Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

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**Anne Donovan**

Initially I really wanted it to be narrated by a woman because it was for the Women's Library and it was about women but this character just kept coming up all the time: George the boyfriend of this young woman who wanted to marry her because I I thought the woman cannot narrate it obviously and if her mother or her sister or someone narrated it would be different and there was this, somehow this voice of George kept coming and there was a great tenderness about him and a great you know and I just I wanted to keep that and I kept working what could he be doing so the idea of him working in a draper shop and having left the factory because he could no longer bear the the that and the idea that the irony is again of the fabric and all the rest of it and and so on in the colours so it was a lot to work with in terms of the imagery of yellow the imagery of dust the imagery of you know the colour and the the textile and the fabric and all those things which of course are generally quite I suppose quite feminine things seen as feminine things but also seen through the eyes of this very gentle man

Lassie wi a Yella Coatie by Anne Donovan

I lift three rolls frae the shelf lay, them on the wooden counter. ‘These are our finest cotton's, Miss. Any of these would make a lovely frock for the summer.’

She feels the fabric between her fingers tests, the softness.

Her mother stands beside her stares, critically at the cloth. ‘Blue is not your colour, Elinor, it makes you look washed out.’

‘And Alice is wearing pink so I must have something different.’

I stand attentive but allowing them time tae examine the material. I’ve been in the shop three year now and have learned how to deal with customers, when to give them time, when to make a wee suggestion. My faither cries me a big Jessie for working in a drapers but my mother was glad when I gied up the factory. I wanted a job in the park among the flooers, but they werenae taking on any men. Nae Catholics anyhow. And as long as I’m away frae the stour and the racket, I can thole my da's jokes about me knitting him a jumper for his Christmas.

Mr James, who owns the shop is a fair man, and I’ve come to enjoy the beauty of the fabrics, the touch of silk and linen and wool unner my haund. It soothes me.

‘I just can't decide.’ The young lady's eyes scan the shelves. ‘What about those?’

‘These are a slightly heavier weight, Miss. Not as delicate, but they'll make up well too.’

I set them on the counter, bold and brash beside the cotton lawns.

‘I love this one, it's so cheery isn't it mother?’

The mother looks unimpressed. ‘I never liked yellow, it's such a vulgar colour.’ ‘Mother you're so old-fashioned, everyone's wearing yellow now.’ ‘If that's your choice, we shall take it.’ She turns to me, ‘Five yards please. Have it put on my account and sent to the house this afternoon.’ ‘Certainly madam, will you be wanting any lining?’

In the back, folding the fabric into its parcel my, haund tremmles. The yella background glares at me, its brichtness hurts my eyes.

Sarah.

18 year old and as bonny a lass as you’d ever set eyes on. I met her at the dancing; in the midst of the smoke and noise of folk talking over the music, she seemed to glow like an angel in the gaslight. Gowden hair and skin that sparkled. ‘It’s as if someone had sprinkled ye wi startdust,’ I said. No that first night, of course I was far too shy to talk to a lassie like that; if it hadnae been for my pal Wullie, who fancied her pal, I might never have asked her up. But once we were dancing - her soft curls touching my skin as we birled under the lights - I was in love. Folk talk about love at first sight, they say it's all blethers, but it isnae. There was Sarah and me, and that was it.

I walked her hame that night. The four of us went thegether; me with Sarah and Wullie wae Maggie, her pal who stayed up the same close. We all sang as we went, the words of the last waltz stuck in our heids,

‘Lassie wi a yella coatie

Will ye wed a moorland Jockie?’

‘That’s you, George,’ said Wullie. ‘Still has the hay stuck behind his ears, this yin.’

Sarah lived in wanny they streets in the Calton that my mother thought wasnae good enough for us.

When we got to the building, Wullie led Maggie through the close to the back court so they could winch in the darkness. But I stood like a chookie at the front entrance.

A light burned in a second-flair windae.

‘Who's waiting up for you?’ I asked.

‘Ma mammy. Ma daddy’s deid and my wee brothers’ll be in bed. I need to be awfy quiet in case I wake them up – it’s a single end we're in.’ Even in the dim light she was that douce and sweet. A shifted frae one fit to the other.

‘What about you George where’d you stay?’ ‘Out at the cross. Close next to the butchers.’ ‘They're big hooses, yous must be posh.’ ‘No really. Me and ma da and my brother are all working but.’ I felt embarrassed that we had a room which was never used except for visitors. My mother and father slept in the recess of the room while me and Francis shared the bed in the kitchen. I heard Maggie giggling then Wullie emerged frae the close, straightening his tie.

‘You're in a dwarm, George, is that ready?’ I turn and Mr James is standing next to me.

‘I’ll just be a minute.’

‘Well, when you finish there's new stock waiting to be marked into the book. Then you can go for your dinner.’

The day I take my pieces and heid doon Argyle street into Glasgow Green. It's a fine April day, blue sky and white clouds birling. Me and Sarah walked there often on a Sunday afternoon; the lang straight road tae the fountain was aye mobbed wi’ courtin’ couples and faimilies enjoying a day out. We'd watch the weans playin’ and I’d imagine us with bairns of wur ain.

I worked in the factory then; lang, hard shifts. I hated the clatter and coorseness of it, but I was strong, I tholed it. The money was better than most places, and every week I went to the savings bank on the corner and added to my account. My brother Francis spent every penny, took lassies out to fancy tea shops and bought them wee presents. I thought he was daft. I’m a country boy at heart. We'd come to the city when I was 13 and I longed to go back, dreamed of setting up hame with Sarah somewhere clean and fresh. There was one thing on my mind, and that was our future.

I had my eye on a ring in Archer's windae. A ring I was gonnae gie Sarah when I proposed. I wanted to wait till I could dae it right, had enough to set us up in a place of wur ain. I’d seen too many of my pals start merriet life squashed up with their parents or in one room in a crumbling building. I didn't want that.

Noo I imagine a scabby wee room somewhere, just me and Sarah and I think it could be heaven.

I never go anywhere these days. My brother tries to get me to go to the dancing with him, but I cannae. Saturdays, after the shop closes, I walk. I feel close to Sarah as if she's by my side. Dauner up toon, through Blythswood Square where the posh hooses are, alang Charing Cross and heid West. It's cleaner here, less works and smoke. And it has nae memories.

Sarah never mentioned her work. Naebody did. Why would ye? You spent all they hours stuck somewhere you didn't want to be, doing something you didn't want tae dae. Once you were oot, you just wanted to forget it.

I only mind her talking about it the one time. In the wee café at the cross on a Sunday afternoon. We'd been for a walk in the Green - oh such a bonny day it was and her cheeks were pink and flushed with the wind. She'd her blue costume on. A pot of tea and two scones on a plate in front of us. ‘I’m ready for this after that walk.’ She said. ‘Aye’, I looked at her bricht and shining like a new penny. I near did it, near blurted it oot, never waited till I’d saved up, just asked her right then.

She'd taken off her gloves to eat her scone and I could see her looking at her haunds. ‘What is it?’ I asked. She showed me her thumbnail. Round the edge glinted a rim of gold. ‘You're like a princess and a fairy tale,’ I said. ‘Oh George you're such a blether,’ she laughed, then she frowned rubbing the mark with her hanky. ‘I thought I’d washed it all out but it gets everywhere this yellow. But we’re all the same, the lassies – everything gets clarted wi it, your hair and claes and skin. You should see the state of us gaun hame at night fae thon place.’

Last Saturday I was coming back frae my walk, I’d been to the art galleries, numbed my mind looking at the fine pictures and strange objects in glass cases, worn out my body by walking and walking the park. It was dark, sometime after nine when I passed ower Blythswood Square. A big hoose was blazing with light, every windae a picture, folk in fancy goons, dancing and talking. A carriage drew up and a gentleman came out to help the lady out. It was the fabric I recognised: gyre and gaudy. ‘That's a stunning frock, Miss Montague.’ Said the man. ‘You'll be the belle of the ball.’ She stood on the pavement looking fresh and young. Dark hair carefully arranged, her skirts swayin round her, the colour of daffodils. As the carriage drew away I heard the music float through the doorway. Just the tune, but I know the words fine.

‘Haste ye lassie, tae my bosom

While the rose are in blossom

Time is precious, dinna loss them

Flooers will fade and so will ye.’

She started getting headaches. At first naebody paid much notice. We all spent too much time in stuffy places with noisy machinery all around us - most folk had a headache during the week. They went away at the week's end. A good blaw on the Green on a Sunday afternoon, that sorted you.

Sarah’s headaches didnae go away at the week's end. She went to the chemist and he gied her some pills to take away the pain, but it kept coming back. I noticed she was getting tired on our walks, couldnae manage to go as far. One day we were in the cafe having a cup of tea. She barely touched the scone, held herself tensed up. ‘Sore heid again?’ I asked. ‘It’ll pass.’ Her face was blanchit and she looked thinner than usual. A dark pain touched my heart. ‘You should go to the doctor.’ ‘He's too dear, George.’ ‘I’ve got the money.’ ‘Don't be daft, you can't do that.’ ‘Of course I can, I’ve been saving it for you, for us.’ I reached across the table and took her haund. It was like ice. ‘Don't, George,’ she said ‘everybody's looking.’ But she never took her haund away.

I met her at the doctor's on the Saturday after work. She’d went home first to change and was smart in her blue costume, though so pale you could near see through her skin. When she came out the doctor's office, she said, ‘Take me hame, George.’ Walking along, she held my airm; no lightly, the way she used to, but as if she was feart to let go. She was silent. I was waiting for her to speak first, but, halfway down the street I couldn't stand it any longer. ‘What did he say, Sarah?’ ‘What I expected.’ ‘How d’you mean?’ She stopped, looked in my face, ‘He cried it plumbism. It’s the dye. 'The dye’s making ye sick?' 'I knew anyway.’ I grasped her haunds, ‘You knew it was making you sick?’ ‘Aye, lots of the lassies get the leads after a few year, everybody knows.’ ‘ah didnae.’ Her wrists were that wee my fingers could reach right around them. ‘You kept on working there?’ ‘I hoped I’d be lucky, what was I supposed to do?’ ‘There are other jobs.’ ‘No matter what job you work at there’s something can make you sick. Maggie got blood poisoning for a dirty needle at the weaving shed. My uncle lost his airm in the factory. I have to work, George. My mother needs the money.’ ‘She'll get nae money if you're sick and cannae work.’ Tears started in her eyes. I pulled my arms around her and held her tight. ‘I’m sorry, I didnae mean…I’m just that worried about you.’ She leaned against me, ‘What did the doctor say? Can he gie you something?’ ‘Just pills for the pain.’ ‘You're no going back. I’ll take you somewhere, somewhere nice, somewhere at the seaside and you'll get better.’ ‘Oh George,’ she said.

I keep walking, frae west tae east, frae the big lit up hooses tae the dark tenements. Doon Buchanan Street wae it’s fancy shops, alang Argyle Street and the Trongate

past the big steeple, the place is mobbed wi’ folk oot for their Saturday night, their night of freedom frae work and care. Sounds of singing and laughter frae the pubs, a crowd of lassies barring my way. ‘Who's the handsome fella all by hissel? D’ye no want to join us?’

I smile and pass them head on until I reach the cross. I’m tired I want tae go hame. But but I stop at the cafe first, cannae face my mother and father; her worried face and him trying to joke me out of it. It's three year now and they think that's long enough time for me to stop broodin and find another lassie.

‘Sarah was a lovely lass,’ said my mother, ‘it's terrible what happened to her but there are other  fish in the sea, time you get married and gied me some grandweans. There’s precious little chance of any frae that brither of yours.’

That was after she found the wee book that I’d copied things into. I’d went to the Mitchell Library and looked it up. They have all kinds of books there, you can find oot anything, they know all about it: the doctors, the folk who inspect the factories.

‘The symptoms of plumbism are manifold. One of the earliest signs is pallor of the countenance. There is a developed degree of anaemia. In several large dyeworks I have examined the girls who handle and pull the yarn covered with yellow dust. I found them anaemic, complaining of headache, and showing a well-marked blue line on their gums. While several complained that they suffered from colic. In some cases more serious symptoms developed. a fatal termination is not unknown.’

She went downhill very quick. She wasn't fit to go to the seaside was barely fit to go to the fancy tea room in Buchannan Street. The waitresses dressed in black frocks and starched pinnies, there were vases of flooers on the tables and a big cake stand with sandwiches and scones and cake. Sarah, white as the lilies on the table, sat across frae me. She looked round and smiled, ate as much as she could of the cake and humoured me while I talked of our future about getting married and all they bairns we were going to have.

I finish my tea and leave the café, walk the few yards hame. My father's in bed but my mother is still up, hugging the remnants of a fire. ‘You're late, son.’ ‘Went a good lang walk.’ ‘You're aye walking, son.’ ‘Aye.’ She stood up and I put my airm round her shoulder. She's afyy wee, my mother. ‘I’m away tae my bed now, dinna be lang.’ She touched my cheek, ‘You look tired son.’ ‘Aye.’

I sit and stare at the dregs of the fire. There's precious few flames, just a glow and a flichter that keeps me there. The auld wifey say that late at night you can look into the fire and see the future. But it's too late noo. These days I see nothing but the past.

When I was asked to write the piece for the Women's Library based on something in the library I had no idea what I would choose, how I would be inspired. So I had a completely open mind and as I was looking through things, I looked a lot at the suffragette magazines and I came across a letter which was talking about the terrible conditions in which some women were working at that time and in particular the women who were working in dyeing and yellow dye was particularly poisonous because it had lead in it, and there was a just a mention of how the women actually came out covered in yellow. And you know, how poisonous that was and and how badly it affected their health. What really got to me, about was the the idea of the image of yellow and yellow is such a lovely bright colour that we think of and we associate with joy, and yet for these women it was basically, well if not necessarily a death sentence but then certainly something which meant that they were going to be very very ill. I did read a lot, a tremendous amount at one point, I had vast tooms of the library about industrial diseases and about you know all these different kinds of things I was fortunate to to be put onto someone who had done a a dissertation in social history, uh which was about workers in the east end who were male workers but again the information I got from that, it was very helpful and in particular the way in which the the owners of the factories and everybody knew all about it but didn't, um really do anything until they were forced in the same way as happened with as asbestos, and asbestosis, I mean industrial diseases, um and also the other thing which I think is in the story to some extent is the way in which people accept things because they have no choice they cannae go and work somewhere else they have to have a job, and you know jobs are dangerous and that's all there is to it. So I think again as well, as it's a message from the history of our own culture but it's also a really thought provoking in terms of what is going on in the developing world, um there are many things that in in the western world you know lots of new phone, new this, new technology and many of these things are being used and the metals that are then being made from they cannot certify whether these mines are safe for people. There are people in all sorts of places working incredibly long hours doing all sorts of things in order to make products which we take for granted but we don't know whether their conditions are safe or not and what the long term risks to their help health are in the same way as a hundred years ago in Scotland in England in Britain the same thing was going on and for lots of people.

**Laura Dolan:**

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