

Dancing at Discos and Holding Hands on Day Trips

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By Clare Doran,
Press & publications Officer, LJMU
clare12doran@yahoo.co.uk
<http://www.claredoran.blogspot.co.uk/>

Biographical note

Studying for an MA in Writing, Clare Doran is also a Press and Publications Officer at Liverpool John Moores University. Her non-fiction work, covering mental health, youth crime and music, has been published in various publications including *Openmind* and she was listed as a winner in the Fish Publishing Microfiction competition, highly commended in Writing on the Wall's Pulp Idol Festival and long-listed in their Flash Fiction competition with work exhibited in FACT, Liverpool.

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Abstract

This piece explores the practice of people with learning difficulties having children taken away from them, and the often unanswered questions about sex due to their position in society as eternal children. Creative fiction, the story develops these issues from the point of view of a character with learning difficulties.

They are his children, and then they are not.

Peter hands over something in an ASDA bag. He has grown even more big and strong in the last couple of months, and has even more chest hair. It pokes out from his low cut t-shirt. Neil has heard t-shirts like that described as gay. Last time he said something like this though Peter went a bit angry which isn't like him.

'Here you go, Neil,' Peter says with a smile as they settle in the seats at the pub. 'Thought this might help you with college for when you're practising at home.'

The bag contains a new book. Neil starts to read out the cover which has some farmyard animals on it because he wants to show Peter that he likes the present. In slow, uneasy tone he says, 'Maths for five to seven years...'

'Look at it later.' Ella is a snapper at times.

'This is a nice pub,' Dan says.

He is always good at being happy. Ella is less so. There is nothing different about this pub and they've been before. The stools look uncomfortable but the men at the bar who crouch over them are supping happily. The people are friendly in this pub though. It is nice. Neil likes making new friends and it seems like this could happen here. The clink-clinkings of the glass and people talking and laughing makes him happy. There is a musty smell of beer but the door keeps opening from the kitchen bringing steak, chips and lots of lovely food to his nose.

'Yeah it's nice,' Neil says. Normally Dan takes him to discos and on day trips with others who he's heard people say are 'like him'. Peter and Ella aren't like him. They should be but they aren't. Well Peter has the same chest hair. Neil has to shave

his own a lot and always gets it wrong so his Mum, who he calls Marie these days, has to help.

Neil's Mum helps shave his face too so he doesn't end up with patches. 'Like shaving a chicken', she says. And he always ends up with bits of tissue and blood dotted over his face. But when Dan comes around he tries to do it himself. It doesn't look good when your Mum is still doing things like that for you. Neil doesn't even like still living with his Mum but now she isn't too good, he can be like a carer too. In fact she hardly has days when she can shave him anymore or do any of the normal things she used to do. So he's started calling her Marie instead of Mum and that makes her shake her walking stick and throw the paper at him. And she swears more too. He hates being called a little bugger but Lucy, who comes and helps care for her, and the other carers say that is what happens when the mind goes and that his Mum doesn't mean it. Maybe he'll have his own place soon. Dan has mentioned that a few times. They say his Mum has done well all these years to cope. But Neil doesn't like it being called a 'home', his home is home.

Ella has the gingeriness about her, like her own Mum, Sheila, who Neil is meant to ask about to be polite but he doesn't see because 'we've learnt a lesson there' as his old social worker Margaret said.

'Yeah this is a nice place - miles away from anywhere my mates would see me.' He hears Ella reply.

Neil wants to tell her not to be embarrassed of that hair which has been cut too short or maybe it's the fresh spots on her chin, or just the ginger hair which is Sheila's fault, not his. He goes to say this but Dan cuts him off with another happy comment.

'Neil, tell them what you've been doing at college.'

'Maths and English. We went to ASDA the other day. It's important for the economy to know what food is what price.' Neil replies. He remembers his teacher saying something like this. He was quite proud to once again get into Liverpool Community College, even though he'd done variations of this course for years, running through his mind like when his Mum leaves the tap on.

'What else have you been doing?' Dan winks at him and Neil remembers the music lessons. Peter and Ella like bands.

'I've been playing the keyboard.'

'What do you play?' Peter asks.

'All kinds.'

He tries to think of something they've learned recently.

'Sometimes I play "Here comes the Bride".'

'Why would you play that?' Ella says.

Her vodka and orange has gone down faster than anyone else's. Neil doesn't like strong drinks like that. Peter drinks a safe pint and he is driving so only one. Dan never drinks. Well Neil knows that he does drink because he talks about nights out with his friends sometimes. But he never drinks with Neil. He heard Dan telling Peter once that it was because he was acting as a carer. Neil doesn't like the word 'carer' in this way and he doesn't think Dan is acting, so he calls him a friend. He doesn't want Peter and Ella to think he needs caring for anyway. He gets a certain number of hours with Dan and it's up to him what they do. So even though he doesn't *need* Dan to meet Peter and Ella, it's his choice. It makes it easier.

It is then that Neil realises Ella has got the wrong idea about him having a girlfriend again. Ella is only just old enough to drink. Being eighteen was difficult and he has only known her from this age.

'I've only been going with Joanna two weeks.' Neil says.

She isn't really even a girlfriend yet in his eyes.

'You have a girlfriend?' Ella says.

'Let's hear more about college.' Dan says.

'Only person I know who has been in college for over thirty years.' Ella says into her empty glass.

The barman comes over. He's a real happy man. Neil likes him. They have only met once but get on great. He picks up Ella's empty glass.

'Are you alright today, Neil lad?'

'Yeah I'm great. How about you mate?'

'Can't complain. Not bringing the new girlfriend in to see us?'

'Having a night off, mate.'

Neil sits back in his chair. He's heard people say things like that about their girlfriends. Ella's smile looks frozen.

'I'm going the loo.' She says and gets up.

Neil watches her trot off.

On every other weekend, Peter and Ella come to visit him. Well, they don't come to him. Imagine those two in his room, the place he owns with all his maths books that he practices with his calculator. The five and ten times tables are the most enjoyable. They would completely mess it up. So instead it is places like the pub.

Besides, his Mum wouldn't like them around the house too much at the moment. The last few months, the whole thing had got confusing for her. She loves them now but it was hard to find out about them at first.

All those years ago when the social workers kept visiting and upsetting them, she had cried in the kitchen for ages, sat on the little table, which is still there, smoking and crying. Then Peter and Ella went missing for years.

'Why can't I take them? Why not?'

She'd said different versions of that over and over to them. The social workers had kept looking at him. He hadn't even done anything wrong. Well there was that nice thing with Sheila that he was always told not to do, by nearly *everyone*, but he didn't do that now. He could do things on his own, in his bedroom, secretly, but that wasn't the same. There hadn't even been a girlfriend since all that trouble. Well not a real, proper one. There was dancing at discos and holding hands on day trips to Blackpool and weekends in Wales. But he was always being watched. Lately there is Joanna, but they are never on their own and just dance at discos and hold hands on day trips as they are watched by the social workers who take them, sipping their cokes and lemonades. Sometimes though, they sneak nice touches on the skin, kisses on the lips, and hands in places other than each other's hands. He feels a bit embarrassed even thinking about it, especially if they get seen by the wrong person and get told off. Like sometimes at the discos when it feels nice that one of the girls is dancing too close to him and he feels that rise in his pants but he doesn't want anyone to see. He went outside that one time and then there was all the trouble.

Mum doesn't need to know. She had just about let him go on those group holidays after all that with Sheila.

'How could they let this happen? I let you go on these holidays to give meself a break and they let you run riot?' She had said at the time.

Those holidays were great, whether they were sunny and it was warm against his skin, or the weather was the type Mum always said was 'bloody typical' with the rain hitting their heads and hands like it was telling them off.

Mum was really annoyed at the social workers after that one with Sheila though. 'Bleeding hell! Yer all a shower of shite! Call yourselves social workers? It's like ye running a bloody escort service with those bleeding group holidays. Meant to be teaching life skills eh? People like my Neil need to be watched!'

'Can he see them?' She had asked more quietly, a few times.

The answer was no. It was over with Sheila pretty quickly after that anyway. It was just that holiday when they had done that nice thing. And he'd wanted that ever since.

Neil knows that his Mum loves Peter and Ella but sometimes can't remember who they are on her bad days. Sometimes though she points at their photo and says to visitors, 'look at my grandchildren, the clever bastards found us,' and smiles proudly. Other times she'll mutter in a nasty voice, 'they're not like *him* you know.' She isn't good enough to come out today. Lucy explains that she doesn't mean to be like that. And it was Mum who framed that photo of them in school uniforms on the mantelpiece when she was having a good day.

'Look, Neil, your Mum loves them see? How nice is that frame?' Lucy says and then dusts all around it and the mantelpiece.

This is good because cleaning is boring and he isn't very good at it. Lucy is always finding copper coins and toy soldiers in his bedclothes. But it isn't his fault if he falls asleep when sorting them out on his bed. Sometimes when Lucy is tired, this really gets to her. She goes on and on. Her voice goes up and down like a yo-yo.

That picture of Peter and Ella is nice. New people in the house ask who they are and look astonished when he says 'Mine.' That is because the photo shows that they don't really look like him. Peter is strong and sturdy and dark and very tall. Ella has always been a carrot-top with a freckly pale face. Peter and Ella are twins but they don't look the same. It is nice to look at photos of them from the years they went missing as they grew into how he knows them.

This is all too complicated for Mum now she's not well so she isn't coming today. Peter and Ella are old enough to come on their own. Dan has been there from the start, when Peter and Ella first asked to see him. Neil said that he would choose this over the extra discos and day trips and he likes the pub as it is relaxed and Peter and Ella are old enough to drink. Neil has been to this one before and will have half a lager with lemonade. He will have three of them during the afternoon and some cheese and onion crisps, maybe some proper food. It's his choice.

It is only in the last year that they all got to know each other. Because he had missed loads of their birthdays Neil recently bought Ella a gold necklace and Peter a gold watch out of his money. This was after things had got better, after the first few meetings when everyone felt a bit weird because they didn't know each other. Things got better after Peter had printed off the scanned image of him and Ella from when they were in school that he said had tormented Ella on Facebook. That is the photo on the mantelpiece.

'I'll have to get me one of them. Everyone is always talking about them.' Neil had said after the excitement of the photo had died down.

'What a Facebook? I could set one up for you.' Peter had replied.

'Would you? Yes! That's cool that - you're the best.'

Peter is nearly always nice.

'How's your Mum?' Neil is told to ask certain polite questions by Dan. Sometimes, like today, he remembers. Dan gives him a secret wink.

'We saw her last week. She's doing really good.' Peter answers as he puts down his pint. 'Moved to a new house which she likes a lot better.'

They had started seeing Sheila at the same time, but not when they see him.

‘How’s Marie?’ Peter asks. They call his Mum, Marie, like he does now.

‘Ok,’ Neil answers.

‘You still working in that café on Saturday mornings, Pete?’ Dan asks.

They talk about this until Neil feels left out.

‘I had a job for a bit too,’ Neil says. ‘I’ve had a few jobs. But it wasn’t my fault when I lost the last one.’

‘It’s ok, Neil, what happened there wasn’t your fault.’ Dan swerves the conversation with a smile.

‘Oh yeah like everyone gets off with seventeen year olds when they’re twice as old and working in the youth club.’ Ella is back and says this almost into her hand but they all caught most of it.

Neil looks at the floor. That was five years ago and he didn’t know the rules. She had seemed old enough. When the other people working there had sat him down and made him go through all those forms it had been horrible, really horrible. It was worse than what happened with Sheila. They got his Mum involved because there were too many words on the page and he didn’t know what they meant. It was only a kiss, wasn’t even that nice, and then the social workers were back. And anyway everyone had agreed in the end that it wasn’t his fault. The checks should have been done properly. He regrets ever trying to explain why he doesn’t work now to Ella. She had jumped all over the kiss and the girl being seventeen thing like they had at first. There are a few moments of silence.

‘You’re wearing it!’ Neil nearly spills his drink in excitement.

Ella looks confused and then he touches her neck and points out the gold chain.

‘It’s nice,’ she says and smiles for the first time properly.

Peter doesn’t seem to be wearing his watch but he usually forgets. But the silence isn’t as bad now. The chatter starts again.

‘Uni going well, Pete?’ Ella how’s the foundation course going?’ Dan asks.

Neil listens to their stories until it is time to order food.

‘That burger looks nice doesn’t it?’ Dan points at one going past carried by a barman.

The smell makes Neil’s stomach growl.

‘Better than the kebab I had last night.’ Peter says.

‘What’s the worst thing you’ve ever eaten?’ Dan asks.

Neil has a way of getting into this talk. He has a funny story.

‘Me Mum left everything on too long, the bacon was black and the toast was black! It was horrible.’

There isn’t the laughter that Neil hoped for.

‘Why did you eat it?’ Ella asks.

‘I was hungry.’

‘Where were you?’ Peter asks Dan.

‘Not on shift yet. I don’t look after your Nan, Marie anyway.’ He paused slightly. ‘I work with your Da-, I mean Neil.’

They order and the food arrives quickly. Ella only says one other annoyed thing to him. ‘Use the knife and fork.’

Sometimes Ella thinks she is *Mum*.

When Dan goes to the toilet and Ella goes to the bar as she wants a glass of water, Peter starts.

‘So how much have you got today?’

Neil feels the notes inside his pocket. He wraps them in his hand and gives them to Peter in a handshake.

‘That’s great ta.’

Peter looks happy and Neil doesn’t feel as bad about taking the money from his Mum’s wardrobe now, in the special place she hides it. Sometimes he takes it from her purse which she always forgets about anyway. If he struggles then he gives Peter his own money which Dan counts out for him every few days. He can always pretend that he’s lost that. The others are back and Peter gives him that look so he knows it is their secret. Maybe Peter will buy him another maths book next time. Neil feels a bit better.

They all leave the pub and say goodbye in the car park. Peter is driving with Ella. Neil and Dan walk towards the white car. Dan has just bought it.

‘I’d like to drive a car one day. Do you think I could get lessons one day Dan, perhaps when I’m older?’ Neil asks.

He sees his reflection in the mirror and some of the grey hair Peter was joking with him about a few meetings ago stares back at him. Never mind he still looks happy in the mirror. Then a thought causes panic to come over his face. He watches himself frown. Maybe he should teach Peter about the value of money and making sure you have enough? He thinks about asking Dan for advice, or the teacher in college, but perhaps he doesn’t need to worry. Peter and Ella can look after themselves and Peter will bring the money back. Neil can tell he was always a good kid. It would have been nice to know him then, to know them both back then before they decided to look for him. But they have their everyday family too. He can’t tell them what to do. It’s nice just to help where he can. They are his children, and then they are not.

He looks away from the mirror. It is a nice day but cold. They head home.