Scottish Short Stories

All That Glisters

by Anne Donovan

Thon wee wifey brung them in, the wan that took us for two days when Mrs McDonald wis aff. She got us tae make Christmas cards wi coloured cardboard and felties, which wis a bit much when we’re in second year, but naebody wis gonny say anythin cos it wis better than daein real work. Anyway ah like daein things lik that and made a right neat wee card for ma daddy wi a Christmas tree and a robin and a bit a holly on it.

That’s lovely dear. What’s your name?

Clare.

Would you like to use the glitter pens?

And she pulled oot the pack fae her bag.

Ah’d never seen them afore. When ah wis in primary four the teacher gied us tubes of glitter but it wis quite messy, hauf the stuff ended up on the flair and it wis hard tae make sure you got the glue in the right places. But these pens were different cos the glue wis mixed in wi the glitter so you could jist draw with them. It wis pure brilliant so it wis. There wis four colours, rid, green, gold and silver, and it took a wee while tae get the hang of it. You had tae careful when you squeezed the tube so’s you didny get a big blob appearin at wanst, but efter a few goes ah wis up an runnin.

And when ah’d finished something amazing hud happened. Ah cannny explain whit it wis but the glitter jist brought everythin tae life, gleamin and glisterin agin the flat cardboard. It wis like the difference between Christmas tree skinklin wi fairy lights and wan lyin deid an daurk in a corner.

Ma daddy wis dead chuffed. He pit the card on the bedside table and smiled.

Fair brightens up this room, hen.

Its good tae find sumpn that cheers him up even a wee bit because ma daddy’s really sick. He’s had a cough fur as long as ah can remember, and he husny worked fur years, but these past three month he cannny even get oot his bed. Ah hear him coughin in the night sometimes and it’s different fae the way he used tae cough, come fae deeper inside him somehow, seems tae rack his hale body fae inside oot. When ah come in fae school ah go and sit wi him and tell him aboot whit’s happened that day, but hauf the time he looks away fae me and stares at a patch on the downie cover where there’s a coffee stain that ma ma cannny wash oot. He used to work strippin oot buildins and he wis breathin in stour aw day, sometimes it wis that bad he’d come hame wi stour — dust
his hair and his claes clartit wi it. He used tae kid on he wis a ghost and walk in the hoose wi his
airms stretched oot afore him and ah’d rin and hide unner the stair, watchin him walk by wi the
faint powdery whiteness floatin roon his heid.

He never knew there wis asbestos in the dust, never knew a thing aboot it then, nane of
them did. Noo he’s an expert on it, read up aw these books tae try and unnerstaun it fur the
compensation case. Before he got really sick he used tae talk aboot it sometimes.

You see, hen, the word asbestos comes fae a Greek word that means indestructible. That’s how they use
it fur fireproofin – the fire canny destroy it.

You mean if you wore an asbestos suit you could walk through fire and it widny hurt you?

Aye. In the aulden days they used tae bury the royals in it. They cried it the funeral dress of kings.

The next day the wee wumman let me use the pens again. Sometimes when you think somthin’s
brilliant it disny last, you get fed up wi it dead quick an don’t know why you wanted it in the first
place. But the pens wereny like that, it wis even better than the first time cos ah knew whit tae dae
wi them. Yesterday ah’d put the glitter on quite thick in a solid block a colour, but today ah found
a different way a daein it almost by accident. Ah’d drawn a leaf shape and coloured it green but a
bit squirted oot intae a big blob, so ah blotted it and when ah took the paper away the shape that
wis left wis nicer than the wan ah’d made deliberately. The outline wis blurred and the glitter wis
finer and lighter, the colour of the card showin through so it looked as if sumbdy’d sprinkled it,
steidy ladelin it on; it looked crackin. The teacher thought so too.

It’s lovely Clare. It’s more…subtle.

Subtle, ah like that word.

Ah tellt ma daddy aboot it that night efter school, sittin on the chair beside his bed. He seemed
a bit better than usual, mair alert, listenin tae whit ah hud tae say, but his skin wis a terrible colour
and his cheeks were hollow.

Whit did she mean, subtle, hen? How was it subtle?

Ah tried tae think of the words tae explain it, but ah couldny. Ah looked at ma fingers which
were covered in glitter glue and then at ma daddy’s haun lyin on the bedcover, bones stickn oot
and veins showin through. Ah took his haun in mines and turnt it roon so his palm faced upward.

Look, daddy.

Ah showed him the middle finger of ma right haun, which wis thick wi solid gold, then
pressed doon on his palm. The imprint of ma finger left sparkly wee trails a light.

He smiled a wavery wee smile.

Aye, hen. Subtle.

That night ah lay awake fur as while imaginin aw the things ah could dae wi the glitter pens.
Ah really wanted tae make sumpn fur ma daddy’s Christmas wi them. The tips of ma fingers
were still covered in glitter, and they sparkled in the daurk. Ah pressed ma fingers aw ower
the bedclothes so they gleamed in the light fae the streetlamps ootside, then ah fell intae a deep
glistery sleep.

clartit — fouled, dirty       steidy — instead of
£3.49 for a pack of four. And ah hud wan ninety-three in ma purse.

Ah lifted the pack and walked to the check-oot.

*Much are they?*

Three forty-nine.

*Ah but much are they each?*

The wumman at the till hud dyed jet-black hair and nae eyebrows.

_We don’t sell them individually._

She spat oot the word individually as if it wis sumpn disgusting.

*Ah but you’ll get mair fur them. Look, you can have wan ninety-three fur two._

*Ah’ve already tellt you that we don’t’ sell them individually, ah canny split the pack._

A could see there wis nae point in arguin wi her so ah turnt roon and walked towards the shelf tae pit them back. If Donna’d been wi me, she’d just have knocked them. She’s aye takin sweeties an rubbers and wee things lik that. She’s that casual aboot it, she can jist walk past a shelf and wheech sumpn intae her pocket afore anybdy notices, never gets caught. And she’s that innocent looking, wi her blonde frizzy curls and her neat school uniform naebdy wid guess tae look at her she wis a tea-leaf.

She’s aye on tae ma tae dae it, but ah canny. Ah suppose it’s cos of ma ma and da, they’re dead agin thievin. Donna widny rob hooses or steal sumpn oot yer purse but she disny think stealin oot a shop is stealin. A lot of folk think lik that. Donna’s big brother Jimmy wanst tried tae explain tae me that it wis OK tae steal ooty shops cos they made such big profits that they were really stealin affy us (the workin classes he cries us though he husny worked a day in his life) and they’re aw insured anyway so it disny matter, and even though ah can see the sense in whit Jimmy’s sayin, well, ma daddy says stealin is stealin, and ah canny go against his word.

In the end ah sellt ma dinner tickets tae big Maggie Hughes and all week ah wis starvin for ah only hud an apple or a biscuit ma ma gied me fur a playpiece. But on Friday it was worth it when ah went doon the shops at lunchtime tae buy the pens. It wis a different wumman that served me and she smiled as she pit them in a wee plastic poke.

_Are you gonny make Christmas decorations, hen?_

_Ah’m no sure._

_Ah got some fur ma wee boy an he loved them._

_Aye they’re dead good. Thanks._

Ah couldn’t wait tae show them tae me da, but as soon as ah opened the door of the hoose ah knew there wis sumpn wrang. It was that quiet, nae telly, nae radio on in the kitchen. Ma mammy wis sittin on the settee in the livinroom. Her face wis white and there were big black lines under her eyes.

_Mammy, whit’s…?_

_C’mere hen, sit doon beside me._

She held her weddin ring between the thumb and first finger of her right haun, twistin it roon as she spoke and ah saw how loose it wis on her finger. No long ago it wis that tight she couldn’t get it aff.
Clare, yer daddy had a bad turn, jist this afternoon and we had tae go tae the hospital wi him. Ah’m awfie sorry hen, ah don’t know how tae tell you, but yer daddy’s died.

Ah knew it wis comin, ah think ah’d known since ah walked intae the hoose, but when she said the words the coldness shot through me till ah felt ma bones shiverin and ah heard a voice, far away in anither room, shoutin but the shouts were muffled as if in a fog, and the voice wis shoutin naw, naw, naw!

And ah knew it wis ma voice.

We sat there, ma mammy and me, her airms roon me, till ah felt the warmth of her body gradually dissolve the ice of mine. Then she spoke, quiet and soft.

Now hen, you know that this is fur the best, no fur us but fur yer daddy.

Blue veins criss-crossed the back of her haun. Why were veins blue when blood wis red?

You know yer daddy’d not been well fur a long time. He wis in a lot of pain, and he wisny gonny get better. At least this way he didny suffer as much. He’s at peace noo.

We sat for a long time, no speakin, just haudin hauns.

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The funeral wis on the Wednesday and the days inbetween were a blur of folk comin an goin, of makin sandwiches and drinkin mugs of tea, sayin rosaries an pourin oot glasses of whisky for men in overcoats. His body came hame tae the hoose and wis pit in their bedroom. Ma mammy slept in the bed settee in the livin room wi ma auntie Pauline.

Are you sure that you want tae see him?

Ah wis sure. Ah couldny bear the fact we’d never said goodbye and kept goin ower and ower in ma mind whit ah’d have said tae him if ah’d known he wis gonny die so soon. Ah wis feart as well, right enough. Ah’d never seen a deid body afore, and ah didny know whit tae expect, but he looked as if he wis asleep, better, in fact than he’d looked when he wis alive, his face had mair colour, wis less yella lookin and lined. Ah sat wi him fur a while in the room, no sayin anything, no even thinking really, jist sittin. Ah felt that his goin wis incomplete and ah wanted tae dae sumpn fur him, but that’s daft, whit can you dae when sumbdy’s deid? Ah wondered if ah should ask ma mammy but she wis that withdrawn intae hersel, so busy wi the arrangements that ah didny like tae. She still smiled at me but it wis a watery far-away smile and when she kissed me goodnight ah felt she wis haudin me away fae her.

On the Wednesday morning ah got up early, got dressed and went through tae the kitchen. Ma auntie Pauline wis sittin at the table havin a cuppa tea and a fag and when she looked up her face froze over.

Whit the hell dae you think you’re daein? Go and get changed this minute.

But these are ma best claes.

You canny wear red tae a funeral. You have to show respect fur the deid.

But these were ma daddy’s favourites. He said ah looked brilliant in this.

Ah mind his face when ah came intae the room a couple of month ago, after ma mammy’d bought me this outfit fur ma birthday; a red skirt and zip-up jacket wi red tights tae match.

You’re a sight fur sore eyes, hen.

That sounds horrible, daddy.
He smiled at me.

*It disny mean that hen, it means you look that nice that you would make sore eyes feel better. Gie's a twirl, princess.*

And ah birled roon on wan leg, laughin.

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*They claes are no suitable for a funeral.*

*Ah’m gonny ask ma mammy.*

Ah turned to go oot the room.

*Don’t you dare disturb your mother on a day like this tae ask her aboot claes. Have you no sense? Clare, you’re no a baby, it’s time you grew up and showed consideration for other folk. Get back in that room and put on your school skirt and a sweatshirt and your navy blue coat. And ah don’t want to hear another word aboot this.*

In the bedroom ah threw masel intae a corner and howled ma heid aff. The tears kept comin and comin till ah felt ah wis squeezed dry and would never be able tae shed anither tear. Ah took aff the red claes and changed intae ma grey school skirt and sweatshirt and pit ma navy blue coat ower it. Ah looked at masel in the full-length mirror in the middle of the wardrobe and saw this dull drab figure, skin aw peely-wally. My daddy would have hated tae see me like this but ah didny dare go against ma auntie’s word.

The only bit of me that had any life aboot it wis ma eyes fur the tears had washed them clean and clear. A sunbeam came through the windae and ah watched the dustspecks dancing in its light. There was hair on the collar of ma coat and it lit up intae a rainbow of colours. As ah picked it up and held it in ma fingers an idea came tae me. Ah went to ma schoolbag which had been left lyin in the corner of the room since Friday, took oot ma pack of glitter pens and unwrapped them. Ah took the gold wan, squeezing the glitter on ma fingers and then rubbin it intae ma hair, then added silver and red and green.

The strands of hair stood oot roon ma heid like a halo, glisterin and dancing in the light. Ah covered the dull cloth so it wis bleezin wi light, patterns scattered across it, even pit some on ma tights and ma shoes. Then ah pressed my glittery fingers on ma face, feelin ma cheek bones and eyebrows and the soft flesh of ma mouth and the delicate skin of ma eyelids. And ah felt sad for a moment as ah thought of the deid flesh of ma daddy, lyin alone in the cold church. Then ah stood and looked in the mirror at the glowin figure afore me and ah smiled.

*Subtle, daddy?*

*Aye hen, subtle.*