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“To allay my anxiety, I called my mum, only to be told that I was ‘too old’ and ‘too respectable’ for this spontaneous act of self-mutilation. Suddenly, it felt a bit rebellious”

{COLUMNIST} DANIEL BARNES

Daniel Barnes has a day job as a philosopher and art critic, but his social life is a one-man mission to explore the depths and excesses of 21st-century gay life. This column offers a glimpse into his misadventures, such as **The Time I Got My Ear Pierced...**



My Straight Best Friend and I have known each other since school. We think we're right lads, but really we're just silly boys who too often get into trouble on school nights. His wife despairs of us, and every boyfriend I've ever had has despaired, too. He recently moved to Margate, breaking my heart and leaving me alone in London. So I've had to learn to get into trouble by myself.

After he left, I spent a lot of time drinking alone in Central Station, a dirty bar where all the hot, slightly-dangerous-looking chav lads go. I like those rough types, but they never like me – and it's only a matter of time until one of them punches me as I stare a little too intently. Sitting there, just watching the lads go by, I would while away the hours thinking about how I could change my life. A haircut, perhaps – but my hairdresser was on holiday, so that was not an option. You see, once you've gone to the effort of sleeping with your hairdresser for two years so that he'll give you amazing haircuts for free, it doesn't make sense to go anywhere else.

An ear piercing instead, then. I had wanted one for a while, but never got round to it. Then one afternoon, after a particularly-shambolic day working on my book, I found myself standing in Claire's Accessories in Marble Arch. Years ago, when I first entertained the idea of skewering one of my ears, a guy I fancied told me it was the best place for piercings, but once there I felt a bit nervous. To allay my anxiety, I called my mum, only to be told that I was 'too old' and 'too respectable' for this spontaneous act of self-mutilation. Suddenly, it felt a bit rebellious.

Unaccustomed to rooms full of glitter and girls, I pretended to look at things I

didn't understand and was considering which of Claire's assistants to approach when a perfect TOWIE replica Essex girl made the decision for me, barking: "Can I help you, bruv?" "Um, yeah", I said. "I want my ear pierced, but with something nice." She gave me a knowing look and said: "You want pimpin' gems, innit. We get a lot of lads like you."

I wondered if "lads like me" really meant "gay boys in the throes of a midlife crisis" – it seemed likely. When she asked which side, I quipped, "Not on the gay side!", but the irony was lost on her as she deadpanned: "I normally do lads on the left."

I was handed a Perspex case full of earrings mounted in rows, glistening beneath the halogen lights. My inner magpie squawked at the sight of so many shiny things and I suddenly realised how easy it has been to make a living writing about Damien Hirst. My originally-modest budget dissolved the moment I realised I could not leave without the biggest diamond available. Of course, this being Claire's Accessories and me being an

impoverished writer, I had to settle for cubic zirconia, but if it's good enough for Damien, it's good enough for me. I left soon after, heavy with the weight of bling that hung from my ear, and feeling like a changed man.

Heading home, I popped into Central Station. A guy in a '90s England shirt and grubby grey joggers challenged me to a game of pool. Despite my protestations about not being able to play, he forced a cue into my hand anyway, commanding, "You're playing with me". He strutted around the pool table with his hand down his pants, laughing at me and calling on the barman to marvel at my ineptitude. When his inevitable victory came, he gleefully yelled: "Now let's go back to mine and hope you're not that bad in bed."

After a sleepless night, I did a triumphant walk of shame down the Caledonian Road, convinced that my pimpin' gem had finally got me what I wanted. As I sat waiting for the first Tube home, I texted my Straight Best Friend to say, "I don't need you any more. Diamonds are a boy's best friend." ■

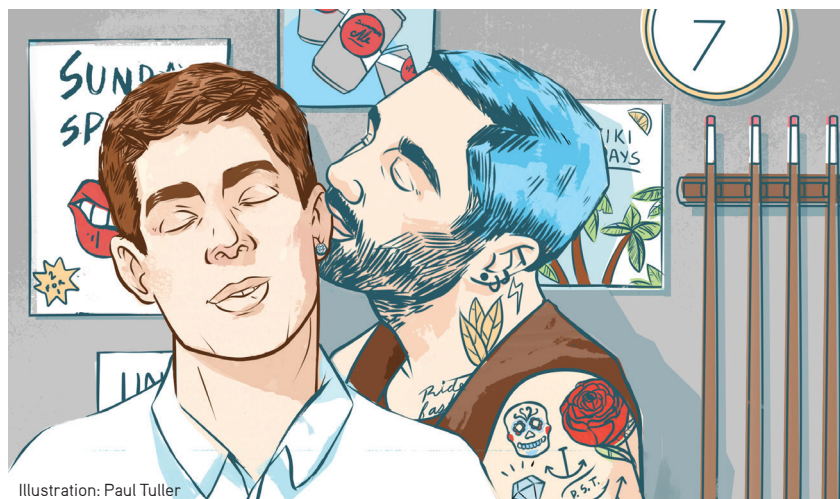


Illustration: Paul Tuller