



Tony  
Sullivan

THE  
GODLESS  
GIRL

# THE GODLESS GIRL



BY

**TONY SULLIVAN**

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END OF SAMPLE

## BOOKS BY TONY SULLIVAN

(Including forthcoming ebooks - some with review comments)

**CHIEFLY ABOUT HOOKE** - A ruefully comic account of self-deception. (ebook edition to be published in 2012)

*'All would-be writers should read this funny, insightful and assured novel'*

**Sunday Times**

**IN THE PALM HOUSE** - Short-listed for the Whitbread First Novel Prize when first published in print. Set in the 1950s: a boy's tragicomic relations with his family and with a big-brother Jesus Christ. (ebook edition to be published in 2012)

*'In The Palm House is a fine debut; Mr Sullivan is a novelist to watch'*

**Daily Telegraph**

**SOME GREAT ENDEAVOUR** - Set in the Edwardian period. A group of progressive young people seek to change an unjust society. (ebook to be published in 2012)

**SPARROWS IN A TEMPEST** - The sequel to Some Great Endeavour. The book is a moving story of a troubled love-affair during the First World War. (ebook to be published in 2012)

**MAD HANNAH RAFFERTY** - Short-listed for the MIND Book of the Year when first published in print. Mad Hannah is writing her gaudy life story on toilet paper while incarcerated in a mental hospital. (ebook edition available early spring 2012)

*'Hannah Rafferty's deftly written story will remain in the mind long after gaudier and more celebrated fiction has been forgotten'*

**Sunday Times**

**CARROWAY BLUES** - Denis Ducane's yearning for culture and for the daughter of a middle-class family. (Previously unpublished ebook – March 2012)

**FALLING AND FLOATING WITH CHARLES BABCOCK** - Aging, irascible Babcock's comic endeavour to reconcile himself with the modern world. (Previously unpublished ebook – March 2012)

**TWO WOMEN TWO WARS** - During World War 1, Eliot Palgrave meets delightful Daisy Dolman when his fellow officer, Guy, jilts her. He marries Daisy and hopes to write a great novel about the war. A story of tangled relationships with surprising twists and turns. (Previously unpublished ebook – February 2012)

**CONVERSATIONS WITH JOAN OF ARC** - Based on historical fact, the book is a gripping and moving account of one of the great heroines of the Middle Ages. (Previously unpublished ebook - February 2012)

*"Amazing and very well researched"*

Online Review

**VOLANASIA? MY GOD, WHAT NEXT!** - A mordant black comedy with nice and nasty characters and some wild goings-on; yet at the same time a very serious contemporary issue is raised. (ebook edition January 2012)

*"Compelling and gripping entertainment"*

Online Review

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Sullivan was born in Liverpool and found the dole helpful while writing his first novels; he also worked in a variety of jobs before going to Liverpool University. He became an English teacher but continued to write, and had three novels accepted by the publisher Andre Deutsch Ltd. The first of these was short-listed for the **Whitbread First Novel Award**. All received good reviews. Tony has a number of unpublished novels that will be issued as ebooks. He now lives with his wife and laptop in rural Lancashire.

# THE GODLESS GIRL

*“The wild force of life burned in her and her excesses  
were as spendthrift as nature’s”*

## ONE

An email from her mother in Australia:

*Dear Lorna,*

*I found your father pretty much as I feared after his desperate ‘cry for help’. He is in a bad way, I’m afraid, and you can imagine our meeting again after eighteen years! We were both crying helplessly, which convinced me that he bitterly regrets ever having left me. He claims his life with Kath was roses all the way, which I thought rather tactless, but of course when you’re desperately ill the truth will out. Anyway that’s all over now, she passed away a few years ago. Since then he has been living alone. His bungalow is in the outskirts of Melbourne and it’s a tip really for he can do nothing for himself and the woman who comes in to clean is someone I would never employ. She’s been taking advantage, as such people will if you don’t watch them like a hawk. By the way, is Dorothy turning up regularly? I don’t want you looking after the house when you’ve got the workshop to look after. I do hope everything is going as well as can be expected without me. Did you get the order off to John Lewis in time? I*

*don't know how long it will be before I return. And who knows, I may bring your father back with me! Won't that be a surprise! Although he hasn't actually said so, I believe he would like us to get together again, but at the moment he is too ill to be moved. He was in hospital for an operation, but has it spread elsewhere? I have been praying for him. Of course, he won't pray for himself, he hasn't changed a bit in that respect. Will you ask Fr Bredan to say masses for him? Take what it costs out of petty cash. Show this to Leonard, it will save me writing to him. And let Elvira know what is happening. I do hope you're managing to 'rule the roost' while I'm away. And don't let anyone take advantage of you. If you see Joseph give him my regards. It's been blazingly hot here. You don't expect it in November.*

*All my love, Mum.*

To which Lorna replied:

*Dear Mum,*

*What a strange thing it is, the two of you brought together after all this time and in such sad circumstances! Do you think there is any chance my father will recover? You hear every day of marvellous cures. I will get Fr Bredan to say the masses. I wish I could go out there to be with you both. Don't worry about how things are here, I'm really coping quite well and of course Georgina is keeping the girls in order as always. I am paying the bills and keeping the books, checking the stock etc. all as usual. The John Lewis order went off in time, though we had rather a rush at the end with the packing and transport. And one of the machines has broken down. I had the mechanic look at it and you'd have thought it was his favourite child the way he fussed over it, blaming us for being cruel to the poor thing! But it was Betty Loveday's machine and you know what a careful worker she is, so it couldn't have been her fault. I'm getting it repaired. I sent your email on to Leonard, though whether he was very upset by the news is difficult to say. You know he always blamed Dad for leaving you. I emailed Elvira but haven't yet had a reply. Don't worry about the workshop, everything is going along quite smoothly, though of course we all miss 'the Boss'!*

*Your loving daughter, Lorna.*

It was Bonfire Night, the crash and fizz of fireworks, sudden bangs expanding with a roar that rushed out everywhere. Lorna winced and cringed, alone in the big house. It would have been like this in Iraq, she thought. The noise was so loud she did not immediately hear the front door bell, which was in any case a demure set of chimes her mother thought tasteful. When the chimes were repeated frantically, Hector raised himself on his forelegs and barked. Lorna put her book aside and went into the hallway wondering if it was children, a penny for the guy. But it was late, ten o'clock. And they rarely bothered with a guy nowadays. They preferred Halloween, trick or treat and a pumpkin from Tesco: that was American and 'cool'. (Lorna supplied the quotation marks; it wasn't a word she felt comfortable with). These days, November Fifth meant merely a splash of fireworks set off to thrill the kids and their dads and impress the neighbours. They no longer had bonfires in the streets. Years ago the poorer streets were ablaze with bonfires, the residents dancing round them, black against the blaze, devil worshippers singing and drinking and laughing. Her father had pointed them out as she sat safe with him on a bus, aged six. Probably bonfires were prohibited now. Health and Safety. A child might fall into a fire, an Asian might be flung into one.

She went to the front door accompanied by the labrador and secured the door with a chain before opening it. There in the gap of night was her sister's face, rockets whizzing and breaking into stars behind the filmy muss of her hair. 'Got a penny for the guy?'

'Vira...?' Confused, Lorna released the chain and let her in. Her sister held her and kissed her emphatically. Hector barked an excited greeting.

'Hello, you daft old thing!' She fondled the drooling dog.

'Why didn't you say you were coming?' Lorna asked with faint alarm. 'What are you doing home at this time?'

'Got time off for good behaviour.'

Elvira went back to her sagging car parked behind Lorna's on the drive and dragged a suitcase from it. Lorna followed her into the living room. It was a large bright room, the walls an inoffensive lavender hue, sultry velvet drapes at the windows. There was an imposing TV for the soaps her mother followed and the news at which she snorted and exclaimed. Beside it was a mini hi-fi with a rack of CDs (Sinatra, Beatles, Chopin, Tchaikovsky). Against one wall was a long low sideboard in light oak that held the gin and vodka her mother liked to sip with tonic or lime after a hard day's work, when she would ease off her shoes and curl up on the settee with the *Daily Mail*. Shelves held the dictionary Lorna used conscientiously, the books she was reading and a stack of the magazines her mother studied for the fuss and frolics of celebrities. There were pictures on the walls – a sunset in slick acrylic, a winsome drawing of a dog, a couple of cottage-garden watercolours. Lorna hadn't chosen any of them, there wasn't a hint of her taste in the room, she doubted whether she had such a thing. Elvira and Leonard, they had taste; but as for herself...

Elvira wrinkled her nose at the room, her usual disdainful reaction. She dropped her suitcase and took off her ratty fur coat. Beneath it she wore faded jeans and a jumper the colour of gravy that came nearly to her knees. 'Like my coat? Got it in a charity shop, four pound fifty. Great, isn't it? It's not animal fur, of course.'

'O you wouldn't have animal fur,' Lorna agreed. 'I could have got you a lovely coat wholesale, if you'd asked.'

'Did you get what you're wearing wholesale?'

Her placid tweed skirt, the sensible twin-set which failed to conceal the embarrassment of her breasts. 'You know I've no dress sense.'

'You don't make enough of yourself, never did. You always look as though you're trying not to be noticed. You've not got a bad figure and you've lovely eyes. I've always admired your eyes; they remind me of Saint Theresa the Little Flower. But you've got the hair of a prison wardress. While I'm here I must try and freshen you up a bit.'

She was always eager to improve others, loathed to do the same for herself. 'Will you be home long? What about – ? Aren't there exams and things at the end of term?'

'It's mainly a dissertation and I can do that here. How's Deidre? Where is she: out playing bridge?'

'She's in Australia.'

'Australia? What, on holiday?'

'Didn't you get my email? I sent you an email.'

'I've not looked at them recently.'

'She's with Dad. Our father. He sent for her. He's very ill.'

'Dad? Good God! But...After all this time?'

'It was a shock, of course; and at first when she heard, she didn't know what to do.'

She had discussed it with Lorna, her eyes huge, cheeks falling away from the face-lift she'd had recently. How could she possibly meet her renegade husband again? '*But he needs you,*' Lorna had said. '*Forgive him.*' Deidre told her she didn't understand, forgiveness wasn't the point, there were faults on both sides – '*I've come to realise that, over the years. The way I used to nag him because he was letting the business go to pot; and I don't think I loved him as much as he deserved.*

'Then she made up her mind, she dropped everything and left me in charge. She's been gone nearly a week. I miss her already!' Lorna laughed, shaking her head. At such moments a rare loving beauty suffused her face.

'I sometimes wish I was as close to her as you are. But my poor dad! What's she hope for – a deathbed reconciliation?'

'He may not be dying. They can do marvellous things nowadays, medically.'

'You've heard from her since? Did she say how he was?'

‘It’s cancer.’

‘He’s in hospital?’

‘Was. But he’s home now...I’ll make a cup of tea.’

‘And something to eat. I’m starving. Took me ages to drive from Canterbury. My car kept stuttering and juddering. There’s something wrong with it. I’ll have to get it seen to, another load of debt.’

She followed Lorna into the kitchen, its tiled surfaces blazing with fluorescent light. It was fitted with everything a modern kitchen demanded, although some of the appliances were rarely used. Lorna and her mother, busy working women often home late from work, preferred the microwave to the stainless-steel double oven. She filled the kettle and switched it on. Elvira hovered at her shoulder. Lorna opened the refrigerator and peered inside. ‘Do you fancy bacon and egg?’

‘You know I don’t eat bacon.’

‘Are you vegetarian now or are you still trying to be a Jew?’

‘We are Jews! Dad’s a Jew.’

‘You’re not really a Jew unless your mother is; and Mum isn’t, so your not. I’ve told you this hundreds of times. I’ve never felt Jewish even though we’ve got the name for it.’

Ben and Deidre Levison. Their children: Lorna, Leonard and Elvira Levison. But their mother was an O’Halloran, born in Eire, and Lorna preferred to think of herself as Irish whenever she thought of herself, which wasn’t often.

‘Haven’t you any cheese?’

Lorna brought cheese to the counter and reached for the sliced bread. ‘No, Hector,’ she said to the dog, who was partial to a bit of bread and butter. ‘You know you’ve been fed.’

Hector sighed and shook his head; he left the kitchen, claws pattering on the tiles. Elvira poured boiling water from the kettle into a teapot, spilling some. ‘I’m worried about my poor dad.’

‘You’ve not seen him since you were six.’

‘He used to send me cards on my birthday.’

‘You were his favourite. He never sent me any.’

‘He sent me that koala bear – the one our Leonard kicked out the window. And now maybe he’s dying. But he’s only – what? How old would he be?’

‘Sixty.’

‘That’s too early to die. I wish I could get out there to see him. What about Kath? Has he still got Kath with him?’

‘Kath passed away some years ago. He was living alone and in something of a state, Mum says; no one to care for him. He sent for her in desperation. And it was good of her, wasn’t it? To drop everything and go to him after the way he’d treated her.’

Lorna opened a bag of crisps and shook them into a bowl, which she placed on a tray together with the tea things, the sandwich, and a biscuit for herself. She carried the tray into the living room and the sisters sat side by side on the settee. Elvira was the youngest in the family and had gone through more living than Lorna would probably manage in a lifetime. Her face was oval and her lips were good for smiling invitingly or tightening with scorn. Her skin was clear and soft and she had hazy dark hair, a strong nose and a firm chin. Although she wasn’t strikingly pretty her figure possessed sexual allure and her personality was attractive, appealing. In any group, she was the one you noticed and wanted to be near, to learn more about her, to gain her interest. Her charm derived from a passionate response to life and you were wise not to get in the way of it.

Lorna was thirty-five and did not possess sexual allure. She had a plain face, her hair was lighter in shade than Elvira’s and hung each side of her face. Whatever attraction she possessed derived from her manner rather than from her looks. She had a gentle, absent-minded manner somewhat timid and withdrawn when she was beyond the security of her family. She lacked confidence. Yet in

certain things, in a sense of duty and in conventional morality, she was immovable.

She poured the tea and asked Elvira how she was getting on at university, still vaguely perturbed by her sudden arrival home. She had seen little of her during the summer vacation; she was off gallivanting across Europe much of the time. Lorna had hoped she would suggest they went off together, but Elvira had other plans. She was now in her second year – ‘And I’m getting on very well. Yes, I would say so, very well. The advantage of being a mature student is that you know what education is for. It might look good from the outside, being at university, but many of the poor kids are quite lost – they’re homesick, the elite academic bullshit intimidates them; their terrified of getting poor grades and disappointing their parents, and most of them don’t know what they’re going to do afterwards. Whereas when you’re older, you use the university, you don’t let it use you. You have a clear idea what you want out of it.’

‘So what will you do when you get your degree?’

‘I’ve not decided yet.’

Lorna raised her eyebrows at Hector lying at her feet.

‘Because I’ve had much more experience, been a mother and so forth,’ Elvira continued, speaking with her mouth full of cheese sandwich, ‘some of the students come to me for advice, I get to hear all the girls’ love-problems.’

‘You don’t have any yourself?’ Lorna asked with an acuteness one did not expect from her reserved manner.

But that doesn’t mean, just because I’m a bit older, I can’t join in the student life. I get invited to dozens of parties, and this year I’m directing a production of *Waiting For Godot* for the Dramatic Society. I couldn’t get out of it once they heard I’d been an actor.’

Yes, ‘actor’, Lorna mused. But it was as an actress that she had played parts with Shopfloor Theatre. Actresses were actors now, feminism rampant – ‘It sounds marvellous,’ she said. ‘I wish I’d gone to university.’

‘You should have! You’ve got the brains for it. You’re probably more intelligent than me, in a rational sort of way. I suppose my intelligence is more located in...the imagination. But you certainly should have gone to university. Deidre should never have dragged you out of school to work in the workshop.’

‘She needed my help and I’ve never regretted it. It was great fun when she was starting the business and I’m quite proud of the bit I put into it. What’s this dissertation you have to do about?’

‘What? Oh, the dissertation...It’s a sort of case study thing of an organisation, I have to choose some organisation and study it, staff-management relations and so forth. It’s quite boring.’

‘And how long will you be home?’

‘Depends how long it takes.’

‘And that’s really why you’ve come home?’

Lorna wondered if by any chance she had been – What did they call it? Never having been to university, she had to search for the word. Sent down. Had Elvira been sent down? That suitcase and her evasive manner...But why assume the worst? Except that with Elvira you were prone to assume the worst. The worst or the best: she was a person of extremes. Lorna could never afford to go to extremes. She had been born with a sense of responsibility and in times of crisis felt she was the strong centre holding the family together. It made her feel proud, her life worthwhile.

Elvira picked up the book Lorna had been reading. ‘What’s this? *A History of God*. You’re still into God, are you?’

‘Would that you were!’ Lorna smiled. ‘It’s very interesting. I feel I’m learning a lot. Sometimes now I get the feeling the Roman Catholic God is a bit too...human. I can’t explain it. I’m not altogether happy with what the Church says about God. There’s that thing about God being known by the natural light of reason. I don’t really think we can know God through the reason. He’s – It’s – too ineffable for that. I don’t think I really understand what God is any longer.’

‘You’re on the rocky road to atheism, pet!’

‘O no, I shall never be an atheist. I don’t know how you can bear to be one.’

‘And you still go to church?’

‘O yes, I still need the Church.’

‘What for?’

‘It’s good for asking forgiveness for your sins.’

‘What sins do you have to forgive?’ Elvira jeered fondly. ‘And is that all you read now, theology?’

‘O no. I read novels. I’ve just finished Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*. Have you read it?’

‘Enduring Love!’ Elvira sneered. ‘And what else: do you still play chess with the computer?’

‘Not at the higher levels. The nasty thing always beats me.’

‘Tom tried to teach me chess,’ Elvira began.

‘Who is Tom?’

When Elvira did not reply Lorna reached for the teapot; but Elvira didn’t want any more tea. She got up and said she must go to bed. It had been a tiring day: the traffic-jammed drive up the motorway in her faulty car and now the news of her poor father – as well as everything else.

‘I’ll just go up and see you’ve got everything,’ Lorna said.

Elvira had used her bedroom as a study, and her desk and her books were still there. The room was neat and clean, the daily woman saw to that; but it was, in any case, the way Elvira kept it. When she was a schoolgirl in the old house, her bedroom was never tidy, knickers entangled with her tennis racquet and a bra dangling from the bookshelf. But once they moved to the present house in Withington, she had changed; it was as though she wanted to impose on her room the

order she failed to impose on her life – a conclusion Elvira would have termed banal.

On one wall shelves were stacked with books that Lorna sometimes mused among, reading here a bit of Nietzsche, there a bit of Kierkegaard. Elvira had read few of them, acquiring them mainly to impress Leonard. Next to the bed was the CD player on which she played the classical music Leonard had introduced her to, diluting it with a judicious mixture of pop and folk-rock. She had wanted to move Lorna beyond the easy classical pieces she enjoyed and they had got as far as Bartok, then Elvira had lost interest in the project.

Lorna fluffed up the duvet and would have switched on the electric blanket had there been one, but Elvira considered them decadent. As for a hot-water bottle – ‘Would you like a hot-water bottle?’

‘Christ, no. I’ll be all right. Stop fussing.’

Lorna went to the bathroom for a clean towel. When she returned Elvira was already half undressed, her exposed flesh glowing warmly beneath the overhead light – ‘O I’m sorry!’ Lorna excused herself but Elvira wasn’t embarrassed. Probably used to being seen half naked. Her suitcase was open on the bed. ‘Have you got everything you need? I’ll say goodnight then.’

Lorna wondered if she should kiss her goodnight. While she was still trying to decide, Elvira came to her, flung her arms about her and hugged her. ‘O it’s good to see you again, you good good thing!’

Lorna was surprised and confused. She wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words. She said goodnight – ‘God bless’ – and returned downstairs, saw to Hector and made sure everywhere was securely locked up. The night was quiet now apart from an occasional passing car; the fireworks had dwindled to single bangs that sounded almost defiant, the lonely truculent assertion of grown-up little boys. She put the dishes in the dishwasher and tidied the kitchen, then went to bed. It was a while before she could sleep.

## TWO

Lorna knelt in a weathered pew and the church rose all about her, its sanctified walls. Sometimes it felt like kneeling at the foot of a venerable old man of stone. Her faith was no longer as simple and ardent as it had once been, and as she sometimes wished it still was. But everything was different nowadays; there was so much you had to try and come to terms with, ‘get your head around’ as they said, as Lorna never said: abortion and homosexuality, celibacy and sex and the nature of God. You weren’t sure where you stood any more or what was right. Even the mass was different. The service was in English, the priest stood behind an altar like a counter, facing the congregation. It felt like a shop. They should never have got rid of the Latin. *Introibo ad altare Dei*. Magic words. You needed words you didn’t fully understand to get really close to God, a language on the other side of life, words you could melt into. *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. To feel the reality of God, to get so that you disappeared into Him, you had to use words that were pure and free of the world. An incantation. *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. Nevertheless, although she was tempted to prefer a God about whom you could say little because He/It was quite beyond language and the finite mind – a Radiance you must simply worship as the creator of all – she was loathe to pit herself against the might of Church doctrine. She was reluctant to leave a down-to-earth religion that assured her God was a responsive omnipotent Father to whom you could pray for others – for her parents, for Elvira and Leonard. The sense of benign power such prayer gave you!

She was at early mass, having sent a text to Georgina, the supervisor, saying she would be late to work. When the mass was over she called at the presbytery, a large weathered house smelling of sanctity and furniture polish. The elderly housekeeper surveyed her suspiciously while showing her into a reception room where women in trouble were interviewed, girls pregnant without husbands, girls

who had fallen in love with non-Catholics, wives who wanted to leave their worthless husbands. A clock ticked solemnly above a fireplace in which there was a decorative screen instead of a fire. On the walls were framed photographs of priests, faithful old men who had served their time in the parish. Celibate like me. She studied them, wondering about their lives. Had they felt it was all worthwhile?

There was a large pier-glass above the fireplace and she glanced into it, meeting a woman in her thirties with a pale anxious face. Elvira was right, it was time she did something about her hair – ‘Aha!’ laughed Fr Bredan. ‘Leave a woman alone in a room for a single minute and you can bet she’ll look in a mirror!’

Lorna had seen him in the mirror and she did not whirl away guiltily as she might once have done. Instead she said, ‘What is the mirror for, then? You shouldn’t put temptation in the way of us weak women.’

Fr Bredan laughed again, but with less assurance: an elderly Irish priest in a black cassock that swished

as he strode across the room, making for Lorna. Out of date now, most priests wore black lounge suits, some hardly bothered with a Roman collar. But Fr Bredan clung to the cassock, an old-fashioned priest defying change. ‘Well, Lorna, how are you? Sit down. What brings you here?’

Lorna sat on one of the penitential chairs reserved for visitors; Fr Bredan sat at his ease in a worn armchair, his legs crossed. He swung a polished black brogue creased with wear. Lorna told him her mother wanted masses said for her father; he was very ill and she had gone to Australia to be with him – ‘I know. She told me she was going, popped in to see me before she left. Isn’t it wonderful now that he should send for her after all these years?’

Fr Bredan’s eyes were bright with hope: might not Deidre bring her estranged husband back to God at last? Even to a Jewish God, for he had never converted to Catholicism. They were still married, however, Deidre refusing to grant the divorce he had begged for. Perhaps Our Blessed Lord had arranged it all, a

death-bed conversion...He said he would begin to offer up his masses starting tomorrow and Lorna gave him £50 in notes. He folded them away absently and asked about the rest of her family. 'The lad, I suppose...?' He sighed over Leonard's apostasy. 'And they've a kiddie, have they not?'

'Little Natalie,' Lorna smiled.

'And what of your sister?'

He was always eager to hear news of Elvira, his favourite Magdalene. He remembered her from the Children of Mary. She had once worn the skyblue kerchief, kneeling in prayer, singing hymns to the Virgin. 'Bright eyes with seductive black eyelashes, and a soulful expression. Young Father Adair would back away nervously whenever she looked at him! And then there was the baby, of course. That was a sorry business. The man wouldn't marry her?'

'She said she didn't want to get married, and I believe her. She tried hard to bring up the baby herself.'

'Aye, and why not?' The priest's eyes widened dramatically. 'It's all the rage. Unmarried mothers are feminist heroines nowadays. And if trouble and sorrow come of it – why, bless us, it's no one's fault! No one is ever to blame, it's never anyone's fault...Unless it's us that are at fault, Lorna. We're the ones out of step, I'm afraid.'

Lorna was uncomfortable; she no longer cared to be identified so closely with the priesthood. Moreover, she was inclined to admire those women with children born out of wedlock who made a good loving job of bringing them up single-handed. She didn't approve of sex without marriage; yet if love was involved...?

When Fr Bredan asked how Elvira was getting on, old habit reasserted itself and she confided in him. 'She came home last night. I don't know why. I can't help feeling there's – She says it's all right, but you never know with Elvira. I mean, she's brought a suitcase with her. What if she's given up? But you can't leave just like that, can you? She'll be in trouble.'

‘Ah, no!’ Fr Bredan laughed, shaking his head. ‘You’re not, it seems, familiar with the peculiarly liberal attitude we have to education nowadays. Supposing your fear to be justified, the university will consider her departure quite unexceptional, I do assure you. Young people are dropping out all over the place – often, I daresay, with the sympathetic connivance of their tutors, as though they’d little faith, themselves in the muddled doctrine they teach – Karl Marx in a Sunday suit, hand-in-hand with Mickey Mouse!’

‘But what if they’ve expelled her?’

‘Sent her down?’ The priest probed with his tongue at a scrap of breakfast bacon lodged between his teeth. ‘Don’t give it a thought. Whatever the truth of the matter, she’s better off out of it, to my way of thinking.’

‘Even though she may have spoilt her chance of an education?’ Lorna said tartly.

Fr Bredan’s eyes narrowed. ‘The important thing is that we’ve got her home again. And if she’s in trouble of some sort – all the better; it may prove a crisis, turning her back to the loving Church she venerated as a youngster’

‘It might not be as easy as that.’

‘You think not?’ He swung his black shoe back and forth.

‘She puts a brave face on it but I feel she’s unhappy. But that doesn’t mean she regrets leaving the Church. She misses her baby still, I’m sure; she regrets having given it away.’

‘Then we must help her! She may have a crying need for love and security. The bewildered heart, Lorna! The craving for moral security, for forgiveness. I’ll drop by and see her some time... Yet I don’t want to frighten her. I’ve little tact, y’know, I can rarely stop meself saying what I think. I haven’t the modern way with me, the smart sociology that makes excuses all round and leaves everyone in the clear; the latest theology that takes great pains to reduce Almighty God to an accommodating intellectual construct!’

He laughed, getting up and causing Lorna to rise. 'I think I should take a back seat at present, Lorna, me love, and leave it to you. You must do my work for me.' He brought his seamed face close, his old mouth muttering earnestly. 'Try and impress her with the stupidity of her unbelief, the peril to her immortal soul. It may be that her eternal salvation lies in your hands! Do what you can. Then when she's good and ready, I'll come and put the boot in!'

Walking away from the presbytery, Lorna sighed and shook her head.

### THREE

Elvira had wanted to go on the stage. She had acted in school plays, mercilessly quizzing her family afterwards: Did you think I was good? How good did you think I was? Wasn't it good the way I did that little dance? Did you see the way I stamped my foot when I was supposed to be angry...? She insisted upon acting plays at home, dragooning Lorna and Leonard into them – although Leonard cooperated willingly, he and Elvira were always close; it was Lorna who was dragooned. Because she was the eldest she always had to play the mother or a maiden aunt and she hated it, hated the exposure. 'I'm no good at acting,' she would moan – 'We know that,' Elvira would say, patiently stifling exasperation; 'we don't expect Vanessa Redgrave. Just say the lines.'

When she was in the 6<sup>th</sup> Form and expected to do well – 'I shall try for Cambridge, then I can get into the Footlights, although I think I'm really better at tragedy' – a group calling itself Shopfloor Theatre visited the school. They gave workshops and talks, how wonderful it was being an actor, and invited Sixth Formers to act with them in a play they would perform at the school. Elvira volunteered, racked with excitement and anxiety, and was chosen along with half-a-dozen others. The play was one devised by Shopfloor Theatre, much concerned with early socialism and grim capitalist exploitation. She was given the part of a mill-girl and for days afterwards the house resounded with her attempts to speak her lines with a broad Lancashire accent.

Harry Dashent, a member of the company, played the idealistic son of a tyrant mill owner and Elvira fell in love with him. Shopfloor Theatre was based in Liverpool and she saw a lot of him afterwards, hurtling there in a train, flinging herself into his arms at the station. He would carry her off to his mucky room in Toxteth and it wasn't long before he deflowered her. When Shopfloor Theatre

went on tour, Elvira went with them as a member of the company – ‘They’ve taken me on! I’m actually going on tour with them!’ Deidre howled with dismay: ‘You’ll be the death of me, stupid child!’ and Lorna was worried. What about her education, the A levels she was supposed to be taking? And everyone knew what theatre-people were like. The mother-daughter wrangle lasted for days full of anger and tears, but Elvira was not to be dissuaded. She could be quite hard when she liked, and Deidre was not a martinet. In point of fact she was too involved with the running of her business to care overmuch for her children.

With Shopfloor Theatre Elvira toured Edinburgh (the Festival) and Glasgow and Newcastle and Durham and many towns further south, living with Harry Dashent. At 23 he was six years older than her, a goodlooking vibrant personality furnished with the kind of off-stage charm actors affect; and for much of a year they were madly in love. At least, Elvira assumed they were; then she discovered he was seeing other girls on the side. He claimed, naturally, that these affairs were totally unimportant. But her pride was mortally offended, and although there was a reconciliation – and later another fall from grace and another reconciliation, and then another – she never forgave him. Her pride was also dented by the discovery that she would never be the great actress she had assumed she must be. She never got to play more than a mill-girl or a prostitute, or a house-maid when Shopfloor Theatre decided to scourge the upper classes.

‘The trouble is, you see,’ Dave Tenby told her, ‘you’ve got too strong a sense of self. It gets in the way.’

‘You can never get out of yourself deep enough into another personality for it to be effective.’ He was the stage manager and Elvira had a brief affair with him, wanting revenge. She was careless and found herself pregnant. ‘Don’t worry,’ she told Dave; ‘it’s really got nothing to do with you.’ For convenience she let her family believe Dashent was the father.

## FOUR

When she had finished work and before returning home, Lorna called on her brother. And his wife, of course. You could never think of Leonard without Hilda. It was like Laurel and Hardy, Morecambe and Wise, though they were hardly a comic couple. They lived in a quiet street off Oxford Road, halfway between the university and the Whitworth Art Gallery. It was where you would expect them to live: one of a terrace of late-Victorian houses, stately and tall and faintly decrepit. Deidre had paid the deposit for the mortgage.

Leonard was Head of Humanities in an overgrown college that aspired to be a university; Hilda worked in market research for an organisation that promoted healthy organic foods. It wasn't yet seven o'clock and they wouldn't have sat down to dinner (something Hilda might concoct from a *Guardian* recipe, accompanied by a bottle from their wine society) although Lorna would be too late to see Natalie, who was sure to be in bed. She hoped Hilda would be otherwise occupied so that she could talk to Leonard alone. As it happened she was out visiting a neighbour who had succeeded in placing her child in a desirable primary school – 'We hope to get the kid in there next year. It's a church school but I don't think that matters. We can always help her out of it later.'

'Out of the school?'

'Out of religion.'

Unlike the lounge at home which always blazed with light as though insisting it had nothing to hide, her brother's living-room was, as Hilda liked to put it, 'sculpted with shadow', an effect created by occasional lamps – one on the hearth, one on the mantelpiece, another on the bookcase and a fourth on Hilda's desk in the corner. There was also a pair of willowy reading lamps perched over

armchairs so obviously claimed by Leonard and Hilda that visitors instinctively avoided them.

‘Sit yourself down. Like a drink?’

‘Can I have a sherry?’

Leonard poured her a glass of amontillado and didn’t know what to say next. He was never comfortable with his older sister, never knew quite what attitude to take. They never discussed anything intellectual and it had come as a surprise to discover she had read Jane Austen and Dickens and Hans Kung and Karen Armstrong, among many others. But he hadn’t discussed these authors with her, loathe to embarrass her, doubting whether she had anything worthwhile to say. *And why should she have?* he would then protest in her defence, to himself or to Hilda: literature taken seriously was a specialist sport. As for theology: did she really understand what she was reading?

On this occasion they had his mother and newly-found father to talk about: ‘What’s happening in Australia? Is he better or worse? I suppose she’s getting masses said for him, isn’t she?’

‘Well, if it comforts her....He’s still very ill but there’s some hope he may recover. But that’s not why I’ve come – though I’m sure you want to know how your father is, don’t you?’ Her clear pale eyes challenged him. ‘The thing is, Elvira came home last night.’

‘In the middle of term? Did she say why? How long is she staying?’

‘She’s brought a suitcase with her. It isn’t a flying visit, I’m sure. What do you think she’s done now?’

‘Need she have done anything? She may just need a break. You know how passionately she goes at things, plunging on to the brink of exhaustion.’

‘You don’t think she’s left for good?’

‘Why should she? Although I suppose it’s always possible.’ Leonard was irritated, briskly shaking his head. ‘You never know what she’s going to do next. I

used to find that charming, but it can soon become irritating; I mean the way she demands everyone's attention to the sloppy drama of her life, which constantly needs help getting the show on the road again. I suppose she's never got herself right since giving up the baby, thanks to the pressure you and Deidre put on her.'

'Not me! And not mother, if it comes to that. You know very well no one can do anything with her. Adoption was her own idea; and anyway it was better than what you and Hilda suggested.'

'Abortion would have been conclusive, nevertheless.'

'Elvira might be capable of most things but she would never have had an abortion.'

'Still haunted by the spectre of Catholicism!'

'O you don't understand! Only a woman would understand the way a baby tugs at you. She loved that baby. I wanted to help her look after it, as you know.'

Elvira had gone to London, found herself a grotty flat and got a job. Once the baby was born she had lived largely on benefit. Her mother refused to have anything to do with her – 'I have tried and tried, Lorna, God knows! But I have failed; there is nothing I can do with her' – but Lorna had gone down and stayed with her a while, cleaning the flat and cooking and helping to look after the baby. Elvira needed help, she was harassed and disorganised, money spilling away everywhere, the baby crying, no milk in her breasts. Lorna gave her most of what she had in her bank account and thought of leaving home, leaving the workshop and her mother and setting up house with her sister. They could bring up the child between them! It was a cherished project but Elvira wanted no part of it, insisting she could manage alone. A couple of months later she had surrendered the child for adoption.

'She's never got over it. She's felt guilty and a failure ever since.'

'A role she dramatises to the hilt,' Leonard asserted grimly. Yet was this any more than a feeble defence against the power Elvira had always had over him?

Lorna left, and when Hilda returned he told her the news. 'O dear,' she said.  
'What's happened now?'

## FIVE

In the summer months he would often wake early filled with a sense of purpose as though a great bell had pealed in the world outside, summoning him. He would slide out of bed while Hilda slept soundly, clasped in her body, and would dress and go to his desk. Or he might go out and stroll about the empty streets or in a nearby park. It was good to be out alone, the world knee-deep in the dawn. The ideas of Prefiguring and of Relationships, the scheme of his textbook, had all occurred at around five in the morning. But now it was nearly winter and the mornings were dark, discouraging early rising. When the alarm-clock made its officious clamour they awoke and got out of bed, Leonard with the alacrity of a boy-scout, Hilda with a woman's dopey drugged lethargy.

While he dressed, she went in to their daughter who was already awake and singing. 'Hello, darling! You make my mornings happy with your little songs. Nyum, nyum, nyum!' as she kissed the child hungrily.

During the week breakfast was a hurried affair. Leonard generally made the meal, poured and milked the muesli, stuffed slices of bread in the toaster, attended to the coffee and Natalie's cocoa, good and warming for the little girl on a cold morning. Hilda was busy making herself presentable (as she called it) and hunting down various documents pertaining to her job. She was a well-built blonde with strong legs and firm breasts, an eloquent smile, eyebrows that could arch ironically. Leonard was usually preoccupied with the problems that might arise at the college. The radio was on – never the TV at this hour – and a girl was gabbling the weather forecast in barely comprehensible Estuary English, a voice that never dared the social gaffe of a clear and forthright Received Pronunciation. Then came the news: armed conflict and suicide bombings in Baghdad; the continuing search for Saddam Hussein. There were further warnings of global

warming but England's team was doing well in the Rugby World Cup. Leonard wasn't interested in rugby and he shook his head over the miserable, wrongheaded incursion in Iraq. He and Hilda heartily despised the mendacious New Labour government. Lorna thought it served them right for putting their faith in politics.

'I must be off.' He stood up, brushing crumbs from his shirt and tie. His daughter sat at the table swinging her legs and he poked a comic grimace at her, suppressing the distaste he felt at the sight of her face and hands stickily embroiled in a slice of toast spread with the black treacle she loved. 'Bye-bye, sweetie!'

'Bye-bye, Daddy,' she answered absently, studying the toast and deciding where to bite next.

Leonard kissed his wife goodbye, assured her he would collect Natalie from nursery school and went to his car parked at the kerb. Hilda's car occupied the drive. All along the narrow street of tall old houses with squat front gardens there were cars parked at the kerb. Inevitably, he had to wait a few minutes before he could join the stream of cars at the junction of the main road, and once he had done so he was soon in a stuttering log-jam of painted metal. It was an hour when many parents were taking their brats to school, frequently in polluting SUVs, mother and child strapped down in a heavy black tank.

Trapped in a fuming stalemate of traffic, Leonard cursed affluence – which, as he would declare to whoever cared to listen, created far more problems than poverty. An ex-Catholic, he was more than half convinced we were hurtling madcap towards the end of the world.

He halted the car in a queue at traffic lights. Nearby was a house in which he had rented a flat during his first years teaching. He had already liberated himself from Catholic dogma, and when Elvira was a schoolgirl of sixteen he seduced her out of religion. That was the way she liked to put it, and was prone to repeat from time to time. 'You seduced me out of religion. You did a Nietzsche on me.'

She loved to visit him in his flat and they had many interesting talks on subjects often derived from his picnic with the Existentialists when he was an undergraduate. They grew very close to each other, often hugging and kissing. She was still in the Children of Mary and worried about the state of his soul. She suspected he no longer went to mass, her suspicions confirmed by Lorna and her mother, who were woefully sure of it. She usually slept late of a Sunday dragging herself to eleven o'clock mass after a night of lurid dreams, but one Sunday instead of going straight to church she called on Leonard, finding him at breakfast. 'Come and join me.'

'Thanks. I just had to get out of the house. Mother was laying in to Lorna about something or other.'

'You didn't feel obliged to stay and defend her?'

'It's got nothing to do with me. We are a three-part family. On one side there's mother and Lorna, you're on the other side free as a bird and I'm in the middle'

'— owning allegiance to no one but yourself. However, you can come onto my side if you like.'

'You no longer go to mass, do you? It's a mortal sin, you know. You'll go to hell if you're not careful.'

'The only hell is here on earth for people less fortunate than ourselves. What sort of God is it that allows such suffering? Have a piece of toast.'

She had drunk the coffee he poured, ate buttered toast smeared with marmalade, breaking the fast she had reserved for Holy Communion. This caused her to squirm uneasily on her chair, occasionally glancing at her watch. He had observed her, amused. It was five to eleven, she would have to run like hell to get to a church in time and he was obscurely excited, watching her face, her dreamy almost drunken expression. 'There is no hell and there is no God,' he said quietly. 'So what's the point of Sunday mass?'

‘If there is no God then everything is permitted.’ She had already battered her way through *The Brothers Karamazov*.

‘Dostoevsky is sometimes a moron. Anything is permitted for those who can square it with God. Take any war: don’t the combatants believe God is on their side and therefore everything is permitted? Anything is permitted to those who chose to believe they’re doing His Will.’

‘I want to be like you!’ the young girl had cried impetuously. ‘Intellectually free and brave.’

‘You’ll have to hurry if you’re going to mass.’

‘I’m not going; I’m never going to mass again. For some time, in fact, I have felt it was quite meaningless.’

Some years later she found herself pregnant – a propter hoc Dostoevsky would have been eager to make. Leonard remembered the time as spangled brilliantly with the exclamations of her crisis. She had applied to him and Hilda for help and they had agreed with her that adoption, the solution preferred by her mother, was not a good idea – ‘She would never reconcile herself to it,’ Hilda had assured him in private. She would brood endlessly over the missing child and they would have the greatest difficulty extricating themselves from her predicament. Abortion, a sharp clean break, was best – ‘But whatever we advise,’ Hilda had said, ‘she’s sure to blame us for it later.’

Leonard had made the suggestion but Elvira had insisted on bringing up the kid herself. Rejecting abortion she had scorched him with one of her scornful stares, a despising grimace that blazed betrayal. And he had felt terrible, wracked by a yearning frustrated love. ‘How will she manage in London on her own?’ he had cried – ‘She’ll manage,’ Hilda had assured him. ‘She can be quite practical when she has to be. And if she isn’t, it will be a lesson learned.’ Not for the first time he had wondered at the woman he had married.

END OF SAMPLE

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