

TLC Showcase
Chrissie Gittins



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Introduction

I was lucky enough to be awarded a ‘free read’ with The Literary Consultancy by Spread the Word, the literature development agency. My package of stories was returned with penciled suggestions on the manuscript and a comprehensive report. For the first time a professional writer had taken my work seriously – which meant that I had to do the same. I absorbed the criticisms and the comments on my writing ticks and veered away from repeating the same mistakes.

This manuscript became my first collection of short stories *Family Connections*, which was published in 2007. The story below – *Just One of the Girls* – is part of my second collection. A friend lost a friend to cancer very suddenly. He was devastated. I know how much my friend loved his friend because he loves me too. Some time after the bereavement he and I went shopping for a new pair of shoes for him – a pair of women’s shoes. This experience comes together in the story with a wish to bear witness to his grief and the friendship he has lost. This story was broadcast on BBCR4 in 2009 and repeated earlier this year.

The collection is about different kinds of death – the death of relationships and deadly relationships, the death of loved ones and the death of misconceptions. But there is renewal too – and hope.

Just One of the Girls

By Chrissie Gittins

Dan sat at the far end of the wine-coloured sofa. He stretched out the length of his right arm, folded his hand onto his chest, and stretched out his arm again.

“What are you doing now?” asked his friend, Rich, from the companion sofa.

“I’m trying to see if it creases.” Dan had carefully ironed his cream linen round-necked shirt that morning. He’d been awake most of the night, his body shot through with adrenalin. At six o’clock sunlight bounded through the kitchen windows as he smoothed the narrow collar and cuffs with the tip of the hot iron. Curlicue shadows from the wrought iron window grilles were thrown onto the opposite wall.

“They’ll be here in a minute,” said Dan.

“What?”

“The flowers. I’m waiting for the flowers.” His eyes rested on the mantelpiece. The line of cards spilled over onto the cupboard beside. Among the doves, butterflies, calla lilies and black roses were the words ‘With Sympathy,’ ‘Our Thoughts Are With You,’ and ‘My Deepest Condolences’. In the middle of the mantelpiece was a silver-framed portrait of Milly, Dan’s wife. A smile was in her eyes and about to spread over her face. She was 52. Dan remembered the moment just after he’d taken that photograph – the pools of her damson nail polish shining through the sand, her gold and scarlet sarong swirling round her thighs. He’d taken her hand, circled her waist, and waltzed her into the Aegean Sea. He didn’t stop until she screamed and fell back into the waves, laughing.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Rich.

“Nothing much.” Dan wanted to hug the memory to himself. “She would have enjoyed today.”

“She would,” said Rich.

“She’d see all her family and friends in one place. When does that happen?”

“Weddings?”

“Yeah. Not that you were at the wedding.”

“No, we didn’t know you then.”

Rich tried to think of Milly before she got ill. Before the drugs, the hospitals and

the doctors kicked in. He wanted to shunt the last few months out of his mind and leave them in a siding.

“Dan, there’s a car’s here,” said Rich. A Ford Mondeo was pulling up outside. Wreaths and bouquets lay across the shiny seats. It was the funeral director’s son. Dan had requested that the flowers be brought to his home; he wanted them beside him as he drove in his own car to the crematorium. Standing up, he smoothed down the front of his shirt then held out his hand to Rich. They walked arm in arm to the car. The June sunshine warmed the back of their necks.

A memory which was yet to surface for Rich was the day they went to Doris’s. Rich and Milly each booked time off work. Rich wanted a new pair of shoes. The tube went in and out of daylight as it stretched away from central London. They both looked out for the Kings Arms landmark from the top of the double decker bus.

“There it is,” they said in unison.

Rich looked back from the junction on the main road to the bus stop on the opposite side to where they’d alighted. “That’s where we need to get the bus back,” he noted.

The window at Doris Fashions displayed a small sample of their stock – a sequinned evening gown in viridian and mint green, a flowing scarlet satin and chiffon dress, a black microdress, a lacy corset and a PVC basque. These garments were draped over 1960’s mannequins with lustrous wigs. The shoes, displayed against the wall, were all available in extra large sizes; their names – Dorothy, Donna Sandal, Janie Sandal – were hand written with the price in black felt tip on different sized pieces of card.

Rich saw a black leather shoe which took his fancy; it had a strap and a square diamanté buckle. Milly closed the shop door behind them.

“Oh leave it open, love,” said Doris from behind the counter. “I want to get some air on me.” It was a soft February day; its amber light giving a generous glimpse of spring.

“Can I help you with anything?” asked Elsie, a diminutive assistant in her late sixties.

“Do you have a ten and a half in Gilda?” asked Rich.

“We should do. It’s one of the few that come in half sizes.” Elsie took Rich to the back of the shop where there was a narrow aisle leading to the storeroom. Along the side of the aisle were three cubicles hung with air force blue curtains. The furthest cubicle had an extra curtain which could be closed across the aisle. This afforded male customers a little more privacy.

“Does your partner want to join us?” asked Elsie, nibbling on an orange tortilla chip. Rich did not challenge her assumption.

“If she wants to.”

Elsie beckoned Milly who was looking through a rail of PVC cat suits. “Do you want to come and join us, dear? Or would you rather have a look around?”

“Come and help me decide,” Rich called out. Elsie lifted the curtain to bring Milly into the fold and began opening cardboard boxes in the storeroom beyond. Milly smiled at Rich while he took off his shoes. On the wall of the cubicle were letters and photographs from satisfied customers. Milly read the one nearest to her.

‘Dear All at Doris Fashions, I came into your shop last week, and you and the girls were just great. I was very very nervous, but you put me at my ease and I had a lovely shop. This was the first time I had ‘shopped in public’ for me in 30 years of cross dressing. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the advice I got. I felt very welcome, and for the first time ever – just one of the girls. Kim.’

Rich tried on one of the Gilda shoes over his grey ankle sock.

“Pop socks?” offered Elsie, pointing at a box in the corner of the cubicle.

“Oh,” said Rich, putting an embarrassed hand over his mouth. The shoes fitted snugly over the pop socks. He stood up to admire them and hitched his trousers above his ankles.

“They’re very elegant,” said Milly.

“I’m not sure,” said Rich, pulling a disappointed face.

“What are you not sure about?” asked Milly.

“The buckle.”

“A bit ostentatious?” suggested Milly. Rich nodded and said, “Go and choose something else. You know what I like.”

Milly went back and studied the window. There was a shoe similar to a pair she had in the drawer at the bottom of her wardrobe. She wasn’t sure she did know what Rich liked, but she thought these were worth a try. She caught Elsie’s eye.

“How about the black patent leather one at the bottom of the display. High heel. Not too high.”

“Court shoe?”

“Yes.”

“That one doesn’t come in half sizes. But you can always try the 11.”

The 11 fitted perfectly. Rich gazed at his glamorous feet. A lady customer who had been trying on clothes in the next cubicle left. Elsie flung back the second curtain, opening up the aisle.

“There, you’ve got more space now, darling,” she said.

Rich walked up and down the aisle in the court shoes, in the Gilda shoes, and again in the court shoes.

“I can’t decide,” he said, his hands pressed against his cheeks.

“Those are more classic. Would go with more things,” said Milly.

“The others are more for special occasions,” said Elsie.

“I’ll have these,” said Rich, looking down at the court shoes, relieved at having made a decision.

“Can I help you with anything else today?”

“We’ll have a mooch around. Thank you, darling,” said Rich.

They sifted through the rails. Milly picked out a black mini dress with silver beaded circles and vertical stripes.

“Mmmmmmm,” said Rich. He found a strappy maroon dress with a sweeping black floral design.

“Nice for around the house,” Milly teased. Rich widened his eyes in disapproval. He spotted a line of boxed wigs on the top shelf – Savannah, Lana, Saloumi.

“Could I try on a wig, please,” Rich said, in the direction of the counter. Elsie came bustling down. “This one. Japan.”

“That one’s ginger,” said Elsie.

“Ginger? Maybe not.” He looked again and pointed. “What about that one? Sophia.”

“Could you get it down for me, darling?” asked Elsie. Rich stretched up and passed her the box. She lifted the lid. The box was packed with long brown and black wigs in see-through plastic bags.

“Not black,” said Elsie. “Wouldn’t do anything for you. Too harsh.”

“I’ll try the brown.”

The three of them went back to the third cubicle.

“You know how to put it on, do you?” asked Elsie.

“Yes.”

“I’ll go and get you the brush.”

Rich put his head forward, secured the wig, and threw his head back.

“I had long hair like this when I was seventeen. But I didn’t look so old!”

“It’s like my hair,” said Milly. “Same colour, same texture.”

“Same length, same cut,” said Rich.

They put their heads together in the mirror, ran their fingers through each other’s hair, and laughed.

In the weighted weeks and months that followed Dan and Rich took comfort in the way the funeral had gone. There was standing room only at Honor Oak crematorium.

They didn’t need to be told that Milly was loved, but any physical marker which showed that Milly had lived was precious solace in the chasm of her absence.

Rich visited his mother the Sunday after the funeral. Una lived alone in a suburb of monkey puzzle trees and off street parking. Rich made them a tray of tea with the Brown Betty teapot he’d grown up with. Una insisted on Jacob’s Orange Club Biscuits. Rich placed the tray on the oak occasional table.

“Haven’t seen much of you recently,” said Una.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Busy doing what?”

“Arranging a funeral, if you must know.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Whose funeral?”

“Milly’s.”

“Dan’s wife?”

“Yes.”

“But she’s younger than *me*!”

“Was. She *was* younger than you.”

“What was wrong with her?”

“She had cancer.”

“You never said anything.”

“She was diagnosed three months ago. It was all very quick.”

“Oh.” Una studied her son’s face. “Why did *you* have to arrange the funeral?”

“I *helped* to arrange the funeral.”

“Well why did you have to *help* arrange the funeral?”

“To support Dan.”

“What about *his* family?”

“Mum, Milly and I were very close friends. I wanted to help.”

“There’s time enough to help your friends when you’ve helped your own. I’ve been waiting for my new blinds since Christmas.”

“You’ll get your new blinds. In good time.”

“I’ll not need new blinds when *I’m* dead.”

Rich sighed and took the tray back to the kitchen. Through the window he could see the vestiges of his father’s garden – the brave rose trees, the turbulent lilies, the loyal rectangular lawn.

Back in the familiarity of his own home he relaxed. He didn’t have to explain himself to his partner, Graham. They simply went about their daily lives; they went to work, they decorated the house, they walked the dogs.

Rich saw Milly on the footpaths of Hilly Fields. He saw her in a passing car at Ladywell traffic lights. He saw her walking towards him on the street where he lived.

Winter brought an empty Christmas and a reluctant yearning for spring. Milly’s birthday fell in February. Sunday the twelfth started with a deep frost clutching the ground. The dusky pink hellebores in Rich and Graham’s back garden leaned into the soil, bowed by the bitter cold. After a vegetarian full English Rich slung the dishes on the side of the sink.

“What are you going to do today?” asked Graham.

“Not sure,” said Rich.

“Well, don’t forget we’re due at Positive Place at three.”

“Remind me”

“Trustees’ meeting.”

“Oh yeah.”

Positive Place, a centre supporting people affected by HIV and Aids in South London, was close to their hearts. Graham grabbed his car keys from the middle of the table.

“Where is it you have to go this morning?” said Rich.

“Lewis’s. Holdbacks. Front room curtains.”

“Riiiiiiight. I remember now. See you when you get back.”

Rich went upstairs to wrestle a clean cover onto the duvet. As he flipped the duvet into the air and let it fall his eyes flicked to the open door of the wardrobe. Glinting from the scramble of shoes at the bottom were the black patent leather court shoes. He picked them out carefully and wiped them with his forearm. Milly had given him one of her dresses – a 1950’s red and white polka dot shirt waister with a flared skirt. He took it off its hanger and laid it on the bed, placing the shoes on the floor beneath the skirt. The long wig was still in its box in the chest of drawers. This he laid above the dress with the longest locks touching its white collar.

He sat down at the mirror which stood on the chest of drawers and took out his pots and tubes and compact from a draw string bag. He was adept at applying make-up. Milly had taught him to push the eyeliner brush gently under his lashes. He remembered her words when he dipped a long brush into sage green eye shadow. “Make the brush do windscreen wipers on your eye sockets.”

Dressed, coiffed and perfumed Rich looked at himself in the full-length mirror. He tried to remember Milly’s gestures, the way her hands would weave as she talked, the way one side of her mouth curled more than the other when she smiled. He tried walking in her relaxed, casual way.

Stopping at the window he could see that the frost had melted from the leaves and grass in the long tapering garden. The pink hellebores were standing straight, encouraged by the sun.

About the Writer

Chrissie Gittins writes poetry, poetry for children, short stories and radio drama. Her poems are widely anthologized, have won prizes and have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Her first adult poetry collection *Armature* appeared from Arc to critical acclaim in 2003. Her second adult collection is *I'll Dress One Night As You* (Salt, 2009). A sequence from this book was accepted by Les Murray for publication in *Quadrant* magazine in Australia.

Chrissie's short stories have won prizes, and been published in magazines and anthologies; five have been read on BBCR4 by actors including Anne Reid, Stephanie Cole and Penelope Wilton. Her stories were highly commended by Ali Smith in the New Writing Ventures Awards and her first short story collection is *Family Connections* (Salt, 2007); '**most of them carry an insidiously discomfoting charge**', *Nicholas Clee*, *The Guardian*. Her plays for BBCR4 include *Starved for Love* (starring Patricia Routledge), *Life Assurance* (starring Sorcha Cusack), and *Dinner in the Iguanodon*.



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