

The Journey

I see them scurry and flee. They race past me, sometimes crossing paths, at other times following in the wake of another. Each one a little protective cocoon battling against the overwhelming force of the steel giant as it carves a path through them.

With my cheek pressed against the window it seems that they're rushing towards me, the little droplets of rain water, desperate to escape the destination for which I'm headed. Beyond, the Scottish landscape tempts with rolling hillocks and ragged cliffs marching confidently into the sea.

After a time the hilly lands desert me, retreating behind the border as I pass into the unknown lands of the South. The land here is different, exposed. Vast plains stretch as far as I can see, and dotted here and there, a few light forests cling together for strength. As I observe the passing vista, a voice overhead drawls out the name of the next stop.

The Newcastle I next approach momentarily distracts me with its unusual construction. The train passes high above while buildings underneath elbow for space around the mouth of a wide river. Old and new are thrown together in a mishmash of styles in dramatic fashion, with the reddened roofs of the houses gloriously vibrant in the afternoon sunshine.

As the train glides past I see old brickwork buildings, seemingly suspended in the air, play host to further railway sidings. Nestled amongst all this stonemasonry lies a glittering jewel, a bulging slug-shaped musical theatre on the banks of the river, its sweeping curves reflecting the light magnificently.

My taste of Newcastle is brief but memorable and very soon the train carries me further south still. I doze by the window, the world outside passing me by. She is there in my dreams, almost within reach, an ever-changing form of shadow and light. I reach out, my finger tips searching for the contact, and find nothing. I am alone, tumbling in the empty blackness, the remains of a dropped connection.

I awake with a start, surprising the man opposite as I jerk suddenly upright. He shakes his head and returns to his laptop. I blink heavy eyelids as I collect my fuzzy thoughts, reacquainting myself with reality. It seems I haven't slept in a long time, my nights are spent by lamplight, hunched over a flickering screen, fingers deftly skipping over laughter and distance.

The tannoy comes again, this time well-spoken, announcing my sudden arrival. I disembark, my feet grasping a hold on the platform as the terminal whirls around me. To left and right swarm the other travellers, each clamouring for their own patch of ground.

I'm buffeted side to side by the surging masses as I labour under the weight of my holdall, the strap chastising me for every step I take. Inch by inch I near my goal, my thoughts swimming in circles and my heart pounding in my ears. My quickened pulse sets me on edge, my eyes darting feverishly around the scene before me.

I'm dwarfed by the cavernous space. Arches reach high overhead, solid and unwavering, the stone walls themselves oozing authority. The confidence I had in setting out abandons me. The secret messages and excited whispers leading

up to this moment are meaningless now. In my pocket, a well-thumbed photograph waits patiently for its subject.

I near the end of the platform, the crowds parting almost ceremoniously exposing me to scrutiny. I scan the awaiting faces with urgency, searching for the familiar face. Torturous moments pass to the thudding of my heart, a beat so loud I feel sure it will attract attention.

Then all at once she's there, head bowed over her mobile. I'm struck with the strangest sensation, a feeling of being almost outside myself. I exist in both the physical and the virtual at the same time. A contact in someone's phone and now a real life acquaintance.

I have moments before she sees me - I'm relieved I saw her first - in which to accept this reality. All those months spent together in the digital ether, creating a virtual fantasy, and here is the first piece of proof that it could be real. She looks up. She smiles. I smile back at the photograph in my pocket.