

Castaways

In the storm which followed, there was no respite. Tossed from one following wave to another, bounced from side to side, swept away into channels which held promise only of loss or oblivion, the family members blanched and hung on to each other for dear life. The sky was black with fumes and the air was a bedlam cacophony of wild shrieks, squealing and the pounding as of leviathans massed for war. The craft in which the family rode was harried this way and that, quite out of their control. If Mr Selkirk tried to point its nose in one direction, a huge dark mass would sweep down on him from behind, howling and growling like a banshee, forcing him to turn aside; sweat poured from his brow. Mrs Selkirk sat tight-lipped, grey-faced, her hair blown about her face, gripping her smallest child as it whimpered in her lap.

After one particularly punishing encounter with the elemental forces, the craft was sucked into a whirlpool of current; it lurched to one side, skeetered across the flow and ran aground on a small island which was scraped and pounded on every side by the storm.

“Quick!” cried Mr Selkirk, pulling his wife’s arm and clutching his elder daughter. “Come on, out now! while we have the chance! Hurry!”

As fast as they could, the family of five scabbled and scrambled their way on to the island, falling in their haste to the ground which seemed to sway under their feet. All around them the din of the storm never ceased, waves of sound hammering on the edge of the island.

Not a moment too soon! For the craft which had carried them thus far, across many hundreds of miles, was swept back into the storm. The noise reached a crescendo so great that it was impossible to hear the tearing, cracking, smashing sound as the craft was broken up into tiny pieces, never to be seen again.

The family lay panting on the island, horrified at the sudden spiriting away of their car.

“That cost me seven thousand when it was new,” muttered Mr Selkirk, unable to quite grasp what he had just seen. “Seven thousand only two years ago – and all smashed to smithereens under the wheels of that lorry!” He should his head in disbelief.

“Never mind the money, Alex,” whimpered his wife, “Just thank God that we managed to get out of it alive!”

Annie, the eldest daughter, sobbed: “I never want to come to Glasgow again! It’s horrible, horrible!”

At that, the two younger children gave full vent to their misery, howling and crying, red in the face. Their parents did their best to comfort them.

“Well,” said Mr Selkirk, “I think you’re right, Annie. We should have taken the train. I should have known that trying to get across Glasgow at five o’clock on a Friday night would be sticky...”

“Sticky?!” screamed his wife, unable to restrain herself. “Sticky, Alex?! It’s a nightmare! Now get us out of here! Get us home!”

As even Mrs Selkirk eventually had to admit, this was far easier said than done. The island on which they had fetched up was in fact a traffic-roundabout. It was quite large for its kind: about twenty yards in diameter, with six plastic bollards, one every sixty degrees. A tall steel lamp-post was erected in the middle, but it did not look

promising. The glass bowl was hanging at a crazy angle and appeared to be deficient in bulbs.

The lamp-post was simply the safest place on the island. Within inches of each side, traffic streamed past in a torrent, deafening the family with its relentless, pounding roar. Brakes squealed, horns sounded, almost incessantly. Huge juggernauts jostled with motor-bikes and coaches, small nippy vans zipped in and out of the endless filthy flow of vehicles. On one side, the vast tidal wave seemed to flow away from them; on the other, it appeared terrifyingly to come upon them like a great crashing wall of fatally breaking surf. And the air was thick with the fumes and heavy with the dirt.

The Selkirk's middle child seemed possessed by a suicidal spirit of curiosity, and was continually wandering to the very kerbs of the island to investigate the powerful forces on nature which had brought them there. His mother's screams and father's hoarse cries of warning were unheard, and several times Mr Selkirk dashed forward to rescue his son just in time to save him from being swept away to his doom. Finally, Mrs Selkirk sat on the boy, to keep him secure.

For hours and hours, into the evening and into the night, the storm swept by, never-ending in its punishment of ears and eyes and all the senses. The family of castaways huddled together at the very centre of the island, their backs against the slender steel post which vibrated and swayed in the night. The very ground under their feet shook and quivered. Hour after hour, and all natural light drained away. Hour after hour, and they were now blinded by the oncoming lights of the vehicles, a cataclysmic electrical display which lit up the heavens.

Late in the night, there was a lessening of the tempest. The children slept in their parents' arms. Mr and Mrs Selkirk huddled together for warmth and they dozed. The night-traffic flowed past them, rumbling and roaring, growling and shaking the roots of their world.

The dim light of dawn awoke Mr Selkirk. He was cold and stiff. He glanced at his watch – it was half-past four. And already the flow of traffic was on the increase. Small gaps appeared between the lorries and the cars, but they were short gaps and barely enough to see clear to the far side of the road. His wife and children were still fast asleep, exhausted by their ordeal. There was no point in waking them – it was already too late to escape across the expanse of roadway. He wrapped his jacket closer round himself and the sleeping children and tried to sleep.

At about six, the deafening horn of a passing lorry blasted them out of their slumbers. Everyone awoke at once. It took them several seconds to realise where they were, amid the confusing turmoil of the sea around them. When the children remembered what had happened and where they were, they subsided into tears, clinging to their parents.

"I'm hungry!", they wailed, "I'm cold, I'm tired, I want to go home!"

Mr Selkirk realised that he had to find some food. Like a caged panther, he paced up and down at the shores of the island, gazing into the seething waters around him, hoping to catch a glimpse of something that they could eat. There was nothing. Only plastic bags, seized suddenly by the tempest and buffeted backwards and forwards between conflicting back-draughts. Three or four empty plastic bottles lay behind one of the bollards, and these he collected, although they were empty. He found a grubby white plastic fork and a polystyrene cup there too. All these treasures he placed in one of the plastic shopping-bags which was floating demonically around his head

After a few minutes of this activity, he returned to his family. Eagerly, his children looked inside the plastic bag, their hopes raised, only to be cruelly dashed. They fell to the ground in tantrums.

“We’ve got to get off this island, Alex,” said, his wife, unnecessarily.

In answer, Mr Selkirk raise his arms to embrace the violence of the scene around him. No one could hope to venture out into that storm and expect to survive. A continuous, relentless tidal rip rotated around them at insane speed.

The hours of the morning passed.

Mr Selkirk amused himself by writing a message on a couple of scraps of paper which had blown in. “Help!” he wrote on one, “Trapped on a roundabout near Maryhill!” On the other, he wrote, “Contact Mrs Jessie Selkirk, and tell her that her son and family are still alive”. He placed each message in a plastic bottle and launched them as far as he could throw them into the strong currents around the island. One on one side, the other on the opposite side. He glimpsed them briefly as they bounced once, twice, ricocheted off a passing vehicle, then vanished into the blur of wheels and exhaust pipes.

To keep the children occupied, Mrs Selkirk took them beach-combing around the periphery of the island. While they were gone, Mr Selkirk kept lookout. Perhaps someone would see them, maybe heave to and take them away. To increase their chances of being spotted, he took off his vest and attached it to a long thin piece of metal which had been lying up against the kerb. The cotton vest fluttered bravely in the wind, but seemed pitifully small against the surrounding maelstrom.

At about three o’clock, Mrs Selkirk and the three children arrived back, laughing and shouting with excitement. It was difficult to hear them above the noise, but it eventually transpired that they had amassed a considerable collection of flotsam and jetsam. There were two hub-caps; a bicycle chain; no fewer than four tyre-treads from huge wheels; a piece of tarpaulin about three by two metres; two unequal lengths of red rope; several bottles; and a plastic milk-crate (empty).

Since the sky was growing darker by the minute, not because night was falling, but because a storm was brewing, Mr Selkirk began to construct a shelter from the tarpaulin and the ropes. By tying the ropes together, then one end to the lamp-post and the other to one of the bollards, he rigged up a support for the tarpaulin. The edges of this tent were weighted down as best he could with the crate and the vehicle-parts. And a shelter was built, just as the first heavy drops of rain lashed into them. Hurriedly, they all crept under the tent, as the rain fell thicker and faster, and the sound of the traffic on either side turned from a dull deafening roar to a clearer, water-based swishing.

The rain crashed down on them for about an hour. Water from the road on either side frequently splashed under the edges of the tarpaulin and soaked the family members as they clung on to each other.

At the height of the storm, there was a tremendous crash outside, and something hit the fabric with considerable force, narrowly missing the head of the middle child, before tumbling to the ground beside Mr Selkirk’s feet. He looked down and saw the edge of something poking under the tent. Without releasing his grip on the fabric, for only in this way would it not fly away, he pulled the object in amongst them.

There were gasps of delight. It was a crate from a bakery van, and was miraculously still intact after its fall. There were loaves of bread, still warm. There were packets of hot-cross buns. Rolls, french-sticks. Mrs Selkirk quickly handed out suitable items to all the children, and fed a couple of buns to Mr Selkirk.

“Now all we need is something to drink!”

But the rain-storm eased off quickly and brought no more unbidden treasures from the cruel sea. Surreptitiously, the children caught drops of rain rolling off the tarpaulin and then licked their fingers for the moisture. When the rain finally ceased, Mr Selkirk looked out. Far above them, beyond all the roaring and relentless traffic, a huge rainbow arched the sky. He stepped outside, stretched and looked about. His vest had gone, presumably torn from its moorings by the rain and the lashing winds, perhaps now in shreds under wheels in the overwhelming race-tides. It did not matter. Mr Selkirk felt he was secure: his family was sheltered from the rain and wind, there was food for them to eat, he had no responsibilities. Perhaps, perhaps, they could survive as castaways.

When night fell and the blinding lights of the on-rushing vehicles swept over them and by them, there was some comfort in being able to huddle in the makeshift tent and be hidden from the world. Their stomachs comfortably filled with the bread and cakes, the children curled up against each other and fell asleep.

“Tomorrow,” said Mrs Selkirk, “We must get away from here. While we’ve still got food for the journey.”

Her husband looked at her sceptically. “And how are we going to do that?” he murmured.

“You’re going to build us something that will get us off this island and over to the other side of that road,” said Mrs Selkirk confidently.

Now, she knew that her husband was proud of his DIY abilities; or rather, his enthusiasm to DIY. If she threw down such a gauntlet, he would be sure to pick it up. And this was no exception. While the traffic thundered outside, and the long night boomed past, while his wife and children slept, Mr Selkirk lay, turning over and over in his mind the resources available to him and executing leaps of imagination.

When the sun came up, he knew exactly what he was going to do. After a breakfast of croissants and morning-rolls, his children departed on another beach-combing trip, with instructions to bring back anything and everything they found – “but don’t take any risks, do you hear?” As his children slowly merged with the cloud of dust and debris which floated in from the traffic, Mr Selkirk gathered together all his materials, and set to work.

At regular intervals over the following days, the children would re-appear, proudly dragging some unlikely item behind them – a cushion, a collection of empty beer-cans, a broken fishing-rod, a washing-line, a single white trainer; but the greatest prize of them all was a set of wheels from an old-fashioned pram. Meanwhile, at odd times of the day or night, odd bags or boxes of food would turn up on the shores, debris from some distant traffic-accident up-wind, or food-parcels – Mrs Selkirk thought wistfully – sent in their direction by well-wishers cut off from them by the impenetrable flow of traffic.

Four days after they had first been stranded, the new craft was ready for launching. It did not look much: forward motion would be provided by the pram wheels; there was space for one person on top; the passenger seats were formed by four huge tyre-treads, tied firmly to sub-frame of the pram. There was a steering wheel, and a complicated series of ropes and hooks strung out at the front.

“What is it, Dad?” asked his eldest, puzzled.

“It’s what’s going to get us home,” he announced, bursting with pride.

The children were doubtful.

“It doesn’t look like it,” said the youngest.

“Well, it will!” snapped her father. He looked at his watch: it was half-past two. From experience, three o’clock was the hour when the tide seemed to be at its lowest ebb, the safest time to set out. Half an hour to get ready.

There was feverish activity on the island as clothes and food were tied into tight bundles, once for each member of the family. Once packed, each bundle was strapped firmly to a child or a parent. The children and their mother then placed themselves each on one of the passenger-seats. The craft was rolled to the very edge of the roundabout, at a point where the traffic was heading east; and then Mr Selkirk knelt on a piece of hardboard, his knees protected by the cushion.

It was time to go. After a final check of every knot and every binding, Mr Selkirk watched over his shoulder at the traffic coming up behind him. Lorries, coaches, vans, cars came and thundered past. Still he watched. Vehicles came and went in tight bunches. His attention never wavered. There would be a short gap, then another series of close-packed cars would sweep past, their motion causing Mr Selkirk’s hair to stand on end. Still he stared unflinchingly into the oncoming waves, learning the pattern, looking for a particular wave, the wave which had their name on it.

At last, just as the children were getting nervous, his chance came. There was a rush of traffic, then a small lorry came past. Behind it, at some distance, a coach had pulled out into the roundabout, and was holding up everything behind it. Mr Selkirk cast out with his fishing-rod, and various pieces of curved metal hooked on to the tail-gate of the small lorry. At once, the entire craft was swept out into the roadway, dragged mercilessly behind the lorry at great speed. Behind the pram came the children and Mrs Selkirk, screaming and howling, eyes closed or eyes popping with terror. Mr Selkirk held on like grim death, as the pram bounced and careered along the road.

The lorry pulled off the roundabout, jerking the small boat behind it in its wake. But, despite having signalled to turn off on to the east-bound road, the driver continued to another exit, which led into a huge and incredibly busy motorway.

As the craft hit pot-holes and swayed terrifyingly from side to side, it occurred to Mr Selkirk that they were not going to make it. They had to get out to the farther side of the road, and this lorry was travelling too fast. Behind them, a huge queue of cars was right on their bumpers. Panicked, Mr Selkirk, tugged one of the ropes which he hoped would steer the craft to the left, to safety.

The rope broke. And in a confusion of tumbling horizons, shrieks and stars, the flimsy craft shot out to the right, soared over a kerb, darted miraculously between two sections of crash-barrier, then bounced and juddered to a screeching, grinding halt against a sign which indicated without contradiction “Kilmarnock” in one direction and “Carlisle” in another. Some of the craft remained attached to the lorry and rattled recklessly into the distance.

Dazed and bleeding, Mr Selkirk looked around. His family was safe, undamaged, lying in a heap about six feet away from him. On either side, the metal crash-barriers rose up, the only thing between them and two opposing streams of traffic. They had exchanged their desert island for a barren reef.