigade.

I learned that some years later, when Nora lost her little one, she had to bear the unbearable without her mother's understanding; we never forgave her.

Silently, I prayed the drink would take her and my prayers were answered, appropriately enough the boys suggested, on October 31st.

The earliest date they could give us for the funeral was November 6th which allowed time to have a wake and to give her biddies from the Church a chance to come and say the rosary around the open coffin.

She had left orders that she be laid out wearing an outfit of scarlet chiffon and georgette she had worn to Rome for the feast of the Sacred Heart, where she had been complimented on its liturgical significance. Thereafter she decreed that she be dressed in it when they laid her in the earth and her soul went to meet her maker. There was no question of a cremation. Catholics, we had been reminded, do not do cremation.

Helpless beside the embalmed remains, Brendan's eyes registered confusion. Although it was like her, he refused to accept that the corpse was his Mammy. It was too quiet.

The whole business was just beyond him so, to help him through it all, we decided the best tactic was distraction. Now that Gran was no longer around to dispense misery and prejudice, there was no reason to deny Brendan his bonfire. The boys and their dad got a bumper box of fireworks and built a modest but respectable pile from old bits and pieces of dried wood at the foot of the garden – the garden which now belonged to Brendan. After he had waved the last of the day's mourners goodbye from the upstairs window, I signalled to the boys and their dad to get things underway. They lit the bonfire and opened the firework display with Catherine wheels and rockets. I waved to Brendan to come down and join us – it was his bonfire after all.

He threw up the window and called down, 'Penny for the Guy'.

'That's right Brendan – a penny for the guy'.

I hoped he wouldn't be disappointed that we hadn't managed to fashion a Guy for a grand finale. He seemed to have his heart set on one. Still, he sounded happy enough.

A moment later I heard a warning shout from my husband and thought it was for one of our lads going too close to the fireworks, but it was for Brendan fast approaching the blazing bonfire. A Stromboli exploded in a fountain of silver as he flashed by, a familiar bright red diaphanous bundle of georgette across his big muscular arms.

With a smile so wide I thought his cheeks would burst, his eyes sparkling with delight, one almighty heave and a shout of triumph, his scarlet trophy was on the fire.

'Penny for the Guy!'

Poetry

The Clyde

Kirsten MacQuarrie

'Don't go out, it's not safe,'
They tell her: brows furrowed,
Scars knitting.
So by the window she watches
Evening light
Skim the river.
Depths darken, but the surface quivers
Blue and green.
The sun lowers, mixing the colours.

Remnants Of A Catholic Girlhood

Jillian Joyce

My mother's sharp slap on the back of my legs as I dance to the band
that stops the traffic all the way along the Barrhead Road –
at least, according to those who had to get off the 48 bus and walk
while the guy at the front waves his stick like a wand
and my mum rages in the thunderclap air
"Don't you EVER dance for them!" she says, "They're protesting against
the likes of us."

"Proddy dogs eat the frogs, two for tuppence haepenny!"
I smile as I sing but the swagger disappears when I hear the reply
"Cathy cats eat the rats, two for tuppence haepenny!"
Rats? Rats are far worse than frogs! Is that a swipe about us being the
poor kids
the ones who just might end up eating rats if it came to it?
The notion stings me like my mother's slap.

He kisses me on the cheek after chasing me all the way up to the puggy,
catching me by the hood and holding tight while I struggle and complain
that the game isn't funny anymore and we are all alone here right across
from the chapel,
me, waiting for the doing he has promised to dish out in front of his
fellow prods.
But whether he takes fright within sight of god's house or was showing
off all along,
I am glad he doesn't kick my arse.
On the school bus with the windows getting bricked.
Shards cascade onto stricken faces – a hail of diamonds
turning ruby in the afternoon sun.

Another window shatters as we round the corner at Hillpark
swerve across Thornliebank Road where the driver who's had enough
stops the bus, gets out and goes mental shouting about how he could
have killed somebody
while the brickers brick it and run away.

Getting called "Fenian Face" at work.
Being told on a daily basis by Bunty from the typing pool that the
only good Catholic is a dead one. How we all laughed.
Getting the boak hearing Proddy folk talk about queen and country
as though either gave a thought for them or the picture of King Billy on
the living room wall.
Banks that wouldn't employ you until 1989 when suddenly you became
trustworthy
even to the likes of the TSB.

You can't say things hadn't moved on immensely
since my grandparents' day.
There weren't signs proclaiming No Catholics hanging outside the ship-
yard gates.
There wasn't the parish and poverty, the burden of endless pregnancies,
the shame.
We still had the songs and the sayings, the anger and the spite
but the homicidal whispers of divide and conquer issued from a mouth
that was toothless and had lost all its bite
by the time we were grown
and might yet be the only good dead thing I'll ever have known.

Social Inclusion Act (Scotland)

Ellie Stewart

A tall, black African boy
moved to my village
when I was young.

Fast, smiley, fun – an orphan,
adopted by his lesbian Mum.

Aye, they said, that's well and good.
But Chapel or Kirk?
Which one?

Colours Of Change

Women from Brora Community
Learning Centre

Put on your turquoise scarf
and mix the green and the blue.
The Hebridean sea,
swimming pool blue and orange sun.
A Greenpeace boat passes by,
traffic light green says 'go'.
There are many currents
but it's all one sea.
Message in a bottle
'Tolerance'.
Sectarianism, frozen in history.
Our sea of warm hearts will never freeze.

Orange And Green

Leela Soma

The tricolour, no, not the red, white and blue
But the Indian tricolour of orange white and green
The crisp white that aspires for purity and truth
The emerald green and saffron for faith and fertility

The tricolour is safe in my heart
Now nudged by the blue of the Saltire
And the white of the St. Andrew's cross
I blend them together, no, not just orange and green

Miss, are you a Catholic or a Proddy Hindu?
What football team do you support?
Rangers or Celtic, they insist
The winning team, of course

I say with a smile and I scribble verses of every hue.

No More Sectarian Scotland

Nicola Burkhill

I have watched it
writhe like a snake
through our society.
Slippery and sly, its
deadly venom spat out
in the guise of banter.

It hides behind religion,
football shirts, plays with knives,
fills hearts with hate.

It feeds off lies, breeds
contempt in our children.
Taints their innocence.
Claims their lives.

Their only mistake,
a learned behaviour
inherited from a generation
that had no choice but
to accept its fate.
Will they ever question the lies
or speak against their elders?

It is time to unpick
that ugly thread that
has woven its way into
our modern day families.
I am neither green, nor blue,
Fenian nor Hun.
I am simply a mother carving a future
for her precious sons.

My love knows no bounds
My heart knows no hate.
I do not accept a sectarian fate
for my Scotland.

Eleanor Thom

Families in transition is a favourite theme in Eleanor Thom's writing, which often explores her own culturally diverse heritage. Her first novel *The Tin-Kin* (Duckworth, 2009) won the Saltire Society's First Book Award, and was featured on BBC2's The Culture Show. Born in London, Eleanor now lives, writes and works in Scotland. eleanorthom.com

Denise Mina

After a peripatetic childhood in Glasgow, Paris, London, Invergordon, Bergen and Perth, Denise Mina left school early to concentrate on doing dead end jobs badly and rudely. Attending night school, she was accepted to study law at Glasgow University and went on to study for a PhD at Strathclyde. Misusing her grant (you could do that in those days) she wrote her first novel *Garnethill* the first in a trilogy of books featuring Maureen O'Donnell.

Sanctum followed. Then came three Paddy Meehan novels about the newspaper industry in Glasgow in the 1980s. The Alex Morrow series began with *Still Midnight* and she is onto her fifth – *Blood Salt Water* set in Helensburgh in the three weeks before the Referendum vote.

As well as twelve novels, three plays, five graphic novels and regularly contributing to television and radio, she made a short film about her family – *Multum in Parvo*.

Her novels have won six major awards and she was inaugurated into the CWA Hall of Fame in 2014. BBC Scotland/Slate adapted the first two Paddy Meehan novels for TV. She wrote Vertigo's *Hellblazer* for a year, a stand alone *A Sickness In The Family*, again for Vertigo, and adapted Steig Larsson's Millennium Trilogy for DC Comics.

Her forthcoming book, due in 2015, is *Blood Salt Water*.

Magi Gibson

Magi Gibson, as well as being Reader in Residence with Glasgow Women's Library, is an award-winning poet and short story writer. Her poetry is published in four individual collections, including the highly popular *Wild Women of a Certain Age* and the Saltire-nominated *Kicking Back*. Over the years her poetry has appeared in many anthologies, including the groundbreaking Scottish women's anthologies, *Fresh Oceans* (Stramullion) and *Original Prints* (Polygon). Poems have also appeared in *Modern Scottish Women Poets* (Canongate) and *Scottish Love Poems* (Canongate), as well as in anthologies in South Africa, Australia and Mexico where they have been translated into Spanish. Her full-length screenplay was a finalist in Scottish Screen's Newfoundland competition, and her short film script was shortlisted for Tartan Shorts. She won the Scotland on Sunday/Women 2000 Prize for Poetry, and was a finalist in the Asham Short Story Competition, with her story becoming the title story for the *Serpent's Tail* publication, *Harlot Red*. She is the author of the 'Seriously Sassy' series of novels for young feminists, aged 10 – 14, has judged many poetry and short story competitions, and edited anthologies and the new writing magazines, *Ironstone* and *Pushing Out the Boat*, both of which she founded. She has held three Scottish Arts Council Creative Writing Fellowships, and recently had a first – a poem included in the English GCSE syllabus! She runs the Wild Women Writing Workshops in Scotland and Ireland.

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For more information about the Mixing The Colours project and Glasgow Women's Library broader programmes visit: womenslibrary.org.uk

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