

This Is The Night

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Richard Yates Short Story Contest

This is the night

of which it is written:

The night shall be as bright as day,

dazzling is the night for me,

and full of gladness.

— from the Exsultet sung at Easter Vigil Mass

The chapel was dusked but peopled as Father Mark held the lit Easter Candle.

The Light of Christ!

Thanks be to God!

An altar server put their wick to it. A second flame leaped in the darkness. The chapel emerged pew by pew as the altar server passed down the aisle with it. Light itched in still air. He'd forgotten how it haunted, how each candle sketched brief murals on the walls of whoever was holding it. The flames themselves seemed enormous. Would the puny wax wilt under them.

When the altar server was back and the dim church pithed with light like little prayers being whispered, Father Mark sang the Exsultet. He normally loved it: he had grown up as a choir boy and his voice was like sweet tea to him, tonic and soothing. *Be glad, let earth be glad,*

as glory floods her. But now he couldn't get Father Steve's limp hands out of his mind and his voice broke like he was fourteen again. He couldn't cry in front of everybody. Each word stank like vomit.

Someone shrieked in a far pew. He thought of Father Steve's calmness, even right up to the end when absolution was too tiring. For a second, he thought the shriek was because of him, his lyrics putrid. But then he looked. People had parted. The woman left alone held her hand up like in a blessing, only livid flame gobbled at it. Even in the dimness of the chapel, he could tell the fingers looked darkened. Charcoaled. *O truly blessed night.* She seemed calm. He broke off mid-syllable and stepped down from the pulpit. The woman looked up at him as if to say, *Why did you stop singing.*

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Susie was home for the Easter holidays, but it was in the last week of term at Cambridge that she'd had the night she had to confess about. She hadn't been going to Mass there because she was so overwhelmed with problem sets and failing to make friends with people, even in Lent term (the second one), and she barely ever went to confession usually but this was the kind of sin that had her cowering by the radiator in her room while her corridor-mates went partying. (She told herself they were her friends. But they'd stopped asking her to come with them.) In that last week before vacation, she would hear Lady Gaga blasting from Sarah's speakers and the group of them singing wasted. Then they'd leave and she would cry until she fell asleep against cooled

metal. Wake when they got back in the early hours of the morning, darkness clinging to the curtain-edges. The towel hung to dry on her radiator was tear-wet permanently.

She thought going home would fix things. Now she was at her parents' for the holidays after that last parched week on the corridor, and her friends from sixth form were back too and they met up in Costa, all seven of them crowded around a table meant for two with coffees she didn't know the names of. Tammy rabidly overshared while Alana went red and said she was thinking of dropping out because she didn't like her professors. (Biology at King's. It had been between that and Music.) Bryony's face seemed gaunter. A lot of them were finding the work tough. Even more of them had boyfriends.

Tammy told about her First Kiss. Her eyelids were rimmed black like a crack had opened up in her. That was new. Susie couldn't stop staring at them. She said, 'We were at a club, me and Joshua. We were drunk, but we liked each other anyway. He took me outside. It was sooo romantic. Since then, we've been going for drinks every Thursday.'

Susie closed her eyes and sipped her tea in a mug that tasted of artificial sweetener, not that she'd added any.

Tammy: 'What do you think, you think he likes me?'

The others grinned and asked for details. Tammy gave them gladly. A fly settled on the milk jug, its body green-metallic. They looked at Susie.

She said, 'What? I dunno. I mean, if he likes you. He might just be having fun, mightn't he.'

Tammy looked hurt.

'What about you, is there anyone?'

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

And so they called her *Lovesick Susie* and she didn’t bother correcting them because she’d rather they thought that of her. She poured more milk into her tea because she needed to be doing something. But it only made it murkier. The talk moved onto Martha’s baby.

‘She got pregnant at uni?’

‘Yeah, like within a month. I don’t think she meant to.’

‘God. You have to be so careful. A baby changes everything.’

‘Was she — using —?’

‘I don’t know.’

Susie stood up. ‘Toilet.’

In the toilet, she sat on the loo seat and breathed quietly. There was no toilet paper to wipe her eyes on, just some damp squares of it on the floor tiles.

When she came back out, they were talking about how busy they were.

‘I don’t have any time by myself,’ Tammy boasted. ‘I’m either working or hanging out with people.’

Zahra was scatty like always and had to write her essays in the evenings. Alana had a flatmate she avoided. Bryony swam every morning. Then they looked expectantly again at Susie.

She said, ‘There’s always work to be doing. It never ends, that’s what it feels like.’

Zahra: ‘Yeah, but you’re at *Cambridge*. You signed up for it.’

But had she. She tried not to complain. Tammy ordered a new coffee (she always let her drinks go cold before she finished them, she had done that since Year Ten when they had first

gone out together). She got whipped cream on the second one, which she handed around the spoon for so that everyone got some of it. It tasted of lip balm.

Then Bryony checked her phone and it was nearly time for closing. They left Costa in a gaggle, all permutations of hugs and *Happy Easters* and *Text mes*. ‘Shall we go for dinner one day next week?’ ‘Definitely!’ Susie hated being hugged. It felt like troops of spiders being set loose over her skin. She let them clutch her one by one. She walked Alana to her door since they lived close. ‘I’ve missed you,’ Alana said quietly. But didn’t ask for another hug. Alana understood, sometimes. Susie crossed the road alone and got this feeling of let-downing, that she’d not said what she was meant to. *I’ve missed you too*. She looked back. Alana was fishing for a key. A car passed between them. Then she was stood in the lit hallway with her arms half out of her coat sleeves.

As Susie walked home, she blamed it on Cambridge. Of *course* it was stressful to be striving for a First via problem sets that bored you (but not with their simplicity), and trying to make friends with people who spent the weekend clubbing then being hungover from it, and to find meaning in webs of algebra and sleight-of-hand theorems.

But she felt very confused about it: she’d spent years working towards Cambridge, living and breathing her GCSEs in Year Eleven so that she got A*s in everything, getting trains all over London for enrichment courses in French and Chemistry, reading Richard Feynman and Kip Thorne and books of physics puzzles to prepare for interviews. And she’d loved it. Hadn’t she? Mystery quarks. Wave-particle dualities. It was better than fiction. But in the two terms since she’d started, she had drowned in Calculus that didn’t seem to go anywhere and was hard to

visualise, and Mechanics that was always about distant orbiting bodies and she couldn't bring herself to care about it.

No, Cambridge wasn't what she'd expected. It rained most weekends, making the flagstoned streets slippery, and she hardly ever saw the river because she didn't have time for it.

Now, at home, she structured her days around revision. It was a week and a half until Easter and five until next term started, and she got texts from some course friends (not the people on her corridor) that she didn't reply to because she needed quiet. She felt ashamed. She wanted friends, didn't she. She wrote notes in the mornings and went over them with highlighter, and practised problem sets in the afternoons until she could solve the questions without consulting anything. She played P!nk in her headphones. She didn't have a radiator with a towel on it but at night, she turned her light off and lay staring into plush darkness until the moon slipped out of sight and her dad was snoring, and then she sat up and held her pillow and the toy dog called Charlie that she'd been given for her fifth birthday (she'd missed him). He was orange with a tear in his chest from well-loved-ness. Weeping with him there felt more real. She fell asleep soothed by it.

But she couldn't blame Cambridge totally. No, she didn't know if she was crying because of that night before the term's end or the lectures she'd felt lost in and caught herself daydreaming or living away from home even though she'd thought she was ready for it. She thought about confession but she didn't know the new priest at her parents' parish, and they never went to Mass without her so they couldn't tell her anything. But then it was Palm Sunday (a week before Easter) and the priest said, *Sanctify these branches with your blessing* and his chin was naked-shaven and she felt like she could risk it. Confession was on Wednesday nights.

She told her parents she was going to meet her friends at the pub then walked to church in the opposite direction. It was a dull day for April and the clouds overhead felt pendulous.

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Father Mark had never doubted God for a minute, not since he was eight and sang a solo at Westminster Cathedral and the marbled arches knelled with gentle tones that didn't seem to belong to him. He'd known then that God was listening. Taking what came out of him and shaping it into something lovely that lifted others when they heard it. God wanted to be lifted, didn't he.

No, it wasn't a doubting. But Father Steve had left him and the Church stared down the barrel of ever more scandal, and it was more like a failure of accessing. Like when you ran to catch a train and got there milliseconds too late and the closing doors puffed your nose hairs, and you stared through the window at the people who had made it. He could *see* that God was there because his spaniel Doreen still curled up on his feet in the evenings and the Mass still gave him goosebumps and when the sanctuary lamp burned down, he felt chill and part-missing until he brought a new one out and lit it. God was *obviously* just as there as ever.

So why was it different. Father Steve had died two weeks ago with a coin-yellow catheter tube and deep grooves on his face that looked like trenches rivers ran down, and there was so much to sort out now. Father Steve had been his mentor ever since he'd interviewed for choir master nearly two decades ago then gone to Mass and heard a sermon about *the couch of life* and how *God doesn't want you to stay sleeping on it*, and he'd come back the next week and started

thinking about the diaconate. The care Father Steve took with his parishioners, the gentle mercy of his blessings. Back then, Father Steve was a sagging-stomach man with hair in the middle of whitening, and just-graduated Mark had gone into the confessional and said his sins then asked, *Can I take you out for coffee?* He'd only ever considered music ministry. That was what he had grown up doing, and he knew he was good at it. But as he'd listened to that first sermon he'd thought, what if. Could he be a Father Steve for people.

From then on, he had spent every Monday afternoon at Father Steve's house. Had got to know the shabby sofa that was faded-red like old lips and the teapot Father Steve always let sit for the exact right amount of minutes, not that he timed it (it was stripy and the tea was strong without being bitter). He'd gone from choir master to deacon to priest on that sofa while Father Steve had been unchanging, like a giant moon that orbited, a hand-knitted cosy on the teapot from one of the parishioners and a saucer of custard creams. But he had never been alone there. Father Steve had always been gloriously, steadily with him. Now it was Wednesday of Holy Week and he'd spent days sorting through sermons (apparently Father Steve had kept handwritten copies of all of them) and a drawer of glinting rosaries that didn't look used but needed untangling. He didn't want to get rid of anything. The sermons were in folders marked by dates that went back forty years. How comforting it would be to read them. To refer back to them, even, when he drafted his own homilies. Had Father Steve of forty years ago had the same preoccupations as when he knew him. Living a full life. Letting silence in. He craved a glimpse of Father Steve from back before they had first got coffee that had of course ended up being tea.

But did he actually want to know those things. Because he'd come across some surprises: a scummy film over the kitchen counters that he hadn't known was there because Father Steve

always insisted on being the one to refill the teapot and stack saucers with biscuits; the bedspread that was yellowed as if it hadn't been changed for years; and his hot chocolate, a whole cupboard of it above the microwave (also grimy), powdered, solid, white, milk, light, decadent, everything. He'd never seen Father Steve drink anything but orange juice and tea. The day he found those, he went home and didn't answer the phone to anyone. He wanted to know Father Steve perfectly. But not if Father Steve was different.

Now he was opening folders of homilies four days before Easter Sunday and glancing at the headings — Father Steve had always titled his sermons, though he never read the titles out to anyone — and wishing he could read them all. *Constant Creation. Lighting A Fire In You.* But he had the whole house to clean and he'd promised the diocese he'd do it. Should he recycle them or burn them (somehow burning seemed more fitting). He fingered through the pages. The handwriting changed, got messier; the pen went from blue to black to green and back to black again. Then there was one in wispy pencil titled *Are You Awake?* and he slid it from the folder and sat down on the floor with it. The couch of life. Their favourite. They had talked about spiritual sleeping when they'd gone out for that first coffee-tea, and ever since, when Father Steve had preached on it, he'd asked Mark to read over what he'd written, to let him know if it was too strong or revealed too much of him. They'd sat on the sofa with their biscuits and Doreen had picked between their feet, and for an afternoon, he'd sensed an evenness in their intimacy. The sermons were gentle but poignant. Reading it through now, he felt a hands-on-knees aloneness. He put those pages in his rucksack. Then piled the rest up on the table in the kitchen without looking at them. He'd burn them, yes, he would; burn them in the Easter Vigil

fire that everyone lit their candles from. The fire would be for Father Steve. It would be beautiful.

As he drove home with the one sermon in his bag and the rest on the seat behind him, he wished he knew what to say to himself. *Lift up your hearts*. He always had fragments on the Mass on his tongue-tip. But they weren't any help now. *Let us give thanks*. He turned onto the dual carriageway (Father Steve's parish was a few towns away) and wound down his window as if to let something fly away free. When he got to his church for confessions, he ate a cereal bar in the car before going in. His gaze rushed to the sanctuary lamp. It was still lit. That surprised him.

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Susie practised while she walked. *Bless me Father, for I have sinned*. The sky was dusky-grey and she felt nervous about confessing. There was so much she'd done wrong and she couldn't possibly list all of it, and did it count if you missed things out? She hadn't confessed since the summer, pre-Cambridge, pre-Tammy's-First-Kiss — and even that had been the first time of her going in years, and not out of a Christian impulse but more because she didn't know what her room would be like and if she'd have a kitchen (the website said everyone ate in Hall, and she'd bought a pre-paid card which meant she was committed. But cooking was one of her favourite things).

When she'd gone to Mass over the summer, she hadn't known what she was doing really — she hadn't attended regularly since she was seven and doing her First Holy Communion, and they'd had lessons in the church hall where they did lots of colouring-in. As a teenager, she'd

dropped in occasionally and gone to Midnight Mass at Christmas because she liked the mystery that felt like lace across her shoulder blades. But it wasn't until that summer when she'd finished her A-levels and was waiting to find out if she was going to Cambridge or Exeter that she started going every Sunday. She also went clubbing with her sixth-form friends in a club they had to catch a train to, which changed names every few months but just then was called *Chameleon*. (She'd sat on a stool not drinking and watching people partying. She hadn't really enjoyed it. But she'd felt very eighteen.)

And so it had somehow become a thing that summer, her sleeping in on Sunday mornings while the sun soaked through the curtains then dressing in something long-sleeved that meant, to her, *I mean this*, and walking to church in a still way like she was a pool that nothing swam in. Singing hymns that reeked of incense. Father's voice steady. She'd planned on carrying it on at Cambridge. But then she'd got so busy.

She hadn't even been inside the university's Chaplaincy. She had signed up for the mailing list. But she felt too afraid to go to anything. She knew so little about God. She imagined Cambridge Catholics being very zealous (like the mathematicians).

But now she got into the church and there was a queue of people kneeling in the pews near the confessional. She felt foolish. When she'd rehearsed it in her head, it had just been her and the priest that she didn't know the name of (he'd arrived after Christmas). But in truth she was one of many. Her repentance counted for so little. But then so did her sins, maybe.

She genuflected and joined a pew where a whole family were waiting together. Mum, dad and two children. She kneeled. She'd never felt comfortable sitting as the tabernacle gleamed and the patterned windows dyed the light like it was passing through a prism. The church was

emptier than at Christmas, Mary cloaked in purple cloth, crucifix hidden. But there was still the tapestry behind the sanctuary slashed with hills and trees, and the Stations of the Cross were dark oak, same as the high beams. The sanctuary lamp was a majesty. Its light winked through red glass like a gentle conjuring.

Voices were muffled in the confessional. She ran back through her sins. She had the main one to confess to and she wasn't sure about the others, whether to tell about how she wished she hadn't got into Cambridge even though that was what she'd always wanted or the walks through Jesus Green when she daydreamed about being a zookeeper (the cows watched her morosely). The times she'd not shared chocolate with the corridor. When she'd skipped taking notes in lectures because a Cool Girl wanted to talk to her. They were pale sins in comparison, even the not wanting to be in Cambridge. Did telling them have a point to it.

She had her turn eventually, in the last five minutes of the hour (no one else had come in behind her). She closed the wooden door and stood for a moment. She'd forgotten there was a choice, that she could sit on a church-hall chair in full view of the priest or kneel facing a grille and speak to him anonymously. She knelt. Then she worried he might think her cowardly.

She'd practised saying it in her head. But it was different out loud. *His bed. Never before.* The words sounded ugly, like fruit with mould on it.

He listened to her story. Then he was quiet, and Susie wished she could see him. Did he want more? More contrition? She said the main parts again. It was still hard when she repeated it.

Then he said, 'Resisting temptation is difficult. But you're sorry for what happened.' His voice sounded tired. 'Pray for strength to resist it next time.'

She felt a trickling down her spine. But it was cool and dim in the confessional.

Temptation. Had she not properly explained it. In her head, she'd said it over and again, *non-consensual* as if she wanted to believe it but couldn't really. Had she not said that bit to him. She felt an urge to re-explain herself. She hadn't been *tempted*. He'd peeled her tights off without asking and pushed himself onto her, and she hadn't said *No stop* but she hadn't said *Yes* either, there had been no *temptation*. The priest prescribed her three Hail Marys and a prayer to end abortion. She stood up from the kneeler feeling hideous and alien. 'You're wrong,' she said softly. 'You don't care, do you?'

She left the booth and knelt in the pew again and said her *Hail Mary, full of graces* but not the other one because she didn't agree with it (she hadn't thought about it too much, but if Martha chose to end the pregnancy, she would have respected it). She felt confused and disgusted. *Had* she sinned? Had she been sinned against? She hadn't said *Stop it*.

Now she saw she'd confessed falsely: she wasn't sorry. She'd wanted comforting. He'd dropped her home after he'd finished and kissed her greedily over the gearstick, and she had crept along the corridor (the others were out drinking, she needn't have worried about waking anybody) and pulled her blanket off her bed and sat swathed in it by the radiator. Her flesh felt like nails hammering. That was her first night leaned against metal. When the others got back, they were loud outside her door. It didn't matter. She didn't cry into the towel that night. Just crouched there quietly.

Now she was the only one in the church except Priest Unforgiving, and she moved to the front pew. The flame-tip of the sanctuary lamp looked watery. She felt strangely tempted.

When Father Mark got home from the confessional, he put on the TV and got crisps out of the cupboard and sat down with a feeling of inhaling underwater. Lately, he'd loathed hearing confessions. Or, not loathed. Just not felt up to it.

He'd have salmon for dinner, a frozen fillet from Sainsbury's that even came with a sachet of lemon juice so he didn't have to buy a fresh one. But he couldn't be bothered to get it out and turn on the oven. The news was on. Some other scandal. *You don't care, do you?* He'd always confessed to his mentor, Father Steve in his old parish, and Father Steve had listened like an old tree in a forest. He had always felt forgiven. Had felt God listening then, too, like when he'd sung his first solo and all the faces had turned to him.

But in the last weeks of Father Steve's life, he'd had to find someone else to confess to. He'd hung on as long as possible but when Father Steve stopped being able to speak properly, he couldn't offer absolution and it wasn't fair to ask him to. Father Mark had called into neighbouring parishes. But telling anyone else made him feel ashamed instead of reconciled. The News went to the weather and he didn't listen to it.

Also he'd found he had some innermost things he couldn't confess to. With Father Steve, every sin he said seemed sorry but understandable, and Father Steve had smiled with deep eyes like the Joseph in the vestibule, and he'd felt the embrace of it. *God the Father of Mercies*. He didn't remember hiding things from Father Steve — the quiet, the being cut-off from the one who loved him unconditionally. Maybe he hadn't had those feelings back when Father Steve had been his confessor.

But as a priest, he had roles to fill and one of them was *mediator*, the bridge between man and God. He still went to the church every morning first thing and knelt before the tabernacle and begged him, but he only felt bare and unaccompanied. How could he be a bridge to anyone when the far end of him led into a weeping darkness? How could he carry them? It made him feel even more separate, that he was giving people blessings and acting like God was with him when really he was aching alone. He could remember how it felt for God to be there. But he couldn't get to it.

That was why confessions were so hard now. He had to go through the motions and offer absolution when really he had no power over it. He felt especially alone that evening. When he'd been a deacon in the other parish, he and Father Steve had served together — visiting the sick, school assemblies, baptisms. Now he'd only done three months solo and he had so much to carry already. And no Father Steve to talk to about it. Rainclouds dotted the TV screen. April weather. As a deacon, he hadn't heard confessions. Or given last rites. He didn't feel ready for either of them.

When Father Steve had died two weeks ago, he had felt relieved and revolted and he'd bought a spiral-bound notebook from the corner shop and started writing in it. He knew he couldn't tell anyone the sins people had confided in him. But he could scrawl them in hairy handwriting and recycle the book when he was finished, and nobody would have to know. He could also write about Father Steve. He jotted down memories. When they had said Mass on the beach. His first retreat with the Confirmation candidates, when a fifteen-year-old had said to them, *I wasn't sure before but now I feel something*. But also: Father Steve with slurred speech

being taken away in an ambulance. He cried big, bulbous tears onto the ink. It would dry, though, wouldn't it.

One thing he found hard about confession: that he could only *absolve* people. It made him feel harshly powerless when a parishioner came weak-shouldered and said their wife was having an affair and they were sorry for blowing up at her, or with the wizened man with cancer who confessed to not telling anyone. When he shook their hands after Sunday Mass, he wanted to ask how things were, if they'd confronted the wife or told someone. He sensed it had felt less heavy when God had been there with him. Was the writing a kind of godless prayer? He felt sick when that thought struck him.

God wasn't gone. God was still flooding the town, gracing people with his kind ear. But he was gone from Father Mark, and when he consecrated the bread and wine now, it didn't do anything. He got the fish out of the freezer finally. It had happened midway through his first month of ministry, him visiting Father Steve on a Monday to recap about his first weeks and Father Steve looking translucent. *It's nothing*, he'd told him, *A cup of tea'll fix me*. But then it hadn't.

So when the woman had stood up and said, *You're wrong, you don't care, do you* he had felt stunned. It was God speaking. He put his fish in the oven and slit open the sachet of lemon juice. Then he got out the sermon and read it. The couch of life. He'd woken briefly.

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Susie went for dinner with her friends on Maundy Thursday evening, the day after her confession. She came from the Mass of the Lord's Supper where they'd processed out with the Body and laid it in the side hall among candles that caterpillar-wriggled and daffodils in clear vases. It felt strange going to Wagamama's straight from something so sombre. But she would come back to pray afterwards. The church was open until ten-thirty and then there would be Evening Prayer, and dinner wouldn't take that long. She hadn't prayed since confession yesterday (didn't pray usually anyway). She craved to spend time in deep quiet.

Mass had a terrible sense of glory to it. Twelve people had their feet washed. The priest talked about Christ's saving love but in a voice that sounded weary like when Susie did calculus. They sang one of her favourites, *Unless a grain of wheat should fall upon the ground and die, it remains but a single grain with no life*. When they walked out with the Body, she felt like something awful was expanding from inside her.

At Wagamama's, she had a rainbow meal with a vegan egg that tasted spicy, and they talked about the summer holidays.

Tammy said, 'I'm going travelling around eastern Europe. Croatia and Hungary, we think. With Joshua who I told you about.'

Bryony: 'I have a internship in London. Finance.'

Alana didn't say anything. They'd advertised summer research jobs in the Maths Department but Susie didn't want to see a single equation until she had to. She thought, I'll tell Alana on the way home that I don't have plans either. But then she remembered she was going to church. They wouldn't walk together.

Then Zahra said, 'I'm tempted to travel too. I really want to go to Australia.'

Bryony: 'That's a long trip for just a couple of months.'

But after that, Susie didn't hear anything. Zahra was tempted. *Tempted*. She had to *resist it next time*. Susie had crept to Superdrug the morning after with just a coat on over last night's outfit because her wardrobe door seemed heavy and she'd last had her clothes off when he had peeled them away like the foil on a chocolate bar. She got to the shop before opening and stood outside with her legs crossed. The lips of her labia felt scribbled on. When she got in, she searched the shelves fruitlessly. It was behind the counter. She had to ask for it.

She'd swallowed it dry on the way home and thrown away the packaging. As she'd walked, she'd thought briefly of the Chaplaincy she hadn't been to. She couldn't go now, could she.

'Susie? *Susie?*'

It was Tammy. Everyone was looking at her. The waiter was poised over her bowl. 'Are you finished?'

She nodded. There was a finger of green tea left at the bottom of her tumbler. She drank it cold. Her friends seemed suddenly staggeringly important to her. How had she not realised. Tammy had sent a postcard from York and she'd blu-tacked it to the wall. It was a cartoon of the cathedral. The conversation moved on without her. She sensed Alana trying to catch her eye. *Tempted. Tempted*. Was the priest right. She felt a disgust from somewhere deep, as if her skeleton was rotting and she needed to get rid of it. She shouldn't have gone to university. But there was nothing here for her.

They paid and left. Alana said, 'Coming?' She thought about the Host in the side room surrounded by daffodils, and what prayers she might say to it. What the priest had said. *Tempted*.

She nodded yes. They walked in silence. When they stopped at Alana's door, Alana reached into her rucksack and pulled out a bag of Mini Eggs.

‘For you. I know you love them.’

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It was during the last rites for Father Steve that God first went quiet.

It was Easter Saturday and Father Mark was writing. Easter Saturday always started gently. He'd finished the evening's preparations — the altar servers knew their roles, the bells were out, they had enough lectors — and had fake-prayed in the church, even though the Passion had achingly moved him. Now he had his notebook open at a kitchen table wilded with old for-burning sermons. He hadn't put those things together in his head before, the dying, God going mum. Now it just came out of his pen-tip. Yes, his first last rites as a full priest. God looking the other way as Father Mark called out to him.

Good Friday had been a day of fasting, so today he'd treated himself to lunch out, a hot panini at Costa. In the church, he'd been insistent, *I want to love you God, come back to me*, and he had sat in strident silence. The sanctuary lamp was quelled because Christ had left the tabernacle. This was the only time of year that happened. It felt right to him. It wasn't that God had used to have a presence and now he didn't, or the world having dark corners that he didn't want to look in. It was more a sense of not being able to love. A smarting aloneness. But he still prayed very sincerely. An hour of centring prayer. A glittering rosary. Then he went for lunch and

came home and got out his notebook. Maybe this can be my prayer, he thought. Maybe God will read it.

The Monday when Father Steve first got ill, he was taken to hospital in an ambulance. Father Mark was with him, had come to tell him about his first three weeks of ministry. The parish had been priestless for about a year before he'd got there. There was a lot that needed doing. But when Father Steve let him in, he looked ghostly and quivered over his walking stick.

‘Are you ok?’ Father Mark asked, ‘You look weak.’

‘Oh, it’s nothing. A cup of tea’ll fix me.’

They went in and settled on his sofa with arms like love handles drooping. Father Mark had presided over his first wedding that week, a twenty-something couple with a family that loved singing, and he told his mentor about it. He hadn’t married people as a deacon. Father Steve smiled like an ocean wave. But he still looked flimsy. Maybe the expanse of lurid sofa made him look worse than he was really.

But then he got up to make the tea and fell, a very quiet ‘Oh,’ and the soft thud of his body. His stick clattered after him.

‘Father!’

That was when his speech went slurred. Something about the teapot. Father Mark called 999. An ambulance came quickly.

His organs were failing. ‘He might have a few days or a few weeks,’ the doctor told Father Mark over the phone the next morning. He came that afternoon and asked Father Steve, ‘Do you want to go home and have me look after you?’ He said no. He wanted a hospice. They found a Catholic one not far from him. Father Mark visited daily (it was an hour’s drive each

way but he just cancelled whatever commitments he needed). Father Steve had asked that no parishioners come, didn't want them to see him. It occurred to Father Mark that he was his next of kin. When he'd said *Father* that last time, he'd meant it.

Every day in those last weeks, Father Mark gave him the Eucharist. *Confession*, Father Steve asked sometimes, his voice extinguishing, and Father Mark said, *Tell me your sins*. (Maybe that was when Wednesday nights got difficult.) When he came to do last rites because the nurse had called him, Father Steve looked frailer than he'd ever been. *No pain*, he whispered. *It's been good*. Father Mark blessed him.

But it didn't work. Maybe he was feeling too much to mean the words properly: *May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up* and Father Steve nodding but then this gashing in his chest as if the meaning had dribbled out before he got to say it, and Father Steve's face stilling and him not able to do anything about it. In that moment, the rites felt pointless. He carried on with them anyway because he owed them to Father Steve. But it felt like a betrayal, like Father Mark had taken something and wasn't giving it back finally. He got to the end of the last prayer and pushed a wafer onto his parched tongue. But he couldn't swallow it. He took Father Steve's hand. It was gentle and flaccid. He kissed him on the forehead. His skin was cool. 'I think he's gone,' Father Mark said quietly.

That day, he went to a nearby cafe and sat with a coffee that he drank too quickly, the liquid scorching his mouth like curses. He didn't cry then. But didn't trust himself to drive home yet. He sat for hours. The barista brought him a sympathy biscotti. That night, he had two KitKats for dinner because he couldn't face making anything. Doreen curled up on his feet. She felt warm but inadequate.

As he wrote about this now, on Easter Saturday afternoon with Doreen sat on his feet again, he shatter-cried. His Father Steve. The Mass on the beach when they'd run out of wafers so Father Steve had consecrated Pringles. The notebook pages weren't very thick but he didn't worry about wrecking them. This book was just for him. Father Steve had asked him to have the teapot, one day near the end as Father Mark was whispering hymns; but he had tried and the tea tasted different when he made it, thick and filmy. Could it be something had ended that God had been living in. He had an early dinner through tears. Then he made his way to church with the stack of sermons ready to light on fire and sing the Exsultet. This was the pinnacle of the year. *Let me celebrate this for you*, he whispered.

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They gathered outside in darkness. The altar servers stoked a fire that looked mouth-open, bursting like the vegan egg when the fake yolk had spilled over the split spectrum of vegetables. Susie couldn't take her eyes off it. It looked ravenous. The priest blessed the throttling flame and lit the Easter Candle from it, *Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End. All time belongs to him*, and she couldn't believe that neat bud around the wick-top could be seeded from something so rowdy. It throbbed in the cool night until they processed into the church with it.

The Light of Christ!

Thanks be to God!

She let her smaller candle be lit as the altar servers passed down the aisle. It was a still flame. She knew it was hungry still even though it tried to hide it. She tried to follow the priest's chanting. *Let this holy building shake with joy.* Let this dear flame tremble. She tried to see her candle as belonging to something (set theory, she'd studied it), seeping red across the world, driving out darkness. But all she could think of was how the lounge had been dark and he had taken off her glasses. She had needed a flame then. She thought about exams next term. How could she pass them when her thigh muscles still felt tensed like tall wire fences. *Standing in the awesome glory of this night.* Awful glory. She held her hand over the flame so that the skin was illuminated, and someone shrieked behind her. The priest stopped singing. She looked up at him. The people had Red-Sea-parted. He strode through the middle of them.