

On the Drom

‘SELT! Tae the laddie at the back wae the bonnet. Ta much. Nou men, next up we hae this beautifully crafted oak caravan, worth clinging on tae fur it’s at least 100 years auld! Aw we’re asking fur is a sterting price o’ £3,500! Brilliant, oh, £4,000, £4,500, £5,000. Bonny, weel done! £5,250, £5,500, £5,750...come oan lads, this is a bargain! Nae mair takers? It’s SELT, tae this smairt young yin at the front! Cheers!’

It’s all thanks to my creator, Bill Macaulay, that I’m here today. I was built a Gypsy Vardo by him but wasn’t always used as one; Bill used me for travelling and storing his produce. He was always piecing together lovely items of furniture and so he built me for travelling around with his goods when he was seventeen. My friend made me as beautiful as can be with American Oak wood, spending weeks assembling me and then decorating my interior with pieces of his beautiful hand made furniture.

We were always travelling to lovely places with Dune, Bill’s *grai*, selling as much furniture as he could make. I thought it crazy that Bill would sometimes spend hours in the night thinking of new detailed designs but it shows how much he enjoyed his job and wanted to please his customers. The years we spent together were great. Bill was born in Largs which was where we started our journey. I didn’t want to leave for I loved the view across the pebbled shore and dark waters to Cumbrae, but I’m glad we did travel on or I would have missed out on the experiences I can share with you now.

Bill, Dune and I journeyed along the coast through Ardrossan and Saltcoats where we sold forty-three wicker chairs as the people there liked them a lot. One woman with similar talents to Bill was so interested in his work that she asked to travel with us. Thank goodness bill said no, I didn’t want some stranger interrupting on our friendship and she was filthy! We remained between these two towns for 9 years selling many articles, then left for Troon after Bill found out that Cathy — the lady-friend he had met in Saltcoats — was cheating on him! I was shocked; Cathy had always seemed lovely, once painting a pretty red flower on my side and saying to my friend, ‘whit a lovely caravan ye hae Bill’. Obviously this was just a mask over her inner ugliness. My friend was upset for days. Even when we arrived in Troon he was still distraught.

Eventually Bill got over the loss, thanks to the fact that everything was selling quickly and he had to make products faster. He had a tough time as he was then getting quite *puro* at the age of twenty-nine and wasn’t as strong as he had been. Dune was also getting elderly a so bill replaced her with Jessie. She wasn’t as pretty but did the job.

In 1871, Bill and I moved on to Ayr, the most cherished place of all that we visited together. It was lovely because you could watch the sun set above Arran. Bill had stopped making his furniture by the time we arrived in Ayr due to becoming ‘an auld codger’, as they call it nowadays. I was saddened by this because I loved the pieces he produced but I knew Bill was happy, so was I too. We stayed on the front in Ayr — just Bill and I — because a local ironmonger bought Jessie — for almost four months and it was fantastic. Every evening Bill would go skinny-dipping in the sea and he

really enjoyed himself, not having to work anymore — he could just relax. One morning however, while washing his face in chilly water, Bill Macaulay slipped into the sea and disappeared. It felt like the end of everything. But, as the years continued, I came to feel almost happy for my friend as he had always wanted to die near the same waters as he was born, back home in Largs.

I remained on the front in Ayr for twenty-three years after Bill's death. I spent every evening looking out onto the *dari—av*, how peaceful it was — lonely too. Passers-by used to stare at me in awe and occasionally pass comments such as 'whit a sin, abandoning that pretty caravan' or 'I wuner wh sort o' life it has seen?'! I remember two young girls who played 'houses' inside me, I was their holiday home for one hour or so every weekend until their *Daj* called them to go home for dinner. Of course, not all of the local people were so nice. I was disgusted by one man who was extremely drunk. He urinated on me! How I wished he had been punished!

A kind man called Balo rescued me from terrors like this. In 1895, when he was riding his *grai* on the beach, Balo spotted me and was so delighted by my beauty that he immediately attached me to Shofranka and we rode off. I was stunned with joy. It was great to be back on the road again, but the journey didn't last long.

We soon arrived in a vast area of land — filled with rubbish and junk mouldy food, broken furniture, cracked china. It wasn't too pleasant but I could understand the place because Balo's family seemed to be living there. There was a small fire in the centre of it all with cooking equipment beside it. I noticed a kind of den made from branches and earth, and pondered for a while at what it was meant to be? I was surprised when I realised that Balo and his family were sleeping there! Sitting on a rotten piece of wood (about to fall apart) was Simza, Balo's wife, cradling a young boy. Neither of them were very clean but their beauty shone out from them. I could tell at once that they were lovely people and that I would enjoy my time with them.

I was then stripped of all my contents Balo. He was re-decorating. He chose lots of items from the surrounding land to be included in my renovation, for example, wood from an old chest that he used for a cabinet. It took my new companion about three weeks to fix me up, including painting me scarlet red, yellow and royal blue (he kept the pretty flower which I was glad about!). I was very pleased when Balo, Simza and Arben moved in. this time I was on the drom for a lot longer.

Shofranka and I took care of the family from then on; we were always on the move to avoid any serious occurrences associated with the war. It was great to live a gypsy family's life with them. Balo and Simza looked after Arben with such great care and they were all such lovely people. My owners both worked with metal and as Balo would make nails, tools and cooking equipment, Simza would plate objects with tin or emboss and engrave jewellery. Every town we came to we would stop at to sell these goods and Balo would also sharpen people's scissors or knives, using his whet-stone wheel — for a small fee. As he grew up, Arben was taught these skills and continued the trade with little help from his *Dat* and *Daj*.

In 1941, the war had not yet ended and we moved on to Clydebank from Abbotsinch. All of the family were trying to ignore the war. Scotland had remained uninjured throughout it, and there was no need for worry. Or so Simza thought. But moving on

to Clydebank was a mistake. On the 13th of March, the only sustained German air force attack on Scotland took place. 1200 people were killed in the raids. This, I assume, included Balo, Simza and Arben (then forty-six years old), who were resting at the bottom of an old oak at the time. As soon as Shofranka heard those aeroplanes she darted in the opposite direction, leaving all suffering behind us.

We ended up in a field at Glenburn. I felt ashamed of leaving everyone behind but I had not had any control over Shofranka. For two years she and I remained in the same area, moving whenever Shofranka needed a drink from the near-by brook or just when she chose to. Near the end of those two years, Shofranka gnawed her way to freedom and left me...stranded.

An auctioneer then discovered my presence while charting of land I was on. He attached me to this automobile item, I think it must have been a new invention as I had never seen one before. It was really brilliant though, and I had arrived in Barrhead in no time. I spent the night in a box-shaped place that had loads of tools in it, quite different from Balo's. During the night I thought about the gypsies, wondering if they were killed in the raid or if they had survived and what Balo, Simza and Arben were up to now. In the morning I was auctioned.

And the experiences continued. I was bought from the auction by a lovely man, Andrew Wilkins, and I live with him and his son Danny now — I have been here for thirty years. We all stay at a filling station — where automobiles are filled with fuel — which Andrew owns. I have seen more and more cars since being auctioned and they get more impressive (and popular) as time goes by. Andrew and Danny fix these wonders in their garage with the help of plenty of tools. That is their job. It looks quite complicated but they must do it well as the owners of these new inventions always seem satisfied.

You might think that I would be envious of these machines that have taken the place of *vardos* like me? Not at all. My time has been; something new has to enjoy the glory. I have had a long lifetime, a lifetime like no other. Wonderful people have cared for me and travelled with me, helping me on my journey through history. And I am sure that I have a lot more adventures to come.

Glossary of Romani words used:

drom — road,	daj — mother,
puro — old,	dat — father,
dari-av — sea,	grai — horse,
vardo — travelling wagon,	