

## FLOWERS ON THE FLAGSTONE

by

Mairi Wilson

It was the upturned pram they found first, behind yon half-built wall at the back of the school. Where the Council had started to build a nursery for the incomers' children to learn our Gaelic, but they'd not stayed and the schoolhouse itself had fallen empty since the last of our own finished Primary. Which would be why no one had reported the pram before, what with the long lying of the snow that winter too and the travellers there till the spring. The police had questioned them first of course, but they'd had babies in the camp themselves that year and they'd have said nothing about the pram would they, those tinks, keeping to their ways as they do.

A fine wee pram it had been I mind well, before the weather got to it. Before its blue had faded and its wheels twisted. At first the Council's men paid it no heed, just a part of the midden the travellers left behind. Then later when she'd seen it there on the flatbed of Donnie Muck's lorry, she'd screamed and carried on something dreadful.

Many's the day I'd seen her pushing that pram the length of The Street down and back, and back and down, its wheels cutting through the snow leaving parallel tracks like the warp threads of the loom waiting for its weft. A bairn like that made even a stone heart smile, but then it had been a good while since there'd been weans in the village and goodness knows we all missed them. Auld folk need young laughter like porridge needs salt, and without it we are all the sadder.

She wasn't from the island though, nor even the Mainland. You could tell soon as look at her. Those dark sloping eyes and that straight sweep of thick hair shining blue as a raven's wing in the sunshine. No, she was not a belonger, that one. Seoras Òg brought her with him when he returned from the ships. I suppose he knew none of us would have had him, what with the drinking and bullying and him so like his father.

But for all her strangeness she was a good woman, I was sure of it. And even a bad one would not have deserved all that happened. Her smile was that sweet, her face that innocent, it makes me near cry to think of it even now. You could tell she'd left the ways of a port life behind, if indeed the Elders were right in

those assumptions. Those cross-eyed crows would turn their backs rather than look at her. But I'd long since stopped caring what those auld hypocrites thought and hadn't set foot in yon cauldron of a Kirk since they'd damned me for my Mòrag.

"Name the father and the Lord will forgive you," they'd said to me then. "Name the father and the Kirk's mighty arms may yet embrace you again." Aye, and set the Kirk's mighty gossips a-clucking, I'd thought. And what good would the naming do when he'd never acknowledge what he'd done to me and I no longer bore the bruises that proved it? They'd have called me a liar as well as a whore and I had no need of a double damnation, nor my child of the darkness of his shadow. Jezebel they'd called me then, throwing it at my back as I'd left with my head high in defiance of their judgement. And Jezebel they whispered behind her back now.

Perhaps that's why I took to the lonely young stranger, watched for small ways to reach her. I knew what it meant to be cut cold like that. Samina her name was. Strange to our tongue but it made me think of the sun and the lapping of waves on the sand. I never heard any one else call her by her given name. I'd offered her mine but she'd not use it. Mrs MacIver she'd say, though unmarried I was. Maybe she'd felt 'Eilidh Bheag' too familiar for a woman older than her own mother.

When they found the pram, suspicion lit on the travellers again with a certainty of conviction any Minister might hope for in a God-fearing flock. And with that certainty all sorts of strange wonderings became fact, told and retold over pots of tea in kitchens, over Effie's Post Office counter between stamps and pensions, and of course at the bar of the Am Fuaran on those few occasions Seoras Òg was absent. We had a rare talent in the village for embellishing our recollections, refining and cementing our speculations. And for blaming our troubles on strangers.

So the police were recalled. Suspicions and sightings relayed, rumours retold. Then the village settled down and waited.

You never saw them together of course, him and wee Samina, not before nor after, and not once did I see that man with his baby. And on the days after the nights when he'd roared like a winter storm beating in from the West, she'd be walking up and down for hours, whether there was sun to warm her bairn or not. On those days I'd open my door and wait for her, the kettle already heated at the

hearth. We all knew why she stayed out so long in all weathers. We recognised the traces of a drunken tattooing.

Not even that time she sat in my kitchen hardly able to swallow a sip for the pain did I mention it though. Nor even when I'd moved the arm that was hugging her side and lifted her too-big jumper. The tears had run down her frozen face as I'd struggled to still my own at the sight of the purples and blues of recent blows, and the greens and yellows of older. My mother's ointment had helped and I'd tucked another pot of it under the sleeping bairn's blanket for the next time. Perhaps if I'd not kept the silence, if I'd spoken up in her name. But who would have listened?

After the ointment, it was a lotion for her wee lassie's rash. And then a poultice for her own tooth that was bothering her. She was interested, I could see, so I started to share the old ways. We'd always been gifted, my family's women, the only daughters of only daughters on back through the generations. The chain was unbroken until my Mòrag's asthma that day, and me too scared to give her a taste of the hemlock roots I knew would ease it till the medics came, for fear I'd be mistaken in the amount of it.

I could give Samina a place in the village, I'd thought, so I took to teaching her the plants' many secrets. And she was quick too. I liked that. She'd work quietly beside me, careful, meticulous. Except that time after the baby had gone and I'd clattered the metal coal-scuttle on the hearthstone and she dropped the pan of witch hazel and stood shaking.

I'd heard it myself that night but not known it till later. I'd lain in my bed as so often I did listening to him roaring and banging, to her screaming and weeping, and the baby crying all the while. But it had stopped too sudden that night and I was frightened. I'd slipped round to the kitchen door, tapped lightly and waited. In time she'd appeared, pulling her cardigan over blood on her dress, eyes darting like herring scattering before the nets of a trawler.

"Go please, Mrs MacIver," she'd begged, "please go." So I'd left her. Not happily mind. But I'd left her.

Then later that scraping and clattering of steel on stone, sharp in the night despite the muffling of fresh snow falling thickly around us. The snow hadn't let up for three days after that. And when it did the bairn was missing. The police were called and noses poked in but the weeks passed and nothing came of it. Yon

lass was beside herself. Well, wouldn't you be. And himself with the face like thunder.

And the bruises, they said now in the Post Office, hadn't she earned them when she'd lost the poor man's baby? It was her penance, her punishment, his way of grieving. And who of us could blame him? Auld fools.

She'd have known they'd get nothing from the tinks, of course. And with the pram so near to home she'd have worried the police would get to wondering again. That lazy brute of a husband couldn't even get rid of a pram right. He'd have thought himself clever, mind, leaving it by the traveller camp. Just as stupid he was, as his beast of a father.

But when the police didn't come back and no arrests were reported in the papers, the talk faded again. Spring turned to summer and the shag iris bloomed yellow in the bog ground where she'd help me pick the plants for healing, for even then she'd still work with me sometimes in the kitchen. But her light had gone and there was really only one question for me that she had, and she'd ask that same one over and over.

One morning as I opened my door to a watery Hebridean sun, there was something in the silence that chilled me. I found them both at the kitchen table, stiff in their chairs, his face twisted, hers serene, and the flowers on the flagstone at her feet like a shrine. And I knew what the sound of steel on stone in the dead of that night had been, where the poor wee mite had gone to.

I'd looked for traces of the roots and found them as I'd known I would, and I'd cleaned the pan where she'd boiled them. No need to make it easy for the police after all, and I didn't want them asking me their questions.

But too hasty I'd been, going then for help. If I'd felt the faintest of flickers at his neck I'd have waited. They'd flown him to the Mainland. It had taken some weeks in intensive care but they'd got him back. And that's when we heard his story. How, so he said, she'd murdered his bairn. Thrown her body on it when he hit her just to spite him, squashing the life from the wee lamb he'd adored, cracking bones like kindling beneath her. How he'd buried it under the bloody flagstone to remind her of her wickedness every time she sat at his table, and how she'd scrubbed the stone clean till it shone like a new one again.

In the village they'd loved his story, quick to pity where once they'd been quick to damn. But not me. I knew that family and the treachery of its men, Seoras

Òg like his father before him. He must have struck her hard that night, for her to have fallen so. Cut off before it could scream, poor mite. A poof of air and then the feel of it; the soft spreading under the very body that had borne it. No mother could live long with such a memory.

He served a short time but the Sheriff went gentle on him. His dead mother's cousin, wasn't it. And then he came home. For a while he stayed away from Am Fuaran but that didn't last long and he'd sit in the corner there before bringing a bottle home with him after closing. He'd drink staring at that flagstone, falling asleep with the bottle not empty, waking up with the dawn light to drain it. And all the time I was watching through the window, looking for a way to finish it for her, to deal him the justice I'd never dared deal his devil of a father.

An empty from his bin was easy to find, one bottle just like another. The unlocked door, the bottle switched before dawn, then switched back later in the morning. That had been easy. It was the waiting that had been hard. Waiting for someone from Am Fuaran to care enough for his absence to come calling. Near a week that had taken.

Switches click and dark silence settles about me. Not the silence of the island but welcome all the same. I settle back against the narrow mattress of my bunk and close my eyes. I see the sky glowing red as the sun drops behind the outer isles, bruising the sea purple with its touch. I see my Mòrag playing on the sand and young Samina cradling her baby whilst my hand, sure and steady, picks the hemlock we'd both of us needed. And in my head I'm home and near happy. Most days, it's enough.