
Opening Extract from...

A Perfectly Good Man

Written by Patrick Gale

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For Aidan Hicks

All perfection in this life hath some
imperfection bound up with it; and no
knowledge of ours is without some darkness.

THOMAS À KEMPIS, *De Imitatione Christi*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The reader is asked to remember that what follows is neither journalism nor history but a work of fiction. The novel's principal settings and church parishes are real ones near my own home but their inhabitants, in particular the priest in their midst, are entirely imaginary. Where such true events as the March for Geevor are included, I have made use of the novelist's prerogative to embroider on the facts for the low purpose of entertainment.

My text quotes from Dorothy Sayers's radio play, *The Man Born to be King*, with the permission of the Sayers Estate, and from U.A. Fanthorpe's poem 'Atlas', with kind permission from Dr Rosie Bailey.

PG

LENNY AT 20

He had the heating on because immobility made him cold. The flat was recently built. Its windows and doors were all double-glazed but there was a keen easterly that had found a chink in one of the seals around the picture window and set up a wail. The whole flat was keening.

He was writing neat drafts of difficult letters to his mother and fiancée. Ex-fiancée. He kept getting the shakes, which spoiled his attempt at neat handwriting, and the unearthly noise was jangling his thoughts as effectively as a crying baby or a whining dog. He tossed down his pen and wheeled his chair to the window where he killed the noise by opening it a little. At once different sounds filled the room: traffic from the Ross Bridge, seagulls from the rooftops, the shouts of some hooded boys jumping their skateboards on and off a ledge in a corner of the harbour car park, one dog barking at another from the back of a pick-up.

It was sunny out but clean. Crisp. He liked that. With the boiler on and a window open he would be wasting fuel, *heating outside*, as his mother put it.

Sure enough, minutes after he wheeled himself back to the table and resumed writing, he heard the boiler fire up. There was a sudden blare of talking as Dilys next door, who was deaf, turned her television on. She watched the same programmes every day. As far as he could tell he was

the only resident in the block who wasn't over seventy. He had been there three months now. When a vacancy came up and the council offered it to him, he had seized the chance, spurred on, he was sure, by the grotesque local hero stories in *The Cornishman*.

Away from Pendeen and his mother's stifling concern, given the opportunity to build an independent life for himself in town, where he needed nobody's help to do anything, he was convinced that things would improve. The change of scene, the view, the independence had indeed all brought relief. The problem had moved house with him, of course. If anything it had been heightened. The flat was ingeniously perfect for his needs: a gentle ramp to the front door, all on the level within, and swings to help himself into bed and into the shower. Tables, work surfaces, fridge and cooker, clothes storage were all modified to be usable from a sitting position. There was even a full-length mirror in the hall so that he could check before he went out that, yes, he looked fine, like a perfectly unremarkable twenty-year-old who just happened to be in a wheelchair. The only things out of his reach were the pictures his mother had hung for him – a reproduction of a fiery Rachel Kelly painting he had always liked and a framed enlargement of a photograph he had taken of a sunset at Sennen Cove. This had hung on his bedroom wall ever since he won a prize for it at school and he had agreed without thinking when his mother assumed he would want to take it with him. But now it embarrassed him and was the last thing he needed when trying to muster the motivation to haul himself, literally, out of bed. What had once filled him with teenage pride now reminded him of the motivational posters

first on the walls at school and then in the rooms of the rehabilitation centre he had religiously attended. He recalled with particular rancour an image of a soaring seagull with a quotation from Virgil: 'They can because they think they can!'

It didn't matter now. Nothing especially mattered. Unless, of course, he had been ripped off, like the time he had bought Ecstasy tablets that had turned out to be little more than overpriced remodelled Aspirin. He finished the second letter, sealed it and set it beside the first. He had never been comfortable stringing sentences together, still less using a pen, but somehow, as with thank-you letters, a pen had seemed called for. He had been obliged to buy paper and envelopes, which, like the open window on a heated room, seemed wasteful. Some would think it sad that he could think of only two people who mattered enough to him to merit a letter. There were others, of course, but these were the two people who needed to understand. His rugby friends had all pulled together at first, just as one would expect from team players. They had all tried so hard to do and say the right thing but none of them quite arrived at the point of managing to think it, so as to make their words and gestures more than that.

People were gathering on the car park. He saw some children in matching white tee-shirts running with paper fish fluttering on long lengths of bamboo above their heads, and he remembered it was Golowan; local schools and bands were assembling for the annual Mazey Day parade up Market Jew Street.

He checked the time. There was still an hour to go. He wheeled himself over to the kitchen drawer where he had

stashed the two deliveries – two small, innocuous, brown, padded envelopes. One from Mexico contained a small polystyrene carton protecting what the label claimed to be veterinary Nembutal. (Knowing no corruptible doctors, vets or nurses, he had found it impossible to source the drug in the UK.) The other, posted within England, bought from an online specialist, was a simple barbiturate-testing kit. He had read the instructions already but read them again now because since the accident he had become that kind of person, a careful reader of warnings and waiter for lights, a measure-twice-cut-once sort of man.

The kit consisted of a tiny translucent plastic case which opened to reveal three small syringes and three tiny, clinical containers of liquid, a mixing vial and instructions. Following the instructions, he carefully used one of the syringes to draw just one millilitre of the putative Nembutal through its sterile seal. He began to shake again – something else that often happened since his accident – and he had to set the syringe down on the table for a second or two to let his hands relax. He breathed deeply twice and watched a lorry edge by, a local steel band mounted on its decorated trailer. Then he took up the syringe again and in a single confident movement added its contents to the vial. Then he did the same, adding to the Nembutal a quantity of one of the containers. Then he drew up the second liquid into a syringe.

'Please,' he thought. 'Please, (just this once)' and he squirted its contents into the mixing vial. At once the testing solution turned a bright, satisfying blue. He felt himself smiling honestly for the first time in weeks. 'Bad news, mate,' he said out loud. 'You're pregnant.'

Finally he took the third syringe, drew up the third liquid and added it to the rest. Nothing happened. No change. No diminishing of the intense, hope-laden blue. He screwed the cap back on the vial and gave it a shake to be sure. Still blue. 'Still pregnant,' he murmured.

Relief stole over him. He had searched and searched online and found only impossible, unconvincing websites offering the drug without prescription, alongside a lurid buffet of antidepressants and sex-enhancers. Blatant scammers were everywhere as were hysterical-sounding victims desperate to expose them.

His salvation had arrived unexpectedly in the course of a purgatorial night out with old friends from the rugby club. It was somebody's stag night. Things had started silly and were sure to get sillier and a rowdy pub was no fun when your head was at the height of everyone else's arse and jokers kept pushing your wheelchair about. Pretending to be staying outside for a smoke as they arrived at the Swordfish, the third pub of the evening, he scored some skunk off a raspy-voiced old hippy to help him cope. The hippy asked outright how he came to be in the chair and Lenny soon found himself matching bluntness with bluntness and confessing the trouble he'd been having finding a trustworthy source of suicide drugs online.

'Nembutal,' the hippy had sighed with welcome candour. 'The paralytic's pal. No problem. I've got a woman friend in Puerto Vallarta. She can get you the kind for dogs. You'll need 100 mil. Yeah. 100 mil and a pause for thought. You go back inside, my friend, and I'll send her a text and let you know.'

He murmured a price in Lenny's ear twenty minutes later as he unexpectedly passed him a drink in the crowd. It seemed worryingly cheap, like the sex he had been offered in Amsterdam, and he had every expectation that the drug would have been diluted to inefficacy or lost its power with age, both of which the chatter on the suicide forums told him could happen.

But no. It was real and full of kindly force.

He needed to get out. Even with the window ajar, the little bottle's potency seemed to be drawing all the oxygen from the flat.

He threw the testing kit into the bin, tucked the Nembutal back in the fridge then hoisted himself onto the loo because excitement was getting to him and he needed to piss.

After the accident he had returned to work at the same Penzance chemist's that had taken him on as a dispensing assistant after school. The grand scheme – derailed by the accident, of course – was to work there, gaining useful experience while he retook his maths and chemistry A-levels with a view to studying pharmacy at university. During the previous day's shift, he had stolen from his employers for the first time, pocketing the dose of prescription-only anti-emetic he now swallowed with a gulp of juice straight from the carton. He wanted to be sure he didn't throw up the precious Nembutal when the time came.

He took the anti-emetic's packaging with him to throw into a bin on the prom; he didn't want anyone at work to get into trouble on his account and had even slipped the money for it into the till in the hope the theft wouldn't be

detected. As he pulled the door locked behind him he remembered afresh that he was the only resident, on his floor at least, who had not bothered to prettify the entrance to his flat. All the others, all his elderly neighbours, had planted window boxes or hung wind chimes or even set out garden gnomes or resin meerkats. Everyone but him had done something to mark out their small share of walkway as their own.

Two of the residents whom he saw every day but whose names he had yet to learn had met by the entrance ramp and paused to chat. They watched him with approval.

'Morning, Lenny. Off to watch the parade?'

'That's right,' he told them, although he wasn't. 'Thought I might as well.'

'Good lad,' said the other.

And as he wheeled away from them he knew they would be looking after him and saying pity or waste just as they would over a nice young man who turned out to be gay or a nice young couple whose baby turned out to be autistic. 'Shame,' they'd say, then sigh, then move the conversation on because there was nothing to be done. 'You having that lamb thing you bought, or the chicken?'

He followed the pavement around to the seafront but then, instead of turning left to where the marchers and bands, the fish, mermaids and starfish were preparing to parade up the hill, he turned right and headed away from them, over the Ross Bridge, past the Scillonian dock, around the corner, where the funfair had been set up and the traffic diverted, and onto the promenade.

Provided one could cross the road and find an access point onto the pavement unblocked by thoughtlessly

parked cars, it was a good place to exercise, he had discovered. The pavement was broad so that he could pause if he wanted to without feeling he was getting in people's way and there was always plenty of life along there: rollerbladers and skateboarders, dog-walkers, people jogging or pushing babies, or simply sitting on benches or leaning on the railings to watch the sea and one another.

He knew this should change his mind. In the Hollywood version of his story he would see a happy old couple or a beautiful girl, or be asked directions by an elegant woman or catch a ball for an endearingly plain child and be charmed into lingering, seduced by life. As it was, he wheeled himself along the front with no such significant encounter. Sunshine was dazzling on the sea, the brightly coloured banners cracked and flapped in the breeze. Nobody asked him directions or tossed him a hope-restoring ball. The only eyes that met his gaze were those of dogs, and of children in pushchairs, fascinated to find an adult on their level and unashamed of staring.

He crossed the road when he neared the Lugger and wheeled up to Captain's to buy chips, which he took back to the front. They were perfect chips, crisp, hot and salty, and he ate them with slow relish so that his pleasure in the taste of them and his pleasure in the scene around him – water, people, dogs, life – became indistinguishable. He ate carefully. He had learnt the hard way that seagulls registered the wheelchair rather than the adult in it and read him as an overgrown and helpless child, easy to plunder. He had lost the best part of a pasty and suffered a nasty peck to the back of one hand before he learnt to eat with his food tucked beneath a jacket or coat.

As he wheeled himself homewards, the Mazey Day parade started off with a cacophony of steel drums, pipes, school bands and even what sounded like bagpipes and the synchronized chants and whooping of cheerleaders. As he came back over the Ross Bridge he saw the last of a squadron of drum majorettes, in white calf boots and rumpled pink satin, heading round the corner near the station.

It was one of several local festivals that had grown up in his lifetime, cheerful traditions confected to promote tourism and perhaps imbue a pride in all things Cornish. It meant no more to him than the dual-language English-Cornish signs that had begun to appear about the place, but perhaps future Cornish children would feel differently.

He saw Father Barnaby getting out of his impossibly old Rover up ahead and joining the crowd on the prom. He was all in black – a human crow amid the holiday crowd. Lenny had teased him once, about always wearing black, and Father Barnaby had joked that always wearing the same meant one less thing to decide in the mornings. In fact he did wear civilian clothes occasionally – he had a weakness for black, no-label jeans – but he looked strange in them and vulnerable, like an habitual glasses-wearer when he took his glasses off to clean them.

Lenny tailed him for a few minutes, noting how people made way for him, either because of his height or clerical dress, and how many of them stared or even flinched then let out nervous smiles. But then Lenny was held up by a double pushchair with a dog at its side and lost sight of him. It was probably better that way. If Father Barnaby had spotted him he would have offered to push the wheelchair and Lenny would have felt doubly exposed.

Predictably he was in conversation with one of the neighbours as Lenny approached the ramp. On a sunny day like this there was always one or another of them out on the walkway and priests were always good for a chat. Kitty had found him. Kitty who had the foul-mouthed, second-hand mynah bird that so embarrassed her. And now here she was, a schoolboy joke made flesh, all puffed up and aglow from the pleasure of passing the time of day with a handsome vicar. Tense, though, in case he wanted to step inside and heard her bird.

Barnaby was no idler. Lenny was counting on that. His focus on the matter in hand was always total. Sure enough, the moment he spotted Lenny, he broke off chatting.

'Here's the man I came to see. Goodbye – sorry. I don't know your name.'

'Kitty,' she said, preening like a ten-year-old. 'Kitty Arnold.'

'Goodbye Kitty.'

He didn't offer to help, as Lenny had been dreading, but simply strode forward and shook him by the hand. 'Good to see you,' he said.

'Sorry I'm late,' Lenny began, leading the way to his door.

'You're bang on time. I was early. I'd forgotten about Golowan when we spoke and I thought I'd never be able to park but I got lucky.'

'I know. I saw you.'

'You saw me?'

'You don't exactly blend in, dressed like that.' Lenny had his mother's candour. He saw Father Barnaby flinch. 'It's not just the dog collar,' he added. 'You're tall. Sit down. Can I get you anything?'

'A glass of water would be good.'

Perfect. Lenny wheeled into the kitchen, poured him a glass of water and tipped his own drink into a second glass.

'Thank you.' Barnaby took his water and raised it. 'Cheers.' He drank, looked around him. 'It's nice,' he said. 'You've settled in?'

Lenny nodded. This was proving harder than he had imagined.

'It must be a relief to be on your own. Your mum worries and that can be …'

'Yeah.'

Barnaby stopped talking and let silence fall between them. He looked Lenny directly in the face. Lenny met his gaze for a few seconds then glanced away and fiddled with his glass. He remembered Barnaby as handsomer – Hollywood cowboy handsome – perhaps because of all he represented. In the flesh his jaw was weaker, his nose smaller than in Lenny's memory. But his pale grey eyes had a startling intensity that was unnerving at close range.

'How can I help you, Lenny?' he asked at last.

'I've not been a very … Does it matter that I never go to church these days?'

'It does if it makes you unhappy. Does it?'

'Not really. But … Do you pray for us? The people that don't show up?'

'Yes, but that's a pretty impersonal prayer. I pray for you specifically.'

'Do you?'

'Do you mind?'

'No,' Lenny said, 'but why?'

'Lenny! Obviously I've been praying for you ever since your accident and during the operations and so on but … Do you need me to pray for you now for a specific reason?'

Lenny forced himself to meet Barnaby's stare. 'I'm going to die,' he told him.

'We're all going to die. Does dying frighten you?'

'I mean I'm going to kill myself.'

'You can't.'

'Fucking can. Sorry.'

'That's all right. Why?'

'Isn't it obvious? Don't worry. I'm not depressed or mad or anything. I know exactly what I'm doing. It's a decision, that's all. My life, my death.'

'Lenny, your hands are shaking.'

Instinctively Lenny clasped his hands onto his useless knees to hold them still. 'That's because I haven't told anyone this. Not my mum. Not …'

'Not Amy?'

'Certainly not Amy. Jesus! Sorry.'

'That's quite all right.'

'I just can't do this, OK? Everyone has been brilliant – the boys at the club, the people at work, the council, the physios, the old bats in this place. But I can't do it. I mean look around you. No books. Not even a few. I don't have – what did you call them that time? – inner resources. I know you think I just have to wait and they'll well up in me like a bath but they won't. I've always been a doer, a player. I did OK at school and college but I hate indoors. Working in a dispensary, it's just a job. I lived for the nights out with Amy and practice and matches and … If I stay here like this I'm going to turn into some bitter old fuck-up

downloading porn and taking pictures of girls who pass the window there …'

Barnaby winced: not as cool as he liked to make out.

'Lenny, I'm so sorry. You should have said you needed help.'

'Yes, well, everyone was being so nice.'

'It'll pass. You'll find new things. New things will enter your life and change it.'

'They already did. They're called incontinence pads.'

'Christ!'

'You swore!'

'Lenny, please. Give life a chance. I've seen lesser men than you work through things like this. When the mines were still open here the accidents could be—'

'I'm never going to run or walk or surf again. I'm never going to score another try again. Or fuck.'

'They kept you a place at the chemist's, didn't they?'

'Oh yeah. They've even installed a ramp so I can get up high enough to see over the counter. But I won't be able to reach the higher shelves so there'll always have to be another dispensing assistant on duty with me. It's charity. It's making allowances. I know they mean well but I don't want that.'

'Please, Len. Think of your mum.'

'I am thinking of her …'

'And Amy. You've upset her dreadfully already. This'll devastate her.'

'Well she'll get over it. I had to push her away. I couldn't let her martyr herself.'

'But if you'd been married already?'

'I'd have divorced her.'