



AWAY WITH BRANDY Daren King

Under the hot blue sky I walked with my backpack on, on through town, on until I reached the entrance to the station. I didn't keep on going because a man lay dead in the road. I put down my pack, walked up to the phone box that stood on the grassy verge and put my hand on the door handle. Someone was in there, making a call. The sunlight on the glass was so harsh I'd not seen him when crossing the grass, but I could see him now. It was Mark. He put down the receiver and opened the door. 'Alright Daniel?'

'Hi Mark,' I said. 'What's happening then?'

'Me? Fine mate. Buzzing. Unlike this poor sod. What about you?'

I nodded and mumbled something back. Over his shoulder I was watching the cars that were passing on the road. They each had to slow and then stop and could only overtake the body once the other lane was clear. Perhaps they couldn't tell what it was: surely if they'd have known it was a man—a dead man—they'd have stopped.

'Still at Carpart,' he said. 'Sods they are. Look at my thumbs.'

I did. They weren't very nice. He tucked them into the front

pocket of his overall and continued.

‘How long since you left, Dan? Four, five years? Nah I’m still there. Sods. Same old crap. Same crap different day. Different boss now. Funny bloke he is. Right mouth on him. Sod.’

I looked back at Mark. I hadn’t really been listening at all. He was moving his lips but I couldn’t make out the words. It was like he was still in the phone box, behind the glass.

I looked back at the body. There was no blood but its tie was red and spilled out from just below the chin. The only stain was blue from a leaky pen.

‘Daniel,’ Mark was saying. ‘I said what are you up to?’

With a nod of my head I indicated the body and explained how I’d stopped by the phone box to call the police.

‘Nah mate I mean what you doing with your life like on a grander scale and that.’

I checked that my backpack was still on the grass and told him I was intending to travel.

‘O yeah, where to?’

‘Germany,’ I said. ‘Nothing ever happens around here.’

‘Well it’s the suburbs ain’t it.’

‘I’m going there to work,’ I said. ‘I hear they pay well. In Germany.’

‘Yeah but hefty tax though ain’t it. That’s the trouble. Good idea though. Would’ve come with you a year ago. Got a kid now ain’t I. Daughter.’

‘A daughter?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Little monster. Little sod. Beautiful she is. Beautiful girl. Off home to see her now. Got to work this morning they told me, it’s me day off. First I’ve heard. So I was in this phone box

calling the wife. Then I heard this thump and this accident thing happened. Just called the filth.' He tugged my sleeve. 'We better move I reckon. Don't wanna be here when they get here. Have to pay for the ambulance, I heard. Then search me and find some dope in me pocket. Bastards.'

We wandered back the way I'd just walked and stopped behind the jutting corner of a fence. Yellow flowers grew over the top but all you could smell was lacquer. I put my backpack on the pavement and said nothing. Mark was looking down at his trainers. He said: 'Come with us if you want.'

'Alright.'

It was an old house, Mark's house, and it was small. Most of the lounge was taken up by the settee, most of which was taken up by his wife. She was pretty and smelt of milk. One side of her face was glued to the front of a magazine. When Mark poked her she sat up. 'What you doing here?'

'Told you,' he said. 'I rang you.'

'O yeah,' she said, wiping her hair with her sleeve. 'I was dreaming.'

'Bumped into an old mate,' Mark said. 'This is Daniel.'

I stepped in from the corner and said hello.

'You get paid?'

'Course I did.' He was making a kiss shape with his lips. 'Told you on the phone.'

'That's alright then,' his wife said. 'Kylie's asleep if that's where you're going.'

'We were gonna go up and see her.'

'Don't wake her then.'

I followed Mark up the narrow staircase and in through a door at

the top. The curtain was closed over the thick narrow window and the sun behind it was blue. 'This is Kylie,' Mark said. He leant over the bars and lifted her and put her into my arms. 'Hello lover. I won't put the light on.'

I said nothing.

'Good girl,' Mark said, taking her and putting her back into the cot. He was making that shape again, crossing his lips. 'There. She ain't shy. Shall we go down. Let her sleep. Beautiful girl. Beautiful ain't she.'

Back downstairs, his wife was still on the couch. There was a jar of petroleum jelly by her feet. She was more sociable now, more awake. 'You should tell your friend to stay for lunch,' she said. 'Stay for lunch Daniel.'

'He can't,' Mark said. 'He's got a train to catch. Off to see the world.' He looked at me, nodding his head. 'Good on him,' he said. 'Good on him.'

So again I headed out across the long paths and oblong areas of grass towards the station, a different station this time, near Mark's house. As I strolled up the station road I saw Brandy's metallic chocolate Vauxhall Astra Jubilee pass me on the dual carriageway. It hit the roundabout and turned round, then some yards ahead mounted the grass verge, the tyres leaving no mark with the ground being so hard. I opened the passenger door and dumped my backpack in the back. As we rejoined the carriageway Brandy asked me where it was I was headed.

'The station,' I said. 'I'm going to live in France, in Paris. Nothing ever happens around here.'

'Paris huh?'

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’m getting the train to Calais then a ferry into France.’

‘I expect you can speak French?’

‘Some,’ I said. ‘Enough to get by. *Girafeau* . That means baby giraffe.’

‘No doubt you’ll pick up a little more as you go along.’ He pulled a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of his lime green shirt, tucked one between his lips and lit it. As he drove he sucked it without removing it, keeping his hands on the wheel. I watched the station shrink in the rearview mirror. ‘To the station then,’ he said. ‘Unless of course you want to survey the landscape first. Plan your route.’

‘Do people do that?’

‘Not for me to say Danny my boy,’ he said. ‘But people do do that, yes.’

‘Alright.’

‘I happen to know a pretty good survey point.’

‘Then take me there.’

He drove me up a road that bent in angles that were strange and sometimes unexpected. When he stopped us with the handbrake we were up so high our town looked like a toy, its painted plastic parts laid out below. Brandy had finished the cigarette and was holding a match to the new white tip of another. The heat and his size made him sweat. ‘Of course it’s more of an emotional survey than a landscape survey.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes.’

‘Because you cannot actually see Paris from here.’

‘No.’

‘Or even Dover or the sea or anything at all to do with going to France. But you do understand why I brought you here.’

I nodded.

‘I brought you here Danny my boy because I think one needs to take a step backwards before taking such a gargantuan step forward.’

I nodded. His nailpolish was chipped and the colour of spunk.

‘One should remove oneself from one’s everyday surroundings and place oneself in a location altogether different. From up here you cannot see the road that will lead you to France. But you can see the town that you are leaving behind. And, Danny boy, knowing where you are going from is as important as knowing where it is you are going to.’

‘O I know that,’ I said. ‘But you said the road that will lead me to France. And that’s wrong because I’m going by train.’

‘In which case your road is the train track and the start of that road is the station. It’s metaphor, Danny. Hold on. Let me open the window. Beautiful. Not a cloud. I like it like this because you get proper smoking and also passive smoking too. But it’s too hot, let’s get some windows open. What do you want to leave for anyhow?’

‘It’s boring around here,’ I said. ‘Nothing happens.’

‘But it’s the same everywhere,’ he said, sucking on the butt. ‘It’s like it says in the papers. Births, deaths. It’ll be just the same in France. Have you booked a ferry ticket?’

‘No.’

‘But you have with you the money to buy one?’

‘I haven’t got much money.’

‘Enough to buy a train ticket and ferry ticket to France.’

‘I was going to sort that out along the way,’ I said. ‘Go to the bank. Get an overdraft.’

‘And the bank are going to do that are they? On the spot. On a gorgeous day such as this. At a train station. Ah there you are Danny

my boy. I'm your bank manager. Here's some money. Go and enjoy yourself. The bank are going to do that are they?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Maybe I should make an appointment. Fill in some forms.'

'And maybe if you lick your bank manager's hairy sweaty arse.'

My elbows were on my knees by now. The sky was blue but seemed silver because of the smoke from Brandy's cigarette.

'No doubt you've already considered hitching.'

'O yes,' I said. 'That was what I considered first.'

'But you decided against it.'

'I did but now I'm giving it some thought again. Yes,' I said after giving it some thought. 'I'm going to hitch.'

Brandy flicked the cigarette out into the air, which was still. 'Now that is what I like to see,' he said. 'That sort of snap decision making. The one thing a traveller cannot live without. Tell you what.' He looked at his watch. 'Tell you what. Leave it for today. It's afternoon now, you won't get very far if you go this late. Go tomorrow and I'll drive you to a good hitching spot.'

'Alright,' I said. 'Fine.'

'Daniel have you got something to eat or something? I'm famished. Overweight and underfed.'

I rummaged in my backpack for my sandwiches.

'You won't be needing them,' he said as I handed them over. 'Not if you're not even leaving until tomorrow. I'll put them in my face then drive you home.'

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