**Anither Place**

**by Vivien Strachan**

Convery shifts onto his bar stool and soaks in his surroundings. Saturday night at The Broken Fiddle. He clocks a couple of faces from his morning at the harbour. The person he needs to see hasn’t arrived.

The low ceiling muffles conversation and amplifies the groaning floors. A mural depicting a swarthy, tormented man in a noose looms over the supping congregation. In the gloaming of the pub Convery’s eyes are drawn to a group of weeping women in the image, genuflecting and dappled with streaks of citrus sunshine, ripples of which illuminate a broken fiddle at their feet.

Underneath the image in flourishing script:

*'James Macpherson, the last man to be hung in Banff. Cateran, Poet and Musician. Betrayed by one of his own.*'

Convery's contemplation of Macpherson's Lament is shattered as a galoot of a man dumps himself down. Leaning in too close, his ‘*Aye, aye*?’ is stained with sour coffee, and suspicion.

*‘Seen you doon at the hayrbur. Scampi*.’ He reaches out a giant capstan of a hand and offers a business card. *‘It’s Charles, bit a’bdy cries me Scampi. Aifter a wee incident up ben Scatterty picnic site, ken. Dinna ask. Scampi’s Taxis at your service.’* An avuncular prawn cartoon, thumbs up, smiles from the card.

At seven in the morning, his sleepy windscreen had revealed the harbour of this town, already skelping along into its daily routine. Pot-bellied fishermen in yellow oilskins swearily teasing each other, lorries from Stornoway reversing awkwardly, and Filipino deck hands shivering underneath beanie hats in the retreating January haar. Convery yawned as a pair of oystercatchers puddled about, probing and testing the ground with their traffic cone coloured beaks. Only now, as the new year darkness settled, was he beginning to revive.

*‘What’s a cateran*?’ Convery is still distracted by the pub mural. He is nodding in acknowledgement but offers no reaction to Scampi’s daft name. Convery loves words. Slowly, he draws his eyes away from the painting and sizes up his new companion.

*‘A cateran is a kind o coo trader meets ootlaw back in i day. A cowboy mibbe, aye,’* offers Scampi.

No one in The Broken Fiddle ever asked about the Cateran.

*‘Fit brings you up here en*?’ Scampi eyes Convery.

*‘Work – Fisheries. Consultancy*.’

Scampi has picked up on his accent, even though it isn’t strong.

*‘Nae anither bliddy Scouser! He he*!’ Impressed with his own linguistic detectivery, Scampi inflates, gut swelling under his fleece. ‘*Ah telt Woody ower there ye were fae Liverpool – ah could jist tell by the wy ye walkit in*.’ His head twitches as he spins round, looking for Woody who has made himself scarce.

*‘Did ye git stoppit by the Polis on the wye up? Lost track o the nummer o loons wi Liverpudlian accents that’ve asked for a taxi tae Aiberdeen fae here and paid wi wads o cash ken? They’ve nae idea far they ur, or hoo far they ur fae the city. Micht as weel be in Timbukbliddytoo.’*

The chuckling stops. Scampi tics into his pint, troubled.

*‘My ex is from Liverpool-ken, Crosby? Bitty posh, kin? We've got a quinie, she's 15 noo.’* He slumps slightly.

*‘Oh yeah?’* Convery’s eyes keep flicking around the room. *‘For the record, Scamps, my Mum is from this neck of the woods, so I can understand you better than you think.’* Convery turned to meet Scampi’s eyes, pulling himself slightly straighter up.

Scampi*,* cautioned, brings the story back to himself. *‘Ah dinna git tae see her ower muckle; weel, I'm nae allowit to see her noo. Ken fit like fan the fucking ex starts telling lees and yon social wirkers start their fucking in an oot and upabooterie ..’* He stalls again and toys with a bar mat, pressing each side into the bar like a slow, methodical propeller. ‘*Onywy, ye’ll find me aroond the hairbur office*.’

Convery looks down at his trainers, still distracted. ‘ “*Another Place”’,* he muses. *‘Have you seen “Another Place”on Crosby Beach?’*

‘*Fit?’*

*‘You know, them proper weird statues staring out to sea? Facing the ebb and flow of the tide, trying to breathe and stay alive.’*

A swell of activity interrupts them as a group of young lads sweep in, sucking in the seaweed air from outside.

‘*It’s only when the tide goes out that you see who’s swimming naked and all that…’* Convery looks for understanding.

*‘Oh aye…yon weird statues. Bliddy weird, bud, they gie me the heebies*.’ Scampi’s nails were bitten to the quick, hands trembling slightly. He didn’t need statues to speak the truth of loss. Uncomfortable, he begins to babble.

*‘Calm Down, Calm Down eh La! … Mister, I’ll watch yer car for a quid… There she goeeeessss’*

Oblivious to Convery's detachment and amused by himself, he peppers Scouse songs with football chat. Reading social cues is not in Scampi's skill set.

Convery retreats to Macpherson’s Lament. He imagines himself on the gallows, waiting to drop, his bowels opening as the artery in his neck snaps, splattering the tartan circus in his vengeful shit.

With Scampi’s riptide washing around, Convery’s gaze is drawn to a dark-haired woman in the mural. She is reaching to the broken fiddle, weeping. Something about her reminds him of Laura. Of home. He felt a watery taste in his mouth, nausea. The drive up had been dark and slow. Stopping at a dilapidated service station hadn’t helped. Pulsating sponge dumpling and macaroni pie. No wonder his mum had left for Liverpool.

*‘Fit Like a'bdyyyyyyy?’*

A bride bobs in on a deflated unicorn. Around her spins a diaspora of aunties and cousins, all sporting designated ‘Team Coleen’ T-shirts, their winter coats discarded. Unusually, the Maid of Dishonour is propping up the Monster in Law.

Convery, after years of solitude, still struggles with noise.

*‘Scampi! Aaaa'bdy kens Scampi!’*  Coleen drapes herself over their hero. ‘*Such a big-hearted loon, he gies free rides, nae bither at aa*...,’ proclaims Coleen, before edging over to Convery and whispering ‘*yon sofa in the hayrbur maister’s neuk kens aa aboot Scampi’s charitable activities*.’

Scampi sputters to life; he was going to be busy this evening.

‘*Fa’r ye fae*?’ demands Coleen of Convery. ‘*Ma pal ower there wints tae gang awa wi ye.’* He was dressed a bit curiously, but she could see that he workit oot.

Convery is being disrupted by Coleen and her gang for the second time that day. Earlier, a flat-bed van had toured the town, snaking around Low St with its bonnie auld buildings and looming market cross, stopping for anyone wanting a closer look at its rowdy cargo.

Triggered by the commotion, Convery had charged over to the window of the B&B. He watched as they tormented each other with treacle, eggs and other gunk, the pyjama clad girls bunting and furling with each other, soft rock blaring from the van.

‘*Kinel’,* he shook his head, ‘*this place.*’ But he stayed a while, entranced. Liverpool Blackenings, he knew, were more private affairs, administered to men bent double in tower block corridors, taxi offices, and flats over chicken shops.

Aye, but here the quines rampaged again, Laminated *fou* and looder than stink. Convery smiles as the bride whips her unruly subjects into song:

*‘Take me hooooome country roads*…’

*‘Scampi Scampi far’s oor drink?*

Shifting over to a quieter corner, Convery recognises a cool presence slightly removed from the throng. His landlady, Stella. Cocktails have prised her out of her coat, but still she casts him only a half smile. In the feeble lighting she draws glances. Stella isn’t seen out often.

Earlier, Convery had followed instructions to find her house up from the shore. Marconi Crescent was a collection of hunkering bungalows. Each one a slightly different shape, windows avoiding each other’s gaze. *Culbuchley Cottage B&B*, *Vacancies*. Everything here was concrete, save a rockery displaying a few heathers and a lonely Pampas grass.

Ringing the doorbell several times, Convery could hear loud music blaring from inside. It was plaintive, bombastic, joyous.

*‘First they take your prydeeee, turn it on its syddd*…’

A woman’s voice ran full pelt alongside.

*The story of the Blues.* Such a rush of a song, cutting through the chilly North-East morning like a shot of espresso. Following the singing round the side, he could see a lean woman bent over, hauling out sheets, stuffing them into a tumble drier. She pressed the buttons with a flourish in time to the music, before spinning round to catch Convery gawping at the window.

‘*Oh my gawd*!’ she jumped back, tripping over her laundry basket. *Jeeso*.’

‘*I’m sorry, I’m sorry, ehhhh, look, I’m not a perv, I just wondered if you had a room*,’ he shouted through the window, holding his hand out in a placatory gesture.

The woman remained bent over with her hand on her chest, the other on her thigh, panting, before thumping off the music. She wore a necklace of red cherries. Taking in a deep breath, she pointed him round to the front.

‘*I rang the bell a few times, but you were mid performance*.’ Convery’s iron-grey eyes teased her. The crystal cherries sparkled, even in the low winter sunshine.

 ‘*Sorry, but changing sheets is sic a trauchle.’* She sighs, still embarrassed*. ‘You lookin fur a room then?* She eyed his vintage suede jacket. *‘Maist fowk book online.’*

Convery was in no mood for a ticking off, but he had felt soothed by the accent, so familiar to him as a youngster.

*‘Double, aye?’*

Convery had had enough of single beds.

Now, in the pub, Stella moves closer and leans into Convery, *‘My cousin's quine’s Hennie*.’

*‘That's your cousin’s... daughter?’*

*‘Aye, a richt bessie, at een.’* A scowl descends on her face as she watches the antics, then she remembers she’s supposed to be having a good time*. ‘Fit a bourach!’*

Mischief passes over her face as she repeats ‘*boooracchhh’ sexily.* Convery can’t help but meet it with a laugh*.*

*‘A pagan ritual showing the soiling of maidenhood, Mr Convery.’* She shot a disgusted look over at Scampi.  *‘Be careful aboot that een, mind. There’s a bit o’ a wrangness there.’*

Stella nuzzles her glass. *‘I only ivver socialise wi quines. Wifies. Dames. Blaans… Afternoon Tuys, Ladies Days, Hennies, Broonie Find Rysers. Strictly. Nae. Men. Nivver. Even at weddings, apart fae the odd dance. I am jist scunnert wi gaan tae gowp and ooh and ah at anither funcy bliddy new kitchen. I only gang oot tae stop them talking about ME. But they dae onywy. Especially since…’*

Convery jumps into fill the pause. His ale is slipping down nicely. ‘*Well, I am a man. Ready and willing to supply man chat, if necessary.’*

Stella flicks her fair hair, blow-dried for the night out. *‘Yer chat can git tae’ …* she snorts*,* stopping short of swearing*. ‘Ahm rilly looking for a rare mannie fa can supply me wi twa, that’s two to you, kitchens.’* She elbows him.

Convery leans into her elbow. She holds it there jist a bitty longer than she needs to.

Flushing, she spits out ‘*look, sna!*’ Flakes shimmer down in the sodium light outside.

‘*So, fit's it like, Liverpool?’*

*‘Liverpewl?’* He crosses his arms, presses back into the rickety chair and breathes out.

*‘Growing up in Liverpool is something else like...well, obviously it’s rock n roll but it’s also kinda like living at the bottom of the deep blue sea sea sea.’* Convery sings the words like a shanty. He has a decent voice.

*‘Dark and suffocating, yeah, edgy and brutal sometimes, but it it’s just so, so EPIC, too. Kinda glamorous is right. E- bloody-ssential to find people there who're gonna teach you how to stay afloat, but if you do manage to navigate it there are sublime treasures… mega fuck off diamonds and pearls just waiting to be discovered. Songs and fables from people mapped and charted like some massive oceanic trench.’*

*‘Soonds jist like here.’* Stella sweeps out her arm elegantly like a tourist guide, he carries her along with him.

*‘Exxxhactly’* retorts Convery in mock Scousebefore his face clouds. *‘Haven’t been there much lately like. I’ve moved on.’*

He’s said too much.

*‘Everyone from a bin man to a judge looks like they're in a band, or at least they used to be in one. Pete Wylie is my gardener dontchaknow.’*

*‘Nivver! Pete Wylie?’* Her eyes shine in the light of the pub fire.

*‘Story of the Blues is een o ma alltime faivrits. A richt humdinger o’ a sang,’* She shakes her head in awe*. ‘Your lot can fair dee an anthem.’*

Convery nods sagely. Anthems haul up the feelings behind the words.

*‘Actually, I don't have a garden’* he draws his hand down his chin as if to smooth an invisible beard. ‘*I’m more comfortable on the water. Always loved fishing. Mainly now only for shopping trolleys on the canal.’*

Stella plays along with him*. ‘Send yon Pete Wylie up here. Fit rare it would be tae hae a gairdener. Mibbes nae a Scouse een richt enough. I want to keep hauld o’ my gairden tools’.*

Convery shoots back.

*‘Is that so? Unless I’m mistaken YOU didn’t have a garden either – you had a concrete bloody multi storey car park. I’m surprised you’re not charging me by the hour.’*

Her features harden again, the same craggy look as when he’d first stepped over her threshold. ‘*I will if ye dinnae stop geein me cheek, ya vratch*.’ She folds her arms across her chest, drawing back.

*‘Yup, I’m a terrible Vratch.’* He shakes his head*. ‘Who helps you out then? At the BnB, I mean?’*

*‘Naebidy. It's me mysel’ and I. Everything doon to yours truly. And that's jist fine.’* Stella looks down, fidgeting with her wrist.

*‘What happened to your husband… if you don't mind …?’* Convery softens.

*‘Operation Klondyke.’* She looks for a reaction, drinking in every line on his face.

It sounded like a spy thriller he had picked up at The Fisherman’s Mission that morning. Firing on the sweet carb rush of black pudding, Convery had pulled out ‘*A History of Scottish Art’*. He thought of the faded *Vettriano* print in his mum’s bedroom. God, he had spent enough time staring at it as a child, waiting for her to rouse.

But now, in the twilight of the pub, Convery must not reveal he knows the Klondyke story. The ale has other ideas and makes him peer into Stella’s face, urging her to continue.

*‘Ken, the “Quota scandal”? My husband wis ane o the “Black Fish Skippers”.'*

Convery gives an ambiguous shrug, pint tipping back. She notices a fine watch nosing out of his sleeve.

*‘Himsel’ and his clivver pals had a wee arrangement wi a processing factory in Shetland. When oor boat, The Lothian Rose, went tae land, the boys at the factory had riggit oot the wecht machines so that the Fisheries boys wid only see a legal wecht. But ….’*

Already some of the hen party were turning their backs. She could tell they were talking about her.

‘*Go ed*’

*‘Doon bala the real catch o herring and mackerel was bein tappit aff. Himsel’ mastermindit a fine wee schemie tae rig up a sicrit pipe far a’ the illegal haal could be pumpit oot tae the factory from the boats.’*

They both knew that the most interesting things always lie beneath the surface.

*‘Fan the fustle wis blaan my braw rock o quarter o’ a cintury anchored himsel like a sookin buckie tae a hairdresser fae Shetland. Pamela. La di da. Left me the last day o’ his trial, saddled wi a twa hunner thoosan fine and a lifetime o black affront.’*

Convery has been following her lips intently, a struggle against the hubbub, but he already knew how the story went.

*‘A sortit oot noo, mind. That glaickit eejit always did bliddy love getting his hair deen. Greasy haired bastart. Iviry week. A thocht it was a bitty weird fur a mannie. I needed ane o those bliddy things yer granny had on the back o her guid sofa…’*

*‘Antimacassar?’* offers Convery*.* He had read a lot, inside.

Stella eyes him suspiciously*. ‘Eh, Aye. An antimacassar. You’re a clivver een. Varsity? UN-I-VER-SITY?’* She spells it out for him, eyes lighting on the ivory trinket collection above the bar. Gifts from merchant seamen to their mothers. Severed from the tusks of elephants in Africa to rest on a shelf in at the edge of the North Sea.

 *‘Open University. Environmental science. Then Fisheries Management on my rel, l eh, …I really wanted to do Marine Biology, but that was impossible ...at the time.’* He strokes his chin again, looking down.

Stella launches back into her story*. ‘I’ve got my faither’s licence and boat noo. He died 6 months ago – cancer. I’m the ainly bairn. His star o the sea.’* Her voice splits.

*‘So, where is he now, your husband… Ex?’*

*‘Up in Lerwick. Wi the fair Pamela.’*

*‘I’m sorry, that’s harsh… what about his Licence – will you use it?’*

She raises her glass.

‘*Too bliddy richt. Licences are rare as hen’s teeth. Bit o a risk takin it oan, but if it works oot, I’m happy, if it disna, I’m suppose I’m wiser.’*

*‘Here’s to the wise then.’* They touch glasses.

Over on the cramped karaoke stage, muckle hands grappling waists, Scampi is dancing.

Convery ignores the rabble, raising his pint in allegiance: ‘Another toast! *Here’s to a two-kitchened, greasy sofa-ed life of bliss*…*To Pamela and Sandy!’*

*‘Sandy? Fit…?’* Stella’s eyebrow arch.

*‘Hoo div ye ken he’s cried San…’?’*

She recognised the look on the tenant’s face. Her graunny wore it when she biled partens alive on the rocks at the Pint o’ Craigneen.

Stumbling back across them, Coleen grabs Stella in a bear hug. Someone has kicked off a slurred rendition of ‘The Fisherman's Hymn.’ The Broken Fiddle heaves along to its strains with Scampi leading a shambolic choir:

*‘When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,*

*Will your anchor drift or firm reeeeeeemain?’*

Convery and Stella lock eyes again through the mayhem. He takes out his wallet and warily places an identity card on the table.

*Paul Convery. Marine Scotland. Fisheries Officer.*

Stella ponders the card, still bemused by Convery’s half admission.

‘*You…ken Sandy*?’ Suspicion, so familiar, is difficult to lose.

Convey neither confirms nor denies. ‘*I’m looking for new opportunities*.’

Four hundred miles away, a dark-haired woman reaches out to touch the cast iron sculpture of a faceless man. ‘*Where are you Paul*?’ she whispers.

Soon, the tide will come in.