**A Puckle Mindins**

**by Rachel Matheson**

**Mindin Een:** Strammely, shitey wee pieces o reid twine.

Rippit an knotted, plunkit awa in a tin wi a daft picter o a castle glowerin an fauchie-lookin on the lid. Wee tin, something fur shortbread or ither nonsense, the noble landscape it eence depictit hazed ower an miserable wi rust. Sat on the fireplace.

The village wis sma an there wis een street, wee sidey lanes peelin aff it intae stumpy ends like a hunk o seaweed. A time weel afore the grandbairn, barely afore the dother. Peggy’s hauns are coorse, even then, bit nae rigid, can cut through the air like a scurry doon the herber, shuckin guts fast as yi’d blink.

The manny she’s mairriet tae moves mair canny, tumbles ben the village at the pace o a hivvy kert missin a wheel. He belongs on the watter, can slither through updraft o spumin waves like a siller fluke if needs be bit, on land, aye glances aboot fae beneath his bunnet like some daft crab movin wi scuttlin agitation ower the shore, anxiously keekin oot fae unner its shell at aw times. Aye apart fin on land, her man. Even their waddin day he’s lookin oot at something tae the side in the anely photie they hiv, speerin at some circlin danger, a reason fur caution.

*Oh, the fisherman's a bonny bonny man
Ah've ne'er seen onything bolder…*

He is bold at sea, bit, regardless, ilka time he leaves, Peggy maks him sit by the kitchie table wi’ his airm oot an ties her wee length o reid skein roon his wrist. Sharp, gratin stuff it is, fierce eneuch tae withstaun the waves. She sings as she winds an ties.

*An they ca’ me the fisherman’s lassie…*

Dark een aat swallow up the gaze fae her siller, he peers doon at the twistit leathery folds o his ain palm, wrist circlet wi dark hair tanglin amon the reid. His cigarette smoke aets up the pale licht comin in aff the sea an smothers the room. Fin she’s done wrappin her charm tichtly roon him he stands up, stiff as a trunk. an walks tae the door, pausin tae nod at the wee manny Jesus as he passes, limp on the crucifix, een fisherman tae the ither. Een wye or ither, some auld religion will keep him staunin oot there, some charm encircle him agin danger.

A fierce end tae April aat year, a hackin hoast o sudden sna pouder, clairtin the coastline an aetin up the shore. Fir three days aifter the storm subsided, she gid doon the herber in the bitter caul, sun mak’n a diamond glint oot o the cruel lift. She watched an she wited. She wore her ain reid band, a threid sewn intae her thick socks fir luck. At the kitchie table she sat, speerin oot o’er the kickin waves, scowlin ower at Jesus intermittently through the fug o her Woodbine finiver she caucht him eein her up fae the crucifix. She wited. Then, fin eneuch time hid passed, she hung the mirrors backward.

The bairn came wi’in five month. Twa year aifter aat, she readied hersel tae flit, tae boot her sorrow tae the granite buildins faarer sooth. The wee dother, Marie, born wi the epilepsy, fit the doctor cried the ‘Sacred Disease’, bletherin aifter some auld Greek nonsense, a cursed result o the faither’s daith maist likely, some said. In the Toon, they micht mak her better, shift the lingerin sickness o his ghaist, cure tham baith o the grief.

Fae the cottage, she’d te’en Jesus. Aneath him, the nicotine an the scowlin kitchie smoke o their short lives thegither hid left an imprint, a cross markit on the plaister like a snaw-ghaist, a phantom o the blizzard ye couldna trust. An she’d te’en the wee tinny fae the fireplace in which, ilky-time he returned safe, he hid cut the charm she’d gien him an deposited it. Ilky bliddy time. Bastard.

**Mindin twa:** Photie.

Scaldit lookin fizzog, brow deep an hivvy, wrinkles curvin oot fae unner the een like liftit skirts, the dark edge o a muddy shadow cast ower the jaw like an anchor sinkin dimly aneath the watter. In the backgrun the buildins hover, splinterin softly oot o focus, spires frayin like fir tries, tall an sharp as the wifey starin oot afore tham. Fin they’d first arrived, Peggy hid been spellboon by the fool’s gold o the buildins on a bricht day, its habit o winkin at ye afore slitherin fae view oot the corner o yer een. It glittered like the scales o siller darlins she said, the hale landscape a tall-tale built on the backs o fishermen, a careful spell tae keep ye fae facin the caul truth o life at sea.

The edges o the photie hiv softened, turnt as yella as auld sheep’s wool. The curved corners rise like the quiet, ragged voice o its occupant fin she used tae sing, slitherin her fat, arthritic fist alang the edge o the haddies, pullin the knife as steady as she could, slow’t wi age, wincin tae grip.

*Ah'm a ramblin tamblin fal a do a day
Ah'm a ramblin tamblin lassie…*

The voice withered mair an mair as the year progressed, her ruckled gullet stretchin like dry paper ower the catch o cigarette smoke an the echoin shift o her dentures, wirds tumblin oot on tae the bunker, gien rhythm tae the broad fingers aat clamped rigid as coral ower the knife, carvin awa, canny-like.

*Ah'm a ramblin tamblin fal a do a day
An they caa me the fisherman's lassie…*

Draggin the dother alang by her stubborn wee fist, Peggy hid arrived in the Toon awreedy coorse as the granite aroon her. The great steens, formed o bubblin magma aat nivver made it tae the surface, compressed intae a hard, unyieldin mass. Spattert wi quartz, a mineral singularly suited tae it, cooryin intae the grainy rock, comfortably endurin the pressure o the boilin slurry aat slowly encased it. Granite spreids an crushes doon as it forms, in sic a wye it could nivver hud ony livin organism sae kindly as it does yon siller quartz. It refuses fossils, disnae preserve stories o leaf an trie, or trace o animal in wanderin footprint or petrifiet drappin. It dismisses sic saft, shilpit ghaists tae focus on the solidity o its own muckle brutalist glitterin form.

Fin she’d arrived, thon jewelled blocks hid jis begun bein turnt intae heich-rise buildins, gye majestic, wi funcy balconies an views fur days. They were tarry, her an wee Marie, an barely five year in the Toon, got gien een, a new flat wi a funcy electric fire, its grinnin orange bars turnin the nearby waas tae marmalade. Fin it wis on, att wis. Maistly nivver.

Aye bliddy caul in aat flat. The bairn couldna staun it. Bit the maither, aw six feet o her, broad sweepin back an roch reid shins, nivver felt the chill. Broucht up on the spit o the coast, bitten by the teeth o ice an salt reelin fae its crackit moo, she’d aw bit lost ony physical sense o hersel, unresponsive tae the callousness o caul or the fleg o skraichin waves.

In the Toon, she worked the fesh factory, until the arthritis stopped her. By then Marie hid took it up, chargin oot ilky morn, hair sprayed in a fierce knot, een thick wi mascara. She drew on bricht reid lips aat blew oot o the hoose as bold as the stripe on a lichthoose, pale pink stainin the ridges o her sma yella teeth. The epilepsy she’d suffert wi as a bairn wis aw bit gang; she took the medicine an Peggy got her tae the check-ups. She wisnae the sharpest quine bit she wis healthy.

Jist twa an a half year past she started the factory, Marie hid hid the grandbairn, a fierce, healthy wean, skraichin fit tae burst the very waas o the wee twa-bed. The faither, daft heap fae the tenth flair, wis awready hoofed awa ben her majesty’s pleasure by aat point, fir which Peggy could anely mutter thanks fae behind her wa o fag smoke – he’d wantit tae crie the poor quine Dexy, aifter yon daft band. Christ… Olivia, wisnae much better, wee bit fantoosh, bit at least Grease wis a nae bad film.

The wee flat got fuller wi the three o tham. The years trickled by, Marie coursed oot tae the factory each day, Peggy took the wean tae the school an back agin, propped her in the kitchie whiles she sorted oot the tea.

*Oh, the fisherman's a bonny bonny man
Ah've ne'er seen onything bolder…*

Graceful shuck an slither unner her knife on the bunker.

 *He wears his sea beets ower his knees
An his straps across his shoulder…*

Slurp o scraps intae the bucket aneath.

The grand-bairn wid watch fae a stool as Grunny winced an worked, singin tae the slippery bodies starin up ablow, deid-eened. Knees icy an knockin unner her school skirt, distracted by the green an reid an yella marbles, peerin fae paper bags on the table. The sook o soor plum an rhubarb-custard clartin the air in front o her, the sweet tang tainted wi the fierce guff o deid fesh.

‘A richt bonnie haddy, so ye are,’ the auld wifey wid say, speerin ower.

Said as fact, ony unnerlyin affection tae be guessed at. Her wirds were stiff as her auld, salt-mockit socks hid eence been. Ony glint o kindness wis a swick, yer lugs pickin up a false note. Forty year in the Toon, gradually calcifyin, lungs jammy wi tar, bones as brittle an painful as the knives o east wind aat hollered ower the herber, brow as hivvy as granite, een twinklin wi quartz.

In the photie she is twenty-five. In barely thirty year, the strange, constant singin will dim unner the palsy an the brow will close ower the sharp een, the gaze soften intae jeellie.

*Ah'm a ramblin tamblin fal a do a day…*

The flat will trap smoke an stue an build up a thin, rigid net o muck an siller motes, a fool’s gold cloak o discardit skin an weakenin braith.

*Oh, the fisherman's a bonny bonny man…*

Ahin her heid as it slumps agin the airmcheir, the photie still hoverin proudly in its sma dark frame. In it, the buildins try tae oot-bigsie the fierce wifey starin stracht oot, lookin aheid, nae sidey-wyes glance, nae mistrust or caution. Aat’s fit got her manny, aifter aa.

**Mindin three:** The wee creep Jesus

Marie likes tae drive as if her ain ferocity can dictate the car’s speed, bunched ower the wheel, JP atween her lips, the windae wound doon tae stop the car mistin up as the thin beginnin o sna lands on her rigid knuckles. In the spike o settin winter sun she looks like the combined effort o a haunfu o sharp, insistent marks scratched agin the backdrop o the leather seat. The streetlichts begin their bland hum an the radio cranks intae a Christmas tune, some aggravated number fur the joy is expressed in screams, even fin ye turn the volume doon. Marie punches the Waterboys cassette intae the dashboard tae droon it oot.

*I wish I was a fisherman
Tumblin' on the seas
Far away from dry land
And it's bitter memories…*

The cooncil Christmas lichts are blae an siller this year, a farcical neon arctic sae far fae the peace o the real thing it’s a fuckin offense. A blae-tintit polar bear waves its flashin airm up an doon as she passes unnerneath, grittin her teeth at the Astra in front straddlin the road like a tethered buoy, barely movin. The Toon is riddled wi these painfully nervous vehicles, skirtin each ither in the greyin slush o the last twa days, navigatin as if they’re guidin a lawnmower ower a stately bliddy gairden.

Marie mutters, pings tabbie oot intae the road, sparks cruisin doon like a firework. She reverses sharply, turns an heids oot the centre. The buildins turn fae shops intae muckle great hotels, turretted steen buildins, spun wi fairy lichts an banners advertisin three-course office pairties tae thon mindless, entitled eidgets o the local oil industry.

*With light in my head*

*You in my arms…*

She hums alang tae the music, windae doon, cruisin past the poash hotels until they disperse an the caul air gradually unlaces itsel fae the stale reek o the herber faarer back. She skirts the roonaboot, the auld Fiesta lurchin on tae the road tae the supermairket. The wee creep Jesus birls like a Codona’s waltzer unner the rear-mirror. She bocht the car wi the auld wifey’s savins aifter she went, the pish-poor scrabblins o her post-office accoont eneuch tae buy a second-haun.

The money wis the een useful thing left her – aat an the flat the cooncil hid let her keep on. Marie wis proud o the car, an aat she wis allowed tae drive it. Gie her her due, the een thing her maither hid done wis ensure the epilepsy wis dealt wi, determined Marie widna be limited by it. The bliddy ‘Sacred Disease’ as she used tae refer tae it. Naething sacred aboot it, far as Marie kens, nowt Jesus or his posse hid iver done tae indicate ony responsibility. Thon flashin auras aat hummed across her vision afore seizures hid a certain quality tae tham, bit there wis niver onything concrete Marie wid quantify as a religious experience.

The auld woman wis aa bit a heathen by the end onywyes, nivver set foot in a kirk fae the moment she arrived in the Toon. Bit, fin she passed, Marie hid foond the manny Jesus lurkin like a proper wee creep unner the auld wifey’s pilla. A scratched icon, barely the length o her palm, droopin face paintit like a doll, the faded wooden cross dusty an tangled in wi the greasy, grey hair o the bed’s prior occupant.

A twa-bed up fifteen flicht, a fistfu o currency an the wee creep Jesus. Funny fit a person becomes fin ye tak awa the very braith an body.

She’d picked the car up fae a lad oot taeward Rhynie, a week past. Some kid lookin tae get oot fae the middle o naewhwere, see the world, sellin the car tae add tae his ticket. The sna oot by his hoose wis held fast unner a coat o frost, foldit ower the grubby knuckles o the sharny road leadin up the drive. The car wis sae bliddy auld it made noises durin the first hunner yard, aat she reckoned could anely indicate parts fawin aff, shook loose by the cursive script o nivver-endin notches in the track. She imagined pickin wee Olivia up fae school in it, missin an exhaust, stotin up wi a burst tyre. A tattieboodie, worn awa tae rags, went heavin up an doon as she passed by, crackit yella fitba-heid oozin whispy innards, badly drawn een, half-peckit oot, its knowin grin followin her as it flashed by unner the heidlamps.

Fin she reached the turn aff tae the main road, she’d paused, turnt aff the engine. Reachin intae her purse she’d pulled oot the carton o reids an lit een, then, wi her free haun, rootit aboot til her fingers hit the familiar worn edge o the crucifix. Wee creep Jesus, loiterin atween the stale hankies an foosty deid lipsticks. She hoisted him fae the bottom o the bag an hung him ower the rear-mirror by the strammely, auld string clippit tae the back. She gave him a glare, een creep tae th’ither. The waspish burn o lit paper, the hissin retreat o scaldin baccy. His blunt stare came richt back, een leakin halfwye tae the grun, aa humility. If onything wis gonna protect her agin a sacred disease as she raced back tae the Toon, it may as weel be this poor sod.

She leant tae start the engine an spied the lad hid left a tape stickin oot the deck. Aifter turnin the key, she pushed it in. Pulled oot on tae the road an moved through the gears as the song filled the car.

*Countin’ the towns flashin’ by
And a night that's full of soul…*

The abusive cracklin o the wind hurtled ben the windae an Marie wis forced tae wind an unwind aa the wye hame, boundin atween foggit windaes an the incessant skraich agin her cheek, numbin her lug an throwin tendrils o hair roon her tabbie.

*With light in my head…*

The hush o sna, the dim souch o slowly buildin wind, the scattered cats een. The jiggery dance o the wee creep Jesus, keepin her safe.

*You in my arms…*

**Mindin fower:** The very granite waas.

The livin-room is stiflinly warm, ringin wi heat tinnitus, the very fug o it bruisin the air, pushin its quiet hum intae ony available space. Olivia draps inta the cheir, lettin her airms ging slack, her face cut in half by the sun slicin through the greasy winda. Its rays slant lazily ower the old sofa, split wi oweruse, white foamy stuffin spirallin fae its corners like thin, half-scrievit letters.

This simmer the humidity is fierce, the pungent odour o the factory layin intae it, gougin through the air like a rotten tanker leakin oil. Openin the windaes tae disperse the heat lets in the powerful belch o deid fesh aat lingers, steamin an damp as a clootie rag ower the estate. Scrannin fitever fresh air she can pretend there is, she steps oot on tae the clarty auld balcony, skinned wi deid leaves an buckled tabbies. On the roof o the buildin opposite, dryin bed-sheets slump like deid bodies. Botherin tae come ootside is an absolute waste, it feels like breathin in soup nae matter fur ye are, aa air in Aberdeen is jist pure Cullen skink the day.

In the livin room ahin, cobwebs hing like hammocks in the corners, grey an soft wi stue, an discarded coffee mugs wi blaickened rims chatter thegither on various surfaces. She should sort the place oot. Maybe. Or no, actually, scratch aat. The flat’s grand; his been aa her life up tae noo. The need tae clear it hid been assumed by the dafties at the funeral an ye should aye be wary o bein made complicit in ither fowks’ assumptions. People in her maither’s femily were far tae bliddy confident in fit wis best fur a’body else. Classic Nor-east, they asked questions in the same wye maist people stated facts:

‘Ye’ll be keepin on the flat, then.’

‘Ye’ll be haein tae sort through aa the shite up there, will ye na. Yer ma wis an awfa quine fer nivver throwin onything oot!’

‘Ye’ll have telt yer da; gang up the aul HM Peterheid, aye.’

She hidna telt her da. Hidna gang up the Peterheid. Gulag Gary could swivel. She hidna even proactively chosen tae keep up the flat bit, fin the polis contactit the cooncil, as landlords o the property fur the daith hid occurred, a worker hid turnt up wi the papers an she’d signed, wis a’ready on the lease onywyes. An they’d helped her strachten the hoosin broo tae, fir their ain sake, she’d nae doobt, penny-gripin sods. Fower waa, fifteen story up, granite bluster on twa side, Charlie in 15b ahin een wa, an the frozen landin ahin th’ither, badly lit, peelin paint the colour o toffee an auld nicotine, cooncil decoratin tae bruise the bliddy senses. Scratchit intae an cheered up wi markers and cheap blades.

MastriCK

Young

TEEM

Yer maws got baws!

TONI-LEE IZ A BOOT

Thanx fur the swedgers

She hidna even cleaned the bathroom fur it hid happened, the flair wis streaky an half-smothert in a mountain o old towels, an open toothpaste tube scramblin aboot on top, rock solid, an thon daft wee Jesus her ma used tae keep in the car, sprawled by the sink, peerin up finivver ye gid fur a pish. Wee creep. Epilepsy, triggered by alcohol an the sudden caul o the flair tiles. She’d been stocious. Fuckin mortal, probably. Bliddy waste. Managed it fine fin Grunny wis aroon tae force her, ye’d nivver fecht the auld wifey on onything, nae chance. Took her medicine like a good quiney, gid oot the fesh factory ilky mornin, hame ilky evenin, reekin o cheap vanilla perfume, chewin-gum, an the soor dregs o deid haddies. Glorious.

Bit something hid changed aifter the auld wifey passed. Turns oot, her ma really couldna look aifter hersel. So, Olivia hid tae start doin it fur her, takin time aff school, tae scared tae leave her alain. Da hid come back fir a bit, bit it wis, honestly, better fin he wisna there. She really couldna care fin he wis liftit back up the HMP agin, fuck ‘im. Bit her ma, aat wis different; Grunny gang, dad cairriet aff, the drinkin increased, the seizures came back. She hid tae gie up the licence an then sign fur disability, they widna keep her at the factory. In some wyes, she is amazed her maither made it as mony years as she did afore the inevitable.

Fin she’d foond her, she’d been there aa nicht, unconscious, bleedin internally, swellin in the brain. Aboot tae clean her teeth, fer Christ sak, heid duntit aff the sink on the wye doon. Een wide an blazin wi shock, lips turnin grey, thick blaick hair smeared ower her skull, the harried shoe-leather o her bunched cheeks, softened wi smokin.

An then the wirds hammerin oot o thon skurry o a minister at the service, grey-faced, een like spinnin tops unner his glesses, catchin the licht an throwin ye aff, a total swick. A distraction. Fitever he wis sayin, she couldna catch it, her lugs were bunged an ringin, smell o stue in bibles, nicotine ower lipstick on the tongue, an somehow, wi’oot her kennin it, her maither wis deid. Officially an completely. Her favourite song, as the coffin trundles back ahin the curtain.

*I wish I was a fisherman, tumbling on the sea*

*Far away from dry land and these bitter memories…*

On the sideboard, sits a sma rustit tin fu o reid string she canna fathom the purpose o an, next tae aat, her Grunny’s guttin blade. She remembers the dull shuckin o the knife cuttin through fesh in the kitchie fin she wis wee. It wis the opposite o pickin a fecht, the deid flesh gein in like gravy. Jist like her maither. The maither fie wis sae bliddy daft, sae feckless, not managin her ain health. Giein in tae her ain stupidity an misfortune. Ye canna let the world handle ye like aat, buckle ye, fuckin brakk ye an hiv done wi ye sae readily.

Olivia willna. She is aa aat is left noo. In the photie on the wa, the stern face o a twenty-five year auld wifey, glarin oot fae the herber edge. Clingin tae her richt haun, a bairn barely up tae her knee, een as wide as saucers, lookin oot tae the side, something lingerin past her she is wary o. Something comin. Bit the aulder wifey huds her ain gaze steady. Olivia hears the wirds, ‘A richt bonnie haddie’, said wi conviction.

An she hears the driftin song,

*Fall-a-do-a-day…*

Firm granite, a glint o feldspar streakin through it. She is the last glintin chunk in the calcifyin block o fit their wee femily eence wis. Grunny, maither, her. Granite willna hud fossils, anely fierce glintin shards o hard mineral. Fower fierce wa o the stuff, fur she can hud steady above muckle seas, fifteen story up, speerin oot across her kingdom. Wrapped in the deep rock built aroon her aa her life, she is a sharp flicker o quartz, jist startin tae form.