

The Daniel Album

With an irony which he would have appreciated, it was Bryn Young himself who first gave me the idea of retaining stories in a series of physical images. 'Literature or life, recall or revision', he said, 'if you can keep with you a sequence of pictures of moments physically frozen in time, you can hang on to what happened, how it happened and, perhaps most significantly, why it happened'. Of all the real life events that I have remembered in this way, one of the most vivid is the brief, stormy love affair which happened to my friend on the edge of manhood and demonstrated that even sophisticated adults can blunder clumsily into places where they have no proper business.

Picture One – Bryn Young, in front of our English Year 12 A level class, late March 1998. Nearby on our right, the classroom windows are full of spring light, part of which catches Bryn Young on his left side starkly enough to show him in positive and negative contrast, implying some truths about the man himself. He dresses unusually well for a teacher; his measured jackets, always neat and slim, hang easily on him. He is leaning backwards in his chair, his left side turned slightly towards us.

The light picks out smooth, tanned facial features, even if it also highlights the narrowness of his cheeks and neck. His curious green eyes have qualities of command and examination; he expects you to listen and will rake you with question and accusation if you don't.

We are listening, in the usual absorbed, if intimidated, silence. His charisma is real, but mysterious; we are almost mesmerised, without understanding why. To us, he represents adult sophistication, a man at home with himself and the world, exactly where we aspire to be. I remember the hypnotism of his teaching voice; low, nasal at times and with the precise enunciation of syllables which probably came from his Welsh background. At this moment, he is talking about the nude wrestling scene in *Women in Love*.

'We tend to think', he says, turning in his chair to face us, his right hand jabbing out his meaning, 'of homosexuality and heterosexuality as mutually exclusive, as if love can be so neatly divided. Lawrence, writing in an age which we regard as sexually repressed, explored many nuances of sexuality, and it lends his books some of their force'.

I suppose it is the mention of male love which drifts my eyes towards the friend beside me. At that time, I did love him in my way, but it had become clear recently that I couldn't love him in his.

Picture Two – Daniel Shiel, aged seventeen, in close up profile, tousle-haired and smooth-skinned. A beautiful youth by any definition; like Bryn, everything he wears, even the drab school uniform, lives easily on him and beneath it I know he has the near perfect body of a seasoned runner and athlete.. He is still blonde, though not as startlingly so as he had been when we both started infant school; his eyes are a disconcerting dark blue, wide set and capable of expressions ranging from cynical to glassily unhappy.

At that very moment, he is so arrested that even our non-verbal language of frowns and grimaces has deserted him. He is sitting up naughtily chair straight, and his head is slightly bowed, the eyes looking upwards, elevating Bryn Young to somewhere above him. But the clincher is that expression in his eyes, once or twice disconcertingly directed at me, the centre dilated, the blue moistened, speaking of inner helplessness. Daniel is too obviously in love with Bryn Young.

The Daniel Album

By then, we both knew that Daniel was gay, but most people didn't; coming out still wasn't so easy in 1998, and Daniel had already endured hostility from some sixth form jocks, though his athletic abilities protected him to some extent.

Between us, we had eventually hit the buffers typical of adolescent relationships, when the games and dares come up against questions which can no longer remain unanswerable. I could fool around with Daniel, accept strip dares in semi-public places, engage in masturbation games in a vaguely rebellious spirit; lads fooling about to pass the time. But one holiday afternoon not long after New Year, on a day when both his parents were at work – he was an only child – he answered the door wearing just a pair of slip briefs, and it rapidly became clear that what he had in mind was much further than I could go.

'You said to me once, Mark Staunton and Daniel Shiel – we're forever', he said, and his voice shook. 'I thought 'this is it', and now –'

I left a few minutes later, and though we pretended at school that nothing had happened, a great gaping chasm had opened between us. My love for him had enormous meaning then, and it frustrated me that I couldn't love him in the way he seemed to need. I wondered what he would do next, but felt that I had forfeited my right to know. Shortly afterwards, the conversations between Sarah Jephson and I became suddenly more intimate, and within weeks, Daniel and I had drifted away from each other like separated islands.

Picture Three – the secluded staff car park, overlooked by the staff room and well away from the hubbub of the main exit where everyone is leaving on a school afternoon in mid-May 1998. Bryn Young sits on the gleaming blue bonnet of his car with his back to me; the pose is one of studied relaxation, and from the front, probably convincing enough. From the back, there is clamp-like tension and a hand digging deep into his leg. The boy standing in front of him is undeniably Daniel, and the expression on his face is so lacking in guile or subtlety that I have to momentarily turn my own away in guilt at having exposed his vulnerability.

My bike and I were behind the corner of the main school building, half way between the staff car park and the main exit. I was no expert at reading relationships, but it took no great perception to interpret the likely relationship between them, Bryn Young smiling and occasionally touching Daniel lightly on his arm; Daniel's variety of grins and smiles ranging from rueful to mock outrage, and sometimes he looks up at Bryn as he did in the classroom, though the eyes now register something very different from despair. I felt a twitch of jealousy at the teacher's interest, but deeply doubtful about the nature of it. I found it difficult to believe that Daniel's expression could happen without something on Bryn Young's face which he interpreted as answering his pleading.

I noticed then that I was not the only observer; an elderly female teacher, Mrs Earnshaw, was watching fixedly from the staff room, her arms folded and her mouth in a thin, unmoving line. Any remaining doubt I had about my reading of the meeting was instantly obliterated by the expression on her face; the narrowed eyes and the clasp of one arm on the other screamed outrage silently across the car park.

Picture Four – the boys' changing room, just after five o'clock, late June 1998. I emerge from the shower area and see Daniel standing completely naked, his hair swept back from the shower and his towel on the bench in front of him. Boys have no need to be coy about nudity in a boys' changing room, but there is something extravagant, even exhibitionist, about him standing there in casual conversation, at least to my fevered mind. Few of us then genuinely believed people would take pleasure from our nakedness, but Daniel, I can see, has become

The Daniel Album

one of them. And leaning on the wall next to him is a fully-clothed Bryn Young, whose predatory, examining eyes allow for no ambiguity whatsoever.

The pictures are more painful to recall when my role in them is active. We had been detained by the P.E. teacher to help bring the equipment in from the athletics field. Daniel was unusually stropy about it, and unreasonably so; everyone did it in turns, and the teacher tried to be scrupulously fair about allocating the duties.

By the time we returned to the changing room, everyone had gone. We were sweaty and uncomfortable; we knew we had to shower, but we stripped at a distance, his eyes avoiding mine. When he left the showers, I stayed in, to avoid having to dress alongside him.

I heard a murmur of voices and wondered if a caretaker was protesting. Then I emerged to see them together; my instinct of intrusion made me turn away. Suddenly, I heard Bryn's voice, at close quarters, his clothed body close to my naked one; I'd already discarded my towel. I felt irrationally bashful and afraid.

'Hello, Mark. Sorry to barge in like this. Daniel was due to meet me, and he's generally punctual; I give him a lift, and we enjoy a little literary sparring. I thought he'd got lost'.

I turned to look at him. His eyes seemed to be examining me unashamedly and, confusingly, it produced a kind of thrill, an implication of my own attractiveness which I had never suspected before. He was, as ever, well groomed and beautifully dressed, with that sardonic twist to his lips noticeable at close quarters. The cool green eyes raking me were unsettling, and I suspected that if he ever decided he wanted me, I would struggle to resist. My sense of vulnerability made me coldly angry. I turned away from him and dressed rapidly.

Their desultory conversation continued and I think Bryn spoke to me again, but I had locked myself into a fortress of detachment. Eventually, the door closed and I turned. Daniel was alone, but still in no more than his pants, meaning the naked flirt had continued in my near presence. The blue eyes were in their cynical shade, and my anger exploded.

'You must know that you can't do this, Daniel,' I said, moving across to him as I packed my kit into my bag.

'Do what, Mark? Accept a lift? Discuss English with an English teacher? Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing?'

'You know what. You know bloody well what'.

He turned his back to me, pulling on his trousers, then affected surprise to see me still with him. His face paled, and I saw his hurt and resentment spread before me like an open wound.

'Nothing I do is your business. If I want to move on from boys who don't know their own mind to men who do, it's no business of yours'.

'Oh, yeah? Well, we'll see about that!' I shouted, and banged out, not knowing myself exactly what I might mean.

Picture Five – the school hall, late July 1998. We are sitting in the sixth form area, a mezzanine raised above the main hall, looking towards the stage, where the Head stands behind his lectern with the staff in a semi-circle behind him. Carter, the Head, a tall, gangling man with a habit of sudden, incongruous smiles, is using the high volume and slow diction of his assembly announcements voice, hopelessly inappropriate for the final assembly, when something warmer is expected. We are all too warm and too restless to enjoy the end of term atmosphere.

Daniel was sitting two rows in front of me on my right. Like all of us, he looked in a state of semi-consciousness.

The Daniel Album

‘And now we arrive at the always rather difficult business – of saying our **goodbyes**’.

He named the teachers who were leaving, each announcement followed by applause, the volume for each teacher depending on respect or popularity, not necessarily the same thing.

‘And last and very certainly not least (wide, inexplicable beamer) – our **much admired** and **multi-talented** – Head of English, **Mr. Young** – finds himself elevated to no less a position than **university lecturer** at –’ and he named a university a long way away.

My eyes flickered right, and Daniel looked struck by lightning, his mouth open, his eyes glazed almost to tears. A few boys who’d heard the gossip were grinning and nudging their heads at him.

I turned away, unable to watch his pain, but something pulled me back, and I saw his face turned towards me with a narrow-eyed expression of pure, naked hatred. Heads turned to me as the object of his fury. I fought an urge to vomit. I could almost believe that I **had** betrayed him somehow. But that face in the staff room window was all the evidence really needed.

Picture Six – the front door of Daniel’s house, mid-August day 1998. It is an unremarkable, dark wood door, but significant because it is open, and its openness carries with it an implied mystery and threat.

I know from the holiday grapevine that Daniel’s parents are away in Italy and he had declined to go with them, saying that he needed to prepare for the crucial A level Year 13. The door could be open because of a break in, meaning he may be threatened, or something has happened to him which explains the carelessness of leaving the door open.

I crept in, trying to control my anxiety; it was oppressively quiet. I walked through the downstairs rooms and climbed the stairs very slowly; they creaked and the banister groaned, as my sense of being subsumed into some Gothic horror scenario increased. It was already impossible for anyone awake or conscious in the house not to have heard me.

His bedroom door was open; he was stretched on his bed, completely still, in an athletics vest and shorts. He had turned to the wall in a kind of embryo position. I could not hear his breathing. On his computer desk, I saw a scattering of tiny pills, and a small bottle beside them. The tension in me bubbled slowly up towards panic. I saw myself standing over my dear friend’s body, my insides suddenly forcibly removed. Then a wave of revulsion at my lack of effective action overcame me and I turned my anger to the sleeping figure beside me. ‘Dan! What have you done? Daniel!’

I shook his shoulder and fought a tide of despair; this was beyond anything I had ever yet experienced, and I had no points of reference. I grabbed the bottle and tried to read the pills label. I tried to speak, but my voice sounded gasping, broken. Then he groaned and woke, his body turning towards me, his face registered bemusement as he blinked sleep from his eyes. ‘Mark? Is it you?’

‘Daniel, what have you taken? What the hell are you doing? What are these?’

I flung the bottle at him. He sat up slowly.

‘Yes, I was close to it, Mark. But I didn’t take them. I have the anger, but maybe not the balls. They’re still in the possession of Bryn Young’.

I felt only sympathy and concern now, and he could see that.

‘I know you had nothing to do with him leaving, Mark. . He tried to say it was his decision, but I think some teachers were being difficult. They could never have proved anything; we were too careful for that. ‘Nothing was planned, Daniel’, he said. ‘It never is. You caught me at a time when I had no-one and no defences. You are so beautiful’ – said with derision – ‘that you broke through my usual defences against affairs, especially with pupils’. An **affair**,

The Daniel Album

he called it. A bit on the side. ‘Others will want you, Daniel, and I could never bear it’. He’s emptied me, Mark. I don’t know what to do. But why should you care?’ I put my hand on the back of his neck and kissed him on his cheek. ‘I care because I love you, Daniel; maybe not the way you want, but it makes sense to me. I don’t know what to do either. We’ll probably both blunder about for a few more years yet. But we’ve got time to work it out, buddy, and we will’.

Picture 6 – the only actual photograph, professionally taken and beautifully framed. Four well-dressed people are standing outside a registry office, July 2007. A light-haired, good-looking man, suited and carnationed, Daniel Shiel, is beside a smaller, darker man with a contented smile, John Emerson, now Daniel’s civil partner; they have been together for four years. Next to them, the still lean if not so beautiful Mark Staunton, and next to him, Mrs. Helen Staunton nee Ericson, a girl I met when travelling abroad, from the first much more than a holiday romance. John is holding a Civil Partnership Certificate as if he still can’t quite believe it’s happened, but is very satisfied that it now has.

I did the ‘best man’ business, or as much as needed in an informal hotel ceremony, and I had plenty of material from school and subsequently to manage a speech. Bryn Young and 1998 didn’t get into it. I assumed John didn’t know about that, and I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him.

We met an old schoolmate some years later who had been to the university where Bryn Young taught. Young, he said, was well and truly out, and though some gay students claimed ‘affairs’, he had taken up permanently with a sharp-tongued writer called Max and very few dared tread on Max’s toes. Bryn Young was at last spoken for.

Before Daniel and John went off to Paris for a break, Daniel and I talked in the garden of the hotel. It wasn’t the last time we talked together; he was and is an old friend. When we parted, perhaps my most gratifying picture of all is of him starting to shake my hand, deciding that wouldn’t do, and saying goodbye with a lingering kiss on my cheek.