

THURSDAY

I woke to the smell of bacon, and realised I had had nothing to eat since Mrs Grant's the crisps the previous afternoon. I sauntered down to the kitchen, where Dad was standing at the stove in his underpants, doing a fry up. I fervently hoped the fat would spark up and hit his naked flesh. The bacon was already burning, and he was swearing at the eggs because they were scorched underneath and still uncooked and slimy on top.

'So what's the score, then, Dad, you and Mum getting back together?'

He turned and gazed at my as though he wasn't quite sure who I was.

'Want some of this?'

He slid the burnt bacon and half cooked eggs onto a plate.

'No, thanks.' I helped myself to some cereal and was about to carry it back up to my room, but my Mum was standing in the doorway, looking clean, happy and with her hair tousled in a more becoming way than normal.

'Danny, please stay, your father and I need to talk to you.'

'No need, Mum, I get the picture. It's nothing to do with me. You are grown ups. You don't need my permission to do whatever it is you are doing.'

I edged past her, tripping over the cat and spoiling my dignified exit by spilling some milk on the hall carpet. The annoyance made me feel I wanted one more cheap shot at the pair of them.

'And don't worry, if Ms Lennox is broken hearted next term, I'll take care of her. She's much nearer my age anyway. She's been eyeing me up for months.'

Dad went ballistic, and I could hardly blame him. He flung the horrible cooked breakfast on the floor and yelled a lot of abuse at me that doesn't bear repeating. Then he did what he always does. He sat down, put his head in his hands and started to cry. My Mum did what she always did, sat by him and stroked him gently to comfort him. When he stopped crying, they both looked at me reproachfully.

'Your Dad and I are trying hard to put things right in our marriage and it would be helpful if you would only get out of the way.'

I heard those last few words she said, and then there was a 10 second pause before she heard them herself. She leapt to her feet

'Oh, Danny, you know I didn't mean you had to get out of the way...'

I was so cool I could have been sitting in the freezer for an hour.

'Just give me time to pack a few things and I'll be out of way of you both.'

I marched up the stairs, my mother in hot pursuit, but I slammed the bedroom door on her and wedged a chair behind it. I stuffed a few things into my school bag. It wasn't very efficient as I discovered later when I realised I had three pairs of socks and no underpants. But I had the all-important laptop and phone.

By the time I got downstairs again and grabbed my shoes, they had completely forgotten about me, so engrossed were they in another blazing row. It reminded me of the bitter words my Mum had said to me the last time Dad left.

‘We don’t argue when you are not around, Danny. You seem to be the catalyst that starts the row.’

Well, so be it. I wasn’t going to be any sort of catalyst in anyone’s life anymore.

I walked down to the weir, my school bag hung over one shoulder and sat on the wall for ages, staring into the water. The weir was a long arch of broken stonework that held back the water; forming a deep pool and diverting some of it into the narrow lade where it used to turn the mill wheel. The wheel was long gone. I vaguely remember playing on the skeleton of rotten timber paddles as a kid. The paddles had long since gone, by someone on a health and safety kick.

I threw a stone into the pool, assessing its depth. Although it was summer, there had been heavy rain and the pool was maybe three metres deep. Deep enough for drowning, but it did not matter how long I stared, there was definitely no body there. My head felt clearer this morning. I guessed I must have been so taken up with the story I’d told Kenny’s gang that I imagined what Dr Binnie had said.

‘Far too much imagination for your own good!’ That was what my Granny used to say when I told her stories.

‘Your writing is very imaginative, but try to stick to plausible facts in your storyline or you will lose your reader.’ That was Mr Gunn, my English teacher.

‘Snap out of that dream world, Laddie, or you will never pass your test.’ That was Mr Brown, Maths teacher. Brown by name and boringly brown by nature.

I shook my head and stood up. Time to focus on reality. I was hungry. I was homeless. I had only £20 in my pocket and maybe around £50 on my bankcard. My phone had no charge. I ran through my options. Go back home? No way, at least not until Dad cleared out again. Hang out with Joe and scrounge some food at his house? OK, but where would I sleep at night? So much imagination but not enough to make me think I should have taken a sleeping bag. I could go to my grandparents. They’d both like that and Granny would probably welcome some help. I’d get fed well and as I’d seen the day before, my room was still there, right down to the collection of teddy bears. The image of the childishly decorated room made me feel that would be a backward step. Anyway, it was the first place my parents would look for me.

Maybe I should head into Glasgow. I had enough for the bus fare. I could get a job. I was tall enough to pass for sixteen. Maybe I should sneak back home and get some warmer clothes and a sleeping bag. I mooched along to the bus stop on the road out of town. I’d just missed one so the next one wouldn’t be due for another hour. Killudan really was in the back of beyond. It was high time I moved out and made my own way in the world. I sat on the bench inside the shelter. Every time a car passed by on the way to the bypass, I stared at the ground. Folks around our way will always stop to pick up someone they know. Cars slowed, but no one recognised me so they picked up speed again. I was almost asleep when I heard a car horn and realised someone had stopped. Ava was leaning out of the passenger window and looking a little apprehensive.

‘Dad and I are going into the West End. I am going to see an exhibition at the Art Gallery while Dad’s got a meeting. Want a lift?’

I hesitated, but hunger got the better of me. I slung my backpack into the back seat and got in. Ava introduced her Dad and he smiled at me in the mirror. I'd seen him around town, but never met him before. He was from around here, but immigrated to Canada, married a Canadian and made a lot of money in oil – or so I had been told.

Ava didn't turn to look at me. I noticed she'd her sketch book out and was busy drawing as usual. I edged over, trying to see what she was sketching, but it was impossible to see.

'So where you headed, Danny? Want me to drop you at the subway?' I think he meant the Underground. He spoke with a slight Canadian accent, but you could hear he was Scottish in spite of it.

I muttered that I wasn't quite sure, hadn't made up my mind, and anywhere in the city would do. He drove on, picking up speed on the bypass and glancing curiously at me in the mirror, then looking over at Ava as if for guidance.

'That's a heavy pack you're carrying,' he said eventually. 'You going away for a few days?'

'I don't know. Maybe. Depends.' So much for my imagination. I ought to have had a story ready.

He was silent for a while, concentrating on manoeuvring round some road works. When the road was clear again, he glanced back at me in the mirror.

'Hey, listen, buddy, just tell me if it's none of my business, but you look very pale. Have you had anything to eat this morning? We could stop somewhere. There's a Macdonald's just before we reach the motorway. I could use a shot of coffee'

Before I could work up an answer, Ava said hadn't had time for breakfast either and please could we stop. I was pretty sure she wasn't hungry but was trying to save my embarrassment.

I can't remember what we all ordered, but Ava's dad insisted on paying and as the hunger pangs subsided I started worrying about how to explain myself, or even if an explanation was necessary. Ava's Dad chatted away about he felt about being back in the 'old country' wondering if they would stay or go back to Canada. It seemed he could work for his company either side of the Atlantic. I liked him, mainly because he didn't talk down to me like a kid, but as though I understood what he was talking about. I didn't understand most of it, but I was sharp enough to ask some leading questions and keep him talking. When I asked where in Canada he'd worked, he drew a map on a napkin and showed me Alberta and where the oil sands were.

Ava was quiet while I chatted with her Dad. She'd finished her burger and was sketching the guy at the next table, occasionally stopping to suck her milk shake through a straw.

'Ava doesn't like me to talk about the oil business,' he said, as we got back in the car. 'It's because she thinks it's not good for the environment to be extracting so much fossil fuel. But we've made a good living out of it as a family and anyway, renewables can't supply all our energy requirements at the moment.'

Ava laughed and replied and they had some friendly banter for a while. I was amazed at the way she spoke with her Dad, as though he were a friend, not a parent. I was familiar with the arguments, without having any particular view on it, so I just listened.

‘Anyway, I have an interview this afternoon about another job here in Scotland working with renewables. I have to meet a colleague first for lunch. I’ll drop you at Kelvingrove and pick Ava up at 5 pm. Want to leave that pack in the car or are you going to drag it around with you?’ He looked at me quizzically and I thought by now he deserved an explanation.

‘I had a bit of a row with my parents this morning and thought I might head into the city and get a job, but I realised now that’s stupid. No-one’s going to give a homeless 15 year old a job.’

‘Well, you look a lot older than 15, but I guess any employer is going to ask for paper work, so you’re right it wouldn’t be easy. How about you look around this afternoon, have a think about it and I’ll see you at the Kelvingrove at 5 pm when I pick up Ava? Then you can come home with us if you want, or take your bag and your chances in the Big Smoke.’

‘Thanks, Mr Sorenson.’

‘Oh, no, that’s my wife’s name! It’s Ukrainian. Ava has her mother’s name, but I kept mine. I’m Bill McLeod, but just call me Bill.’

I liked him even more. There was none of that patronising bullshit I expected about being too young to leave home, or how I had to call my parents right away.

He dropped us off in the car park at the back of the Kelvingrove and drove off. It was sunny by this time and we opted to sit on the low granite wall outside for a while.

‘You must think I’m a complete twat.’ I muttered eventually.

‘Don’t dare tell me what I think.’ She sounded angry.

‘Well, I suppose I should say sorry for not joining you and your pals at the river yesterday.’ I put a heavy emphasis on the word ‘pals’, letting them know what I thought of them.

She was silent, staring at her feet. She was wearing bright yellow Dr Martens and a purple flouncy skirt that seemed to be made of bird netting over black leggings. I dared not look to see what she was wearing on top, but I knew she would be really smart and pretty too. I was wearing yesterday’s grubby jeans and t-shirt. I probably smelled too, as I hadn’t stopped for a shower this morning.

‘Well maybe I should just bugger off and leave you in peace to do whatever you are going to do, eh?’

‘You’re making assumptions again. You have no idea what I think or want.’

‘Well, you need to tell me since I can’t work it out for myself. Do you want me to go or do you want me to hang around for a while?’

‘I wanted you to hang out with me yesterday at the farm. I thought that was clear.’

‘Yeah, well I was hot and tired and my bike was stolen and you had all your friends. And you didn’t tell me we’d be swimming so I didn’t have my gear.’

You didn’t mind sitting around with my Mum.’ Her voice was a bit shaky. I glanced up for the first time. Her long hair was over her face, but I could tell she was near tears.

‘Well she was nice to me.’

‘And you didn’t think I would be nice to you?’

‘No chance. Not in front of those guys. They think I’m a right wuss. You’d have been embarrassed to be seen with me.’

‘Again with the assumptions! Don’t you know when you assume something you make an ass of you and me?’

She pinned her hair back and I could see that she was smiling through the tears.

‘Anyway, no-one knows us here, so you don’t have to be embarrassed to be seen with me either.’

I took a deep breath, stood up and held out my hand to bring her to her feet. I’d never stood alongside her like that before. She barely came up to my oxters.

‘Ok, can I apologise and start again? Shall we go in and see this fucking art exhibition? What is it anyway?’

She grinned and pulled a leaflet out of her bag.

‘It’s only by one of your famous Scottish artists, John Patrick Byrne.’

‘Never heard of the prick.’

She giggled as we climbed the steps into the museum.

‘What’s with all the swearing?’

‘I dunno, I guess I am practicing at not being such a wuss.’

She giggled again. ‘Where I come from, people don’t swear the way you guys do. Like, if someone swears, it’s really shocking.’

You guys. She said *you guys*. Maybe she meant Scottish folk, but I put my shoulders back. Maybe, just maybe, she meant I was as cool as some of her other pals.

‘What made you want to see this John Patrick Whotsit’s paintings?’

‘Oh, Van Gogh suggested we go see it. Sort of summer homework.’ Van Gogh was one of the art teachers in our school, so called because he wore his long grey hair in a pony tail tied at one side of his head, so we never really knew if he had a full set of ears.

‘Anyway, I’ve never been in this place before...’

She stopped as we passed through the huge swing doors. I’ve been to the Kelvingrove many times before, but this time it was as if I had never seen it before. I watched her begin to take it in, the soaring sandstone columns.....We’d hit on the lunchtime organ recital, which made it particularly impressive.

‘Wait here.’ I dodged through the crowds and managed to grab us both a coke and huge slice of cake in the café. All the chairs were taken, so we found a corner and sat on the cool marble floor, our backs against one of the stone pillars with the donor’s names printed on the brass columns. It’s hard to eat a huge slice of Victoria Sponge off a paper plate when you are sitting on the floor. Crumbs rolled down onto her skirt. I thought briefly of brushing them off, but decided not to chance my luck. Then I showed her my favourite exhibit, which was the Spitfire, of course, and she spent a long time sketching butterflies, while I just watched.

I guess if you are going to spend a day being homeless, the Kelvingrove is not a bad place to start.

Eventually, we got downstairs to the exhibition. It was a bit of work to persuade the staff that we were both under sixteen and could therefore get in free, but it was flattering that he thought we were older. I was shit scared that I wouldn't understand what it was all about and would let Ava down by my stupidity, but she knew nothing about the guy either. Once I started reading his life story, I got interested in spite of myself. Seems he didn't have much of a start in life. Well, join the club, mate. I wondered if I'd be able to turn it around as well, become an actual author instead of just scribbling stories that I never let anyone read.

I can't pretend I understood his artwork. Ava was taking notes, sketching and muttering things under her breath like 'conté' and 'scraperboard', but she took time out to notice I was standing around like a knotless thread.

'How about you find three pictures you like, just look at them and tell me afterwards why you like them and how they make you feel,' she whispered 'That's what Van Gogh told us to do.'

It was hard work, but I eventually found two, both self-portraits. The first one was called 'Relaxez Vous' and showed him with his arms behind his head. It made me feel – well, I dunno, a bit more secure I think. The other one was called 'Me and My Shadow' and showed him smoking heavily along with a skeleton smoking a pipe. I thought at first it meant he was resisting death, but when I looked closer he appeared to be high fiving death, as though they both belonged to the same club, or something. Both of the pictures took me out of my gloomy self, I suppose, but I wasn't sure if I could explain that to Ava and I was glad I didn't have to write about it for Van Gogh.

Ava took a long time examining the pictures. I didn't mind too much, I just followed her around, sitting down wherever there was a bench and watching her. She was definitely more interesting than any piece of art work. I noticed the way she wrinkled her brow when she was puzzling over something, how she tilted her lovely head as though to get a different perspective, how she'd stand back from a picture, then move in close. Eventually she came and sat on a bench beside me.

'I'm sorry if it bored you rigid.'

I shook my head and told her about the two pictures I'd like and why. She nodded sagely, as though I'd said something profound.

'Art is my escape. When I get upset or disappointed, it helps me to sketch. It sort of takes me to a place where I feel sort of whole again. Do you have anything like that?'

'I dunno. My writing, I guess.'

'Of course, you always get A for creative writing. Do you write outside school as well?'

'All the time.'

'Tell me more! Can I read something you've written?'

A couple of smartly dressed women were glaring at us. It seems art exhibitions are a bit like church. The sense of awe imposes silence.

'Maybe. I'll show you mine if you show me yours.'

It was out of my mouth before I said it and I reached out in horror, as though to drag it back from the air. I hoped desperately Canadians don't use that expression.

‘I didn’t mean...’

‘Oh, I know you didn’t!’ She collapsed in helpless giggling and we had to scarpers before we were thrown out of the gallery.

It was almost time for her Dad to collect her. We sat on the back steps and she gazed up at the skyline and the University tower.

‘I love Glasgow, she said, ‘All these old buildings and history. Imagine going to university here. I would love to stay and go the Glasgow School of Art. What will you do?’

‘I don’t know. All I want to be is an author, but I don’t really know how to get there.’

‘Have you ever submitted a story to a completion or anything like that? Maybe that’s how you get started.’

I was silent. I couldn’t explain my lack of confidence. Maybe it was different for her, growing up with parents who seem to show a real interest in what you do. Of course, my parents wanted me to do well at school and go onto university, but they had no interest in my writing. Dad was an engineer and although I’d never asked him, I am sure he thought writing was not nearly masculine enough. Mum seemed to care more about my marks than my interest in writing, and was always nagging me about Maths. She used to teach Biology and maybe at one time that had made her enthusiastic, but all I ever heard her talk about now was attainment, standardised testing, outcomes and performance.

I changed the subject.

‘Why wouldn’t you be able to stay here?’

‘My Mum wants to go back to Canada. My Dad wants to stay here. It’s a toss up who will win.’ She sighed. ‘Actually, they might both win. They are not very happy together, so Dad might stay here and Mum might go home. They fight a lot and they just seem miserable. Mum says Dad has gone right off sex. They’ve been sleeping in separate rooms for months.’

I suddenly remembered her mother putting her hand on my knee and asking me to call her Jenny when we were sitting under the apple tree.

‘I wish my Dad had gone off sex. He’s had more affairs than I can count. They’re back together again, but it won’t last. It never does.’

‘Oh, I think my Dad has only gone off sex with my Mum. I mean he’s discreet about it, but he’s away on business a lot, so who knows. If they split up, I want to stay with Dad, but I’m not sure if I’ll be allowed, because he’s away so much of the time. Are you going to go back home tonight?’

‘I dunno.’

We sat there, silently, brooding on how awful our parents were, although I was certain mine had the edge over hers in sheer bloody uselessness.

I slipped into a daydream, where Ava and I were old enough to share a flat in Glasgow. She would go to Art School, I would hang around West End cafes writing and talking with other authors and when she got home I would have cooked her delicious meals. There would be a spare room we could turn into a studio for her and I’d just write at the kitchen table and at the weekend we’d have friends round, smoke weed, talk politics and art and discuss my latest novel. I was getting into how we’d decorate the flat, dark blue walls with open shelving and lots of books, plus a large print of Bryne’s ‘Relaxez Vous above the fireplace when her Dad turned up.

Her Dad was really cool, not asking me whether I'd made up my mind about staying in the city, just letting me get in the back seat and put on the seat belt. To my surprise, Ava got in beside me. Bill never showed any sign of noticing this. We had some polite chat about the interview, which appeared to have gone well, and then he spent the rest of the journey taking phone calls and ignoring us. I charged my phone in the car. There were dozens of missed calls from my Gran and two from Dr Binnie. There were also several texts from Ava earlier in the day, but oddly nothing at all from either of my parents. Much as I hated them at the moment, it was galling to know they hadn't even missed me all day.

I didn't get into the texts because there was a ping and I realised Ava was texting me from the other side of the car.

I can ask Dad if you can stay at farm?

I had a flash back of her mother putting her hand on my knee and let the reel run on till she was sliding it up my leg, all the while gazing at me deeply with her grey green eyes. Then I saw her curl her lip in disdain, she slapped me hard across the face and I snapped out of it.

No, thanks - Mum w'd be mad.

Grandparents?

Naw, they'd make me call Mum

What will you do?

I glanced up. She was gazing at me softly. Her eyes were also green, but there the resemblance ended.

'Maybe stay at Joe's. Sometimes sleep over there.'

I actually hadn't slept over there since Joe told me last year that he was not into girls at all. He was adamant that he wasn't into boys either, and certainly not into me, but I did feel a bit nervous, not about Joe, but about gossip at school Oh, what the hell, it was the holiday, no-one would know.

'Joe the Geek?

thumbs up emoji

He's in my French class.

He's cool'

Joe is a bit of a geek, but his nickname is more of a compliment than an insult. Hardly anyone teases him about it because he knows almost everything techy there is to know, but doesn't make you feel small. Plus he runs a wee business in the school bogs, fixing kid's phones and other devices and charges a very reasonable fee. He even has a laminated sign he sticks on the cubicle door:

Joe the Nerd is
IN OUT
No fix – no fee

Sometimes you can hardly get in for a quick slash because the queue of folks waiting to get advice. He knows how to get round those pesky parental controls too and how to get you hooked up if you have the sort of manic parents who switch the Wi-Fi down at bedtime. Best of all, when a virus corrupted all my precious story files, he got them back for me and didn't even make too much of the fact that the virus had come from a porn site.

Joe sounded a bit odd on the phone but said it was no problem to sleep at his place. I told him I'd collect some stuff and be round later. In the background I heard his mum tell him to ask me to come for dinner at seven.

Ava was back
Call me later?

Sure

Heart emoji you!

I paused. How seriously was I supposed to take that? Surely I would have to say I loved her back? How serious was she? I didn't dare look at her in case she was laughing at me. Maybe it was just a cultural thing? Maybe Canadians say I love you to anyone? I opted for something that could be interpreted either way.

Not half as much as I Heart emoji you!

Sure took your time there

I'm a serious guy

And I'm a serious girl.

I mean it, I love you

R we an item now?

Of course!

Then I love you too

She reached across and held my hand. Funny how you can daydream all you like about getting into a girl's knickers and all that, but in this case it was just enough to squeeze her hand and keep holding it.

I asked Bill to drop me in the town centre, as I didn't want my parents to see me get out of the car. When I turned into our street, I noted both their cars were there. I'd forgotten it was early evening and they'd both be back from work. I snuck round the back, hid my backpack in the hedge and did my usual trick of shinning up the drainpipe, over the porch roof and in the bathroom window, only I'd forgotten how the flimsy plastic roof would no longer take my weight. My left foot went straight through just as my right leg went over the sill. I held on tight to the window frame and pulled up sharply. My foot came free, but the sharp edge of the plastic ripped right through my jeans and left a long gash just above my ankle. I paused, hoping neither of my parents had heard the crash, then I clambered down, locked the bathroom door and cleaned up the blood trail on the window sill, over the sink and the bathroom floor. I found a clean flannel and put some pressure over the wound. I cautiously opened the bathroom door. There was no one on the landing and the house was eerily quiet. I crept to my room and tore off my jeans. It was not a pretty sight. Gobs of blood were swelling up and running down my leg. I stood on the jeans to stop it reaching the carpet, and wound my sock tight around to stem the flow. I grabbed a bag and stuffed it with more clothes, put on some fresh jeans and a clean t-shirt. I then threw the bag out the bedroom window, where it landed with a soft plop in the back lane. My original plan was to leave by the bathroom window again, but cracking the porch roof had blocked that escape route permanently. I would just have to chance my arm and go out the front door. I carried my shoes and went softly down the carpeted stairs. It was only then I saw the note.

The note read:

Dear Danny

I'm taking your Mum to Ibiza for a couple of weeks. She really needs a break and we need some time on our own to sort things out.

Your mum's put some cash in your bank account for food.

If you need anything, get in touch with your Grandparents, but DON'T tell them we are away.

Your loving father

At the bottom of the page my mother had scrawled:

Don't forget to feed the cat!

I fed the cat first, and went online to check my account. There was a new entry of £1,000. It was only then I realised they were serious about being away for two weeks, or maybe longer. Who eats their way through £1,000 in two weeks? Of course, it was guilt money. I put my shoes on, retrieved my backpack and bag, shoved them in the porch, and locked the front door behind me. It was ten to seven, and I needed to hurry to get to Joe's house in time for dinner, which wasn't easy as my leg still hurt and I was half limping.

I arrived a little breathlessly, just in time for dinner.