

K. Uwe Dunn

## **Daniel, You Are Above Ground**

Daniel: How do I get to breakfast?  
Me: To breakfast?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: It's night time.  
Daniel: But . . .  
Me: You don't have to worry about it now.  
Daniel: How do I get there?  
Me: It's 10 p.m. Time for sleep. Think about breakfast in the morning.  
Daniel: I'm scared.  
Me: Why are you scared?  
Daniel: Because I won't remember how to get there.  
Me: Someone will come.  
Daniel: Someone will come.  
Me: And take you there. There's no reason for concern.  
Daniel: But . . .  
Me: Just relax.  
Daniel: When I leave the room, which way do I go?  
Me: Okay, if you insist.  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: When you leave the room, go right.  
Daniel: I go right.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: And then what?  
Me: Go to the cubicle at the end of the hall.  
Daniel: The cubicle at the end of the hall.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: Then which way?  
Me: At the cubicle, turn left.  
Daniel: I turn left.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: Then, after I go left, which way next?  
Me: Then you see room 101.  
Daniel: Room 101.  
Me: 101, 102 and 103.  
Daniel: 101, 102 and 103.  
Me: And keep going.  
Daniel: And keep going.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: And then?

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Me: You'll see the sign with the menu.  
Daniel: The menu?  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: The sign with the menu.  
Me: And make a right.  
Daniel: A right.  
Me: Then, you're at the dining hall.  
Daniel: For breakfast.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: Oh dear. I'm not going to remember all that.  
Me: That's okay. You won't have to.  
Daniel: I won't have to?  
Me: Someone will come get you.  
Daniel: They won't forget me?  
Me: They won't forget you.  
Daniel: Okay.  
Me: Okay?  
Daniel: Okay.  
Me: . . .  
Daniel: Tell me again?  
Me: You don't have to worry . . .  
Daniel: When I leave the room . . .  
Me: You go right.  
Daniel: I go right.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: And then I see the cubicle.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: And go . . .  
Me: Left.  
Daniel: I go left.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: And then . . .  
Me: You'll see 101, 102 and 103.  
Daniel: 101, 102 and 103.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: And keep going.  
Me: And keep going.  
Daniel: Until . . .  
Me: Until you see the menu.  
Daniel: The menu.  
Me: Yes, the menu.  
Daniel: Then what?  
Me: You turn right. And then . . .  
Daniel: I'm scared.

Me: Don't be scared. There's nothing to worry about.

Daniel: But I'm afraid I won't find my way . . .

Me: You will.

Daniel: . . . to breakfast.

Me: It will all be taken care of. Sleep easy.

Daniel: It will all be taken care of.

Me: Sleep easy.

Daniel: Sleep easy.

Me: . . .

Daniel: . . .

Me: . . .

Daniel: Tell me again.

Me: When you leave the room . . .

Daniel: I go right?

Me: Yes.

Daniel: And then?

When I met Daniel, he was naked in the hall shouting for the police. "Police! Police! Help! Help me! Police! They're trying to get me. They won't let me leave. They won't get their hands off of me. Police! Police! Help! Help me!"

He was stuck in front of the timeclock, like a broken float in a parade of nurses and aides at shift change. Everyone tried but no one succeeded at getting him to move. He had his feet firmly planted on the ground and a death grip on his wheelchair wheels. He wasn't going anywhere if he didn't want to.

"Daniel, put your gown back on." "Daniel, get your hands off the wheels." "Daniel, you have no clothes on! It's indecent." "Daniel, pick up your feet." "Daniel, listen to me." "Daniel, we need to take you back to your room." "Daniel, we're only trying to help."

But that's not what he thought. He thought the "help" was the problem. Us aides and nurses were prison guards restraining him, trying to get him back to his cell. "I didn't do anything!" he yelled. "What crime did I commit? You have to release me. By law, you have to release me."

His nakedness was no emergency. It was late, so families weren't around, and everyone there had seen all there was to see. Shame and privacy are the first things surrendered upon entry into the nursing home. Nakedness is normal. There's always somebody stripping somewhere, and we're usually the ones removing the clothes.

Sweat gathered around his disheveled hair and his boxy, thin-rimmed glasses were barely hanging onto his nose, which was pointy like an arrow. He kept moving his bloodshot eyes from the floor to the door and back again, as if trying to plan exactly how and when to make

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a run for it.

We waited for him to get tired but it never happened. One would think that an eighty-year-old man would only have so much fight in him, but he just kept going, at 11 p.m. nonetheless. Eventually, we just had to use force. We had no choice. I pried his fingers off the left wheel while another aide got the right. Then, as we had his hands in the air, a nurse pulled the wheelchair. We finally got him moving.

Since he still had his feet anchored to the floor, the only way to move the chair was to go backwards. If you tried to push it forward, it wouldn't budge, or, worse, it would tip over. So, the nurse rolled the chair while we held his hands, her walking backwards, us walking sideways, all trying to keep the same pace and keep him restrained.

We took him to his room and put him in bed. We all knew he wouldn't stay, but, well, for me at least, that was someone else's problem. It was time to go home.

Daniel was unmanageable. If we left him in bed, in a few minutes he would be on the floor. If we left him in his chair, in a few minutes he would be on the floor. He continually got up and tried to run toward the door, but he would only make it a few steps before tumbling over, tearing his skin and bruising his arms. After a few falls, he had so many patches and bandages as to look like a wounded soldier in a war.

I tried to joke around about it, but he didn't understand. "So, were you in a fight?" I asked.

"What?" he said. "What are you talking about?" He didn't remember the falls. He didn't remember the bandages unless he was looking right at them.

He had to be "a one-on-one," which meant 'round-the-clock supervision. He was never to be left alone. This was the last resort of the nursing home due to the cost of the matter: they paid three aides eight hours each day to watch one guy. But they had admitted him. He was their problem and they had no choice.

Most aides didn't last. After only a few hours, they stood at the doorway of his room shouting for assistance and begging for a break. "We need help in here! He's almost on the floor!" So, eventually, it was my turn, and I was actually happy to give it a shot. I hadn't been an aide for that long, and running around taking care of twelve patients or more a night was getting to me. I saw it as a break from the floor, a chance to really get to know a resident. Plus, I thought maybe I could come up with something none of the other aides thought of to curb his behavior.

My first idea was a disaster. I figured, well, if he wanted to get up, let's just get him up and let him walk. I wrapped the pink, blue and

white-striped gait belt around his waist, stood him up, and we started walking. He was thrilled, for a moment, and I was, too. Maybe he just needs to walk around and burn off some energy, I thought. But it only lasted a minute. It wasn't long before he started to go down. It looked like he was just crumbling and I couldn't catch all of the pieces. I had a hold on him but that would only ensure that he didn't fall hard. It wouldn't keep him off the floor. Panicked, he grabbed the beige railing with the fake wooden stripe on the wall. At first that was a good thing because he didn't fall and it gave me a chance to grab the wheelchair. But then he wouldn't let go. Now, we were a spectacle.

Sisters, brothers, children, grandchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews all walked by, along with aides and nurses, of course. And they all stared. Stared at us, stuck again.

Like the first time, I was able to pry his fingers off and hold his hands up. Then another aide put the wheelchair under him and I rolled him back to his room.

Fail.

At least in his room, no matter what happened, I had control over who found out. It didn't become a circus every time I screwed up.

He lay on the bed and I sat in the chair. Every few minutes, he tried to stand and I pulled him by the shirt back down again. It was like a long game of whack-a-mole, up and down, up and down.

Daniel: How can I get above ground?

Me: Huh?

Daniel: Above ground. How can I get above ground?

Me: Um . . . we are above ground.

Daniel: But we're not. We're underground.

Me: We are not underground, Daniel.

Daniel: But how can I get above ground?

Me: Look out the window. See the corn field? See the sky? We're above ground.

Daniel: I don't mean that. I mean how do we get above ground?

Me: We're in a nursing home. We're in your room. You're in bed, above ground.

Daniel: But, mister, we are not above ground.

Me: Do you mean out? Do you want to go out?

Daniel: I need to get above ground.

Me: If you mean out, I can't take you out right now. I'd be fired.

Daniel: Why are we underground? What are we doing down here?

Me: Do you need to go to the bathroom? I can take you to the bathroom.

Daniel: I need to get above ground.

Me: How about we go to the bathroom. I'll take you to the bathroom.

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Maybe that will put you more at ease.

Daniel: I need to get above ground.

Me: Daniel, you are above ground.

Daniel was in front of the toilet but he could not see the toilet. His eyes drifted up and stopped at a random spot on a blank wall. He pointed to nothing. His knees buckled. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know which way to turn. He didn't know why he was there. He didn't know that he was in the bathroom.

"Daniel, turn away from me." My right hand was on the gait belt, the only thing keeping him from falling. I used my left hand to gently nudge him the way I wanted him to go. "Take your left hand and put it on the bar to your right." Useless directions. I wasn't sure he knew which hand was which and where the bar was. I should've known better. I grabbed his left arm firmly and pushed it toward the bar. "Dan, take this hand and put it on the bar." I ended up doing it myself but without success. He didn't grab the bar.

I was losing him. His legs were bending too much. I held onto the gait belt. I could guide his arm, but I couldn't straighten out his legs. He sat on my lap. That was okay. I was still supporting him and he wasn't on the floor.

I hadn't experienced this before. Even the craziest of the crazy usually knew what to do in front of the toilet. But he got lost three times each step of the way. Lost in a turn. Lost in a step. And he didn't even know where the target was or what we were trying to achieve. We were caught in the spaces in between.

I pushed my legs toward his wheelchair, dumping him back in. It wasn't graceful, but he was safe. I could change his brief while he was in bed, so the fact that he never made it onto the toilet wasn't that big of a deal. It was just bewildering.

He tried to get up again and again. I looked around the room, desperately searching for something to keep him occupied. Soap, lotions, briefs, wash rags, shirts, pants, socks, all the usual stuff. Until, under a blanket in the closet, I found a big beach ball. What a random find. But I was grateful for it because at least it was something to try.

I didn't want to just throw it at him. I envisioned it bouncing off his head, knocking the lamp over and making him mad. So, I slowly handed it to him, and he lifted it into the air. We both stared at the shiny object reflecting in the light, grateful that it broke the cycle of boredom, even if only for a few seconds.

He seemed content to hold it and none of its potential dawned on him. I figured I'd help guide him along. Since his focus was now solely on the ball, I felt more confident throwing it to him. I grabbed it and lightly tossed it up. Surprisingly, he caught it and was pleased with

himself. I caught a rare smile. “Throw it back!” I said. “Daniel, throw it back!” He wiggled and threw his head back. The ball didn’t move. “Come on, you can do it. Toss it to me.” He bent over, placed the ball on the floor and tapped it toward me. Good enough. Now we had a game.

I called it a success. It kept us busy for a few minutes. But he quickly got bored and began plotting his escape again.

Daniel: What’s outside that door?

Me: Don’t worry about it right now. We can’t go out there at the moment.

Daniel: Oh, really? And why not?

Me: Doctor’s orders. You have to stay in bed until you feel better.

Daniel: I feel fine. And where’s the doctor?

Me: It’s night time. He’s not here at the moment.

Daniel: Can’t we call him?

Me: I don’t have the number.

Daniel: Well, who does?

Me: The nurse and she’s not available.

Daniel: You can’t keep me locked up here against my will. It’s against the law.

Me: It’s my job, Daniel. I have no choice in the matter.

Daniel: Well, why am I here?

Me: You’re here because you need help.

Daniel: Help with what?

Me: Day-to-day things.

Daniel: Day-to-day things. What does that mean? What kind of things?

Me: Eating. Getting dressed. Going to the bathroom.

Daniel: I can do all those things on my own.

Me: I know. I know.

Daniel: I’ve done them my whole life. What makes anybody think I can’t do them now?

Me: Maybe you’re just not feeling well at the moment.

Daniel: I feel fine. There’s nothing wrong with me.

Me: Well, we can call the doctor in the morning. Maybe he can let you go home then.

Daniel: I’m not waiting until then.

Me: You have to.

Daniel: I’m getting up right now.

(He tries to stand. I stop him.)

Daniel: Why won’t you let me up?

Me: Because you’ll fall.

Daniel: I haven’t fallen yet.

Me: Look, you have bandages. You have cuts and bruises all over your

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body.

Daniel: What? How? Did somebody beat me up?

Me: Because you've fallen several times.

Daniel: Lies! I haven't fallen once!

Me: Okay, Daniel. Calm down. Don't worry about it.

Daniel: Let me out of here right now!

It was night time, so I couldn't even see the boring corn outside of the window. It was just dark. Sometimes, I'd get at least fifteen minutes of quiet in which he wouldn't try to get up. But, mostly, it was up and down, up and down again. I felt like I was becoming his actions. He moved. I countered. He moved. I countered. But I was keeping him contained. And I wasn't pulling my hair out yet.

They kept me there for days. I felt like saying, "Help! Let me out!" But I didn't. I wasn't freaking out and, mostly, I kept him in his room, so the higher-ups figured it must be working. Each day I came in, pulled him down by his shirt, and it "worked." My fingertips even became red and sore from holding onto his flannel shirts so much. They were raw. I already sanitized and moisturized several times an hour, what more could I do? I tried to switch hands, but the urgency and angles sometimes wouldn't allow it.

You get creative when you're bored, and so I kept discovering new tricks to keep him busy. I had noticed that he was preoccupied with the sheets. There was nothing exciting about them. They were plain old white sheets, the kind our home and every nursing home had in droves. But he sat and stared and picked at them, pushing and prodding with the focus of a carpenter. So, I gathered sheets and left them crumpled and disorderly in front of him. He moved them around, sliding his hands down and patting them. He shifted and turned them, picked up corners and held them before his eyes, matching shapes and lines, figuring out what to do. Finally, he folded them.

He loved to do this and I felt like an idiot for not realizing it before. It is commonly known that people suffering from dementia love to fold laundry. It is a simple, calming act, something that feels good on the hands and is satisfying to the eyes. It makes sense to them at a time in their lives when not much else does. They love rummaging as well. Give them a pile of stuff in a box and they'll search through it endlessly, each object being new and interesting and tomorrow it would be again.

When it came to folding, however, unlike the others, Daniel didn't just see white sheets. He saw something in them: numbers.

Daniel: Four, six, eight, ten. Twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen.



Twenty.  
Me: Huh?  
Daniel: Twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six. Twenty-eight and thirty.  
Me: Numbers?  
Daniel: Yeah, see them right here?  
(He points to the sheet.)  
Me: I don't see them.  
Daniel: One, two, three, four.  
Me: Where are they?  
Daniel: All over.  
Me: They're everywhere?  
Daniel: Yes. They're everywhere.  
Me: What do you see now?  
Daniel: Five, six, seven, eight.  
Me: Do they stay still?  
Daniel: Nope. They move. They keep moving, and I can't get them.  
Me: Do they vibrate?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: Do they shake?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: Do they slide?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: Do they add?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: Do they subtract?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: Do they divide?  
Daniel: Yes.  
Me: Do they ever disappear?  
Daniel: No. They're always here.

The next day, I asked around to see if anyone knew what Daniel did for work. Ah, of course. He was an engineer. His wife said he used to travel around the world advising companies about new aircraft-building techniques.

This led to another breakthrough: pen and paper. Again, so simple, but it's hard to think straight when you're like the Sisyphus of wrestling. I gave him the tools, and he sat and wrote out math problems: addition, subtraction, division, and equations. Four plus four equals eight. Eight plus eight equals sixteen. Sixteen plus sixteen equals thirty-two.

But this led to an unforeseen problem. It was fine when he was calm, but when he inevitably became agitated, he started shouting at me.

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Me: It's time to go to sleep.  
Daniel: But one plus one equals two.  
Me: Huh?  
Daniel: One plus one equals two, you moron!  
Me: Um. I know. But, what does that . . .  
Daniel: And two plus two equals four!  
Me: Yes! That's right. But . . .  
Daniel: Come on!  
Me: I know! But I can't . . .  
Daniel: And four plus four equals eight.  
Me: Yes! I understand. But why are you yelling math at me?  
Daniel: Because you need to understand it.  
Me: And I do.  
Daniel: And if you'd only understand it, then we wouldn't have to go through this shit.  
Me: Huh?  
Daniel: We wouldn't be in this mess.  
Me: Will you please try to go to sleep?  
Daniel: Not until you understand!  
Me: Oh jeez.  
Daniel: Eight plus eight equals sixteen! Sixteen plus sixteen equals thirty-two!  
Me: Yes, but what does that mean?  
Daniel: Everything!  
Me: . . .  
Daniel: Thirty-two plus thirty-two equals sixty-four.  
Me: Yes.  
Daniel: Come on!  
Me: And sixty-four plus sixty-four equals . . .  
Daniel: One-hundred-and-twenty-eight.  
Me: Okay. And so on and so forth.  
Daniel: Get it straight!  
Me: I am!  
Daniel: You moron.  
Me: I'm trying!  
Daniel: You'll never understand.  
Me: What do the math problems do? What do they lead to?  
Daniel: Goddammit.  
Me: Will you please go to sleep?

And off we went. Everything was fine, day in, day out, with me watching him until the day he fell again. And he fell hard.

I took him to the bathroom, like I had so many times before, but this time, he got up too quickly and face-planted on the floor. I ran to get the nurses, and by the time we came back a puddle of blood had gathered around his face. Whenever I found a resident like this, it startled me, but it never amounted to much of anything. Humans have a lot of blood and even if it looks like a lot, it usually isn't.

We each took an arm and got him up. He had a half-inch cut at the top of his nose and one hand covered in blood and the other covered in shit. No one wanted to touch him.

The nurse, heavysset and babyfaced with a 'fro of curly brown hair and dressed in navy scrubs with lilac trim, was the only nice one on night shift. She said, "What happened?" Daniel looked up at her, blood dripping off his chin and said, "He pushed me." And that was that. I was removed from Daniel duty.

I didn't get in trouble for it; the wife didn't want to investigate. She knew me. She trusted me. And she knew how he was. She knew I didn't push him onto the floor. But he looked worse than ever before. Along with the bandages and scrapes, he had bruises like goggle-imprints around his eyes. He looked battered and beaten and regardless of what I had or hadn't done, it was clear that we couldn't carry on the same way.

Still, I watched others watching him. He healed from the big fall, but as the weeks passed, he steadily declined until one day the best he could manage was rolling around in bed, rolling through number-covered sheets, like swimming through third-grade math for eternity.

He couldn't get up any more, and the one-on-one was discontinued. I was devastated. I didn't know why but there is nothing worse than when a fighter can't fight anymore. It is almost worse than losing a loved one. The energy was so strong that it couldn't be contained. It had to rush out and punch you in the face. And now it was just drained.

I stood at the side of his bed, rooting for him to get up, the exact thing it was my job to stop him from doing only a few weeks before.

Daniel: How do I get to breakfast?

Me: When you go out the door, you make a right.

Daniel: I make a right.

Me: Yes. And then when you get to the cubicle, you make a left.

Daniel: I make a left.

Me: Then you'll see 101, 102 and 103.

Daniel: 101, 102 and 103.

Me: And you'll keep going.

Daniel: I'll keep going.

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Me: Until you see the menu. And then you make a right.

Daniel: I make a right.

Me: And you'll be at the dining room for breakfast.

Daniel: Oh dear. I won't remember all that.

Me: It's okay. They'll come get you.

Daniel: They'll come get me.

Me: They'll take you there.

Daniel: They won't forget me?

Me: They won't forget you.

Daniel: I'm scared.

Me: Don't be scared.

Daniel: . . .

Me: . . .

Daniel: But how do I get above ground?

Me: Daniel, you are above ground.

I wasn't there when he died. I came back the next day, sat on his bed with the stupid beach ball and cried.

(Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.)

