



Living at the Edge of the World – Winter

By S. J. Barratt

For Holly

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In 2024, the BookFest Book Awards recognized 'Living at the Edge of the World – Winter' with a Second Place in the Children's category, acknowledging its significant contribution to the Diversity & Multicultural genre.

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Chapter 1 – But why?



Tabitha flung down her suitcase as they arrived at the terminal, and dumped herself down on the case, not caring if she broke the zip.

'But why?' she wailed. 'Why did our parents decide to go on a world cruise, and leave us in the middle of winter? And why did they send us away to Scotland, for goodness' sake, to see a great uncle we haven't even met!'

She glanced despairingly at her twin brother Timothy, seeking some understanding, but he simply shrugged,

and turned back to his book of insects.

'Do you know anything more than we do?' Tabitha asked Heidi, the girl who had been looking after them for the last year and trying to teach them German.

'Well, I only know your mother has a contract to create social media stories about the trip. And your father said something about writing his next history book. I did ask them if I could look after you while they were away, but they said I was too young, and that I should go back to Zurich – so I am not happy either,' said Heidi.

'Well, if you must have parties with your friends when our parents are out, then at least don't get caught drinking their booze.'

Tabitha turned her back on Heidi, and slumped even further on her suitcase, with her head in her hands. 'The

Highlands of Scotland! Seriously? They probably don't even have WiFi!

Timothy looked up. 'Actually, we're going to Shetland. They do have good internet in places. BUT the island we're going to, there's only thirty people living there – so you will have to share the bandwidth with them.

'Seriously? Talk about being unplugged!'

'That's why I filled *my* suitcase with books!' said Timothy.

'Books? Since when have we read books?'

Timothy took a deep breath and looked as though he was a professor giving a lecture to an amphitheatre of students hanging on every word.

'Books may be old fashioned, but they are magical. *You* the reader are the essential part in a book. The words only come alive when *you* use your imagination.

You make the words jump off the page,' he said, nodding in acknowledgment to the applause he was hearing from his imaginary audience. He went back to his insect book and was soon immersed in the detailed life of the Aspen hover fly, known to the informed as "*Hammerschmidtia ferruginea*".

'Seriously?' was all Tabitha could muster. She raised her eyebrows and went back to scrolling her phone.

#

They said goodbye to Heidi.

'We'll miss you! ... but not the German lessons.'

The twins boarded their first plane to Glasgow and then an airline chaperone led them onto a tiny second plane to Sumburgh, arriving in the south part of Shetland.

'It's soo windy!' exclaimed Tabitha as she went down

the steps, her pink glittery jacket almost sailing off her.

'Well, we are eight hundred miles north from Piccadilly Circus,' said Timothy, as they walked across the tarmac to the tiny terminal to get their luggage.

'And it is *soo* cold and the sky is *soo* grey,' said Tabitha.

Timothy handed his sister the blue woolly hat he was just about to put on his own head.

'No way! I am NOT wearing that! What would my TikSnap fans think?'

'Suit yourself – freeze to death then.'

As they came out of the terminal, Timothy looked anxiously at a bus timetable his parents had downloaded for him back in London.

'Come on! We must get this bus and then there is another one to catch, otherwise we'll miss the ferry.'

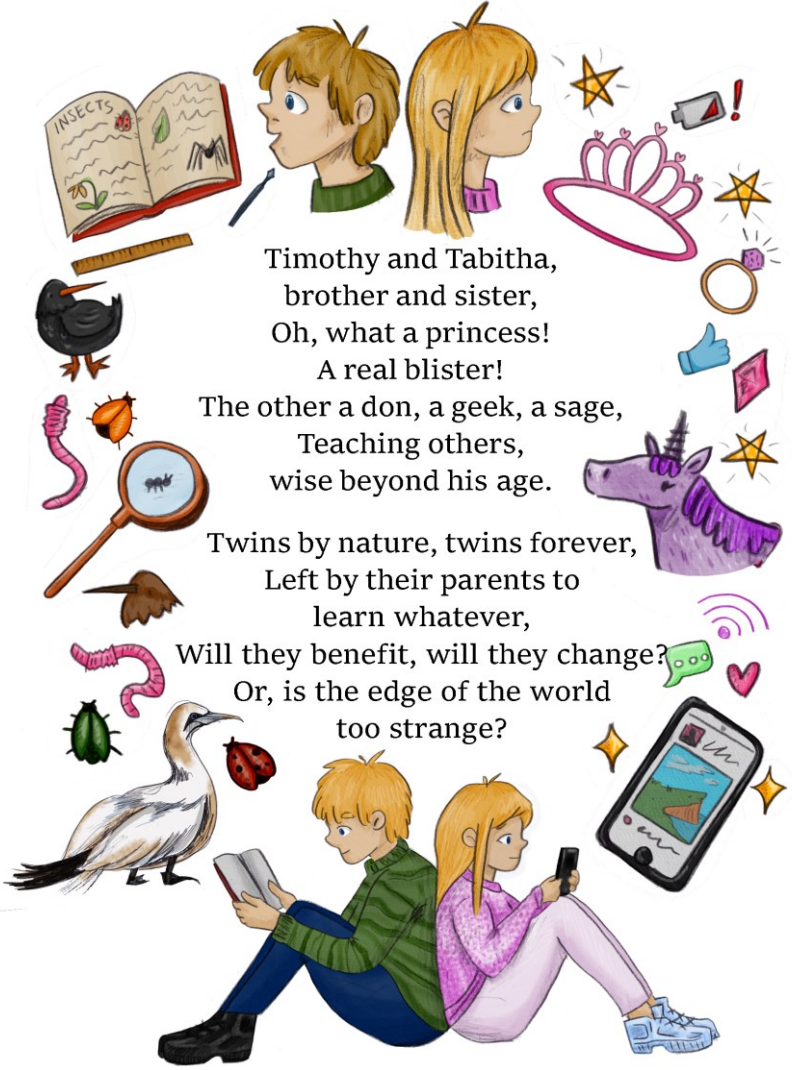
The next one is in two days' time!

'No way, let's get a taxi then!' cried Tabitha, looking towards a sign in the airport.

Timothy looked astonished, 'Just how are you going to pay for a taxi?'

Tabitha gave her brother a scathing look and held up a credit card, 'How do you think? Mum's emergency credit card!'

#



Timothy and Tabitha,
brother and sister,
Oh, what a princess!
A real blister!

The other a don, a geek, a sage,
Teaching others,
wise beyond his age.

Twins by nature, twins forever,
Left by their parents to
learn whatever,

Will they benefit, will they change?
Or, is the edge of the world
too strange?

Chapter 2 – Ultima Thule!



'*Noo den*,¹ you must be Timothy and Tabitha,' said the ferry master. 'My name is Brody – your Uncle Tamhas sent me over to get you both. You *bairns* are in luck today, the weather was good this morning, so at last, we have been able to cross from Papala. It is the first time in a couple of weeks!'

'Hello,' said Timothy and Tabitha, relieved to have found the ferry waiting for them. They stood with their suitcases while the ferry master loaded his boat with supplies.

'Was that English?' Tabitha whispered to her brother.

'Yeah, I think I got most of it, but what was "Noo

den"? It sounds like "Now then", but maybe it was just "hello" and I have no idea what "bairns" means. Paps told me that Shetland dialect is a mix of Norwegian, Scottish, and English, so it could get complicated!'

'We had enough trouble with Heidi's German! How are we going to understand anyone? And why are there Norwegian words?'

'Well, if you had looked at Papala on a map, like Paps suggested,' said Timothy, 'you would know that on the right-hand side of Shetlands you have Norway, and to the left you have the southernmost tip of Greenland!'

'All right bossy boots, I was busy with my TikSnap postings, I didn't have time for Pap's geography lecture.'

'We're probably closer to Bergen in Norway than Aberdeen in Scotland – and London is way down south!'

¹ "Noo den", Check out the Shetlandic glossary in the appendices.

'I think I know that!' said Tabitha, making a face at her brother.

'For sure we are far north,' said Brody as he picked up their suitcases. 'The ancients said that Papala is at the edge of the known world. You could even say "Ultima Thule"- the ultimate furthest point in a journey!'

'I think this journey is far enough for me. Honestly, we left home at the crack of dawn. We're closer to Norway than London!' exclaimed Tabitha. 'I want to go back home where there is central heating.'

'Oh, come on Tabs, this is an adventure,' Timothy countered. 'I was reading about the history of Shetland islands with Paps. It was the Danes that gave Shetland to Scotland in the fifteenth century. They couldn't afford to pay the dowry for Princess Margaret of Denmark when she got married to King James III of Scotland.'

It was a real insult – the islands were basically pawned in the negotiations.'

Tabitha looked at her brother in amazement.

'How do you remember all this stuff! You get more like Paps every day. You are a walking Wikipedia! You do realize though, that with all that knowledge in your head, you will have to become a professor, just like Paps,' she said as though it was the worst possible outcome for her brother.

The ferry boat was small, a twelve-seater. Brody helped the children aboard and told them to sit in the cabin where they would be out of the wind. He cast off the boat from the moorings and quickly jumped aboard, amid all the packages and provisions that various islanders had ordered.

As the boat sped towards the open sea, the captain saw Tabitha looking nervously at her i-watch to check the time.

'What do you keep looking at your watch for? Time means nothing from now on, and not on Papala! You can take a nap; it's going to be at least a couple of hours before we arrive in Ham.'

Tabitha looked at her brother to see if he shared her anxiety about the open sea and the long ferry journey to get to the island. But he was looking at his insect book again.

'Old Tamhas told us his niece was going to send her bairns to him for a few months. Your parents have gone off on a world cruise I hear?'

'Yes, they have, but what are "bairns" – is that us? Does it mean "children"?' said Timothy looking up from

his book. 'Do you know our Uncle Tamhas well then?'

'Of course, I do – the island is *peerie* – everyone knows everyone and even people on the mainland know Old Tamhas. He's been living on Papala even longer than me.'

Tabitha looked out of the windows. The sky was grey and so was the sea; it was difficult to see where the sky ended, and the sea started.

'I don't know what "peerie" means, but did you hear? We're going to a place called Ham!' giggled Tabitha to her brother.

'Green eggs and Ham,' giggled back Timothy, 'Do you remember that book we read when we were tiny?'

'Yes, I remember it. You learnt the whole story by heart,' said Tabitha laughing at him.

'Typical geeky Timbo, only five years old and already

a walking audiobook.'

'Well, if you are wanting *green* eggs,' said Brody, 'we have them on Papala. Our hens on the island lay bluish, green eggs. The breed is easy to spot, as they have a tuft of feathers on their head.'

'Seriously! Even the chickens sound weird,' said Tabitha. 'I hope the eggs aren't green and mouldy inside!'

'Well, I'd like to taste them, just to see if they are any different from normal eggs, and with ham too! I think our great Uncle Tamhas has pigs,'

'Pigs!' shrieked Tabitha. 'I can't live with pigs – too smelly!'

Timothy looked puzzled, 'How else do you think you can get ham, if you don't keep pigs on the island.'

'From a shop, of course, stupid.'

'Sorry to disappoint, Tabs, but I don't think there are

any shops in Papala.'

'No shops?' wailed Tabitha.

#

'Noo den, Welcome to Papala,' said a tall guy with a whitish beard, looking quite stern as the twins got off the ferry. 'You must be Tabitha and Timothy from London.'

'And you must be Great Uncle Tamhas,' said Timothy officiously holding out his hand to shake. Tabitha just scowled and kept her freezing hands firmly in her pockets. She was feeling decidedly antisocial at this precise moment, with the wind still howling around them.

'How was your trip?'

'Fine,' said Timothy.

'Choppy and cold,' said Tabitha and as she spoke, she felt a retching in her stomach and threw up her Gatwick

lunch, just missing Uncle Tamhas's feet.

'Why, thank you Tabitha – that is a lovely welcome gift!'

'Do you want to drink something?' asked Uncle Tamhas, offering a flask from his back pocket.

Tabitha took it from him, smelt it and gave it straight back. 'That's whisky, Uncle Tamhas, I can't drink that!'

'But of course not! Whisky is not for you bairns! What am I thinking! Here, have a peppermint.'

Tabitha took the mint grudgingly, but as the sweet melted it certainly helped improve the taste in her mouth.

'Is that your car Uncle Tamhas?' Timothy looked in astonishment at a very old rusty Ford station wagon.

'It sure is,' said Uncle Tamhas cheerfully, 'My old rust bucket. It gets me around on the island when needed.'

'Mmm,' was all Tabitha could muster in response.

She was glad nobody from back home could see her getting in such a rusty old banger.

'Now bring your *proil* and let's get home to Hamnafield.'

'Bring all our what?' asked Timothy.

'Bring your stuff. You don't know the word "proil"?' For sure, I'm trying to speak English so you can understand, but we speak dialect here, and these days, I don't know what is Shetlandic, and what is English anymore!

'Fascinating,' said Timothy.

'Completely crazy,' murmured Tabitha. 'Oh no, my phone has just died and my i-watch too!'

'Well, you can charge it at home, but you won't be needing a mobile phone to call anyone on the island of

Papala as there is very little coverage. There's a computer that anyone can use in the school if you need internet.'

'Seriously! I don't use my phone to call people! I have a platform. I'm a TikSnap influencer with more than fifteen thousand followers!'

'Are you now! A "TikSnapper?" - well I have no idea what that is, but what I do know is that you need some warmer clothes to survive this island, otherwise you will be the death of me, and your parents won't be happy!'

He looked at Tabitha in her pink glittery jacket, white jeans, and previously white platform trainers, which were now a dingy-grey, covered in mud and grass. He picked up what seemed to be a rucksack, but it had pink ears and was covered in purple glitter.

'Oh my, it's a Unicorn! Did you know that's the symbol of Scotland?'

Tabitha looked up at her uncle, pursing her lips in an annoyed way, 'There's an international "Unicorn Day" on 9 April. If you use the hashtag #NationalUnicornDay, you'll see thousands of posts on the subject. Last year I got two and a half thousand likes from my unicorn post!'

'What an earth is a hashtag?' Uncle Tamhas asked, 'All I know is that in Scotland, unicorns are extinct because they didn't gallop quickly enough to get on Noah's ark when the floods came!'

He handed over the glittery backpack and Tabitha snatched it from him. Uncle Tamhas raised his eyebrows ironically at her bad manners.

#

Travelling in "the auld rust bucket", they did not meet another vehicle on the road, and they soon pulled up in front of a charming stone cottage clearly weathered through the centuries of time. Timothy could see an extensive vegetable polytunnel area behind the house with outhouses beyond, where he was almost sure there were pigs, from the smell wafting towards them.

'Welcome to my croft, "Hamnafield" we call it here. Let's get the kettle on for a cup of tea in the *but end* - leave your proil for now in the *ben end*. I've made you a good *tattie* soup, as you must be starving after your long journey all the way from London.'

'What did you say? "But end" and "Ben end"? You've lost me, Uncle Tamhas!'

Uncle Tamhas laughed, 'Years ago, the houses in Shetland only had two rooms, one for sleeping and one

for eating and living.

I have another floor for the bedrooms now, but we still call this room that I use for storage, the ben end and what you call the kitchen, the but end.'

'Fascinating!'

'Honestly, why don't you use regular words that everyone can understand!' said Tabitha, thoroughly irritated by Timothy's sudden interest in the local dialect.

Uncle Tamhas took them up a short flight of stairs and showed them their bedroom with wooden beams on the ceiling, there were two beds and a cupboard cleverly built into an alcove under the rafters. Two brand new desks and chairs were under the window. The modern wood looked out of place and jarred with the old, weathered feel of the space.

'When I heard you were coming, I got some desks for your schoolwork and studying time.'

'Where on earth am I going to put my clothes – there's not enough cupboard space!' exclaimed Tabitha, '... and Timothy, I want the bed by the window!'

'I don't think you'll be wearing much from your suitcase, so I don't think it matters, Tabitha,' said Uncle Tamhas with an ironic smile. 'Anyway, come and have some tattie soup – that will warm you up.'

The fire was already lit in the kitchen and was smouldering away with glowing embers. The fireplace was beautiful with comfy armchairs in front of the fire. There was even a rocking chair that seemed to be calling out for Tabitha. She curled up in it and looked around at the huge beam above the fireplace made into a shelf and the lovely stone wall that reached all the way to the roof.

She closed her eyes for a second, suddenly realizing how tired she was.

'What's that smell, Uncle Tamhas? That's not wood burning, is it?'

'No my boy, that's a peat fire that I have banked up for the night. We have blanket bog here in Papala and an endless supply of peat,'

'Interesting,' said Timothy.

'Smelly,' said Tabitha, opening her eyes wide.

'Why not use wood in a fireplace like everybody else?'

'Well for one thing, there are no trees here.'

'No trees? Seriously, what is this place?' Tabitha shook her head, lost for words.

The three of them sat in the comfy seats in front of the fireplace.

Even Tabitha started to unwind after the journey,

looking at the slow-burning flames, finding comfort in the earthy smell of the peat fire and the delicious smell of the tattie soup that was still too hot to eat.

Tamhas took a round loaf of farmhouse-type bread and with the most enormous knife they had ever seen, cut them both a huge slice and spread loads of butter all over the bread. Timothy and Tabitha found they were both starving – even Tabitha, despite being ill after the crossing. The cardboard sandwich and fizzy coke they had swallowed at Glasgow airport had been hours ago.

The freezing wind had gnawed a hole in their stomachs. Timothy munched the huge slab of bread and butter cheerfully, dipping it into his steaming bowl of potato soup.

'Delicious.'

'The bread and the butter are home-made,' said Tamhas.

'How can you make butter,' asked Tabitha, 'if there are no shops here?'

'Oh, talking of shops,' said Tamhas, 'Your mam asked me to look after her emergency credit card – Tabitha, hand it over please and I will keep it for you until you leave.'

'Ha ha, Sis, they've tracked you down!' said Timothy delightedly.

'Well, there is nothing to buy here anyway, so I don't care,' said Tabitha sullenly.

Timothy ignored his sister's attitude and started to fire questions about the insects he could find on the peat bogs and the type of birds he could see on the island. Within minutes Tamhas and Timothy were exchanging

information and local vocabulary for insects and birds that Timothy had already researched back in London.

Tabitha switched on her phone to see if she had any reactions to the TikSnap story she had posted before boarding their second plane, but nothing showed. Her phone was completely out of signal.

How was she going to survive living here, unplugged, without any decent WiFi? she wondered dejectedly. What were her followers going to think?

Maybe she should have warned them where she was going – what content could she use here for stories online? It was just a big grey nothingness!

#