

## Inside

By Richard Styles

The wheels crunched in the snow as the bus pulled into the courtyard and came to a stop next to the outer wall. The driver clicked his seatbelt off and put on his coat and opened the door and left. His job was to drive the bus. Everything that happened after that was none of his business.

Harry Daniels watched him leave. He heard the crunch of gravel and the swing of a door open then close. He couldn't see anything through the rain and the ice and the wire mesh that crisscrossed the bus windows. He figured they would leave him there for a while. Maybe ten minutes. Maybe an hour. He wasn't going anywhere. His wrists were cuffed through an iron loop attached to a pole in the aisle. And the driver had left the bus door open. In November. No accident there. But at least he had turned the engine off. Daniels couldn't stand the sound of a motor engine.

They had sat him on the opposite side of the driver in the first available seat. It was the logical thing to do with one prisoner. No need to have a guard on board when the driver can just keep an eye on him. The driver probably offered the idea. It would sound good and sexy and noble when he told his wife about it later over dinner.

They hadn't seen the problem with this arrangement. Daniels had.

The idea behind the poles was smart. Keep the prisoners' hands up high, in-view and uncomfortable. Give the guard at the front of thirty convicts an easier gig. Just stare straight down the centre. If their hands aren't going anywhere, neither are they. Even from the front row a prisoner's hands couldn't get near the driver. They were locked to the pole.

But their feet were not.

Daniels had noticed as the bus set off that he had enough slack in the handcuffs to stand, grasp hold of the pole, swing his body round in an arc and bring his foot into the side of the driver's face. The driver wasn't even wearing a seatbelt. At a snail's pace an unexpected collision would break his nose off the dash. With the bus doing seventy, he would probably die. Daniels' only problem then would be the iron pole he was trapped to. It was thick and solid and unmoving. He would have to pry up the bus floor and tear off the roof and carry it with him. Not ideal. A man running from a crashed prison bus was suspicious. A man running with handcuffs attached to nine feet of iron was something else entirely. Besides, he didn't like the sound of travelling anywhere on foot in the cold. And so Daniels had dismissed the idea for now. And fell asleep.

*'Em? Em? You home?'*

*'In the bathroom ... Oi! Don't come in! Get out!'*

*'Emily, we've been living together for seven years – darlin, I am fully aware that you poo –'*

*'Out!' Footsteps. The door creaks shut.*

*'– but I didn't know that you had them like that. Jesus, honey, crack a window.'*

*Laughing. 'I hate you.'*

*'You too. Guess what I did today.'*

*'...'*

*'I'm talking to you, smelly.'*

*'Harry, I can't go if you're talking to me.'*

*'Want me to come back in there? Give some moral support from the tub?'*

*'Noooot liiiisteniiiiing.'*

*'Really? Well, in that case, I had a cigarette on the way home and I flirted with the fruit and veg lady again.'*

*'Does our marriage come with a 30-day money back guarantee or anything?'*

*'Not sure. I'll see if I can find the receipt.'*

He heard the guard before he saw him. A door opened and closed and woke Daniels up. He heard slow, irregular steps through the snow. A jingle of keys or loose change or both. A thick cough – a smoker? He was just a silhouette through the blizzard, but Daniels made a guess of what the man might look like. And he was right.

He was big. That was the prisoner's first thought. At least a head and shoulders taller than Daniels and twice as wide. He had a strap of ginger stubble on his chin. His hair had once been the same colour, but it had been dyed, badly, and now looked artificially black. The guard didn't look up as he came in and kicked the door shut. He took a step and turned and leaned on the little cockpit door that separated the driver from the rest of the bus. He pulled a clipboard out of the brown parka he had over his uniform. He didn't look comfortable in it. It was too small for him. There was a name tag attached to the breast pocket: BARBAY. Daniels looked down. There were keys attached to Barbay's belt and a pack of cigarettes

protruding from his pocket.

'Are you staring at my dick?'

The guard's voice boomed easily over the wind outside. Daniels looked back up at Barbay's questioning face. Said nothing.

Barbay raised his eyebrows then tilted his ear at Daniels. When the prisoner stayed silent, Barbay took a step towards him.

'What are you, deaf?'

Daniels kept eye-contact. Said nothing.

The guard took another step closer. Put a palm against the pole Daniels was cuffed to. 'Who do we have here?' He brought the clipboard to his eyes again and read. 'Harold Flynton Daniels. Flynton? Wow, your mama was a bitch, huh?'

'It's better than Barbie. Did your mama like dolls? Or was it your papa?' Daniels took his gaze off Barbay's eyes as he spoke and watched the man's hands. Ready to move if the guard decided to strike him.

He didn't.

Instead, Barbay looked pleased with himself. He walked around the other side of the pole and sat down in the seat across from Daniels. 'So,' he said, stretching one syllable into two. 'You can talk. Well done, Flynton. But you actually say it Bar-bay. And that's Guard Barbay to you. And you see this?' He held up the clipboard and fanned the pages. There were a lot of them. 'This is your life, Flynton. I have your whole life in the palm of my hand. So I'd watch your mouth, if I were you. They're not ready for you over there yet. So I've come to keep you company for a little while. Ain't that nice of me? You should be thanking me. Say thank you, Flynton.'

Daniels put his head forward onto his arms. He was starting to lose feeling in his fingers. His wrists were agony on the pole. He said nothing.

'Say thank you, you slut-killin prick.'

The words brought fire to Daniels's chest and pulled his eyes closed. He left his body in the bus whilst his mind went back to a happier place.

'Harry?'

'Yeah.'

'Do you think we'll ever have a place somewhere warm? Like by the sea?'

*'Yeah.'*

*'Really?'*

*'Of course we will. One day.'*

*'When I'm all old and grey and wrinkly?'*

*'Yeah. Then. When your boobs get lower than your bellybutton, then we'll go.'*

*'I could use them as a scarf!'*

*'You're excited now, aren't you?'*

*'I do like scarves.'*

*'Yeah, I know . . . I have my interview tomorrow.'*

*'I know, clever boy, I ironed your shirt for you.'*

*'My white one?'*

*'No, I did your pink one.'*

*'Does pink really say "hire me"?''*

*'Course it does.'*

*'Really? Isn't it a bit . . . ?'*

*'What? Gay?'*

*'No, not gay. Just a little bit –'*

*'Gay.'*

*' . . . is it?'*

*'No. I like you in that shirt.'*

*'You prefer me out of it?'*

*'Ha. Ha.'*

*'Your nose is bleeding again.'*

*'Ah, shit. Gimme a sec.'*

*'How many is that this week?'*

*'Hang on. Let me grab my nose-bleed journal and I'll tell you.'*

*'Hilarious. Will you please go and get that checked out. They can't be good for you.'*

*'Nobody ever died of a nose-bleed, Harry.'*

*'Emily.'*

*'OK OK OK, I'll go tomorrow. Will that make you happy, wuss?'*

*'Ecstatic.'*

*'Good.'*

*'Good. Now. You wanna play battleships?'*

*'Yes, but if you cheat again –'*

*'I didn't see where your boats were!'*

*'Nobody sinks an aircraft carrier on their first go, Harry.'*

Daniels opened his eyes. His face was against the cold glass of the window. Outside, the snow had started to fall again. He wondered what had woken him. Then he felt the pain in his chest and saw Barbay massaging his fist in front of him.

Daniels' breath caught.

It took his shaking diaphragm seven seconds before it permitted him more oxygen. He gasped and spat then shifted back across the seat to the pole. The punch felt like it had tore his arms from their sockets. A trickle of blood ran under his handcuffs onto his wrists. He couldn't complain though. His bound hands were the only thing that had stopped his head smashing through the window.

*'No time for sleepies, convict. I'm just getting to the good bit.'*

Barbay had left the clipboard where he had been sitting across from Daniels. He walked forward and picked it up again and paced up and down the aisle as he read aloud, 'Emily Daniels. Age: twenty-nine. Is that the reason, Flynton? Worried her ass would get fat at thirty, is that it? Thought you'd do her in before her titties started droopin? Profession: Lawyer. That's ironic, huh, Flynton? Pity she weren't around to help you out in court. I bet you she . . .'

Daniels stopped listening. He focused on the wind and the snow outside. He let the blizzard come into the bus and enter his head. The cold numbed his entire body. It felt good.

Then Barbay walked back up the aisle and held up a photograph.

*'Damn, Flynton. So this is the bitch you killed? Wow-wee, I hope you didn't eat that pussy . . .'*

Daniels gritted his teeth. Ignore him. He wants me to bite. Ignore him.

*' . . . I'd need an hour with her before I cum. And you're going to prison over this slut?'*

Daniels' fingers clenched around the pole. His toes scrunched into fists.

*'I bet she didn't even suck your little dick either did she? I can tell, y'know . . .'*

There was a fire spreading through Daniels' veins. He tried to extinguish it with her eyes and her skin and her laugh but the heat only intensified and burnt the memories to ash. The rain against the window

kept time with his pulse as Barbay thrust the photo in front of him. Looking at her felt like preparing to jump into an icy river. Waiting for the green of her eyes to pull him into the cold water – into the smooth current of her skin – holding him under until he could no longer breathe.

*'Sweetie, I'm in an interview, remember. I'll call you later, OK?'*

*'Harry.'*

*'Emily? What is it? What's wrong?'*

*'I'm sorry.'*

*'Emily? What's happened? Are you OK?'*

*'I'm sick.'*

*'... that's a pussy way of killin if you ask me, Flynton. Me? I'd do this whore with a blade, know what I'm saying? Go in there with two of em and start slashin ...'*

Barbay was still pacing up and down. Talking more to himself now. There was snow all over the aisle. He hadn't remembered to wipe his boots when he came in.

Daniels hunched forward in his seat at the front of the bus. His breath now visible in front of his face. He was trying to tune out Barbay and his boots and the tinkle of keys or loose change or both. He was sick of hearing his voice now. He wanted to shut him up.

*'... and then the cops don't recognise em that way. They're all carved up –'*

*'Are you a gambling man, Barbie?'*

*'Y'know what I've been thinking about lately?'*

*'What, baby?'*

*'Death.'*

*'Oh, honey –'*

*'No, hear me out.'*

*'You're not going to die, Emily.'*

*'Harry. You see that little chart at the end of the bed?'*

*'You're not —'*

*'Pass me the chart, Harry . . . Have you read this?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'Harry.'*

*' . . . No. I haven't read it.'*

*'Do you want to hear what it says?'*

*'Why are you doing this?'*

*'Because I think you need to hear it.'*

*'I have heard it, Emily.'*

*'No. No, you haven't. Not from me.'*

*'I'm going to get a coffee.'*

*'No, you're not.'*

*'I'll bring you some water.'*

*'Harold, sit the fuck down . . . Good boy. Now. You tell me what the word "malignant" means.'*

The guard stopped pacing and walked to the front of the bus and frowned at Daniels. 'What did you say to me?'

'I said, do you like to gamble?' The prisoner sat back in his chair and dropped his chin on the arm that crossed over his body to the pole.

'What if I did?' the guard replied.

'You got a coin?' Daniels said.

'Maybe.'

Daniels kept watching him. Barbay held his gaze for a second then propped back onto the little cockpit door and put the photo in his coat and looted a hand into his trouser pocket. He couldn't do it with the parka on. The tight material caught on his biceps. He shrugged it off onto the driver's chair. Then pulled out a box of matches and a pack of cigarettes and a handful of silver coins. Daniels' neck began to sweat despite the bitter temperature. Barbay fingered his palm and selected the biggest coin and dropped the rest with the matches and the cigarettes back in his pocket.

'What's the bet?' the guard said.

'Simple. Heads or tails. I win, I get these cuffs off and that photo.'

'No way. Can't take the cuffs off.'

'The photo then.'

The guard blinked. 'All right. What if I win?'

Daniels shrugged at him. 'You tell me.'

'Got money?'

'Just a twenty.'

The guard blinked again. Then said, 'Deal.'

Barbay placed his thumb and first finger together, then balanced the coin on top. Daniels sat forward in his seat. Grasped the pole with both hands. He only had one chance at this.

'Ready?' Barbay asked. 'Call it in the air.'

The stereotype goes that women are better at multi-tasking than men. In truth, neither sex is particularly efficient at dividing their concentration. The human brain will want to prioritise a particular task. Trying to say the alphabet in your head whilst working out basic multiplication is proof of this. Unless Barbay played outfield for the Yankees on the weekend, he was going to keep his attention on the coin to catch it. For perhaps half a second he'd be oblivious to his surroundings. For half a second, his goal would be simple: catch the coin. And half a second was all Daniels wanted.

If the pole the prisoner was attached to was the centre of a clock, he was sitting in his seat at eight and Barbay was leaning on the cockpit door at two.

Exactly opposite.

180 degrees to cover.

Barbay flicked the coin into the air. Watched it rotate upwards. Taking his eyes off Daniels.

Nine o'clock. Daniels grasped hold of the pole and stood.

Ten. He gained momentum as the lower half of his body moved through the front of the bus in an arc.

Eleven. The piece of silver was as high as it was going to go. Just shy of the bus ceiling. Barbay's palm came out ready to catch it. Daniels brought his knees into his chest.

Twelve. The coin began to fall.

One. Barbay's eyes flicked towards the blur that was coming towards him.

Too late.

Two o'clock. Daniels' braced his whole body and slammed a heel into the guard's neck. Barbay let out an initial gasp of air as the impact struck his throat and smashed the air from his lungs.

Then he began to fall.

Later, Daniels would tell people that Barbay hit the floor before the coin did. In reality, Barbay hit the deck of the bus just after and was still.

Daniels could end it then. He could escape. He rehearsed it in his mind. Kick the guard in the head until he lost consciousness. Take his keys and unlock the handcuffs. Take the picture and the papers and the parka. Maybe one of Barbay's cigarettes, too. Then things would get hard, but not impossible. The bus was parked against the outer wall. He could see the heavy stone through the window. The bus roof was perhaps ten feet shy of the top of the wall. He'd have to climb on top of the bus. Jump up onto the wall then drop down the other side. The fall would hurt. But the thick snow should soften his landing. And he would be free.

*She is on the bed waiting for him. He comes in and kneels beside her and asks her again if she is sure. She takes his hand and squeezes it as hard as she can. It is like being touched by a mouse.*

*He nods and picks her up and carries her downstairs and into the garage.*

*The car door is open. He places her in the driving seat and rolls the glass down. Then he shuts the door and kneels with his head resting through the open window. She turns towards him and smiles. Pulls his hand up to her face. Stroking her neck and her cheeks and her lips with his fingertips. He breathes out and recites the speech he has been writing in his head for the last year.*

*She places her head on his and listens. Letting the tears run down her face into his hair. They stay like that for ten minutes.*

*Then she turns the key and starts the car.*

*He looks up at her. She says she is ready.*

*He kisses her hard on the mouth. Starts to recite his speech again. She tells him to go.*

*He staggers out. Closes the garage door and falls to his knees.*

Sat on the prison wall, Harry Daniels had a choice to make. To his right he could see her. She was everywhere. She was in the pale sun setting over the fields of snow and trees. There were cars in the distance. He could see the headlights. She was there, too. Narrowing his eyes he could even make out tiny houses. She would be in all of them. With their chimneys approaching the falling sun like needles to a

balloon – to burst the light for another day.

When Daniels looked to his left the picture changed.

There was still snow on the ground, but there were no trees. And she wasn't there. Instead there were guards pointing their weapons at him and shouting. Their spitted words turned to smoke in the cold. They had surrounded the bus parked next to the wall. Some of them were trying to climb up. Others fired warning shots in the air.

No. She wasn't anywhere on this side of the wall. Out there he would see her when he bought groceries or paid his taxes or combed his hair.

In prison, she would be taken from him. The walls and the bars would prise her away. Leaving him with no memory at all.

The warning shots were coming closer to him. He looked to his right and then to his left and made his decision and dropped down.

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