

Portraying a woman Church of England priest as protagonist in a satire

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“Don't let the bastards grind you down.”
— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

ABSTRACT

The first part of this dissertation is the Creative Portfolio, consisting of the initial ten chapters of *Oh Dear God!*, a satirical novel, set in the present day. This submission creates an older woman Church of England protagonist, Christal. She is dumped in a dead-end rural parish by a Machiavellian bishop who sees the chance of getting rid of her and closing a failing church at the same time. It is aimed at readers of satire, feminists (of any gender), mature women, anyone looking for a story of unlikely triumph or curious about church life. The novel is in episodic form, recounted by the protagonist in the first person and employs present-tense narration. It explores themes of institutional misogyny, the decline of rural churches, menopause and some of the social hypocrisy surrounding sex work. It also charts the effects of a child death on a small community and the role played by the local Church in such a tragedy.

The second part of this dissertation is the Critical Reflection, considering some of the research supporting the creative piece, which included academic studies and literature, TV and film, other novels relevant to the subject or with comparable writing styles. It encompassed television documentaries, research papers, newspaper articles, academic papers, a conference, an online symposium and other online material. Topics included narratology, ecclesiology and theology, satire, feminism and gender studies, and sociology with reference to both sex work and the decline of rural churches. The reflection focuses on the current status of women priests in the Church of England facing institutional misogyny alongside their disproportionate role in rural and unpaid ministry. This is evidenced using statistics and testimony of women affected. The submission then examines the choice of first-person narration, present-tense narrative and what is needed to combine the two effectively.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Creative Portfolio	1 – 60
Critical Reflection	61 - 77
Selected Bibliography	78 - 84

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love (Psalm 145: 8). Unlike a bishop who is pissed off. Very pissed off. With me.

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. It's going to be a bit of a day. I shouldn't have been out on the razz last night. Not before a big meeting with the Bishop. It's just that since the divorce, well, maybe it's a late-life misspent youth. And Margie, she's a great friend but she does lead me astray sometimes. I've never had hollow legs like her. Not a bad thing for a priest. She can fill her chalice at the altar on a Sunday and finish it off without a wobble. Me, I'm always a bit merry by the time I'm giving the notices. Don't worry God, I'm paying for it now. I have the mother of all hangovers. And I'm in last chance saloon with the Bishop. I so need it to go well...

The alarm clock is on its *n*th repeat as I lurch into the reality of watery, wintry morning light and that means I'm late. Still, there is hope, if I get a shift on.

It doesn't take long to scoop my underwear off the floor. I could do without standing on a fork and hopping like a demented rabbit but it serves me right for abandoning last night's dinner. Must do better on the washing up front.

Yay! I have made it out on time. The door slams behind me. My backpack is still inside, with my keys and my money and my debit card. I wheel rapidly to try to stop it shutting and break my fingernail.

I shove my fists glumly into my pockets against the November cold. Something is niggling me in my tights. I check the street left and right. No one is looking. I double check, then quickly hoist the back of my dress up and slide my hand into them to see if I can assuage the itching.

'Morning Christal!'

I mean, sodding hell, God. My church warden is beaming me from the front gate.

'Morning Charles!' I blush. Bloody menopause. I give a wave and pretend I'm opening my door and about to go in. I think he buys it. The details from the night before are flitting sketchily my brain. I retrieve a tenner from my tights. Taxi money, I presume. Hallelujah! I start to trot down the garden path. I can get the bus. It's been a while but you don't forget how to take a bus, right? I step boldly off the kerb.

'Look out!'

A cyclist swerves round me, his string of ensuing expletives drifting away on the breeze. Crikey. Rude. I toss my hair defiantly. The bus doors open with a whoosh. I stride on, brandishing my tenner. 'Central Wheatford please!' The driver stops chewing her gum and looks at the banknote.

'Contactless,' she says.

‘Contactless?’

‘Yeah. Contactless.’

‘I can’t pay for a ticket?’

‘That’s what *contactless* means.’

‘Sodding hell. The Bishop’s going to sack me.’

‘Bishop,’ says the bus driver, masticating slowly.’

‘Yes. I’ve got to see him this morning or...’

‘Best hop on then, darling.’

‘I’m going to be in such trouble. You’ve no idea.’

‘Just take a seat, there’s a love.’

‘Thank you! And er...God bless you!’

‘Do I look blessed to you?’

I gabble some more inadequate words of thanks. The townscape whizzes past as I try to collect my thoughts. What will the Bishop have to say? Should I even dare speak? I rehearse a solid response in my head: In my defence, Bishop, it was only one glass of wine. It was the antibiotics. Defence. One glass. Antibiotics.

By the time I run up the hill from the bus stop to the Bishop’s lodge my cheeks are on fire.

‘I’m late!’ The Bishop’s executive assistant glances up briefly from a folder, smoothing his immaculately knotted tie.

‘You don’t say. Take a seat. The Bishop will see you in due course.’

The single wooden seat has seen better days. My best black dress snags on an unruly piece of splintered ply. I yank incautiously to free it. Back straight, knees together, feet together. Be dignified. Be demure. My reflection in a window confirms the worst: I look as pink as I feel, my clerical collar is askew and my hair appears to have been backcombed with a teasel.

I breathe in for a count of four and exhale for a count of eight. The Bishop’s EA is staring at me through narrowing and distinctly unfriendly eyes. ‘Sorry’, I mouth but he only allows himself a further cursory glance in my direction and then reengages with his computer screen.

‘Ahem.’ The Bishop has appeared in the doorway. He gesticulates curtly that I should follow him, pointing wordlessly to a chair.

‘Tea? Or are you one of those mocha-doo-dah types?’

I look at the tray in front of me, already bearing a tea pot and two cups.

‘Tea would be lovely.’

The Bishop pours with precision. 'Milk? Sugar?'

'Milk no sugar thanks.'

He proffers a small plate with malted milk biscuits. I hesitate. The Bishop breaks the silence.

'You're not one of those women constantly on a diet, are you?' He whisks the plate away deftly swiping a biscuit and consuming it.

From the opposite side of his well-ordered desk, Bishop Cuthbert fixes me with a beady eye. I just get the feeling he doesn't like women and he's not alone in the episcopate in that. 'The boys' club,' my friend Margie calls it: male priests of a certain generation who openly wince at the sound of heels in the sanctuary and tut at hair longer than two inches left on the vestments.

Bishop Cuthbert's lips purse. The pause is interminable. In the silence I can hear the laborious ticking of a grandfather clock. His eyes narrow.

'Now, then,' he says, in what sounds like a low growl, his teeth glinting, 'What are we going to do with you, my dear?'

Luckily I spot the rhetorical question. The Bishop angles his head slightly to one side, his gaze dropping to the folder in front of him. He straightens a pen so that it sits perfectly in line with two others.

'Christal Petrie, curate at St Margaret's, fifty-four years of age. Curacy period at an *end*.' His fingers begin to drum on the desk.

When you start a curacy it feels like you will be the trainee priest forever, not just three years. You are the butt of endless jokes, the junior partner. But before you know it, time is up and you have to find your own church to take charge of. I need the Bishop to sign my curacy off so I can go and lead my own church. They seem to be in short supply round here.

I choose this moment to reach for my perfectly proportioned designer china teacup, the kind that has golden twiddly bits painted round the rim with a stupidly small handle. I take what I hope is a delicate sip. But it isn't. It turns into a slurp of music hall proportions. I miss putting the cup back down squarely on the saucer. The cup clatters. The tea slops. The Bishop stares at the pool of liquid in the saucer. He raises a perfectly trimmed eyebrow, then resumes his taciturn examination of the file in front of him. I daren't move.

'Ah!' Bishop Cuthbert stabs a finger triumphantly at the folder. 'The Misdemeanour'.

'Defence. One glass. Antibiotics!'

'I beg your pardon?' There is something arctic in the sound of the Bishop drawing breath.

The Misdemeanour. I wonder if it will ever go away? Is it like points on a licence? I am beginning to doubt it. This is not the DVLA. This is the CofE.

My mind drifts back to the routine scan, the kind you get when you hit a certain age.

‘You have polycystic breasts,’ the doctor said.

‘Polycystic?’ I repeated, blankly.

‘You’re lumpy. What are you now? Over fifty? It’s not malignant. But you’ll need a strong antibiotic, just to be on the safe side.’ So there is an unsafe side, I thought, as I stared at the tatty NHS ceiling and wished his prodding hands away.

The Bishop sighs. ‘The Mis-de-mean-our.’ He draws out each and every last syllable. ‘Conduct unbefitting,’ he pauses, ‘of a Minister in the Church of England.’ I find my hands making an involuntary and placatory gesture.

‘What you have to understand is...’

‘I do not have to understand *anything*.’ More lip pursing follows.

‘I mean, to explain, I had been on antibiotics. They were finished and I only had one glass of wine but it made me stupidly drunk and thought it would be funny to give the statue of Cranmer a hat and my friend Margie...’

‘Half of Cambridge witnessed extra-large purple frilly knickers on Cranmer’s head! In front of a theological college. Mother Mary and all the saints, have you no *shame*?’

‘Well, yes, quite a lot actually. They were my extra-large ones. Normally I wear a size smaller.’

He rubs his brow. ‘Purple is an episcopal colour. The Bishop of London came under suspicion!’

I dig my ragged fingernail into my palm. Pain. I need a church. No vicaring job means no pay and no home. The warden at my curacy church has already asked if I want pink or blue napkins at my farewell party. If the Bishop doesn’t give me somewhere then I’ve taken a late-life dive down a ministerial rabbit hole. There is no employment law to help me out here. The Church of England is not an employer. We get paid a stipend not a salary and the Church gets off with a lot.

‘I don’t want you in that way anymore,’ said my ex, as the marriage heaved itself into a death rattle. The words still ring in my ears most days. ‘You’ve stolen my future,’ I wanted to reply. Instead, I watched him wordlessly and planned a simple revenge in my head by stabbing his bike tyres with a large knife (sorry, God).

The Bishop is still fixed on the file in front of him, his eyes remaining steadily downwards. I am fiddling with a short black thread dangling from the hem of my dress. My fingers worry at it. It is there, nagging at me provocatively, as short black threads do, once you have spotted them. My broken nail catches on the thread. It unravels quickly and irrevocably, letting a large chunk of hem cascade towards the floor. My hands scurry to smooth it back into place.

‘How many parishes did you apply for?’

‘At least six.’ And the rest.

Bishop Cuthbert tuts but then his face suddenly brightens. He sits up to his full height and closes the file slowly.

‘Upper Bollington.’ His teeth flash in a slightly crocodilian manner. ‘Yes. It’s on the very edge of the diocese. I’ve been pondering a suitable candidate for that place for some while. You’ll do very nicely.’

‘I will?’ I mumble, trying to tuck my hem up unobtrusively. I will finally join the ranks of my training friends who are all safely ensconced in their first incumbencies. I am no longer the last curate standing.

‘What in the name of all the saints are you doing with your dress?’ I open my mouth but once again manage, in the nick of time, to say nothing.

‘Upper Bollington.’ He nods in a self-congratulatory way, flipping my file shut, and picks up his phone. Within seconds the EA sticks an enquiring head through the door.

‘Fetch me the details of Upper Bollington please, Michael.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ replies the Bishop evenly, examining the tips of his fingers. ‘Really.’

It takes Michael some minutes to return and plonk a very thick file on the desk.

‘Thank you, Michael.’ The Bishop opens the file. ‘I think you need a challenge.’ He straightens his pens again. ‘It will be the making of you. It’s an interesting parish. There’s the church, of course, and a spacious vicarage next door.’

‘I’ve never heard of Upper Bollington.’

The Bishop shrugs. ‘How shall I put this? It’s a bit out of the way. The church is St Jude’s.’ He examines his fingertips again.

‘Isn’t that the patron saint of..?’

‘Lost causes. I want you to go and see it immediately. I think we can dispense with the usual formalities. You’re the ideal candidate.’

‘But won’t the Parochial Church Council need to..?’

‘I don’t think we need to bother the PCC on this one,’ he says, sucking in his cheeks. ‘I’m using my discretion.’ There is a pause. ‘Oh, and by the way, they’ve never had a woman.’

‘Bloody hell!’

For now we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Except if you are me and can't even find a light switch.

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. I'm about to enter your house. But it could be my house too, as incumbent. What if I don't feel you here? What if I don't get that vibe? I don't want to leave my diocese, the friends I've trained with. I don't have the courage at the moment. I'm so sodding tired from the divorce and my cockwombling ex and his endless aggressive prevarication. I need somewhere to settle for a while. Just find me again. Whoever that is these days...

The church door gives an eerie creak. My eyes strain to settle to the darkness. It could be beautiful, with a plush carpet and polished pews. Perhaps there are even stunning, Chelsea Flower Show inspired floral arrangements. Hello lovely church, welcome to your new vicar.

My fingers fumble their way to a light switch. The reality of the church is shabby, threadbare and cobwebby. I lean on a pew and it makes a distinctly ropey cracking sound. I flinch away from it and see on my hand a layer of grey grime.

'Eugh.'

'Ahem! Can I help you?' An unkempt man, in his forties maybe, is looking at me quizzically.

'Er, I'm fine thanks.' A long trail of cobwebs dangling from the Norman ceiling behind him steals my attention.

'Oh, OK. Leave you in peace then.' He seems gracious, with a gentle hint of disappointment.

'No. Um. Did no-one tell you I was coming?'

'Not a peep.'

'I see.'

'Lard's the name. Lard McGreggor. Parish Admin, that's me.'

'Lard?'

'You ask a lot of questions, by the way.'

'Your name's *Lard*?'

'Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. I mean, that's what everybody roun' here calls me.'

He pats his stomach expansively and says, 'If the cap fits, or the belly in this case.' He chuckles warmly. His shirt buttons are under a lot of strain.

'I might be your new vicar,' I blurt.

‘Bloody hell! Total surprise there, don’t you know.’

‘I’m a recent candidate.’

‘Well, no bugger bothered to tell me. I mean, we’ve been in vacancy for years. No one’s come near the place.’ He exhales audibly. ‘In that case, welcome.’

‘My name’s Christal.’ I fix a smile and offer him my hand.

‘Pleased to meet you. I didn’t mean to put you off.’

I fill my lungs decisively. ‘Well, Lard, it would appear that I am soon to be the new vicar.’

‘Aye well. Good.’ Lard is growing on me.

‘Could point me in the direction of the church warden?’

Lard grins and extends his hand. ‘Lard’s the name, church warden’s the game.’

‘Oh, you’re both?’

‘Aye and a wee bit more besides. Verger, gardener, general dogsbody. That’s me.’

‘You must have a lot of time on your hands.’

Lard reddens slightly and looks down at the toes of his trainers.

‘Perhaps you could show me the office?’, I say quickly. Lard perks up, recovering some of his earlier animation.

‘Fancy a biscuit?’

I have been offered many cups of tea and coffee in my time as a trainee vicar with mixed offerings. A biscuit sounds safe. I remember once crossing the threshold of an elderly parishioner, stepping gingerly round unidentifiable bits of brown matter, nearly but not quite concealed by a nineteen-seventies swirly carpet. By the time she proffered me a cup of tea, most of it was in the saucer and the milk had curdled. I politely drank down translucent dark brown liquid with chunks of ‘cheese’. When bishops say we should meet our people ‘where they are’, I’m never convinced they have recently sat next to where a cat has had an accident or a child has disgorged a chocolate biscuit.

‘This way then, Vic’, says Lard cheerily, gesturing towards a very dusty velvet curtain, masking the entrance to the church tower. Was it once a lovely honey golden colour? I hope it wasn’t cream.

Lard coughs as he pulls the curtain aside. ‘Aye, well, it’s a wee bit dusty in here.’ He reaches for a large tartan tin and opens the lid with a flourish.

‘Ta dah! Biscuit central. What do you fancy? I’m partial to a Tunnock’s teacake myself. And a caramel wafer. And a garibaldi. And shortbread. And...’

‘Wow. That’s quite the selection. Shortbread. Great,’ I say, reaching in. ‘Don’t suppose there’s a cup of tea to go with that?’

The space is small and even dingier than the Church. There are some old metal shelves along the walls and a tatty wardrobe. Everything in the ‘office’ has seen better days.

There's a huge, cumbersome desk that someone clearly didn't want to give house room to anymore and a weary studded leather office chair. Disappearing in the murk, I can make out old stacking chairs, boxes, flower stands. You name it, someone has seen fit to dump it here. There's even a plaster statuette of the Virgin Mary with a decapitated Jesus.

'This is the office?'

'Aye, well, it's no very grand and if I had known you were coming I'd have had a wee tidy up.'

I make a mental note to check out the cost of skip hire. Lard rummages about and produces a kettle. 'Just off to fetch water from the well,' he says with a grin. This really is the Styx.

'The well?'

'Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. I mean, it's a tap ootside. All mod cons here.'

'And the toilet?'

'Oot the door and roun' the back. If you know what I mean.'

Lard disappears with the kettle and I decide to venture to the toilet. As I pass him at the standing tap on the path, I can just about hear him humming faintly to himself above the sound of the rushing water. There may not be any 'mod cons' here, no gleaming kitchen with the usual facilities, but there is a simple human hospitality. I'm about to become homeless, in parish and housing terms. There's no such thing as an eternal curate. Is it here?

What had the Bishop's parting shot been? 'It is yours to make of what you will but if you don't make something of it, we will close the door and the last one out can switch off the lights.'

I've often wondered when watching those daytime house programmes with converted churches what it would be like to live in one. Would the holiness fade? Would you still be at home, God? Lard probably has no idea of the axe of doom swinging like a dark pendulum over the church. It's still a place of worship but also a potential character, three bed detached.

I round the final corner of the building into a sea of nettles, punctuated with piles of old wood but nothing remotely resembling a toilet. When Lard had said 'oot the door and roun' the back', he hadn't actually said there was a toilet, had he?

There's a choice here between potential ignominy and relief. I can't be caught literally with my pants down. One more strike and I'm out. My pelvic floor muscles respond just enough to pull up. But what if I had a menopausal flood day? That river of blood that just starts flowing, no telling when? It's a quick trip to the vicarage then I suppose but it could get messy. And what about the other women in the congregation? I make yet another mental note to add a toilet building project to a rather long list of parish improvements. And please God, let there be a pot of cash somewhere.

Back in the 'office' Lard is whistling cheerily, brewing a couple of large mugs of tea. He has produced milk also.

'Do you want to be Judy Garland or ABBA?' he says.

'Sorry?'

'There you go, Vic,' he beams, deciding I am ABBA. I look around for somewhere to sit.

'Ahem,' he says dramatically, 'Have the seat.' I look at the tatty leather chair, one of the buttons hanging from a greasy thread. I think I might prefer to settle for an ancient metal and wood one. But Lard is insistent. 'You're the boss.' I ease down into the chair and survey what is by default 'my' office.

'So how many do you get on a Sunday?'

Lard bites his lip. A silence yawns.

'Ballpark. Average. That will do.'

'Three. Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. Do you count dogs?'

'*Three?*'

'And a dog.'

'Dogs don't put money on the collection plate, Lard.'

I should have checked the numbers before agreeing to look at the parish. The Bishop made it quite clear: take St Jude's. If nothing else is on offer then I will have to leave this diocese and start over somewhere else. They might even make me do a second curacy. Each diocese has its quirks. All the contacts I have built, all the networks would then go. It's bad enough weathering the loneliness of ministry without going further from my friends. The Bishop could get rid of me, ship me off to another diocese with a glowingly whitewashed report. I wouldn't put that past him. The 'Misdemeanour' could be gently expunged and no-one would be any the wiser, except me and the Bishop. But I'd be off his hands.

'Who's the treasurer?'

Lard pulls himself upright. Aha. I had suspected as much. 'What've we got in the coffers?'

'The God's honest truth?'

'I think that would be highly appropriate under the circumstances.'

'Sod all.' Ah. This parish is going under or has already gone. The Bishop has made no bones about it. Why not prove him wrong? I feel the first unwanted flush of a menopausal heatwave hit me. I'd like to hook him up to a period pain simulator and see how it would affect his ability to preach.

'Tell me about the congregation.'

'Well, there's me.'

‘Yes?’

‘And Mrs Moody.’

‘And is she?’

‘What?’

‘Moody?’

‘Aye. Well. No. Well, aye. Sometimes. Quite a lot, actually. There’s an organist.’

Now I’m warming to the place. I take a slurp of tea and cradle the mug in my hands. I have visions of a robed choir, with me processing in stately fashion behind, wearing a brand new shiny golden chasuble (vicar’s poncho thingy) from a top London outfitter, smiling benignly at packed pews.

‘You all right there, Vic?’

I dab at my pink and greasy forehead with a tissue.

‘An organist. That’s fantastic!’

‘Betsy’s her name. She’s, well, she’s Betsy. You’ll see.’

That’s something to work with at least. One of my friends at vicar school told me how they had crossed their resident organist by pointing out that one of the hymns had been on the slow side. The next time she processed in church she walked in to the TV Formula One theme tune. And they all know the Elephant by Saint-Saëns. Never put on weight having pissed off the organist.

‘Is that it?’

‘More or less,’ says Lard.

‘Ah. When did we last pay the parish share?’

Lard splutters and a small cascade of shortbread crumbs lands on the desk. I wait until he has recovered himself, gulping down the final bits and taking a big swig of tea.

‘Sorry about that. When you say *pay* the parish share...’

‘Yes, Lard, pay the money the diocese expects to receive from this church.’

‘Well, aye. Well, no. Well, aye. We havna paid it in a wee while, neither we have...’

‘A wee while meaning?’

‘Oh, couple of years, give or take.’

‘Two years?’

‘That would be five.’

Oh blimey. Five years since the last priest left. It’s a wonder the diocese hasn’t pulled the plug already.

‘So, here’s the killer question,’ says Lard.

‘There’s a killer question?’

‘There is round these parts.’

‘And it is?’

‘Are you for or against?’

‘For or against what?’

Lard’s voice drops to a stage whisper and he leans forward: ‘You no seen the signs around the village yet? Are you for or against...’, he takes a deep breath and then says sotto voce, ‘the road humps.’

In my Father's house there are many mansions (John 14:2). Except if you are me and you are standing in front of a rather dilapidated vicarage on a pretty much take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. I am about to enter my house, or the one that comes with the job at least. You know, it was one of the worst things about the divorce, losing my home so my bastarding ex could have a new life. Sorry God. I shouldn't call him that. But he was and is and will forever be an utter bastard in my eyes. I'll let you do the forgiveness on this one. I invested so much in that home. I put up every last curtain, every last hook, painted all the rooms something more exciting than builders' magnolia. I put my heart into that space. And now? I'm looking at a crumbling Victorian heap. It doesn't have 'dream home' written all over it...

'It's not much to look at,' says Lard. Shrivelled weeds have grown out of the drainpipes, the cracked single pane of a wooden-framed window is like a crooked jeer, the peeling paint on the front door screams 'abandon hope all ye who enter here!'

'It's quite roomy inside.' He unlocks the door with a monstrous, rusty key. It takes three shoves before he manages to force it open. 'Aye, it could do with a wee bit of adjusting there.'

I put my hand tentatively on the door frame and peer in. What else might it be in need of? The interior is dank and dreary. The cobwebs could grace the set of a horror movie. I step gingerly over a pile of yellowing, unsolicited mail.

'How long since anyone has lived here?'

'Oh, well, now. That would be quite a while. Quite a wee while, to be honest.'

Even though it's relatively sunny outside, I feel the need to flick a light switch. Nothing happens. I flick it again speculatively and look upwards. There is a light bulb in the faded shade.

'I'll just have to reset the switch,' says Lard, diving into the cupboard under the stairs.

'I'll no be a sec.'

'How long did you say since anyone has lived here?'

'Found it!' says a disembodied voice from under the stairs.

'How long?' My tone has become more insistent. Lard pokes his head out of the cupboard.

'It would be,' Lard mumbles, 'let me see, five years. Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. Give or take.'

'Five years?'

'If you don't count the squatters.'

Next, he'll be telling me they ran a brothel. A dusty Lard emerges from the cupboard and then does that thing where he looks at his trainers.

'You'll be wanting the guided tour then?' Lard pulls out the bottom corner of his cardigan from inside his parka and cleans cobwebs off his glasses. 'OK, living room to the left, kitchen straight on and on your right, the peace de resistance! Ta dah!' Lard gestures dramatically towards a door.

'Peas de resistance?'

'You repeat a lot, don't you know. Aye, peace de resistance. The vicar's study. It's got an entrance this side and a wee vestibule affair and door to itself on the other. You can have parishioners visit without them coming in the house. Great, eh?'

All three parishioners, that will be then. Hardly high amounts of traffic in the hallway, even on a good day. I can always include the dog in the headcount. I steel myself to look at the kitchen. It is as Victorian as the house itself. There's a butler sink, a tatty wooden draining board, antiquated calked-up taps and an array of cupboards to the ceiling that I daren't open. The table is lopsided and is surrounded by an assortment of wonky chairs. Something flashes across the kitchen in a blur of fur and tail.

'Lard! What the...?'

'Och, that'll just be a...we have very big mice in these parts, don't you know.'

Great. A falling-down vicarage with added wildlife of the biting kind and dodgy electrics will be my new home. I look through the window at the briars pressing against it and tune into the grating sound they make when moved by the wind.

'Tennis courts, apparently,' says Lard, following my gaze.

'Really?' Through the thicket there is not a single court in sight.

'Aye. Apparently so. And a big garden.' For a fleeting moment I can sense the shadows of fruit trees that filled a thousand crumbles, tea parties on the lawn, the all-but-lost walled garden with its supply of vegetables to the poorer households of the village, the generations of children who must have sneaked into the small orchard to steal apples under the benevolent and studiously averted gaze of a kindly vicar. But now that heritage is lost, buried under a spiky mantle of brambles and pernicious weeds.

Even the hint though of tennis courts stirs me. I can almost hear the faint echo of a tennis ball on gut strings. There's an amenity here, I'm sure of it. It has no shape yet, but something is awakening. These are the lost gardens of St Jude, crying out for a working party. There's no shortage of work to be done and I am a vicar in need of a job. It might be Hobson's choice but it will pay the bills. And the divorce lawyers.

'Let's go upstairs,' I say.

Lard reddens. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Er, I want you to show me the upstairs, please.'

Lard seems to recover his composure and gestures towards a wide staircase. 'After you, Vic.'

Running my hand up the banister is not a good idea. By the time I get to the top it is black with a good many years of accumulated dust. It makes me cough. Looking down from the landing to the hall below I sadly sense a time when this would have been a grand dwelling. If the walls could speak.

‘Right,’ says Lard, in a slightly staccato manner, ‘in front of you is the master bedroom.’

‘How many are there?’

‘Five in total. Got kids? Grandkids? Loads of space for the family.’

I rub my left ring finger where the flesh still feels indented. For all Lard knows I could have several kids, grandkids or a blended family in tow, it’s true. But no husband. Oh, where is Gabriel Oak when you need him? Or James Bond. I’m not fussy. Any hero will do. Even Jack Dawkins, though he might struggle to pick me up. I just want a mature, tall, broad-shouldered man to carry me across the vicarage threshold, sweep me straight up the stairs, deposit me enthusiastically on a large four poster bed and proceed to tear off my clothes.

‘Got any kids then?’

‘No. Grown up and gone. No grandchildren.’

‘Aye, well. Plenty space though, eh?’

The décor in the bathroom is overwhelmingly dire. The air is icy. There’s the question of heating this whole place. Just how much of my meagre stipend is going to get eaten up by trying to be comfortable in the winter?

‘It’s even got a roll top bath!’ I’m not really sure why Lard says this proudly. It is original and rather sad. I run my fingertips over several pockmarks in the enamel and wonder if the tidemark will clean off. The curate’s house has been on the small side but cosy, lovingly and freshly painted by the parishioners to make it welcoming, bottle of prosecco in the spotless fridge, new central heating boiler, garden kept in check by a retired parishioner. And now this.

‘It’s got a cellar, you know.’

‘I think I will pass on that one for the moment. I’d ask for a tour of the garden but I haven’t got my machete in my handbag today.’

‘Crumbs. I’ve heard city parishes are tough but I’d nae idea.’

‘Joking. It would be like an Amazonian adventure.’

‘Reverend Livingstone I presume, eh?’ says Lard. ‘We could sell the story to the local paper.’ It would be really picky to correct Lard on his continents. He looks at his watch.

‘Oh Lard, I’m so sorry. Am I keeping you?’

‘No, no! Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. We just need to catch the shop before it closes for lunch. I’m dead low on choc chip cookies.’

‘Guided tour of the village it is then.’ I sound brighter than I feel. ‘Lay on, Lard.’

‘Lay on what?’ says Lard, looking at the ground. I’ll have to cut the Shakespearean references. I exit the vicarage, followed by a lovely bear of a man.

The village shop is just across the road. It’s a squat 1950s building, with a miscellany of disparate items for sale on a small forecourt. Lard goes in to source his supply of choc-chip cookies and I hover outside, looking down the village. It seems to be a place of two fairly neat halves. On the church side of the road there’s a village green and a Victorian school. Beyond that there are neat cottages, the kind you see in glossy magazines, and yet another pub. On the shop side of the road there’s a 1970s housing scheme, cramped and ill tended.

‘Ow!’ Suddenly there’s a searing pain coming from my right ankle.

‘Sorry darlin’,’ says a young, wiry looking woman with pinched features, drawing a pushchair back from my legs. ‘Clint, come ‘ere!’ She’s screaming at a young child who is wandering off. I look at the gaggle of children surrounding the woman. She turns towards me again. She’s dressed in a totally inadequate black bomber jacket, a mini skirt and ankle boots, displaying two stick like and pale bare legs. She has the yellowing remnants of a large black eye.

‘Sorry darlin’ but they are getting right on my tits today.’

‘Well, I er...’

‘Clint!’ shrieks the woman as the small child wanders dangerously close to the road. ‘Back here. NOW!’

Clint stands perilously close to the edge of the pavement, as if about to cross the road, and turns with a cheeky glint in his eye. I massage my ankle.

‘Get back here this minute!’ The woman is trapped by the pushchair and the other three small children. My shin is throbbing but the pain dissipates.

‘Bloody nightmare, that one, just like his father. I think.’ She makes a mild shrug of a gesture. Clint’s grin from the pavement edge broadens. ‘I will count to three.’ Her tone is one of menace. Clint looks unconcerned. ‘One!’ Clint’s eyes narrow in defiance. ‘Two!’ He raises a foot as if to step off the kerb. The young woman puts the brake on the push chair and shoves three small hands into mine as she turns to stride towards Clint and opens her mouth. ‘Three.’ Clint steps back from the edge of the road. She strong arms him back to the pushchair.

‘Well, that was impressive,’ I say. ‘What happens after three?’

The young woman’s features shift into a quizzical look.

‘Dunno darlin’. He ain’t never pushed me that far.’ The young woman rounds on Clint. One of the other children giggles.

‘Now bloody behave the lot of ya or there’ll be no sweets!’ She grabs the children’s hands from me again. ‘Thanks darlin’. You new here?’

‘Er, yes. Hello. Reverend Christal. I think I’m your new vicar.’

‘You *fink* you’re the new vicar?’

‘It’s complicated.’

She shrugs. ‘Ain’t had no vicar here for years. I’m Rosie. Pleased to meet ya. And these are my kiddies. Do my head in most days.’

I look at the gaggle of small, slightly grubby faces and try to smile benevolently.

‘What are their names?’

‘Well, you got the measure of Clint,’ she says cheerily, then there’s Chardonnay. I’d had a few that night! This one ‘ere is Chips.’ She points to a child who is about three. His first word. Loves ‘em he does.’ Rosie throws her head back as she laughs giving me the full benefit of her glossy white enamels. ‘This one’s Chanelle.’

‘What a lovely name.’

‘Yeah. I think so. Her Dad used to buy me bottles of the stuff all the time. Expensive innit.’

‘And the baby?’ I say, smiling at the child in the push chair. ‘What’s she called?’ The child in the pink baby grow drools at me appealingly.

‘Corbin,’ says Rosie blankly.

‘Oh, a boy! I thought, er, so sorry. I just assumed...’

‘Puked up on everything before we came out. Serves ‘im right. Gotta wear pink then if it’s all I got clean.’

Lard emerges from the shop, carrying his haul of choc chip cookies. He has several packets of Rich Teas as well. He smiles apologetically.

‘Just in case, you know. It’s not a great day. No caramel wafers. And no tea cakes. I mean. You can get along without tea cakes. But no caramel wafers.’ He shakes his head.

‘Hello Lard.’ Rosie’s smile is warm and her voice suddenly saccharine.

‘Rosie.’ Lard’s cheeks are reddening.

‘How are you then?’ Her voice resembles dripping honey. One of the children gives a little howl of impatience. ‘Ain’t seen you for a while, Lard.’

‘Er, no’. Lard clutches his haul of biscuits tightly to his ample chest. ‘Aye. Well. I’ve been busy.’

Rosie suddenly looks younger and less frazzled. She approaches Lard and trails a provocative finger down his cheek.

‘Well, aye. Well, no. Well, aye. Busy. You know. Aye. Busy.’

Rosie pouts at him. ‘Well, don’t leave it too long, Lard. You’ll get a warm welcome.’ Her voice has dropped to the breathy, sex-laden tones of a silver screen siren. She has inched closer to Lard so now there is hardly any gap between them.

‘Is that the time?’ says Lard, even though he can’t loosen himself from clutching biscuits to his chest to look at his watch. ‘Well, we’d better, er, aye, be going.’ He turns to me with appealing, eyes.

‘What about you, Vicaress? Fancy a nice cuppa?’ asks Rosie.

On balance I think we should head for the musty ‘office’ and maybe another interesting mug from Lard’s collection. ‘That’s really kind but another day, perhaps?’

‘Well, I’m always up for it,’ she says with a wink.

Lard’s clears his throat expansively. ‘Er, right Vic, on with the tour, eh?’ He grips his biscuits tightly and marches off.

In my pocket there’s a buzz from my phone. It’s the Bishop. I take a breath and swipe ‘answer’.

Bishop Cuthbert dispenses with all formalities.

‘Well?’

Greater love hath no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). Or in my case, greater love hath no friend than this, that she lay down her first spare Saturday in a goodly while to help me unpack my life from boxes.

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. I'm so tired. The last 24 hours have done my head in. The packers came take my stuff and now I can't even find my toothbrush. Bless Margie. She's going to help with the unpacking. That's a true friend but the truth is God, I'm so lonely. Why can't I have a special someone in my life to help with these situations? Hmmm? Can't you do something about that?...

'What sort of a fuck up is this?' Margie is looking at the vicarage as she hoiks up her black jeans. I've always thought of swearing as the refuge of the inarticulate, but around Margie, it's the lingua franca.

'Margie. Be reasonable. It's take-it-or-leave-it.'

'Listen girl. You're worth more than this. Freezing your bits off in the icy wilderness of rural Fartfordshire. That cockwombling Bishop has dumped you right in it here.'

'But Marg...'

'No buts. Why don't you get out? Come across the border to Chelmsford.'

She stamps her metallic Doc Marten boots against the cold and blows into her hands. 'Not *all* bishops are bastards you know.'

I shrug at her.

'Step away from the disaster zone.' She huddles herself in her arms. 'What time is the van due?'

'Vans. Plural. Small ones.'

'How much stuff have you got?'

That's just it. I have too much stuff. Baggage from nearly 30 years of marriage. Boxes too painful to look inside, like Pandora's. Once opened I might not be able to close them again. They've occupied two full rooms, floor to ceiling, in the curate's house for the last 3 years. Most of it was from the marital attic. I just kept shoving stuff up there, like our problems, never facing them or admitting the truth. 'Where were you? I waited up.' There was always some excuse. A friend whose car wouldn't start. A bicycle puncture on the way back from the station. Forgot the time at the pub and missed the last train. 'What time did you get in then?' was always the silent question on my lips. Had he actually come home or spent most of the night somewhere else?

'Marg, it will take me a long time to wipe the slate clean with the Bishop.'

'Is that how you see it? You've got to do penance in this Godforsaken hole all because some misogynistic old wanker...' We both giggle.

It is so good to see Margie. Dear, uncompromising, out-of-the-box-and-dancing-on-the-rainbow-lid Margie. I've never figured out how she gets away with it. She wears *jeans* (black ones for funerals of course) and everybody still loves her.

'Beggars can't be choosers,' I say. 'Besides, the place has potential.'

'Potential? Chernobyl has more potential than this, sweetheart. The nearest Starbucks is how far? Five miles? More? Wouldn't catch me taking this if hell were about to freeze over. Talking of freezing...' She draws her leather jacket about her more tightly.

'Seriously Christal. Other dioceses are available. Fresh start and all that. Why stick around where you're not wanted? You've no ties here, right?' She tilts her head towards me. 'Right?'

'Well...'

'Oh what. You're not still holding a torch for Ben Roberts now, are you?'

'Not...exactly...'

'But that was training college. That was three years ago! Good grief, girl. Moving on.'

'It's not that simple...,

'Yes. It. Bloody. Well. Is. Where is he?'

'Cambridge way.'

'So, you've been bumping into him at deanery synod meetings. Is that it? Cambridge fits. I can see his fancy high-Anglo pants swanning about a college there, swinging his smoky handbag. How often do you see him?'

'Not much.' I look down

'But when he wants a favour, bet you go running, fluttering your eyelids at him, right? For fucks sake.'

I scan the road for the movers, praying she'll drop the subject. A group of young boys at the other side have been eyeing us curiously. I smile in their direction.

'Show us your knickers, vicar!'

Marg strides down the path at them in a no-nonsense way. They laugh and jump on their bikes, doing wheelies up the road. When the van eventually pulls up near the gate, the driver looks towards the house blankly.

'It's not kerbside then.' I already call him 'Mike the Miserable' in my head.

'I did explain...'

'Stick the kettle on then, love. It's brass monkeys today.'

'The kettle is in the kitchen boxes. And you packed it at the other end.'

'You didn't tell us not to. We're packers. It's what we do.'

'You bring it in, I'll put it on.' I don't call him 'love'.

‘Them boxes is at the front of the load. It’ll be a while.’

He chats to his assistant who jumps down from the cab and heads to the shop. The lads on the bikes are circling again like mini vultures. I go inside the house to signpost the general direction of the furniture and boxes. There’s plenty of space at least. The detritus of my marriage might not be so suffocating here.

It doesn’t take long for most of the first van load to come in. I’m in the kitchen, trying with grim determination to find the kettle. I don’t want to buy a take away at the shop. That eats into the wine budget. There’s a yell from outside. I go to the door to see Marg tearing down the path and swearing blue murder at the lads on the bikes. One of them is doing wheelies with one of my lampshades on his head. Mike the Miserable is shaking a fist at them.

‘Little bastards have been thieving stuff off the back.’

‘They’re bored,’ I try to say charitably.

‘National service. That’d sort ‘em out.’

I hardly think that’s the answer to rural youth deprivation but I decide to let Mike the Miserable feel righteous in his indignation. And I thank my lucky stars that I put all my underwear in a suitcase and took it in the car.

Marg and I are sitting in the kitchen, a bottle and a bit into drowning my sorrows. I fiddle with my wine glass. Marg is still not convinced that I should stay.

‘I’ve got to run with this. I’m exhausted. When the money comes through from our house, my house, I’ll be more secure, have more choices.’

‘You should have done the finances before the absolute.’ She knows I am wounded. ‘Wankbadgers, the lot of them.’

I snort and raise my glass. ‘Here’s to the wankbadgers!’ Margie clinks her glass to mine and we both take large swigs.

‘Ahhhhh!’ She proffers her now empty glass for a refill.

‘Shall we change the subject?’ I miss her glass slightly as I top it up.

‘No. Not a hope darling. Auntie Margie is here to sort you out. You are on a one-way ticket to fucking self-martyrdom and I’m not having it.’

‘Go on then. Let’s hear it.’

Margie closes one eye to focus and raises a finger dramatically. ‘One. Get a better parish. Two. Get laid. Caveat: get laid by someone whose name is not and has never been Ben Roberts. Three. Get a better haircut. But not necessarily in that order.’ She burps.

‘You know that bit in the handbook that says, “sexual intimacy belongs within marriage”?’

‘You mean, you’ve actually kept to that?’

I shrug at her helplessly. ‘Since my separation.’

‘But that’s years! Fuck me.’

‘Yeah well, there’s celibacy because you choose it and celibacy because you have no choice. It’s not quite the same thing.’

‘Girl, you need to go dating.’

‘Who the heck would want to date a priest? Besides, taking your clothes off at twenty or thirty isn’t the same as in your fifties. Gravity is not kind. I don’t even know if I can remember how to kiss someone.’

‘Look,’ she says. ‘Ben Roberts is a yummy mummy pleaser. He sucks up to bishops like they’re his friends. Like a bishop is *ever* going to be your friend. He’s still good-looking for his age and he probably tickles their fancy. Metaphorically speaking of course, but you never know.’

My stomach lurches with laughter. ‘Margie!’

‘Move on, sweetie. You’re worth more than him. You’re worth more than this shit-hole parish. You. Are. Worth. More.’

Another bottle is destined for the bulging recycling bin before the night is out. I know what she is saying is true but part of me wants to stay put and prove my worth to the wankbadgers before I move on. There’s something for me here with the Lards and the Rosies of this world. I grin at Margie.

‘Oh, right. I can see I’m not charting here. You’ve made your mind up, haven’t you?’

I fill my glass.

‘They’re good people here, you know. They need someone to love them. Help build things up a bit. Plenty of work to be done.’

‘That or they will close it down.’

‘Yup.’

‘No pressure then.’

‘Not a smidgen.’

‘Got any hot birds locally?’

‘I said smidgen, not pigeon.’ Our laughter is raucous and Margie nearly falls off her seat.

‘Seriously though, you need to do some dating. A little bit of swiping left and right.’ She waves her arms to and fro in expansive gestures.

‘No way.’ I shake my head. ‘Not doing that.’

‘Stop mooning over Benny Anglo-pants and get yourself a new squeeze.’

‘I wouldn’t know where to start.’

‘Go fetch your laptop and log on. Please tell me you have WiFi or I may have to end it all by throwing myself in the local duck pond.’

‘The phone signal is crap but we do have WiFi in this village – most days.’ I hiccup and plonk the laptop in front of her. My love life in Margie’s hands. What could possibly go wrong?

There’s a faint cracking sound as she flexes her fingers. ‘Tinder. Hot Blokes Near You. Adult Intimacy. Where shall we start?’

‘Be serious.’

‘OK. We could try Plenty More Fishes, Spiritual Soulmates, Christian Coupledome?’

‘Well, for starters, does he have to be Christian?’

‘You’re a priest in the Church of England. Doesn’t the thought of a nice Christian guy float your very straight boat?’

‘Dunno. Never really thought about it in those terms.’

‘Comes in handy at Christmas. Someone to celebrate with.’

‘There are other Abrahamic faiths.’

‘They don’t do Christmas.’

‘Fair point.’

‘And you do like Christmas, don’t you? I seem to remember at College it was deck the halls with as many fairy lights as the local supermarket could disgorge in one day, huh?’

‘Well, yes, but if he loved me, he would...’

‘Let’s not set the bar too high. You’re looking for something shaggable for starters.’

Sometimes I wonder how we became friends.

‘Oh look. You could go on a Christian Culinary Weekend. Bread making and fish preparation. Be still my beating heart. Got any more wine?’ I scratch about in the back of cupboard for something to drink while Margie sits at the laptop, tapping away furiously.

‘Right then, have a butchers. What sort of age are you looking for?’

‘I dunno. Surely it’s about being like-minded, sharing interests?’

‘Noble. But fucking useless. Got to narrow it down. Age. Height. Penis size...’

I spit a mouthful of wine all over the table. Margie brushes some spatters off her leather jacket.

‘Joking,’ she says dryly.

‘Oh. Sorry. Well, how about my age?’

‘Hmmm. If I know men they’ll all be shaving a bit off.’

'I love your faith in human nature.'

'We work with people, remember. We know what they are like.'

I take another swig of wine and ruminate. 'OK, let's say 49 - 59?'

'Yep.' She taps away vigorously. 'You may get lucky and find a toy boy but you shouldn't end up dating someone old enough to be your Dad.' She gestures sticking her fingers down her throat.

'Height?'

'I don't know.'

'Listen Cinders, at this rate you are never going to get to the ball...or his balls.' She snorts wildly and stuffs her mouth with crisps. 'I get your innate altruism, but you don't want to turn up to a date and find that he stares you square in the belly button, do you?'

'You have such a way with words.'

'OK. No short stops. We'll go five nine or above, huh? OK. Fat, thin, medium chunky?'

'I'm overweight.'

'No, no, no. You are *curvaceous* in dating speak.'

'OK then let's say medium build.'

'You sauce pot. Education?'

'Preferably.'

'No, you get to be more specific. Are you going degree level or above?'

'Does this torture have an end in sight?'

'Yep. A hairy arsed one, if you're lucky.' She turns the lap top screen towards me.

'Phew, it might just be Christmas after all.'

'Bet you'd love one of those in your stocking.' Margie grins and clicks her fingers at me.

'Bank card.'

'Bank card?'

'It's not free you know. Not unless you want to be on a site with all the cheapskate pervs. There's a lot of very bored truckers out there.'

'How do you know?'

'Not all of them are male, sweetie.'

'This is going to set me back how much?'

'Depends. Are we flirting here or in it for the long haul? You want a month, three months or a year?'

'Definitely flirting. One month will do.' There's the winter heating bill for a draughty vicarage to factor in.

'Username? What about "Hot Vic"?'

My eyes narrow.

'OK. How about "Faith"?'

'Yeah. I like the sound of that.'

'Right. Profile pic.'

'Oh bloody hell.'

'Got a decent selfie then?'

I pull up some pics on my phone. She scrolls rapidly.

'To vicary, too frumpy. Right, get your lippie on.' Margie looks me over critically, yanks at my top and says 'Cheese!'.

'OK, what are we going to say about *you*?'

I pour myself another glass of wine and swig thoughtfully. 'I'm a priest.' I hiccup.

'No, definitely not. Let's keep the erotic dog collar fantasists and cassock chasers at bay.'

'Teacher then. I teach people...stuff. Lots of stuff. All the time.' I make a big circling gesture with my arm.

'OK. That's good. What else?'

'I'm kind, sympathetic, caring.'

'Blah, blah, blah. You're hot, sensual and open to offers.'

'How about you start with A is for amiable?'

'Naff.' She pauses. 'But it might just be our best shot.'

'B is for Bloody incompetent.' I take another swig of wine. 'C is for Catastrophic... Margie is typing at lightning speed and studiously ignoring me.

'Right, here goes...how does this sound: "Art-Decophile, bright, creative, daring, equanimous, feisty, generous...'

'That's you.'

'No, it's not. I don't have a thing about 1930s tea pots.'

'True.'

'Say 'yes' and we're once click away from happiness or a potential shag at the least.'

'Yes.'

‘Good girl.’ She makes a dramatic gesture of hitting the return key and we’re done. She raises her glass.

‘Here’s to happy, shag-tastic times.’

‘Here’s to finding true love and companionship with a kind and intelligent man,’ I reply.

‘Steady on. Don’t shoot for the moon straight away.’

As we clink glasses there is a ‘ching’ from the computer. Something has landed in my inbox.

‘Here we go,’ says Margie, ‘Hang on to your knickers!’

Oh help.

Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap (Luke 21:34). And don't Marg and I know it.

Dear God,

Is it a waste of good prayer to ask you to help with this hangover? I suppose it is. So many things need fixing in this world. My hangover is self-inflicted. Free will is a dreadful thing God, when it lives at the bottom of a bottle of Merlot...

'I've got a mouth like a camel's arse,' says Marg, scraping at toast too noisily.

'Why did we do it?'

'Here,' says Marg, pressing a large glass of water into my hand. 'Down that.'

'Ugh. Aren't you having any?'

'Me mate? No. Hair of the dog for me,' she says rummaging about in the fridge and pulling out a near empty bottle of white wine that had escaped our attention the night before. My lap top pings. Oh no. Bits of the evening are decidedly fuzzy but other bits are shaping up in my pounding head.

'Did we, did we really...?'

'Sleep together?'

'What?'

She snorts. 'Nooooooo! Course we didn't. But you did look pretty hot when I took the photo.'

'Photo?'

'Yeah, babes. Your mugshot. For the dating websites.'

'Plural?' I'm beginning to get flashbacks to the night before.

She grins. 'Yeah, along with Christian Coupledome, I thought I'd give Hot Anglican Babes and Curvy Christians a go too.' She laughs throatily. 'You are so easy to wind up.'

'Don't do that.'

'It's at your expense. I'm good.' The lap top pings again. 'Hey babes. Got some interest here.'

'I think I need to sit down.'

'Wew, they are logging in to hook up with you.'

I reach out to the laptop and click on the message file gingerly. Marg pulls up a chair and crowds in.

‘Cor, he’s a bit hot, eh? Princely Paul, huh? Bet you’d enjoy being impaled on the end of his sword.’

I have the mother of all hangovers. Marg needs to wind it in.

‘He likes *shopping*.’

‘So let him kill the woolly mammoth at Asdas while you write sermons. Neat.’

I’m just rubbing my forehead when the doorbell goes. Before I can stop her, Marg dives round the kitchen table and heads up the hall.

‘Marg, no, wait!’ I follow and feel a rush of cold air as the door opens.

‘Yes?’ She is eyeing Lard up and down critically.

‘Oh er, hullo, I was just wondering if the vicar...’

‘C’mon in.’ Marg sweeps her hand expansively in the direction of the kitchen. I want to hiss at her to send Lard away but it’s too late.

‘Morning Vic, you no feeling well?’

Marg offers him a saccharine grin.

‘Tea?’

I make slashing motions with my hands across my neck to Marg out of Lard’s eyeline.

‘Oh, aye, right. Aye please. If it’s no too much bother. Would you have a biscuit to go with that tea, now?’

‘I’m sure I can find some,’ she says.

I clutch my bathrobe tightly at the neck and give Lard a slightly cold look. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Well, now, er, it’s like this...’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve taken a booking for the church hall.’

‘Crikey, it’s all happening round here,’ says Marg.

‘You are the booking secretary. That’s perfectly OK.’

‘Aye, well, right, well no...’

Suddenly Marg lets out a cry of ‘Aha!’ and slams a cupboard door shut. ‘Choc chip cookies!’

‘Carry on Lard,’ I say, digging deep into my reserves of patience.

Lard munches meditatively on his first biscuit.

‘And...?’

‘Well, I’m no sure it was a very good idea.’

‘Because...?’

‘That would be because...’ My laptop pings. Marg grabs it with a slightly excited squeal. It’s bad enough sitting in my dressing gown in the kitchen with a pounding head in front of my church warden but Marg might be about to give away something that I will truly make her regret later. I reach across the table and slam the laptop shut. Marg gives me a look somewhere between disappointment and contrition.

‘As you were saying, Lard?’

‘Well, I’ve taken a booking...’

‘And there’s a problem?’

‘Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. The hirers are a protest group.’

‘There’s a protest group in Upper Bollockford?’ Marg does a little wriggle and her eyes glint eagerly. ‘You mean people round here actually have something to protest about? Chip and pin codes on catflaps or people painting the numbers on their wheelie bins in colours that are far too exotic, like pink?’

‘Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. It’s the road humps.’

Marg guffaws. ‘You...have...a protest group...about...road humps!’

‘Aye! It’s serious stuff you know. Village is divided. Into two camps. Two!’

‘Crikey,’ says Marg, wiping away moisture from the corners of her eyes.

‘OK.’ I turn to Lard again. ‘What do you think might be the difficulty?’

‘Well, there could be a right ruckus. It’s the anti-hump lot who’ve made the booking.’

‘Let me get this straight,’ I say, cradling my very heavy head in one hand whilst trying to focus on Lard by shutting one eye. ‘The anti-hump campaigners have made a booking and you’re worried there’s going to be a riot or similar?’

‘Aye. Definitely.’

‘Well, we can just run with it this time and see how it goes. I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

‘But...’

My very thin patience is about to snap in a messy way. Lard needs to go.

‘No buts, Lard. Keep the booking. We need the money. When is it for?’ I don’t know why I even ask that because I am not that interested. The only thing that is on my mind is taking a big mug of tea back to bed and nursing my hangover.

‘Next Wednesday.’

‘Fine.’ I say, slapping my hands on the table. ‘Next Wednesday it is. Let me show you out.’

Lard manages to grab another choc chip cookie as I bundle him towards the door.

‘Aye, right you are then, Vic. See you tomorrow.’

I'm inching the door shut but he hovers on the doorstep. I feel the dreaded 'door handle' conversation coming on, the one when people have finally built up trust and decide to tell you what the matter really is.

'You know what though?' he says.

'What?'

'Those are really cool slippers. Bye now.'

I look down at the slippers that Marg gave me last Christmas, each one sporting a unicorn head with sparkly rainbow tassels all around. I stomp back to the kitchen where she is preparing her breakfast roll-up and is back on the laptop.

'Oh, for pity's sake, Marg.'

'Hey, hey, wait a minute. We've got some live ones here. Honestly. I mean Big Banger Seven-and-a-half you can dismiss right away. I bet he's exaggerating. But the rest. Wouldn't mind myself, if I were straight.'

'Really.' I rub my forehead again.

'Yeah. I've got it down to three. There's Beau Derek. He's got a sense of humour and a way with words. There's Faithful Freddy. He's a bit on the short side but what he lacks in height he may well make up for in...'

'Marg. Stop. *Please.*'

'...personality, I was going to say. And likely suitor number three is Gardening Graham. Get chatting to that lot, why don't you.'

'I need toast.'

Marg springs up from the table, like she had never let a drop of alcohol pass her lips on the preceding evening and before I can blink has dropped bread in the toaster, flicked the kettle on and returned to the table with marmalade, butter and a cheeky grin.

'Now it's your turn. Get clicking.'

This misery is not going to end until I give it a go and say 'thank you very much gentlemen, you look really lovely and I hope you find someone but it's not going to be me'. A little bit of chat and I am out of here.

'Did Lard say the humpy protesters were in the diary for Wednesday?'

'Yeah, why?'

'You've got a date.'

'I've what?'

'I was chatting to Beau Derek earlier. He looks like a good prospect. A bit nerdy. Perfect for you, babes.'

'Marg!'

‘OK, OK, I shouldn’t have pretended to be you. And bang to rights, I shouldn’t have told him how you got that scar at the top of your thigh, but honestly, you’re good to go. All set up.’

‘You haven’t promised...’

‘No. I didn’t. Look babes.’ She spins the laptop round so I can peruse Beau Derek. I’m pleasantly surprised. I’m looking at a thin, pale, dark-haired man, with a warm, youthful smile and lovely eyes behind totally geeky (and ever so slightly sexy) black glasses.

‘Oh! He looks...nice.’

‘He likes *DIY*,’ says Marg, in disgust. ‘So, I reckoned he was about perfect for you. Get this place sorted for a start.’

‘I’m looking for a companion, not a free handyman.’

‘That’s your trouble, you know,’ says Marg. ‘You’ve got to see the upside. Make hay while the sun shines or get him busy cutting it while he’s still trying to get in your knickers.’

The laptop pings. ‘We have a late runner,’ beams Marg. ‘Name’s Brian but you can’t hold that against him. You need a haircut.’

‘No, I don’t.’ I pull at a couple of straggly, unkempt strands, trying to examine them positively.

‘In fact, you need a complete makeover.’

What I need is my bed, a shedload of aspirin and sleep. Or just not being hopelessly hungover. I don’t mind which.

‘Would you say ‘curvy’ or ‘ample’?’

‘What about?’

‘Your boobs.’ She doesn’t even take her eyes off the screen.

‘Stop! I mean it!’

‘You’re mature, lovely, cuddly...’

‘Thanks for the ‘cuddly’ bit.’

‘I don’t know much about men but what I do know is that they don’t all go for stick insects.’

Marg is at least on it with the affirmation and compassion. Is that why her parishioners all love her? Is that why her church is full on a Sunday?

‘You need to hold your drink a bit better, bloody hell, but apart from that, you deserve to be loved.’

‘I thought God did that.’

‘Top of the class, vicar, but even God doesn’t do a movie, wine and a friendly shag on a Friday night. Forget Benny Anglo-pants. He’s too shiny. I’ll bet he’ll do that joint ministry

thing where he hooks up with some much younger, ever-smiling babe and they produce the cutest sprog who appears in all the church videos to a Mumford and Sons soundtrack. You know the type.'

'Yes. The type that's not me.'

'You want someone who will be your Dennis Thatcher or Mr Theresa May. And some self-care.'

'Dating is self-care?' My head has found a resting place in my right hand, elbow propped on the table.

'Doing anything that is not ministry is self-care. You've got your work cut out here, not gonna lie. Maybe I was a bit harsh last night. It's a shit hole. But your biscuit-buddy Lard is the salt of the earth. You seem determined to give it a go. But don't forget to have some fun.'

I lay my head on the table and feel my eyes becoming incredibly heavy, while I am lulled by a gentle rhythmic tap-tap-tapping coming from somewhere in Marg's vicinity...

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn (Psalm 98:4-6). That's all very well but what the Psalms don't seem to cover is handling an organist with issues.

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. Sunday is coming and I want it to be special. It's my first official Sunday in parish. This is me, finally fully fledged. The Bishop is too busy to come (hurrah!), so the Archdeacon will lead my licensing. Lard has made a big announcement in the parish rag that there's a new vicar in town. The word is out. They will be arriving in their droves. Surely?...

'We don't perform miracles you know.' The dry cleaner doesn't even crack a smile.

'It says in a note in the vestry that you'll clean the vestments for St Jude's free of charge.'

'Clean them, yes. Restore them to wearable condition, no.'

She has a point. The chasuble (vicar's poncho thingy) is punctuated with moth holes, creating an unwanted lattice. I scuttle back to the vicarage via a fabric shop, get the sewing machine out and enjoy a couple of hours letting a needle dip up and down rhythmically. What happened to my sewing days? As a teenager I used to make my outfits for the school disco, driven by economy. Then a young family and work silenced the whirr of the machine. And the demands of my ex. Pure cotton shirts, thank you very much. None of your easy iron stuff. It was a Sunday night ritual. Telly on, ironing board out and a couple of hours spraying and steaming in front of the latest prime time drama. I remember when everyone was raving about Poldark with his shirt off. I missed it. I think I was dealing with a tricky cuff at the time.

Lard, Mrs Moody and I have gathered in the weak sunshine of Saturday morning to give St Jude's a thorough clean. I bustle through the porch with my arms full of buckets, cleaning fluid, dusters and a couple of mops. Lard has brought his essentials: a packet of Tunnock's caramel wafers. Mrs Moody arrives with a scowl. I reach out my hand to greet her, dropping a bucket or two in the process. She winces as they clatter on the floor.

'Hello Mrs Moody.' In another attempt at extending my hand to her I lose control of two mops. 'Ooops! I'm Christal.'

'I know.' There is a glacial stillness in her tone. Oh dear. I just need to get this little working party going. Mrs Moody, her cheeks sucked in, wanders about muttering darkly under her breath. The odd audible comment suggests this is all a waste of time and good cleaning fluid. She loves St Jude's, 'but...' Is that a gentle Irish lilt I hear? I wish her 'love' of St Jude's extended to a little more elbow grease.

'So have you been coming to St Jude's long, Mrs Moody?'

‘A long time indeed. Such a beautiful building in its day, you know.’ Her face softens into what might almost be described as a smile. ‘Now Reverend Soames, he was a lovely man. So welcoming. Everyone *loved* Reverend Soames.’

That old chestnut. It’s a classic situation. The most loved vicar is the preceding one, and sometimes the one before that. Dying in post elevates you to a saint. It’s never the one having to change things and trying to keep the show on the road. Lard is, of course, being the stalwart in this whole situation. As we boil kettles and fill buckets with antiseptic smelling concoctions, the conversation begins to flow easily. What I won’t shortly know about Garibaldi biscuits is not worth knowing. Show an interest, they said at vicar school and I am doing just that. I will sample ginger nuts, malted milks, jammy dodgers. You name it, we’ll consume it as we work. And Mrs Moody will continue to tut-tut her way round the church behind us with a dustpan and brush for offending crumbs.

We replace all the missing light bulbs. We lovingly scrub the tiles and the floorboards. We carefully wash all the stained-glass windows. We vacuum the life out of the heavy, dusty tower curtains. We sweep away mouse droppings. Lard and I clamber up and down ladders while Mrs Moody watches broodily from a distance, with the odd flap of a duster. The altar linen has already had a trip to the washing machine in the vicarage and is as white as it ever will ever be and the chalice, the receptacle for the Communion wine, has been polished so I can see my wrinkles in it.

I have no friends turning up tomorrow. They’re already licensed and in full swing with their own Sunday services to run. And as for family – my ex holds the narrative and my daughter is estranged.

We preen and polish the morning away and soon I feel slight grumblings of hunger. I’ve brought a plate of sandwiches. Lard and I sit in satisfaction on the now shiny pews to munch. It would make more sense to use the ‘office’ with the desk, but our cleaning energies have not stretched that far yet and the fresher atmosphere in the main church is more appealing. Mrs Moody has clipped off in her sober leather brogues to consume her midday meal in the safe and sanitary space of her own home. Lard and I are in jolly spirits. Sadly, we haven’t unearthed any hidden treasures to take the place out of its financial penury. I’ve been to the very back of the substantial Victorian safe in the vestry, but there are no mediaeval treasures lurking in threadbare pouches.

‘What about flowers?’ Lard is rattling a few coins in a fairly empty petty cash box.

‘I’ve got an idea. Come with.’

We nip back to the vicarage and make our way out to the jungle behind, armed with secateurs. We clip enough greenery for rustic arrangements in a couple of vases. In truth, they are amateurish and wildly shambolic. But we can call them ‘floral displays’ nonetheless. Lard presents me with tea in a jolly rainbow mug.

‘Do you think the Archdeacon will like it?’ Lard’s face is serious.

‘What, the church? Hasn’t he been here before?’

‘He’s new.’

‘Well, what is a church, Lard?’

‘A building?’

‘It’s so much more. It’s people.’

‘We havna got many o’ those.’ Our sandwiches have gone and Lard is cracking open the biscuit tin. ‘A building is handy thing to have on a Sunday, mind you.’

‘Yes, Lard.’ A roof and four walls is an ideal the place of worship, especially if the roof doesn’t leak. But the people in the worshipping community are its capital. They are the body of Christ.

‘What time did you say the organist was coming?’

‘Betsy?’

‘Yes.’

‘This afternoon. She’s no very reliable, got to warn you, like. She’s a bit...’ Lard stalls.

‘A bit...?’

‘Aye, she’s a bit...you know.’

In my mind’s eye, Betsy is a cosy elderly lady, with a dinky hat and sensible rain mac. Perhaps she will be accompanied by a small and yappy terrier. She will hit the odd bum note and I will have to say supportive things like, ‘I look forward to hearing you practice that one. Why don’t you come in on Thursday morning and have a go?’ And there’s no sound system. The alternative is a CD player and the hope of hitting the button at the right time. There’s always the danger that in a funeral you hit the wrong number and instead of Fields of Gold you get Roxanne.

‘Right Lard’, I say, swigging down the last of my tea, ‘Time to crack on. We’ve still got the floor to wash in the south aisle and I better have a dust round the organ. He gives me a mock salute and I say a gentle prayer of gratitude for his time, devotion to St Jude and his endless supply of biscuits. The furniture polish is in my hand and I’m about to spray the organ bench when the church door clatters back on its hinges.

‘For fucks sake, don’t even go there!’

I’m frozen, duster still suspended, as a young woman, sporting a supremely spiky black Mohican, black vest, ripped tartan trousers, black studded belt and Doc Martens tears down the aisle, gesticulating wildly and shrieking the F-word repeatedly.

‘Oh, hullo Betsy,’ says Lard.

She ignores him and stands with eyes glaring at me. ‘Don’t do it!’

‘OK,’ I say, giving her my best rabbit-in-the-headlights look. ‘I won’t. Promise.’

She stands with her hands on her hips, breathing heavily.

‘Vic, this is Betsy. Aye, Betsy.’

Crikey. I have an organist who is a punk of about 18 (difficult to tell what’s under the kohl black eyeliner and scarlet lips). And she has anger management issues. I’m still holding

the duster and can of polish aloft, like she is about to shoot me and I'm trying to surrender.

'Do you know ANYTHING about being an organist?' she yells. 'Well, do you?'

I shake my head cautiously and slowly. I'm not going to make any sudden movements. I indicate that I'm going to put the can of polish and the duster down on the nearest pew. I straighten up with my hands still in the air. She fixes me in a fiery stare.

'Let me tell you this: what you don't need, what you absolutely DO NOT NEED, yeah, is some bloody CLEAN FREAK polishing the ORGAN SEAT.' She adds in a low tone: 'Do I make myself clear?' I nod meekly.

'You see, you see, if you polish the organ bench...'

'Yes?'

'And I'm in the middle of some Toccata and Fugue...'

'Yes?'

'I will sail right off the sodding end of it and land on my ARSE!'

I see her point.

'And there goes my Toccata and Fugue. Tits up! Literally!'

'I'm so sorry.' I try to sound placatory. 'I had no idea...'

She issues a disdainful snort and grabs the polish and the duster. She drops the polish theatrically into Lard's bucket of dirty floor water, the duster she brandishes menacingly and stomps with it towards the organ. She proceeds to dust furiously, all the while holding me in a steely glare.

'Well, it's nice to meet you at last, Betsy,' I venture.

'Bezza! It's Bezza, right? BE-ZZA!'

Lard retrieves the dripping can of polish from his bucket and tiptoes off to the side aisle to keep mopping in an unobtrusive fashion, whistling a slightly random tune. I pretend to dust a window ledge with my back to Bezza. After about five minutes I hear the click of a switch and the organ wheezes into life. I carry on studiously dusting the same window ledge. Bezza clears her throat. Her fingers fly along the keyboards and her feet dance on the pedals. It is cacophonous. She has pulled out all the stops, literally. The noise is deafening. Oh. My. Word. The piece is mercifully short. Bezza turns and looks hard at me.

'Er, that was certainly *different*.'

She snorts. 'Different? Of course it is. It's Messiaen. He only does different.'

'I see. It's quite, er, discordant. Could you play something slightly more...harmonious tomorrow for the licensing? Please?'

'That's a totally I-listen-to-Classic-FM bullshit statement. Pathetic. You can't say 'harmonious'. Music should challenge.'

She turns again to the organ and with what becomes more apparently prodigious talent strikes up Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor, the one that graces a hundred horror movies. The things they don't teach you at vicar school. There wasn't a module on how to handle the antics of an angry young organist. Bezza stops playing with a triumphal flourish.

'Well, that's fantastic Bezza. I'll leave the music up to you then?'

'Yes, you *will*.'

'So it's meant to be a jolly, welcoming occasion. I think that...'

'Don't think,' she snaps. 'When it comes to the music, I'll do the thinking.'

I suddenly have less dislike of CD players and their potential pitfalls.

'The hymn I'd like is, "I the Lord of Sea and Sky".'

'That's not its title.'

'Can you play it?'

She raises an eyebrow and tilts her head sideways.

'That's all going to be lovely then. Lovely.' My prayer list for this evening is growing. 'So, I'll see you tomorrow then? Service starts at 9.30 am.'

She pivots her on the organ stool, swinging her boots athletically over the top and glares at me. 'Later,' she snaps and stomps off. I look at Lard with a heady rush of bewilderment.

'Aye. Well, that's Betsy. Known her since she was quite wee. Marvel on the organ. If she's in the right mood.' And what if she's in the wrong one tomorrow?

'Well Lard, I think we've made a good fist of this today and thanks for introducing me to the congregation.'

Lard, Mrs Moody, Bezza. I'm just missing the dog. There'll be the ArchD too. That will make five. It's almost an evensong congregation.

'Aye well that's about it, give or take,' says Lard.

'Maybe the parish mag will bring some in?'

'Aye. Well, no. Well, aye. Never has done before, like.'

'But you never know. Positive thinking Lard. That's what's going to get us through. And once I'm licensed, I will set about generating some trade. I can do a school assembly.'

We sit surrounded by the paraphernalia of our cleaning exploits. We've worked hard and tiredness settles on us in the form of a gentle silence.

'Right Lard. We're done here,' I say in the end. 'I'm going home to bake cakes.'

'What about biscuits? Are we having those?' Good old Lard. Never one to miss an opportunity.

‘Absolutely. Why not? Fancy giving me a hand?’

Lard beams at me warmly. We gather up the mops and other bits and bobs, stow them in the tower ‘office’ and head towards the vicarage. Let there be biscuits.

Their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. (1 Corinthians 3:13). That's me stuffed then.

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. It's the day of my induction. Where did I go? That person who travelled for a foreign government, met dignitaries and terrorists, typed up translations late at night. I was her, once, blissfully, before the oestrogen-levels started to drop. And now there are niggly little butterflies in my stomach. Or perhaps they're moths. Maybe everything is full of holes...

I would like to say I'm looking the Archdeacon confidently in the eye. But I lay staring at the ceiling on the hour, every hour, through the night and the ArchD is diminutive in stature. There is no physical way in heaven and on earth I can look him straight in the eye unless he wears heels. What he lacks in height he makes up for in scary acerbity. Any time I have complained to Marg about him, she has just chuckled.

'He's got a Napoleon complex. Well and truly suffering from short man syndrome. Plenty of power and energy badly crammed into a vertically challenged package. Also known as a shortarse.' She pauses. 'Although I dated a nice one once.'

'But you're...?'

'I was experimenting. I was fifteen. We snogged sitting down.'

I watch at the ArchD striding up the church path and suppress a giggle. Thank you, Marg.

'Good evening, Archdeacon Nigel,' I say as he reaches the porch. I'm not sensing a warm vibe from him. Perhaps he's in a mood because his carefully spiked hair is in danger of being flattened by the rain.

'Too much *effing* traffic. And some of the driving! Do people even pass driving tests these days?'

He wriggles out of a trendy rain mac and shakes it furiously, spattering the notice board. He shoves it in my direction. Christal, the coat rack. He shudders with a 'brrrr!' and preens himself, standing up to his full height, which isn't very much.

'Well?' he barks, as I have stalled, mesmerised by his tidy up routine. 'As you can't be bothered to have me met in the car park. Whoops. Was I supposed to do that? Was Lard? Even my 20 or so calls to Marg last night had failed to cover meeting the ArchD in the car park and making sure he navigated the 50 yards or so to the church door safely. He couldn't figure out that that great hulking stone building right in front of his nose is the actual church?'

'Oh, er, come this way, Archdeacon.' I clasp the soggy mac to my chest and turn towards the church, sparkling clean, well lit, decorated with our rustic 'floral' arrangements. I turn to beam at him. His eyes show no warmth.

‘The vestry?’ he snaps. I bow inappropriately. ‘Good grief. *Shall* we?’

Lard is lighting innumerable candles. He’s got the best big brass candlesticks out behind the altar and seems to have populated the area in front of it with a year’s supply. It looks festive.

‘ArchD, sorry, *Archdeacon* Nigel, this is Lard’.

Lard passes a lit taper into his left hand and stretches his right out to the Archdeacon. The Archdeacon ignores the hand.

‘Lard?’

‘Aye, Lard by name, Lard by...’

‘Yes, very well. Lard it is. I take it this is the vestry?’

His eyes drop to study the threadbare carpet and then up to the cluttered shelves. He turns round stops suddenly in front of the chasuble hanging on the coat rack. It’s taken me all week to make. The band running down the front is bejewelled with crystals, depicting light radiating from a cross. The Archdeacon’s eyes widen.

‘What the *fuck* is that?’

‘It’s my, er, our chasuble. It’s the tradition here to wear one.’

‘Have you got anything else apart from this *sweetie* wrapper?’

I pull out the threadbare original, which is at least clean, but daylight shines through in places.

‘Okey dokey,’ he says. ‘Sweetie wrapper it is then.’ He looks in the vestry mirror and makes agitated hand movements to pull his spiked hair back into place. I’m blocking the vestry door, so the ArchD makes an irritated gesture that he wishes to come out again. ‘Walk through,’ he barks. I scuttle to find the order of service and gesture frantically to Lard to join us so he knows what we are doing. After all he is crucifer, server, church warden. I say a quick prayer that the ArchD won’t upset Lard. We stand before him as he flicks rapidly and taciturnly through the service booklet.

‘Ok, starting at the back. Crucifer?’

‘Aye, that’s me,’ says Lard, pointing to the large wooden cross that he will hold aloft as we process in.

‘OK. Is there a choir?’

‘Er, no...not today.’

‘Organist then?’

‘Aye, Betsy,’ says Lard. ‘She’s a wee bit..’

‘Marvellous!’ I cut in.

‘Aye, I suppose,’ says Lard. ‘I’ll let you know when she arrives.’

The Archdeacon looks around at the empty pews.

‘Is there a congregation?’

‘Oh aye!’ says Lard, with enthusiasm. ‘There’s Mrs Moody and Betsy. She’s the organist. Well aye. We’ve already mentioned her...’

The Archdeacon’s eyes have settled on a point on the ceiling in the far distance.

‘...and my Mum...’

‘Your Mum is a congregant, Lard? That’s great!’

‘Aye. Well no. Well aye. She disnae get out much. I’ll just be fetching her in a minute.’

‘Right,’ I say clapping my hands together. ‘I’ve set out a table there for signing the license.’

The ArchD has turned curtly on his heel and disappeared into the vestry. The walk through is over then. The main door crashes back on its hinges. A rather startled Archdeacon pokes his head out of the vestry. Bezza stands defiantly in the nave and looks the ArchD up and down with her hands on her hips. The vestry is down a step, making his stature even more challenged than normal. She has him in her sights and does not let go.

‘Bit of ‘Somewhere over the rainbow’ going to suit you then?’ says Bezza, cryptically. The ArchD coughs. Is he actually blushing? I look from one to the other and back again. The standoff is broken by Bezza who turns wordlessly towards the organ, flexing her fingers. I hear the door hinges once more. The staccato clip clop of rapid footsteps signal Mrs Moody’s immaculately polished brogues. She enters and stops to venerate the cross in a fulsome manner. She picks a hair off the collar of her tweed suit.

‘Archdeacon, this is Mrs Moody.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Archdeacon. It was your predecessor who came to license and install Reverend Soames.’

‘Yes, quite,’ he replies.

‘Lovely man he was, Reverend Soames. Everyone loved him.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘And he looked like a proper vicar’, she adds, turning towards me.

‘You don’t say,’ he responds turning to enter the vestry. The Archdeacon disappears into the vestry and shrugging at Mrs Moody, I follow him in dutifully.

‘It is quite unnecessary to introduce me to individual congregation members,’ he says, looking critically in the vestry mirror and smoothing one of his eyebrows back into place. Little does he realise that this wouldn’t take up much time. Meanwhile the organ bursts into life. I feel my lungs constrict momentarily as I anticipate some discordant offering of Bezza’s choosing. Instead, I hear the strains of ‘Sheep may safely graze’ being played with genuine skill and lightness of touch. *Thank you, God.* Even the ArchD has paused to listen in appreciation.

It is time to put on our robes. The ArchD swirls the chasuble over his head in a practiced and competent manner, barely dislodging a hair. He looks down at it and tuts. I wonder where Lard has got to and am hoping he hasn't been distracted by a forgotten stash of biscuits in the 'office'. We've already set out a table of goodies baked yesterday evening. I stick my head out of the vestry door to see Lard pushing a frail woman in a wheelchair.

'Hello Lard's Mum!' I say cheerily, as he rolls her to the front where there's just about space to park the chair amongst the unforgiving strictures of Victorian pews.

'Hello dearie,' she says in a brittle but warm voice. 'I'm Robbie.'

I hear the same gentle, Scottish inflections as Lard. Suddenly she heaves forward with a racking cough. He gently massages her back and eventually helps her sit upright in her chair as much as her spindly, twisted body will allow. When she has stopped gasping for breath she smiles gently and says, 'Pleased to meet you. You must come round for...' but she is gripped by coughing again. The ArchD is hovering in the vestry door, tapping pointedly at his watch.

'Time to robe up Lard, please,' I say quietly. I go back to accompany the ArchD to the porch. Congregation three, total including altar party, six. There's more clattering from the porch, the sound of a sharp slap and response, in a child's voice of, 'Ow, that hurt!'

'That's Rosie and her brood arriving.' I smile at the ArchD.

'A family?'

Rosie is bouncing the pushchair down the step into the church, preceded by a whirlwind of children who are suddenly running in all directions and exploring the building with gusto.

'Rosie! Welcome. Take a pew, as they say.' I wave expansively towards the infinite selection of spaces in the church.

'Ello Vic. Glad you're 'ere. Just have a favour to ask. Need a babysitter for half an hour Wednesday evening. D'ya think you could help out? Chips! Put that bloody statue down!'

'Of course, what time shall I come over?'

Rosie has turned the pushchair and is heading towards Chips who is now brandishing the statuette of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus from the south aisle in the air. There are shrieks of delight coming from the 'office' in the tower and I suspect they have found Lard's emergency stash of biscuits. A couple of chocolately smeared faces peek round the curtain with big grins. Meanwhile another child is standing quietly by the refreshment table and filling pockets with a fulsome selection of goodies. In the sanctuary, the altar cloth is making random, gentle flapping movements.

'Six o'clock, there's a love!' she yells as she removes the statuette from Chips in a single, deft movement. Lard's Mum Robbie smiles benevolently in a slightly detached way and coughs. The ArchD throws his hands in the air. Bezza starts to play something that resembles a circus theme tune on the organ.

'OK, then, six o'clock Wednesday it is,' I say, nervously.

‘Right you lot,’ bellows Rosie, ‘OUT!’ Miraculously children reappear from all corners of the church and charge towards the door. I heave a sigh of relief.

The ArchD looks at his watch again. ‘Shall we begin?’ We head up the aisle to the porch and I motion to Lard to get a move on. He is still lighting candles. Eventually Lard puffs into the porch holding the crucifix.

‘Let us pray,’ barks the ArchD. ‘May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts...’

As we process past the organ, the music segues from the innocuous sheep grazing safely to the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. I bite my lip to suppress a giggle. Bezza can see beyond people’s carefully constructed defences. What a gift. She will go far but might need some anger management classes.

The Archdeacon has reached the sanctuary steps. We pause ceremonially and bow towards the altar. He glides towards the lectern. His words of welcome are disappointingly brief, his pace of delivery is as rapid as gunfire. It doesn’t take us long to get through the formalities. The i’s get dotted and the t’s crossed. The ArchD is barking his way through the final prayers making a bid for the fastest licensing in history. I’m glad there’s still a Eucharist to go. That will lengthen the proceedings slightly.

The ArchD is ready to enter the small sanctuary and get behind the altar for the Eucharist. This involves sweeping round to the back where there isn’t much space, something I’m sure a chubbier priest might struggle with. He’s slight enough to get behind it without crab-like sideways movements. He genuflects, sails up the steps and turns with ease round the end of the altar to take his place. There’s a curious crackling sound and a strange faintly acrid but toffee-like smell reaches my nostrils.

The next few seconds take an eternity to play out in real time. The crackling and smell become accompanied by a plume of smoke rising from somewhere in the vicinity of the ArchD, who is engrossed in the prayer for the setting up of the altar with its accoutrements.

‘Excuse me, Archdeacon, I think you are on fire,’ I say calmly. Lard, however, is bellowing ‘Fire! Fire!’ while racing more rapidly towards the fire bucket than I have ever seen him move.

‘What?’ The ArchD tries helplessly to wheel round in the tiny space behind the altar to find the source of the flames. Non-fireproof chasuble material is meeting one of Lard’s copious candle displays in too tight a space.

Lard bustles back to the sanctuary and deposits the contents of the fire bucket over the ArchD. There’s an instant cloud of very Old Testament style smoke, more sizzling, and the sound of stamping, which is Lard jumping on the chasuble that the ArchD has managed to throw off. As the vapour dissipates, Lard examines the immolated remains of the chasuble. The ArchD stands frozen behind the altar, staring ahead, water dripping down his face from his flattened hair. I fully intend to offer some sort of apology but nothing seems to be coming out. Eventually the ArchD turns, extricates himself from behind the altar and walks wordlessly out of the sanctuary and into the vestry. Thirty seconds later he emerges with his bag and leaves.

‘Shit.’ There’s a hubbub of startled conversation from the congregants.

And Bezza strikes up on the organ. It’s one I know from Roxy Music: Smoke gets in your eyes.

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. (Matthew 7:16-17). Oh dear, Lord. What does that make me?

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. I'm off to the school today to give my first assembly. I've only ever taught adults but I'm reliably informed children are easier. Something to do with more malleable brains. So why the butterflies in my stomach? Was it the steady drip feed of critique from my ex? You don't notice it at first, but it undercuts slowly and relentlessly, like a river. It starts as a trickle but then, before you know it, becomes a torrent. 'You look ridiculous,' he said one evening in a theatre foyer, just before the show started. A little bit of sparkly eyeshadow and a flouncy blouse was all it took. I thought I looked good. I spent the whole show on the verge of tears. We were out together but he didn't want to be with me. And he let me know it. It would be nice, Lord, to spend time with someone, anyone, who wanted to be with me. Just as I am...

The paltry numbers attending my licensing yesterday will go down as an embarrassment with the Archdeacon so it's time to start building a relationship with the Primary to see if we can get some families walking through the door. Or children dragging their parents in. Who cares? We desperately need bums on pews. Maybe the news of yesterday's accidental immolation will spread through the village and garner some curiosity? Even bad publicity is good, right?

There's a warming scent of coffee in the tower and Lard is giving me the low down on the village school. We're both managing not to mention the faint whiff of something turning to carbon hanging in the air.

'OK Lard,' I say, feet on the old desk and munching the obligatory biscuit or two, 'who runs the school then?'

'Well, now, the headmaster is Mr Gregson.'

'And what's he like?'

'Popular. Very dynamic. Smiles a lot. Natty ties 'n all.'

'His wife probably buys them. It's usually the way,' I sigh.

'Oh no,' says Lard. 'He's no married.' My ears prick up. I swing my legs off the table and give Lard my full attention. 'Gorgeous Greg they call him. Aye.'

'How old?'

'Late forties? Early fifties?'

My stomach flutters. There are local, professional, tasty and available men here?

I have a rough plan for today's assembly. Yesterday evening was pervaded by clearing up after the fire. We can have a gentle session on the power of prayer: say sorry and say

thank you but don't ask for too many sweets or for your arch enemy at school to be struck down by a plague of spots. That sort of thing. Maybe I'll start with a get-to-know-you Q and A.

The school sits on the far side of the village green not far from the church. At the front it's completely Victorian but then it extends away at the rear in 1960s style. I can envisage girls and boys over a century and a half ago tearing up the path in the morning to the ding-ding from the bell tower ringing out over the village, hair unkempt, laces loose, grubby white smocks for the girls, shorts and caps for the boys, scrambling to squeeze into the small schoolroom with a high ceiling but precious little floorspace.

I've been ushered to a seat outside the head's office (a sign in dodgy French tells me so). The children's artwork on the walls is colourful and captivating, if a little cryptic. After about 10 minutes, I realise that the slot has truly come and gone. And the longer I sit here, the more chance there is of a hot flush.

A classroom assistant comes along the corridor with a young boy and tells him to sit quietly in the seat next to me. 'Mr Gregson will be out to see you soon', she says, darkly. The boy stares at her with animosity, crosses his arms dramatically and adds a very audible, 'humpf!'.

We glance at one another sideways fashion and stare quickly ahead again as we pretend not to have caught each other's gaze. A minute passes and we both risk another look. He stares back at me with unbridled ire through dark and smouldering eyes.

'Hello.'

'Humpf!' he snorts and crosses his arms again with a little bouncing movement in the seat.

'My name's Christal.' Might as well strike up a conversation while my appointment with Gorgeous Greg seems to be on hold.

'Humpf!'

'What's yours?'

'Moses.'

'Ok. Moses. Pleased to meet you.' I proffer my hand. The humpfing continues and his arms stay crossed.

'I've come to see the headmaster,' I say cheerily, 'but he's a bit busy, I think.' Or ignoring me.

'What you done, then?' he says.

'Done? Nothing.' Oh, I get it. I lean towards him conspiratorially. 'I got some gel toothpaste and when no one was looking I went round and put it on the bottom of all the door handles in the school and every time someone opens a door they get a sticky hand but I know it's there, so I push the handles from the top.'

Moses gives a delightful little giggle, clapping his hand to his mouth. Our chat is abrogated by the appearance of a smart, middle-aged man with piercing blue eyes. He smiles and in an instant my stomach melts and starts slipping down inside me. The menopause doesn't leave you disinterested in love or sex. It just gets more sporadic.

Gorgeous Greg ushers me into the school hall and puts a seat out at the front, leaving me to sit awkwardly while the children file in with a buzz. Some stare, some smile, some look with hostility like they'd rather be anywhere but in the same room as a vicar.

The little ones are chaotic and sweet, their winter uniforms still new, their uncertainties about life at school still not yet overcome, staring at a blank patch of floor as if to say, 'Am I meant to sit there?'. Teachers and classroom assistants are directing them gently to sit, yes, there.

Once the children are nearly in, Gorgeous Greg takes the floor to chivvy the proceedings along. 'Right then, settle down everyone.' His voice is both commanding and warm. He can't possibly be single. 'Good morning school,' he booms.

'Good-mor-ning-Mr-Greg-son', they reply in an evenly metred sing-song chant.

'I'd like to introduce you to our new Vicar, Reverend Christal.'

I bob up off the chair keenly, all smiles and give a silly wave. 'Good morning, children!' I sound like a demented holiday camp rep.

'Good-morning-Rev-rend-Christ-al,' the children intone.

'Over to you,' beams Gorgeous Greg as he strides off to his seat at the side.

'Well, er, good morning children!'

'You've said that already,' pipes up a voice from somewhere near the back.

'Indeed, yes, yes, I have. It's so good I said it twice.' There's a sea of faces staring at me blankly. 'So, I'm Reverend Christal and I'm the new Vicar at St Jude's and...' A little hand shoots up.

'What's a vicar?'

'Well, er, a vicar is a priest and a priest is someone who, er, teaches you about God.' I give a saccharine smile. 'And Jesus,' I add hurriedly. I'm hoping that will do and we can move on to my hobbies and if I've got a dog and what I like to watch on TV, pizza or fish and chips. *Strictly* or *Bake Off*. That sort of thing.

Another little hand goes in the air.

'Yes?'

'Are you married?'

I try to flick my hair nonchalantly, redden slightly and say in a jolly voice, 'No,' I cast a coy sideways glance at Gorgeous Greg. He's on his phone, tapping furiously, as he walks out of the assembly hall.

'Are you married to God then?'

‘No, I’m divorced and...’

‘What’s the best snog you’ve ever had?’ There’s another eager hand waving frantically in the air to my left so I ignore the question utterly and point smilingly at the gesticulating child. ‘Yes?’

‘Did Jesus have a girlfriend?’

‘Well, I don’t really think so, he...’

‘Yeah, he did,’ pipes up the girl’s neighbour. ‘Mary Magdalene. She was a whore.’

‘Now, we don’t really use that word anymore and there’s nothing wrong with that because Jesus was trying to show us that sinners...’

‘Rosie Greenwood’s a whore. My mum says so.’ I spot a teacher moving calmly but swiftly towards the child and whispering in her ear. I’ve spotted one of Rosie’s brood but he luckily he hasn’t noticed as he is engrossed in picking the rubber off the side of his gym shoe. Here I am with the statutory right to address the children for 15 minutes per day or 1 hour 15 per week and so far it’s a fiasco of snogs and sex work.

‘I’d like to talk to you today about praying.’ The sea of faces remains stony. ‘Praying is important. Who says bedtime prayers?’ A few hands go up. Mostly from the little ones at the front. A tiny chink of light in a sea of darkness. ‘Great,’ I say, brightening. ‘Would anyone like to tell me what they pray for?’

‘I don’t pray but my dad does. I know cos I hear him saying, ‘Oh God! Oh God!’’

‘Well, that’s a powerful prayer, I’m sure.’ I point quickly towards another hand.

‘My mum says she prays for the anti-hump campaigners to curl up and die because they are all idiots and who wants their child to get knocked over by a car on the way to school and...’

‘Well, now I’m going to have to stop you there. We must never pray for people to die, not even the anti-hump protestors.’ I exhale and try once more to regain the room. ‘What’s happening soon for Christians? Hands shoot up all over the place.

‘Christmas!’ Suddenly there’s excitement in the hall.

‘And who comes at Christmas?’

‘Santa!’

Ah. I should have guessed.

‘Who else comes at Christmas?’

One little boy says hesitantly: ‘Jesus?’

‘Yes. Yes! Jesus!’

‘That’s not as exciting as Father Christmas,’ grumbles one of the Year 6s. ‘At least he brings presents.’

‘But Jesus is the present for the whole world.’ I wish my tone didn’t sound quite so desperate.

‘Did they wrap him up with a bow then?’ There are sniggers. The teachers look at the older classes with stern glints in their eyes. The giggling subsides.

‘Jesus gives us all a present at Christmas.’ I sound like some banal evangelical pamphlet. What happened to ‘do you have a dog/cat/hamster’?

‘They laid him in a mangey,’ states one girl firmly.

‘We’re practicing for the nativity play,’ says another assertively. ‘I’m going to be Mary.’ She folds her arms and gives me a superior look. That’s something at least.

‘I’m going to be an elf,’ says another girl.

‘Sorry, a what?’

‘And I’m going to be Goldilocks.’ There’s another little hubbub and I catch ‘teddy’, ‘ragdoll’, ‘fairy’ and a multitude of things that didn’t crop up in the stable.

The class teacher clears her throat. ‘It’s a nativity with storybook characters,’ she says, looking slightly embarrassed. Secular Christmas has just jumped up and bitten me on the bum.

‘Is Father Christmas real?’

‘Well, it’s a great story, isn’t it?’

‘A story?’

This is the point at which I should keep my mouth shut.

‘What did he bring you last year?’ shouts another child.

‘Well now, he doesn’t actually...’

‘If he didn’t bring you a present, did you do something naughty?’ There’s an excited chorus of ‘ooh!’ and lots of whispering behind hands.

‘I don’t believe...’ No sooner have the words left my lips than they smell blood.

‘She doesn’t believe in Father Christmas!’

‘Are you saying there’s no Father Christmas? But my Mum says he’s real!’ Three little girls and two boys burst into tears. I raise my hands in a placatory way. But the chorus of sobs is instantly deafening. Staff are on their feet trying to comfort children. Mr Gregson marches into the hall, alerted by the din. He looks at me questioningly. I give him a feeble shrug.

‘Right! Settle down. Settle down.’ The cacophony of incredulity and downright misery gradually subsides. There are still a few random sobs. Mr Gregson looks at the staff and announces that they are to take their charges back to their respective classrooms. He raises a sardonic eyebrow and with a sweep of his hand, gestures me out of the hall. I follow him meekly through the dining room as he strides towards his office. Once inside he points to the chair in front of his desk.

‘Have a seat, Reverend Christal.’ His tone is firm and not warm. Ouch. I fidget in the chair. Gorgeous Greg leans back in his and looks at me with searching eyes.

‘Well?’

I swallow. ‘They were a tough crowd.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘They misconstrued something I said about Father Christmas.’

‘And?’

‘I didn’t say he doesn’t exist. I just meant that...I’m sorry...I didn’t mean...they just jumped to conclusions and the next thing I know they’re all crying and getting upset and...’

He rubs his forehead. ‘Well, this will rebound. I can guarantee you that. About 5 pm this evening the emails will start and the answerphone will be clogged in the morning. And one of the parents works for the local rag.’

‘Oh, shit.’

‘Indeed.’ He jumps to his feet and heads for a kettle. ‘Tea?’

I nod ruefully. There’s more to weather and I’m going to have to take it. He drops tea bags into mugs.

‘When I was a Newly Qualified Teacher, I managed to reverse over the school cat on my second day. I was known as ‘moggy-murderer’ from then on. Some of the children would just burst into tears when they saw me. It happens to the best of us.’ He plonks a steaming mug in front of me. ‘It’s bad enough being a bloke in primary education,’ he says, ‘but that... it didn’t go down a storm.’

I am starting to get a warm fuzzy feeling. This is dangerous.

‘I’m really sorry. I wasn’t trying to be controversial.’

‘You’ve got a lot to learn,’ he says gravely. ‘But you come across as really genuine. That’s a great quality. Authenticity counts.’

‘Yes, but I keep messing up.’

‘It’s not a crime, just gets you into hot water occasionally.’

‘Then I’m a lobster.’

He flashes me a brilliant smile. ‘Even lobsters can swim with sharks. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a PR disaster to head off at the pass. Wish me luck.’

‘I wish you every blessing. And, er, thanks.’

He smiles, his lips only slightly pursed, shakes my hand and gestures towards the door. ‘I look forward to welcoming you back but do me a favour and write a script for approval next time.’

You know, sometimes God sends angels. Gorgeous, blue-eyed, forgiving angels.

I might be in love.

'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' Julian of Norwich. Unless you are me, babysitting before a date and can't find a thing to wear.

Dear God,

I've forgotten how to date. Did I ever really know? It's been 40 years. Back then at uni, it was all awkward passing comments in corridors and soppy stares the library. I was still in my teens, for heaven's sake! And I had a bod. Not this wobbly post-menopausal mess. Is anyone still going to want me for me? Will I ever be able to take my clothes off in front of a man who isn't a doctor again...?

'Lippy?'

'Check'

'New tights?'

'Check'

'Mascara?'

'Caked on. I'd better not cry.'

'Foxy underwear?'

'Marg, I really don't think...'

'Condoms?'

'Marg! Please!'

'Just being sensible.'

'It's a first date. In the pub. I hardly think I'm going to need condoms.'

'You never know. He might come back after. A bit of snuggling up in front of the fire...'

'It does actually sound wonderful, Marg. I don't know when I last had that romantic feeling. But what if he takes one look and walks out?'

'Change the mantra. He's asked to go on a date. It's all good.'

'Suppose. But I set the ArchD on fire.'

She shrugs. 'His eyebrows will grow back.'

'I managed to tell a whole primary school that Santa doesn't exist.'

'That's a bit more serious but I thought you said Gorgeous Greg had smoothed it all out?'

'Parents cross the road with their children when they see me coming.'

'Villages are like that. They'll get over it. In about 20 years or so. Come on girl. Glad rags on. If he's Mr Right he'll love you as you are.'

‘There’s a lot to love.’ My biscuit consumption has increased with the advent of Lard in my life. I spent a whole hour earlier with a mound of rejected dresses growing like a volcano about to explode in the middle of the bed. All my favourites are straining at the seams. There’s a green wrap dress with white lilies that is stretchy but the buttons that hold it together at the waist are slightly loose and they might ping off. I have a cream dress that’s a bit boring but safe. A bit of red lippy and dark smouldering eyes at the ready.

I’ve got to go out anyway. Rosie Greenwood needs a babysitter for half an hour. At least I haven’t got far to go. She’s in one of the council terraces opposite the school. I’m booked in for six pm. And then I can go straight to the pub. Ready for action just in case I’m late getting away. All shall be well and all shall be well...

I say ‘right’ decisively to no one in particular and put on my dress and comfortable pants. Marg’s suggestion of foxy underwear can keep. It’s just going to be a nice drink in the pub. A quick one if the encounter is not going well, maybe two or three if we’re relaxed and chatting. No goodnight kiss. Well, a peck on the cheek?

The bathroom mirror eventually shows me my best made up look. A bit too heavy on the mascara? A bit too red with the lippy? I check my watch. It’s ten to six and I had better get to Rosie’s. I grab my coat and bag and take my keys. The vicarage sits as a brooding monolith across from the shoebox council houses. Bet they’re warm though.

I check my phone to refresh my memory of my date. He’s a geeky bloke with a nice smile. And he’s skinny. Can you cuddle a skinny man? What if he has a laugh like a hyena on speed? What’s the deal breaker? What if he has five kids? What if he has ten? I hear the frantic ping of a bike bell and a ‘woah!’ as a lycra-clad cyclist swerves round me. What did he yell? I take a deep breath, check several times before stepping off the pavement again and cross the road without endangering a single cyclist. In a couple of minutes I’m standing before Rosie’s door and examining a tableau of numerous smudgy hand marks. The air is suddenly pierced with a scream from inside.

‘She hit me!’

‘He hit me!’ This is accompanied by various wails.

‘Stick a sock in it!’ Someone laughs. ‘You heard me!’ The screams and wails stop abruptly. ‘Into the living room now, siddown, shurrrup!’

I can hear a thundering of footsteps on the stairs and then all is still. I make a little direct prayer that whatever I am about to deal with, silence and calm will prevail.

‘He hit me!’

Oh well, better get this over and done with. I knock and hear footsteps thundering down the stairs. Rosie answers with a seductive smile that fades as soon as it has crossed her glossy red lips. Despite the cold she’s wearing a low cut, lacy cami, a mini skirt and fishnet tights. It makes me shiver with cold just looking at her. Her shiny black boots are very pointy.

‘Ello Vic,’ she says, giving my arm a squeeze. ‘Come in, come in!’ She stands back and waves me through the door. I enter the slightly dingy hallway and step over a mountain of little shoes and boots. ‘Kids is in there.’

I follow the direction she has pointed into a little living room. The kids are sprawled on two shabby sofas, a huge TV is on the floor in one corner, there’s a scattering of well-worn toys, a baby in a bouncer and that’s about it. I pick my way through and find a free spot on one of the sofas. The children ignore me almost completely. I glance at the empty walls.

‘Er, this is nice.’

‘Innit tho,’ says Rosie, flashing her red lips. ‘No mould. Shoulda seen the last place we was in. It was grim. Poor Chips coughed his lungs up all winter.’

One of the children is pulling stuffing out of a tear in the sofa and earns a little slap. Outside there’s a small patch of overgrown grass (but who am I to speak?), a mattress and some other junk piled up by a shed with various bikes and trikes.

There’s a knock on the door. Any questions I have stay on my lips. Rosie perks up her small breasts in her bra, smacks her lips together and flashes me a smile.

‘That’ll be ‘im then. Won’t be long. This one doesn’t usually need the full time, know what I mean? Half an hour, tops. Just keep the kids in ‘ere, will ya Vic?’ She winks and disappears from the doorway. A long, cold icicle seems to slither down my spine.

I hear her honied tones in the hallway. ‘Ello darlin, let’s be havin’ you,’ then a slightly raucous laugh. I am welded to the sofa. I dare not go to the living room door and look. The children are all motionless, still glued to the TV.

‘Gimme your coat then darlin’. It’ll be warm enough for you upstairs.’ Another filthy giggle. And a man’s laugh follows. Things are beginning to dawn ever so slowly. Rosie is not leaving the house. Work has come to Rosie in the shape of a man.

One of the children sidles up with a ragged bunny, thumb in mouth and settles himself on my lap. There’s the sound of heavy footsteps going rapidly up the stairs and I hear Rosie shriek with laughter like an over-excited teenager. A door slams.

The child on my lap gives a contented sigh. I have a feeling that I should get up and close the living room door but it would mean disturbing my little companion and his peace.

The rhythmic thud from upstairs starts gently and slowly. It has the quality of a small wooden fence post being tapped on a carpeted floor. My arms tense slightly round my little charge and I look at the other children with a growing sense of unease. They don’t move. The noise from above has now picked up tempo. Thud. Thud. Thud.

The child in my lap looks briefly upwards and then snuggles deeper into me. Thud. Thud. Thud. The rapidity is increasing.

‘What’s your name?’ one of the children suddenly blurts, peeling his eyes away from the TV.

‘Christal,’ I say, trying to drop my gaze from the light shade above my head which is starting to swing fractionally.

‘Christal?’

‘Yes,’ I say, my eyes still mesmerised by the light shade. ‘I came to the school remember?’ It doesn’t seem to chart.

‘Christal. Can I ask you a question?’

The thuds from upstairs are now being accompanied by small yelps, reminiscent of certain female tennis players.

I gulp. ‘Er, yes, of course.’ I am trying not to looking at the ceiling. Thud/yelp. Thud/yelp. Thud/yelp.

‘What’s mummy doing?’

‘Wouldn’t you rather ask me about Santa?’ I say, helplessly.

‘Santa doesn’t exist. I want to know what mummy’s doing.’

One of the older children throws a cushion at my interrogator. ‘She’s on the job,’ he says in a perfunctory way.

‘Do you think she will be long?’

Thud-yelp-thud-yelp-thud-yelp is becoming staccato.

‘No, I don’t think so somehow.’

‘But what’s she doing?’

‘She’s, er, giving a nice man a massage.’

‘What’s a massage?’

‘A massage is when you rub someone’s muscles so they relax.’

‘And it makes you go Oh! Oh! Oh! too.’

‘Sometimes. Anyone want a biscuit?’ There’s a chorus of ‘me!’ and lots of little hands go in the air. One of the children leaps off the sofa and heads to the kitchen. My drowsy charge is weighing me down and preventing me from following. The small, skinny child has raced back and is now tearing round the room in circles waving a packet of biscuits while two others try to catch him and wrest the packet off him. He jumps on the spot holding the biscuits aloft, taunting the others in a sing-song voice.

‘You can’t have them! You can’t have them!’

‘Now then, bring them to me and we’ll share.’

He persists at jumping up and down.

‘Now!’

He stops jumping in the air and delivers the packet.

‘I’m going to need a plate, please.’

The child zooms away again and returns with a plate. I have their attention. They’re no longer interested in the bonking noises coming from upstairs. I open the packet and make four piles of three biscuits.

‘Now we’re going to...’

A flurry of hands suddenly grab the biscuits from all directions. The children retreat to their previous sofa sprawl and let their eyes fix again on the TV. The charge in my lap already has a mouth smeared with sticky brown.

‘Was that good?’ I say softly. He nods slowly and then wipes his mouth against me, all over my choice of cream dress. The cries from upstairs have reached the ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ stage. Hallelujah.

I peer down at my chocolate coated breast. There’s a piercing cry from upstairs. The lampshade settles. The thudding stops. The children do not bat an eyelid. What happens now? Do they have a cup of tea? Do they smoke a fag/vape? How long will it take them to get dressed again? Did they even get undressed? How soon can I speak to diocesan Safeguarding?

There can be few niceties as I soon hear footsteps on the stairs. I look apologetically at the little charge on my lap and his chocolate-smudged face.

‘I think I’m going to be going now’. He just nestles deeper into my chest. I give the little chap a squeeze and start to move him gently onto the sofa. A rather flushed Rosie appears at the doorway, looking business-like and not at all post-coital.

‘Thanks then, Vic. Job done. So to speak.’

‘Rosie, we need to talk but I’ve got to go. I’ve got a date.’

‘You wanna tart yourself up a bit, Vic.’

I make my way to the door. ‘Rosie...’

She looks at me quizzically.

‘Er, I mean, well...’

‘Spit it out Vic.’

‘What is it you do?’

‘I make lonely men happy,’ she says, with a massive wink.

Who am I to judge? Didn’t my Lord and Saviour hang out with sex workers? Would he have babysat the kids? Isn’t she just a part of a supply and demand economy?

Then I have a flashback to Lard outside the village shop and his ever-reddening face as she stroked it. Oh, Rosie. Oh, Lard. I’ve just got to stop conjuring up that mental image.

Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. (Song of Solomon 2:8) OK, that's a bit optimistic for a first date but if I don't get out of this dress and into something else in a hurry, I will never know...

Dear God,

Bugger. Sorry. I'm not sure this chocolate will ever wash out. I'm going to have to grab the first thing that comes to hand that I can wriggle into. He might not wait. Maybe a good thing but Marg will kill me. I'll never hear the end of it...

I race across the road and tear up the vicarage path. I fumble with the large key in the lock. Stop. Breathe. Find a dress. I run upstairs trying to unzip as I go. My phone rings.

'Lard?' I answer tersely.

'Aye, well, aye, it's Wednesday night.'

'Yes, Lard. It is.' I put the phone on speaker while trying to wriggle out of my dress.

'Aye, well, we've got this booking at the church hall.'

'And?'

'Aye well, I thought you might want to pop down there, you know. Keep the peace.'

'Lard, I hardly think they'll be planning to bomb the school. We don't need to get the UN involved just yet.' I grab the last dress on the pile, wrap it round, and say a quick prayer that the buttons will hold. 'It will be OK. I've got to dash. Bye!' Bloody hell, it's my night off. My mobile starts to vibrate again.

'Marg. What?'

'Just checking in. You there yet?'

'Not exactly.'

'What do you mean, not exactly?'

'Maybe I should just get there?'

'How long until the get out call then?'

'Get out call?'

'Yeah. Crap. You're really not up on dating are you?'

'Explain.'

'Simple. Just tell me when I should call you and if it's not going well, you can say that your Granny has just died and make an exit.'

'My granny is dead.'

'OK. Your hamster then. And don't say you haven't got one. It's a get out.'

‘I dunno. Half an hour?’

The pub is on the other side of the church. According to Lard, the original footings pre-date the Norman church as the monks built a hall to live in while they set to work on constructing St Jude’s. I imagine monks merry on mead after a hard day’s bricklaying. I jog in my heels to the car park. I can’t spot a tall, geeky bloke waiting outside.

As pubs go, it is low beamed and cosy. It is decorated in earthy greys, mustards and browns, with rich tweedy fabrics, tasteful nick-nacks and has a great contemporary vibe. The main bar is full of men but there isn’t anyone who is on their own. Perhaps ‘The Snug’ sounds like the place for my date to be waiting. I retrace my steps past the main entrance and push the door to the Snug decisively. It crashes open. All heads turn in my direction. The buzz of conversation drops. I scan the room. A tall, skinny man stands up, almost skimming the low-beamed ceiling with his swept-back hair. I try to look decisive, striding purposefully. I fail to see the dog at the edge of the bar, trip, shriek and lunge towards him. He catches me and I look up into the most lovely, soft grey eyes.

‘Er, can you stand up now?’

‘Yes! Of course.’

‘Quite an entrance.’

‘Nice to meet you Dick,’

‘It’s Derek. Can I get you a drink?’

‘Intravenous gin please.’ He blinks. ‘Just gin and tonic then.’ He smiles and goes off to hover at the bar. I sit down at the table. He’s tall, almost ridiculously. Six ft two at a guesstimate. He’s wearing smart black shoes, skinny blue trousers, a petrol blue tweed jacket and a blue open necked shirt set off beautifully by the slight angularity of his slim frame. I look down at my dress straining at the buttons and try to pull some slack into it.

Derek places my G and T delicately in front of me with long, elegant fingers. I waste no time taking a sip. ‘Mmmmm! That is good.’

‘Hard day?’

‘You could say that.’

‘What do you do?’

‘Er, it’s a bit niche. Can I ask you what you do first?’

‘Of course. I’m a primary school teacher. And you?’

‘I’m in pastoral care.’

The door to the snug opens and in walks Lard. He spots me, bustles over to the table and smiles.

‘Hello Vic.’

‘Hello Lard. Er, nice to see you.’

‘Aye, well, aye. I saw you coming in and just wanted a wee catch up.’

I stare at him pointedly. 'Now's not really the time.'

Lard reaches out a hand to Derek. 'Hullo there. I'm Lard. I work with Vic.'

'Work at...?' says Derek.

'At the church,' says Lard with his usual candour.

'Thanks, Lard,' I say firmly, 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Aye, well, aye. In church?'

'Yes!' I practically hiss.

'Aye. Right you are then.'

I look at Derek. His eyes are twinkling and he takes a quiet sip of his lager.

'I thought your name was Christal?'

'It is.'

'But your friend called you 'Vic'?''

'He did. It's short for Vicar.'

'Ah.' He takes another sip of his lager.

'So, I was going to tell you...eventually.'

'Good.'

'Shall we hit reset? Hello, I'm Derek. I'm a primary school teacher.'

'Hello, I'm Christal and I'm a priest.'

'That wasn't so bad, was it?'

'Depends what you think.'

'Nobody's perfect.' His chuckle is generous. 'How long have you been here?'

'About 3 minutes,' I say, ruefully. 'This is my first incumbency...my first post.'

'How's it going?'

'So far I've managed to set the Archdeacon on fire and bust the Santa myth to the whole primary school.'

He throws his head back as he laughs warmly.

'No, really.'

'You weren't joking. Ah.'

'Made the local paper. Parents cross the street with their children when they see me.'

'It's a village. They'll get over it. In about 20 years or so.' His laugh is lovely and light, like ripples on water. 'How did you end up here?'

‘Seemed like a nice place.’

‘Any plans?’

‘We’ve had a spring clean, I suppose. And you. Tell me about you.’ I take another large swig of gin and tonic. If I finish it soon, I will at least have the excuse of going to the bar for another.

‘Not much to tell really. Pretty bog standard. Always wanted to teach. Did a degree in fine arts. Like little kids. Got lots of nieces and nephews. The young ones have no hang ups. You can teach them about Piet Mondrian and they just accept it. They run with it.’

‘Mondrian?’

‘Black lines, white, yellow, blue and red squares. One little girl did a picture of her pet rabbit in the style of Mondrian. Priceless.’

I’m cradling my chin in my hand, totally absorbed in what he’s telling me, his passion, his vocation. It’s hot.

‘What?’

‘Oh, er, I admire your enthusiasm.’

‘Why did you become a vicar then?’

‘God’s got a great sense of humour.’

‘Because?’

‘I wake up each morning and look at the collar and wonder how on earth I got here. My Bishop seems to think the same.’

‘Don’t let the bastards get you down. Prove them wrong.’

He raises his pint in a toast. I go to grab my gin and tonic but miss. The glass clatters as it flies across the table and the contents land in his lap.

‘Ooooooh!’ he groans and jumps up. He looks like he’s weed himself. I get a napkin from a nearby table which is set for dinner and start dabbing at his crotch. He takes the napkin from my hand.

‘I’ll take that.’ He sits down, continuing to dab ineffectually at his soaking groin. I start to giggle.

‘Glad you’re finding this so amusing’

My laughter subsides to a last few gulps of air. ‘I’m so, so sorry. Honestly.’

‘Waste of good gin and tonic too. Shall I get you another?’

‘Do you want to risk it?’

‘Can it get any worse?’

‘Oh, it can always get worse.’ I say in a low voice. My bladder starts to nag at me. ‘Just popping to the ladies.’

I leave the snug and enter the main bar. On my way through I see that a group headed up by Gorgeous Greg. The table is covered in pens, papers and notebooks.

‘Hello, Greg. Having a get together?’

He flashes that winning grin. ‘Just a meeting about the road humps. Time we got a zebra crossing in front of the school. Everyone, this is Christal, our new Vicar.’

The rest are looking daggers at me. I give them a feeble smile. When I emerge from the loo I see Lard puffing in the main door, looking rattled.

‘Vic, Vic!’ He pauses to bend over and wheeze, as if he’s just run a half marathon. ‘I think...you...better...come...’ He stands upright, still puffing, cheeks pink. ‘The Church hall...that protest group...’

‘The anti-hump lot?’

‘Aye. Them. They’re getting militant. They’re on their way here. With placards and banners and all.’

‘And...’

‘They found out that the pro-hump lot were having a meeting.’

‘Ah.’

‘They’re pretty fired up Vic. I think you should stop them.’

‘Me?’

‘Aye, well, you’re the vicar. Pour oil on troubled waters and all that.’

‘I really don’t think...’

The bar door flies open. A crowd of people surge in and surround the group at the table. The noise in the room goes up by a number of decibels. Gorgeous Greg is on his feet. Chairs scrape noisily back across the floor as others follow. People’s faces seem very close as they yell at one another.

‘Now listen,’ I proffer, holding my arms up and wiggling in between them. ‘Hello everybody, hello!’ No one pays any attention. ‘Hello!’

I try to manoeuvre myself to the centre of the fracas but someone grabs me from behind to drag me out of the way. They pull the back of my dress and I get spun round. The buttons at the waist ping off, clattering across the pub flagstones. The dress opens and my grotty underwear goes on display.

There in the doorway, alerted by the noise and scuffles breaking out, is Derek. And what appears to be a press photographer.

Flash, as it were.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

INTRODUCTION

I have worked on a novel, *Oh Dear God!*, a satire of approximately 70,000 words, featuring as protagonist an older but recently qualified woman priest in the Church of England (CofE).

The fields of research encompassed narratology, ecclesiology and theology, satire, feminism and gender studies, and sociology with reference to both sex work and the decline of rural churches. The aim of the research was to examine and develop my craft as a writer and storyteller, particularly my understanding of narratology, looking at first-person narration and the use of the present tense. I wanted to infuse the work with my own experience of the barriers to women priests in the Church of England thirty years on from their first ordinations, linking their involvement with rural churches, and the impact of rural church decline, especially when there is a crisis in the local community.

The methodology for this research included a broad spectrum of approaches covering academic studies and literature, TV and film, theatre drama (where available), as well as reading novels relevant to the subject and also with comparable writing styles. It encompassed television documentaries, research papers, newspaper articles, academic papers, a conference, an online symposium and other online material.

NOVEL SYNOPSIS

Fifty-something Reverend Christal Petrie is dumped in a dead-end parish by her misogynist bishop who plans to get rid of her and close the failing village church. She is recently divorced and menopausal. Christal faces additional challenges, including a fire in the church, a disastrous first primary school assembly and interactions with the village sex worker, Rosie. On a first date in the local pub, she is caught in a fight and makes the local news, to the ire of her bishop.

The disappearance of one of Rosie's children sees Christal step up to support a local community in crisis. The church becomes a vital focal point. Villagers rally round to search for the child and support his mother. Eventually, however, the child is found dead and Christal must take the funeral. In their grief, village factions unite. The Bishop grudgingly admits that Christal has risen to the challenge. Christal's prayers are answered when an old desk in the church tower is found to be extremely valuable, solving the church's immediate financial problems. In this socio-political satire, Christal raises the sinking St Jude's to a crucial community hub and she finally finds her home.

RATIONALE

The writing of this novel postdates my ordination as a priest in the Church of England in 2017 which has given me experience of and insight into the workings of the Church and personal experience showed me that I was not offered the same opportunities as my male counterparts.

The vocation of priest is niche in itself but I wanted also to explore a unique and necessary perspective in portraying an older woman in the role. Through this research I gained insight into how the themes I instinctively wished to highlight, such as institutional misogyny, social hypocrisy and the threat to 'unviable' churches, which are vital social hubs in a crisis, can be effectively highlighted within a satirical framework. I also honed my skills and knowledge as a creative writer, looking at aspects of narration, in particular first-person, usage of tense, in this case the present, and the resulting need for narrative excursions to provide sufficient depth to the narrative.

The intended audience is readers of satire, feminists (of any gender), mature women, anyone looking for a story of unlikely triumph or curious about church life. The latter find affinities with writers such as Catherine Fox, Richard Coles and Fergus Butler-Gallie. This shows an appetite for revealing, church-based novels and autobiographies but there is a gap in the market for satire based on a mature woman Church of England priest dealing with the inherently patriarchal institution of the church.¹ We see this in the television series *The Vicar of Dibley* but it has not been addressed in print.² In addition, *The Vicar of Dibley*, which aired between 1994 and 2007, is now outdated. Dibley is a thriving rural parish, devoid of financial crisis or building collapse and is not being subsumed into a multi-parish benefice, nor sharing the vicar with numerous other churches, as is the reality for many today.

WOMEN PRIESTS IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND (CofE)

A key motivation in writing *Oh Dear God!* is to raise the profile of the woman priest in the Church of England (CofE), a role which, I wish to demonstrate, is subject to institutionalised discrimination.

¹ Catherine Fox, *Acts and Omissions* (Marylebone House, 2014).

Richard Coles, *Murder Before Evensong* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2023).

Fergus Butler-Gallie, *Touching Cloth* (Bantam Press, 2023).

Women priests' experiences with Church-based misogyny is considered in:

Lesley Crawley, 'Sexism runs deep in the Church of England', *Guardian*, 16 August 2011

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/aug/16/sexism-church-of-england-prejudice/>> [accessed 1 October 2023].

² *The Vicar of Dibley*, dir. by Dewi Humphreys (Tiger Aspect Productions, 1994).

Women have been ordained successively in the Anglican Communion since 1944 and in England since 1994.³ In contrast, in Scotland where I grew up, the Church of Scotland decided to ordain women as ministers in 1968 and so leadership by women was normal for me.⁴ It was during training as a priest in the Church of England that I began to experience and understand that, despite thirty years of ordination, women clergy in the CofE are underrepresented in the Church they serve.

When the vote allowing women to be ordained was passed in Synod, the Church's ruling council, in November 1992, women and their supporters were not allowed to be jubilant. Martine Osborne observes that 'members had been told to show respect to dissenters and to keep their response muted'.⁵ Even at a moment of monumental change, women were to be silent. This has uneasy resonances with the biblical teachings of St Paul in I Corinthians 14. 35-36: 'If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church'. This is often a justification used by complementarian theologians and Christians who do not recognise the ability of women to be leaders in the church, espousing the theory that makes 'the permanent subordination of women the creation ideal'.⁶

In the UK there are exceptions from the Equality Act 2010 in Canon Law (the law governing the CofE, which is different to UK law, e.g. on marriage), enabling male colleagues to refuse to ordain or work with fellow women Anglican priests.⁷ For example, the CofE 2020 ministry statistics show that 590 parishes officially rejected women's ministry, by means of a 'resolution'. This represented 4.8 percent of all parishes in the CofE.⁸ Such parishes require oversight from a bishop who does not support women clergy. This is, in some instances, the lead bishop of a diocese or alternatively oversight is given to the parishes rejecting women's ministry from a so-called 'flying bishop'. Sometimes parishes are not overt about this stance and women there do not realise that any church vocation, especially to the priesthood, will not be

³ Therese Koturbash, 'Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi – First Woman Ordained in Anglican Communion 25 January 1944', *Women's Ordination Worldwide*, 25 January 2020 <<http://womensordinationcampaign.org/blog-working-for-womens-equality-and-ordination-in-the-catholic-church/2020/1/25/rev-florence-li-tim-oi-first-woman-ordained-in-anglican-communion>> [accessed 1 October 2023].

The Church of England, 'Celebrations mark 25 years of women's ordination to the priesthood', 11 March 2019 <<https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/celebrations-mark-25-years-womens-ordination-priesthood>> [accessed 1 October 2023].

⁴ Elizabeth Quigley, 'The women who won the battle to be Church of Scotland ministers', *BBC Scotland*, 22 May 2018 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-44196558>> [accessed 27 April 2026].

⁵ Martine Osborne, 'Where is discrimination against women still allowed in the UK? The Church', *Guardian*, 11 November 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/11/discrimination-against-women-church-of-england-women-priests>> [accessed 5 April 2024].

⁶ Kevin Giles, *What the Bible Actually Teaches on Women*, (Cascade Books, 2018), p.14.

⁷ Martine Osborne, 'Why are female clergy cheering for a bishop who doesn't believe in female priests?', *Guardian*, 14 January 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/14/female-clergy-church-of-england-ordination-bishop>> [accessed 1 October 2023].

⁸ The Church of England, 'Ministry Statistics 2020', p.32, <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/ministry-statistics-2020-report-final.pdf> [accessed 1 October 2023].

fostered. Martine Osborne states that those attending such churches ‘are generally completely in the dark’.⁹

In the course of my research in 2023, it became clear that the CofE had last published a full report with analysis of ministry statistics in 2021, relating to the year 2020.¹⁰ In an article in *The Church Times* in 2024, the discontinuation of this full report was ascribed to ‘staffing issues’.¹¹

The 2020 report shows that from the first ordinations in 1994, after some twenty-six years, women still only made up one third of 20 000 ordained ministers.¹²

In response to these figures, Women and the Church (WATCH), a national organisation campaigning for equality in the CofE, highlighted that women were ‘twice as likely to be in self-supporting (unpaid) roles’ and called the disparity between women in paid and unpaid roles ‘particularly marked’. It questioned how the ministry of women was therefore ‘perceived and valued’. The WATCH analysis further showed that men were being ordained at a significantly younger age than women and more likely to be offered full-time residential training where women were expected to train part-time on regional courses.¹³ In my experience, regional courses are often the training route for those destined for unpaid ministry. The choice of training route offered is at the discretion of the diocesan bishop.

Ministry statistics for 2022 were then released in October 2024 as the result of a request by Dr Felicity Cooke, a lay canon of Ely Cathedral, to the CofE General Synod.¹⁴ It is difficult to address the inequities in ministry without figures showing the disparities. Ministry statistics now continue to be published annually but on spreadsheets of approx. eight pages and without the in-depth analysis of the fifty-eight page 2020 report, which clearly highlighted the disparities in women’s ministry. In particular, there is no breakdown of the rural/urban landscape offered. Unlike their fictional counterpart in *The Vicar of Dibley*, many rural churches are in decline due to ageing and dwindling

⁹ Martine Osborne, ‘Where is discrimination against women still allowed in the UK? The Church’, *Guardian*, 11 November 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/11/discrimination-against-women-church-of-england-women-priests>> [accessed 27 April 2026].

¹⁰ The Church of England, ‘Ministry Statistics 2020’ <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/ministry-statistics-2020-report-final.pdf> [accessed 1 October 2023].

Note: the only genders recorded are ‘male’ and ‘female’.

¹¹ Madeleine Davies, ‘Women remain a minority in incumbency posts’, *Church Times*, 19 July 2024 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/19-july/news/uk/women-remain-a-minority-in-incumbency-posts>> [accessed 14 April 2026].

¹² The Church of England, ‘Ministry Statistics 2020’, p. 3.

¹³ Anglican Ink, ‘WATCH report on Women’s Ministry 2020 in the Church of England’, 9 March 2021 <<https://anglican.ink/2021/03/09/watch-report-on-womens-ministry-2020-in-the-church-of-england/>> [accessed 27 April 2026].

¹⁴ Madeleine Davies, ‘Women remain a minority in incumbency posts’. The Church of England, ‘Ministry Statistics 2022’ <<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/data-services/key-areas-research>> [accessed 27 April 2026].

congregations.¹⁵ There is evidence that churches are struggling to find wardens and other helpers.¹⁶ Rural churches are often combined into multi-parish benefices so one priest serves several parishes.¹⁷ This gives rise to a massive administrative role and also one where the priest cannot live in most of the communities served, according to the traditional model of ministry to a community. It is a burden that falls in a disproportionate way on women's ministry, as in percentage terms, they serve more highly than men in this context. In 2020, 43 percent of stipendiary women ministered rurally compared with only 35 percent of men and for 'self-supporting' priests (unpaid), it was 46 percent, compared with 40 percent of their male colleagues.¹⁸

In 2024, around the 30th anniversary of women's priesthood in the CofE, *The Church Times* highlighted the imbalance of women to men in paid roles, stating that: 'Men outnumber women as incumbents by more than two to one in the Church of England', adding that the gender gap for such posts was 'marked'.¹⁹

The 30th anniversary also prompted The Reverend Lucy Davis, then chair of the National Association of Diocesan Advisers in Women's Ministry, to highlight that 'bullying and harassment' were disproportionately higher for women priests and she expressed concern over "'low-level misogyny" and online "vitriol"'.²⁰

At the same time, a leading commentator on the Church of England, Reverend Angela Tilby, in an article entitled 'Misogyny still plagues the Church', maintained: 'senior male priests often prefer to work with women who will not challenge them'. This gives rise to a state whereby: 'Misogyny remains the legacy of a catastrophic moral system that has plagued the Church since its inception'.²¹

¹⁵ University of Cambridge, 'Future of churches at risk unless they reimagine their buildings, report finds', n.d. <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/future-of-churches-at-risk-unless-they-reimagine-their-buildings-report-finds>> [accessed 8 April 2024].

Trevor Cooper, 'The Future of England's Rural Parish Churches', www.buildingconservation.com, 2019 <<https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/rural-parish-churches/rural-parish-churches.htm>> [accessed 22 April 2024].

¹⁶ Madeleine Davies, 'No churchwardens and vacant PCC posts: an investigation into the church volunteering crisis', *Church Times*, 15 March 2024 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/15-march/features/features/no-churchwardens-and-vacant-pcc-posts-an-investigation-into-the-church-volunteering-crisis>> [accessed 26 October 2025].

¹⁷ The Church of England, 'Amalgamating Parishes and Declining Clergy Numbers', 2016 <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/amalgamating_parishes_and_declining_clergy_numbers_final.pdf> [accessed 22 April 2024].

¹⁸ The Church of England, 'Ministry Statistics 2020', p. 35, <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/ministry-statistics-2020-report-final.pdf> [accessed 14 May 2026].

¹⁹ Madeleine Davies, 'Women remain a minority in incumbency posts', *Church Times*, 19 July 2024 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/19-july/news/uk/women-remain-a-minority-in-incumbency-posts>> [accessed 14 April 2026].

²⁰ Madeleine Davies, 'Women remain a minority in incumbency posts'.

²¹ Angela Tilby, 'Misogyny Still Plagues the Church', *Church Times*, 23 February 2024 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/23-february/comment/columnists/angela-tilby-misogyny-still-plagues-the-church>> [accessed 27 April 2026].

With regard to women Bishops, subsequently ordained from 2014, this leads to a distinct irony.²² Until the recent and historic instalment as the first woman Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop Sarah Mullally, when Bishop of London, was essentially line manager to the Bishop of Fulham, who refuses to have anything to do with ordaining or ordained women.²³ In the secular world there is legal protection for employees but clergy in the CofE are paid a stipend, not a salary, and therefore do not have recourse to employment law, should they wish to challenge this situation.

Even the language of the law governing the Church, Canon Law, is that the priest is referred to as 'he', with a clause in Canon I1 stating:

- (a) words importing the masculine gender include the feminine;
- (b) words importing the feminine gender include the masculine²⁴

After more than thirty years of women's ordination, most of the Canons still refer to 'he', while a few have been updated.

The gender imbalances in the CofE are thus explored in *Oh Dear God!* as the protagonist is given a role that no one else has been willing to take and she has little choice but to accept. This reflects the predominance of male incumbents in more popular town and city parishes.²⁵

Another aspect of my focus in creating a woman protagonist in the CofE was to help address their paucity in literature. There is a raft of male representation, most recently added to by Reverend Richard Coles with the Canon Clement series but, by contrast, women are not proportionately present.²⁶ I can cite only a few main examples: firstly, the TV sitcom 'The Vicar of Dibley', featuring the lead character of Geraldine Granger.²⁷ Secondly there is Merrily Watkins, a fictional diocesan exorcist in the Diocese of Hereford.²⁸ There is Vicky Burnham-Woods in *Archbishop*.²⁹ Not a priest but still clergy, there is 'deaconess' Theodora Braithwaite in a murder mystery series.³⁰ Finally we

²² Tim Wyatt, 'From today, women can be bishops in the Church of England', *Church Times*, 17 November 2014 <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2014/14-november/news/uk/from-today-women-can-be-bishops-in-the-church-of-england>> [accessed 5 April 2024].

²³ Martine Osborne, 'Where is discrimination against women still allowed in the UK? The Church', *Guardian*, 11 November 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/11/discrimination-against-women-church-of-england-women-priests>> [accessed 5 April 2024].

²⁴ The Church of England, 'Canons of the Church of England, Section I', n.d. <<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/canons-church-england/section-i>> [accessed 22 April 2024].

²⁵ The Church of England, 'Ministry Statistics 2020', p. 35, <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/ministry-statistics-2020-report-final.pdf> [accessed 1 October 2023].

²⁶ Richard Coles, *Murder Before Evensong* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2023).

²⁷ *The Vicar of Dibley*, dir. by Dewi Humphreys (Tiger Aspect Productions, 1994).

²⁸ Phil Rickman, *The Wine of Angels* (Corvus, 2011).

²⁹ Michele Guinness, *Archbishop* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2014).

³⁰ D. M. Greenwood, *Clerical Errors* (St. Martin's Press, 1992).

encounter Isobel Knox in *Love for the Lost*, a young Anglican curate in an industrial parish.³¹

In *Oh Dear God!* I also wanted to take the opportunity to highlight the role of an older clergy woman as the Ministry Statistics 2020 again showed an age disparity. Most women were ordained over the age of forty-five but contrastingly the bulk of men were under forty. By 2025 the landscape had not altered. Moreover, in 2020, the average age at ordination for women was 47.2 years. This increased in 2025 to 50.4 years.³²

Given the success of *The Vicar of Dibley*, I looked to employ humour as a vehicle, inspired particularly by Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Anthony Cappella's *The Wedding Officer* and Sue Townsend's *The Queen and I*.³³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines satire as a 'work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary'.³⁴ Satire therefore presented itself as a means of critiquing the imbalances outlined above. Declercq gives this succinct view: 'satire is a genre which necessarily sets out to critique and entertain'.³⁵ The intention with *Oh Dear God!* is to tackle the misogyny in the Church of England by means of humour and offer a heroine in Christal Petrie who, despite being unfairly treated by her bishop, overcomes adversity to succeed.

For example, in the episode when Christal is being rebuked by her bishop for her drunken antics while on antibiotics, I take the opportunity as author to demonstrate a comical irreverence for authority:

'Half of Cambridge witnessed purple lacy knickers on Cranmer's head! In front of a theological college. Mother Mary and all the saints, have you no *shame*?'

'Well, yes, quite a lot actually. They were my extra-large ones. Normally I wear a size smaller.'

Within the framework of the satire, the novel includes, as the crisis, a child death. This needs careful consideration of how this impacts the narrative in what is essentially meant to be a humorous work.

³¹ Catherine Fox, *Love for the Lost* (Marylebone House, 2015).

³² The Church of England, 'Ministry Statistics 2020', p. 42, <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/ministry-statistics-2020-report-final.pdf> [accessed 1 October 2023].

The Church of England, 'Ministry Statistics 2025', Table 13/14 <<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/data-services/resources-publications-and-data#na>> [accessed 27 April 2026].

³³ Sue Townsend, *The Queen and I* (Penguin, 2012).

Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Picador, 2014).

Anthony Cappella *The Wedding Officer* (Sphere, 2007).

³⁴ Entry 'satire', *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d. <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/satire_n?tl=true> [accessed 10 October 2025].

³⁵ Dieter Declercq, 'A Definition of Satire (And Why a Definition Matters)', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76.3 (2018), pp. 319–30 (p. 319), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45210947>> [accessed 10 October 2025].

According to L.J. Potts, ‘There are only two literary modes of thought: tragedy and comedy’.³⁶ The question here is what happens when tragic events feature in something supposedly funny. Moss states that in previous centuries, ‘death was a familiar event’ and that narratives explored ‘high rates of infant and young-adult mortality’, yet when she sought children’s literature dealing with death in a local library, little was on offer.³⁷ I am aware that as a priest I perhaps come to this with different viewpoint to other authors. As Teela Saunders states: ‘Professions that deal with sensitive issues such as death, trauma and health use humour as a coping strategy’.³⁸ This is evidenced in Adam Kay’s candid *This is going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor*, cataloguing his own experience.³⁹

The inclusion of a tragic event later in the proposed full novel is challenging, yet other writers of satire have navigated this, such as the controversial death of the beloved Mr Darcy in Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones novel *Mad About the Boy*.⁴⁰ Nagel describes the killing of Kid Sampson in Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* as ‘brutal and shocking’, but maintains the novel persists in its ‘angry humour’.⁴¹ In *Oh Dear God!*, the child death is structural to the plot but I need to ensure it is acceptable to the reader. It was therefore changed from originally being depicted as a deliberate act of violence, much in evidence in novels of the eighties and nineties, according to Dean, to an accidental death, in the anticipation that the absence of evil would render it slightly more palatable.⁴² The death allows the protagonist as priest to take a ‘pain-bearing role for a community [...] as in Lockerbie, Dunblane, or Soham’ and ‘to provide somewhere for people to take their bewilderment and pain’.⁴³ This is essential and authentic work for a priest.

³⁶ L. J. Potts, *Comedy* (New York, 1966), p. 10, cited in Robert D. Hume “Some Problems in the Theory of Comedy.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 31.1 (1972), pp. 87–100, doi:10.2307/429615 [accessed 30 October 2025].

³⁷ Judith P. Moss, ‘Death in Children’s Literature’, *Elementary English*, 49.4 (1972), pp. 530–32 (p. 530), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41387811>> [accessed 12 October 2025].

³⁸ Teela Sanders, ‘Controllable Laughter: Managing Sex Work Through Humour’, *Sociology*, 38.2 (2004), pp. 273–91 (p. 274), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42858147>> [accessed 12 April 2024].

³⁹ Adam Kay, *This is going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor* (Picador, 2018).

⁴⁰ Stephanie Merritt, ‘Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy by Helen Fielding – review’, *Guardian*, 12 October 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/12/bridget-jones-mad-boy-review>> [accessed 22 April 24].

⁴¹ James Nagel, ‘Catch-22’ and Angry Humor: A Study of the Normative Values of Satire’, *Studies in American Humor*, 1.2 (1974), pp. 99–106 (p. 101), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42573658>> [accessed 12 October 2025].

⁴² Dominic Dean, *Killing Children in British Fiction: Thatcherism to Brexit* (State University of New York Press, 2024) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/herts/detail.action?docID=31231931>> [accessed 12 October 2025].

⁴³ John Pritchard, *The Life and Work of a Priest*, (SPCK, 2007), p. 61.

NARRATION

A first-person narrator

The protagonist Christal narrates in the present tense while participating in the narrative she recounts and is thereby a homodiegetic narrator with internal focalisation.⁴⁴

There are manifold ways in which the story of Christal could be told. It was important to me, as a writer wishing to give women a voice, to consider this aspect of the creative piece with care.

I find the use of first-person narration attractive because it can be employed to present an illusion of a personalised account of events, drawing the reader into the world of the protagonist and lending the narrative a sense of intimacy. The implied reader or narratee is allowed inside the head of the narrator and can become part of a relationship. This is particularly beneficial when the reader finds the protagonist sympathetic and is thus inspired to journey through the narrative with them. Alison Case, examining Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary*, states women: 'expressed delight and a kind of rueful identification with Bridget's voice'.⁴⁵ Kelly Marsh echoes this sentiment: 'Bridget Jones is not the first imperfect and unrepentant yet much loved heroine in British literature', citing also the eponymous protagonist in Jane Austen's *Emma*.⁴⁶ In both these examples we find flawed but relatable heroines.

In this extract from *Oh Dear God!* the narratee is party to Christal's innermost thoughts, as she challenges God in prayer:

Bless Margie. She's going to help with the unpacking. That's a true friend but the truth is God, I'm so lonely. Why can't I have a special someone in my life to help with these situations? Hmmm? Can't you do something about that?...

Similarly, from her perspective as an older woman, rejected by her husband, we hear:

Where did I go? That person who travelled for a foreign government, met dignitaries and terrorists, typed up translations late at night. I was her once, blissfully, before the oestrogen-levels started to drop. And now there are niggly little butterflies in my stomach. Or perhaps they're moths. Maybe everything is full of holes...

⁴⁴ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction*, 2nd edn (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), no page number given, cited in entry 'focus of narration', Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003), <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/herts/detail.action?docID=6397652>> [accessed 5 October 2025].

⁴⁵ Alison Case, 'Authenticity, Convention, and "Bridget Jones's Diary" Narrative', 9.2 (2001), pp. 176–81 (p. 177) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107244>> [accessed 6 October 2025].

⁴⁶ Kelly A. Marsh, 'Contextualizing Bridget Jones', *College Literature*, 31.1 (2004), pp. 52–72 (p. 63), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25115173>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

An inherent weakness in this choice is the reliability of said narrator. As Harriet Kramer Linkin states of Du Maurier's eponymous heroine Rebecca: 'she filters the details of her story; moreover, as she produces her confessional memoir, she engages in paralipsis, or omission, to exonerate her questionable actions'.⁴⁷

Christal's unreliability is evident in a defensive explanation to the Bishop:

'I mean, to explain, I had been on antibiotics. They were finished and I only had one glass of wine but it made me stupidly drunk and thought it would be funny to give the statue of Cranmer a hat and my friend Margie...'

What the narratee cannot tell definitively is if this account is accurate or if she simply drank too much and is not prepared to admit the truth. She might even be lying to herself. As Michał Głowiński states, the narratee is at liberty to question the authenticity of Christal's utterances, as we are limited to her version of events. A first-person narrator 'is equal to any other character belonging to the realm of ordinary mortals and, therefore, fallible'.⁴⁸ William Edmiston confirms such a disadvantage, by elaborating that the first person narrator 'is of course a fictional creation and not a true autobiographer'.⁴⁹ Thus it is my choice, as author, to limit Christal's memory of a drunken night out, for example, where perspectives expounded through other characters could give a fuller or even competing narrative. Here, the recounting of the story could be considered inhibited as the narrator also lacks omniscience, a deficiency noted by Głowiński.⁵⁰

The first-person narrator is the sole mediator of other characters in the work, as when Christal unexpectedly finds herself greeted by her church warden while fishing in her tights for the source of an itch in public.⁵¹ In the exchange, for example, we hear nothing of Charles' own thoughts. He is essentially a flat character.⁵² This is in contrast to third-person narration where there is the possibility of the narratee encountering the thoughts of more than one character in quick succession through an omniscient narrator. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrator can, in one paragraph, offer the disparate musings of both Bingley and Darcy towards the same social event, thus giving us a succinct view of their differing natures:

The manner in which they spoke of the Meryton assembly was sufficiently characteristic. Bingley had never met with pleasanter people or prettier girls in his life [...] Darcy, on the contrary, had seen a collection of people in whom there

⁴⁷ Harriet Kramer Linkin 'The Deceptively Strategic Narrator of "Rebecca"', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 46.2, (2016), pp. 223–53 (p.224), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45274868>> [accessed 6 October 2025].

⁴⁸ Michał Głowiński and Rochelle Stone, 'On the First-Person Novel', *New Literary History*, 9.1 (1977), pp. 103-114 (p. 104), doi:10.2307/468439.

⁴⁹ William F. Edmiston, 'Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of the Theory', *Poetics Today*, 10.4 (1989), pp. 729-744 (p. 729), doi:10.2307/1772808.

⁵⁰ Głowiński, p. 105.

⁵¹ See Creative Portfolio p. 1.

⁵² Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003) <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/herts/detail.action?docID=6397652>> [accessed 5 October 2025].

was little beauty and no fashion, for none of whom he had felt the smallest interest, and from none received either attention or pleasure.⁵³

Commentary on other characters can be given in direct speech by other characters, as in this statement by Lard, the church warden. Christal asks him when the church organist is arriving:

‘What time did you say the organist was coming?’

‘Betsy?’

‘Yes.’

‘This afternoon. She’s no very reliable, got to warn you, like. She’s a bit...’ Lard stalls.

‘A bit...?’

‘Aye, she’s a bit...you know.’

In this way we do hear about another character that the narrator Christal is yet to meet. This is, however, far from the omniscience we experience in Austen’s conveyance of Bingley and Darcy’s opinions and is filtered to match her own view later. Similarly, in *Alias Grace*, protagonist Grace describes herself through the judgemental utterance of another character: ‘Mrs Honey looked at me [...] and said I was very scrawny’.⁵⁴

Atwood changes narrators in her writing, as documented by Hilde Staels, who concludes that this ‘creates a clash between the consciousness of characters, and uses theme to draw out oppositional concepts and negotiate the borders that divide them’.⁵⁵ It can be argued that the narratee retains the sense of intimacy but receives a richer picture as the story is told from different and possibly even oppositional perspectives. Thus, we get closer to the feel of an omniscient narrator, albeit with only one perspective at a time.

Once the creative decision to write in the first-person had been made, I felt it necessary to reflect further on the narratee. Prince states that such an examination is important as it ‘constitutes above all an essential component of any general account of narrative and should be investigated and elaborated as such’.⁵⁶ He goes on to say that all narrative, irrespective of form, ‘presupposes not only [at least] one narrator but also [at least] one narratee’.⁵⁷ Thus there emerges a possible spectrum to explore. Phelan expands on the multitudinous relations between what is written, by whom, and what is read, by whom. For example, there is the physical reader with book or tablet in hand, then the intended ‘authorial audience’ and in this case I could cite feminists as being a group I wish to

⁵³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Global Media, 2006)

<<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/herts/detail.action?docID=3011083>> [accessed 23 October 2025].

⁵⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Virago, 1997), p. 147.

⁵⁵ Hilde Staels, ‘Intertexts of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46.2 (2000), pp. 427–450 (p. 45), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26286207>> [accessed 4 October 2025].

⁵⁶ Gerald Prince, ‘The Narratee Revisited’, *Style*, 19.3, (1985), pp. 299–303 (p. 302), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945558>> [accessed 10 October 2025].

⁵⁷ Prince, p. 302

engage. Finally, there is the one deliberately addressed by the narrator, in this case God, as we shall see.⁵⁸

The first utterance of each chapter in *Oh Dear God!* is an epigraph formed of a biblical quote, a foreshadowing of the chapter content and used as a foil for an ironic statement from the narrator, Christal.

For now we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Except if you are me and can't even find a light switch.

According to Ziolkowski, 'epigraphs are often highly illuminating and contribute to our understanding of the text that follows'.⁵⁹ It therefore seems apposite in a novel about a priest to be quoting scripture, albeit to prompt the ensuing ironic statement. Here, Christal could be engaging in an inner monologue, i.e. literally talking to herself.

The chapter then continues:

Dear God,

Hear my prayer. I'm about to enter your house. But it could be my house too, as incumbent. That's scary. What if I don't feel you here? What if I don't get that vibe? I'm so desperate. I don't want to leave this diocese. I don't have the courage at the moment. I'm so sodding tired from the divorce and my cockwombling ex. I need somewhere to settle for a while. Just be me. Why is that so hard?

In this case, Christal is talking to God as narratee (we are not party to whether this is silent or spoken). This features also in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, where the initial chapters are addressed as prayer to 'Dear God'.⁶⁰ Introducing God as an additional narratee could have been linked through the original chapters to provide interludes and even create the opportunity to explore a separate story arc. Ultimately, this proved repetitive. By relocating the prayers to the start of the chapter, before the 'action' of the day or moment, God as an additional narratee gives Christal the chance to mull over aspects of her life that might otherwise remain hidden.

Finally, each chapter segues to the action narrated by Christal:

The church door gives an eerie creak. My eyes strain to settle to the darkness. It could be beautiful, with a plush carpet and polished pews. Perhaps there are even stunning, Chelsea Flower Show inspired floral arrangements. Hello lovely church, welcome to your new vicar.

⁵⁸ James Phelan, 'Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account', *Narrative Culture*, 4.1 (2017), pp. 89–103 (p.92), doi:10.13110/narrcult.4.1.0089.

⁵⁹ Theodore J. Ziolkowski, 'The Craft(iness) Of Epigraphs', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 76.3 (2015) pp. 519–23 (p. 519), doi:10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.76.3.0519.

⁶⁰ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2017).

At this point the narratee comprises the possibility of an imagined reader on Christal's part as well as the actual reader, plus God, and herself.

Present-tense narration

To quote J.M. Coetzee from *Realism*, which features first person present continuous narration: 'storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away'.⁶¹ One of the devices I employed in striving to achieve that connection is use of the present. As a writer I am drawn to the present tense for its dramatic quality, (perhaps from prior experience writing plays) in that it is almost like action in a film, giving a blow-by-blow account and a slow reveal. As Cohn states, it gives 'the illusion that the speaker recounts his tale as it unfolds, with no foreknowledge of the future'.⁶² Rather than an epic account that sweeps across years and even decades, such as in Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the present can be employed to focus the attention on the minute and even mundane, giving an intimate connection with the narrator, not seemingly separated by the distance of time.⁶³ Here, Christal tells us of the anticipated but dreaded meeting with the Bishop:

I choose this moment to reach for my perfectly proportioned designer china teacup, the kind that has golden twiddly bits painted round the rim with a stupidly small handle. I take what I hope is a delicate sip. But it isn't. It turns into a slurp of music hall proportions. I miss putting the cup back down squarely on the saucer.

This hyper-focused narration articulates further the narrator's emotional state through her awkward negotiation of the physicality of the episode.

This approach of immersing the reader in the present moment of the narrator's experience can also present limitations in story-telling since, according to Frey, 'the logical realm of the narrator is that of the past'.⁶⁴ According to DelConte, use of the present is not a natural choice for narration as it has no 'real-world analogue'. Moreover, it removes any gap between the narrator's experience and their recounting of events, thus, 'it all but prevents retrospective analysis', which he feels is a major part of story-telling.⁶⁵ DelConte does however accede that it can be used in disjunction with the

⁶¹ J.M. Coetzee, 'Realism', *Salmagundi*, 185/186 (2015), pp. 194-220 (p. 205), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43943828>> [accessed 25 April 2024].

⁶² Dorrit Cohn, 'Kafka's Eternal Present: Narrative Tense in 'Ein Landarzt' and Other First-Person Stories', *PMLA*, 83.1 (1968), pp. 144-50 (p. 148), doi.org/10.2307/1261242.

⁶³ Charlotte Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Penguin, 2003).

⁶⁴ John R. Frey, 'Past or Present Tense? A Note on the Technique of Narration', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 46. 2 (1947), pp. 205-08 (p. 205), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27712863>> [accessed 5 October 2025].

⁶⁵ Matthew DelConte, 'A Further Study of Present Tense Narration: The Absentee Narratee and Four-Wall Present Tense in Coetzee's 'Waiting for the Barbarians' and 'Disgrace'', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 37. 3 (2007), pp. 427-46 (p. 429), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304869>> [accessed 8 Oct. 2025].

present action, for example when a narrator uses the present to recount a childhood experience, narrating in the present from the perspective of his seven-year-old self.⁶⁶

In literature over a number of centuries, however, present-tense narration does feature as a literary device. Beckwith notes that ‘Both Collins and Dickens use present-tense narration for enhancing suspense’ in the nineteenth century and indeed such writing was already in use by Richardson in *Clarissa*.⁶⁷

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, Modernism encompassed writing in the turmoil of international conflicts which, according to Wexler, is critiqued for the ‘deliberate obscurity of its form’.⁶⁸ Several of Franz Kafka’s works, written in the first person, for example, use the present exclusively. Unlike *Oh Dear God!* though, Cohn expounds that in Kafka’s writing ‘they are essentially soliloquies describing their speakers trapped in a lasting, insoluble situation’.⁶⁹ By contrast, the protagonist Christal is recounting action as it happens and so the narrative action progresses.

In a positive vein, Neumann expounds the theory that present tense narration brings ‘immediacy and urgency’ to the fore, which are surely attributes of captivating storytelling.⁷⁰

The relatively modern taste for present-tense narratives is documented by Miyahara as flourishing in recent feminist and post-colonial writing, citing numerous examples of such works. The rationale she expounds for this style of authorship is this: ‘it shuts out the official authoritative slant of written-ness [...] in favor of individualistic orality’.⁷¹ In other words, why conform to the norms and conventions of the very systems or patriarchal strictures the author wishes to decry? Cohn agrees, stating that present-tense narration represents a freedom from conventional strictures: ‘the license to tell a story in an idiom that corresponds to no manner of real world, natural discourse’.⁷² A further endorsement is given by feminist theologian Fischer, who advocates that

⁶⁶ Matthew DelConte, ‘A Further Study of Present Tense Narration: The Absentee Narratee and Four-Wall Present Tense in Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ and ‘Disgrace’’, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 37. 3 (2007), pp. 427–46 (p. 427), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304869>> [accessed 8 Oct. 2025].

⁶⁷ Susan Lynn Beckwith and John R. Reed, ‘Impounding the Future: Some Uses of the Present Tense in Dickens and Collins’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 32 (2002), pp. 299–318 (p. 299), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44372061>> [accessed 9 October 2025].

⁶⁸ Joyce Wexler, ‘Modernist writers and publishers’, *Studies in the Novel*, 17.3 (1985), pp. 286–95 (p. 291), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29532350>> [accessed 26 October 2025].

⁶⁹ Dorrit Cohn, ‘Kafka’s Eternal Present: Narrative Tense in ‘Ein Landarzt’ and Other First-Person Stories’, *PMLA*, 83.1 (1968), pp. 144–50 (p.144), doi:10.2307/1261242.

⁷⁰ Anne Waldron Neumann, ‘Escaping the ‘Time of History’? Present Tense and the Occasion of Narration in J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’’, *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 20.1 (1990), pp. 65–86 (p. 66), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225296>> [accessed 8 October 2025].

⁷¹ Kazunari Miyahara, ‘Why Now, Why Then?: Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary British and Commonwealth Novels’, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 39.2 (2009), pp. 241–68 (p. 253), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41427206>> [accessed 8 October 2025].

⁷² Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 105, cited in Matthew DelConte, ‘A Further Study of Present Tense Narration: The Absentee Narratee and Four-Wall Present Tense in Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ and ‘Disgrace’’, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 37.3 (2007), pp. 427–46 (p. 429) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304869>> [accessed 8 October 2025].

‘women need someone who will hear their stories [...] on their own terms’, or in this case, share one.⁷³

Thus, if the protagonist Christal is to have a voice against the institutional behemoth she works for, there is assuredly no better means other than her telling her story in her own time and in her very own way. This is one of the most compelling reasons why Christal persists as a present-tense narrator in a work that seeks to challenge an institution’s misogyny.

First-person narration combined with present-tense narrative

In this research and creative writing, a key focus has been an examination of ways in which first-person narration limits the protagonist Christal and the characters in the world around her. Coupled with the present tense, this could, on the surface of it, constitute a restricted vehicle for telling the story. Indeed, the technical challenge here is to sustain a whole novel in the present tense. For Cohn, ‘its effectiveness quickly wears off when used too extensively’.⁷⁴

There are, however, ways of mitigating this by employing other literary devices to enrich the narrative, such as reminiscence, speculation and imagination. In *The Book of Evidence*, John Banville’s protagonist uses his imagination: ‘I always picture, I’m not sure why, that strip of shabby grass and one tree that I can glimpse from my window’.⁷⁵ This attempt to connect with nature, no matter how dried up and sparse, is in stark contrast to a harsh statement in the preceding sentence on how the protagonist views his fellow inmates. We now have a person of sensitivity or perhaps a psychopath. Whatever the case, our view of the protagonist has expanded.

Steven Galloway’s *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, recounted in the third person and present tense, uses speculation as a means of broadening the picture. The character of Kenan, in the midst of war-torn Sarajevo, tries to delude himself that it is a normal day and imagines that he could take lunch with a co-worker or sit outside in a park over coffee: ‘He might tease his friend Goran, who is, inexplicably, a fan of Chelsea Football Club, about a recent loss’.⁷⁶ None of this will come to fruition but it tells us much about Kenan in a few simple sentences: he is amiable and affable, takes breaks from work, likes coffee and the open air, likes football and ribbing his friend. From the character oppressed by his daily war routine of fetching water in canisters and dodging bullets, we now have a glimpse of him in an entirely different light.

The use of reminiscence features in several novels I have examined to expand the timeframes in this form of narrative. For example, again in *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, the

⁷³ Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well*, (SPCK, 1992), p. 7.

⁷⁴ Dorrit Cohn, ‘Kafka’s Eternal Present: Narrative Tense in ‘Ein Landarzt’ and Other First-Person Stories’, *PMLA*, 83.1 (1968), pp. 144–50 (p. 147), doi:10.2307/1261242.

⁷⁵ John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (Minerva, 1990), p. 7.

⁷⁶ Steven Galloway, *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (Atlantic Books, 2008), p. 39.

character of Arrow remembers walking down the street she is currently on, hand-in-hand with her grandmother, wanting an ice-cream: 'When her grandmother said no, Arrow let go of her hand and refused to continue'.⁷⁷ The author is able to tell us succinctly of her character over decades as opposed to just the present. This passage also continues thereafter to speculation in the present: 'Arrow wonders, as this memory fades, what she would give up for a scoop of that ice cream today. All the money she has? Certainly. Her rifle? Maybe'.⁷⁸

Thus, in *Oh Dear God!*, Christal is watching her belongings being unloaded from a removal van and her friend is commenting on how much she owns. This allows for a moment of reflection and a useful expansion on the difficulties in her marriage:

That's just it. I have too much stuff. Baggage from nearly 30 years of marriage. Boxes too painful to look inside, like Pandora's. Once opened I might not be able to close them again. [...] 'What time did you get in then?' was always the silent question on my lips. Had he actually come home or spent most of the night somewhere else?

A further example has been inserted when Christal is being admonished by her bishop:

My mind drifts back to the routine scan, the kind you get when you hit a certain age.

'You have polycystic breasts,' the doctor said.

'Polycystic?' I repeated, blankly.

'You're lumpy. What are you now? Over fifty? It's not malignant. But you'll need a strong antibiotic, just to be on the safe side.' So there is an unsafe side, I thought, as I stared at the tatty NHS ceiling and wished his prodding hands away.

The reminiscence and speculation in *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, alongside the use of imagination of *The Book of Evidence*, has informed expansion in *Oh Dear God!*, helping to underpin and sustain the first-person present-tense narrative.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Oh Dear God!* explores the reversal of the protagonist's fortunes, that of the rural church to which she ministers and the unifying force of a tragedy on the surrounding village community. The rural dwellers unite in the context of a dire emergency which, had hypocrisy, social prejudice and even fear not abounded, might never have transpired.

⁷⁷ Steven Galloway, *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (Atlantic Books, 2008), p. 81.

⁷⁸ Galloway, p. 82.

An examination of the role of women clergy in the CofE, some thirty years after their first ordinations shows a landscape where women are still outnumbered by male colleagues two to one in stipendiary (paid) roles. In addition, parishes can officially refuse to foster or accommodate women's ministry, by virtue of exceptions to equality laws in the secular world. In particular, women are disproportionately engaged in rural ministry, a sphere of declining churches.

Oh Dear God! is intended to entertain but at the same time it is used as a vehicle to place social and institutional injustice under scrutiny in an accessible form, namely satire.

In portraying a woman Church of England priest as protagonist, I opted for the use of first-person narration. The merits of giving the illusion of an intimate relationship with the narratee are set against the unreliability of the narrator. The use of the present tense can create a sense of immediacy and excitement but coupled with first-person narration has the disadvantage of restricting what can be imparted. This necessitates recourse to other literary devices in order to give a fuller narrative. Robust evidence for more prevalent use of present-tense narration in post-colonial and feminist writing suggests a suitably anti-establishment voice for the down-trodden protagonist Christal.

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