

Blood Family by Anne Fine

Published by Doubleday Childrens

Eddie

None of them would believe me if I told them. So I say nothing. I don't lie, but I don't come out with it. Most of the people who teach me assume I come from the same sort of home as all the others. They don't know who I am and, if they did, most of them would have forgotten the headlines. It was all years ago.

It started with a banging on the door. 'Open up. Police! Open this door, please.'

Mum made a mousy noise from fright, and curled herself deeper in the chair, digging out more of the stuffing with her nails. On went the banging. On and on. But there was something odd about the way the voice outside stayed calm. 'Open up, please!' It didn't get louder or angrier. In fact, it sounded almost tired, as if whoever was calling to us through the door had never been expecting any response.

'We know you're in there, Mrs Harris. Please open up. Nobody's going to harm you.'

I do remember thinking that was mad. What did they reckon was going to happen to her after Harris came home, if she unlocked the door? He had his rules, and not letting anyone in was pretty well the most important - apart from keeping quiet all the time, and never fidgeting or asking questions.

The voice changed tack. 'Edward?' There was a pause. Perhaps it struck him I might not be called that, because he tried again. 'Eddie? Ed? Are you in there with your mother?'

I looked her way. But she'd shrunk even deeper in the chair and buried her face in her arms.

'Right, then.' The voice was still patient. 'Mrs Harris? Eddie? Stand well away from the door because we're going to have to force it open from this side.'

I didn't see how it was possible. Every time Harris left the flat, Mum had to slide both bolts across, and slip on both the

chains. But almost at once I heard the rasp of metal. Someone was jemmying the door on the hinge side. I knew then they'd be in within a minute. After all, Harris had said it often enough when he was cursing the rattling window frames or cupboard doors that wouldn't shut. 'Whoever jerry-built these flats ought to be boiled in oil!'

There was the most almighty splintering noise.

And they were in.

Five of them. That surprised me, for we'd heard only one voice. I suppose the others had kept quiet so that we didn't think they were some mob from one of the clubs, coming for money Harris owed. Three were police - two burly men and one tall woman. But there were two more behind: one soft-looking, halfway-to-bald man, and one young woman with bright copper hair.

All of them stared at me. 'Well, well!' one muttered. 'So the old lady was right.'

I felt peculiar. I wasn't used to meeting people's eyes because Mum hardly ever raised hers from the floor, and I would always try to keep my face turned well away from Harris in case it set him off.

They looked around the room. The younger woman with the blazing hair tugged out a fistful of tissues and pressed them to her nose. 'What is that smell?' But no one answered her because the officer who had been telling us to open the door was already asking, 'When is Bryce Harris expected back?'

The question was directed at me. Not one of them had done much more than glance at my mother, and she had buried herself so deeply in the chair you couldn't even see what Harris had left of her hair.

I shook my head. I didn't know when he was coming home. Sometimes we got ourselves into a state for nothing, fearing that someone else's grinding footsteps up the stairs belonged to him. But often he was back quite soon, as if to catch us out.

The man who wasn't in a uniform dropped to his knees in front of where I was crouching. 'That must have been a bit of a fright,' he said. 'I'm sorry if you got scared.'

I didn't say a word.

'My name is Rob,' he said. 'Rob Reed, and I'm a social worker.' He waved towards the woman. 'So is this lady here. And I

need to explain that you can't stay here any more. So, for the moment, we'll be taking you out of this flat with us.'

I'm sure I stared. I hadn't been out of the flat since Harris made us move here because some woman from my nursery school kept coming round to talk to Mum.

He peered at me more closely. 'Eddie? Edward? Do you understand what I'm saying?'

I must have nodded since, with some relief, he pushed his hands down on his knees to lever himself upright. 'You're not to worry,' he assured me. 'Your mother will be coming along.' Unsure, he turned to the others. 'Right?'

I realized everyone was looking at the bruises down Mum's legs. One of the officers muttered, 'Too right. Can't leave her here to get another royal kicking.' He nodded to the women. 'Best get her out of here.'

They stepped a little further into the room and leaned over my mother, who whimpered as they prised her fingers from her face and held her under the arms. One of the other officers turned to me. 'Can you stand up, lad?'

I pushed my back against the wall and up, till I was on my feet. I saw him staring at the greasy black smudge behind me on the wallpaper, and realized for the very first time how many hundreds of times I must have cowered against that wall till, desperate not to call attention to myself, I dared slide up it in that quiet way.

'Got anything to wear?'

I looked down at myself. I don't suppose I'd thought about the clothes I wore, until that moment. But I watch television so I knew what he was thinking of the state of me.

'Here,' said the man who'd called himself Rob Reed, noticing my confusion. 'I'll look for something.'

'Don't hang about,' the elder officer warned. 'I'm sure we'd all prefer to get away before trouble arrives.'

I think we all knew what he meant by 'trouble'. Already Mum was halfway to the door, stumbling between the women. Her head was down. She didn't look to see if I was following. The younger officer left as well, but only to see the three of them safely down the stairs because he was soon back. The radio clipped to his jacket was

chirruping as he came through the door, and I distinctly heard the words 'safe in the van'.

Rob Reed opened the door to the small room that used to be my bedroom till Harris said he needed it to store some stuff. I suppose he thought I must have clothes in there. He saw the great black plastic bag and turned to me. 'So what's in there?'

I didn't see that there was any point in lying. 'Harris's dog.'

'His dog?'

I wasn't sure how to explain. 'He said that he would get her out of here when he had time.'

'It stinks! It absolutely stinks!' he said, though I thought Gem had been bagged up so long it wasn't too bad. And I was used to the smell.

He yanked the cupboard door open - 'Oh, my Lord!' - and slammed it shut again before more bottles could come tumbling out. Then he turned back to me. 'Don't you have any other clothes?'

I shook my head. I mean, I had pyjamas, but even I knew they were probably worse.

As if his sheer disgust had made him brave, Rob Reed strode into the room where Harris sleeps. (Mum uses the big chair.) He yanked a shirt off a hook. 'Put this on.'

Then he saw my face. 'Listen,' he said, 'you're safe now. He can't get at you any more.'

We went back in the telly room. He pointed to the blanket in the corner. 'Is this where you've been sleeping?'

I nodded. And suddenly you could tell that all he wanted was to get out of there. I think he recognized his own rising anger as quickly as I had. Looking around the room, he asked me almost roughly, 'Is there anything in here you want to keep?' But I was back against the wall again, down on my heels, and had no answer.

I watched the two of them through the gap I kept cut in my fringe so I could see when Harris had calmed down enough for me to move. Their eyes met and the officer nodded towards the door. Rob Reed looked desperately round the room. But it was all spilled ashtrays, empty bottles, and one or two chipped ornaments from when Mum and I lived in the other place - the one with flowers and that

stringy rug I liked to pick at. I saw his eyes run over the newspaper Harris had taped across the window - 'to stop that nosy old bat across the way prying into our lives' - and past the broken lamp and torn town map. Beside the telly was a mess of tangled wires, and all of Harris's nasty games and films and stuff were out of their boxes, all over.

Rob Reed looked at the table. Empty packets of cigarettes, a few more bottles and a heap of newspapers.

He reached down. Propping up one leg was an old book - a musty thing covered in dark green leather. Harris had swiped it from a market stall after he had upended the table in a temper one night, snapping the end off one of its legs. The book meant nothing to me. I knew my letters - anybody would who'd watched as much telly as I had. But I couldn't read; and anyway, once Harris jammed it underneath the table leg, nobody in their right mind would have dared touch it.

Rob Reed said, 'Maybe this is yours?' and from the hopeful - almost desperate - way he asked the question I guessed that finding something that was mine was part of his job, and we would not be able to leave until he had.

Right then, I heard men shouting. It sounded muffled and far away, so could have been from any of the blocks. But I still panicked as I always do, and held my hand out for the book as if I wanted it, so we could all get out of there before Harris came back.

He read the title on the spine out loud before he passed it over. 'The Devil Ruled the Roost.'

The police officer cast one last look around the flat and shivered. Their eyes met once again. Then I heard Rob Reed muttering quietly to himself as he steered me in front of him towards the door. 'Didn't he just? Oh, yes indeed. Didn't he just!'