

Sunday 14 January 2001

The bed was warm. If a foot or an elbow accidentally found its way out from under the quilt she could feel the chill in the air, even though the central heating had turned itself on half an hour ago. But her knees and neck and back were warm. She burrowed down under the covers, breathing in the scent of just-washed sheets. Her eyes were closed, but she was fully awake, waiting.

Distantly at first, then with increasing strength, she heard the drum of a powerful engine as it rounded the corner of the street, its thumping notes drowning out the early birdsong. There was sudden silence as it came to a halt on the drive. The garage door screeched as it was pushed up, and a few moments later clanged as it shut.

Smiling, her eyes still closed, she tracked his movements: the grating of the key in the lock, the pulling off of boots, the padding of socked feet up the stairs, the soft brush of the door opening onto carpet, the quiet shedding of clothes. Ten minutes after the stilling of the Norton's engine, his naked body slid under the quilt.

'You awake?' he whispered.

All pretence of sleeping abandoned, she let out a piercing shriek. 'Josh, your hands are *freezing*.'

She slid her arms round his waist. 'It's nine o'clock. I'm getting up.'

'Do you have to?' he mumbled sleepily.

‘Yes. It’s Sunday. I’m going to church.’

‘Do you want me to come with you? I will if you want.’

‘Only if you want to.’

He rolled over onto his side, facing her, propping himself up on one elbow. His face was heavy with weariness after his long night at work, but his eyes still glinted. ‘I’d much rather lie here beside your warm bare skin than listen to one of Roger’s sermons.’

‘Then I’ll remove temptation by getting up.’

Josh groaned and fell back, rubbing his eyes. ‘All right, all right. Let me get an hour’s kip. Wake me at ten.’

Eileen stood under the shower, feeling the water beat on her upturned face. She felt a smile creep up on her. *Thank you, Lord. Thank you for my life. How easy it was, after all.* It wasn’t all easy, of course. It couldn’t be, this side of the great divide. There were worries still. But her life was transformed: at its beating heart was something she had thought never to know again, in human terms, something warm, solid, utterly reliable. There were times when contemplating it made her feel almost foolish.

‘Josh, it’s gone ten. I’ve brought you some tea.’

He opened his eyes blearily and fumbled on the bedside table for his glasses. She put the mug down and he took her hand. ‘Come back to bed instead.’

‘Not a chance,’ she said, shaking her head, but smiling. ‘If you’ve got enough energy for lust you’ve got enough for church. You stay there if you want. I’m going.’

Josh pulled himself up and picked up the tea. ‘You’re a hard woman.’

Eileen perched on the side of the bed. ‘It’s for your own good,’ she said, serious now. ‘When I snuff it, or you do, I want you to be with me, not in some dark hole eternally because you wouldn’t listen.’

Josh’s eyes crinkled. ‘I know. And maybe, my love, your efforts are beginning to bear fruit.’

‘I hope so. It’s hard work, being hitched to a heathen.’

‘No harder than being saddled with a saint.’

‘Ha, ha.’ She stood up and folded her arms.

‘Anyway,’ he said, taking a gulp of his tea, ‘I’m not a heathen. More of a long-term backslider.’

‘Whatever. Words will get you nowhere. It’s time to get up.’

They walked briskly, muffled against the raw January chill that seemed to seep into their bones. It was a five-minute walk: down Bluff Lane, turn right, past the modest row of shops, shuttered now – convenience store, multicultural takeaway, hairdresser, betting shop – to the church, St. Barnabas’, sixties modern, ugly and functional, warm and welcoming. With only a minute before eleven o’clock they just had time to pick up books, whisper greetings and slide into slippery wooden pews towards the back. Then Roger was there, hearty voice ringing out, and people were shuffling to their feet for the first hymn.

Afterwards Eileen sipped at a cup of weak tea and grimaced. ‘I swear you were asleep in the sermon,’ she muttered to Josh.

‘No surprise if I was,’ he said. ‘But actually I was just resting my eyes.’

‘They look in need of rest. Baggy and bleary.’

‘Thanks. But you’re right. I’ll be stretched out on the sofa this afternoon, I think.’

‘This tea’s awful. Could you dispose of it for me? Discreetly. I need to catch a few people before we go home.’

Josh groaned. ‘At least half an hour, then.’

‘Ten minutes. Anyway, looks like Mrs. Melrose is bearing down on you.’

‘Oh, help.’

‘Don’t be uncharitable. Turn on the charm. You can if you want.’

They walked home under a sky of rolling grey cloud. Josh hugged her gloved hand to his side and yawned.

‘You seemed very close with Mrs. Melrose,’ Eileen said.

‘She was asking after you.’

‘Oh?’

‘She wanted to know if you were well.’

‘The dear soul has been anxious about my health for months. I keep telling her I’m fine.’

‘She’s getting a bit forgetful,’ Josh said. ‘Like my mum. I phoned her yesterday and she asked me all the same questions as last week. Anyway, it wasn’t so long ago you scared us all to death.’

‘Gone and forgotten,’ Eileen said, remembering.

It had been another morning when Josh came home after a night shift, this time in merciless daylight, because it was still summer. Eileen could never sleep when it was so light, and lay dreaming under a sheet. His footsteps on the stairs, she recalled, seemed unusually heavy. It must have been a stressful night. He threw off his clothes with a sigh and lay down beside her.

Barely five minutes later he pulled away from her suddenly, frowning.

‘What?’

‘So when were you planning to tell me?’ he said sternly.

She looked at him and saw that there was no point in prevarication.

‘Soon. I only noticed it myself a day or two ago.’ She wrapped her arms tightly round herself as if to hold in this thing, this intrusive, unwelcome, uncompromising fact. Soaping herself in the shower a few days previously her hand had found a lump on the underside of her breast, small as a marble, movable, hard; and she had stood still under the streaming water, a cold nausea clenching her guts.

‘Why didn’t you say something?’ He was fierce, relentless, and in the sudden revival of her fright she felt tears spring to her eyes.

‘I didn’t want the bubble to burst. Not yet.’

He groaned in frustration and pulled her into his arms, rubbing her back. ‘Stupid woman,’ he said. ‘There is no bubble. It can’t burst.’ He held her away from him and looked into her brimming eyes. ‘This is it, sweetheart. Reality. This is what we’ve got. We weather it together.’

And we did. But why am I still surprised? I embarrass myself sometimes with my own stupidity. It's a good job nobody knows the full extent of that. Just me and God. Why wouldn't I think that Josh would be there through it all, as I would have been for him? What do they call it? Default mode. I'm so used to going it alone I just fall back into my old habits, even now. Or perhaps not quite so much, not after that scary episode.

As they walked up their front path a voice called to them from the neighbouring house. An elderly lady in a blue checked apron was drying her hands on a towel in her open doorway. 'Morning, my dears. Just thought I'd tell you, don't be wondering where that cat of yours is, he's curled up on my sofa.'

'For a change!' Eileen laughed. 'Thanks, Doris. Kick him out when you're fed up with him.' She waved as the old lady closed her door.

She put the key in the lock. 'You go and rest, then,' she said to Josh. 'I'll peel potatoes.'

Josh grinned. 'Poor slave.'

'Just this once.'

Her hands in muddy water, she tracked back again to those dark few months of tests and hospital visits, of fears of malignancy, of what seemed endless waiting, until at last they told her that she didn't have cancer but something called a granular cell tumour: not only not life-threatening but curable. She remembered sitting in the consultant's office, Josh beside her holding both her shaking hands in one of his, and the consultant shuffling the pathologist's report and saying, almost to himself, 'It's most unusual. I've not seen one of these for a good many years.' Then he had looked up, and peered over his half-moon glasses, as if seeing for the first time not a patient with an uncommon condition but a middle-aged couple in a

highly emotional state, and he smiled, clearly delighted. ‘Well, now. This we can sort out. A minor operation, and you’ll have nothing to remind you but a tiny scar. Go home and celebrate. I’ll book you in.’

They had walked back down the hospital corridor in stunned silence, Josh’s arm round her shoulders, and then she had burst into tears and sobbed all the way back to the car park. *Well, I suppose I can be forgiven for that.* But something had changed between them, she knew: from the still, to her, astonishing high of mutual discovery, the delight of finding themselves in such a ridiculous state of adoration, they had dropped suddenly into a cold place of dread, and faced the ending of all their joys, which seemed then so fleeting and so fragile. Now, she knew how much she depended on him, and how he could always be depended on, and while she marvelled at this new depth it also terrified her. Washing her hands at the sink, she shook her head. *No love, no fear. No treasure, nothing to lose.* And Josh was aware of it too, of course: while she had stood to lose her life, he had contemplated losing her. Maybe that was the moment when his own tide had turned, barely noticed at the time: the moment when he found himself pouring out gratitude to a God to whom he had been a stranger for so long.

She had the operation in late October. By her birthday she knew it had been successful. As a result it had been a happy Christmas, with the wonder of the Incarnation lapped over by their own particular blessing. Eileen smiled to herself as she recalled going over to Natasha and Sean’s for Christmas Day, a bin-bag of presents in the boot of the car; then sitting on their sofa in the afternoon, replete with turkey and pudding, watching as two-year-old Daniel, shrieking with amusement, decorated Josh and Christina with tinsel and paper-chains. Eileen had charge of three-month-old Ben, for whom paper-chains were simply something to follow with his wobbly eyes. And then, as they were going home that evening, with both the boys asleep, putting on coats against a chill wind blowing in at the open front door, Natasha had hugged her mother tightly. ‘It could have been so different, Mum. Thank God you’re all right.’

Eileen dried her hands and put the saucepan on to boil. *What can I say?*
Except amen?

Eileen said, 'Let's leave the washing up and go for a walk round the park before it gets too dark. I'm beginning to feel claustrophobic, being stuck in so much this time of year.'

'You are a slave-driver. I could do with some more sleep.'

'Sure it's sleep you mean?'

'Well?'

'Time for all that later. I'm going out. You coming?'

'OK. I give in.'

They put on coats and boots and left by the door of the conservatory that led into the garden. There was a gate in the back fence which gave onto Ramsley park. Josh kept it locked because of the crowds of kids and the occasional drunk who frequented the park, though there were fewer now in the middle of winter. He pulled the gate shut after them, took her hand and strode out across the grass and onto the gravel path. Darkness was already beginning to fall, blurring the trees and shrubs into murky clumps. On the horizon lay a thin line of orange, a remnant of the setting sun.

'So what did you think of Roger's sermon this morning?' Eileen said, with a twitch of a smile.

'You think I was asleep, don't you?' Josh said. 'You are a cynic. I thought it was one of his better ones, since you ask. More joined-up. Not so much rambling.'

'Hm. Maybe he's making it his New Year's resolution,' Eileen said.

‘Or maybe someone bought him a book for Christmas,’ Josh said. “‘The harassed vicar’s guide to comprehensible preaching.’”

‘When Roger’s on form he’s brilliant,’ Eileen said. ‘And no one, not even you, can doubt his sincerity. It can’t be easy, though, to get any peace and quiet at all in a vicarage with a wonderfully loud French wife and two small children racketing around. Or even to get much sleep.’

‘Mrs. Melrose asked me this morning why the children so often come to church in their slippers and eating bread and jam.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought that of Mrs. Melrose. She is a nice old lady normally.’

‘She wasn’t being bitchy at all, just puzzled. I didn’t tell her my theory.’

‘Good! I can’t imagine what she would have thought! She probably thinks you are polite and respectable.’

Josh chuckled. ‘I still think the...how shall I say? the fluctuation in the sermons, and the state of the children, is down to Roger and Claudine’s sex life.’

‘Who cares? I love them dearly, and the children are delightful, gabbling away to each other in French under the pew. And I’m glad there aren’t too many stiff-necked critics. For my money Roger and Claudine are just what Christians should be like: warm, committed, full of love. If they don’t have time to get the children dressed properly because they’re too worn out from their exertions from the night before, good luck to them.’

‘The night before, the morning before...sounds like us, and we’re old as the hills.’

‘Ha! Speak for yourself. Luckily for us we don’t have small children. Just a mostly-absent cat. Anyway, I think we’ve gone far enough. What do you say we turn around and go back home for a cup of tea?’

‘Now you’re talking.’

They skirted the small lake, its smooth water dark, the paddle-boats drawn up at the side, chained together and covered with tarpaulins. Eileen shivered. ‘I’ve been thinking about Christina,’ she said.

‘For a change,’ Josh said, shaking his head.

‘I know, you say I worry too much. But she’s very thin.’

‘Darling girl, she was never anything but.’

‘She says she’s all right. But she wouldn’t tell us if she wasn’t. I know her. She’s very close.’

‘Just like you. Like you used to be. Before I came along and spread a bit of sunshine in your life.’

‘Oh, that’s what you were doing. I did wonder.’ Still walking, she looked up at him, her brows drawn together. ‘All the business with John. Is she really OK?’

He shook his head. They arrived at the back gate and Josh pushed it open. They went through into the garden and he relocked the gate. It was fully dark; the garden was all shadows, the house a silhouette against the streetlights.

Josh paused by the back door. ‘Look, whatever’s happened has been her choice. You know that. Maybe she regrets it, I don’t know. But it was her idea to send him packing.’

Eileen unlocked the door, stepped inside and switched on the light. She pulled off her boots and stuffed her feet into slippers. ‘All she said to me was that John didn’t seem to have his heart in it, in them, not as completely as she wanted.’

‘Well, he’s not likely to, is he, with Helen and the boys still in the background. That’s not going to change.’ Josh grunted with the effort of pulling off his boots.

‘Maybe she should have thought twice about giving him such an uncompromising choice,’ Eileen said. She picked up the kettle and filled it at the sink. ‘Sometimes I think she is too honest for her own good.’

‘She’s an adult, love. She’s made a choice. Now she has to live with it. We all have to do that.’

Eileen sighed. ‘I know. I just think of her in that little bedsit by herself, going off to work every day in the library, eating her sandwich in the park. It’s a funny life for a young person. I can’t help worrying about her.’

Josh sat at the kitchen table and folded his arms. ‘You’ll be saying next you wish she’d meet some nice young chap with a steady job.’

‘No. It used to drive me nuts when Marie was in match-making mode. Though I have more of an insight into her motives now.’ She grinned slyly as she poured boiling water into the teapot.

‘You mentioning Marie reminds me. Something you said earlier. Mm, let me see, yes, it was “time for all that later.” How about you pour the tea and we take it upstairs?’