

Cut Fingers

Plain, purl, plain, purl, slip one, knit one, purl into back of slip stitch. Only twenty more rows o' this then onto the cable pattern. Ah'll empty that last drawer after the next twenty rows; ah can't face it, but faither is bringing the boat up the night tae take me hame and ah have tae be doon at the harbour before the evening tide. Ah jist hope ah've made the right decision.

Mither always said 'it taks a lang spoon tae sup wi a Fifer' but she's wrong. Ah'm going tae miss this place and aw ma pals especially Molly.

Is that the bairn ah hear ben the room? She only been doon for ten minutes, she normally sleeps for hours in the efternin. No. No, it's the wind in the chimney. The fires been ash since ah burned the wee bit wid Mistress Campbell brought in for me, the hearth'll no feel warmth now until the new tenants arrive. Mither wis right as usual; Ah don't suppose ah could've managed for much longer.

This shawl keeps slipping off ma shoulders when ah knit, ah miss using ma leather sheath tae hold ma pins steady, but it refuses to stretch round ma girth nowadays.

Ah remember when ah first used the sheath. Ah had just come up tae Fife for a start; curing wi the herring fleet. This wis where the work wis for most o' the season. Ma mither taught me tae be a fine knitter and the lassies here were amazed that a wee bit thing o' fourteen could pingle the needles so fast. Me and the rest of the fish gutters and curers slept in sheds. It wis temporary, before we moved up the coast following the herring. Ah hated it and cried those first nights, but Molly wis the first tae speak tae me

and we were pals fae then on. She found me an old sheath that one of the girls left behind when she got married. It seems she didn't think a married woman would have the need o' knitting. What a difference that leather made tae me, ah could walk oot wi the girls on our days off and we'd knit and chat and flirt wi the lads.

Purl, plain, purl two... dash it, ah missed the slip stitch, ah'll need tae work it back.

Ah just turned sixteen when the fishing fleet took advantage o' the extended season. We went early tae the west coast and even as far out as Stornoway. It wis a fair trek oot there and it wisnae like we could go on the fishing boats; bad luck the men said, especially me wi ma red hair. No, we hiked it north on our own and cadged a lift fae a wee ferryboat, but it wis worth it for the extra money. That wis the same year the powers that be allowed us tae autumn in the south. Yarmouth wis chilly and bleak and our doss wis desperate. Large dorms and three tae a bed, although we welcomed that as it kept us warm. Ah thought ah had a nerve tae complain about our shed in Anstruther efter that.

Six more rows till ah need tae rise and get on. Look at ma fingers, they never have healed properly, every now and again the wool catches a nick and opens up a weald. Ye would think that the two years ah've been away fae the gutting they would have mended; the other women said it takes a gid while though.

Ah worked in a team wi Molly and wee skellie-eyed Agnes, two gutting, one packing. We took turns at the packing because the salt fae the brine would nip our hands. Sometimes our fingers would be red raw. Ah remember there were nights when ah would lie in bed wi ma feet stounding wi standing aw day and ma fingers bloodin wi the

cuts. The only way tae stop the pain wis tae wrap the fingers up in rags, but it made little or no difference. Ah don't think ah could ever go back tae that.

Ah loved the winter when ah could go hame tae Eyemouth, now it will be like winter aw the time.

Ah seem tae remember this shawl here wis the last thing ah knitted before a met Murdo. Ah hid been wi the girls for a gid few years and hadn't noticed him before. We were in Lerwick. There wis a dance on the Saturday night. How ah loved tae dance tae those fiddle jigs and reels. Ah noticed this lad standing looking ma way. Ah smiled and noticed a wee pink flush grow on his cheeks. A rough chap beside him wis shoving the lad on the back. Ah could feel ma heart aw a flutter as ah watched him walk towards me. He took ma hand and birlled me into a reel. What a rare dancer he wis.

It wasn't long before ah wis knitting Murdo a new gansy, my family pattern is cable, moss and flag. Murdo's family is simpler, stocking stitch with a herring bone yoke. Ah can not tell the joy ah felt in bringing these two patterns the gither and joining them wi the love of our marriage, it wis better than watching the northern lights every night of ma life.

Ah did not tell him at first, but after two months into the wear of his marriage jerseys ah began to cast on again.

'Ah'm in no need of another gansy,' he said

Ah couldnae help for smiling when ah said, 'you'll need a band put on your sleeve for your new born child.'

His wee cheeks flushed pink as they had at our first meeting. He said little but after that day he worked harder to buy his share in a boat.

Soon after he took me doon tae the harbour tae see her. Murdo said ah wis the wife o' a boat skipper and ah should hold ma head high. The Amber Sky wis a fine fishing vessel that sailed out of Pittenweem. She wis forty feet with grey bows and covered decks which Murdo said wis much safer in high seas. Heaps of dregging nets hung over the side. A couple o' weathered old boys ah had seen around were mending another net and hailed hearty when they saw us.

'Dinae you be takin' that lassie o' yours on board now Murdo, ye ken it's bad luck.'

When Murdo bought his sixth share in the vessel we flited tae this cottage tae be nearer the mooring. Ah wis a proud woman that day, perhaps ah wis too proud.

Ah did not need a lang spoon, ah knew many o' the folks fae my herring days and Molly still came to see me when she wis here. My time wis spent coddling baby Fiona, but ah missed the independence. Ah started knitting jumpers for 3s 2d tae be carted up tae St Andrews and sold on tae those rich Peterhead fishermen with lazy wives. Ah don't know how ah would have survived these last few months without that pittance tae keep us.

Ah think that's Molly at the door.

'Hallo hen, is it the night yer goin? Ah've come tae say cheerio.'

'Come away in Molly, ah'd offer you something but ah'm all packed up.'

She would know this wis a grand excuse because she had brought me fish heads three days ago for broth and the house still smelt o' the remnants of last night bite. Ah had the last of the oatmeal and tea for breakfast.

'Ah cannae even offer ye a cup o' tea.'

‘Dinnae worry hen, ah’ve brought ye a wee can o’tea, we’ll huv a last brew the gither eh.’

Molly bustles about pouring the tea intae a tin cup she’d thought tae bring.

‘Is there onything ah can dae tae help?’ she says.

‘No Molly, ye’ve done enough for me.’

‘Ah huvnae done near enough.’

‘Aye ye have. Ah’ve made ma decision Molly, so don’t harp on.’

‘Aye ah ken ye huv, but huv ye telt yer maw then?’

‘No, no yet. Ah’ll tell her the night when ah get hame.’

She leaves me with a kiss and a hug and a promise tae come visit when the gutters next land in Eyemouth.

There’s nae putting it off now. The baby will stir soon and ah promised faither ah would ready for his arrival. He wants tae turn around and head straight back. He’s already unhappy about transporting a red-haired woman on his boat, but he couldn’t cross the mither, her word is law and bigger men than faither huv felt the sting o’ her tongue.

Ah smell Murdo as soon as ah open the drawer. That sweet smell of pan drops he loved to suck. There isn’t much in here now, only a few neck scarves and some socks. His Sunday best gansy went with him.

Ah lift the knitting ah had stored in the corner that day Molly came tae me wi a solution. This new gansy for Murdo; it wis almost finished when the Amber Sky went down.

They said it wis the minister that did it. Unlucky, worse than a woman, everyone knows that, but old George's wife had taken ill and the minister came down tae the boat tae fetch George hame. He wisnae permitted tae set foot on the boat, but being there wis enough, folks said. The Amber Sky left the harbour that night one crew member down and the curse o' the black cloth on them.

Murdo's body was found two week later. The sea had taken its toll but they said when they hauled him out they knew it was him by the cable moss and herring bone and the one band on the sleeve.

After the funeral Molly found me ripping out ma knitting, the second band for Murdo's second child. No one knew, only Murdo and he wis gone.

'Ah can help ye if ye want,' she said that day.

'What dae you mean?' although ah already knew.

'Ah can use a knitting needle fur mare things than knitting, ye ken. How will ye manage wi two bairns?'

Ah remember the feel o' the wool unravelling in ma hand, just like the life inside would if ah let Molly help me, but ah knew ah hud few choices.

The wool feels coarse tae the touch, ah hold it up to ma nose and smell the oil; there is no trace of him. It's unfinished anyway, ah just had the neck tae sew round. The wool snags my fingers, it is still unwashed and good, it can be used again. Ah begin tae unravel Murdo's gansy again, but this time wi a clear mind. He won't need it now but ah do.

Ah still have an hour before ah have to leave; the baby is sleeping on and ah'll let her lie warm and in peace.

As ah unpick the neck and work my way down to the second sleeve with two bands on it ah wonder what ma mither will say when she realises it is not two of a family coming hame but three.