

Escape to Atlantis

The yawn cut through the drone of the man's voice like a chain saw on rusty metal. Arrested in mid sentence the teacher's body froze and his hand tightened around the book in his hand.

"Am I keeping you awake Mr. Jackson?" His voice, dangerously soft, stilled the explosions of laughter that swept through the room.

"Oh no, that's all right Mr. Davis, sir. You can't help it." Danny's reply was cheerily indifferent.

Mr. Davis stared at the sea of grinning faces and suddenly felt weighed down by the hopelessness of it all: the endless days incarcerated within grey walls; the monotonous thud of rain against iron-barred windows; the grey uniformed inmates. His frown settled on Danny's open face and locked on to eyes as black as midnight. A jarring clang broke the impasse.

"Saved by the bell Jackson." Relief flooded the man's body and, almost smiling, he flicked his head at the door. Danny danced out of the classroom, fingers snapping and body swaying to a tune that played in his head. "Have a good holiday sir." He called over his shoulder as he disappeared down the corridor.

The canteen reverberated with the noise of caged youths chafing at their incarceration. Danny grabbed a tray and joined the queue at the servery, automatically checking the familiar surroundings for anomalies. His gaze stopped mid-sweep, halted by a painting hanging underneath the clock, a painting he'd never seen before. Carefully balancing his tray he wound his way around boys and furniture and sat at a table near to the painting. He scrutinised it. It was a courtyard scene: a conglomerate of blues and oranges with splashes of reds and greens and browns. He felt the warmth radiate from the sun as it spilled through the leaves of a plane tree and sent dappled shadows chasing across the paved floor and stuccoed walls. The hurly burly brashness of the canteen retreated to a far corner of his mind as soft café music filled his ears. He could hear the laughter and chatter of customers, the clank of crockery and the hiss of a coffee machine. Danny was enthralled. He haunted the canteen, drawn to the picture like a surfer to a wave. He badgered the guard daily for information:

“Where did it come from? Why’s it here?” The guard shrugged but finally gave him the information he sought.

“Some ex-Borstal boy-made-good left it to the school in his will in the unlikely event it would inspire a young tearaway, much like yourself, to mend his ways and return to the straight and narrow. His message to all delinquents was to look to the light and appreciate that freedom and captivity sit on the same side of the coin, whatever that means.”

Danny spent hours pondering the words, and returned to the painting time and again, searching for clues. He studied the light, the hues, the shifts in patterns. He immersed himself in the atmosphere of the scene, joined the customers at their tables underneath the gently swaying umbrellas, addressed them by name and wrote down their orders for cappuccinos and lattes. He skipped around the courtyard delivering trays with pots of tea and home-made scones and rang up change in an old-fashioned till. He loved the cosy feelings the painting evoked, the smell of the jasmine creeping over the wall intermingling with the aroma of freshly-brewed coffee.

Even in the privacy of his room Danny would bring the picture to mind and brood over its significance, wondering why it meant so much to him. On one such occasion, as he lay stretched on his bed with his hands laced behind his head, the guard appeared in the doorway. Danny stared at the intruder through slitted eyes, his gaze shifting to the sad, shivering excuse-for-a-boy trying desperately to remain invisible. The boy clutched a duffel bag against his chest and blinked fearfully at Danny.

“Right.” Said the guard and jabbed his finger at the unoccupied bed against the other wall. “That’s your bed over there. This over ‘ere is Danny. Get settled in and Danny can show you to the canteen. Can’t you Danny?” With that he prodded the shaking boy, gave a curt nod in Danny’s direction and left.

The boy crept apologetically to the bed. Hardly daring to breath he positioned himself gingerly on the edge of the mattress, the bag clutched in a tight grip on his lap. He avoided Danny’s eyes and stared down at a round stain on the carpet.

“What’s your name?”

The boy swallowed nervously and whispered. “Aloysius.”

Danny sat up with a sudden fluid motion and swung his feet to the floor. Aloysius jumped back, his eyes scared as Danny leaned forward and stared into his face.

“Well Aloysius that blob on the floor used to be Lucien O’Reilly, a smart-aleck little git who thought this was his room.”

Aloysius sniffed and dragged a shaking hand under his nose. Danny stared at the back of the boy’s hand as it latched onto the bag in his lap. It was dotted with faded, puckered circles. The back of his other hand was the same. Danny knew cigarette burns when he saw them.

The magistrate in the Children’s Court also knew cigarette burns when he saw them. He gave the large woman standing next to Aloysius Jeremiah Green a knowing, penetrating look. Aloysius’s mother stared haughtily back, secure in the superiority allotted to persons of Avenging Angel status. Her self-righteous wrath and indignation offered little hope of redemption for the wicked boy who had, in an uncharacteristic burst of anger, thrown a brick through the church window. She was a crusader, a shining light in the darkness, a zealot chosen by God to rid the world of the devil, and the devil, as everyone knows, is incarnate in all small boys. In a rare moment of compassion the magistrate sentenced Aloysius to a stint at St. Michael’s Training Centre for Troubled Youth, a facility which, according to the local press, resembled more a five-star holiday resort than a place of punishment.

Danny stood up. “Come on then.” He said to the shaking newcomer. “There ain’t no room service you know. You gotta do for yourself round here.” Dutifully Aloysius followed him out of the room and down the corridor.

“Oh, and one more thing.” Danny swung round, pointing a finger in the boy’s face. “Don’t tell anyone your name’s Aloysius. You’re Olly, got it?”

Olly nodded.

Danny showed Olly the picture. “What do you think that is?” He queried. Olly gave the painting a cursory glance before looking back down at his shuffling feet. “Dunno Danny. What does that say?” He pointed to the plaque underneath the frame. Olly had never attended school long enough to decode the black squiggles that defined the world and its inhabitants, his mother deeming them to be breeding places of immorality and vice.

Danny laughed briefly. “Mate, that’s just the title, it says Arts’ Centre Café. Take a good look at the picture. What does it say to you?”

Olly shrugged. “It don’t say nuffink Danny. It’s just a pitcher innit? Pitchers don’t talk.”

Danny was silent for a minute as he contemplated the painting. “It says heaps Ol. Just forget you’re here,” he swept his hand around the canteen, “Just look inside the picture and let your mind take over.”

Aloysius blinked rapidly and swallowed. He stared nervously at the canvas, searching through the mess of colours for a clue to crack the code, willing it to talk to him. After a while his voice quavered. “I think it’s under the sea Danny.” And he winced, waiting for derision to rain down on his head.

Danny tilted his head and frowned at the painting. “Why do you think that?”

“It’s got lots of little blue waves sort of lapping all over it, and them blue and orange umbrellas remind me of big jelly fish floating on the sea. I saw some once, a long time ago when I went to the seaside with me gran. She took me on the pier and bought me an ice-cream.” He was silent for a while, then whispered. “It was the best day of my life.” He blushed, red and hot. It was the most information he’d ever divulged about himself to anyone and now he waited fearfully for the jeers. But Danny surprised him. He put a protective arm around the boy’s shoulders. “You’re right Olly, it does look like it’s under the sea.” He nodded his head thoughtfully, “Yeah. Maybe it’s a cafe in Atlantis, the lost city.”

Danny and Aloysius stared at the picture, oblivious to the curious looks from the other boys. Olly sighed and shook his head. He’d got it wrong again. “No.” He said and swept his hand at the picture. “There’s no fish.”

Danny nodded, “Yep, you’re right. The artist slipped up there. She should have painted a couple of sharks circling overhead, looking for an empty table and a shoal of fish swimming underneath the chairs gobbling up the scraps.”

Emboldened, Olly grinned and bravely joined in. “And a crab or two and a kangaroo.”

Danny burst out laughing. “It’d be a drowned kangaroo mate. But there could be a couple of mermaids sitting at that table underneath the tree. They’d be drinking milkshakes and complaining about the shortage of mermen. And see that dark corner over there?” Danny jabbed a finger at the bottom right-hand corner of the frame. “That’d be an ideal spot for an octopus to lurk. He’d snake out one of his tentacles and tap the waiter on the shoulder and say ‘Hey mate, how about a cuppa coffee?’ ” Olly dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“Get a move on you couple of fairies.” The guard’s voice broke into their happy make-believe world under the sea, bringing them back to the grey reality of the canteen. Danny swung round and glared, then suddenly burst into song, snapping his fingers in the air and swaying his body to the tune of ‘The Octopus’s Garden’. Olly threw caution to the wind and joined in, mimicking Danny as he followed in his footsteps, dancing around the tables, swaying his body and slapping his hands in the air. For the first time in his life he felt safe and free and sang along at the top of his voice. The other boys jeered and laughed, but soon got caught up in the frivolity of the moment. They jostled to form a swaying line of grey which stretched around the canteen and got longer and longer as more boys joined in until it snaked and sang its way out of the canteen and down the corridor.

A few days later Danny disappeared. He went to bed as usual in the room he shared with Olly and in the morning he just wasn’t there. He wasn’t anywhere. The staff searched high and low, every room was stripped, every cupboard, alcove and dark corner investigated. Olly was hauled up before the superintendent and grilled till he broke down in a flood of tears. “I dunno Mr. Boswell sir. Honest. Danny never said nuffink to me about going anywhere.” The boy sobbed miserably. “I would have gone wiv him if he’d said.”

The police were informed and Daniel Jackson’s description was circulated to nearby bus depots and railway stations but, as he wasn’t considered a threat, not much effort was put into the hunt. At Saint Michael’s the escape was a seven-day wonder and the hue and cry soon abated in the excitement of the World Cup Series. Everyone forgot about Danny, everyone except Olly whose grief for his lost friend got deeper as time went on. Olly shrank further into himself and reverted to creeping silently along the walls, his eyes sliding away if anyone looked at him. His new room-mate gave up on him very quickly and formed friendships with other boys.

Mr. Davis returned from leave, surprised and disappointed that Danny had done a runner. It seemed totally out of character: the boy was settled and happy at St. Michael’s and

anyway, where would he go? He had no family and, as far as the authorities knew, no friends in the community. He questioned Olly, trying to prize information out of him and noticed how jumpy and withdrawn the boy had become. He seemed to have lost what little confidence and bravado he had built up as his friendship with Danny developed. Mr. Davis attempted to cheer the boy up and engaged him in conversation.

“How are you going Aloysius? Getting on all right with your new room-mate?”

Olly nodded miserably, his eyes glued to his shuffling feet. “All right thanks.”

“You haven’t heard from Danny have you?”

Olly sniffed and shook his head.

“I must say, it’s all very mysterious.” Mr. Davis continued. “I mean he can’t have disappeared into thin air, Aloysius, could he?” Mr. Davis frowned down at the silent boy struggling to hold back tears. “You must miss him very much.”

With that the boy burst into sobs. “He just bleedin’ took off, didn’t even say goodbye or nuffink.” His shoulders shook with abject misery at a betrayal that cleaved his soul.

The teacher gently patted the distraught boy’s shoulder. “He must have had a reason.”

“Yeah.” Olly struggled to gain control. “I s’pose he did, only he didn’t tell me.”

“Are you quite sure he didn’t say anything? Leave you a note?”

Olly bit his lip. “No, he knows I can’t read ‘n’ write.” He searched through his pockets and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “He just left this pitcher on me bed.”

Mr David opened the scrap of paper and frowned as he turned it around. “Looks like an octopus with flowers at the end of its tentacles.” He flashed a sympathetic smile at Olly. “Reminds me of that Beatles’ song.”

The change in Olly was instantaneous. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. He snatched the paper out of the teacher’s hand and stared at it. His eyes shone with secret delight. “Yeah, yeah. Why didn’t I think of that?” He grabbed the teacher’s hand and pumped it up and down. “Thank you Sir, thank you, thank you.” And he danced off, singing ‘The Octopus’s Garden’ at the top of his voice.

That night Olly lay fully dressed under the bed covers, his eyes glued to the clock. When both hands settled on the twelve he slid out of bed and crept noiselessly out of his room and down the corridor. Reaching the canteen he tiptoed across the room, drawn by a moonbeam that penetrated the barred window and illuminated the picture hanging on the wall. Olly stood underneath it and stared with fierce concentration. His eyes searched through the dappled shadows and blinked in the bright sunlight bouncing off the café walls. He heard voices murmuring, chinking crockery and clattering teaspoons. The aroma of fresh coffee wafted around him, mingled with the cloying smell of jasmine and warm scones. He examining each figure in the painting before moving on to the next, and then he saw him. Olly's heart gave a lurch and tears sprang to his eyes. There was Danny, sitting in front of an easel, paint brush in hand and a jaunty beret on his head. Olly swallowed noisily and brushed away the tears that ran down his face. Danny looked up and waved. He put down his paintbrush and strolled to the edge of the frame. He laughed down at Olly. "What took you so long?" he said and stretched out his hand. Olly reached up and grasped it. He clambered up the wall, through the picture frame and tumbled into the courtyard.

Shockwaves reverberated around the training centre the next day when Olly's disappearance was discovered. A team of policemen arrived, tracker dogs in tow, and combed through every nook and cranny, every shed and out-building. Staff and inmates were questioned and statements taken. Olly had vanished as completely and utterly as had Danny. There was no evidence of a break out, nothing was disturbed or out of place, there was no sign of a scuffle or the slightest indication of violence. But the fact remained that one small, sad boy had vanished into thin air.

Eventually things settled down and only an occasional snatch of song brought back memories of a boy singing and dancing around tables, or a flickering shadow on a wall conveyed the illusion of a melancholy, ghost-like figure. Mr. Davis would halt occasionally when patrolling the canteen, a perplexed frown on his face as he tried to recall something he should have remembered, something important. He stopped in front of the picture one day, and wished he was in a sunny courtyard, far away. Turning, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, the edge of a piece of paper underneath the frame. Carefully he pulled the paper out and unfolded it. It was a crudely drawn picture of an octopus holding a bunch of flowers. He caught his breath as a memory took him back to the last time he had seen Aloysius. The child had wept as he had shown him the very same piece of paper. The noise and clatter of the canteen reached a roaring crescendo as the teacher stared horrified into the painting. That

artist sitting at an easel hadn't been there originally, had he? And that waiter, the tray held high at his shoulder? The artist looked up and grinned cheekily at Mr. Davis, giving a thumbs-up sign, and the waiter smiled shyly and winked. The teacher backed away, a look of horror on his face. A scrap of paper fell from his hand as he turned and stumbled out of the room.