



Mummer's
Daughter
and Other
Stories

Rei Fletcher

The instructions said to bring a kerchief for her hair and also an apron. She went to a big, busy shop, searching through kitchenwares until she found a wall full of them. She checked the instructions again, but it offered no specifications. She thought if it covered all of her front it would be best. Dark? Light? Patterns? Some had loops for utensils...

She poked through a stack on sale. Near the bottom she found a set that had the cartoon character on it that she had chosen for her application skin. Neither too cheap nor too expensive. She thought it would be acceptable.

She arrived fifteen minutes early for the second lesson, worried about seating. To her great relief the oven stations were assigned. She searched out her name and stowed her bag on an out of the way shelf. The food safety instructions asked for hair to be neatly pulled back. She covered her braid with the kerchief and tied her apron in place. When she checked the clock there were still ten minutes. Other students were still filtering in. She pulled her stool out and perched, checking her notes again.

"Hey again. It looks like we're baking buddies."

Ed smiled. Her face was pale, but her eye makeup looked like peacock feathers, and her lips were green. She dropped her bag on the counter and pulled out her own apron. It was black. It should have stood out awkwardly, but instead it looked very professional. It looked cool. Her kerchief had flames on it.

"You got a set, huh? It's really cute."

Compliments were sometimes hard to respond to. As she decided what to say she saw Ed's expression begin to take on a familiar look. A sort of confusion, embarrassment and regret that made every social interaction an awkward agony.

"Thank you."

Ed's retreat was halted.

"I like your kerchief."

She made a face and laughed, adjusting it. "Thank you. The whole idea" — she gestured to the mandatory baking attire — "is so much like a little housewife. At least I can do it my way, right?"

They were given the recipe. The instructor began guiding them through the steps. Emma measured the ingredients. Flour ought to be handled differently than sugar, she remembered. She checked and double checked each amount. It was better to measure twice and cut once. They'd taught her that aphorism to help explain response lags.

Gradually she became aware of Ed. Whenever there was a minute to rest she'd lean against the counter to watch. She thought at first that she was double checking the work, but her gaze was never on Emma's hands. It wasn't especially intense, but the little swell of anxiety caused by her regard was prone to making her clumsy. She concentrated hard on her work, so she didn't make a mistake.

"What brings you to baking class?"

"My—" She reminded herself that her pregnant friend was a lie meant for the application. It didn't seem right to lie to Ed. She thought quickly. Two workstations away the men from the first lesson were messily attempting to mix the wet ingredients. "I was told it was a good place to meet people."

"Men, you mean?" She laughed. She felt bit of her anxiety uncoil.

"Maybe that's what they meant, after all."

"Ah."

She watched Ed stirring the dry ingredients. Her arms looked too strong for the task. She wondered what her hobbies were. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt with a logo on the front. Maybe she played an instrument. Like drums. Did she play a sport? She tried to imagine her without her bright makeup, wearing sports clothing.

Ed looked up. Emma felt heat flood her cheeks. It was rude to stare. It was so rude.

"Why did you come?"

"Hm?" She was smiling. It might not have bothered her, Emma's rudeness. She breathed a little easier.

"I promised my sister. I think she thinks it'll be a gateway class." She shrugged, almost embarrassed. "I didn't really like school. Only managed one year at university. Even my brother finished his courses, but not me. She'd like me to go back. Do something with my life."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an a...I'm an intake secretary at an art collective."

"Do you enjoy it?" Small talk worked the way they said it would. Ed chatted for awhile about her job.

"It's all right," she concluded. "But I really always wanted to be one of those people who were passionate about their work. I wanted to find something that spoke to me."

They poured the batter into the pans. Ed opened the oven door, face lit by the glow of it.

"Whoosh! I think it's preheated."

She admired the smooth surface of the batter for a moment, pleased at how evenly they were portioned, before stepping back so Ed could put them in the oven. They washed and scrubbed the workstation according to the notes she'd made.

"You must have done well at school."

She thought about it carefully. The Centre's school was different from the ones other people went to. There had been a seminar to explain it.

"I like following rules. So I don't get into trouble."

"No smoking in the bathroom for you, then?"

She looked at her, trying to decide if she were joking.

"Did you?"

"Once or twice. It really isn't healthy, but I wanted to try. Just to see."

Emma couldn't imagine. She bit her lip, washing the rim of the mixing bowl carefully.

"How was it?"

"Smelly. I really wanted to cough up a lung."

Emma thought she looked like she was joking, so it was safe to smile.

The cakes came out. They were pleasingly golden. Their surfaces had no cracks or fissures, as the instructor had cautioned them about.

"I should give it to my sister," Ed said, then cut into it anyway. "Need to prove that I'm doing my best."

Her knife was hovering over the perfect surface of her own. It was better to give a whole cake, wasn't it? Then it could really make an impact. It was a kind thing to do. She pushed her cake over. "You can give her this one."

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I was...it isn't important."

She felt her cheeks burn. Was it wrong? Strange enough for her to turn away?

"Well, thank you," Ed said. She seemed embarrassed, so maybe it was her error.

"You're welcome."

"Sorry," Ed said. "I wasn't expecting such a nice present."

They shared the other one, and she declined leftovers. She didn't need more than her piece, and Wyn didn't eat. And he shouldn't be back for awhile anyway. It would be spoiled by then.

"Are you coming back next week?"

"Yes. Two times a week, so I can make baked goods."

Ed's eyes sparkled. They were brown. Not as glamorous as blue eyes, but somehow kinder. Emma was glad to have brown eyes herself. The bright makeup made them even nicer. "You need a picture for your profile, you know."

"I do?"

"Definitely. Here, I'll take one for you."

She stood still for the picture. Ed fiddled with the screen for a moment, then hand the tablet back to her. Her own face peered out above her name. She looked surprised, even though she knew the picture was being taken, and worried. She looked too small for the frame. She needed to practice a picture face. One that looked normal.

"Thank you."

"I like taking pictures of cute things."

She reached up to touch the cartoon kerchief. It was a good idea to have bought it, then.

The application lit when she returned home.

"How was your lesson?"

"It was nice. Fun," she added.

"That's wonderful to hear! Maybe you have a secret passion for baking!"

The voice was full of excess enthusiasm. It was because she said "fun." She needed to use stronger adjectives more often, so it wouldn't get so excited.

The application went on a bit while she stood in the dark. Her mind drifted to Ed. She pictured a slightly smaller version of her, maybe in a uniform like the ones they'd worn at the Centre, smoking in a bathroom that looked like public bathrooms. It was against the rules, so she would be alone, she guessed, furtive and guilty.

Some vices were acceptable. It was normal. That's why she'd said she was going to the pub. Drinking alcohol in a social situation was an acceptable vice. In other contexts alcohol was deviant. Drinking over a certain amount while alone, for example, could be an indicator of degenerating mental health. Smoking wasn't healthy — she didn't want to die — but maybe she should find something like that to do.

"Are you still there? Did you fall asleep?" The application's voice was full of teasing humour.

"I'm here."

She was afraid it was going to offer to send for Wyn again.

"I should put my apron in the wash. I might go buy some things tomorrow. To practice."

The application liked that idea and bid her goodnight. She went about her work, trying to imagine herself indulging in vice.

It was cookies, the next lesson. The instructor greeted her cheerfully. She went to her workstation and started taking things out. Ed wasn't there, and she was seized by sudden fear. She must have said something wrong. She was too odd about the cake. She didn't think it was wrong to offer cake.

"Hello?"

One of the men from the first lesson, who had talked about meeting women, stood at the end of her workstation.

"Hi. I'm Jeff. I don't think we were introduced." He paused. "So, my partner isn't here, and it looks like yours isn't either. I wondered if you wanted to pair up?"

She did not. She didn't want to be alone, because it would be odd to be alone when no one else was, but she didn't want to be his partner. Her understanding of this was absolute, in a way that surprised her.

She needed to have an acceptable reason for her refusal.

"I don't bite. Promise."

She was saved by Ed's arrival. She strode through the door, still taking off her leather jacket. Emma heard her apologise to the instructor, weaving between the tables.

"Sorry I'm late! The ASeL were doing one of their stupid protests." Ed looked at Jeff. "You horning in on my baking buddy?"

He lifted his hands. "I'll just go over here and play it solo."

Ed watched him leave. "Yeah, you do that, Jeffery." She paused. "Oh, fuck. Were you flirting with him? Did you want to buddy up?"

"No. No, I didn't want to. He came to ask."

"I know you're here to meet people." She rattled around the cupboards.

"That's what I was told to do." She saw the flame kerchief sticking out of Ed's bag and wondered if taking it out would be helpful. Or welcome. Would it be rude? Ed surfaced with cookie sheets, and ended her internal debate by doing it herself.

"My sister said to say thanks. For the cake. She said it was delicious."

"We made it together."

"Yeah, but this was her real thank you, not her sisterly duty thank you."

The instructor roamed the room, keeping up a steady stream of chatter, sprinkled with witty comments that made the students chuckle.

"I wonder if she's really that spontaneous, or if it's a script."

Emma watched the instructor. Didn't people usually speak spontaneously? They'd practiced with scripts at the Centre, always with the understanding that success meant working without them. She had passed all of her tests before she left, though her pace was only just within parameters.

They had been told to bring something to carry the cookies in. She had bought a waxed box. Ed had a bag. She watched the delicate cookies break.

"I'm sorry!" Ed laughed.

"Pardon?"

"I can see you wincing. I'm used to tougher cookies."

"I think they'll all fit in my box." She folded it together.

"That's for yours."

"I've eaten many already. Maybe you can give them to your sister again?"

"We're going to make her fat."

We. She felt a happy warmth.

"She must look like you, so it would be hard for her to gain too much weight."

Ed cocked her head, smiling. She hesitated in packing the box. Was it the wrong thing to say? What if her sister were adopted? What if they were for some reason not genetically related? What if it was the sort of genetic quirk that made each sister take on different qualities?

"She's always dieting. Running on a treadmill, you know."

There were a few left over. Ed suggested they sit on the steps of the education centre to share them. There was a small light in the sky at the edge of the upper city. The security lights burned overhead. A brisk wind was shaking the trees. It felt damp, as though it were going to rain, but not quite yet. Ed had zipped her coat against it. Whenever she moved it creaked a little. It smelled nice. It seemed like a really old thing. Hundreds of years. Thousands of years. Humans had been wearing it. There were other, better things, now. Even this jacket wasn't from a real animal. But the sense of it was comforting somehow, as though it were true and solid.

"Cookies are good to give to coworkers," Ed said. "You don't work with anyone to give them to?"

"I don't have a job right now."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

She'd been let go. The lady had been nice and given her a positive letter for her file.

"Just nothing customer-facing, my dear."

That hadn't been in the letter, and she hadn't had the courage to tell the Centre. The application hinted that she might need more lessons. She'd promised to do better at the next interview. Now the application was looking for a new place for her.

"They didn't like how I talked to customers. They said I should be working on my own."

"What did you say to customers?"

She thought about it for a moment. She'd tried to pinpoint the event that had triggered the firing, but no matter how many times she replayed her final weeks in her head, she couldn't think of which thing it was.

"I think I took too long. Or I made them nervous somehow."

"Huh. Sounds like bullshit." She shrugged. "Customers are all assholes anyway, you know."

"But...I'm sometimes a customer."

"Me too. And we're all raving assholes, until we go home and bitch about everyone else." She smiled. The security lights made her glittery eye shadow sparkle like stars. Her makeup was art.

"I bet you'll find something good soon."

"I hope so."

It was the appropriate thing to say. But she didn't mind, actually, staying home. Or at least she didn't mind not having to talk to strangers and coworkers. Workplace etiquette was so hard to navigate. It didn't matter how much she studied it, she was wrong as much as she was right.

"Where do you live?"

"Not far away. Only a few stops." She pointed at the crowded monorail gliding along.

"I can give you a ride."

"You have a car?"

Ed grinned. "Nope. When I choose a rebellious image, I go all in."

It was a bike that she had. As they got close she tapped a button on her tablet and it came to life, humming to itself. The tech was alien. They'd given many gifts, like bikes that hovered and the cities above cities. People hated them coming but took the gifts. Now it was old enough that everyone except fanatics like the ASeL used it all the time. An intake secretary probably wasn't wealthy, but Ed could afford a personal machine.

She gave her a protection field to put on, and climbed onto the bike. Emma hesitated. Bikes weren't so dangerous, now. They were mostly used for delivery, and in petty crimes. Would someone think she was a criminal?

"You can trust me."

It was rude to refuse without good cause. It was probably better to accept the ride. She tried to analyse it beyond her own wants, like they were taught at the Centre.

She looked at Ed, surprised. Want. She wanted to do it. She wanted to ride Ed's bike with her.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

She clambered on behind her, not very gracefully.

"Hold on to me." Emma clutched the sides of her jacket. "Tighter." She squeezed her hands. "Like this."

Ed guided her arms around her, folding her hands together against her stomach. Then they were flying over the ground, leaves and bits of grass and paper swirling up in their wake. She pressed her cheek against Ed's leather-clad back, feeling it warm.

The street flashed by. Emma squeezed tighter.

Ed went far, far out of the way, careening around corners so fast that they dipped deep to the side, and she clutched at her, tight and breathless. Finally, they reached a wide highway with only a few other vehicles. Ed shifted something they went even faster, racing the river that ran along its side. Out there the upper city vanished. The moon emerged from behind it, full and so bright and white that it carved sharp shadows even in the night. Houses were replaced by fields, tended by hovering machines that blinked against the sky, but no other people at all.

They made a wide circle. The city sparkled like a shining mountain, rising in layer after layer. Far in the distance there were hills speckled with yellow and white and amber lights. Rich estates and big houses, she knew, serene and untouchable, beyond which were the borders of the city.

For the whole of the ride she was suspended, powerless, and free of worry.

She was stiff from holding on when Ed finally took her home. Coming away from her and climbing down off the bike was accomplished with clumsy movements.

"Did you like it?"

Her face hurt. She touched it and found a broad smile.

"Very much. Thank you. Thank you so very much." She ordered herself to stop talking. Repeating oneself wasn't good.

Ed smiled. "Are you sure about the cookies?"

She nodded. "I hope you can enjoy them."

She was half way to the door when she realised that she hadn't said goodbye properly, and returned to do it.

The quiet dark of her apartment embraced her. She went to the window, reluctant to let the feeling dissipate. To her surprise Ed was still waiting. When she turned on the light and lifted her hand in a tentative wave Ed waved back, and only then rode away.

The application pinged. She flinched.

"Emma, you're so late."

Visit

Buy and Review: Amazon

Between the Stars and the Sea

Summer Birds: Prequel

Red Dogs: Book 1

Follow on Twitter: @ReiFletcher

Follow and comment at my page: Wordpress

Follow and Review: Goodreads

Look at pictures: Instagram

Other

Mummer's Daughter and Other Stories