

'God and the devil fight for a human soul' from Adolescing. Copyright © Hilary Leland 2014.

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God and the devil fight for a human soul

After I left home I started having a lie in some Sundays. Once I skived off mass three Sundays in a row but it felt terrible doing that. I do not think that I am very religious but you have to go somewhere on a Sunday morning.

This was a difficult time. I got a job at Clarendon House but there were three other young people working in the same office. I wish they had all been old! I felt scared every day when I got up for work. I had to get a flat because I couldn't come in from the village every day. Not that I wanted to carry on living with Dad. My flat was okay but it didn't have a television and there is no point in cooking a meal for one. I hadn't any friends. In the evenings I talked out loud to nobody and the flat became dirty and smelly. Then one Sunday I saw a notice on the church notice board advertising an Easter retreat at Saint David's, five days. On impulse I filled in the form and arranged my annual leave so that I could go.

After a day I knew that I had done the right thing. There was an old house where you could hear the sea, and eighteen of us, not including the priests and nuns. I expected to be the youngest but we were all different ages. Even two of the nuns were just young girls. None of the women was

wearing any make up and everyone wore just quiet comfortable clothes, me too of course. It was such a relief after being at work. Sometimes there was an hour of silence. We sat or walked together in silence. The men didn't look at you the way men do, or talk in that loud way. We talked quietly when we talked. Before I arrived I thought, What have I let myself in for? It will be mass every day! but it was nothing like ordinary mass. Ordinary mass is bored Father Dominic saying the words in a sing song voice. Here there were different priests so we split up into three groups. Six of us and two of the nuns sat in a circle in just an ordinary room with chairs. It didn't even have a crucifix. We talked with the priest and laughed together. The priest encouraged us to talk about the things you usually keep to yourself. I felt that we were friends. I even said something to them about Violet Perkins in year ten who was expelled when they let me stay. Then after nearly an hour, the priest took a chalice and things out of his case. He quickly said the offertory and went straight on to the consecration and the communion. All our conversation had been part of a mass. We shared the bread and the wine like real friends at a meal.

On the second day there was going to be a mass for all of us together in the little chapel. I had been to confession but I was getting distracted. I came in from the garden and went back to my bedroom. I shared it with two sisters from Port Talbot but no one was around. I thought, I can't not do it for

a whole week. It will just keep distracting me. Indecisive, I unbuttoned my white jeans. Then I shook my head and did them up again. I went across the hall to the wash room and locked the door. I took my jeans right off and my knickers too. I knelt down with my hands out of sight, one from the back and one from the front and emptied my mind. It wasn't as if I was being dirty minded or anything but perhaps I shouldn't have knelt that time. There was nowhere comfortable to sit in there. I just hunched down on my hands until I sobbed and it was gushing.

Then of course I found I had to get to the chapel in a hurry. I had only a little time to clean myself and I didn't want to leave any signs on my flannel or the towels. I arrived at the chapel out of breath and thinking I might have spoiled it a bit but everyone smiled and they made a space for me and, again, it wasn't like an ordinary mass. It was the same priest that our group had yesterday. During the homily he sat down with us. I will write down the bits I can remember.

'What sins did you all confess yesterday? Has any of you stolen something? A Bic from the office, a can of baked beans?' We giggled. 'Or have you been using contraceptives? Who cares?' Then we really laughed. 'Do any of these sins matter? What is sin really?

Well, sin is turning away from God. Sin is turning away from our neighbour. So forget your other sins; when have you turned away from your neighbour?' He looked around

the chapel, from one face to another.

'He'll only spend it on drugs.

Cross the road quick or he'll tell you his life history.'

Then he turned to look at me.

'It's for her own good. There is no helping some people!'

I thought, Everyone is looking at me; but then he let me off and turned to either Sean or Peter, I don't know which because they were sitting just behind me.

'Or perhaps, She's a good ride if you can put up with all the wingeing.'

Lots of people were shocked but we were laughing too, except Sean, I think. Then he was serious again.

'And when have I turned away from my neighbour? As a priest I meet people at the worst times in their lives. That is what they pay me for. I would be too ashamed to say how many times I have turned away from my neighbour and that is the same as turning away from God.'

He put his face in his hands for a moment, then looked up again. He was not a young man but his eyes and his way of looking at you were very like a young man, appealing and intense.

'Now the worst thing I could do would be to talk down to you as if I was anyone special; but we need to help each other to fight sin—'

He smiled,

'—and to fight the devil. Do you mind me talking about

the devil? I am talking like an old fashioned priest now; but have you ever met the devil? I have. He's charming, he's good company, or she is; it is the same devil whether it is a he or a she. A nudge and a whisper, this is what clever people do, this is what clever people think and we fall. It is easy. The ways of the devil are the ways of the world; we all do what she says.

Only one day—Now I'm not talking about hell. I am a priest but I don't know anything about hell, or heaven. I only know the same things that you know, the world we all live in. One day we will be weak and in need; and then, instead of help, the cruelty and heartlessness and selfishness of the world will be turned on us, you and me. We will understand what kind of world we have helped the devil to create.

But the devil is so strong. We cannot fight her by ourselves, only with the grace of God. We do not know how strong the devil is because she makes friends with us. Try disagreeing with her sometimes and find out what it is like when she turns on you,' he stopped and looked at us one at a time, 'and when everyone joins in.'

'Sin is so easy, just as easy as shutting people out on a cold night or shouting a slogan in a crowd; and it is so difficult not to sin. I do not know how; but Jesus died to redeem us from sin. Perhaps he can show us how,' he smiled again, 'or she. May I have just a minute?'

He stood up and one of the nuns handed him a chalice.

He busied himself with that for a minute, looking over his shoulder at us, apologetically. Then he turned to us again.

‘I think that most of you will manage to do some real good in the world. You will struggle in an evil world, not perfect yourselves but managing to do some good. I honour you for it. You will be able to do this through the grace of Jesus. If we let Jesus into our hearts, perhaps we can do something together to show God’s love to those in need, to weaken the grip of the devil on the world, to let some light into the darkness. God bless you all.’ He held up the chalice.

‘Let us pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father!’

We left the chapel, filled with a sense of common purpose. There were several speakers that afternoon, a speaker from a Christian project for rough sleepers in Swansea, from a Christian Aid project in Angola. Far from our jobs and our families, we young people had an inspired sense of purpose. We would purify our hearts and put out all our youthful energy to the service of the needy. I talked about it with the quiet boy, Sean. He had been crying, I could tell. We made plans.

I thought, I will give my new friends a surprise tomorrow when I tell them what day it is.

On the second night I dreamt of Vicky Churchill at school. I think it is wrong to have dreams like that about a person when she only meant to be friendly. Once I went to her

house and she was getting out of the bath but she opened the door to talk about her cousin's wedding. I looked at her then turned away again quickly. She thought it didn't matter if girls saw you, only boys. I dreamt of her like that, waving arms and legs, the towel sliding up her thigh when she was drying under her arm, giggling and sometimes hair. Just a glimpse, she didn't do it deliberately. I looked out of the window but concentrated out of the corner of my eye so hard that I forgot to breathe. The towel slipping over her sharp spiky hip, my heart jumped when I saw it again, hair, wrinkles and damp and more hair. I woke up with a knot in my stomach. The two Welsh ladies were asleep so I carried on thinking about Vicky. One day at school she came very close to me, giggling, her eyes enormous behind those glasses. Yes, she is going to whisper in my ear. Something lovely, something filthy. NO! Something friendly, something sweet. It is only me who is filthy. Nobody else has a mind like mine. I was about to start crying, no but let's pretend let's pretend! Careful not to make a noise, I rummaged with my fingers, brushed and tickled and meddled, melted into hot water.

Then I had to stop, it didn't feel right. I struggled with myself.

'No. That's not what he meant, not this kind of sin. This isn't even a real sin any more.'

I spread my knees wide apart and squeezed my eyes

shut, shutting those voices out. One finger, two, three. Her thin bony thighs and—Pretending, I stuck out my tongue and wrinkled up my nose no DON'T!

Vicky never did anything to deserve this. No wonder nobody wants to be friends with me. They don't realise about me here yet but they'll soon find out.

My fingers were still going like wriggly eels even then, 'NO!' I yanked my hand away and held it up to the dim light from the window, staring at my clawing fingers. I rolled onto my side, clutching my tummy with a screaming hurt child down there. She could not understand why I refused to pet her any more. I said,

'I'm sorry! I can't be this person if I'm that person!'

I tried to go to sleep but it happened again! I thought about two of the girls on retreat, Colette and Geraldine; they had made friends, they whispered to each other even in chapel so I pretended, you can guess what. I rolled onto my back again and lay there pretending. I made little contented noises but how can I treat my friends like this? I turned on my side again, trying to get back to sleep. It's no good. I couldn't be bothered to wash but sat on my bed until it was time for the passion service. Afterwards I went back to my room and found a letter on my pillow. Annabel was younger than me, I think. She had come with her parents. I never spoke to her, we had nothing to talk about but she wouldn't leave me alone.

2nd April 99

Dear Amy,

You are always going off by yourself you should have finished telling us about Violet because you got yourself into a tizz about sinning but back then I was like what can they do with two of these? You could have put me right about that Amy! So I read the problem page instead and wrote them a letter but they're just ignorant because you have to sort of stretch things back until it sort of pops out in the mirror and I was like oh is that all it is? So then I was like hey you go snap crackle pop like fireworks all over and they were like ew that's gross but you don't think so and all the boys were like wow yeah me too but I wasn't talking to them do you Amy? I can't stand any of them except you I was waiting for you and I'd have let you see but you haven't had a shower all week don't you wash and then me and Sean were kneeling behind you at mass and he was like don't look down Amy's in good shape today and I couldn't help laughing in your white jeans not the blue ones! You haven't let Sean do it have you? I can't wait for us to get together even if we just talk but most girls talk about hair and relationships not I want to put my finger in someone's that sort of thing we ought to have counselling or something. I have to do the stations of the cross now but no one goes into the

green room after tea if we keep the lights off and there wasn't even a crucifix there remember? Jesus won't be watching! I'll be gutted if you don't show up because they all have boyfriends except you.

Yours ever,
Annabel

At first I couldn't read this then I couldn't make out what she was saying then I couldn't understand what she meant. What a load of crap! She's trying to trap me, in the green room, or he, is it some filthy boy pretending to be Annabel with a girl's handwriting like my handwriting did I write it? I stared at the letter again, which room is green? Without a crucifix, kneeling at mass! I felt round the back of my jeans (blue? No, white.) I looked at the letter again and slid my hand down the waistband. I've lost weight. Perhaps I need a belt, a two, three inch gap, fuck! Kneeling behind me, don't look down FUCK YOU SEAN! I was trembling with anger but perhaps she's lying. It's the second of April, not the first. Good Friday. It's my birthday! I'm twenty. Still reading the letter in one hand, I undid a button of my blouse with the other and fingered my armpit. I touched my nose and smelled, yeah, Annabel, so I don't wash. Grease, yeah, blackheads and you're all so scrubbed and golden.

So what? She still wants me, apparently. What's the time? No lunch, after tea? It's dark already! I ran downstairs and

outside into the rain, and looked up at the house and all the windows. I ran back inside. Nobody will know so long as we leave the lights off.