Blessed Assurance

by
Stewart Ennis



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To my daughter Flora,
for the days and miles spent telling stories,
and to all my family, blood and otherwise

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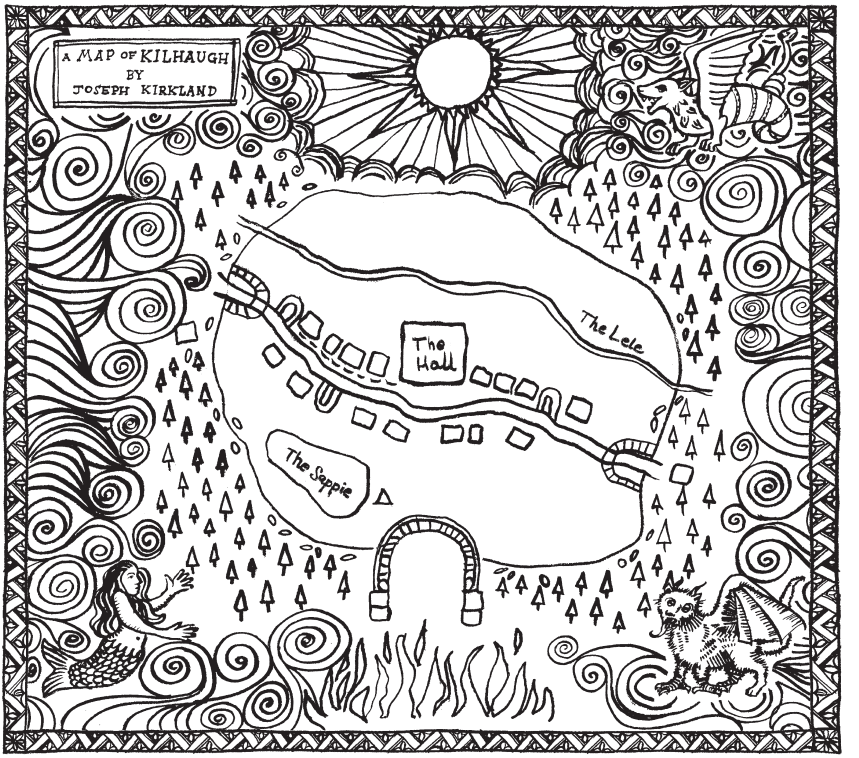
Blessed Assurance

"…of God himself can no man thinke…"

– Anon, *The Cloude of Unknowyng* (fourteenth century)

"The believer will fight another believer over a shade of difference; the doubter fights only with himself."

– Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote*


A MAP OF KILHAUGH
BY
JOSEPH KIRKLAND
The Hall
The Lake
The Steppie

CHAPTER ONE

Joseph Kirkland's First Dream: Episode One

This is my story, this is my song
praising my Saviour all the day long

Blessed Assurance was not the hymn Joseph would have chosen, but that's not how dreams work. This was one of the vivid dreams, so lacking in ambiguity it might have been lifted from the pages of his Children's Illustrated King James Bible. Take the sky for example, a deep dark pink *dream* sky with Bible-black clouds. Or those hailstones the size of marbles, rattling down the flutes of Kilhaugh Gospel Hall's corrugated iron roof like a military snare drum, dislodging a million flakes of old red rust – an eschatological snowfall from the Book of Revelations. Our boy, *The Dreamer Joseph Kirkland*, believed that this portentous weather had been laid on just for him, by *Him*, that this was all part of it, that everything was part of it. And it was. Even the eczema on his wrists and ankles, which was itching like fury now. He pushed up the sleeves of his big grown-ups' Baptismal gown and scratched – *mmm sooo good* – till his nails were choked with red-black scab. The clatter of those hailstones should have been deafening, but nothing on God's good earth could drown out Auntie Ishbel pumping her harmonium in full on Hallelujah, as everyone sang His praises. And how they sang His praises; as though their souls depended on it. And they did.

Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine!
Oh, what a Foretaste of Glory Divine!
Heir of Salvation, Purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, Washed in His Blood.

Joseph Kirkland walked tentatively, slower than a funeral march. But then Joseph Kirkland did everything tentatively. He even dreamed tentatively. He sensed an unusually big gathering but it was hard to tell with these specs, one lens patched, the other steamed up.

"Joseph has been SAVED," shouted Mister Agnew from the platform.

"Joseph Kirkland has been SAVED!" shouted another, and they clapped their hands and cried "Hallelujah!" No, no, no. This wasn't right. Shouting? Clapping? Hallelujahs? No, no, no. This wasn't right at all. These folk experienced ecstasy, of course they did, when the Saviour filled their hearts with joy, but they would never express it so … *flamboyantly*. "JOSEPH KIRKLAND has been SAVED!" they cried out in one voice.

Stone-cold fear crawled up Joseph's spine and he did what he always did when screaming didn't work and there was no high window to jump out of; he pressed his calf against the blistering radiator till he felt something akin to pain. It had the required effect. He woke up.

CHAPTER TWO

Intermission

He had not been Saved.

Sorry.

That all too familiar leaden pall of cold, clammy dread wrapped itself around him and he felt the usual combination of relief, guilt at feeling relief, and fear. He bit his lip, dug his nails into his forearm, did all those things he must do to make absolutely certain he was not still asleep, that the recurring nightmare he assumed had ended, had in fact ended; not just taken some unexpected and terrifying twist. Because honestly you never knew sometimes.

There was a street lamp on the lane outside his bedroom window. Every night it shone through the gap in the curtains, hitting the window frame at the perfect angle to cast a cross – long, black, skewed, but still a cross, still *The Cross* – onto the bedroom ceiling.

In the shadow of the cross let me hide.

It was the last thing he wanted right now, dark lines from hymns or Scripture.

Sorry.

Sorry, sorry, sorry. These days – since he'd reached *that age*, the age of *no more excuses* and *knowing the consequences* – he seemed to spend half his life saying *sorry* to God – or Jesus. *Sorry* for being bad. *Sorry* for thinking bad thoughts. *Sorry* for trying to avoid Him – or *Them* – by thinking other things, frivolous earthly things. *Sorry* for doing frivolous earthly things, like reading comics procured by Archie Truman or playing commandoes with Archie Truman. *Sorry* for taking an interest in Archie Truman's colourful accounts of the films he'd seen at the Regal Picture Palace in Templeton. *Sorry* for most things involving his hush-hush friendship

with Archie Truman – one of the *Glasgow Overspill*, as Gran menacingly referred to the folk who'd moved into Kilhaugh's new housing scheme. *Sorry* for all those other things – too many to mention – that took him even further away from God or Jesus. Not that it was ever possible to avoid Him… Them? That was another thing. He should just ask Uncle Andrew or Mister Agnew – *Should I be praying to God or Jesus or both?* – get it sorted out once and for all. But he was eleven for goodness sake, going on twelve; this was something he should've asked long ago.

Joseph's bedroom was as sparsely furnished as the Hall and similarly free of anything that might be called décor. There was a heavy bedstead, a wooden chair, a chest of drawers and a small desktop bookcase, all the colour of dark marmalade. The street lamp that produced the *Shadow of the Cross* also illuminated his library; a grown-up Bible, a beloved *Children's Illustrated Bible – you're too big for that now* – a collection of Oliphant's *Heroes of the Cross* missionary biographies, and three framed samplers that Gran had embroidered, a gift for each of his last three birthdays; his 11th,

"**Be sure**
your **sin** will
find you out"

Numbers 32:23

his 10th,

"For **God** so **loved** the **world**,
that **He** gave **His** only begotten **Son**,
that whosever **believeth** in **Him**
should **not perish**, but have **everlasting life**."

John 3:16

and his 9th,

"For the **wages** of **sin** is **death**;
but the **gift** of **God** is **eternal life**
through **Jesus Christ** our **Lord**."

Romans 6:23

And it shined its light upon a gaudy poster which at first glance looked like a cover of one of those American *Good Housekeeping* magazines that often found their way into the Episcopalian jumble sale and Doctor Baranski's waiting room. The poster was indeed American but not from *Good Housekeeping*. An illustration of *The Pre-Tribulational Rapture*, it featured a despondent beige-suited husband at the moment of discovering that the gingham-clothed kitchen table had not been laid for his tea. If only the silly man had been less bothered with his tea, *Look out the window! Oh for goodness sake. Quick!* Then he'd have seen his pretty fair-haired, barefoot wife in her yellow cotton, flower print dress and white apron, ascending body and soul into a sheep-clouded blue sky. And writ large against that sky:

Then We Which Are Alive And Remain
Shall Be Caught Up Together With Them In The Clouds,
To Meet The Lord In The Air:
And So Shall We Ever Be With The Lord

1 Thessalonians 4:17

In Gran's eyes this was, *Glorious, Miraculous, Proof if proof were needed.* For Joseph it was deeply troubling. How would the poor husband feel when he realised his wife had gone forever? No, *more* than forever. Gran did nothing to reassure him, "If the husband has been Saved," she'd say, always at bedtime, "he might go with her. But if the Lord calls him *home*

and he's not *ready*…well… he'll be going somewhere quite different, that young man, somewhere quite different." And as she switched off the light and closed the bedroom door, "That's something for you to think about, eh?"

She was blissful and beautiful, the young wife in the yellow cotton flower print dress. And kind. You could just tell. But surely she must be scared. How could she not be? Okay she'd be with God and Jesus… but even so. Not even a wee bit scared? Floating up to Heaven? On her own? In her bare feet? But at least the Pre-Tribulational Rapture poster was colourful, like the book jackets of his *Heroes of the Cross,* like his *Children's Illustrated Bible*, like the tartan barley-sugar tin of Scripture texts, and the pictures on the front – *sorry,* the back, *it's about the Scripture, not the picture* – of the texts themselves. At least there was colour.

Oh no. Please.

He'd wet the bed. Again.

The big light hurt his eyes but it also burnt off the shadows and took the spotlight off the scripture samplers and so on, giving it all equal weight. Joseph put on his dressing gown and rolled the sodden pyjamas and sheets into a ball. There were blood spots on the top sheet. This is what happened sometimes, things from nightmares seeping in. The broken skin on the underside of his wrists was sticky, pink and shiny like the wee polythene bags of giblets from the inside of Mister Underwood's chickens. It stung when he touched it, but how could he not?

He tiptoed along the lobby avoiding the squeaky bits of floor. His task was simple; get the soiled things into the dirty linen basket in the kitchen, get clean sheets, don't wake Gran up…

"Joseph!" So it wasn't as late as he'd thought, "What are you up to out there?"

He could do a Grandpa. Decide to not hear her. Go back to bed. Pretend to be asleep.

"Three sets of sheets," she said with her big exasperated sigh, her big shake of the head, her big roll of the eyes, her folded arms, her pursed lips. The whole routine.

Joseph missed a lot of it. He was looking at the display cabinet. Anyway, Gran didn't like him looking her in the eye when she was giving him a row. Joseph looked people in the eye for far too long. *I've told you umpteen times it makes people feel uncomfortable*. Or not at all. The cabinet contained Gran's modest collection of fancy – not *too* fancy – china, Apostle spoons, assorted ceramic whigmaleeries from Scottish seaside towns, etcetera. And here was a new thing. A plate with a picture of Hong Kong. And next to it a framed photo of cousin Sam – Uncle Andrew and Auntie Ishbel's eldest – proud in his hero-white Royal Navy uniform. Apart from a few more scripture samplers and a mantelpiece clock, there was nothing else to tempt the eye. No rich brocaded fabrics. No paintings. No patterned wallpaper. No lurid colour. The walls were a solid mushroom. The curtains a solid green. The carpet a solid brown. The three-piece suite a solid oxblood. *You'll find little mention of the "colour" of things in the scriptures. Why? I'll tell you why. Because the Word is enough, it doesn't need dressing up or colouring in*. The harmonium, with its fantoosh fretwork might be on the fancy side but it was functional, and when it wasn't being played it had a drab grey dust cover thrown over it, in case it – or anyone else – got ideas. There were no other distractions. Except for Peter the yellow budgerigar.

"*Cooo*," said Grandpa, in a wet throaty warble.

"Three sets!" said Gran, again, looking over at Grandpa, who was sitting by the window in his pyjamas, toothless, cooing to the budgie perched on the end of his thumb. "In one week! And there's me thinking, *oh maybe I can take that rubber sheet off now*."

"*Cooo*," said Grandpa, seemingly oblivious to Joseph and to whatever Gran was saying. "*Cooo* wee Peter," His hands shook so much these days, but never when he held Peter.

"*Cooo*, bonnie wee birdie. Pretty wee Peter. Ma pretty wee boy. *Cooo*."

Gran carried on, seemingly oblivious to Grandpa's oblivion. "I don't know," she said, shaking her head, sighing, at Grandpa, Joseph, Peter, anyone, the photograph of Sam, no one, herself – *Him…Them.* She did a lot of that, the head-shaking, the hand-wringing, the sighing.

"Bonnie wee yella birdie," said Grandpa, "*Cooo.* Who's a hungry wee birdie?"

A bulging catheter bag hung from a frame on the floor beside him. Gran looked away as he fiddled with the rubber tube that led into the front of his pyjama trousers. He broke a tiny bit of millet off a stalk jammed in the side of the cage and put it in his mouth. In the blink of an eye Peter had snatched the morsel from between Grandpa's puckered lips,

"Oh my, ho ho, yon was fast but, eh? Feart I might bite your head off wee boy?" And then again to Gran, but louder as though she was the one who was deaf , "Ho ho! Did ye see that mum?"

"It's *frightened*, not 'feart' – and that's disgusting that so it is. Letting it eat from your mouth like that. It is so. You could at least put your teeth in."

"Clever wee birdie, so you are." A tiny yellow feather clung to the side of his mouth,

"You'll catch something, so you will," said Gran, "Mark my words. Then that'll be you. That'll be the next thing."

"Fly away Peter," he said with a big cheery gummy baby smile and the ghost of a glint in his milky blue eyes as he threw the budgie up in the air like Noah sending forth his dove.

"Some other thing for muggins here to contend with."

The budgie flapped once around the room, tried and failed to land on the mantelpiece clock, then flew into its cage and onto its swing. Grandpa gave a high chirruping trill, just like a budgie and Joseph worked his mouth and tongue, *How does he do that?,* feeling for the place that enabled Grandpa to make such a sound.

"That's all ye need, eh wee birdie?" said Grandpa. Peter swung back and forth, "A wee bit millet, a wee bit flap about, a wee bit swing and that's you. Happy as Larry. Ho ho. There's a man I'd like to be pals wi … *Larry*! There's naebody as happy as Larry, eh mum?"

"Oh for goodness sake, dad. And it's *nobody*, not *naebody*."

Gran and Grandpa never used each other's Christian names, *Sarah* and *Samuel*. He called her *mum*. She called him *dad*. That's how it was.

As Grandpa fiddled with his hearing aids it crossed Joseph's mind, *Are his ears even bigger tonight? And his nose?* Or did it just seem that way because in every other department there was less of him every day. He'd taken to shouting, *Lugs, neb and a bony bahoochie! That's yer auld Grandpa*, or *I'm like yon Cheshire cat, mum. Soon there'll be nothing left but a big glaikit grin*. Or his latest thing, *I'm fading away mum,* like a slowed down record, *help me, help me*, waving like a drowning man being carried off by the tide.

She didn't like all this mocking of death. She didn't like this quoting of literature. And she really didn't like this new *fading-away* business. Because he was. Fading away.

"Are my ears deceiving me," he wheezed, "or did I hear some kind sowl say *tea*?" He looked side to side, up and down, for the person or creature that might've done so.

"It's *soul* not *sowl*!" She tutted and sighed. "Tea? At this time of night?"

"Heel," said Grandpa, slapping his thigh and whistling at his catheter bag like it was a well-trained terrier. He picked it up and shuffled over to the big chair beside the electric fire with its plastic coal and flickering fan-assisted glow: "Not heving tae geng tae the levvy, does hev its edventeges," he said in mock Scotch posh to the imaginary television camera located somewhere above the pelmet, and bent over to switch on the third bar of the fire. Even that short sequence of movements had taken it out of him.

"Oh that's right," said Gran, "Three bars! Just waste

electricity, why don't you. Is it for this I spend half my life on my knees, scrubbing posh folk's toilets? If you'd wear your dressing gown you wouldn't need three bars. And we wouldn't have to see that –" she averted her eyes from the unmentionable catheter tube – "paraphernalia. It's not nice, so it's not." She turned her attention back to Joseph, still perched on the edge of the settee, "You should be wearing your spectacles by the way," then to the damp bundle in her hands, and remembered what it was she was supposed to be annoyed about, "As if I don't have enough to put up with." And away she went, sighing and mumbling and tutting all the way into the kitchen.

Grandpa seemed to see Joseph properly for the first time and did one of his comic double takes, all wide-eyed and drop-jawed. He stared at the clock, half past ten, well past Joseph's bedtime, and added his funny head-scratching, Laurel-and-Hardy confused look. His whole wonderful, irresistible shtick. He winked, and jerked his head towards the birdcage where Peter was busily rubbing his beak on a cuttlefish bone.

"Clever wee birds, budgies, eh?" Joseph smiled. Grandpa's antics were the one thing that could always be relied on to crack a smile on Joseph Kirkland's poker face. "Eeny meeny miny moe," he said, picking a briar from the pipe rack on the hearth. He fumbled about his person for something that wasn't there. Stuck his hand down the side of the chair. Whatever it was wasn't there either. Here was an excuse – not that he needed an excuse – to burst into song, "Come out, come out, wherever you are…"

Joseph handed Grandpa his leather tobacco pouch. It had been on the back of the chair all along. Grandpa wagged his finger at it, *tut tut tutting*, like Gran. "Naughty wee thing. I cannot let you out my sight for one minute." He opened the pouch, eyes darting this way, that way, like it was filled with who knows what secrets, that had to be hidden from who knows who – Gran – then stuck his big beak of a nose

inside and inhaled, "Aaah, *Bisto*!" He stuck the pouch under Joseph's nose. This was his grandson's cue,

"Aaaah, *Bisto!*" whispered Joseph, breathing in the aromatic blend of ready rub and flake he'd helped Grandpa mix. Joseph lit a taper off the top bar, something he'd never do if Gran was in the room. *Do you want to electrocute yourself?* Grandpa held it to his pipe, sucking and puffing louder and harder than necessary, a pantomime puff, and extinguished the burning taper on his tongue. It sizzled. He smacked his lips, gave his nose a conspiratorial tap and, with a flourish of his long bony fingers, flicked both the off switches on his hearing aids and sank into his chair, content as a baby with a bottle. Thick yellow pee trickled down the catheter tube. His half-shut eyes rolled and flickered and away he went, deep down into his thoughts or his thoughtlessness or wherever it was he went these days. And that was it. Curtain down. End of show.

Gran came back in, clutching two mugs and a saucer with a couple of digestive biscuits. "Ach, you and your weeds," she said, wrinkling her nose, "There's your tea." But Grandpa was miles away and Gran stood for a moment, lost. "I've no clean pyjamas so you can just…" Her tongue rummaged around for an acceptable alternative to *nude*, *naked* or *nothing on,* "… sleep as you are. And I've no sheets either. You'll need to fling down a bath towel." She was not happy with this solution. Or with Joseph. But even so she thrust a mug into his hand, "Hot milk and honey." She frowned, "It'll help get you back to sleep. And you might as well take a digestive since they're there. He mouthed a *thank you*. "Aye, well…" and detecting a softening in herself, she readjusted her stony-faced armour.

Grandpa's head was flung back, his mouth wide open like a basking shark grazing for plankton. She put his tea on the mantelpiece just in case, and performed what was now a nightly ritual, the clamping of the catheter tube and the removal of the bulging bag. Grandpa snored a loud snore, like he'd just been deflated and Gran sighed a big sigh like she'd also been deflated. Joseph was still standing in the doorway

nibbling like a mouse on his biscuit, "Och away and sit down if you're going to eat that. No crumbs on that carpet mind. Then bed. Have you said your prayers?" He nodded. "Aye well, you can say them again, it'll do you no harm."

She went away to empty the bag. Her lips were moving again, searching for a combination of common words and scripture that would finally move Joseph to do the thing he must do, now he was at *that age*. Something other than her daily mantra; *Have you been Saved? Have you asked the Lord Jesus Christ into Your Heart?* But she was done in.

Joseph finished his biscuit and was about to go when Grandpa's pipe fell from his hand, spilling a dod of smouldering tobacco onto the *Templeton & Kilhaugh Gazette* that lay on the carpet. Joseph felt compelled to stay and watch. To see if it would take.

The blankets were rough against his skin. Might not that be a good thing? Like those monks his teacher Miss O'Donnell spoke of, who wore horsehair shirts as an act of … an act of *what was that* again? But it was a Catholic thing. Maybe it was as well he couldn't remember.

Several times he slipped over the edge into sleep and each time something snatched him back into wakefulness. A whisper. A falling. A shadow or shape seen through the corner of a half-closed eye. Through the lid of a closed eye even.

I'm not going to think about the Devil… I'm not going to think about the Devil. And the more he tried not to think about the Devil, the more he thought about the Devil. And the more he tried not to think about the thing that had to be said, the thing he was avoiding saying; *God and Jesus I want you to come into my heart* … the more he thought about the Devil.

Sorry.

He put the big light back on. His eyes were that sore. He

was that tired. No wonder, with all these sleepless nights. The bed-wetting. The recurring nightmares. All the rest. He got up and looked out the window at the moonlit December night. The stars were out in force.

The Plough. It was the only constellation Joseph could name. Grandpa knew them all. Or so he said. "Aye, I could tell you all the names. Orion's Belt. O'Brian's Braces. When I could see them. The only Milky Ways and Galaxies I can see these days are the chocolate ones at the back of Moretti's ice cream van. Ho ho."

There was no one down on the back lane. Sometimes, late on a Friday or Saturday night, you'd see folk on their way home from Faulkner's Public House, noisy with songs, jokes and *language.* Uncle Mathew too once, with a drunk girl who sang loudly. A pop song as well. Right outside Gran's:

> *The only one who could ever reach me, was the son of a preacher man…*

Gran and Grandpa's room was at the other side but even so. Uncle Mathew tried to haul the girl down the lane out of range, but she was that drunk and floppy it was impossible to get her to go in any particular direction. The girl was young, much younger than Uncle Mathew. Joseph had seen her around in her Templeton Secondary uniform. Uncle Mathew was as nervous as he was angry. He kept looking up at Gran's house and hissing at the girl, *God sake, will you just shut it*, looking and hissing. She thought it was all hilarious, a proper grown-up man scared of his mum. She stagger-danced around him, clutching her half-bottle, singing away, laughing and dancing, not a care in the world:

> *The only boy who could ever teach me, was the son of a preacher man…*

Uncle Mathew looked like he was going to hit her. He

slapped his hand over her mouth. She did not like that at all and tried to pull it off. But he ignored her and made another attempt at dragging her away. That's when he saw Joseph's face at the back window and gave him a *I'm warning you* look. There was no need. Joseph knew better than to report anything Uncle Mathew said or did. Two years ago he'd shamed himself after overhearing Uncle Mathew nattering to his policeman pal, Duncan Carmichael,

"Are you *shaggin*' anybody?" he'd said.

Joseph was a million miles away from boys his age. An innocent abroad in the village he was born in. It was the first time he could recall hearing this word. There had been no dirty laugh accompanying it to suggest it might be *language*. And so later that afternoon, when Gran, Auntie Ishbel, Mrs Agnew, Mrs Sangster and a couple of ladies from the Hall were in the living room having tea and biscuits after the women's prayer meeting, Joseph didn't think twice about walking in quite the thing and asking,

"What does *shagging* mean?"

No one uttered a word. No one looked at each other. The air was congealed with embarrassment. Diluting it with light-hearted laughter was not a possibility. In that mortifying silence Joseph intuitively knew what must be done. He must leave immediately. He must he never speak of this incident. He must convince himself, as they would convince themselves, that the incident had never taken place. That the word had not been spoken. Now if Joseph didn't understand a word or wasn't quite sure about something – which was most things – he kept it to himself.

Here was something new though. A big dog had appeared and sat itself down beneath the lamp post. Some kind of shaggy mongrel thing with a bit of collie? A bit of Alsatian around its muzzle? Black or brown? It was hard to tell in the dark, under the moonlight and the yellow lamplight.

It wasn't one he'd seen before. It looked up at the window, head tilted to one side. Was it looking at Joseph? Maybe it was thinking the same thing, *is that boy looking at me?* Lots of children at school had dogs. He'd see them following their young masters and mistresses to school, sitting outside the shops, slapping their tails on the ground anxiously waiting for them to come out, missing their masters and mistresses so much. And when they reappeared the devoted dogs would pant and bark and run around in circles, so excited, like their masters and mistresses had been away for weeks and they'd gaze at them… adoringly.

"That must be so nice that."

There was a man there now, in the shadows, close to the wall. He was wearing a bunnet so Joseph couldn't see his eyes or his face properly. He was heavily bearded, he could see that much, and had a tweed jacket on and big boots. A workie? Or a farmer. The man clicked his fingers just the once and the dog pressed itself against his legs. So it was the man's dog. Well trained. A working dog. For hunting. Sheep maybe. Or just plain loyal and loving. A *do anything for you* dog. A *lay down and die for you* dog. A *loyal companion*. He made a roll-up, one-handed, like a cowboy, lit it and blew a smoke ring up into the lamplight beam like in that film…? Archie would mind the name of it. He belonged to the night this man. He carried on down the lane. No, he *moseyed on down*, roll-up stuck in the corner of his mouth like the black-clad gunslinger Kit Mossman in the Zachary T. Mayfield books, that Grandpa read in secret and kept hidden away under his side of the mattress. The dog looked up, sniffed the air, like it was adding *Bespectacled Boy at Back Lane Bedroom Window* to its canine directory – or map – of interesting scents, and padded off after its master.

He was drifting away. At last. Just let go. Just give in. *Oh please…* Almost there. But then the Devil whispered in his

ear and… Bang! He was back, fumbling for the light and wiping cold sweat from his neck and sternum. If only he could lure that black dog into his room, get it to sleep on the end of his bed, one ear cocked, one eye open. A dog like that would keep the scary things at bay. Then Joseph would sleep. No problem.

Up again. Sitting in the toilet now. He didn't need to, but it was bright in there. There were no Bible things and he liked the coolness of the linoleum under his bare feet. A shiny black beetle was trying to crawl up the inside of the bath but it kept slipping back down. Up and down, up and down, up and down. It would not give up. How had it got in? Up the plug hole? Should he flush it away? What if it had fallen in? What if it wasn't the kind of creature that could swim? But then if he left it there, struggling…

From the lobby Joseph could hear Gran praying her urgent fearful prayers. She'd be on her knees, which wasn't easy these days, and Grandpa in no fit state to lend a hand,

"Lord, forgive me. I know I'm not an educated woman."

Just as Joseph was forever saying *sorry* to God and Jesus for the error of his ways, so Gran was forever apologising for her lack of schooling. She didn't talk much about her childhood but her wee sister, Great Auntie Abi – *enough of the "great"* – had told Joseph that right after their father died, their mother had immediately taken not well. "Ach, mother was aye *fragile* at the best of times. Then when father passed away, well… your Gran was the eldest, so she had to take it all on. She was barely twelve year old. But that's how it was then. There was none of this, *Oh how will I cope*? You just coped. I was only a toddler. Your Uncle Edward just a year older. Aye, me and my big sister might no see eye to eye on some things. Most things. But she did good by us. And she never complained. Not back then," she laughed, "Made up for it since mind. Don't you dare tell her I said that."

"I know I can't mind the scriptures as well as I should," said Gran, "but please Lord, tell me what to do. What to say. So that when the Day of Judgement comes you shall not find him wanting."

"I will. I promise." It was inaudible, Joseph Kirkland's promise, the promise of someone not wanting their promise to be heard, by Gran or by God.

Another hymn popped into his head"

Don't turn the dear Saviour away / Oh think of that great judgement day

One that Gran was fond of singing at him these days:

Oh think of your fate, when the Judge says "too late"/ Don't turn the dear Saviour away.

The fact of the matter is Joseph Kirkland was afraid. Afraid of *not* being Saved. Afraid of *being* Saved. Afraid of the transformation that would surely occur the moment he uttered those words, *Jesus! God! I want you to come into my heart*!

"It will be glorious!" says Gran.

"Glorious!" says Mister Agnew.

"Glorious!" says Uncle Andrew.

"Oh it will be glorious!" says everybody who's ever been Saved.

But *what*? *What* would be glorious? What would this "it" feel like? Would he still *be* Joseph Kirkland? When his cousin Jenny was Saved three years ago, she changed. It was hard to say how. But she was different. Noticeably so. More hesitant. More serious. It was hard to put a finger on it, but there was no doubt that she was absolutely not the same happy-go-lucky Jenny she'd been before. She had been altered.

Gran was crying again, getting herself into a right old state. And frightened. Terrified. And rightly so because Hell was not just some metaphor for something, anything. Hell

was real. Solid. Tooth and bone. Flesh and blood. Fire and brimstone. *Eternal Damnation.* Actual *Burning Embodied Souls* in the actual *Fires of Hell. Weeping and Wailing* and *Gnashing their Teeth*. Getting poked and prodded, gouged and goaded by a larger-than-life pitchfork- wielding goat-horned Satan. *For All Eternity.* Not a fortnight or so of discomfort or despair. Not even *Forever*. For *More than Forever*. And one of those tortured souls might well be her own beloved grandson. And he really was beloved, despite her tutting and her sighing and her head shaking. So of course she was terrified. How could she not be terrified?

"Please *please,* guide me Lord."

It was too much, too painful, to see her like this. And it was Joseph's fault. It was in his gift to do something about it. A few simple words. That's all it would take.

He rattled mechanically through his *Gentle Jesus*:

"*Gentle Jesus meek and mild look upon this little child, pity my simplicity, suffer me to come to thee, fain I would to thee be brought, dearest Lord, forbid it not in thy Kingdom of thy Grace, give this little child a place.* God bless Gran, God bless Grandpa, God bless Uncle Andrew and Auntie Ishbel, Auntie Abi, God bless Uncle Hector, God bless … God bless…" He couldn't remember who he'd God Blessed and who he hadn't so he skipped to the end, "God bless those that I don't like and God bless those that don't like me. Amen."

And he was asleep.

And like the weekly serial at the *Saturday Morning Pictures,* Joseph's dream continued exactly from where it had left off.

CHAPTER THREE

Joseph Kirkland's First Dream: Episode Two

"Joseph Kirkland has been Saved," drawled the ruddy-faced wee man with the mutton chops. Mister Agnew was even more animated than in *Episode One*. His arm trembled beneath the great slab of Bible he was struggling to hold one-handed above his head like an American penitent at a Billy Graham evangelical Crusade. "JOSEPH KIRKLAND HAS BEEN SAVED!"

The crowd murmured its approval. *Crowd?* In the Hall? He wiped the condensation from his spectacle lens. Yes, all the benches were filled; everyone who was anyone in Joseph's life, its centre or periphery, had turned out to bear witness. Uncle Andrew of course, and Auntie Ishbel, his cousin Jenny and her big brother Sam in uniform were there. Auntie Abi, Uncle Hector and Uncle Mathew, who never went to the Hall any more, were there. Miss O'Donnell and the next-door neighbour Mrs Merryweather were there. As were old mamma Moretti, the recently deceased old man Moretti, and they were all Roman Catholics. And of course Archie Truman, who'd probably never been in a place of worship in his life, was there, along with his sister wee Maggie, and in case there was any doubt that this was a dream, Archie was clutching the latest edition of *The Believer*. Even that bearded man from the lane was there, who Joseph knew nothing about, yet here he was claiming a place in Joseph's dream. He still couldn't see the man's face properly, it was still in shadow, but it was him all right, and the black dog too, lying under the bench at the back, beside the door, as if they hadn't yet decided whether they were going to stay or go.

Blessed Assurance Jesus is Mine / Oh what a foretaste of Glory Divine

The singing increased in volume and passion, Auntie Ishbel improvised a series of impossibly loud and dissonant horror-film chords on the harmonium and Uncle Andrew hauled open an impossibly large horror-film trapdoor that led deep down into a horror-film cavernous rock- hewn pool, where Mister Agnew awaited him, black rubber waders over his cavalry twill suit. He reached out his arms to guide Joseph down the steps but the baptismal gown was so long Joseph's foot got caught in the hem and he stumbled into the pool. The water went right up to his chin. The shock of the fall and the iciness of the water made him gasp,

Heir of Salvation, Purchase of God / Born of His Spirit, washed in His Blood.

Joseph shivered. His teeth chattered. This hymn didn't help, it was that dark and Old Testament. Why would Blind Fanny Crosby, who lived her entire life in darkness for goodness sake, want to write such gloomy hymns as *Blessed Assurance* and *Rescue the Perishing*? Why couldn't they sing a bright and buoyant cheery children's chorus; *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam, Jesus Loves Me This I Know*, *My Cup's Full and Running Over, Give Me Oil in My Lamp Keep Me Burning, This Little Light of Mine*, *I'm H.A.P.P.Y.*

Mister Agnew cupped Joseph's face in both his hands,

"When THE LORD calls him home THIS BOY will NOT be FOUND WANTING!" His voice reverberated all around the cavern, "When his time comes – and that time may be TONIGHT or it may be TOMORROW but you may BE CERTAIN his time WILL come – HE WILL be READY! For it is WRITTEN in the BOOK of…"

Joseph didn't find out what was written or in which book, because Mister Agnew had pulled him under the water so violently he'd no time to take his specs off or draw breath. Mister Agnew's voice was distorted now, a drowning voice. Was Mister Agnew drowning? Somebody was. Joseph eyes bulged. His lungs felt like they were going to explode.

Is this it then? Is this me getting Saved?

"Big deep breaths," said Mister Agnew, "don't fight it," except it wasn't Mister Agnew anymore, it was the anaesthetist from Templeton Eye Infirmary, "Good boy," said the anaesthetist, "that's it, just breathe and count backwards from ten. And… ten… nine…"

I don't want this. I don't want it.

"Just breathe," said the fair-haired pretty young barefooted woman in the yellow cotton flower print dress, the one from the Pre-Tribulational Rapture poster. Her hair was perfect, and wasn't that odd her being underwater and all?

This is my story, this is my song
Praising my Saviour all the day long
Perfect submission, all is at rest
I in my Saviour am happy and blest

"Breathe Joseph," she said, quite calm, "A big deep breath." She was Scottish, not American as he'd imagined, and she was laughing, like it was just a game they were playing, and it felt like that now, playful. "Look at you, my wee man," she said, "my wee soldier. You'll be all brand new, so you will. Come on. Wee soldier. You'll be fine, so you will."

And he would have, just because she said so, but that was never how this dream went.

The trapdoor slammed shut. And then there was blackness. There was no leg-scalding radiator, no high window nightmare escape to leap from. Joseph inhaled the ice-cold water deep into his lungs. And there was emptiness. And then …

CHAPTER FOUR

He That Believeth Not Shall Be Damned

"Thank you Lord for our nice breakfast," said Joseph.

"Sausages are the boys, eh?" Grandpa gazed admiringly at the two grilled links on Joseph's plate. He was awful wheezy this morning, his breathing more laboured, his skin more jaundiced; not far off the colour of his catheter bag. Gran shushed him like a librarian but Grandpa was impervious, "The old bangeroos eh? The old laughin links, ho ho. The old surprise bags, eh mum?"

"For goodness sake." She waved her hand in front of his face, overarticulating ev-er-y syll-ab-le, "Jo-seph – is – in – the – mid-dle – of – giv-ing – thanks."

There were two crustless toast triangles on Grandpa's plate, and an egg cup filled with half a dozen tablets of various shapes, sizes and colours. He ignored the tablets and played with the toast triangles, shifting them this way and that as though trying to solve some complex geometric puzzle.

Gran often asked Joseph to *give thanks* and he always felt uncomfortable. This morning he felt more awkward than usual, more insincere, like he was doing a not very convincing impersonation of Uncle Andrew or his cousin Jenny.

"And also, Lord…" he searched for something profound, "we pray for all the folk who are starving in the world, in places like … Africa and… India and…" He tried to think of other places where folk might be starving, and failing that went on to cover other international issues, "and for folk in East Germany and … Russia and … other countries where folk aren't allowed to give thanks. So … thank you Lord for …" He opened his eyes to remind himself what he was giving thanks for, "…these lovely sausages and toast and tea that you … and Gran …" for surely she should be credited for her part, "put here … for us … to eat. Amen."

"Amen," said Gran hesitantly, not sure what to make of his effort. She tapped the side of Grandpa's egg cup, "Mind – you – don't – for-get – those – tab-lets."

"Sausages are the boys though, eh? *Surprise bags* right enough, eh mum? Ho ho!" Joseph loved how Grandpa actually said *ho ho* and *ha ha* when he laughed, without it sounding fake. "Mind? Dearie me. Eh? Ho ho."

"Dad!"

"You never knew what was in them," he was shouting again, "Eh mum? So you didn't?"

She was shouting too now, trying to let him know he was shouting.

"Dad!"

"In the war. Could've been anything in those sausages, so it could. Could've been mice! Plenty of mice around, eh? Ho ho! Wi' all those cats killed. And the doo men wi' their pigeons too, mind that? Och, yon was a crying shame that but, eh?" He allowed himself a moment's *in memoriam* sadness for the doo men and their pigeons, slaughtered for the war effort. "Mind you. Mouse meat! Eh? Ho ho." He placed one hand on his heart and gestured grandly towards the remaining sausage on Joseph's plate, "Wee cowrin tim'rous sausage."

Gran stirred her tea, tutting at him for even *mis*quoting Robert Burns at table. Grandpa had told that story, made that joke, umpteen times, but Joseph liked it when Grandpa reminisced about the war, or the time when Gran and Grandpa were ages with himself; an extraordinary notion. He'd liked to have been pals with Grandpa when he was wee. Gran? Maybe not so much.

Sorry.

Gran, though she'd never admit it, liked them too, the old stories, the funny stories, and even with all her tut tut tutting and her interruptions, she had to let him finish.

"And by the way," she said, "I made that toast special for you. Nice and soft and buttery. There's more butter than bread in that toast."

Grandpa held the toast up to one of his many imaginary television cameras,

"Toast, the breakfast of choice for retired gentlemen. And meh word, doesn't this toast just melt in yer mooth."

Gran covered up her wee grin with an exasperated sigh, and sighed again when he tore off the tiniest piece of toast and chewed on it forever.

"For goodness sake, will you just swallow it." Chewing was hard enough these days, swallowing was almost beyond him. "Daft old man." Grandpa cupped his ear, so she'd say it again, louder, "I said you're a *daft – old – man*."

"Begging your pardon? What did you say?"

"I said…"

Grandpa winked at Joseph.

"Oh, so the two of you are in cahoots now?" she said, "Didderum and Dodderum, that's what I should call the pair of you. Fine, that's just fine."

"Maybe another wee splesh of the old Derjeeling mum? Eh? To wesh doon the auld toastie boys. Eh do believe thet tea might just do the trick?"

"The only tricks round here are the tricks you're up to. Same tricks you're teaching him. Think I'm as daft as you're deaf? Aye, deaf when it suits you that is." She shook her head but another wee hint of a smile had begun to creep around her mouth. "I don't know."

Grandpa's playfulness was infectious. It took her out of herself. Made her feel almost at peace with this world. And she loved him for that. And she got terribly annoyed with him for that. And with herself.

The second she was out the room, Grandpa emptied his toast onto Joseph's plate.

"The Queen of play pieces that." The camera rolled and he was off again, "I say chaps! Do my eyes deceive me or does that young fellow have the Royal cold toast play piece?"

Joseph wrapped the toast in two sheets of old Gazette and shoved it in the pocket of his school shorts just as Gran came

back. She saw Grandpa's plate was empty but said nothing. Grandpa picked up the newspaper from his lap, already open at the racing section, slid his specs down the end of his nose and puckered his lips, for another turn,

"Thenk eh'll jast ketch ap with the latest nyoos," he said, in his mock Scotch posh that he deliberately kept letting slip. He removed a pencil stub from behind his ear and circled a few racehorses, kidding on he was reading the news, "Meh goodness," he said, "they say thehr's a mehn lehndit oan the moon. Well he'll be awricht fur his cheese sehnd-whiches."

Gran never made any direct reference to Grandpa's weekly trip to the bookies, or to his dominoes at the British Legion, and anyway, he hadn't been for months, not since he'd taken not well. She stirred her tea, and stirred and stirred, thinking and stirring. "That's the only news worth reading," she said, as she always said, looking up, as she always looked up, at the big family Bible on top of the harmonium. More stirring. "Let me see your wrists." Joseph pushed up his sleeves. "Och for goodness sake, you and your scratching, look at the state of you." She shook her head, "I'll get more ointment up at the chemist." More stirring, so much stirring, "As if I don't have enough to do." She picked up a piece of her own toast, looked at it and put it back down. Her appetite had gone the same way as Grandpa's. Not that she had much of an appetite at the best of times. Most Hall folk were as thin as rakes. As though fat were a sin. As if *eating* was a sin. *Descended from the House of Jack Sprat*, according to Grandpa. Taking too much pleasure from eating was definitely a sin. Folk from the Hall did not *dine*, they *ate* and when they gave thanks for their *daily bread*, it was not because their daily bread had *an excellent nutty crust* or a *wonderfully light and airy texture* or *an unexpected depth of flavour,* but because it was necessary to sustain life, to keep them here on this insignificant planet just long enough to learn to love Him, to spread His word, so that others might love Him, so that those others might in turn spread His word. And so on and so on and on… till the Day of Judgement.

Gran took a deep breath. Joseph held his. He dreaded what was coming. Grandpa too. The song-n-dance man had picked up his catheter bag and was quietly singing,

"*Pardon me boy…*" while doing a slow softshoe shuffle over to the budgie cage, "*… is that the Chatanooga choo choo?*"

"Well?" said Gran. Joseph looked at Grandpa.

"*Yes yes… track twenty-nine…*"

"Forget about him and his antics."

"*…boy you can gimme a shine.*"

"You know fine well what I'm going to say but I'll say it anyway. Are you *ready*?"

Joseph got as far as opening his mouth.

"Ach, you can save your breath. Oh I know exactly what you're going to say, *I will be Gran*, *I'm going to Gran, tomorrow Gran, the next day Gran.* And what if there isn't a tomorrow? Or a next day? Mm? I mean with the world the way it is … all this palaver right now with … atomic bombs and… not that I know much about it …what if He decides to call you in the middle of night? Or on the way to school? Or right now. Right here." She tapped the table. "At this breakfast table? And you're *not ready*? You're found *wanting*? What then?"

"Wee yella budgie," Peter sat all of a tremble on the end of Grandpa's finger. "Who thinks he's a wee yella canary then? *I taut I taw a poody tat, I did, I did, I did…* "

"What'll you say to Him then?"

Peter took a toast crumb from between Grandpa's lips.

"Clever wee birdie."

Gran's face registered her usual revulsion, but she bit her lip.

"*Lord I was going to*? Is that what you'll say? Mmm?" And she also burst into song, *"Almost persuaded, now to believe*." It was a trick she had in common with Grandpa, the ability to seamlessly segue from speech to song and back again, "*Almost persuaded Christ to receive…*"

"Fly away Peter." Grandpa threw the budgie into the air. It flapped around the room, "Fly away Paul." He looked at

the finger on his other hand, then at Joseph with his clown surprise, "No Paul?"

Gran ploughed on. She was not going to let Grandpa upstage her:

> "*Seems now some soul to say,*
> *Go, Spirit, go Thy way*
> *Some more convenient day*
> *On Thee I'll call.*"

She stopped, sat up straight, clasped her hands, ready to segue back into scripture, "*He that Believeth and is Baptised Shall be Saved; but he that Believeth Not Shall Be Damned*; Mark sixteen, verse sixteen." She took a sip of tea. Her mouth was dry. It often was. And no wonder. Who wouldn't be parched with all that singing and scripture quoting. And fear.

Joseph spoke, cannily, cautiously; he was only trying out the words, a rehearsal, not yet intended for a full public performance,

"I … did."

"Did what?"

"I …asked Him…"

"?"

Joseph dithered for a second or two, only now realising he was centre stage and it was too late to retreat into the wings (Gran would never have used such figures of speech; theatre, like all entertainment, was one of the many Gateways to Hell).

"I asked God… Jesus…."

Gran carefully put down her cup, not daring to take her eyes off him in case he or the moment shattered. Or disappeared. Joseph didn't play the part particularly well. It was gawky, all twitching fits and starts, but Gran was the best kind of audience, willing – no, *desperate* – to suspend her disbelief.

"…to come into my heart…"

She was rubbing away at her knees. No wonder. She'd spent who knows how many hours on those knees, cleaning floors. And praying. For this moment. When she spoke, her voice was soft without its usual sermonising edge, acutely aware perhaps that the grandson had something of the small frightened woodland creature about him. He might scurry off into the undergrowth, if she was too abrupt,

"Son, are you telling me that you've been Saved?" Joseph nodded. Oh what he would've given to be able to scurry off into the undergrowth right now. "That's what you're telling me?"

He nodded again. Nodding was something he did a lot of. One of his *things*. Grandpa had his winking, his nose tapping, his songs and his telly adverts. Gran had her head shaking, her hand wringing, her sighing and her scripture quoting. Joseph had his vacant stare and his nodding (and his burning, but that was secret). Under normal circumstances, she'd have remarked upon it — *You and your nodding, that head will fall off one of these days, with all that nodding* – but these were not normal circumstances. This was a dream – *her* dream – come true. A prayer – *her* prayer – answered.

"Dad!" She so wanted Grandpa to be a part of this glorious moment, "Dad!"

But Grandpa was in the middle of a Mills Brothers calypso number:

> "*Yellow bird yellow bird, up high in banana tree…*"
> "Oh for goodness sake, will you … dad!"
> "*Yellow bird yellow bird, you sit all alone like me…*"

That daft old man and all his budgie nonsense would not ruin this moment. She wrapped her bony wee self around her grandson and sobbed. Oh the relief of it all, the relief, her tears running off Joseph's otter-slick Brylcreemed hair.

"Och Joseph. Och son. You've no idea. Honestly… Joseph… son…" But the Good News had to be spread, "I'll

away and phone your Uncle Andrew and your Auntie Ishbel. And Mister Agnew of course, he'll need to know." Her voice trailed off into the lobby, "And the Sangsters. Uncle Andrew can tell them. And your Auntie Abi and your Uncle Hector. I know they don't go anymore but… hello? Oh Ishbel, pet, oh pet, wait till I tell you…"

She needn't have worried about spreading the Good News. Mrs Merryweather, the "poor misguided catholic" from next door would see to that. She worked up at the Telephone Exchange and was no doubt listening in at this very moment. *Watch what you say on that telephone*, Gran would say, *unless you want that old gossipmonger from next door to know your business*. But this morning Gran did not give two hoots about that old gossipmonger. Indeed she wanted that old gossipmonger to tell Kilhaugh and the world, because Kilhaugh and the world would be all the better for hearing it; *Joseph Kirkland has been Saved!*

Oh Joseph, Joseph, Joseph.

He pushed the door to. He could not thole it. Gran crying tears of terror at the possibility of a very real Damnation was awful enough, but crying tears of joy at a sham Salvation? And it *was* a sham Salvation. Oh, Joseph tried to convince himself that what he'd told Gran was not in fact a lie, merely the truth in advance. After all, wasn't he genuinely *intending* to be Saved? Of course. No two ways about it. And soon he would be. Very soon.

Tonight. I'll be Saved tonight. I will. I really will.

And then the truth will have caught up with the lie and rendered the lie null and void. It'll be as though there had been no lie in the first place. Hip hip hurray!

Gran was wet-eyed and tingling with euphoria from tip to toe of her arthritic body. But in control. She belonged after all, to Kilhaugh Gospel Hall, a picture postcard of Scottish sobriety and restraint. Yes, she was a great admirer of the

charismatic American evangelist Billy Graham. But the kind of abandonment on display at some of that man's Evangelical Crusades was not for her or hers. To simply sing His praises was more than enough for her and her newly Saved grandson. She sat down at the harmonium; the boy deserved a treat.

"You choose," she said, nostrils flared with jubilation, pointing at a well-thumbed copy of *The Good Shepherd Pamphlet of Popular Hymns & Choruses*. This was Gran's treat, and good practice for eternity.

What will Heaven be like? Joseph once asked her.

That's beyond the powers of our imagination, she'd replied, but imagined anyway. *It'll be glorious. Sitting at the Lord's feet, singing His praises all day long. For all eternity*.

He never asked again.

Joseph considered a serious hymn, to show he was a serious boy, but the first one he thought of was the last one he wanted, *Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel,* the only Christmas carol he knew that referenced *Satan's Tyranny* and the *Depths of Hell*. No. And anyway, Gran had such a queer and almost festive-free relationship with Christmas, it was best not to go there.

"*Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam*."

Gran pumped the harmonium's threadbare carpeted pedals.

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam
To shine for Him each day
In every way try to please Him
At home, at school, at play…

Joseph sang in his usual low mumble just above the level of human audibility. But Gran's high theremin tremolo was plenty voice for both of them. It could cut through anything.

A sunbeam, a sunbeam…

Even Grandpa's deafness. He was fiddling like mad with his big flesh-pink plastic hearing aids, trying to turn them down or turn them off…

… until he realised, they were already switched off.

A sunbeam, a sunbeam… I'll be a sunbeam for Him…

The phone rang,

"That'll be Mister Agnew," she was all wee-girl excited, "about your Baptism."

My Baptism. Joseph's breakfast curdled in his stomach.

Grandpa's lungs emitted a low whistling sound as he stroked Peter's head. He was unaware, or so it seemed, of the *Glorious* goings-on all around him. Joseph envied Grandpa's deafness. He'd inherited his lazy eye, maybe he'd get his deafness too. Recently Miss O'Donnell had been wondering if Joseph might already be going deaf and had sent him to the school hearing lady on one of her once in a blue moon visits.

"Deafness isn't your problem young man," said the hearing lady, "it's daydreaming."

Oh to be deaf, dumb and blind right now. Or daydreaming. Oh to be utterly insensible to everyone and everything right now. Grandpa was singing again, one of his *heathen music hall songs,* shaking his Swan Vestas like a maraca,

While you've a Lucifer to light your fag, smile boy, that's the style!
What's the use of worrying, it never was worthwhile, so…

Joseph sniffed the sulphurous sandpaper on the side of the matchbox, tasted its tang with the tip of his tongue, struck a match and held it over the pipe. Grandpa sucked and puffed half a dozen times to get it going, then tilted his head towards yet another imaginary television camera – they were everywhere,

"A wee bit a' beccy," he said with a wink, a lopsided grin and a smooth suave burr, "It's the perfect way, to stert your day!" and blew a plume of smoke out the side of his mouth.

Joseph loved his pretend telly adverts. Gran hated anything to do with telly. *That box. It's just one more Gateway to Hell.* Unless of course *He* was making some special use of it, such as a live broadcast of one of Billy Graham's *All Scotland Evangelical Crusades*.

Joseph tried a smile for Grandpa's sake. Such a phoney smile, but Grandpa didn't notice, or chose not to, or maybe Joseph Kirkland had already turned into a top-notch liar. Grandpa lost himself in pipe smoke. Joseph lit another match and stuck it in his mouth, holding it between his teeth, minding what Grandpa said about exhaling all the air, *so the match doesn't flare up and burn the roof of your mouth*. Joseph tried and failed *not* to exhale.

"Open that windae, eh son?"

Joseph tugged open one of the curtains and pulled up the sash window a couple of inches. The cold blast was sudden, shocking.

"Oh my, that'll blaw the cobwebs away, eh? Be a pal and get us a chair son. And put my tea on the windowsill, eh?" When Joseph had attended to all his needs Grandpa sat himself down facing the window, "Ho ho. The VIP treatment, eh?" leant back and rubbed his hands together, "Right then, when's the big picture start?"

Grandpa's blithe banter was no match for Joseph's dread, a feeling that intensified to near apocalyptic proportions when he looked outside. A dense and dirty grey fog had descended, rendering the front path almost invisible. Even the street light was no more than a hazy glow.

"Oh my, yon's a right auld rouk, eh?" Agnew's Paper Works had completely disappeared and it was just across the road. "A real pea-souper, eh?" He added a cheeky wink, "Fact it's more like yer Gran's porridge than pea soup, eh son? Ho ho."

That wasn't the worst of it. The fog was drifting into the living room, clinging like candyfloss to whatever it came in contact with. It had already formed a thick miasma all around Grandpa,

"You daft old man!" shouted Gran, waving her hand through this poisonous halo, trying to disperse it, "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Don't shoot, ah'm a comin' out," he said, surrendering his pipe.

"And you," she said to Joseph, "with that chest of yours. Honestly, I can't let the pair of you out my sight for one minute without you getting up to some flumgummerie."

She could've and would've continued at length but for Joseph's *Good News*. So she let it go, though it took an effort. All this for her newly Saved grandson. This was the last thing Joseph wanted. Given the choice of guilt or Gran's fury, he'd've taken the fury any day. She pulled her cardigan tight around herself and slammed shut the window. It was only when she yanked the other curtain wide open that she saw the full extent of this unco fog.

"Oh, will you look at that!" She pressed her face against the glass, "I've never seen the likes. It's a wonder Ishbel never mentioned it." She footered with the hem of her apron, as if there was a secret something sewn inside, "There was nothing about fog on the wireless," she added, transferring her footering onto the hem of the curtain, like it was one continuous piece of material. "*Clear blue skies* and *crisp winter sunshine*, was their so-called prediction."

Gran put up with the wireless like she put up with the newspapers, *Fine, if you must, but between the hours of midnight on Saturday and midnight on Sunday they'll have no place in this house.* The morning Weather Forecast was the only time that Gran personally turned on the wireless. *Entertainment* programmes were in the same category as the television, the pictures, novels, jukeboxes, the theatre, pubs, bookies, dinner dances and other worldly distractions – *Gateways to Hell – flickering lights and fool's gold – glitz and glamour created by Satan to tempt and tantalize and take you further from God*. The fact that the weatherman kept getting it wrong only confirmed it; God made His own decisions about the weather

like He did with everything else in this world and it was a sin for man to even try to second-guess Him.

"Look at them with their weather balloons and their satellites and all the rest of their clever scientific accoutrements; still trying to build their Towers of Babel, so they are. *Nothing is restrained from them, which they have imagined to do*. Genesis eleven. It's all there, *Let us down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.* And now look at us. All this carry-on with the East Germans and the Russians and … all the rest of them … and is it any wonder?"

Grandpa made his way back to bed. Gran held up the empty egg cup: "Did – you – take – those – tab-lets?"

"Worry not Doctor Kirkland. Doon the old thrapple they all have gone." Cue for a song.

"*Red and yellow and blue and green, purple and orange and pink…*" he looked up at one of his telly cameras, "…and the ones that make ye wee wee wee… all the way home!" and with a sway of his hips and a wobble of his head, he shuffled off in something approximating a shimmy. She made disapproving noises, but seeing him like that, a wee spring in his step, the stuff of life still burning, or at least smouldering, how could she not feel a little joy?

"Right, school," she said, as stern as she could muster, "I'll get you a play piece."

Here was an opportunity to display some *honesty* and *integrity.* He showed her the toast,

"Grandpa said he couldn't eat it." Gran opened her mouth, but Joseph was on a roll with his *honesty* and *integrity*. "He does it a lot. With his toast. And his sausages and…"

She held her grandson's face tight and gave him that *Who are on earth are you?* look, that *Where on earth did you come from?* look. Joseph gave a wee shudder, her hands were that cold these days, like Grandpa's.

"The size of you," she said, "I'll need to stand on a chair soon." She was all teary again. "What am I like? I'm getting as

daft as dad." She took a hanky from her cardigan sleeve, blew her nose, tried to get herself together, "I've spoken to Mister Agnew and Uncle Andrew and … och son, everybody's that happy, so they are. It's the most wonderful thing, so it is." Joseph would've nodded if his head hadn't still been clamped between her hands.

"Mister Agnew's going to speak to you after Sunday school about the Baptism. I thought maybe a fortnight on Sunday but no, he's thinking next Saturday."

A week tomorrow? No. Please… It's okay. It'll be fine. I'll be ready. I will be ready.

She held up a sheet of paper with *Six Things To Remember* written across the top.

"Things Mister Agnew said you should be thinking about in the meantime. You get your school things and I'll read it out," Joseph went into the lobby for his duffle coat, Gran hard on his heels, holding the note at arm's length,

"One: *Habits; things you do that you shouldn't be doing*. Mmm, well, no shortage of things there, I don't wonder. Two: *Thoughts; things you're thinking that you shouldn't be thinking.* Yes, well – I dare say you'll know more about that than I do. Three: *Motives; why are you doing the things you're doing and saying the things you're saying?* And mind, it's not me who'll be watching. You can hide from us, but you can't hide from Him. And don't forget your mittens and your balaclava and whatnot, you've seen what it's like out there."

He got into such a fankle trying to get his balaclava over his specs that she snatched them off him in exasperation and shoved them into her apron.

"Four: *Companions; be careful of the company you keep*. '*Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the unGodly*.' Psalm one, verse one." She raised an eyebrow. She didn't need to say his name; Archie Truman was the unGodly companion she had in mind.

"*Five* …" a big rolled-up sheet of paper sticking out his school bag had caught her eye.

"It's homework …for Miss O'Donnell."

"Oh yes. And what homework has your Miss *O'Donnell* given you now?"

Gran always referred to Miss O'Donnell as *your* Miss *O'Donnell* or *this* Miss *O'Donnell,* and always emphasised the Irishness of her name and *Saint Rita's* as her place of worship. Like the Morettis and Mrs Merryweather, Miss *O'Donnell* was a *poor misguided* Catholic and so Gran was suspicious of her, of Joseph's fondness for her, and of anything she taught. Only a week ago Gran had discovered that this Miss *O'Donnell* had asked Joseph to learn a verse of *Tam o' Shanter*, for a school Burns Supper. Not the only vaguely sensible bit – which Gran seemed to be surprisingly familiar with – where Tam's wrath-nursing wife Kate warns him about the dangers of alcohol. No, it was the verse about warlocks and witches – dancing *in a church*! She'd no option but to write a note to his Miss O'Donnell.

While I disapprove of Robert Burns at the best of times, I'm not an unreasonable woman. If Joseph must take part, could he not at least say the Selkirk Grace? which she also disapproved of, it being written in Scots, *a rude language*. But at least it was a prayer.

"She asked us to draw a map."

"Oh did she, indeed?" Gran folded her arms like a procurator fiscal, "A map of *what*, may I ask?"

"The village."

"Kilhaugh?"

"She said we've just to put in special things… important things."

"Important things?" She laughed, a short disdainful laugh, "In Kilhaugh? Aye, well, that'll not take long. There's the Hall and there's here. And maybe the doctors and the police station. And the school maybe, though I sometimes wonder. Why, what are you thinking of putting in this map of yours?" Joseph shrugged. "Well I can tell you what you *won't* be putting in Miss *O'Donnell's* map. You won't be putting that

café in your map, and you won't be putting *Faulkner's Public House* in there either, and I don't see why you'd want to put in *Kilhaugh Episcopalian*, as you're never in there except for their jumble sale once a year, which is tomorrow by the way, so mind go and see if there's any winter things that might do you, especially any quality coats and suchlike handed in from up the hill. Anyway, you decide for yourself what needs to go into this map of yours, I'm not doing your homework for you. Just mind what I said though. What number are we at?"

"Five."

"*Reflect upon the suffering of Christ*. What *He* suffered for *me* and *you*." She handed him his specs, "And mind wear them. Or that skelly eye of yours will never straighten itself out. Although, if you ask me, it's already too late."

He went in to say cheerio to Grandpa. He looked sound asleep but when Joseph kissed him, he began speaking, slowly, eyes closed, as if in a trance,

"And if you mind your p's and q's,
your three times threes, your two times twos,
your musts and must nots, don'ts and do's,
your pardons, pleases and no thank yous. Then …"

They said the last line together, "You won't go far wrong."

Grandpa opened one eye and wheezed a *ho ho ho*. Gran tutted a *tut tut tut*.

"*Six. The Books of the Bible song*, which you've to do off by heart at *Sunbeams* next Friday. He says it'll *focus your mind*. Anyway you'll already know it from Sunday School."

He didn't know it, not really. He just echoed his cousin Jenny and the others.

Please don't ask me.

She didn't have to. She just stood there, waiting till he began his hesitant tuneless murmur, "*Gen-e-sis, Ex-o-dus… Lev-it-icus and Num-bers, Deuter-onomy, Joshua … Judges. Ruth, and Sam-u-el, Sam-u-el, Kings, Kings… Kings, Kings …* em *…Kings, Kings…*"

"Is that it? Aye, well, maybe if that Miss O'Donnell of

yours wasn't filling your head with Robert Burns and maps of Kilhaugh… away and get your Bible."

He'd held his Bible a thousand times but this morning it felt heavy and awkward. Gran took it from him and slipped Mister Agnew's list of *Things to Remember* under the fold-out Map of the Holy Land at the back.

"Now *there's* a map that'll mind you of things that need minding. You keep that Bible in your duffle coat pocket and do your Books whenever you've a minute. And straight to school. No wandering."

Joseph the Deceiver opened the door onto an unrecognizable morning. He pawed at the thick grey fog with his mitten, as though it was possible to scoop it up in lumps. When he got to the end of the path he turned round to wave cheerio to Gran, as he always did, but the house and everything and everybody had already faded away to nothing.

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The village of Kilhaugh and all its inhabitants are entirely imagined. This is a work of fiction.

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