**The Edge**

**by Marta Rifat**

Thick mist encircled the MacRaes. This was wrong.

‘But— .’ Annie said.

‘Don’t,’ he warned.

‘I was going to say, *Ed*, how come the weather was fine all the way up and now—.’

‘It’s all fog and there’s no signal,’ moaned Ben. ‘Bandit country.’

That was Granda Robertson’s wheezing condemnation for anywhere outside Glasgow. Wee Doddie Robertson – you’d never call him that to his face or he’d rearrange yours – looked as old as the Cairngorms and yet subsisted on spite and 20 a day. The reek of cigarette smoke rolled off Ben after a visit to the curmudgeon’s fume-filled flat. At least Annie hung out a window when she lit up. Ed had hoped if everyone breathed some completely fresh air, things would be different.

A small vein throbbed near his left eyebrow. His grip on the steering wheel relaxed then quickly resumed. The ancient van was always pulling to the right.

‘Eyes on the road Ed, c’mon, for f –, for godsake. You’ll get us all killed.’

‘Mummy!’

The shriek came from Ellie, squashed with her older brother in the van’s semi-seat behind their parents.

‘No sweetheart, naeb’dy’s gonna get… look, we’re OK. Ab-so-lute-ly fine. Because *Daddy’s* in charge.’

‘Ann. Let’s keep it light, eh? I can barely see the road.’

‘D’you actually know where we are, genius?’

‘Poking me with your stick-on nails does not help. Give it a rest. It’ll be fine.’

‘You always say that and it always isn’t.’

‘There’s a sign coming up. We can’t have far to go. And no, Ellie, we’re no there yet.’

Ellie sighed and resumed her intense discussions with Panda, Egg the rabbit and Dolores, an imaginary and naughty friend.

The signpost for the turning he needed took Ed by surprise, and he swung left sharply, forgetting that the van wasn’t loaded with the usual boxes of fruit and veg, tins and packets, as well as the other stuff, the stuff that weighed hardly anything in little clear bags and generated his brother-in-law’s main income, the stuff that Ed wasn’t supposed to know about and didn’t want to know about. Everyone yelled and he slammed on the brakes.

‘Sorry, sorry, everybody. All OK?’

‘Nicely done, Ed. Driver of the Year award for you. I really wanted to fling myself into the windscreen and chip two, no three nails. Can’t wait to see what you’ll do next.’ Annie threw her door open and stood outside, arms folded.

The vein pulsed.

‘Ellie, Ben, tell me you’re OK.’

‘My phone’s under your bloody seat, so I’m totally not OK, Dad.’

‘Ben’s a big sweary baby,’ said Ellie and squealed as her brother lunged for her. Ed pulled out his son with one hand and fished for the phone in the other.

‘Ben, cool it. Please. We’ll stop here a bit. Have something to eat. How about it, kids?’

Silence.

He could barely see the rutted track they were on and could only hear the wind and some birds and maybe a tractor far away. Panic started to rise in his gut. Small, sticky finger gripped his thumb.

‘Caravan,’ whispered Ellie.

A large, off-white caravan loomed from the off-white mist.

‘This? We came all the way across the ‘king country for this, Ed? You are bloody joking. I mean, what the?’

Panic was shortening his breath, drying his mouth, taking over. He closed his eyes then lifted Ellie into his arms.

‘Well, I’m not turning around now, *love*. So, let’s have a look at what *your* dear brother, Uncle Simon, has lent us for the weekend.’

Ed hauled out the cases, wincing. A rib was still tender from Annie’s last outburst at the flat. She struggled to unlock the caravan door. It creaked open. Inside, the air was sharp and damp.

Annie condemned it as a hole and she was not touching a thing. Ed stifled ‘So, what’s new?’ under a cough. The children hesitated and he put his hands behind his back. ‘Ellie, sweetheart – left, or right?’ She tapped his left arm. He produced a bottle of disinfectant and cleaned every surface. He connected the power and switched on the meagre, peeling heater.

‘Smells like Christmas and not in a good way,’ moaned his son, throwing himself onto the hollowed sofa bed. The whole vehicle shook. Annie glowered at the curling carpet tiles. Ed screwed the cap tightly on his bottle of ‘Winter hearth antibac’.

They ate the vegetable soup and the pile of sandwiches he had made the night before, then chose from the fruit box.

If Annie’s brother paid me more for this dodgy driving job, if I hadn’t been out of work so long, if she saved some money for once, if she ever made an effort in the kitchen, if she treated me like… The long list crawled around a worn path.

He put their belongings into cinnamon-clean cupboards. Annie smoked and swore outside, Ellie admonished Dolores and Panda, and Ben chased coloured shapes around his phone.

Ed silently damned his brother-in-law for claiming the caravan would be ‘a great family break’. Si had clearly never stayed here. Just another side hustle, a con. ‘It’s a gem. Empty the chemical lav and it’s yours for nada. Cover the fuel and you can take the van and all, mate,’ Si had laughed, lobbing the keys at Ed.

Big deal, mate. Ed mourned the days of owning a car. Now he was supposed to be grateful to borrow the fruit and veg rust-bucket that he drove all week and which barely managed 50mph downhill.

He was washing up and planning dinner when the row erupted. Ben found Ellie testing how many bananas would fit in their mother’s handbag. Ellie blamed Dolores. Annie was that close to lashing out.

An almighty banging on the flimsy door stopped them.

Ed opened it to a gaunt man in blue overalls.

‘Simon said to give ye these.’

The man held up paper bags, dark with grease. His bony arms were too long for his worn jacket.

Ed took them carefully.

‘Rowies,’ said the man, appraising Annie intently.

‘What did you call me?’ she shouldered past Ed and glared at the man. Even on the caravan threshold, she was barely level with his chest.

He stepped back. ‘Nethin. Called you nethin. Ah brung rowies, ken, Aiberdeen butteries, an pies, like he said. You’re the sister.’

‘What’s it to you?’

‘Nethin. Jist dain fit Simon, Mr Robertson, says fer us tae dae.’

Ed fought down rising bile. ‘And what else did he tell you, Mr whoever you are?’

The man looked off into the mist.

‘Jist keep an eye. See you’re OK.’

‘D’you work for my brother?’

‘Best spik tae him.’

Before Ed or Annie could ask another question, the figure loped off into the grey and they heard a quad bike engine roar away.

The children stuffed their faces, seduced by the familiar pleasures of fat, salt and carbohydrate, although the lumpy oval shape was unfamiliar, and they peeled the savoury pastry from the pies, leaving the pucks of congealed meat.

Their parents looked at each other.

‘No, I don’t know what he’s playing at.’ She sucked hard on her cigarette.

‘Are you not …’

‘Scared? Of that streak of misery? Shut up. Simon’d sort him out, one word from me.’

Ed had heard plenty about Simon and his sorting out. In the early days, Ed had often expected to be on the receiving end and seriously considered giving up Annie, but she was gorgeous and funny and more full of life than anyone he’d ever met. He frowned at how much had changed since then. How could a golden boy of the ring fall to this? The same reason for everything, Annie’s will was stronger than his and when she said to hang up his gloves before he lost his looks and Simon would fix a job for him, he did. His friends had tried to warn him, his sister had her own benzo-shaped troubles, his trainer did whatever the goons in the tight suits instructed, and that left nobody else to turn to, except himself, but he never seemed to reach a decision before the decision was made around him and on life went.

‘Kids, go outside and play or something. Dad and me have to have a wee talk.’

Ben sniggered and Annie clipped the back of his head. Ellie grabbed Egg and fled between their legs.

‘So?’ Ed rolled up the torn paper and pie innards and put them in a plastic bag he’d brought for waste.

‘So.’ Annie crossed her legs and wondered how six foot two of muscle and grace had turned into a zombie housewife. He still looked exactly like one of those Greek statues she’d seen on a school trip and she’d kill to have eyelashes that long and thick. A tiny part of her knew she should feel desire, maybe even gratitude, but there was a thick wall of scunner in front of it.

They sat, then started talking in circles which reached the shouting stage when Ben burst in, declaring terminal boredom.

He didn’t know where Ellie had gone and whined that nobody had said he had to watch her all the time. For once, Annie was too worried to hit anyone and ran into the mist shouting. Ed set off for the main road and she took the track further into the fields.

Ed was heading back when his phone chimed. Number withheld.

‘We’ve got yer bairn.’

The ground tilted.

‘Are you hearin me? We’ve got her. Fit? Dolores. Fit kin o a nam? We’ve got your Dolores.’

‘Don’t hurt her. Please. What do you want?’

‘Fit div we want? Man, we’ve no time for aa this footerin aboot, even fer Robertson.’

‘What do you mean? Can I speak to Ellie?’

‘Fa’s Ellie?’

Ed bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself crying. Blood pooled in his mouth.

‘Our wee girl. She pretends –’

‘Chrissakes. Are ye at the caravan?’

‘Five minutes, I’ll be there. What–’

‘Jist be there.’

The line cut.

Ed sobbed and phoned his wife.

They waited by the caravan, scanning up and down the track, willing the mist to lift. A quad bike appeared. The pie man was driving and a younger, impassive version of him was in the other seat, Ellie on his lap, Egg’s long ears dangling from his fist.

Annie grabbed her and held so tightly that the girl wriggled to the ground and ran to her father.

‘Mitherly love.’ The younger man swept his gaze up and down Annie and up again, settling on her cleavage.

‘Bairn was on oor property. It’s private. Totally private. Aa sorts o dangers.’

Ed stroked his daughter’s fine hair as she clung to his leg. Then he straightened, shoulders back, arms out, ready for the fight.

A flicker of surprise passed over the pie man’s lined face.

‘Ah, steady there. Nethin happened. Nethin. Foond her in the, em, in a *barn*, gied a biscuit and ca’d yer phone. That’s it. She’s fine.’

Ellie looked at the adults, yawned, grabbed her rabbit and told everyone it was nap time. She climbed up the rusting steps to bed.

‘OK, then. Thank you. We’re sorry for any trouble, Mr…’

‘Ed! *They* should be sorry. They will be sorry when I – ‘

The men gave a short bark of laughter and turned to leave. The older one swung back.

‘Robertson owes *us* noo. You mak sure he kens it, missus.’

Annie flinched.

When the men had vanished, Ben emerged from the footwell of the van, the only hiding place Ed could think of, and a tense whispered conversation eventually convinced Ben that the men weren’t bad, just grumpy farmers that somehow knew Uncle Simon, and everything was fine.

When Ellie woke, all she would say was a man gave her a custard cream after she promised to come out of the big building with little trees, then she had a ride back and bounced all the way. Annie decided she’d deal with this, on her own, face to face with her brother when they got back. Ed closed his eyes and nodded.

Ellie demanded more adventures.

Small patches of blue were breaking the grey.

‘Right,’ said her father. ‘Everyone in the van – Mystery Tour.’

Simon had long since removed the satnav. ‘Security, mate, you know. Still, follow your nose, have a bit of fun.’

Back on the main road, the haar billowed, and everyone strained to spot a sign to the coast.

Suddenly, the curtain of mist whipped away, the sun shone, there was sea ahead, blue as the Med. Ed headed straight for it, but found the road gradually rose and took them into a farmyard. A young woman in wellington boots caked with manure, vigorously waved him through.

The road petered into a lane and ended in a small car park. On top of a cliff. The vein pulsed and bulged.

An elderly couple stepped out of a dusty Honda and smiled at them.

‘Come to see the gannets?’

‘We were trying to get to the seaside,’ said Annie, mimicking their polite tones. They didn’t notice.

‘Och, you’re not far. We can show you on the map, but if you’ve not seen gannets before, it’s really worth it. We can lend you binoculars.’

Everything was forgotten in the spectacle, clouds of blinding white birds riding the winds then plunging down, fearless, spearing the waves. They were like beautiful machines.

Back at the van, Ed studied the ancient road map the couple had given him. He had fetched a bag of oranges in exchange and the woman had patted his arm and asked if everything was alright. He said nothing. She pointed to places along the coast, listing all the attractions and he managed to focus on two.

Ed hadn’t eaten ice cream since he was a boy, his diet was strict as soon as he started training and he lost the taste for it. This was better than anything he remembered. They sat around a yellow Formica table and beamed at each other, yielding to the luxury of real double cream wrapped around their favourite flavours.

The toilets were marked ‘Loons’ and ‘Quines’ and Ben blushed scarlet when a giggling girl pulled him away from the Quines’ door and whispered the translation into his pink ear. The café was heaving with happy people. The MacRaes couldn’t understand most of what they were saying. It was like being abroad. The morning was a lifetime ago.

On they travelled, past rolling fields and tiny villages. No high-rises, flyovers, reeking underpasses, another world. Golden cows and black ones with a white stripe around the middle. Ellie screamed they were pandas.

The journey stopped beside towering sand dunes. The wind was fresh. The sea boomed nearby.

‘No signal. This is rubbish.’ Ben waved his phone in front of his father’s face. Ed sighed. Ben had reset. How had Ed produced this lazy, whining bag of bones. Maybe he hadn’t. He glanced at Annie. No, don’t go there again.

He took Ellie’s hand and headed for a sun-bleached wooden path up a dune. His wife and son listlessly followed, no longer hearing birds, or noticing wildflowers.

Father and daughter reached the top of the pale track and below them stretched shingle, a beach, the mouth of a river and the sea. But the path continued away from the beach. Ed tried standing on the steep slope of soft sand and grinned. He grabbed Ellie and they slid in stages, carried by the dune, to the shore. He shouted to Annie and Ben to follow, but they shook their heads and turned back down the boardwalk.

Ellie ran to a jumble of huge stone blocks wedged into the sand. She pressed her hands onto the cold surfaces.

‘What’re these, Daddy?’

He lifted her onto one.

‘Fairy castles.’

A fail-safe response. Ellie was an expert on fairies. And cleanliness. She scrambled down, inspecting the castles. ‘No windows,’ she noted as she dabbed her hands with the sanitiser she carried in her pink rucksack.

He looked up at the dunes, saw the gouge he’d made descending. He imagined the biggest overhang, thick with spiky grass, breaking free and burying him. There would be no Simon, no sleepless nights, no more trying to make everything clean and safe, pretending life was bearable. No more anything.

He sank to his knees and tears rolled. Howling, he grabbed fistfuls of pebbles and threw them at the river. He gulped for air and opened his eyes. Ellie was clutching her arm and staring at him.

He ran to her, kissing her, sorry, sorry, sorry.

She searched his smeared face for clues. ‘Is it a game?’

This little scrap of a girl. She must always feel hope. He must make sure of it. The sudden certainty made him gasp.

‘Daddy?’

He scanned the beach and spotted a scuffed yellow float. He balanced it on a fairy castle. With Ellie on his knee, they threw pebbles. One missile eventually knocked the target flying from its perch. Ellie clapped her hands and retrieved the float. Then she waved and pointed. Annie and Ben were toiling over the sand.

‘Hurry up,’ Ellie called, ‘we’ve got a compemetition!’

Her mother and brother just wanted the van keys and civilisation but their identical tight mouths softened at the sound of Ellie’s laughter and Ed looked to be actually enjoying himself, for once.

Afterwards, Ben carried his sister on his shoulders and Annie didn’t pull away when Ed took her hand as they all walked back by the edge of the dunes.

Large dark eyes rose from the water and studied them. On the far shore, seals hauled up and softly sang.