



HOT LITTLE DANNY Alan Beard

After six months of signing on they send me to Josiah Mason college for ‘work training’. Attendance compulsory: my benefits depend on it.

The woman who takes General Studies wears a mid-length skirt-and-boots combination that my mother might have worn as a teenager in the seventies. She says her name is Mel — short for Melanie, she says, don’t laugh my parents were hippies. No one is. She gets us to move our chairs into a circle to ‘facilitate discussion’. I sit opposite her and think she looks all right for a woman her age. I like her sugary mouth, eyes that crinkle up easily, as if she is always amused. She tries to get us to talk about ourselves but we just grunt and look at the floor. So she talks instead about herself: she’s 39, she mock cries about her forthcoming 40s; she has no children — ‘you are all the children I need!’ — she laughs loudly to let us know she’s joking. I’m watching her round knees and trying — probably all the boys are — to see more of her thighs as she moves on her chair.

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‘Go that way.’ Jake is breathless. ‘Get the fucker.’

‘Where is the little runt?’

We are behind billboards on an arc of wasteland, rubble and brick and waist high nettles, down to the railway line. The runt, escaped from a pub car park, is hiding out there somewhere. We sweep out in a line, the four of us, like coppers on the news, searching the rough ground.

‘There he is, there he is.’

He slips out of hiding, his white mesh cap not helping. Idiot, I think, enraged he could be so stupid.

Jake has him in a neck-lock. Mark holds his hands behind his back. The kid’s face is red with denial. He didn’t do it. Jake rips open his shirt, with difficulty. The runt twitches his nose at me.

‘Burn him, Danny, burn him.’

The cigarette between my fingers I use as a pen, put a big full stop on his tit, above the nipple. A train goes by behind him as I do it.

‘Teach you,’ I say.

We go back to Jake’s, a place he’s buying from our joint proceeds. Dirt cheap anyway on the estate of red brick 60s housing and brown towerblocks. The electric chugs as wires crumble in the walls, lights flicker, the music wavers. Mice run along the skirting.

Cheers, I say to Mark who says I did well out there, and feel good because I’m one of the youngest in this late teen project. Him and Jake in their mid 20s are the oldest, direct things, deal with banks and building societies.

On my way upstairs I pass a topless girl sat smoking, leant forward so her tits rest on her knees, one arm crooked around them,

pink peeks out.

They joke in the kitchen about my age, friendly cuffs and smiles from teeth already brown, cutting up dope and listening to one of the radios tuned to the police frequency.

‘Schoolboy Danny! You’re too young to smoke.’

‘Nah,’ I say, ‘I left months ago.’

When the pill kicks in I go back to the girl on the stairs to taste her smoky breath and feel her hands on me. She is soft and white, orange freckles across her shoulders, a mouth that opens slowly. Nothing rasps: we flow somehow, like things melted together, for a while. After I pull myself up to a sharpness and join in the backslapping and high fives below the stairs I leave her on. Mark and Jake talk about next operations, mainly drug deals and distribution, but also a warehouse robbery. My part in it they discuss like I’m not there — delivery, collection, and, after tonight, enforcement.

I move about the house leaving a swathe of colour, laugh at two snorting Shazzes on the sofa making a mess over their touching knees; go outside to see the night set deeply, the estate settling to sleep as we begin. Then I jump back into the music and thrash about like something caught and pulled out of water, gleaming, catching the light as I twist about.

Days without drugs are like drinking pondwater, each minute a piece of weedy scum. Even the birds sound strangled in the trees. People are too present, their fingernails and hair, their squinting looks, their dirty skins. My joints ache, my eyes begin to jelly up. I go back to Mum in Selly Oak.

As I reach the door Jerry Hughes walks past, my best friend when

I was 9, 10, 11 years old. Sat next to him one year in primary school; stuck sticks down drains with him. I remember playing hide and seek in the car park at one end of our street, crouched, cheek against the concrete to look under the vehicles for a glimpse of his ragged trainers. His dad when he was alive had a booming voice which you could hear even if you were at the wrong end of the street, near the six lane Main Road, bristling cars. 'Hi Jerry,' I say but he scuttles past, dragging his bad leg, scared, which makes me smile.

Mum hears the key in the lock and comes down the corridor swishing her skirt; thinking aloud about her sister, Aunt Julie, who is having a mastectomy today she tells me.

'Julie, Julie you're all right. Say it with me Danny, Julie Julie you're all right.'

She's as insomniac as me, not taking her medication, making me foursugared coffees and gabbling about when she was a girl, friends and enemies who imprisoned her in a hedge, or made fun of the twitch she used to have.

The air smells faintly of farts. I stay to catch up with all the family news. It takes a few days now to get it all from her distracted thoughts, distracted forever by my long gone father. He was always disappearing for days, and finally went for good. I would watch his white car with the yellow sticker advertising an arts cinema on the side window, wait with the winker going, to turn into the traffic.

Occasionally we'll go visiting, take buses to Yardley and Erdington. I play the dutiful son while I climb down carefully from some place in the sky. I sit around with aunts and uncles and cousins and friends, invariably in the kitchen sipping tea. I've watched the new additions to the family grow from crawl to stumble to walk, seen them

fight over toys, and hear them learn to swear. The older ones live perpetually twenty years ago, trying to re-create their before-you-were-born world, lighting fags and fetching photo albums and vinyl albums in cardboard covers coming apart.

Then I have to get with my mates. Do stuff. Smudge everything with drugs, marijuana at least. Go out and bloody the night with flame. Set an old building alight, stand around in its glow until the cops come. We will get to it, holding cans of petrol, along the canal, kicking out at the geese we disturb, darkness coming down and moths around like rags of mouldy cotton.

I walk through Selly Oak on my way to the Castle. I walk past the massage parlours — Emmanuelle's, the Hideaway Club, Manyana — the empty shops covered in fly posters, the cafes and takeaways. I dodge through groups of students in fur lined coats, the women with koala bear bags, the men with little Vs of beard and sideburn, on their way to and from the university. Or who stop, slowly counting out change among fruit stands outside Asian mini-marts, arranging to meet in The Varsity.

Some hymn or pop song — Forever, forever more — I'd heard somewhere set the mood as I went into town with my crowd. Down Broad Street, a CCTV celebrity, I led, an arrow that cut through the glad-ragged hordes, and glanced off pub and club doors as we were refused entry. Light and drink and girls within, music pouring out, smells of perfume, smoke and beer to go with the flashing legs around. The families on their way through to the cinema wary of the likes of me, leering into their faces, singing and waltzing with the wife if I get a chance, little pirouette and bow for them at the end.

She said she'd seen me dancing in one of those bars that let us in, The Sports Bar maybe or Revolution, stopped me from going out of class to tell me, and asked to take me for a meal — out of town she added quickly, as if it was something she asked all her students.

She drove down to Worcestershire, a town by the wide river. A vegetarian restaurant, green paintwork. A cannibal wouldn't have been more out of place. She wore jeans and fake gold jewellery and her made up eyes looked around, her head held back a little as if she was sniffing the air. She pointed out the colour of the salads in their bowls, red bean, rice, a tray of quiche. On the wall a poster of a man in a gas mask, above him 'No Smoking', below 'People are Breathing'.

Waiting for her to pay the bill I rolled a fat one, leaving shreds of tobacco and dope over the table and lit it on the way out.

The man we stop to rob on early hours streets has large swollen cheeks and chin, all stubble, a wave of black hair on his forehead, dyed must have been, a dead cigarette, creased blue shirt, creased grey trousers, cracked trainers.

'All right lads?' He asks with drink on his breath. 'Want a fag or something?'

We follow him, turn a corner behind him. I know we won't get much out of him but instead of leaving it I take it out on him as he blubbers from his hit mouth, because he's there, in the wrong place, where there should have been someone richer.

Greeny-yellow smear across the rain-windows of trains. The blurt of city. Coming out of stations, I glimpse Shazzes pushing babies along, unwarming coats flap. Snow then, like wet paper around, it doesn't

fall, it doesn't appear to fall, it just fills up the air.

The criss-cross I make across the city on my missions, alighting in odd places I've never been before, watching out for local lads. But I'm OK, I don't stand out when I don't want to; none of the baseball cap, the burberry, no tattoo on the neck, no piercings, just me slipping past you in the night.

Most are easy, give in, promise to pay, do pay. I'm not that big so I get the easier ones, carefully chosen. Schoolkid; skinny; the just-at-work with spare money. The scared already.

I watch a family emerge from the swimming pool, come out of the lit building into the dark. The little girl with wet hair, plastered to her cheeks, in red skirt and white socks, skips with delight into the car park. The boy who owes us wears an anorak and jeans, and bashes his frizzed head with a rolled towel.

'Oy!' I urge from the side. I don't care about grownups, fathers, usually as piss-scared as their offspring. Besides in my coat pocket, my fingers already curled around the handle, I have a hammer. Jake says guns will — might — come later.

She talks on the bed about I'm a Celebrity — eating bugs.

'I'd do it,' I say. 'Dip my hand in to get bit or stroked.'

She laughs, strokes.

'They'll have public floggings next. You probably, when you're caught, in Centenary Square where the old statue was, and filmed live by Midlands Today.'

'Central,' I say.

'Central,' she corrects herself.

She likes to come around my house when my mum is out, once a

week or so, 10-2, she puts it down as travelling time, being peripatetic. She is amazed to come to this three storey near the university, had expected a towerblock flat maybe. She likes the view across the red buildings of the Uni — she went there — to the Italianate tower. She likes my ‘spermy boudoir’ in the attic, the *Kerrang* posters, put up when I was 11, just after Dad left, corners hanging off the sloping roofs. She likes my unwashed toes, my vigorous swearing, my soft stubble, my body — not muscly, but strong, she says.

She gets giggly sometimes on the dope we smoke before and after lying on the creased bed or pretending to listen earnestly to music she’d brought around. She is retro, pop music sustains her. She’s into people I’ve never heard of. Syd Barrett — the same four songs, ‘the rest are crap’ — taped over and over again on a 90 minute tape, because she ‘wasn’t up to speed’ with CD burning.

‘Wined & Dined; Dominoes,’ she repeats the titles as they play over and over into my room that has heard nothing but rock when I bothered to play anything.

She talks of her childhood in a village somewhere outside the Lake District with woods and a stream that was gradually spoiled by a slagheap built nearby. The neat little patch of houses, some half-timbered, the giant pub, smaller church and bridge. She sounds like Mum now, but I don’t tell her so. Got surrounded by landfills and rubbish tips, she says, shaking her head, a whole new hill built up behind her house as she grew. A smell always there, worse in summer, plagues of flies, seagulls coming inland, lorries rumbling up and down the narrow roads. So she came to the city and liked the comforts: buses, trains, cinemas, pubs, and the density of people warming you through. And variety. A variety of men. Her husband one of them? I

ask, and she ssh's me, doesn't want mention of him, never does. I don't know what he does or how old he is or if he's any good in bed.

I tell her of when I was 8 in the Chinese takeaway. The telly in the top corner, two women from the massage parlour dressed in short white doctors coats watching it. The one at the Formica counter with the long, loose-curved perm, black against her white shoulder, makes to clip Chie's ear, same age as me but not in school much. She steps back to light a fag and points at me.

'Serve the young gentleman.' But then she looks over me at Dad coming in.

'Watcha, Deek.' She blows a lipstick kiss at him. I'm looking at the pink between the buttons of her coat. So is Dad.

Mel says I'm articulate and observant. She says if I was in her class I'd get triple A's. She says to call her Miss and to tweak her rubbery nipples like the naughty boy she knows I am.

Mum said she'd forgotten how to enjoy herself. I persuade her to sit and chat with beer, I nearly roll a spliff.

'My eyes are always sore,' she said. 'Like they were then, when he was here, when he'd sit down and have a 'reasonable' talk with me. Take his voice out for a long walk. He'd speak soft, slow as if to a dimwit. Each affair he confessed to with regret, as if he was forced to act that way. My eyes would start going then, blinking first, I'd fight that and then feel them go cold as I kept the lashes apart. His voice seemed to enter me there, through the pupils.'

I get to go to Mel's when her husband's away for a week. Shame to let the opportunity pass she says, but looks out for the neighbours when

letting me in. She wears stockings all week. She keeps apologising for non-existent cellulite.

On shelves, leaning against books, are photos of him now with grey receding hair (older than me she explains, deciding she can't any more ignore his existence), his close eyes that seem grey too, and sloping smile, and then ('well before I knew him'): graduating with long hair curling down from his mortar board. I say university people are slippery and mean or too locked up in their own worlds — the arts side at least. She laughs. My dad's a film lecturer, I say, I should know.

I pad around in my boxers like the man of the house looking at all the rooms: posters, plants, cushions, shelves of books, an exact opposite to the bareness, apart from technical equipment, of Jake's. She comes out of nowhere to pat my arse.

'Get back to bed, you.' She buries the tied condom deep in the rubbish in the bin.

Lying next to her with her knees up, the view along her thigh, the sheen, the curve, we talk more. I tell her of being sat out the back with Jerry Hughes from up the road, feeling weary of him acting like a horse or something, on all fours. I hear my mum's chopped up voice through the kitchen window, talking to silent Aunt Julie. 'It's the woman in him they love'... 'preening'... 'stays away like a cat'.

'Following in his footsteps?' says Miss Teachypants. She opens her legs more to let my fingers in. 'What else?'

At first when he'd really gone, Mum would take me over to his place, drop me off, and his new Shaz, someone from his faculty, hair done up like she's expecting the Queen, would serve up an evening meal, too much for a child, and I could sense the woman's fear when she turned to me. First time I'd seen it — the tensed shoulders, her

bosom on show in a low cut blushing. The sidelong approach, as if looking for escape: fear of me, an 11 year old. Dad wasn't interested in how we reacted, talked films to us both as if Steve Buscemi was one of his best pals.

'Cool,' says Miss Muckylips.

She liked the pictures she says, as a youngster she dreamt of an afternoon that never ended, of going into the cinema to see the best movie ever made and you are so comfortable and the movie so beautiful it can never end and you never come out to the pavement again.

I like to remember this when I see her amongst us young unemployed getting down with it, using Eminem phrases like 'whoops there goes gravity' when she drops her pencil, as she talks about filling in forms properly. No one ever reacts, especially not me watching her prissy looking mouth, the pink gums and straight teeth, full of advice and education knowing soon it would be full of me.

I have to really hurt someone. Cut him. Drown him, threaten to, and really do it if he doesn't begin payment, plus beg for an hour or two. I follow him from his estate home on the bus to his stinky job where he wears a tie. Think of it as taxes, I'm going to say.

I've seen myself drown him so many times, or else sliding him, already dead, into the canal for the geese to honk over. I've seen his face bloated, distorted by the water so many times that when I see him on the street at the bus stop with the other geek clerks, the newly-at-work, singing in their clerk hearts that the day has ended, his perky face doesn't look right, the drug-snuffing pretty nostrils he has totally wrong; his tight mouth should be out of shape, grinning within water

stretched cheeks.

But when it comes to it I can't do it. Can't push the knife in, cut the bugger a bit. Followed him back on the bus, he looked back as he got off, and turned him by the steps to his building. The door to the block opened with a noise like a kid's shout. In front of me the man is trying to stand straight in his sticky tie and poor checked shirt. I can't make the final thrust. Should do, quickly, and turn and disappear. No CCTV here but even if there were, they'd just see me brush past, maybe he wouldn't even fall straight away. But though I will it, it doesn't happen.

I told her Dad taught me to respect the main road — the only thing I remember him teaching me — after Jerry Hughes had been run over in front of my eyes, not killed but broken up for weeks. And how my Mum made me go round his house, even though I'd dropped him after falling in with older lads who said he was a geek. Mum gave me a present to take round, a puzzle we could play together but we didn't, though I autographed his cast, with a green felt tip kept nearby for the purpose. He lay on the sofa smelling like stale biscuits, pyjama legs cut to accommodate the off-white plaster. His mother, Dottie, made me watch a video of when she and her husband won a prize on *The Price is Right*. 'It was a bathroom suite,' she said, 'the one you used today.'

Mel told me of her Selly Oak days — there before I was, or maybe I was just born, so pushed in my chair by Mum across the road to Sainsbury's, I might have seen her pass, her student arse in combats or whatever they wore in those 'Thatcherite' days on my baby eye level. Dungarees or ra-ra skirts, she says, depending. She spoke of the political involvement then, marches and petitions, plans to bring

down governments, but also the 'discos', being chatted up among the deep library shelves, sex in the halls of residence. She switched then to talk like a teacher about 'safely navigating' my adolescence, about being careful, I watched her eyes flicker over me, as if storing me up in her memory.

At Jake's the mice pepper everything we eat. A coming down, early hours pastime is hunting out their nests, killing them with sticks, always saying we will fry them and eat them with chips but we never do.

Not any more. I didn't do as told.

Jake explained things to me. Didn't I realise we were a feeder group, a branch allowed to operate at a low level, watched for talent, monitored for trouble? I hadn't been there long enough, obviously, and now never would.

'Well,' he said pinching my arm in a grip that hurt, 'it's good we find things out in time.' He lifted his hand at any possible explanation. 'It's OK. No big deal. You just drop out, no spoils of war. You can still score here if you want, come to a couple of parties. We won't be here long anyway.'

When I see her in the Broad Street pub, sat with colleagues from work or somewhere, and see her arm around not her husband but some bearded twat 30-something and probably 'into' his career, I see her look across and catch my eye and the slight 'no' shake of her newly-tousled hair. She turns back, catching strongly into the conversation around her, shouted above the music, across the line up of half full pints and bottles of Bud and cocktail glasses, not looking back.

I'll fly above the crush of people to her, to make a nuisance of myself, be her bad pupil. I'm on my way across when there's about five emerge from the crowd. One of them is the runt, marshalling his own mini-gang. Arms coming out to grab me from the crush of drinkers, bodies up against me, knees push at the back of my legs, a feel of steel through my shirt.

I hear snatches as they push, words as they edge me out of the pub.

'Burn him.'

'Peel him.'

'Kill him.'

I try and tear my eyes through to her corner across and through the muzzy crowd to where she is absorbed in her mates and her news and her future. I'm bundled and prodded, knifed lightly in the shoulder. The blood drops from me as I'm out in the street a while, rolling within the crowd, the near naked Shazzes thinking I'm drunk, down a side street by O'Neill's, a few more cuffs and kicks and stabs out of CCTV range and I'm left with the blood and snot hanging from my nose and mouth, head down, my balls sore, feeling ruptured, leaking.

Wouldn't she like me like this, couldn't she tend to my wounds in her house above the city?

My head down to let myself leak I see first his cracked trainers, then his creased grey trousers, his wave of dyed black hair.

'Got a fag?' he asks, leering out of the night, the crowd going by behind him, wrapping his arms around me, and legs, whispering, ooooh, OK now, OK now as we fall, entwined, to the ground.

* * *

I remember waiting at the pelican crossing on the main road thinking of Jerry Hughes and his flight into the air. How he landed near me and spots of his blood appeared on my jeans and trainers. I notice a pall of smoke move up, darker than the sky, and suddenly the roof of the massage parlour is in flames, tiles cracking and sliding off. The white car with the yellow sticker draws up, middle lane, three cars back, Dad inside on his way back. He winds down his window to see better the leap of flame and smoke like blood pumping up. Tiles smash on the pavement in bursts of shrapnel. Mum is out, she'll return to find him cooking, making amends. Between them, sometimes, I saw bouts of love that lasted months.

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