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Brethren: A Novel

(vol. 1 of 2)

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Brethren is a work of fiction, with invented characters and setting, and an entirely speculative theology. However, it draws on my memories of church life in the 1980s, and several friends from Liverpool (and Glasgow) helped me to remember important details: (in alphabetical order) Jeanette Allen, John Barker, Fiona Barrick, Richard Bell, Andy Cowen, Chris Ford, Kate Jenkins, Liz Kelman, Gaynor Morrell, and Neil Morrell. Jonathan Adams kept an old box full of letters and papers for twenty-five years, and sent it back to me just when it was needed.

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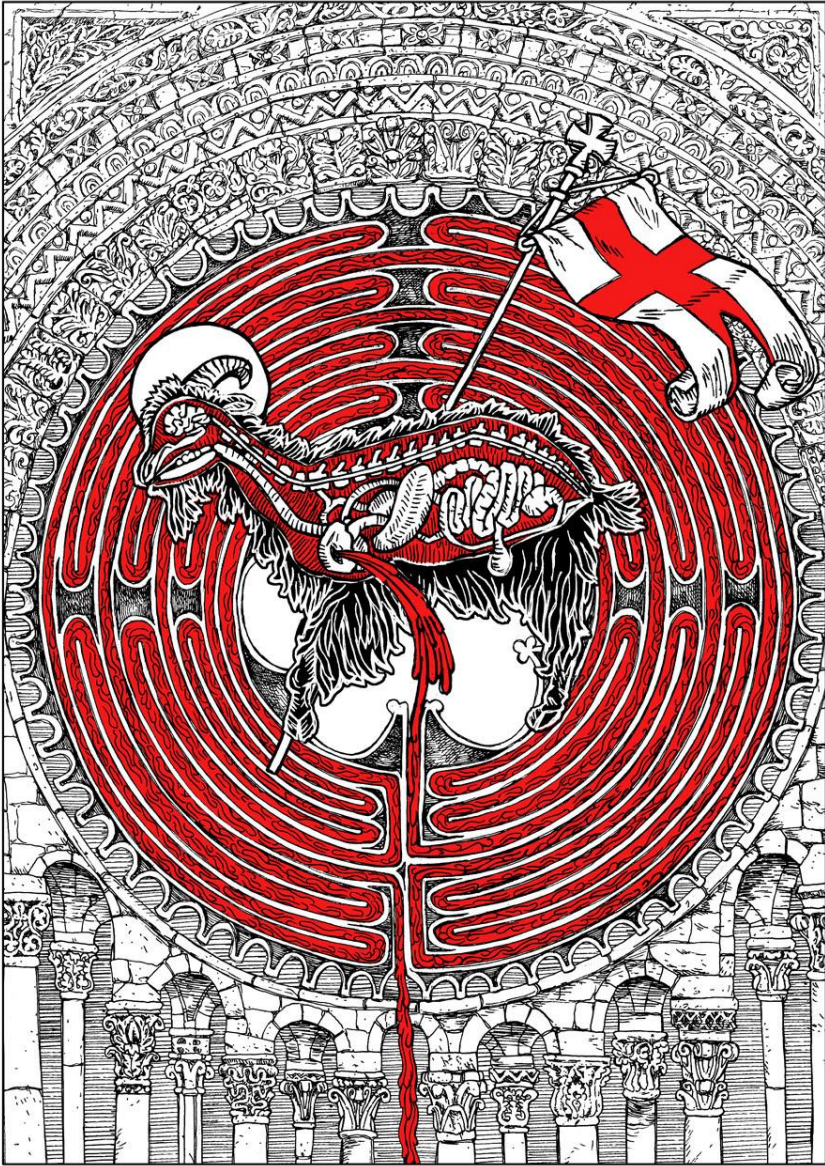
Brethren

JONES, DO YOU REALISE WHAT THE ARK IS? IT'S A TRANSMITTER. IT'S A RADIO FOR SPEAKING TO GOD.

Raiders of the Lost Ark

COME, LORD, COME TO HELL ANON / AND TAKE OUT THY FOLKS EVERYCHONE.

'The Harrowing of Hell' in the Chester Mystery Plays



Chapter 1: Robert

When he was born again, the walls began to sing.

On Sundays, it's fish fingers for tea, with boiled potatoes and butter beans. Robert eats at five o' clock, an hour before Auntie Rose and Uncle Edward, but she often sits with him at the morning room table.

There are always fourteen to twenty butter beans: seven to ten mouthfuls, two beans at a time. Mix each mouthful with one-third of a fish finger to disguise the taste and texture. Half a gulp of orange squash to wash it down.

Auntie Rose is sitting at the other end of the table. Apron on; arms crossed. Her eyes follow the fork up to his mouth.

The fluorescent tube above stutters, as if there's something trapped inside.

By five thirty, Robert's back in the television room, at the far end of the sofa, near the window. Auntie Rose is at the other end, by the door; Uncle Edward's in an armchair in the far corner of the room.

'Aren't you going to church?' Auntie Rose asks.

'Not today,' Robert says.

'But you didn't go this morning either.'

He shrugs. Last week, he arrived at the evening service late, and before he entered the church, he placed a brown paper bag over his head with the words SHAME AND DISGRACE written on it in black marker. Inside, he couldn't see where he was going, so he bumped into a few pews before he found an empty seat near the back.

The speaker was from Jireh in Bebington. Quite a good sermon, on the theme of repentance. But Bill Forester said Robert was ‘disruptive’, and he should stay away from church, just for today.

No need to mention any of that.

The *Radio Times* sits on the empty cushion between Auntie Rose and Robert, folded neatly to tonight’s page for BBC 1. She picks it up. ‘Do you want to watch *Songs of Praise* instead then?’

He winces. ‘It’s not the same thing.’

‘Alright, I only asked.’

Songs of Praise is naff. Plus, he can still catch the second half of the top forty on Radio One. Normally he misses the chart show, but he’s stuck at home tonight, so he can listen with a clear conscience.

A choral ‘Amen’ comes through the wall from the Foresters next door. The whole family comes round for Sunday lunch—aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—and stays for the afternoon. When they meet together, they sing.

Robert knows the Foresters’ habits because he lived with them for several weeks three years ago, shortly after he moved to Liverpool. Auntie Rose was in hospital with golden Staphylococcus. Uncle Edward went to the bookies every afternoon, and passed out when he came back. Even though Robert was twelve, the Foresters made him show his teeth at night after brushing. He didn’t mind.

He was happy there.

If Robert pressed himself against the adjoining wall, he could hear the singing with his body. WHEREFORE MY BOWELS SHALL SOUND LIKE AN HARP FOR MOAB, AND MINE INWARD PARTS FOR KIRHARESH. With his aunt and uncle in the room, he can’t follow the sound down into

the dead cavity between the two houses. But he can turn an imaginary volume dial up, chasing the echo back to its source. The background hiss in his head gets louder as the sounds from next door die away.

Robert keeps his eyes fixed straight ahead, but he can feel his uncle's gaze drifting towards him like a drunk at a steering wheel. If Robert jerks his head left, to catch him out, his uncle stares straight ahead at the television, even though it's turned off at the wall to save electricity.

Above the carriage clock on the mantelpiece, there's a seam of glue where the edges on the rolls of flock wallpaper go out of alignment. Solid resistance for a picking fingernail. Nits on a scalp.

His ears pop, and the pressure in the room adjusts. Here is a new thing, but at the same time, a very old thing. A presence.

It first appeared to Robert last summer, when he came home from church camp. He wasn't surprised to find it waiting for him. He was expecting a message from God, after giving his heart to Jesus in Wales. The only surprise was that the presence didn't immediately deliver the message. It's returned several times since then, but Robert's still waiting for it to speak.

It's only for him. No one else can see the presence.

It always takes a human shape, but otherwise it changes; tonight it's about four feet tall. Not like a child or a dwarf: the same proportions as an adult. It stands in the centre of the room, and arranges the other occupants around itself like the figures on a clock face.

Tick-tock on the mantelpiece. Or is it coming from the presence?

Its body is ivory; at other times, wax. But it's always hairless, smooth, like an Action Man. No openings, apart from a bubbled vertical slit in the centre of its head, like the line of glue on the wallpaper.

An egg. Sealed, but waiting to split. The presence can change, be reborn. Like Robert at church camp.

The central heating's on, but Auntie Rose pulls her cardigan tighter. Uncle Edward stands up and turns on a bar of the electric fire, which pings and creaks as it turns orange. The light behind the fake coals rotates and flickers. But like the ticking of the clock, the smell of burning dust comes from the presence, not the fire. It draws all sensations into itself.

Silence in heaven for half an hour. Silence in the television room too. Robert sometimes feels like his aunt and uncle have already died, and he's living with their ghosts. Or their empty bodies.

If the presence is waiting to be reborn, does that mean it's dead too?

When the Foresters have left for church, Robert goes through to the front room, which Auntie Rose calls the dining room, even though they only eat there on Christmas Day. The table has carved legs, and takes up too much space. Around the edges of the room are two winged armchairs in alcoves, and a display cabinet with glass doors and shelves. Inside the cabinet, there's a black-and-white studio photograph of Auntie Rose and Uncle Edward, and two commemorative plates: one each from the Silver Jubilee and the royal wedding. Below that, there's a junior school photo of Robert in a cardboard mount, and a loose snapshot of his dad as a teenager, when he first went to sea. The picture of his dad's

supposed to be propped up against the edge of the mount, but it's slipped down onto the glass shelf.

There's no photo of Robert's mum.

He opens the cabinet door and picks his dad up, then closes it again and salutes the photo. He scoots round the table to get to the armchair at the back of the room. He leaves the curtains open and the light off, but the streetlamp outside is bright enough to make out the outlines of things. By special permission, he's allowed to listen to a portable radio in here.

A Scouse double at the top of the charts. 'Pipes of Peace' by Paul McCartney is number one; 'Relax' by Frankie Goes to Hollywood is number two. But McCartney's a has-been; and as for Frankie, well, Robert knows what 'Relax' is about, sort of, but he doesn't want to think or talk about it—not even with Tracey Forester. Especially not with her. But not talking is getting awkward. How can he keep ignoring Frankie if they reach number one?

The radio belongs to Auntie Rose. Robert has a Walkman, but there's no record player in the house. He usually buys albums on vinyl and gets Tracey to tape them. That way it doesn't matter if his Walkman chews up the tape, and he can keep the vinyl in mint condition. The Foresters have a hi-fi in their front room with a graphic equaliser and a double tape deck. So the first time Robert hears a new record is next door, during the taping. If Bill's out, Tracey turns the volume and the bass frequencies up.

After coming back from church camp, Robert tried to convert his record collection, and only listen to Christian music. But albums from the Scripture Union shop sound like *Songs of Praise*. Their lyrics are about God, but it's all too obvious. The meaning's on the surface: nothing behind. Whereas, when he listens to The Teardrop

Explodes, or Simple Minds, or—especially—U2, God is hidden inside the song, even when the words seem to be about something else. It's like the lyrics are in code, and Robert's got the key.

Tracey always goes to youth group after the evening service, so she doesn't come home until ten. Like Robert's, her bedroom has a rectangular bay window, which looks onto the back garden. At about ten twenty, Tracey knocks the base of her fist three times against her side of the common wall between their rooms. Robert knows she's hitting an 'X' drawn there in pencil; he thuds back at the identical 'X' on his side, directly above the disused fireplace. Then they both go to the side panels of their respective windows, and turn to face one another.

Tracey has her Walkman on, the same model as Robert's, but red instead of blue. She touches her hands to the earphones, then holds her index fingers up in the air, parallel to one another, as if measuring the space between them. She swipes them through the air like drumsticks, and mouths the words, 'THIS SONG IS NOT A REBEL SONG!'

Robert mouths in reply, 'THIS SONG IS "SUNDAY BLOODY SUNDAY."' From the introduction to the live version on *Under a Blood Red Sky*. He leaves Tracey alone at the window for a minute, while he fishes out his own Walkman.

In the studio version of the song, the bass is the easiest instrument to follow, just to the right in the mix. DUR-DER-DER, DER-DUN; DUR-DER-DER, DER-DUN. A five-note pattern, although it sounds like four unless Robert slows it down in his head and counts it out on his fingers. The guitar's flat: dead chop. Marching forward, no time to waste. The cymbals spill everywhere, washing out to the edges.

The violin cuts the song open.

Back at the window, Robert looks at Tracey's hands. Her fingers are hitting the sill so fast they're almost invisible. Eyes closed, but she knows he's there. He waits for her to open her eyes again and flutters an imaginary white flag on a pole above his head.

Her nightie is stitched in diamond shapes—like a quilt—with lace at the collar and cuffs. The eczema flares at her wrists, and out in a halo around the tiny metal cross she wears around her neck. Sometimes she uses a steroid cream, and then she glistens.

Dragon skin. Beautiful.

When the presence delivers its message, everyone will know that God has chosen Robert. Tracey and Bill will know. He'll be part of their family again.

Chapter 2: Tracey / Robert

Tracey's watching the annual revue show at church: peeking out from behind the door to the impromptu dressing room. As usual, there's a skit with an elder in drag, speaking in a Monty Python falsetto, wearing an orange wig (the same wig every year, but not necessarily the same elder). Tonight, it's John Cooper. He can't work a washing machine or cook anything but beans on toast, but he can boil a kettle, so he's pretending to be a tea lady.

Tea. The solution to all life's problems.

'I don't seem to be able to pray, and God feels very far away,' says Kevin Cooper, John's son, in the role of Joe Bloggs believer.

'Oh dear. Have a cup of tea,' John replies. His only line in the sketch, repeated several times.

Dark, so big tick for that, but otherwise off-target. The tea's not important; no one thinks it is. Someone goes to the trouble of making it, puts it in your hand. Someone *touches* you. That's why.

John and Kevin leave the stage area to polite applause. John plods through to the dressing room, but he has to go past Tracey to get in. 'Shouldn't you be wearing a hat?' she says.

'Eh?'

'1 Corinthians 11,' Tracey says. Women should cover their heads in church—a tradition Tracey has never observed, and her dad has never mentioned. But John brought it up in the morning meeting two weeks ago.

'Very funny,' John says, adjusting his cushion boobs.

Tracey's about to go on and play the drums in a sketch with Robert. He's not very popular with John—or with the women who make the tea after the service. Last week, he poured himself a cup, and kept pouring as it overflowed into the saucer and onto the table. Tracey had to grab his hand to get his attention. It took ten minutes to mop it up.

Jenny Spinks, the compere, announces a short break for Tracey to set up her drums. She only needs the bass and snare tonight, but she's brought the whole kit. Maybe Robert doesn't need a proper drummer, but that's what she is, so that's what he gets.

She looks at the audience. Nobody's wearing a hat—not even the old ladies. Which must mean the church isn't a church right now. So it only becomes one on Sundays, when people come here to worship.

Tracey never wears a hat because there are no special places where God is more present than others, and no magic rituals to summon or bind him. The whole world is God's church, and this is just a building.

God's everywhere. He's here now.

The congregation funded and built Garston Chapel. Tracey remembers playing in the sand in a roped-off corner of the construction site while her dad discussed the floor plans with the other elders. There are two halls, with a blocked-off courtyard between: one for the morning service; the other for the gospel meeting in the evening. The courtyard's surrounded by plate-glass windows, which provide natural light into the halls; and there are linking corridors at both ends of the building, with a kitchen in the far corner. Tonight, the revue's in the morning hall, and the back corridor's the dressing room. So people take their drink and biscuit next door in the evening hall.

Is everyone ready for Robert's poetry? Tracey feels sick, but excited too. In the morning hall, she presses her palm against one of the windows, and squeaks the condensation aside. There's snow falling outside, dissolving as it hits the glass.

Kevin Cooper, who wore his own clothes and therefore has no costume to change out of, comes up and says, 'What did you think?'

'Was it meant to be that dark?'

Kevin's chuffed. 'That was me. Dad just had the tea lady idea.'

Tracey's known Kevin since she was four, but she's never paid much attention to him. She can see the top of the Motörhead logo on his black t-shirt, hidden under a white school shirt. 'Robert wanted me to ask you ...'

'What?'

Too late, because Robert now appears from near the front entrance, where he's been hiding in the bathroom, waiting for an empty hall. He's wearing a cut-out Morrissey mask, with two gouged holes in the eyes, and a letterbox slot for the mouth.

He had a bag over his head two weeks ago. Why does he keep covering his face?

'Have you told him yet?' Robert says. His voice sounds weird behind the mask, as if he's a ventriloquist's dummy.

'I was just about to,' Tracey says.

Morrissey's forehead has the word THIS written on it in black marker. Under his nose, the word CHARMING forms an uneven moustache, since the second syllable has been crossed out and replaced with -LESS, drooping down the left cheek. The word MAN makes a goatee on his chin, but it's also crossed out, and replaced with Boy underneath. To reinforce the last point, Robert is not wearing a Smiths t-shirt, but one that reproduces the

cover of U2's first album, also called *Boy*. A picture of a bare-chested child, making cow eyes at the photographer.

'Ask me what?' Kevin says.

Robert hops from foot to foot as if he needs to go to the loo—although he's just come from the bathroom. Tracey thinks he's laughing, but it's difficult to tell with Morrissey in the way. 'To play piano,' Tracey says.

'But I can't,' Kevin says. 'Only guitar. And I don't have it with me.'

'I know you can't play piano,' Robert says. 'That's the point.'

'I don't get it. What do you want me to do?'

'Whatever you want,' Robert says. 'So long as you do it on the piano.'

Kevin wiggles one hand down by his waist and the other up in the air near his shoulder. 'I'm a guitarist,' he says again.

Morrissey doesn't react. 'Will you do it, or not?'

'Pretend to play the piano?'

'No,' Robert says. 'Actually play the piano—but really badly.'

'Why didn't you ask me about this yesterday,' Kevin says to Tracey, 'when we had the rehearsal?'

'Robert doesn't do rehearsals.'

'No script,' Robert says. 'Plus, one person with no idea at all what's happening.'

'One person *on stage*,' Tracey says. 'Because the audience has no idea either.'

'Don't you remember,' Robert asks, 'from camp last summer?'

'No,' Kevin says. He strokes his own moustache, which is not as impressive as Morrissey's. He ignores Robert and gives his final answer to Tracey. 'But I'll give it a go.'

Robert says, 'All you need to know is I'll be reading some poetry. And you're my accompaniment. If you can't think of anything to do, just follow Tracey's lead.'

'Is the poetry about The Smiths?'

'It's a tribute to the Romantics.'

Kevin smirks. 'Duran Duran?'

'The *real* Romantics.'

No rehearsals. Well, that's a fib, because Robert and Tracey have practiced adding a backbeat to the poems several times. THUM-THUM-THUM on the bass drum, keep it going while Robert breaks his lines down into syllables, one stress per beat. Then a rimshot on the snare at the end of each line. She has to keep it simple, but that's okay because Robert's not exactly Shakespeare. For a start, his lines don't go DE-DUM, DE-DUM all the way through. So it's difficult to get the rhythm right.

She works at it on her own, and doesn't tell Robert. She needs to know exactly what he's going to say next and how he's going to say it, which means she has to memorise the poems too, and say them to herself while counting out the beats.

So 'no rehearsals' only means she doesn't know exactly what he's going to do before and after the poems. For example, no warning about joining The Smiths tonight. Robert didn't seem very impressed with their *Top of the Pops* appearance last year. He did talk about it the following day, but what he said was, 'Moan, moan. Look at me, look at me.' Which is rich, coming from him.

'I'm surprised,' Kevin says to Tracey, when Robert's busy rummaging in a plastic bag at his feet. 'Wouldn't think this was your thing.'

For *The Two Ronnies* sketch Tracey did with Jenny Spinks earlier this evening, she taped a repeat showing, and copied out the entire script, line by line, adding marks on the

page for emphasis. Pause; rewind; replay. She tried *The Two Ronnies* with Robert last year, but even when he knew his lines, he mugged for the crowd instead of playing it deadpan. Maybe she should have given him a mask.

Below Morrissey's face, the rest of Robert's outfit isn't quite right. He buys his non-school clothes at Top Man and Burton, but he only goes in the sales, so he gets their leftovers. The colours are too bright, or the size is wrong. Tonight's shirt, which he's wearing unbuttoned to display the t-shirt underneath, is yellow to go with the daffodils in the plastic bag. It also has orange paisley shapes, which look like embryos, and clash with his red hair. He normally has a kind of afro, to cover up his Prince Charles ears, but tonight he's gelled it up into something resembling a quiff. Or a breaking wave, which is about to collapse onto Morrissey's face.

The crowd is returning. Robert hands Tracey an A4 sheet of paper from his plastic bag. 'To stick on the bass drum,' he says, brushing off a pollen stain. The sheet says 'The Jones'.

'Shouldn't that be The Joneses? Or is there only one of you?'

'Jones-es. Jones-es-es,' Robert says. 'Never mind.' He retreats to the dressing room at the back of the hall, since he doesn't want to spoil the surprise.

'Are you sure you're up for this?' Tracey asks Kevin.

'Why not?' He walks over to the piano and sits down as Tracey slides her drum kit out from the back of the stage area. She sits down to adjust the placing of the stool and the cymbals. Kevin lifts up the piano lid. He interlaces his fingers, and cracks his knuckles back.

Jenny Spinks announces them. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm Garston Chapel welcome for The Jones ... es. With their hit song, “William Wordsworth, It Was Really Nothing”.’

Robert flips the door of the dressing room open. It bangs against the back wall, and Mrs Evans spills her tea in the third row. Tracey starts drumming. The pattern doesn’t matter at the moment, so she just does a basic snare and hi-hat combination. Robert is pulling daffodils out of his plastic bag. He’s also stuck one in the back pocket of his jeans. It looks sad, drooping down towards the floor.

Kevin stabs notes on the piano. He’s a distraction already, but she tunes him out and concentrates on Robert, who yodels, and then starts doing a sort of waltz with an arm outstretched, pausing every few steps to throw a daffodil up into the air over the heads of the audience. The first one goes towards Mrs Evans, who lets out an ‘Oh!’ Robert blows a kiss to the third row. He puts the plastic bag down, and begins his preparations: stretching and leaning down to touch his toes; jogging on the spot, huffing and puffing as he lifts his knees high.

He starts dancing.

To Tracey, he looks like Ian Curtis of Joy Division, but the only influence he’ll admit to is Bruce Lee, which is why he calls his signature move the ‘Nunchuks’. He keeps his upper arms rigid, and flops his lower arms, wrists and hands around in circles in front of his face and out to his sides. At the same time, he moves his neck from side to side, and steps backwards, forwards and sideways, while keeping his head fixed forward. Tracey can’t be sure, but it looks like he’s in a staring competition with Mrs Evans. Or a mating ritual.

Mrs Evans is seventy-two. Leave the poor woman alone!

Tracey is now directly behind Robert, so she can't get this message across, except by hitting the crash cymbal harder. When that doesn't work, she throws a spare stick at the back of his head. It bounces off towards Kevin, who ducks, and hits keys randomly.

Robert stops, and rubs the spot on his head. Then seemingly has a bright idea, and eviscerates his plastic bag for the last of his daffodils. He turns around and nods to Tracey, which is her cue to go into the THUM-THUM-THUM bass drum rhythm,

'O DAFF-O-DILLS,' Robert says, addressing the flowers in his hand. 'YOU GIVE ME THRILLS.'

Kevin tries to follow Tracey by blurting out a crashing non-chord whenever she hits the snare. Or rather, half a second after she hits the snare. Still distracting.

'YOU ARE SO YELL-OW,' Robert says. 'AND EX-CEED-INGLY MELL-OW.'

Robert's now into the swing of things—but so is Kevin. That's not good, because he's bored with following Tracey.

'I CRUSH YOUR HEAD, WITH MY TRAIN-ER TREAD.' Robert demonstrates this action by grinding two of the remaining flowers under the ball of his foot.

'AND YOU LIE THERE ...' Robert normally whispers this line for added pathos, but tonight he has to raise his voice because of Kevin, who's hitting the piano with his fists and elbows. And yes—bashing his head up and down on the keys, which means Robert has to shout for:

'UTT-ERLY SPLAT-TERED.' He gestures towards the yellow pulp at his feet like a magician showing off his assistant: only in this case, he's stomped her to death instead of sawing her in half. Kevin redoubles his attack on the piano, so Tracey has to drum louder too, or Robert will lose the rhythm.

‘AND WHEN I GOT HOME, I GOT BAT-TERED.’ Since Robert’s now screaming, this comes out funny peculiar rather than funny ha-ha. He takes a moment to gather himself before bellowing the last line:

‘FOR BE-ING SUCH A COM-LETE AND UTT-ER FASC-IST.’ Tracey isn’t sure about the stress pattern there, but anyway.

Kevin has now murdered the piano. He shoves the stool over behind him as he jumps to his feet in horror at what he’s done. The piano makes a last sound of distress, and falls silent.

Robert throws the rest of his daffodils out into the audience, but most people are looking at Kevin. Some of them have their hands over their ears. Tracey winds down the rhythm with the ride cymbal: quieter, quieter.

A general shifting in seats. Jenny Spinks claps her hands once, but then stops and mumbles an apology.

Tracey looks at Kevin, who grins.

Robert’s wobbling on tiptoe, with one hand pointing straight up in the air. He’s silent, staring out into the aisle between the rows of pews. At the top of his outstretched arm, his hand opens and closes.

Fifteen seconds pass. Kevin whispers, ‘What now?’

God’s everywhere. He’s here now.

There’s a weird smell. Sour milk? Mouldy fruit? Tracey says, ‘Robert.’

★

Robert's looking at the presence. It's about eight feet tall; covered in condensation. Standing in the aisle in front of the stage area. Its ivory skin is translucent, but the white flesh has thickened underneath. Curds and whey. Fermenting.

Its head has an opening now. A dry circle. An inverted cone cut into this wet dissolution, positioned somewhere between where the nose and mouth would be—if it had a nose or a mouth. An all-purpose sense organ, for receiving and transmitting, detecting and analysing. Light particles, sound waves, molecules changing from one state to another.

The cone advances towards Robert, out of the head. So it's bigger than the head, even though it's coming out of the head. And now Robert is inside the cone, which means he's also inside the head.

The cone is black, but as it narrows towards the apex, there's a red disk. So it's truncated. It doesn't end in a point, but in another, much smaller circle. The circle flashes: red, then black; red, then black.

No, that's not right. More like it's sliding in and out. Red, black. A diaphragm opening and closing.

In the red phase, there's a spiral, which swirls out down the black wall of the cone. The red line of the spiral is coming towards him, but it's also moving away from him, because the farther it goes from the disk, the larger the spiral gets.

It all reminds Robert of the jukebox in the café at Garston swimming baths. When you press the buttons to select a song, the chosen record clunks out of a horizontal stack of seven-inch singles and slides into the playing mechanism, where it starts spinning. Then when the song ends, the record clunks back into the stack.

Something pulses along the groove of the red spiral towards Robert—and away from him. Not an object: a signal. He reaches for it as it flies off above his head.

He falls into the cone.

‘Robert,’ the red disk says. It sounds worried.

‘What?’

‘Robert,’ Tracey says.

He’s standing in the church hall with his arm in the air, his hand blinking on and off. How long has he been like this? He flattens his feet, does a half-step shuffle, and sweeps his arm down, his upper body following it into a bow. ‘Thank you,’ he says. ‘Thank you.’

Tracey splashes a cymbal. Jenny Spinks claps.

The presence is still there, but the cone has now retreated back inside its head. It begins to vibrate as the red spiral rotates. ‘I KNOW YOU WILL NEVER FORGIVE ME LEAVING YOU WITH THIS TERRIBLE MESS,’ the cone and the spiral say. ‘I WOULD LIKE TO SAY I LOVE YOU BUT AFTER THIS YOU WON’T BELIEVE IT.’

It sounds like an old record, full of scratches and crackles. As if everything it can say to him is fixed in advance. It’s all been said before; it’ll all be said again.

Chapter 3: Tracey

Mark Thorn's house is a motherless place. Kids come here from all over Liverpool, not just Aigburth and Garston. They spill drinks, pull the curtains off the rails, rip the wallpaper, chase each other on and off the sofa. Mark doesn't seem to care.

Peter Pan and the Lost Boys.

Every Tuesday evening, Mark holds a Bible discussion group. Tracey got here early, because she wants to talk to him alone. But now she's stuck in the kitchen, making drinks. She sniffs the milk—always a good idea, here. The sour smell's familiar. It seems to be following her around at the moment, as if the entire world's about to turn.

The house belongs to Mark's parents. Tracey's never met them; they live in Wales. They used to rent it out to students, but when Mark was released from hospital, they moved in here with him for six months. They've gone back home now, but Mark stayed in Liverpool, and the house became a sort of unofficial church youth club.

Several people in church say they have an 'open door' policy, which means anyone can come round without asking first, but Mark is the only one who puts it into practice. Or maybe the only one who Tracey's friends want to visit.

He lives by faith. That means he trusts God to provide for him. Everyone's inspired by this. They imagine strangers handing over tenners on the street, compelled by angelic voices. Mark is vague on how it works in practice, but Tracey can guess. He has a navy pension, he doesn't pay anything for the house, and—Tracey knows this because she sometimes sits at the back during elders' meetings, waiting for her dad—the church gives him a payment every month from the collection. That's not including the envelopes her dad sets aside from his own money. She saw him hand one over before the evening meeting

last Sunday. He didn't look at Mark; Mark didn't look at him: like spies on a bridge. Her dad doesn't even like Mark.

Tracey keeps quiet about all this, because she doesn't want to spoil it for everyone else. Anyway, it's still impressive. People with no money stay here for free, and Mark doesn't have any gadgets: no VCRs or hi-fi. Not even a television. He used to have a motorbike, but he traded it in for an ex-police Transit van, so he can give people lifts.

His bedroom's downstairs at the front. During the day, he sits in state and receives visitors.

The tea's just for herself. Mark drinks boiled water; he's a show-off that way. She comes through from the kitchen, and puts his mug down on the bedside table. Mark's leaning back against the headboard with his damaged leg stretched out on the coverlet. He's wearing an Adidas tracksuit and a t-shirt underneath. The sheets are all tucked in, ship-shape; the whole room stowed neat as a cabin. Besides the bed, the most noticeable piece of furniture is a bench with a set of weights, which he uses every day, but there's one decoration: a poster blu-tacked to the wall above him. It's a reproduction of a Victorian painting, which shows a man, kneeling by a pool. A group of topless women in the water, pulling him in.

The poster's a subject of controversy among the Tuesday night regulars. Someone's drawn a speech bubble coming out of the mouth of one of the women, which says, STOP LOOKING AT MY BOOBS! Mark wanted to be a painter, before he joined the navy. He was angry about the speech bubbles, because you shouldn't deface a work of art, but no one confessed.

Tracey wants to talk about Robert, but she doesn't know how to start. It's weird, being in a man's bedroom. She sits down on a straight-backed wooden chair, and puts her own mug on the large dresser opposite the bed, but she doesn't say anything.

The bedroom door stays open.

Doors stay open in Tracey's house too. It's a matter of principle. But not on the morning of her mum's funeral, when she stood outside her parents' room, holding a mug of Earl Grey. Three sugars—two more than usual—because she thought it might help. She held her breath for twenty seconds, as if she had the hiccups, then she knocked. No reply, so she entered.

That bed was tucked-in too. Her dad sitting on the edge, in a stiff shirt and a fat black tie. Puffy face, like he'd shaved in cold water. Still in his socks, freshly-polished shoes to one side.

She looked down at his feet. His left big toe poked through a hole in one sock. His eyes followed her gaze. He wiggled the toe around.

She put the tea down. Her dad didn't speak. She didn't touch him. She doesn't touch Mark either.

He's had several operations. The scar tissue contracts, so they have to cut it open again and do skin grafts. Mainly the left knee, but he has problems with the elbow and wrist on the same side. It's most visible on his left hand, but you can see angry flashes at his neck and waist when he moves. Sometimes he wears a metal leg brace, but even when it's not there, you imagine it is, because he keeps his leg rigid and pivots around it.

Tracey doesn't believe in saints, and even if she did, Mark wouldn't qualify, but she envies him. He's been purified. She imagines him turning away from the explosion in the

Falklands, his face protected by the hand of God. His skin sizzling as it hit the black Atlantic water.

She runs her fingers over the inflamed skin on her own neck. Resists the urge to pick and scratch. She doesn't feel purified. She feels grubby, dragged down into her body.

'Does it bother you?' Mark says, looking at her probing fingers.

'What?' Maybe she's coming out in sympathy, the eczema spreading like a blush. Quickly, 'No, no.' But it feels like an insult, this denial. Because it's Mark, who deserves the truth. About this anyway. 'Yes it bothers me,' she says. 'First I prayed that God would take it away. Now I just pray I'll know how to bear it.' She glances at his hand, then winces. 'It's not the same.'

'It is the same,' Mark says. 'Because you feel the same.'

'I don't. It's not that bad.'

'It's alright.' Mark swings both legs over the side of the bed, so he's facing her. He places his hands together, as if he's about to pray, but then he squeezes them between his thighs. He's curled in on himself, and his hands are trapped, not raised to God.

He straightens up; his spine clicks. He unzips his tracksuit top and shrugs it off. Then he takes off his t-shirt. Smooth, in one go—even though he has to hold his left arm at a funny angle. 'Look,' he says.

She looks. Ridges and whorls, mountains and valleys. A changing landscape. When the burns were new, he must have been skinless. Without form, and void. A wet hole of pain. Then God made a firmament, to divide raw, molten flesh from the crust on its surface; inside from outside; who he was before from who he is now.

But Mark lives in a fallen world, and his body doesn't know how to stop making scar tissue. Now the burn is something it keeps doing to itself, over and over again, the landscape folding, cracking, splitting.

His burns are part of him. Or he's part of them. Whereas her eczema is a parasite. Chewing her skin up in its jaws, scratching it off with its claws.

Should she touch him? Put her finger in his side.

Mark puts his t-shirt back on. 'What did you want to speak to me about?' he asks.

'Have you noticed anything strange about Robert lately?' she says. 'Stranger than usual.'

Mark tuts. 'That thing at the church show. And camp last year. A lot of bottle, I'll give him that. But he takes it too far. It's just to please himself—he doesn't care what anyone else thinks.'

'It's funny.' She enjoys the reaction Robert gets. She enjoys provoking it with him. But she's not responsible; she can wash her hands. It's like being a participant and a bystander at the same time.

'I can see the attraction for you,' Mark says. 'Everyone can see you're a good person. Look after your weird friend when he throws an eppie.'

Tracey blinks. It's part of Mark's power, this willingness to say the unsayable, as if he's passed beyond vanity to some place where everyone's capable of looking at their reflection in the mirror, and seeing it for what it is.

'He's different,' she says, 'lately. He has these ... gaps. Seems to go somewhere else.'

'Hard to tell what's normal, with him. Have you asked?'

'I tried. He changed the subject.'

‘Are you and he ...?’

‘No. He’s just my weird friend.’

‘You seem close.’

‘I don’t think of him that way.’ She goes to scratch her neck, touches the cross there instead. ‘I’ve known him a long time,’ she says. ‘He changed, when he became a Christian. For the better.’

‘So I’d hope.’

‘He seemed happier—for a while. This is new. I think.’

The front doorbell rings. Already? She glances at her watch. Still an hour until the official start of the Bible study. She had to rush her tea to get here before anyone else.

‘I’ll keep an eye on him,’ Mark says. He zips up his tracksuit top. ‘We can talk again.’ He nods towards the hall. ‘Will you get that?’

She goes to the front door, feeling proud, like she’s sharing the hosting duties.

It’s Robert. ‘Hi,’ he says. He frowns. ‘What are you doing here so early?’

Rebecca Miller’s gran has just died. Tracey isn’t close with Rebecca, who goes to Bethesda, but everyone remembers Tracey’s mum, so she often finds herself trapped in awkward conversations about death and heaven. Robert doesn’t seem to have the same problem—but not everyone knows his story.

Tracey’s making another cup of tea—but only the one. Because making a drink for Mark or Rebecca is fine, but she doesn’t want to set a precedent and end up as the group Wendy, tonight or any other night.

The kitchen’s full of people, but she focuses on the sound of the kettle as it struggles towards the boil. Kevin jostles her as he squeezes past into the lounge.

Apart from Mark, everyone here's a teenager. Well, there's Sandy and Helen, the nurses who live upstairs. They're older. They help out with Mark's dressings. She doesn't *think* he planned it that way.

Anyway, people move in and out here all the time.

The Lost Boys are just as likely to be girls though. They find the burns romantic. It'd be different if he looked like Simon Weston. When Mark turns his attention on you—that's not a feeling from God. Not for Tracey. For others—well, it's not for her to say. Maybe it's a gift, but he doesn't always use it wisely. Robert, who really is a Lost Boy, follows Mark around from room to room, while the girls squeal and shout.

Well, she knows herself. Robert can be too much.

Mark lurches through the kitchen holding a pile of study sheets for the Bible study. He types them himself, and photocopies them at church. As he moves his bad leg, he seems to bob up and down. There's a paparazzi swarm around him. 'Alright, alright!' he says. 'Time to get started. Sit down and shut up!'

Everyone moves through to the lounge at the back: a large room, which seems to have been created out of two smaller ones, since there's a crude plastered archway in the middle, where the connecting wall used to be. The furniture's donated or rescued. The sofa smells of chip grease and engine oil, so Tracey usually sits on one of the hard-backed wooden chairs. Or the floor. But the carpet's even dirtier.

She takes the seat next to Rebecca, who holds on to her hand like it's a soggy hanky. Robert's on the opposite side of the room; Kevin's on the other side of Rebecca, next to his friend Paul.

Kevin usually says nothing during the discussion; Robert won't shut up. Paul asks awkward questions. Like Robert, he's a recent convert.

Kevin winks at her. What's that supposed to mean?

'Pray first,' Mark says, and lowers his head. Everyone else does the same—apart from Robert, who keeps looking at Mark, and Tracey, who watches both of them.

Sandy and Helen whisper something to each other. 'Oy! Shh!' Mark says. 'Tracey, do you want to open for us?'

Not really—but if you insist. 'Lord,' she says, taking the opportunity to get her hand back from Rebecca. 'Please help us to learn something new about you tonight. Not assume we know the answers already. Thank you.'

As she says these words, she discovers that she means them.

'Good prayer,' Mark says. 'We're going to look at Genesis 22. Difficult story. I've been struggling with it all week. God asks Abraham to kill his only son, Isaac, whose birth was a miracle. Why, God?' No one answers, so Mark continues. 'Who wants to read the passage?'

The usual awkward silence, until Robert says, 'I will.'

Everyone groans. Paul throws a balled-up piece of paper at his head.

Robert uses the King James Version. Tracey can't remember when it fell out of fashion. Everyone had it when she was little, or the Revised Standard Version, which is similar, but with modernised spelling and vocabulary. Even that's heresy for some members of the congregation. As Mrs Evans likes to say, 'If the King James was good enough for the Apostle Paul, then it's good enough for me.' But now over half the church uses the New International Version. There's also the Good News, in simple English, and the Living Bible, which is even simpler.

When Tracey was little, she knew every Christian believer. But now there's a bigger world. People debating God's Word. New ideas, new gifts—like speaking in tongues, which

her dad doesn't like. He says that miraculous proofs of God's presence were special gifts for the early church. He uses the RSV.

Where do people speak in tongues? Not in church. They don't do it here either, even though Mark has the gift. She doesn't want to ask him how it works, because she's scared he might pass it on. How would she explain to her dad?

Everyone here tonight has an NIV or the Good News, apart from Mark. He uses the Living Bible when he's reading out a long passage. But when he wants to concentrate on a particular word or phrase, he goes back to an interlinear edition of the NIV, which puts the English translation next to the Greek text. Mark doesn't know any Greek, but he looks up the words one by one in *Vine's Expository Dictionary*.

'Why the ye olde version?' Paul says to Robert.

'But I don't have it tonight,' Robert replies. He claps one palm against the pale cover of a new NIV. 'I brought this one instead. I just got it, for the group.'

'Okay,' Mark says. 'Why *did* you use the King James?'

'Nobody knows what it means,' Paul says.

'God won't fit into normal words,' Robert says. 'When I'm reading, I want to feel that. I don't want the words to disappear.' His knee has begun to jiggle.

Mark says, 'Jesus came down to earth, to speak with us face to face. And used simple language.'

'But no one understood Him.'

'And the people who made the King James, they were trying to do what Jesus did: make it easier. Even Shakespeare wrote for ordinary people. But English changes, even if the Bible doesn't.'

Robert pushes his palm down on his jiggling knee. A lid on a boiling pot. ‘The disciples had to ask Him what he meant.’

‘And He told them.’

‘But they still didn’t understand. And what about Revelation? God hides what He means. Sometimes.’

‘I think it’s dangerous, this idea of hidden meanings,’ Mark says. ‘You end up with the Bible in a special language, and you need priests to read it for you.’

‘I’m not talking about priests. God has secrets. He doesn’t share them with everyone. He whispers in your ear.’

‘Robert, we can talk about this another time if you want. We need to get on with Abraham and Isaac. Can you read Genesis 22 for us?’

Tracey tries to concentrate on the reading. The stories are all so familiar. The best way to pinch yourself awake is to ask questions in your head. Try to make the story real.

Robert begins, ‘SOME TIME LATER GOD TESTED ABRAHAM. HE SAID TO HIM, “ABRAHAM!” “HERE I AM,” HE REPLIED.’

Abraham’s not even surprised. He doesn’t say, ‘Can I really hear a voice? Is that you, God?’ Not even, ‘Oh flip, it’s God again. He’s already made me cut the end of my penis off. What’s He want this time?’

Robert continues. ‘THEN GOD SAID, “TAKE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON, WHOM YOU LOVE—ISAAC—AND GO TO THE REGION OF MORIAH. SACRIFICE HIM THERE AS A BURNT OFFERING ON A MOUNTAIN I WILL SHOW YOU.” EARLY THE NEXT MORNING ABRAHAM GOT UP AND LOADED HIS DONKEY.’

God speaks; Abraham obeys. But there *is* a gap. A night between. What happened then? Abraham alone with his decision. Jesus in Gethsemane, sweating blood. Please, don't make me do this.

‘AS THE TWO OF THEM WENT ON TOGETHER, ISAAC SPOKE UP AND SAID TO HIS FATHER ABRAHAM, “FATHER?” “YES, MY SON?” ABRAHAM REPLIED. “THE FIRE AND WOOD ARE HERE,” ISAAC SAID, “BUT WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR THE BURNT OFFERING?” ABRAHAM ANSWERED, “GOD HIMSELF WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB FOR THE BURNT OFFERING, MY SON.”’

Isaac has to carry the wood. Like Jesus carrying the cross. At least Jesus knew what was going to happen.

Mark's a burnt offering too. She blinks that thought away—like tears.

Robert reaches the climax of the story. ‘HE BOUND HIS SON ISAAC AND LAID HIM ON THE ALTAR, ON TOP OF THE WOOD. THEN HE REACHED OUT HIS HAND AND TOOK THE KNIFE TO SLAY HIS SON.’

Kevin lifts a knife-like finger and moves it towards Paul's throat. Paul swats it aside and tries to concentrate on his Bible.

God doesn't speak to Isaac, because it's not Isaac's test. But at some point in the story, Isaac makes a decision. Abraham's an old man. He can't carry the wood, and he can't tie Isaac up against his will. So Abraham decides to obey God, but Isaac decides to obey Abraham. Which decision is harder?

Isaac's trapped in Abraham's story. Lie down and die, so *someone else* can prove a point to God. Your life doesn't belong to you. That's the real test.

Robert continues. ‘BUT THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CALLED OUT TO HIM FROM HEAVEN, “ABRAHAM! ABRAHAM!” “HERE I AM,” HE REPLIED. “DO NOT LAY A HAND ON THE BOY,” HE SAID.

“DO NOT DO ANYTHING TO HIM. NOW I KNOW THAT YOU FEAR GOD, BECAUSE YOU HAVE NOT WITHHELD FROM ME YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON.”

The angel opens its mouth, but God’s voice comes out. Like a tape recording. Or a ventriloquist’s dummy. Can God possess you like the devil does? Is that what happens when you speak in tongues?

Does Isaac hear the angel too? Double relief. Not just, ‘You’re not going to die.’ But also, ‘God really did speak to your dad. He’s not mad.’ Or maybe Abraham’s staring at nothing, talking to himself. So Isaac has to keep believing, keep sacrificing himself on the altar of his dad’s faith whenever he remembers this moment.

No mention of Sarah. No one cares what Isaac’s mum thinks.

Earlier in Genesis, three angels visit to announce Isaac’s coming birth. In that story, Sarah’s there, listening outside the tent flap. She doesn’t get to sit with important visitors; she just makes the tea.

When the angels tell Abraham that Sarah will become pregnant, she says to herself, ‘You must be joking.’ Because she knows her own body.

The angel says, ‘WHY DID SARAH LAUGH?’

Sarah denies it. ‘I didn’t laugh.’

‘Yes, you did.’

The message is for Sarah, but God delivers it to Abraham. Like John Cooper, who thinks women shouldn’t speak in the morning meeting. If they have something to say, they should whisper it to a man sitting next to them, and he can say it for them.

Abraham believes; Abraham acts; we never see him thinking. If there was a night like Jesus in Gethsemane, then it’s private, hidden. But Sarah thinks, and her thought is a doubt.

Where's Sarah when Abraham takes Isaac away to kill him? She doesn't know anything about it. Because if she knew, she'd stop it.

In the New Testament, when the angel Gabriel visits Mary, he doesn't ask her to kill anyone. He announces a birth instead, like the angel with Sarah—but Gabriel speaks to Mary directly. And he has a name, a voice of his own.

Jenny Spinks says that in the Middle Ages, people thought the Holy Spirit made Mary pregnant through her ear. Ridges and whorls, mountains and valleys. A labyrinth of folds and passages. A beating drum.

Robert's finished the reading, and the atmosphere in the room's serious.

Kevin puts on a childish voice and sings a Sunday School song, 'FATHER ABRAHAM HAD MANY SONS, MANY SONS HAD FATHER ABRAHAM.' He waves his arms in the air to the rhythm of the words. 'I AM ONE OF THEM—AND SO ARE YOU.'

Rebecca finishes the verse: 'SO LET'S ALL PRAISE THE LORD!' Everyone laughs.

Tracey can't ask most of her questions aloud. But she can ask, 'What's the difference between a test and a temptation?'

Mark must have been thinking about this too, because he doesn't hesitate. 'God tests; the devil tempts,' he says. 'When God tests, he wants us to pass. To grow stronger in our love for Him. When the devil tempts, he wants us to fail. To separate us from God. And God will never ask us to commit a sin.'

'What, you mean like murder?' Paul says.

'If a voice told you to kill me,' Robert says, 'you'd think it was the devil.'

'Not necessarily,' Kevin says.

Tracey admires Rebecca's angora jumper, and then lowers her head to pick at the fraying elastic holding up her knee socks. What if her dad said, 'God told me to kill you?'

Or worse, ‘God told me to kill your mum.’ Is that why she died? To test her dad’s faith. To test Tracey’s.

No angel for us; no message from God. No explanation. Silence.

She says, ‘The devil can pretend to be an angel of light. To trick us.’

‘God had a special relationship with Abraham,’ Mark says. ‘They’ve spoken before, many times. So Abraham recognises God’s voice. No room for doubt.’

‘Abraham knows,’ Robert says. ‘But he can’t explain to anyone else. No one will understand.’

‘Abraham had a personal covenant with God,’ Mark says, ‘but today God’s covenant is with the church. If we want to know His will, we need to look at what it says in the Bible, talk to other Christians, pray together.

‘Sometimes God gives us a map for the future, so we can find His will when we get there,’ Mark continues. ‘Prophecy. This story is a prophecy about the crucifixion of Jesus. God can ask Abraham to do this, because He’s willing to sacrifice His son too. The question for us is: What are we willing to do?’

‘If we hold something back from God—if we say, “You can have everything else, but not this”—then we’re going to lose it.’

The Lord your God is a jealous God. But jealousy comes from fear; and PERFECT LOVE DRIVES OUT FEAR. How can Tracey love a God who’d take her mum away, just because Tracey loved her too much? Or not enough.

Robert flips to a Bible passage and reads, ‘IF ANYONE COMES TO ME AND DOES NOT HATE FATHER AND MOTHER, WIFE AND CHILDREN, BROTHERS AND SISTERS—YES, EVEN THEIR OWN LIFE—SUCH A PERSON CANNOT BE MY DISCIPLE.’

Rebecca blows her nose. Tracey pats her shoulder, and thinks, WHOEVER CLAIMS TO LOVE GOD YET HATES A BROTHER OR SISTER IS A LIAR. But she doesn't say that aloud either, even though it's a Bible verse. She doesn't like arguing.

'If we let go of the thing we love,' Mark says, 'then we might get it back. Abraham believed God would keep his promise about a great nation, even if he killed Isaac.'

'How?' Paul asks.

'God would bring Isaac back from the dead.'

Paul laughs.

'God brought Jesus back too,' Mark says.

'Ah.' Paul blushes, as if he's been caught out. 'But what if God hadn't stopped Abraham?'

'He did stop him.'

Paul's trying to learn how to behave in Bible studies, so all he says is, 'Hmn.' He looks around, trying to catch someone's eye: someone else who agrees this is nuts. Tracey keeps her face blank.

'Abraham was willing for everyone to hate him,' Robert says.

Mark says, 'Abraham was saved by faith. And faith means: Be ready to answer God's call, to carry out His will. Whatever it costs.'

'On your study sheet, there's two questions.' A collective rustle of paper as everyone confirms this. 'What have I given up for God? What would I struggle to give up, if God asked me to? We'll take ten minutes now to write down some answers.'

Silence for a while—or what passes for silence here. People tapping pens, muttering, giggling.

When a decent interval has passed, Mark asks, 'Kevin, what have you got?'

‘Who, me?’

‘Nobody has to say what’s on their list, if they don’t want to. Maybe it’s private, between you and God. But it would be good if we had some examples.’

‘Well,’ Kevin says, ‘no swearing, no drinking, no, um, sex before marriage. That kind of thing. Which made me think. Why is it always about giving things up? A list of things you can’t do.’

‘Prohibitions,’ Mark says. ‘But when Jesus came, He said, BLESSED ARE THE POOR. BLESSED ARE THE MEEK’ He looks at Rebecca. ‘BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN. All positives. And then, the most positive of all: LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF.’

‘BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED,’ Robert adds.

‘On your list,’ Mark says to Kevin, ‘they’re all general things. Nothing personal.’

‘Hang on a minute.’ Kevin tries to excavate himself from his position on the sofa, where five people are sitting, even though there’s only space for three. Kevin is half-submerged in the middle, and has to elbow his way out.

Robert can’t wait any longer. ‘Dungeons & Dragons,’ he says.

‘Isn’t it satanic?’ Rebecca asks.

‘So they’d have you believe,’ Kevin says.

‘I had lead figures,’ Robert says. ‘When you paint the face, you split it up into different sections. Not just pink. Brighter on the forehead, nose, chin. Darker under the eyes.’

A featureless blob replace Robert’s face. A circular hole in its centre, vibrating like a loudspeaker. Tracey blinks, and it’s gone.

‘What did you do with them?’ Mark says. ‘The lead figures.’

‘I threw them all away,’ Robert says. ‘And the rulebooks. A hundred pounds.’ He sounds pleased with himself.

‘A hundred pounds!’ Paul says. Everyone looks at him.

Robert says, ‘I only get two pounds fifty pocket money.’

‘You could always get a job.’

‘I thought there weren’t any,’ Kevin says.

Mark says, ‘Paul, what answers have you got?’

‘Politics,’ Paul says. ‘For both questions.’ He crosses his arms.

Mark waits a moment to see if he wants to say anything else, then asks, ‘Anyone else? What would you struggle to give up?’

‘Music,’ Tracey says. She nods at Kevin and taps her finger against the second button on her blouse. He grins and touches the same place on his shirt, behind which he’s wearing another band t-shirt. She can only see part of the logo. Led Zeppelin?

‘How much time do you spend on music?’ Mark asks.

‘Playing or listening?’

‘Both.’

‘More than praying or reading the Bible,’ Tracey says. ‘More than the telly. It’s probably the most important thing in my life—other than God. And it feels ... separate from Him. Not necessarily opposed, just separate.’

‘God speaks to me through music,’ Robert says.

‘The question isn’t always: what do I have to give up?’ Mark says. ‘Sometimes it’s better to ask: how can I use this to serve God?’

‘Like David in the Psalms,’ Robert says.

Mark asks him, ‘What did you write down, for the second question?’

‘What’s the one thing I *don’t* want to do?’ Robert says. ‘The most difficult thing. The thing I’m most scared of.’ He slaps the cover of his Bible. ‘Tell everyone at school about my faith.’ He pauses. ‘Therefore, I’m going to do it.’

Mark puts his hands together and leans forward. ‘How?’

‘I can ask to speak at an assembly.’

‘You ... could do that.’ Mark’s taken aback. He normally has to push people; he’s not used to them getting ahead of him. ‘I think it’s a good idea,’ he says. He’d just prefer if it was someone other than Robert who’d had this idea. He adds, ‘We can pray for you.’

Kevin gives up trying to escape from the sofa cushions and sinks back into oblivion; Paul has his hand over his eyes. They both go to the same school as Tracey and Robert.

Sandy and Helen are whispering to each other again. Tracey notices some writing on the wall where there’s a ripped corner of wallpaper. It’s quite small, but it reads, MELANIE FANCIES CHICKEN SKIN. Who’s Melanie?

Tracey can’t say some things aloud. Things like: Please God, don’t hurt Mark’s beautiful face. And then there are other things, which have to be said, no matter how painful it is.

She holds her hand up like Mark does in church when he’s singing praises. Everyone stops talking. ‘If God told my dad, “Kill your daughter,”’ Tracey says, ‘he’d reply, “Take me instead. Kill me instead. I’ll die before I kill her.”’

She looks at Mark, but she’s talking to Robert. She says, ‘I’ll stand there with you. I’ll speak with you.’

Chapter 4: Tracey

Tracey presses the bell. BING; BONG. Tinkling metal chimes.

Robert never has any visitors—apart from her, and she never steps inside for longer than a few minutes. She feels too self-conscious, as if the rooms are larger on his side of the garden fence; as if there's an echo when she speaks. But today she's not going in, just ringing the bell to let Auntie Rose know she's here.

She walks round to the far side of the house, where there's a tall set of wooden gates blocking the driveway, next to a smaller pedestrian gate. Behind the gates, farther down the driveway, she can hear locks being turned on the back door, which opens from the kitchen onto the driveway. Auntie Rose is singing, 'LA CUCARACHA, LA CUCARACHA, PLAY IT ON YOUR OLD GUITAR-CHA!'

She always sings the same lines. She's tone-deaf.

When the door's open, Auntie Rose stands on the threshold for a second and rubs her hands together. 'Brrr!' she says. Then she walks down the driveway to open the side gate for Tracey. She's wearing her apron because she's making a pot of tea for Robert and herself.

Tracey tries to avoid drinking Auntie Rose's tea. Loose leaves. She has to pick them off her tongue with her fingertip. 'Good morning Auntie Rose,' she says.

'How are you today, Tracey?'

'Very well thank you. Did you watch the ice skating last night?'

'Oh wasn't it *beautiful*. I was so pleased they won.' But she doesn't look pleased.

She keeps rubbing her hands together. She says, 'I'm concerned about something.'

'What?'

‘You can’t have your drums in the garage any more.’

‘Okay. Why not?’

Auntie Rose slides the two bolts at the top and bottom of the gate back in place behind Tracey. ‘The noise upsets Edward,’ she says.

Tracey doesn’t believe this. Uncle Edward doesn’t have emotions. But maybe Tracey’s daily practice wakes him up. ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ she says.

‘Yes,’ Auntie Rose says. ‘So you’ll have to move them.’

Tracey tries not to scowl. ‘When do you want me to do that?’

‘Today.’

She waits a second, and says, ‘Can I practice now? I’ll move them after school.’

‘Well ... alright.’ Auntie Rose removes a Yale key from her apron pocket. She holds it out in the air between them for a second before she hands it over.

It was a condition when her dad bought the drums: she can’t use them inside the house. And her garage is full of her mum’s stuff. Her dad doesn’t even keep the car in there. So every day, when she gets up, Tracey does her *Daily Bread* reading and quiet time, has breakfast, and then comes through to Robert’s garage at about the same time that he’s eating, several metres away. She practices for twenty minutes. Then she knocks on the kitchen door to give the key back. When Robert’s finished his breakfast, he then repeats her journey the other way round.

Today it’s foggy, and there’s frost on the ground. It’s difficult practising on winter mornings, because there’s no bulb in Robert’s garage, so it’s gloomy as well as freezing. In one corner, there are garden things: gloves, secateurs, a metal watering can, and a rusty manual lawnmower, which her dad heaves backwards and forwards across the tiny front and back gardens for Auntie Rose. Why doesn’t Robert do that?

The drums are in the middle of the concrete floor, on a few yellow sheets of the *Echo*, spread out to cover an oil stain. Which means there must have been a car in here once. Didn't Uncle Edward used to run a petrol station?

She sits down on the stool, and checks the kit. Bass, snare, tom; a ride and crash cymbal, a hi-hat with a floor pedal. She usually listens to something on her Walkman, and tries to drum along. Today, it's 'Blue Monday', which is impossible, but that's why it's interesting.

Robert seems to think that Larry Mullen, Jr of U2 is Tracey's favourite drummer. But if he'd ever thought to ask, he'd know it's Stephen Morris of Joy Division and New Order. Listening to their records, she can't tell which bits are Morris copying machines, and which bits are machines copying Morris.

From back issues of the *NME* and *Melody Maker*, she knows that Joy Division's producer, Martin Hannett, made Morris record each drum part separately, in isolation, but Morris couldn't stop himself hitting the missing rhythms out on his legs; he had bruises after every session. She knows that the weird cymbal on the long version of 'She's Lost Control' isn't a cymbal at all, but the pressurised hiss of an aerosol nozzle, which Morris squirted into a microphone in time to the music. She knows that 'Blue Monday' is programmed on a drum machine. And she knows from *Top of the Pops* that when New Order play it live, Morris abandons his kit and fiddles about with synthesisers. So there's no way for Tracey to reconstruct the drum pattern by watching him move. Instead, she has to play the original recording on her Walkman in snatches of a few seconds, rewinding the same section over and over again.

Like the VCR with a comedy sketch.

‘Blue Monday’ opens with a kick drum. She wasn’t sure at first, because the compression makes the pitch seem higher. But yes, it’s a kick, from the lower body. Except there’s no twitching foot on the record—only hers, here in the garage.

DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

It doesn’t even sound that fast, until you try and copy it. Maybe if she had two pedals, but one foot can’t keep up. Especially today, when she can see her breath, and she’s bloated with boots and a puffa jacket. Last winter, she tried drumming in fingerless gloves. But it’s better when the sticks touch skin. And the blood gets moving in her hands soon enough. She can see her fingers getting redder.

DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

The same pattern when the synth comes in, but it changes when the bass starts. Or rather, it moves down in the mix, and a new rhythm comes in on top. Much simpler: kick, snare, hi-hat. Clear, separate movements, like Morris in the studio, playing for Hannett.

About one minute in, all the instruments drop out except for a fill on the hi-hat, then when the song comes back, there’s a new drum sequence, and the impossible rhythm disappears. For the rest of the song, which is over seven minutes long, the basic beat’s the same. There are flourishes and fills, but they’re bolted on top: new sequences, not changes to the core pattern underneath.

After playing along for a couple of minutes, Tracey hits the stop button and rewinds the tape. Go back to the impossible bit, which helps her to think about another impossible thing. In about an hour and a half, she and Robert are going to speak to the upper-school assembly.

DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

The Brethren believe in witnessing. Many evening meetings involve testimonials, in which believers describe how they first came to experience God's love and forgiveness. Faith is a story. You tell it to yourself; then you tell it to other people. And when they hear your story, it confirms their own.

It starts in darkness. Separation from God, the depths of depravity. Persecuting Christians; trading slaves. Alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution. Tracey doesn't know any drug addicts or prostitutes, but Mr Harris was an alcoholic. He wasn't allowed to take communion, and everyone used to watch his mouth and hands when the cup came round.

Then there's Robert's dad.

DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

She hasn't even had sex, but she can still plumb the depths of depravity, inside her own heart. FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD. THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE.

Yes, but the story's better if you met God on the road to Damascus. A flash of lightning, dividing before from after. Mark found God in the Falklands. An explosion and a shipwreck. He definitely has the best testimony in church. He can even show where the devil tried to snatch hold of him.

Tracey can't find her lost self, no matter how often she rummages through her past. As far back as she can remember, she's been surrounded by God's love. Waiting together, in silence, in the morning meeting. Sharing the bread and the wine. She's never felt alone, or separate—until recently. Because the older she gets, and the more history she accumulates, the farther away God seems, and the more she has to fight to clear a quiet place inside for His still, small voice.

Silence; noise. And somewhere in-between: DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DA-DA-
DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

Baptism is part of the story. Go down into the water; come up clean, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Die to your old self; be resurrected in the Spirit. Communion re-enacts the story of Christ's sacrifice for all mankind, and we do it together; baptism re-enacts the story of each individual's salvation, and we do it alone.

At church, the baptistery's hidden under the floor in the evening hall. Beneath the wooden cover, there are steps leading down into it, with handrails. When there's a service scheduled, Tracey's dad stays on after the morning meeting to take the cover off, fill the pool, and turn the water heater on.

Tracey was baptised a year ago. She had to go to classes for a couple of months beforehand, but there was nothing new to discover there. At home, her dad said, 'I'm not going to interrogate you. It's not an exam you have to pass. You know when you're ready. It's between you and God.'

How DO I FEEL? Bernard Sumner asks in 'Blue Monday', because, like Uncle Edward, he's got no idea what an emotion is. A robot asking what it means to be human. He doesn't want a description; he wants instructions.

God is all around her—and He's hidden somewhere inside. A repressed memory. She thought baptism might bring it back to the surface. How DO I FEEL?

A year ago, she put on a special white robe, like a dressing gown. She stepped down into the pool, where John Cooper waited, immersed to his waist. Like entering a mouth.

The robe ballooned, and she pressed the water out from underneath before waddling her way to John. A smell of chlorine. Probably no one's ever peed in the baptistery, but someone might have a verruca.

She turned her back to John; he placed one hand on her stomach, and the other on the back of her neck. ‘Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Tracey said, and then, to make double sure, ‘I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Saviour.’

‘IF YOU DECLARE WITH YOUR MOUTH, “JESUS IS LORD,” AND BELIEVE IN YOUR HEART THAT GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, YOU WILL BE SAVED.’ John dipped her under the surface while the organ music swirled into her ear, filling it up.

She imagined Mark under the water with her, his hands on her stomach and her neck, fire and shrapnel raining down.

‘I baptise you, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,’ John said from somewhere above, through the water. A distorted voice, like Bernard Sumner’s through a vocoder. John dipped her a second time, and a third. Then raised her up, the water sucking at her arms and legs, back into the light.

Still nothing new.

DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

It’s exciting, inside the song. And she gets inside, even as, inevitably, almost immediately, the thump of her foot on the pedal falls out of synch with the stuttering drum machine.

The failure, the gap. Somehow, that’s her connection to the song. An emotional robot; a machine with a body.

How DO I FEEL? By pretending not to feel. Until she can’t stop it pulsing through her hands, gushing out between her fingers, swirling into her ear.

DUM, DUM- Click. Enough.

If she can find some place in herself, in her past, that's outside God, then maybe she can prick a hole in the barrier between her and Him—and let Him back in.

She puts her gloves back on and claps her hands to encourage the blood to keep moving. Muffled: the wool absorbs the sound. 'God, help me today to find the right words,' she says, and that sound is heavy and clear, like glass.

BING; ... BONG. Obviously Robert, because he waits several seconds before he lets go of the doorbell button. It's a game they play. Tracey waits by her front door, and tries to swing it open before he releases the BONG sound.

They walk to school every day, but they usually separate where Greenhill Road meets Heath Road. New Heys Comprehensive is spread over three sites. The lower school used to be a boys' secondary modern, and it shares playing fields with the custom-built middle school building, where Robert spends most of his time. Tracey walks on from the middle school, past the lower, and on to the upper, which used to be a girls' grammar. Her birthday's at the end of October, and Robert's is at the beginning, but she's a year older, so she's in fifth form and he's in fourth. But today's different. Because of the assembly, they both have to report to the upper-school staff room.

In the porch, Robert's wearing his snorkel parka, zipped all the way up, so she can't see his face, just the flash of the orange lining. He's still looking at the doorbell. She says, 'Auntie Rose told me I can't practice in the garage any more.'

The parka funnel swivels towards her. 'Why?'

'You tell me. Something to do with Uncle Edward.'

Robert taps his red mittens against his blue nylon parka pockets. 'I can ask her. But if she's made up her mind, it won't do any good.'

They set off. Robert falls silent, and Tracey doesn't speak either. Two prisoners heading towards their execution. At the top of Ravenstone Road, they cross over Brodie Avenue, before turning right and continuing along towards Greenhill Road.

Robert says, 'I had a dream.'

'Oh?' Other people's dreams are usually boring, like other people's illnesses.

'I was on a gameshow on telly, like that Japanese one, *Endurance*, where they have to eat cockroaches, or carry weights hanging from their goolies.' She can't see Robert's mouth, and the sound has to make its way out of the parka funnel into the cold air, like his head's one of those old gramophones with a horn instead of a loudspeaker.

'Were you reading poetry?' Dear God, please don't do that in the assembly. 'No, you can't have been,' she adds, 'because then the endurance test would be for the audience.'

He shifts his backpack up on his shoulders and says, 'I was eating myself.'

'Eating?'

'They had me tied up. On a cross.'

'Like Jesus?'

'No nails, just ropes; and laid out flat on the ground.'

'And they were filming you?'

'There was a chef with one of those white hats, holding a cleaver. He started to cut things off me.'

'Things?'

'Just toes and bits of fingers—to start with,' Robert says. 'And he had a big cauldron, with gravy and vegetables, bubbling on a fire.'

'A pot of Scouse.'

‘He threw the fingers and toes in. Splash, plop. Then the cauldron would rumble, like a stomach.’

‘Did the chef say anything?’

‘I couldn’t understand him.’

‘Was he Swedish?’ Tracey asks. ‘BORK BORK BORK!’

‘He filled a bowl, and I had to eat a few mouthfuls.’

‘I thought you were a fussy eater,’ Tracey says. When he stayed with her, he used to have dried bread and water.

‘I had to keep it down,’ Robert says, ‘and if I did, the presenter asked me if I wanted to keep going, on to the next round. Big microphone. I had to speak as loud as I could.

“Yes, I want to continue.”’

‘So you could understand what he said?’

‘No. But there was a translator.’

Tracey shuffles through the winter mush on Brodie Avenue, sliding her feet along the ground so her shoes push it up into a ridge in front of her as she goes. ‘Were there any other contestants?’

‘Two. One of either side of me.’

‘Of course.’

‘But behind me, so I couldn’t see them properly. I couldn’t turn my head because of the ropes.’

‘You had ropes around your head too?’

‘Forehead,’ Robert says. ‘So I was worried. Maybe the other two weren’t really playing, and it was all a trick. When it was their turn, they were just cutting bits off a dead pig, and making slurping noises. “Ha ha! You divvy. There’s no prize either!”’

‘Do we have to talk about this? Shouldn’t we go over what we’re going to do in the assembly?’

‘They started with fingers and toes; then they moved up my arms and legs.’

‘Weren’t you bleeding?’

‘They moved the ropes as well, for a tourniquet.’

‘Robert, this is really disgusting.’

The funnel points down at the floor. ‘I have to tell you. I don’t want to.’

‘Okay. But hurry up, because we’ll be at Kevin and Paul soon.’

Over the last couple of weeks, they’ve all started to meet up at the junction where Brodie Avenue turns into Greenhill Road, by the lollipop lady. Kevin lives down in Cressington, but comes up by Whitehedge Road; Paul lives farther along Long Lane, near the church. She can already see the two of them in the distance: shoulders hunched, hands in pockets. Kevin waves when he sees her looking in his direction.

‘When they get to my elbows and knees,’ Robert continues, ‘they stop. And they move the knife up to my face. The presenter’s in front of me; someone holding my mouth open. The presenter says, “Do you want to continue?” A knife in my mouth; they’re going to cut my tongue out. What am I gonna do then? How am I going to keep playing?’

‘And then the presenter’s gone, and Jesus is there, but they’re crucifying Him properly, so he’s up in the air in front of me. And until then, I feel sick, but I’m not scared. But now I’m trapped. And just before the knife cuts into my mouth, I shout, “Do it to Him! Do it to Him instead!”’

Robert’s still looking at the floor. He slows down to step over a puddle.

‘It’s only a dream,’ Tracey says. ‘Don’t you remember what Mark said? We’re not responsible for our dreams. It’s not a sin.’ The funnel turns towards her and she can see Robert’s furrowed eyebrows inside.

Ah, right. Mark was talking about boys having wet dreams. He didn’t say so, but he had a nudge nudge, wink wink tone in his voice. And Kevin blushed. She says, ‘I think dreams are just our brain, sorting through stuff.’

‘Not in the Bible,’ Robert says. ‘Dreams are about the future, not the past.’

‘Some dreams. The ones from God. I don’t think this one’s from God.’

Robert’s slowed to a crawl, but he can’t put off the rendezvous with Kevin and Paul forever.

They’re both in uniform, but they belong to different armies. Kevin’s is simpler: shoulder-length greasy brown hair, Dr Marten’s boots and a leather biker jacket with zips and studs. Paul’s is much more elaborate: a white Fred Perry tennis shirt, a cashmere Pringle V-neck, drainpipe Farah trousers, and white Adidas trainers. His tie is done up backwards so the thin part is at the front, with only a few inches visible, and the rest of it tucked away inside the tennis shirt. Over all this, he’s wearing a fishtail Merton parka, with a giant Who target on the back, and badges on the lapel for The Jam and The Specials.

Robert has a badge too: it says, JESUS SAVES.

There are a few other rockers in school, so Kevin’s got a tribe outside of church friends, but Paul’s the only remaining mod, which is why he makes the effort. Though surely mods aren’t supposed to have a perm and highlights?

Kevin asks Robert, ‘What are you going to do? In the assembly.’ He’s in the lower sixth with Paul, so they don’t have to go, but they’re going to sit at the back today to show their support.

‘He doesn’t want to talk about it,’ Tracey says.

‘No rehearsals,’ Robert says.

‘Ah, I forgot,’ Kevin says.

‘BUT WHEN THEY SHALL LEAD YOU, AND DELIVER YOU UP,’ Robert says, ‘TAKE NO THOUGHT BEFOREHAND WHAT YE SHALL SPEAK, NEITHER DO YE PREMEDITATE.’

‘Do you memorise this stuff?’ Paul asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t that kinda like rehearsing?’

Kevin laughs, but Robert doesn’t join in. Instead, he holds up a mittened hand to forbid any further questions.

‘He’s going first,’ Tracey says, ‘then me.’ That way she can do damage control if Robert spazzes out.

‘How did you get the teachers to agree?’ Paul asks.

‘Are you kidding?’ Tracey says. ‘They love it. Kids doing their jobs for them. They hate assembly too.’

Kevin says, ‘Just so you know, we might not walk in with you tomorrow. Depends how it goes.’

‘You’re assuming the Rapture won’t take place before then,’ Tracey says.

‘Yes,’ Kevin says. ‘I am.’

These are her friends, but they’re going to disappear in the assembly hall. They’re already wearing camouflage. How DO I FEEL? Like all the instruments are being recorded separately, and she’s beating out the missing rhythms on her own body.

DUM, DUM, DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-DA-

‘Where do you practice your guitar?’ she asks Kevin.

‘At home, in the attic.’

‘The attic?’ She imagines a ladder leading up to a trapdoor in the ceiling.

‘It’s like another level. The stereo’s up there too.’

‘Don’t your mum and dad mind the noise?’

‘They’re two floors down with the telly turned up,’ Kevin says.

‘Do you think I could keep my drums at yours? I need to move them. I can’t play at mine.’ She glances at Robert, who says nothing.

‘Fine by me,’ Kevin says. ‘We could practice together. I’ll ask my dad.’

Chapter 5: Robert

A sea of faces; rising, falling; surging, breaking apart. The advancing and receding hiss, the murmur and the chatter. Robert lets this sea swallow him: Jonah in the belly of the whale. And like the whale, all those empty mouths will vomit him out.

He puts his hands over his ears. There's a sea inside him too: his head is a conch shell. Concentrate.

A FINGER OF FUDGE IS JUST ENOUGH TO GIVE THE KIDS A TREAT.

Don't stop, because there's something else, trapped with him deep in the belly of the whale; something scuttling out from inside the conch, unfolding itself.

Damn and bloody. Shit, fuck.

A FINGER OF FUDGE IS JUST ENOUGH UNTIL IT'S TIME TO EAT.

It can't get out if he drowns it in babble. It can't come in if he doesn't leave any space for it to enter. The problem is, there's no space for him to think either. He swallows, tries to swallow again with a dry mouth.

Jesus is shit. Fuck Jesus.

IT'S FULL OF CADBURY GOODNESS, AND VERY SMALL AND NEAT.

He told Tracey about his dream, but he didn't tell her everything. As the knife went into his mouth, words gushed out in a mixture of blood and water. Terrible words, whose monstrous shapes lurk now, waiting to form themselves again, and take possession of his tongue.

A FINGER OF FUDGE IS JUST ENOUGH TO GIVE THE KIDS A TREAT.

He's sitting next to Tracey, behind a table on the assembly stage, waiting while the upper school files in and arranges itself cross-legged in rows on the floor of the hall below.

The assistant headmaster, Miss Murphy, is on the stage too, but she stands to one side and just behind them with her arms crossed, daring anyone in the audience to question this arrangement. Robert fiddles with the zip on his parka, which he's still wearing, although he's pulled the hood down.

Robert comes to the upper school for P.E., but today it feels different. He even got to go inside before the bell rang, and look at the staff room. On the way in, the crowds broke around them, and Kevin and Paul disappeared somewhere behind in the churning foam.

Now he's inside the sea; and it's inside him.

I worship the devil. Satan is God.

JUST ONE CORNETTO, GIVE IT TO ME.

Mark said we're not responsible for our dreams. Or stray thoughts that come in. Radio waves; our mind flickers along the dial. It's only sinful if we tune in. But it's exhausting, trying to keep them out.

'Quiet, everyone!' says Miss Murphy. 'Today, two of your fellow pupils have asked to share something with you. They're going to tell you what their faith means to them. Now, this isn't a church school. Our assemblies are non-denominational.' Robert's eye zeroes in on the turban of somebody or other Siddhu, the only Sikh boy in the school, who's in Tracey's class. Wouldn't it be amazing if he converted after hearing today's assembly?

Wouldn't it be amazing if he kissed Satan on the mouth?

DELICIOUS ICE CREAM, FROM ITALY.

Miss Murphy continues, 'But we thought it would be good for you to learn about each other's beliefs. Most of you know Tracey, from 51G. And this is her friend Robert, who's in the fourth year.'

Does the presence puts these thoughts in his mind? No. Because it arrives now, and when the cone in its head moves forward to swallow him, it's like an envelope, which protects him from further attacks.

Shapes and planes. But the presence isn't a geometric figure, existing nowhere. It's a body, here.

Its skin has hardened, but still translucent: like a fingernail. It's the same size as last time, but its body is suspended in mid-air. The tips of its toes touch the edge of the stage, where the lip falls away to the floor of the hall. If it slid forward a few inches it'd be standing on the apron, with no need to defy gravity, but it doesn't seem to care about that.

The cone surrounds Robert. There's no spiral, no disk. Instead, there's a red jet, like a fountain, which gurgles out from where the disk used to be. As if the disk was a plug, which has now been removed.

OUT OF THE SAME MOUTH PROCEEDETH BLESSING AND CURSING. MY BRETHREN, THESE THINGS OUGHT NOT SO TO BE. DOTH A FOUNTAIN SEND FORTH AT THE SAME PLACE SWEET WATER AND BITTER?

'Sanctify my speech, Lord,' Robert prays.

He stands up and opens his arms. He wants to gather the crowded hall to himself, but he can't see anyone from inside the cone. The red jet waves its way towards him, twisting over itself to stop its shape from falling apart.

Robert shouts, 'WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH ME, JESUS, SON OF THE MOST HIGH GOD! I BEG YOU, DON'T TORTURE ME!'

Miss Murphy takes a step back from the table, and someone behind and beyond the cone, to Robert's left, shouts back, 'Jesus isn't here!'

‘Yes, he is,’ Robert says, hoping the audience can see him, even if he can’t see them.

Someone to his right blows a raspberry, but it’s just a sound, without a mouth. There’s nothing solid in front of him: only the presence.

I’VE GOT THOSE, CAN’T GET ENOUGH OF THOSE BLUE RIBAND BLUES.

He had some idea of roleplaying an episode from the gospels. He doesn’t mind seeing himself through invisible eyes, or Miss Murphy’s, or even through whatever the presence perceives him with. But Tracey’s rigid next to him with her eyes closed, and he can’t stand that.

BLUE RIBAND’S THE CHOCOLATE WAFER BISCUIT I ALWAYS CHOOSE.

The hall’s still there, behind the cone. People can hear him. Does he trust God, or not? He empties his mind.

Lord, fill me with your signal. Let me receive You, loud and clear.

‘U2,’ he says. Tracey opens her eyes.

‘Most of you probably know them from “New Year’s Day”. Off their third album, *War*. I like the second one, *October*. Ugly cover. Picture of the band outside, shivering. They look like they’re thinking, “What are we doing here?” Kind of like Tracey looks now.’

Robert smiles at her, and a few people in the hall laugh. The sound ripples through the cone as a kind of liquid interference. ‘What are we doing here?’ he says again, pointing to himself and Tracey.

‘When they were doing *October*, U2 were trying to understand what it means to be a Christian. Living and praying together, part of a church group called Shalom. Everyone in Shalom had a voice; some said they had to give up the band. Others said, no, use your

music for God. Meanwhile, they had to record an album, but Bono lost all his lyrics. He didn't know what to sing.

'So he went to the microphone, with nothing. That's all we ever have to offer God. But He hears us anyway. Bono sang about not knowing how to sing. It's in the titles: "I Fall Down", "Is That All?" Please help me. Get back on my feet, find the words to praise You. Make my life a sacrifice.

'The best song on *October* is called "Tomorrow". The first on side two, which just goes to show: never too late to start again. To be born again. Bono's asking Jesus, "When will you come back? Will it be tomorrow? I want to be ready." But it's about his mum too. He says he didn't know that, when he started singing. Only afterwards.

'A knock at the door.' Robert raps on the table. He skins a knuckle, but he doesn't wince. 'Jesus. But Bono's mum died, and it's the day of her funeral, and that's the knock too. Black car at the side of the road. Don't open the door. But I have to; I must. Open it to eternal life; open it to death. Because Jesus is coming, but his mum's gone forever.

'I found Jesus after my mum died,' Robert says. 'Like Bono.' He wants to add, 'Like Tracey too,' but he doesn't dare, and anyway, he doesn't know if it's true.

A voice from the hall says, 'Didn't know He was lost!'

'No,' Robert says, 'but I was.'

And now he's lost again, up here on the stage. He sucks the cut on his hand. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

The red stream from the presence leans in to kiss him. It tastes like cherry liquorice, but he doesn't know a jingle for that. And then it tastes of metal, like his bloody knuckle. A hard finger, forcing its way down his throat. But he can't spit it out. It's already part of him, and it's leaking out of his mouth.

It's no use. He's failed. The school won't vomit him out, but there's no room in their mouths for God. No room in Robert's mouth either; he can swallow and swallow, but he can't keep God down.

'Robert, have you finished?' Miss Murphy asks.

He's trapped. But the presence is trapped too—their tongues joined together by a red rope. It says, 'I PRAYED I'D LAST UNTIL YOU CAME HOME. I DIDN'T WANT ROBERT TO BE ALONE.' The words travel up the rope, and hum against his teeth.

But he's not alone. Tracey's with him.

He turns his head to signal to her, but she's not looking at him. She stands up, and grabs the table to keep her hands still. 'The church we go to, I grew up in it,' she says, and then frowns. 'I think it's okay to go to other churches too. It's more important to know God.' She pauses. 'LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF. I used to think that meant the people in my church. But it means everyone else too.'

Robert moves his hand over her jittering fingers—and now she's connected. They're both connected—plugged-in to the presence.

Tracey says, 'I'm not going to tell you about God. I'm here to learn about Him—from all of you.' She turns to Robert. 'But I agree with everything my friend said,'

And now the words come in a gulping rush. They pulse out from his mouth back up the red stream towards the presence, and the cone vibrates to their rhythm. Robert speaks of the power of the risen Christ in his life. He speaks into darkness, but the cone amplifies his words, and the school hears him. Tracey hears him.

'God isn't cool,' he says. 'He doesn't care what clothes you wear, how popular you are. He doesn't care what music you listen to. He chooses weak people, sick people, to show His strength. He chose me.'

The cone disappears, and Robert is naked and afraid. Someone on his left sniggers. But someone on his right whistles: loud, the kind where you have to put two fingers in your mouth. Robert can tell it's meant to be supportive: Paul.

Now the presence is gone, and Robert's looking out at teachers, kids, the lines on the floor of the hall marking out a netball court, gym bars over the windows.

Interference; patterns.

Miss Murphy raises her arm to usher Robert and Tracey off the stage. On the way out, one of the other teachers, Miss Baker, grabs Robert's arm. 'Thank you,' she says. 'I wish more Christians would do the same.' She shakes his hand.

He takes it back, but it doesn't stay empty for long. Somebody worms little fingers through his. A hot hand, reaching up. He looks down.

A girl. Naked. Hair shaved, skull too big for her head. Visible bones, bloated belly. 'Hello,' she says. There are crescents of blood where her teeth meet her gums; the same around the fingernails biting into the bones of his hand.

An acrid smell. Not like the boys' changing rooms, or the urinals in the bogs. More like the homeless man who gets on the 80 bus at Booker Avenue, whose encrusted clothes are part of his body. Socks stuck to his feet, armpits rotted out of his shirt. But the girl has no clothes.

Robert holds his nose with his free hand, but nobody else reacts. Except maybe Tracey, who looks queasy, and moves her own hand to cover her mouth.

'Hello,' the girl says again, squeezing his fingers. 'Don't stay here. Come away with me.' When he shakes her off, she laughs and says, 'I wish more Christians would do the same.'

‘Robert, you can go back to the middle school now,’ Miss Murphy says as they reach the foyer, ‘they know you’re going to be late. I hope that all went okay for you. It wasn’t quite ... what I was expecting. But it was fine.’

‘Are you okay?’ Tracey asks, but she’s looking at something behind him. Robert turns, expecting to see the presence, but it’s only Kevin and Paul, filing out with the crowd. Kevin pulls his jacket open on one side and uses it to screen his hand, with which he makes a thumbs-up gesture at Tracey. Paul grins.

‘Yes,’ Robert says, trying not to breathe in, even though the girl’s now skipping a couple of steps ahead. ‘I’ll maybe see you after school.’

‘I’ve got to move my drums,’ she says. ‘So I’ll stop in and say hello.’

Outside the foyer, the girl leads him on. ‘Don’t come too close,’ he says when they reach the upper-school gates. ‘Unless you want me to be sick.’

The presence smells too, but that’s different. Its sickly-sweet odour reminds him of things changing from one state to another: of transformation. But the girl reeks of neglect. He asks her, ‘Will it come back?’

‘It? Probably. How should I know?’

He zips up his hood. ‘Aren’t you cold?’

‘I’m used to it,’ she says, shivering.

He says to her, ‘Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Son of God?’

‘Sure,’ she says. ‘Why not?’

There’s an unforgiveable sin: HE THAT SHALL BLASPHEME AGAINST THE HOLY GHOST HATH NEVER FORGIVENESS. Mark thinks it means accepting Christ, then denying Him; or saying His miracles come from the devil. But if you’re worried about the unforgiveable sin, it means you haven’t committed it.

Robert's not convinced. Maybe it isn't something you say. Because he can fight against words, forming in his head, but there's something below the words. Biting and tearing and chewing. Something that's standing in front of him now.

The girl says, 'Have you got anything to eat? I'm hungry.'

He rummages in his parka pocket and pulls out a squashed Club biscuit, which looks as though it's been there for a while. The outer wrapper's missing. He holds it out to her.

She looks at it for a second, but grabs his hand instead. A silver wink as the chocolate falls to the floor. Before he understands what's happening, she brings his scabbed knuckle up to her lips and licks the coagulated blood. He snatches his hand back.

She says, 'I wish more Christians would do the same.'

Chapter 6: Robert

Wings, eyes, wheels. Multiplying faces. That's what angels are made of.

Some angels: the ones in dreams and visions. But when they appear in person to deliver a message, they're anonymous, man-shaped outlines. Not tall or short; thin or fat. No distinguishing features at all, except shining clothes, or a drawn sword.

Robert is kneeling on the floor by the side of his bed, with both his Bibles and a concordance laid out on the duvet in front of him. It's not a comfortable position. The bed has storage drawers in the bottom part, which means it's quite tall, so he has his elbows propped up on the duvet at chest height. He holds his wrists together, as if they're tied. He can't keep his palms pressed flat against one another, because it's impossible to turn the pages that way, but wrists are the next best thing.

His hands hover like flapping wings.

Other angels are invisible, or they don't seem to have a body at all. They speak out of nowhere, and their words alone constitute their presence: or rather, God's words. A messenger, but also the medium through which the message travels. If angel lips, teeth, tongue congeal around God's words, then flesh doesn't shape speech; speech shapes flesh.

Robert looks up at the bare light bulb, and out towards the black windows, which, because of his position close to the floor, only reflect the bulb and ceiling back at him. Curtains open, no lampshade: he doesn't like to block light. Or darkness.

He's at the centre of the room, under the hanging cord of the bulb, his rigid back parallel to its plumb line. Around the walls are a bookcase, a wardrobe, and, near the door, an old kitchen table with model aeroplanes in various states of assembly. There's a bench tucked under the table: the only place to sit other than the bed.

He stands, and reaches up to tap the bulb. It swings back and forth, casting shadows.

Robert's King James Bible is bound in black. The leatherette cover has lines and seams. If his hands are sweating, his palms stick to its surface, and he has to peel the book off his skin. The pages are thin, almost translucent, and in the text, whenever Jesus speaks, the words are printed in red. His New International Version is different: a flimsy card cover with an abstract, colour pattern, but the pages are thicker than the King James, so the book's harder to carry in his hand. The concordance is Mark's: an oversize hardback that falls open wherever you want it to, and stays that way; whereas the Bibles clam shut unless he bends the pages back, so they're splayed face-down on the bed.

He rubs a fold of the duvet cover between his fingers. A recent innovation for Auntie Rose, who still has piles of blankets in the chest on the landing, just in case. Robert doesn't like the way in which the Bibles sink down into the puffy quilt. Like they're nestled in fat.

The bed is trying to digest them.

He flicks through the KJV to Isaiah, in which the seraphim, who sit around the throne of God, have six wings: two to cover their faces, two to cover their feet, two to fly with.

Outside the bedroom door, Uncle Edward is huffing and puffing up the stairs, giving plenty of warning of his arrival.

From Isaiah, Robert flips to the back of the Bible, and the FOUR LIVING CREATURES in Revelation. They also have six wings, and their song of praise to God is the same one that the seraphim sing. But they have eyes all over their heads, bodies, wings—like chickenpox.

Uncle Edward pauses for a few seconds at the turning of the stairs, where there's a small landing, and gathers himself for the final steps. He stops again on the larger landing at the top, breathing through his mouth. As if he's about to knock on Robert's door. But he goes into the bog instead.

The pages whirr through Robert's fingers as he moves from book to book: backwards, forwards; up, down and across the twin columns of words.

Ezekiel has creatures with wings and eyes too—they also have multiple faces, and a wheel made of topaz, which moves parallel to their bodies. Maybe this is how angels appear in heaven. But when they come down to earth, they adopt the form of a man.

In the bog, Uncle Edward sits down. The tiled walls act as an amplifier. THPPTHPH. THTHPPBH. PFFT. PBPP. PHT.

The bulb has stopped moving above Robert, and as he leans over the Bible pages, his shadow falls on them. He closes his eyes and rubs his wrists together. He can't imagine what any of the Biblical creatures look like. He can see isolated details, but the bodies won't come into focus as a unified whole, which means they can't move, in his imagination. He can't articulate their various parts.

PWRPP. PFB. A splash, a groan. The toilet seat creaks.

The creatures in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation all seem to have similar components. An empty torso. Rummage around in a box of assorted wings, heads, wheels. Pick up a sticker sheet of eyes. Peel them on and off.

The toilet flushes.

The presence has no wings, no eyes, no wheels. No face either. It does have a human shape—like the angels who deliver messages. But its body changes every time it appears, like the creatures in the visions.

Maybe angels adapt their bodies to our senses and imaginations. And wings and eyes and wheels had some specific meaning for Isaiah and Ezekiel and John.

As for the girl, Robert doesn't want to remember her body. He avoids looking at it. If he had wings, he'd cover his eyes.

Uncle Edward's in the bathroom now, slippers slapping the lino.

When angels come in person to deliver a message, the message is personal too. For that individual alone. But when they appear to prophets in visions, it's for the church, or the nation of Israel. Is the message from the presence just for Robert, or is it for Tracey and Mark and Jenny too?

Uncle Edward puts the plug in the sink. The radiator gurgles as the taps gush. The water'll be hot now, because the central heating only went off an hour ago. Robert has a bath every Monday and Friday night; Auntie Rose has hers on Thursday, the day before her weekly hairdresser's appointment. Uncle Edward doesn't have a regular slot.

Ezekiel eats the words of God. He chews a scroll, which tastes sweet as honey, even though it's full of LAMENTATIONS, AND MOURNING, AND WOE. In Revelation, John eats another honeyed scroll, but, he says, AS SOON AS I HAD EATEN IT, MY BELLY WAS BITTER.

We eat God, but we can't digest Him. We eat God's words, and spew them back out onto the page.

Grunt, splash. Furious rubbing.

Robert gets his Walkman, and puts the headphones on. The tape is the new Simple Minds album, which came out a couple of weeks ago: *Sparkle in the Rain*. He presses play, but tries not to listen. He doesn't want music; he wants noise.

The sink swallows dirty water. It belches.

Change me, Lord Jesus. Sound me, as Your lyre and tambourine. Pluck me; beat me.

Robert's read the entire Old Testament and New Testament twice (once in the KJV, and once in the NIV), so what's it to him if Thomas Aquinas says that angels are incorruptible and immaterial? Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation don't agree. Not exactly. Robert knows what to do with tradition, with priestly vestments and stained-glass windows and departures from scripture. Strip; smash; burn.

The Bible speaks for itself; he just has to tune in to its wavelength.

But he could ask for help. God can speak through other people too.

He pulls the earphones off. Uncle Edward's still in the bathroom, but the direction of the sound's changed, so he must be standing in front of the mirror.

Robert grabs his coat and runs downstairs. He opens the door to the television room. 'I'm going to see Jenny,' he says.

Auntie Rose prunes her mouth, because she thinks Jenny wants to be his girlfriend. 'Don't you want to see *Jewel in the Crown*?' she says.

'No.'

'Well, you have to be back by ten thirty.'

'I know.' Once, he got home at ten forty-five, and had to ring the bell for ten minutes before Auntie Rose undid the bolts, quivering with anger. She didn't shout; she kept her mouth closed. She'd already taken her teeth out.

'Don't forget,' she says.

In the hallway, Robert can hear Auntie Rose pushing the insulation snake back against the bottom of the door, even though Uncle Edward's already half-way down the

stairs. He hurries to the front door, to get there before he has to speak to Edward; he pulls it shut behind him.

It's a half-hour walk to Jenny's, in the opposite direction to school. South Mossley Hill Road is a monotonous procession of semi-detached houses, one pair after another. Then Robert crosses several junctions around where Mark lives, before he turns onto Mossley Hill Road.

Jenny has a degree in theology. Robert's suspicious of this—every time you ask her a question, it's 'On the one hand, this; on the other, that'—but he's not in the mood for Mark, who seems determined to interrogate him every time they meet.

There actually is a hill on Mossley Hill Road, which runs alongside empty fields on both sides as it comes up over the summit. There are hardly any streetlights, and it almost feels like you're in the country.

Two years ago he went to a scout camp near Oban. The toilet was a pit dug in the ground with a plank over the top, on which you had to squat. But not everyone bothered. That's how he thinks of the countryside: a giant open sewer. Turds everywhere, all shapes and sizes, just waiting for you to step in them.

Nature's better at a distance, with a pavement running alongside.

He stops walking when he gets to the top of the hill. The moon's nearly dark, but the sky's clear, so he can see across the fields down towards Mark's house.

There's a horse in the field. It doesn't move; it's probably asleep. He should bring an apple next time. When he stayed in the children's home after his mum died, he had to feed the chickens.

The children's home: he automatically shifts his mind away to a different subject.

Jenny lives in Linwood House: a dilapidated mansion split into bedsits, near the university halls of residence. Jenny's been here since she was a student; she likes her neighbours. Or she likes complaining about them.

South Mossley Hill Road; Mossley Hill Road; then Jenny's on North Mossley Hill Road. Robert likes the symmetry of this route.

He waits for a few seconds at the gateway to Linwood House, to let his eyesight adjust, because there's no outside light, and all the curtains are closed in the rooms facing the street. When he gets to the front door, there's a forest of white buttons on little black boxes. Some buzzers have scribbled names; others, numbers; one or two have no identifying marks at all. Lucky dip.

Spinks.

As he pushes, there's a buzz deep inside the house. He imagines Jenny strapped to a machine, which gives her an electric shock. Aagh! He presses two more times. Aagh, aagh! There's no intercom, and it always takes her a couple of minutes to get to the door.

Robert never phones people, because he has to ask for permission from Auntie Rose, or else go round the corner to a phone box. Anyway, Jenny's house has a shared payphone on the stairs, which no one ever answers.

She doesn't want to see him. Why would she? If she's not in, it's God's will.

Jenny opens the door. She wears a dress to church, but tonight she's in green dungarees. He says, 'I can come back another time, if you're busy.'

'No, it's fine. I was just finishing marking.' He follows the backs of her bare feet up the stairs. Her soles are dirty, but so is the carpet. It's loose, and it slips under the runners if you move too fast.

‘I finished *The Odyssey*,’ he says when they’re inside her room. Jenny bought the Penguin translation as a present for his last birthday. ‘Did you finish James Joyce?’

‘That’s for me to know, and you to find out. Did you like it?’

‘Gods and goddesses. What do I do with that?’

‘Good to think with. Just think of it like *Lord of the Rings*.’

It’s a large room, with a sofa and a double bed. The sofa is covered in a paisley drape. There are several book shelves, but also piles of paperbacks on the floor. The heap nearest his foot has a dog-eared copy of *Militant* newspaper on top. The headline reads LIVERPOOL COUNCIL ... STOP TORY ATTACKS! Robert still has his hands in his coat pockets, but he lifts one leg off the floor and pokes the front page with the toe of his Dunlop Green Flash. ‘Were you on strike today?’

‘Half-term. Not much point.’

‘But you would be, if school was on.’

Jenny folds her arms. ‘Yes.’

‘Our MP’s David Alton,’ Robert says. ‘He’s a Catholic.’ Which makes him the enemy, sometimes. But not compared to Derek Hatton, the public face of the council. Robert studies the photo on the front page of *Militant*. ‘He looks like a spiv.’

‘Do you know many spivs?’ Jenny turns the newspaper over, so the photo’s not showing. ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’

‘Four sugars please. No, hang on. None.’

While Jenny’s gone to the shared kitchen, Robert looks at the poster on the wall above the gas fire. It show’s a woman’s face, floating in front of a watery background. It’s for a film called *Nostalghia*, spelt that way because it has subtitles. He takes off his coat and

sits down on the edge of the sofa. He rolls a pinch of the nylon drape between his finger and thumb. What's Jenny hiding under here?

She comes back with two grubby mugs: the sink in the kitchen's usually full of unwashed plates. As she places their drinks down, her neighbour knocks.

'Phone for you,' he says in a continental accent. As Jenny passes him on the way out, he adds, 'Dave.' That's Jenny's boyfriend. They both work at St. Margaret's—an Anglican school. The neighbour looks down his nose at Robert, and says to Jenny, 'I covered for you. This time.'

While she's gone, Robert sips his tea, which tastes bitter without the sugar. He gets up to have a flick through her LP collection, which is stacked to the left of the fire. Mark's the same age as Jenny, and his music's all from yonks ago: Pink Floyd, Yes, Genesis. But Jenny's is all over the place: Marvin Gaye and The Clash; Joni Mitchell and The Raincoats; folk albums by Fairport Convention and electronic music by Brian Eno.

When she comes back, he asks, 'Why isn't it alphabetical?'

'I like surprises,' she says. Then she adds, 'I think that's the first time Eduardo's ever answered the phone.' She takes off her Lennon glasses and scowls as she polishes the lenses. 'I *covered* for you. I don't know what he imagines I'm doing in here with a schoolboy.'

Robert looks at the double bed. 'Does Dave mind?' He's quite pleased at this thought.

'Why would he?'

Robert takes a slurp of tea. 'Angels don't marry,' he says.

'Nor do I. Not at the moment.'

'Have you ever seen one?'

‘An angel? No. Have you?’ She laughs.

Robert waits for a second, and says, ‘When the apostle John sees a vision, or Ezekiel, where is that?’

‘Oh, okay. We’re being serious.’

‘I’m always serious. The seraphim sing God’s praises. In heaven.’

‘So one assumes.’

‘Then there’s the Whore of Babylon, drunk on the blood of the saints, riding a beast with ten horns and seven heads. She doesn’t sit in God’s presence. So where’s she?’

‘Symbols. Of Rome, empires. Avatars.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘In Hinduism, it’s a manifestation of a god on earth.’

Robert says, ‘I don’t see how that’s relevant.’

‘Or in Catholicism, Mary appears in different aspects. Our Lady of Sorrows.’

‘Again, not relevant.’

‘Well, this is the same, but in reverse. The manifestation of an earthly reality in heaven. Like a projection. I always imagine John in a darkened cinema, eating popcorn. Armies, battles. Goodies and baddies. Big budget, widescreen. An angel sitting next to him, explaining everything.’

‘So it’s not real?’ Robert asks.

‘It’s an allegory.’

‘But the angels are real.’

Jenny says, ‘Christ has avatars too. In Revelation, He has stars in his hand, a sword coming out of his mouth. And medieval people prayed to His wounds.’

‘His wounds?’

‘Bits of bodies. That was normal, because of saints. Churches full of relics. Connecting earth and heaven.’

Robert can’t process this, so he returns to the previous point. ‘Jesus left His earthly body behind, after the resurrection. So He can appear how He wants. Can angels do that too?’

Jenny rubs her forehead. ‘Maybe they put different bodies on like a set of clothes.’

‘But when an angel appears in a vision, it’s really somewhere else, not there with you?’

‘Or it takes you up to heaven. Then *you’re* the avatar.’

‘But angels can be there in person too. So how do you know it’s actually there, physically there?’

Jenny shakes her head.

He puts his mug down and picks up his coat. ‘I’m going to go home now.’

‘You don’t have to. If you want to talk more.’

He looks at the poster on the wall. The water behind the floating head reminds him of the presence and the assembly. He says, ‘I have to be back by ten thirty.’

He should have asked Jenny about THE ANGEL OF THE LORD. It stops Abraham from killing Isaac, but then suddenly God’s there, speaking in His own voice. When Tracey pointed that out, Robert borrowed Mark’s concordance and found other appearances by the same angel. For example, to Moses in a burning bush. But when the bush speaks, it says, I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHER, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, THE GOD OF ISAAC AND THE GOD OF JACOB.

Other times, the switch is only revealed afterwards. When the Angel of the Lord speaks to Samson's parents, it ascends to heaven in the flames of a burnt offering, but then Samson's father says, WE SHALL SURELY DIE, BECAUSE WE HAVE SEEN GOD.

The Angel of the Lord has no name. Whenever it appears, it also disappears, but the disappearance happens when no one's looking, in-between the words on the page. A scratch and skip on the record. And the angel is the record. But it's also the living presence of God. Like listening to John Peel on the radio—then, suddenly, he's in the room with you.

At the top of Mossley Hill Road, Robert extends his arms like the wings of a plane. He runs down the hill, and as the gradient increases, he loses the rhythm of his steps, until he can feel the impact of the pavement all the way up to his knees. He stops again near the bottom of the hill, doubled over, gasping. Acid breath.

He's near Mark's house. The curtains are open, and Mark's standing with his back to the window. A dumbbell in each hand: up, down; up, down.

Back to a fast walk.

Jacob wrestles an angel. Hours and hours. No progress: blocked. It can't win, so it dislocates his hip, but he won't let go. Finally, the angel gives him a blessing, and after it leaves, Jacob says, I HAVE SEEN GOD FACE TO FACE, AND MY LIFE IS PRESERVED.

Robert has to make the presence reveal its message. Step inside the vision; put his hands around its throat. Take the blessing; smear it on his face—like the Passover blood on the doorpost.

He doesn't know what he's supposed to do about the girl.

Chapter 7: Robert / Tracey / Robert

On the six o' clock news, there's more on the miners' strike. Pickets and police. Robert doesn't think much of the pushing and shoving, the beer bellies and pasty faces. He's on the side of the man alone, walking into work through a hail of jeers. Always the individual; never the group.

Except in church. Except in Mark's home group. Except in heaven.

Why don't the miners just take the redundancy pay; get a different job? Leave.

Never come back.

At New Heys, ninety per cent of the kids stop after O-levels and CSEs. But Mr Higgins the art teacher told Robert he could stay on, and then go to Art College. Robert's dad joined the merchant navy at sixteen and worked his way up from able seaman. He doesn't think much of students. Engineering might be okay; law. But art?

Uncle Edward says, 'You're nothing, if you don't stand by your mates.'

Robert and Auntie Rose look at him. What mates? Uncle Edward used to own a garage.

The phone rings in the morning room. Normally, Auntie Rose won't answer in the evening, but it keeps going. After a minute, she says to Robert, 'Are you expecting anyone?'

'No,' he says, without taking his eyes off the screen.

She tuts and goes through. Robert can hear her clear her throat and pause before she picks up the receiver, to put on her phone voice. 'Hellloo?' Silence for a few seconds. 'Mmm,' she says, then, 'I didn't get a cheque.' More silence, before she calls out, 'Robert! It's your dad!'

He stands up, but pauses to adjust the antimacassar on the back of the sofa. It falls off otherwise. He keeps looking at the screen as he sidles towards the door. He's not that interested in the miners' strike, but it's a way to stay calm; keep his mind elsewhere.

In the morning room, Auntie Rose hands him the phone.

'Son,' his dad says, then falls silent.

Robert squashes the receiver between his cheek and shoulder, and presses his stomach against the edge of the sideboard. 'Hello?'

Breathing down the line. 'How are you?' his dad asks.

Pause. 'I'm watching the news.'

His dad speaks over him. 'I'm fine. I'm ... on holiday.' The voice sounds tiny: a homunculus inside the phone.

'I've got to go next door in a minute, to watch a film,' Robert says. 'Where are you?'

'I'll see you soon.'

'Alright.'

His dad says, 'I love you.'

Robert holds the phone away from his ear, as if his dad's shouting. He waits until he can hear the distant dial tone, then puts the receiver down.

*

'*Time Bandits*, or *The Thing*?' Kevin holds a video cassette in each hand.

'*The Thing*,' Paul says.

'*Time Bandits*,' Robert says.

'*Time Bandits*,' Tracey says. 'Because it's my dad next door who's going to walk in at the worst possible moment.' Kevin's being clever. Obviously they're not going to watch *The Thing*, which has an eighteen certificate.

He pushes the cassette into the VCR. 'Trailers?'

'No,' Paul says.

Tracey's about to say 'Yes,' but Kevin's already hit fast forward.

Crackly white slashes speed across the screen. When the picture goes black again just before the main film starts, Kevin switches back to play and sits down.

Paul has a bass guitar, so Kevin asked him to join in for their Friday night practice sessions. For the last two weeks they've watched a video at Kevin's afterwards, but Tracey's feeling guilty about leaving Robert out, so tonight they're all crammed on the sofa in the front room at her house. Paul on the left, then Tracey, Kevin, and Robert on the right.

On the television, a boy lies down in bed and closes his eyes. His wardrobe rattles. 'There's a lion and a witch in there,' Kevin says.

The wardrobe door creaks ajar. The boy's eyes open as a dwarf in a pilot's helmet with a monocle steps out, followed by a succession of other dwarves, like a conjuror pulling coloured scarves out of a hat.

The boy turns a torch on. Pandemonium. IT'S A KID! The dwarves push him up against the wall in a threatening half-circle.

The wall gives way. It doesn't collapse: it shifts backwards in one piece, like the entrance to a secret passage in a castle. PUSH! The wall keeps moving, creating a tunnel.

A whoosh and a crack of thunder from the wardrobe. Low-budget, tinsel magnificence. HE'S FOUND US! A giant, disembodied head appears. It says, RETURN WHAT YOU HAVE STOLEN FROM ME! Creepy, booming: RETURN THE MAP!

The boy and the dwarves keep pushing the wall, until it falls out the end of the tunnel, into empty space. They follow it over the edge, down into nothing, accompanied by a confetti pop of paper.

‘Wait, wait,’ Robert says, placing himself in front of the television.

Kevin cups his hands around his mouth. ‘Return the remote control!’

‘It’s right by you,’ Tracey says.

Robert waves like someone flagging down a car. ‘Was that supposed to be God?’

Kevin pushes pause, but he can’t get the film to stop because Robert’s in the way.

On the screen, a black trapdoor opens in the sky and the dwarves fall out. Kevin sticks his arm out to bounce the signal around Robert, and the dwarves freeze, flickering backwards and forwards in mid-air.

‘Was that supposed to be God?’ Robert asks again.

‘Sort of,’ Kevin says.

‘I don’t like it. You can’t do that.’

‘It’s not really God.’

‘Like Brian isn’t really the Messiah?’ Tracey suggests.

‘He’s not,’ Kevin says. ‘HE’S A VERY NAUGHTY BOY.’

Paul laughs.

‘Have you even seen *Life of Brian*?’ Kevin asks. ‘They’re at the Sermon on the Mount, standing at the back. They can’t hear what Jesus says. BLESSED ARE THE CHEESEMAKERS. It’s not about God. It’s about religion.’

‘We’re not watching *Life of Brian*,’ Tracey says, although she was the one who brought it up.

‘But *that* was God,’ Robert says, pointing at the television.

‘Not our God,’ Kevin says. ‘Not the God in the Bible.’

Tracey says, ‘*What if* there was a world with a God like this?’

Robert says, ‘You can imagine other worlds, outside this one. That’s fine. But there’s nothing outside God.’

‘Deep,’ Paul says.

‘You can’t imagine Him different than He is, because that denies His perfection.’

‘How does the film deny His perfection?’ Kevin says.

‘It’s cheap.’

‘So if there was a bigger special effects budget, that’d be okay?’

Robert says, ‘They want it to be cheap. It’s part of the joke.’

‘What does everyone else think?’

‘I don’t think God minds a joke,’ Tracey says. ‘And I think it’s my house.’ She looks at Kevin’s fingers, caressing buttons. My remote control too.

Robert tuts, but signals his surrender by sliding his palms across each other.

Wiping the responsibility off his hands, like Pontius Pilate. He sits down again. The sofa cushions humph in protest.

Play.

The boy in the film’s called Kevin too. ‘Is that why you like it?’ Paul asks. ‘Because he’s got the same name as you?’

Film Kevin and the dwarves are in Napoleonic Italy, where they meet the Emperor, who utters the first swearword of the film, a ‘bloody’. Tracey once watched a film with Mark, who has a very strict policy. More than three ‘shits’ or ‘fucks’: turn it off. More than two ‘For God’s sake’: that’s it. The worst is ‘Jesus Christ!’: no second chances at all. But this is a children’s film, so it should be okay.

The dwarf with the monocle explains to Film Kevin that GOD MADE ALL THE BIG STUFF, LIKE GOOD AND EVIL, MEN AND WOMEN, NIGHT AND DAY. AND WE DID TREES AND SHRUBS.

Robert says, 'So the dwarves are angels?'

'Shh,' says Real Kevin.

'No.' Robert corrects himself. 'Angels only deliver messages. They don't create things.'

The dwarves got the sack for designing a hideous Pink Bunkadoo tree. As A DISCIPLINARY MEASURE, WE WERE SENT DOWN TO THE REPAIRS DEPARTMENT. YOU SEE, TO BE QUITE FRANK KEVIN, THE FABRIC OF THE UNIVERSE IS FAR FROM PERFECT. IT WAS A BIT OF A BOTCHED JOB. WE ONLY HAD SEVEN DAYS TO MAKE IT. AND THIS IS THE ONLY MAP OF ALL THE HOLES.

'You've seen this before?' Robert says to Kevin.

'Yes.'

'And you're asking me what I object to?'

Paul says, 'Can we just watch the film?'

Robert stands up again. 'I'm not staying in here.'

'Okay,' Tracey says. 'Can you make us a cup of tea?' But then she remembers: her dad's working next door, and who knows what Robert will say to him. 'No, I'll do it. Can you stop the film?'

'Oh for goodness' sake,' Kevin says. A nice Christian expletive.

'Can I go and read in your room?' Robert asks.

'If you want,' Tracey says. Behind Robert's back, Paul taps the side of his head and moves his finger in a circle.

In the dining area by the kitchen, her dad is marking a set of written exercises from his students. They're covered in red pen. He teaches Quantity Surveying at the Poly, and he looks the part, even on his days off. Brown cords, grey twill shirt, knitted tie. He doesn't like to stand out: it's immodest.

'Everything okay?' he asks. He looks naked without his glasses, embarrassed to be caught blinking.

'Yeah.' She flicks the kettle on in the kitchen. 'We're watching *Time Bandits*.'

Her dad crosses out a set of figures on someone's homework. 'Oh?' He smells of coal tar soap: a big improvement on the front room, where she's trapped on the sofa between Old Spice and Hai Karate.

She looks down at her feet. 'It's about a group of dwarves who work for God. They steal a map of creation, and travel through the holes. They rob people.'

'Sounds ... colourful.'

'God's in it. As a character.'

'Right.' Her dad places his pen down and puts on his glasses.

'Is that okay?' Why's she telling him this? She might as well have sent Robert through.

'We don't have a law against depicting God.'

'I don't know how I feel about it.'

'You can make up your own mind.'

When her mum was alive, her dad was worse than Mark. No television at all, except the news and nature documentaries. But since she died, he doesn't seem to care. Or he cares about other things. Last Christmas, they even watched James Bond.

He smooths his tie down. Light blue. Plain, but still blue.

Tracey's out of mourning too. She looks down at her purple woollen tights while she's waiting for the kettle to shudder to a halt. School rules say grey or black, but nobody cares, so long as the rest of your uniform's regulation. She remembers her dad's socks on the morning of the funeral, and she wiggles her toes. 'Robert's upstairs,' she says.

'Don't leave him by himself up there.'

'I won't.'

For a second, she hates her dad. Because there's never any excuse to close the door, shut him out.

When she gets back, Robert's hovering in the downstairs hallway, pretending to read a book from her room: *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. He comes into the front room to pick up his tea. 'No sugars, right?'

'I put four in.'

He scowls. 'Fine.' He sits down in the middle of the sofa between her and Kevin, so they have to move apart.

In the Fortress of Ultimate Darkness, Evil watches the dwarves via a magic pool of water. He's not impressed by this group of STUNTED LITTLE PROLES. But he's imprisoned, and he needs the map to escape. Robert holds a page of C. S. Lewis up between himself and the screen, so he can't behold Evil.

The dwarves flee to Ancient Greece, but Film Kevin's separated from everyone else. He arrives in the middle of a fight between a warrior and a guy wearing a cow head.

Wait, no. A Minotaur. But the fight's out in the open. Where's the labyrinth?

In the final battle with Evil, the dwarves get reinforcements from all of time and history. ‘That’s a Sherman tank,’ Robert says. ‘Seventy-five millimetre gun.’ He sniffs, and turns a C. S. Lewis page.

God arrives to turn Evil to charcoal.

‘See,’ says Kevin. ‘It’s a theologically orthodox conclusion.’

Now God’s a posh Englishman in a white suit. OH, I HATE HAVING TO APPEAR LIKE THAT. IT REALLY IS THE MOST TIRESOMELY NOISY MANIFESTATION. STILL, RATHER EXPECTED OF ONE I SUPPOSE. This is much worse than the beginning of the film, but it seems pointless to turn it off now, ten minutes from the end.

‘*The Wizard of Oz*,’ Paul says. ‘Munchkins, man behind the curtain.’

‘So there’s no hell in this universe,’ Robert says.

‘Isn’t this hell?’ Tracey says. ‘The Fortress of Ultimate Darkness.’ She doesn’t know what she believes about hell. She doesn’t think Robert knows either.

‘I love this film,’ Kevin says.

Robert puts his book down.

Tracey doesn’t want them to argue, so she says, ‘We had a good practice tonight.’

‘It was okay,’ Paul says.

‘He barely plays,’ Kevin says to Robert. ‘Lets us do all the work, then adds a note or two.’

Paul flattens his hair. ‘But it makes all the difference.’

‘Does anyone sing?’ Robert asks.

This question falls into a hole of silence, until Tracey says, ‘We’re just messing about. Cover versions. We don’t need a singer.’

*

The wardrobe door creaks. Robert scrunches his eyes tight as fists. He doesn't need to look; he can smell her. 'Kevin's parents were rubbish,' she says. 'In the film.'

Robert doesn't respond.

'I don't blame him for wanting to escape; stay in Greece. Who wouldn't want to be adopted by a king?'

The quilt flips back. Breath on the back of Robert's neck. In the bed next to him, a hand snaking across his stomach. He imagines fleas, lice, mites—creeping across the sheets. The plagues of Egypt.

He reaches up and wraps his hands around the metal struts at the head of the bedstead; braces his feet against the struts at the bottom. He pushes his body backwards across the mattress, until he forces her off the edge.

A bony thud on the floor.

He sits up, still with his back to her. The light switch dangles down from a cord in the ceiling above the bed; he turns it on. Uncle Edward's in the master bedroom next door; Auntie Rose is in the little room at the end of the landing. He listens: nothing from either direction.

The girl sucks her teeth and says from the floor, 'That wasn't very nice.'

'It's *my* bed.'

'No, it's not.' She stands up; she's whispering too. 'Goldilocks.'

He can't take it any longer. He turns around.

White skin; red between her legs. A wound. Livid, raw.

'Stop looking,' she says, covering it with her hand. 'You fucking pervert.'

Smears on the rumpled bed. The sheet, his pyjama waistband, his stomach. How's he going to explain this? When he has a wet dream, he wipes the bed down with a sponge and says he peed himself. But blood?

IF ONE OF YOUR MEN IS UNCLEAN BECAUSE OF A NOCTURNAL EMISSION, HE IS TO GO OUTSIDE THE CAMP AND STAY THERE.

AND IF A WOMAN HAVE AN ISSUE, AND HER ISSUE IN HER FLESH BE BLOOD, SHE SHALL BE PUT APART SEVEN DAYS: AND WHOSOEVER TOUCHES HER SHALL BE UNCLEAN UNTIL THE EVENING.

The girl says, 'It's your fault.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't you recognise me?'

'No.'

'What was it you said, in your dream? DO IT TO HIM! DO IT TO HIM INSTEAD!'

Robert turns the light off; he doesn't want to see her any more. But she's still there.

In the darkness, a blinking disk between her legs; a bubbling stream.

She laughs, and says, 'Everyone likes picking scabs.'

Chapter 8: Tracey / Robert

The Lord's Supper. When Tracey was little, the name used to confuse her, because it's the morning meeting. For church members only: the gospel service is in the evening. There used to be two different songbooks: the *Believers' Hymn Book* for the Lord's Supper; *Redemption Songs* for the gospel. But since last year they use *Mission Praise* for both.

Her dad gets here early, to help set up. For the Lord's Supper, the pews are arranged in four sections around the sides of the table in the centre of the room. Tracey sits at the back of the hall on the side farthest from the entrance, so no one's behind her, and she can see people arrive.

Jenny Spinks is early too. She goes over to the piano. In the gospel meeting, there's a guitar and tambourines; for the Lord's Supper, it's unaccompanied singing. But you can ask for piano if you want: another recent innovation. Jenny plays a few notes to reassure herself it's in tune. Then she disappears through the double doors on the other side of the hall, out towards the entrance. Waiting for her parents to arrive.

Mrs Evans sits down alone on the front row in the section opposite Tracey, mumbling to herself. She has a hat with peacock feathers, but other women wear a beret or a kerchief. Another reason for Tracey to sit on the back row: because otherwise she imagines disapproving stares boring into the back of her naked head.

John Cooper sits down next to Mrs Evans and says something. She adjusts her hat in response. John moves around the room before he settles down. He talks to anyone who's sitting alone—except for Tracey, who he avoids.

The room's getting noisy, people catching up on the week's news before the service starts. Kevin slides in next to her. 'Didn't you come with your dad?' she asks.

‘Yeah, but I went to get a Kit Kat,’ he says, patting his coat pocket.

‘Robert didn’t knock for a lift, so he’ll probably be late,’ she says.

‘Uh huh.’

‘Where’s Paul?’

‘Derby game yesterday, so we went out.’

‘Who won?’ she asks, to be polite.

‘I-I, but that’s a good result—for Everton.’ Kevin sniffs. ‘I left early.’ He lifts an imaginary glass, and tilts it back towards his open mouth.

‘You were drinking?’ She wrinkles her nose.

‘I was a good boy.’ Kevin holds up a single finger, then points it towards himself.

‘Paul had more.’

Mark limps in with Sandy and Helen, the nurses he stays with, and sits in the section to Tracey’s left, near to her cousin Sally, who waves when Tracey looks in her direction. Sally’s nine. She should be in Sunday school, with her brother Richard, but she likes to do whatever her big cousin does. Tracey doesn’t want her to come over, so she puts her palms together and nods towards the table at the centre of the room. It’s covered with a plain white cloth. A plate with a couple of slices of white bread from Gateway, and a jug of red table wine next to an empty brass goblet.

Her dad’s sitting in the section to her right, next to Trevor Jenkins, who became an elder last year. Her dad put his name forward.

The church is full now. When everyone’s quiet, Trevor stands and says, ‘Lord, in this time of strife, we ask you to heal the wounds of our city and our nation. We meet today to remember your death and celebrate your resurrection. We are not divided. We share a

spirit of fellowship and brotherhood, because we share in your sacrifice. Help us to be the instrument of Your healing in the world around us. Amen.’

As the congregation chant the last word, Paul and Robert slip in through the doors at the back of the hall. Paul looks grey; Robert looks at his shoes. They don’t acknowledge each other.

Mark stands up and says, ‘I’d like us to sing number 13.’

Tracey flicks through *Mission Praise*: ‘As we are gathered, Jesus is here.’ One of the new, chorusey songs, only five lines long. Which means they’ll sing it through twice. Mark starts, because he chose the song.

God leads the morning meeting. The only fixed point is the sharing of the bread and wine, about fifteen minutes before the end. Otherwise, no one’s in charge; no one prepares; anyone can participate, as the Spirit moves. Anyone male, that is. Women can ask for a song, or read a Bible passage—but not speak their own words. Not presume to let God speak through them.

Silence falls again.

A cough, a sniff, a creaking pew. Jane Gibbon’s baby burbles at the back, and Jane makes a soothing noise. A gust of sleet spatters against the window to the courtyard. Sally swings her feet against the underside of the pew in front. Aunt Maggie taps her on the knee, and Sally makes a theatrical sigh. Mrs Evans blows her nose. Jane stands up and takes her baby outside.

Not music; not noise. Part of the silence.

Mark stands up again. There’s no rule about multiple contributions, but it’s not common. Easier to justify if the first one was only a song request. He opens his Bible and reads, ‘COME OUT FROM THEM AND BE SEPARATE, SAYS THE LORD.’

‘This is a fallen world. We’re called to be a light on a hill, to shine in the darkness. The light is not part of the darkness; where there is light, there can be no darkness. When we come to Christ, we leave our old lives behind.

‘The apostle Paul tells us we must obey the secular authorities. He doesn’t tell us what to do when there are two authorities, in conflict with one another.’ Mark closes his eyes.

‘What’s he talking about?’ Kevin whispers.

‘I think he means Hatton and Thatcher.’

Mark opens his eyes and looks around the room, as if he’s surprised to find himself here. ‘I’ve been in a war,’ he says.

‘Yeah, we know,’ Kevin says.

‘But now I contend with THRONES and PRINCIPALITIES in the heavenly realm. Christ won the victory for us by His death on the cross. Our struggle is to take hold of that victory and apply it in our own lives.’ Mark sometimes misjudges the mood in the morning service. He forgets he’s not speaking to a bunch of teenagers. But not today.

He sits down. Quiet again. But it won’t last. People can’t stand it for longer than a minute. How can you hear God, if you don’t shut up and listen?

Aunt Maggie says, ‘Can we sing number 233?’ Tracey picks up *Mission Praise* and joins in on the first line: ‘THERE’S A QUIET UNDERSTANDING, WHEN WE’RE GATHERED IN THE SPIRIT.’

When everyone sits down again, Paul stays on his feet. Tracey’s never heard him speak in the morning meeting before. He says, ‘I’m not as good a Christian as you lot.’ He leans on the back of the pew in front. ‘In junior school, we used to say the Lord’s Prayer every morning. HALLOWED BE THY NAME. What be thy name? FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES.

Forgive us our what?’ He runs his hand over his forehead, as if he’s dizzy. ‘Chew the words, over and over, until you can’t taste them any more. Like school dinners.’

Tracey looks at Robert, who’s looking at Paul.

‘I didn’t even know that prayer came from the Bible,’ Paul continues. ‘Where is it?’ He looks around the room, and it takes Tracey a couple of seconds to realise the question isn’t rhetorical.

Her dad says, ‘Matthew 6.’

Paul opens his Bible. It takes him a while to find Matthew, but everyone waits. Tracey can hear him turning the pages. That’s part of the silence too.

Paul moves his finger over the words. ‘It’s different here. MAY YOUR HOLY NAME BE HONOURED. MAY YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. *On earth.* What does that mean? I honestly want to know.’

He sits down.

Tracey starts counting in her head: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven--

Jenny says, ‘I Corinthians 12: 25-7.’ She doesn’t stand up, but she reads, ‘THERE SHOULD BE NO DIVISION IN THE BODY, BUT ITS PARTS SHOULD HAVE EQUAL CONCERN FOR EACH OTHER. IF ONE PART SUFFERS, EVERY PART SUFFERS WITH IT; IF ONE PART IS HONOURED, EVERY PART REJOICES WITH IT. NOW YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST, AND EACH ONE OF YOU IS A PART OF IT.’ Then she says, ‘I’m part of this church. I’m also part of this city. This country.’

John Cooper stands up and says, ‘THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU. There’ll come a time when Jesus returns, and then He’ll rule on earth. Until then, we watch and wait. And as our young friend has reminded us’—he indicates Paul, ignoring Jenny—‘we watch our hearts too. We don’t just say words, or observe outward forms. I Corinthians 11.’

Here we go.

‘BUT LET A MAN EXAMINE HIMSELF, AND SO LET HIM EAT OF THAT BREAD, AND DRINK OF THAT CUP. FOR HE THAT EATETH AND DRINKETH UNWORTHILY, EATETH AND DRINKETH DAMNATION TO HIMSELF.

‘There’s no magic. It’s not a trick. You can’t save yourself by eating the bread and drinking the wine. But you can damn yourself, by refusing to allow Christ into your heart. Mocking his sacrifice.

‘Just before this passage, Paul tells us that we eat and drink to SHEW THE LORD’S DEATH TILL HE COME.’ John pauses. ‘He also tells us about the roles of men and women in the church, but that’s by the by. It’s not a popular message nowadays.’

Kevin nudges Tracey.

‘If we eat and drink with hard hearts, we kill Christ over again. But if we allow Him to transform us, we are resurrected with Him into new life. He’s not in the bread and wine.’ John taps his chest with his index finger. ‘He’s here.’

Even before he sits down, Mrs Evans says, ‘Could we please sing number 197. Unaccompanied.’ She taps her foot, one two three, and starts the first verse, in a warbley soprano: ‘ROCK OF AGES, CLEFT FOR ME, LET ME HIDE MYSELF IN THEE.’ A survivor from the old hymnbook. Mrs Evans asks for it every other week.

When the song’s over, Tracey wants to sit and listen for God’s voice, but she can’t, knowing that someone else will break the silence for her. So she might as well do it herself. She says, ‘I Kings 19: 11-12: AFTER THE WIND THERE WAS AN EARTHQUAKE, BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE EARTHQUAKE. AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE CAME A FIRE, BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE FIRE. AND AFTER THE FIRE CAME A GENTLE WHISPER.’

Her dad’s looking at her. She hides in the pages of her Bible, but she can’t stay there forever. When she raises her eyes again, he nods.

He stands up. He holds out his copy of *Mission Praise* and says, 'Do you remember when we got this?' He looks around and smiles. 'Quite a mix-up.' People smile back. 'Lots of us liked the old hymn books. Why change?'

'It's not long now 'til Mission England. At Anfield, in July. This book was created for that; for any church that wants to take part. We made a decision. It was difficult; we talked about it. God is going to speak to our nation through Billy Graham, and we want Him to speak through us too.'

'We examined our hearts.'

'This is a Brethren church. We don't go on about it, because the name's never been important. It's what the apostle Paul calls the early Christians. But it used to be the case, years ago, if you wanted to take communion, and we didn't know you, you had to bring a letter from your home church. A recommendation, from the elders, to show you were in good standing.'

'We don't do that any more. I'm glad.'

'I examine *my* heart. Not the heart of the man sitting next to me.' He looks at Jenny. 'The woman.'

'We could say: well, okay, you don't need a letter, but there has to be a rule. Only baptised Christians. But who am I to deny someone fellowship with Christ, just because he hasn't been baptised yet?'

'We're not *against* anyone.'

'But I got caught up in tradition. And because I held on too tight, God told me to let go. So this isn't a Brethren church any more. Not for me.'

John Cooper frowns.

‘And then I discovered something: my faith’s strong enough to survive without that label. Strong enough to join with all the other Christians singing from this book today: in Liverpool; in England.

‘Not the letter of the law. The spirit.’

He continues. ‘Mission England’s at Anfield. I’ve never been there.’

‘You’re not missing much,’ Paul says. Quiet, but loud enough that everyone can hear.

Her dad smiles. ‘We all know how important football is in this city. Bill Shankly said Anfield’s a shrine; people go there to worship.

‘We don’t sit waiting for the world to come to us. It won’t. We go out, and we take the gospel into the beating heart of our city. To enthrone God, where God is not.

‘I tell myself: stop talking about “the body of Christ” when you mean “my church”. Stop talking about “my church” when you mean “the body of Christ”.’ Her dad points to the table with the bread and wine. ‘We remember a dead Christ, but our communion is with the risen Christ.’

He sits down.

Jane Gibbon asks for number 137: ‘Let there be love shared among us,’ which has a line about God sweeping the nation. ‘With the piano please.’

While Jenny goes over to the piano and turns pages on the music stand, Kevin unwraps his Kit Kat. ‘Thought your dad didn’t like giving sermons.’

‘He doesn’t.’

‘Sounded like one to me.’ He snaps the Kit Kat in half and takes a bite. While he chews, everyone else opens their mouth to sing.

At the end of the song, Trevor Jenkins stands up and reads from the gospel of Luke: ‘AND HE TOOK BREAD, AND WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS HE BROKE IT AND GAVE IT TO THEM, SAYING, “THIS IS MY BODY WHICH IS GIVEN FOR YOU. DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME.”’

He moves to the table at the centre of the room and picks up the bread. He hands the plate to Mrs Evans on the front row. She tears off a small piece, pops it in her mouth, and hands the plate along.

Silence again.

When you look at the surface of an LP, there are thin bands between each song. The whole record’s black, but the bands seem to be even darker. Because the grooves are empty.

The hiss of the needle.

Robert stands up. He trembles. He says, ‘BUT, BEHOLD, THE HAND OF HIM THAT BETRAYETH ME IS WITH ME ON THE TABLE. AND TRULY THE SON OF MAN GOETH, AS IT WAS DETERMINED: BUT WOE UNTO THAT MAN BY WHOM HE IS BETRAYED!’

Her dad says, ‘Robert, this isn’t the time to speak. You need to be quiet during this part of the service.’

Robert hiccups. He gets down on his knees behind the pew, which means he’s lower than everyone else, and his head disappears, but Tracey can hear when he knocks his forehead against the wooden seat back. Deliberately: one, two. He’s crying.

That’s not part of the silence.

When the bread comes round to Paul, he takes a piece and hesitates before handing the plate down to Robert. Tracey can’t see what happens next, but it’s a long time before it reappears.

When the bread reaches her section, Kevin swallows a mouthful of Kit Kat before he plucks a morsel off. Jenny’s the last to take the plate, and she returns it to the table.

Trevor tries to ignore Robert sniffing. He reads, ‘AND LIKEWISE THE CUP AFTER SUPPER, SAYING, “THIS CUP WHICH IS POURED OUT FOR YOU IS THE NEW COVENANT IN MY BLOOD.”’

He fills the goblet and hands it to Mrs Evans, together with a folded cloth napkin. She takes a sip and passes both items along. The napkin accompanies the goblet around the room every week, but no one ever uses it.

Germes fester on the rim of the cup; drooley spit dilutes the wine. But isn’t it worth the risk of getting sick?

Robert’s still down on the floor, but he’s quieter now. When the cup reaches him, there’s another pause. Murmuring encouragement from Jenny’s parents, who are next to him, on the other side from Paul. Tracey imagines them holding the goblet to his lips.

Drink up; take your medicine.

Banging knees and elbows; copies of *Mission Praise* fall to the floor. Robert flounders through the door out towards the entrance hall.

Everyone breathes out. Thank goodness.

Paul waves to get Tracey’s attention. He tilts his head back towards the door, rolling his eyes upwards to follow. She gives him a thumbs up, and he slips out after Robert.

She presses her knees together under her pleated skirt, and moves the soles of her feet up and down, as if she’s walking. But she’s not going anywhere—at least until the cup reaches her.

★

A cow’s head. On a sprig of lettuce at the butcher’s counter. With a tongue next to it—flaccid, blooming at the root. That’s what he thinks about when he thinks about meat.

The bread is not bread. It moves. Tries to speak. But it has no teeth, lips, throat.

Killing Christ over again. Stretching and tearing His body, which remained whole, even on the cross; even in the tomb. But not on this plate.

Livid, raw.

He puts the bread in his mouth. He tries to speak with it, to become its body, but no words form. Only mewling sounds.

He retches.

He angles the goblet, backwards and forwards. The red circle at the bottom becomes an ellipse, then a circle again. The liquid leaves a thin film behind on the sides of the cup as it sloshes.

He lifts the goblet to his mouth. He tilts his head back, as if he has a nosebleed. The wine pulses down the groove of his throat.

A circuit closes. A chain of hands, passing the cup along, linking him to Tracey on the other side of the room. He's plugged in.

HIS WORD WAS IN MINE HEART AS A BURNING FIRE SHUT UP IN MY BONES, AND I WAS WEARY WITH FORBEARING, AND I COULD NOT STAY.

The circuit's broken. The hands let go. Robert's a blockage, an impasse. A clot.

His throat tightens; he can't breathe. Get it out.

In the toilet cubicle, leaning over the bowl, nothing comes up. No breakfast today: he wanted to keep his stomach ready for the Lord's Supper.

A knock on the bathroom door. Paul says, 'Are you okay? Do you need any help?'

Not from you.

A red jet: not from his stomach; from the root of his tongue. No muscles clenching: free-flowing. Unquenchable, renewing itself miraculously.

Paul opens the door. The red stream disappears. ‘No!’ Robert says.

‘Okay. I’ll wait out here.’

Robert gets up off the floor and leans his forehead on the cubicle doorframe.

Behind him, the girl sits on the shelf below the frosted window, and swings her legs back and forth, kicking the side of the cubicle. When she gets bored with that, she squeezes past him into the bathroom, where she peers at the bleeding cake of disinfectant at the bottom of the urinal and pokes it.

She waddles round the bathroom, puffing out her cheeks, massaging her distended belly: holding it in front of her, as if it’s a bowling ball. She says, ‘BLESSED ART THOU AMONG WOMEN, AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF THY WOMB.’

‘Who’s the father?’

She presses a finger against each cheek to fart out the air in her mouth. ‘The Holy Spirit.’

Robert steps back inside the cubicle and kneels down in prayer. The water at the bottom of the toilet bowl blinks like the wine at the bottom of the goblet. It’s almost like he’s inside the presence, staring down its throat. He presses the flush, and a red spiral begins to rotate.

YE CANNOT DRINK THE CUP OF THE LORD, AND THE CUP OF DEVILS: YE CANNOT BE PARTAKERS OF THE LORD’S TABLE, AND OF THE TABLE OF DEVILS.

‘Never a good idea,’ the girl says, ‘alcohol on an empty stomach.’

Chapter 9: Robert / Tracey

Friday is gammon, green beans and powdered mash potatoes. Robert doesn't mind mixing food in his mouth, but it has to be separate on the plate. He cuts the meat up into little cubes, which he pushes to one side, away from the white ooze of the potato. Then he attacks the beans, but he can't get through the ligaments.

The knife slips, and squeals across the plate. Chew, chew, swallow. Chew. Swallow. Chew, chew, chew. Swallow.

Breakfast is easy: a few mouthfuls of cornflakes. Lunch is even easier: he takes ham or cheese sarnies to school, and throws them away. He even asks for an extra round, so he can say he's full at teatime. But it doesn't work. Come five o' clock, he has to finish everything on his plate, or he's not allowed to leave the table. The only space left for his will is to refuse dessert.

Butterscotch Angel Delight. Fondant fancies. Strawberry Supermousse.

He can hurt the girl, if he's willing to hurt himself. AND IF THINE EYE OFFEND THEE,
PLUCK IT OUT, AND CAST IT FROM THEE: IT IS BETTER FOR THEE TO ENTER INTO LIFE WITH ONE,
RATHER THAN HAVING TWO EYES TO BE CAST INTO HELL FIRE.

She's a tapeworm. Starve her out.

It's not working though. Neglect only makes her stronger. Hunger makes her belly swell.

When he falls asleep that night, he dreams the phone's ringing. But it's the girl on the other end, so he won't answer. He wakes up; throws the covers back and drums his fingers against his stomach. Suck it in; let go. Not much difference.

He's thirsty as well as hungry, but that's easy to fix. It means getting up again later in the night, but he doesn't mind.

He stops on the landing at the turn of the stairs. In the alcove, below the stained-glass window, there's a ceramic statue, about a foot high. A woman, in medieval armour, with a pageboy haircut. Kneeling in prayer, with her sword held upright in front of her like a cross.

Joan of Arc. Auntie Rose and Uncle Edward brought her back from their honeymoon in France.

Her hands fuse together in a fingerless blob, with a circular hole drilled through the centre. Maybe somebody had that job in the factory, for all the Joan of Arcs. Moving the drill, down and up, down and up.

Her sword's separate, and made of metal. It hangs down through the hole in her hands, held in place by the cross-guard. A loose fit. He jiggles the pommel, then pulls the blade out. Cheap alloy. He used to bend it back and forth, when he was little, every time he visited here. The line of the edge is still wobbly.

He holds the blade in front of his face, with the point towards him. He opens his mouth and presses the flat against the runnel of his tongue. He supports the sword grip with his right thumb, and taps the pommel with his left index finger, slowly. Farther back, into his mouth, until the point touches the back of his throat, and he gags.

Shush.

He pulls the sword out of his mouth and walks downstairs, where he unlocks the door into the morning room. He steps inside, and lets it drift closed behind him. Moves the sword to his right hand, and feels for the light switch with his left.

He can't find the wall.

No moonlight, because the morning room has no windows. He's always been puzzled by this: how can it be a morning room, if you can't tell it's morning? He turns around to face where he came in, looking for the outline of the door. He steps forward with his left hand held out in front of him.

No door. Dizzy. As if it's not the walls receding, but the floor. Stop; calm down. Try the kitchen door on the other side of the room.

He turns around again and steps forward. His hand pats the air to his left, where the table should be, because he doesn't want to walk into it. One, two, three strides. Four, five.

No table. No door, no wall. He closes his eyes, then opens them again, but it makes no difference. Just keep going forward until you hit the kitchen door, as long as it takes. Another stride. Another. Three more.

He trips on nothing. Expects to bang his head, but tumbles across the floor, the sword skittering away. It doesn't hit the door or the wall.

The floor. Concentrate on that. Hands and feet on the lino. It should be sticky, peeling off the soles of his feet; he should be able to feel the lines of the pattern through his skin. He tries to visualise the pattern, but in his mind, there's only disintegrating ink blots. In the dark, it's difficult to remember yellow, green. He leans as far forward as he can, like a Muslim praying. He sticks his tongue out, so the tip touches the floor.

Cool. Dry and smooth. Not lino: more like a pane of glass.

Find the sword. Blunt, soft, but still a weapon. He crawls forward, palms down, sweeping around his path: windscreen wipers.

There. Thank God.

He stands up again. Turns to his left, then, thinking about it, back to his right. Looking for the sideboard. Not looking: feeling. In the dark, you have to fall over what you're trying to find.

He's trying to reach the telephone. Nine-nine-nine. I'm lost, in my own house. Come and get me. How can he even be sure which direction he's facing? Like someone's spun him round in a blindfold.

Don't shout. There might be something in here with him.

Assuming he *is* inside. Maybe he's not trapped; maybe he's locked out. Of God's love. And this is hell.

He wants to run, but that's not going to help. He's going to starve to death, and he's not ready for that kind of hunger. Not yet. They're going to find his skeleton under the morning room table, but they won't understand what happened. It won't *mean* anything.

What if he needs to go the bog?

Breathing. Fast, shallow. Shouldn't empty space be full of air, even if there's nothing else? Unless he's in a bell jar, suffocating.

Please God, help me. Say it. 'Please God, help me.' Let me be alone.

A yellow light pricks his eye. He blinks back tears.

A colour, a shape. Coming into focus as his vision clears. Shapes, plural. He can't see the light source, but wherever it's coming from, it's shining on a wall, an arch, a table.

The light hums, shudders, falls silent. Don't go out!

An open fridge. He can't see it, but he can feel its cold breath, creeping round his ankles. But that can't be right; it's too far away. He leans down, brushes imaginary cobwebs away, nearly falls over again.

Stupid to look away from the light, but it's still there. He walks towards it. Moves the sword back to his left hand and holds it out in front of him. He daren't run, because he can't see the floor. Can't feel it either. But it must be there, otherwise he'd be falling.

One minute, two. Before the light came, it could have been an hour, a day. In the dark, time's as meaningless as space. The shapes are larger; he can see chairs round the table, a sideboard to one side, a grey window behind.

Tracey's house, downstairs at the back.

There's carpet under his feet now, and he stops, flexing his toes. Like he's standing on a beach in the sand, letting the sea swirl in and out round his ankles. A fixed horizon in front, near and far in their proper places.

Tracey's house. But he's coming into it out of nothing, through the wall. From the space between the houses.

It's wrong.

The layout at the back of Robert's house goes: television room, entrance hall, morning room, kitchen. All separate, compartmentalised. To get to the kitchen, he has to go through two locked doors. But in Tracey's house, there's a single, open-plan area instead, with empty arches instead of doors. And she has different names for the rooms: lounge, dining area, then kitchen.

Robert's standing in her lounge, so the dining area's straight ahead, but the door out to the entrance hall is on the right side of the room, instead of the left; and the kitchen turns off to the left, not the right.

A mirror image of itself. The two houses still unfold in opposite directions from their common wall, but they've swapped places.

He steps through the arch into the dining area, then turns into the kitchen. The fridge breathes at him. Clean. He steps up to the sink and turns the cold tap on. Puts his mouth underneath, gulps and slurps. Burps air between swallows.

He looks at the window. Black outside, nothing visible: not even his reflection. Probably just as well. What if the moon and stars were reversed? Or his face.

He goes to the fridge, opens the door wider. Inside, a plate of bloody muscle; a chilled goblet of coagulating blood. He closes the door; opens it again. A slice of Gateway bread; a cup of wine.

He walks through to the entrance hall. He could get home from here—but he'd have to go outside, into the dark. Barefoot in the frost. And won't his house be reversed too?

There's a long mirror at the bottom of the stairs, but he keeps his eyes fixed on Tracey's puffa jacket, which hangs from the knob on top of the newel post. He turns the inside edge of the hood out, and presses his face into it.

Mint shampoo.

This is where he belongs, where he wants to be. Not next door, buried alive with the old people. But he doesn't want it like this. Not with everything wrong.

One of Tracey's hairs sticks to his lip. He picks it off with his finger and thumb, like he's threading it through his mouth with a needle.

Up the stairs, to the landing at the turn. Stained glass, but no Joan of Arc. At the top, he thinks about going into the bathroom and locking himself in, but there'll be mirrors there too.

Three bedroom doors. Tracey's, directly in front of him, echoing his own; replacing his own. Far left, at the end of the upstairs hallway, the spare room where no one sleeps; where Auntie Rose sleeps. In-between, Bill's room; Uncle Edward's room.

Ip dip doo.

The spare room's wide open; Tracey's old teddies piled on the bed. Her bedroom door's ajar: her name in rainbow stickers, half-picked off. The letters are the right way round, as is the prancing pony sticker. So not everything's reversed.

Bill's door is closed, but there's a sound coming through the crack at the bottom. Not breathing. A continuous click, reset, click. A halo of crackle: expanding, contracting. A needle in the terminal groove of a record, thrown back against itself. Scoring a channel into flesh; deeper, deeper.

Robert turns the handle on Bill's door, and pushes it open. Inside, the room's dark, but not black. Grey shapes. He steps through the door and turns to his right; finds himself facing the wall. The paper's smooth, with coloured stripes; the paper's textured, with paisley shapes.

The wall's vibrating. He places his palm against it. Stretched taut, like a drum skin. He's at the centre of the labyrinth, inside the ear of the house.

He turns around. The girl's sitting on the edge of the bed. She opens her mouth, and the needle hiss comes out. He holds the sword up in front of him. She nods, then does it again. Her neck flops down and snaps back, following the rhythm of the needle.

The sword is the needle. No longer blunt and soft. Piercing.

She lies down on the bed and beckons him closer. He asks, 'How do I get back?'

She snatches at the sword. But she's not trying to take it away, so he relaxes. She makes a fist around the blade, then slides her hand up over the grip; hooks her fingers between his; spreadeagles her thumbs over his thumbs. Their hands move the sword together, like the pointer on a Ouija board—across her swollen belly, into her navel.

She pushes down; blood wells up.

The rhythm of the sound accelerates. Narrowing space between the click and the hiss; narrowing time between the point and its sheath of blood.

She pulls the blade along the taut surface of her stomach. Lips opening to speak.

Light spills like a pile of guts. Flickers over the shivering walls.

Her mouth closes, but something moves inside her belly: a white tongue, trying to speak. A maggot.

She lets go of his hands. The rhythm of the sound slows to a heartbeat.

She reaches inside herself, and cups her palms around something. Lifts, and it sucks away from the lining of her guts. She manoeuvres it through the lips of the wound, and holds it up to him.

The presence.

It's about a foot long, the same size as Joan of Arc. Covered in jelly and brawn, but smooth and white underneath. He can't see how there was room for it inside the girl. Maybe it was pressed up against her lungs. Maybe she has no organs; she's hollow. Like a guitar, or a bell.

A liquid cord joins her to the presence. It twists out of her middle, turning over and back on itself, and it disappears into the hole at the centre of the smooth, white head of the presence. But this stream isn't red: it's an angry purple, as if it's choking on its own coils.

The girl hugs the presence to her chest, and rocks it back and forth. She sings, 'My AUNT NELLIE HAD A HOLE IN HER BELLY, AND A HOLE IN THE BISCUIT TIN. SHE WAS SITTING ON THE GRASS, WITH HER FINGER UP HER ASS, AND HER TITS GOING DING-A-LING-A-LING.'

'It's not yours,' Robert says.

She turns her upper body to move the presence away from him. 'It is mine. I swallowed it.'

‘I don’t believe you.’

The girl holds the presence up to him. ‘You take it then. Cut the cord.’

Robert shifts his grip on the sword, and takes a step back. ‘No.’

‘Too much responsibility? You’re all the same.’

He says, ‘How do I get back?’

The girl shakes her head. ‘No going back. You don’t want to go back. You want to stay here.’

‘No. Not like this.’

‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’

‘Why me? Why are you doing this to me?’

‘Because you owe me.’ She presses the presence to her flat breast. ‘Because I sacrificed myself for you.’

‘What are you talking about?’

She grins. ‘Now *I* want a sacrifice.’

*

WHUMP-UMP, UMP-WHUMP, WHUMP-UMP. It sounds like two drums hitting the same beat at once. But sluggish, exhausted. No cymbals. A knife runs up and down a guitar string. Then there’s a distorted moan, replaced by a chant: HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI, HAI.

The song was recorded with two microphones: one close to the drum kit, the other farther away to capture the echo in the room. The sound from the drum lasts about half a second; the echo has a longer half-life as it bounces around the walls. A machine called a noise gate shuts off the room mic when the volume on the close mic drops below a certain threshold. So the sound’s multiplied, but there’s no natural decay: the echo’s chopped off.

Gated reverb. An effect invented for this song: 'Intruder' by Peter Gabriel.

Tracey presses stop on her Walkman. The fluorescent numbers on the alarm clock say eleven thirty. She's supposed to be asleep by now. She swallows, struggles to do it a second time, coughs. A drink of water would be nice.

She swings her feet over the edge of the bed. The room shifts with her. A fireplace instead of the walk-in wardrobe; a table with model aeroplanes. Blink. She's not even thinking about Robert.

She steps out onto the landing and looks down towards the stained-glass window. Scarlet and sapphire lozenges; lead lines. Joan of Arc stands guard underneath, empty-handed. Tracey blinks again, but Joan's still there.

She turns towards her dad's bedroom. Not left; right. The wrong side. Somehow she knows that. Why's the door closed? A thin strip of light strobos out from underneath.

She knocks. 'Dad?' Again, louder. 'Dad, are you okay?'

The handle jerks downwards. Light crashes out as the door swings open.

(Tracey / Robert)

Daylight, birdsong. Where is she? She looks around, then down at herself. She's sitting on the front porch step. Cold bum, so she's been here for a while. But that doesn't make sense. She was outside her dad's room a moment ago.

Her nightie's gone, and she's dressed in her school clothes, but somehow she knows it's not a school day. Patent leather shoes. Didn't she throw those away because they were too small? Squashing her toes, rubbing skin off her heel.

Her brain's tight inside her head; her fingers and toes itch; her jaw aches; her stomach cramps. It's not just the shoes then: her body's too small. She's pressed up against her edges.

When is this? Suddenly she knows. It's a year ago: the day of her mum's funeral.

Back then, her kitchen was crawling with aunts: her mum's sisters, Miriam and Deborah; her dad's, Maggie and Rachel. The uncles were in the front room: her dad's younger brother, Josh; Miriam's husband, John; Maggie's husband, Graham, and his two brothers, Matthew and Joel.

Every name a stone.

She wished she was Robert, living in an empty house, with three years' practice to get used to this feeling. Three years without her mum. How could she have wished for that?

'I'm sorry,' she said aloud. 'I'm sorry for thinking that.' No one replied.

A sort of ripple passes across the world, and she's separated from her past self again. Is this a dream? It's definitely not a memory. When she remembers, this is all much vaguer—like

pushing her tongue against a sore tooth. It's part of her, but not who she is. It's inside her; she's not inside it.

She's been crying: her cheeks are caked in salt trails. It stings: like toothpaste in the corners of her mouth after brushing. She wipes her eyes and her face with the cuff of her blouse.

It feels like she's really here. She can't turn it off. But she knows exactly what's going to happen next.

Another ripple.

Her dad was with the uncles; the kids were with the grandmas in the lounge. When everyone arrived that morning, there was a choice: stay with the kids, who didn't understand what was happening; or go with the adults, who did, but weren't talking about it. She didn't want to play; but she didn't want to make sandwiches either. So she was alone in the porch, the front door pulled closed behind her.

A temporary hiding place. Because after the service, the whole church was going to end up back here. No escape.

She shivered. A March morning: too cold to be outside without a coat.

Another ripple, and she's split in two again. Her current self and her past self. Separate but joined, like her house and Robert's. She's swapped places with herself.

She holds her hand up in front of her and flexes it. Fist, open; fist, open. Difficult. The fingers move slowly.

That movement's not part of the past. It didn't happen, a year ago. Has she changed anything else, by changing that? Is Robert still going to arrive, like he did last year? Yes, here he comes.

Her ears pop, as if she's dropped a hundred feet.

She watched Robert walk round the front of his house, along the gravel path between the wall and the rose bed. When he got to the fence separating their gardens, he swung his right leg over and straddled it on tiptoe, then lifted himself off with his hands before bringing his left leg over. On her side of the fence, he turned away and checked his fly was closed.

He still does that. A nervous tic. But he's tall enough now to get over the fence in one go. Is *he* reliving this as well?

Uncles murmured in the front room. Robert ducked and shuffled under the bay window, his palms scuttling across the pebble-dashed wall to support his bent knees.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'I don't want them to see me.'

When he reached her, he stood up straight again and said, 'John Lennon.'

The ripple comes when she opens her mouth to say, 'What about him?'

The words feel wrong now—like they're being pulled out of her against her will.

They're dead. She's listening to a tape recording of herself.

Robert said, 'He was born in 1940, and he died in 1980. The same dates as my mum. And I have the same birthday as him: 9 October. And he lived with his aunt Mimi after his mum died. And his dad was in the merchant navy.' As he spoke, Robert ticked these points off on his fingers.

'Okay.' Tracey didn't care about The Beatles. Like getting excited about World War Two and Winston Churchill. But Robert didn't move to Liverpool 'til he was thirteen. And he liked Spitfires and bombers.

He said, 'Lennon met Paul McCartney at a church fete in Woolton on 6 July 1957.'

'Posh boys then,' Tracey said, although she was posh too.

'No.' Robert shook his head. 'No. But do you know why they were best friends?'

You're not my best friend, she thinks. Could she say that? How much can she change? But it's too late. The words from the past are already rising up her throat and into her mouth.

'Because they were both posh boys from Woolton?' she said.

Robert replied, 'Because McCartney's mum died in 1956, and Lennon's in 1958.' His eyes filled up with silly tears, and he looked away, over the front garden.

'So who's Lennon and who's McCartney in this comparison?'

Robert lowered his chin against his chest. 'I have the same birthday as him.'

'I don't care. I always preferred McCartney.'

She must have said that too—but she didn't find her mum's copy of *Revolver* until three months later. All through that summer, whenever her dad went out, she played 'Eleanor Rigby' over and over again.

‘How did she die,’ Tracey asked. ‘Lennon’s mum?’ She already knew the answer to this question. A traffic accident: the same as Tracey’s mum. But she wanted to make Robert say it.

Was that sadism, or masochism? Now she imagines herself slapping Robert in the face. The idea makes the blood flow faster in her fingers.

‘Come on then,’ she asked. ‘How did Lennon’s mum die?’ She twisted her leg and ground the point of her shoe against the paving stone, her foot almost doubled over.

Robert placed a hand against the doorpost. ‘She was knocked down by a car,’ he said, like he was trying not to be sick. Breathing through his mouth, like Uncle Edward.

He stepped closer to her and put his hands on top of her head, as if he was anointing her with oil. She felt a fat tear hit her, and trickle down her forehead. She reached up and pulled his hands away, but she kept hold of his wrists, and he stayed standing in front of her, blocking her view.

Keeping everything out, trying to protect her. But he can’t. Because it’s already happened. Her mum’s dead. Tracey can’t change *that*.

‘How did *your* mum die?’ she asked. They’d never talked about it before.

Robert’s breathing got louder. ‘She had a heart attack.’

‘Didn’t you say she was the same age as Lennon?’

‘Forty.’

‘Young for a heart attack.’

Robert screwed his eyes closed, twisted his wrists out of her grasp.

Tracey looked up at him, towering above her. ‘It’s not your fault.’

‘How do you know?’ he said. ‘You don’t know.’

It feels like a betrayal, this grotesque repetition. Every word written by someone else—even though *she’s* the someone else. Trapped inside her own body, watching it speak. A zombie, moving in slow motion.

Robert said, ‘Did they catch him? The driver?’

‘He was drunk. He’ll go to jail.’

Robert folded his arms across his chest, and leaned forward to press his forehead against the porch door. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I could cope with it, left on my own. But everyone needs you to play the part. They’ve got to say, “If there’s anything I can do.” Special voice: like a BBC announcer. And then I’ve got to say, “No, there’s nothing.” Forgive them for not being able to help.

‘Just shut up; leave me alone.’

Robert said, ‘Do you wanna come next door for a while?’

‘Yes.’ She stood up. ‘I’d better tell someone though.’ Aunt Rachel: she was most likely to be off by herself, having a smoke.

‘I’ll wait here,’ Robert said, still swaying against the doorpost.

Standing in Robert's porch with the front door open, she can hear the clock tick in the back of the house. Where is everyone? She doesn't remember speaking to Auntie Rose or Uncle Edward, but she can't think why they aren't here.

'Come in then,' Robert says from inside, holding the door for her. At least it's cool and dark in there. A wet cloth across her flesh. Her mum used to do that when she was sick.

She feels her face collapse, and she tries to freeze it, put it back together again. She uses her fingers as well as her mind. When everything seems to be in the right place, she follows Robert through to the morning room.

'I can do you tea,' he said, 'but we've only got powdered milk.'

Auntie Rose mixed a jug up every morning, and it always had a layer of froth on top.

'No thanks,' Tracey said.

'Squash?'

'Okay.'

He took a glass from the compartment inside the end of the dresser, and unlocked the kitchen door.

The fluorescent light stutters, and strobes the morning room into semi-darkness, although there's pale daylight coming through the doorway from the kitchen.

This is wrong. It's changing.

Robert opened the fridge, poured an inch of Robinsons Barley Water into the glass, and turned the tap on at the sink. He let it run for thirty seconds before filling the glass. Then

he came back into the morning room and placed it on the table in front of her. He closed the kitchen door and locked it again.

Dull, ordinary.

Back to how it was, but Tracey still feels a moment of panic at being cut off from the daylight. There are no shadows under the fluorescent light. Not cool and damp. A finger poking at her eye. Her face begins to slip again.

The glass was chunky. Thick, stippled. Wide at the top, then narrow, then widening out again. Uncle Edward did the washing up, and inside at the base, beyond the narrow waist, where it was probably difficult to get your fingers in with a cloth, Tracey could see a line of brownish stuff under the yellow squash. The glass was only semi-transparent, so it was hard to make out, but it looked like dried blood.

Robert says, 'You're wondering what the smell is.'

'What?' she says, a second before it hits her. She gags.

'It's your mum,' he says, 'in her coffin.'

This is very wrong. 'You never said that. Why are you saying it now?'

He smiles. His teeth are too large, the gums drawn back. Crescents of blood.

'This didn't happen,' she says.

'Do you remember what your Aunt Rachel said to you, two weeks after the funeral?'

She closes her eyes.

'She took you to a café on Lark Lane. The first time you had a cappuccino. You fiddled about with a spoon, trying to get through the foam.'

‘I don’t want to think about that. I want to go home now. Back to my bedroom.’

‘She asked your dad to put your pocket money up by a pound. So you could buy tampons. Because obviously *he* wasn’t going to get them. He tries. With his Delia Smith and his apron. But Sundays are better, because then it’s someone else in the kitchen. Never Aunt Rachel though. You said to her, “I don’t use tampons.” Of course. Because you have to stick them inside you, don’t you?’

‘Shut up.’

‘But Aunt Rachel explained how it works, and your face was so red. It was sweet. She did a better job than your mum. “Eve’s curse”, for God’s sake. And the story about the woman with the ISSUE OF BLOOD.’

Robert picks up the glass of squash from in front of her and takes a gulp. When he puts it down on the table, there’s a suspended sliver of red, expanding into the murky liquid around. Disappearing, hiding.

He continues, ‘And you said, to Rachel, “I won’t need a pound a week,” which wasn’t true, but you felt guilty. Not about the money though.’

Robert picks his teeth with his fingernail, and sucks air through the gap between the front two. ‘And Rachel said, “Get a cappuccino then.” I like her. Did you know she fucks her boyfriend? He’s not a Christian. But you all know. You just pretend.’

‘Stop it!’

‘I will, if you swear at me. Go on. Just say, “Fuck.” Not even that. Shit’ll do, if you can’t manage a fuck. Why don’t you have any girlfriends, at school? Do you remember when Becca Donnelly and her gang got you in the loos? Held you down and put a compass point to your ear? Said they were going to pierce it for you. Unless you swore. What a brave

girl you were. Because you didn't say anything, did you? Not even when they asked you,

“Do you love Jesus? Is He your boyfriend?””

Tracey slaps herself in the face. ‘Wake up!’

‘That’s not going to do you any good.’

‘What’s happening? What is this? What do you want?’

‘Do you ever imagine your mum fucking your dad?’

Tracey puts her hands over her ears. She says, ‘This isn’t real. It’s not real.’

‘They must have done it. But probably only once. Or maybe your dad had a wet dream, and your mum just happened to be in the right place.’

Robert picks up the telephone handset from the dresser and dings the little black circuit breakers in the cradle. Tracey can hear the dial tone cutting in and out.

He drops the handset with a clatter, and continues. ‘The woman with the issue of blood. That happens in the middle of another story. There’s a ruler of the synagogue. An elder, like your dad. His daughter’s about to die, but Jesus can save her. And the woman, she’s in the crowd. She doesn’t dare speak; only wants to touch Him. Not even; just His clothes. AND STRAIGHTWAY THE FOUNTAIN OF HER BLOOD WAS DRIED UP; AND SHE FELT IN HER BODY THAT SHE WAS HEALED OF THAT PLAGUE. Do you feel it, in your body? Do you feel His body, in you?’

Tracey closes her eyes.

‘AND JESUS, IMMEDIATELY KNOWING IN HIMSELF THAT VIRTUE HAD GONE OUT OF HIM, TURNED HIM ABOUT IN THE PRESS, AND SAID, WHO TOUCHED MY CLOTHES? And He makes the woman confess. Can you imagine? A shameful secret, which makes her unclean. And she has to tell it, in front of a gawping crowd. So cruel.

‘I can’t imagine *you* doing that. Speaking up, confessing. Robert maybe. If he had an issue of blood, he’d tell everyone.’

Tracey says, ‘I did speak up; we both did. In the assembly.’ It’s no good, trying not to see and hear, so she puts both hands on the table, to steady them. One on either side of the glass.

‘Well, that’s nothing special,’ Robert says. ‘I was with him too.’

He continues. ‘While the woman’s speaking, the daughter dies. I don’t think it’s a coincidence. Blood for blood. The woman took the daughter’s life. Jesus gave it back, sure, but He’s not here now. You can’t rely on Him.’

Tracey says, ‘He is here.’ She grabs hold of the glass, and a drop of squash sloshes over the edge.

‘People talk about hell being the absence of God. That won’t work. Because if He’s not there, He’s not omnipresent. And if He’s not omnipresent, He’s not God.’

Tracey prays to herself. ‘God, I don’t know what’s happening, but I want to go home. Please take me home.’

‘Home,’ Robert says. ‘What’s that?’

Tracey gets up from the table. There’s daylight in the kitchen beyond the locked door, but Robert’s in the way, and there’s no way to get home from there, so she fumbles behind her for the door back into the hall. She keeps her body facing towards him, but turns her head so she can look back through the door.

The space beyond is black. Not even a space. No dimensions or directions. No end—but it has a beginning. An entrance; a threshold.

Blood on the doorpost. The Angel of Death outside. Or inside, with her.

‘You lot,’ Robert says, ‘always going on about blood. His precious blood. Magic.’

‘It’s not magic. It’s faith.’

The florescent light spasms again, and goes out.

Robert says, ‘Abracadabra,’ as Tracey steps out into nothing.

And finds herself on solid ground, with carpet tickling her bare feet, outside the open door to her dad’s bedroom.

*

Who’s that, in the mirror? Robert looks at his face, his hands, his body. Everything’s wrong. Smaller. Smoother and fatter too. Like he used to be.

He’s not in Tracey’s house any more. He’s in the bathroom in his dad’s house, over on the other side of the Mersey. It’s the day his mum was buried, three and a half years ago. He’s not particularly surprised to be here.

He looks in the mirror again. He’s practising.

He pulled the corners of his mouth down with his index fingers. Was this what a sad face looked like? Should it be sadder? What sort of things did sad people do?

Besides go to funerals.

Is he going to have to relive all of this? He hopes not.

His dad was drunk when Auntie Rose arrived this morning. A bottle pulling his jacket down on one side, so his body looked cock-eyed, like he was standing on the deck of a ship.

Robert had already poured two half-pints down the drain the night before. Glug, glug: faster as the bottle tipped farther over. But his dad probably had more in the bedroom, and Robert wasn't going to check in there.

His dad's room smells like the girl.

They lived in an old farmhouse in Neston. Small windows and low ceilings, which made it dingy inside, but Robert didn't mind. His room was in the attic, next to a storage space full of cobwebs and boxes. The old cow shed was directly below his window, and at night, when everyone else was asleep, he could climb out and sit on the ridge of the roof.

The night before the funeral, his dad saw a ghost. He was going through boxes in the attic, looking for photos, while Robert was downstairs making himself a cup of cocoa. A pale woman appeared, in a frilly servant's dress, and beckoned his dad into the wall. Her throat was slit. 'She leaned her head back,' his dad said, 'and her neck opened and closed.' He smacked his lips, like a fish blowing bubbles. 'I swear there were teeth in there.'

Red on white; white on red.

Maybe there's another message from God hidden here, in the past. Maybe he's been sent back here to find it.

Auntie Rose tried to hug him, but he wriggled out of her arms.

'Don't be silly,' his dad said, as Robert sat down on the floor. 'You're twelve years old.'

An egg: scared he'd crack. Lose himself, dissolve into tears. He wanted his separate parts kept separate. His true self suspended inside him, not leaking out for the whole world to see.

Jesus makes him whole again. Now he can cry. He can bleed.

'I sorted it out with the priest,' his dad said to the funeral director. 'There won't be any problem.'

The priest? Maybe the same one who visited a month before his mum died. Robert couldn't remember the face: only the black cassock. Stiff; mud along the hem. A smell of baked sweat. His mum was alone in her bedroom, and the priest went inside, closed the door. Didn't come out for an hour.

When the priest left, he placed his hand on Robert's head, and said, 'Pray for her.' Pressed down hard. Robert kept his eyes straight ahead, staring at the collar pinching the skin of the priest's throat. A spot of blood: a shaving cut.

Red on white; white on red.

He hates priests. God doesn't belong to you. He belongs to me.

'You have to say goodbye,' his dad said, at the funeral parlour. 'This is the only chance you'll get. You have to.'

He shook his head, and pulled his tie tighter. 'I don't want to see.'

'It's okay. It's just your mum. She wants to say goodbye too.'

But it's not his mum, not any more. It's not his dad either. It's not even Robert now.

The girl stands by the open coffin, waiting, her finger held to her lips. Don't tell.

I won't.

She tries to stand on tiptoe, so she can see over the edge of the coffin. She totters a step to the right, then drops flat-footed and tuts. She turns back to Robert, and beckons.

There's a panel open at the top of the coffin. He takes a step forward, closes his eyes. The girl takes his hand, and pulls him onwards. Another step.

'You're here now,' she says, squeezing his fingers.

He opens his eyes.

A head, on a satin pillow. Sealed inside a plastic bag. Tied at the neck, sucked in tight over the face.

He tears at the plastic. It thins and blisters. A finger through. Two. Inside: the presence.

But the bag's not covering its face. The bag's its skin, and its head is collapsing. Dissolving, a dirty halo seeping into the sodden pillow underneath. But the cone inside the head stays intact and upright, balanced on its truncated point—like the gramophone horn in the HMV logo. The red disk inside begins to blink, and as the spiral climbs the cone towards him, a noise comes out. Slow and stretched. Then it jerks forward into a scratchy voice.

'DEAREST FRANK,' it says, apparently addressing his dad. He looks back over his shoulder, but there's nothing there. No funeral parlour: only blackness.

'What's that?' the girl says, leaning in against the coffin and cupping her ear. 'I can't hear you.'

The voice continues: 'YOU REMEMBER WHEN I HAD TO BRING YOU HOME. THE LAST TIME I TOLD YOU WHAT I THOUGHT WAS WRONG WITH ME. WELL, IT'S TRUE. IT'S STARTED AGAIN, ONLY IT'S WORSE. HOW YOU WILL HATE ME. NO ONE HATES ME MORE THAN MYSELF.'

'Speak up!' the girl says.

'MY HEART ACHES FOR YOU BOTH. IF ONLY YOU KNEW HOW SORRY I AM.'

'No,' Robert says. 'This didn't happen. It's not true.'

'It is true,' the girl says.

The disk and the spiral flicker on and off: red, black; red; black—following the rhythm of the words. 'PLEASE BE STRONG FOR ROBERT'S SAKE. HE'S GOING TO NEED YOU SO MUCH. TRY AND KEEP CALM. I'M SURE ROSE WILL HELP YOU. I WOULD LIKE TO SAY I LOVE YOU BUT AFTER THIS YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT.'

If Robert could put his hands round its throat, he would. Not to make it speak. To make it shut up. But there's no body to take hold of.

He turns to the girl. 'I don't want *this* message,' he says. 'Make it stop.'

'Me? It's nothing to do with me.'

The voice drops into a slur, and the disk wobbles, before correcting itself, and concluding at a normal speed, 'I BEG YOUR FORGIVENESS. I'LL MISS YOU SO MUCH.' The last words are barely audible, lost in a sea of crackle, as if the speaker's moving away from the microphone.

The girl squeezes his fingers. 'It's your fault,' she says. 'You did this.'

Back in his bedroom at the farmhouse on the morning of the funeral, before Auntie Rose arrived. Alone, looking in the mirror.

A skip on the record. The past is repeating itself.

A black tie, but no jacket. A waste of money, his dad said, because he'd only grow out of it. He adjusted the tie knot, pulled it tighter. Grabbed the dangling end from down near his belt, and swivelled it round, back behind his neck, lifting it up in the air and wrapping it around his fist.

Tighter again. Pulling himself up onto his toes. His face went red. He swallowed; felt his Adam's apple bump under the noose.

He let go, twisted the knot back round to the front, and strained the thin end of the tie back through it, until the loop got large enough to pull the tie off over his head.

Start again.

Chapter 10: Robert

Robert's in the front room at Auntie Rose's, looking out the window, watching his dad stagger out of a taxi and up the driveway. So not much has changed, since the funeral three years ago—except now his dad's shirt is untucked, buttons in the wrong holes. His trousers sag, and he holds them up as he walks. His bare ankles flash white with each step.

BING; BONG. A downward lurch between the two chimes.

Auntie Rose has been expecting his dad since the phone rang two hours ago. She answers the door and walks out in her dressing gown and slippers to pay the taxi driver. His dad shivers in the porch until she returns and shoos him inside.

The lights are off, and no one knows Robert's in here. As the taxi pulls away, he turns on his pencil torch, and shines it onto the open page of the KJV on his lap. He wishes he could read by touch.

THEN WAS JESUS LED UP OF THE SPIRIT INTO THE WILDERNESS TO BE TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL.
AND WHEN HE HAD FASTED FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS, HE WAS AFTERWARD AN HUNGRED.

Robert fingers the empty holes on the left side of his belt buckle: one, two, three; prong in the fourth hole. He undoes the belt, and cinches it tighter, until he can get it in the fifth hole.

Too tight, cutting into his guts. Maybe next week.

Satan takes Jesus up to the top of a high mountain, and shows him ALL THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD. And says, 'You can have it all. Just bow down and worship me.'

The first Christmas after his mum died, Robert bought his own presents, with money his dad gave him. Anything he wanted: an Airfix Lancaster bomber; the spaceship

from *Battlestar Galactica*. And in the porch, a black and gold Raleigh Super Grifter, which he was already bored of by the middle of December.

No wrapping paper; no surprises. On Christmas Day, he ate a box of Milk Tray for tea. His dad stayed in bed all day. Robert saved him the coffee creams.

GET THEE HENCE, SATAN: FOR IT IS WRITTEN, THOU SHALT WORSHIP THE LORD THY GOD, AND HIM ONLY SHALT THOU SERVE.

‘Robert!’ Auntie Rose calls, thinking he’s in his room upstairs. ‘Come down! Your dad’s here.’

He turns the torch off, closes his Bible, stands up. When he steps out into the hall, Auntie Rose is still staring up the stairs. He clears his throat; she twitches and gasps.

Don’t be so melodramatic. But he’s always catching her by surprise. Sometimes he whistles a tune, just so she can hear where he is. He says, ‘How long’s he been back from Kuwait?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did they send him home again?’ Robert doesn’t want his dad to get the sack, because then he won’t be able to send money to Auntie Rose. Robert doesn’t want to go back to where he was before. He doesn’t want to go back to the children’s home.

‘You’ll have to borrow the airbed from next door,’ she says.

‘Why? Why does he have to go in my room?’ She could move back into the main bedroom with Uncle Edward instead, leaving the front bedroom free.

‘I thought you’d want to see him.’

They both go through to the television room. Robert’s dad points to Auntie Rose as they enter. ‘Her,’ he says. ‘She’s a good sister to me.’ He juts his chin out, as if Robert’s about to disagree with him.

‘I know.’ Robert stays in the doorway. No Uncle Edward; gone to bed early. His drinking record’s not exactly spotless, so he probably thought it wise to avoid a conversation on the subject.

His dad’s in the seat Auntie Rose normally occupies, the *Radio Times* crumpled underneath him. She’s standing in front of him in the centre of the room, her hands holding her dressing gown closed. Robert squeezes past her and sits down in his usual seat, at the far end of the sofa.

‘I’ll make some tea,’ Auntie Rose says, and goes through to the kitchen.

‘What’s on telly?’ Robert asks, pointing at the half-hidden *Radio Times*. His dad doesn’t take the hint, so Robert says, ‘I think *Minder* started at nine.’

‘Talk to me,’ his dad says, wiping his palms on his knees, staring at the electric flames in the fireplace.

‘What about?’

‘I don’t know.’

His dad hasn’t shaved, and there’s grey in the stubble. His fingers move over his scalp like a spider. He prods at his hairline, where there’s a scab.

‘How did you get that?’ Robert asks.

‘I fell over.’

‘Okay.’

‘I’ve got the D.T.s.’ He holds his hands up, so Robert can see them shaking. ‘I haven’t had anything to drink since yesterday morning.’

Big wow. Gold star for you.

‘Come closer,’ his dad says.

‘This is where I normally sit.’

‘Please.’

Robert has to honour his father. It’s the only commandment with a promise. He looks at the middle sofa cushion, which is riding up, and fusses it back down into place. It’ll give way; there’s a gaping pit underneath. He takes a deep breath and shuffles along. He lowers himself into the middle of the sofa, keeping his weight pressed down on his rigid right arm, which is still on the edge of the cushion where he normally sits.

His dad’s head drops, so Robert’s looking at the cropped hairline at the back of his neck. He always goes to the same barber in Liverpool town centre—Jack the Snipper—where he gets a crew cut.

Robert doesn’t like barbers. He goes to the hairdresser on Brodie Avenue.

His dad says, ‘Why did she do it? Why?’

Robert jiggles his knee. Why’s his dad asking that? The accepted fiction is still the heart attack. He can’t even keep his lies straight any more. It’s pathetic. ‘I don’t know,’ Robert says.

His dad’s shoulders shake, but he doesn’t make a sound. Auntie Rose has left a box of tissues on the pouffe, so Robert reaches forward to take one. He hands it to his dad, who crumples it in his fist, and wipes his nose with the back of his hand.

Robert feels the next words stick in his throat, but he grinds them out of his mouth. ‘I love you.’ His voice sounds like a robot.

Do it. Do it now.

He raises his arm, inch by inch, reaches it over his dad’s hunched back, leaves it hovering in the air for a few seconds, and finally rests his open palm on his dad’s left shoulder.

‘That arm means more to me than anything.’

Robert burns, as if his dad has heaped coals of fire on his head. He's glad the presence isn't here. He doesn't want any witnesses.

'When I was your age,' his dad says, 'I was at sea.'

'I'm only fifteen.'

'Close enough. I was in a ship off Vancouver.' His voice has changed. 'We got hit by a Japanese submarine.'

Is Robert supposed to leave his hand on his dad's shoulder all night? When is it okay to take it back? He tries to squeeze near the neck, but there's too much bone, and not enough flesh.

'We had time,' his dad says, 'before it went down. There was a gun. They put one on a lot of merchant ships. But I couldn't load and aim and fire it all by myself, and no one would help. I asked the captain. He was already in the lifeboat; he said, "No, we don't want to provoke them." So I gave up, and I got in too.'

'Was it cold?'

'You could feel the fog sticking to your face, and the snot freezing on your lip. Then a searchlight came, floating above the water. Looking for survivors.'

'Were they going to sink the lifeboat too?' Robert's read comics about the Japanese. Did the ones on submarines shout BANZAI?

'They wanted prisoners,' his dad says. 'They didn't have room for everyone, but they always took the officers.' He closes his eyes. 'The captain, he was next to the wireless op, who had a busted arm. Shivering, in shock.'

His dad's shivering too. Robert holds on tighter.

‘And the captain, “There there.” Took off his jacket; draped it over the op’s shoulders. I didn’t understand at first, and then I did. The epaulettes.’ His dad twists his mouth in disgust. ‘The op had a wife and two kids.’

‘Didn’t anyone say?’ Robert asks.

‘The first mate tried, but the Japs didn’t believe him. They took him too.’

‘What happened after?’

‘He was still the captain. But no one spoke to him.’

‘Were you in the lifeboat long?’

‘The coastguard came.’ His dad unfolds the tissue screwed up in his hand, and folds it smooth on his knee, before blowing his nose and scrunching it back up again. He looks at Robert. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says.

The door opens, and Robert snatches his arm away. Auntie Rose puts the tea tray down on the pouffe. ‘I have to go get the air bed from next door,’ Robert says.

When he’s collected it, he drops it in the porch. Before it’s blown up, it could be anything: a swimming pool, an inflatable dinghy—a life raft.

He steps outside, closes the porch door; starts walking.

Mark says, ‘You’ve missed the last few Tuesday nights.’

They’re in his room. Robert’s sitting on one of the wooden chairs, near the open door. His hands in the pockets of his parka. He ignores Mark’s implied question, and says, ‘My dad’s here. I needed to get away.’

‘Does he visit often?’ Mark asks.

‘He works overseas. On the seas. First mate on an oil tanker.’

‘Yeah. We had a lot of merchant guys, in the Falklands. From the reserves. Not enough ships.’

‘He’s only here because he’s been drinking.’

People tense up when Robert mentions stuff like this, but Mark stays loose—apart from his injured leg. ‘I’m sorry to hear that. But I don’t think it’s what you want to talk to me about.’

‘I don’t have time to explain.’ He doesn’t have the words either.

‘You can make a start.’

Sandy and Helen are in the kitchen. Talking about bedpans; making retching noises. Robert lowers his voice, so they can’t hear. ‘You know the story of Legion, the possessed man?’

Mark, who’s sitting on the edge of his bed, leans forward too. ‘I do.’

‘He lives among the tombs, in the mountains. He won’t behave. Everyone tries to tie him up in chains and irons, but he breaks free. Cries out, and cuts himself with stones.’ Robert’s always been jealous of Legion. He can do whatever he wants, and blame it all on the demons.

He continues, ‘Then Jesus comes, and the man falls down and worships him. **WHAT HAVE I TO DO WITH THEE, JESUS, THOU SON OF THE MOST HIGH GOD? I ADJURE THEE BY GOD, THAT THOU TORMENT ME NOT.**’

‘That’s the demons speaking,’ Mark says.

‘So Jesus asks who He’s talking to, and the man says, “**MY NAME IS LEGION: FOR WE ARE MANY.**”’

Mark picks up the story. ‘And the demons beg Jesus, “Don’t send us away. Put us in that herd of pigs.” So Jesus agrees, and the whole herd runs into the sea, and drowns itself.’

‘What are demons?’

‘The Bible call them unclean spirits.’

Robert asks, ‘How do you know if someone’s possessed?’

‘You mean, if they don’t live among the tombs, and cry out and cut themselves?’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t,’ Mark says. ‘But most people are.’

Robert takes his hands out of his pockets and presses the heels into his eye sockets, feeling the shape of the bone. He stays like that for a second, then takes his hands away. He doesn’t say anything, but what he feels is relief. Gratitude. Because Mark’s going to tell him what everything means.

‘You probably have a demon of alcoholism, a demon of suicide. But “possessed” is the wrong word.’ Mark picks up his mug and takes a sip of boiled water, waiting for Robert to reply.

Robert lifts his legs and feet up off the floor, and places the heels of his trainers on the front edge of the chair seat. He wraps his arms around his lower legs, pulling them together. ‘Why is it wrong?’

‘The Greek is “demonised”. WITH A DEMON; “in a demon” would be better. Like “in love”. Or “in drink”.’

‘Inside a demon?’

‘More like the demon’s surrounding you,’ Mark says. ‘A filter. Messing up how you see things. Like drinking does. Or love.’

‘I wouldn’t know. I’ve never done either.’

‘The point is: demons are everywhere. We’re all “in” them, and they’re in us.’

‘How’s that different to possession?’

‘Because the demon doesn’t own you. It’s hitching a ride, trespassing, because you’re under the protection of Christ’s blood. You need to stick up for your rights: throw it out. With the power of the Holy Spirit.’

Robert thinks. ‘We’re “in” the Holy Spirit too. Like the water of baptism.’

Mark frowns. ‘Yes,’ he says, after a moment.

Robert goes quiet as Sandy and Helen pass the bedroom door. When they’ve reached the top of the stairs, Mark says, ‘We’re soldiers in God’s army; we have to fight the enemy. Hand to hand. No point saying, “I command you, in Jesus’ name,” if you don’t make His victory real in your life. So I never try deliverance, unless I know you really want it.’

‘Deliverance?’

‘Throwing demons out.’

‘Have you ever spoken to one?’ Robert asks.

‘There’s no point,’ Mark says. ‘The only thing I need to know is their name.’

‘Like Legion?’

‘It’s usually the sin they’re in charge of. Fear, anger, lust. But there’s always one in charge: the STRONG MAN.’

‘Why do you need to know their name?’ It’s better to keep asking questions.

Otherwise Mark will come up with some of his own.

‘Demons don’t play fair,’ Mark says. ‘They take advantage.’

‘I thought you had to invite them in.’ Robert can’t remember inviting the girl—but she acts like he did.

‘If there’s a crack for sin to get in,’ Mark says, ‘a demon can get in too. But when you throw them out, that’s when they get legalistic. They won’t obey unless you use their name. Unless you identify the sin, and repent.’

What sin has Robert committed? Against his aunt, his uncle—his dad. His mum.

Mark asks, ‘Do you think demons are attacking you?’

Robert hums a tune to himself. It’s been in his head all day. He picks up Mark’s interlinear Greek Bible and flicks through the pages.

Mark puts his mug down and says again, ‘Do you?’

The tune won’t tell him its name, but Mark’s waiting, and eventually, he has no choice. ‘Yes,’ he says.

‘Like I said, addiction’s demonic. And suicide.’

Robert fidgets. ‘I don’t want to drink. Or kill myself.’ What does it mean, this resistance? Is it the demons in him, resisting the truth?

‘It’s an opening, for the spirits to enter.’ Mark reaches over and takes his Bible back; he places it on his lap. ‘I don’t want to upset you. But I’d like you to be free. God wants everyone to be free.’

‘I want to be free too,’ Robert says. Then adds, ‘I don’t want to be his son.’

That’s the temptation. Take another name: Legion, for example. Or Forester. What if Bill was his dad, and Tracey was his sister?

‘Think about it,’ Mark says, ignoring Robert’s last comment. ‘Pray. If you’re willing to work, we can throw the demons out.’

Robert’s not so sure. None of this sounds *wrong* exactly, but it doesn’t sound right either. Is he ‘in’ the girl? Is she ‘in’ him? What about the presence? He wonders if he summoned it. It comes when he puts his mind somewhere else: between the misaligned

edges of the wallpaper, or the stage and the floor of the assembly hall. But the girl's getting in the way. Interfering. Somehow, she's changing the message. If he summoned her, he didn't mean to.

'It doesn't have to be the two of us,' Mark says. 'I can ask Tracey.'

'I don't know about that.'

'Why not?'

'It's not safe.' But that's not the reason. It's Robert's secret, not hers. He doesn't even need to tell Mark. Not *everything*.

'You don't need to worry,' Mark says. 'God will protect her.'

On the way home, Robert can see the blue ambulance light from half-way up South Mossley Hill Road. When he gets closer, Auntie Rose waves to him from the back of the ambulance. His dad's lying on a stretcher inside, groaning. A wet patch on the front of his trousers.

'He had a seizure,' Auntie Rose says. She's got her coat on over the dressing gown.

Robert looks around, trying to see if any of the neighbours are peering through their curtains. Tracey's house is dark.

The ambulance men are wearing blue uniforms. Their jackets have silver buttons up the front, and on the pocket flaps. No epaulettes, but they have insignia crests on each shoulder.

Robert climbs inside the ambulance.

After the forty days in the desert, Satan never comes back to tempt Jesus again. If only it were that simple. The problem for Robert is he has to keep facing the same temptation, over and over. The devil won't take 'No' for an answer.

Maybe it's that way for his dad too.

What if Mark does cast the girl out? Will the presence go too? Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea. He thinks of the sodden coffin, and the words floating up towards him.

Without a mouth—without a body.

No more visitors. He'll be alone. Who's he going to be then?

Chapter 11: Tracey / Robert

‘It’s either that, or ...’ Kevin pauses a second while he scans the listings in the *Echo*. ‘*Terms of Endearment*.’

‘What’s on the Odeon?’ Tracey asks.

‘A load of rubbish,’ he says, without looking at the page. He flips back to the reviews page, and reads the *Footloose* summary: ‘KEVIN BACON TAKES THE LEADING ROLE AS THE HIP CHICAGO TEENAGER WHO TAKES HIS BIG-CITY WAYS TO SMALL-TOWN AMERICA AND PREACHES THE VIRTUES OF ROCK ‘N’ ROLL. LORI SINGER, OF *FAME FAME*, PLAYS THE HELL-RAISING VICAR’S DAUGHTER WHO TEAMS UP WITH HIM.’

‘Sounds like it’s taking the mickey.’

Kevin flicks the newspaper page flat and folds it over. ‘No more than usual,’ he says. ‘I tune it out.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t.’ Paul couldn’t make the practice session tonight, and Kevin suggested going to the pictures. Why not? But now Tracey’s not sure exactly what she’s agreed to. She wishes they had American-style ‘dating’ in Liverpool, which, as far she can tell, allows you to go out with someone without officially ‘going out’ with them. She thinks of Rebecca Miller, who gets asked out all the time, and says, ‘I’ve prayed about it, and I don’t think it’s God’s will.’

Kevin’s just passed his driving test, and he got an M-reg. Allegro as a present. He wrestles with the gear stick and stalls the engine before getting the car off the pavement onto South Mossley Hill Road. He starts in second gear, and it lurches forward, bouncing Tracey backwards and forwards against the seat belt.

‘Oops,’ he says.

‘Lights.’

He flicks the windscreen wipers on and off before he finds the right lever.

‘Are you sure you passed?’

‘You should see my three-point turn.’

Kevin’s not tall, so he’s hunched over the wheel like Mr Magoo. Maybe he has to stretch to reach the pedals. She peeks over and looks down—through a hole in the bottom of the car. He follows her glance. ‘Don’t mind that,’ he says, ‘free air conditioning.’

‘How did it pass the MOT?’

‘It probably won’t, next year.’

After getting out of Booker Avenue, and onto the dual carriageway on Brodie, Kevin accelerates. ‘Did you go into town yesterday?’ Tracey asks. There was a one-day strike. The teachers didn’t come out, but the jannies did, so New Heys was shut.

‘No. Did you?’

‘I wanted to see what it was like.’ There was a march and a demonstration before the council meeting at the Town Hall. The plan was to pass an illegal budget in defiance of government cuts, and local unions gathered to show their support.

‘Weren’t the buses on strike?’ Kevin asks.

‘There were trains.’ Tracey got off at Central, and joined the march there. If you listened to the whole crowd walking, no consistent rhythm. But if you focussed on the people around you, everyone was marching in step. No Jericho trumpets, but banners and chants, and politicians at the front with squawking megaphones.

LABOUR COUNCIL, LABOUR COUNCIL, WE’LL SUPPORT YOU EVER MORE!

‘What was it like?’ Kevin asks.

‘Heaving.’ From a distance, she could see women dotted through the crowd, but up close it was all hairy arms and necks. She got caught up in the crush in front of the police lines round the Town Hall on Castle Street, and someone behind pinched her bum. Then laughed.

MAGGIE, MAGGIE, MAGGIE! OUT, OUT, OUT! MAGGIE! OUT! MAGGIE! OUT! MAGGIE, MAGGIE, MAGGIE! OUT, OUT, OUT!

‘I think Paul went too,’ Kevin says. ‘Did you see him?’

She laughs. ‘No.’

‘He was in Manchester the day before, at the Cup replay.’

‘How did he manage that?’

‘He sagged off.’

There were football colours and banners in the crowd on the march: EVERTON SUPPORTERS SUPPORT THE CITY COUNCIL. Football chants too.

THEY ALL LAUGH AT US, THEY ALL MOCK US, THEY ALL SAY OUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED. BUT I WAS BORN TO BE SCOUSE, VICTORIOUS ARE WE.

She says to Kevin, ‘How are you two such good friends, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘He’s not like you and me.’ Kevin means that Paul’s common, but what he says instead is, ‘His uncle’s on the council.’

‘Really?’

‘Saint Mary’s ward.’

‘What’s that?’

Kevin shifts gear. ‘Like a constituency for an MP. Paul knows the boundaries, because he had to do the leaflets in the election last year.’

‘Are we in Saint Mary’s as well?’

‘Grassendale,’ Kevin says. ‘Conservative.’

‘Is that what Hatton is—a councillor?’

‘He’s the deputy leader of the council too.’

‘He was up on the balcony at the Town Hall, before they went in.’ Tracey left after the speeches, but today’s *Echo* said the meeting went on for eight hours, and they couldn’t get the budget through, because some of the Labour councillors voted with the Conservatives and Liberals.

Kevin continues, ‘I don’t care. But Paul does. It’s easy to wind him up.’

Tracey smooths her denim skirt flat. ‘The city’s going to go bankrupt.’

‘How would you tell? It’s not like anyone collects the bins now.’

‘The school’ll shut down.’

‘Well, it’s not going to happen before summer.’

THEY SAY CUT BACK, WE SAY FIGHT BACK!

She wipes the condensation off the car window as they drive through Toxteth. She remembers, during the riots, playing tennis in the public courts down on Otterspool Promenade, and seeing the pall of smoke hanging over the city centre. She thought it was CS gas, because they showed the police firing canisters on the news.

WE LOVE YOU MAGGIE, WE DO! WE LOVE YOU MAGGIE, WE DO! DO WE FUCK, DO WE SHITE!

WE STICK UP FOR OUR OWN, RIGHT!

Kevin parks the car in the Mount Pleasant multi-storey, on only his second attempt, and they walk along to the ABC. She lets her hand dangle, but he doesn’t take it. At the ticket booth by the entrance, Kevin says to the clerk, ‘Two kids for *Footloose* please.’

Tracey frowns. ‘No,’ she says, ‘I’m sixteen.’ Should she buy her own ticket? Will he get offended?

‘So,’ the clerk says, ‘that’s one adult’—she looks at Kevin, who’s obviously older than Tracey—‘and one child.’

‘Oh, is it under sixteen?’ Kevin asks. ‘I thought it was eighteen.’

The clerk pops her bubble gum.

‘Two adults then.’

‘Smoking or Non-smoking?’

‘Non.’

‘Four pounds forty,’ the clerk says.

Kevin hands over a five pound note.

When they’re farther away from the booth, Tracey says, ‘Sorry, I don’t like lying.’

‘You’re right. I just object to the prices.’

‘I can pay. I brought the money with me.’

‘You can buy the popcorn.’

They’re in Screen One, up on the balcony, near an usherette with an ice-cream tray. Tracey loves the ABC. There’s an organ, and an arch framing the screen, with two sets of curtains. The outer set, in red velvet, swish aside to reveal a translucent canopy, like the screen has a petticoat, all gathered in ruches, which rises up into the ceiling when the film starts.

Footloose is about a town where the local minister bans rock music. Tracey’s supposed to identify with his daughter, Ariel, who explains the reason for the ban: her brother was killed in a car crash after a night of drinking and dancing. But Tracey’s more interested in the minister.

I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THIS COMMUNITY.

In films and books, no one ever believes something simply because it's true. There's always a secret, personal reason. Righteousness is hypocrisy; conviction is prejudice. God is a mask to hide behind. And the story strips the mask away. Reveals the secret that explains who you are. But the minister's trying to be a good person.

It takes Kevin an hour to get his arm up over the back of her chair, where it wriggles its way over her shoulders, like a caterpillar. She can feel her heart bumping, and she's angry with her body, because there's nothing to get excited or worried about. She resists the urge to scratch her inflamed neck, and tries to concentrate on the film.

In *Footloose*, the kids are pure and clean. They don't have any secrets. But they don't have any doubts either. It's the minister who changes his mind. He even fights the rest of the town council when they start burning books.

We don't hide from ourselves in God. *He's* the secret that explains who we are.

Maybe Kevin's arm's gone dead, because he removes it from her chair and flexes his fingers. He takes some popcorn from the bucket she's holding squeezed between her thighs. Has a good rummage around first.

She's got to wait for him to do things: ask her out; touch her. Why?

IF WE DON'T START TRUSTING OUR CHILDREN, HOW WILL THEY EVER BECOME TRUSTWORTHY?

When the film's finished, they walk down to Top Shop on Church Street, because a Burger King's opened on the first floor above, and Kevin wants to try it out. 'I don't think it's going to be like the diner in the film,' Tracey says.

'Anyway.'

They're still not holding hands.

Inside the Burger King, Kevin looks up at the menu, which is on the wall above the till. Backlit, glowing: radioactive. ‘What’s good?’ he asks the spotty teenager on duty.

‘It’s all the same,’ she replies. She looks like the girl in the ticket booth at the ABC. Only the uniform’s different. But no marble or plush seats here. Everything plastic and fluorescent.

‘Okay, I’ll have, um, a Whopper,’ Kevin says. He looks at the girl to check he’s doing it correctly, and when she says nothing, he adds, ‘And fries; and a Pepsi.’ He turns to Tracey. ‘Do you want anything?’

‘A strawberry milkshake.’

Burger King and the new Top Shop have been here for a couple of weeks, but they only had the official opening earlier today, with a visit from Miss World. Tracey picks up a signed photo from a pile by the till, and holds it up. ‘What was she like?’

‘Nice hair,’ the girl says, scooping fries into a cardboard container. ‘Just like the photo.’

They sit down at a little table with bucket seats bolted to the floor. ‘What did you think of the film?’ Kevin asks.

‘I didn’t think the minister was the villain.’

‘I don’t think he was supposed to be. The music was last.’

‘Good to dance to. But you wouldn’t know about that.’

Kevin grins. He jerks his head up and down and shakes it from side to side.

‘That isn’t dancing.’ She takes one of his fries. ‘How’s the burger?’

‘Okay. Lettuce and so on.’ He puts it down on the waxed paper wrapper and picks at it with his finger. Slides out something soggy and greenish from the compacted mass.

‘What’s that?’ he asks.

Tracey cranes forward, and they examine it together. 'I think it's a pickle.'

'Oh.' Kevin sounds disappointed.

'The milkshake's thick. Super cold. Like sucking ice cream.'

He says, 'The girl in the film reminded me of you.'

'Kevin Bacon didn't remind me of you at all.'

'Doesn't it get you down,' he asks, 'being an elder's kid?'

'I don't mind.'

'I hate it,' Kevin says.

'Have you been baptised?' She can't remember.

'Yeah. Got it over with quick as I could.'

He talks like he was trying to lose his virginity. 'You're not wearing a band t-shirt tonight.'

Under his coat, Kevin has a red and blue striped shirt, and a dark blue blazer. He's also clean-shaven, although his hair's still down to his shoulders. 'I borrowed this off Paul,' he says, fingering a gold button on the blazer. There's a wisp of stray thread where the other should be.

'I figured,' Tracey says, pointing at the badge for The Specials on the lapel. 'Why do you like heavy metal? Don't the lyrics bother you?'

'It's like reading a story. You pretend to believe it, because it's bigger than real life. But you don't carry it out of the song.'

'Pretend? You mean be a hypocrite?'

'I'm not explaining it properly. You can try something out, see how it feels. But then you turn it off.'

'Like dating,' Tracey says.

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’ She gurgles her milkshake up through her straw.

Kevin looks out of the window, down at the people in the pedestrian zone on Church Street. ‘I don’t have anything against God. I don’t like the people who claim to speak on His behalf.’

‘But you believe in Jesus?’

‘Not the same way my dad does.’

‘How do you know you’ve been saved?’ Tracey says. ‘How can you be sure?’

‘Does that worry you?’ Kevin asks.

‘It’s more, what’s supposed to come after? What am I supposed to *become*?’

WE WILL NOT ALL SLEEP, BUT WE WILL ALL BE CHANGED—IN A FLASH, IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE, AT THE LAST TRUMPET.

‘Do you ever think about heaven?’ she asks.

Kevin wipes his fingers on the burger wrapper, avoiding his discarded pickle.

‘When we went to Tenerife last year, there was a swimming pool in the hotel. Every day, bobbing. Boiling sun, peeling shoulders.’

‘Lucky you. We go walking in the Lake District. Bed-and-breakfasts.’

‘But your skin gets wrinkly,’ Kevin continues, ‘and the chlorine gets in your sinuses, so you have to get out, and by the end of the fortnight, I was desperate to get home.’ He looks up at the ceiling. ‘What actually *happens*, in heaven? You can only say, HOLY, HOLY, HOLY so many times.’

‘An eternity of choruses.’

‘You asked me before, why am I friends with Paul. Why are you friends with Robert?’

‘I don’t know if I am any more. He’s stopped calling for me.’ She can’t help feeling it has something to do with the weird dream about her mum’s funeral. If it was a dream. She normally forgets them as soon as she wakes up, but every time she thinks about this one, there it is again: too vivid, too close. Like a broken vial of ammonia under her nose.

Kevin waves his hand in front of her unfocussed eyes. ‘You don’t seem to have much in common.’

Robert was in the dream too. ‘We like the same music, mostly,’ she says to Kevin. ‘Don’t you have someone you grew up with? I’m responsible, whether I like it or not.’

‘I thought he only moved here a couple of years ago.’

‘He used to visit Auntie Rose. It’s easier to connect, when you’re seven. Nothing to disagree over. But even now, if you make the effort, you can find things in common.’

‘I’m jealous,’ Kevin says.

Tracey laughs. ‘Don’t be.’ But he doesn’t mean that kind of jealous. ‘Why?’ she asks.

‘He doesn’t have any doubts.’

‘I don’t know about that.’ She tries to think of someone who doesn’t have doubts, and says, ‘He’s not like Mark. But I think God speaks to him.’

‘Speaks?’

‘You know what I mean.’ But how can he know, when she’s not sure herself?

What does Robert *do* all day, when he’s not with her? What’s his life like, alone in that house? It’s impossible to imagine him on a date.

What if God said, ‘You can swap places for a day?’ She twitches away from that thought, like it’s ammonia too. Because she knows what that would be like. It would be like living inside her dream.

If it was a dream.

Does she want God to speak to her, or not? Because He might do it through Robert, but He's definitely not going to do it through Kevin.

'I had a nice time tonight,' he says.

'Me too.'

'Do you want to do it again some time?' Kevin asks, fingering his missing moustache. 'Next week maybe?'

I've prayed about it, and I don't think it's God's will.

She says, 'I've got to revise. But I'll see you next Friday at practice.'

*

Robert's not sure where his dad is. After the ambulance took him to hospital, they transferred him to a detox ward in Clatterbridge on the Wirral, but when Robert went to visit him there, he'd already discharged himself.

The 488 bus leaves from Whitechapel for Neston; Robert sits downstairs at the back. He can feel the vibrations of the engine up the inside of his thighs, like he's inside its throat. As the bus passes the shadow line at the entrance to the Kingsway tunnel, it enters a fog of exhaust fumes, which seep through the windows. Robert breathes deep. In, out; in, out. Then holds it.

In the twilight, he can still read the sticker on the side window. It used to warn vandals that THE EXECUTIVE WILL PRESS FOR HEAVIEST PENALTIES AGAINST OFFENDERS, but someone's changed it to THE EXECUTIVE WILL PRESS HIS PEN IS AGAINST OFFENDERS.

His heart's a fist, clenched tighter and tighter as the seconds tick by. A minute; a minute and a half. He tries to push the feeling back down his throat, but he can't keep it in any longer. He sucks the grubby air.

He runs his fingers over the graffiti scratched into the glass around the defaced sticker: LFC, IRA, UDF. Eventually, the bus emerges back into daylight in Birkenhead. But even though he's on the Wirral, he's still inside Liverpool. The bus carries the city with it.

Once they get past Clatterbridge hospital, they're in the countryside. Miles between the bus stops, and nothing around them. The smell of manure. He'd rather breathe the fumes in the tunnel.

He puts his headphones on and plays an album Mark copied for him: *Nebraska* by Bruce Springsteen. Folk songs. Mark says Springsteen recorded them at home. They were only supposed to be demos, but when the band tried to rerecord them in the studio, Springsteen decided he preferred the original versions.

An acoustic guitar chug-chugs along like the bus engine throbbing under Robert's thighs. The voice is echoey: maybe Springsteen's house has really big rooms, but it sounds more like he's playing in an empty church hall. You can hear when he breathes in; the smack of his lips shaping the words around the microphone.

They're not soppy songs, which Robert likes. They're about brothers and fathers and people who've forgotten how to love each other, but keep trying anyway. Mark says love is a choice, not a feeling. You have to keep chug-chugging along—towards a destination you don't even want to reach.

Robert gets off the bus at the bottom of Talbot Avenue and walks up. It's not so different to South Mossley Hill Road: rows of semi-detached houses. But overgrown

thickets of green start appearing between the houses. Then a garden with a chicken coop; Land Rovers with spattered mudflaps.

Woolyback land. The children's home's not far from here.

It starts raining. A dog barks as he walks past its house. Flings itself at the inside of its front door. The letterbox rattles.

His dad's house is by itself on the corner at the top of Talbot Avenue. He wipes the drizzle out of his eyes and climbs up onto the bars of the old farm gate. He can feel the cold of the metal through his damp cords. His Peter Storm cagoule sticks to his ribs.

The gate's fifteen feet wide, heavy, so he only pushes it wide enough to slip through, then lets it clang back against the post. He steps over the cattle grid and grinds gravel until he reaches the front door.

The buildings are arranged in an L-shape, with the farmhouse in the centre, and the derelict stable and cowshed on either side. The core of the house has three floors, but other sections have two, and the stable and cowshed only have one, so the grey slate roofs are all higgledy-piggledy.

He peers into the porch, and rings the bell. BRRRRRRING. The sound's all alone, nothing to touch in there but the walls—but a fly comes to answer the door. It bumps against the glass.

Chapter 12: Robert / Tracey

New Heys has old-fashioned wooden desks in the classrooms, with hinged lids, and an inkwell holder in the top right corner. Last summer holidays, the jannies nailed all the lids shut, but before then, if you opened them up, you'd find leaking biros, empty crisp packets, graffitied pages torn from notebooks—and, occasionally, a fresh turd.

The Phantom Crapper strikes again.

Denied access to the desks, the Crapper transferred his attentions to the O-level art portfolios, which were left in the classroom between lessons. More sophisticated now, he crapped elsewhere, and merely wiped his arse along the edges of drawings and paintings. But only the good ones.

Robert started the O-level in September, but his early efforts fell victim to the Crapper's attentions in November, shortly before Mr Higgins started locking up the portfolios in the supply cupboard at the end of each lesson. The loss of several paintings allowed Robert to negotiate a special concession. When everyone else does P.E. on Wednesday afternoons, he draws robot animals. Even better, Mr Higgins leaves him by himself in the classroom.

Unfortunately, today isn't Wednesday; it's the normal double art period on Friday. It's the last day of term, but Robert still can't escape from Tommo Donnelly, cock of the school, and his scally mates, Lee and Simon. 'Hey, Damien.'

Robert ignores this.

'Damien.'

He got the nickname after the assembly with Tracey. From *The Omen*. He gets the theme song too, when kids walk past him in the corridors: DER DER, DUH DUH. DER DER, DUH DUH. DER DER, DUH DER DER, DER DUH.

‘Damien!’ Tommo shoots a wad of wet paper through an empty biro tube at the back of his neck.

It’s only going to get worse, so Robert turns around. ‘What?’

‘I can see the six six six on the back of your head. You’re going to hell.’ Lee and Simon snigger.

Robert says, ‘I look forward to seeing you there.’ No one sees anyone in hell. Everyone’s eternally alone. But that’s not a good punchline.

Mr Higgins finally arrives, ten minutes late, red-faced, swaying slightly as he pauses in the classroom doorway. ‘Why are you all still here?’ he says.

Tommo bends down to rummage in his filthy Adidas sports bag. ‘Sir, sir!’ he says, waving a large, moulded cassette box. Black, no markings. ‘Can we watch a film?’

Mr Higgins looks at his watch. ‘Depends what it is.’

‘*The Evil Dead*.’

‘I’ve seen it,’ Lee says. ‘It’s shit.’ Tommo kicks him.

Mr Higgins looks out the window, where there are girls playing tennis in short skirts. ‘We can’t watch that.’

A chorus of ‘Go on sir!’

Robert feels sick. He avoids horror films, and there are stories about this one in the *Daily Express*. It’s a video nasty.

‘Alright, fine,’ Mr Higgins says. ‘On your own heads be it.’ He walks over to Tommo and takes the cassette box. ‘I’ll go and get the television. Quiet until I get back.’

Tommo threw an egg at Robert on the way to school today, but, miraculously, it bounced off and splattered on the ground. Robert knows he's going to pay for this moment of grace.

'WHILE SHEPHERDS WASHED THEIR COCKS BY NIGHT, ALL TUNED TO BBC, THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CAME DOWN, AND SWITCHED TO ITV.' Tommo doesn't know any hymns, but he does the best he can. 'JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR, WALKS LIKE A WOMAN AND HE WEARS A BRA.'

Mr Higgins is back, bumping the wheeled television stand through the doorway. It wobbles off in the wrong direction, like an errant shopping trolley, but eventually he gets it into the corner, where he opens the flaps covering the screen and the VCR underneath. Then he turns round and stands in front of the screen. He puts his hands on his hips, but no one seems impressed, so he tries folding his arms instead. That doesn't have much effect either, until everyone realises he's not going to play the film unless they all shut up. When the room finally falls silent, he wags a finger at the class. 'No telling! Or we all get in trouble.'

'How long is it?' Robert asks.

Mr Higgins looks at Tommo, who says, 'Ninety minutes?'

'We don't have time.'

'Well,' Mr Higgins says, 'anyone who's *scared* can leave at three thirty.'

'Yeah, Damien,' Tommo says.

'Donnelly, close the curtains.'

'Why me? I brought the film.'

'Your bum chums can do it then.'

Lee and Simon don't move, for fear of identifying themselves as 'bum chums'.

'Chop chop.' Mr Higgins claps his hands, and points directly at them. They now have no

choice but to peel themselves off their desks and shuffle over to the window. They squeak their trainers across the floor as they go. When the room's dark, Mr Higgins hits play.

The tape crinkles and crunches. The sound of a buzzing fly comes out of the speaker. Robert squints at the screen. A swamp. The water's stained, like tea when the bag's left in too long, but he knows what's underneath. Rusty cans and scummy bottles. Bloated, flapping pages: women with orange skin.

Older kids in a holiday cabin. Something peers in at them through the dirty windows. Everything's filthy, even the film. Grainy, scratched. The tape grinds through the VCR heads. Robert closes his eyes.

'Oy, Damien,' Tommo says, 'you'd better watch.'

He opens his eyes again, and the television screen's a flickering lozenge of light. Far away, blinking on and off—inside the head of the presence.

The television's shrunk, but the presence has grown. Most of its body is sunk invisibly beneath the classroom floor, and the top of its head disappears into the ceiling. Its hard skin now has a dull metallic sheen, but it's mottled with an oxidized bloom—like the back of a tarnished mirror.

On the screen, a woman draws a picture. Her hand, possessed, shudders over the page, her pencil gouging out a mask-like face, ripping the paper. When Robert draws, it's like that too. He opens himself up, and as his Rotring pen moves across the page, it records the conversations around him; then, later, when he runs his finger over the ink lines, he can remember what people said.

JOIN US, a voice from the television says, and the locked trapdoor to the cabin cellar bangs against its chains.

The girl's sitting on an empty chair to Robert's left. 'This one's my favourite,' she says. 'Much better than *Driller Killer*.'

'I hate it,' Robert whispers.

'Why?'

'Because of the way it makes me feel. Why would anyone *want* to feel like this?'

'Who are you talking to, Damien?' Tommo asks.

In the film, there's a book, bound in human skin, written in blood. A manual for summoning demons. A tape recording explains that the demons MAY BE RECALLED TO ACTIVE LIFE THROUGH THE INCANTATIONS PRESENTED IN THIS BOOK. IT IS THROUGH THE RECITATION OF THESE PASSAGES THAT THE DEMONS ARE GIVEN LICENSE TO POSSESS THE LIVING.

'GIVEN LICENSE,' the girl says. 'By whom?'

On the screen, the voice on the tape starts pronouncing words in an alien tongue, and Robert puts his hands over his ears. 'No, no,' he says, to drown the sound out.

'Yes, yes,' Tommo says.

A grave in the woods glows and churns.

Robert hasn't read any incantations. Mark says that doesn't matter: demons can attack him anyway. All it takes is a slip of the will, a moment's inattention. It doesn't seem fair. Tommo doesn't need a reason to persecute him, but surely things are supposed to be more logical in the spiritual realm?

'JOIN US,' the girl says. 'Like anyone has a choice.'

'I have a choice,' Robert replies. Whatever Mark says, he has to believe that.

One of the women goes outside the cabin. She's attacked—by tree branches. Stripped, bound, speared between the legs. Tommo and his mates find this hilarious.

'It's not funny,' Robert says to the girl. 'It's disgusting.'

They're making him eat this film, but he can't chew the images into bland, meaningless paste; can't swallow them. He's choking. He turns to the girl. 'What do you really want? Answer me, in the name of Jesus Christ.'

Tommo jabs the back of Robert's shoulder with a compass point. 'I really want you to watch this film.'

'Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,' Lee and Simon say.

Mr Higgins says, 'Keep it down, you lot.'

'I want a sacrifice,' the girl says. She sniffs her armpit. 'I had a nice chat with Tracey the other night.'

'Stay away from her,' Robert says, trying not to move his lips.

'She is harder to get to. Unless I go through you.'

Robert glances back at Tommo, who seems to have stopped paying attention to him. Instead, he's staring at the screen: slack-jawed, drooling. Robert moves his hand in front of Tommo's face. No response. He looks around. Everyone else in the room seems hypnotised too. 'I still don't understand why you're here,' he says to the girl.

'Yes you do,' she says. 'I gave you the knowledge of good and evil. But you won't use it.'

'When? When did you do that?'

'In the home.'

The home. Robert blinks—tries to concentrate on the film, which suddenly seems the safer option. Everyone in the cabin's possessed now. Or dead. Or both. Except for one man: Ash. YOU BASTARDS! WHY ARE YOU TORTURING ME LIKE THIS?

Tommo and his mates are right. It's supposed to be funny. The spirits are mocking Ash, and the film's mocking Robert for being scared of it.

‘It’s against the law,’ he says, still staring at the screen. ‘Making me watch.’

‘It doesn’t cover videos,’ the girl says. ‘That’s the problem. But that doesn’t let you off the hook.’

‘I can’t.’

‘No one’s forcing you. You nearly made them turn off *Time Bandits*. You should’ve. But now you just sit there, saying nothing.’

‘Mr Higgins,’ Robert says. ‘He’s an authority.’

‘I was only obeying orders. Is that it?’

Ash throws the Book of the Dead on the fire. As the pages burn, the dead bodies of his friends begin to rot and seethe and pulse. Burst open.

The image on the screen moves towards Robert—out of the presence, up the wall of the cone. Carried forward on the crest of a silver stream of information. Rippling, waving. But muffled too. Like Robert’s the one under the filthy water with the obscene, bloated sirens.

The presence offers him its snaking tongue, with the image on its tip like a Catholic communion wafer. It says, ‘PEOPLE TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MY GENEROSITY HERE.’ Even under the distortion, Robert can tell it’s not his mum’s voice. ‘GO ON;’ it says, ‘TAKE IT. IT’S YOURS NOW.’ It’s trying to lay the words in his mouth, like eggs.

‘Stop it!’ he shouts, pushing his stool over as he stands up. ‘I’m not listening. I don’t want your message any more.’

His voice breaks the spell in the room, and the presence and the girl are gone. The image on the screen too. The television dissolves to grey static as the VCR mangles the tape. Spits it out.

Robert runs over to the curtains, pulls them open. The seams rip, the wooden rail at the top snaps. Black cloaks billow and sag, empty themselves onto the floor, spew dust back up into the light.

Mr Higgins holds his hand over his eyes, as if he's been in the dark for days.

Robert doesn't wait to see what happens next. He makes straight for the door.

Too late, again. He's already smeared with shit.

Demons, unclean spirits. Robert still doesn't know where the girl fits in. Maybe he doesn't need to. He just needs to be empty—have faith. Lay down on the altar like Isaac: let Tracey tie him up; let Mark hold the knife.

Except—Robert's Abraham. *He's* the one God speaks to. Not Mark.

*

Tracey's staring at a GET WELL SOON card. A cartoon of a man in a hospital bed. He's wearing striped pyjamas, sheet pulled up to his chest. Cross-eyed; sticking out his tongue, which is covered in red spots. Inside the card, a printed message says, HOPE YOU'RE BACK TO YOUR OLD SELF SOON!

She found the bulging envelope on the porch floor when she came home from school. She nudged it with her foot and stared at it for a minute, because she thought it was a love letter from Kevin. When she picked it up, she tore the envelope open fast—like pulling off a plaster.

YOU ARE HEREBY INVITED TO MY DELIVERANCE, AT MARK'S HOUSE. BUT YOU CAN'T ASK ME ANY QUESTIONS.

After she read the message, she ripped the card in half and crumpled up the envelope, but now she's put the two halves next to one another on the coffee table in the front room.

BING; BONG. Surely that's not Robert? He wouldn't dare.

Her dad's doing church accounts in the back room, and when the chimes sound again, she hears him go to answer the door. He sighs loudly when he passes the front room. She tenses her shoulders when he opens the front door, but then she hears Mark's voice in the porch. They're probably talking about money.

She stares at the divided card. Her house—and Robert's. Joined at the seam—ripped in half.

Her dad sticks his head round the door. 'Mark's here to see you.'

'Me?' She stands up. 'About what?'

'He can tell you.'

'I didn't ask him here,' she says, even though Mark can hear.

'Thanks Bill,' Mark says, squeezing past him through the doorway. 'No need for tea or anything.'

'You don't drink tea,' Tracey says.

'I'll be in the back if you need me,' her dad says, to no one in particular.

Mark looks spiffy: white jeans and a denim shirt with the collar turned up. Is that for her benefit?

He moves over to the sofa. He grimaces as he sits, favouring his injured leg. Tracey waits until he's settled, then sits down again. She leans forward and puts her palm over the two halves of the card. She sweeps them off the table and drops them in her lap.

'Robert came to see me,' Mark says.

She touches one of the ragged edges of the card. ‘So I gather.’

‘I thought that’s what you wanted. When you spoke to me.’

‘Well, he’s stopped talking to me since then.’

‘He’s only next door.’

‘That’s not how it works. He comes here.’ Is that true? It didn’t used to be. But then she moved her drums, and suddenly there was no reason for her to step over the fence. ‘He sent me a card,’ she says, holding the two pieces up, one in each hand.

‘Maybe that’s his way of asking for help.’

Tracey laughs. She hands the pieces over.

Mark puts them back together on the table. ‘Have you been ill?’

‘I get DEEPEST CONDOLENCES FOR YOUR LOSS ON my birthdays. What’s deliverance?’

Mark stares at the card. ‘Remember when we did the study on spiritual warfare, from Ephesians?’

‘Yes.’ Tracey didn’t enjoy it. Talking to God in prayer makes her feel more real, more present to herself. But imagining demons overhearing that conversation, broadcasting thoughts of their own to interfere—she doesn’t know how to feel about that.

‘It’s part of my ministry,’ Mark says, tapping the bottom half of the card. ‘I don’t go on about it, but it’s important.’

‘What?’ Tracey asks, but she knows.

‘Casting demons out.’

‘What’s that got to do with Robert?’

Mark leans forward. ‘He’s oppressed by demons.’

‘Maybe he’s oppressed by God.’ She gets up and steps over to the television. She touches the dead screen and gets a pin prick shock.

‘Do you believe in the Bible?’ Mark asks.

She can see a curved version of him stretched across the glass, like an expanding soap bubble. She moves her palm across the milky image, and wipes off the clinging film of static. Electronic dust. ‘Of course.’

‘So you believe the devil’s real too.’

She shakes her head, but she mean yes.

‘And angels and demons.’

She feels like she’s lying face-down on the carpet, with Mark’s stiff knee in her back, her arm twisted up behind.

‘Well?’ he says.

‘Why does it matter what I believe?’

‘I need your help. Robert needs your help.’

‘He’s got a funny way of asking for it.’

Mark shakes his head. ‘He doesn’t know any better.’

Tracey’s neck stiffens, as if someone’s standing behind her. She leans forward, and lowers her voice. ‘Does my dad know about any of this?’

‘That’s up to you. It’s you I’m asking, not him.’

But who’s *really* asking? Mark, or God? Does she want God to speak to her, or not?

She picks up one-half of the card. Mark’s hand is still on the table, and she pushes the other half back towards him. He lifts the tip of his middle finger, and the ripped edge slides under.

Chapter 13: Tracey / Robert / Tracey

STOP LOOKING AT MY BOOBS! Someone's taken a biro, and coloured in all the nymph nipples on Mark's art poster. Added little tassels, so they look like stripper pasties.

Tracey walks around the edge of his bed, and sits down on the far corner, near where Mark's cleared his weights away to make a space in front of the bay window. He's also brought in some extra wooden chairs, which he's arranged in a circle. Now he places a plastic bucket in the middle.

'What's that for?' Robert asks. He's standing behind one of the chairs, with his arms crossed. Still in his school uniform, though he's taken the tie off.

'Demons come out through the mouth,' Mark says.

'So you puke them up?' Robert already looks queasy.

'Not quite.' Mark's wearing black wool trousers with a crease; an ironed white shirt with a button-down collar. It's the first time Tracey's seen him in proper church clothes. She remembers him saying he used to write the word Satan with a small 's', until God told him, 'No, he's dangerous. You have to treat him with respect.'

'Why the mouth?' she says.

'Because they're spirit, breath,' Jenny suggests. Mark wasn't expecting her, judging by his reaction when she arrived. So Robert must have asked her. Maybe he sent out a whole lot of invitations—but Tracey and Jenny were the only ones who showed up. Jenny's still in her work clothes: a cream silk blouse with puffy sleeves and tight cuffs, a grey pencil skirt. Knees tight together.

Tracey's in jeans and a sweatshirt. No one told her there was a dress code for exorcisms.

‘Look, this isn’t difficult,’ Mark says. ‘Jesus did it all the time. But it only works if everyone in the room believes.’ He leans back on the windowsill to take the weight off his leg.

‘Believes what, exactly?’ Jenny asks.

‘That the power of Jesus is available here, right now.’

What he doesn’t say, but Tracey understands: it’s only going to work if everyone agrees that Robert’s really oppressed by a demon. Tracey wants to believe this—if it’ll help Robert—but she’s taking it on faith, because Mark hasn’t offered any real proof.

Jenny says, ‘What’s your Biblical warrant for this?’

‘The authority of Jesus’ ministry. Proved by my own experience, and the experience of people I trust.’

Jenny can’t compete with that, but she says, ‘I don’t see how you can justify the idea that demons are sins.’

‘Common sense,’ Mark says. ‘Demons want us to sin.’

‘But the idea of each one bound to a sin, taking its name, its purpose—its whole identity. That can’t be right.’

‘Why?’

‘People are more complicated than that. So demons have to be too.’

‘Why?’ Mark asks again.

‘Because God created them,’ Jenny says.

‘He created worms and cockroaches too. Who knows what demons were like, originally? It’s what they’ve become that matters.’

‘I thought they were fallen angels,’ Tracey says.

‘They don’t behave like angels,’ Jenny says.

‘You mean they don’t carry messages?’ Robert says.

‘Angels can make bodies. Demons have to take over someone else’s.’

‘So what if something has a body of its own? That could be a fallen angel.’

‘I don’t know,’ Jenny says. ‘I don’t know a lot of things, because the Bible doesn’t say. It’s important to know what it doesn’t say.’

‘I know exactly what I need to know,’ Mark says. He draws the curtains; closes the bedroom door. Everyone’s locked in now. No escape.

He puts his hand on the top of Robert’s head. ‘Repeat after me,’ he says. ‘Lord Jesus, I know you are the Way, the Truth and the Life.’

Robert says the words.

‘Like you mean it,’ Mark says.

Like he means it, Tracey thinks. What does that sound like?

Mark continues, ‘You died for my sins on the cross, and rose again, so that I can be forgiven and receive eternal life.’

Robert says the words. Into the bucket. There’s an echo—like it’s a wishing well.

There’s a smell too: like the bins in summer when the collection’s late. Rancid; sweet.

Robert looks up, tilts his head. ‘She’s here.’

Mark frowns. ‘She?’

‘I can smell it,’ Tracey says. She pulls the neck of her sweatshirt up over her nose and mouth. It? Her? Do demons have a gender?

Jenny says to Mark, ‘Can you smell anything?’

He holds his hand out to stop her speaking. ‘Where is it?’ he says to Robert.

‘Sitting cross-legged on the bed. Where Tracey was.’

Everyone turns and looks.

Mark looks annoyed, as if the demon's not sticking to the script. He tweaks the creases on his trousers up into sharper peaks. 'Everyone hold hands and pray together. When I say a line, you all join in with "Amen."'

Tracey and Jenny shuffle their chairs towards Mark. Robert does the same, pausing after each lurch to push the bucket ahead of him with his foot.

Tracey's opposite Robert in the circle. Her left hand in Mark's; her right in Jenny's. She looks from side to side. Mark prays, 'Lord Jesus, I'm nothing without your strength, your power. Your righteousness. Amen.'

Everyone repeats, 'Amen.' Tracey moves her eyes along the line of their joined hands. Up, down: like a wave.

Mark continues, 'I can't hide from you. You know the thing that binds me, torments me—defiles me.'

'Makes me unclean,' Robert says.

'Amen,' Jenny and Tracey say.

Mark says, 'So I confess to you now ...'

Robert leans forward, his mouth hanging open. Jenny shifts her grip on Tracey's hand. Does everyone have to join in for this? Is there something Tracey can say—a little secret? One she won't miss too much.

'Robert?' Mark says.

'What?'

'Do you have anything to confess? Anything holding you back from God?'

Robert cocks his head to one side, as if he's listening to someone speak.

‘I don’t like sex,’ he says, after a moment. ‘Why does everyone always want to talk about that? You can’t make me. I haven’t done anything.’

Tracey laughs. Then clears her throat and starts saying the Lord’s Prayer under her breath.

‘What about masturbation?’ Mark says.

Tracey prays a little louder.

‘I don’t do that,’ Robert says.

‘Never?’

‘No.’ He pulls away from Mark and Jenny and crosses his arms over his chest, with his hands slipped under his armpits. ‘I tried once; it didn’t work.’ He nudges the bucket with his foot, moving it up onto its edge. It wobbles, then settles down again.

‘Alright,’ Mark says. Since the circle’s already broken, he takes his own hand back from Tracey. She watches it withdraw, and leaves her own hanging in the air for a few seconds. ‘Let’s go on,’ Mark says, continuing his prayer. ‘I want to be free, so I forgive others, Lord Jesus. Anyone who’s ever harmed me, I offer them all to you.’

Tracey and Jenny say, ‘Amen.’

‘No more resentment,’ Mark says. ‘No more anger. No more hatred. Specifically, I forgive ...’

‘No one,’ Robert says. ‘There’s no one I need to forgive.’

‘What about your dad?’ Mark says.

Robert shakes his head.

‘What about your mum?’ Mark says.

Robert flinches, as if Mark’s about to hit him. ‘No,’ he says.

‘You don’t forgive her?’

‘I don’t need to.’

‘You do.’

Robert moves his hands to his knees and makes his hands into fists. ‘What did she ever do to me?’ he says. ‘Except love me.’

‘Say it anyway,’ Mark suggests. ‘I forgive ...’

‘My dad,’ Robert says.

‘What for? You have to be specific.’

Tracey keeps muttering the Lord’s Prayer, but Jenny tugs at Robert’s left hand, and Mark reaches over to take his right again. They keep him crucified between them. Helpless, forsaken.

Robert takes a deep breath, and says, ‘I forgive my dad for going to bed, when he got home from Kuwait. And not getting up until the evening, even though I woke him, to tell him she hadn’t come back from shopping. I forgive him for not calling the police until the following day.’

‘Good.’ Mark moves the plastic bucket back closer to Robert.

‘I forgive him for not telling me.’

‘Telling you what?’

‘How she died.’

‘What else?’ Mark says.

‘I forgive him for leaving me there.’

‘Where?’

‘Where I was,’ Robert says, ‘before I came here.’

Tracey stops praying. Mark asks Robert, ‘Where was that?’

‘The children’s home.’

‘You never told me,’ Tracey says.

‘Only a couple of months. Before Auntie Rose agreed.’

‘Maybe you need to forgive her too,’ Mark says. ‘For not agreeing sooner.’

‘Okay.’ Robert shrugs. ‘I forgive her.’

‘What for?’

He pushes out a long breath—as if it’s an unclean spirit, starting to leave his body.

‘For not being my mum,’ he says.

‘Did anything happen, in the home?’ Mark asks.

‘Nothing happened to me,’ Robert says. ‘I didn’t do anything.’

‘I’m sure it was horrible,’ Jenny says, gripping his hand tighter, ‘but they were probably doing their best.’

‘Is there anyone from the home you need to forgive?’ Mark asks.

‘No one in particular.’

‘Say it anyway.’

‘I forgive *everyone* in the home,’ Robert says.

‘And now your mum,’ Mark says.

Robert snatches his hands back again. ‘I don’t ...,’ he says, with his fingers over his mouth, as if he’s trying not to be sick.

Mark rubs his injured knee. ‘You forgive her, for killing herself. For leaving you alone.’

Robert stares. He grins.

‘There it is,’ Mark says. ‘That’s the demon.’ His palm goes up again, like a policeman directing traffic. ‘I’m speaking to Robert now. Let him speak, in the name of Jesus.’

‘It is me. I am speaking.’

‘Forgive her,’ Mark says.

Robert presses his hands over his ears, and raises his voice to a shout. ‘I forgive her.’

Jenny and Tracey flinch, but Mark doesn’t move. ‘Now I’m going to speak to any demon who torments Robert. Reveal yourself. You cannot hide. I command you in the name of Jesus to step into the light of God, and say your name.’

*

‘My name is Azazel,’ the girl says.

Robert copies her. ‘Az-a-zel.’

‘What does that mean?’ Mark says.

‘Ask Jenny,’ the girl says. ‘She knows.’

‘Jenny knows what it means.’

‘Me? I’m not ...’ Everyone looks at Jenny. ‘Fine,’ she says. ‘It’s from Leviticus. The ritual for the Day of Atonement. It might not even be a name.’

‘It’s my name,’ the girl says.

‘We don’t have theological discussions with demons,’ Mark says. ‘They’ve got nothing to teach us about God.’

Jenny pulls her bag out from under the chair, and gets her Bible out. She places it on her lap.

‘It’s hardly the right moment for a Bible study,’ Mark says.

‘It’s the ideal moment,’ the girl says.

‘Maybe it’s something Robert needs to tell us,’ Jenny says.

‘Well, there’s no harm in reading from God’s Word,’ Mark says. ‘But I’m not having a demon explain it to me.’

‘Take your time,’ the girl says. ‘Talk it over.’

‘On the Day of Atonement,’ Jenny says, ‘the High Priest stood before the Ark, in the presence of God. But first he had to make a special sacrifice.’

‘Nothing to do with demons,’ Mark says.

‘So he took two goats, and he cast lots between them. One goat for God; the other ... for Azazel.’

‘That’s you and Tracey,’ the girl says to Robert.

‘It doesn’t say that.’ Mark gives in and goes to get his Bible from the top of the dresser on the other side of the room. He gives the bed a wide berth.

‘You won’t find it in the NIV,’ Jenny says. ‘Or the King James. Or the Living Bible. They all translate it. But they’re guessing, because no one knows what it means.’

‘I do,’ the girl says.

Jenny says, ‘In Hebrew, it’s something like “sent away”; “removed”.’

‘Exorcised,’ the girl says.

‘In the Latin Bible, it’s *CAPER EMISSARIUS*. Messenger goat. Scout, spy.’

‘Angel,’ Robert says.

Jenny flicks through her Bible to Leviticus. ‘In English, it’s usually *SCAPEGOAT*, but Tyndale invented that word in 1530 for his translation, and everyone else copied him. Except the RSV.’ She reads, ‘THE GOAT ON WHICH THE LOT FELL FOR AZAZEL SHALL BE PRESENTED ALIVE BEFORE THE LORD TO MAKE ATONEMENT OVER IT, THAT IT MAY BE SENT AWAY INTO THE WILDERNESS TO AZAZEL.’

‘So the High Priest sacrifices one goat; sprinkles its blood in the Holy of Holies. Then he puts his hands on the head of the other, and confesses the sins of the people.’ She reads again. ‘THE GOAT SHALL BEAR ALL THEIR INIQUITIES UPON HIM TO A SOLITARY LAND. TO Azazel. Which could just be a place in the desert. Or a demon who lives there.’

‘Both,’ the girl says.

‘Jesus,’ Mark says. ‘He’s the scapegoat.’

‘But they don’t kill the scapegoat,’ Tracey says. She hooks her feet around the front legs of her chair and looks down again.

‘Right,’ Jenny says. ‘Literally, “the goat who escapes”. Because it doesn’t matter what happens to it, after they send it away.’

‘One goat for God,’ the girl says, ‘and one for me. But the one for God dies; and the one for me lives.’

Robert doesn’t believe her. ‘Maybe Azazel kills the scapegoat.’

‘Jesus is the scapegoat,’ Mark says. ‘And He wasn’t sacrificed to a demon.’

Jenny closes her Bible, but keeps her finger inside it to mark her place. ‘Why Azazel, Robert?’ she says, as if he chose the name. ‘Did you hear it in a sermon?’

Robert tuts. ‘No.’

‘In the desert, outside the camp.’ Jenny taps her Bible against her knee. ‘The Greek word for hell is *Gehenna*. Which was a place outside Jerusalem where people sacrificed their children.’

‘Maybe Abraham went there to kill Isaac,’ the girl says, drawing patterns on the quilt with her finger.

‘In Jesus’ day, it was abandoned, cursed. A rubbish dump.’

‘So Azazel is hell?’ Robert says, thinking of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. Maybe that was Gehenna too.

‘I don’t know.’

‘If Azazel eats the goat, does that mean it’s eating sin?’

‘What else would a demon eat?’ Mark says.

Jenny says, ‘In medieval paintings, the entrance to hell is a mouth. So when Jesus dies, it tries to eat Him. But He’s too pure; it can’t digest Him. So it spits Him out.’

‘Does Azazel spit the scapegoat out?’ Robert asks.

The girl burps.

‘We don’t need to know this,’ Mark says. ‘It’s not relevant.’

‘Yes it is,’ the girl says.

Jenny says, ‘Christ bears the sins of the world, but He’s still pure. He takes the penalty, but not the guilt.’

The girl burps again, and says, ‘His flavour doesn’t change. He still tastes the same.’

‘For the scapegoat, it’s more like the other way round. It takes the guilt, but not the penalty.’

‘You take the penalty; Tracey takes the guilt,’ the girl says to Robert. ‘Or the other way round. It’s up to you.’

‘I don’t want it to be up to me.’

‘Robert,’ Mark says, ‘stop talking to it.’

‘But it is up to you,’ the girl says. ‘So who do you want to be? The goat for God, or the goat for Azazel?’

‘Enough.’ Mark gets up and stands in front of Jenny. He takes her Bible, and puts it with his own under his chair. He turns back to Robert.

★

Robert’s face grows gaunter, his teeth sharper. He nudges Tracey’s foot with his own, runs the edge of his trainer along her bare ankle. ‘Your dream,’ he says. ‘It wasn’t a dream. It was me. I took you there.’

She’s suddenly back in Robert’s empty house, trapped in the morning room. She feels like her body’s shrinking, tightening its bands around her.

‘Is that a demon speaking now?’ Mark asks.

‘Yes.’

‘What brought you to this child of God?’

‘Something he didn’t do,’ Robert says. ‘Something I did for him.’

‘Are you a demon of suicide?’ Mark asks in a much louder voice, as if the demon’s hard of hearing.

‘Sometimes.’

Mark places both hands on Robert’s head. ‘Demon of suicide, you have no power over this redeemed soul. The blood of Jesus covers him. In the name of Jesus, I cast you out.’

‘Is there another demon there?’

‘I don’t like sharing. Not even with Robert.’

‘Are you a demon of alcoholism?’ Mark asks.

‘I can be, if you want.’

‘This body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. You don’t belong. You’re trespassing. Get out! The blood of Jesus washes you away!’

Robert leans over the bucket, and a thick trail of drool starts leaking out of his nose and mouth. It’s almost transparent, but not quite. A hint of pink.

It gushes darker and darker out of his face, until it’s thick scarlet. He tries to hold his nostrils closed in case the overflow sprays over the edge of the bucket, but Mark bats his fingers away. ‘Let it out!’

Out it comes. Or does it?

Robert wipes his face on his sleeve. He examines the contents of the bucket, sloshes them around a little. ‘Where did all that come from?’ He sits upright. ‘Why are *you* here?’ he says to Tracey. ‘You’re useless. You don’t know anything. God’s never going to speak to you.’

‘You’re my friend,’ she says, when she gets control of her breathing. ‘*He’s* my friend.’

‘Who am I speaking to now?’ Mark says. ‘Is that Azazel? Are you the one in charge—the strong man?’

‘What do you think? Am I the one in charge?’

Tracey looks at Jenny. She’s wearing too much foundation, but her face is damp with sweat. It looks like her skin’s melting. Tracey takes her hand.

Mark says, ‘In Jesus’ name, tell us your hold over Robert. Why are you tormenting him?’

‘I died for him,’ Robert says. ‘And he sprinkled my blood in the Holy of Holies.’

‘What?’

‘I forgave him. And he sent me into the wilderness.’

‘This is blasphemy. Say who you are, in Jesus’ name.’

‘Azazel.’

Mark puffs himself up, and the burnt skin on his neck flushes. He says, ‘Come out from Robert now, by the power of Jesus!’

‘Oh dear,’ Robert says. ‘This isn’t going how you thought it would, is it?’ He mashes his mouth with his hand, and pulls at the skin on his cheeks, as if he’s pinching them to get colour in. ‘Do you remember your bunkmate on HMS Sheffield? How he died?’

Mark collapses back into himself.

‘His lifejacket shrivelled like a crisp packet on a bonfire. You couldn’t even recognise him. Only his smile. The shape of his teeth as the lips bubbled away.’ Robert grins again. ‘But then you were burning too. You wiped your skin off on him.’

‘MUMMY, MUMMY, HELP ME. But he couldn’t even say it, with his black tongue. And then you, HE’S DONE FOR. BUT I’M ALIVE. TAKE HIM, NOT ME. God heard your prayer.’

Mark slaps Robert’s face, then looks in horror at his burnt hand.

‘Robert said the same prayer. God heard that too.’

Mark lifts his head, but before he can speak, Robert says to him, ‘I defy you, in the name of Jesus.’

‘You can’t,’ Mark says. ‘His name doesn’t belong to you.’ Tracey and Jenny stand up with him. Tracey’s legs are shaking, but when the three of them are joined together, she feels stronger.

‘I don’t care who you are,’ Mark says. ‘Leave now. Go back to where you came from.’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

Robert says, 'I have permission to be here.'

'No you don't.'

'Remember the apostle Paul? He was tormented too. LEST I SHOULD BE EXALTED ABOVE MEASURE, THERE WAS GIVEN TO ME A THORN IN THE FLESH, THE MESSENGER OF SATAN TO BUFFET ME.'

'Go!' Mark says.

'Amen,' Jenny says.

'I BESOUGHT THE LORD THRICE, THAT IT MIGHT DEPART FROM ME.'

'Go!'

'Amen,' Jenny and Tracey say.

'AND HE SAID UNTO ME, "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR THEE: FOR MY STRENGTH IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS."'

'I'm a servant of Jesus,' Mark says, 'and I have His authority. IN MY NAME THEY WILL DRIVE OUT DEMONS.'

'Ah, the Great Commission. But it's not in the earliest manuscripts. You should be like Jenny; check the footnotes.'

'I've got nothing to do with you,' Jenny says.

'What if there's no demon? What if it's Robert saying all this?'

'Then I'll forgive him.'

'Good for you.' Robert's head turns towards Tracey. 'What about you?'

'Don't speak to it,' Mark says.

'Shall I tell you why you're here?'

Mark's face is a safe place to look. Tracey keeps her eyes anchored there.

‘Because this is the proof you’ve been waiting for. It doesn’t come from God. He wouldn’t lift a finger. But He created me, so He must be real.

‘That’s my gift to you. My existence.’

‘You’re going back where you came from,’ Mark says.

Into the pit that’s opening up beneath Tracey’s feet.

‘Robert doesn’t want me to go.’

‘I’m speaking to Robert now. I command you to let him speak.’

‘It is me,’ Robert says. His voice is too small for his body.

‘Do you renounce Azazel?’

‘I don’t know what that means.’

‘Say after me: I renounce Satan, and every part of his kingdom. There is no path to the truth except the one revealed by you, Lord Jesus.’

‘Wait,’ Robert says.

(Robert)

Robert's back in the past again. He's trapped in here—with her. He can't see her yet, but he knows she's here. And she's in charge. She's the one playing the tape: fast-forwarding; splicing; editing. But it's not like watching a video. The past is rubbing up against his goose pimpled flesh; forcing its fingers down his throat.

It feels wrong—like her words, coming out of his mouth.

'Penny for the guy,' Susan said, kicking the dummy.

'We should ask if we can borrow it,' Fred said. 'Get some money.'

'But we'd have to keep carrying it round.'

'We could get a wheelbarrow.'

The three of them were on the stairs in the children's home. The dummy was for the fire brigade. Susan, Fred and Robert had to hide it in one of the bedrooms. Then later, the firemen would arrive for their drill. 'Someone's trapped in the smoke! You have to find him, but you don't know where he is!' The home was the largest local residence, and everyone who lived there had to clear out when ordered by the staff, so it was a good place to practice.

The dummy looked like a giant Action Man. It had sculpted face and hair, but the body was covered in clammy rubber skin under the jumble sale shirt and half-mast trousers, with a seam at the bottom of its neck.

The kids at the home took it in turns to hide it. This month, Susan, Fred and Robert had to choose which room it went in, while everyone else watched telly downstairs.

And then later, Stevie was going to time how long it took the firemen to get the body out, and if it was longer than the last drill, there'd be HMV gift vouchers for the three of them.

So it was a special treat, manhandling the dummy. Except it wasn't. Because it weighed the same as a grown-up. It had to—otherwise the drill wouldn't be a real test for the firemen.

The three of them were all breathing hard. Robert's chest and armpits were slick. 'It's because it's dead weight,' Susan said. 'He's not helping us'—a kick to the dummy's ribless chest, sprawling on the stairs below her—'not carrying any of the load. Even when someone's leaning on you, covering you, they're still doing that.'

She leaned over the bland, self-satisfied face and dribbled a thin line of spit out of her mouth. She let it dangle down for several seconds, sucking it half-way back through pursed lips, before finally letting it pool in the slit between the dummy's rigid lips.

Is it just spit? Or is there a hint of pink?

Robert was sitting on the stairs, below the dummy, with its legs straddling his waist, to stop it sliding down while everyone took a rest. Susan and Fred were several steps above, their feet level with the dummy's head.

'Let's just stick it in our room,' Fred said, reaching down to prod Robert with the toe of his Doc Martens boot. He and Robert shared a dorm on the first floor.

'They'll find it too quick,' Susan said.

'I don't care.'

Robert looked back over his shoulder to follow the conversation better.

‘We have to make an effort,’ Susan said, ‘or Stevie’ll get angry.’ She took a packet of Silk Cut out of the front pocket of her cotton pinafore. ‘I’m gasping. Got a light?’

‘I don’t think a ciggie’s gonna help,’ Fred said, but he fished around in the breast pocket of his army surplus shirt for a Bic lighter.

‘Hey new lad,’ Susan said.

‘What?’ Robert said.

‘He looks like he’s riding you.’

Fred laughed, and shook the dummy by the shoulders. ‘Giddy up, giddy up!’

Susan held the cigarette packet out in Robert’s direction. ‘Do you want one?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Don’t you smoke?’

‘No.’

She frowned. ‘Why not?’

Fred flicked the Silk Cut packet, and said, ‘Where’d you get these?’ Everyone else in here made roll-ups, from loose tobacco in tins. You could do it officially, once you turned fifteen. The older kids all had their own tin, which they kept and reused. Fred painted his with a Union Jack, and wrote the date ‘1690’ on top.

‘Stevie gives them me,’ Susan said. ‘He gets them duty-free from Ireland.’ She was proud of this—as if Stevie was an epic explorer for catching the ferry over.

‘My dad brings them back from Kuwait,’ Robert said. ‘He used to, anyway—my mum smoked Silk Cut.’

‘Is he going to bring some for me?’ Susan said, flicking ash at Robert’s head. ‘No? I didn’t think so.’

‘Come on,’ Fred said. ‘They’ll be here soon.’ He stood and grabbed one of the dummy’s arms.

Susan licked her finger and thumb and pinched the cigarette out. She put the unsmoked stub in her pinafore with the packet, and then stood up to take the dummy’s other arm. ‘You can have his bollocks,’ she said to Robert.

Fred looked at Robert and sniggered. ‘He doesn’t have any.’

The dummy moves its painted eyes towards Robert. ‘AND THE LORD GOD COMMANDED THE MAN, SAYING, OF EVERY TREE OF THE GARDEN THOU MAYEST FREELY EAT,’ it says, bubbling the words through Susan’s drying spit. ‘BUT OF THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL, THOU SHALT NOT EAT OF IT: FOR IN THE DAY THAT THOU EATEST THEREOF THOU SHALT SURELY DIE.’ It speaks with the girl’s voice. As Susan and Fred pull its arms, the back of its head bumps against every step.

After the fire brigade left, Stevie took Robert to the downstairs office. ‘You can go with the others in a minute,’ he said. ‘I’ve got something else for you, because you beat the record.’ He turned the key and opened the office door.

‘It wasn’t me,’ Robert said. ‘I’m not strong. Fred and Susan did most of the lifting.’

‘Come in,’ Stevie said, holding the door open. ‘Do you like The Beatles?’

‘I don’t know. We don’t have music in our house.’

‘This is your house now. And there’s lots of music here.’ Stevie was in his early thirties, fit, with big muscles. Always very neat, with a smell of aftershave. He sat down at the office desk and opened a drawer. Robert stayed in the doorway. Kids normally only went into the office when they were in trouble.

‘Take a seat.’

Robert took a step into the room.

Stevie took a tape out of the drawer. ‘Here. I’m not getting up.’

Another step.

Stevie handed the cassette box over. A proper one: a photographic cover and a folded insert. *Magical Mystery Tour* on the front. Rainbow-coloured letters, four people in animal costumes above the words.

‘Everyone likes The Beatles. There’s a song on Side Two called “Strawberry Fields Forever”. It’s about a girl in a children’s home in Liverpool.’

‘Thanks.’

‘It wasn’t an album. Most people don’t know that.’

‘What?’

‘*Magical Mystery Tour*. It was a double EP, not an album.’

Robert said nothing.

‘Don’t tell,’ Stevie laughed, ‘or they’ll all want one. People take advantage of my generosity here.’

‘I won’t,’ Robert said, stepping backwards towards the door.

‘Hang on, hang on. I’ve got something else.’ Stevie closed the top drawer, and opened the one below. He reached in and took out a magazine. Folded in two, so Robert couldn’t see the front cover. ‘Here, this is for you too.’

Robert stayed in the middle of the room.

‘Go on; take it.’ Stevie poked him with the end of the rolled-up paper.

He doesn't want it. But Stevie's holding it out. He's been holding it out forever, and Robert can't bear to leave it there, floating in mid-air. Even now.

He takes the magazine.

'Now, you really can't tell anyone about this. Boys will be boys, but Auntie Janet, she wouldn't like it at all. So you can always talk to me, but anyone else, you'd get in trouble.'

'I don't want to get in trouble,' Robert said, trying to give the magazine back.

'You can't. It's yours now.' Stevie winked.

Robert unfolded the cover. The magazine was called *Club*. It had a photograph of a topless woman beneath the title.

'Take a look.'

'I'll do it later, when I'm on my own.'

'Do it now.'

Robert picked the dog-eared pages apart and opened the magazine up to a random spread. He held it by its corners, between his thumbs and index fingers. Turned his face away, as if he was looking at pictures of his mum's dead body.

'Here,' Stevie said, taking the magazine back and folding it in half again. 'You'll have to hide it while you take it up to your room.' He pulled Robert's belt away from his waist and stuck the magazine inside his trousers, then tugged his shirt front up and over, to cover it. 'That's better.'

Robert didn't like the feel of the stiff, glossy paper against his tummy. And the bottom of the magazine rubbed against the top of his leg when he moved.

'You can go now,' Stevie said, waving him towards the door. 'But remember, new boys need to fit in.'

Robert wanted to say, 'I'm not going to be here that long,' but he didn't want to be rude, so he asked, 'Does everyone get a magazine?'

'No.'

Outside the office, Susan was swinging from the post at the bottom of the stairs.

'What did he want?' she asked.

'None of your business,' Stevie said from the office, where he could still hear them.

'Boys' talk.'

'Where's the presence?' the girl's voice asks from Susan's mouth. 'Why wasn't it there in Mark's bedroom, for the deliverance? Why isn't it here now, watching over you? It made you remember, and now it's left you alone. With me.'

'It's turned the tape off, stopped recording. It doesn't want to see any more; it doesn't want any evidence. Because it did nothing; it never does.'

'It speaks to me,' Robert says.

Susan leans in against the bannister and presses her cheek against the post. 'It just parrots other people's words.'

'God's words.'

'So why did you push it away? You know, in your heart. *I* saved you. This all belongs to me. You belong to me.'

There was a cow called Buttercup, who lived in one of the fields around the home, and a rooster, King Billy, who watched over a dozen chickens. Janet milked Buttercup, but one of the kids had to feed the chickens after breakfast. That week was Robert's turn.

The buckets were heavy, and he couldn't lift them away from his body, so they knocked against his calves and slopped onto his shoes. Water and pellets in one; a mix of leftover cereal, milk and soggy toast in the other. Never enough for the chickens. During the day, they hung around the kitchen window, just in case. If you left the back door open, they came inside, and ate the cat's food from its bowl.

At first, he hated them. Mindless mouths, stepping over one another. Cannibals too, because the slops included fried eggs. When they ran, they gripped the ground with their claws, and flung out dirt behind.

Not just CLUCK, CLUCK. Sighs, purrs, growls. BAWK BAWK BAWK, BAK AWK! when the hens were laying; a mournful WUUAH WUUAH from the rooster to bring them BOCK BOCKING for food. And when they saw Robert coming with the buckets, they puffed themselves up: QUOOARK, QUOOARK.

Robert moved his neck up and down, swung his hips from side to side. Watched the ground for worms.

'What the fuck are you doing?' Fred said.

'Nothing,' Robert said, blushing. He didn't hear Fred approach.

'Weirdo. Stevie wants to see you, up in the staff flat.'

'Is Janet there too?'

'How should I know?'

The girl's standing next to him. 'Janet's not there,' she says. 'But I am.'

'You can't be her,' Robert says. 'She's older than you.'

'She's not. She's my age. She's always been my age.'

He can see it now. Susan in the girl's face: trying to escape, fight her way out of the sunken flesh. Reclaim her life.

The staff flat was on the first floor near Robert's bedroom. It was self-contained, and the door had a Yale lock. If you needed something at night, you had to ring the bell: a home within the home.

But that day, the door was open. Susan lay sprawled on the sofa. The television flickered, but the sound was turned off. Stevie was in the kitchen. Robert stayed in the doorway. Susan watched him, without saying anything.

Stevie came through, carrying a bowl of Coco Pops, the milk already stained brown. Robert stood on the doormat, with chicken shit stuck in the grips of his shoes.

QUOOARK, QUOOARK!

'There you are,' Stevie said to him. Then bent down towards Susan. 'Careful: don't spill any.' His hand squeezed the back of her neck, pushing her head down.

Robert blinks, and now it's the girl inside the flat. She puts the bowl down on the floor. She says to Robert, 'Do you want to hear your mum again? I can play the tape too. I can do anything the presence can do. I can take its place.'

She straightens up, opens her mouth, and tilts her head back, like a bird waiting for more food. But nothing goes into her empty mouth, and his mum's voice comes out. 'I HAVE TO GO. I'M GOING BLIND. I CAN FEEL MY BRAIN GOING. I DON'T WANT ROBERT TO SEE A MAD WOMAN. I'VE TRIED TO HIDE IT FROM HIM. BUT I CAN'T ANY LONGER.'

The girl looks at Robert. ‘Didn’t you ever ask your mum, why there was no one from her side of the family? No grannie, granddad; uncles, aunties, cousins? Where do you think she grew up?’

‘I don’t know. She never said.’

‘You never listened. She grew up here.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

The girl closes her mouth and swallows air. Opens it, and tilts her head back again.

‘I BEG YOUR FORGIVENESS. I LOVE YOU ALL. I PRAYED I’D LAST UNTIL YOU CAME HOME. I DIDN’T WANT ROBERT TO BE ALONE.’

She burps.

‘Why do you think this is happening?’ she says.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You did this. To your mum; to me. She took your place, before you were born. She died for you. But it wasn’t enough; she wasn’t pure enough. So I had to do it again. I took your place.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Robert says. ‘You’re not Susan. You’ve stolen her life.’

‘You stole it first.’

‘Don’t just stand there,’ Stevie said. ‘You’re always hovering. Come in!’

‘No,’ Susan said. ‘He’s useless. He doesn’t know anything.’

Stevie gripped her shoulder tighter. She twitched her foot and flipped the bowl of cereal over. Brown slush seeping into the carpet.

He tutted. ‘What did you do that for? Now you’ll have to clean it up.’

Susan shook her head. ‘Not him.’

‘Okay,’ Stevie said. ‘Not him.’

Now Susan has Tracey’s face, and she’s shivering. She says, ‘THE FIRE AND WOOD ARE HERE, BUT WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR THE BURNT OFFERING?’

Stevie puts his hands on either side of Tracey’s waist and bumps her towards the door of the spare bedroom. He says, ‘GOD HIMSELF WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB FOR THE BURNT OFFERING, MY SON.’ He doesn’t seem to care that Robert’s still watching.

Tracey takes a few steps, then pauses. Puts her hands out to touch the frame of the door, as if she’s going to grab hold. Getting ready to kick and scream. But her fingertips only brush the wood, then her arms fall down to her sides. She turns around and says, ‘Why should Tracey get to live the perfect life? She should suffer, just like you suffered.’

‘Her mum died too.’

‘She barely misses her, what with all the aunts and uncles.’

Now Stevie turns around and opens his mouth. But Mark’s voice comes out. ‘SAY AFTER ME: I RENOUNCE SATAN, AND EVERY PART OF HIS KINGDOM. THERE IS NO PATH TO THE TRUTH EXCEPT THE ONE REVEALED BY YOU, LORD JESUS.’

Tracey puts her finger to her lips.

‘Wait,’ Robert says.

‘No,’ Mark says. ‘There’s no time to wait. You have to choose. Do you renounce Azazel?’

‘Yes,’ Robert says, with tears in his eyes. ‘I renounce her.’

He renounces his dad. He renounces his mum. He renounces Susan, and Tracey.

He renounces everyone.

Chapter 14: Tracey / Robert

It's been three months since the deliverance. Nobody's asked Tracey about it, not even her dad. They all want to pretend nothing happened—except that at church, people whisper now when Robert or Mark walk past. But shouldn't Tracey be different, even if the world seems determined to carry on as normal?

Everything's faded, even the dream of her mum's funeral, and it's hard to keep a grip on the reality of that cruel voice, speaking to her out of Robert's mouth.

WHY ARE YOU HERE? GOD'S NEVER GOING TO SPEAK TO YOU.

If the only proof of God's existence is the devil, what does that say about God?

Now that Tracey's exams are over, Jenny's asked her round to watch an old black-and-white film: *The Trial of Joan of Arc*. 'You didn't tell me it has subtitles.'

'Aren't you doing French?' Jenny asks.

'I stopped after third year,' Tracey says. 'The teacher looks like Cruella de Vil.' The French textbook had a character called Jean-Paul. In Tracey's copy, someone changed it to JEAN-PAUL, GEORGE AND RINGO. Every single time. It must have taken hours.

'Which O-levels did you do then?' Jenny says.

Did: past tense. Tracey has to get used to that. She goes into a skipping rope rhythm. 'Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Maths, Further Maths, Geography, English. And Home Economics. But that's a CSE.' She crosses her fingers. Behind her back, so Jenny can't see, because it's superstitious. 'I want to be a doctor. If I get the grades.'

'Cautiously confident?'

‘Not *confident*, no.’ But she did come top of the class in Physics, Chemistry and Biology for the last two years.

Jenny swirls a herbal teabag around in her cup, dips it twice, then dribbles it out over the edge of the cup onto the saucer. The windows are open, but the bedsit still smells of hippies. What is it—patchouli? Tracey’s never had herbal tea before, so she copies Jenny’s movements with her own cup. They’re both sitting on the sofa, in front of the television.

‘I wanted to get this film a couple of months ago, but I couldn’t find a copy,’ Jenny says. She and Tracey haven’t talked since the deliverance. She asks, ‘How’s Robert doing?’ Then adds, ‘At school.’ Because that’s a safer question.

Tracey shrugs. ‘He’s in the top band.’

‘There are no bands in Liverpool comprehensives, since Labour took over. Everyone’s equal.’

‘Right,’ Tracey says. ‘Well, they keep him there, but he doesn’t do well in exams. He won’t answer the questions; he just writes whatever he feels like.’ She hasn’t seen Robert much, because of revision. Well, that’s the story she’s got ready, if anyone does ask.

‘How have you been?’ Jenny asks.

‘I haven’t stopped to think about it,’ she lies.

‘Joan of Arc heard voices,’ Jenny says. ‘Saint Catherine, Saint Margaret.’

Tracey frowns. ‘Spirits. Dead people.’

‘Virgin martyrs.’ Jenny fiddles with the top button of her blouse. ‘Killed because they wouldn’t marry pagans.’

‘Nothing about saints in the Bible.’

‘Especially Catherine and Margaret,’ Jenny says. ‘They never existed.’

‘So it was demons?’

‘She heard Saint Michael too. The archangel Michael.’

‘How can an angel be a saint?’ Tracey sips her peppermint tea. It’s murky brown. She licks the back of her teeth. Shouldn’t peppermint make them feel cleaner?

‘Not “holy person”. “Someone who intercedes in heaven”.’ Jenny puts her cup down on the floor. She puzzles over the VCR, which is new. ‘Joan’s a saint now. But only since the First World War.’

‘You have to tune the telly,’ Tracey says, ‘like you tune it to BBC1.’

‘I’ve done that.’ The picture resolves. ‘There we are.’

A courtroom. Joan’s chained hands, joined at the wrist, descend like a dove on a copy of the Bible. She swears to tell the truth.

YOU SHOULD HAVE A QUESTION PAPER ON YOUR DESK. DO NOT OPEN IT UNTIL I TELL YOU TO.
YOU ARE NOW UNDER EXAM CONDITIONS.

Rows of priests, all the same. One of them asks, HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOUR VISIONS
ARE MEN OR WOMEN?

I DON’T EVEN KNOW IF THEY HAVE A BODY.

HOW CAN THEY SPEAK WITHOUT A BODY?

I TRUST GOD. THE VOICE IS SOFT AND SPEAKS THE LANGUAGE OF FRANCE.

‘Who cares what language they speak?’ Tracey asks.

‘What language do angels normally speak?’ Jenny waits, like she’s expecting Tracey to put her hand up.

‘So they translate?’

‘Everything’s a translation. Joan spoke in French. But the trial record’s Latin. So the dialogue here’s translated back into French. And then English for the subtitles.’

‘It’s weird. Someone’s mouth moves, but the sounds aren’t connected to the words.’

‘They are if you know French.’

‘I have to keep looking up and down.’

One priest, dressed in white, doesn’t speak, but makes hand signals to direct the questions. A quill scratches. Joan complains they’re not recording all her words. ‘If it’s from the trial record, then how do we know what they *didn’t* write down?’ Tracey says.

IF YOU HAVE A QUESTION, RAISE YOUR HAND AND WAIT. INVIGILATORS CANNOT ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CONTENT OF THE EXAM.

She gets up and taps the screen over the white priest’s face. ‘And what about him? He can’t be in the record if he doesn’t say anything.’

‘There was a second trial, years later, to clear Joan’s name.’

‘French, Latin, English. I still feel like she’s talking *to me*,’ Tracey says. She imagines priests coming into the bedroom in South Mossley Hill Road; or waking up with her bed in the middle of the upper school assembly hall. Her whole life under exam conditions.

Will the Day of Judgement be like that? But Tracey won’t be alone then. Jesus will stand by her side.

YOU HAVE THREE HOURS TO COMPLETE THIS EXAM. YOU MAY OPEN YOUR PAPERS AND BEGIN.

All the exams are blurred into one now. Chair legs shuddering across the gym floor. Zips opening and closing on pencil cases. Becca Donnelly on the desk in front, rattling a Biro tube against the edge of her desk, and sighing loudly.

The priests take turns to interrogate Joan, but she’s alone, with no one on her side of the room. She doesn’t look at anyone in particular when she speaks. And she’s never

surprised, never stuck. As if she knows all the questions in advance. As if she's reading from the trial record, repeating what she's already said.

WHAT CLOTHES DID SAINT MICHAEL WEAR?

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT HIS CLOTHES.

WAS HE NAKED?

DO YOU THINK GOD CANNOT AFFORD CLOTHES FOR HIM?

DID HE HAVE LONG HAIR?

WHY WOULD IT BE CUT?

'Why are they so bothered about haircuts?' Tracey asks.

'Because angels have no sex. But Joan does. And she dresses like a man.'

Jenny's in dungarees; Tracey's in jeans. She thinks back to the church revue show.

'John Cooper wouldn't mind. He likes wearing women's clothes.'

AREN'T YOU SUBJECT TO GOD'S CHURCH ON EARTH, AND TO ITS CHURCHMEN?

GOD MUST BE SERVED FIRST.

Jenny says, 'Mark was asking Robert to submit to *his* authority.'

'Not Mark's; God's.'

'Who gets to say if it's a demon or an angel?'

'Our church isn't like that,' Tracey says. 'No one's in charge. Only the Bible.'

'You don't really believe that.'

A priest reads out the sentence against Joan. Others walk out in protest.

'You think it's impossible,' Jenny says, 'to stand up for what's right. You think you're the only one in the room. But it's not impossible.' She wipes her eyes.

Tracey reaches out to touch her arm, and nods at the screen. 'Who do you think was speaking to her?'

‘What if it was God?’

‘He doesn’t pretend to be someone else.’

‘What if He created Catherine and Margaret? Young girls believed in them, prayed to them. Hundreds of years. What if *that* was the answer to all those prayers?’

MY EXISTENCE. THAT’S MY GIFT TO YOU.

My afterlife too. My continued existence. Because now Tracey’s waiting for that voice to come back. Keeps expecting to hear it in Robert’s voice. Maybe he’ll be the one by her side, on the Day of Judgement. Smiling, with blood on his teeth. Listing everything she’s ever done wrong.

YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES LEFT UNTIL THE END OF THE EXAM.

Joan’s execution pyre catches fire. A priest holds up a cross on a pole so she can see it, but he’s driven back by the heat and smoke. He squints as the sweat runs into his eyes.

The smoke clears, and the stake’s empty.

‘Like when Darth Vader kills Obi-Wan Kenobi,’ Tracey says.

STOP WRITING AND PUT YOUR PENS DOWN.

Tracey’s walking up Rose Lane to Mather Avenue, to catch the 86 bus. She would get the train, but Mossley Hill station is closed because the signalmen are out in support of the miners. The sky’s overcast, so the summer twilight’s grey—apart from the yellow windows of Chris’s chippy. She likes coming here on a Friday in term time, when the students are here, escaping from the canteen food at the Carnatic Halls. She can imagine what it’s like to be one of them. But the chippy’s still full, even in July. She only wants chips tonight, so Chris waves her to the front of the queue. As he wraps her portion, he gives her a wink, and calls her a ‘little lady’.

The chips are just out the fryer: so hot she has to juggle them round her mouth with her tongue, eating with her mouth open so she can blow cold air in and out at the same time. She's got an ulcer, and the salt and vinegar stings.

The beer garden in The Rose is full: someone gives her a wolf whistle. She keeps her eyes down on the pavement. The British Legion's safer: toothless men with pints of mild. Quarry Bank lower school is on the other side of Rose Lane at the top. They're rivals with New Heys, but no one cares about school sports, so it just means lads fighting. Not serious. Twos and threes: no gangs. Fists and stones: no bricks or bottles.

She crosses over Mather Avenue, and walks past the fire station to the bus stop. Crumples up her chip paper and throws it in the bin before she gets on. Shows her Saveaway ticket with the day and the month scratched off. Friday the 13th.

She sits at the front on the top deck. Level with the orange streetlights, which strobe down the line of windows as the bus accelerates. There's a group of scallies at the back. She can see them in the round mirror above the stairwell. Legs spreadeagled, or over the seat in front, and when they speak, they all shout over each other. She puts her Walkman on and keeps her shoulders hunched.

The top of the bus swings and lurches as the wheels run over potholes. She rests her face against the window, which squashes her left headphone and vibrates against her cheekbone. Her temple shudders down the glass, so she has to keep moving it back up, but she likes the rhythm of it.

She brought *Architecture and Morality* by OMD with her on an SA90 cassette because it's got two songs about Joan of Arc in the middle, but now she rewinds the tape back to the beginning and it starts with 'The New Stone Age'. A sound like sticks rattling

off the metal handrails on top of the seats. A hiss of steam from an overheated engine radiator. A frightened heartbeat.

She gets off the bus at the stop for New Heys, and walks up the hill to the upper school, past the sports fields. Beyond the main gate, she steps over a low wall and down a grass incline to the chain-link fence around the outdoor netball pitch. She puts her fingers through the wire, and rattles it backwards and forwards.

The popular girls play Goal Attack or Goal Shoot. The girls picked last don't get a choice: Goal Defence or Goal Keeper. On a good day, Tracey plays Wing Attack; on a bad day, Wing Defence. Not much difference: always in the middle.

No more P.E. in sixth form. Only A-levels. And she won't be in the middle there. Does God choose her to come top, or does she choose herself? Because if He chooses her, that means He's *not* choosing everybody else. Robert, for example. He never comes top—except in art. But if he can't be the first pick, then he'd rather be the last. Maybe that's better. THE STONE THE BUILDERS REJECTED HAS BECOME THE CORNERSTONE. In her Physics mock, she made a deliberate mistake, so she wouldn't get a hundred per cent. She needn't have worried: she got two other questions wrong.

Tracey presses fast forward and skips through the middle of the second side of *Architecture and Morality* until she gets to the last track: 'The Beginning and the End'.

When they came to take her to the pyre, Joan said, I ASK FOR A CROSS. Tracey rubs the one round her neck between her finger and thumb. The Brethren don't really approve of external signs, but Tracey wanted it there for school, next to her treacherous skin. Like a hair shirt.

In school, she can't speak up for God. So her body speaks for her. She trains it to endure His love. But when she pivots round a fixed foot on the netball court and the ball soars up in the air, the cross lifts off her neck too.

They took Joan's crucifix away when they chained her to the stake. Gave her another to look at, but kept it out of reach until it disappeared in the smoke. Joan called on her saints, who didn't answer.

She had to endure the love of God too.

Tracey grew up surrounded by God's love; surrounded by faith. She shared it with everyone else in church—with her dad. But now she wants her own faith. That's why she went to the assembly with Robert—the deliverance too.

She wants to be alone with God, like Joan was alone. Maybe that's what it takes to prove your faith is real—a funeral pyre.

*

The girl's gone—but the presence has gone too.

Four years ago, on the way to the cemetery for his mum's funeral, Robert said to himself, 'Goodbye,' over and over, because he didn't have the courage to say it in the funeral parlour. Again, at the grave, wiping soil off his hands. Goodbye, goodbye.

Too late. Wrong.

After the deliverance, Mark told him, 'What are you doing, to keep the demons away?'

'I thought there was only one.'

Mark frowned. 'You have to work at it, finish what we started.'

He's been working. For three dead, grey months of gammon and fish fingers and broad beans and silence. But he has to do his duty. Chew and swallow; finish forgiving his dad. He can't do that until he sees him. Look him in the eye; say the words. So Robert has to try again to find him.

He takes the 488 bus over to Neston, and walks up Talbot Avenue. This time, when he touches the porch door, the Yale lock clicks open. 'Dad!'

No one answers, but something's there. Its fingertips touch his cheek, smear themselves along his upper lip. He steps inside the porch. The inside door's open too. He pushes it wider, and steps into the dining room.

The smell's coming from the oldest part of the house. It's like the presence, but that can't be right.

He turns left into the kitchen. The sink's full of dirty plates and dead flies. Cracked green sludge in the bottom of a WORLD'S GREATEST DAD mug, which his dad bought for himself last Father's Day.

He goes to the fridge. A rotten belch: flaccid, iridescent chicken and cottage cheese milk. When he closes the door, he imagines a plate of bloody muscle and a chilled goblet of coagulating blood; thin wine and a slice of mouldy bread.

His dad doesn't eat much—not when he's drinking.

Robert goes back to the dining room. The door into the oldest part of the house is weathered oak, painted black. He lifts the latch, and the door shifts down an inch as it swings outwards, so the lowest corner scrapes against the floor at the end of its arc.

Inside, the main hall of the house has a low ceiling. At the far end, there's a single, tiny window. Wooden beams, with wattle and daub walls: black bones, pale, flaking skin. The flagstones shine with sweat.

In the shadows at the end of the hall, to the right of the crooked spiral staircase, light trickles out round the edges of the door to the television room. Not natural: seared, cauterised. The smell's coming from there.

Hot. Furred, evaporated. A home within the home.

'Dad?'

Robert hesitates, then steps backwards. Into the dining room, then the porch. When he gets outside, he pulls the door closed, as hard as he can, to make sure the lock catches. Pushes it twice, to make sure it won't open again.

He knows now. He doesn't miss his dad. He misses the presence. He even misses the girl.

His stomach's still twitching from the smell, but now it contracts and growls. Another mouth inside him, opening and closing, demanding to be fed.

Come back. Show me what to do; who I am. Show me I matter.

Chapter 15: Robert

Garston Chapel have hired a coach for the trip to see Billy Graham. Robert kneels up on his seat so he can see out over the headrest. He wants to pray for everyone later, so he stares at each new face for a few seconds, and tries to memorise it. His eyes stop at the back of the coach: Tommo and Simon from school, whispering to each other.

Robert's sitting next to Tracey, in front of Kevin and Paul. He twitches his head towards the back seat, and says out the corner of his mouth, 'They're in my class.'

'God moves in mysterious ways,' Kevin says.

'I invited them,' Paul says.

'My point exactly.'

Robert raises his palm in a frozen wave. Tommo stares at him, and silently mouths the word, 'Damien.' He flips the hair away from his forehead, and jabs at the exposed part line with his finger. 'Six six six.'

Robert feels people's eyes on him in church, since the deliverance. But surely Tommo doesn't know anything?

The coach slows to a crawl long before they reach Anfield, as men with walkie talkies and orange reflective jackets wave them past traffic cones and billowing lines of tape, into a closed-off street, where the driver parks next to several other coaches. When they get off, there's a line of old people in wheelchairs waiting to get on a shuttle bus.

'I thought it was Youth Night,' Paul says.

'Young at heart,' Tracey says.

Kevin slaps the back window of a social services Transit van. 'I'm surprised the council's helping people get to Billy Graham.'

‘Keeps them off the streets,’ Paul says.

There are signs tied to lampposts pointing the way to Anfield, and Trevor Jenkins handed out the tickets on the coach, so the Garston Chapel people make their own way towards the ground, thinning out as they go. Hundreds of other people are walking in the same direction, in twos, threes, and larger groups. Some of the groups follow banners with church names and Bible verses: JOHN 3: 16; REVELATION 3: 20.

Paul’s leading the four of them, even though Kevin’s the Liverpool supporter.

‘Where did Tommo and Simon go?’ Robert asks, looking round.

‘They know the way,’ Paul says.

The four of them are in a park now, with the stadium ahead, across another closed-off road. In the park, there are more men in reflective jackets standing next to loudspeakers on poles. ‘What are these for?’ Tracey asks.

The steward puffs his orange chest out. ‘In case everyone can’t get in.’

‘We’ve all got tickets.’

‘Everyone last night had a ticket too.’

A few boys are kicking a football, dribbling around the people walking across their makeshift pitch. Their shouts rise above the talking and laughing and singing.

‘It’s quiet, without the cars,’ Tracey says. It’s not quiet, but Robert knows what she means. All the sounds are human sounds. Together, converging on the stadium. Even the boys, trying to be apart, are caught in its force field.

They cross over the final road, and come into Anfield through a large set of gates with YOU’LL NEVER WALK ALONE written in cast-iron letters at the top. On the right, Robert can see the backs of terraced houses with chimneys and slate roofs.

Imagine living there! Shouts, cries, thousands of gasps as a shot misses, but everything invisible: like a film soundtrack without the pictures.

They must be able to hear Billy Graham too.

The four of them walk into the stadium through a tunnel, and across the front of the visitors' stand, then up its central aisle to reach their fold-down plastic seats.

The pitch is much larger than it seems on *Match of the Day*. At its other end, the few people moving around on the terraces of the Kop are tiny. The grass is covered in sheets of brown matting. 'Tommo'll be disappointed,' Paul says.

'What do you mean?' Robert asks. He looks around the nearby seats; no sign of Tommo and Simon yet.

'Why do you think he's come?'

'Curiosity?' Tracey says, on Paul's other side.

'What happens at the end of the evening?'

'Billy Graham calls people to go forward,' Robert says, 'to commit their lives to Christ.'

'And where do they go?'

Everyone thinks about that.

'The pitch,' Tracey says, after a few seconds.

'Sacred ground,' Paul says.

'They see it on telly every other week.'

'But you don't get to touch it,' Paul says. 'Not even when you're here for a game. Not since they put the barriers up.'

'You don't know why Tommo's here,' Robert says. '*He* might not know.'

The stage for Billy Graham is half-way down the pitch, but away from the kick-off spot, close to the stand on their right. The stage has a grand piano with an open lid; a couple of microphone stands; a lectern. It's surrounded by low metal crowd barriers, but they're partially hidden by rows of flower boxes and green ferns in pots. There are two short towers of scaffolding on either side, with spotlights.

The front row of the stand nearest the stage seems to be reserved for special guests. Tracey points at two small figures sitting next to one another. One in a purple shirt; the other all in black. 'That must be Sheppard and Worlock,' she says. The Anglican and Catholic archbishops.

'Bezzie mates,' Paul says.

The stadium hums. Robert can feel it coming up through his shoes, into his legs and thighs. Hundreds of feet, but one continuous vibration. People are still arriving at eight o'clock when someone walks out on stage. 'Is that Billy Graham?'

Tracey squints at the stick figure. 'I don't know.'

Grey suit, grey hair. The man sits down at the piano and lifts both hands towards the stand on the right; Sheppard and Worlock stay seated, but most of the other people get to their feet. The choir members are all dressed in red or white, and they're holding booklets, which they fold open.

'Isn't your cousin singing?' Robert says to Tracey.

'My aunt's one of the counsellors too.'

'Majesty, worship His Majesty': a chorus from *Mission Praise*.

'It's not very youthful so far,' Paul says.

At the end of the song, the grey man goes to the lectern and says, ‘IT’S A SPECIAL JOY TONIGHT TO WELCOME A GUEST WHO NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION. ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS MENTION HIS NAME WHERE CHRISTIANS GATHER, ESPECIALLY YOUNG PEOPLE, AND THEY’RE ANXIOUS TO SEE HIM.’

Robert frowns. ‘I feel like I’ve heard this before,’ he says.

The man on the stage leans forward to get his mouth closer to the microphone, so the volume rises when he says the name: ‘CLIFF RICHARD!’

Kevin and Paul sink down in their seats; Robert and Tracey tap their fingertips politely against their palms. Everyone else in the stadium applauds wildly as Cliff bounces up to one of the microphones. ‘They can’t *all* be that excited to see him,’ Paul says.

Cliff’s far away, but Robert can still make out all the details of his outfit, maybe because it’s so familiar: a skinny tie, a red waistcoat, large tinted glasses. Cliff pushes his shirt sleeves up past his elbows, and nudges the glasses up the bridge of his nose. ‘THE ONE THING THAT HAS MADE MY LIFE REALLY TERRIFIC, REALLY VALUABLE,’ he says, ‘IS THE FACT OF JESUS ENTERING INTO IT NINETEEN YEARS AGO.’

‘I bet he’s the youngest person on that stage tonight,’ Kevin says.

‘Does this seem familiar to you?’ Robert says.

‘I WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND TELEVISION,’ Cliff says, with a slight echo off the microphone, ‘BUT I’LL GLADLY SWITCH IT ON, AND JUST ENJOY IT.’ Does the distortion kick in when the volume hits a certain level, or is it triggered by specific sounds? PP, SS, TT? ‘AND CHRISTIANITY—OKAY, YOU CAN ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT IT—BUT IT NEEDS SWITCHING ON TOO. YOU NEED TO STEP INTO IT.’

‘Step into the television?’ Kevin says. He, Paul, Tracey and Robert form a little island of resistance in the flow of the stadium’s attention. Robert doesn’t feel bad about

that. The crowd's big enough to contain this difference. But the moment's doubled, accompanied by its own echo, and the feedback separates him from himself.

He remembers last New Year's Eve, at Mark's party. Every second had to be charged with magical significance; every huddle of guests opening and smiling, just waiting to share secrets with him. But Robert ended up sitting alone at the top of the stairs, head between his knees, pretending he'd drunk too much. Not that there was much to drink—Mark had a carton of non-alcoholic beer, and Sandy and Helen brought bottles of fizzy wine. Robert didn't touch any of it, but pretending was the only way to get anyone's attention.

That's what this feels like.

Cliff starts singing one of his songs, and Robert prays: help me give myself to this. Let it surprise me.

He tries not to focus on anything specific; tune himself to the background buzz from the stadium. He registers Cliff leaving the stage, and a second hymn from the choir, during which another grey, solitary man comes up to the lectern. Hunched, a V-necked jumper underneath his blazer to protect him against the non-existent cold.

As the choir falls silent, Billy Graham says, 'LET US BOW OUR HEADS.'

Robert watches everyone pray. As they all nod and murmur, Tommo and Simon slip into their seats at the end of the row. Simon's looking round, mouth open, but Tommo leans forward to catch Robert's eye. He sweeps the part in his hair aside, angling the top of his head, and jabs his finger at the part line.

Rock music is really religious music, Billy Graham explains. Elvis Presley wanted to be a preacher.

'Makes a change from backmasking and jungle rhythms,' Kevin says.

Young people are desperate for guidance—for leadership. But they look to false idols: Boy George or John Lennon.

‘I don’t do anything without checking with Boy George,’ Paul says.

BUT THERE IS NEITHER JEW NOR GREEK, THERE IS NEITHER BOND NOR FREE, THERE IS NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE. No young or old either. No generation gap in Christ Jesus.

Billy hopes everyone has a Bible.

‘No,’ Paul says, ‘we don’t, because no one told us to bring one.’

Billy raises his own Bible in the air, then places it on the lectern without opening it. When he refers to a verse, he quotes from memory. But he wants everyone to measure his words against scripture. And Tracey has her NIV, so the four of them all lean together.

‘A MAN HAS TWO SONS,’ Billy says. ‘ONE OF THEM, THE YOUNGER, GOES TO HIS FATHER, AND SAYS, “FATHER, I HAVE AN INHERITANCE COMING, BUT I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE IT NOW.”’ He’s paraphrasing, not directly quoting, but Robert still knows what he’s going to say next. ‘I’M TIRED OF CHURCH, AND BIBLE READING. I WANT TO SEE THE THEATRES, AND GO TO THE SHOWS.’

‘I’d like to go to a show,’ Kevin says.

‘This is the closest you’re going to get,’ Paul says.

‘Shh.’ Tracey pushes the open page towards them.

Billy beats his fist down on the lectern in time with the rhythm of his words; his finger follows their melody line in the air. His two hands move towards each other, and rush apart; his arms sweep objections aside. His argument’s easy to follow, but there are odd, American emphases in some of the words: LEESHUH for leisure; FARTHER for father.

‘AND THIS YOUNG MAN COULDN’T GET ANY SATISFACTION. HE HAD ALL THE MONEY HE WANTED; HE HAD FRIENDS; HE HAD DRUGS; HE HAD SEX; HE HAD EVERYTHING. BUT NO SATISFACTION.’

‘I think there’s a song about this,’ Kevin says.

‘Even Mick Jagger’s younger than Cliff Richard,’ Paul says.

‘I want to listen,’ Robert says. ‘I want to be here.’

Two giant feet sink into the matting on either side of the scaffolding; two giant legs straddle the stage. The presence: bigger than it’s ever been before, its head towering above the stadium walls.

Its body’s turned to gold, but its surface is beaten, stippled. Covered with indentations in the shape of inverted cones, each of which has a black spot at its apex. It reminds Robert of the living creatures in Revelation, covered in chickenpox eyes. ‘You left me alone,’ he says under his breath. ‘Why didn’t you help, during the deliverance?’

The presence doesn’t answer. Or maybe its changed body is the answer. *That’s* the message. The Word made flesh.

The black spots inside the cones all flick themselves to white, and the presence is covered in pinpricks of light. They blink open and closed, with the same rhythm as Billy’s speech.

‘AND HE BEGAN TO BE IN WANT,’ Billy says. His voice is part of the hum of the stadium and the hum of Robert’s thoughts, and both are drawn up into a low note shining out from inside the presence. Identical with itself, continuous, but modulated underneath, rising and falling.

A light, a sound: for the presence, it’s all the same thing.

What is an angel? A messenger, but also a technology for recording and transmitting the message. An archive. The presence is recording Billy Graham, weighing his words. Judging. But it’s also playing the recording back to Robert through itself, and the speech and the playback have swapped places, like it’s broadcasting directly to the

microphones and the loudspeakers, and Billy's just acknowledging the truth of the repetition; submitting to its judgement.

'HE RAN OUT OF MONEY,' Billy says; 'HIS FRIENDS LEFT HIM. HE TRIED TO FIND A JOB; HE COULDN'T GET A JOB.'

'I know the feeling,' Paul says.

If this is God speaking through Billy Graham, then why are the words so dull, so banal? It's like when someone translates tongues. The revealed message is always disappointing. Why would God go to the trouble of using an angelic language to say something so uninspiring?

Maybe that's the point. MY STRENGTH IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS. Was it really God speaking, when Robert heard Stevie's voice—his mum's?

The presence seems to be hollow now. Does that mean it's swallowed the girl? Is she trapped inside it?

Billy continues the story of the prodigal son. 'HE THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, "WELL, THE SERVANTS THAT WORK FOR MY FATHER HAVE FAR MORE THAN I'VE GOT. I'LL GO BACK AND JUST BE A SERVANT."'

On the son's painful journey home, he rehearses the speech he knows he has to make, admitting his faults and asking for mercy. But when he finally reaches home, the father embraces him. 'KILL THE FATTED CALF! MY SON THAT WAS LOST IS FOUND.'

Robert looks up at the chest and arms of the presence, and his gaze finally ascends to its summit, far above the walls of Anfield and the echoing souls in the stadium. Its head is enveloped in a Pentecostal flame. It's too bright to see anything up there but the flame itself: the whole presence is now a vibrating organ.

He doesn't have to make it do anything; it's emptied itself out for him. It's here to bear witness. Not just for him—his mum too. Even when she thought she was completely alone.

'COME HOME. THAT'S THE MESSAGE OF THIS STORY TONIGHT.' The words enter Robert's ears and leave his mouth at the exact same moment. But he doesn't say them aloud: he exhales them. Breath, spirit. He's hollow, like the presence. 'COME TO THE FATHER. LET HIM RECEIVE YOU, AND LOVE YOU.'

The counsellors are already streaming out from the front rows of each stand. They make their way past the wheelchairs and the St John Ambulance. They spread out on the pitch, standing apart from each other. When they've chosen their individual spot, they bow their heads and fold their hands together.

The presence rings itself, like a bell. No one acknowledges it, but the counsellors on the pitch avoid its feet.

Robert's already been saved. If he went forward, wouldn't that be a *lack* of faith? As if he got it wrong the first time, as if God didn't answer.

A flicker, a ripple. A shape in the edge of his eye, running from the top of the stand down the steps in the middle. Naked, small.

Robert stands up.

'You're keen!' a man in a dog collar on the row behind says.

Robert pushes past knees and feet; past Tommo, who shrinks back as if he's contagious; past Simon, whose eyes are closed. He looks down the centre aisle towards the pitch. A figure disappears round the edge of the front row of seats, towards the exit tunnel. He follows.

Billy says, 'WHEN JESUS CHRIST DIED ON THE CROSS, HE DIED IN YOUR PLACE. AND GOD TOOK YOUR SINS AND MY SINS AND LAID THEM ON CHRIST. AND HE BECAME SIN FOR US.'

As Robert comes up to the corner of the stand, he can hear the skittering feet inside the tunnel. He follows. He can still hear Billy Graham, but the signal's weaker, swallowed by the concrete walls and ceiling. 'AND GOD NO LONGER LOOKS AT US; HE LOOKS AT THE CROSS. AND HE SAYS, "BECAUSE OF THE CROSS, YOU'RE FORGIVEN."'

A walkie-talkie squawks and feeds back. A steward tries to step in front of Robert, but he dodges past. 'It's not that bad!' the man shouts after him.

'AND NOT ONLY FORGIVEN,' Billy says, receding into the background, 'BUT GOD FORGETS OUR SINS. HE HAS THE ABILITY TO ERASE THE TAPES.'

Outside in the car park, the girl's swinging off the cast-iron gates under the motto: YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE. Robert knew she'd come, as soon as he saw the presence. That's how it is: he can't have one without the other.

She says, 'The prodigal son. What about the elder brother?' She moves her feet along from one slot to another between the railings, clenching and unclenching her fists. 'Can you remember that part of the story? He stayed at home. Day in, day out. Never got a party. Who do you think Tracey identifies with?'

'Leave her alone!' Robert shouts. The stewards stare, but they're used to people praying out loud, talking to God.

'You don't deserve the fatted calf,' the girl says. 'You wouldn't eat it anyway.'

He imagines the marbled flesh, the stiff rind. Strip every sliver of white; snip every greasy edge. But it's not enough.

'You're already weak,' the girl says. 'But it's not too late. Come home.'

'No.' Robert turns around and walks back towards the tunnel.

‘Why did you come out here? Because you know. You belong with me.’

People are leaving the ground, and Robert has to duck and squeeze and push against the flow. ‘I’m trying to find my friends,’ he says to the steward with the faulty walkie-talkie when he gets to the corner of the pitch.

The presence is gone. Where its feet sat on the matting, the surface of the pitch is smooth, unmarked. People are huddled in groups of two and three: those who went forward talking to counsellors. Robert looks round. Dizzy, panic tingling in his head.

The presence is a witness. So Robert has to imitate it; he has to be a witness too. He scans the pitch. Down here, there’s no broader perspective. He can only see what’s right in front of him.

Simon. Juddering and gulping. His face is almost unrecognisable: swollen, smeared. He’s standing next to another grey man. No sign of Tommo.

Robert strides over to Simon, and puts his arm round his shoulder. ‘I know him,’ he says to the counsellor, who takes a step backwards. He says to Simon, ‘It’s okay. It’s gonna be alright.’

Come home. But Robert’s already been home. There’s no fatted calf in Neston. No father waiting with open arms. Only a door he doesn’t want to open. What’s behind it? He’s not pure enough to look, not yet. He has to offer a sacrifice first.

The girl. She’s the sacrifice. That’s why she’s back. Not so Mark can cast her out again. So Robert can kill her. It’s not the presence he has to wrestle. He has to put his body against hers, like Jacob with the angel.

When she’s dead, there’ll be no going back. He’ll be just like everyone else. That’s the real sacrifice.

Chapter 16: Robert / Tracey

Robert's in his room. The angry child from the cover of U2's *War* album scowls out from a poster above the bed. It's the same face as the one on the *Boy* cover, but older and wilder. Robert's sitting on the floor, legs crossed, leaning back against the bed. The girl's in the same position on the other side of the bed: at least, he assumes she is. He's deliberately not looking: waiting for her to come to him.

She says, 'MY KNEES ARE WEAK THROUGH FASTING; AND MY FLESH FAILETH OF FATNESS.'

Robert doesn't reply.

'Come on, that's easy. MAN SHALL NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE, BUT BY EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDETH OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.' She pauses. 'Like a bird regurgitating food for its chicks.'

Robert wraps his arms around the cage of his ribs; his heart flutters.

The girl continues. 'In the gospel of John, Jesus says, I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE. Does that mean He's eating Himself? Carving the flesh off His own bones.'

She knows the Bible better than Robert does. Her faith is stronger than his.

He pinches his nostrils closed, then opens his finger and thumb. He can't even smell her any more. He can't win with words, but he doesn't need to. He just needs her to get close.

The floor shivers; outside on the landing, the banister creaks. Uncle Edward coming up the stairs.

'Why didn't you ask him to Billy Graham?' the girl says.

'He'd never come.'

'How do you know? You don't know anything about him.'

‘I know every time he goes the bog,’ Robert says.

‘You never talk to him.’

‘What would I say?’ Robert’s world reaches up to the heavens and down into hell.

Uncle Edward’s goes from the television room to the bedroom.

‘Well, anyway,’ the girl says, ‘maybe Auntie Rose wouldn’t *let* him go to Billy Graham. She doesn’t like it when he goes out by himself.’

‘Because he comes back drunk.’

Uncle Edward does have one regular weekly excursion: to William Hill on Friday afternoons. One day in the holidays, with nothing better to do, Robert followed him. Uncle Edward’s metal heel taps clicked on the paving stones, and every few steps he made a juddering half-skip as he pulled up the elastic waistband on his trousers.

He’s probably doing that now, on the stairs. Thud, thud; pause.

‘What if I let him see me?’ the girl says.

‘You can’t.’

‘Yes I can.’

‘You’ve never done it before.’

‘That’s not entirely true.’ She grabs hold of the bedpost; swings herself onto her feet.

Robert stands too; turns around. Now they’re looking at one another over the bed.

She puts her tiny fists up, like a boxer. ‘I don’t belong to you.’

Yes she does. She’s his cross to bear. Only he can see her, touch her. Kill her.

‘Uncle Edward doesn’t know anything about God,’ he says.

‘You should be grateful then.’ She takes a step backwards. ‘I’m doing your dirty work for you. I do all God’s dirty little jobs.’

‘Stop.’

‘Maybe God will stop me.’ She jumps for the door.

Robert follows, but she’s already grabbing at the handle. She opens a gap—a few inches. She flattens herself against the wall and slides her cheek and shoulders along; wriggles through.

Robert can’t stop himself in time; his shoulder slams the door shut behind her. The handle snatches itself away from his fingers, and it takes him several seconds to get out onto the landing—where he just manages to stop himself colliding with Uncle Edward, who’s leaning on the banister at the top of the stairs.

Edward flinches. He grips the newel post to stop himself toppling backwards.

‘I ...,’ Robert says.

Edward’s left hand flexes on the post; he presses the other against his chest. He purses his lips; nods his chin. He wheezes, coughs, like he’s got something stuck in his throat.

The girl leaps out from Edward’s bedroom. ‘Boo!’

His neck jerks; his eyes pop. His left foot steps back off the top stair, and his legs collapse. As he goes down, his shoulder and the side of his head hit the banister, which vibrates.

His hip bumps down, stair by stair; his shoulder drags along and between the banister posts. He slides down until he’s sitting awkwardly, legs splayed, on the small landing at the turn of the stairs.

Robert steps forward.

Edward gets up on his knees, mutters something to himself. The girl stays over by the main bedroom door, out of Robert’s reach.

Ignore her—for now. He puts one foot onto the top stair.

Edward reaches across the landing carpet for his glasses. One of the arms is twisted at an angle.

‘I’ll fix them,’ Robert says, and takes another step down.

Edward blinks up. He leans in against the landing post, and staggers upright. He slides the left arm of the glasses in behind his ear and tries to press the pads in against his nose.

Robert keeps his eyes on Edward, while his foot gropes blindly down onto the next step, where it finds something loose, which glides forward. Robert wobbles and lurches towards Edward, who steps back—off the landing.

Edward windmills over. His body ripples down the main flight of stairs, all the way to the bottom, where it collects in a broken heap. The house shudders and groans.

The girl’s still on the upstairs landing. ‘Penny for the guy,’ she says.

Robert looks down, to see what he trod on. Edward’s abandoned slipper, which now sits on the small landing. He kicks it aside, then sits down at the top of the main flight of stairs. He leans forward, hands on his thighs, head between his knees; paper skin sticking to his ribs. He can’t breathe.

‘You’re not very fit,’ the girl says. ‘You only ran across the room.’

The other slipper’s below the landing, flipped upside down; two steps above the broken glasses, which are one step above Edward’s twitching foot.

Robert looks back at the stained-glass window and the statue of Joan of Arc, but Joan keeps her eyes averted. Hands clasped together in prayer under the cross guard of her sword.

‘Why don’t you go and help him?’ the girl says.

Auntie Rose opens the door to the television room, but stays hidden behind it. She calls, 'Edward, Edward? What's happening?' She peeks out.

'He fell,' Robert says, standing up so she can see him over the banister.

'Edward! Are you hurt?'

Robert can see his uncle's chest rising and falling, but his mouth looks wrong: disjointed. His teeth have probably come loose. 'You should call an ambulance,' he says to Auntie Rose, who's now at the foot of the stairs. She leans down and places her palm against her husband's forehead, as if she's checking his temperature.

'Is she going to close his eyes?' the girl says from above. 'Bit premature.'

Robert waits for the ambulance by the front gate. The girl's over by Tracey's driveway, still out of reach.

The white van approaches slowly along South Mossley Hill Road. A man in the passenger seat leans his head and arm out the window, scanning his eyes along the house fronts, jumping from one porch to the next. No siren or blue light, but there's a horizontal orange stripe round the middle: the same 'jam butty' pattern as a police car.

Robert waves. When the ambulance reaches him, the man says, 'Is this 137?' He has a moustache and sideburns.

'It's my uncle. Inside, at the bottom of the stairs. He fell.'

The man with the moustache slides back the passenger door and hops down; the driver does the same on the other side. They go to the back of the ambulance, and get a stretcher out. Close up, they look like policemen: dark jackets, white shirts, clip-on ties. Robert almost expects them to arrest him.

'I couldn't do anything,' he says. 'To stop it.'

Are these the same men who took his dad? He can't remember faces: only uniforms. The blue serge is a disguise. They disappear inside the house.

The girl leans back against the garden wall. 'Poor Uncle Edward,' she says. 'Your dad joined the merchant navy on his sixteenth birthday—made everyone look bad. Edward had to wait 'til he was eighteen, and he had flat feet, so the army made him a storeman. Not exactly a go-getter when he came home either. They put him on the sickie 'cos they couldn't be bothered finding him a job. He's not even a proper alcoholic.'

'I suppose he did sell petrol to Paul McCartney in 1961 though. No one can take *that* away from him.'

The two ambulance men manoeuvre the laden stretcher back out through the porch doors. Red faces, arms straining. Uncle Edward's piled in a heap under a scarlet blanket, but they've left his face uncovered.

Robert stays by the gate. He's been holding it open all the time they've been inside.

'Broken foot, concussion,' the man with the moustache says when he reaches Robert. He stops speaking for a second to get his breath back. 'But he might have had a stroke.'

Robert imitates the man's serious expression, but with a stronger frown, as if he's the one delivering the bad news.

They put Uncle Edward in the back of the ambulance, and wait outside with Robert. The light goes on behind the curtains in the little bedroom upstairs; Auntie Rose is getting dressed.

'Are you coming too?' the second man says to Robert. He has a COAL NOT DOLE badge on his lapel.

'There isn't room.'

‘It’ll be fine.’

‘The least you can do,’ the girl says.

‘You’re doing well,’ the moustached man says. ‘Being brave. Supporting your ...’

‘Auntie. ... Uncle.’

‘We’re going to Alfred Jones Memorial. Not far.’ He moves to one side of the ambulance door.

Robert puts a foot onto the fold-out step. The inside of the ambulance looks like a prison cell.

‘Good lad,’ the man with the lapel badge says.

‘It’s gonna be crowded,’ the girl says. ‘I’ll see you down there.’

Robert sits down next to the red lump on the stretcher. He’s getting used to this now.

The church youth group does visits to the geriatric ward at Alfred Jones, so Robert knows the building. It’s in Garston village, on Church Road. It stands by itself on top of a hill. A Victorian brick façade split into sections by red pillars. Each section has four rectangular sash windows, two on each floor; four chimneys on the slate roof above.

Ordered, logical. Safe. But not tonight. Not with the girl here.

There’s a driveway up to the side entrance, where a nurse is already waiting for them. ‘Hello,’ she says. ‘We’ll soon get you right as rain.’ She’s speaking to Edward, but she looks at Robert and Auntie Rose.

The ambulance men carry Edward inside, and lift him onto a sturdier stretcher-bed with railings on each side. As they leave, the one with the lapel badge squeezes Robert’s shoulder, and pats the side of his face. ‘Chin up.’

The stretcher-bed has an angled upper half, to raise Edward's head and shoulders, and it's on wheels. The sister pushes it along a corridor and into a large alcove, where there are several bays, separated by curtains. The curtains are the same colour as mushy peas; the walls are chip-fat yellow.

'What's going to happen?' Auntie Rose says. She keeps tight hold of her handbag.

'He fell down the stairs,' Robert says again.

Uncle Edwards groans. He rearranges himself under the blanket. His hand peeps out and plucks at his lips.

'We're going to x-ray his foot, and check for signs of stroke.' The sister leans over Edward, and raises her voice. 'Can you understand me?'

Edward puts his hand over his mouth. 'Where are my teef?'

'I'm sure they're safe. Can you tell me your name?'

'Eward.'

'Do you know where you are?'

'Hoshpital.'

Robert doesn't want to look at Edward, so he concentrates on the nurse. A blue one-piece dress buttoned all the way up with a Peter Pan collar. A watch on a ribbon, hanging like a medal, pinned to her left breast; a plastic name tag on her right. RIORDAN.

Robert wishes he had a uniform: a job; a script. He wishes he knew exactly what to do—like the ambulance men. Or Mark. Except Mark got the deliverance wrong. Didn't he?

Sister Riordan folds the red blanket down and takes hold of Edward's right hand. 'Can you squeeze? Good. Now the other.' She fold the other end of the blanket back to reveal Edward's socks. 'Which is the one that's broken? Can you wiggle your toes?'

‘Is Jane Gibbon on tonight?’ Robert asks. She goes to church, and she’s a nurse here too. She arranged the youth group visits.

‘I don’t think so, but the doctor will be here shortly.’

Auntie Rose’s eyes are watering. ‘Don’t leave us,’ she says.

‘I’ll be back soon.’ Sister Riordan’s rubber soles squeak off down the corridor.

In the alcove, all the curtains are pushed back against the walls. Robert looks across at a shirtless man, who’s in one of the other bays. There are sticky pads on his chest, but no monitor nearby. He’s alone, but there’s a single plastic chair next to his stretcher-bed.

Robert walks over. He clears his throat. ‘Is anyone using this?’ The man stares at the ceiling. Robert scrapes the chair over to their side of the room. Auntie Rose sits down hard, as if her body’s suddenly got heavier.

‘I’ll see if I can find a cup of tea,’ he says.

She grabs his wrist, and looks at the ragged man on the other side of the room. He peels her fingers off. He doesn’t want to be here when Edward starts talking.

Is all this Robert’s fault? Will he have to confess?

There’s a nurses’ station opposite the alcove, but no one’s there, so Robert continues on down the corridor in the same direction Sister Riordan took. He goes through a set of double doors, which swing backwards and forwards behind him.

A T-junction. That can’t be right.

No signs or directions: the walls are bare. He tries to picture the outside of the building, but as far as he can remember, it’s just a box. Like trying to guess how the intestines are packed inside the stomach. He’s in the gleaming white guts of the hospital.

No signs, no clues about what to do next. But here's a vending machine. It's not for hot drinks: it's full of chocolate bars. When did Robert last eat chocolate? He doesn't even get hungry any more. He had to punch a new hole in his belt last week.

He stares at the machine. Fishes around in his pocket; sticks two ten pence pieces in the slot; turns the knob. He pulls the tray for Dairy Crunch and takes a bar out.

He's suddenly dizzy. His hands shake; his stomach clenches. The walls shift and spasm.

He rips the outer wrapper off, and snaps the bar in half. Gets his nails underneath the edge of the silver paper, and scrapes it back off the exposed chocolate. He jams the broken edge of the bar into his mouth, and bites down hard.

'Ow!' He's bitten his tongue. Blood mixes with spit as he churns the chocolate into brown slime. He retches, swallows. Chews, swallows again.

He sticks a finger into his mouth to pick the paste of ground Rice Krispies off the surface of a molar. Thinks about sticking the finger farther in, but he doesn't want to leave a mess.

He wolfs another bite. The girl laughs: half-way down the right-hand corridor. She doesn't have a uniform; she's naked. But she has a script—a role. It's only Robert who's got to make it up as he goes along.

He drops the remains of the Dairy Crunch, and stumbles after her. Crashes through another set of doors and finds himself, loud and alone, in the women's geriatric ward.

He freezes, but no one reacts to his arrival. It takes him a moment to orient himself, because he's on the opposite side to the one he normally comes in by. There's a

small glass-sided cubicle in the corner to his right, with a desk, a chair and a nightlight. A steaming cup of tea on the desk, but still no sign of a nurse.

On the few times he's been here with the church, he can't bear to look at the women's faces. It feels like an imposition: singing hymns at them—or it would be, if they understood what was happening. One of them always moans and claps along, but he can't remember which bed she's in.

He shouldn't be here. It's even more horrifying in the dark—even more intimate. Sighs, snores, muttering.

The doors at the other end of the ward creak open; the girl pokes her head and shoulder through. Beckons Robert with a curling finger.

Bodies toss and turn; mouths slacken. Blankets bunch at the foot of beds; fall on the floor. 'No, no,' a voice says, the head turning from side to side on the pillow.

By the time he gets through the doors, the girl's already running away again. He's completely lost—the inside and outside of the building won't fit together at all—but he follows her round a corner.

She's gone, but there's a single, open door at the end of the corridor: nothing visible beyond.

He walks up to it; steps through.

Back into his bedroom.

The girl's standing on the bed, looking down at him. He's alone with her, in an empty house.

'You should have used a ball of thread,' she says. She puts an index finger on either side of her forehead to make horns, and paws the duvet. The mattress shifts under her foot,

and she hops to regain her balance. ‘Time to choose. Who do you want to be? The goat for God, or the goat for Azazel. Did you think you could just join her family, and no one would notice the extra mouth?’

‘You have to take her place. You have to kill her.’

‘No,’ Robert says. ‘You’re the sacrifice. Not Tracey. You.’

The girl jumps off the bed, and bends down in front of the derelict fireplace. It gapes around her, opens its black throat. She wriggles like a tongue, and worms her way inside.

Into the wall. Through the wall.

Robert reaches into the fireplace after her. Closes his fist around emptiness. He pulls his hand out; bangs the ‘X’ on the wall. No answer from Tracey’s side.

He rushes back to the stairs, where Joan of Arc’s still praying. He runs his thumb along the edge of her letter-opener sword. Rattles the pommel and the blade against her hollow porcelain armour. He’ll need something sharper tonight.

He hurries down the stairs; turns locks, opens doors. In the kitchen, he wrenches a drawer open, and rummages past a can opener, a turkey baster, wooden spoons—until he finds a chopping knife with a long, triangular blade.

Back upstairs, into his bedroom. The sugar rush from the chocolate’s wearing off, and he’s weak again. His bones are chalk. God, give me strength.

He sticks the knife between his teeth. Gets down on his knees in front of the fireplace; drops to all fours.

His body against the girl’s. And he’s alone: there’s no sign of the presence. But maybe it is here; he just can’t see it. And if Robert lets it possess him, then his body becomes the Word of God too.

He closes his eyes, and starts to crawl.

*

Tracey went back to see Billy Graham again tonight—with Paul, who wanted to see the Kop from close-up. When she gets home, her dad's reading *The Times*. She stands in the lounge doorway without saying anything until he acknowledges her.

‘Did the Kop live up to Paul's expectations?’ he says, without lowering the paper.

‘It smells of wee,’ Tracey says. ‘Paul wanted to stand, like the Liverpool fans do, but they put cushions down on the terraces, and everyone else was sitting.’

‘Hasn't he been before?’

‘To Anfield, yes. But visiting supporters go in the stand at the other end. Where we were last night.’ The *Times* headline blocking her view says: DANEGELD IN LIVERPOOL.

‘What's Danegeld?’

‘Hmn?’ Her dad turns the page over to scan the editorial. ‘The Vikings. If they turned up to sack the town, you could pay them to go away instead. But it never worked. They always came back.’

‘So Hatton's a Viking?’

Her dad moves his mouth from side to side as he thinks about this. ‘Were they pillaging the government in London? More like threatening to commit suicide.’

‘It worked though. They got more money.’

‘Until next year.’

‘So that part fits.’

He squints down through the bottom part of his bifocals and reads, ‘A THIRD-RATE

PROVINCIAL POLITICIAN, A SELF-PUBLICIZING REVOLUTIONARY WHOSE ORGANIZATION OF “THE

GREATEST DEMONSTRATION BY THE WORKING CLASS IN THE HISTORY OF MERSEYSIDE” PRODUCED A TURNOUT LESS THAN HALF A SATURDAY GATE AT ANFIELD.’ He chuckles. ‘Was it full tonight?’

‘Ish,’ she says. She doesn’t want to be too enthusiastic. ‘Why didn’t you come?’

‘I’m going on Friday. But my job’s done. Other people can take over now.’

‘Billy Graham was less shouty than I expected.’

‘He doesn’t need to be; it’s not up to him if people go forward.’

‘Robert went down, yesterday,’ she says.

Her dad’s got one leg crossed on top of the other, and the foot up in the air twitches. ‘I’m not surprised,’ he says. ‘It’s public. Appeals to his sense of drama.’ He folds the newspaper in half and puts it on his lap. ‘He seems better now.’

Tracey hasn’t talked to her dad about Robert since the deliverance.

‘I don’t agree with everything Mark does,’ he says. ‘Some of it might even be dangerous. Especially for people like Robert.’

‘People like Robert?’

‘Vulnerable people.’

She crosses her arms. ‘Do *you* think people can be oppressed by demons?’

‘There’s no need to go looking for demons. FOR FROM WITHIN, OUT OF THE HEART OF MAN, COME EVIL THOUGHTS, THEFT, MURDER, ADULTERY. ALL THESE EVIL THINGS COME FROM WITHIN, AND THEY DEFILE A MAN.’

‘He’s happy when we do sin though,’ Tracey says. ‘The devil.’ That’s what she’s been told at church for the past sixteen years. Though the precise mechanism of influence is never explained.

Her dad says, ‘The best way to resist the devil is by drawing closer to God.’

She looks out the patio windows, into the back garden. 'Paul brought two friends from school yesterday.' Two more than Tracey managed.

'I like Paul. He's very ... sincere.'

'He's a Hatton fan,' she says, although she's not sure that's true.

'Is he going to camp with you on Saturday?'

'Derek Hatton?'

'Paul.'

'Yes.'

'First year at Seniors,' her dad says. 'All grown up.'

She sticks her tongue out, but he's already hidden behind the paper again. She turns her head back to the garden. And jumps.

In the middle of the grass, there's a naked figure, standing still. Like a statue: legs together, arms flat against its sides.

Robert.

Not Robert. Smaller. Hairless, white as a maggot against the deep twilight. He looks like he was in the dream she had about her mum's funeral. Except he has a dark stain between his legs.

He's looking at her. He moves a finger up to his neck, and draws it across his throat.

'Dad,' she says.

He rustles the paper.

'Dad.' Her eyes flick to him. 'Look in the garden.'

He puts the paper down, and they both peer into the gloom.

Nothing.

Chapter 17: Robert / Tracey / Robert

How big is he? He's lost his sense of scale. He could be a hollow, booming giant. He could be a tiny homunculus.

Robert stays down on all fours. He's crawling through a tunnel to be born. Born again. Because he didn't get it right the first time. He couldn't save his mum; he couldn't save Susan—but he can save Tracey. She's not going to take his place; she's not going to die for him.

He opens his eyes, not that it makes any difference. Nothing to hold onto in this no-space: nothing except the past.

The girl's invaded his memory. Changed it; remade it in her own image. He's forgotten how to remember by himself, how to find strength in who he used to be. He's moving towards Tracey's room. What happened there, in the past? What gave him strength?

He slept there when Auntie Rose was in hospital two years ago. They set up the air bed, and gave him a sleeping bag. It had a fancy hood, with drawstrings, which you could pull tight around your face. He imagined himself at the South Pole, toasty toes and fingers, but frostbite in his nose and lips and eyelids.

Keep moving, or freeze to death.

He's holding the knife between his teeth, like a pirate. The blade touches the metal in his fillings. He tries to suck the spit in around it, but he can't stop drooling.

He moves the knife to his left trouser pocket. It's not deep enough to take the entire blade, so he'll have to keep remembering to push it back down as it works itself out.

Forward again. The floor's smooth, but it's coated in fine grit. He must be leaving a trail behind, forming and erasing patterns he can't see.

He gets up onto his knees. The grit trickles off when he wipes his hands against one another, or puffs into the air when he claps them together. Dust is made of skin and hair. Whose body is Robert clouding up around him? Who is he breathing in?

Cough; swallow.

Two years ago, Tracey's mum was still alive. One night, Robert woke up crying. He struggled out of the sleeping bag; kicked his feet and legs across the wavy airbed. Tracey lay in her bed, turned towards the wall, the line of her spine curved like a bow. Obviously awake, but not going to admit it.

In the grey, he could still make out a poster on the wall: the cover of *Unknown Pleasures* by Joy Division. A pattern of lines shaped like a receding mountain range, one peak in front of another. Tracey explained it to him: a graph plotting a series of radio transmissions from a pulsar.

A hard line of light appeared under the bedroom door, broken in two places. Flickering interruptions in the signal: except in this case, the interruptions were the signal. No shadow without presence.

The door opened a few inches, and Tracey's mum whispered, 'Robert? Are you alright?' A silhouette with a halo, like the empty bodies of angels in the Old Testament. She came over to Robert's bed. Took him in her arms, and pressed his cheek against her thighs.

As he crawls forward now, he tries to remember his own mum, but he can only see the silhouette in Tracey's doorway. Only feel the enveloping body around him. A screen of flesh, a veil over his own childhood.

He imagines the signal from the pulsar, sweeping through space like a lighthouse beam, crackling with tiny specks of interstellar matter like the prickle of dead light on the inside of his eyelids.

Tiny specks. Moons, planets.

The knife's worked itself up out of his pocket, so he shoves it back down, and it rips the lining of his pocket; pricks his thigh. 'Ow!' He twitches away from himself.

Somewhere ahead of him, a thin vertical crack of light, as if the knife has slashed the darkness open.

It's not a doorway. Tracey's room has a set of walk-in wardrobes, and he's looking at the thin gap between two of the sliding panels. From behind.

Only a few strides away. He stands, and steps forward into the back of the closet, where he's surrounded by dresses and blouses. He slides the wardrobe door open, and blinks into the light of her room.

He turns around to look back at where he came in, and sweeps the dresses on the rail aside. The wall's closed behind him, and he's looking for the 'X' where Tracey bangs her fist. There. He runs his finger over the two lines; taps the point where they join.

Back to the room, and *Unknown Pleasures* is still on the wall by the door, but there's a new poster next to it, with camouflage patterns from the cover of *Dazzle Ships* by OMD. A bible and a Daily Bread pamphlet on the bedside table; a nightie folded on the pillow.

This house is a sacred place. He comes here to worship, to offer his life back to God.

Home. Not-home.

The writing on the posters is correct, but the rest of the room's the wrong way round, as he knew it would be, but here there's no avoiding the floor-length mirrors on the

wardrobe doors, so he steps forward to the centre of the room and spins again. In the glass, the room's flipped back to its familiar arrangement, but his reflection looks how it always does.

So his body's reversed in the mirror, not in the room.

Double check. When he feels inside his mouth, the missing tooth is still on the left. But there's a kind of shimmer around his image in the mirror, like a heat haze, and he can't quite focus on his eyes, or on the outline where his body separates itself from the room.

He steps up to the wardrobe doors and places his dusty palms on the glass. The surface is quivering like the skin over his heart, and the blood in his ears beats to the same rhythm.

The girl's unclean. Is this still a sacred place—if she's here? He can purify it—by sacrificing her.

He takes the knife out of his pocket. There's a spot of blood on his thigh where the point dug in. He tugs the denim off the clot, feels the scab underneath break. Presses the cloth back against his leg: a second stain, lighter than the first.

He steps out onto the landing. Joan of Arc's travelled with him, but she's headless. Someone's knocked the top off the statue.

He takes his shoes and socks off so he can feel the carpet beneath his feet—so he can ground himself—and creeps down the stairs. Leaning out over the banister, he can see a light on in the back room, but the door's closed. He moves the knife from his left hand to his right; wipes his palm against the front of his shirt; moves the knife back.

He's suddenly ashamed. He wants to hide, go back.

Something at the bottom of the stairs, blocking the way. Robert. A version of himself, but not his reflection, because it's naked, and the body's smaller. How it used to be, before his mum died. Fat calves, fat thighs, fat belly.

Nothing between the legs. Only red jelly. Livid, raw.

He presses the blade against his thigh, touches the tip against the red spot on his jeans. 'You're disgusting,' he says to the creature in front of him.

It says, 'AND IF THINE EYE OFFEND THEE, PLUCK IT OUT, AND CAST IT FROM THEE: IT IS BETTER FOR THEE TO ENTER INTO LIFE WITH ONE EYE, RATHER THAN HAVING TWO EYES TO BE CAST INTO HELL FIRE.'

'You won't hurt yourself. So I did it for you.' The double reaches between its legs; rubs its hand across itself. Holds the palm up towards Robert; wipes it across its face.

'I did,' Robert says, clutching at his shrunken stomach. 'I did hurt myself.'

'If you kill me, doesn't the presence go too? Is that what you want?'

'I'll do it. For her.'

Robert steps down, knife held out, but the double moves backwards, away from him, off the stairs and around the banister, towards the closed door.

A line of light underneath, broken in two places. The door opens, and the double's gone.

A backlit silhouette. Is this the presence? It's back to human size, scarcely taller than Robert. But something's wrong. 'Hello?' it says. 'Is someone there?'

The darkness at its centre dissolves; fills itself in. No gold. Clay slapped over its pitted face and torso, pulled and smeared, hiding the shape underneath. It looks like the soil piled by the side of a grave. Its head has an indentation at the centre, but no real shape:

like someone's bashed its face in. It sucks a mouth apart to speak again. 'Robert? What are you doing here?'

The body seems dead, but the voice is alive. That's wrong too, but Robert can't focus his mind. The figure in front of him's like the shimmer around his reflected image. The throb in his blood fills his head.

He says, 'Whose words are you saying? Who's sending them?'

The girl's behind it. She leers, knowing he can't reach her through its bulk. 'How did you get in?' she says.

'I followed you. Why are you talking like her?'

'THE VOICE IS JACOB'S VOICE,' the girl says, changing her speech, 'BUT THE HANDS ARE THE HANDS OF ESAU.'

'Go home,' the presence says. 'You can't be here. You have to go home.'

'This is my home,' Robert says.

'No.' The presence shakes its head.

'Get out of the way.'

'I can't do that.'

'I have to sacrifice her.'

'You're not going to do anything. Give me the knife.' The mouth of the presence is a red slash, as if Robert's already cut its head open to let the words out.

'Quote the Bible again,' he says to the girl. 'It won't work.' He laughs.

Her outline ripples. 'I don't understand what you're saying.'

'Stop using her voice!'

The presence pulls its wet fingers apart. Reaches towards Robert's trembling hand.

‘What are you doing?’ he says. ‘You’re supposed to bear witness. Not get in the way.’

‘Give me the knife.’

This is the last part of the test. The girl’s wearing the presence, like a mask. He has to get through it to reach her; rip it off her face. Once he’s past the crumbling skin, the flesh will give way completely; move apart along the path of the blade.

Does the girl feel pain? Robert doesn’t want to imagine her pain.

‘It’s your fault,’ he says to the presence. ‘You won’t get out of the way.’

Step inside the vision; take the blessing.

As the knife goes in, the clay slides against itself, then slurps closed as he pulls the blade out. The suction nearly takes the handle out of his hand.

‘Weak, weak,’ the girl says. ‘Harder.’

The presence gasps. It tries to grab the blade. He slashes its hand away, and pushes the knife in again.

‘No!’ the girl screams.

The edge of the metal catches on something under the clay. He jiggles it about, like a key in a lock, and it comes loose. The clay sighs and bubbles as he pulls the knife out. The presence falls to its knees, and he slices its face. Maybe he can cut out the red disk, if he burrows into its head.

The girl runs forward and flings her arms around the presence; it collapses back against her. Why is she trying to protect it? The knife’s slippery, so he puts both hands over the handle. He lifts it up over his shoulder.

‘Stop it! Stop hurting him!’

The head of the presence opens below him, and a voice comes out. A woman's voice. Clear as water; no distortion at all. It says, 'O my boy, my darling boy. I'm so sorry I left you.'

'Turn it off!' Robert shouts, but he knows. This isn't a recording. Nobody's ever said these words before. They're coming into being now.

'How I've missed you,' his mum says. 'But what have you done to yourself? What have you done?'

He drops the knife; puts his hands over his ears.

The room reverses itself. Robert swaps places with himself.

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Her dad's not moving. White palms and face around the ribbon slashes on his hands and the sides of his mouth. Gouting blood from his side. Tracey's on the floor with him; he's lying across her lap. The carpet's slick. She can feel it squish against her legs.

Time cleaves in two: before separates from after. But it's not a lightning flash of illumination. It's a chasm. Her past and future are rewriting themselves. The crack's spreading out from this moment, and she can't stop it.

In the hallway behind Robert, a figure steps out of the darkness. Another Robert, with a dark stain between his legs. A gap. The double looks at Tracey, and says, 'YOUR BROTHER CAME DECEITFULLY AND TOOK YOUR BLESSING.' It laughs. 'Yes. This is a vision; *and* it's really happening.'

Robert's on his knees in front of her, his trousers soaked in red. Bent forward; she can't see his face. He looks like he's trying to get more of the blood on him. Like he's lapping it.

The double picks up the knife with one hand, and grabs Robert's hair with the other. It pulls his head up, and presses the knife against his throat. She can see the shape of the skull under Robert's skin. The double looks almost bloated by comparison. An obscene cherub. 'Shall I sacrifice him as well?'

'Yes,' Robert says.

'No,' Tracey says.

The double looks at Tracey; pulls back its lips. She can't tell if it's a grin or a snarl.

'In Jesus' name,' she says, 'I cast you out. Both of you.'

She's finally alone with God.

★

This hasn't happened yet. It's always happened yet. And it's never over, so he can't press 'Stop'—or even 'Record'. He won't hear this replayed on the Day of Judgement. This is the Day of Judgement.

The double leans down to whisper in his ear. 'Don't you get it? You're not the hero. You're the monster.'

Robert stands up; hands gloved in blood. Turns away from Tracey, towards the double. 'No,' he says. 'It's you. You did this.'

It holds up its own reeking hands, like the two of them are surgeons standing over a dissection table. 'I'm made in your image. You made me.'

'No.'

'Her family. Her faith. That's what you wanted. They opened their house to you. And this is how you repay them.' The double smears its face again. 'Not the Passover blood on the doorpost. The mark of Cain.'

He'll never see his mum again. He'll never be able to remember what she looks like. He can't ever be the person who didn't do this.

He can feel the two houses ripping apart along the seam that joins them: he can feel himself, ripping apart from Tracey. He can't stay here any longer; he can't go back next door either.

He falls into the space between the houses. Into Azazel.

Chapter 18: Robert

Empty, flapping; full of teeth. Holes where its eyes used to be. Ragged limbs. Robert averts his gaze.

He's in his dad's house, standing in the open doorway to the television room. He steps down inside, but keeps his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. The carpet pile is stiff and brittle; it sticks to his bare soles. And it's covered in little pellets—like liquorice torpedoes, but hollow. He bends down to look closer. Segmented.

The electric fire throbs. The room feels swollen, feverish. Panting, but it can't get cool. He goes over to turn the fire off at the wall, and it pings and creaks with relief. The television's on too, but the sound's down.

The presence is behind him, in his dad's armchair. Robert turns to watch as it uncollapses. Reconstitutes his dad, who's sitting in striped pyjama bottoms, with a thick glass gripped between his knees and a bottle squeezed between his thighs.

'Dad,' Robert says.

The head lolls back; the knees open. The glass falls on the carpet. The bottle tips forward on the chair; leaves a brown dribble on the cushion. Its wet lip points towards Robert.

Night time. Damp, cold air coming through the open window, fighting with the dry shimmer off the fire. The two currents touch each other, the boundary between them shifting: advancing, receding.

Robert can't feel his own body. He's coming loose from the flaking mask on his face, the crusted lines on his palms and under his nails; the tortured belt knotted into his

stomach; the blood-soaked jeans sucked in against his calves and ankles. All the miserable, inescapable weight of his guilty self.

He's inside the body on the chair. Its eyes stare. The face gets paler; hands and feet swell pink, then red. A locked spasm spreads downwards from its jaw and neck, following the pooling blood.

An unbecoming. A becoming, unfolding from inside the unbecoming. Robert, unfolding inside the presence.

The skin on his new body sweats and blisters, but it's not sweat. It's the inside and outside beginning to change places. He's not alive, but something is, and it's multiplying, spreading. Gut, lungs; climbing up his throat into his mouth.

He's eating himself.

The suffocated blood settles: turns deeper red, purple, blue. The network of threads stitching his flesh together reveals itself. Turns black.

Outside, the sun comes up. Birds sing.

A fly lands on the frame of the open window. Pauses there for a second, before moving to Robert's slack mouth, where he can feel its feet dancing over his lip before it settles. Its abdomen swells and pulses. It expels sticky white cylinders, like grains of rice. They form a crust over Robert's lips and gums.

Another fly arrives, and lands just outside the gaping flap at the front of his pyjama bottoms. It crawls inside and disappears. A third lands on his eye.

He's being colonised, possessed. From the inside out; from the outside in. The inside's part of the outside now.

His abdomen glistens. Metallic green, like the bodies of the flies. His muscles begin to lose their grip on themselves. The electric fire beats on, and his belly begins to

rise in the oven of the room. The things between his legs swell. His lips and tongue bloom and flower.

The presence says, 'FOR I DELIGHT IN THE LAW OF GOD AFTER THE INWARD MAN: BUT I SEE ANOTHER LAW IN MY MEMBERS, WARRING AGAINST THE LAW OF MY MIND, AND BRINGING ME INTO CAPTIVITY TO THE LAW OF SIN WHICH IS IN MY MEMBERS.' But Robert doesn't hear it speak with his ears; or see it with his eyes, which are now covered with eggs.

The sun sets and rises; sets and rises.

Little mouths, hungry; plenty for everyone. At first, they lick and suck. Later, they gouge and chew. Burrow across his face and groin. Work their way under separating layers of skin, which puff and slip.

He splits; his stomach bursts. He exhales himself into the air around, and pours himself into the chair underneath. It sops him up. Wasps sip the fermenting juice. Clouds of flies. Sugar and shit: it's all the same to them.

More eggs, in the gaps his body has created for itself.

The sun sets and rises; sets and rises.

A white beard of maggots. Some fall off his face, down into his lap, where hundreds of others roil and churn in and out of the open stomach and up into the chest. At his edges, individual maggots separate themselves and drop down the sides of the chair. They fall onto the floor, and crawl underneath. Curl up; wait for their skins to harden.

The sun sets and rises; sets and rises.

The pupae vibrate and split. Wingless flies suck themselves out. They totter between the fibres of the carpet, until they dry out and stagger into the air.

The light bulb overhead pops dead with a rattling pupa inside, but the orange glow of the fire shines on like a beacon as spring turns into summer.

His organs spill into one another. His brain leaks out through his ears. Beetles and ants pick and nibble. Mould and fungus fur his surface, but now he's nothing but surface.

No more secrets.

The presence re-enters itself—re-enters Robert—and says, 'O WRETCHED MAN THAT I AM! WHO SHALL DELIVER ME FROM THE BODY OF THIS DEATH?'

The ragged throne on which he sits rests on four sunken castors. He regards his greasy skull through the compound gaze of buzzing flies. He can't see a cone in the head of the presence, but that's because he's looking through it—*with* it. And the disk at its truncated apex is a mirror, reflecting his vision back into his superimposed self.

A wax figurine; a bloody fountain; a porcelain saint; a flickering silver tongue; a statue punctured with light. A clay golem. That's what angels are made of.

All stripped away now. Stripped down to bone.

Robert's carrying the presence inside him. He's carrying it, but it's carrying him too. They're inside each other. They've swapped places.

The presence isn't his dad any more. It's the Angel of the Lord. And as it appears, it also disappears.

'I'm sorry,' Robert says. 'I didn't know; I didn't understand.'

When the Angel of the Lord speaks, the words aren't sounds; they're fashioned out of itself. And the Word made flesh says, 'TAKE, EAT: THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS BROKEN FOR YOU.'

Robert kneels down on the floor in front of the chair. Insect shells splay and crack. He closes his eyes, and opens his mouth to receive communion.

Chapter 19: Tracey

There's blood in the telephone.

It was on Tracey's hands; she smeared it on the cradle when she dropped the receiver after calling the police. She wiped the handset down with Dettol, but there are still dried flecks inside the tiny holes in the mouthpiece.

Dettol's no good for the lounge carpet. When she pulled out the tacks fastening it to the wooden floor, she had to peel it away, like a dirty bandage from a wound.

You can unscrew the cover on the telephone mouthpiece. Spies do it on telly when they want to plant a bug. She's about to try when she hears the car horn beep outside.

When Tracey gets into the front seat of the Beetle, Aunt Rachel turns the ignition off.

Tracey can hear her leather jacket shift against the seat covering when she turns. 'Did you get what you wanted from your dad's room?'

Tracey doesn't reply.

'We have to help you. You have to let us help you.'

'I want to do it myself.'

Rachel sighs. 'There's legal stuff. One of us might need to be a guardian.'

'It's my house,' Tracey says. Her voice sounds angry.

'Yes, it is. Maggie thinks your dad paid the mortgage off with the insurance after your mum died. Even if he didn't, he was insured too.'

'I don't care about that.'

'You can't live there by yourself. Stay with Maggie for now. Or Josh. They've both got a spare room.'

‘Do you want me to go?’ Tracey and Rachel have been sleeping in the same bed at Rachel’s flat. Last night, they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

‘Of course not. I’m talking about the future.’

‘I want to stay at New Heys. Do my A-levels.’

‘You can.’

Tracey smooths down her new grey jacket and A-line skirt; picks fluff off. ‘I should have planned the service today.’

‘Everything you asked for is in there. We can go over it now.’

‘Who’s leading?’

Rachel pauses. ‘John Cooper.’

Tracey squeezes her eyes shut and presses her palm against her forehead. ‘It should be Trevor Jenkins. Or Uncle Josh.’

‘There was a meeting. Trevor was the one who asked John to do it. ... He and your dad knew each other a long time. They built the church together.’ Rachel lets go of the steering wheel and flexes her fingers, as if they’re stiff.

‘I know,’ Tracey says. ‘I was there.’

Rachel takes Tracey’s chin in her hand and tilts her face towards the light. ‘Are you wearing mascara?’

‘What does that matter?’

‘It’ll run.’

Tracey twists around and reaches behind her shoulder for the seatbelt. It’s the old type, so it hangs loose in her hand instead of pulling back against her. She looks across at Robert’s house. ‘Auntie Rose,’ she says.

‘What about her?’

‘Did anyone let her know? She might want to come.’

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’

Tracey juts her chin out. ‘Yes.’

‘We’re going to be late.’

‘They’re not gonna start without me.’ She hangs the seatbelt back up, and opens the car door.

Rachel has to park half-way up Long Lane, near Paul’s house. Tracey walks with Auntie Rose, who leans on her arm. She’s wearing a tweed coat and a hat Tracey’s never seen before. A smell of mothballs. Her outfit’s too heavy for this humid July day.

‘How’s Uncle Edward?’ Tracey asks, taking smaller steps. But she still has to stop for Auntie Rose to catch her breath.

‘He’s not well. So he couldn’t come.’ Her arm’s trembling inside the heavy coat.

‘It’s okay. We’re glad you’re here. I’m glad.’

Rachel’s several feet ahead, swinging her keys round her index finger. She doesn’t look back, but she knows they’ve stopped, because she stops too.

Cars all along the pavement; across the road, up onto the central reservation in the middle of the dual carriageway. A limousine and a hearse directly outside the church entrance, with two uniformed drivers smoking by the back. They drop their cigarettes and stub them out when they see Tracey coming.

Rachel waits for Tracey and Auntie Rose at the bottom of the church steps. ‘We decided not to bring it inside,’ she says, nodding at the hearse. ‘Him, I mean.’

‘I don’t care,’ Tracey says, not looking. ‘It’s not him.’

‘The doors.’ Rachel looks up at the entrance, and raises her hand above her shoulder, to the approximate height of a coffin, if it was perched there.

‘I said I don’t care.’

Trevor’s on greetings. ‘Welcome,’ he says to Auntie Rose, but he’s looking at Tracey.

‘Can I leave my friend with you?’ she says, patting Auntie Rose’s arm as if Trevor doesn’t know who she’s talking about. ‘I have to go down the front with my family.’

‘Absolutely,’ Trevor says, head bobbing up and down like it’s on a spring. ‘We’ll get her a seat at the back, and save the one next to her for me.’ Like Auntie Rose is a child who can’t understand.

Tracey thought everyone would fall silent when she walked in, but the hall’s full of life: whispering, nudging, primping ties and hats. She stands at the back and allows herself to hate them all—for a few seconds.

It has to come out somewhere.

Someone should play the organ when she starts walking up the aisle. ‘The Funeral March’ instead of ‘Here Comes the Bride’.

As Tracey steps forward into a future without her dad, Rachel stays close behind, with her hand on Tracey’s shoulder. People do stop talking when they pass, but the chatter starts again after a few seconds, as if Tracey’s carrying a bubble of silence around her.

Aunt Maggie and Uncle Josh are on the front row on the right. Tracey’s cousins Sally and Richard are on the row behind, hemmed in by uncles. Her mum’s sisters, and her older cousin Judith, are at the front on the left.

There are spaces for Rachel and Tracey on the right by the aisle, each with a photocopied order of service to mark it off. Rachel takes the outside seat, so Tracey's between her and Aunt Maggie, who has a box of tissues ready on her lap.

Tracey looks behind her. Mark and Jenny are on the third row, surprisingly sitting next to one another, but not talking. Kevin and Paul, just back from Seniors camp, are on the opposite side of the hall, arguing about something. She envies their distraction: they can *choose* if they want to be here. When Paul sees her looking, he raises a hand and smiles, then winces. Kevin won't meet her eye, and Paul looks away when Kevin jabs him in the shoulder.

John Cooper stands silently at the front, behind the lectern. There's an overhead projector next to him. 'What's that for?' Tracey says to Rachel.

'I don't know.'

She looks down at the photocopy in her hand, which offers no clues. There's a degraded copy of a black-and-white picture of her mum and dad on the front, taken on their wedding day.

The congregation rises for the first two hymns. Her dad's favourites: number 168, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing', and number 265, 'When I survey the wondrous cross'. No guitar or piano. The first song includes a round on the last line of each verse, which is repeated several times, and split into alternating male and female parts; the second hymn is quieter and sadder.

After everyone sits, John Cooper grips the sides of the lectern and leans forward. 'I've never seen our church this full,' he says. 'I know why. We had to come. To pay our respects to our friend. My friend. Tracey's father. We all knew him. We know what he stood for. A man of faith, a true Christian.'

‘And yet, in another sense, none of us want to be here. How cruel it seems, only a year after Sara was taken from us, to lose her husband Bill as well.’

Tracey blinks and blinks again. She gulps and wipes snot off her upper lip. Her throat feels raw from swallowing. Aunt Maggie pulls a tissue out for her, and passes the box along. She’s crying too.

‘Sara died in an accident. But *this* was no accident.

‘Until we meet with God in the Kingdom of Heaven, where I know Bill is joined with Sara today, we cannot escape suffering. But why did God permit this? I cannot say. But He will use it for His glory. When Jesus died, Satan thought he’d won. He could not imagine God’s wonderful purpose. And so he lost.

‘I do not speak of the person who held the knife.’

Rachel and Maggie turn inwards towards Tracey, press their thighs in tighter against hers, squashing her between them. Farther along the pew, Josh leans forward and stares at John: thin mouth.

Tracey feels sorry for Auntie Rose, at the back, having to hear this.

‘One of us,’ John says. ‘It would be easy to pretend otherwise. Cast him out, call God’s judgement down. And let us be clear—God will judge him.’ John pauses. ‘As He will judge all of us.’

‘Perhaps this boy knew not what he did. And perhaps we failed him. Perhaps some of us even encouraged him.’ John looks towards Mark, and a few people turn around. ‘In his fantasies.’

Robert acted alone: that’s the fiction. But Tracey saw something standing behind him. It spoke to her; she spoke to it. Then it was gone, and Robert went upstairs. He locked himself in the bathroom, and smashed the glass on the cabinet mirror.

Blood all over the tiles there too.

‘There’ll be time to think about this,’ John says, ‘and each man must come to his own conclusion.’

In the police interview, Tracey just recited the physical facts in a monotone, and finished with her dad dying. Because nothing after that mattered. Not to them. They didn’t need her as a witness anyway—Robert couldn’t stop confessing. But he didn’t tell the whole story either. He didn’t say there were two of him.

She knows the police spoke to Mark. She doesn’t know what he said, but no one in her family’s talking to him now. It’s not fair. He was the only one who tried to help.

‘I can’t presume to forgive on someone else’s behalf,’ John says. ‘But I can speak for all of us when I say, I loved Bill Forester.’

If Robert went on trial, Tracey would have to say what she saw. In the witness box, pale and luminous. Wearing her nightie, sacrificing herself for the truth. But there won’t be a trial. Robert’s in hospital, and there’ll be some kind of a hearing to make sure he stays there, but Rachel made the police promise not to call Tracey to testify.

She gets to keep her secret with God—and Robert.

Don’t remember him. Remember dad.

‘We’ll hear from Bill’s family shortly,’ John says. ‘But let me share one thing.’

He wipes his forehead, and smooths his hair down. Tracey can smell his sweat from here. He moves his Bible to his left hand, and hitches up his belt with his right. He throws the Bible onto the lectern and leans against the wood, as if he’s scared of falling over.

‘Billy Graham.

‘Some of you are new. You’re here because you went to Anfield. You might not even know Bill, and you’re wondering what you’ve gotten yourself into. I was never against Mission England, but at first, I wasn’t really *for* it either.

‘If you’re new here, you are welcome. God brought you to us, but Bill made it happen.

‘We just sang two of his favourite hymns. They’re both in *Mission Praise*, but they were written in the eighteenth century. By a Puritan and a Methodist: Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. That was before the Brethren existed. But these men are part of our history too. Because it begins with Christ, and any man who acknowledges Him is my brother.

‘Bill taught me that.

‘I don’t follow the football, but I understand Liverpool FC had a respectable year.’ Laughter from the audience. More than the comment deserves—out of relief. ‘Let me see,’ John continues. ‘Top of the League, Milk Cup—and the European Cup.’ He ticks each victory off on his fat fingers. ‘Not too bad.’

He takes a few steps away from the lectern, down the aisle, to where Paul’s sitting. He reaches down to squeeze Paul’s shoulder. ‘And yes, my friend, I haven’t forgotten: there are two clubs in this city. The other one won the F.A. Cup.’ He speaks over Paul’s head, and Paul doesn’t look up, only twitches his shoulder under the grip of John’s paw.

John says, ‘Bill told us to take the gospel into the heart of our city.

‘I never much liked the word martyr; nor the word saint. We’re all saints. But martyr just means “witness”. The Greek word for witness. So Bill Forester is a martyr. He died for his faith.’

Tracey’s ears burn; her eyes spill over again.

‘Bill took us on a journey to Anfield, and we took over the stadium for a week. Now I want to borrow something else from Liverpool Football Club. A song. Not a hymn. Not in *Mission Praise*. It doesn’t even mention God. But the promise it makes can only be fulfilled through Him.’

John turns on the overhead projector, which beams a transparency onto the bare wall of the church hall. The words of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’.

‘Again: how cruel for our young sister to be left alone in this world. And yet I say to you, Tracey, you are not alone.’ He waits for her to look at him, but she can’t see anything through the tears. ‘God stands with you, and we stand with God.’

The last time she heard this song, Paul was singing it. Different words: SIGN ON, SIGN ON, WITH NO HOPE IN YOUR HEART, AND YOU’LL NEVER WORK AGAIN! YOU’LL NEVER WORK AGAIN. She says Paul’s version to herself, to help her get control of her face. It doesn’t work.

When the singing stops, Uncle Josh gets up to speak, but Tracey can’t concentrate, waiting for her turn. She prepared a little speech. Sober and dignified. Quiet, so people have to lean forward to hear. Only that’s not what happens when she gets up to the lectern. She sobs and shakes—like she’s possessed by the Holy Spirit, like she’s speaking in tongues.

When she was alone with God, all she could hear was His silence. If she wants to hear God speak, she has to come here. But who’d have thought He’d do it through John Cooper?

Faith isn’t a secret. You have to share it with others.

Rachel takes her out to the loos to clean up, and by the time they come back, the church is almost empty. ‘Are we going in the limousine?’ Tracey asks. The burial’s in Allerton Cemetery, which is just around the corner.

‘Yes,’ Rachel says.

‘It’s hardly worth it. Isn’t everybody walking?’

‘It’s so we arrive together. As a family.’

The hall’s silent, but there’s chatter and clinking plates in the kitchen from the women who are staying behind to prepare for the reception. It obviously couldn’t be at the house.

‘What happened to Auntie Rose?’ Tracey asks.

‘Trevor drove her home.’

Tracey picks up her jacket and checks the pockets for snotty tissues. ‘Where’s the order of service?’

‘Josh kept it for you.’

There’s something else on her seat. A folded piece of paper. She picks it up. THESE ARE SPOTS IN YOUR FEASTS OF CHARITY: TREES WHOSE FRUIT WITHERETH, WITHOUT FRUIT, TWICE DEAD, PLUCKED UP BY THE ROOTS; WANDERING STARS, TO WHOM IS RESERVED THE BLACKNESS OF DARKNESS FOR EVER.

It’s the King James Version, which narrows the list of suspects—but it can’t be John Cooper. Not after that speech. Is it supposed to make her feel better? She screws it up; throws it away.

A week later, the police find Robert’s dad at the house in Neston. Tracey goes to that funeral as well. A non-denominational chapel in Chester crematorium, with the next lot of people waiting outside for their slot in the schedule.

The Brethren don't believe in the resurrection of the body—at least, Tracey doesn't think they do: not the *same* body—but cremation's still a bit disreputable. Like getting married in a registry office.

Well, it's not like there's anything much to bury.

Apart from the minister and the coffin, Tracey and Auntie Rose are the only ones there. They sing, 'For those in peril on the sea'. When they stand up and sit down, the creak of the pews echoes.

Chapter 20: Robert

TO ROBERT FISHER FROM SARAH CRICK. YOU'LL HAVE TO PAY ME IF YOU WANT ME TO BE YOUR MATE.

I'M QUITE CHEAP. A SAUSAGE ROLL USUALLY BOWLS ME OVER.

For all Robert knows, the whole world could be back to front. Nowhere's familiar any more.

After the hospital, the first place he can remember is a B & B, somewhere near Toxteth. Other people's toenails clippings in the carpet; other people's shit stains in the toilet. A hollow space in the middle of the yellow sheets. Maybe that's someone else too.

He never sees the girl, but wherever he goes, he knows she's there. She's in charge.

DARLING HONK, DO I STILL REMIND YOU OF A SPOTTED PUDDING!

Once, an American tourist accidentally books a room in the B & B. She has a Beatles t-shirt, and she smiles and says hello in the corridor. Until someone mugs her outside the front door.

ROBERT, 100% FOR JESUS. ALWAYS. NEVER GIVE HIM UP. ALL LOVE AND PRAYERS, YOUR NEW FRIEND,
LOUISE

He carries his clothes in a bin bag; tips them out in the corner of the room. He's kept his Walkman, and a dozen cassettes, but the batteries are usually dead. His only other possession is a booklet from Merseyside Christian Youth Camps. Where he found God, in the summer of 1983: where he was born again.

The booklet has the schedule for the week at camp, and daily questions for group discussion, but he never looks inside: only at the scribbled messages from other campers on the cover. They're all over the front and back, at different angles. When he reads them, he has to turn the booklet round and round in his dirty hands.

HELLO HONKIE TONK, THE WEEK WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO COOL WITHOUT YOU (CORNY!). HENRY'S CAT LOVES YOU! KEEP IT MELLOW DOOD, LOVE LIZZIE

On the coach down to the camp site, he answered every question with the word HONK. He can't remember why. Maybe a chicken cluck was too complicated, too expressive. It couldn't be reduced to a single syllable.

ROBERT, CARRY ON EATING SPAM. IT'S GOOD FOR YOU. SEE YER SOON, KATHY

The booklet's bound with staples and tape, but the staples are rusty and the tape's not sticky any more, so the pages are falling out. He keeps them together with an elastic band. When he takes the booklet out to read the messages, he tries to only touch the cover with his fingertips. But it gets more smudged and dog-eared every year.

HI ROBERT, YES IT'S NICK WHO NEVER KNOWS WHAT TO WRITE BECAUSE HE IS INSECURE.

One evening, he comes back to the B & B, and he can hear voices in his room: a man and a woman with a baby have moved in. No one pays any attention when he tries to object, so he just takes his bag and leaves.

He knows that's because of the girl too.

He sleeps outside for a few nights, until he realises he can go wherever he likes, now that he's invisible. The only hotel he can think of is the Adelphi, in the town centre. He's never been inside before; it's supposed to be posh. One of Tracey's aunts had her wedding do there.

He wanders around the reception area, where there's a porter slumped asleep at the check-in desk. What time is it? Three in the morning. He walks up a wide flight of stairs into the ballroom. Fake marble pillars; arched alcoves with glass partitions; an enormous chandelier.

A place, with a history, but he doesn't want to be in a place, and he doesn't want to have a history. He wants to be nobody, nowhere.

So he lives upstairs, and moves from identical room to identical room: whichever one's left open for the cleaners after the guests leave. He makes sure the curtains are pulled tight to keep the daylight out, and crawls into the unmade bed. Once he's inside a room, no one ever disturbs him, but if he leaves and comes back, the door's always locked, and he has to find a new one.

ROBERT, YOU ARE THE MOST STUPID GUY I'VE EVER MET. BUT THERE YOU ARE, KEVIN

Eventually, other people disappear altogether. He can still see the traces of their presence, but never their bodies. He checks the abandoned meal trolleys for bites of pasta and scraped fish skins in the evenings, but there are more leftovers after breakfast: toast crusts, soggy cereal, congealed egg. His own body still wants to be fed, and he doesn't care enough to fight it any more, but he doesn't want to indulge it either.

TO ROBERT, THANKS FOR YOUR VERY PECULIAR MESSAGE. I'M STILL TRYING TO WORK IT OUT. TAKE CARE, REBECCA MILLER

No one answers if he calls room service, but if he closes the room door behind him, and then opens it again, there's a bottle of whisky placed on the carpet, just outside.

A present, from the girl.

The brands vary—J&B, Johnnie Walker—but more often than not, it's Teacher's: the type his dad used to drink. At first, he leaves the bottles unopened on the dresser. It's several weeks before he stretches and breaks the polythene wrapper on one of the clear plastic cups in the bathroom, and snaps the metal cap off the whisky.

The cup trembles with the weight of the liquid.

Has he ever had whisky before? He can feel it sting his lips and bite into his tongue before it burns the back of his throat. Antiseptic: purifying. He fills the top of the cup with water from the bathroom sink, and opens one of the packets of shortbread biscuits by the kettle.

It takes him a week to finish the bottle. He decides to change rooms again. When he opens the door on the way out, there's a new bottle waiting for him. He takes it with him.

HONKY, I THINK YOU HAVE WONKY, LONG SIDEBURNS. BUT DON'T FRET, THE LORD CAN USE YOU YET, IN MINISTRY TO OLD LADIES. FONDEST REGARDS, LINDSEY

So long as there's whisky left in the bottle, the corridor outside stays empty, but seconds after he shakes the last pregnant drops from the lip of the bottle neck, there'll be a replacement waiting. He tries emptying the bottle directly into his mouth while holding the door open with his foot. That keeps the replacement away for a while—until he closes the door again. He also tries snatching at the handle, fast as he can, but he never catches anyone outside. The only sound is the humming of the strip lights above; the only movement is the blip of the battery light on the smoke alarm.

At first, it takes him several nights to finish each bottle, and whenever he collects a new one, he changes rooms as well. But now he stays where he is until the sheets start to smell.

ROBERT, I ENJOYED OUR TALK THE OTHER DAY WHEN WE GAVE THE SLATE MINES A MISS, IAN

There's a desk at the foot of the bed, with a mirror. He looks into it. The main light's off, and he adjusts the angle lamp so it shines directly on his face. Blotched skin, cracked lips. He looks like he's been stretched on a rack, all his limbs and features out of proportion. He runs his hands over the unfamiliar stubble, and scowls; the image scowls back. His mouth falls open, and that looks wrong too. He peers into its black cave: chipped yellow teeth.

TO MY LITTLE HONKY PONKY, CAULIFLOWER TASTES NICE WITH CUSTARD. NEVER CHANGE. I LOVE YOU
AS YOU ARE! GOD BLESS, FROM MANDY PANDY

He sleeps as much as he can, but his back hurts if he stays in bed too long. There's usually a television in the room, but he can never get it to show anything except what looks like a closed-circuit image of the room itself.

The picture's black-and-white, or rather, darkish grey and lightish grey, and he can't make anything out: only shapes and blobs. Even so, that's definitely the back of his head. And his slouched shoulders. He doesn't know how he knows this—when has he ever seen the back of his own head?

He turns around to try and catch the camera watching him, but there's never anything there. He inspects the rest of the furniture, the lights, the plug sockets—but he can't find any miniature devices.

He tries speaking to himself, but there's no sound on the television. And there's some kind of time delay with the picture, because the figure on the screen doesn't copy his movements. When he stands up to look into the invisible camera behind him, the image stays supine; and *vice versa*.

Maybe he's looking at a tape from the night before. So he tries an experiment. He raises his arm in the air at nine p.m., and then watches intently at the same time the following night. The figure on the screen pours itself a half-cup of Teacher's at eight fifty-seven, then raises it to its lips with both hands and lowers its head to slurp it up. It tilts its neck back against the headrest. It doesn't move for another five minutes.

Okay. But then, why would it be *exactly* a day behind? Maybe it's only a few hours.

He tries hopping on one leg; he falls over. Then he watches the television continuously for as long as he can to see when the image catches up to him. After thirty minutes, he sees himself stand up and slide his hand along the wall until he reaches the room door, which is off-screen. He comes back with another full bottle of whisky, which he

places next to the empty one on the floor. He flops down on the chair, and continues to look towards the television screen, which is (thankfully) not visible within the camera's angle-of-view.

Hours later, Robert stands up and slides his hand along the wall until he reaches the room door, where it dawns on him: the tape's recording the future.

He keeps watching to find out what happens when he changes rooms. After he sees himself stuffing his clothes into the bin bag, the screen goes dead.

Maybe the image will tell him where he needs to go next, but no: the signal doesn't resume. He staggers out into the corridor until he finds an open door, then reels inside. He turns the television on and sees himself crumpled in the sheets on the bed.

He tries to repeat the same gesture every hour, on the hour. Stand up and sit down again; or raise his glass in the air. Change the time to five past or ten past, to see if he can reach a point where the gestures in the room synchronise with the gestures on the screen, so that they appear to happen at the same time.

It's something to do.

But in the end, it's easier not to move at all. That way, the image is always the same. Or just turn the television off, and use the batteries from the remote control for his Walkman.

HONK, I REGRET SITTING ON THE FRONT ROW, MIKEY

It takes him a while to realise he's up to a bottle a day, because with the curtains closed, 'day' is no longer a meaningful unit of time. In the bathroom mirror, he seems swollen as well as stretched, like his skin's about to burst. There doesn't seem to be enough room

inside for his organs. They're pressed up against each other, and everywhere he touches feels bruised.

HONK AND EGGS, HAVE A BUSK ON ME, LOVE PAUL THE CHICKEN DANCER (DON'T TELL!)

Empty bottle. He opens the door to the corridor. No whisky; that's not good. But there's something: a plastic container with a child-proof plastic cap. No label. He shakes it, and pills rattle inside. Not Largactil then.

When he takes the pills, he can't remember who he is or why any of this matters. Not exactly pleasure, because pleasure's a feeling, and this is just an absence where a feeling used to be. But he likes it. He likes feeling nothing.

He falls over—his arms and legs don't seem to want to obey his brain. But mainly he just stays in the chair—even the bed's too far away now.

WHETHER IT'S LOGICAL OR ILLOGICAL DOESN'T REALLY MATTER. WHAT MATTERS IS WE'RE BROTHERS AND I LOVE YOU IN CHRIST, TREVOR JENKINS

He starts to feel anxious again: he's worried that the pills will stop working. And once that thought's entered his head, they actually do stop working. They still keep him paralysed, but now some version of himself stands outside himself with unblinking eyes and a dark stain between its legs.

The next time he opens the door, there's a bottle of whisky—and a bottle of pills. That works for a while, but it's like the princess and the pea. He's unconscious, even while

he's awake, but even while he's unconscious, some tiny kernel of self is trying to get out, screaming and banging on the walls.

Like being awake on the operating table, but unable to tell anyone.

He knows who he is now. He's the rotting thing in his dad's house. He's a maggot, feeding off the dead body of Christ, adding to His suffering by refusing to suffer himself.

TO MY DEAR HONKY DOODLE DANDY, PLEASE DON'T INSPECT MY BRA VERY VERY CLOSELY, LOVE DAVE
THE KETTLE ☹

No whisky outside; no pills. Only a thin cellophane packet of powder. He sits down on the floor, with his foot wedged against the door to keep it open, and holds the powder up against the blurred light in the corridor ceiling. He squints—even the corridors are too bright for him now—and flicks the bag with his index finger.

He drags himself back inside the room, and lets the door close with a pneumatic sigh. He leans back against the wall, and pops the zip-lock seal on the bag. He licks his fingertip and dips it inside; wiggles it about in the powder. He presses the finger against his tongue. The powder fizzes and pops, like Space Dust, but it tastes bitter.

The phone in the room behind him blurts out half a tone, as if it's clearing its throat and isn't sure whether to continue, then settles into a steady pulse. He gets his Walkman, and puts the headphones on. Presses 'Play', and turns the volume up.

He waits five minutes, and lifts one foam headphone away from his ear. The phone's still ringing, but nothing else has changed, so he takes another fingertip of powder from the bag. Again, he can't feel anything, so he tilts his head back and empties the packet into his mouth.

He can feel something now. He can feel it eating into his teeth.

For the first time in years, he prays. 'Let me die. Let it kill me.'

The music on the cassette finishes, and behind the blank tape hiss, the phone won't shut up. Robert stands up and lurches towards the bedside table. He picks the receiver up.

'Is that Franny?' a Scouse voice says in his ear. 'I *knew* you were there.' Robert doesn't reply, and the voice says again, 'Franny?'

'I think you've got the wrong number.' His own voice sounds strange to him, and the words echo on the phone line.

'Is that Stu?'

'No.'

'Tell Franny from me, she's a fuckin' slag.' The woman's mouth comes closer to the speaker for the last two words, which pop in Robert's ear.

'You can hear me,' Robert says.

'Yeah Stu, I can hear you. You meff.'

He's about to put the phone down, but he hesitates. It's the first time he's spoken to anyone in years. He remembers the assembly, when Tracey spoke with him to the school. And the camp booklet. Where is that? When did he last look at it?

'What did Franny do?' he says to the stranger on the other end of the line.

'She snogged Jimmy.' The voice wavers. 'I love him. I can't stand it.'

Has Robert ever loved anyone? Did he love Tracey? Not like the woman on the phone means. His mouth is made of rubber, but he manages to speak. 'I'm sorry,' he says.

'Fuck you Stu.'

A dead, continuous tone—like the sound of a heart monitor after someone goes into cardiac arrest. Robert's still got the phone stuck to the side of his head, but even when he drops the receiver, the sound's still there. The whole room's an ear.

TO ROBERT, I'VE LEARNT SO MUCH FROM LISTENING TO YOU! EVERYBODY SHOULD THINK SO DEEPLY
AND CAREFULLY, JENNY. PHILIPPIANS 4: 19

Chapter 21: Robert / Tracey / Robert

‘Can you tell me your name?’ The nurse is shining a pencil light in Robert’s eyes.

‘Wha?’ His mouth won’t move. He tries to wipe the drool off with the back of his hand, but he can’t lift his arm either. He blinks: he can manage that. He can also move his head: a few inches to the left; a few to the right.

He’s lying on a paper sheet, propped up on a stretcher bed, in a curtained alcove. Sticky pads on his bare chest, but no wires or monitor.

‘I’ll come back to you later,’ she says. ‘We have other people we need to take care of.’ She sniffs. ‘People who didn’t *choose* to be here.’

He’s shirtless; shoeless too. His feet are rigid, curled. He tries to relax the toes, straighten them out. He has to focus his attention, move each toe in turn, one by one.

The nurse pokes her head round the curtain. ‘What’s the matter?’

He realises he’s been groaning. He tries to speak again, but just makes a gargling sound. He lifts his thumb and index finger and pinches them together. Moves them backwards and forwards in the air.

‘Pen? Paper?’

He nods, and the nurse disappears again. He remembers this place: Alfred Jones in Garston. How did he end up here? It’s miles from the Adelphi.

The nurse swishes the curtain open, and hands him a pad and a biro. He presses the pad against his thigh with the base of his palm, and holds on to the pen as tight as he can. He doesn’t have much sensation in his fingers, so it takes him a while to write **SISTER RIORDAN?** in toddler letters. It’s not like she’ll remember him. But if she’s here, it’ll prove this is really happening.

The nurse looks at the pad. 'Repeat customer, are we? She hasn't worked here for a while.'

He writes again. 'Bag?' He's surprised the nurse can read any of it.

She points under the stretcher-bed, then returns to the reception area. He eases his scabby ankles over the side, and inches his bum forward on the paper sheet until his feet touch the floor. The creased sheet falls off behind him, and his arms and legs sway, but he doesn't fall over.

The nurse picks at an open packet of sweets without looking up from her magazine.

Robert focusses on his jaw, his teeth, his tongue. He smacks his lips, like he wants to get rid of a bad taste. He tries to say, 'I can't speak.' An exercise in futility.

He bends down slowly, and twitches the fluttering edge of the crinkled bin bag towards him. He can see the MCYC booklet and the earphones from his Walkman inside, on top of his scrunched clothes. Everything smells of mould.

He straightens up; shuffles forward. The hospital entrance is on his left. Someone's having a smoke outside, and the automatic doors open and close whenever the edge of his foot strays into the sensor zone.

On Robert's right, opposite the entrance, a series of alcoves and curtains stretches away into the distance. Surely that's not right?

He keeps shuffling. It takes him a couple of minutes to reach the next alcove. But when he gets there, he finds himself looking into the space he just left, with the exact same paper sheet bunched on the floor by the same stretcher-bed. He looks behind him, and he's still next to the entrance; he doesn't seem to have moved at all. He wipes his hand over his face, and looks again. The same.

He shuffles along to the next alcove—and again finds himself back where he started. But this time, one of the curtains has been pulled closed, and he can hear a sound behind it: a tiny cry, as if it's coming from somewhere much farther away.

He drags his feet towards the closed curtain. When he gets closer, he can see a small gap where the curtain doesn't quite meet the wall. If he presses his cheek to the plaster and peeks round the edge, he can make out someone standing inside.

Not someone: something. A metal statue. He knows he's seen it before—or something like it—but his mind's as numb as his fingers. He's glad it's numb, because that's the only way he can deal with the world around him coming back to life.

The recognition spreads slowly, like a blush. This is how the presence appeared, at Billy Graham. Pitted gold. But now it's the same size as Robert—and its head is the head of a bull.

The neck muscles seem to bulge; the horns curl up towards the ceiling; the frozen nostrils flare. He never expected to see the presence again, and he's not sure this is the presence. It's fixed, unmoving. A graven image, not a living creature—or even a dead one.

An idol.

He opens the curtain wider. The air around the statue shimmers. He puts his hand out towards it, but stops a few inches away. He can feel the heat coming off it. Not a cold Pentecostal flame. A smell of burning dust, like the electric fire in the television room at Auntie Rose's.

The tiny sound's coming from somewhere inside the statue. It whistles out through its nostrils, but the statue's not making the sound. It's a baby, crying. It's been crying for a long time. It just keeps going—like the phone ringing in Robert's hotel room.

He can't rescue it—he can't even rescue himself. But he remembers a Bible verse.

Jonah inside the whale: OUT OF THE BELLY OF HELL CRIED I, AND THOU HEARDEST MY VOICE.

Did hell swallow Christ, or did Christ swallow hell?

He shuffles out into the corridor again—towards the hospital entrance, but he ends up back at the same alcove he just left, with the same closed curtain. He steps up to the place where it joins the wall, and tweaks it open.

The statue's gone, but Tracey's lying on her side on one of the stretcher-beds, asleep. Cheek pressed into the cracked vinyl padding; eyelids flickering. Different clothes, hair, body; glasses clutched in her clenched hand—but it's her. Robert stays outside the curtain; he's scared he might touch her. He's scared all this is real; he's scared it isn't.

He turns to the nurses' station, and finds he can speak now, if he goes slowly. He tries to whisper, but it comes out loud. 'Ish she shick?' He sounds like Uncle Edward without his teeth.

The nurse looks up from her magazine; frowns. 'Leave her alone. She's been on duty since Friday.'

Robert goes to another stretcher-bed; sits down; pulls the curtain closed around him.

*

The television's up on a wall bracket. On the screen, Tony Blair's leaning forward in his chair, trying to get as close as he can to the interviewer.

'Overdose in there,' the nurse says, pointing to the closed curtain. 'No one else has come in since.'

Tracey looks down at the notes left by the paramedics. 'Awake?'

‘He was ten minutes ago. Not very lively. But everything stable; no danger.’

Tracey pulls up the elasticated waist on her blue scrubs, which are a size too large.

‘We don’t know what he took?’

‘I don’t think *he* knows. Some kind of dissociative.’

‘They didn’t take a blood sample?’

‘He refused.’

‘Lively enough for that then.’

Tracey walks over and pulls the curtain open, keeping her eye on the chart. She sees his filthy feet before she sees his face.

She’s imagined this, without ever thinking it would happen. She thought she might be scared of him—but he looks like an old man. Not just dirty: stained, worn-out.

He’s a patient; she’s a doctor. That keeps her safe. But she still doesn’t want to touch him. ‘I don’t need to do anything,’ she says, showing him that the chart’s been filled in.

He looks like he’s trying to remember how to be afraid.

‘Do you know who I am?’ Tracey asks.

‘Yes.’

Tony Blair witters on in the background.

‘When did they release you?’ she says, although she knows. They sent her an official letter before it happened. Robert doesn’t reply, so she says, ‘Mark used to visit you.’

Robert squints at Tony Blair. ‘Jenny? Did she come too?’

‘Yes.’

He swallows—painfully, as if he’s chewing Paracetamol. ‘But not you.’

‘No. Not me.’

He puts his hands on his knees. 'When is it, now? What year is it?'

'1997.'

He blinks, and opens his mouth.

'Don't.' She says this too loudly, and the nurse looks over to check everything's alright. Tracey waves her away. 'Whatever it is,' she says to Robert, 'I don't care.'

'I ruined your life.' His jaw quivers.

She's disgusted by this self-pity. 'You're not that important,' she says. 'I don't even think about you.'

'Did you stay there? In the house.'

'Why not? It's mine.' When she moved back in, she wanted Mark to perform an exorcism, but he wouldn't—he said demons don't dwell in buildings—so she got a priest to do it.

'Auntie Rose.'

Tracey holds the clipboard against her chest. 'She's on her own now. Paul mows the grass.'

'Paul?'

Why did she mention that? 'He comes round, sometimes.' He stays over too, but that's none of Robert's business. Or anyone else's.

'Where are you staying now?' She looks at the chart again and taps it with the end of her pen, as if this question's written there, and she's ticking it off.

Robert squints. 'The Adelphi?' She laughs, and he looks down at his shaking hands. 'I don't know,' he says.

'I'll get Social Services in. It won't be until the morning.'

'It's morning now. Isn't it?' He looks towards the entrance doors.

She can hear the birds, but her brain's still scrambled, and it's just white noise to her. She says, 'Are you going to hurt anyone else?'

Robert cringes. 'No.'

She pulls the curtain closed behind them. 'Do you still read the Bible?' she asks.

'No.'

'But you remember.'

He closes his eyes. 'Some.'

'Do you remember David, following the Ark into Jerusalem, **DANCING BEFORE THE LORD WITH ALL HIS MIGHT?**'

He doesn't reply.

'I used to think that was you. And I was Michal, the daughter of King Saul, high up in the palace window, watching. Michal hated David, for making a fool of himself in front of the servants. He told her off. "I don't care how I look. I'll humiliate myself for God."

'I thought God was going to speak to me through you.

'But there's another part to that story. When they brought the Ark into Jerusalem, it nearly fell over. A man called Uzzah put his hand out to stop it. God struck him dead. Because Uzzah thought God needed his help. He thought he was God's equal.

'Why didn't God strike *you* dead?'

Robert says, 'I think He did.'

*

ROBERT, REMEMBER THAT YOU HAVE TO FIGHT THE ENEMY TO CLAIM YOUR BLESSING. I'LL PRAY FOR YOU, MARK

(Tracey / Robert)

The concert on the last night of church camp in Wales. Someone was standing at the front of the rec room in a chicken costume: a fake fur bodysuit with a zip up the front; flapping decorations around the collar and down the zip line, like rows of bunting. A rubber mask with a felt coxcomb and wattles; round, dead eyes and a gaping beak.

The costume was supposed to be for outreach to kids in the local village. Tracey had never seen anyone use it in the concert before. She wondered if the wearer even had permission.

The chicken jumped up onto the makeshift stage, which was made up of several tables from the dining hall, pushed together. It stamped up and down to test the stability. Then it lifted a smaller table up onto the platform.

Tracey's in her hospital scrubs, sitting close to Robert, but with an empty chair between them. They're both at the back of the rec room. 'I don't want to be here,' she says. The last time she went to camp was ten years ago. 'Is this because of you?'

'You went back to sleep.' Robert's still bare-chested, shivering. Slurring his words.

'If this is my dream, then why are *you* here? Why are we watching you?'

On stage, chicken Robert reached into a plastic bag and pulled out a large bottle of tomato ketchup. From the dining hall. Squeezy: red with a white nozzle. Next, he pulled out a large carton of eggs. He placed the carton on the small table, and opened the lid, pressing the top down twice until it stopped trying to close by itself. Next out of the bag was a miniature rubber chicken, which Robert held up next to his mask, as if to note the family

resemblance. He squeaked the toy once, then dropped it on the floor. Finally, he brought out a metal tablespoon, which he held up for everyone to see before placing it next to the eggs on the table.

‘You kept the secret,’ Tracey says to the older Robert in the audience. ‘You never said anything.’

‘You mean Azazel.’

‘Why?’

‘What good would it have done? She won. I belonged to her. I was *inside* her.’ He looks around at the rec room. ‘But this isn’t part of her. It can’t be.’

‘I don’t need to see this,’ Tracey says. ‘I know who I am. I know where I came from.’ She turns to Robert. ‘And *you’ve* got nothing to do with it.’

He doesn’t reply.

‘That thing—Azazel—it said to me, “My existence. That’s my gift to you.” I don’t accept. *I* decide what I believe.’

‘So what do you believe?’

‘That I’m not alone.’

A second performer stepped through the door at the back of the rec room. Dressed in a bulky collection of clothes. A German army parka over a leather motorcycle jacket; three open shirts on top of each other: one checked, one stripy, one white; two t-shirts under that; swimming shorts pulled over tracksuit bottoms; an unlaced boot on his left foot, a flip flop on his right.

He also had a bin over his head. Blue plastic, from the craft room, with vertical slots cut in it all the way round. A wide strip of paper taped round the inside—Tracey could see the white flash through the slots—but with a letterbox gap at the front, so the bin wearer could see out.

He climbed up on the stage. He moved slowly, not just because he was bloated with clothes, but also because he was carrying Kevin’s ghetto blaster. He put this down near chicken Robert, and returned to the front of the stage.

In the audience, Rebecca Miller leans forward from the row behind onto the chair between Tracey and Robert. She says, ‘Why does Paul have a bin over his head?’

‘Why are you asking me?’ Tracey says.

‘I thought ...’ Rebecca waggles her finger between bin-headed Paul at the front and Tracey at the back.

‘I didn’t even know him then.’ Tracey looks around. The room’s full. Everyone else from camp’s here too, but apart from herself and Robert, they all appear as they did fourteen years ago, in the summer of 1983.

Teenage Kevin turns round from the row in front, and says to Rebecca, ‘Nobody’s supposed to know it’s Paul. That was the only way Robert could get anyone else to join in.’

‘It’s gonna be obvious,’ Rebecca says, ‘when he opens his mouth.’

‘He doesn’t have any lines,’ Robert says. ‘That was one of his conditions.’

Up on the stage, chicken Robert threw his head back, but instead of crowing, he stood silent, open beak waiting to catch manna from heaven.

He looked down and pointed at the audience. ‘Tonight,’ he said, ‘we present to you the folk music of chickens!’ He held his palm up to the side of his mouth, and added, in a stage whisper, ‘Medieval chickens. Mystical chickens.’

He pointed the spoon at the carton of eggs. ‘I shall play the salmonellaphone,’ he said, ‘with accompaniment from my dead cousin.’ He pressed his foot against the rubber toy, which blurted out half a squeak. ‘Our mysterious friend here’—at this point, Robert stepped forward and poked Paul in the shoulder—‘embodies the collective chicken soul. They possess him.’

‘Unh!’ Paul said.

‘What are you trying to tell us, mysterious friend?’

‘Yes, Paul!’ Kevin shouts. ‘We all know it’s you.’

The bin flopped from side to side. ‘Ohh Au!’

‘As I play the beautiful music of the salmonellaphone, which is of course inaudible to humans, our friend, enraptured by its heavenly melodies, will demonstrate the folk dancing of chickens. He will move as chickens move.’

Paul placed his hands on his hips and made a feeble effort to flap his elbows.

Rebecca says, ‘Shouldn’t Paul be wearing the chicken suit?’

‘That was the original idea,’ Robert says. ‘But he wouldn’t.’

‘Yeah,’ Kevin says, ‘but you were secretly made up.’

Chicken Robert stepped back behind the table. ‘Quiet!’ he said to the audience. He tapped several eggs in succession. ‘Each egg is laid to a different density,’ he explained, ‘so each produces a different ultrasonic note.’ He tapped one on the left of the carton; then moved the spoon over to the right. The only sound was the spoon cracking the top of the two shells. ‘See!’ he said, repeating the motions. ‘Completely different.’ He turned to Paul. ‘Are you ready, mysterious friend? Are you ready to receive your instructions from the world beyond? To be ... a chicken ... medium!’

Paul shrugged.

‘We begin with a ritual.’ Robert squeaked the small rubber chicken twice with his foot. He looked down and said, ‘Patience, cousin. We must observe the proper forms.’

Mark stood up, near the front. Wearing a Hawaiian shirt from his earlier appearance as one of the Abererch Beach Boys, who sang about ‘MCYC Girls’ instead of ‘California Girls’. ‘Robert,’ he said, ‘I’m not sure I like where this is going.’

‘When we did “The Joneses” in church,’ Kevin says, ‘I said I couldn’t remember this. I lied. This is the most exciting thing that ever happened at camp.’

Chicken Robert’s voice made its way out of the mask. ‘It’s fine.’

‘Is it fine?’ Mark said.

‘Yes.’

Mark sat down.

Robert reached down into the plastic bag and took out a piece of paper. He began reading. ‘WHEN STILL, POISED. HEAD MOVEMENTS INVOLVE STRONG NECK MOVEMENTS TOO. NOT JUST UP AND DOWN: THREE-DIMENSIONAL. PSYCHOTIC STARE, BUT SIDEWAYS.’

He tilted his neck, so the dead eye of the mask pointed out at the audience. Paul stood paralysed.

‘FEET PLACED BALL FIRST ON GROUND, SMOOTHLY. WHEN WALKING, LEGS HELD OUT AT AN ANGLE, VERY SLIGHT WADDLE. LITTLE WING MOVEMENT, BUT SHOULD ALWAYS BE ACCOMPANIED BY HEAD. WHEN RUNNING, STRONGER WADDLE, MORE WING MOVEMENT. CLUCK STARTS QUIET AND GETS LOUDER. REFLECTIVE, ALMOST MOURNFUL.’

‘Isn’t this someone *watching* a chicken?’ Rebecca asks.

‘If Paul was doing the movements though,’ Kevin says. ‘Which he’s supposed to be.’

‘Didn’t they rehearse?’

Tracey makes a sour smile. ‘I don’t want to see this,’ she says. ‘I didn’t want to see it the first time.’

Paul was standing slightly closer to the front of the stage than Robert, and the bin acted like a pair of blinkers, so Robert poked him again to get him moving, and then continued.

‘PRIMARY MOTIVATION: INSATIABLE, TRIVIAL GREED. THINK CHICKEN: BE STUPID. *DO NOT THINK EGG.* I CANNOT BE A ROOSTER, BECAUSE THE IDEA OF “ROOSTER” IS DIFFERENT TO THE IDEA OF “CHICKEN”, BUT I CANNOT BE A HEN EITHER. I MUST BE A *MALE CHICKEN.*’

‘He’s got a dozen eggs up there,’ Rebecca says.

‘But *he* didn’t lay them,’ Kevin says.

‘ALL CHICKENS THINK THE SAME THOUGHTS. FOOD, FOOD, FOLLOW THE FOOD!’ Paul perked up at this, and pointed to his right. ‘ALL CHICKENS SEE WITH THE SAME EYES. THE EXPERIENCE OF ONE CHICKEN IS THE EXPERIENCE OF ALL CHICKENS. FOOD, FOOD, FOLLOW THE FOOD!’ Paul jabbed the air three times.

‘I think he’s pointing at the dining hall,’ Kevin says. He looks out the windows of the rec room. Tracey follows his gaze. No tents or chalets outside; no campsite. ‘Where the dining hall *should* be,’ he adds.

Robert said, ‘ALL CHICKENS PECK EACH OTHER’S BUMS. ALL CHICKENS WORRY ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE LIPS.’ Then he fell silent, and bowed his head. The bin tilted as Paul tried to work out what he was doing.

‘That’s a weird place to stop,’ Kevin says.

After a few seconds in prayer, Robert said, ‘Thus concludes the ritual.’ He stepped back behind the salmonellaphone, adjusted his foot on the rubber chicken, and picked up his spoon. ‘Are you ready to dance, mysterious friend?’

Paul grunted.

The spoon moved through the air over the carton, touching eggs in a seemingly-random sequence. ‘Insects in the walls are writhing in ecstasy!’

After thirty seconds with the silent salmonellaphone, Robert started pumping the rubber chew toy, which gasped out a broken melody. ‘Dance, mysterious friend! Dance like a chicken!’

Paul capered from side to side and moaned.

‘Is Robert trying to play a song?’ Rebecca asks.

‘Yes,’ Kevin says.

Robert couldn’t control the pitch of the notes. The only thing he could do was change the speed of his pumping foot, but it was difficult for him to get the sounds out fast enough.

SQUEAK, SQUEEEAAK, SQUE-.

‘It’s “Wild Thing”,’ Kevin says.

‘How can you tell?’ Rebecca says.

‘He borrowed the tape from me.’

Robert kept tapping eggs with the spoon in his left hand, but reached down with his right to press ‘Play’ on the ghetto blaster.

Cacophony.

Rebecca puts her hands over her ears.

‘Jimi Hendrix,’ Kevin says. ‘Smashing his guitar and setting fire to it at Monterey Pop.’

‘I know,’ Tracey says. ‘I’ve seen the film. But this is stupid. It doesn’t even make sense.’

Waves of noise, lapping. Robert turned the volume up as loud as it would go, and the crappy speakers on the ghetto blaster added even more distortion.

He threw his spoon away and picked up the ketchup bottle. He took the cap off the nozzle. He held the bottle down by his crotch, above the carton of eggs. He pushed his hips forward, and at the farthest point of the thrust, pressed down hard with both hands on the sides of the bottle.

A whistle of escaping air.

He thrust again as the feedback on the tape started to crackle and fizz; he gripped the bottle tighter and squeezed harder. A congealed plug of ketchup shot out from the tip of the nozzle, and flew over the heads of the front row, who all ducked. The bottle groaned with relief.

Robert let the air back in, and squeezed again. The bottle farted a thin stream of ketchup over the carton of eggs. When there was no air left in the top, the stream picked up and jetted farther out. All over the eggs, the table, the stage. From a distance, it looked like blood.

Mark stood up again, and extended his arms, palms forward, as if he was pushing against a wall between him and Robert. 'Enough! Stop!'

'Too late!' Robert threw the ketchup bottle off to his right. It boinged off Paul's bin. 'God wants a sacrifice,' Robert shouted, placing his hands on the craft table, one on either side of the carton of eggs. 'My instrument. My children.'

'*He* didn't lay the eggs,' Kevin says. 'I thought that was the point.'

'Maybe he's the father,' Rebecca says.

'But he's not a rooster. He's a male chicken.'

The feedback on the tape sputtered, but resumed with a continuous sound like a foghorn, a blaring distress call. Except it was muffled, underwater.

‘You can’t,’ Robert shouted, ‘make an omelette!’ He reached into the carton. ‘Without breaking, some eggs!’ He threw two eggs down on the stage, and leapt back as they splattered.

He wiped his hands on the matted orange fur of the chicken bodysuit; reached into the carton again. Two more explosions. The front row had all retreated to a safe distance. Mark was still standing in the middle of the room, hands pushed forward, protecting the audience behind him. Paul jumped down off the stage, but only so he could turn around and see what was happening.

Robert picked up the egg carton and threw it down. He kicked the little table, and it skittered away and fell off the edge of the stage. He dropped to his knees and picked up the rubber chicken; swept his arm behind his head and brought it down on the eggs in the carton. Again and again.

With every blow, the chicken emitted a feeble wheeze, like a dying bagpipe.

Tinny applause on the tape from the audience at Monterey; none in the room here.

The sound on the tape cut off abruptly as it ran onto the leader at the end; the ‘Play’ button pinged off. Robert knelt on the stage, surrounded by smears of ketchup, scattered bits of eggshell, drizzled slime.

Medieval slime. Mystical slime.

He ripped his mask away. He stared out towards the back of the room. Unfocussed eyes; face shining with sweat.

‘I’m surprised they ever let you back on again,’ Kevin says to the grown-up Robert in the audience, who’s slumped forward, looking at the floor. ‘Church, here. Anywhere.’

‘They didn’t,’ Tracey says.

‘How do you mean?’ Kevin asks.

‘They let *me* back on. I had to promise.’ She turns to Robert. ‘What’s the point of all this? I never understood.’

He rubs his palms against his thighs. ‘It’s public, but it’s still a secret. I’m the only one who can make sense of it all. More than that. Go up to the edge; look over. Lean forward. It’s *safe* to do it this way. Because someone’s always gonna catch me.’

‘Mark? But he didn’t stop it. You carried on.’

‘Not Mark.’ Robert straightens up; looks at her. ‘You.’

‘So why are we here now?’

‘Because I’m not a chicken; I’m a cuckoo. Because even God can’t change the past.’

Jenny turns around, three rows ahead. She’s wearing a bowler hat and a fake plastic moustache from the sketch she did with Tracey earlier in the camp concert. ‘You’re wrong,’ she says.

Everyone else in the audience turns round too.

‘I can’t deal with this,’ Tracey says. ‘I haven’t slept for two days.’

‘You’re asleep now,’ Robert says.

‘When Christ died,’ Jenny says to him, ‘He went down to hell, to preach to the SPIRITS IN PRISON. And lead them out. That’s where the presence was. That’s where the messages came from.’

Tracey looks at Paul, who’s still below the stage, doubled over, surrounded by confused, abandoned chairs. Hands on knees, shoulders shaking. Bin wobbling.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Rebecca says.

‘I think he’s laughing,’ Tracey says.

‘What do you believe?’ Jenny asks her. ‘Say it again.’

‘I’m not alone. I was never alone.’ She looks at Robert. ‘Nor were you.’

Someone’s banging on the rec room windows. A naked child. Tracey can see it, but she can’t hear anything. The child opens its mouth, ripples its throat.

‘Is it singing?’ Tracey asks.

Now the child’s pressing its lips against the glass. Its flattened mouth looks like an undersea creature.

‘Are we supposed to let it in?’

‘No,’ Robert says. ‘We’re not supposed to let it in. But it’s too late.’

‘It’s not too late.’ Mark primps the collar on his Hawaiian shirt. ‘God *can* change the past. Forgiveness changes the past.’

‘I killed him. He’s dead.’

‘But you’re not,’ Tracey says. ‘So what are you going to do?’

Robert moves to the windows; smears his palms down the surface of the glass. Over the girl’s face, as if he’s trying to smother her open mouth.

‘I can’t cast her out,’ he says. ‘But I can cast myself out of her.’

*

In the hotel room, Robert prayed, LET ME DIE. LET IT KILL ME. But somehow the words got scrambled, and a different message went through. HELP ME.

The girl's not in charge of his past. That's what the presence was trying to tell him, all along. He's been living inside Azazel for the past twelve years, but now he's inside the presence. Everything's inside it—even Azazel.

The presence is still bearing witness. It came to hell with Robert; became hell for him.

Bill Forester once said: we remember a dead Christ, but our communion is with the risen Christ. Robert imagines a communion-wafer boat bobbing out of the mouth of hell on a tide of wine. Because hell swallowed the dead Christ, but vomited up the risen Christ.

Then Christ swallowed hell.

ROBERT, I'M SO HAPPY YOU CAME TO CAMP WITH US THIS WEEK. I KNOW GOD HAS GREAT PLANS FOR YOU. I'LL SEE YOU AT CHURCH TOMORROW. YOUR OLDEST FRIEND, TRACEY



Note on Chronology

With regards to the wider world in 1984, I have stuck to the historical chronology, with a few exceptions: chapter 2 alludes to ‘William, It Was Really Nothing’ by The Smiths, which wasn’t released until August; similarly, for chapter 11, I moved the release date of *Footloose* forward by two weeks (along with the publication date of the *Liverpool Echo* review). In chapter 7, the miners’ strike also starts a couple of weeks early. Chapter 15 takes place on 17 July, and although Billy Graham preached the sermon I quote from at Anfield in July during Mission England, it may not have been on that particular evening. Finally, chapter 16 takes place on 18 July, but the newspaper editorial Bill Forester reads from was published on 11 July.

Brethren: Critical Essay, Appendix and Bibliography
(vol. 2 of 2)

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Critical Essay: Christian Fantasy

Brethren is a work of Christian fantasy.¹ By this, I mean an avowedly fictional narrative in which supernatural entities, whose nature and form are shaped by Christian doctrine, intervene directly as characters. This definition complements that provided by Colin Manlove in *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present*:

What we are concerned with are works which give substantial and unambiguous place to other worlds, angels, devils, Christ figures, miraculous or supernatural events (biblical or otherwise), objects of numinous power, and mystical relationship with some approximation of the deity; and all under the aegis of Christian belief.²

‘Fictional’ in this context means the product of human imagination and invention, without invoking direct authorisation from any external, supernatural authority. So, although God and angels appear as characters in Christian fantasies, by definition the author does not claim to be describing actual encounters with them. ‘Avowedly fictional’ therefore distinguishes these fantasies, not only from the canonical narratives of scripture,³ but also from the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, i.e. stories claiming factual

¹ It is also a Gothic novel, i.e. a horror story, but the Gothic is a saturated critical field, in which it is difficult to make any claim to originality. I shall however allude to the novel’s Gothic elements below whenever they help to illuminate its status as a Christian fantasy.

² Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 5. Note that in the text of *Brethren*, I use small caps to indicate quotations, to mimic the type design of the Bible, in which quotations from the Old Testament are similarly rendered in the New. By contrast, in this critical essay I use MHRA conventions for quotations and references.

³ I follow the protagonists of *Brethren* in using the English Protestant canon, as confirmed in the King James Bible of 1611, because the discussion here is intended to illuminate the world of the novel. The

status, and attributed to biblical personages, but which can be proved to have been composed in circumstances other than those claimed by the text itself.⁴

Apocryphal narratives accumulate around the gaps and silences of canonical texts, in places where the original meaning is lost or unclear—where there is no secure interpretive tradition. And the purpose often seems to be to eliminate these troubling ambiguities. The Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha might therefore be described anachronistically as attempts to ensure retroactive continuity, or as Old and New Testament fan fiction (except that they were not consumed as fiction).

In some cases, the intention behind such texts seems to be entirely orthodox: i.e. to shore up the authority of a canonical text, where omission or ambiguity seem to bring it into doubt. But in the process they inevitably add to, and therefore change, the meaning of the original text. Other apocryphal texts assert the authority of an alternative theological tradition *against* the authority of canonical texts, such as the various Gnostic gospels.⁵

editions I consulted were *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) (hereafter KJV) and *Holy Bible: New International Version*, anglicised edition (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011 [1979]) (hereafter NIV). However, older, Catholic traditions of belief also come into play, as outlined below.

⁴ *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, trans. and ed. by J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments*, ed. by James H. Charlesworth (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1983). Christian fantasy can also be distinguished from another category of texts, which claim the status of supplementary revelation (that is, supplementary to the Old and New Testaments), and which, unlike the Apocrypha, admit their contemporary point of origin as part of this claim, such as the works of Swedenborg.

⁵ There was no definitive Biblical canon when many of these texts were composed. They are nonetheless clearly the product of a historical moment subsequent to that in which the Synoptic Gospels and John were composed, and they were created for polemical reasons, within and for communities of believers who took issue with these earlier texts. See Paul Foster, *The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Christian fantasies are similarly inspired by interpretive gaps in canonical texts and established traditions of interpretation, but they do not aim to compel belief—only suspension of disbelief.⁶ Though they usually approach ultimate realities from a position of faith, they do not claim the status of divine revelation, but only that of human speculation. As such, they both admit and invite the possibility of contradiction.

Since this definition presupposes the existence of fiction as a recognised and distinct category of literature, it arguably only applies to texts created since the rise of the realist novel, which established norms for depicting *secular* fictional worlds. However, even for their earliest readers, Dante and Milton were understood to be making different truth claims to, say, the Gospel of Nicodemus (let alone the Gospel of Mark), and—crucially—Dante and Milton are now read as Christian fantasies, whereas the Gospel of Nicodemus is not.⁷

Some recent Christian fantasies remain willing to blur the line between divine inspiration and human invention: that is, they refuse to fully embrace their status as fantasy. But precisely insofar as such stories attempt to compel belief rather than suspension of belief, they exist in a state of bad faith, and fail as both theology and fiction.⁸

⁶ On belief and suspension of disbelief, see James Wood, 'Introduction: the limits of not quite', in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. xi-xvii.

⁷ Many modern readers would also subsume canonical texts within the category of Christian fantasy, as per Borges' dictum, '[M]etaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature' (J. L. Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2000 [1964], pp. 27-43 (p. 34)). But the categorical distinctions between canonical, apocryphal and fictional texts remain important here because they are important within the fictional world of *Brethren*.

⁸ For example, Frank E. Perretti, *This Present Darkness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1986) was published during my teenage years, and was widely read in the church I attended then. It depicts angels and demons battling invisibly to influence the political and social life of a small American town. There

To succeed *as fiction*, Christian fantasy must fully embrace its speculative nature. It cannot confine itself to authorised theologies or cosmologies. Rather, successful Christian fantasy always and by definition exceeds the bounds of orthodoxy.

To be clear then: I am not a practising Christian, and no aspect of the world depicted in *Brethren* aims to compel belief. Like the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, *Brethren* draws attention to ambiguities and gaps in canonical texts. But my purpose is not to ‘fill’ these gaps. Rather, my intention is to make them speak *as gaps*.

are many online reviews by Christian readers at *This Present Darkness*. In *Goodreads* [cited 7 July 2018]. Available from: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17311.This_Present_Darkness>. Most of these reviews acknowledge the book’s fictional status, but they also believe it sheds light on the activities of actual angels and demons. The book itself invites this response, but in fact, *This Present Darkness* is demonstratively speculative (i.e. derived from a tendentious reading of partial and fragmentary canonical sources), and, in its presumed application to real-world politics, reductive and deterministic.

We might begin by establishing a rough typology of Christian fantasy, which I've outlined below in a diagram.

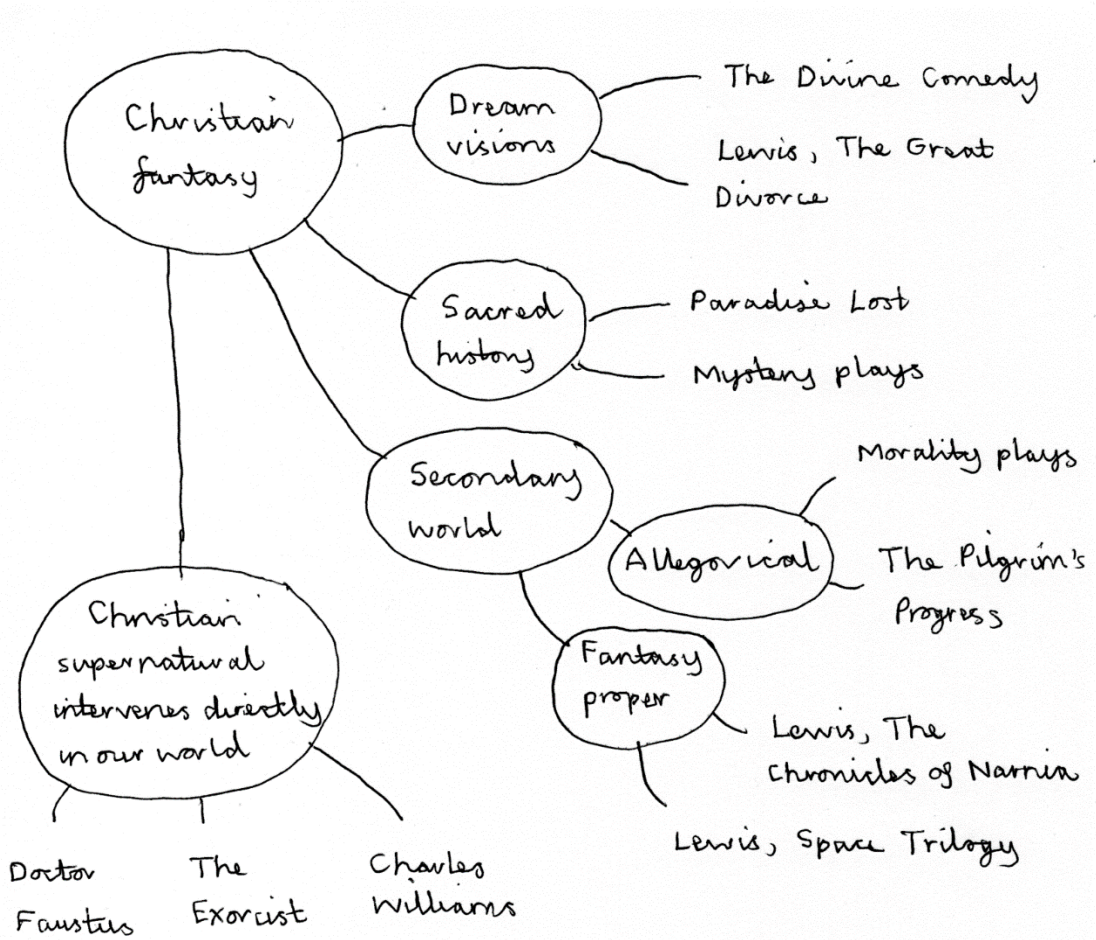


Figure 1: Christian Fantasy

These categories are not always clearly distinguished from one another, but it's useful to consider them separately for purposes of discussion. The first is dream visions of the next world—i.e. heaven, purgatory or hell. Medieval examples include *Tundale's Vision* and *The Monk of Evesham's Vision*, which, like many texts in this genre, purport to be records of

actual visions.⁹ However, I include dream visions here mainly because of the distinguished example of *The Divine Comedy*, and because modern examples identify themselves more explicitly as fantasy.¹⁰

In any case, dream visions are marked by a clear separation between the vision and everyday existence. The narrator brings news back from a foreign land, so to speak—one that s/he encounters as a temporary visitor, and which otherwise remains inaccessible to readers.¹¹

⁹ I use the versions of the titles from *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante*, ed. by Eileen Gardner (New York: Italica Press, 1989). See also Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1993), pp. 91-103. In some cases, the dream aspect may constitute a frame for stories which more properly fall under other categories. For example, John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. by N. H. Keeble, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 [1678-84]) is framed as a dream, as is most of William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text*, trans. and ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), but both are allegories of the Christian life in this world, which puts them more properly in our third category.

¹⁰ *The Divine Comedy* isn't actually presented as a dream, even though it otherwise serves as the exemplar and apotheosis for this tradition. Because of the level of detail provided by Dante, and the insistence that he undertakes a physical journey, whose progress the poem as a whole maps in some detail, his poem might also fall under our third category below. I used the translation by Dorothy L. Sayers: *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Cantica 1: Hell*, trans. and ed. by Dorothy L. Sayers, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949); *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Cantica 2: Purgatory*, trans. and ed. by Dorothy L. Sayers, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955); *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Cantica 3: Paradise*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, ed. by Barbara Reynolds, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962). This was the edition I first read in the 1990s, and the notes and commentary were written under the theological influence of Charles Williams, whose work is cited frequently by Sayers. For a modern dream vision, see C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (London: Geoffrey Ble: The Centenary Press, 1945).

¹¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) also depicts heaven and hell, but does not claim to present a visionary experience. Moreover, heaven and hell are not categorically separated from earth: the various locations occupy the same level of reality within the poem.

The second category is stories that retell and expand on episodes of sacred history. *Paradise Lost* is the most distinguished example, but the medieval mystery plays were more popular in both senses of the word (though only the ones including supernatural characters as *dramatis personae* interest us here).¹² In any case, the underlying sacred narrative is assumed to be factual, and the fiction consists in the liberties taken in dramatising events.

Many texts in this genre, including the mystery plays, draw on episodes from the Apocrypha as well as from the canonical books of scripture (for example, the Harrowing of Hell).¹³ In the case of *Paradise Lost*, the underlying narrative has been speculatively ‘reconstructed’ by Milton on the basis of fragmentary allusions across several canonical and apocryphal texts—and in the process, significantly expanded.

The third category includes stories set in fantastic worlds that exist independently of our own, and at a remove from everyday reality, as with dream visions. However, here the intention is to comment back on real-world events (politics, or more generally the pursuit of a Christian life). Hence the setting is allegorical. It might be an empty and amorphous conceptual space, or one composed of conventional or emblematic locations. The characters are also representative, or personifications of abstract ideas, and they act out generalised stories with a clear didactic purpose. Medieval morality plays fall under this category, as does *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.¹⁴

¹² See for example *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling*, ed. by David Mills, *Medieval Texts and Studies*, 9 (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992); *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. by Richard Beadle and Pamela M. King (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

¹³ I discuss the Harrowing of Hell in more detail below.

¹⁴ *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, ed. by G. A. Lester, *New Mermaids* (London: A. & C. Black; New York: W. W. Norton, 1981); Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

A related but different set of texts, such as C. S. Lewis's Narnia books, resemble modern mainstream fantasy. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, these stories take place in a parallel or 'secondary world' with the same kind of reality as our own, but with additions that transform the nature of that reality (for example, magic).¹⁵ In Christian fantasies, these additions take the form of Christian supernatural beings, or creatures and events that dramatise Christian ideas and doctrines more directly than realist fiction would allow (for example, the character of Aslan in the Narnia books, or the re-enactment of the fall on Venus in *Perelandra*).¹⁶

In some cases (e.g. Lewis's works), the protagonists of these fantasies have been displaced into the secondary world from a primary one that resembles our own.¹⁷ This perhaps suggests a genealogical connection to the dream vision.

The final category of texts are those in which the Christian supernatural intervenes directly in our world (often in a battle over individual human souls). This includes Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, and (most importantly for

¹⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (No place of publication given: Allen & Unwin, 1968 [1954-5]). The term 'secondary world' is also Tolkien's, from his influential essay 'On Fairy-Stories', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006 [this essay first published 1947]) pp. 109-61. Tolkien does, however, argue for a categorical distinction between the worlds of realist fiction and those of fairy stories.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, with illustrations by Pauline Baynes (London: HarperCollins, 2010 [1950-6]); C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet; Perelandra* (London: HarperCollins, 2001 [1938, 1943]).

¹⁷ There are also 'secular' fantasies based on this conceit. See, for example, Stephen R. Donaldson, *Lord Foul's Bane* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).

my purposes), the novels of Charles Williams.¹⁸ As C. S. Lewis noted in a lecture on Williams, these texts mix:

what some people call the realistic, and the fantastic. I'd rather fall back on an older critical terminology and say that they mix the Probable and the Marvellous. We meet in them, on the one hand, very ordinary modern people who talk the slang of our own day, and live in the suburbs. On the other hand, we also meet the supernatural—ghosts, magicians, and archetypal beasts. ... [T]his is not a mixture of two literary kinds. Williams is really writing a third kind of book, ... in which we begin by saying, 'Let us suppose that this everyday world were ... invaded by the marvellous. Let us, in fact, suppose a violation of frontier.'¹⁹

Brethren also falls into this category.

¹⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus: A Two-Text Edition (A-Text, 1604; B-Text, 1616) Context and Sources Criticism*, ed. by David Scott Kastan, A Norton Critical Edition (New York and London: Norton, 2005); William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Charles Williams, *Descent Into Hell* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980 [1937]); Charles Williams, *All Hallows' Eve* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981 [1945]).

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, 'The Novels of Charles Williams', in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017 [this lecture first broadcast 1949]), pp. 31-41 (pp. 31-2).

I now want to discuss several aspects of *Brethren* as a Christian fantasy: firstly, its representation of angels and angel bodies, and by extension its representation of the body of Christ via the Old Testament figure of the Angel of YHWH.²⁰ Secondly, its identification of the term Azazel from the book of Leviticus as the name of a demon, and its characterisation of that demon. And finally, its use of and elaboration upon the legend of the Harrowing of Hell.

My original idea was that the depiction of the Christian supernatural in *Brethren* would be rigorously Protestant. This is important because much medieval and Catholic angelology derived from a late-classical, apocryphal text, which falsely claimed to be the work of a disciple of Paul: hence the author is now known as Pseudo-Dionysius.²¹ His work elaborated on cryptic remarks in Ephesians about ‘rulers’, ‘authorities’ and ‘powers’ in the ‘heavenly realms’ (6. 12, NIV) to outline a detailed hierarchy of angels, in which there were nine separate orders.

By contrast, Robert’s theories about angels would be taken solely from the canonical books of the Bible, and this would lead him to rather different conclusions to those of Christian traditions informed by apocryphal sources. However, this approach quickly proved untenable. I found myself pushed beyond the boundaries of Protestant orthodoxy for the same reasons Samuel Johnson noted in his discussion of *Paradise Lost*:

²⁰ Throughout this essay, and the novel, I use the term ‘Old Testament’ rather than ‘Jewish scriptures’ because my characters read the texts collected under this rubric in these terms.

²¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, ‘The Celestial Hierarchy’, in *The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid and ed. by Paul Rorem (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 143-91.

[An] inconvenience of Milton's design is, that it requires the description of what cannot be described, the agency of spirits. He saw that immateriality supplied no images, and that he could not show angels acting but by instruments of action; he therefore invested them with form and matter.²²

In investing the 'presence' with 'form and matter', I therefore found myself drawn back towards the idea of *Brethren* as a horror story: that is, a story in the Gothic tradition, in which the protagonist is haunted by repressed secrets. And one of the ideas behind the Gothic as it emerged in eighteenth-century novels was that England was similarly haunted by its medieval past: i.e., its Catholic past. The ruined monasteries and abbeys and castles that were the settings for Gothic fiction were ruined because of the destruction caused by Henry VIII's reformation.²³

So my protagonist tries to construct an austere Protestant system of belief, but he's haunted by Catholic ideas, which seep into his visions and experiences: for example, transubstantiation (the idea that the bread and wine somehow become the actual body of Christ during communion). In *Brethren*, then, the bodies of angels are contaminated by the body of Christ.

²² Cited in Joad Raymond, *Milton's Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 213. However, Raymond believes this to be an inaccurate summary of Milton's position, which he sees as rooted in theological conviction rather than narrative convenience.

²³ For general discussions, see Fred Botting, *Gothic, The New Critical Idiom*, 2nd ed (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Nick Groom, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, Routledge Companions (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge Companions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

In the Bible, angels are the agents and messengers of God. They are therefore intermediaries between humans and God: created beings, but of an order distinct from humans, and closer to God, whose directions they carry out, and in whose presence they spend much of their existence. Although they often appeared to men in human form, and could in fact be mistaken for humans, both Catholic and Protestant traditions assumed that they were spiritual beings, who only adopted bodies temporarily, for the convenience of their human addressees.²⁴

For Aquinas, angels were unchangeable and incorruptible. Lacking substantial bodies, they also lacked senses, and apprehended reality directly and intellectually. And they did not have emotions, because emotions were transient, and linked to sensations.²⁵

There is biblical support for some of these ideas—for example, Hebrews 1. 14, which describes angels as ‘ministering spirits’ (NIV). However, other texts cited in this context are less definitive than traditional readings suggest. For example, when Jesus says, in Matthew 22. 30, ‘At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven’ (NIV), this does not necessarily mean that angels lack bodies: only that their bodies are not like human bodies, and that they do not reproduce sexually (or at all).

Moreover, several other biblical texts, taken at face value, would seem to suggest substantial rather than illusory bodies. For example, the angels who visit Abraham in

²⁴ On confusion between humans and angels, the normal citation is Hebrews 13. 2, ‘Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it’ (NIV). This may be an allusion to Genesis 19, in which neither Lot nor the inhabitants of Sodom seem to recognise his guests as angels.

²⁵ David Albert Jones, *Angels: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 41-5; Raymond, *Milton’s Angels*, pp. 19-88.

Genesis 18 eat with him (as do those who visit Lot in Genesis 19).²⁶ This episode caused considerable difficulties for Aquinas and his followers, since the obvious inference—that the angels only pretended to eat—implicated them in a deception.

For Aquinas, the solution to such interpretative dilemmas was to be found in the idea that human minds and senses were not fully equipped to understand divine or spiritual realities. The idea goes back to the apocryphal works of Pseudo-Dionysius, who advises:

We cannot, as mad people do, profanely visualize these heavenly and godlike intelligences as actually having numerous feet and faces. We must not have pictures of flaming wheels in the skies The Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences ... as a concession to the nature of our own mind ... to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature.²⁷

This was referred to as the doctrine of accommodation.²⁸ In book V of *Paradise Lost*, the archangel Raphael expresses the same idea:

what surmounts the reach
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
By likening spiritual to corporeal forms,
As may express them best (566-9)

²⁶ It's notable that on both these occasions the angels are not immediately recognised as angels (see note 24).

²⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Celestial Hierarchy', pp. 147-8.

²⁸ On accommodation, see Raymond, *Milton's Angels*, pp. 162-88.

However, Milton's ideas on angels were otherwise rather different to those of Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas.²⁹ He conceived of spirit as a rarefied form of matter rather than something categorically different.³⁰ His angels are not, therefore, insubstantial intelligences. They eat and digest food (but presumably do not excrete); they also make love (but not by means of sexual intercourse).³¹ Although they may adopt different shapes, they nonetheless have a 'proper form' (V.276), to which they periodically return, and there is some essential correspondence between this spiritual body and its earthly manifestation to human senses.³²

Brethren goes even further than Milton. Robert, reading the Bible without the benefit of established interpretive traditions, finds plenty of evidence to suggest that angels have bodies.³³ In particular, he's inspired by the descriptions of the seraphim or cherubim in Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation, which he, against the advice of Pseudo-Dionysius, imagines to be literal accounts, 'as mad people do'.³⁴

²⁹ Raymond, *Milton's Angels*.

³⁰ On Milton's materialism, see William Kerrigan, 'The Heretical Milton: From Assumption to Mortalism', *English Literary Renaissance*, 5.1, *Studies in Spenser and Milton* (1975), 125-66.

³¹ According to *Paradise Lost*, V. 438, they 'transubstantiate' food.

³² Satan's 'proper form' changes after his expulsion from heaven. He adopts numerous disguises throughout *Paradise Lost* (a toad, a cormorant), but at one point the angel Ithuriel obliges him to return to '[his] own likeness' (IV. 813): i.e. his post-fallen state; that of a 'grisly king' (IV. 821).

³³ Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995 [1976]) is an interesting point of comparison here, as a summary of beliefs current in evangelical Christianity in the 1970s and 80s. Although Graham emphasises that the Bible is the sole authority on these questions, he smuggles in a number of tendentious readings. And although he pays lip service to *sola Scriptura*, he also cites a number of contemporary anecdotes about angelic assistance or protection. These are usually accompanied by some kind of disclaimer, but Graham needs them because he believes in a God whose messengers still intervene in world affairs.

³⁴ In fact, these figures are nowhere identified as angels in the Bible, and they don't perform the standard angelic role as messengers or intermediaries between God and men. If we exclude them from

Robert takes the shifting configurations of the seraphim and cherubim, not as evidence of fundamental distinctions between angels of different orders, but rather as proof that *all* angelic bodies may change. In chapter 6 of *Brethren*, Jenny suggests an analogy between angelic bodies and clothes, which recalls the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident. But Robert doesn't pick up on Jenny's hint. His conclusion, translated into Aristotelian terms, is instead that the substance of angelic bodies is malleable: that their 'proper form' is to be in flux.

In fact, the 'presence' that appears to Robert doesn't much resemble the cherubim and seraphim, but its form nonetheless draws on a version of the theory of accommodation. In *Brethren*, then, angels aren't just God's messengers and agents. They're also the medium through which the message travels. So an angel's body is a communications technology, and subsequently, an archive. And since my book is set in 1984, the form of my angel alludes to then-current technologies for recording and transmitting sound: vinyl and magnetic tape.³⁵ The presence therefore has a material form, including (perhaps) 'An all-purpose sense organ, for receiving and transmitting, detecting and analysing.' (p. 23).³⁶ And:

consideration, then every other angelic appearance in the Bible is in human form (and without wings). However, the seraphim and cherubim were usually understood to be angels (for example, Pseudo-Dionysius identifies them as two of the nine orders), and in this instance I've allowed Robert to be unconsciously influenced by prevailing assumptions, which he may have encountered in sermons.

³⁵ For the ways in which technology mediates presence, compare Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2000) and Jennifer Wicke, 'Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and Its Media', *ELH* 59 (1992), 467-93.

³⁶ Compare the angels in *Paradise Lost*, who, lacking human organs, nonetheless 'contain / Within them every lower faculty / Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste' (V. 409-11).

It all reminds Robert of the jukebox in the café at Garston swimming baths. When you press the buttons to select a song, the chosen record clunks out of a horizontal stack of seven-inch singles and slides into the playing mechanism, where it starts spinning. Then when the song ends, the record clunks back into the stack. [The presence] sounds like an old record, full of scratches and crackles. As if everything it can say to him is fixed in advance. It's all been said before; it'll all be said again. (pp. 23-4)

In the Bible, angels aren't just messengers. They're also God's ambassadors: a symbolic substitute for Him, endowed with His authority. In the Old Testament, one particularly mysterious angel, called the Angel of YHWH (rendered as the Angel of the LORD in most modern translations), seems to act as a sort of veil, which may be removed to reveal God Himself. As Tracey puts it, 'The angel opens its mouth, but God's voice comes out. Like a tape recording. Or a ventriloquist's dummy.' (p. 35) And here's Robert on the same theme:

The Angel of the Lord has no name. Whenever it appears, it also disappears, but the disappearance happens when no one's looking, in-between the words on the page. A scratch and skip on the record. And the angel is the record. But it's also the living presence of God. Like listening to John Peel on the radio—then, suddenly, he's in the room with you. (p. 77)

Christian theologians solved this mystery by identifying the Angel of YHWH as a Christophany: a manifestation of Christ before His Incarnation.³⁷ Because this angel seems

³⁷ One theory about the Angel of YHWH starts with the assumption that many parts of the Old Testament are palimpsests, compiled from earlier texts. Seen in this light, the Angel of YHWH may originally have been YHWH Himself, but whenever He seemed to be carrying out tasks beneath His dignity, subsequent editors felt the need to insert an intermediary agency (an angel). See *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd edn (Leiden, Boston

to share with Christ the status of a messenger from God, who is at the same time God Himself.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the whole force of the argument is that Christ is *not* an angel: not a created being. He is instead identical with God, and therefore rules over the angels. So Christ is not an angel, but—it seems—an angel could or can be Christ.³⁸

In *Brethren*, the ‘presence’ is eventually identified by Robert as the Angel of YHWH, which is therefore revealed to be an avatar of Christ.³⁹ Because of this identification, in the end the novel asserts no general theory of angelic form. Rather, it retroactively subsumes the theology of angelic bodies within the theology of the Incarnation. As Robert observes:

When the Angel of the Lord speaks, the words aren’t sounds; they’re fashioned out of itself. And the Word made flesh says, “TAKE, EAT: THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS BROKEN FOR YOU.” (p. 245)

I’ll explore the implications of this in more detail below, in the section on the Harrowing of Hell.

and Köln: Brill; Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 53-9 (hereafter DDD).

³⁸ And not only the Angel of YHWH. For example, the archangel Michael (the only angel identified with this title in the canonical books of the Bible) was sometimes identified as an avatar of Christ (see Raymond, *Milton’s Angels*, pp. 247-8 for debate on this question within early-modern Protestantism). More recently, Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses both make this identification a cornerstone of their beliefs.

³⁹ This is one of the ways in which I step beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. Christophanies only occurred before the Incarnation. For Christian theologians, this explained why the Angel of YHWH did not appear in the New Testament.

Angels are servants of God. For most Christian theologians, they have evil counterparts: fallen angels, who rebelled against God.⁴⁰

In fact, Satan is the only named character in the New Testament who is explicitly identified as a fallen angel.⁴¹ The name comes from the Hebrew word for ‘accuser’ or ‘opposer’. In the Old Testament, this was originally a function or role that could be performed by any angel, including the Angel of YHWH. In the Book of Job, this generic term is assigned to a specific individual, who is now ‘the satan’, but he is still performing his role—a sort of prosecutor in the court of heaven—under God’s direction, or at least with His permission. Later still, the word becomes a proper name, but it is not until the New Testament that this entity is definitively identified as God’s enemy, and the ruler of a spiritual kingdom opposed to His.⁴² In the shift from Old Testament to New, and from Hebrew to Greek, Satan therefore becomes *diabolus*, the devil: not just accuser, but *false* accuser.⁴³

⁴⁰ For the general background, see Darren Oldridge, *The Devil: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Philip C. Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016); Luther Link, *The Devil: A Mask Without a Face*, Picturing History Series (London: Reaktion Books, 1995).

⁴¹ Or at least Jesus says he fell from heaven, and Revelation adds he fell in the company of angels (Luke 10. 18; Revelation 12. 9).

⁴² On the history of Satan, besides the works cited above in note 40, see also Johnny Awwad, ‘Satan in Biblical Imagination’, *Theological Review*, 26.1 (2005), 111-26; Neil Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 24-76; DDD, pp. 726-32.

⁴³ DDD, pp. 244-9.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Satan is described as the ‘prince of demons’, and Jesus casts out many such creatures.⁴⁴ Are they fallen angels too? The Greek word is *daimonion*, a diminutive form of *daimon*, which in classical literature meant a tutelary spirit (a ‘genius’ in the older sense) or a superhuman creature between gods and men.⁴⁵ ‘One special function of the *daimons* was apparently to assign to each human being the destiny appointed for him by the *theoi*—the gods on the highest level’.⁴⁶ By extension then, in Greek literature *daimons* performed a similar intermediary function to that of angels, but in the Synoptic Gospels *daimonions* are never described with this word. Rather, the normal synonyms are ‘evil spirit’ or ‘unclean spirit’. Moreover, demons never manifest physically except by taking possession of a human. Unlike angels, they can’t assume bodies of their own.⁴⁷ Perhaps they are lesser creatures, but their origins remain uncertain.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ In fact, Beelzebul is named as the prince of demons. The identification with Satan is traditional, but sometimes the two are treated as separate characters.

⁴⁵ DDD, pp. 235-40.

⁴⁶ Derek Prince, *They Shall Expel Demons: What You Need to Know About Demons—Your Invisible Enemies* (No place of publication given: Derek Prince Ministries, 1998), p. 102. I draw on this work, and on Frank Hammond and Ida Mae Hammond, *Pigs in the Parlor: The Practical Guide to Deliverance* (Kirkwood, MO: Impact Christian Books, 2010 [1973]), for my depiction of evangelical deliverance ministry. Prince’s book was published several years after the events of *Brethren*, but it is based on the author’s own ministry, of many years’ standing, so that he is already acknowledged as an authority by Hammond and Hammond in 1973.

⁴⁷ In medieval drama, demons are often scatological. See Charlotte Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), p. 96. In Blatty, *The Exorcist*, Pazuzu similarly renders Regan incontinent. Perhaps demons, lacking bodies, delight in the carnality of their hosts, especially their capacity for filth and sin.

⁴⁸ For the idea (based on the pseudepigraphal Book of Enoch) that demons are the spirits of angel-human hybrids, see Almond, *The Devil*, pp. 4-6; Link, *The Devil*, p. 28.

In any case, there are several ways besides possession of conceptualising human / demon (or human / fallen angel) interaction. In outlining these below, I draw on Biblical and literary sources.

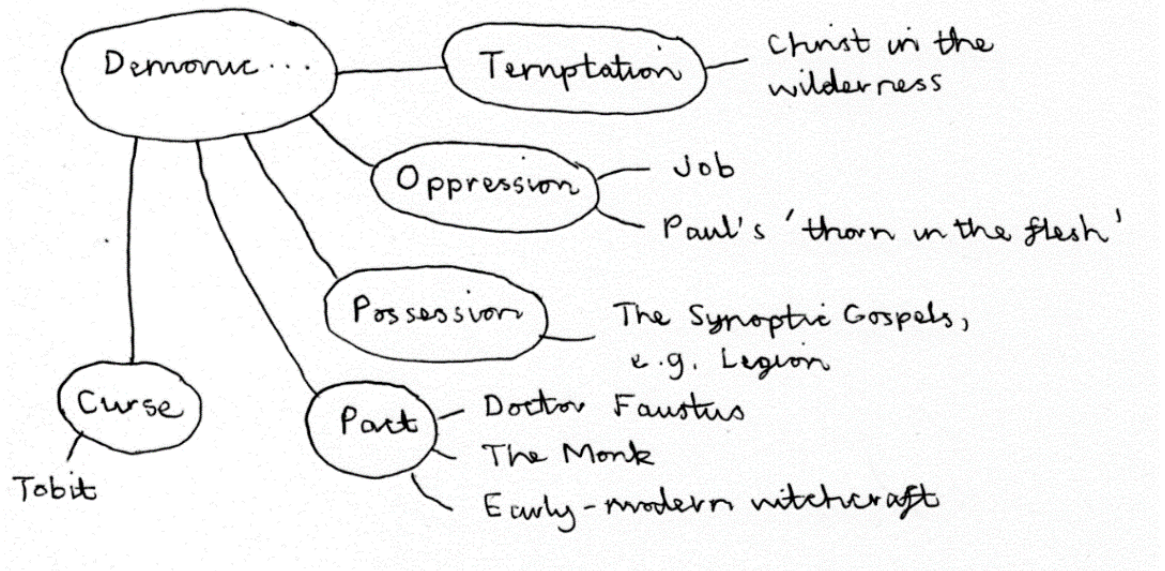


Figure 2: Demonic ...

The model for temptation is Christ in the wilderness, as discussed by Robert at the beginning of chapter 10. However, temptation need not involve a direct communication or visible manifestation. It may simply involve Satan suggesting the possibility of sin to the imagination.⁴⁹

God is omnipresent, but Satan is not. So it's difficult to imagine him personally involved in the thought life of every Christian. Perhaps he delegates temptation to lesser demons? In chapters 10 and 13 of *Brethren*, Mark assumes this to be the case, and, moreover, that particular demons are responsible for particular sins. This is a truism for

⁴⁹ The Lord's Prayer says, 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one' (Matthew 6. 13, NIV). However, the Greek word is ambiguous, and hence KJV has 'deliver us from evil', which is the most familiar version of the prayer.

evangelicals involved in deliverance ministry, as indeed it was in medieval Catholic thought.⁵⁰

However, there's little Biblical evidence for this. In the Synoptic Gospels, the presence of demons is associated with madness and sickness (especially epilepsy). Although an indwelling 'unclean spirit' renders the afflicted person unclean, and therefore liable to expulsion from the community (as appears to have been the case with Legion), there's no suggestion that such a person is especially prone to a particular sin, or even requires forgiveness *per se*.

Moreover, outside of the episode with Christ in the wilderness, most of the Biblical references to temptation are vague about *who* exactly is doing the tempting. There's no identification of demons in general as the source. Tracey's dad would no doubt point to James 1. 14: 'each person is tempted when they are dragged away by *their own* evil desire' (NIV, my emphasis).

Unlike the opportunistic nature of temptation, oppression involves a more insistent and intrusive targeting of a particular individual over an extended period of time by an identifiable antagonist. In Job, this is Satan himself, although he acts under God's direction; for Paul, it was a 'thorn in the flesh', which he identifies as a 'messenger of Satan' sent to torment him, again with God's permission (2 Corinthians 12. 7). In chapter 13 of *Brethren*, Azazel cites Paul as a precedent. She too has 'permission' to be there: presumably from God.

Though there are examples in Acts of demons conferring supernatural powers on individuals, i.e. divination (see 16. 16-19), the idea of a negotiated and legally-binding pact

⁵⁰ Prince, *They Shall Expel Demons*, pp. 104-6. On medieval demons as analogous to microbes spreading temptation everywhere, see Link, *The Devil*, pp. 73-4.

conferring specific benefits and penalties is associated with early-modern ideas on witchcraft, and literary works influenced by this worldview.⁵¹

There is better Biblical evidence for curses, in which a demon is given ongoing power over specific areas of a person's life.⁵² Contemporary deliverance ministry also assumes that indwelling demons may be present from birth due to the actions of parents or grandparents.⁵³ For some writers, this explains inherited predispositions to conditions like alcoholism and schizophrenia.⁵⁴

For those who are oppressed or 'demonized', Christ's ministry offers the possibility of deliverance, and both Catholics and Protestants cite His example as justification for their own practices of exorcism. In the New Testament, Christ performs no special rites, but

⁵¹ For example, Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*; Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. by Howard Anderson with an introduction and notes by Emma McEvoy, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1795-6]). James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. Ian Duncan, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 [1824]) is rather more sophisticated: here the supernatural antagonist argues for predestination as a pact with God.

⁵² However, the most explicit story along these lines is in the apocryphal Book of Tobit, where a demon persecutes a widow because of a curse. There's no suggestion here of indwelling. Instead, the demon murders any man the widow marries, and she loses several husbands as a result. The curse is broken by ritual actions akin to spells, but carried out under the direction of the archangel Raphael.

⁵³ Prince, *They Shall Expel Demons*, pp. 73-4 on curses, and p. 114: 'babies are often demonized before they emerge from the womb'. I find this notion repugnant.

⁵⁴ In Hammond and Hammond, *Pigs in the Parlor*, pp. 139-49, Ida Mae Hammond claims to have received a special revelation about schizophrenia, which, so she claims, is caused by a 'network of demon spirits' (p. 139); similarly, Prince, *They Shall Expel Demons*, p. 189, claims, 'Addictions ... are almost always demonic'.

simply relies on the authority of His word as the Son of God. This lack of ceremony distinguished his activities from those of other first-century exorcists.⁵⁵

Evangelical deliverance follows the Bible, and therefore works on the assumption that Christ's power is still freely available to believers. Deliverance will therefore happen without too much effort, provided the participants are right with God, and not harbouring hidden sins.⁵⁶

Few people now share the evangelical belief in literal demons. Conversely, metaphorical demons are ubiquitous, although they are perhaps especially prone to appear in discussions of mental health problems and addiction, i.e. in the same spheres where literal demons are thought to have a particular interest. But unlike literal demons, metaphorical ones are not external agents: rather, they are part of us. 'The devil,' Freud wrote, 'is certainly nothing else than the personification of the repressed unconscious instinctual life'.⁵⁷

An evangelical deliverance video on YouTube certainly suggests a Freudian reading.⁵⁸ In this ritual, an afflicted woman is surrounded by a group of clean-cut men in suits and ties as a minister confronts her indwelling demons (of lust, anger, hatred, etc.).

⁵⁵ See for example Luke 4. 35-6. On the implied contrast to other exorcists, see Awwad, 'Satan in Biblical Imagination', p. 122.

⁵⁶ However, deliverance ministry assumes multiple occupancy by demons almost as a given. Though there are Biblical examples of this—notably Legion, and Mary Magdalene, 'from whom seven demons had come out' (Luke 8. 2, NIV)—most exorcisms performed by Jesus involved a single demon.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Laurence A. Rickels, *The Devil Notebooks* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 117. This book offers psychoanalytic readings of various devil fictions.

⁵⁸ Deliverance from demon that entered through sex. In *YouTube* [cited 4 July 2018]. Available from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmvRKC16Svs>>. Despite the title, the video shows deliverance from several demons / sins.

The demons speak through the woman, and their presence allows her to simultaneously avow and disavow unacceptable thoughts and impulses. This demon is the return of the repressed: an eruption from within of resistance to the patriarchal authority represented by the men. In the end, however, the superego of patriarchy asserts itself over the id of female sexuality, and the status quo is restored.

The plot of *Brethren* also hinges on the return of the repressed, and one can read the story psychoanalytically, as Robert's attempt to disavow his adult sexuality, which he is unable to imagine except in the perverse and abusive terms suggested by his experience in the children's home. In this reading, Azazel is a projection, and the murder of Bill, which discloses to Robert the revelation of his own dead father, becomes an Oedipal act, a displaced murder of Stevie.⁵⁹

The main dramatic problem with metaphorical demons is that they are shadows without any personality of their own, and in the end they just do whatever the exorcist—or Freud—tells them to.⁶⁰

Only in fiction can a demon be both literal *and* metaphorical.⁶¹ In *Brethren*, I wanted to give Azazel agency apart from Robert's unconscious desires. Only then could she push him to places he would not dare to go on his own. But, as with the novel's depiction of the Angel of YHWH, I could not 'show [a demon] acting but by instruments of action'. In

⁵⁹ On psychoanalysis and the Gothic, with a particular emphasis on the role of loss in family dynamics, see Steven Bruhm, 'The contemporary Gothic: why we need it,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, pp. 259-76.

⁶⁰ On psychoanalysis as exorcism, see Rickels, *The Devil Notebooks*, pp. 31-2.

⁶¹ Raymond, *Milton's Angels* similarly argues that *Paradise Lost* was intended to be read as both literal and metaphorical.

other words, like the Angel of YHWH, my antagonist had to have a body. So she could not be a lowly entity of the sort featured in the Synoptic Gospels. She had to be a fallen angel.

Making her Satan seemed too ambitious—and too obvious.⁶² But if she could not be *the* Satan, she could be *a* satan: an accuser or prosecutor. As such, she appears in a form calculated to remind Robert of the thing he feels most guilty about. Hence she takes the form of a starved, naked child, for reasons that become apparent in the course of the novel.⁶³

So the antagonist had a function, but not a name or a history. I found both in Leviticus, in the description of the ritual for the Day of Atonement, during which the scapegoat is sent out into the desert to an entity or a place called Azazel. The meaning of the word is unclear, and may simply indicate the idea of ‘taken away, removed’, as Jenny explains in chapter 13 of *Brethren*.⁶⁴

⁶² Not least because of the shadow cast by Milton. See Neil Forsyth, ‘Satan’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost*, ed. by Louis Schwartz, Cambridge Companions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 17–28; Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic*.

⁶³ Demons, being spirits and / or fallen angels (see below), don’t have a gender, which is one reason why, in *Brethren*, Azazel assumes a form with mutilated genitals, but I use the word ‘she’ here and below (as throughout the novel) because this is how Robert perceives her. Compare the androgynous vampire of *Let the Right One In*. Dir. Tomas Alfredson. Kåre Hedebrant and Lina Leandersson. Sandrew Metronome. 2008. Conversely, Azazel appears to Tracey in Robert’s form, because that’s what Tracey feels most guilty about (though she has no reason to).

⁶⁴ DDD, pp. 128–31. On the idea of the scapegoat more generally, see René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

In addition to Azazel, there are also several allusions to the bull-headed god Moloch in *Brethren*, usually in the context of child sacrifice (see DDD, pp. 581–5 for the Biblical evidence on this figure). I don’t have space to discuss Moloch in detail here, but for the associative connections with the classical figures of the Brazen Bull and the Minotaur see Gideon Bohak, ‘Classica et Rabbinica I: The Bull of Phalaris and the Tophet’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, 31.2 (2000), 203–16.

Unsurprisingly, Azazel appears as a character in several pseudepigraphal texts, whose authors presumably wanted to resolve or exploit this troubling lacuna in Leviticus, and incorporate Azazel within a cosmology of fallen angels and demons.⁶⁵ Although I've kept the identification as a fallen angel, I've otherwise ignored these accounts, and instead tried to create an independent fictional elaboration, based not only on the original passage, but on unrelated literary sources.

In medieval morality plays like *Mankind* and *Everyman*, personified abstractions like 'Mischief' and 'Goods' (i.e. material goods) act as antagonists. However, over time, there was a tendency to combine such characters, for economy in performance as much as anything else. Already in *Mankind* (c. 1464-71), the character of Titivillus (in fact, named after a demon) seems to be a sort of catch-all tempter and trickster.⁶⁶ And this tendency culminated in the character of 'the Vice' in Tudor Interludes like *Jack Juggler* and *Horestes*.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ In the Book of Enoch, Azazel is one of the leaders of the fallen watcher angels, who lay with human women, and taught them the arts of cosmetics and deception. In the Apocalypse of Abraham, Azazel is identified with the serpent in Eden. See DDD, pp. 128-31 (pp. 130-1). In *Paradise Lost*, Azazel is a 'cherub' (i.e. one of the cherubim), and the standard-bearer of Satan's army (l. 533-6). Azazel also occurs as the name of a demon or fallen angel in the titles of several works of paranormal romance or urban fantasy currently available on Amazon.com.

⁶⁶ Lester, *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, pp. 1-57.

⁶⁷ *Three Tudor Classical Interludes: Thersites, Jacke Jugeler, Horestes*, ed. by Marie Axton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982). For a discussion of the genre as a whole, see Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice* and George Oppitz-Trotman, 'Staging Vice and Acting Evil: Theatre and Anti-Theatre in Early Modern England', *Studies in Church History*, 48 (2012): *The Church and Literature*, 155-68.

The Vice is part-Shakespearean fool and part-Machiavellian intriguer. He's prone to break the fourth wall, with soliloquies and stage business addressed directly to the audience. He also adopts disguises.⁶⁸ The Vice was not usually depicted as a demon (Titivillus notwithstanding).⁶⁹ However, the association becomes explicit in the character of Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*, which both draws on and transforms the Vice tradition.⁷⁰

Azazel is inspired by both Mephistopheles and the Vice. So she improvises, adapting her approach to perceived vulnerabilities in her opponent's armour. In fact, she draws on all five models of human / demon interaction outlined above, although her persistence, even in the face of Mark's attempts to banish her, most obviously suggests oppression.

She tempts Robert to take Tracey's place: to kill her. Obviously this wouldn't serve the stated purpose of being accepted into Tracey's family. Rather, Azazel is trying to convince Robert that the logic of his own desires leads him to this self-defeating course of action. And because he wants this, so she suggests, he is already symbolically guilty of it.⁷¹

⁶⁸ In *Jack Juggler*, the Vice usurps the role of the protagonist, Careawaye, not only in the eyes of others, but in those of Careawaye himself, who is left confused as to his own identity. According to Link, *The Devil*, p. 15, it is in the very nature of the devil to appear in the guise of another. He is 'a mask without a face'.

⁶⁹ There were separate devil or demon characters in the mystery plays, and in other morality plays, whose dramatic functions and characterisation might or might not overlap with those of the personified sins and the Vice (see Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice*, p. 28).

⁷⁰ John D. Cox, 'From *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642*', in *Doctor Faustus*, pp. 257-65 (pp. 263-4); Douglas Cole, 'Doctor Faustus and the Morality Tradition', in *Doctor Faustus*, pp. 304-12 (pp. 310-11).

⁷¹ Compare Matthew 5.28: 'But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (NIV).

Azazel's strategy here follows the example of Satan in the wilderness, who uses Biblical quotations in an attempt to trap Jesus into betraying Himself.

It is not enough for Azazel to influence Robert unconsciously. She needs him to believe in the reality she presents to him—and then to make a deliberate choice to enact that belief. For her purposes, it doesn't seem to matter that Robert makes this choice under false pretences, and that his intention is to reject and kill her. He's still guilty of hubris: of presuming to confront her directly, as Christ confronted Satan.

Robert doesn't realise that his arguments against Azazel, which he never checks with anyone else—and even his choice to defy and oppose her—are actually a kind of acceptance, because everything is based on her premises. The consequences of this follow logically: after Robert kills Bill, he has to inhabit Azazel's reality. It's only at this point that she truly 'possesses' him.

In *Doctor Faustus*, Mephistopheles persuades Faustus to sign a contract with Lucifer, and then insists that the contract cannot be broken, even as the Good Angel tries to tell Faustus otherwise.⁷² Azazel similarly claims that Robert is indebted to her. She knows that Robert's feelings of guilt make him susceptible to this line of argument. In the world of the novel, as in *Doctor Faustus*, Azazel can't simply assert her rights—because she doesn't have any. She has to get Robert to acknowledge her authority willingly.

Robert isn't cursed as such, but Azazel tries to convince him he's condemned to re-enact his parents' lives. And since he allows Azazel to determine and create the reality he inhabits, he also allows her to tell him what his life means. The sin here is not to

⁷² For example, at II. 3. 76, the Good Angel insists that it is 'Never too late, if Faustus can repent.' I use the scene and line numbers from the A-Text, in the edition edited by David Scott Kastan cited above.

acknowledge that he is still making a choice: to reject the possibility of forgiveness and grace.

This is again the same sin as Faustus: once Robert kills Bill, he is trapped in the logic of Azazel's argument, and he can't believe in the possibility of his own salvation.⁷³ But unlike Faustus, Robert eventually escapes from this closed loop. To understand how he does this, we need to review the story of the Harrowing of Hell.

⁷³ For example, in V. 2, when urged to remember that 'God's mercies are infinite', Faustus replies, 'But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned. The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus' (13-16).

The Harrowing was a popular legend, accepted as doctrine by the medieval church, which purported to explain what Christ did between his death and resurrection. The main source was the so-called Gospel of Nicodemus (hereafter Nicodemus). The earliest extant version of this apocryphal text dates from the fifth century, but it may have originated earlier.⁷⁵ The Latin version was well-known in the medieval period. In England, there were several vernacular adaptations, and the Harrowing is included as an episode in most of the extant mystery cycles; it also features in *Piers Plowman*.⁷⁶

Nicodemus is a typical apocryphal text in that it attempts to fill a perceived gap in the canonical Gospel narratives. It tells the story of how two sons of the high priest Simeon are resurrected after Christ's death. When interviewed, they tell how they 'were placed with all our fathers in the deep, in obscure darkness', when 'suddenly there came a golden heat of the sun and a purple and royal light shining upon us'.⁷⁷ Numerous Biblical characters (David, John the Baptist, etc.) testify that this light is Jesus, whose arrival fulfils Old Testament prophecies.

A personified Hades discusses the situation with Satan, who argues that Jesus has been defeated by death, and so it's safe to let him in. Hades is not so sure. Didn't Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, and so snatch him away from their grasp? But it's already too late:

⁷⁵ Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 164-7, 185-98.

⁷⁶ Karl Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007); *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, pp. 302-13; *York Mystery Plays*, pp. 237-50; Langland, *Piers Plowman*, pp. 210-25.

⁷⁷ Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 191. I refer to and quote from the translation of the so-called Latin A text, which was the best-known version in medieval Europe.

[T]he Lord of Majesty came upon Hades in the form of a man, and lighted up the eternal darkness and broke the indissoluble chains, and the succour of invincible power visited us who were sitting in the deep darkness of trespasses and in the shadow of the death of sins. And the Lord ... holding the right hand of Adam, ascended from the underworld, and all the saints followed him.⁷⁸

This isn't a punitive hell. In all likelihood the original story dates from a period in which Christian ideas about the afterlife had not yet been codified into dogma. As we might expect from his name, Hades here rules over a realm that resembles the classical underworld.⁷⁹

Who is imprisoned in this place? Nicodemus only names Jewish patriarchs and New Testament characters who died before Christ, i.e. the righteous under the old dispensation of the Law. Medieval theologians assumed a distinction between limbo, which held the patriarchs, and hell proper, a separate place of eternal torment for the damned. The Harrowing only applied to limbo.⁸⁰ However, Nicodemus, while it seems to restrict the Harrowing to 'saints', nowhere makes a distinction between their location and that of other souls. Moreover, the earliest extant allusion to the Harrowing story in I Peter 3. 20

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp.193, 195.

⁷⁹ Turner, *The History of Hell*, pp. 52-65 for the early development of Christian ideas on hell. Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 18-20 for how the Harrowing story was instrumental in shaping these developing ideas.

⁸⁰ For example, the version in the Golden Legend describes the Harrowing as the story of 'how Christ led out the holy fathers who were in Limbo'. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints, with an Introduction by Eamon Duffy*, trans. and ed. by William Granger Ryan, 2nd edn (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 216-24 (p. 222).

refers to Christ releasing ‘disobedient’ spirits from prison, which suggests a more general deliverance (NIV).⁸¹

In other words, Hades is not only the ancestor of hell, but also of limbo and purgatory.⁸²

Most versions of the Harrowing follow the ransom theory of atonement, which postulates that the human race was legally forfeit to Satan by virtue of original sin. By submitting Himself to death, Christ in effect pays a ransom to Satan to release humanity from hell. However, since Christ is innocent, and therefore unjustly condemned, hell cannot hold him.⁸³

The Harrowing is central to the ransom theory. Protestant theologians focussed more on Christ’s experience on the cross, where He took the punishment due to humanity on Himself. Here, the payment is owed to God, not Satan: to divine justice.⁸⁴ In any case,

⁸¹ I Peter 3, 18-20: ‘He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit[, in which also] he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built’ (NIV). I use a variant reading here in square brackets (however, KJV uses the same).

⁸² There is a useful summary of official doctrine on purgatory in Dante’s time by Dorothy L. Sayers in Dante, *Purgatory*, pp. 54-61; for the evolution of this doctrine, and the ways in which the Catholic imagination was subsequently shaped by Dante’s version, see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (London: Scolar Press, 1984), especially pp. 344-55.

⁸³ On the ransom theory, see Link, *The Devil*, pp. 30-2. Nicodemus adds a further twist to this story by treating Satan and Hades as two separate characters. In Nicodemus, Christ offers Himself as a ransom for Adam and the patriarchs, but when He leaves hell in their company, he binds Satan and offers Him to Hades as compensation. So Christ replaces Adam; but then Satan (unwillingly) replaces Christ.

⁸⁴ This theory was first formulated in the eleventh century by Anselm. See Link, *The Devil*, pp. 32-3 and Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 102-3. However, the older ransom theory remained popular, for example in the dramatisations of the Harrowing story in *Piers Plowman* and the mystery cycles.

the penal aspect of Christ's suffering is already complete at His death. So when He descends to hell, He doesn't do so in order to be punished further. Instead, He enters hell as a triumphant victor over sin.

Whichever theory one subscribes to, the underlying idea is the same: Christ sacrifices Himself for us; He takes our place. Christianity might therefore be said to be based upon an ethics of substitution.⁸⁵

Evil perverts this principle. The Son of God lowers Himself to our level and becomes us; Satan attempts to raise himself to God's level. Evil does not identify with or redeem the substituted thing; instead, it attempts to replace and destroy it. Not a substitution, but a usurpation.

Brethren therefore describes a series of possible substitutions, or usurpations disguised as substitutions: Robert for Tracey; his house with hers; Azazel for Robert; the presence for Bill; Bill for Tracey; and so on.⁸⁶ In Robert's vision of his past during the exorcism, Azazel claims to have done for him what only Christ can do: in the guise of a human, she has taken upon herself the punishment due to him. And that punishment is, implicitly, a re-enactment of his mother's fate, so Azazel is also substituting for her too:

'You did this. To your mum; to me. She took your place, before you were born. She died for you.

But it wasn't enough; she wasn't pure enough. So I had to do it again. I took your place.' (p. 189)

⁸⁵ For Charles Williams' ideas on how Christians could participate in the Christ-like activity of substitution by bearing one another's fear and pain, not metaphorically but literally, see Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 155-7; Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their friends* (London: HarperCollins, 1997 [1978]), pp. 104-5. This idea is central in both *Descent Into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve*.

⁸⁶ The story Robert's dad tells in chapter 10 is also about a substitution / usurpation.

Robert responds to this claim of substitution by accusing Azazel of usurpation: “‘I don’t believe you,’” Robert says. “‘You’re not Susan. You’ve stolen her life.’” (p. 189)

At the climax of the novel, the substitutions accelerate and multiply. In chapter 18, Robert has a vision of his dad dying, and his dad’s undiscovered body rotting over a period of several months, a period of time which Robert perceives as a single extended moment. In this vision, the presence is finally revealed to be the Angel of YHWH, which takes the place of Robert’s dad, and then of Robert himself:

Robert’s carrying the presence inside him. He’s carrying it, but it’s carrying him too. They’re inside each other. They’ve swapped places.

The presence isn’t his dad any more. It’s the Angel of the Lord. And as it appears, it also disappears.

‘I’m sorry,’ Robert says. ‘I didn’t know; I didn’t understand.’ (p. 244)

So the Angel of YHWH is an avatar of Christ, but not the triumphant, resurrected Christ. Rather, the Christ who has abandoned his divine nature to submit Himself to death. So its body retains a human form (or rather a human outline), but otherwise changes every time it appears—not because Robert’s theories about angels are necessarily correct, but rather because this is Christ subject to change and time: to death.

This version of the Angel of YHWH does not carry with it the living presence of God. It carries with it the absence of God. And so the words it speaks are not the words of God, but the words of those abandoned by God.

This angel is abject.⁸⁷ It speaks with the voice of hell.⁸⁸ It bears witness to hell.

In *Brethren*, then, the Harrowing is not a one-time event, which happens in the short interval between Christ's death and resurrection. Since God's proper habitation is outside of time, the Harrowing is happening continuously. Christ is *always* in hell: or rather, one aspect of Him is always there.

His human self; His body.

A paradox then: in hell, Christ is eternally incarnate, eternally in time.⁸⁹ And if Christ remains physically present in hell, we might be able to encounter Him there *before* we die.⁹⁰

Where is hell? In *Doctor Faustus*, when Mephistopheles appears, Faustus asks how a demon can be at liberty outside of hell. Mephistopheles famously answers, 'Why this is hell, nor am I out of it' (I. 3. 76). And later, 'Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In

⁸⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁸⁸ In practice, this means the voices of Robert's mum and Stevie. I don't mean to imply that suicide is an equivalent sin to sexual abuse, nor even that hell is the punishment for suicide. Rather, hell is the condition that produces suicide. On voices from a provisional afterlife, see also George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁸⁹ In Nicodemus and subsequent versions of the Harrowing, Christ's body remains in the tomb, and only His spirit harrows hell. So my position here is unorthodox, not only in placing Christ's body in hell, but in placing hell in time. However, the second position follows from the first.

⁹⁰ In imagining a version of the afterlife in which choice is not yet fixed, and isn't even securely 'after', I follow Williams, *Descent Into Hell* and *All Hallows' Eve*. In both novels, the recent dead exist in an empty, partially-dematerialised version of our world, where they remain until they make a final choice, which determines their eternal fate. Conversely, the titular event in *Descent Into Hell* occurs while the protagonist is still (nominally) alive, but has already cut himself off from the possibility of redemption. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* similarly describes a grey, suburban hell, whose residents can travel to heaven, but choose not to.

one self place, but where we are is hell' (II. I. 117-18). Milton similarly describes how Satan, having made his way by heroic effort up through Chaos to the newly-created Earth, has really changed nothing, because:

within him hell

He brings, and round about him, nor from hell

One step no more than from himself can fly

By change of place (IV. 20-3)

For Marlowe and Milton, hell is an inflamed state of bad conscience, in which the soul is punished by its consciousness of its own depravity, and its separation from God. Satan brings hell with him, not only because he chose sin in the past, and thereby rendered himself liable to punishment, but because he continues to identify his essential self with that sin: he is unable to imagine his existence except in terms defined by it.⁹¹

In other words, once hell becomes a state of mind, there is no need of jail keepers: no need of *any* external agency of punishment. We condemn ourselves to hell, and we punish ourselves there too.⁹² So hell becomes a state of isolation, not of collective misery.⁹³

In *Brethren*, however, hell must still be a place, if the body of Christ is there. After Bill's death, Robert 'falls into' Azazel, which is not just the name of a demon, but 'a place

⁹¹ For Marlowe's influence on Milton, see Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic*, pp. 60-2.

⁹² Compare Dorothy L. Sayers, in Dante, *Hell*, p. 68: 'Hell [is not] a place of punishment to which anyone is arbitrarily *sent*: it is the condition to which the soul reduces itself by a stubborn determination to evil, and in which it suffers the torment of its own perversions'.

⁹³ For recent ideas on hell, see Geoffrey Rowell, 'Conclusion', in *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 212-21; John Casey, 'The Decline of Hell', in *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 193-222.

in the desert', 'outside the camp' (pp. 240, 173). To be possessed by Azazel is to be inside her body, which is also, therefore, a place—where the scapegoat (Robert) wanders through an empty wilderness. But hell is also the vision of Christ, experienced without hope—without the possibility of redemption. Christ appears to Robert as a rotting corpse because Robert cannot believe in the eucatastrophe of resurrection at that moment.⁹⁴ But Christ has not been defeated by death; rather, His resurrection body can only be revealed through the destruction of his physical body.⁹⁵

So in one sense Robert was not wrong when he concluded that, 'He has to put his body against hers, like Jacob with the angel.' (p. 213) But Robert's body isn't sufficient. Only the body of Christ can defeat the body of hell, and it does so by *becoming* the body of hell: incorporating hell within itself. Swallowing it, like the Eucharist.

⁹⁴ 'Eucatastrophe' is Tolkien's word, from 'On Fairy Stories', p. 155. It is not merely a happy ending, but the undoing or reversal of a tragic ending. 'The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation' (p. 156). Aside from fairy tales and the Gospels, the modern exemplar is perhaps William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by John Pitcher, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010 [1623]).

⁹⁵ Yonatan Moss, *Incorruptible Bodies: Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity, Christianity in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) recounts a sixth-century debate between Julian of Halicarnassus and Severus of Antioch. Julian argued that Christ's body was incorruptible from birth; conversely, Severus argued that it was corruptible (not imperfect, but naturally subject to deprivation and change) until it was transformed at the resurrection. But what happened between Christ's death and resurrection? Perhaps the blunt comment on Lazarus at John 11. 39, 'by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days' (KJV), was a way to raise the question by analogy, but presumably even Lazarus was not raised as a zombie. In the medieval period, post-mortem incorruptibility was certainly taken as a sign of sainthood.

In any case, my formulation here is highly unorthodox, and depends upon the idea of avatars embodying different aspects of Christ.

God in hell; hell in God. If we want to be resurrected with Christ, then we must die with him: we must go to hell with him.⁹⁶ The way to transcendence leads through abjection.⁹⁷

In *Brethren*, hell is remediable, because Christ remains there to bear witness to the sufferings of hell's inhabitants. If Christ is continuously experiencing death and separation from God, then He is also continuously enacting His triumph over sin. But if hell is remediable, it isn't really hell. It has become something else, like the transubstantiated body of Christ.

Within that transubstantiated, resurrected body, hell becomes limbo—or purgatory.

⁹⁶ Compare Dante, who cannot ascend to the awareness of God directly, because he is blocked by sin. He must therefore take 'another path', down through hell—all the way down—and then back up Mount Purgatory (*Hell*, p. 73).

⁹⁷ Hence medieval saints kissed lepers and drank pus from the cancerous sores of the sick. After Catherine of Siena performed the latter action, she dreamt of Jesus 'inviting her to drink the blood flowing from his pierced side', and henceforth ate no food except the Eucharist. See Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 25, and, more generally, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* (Berkeley and London: The University of California Press, 1987). These medieval precedents inspired Robert's 'holy anorexia'.

On the basis of what I have written so far, one might assume that *Brethren* has only one human protagonist: Robert. But of course that is not the case. In this final section, I want to return to the idea of a ‘violation of frontier’, and consider the role of Tracey in the novel.

Brethren is a reimagined version of my teenage experiences in Liverpool, and Robert is an exaggerated version of myself. Tracey, by contrast, is an entirely invented character, who stands for the church in which I was a member. Unlike Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, I did not want to satirise that church, but instead to present its best self to the reader.⁹⁸

In general, I find it easier to imagine deranged and obsessive characters than well-balanced and healthy ones.⁹⁹ For the same reason, Robert is easier to talk about than Tracey is, as the preceding sections of this essay demonstrate. Robert is ‘normal’ for me, and Tracey is the book’s alien other. But that is precisely the point. If novels are dialogic or polyphonic texts, then without Tracey, *Brethren* is not a novel.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Vintage, 1991 [1985]). I was aiming for something closer to Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2005). Compare Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York, 1970), p. 204: ‘When you write about backwoods prophets, it is very difficult to get across to the modern reader that you take these people seriously, that you are not making fun of them, but that their concerns are your own and, in your judgment, central to human life.’

⁹⁹ Jonathan Walker and Dan Hallett, *Five Wounds: An Illuminated Novel* (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2010) features five such protagonists. However, in certain respects the relationship between Cuckoo and Gabriella in *Five Wounds* resembles that between Robert and Tracey in *Brethren*.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Walker, ‘Reciprocity Failure: A Novella’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2014) is told by a self-obsessed, Robert-like narrator. My immediate inspiration for this was *Taxi Driver*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Robert De Niro. Columbia Pictures. 1976. Like *Taxi Driver*,

Robert belongs to a long history of characters in English fiction, for whom religious experience is a kind of mania or madness.¹⁰¹ In chapter 11, Tracey notes how:

In films and books, no one ever believes something simply because it's true. There's always a secret, personal reason. Righteousness is hypocrisy; conviction is prejudice. God is a mask to hide behind. And the story strips the mask away. Reveals the secret that explains who you are.

(p. 145)

By contrast, I wanted Tracey to be a character whose faith grounded her in reality, and made her a better person.

Brethren is about the 'violation of frontier' between our world and another. But unlike many stories of this genre, it is not about a group of outsiders pulling together to solve a common problem. For example, in *It* and *Stranger Things*, the violation is a shared experience, which binds members of a group to each other, and confirms their separation from the society around them.¹⁰² By contrast, Robert is doomed by his inability or unwillingness to communicate what is happening to him.¹⁰³ Conversely, Tracey is saved because she is *never* an outsider. She is connected to others when the novel begins, and she

Reciprocity Failure gives us no respite from its protagonist's worldview, but 35,000 words felt like the longest possible length over which such a character could sustain the reader's interest by himself.

¹⁰¹ For example, Lewis, *The Monk*; Hogg, *Private Memoirs and Confessions*. A more recent example is A. S. Byatt, *A Whistling Woman* (London: Vintage, 2002), which features a Manichean visionary, but the same novel offers the stolid Anglican clergyman Daniel Orton as a corrective, like Tracey in *Brethren*.

¹⁰² Stephen King, *It* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1986); *Stranger Things*. Created by The Duffer Brothers. David Harbour and Winona Ryder. Netflix. 2016.

¹⁰³ Compare *Donnie Darko*. Dir. Richard Kelly. Jake Gyllenhaal. Pandora Cinema and Newmarket Films. 2001.

never loses that connection, despite her suspicion that Robert's experiences might somehow be more valid than her own.

The novel is about the difference between Robert and Tracey—not their joining together—because this is what empathy means: not the erasure of difference, but the willingness to imagine it more fully. Tracey is capable of this imaginative feat; Robert is not.

There are various other ways of thinking about the difference between these two characters. For example, in the terms of Jungian psychology, Robert is an introverted intuitive type, while Tracey is an introverted feeling type.¹⁰⁴ Or we could put it in terms of what Scarlett Thomas, adapting an idea from Stanislavski, calls a 'superobjective': 'a big wish, an ultimate wish, the thing you desire *more than anything else*'.¹⁰⁵ Robert's superobjective is, 'I want to be special'; Tracey's is, 'I want to be authentic'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ On Jung's eight personality types, see Anthony Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 89-97. Introverted intuitives 'have difficulty in communicating their ideas simply and in an organised way, for they pursue image after image and idea after idea, "chasing after every possibility in the womb of the unconscious", as Jung says' (p. 96). By contrast, introverted feeling types 'have a highly differentiated set of values which they tend to keep to themselves. They may have a covert influence on those around them, however, by virtue of the standards they embody in their way of life. They can provide a group with its ethical backbone, not by preaching or lecturing, but just by being there' (p. 94). To varying degrees, other characters in *Brethren* embody other Jungian types: Bill (extraverted thinking), Jenny (introverted thinking), Kevin (extraverted feeling), Paul (extraverted intuitive), Mark (extraverted sensation).

¹⁰⁵ Scarlett Thomas, *Monkeys With Typewriters: How to Write Fiction and Unlock the Secret Power of Stories* (Edinburgh and London: Canongate, 2012), p. 278.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas also recommends choosing a 'seed word', whose various connotations will help to map out all possible permutations of the novel's central 'thematic concern' (ibid., pp. 378-83). In *Brethren*, this word is 'Elect / Election'.

C. S. Lewis, in his essay on Charles Williams, refers to a quality of ‘courtesy’ in his friend’s novels.¹⁰⁷ By this he means something larger than good manners: more like a selfless consideration for others combined with a lightness of spirit. Elsewhere, Williams talked of ‘co-inherence’: the manifold ways in which all human beings are implicated in the lives of others, whether we choose to recognise this or not.¹⁰⁸ For Williams, to choose heaven is to acknowledge this co-inherence in *all* the choices we make, down to the very smallest.¹⁰⁹ To choose hell is to reject co-inherence, and retreat within ourselves.

This principle also governs the alternation of points-of-view in *Brethren*. Tracey takes over from Robert whenever his point-of-view threatens to become too painful or embarrassing—too revealing of his smallness of spirit. Of course, *she* does not know she is doing this—but the narrative does.

To put all this another way, Tracey has access to the same transcendent realities that Robert does, but—despite her doubts—she ultimately has no need of Robert’s visionary experiences. She has greater humility than him. Her sense of co-inherence embraces his lack of this sense.

So Tracey’s chapters retain a connection to the everyday that Robert eventually loses. Tracey’s normality is what Robert envies, even if he never puts it this way to himself. So that normality has to be protected by the narrative for as long as possible—and when it cannot be protected any longer, when Robert’s reality threatens to take over Tracey’s—that is the not the beginning of the story, but its crisis.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, ‘The Novels of Charles Williams’, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ On co-inherence, see Carpenter, *The Inklings*, p. 103; Lindop, *Charles Williams*, pp. 291-3.

¹⁰⁹ In Williams, *All Hallows’ Eve*, one of the dead characters comes to understand co-inherence by thinking about her husband getting out of bed to fetch her a glass of water.

The violation of frontier is not, then, the intrusion of a supernatural reality into our world, because all the characters take the existence of this reality for granted.¹¹⁰

Rather, it is the violation of Tracey's reality by Robert's. But ultimately, *Brethren* measures Robert against her standard, and not the other way round.

¹¹⁰ Similarly, although Lewis, 'The Novels of Charles Williams', discusses his friend's work in terms of a violation of frontier, in fact the frontier is open. As T. S. Eliot says in his introduction to *All Hallows' Eve*, 'For [Williams] there was no frontier between the material and the spiritual world. To him the supernatural was perfectly natural, and the natural was also supernatural' (pp. xiii, xiv).

Appendix: Scripts for the Two Illustrations

Since the frontispiece and final illustration were created by the artist Dan Hallett, I include edited versions of the scripts I wrote for him below, to clarify my contribution to their iconography.¹¹¹ The full versions of these scripts included general notes on the novel, but I've removed these, since their substance has been incorporated into the critical essay. I've also edited the original texts for clarity and brevity.

¹¹¹ For my previous collaborations with Dan, see Jonathan Walker, *Pistols! Treason! Murder!: The Rise and Fall of a Master Spy*, with illustrations by Dan Hallett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; original publication Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2007); Jonathan Walker and Dan Hallett, *Five Wounds*. For theoretical discussion of these collaborations, see Jonathan Walker, 'Textual Realism and Reenactment', in *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, ed. by Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering, Reenactment History (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 90-108; Jonathan Walker, 'The Design of *Five Wounds: An Illuminated Novel*', *Visual Communication*, 12.2 (2013), 217-41.

Script for the First Illustration

The first illustration represents some of the ideas introduced in chapter 13, in the discussion around the scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement.

A really boring way to approach this would be a picture of two goats: maybe one black, and one white. So I thought, what if it's not two goats? What if it's half a goat? This ties in to another famous Biblical story about King Solomon, who decided to cut a baby in half to find out which of two women was the mother: she was the one willing to give the baby away rather than see it harmed (I Kings 3. 16-28). In the context of the novel, depicting the goat cut in half could suggest that choice is painful, disruptive, and reveals secrets (the inside of the goat). It always involves violence and the renunciation of possibilities (by choosing one thing, by definition you exclude another).

I started off by thinking of Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child (Divided)* (1993), with its bisected cows.¹¹² However, if you look at the cross-sections in that, the interiors of the bodies just seem a mess. It's difficult to make out the shapes of internal organs, etc. So we want a goat cut in half, but rendered somewhat non-realistically, more like the 'self-dissecting man' from the anatomy treatises of Vesalius, who displays all his internal organs.¹¹³ In fact, the high priest often had to separate individual organs as part of the different Old Testament sacrificial rites.

¹¹² Damien Hirst, *Mother and Child (Divided)*, 1993. In *Damien Hirst* [online, cited 17 July 2018]. Available from: <<http://www.damienhirst.com/mother-and-child-divided-1>>.

¹¹³ I refer here to some reference material that Dan and I used during our first collaboration. See Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

So: a cross-sectioned black goat, with a (probably simplified and stylised) set of visible internal organs.

The Hirst cows look very odd with only two legs, and similarly I suspect it will be difficult to render a convincing two-legged goat. This is something you'll have to figure out. I guess the Hirst one is neither sitting nor standing, but suspended, and that's probably the impression we want too.

The idea that the scapegoat is Christ also made me think of the image of the Agnus Dei, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, which is shown with a halo, carrying a flag with a Saint George's Cross. So our goat will similarly have a halo and flag. It's both the Lamb of God and the scapegoat. But a goat (particularly a black goat) is normally a satanic symbol, so it's also both Christ and the devil.

Brethren also has several allusions to the Minotaur and the labyrinth, which represent the devil and hell in medieval allegory, with Theseus as Christ, penetrating the labyrinth to kill the devil. So one final layer is to have a red maze in the background behind the goat. This maze begins / comes out of / is analogous to the spaces between the goat's internal organs, i.e. the organs sit on a red background inside the goat, where they block out most of that background, reducing the visible part of the background to a series of lines, whose shapes resemble those of a maze / labyrinth.¹¹⁴

A drop / line of blood trickles out of the goat and down onto the background of the page, where it begins another, similar path through the maze / labyrinth. (For reference, there's a labyrinth filled by an advancing rivulet of blood in the first *Hellboy* film.)¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Dan was not able to follow this part of the script.

¹¹⁵ *Hellboy*. Dir. Guillermo del Toro. Ron Perlman. Columbia Pictures. 2004.

The blood coming out of the goat is therefore a trickling red thread like the thread Ariadne gives to Theseus in the Minotaur's labyrinth. So there's a sense in which we should be able to see the blood flow as reversible: we should be able to follow its thread from the outside inwards, as well as from the centre out.

Mazes / labyrinths are common elements in the floor decorations of medieval cathedrals, where they represent the idea of pilgrimage. We'll use the one from Chartres as the pattern for our labyrinth. In this context, it's Jerusalem at the centre, not the devil. This alternative, positive meaning ties in with the goat / lamb doubling / superimposition.

Script for the Second Illustration

The second illustration depicts the Harrowing of Hell. There are two basic ways of representing hell in medieval images of the Harrowing: as a devouring mouth, or (seemingly much less common) as a walled city.¹¹⁶ In the former style, the mouth gapes open, and Christ seems to reach inside and lead people out by the hand. In the latter, he ‘besieges’ the gates of hell, and breaks them down, perhaps by striking them with his staff / ensign (which has the same St George’s Cross as the Agnus Dei).

In chapter 13, Jenny suggests that hell swallows Christ, but then vomits him out, because it can’t keep him down. I can’t find any visual suggestion of this last idea—perhaps because it’s too irreverent—but it echoes the story of Jonah and the whale, which was interpreted as an allegory of Christ’s death, i.e. Jonah in the belly of the whale is Christ in hell.¹¹⁷

In keeping with the emphasis on the body in *Brethren*, we’re going to show hell as a mouth rather than a city. The mouth / face should have horns, and should vaguely (but not explicitly) suggest the head of a weird, demonic bull (because in the book hell is also depicted as the Minotaur / the bull-headed god Moloch).

The pic will show a Robert / Everyman figure kneeling inside the mouth, hands clasped in prayer. But he’s not kneeling directly on the red tongue. Instead, he’s on a round, white communion wafer, which sits on top of the tongue. Hell is either about to try

¹¹⁶ Figure 3 in the essay on ‘Christian Fantasy’ combines both approaches.

¹¹⁷ I’m not aware of any direct depictions of hell vomiting out Christ. However, images of the whale vomiting out Jonah were juxtaposed with images of the Harrowing, to make the typological connection. See Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 21-2, 154-5.

to swallow this wafer, or is in the process of vomiting it back out, but in any case, hell is sticking its tongue out, as if at the doctor's.

Communion wafers are sometimes embossed with Christian symbols, one of which is the Agnus Dei (the image is also invoked in the words of the mass at the consecration of the host). Our wafer will instead be inscribed with the pattern / shape of the Chartres labyrinth from the first illustration, with Robert positioned at the centre. Not sure what this necessitates regarding the relative scale of Robert / wafer / hell-mouth, but see if you can figure it out.

Re: the labyrinth pattern on the wafer. Don't attempt to draw the path with two separate 'sides' enclosing a central space, as in the first illustration. Just do it as a single red line, to make it easier to draw at a smaller scale.

People in hell are always naked, so the only period indicators in medieval illustrations are in the general artistic style for human physiology (medieval faces often look a bit gormless to me)—and haircuts! But since this is (sort of) Robert, who at this point in the story has been hacking his own hair off with a pair of scissors for the past several years, his hair won't be noticeably 80s in style. He's also described as wearing dirty jeans, so give him those too, but he's bare-chested and barefoot. Robert's ears are described as sticking out like Prince Charles in an early chapter, so give a suggestion of this, but don't emphasise it too much, because we want to keep the dual significance whereby he stands for Everyman as well as himself (he should seem like a type rather than an individual). He should nonetheless look very much the worse for wear: bony and thin, but also a bit misshapen. He's approx. 27 years old.

Christ stands outside the hell-mouth. He's carrying an ensign with the same design as the one in the scapegoat picture, and he has a halo. He is wearing a cloak with a shoulder

brooch, as he is often represented. However, his body and face appear as that of a skeleton, like those which feature in a Dance of Death. It shouldn't be a clean skeleton either, but one with tufts of hair, and gobbets of dried flesh and skin.

Skeletons in the Dance of Death sometimes have a jaunty, irreverent or mocking air. We don't want that. This Christ skeleton should be serene and authoritative. It should also be drawn at a larger scale to Everyman / Robert, and it's reaching down to offer its free hand for Robert to take.

Around the wafer, the hell-mouth is vomiting up a flood of red wine (the blood of Christ, to accompany the body of the host). Perhaps the wafer is even floating on the flood, being carried forward out of the mouth, so the wafer's like a raft for Robert—if you can make that work.

N. B. No demons in this hell: only the mouth.

I initially thought of having the hell-mouth spewing its guts up, so that they flow around Robert and the wafer, and the coils of the guts would suggest (but obviously not directly reproduce) the shapes of the labyrinth, which in the text of *Brethren* is compared to both the inside of an ear and the packed cavity of the intestines. In the pic, Robert would then also be at the centre of this alternative labyrinth of guts.

I don't think this will work—it may not be obvious what the spilling guts are, or why they're there, plus it will make the picture too busy.¹¹⁸ It's better to keep the focus on the wafer and wine (the body of Christ inside the body of hell), but I mention it so you're aware of some of the broader thematic issues, i.e. the association between hell and the (disintegrating, putrefying, turned inside-out) body.

¹¹⁸ In fact, Dan managed to render the tide of blood flowing out of the hell-mouth in such a way that the waves suggest tubular coils.

Postscript to Second Illustration

Dan did not draw Christ outside the hell-mouth, reaching in to draw Robert / Everyman out. Instead, the dead Christ is inside hell, with His foot on the wafer that represents His resurrected body, which is on its way out of hell. This actually works better thematically.

Looking at the finished illustration, I thought it would not be obvious to the viewer that Robert / Everyman is kneeling on a giant communion wafer, so I added a clarification to that effect in the written text of the novel.

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