

# Half a Life

## Prison - A Revolving Door

Danny first came into conflict with the law when he was only 14.

One hot December night in 1973, around 1am, Danny and two other youths broke into a warehouse in Fyshwick, Canberra. With flashlights and carry bag, the three adolescents stumbled through the deserted warehouse in search of electrical equipment.

After removing the cardboard coverings from three new cassette recorders, they shoved the loot into the carry bag and escaped on foot to a nearby highway. From there they hitched a ride to Woden where they divided the stolen goods near the local bus station.

Their joy at outfoxing the law was short-lived, however, and the system responded by sending them to a NSW boys' home for 12 months on charges of breaking and entering.

At the time of the warehouse heist, Danny had just completed Year 9. During his primary years, he had attended remedial classes, as he was considered a slow learner. His mother says he never liked school and would try anything to get out of it.

"I was always getting notes from school to say Danny wasn't attending. He was too busy hanging around amusement centres. I never worried about it much until he got in trouble with the police."

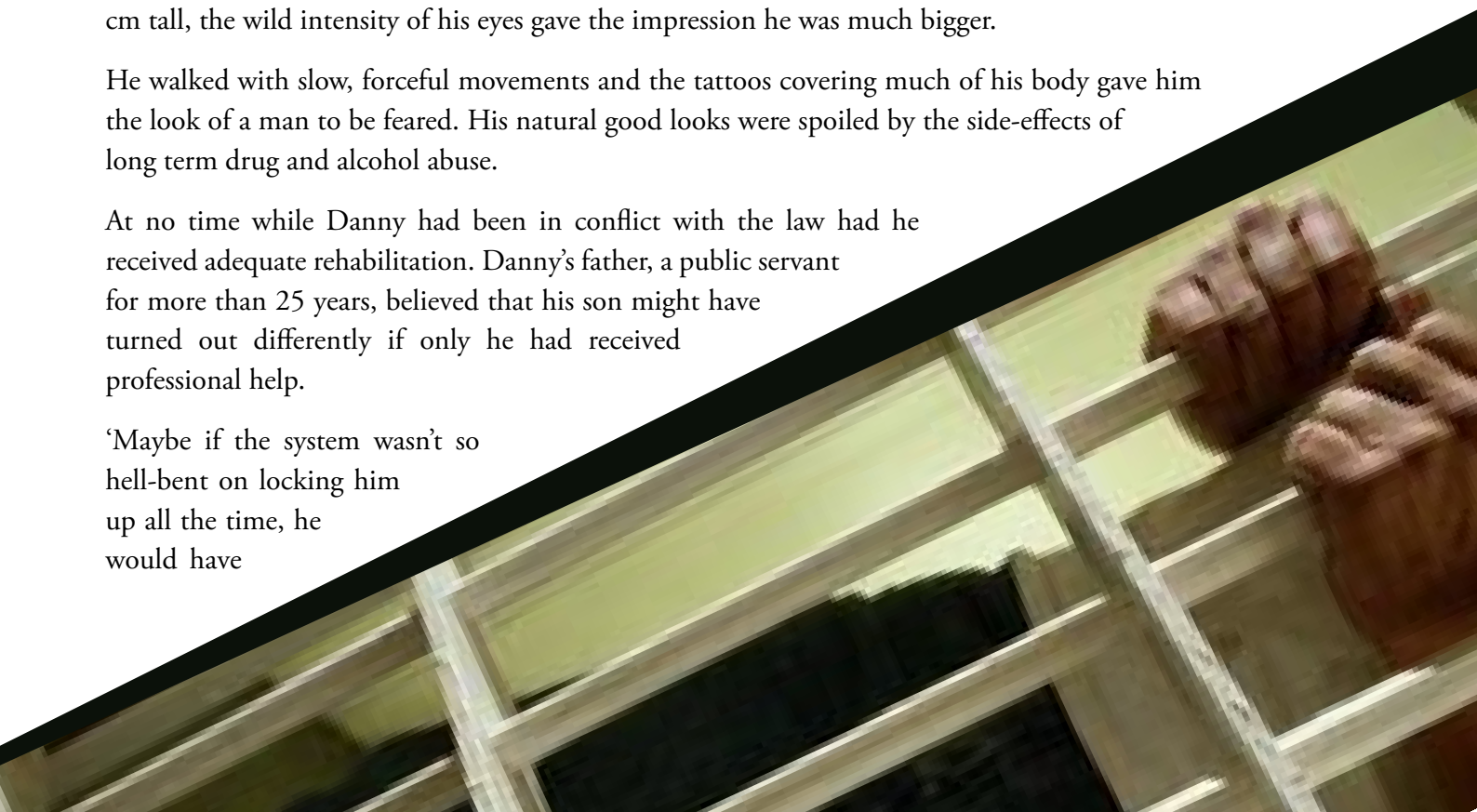
When Danny was 30 he had spent nearly half of the previous 16 years, at one time or another, behind bars. He appeared in court frequently on charges ranging from driving offences to assault; inflicting grievous bodily harm.

The effect of Danny's lifestyle showed in his appearance. Broad-shouldered and robust at 95kg and standing 175 cm tall, the wild intensity of his eyes gave the impression he was much bigger.

He walked with slow, forceful movements and the tattoos covering much of his body gave him the look of a man to be feared. His natural good looks were spoiled by the side-effects of long term drug and alcohol abuse.

At no time while Danny had been in conflict with the law had he received adequate rehabilitation. Danny's father, a public servant for more than 25 years, believed that his son might have turned out differently if only he had received professional help.

'Maybe if the system wasn't so hell-bent on locking him up all the time, he would have



turned out different. My wife and I tried to help him when we could. We even paid off his fines occasionally rather than let them send him to jail.'

Danny comes from a working-class background and is the eldest son in a family of eight. He was born in Canberra and lived with his parents in a government house until he left home at the age of 19.

His first job was with a travelling sideshow at the age of 17. He worked with the sideshow for nine months as an assistant on the dodgem-car rides. During a break from the sideshow, Danny was involved in a serious car accident where he sustained head injuries. Before he had time to recuperate, he was involved in another serious accident. His failure to slow down at a give-way sign cost him half an ear, his right elbow and the life of his girlfriend.

By the age of 13, Danny was a heavy drinker and used drugs frequently. Shortly after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was sent to Goulburn jail for three months for several driving offences. He remembered his stay in Goulburn jail with distaste.

'I couldn't believe it; for a few bloody driving offences the bastards stuck me in the maximum-security section where I was locked up by myself for about 18 hours a day.

'I thought I was gonna go mad in there; I hated it.'

Not long after his release, Danny and a few other friends savagely assaulted a man while on a drinking binge. Sometime during the five-month remand period, Danny found himself a girlfriend, Karen. He was sentenced to nine months imprisonment for the assault charge, during which time Karen visited him regularly.

Shortly after Danny's release, he and Karen moved interstate but returned to Canberra within four months because they could not find work.

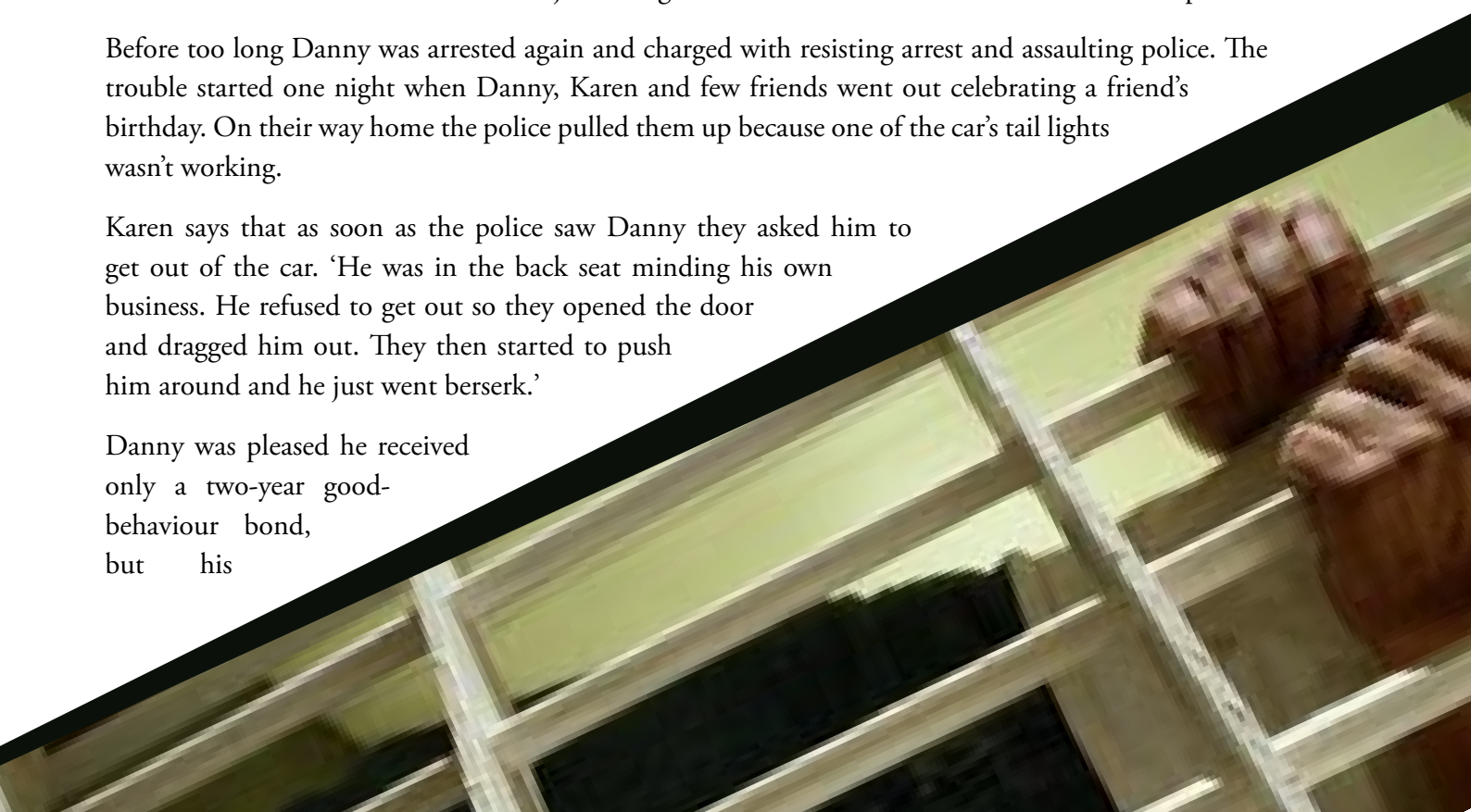
For the next few months Danny managed to stay out of trouble. With his father's help, he secured employment with a transport company as a truckies' off-sider. During this period Karen said Danny's drinking problems got progressively worse, which made his violent outbursts occur more frequently.

'He definitely needed help, and not just for the drinking,' Karen said. 'He couldn't handle stress at all, and at times he was so irrational. I think the head injuries he got from the accident had a lot to do with his problems.'

Before too long Danny was arrested again and charged with resisting arrest and assaulting police. The trouble started one night when Danny, Karen and few friends went out celebrating a friend's birthday. On their way home the police pulled them up because one of the car's tail lights wasn't working.

Karen says that as soon as the police saw Danny they asked him to get out of the car. 'He was in the back seat minding his own business. He refused to get out so they opened the door and dragged him out. They then started to push him around and he just went berserk.'

Danny was pleased he received only a two-year good-behaviour bond, but his



dislike for the police grew. 'Most of them speak to me like I'm a dog so I treat them the same way.'

Before 12 months had passed Danny was facing court again for serious driving offences. Karen says she terminated their relationship during this period because she could no longer cope with all his problems.

'Every time Danny went to prison his behaviour changed and he was worse when he got out. He hated all authoritative figures to such a degree it scared me. I think he's just a scared little boy in a man's body, searching for answers in a world he doesn't understand.'

Not long after his release, Danny, in a drunken state attacked four young men in a flat and held them hostage until the police came to the rescue. He was subsequently sentenced to serve four years in prison. He did his time in Cooma jail but served only 19 months before being released on parole.

His family found it hard to believe that, neither before or after his release, did he receive counseling for his drinking problems or his irrational and violent behaviour.

At some court hearings, the magistrate would request that a welfare report be prepared and submitted before sentence was passed, taking into account his employment status, state of mind and current living conditions.

The reports usually recommended that it would be detrimental, to both Danny and society, to impose a prison sentence. Some magistrates recommended that Danny seek psychiatric help and attend Alcoholics Anonymous, but as this was not compulsory Danny never took the magistrate's advice.

But not all judges believed in rehabilitation, and often Danny was heavily fined or imprisoned. Even when he was given a fine, Danny usually ended up in prison, unless his family found the money to pay the penalty for him.

Throughout his life, Danny has appeared before the court many times on a wide range of charges. He is one of Australia's long-term unemployed and for many years he lived alone in a government flat, spending most of his time with unemployed friends either drinking or drug-taking.

Danny has spent his life living from day to day without any fear of tomorrow. He does not have hopes or dreams for the future and when asked, many years ago, where he would end up, he said he didn't know nor did he care.

His hatred for the police, the courts and prisons made him bitter toward society as a whole. The only things he has ever held dear in life are his family and some of his criminal comrades.

When asked where he went wrong in life, he answered, 'I wanted to be the same as other people. I wanted a family, a house, a job, but I could never seem to get it all together. I don't know what went wrong. Maybe it's because no one really gives a damn.'

