

James Stephens
Durham University

The Tale of the Four Danials

Abstract

James Stephens is a second year physics student at Durham University. In this piece, he uses four stories to illustrate the effects of global inequality on different individuals. Though the details in each piece change, the first three stories are inspired by genuine people.

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JAMES STEPHENS

The Tale of the Four Danials



Danial

Keynsham, England

With my knee pressed on top, I finally managed to zip up my overpacked blue suitcase. Because today, I was flying out to Germany. I was all set up for a year-long exchange to Heidelberg. And it felt like my nerves were hooked up to a generator. I remembered how I got to this point: I had just started the second year at Durham, when I saw a poster advertising “global opportunities.” I was intrigued, but uncertain. I barely knew any German, nor had I been abroad on my own before. But gradually, the idea won me over: this could change the course of my life. And before I knew it, I was about to go.

My Mum called from the hall: “So what time are you getting the bus to the airport?” (for the fifth time). I dragged out my suitcase. “It’s at 11,” I said.

It was at that moment that my younger brother emerged from his messy room.

“You’re finally leaving!” he spoke. “Now I can have full control of the TV.”

“And you can’t annoy me anymore,” I replied.

“I can via text,” he said. “But seriously, I’m jealous. I want to go to Germany.”

“Maybe you can, once you grow up a bit,” I smiled.

“Not fair.” He crossed his arms.

I considered some last-minute checks, but figured I was fine.

“If it’s at 11, you should get going quite soon,” said Mum. “I’ll see you to the bus stop.”

“I’m 20. I can see myself to the bus stop,” I replied, my voice going up an octave.
“I insist.”

So, I relented. Overall, if this were the extent of my problems, I had it pretty good. I know I’m lucky to even have this chance. Ever since I realized it was possible, I have wanted to see more of the world, to explore far beyond my hometown. And now I can.



Danail

Sofia, Bulgaria

Results came out on the sixth. Even worse, resit results. I should have studied harder, but between my job at a bubble tea shop and a struggle to find the time, I hovered at the minimum. Still, I thought, this was the best way to avoid a dead-end job. And if I were lucky, I could even find ways to go abroad, something I wanted to do one day. Then a voice snapped me out of my daydreams.

“Aren’t you going to check?”

I realised my younger brother was looking over my shoulder. He seemed vaguely curious to see if I’d have to drop out or not. So, I opened the link and saw the results. I needed to pass at least four of the six retakes.

And I had passed them all.

“Ha!” I said to nobody in particular. “Victory is mine!”

The truth is, having to retake modules really woke me up. Even though I could do with the money, I negotiated a few less hours of work and forced myself to put them into studying. And now, thankfully, it had worked. I knew I was lucky to get into university at all.

“Don’t get too smug. You know you still need to do the other two years, right?”

“Please don’t ruin this moment for me.”



Davaa

Erdenet, Mongolia

Sunlight streamed onto the concrete school yard, and the arid grasses that pushed up at its edges. It was unusually warm today, so I ate lunch outside, with a friend.

“And what about Bayalag, what’s she doing afterwards?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think anyone does.”

“And Altan?”

“Definitely herding. He lives on the outskirts anyway.”

“So basically,” I said, “Nobody we know is going to a university after this.”

“As far as I’m aware.”

Almost nobody went to uni from my school. While some people did get the grades, it was expensive, and though the government gave out grants, most were known to go to the children of civil servants.

“So, what are you doing then? Any updates?”

“Well, I’m not going to farm sheep for my uncle unless I have to. So, I think I’ll join the police instead.”

I thought it was a good bet. It would keep me out of the mines, out of herding, and would be as specialized as I could go. Plus, I could probably travel to other parts of the country—after all, every province needed law enforcement. As a result, I went for it and applied last week.

But I had always imagined doing a bit better—working on something that could have a bigger impact and do more for the world.

“I can see you doing that. So long as you’re not too disorganized, you’ll be a great cop.”

“I really hope so.” I replied.

“Well, we finish school in a month. So even if it isn’t your first choice, make do, and embrace it.”

I muttered my agreement. But I would need more time to accept it.



Daniel

Metangula, Mozambique

As dusk turned to night, I looked out at lake Malawi, shining in the light of the full moon. I would be 18 tomorrow, officially an adult. But it was too hot to sleep, so I was sitting pensively on the doorstep.

Just then, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Is something wrong?”

It was my younger brother.

“No, I just can’t sleep.”

“That’s a surprise. I thought you’d be tired from all the work today.”

I and the rest of my family were farmers. We had been growing cashew nuts for generations. I thought ours were the best. And while I had gone to primary school, something that could not be taken for granted here, it was straight to work after that, helping with the family business.

“I am. But I’ve been thinking. Even though I’m 18, in a few hours, I’ll still be in Metangula.”

“Yeah. Where else would you be?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t you get it? I’ll probably always be here. I might never get the chance to move on.”

“And that’s an issue?”

“Yes. That’s not the life I want.” I raised my voice a bit. Probably too much, given how everyone else was asleep.

I expected another sly comment. But instead, he sat down next to me.

“Actually... I know what you mean. We own this land, so we’re tied to it. We stay, to run things.”

“Exactly. I’m stuck here.”

“Not necessarily. In fact, you could abandon us tomorrow, if you wanted to. It will simply make your life much harder.”

“Where would I even go?”

“One of the big cities, perhaps Maputo (the capital of Mozambique),” he offered.
“There is supposed to be work there.”

I was uncertain, but, in the humid darkness, I decided to hope.

“Right now, I don’t know how to leave, so I’ll stay. But one day, I’ll work out how and carve out my own life.”

