

Me and Danny Down by the Schoolyard

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Depending which way you faced on the swings, there were two views from John Jay Park in Manhattan: the barges and ripples of the East River, and a small red brick building called The Town School.

Actually, John Jay was really more like two parks. Far back, a couple of more blocks up from Town, was a whimsical playland of brightly-colored, plastic-coated jungle-gyms, a row of swings, and a sprinkler for hot days. But once you were in fifth grade, there must have been a tacit agreement among the faculty to escort students to the "second" area of John Jay Park--a huge grey concrete slab dotted with basketball hoops and three handball courts.

I blame the playground-switch for the emergence of the bewildering and often cruel social stratification of the fifth grade.

With the friendlier, more intricately-equipped section of the park, activities were determined purely by predilection. If you liked the swings, you went on the swings; if the monkey bars were your thing, you spit in your hands and went to town. It didn't matter who else was on the swings, or who else climbed the jungle gym--social interaction was secondary, formed purely by coincidence and made pleasant out of convenience. But once the 30 of us were escorted to that near-naked concrete slab, accompanied only by a mesh bag of handballs, two Nerf footballs, and some half-deflated basketballs, that's when the cliques began to congeal.

The standard athletic, ESPN-watching, good-at-math, hair-gelling boys gathered on the far end for organized games of basketball or football. Once we found out that we could bring a radio outside with us, the girls' gossip circle soon became the "gymnastics club," a conglomerate at the left-hand corner of the schoolyard where Top Twenty hits by Amy Grant and Madonna were choreographed.

If you didn't want to follow the rules of the schoolyard, there was only one place to go--the handball court.

And that's where my journey with Danny began.

The first thing Danny said to me was, "You know Butts Up?" It took him the rest of recess to fully explain, but I had the time.

The rules of "Butts Up" were always changing. But the reverence we had for the game carried a weight usually reserved for solemn and venerable traditions. Basically, you threw the ball at the wall, and had to let it bounce once before hitting it to the wall again. If you didn't let the ball bounce, touched the ball twice (a "double-touch"), hit below the designated line, or displayed some other such brand of incompetence, you were penalized with a letter. Starting off with "B," the letters accumulated to spell, you guessed it: "B-U-T-T-S U-P." If you were unfortunate enough to accumulate the entire phrase, you had to place both hands on the wall and stick your butt as far out as possible. Your butt would then be pelted by each of the other players, one by one, while the rest of the group heckled you.

And as we heckled and bruised each other's behinds, the Mariah Carey albums of the gymnastics club and the hollers and high-fives of the football game faded into the background almost completely by the time the teachers started waving us back inside.

Charles Gray drew pictures of army bases in his notebook and had pretend battles, during which he ripped up pieces of paper to illustrate the magnitude of destruction.

Ben said "fuck" a lot.

Colin kept a tangerine in his locker for four months until it got all shriveled and moldy. He named it Oscar.

Francisco ate catnip because he thought it could help him run faster.

Danny wasn't just one of the misfits--he was our leader.

You wouldn't know it by looking at him. A clean-cut, handsome, dirty-blond boy with deep brown eyes, Danny wore short-sleeved polo shirts with the collars turned up, and walked to school without a jacket even in February because he "never really got cold." And Danny never got sick, probably because everyone kept telling him that he was going to.

My earliest memory of Danny is at a classroom birthday party in third grade, when he successfully shoved an entire cupcake in his mouth. He had vanilla icing and rainbow sprinkles all over his face, but there was an impressively minimal amount of crumb-spitting as he chewed and swallowed.

When Danny was mad he didn't yell or hit or tease; he called up the person and left the dust buster running into his or her answering machine. Danny made incessant incantations with words like Dodecahedron ("DOH-deca- HEEE-droon, DOH-deca-HEE-dron!") and chanted them down the hallway on his way to the bathroom. He read the dictionary. During the annual third-grade week-long field trip to Manhattan Country School Farm up in the Catskills, Danny declared that washing dishes was a "Kafka-esque experience."

In Ms. Wheelock's fifth grade French class, we had creative projects to help us master our new vocabulary. When we made menus, Danny's Special "du jour" was a ham sandwich. Refusing the assistance of our vocabulary list, Danny

preferred the more evocative approach. His menu read proudly, "Pain avec le cochon mort" ("bread with dead pig").

Along with the more "mature" recess locale, fifth grade also brought with it trips to the computer lab for writing workshop. We wrote poetry and made a class anthology. I remember Danny's poem exactly, because I read it so many times out of sheer fascination:

Ignore
Ignore the salesman knocking at the door some
more
Ignore, ignore.
Ignore all sadness
Ignore all
pain
That's happy.

Our prim and proper teacher, an English-born and Belgium-raised mousy woman named Ms. Nattalicchi who only lasted a year before quitting, urged Danny to write another poem, or at least to expand on the one he had written. What was the salesman selling? she asked. Maybe he could write about that, she suggested. But he firmly asserted that he was done. Why should he add to it if he didn't feel moved? He called her Ms. Gotta-take-a-leaky and spent the rest of the poetry workshops on a story about a guy who invented banana-flavored surfboard wax.

Danny and I used to stay on the phone for hours watching television together.

His parents were never really home. They were both prominent New York City criminal judges with incredibly busy and demanding schedules, and after he vocalized his dislike for nannies Danny was left home alone regularly starting when he was about eight years old. As we laughed into the receivers while giving our own (much more startling and irreverent) false answers to the questions on *Hollywood Squares*, Danny would tell me to hold on while he met the pizza delivery guy at the door. I carried a deep respect for his worldly knowledge about how much to tip and delivery-ordering phone etiquette, since I had yet to be initiated into this world of independence.

Danny wasn't an only child. He had a sister, Jane, who had been kicked out of more schools than I can remember. She went through all the colors of the plaid in abandoned private school uniforms before she was 17. Danny and Jane never seemed to get along. When Ms. Wheelock assigned us to write descriptions of our families, Danny describes Jane simply as "très bête et très laide," (very ugly and very stupid). But Jane was neither of these things. She was pretty, and brilliant, with a penchant for the sciences and a portfolio of vibrant and skillful drawings. She had a good family and went to nice schools. But Jane was still stuck in a revolving door of rehab programs, being treated for drug abuse and severe depression. When Danny's parents were home, their energy simply didn't come too often in Danny's direction.

"I love your friend Danny," my mom said to me as she perused our homemade fifth-grade literary anthology and pondered the controversial "Ignore." "But why is he so...so strange, sometimes?"

No one--not even me, really--fully seemed to understand Danny's constant need to push the envelope, to defy instruction and convention, to cause trouble when he just could have had his laughs privately after doing what he was told to do. But sometimes in those silences when Danny put the phone down to check on Jane or walk his dog, I'd wonder what it was like to grow up in a place where all the right ingredients were there, but nothing had seemed to combine correctly. In an amorphous, not-quite-definable way, I theorized that writing minimalist pseudo-poetry, stuffing a whole cupcake in his mouth, playing a perverted twist on wall-ball, and shouting the names of polygons in the halls were just small attempts to find a new set of ingredients, a new combination that would lead him to another place.

I guess because nothing was really right, the best Danny could do was convince himself that everything was possible.

Ben decided to have an "Up All Night" party for his 11th birthday. Danny and I were the only ones up for the challenge. We stocked the fridge with Jolt Cola and rented movies. By 4 a.m. we were all pretty irritable. When Ben threw a bag of Doritos at me I knew it was time to surrender and go to bed. I slept in the guestroom and Danny slept in Ben's room.

Sometime the next mornings Danny told me he "liked me," you know, "in that way." I was scared and didn't know what to do. I said "thanks" and then acted like nothing happened, and he did too.

And so Danny started keeping steady company with Arielle. When Arielle came to our school three years before, she got all the girls' attention. I would like to say it was because of her loud laugh or because she shared a name with Disney's Little Mermaid, but it was really because she already had boobs and had been getting her period since she was eight. She told us it felt like your belly button was caving in.

Danny and Arielle started to walk home together in the afternoons. One day, Danny came to school with a blue mark on his neck the size of a golf ball. He said something about a tree branch. But having seen a particularly informative episode of *Who's the Boss?* some weeks before, I knew what it really was. I would be lying if I said I wasn't jealous; but I would also be lying if I said I wasn't impressed.

Pretty soon after the hickey incident, Danny's mom decided to send him to Collegiate, an exclusive, academically rigorous, jacket-and-tie all-boys school on West End Avenue. I don't know for certain what exactly led to the decision, but I do know that Danny's mom, Laura, told my mom that the move was "a year too late."

As for me, after graduating from Town's eighth grade I entered Trinity, an elite private high school on the Upper West Side. It was hard to find a kid at Trinity that wasn't an achiever--some spoke three languages, others studied piano at

Julliard. There were renowned athletes, award-winning writers, kids who arrived at school at 7a.m. to swim laps in preparation for their swim meet and who left for home at 7:30p.m. after play rehearsal. There were kids that single-handedly swept awards at model congress and at the end-of-the-year awards ceremonies. There were also the kids who didn't need to be smart, because their parents had been smart enough to make their first million by the age of thirty. All they had to worry about was being cool: they threw house parties, smoked outside the neighborhood bagel shop, talked on their cell phones in the hallways. They didn't have to worry about skipping class to smoke weed in Central Park because, after all, there were buildings named after their grandfathers at Yale. The dominant female culture consisted of girls who carried Coach bags and had Tiffany bracelets dangling from their manicured hands. They huddled together in groups, whispering, giggling and squawking, wearing tight jeans and bright low-cut shirts. With the good 25 pounds I gained due to the McDonald's across the street and my attachment to my navy blue K-Mart cardigan sweater, the prospect of my gaining access into this world was bleak.

Of course you had the non-conformist culture, but they were far from an accepting sanctuary. Their handbook seemed almost more intricate and unforgiving than the mainstreamers. After a week of trying to navigate my brother's bootleg Phish tapes and home-tailoring my tapered jeans, I realized that the only instructions worth following in high school were the ones that would get me out of there and into college. I spent my afternoons and break periods in the library, listening to Paul Simon over Physics homework.

Danny was too smart for school. He got bored easily, and even more easily fed up with the snobby, insular, hyper goal-oriented culture of the New York City private school scene. But even though I felt very similarly, I tried to ignore it. In the four-year time span between fifth grade and high school, a lot had changed in my life. My father, once an extremely affluent big-shot in the 80s hotel/casino scene, (he even played tennis with Sinatra) had fallen into a bad investment with some bad partners, resulting in an accelerating sequence of events that to this very day I don't fully understand. With Murphy's Law in full swing, we still had an income to keep us out of financial aid qualification territory, but the problem was that that income went to paying lawyers and not much else. My mother, doing everything from selling her business, our apartment, her jewelry and even bidets by phone, insisted that I would not leave Trinity, which was deemed one of the best schools in the city. We made the tuition payments every year, but without much wiggle room. My family soon became the personification of the proverbial duck--looking smooth and collected on the surface (my mom still drove the Mercedes, which she took loans out on for ten-plus years), but paddling like hell underneath.

To make a long story short(er), as much as I hated the achievement-obsessed, name-crazed environment I was in, for all practical purposes I had to put aside my handball-court mentality and learn to play another game. I took my SATs twice. I signed up for AP Calculus, even though I would have much rather taken Art History. Let's face it, my mom wasn't working at a bidet company so that I could spend my nights writing poetry instead of studying for Biology, or so that I could graduate and go to Hampshire and study tomato farming and modern dance.

As far as Trinity School was concerned, I had to play by the rules, no matter how hard it could be. After all, I wasn't exactly in a position to bite the hand that fed me.

So I watched as Danny did all the biting for me.

"My day begins when school ends," Danny told me, hovering over some comic books and incense as we walked down Eighth Street one day.

At 16, Danny was dating a 21-year-old girl named Cassandra (pronounced "Cos-AHN-dra," thank you very much) with an acute drug and alcohol problem and, judging by the pictures he showed me, an affinity for leather and sharp objects that protruded out from various soft places in her body.

Danny's day usually "began" by catching the Subway downtown to meet Cassandra somewhere near her Avenue A apartment. He stayed out most nights until early in the morning, getting most of his sleep in his classes; I always pictured him slouching in some seat in the back of a mahogany-paneled room, wrinkling up his blazer and tie, waiting to start his day.

"How do you *not* worry about work? What are you doing to do about college?" I always wanted to ask Danny these things, but I never did. While Danny attended to Cassandra, frequented the East Village, painted his nails black, skimmed the Imports section of the Virgin Records Megastore for "ambient" music (he played it for me over the phone once--I felt like I was on hold for the Psychic Friends Network), and wrote increasingly dark and cryptic poetry, I spent my afternoons in an SAT prep course, staring into space between Analogies and Sentence Completions, waiting for the day when I could start my real life, too.

Danny told me he wanted us to hang out more, so I invited him to a play at Trinity--the senior theater class' production of *The Curious Savage*. Danny looked bored to tears, tapping his combat boots on the floor and fiddling with the safety pins that held his backpack together. Everything about the way he looked at me--and at the play, at the walls laden with college posters and sports trophies--seemed to accuse me of losing my imagination. And I couldn't help thinking that maybe he was right.

During intermission I wondered how I could toss my head and laugh in just the right way, so that suddenly we could both clasp onto some sense of irony and laugh about this crazy adolescent universe. We were still partners in crime, I wanted him to know, I just have to go undercover for a while. I was still, after all, the only girl to grace the handball courts and let the boys throw the ball at her butt.

But as I looked at Danny nodding off and checking his watch all through the final act, the only thought in my head became, what does this guy want from me? And, crossing my arms even tighter, I became as silent as he was.

After the show, we sat in the Trinity lobby, waiting--me for my mom to pick me up (she worried about me taking the bus so late at night) and Danny for Cassandra to call. Danny told me about how they'd stopped going to Al-Anon, because they felt that the program didn't suit them. They agreed that they would be better off dealing with her problems "in their own way."

"Is Cassandra going to school again?"

"She started taking classes at The New School, but she stopped. She didn't like it much."

"Well, she should probably try to get a degree at some point, don't you think?"

"Why?"

"I don't know, so maybe she could get a job, learn about the world, maybe do something with her life? How does she support herself?"

"She knows a lot about the world. And she bartends."

The conversation escalated. Danny got defensive, I became exasperated, and he told me that I was "perpetually perturbed" and anxious about things that were of little or no importance.

"I just feel like💎" Danny started and stopped again, his leather-clad arms dropping defeated to his sides. "I feel like I just keep waiting for you to calm down."

"Well I feel like I keep waiting for you to grow up!" I shouted, much louder than I had intended.

Through the lobby window I spotted my mother park across the street. I leapt out of my chair and barely said goodbye.

I didn't speak to Danny for five months.

Then one day, out of the blue, he called and asked me if I wanted his old laptop computer. I was hesitant, but Danny said he was just going to throw it away anyway, so I might as well.

He dropped it off at my apartment building while I was out. Resting in a black carrying case that seemed to be 80% duct tape, the computer was covered with decals and stickers all over it, saying things like "You should donate your body to science fiction" and "Ask me if I give a fuck." I spent about two hours getting the stickers off with various household cleansers and plugged it in to sort out the hard drive, which was endearingly labeled "Shitbox."

I found a document with my name on it and opened it, expecting to find instructions on how to navigate the crazy thing. But instead, I found a piece of resurrected art💎

Ignore

Ignore the salesman knocking at the door

some more

Ignore, ignore.

Ignore all sadness

Ignore all pain

That's happy.

...with an addendum: "All my love and affection, Danny."

It had taken me over ten years to finally understand. There was Danny's need to shock, his brooding and moodiness, his concern with keeping up with the St. Marks Comics selections and dying his hair just the right shade of black, his judgments on my selection of videos at Blockbuster. But it wasn't until I sat at his old clunky computer, my hands still sticky and raw from decal adhesive, that Danny finally proved to me that he really never did follow any prescriptions, and that he never wrote any prescriptions for anyone else. After all, that's how it had all started back at John Jay Park-- with Danny playing by his own rules, in his own space, and welcoming anyone to come and go as they pleased. And if he sometimes strayed, it was simply because he was just as lost as the rest of us.