

2. FLOOERS IN OCTOBER

At the fit o Steenhillock brae, a twa mile ben the main road frae the neep-park cottars wis a crossroads. Here, ye micht cairry fair on tae Dunracht some fower mile aff, or fork tae the north three mile as the craa flees, tae the clachan o Leddrach gin ye'd a mind. In the nearest neuk o the crossroads wis Kilrogie schule, ae lang chaumer wi a stove tae gie some heat, a rikkin lum wi its schulehoose tackit ontilt. The ruler o this sma empire wis Miss McFarlan, as dour an nippit an soor's a limb o the educational tree as iver liftit a tawse. Faith, Tarry McPhail was say, ye widna need tae bigg a tattiebogle tae flegg the craas awa, jist open the schuleroom windaes an lat them hear her skreichin fin her birse wis up, or something misfittit her.

Kilrogie schuleroom wis stervin cauld in October. The wee stove huggit its heat tae itsel as if it wis feart tae share it. The heather in the moss o Leddrach, atween the schule an the Menzies fairm o Tullynorth wis poodery an broon, the heather bells mair like wee dry castanets, rattlin in the dreich wins. At the back o the schule, the glaury puil was a sottar o kirned dubs, far bairns' tackety buits hid trampled the simmer girse tae smush. East o the schule an the puil, the wids o Pitrasherty raise up, a bield fur rubbits, a hinneycaimb wi their burrows, a rubbit fortress. Frae their dubby lair they reenged ower the nearhaun fairms ettin aathing clean in, a plague o furry locusts.

Minnie luikit throwe the schule room windaes inno a sky, a corp that wis drained o bluid, nae a pikk o colour in't, blae an dull as dishwatter. The birks in the wids tho war a lowe o yalla an gowd, the hips an hawes in the sheughs war skirps o bluid, an roon the fit o the muckle horsechestnut trees, sheeny conkers lay in their wee green spikey jaikets, knights' maces o auld.

In the verra mids o the wids stude the horsie steen. The bairns o the Leddrach caad it the horsie-steen, fur gin ye luikit close eneuch, ye cud jist makk oot the shape o a carved shelt wi a chiel on his back. A Pict, fowk said he wis. Foo it cam tae be there nane o the bairns kent, bit Minnie Bruce secretly thocht the shelt micht be an ancestor o Fauldie, her Da's favourite horse, tho Fauldie wis bigger nur yon shelt, wi braider feet an heicher aathegither. She cud jist aboot makk oot the horsie-steen frae the windae o the schuleroom. Dandy Davidson, Steenhillock's orraloon, wis there in the wids aside it. He wis a fernytickelt loon, aa airms an legs like a daddylanglegs, fa smokit a cutty pipe an keepit a Futterat fur rubbitin. His fowk ained a craftie hauf wye doon the steep rain ruttit roadie worn roch bi the hooves o kye an horse that ran atween Steeny's an the main road. The craftie wis a nochtie placie, a wee roch patch in the itherwise gleamin silky greens an gowds o Matthew Bruce's hey an corn parks. Dandy hid left the schule at simmer, finiver he turned fowerteen, an gaen tae wirk at

Steenhillock. Eenoo, he wis slawly creepin roon the rubbit's hoosies, blockin aff ilkie hole wi a steen, makkin ready fur a day's wirk wi the futterat, a slack time at the fairm an a guid chaunce tae kill aff the furry vratches o rubbits.

Minnie's teacher wis staunin in front o the stove warmin her dowp. She wis a year or twa the wrang side o forty, Miss McFarlan, an ill-naturet worrit o a craitur wi a reid mower on her tapmaist lip an a permanent lirk atween her broos, like an ill-fittin seam. There war nae mair nur ten bairns at schule that foreneen. The missin echt war frae fairms tae the wast o Dunracht, an thon day they war awa liftin tatties at Pitrasherty Hame fairm, sae excused frae attendin. The takk-aa wadna be veesitin the hoose fur an argy-bargy. The tattie-howkin wisna tae stert at Steeny's, Tully's, nur Northies till the wikeyn, sae the bairns o schule age frae thon fairms war aa present. Ilkie bairn sat wi a slate an a slate pencil. A map o the warld hung skweejee on ae waa, an embroidered sampler hung on tither. Their ainer, Miss McFadyn wis spikkin poetry.

Slowly and sadly we laid him down
From the field of his fame fresh and gory:
We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone
But we left him alone with his glory!

Dowpit doon at the back o the class, Isie wis scrattin oot her ain version o't wi a slate pencil on her slatie, in scratty haunwritin:

Slowly an sadly we laid him doon
We rubbit his nose in butter
We pit him in a sardine tin
An floatit him doon the gutter.

Minnie leuch. Miss McFarlan heard her. Up she merched an read Isie's scrattins. The tawse cam oot o its drawer, an the teacher wheeched it throwe the air wi its lang leather tongue, skelp ontae Isie's saft plump haun.

'Isie Menzies, ye've as much sense as a flech' she raged.

Isie tossed her lang reid pleats an sniffed.

'I dinna care fit she dis,' she telt Minnie as Miss McFarlan gaed back tae her desk. 'Fin we roup oot at Mairtinmas, Da's pitten me tae a braw schule in the toun, naethin like this tippency haepenny fleapit. Miss McFarlan's jist a glorifeed skiffy, Da says, she widna ken a bar o music frae a bar o soap.'

Minnie's brither Matty gaed tae a braw schule in the toun, Strathbogie College, tho Minnie wis quicker on the uptakk. Bit then, she wis jist a quine an wad likely get merriet: a waste o a guid education aabody said. Sae she sattled fur playin at schulies ahin the henhoose at Steeny's wi her clooty dall an the chuckens as pupils. Miss McFarlan, tho, wis gled o Minnie's help as a monitor

wi the littlins. Maist o the littlins war frae ae faimly, steppies an steenies, belangin tae Spikk Thamson an his wife Molly, fa farmed Northies, neist door tae the Menzies fairm o Tullynorth, tae the east o Steenhillock. Fowk caad him Spikk fur he seldom opened his mou, bit wid answer ye wi a nod or a grunt or a nicher like an ayld dane shelt. His wife, Molly wis roon's a buttered bap, tho fit wis fat an fit wis bairn wisna gweed kennin, fur since they'd bin merriet she drappit a bairn ilkie year. They keepit a champion cull. bit fowk said that spikk o Northies micht makk a better job himsel if he lowsed his galluses in the byre. Faith, he michtna be bonnie, bit there wis nae denyin the chiel wis fertile. Forbye, Northie's bull wis a coorse, illnaturet breet an wad gore ye as quick as luik at ye if ye made the mistak o cuttin ower Northie's grun on the wye tae schule. Northies keepit a puckle yowes at the back o the Hill o Leddrach, black faced yowes, bit maistly he let his parks oot fur feedin beasts. He anely fussled twa tunes did Spikk, Katy Beardie and the Leddrach Pairish favourite, Teenie Trickie:

Up wi't Teenie Trickie timmer leg an aa
Up wi't Teenie Trickie timmer leg an aa
Up wi't Teenie Trickie timmer leg an aa
She did in the coort an ahin the stable waa

Fowk said thon sang cud hae bin aboot Spikk's wife hersel, bit fowk'll say onything. Fariver he did it, the bairns war bonnie eneuch in their wye. Like piz in a pod they war, blin- fair, wi snottery snoots an hair like dried strae. Willie the youngest peed his brikks regular raither than sikk oot tae the wattery, bein feart o Miss McFarlan. Maist o the time, he sat in a neuk his lane, sent there in disgrace fur hodgin aboot an nae pyin attention.

Efter the poetry recitation wis ower, the bairns ran throwe the catechisms, syne Miss McFarlan screived a heeze o sums on the boord wi a daud o chakk - it skreighed fin it skyted on the boord an she broke a nail. The aulder bairns war set tae their lang-division an Minnie wis sent tae gar the littlins chant their tables in a neuk. Miss McFarlan tuik up the tings an opened the moo o the blaik stove tae shovel in a sup coal. The fire hoastit oot a black pluffert o rikk an she powked it up tae gar it daunce, afore pittin tee the door again.

The schuleroom guffed o weet, dryin socks an mochles, fur it hid rained in the mornin an maist o the bairns hid cam in like drookit rats. Ten tin flasks, stoppered wi cork an paper, sat roon the fit o the stove, heatin, ready fur their dennertime piece. As dennertime won nearer, Minnie's heid began tae stoon. There wis a ruggin feelin doon at the fit o her wame, as it something hid cleukit her intimmers, an wis tryin tae teir them oot. It wis a fremmit feelin, a new feelin. Forbye, her drawers war damp an sticky, as if something wis leakin ooto her.

'Please God, let it nae be skitters' she prayed silently. Minnie tuik scunner usin the dry lavvies oot in the playgrun, the timmer seats stukken wi shite, an the stank eneuch tae caa ye ower. She faulded her fingers inno a neive an rubbit them back an fore alang her wame. As the hauns o the clock trailed roon tae bell-time, Miss McFarlan said grace, an her wee boorich o pupils fell tee tae chaw their breid an jam.

'Nae eatin yer piece, Minnie?' speired Isie. 'Gie it tae ain o the Thamsons. They're aye hungry. Ma says they maun hae wirms.'

Minnie suppit her sweet cocoa, bit it didna shift the queer feelin, nur the duntin heidache. Fin she'd drained her tin mug tae the lees, she ruggit on her dry mochles, wippit her scarf toon her thrapple, hauled on her toorie an jaiket an set aff ootside.

'I'm awa tae watch Dandy wirk the Futterat,' quo she, thinkin mebbe the fresh air wad makk her feel better. Isie follaed her. She likit tae torment Dandy. He wis three year aulder than them, a skinnymalink o a loon, at yon glekit age o fowerteen, nae man nae bairn, a halflin fa smokit a cuttit pipe bit didna yet hae onythin tae scrape frae his chooks wi a razor. The fattest rattens in Leddrach bedd in Davidson's ae crazy ruk, the hale place wis little mair nur a rickle o steens held thegither win spit, bit they war weel eneuch likit foraa that they war throweith deevils.

Dandy hid stopped aa the rubbit's holes bar twa. Inno ae open hole, he wis makkin ready tae pit the ferret. Syne he'd rin roon tae tither an catch the rubbits as they cam fleein oot, terrifeed, chap them ahin the neck an kill them. He lowsed the towes frae the neck o a sack he wis cairryin. The Futterat wis curled up in a baa at the fit o't, soun asleep.

'Ye can stroke him if ye like. He's a quate breet,' he telt them.

Isie pit her haun in first, drawin it ben the back o the sleepin Futterat. She gied a wee shiver o delight.

'Sae smeeth his pelt,' quo Isie. 'Lift him oot, Dandy!'

The halflin liftit the sleepy Futterat ooto the pyoke fur Minnie tae haud in her bosie. It wis aboot the size o a squirrel, bit lang an lean far a squirrel wis biggit like a teacosy. It wis the colour o pale hinney streakit wi broon, wi twa sherp preeens o een, like Minnie's ma's hat preen that she wore fur best on Sundays. It guffed o musk, a queer strang smell that Minnie's neb hid niver smelt afore.

'Fyaach!' quo she.

'Fyach yersel,' replied Dandy, risin tae the defence o his favourite pet. 'Ye smell jist as strang's the Futterat.'

'I dinna,' the quine cried, turnin reid-faced, hopin the damp in her brikks wisna skitters efter aa.

'Ay bit ye div,' said Dandy. 'Aa humans smell. See my hauns?' He liftit up his haund tae show the quines. They war clartit green an black wi dubby girse.

'I hae tae rub ma hauns hard on the grun tae get rid o the man-stink, afore I gyang near the warren, or the rubbitts wid get win o't.'

The futterat yawned in Minnie's airms. Its wee coorse moo wis like an opened trap, twa raws o razor sherp teeth that cud takk yer finger aff as quick as luik at ye. She luikit in its een, bit cudna read fit lay ahin them, in its wee wud harns. Isie likit the futterat. Minnie wis feart o't. The futterat smelt the fear, an nippit her, drawin a bricht skirp o bluid. Dandy Davidson wheeched it awa.

'Preen yer lugs tae the grun,' he telt the twa quines. 'Ye'll hear fit happens fin the rubbitts ken the futterat's in their hoose.'

Minnie an Isie lay doon on the cauld, hard grun, an listened. The futterat wisna a meenit doon the warren, fin the quines cud hear the rubbitts drummin wi their hinlegs, drummin oot the warnin souns that rubbitts makk tae warn the lave o danger, deidly danger. Syne there wis a thin skreich like a bairn skirlin oot o't - ay, richt like a terrified bairn, uncanny yon, near human, an the first o the rubbitts shot oot o the ae unblockit hole, tae be killt wi a dunt bi Dandy, an laid oot on the frosty grun. Ane or twa gied a lowp or twa wi their legs, tho their necks war brukken an they warna gaun onyplace onymair, afore they streakit oot wi their derk een glazed an sticky.

The pain at the fit o Minnie's wame grew waur. She cud feel the stickiness growin atween her legs. Dandy said she stank. Mebbe she did. She raise up frae the warren, an left them tilt. Isie wis enjoyin hersel, she aye did fin loons war aroon. Minnie hid telt her ma an Meg Ramsay aboot the bruises she'd seen on Isie's neck in the Earth Hoosie, an Meg an her ma hid luikit at een anither, an said that Isie wis surely gaun tae be 'a man's body' fitiver that meant, an warned Minnie niver tae get ower close tae a loon or something micht happen, tho they didna tell her fit that thing micht be, tho it soundit rale nesty. Loons cud be coorse, she kent that. They blew up puddocks wi a straa till they burst. They rypit teuchits nests an broke their eggies. If loons cud dae thon tae the breet beasts, fit cud they dee tae quines?

She wauked awa frae the warren, leavin Isie an Dandy tae their ain devices, an cairriet on inno the mids o Pitrasherty wids, till she reached the runkled face o the Horsie Steen. Loons warna coorse tae shelts like they war tae puddocks, or rubbitts, or daddylanglegs. They pu'd the wings an legs aff daddylanglegs an thocht it fun. Jock Dow the grieve, her ain da, Matthew Bruce, Dandy, even, war gweed tae shelts, tho. Fair made pets o them, thocht mair o them whyles than they did o their ain families. It wis naething fur Minnie's Da tae bide oot aa nicht sleepin in the strae wi a meer at foalin time. Fin Fauldie tuik colic aince, her da hidna slept atween sheets for fower days till the horse wis richt better.

The wids war quate, here, an dreich. A twa three yalla leaves flichtered doon frae the tap o a great horse chestnut. A craa flappit awaa skreichin, pit oot that she'd disturbed him frae his reest. She dowpit doon on the crackly forest flier wi its smush o beechnuts an leaves an ooto sicht o aabody, drew up her skirts. Fit she saw drave the pech clean frae her, an pit twa fite brands o fear on her rosy chikks. The stickiness wisna skitters, efter aa. It wis bluid. Things anely bled like that fin they war hurtit, ay, hurtit sair, like the rubbits grippit an killt in the teeth o the Futterat. There wis nae sign o a cut, nur a bruise tae be seen. Wi trimmlin hauns she liftit the dry leaves tae scrape the bluid awa luikin fur some deep hurt on her flesh tae makk sense o't. The bluid wisna comin frae ootside, tho, it wis seepin frae inbye her. Something inside her wis hurtit, wis brukken. Mebbe she wid dee. She tried tae clean it awa wi haunfus o roch dry girse an moss, bit anely spreid the sticky clart aa ower hersel. Noo, her verra hauns war reid, like Meg the cook fin she washed coo's liver oot afore she sliced it.

She sterted tae rin fur hame, keepin weel ooto the road o Isie an Dandy, skirting the back o Rogie's puil far the littlins war still duntin their feet on its steeny banks, ettin their denner piece an flingin steens in the dubby watter. She ran throw her Da's peat cut at the Moss o Leddrach, rinnin as if her life dependit on't, fur faith, she thocht it did, her hairt thumpin an stounin like a wud thing, like the rubbits warnin feet at the stank o daith fin it entered their ain derk chaumer.

There war twa roads noo she micht takk, up by Tullynorth, far her aunt, Lotty Menzies wad be gaitherin eggs fur an efterneen at the bakin, or north wast throwe the neep park, its shaws aa rottit an frostit. Hitchin up her draiggled petticoats, she climmed the dyke at sic a rate she caad doon the tapmaist steen. Dandy wad seen be set tae mend it onywy, fit fur little eese till he learned the plooman trade. Her buits cobbled ower an sliddered atween the raws o neeps, bit on she ran like a tod wi a pack at its dowp till she reached Kilrogie wids, an the ae gress park that lay atween her an hame. Here, she dauchled awhile, tae catch her braith, fur her lungs war sair noo an she focht fur win. Her braith, fin she lat it oot, hung afore her like a wee grey cloud. The great green firs aroon her stood like watchers, sayin naethin ava bit their ain laich Autumn sough.

A bare ten meenits frae hame, she luikit throw the spinnle airms o a beech at the wallie richt in the mids o the girse park. Jock Dow the grieve wis a dowser, twis him that fan thon wallie three year back, wi naething bit a fork o hazel atween his hauns tae pynt it oot. He'd let Minnie haud the hazel fork the day he'd fand it. In her twa wee hauns the twig wis a deid, fooshunless thing, bit fin Jock tuik her twa thin wrists in his great roch hauns, the hazel lowpit. Syne the twig pulled doon wi a force like magic that fair bumbazed her. Deep, deep doon in the wame o the lan, ooto sicht o mortal een, the watter bedd, in its cauld blaik

lair. Bit Jock Dow'd fand it oot, it cudna hide frae him. Fit if Jock Dow cud dowse fur bluid as weel? Fitiver wis torn an wellin up inside her, wid Jock Dow ken?

Thochts raced throw her heid like rinnin bawds, criss crossin a corn park afore the binder. Anither stoon o pain at the fit o her wame drave her on again, throw the park, ben the back o the stable, roon the side o the byre, an throwe the coort. Syne she wis liftin the latch on the green timmer gairden gate, she wis clatterin ower the steen path flags aside the muckle cheese press, she wis pushin open the door o the hoose, she wis intae the kitchie, an greetin in Meg Ramsay's bosie.

'Wheeshtie, wheeshtie lassie, fitiver's adee?' speired Meg, showdie her maister's dother back afore.

'I'm deen, I'm deen Meg', Minnie sobbit oot, an fin she'd quatened a bit like a fleggit beast that's fand a safe neuk, she telt Meg fit hid happened till her.

'Weel, weel, is that aa,' quo Meg. 'It happens tae aa lassies aroon your age. I'll poor a sup hett watter inno the basin, an clean ye up. I'll gie ye something tae weir tae catch the bluid, an seein's ye've hid a gey fleg, mebbe I'll lay oot yer goon. I'll fill the steen pig wi hett watter, an up ye gyang tae yer beddie wi Besty yer dall. Fin yer aa redd up an cosie, I'll bring ye a cuppie o tea, an we'll hae a news aboot this. Yer ma should mebbe hae warned ye that this wid happen.

'Far is ma?' speired Minnie, growin a thochtie easier.

'Ower at the byre wi yer da. There's a sick coo needin attention.'

'I canna pit on ma gown, Meg, I've tae help wi the milkin at teatime.'

'Nae the nicht, ye winna. Ye winna set fit in the byre till yer better. A lassie in your condition wad soor the milk.'

An the skiffie washed her an soothed her, an tuckit her up in her bed, comin back in a wee whyle wi the promised cuppie o tea, tae explain far the bluid cam frae.

'His naebody telt ye onything aboot it ava?' she speired.

Minnie shook her heid.

'Weel it comes tae aa weemin, the curse, an it comes ilkie month till auld an past the age o haein a bairn yersel. Gin ye takk doon yer faither's Bible, ye can read fur yersel the wye o't, I'm nae muckle eese wi wirts.'

Meg opened the Buik at Genesis, chapter three, verse saxteen, an read till the young quinie fit God said tae Eve efter she'd temptit Adam inno etten the aipple o wisdom, an throw her coorseness, baith o them war turnt ooto Eden, like ill daein cottars at term-time.

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

That much Minnie kent wis true. At dennertime, her faither wis ay fed first, syne the feed men that ate wi them. Weemin war fed neist, bairns efter thon, the collie dug Benjy last ava. That wid likely be far the wurd Evil cam frae, efter the first wummin in the first gairden on earth.

'It's fule bluid, Minnie. Orra.'

'Div men bluid tee?'

'No. they hinna got a curse. Jist weemin. An ye shouldna wash yer hair fin yer nae weel, at yer time o the month.'

'Foo nae?'

'It washes the strength ooto ye. Forbye it's affa unlucky.'

'Bit Da'll winner fit wye I'm nae helpin him in the byre!'

'Lordsake lassie, yer surely nae thinkin o tellin him! Na, na. That's ain o wummins' secrets. Men hae there's, tee.'

'Fit secrets dae men hae, Meg?'

'If I telt ye thon, it widna be a secret. Bit ye'll tae ca cannie, noo Minnie, an bide awa frae loons, fur noo ye've gotten the curse ye can faa wi a bairn.'

'Foo div ye faa wi a bairn, Meg?'

'Bide awa frae loons. or ye'll seen fin oot. Hiv ye niver seen the staig mount the meer? Or the bull in the park wi the coos?'

She wis niver let inno the stable fin the staig cam veesitin, an as fur the bull, it luikit like coalie-bag lifts, like ye played in the playgrun. She wis mair bamboozlit nur iver.

'Anither thing'll cheenge noo, an aa,' the kitchie deem continued. 'Ye mauna gie yer Da a bosie afore ye gyang tae yer bed. Yer ower auld fur bosies noo. Bosies lead tae ither things wi man bodies.'

'Fit ither things?' speired Minnie.

'Ye'll ken sune eneuch. It's jist that men canna help thirsels, sae it's up tae weemin tae bide oot ower an be decent.'

Meg left her maister's dother tae luik ower the Bible tae see fit else she might fin oot aboot weemin an the vexxed business o The Curse. The Guid Buik fell open at the fifteenth chapter o Leviticus:

And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her fresh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days; and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the event.

And if any man lie with her at all, and her flowers be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days, and all the bed whereon he lieth shall be unclean'

Floors... a queer wurd fur bluid, bit fittin, somehow. Like the hips an hawes that flamed in the briars eenoo, like the petals o the rose itsel fin it bloomed in simmer. Except these floors war secret floors, an these floors war unclean, like Minnie hersel, barred frae the beasts in the byre till she wis better, barred

frae her faither's affection, a bladdit flooer, an unclean flooer, till the reid filth
wellin up inside her wis ower an by.