

# KILMENY

A short story by Gerda Stevenson,  
based on  
James Hogg's poem of the same name

*Bonnie Kilmeny gaed up the glen;  
But it wasna to meet Duneira's men,  
Nor the rosy monk of the isle to see,  
For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.  
It was only to hear the yorlin sing,  
And pu' the cress-flower round the spring;  
The scarlet hypp and the hindberrye,  
And the nut that hung frae the hazel tree;  
For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.*

**By James Hogg.**

She wis staunin at the stairheid, like a ghaist. The middle o the nicht, juist staunin there in her lang white goonie, still as a stane. Yin airm wis hingin at her side, the tither wis stuck oot, her mobile phone in her haund, like she's takkin a picture o something she disna see.

'Kilmeny,' I says, 'Kilmeny, lass, it's me, yer grandmither.'

Her een were govin richt through me, like she wis blin. I walkit her, slaw, back tae her bed.

"Noo, lay ye doon, an tak yer rest," I says, tho she wisna hearin a word I spak. I touched her broo. It wis that cauld I wis feart she'd niver wairm up,

sae I lay doon aside her, rowed the blankets ower us baith, an happed ma auld banes about her.

She wis sleepin soond come mornin, whan I heezed masel oot yon cosy bield, an hirpled doon the stair tae redd up the stove.

It wis late Spring, but the air in the hoose fair hud a nip tae it. Through the kitchen winnock I seen cranreuch skinklin ower the lea. I appened the door, an stood on the thrashel tae tak a waucht o the snell air.

It's times like thon, the sun risin abuin the hill, yowes souklin thair lambs, an the birdies burstin thair thrapples wi sang that ye canna credit there's a plague ramstamin aboot the planet. Mind you, Kilmeny didna like it whan I said sae.

"It's *us* ramstamin, Gran," she telt me, lookin up frae her books. "Homo sapiens. The plague's only answering back."

She hud sic a thochtie look in her pure white oval face, framed bi thae gowden plaits hingin doon the side o her cheeks – like a spreet oot the fairy tales I yaised tae tell her whan she wis wee.

"Weel," says I, jeestin her, "speak fur yersel, an dinna gie *me* the back-chat! I'm livin a quate life here, wi ma choukies an ma veggie patch, mindin ma ain business."

She'd moved in wi me, the day efter Lockdoon – turnt up at ma door oot the blue, wi juist a backpack. Her mither an faither hud moved tae the ither side o the warld twa year syne. I wis aa her family noo, an she mine. She'd feenished wi the uni, an wis here tae tak tent o me, she said – get ma messages frae the shop, an keep me sauf frae the plague.

She aye cared fur aabody afore hersel. I wis that gled tae see her, I didna lat on that ma neebors wad see me through. There's three hooses in the glen an I wisna short o help.

The mornin efter her sleep-walkin, she cam doon fur breakfast, wi nae mindin o her midnight stravaig. But she telt me she'd hud a nichtmare. The day afore, she'd been doon tae the wid – her favourite airt wi its hazel an birk. She'd seen the Laird o Duneira's men there, the gamekeeper an gillie, layin trails o pushion an snares. She braiged them sair – *Whit in the name o aa that's guid were they daein, killin beasts that hae a richt tae bide here?* They didnae tak weel tae thon – a lassie giein them jip – an pintit thair guns at her. But she stood her grun, telt them they were nae threit tae her, an neist time, she'd mak shair she hud her phone wi her, tae hae pruif o whit they were up tae. They fired their guns then, close tae her heid, blastin brainches aff the trees.

Fur aa that she lookit a shilpit wee craitur, she fair hud smeddum. But she peyed fur it: in her nichtmare, deid beasts were streekit oot on the gress aa ower Duneira's hauchs, some hingin frae the trees, an the sky wis rainin bluid. She telt me o the dreidfu veesion wi a quate caum, sat there at the breakfast table, sippin a gless o milk.

Simmer cam in fine, filled wi the yorlin's sang. Whaniver she heard it, Kilmeny wad look at me, her een wide wi pleisur, a finger tae her lips. O aa birds, the yorlin seemed tae cast a spell ower her. She gied me a haund at whitiver wis needin duin about the place. She'd tak ma auld bike frae the

shed, an cycle tae the shop fur messages. She lay doon the law, tho, in her ain douce wey: no a sliver o plastic packaging wad she suffer the sicht o here in the hoose! Frae time tae time, an antrin wee electric van, like a sewin machine on wheels, wad stotter doon the track bringin gear an guidis fur the hoose, aa happed in cardboard. She'd order it on her phone.

“Are ye shair this is necessar, Kilmeny?” I speired, giein her a bit cash tae cover the maist o it.

“Yes,” she says, “I’m sure. And thank you.”

I didna want tae gainsay her notions, she wis that certaint o them, but I couldna think she wis makkin muckle differ, in the scheme o things. I mean, the lassie wis no in the real warld.

I smellt the guff o mothballs ae day, as I cam in frae feedin ma choukies. I fund Kilmeny rakin aboot in ma boxes unner the stairs. She'd been up in the attic an aa, pullin oot auld ganseys, plaids an siclike. An wi a beatific smile on her face she's speirin me could she hae them fur the refugees!

“Can ye no lat ma bits an pieces bide in thair stour?” says I – I dinnae tak tae haein ma gear dished oot tae fowk I dinna ken. “*I’m* yer faimily, Kilmeny. We awe naethin tae some blaw-ins frae ower the sea!” But she lookit that stricken I lat her hae some auld bits. They went awa in the wee electric van neist time it cam by.

Whan she wisnae readin her books o an evenin, she'd be gloutered tae her phone, messaging fowk, fingers gaun nineteen tae the dizzen.

“Whit are ye uptae on that contraption?” I’d jeest, sat at the telly, knittin socks, an watchin the progress o the plague. “Still ettlin tae cheyng the world?”

She juist smiled. Niver watched the news wi me, tho she’d fetch me a cup o herbal tea – yin o her mixes the wee van wad bring.

I mind, yin time, she said she fair liked ma knittin. I telt her it wis coorse compared tae whit I yaised tae mak. Ma auld fingers were aa knurlied wi arthritis. I went ower tae the press, an took oot a white shawl I’d made, years syne, fur her mither whan she wis new born.

“It’s like snowflakes,” Kilmeny said, strokin her fingers through the fine, saft oo.

“I dinnae ken whaur the yin I made fur *you* micht be,” says I, “mibbe wi yer parents, tither side o the warld – but ye can hae this yin, whan yer time comes.”

She lookit up at me, troublit, wi nae words. I kent fine whit wis in her mind. “Kilmeny,” I says, “think aboot it: we’ve hud fire an ice, fluids an drochts, no tae mention plagues – the hale clamjamfrie sin time stairtit, but we’re still here! Twa thoosand year frae noo, kye wull be grazin Duneira’s land, trees’ll be drappin thair fruit, an fowk’ll still be bringin bairns intae the warld, yersel amang them, I’m certain shair. Yer time an yer bairn wull come. An the shawl’s waitin fur ye whan it dis.”

She haudit it back tae me wioot a word.

It wis midsimmer, an Duneira’s men were oot wi thair guns again. The sun barely set at this time o year, but I wis wabbit thon nicht, an heidit fur ma

bed. I heard the sneck o the door click ablow, as I dozed – Kilmeny maun be haein a dauner in the gloamin, I thocht.

Neist morning, she didna come doon fur her breakfast. I trauchled up tae her room tae gie her a shake, but her bed hudna been slept in. I cried oot fur her, aa ower the glen, but she wisna tae be seen. Duneira's men were rangin about wi thair guns. They'd catcht neethur hide nor hair o her, they said, lauchin at me in thair coorse wey.

I kent she liked tae tak a rove doon tae the kirk, whiles, sae I went masel. I fund the meenister lockin up, but he'd no seen her in weeks. Naebody hud a clue whaur she micht be. The polis raked through her gear, took her mobile phone awa, an scoured the glen wi thair dugs, but naethin – she wis merked as a 'missin person'. There were nae mair deleevries frae the van.

Times I wunnert if her comin tae bide wi me wis juist a dwaum. She cam like a dwaum, and she left the same wey. The meenister said we suld gie prayers fur her. He rang the kirk bell, an a when o us gaihert tae caiver words o tuim howp.

Seiven year passed, an wi it the plague. We hud a dreidfu fluid, like nane we'd seen afore – the hale glen turnt tae a whammlin, rairin river fur days on end, creepin up aa the time. It stapped juist inches frae ma door. Neist it wis the drocht. Naethin wad grow thon year. Syne it wis fire – aa the hills went up in a lowe. Weeks, it took, tae douse it. The beasts an thair biolds were scorched, an there wis naethin left fur Duneira's men tae kill.

It wis the middle o May. The daffodils hudna bloomed like they suld, an there wisna a spark o yellae on the broom, anely the black pods frae the year afore. Snaw wis faain, yowdendriffs piled up like great bens aa ower the glen – the warld wis tapsalteerie, an I wis weary o it aa. I couldna keep wairm. I happed masel in ma blankets – thaim that hudna gone wi the van – took the bairn’s white shawl oot the press, an windit it roon ma heid an shooters.

"Whit’s the warld comin tae," I thocht, chitterin there in ma cauld sheets.

I hear the sneck lift doon ablow. Fitstaps on the stair. She walks in through ma bedroom door.

"Kilmeny!" I says, fair stamagastert. "Kilmeny, lass! Whaur hae ye been?"

She looks on me wi a grace that wud stoond yer hert. An she tells me a story I canna fathom: thon midsimmer nicht she heard the guns blastin, she went doon tae the wids. Duneira’s men were at the killin. She stood afore them in the muinlicht, an braiged them no tae dae it. The gillie glaumed at her claes, an the gamekeeper swung the butt o his gun at her heid. The muin birlid i the lift, an aa gaed daurk.

She waukent in a land she’d niver seen, a land wi nae wund nor rain, nae sun nor muin, anely pure licht, like a veesion. There wis a stream, she mindit, quate its watter, like the ghaist o a hillock burn. She douked her haunds intae the skinklin rinnal and slocked her deep drouth. Syne she wis cairied – hoo or bi whae, she couldna tell – tae a muckle stane, heich on a

braid muir that streeched oot on aa sides, fauld on fauld, as faur as her een could see. The lift abuin wis a skimmer o a thousand colours she couldna name, an she kent then she wis in the land o thocht.

She lookit doon. The muir drew itsel awa, like a veil, an she saw ablow her a warld o weir, bluid dreepin frae the lift, like in her nichtmare years syne here at hame, bluid teemin through toons an glens in spates. She lookit awa. The muir happed its fauldin veil ower the veesion.

Whan she cast her een ahint her, the muir kythed anither sicht – a land o peace, whaur hairsts an trees were growthie aa ower the braid yird, an beasts were thrang in the sea. It seemed her mind could caa up whitiver it wisst.

“Kilmeny,” I says, whan her tale hud endit. “Suld we tell fowk ye’re come hame? Suld we lat them ken ye’re sauf an soond?”

She shook her heid, laid her haund on ma broo, an telt me tae rest. Syne she went doon, an I could hear her steerin aboot in the kitchen as I dovered in an oot o sleep.

Whan I waukent, she wis at ma side, staunin bi ma bed, wi a bowl o broth. Whaur she’d fund the bits an pieces tae mak it I dinna ken, fur the cupboard wis near bare.

She says she’s leavin soon. I canna say hoo lang she’s been here, mibbe a day, mibbe a week – fur I’m fadin noo.

“Are ye heidin tae the land o thocht?” I speir. She juist smiles – thon smile that wud stoond yer hert. I mind I telt her, lang syne, that she wisna in

the real warld. But I dinna ken whit the real warld is noo, an I'm feart o this yin.  
I'm chitterin wi the cauld. "Tak me wi ye, Kilmeny," I says.

She lays doon aside me, rowes the blankets ower us baith, an haps  
hersel aboot ma auld banes, her young limbs wairm anent mine.

An we're sailin, heich abuin the glen an its bens o yowdendrift, tae the  
muir streeched oot afore us, fauld on fauld on fauld.