

PROLOGUE: A DEED WITHOUT A NAME

This is so ~~rude and~~ shocking that I can hardly bear to write it down but write it I must, for I can keep it in no longer. When I say, shocking, I mean, shocking to *me*, because it's about me. As you don't know me, you probably will think my warning preface is exaggerated. I'm hoping that you'll tell me that my confession isn't so unusual and shocking after all.

Well, maybe I'd like you to be a *little* shocked.

But, who are 'you,' anyway? Who am I writing this for?

'We read to know we're not alone,' said a character in William Nicholson's *Shadowlands*. I think that we also *write* to know we're not alone in the hope that the very things we fear sharing will gain the approval and acceptance of a wider audience – particularly those things which we cannot share with anyone that we actually know.

This is meant to be utterly secret, this notebook I'm starting, but is there always the knowledge, even the desire, that one's words will not remain forever unseen? There's a catharsis in writing, a release...the need to express oneself, and even a slightly vain self consciousness – especially where one writes one's own story. As Matthew Arnold said of Jane Eyre, the author is in dialogue with herself.

There's almost a mission about writing – there is for me. I hope not only to help myself, but that my writing may somehow encourage and liberate someone else who is going through this. The fact that this confession may resonate with others is comfort enough.

I think I'm alone now, and hope to remain undisturbed. I am so afraid of this being found – or even of admitting this to myself – that I still hesitate. The secret involves someone not so very far away – and I could be discovered at any minute.

This seems such an odd place to make such a revelation – both incongruent and ironic. If I tell you (my imaginary collective audience) that I am in a convent, on our church retreat weekend, then what I am about to say will seem even worse.

If I told you that I am in love with a member of the clergy – that sounds kind of honourable, doesn't it? But wait – is it a priest? you ask, knowing that such a relationship is forbidden.

Yes, consummation of this love is prohibited. But I'm not Catholic, so I don't believe in celibacy for men of the cloth. I may have to believe in celibacy for other reasons.

If I say that I'm in love with my vicar, that sounds shocking, doesn't it – in a juicy gossip sort of way – but not wicked. Unless he is married.

I can confirm that is not the case. There is nothing in our circumstances that make this match controversial. But we couldn't ever wed. We couldn't have a proper legal Christian wedding in this country.

Isn't that ironic: a vicar can't marry in a church?!

Someone's at the door. Help! Where can I hide this?

I stuffed the notebook under my pillows, trying to resettle on my bed innocently. I picked up my Bible from the bedside table and opened it randomly on my lap, pretending to be in the middle of deep spiritual devotions.

Harriet came in. She's thirty – four years older than me – and about the same height (around 5'6"), attractive, feminine and curvy with long reddish brown hair.

What she would've seen is a thin (in places, not in others!) olive skinned creature called Elspeth – unusual by name and nature! I've got shortish straight dark hair, just enough to cover my ears and to kink up at the bottom; rather uneven features, the best of which are my chameleon eyes, green at present like my light khaki ethnic top and short skirt which shows my long legs.

"You look as if I've disturbed you," Harriet said.

"No you haven't," I replied unconvincingly, trying to work out if I'm glad to see her or not. Being alone with a guilty secret is never good for me, and I really like Harriet, she's in many ways my closest friend.

The notebook fell from under the headboard. I jumped.

"What was that?" asked Harriet.

"Oh, nothing, nothing." I sounded over nonchalant.

I sat up, trying to forget about the notebook which I could just see lying open on the floor through the gap between my pillow and my headboard.

Harriet looked intrigued, and wanted me to tell all. Sadly, I can't tell *even* her...
...especially her.

"It's nothing exciting," I lied, shrugging. "In fact, I was just wishing I was doing something more sociable. It's 9.30 on Saturday night and I'm away with friends!"

"I'm glad that you said that." Harriet rummaged in her bag and produced a packet of cigarettes and a bottle of wine. "Fancy a walk?"



The red Victorian Gothic convent was floodlit dramatically. There were still a few glowing yellow triangles, like pumpkin lanterns, in its lancet windows and the sounds of children were heard distantly. Harriet uncorked the wine bottle and passed it to me. "I hate coming to these things alone. Everyone else goes back to their rooms in couples, in their happy little family units."

"Well, *I'm* here. I'd be in just the same boat if I wasn't sharing with you."

"I know, Elspeth, and you're lovely, but don't you wish that you could go back to a nice husband?" That really hurt, as I was very happy to come away with a good friend, particularly as she had spent the preceding week persuading me not to pull out, for her sake. Her company is in no way inferior to a man's, but it seemed that mine is for her. She read my thoughts. "It's not that I'm not enjoying this with you...I just meant, well, that I wish I wasn't single any more. It's been three years now since I was with someone, and I can't keep on like this."

Harriet got out the cigarettes and lit one — it's the only time that I've ever seen her smoke.

"Want one?" she asked. I knew she thought I'd decline, but I was feeling a little rebellious and low.

"Alright," I said, which caused the desired look of surprise. "I feel like it's something I should cross off life's list of things to do." That list is still pretty long.

Harriet leant across to light my cigarette. I held it out to her between two fingers.

"You need to put it into your mouth and inhale," she corrected, amused but kind. "It doesn't matter." She popped it in my mouth with a brush of my chin and showed me how to draw it in and breathe it out.

"I'm not sure what I thought of that," I said after my first drag, trying hard not to splutter.

"You don't have to smoke it if you don't like it. There are better new frontiers to conquer in life than the cigarette."

"I'm glad I'm with you, and not in front of anyone else. You're a good person to have first times with."

There would be many more things that I would like to pioneer with her.

A nun scuttled past – the image instantly recalling the end of a powerful recent film where one such sister had scurried out into the night, forsaking all. How close I had come – and still might – to emulating her!

"Are they allowed to be up this late?" asked Harriet. "I'd hate to be a nun – there's so many things that you can't do – such as anything I brought in this bag with me."

She pulled out a book – *Lady Chatterley's Lover*! "Tailor made for the church weekend," she grinned.

"I've not read it, but I've heard about the legendary plaiting scene – and it's not *this* hair that they put the daisies in!" I tugged at my locks. We laughed wickedly.

"That's the main reason that I just couldn't be a nun!"

"This is what I like about you...you're honest, and not a boring Christian."

"Well, it's 'better to marry than to burn with passion,'" she quoted.

"I knew someone impatient who underlined that in her Bible...but she was younger at the time than I am now," I remembered sadly.

"We'll find someone, Els. At least the possibility's always there. If you were a nun, the door would be closed on principle."

"Sometimes I feel I may as well be a nun," I muttered. "At least they *chose* to be forever celibate."

"Elspeth! Don't say that. You'd hate being a nun. Anyhow, nuns aren't in the Bible."

"Neither are vicars, but we still have those."

Harriet was a little taken aback. "What are you saying? That vicars are wrong and unnecessary?"

"Well, we'd governed our little church without one for several years quite happily."

She stared at me. I *knew* I had to justify my remark.

"I know you're very pro-clergy...and I did think, before we got a vicar, that we didn't need one...but now our vicar is safely installed, well, it's the best thing to happen to our church since I've been there. And I've come to be — *we've all* come to be —" I amended quickly "very fond of our reverend."

Harriet smiled radiantly. "I'm pretty impressed with the vicar too."

I laughed and gave her a little push. But only you know how true my statement is!