

Narrow margins

By David Elliott



“Please...”

“Darling; I’m sorry.”

“Mum, New York is a world away.”

Doretha put her hands into her apron pockets. Her face contorted by her tongue pushing out her cheek.

“Come on Ellie, grab your coat.”

Doretha dragged her youngest daughter down through Rotherhithe to the public pier by the Mayflower Pub.

She accosted the boy in the hut.

“The Gravesend ferry?”

“Lucky you, it’s running against the tide, a half-hour late.”

Doretha rummaged in her purse and payed the fare in tarnished coppers. She looked over to the punters drinking in the pub and winced. “There goes this week’s housekeeping.”

The ferry arrived and they wobbled across the gangplank and found a couple of spare seats. At the stern, a wedding breakfast of delinquent EastEnders were demolishing a case of Young’s beer and bottles of London Gin; knocking the bones out of their drab dockland’s lives.

They sailed past Silvertown where the guano streaked South-American traders and banana boats were moored.

“Can’t we go quicker?” Ellie quietly whispered into her Mum’s ear. Her shallow breaths chasing the salt air on the incoming tide. Her lungs matching the steamers fight for every inch of headway.

Eventually Tilbury arrived; all the ocean liners queued up awaiting their passengers and their Royal Mail.

“Mum, which one?”

Doretha’s search was blurred by the forest of funnels.

The ferry span in mid-stream, its counterturning screws churned up a maelstrom.

“Gravesend stage. End of the line.” Cried a boatman.

Doretha and Ellie stayed glued to the rail.

“Not alighting?” asked the boatman.

“No thanks, we’re looking for a ship.”

“Which one?”

“The Anchises.”

“Ah, single blue funnel.”

As the ferry tooted and left the Gravesend stage hugging the Kent station, the clouds closed in. Weather turning with the tide. Her toot was answered by a deeper hoot from a departing liner, cutting through the mocha water.

“Mum, a single blue funnel.”

They checked every porthole of the Anchises as the boats passed in the narrows.

“There, the red coat at the stern. Maisy!”

Ellie waved madly, until her weary arms fell like an anchor.

“Godspeed sister, Godspeed.”