



James Clelland

SHORT STORIES

Skaethorn Road, NW, R.I.P

It took him three attempts to close his front door. The house had always been damp, even in the days when he could afford to heat it. Now the door surrounds were paintless and swollen black while the door itself was frayed at the bottom like the dress of a pantomime pauper. His ritual of closing the door and locking it was empty and futile, the habit of a long lifetime. His was the only one of the six houses in the red brick terraced row still occupied and he owned nothing of value.

A light murk curled up from the River Kelvin which oozed by the side of his small garden at the end of the row. The front door secured, he stood on the pavement and panted for breath. He leaned heavily on his stick and hunched his shoulders to keep pressure from his lungs in case the pain came again. To his left the line of empty houses, all with boarded windows except his own, pointed to a steep hill flanked on both side by grey sandstone walls. Halfway up the incline, huge buttresses hinted that a railway had once straddled Skaethorn Road. On his right, beyond his stump of a garden, was a one lane bridge, with slim pavements and rusty iron railings, below which ran the muddy Kelvin. The infrequent car or truck hesitated to check the exit was clear then rumbled across the bridge, swept past him or on towards Great Western Road.

He tapped his pockets, checking that keys, pension books, purse and pills were all where they always were. He pulled his once-checkered bunnet down firmly, tucked the ends of his scarf into the pullover he always wore beneath his jacket and turned to cross the bridge.

He always walked this way, up the long slope of his street that finally met Maryhill Road at the Canal Docks. Maryhill was his regular destination, it never failed to attract him, it was associated with life. The road beside him was deeply rutted with badly repaired potholes and scars; cars crawled slowly up or down to the clank and grind of overworked shock absorbers. He stopped often, to grasp the bridge or lean against the ivy trailed pailing enclosing open ground across the river, but ignored the familiar noises. He looked down at his feet, intent only on gathering energy for the next step or two. It took him almost half an hour to cover the hundred yards or so to the tilting sign that announced the entrance to the Kelvin Walkway. The black cinder path curved down from here to meet the river and face his garden on the opposite bank, then together they passed under one of the high arches of the Kelvin Aqueduct that carried the Canal over the river valley.

A distant memory came to taunt him. With Jessie on his arm he had often taken this river walk before it was civilised with cinders. Sometimes, running arm-in-arm, they had charged up the sharp, grassy hill that led to the Canal bank. Then propping each other up in mock fatigue, they watched the glistening horses pull coal barges to the city. An exchange of nods with the bargees, then they waited to admire his skill as he raised his vessel through the series of locks on the Canal that stepped majestically, like stairs of water, to the Docks before crossing Maryhill Road. The Canal had been busy then. Pleasure cruises, full of fun and bright faces, fishing boats, taking the short cut through Scotland's waist, tugs and masted yachts, had all brought colour and life to the waterway.

Now it lay abandoned, a derelict relic, a hindrance to grand city plans. A motorway outside Glasgow had severed the lifeline, various street culverts had sutured the wound and water was allowed to tumble freely through twisted and broken lock gates. High flats stood like prison guards above the grey colonic stream and youngsters threw fishing lines hopefully over the encroaching rushes but the Canal was dead.

He never looked at this lost paradise for the pain was too real, the loss too bitter. Nor did he ever turn his eyes to the other side of the road for that view was even more agonising. The skyline, once open to the Campsie Fells with Ben Lomond visible on clear days, was dominated by the chimney of Dawsholm Refuse Works which loomed like a science-fiction silo. Below it lay a vast black triangle of rubble bordered by the abandoned railway line, the foul Kelvin and his row of houses. This site had once been the Gas Works, as he and his neighbours had once been its workforce. The factory had been demolished, his neighbours, and Jessie, were all gone. Only his house was occupied, only he was left.

As the incline steepened and the pavement ended, he staggered across the road to face the council ghetto that he had watched being built and watched become a slum. Raising his head for a moment he gasped for the oxygen to take him the final few yards. Maryhill Road flowed just behind the advertising billboards, the untidy white backs towards him, the message for others.

He reached the main road and slumped against a brick wall that pointed towards an open space across the street where a blue and white sign proudly proclaimed Land Renewal where families had been reared, lives lived. The Land may be renewed but the houses, and the people had gone as had Frank the florist, Stan's Bar, Tony the fruiterer, Bert the bookie, Martin's Hairdressing shop and Sim the grocer. The Post Office was still there and, being a Tuesday, he mechanically patted his pension book pocket.

The street teemed with strangers. The unemployed lounged, children yelled, youngsters joked, drunkards rolled and mothers fussed over infants but he knew no-one. He came here every day to shop, certain that was why he survived, afraid not to come. Where before he had strolled, nodding to acquaintances, chatting to friends, bantering with locals, now he was just another old man in a district full of old men. He never questioned his struggle to survive; it was just a habit, a slow, painful habit.

A light drizzle began to seep down. Cars squealed and jostled into the city carrying smart aliens in white shirts and suits. Shoppers bumped past, carrying bags or wheeling trolleys and children dawdled long past the school bell. He leaned forward to put his weight on this stick and sagged back as the pain made him clutch his chest. Posters with torn edges, revealing other posters below, flapped on the wall at his side as his whole body began to shake. Angled against the ancient wall he sought out his pills. That brown bottle was his lifeline now, his only hope.

A child approached the bundle of rags propped by the wall and stared with idle curiosity, picking its nose. Above the old man's head a large billboard advised that Radox Baths Soothe and Relax. The child's mother pulled it away and rushed across the busy road. A car horn shattered the air and tyres complained, but she ignored that. She had shopping to do. The driver shouted through his open window before driving on, shaking his head. The mother sniffed and went into Ali's Supermarket to buy twenty fags and a packet of crisps. On the gable of the Supermarket, in line with the Land Renewal sign, someone had pasted a red poster that heralded, Vote Labour, We'll Protect You.

Across Maryhill Road the bundle of grey clothes sprawled on the pavement. He lay, a crumpled dusty heap, clutching an unopened brown bottle that could have been a miniature of whisky. It was hours before someone, a postman finishing his round, thought to look closely. By that time it was too late.

The men arrived on a fine May morning. Overhead the powder blue sky was streaked by transient wisps of wide vapour trails from long past jets and light brush-strokes of cumulus clouds. Only the thick vertical stack of smoke from the nearby Refuse Works seemed in focus until that too became untidy and diffuse then finally dispersed. From behind the terraced row an unseen bird's cry merged

with the gentle splash from the adjacent River Kelvin. As George turned off the engine, no other sound could be heard. Few cars passed this way.

The three men sat a moment in the cabin of the Transit van. George owned the vehicle, was in charge, the boss of the gang of strippers. He was irritated at the delay in beginning this job. This work of stripping and then demolishing the six houses had been fixed long ago but held up until all the homes were vacated. This had taken longer than anyone imagined.

“At long last, eh, Billy?” he said to the man beside him, a heavy-framed giant in a donkey jacket, his working companion now for almost twenty years. Billy only nodded and turned his ruddy, unshaven face, with a pipe screwed between his yellow teeth, to look at the condemned row. It huddled beneath the high banks of the Forth and Clyde Canal but his eyes drifted to the small densely scrubbed garden at the end of the terrace bordering the Kelvin. The front of the houses practically tumbled onto the road and Billy turned to face the ten feet high wall with bricked up windows that had been the Gas Works. Now the Gas Board houses, like the Works before, were to be reduced to open space, this city’s main light industrial product.

To Billy’s left sat the boy, Allan, employed for six months as cheap YOPS labour. This was his first day. He looked at the dismal houses and saw doors closing behind men who tucked metal lunch boxes below their oxters before crossing the road to work; saw women, holding babies, give a last wave from behind lace-curtained windows. He sighed. Like his schooldays and his bright career expectations, it was in the past, little more than a dream, and he was here to complete the destruction. He raised his head and saw cars stream to the city centre behind a huge advertising board on Maryhill Road. The message was for the mainstream and Allan distantly wondered what it was.

“Thought we were never going to get started”, George said, “That last one took his time. Hung on for months, so he did. Dunno why they didn’t just put him in a Home and get the site cleared quickly. That would have made sense, wouldn’t it? But no! They left him here to the bitter end. Doesn’t seem fair, does it? I mean – he’d have been better off with some company, eh? – the poor old bugger. Not stuck out here in the back of beyond, with no life about for miles. Then we’d have finished the job by now.”

George jumped down for the cab and disappeared into the narrow close which split the houses into two rows of three. Allan hesitated but decided to move when told or when Billy did. The older man puffed gently on his pipe and sat with arms crossed.

“Shame, isn’t it?” Billy said with suddenness that surprised the youth.

“Aye,” Allan was pleased that Billy felt as he did, “Aye, ‘tis that.”

Billy removed his pipe for the first time that day and pointed it through the windscreen. “Such a waste,” he said. Allan followed his pipe stem and found it directed at the overgrown garden. “All they lovely bushes goin’ tae waste. Shame.”

Billy slipped his pipe between his front teeth and the two fell silent again.

“Shift yourselves, you two!” George’s voice filtered from inside a house, “We’ve no’ got all day, have we? C’ mon!”

“Oot we get, son,” Billy nudged Allan, “Just you stick by me. I’ll keep you right, to begin with. You’ll soon get the hang of it. Remember, we’re after anything valuable. Lead, copper, anything like that. That comes oot first, then we pu’ it doon.”

Billy paused before the last door on the row, the one beside the garden. For a moment Allan expected him to knock, but he grinned through dense tobacco smoke and said, “Tell you something, son. Afore we bulldoze the place, I’m for some of them shrubs. Too good tae waste. Somebody here’s

had green fingers, right enough.” Billy turned a key in the lock but had to kick the door open. He grunted and thumped inside, the sound of his boots hollow and violent. Noises from the next house showed that George was already busy stripping.

Allan stood at the broken door, reluctant to violate the home, feeling he should ask permission. A shout from Billy dispersed his doubts and he slouched through the dark hall into the front room. The house was bare. All the furniture had been removed and only scraps of faded lino, dotted with debris and rubble, covered the floor boards. Cupboards doors hung loose, the windows were broken and the fire grate was thick with soot and filth. The room reeked of dust and emptiness. The wallpaper was blackened and grimy except for lighter patches in the shape of plaques and small picture frames. On the wall above the fireplace, three such spaces were duck-shaped.

The boy felt like an intruder, a parasite, for the room was lived in, had a tangible past despite the mess; it had existed as a home not so long ago.

“Nuthin here, son.” Billy mumbled and pushed past Allan towards the kitchen.

Left alone, Allan sauntered to the broken windows. George had unlocked the back of the van and started to fill it with pipes of various lengths and types. As well as the price for demolition, this was what the trade called ‘skin’ and sometimes careful stripping doubled the profit. A couple of days salvaging, then a week or so to reduce the terrace to red cinders, and the job was done.

The boy looked past the yawning van, full of the profitable humus of someone’s life, to the narrow bridge over the Kelvin. Through the window pane the view resembled a television picture and gained reality as a result. He looked up at the sky. Fresh vapour trails had appeared but already the edges had begun to fray. Soon the streak would widen and disperse, slowly cease to have form, then evaporate completely leaving no trace of ever having existed except as a memory.

Clanks and bangs from the kitchen warned him that Billy was busy, had found something useful. Allan hesitated, took a last look at the spreading vapour and slowly walked to the door. He felt sad, but was unsure why. Perhaps it had something to do with leaving behind the freedom of school, the dreams of a future, to begin this work, the reality; maybe because he was completing the destruction of what had once been a home; perhaps guilt at plundering the memory of people he never knew. He lingered at the door, unwilling to help.

“Allan!” Billy yelled, “get our lazy arse through here! There’s work to be done!”

The boy left the front room and entered the tiny kitchen. Maybe he was unsuited for this type of work, maybe he was too soft.

“No’ Much left in this shit heap,” Billy growled, “The vandals have been here. Shouldnae take us long tae pick it clean. Gimme a haun, son.”

Allan said nothing. He took his hands from his pockets and helped Billy pull the gas pipe from the wall.