

## **The Mystery of the Mallaig Train**

by Jamie Groves

‘Well it’s hardly the murder on the orient express, is it?’ says Stuart, always the smart arse.

McCall shoves his hands further into his pockets, scowling, his anger compounded by his physical proximity to Stuart. Two men in a toilet cubicle together. People might talk.

‘It’s a bloody liberty,’ says McCall, looking up at the lipstick scrawl. ‘Brand new carriage n’all.’

Stuart tuts, shakes his head. ‘Do you have any leads? Any clues? You could send a sample to the lab for forensic analysis.’

‘Get to fuck,’ says McCall, backing out of the cubicle.

Stuart follows him down the carriage, rankling, their shoes squeaking on the brand new floor.

‘Have you called the police? Alerted Interpol? Hey, you could be in the Crimewatch reconstruction!’ He deepens his voice, affecting a piss-poor impression of McCall. “‘It was just another day on the Mallaig branch line. Or so I thought. Little did I know, criminal masterminds were plotting to - ’”

‘Ok,’ snaps McCall, whirling round, his anger mocked by a loud squeak from the rubber floor. ‘I’m sorry I mentioned it. I just thought you, of all people, might share my annoyance. You who was pretty proud this morning, after all these years we finally get some new rolling stock. And then some mindless bawbag comes along, sees something nice and new and clean and thinks “Ah-ha! That looks nice and new and clean. I’d better fuck it right up.”’

McCall’s anger surprises even himself.

Stuart holds his hands out, conciliatory.

“You’re right. It is a liberty – I’m serious – it just goes to show, as you so often say, people’ve got no respect these days. It’s sad, pal. It really is.”

Placated, but still aggrieved, McCall stabs the exit button and the doors hiss efficiently open. This morning, he pressed the button a dozen times, just to enjoy its pleasing mechanical politeness. Now, it’s ruined.

He steps down onto the platform, stalks towards the station house to make a brew. His break time has been halved now, with that business, and he's less time to enjoy his cuppa. It's a sad day indeed when a man can not enjoy his cup of tea at break time. But still, at least Stuart stopped taking the piss and saw his point.

As the kettle boils, he looks out of the window, sees two old fellas sitting on the window ledge of the Co-op, one telling the other a story, waving his hands like he's re-enacting fisticuffs. He hears the deep, low rumble of the Cally Mac ferry, firing her reverse jets as she moves in to moor.

It comes inevitably. A part of McCall is almost relieved when Stuart breaks the pretence.

'Kids these days,' he sighs. 'They're just so... *lippy*.'

McCall pretends to throw a mug at him, and Stuart dives for cover. With a laugh, the anger gently dissipates.

Break over, they head back to the train. A trickle of foot passengers are in from the Armadale ferry. At peak season, there would be dozens; cyclists and campers and holidaying families. Four hikers are spread out on a bench, rucksacks and coats piled up around them. A young couple stand towards the end of the platform taking selfies, Eigg and Muck in the background, sunlight twinkling off the flat blue sea. Mrs McPherson is on her usual bench outside the waiting room. She likes a natter, and some days McCall does too, but today he strides past purposefully, towards his brand new, sullied carriages, cleaning fluid and wipes in hand. As he approaches the train, the assembled passengers begin to stand.

'Five minutes, folks,' he calls to them. 'Got a wee situation...'

McCall is not officious. He's not one of those men who, given a pair of epaulettes, think they rule the world. But it's true, they do have a situation. And he, as the train operator, is obliged to take command and deal with it before normal service can resume.

Back inside the cubicle, he regards the scrawl again.

*Maskell & Pitman taking me to bothy nr Arsaig. JD*

What a daft thing to write. What does it even mean? Who cares about your holiday plans, J-bloody-D?

He thinks back to that morning's journey. Mostly he was preoccupied with the glory of the new carriages, revelling in the near-silence with which they hummed along past the mountains and lochs, the viaduct that bit more breathtaking without the clank and jolt of the seventies stock. Since the Mallaig line was voted the Most Scenic Railway Line in the World, or some such, he's taken an even greater pride in his job. And that vote probably helped tip the balance in his campaign to replace the creaking, dilapidated stock. With more tourists coming, we need to cater for them, or they won't come back, he'd said, again and again, to anyone who would listen, and many who wouldn't. And he's drawn again to the age-old quandary of all those who live in beautiful, economically deprived areas. You want to draw tourists in, but then they come and mess up your scenery, litter your beaches, scribble on your train carriages.

Arisaig. They couldn't even spell it right.

He does remember a little group getting off at that tiny station by Loch nan Ceall, the saltwater spot where you can pull fresh mussels and oysters from the rockpools when the tide slinks out. The spot to which a young, confident McCall had gone, lifetimes ago, on a camping trip with friends, and girls, and almost got his end away behind a beached rowing boat. Lifetimes ago.

A young lady, fairly pretty, he remembers, with two men. He remembers checking their tickets. The men were friendly, one commenting about the unseasonal lack of rain, the other replying that a lack of rain's always unseasonal in the Western Isles. City boys. Glasgow, by their accents. He remembers that one of the men held all the tickets – odd for a party of adults, more usual for a family with kiddies. He remembers her giving him a funny look – a 'look at me!' look – but in McCall's experience, pretty young ladies are hard to look at without getting flustered, hard to talk to without talking daft. He just smiled and kept his focus on the men. Men are easier to deal with. He remembers seeing them disembark safely, before waving his flag at Stuart. He remembers one of the men was holding her hand – not her hand, he thinks now, her elbow, like you might hold a blind person's elbow guiding them across the road – as they headed for the exit.

'Aye, that's her,' he says, looking at the photo a few weeks later of Joanne Doyle, the girl who's been in all the news. 'Aye, that's them,' he says, looking at

the fuzzy CCTV stills of the group boarding the train at Fort William. But he can't, for the life of him, remember the scribbled names, he tells the police, as they attempt to retrace her steps, trying to piece together her disappearance. Which is odd, considering how many times he had cursed their names as he scrubbed away the last, desperate clue she had left behind.

He remembered mention of a bothy, nr Arisaig, and that helped narrow it down. There are only so many bothies in the area. And they found it, and found DNA traces of her, and they found her, some time later, in a shallow grave, wrapped in a tarp, and her parents could at least, at last, know that their baby wasn't coming home. But without names, the trail dried up. They even took the panel off the toilet wall and sent it to the lab for forensic analysis, but the detergent and vigorous wiping had obliterated the form of the letters completely. Stuart had the decency to keep his mouth shut through all of that.

McCall is bereft. He did the right thing, but his actions mean those lads are going to get away with murder. He tries everything the police suggest. Memory exercises, hypnotic regression, just bloody sitting down with a brew and thinking about it. But like faces from a dream, when you scrutinise them they disappear.

But he holds to the idea that criminals always return to the scene of the crime, clings to this notion as his last hope that he can in some way help the girl he failed, whose 'look at me' look was the last contact she made with anyone other than her killers. So he works the Mallaig line every day, and he keeps his eyes open, and every day he carries her photo, clipped from the newspaper, in a little envelope in his pocket, along with the blurry CCTV still from Fort William, and some days he carries handcuffs and some days he carries a club or a wee knife, depending on what kind of justice he's thinking of as he dresses that day, and he knows that one day he'll get them. He'll recognise them when he sees them. That much he knows.