

Danny the Davidson Tiger

Fiction • Ciaran Francis

"Oh yeah, I know this road," I said as I turned a corner. The dark, tree-lined streets suddenly popped with context. "This was the one I always took to my ex's house."

"Huh," Jake said. "Well, I think it's just a little up this way. Pretty sure it's a straight shot."

I drove for a little bit. We were getting to a point in the road where the hair always stood up on the back of my neck. The isolated houses and pitch-black pockets of forest and open field were fine, even when the empty spaces filled with fog like little ponds, even when anything could be lurking right in front of you. That was fine. The worst nature could throw at you in these parts was a deer. The unnerving part was man's own touch.

To the right was an old, white, wood house, the modest type, probably 1930's or so. It stood on the top of a bare hill with dark windows and chipped paint, watching. To the left was a bottleneck—a bridge. It used to carry trains, but now it was quiet like the house. The turn into its tight lips was a near ninety degrees, and it was

impossible to see what you were getting into without committing fully. Perhaps on the other end of the short, inescapable throat there was nothing. Perhaps there was another truck, the driver just as surprised as yourself. Perhaps the person on the other side isn't surprised to see you at all. Perhaps they were waiting like the house and the bridge. I pushed those thoughts to the side and drove on. We crossed the bridge without a problem or another person on the other side.

Jake was paying close attention to the road at this point. Only a moment after we crossed the bridge, he said, "yup, that's it right there."

I was shocked. I had passed by this place dozens of times and always wondered what it was. Situated here were three monuments to a dead world. To the right was an old railroad crossing. The trains in these parts, like so many other great American beasts, were long since extinct. The metal braced path bore the same presence as an old wagon trail, and just as many ghosts. To the left and ahead was an old building, the purpose of which was unknown. Its brick walls testified to both its age and neglect. Finally, to our left, stood our target. I pulled into the gravel, U-shaped driveway.

"So, this is the old elementary then?" I asked. "I never woulda guessed."

"Not just any school," Jake said. "This was the Davidson before the Davidson we have now. Thank God they never tore it down. This place is so fuckin' cool."

"There are so many cars out front," I said. "Were they here before?"

"Oh yeah, yeah," Jake said. "Although I'm not sure about the camper. No, the camper was here last time. Hmm..."

Parked in front of the shadowy main entrance sat a dozen or so cars. The oldest were two 80's-era cars, which were completely wrecked, while the newest was a bus-sized camper which looked as though it could have been parked moments before our arrival. We got out of the car and the silence of that lonely, dead world surrounded us like the darkness hung beneath the trees and behind shattered windows. I didn't lock the car. I didn't want that sudden and unmistakable noise here and now.

"Here," Jake said, handing me a surgical mask.

"What's this for?"

"You'll want it. Trust me. There's some crazy water damage in there and some of the walls have a whole rainbow of mold."

I put the mask in my pocket, and we made our way toward the building. The entrance stood under a blocky, concrete patio. The stairway up was gone. The windows stood black and tall, as though only nothingness was inside, but the doors looked ready for new pupils.

We walked around the side of the building, other windows looking similarly unyielding despite being broken and jagged. On the side of the building was a narrow-raised platform attached to the building—used, no doubt, for maintenance. We stepped onto the platform, which provided access to two doors.

“This one’s always unlocked,” Jake said, grabbing a now evidently locked doorknob.

“Strange,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jake said, trying the other doorknob.

I jiggled the first handle again, trying my luck. I could’ve sworn I heard something in the blackness behind it. It was so faint. Was it clapping? It was almost like someone was checking acoustics, playing with the unholy absence.

“Well, let’s try the back,” Jake said, moving down the stairs.

I said nothing. The building was so small, we were inside in only a couple paces. The layout was much like the schools I had been educated in, with its flat brick walls lined with doors and windows. This was a twisted version of the places I had been. Granted, I felt no comfort in those places either, but this was different. Stepping inside this building felt like going beyond what one was supposed to see. Standing there in the silence was like looking into the darkest secrets of a dead world and having them look right back at you. Like whatever is on the other side is just as surprised to find you as you are them.

Two of the three doors were barred shut. In the third stood a screen mesh, as unrelenting and unspeaking as the windows. We walked up to it, a monolith before our mortal bodies.

“Shit, I forgot my knife,” said Jake, searching his pockets. “I got my flashlight, though.”

Through the penetrating beam we saw old desks and water damage. A hallway just beyond beckoned us further, teasing us.

“Here,” I said, pulling out the knife from my boot and cutting three of the sides of the screen and swinging it in like a door.

We entered, the silence broken by our steps on the jagged glass and soggy mush. Ceiling tiles caked sections of the floor, soaking in dirt and water, exposing a tangled mass of serpent-like wires. They were what remained of primitive comfort technologies. They were useless now; moisture was everywhere, and it hurt to breathe. The hallway exposed another identical classroom on the other side, the desks forward-facing and patient. We walked to the door and on the left were the entrances to two more classrooms, to the right an open, gapping abyss.

“That way is the cafeteria,” Jake said, instinctively whispering. “Past that is the principal’s office and that other room where I found that

creepy-ass wire noose.”

We walked to the cafeteria, where the blackness was dizzying. To expose one corner was to leave three more to your back. The open entrances were no comfort, either—they were the most suspect and unpredictable. The cafeteria seemed to be in a similar state as the rest of the rooms: moldy walls, writhing ceiling, the floor wet and sharp like a maw. But there was one notable difference. These walls had the faded forms of children’s characters on them. Snow White, Winnie the Pooh, and Mickey Mouse stood as silhouettes of a brighter time. Their chipped, no doubt lead-based forms seemed to ripple in the dark. Perhaps most prominently of all was the mascot of the school itself. The anthropomorphic, potbellied tiger stood five feet tall, grinning a lazy grin just next to the entrance to the classroom hallway.

“This room always freaked me out the worst,” Jake whispered from the other corner, “I always feel like they’re watching me. I’ll let you look around a bit. I’m gonna take a second look at those classrooms.”

His voice seemed so distant and muffled, beyond his whisper. Like the blackness, the damning, deafening blackness, shrouded his voice and carried him to the next room. He faded from existence then, in that split moment when his flashlight disappeared behind the wall, ushered by that all-consuming, never-ending shadow. All that existed in this moment, this never-ending fraction of eternity, was me, an entity, an abstraction.

Me and Danny the Davidson Tiger. The suddenly very real, very alive tiger.

He blinked. I swear to god he blinked, and I was frozen, nothing more than a useless figure watching Danny blink again, turn his head as if to look around, and then put his finger on his lips to shush me. My blood froze. His bereft form gained depth as it eased out of the wall, and then his faded and chipped fur coat was as alive and breathing as I was, or maybe he was real, and I was fake. I couldn’t say at this point. He put a massive fur paw on my shoulder and I sank to my knees, landing in the broken glass and mud water.

Danny brushed the hair from my face with his sharp claw. His lazy smile was more sinister now. His teeth sparkled like the shards of glass digging into my knees. His eyes were so glossy, so deep. They carried on forever, miles back. I saw myself from behind. He leaned in and kissed me with that mouth of crooked, jagged teeth, drawing hot blood from my mouth into the cold world. And that smell. The smell of his breath was like flesh rotting in industrial waste. I filled my lungs with air and felt fiberglass instead. He put one huge finger around my throat and the claw pushed into the front left side. The front of my body was

a great and sinister delta of blood. He pushed me back, back into the darkness, the cold. Nothing was real. My flashlight was gone. I was gone. I lay in the broken teeth and saliva. Broken teeth. Broken. I felt the cold as my clothes whisked themselves into oblivion. Into nothing. I was cold. They were gone. I was gone. Gone. I was gone. Clothes were gone. I was gone.

I was falling now. Moving. Lightning speeds. Loud noises. Clapping? Fighting, no doubt. The shattering of teeth. Those monoliths that guarded the dark secrets, the teeth, gone, like me. Gone. The darkness gave way to color and sound, I wasn't gone. Red and blue. Jake. A pin prick in the arm.

I woke up hours later in the hospital. It was the mold. I forgot to wear my damn mask and when Danny attacked me, I was helpless. Jake had found him on top of my bleeding body, fought him off, and called the police. While I was put down the k-hole, Danny fled the scene.

I don't think he knew about the mold either.