

The Reunion

It was November 1963 when twenty five year old Daniel McLevy stepped off the liner onto dry land at Southampton dockside on the south coast of England after the five week journey from Australia where he had lived and worked for the last seven years. A year after running away from his home he had taken the assisted passage scheme to get as far away as he could to begin a new life in another world unsure if he would ever return to the home where he had grown up.

The first year after leaving he had stayed in a rundown, damp, cold, cheap boarding house in Notting Hill Gate inhabited mainly by new immigrants from the West Indies and a few forgotten veterans from the second world war. He found work, saved money to fund his ambition to leave for Australia and made friends for the first time in his short life. He shared a room with five others, mostly alcoholics and damaged mentally by their experience of war. He grew up fast, learning the signs to look for when trouble might come, when to leave the room, when what started as a joke might turn into something more serious and a mindless fight. It could be a certain look or a certain gesture, most times it turned into nothing more than angry words but they also looked after him, he learned their stories, they trusted him, maybe because they noticed the damage in his own mind he tried to hide from them, though sometimes he could not.

The time to leave came though, Australia was calling and he left Britain far behind for the iron ore mines of the Pilbarra region way up in the north of the state of Western Australia. What never left him though in the following years was the need to reconcile with his family, he could no longer shake off the feeling that he must make his peace with them. It was more than possible everything would go very wrong but he was back now on the freezing dockside heading through immigration and on to the railway station with his fellow travellers where he caught the train that took him to London where he booked himself a room in a small hotel for a couple of nights.

That afternoon he never left the room going over in his mind, again, what would be said when he met with his mother. He felt as if he was walking into a trap of his own making, hemmed in by the city, it's smell, it's noise and it's pollution. If there was no return to the outback it would take Daniel a long time to get used to life back in Britain. He had grown

accustomed to the life he had made for himself in the small iron mining town of seven hundred people, many who came from many different countries also the isolation was what he had always craved, he knew though what he had to do.

While he shut himself away he thought briefly of one of those left behind under a burning sun on that red earth a world away, a woman from Henan province in China, Zhao Wen, one of the few who seemed to know why he was like was. She had urged him to return to his old home and find a way to reconcile his two conflicted lives and as they stood on the runway in the shadow of the small plane that would take him to the airport seventy miles away on the west coast they said their farewells.

“Will you come back Daniel?” She had asked

“I don’t know. I love it here. I reckon I will, I’ve been here long enough to become an Australian citizen now. Will you go back to Xinxiang?” He hoped she would wait for him to return

Zhao Wen held onto both his hands. “China is a beautiful country, so much potential but it needs to look after it’s people so much better, the years of famine were bad enough but now our leaders hold on to their power only through terror and through fear and one day I will make amends with my family, they are too precious to lose over some stupid argument. perhaps I will also become an Australian citizen”

Daniel nodded and smiled as the pilot called to the six waiting passengers. He promised to keep in touch, said he would never forget her, leaned forward and kissed her. She reached into her pocket and took out a small card with some Chinese characters, a picture of the sun, a willow tree and some mountains on the face of it. She took out a pen and wrote on the back in Chinese and English ‘From your friend. For a safe journey. Don’t stay away too long. –Wen’ and gave it to him, he thanked her. Daniel climbed aboard and was away to his future, looking back he saw Zhao Wen waving until he could see her no more.

Daniel left his hotel the next morning taking the underground north to Hampstead feeling a little nervous, the possibility of once again being pushed aside preyed on his mind. In the years since he had left home he had grown, been through a lot and learnt to look after himself but he still craved the acceptance of his family for who he was, with all his flaws and faults and his schizophrenia which he had tried to never talk about for fear of being of being cast aside and put away somewhere but it always showed itself somehow. It was snowing as he

left the station, he turned left down the high street, the village looked smaller to him now, the shops and cafés were still familiar and it had kept all of its charmed qualities. Turning left again along Flask Walk, head down and hands stuffed deep in his pockets he spotted a newspaper headline screaming out that President Kennedy had been assassinated, he hurried on with other thoughts on his mind eventually coming to the long tree lined Lime avenue , not far now. He took a seat on a snow covered bench for a short while throwing off the feeling that he should not be here. He was on the edge of Hampstead Heath which, when he was a child, had been his playground, his escape from a loveless home. On his own and with a wild and vivid imagination and only the explorers he loved to read of in his mind, the heath was as far as he could run back then.

He wondered, not for the first time, how his parents had come to live in such a beautiful place, it was way out their league. In his mind he could see the day they arrived from south of the river twenty two years before when his father had bought them here to escape the bombing down near where his parents lived near the river at Woolwich Arsenal. His father, mother and her best friend Eileen had grown up there together and Eileens father, who was involved in some strange business and knew some dubious people got them accomodation here in this very different part of London. It seems there were no questions asked and Daniel presumed that as long as Eileen stayed a couple of doors away then his mother also stayed. He looked at his watch, it was time to go. Still there was time to turn and walk away but he was stronger now and would not run again. He had blinked once more and when his eyes opened he was in a different life, as if the last few years had belonged to someone else. As he walked across the heath and around the small pond at the back of the row of houses where he used to live he took out his wallet and looked at the card Zhao Wen had given him only five weeks before and smiled to himself, this was his life and his life only. Was this how the future would be now? Just people drifting in and out every two or three years? The idea held no appeal to him but the road ahead was in his hands now and he was ready to face anything that lay in his path. First he would call on his mothers old friend Eileen who had been like a mother to him when his own mother had not been. That would be best he thought.

He approached the door to Eileens house with some trepidation, rang the bell and waited. Always, when he was younger and had disturbing thoughts in what he called his other mind he came to see her when his mother, either because she was incapable or through lack of interest or care had rejected him and Eileen had taken him in. Both women had been young unmarried mothers, still very much frowned upon and shameful back in those days but they

came from strong families who stood by them. Now in their mid forties they were still good friends though their lives had taken somewhat different directions.

The door opened, Eileen stood in front of Daniel same as ever with a cigarette in hand staring at him. He knew he looked a bit of a mess and put a hand through his hair, tried to look a little tidier thinking Eileen had no idea who it was standing on her doorstep or perhaps it was just the surprise, the unexpectedness of seeing him. It was Daniel who spoke first.

“Hello Eileen. I’m sorry it’s been so long. Too long.”

“You’re damn right it’s been too long.” She said reproachfully and straight faced then she smiled “But I knew you would come back you were never going to stay away forever that was not who you were. You look cold come on in. Have you seen Maureen yet?”

Daniel followed her inside telling her he thought it better to see her first before he saw his mother. Eileen knew it was just a delaying tactic because he was nervous, just to give him a few more minutes to pull himself together but said nothing. She gave him a beer and lit another cigarette she took from his own packet that he had lain on the table, he told her to keep them and watched as she put them in her bag. Looking around Daniel noticed there were boxes stacked up all over the place, floor to ceiling full of what he had no idea. She said it was best not to ask so he didn’t.

He had done the right thing, Eileen told him, returning home to see his mother even if it was his intention to return to Australia and said he seemed to have gained some confidence over himself, that Maureen would get the shock of her life but would be so thankful to see him again. Daniel spoke a little of his life over the last eight years but was now eager to get to his mothers house. Before he left Eileen asked if he had experienced any more episodes like the ones from his past. He had, he replied, but one of the good things about living in the outback was that it was possible to lose yourself out there and scream into the distance and be heard by no one. She nodded asking if he had got help for what he lived with and he was ashamed of his lie when he said he had. At the door Eileen said,

“You know where I am if you ever need anyone, now go and see your mother, tell her I will be round when you are gone.”

After they had hugged each other Eileen looked to him eyes screwed up a little and he knew she had seen through his lie but she said no more. What a fool I am he thought, what is it I

am afraid of? Deep down he knew that what he was afraid of was himself and what he was capable of. This feeling was justified and was with him always. As he walked the short distance to his old home he heard Eileens voice.

“Welcome home Daniel, good to see you again”

He waved to her as another cigarette was lit as she watched him. Thirty seconds later he was at his mothers house knocking on the door. He closed his eyes, took a large intake of breath to calm himself, glanced back to Eileen and saw her give a thumbs up sign, he turned back quickly as the door slowly opened. Both he and his mother seemed unsure what to do, unable to make the first move or say the first words. Maureen after just staring at him for a few seconds pulled him to her and he put his arms around her.

“I can’t believe it Daniel, come inside it’s bloody freezing.” He didn’t feel the cold so much, only a warmth inside spreading through his veins that confused him and surprised him a little. Maureen let go of him and he followed her through to what had always been her favourite room in the house, the kitchen, where she put a kettle on the stove. Looking around the room he noticed nothing had changed. Everything had been there since they had moved in during the war and it all worked, why change it? Daniel watched his mother as the kettle boiled. She had only been twenty years old when he was born, his father twenty two but they both came from families who looked out for all of them in those early years. Now she was forty five but looked so much older, she had done so much damage to herself whether she knew it and didn’t care or lived in denial he did not know. He had seen the damage alcohol could do often enough back in Notting Hill Gate and could see she needed help even if she would never admit it. He thought perhaps they were both cut from the same cloth, escaping their past but on very different roads. Right through the forties and fifties there had been no bond between them, it had been easy to leave such a cold, loveless, uncaring home. Maureen brought over the cups of tea and sat down at the table with Daniel then she recalled he never drank hot drinks and pushed his cup aside. They both laughed, it broke the ice a little, he went to get a glass of milk. She had her elbow on the table her chin resting on her hand looking at him as though trying to read his mind.

“Where have you been Daniel? Where did you go? It looks like you’ve been far away, just like all those explorers you used to read about”. She smiled at the now distant memory.

“Your brother read that note you left, said you would be back in a week but you never did come back, I thought you were gone forever”

As she took a drink of her tea he noticed the shake of her hand and asked a question which he immediately regretted.

“Do you still drink as much as you used to mum?”

It was hurtful and unfair and not the right time and he apologised but she gave an answer of sorts.

“Only when the girls come over from south of the river. Come on tell me how you’ve been, where you’ve been, please do.”

Daniel knew this lie, this denial, it was the mantra of many addicts, he had heard it told so many times.

‘But who am I to judge anyone let alone my mother. I have lied to myself and others too about what goes on in my own head, the truth often scares us, so much easier to deny there is any problem at all.’ Daniel said these words only to himself and told her of the places he’d been to and the good people who had looked out for him. Some things were best left unsaid, some things she did not need to know. It was not necessary to worry her or for her to feel any burden of guilt. There was enough going on in her life, no need for that and besides the path his life had taken was his of his own making not hers.

“You look well Daniel” Maureen said with genuine love in her tone “look at your hair and your skin all tanned still”

She ran a hand through his rather wild hair in an attempt to tidy it and he felt he was going to cry. Ever since he had been a young boy he had so rarely felt his mother’s touch, the alcohol had always come first and the cruel words had always followed and then the rejection. He thought she was trying to find a way to say what she really wanted to say.

“I worried so much about you Daniel. I hope you believe that. When I thought about it all and looked back I might have done what you did and escaped too. You were always so quiet, made no friends and hid yourself away. You must have thought me and your brother were no family at all, that no one cared but you were just different that’s all weren’t you? In your mind, and I did nothing. I forgot what it was to be a mother for all those years.”

Daniel listened as she unburdened herself, she was doing what he found it so hard to do and speaking her feelings to someone but he was a good listener if nothing else and knew better

than to halt the flow of words and thoughts of someone who wanted or needed to get them out into the open. He admired his mother for that and put his hand on hers as she continued.

“You know when your father died in that crash on the runway after a flight over Germany with all the crew? He was so close to home. Much of me died with him, he was the first man, the only man I fell in love with and I know he adored you. He was a brave man though like all those others and so like you, both gentle people, not fighters at all, surprising when I think of where he came from. We were left behind and I couldn’t cope with it all. I’m so sorry Daniel”

Daniel put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a large coin, an old two penny piece with the date 1797 impressed on it that he carried on him every day. It was all he had taken from his old life, he passed it to his mother. Maureen took it turning it over and over and smiled.

“I remember when your dad gave you this, said it was to bring you luck, you were only about three so I kept it safe until you were older.”

She handed it back. Daniel took it, he could only vaguely recall his father giving it to him but there was never a time it was not in his pocket, by his side. He noticed how thin she was. Her life was never meant to be this way. It seemed to Daniel as if she blamed herself for the death of his father even after all these years and she was punishing herself, totally illogical of course, there was no one to blame and there had been no one to whom she could release her anger and bitterness except herself and her youngest troubled son. Maybe it’s what people do when lives are shattered and we look for an explanation and find none that satisfies us.

“How are you now mum?” Daniel asked as he was offered a cigarette

“ I’m just glad you are safe. I learned something after you went away that I should have known a long long time ago. If you push away those that need you and rely on you and love you when they are so young and have no choice one day they will run, find another way. Sounds obvious doesn’t it. I knew I had treated you differently to your brother, when you were small after your dad died you would come to me for a cuddle, often, and I took your arms and I shouted you away, wished horrible things on you, I didn’t care how you would feel. You came a distant second to me and my life. I’m so sorry I got things so wrong Daniel.” She was going to cry he could see that and held her hand, she squeezed his hand tight as if she thought he was going to run.

“We’re not bad people just confused and the past is the past now.” Daniel replied. “We did what we did and escaped in our own different ways. If you want we can try and make a new start.”

“Eileen told me of the talks you two used to have, i’m glad she was there for you when I was not and I should have been.”

Maureen got up from the table and hugged him. “Yes, a new beginning that would be good.”

Daniel put his his arms around his mother and as he did so he saw hidden behind a cereal box two bottles of gin, one half empty. He closed his eyes and sighed. Would she ever stop lying to herself, hurting herself? He made a promise to himself, he would get in touch with his brother and get her the help she needed. It would mean three or four months in the care of those who deal with addictions, it would mean separating from her friends but to get that help his mother would have to admit there was a problem.

He did not say this to his mother at this moment and he did not know if David, his brother, would even talk to him. It seems he blamed Daniel for all the problems that came their mothers way but he would try. Instead he told her he would be going back to Australia where he had a girlfriend and he would probably become a citizen of that country.

She smiled. “I’m happy for you Daniel, you should go wherever you will be happy as long as you don’t run away again with no words.”

Daniel told her all about Zhao Wen and life in the Australian outback, she said she hoped that one day it would be possible to meet her. He promised her that would happen. He stayed a couple more weeks in London then returned back to his other life on the other side of the world into the arms of his girlfriend. Ten months later he was able to bring his mother over to join him, She had voluteered to attend the addiction clinic and left the place after the treatment. It had not been easy but it appeared to be successful.

Maureen loved the outback and the peace she found there even got a job in the small post office which kept her busy and she became a well known face in the small town and got to know Zhao Wen at last. Daniel certainly had his problems that disturbed him but he managed to get help also, at the urging and encouragement of Zhao Wen and his mother.

Two tears passed by when Mureen relapsed and became very ill. Daniel was told the damage had been done over many years. She died not long after being admitted to the hospital, died a

believer in an afterlife, believing she would be with the man she had loved once more. Daniel brought her back to London for burial in Brockley Park Cemetery south of that great London river where she was to be buried in the same piece of earth as his father. Before the funeral he went to see her body one last time and placed his two penny piece into her hand and wished her luck should there be a longer journey ahead for her. Eileen said some beautiful words at the funeral about her best friend as did David who never spoke again to his brother. Daniel hoped his mother would be at peace with herself and his parents would meet again because that is all she ever longed for.

The End