

A TRIP DOON THE MEMORIES

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

The train shoogles, clanks and puffs as it slows tae get round the bendy bit o track. Oot the windae, I see the loco like a black dragon, panting, as it approaches the station on the pier ahead.

“Fairlie Pier,” Dad says. “Ye’ll nae huv sailed fae here afore.” The curving rails glitter like gold in the sunset. A cinder blew back frae the engine.

“Ow.”

“Ah telt ye no tae lean oot the windae.”

“But Mum...”

But she is busy and anyway, my eye is okay after a wee rub. I’m fair excitit tae see that the journey is going tae end in the big warehouse perched on legs over the glinty, golden sea.

Whit a long trip since St Enoch station in Glesga. It wiz like a cathedral o steel girders, glass and a polished dark red wood, that Dad said is mahogany. The rails ran oot like silver streams across the big bridge intae the smoky afternoon. I read my Beano, as we passed wee green hills, villages, and fields wi loads o black and white-patched cows. Then the big works and finally the seaside toons. Then, I put my comic away tae look at the mountains on Arran across the sea.

The squashed sun gleams on the flattened brass handle of the door. The frayed leather strap hangs low like a teacher’s belt, as if guarding the way oot; the silver latch grins like teeth. Mum and Dad stand up and beat the other folk in the race to recover hats and bump battered bags frae the net o the luggage rack. I stagger as the train shudders to a stop in a screech like scraping metal. The folk pick up their newspapers, books and knitting. We leave the strange old man wi the belly bulging against the tweed waistcoat and his poke of acid green sweets.

They were sweet and sour. Dad talked to him – inflation, cost of living; whatever they were. So he must be all right.

It's a scary step and a stretch doon tae the platform. "Dad, what's inflation?" but he's busy wi the bags and looking fur the green cardboard tickets. I edge past the scary locomotive, still puffing and hissing steam. It gets easier each time I do it. But occasionally, it thunders and I dash behind Mum. "Och, dinnae be feart! It's just a wee bit of smoke," she says.

The turnstile creaks around in its rusty circle and my leather shoes stop clatterin and begin thumpin as we walk onto the wooden planking o the covered bit o the pier. How high the roof arches above us! The lights sparkle and keep the spooky shadows away from the passageway. As we walk doon the ramp to the pier, the boots o the passengers behind us make a noise like drums. The air on the pier is clear wi a salty tang like the Italian chippy at home, where on a Saturday night we bought oor tea.

The steamer isnae in yet so we sit doon in a waiting room wi the dancing light o a roarin coal fire. The smoke races up the chimney, like the locomotive gaun through the countryside. We're in a cosy half-way house between my worlds. Between the smoke of the city and the cool salty air that races into your throat from across that great ocean, the Atlantic. All the way from Canada, Dad said. Aye – wasn't that where Willie and his family went to? Didn't I build a model of Toronto airport oot o cardboard at school for him before he left? Dad says we would be going oot on that sea too. No tae Canada, just a wee bit away.

After a bit, Dad goes ootside fur a while, then comes back and waves us forward.

"The Talisman is in, quick noo, we dinnae want tae be left behind."

I'm glad. I like the Talisman best o all the paddle steamers. We get up and walk intae a cool breeze frae the sea.

"We'll be in Millport soon – on the boat ye go, yer Gran and Grandpa are waiting fur us."

Grandpa has white hair, like God has. Grandpa lives in a big house, much bigger than oors – so many rooms, wi a big garden and trees to climb and ma cousins tae play at Vikings wi. It's always sunny in Millport, and the rock pools are full o wee fish, red anemones and pea-green crabs. I like it there, waking up and seeing the hills and the sea oot the windae. At hame, it's smoky and the sandstane buildings are black wi dirt. I'm always happy in Millport. It's like thon heaven place they talked about in Sunday school, where you'd meet all your deid family and friends someday. Then Dad nudges me forward. "C'mon, get on, dinnae dither.'

The gang plank sways and creaks and in the gloamin, the sea's all bubbling and green from the paddles as I haud ontae the polished wooden railing o the gangway. An auld man in a uniform, waves us aboard wi a bony hand. I try no tae look doon into thon canyon between the boat and pier, wi that scary sea jumpin up below. I used to worry about falling down there, but grip the railing tighter anyway.

Mum says it's a cold evening, so we are going below, down the steep stairs to meet the sweet smell of baking creeping like mist from the tea room, where we're going for scones wi cream. Magic. I take a last look at the island, curved like a whale against the red sky in the west. We'll be there soon and in my wee heaven. Gran has sizzling Ulster fry cooking in a pan for supper and hot toast, slathered wi butter. I peer oot intae the darkness below the pier, where oor table faces. The deck gently rolls, then the table shakes wi the engines. The paddles thunder and splash and we're on oor way across that wavey water between my two worlds.

The steam trains and pier are long gone. Old pictures glow on my laptop, like fairies bringing my memories; I am at ease and comfortable in them, like wearing a favourite old coat.

Roddie McKenzie (Dundee) is a member of Nethergate Writers. His stories are in their twelve anthologies since 2006. Poetry and prose have appeared in: Tether's End Magazine, Lallans, "Seagate III", New Writing Scotland 35, Northwords Now 36, Writers Cafe Magazine 16, Poetry Scotland 104, and "Rebel" (Scottish Book Trust, 2018).