

## A BURDEN

Gillian tarries in the dark at the fet o their lang slopin gairden. She flings the day's veg peelins an eggshells ont a the compost heap in the corner. Next door, on her richt, an upstairs licht flicks on at Jeannie Smith's.

Throughout this new estate, the cooncil has strung fencin wire along regiments o low cement poles ti separate the plots. Neighbours can squint ower back gairdens aa alang the street. Folk rarely close their upstairs curtains till they turn in for the nicht. Some hiv pit up fite nets for privacy, but maist prize their stark view oot ower the distant North Sea.

Noo, here's Jeannie Smith pullin her flash green mini coat fae yon hulkin walnut wardrobe near her bedroom winda. Steppin back, she disappears. Winda panes blank eence mair. Far's she aff til at this time o nicht... fin her man's awa ti the fishin in Yarmouth till December?

Dammit. There's washin on the line. Ma's forgotten Da's flannel sarks an drawers again. They'll need airin. Anither job afore postin them ti Yarmouth ... Aye the same routine for the duration.

Haulin a stiff toowel aff the line, though, Gillian likes the thocht o her wee twin brithers diggin deep, findin sticks o bricht pink Yarmouth rock roll't up inside a bundle o whiffy sarks and drawers, sent hame ivry wik or twa. Her Ma aye washes, syne folds them inta Da's cracked, black canvas kit bag. She tichtens the cord through a dizen eyelets afore tyin aff his hame-made rope haunle. Finally, she ties on a broon ticket bearin' his address. A winter ritual ... Like their Sunday nicht troop doon ti the phone box at the corner for Da's call hame.

Gillian's aboot ti struggle up the slab path, airms full, claes-pins stuffed inta the pooch o her pleated school skirt, fin anither bedroom licht gings on above her. Twa doors ti her left. Aye, the Buchans'll be preparin for the weddin. Georgie, their youngest, gets mairriet this

Setterday. Ma's been invited but disna like ti ging athoot her man, an Gillian refuses ti hae onything ti dee wae't. Mind you, a wedding duncie is aye an event especially at iss dreich time o year ...

It's months till Gillian's O Levels, an her Ma canna understan fit wye she's si contrary, but noo she only ventures oot ti the school an back on dark days like iss. An there's the twins. Her grunny canna trek up fae the aul fishin village ti babysit. It's her varicose veins. Nae mony weemin hiv struck oot an got their drivers' license. So, her Da's new Consul sits idle in its new, creosoted garage durin' the Yarmouth season. A peety, that ...

Up abeen, though, Georgie Buchan nicht weel tak a sleekit look at Gillian dartin through the dark wi the washin, but she his already spied yon flash o emerald green sleeves aside him – tuggin ees bedroom curtains shut.

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In July past, leavin the hoosin scheme ahin, Gillian, her Ma and the twins were makkin their wye towards the sands. Stuck at hame for the holidays, Gillian fair miss't the claik wi the quines in her class fa maistly bussed ti the school fae country villages. Even a summer job in a shop wid hiv been a change, if only Da could hiv been persuaded.

She kent fine that bidin on at the school was a privilege, an she wis keen ti be a teacher – fit wis expectit for quines like her but ... Weren't there only sae mony library books and *Jackies* ye could read afore aa yon ither places, different folk's lives, nivver mind the allurin possibilities they opened up, left ye restless an burstin for... Fit?

She wisna that sure. It was mair than jist savin for her ain record player, onywye.

Noo here wis Georgie Buchan swingin up the worn rock steps fae the beach. Fin they eesed te bide in the aul village on the shore, Gillian babysat his youngest sister noo an then, afore they aa moved ti the estate. Georgie wis a flash young fisherman, though, wey ower much money an a black leather jacket cover't in chunky zips.

“Worse for the drink,” her Da aye said.

Georgie ca’d Gillian ower.

But “Aye, Georgie, how are ye?” wis a’ her Ma had said, nae even slowin her step while Gillian glower’t at er bein se pally. “Dinna be se... glaikit, Gillian. See fit he wants.”

But Gillian’s heid lower’t file her airms rose, crossin themsels ower her breist te let er hide ahin er lang curly hair because... Fit wye? Because he stood ower close, didn’t he? He whisper’t alcohol ower er broo, an she jaloused ... a boundary. That’s fit it wis. An it was bein’ crossed.

“Come back. Later on,” he said, runnin a comb ower ees greasy Elvis wave. Georgie had deep, broon een.

Dammert, she jist turned awa. “No, I canna.”

“Sivven o’clock.” He looked at her stracht. “Back here,” he said, cockin ees heid at the ancient fish hoose on the cliff as ee slid ees comb inta ees jacket pooch.

She kent fine there was nae door on the place, jist worn benches aroun bare granite waa’s. A meagre shelter against a knifin sea breeze. Only aul fishermen were welcome in ere tradin news o shots landed, comparin the boats an nets that made their loons a livin. It wis nae a place for weemenfolk.

Fin Gillian scramble’t doon the stair ti tell her, her Ma lached it aff.

“Och worse for the drink ...” she said but gave Gillian een o yon looks o hers. “An yer in the nicht, aren’t ye?”

“Aye,” she girned, yet the shame widna leave her.

Fit made him say at ti her? Jist because she wis ... developin? It wis aa there. Somethin ...mucky, even dangerous that hung aboot er lately. Somethin nivver spoken. Yet, by an by, it came ti her that, aye, a woman’s body wis a burden.

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On Setterday efterneen, folk are openin their doors an gates. Clappin their hans, they bring the street ti life. A lang vee shape o fite nylon

ribbon shivers atween the leapin silver jaguar on the bonnet an the windscreen o the bridegroom's gleamin black car. He shuffles in ees dark suit file ees best man chucks the customary hanfu o coins for the bairns gaithered in the street. The Ball Money. Tradition. They'll scatter, leapin high ti catch tanners, thruppenny bits; even scrabble ower the frosty pavement efter a last bob or twa. A o them except een.

Gillian stans ootside the kirk wae her Ma an the weemenfolk, watchin the shy teenage bride arrive wi her Da, glum aneath ees black Eden hat. The bride cradles pink roses abeen her roun satin belly. Hid she geen back te the Academy efter summer, she wid hiv been Head Girl ... maist likely the Dux, this ear, at the varsity the next. Gillian dabs a dreebly tear.

"He says her da's bocht them a new bungalow," Jeannie Smith tells some quine ahin er.

"Ooh, at 'll be affa fine for er, then, fin he's awa at the sea."

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On her third day here, durin' her final university holidays, Gillian is hae'n a breather, leanin' on an aul steen brig in the Trianon Gardens in Paris. Nearby, her allotted group o English schoolgirls is entertainin' Pauline, iss efterneen's stan-in guide. Madame, fae *Amitié Internationale des Jeunes*, wid disapprove o Gillian bunkin aff, but Gillian's brains are reelin. She needs time te think ower fit Pauline said file they a traivelt te the Louvre on the bus for the mornin excursion. Even runnin inta her here hid been a shock. Pauline Buchan ... sae thegither, affa chic in er mini frock an plain black pumps.

"Look, Gillian," she'd said, haulin her awa file the quines, quaet for eence, hid their Art Lecture. "My Ma and Da hated Georgie for ruinin my education. Mind you, aa they ivver wanted wis for me ti be a teacher back in the North East. An yet..." She tugged at the tails o her silk scarf, waftin a fine smell o perfume. "Georgie took me awa for a late honeymoon last Summer. Funcied himself, posin in ees

Polaroids aside the Eiffel tower. He'd already faa'n oot wae some daft Australian loons campin aside it... in a psychedelic VW van." Pauline latched yet, jist as seen, her een clouded ower. "Georgie wis as stuck as we were, I suppose ..."

"Pauline, did ye..." Gillian wanted to tell er aboot Georgie, the beach, but Pauline wis on a roll.

"Ye see, we thocht we were affa cool, strollin through the main drag in Saint Germain des Prés until we fun oorsels trapped on the edge o this muckle upheaval. A march, students chuckin cobbles. He wis fizzin , he couldna see fit aa the fuss wis aboot but, somehow, I could. Ess quine wae lang ravelt hair an jeans heuked my airm... jist shoved a placard at me. She looked se... free, shovin it up high ... An I wis chuffed. Aye, I wis, Gillian. I felt... recognised. Maybe even entitl't. So, I grabbed it, let masel be swept alang for the sheer fun o't. I've nae idea fit it even said."

"Did Georgie march, then?" Gillian could hardly tak it in – serial flashes o rebellion an ess North-Easterners in the thick o 't.

"He wis fizzin, tried te haul me oot, but the din ... An the crowd wis bilin, so a guy birlid him oot o the wye. Madness. Yet I'd nivver felt se... like mysel in my hale life an I didna ging back ti the hotel that nicht. Jist disappeared for the wik ... sittin-in wi the students."

"Gee... I was only sittin my Highers then."

It had aa geen ower Gillian's heid at the time. Nae idea. She'd miss't the revolution. an noo here she wis, stunned by ess unlikely rebel. Pauline Buchan. Se ... cool, thegither. An Georgie? Shid she spik up? Fit good would it dee noo?

"But they said ye'd haen a breakdoon, Pauline..."

"No, they hushed up the Paris bit, an I cam back in a week or twa but nae ti Georgie. So, they focht me for oor Ailsa. I get er here for the holidays."

"I'd nae idea..."

"Look, Gillian. I've nivver wanted her to grow up like us – fine, clivver, held-in quines fa's life ended in a bungalow full o fitted

carpet and Douulton figurines ... or the teacher's college in Aiberdeen if they were lucky. But by the time I'd heard about Jeannie an him, I wis cowed, too feart ti leave ... until Paris."

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Fin Gillian gings back te her group, Madame checks in. Despite Pauline's finesse, Madame's sign-aff is brusque – ess time it's a warnin about the morn's trip ti old Montmartre then the Sacré-Coeur Basilica. They hiv ti be on high alert for kidnappers in the Easter crowds. Gillian's fourteen-year-aul quines lach it aff, of course, already surgin into the verra best back-row-o-the-bus seats. She winna tell them aff. Why wid they nae act up a bittie for yon cute loons file they can, efter aa?

"But, hey, did I tell ye I got work as an interpreter?" Pauline says fin they sut doon thegither again. "It's a mess, but here I feel ... mysel for the first time since leavin the Academy. I wis aye too affronted ti kick up about Jeannie, but Paris wis... a revelation. So, I played ma haun, grabbed ma ain sel back. I'm enrolled at the Sorbonne."

Fin the bus stops at her school in Vaucresson, Gillian sets tee, marshallin quines doon the aisle. Pauline hauns er a wee card.

"My address. I'm assigned ti the ither group for the rest o the wik so ... Write ti me, eh? It's been terrific... jist *spikkin* ti ye."

"Aye, it's ..."

But Pauline heuks Gillian's airm, lookin er stracht in the ee. "Dee yer ain thing fin ye get back, fin ye graduate, an ... Gillian, *nivver* let them coont ye oot."

"No. Nivver."

An something lifts inside.