



The Red Gate

The red gate is still there, rustier than ever. One bar broken, just like it always was. Taller now, I lean on the top bar and look over the field. Grey winter rain slants down. I shiver, but I don't go back to the car. I want to see. Houses, all along the hilltop, a big new estate where there was once only grass. That tree... it's grown, but you can see it's the same old tree. Just by that tree was where our caravan used to be...

The blazing July sun made the step almost too hot to sit on, but I didn't care. I was happy. I was seven. In the van, Grandma bustled about, making pancakes. In the shade of the tree, my dog Patch sat and panted. On my knee I held the eagle kite. After the pancakes, the eagle would soar into the blue, empty sky on its first ever flight.

The sky was always blue, back then. Now, rain clouds hang over the crouched rooftops. The houses get in the way and stop you seeing the path over the hill and down to the sea. A sign by the gate says, "PRIVATE. KEEP OUT". No caravans now.

She brought me the pancake on a blue and white plate. Patch sneaked over, nose twitching. "Don't feed it to him," she told me as she went back inside. The radio was on – some song she liked. Sugar crunched between my teeth and lemon juice sizzled on my tongue.

Patch didn't like lemon. I found him a bit with just sugar on. We sat on the hot step, eating. The field and the sky and the day and the kite waited for us.

I reach into my jacket and pull out the photo. Me and Patch on the step. Blue paint's peeling from the doorway and I'm laughing and showing off the kite. She must have taken that snap. On the back she's written our names and the date. We'd go there every year for our holidays. We didn't know then it was the last snapshot.





I'd lie in bed when I was a kid and think about the van. Imagine what must have happened the night the storm came. The poor old van tumbled over and over by the wind, like a dustbin blown across a backyard. I'd see it in the rushing dark, crashing down the hill, doors buckling and windows gone. Inside, lockers come flying open and cups and saucepans and games and books come raining out. My eagle kite is there somewhere, dancing around with the other stuff, as the van lurches and spins.

Me, Grandma and Patch went down there a week later, to see the damage. The van wasn't by the tree, but at the bottom of the hill, a crumpled tin can put out with the rubbish. My shoes crunched on broken glass. Patch had to stay in the car. We poked around in the wreck for a bit, but there was nothing left worth saving.

The photo is getting wet. I put it back in my jacket and turn up my collar. No point in coming here now. There's just the wind and the rain and those blank houses. But the rain is easing off and a ragged piece of blue sky shows through. If I leave now, I can be home before it gets dark. Then I see them. Up by the houses on a bit of waste ground. Sunlight breaks over them and I hear the boy laugh and the dog bark, before the wind whips the sound away. His kite is a red diamond, not an eagle. But it rises steeply over the rooftops, banking and diving in the breeze, its tail glittering in the winter sun.

