

THE EXORCIST'S CHILDREN

Aaron Wayne

I.

Two priests walk into a pub. This isn't a joke, just to be clear. No, Hardale village isn't an especially good-humoured place and its pub least of all. Of the two priests that did walk into The Queen's Head on that particular February afternoon, only one would walk out. The other would never walk again.

Father Neale, Chris Neale, was dressed like you might expect of a priest on their day off: an inoffensive suit and his clerical collar. David on the other hand preferred to play the incognito clergymen: jeans coupled with a very practical jumper. "It's too cold to be dressing up," David would say. And it was cold, the village being atop one of those rare Essex hills, but this wasn't the reason. It was shame. David was ashamed of looking like a priest.

"Your usual Father?" the barmen asked Chris.

"Oh, go on then," he replied.

The barman grabbed a tankard - the sort you didn't see much anymore, properly thick glass - and he began to pour, "what's your friend having?"

The *friend*, David, was intently watching each pump of ale and the creamy foam it brought forth, the smell of hops sweetening the cigarette air. He'd been teetotal since the accident three months ago and the pleasure of beer was purely voyeuristic now - no touching. "Just tap water please," David replied.

"Water?!" went the barmen, delighting in the opportunity to belittle someone in a way that was socially accepted. "Brought your girlfriend out tonight have you, Father?" They laughed and David smiled a well practiced smile, a *please-shut-the-fuck-up* smile. As they walked away, Chris made a decent dent in his ale before handing David his own pint of clear-ish water; clear enough that it couldn't hide how dirty the glass was.

"Don't mind Jerry," Chris said, motioning to the barman. "He's a good bloke. Doesn't mean any harm."

"None taken," replied David. Looking back, Jerry was now serving a group of younger lads who had just entered. He didn't seem so keen to crack jokes at their expense, David thought. In fact he looked quite uneasy as he poured lager after lager after lager. The 1991 Five Nations was on the telly and England were doing well - this had attracted a very specific class of drinker. The two priests made for the only free table, directly under said television. They sat down across from one another with a pub-full of rugby fans facing them which gave the odd impression that their conversation was being cheered on.

"How's your boy keeping?" Chris asked with some encouragement from the crowd.

"Okay. Getting there. It was his birthday the other week," replied David.

"Do anything nice?"

"Went to Southend. It was alright, he had a good time."

"Take him on the dodgems, did you?" asked Chris with a smirk.

"After you nearly concussed me on the sodding things? No, didn't fancy it." The two priests chuckled.

"He's living with you full-time now I guess?"

"Billy? He is, yeah,"

"You coping alright?" Chris asked, wanting his friend to open up.

"We're getting there. Each day and all that. It's been tricky though."

David cupped his dirty glass. There was a burst of laughter from the punters. Yeah, he thought; it is laughable. He was a priest, meant to counsel and guide people's lives yet he barely had any grip on his own. He imagined the glass shattering in his hands, the sound and the blood.

"Mate, look at me," Chris lent in. "Talk to the Bishop, take some time off. I'll do it for you if you don't." This immediate and casual concern almost brought David to tears. He didn't let that happen though; there were already some fifty blokes watching him drink water, they didn't need to see him cry as well. Regardless, a discontentment filled the room; seems the referee had made a questionable call. Old men began to boo vaguely but the younger lads - the ones from the bar, now sitting down - their objections were different, sharper and sharpening all the more between the gritted friction of their contempt. And David got the awful sense that the thing which was making them so angry was him.

"Have you been eating properly?" asked Chris, but David was too distracted to hear. He was in the process of convincing himself that it was a mistake; the lads were just young and chatting about something else, he was just middle-aged and nervous about everything. "Mate, are you hungry?"

“Erm, yeah. Yeah, I could eat.” No, no. One of them, face painted with St Geroge’s flag, the syllable of *priest* moved all too definitely across his lips.

David would wonder nearly every night for the next few years, perhaps if he’d made an attempt in that moment to engage with the young man - pastoral care, just as he’d been taught - maybe what was about to happen could have been avoided. But David was that very ordinary sort of coward. He forced his attention back across the table to his friend and hoped that, simply by ignoring it, the problem might become ignorable.

“Well they do food here,” said Chris. “It’s not too bad either.”

“Sounds good,” replied David.

“Lovely. I’ll grab a couple of menus.” As Chris began to get up, something was coming down to meet him. A glint of light at first but then sound, like a gavel on brick. With full force, a tankard had been swung into the top of Chris’s head. He fell back down into his chair and, for those few seconds, David read the expression on his friend’s face as the same one that was on his own: surprise, wide-eyed with an open mouth. But when Chris glazed over the contents of their table, when he seemed to then look past them, through them, underground towards the pub’s foundations, eroded, David knew it was worse than that. The crowd went silent. The television cheered alone.

“That’s what you get, you fucking nonce!” said the young man, screwing his features into those of someone twenty years older. “Teach you for touching kids won’t it!” The tankard was still in his hand and the England flag still on his face. It was almost as if he were awaiting some response, the way he stood there. But no one knew how to react right then, Chris least of all. He just fell from his chair, his head hit the stone-slabbed ground, and the

new crack in his skull was made even wider. That's when the convulsing started. This was far more than the young man expected who spat some damning phrase and ran for the door - that exceptional sort of coward: angry, bitter, and drunk. David knelt beside what was, only some delicate seconds ago, his friend but had been replaced now by this writhing thing wearing his friend's clothes.

"Everyone, out! Get the fuck out now!" Jerry shouted from the bar. He was a slight man, not ordinarily intimidating, but the crowd was quick to follow the needlepoint of his arm towards the door. Dust billowed from the pub phone as Jerry pulled it off the wall. "Ambulance and police-- Sorry, repeat that," the TV was still blaring in the corner and, with a jab of the remote, he silenced it. The only sound left was the drumming of Chris's limbs against the hard ground, irregular, whimpering. Jerry watched as Chris's face turned towards his, its mouth in a voiceless scream, and then turned away to reveal the swamp of blood which boiled, oily thick, in its hair. Something needed to be done but Chris's friend - the water drinker - was just sitting there. Jerry looked around for a cloth as the friend stretched a hand out over Chris's body and began to whisper.

"By the authority of the Apostolic See," David said. Chris's eyes rolled in ghost whites and taunted reds. His back arched, his mouth a gargle of foam and David could only continue, "I grant you a full pardon and the remission of all your sins--" *All your sins*. All of them. It was only then that he processed what the young man had actually said. *Touching kids*. David hadn't even realised that Jerry was suddenly kneeling alongside him, pressing a cloth into the open skull. David didn't realise that his reserve of tears were finally falling to become blood on the floor. No, because, at least for now, David didn't want to realise anything. He kept his hand outstretched, his eyes shut,

“Go forth, from this world, in the name of God the almighty Father.” The drum kept playing under his hand. David did all he could to not picture the scene that was just beyond his closed eyelids but that only made the imaginings worse. The ambulance will come and I can stop, David thought; it will all be over soon. But Hardale was a lonely village, distanced in so many ways, and help rarely came quickly.

II.

The Bishop had sent a summons. It wasn't especially far to the Diocese however David didn't drive. *The cycling priest*, his own parishioners affectionately called him. It conjured kindly images of a time that perhaps once existed, countrysides and cakes, which could only be glimpsed now in the satellite haze of Soap Operas. All that being said, the point is, David was sitting on his third bus, the afternoon increasingly far behind him and the passing greenery slowly turning to concrete.

It had been a couple of years, the late eighties, since David had last seen the modest spire of Brentwood Cathedral. Getting off that third bus, he was surprised to find the structure wrapped in scaffolding. Between gaps in tarpaulin sheets there were the limestone hints of something new being built. Whatever it was, it explained why the Bishop had taken occupancy in the neighbouring school. Bishop Felton, unlike his workplace, hadn't changed much. He was still a sixty-something year old man, dull features but a bright and bumbling smile - a more protestant disposition, some might say. So it

was strange that he greeted David in full pontifical vestments. "Hello, my boy."

"Good afternoon, your Lordship," replied David. "Is there an ordination happening?" he asked, referring to the Bishop's clothing.

"Just around the office today, actually. Do come in Father Price. You're in a school remember, you'll get told off for lingering in the corridor."

Although he was still unnerved by his superior's choice of outfit, this small joke was enough to relax David a little; to do as it was intended, to get him into the room. David nodded towards the construction site outside the window "What's going over there then?"

"They're building an extension onto the cathedral. *Italianate*, the architect keeps saying - nice chap." Yes, that's what David had seen behind the tarps. The faux pillars and arches, a modern interpretation of renaissance design; renaissance architecture being, itself, an interpretation of Ancient Greek; and all that beside the original structure which was a 19th century attempt at a medieval church. "It'll look fantastic when it's done, something fresh," the Bishop said. It'll look fucking ugly, David thought as he gave a pursed nod. "Now, do take a seat my boy. There's quite a bit to go through." The Bishop lowered his bedraped self into an impressive looking recliner. David had only a school chair; one of those plastic arrangements, built less for sitting and more for stacking. "So, how have you been Father Price?" This wasn't a general inquiry, David could tell by the tone that the Bishop was referring to the attack on Chris. A week had passed since that incident.

"I'm not too bad, thank you," David replied.

"I'm sorry to hear about what happened to Father Neale - truly awful. We've all been praying for his recovery." Yes, by some miracle - if it can indeed be called such a thing - Chris hadn't died, not technically. He was in a

coma. Severe brain damage. The unspoken words of the doctor told David that, even if Chris did wake up, it wouldn't be worth celebrating. "I heard you delivered his Last Rites. Very admirable work, very admirable indeed," said Bishop Felton.

"Thank you, your Lordship." The crack of hammers hitting brick echoed from the construction site. Between images of a broken and bleeding skull, David remembered his friend's advice, that he should ask the Bishop for some time off. The quiet optimist in David supposed that this was exactly what he was going to be offered. However good sense knew that a priest doesn't get summoned and a Bishop doesn't put on his Chasuble for chats about holiday time.

"There are some matters of procedure that must be dealt with. Specifically the fact that Hardale now finds itself without a priest," the Bishop said, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Thus it has been decided, that is by the Archbishop and me - moreso the Archbishop - that you ought to take up that post in Father Neale's absence." David sunk into his unsympathetic, brown polypropylene chair. "I understand that you might have some reservations but this has been judged as the best course of action." His Lordship didn't need to look at David to know that some more tangible reassurance was in order. "We'll make sure your son can still attend school. We've already taken the liberty of arranging a driver for him. The accommodation is larger. There's a payrise in it for you, of course. Oh, and you needn't worry about your old parish, we'll speak to your assistants. It'll be good for them, if anything, some more responsibility."

"This is coming from the Archdiocese?" David asked.

The Bishop took a deep breath, "I don't need to tell you, my boy, that this is a very sensitive matter. Westminster had to get involved, yes."

David was quick to respond. There was a singular thought which had been yearning for vocalisation, but even he was surprised by his confrontational tone. "The man who attacked Chris accused him of touching a child," David said.

The Bishop looked away, finding something interesting on a blank wall. The office rooms of senior clergymen were often sparse, modern spaces. Not the mahogany-panelled libraries people might expect. This temporary one though was without even the pretence of a picture-framed Mary. Clearly an old classroom, stripped of all charm. Nakedly utilitarian. And in that cream-nothing was the Bishop, clad in gilded curtains, carefully considering his reply. "Rest assured the man who attacked Father Neale is looking likely to be behind bars very soon."

It occurred to David that he didn't really care about the fate of the young man. "It isn't true though, is it? What he said about Chris?".

The Bishop sighed again, "There is a young girl in the village who alleges that Father Neale did things to her. I'll spare you the details. The fact is that there's no proof and, given Father Neale's current state, there's no active interest from the police either. Which is good-- I mean, it's all terrible, of course, but that's good given the circumstances." *Good.* The word was a theological foundation. It was very much in a priest's interest to know what it meant. Yet David found himself having to divine what it could possibly refer to in this context and, as he tried, the Bishop was still talking, giving him even more to contend with. "That being said. The current mood in Hardale is not a pleasant one. It needs a priest, like yourself, who has a deft hand and some good senses. We have the utmost faith that you'll be able to keep the integrity of the Church."

"Sorry, your Lordship. Did you say you've arranged a driver for Billy?" David asked, trying to wade through everything he had just heard.

"For you son, that's right. To take him to school. It's a very nice Mercedes actually, I'm rather jealous."

"I don't know how he'll feel about that. Since the accident--"

"Yes, that thought had crossed my mind, but the boy can't avoid cars for the rest of his life. It'll be good for him I'm sure. Actually it's handy that you brought him up, there is something else I need to go over with you." The Bishop took David's stunned silence as permission to carry on. "As I say, Hardale is a sensitive place at the moment. In these sorts of circumstances it's best not to stir things up anymore than they already are." The Bishop gave his usual smile, the one David had thought of as endearing. "When you move there, to your new parish, the matter of your broken celibacy is something we'd rather you didn't take with you. Now, don't worry, you won't be separated from your own son. No, that wouldn't be proper, not proper at all. Plus, given the current talk in Hardale regarding Father Neale, the place might well benefit from seeing a priest who actively cares for children. No, rather we'd like for you to act as if Billy is your nephew rather than your son."

The cushion of Bishop Felton's words temporarily lifted from David's face. All that mattered was this request and it was too obscene to go unnoticed. "I'm sorry your Lordship. Pretend Billy's my nephew? I'm not sure I can do that. What-- how would I even go about telling him?"

The Bishop began to gather some folders, pretending he had somewhere to be. "That is a tricky one," he said. "But the boy is your son, you know him best. I'm sure you can figure something out. It's in both your interests after all." The Bishop then rose to imply that the conversation was over.

"Forgive me, your Lordship. But I haven't even accepted the transfer," said David, getting up to follow the Bishop who was already walking past him.

"I'm afraid, Father Price, that much of what we have spoken of here concerns particular directives from the Vatican. You can refuse reassignment - of course you can, of course. But that would require a canonical review of your current position." David knew what this meant but it would only be on the bus ride home, the trees he had passed earlier aflame in the setting sun, that he would become so righteously angry at this threat. But he couldn't do anything on that bus. Just like he couldn't do anything now as Bishop Felton opened the door of his office, revealing the school hallway. "You've suffered quite enough recently, my boy. Please, go to Hardale. It'll be good for you."

With that, David was nodded along. Something stirred in him though before he left, the beginnings of his reformation from cowardice to valor, and he tried his hand at bartering for all the concessions he had just tacitly made. "I'd like two weeks off before the transfer," David said, as sternly as he could.

"Of course, time off has already been set aside for the move." The Bishop smiled, "Do take care of yourself now, Father Price." David thanked the Bishop and left. The door was shut behind him.

III.

Her name was Abigail. Billy had never really believed that his mum had her own name but, now, it was everywhere. Letters, cards, condolences, meetings at school, muffled phone calls, the obituary his dad kept on the bedside table.

HUTCHINSON, ABIGAIL

Tragically taken on 21st November 1990, aged 37. Cherished daughter of Patricia and the late Lionel Hutchinson. She will be deeply missed by all. A service is scheduled at St. Peter and St. Paul, Little Horkesley, Monday 26th. Flowers are welcome, bluebells were her favourite.

The sky was one dark cloud that day. It reminded Billy of the textured grey ceiling in his old bedroom and the arguing voices that came through the walls - a loose memory, more an emotion now than an image. To

everyone else waiting outside the church, the cloud was just something to talk about. *Rain looks likely, always rains at a funeral.* Funeral. It was a new word. No one seemed keen to explain it to him so Billy knew it was a bad thing. Turns out it was a lot like school: everyone had to dress uncomfortably, be on time, sit in rows as they listened to a man speak. That man was Chris Neale, his Dad's friend.

"I want to thank David, Father Price, for asking me to be here today. I knew Abigail a little, enough to know how special she was and how many lives she touched."

As his Dad's friend continued, Billy watched the flickering of a particular candle. It was larger than any he'd seen before and covered in decorations, a lot like a prize stick of rock he'd once passed in a shop window. If there were sweets involved, Billy thought, then maybe this whole assembly would make more sense. Why else would everyone agree to be here? No one looked like they wanted to be. And, most confusing of all, was his mum really just there in that box? Had she really died? That small detail was confused by euphemisms about *passing away, going somewhere else, being with God.* Eight years old really is no age to comprehend that which even the adults around him could not. As he mumbled his way through yet another hymn Billy looked at that box, noticing that it didn't have any air-holes. He'd once put a woodlouse in an empty carton and his dad insisted that it needed *air-holes* or the louse would die. Perhaps that was the problem, Billy thought. Perhaps that's why all the doctors and nurses were able to fix him but not his mum. Before he could fully consider this idea, the hymn ended and his Dad's friend began talking again.

"Of course Abigail left behind a loving son, Billy. I was with him the day after the accident and believe me when I tell you that we could all

learn a lot from his bravery and resilience. I know that Abigail would be proud. And let us all be now as he comes up here.”

His Dad and Nanny Pat had asked him if he wanted to be a part of the service. Billy agreed but that was only because he didn't know what it meant. Turns out, what it meant was that, for every evening since, he had been made to learn a poem. These sessions ran for what was surely too long and involved his Dad running a finger under some weird words while waving another finger in the air. *There's a rhythm, da-daa-da-daa-da-daa-da-duh.* Billy had learned The Lord's Prayer in a similar way and, like The Lord's Prayer, as the poem was recited, everyone at the funeral kept their heads bowed. Billy half-expected an *Amen* when he finished and was slightly offended when it didn't happen - no one even clapped. Nanny Pat was beaming at him though, with the kindness in her eyes that he had loved since he was a baby.

“You did so well, Bill!” she said, as he sat back down beside her.

“That was brilliant, son,” David, whispered. “Your mum would be so pleased.”

It was one of Abigail's poems, taken from the many she'd written over the years. Although it wasn't the flowery sort of thing which normally decorates a funeral it was, by David and Patricia's reckoning, the most appropriate; the theme was 'loss', they could tell that much at least. Abigail's father, Lionel, had died of cancer four years prior and the poem was dated for not long after that. She must have been writing about him, they both thought - an understandable mistake.

Teatime (17/02/87)

*I watch you watching the kettle boil,
drawing pictures in the steam,
longingly. I watch you watching garden birds,
a thousand words on the mantelpiece, watching you.
Toil. Watching tea brew.
Careful. Not too much milk, sugar cubes,
a little spilt, watching you
as you hand me my own.
You don't look back but I know - have known.
It's cold. Been that way for a while.
Please sit down. Just one more time.*

David needn't have been surprised that Billy read it perfectly, his son was always flawless in their practice sessions too. Still, he'd worried that the church building and all the onlookers might change that. Certainly David himself had struggled in his earliest sermons; one Sacristan had resigned themselves to wiping the pulpit desk daily, so sweaty were David's hands. But no, Billy's hands barely shook. Like Chris had said: he was resilient. The young boy can't have known how much he'd helped his father in the days after Abigail's death. He cried at times, of course, but Billy was calm and understanding when he had every right to just scream forever into the vacuum the world had become, the space where his mother used to be. It was all the more notable, then, when he did start screaming.

The casket was being lowered into the ground. Billy began to wail a staccato of chokes and wordless pleading, airless breaths, which spluttered in

the bitter rain. It was a release, David supposed; had to happen at some point and, made sense that it was now; there's a finality to the burial, everything becomes real then. But David was wrong. These are very adult conceptions, attempts to make narrative and digestible that which is too awful to simply let exist. In reality Billy was screaming for reasons even he couldn't understand. There was just something about the casket; the size and colour, the strange mechanism by which it was being lowered. It was all so instantly overwhelming. His screeches were the very same as those made the night of that accident by the shredding of metal, the splintering of glass. Although Billy was standing upright. Although his mind had expelled the details of that night, his muscles had not. They held onto the memory tightly, recoiling, recalling exactly what it was like to be trapped upside down, the stench of fuel cutting itself open as it seeped through the broken passenger-side window, every string of his arm aching as they grasped for his mum who was already dead in the driver's seat. It continued to rain while her casket finally fell, fell from sight, through earth, into thought. And Billy's arms ached now, again, as he clung to his Dad's waist to stop himself from falling in as well.