Despair

The Catholic church regards suicide as the least forgiveable sin, guaranteeing a passage to hell (which is why suicides traditionally were not buried in hallowed ground). It is sometimes described as the mortal sin of despair, a sin against the Holy Spirit.

He walked into the old streets, shabby with neglect, the marks of poverty, Victorian terraces banked up from the pavement, feeling weighed on by their familiar tiers of windows. They were built for the rising middle classes but nearly all turned over to flats now, a place for the poor. The father felt their burden but was looking at the street, for he knew their signs from his days of community work, and he was intent on getting through them to the door with the number on the paper in his pocket. With the light failing he was thinking, David must have walked like this, twice a day perhaps on his way between home and work, the pattern of the pavement's York slabs becoming better known to him than the cracked and peeling windows of the houses. Or perhaps he had looked unseeing into some middle distance, occasional traffic threading a path through the solid lines of parked cars, their lamps beginning to stand out now in the twilight. Father Edmund took it all in as he walked, trying to hold the detail, anxious at this late stage (this too late stage) to make the boy's life part of his life, how the world had seemed to him. He wanted to imagine how David would have felt when he would have been happy coming to his home, this life he was making for himself away from his childhood home. The shabbiness seeped into him and he shuddered as he walked. If the poor were blessed it was more like a wound than a gift.

He counted off the numbers as he passed the doors, and here, finally was number 35, the address the mother had given him. When he spoke to the landlady on the phone she told him to come to the basement door. There was the bell, and drawing his jacket tighter around him he reached for it. Shadows moved behind the door as soon as the chimes rang. She was standing in front of him looking a little surprised and then seemed to remember, a mournful look quickly shaping her round and puffy face, a short and ageing woman with her black hair pulled back.

"I'll show you up there," she said quietly, and then gestured for him to follow her as she went past him on the steps to the main door, sorting through her keys while he followed and pushing one into the lock. As the door opened she looked back at him.

"It's all been cleaned up," she said. He thought it was like she was asking for forgiveness. "I've kept all his things as they were, because it seemed the decent thing, until after the funeral, when I can return them. He didn't have much."

Father Edmund wanted to put her at her ease. He told her again what he had said on the phone.

“His mother is an old friend, but I never met him myself. I thought if I saw where he lived it would help me know … how to console her.”

The woman nodded and had passed the door to the inner hall. It felt suddenly, unnaturally quiet there. She had opened the next door, opening the shadowy prospect of David’s flat. The light shifted around her. She looked at his dog collar as if it was dragging the words from her.

“You know,” she said, “I don’t hold with them, not normally, them … homosexuals.” The word seemed to give her difficulty. He thought she probably used another word, normally. She had a very faint Irish accent and may well have been Catholic, the Church encouraging her disdain. “It’s just that he was such a sweet boy, so warm and very kind. It’s a terrible thing to have happened. I can only imagine how his poor mother must feel.”

“It’s a terrible thing for everyone,” said Father Edmund, and because she had stopped outside the doorway he walked past her into the flat. She stayed by the doorway, and it was like they had reached another impasse.

“Do you mind if I leave you?” she asked. “If you just pull the doors closed behind you.”

He wanted her to go away. “I won’t be long,” he said and she nodded.

As he turned to the room he was not sure what he could have expected. It was mostly a square, high ceilinged space, the walls painted white with a green carpet, which seemed thin and worn. There was a sofa with a brown corduroy cover and wooden arms, a matching armchair. Father Edmund assumed that this much had come with the flat, and he was looking for signs of the boy. Perhaps David had been compulsively tidy, or perhaps it had been tidied after him, but there was little to go on in this sparse and depressing room. As he looked across to the window he saw a trolley with a small hifi system and a pile of disks. He walked there and went down on one knee by the pile, feeling the uncomfortable tug of the muscles in his back and legs, looking through the titles. They were mostly modern things, predictably, names he did not know and then a scattering of classical recordings, Chopin, Schubert, and Rachmaninov. He could make nothing of this and he stood up again. A print of a Paul Klee painting hung on the wall beside the window. At least, Edmund thought it was Klee, but again it did not tell him very much.

In an arm leading off the room there was a kitchenette. It too was blankly tidy. He did not think he could bring himself to start looking through the cupboards. He would have to be desperate, and he wondered if he would become desperate. There were two other doors off the room. He assumed one would be the bedroom, the other the bathroom.

The bathroom; he would have to face it before he left. She said everything had been tidied up so he told himself that all he would see was an ordinary bathroom, the tiles and taps, that kind of thing. It would be like the battlefields he had visited long after their violence, trying to imagine how it must have been to face death in that place when all there was to be seen now was the field itself, the grass and the trees, the

tracks through it, the neat signs for the tourists setting out the matters of fact, asking you to understand that what looked unexceptional was in truth the site of some notable action. These were the diversions which had punctuated his religious life, as he liked to think about history and the ways men had struggled to make sense of their lives. He could not imagine how it would be to dream that ending your life could bring sense to it. He realised then that he had come to imagine just this, and he pushed it out of his mind, pushing open the door.

He had guessed correctly. The cold light went over him as he opened the door. He stood holding it open, taking in the olive green sink and bath, the white and orange tiles. It was as clean as she had said, untainted and he looked at the tiles and imagined them streaked with the sprays of blood, if that was how it had been, and the boy's body in the water, obscured by the redness of the water, a decorum there, his head at an angle resting on the edge of the bath, and Father Edmund felt a tightness in his throat, a rising pressure in his stomach. This nausea would consume him. He shut it away when he closed the door.

The bedroom was his last hope, his best one. The double bed almost filled it. There were recesses either side of a chimney breast, one of them with a hanging rail thick with clothes. So here at least was some sign of him. Beside the bed too, squeezed between the headboard and the wall, there was a chest of drawers and some pictures in frames. Father Edmund immediately recognised the boy's mother, then his grandparents, distant faces. He sat down on the edge of the bed, taking from his wallet the picture given to him by the mother; the mother, a way of pushing her away. Her name was Beatrice, and most people called her Bea. As he conjured her name a feeling of absolute weariness came over him and even sitting on the bed he felt the weight of his body as an oppressive thing, his head and his shoulders become too much to bear. He held up the photograph in both hands, fingering its edges, looking at the smiling face, ghosting his face, his boy, his David. But no, he looked mostly like his mother, and Father Edmund thought this was probably a good thing, leaving questions to one side. He turned his eyes from the picture to the line of clothes. There was the patterned shirt he had worn on the day of the photo, slack now as it hung from the rail and dismal in its lifelessness. Without the picture he might have thought nothing of it. The aching in his body spread to his arms. It was the frustration, the wishing he could be holding the boy now in his empty arms, the warmth and solidity of his life, the possibility of hope, when there was still time to show him there could be hope. Father Edmund found himself shaking, his fingers tightly gripping the edge of the photograph and he closed his eyes as he felt the tears start there, the heat of them. He was telling himself he had no right to tears and suddenly the spasm slipped from him. He had mostly contained himself, most of his life, and this was no moment to let go, and then the mocking thought came to him that if he had always contained himself he would not be here now.

It seemed another world, his past. He looked at the boy's face in the picture, thinking again that he was mostly like his mother, a good thing, a good woman. His church would reproach her, up to a point, but she deserved better than this. She had deserved better from him, though he had never wanted to hurt her and would say he had loved her. He could not explain himself then, nor excuse himself now, and yet his

blame felt futile. In the end his love, which had once seemed so overwhelming, became beside the point, and losing it the price he had to pay for the more important course he thought he was taking. He let his finger move across the picture, onto the boy's face, and he felt the grief rising again in him, the sharp ache of his regret, and he was telling himself again, not now, not here. There was nothing for him here. He could not have said what he was expecting to find, or why he had come, but then he remembered he had come only because she had asked him to, and he had not felt he could refuse.

He put the picture back in his wallet, carefully, and he stood up, looking once more around the room as if he could freeze the memory of it in his head, take something of it with him. Perhaps this really was why he had come, hoping to put some life into his memories, something he could hang on to. There was no life here, and he already knew all about the absence of his son. He had made his life around the business of others' births marriages and deaths, but this was not like the death he knew from the grief of his parishioners. This was like nothing, a brutal annihilation, and he wanted to be away from it. He wanted to be away from it forever.

The landlady must have heard him shut the door. She was there looking up from her basement, curiously he thought. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to say and the woman seemed embarrassed.

"Are you here, because you'll be doing the funeral, because you'll need to say something?"

That would have been rich, thought the priest, and perhaps a just reward. He had often wondered whether hell might be no more than the things you brought on yourself, a fierce and circumstantial retribution, except that he doubted he could even go to the funeral, or that it would be in a church. Then he wondered why she should be probing him like this.

"I told you, I'm an old friend of his mother's. I didn't know the boy so she asked me to do this, because she couldn't. I don't know what sort of arrangements they will be making … and this isn't my parish …"

There it was, the deceitful truth, the way you could mislead and still feel you were being honest and even honourable. This was how sin caught us out, the darkness reaching for us.

She nodded her head, as if she understood. "I hope it was helpful, the poor dear. I have a son myself. I can only imagine what she must be going through."

This sounded familiar. He could not place it. Nod the head. He thanked her, closing the door. He went past her, out in the street again and when he was away from the house he paused for a moment trying to collect himself but not really thinking of anything, breathing in the close and heavy air, and he began to wonder what he would do next. It seemed wrong and unbearable for him simply to leave, to shamble his way back to his presbytery as if this was just another home visit, but there was no one he could talk to. He did not feel he could go to her, not yet, struggling with his

unresolved shame. He wanted a drink, at least a drink and as he walked he began to pull at his collar, loosening the button and tugging the white band free. He had not thought about it, going into the house, but he wondered if he had been hiding behind it, pretending he had some official role and pushing away unwelcome questions and so he had succeeded in confusing the woman. He had accepted an automatic deference around him from his parishioners for decades, and it helped him live the role, be nothing else. There was the shame again, and he could do nothing about it. David had denied him the chance ever to make amends, as if he ever could.

The lights grew brighter as he came towards the end of the street, heading back to the station through shops. He was looking for a pub big enough and busy enough to swallow him, a place where he could be truly alone in careless company. He came on it just before the station, and as he looked at the façade for a moment he struggled with the unwelcome thought that God was laughing at him. He wanted to think that for all his wrongs God would be his friend now, a voice in the solitude. It was the comfort he gave to other people. The façade stood back at him: the pub was part of a chain he knew with a policy of converting large old buildings. This one had been a Victorian Baptist chapel, built in a classical style with a big arch dominating the frontage and broad steps up to the main doors. He climbed the steps and pushed one of the doors open. The noise and the light slammed into him. It was a huge space with a balcony running around the upper story, the ceiling painted in elaborate colours and wooden cubicles lining the walls on the lower floor. The noise was the sound of the crowds of young people spread around the place, shouting amusement at each other, and the cigarette smoke picked up the urine yellow light, spread it like a haze in the air. Temporarily defrocked Father Edmund found his way through them to the long bar, where he ordered a pint of bitter and a large Irish whisky, looking around for a place he could sit and think. Although the bar was busy there were spaces in the cubicles. He found a seat, enclosed by dark wood and fake leather, and he put his drink down on the table, sat on the fake leather and for a while he thought about little but his surroundings, taking them in, until the jumble of recent memories began to push through, him sitting on that bed, pushing into him then beginning to tumble through his mind like laundry, hoping that the drum would come to rest. He had a hand on each glass, fingers held against the smooth cold of each glass, and he tried to let the feeling of the cold against his fingers be all that he knew.

He was here to gather his thoughts, a way of not being plagued by them. They could not be simple thoughts. They were his whole adult life. Like most priests he often wondered why he had entered the church, a more interesting question than why he had stayed with it (he could easily point at his faith, which was true, but also inertia, or fear of the unknown, which made it feel like a long marriage). He wanted to understand his vocation, but this was no answer in itself, for a vocation was no more than the mirror image of his faith and something you had to carry with the knowledge it could be gone at any minute.

He knew many of his fellow priests had felt that vocation in their childhoods, but his had been a late one. He had enjoyed an ordinary adolescence. He was a Catholic from birth and as serious about it as the rest of his family, which was to say he was serious and thoughtful, questioning but pious. He had a girlfriend in his last year at school,

and they had eventually gone to bed together. It troubled his faith and practice, but not so badly as to make him feel a hypocrite. He told himself that God was more important than his weakness.

With time he came to feel he was fooling himself, and when he went to university he was beginning to think he would have to make a choice. The priest at the Catholic chaplaincy was a subtle and compelling man, who encouraged him to recognise a longing in himself for commitment and the absence of contradiction. He loved the company of women and came to see this as the trial set for him by his redeemer.

The cool beer, the intemperate whisky, the hope of dulled senses, the escape from what he had been, or perhaps no more than the thing he once did.

You could say the priesthood, or any kind of religious life was a flight from the things we did, our humanity, except that such evasion was itself no more than human, the desire to think we were more than human. He felt the whisky flare around his mouth, and thought how easy it had been to forgive himself all those years ago, and now, and still the past was clawing at him. There was another temptation, the reflex which acknowledged the subtleties of your self-blame, and so found a more sophisticated level on which to forgive yourself. His seminary training had taught him to recognise the signs, and he thought he had probably guessed at them before he went formally into the religious life, an outlook that had drawn him to the church in the first place. He thought too that it was wrong to want to be more or less than human: this much Christ had taught us with the Incarnation, in the way Christ always asked so little, and too much.

They were friends of his family, his parents. He had known Bea since they were children together: not well, because the families never met more than twice a year, but there was always an ease between them, natural in those circumstances. She was home for the summer herself, wondering where next to turn, as if we can decide our lives' next steps in much the same way we settle on destinations. With hindsight he could think of many reasons why their different uncertainties should have come together in those weeks, and brought them together. But he could no longer remember how he lost sight of everything he had thought mattered most, the inhuman truths he felt should define any good life.

He could not shut out the memory of those moments, how her skin had felt beneath his fingers, and then his palms, the heat of it, a softness like no material thing. He could not forget the colour of it in the yellowed light of her bedroom that first evening, the fine hairs rising from the pored surface, the lines of her skin like cells as he ran his nose over them, skin on skin, the tip of his tongue, the wonder of her warm flesh.

There was the moment, when it seemed that all that could matter was the moment, as if there could be no consequences. If he had been lucky that might have held true, and he could have put it behind him as the last thrash of his human self, his most unoriginal sin, but the most obvious consequence of all had followed when she found she was pregnant and was forced to confess.

She had spoken to him first, and he thought there was an end to his choices. He would leave the seminary and honour his obligation. Horrified the families had echoed his own self-forgiving reflex, telling him that his vocation was more important than his indiscretion. They would care for the baby and their daughter, they said, though they stipulated absolute separation. He would have no further contact with Bea or his child. He would never be spoken of again. God help him he had leapt at the chance to take them at their word.

He could ask for God's help, like any other believer, and he had found what comfort could be had there. He had taken them at their word and whatever his curiosity or longing he had accepted their silence, the knowledge of a possibly happy life beyond him as part of his just punishment. He had dedicated himself to the religious life and service. He could never speak of it, not even to his confessor, which even by his own lights was wrong. But it was as though his mind wrinkled at the thought, conflicted by the need to bury the thought so deeply it had no part in his real life, but also not wanting to seek forgiveness, wanting it to be the dark secret that defined him, shaped his own counsel and judgements, ensuring he would never be quick to judge others. Perversely it became part of his faith.

He realised now that these were the terms he could accept, the way he could live with himself. He had not even known the boy's name until Bea had contacted him, telling him his son was dead, and worse that he had killed himself. The note had been all too sane, telling his mother not to grieve, that he was just tired of the struggle from day to day, tired of himself. He had cut his wrists like some noble Roman, the almost painless pagan way. He had lain in the bath, watching the blood pulse from his wrists, his still warm wrists, the blood on the water blooming like strange flowers, the end coming. Father Edmund gave out a little cry, involuntary, desperate to staunch that bleeding, if only he could have known and pressed his fingers onto those warm wrists, the life of him.

But he had only the cold of the glasses in front of him, the noise of the bar around him, its sought-after indifference. Better to think of those other warm days, the heat of her skin against his, the light in her eyes as she had looked back at him, the life there, these images he had kept with him through the loneliness of his life, proscribed by his faith but he could not help himself.

Lord have mercy. His son had been brought up as a Catholic, but the church would have given no quarter to his sexuality. Why should it, since it made no real allowance for any sexuality, at best tolerating marriage as a channel for procreation? Father Edmund had dedicated his life to this creed; he had admonished and steered people by it. The sin was utterly condemned, but easily enough forgiven, as long as there was penitence, and he told himself that this made sense. It was not about God's true mercy, which was unfathomable, but a way of understanding our fallen nature, reflecting the limits of our understanding.

He thought it had given him no chance of understanding his son, and he did not know if he could bear it any more.

For over twenty years he had lived in this denial, in this pious denial of himself in pursuit of sanctity, in that other denial, and he faced now the thought that all this could be a waste. The church told him there would be no forgiveness for a suicide, a pervert, a man too much at the mercy of his nature who had like millions before him fallen by the wayside. They taught this vision of the world, the righteous ascending to glory, the wretched majority condemned to the hell of their own or Satan's making. It seemed monstrous to him, the waste of at least two lives, his son's and his own. He hoped it might have been different for Bea, a joy as well as a struggle for her, but perhaps this was a false comfort too.

Christ have mercy. He looked out beyond the glasses on his table, the ordinary young people, loud and apparently brash or even brutal, and nothing further from their minds than God as if the pursuit of pleasure could be enough in itself, our only real comfort against the unrelenting, unreal pressure of mortality. He felt a violence even in their loudness and perhaps some of their energy would turn to aggression before the end of the night, but he knew too that most people had little harm in them. There was so much more to most of us than the small bad things we did, and it was this truth that gave his ministry purpose and substance. But when we had done something which seemed somehow more significant, which seemed to define us, could you put this aside? He had always thought it would be better to be defined by something good, but such actions, good or bad would always have their force and redemption could never mean one outweighing the other. Our actions would continue to mean whatever they had meant, influencing whatever we did next. He thought our actions expressed who we were, but also helped us understand who we were. We always had choices and naturally sought redemption, but we could never escape our personalities. It was impossible to act out of character, when we could only know our characters through whatever we proved capable of. Without Christ we should naturally despair, for we could not redeem ourselves through whatever we did. His son had been consumed by despair. Lord have mercy.

For decades he had comforted himself with these thoughts. For all he knew they were true enough, but it seemed that everything else had to seem true around them, and right now he felt cut off from any certainty.

No comfort: he could not sit still. The alcohol blurred him, but hardly helped. He looked down at the grain of the wood on the table, and the glint of the glasses, traces of the falling beer like suds on the pint glass, the whisky viscous, and he thought he had to get out into the air, back to his life and everything he knew. In quick succession he drained each glass, letting each come down heavily on the table, keeping his grip and not wanting to let his quiet anger impinge on the physical world. He wanted forgiveness, for his son. God was not here.

He looked around the bar, trying to remember why he had come in here at all. It had been like an instinct. With no purpose he could not even say it was time to go. Everything around him was dimming, dissolving into a meaninglessness, except that it did not dissolve, and the hard lines of the walls and furniture confronted him, immobile. There was nothing to be done. He got up and walked quickly to the door, not looking up.

The thrashing noise of the town wrapped around the silence in his head. It was a harsh air, threatening something. He continued to walk, into the station keeping his head down as if this could keep the pressure out, feeling he might be sick as the tension wound itself in his stomach. On the platform the rails ran away from him, glinting like streams with the red and green of the signals, promising the journey away. Suddenly he felt he would have to talk to her, realising that at least now he had a reason, and that with her number he had some kind of permission. He fingered the phone in his pocket, turning it over in his fingers, and then he took it in his hand. She answered after seven rings, just when he was beginning to think he should hang up, the tension in his stomach. Her voice crackled a little as the connection established itself. He said "Bea" and she answered quickly, " it's you."

It seemed an effort to say anything at all. He realised he did not know what to say to her, and had been hoping she would lead him. He said,

"I've been there. I've done as you asked."

"What did you see?"

I saw the abandoned ashtray of his life, the butt ends made of the things he did, fashioning the end. There was nothing, a room of fragments organised but not collected. They were the dust left by things falling apart. They were.

"There were some pictures, clothes, not much. I don't know what you wanted me to see."

She hesitated, and suddenly he heard that there were other voices jabbering, no, talking, behind him, and he put them behind him again.

"I wanted you to see where he had been, so you'd know that he was gone."

He understood her anger. It was not fair, but perhaps he still deserved it. It did not matter. He said

"I knew that anyway. Believe me, I feel this."

Funny how you could say something so true, and yet it rang false. She said nothing about this. She asked

"What are you going to do now?"

This was the moment for a grand gesture, and all he had was a sentence. The phone hissed at him, the cancelled noise of the background. I wish I could, could.

"Would you like to meet?"

He imagined her shaking her head.

"Do you want to come to the funeral? It won't be in a Catholic church."

"Do you want me to come?"

How would they explain that? Could they say he was a friend of the family? Could they explain why he might be consumed by grief for a boy he had never known? Could he say he was mourning for himself? She said

“I don’t think it would be a good idea. I think you should go back to your life, get on with telling other people about the good life, or however you get by. And I don’t want to explain you to my husband.”

The good life, another life; the price he had paid was bad enough without self pity.

“I’m going to go now Bea.”

“Okay, goodbye.”

He looked down at the tracks, the glinting metal, running away from him. The train would be here soon, taking him back to a life where he could not sit in uncertainty, where he would have to make some sense of all this, or pretend that it mattered so little it might never have happened. He felt the weight of the phone in his hands, her final words still somehow around his ears. The metal gleamed, the yellow lights from the platform slashed with the red of the signals, his son’s wrists and their suddenly unconfined pulse, their fiercely ironic throb as these signs of life brought him to the end. Edmund thought of the small step it would take, the give of the gravel around his feet as he landed between the tracks, and then the cold of the rail on his neck, shaking with the motion of the unseen train approaching, and the unimaginable moment as the wheels cut into your neck. Would that be like pain or just a sudden darkness? Would it really be the end or the beginning of his damnation, as he had been taught, and as he taught?

He could hear the rails singing. The lights across them changed and beyond the end of the platform the flat front of the train came round the bend of the tracks, slowing for the station. He looked at the flat front of the train, imagining the turning of its hard, hot wheels.