

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

John Barlow

STORM **BOOKS**

*There's only two kinds of people:
there's saved people and there's lost people.*

Bob Dylan

Prologue

Warren was confused. There was a white van up ahead, parked close to the trees, its back doors illuminated in the headlights of his scooter. But no one got out of the van.

He'd done what he was told. Up the old York Road. Take the turning to Heston. First lay-by on the right. Just like Ronnie had said. Ronnie wasn't here, though.

Finally he got off the scooter, but left it running. He removed his helmet. Underneath he wore an old knitted skull cap that came down over his ears at the sides, and thick black-rimmed glasses. What with all that, plus his donkey jacket, he seemed well protected against the night. But he didn't feel protected. It was dark, there was no moon in the sky, and the road was deserted.

This wasn't right. He didn't like being out on his own at night. Not in a place like this. He wanted to get back on his scooter and ride away. But he didn't want to let Ronnie down.

Something moved behind him.

He lost his balance, felt the rush of air as he fell.

Then he was on the ground. Grit against his face, wet dirt on his lips. His glasses were gone, and the side of his head was beginning to throb.

He sensed someone kneeling over him.

Then nothing.

“Sorry about that, mate,” he heard.

He felt himself being dragged into the back of the van.

“You’re a strong lad! I didn’t want any trouble.”

“What’s...” Warren mumbled, squinting into the darkness, his eyes useless without his specs. “Ronnie?”

“There’s been a bit of bother. Trust me. We’ve got to get you safe. You trust me, don’t you Warren?”

Warren tried to nod, his head unsteady, his breathing short and fast.

“Where we going?” he said, feeling the cold steel floor of the van beneath him. All he could see above him was the outline of someone’s head.

“Do you like Minecraft?”

Warren nodded again, as a pungent stink of chemicals filled his nostrils.

“Then you’re going to paradise, my friend.”

A cloth was pushed hard into his face.

Then there was blackness.

FRIDAY

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John Ray looked out at his audience and smiled.

“Okay, that’s it. Have a good weekend.”

There were about forty students in front of him, most of them now packing away their books and laptops.

“For the seminar next week can you please read the chapter on capital gains tax.”

Groans rumbled around the lecture hall.

“I do apologise! But, y’know, this module is called An Introduction to Accountancy, not Bullfighting for Beginners. Also ...”

He held up a hand. The groans tailed off.

“... since we’ve been talking about the stock market today, here’s a riddle: if you know that the price of a stock is going to *fall*, how can you turn a profit by trading it?”

He watched as about half the class wrote down the question, or tapped it into their phones. The other half began making their way to the double doors at the back of the hall as if accountancy was already a distant memory.

“What’s the prize?” said a skinny kid in the front row, in a faded Muse t-shirt that seemed too small. “I mean, if we find out how.”

“*If?* Of course you will! You’ve got the internet. You can find out anything these days!” He swept an arm around, as if indicating the four walls. “Formal education is pointless in the age of Google!”

“So this is pointless?” said the young man as he crammed a fat textbook into his canvas bag.

John paused.

“Relatively so. But capital gains tax next week? Now that’s really pointless.”

With that he scooped up his notes, checked his phone for missed calls, and joined the queue for the doors that led to an accountancy-free weekend.

Only then, as he went slowly up the short flight of stairs to the back of the hall, did he notice a familiar face. Familiar and ... *old*. About the same age as him. Amid a sea of youth, the woman standing at the back was out of place, the lines of experience on her pale, angular face curiously at odds with the smooth, untroubled flesh of the eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds around her.

“Hello?” he said, a couple of steps too soon, the word hanging awkwardly between them as he approached.

“Hello John,” said Detective Chief Superintendent Shirley Kirk.

“The academic life suits you,” she said as they made their way down a busy corridor and out onto the lawned quadrangle of Hammerton College.

John Ray’s thick dark hair was just the same, a little too long and wilfully unkempt. He was dressed just as she remembered: loose black suit with a white shirt open at the neck. Yet as they emerged into the chill of the late afternoon, she detected a difference in him, something subtle but undeniable. He still looked as if he’d just walked out of a casino at six in the morning. But the easy swagger was gone; it was as if he’d walked out of the casino because he’d lost everything.

“College life,” he said, lighting a Marlboro and letting a massive cloud of smoke rise and swirl against the deep red brickwork of the quadrangle. “Rescued me from, well, from I don’t know what. How on earth did you find me here?”

“Google. Coppers have it too. By the way, I’m sorry about your dad. I haven’t seen you since.”

He forced the most painful of smiles.

“I’m still not sure if I’m sorry, all things considered.”

“On a personal level, though.”

She let her voice fall away, unsure of what else to say. This was John Ray, a man whose ebullience had always seemed unshakeable. Who with the most casual of glances could make any woman feel a little better about herself, and every man a little worse. Who seemed to be carried through life on a tide of good living and the carefree expectation that it would continue forever.

Yet here he was, miles from anywhere, teaching accountancy at Hammerton College.

John sensed her hesitance.

“This job kind of turned up,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“College lecturer? Don’t you need a tweed jacket?”

“I’m not even a lecturer. Just a teaching assistant. Part-time. I’m doing a course at Leeds City University so I can apply to be a lecturer.”

“Right, I see ...”

“Hopefully, in a year of two I can make the position permanent.”

He drew hard on his cigarette. There didn’t seem to be much more to say about his new life. Certainly, nothing that he wanted to say.

“Perhaps it was a mistake me coming to see you,” she said. “You’ve moved on. Made a change. I don’t want to interfere.”

“I’m still me! What can I do for you?”

“It’s complicated. Perhaps we could talk somewhere a bit more—”

Before she could finish, someone knocked on the window right behind her. Shirley looked around, unable to conceal her irritation. A young woman beckoned to John, pointing at her wrist.

“Date with a student?” Kirk asked, turning her back on the window.

“No, a colleague. I have a departmental meeting. Can’t miss it. I’m ...” and for the first time a real smile broke out on his face, a glint of fun in his golden eyes, “I’m still working my probationary period.”

Jesus, Kirk willed herself not to say.

“Let’s have dinner,” he said.

“Now that sounds more like John Ray!”

A couple of minutes later, as she watched him wander off to his departmental meeting, Shirley Kirk was not sure she really wanted to spend an entire evening with the new John Ray. The death of his father a year ago had clearly affected him badly. Perhaps that wasn’t such a surprise. His dad hadn’t just been murdered, he’d been blown up with industrial explosives. John had witnessed it, held at gunpoint and unable to do anything about it.

She made her way back to a black Jaguar X-Type. It was nearly six o’clock, and the car park was emptying fast. She let her gaze take in the whole place, making sure her eyes didn’t linger on any particular vehicle. But she’d already clocked the one she was looking for, parked up in the far corner.

How easy police work was sometimes! She should get a job teaching it, she told herself, turning to look at the college. The main part, a large red-brick Victorian building, had previously been a boarding school. It was elegant, in its way, and had aged well, with mock battlements and decorative chimney pots, plus a bulky growth of ivy covering one end. Huddled close by, like beggars around a gentleman of means, were various modern annexes in vomit-coloured concrete, plus a couple of dark green prefabs.

Hammerton College was so low on the educational hierarchy that one of the universities in Leeds had to

award degrees on its behalf. Students came here for a variety of courses, and a variety of reasons; but it offered no fast track to a glittering future. The institution was not quite a laughing stock, but well on the way. And here was John Ray, half-Spanish bon vivant and last remaining member of the Ray criminal family, teaching An Introduction to Accountancy.

Welcome to the life and death of the Rays, she told herself, dropping into the cool leather seat of her beloved Jag and slamming the door shut.

“Accountancy? *Hopefully?*” she muttered. “It’s a bloody crime!”

Warren was bouncing up and down, gurgling with delight. The chair creaked under the weight of his large, thick-set body as he stared at the screen, his face pushed up so close that the tip of his nose almost touched it.

He'd been playing Minecraft for six hours, the game expanding into ever more elaborate schemes and designs, then devolving into temporary chaos, before *Craft-Master Warren* regained control. He'd set up the longest railway track in Minecraft history, and constructed an entire building out of TNT then watched as it consumed itself in a series of massive explosions, one triggering the next in an amazing chain-reaction of destruction. In short, a thirty-five-year-old boy in the world of his dreams.

There was no internet, so he couldn't play against anybody else. But it was still pretty awesome. He could have carried on like this all day without stopping, were it not for his voracious appetite, plus the strain of playing without his glasses.

He paused the game and swivelled ninety degrees. On a table immediately to his left was a microwave oven, like the one they had at work. Warren grabbed a Big Mac from a stack of a dozen burgers and popped it into the

microwave. He got to his feet and rummaged through the mass of other goodies further along the table: bottles of Coke, Fanta, Powerade, and so many kinds of potato and corn snacks that his head spun in delirium every time he had to choose something. Then there were Mr Kipling's angel cakes, jam tarts, fondant fancies, Battenberg cake; Ginster's pork pies, sausage rolls, Scotch eggs ... All the things he loved the most. There were even packets of microwaveable French fries, and little sachets of ketchup. He was allowed to eat anything he wanted. It didn't get better than this.

The microwave pinged. Out came the burger, steaming as he removed it from the box. Armed with a new bottle of Coke and his Big Mac, he returned to the computer and resumed the game, playing deftly with one hand as he crammed food into his mouth.

He'd woken up late. The light was already streaming into the room when his tired eyes finally opened. He felt groggy, yet he was warm and comfortable. It took him a few moments to realise that he wasn't in his own bed.

He sat up and reached for his glasses on the bedside table. But there was no bedside table. This was not his bed, and it wasn't his bedroom. Still half-asleep he slumped back down onto the pillows and felt how warm and soft they were, how restful it was to lie here, despite his aching head. Not like the old, uneven bed in his flat with its nylon sheets. No; this was a good bed, with a thick feather quilt and big, soft pillows.

He was slowly waking up. The room? It was simple, not much furniture. But it was warm and it smelled nice, like flowers. He thought about his own bedroom at home, with the constant stink of the Kebab shop coming up through the floorboards, and the damp in the bathroom. This was much nicer.

But where was he? And what about last night? Ronnie?

His thoughts were fuzzy and indistinct, but gradually they started to take shape. And as they did, fear began to assert itself. He'd be late for work! What would he say? He'd never been late before.

Warren liked order. He liked routine. His mornings were always the same: toilet, shower, mug of hot chocolate, cereal, then straight to work. Every day, exactly the same. Jennifer said routine was good. Keep to a routine, she said. Write it down if you want. Have a list on the wall to remind you.

But now?

He threw himself out of bed, looked down, and saw that he was fully dressed. That's why he'd been so warm. His old heavy donkey jacket was gone, his woollen skull cap too. But other than that he was dressed as he had been yesterday evening when he'd driven to Heston to meet Ronnie. Now he was late for work.

His lower jaw was starting to quiver. He was alone, and he was getting frightened. Where were his glasses? He couldn't go to work without them.

He reached into the pocket of his jeans. His phone was gone. And his keys. But they were *never* missing. He kept them there, in the two front pockets of his trousers. Have

a routine; have a place for everything. He always knew where his phone and keys were, because he had a routine. Every morning he would get to work, open the storeroom, set up his laptop, and charge his phone. Then he'd make the tea. Always.

The absence of the phone was too much for him. He stood there, in a room he didn't know, in a place he didn't know, and tears began to fall from his eyes. Without his phone he couldn't ring Ronnie, he couldn't ring Jennifer, couldn't ring work. The tears came in a rush. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed until he shook.

Finally, after the Coke and the Big Mac were finished, he got bored. He'd never played one game for so long. Even on a weekend he tended to have a few games on the go at the same time, and there were always people online with you. But today was different. He was on his own, and he'd been given permission to spend all day on Minecraft *if he wanted*. Plus there was a table piled high with food and drink.

But now he needed a break. His headache had come back, because he'd been playing all day without glasses, and it was getting worse.

He got up from the creaking chair and stretched. I bet they're all wondering where I am at work, he told himself, feeling a guilty thrill at the idea of just not going in. A Friday as well! It was his day to collect the bacon butties on a Friday. Who'd be going for them now?

The thought made him hungry. He considered another burger, but changed his mind at the last minute, opening a packet of chilli nachos instead and shoving half a dozen into his mouth.

On the edge of the *feast table* (as he now called it) was an envelope, WARREN written on it in large black letters. Earlier that morning, after he'd finally stopped crying, he had noticed the letter propped up on a small table by the bedroom door. There had been a thermos flask next to it, although now both the flask and the letter were on the feast table in the adjoining room (which he had christened the *gaming chamber*).

The flask had been full of hot chocolate to drink, made using full-fat milk and extra sugar, just as he liked it. The letter, which he had read a dozen times over the course of the intervening six hours, was addressed to him:

Dear Warren

Sorry about last night. I had to get you here without a struggle, and you're a strong lad!

Look mate. You're in a bit of trouble. It's not your fault, but you need someone to help you, or things are going to be really bad.

I'll explain later.

I brought you here to protect you. All you have to do is stay for a day or two. Nothing more than that.

I promise.

Don't go out. Just stay here and play Minecraft on the computer. All day if you want! I have left food for you. Eat as much as you like. Anything.

Don't go outside, OK?

You haven't done anything wrong, Warren.

It's all a misunderstanding. I'm sorting it out for you.

I told them at the depot that you're not coming in to work today.

I spoke to Jennifer at Social Services. She knows you're with me. She says it's the best thing to do.

I'll be back later. Have a good time!

I'll sort everything out.

And thanks for that stuff you got me.

Ronnie

PS Hope you liked the hot chocolate!

Warren read slowly, stumbling over some of the longer words, even though he'd read them all a dozen times already, finally managing to understand everything again. When he'd finished he nodded, refolding the letter and putting it back in the envelope. The bit about having problems made him nervous, but he was glad that Ronnie was looking after things for him. As for the hot chocolate, that was amazing! He'd been having hot chocolate for breakfast since he was nine, back at the home.

He took the flask and opened it, knowing that it was empty. He'd drunk it all for breakfast, and now all he could do was let the last remaining drops trickle into his mouth. Then, as he had done a handful of times already, he wandered around.

The gaming chamber seemed to be someone's front room, but one that had not been lived in for a while. There was a large sofa and a place for a TV, although it was empty. The bookshelves were bare, apart from a few odd dishes and ornaments. There was no telephone. Other than that there were two tables: on one of them the computer, and on the other the food and the microwave.

The bedroom led off from the main room. It was even starker. Apart from the bed, there was nothing but a small table by the door. Then there was a bathroom, the air thick with the smell of toilet cleaner. Next to the toilet was a pack of toilet paper; there was also a new toothbrush, and a tube of toothpaste. This morning when he used the bathroom everything had been unopened in its packaging.

All the other doors were locked. Whether there was an upstairs he had no idea. Through the windows, which could not be opened, he could see a yard, the stonework old and weathered, and beyond that a succession of large, irregular fields running down to a patch of woodland. High up above the fields there seemed to be a road or track, but no vehicles ventured along it.

It was OK. He understood. It was better to stay here where he was safe. This must be Ronnie's place. If only he could have checked with Jennifer, he thought. But somehow he'd lost his phone, and there was no landline here.

He looked over at the computer, which purred softly, then at the small mountain of delicious food that Ronnie had laid on for him. As long as Jennifer knows, he told himself. And work. As long as everybody at work knew, it

was alright. A misunderstanding, that was all. Ronnie would sort it out.

Then he had an amazing idea: what if there were other games on the computer? All day, and he'd never even looked to see what else there was! He threw his packet of chilli nachos aside and leapt across the room.

“Oh, good old Ronnie!” he shouted as he clicked on the Games folder.

They met at exactly eight o'clock in the Victorian Quarter. By that time the pavement bars were crowded, after-work drinkers slowly giving way to those at the start of a long Friday night out. Leeds: it might not be the city that never sleeps, but it does a pretty good job of being the city that never stops drinking.

Shirley Kirk had managed to walk almost all the way up to John before he recognised her. Not that she had changed much since this afternoon. Her hair, which barely reached her shoulders, had been liberated from its former tight control, but otherwise she was more or less the same, apart from the neat black dress that peeped out from her brown leather overcoat.

“Right on time!” she said, smiling.

“Didn’t see you coming!”

For just a second, there in the noise of the arcade, he was taken aback. He hadn’t seen her as she approached because he’d been expecting the same middle-aged woman who’d turned up unexpectedly at his accountancy class that afternoon. But now, in the context of the busy Victorian Arcade, with its long elegant shop fronts and floral fountains, she looked thoroughly in command. This

was her turf, and she carried herself with unaffected panache and a touch of arrogance. Her slight but notably athletic frame didn't do any harm either, John noted, sucking in his stomach.

He gave her a brief kiss on the cheek. He held back his urge to kiss her on the other cheek, the greeting he would have given anyone from the Spanish side of his family, but which Yorkshire folk consider to be only slightly less effete than wearing a pink bowler hat.

"You look ..." he said, "you look wonderful!"

Her glower was muted, but not much.

"The old Ray charm, eh? Don't forget, I spent several happy evenings in an interrogation room with your dad."

"And you never got a conviction if I recall!"

It was the first time in a long and traumatic twelve months that he'd mentioned his father without a tightening of the gut. It was also, he realised, the first time in quite a while he had said anything remotely flirtatious to a woman. He paused, relishing the unexpected flicker of euphoria that it produced in him, like a charge of energy, of hope, a sudden reminder that he was alive.

His date looked on patiently. Patience, though, wasn't Shirley Kirk's strong suit.

"Shall we ...?" she said.

John returned to the present, fixing her with his eyes.

"Yes!"

He took a couple of exaggerated paces towards the arcade exit, then turned.

"Tonight I am taking you to a gentlemen's outfitters!"

“The curtain place?” she said. “Really?”

“*Really* really!”

He began walking backwards out onto the pavement of Vicar Lane, beckoning her to follow. “Been before?”

“No!” she said defiantly as she followed.

It was not her kind of place. But tonight she was willing to be led.

The Man Behind the Curtain was situated above a gentlemen's outfitters called Flannels. Customers for the restaurant were required to make their way through the shop, right to the back, then take a lift up to the restaurant. Once Flannels had closed for the evening, a security guard remained on the shop floor to make sure that no flannels went missing as the curtains brigade came and went.

The chef, it was said, was an eccentric genius, having previously worked for another eccentric genius in Denmark. A Michelin star had made the place famous soon after opening, and since then the affluent gourmands of Yorkshire had decided that walking through trousers was a price worth paying for access to a gastronomic nut-house of such pedigree.

"You know," John said as they waited for the lift, "I always want to buy a shirt when I eat here. Is it the same for women?"

"I suppose I could buy some cuff links for my uncle," Shirley said as she looked around. "I'm surprised you got a table at such short notice."

The lift arrived.

“I had one already. All I had to do was add you to the party.”

The lift took them upwards.

“Mmm, trainee college teacher eats alone at the city’s most exclusive restaurant. Wouldn’t that be classed as a disjunct?”

“Dunno, I don’t do big words. By the way, you’ve really not been here before?”

She shook her head.

The lift doors opened.

“Voilà!”

The restaurant itself was modest enough, about a dozen tables down a long, thin dining room at the very top of the building, the bare beams of its high, pitched roof on display. The wall on one side had a series of large painted panels, as if Jackson Pollack and Banksy had been given some paint and a couple of crates of wine, and told to get on with it.

If you happened to feel at home in a place like this, Shirley thought, it was probably a perfect setting for dinner. But who the hell feels at home in here?

As if to answer the question, a tall young woman with spiky orange hair and a pierced lip appeared. She seemed to be the maître d’, and was on first name terms with John. The two of them exchanged no pleasantries. They spoke seriously, as if taking up a previous conversation that had been left unfinished, and before long he got the table he wanted.

“The chairs,” he told Shirley as they were led to the far corner, “are comfier than they look.”

Further consultation with the studded maître d' followed, John giving instructions with low-voiced authority, as if the meal that he and his guest were about to enjoy required the kind of detailed orchestration that only he could fully articulate. Diners at nearby tables looked on, as if trying to glean useful tips on how to stand in a public space and be the most commanding figure there. The problem, though, is that you can't learn it.

Shirley also watched him for a second, but the Ray savoir faire was beginning to grate. Her own authority was based on rank and experience, not family notoriety and the training afforded by a charmed life. When she took charge of a situation it was because she knew what to do, and because her job demanded it. And when she was off-duty the last thing she wanted to do was order people around.

As she waited she looked out of the window. Down on the street below, the atmosphere was still one of sobriety, a kind of buoyant expectation that any city-based copper knows is but the opening movement in a night-long symphony of pissing, vomiting and fighting. A bus pulled up and a conga line of hen-party girls emerged. Dressed up like spring chickens, they wound their way across the pavement and into the Victorian Arcade. Three or four hours later, she knew, the spring chickens would be plucked and bedraggled, and police stations throughout the city would be filling up with bloodied young men unable to enunciate their own name and address. Every weekend it was the same. Three decades she'd been on the force, and each year it got worse. Or she got older. Or both.

“No menu or wine to bother about. Does that suit?” said John as they took their seats, which were exactly as he had described.

“You know something sad?” she said.

A waiter arrived with wine. He had heavily inked forearms, pointy shoes, and a hipster beard so voluminous that it looked as if a swarm of hornets had landed on his chin. He filled their glasses without a word, having already been given instructions not to concern himself with *explaining* things at Mr Ray’s table.

“Sad?” John said.

“Oh, nothing really. It was just the wall paintings. It dawned on me that I haven’t been to an art gallery since I was twenty years old. The year I joined the police.”

“Looks like someone needs taking to lunch up at the art gallery next to the Town Hall. The café’s pretty good.”

“Ah, the old Ray charm again! And, by the way, tonight I’m working. Sort of.”

He smiled. “Okay, let’s get down to work.”

The hornet man returned with an amuse-bouche of deep-fried cod skins mounted on tiny silver skewers. Shirley considered them briefly, then spoke.

“Colin Marsden. Local businessman. You’ve heard of him?”

“Yep. Sports shops, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. He’s a friend of mine. Actually, I know his wife better. Same golf club.”

“How very provincial status quo.”

“Colin came to me with a problem. He’s looking for a private perspective on it, something unofficial, under the radar. He doesn’t want the police involved.”

John tried his cod skins. They were so good he almost wept, but decided against it. In fact, he decided to say nothing at all. He didn’t much like the way the conversation was going, and he was only one mouthful into a twelve-course tasting menu.

“Last year,” she said, “you worked things out before we did.”

This much was true, although John wasn’t proud of it. He had hunted down the man who murdered two of his dad’s associates. With the police struggling to piece things together, it was John Ray who had solved the case.

“I got to him, but not in time. He blew my dad up, if you remember. And himself.”

Shirley nodded. She could appreciate how hard it must have been for John. But she also knew that he was the ideal choice in a situation like this. He had friends in the city. People who had known his dad, the kind of people who might not want to talk to the police. Plus, John wasn’t the white sheep of the Ray family, not exactly.

“Can you be a hundred per cent discreet?”

“I’m warning you, I’m not a private eye.”

“Will you at least hear me out?”

“I’m listening. But I’m not interested in helping Mr Sporting Goods, whatever problem he’s got.”

“You might be interested.”

As if to emphasise the point she grabbed one of her skewers and tore the cod skin off with her teeth. It tasted like cod skin.

Colin Marsden was the owner of SportShack, a chain of sporting goods stores. There were about fifty of them, mostly in the North of England. He was a local boy made good. The kind of outspoken northerner that the press loves. Started with nothing, university of life, college of hard knocks ... All the down-to-earth stuff that made John glad he was the Cambridge-educated son of a Spanish career criminal. Son of a juggler would have done. Anything not to be predictable.

“Colin Marsden’s a boorish loudmouth,” he said.

“He’s a local character. Plus, he’s done pretty well for himself.”

John shook his head. “It’s not the man I dislike, it’s the way he portrays himself. You know, the straight-talking Yorkshireman, flat caps and whippets. The whole stereotype.”

“Everyone plays to their strengths. You think you’re so different? The way you rely on the mystique of your family’s criminal past, the notoriety, the old-world charm of it all?”

“You’re joking! After Cambridge I worked as a corporate accountant for twenty years. I couldn’t have got any further from the family business if I’d tried. I fought the war against cliché!”

“And then, for a little while, you became a second-hand car dealer.”

John held her stare, savouring the subtle accusation in her tone of voice. He loved her for saying it, although he tried not to show it.

“Colin has a problem,” she said, trying to ignore the strange glow of his golden eyes. “And he asked for you.”

“How come? I don’t know him.”

“He said he thought you might be willing to help. You know St Olaf’s, right?”

“Olaf’s? The home for boys? Kind of. My parents were benefactors.”

He drained his wine glass, already on the lookout for a refill. The only problem with fancy restaurants, in his opinion, was that the wine was kept on a separate table.

“But my parents are dead, and St Olaf’s has closed, no?”

St Olaf’s Home for Boys had indeed closed several years ago. Based in an old mill-owner’s residence on the western edge of the city, it had belonged to the Catholic Diocese of Leeds. John’s mother was English and a practising Catholic. She had donated money to the home for many years.

His father, Antonio ‘Tony’ Ray, was Spanish, so Catholicism was his birth right; in a lifetime of thieving and deception he had never once doubted the all-embracing clemency of the Almighty, and neither had he ever thought it necessary to go to confession and put his faith to the test. He had, though, been persuaded that giving piles of cash to St Olaf’s would weigh in his favour when judgment was finally made on his soul.

“I used to go to St Olaf’s now and again when I was a kid,” John said, as he watched his wine glass being

refilled. “Mum was friendly with the housekeeper. I’d play footy with some of the lads there. But that was way back in the seventies, when I was very young. What has this got to do with Colin Marsden? Did he go to St Olaf’s?”

“Yes. He did.”

“An orphan, then?”

“No.” She leant into the table. “This is between you and me. His mother died when he was eleven. He was removed from the family home a couple of months later, after his father beat him senseless and tied him up in the bathroom while he went out drinking.”

“Jesus.”

“It’d been going on for years, apparently. Bloke’s dead now, cirrhosis of the liver, years ago.”

“I don’t remember Colin Marsden at all. I didn’t go there much when I was older. I think Dad worked out that the price of absolution was just too high.”

“Colin doesn’t remember you either. But he’s heard of you. And up at the home too, they still remember your parents.”

“I thought you said it had closed.”

“It has. But the priest in charge still lives there. Father Henry Dardenne. You remember him?”

John nodded. Two large dishes arrived, each with a single ravioli sitting at the bottom, alongside a long smear of what looked like Nutella.

“Could we pause while we try this?” John said, fork already in his hand, although his appetite was waning.

The Nutella turned out to be a reduction of squid's ink, and the ravioli had baby octopus legs inside. After that, the courses kept coming. Chargrilled calf cheek with chive popcorn, red snapper parfait with saffron dust, shrimp risotto ice cream ... each small course served on a plate ten times as big as it needed to be. Apart from the cold lime and cilantro tagliatelles, which were hung from de-leaved bonsai cypresses, one tree for each diner.

The wines kept coming too, glasses replenished efficiently by the wordless hornet man, who seemed to take particular delight in telling them absolutely nothing about what they were drinking. And as the meal progressed, Shirley began to understand what made the man opposite her so engaging. He *listened*. It was something so rare in the people with whom she worked and socialised that at first she thought he was doing it deliberately, humouring her. But he wasn't. Once he'd gone through his repertoire of casual one-liners and that overplayed bonhomie of his, John Ray tended to keep his mouth shut far more than most men. Which was just as well, because there was a lot for him to hear.

A couple of weeks ago an anonymous comment had appeared on an internet forum. It made a vague reference to sexual abuse at St Olaf's Home for Boys. The website itself was for men who had lived there as children, somewhere to share their memories and keep in touch. Since the closure of the home, the site had become increasingly popular with former residents.

The comment about abuse had been met with anger by other members of the forum. But more comments followed.

They were always indirect, never making specific claims, and never naming anyone. And they were always made anonymously. Yet despite the protests from other users, with each new comment the insinuations grew that there had indeed been a dark secret at the heart of St Olaf's.

"And before these comments," John said, "there'd never been any suggestion of misconduct there?"

"None. Not a single accusation anywhere, as far as we can tell. Never."

"A Catholic home for boys? In this day and age?"

"I know. You could almost call it strange. But to my knowledge no one has ever pointed a finger at St Olaf's. Or Father Dardenne."

"And now Marsden's worried?"

Colin Marsden, the home's most prominent ex-resident, had lived at St Olaf's between the ages of eleven and eighteen. However, he had continued to work there as a volunteer well into adulthood. Eventually, with his business established, he was able to contribute financially to the home, and to give some of the older boys work experience in his growing chain of shops, which had initially specialised in mountaineering but soon developed into general sports stores. He also organised the home's sporting activities for many years, donating free equipment and a van; St Olaf's climbing and orienteering teams won several regional competitions under his guidance.

"So he's worried," said John. "Fifty stores. That's a big business. Boss gets dragged into a child abuse scandal? Nasty."

Kirk pushed a stuffed baby pepper around her enormous plate.

“He’s concerned about bad publicity, yes. But I get the feeling that he’s actually more worried about Henry. Father Dardenne, that is.” She glanced down at her plate. “What’s inside this? Is it cheese?”

John had already finished his stuffed peppers.

“Yes, a cheese called Stinking Bishop.”

John smiled, awaiting her reaction. There was none.

“Sorry,” she said. “There’s only so much historical abuse you can take, before you just grow numb to it all. And we’ve had our share in Leeds.” She paused. “Father Dardenne. There’s never been so much as a whisper of anything dodgy about him.”

“And you want me to look into him?”

She sat bolt upright in her chair.

“No. Absolutely not!” It took her a moment or two to regain her composure. “Colin Marsden asked me to speak to you about the situation. Nothing more.” She took a business card from her handbag and slid it across the table. “He asked me to make the first contact with you. I’ve done that. Nothing else. Nothing. We need to be absolutely clear about that. Okay?”

John sipped his wine, taking his time to luxuriate in the effects it was beginning to have on him.

“Now to me that seemed like a bit of insurance on your part.”

“There’s no way I can get any deeper into this.”

“And all the background you’ve just given me?”

“Colin would’ve told you the same. He’s a bit of a rough diamond, but deep down he’s a good bloke.” She also drank some wine, enough to encourage the waiter to return yet again and offer a refill, which she accepted. “And don’t forget, St Olaf’s was where Colin lived, the only real home he had when he was growing up, and afterwards too. He feels a huge attachment to it. These rumours have affected him pretty badly.”

“Three sweet courses,” John said after the last of his lavender and chocolate blancmange had slipped down his throat, “is a couple of sweet courses too many for me.”

“Not nearly enough for me,” said Shirley, her blancmange long gone, the plate in front of her shiny and clean, since she’d used her finger to wipe up the last remaining traces of sweetness.

They’d come to the end of their twelve courses, and the fact that the last three had been absurdly delicious puddings was enough to secure Shirley Kirk’s approval. To her surprise, she had to admit that the rest of the food had been good too. The wine had been even better.

So there they sat, in quiet contentment. Neither felt an urgent need to talk, or to move. The man behind the curtain had done his job.

From down on the street below came the screech of tyres. Then a car door slammed, followed by the sound of shouting. Vehicles began to sound their horns, and the sudden shattering of glass – a bottle, perhaps – added to the sense of chaos.

In the restaurant several diners close to the windows stood and looked out.

“Aren’t you going to, I dunno, *deal* with that?” John asked, stirring his coffee.

“Are you joking! Me? You’re forgetting, Mr Ray, I have so many stripes on my arm I don’t have any. Or pips. My shoulder.” Pause. “Did that make sense?”

“Not a bit.”

She tapped her shoulder. “I’ve got a crown. On my uniform. There’s a crown. But, y’know, to hell with it.”

Chief Superintendent Kirk, after seven or eight glasses of wine, had arrived at that state in which she was aware of the injudicious things she was about to say, but incapable of stopping herself.

“They’re trying to get me out,” she said, as if this explained everything.

By now the local police had arrived down below. Their flashing lights illuminated the windows of the restaurant, casting momentary bursts of blue across the walls. Immediately the noise outside dropped, as young officers with absolutely no stripes on their arms sorted out whatever had just kicked off on Vicar Lane.

“Get you out?” he said.

“Retiring me.”

“You’re not old enough to retire.”

“Ha! You really are a charmer! The week after next I’ll have thirty years’ service.”

“And you’re gonna go?”

She grinned. “Not quietly.”

Following coffee, a slightly tapered bottle arrived that looked more like an oversized flask of eau de toilette than a digestif.

“I didn’t know which you’d prefer, brandy or whisky. I guessed whisky.”

“You guessed right. But what is it?”

She squinted at the label in confusion.

John took the bottle and poured half an inch into each of two tumblers.

“Kavalan. It’s from Taiwan, if you can believe that. It was named best single malt in the world a few years ago. I’m a dedicated follower of fashion.”

“Impressive. And I assume this is off-menu as well, even for a place like this?”

She had recognised the name of the red wine that had been served with the meal – ten years of the golf club’s Wine Appreciation Society had finally paid off. It was far too expensive to be on the set menu of any restaurant, even one with stars. They must have been off-menu the entire evening.

She took the small water jug which had arrived with the whisky and let a few drops trickle into her glass. John did the same with his. Then they drank.

Neither of them felt the slightest self-consciousness in the fact that their first taste of Kavalan took a whole minute. Sixty seconds, in which the world came to a halt, and only the sweet oaky flavours that filled their noses, mouths and throats seemed to make any sense. If he hadn’t known better, John might have said the moment was religious.

“It’s ...” he began, but found himself strangely lost for words.

“It’ll do,” she suggested, cradling the tumbler in both hands and gazing at the golden liquid.

Despite such intense physical contentment, a slight frown crept onto her face. Personally she didn’t care about the cost of wine. But something about it did concern her. She tried hard to enjoy the whisky, but a niggling thought had come between her and the Kavalan.

“You come here a lot, right?” she said, her tone soft, almost apologetic. “And you get world famous whiskies served to your table.”

He tried to shrug it off, but the gesture didn’t even convince him.

“The red wine we had tonight ... what was it called?”

“Petrus,” he said slowly. “One of the great wines of the world.”

“Retail?”

“Who cares?”

“A college lecturer on probation might.”

He drained his glass and poured himself another couple of fingers of Taiwanese nectar.

“Well I don’t think *we* should. Not tonight.”

And she could only agree.

SATURDAY

5

It took her a while to find the instant coffee. It was right at the back of a cupboard, behind a chaos of pasta, jars of spices and, curiously, half a dozen pieces of mouldy ginger root.

“Italian,” she whispered, reading the red, white and green label on the jar. “*Obviously.*”

Mugs were less of a challenge. The double sink was piled high with crockery. It was all dirty, but at least you could see where everything was.

She washed herself a mug and teaspoon as the kettle boiled. There were bits of old food and cigarette butts amid the plates in both sinks, and a sickly smell arose as she ran the hot tap, the water activating a month’s congealed grease and negligence.

The floor was just a touch sticky underfoot. Although in fact there wasn’t very much floor available, since most of the space in the kitchen area was taken up by cardboard crates of wine.

With her mug of steaming black Medaglia D’Oro instant espresso in her hand – the idea of checking for milk in the

fridge was too nauseating even to consider – she turned and leaned on the marble-topped kitchen island.

“Shit,” she said, looking out over John Ray’s huge open-plan living room.

She inhaled the aroma of the coffee, taking slow, measured breaths.

“Shit ... shit ... shit ...”

To her left, three enormous Victorian windows let in the metallic light of the early morning. The effect was starkly majestic, but it did nothing to mitigate the scene of muted squalor that spread out before her. Ashtrays overflowing, newspapers scattered on the polished floorboards as if blown across a park by the wind, countless cereal bowls and wine glasses sitting on bookshelves and on the floor.

At first glance it looked as if the flat’s well-heeled owners had gone away for a long trip somewhere and left the keys with their teenage kids. But this wasn’t the aftermath of an extended house party. There were little oases of order amongst the greater mess: on the coffee table a dozen textbooks sat in two neat piles, a notebook and pencil next to them; and along the back wall there was a brushed aluminium music system with inordinately large speakers, surrounded by a couple of thousand manically ordered CDs looking as if they had received more attention than the rest of the flat put together.

No; this place was a pigsty, but it had all the markings of a hog left alone in his mess. The absence of a permanent female presence was hard to ignore, both here and in the other rooms. But there was something else, something adding to the disorder. Next to the hi-fi speakers were the

boxes which they had presumably come in, and beside them on the floor, lying on their sides like wounded soldiers, were more speakers, perhaps the ones which had recently been replaced. The pattern was repeated at various points: a new Mac on the desk, its white packaging still littering the floor; stacks of Amazon parcels, some half-opened, with bits of wrapping discarded, and others waiting to be opened. Wherever you looked, there was stuff – new stuff, good stuff. This guy was a spender, and then some.

She hadn't noticed the high-end clutter last night when they'd rolled up in a taxi. There'd been no fuss, no making coffee and edging towards the inevitable. They were drunk, and surprisingly happy in each other's company. So they went straight to bed.

Now, as she shook off the effects of so much Taiwanese whisky, she was amazed at the contrast between how she had always imagined John's bachelor pad and the reality, seen in the unforgiving light of another cloudy morning in Leeds. There'd been talk of this place down at HQ, she remembered. A few years ago John had been in the frame for murdering a young girl in the city. It wasn't him, of course, but the officers who'd brought him in seemed to resent his 'posh, puffy penthouse'.

Well it might have been posh once, she thought, running a finger along the marble of the kitchen island with grim amusement. But these days it was a luxury apartment in a converted grammar school that had gone completely to seed. Nothing a few hours' elbow grease couldn't fix. Someone else's, though, not hers. Not in a million years.

The heating was on in the flat, and she was wearing John's white shirt and nothing else. She tiptoed across the living room, catching sight of herself in a wall mirror. She stopped, surprised at how much the out-sized shirt suited her. A smile crept onto her face.

Then it struck her: it was *fine*. It was absolutely fine. Since waking up in his bed something had been troubling her, and it wasn't just the hangover. It was as if the idea of sleeping with John Ray just couldn't be right, and that now, in the bleak morning light, she needed to find an excuse. Wine, whisky, frustration ...

Yet the truth was that she didn't need to find any excuse. Why should she? Last night had been great.

"And another thing," she whispered, turning her shoulders as she admired herself in the mirror. "That's none too shabby for a burnt-out fifty-year-old!"

The bedroom was through a door at the back of the living room. She crept in, sliding her bare feet on the gnarled but highly polished wooden floorboards. There he was, wrapped in the white duvet, his face pushed down into a mass of pillows, his thick black hair in a ridiculous tangle.

She stood there and watched him sleep. Then she unbuttoned the shirt and let it fall from her shoulders. She sat on the corner of the bed and sighed, knowing exactly how many minutes she had left before she had to go. Close to her feet on the floor her black underclothes lay as if in wait. And a little further off was her dress, crumpled in a mound. It seemed to glower at her, as if it wanted a few more hours' sleep before she slipped back into it.

Already the elation was draining from her, replaced by the drumming, mechanical order of her life – what she used to think was the single-mindedness of ambition, but which she now knew was simply a routine, like any other. She bent down and grabbed her clothes.

As she was slipping into her dress, a hand tugged at it from behind.

“Leaving without breakfast?” he said.

His hand came to rest against her midriff, warming the flesh. He pulled her gently back onto the bed, and she let herself go, against all normal instincts, slumping down beside him.

John was still bleary-eyed, his breath as bitter as burnt toast. He drew her to him, turning onto his side. As he moved, she saw an empty condom packet on the sheets.

“Shit,” she said, picking it up and dropping it onto the floor. “Evidence.”

“Was it a crime? Come back to bed.”

“No, I mean, it was great. Just, y’know, I’m an officer of the law.”

“Not last night, you weren’t.”

“I can’t be late for work. I have to get a taxi home and change.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

She sprung up, irritated with herself, with her job, with everything. The spell was gone. She was back in her world.

John propped himself up and watched as she clambered off the bed and bustled around, finding her shoes and bag, doing her hair with her fingers.

“You need a cleaner!” she called behind her as she bolted from the bedroom.

He reached for a Marlboro and lay on his back to smoke, balancing a used whisky glass on his chest as an ashtray.

“It’s not a cleaner I need,” he said, staring at the doorway.

By the time Shirley was down in the building’s main entrance her taxi was waiting. She stepped briskly out into the damp morning air, and by instinct she took in her surroundings with a single, well-practised sweep of the head: no pausing, no registering of surprise or undue interest in anything. But in that second she saw everything that she needed to see.

Into the taxi. She leant her tired head against the window and looked out as they moved off. And yes, she had been right. As the cab pulled out of the car park, she saw that there was someone sitting in the blue Citroen parked on Wingate Road, right across from the old grammar school building.

At seven o’clock on a Saturday morning.

[...]