

Greg Egan

The Way She Smiles, the Things She Says

'Hi Dad.'

His son Tom stood by the stove, heating milk in a saucepan, naked. 'I'm making Milo. Do you want some?'

'No thanks.'

What was wrong? Something had to be wrong. People aren't naked in kitchens, they're naked in bedrooms and bathrooms. Never kitchens. Something had to be wrong. Danny's hands hanging by his sides suddenly seemed awkward, unnatural. He folded his arms. That seemed wrong, too, so he put them out horizontally, stretched, then placed his hands behind his neck and rubbed it, yawning.

'How come you're home so early?'

'Oh, we got all the tracks done,' Danny said easily. 'One, two, three, like magic. They must have been doing a lot more rehearsing than I thought.'

'An album in three hours, that must be some kind of a record!'

'Oh, it's all fucking computers anyway. None of the so-called musicians even raised a sweat.' Danny lied so well! he felt genuine disdain.

A joke. A pun. Weak, I know.'

'What?'

'Forget it.'

Danny wanted to say: Why are you standing in the kitchen without any clothes on? He couldn't. Tom didn't seem to be embarrassed or self-conscious at all. Danny wondered: Is this what he does whenever I'm away? Wander around the house naked?

'You're up late. School tomorrow.'

'Nag, nag, nag.'

Tom didn't sleep naked; he bought and looked after his own clothes, but Danny

had seen him hundreds of times wearing pyjamas, had seen them in the washing basket, had seen them on the washing line. Maybe it was a phase he was going through. Maybe he'd just had a shower, and had put the milk on the stove so it would be ready by the time he put his pyjamas on, but then Danny had walked in so he'd stayed to talk to him. Danny smiled with relief. That was it, exactly. Why had he been so paranoid? After all, why should Tom have made sure he was dressed before going into the kitchen, when there was nobody else in the house, and nobody expected home for hours?

Danny sat down and pretended to read the paper, then glanced up at the sound of Tom pouring the milk. How old is he? Thirty-four minus twenty is fourteen. Danny curdled at two disparities: it's not fair that he's no longer fourteen himself, and when he was four' teen he sure didn't look like Tom, tall and muscular. Tom's already taller than Danny.

Tom crossed the kitchen with a mug of Milo in each hand. Danny opened his mouth, and took the first breath for saying 'I said I didn't want one,' but stopped in time, because Tom walked right past him, out of the kitchen, towards his bedroom.

Danny looked down at the paper. He's got a girl in there. Maybe he wants two mugs himself, maybe he's a Milo junkie. Don't be stupid and naive, he's got a girl in there, how could you not have guessed? He's just been fucking her, that's why he's naked, idiot. He's fourteen and he's got a girl in his room. Are you angry, jealous, proud? All three. You were nineteen when you finally fucked his mother, years after all your university friends had tertiary syphilis. Fourteen. Shit. You couldn't have at fourteen. Physically impossible, admit it.

Danny stared and stared at the paper. Should he go to bed, pretend he didn't know, never say anything about it? Should he walk casually into Tom's room and 'accidentally' discover her? Don't be a bastard, why try to embarrass him? He'll tell you if he wants to tell you. What did you expect, did you want him to say, as soon as you walked in, 'Hi, Dad, there's this friend of mine, this girl, here, in my room actually, and, in case you're wondering why I'm standing here naked in the kitchen, it's because I took all my clothes off before I fucked her and I haven't got around to putting any back on yet, largely because I'm very seriously entertaining the idea of fucking her again in the not too distant future.'

Danny made himself a cup of coffee and stared at the paper some more. He felt wretched, guilty, old. Old enough to have a virile son is too old to be virile yourself, it stands to reason. Well, to common sense. Danny thought: 'Shit,

what is this? All the pap-psychology I never believed in, castration fantasies and phobias and Oedipus complexes; he hasn't even got a mother around to kill me for. What a load of garbage. I don't feel threatened. Just that now he'll be more like a younger brother. I can bring women home myself now.' Who? Whores? Nobody else will go near you. Cheap ugly whores a million times older than Tom's girlfriends.

Dad, this is Zoe.'

'Hi.'

She had short brown hair, a beautiful smile, she didn't seem nervous at all. Only Danny was nervous, it wasn't fair. How old she? Was it illegal if they were both under age? Who went to gaol then? The parents?

They both wore jeans and tee-shirts, identical. She was as tall as Tom. Her right hand rested on his right hip. Tom smiled amiably 'Grin bashfully,' thought Danny. 'Look sheepish, look almost winking. I need you to.' Tom did nothing of the sort. They pulled out chairs and sat at the table, Zoe to Danny's right, Tom to her right, facing Danny.

'Hello, Zoe. How are you?'

'Fine, thanks.'

(Do you know anything about fertility control?)

('Don't be nervous, Dad, I had a vasectomy years ago. All my friends had it done too. We figured that we didn't want any paternity suits cramping our style.')

'Do you go to school with Tom?'

'No. We met at the Uni.'

Tom was a cybernetics prodigy, and spent many hours after school and on weekends at the University, because the facilities at the high school were 'hopelessly primitive, months out of date.' Danny knew as much about computers as was absolutely essential for his job: you hit one key and they played a Bach fugue, you hit another key and they played 'Holiday in Cambodia', then you drew a squiggle on a screen with your fingertip and the machine combined the three somehow into 'the song', which emerged as a four-minute version for the seven-inch single, a ten-minute version for the

twelve-inch single, a six-minute version for the four-track EP, a five-minute version for the album, and a little magnetic card you gave to the people who made the video, which evidently allowed them to fnt the song to the length of whatever they shot.

Danny said, 'And I was getting worried that Tom was only interested in machines!' That made them both grin, then Danny grinned too, and felt happy that he'd said it. You can relax now, joke with them, be friendly. Everything's okay.

'Zoe's really interested in your work.'

'Yes.'

'My work? I hardly do anything. They don't need producers, they just tell the computers what they want. Sometimes they sing a few words into a microphone, and it comes out in a different language at twice the speed with the harmonic properties of a foghorn, or rustling leaves, or lightning bolts. And I say "hey, maybe we should also do it with a sound like waves crashing, and have that backwards in the background". Then they stare at me like I'm an idiot, go off and have a conference, then come back and tell me I'm a fucking genius, that it's the perfect "solution". To what, I don't know. I don't know what their problems are. I don't understand why anybody hires me.'

'You must be a fucking genius, Dad.'

'Don't you start. I make tiny changes to shit.'

'Don't you enjoy experimenting? Trying to come up with completely new sounds?'

'They're all new sounds. Too many new sounds. Nobody can decide what they sound like, they're all so fucking unique. I remember when I used to like songs because they sounded like other songs I liked. Not the same melody or the same words or the same chords (well, sometimes the same chords), but the same mood. These songs don't have any mood, they don't remind you of anything at all, they don't cause associations. They're impossible to remember. I used to really hate those fucking pop tunes they'd churn out, with the same fucking king beat as all the others, guaranteed to invade your head like a fucking parasite after you'd heard it once, and guaranteed to have you smashing radios and frothing at the mouth after you'd heard it six hundred times, but good songs were different. You could remember a good song by the way it made you feel, the things it reminded you of. Strange moods, sure, the

stranger the better. But Me shit nowadays doesn't have any mood at all. You hear it, that's it.'

'But what if it sounds like waves crashing, or lightning, like you said a minute ago?'

'Yeah, sure, you can recognise that. But listening to waves crashing doesn't do much for me. Lots of bands used to use synthesizers to make sounds like waves, like all kinds of things, and it was great, it was part of the music they wrote and played. Themselves. Now when the computers do it all it either sounds too much like real waves or just like nothing at all.'

'It's just sour grapes. Dad used to be in a band himself, did I tell you? Oxymoronic Harmonies, they were called. He had a green and purple mohawk three feet high, and ten safety pins in his ear. I've got a photo of him somewhere that their drummer gave me, Dad's always trying to steal it and burn it.'

Zoe reached over and ran her finger up from Danny's earlobe, which made the back of his neck tingle.

'Did you really have ten safety pins?'

'Yes. Very handy when I was changing Tom's nappies.' They all laughed.

'You'd better believe it. Dad was a genuine punk. Beaten up by skinheads every Saturday night outside the Trade Union Club. My mother included.'

'She was not a skinhead!'

'Rick said she was!'

'Her boyfriend was. She wasn't anything. She was unclassifiable, unique.'

'I bet she beat you up, though.'

'No, her boyfriend did. Left me lying on the ground with five broken ribs. She came back later and took me to hospital. She said she hated violence, she was studying anthropology. I've told you all this before.'

'It's different every time.'

'Bullshit, you just don't listen.'

She had studied him anthropologically for three years, and then moved on to study someone else, leaving Tom, who was evidently not thesis material. You'd enjoyed being a deserted father, hadn't you Danny? Radical feminists admired you for it, admired you for not having been cunning enough to dump her with the kid rather than vice versa. The band fell apart but you got work as a mixer, Nightshift Childcare put Tom in their playpen for half your salary, and somehow there was time to fuck the non-separatist radical feminists. Time passed. You didn't ever have to think about what you'd do with your life, it did it all by itself, it just happened and happened and happened. Look where you are tonight. Surprised? Disoriented? Why? Your little boy has grown up. It was either that or prepubescent death, and how likely is the latter? Did you expect some kind of literal cycle, did you think that you would be the one who was fourteen and fucking beautiful Zoe when sufficient time had passed? Oh no. You're one turn up the spiral staircase away from that, Danny.

'What does your father do, Zoe?'

'I don't have a father.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'No.'

No? What does that mean?

'I guess most families are single-parent nowadays,' said Danny, fairly sure that it wasn't true. 'Like me and Tom.'

Zoe smiled. 'I don't have any parents at all. I'm a robot.'

Tom looked down at the table, then burst out laughing. Zoe started, then Danny joined in. It didn't seem all that funny, but Tom

led them off again whenever they flagged. He stood up, then I knelt on the floor, hands on stomach, tears streaming from closed

eyes. Danny put him in a loose headlock, tried to wrestle him over, lint then Tom opened his eyes and Danny shuddered, seeing his face melting from misery and pain. Tom was sobbing, shivering, choking on his tears, trying to say something.

'Hey,' was all Danny could say. 'Hey.' He would have held him Against his shoulder, but not in front of Zoe, now silent. Danny didn't look at her, couldn't

look at her, felt the position of her face lust out of his vision and blushed at the necessity not to look at her. Tom was suddenly six years old, waking from a nightmare about lead people who ate his arms, leaving him with hands on his shoulders like stunted wings. Danny had caught the dream from the description, and had a much nastier version.

Tom ran out of the room.

Danny stayed on the floor, not looking at Zoe, listening to Tom throwing up. Zoe touched his shoulder, and his spine tingled. He stood up.

'It's true,' she said. 'I think Tom was pretty worried about how you'd take it. I told him a hundred times that you wouldn't mind, but he's got himself all worked up into a nervous state. I'm glad you came home early, otherwise he might not have told you for months.'

Danny turned to face her. 'It's not funny. How old are you, anyway? Does your father know you're screwing my son? Where does he think you are now? Are you on the pill? How many other boys are you screwing? How do I know you haven't got VD? How old are you, anyway? Do you know it's a crime to seduce a minor? You slut, why couldn't you leave him alone, he's just a kid, can't you tell? Just because he's six feet tall. He's emotionally immature. He never had a mother. Oh, you slut. How old are you?'

'I'm six months old.' Zoe took her head off and placed it on the kitchen table. Danny curled up and started whimpering. Tom walked in and yelled, 'Put it back on!'

Danny closed his eyes, and remembered curling up on the kitchen floor when he was four or five. His mother had screamed at him for some reason. Everybody else in the family had gone into the lounge room to watch television; they'd closed the door and they'd turned off the kitchen light. The floor was cold. Danny had known that nobody was watching him, that he could uncurl, stand up, and go and lie in his warm bed, or even swallow his pride and join the others in the lounge room, where there was a fire. But lit had stayed curled up on the cold floor in the dark, planning to sled' there, to stay there on the floor with his eyes shut forever. He planned to die there, and even after death to refuse to uncurl, to refuse to move. His parents would have to explain the dead body in the kitchen to anybody who visited, and his mother would have trouble mopping the floor properly.

His cat had walked up to him and licked his eyes, making him giggle, spoiling his stasis. He'd fed the cat, gone to bed, and woken the next morning, very

early, very happy with life. He remembered waking up to birdsong.

'Dad. Get up. Please.'

Danny opened his eyes and stood up. Zoe had her head back on. 'I didn't know they could make them so life-like.'

Tom beamed with pride. 'I worked out the face myself. First on a CAD system, then I did a couple of experimental heads. Isn't it great?'

'You built her yourself?'

'From a kit, except for the face.'

'A kit? Robots from kits? How much did it cost?'

'Ninety thousand dollars. I don't own her, Dad. We built her at the Uni, me and a whole lot of other guys. This company in Japan sells the kits, but only to Universities and research places, they're not really commercially available yet. Because the Cybernetics Club has a University post-office box, we conned them into thinking we were part of the Computing Science Department:

'And do all the other guys fuck her?'

'Dad!'

'Well, do they?'

'No. She's in love with me.'

'Oh, crap. She! It's a machine'

'She's in love with me.'

Zoe said, 'It's true. I love Tom and he loves me.'

'It's just programmed to say that. I might not know much about computers, but I know you can program them to say anything. Don't kid yourself. You know how they work a million times better than I do. Either you programmed her to say it, or the Japanese did, but either way it's just a machine.'

'I love Tom!'

'Switch it off, will you, it keeps interrupting.'



'Don't talk about her like that.'

'I'm taking you to a psychiatrist first thing in the morning.'

'Don't say things like that. Why can't you just be cool about it. Everybody else just accepts it.'

'Everybody else?'

'The other guys who built her don't even mind.'

'You're all a bunch of lunatics.'

'She loves me because I gave her her face. Because I made it special. I loved it before she was even born.'

'Born?'

'Powered up.'

'Exactly. Powered up. Like the recording equipment at work. What do you want to go fucking a machine for? There's nothing wrong with you. You could get real girls.'

'I've had real girls.'

'Bullshit. When?'

'Since I was twelve years old, Daddy.'

'Bullshit. Who? When?'

'I haven't got a list on me right now.'

Danny slapped his face. 'Bullshit. You liar.'

Tom stared at the floor. 'I don't care what you believe. I don't care what you think. You're nothing, you don't matter. You're just stupid. Your fucking mixing console is ten times smarter than you care. You're just old and stupid.'

Danny slapped his face again.

'I know where you've been tonight. I bet you think they're all human, don't you? Well they're not. I bet you've fucked a robot every single time, and you couldn't even tell the difference.'

Danny slapped him. Tom punched him in the cheek and knocked him over.

'I'm sorry. Dad, I'm sorry.'

'Switch it off.' Danny tasted blood, but at least his teeth were still anchored. He wanted to go to bed and wake up, definitely childless, possibly one or two years younger. Not too young, though. 'How can I switch her off? I love her.'

'Why do you love her?'

'The way she smiles. The things she says. That's why people love other people. What difference does it make if she's a robot? She smiles. She says things just like any person would say.'

'And drinks Milo?'

Zoe said, 'Eating and drinking are necessary for a complete capacity for social interaction.'

'No person would say that. Switch it off.'

'Dad, you haven't had time to get to know her. She shouldn't have told you so soon, but she's very honest. If you'd known her for while before you found out, you'd think differently.'

'I bet it's illegal. You can't have robots walking around like ink like people. They might do anything, they might run amok.'

'People run amok all the time.'

'Switch it off.'

'Don't spoil everything! Why do you have to spoil it?'

Danny walked into the dark lounge room and sat down. You realise you can win if you want to, you can force him to get rid of her: you're still his father, he's not prepared to defy you absolutely, he won't leave home, he has no money, he isn't ready. All you need is stubborn insistence, stamina. He'll complain, or stay silent, or stomp about the house or something, but he really wants you to get rid of her. Her? It. It. Concentrate, please! That look on his face when he stopped laughing: he wasn't just worried about your reaction, he was torn up inside, he wants to get out of the mess he's in, but he can't do it himself, he needs you to say no for him.

Danny thought about Tom's mother, recalled her face as best he could. She'd very rarely smiled, and when she had it was a pretty sickening sight. Everything she'd said to him had been a sarcastic put-down of one kind or another, or so it seemed. Selfish bitch. He wanted her to be sitting beside him in the dark room, more than anything else in the world. Simply sitting there in the dark, not touching him, not speaking a word, invisible. He wanted that very badly. He felt sure that her silent, intangible, invisible presence would have made everything immediately all right, calm and solid.

Tom stood in the doorway.

'Dad. I've switched her off.'

'For good?'

'No.'

'Come in here. I want to talk to you.'

'I promise not to bring her here again. It's your house.' 'Okay. Come in here and sit down for a second.'

'I've got to get some sleep. I've got to get up for school.'

'You can miss school for one day. Just come in for a second. Please.'

'Goodnight.'

Danny fell asleep, and dreamt that someone sat beside him, but he couldn't figure out if it was Tom or Tom's mother. When the sun rose and he and woke to the sound of birdsong, he remembered waking that way as a child.