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Opening Extract from...

Reunion

Written by Thomas Anthony Ellis

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Chapter I

Even though he would never know of it, today Padraig Skelly was about to capture a moment that would begin one of Orplow's finest tragedies. Known as Parti to his friends, the man was nothing if not conservative. Having lived in the small town of Orplow for his entire life, he prided himself on his ignorance of the world outside. Even his very first memory was that of his late father, proud and stiff in stature, walking him through the wild flowered meadows and telling him that everything that he would ever need could be found within the tranquil confines of the town walls. The memory always brought back the sweet medicinal scent of the wild blue flowers cast upon the sea front breeze that salted his face as he had looked out onto the coast from the meadow's head. His father had held his hand tightly that day as they stood bearing witness to the commanding tide of the Irish Sea – as if to anchor his son to the very earth on which he stood.

Sixty years on and Parti had not moved a muscle. Time had relaxed his once sporting physique and now offered the sight of an elderly gentleman bent almost completely double. Entirely flat-backed, Parti had to raise his neck up to its very limit just to look ahead of himself. Through school-ground whispers and sniggers, the local children had cruelly dubbed him 'Farty Parti', but never to his face, regardless of how constantly constipated he looked. The steady strain upon his back had forced Parti to adopt a permanent scowl and toothy grimace and, whenever he would waddle by, even the parents would joke that one of the gargoyles from the local church had sprung to life.

However, unbeknown to Parti, this was to be the final day of his life. Later this evening, a fatal seizure would grip him while he was saying his nightly prayers. Yet, this morning was about new beginnings, and it held an activity that had become somewhat of an annual task for Parti. Coming from a wealthy family, Parti had been passed his late father's pride and joy; his Daguerreotype camera. It was the envy of every household in the town. Now looking tired from almost 40 years of service, the leathered accordion like camera was being prepared for what would be its final picture.

Leaving his cottage, Parti locked the front door to his resting place and set about town. A small wooden placard with the legend 'Dunromin' clunked against the door as it closed. Adjusting his stance, Parti could feel the weight of the camera resting heavily in its satchel. Slumped over Parti's retiring shoulders, his back tabled the satchel while both of his hands

grasped its thick leather strap. He could feel the contents of the bag digging into his side; the roll of filter paper, cleaning cloth and the polished sheet of silver on which the image would be developed, all clunked into his ribs. However, there was no room for the tripod. Awkwardly, this found its place under Parti's right armpit and across his chest – the top of which occasionally blasted Parti in the face whenever he was to over-step his staggered stride.

Thankfully, the walk into town was a casual one and not too far. Finding his feet upon the first road from his cottage, Parti waddled past the grand Darby estate. This country manor was home to Raegan Darby, the town's wealthiest landowner and descendant of a protestant family of English tenant farmers. With an astute sense for business, Raegan Darby had seized on the opportunities afforded by capitalist farming and the arrival of enclosure. Watching his lesser-shrewd peers outlive their leases on their farms – Raegan Darby offered them a self-nourishing lifeline. Having bought the land from right under their noses, he gifted the onetime landowners the chance to work the land as an employee of the Darby Empire. Today he could be seen sat next to his handsome wife Fiona on the porch of their manor house, while three bounding great danes enjoyed the lush and lavish land before them.

The Darby land itself reached far and wide, grasping the pebbled shores of Lake Doriend. Dutifully, the sun seemed to rise and set upon this great lake. Each compulsive season of the year brought with it a timely frame to the shores. And Parti had enjoyed them all. The spirited spring brought life to the lake as woodland creatures gathered and bathed. In summer, the bright dandelions burst from their buds, crowning the lake gloriously. In turn the roaring autumn winds would appear but a breeze upon the still lake's surface, while the harsh screaming winters froze the land and glazed the lake with a lick of frost.

This day was a surprisingly warm September morning. The dirt tracks into town had a spring-full bounce to them. The dust from the tracks completely masked Parti's scurrying feet, giving the impression that he was being carried into town on a tiny sandstorm. Occasionally, he would stop and rest up the sturdy stone walls that framed the fields of the town.

Looking up, or straight ahead for most people, Parti could see the church spire. It pierced the horizon, stretching towards the sky without a single cloud to shroud it. The church was the centrepiece to the town, and stood as such to the many lives that passed through it. Parti himself had been baptised, christened and confirmed in the church of St Peter. He had also married and buried his late wife in the church grounds, some 50 years between. And despite the death that the walls housed, the church remained the heartbeat of Orplow. Every Sunday, the people would flock to hear the teachings of Father Daniel; forever grateful to Lord for their salvation.

But salvation always carried a cost. The great famine, or the fungus famine as the townspeople called it, lasted three hopeless harvests from 1845 to 1848. Orplow had prided itself on being self-sufficient, but even the occupants of this town felt the famine's fatal effects. Forced to live on subsistence, people grew accustom to the face of hunger. However, for those few who were wretchedly poor and already etching out a living before the famine struck, it was sadly more than just the apples of the earth that were soon rotting within the fruitless ground.

Now, stood at the church gates, Parti could practically feel the pulse of the town. The bells on the bicycles of early morning commuters jingled; friendly voices combined into one indecipherable chorus; while children could be heard laughing and at play. Parti had always loved this town and, through his photographs, Parti had always strived to capture the beauty of it. His sole function was to show how Orplow worked; to illustrate how the people of

Orplow lived, and what threaded their lives together. His favourite time of the day was the dawn. For him, the mornings brought with them a thrust of life; the earliest opportunity for fates to collide and paths to be taken. And yet, despite years of trying, Parti had never found that one moment that would capture this. That is, not until today. He had always been a believer that a caged bird could never be seen to fly, and so felt his pictures were always doomed to fail. But today was a day for new beginnings, and fate was set to detain the detail that Parti had always desired. Yet, he would never live to know just how doomed the detail was.

The laughter of children was Parti's compass today for he was heading to the local primary school. This was named after the local church of St Peter, but was commonly referred to as Eden. This was mainly down to Father Daniel's proud proclamation that it was within the walls of the school that every child gets their first bite at the apple of Catholicism. Befittingly, the part of the dogged snake was played by the school's own Ms Flannery Ryann. Her core principle was that it was only through sin that people could then go boldly from it. Therefore, her shrewd eye for discipline was sharp if not original.

Being the headmistress to the only dual religion school in the county, Ms Flannery Ryann had quite a juggling act on her harsh hands. With the small population of Protestants in Orplow failing to even fill a single class – let alone justify a whole school – Eden had encouraged their enrolment into the town's Roman Catholic School. Only a mere tenth of the school's pupils were protestant, but it still made national headlines, as the school was seen to be trying to bridge the gap between the divide.

Originally constructed in 1845, the school had been greatly expanded in 1885. This was largely funded by the charitable Raegan Darby when his first child took to the school. The extension allowed the population of pupils to rise to 220; nearly the entire child population of the town. However, with free education not due to hit London until 1891, families still had to find the means to pay for the weekly tuition. Unfortunately, as a slave to its remoteness, Orplow would not enjoy free education for a further 10 years after that of England's capital. Remarkably, Raegan Darby kindly agreed to cover the cost of every child that came from the family of one of his employees. However, he flatly refused to fund those who were outside of his provincial grasp.

But today, the school was in someone else's grip. With crimson hair pulled so tight it looked almost raven black, Ms Flannery Ryann cut a lean, sharp figure. She moved like violence and her half rimmed glasses rested precariously on the tip of her sharp Roman nose. Her eyes were always tunnelled, and if they were to ever lock onto you it felt like the reckoning itself had arrived. Or so the children were made to feel. For among the adults, there was a more intriguing eye cast upon this teacher. It was rumoured that Ms Ryann – though stern and cold in her public display – was once quite the firecracker in the bedroom. However, no known male had stepped forward to confirm this just yet.

Away from the anecdotal adults, today Ms Ryann was putting the children through their paces. The class of 1894 had already shown that they were going to be a handful; the young girls skipped and giggled together, keeping their distance from the boys who huddled and plotted behind them.

'Come on children, get together,' said Ms Ryann. Her voice was shrill and piercing. Her order greeted with abiding silence. The playground froze for a second before the rushing of feet flocked towards what called them. Each child raced as if to come last was rewarded by nothing more than an unimaginable torture. And quite rightly, it was.

Ms Ryann's long stretched, pale fingers clipped the ear of the young chubby brown haired boy who was last to pass her. His ear throbbed as he walked down the line to stand at the back of the boy's queue. Both sexes were in single file and stood either side of Ms Ryann as she now led her little militia through the playground. Both the boys and girls were ordered to stare straight ahead and march towards the school gates. A single word from either would be met with the sharpest scowl you could possibly imagine, swiftly chased by a decree of complete silence for the remainder of the day.

'Right this way, children. Not a peep, please.' Ms Ryann marched ahead. Her shoulders were stiff and her arms swung like fierce pendulums. The girls were uniformed, mirroring her movements exactly. However, the boys were not so precise. One freckled faced boy in particular was turning to the chubby boy with the red ear in an attempt to make his soon-to-be best friend laugh. Embellishing the movements of his mentor, he swung his shoulders in a way to seductively shake his imaginary bosom. Yet, it had not gone unnoticed, and he was to spend the next week nursing his spanked cheeks while cleaning the chalkboard during every break time.

Apart from the sprog-march, the school was still today. The dusty red-bricked building was calm and settled inside. It was a tradition to open the school a day early for the first year infants; it allowed them to become familiar with the surroundings. It also allowed for the school to go through the formalities of registration and of course the famed school picture.

The tight corridors of Eden were adorned with dozens of these pictures; all framed magnificently as every child sat proudly and faced the front. Each picture was flawless in its duplicity and consistency – each year mirroring the last if not for the different faces within them. Often parents would whisper of the irksome feeling of a thousand bright eyes following them as they passed through the school corridors. Today was to be no exception. The class of 1894 were about to have their very first school picture taken. And it was to be the pride and joy of all visiting parents throughout the years. Given the welcoming nature of Eden, the school portrait depicted a class pure in its diversity – as children from various backgrounds were seen sat side-by-side. Sadly for some, it was the only time that every child was seen as equal in the town of Orplow.

The class divide within the town was as clear as day and night, and every child soon took their place within it once their education was complete. Very few would ever get a chance to break through the class barrier and change their fortune. If seen to from the lower tier, then even the brightest of brains would be put to work as soon as their hands were strong enough, while those of the upper tier would fill the positions forged for them by their fathers.

However, today was different. Today was a time for equality. Every boy had on their uniform – reminiscent of the Eton suit, with broad white collared shirts, grey cotton short pants and stunted jackets known scornfully as bum-freezers. Every girl, on the other hand, had on a white blouse topped by an ironing board like grey pinafore. And both sexes had knee high white socks and dark sandals.

Positioned directly in front of the main doors, the class was finally in place. Arched above their heads, engraved into the stone were the words 'St Peter's Roman Catholic School'. The letters appeared more golden today as the sun beamed proudly on the school's face. Beneath the bright light, the children squinted as they faced their mistress.

Scuttling behind her, Ms Ryann heard Parti approaching before she saw him. Riding through the gates on a miniature blanket of sand, his curses and 'fecks' were thankfully muffled by the clattering of the tripod in his arms. She had always had a soft spot for the man. His

outlook had conflicted with hers so drastically that she adored him for it. She was regimented and in order, while he appeared to just fumble through life and somehow make a success of it. A true perfectionist at heart, she had always taken little pleasure in anything other than greatness. Yet, her piercing eyes had grown green when she realised that, unadorned by scepticism, Parti could find great pleasure in the little things that life afforded. However, despite her knowing her feelings to be true, it was more likely that the heel of her shoe would meet with the cheeks of his behind before their two hearts would ever entwine. Parti was a widower after all, and he was loudly committed to his late wife. Ms Ryann on the other hand had never married nor enjoyed the pleasures of a married man, despite the whisperings of the townspeople. And so, she guessed that it would simply be put down to one of the town's many tragedies.

'Morning Ms,' shouted Parti breathlessly. 'Where do you want me?'

If a wry smile crossed her face, Parti didn't see it. Instead, he stood facing his boots; his right-hand outstretched, propping him up against the school gates. The satchel weighed heavy in his committed hand – as the strap began to slip through his sweaty palm. He pushed himself from the wall and grasped the strap with both hands as his legs steadied beneath him. Staggering slightly, Parti eventually made his way towards Ms Ryann. She was after all his biggest distraction in life since the passing of his wife. And on the brief occasions when they had met, Parti had always wanted to tell her how he had felt. But his commitment to the church, and his love for his late wife, had always stolen his tongue.

'Over here please, Mr Skelly,' said Ms Ryann. 'By my side, please'. Her tone of authority always put life into his old legs and Parti forced himself forward.

Stepping forward, he did not know whether it was the blinding pain or the crippling embarrassment that he felt first, as his overzealous stride had brought the tip of the tripod he carried to crash directly into his forlorn face. Like a man bent over in the stocks, he had to embrace the impact totally and suffer the subsequent jitters of the crowd.

The giggles of the children were allowed to play out for an extended second for even Ms Ryann needed a moment to compose herself and stifle her laughter before turning and silencing her class with a single signature stare. Meanwhile, Parti's face was flush and his cheek numb and swollen. He placed his satchel on the ground and turned his back to the children to save his humiliation further. His posture, however, proved too inviting and the boy with freckles doubled his punishment by pursing his lips and blowing a silence shattering raspberry. Even his mother-melting puppy-dog eyes could not thaw Ms Ryann, and her frosty fury was as blistering as Parti's cracked cheek. Whipping out her arm, her sharp cold hand snapped in the air and left a bright red print on the boy's exposed legs. The second slap that had contacted with his buttocks had now made it unbearable to sit still.

With the sun beating down, the heavens began to shine their glory upon the school. The white light was brighter than any Parti could ever remember seeing before. He felt like he had just walked out of the darkest depths of a cave and straight into daylight, as his eyes struggled to adjust to it. He tried in vain to block the blur by squinting. Blinkered, he began to set up his camera. Fortunately, he could do this blindfolded and in the dark, having memorised every component by heart. Having cleaned them over a thousand times, Parti could identify each part by weight if not by shape alone. Once in position, he cleaned the lens once more with his dust cloth and removed the silver plate from the satchel. The sunlight skimmed across the silver plate.

Turning the camera towards the children, Parti saw the usual response. On any other occasion many would become more animated at the sight of this contraption. And the rest would just become more reserved. However, every child in Orplow had been told of the importance of this very moment since the first instance that they could listen. Well versed and over rehearsed, they knew their role and would play their part perfectly. For if not, then Ms Ryann was in place to orchestrate. Overlooking her class, she stood by Parti's side.

'Sit up straight; backs arched; hands on laps.' She barked orders as she observed the class for a final time, before taking her position in the front row at the centre of the children. Boys were sitting straight to her right, and the girls sat neatly to her left. Confident they were all in order, Ms Ryann trusted Parti completely to ensure that they would not move or falter. He had been the only school photographer since the school had first opened and had always gotten it right. His photographs had become as much a part of the institution as the walls themselves. To many, they were the very keystone to the building itself.

Parti held his breath. He had gotten it right countless times before; every picture had been flawless in its design. However, today something felt different. Parti could not see properly. The sunlight was bouncing off his lens brighter than ever and he struggled to make out every child that it framed. Due to its design, the camera only afforded one chance to take the picture, and Parti prided himself on his accuracy. Yet at this precise moment, holding the trigger blindly, he prayed that Ms Ryann had got it right. Filling his shallow lungs and steadying his shaking arm, Padraig Skelly clicked the button and took his final ever picture.

It would not be until later that evening – once the picture had been developed – that Parti would find that every child befitted the tradition. Every child, that is, except two. Across the class, two children gazed into each other's eyes for the very first time; framed for an eternity and already breaking the rules in their very first encounter. The names of these children were Michael and Grace.

Chapter 2

The most beautiful day in 1889 proved to be the worst day of Abigail Alpin's life. While the spring sun sprinkled the far fields of Orplow, Abigail Alpin, hormonal and three months pregnant, was to become a widow. Her childhood sweetheart, and father to her unborn child, was soon to be found hanging from the thick willow tree that shaded their lakeside cottage.

Abigail could still remember the first day she saw Ferris. His chocolate brown hair kinked at the ends as the summer rain soaked his linen shirt to his strong broad chest. He was 14 at the time, but years of working the field with his father had granted him the physique of a man. His arms were thick and his shoulders bulged as he tightly held the handles of his horse drawn plough. All the local girls had begun to talk about Ferris Alpin. He came from a family of labourers who were sadly way down the food chain of the Orplow hierarchy. Nevertheless, it was still this young man who was the local dish of fancy, especially for the younger female population of the town.

Never regarded for his intellect, Ferris always worked until his body could not give anymore. He had a fine eye for the line of the plough, and used it as precisely as a surgeon would their scalpel. The fields he tended were dissected into intricate rows, each proving to be a vital lifeline, feeding the very heart of the town like great earthy arteries. Despite his intense focus, Ferris always enjoyed the distraction of the young fair skinned girl that came to watch him as he worked. Her hair was as black as night and her eyes as radiant as the stars that punctured the winter sky. Whenever exhausted by his labour, he would remember the first time his hand had ever touched hers. His heart had instantly invited him to love something other than the only thing he had ever known. And love her he did. Right up until his dying day.

The day Ferris had proposed to Abigail he had not even needed to utter the words. Spread out upon a tartan blanket, overlooking the great lake, she had felt his steady hand begin to shake in hers. His heart raged within his chest as the sun began to rise from underneath the lake's long mantel. Looking into her eyes his breathing steadied and, as his thick lips pursed to break the silence, Abigail had whispered 'Yes'.

The years that followed had been a struggle but a worthy one. Among the hunger and workload the couple remained strong and united. Nobody in the town could vouch for ever hearing a bad word uttered between the two and, while private in their personal lives, their love was as public and as obvious as the days were bright. From the very first moment their worlds

collided, both Abigail and Ferris knew without hesitation that they were loved by the other. The few family members present at their modest wedding ceremony had all discussed how even the heavens had shed a tear that day; the cloudless sky offered a gentle shower that washed over the church just as the couple began to say their vows.

Eternally grateful for her blessings, Abigail thanked the Lord every day and so could always be found praying in the church during her scarce spare moments. However, these visits grew more often as the struggles and demands of life forced the couple apart for hours that began to feel longer than days. To make ends meet, Ferris had taken more work on the farm. Unable to ignore the man's potential, Raegan Darby had begrudgingly appointed him as the head farmer for the Darby estate. For, despite his natural credentials, Ferris had never been favoured by the forever envious Raegan. Determined to be branded as its saviour, Raegan strived for the town's admiration. He hungered for the recognition he believed his wealth deserved. However, it would be Ferris that the townspeople took time to speak with. Charmed by the man's honesty and integrity, they saw that it was Ferris' toil rather than the spoils of Raegan that truly nourished the town.

The greater workload inevitably meant less time together for Abigail and Ferris. But it was within the few moments that they shared together that life was completely savoured. Lying together during the warm hours of the night, Ferris prayed for Abigail's head to rest on his chest forever. Yearning for comfort and protection, her head would slip and fit perfectly into the nook of his arm. It was in these moments that he was completely at peace. It was these moments that he worked so hard for.

In the final few months, without enough hours in the day, Ferris had abandoned the church. As the townspeople would filter past on a great tide towards St Peter's, Ferris' Sunday mornings were greeted by further graft and labour. On the first Sunday that he had been forced to work, Abigail had stirred and woken to see her husband taking his thick sheepskin coat off the door. He was creeping out of the cottage when she spoke.

'Good morning, my love.'

Stopping dead in his tracks, Ferris turned and looked at his beautiful wife – her eyes scrunched up in a tight ball as they adjusted to the daylight that beamed through the open doorway.

'Pray for me,' said Ferris before stopping her heart with his signature smile, and then leaving the cottage.

And so they would play out this exchange every Sunday for their final few months together. Ferris, ignoring his fatigue, would work on the town's day of rest, while Abigail knelt in the church and prayed tirelessly for her husband. Unbeknown to them both, everyone else in the church – aware of the couple's plight – were praying for them too.

Grateful for the life she had led, Abigail had not lived with many regrets. However, it would haunt her remaining days that Ferris met with death before being greeted with the news that he was to become a father. Her world had come crashing down as hard and as fast as her knees had hit the earth when she first saw her husband hanging. His final face had etched into her mind and flashed before her with every blink of her eyes. What cut her the most was that the expression was not one of fear or anguish; it was one of sadness. His eyes were solemn and his mouth drooped. It destroyed her that, her rock of a partner, was now wilted in defeat.

Ferris' funeral had brought the entire town to a standstill. The church service was the first time anyone had seen Abigail since the news broke of her loss. Many had noted how her once

milky skin had become ashen – having grown accustom to the darkness of her blacked out cottage. Despite Raegan Darby's offer of funding an extravagant service, the ceremony was humble and low rent. Abigail knew her husband was a simple man of simple pleasures. Therefore, she was insistent that his farewell would befit the man, more than the moment.

Stood by the graveside, tears streamed down her cheeks as Father Daniel said his blessings. Her small shaking hands clasped firmly the rosary beads that Ferris had bought her. She was to never be seen without them from that day forth.

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Five years on and Abigail could once again be found grasping what Ferris had left behind. With time, she had regained the soft natural tone to her face. For now, she had Michael. A true son to his father, he already enjoyed a strong head of thick wavy dark hair. He had his mother's piercing eyes, and a roguish temperament he had gathered from both of his parents. More playful than hurtful, Michael was always active and his curly hair would often suffer further entanglement from every townsman who seemed determined to ruffle his head as he passed. Never truly knowing the deep effect it had on his mother, Michael always smiled. It was the same heart-stopping smile worn by his father, and it would strengthen and break his mother's heart every time that she saw it.

Today, Abigail had brought Michael along with her to church. Father Daniel was holding his Easter sermon and, as usual, the church was full. Father Daniel had not seemed to age a moment since the first day Abigail had seen him. His cotton-topped head was as white as paper and his nose as bulbous as the town's local drunk. Not ever seen to drink in public, it was rumoured that the priest's wine was not always reserved for communion alone. However, the townspeople were known to enjoy the sour wine of the grapevine a little too much. And it could be said that almost every house were a little guilty of stoking the fires of the rumour mill.

Placed at the centre of Orplow, the church itself was the most beautiful structure the town had, and would ever see. Having stood for nearly 300 years, the church of St Peter was as strong as ever. Every Sunday morning families filled the aisles, each grouping together on the dark varnished oak benches. The central aisle was robed in a crimson red carpet that poured out towards a grand altar that was overseen by a large looming crucifix. Abigail had not looked at the church's statue of Christ on the cross for some time; she found the sorrowful look on the statue to be too reminiscent of her saddest hour.

Despite its ability to constantly remind Abigail of her loss, the church was now alive with people. Mother's whispered and updated each other on the successes and trials of their families, while fathers sat back and politely tipped their hats to one another. As usual, one father in particular was making his customary effort to be seen by all. Dressed in his finest hunter tweed jacket, Raegan Darby was accompanied by his handsome wife Fiona, who wore her pale blue bustle that appeared to be moulded to her fine frame. Mother's bitched how the heavy corsetry armour complimented the cemented expression of detachment upon her face. Walking slow enough to be seen, they were closely followed by their three daughters. The eldest, at 14 years old, was Cara. She stood tall for her age and was known by all to be a calm, sweet girl. Naturally maternal, today she was holding her infant sister Imogen. Barely a few months old, no-one could ever recall seeing Fiona Darby holding her newborn daughter about the town. There seemed to be a distance between them that nobody could really understand. And lastly, walking out of line, was Grace. The middle child of the Darby family had eyes as wide as the moon. She skipped and hummed at the back of the procession as she rubbed roughly at her button

nose. All three daughters were dressed in fancy floral dresses and soon took their places alongside their mother on the front stool. As a show of his kind nature, Raegan Darby stood, allowing his family to get seated before facing the congregation, gently nodding, and eventually taking his place in the space nearest to the aisle.

Sitting next to her father, Grace had chosen to kneel on her stool and face the back of the church. Without turning to face his daughter, Raegan tugged firmly at Grace's dress, issuing the firm instruction for her to sit still and face the front. Cara's lips curled into a slight smile as she saw her sister flick her tongue out to her father before taking her seat.

Michael was now staring at the back of Grace's head. He was three stools behind her, and had giggled when he saw her get a telling look by her father. Sat by his mother, Michael held her right hand tightly. She was clothed as he had always remembered; in her dark dress of mourning, with her left hand clutching her rosary beads. She held them to her mouth as she whispered softly into them. Michael noted that, every time that she did this, his mother would always look down, and never up. Sat near to the aisle, Michael left his mother to her whisperings and looked about the church.

The great stained glass window flooded the building with a cacophony of light. Streams of broken colour filtered over one side of the congregation. Michael thought to alert his mother to the old man whose face had turned bright green through the windows glare, but he could still hear his mother muttering and decided to leave her to it.

The ceremony proceeded as routinely as ever. Befitting the season, Father Daniel read a passage from the gospel according to Mark. The passage detailed Jesus' final trip into Jerusalem, where the disciples were in awe of Christ as he explained exactly what was about to happen to each of them. Despite the accuracy in the Lord's account, the concept of fate failed to resonate with Michael. He was too busy rustling through the song-book while looking at the tiled numbers above the church piano. He loved to sing, and it was one of the few times that his mother's sweet voice lost its trace of sadness.

And so, with the reading of the passage completed, they came to sing. Passionate in their devotion, the congregation belted out hymn after hymn after hymn. Michael nudged his mother and flicked his head backwards to point out the tone-deaf old man and his portly overzealous wife behind them. Together they sounded like a wheezy old camel. Not wanting to make his observation obvious, Michael faced the front. He could see that Grace was shouting. She threw her head from side-to-side, and her arms gesticulated at the all wrong moments: infuriating her father. His anger was cold and obvious in his stillness. Even his shoulders were tense, shaking slightly like a kettle on the brink of boiling over. Stood by his side, Fiona Darby, forever the wall-flower, appeared as still as the statue of the Virgin Mary that decorated the wall next to her.

Then the singing ceased. Exhausted, the church pianist slumped over his ivory keys. The clatter of chords brought a blunt stop to the proceedings. Father Daniel walked over to the pianist, and gently lifted his shoulder. He was sound asleep; his breath ringing with the scent of rum. Blessing the dreamer, Father Daniel broke the cold silence.

'Let us pray,' said Father Daniel.

The jingle of bells rang out from the side of the altar boy and the congregation knelt. The tiles of the floor were like ice. The congregation muttered and droned out the prayers as many fussed and fidgeted. Abigail did not falter for a second. With her eyes fixed upon the floor, her voice ran like an ocean's undercurrent; hidden from the surface but with an irrepressible power and conviction like no other.

With a flick of his wrist, the altar boy sounded out the bells to raise the church to its feet. Father Daniel was preparing communion. He blessed the bread and wine, lifting them both to the heavens. The church began to shift and shuffle. Michael was certain he could hear the crack of the old man's knees behind him, inbetween the exasperated breathing of his well-fed wife.

Then as if the damns had burst open, the rows flowed out into the central aisle. Staring forwards, the people queued for their communion in two separate lines. The left side of the church headed towards Father Daniel; the right side towards the altar boy. Both carried a bowl full of slim, white wafers, which represented an offering of Christ's body sacrificed by him for his church. At the head of the left line was Raegan Darby.

'Body of Christ,' said Father Daniel, placing a piece of wafer onto Raegan's tongue.

'Amen,' said Raegan, as he moved to the left and looked to his right. Stood behind him was Grace. Her arms were outstretched, and her palms were crossed, facing the skies. She gestured for an offering from Father Daniel. Her eyes were as wide as an angel's wings, and Father Daniel smiled and began to kneel to explain that she would have to wait for her First Communion until she could receive the Eucharist. However, before his kind words could be given, Grace's palm met with a sharp crack as her father slapped her hands down and dragged her off to the side.

The church did not seem to flinch for a moment. Raegan had his reputation and appeared to enjoy it. But Michael noticed. He looked to his mother for a reaction but she was still deep in prayer. She didn't even feel her child's grasp tighten. Soon, both Michael and his mother were stood in the aisle. One by one the queue shortened towards Father Daniel.

'Body of Christ,'

'Amen.'

'Body of Christ,'

'Amen.'

They were three people away from the front now. Michael tugged at his mother's dress. It took three tugs for her to look at him. He opened his arms for her to pick him up. Abigail finally looked at her son, her face showing the slightest trace of bemusement.

'What do you want?' Abigail whispered.

'Raise me up mother', declared Michael. His arms were wider now, his left arm accidentally slapping the buttocks of a lady in the right aisle.

In fear of further embarrassment, Abigail did as her son wished and picked him up. He was five years old now and weighed heavy in her arms, but he helped by holding onto his mother tightly.

'Thanks Ma,' Michael whispered into her shoulder as his head was tucked away.

'Body of Christ,' the priest continued.

'Amen.'

His mother was next. Raising his head from her shoulder, Michael faced Father Daniel. The priest smiled with suspicion, then looked down and picked up a single slice of the white wafer with his left hand. He motioned the offering towards Abigail, his arm stretching forward and his eyes firmly on her.

'Body of Christ,' said Father Daniel. Placing the wafer on her tongue the priest stared at her for a second. He noticed that she always looked down in church.

'Amen,' said Abigail.

Michael took his opportunity. Looking at his mother, his right arm flashed out and plucked

a single wafer from the priest's bowl. It went completely unnoticed. Michael smiled and nodded to the priest as his mother carried him away and back to their seat. She knelt for a moment in prayer. This time silently. These prayers were her own. She made the sign of the cross on her chest and raised herself back up onto the stool next to her son. Michael patted his left hand on his mother's lap and smiled directly at her. The smile she gave back to him made the dimples in his cheeks burst with joy.

After a set of more prayers and passages the mass came to an end. Father Daniel sent the church out in peace and offered his blessings. The pianist stirred and jumped up in his seat. His face startled for a second before breaking naturally into a tune for the procession.

The rows broke once more from the front as the people left their stools and made their way down the aisle. This time heading for the exit, Raegan Darby was once more at the front and was followed in uniformed fashion by his family. Still seated and by the aisle, Michael watched as Raegan passed, followed by Cara with Imogen, and then Fiona. Somehow Grace had moved down the line, away from her father. He was still on the boil and his face flushed, with cheeks as red as the carpet he walked on. His nostrils flared as if they were to consume his great moustache in one foul snort.

Grace was behind her mother. Her expression was glum; her eyes were full of tears and her arms hanged by her side. Blindly, Fiona faced forwards towards her husband. Meanwhile, Michael saw that his mother was still whispering into her brown wooden beads; the silver crucifix hung down from them and brushed gently on her wrist. He looked around him. People were busy in their movements. Nobody noticed him as he rummaged through the pockets of his shorts. Swiftly, he removed his white cotton handkerchief. It was neatly folded into a thick cushioned square.

Timing it just right, Michael waited for Grace to pass. Her eyes were still wet and her cheeks damp as she rubbed at her nose with the left sleeve of her dress. Her right arm hanged down by her side. Seizing the moment, he reached out for her hand. It was just the lightest of touches but enough to place the handkerchief firmly in her palm. Taken aback, Grace looked at Michael. While her legs still carried her away, her eyes were fixed on him. His chin was sunk into his chest as he peered up from under his brow. She was about to smile when suddenly her arm was taken by her mother and she was dragged away. Raegan had plans after all and the family were not to fall behind.

Outside, Raegan Darby was already seated in his carriage. The leather hood was up to hide his anger from the public, but Grace could still see his hands simmering on his lap. The landau carriage itself was a fine vehicle. With two stunning, majestic, black Friesian stallions at its front, the carriage was set to take the Darby family back to their estate. Last inside, Grace took a seat by the window. She looked away from her father, desperately trying to not let him see her tears.

Dabbing at her eyes with the white cotton handkerchief she felt the brittle edge of something give and break a little inside. Cupping the cloth to her chest, she opened it up. Inside was a brittle white wafer. Grace quickly popped this into her mouth before her family could see. The wafer dampened and toughened on her tongue. She smiled and uttered 'Amen'.