



SCHOOL TRIP

Anne Donovan

The wee lassie wouldnae take her cossie aff in the shower. Even though there was a shower curtain and naebody could see her, she still wouldnae.

‘It’s no nice, Miss.’

‘D’you no take your clothes off to have a shower at home?’

‘We’ve got a bath.’

‘A bath then. You strip off to have a bath, don’t you?’

‘Aye.’ The wee lassie looked at her as if she was daft. ‘But that’s different. Ah can lock the door. Somebody could see me here — it’s no nice.’

‘It’s no very nice to be smelly either. You cannae wash yoursel properly down there wi a cossie on.’

She wisht she hadnae said that noo.

They'd never of let the weans go tae the wee shop if they thought they were gonnae knock stuff. They were only at there for hauf an hour while Janice and her got the messages — Jesus they were never out their sight for the entire week. The only shop in the village, if you could call it a village, a huddle a hooses two mile fae the hostel. Apart fae the Spar minimarket and the butchers and surely they wouldnae be shopliftin a pund a sausages. That was wanny the reasons for takin them tae a place like that in the middle of naewhere. There was nothin they could get up tae, it was easy tae keep them thegether. Efter the trip tae EuroDisney last year the heidie'd banned the teachers fae gaun trips anywhere there was shops, crowds, temptation.

'Take them to the countryside,' he said at the staff meetin. 'Give them fresh air, exercise, healthy living.'

God knows there wasnae much fresh air where they came fae. Or trees. Or water. No like here.

'Check that watter!' wanny them'd shouted as they went over the bridge across the firth when they'd got past Inverness. 'It's pure beautiful so it is.'

It was pure beautiful. Flat as glass wi a peachy sunset ridin it.

'Wait till we get to the coast,' said Janice. 'It's even lovelier.'

Everythin had been brilliant, until the shopliftin. Mair like a holiday than a school trip. The whole hostel tae theirsels, the hottest week in June. They'd hand-picked the group — perfect wee lassies every wan.

'Jammy bastards,' said Don, lookin at the list in the attendance sheet the week afore they went. 'Could yous no have taken at least wan nutter? Give the rest of us some peace while yous are away.'

Even bein away wi Janice had been OK. She was OK really, just

they'd nothin in common. Janice was in her late forties wi two kids — students noo — read *Woman and Home* magazine, sat knittin jumpers in fancy patterns at lunchtime in the staffroom. Janice knew how much mince for fourteen people, how long the breid would last, organised the weans in teams for the cookin and cleanin. That was part of it, daein chores. That was educational, learnin tae live together.

'Some of them don't even sit down as a family at mealtimes,' Janice said. 'Just eat whenever they're hungry, in front of the TV, stick something in the microwave.'

Janice'd written up the rationale for the trip, filled it in on the yella form. You had tae dae that noo, everythin had tae be educational. Janice was a Guidance teacher, knew all the jargon.

Social skills, teamwork, widening horizons.

She was just there tae drive the minibus cause Janice couldnae. And because she'd hardly any classes when the seniors were away on exam leave. That wasnae on the form but.

She couldnae even remember the wee lassie's name noo. Her hair was dark and her skin was oily, nose stabbed wi blackheads. She wasnae wan you'd of noticed, no like big Sharon who sang along tae the radio, knew the words of every popsong, or Honor, who claimed tae be vegetarian but didnae like vegetables and ate macaroni cheese every night, or Lizzie, who was neat and quiet, nose aye in a book. This wee lassie was just wanny the crowd, all sittin round the big table eatin cornflakes drowned in milk, jumpin about on the beach or moanin their way through the only hillwalk of the week.

'How many miles is that noo, Miss?'

'About four hundred yards.'

‘How much longer?’

‘You’ve a bit to go yet.’

‘Could we no just sit in the van? Dae we have tae dae this?’

They only walked three miles but Janice tellt them it was six.

‘I’ll put six in the logbook,’ she whispered. ‘It’s too hot for walking.’

The weans collapsed on the minibus seats when they got back, moanin.

‘Man ah’m pure shattered.’

‘Ma legs are fallin aff.’

She started the engine and the radio blasted out. Big Sharon leapt up fae her agony. ‘Ah love this wan... *Ooh baby... ah wanna know ...*’ And they were all singin like linties, bouncin fae wan sidey the van tae the other as they heided back tae the hostel.

That was the day afore it happened. Hauf an hour, hauf a bloody hour was all. They’d only had a few messages tae get — if they’d just taken them intae the minimarket wi them. But they’d been that well behaved up till then, they trusted them. They’d been like a family really. Janice was the mammy and her the big sister. Wan night the weans’d came in the teachers’ room, tried on her shoes and her jaicket. *Cool Miss*. She’d never had a sister, two brothers just, so it was nice. No like bein a teacher, no like bein in control, bein bossy, bein smart. Just nice.

The polis arrived while they were makin the dinner. A big pot of tatties bubblin away, casserole in the oven, her and Janice had cracked open a bottle of red and three of the lassies were settin the table. The rest were hangin around, fixin each other’s hair, bletherin. Lizzie and Honor were lookin at a map of the area, checkin out the

beach they were gonnae take them the morra, their last day. If she'd taken a photie it'd of been perfect.

Social skills. Teamwork. Widening horizons.

She'd just taken the rubbish tae the bin when she seen him gettin out his car. She'd thought it was nice, he was a community polis, bein social. That's how he'd started. Soft voiced, Highland. Sergeant MacLeod. Donald.

'Sorry to trouble you. Just a few missing items... trinkets, sweeties. Don't want to make an issue. If you could see they're returned the shopkeeper will not take the matter further.'

She couldnae remember why they'd searched their stuff. Had they asked them tae gie it back and they'd no? Was it Janice's idea? Or the weans? She knew they'd agreed tae it, knew she wouldnae of just went through their things withoot permission. All she could remember was bein up in the dorm, rummlin through each bag and findin the stuff: sparkly bangles, sweetie necklaces, shiny pens wi blue and pink feathers stuck tae them. Mountains of stuff — how the hell did they get out the shop wi it? Every single wanny them had somethin. Even wee Lizzie. She felt sick.

A dare. That's what Sharon eventually tellt them. Somebody'd started it, knocked somethin — naebody'd say who — got out the shop withoot bein caught, then there was a dare, everybody had tae join in.

'Ah know it was stupid, miss. Please don't get Lizzie intae trouble, she didnae want tae. She only done it cause we said we'd no speak tae her. Her da'll kill her.'

A blur. Them packed aff tae their beds at seven o'clock. Her gettin that pissed on the red wine she couldnae speak while Janice wrote up the incident in the logbook. And next day the traipse tae the

shop, every last wanny them troopin in tae apologise tae the wifie in the beige overall, and the ceremonial haundin over the white poly bag wi its glitterin magpie treasure. Nae rows or lectures because there was nae need for them, there was nothin tae say.

Janice thought they shouldnae go tae the beach as they'd planned but they did, and the lassies screamed as they slid doon the sand dunes and screamed when they jumped intae the freezin watter and Honor done cartwheels along the damp sand on the shoreline, leavin perfect handprints.

And the teachers got wee Lizzie on her ain and tellt her that they had tae report it tae the heidie because it was the rules and they'd ask him no tae tell her da but wernaen promisn anythin, and Lizzie gied a blurry smile and big tears came up in her eyes.

But that wasnae what she really remembered of it all. Naw, it was the searchin. The feelin of dirtiness crawlin on her skin, lookin through their stuff: their wee girly toilet bags wi pink and lilac kittens or love-hearts patterned on them. Inside, the talc that smelled of parma violets and the strawberry sweetie lipsticks. Makeup mirrors shaped like flowers somebody'd bought special for them tae take on their school trip away.

The last bed, the wee lassie's, her that wouldnae take aff her cossie, was the wan nearest the windae. Nae toilet bag. A yella polybag wi Savers printed on it in red letters. Inside her toothbrush and toothpaste and a scratchy facecloth.

She sat on the bed, just looked. If she'd knew, she'd of bought her a nice toilet bag, filled it wi stuff, pretty stuff: bath pearls and heart soap and a soft pure white flannel. But she never.

All the way back in the minibus, she wanted tae tell Janice but

couldnae say in fronty them. Then about an hour fae hame, the weans all seemed tae have dozed aff in the back, leanin on each other's shoulders as they sped along the motorway, and she put out her haund and turned the radio dial, lowered the volume on the nonstop pop.

But Janice kept lookin out the passenger windae, her mind on her knittin and her husband and the meals she'd cook for her sons, hame for the weekend. So she just kept her eyes on the road ahead, listenin tae the windscreen wipers scrapin at the smirr of rain.

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