

The Man Who Sank

by Colin P. Davies

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Editor's Foreword: You've lost that lovin' feeling. Whoa-oh, that lovin' feeling. You've—glub, glub, glub.

Niall is the worst of us. He's meaner, more vicious, more crazy. He hates everyone: Jamacians, Asians, queers.... Chances are he hates me as well. His Dad had been a violent waste-of-DNA and Niall intends to make us all pay. He doesn't care about anything...and yet, only last Saturday, when me met up as usual, I found him anxious and attentive to every stranger on the street.

For half an hour, we'd been hanging around the launderette, hoping to spy at least one of the Jones twins, in their short skirts and ankle boots. Rain came down fine and bright in the orange warmth of the street lamps, and I felt colder than natural for an August evening. Jimmy sat on the bus stop bench, drinking. The canopy sheltered him from all but the strongest gusts. Somehow he'd got hold of a bottle of Woodpecker. Niall tried to light a cigarette in the open doorway of the launderette. He mumbled, "Shit, shit..." as he battled with the wind. Then he turned suddenly and gazed up the street.

"What's your problem?" I said.

He cupped his hand around the lighter. "The wind...."

"No...you seem edgy. Are you expecting someone?"

"Maybe...I don't know."

He tried again to light the cigarette. "Shit!"

"Give it up," I said. "Or come inside."

"Andy...don't be an arse."

I smirked—I could see my face reflected in the window, bright against the blackness of the bus depot wall across the street. The manager enforced a Strictly No Smoking rule here. She'd banned us once before, thanks to Niall's mouth, and I knew he would not risk it happening again. In Selby, at night, warm and dry places are hard to come by.

Eyes watched me through the glass. Outside on the pavement sat a skinny ginger cat. I don't like cats. There's something unmasculine about a cat. You can train a dog to attack, or at least to bark. Yet cats clearly believe they are superior. A cat can look up at you, and down its nose, at the same time.

Niall had the cigarette lit. He dragged on it like a drowning man on a lifeline. "Jeez, Andy. I've got to have food." I didn't doubt him—he always looks hungry. Niall has the drawn, fat-less face of a prisoner of war. "How much cash have you got?"

"I'm skint." I'm sure he knew I was lying.

He launched rings of smoke into the wet wind. "What's this...?" He'd spotted the cat, and the cat had spotted him. "Damn thing looks hungrier than me."

“Looks smarter too.”

Niall ignored my jibe and stooped in front of the cat. They stared at each other. Niall held out his hand. “Here, cat. Maybe I’ve got some food.” Cautiously the cat approached. As it neared, Niall put the cigarette to his mouth, leaned forward, and blew smoke into its eyes. The cat ran and Niall laughed. “Never trust anyone.”

Jimmy came over. “Why’d you do that?” He waved the cider bottle in Niall’s face.

Niall snatched the bottle and swigged the last of the cider. “Never trust anyone.” He tossed the plastic bottle away. It rolled under the bus stop bench.

“Let’s move,” I said. “Nothing’s happening here.”

“Where to?” asked Jimmy.

Niall screwed up his cigarette pack and threw it down with the bottle. “I need more smokes. Let’s go to the Odeon.” Niall would scrounge for cigarettes amongst the filmgoers. He strolled off down the street.

Jimmy retrieved the bottle and followed Niall, slyly slipping the bottle into a bin out of the hard-man’s view.

I moved out of the doorway and stood in the street. I liked the feel of the rain in my face. It was cleaner than I deserved. It challenged the staleness of my ambition. Why did I hang around with a loser like Niall...?

I zipped up my leather jacket and watched their retreating backs.

A shuffling noise made me turn. At the opposite end of the street, just this side of the all-night service station, someone stood in the shadows. I thought of Niall’s edginess, then laughed. Crazy! Someone else on the street.... So what?

I turned to follow the others, but Niall had stopped walking. I could tell something was wrong. He threw his shoulders about, twisting, tugging, as though trying to lift his feet. “I can’t move,” he said. “I can’t move!”

Jimmy began to laugh.

“I’m not joking!” Niall yelled.

I walked up to join them—I refused to run, only to have Niall make a fool of me.

And then he broke free. He stumbled forward. “I thought I was sinking...like in mud.” He examined his shoes. “I...I just don’t get it.”

“The path’s concrete,” I said.

He looked at me as though he could kill, then glanced up and down the street.

I checked around for company, but no-one lurked, either suspiciously or innocently. Everything seemed normal. I began to rationalise. Perhaps a muscle spasm, an involuntary movement—or lack of movement. Whatever....

Not my problem, anyway.

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An hour later we'd wandered down to the car park at the back of The Coal Shaft, a schizo pub which segued from grey fifties drinking-den at the front into eighties plastic Tudor tavern. The rain had retreated into a starless sky and a cool breeze carried the scent of garlic and chicken. A muted radio sang in the pub kitchen.

Jimmy scanned the beergarden tables, but, thanks to the rain, he'd find no drinks to sweep—only abandoned ring-marks in the wood. Niall showed interest in a flash red Peugeot soft-top. He planned to educate me in the art of joyriding. A smart car, no denying it, but still I felt reluctant to get drawn in. My mother already disapproved of my friendship with Niall and I would not give her any more ammunition -- besides, my father would kill me.

Jimmy spotted the stranger first. I read his wide eyes and turned.

Between the tall stone gateposts at the entrance to the car park, a man had appeared. Small and bearded, he wore a limp grey suit with an open-necked shirt and scuffed brown shoes. On his head he balanced a tartan cap.

Niall came up behind me. "I was right...I knew I was being followed." I heard the flick of his knife opening.

I span to face him. "Put that away. Don't be an idiot all your life...just chill out."

"Don't ever call me an idiot!" Niall punched me on the shoulder. I rubbed my arm—though more out of habit than discomfort. One day I would hit him back.

"He's probably just a tramp...after a handout," I said.

"Why would a tramp be following me?" His words sounded calm, but he held up his knifehand and I saw the skin stretched tight and white over his knuckles. If I hadn't known him, I would have said he was scared.

"Who then?"

Niall pressed the knife to his own temple—I don't think he realised. A bead of blood squeezed onto the blade.

"Maybe he knows you," said Jimmy.

Niall nodded. "Oh...he knows me all right."

"Niall's bullshitting," I said. I laughed uneasily. "It's what he does best."

A car drove past the entrance and, for an instant, I thought I could see the headlamps through the man's eclipsing silhouette. I rubbed my eyes.

The night had turned colder.

"Andy...ask him what he wants," said Jimmy.

"You ask," I said.

"You jokers make me laugh. A pair of girls." Niall slashed the air with his knife. I could tell he intended to use the weapon. I understood Niall's way of thinking. He'd let himself be intimidated -- even if only for a

moment—and now he wanted revenge. “Let’s cut him up!” he said, and marched forward.

I followed him. I’d always followed him. I found him difficult, often cruel, but he had guts, no-one could deny that. Besides, the strange man must be a fool. He deserved whatever he got for messing with us.

Carefully, the man folded and pocketed his cap.

Then he ran.

Niall charged after him, and I followed along as if tugged on an invisible string. Jimmy yelled, but didn’t leave the car park. He’d never had the guts for trouble.

The man sprinted across the road, skipping puddles, and turned down past the Health Centre. But Niall had youth and anger. He would not let the man escape.

We trailed our quarry down a dark alley behind the bus depot, where our footsteps reverberated like slaps on a steel drum. The pursuit took us across another street and onto the waste ground which surrounded the derelict Coal Board offices.

It had all happened too quickly. We needed a moment to think, to grasp the meaning of these sudden events—but I could hardly manage just to grasp my breath. Niall charged on.

“Niall.... Wait!”

But I knew he would not stop for me. It seemed he couldn’t even stop for himself.

We approached the dilapidated Victorian building. Formerly a merchant’s extravagant celebration of hard-won wealth, the grand house had served as the local coal industry office for decades. Now it boasted boarded doors and gaping windows and an interior as gutted as the lives of the pit widows.

The man disappeared through a window opening.

Niall slowed down. He had his enemy trapped. I caught his arm, but he shook me off.

“Wait,” I said. I saw his face then—swollen-eyed and white. Fury and fear. Yes...fear. “What the Hell is wrong with you?”

“I’m going to cut him out of my head.” He took his breath in gulps.

“He hasn’t done anything to you. What’s your problem?”

“Exorcism.” He got his foot onto the window sill.

“What...?”

“He’s my Dad.”

“But...your Dad is dead. You told me.”

“He vanished from his locked bedroom—locked from the inside.” Niall fixed me with eyes as insane as his answer.

“He’s just a tramp...that’s all.”

Niall struggled for breath.

“I won’t let you do it,” I said. “They’ll put you away.”

“Get lost, Andy! For your own sake.”

He went through the window.

To Hell with Niall. I’d done all I could. The puppet string had snapped. I could run, leave him to his craziness. I’d spent too long being the restraining grip on his knife hand. He’d end up inside, for sure. He didn’t have a chance.

And the tramp didn’t have a chance....

I vaulted over the sill and into the darkness.

We all knew the story of his Dad—Niall had told it often enough—apart from this new question over the exact degree of his deadness. He’d been retired early on the grounds of mental health, after an incident in the lowest shaft of the mine. Something odd had happened down there—his Dad had the burns to prove it. Yet the company had resisted all attempts to investigate. It had been inevitable, therefore, that his Dad’s story would find eager ears.

He told of how the rock floor had grown soft. His feet had sunk. He’d only just managed to grab an overhead cable when the ground opened up and he’d looked down into another world...a fiery world existing within, or beneath, or alongside ours. He claimed to have seen a burning river and felt the blast of fire and glimpsed creatures as tall as men and as angular as stick insects. He’d become terrified that, one day, that world would return to take him.

The company said he was sick.

Niall had hated him too much to care either way.

Now I could hear Niall’s voice coming from above me. I waited a moment, suffocating in the stench of tomcats. Then I made my way to the staircase and went up, my feet scouting each step for weakness.

I could hear Niall shouting: “I always knew you’d be back!”

As I ran along the bare boards of the landing, light from a glassless window threw my shadow onto the wall. I could hear Niall on the top floor—still one more flight to go.

His voice trembled. “I used to think I could hear you, slithering below the floor of my room.”

I took the final flight in five leaps and discovered Niall blocking the open doorway to a room. I moved closer, but didn’t touch him. I didn’t trust him at the moment.

“He won’t talk to me.” The room took his words and tossed them from wall to hard wall.

I glanced past Niall into a room vast and empty, apart from the dark shape of the man who moved near one of the giant frameless windows. “He’s probably terrified.”

Niall kept his gaze into the room. “How can two different worlds be in the same place? They didn’t teach that in school.”

“Would you expect them to?”

“I’ve thought about it a lot...I’ve heard scientists say similar things.”

I shook my head. “Forget the crazy stories. You’re not a kid anymore.”

“He believed it—I know he did. Then he vanished, and now he’s here.”

“Your Dad was a monster, not a magician.” I’d never met his Dad—Niall had moved to our street with his Mum only last year—but I knew he’d been an intimidating bully. “Whatever happened to him, I hope he got what he deserved.”

“After he’d gone, I always felt he was close. He’d put the idea into my head, and it sank deep. I could scare myself at the slightest sound. Every night is a nightmare.”

“You can’t believe this is him...he’s just a tramp. You shouldn’t let your Dad get to you anymore.”

Niall finally looked at me. “I have to make it stop. I have to kill him.”

I’d never seen Niall so distressed. He appeared about to cry.

“It’s not fair!” he yelled. “I shouldn’t have to still be scared.” He held up the knife and charged at the man.

I threw myself forward, catching Niall’s leg. He came down with a crash and a curse.

I got to my knees. The tramp backed up against the low sill of the window opening.

I felt burning in my right bicep. My jacket gaped open, slashed. Niall had cut me. I put my hand to the pain and there was warm wetness. “You bastard....”

“Get away from me!” Niall scrambled up, but I had his arm and grappled with him. I pulled myself up and grabbed his knife hand. He tried to push the blade into my thigh, but I held him back. We stumbled towards the tramp, who dodged to avoid us and, as I watched, rolled slowly backwards across the sill.

I pushed Niall to the floor.

The man fell from the window. He made no sound.

“We’ve killed him!” I flung myself onto the sill to look down the outside of the building.

Behind me, Niall sobbed. “I’ve killed him...I’ve killed him....” He said it maybe ten times before he stopped for breath.

I turned my back to the window and watched Niall’s sunken body rise and fall with the rhythm of his breathing. Eventually he looked up at me. His lips hardly moved as he spoke.

“My Dad wore a tartan cap.”

* * *

I don’t want to see Niall again. I can’t forgive him for that fight. The wound on my arm is a reminder that nothing and nobody in this ill-defined world can be trusted, least of all your own senses.

I also don’t want to see him because he’s not the Niall I used to know. He’s lost the edge, the don’t give a damn I admired. His hate has turned inwards. He doubts his memory and he does not want to know mine. I phoned him midweek and asked how he was doing, and he replied flatly, “Sinking.”

And I don’t want to see him because what I know, what I’d shielded him from that night, would break

him apart.

When I'd looked down from that window, I'd expected to see the tramp hitting hard stone. Instead, I saw the ground open below him to reveal a distant flaming river, meandering across a scorched red plain. The tramp twisted lithely in the air, then transformed with a shrug into an attenuated twig that floated down through the rising heat. The muddy path closed above it, leaving only an acrid breath of hot air in my face and a silence all the louder for Niall's sobbing.

The fear is inside me now. I hear the slithering sounds at night and lie sweating in my bed. Yet in my dreams it is not Niall's Dad who rises up from the ground, but Niall. He tells me not to worry about the world below—the world within...the world within all of us.

But I do worry. I worry about sinking into Niall's world of fear and hate.

The ground no longer feels solid beneath my feet.

Author's Bio: Colin P. Davies has been selling short stories since the mid eighties and has appeared in BEYOND, SPECTRUM SF, 3SF, ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS INFLIGHT MAGAZINE, PARADOX and ASIMOV'S. His story 'The Defenders' appeared in THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION #22, (Ed. Gardner Dozois) from ST MARTIN'S PRESS. Recently several stories have appeared in 'BEWILDERING STORIES' and a story will appear in the March 2007 issue of 'ASIMOV'S'. He is a Building Surveyor and lives near Liverpool, UK. With the assistance of a professional scriptwriter, his story, "The Hay Devils," has been adapted as a screenplay.