Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Guidance by Muriel Gray

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**Laura Dolan:**

You're listening to a Glasgow Women's Library podcast this is part of our 21 Revolutions programme celebrating two decades of changing minds at Glasgow Women's Library for more information on the Library our 21 Revolutions programme or any of our other work visit our website at women's library dot org dot uk

**Muriel Gray:**

Guidance by Muriel Gray

It's her mother's handwriting as familiar as the sky she holds the envelope turns it over and opens it the card is thin poor quality one from a boxed set she guesses printed on the front the sketch of a woman in a crinoline face half revealed coquettish beneath a frilled parasol things slide out as she opens it the paper scraps are yellow with age she holds them to her face and breathes in the sweet mildew aroma the smell of childhood storybooks from damp attics and hoarded magazines tipping in piles in the staircase she smooths them lays them before her drinks them in the first have dinner ready plan ahead even the night before most men are hungry when they come home and the prospects of a good meal are part of the warm welcome needed. Warm welcome has been circled in spidery blue biro ink glance to the oven it's in there the bake the bone white fish glistening green with olive oil nestling in shallots she's soaked and she skinned she smiles I'm ahead of your mother, my mother, my mother the second don't greet him with complaints or problems don't complain if he's late for dinner count this as minor compared with what he might have gone through that day touches her watch the present that took her by surprise the box that was opened breath that was drawn the heart that beat faster as the gift was fastened around her wrist the third make him comfortable have him lean back in a comfortable chair or have him lie down in the bedroom have a cool or a warm drink ready for him eyes close leans back in the hard chair hand moving over her throat thinking of the bedroom thinking of the softness to come eyes still closed she sees her mother's body stiffen and defend itself as the younger she rails and spits teenage fury cruel taunts into her face and calm mother was you don't know my love you don't know we were lost she'd said some died so many those who came home afraid uncertain what strangers had they returned to how to mend this thing this country this dream that had been so nearly broken forever so you mustn't scorn my darling daughter, my daughter, my daughter

Listen be still I think was it Herbert Great yes he worried in 1938 the breaking and the splintering the families the marriages the lives it's guidance nothing more you'll remember you'll see love carries duty and duty brings love what need the younger she of guidance to obey of instruction constriction submission what needs she of the shackles of passion these men who command these women who lay down should laughed a hard bark we'll shift and we'll move and we'll never settle beneath your command we'll break it all over and start from the start your guidance is empty remote your shackles are broken your duty rings hollow will rage and we'll rant and we'll tear you apart. And her mother had put out a gentle hand to her daughter's flushed face a hand that was slapped away and doors were slammed and bridges burnt her tight shut eyes screw tighter in memory's pain her fingers lie still on the scraps at her mother's bent swollen fingers have slowly carefully harvested from her acres of paper memories still stacked bound with string and cherished in the room at the back. Then those years upon years and she feels the peril inside her that grew around the grit and mother was true she saw she was true the country's so scared that the cracks war had made would open to chasms made loving its job made guidance its duty made kindness a task a consensus made formal. Remembering its fight it fought on to stay free stability companionship a promise set in law the right of all who would have it she opens her eyes and touches the last piece from the card a picture another from their wedding day her arm and her father's he's still handsome beneath the heavy grill of his illness thin chest barrelled with pride her mother a stove of hot joy in her suit of sky blue mother's smile like lightning her guidance come good her daughter her daughter a woman devoted a woman who married a woman in love. The key turned softly in the lock the room was alike the air sweetened her love bundles in paper beneath an arm car keys between teeth a smile in the eyes that promises tales of some mischief an observation or snippet that can't wait to be shared the keys are laid down the paper's laid flat and her face is held softly and kissed like a child's she says fish nearly ready and fetches a drink she plumps up a cushion and settles to ask how was your day and Betty, her Betty, her Betty her love she laughs at the question falls back on the sofa and kicks off her shoes her tights have a hole and they point and they joke and Betty pats and beckons her near and they kiss and they hold and her heart tumbles like an acrobat then silence as she holds her dear Betty sucks in the scent of her hair coconut and wind in the faint tendrils of chlorine it was this that they meant in those words misunderstood to be loving and kind because kindness is catching and hatred is blinding so the charlatans lost those liars who claimed ownership of lips upon lips those who said god would beat on his breast rip holes in the sky if anyone but the chosen would dare to make lifelong promises framed in love bigots planted their flag and the wind tugged it to rags and here's how it stands Herbert's guidance come good this her dear love this her dear wife this till they die.

I was inspired by so many things I saw in the library but I have to pick up this pamphlet that was guidance for marriage and it was it was the marriage guidance council I think it was the pamphlet in the library was probably from the 50s maybe even earlier from the 40s and it was full of things that of course women and men would find preposterous now about how the woman should make the man comfortable when he comes home and it seems subservient but I went to and thought about it and I looked into the history of the marriage guidance council and I thought this is this is cruel this is not true actually there was a reason for them trying to do it was because war tore families apart tore, you know society apart and all they were trying to do in the best altruistic way was to try and find a way of rebuilding the way that a loving family operates and the most marvellous thing about that is that the changes have happened since then those key values have actually be kind to each other have translated into now equal partnerships and gay marriages and so on because it's the same thing they want to have their marriage their love and their commitment framed in law and I think if you look carefully and you think about the osmosis of that probably it started with things like that after the world going actually we do have to formalize kindness and love and gentleness and caring and stability and it's seen as oppressive but I thought what if it's not but if it's actually the ultimate conclusion of that the unintended consequence if you like is the freedom for people of all sexes of genders or sexual orientation to be able to frame their companionship in law.

I didn't collaborate with anyone except obviously the people in the the library to get access to this but I'm not really a collaborative person a lot of artists are single predators who don't like collaboration you want to actually be better than somebody so although some artists and writers in this project collaborated there was also a feeling of competitiveness that I thought was fantastic you know I want my bit to be better than yours there's nothing wrong with that! [Muriel laughs] You know women artists you know and writers can be competitive as well as men you know!

I've been aware of the Women's Library for years and years I mean it's just the most brilliant, brilliant resource I mean it's the outsourcing of education support for women on literacy and in terms of access to data and archives has just been absolutely outstanding it's one of the best resources it's been a quiet resource and it really needs more publicity I think it's wonderful.

**Laura Dolan:**

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