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opening extract from

Nicholas Dane

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1
Muriel's Little Treat

Nick Dane lifted his head and stared blearily at the doorway. There was music blaring through, light flooding in. It sounded as if he was in the kitchen but he could have sworn he was still in bed.

His mother appeared. 'Come on, wake up, I want you out, I've work to do,' she bellowed cheerfully. She headed back down the stairs towards the kitchen. 'I'll make you some porridge with cream and Goldfish syrup,' she called over her shoulder.

She'd called it that ever since he said it himself when he was three. One mistake: a lifetime of pain.

Nick looked at the clock.

'Bloody 'ell,' he yelled in outrage. 'It's only eight bloody fifteen. There's hours!'

'I have work to do,' she yelled from downstairs. Nick rammed his head back under the covers, but he knew he'd never get to sleep now. He was too cross. Eight fifteen! He had another half an hour. What was she on?

'Turn the radio down!' he yelled. Why was it so loud? It was Adam Ant, music for morons. Then he realised it must be the radio in her bedroom to make so much racket up here. She was trying to *irritate* him out of bed.

'Get up and turn it down yourself,' she yelled, so he

got up, slammed the door so hard the room shook and went back to bed. No one was going to separate Nick Dane from his zeds. No way.

Pause. Footsteps on the stairs. The door opens. The soft approach. 'I've got an essay to hand in, I'm late. Come on, Nick. Please?'

He stared at her. 'I'm in bed,' he explained, as if to a child. A flicker of irritation crossed her face. They stared at each other, mother and son, for a long moment. Then he relented.

'Mum,' he groaned, giving in. It was blackmail, it really was. She'd been studying for years now, trying to improve herself. She could do with improving. There was a good job at the end of it. Nick was hoping she'd make enough money to keep him in the style in which he wanted to become accustomed.

Muriel trotted back downstairs. Nick lay listening to the music for a while, then pulled the covers down. It felt cold. He pulled them back up. It felt warm. Bed was so good, it was a shame you had to fall asleep and miss it.

A few minutes later Muriel appeared in the doorway again like an overgrown pixie, with her dyed red hair and her lime green gown, baring her yellow teeth at him and trying to be cheerful.

'Come on! You promised. I'm not going till you're up.'

'I've got nothing on.'

'I won't look. Not that there's much to see, from what I remember...'

Nick looked alarmed and she instantly regretted her joke.

'Only joking, I know it's a monster,' she said.

'Shut up! Close the door, then.'

It was a deal. She closed the door and Nick tipped himself out of bed, pulled on his pants and crawled to the loo. It was too early. Every morning of his life was too early. Life began at about one in the afternoon, everyone knew that.

Muriel stirred the porridge and made a cup of Nesquik milkshake. Her big boy, but he still had his sweet tooth. Nick walked in, with his school trousers on and his shirt undone. Lean, short for his age, but broad shoulders and good muscles. Fourteen years old. It was amazing watching him grow. He was a man – well, on the outside, anyway. He grunted at her, sat down and started pouring the milkshake down him in long, thirsty gulps. Muriel struggled briefly, trying not to remind him not to drink all the milk first, because that would leave no room for breakfast, but as usual she couldn't help herself. Nick glanced sideways at the kettle and ignored her. The milk dribbled down his chin. He tipped the glass back to let the last few drops trickle down and put it down with a bang.

She swallowed her irritation. Nick was one of those kids – the slightest hint of being told off and he was off in the other direction. Infuriating! Just like her when she was his age.

She didn't want a row this morning. Neither of them

were at their best first thing.

She decided to horrify him out of the door. She started dancing around the kitchen, waving the spoon in the air, to the music on the radio.

'Karma karma karma karma karma chameleon, you come and go, you come and go – oh-oh-oh.'

Nick stared at her as if she'd just turned into a pink blancmange, and she was suddenly overcome with giggles. She clutched the edge of the table, put her wrist to her forehead and rocked with silent laughter.

'You're bonkers,' Nick told her. 'You don't even like that song.'

'Karma karma . . . ' she started again.

'Right, that's it, I'm off,' said Nick, jumping up. See? It worked. Like magic. 'I'm too clever for my own good,' she thought to herself as he ran back into his bedroom and collected his bag.

'Eat your porridge,' she told him.

Nick paused in the hall. 'No twattin' about, then?' he said.

'No twatting about,' she agreed.

He came back in, lured by the irresistible Goldfish syrup, and stood next to the breakfast bar spooning it down him and talking with his mouth full.

'What's up with you this morning?' he asked her.

She smiled ruefully. 'Exam hysteria. Jailhouse rock. Stir crazy,' she said.

'The exams aren't for ages.'

'Essay. I'm late. The last one wasn't good enough, I

have to step up my game.'

Nick grunted. Typical. Muriel had blown school, left early, and gone straight on the dole and a life of idle pleasure. Then she had Nick, went clean, got bored, went back to school, and discovered it was easy. She amazed herself. She never even knew she had a brain. All those years at school she'd been no more able to concentrate than grow a tail and now, suddenly, thirty years old, she could devour whole books for hours on end without so much as a glance out of the window.

'Another thing for Muriel to get addicted to,' said Jen, her only friend from the old days. It was true. Anything under an A and she became unbearable.

Once he was settled back in, Nick took his time. He went into his bedroom again and she found him back lying on his bed. By the time he was on his way a second time he was only about five minutes earlier than normal.

He slammed the door and stamped off, his bag over his shoulder. She watched him walk along the road. Who knows, she might have confused him so much by getting him up early that he might actually end up at school by accident. It didn't take much to make Nick walk the other way. He was hanging out down the flats or playing football on the common, or smoking cigarettes or spliff down behind the mill as often as he was in lessons.

He was a bad lot, her boy. Too good-looking, too bright – one of those kids who found it all too easy. Friends, school work, girls. Leadership qualities, they said at school. The trouble was, he wasn't so much a role

model as a ringleader. If there was trouble to be had, Nick wouldn't just be in it, he'd be trying to get everyone else in it as well. He had more than his fair share of charm, just like his dad. He was going to need it if he didn't get his finger out.

And he was loyal. That was his saving grace. Once Nick decided you were one of his, he never let go.

Muriel waited by the window until he disappeared round the corner before going back into the kitchen and getting the gear out from inside the washing machine. It was becoming harder and harder to find somewhere Nick wasn't prepared to go, but the washing machine was one place she could be sure he'd leave alone.

The kettle was still hot from her tea and she had the works prepared in a moment. She wanted to feel warm and cosy, so she turned the gas fire on and knelt on the rug in front of it. She wrapped the belt round and pulled with her teeth until the veins popped out – little highways to pleasure.

It was the first time in ages. She'd been as good as gold for months. Well, years, actually, except for occasions like this. You were allowed the odd treat, weren't you? Amazing chance, Mo having a brother just round the corner on Lime Road. She couldn't believe it when she saw him walking past the newsagent the day before. He was staying overnight. Nice of him to drop it off for her on his way back, too. Seven in the morning didn't often see Mo out of bed, she bet.

Dangerous, though. Far too convenient. The last thing

she wanted was a dealer just round the corner. Yesterday morning it had been two bus rides to get to his place. Now he even knew where she lived! Shit. But he was only rarely round this way to see his brother... maybe it would be all right...

Three or four times a year. Why not?

Muriel knew she really ought to wait for Jen to come round, but she couldn't wait. She pushed the needle into the vein, and closed her eyes. Heaven ran into her arm. There was nothing on earth like it.

She sighed and leaned forward until her head was resting on the floor in front of her knees, her arm stretched out before her and the needle still in the vein. Bliss overwhelmed her, and she stopped breathing. She was in exactly the same position an hour and a half later when Jen called round for a little bit of bliss herself and, hearing no answer to her knock, peered through the curtains and saw her lying flat out on the fireside rug. She rapped on the pane, then started shouting. She put her shoulder to the door and bruised it, and had to rush round to get a key off old Mrs Ash from next door. When they got inside, the thing that struck her was how Muriel had cooled on one side and was hot on the other, where the gas fire had been toasting her.

Mrs Ash rushed around ringing for the police and making Jen a cup of tea, but what was the point of rushing now? Jen looked anxiously at the bag of heroin on the floor next to her ex-friend. Oh my God! How hard

it was to sit there and ignore it. She could pop it in her handbag and walk away... But Mrs Ash must have seen it. She couldn't risk it.

Anxiously, she began going through her pockets and handbag to make sure there was nothing dodgy in it, even though she didn't think anyone was going to search her. That would be heartless, she was being paranoid... but paranoia doesn't mean to say they're not out to get you. Best be sure.

Mrs Ash came back in with a steaming cup and stood next to her staring at the corpse on the floor.

'I never knew, I never knew,' she kept saying. 'Did you know?' she asked Jen.

'Years ago,' said Jenny. 'We both did. This was...' She began to crack up as she spoke. So unfair! When she thought of all the things she and Muriel had been through together, to OD now, when weeks and months went by without either of them using. To have her life snatched away just when she was making something of herself. All the time, she'd been this genius and none of them had even guessed. And now she was nothing, just this lump of cooling meat that looked like her on the carpet. It made Jen feel sick to look at her.

At least Nick hadn't come home to find her like this. And then she thought – Nicholas! What on earth was going to happen to him now that Muriel was gone? My God. He hadn't got a soul in the world.

2
Jenny's House

Nick didn't go to school that day. It seemed a pity to waste getting up early on being bored. Instead, he intercepted his best friend Simon, tapping on the window as he ate his breakfast. They picked up Jeremy further on, and that was the three of them, cronies since they started at school ten years ago – longer, because they used to play together even at nursery. They'd been friends for as long as they could remember.

They went in for registration to get their names down, then snuck out before lessons began. Jeremy's mum worked all day, so they hung out round there, as usual. They made instant coffee and drank it in front of breakfast television. Nick caught up on his beloved zeds on the sofa. They watched a few videos – there was an almost complete collection of 'Looney Tunes' cartoons, which they'd been watching for years but still always passed the time with a few laughs.

Then they got bored. The trouble with skiving off school was, there was never enough to do and you always got bored. But at least it was boredom you were in control of – not like being pinned behind your desk at school, going out of your mind and not able to do anything about it.

At lunch time they ransacked their pockets for change and scraped together enough money to buy some cigarettes. They smoked a couple in the park, then went back and spread the rest of them over the afternoon, in front of the telly and playing cards. The last one got handed around, and they sucked the smoke in deeply, pretending it was a joint and that they were getting off their heads. The funny thing was, it worked – they all ended up feeling stoned.

'It must be the deep breathing,' said Simon.

That was all. Just hanging out. Talking, sitting about, not doing anything. And it was boring and nothing happened, but you know what? It was great. For Nick, there was nothing on this earth better than hanging around doing nothing with your mates.

At four o'clock he went home and found Jen sitting in the front room with a small, plump, neatly dressed woman he'd never seen before.

'Hi,' he said. He looked round. 'Where's Mum?' It was at that moment that his heart started beating like a terrible drum, as if it knew everything already.

'Nick,' said Jen, and stopped.

The well-dressed little woman stood up and held out her hand.

'Ah'm Mrs Batts. Baaatty Batts,' she said in a long, slow, northern accent, stretching out her 'a's so far, it was almost funny. She sounded like a sheep. Nick smiled at Jen, but she shot him such a ghastly look the smile faded on his face. Mrs Batts smiled back, thinking he was

enjoying her feeble joke. Nick nodded at her and looked around.

'Where's Mum?' he said again.

What could Jen say? She's at the morgue, Nick. She's gone to Heaven. She's with those she loves.

That certainly wasn't true. The only two people Muriel had loved were standing right there in that room.

So she just blurted it out.

'She's dead, Nick. I came round and found her,' she said, and burst into floods of messy, snotty tears. She took a step towards him, but Batty Batts got in between them and took her in her arms. Jen didn't hug her back but stood there weeping helplessly with one hand on her face and the other hanging by her side, while the little woman stood and patted her. Nick just stood there and watched.

'Ah'm soo sorry, Nick, Ah'm soooo, soooo sorry,' intoned Mrs Batts over her shoulder.

Jen's tears proved the truth of it, but he couldn't believe it. He wanted to run around calling for her – people didn't just die! But the word dead was so final, it froze him to the spot.

'What happened?' he said.

'...an accident,' blubbed Jenny.

'How?' he begged. Jenny shook her head, and Mrs Batts looked at him and shook her head too, as if to say, Now isn't the time, as if it were some adult thing, something too personal to say to him, even though of all the people on earth, he was the one with the right to know.