lovereading.co.uk

Fighting with Shadows

Beryl Matthews

Published by Penguin

Extract is copyright of the Author

I

Stepney, London, 27 May 1949

Danny Harris ran into the front room, giggling, and threw himself on the floor next to his mother. She was always playing games with him and they had such fun. It was his birthday today. He was three!

With a squeal of delight he leant across his mother. He'd tickle her. She liked that.

When she didn't move, he sat back on his heels, his bottom lip trembling with disappointment and fair hair falling in his eyes. 'Mummy?' She wasn't laughing. Why wasn't she laughing? She always laughed and kicked in delight.

Danny started to cry. Now he was frightened. 'I don't like this game,' he sobbed. 'Mummy! Mummy!'

Terror took hold and he scrambled to his feet, eyes fixed on the silent form of his mother as he backed away. 'Auntie Angel,' he cried. 'Must find Auntie.'

He hurtled to the front door, standing on tiptoe to open the latch. It was a struggle; he could only just reach it. Once outside he started to run, tripped and fell on the path with a crash. He was immediately back on his feet and tearing along the pavement.

Auntie lived close. He knew that. He pounded along,

sobbing. Where was her house? He'd only been there with his mummy or auntie. On reaching the end of the road, he spun round in confusion, then began running back, sobbing in great wrenching cries. He was lost; he didn't know where he was! This shouldn't be happening today. It was his birthday! Mummy had made a great big cake and bought him lots of lovely presents. 'Mummy, Mummy, I'm frightened.'

Out of breath with running and crying at the same time, he stopped, stood where he was and started to scream. 'Auntie Angel! Auntie Angel! Where are you? I want you. Please, Auntie!'

Suddenly he was swept up and a familiar voice was saying, 'I'm here, Danny. Shush, be quiet. Whatever is the matter?'

He threw his arms around her neck and held on with all his might. His auntie was here. He was safe. She'd talk to Mummy about frightening him so much. That was not a nice game. He hadn't liked it.

He felt the comfort of her hand running over his hair and he whimpered on her shoulder. 'Mummy won't play! Mummy won't play.'

Angie Westwood held Danny close, speaking gently in an effort to calm him. The boy was distraught, and had even wet himself. His little trousers were sopping. Her heart was hammering at an alarming rate. Dear God, what had happened? He was always such a happy child.

Several of the neighbours had rushed out to see what the commotion was all about, but Angie told them

everything was all right. Danny had got out and become frightened, that was all. They had always looked down on her cousin Jane for becoming pregnant at the age of seventeen and not marrying. Jane had never told anyone who Danny's father was, but she adored her son and was a marvellous mother. She would never let her darling son be frightened like this!

'Mummy won't play,' Danny moaned, his head tucked on to her shoulder.

'All right, my lovely,' she soothed, returning to her house as quickly as possible. She wasn't going to be able to put the boy down because he was hanging on in desperation. Hitching her handbag on her arm, she left the house. 'We'll go and see her now, shall we?'

The only reply was a sob that shook right through him. He was shaking badly and still whimpering. It was a heart-rending sound.

Angie slammed the front door of her house and hurried to Jane's, just six houses down the road. She hoisted Danny to a more comfortable position, ignoring the wet seeping through her jumper. Poor little thing, she thought, dropping a kiss on the top of his head. He must have sneaked out to find her and Jane hadn't seen him go. It had to be something like that. What else could it be? Jane would be frantic. Angie loved Danny, and often envied her cousin for having such an adorable child. She hoped to have children of her own when she married Alan. They had been going out for six months, and she was sure he was about to propose soon.

She was surprised to see Jane's front door wide open and she hurried inside. 'Jane!'

'Mummy's in the front room.' Danny lifted his head, his face smeared with tears. 'She won't play!'

Now she was thoroughly alarmed. Why did he keep saying that she wouldn't play? Her anxiety had been building all the way here and now she felt ill with worry. A quick glance in the front room made panic rip through her. Jane was on the floor, unmoving. She must have fainted; she did sometimes but always recovered quickly. It had never been anything to worry about, at least, that's what she had always been told.

'Mummy . . .' Danny was gazing at his mother. 'Why won't she get up?'

'I expect she's fainted.' Angie took Danny into the kitchen. 'I want you to stay here while I go and help your mummy.'

His arms relaxed their tight grip and he allowed Angie to sit him on a chair. 'Is Mummy sick?'

'Yes, darling.' She fought to keep her voice steady. 'I want you to be really brave. I'll be right back.'

He agreed not to move from the chair and she ran to her cousin. It looked as if she had just collapsed. Kneeling beside her, she took hold of her limp hand, rubbing it gently. 'Jane, darling, wake up, please. Danny's very frightened.'

When her cousin didn't move or respond, Angie's breath caught in her throat, making it painful to breathe. 'Jane,' she called again, her voice thick with distress. She was so still, as if there was no life there. No, it couldn't

be. It was impossible. What should she do? Think! Think!

Check for a pulse. Placing her fingers on Jane's wrist, concentrating hard to feel some movement. Nothing – there was nothing there. Oh, dear God, what had happened? She couldn't be dead – she just couldn't. Tears flowed down her face. Jane wasn't even twenty-one until next month. But through her shock came the certainty that her cousin was dead. That something special about Jane was no longer there. She had to get help.

Scrambling to her feet, Angie ran out of the house to the phone box on the corner and dialled 999. After explaining what she had found and giving their doctor's name, she was told to go back to the house and wait.

Danny was still sitting where she had left him, quiet and withdrawn now. He looked up, his beautiful grey eyes dark with worry.

Angie bent down in front of him. 'Someone will be here soon to see to your mummy.'

He scrambled off the chair. 'I'll go and see her. Make her better.'

'No!' Angie caught hold of him as he trotted towards the door. 'We mustn't disturb her until the doctor gets here.'

He stopped, holding her hand tightly and looking down at his trousers. 'I've been a naughty boy and weed my drawers. Mummy said I mustn't do that now I'm a big boy.'

'You're not naughty, darling.' Angie gathered him into

her arms. 'You were frightened and couldn't help it. Mummy understands that. Shall we go upstairs and change your clothes?'

He nodded. 'Mummy's made me new trousers for my birthday. Can I wear those?'

Angie felt as if her heart were going to break, but she had to keep control for Danny's sake. He didn't understand what had happened. 'Of course.'

She had closed the front-room door so he couldn't see in, and, when he hesitated outside, she firmly steered him upstairs to the bathroom. After stripping off his wet things, she gave him a quick wash, listening all the time for the doctor.

'There, that's better. Where are your new clothes?'

'In my bedroom.'

Angie followed as he ran to his room. The bed was littered with wrapping paper, clothes and a couple of toy cars – Danny's favourite things.

'Here they are.' He held up a pair of long trousers in dark blue, with red cars embroidered on the front pockets. There was also a pair of red braces to go with them. Angie knew that Jane had been sewing these trousers at night once Danny was in bed. She had made a lovely job of them.

She found a clean pair of pants in his chest of drawers, and then helped him on with the trousers. He was quite able to dress himself, but she needed to be doing something. She knew what she had seen downstairs, but her mind was having difficulty accepting it. Jane couldn't be dead! She couldn't . . .

Danny was gazing proudly at himself in the mirror, admiring his first pair of long trousers. He conjured up a devastating smile, and two dimples were in evidence. 'Mummy's made a big cake. She's put it in the larder. I know, 'cos I've seen it.' He headed for the stairs. 'I'll show Mummy how nice my trousers look.'

This was a nightmare! She caught Danny and took him back to the bedroom. Please come. Somebody – anyone! She spoke as calmly as she could. 'Show me the rest of your presents.'

He began to show her how the cars ran along the lino floor, and then he stopped and gazed up at her, the worry back in his eyes. 'Why doesn't Mummy come up and play with us? She always plays with me.'

The plaintive question was nearly her undoing, and Angie had to use every ounce of her strength to stop herself from sobbing like a child. She mustn't do that; it would frighten Danny. She would have to tell him something. 'When the doctor comes, they will take your mummy away. I'm so sorry, darling, but you can stay with me tonight.' She watched his bottom lip tremble. 'I've got some presents for you, and we'll take your cake with us.'

Danny chewed his lip. 'Are they going to make her better?'

She desperately wanted to wait until tomorrow before telling him the truth, and she struggled to find something he would accept. 'They are going to look after her.'

At that moment, much to her relief, there was a

knock on the door. She kissed Danny and stood up. 'Collect your things together.' Then she hurried downstairs, relieved to see their own doctor standing there.

'Dr James, I'm so pleased you're here.' Angie was shaking as she reached out to him for help. 'Something terrible has happened. I think Jane's dead.'

He nodded grimly. 'An ambulance is on its way. Where is she?'

She opened the front room door and watched the Doctor kneel beside Jane. It only took a few moments before he stood up again.

'I'm so sorry. You're right. She is dead.' He made her sit on a chair by the door.

She'd known that, of course, but to have it confirmed was heartbreaking. The tears she'd been holding back began to flow. 'Why? What happened?'

'I can't be certain yet, but it looks as if her heart finally gave out.'

'Heart? But she was only twenty.'

'She was born with a heart defect.' He frowned. 'Didn't you know?'

'No, Jane never said a word, nor did her parents or mine when they were alive.'

'When your cousin came to see me, I warned her that the birth would put her life at risk. She said the doctor in Somerset had already told her that, but she was determined to have the child. It weakened her heart further.'

Angie rested her head in her hands. 'Dear brave

Jane. How she must have wanted the child to take such a risk.'

'Do you know who the father is? She never would tell me.'

'No, I'm sorry, Doctor.' She looked up. 'But you needn't worry about Danny. I'll bring him up.'

'I was hoping you'd say that, or else he would have had to go to an orphanage. I'm sure your cousin would have wanted you to look after him.'

'I'll never let anyone put him in a children's home!'

The ambulance arrived then, and two men came in with a stretcher. After a quick word with the Doctor, they went over to the body. Angie couldn't bear to watch as they set about moving Jane. They had been more like sisters than cousins. They even had the same colouring: deep chestnut hair and hazel eyes. Angie had been around two when Jane had been born, and from that moment they had been constant companions. Neither had grown to more than five feet three inches, although they had both longed to be taller.

The pain of loss gripped her viciously. What silly things to remember at a time like this.

The men were just coming out when Danny tumbled down the stairs. After a quick glance into the now empty room, he ran towards the stretcher. 'Is that my mummy?'

'Danny.' Angie tried to catch hold of him, but he fought free.

'Why have you covered her right up? Stop it! She can't breathe like that. She can't see me in my new

trousers. It's my birthday. We're going to have a party.' He grabbed hold of the stretcher. 'Stop them, Auntie! Stop them.'

With a cry of distress Angie knelt on the floor and put her arms around the frantic boy. She would have to tell him now. 'Danny, you must let the men go. I'm so sorry, my darling, but your mummy was very sick. She's had to go to heaven and the angels will take care of her now.'

He went very still and whimpered, 'Mummy.'

'I'm so sorry, darling. You'll come and live with me and I'll look after you now.'

He gazed up at Angie, eyes dry, fists clenched. 'Isn't she coming back? Doesn't she love me any more?'

'She loves you very, very much, Danny, but she was ill and has gone to heaven to be looked after properly. She didn't want to leave you, but she couldn't help it.'

A single tear trickled down his cheek and came to rest in his dimple. 'They'll look after her?'

'Yes, they will, and I'll look after you. I love you and will take good care of you. You know that, don't you?'

He wrapped his arms around her, and Angie stroked his silky hair, both silent in their grief. She hoped he understood because he'd had a cat that had been run over, and Jane had explained to him that Dinky had gone to heaven. He knew the cat never came back, but had this really sunk in?

The birthday cake was on the table, untouched. They just hadn't been able to slice into it. Jane had even drawn

a car on the top in red icing with the number 3 underneath. Her cousin must have been gathering the ingredients for some time, because four years after the end of the war they still had rationing.

Angie watched Danny curled up on the settee, asleep at last, his face wet with tears. He had refused to leave her and go upstairs to bed, so she had let him settle down here. He was clutching a battered teddy bear in his arms. He had abandoned this a few months ago, declaring that he was too old for the toy, but tonight he was a grief-stricken little boy who needed the comfort of something loved and familiar. He would be her responsibility now, and one she would take on gladly. How she wished he had some grandparents who would love and spoil him, but the war had put an end to that pleasure for him.

Damn the war! She didn't think she would ever be able to forgive the Germans, who had bombed London night after night. It had been a clear Friday night in December 1940 when their parents had been killed. They had gone to the pub in the next street: a bomb flattened the place, killing all inside. Angie relived that time in her mind. They had been heartbroken and frightened at being left on their own. Jane had been twelve and she fourteen. After the death of their parents they had been evacuated to Bridgewater in Somerset. The Sawyers had taken the two distressed and grieving girls into their home and hearts. The beauty of the farm and the love given to them by John and Hetty Sawyer had helped them to heal. Jane had eventually settled

down, but Angie had been restless, missing her home. After six months she had returned to Stepney and her parents' house, which was still standing, as was Jane's a few doors away. She had gone to work in a factory, making small metal things, though she never did find out what they were for. Something vital for aircraft, she had been told. The work had been repetitious and boring, but she'd stuck it out, and looked after their two houses until the end of the war and Jane's return home.

Angie ran a hand over her eyes and sighed. And what a shock that had been. It was Christmas 1945 before Jane had returned home, seventeen years old and four months pregnant. She had stubbornly refused to say who the father was.

Now she was dead.

The tears began to flow again as she remembered how Jane had involved her in every day of Danny's life. As he'd started to toddle, Jane had even let him stay with her overnight when she had time off from her job as a typist. Her cousin had always been unselfish, and it hadn't seemed strange. It was just Jane wanting to share the joy her son had brought to both of them. Danny may not have a father, Jane had told her, but he's got two mothers who love him. And it was true. Angie had loved the little boy from the moment he had been born.

Since the Doctor had told her about the state of Jane's heart, Angie was beginning to wonder if this had been a reason for sharing Danny. She must have known

how ill she was. Had she been preparing Angie to take on the job of bringing up her son? Had she known she was going to die young?

She dried her tears and gazed at the sleeping child, a feeling of certainty filling her thought. Yes, Jane had known!

How sad she must have been, aware that she might not live to see her son grow up. Jane had done everything in her power to make these early years as happy as possible for her son . . .

Angie stood up, a determined look on her face as she gently scooped up Danny to take him upstairs with her. She wouldn't let Jane down. Danny would have a happy life with her.