What's in a Name?

Autobiographical Story by Marian Evans [nee Reid] Aged 77

"Ye’re a Dogger"
I am?
"Aye, ye’re a Dogger"
She was nine and liked being a Dogger, whatever that was.
She knew she was half Lossie Codhead but being a Dogger was another special name that linked her to her fisher Granny and Dai in the Seatoon. The name warmed and embedded itself in her.
Her other half was the Elgin quine, an Elgin Skiter. The elder of Mary’s two girls, poor wee things, orphans. Willie’s girls. Willie killed in the war.
"Yer faither would have been richt proud a you"
Granny Lossie said every Saturday as her arthritic, fingers gripped the wee girl’s soft, resisting hand.

Saturdays. Always the trainie to Lossie. Running like the wind to Elgin’s big station her excitement held no bounds. The great booking hall with its ticket portal, third class please, never first. Who cared, the girl and her little sister had the run of the whole train anyway, hunting for abandoned newspapers and magazines maybe even a Beano or a Dandy! Blazing fires warmed the winter waiting rooms. Shafts of summer sunlight lit the high windows. And whoever ate in that posh Railway Dining Room? Peering through etched glass doors the girl saw tables with white linen, wine glasses and, of all things, a mirrored bar – just like in the pictures.

The signal lifts, whistles blow, great wheels turn and billowing steam fights to escape from under the platform’s glass roof. The two sisters on their window seats look out for their Elgin granny and granda’s back garden. Today the girls are not hanging onto the fence waving to the driver approaching the White Gates. Today is Saturday and they are the passengers sitting at the windows where rough seats scratch their summer legs. Big leather belts like teachers’ straps hold the windows up or down. Cinders fly and bursts of smoke make mysteries of well-known landmarks. Familiar pictures over the seats remind the girl of where she has never been. There are the pretty children playing on ever-sunny beaches. There are the mountains and lakes with names to set forever a love of trains and travel.

The coastal sky is high and clear. The river flows beside the train as it too reaches the end of its journey rushing into the sea whilst washing miles of sandy beach. The girl loved this place.
“Stand up straight”
Where did that voice come from?
“You should be proud of your height, stop slouching, remember you’re a Dogger”

Across the road was her big cousin Billy, a bobby. She had at least seventeen cousins. Were they all Doggers too?

There’s that word again. A name to live up to but why?

Fish for tea. Yellow fish, a nice haddock or two, a fry to take home. The girl’s Grand Dai had fished from his own boat The Nile. It was a Zulu. She had heard that he sailed to the Baltic and brought back earth as ballast. Snippets of stories, exotic names, mysteries, whispers. The Battle of the Nile and the Zulu Wars happened thousands of miles away in strange lands yet how are such people, places and things named. Her Dai smelled of wool and baccy and could spit tobacco juice with such accuracy he never missed the spittoon. If it was fine he worked mending his nets on the Bankie by the house. If it was wild he’d be up in the roof space. He wore an intricate, hand-knitted gansey and a bonnet and the girl only ever saw him once without them. On that occasion he came to her home wearing a suit and a collar and tie. A strangely unfamiliar man.

“Well, Willie”

She heard him say to her father

“That’s my house paid for”

Hands were shaken, backs gently slapped. That’s all, but pride and confidence permeated that room. Her Dai was a Dogger. There it was again, seeping into the girl’s soul.

Retired, her Dai sat his days out with the other old seadogs on the Lazy Dykie by the Canalie. Looking like peas from the same pod they smoked their pipes and stained their fingers with Woodbines. Their caps stayed on whatever the weather. Their uniquely patterned ganseys were said to identify any fisherman drowned at sea. What tales the old men must have shared of hardship, wild weather, poor fishing and hard times. No modern aids to guide them in their small boats, just the sea, sky, stars and experience to tackle a turbulent North Sea. Strong hands, tired but bright eyes, tobacco yellowed moustaches held them together as closely as their bond of faith and pride. With by-names like Pilot and Choucks they too were Doggers. The girl felt they were a people to be proud of and found comfort in belonging.

She often wondered. Doggers? Dogged? Strong and independent people, used to troubles and hardships. Perhaps it was associated with Dogger Bank the great North Sea breeding and
fishing grounds. It made sense and sounded logical but it didn’t really excite her at all. There just had to be more.

They said her Lossie Granny had been a beauty with black eyebrows like angel’s wings. A fisherman’s wife. What joy could that hold for a young girl? Six children carried and born whilst baiting nets, gutting fish, filling the creel and walking to Elgin to sell the catch. The old folk said that a fisherman looked first for a strong girl to be his wife. Before the harbour came the girl’s grandmother, like all the other fisherwomen, had to carry a younger Grand Dai on her back to see him safely aboard his boat making sure his feet stayed dry at sea. Now the girl knew only the shell of her Grandmother. She did not know the straight, handsome, unsmiling woman in the photograph with her man and her bairns. But the girl felt respect and admiration for this woman who was surely a true Dogger?

Losing her youngest son to war was the final exhausting blow to the girl’s Granny who took to her bed remaining there for many years. The girl’s aunties took turns to live and care for Granny and Dai. The aunties were lively and funny. Auntie Maggie who had been a herring girl, sorrowed that no-one ever called her Margaret. Two other aunties went to 10 Downing Street to work for Ramsay MacDonald. He chose Dogger girls from the Seaon as housemaids for their reliability and hard work.

For the girl, Saturday visits held a mixture of feelings and secret thoughts. She dreaded but complied with her Granny’s arthritic grasp in order to earn the joys that came later. The compulsory visit to her Granny’s wee back room with its four-paned window the size of the family bible, was hard. The old woman wore mostly black propped up on the high bed that was squeezed into a wall corner. She wept for the girl’s father, and the girl’s throat became tight with the pain of her own unspoken loss. Yet her Granny rejoiced in the academic achievements of her two orphaned grand daughters. As she persisted that she would not live to see the girls the following Saturday the gloom that had settled upon them was enchantingly lifted when they escaped to the greenie with its daisies, to the blue skies, skylarks’ songs and the smell of the sea.

So the day brightens and cousins gather and aunties blether and comics are swapped. There’s dookin in the sea in droopy woollen bathing suits and games on the beach. There’s fish and chips for tea and whispered laughter and gossip among the women. Then serious talk about the men away fighting.

Too soon, its time for home. The girl wants to stay, to stay till the last train, to stay overnight with her cousins and play with them in the Pumffle Hole at the top of the stairs. The station is quiet. They
are the only passengers. The girls half-heartedly check the carriages for things left behind. The river and the beach fade and the rumbling wheels shoogles them to sleep.

The girl had a deep belonging to the old fishing town peopled as it is now with so many ghosts. Ghosts of fishing boats and fish markets. Whisperings in old fisher tongue and spectres of old men staring out to sea. She still feels connected, part of something unique and wonderful. Here the shy, little girl found comfort for her untapped sadness and was nourished by the knowledge that she was a Dogger. Whatever that was.

Although no one lives anymore in the old family house in The Seatoon the girl’s own children and grand children are Doggers too whether they like it or not. And they do not like it much. The name makes them shudder.

Doggers had used the skins and occasionally bladders of dogs for floats for their fishing nets.

The girl had no memory of dogs in the Seatoon.

NOTE an original dog skin float can be seen in the Lossiemouth fishing museum.