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Opening extract from

Night Flight

Written by

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For dreamers everywhere

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Chapter 1

Danni's new world was a grey world.

Grey streets.

Grey buildings.

Grey rain.

Grey-faced people.

Danni felt grey too.

All the colour had drained from his life.

His new world smelled of fast food and car fumes. And it was cold.

The cold seeped into Danni's skin, down to his bones, into his heart.

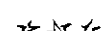
He was frozen.

When he allowed himself to think about his real home, his own home, his country and his family, he would feel a rush of panic. What was happening there now?

Then a glow would grow, warmth would surround him. He'd remember the smell of

the foods and the fruits, the warm ground beneath his feet, the touch of the sun, the sound of his mother singing.

The memories warmed him. But now they were fading. They said he was in a safe place here. But it was cold and grey.



The place where Danni lived with his 'aunty' was a tall, grey block. Concrete. Walkways, like rat runs, surrounded it. The lift was grey metal and smelled of pee. Writing was scrawled across the walls.

Much of this scrawl was meaningless to Danni. Many of the words that the gang of kids shouted at him were unknown to him too, but he could understand the tone of their voices. They hated him.

All day long at school, Danni filled his brain with new words, new ideas, facts, information.



Every day he learnt new things. He'd learnt:

1. Every time you start a new piece of work, you write the date.
2. Then you draw a straight line down the left hand side of the page.
3. And this is called a margin.
4. He'd learnt that he was only allowed to read the books with a blue band stuck on them. Even though there was a red one with a picture of a camel and he would have liked to read that one.
5. He learnt that you stand up straight. Walk don't run. Sit with bottom on the floor.
6. He'd learnt that you were allowed to put things in the bin but you were not allowed to take things out of the bin.
7. He'd learnt that he was useless at spelling.
8. He learnt that if someone poked you in the back, you had to stay quiet. You must not turn round and hit them.
9. Even if they had really hurt you.
10. He'd learnt that if you sat and stared out of the window, this was bad.
11. But if you sat and stared at a bit of paper, this was good.

12. He'd learnt that you sat perfectly still and quiet in the hall when it was assembly.
13. You had to run round and round it when it was P.E.
14. It was very bad if you ran round and round it in assembly. Even if something had frightened you.
15. He'd learnt that you eat your pie with a knife and fork but if you eat your cake with a knife and fork, everyone laughs at you.
16. He learnt that you never EVER run away from a teacher who is shouting at you.
17. You have to stand still and look at your feet.
18. He had learnt that you do not cross bridges until you come to them.
19. But he had never thought of trying to cross a bridge before he came to it.

He had a feeling that none of this made sense.

20. But he had learnt you had to look as if it did and to nod from time to time to show you were listening.

☆☆☆

Late in the afternoons, after school had finished, Danni went to the library. It was on his way home, just outside school, just before the shops and only five minutes walk from the stairs that led to his front door.

He liked the library. It was quiet. Peaceful. The carpets softened all sound. There was no running or screaming or shouting and taunting here - just the quiet sigh of pages turning and the gentle *click click clop* of computer keyboards.

Here he filled his head with pictures and stories: whales and mermaids, elephants and dragons, giants and astronauts ... Sometimes he felt his head was filled to overflowing.

At night in bed, trying to sleep, Danni wished he could fill his heart and soul. He felt an emptiness deep inside him - he was like the hollowed-out skin of some fruit that had had all its juices scooped out. He seemed to have lost his heart somewhere. He couldn't *feel* any more. Everything was muffled. He seemed to be at a distance from everything.

He longed to feel warmth, air, the rays of the sun and the voices of his friends and family,



speaking in a language he knew. Here everything was so cold and grey and strange. Oh, they tried to be nice to him. They smiled and they smiled. They asked him questions. They gave him pieces of paper. They'd given him warm clothes, a coat, shoes, socks, a school uniform, a woolly hat.

They'd found him a 'home' and an 'aunty' to live with. Aunty tried to be nice. She didn't speak his language but she smiled. A lot. BIG smiles. She spoke to him in a loud voice

and she asked questions, questions, questions.

"What did you do today, Daniel?"

Danni couldn't help sighing. She was trying to get him to open up. She meant well, but she couldn't even get his name right. Everyone he met twisted his name one way or another. On and on she went with her cheery voice and her big smile.

"How was school, Daniel?"

"Have you made any friends yet, Daniel?"

"Do you like fish fingers, Daniel?"

Danni struggled to find the words to ask his own questions:

"Will I stay here ever and ever?"

"You send me back? Or keep me?"

"When you go find my family?"

"Will you let come over here?"

No one ever gave him an answer. They just went quiet and said: "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."



Before bedtime, in the cramped living-room, breathing in the stuffy unmoving air, Danni pedalled an exercise bike.

This had been a good find. He had seen it twisted and abandoned in a skip in the street. It seemed that someone had grown so frustrated with it that they had thrown it from a great height. Danni had rescued and restored it.

He had always liked rescuing and restoring. It was what he used to do back home. With his father he would wander and search. They would return from their wanderings with their arms heaped with finds. Sometimes they would come back dragging huge sacks of stuff behind them.



Sometimes they'd be pushing an enormous heap in front of them. And then they'd start sifting and sorting and thinking and discussing and polishing and shaping, and little by little a new something would appear before them.

These old rusty wheels and this plank would make a cart.

This bunch of tangled wire would make a toy.

These ragged coloured bags would become rugs or bags – or a model chicken!

In Danni's new neighbourhood, the skips and tips were always bulging with things that still had plenty of life in them. He'd found a chair. He'd found nearly an entire chess set with a fold-out board, still in its box. He'd found a lamp shaped like a banana.

When he saw the twisted exercise bike, Danni knew he could restore it.

He dragged it up to the flat and convinced his 'aunty' he could make it as good as new.

"And then we can sell it," she said.

Now the bike worked perfectly, but it remained unsold in the small living-room and every night Danni pedalled it. He pedalled

furiously, faster and faster. His legs raced round until he grew breathless. He pedalled and pedalled faster, faster. And, of course, he moved not an inch.

He had spent so long moving to get to this grey country. There had been that first wild panic ride, then the jolting cars, the trains, that awful boat, the crammed truck.

"Don't think," he told himself. "Just pedal, just pedal."

☆☆☆

Danni liked to tire himself out in the hope that deep, undisturbed sleep would follow. Then he tried to soothe himself to sleep by imagining chess games in his head. The queen moves here. *Click*. The knight protects her. *Clop*. The pawns all gather around. The squares go black, white, black, white in a regular pattern. *Clip clop, clip clop*, step by careful step. It can all be worked out.

When Danni closed his eyes and the blackness surrounded him again, he found it difficult to breathe. When he curled up to sleep, he had

flashbacks to the cramped lorry he'd spent so long travelling in. He would snap his eyes open and spread his limbs wide to reassure himself that he was not trapped. "It's all right. It's OK," he told himself. "You're safe. Just breathe calmly. Breathe. Breathe."

But it didn't work. Not the frantic pedalling. Not the planning out of his imaginary chess game. Not his attempts to relax. Nothing soothed him.

Danni had terrible nightmares.

Chapter 2

Danni's head ached from the shrapnel of his days. Today there had been that fearsome scurry home. Taunts and jibes followed him home most evenings. He suffered the looks. The stale air. The cruel words lobbed at him like stones.

A group of kids in his school had ganged up against him. It had started on his very first day at Upperton Middle School. Miss Simmonds, the teacher, made him stand at the front of the class and introduced him.

"This is Dan," she said.

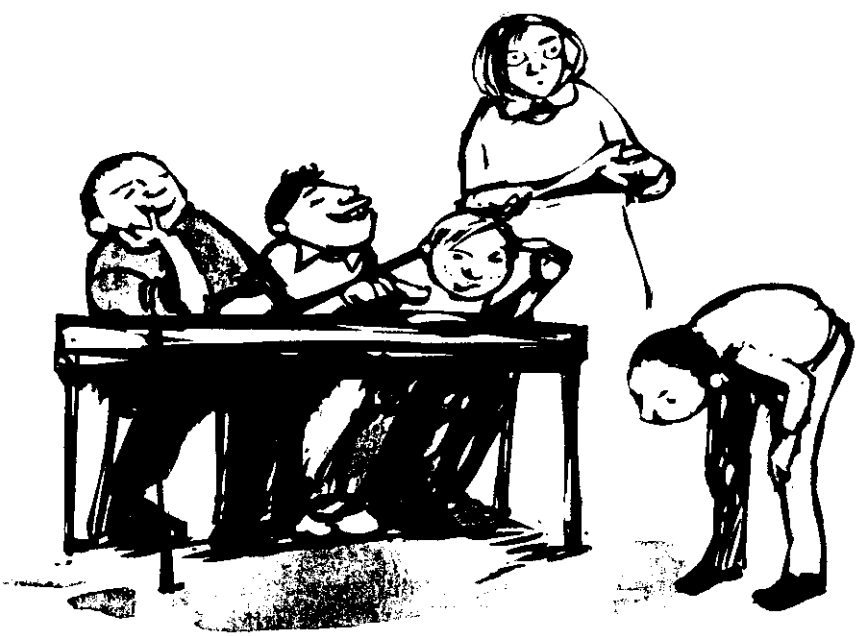
She got his name wrong. They all did. But they all got it wrong in different ways. There were so many versions of Danni's name now, he feared that one day he would forget what his real name was.

Miss Simmonds smiled and asked him some questions.

Danni blinked. He didn't understand most of her words. He didn't have the vocabulary to answer the few questions he'd understood.

"Don't worry," she said. "You'll soon pick it up."

He blinked again, confused. It was all so strange. "SOON PICK IT UP!" she repeated, and he had bent down to look for whatever it was he was to pick up. And they laughed.



The whole class laughed, but particularly Kriss and Keifer and Kevin - the three beefy-looking boys on the table where he was told to sit.

"Reading the baby books, are we?"

From then on, Kriss was always the first to start on him.

"Can't read very well, can we?" The other two were quick to follow.

"Haven't picked it up yet, then?"

And worse.

Words were hissed at him as they passed in the corridors. Nudgings and jostlings stopped just short of pushing him over.

And then there were the looks.