

‘There is a group of children who sit outside the garages opposite our shop and one night they came over to listen to our music. Otherwise, there’s not much for them to do and they just sit there. I want children to grow up with an imagination, I want them to feel included, that they matter’

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The British Male at Sixteen

ANDREW O'HAGAN

Darryl Fuller lives in a precarious personal world. He likes Garage music and Kiss FM; he's totally against drugs and plays football and the drums. Since the age of eight, though, he's been excluded from a string of schools. Stuck on the outside of society, he's looking for a way back in

The people on Barking Road are going somewhere. A black woman with a bundle of clothes is padding down to the Laundromat. A guy with drink on his breath is trying to sell a watch. The people in the taxi office are talking into mobile phones. They are making plans for later. The street buses on their way to Stratford and Plaistow come rolling past with people on the top decks deep into novels or the evening paper.

Darryl Fuller is taking up a little corner at Community Links in the old town hall. He sits smiling, at the end of a group of chairs. This is his classroom. He was born on 2 November 1983 in Forest Gate Hospital. When he tries to remember all the houses he has lived in he comes up with a flurry of names: Shaftesbury Road, Upton Park, the Isle of Dogs, Poplar and Beckton, where he lives now with his dad, who is 36, his mother, who is 34, a sister called Sinead, and brothers Daniel and Ricky. They all live in a four-bedroom house with a dog called Chloe. He says when he thinks about it he isn't sure if his mum's 34. 'I don't like to ask.' He doesn't know if the house they live in is rented or bought.

Chloe is an English bull-terrier with a Staffordshire cross. Darryl loves the living daylights out of the dog. We don't know what the dog's first memory is but Darryl's first memory is of being five years old. He was walking down the street and he looked over at some girls and then crashed into a lamp post. The first school he went to was St Stephen's in Green Street. He was excluded after a year. Darryl looks into space when he is trying to remember things. 'Some kid wanted to fight me and I just stuck him,' he says. Then

he went to another school in Shaftesbury Road. He was there three weeks, he says, when an Asian kid pulled a knife on him. The kid with the knife was aged ten. Darryl kicked the knife out of his hand and then punched him out. Around then Darryl's mum had another kid and they all moved to a bigger house on the Isle of Dogs. He talks about gangs bullying his sister and he couldn't stand it so he 'flipped'.

'What happens when you flip?'

'One minute I was all calm,' he says, 'and then I turned and I'm out of control. I just don't know what'll happen then. It's always fists – if you can't fight with your fists you can't fight at all. I get mad if someone insults my mum or attacks my sister. I search for people who do that.'

Darryl was 10 when they moved to Beckton. He got expelled from North Beckton School and was later allowed back in. Then he went to Brampton Manor and in the first year he was excluded for fighting. They allowed him back in but he started fighting again and was out by the second year. 'By that time,' he says, 'I was having fights just every other month. At the same time in my life I started bunking. I bunked nearly the whole of my third year and when I was 15 they asked me to leave.'

'Did you have friends?'

'Yeah. Virtually the whole school.'

'Was there anything you liked about school?'

'Yeah. Football. Pottery. Do you want to see my lessons?'

Darryl's doing a thing just now about the different spellings and meanings of words that sound the same. It's all written down in sheets in his folder.

'When you have toothache you have. . . pain.'

'A sheet of glass in a window is a . . . pane.'

'White, or having a colourless face. . . pale.'

'A bucket. . . pail.'

On the arithmetic pages he has shown himself able to add 13 and 34 to make 47. This year he can multiply five by five to make 25. And he can make sense of the proposition that, when seven people eat three bars of chocolate each, then altogether they ate 21 bars.

Darryl likes the idea of everything about him being known and written down. He is the British male at 16. Or is he just one of them? His star sign is Scorpio. He is right-handed. People he tries to avoid are Liz, Bob, Gary and Danny. He likes to watch *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, championship wrestling, *South Park*, a music channel called The Box (they have cable in his house) and tons of movies. He is brilliant at Nintendo. There's a PlayStation game he likes called 'Knockabout Kings'. It's a boxing game. 'It's quite hard. I'm the WBA champion undefeated,' he says. Not only that, but he's brilliant as well at 'Tekun' – a fighting game.

'I expect you are.'

'Yeah. I'm brilliant. I like violent games. I clock it all the way up. I play with my brothers. I've beat everyone there is down my street. One time one of the teachers at one of the schools – 'one time' is a favourite expression of Darryl's – asked him to come in and play drums at assembly. 'It was brilliant,' he says. He would love to own a drum kit of his own and he and some of his friends have been trying to fix up a band. His friend Danny's in the band. He doesn't say anything about Danny being one of his people to avoid.

He likes Garage music. Kiss FM is wicked. He records cool songs off the radio and off the music show on cable. 'Some people say I'm all right on the drums,' he says. West Ham United is his football team. A guy called Denver takes him and some of his mates for football practice down at the ground every Wednesday. Three hours every time. 'It's brilliant,' says Darryl, 'I'm

a striker. We've had a good start to the season but now we're playing crap.'

'You mean West Ham?'

'Yeah.'

Darryl says the Prime Minister is called John Blair, or something. When he thinks of what he'd like to do if he was in charge of the country, he says right away that he'd stop racism. ('You could be racist now and down the road end up with a half-caste bird.') He hates drugs as well, he says. 'I have a chance to play for Leyton Orient. I'm trying to calm down and if you do that [drugs], you know what'll happen. It'd be impossible to get rid of drugs but I'd like to. I've got a mate who takes drugs and he just looks so ill.'

'Are you really not interested in drugs?'

'No way,' he says, 'they're for mugs.' He smiles.

'Really? None at all?'

He smiles again. 'You're probably just saying that 'cos you take them,' he says. He paused for ages before saying the third thing he'd do if he ruled the country. 'I know,' he says, 'I would sort charity out. If people need help they should get it – you know – support and that.'

Listening to Darryl, you find yourself able both to admire him and to worry. He lives in a precarious personal world. He is only beginning to know what he can trust; he is only beginning to want to be trustworthy himself. No one would find Darryl an impossible proposition now: he is growing up likeable, with more personality than charm, and more charm than free-floating anger.

But he needs protection in his youth. He needs only to be talked away from his difficult traits: given lessons, a football coach, a number of small tasks, a weekend job at Booker's cash-and-carry. Darryl Fuller wants nothing more than the smart benefits of an able community. He needs to be part of something that is slightly bigger than he is himself. At Community Links, on Barking

Road, something of the sort has gripped him. The only worry is, can he stick it? Can he give himself up to the better thing?

On a typical day Darryl is woken up by his mum at nine a.m.

‘Yeah, I’m brilliant. I love violent

He gets washed and might eat something and if his mum’s busy he’ll iron his own shirt. Then he gets on a bike and cycles to Community Links, where he learns the difference between ‘pain’ and ‘pane’, and where there’s an environment that allows him to feel he’s going somewhere. As well as learning things he also does odd jobs around the building – ‘helping old people downstairs with their tea and that’ – and he sees the time just rolling away with all he’s got to do now. ‘People up here got respect for me,’ he says. ‘They know who I am. They leave me to get on with my work. I get on with everybody now.’

Darryl says he can’t think of anyone to blame about his school-days. He says if he’s honest it was him. ‘I’m young,’ he says, ‘I don’t know how my life will go. I just want nothing bad to happen. I just want to be myself.’ He sometimes gets frustrated because he wants things to go faster. He wants to be better

quicker. He has learned a lot more than he ever did at school, though. There are only six or seven people in his class at Community Links.

games. I clock it all the way up.'

He's been on planes. He went skiing in the Alps. He went to Lourdes with some folk who couldn't walk. Darryl doesn't go to church but his mum goes and she's a Catholic. 'I don't believe in God,' he says. 'They say he made us and I say, who made Him? They say, Adam and Eve, and they say, the apes made them, and I say, who made the apes?' But if he had to die for anything, then he thinks it should be his family. If he had to name two things he hates, he'd say it was school and muggers. His heroes are his mum and his dad and his nan. He'd like to have a silver Porsche Boxer Turbo. He has no fear of cars, even though he was in a crash once, with his dad. Fifteen stitches in his head. It was somebody else's fault: they jumped the lights. But, anyway, he wants to forget all that and wouldn't mind it if one day he lived in a mansion. He's not going steady with a girl but he has a few girlfriends he sees all the time. He says that girls admire him for the muscles on his

stomach although he doesn't even work out.

Outside the strip-lighted classroom other people are coming into the building for classes and meetings and coffee and tea. You can hear music starting up for a dance class downstairs. All over the place the sense rises up of an effort being made; a sense of things being overcome and time being invested. As well as all that there's the sound of people having a laugh. The sound of laughter travelling over troubles and up the stairs and along the corridor to where I'm sitting with Darryl Fuller.

For money Darryl relies on his mum. She gives him a few quid here and there. So does his dad. But one of these days he's going to get a part-time job at Booker's in Beckton; he would like it if he could have more money for drums or clothes or that Porsche Boxer Turbo. He is wearing a light green Ben Sherman shirt. He is very pleased with his hooded top from Paul Smith. His trousers cost 60 quid. His favourite shoes are Kickers and the ones he is wearing are brown and comfy. He wears white socks and he thinks that socks are important. There's a barber's called Geezers where he gets his hair cut; his brown hair is cut into a kind of wedge but he says it's not a wedge, it's called curtains. He says he's been shaving since he was 14 but his skin looks brand new.

Darryl sticks his tongue out when he makes a joke. When you ask him what he thinks of the police he begins to look a bit shifty. 'They do their job don't they? But I hate the way they pull up my mates just 'cause they've got bald heads.' He used to have a bald head himself but then he got into the pop singer Peter Andre who has hair hanging over his face: curtains. He likes the way there are all different kinds of people at Community Links. They're not all the same: they have their own traits and looks and things going on, just like he has. Darryl says that some of the people who come to Barking Road have worse problems than him, but he wants to respect them. He's learned to get on.

'I feel quite sorted out in my head,' he says. 'If I wanted to be a gangster I'd know what to do. But I don't want that. Not now. I don't get off on knowing villains or anything.' He slumps in the chair, smiles in a lop-sided way, and looks around the room where he says good things have happened for him. 'I'd like to have a family some day,' he says.

Darryl's eyes are hazel. He is five foot five. He is 16 years old and proud of it, thank you. His favourite colour is claret. He walks down the stairs of Community Links smiling at everyone and making jokes. The people he meets seem glad he's on his way. The last I see of him he picks up his bike and wheels it towards the doors. It is dark outside. He smiles a big smile as he hops on his bike and heads into Barking Road. Like the rest of the world out there, he is at his best with somewhere to go.

On the way out I look at a piece of paper. It carries the words of Betty Young, an 86-year-old woman who helped set up Community Links at an East Ham shop in 1978. 'The shop was damp and it smelt of coal tar from when the chemist used to be there,' she said. 'There was always boys there, at first three and then more, boys who should have been at school. I know some of them were in trouble but they were always good to me. Gradually we got things going. I remember thinking, I've seen a lot of bad things but this is a good.'

The 86-year-old's words – on a cold night last October – seemed almost to propel the British Male at 16 on his way up Barking Road.

Andrew O'Hagan is the film critic of the *Daily Telegraph*. His first novel, *Our Fathers* (Faber & Faber, £16.99), was shortlisted for the 1999 Booker Prize