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Talking in my sleep

The note that never made it to its intended recipient in Romeo and Juliet. Or maybe, 'Eeny meeny, miney'… the impulsive thrust with the biro to fill in that sixth and ultimately winning lottery number. Or maybe the overly hasty signature on the contract without checking the small print where that 'devil in the detail' costs you thousands and thousands of hard earned pounds. There are whole lives that dramatically change course like carriages going through points on a train track. Mine was one simple word scrawled on a piece of paper. That word was: 'Yes.'

March 1973. I was in my second year with the teaching brothers at De La Salle College in Salford and doing very nicely thank you. Top of the class in 1X and now in 2X doing fractions in my sleep (yes, with common denominators, don't you know?!). I had proud parents who could now relax and focus their minds on getting their youngest, Antony, to accomplish an eleven-plus 'hat trick'.

One Tuesday afternoon, our Religious Education class played host to a surprise visitor. Brother Dominic Green was a portly, charismatic type with the gift of the gab. He was shaped like a barrel – one of those 'weebles that wobble but that don't fall down'. He bustled purposely between our wooden desks and handed out pieces of paper which posed a most interesting question 'Do you think God wants you to become a De La Salle brother?' I pondered for several minutes before reaching for my biro. I was one of five pupils in our year of a hundred who answered in the affirmative. This can hardly have come as a shock to my mother and father. From

the age of five, I got used to answering the question, 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' My contemporaries had answered with 'footballer, train driver or fireman,' but my answer had always been consistent: 'teacher or priest'. There was more than a little logic to my 'yes'. The order of St John the Baptist De La Salle, founded by a Rheims-born cleric in the latter half of the seventeenth century, had been established with the intention of educating the children of the poor. In my day it had become a pretty middle class affair, with well to do kids travelling from as far as Glossop in Derbyshire to attend, but its Direct Grant Grammar School status had meant that the less well-off still had a chance of a first rate education without the crippling fees. I looked up to the brothers. They knew their academic subjects, were single-minded and were mostly decent men. As role models went – they were not bad at all. Enough for a 'yes' on that scrap of paper – and a subsequent visit of Brother Dominic to the family home.

The Dowd residence at 20 Wyndham Avenue was exactly halfway between Bolton and Manchester. Five years previously, just after that ecstatic father–son bonding European Cup Final, our former house at 70 Manchester Road had been the subject of a compulsory purchase by Salford Council whose planning department wanted to flatten a small number of solid Victorian houses to make way for a whole new swathe of functional redbrick council houses. My parents loathed the idea of losing their home on the whim of a local bureaucratic committee but the council always got their way. They were offered a measly six hundred pounds in compensation and a one way ticket to the sunlit uplands – a three bedroom council house, *with an indoor toilet!* The stale aroma of the chamber pot under the bed was banished forever. New items appeared. Hot wax lamps on the new Rediffusion colour TV set. A rent book. And, at last, we were connected to the outside world via an olive green coloured handset that was placed strategically on the piano in the lounge thus making any private phone conversations impossible.

You always knew when we were expecting guests because

that was the only time the hoover came out. And Brother Dominic got the royal treatment. The Pledge was applied to every available surface. My mother and I went through almost a bottle of disinfectant in the kitchen and bathroom. The tubby, gregarious brother caused an eyebrow or two to be raised when he dunked his Rich Tea biscuits in his cup of Mantunna. He then revealed the 'why and wherefore' of his mission.

'Your Mark, it would appear, may well have a vocation to the religious life with De La Salle,' he said. 'And to test this, we have a special school called St Cassian's. I'd like to ask permission for him to visit us on a 'Come and See' weekend – to see if he likes it.'

'Where is it?' asked my father looking a trifle worried. 'Berkshire,' came the reply. 'In the countryside. A lovely quiet spot,' assured the vocations director.

Berkshire could have been in Outer Mongolia for all we knew. For eight consecutive years we had been to the same Blackpool boarding house for our summer holidays (that trip to Pwllheli had been well off our beaten track.) As a family we were a fairly parochial lot. All of my twenty aunts and uncles were still living within six miles of where they had been born. 'Down south' really did mean, beyond Stockport.

Brother Dominic had sparked my interest in this place called St Cassian's. I went to check the place out one weekend in May with the other four boys who had expressed an interest. We were driven down in the school minibus by Brother Gabriel and took in exotic places like Evesham and Hungerford, before we merged on the outskirts of Kintbury, later home to Terence Conran of Habitat fame and the author Robert Harris. It would go on to be named later as one of the ten most attractive villages in the UK.

On arriving at St Cassian's, we were each assigned a 'companion'. It sounded innocent enough, but as I came to discover, these carefully selected seniors were to be Brother Dominic's 'eyes and ears' during our weekend stay. The person who had been assigned to keep close tabs on me was

an agreeable sort, Peter Parsonage. On arriving and taking my dormitory bed, he took me quietly to one side. 'You're a marked man,' he said. 'Why?' I said nervously. 'What have I done wrong?' He laughed. 'Nothing. It's 'Dommo.' He came in this morning and gave me this.' It was a white sticker with my name on it, which he then peeled off and placed on the headboard over my bed. 'I shouldn't really tell you this, but Dommo gave me instructions. "I want that boy," he said to me. "He's a good 'un"'. I blushed.

But 'Dommo' got his wish. I fell in love with the place – and a lot of it was down to 'Cedric'. Not a man, or a boy, or even a pet dog. 'Cedric' was the name of the biggest tree I had ever seen in my life. More than two hundred and fifty years old, this gargantuan cedar dominated everything around it. It was like a stunning, reassuring arboreal octopus. That weekend I stood in front of it for what seemed like hours on end, marvelling at the sound of the rasping wind rustling through its tentacles. It swayed and moved as the clouds flurried through the pale blue sky above. It was so *other.* You couldn't imagine Cedric anyway near Lowry's chimney stacks and factories. Clearly there was some deeply felt pastoral 'thing' stirring away in my sub-conscious. You almost wanted to be enveloped by its sturdy, solid branches.

Indeed, it wasn't just 'Cedric' – the whole place was captivating. Every corridor and hall had a solid and comforting smell of beeswax. The school site was based on the Wallingtons estate, an impressive stretch of land purchased by William Waynflete, the Bishop of Winchester, in the fifteenth century. The redbrick manor house which accounted for much of the school building had been remodelled after a huge fire had eclipsed the original in 1784. As a contrast with industrial Salford, it could not have been more stark. Cedar for cement seemed a good swap. But why was I not daunted at leaving home? I still don't honestly know. But I signed up. And that meant 'Dommo' had got his man. My parents seemed to accept it as the 'will of God'. (Some thirty five years later I would get a different account from my mother following my

father's death: 'He never liked the idea of you going off down there. He thought you were too young to be away from home like that. But what could he do? You were so keen and if it's what God was asking you to do…?')

At this point in the tale, the Catholic 'misery memoir' warning siren is possibly sounding. If you've been brought up on a diet of *Angela's Ashes*, *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Philomena* the scene is now set for a tale in which innocence and aspiration is cruelly crushed by the evil machinations associated with the horrors of institutionalised religion. It's a perspective shared by many a 'recovering Catholic' but that's not my tale. My time at St Cassian's played a huge role in defining many of the emerging themes of my life and was overwhelmingly positive. First, I was in a class of only twenty pupils. We got a first rate education, ranging from the erudite and elderly Brother Augustine (French and English), via the wet behind the ears youngster Brother Stephen (chemistry), through the wily and paternal headteacher Brother Joseph (maths and physics) to the witty and teasing Brother Aidan (History and RE). At a time when boarding school fees were requiring parents to take out small mortgages, this would cost Edward and Patricia Dowd not a penny.

Moreover, we were taught responsibility and care for one another in a way that day school simply cannot fashion. Each boy was allotted a 'manual labour' task: that meant half an hour of polishing, sweeping or washing pans in the kitchen after breakfast and before classes. We'd be assigned in groups to prepare the veg for the head chef, Mrs Appleford, while others were deputed to head off to help out Brother Herman on the farm for longer stints at a time. There were very few food miles in this establishment as much of what we ate was cultivated, prepared and cooked from the acres of land around the house. Boarding schools have their detractors, but the business of having to live and adapt to people twenty four/seven made huge demands of character. Back in Salford, if you had major differences with a fellow student, you could somehow sweep it under the carpet it in the nine to four,

Monday to Friday regime. On the other hand, when you're in community, there's nowhere to hide. If you chipped in, carried out your tasks and helped others, you were deemed 'a good kid'. If not, you were the target of the crowd. It was social reinforcement of a positive kind. Since I had always craved approval and acceptance, I moulded myself to fit in. (Ever since I can remember, even the slightest reprimand had the effect of reducing me to inconsolable tears. I was once caught chewing a pencil in primary school and singled out by Miss Smethurst for a very public scolding. It was as though my world had fallen apart. I had never learned as a child, that frowning on an action did not mean root and branch rejection of you as a person.)

My time in deepest rural Berkshire was passing serenely. The brothers insisted on a weekly letter-writing session, which guaranteed a steady stream of correspondence to and from the family home. Once a month I'd get what we referred to as a 'red cross parcel' from my folks. This often contained a specially baked coconut cake, a hastily written note from my mother on pale blue Basildon Bond notepaper and press cuttings from my Dad. Love of Man United was the lifeline of contact between us and he'd dutifully cut out reports from the Saturday evening 'Football Pink'.

I returned home for a Christmas break and told my parents of my new school and how Brother Joseph, the head, had cottoned on to my burgeoning interest in classical music to such an extent that he let me choose records for playing during 'reading hour' at weekends. The school report was glowing. Top of the class again. What could possibly go wrong?

In early 1974, I returned to Berkshire to begin the Spring term and that is when the ghost of the Persil advert began to reassert its presence. That experience of gazing warmly as an eight year old at that beautiful boy on the TV had happened six years ago. There'd been many a change since. First the facts of life. My father had never dared broach the subject, so it had fallen to Father Kevin, the school chaplain, to do the honours

shortly after I had begun grammar school back in 1971. My introduction to them had been a tad controversial. The priest at De La Salle had taken small groups of us to his study to take us through a small pamphlet called 'Sex Education for Boys'. It had looked innocent enough on the outside with its brown and white cover. But the only way we could all see this publication simultaneously was by standing in a small circle around his chair as he took us through the increasingly detailed drawings. That morning I had done two paper rounds between 7am and 8am and was so late for school that I'd skipped breakfast. Then, after a fifteen minute bus ride, I'd run about a mile down Claremont Road just in time to avoid the dreaded 'late book'. By 9.15am, blood sugar levels were hitting the danger zone. What happened next was excruciatingly embarrassing. I was already feeling light-headed, beginning to sweat and getting the sound of ringing in my ears. Father Kevin then coaxed us all into positions. 'Don't be shy,' he had said. 'There's nothing to be feeling awkward about here.' He turned to page eight. Out of nothing, a quite startling picture of a large droopy penis appeared. My legs gave way and I fell to the ground, unconscious. The rest, as they say, is history. 'Dowdy', it was said gleefully in class 1X, couldn't handle sex.

How prophetic they were. Every boy had been loaned a copy of the sex manual to take home and show his parents. Mine stayed hidden inside my geography atlas all week, the offending penis making an appropriately snug fit alongside the coastline of Chile. Three years on, there was now considerably more testosterone coursing round my adolescent body and it found a focus rather more immediate than a washing powder advert. Suddenly, this pleasant boarding school felt like it was becoming an incubator for a desire which my church would, a decade later, go on to describe in an authoritative teaching document as 'intrinsically disordered.' When did it all start? Mornings after rising and evenings before bedtime in our dormitories, we'd line up in the washrooms, stripped to the waist, to carry out our customary ablutions. The incarnate object of my attention was Duncan. All I now

recall is manoeuvring myself into position to stand behind his washbasin and admire the outline of his rather body-defining maroon-coloured corduroy trousers. I looked at his unclothed taut, muscular torso and then, whenever he turned round, I quickly averted my gaze and pretended to be captured in sacred thoughts. 'Lord make me chaste but not just yet,' wasn't half of it.

As the weeks went by, the pressure cooker effect intensified. As fate would have it, 'Dunner' as he was known, was also from my Salford school and I often wondered why he had elected to sign up for this place. I knew deep down that there was more statistical likelihood of Ronnie Biggs becoming Pope than of him becoming a teaching brother. I assumed he'd come here to get away from home, enjoy a change of scene. But everywhere I turned, he was there in front of me. Our huge dormitory of St Benildus, whose sturdy windows looked out directly out to the imposing presence of 'Cedric' housed twenty beds. My luck (or misfortune) was that mine was a stone's throw away from Duncan's. As I became overloaded with this strange and compelling desire, I'd sneak discrete glances at him over the rim of my wooden headboard and hope no one would spot me. When the lights went out at 10pm on the dot and the dormitory senior proclaimed: 'Live Jesus in our Hearts', the resounding cry that came back was 'Forever'. Then I'd feel sad. Jesus seemed to be anywhere but in my heart. And it would be another eight hours or more before I could lay my eyes on Duncan again at morning mass in the chapel.

That dormitory became the venue for some unusual antics. One boy was a chronic sleepwalker. On one occasion, several of us switched a couple of beds round so that when he returned after his somnambulant promenade, he ended up climbing into bed with another lad who was, to put it mildly, rather startled to find he was sharing a bed with a potential suitor. (We'd switch all the lights on for maximum scandal effect – a move I have since learned was potentially very detrimental to our nocturnal rambler.) For a short while I did

seriously countenance faking my own sleepwalking, hoping that, as Duncan was a heavy sleeper, I might, if the beds fell into the right positions, get an unexpected bonus of climbing into bed with him. But I desisted. I was afraid I would draw attention to my state of arousal and excitement.

On another occasion, it was I who provided all the midnight entertainment. At the end of one indescribably bitter January night, long after the feeble radiators in the huge room had ceased working, I was finding it impossible to get off to sleep. My body was a block of ice and no amount of adolescent lust could get the temperature gauge to flicker upwards. My feet had lost all sensation, save for a dull and persistent ache. I dived down, snorkel style, to the bottom of the bed and began to use what scant warmth remained in my hands to nurture the blood capillaries in my feet back to life. At first the action was gentle and discrete, but little by little, encouraged by the returning warmth into my toes, the action became ever more vigorous. This must have carried on for a good two or three minutes. Then, out of nothing, from under the deepest recesses of my woollen blankets, I was suddenly aware of the dormitory lights being switched on. An authoritative voice bellowed out: 'You. What *are* you doing down there?'

My dormitory companions were now awake and all they could see was a semi-inert lump under the bedclothes which was making the strange (or perhaps not so strange) sound of flesh on flesh. Mole-like, my head popped out from the darkness. The lights startled me. I scrunched up my eyes and pleaded: '*But Brother, I'm only rubbing my feet.*' Cue hysterical laughter, a laughter which brought the headteacher Brother Joseph, wandering along the corridor with his torch. We were all sentenced to the Gulag – an extra afternoon of manual labour on the farm with Brother Herman. And the 'rubbing of feet' entered into the boarding school lexicon as a euphemism for self-abuse – a subject that figured all too unhealthily and obsessively in our laddish discourse.

I wasn't especially interested in the solitary expression at

this point. I was on fire, rather, for another human being, a boy I didn't even especially like as a person. Duncan was seen as arrogant, aloof and stand-offish, qualities that only fanned the flames of physical attraction. Make no bones about it, this was pure and unadulterated lust and it manifested itself in some strange ways. In chemistry and physics, Duncan was my lab partner. This brought with it thrilling opportunities for physical contact. Experiments on focal length with lenses, kinetic energy with moving objects or caressing test tubes of potassium permanganate all had ample scope for body to body experience. Sparing the gory details, this had some fairly dramatic impact on my young body as I struggled to keep the lid on. Towards the end of that Spring term, I could bear it no longer. This was getting to be torture. It was a huge risk, but if there was even the slightest chance of reciprocation, I had to go for it. The evenings were now getting longer as 'Cedric's' shadows extended all over the school grounds. Somewhat out of the blue, I suggested to him after supper and before night prayer that we go for a walk on the rugby pitch. He looked puzzled. 'What for?' he asked. I put my hand on his shoulder and felt an immediate response downstairs. 'It's a big secret,' I said excitedly. 'And you're the only one who'll know.' His ego seem flattered. He didn't have many friends and had been the target of some taunting of late. 'OK, then, let's go,' he said.

I wanted to get to get as far away from the school building as I could in case we were overheard. When I felt it was safe, I took a deep breath and out it came. I didn't know the word 'gay', and though I had heard of the very medical sounding, 'homosexual,' that all sounded too clinical. So I focused on him. I knew he was full of himself so I told him he was handsome and the best looking boy in the school. He looked at me puzzled. 'Why are you telling me all this?' Then the penny dropped. He looked neither horrified nor interested. Maybe flattered, but that was it. My gamble had failed. Duncan, it seemed, was not a fellow traveller. For a few moments I felt downcast and then I knew there was more urgent business. If he blabbed on me about this, living in this place would

become intolerable. I'd quickly become the wonky feet rubber from Salford and the butt of merciless banter about 'benders and bum chums.' The truth was I had very few cards to play. I had nothing to threaten him with and little to offer either, save my continued friendship and loyalty. And Duncan must have felt unnerved, not by me, but by the increasingly loud jibes from the older boys who were beginning to pick on him, because this pledge of mine to stand by him seemed to placate him. To his eternal credit, he never did rat on me.

My hopes had been dashed. But this was not love which had floundered on the rocks, just an inconveniently forceful carnality and I suspect it helped prepare me for my first sexual encounter which occurred just a few weeks later – not with a fellow schoolboy. This was to happen – with Brother Dermott.

In between terms I had been asked to stay on and help out at a special event. Teaching brothers were arriving from all over the country for a kind of 'religious order congress'. 'Dommo' had sold it well. I had been specially picked out with half a dozen others. There'd be some top up pocket money for waiting on the two dozen or so visitors at mealtimes, preparing the vegetables and making sure Mrs Appleford was not short of hands in the kitchen. If I had a vocation to the religious life as a brother, I had to learn to chip in and be a team player. It's what God wanted of me I was sure. So I signed up (I knew Duncan would not be selected and I thought it better to begin the painful process of cold turkey. It would be good to be free from what one Dominican priest later on referred to as 'the tyranny of genitality'.)

The prestigious visitors arrived and I helped take their bags to their rooms. One brother spotted I had a northern accent and told me he taught at the De la Salle School in St Helen's and we exchanged pleasantries. What were my favourite subjects at school?, he asked me. 'French and English,' I responded swiftly. His eyes lit up. 'Aha, a fellow linguist. I'll be keeping an eye out for you young man.' In this post Jimmy Savile landscape that would be enough to send anyone running for cover. But this was 1974. And sure enough, three days later,

Brother Dermott stumbled, or rather, *appeared* to stumble across me talking about languages other than French with a fellow pupil. 'Mark, do you know any Russian?' I shook my head. 'It's so exciting. It has all these amazing declensions and strange exotic sounds.' He gave me a couple of examples, took a piece of paper and started sketching out Cyrillic characters such as **Д, Ф,** and **щ** ' Of course, they look a lot better in text books, but they're all in my room. Shall we go and look at some more?'

I love languages and am adept at them, but have never been able to force myself to handle Russian. This following incident may explain why. Off we went to Brother Dermott's room and he prepared to show me his declensions. Lest anyone reading this think that what happened next 'caused me to be gay', please bear in mind a certain apparition in that washing powder ad six years ago and months of ungratified lusting over Duncan. Indeed, if anything, this encounter with the teaching brother should have made me straight. Dermott was no looker. That's being kind. He was hideously ugly. Aged about thirty five, he had a greasy auburn mop with a basin-cut hairstyle. His freckly face was part hidden by heavy, thick-rimmed spectacles. He was part man, part reptile – I have often thought of him when I see Woody Allen. Except Woody Allen made me laugh.

What dexterous footwork he used. He started with Russian and languages and got on to parents' evenings and demanding mothers and fathers. 'And do you know what subject came up last week with one of them?' he asked me. I shook my head. 'Masturbation.' My pulse quickened. 'This mother, she said that we had no business raising it in RE classes and that it should be left to the home.'

He paused. 'What do you think? Do you think it's always wrong?' Cripes. What a question. We seemed to have moved a fair bit away from Russian datives and pronouns. 'Er…I just think it happens. If it is a sin, as Brother Aidan told us in RE, I guess there's a lot worse ones.' In hindsight, this was not an especially adroit answer. Green light. He drew himself closer.

Then very close until he lowered his trousers and began 'rubbing his feet'. All he wanted me to do was to hold him around his genitals until the inevitable moment which was a matter of a couple of minutes at most. I simply froze on the spot. But he was like a wounded creature in pain. He couldn't look me in the eye and his face was taut. He was fighting himself. When he reached the point of climax, instead of a rousing groan of relief he let out a pathetic melancholy whimper. It was one of the saddest things I have ever witnessed in my life.

I should have just run out of the room, but suddenly I had become the adult. He looked across at me so forlorn. No doubt some will say this was also part of the manipulation, but to this day I just think he was a lonely guy who'd got trapped. However, more shocking was what came next. He recovered his composure and got onto the floor to reach for something under his bed. It was a newspaper with the words *Gay News* emblazoned across the masthead. What was he going to do now? Show me indecent pictures?

'Do you know about the personal ads section?,' he asked me. 'You can put a notice in here and then go and meet people in London and places and stay in hotels with them.' Was this guy mad? I was fourteen and I said as much. 'Well, you'd have to say you're twenty one in the ad, but of course when you got down to London, they'd have quite a nice surprise.' Or an instant coronary and on possible recovery, a half decent chance of a long stint in Reading gaol. When I look back now, I still think this was far worse than the physical misdemeanours. He was encouraging a child who was legally seven years under the age of consent to take up with total strangers in seedy Earl's Court hotels. 'Now all this is our secret, you know that Mark? There are some people who simply wouldn't understand our kind of special friendship.' I made my excuses and left.

Why didn't I go straight off to the headteacher and blow his cover? Maybe I'd made some illogical assumption this would let unravel all the previous few months of sexual tension over Duncan. There were undoubtedly feelings of

pity too that were factored in. What I did do was find myself a confidant: my best friend Chris, another Salfordian. I related the whole thing from start to finish. He was outraged and insisted I spill the beans, but I never did. In fact this all remained under wraps until a TV documentary about the whole subject of Catholic sex abuse which aired on Channel Four in 2003. What the incident did *not* do was dent my hopes and ambitions to become a teaching brother. Dermott was a bad apple but I had plentiful examples of role models in front of me who could keep my aspirations alive. It would take me many years to question whether the barrel itself might have been the real problem.

St Cassian's existed principally to foster and nurture vocations to the religious life but by May 1974, the order of St John the Baptist De La Salle was beginning to have other ideas about how best to keep up the 'flow of labourers into their vineyard'. The fact is that out of sixty or so pupils, only one or two would ever go on to make solemn vows and enter the order. It must have been costing them a fortune (and we were the beneficiaries.) The institution was what was known as a 'juniorate' – a college for educating young boys aged 11–16. But serious questions were being asked as to whether this was wise. Could a young man really discern a vocation to the religious life at this stage in his life? Was there a danger in being over-protected from the world and making unrealistic decisions which he may later come to regret? The brothers had come to a decision: St Cassian's was to be transformed into a retreat centre. The fourth and fifth years among us would stay on and complete their 'O' level exams, but we third years would return back to our feeder schools. My rural idyll, 'Cedric' and all that I had come to cherish in verdant Berkshire was over. No more cross country runs along the wonderful Kennet and Avon canal. An end to hikes on Hungerford Common and in Buttermere Copse. Back to Lowryland and Salford smoke stacks. I imagined the taunts from our soon to be, 4X classmates: 'Did they not want you then?' When Brother Joseph broke this news to us there

were stifled tears that went on for days. It was like having your family broken up. I was not a little angry. I had put myself on the line for all this and here were the brothers changing all the rules, but this was the Catholic Church after all – what was I expecting, a MORI survey?

So in the summer of 1974, I packed my bags for the last time and made the six hour journey north by coach. Our north west contingent was dropped off at our respective schools: West Park in St Helens, De La Salle Liverpool, Cardinal Langley in Middleton, North Manchester, and finally Weaste Lane in Salford. I discovered much, much later that my parents were more than pleased to have me back in the family ranks, except strong expressions of feelings were not the norm. So in fact, I ended up feeling confused because life just appeared to carry on much as before. I had been through a lot in the space of ten months, but life at home seemed to pick up pretty much from where it had left off. My father was on the buses and my mother was selling frocks and doing alterations. Elder brother Chris was now a minor soccer star at the 'proddy dog' grammar school and my younger brother was getting ready for the assault on the dreaded 'eleven plus'.

Then – out of the blue – the 'love that dare not speak its name' erupted like a volcano.

It was about 9am in the middle of the summer holidays. I shared a very small room with my younger brother, but Antony was already up and about and I was dozing in bed. I felt a hand prodding me. It was my mother. 'Wake up. Come downstairs.' I rubbed my eyes and turned over. 'No school,' I said. 'Having a lie in.' She didn't buy this. 'Get downstairs,' she said in an uncommonly unfriendly tone. 'There's something we have to talk about.' Whatever was the matter? I knew it was serious since as a family, we had a tendency to brush most things under the carpet. Confrontation was not our favourite pastime, but clearly something had risen to such a level of concern and alarm that it had to be tackled head on. My school report? No way. Had I missed mass? Negative. What then could it be?

I meandered downstairs in my stripy beige and maroon cotton pyjamas and made sure the waistcord was tight and secure before I went into our front room. I didn't want to be an inadvertent flasher with my own mother. 'Sit down,' she said, pointing at the sofa and reaching for an Embassy Regal. 'What's this all about?' I asked outright. She took a deep breath and pursed her lips. 'Your Dad and I just want to say … just want to say that…' She was struggling for the right formula. And did it help that Dad was not there but doing a split shift on the number 14 en route to Patricroft? She continued. '… just want to say that if there's anything troubling you, you can tell us about it.' What did this mean? Brother Dermott? Who had spoken out of turn? No, surely not. Something else maybe?

'Thank you,' I replied. 'Is that it? Can I go back to bed now?' A shake of the head and a long puff on that ever so important cigarette.

'There is something troubling you – and you know it.' I had no idea. What *was* she going on about?

'*Who's Duncan? ... You've been talking about him in your sleep.*'

Is this the most original example of coming out in modern history? I flushed like a Guernsey Tom at the idea that my secret was out. Then a terrible picture came into my mind that made me go even more crimson. That image was of my mother, bolt upright in bed in her curlers, covering the ears of her husband and trying to insulate him from the stream of lewd invective piercing the paper thin walls of our shabbily constructed council house. In a more spacious dwelling I might just have got away with it, but not at 20 Wyndham Avenue M27 6PY. My parents' room was a decent enough size, about fourteen by ten feet, but the other two rooms were effectively small singles. What's worse, each of the three bedroom doors opened out on to the landing area which was a mere strip of turquoise carpet measuring nine by three feet. Cheek by jowl wasn't half of it. It wasn't quite battery farming, but it was not far from it.

Good God. What had I been saying? It was the love that most certainly had dared speak its name – at three in the morning. It's a miracle that the holy water downstairs in the porch hadn't evaporated and the statue of the Sacred Heart wasn't in a thousand pieces. What about my little nine-year-old brother in the bed next to me? No wonder he had got up early and was nowhere to be seen. He'd scarpered.

My mother was a supremely practical person. Nothing would defeat her, certainly not a spot of unwelcome male homosexuality. Within minutes she was revealing her strategy for nipping it in the bud. 'Hello, this is Mrs Dowd. I need an urgent appointment to see Dr Bhanji.' Dr Rahimtulla Harji Bhanji, was a Kenyan immigrant of eastern Indian, Gujarati, descent and the father of Krishna Pandit Bhanji, more commonly known as the Academy Award winning actor, now, Sir Ben Kingsley. That afternoon, my mother and I strolled purposively along (well, she with more urgency than I), to the GP's surgery at 119 Station Road, Pendlebury, a large terraced building next door to the former home of the celebrated painter, L.S. Lowry. My mother's instinctive reaction to seek out a medical opinion may appear eccentric and unorthodox from the giddy heights of twenty first century gay emancipation, but a little context is required here. It was not until the following year that the American Psychological Association would withdraw its labelling of same sex attraction as a mental disorder. Homosexual acts had been legalised by the Westminster parliament seven years previously, but only then to consenting adults of twenty one years. Moreover, the only 'role models' that existed were the likes of John Inman on *Are You Being Served* or haunted, dysfunctional cinematic figures such as Dirk Bogarde's Melville Farr in the 1960s film, *Victim* (the first English language film to employ the word 'homosexual' in a script and which was also banned initially in the United States). Working class Roman Catholics in the industrial North West were hardly going to be trailblazers and I was by no means the only male adolescent frogmarched off to the GP's surgery in that era.

The session with Dr Bhanji was a total farce. 'What seems to be the problem?' he began in textbook fashion. My mother Pat, now seemed suddenly overcome with embarrassment and was perhaps regretting her earlier impulsive decision to pick up the phone. She nodded to me. 'You tell him, love.' I was not going to play ball as I had a very strong feeling deep down that a crash course of antibiotics wasn't going to flush this out of my system. 'No, you tell him,' I said, and I folded my arms. And it went on like this for some time. Poor Dr Bhanji might have been watching a tennis match as his neck muscles twitched back and forth, until he lost his patience. 'Please, tell me what is the problem or are you wasting my time?' My mother inhaled. 'Our Mark, he likes his best friend at school.' The doctor's brow tightened. 'And what is the problem with liking your best friend at school?' A long pause and then my mother leaned forward towards him. 'Well Doctor Bhanji, when I say like … I mean *like*.' As she had moved towards him, I was suddenly unable to see her face as she faced him, but a Carry On style wink at this point cannot be ruled out. Dr Bhanji stared at me. I felt as though I had robbed the local Barclays Bank. 'Well,' he said. 'This is nothing to be worried about.' I stared back triumphantly back at my mother. But then his next words wiped the smile off my face. 'Mark is a good-looking boy and it is certain the girls will be having an eye for him before too long. It is a passing phase. Tell me about your friend, Mark.'

'Well he was good at sport,' I said 'and tipped to be captain of the rugby team.' Dr Bhanji relaxed. 'Ah, a classic. Hero worship among insecure young males. Mrs Dowd, Mark dotes on his friend because he inwardly aspires to be a hero, like his classroom companion.' No I didn't. Bollocks. I just fancied him to bits, wanted to rip his clothes off and do unspeakable things with him, but I was hardly going to go public with this. The doctor's surgery was, after all, located straight opposite our parish church of St Mark and if I wasn't careful, it would be a case of next stop Father Caulfield. I opted for silence. This was the same doctor who had seen me in a terrible state after

that spate of bullying five years ago. Then he had prescribed me a large bottle of foul tasting brown medicine, a powerful tranquiliser that had doped me up for weeks on end as I missed school and sought to calm my nerves. Had any of this played a part in his deliberations I wondered?

So that was where we left it. We departed the consulting room with no prescription this time round. There were no daily capsules or tablets, just a slow wait for the inevitable stampede of women to come knocking at my door, banish all those memories and turn me into a rampant heterosexual. But it had been my mother who had taken all this on, at no uncertain personal risk to herself. My father had been at work and was no doubt briefed on the outcome. He and I never discussed it. And it's not as if my mother was an unquestioning agent of the Vatican, simply putting into practice Rome's teaching. My parents could be assertively independent when it came to their attitudes to the Church and its clergy. The five year gaps either side of me and my brothers Christopher and Antony was evidence (later confirmed by my mother) that the papal ban on artificial contraception was never a defining feature of the Dowd household. 'What would they know about bringing kids up?' my mother would ask rhetorically. 'I mean married life – they've no idea.' In more general terms, her generally suspicious view of men in dog collars yielded my favourite: '*I'll tell you one thing love – you never see a thin priest.*'

But desperate times required recourse to succour. The following weekend, at mass, my mother whispered in my ear as the altar servers processed out ahead of Father Caulfield and Father Sweeney. 'Don't forget to pray to God about your problem.' I shook my head. 'I don't think it's a problem,' I answered. If we had not been in church I am sure I'd have got a clip around the ear, but she let it pass and, no doubt, stormed heaven on my behalf. But to little avail.

My nocturnal mutterings about Duncan had been totally involuntary. Unlike other acts. My poor mother. No sooner had she adapted to one eruption than she found herself

walking headlong into another. It was barely a week after the GP visit and I was at home on my own. It was late afternoon and a spot of test match cricket on the box was keeping me engaged as Derek Underwood scythed through the Pakistani batting to reduce them to a hundred and thirty for nine on a rain affected wicket. Out of nowhere (was it those tight cricket whites?) I suddenly felt incredibly aroused – the kind of excitement that will not go away unless it is dealt with. Then an image of Duncan crept slyly into my head and I was done for. It was around a quarter past five. Dad was on the buses. Mum would normally get home around a quarter to six and my brothers were both out. A small window of opportunity to kill off temptation. And how best to swat it? By succumbing to it, of course. It was a Thursday, so as long as I confessed on Saturday I'd be OK for communion at Sunday mass and no one would be the wiser.

Self-abuse was frequently talked of in school as 'mortal sin' – an offence so grave that it could cut you off from the love of God. This was why confession was essential before receiving communion. Young Catholic boys and girls had to be 'in a state of grace'. As a regime it tended to work OK, unless you gave into temptation in that small timeframe between Saturday lunchtime when the priests took confessions and Sunday morning mass. If that happened, you absented yourself from receiving the host of bread, running the risk of drawing attention to yourself. Once or twice I had told my mother I was not going up to the altar rails on account of swallowing a piece of meat that had been caught between my teeth as this technically broke the one hour fast we were obliged to observe before reception of Christ's body and blood. The advantage of this little canard was a classy double whammy. Not only did it provide a handy excuse, it also made one look particularly devout.

But masturbation as 'grave sin?' This seemed total nonsense to me – I mean what kind of Creator would it be that we worshipped who could be so easily piqued by something so common among young boys? On the other hand, there was

a tiny chance I could be wrong and therefore the sacrament of confession was my 'Pascalian wager'. Pascal, an eighteenth century French philosopher was not at all sure about God's existence, but he had reckoned that the stakes for ignoring God's statutes and then finding out after you died that you had got it all wrong were so high, that the best option was to assume a divinely constructed world and adjust accordingly. It was a classic 'lesser of two evils'. You lost out much less that way than doubting God, getting it wrong and buying a one way ticket to damnation.

I was so sexually excited that I knew this wouldn't take long. I got up from the sofa to lock the back door (everyone always used the back door) and got down to the practicalities. The bell went for the final lap. It was like a bit of David Coleman commentary, 'and there goes Juantorena down the back straight, opening his legs and showing his class.' Then a sizeable complication interrupted my effortless progress to the gold medal. Oh no! What's this? My mother coming up the garden path with her shopping bags. My first instinct was to fixate on the back door. Only a Catholic could write the following logically flawed proposition:

I locked the back door.

I am wanking.

Therefore, if my mother turns the handle on the door and it is locked, she will know I have been abusing myself.

I quickly pulled up my flared wranglers, zipped up and wobbled to the back door. The key was quietly turned in the lock, hopefully out of her earshot as my mother eased towards the door. Then, calamity. I had been so near to that finishing line that the final movements across the floor of the lounge had … well, set it all in motion. As I opened the back door to help her with her bags, we both crossed our respective thresholds.

'Are you all right love?' she asked as all around me went blurred. I could barely focus on her tartan-covered shopping bag. 'Have you got one of your heads coming on?' she inquired. 'You don't look your normal self.' I pirouetted round with her

bags so she could not see my face and took an eternity to place them on the kitchen table. 'We're having Bird's Eye cod in butter sauce for tea … you like that don't you?'

I'd just about got away with it. But that back door key and lock were never the same again.

I suspect my mother did continue to seek divine intervention, but if her prayers were to be answered, it was not in the form of a cure. Up to now this had all been about uncomplicated lust and an outbreak of this unwanted condition, had it become public, could have been hugely embarrassing among our tightly knit Catholic community. But lurking around the corner was something so transformative, something of such overwhelming beauty and poetic power that it brought me to the brink of feeling that same sex love might give my soul a glimpse of infinity.