

# The Reunion

By Ryan A. M. Ennis



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For Ciara, my Wife, Always.

# The Gathering

## 1

When Simon Tanner recieved a letter in the post from one of his oldest friends, Patrick Sweeney, he was surprised to say the least. Not many people sent letters these days, but to have one sent from an old friend seemed mysterious, but sentimental.

Simon could hardly remember when he had last seen Patrick. Maybe ten years? That's too long. They had drifted apart over the years as life took over, but that was how it was for everyone, wasn't it? Not many people stay in touch with their childhood friends.

Simon started to read the letter as he sat alone at the kitchen table under the dim light of the November morning.

*Dear Simon,*

*It's been too long since we've seen face to face. I hope that you are happy and that your wife is, too.*

*I know you're a very busy guy with your fantastic career and everything and I couldn't be more proud of you. I remember how you used to draw when we were kids, and we got you to make a comic for us. It was going to be the next Marvel! Ha ha! We were a hopefull bunch.*

*Anyways, I'm trailing off topic here, I've decided to throw a special reunion for the old gang at my house. After Christmas and the New Year of course as it's a crazy time for all of us, I know. I've invited the others who have all said they'd be sure to come. So, make sure you are free on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January. We'll catch up and just have a wonderful time, like old times.*

*Your old friend,*

*Patrick*

So, it was an invitation. Simon was

delighted to receive this invitation, but the thin, short letter felt heavy in his hands with a surfacing feeling of guilt. *"It's been too long since we've seen face to face"* was the very first line and that stuck with him.

The town of Redwood was all right when they were kids, but Simon believed he had to leave if he wanted to be a successful artist. And he was right, of course, as he became quite the renowned portrait artist, taking commissions from politicians and celebrities countrywide. So, Simon chose to leave many years ago and he drifted apart from his group of friends as he grew older. Besides, they each drifted from each other, not just Simon.

'What's that you have there?' Beverly, Simon's wife walked into the kitchen with her cosy dressing gown on over her pijamas dotted with cartoon bunnies.

'It's a letter,' Simon said. 'An invitation, actually, from Patrick Sweeney.'

'Which one was he, again?'

'He's the only one of us still living in



Redwood.' Simon poured Beverly a mug of tea.

'I wish I could've been there with you sometimes,' Beverly said as she held her hands around the warmth of the mug.

'No, Redwood was a trap,' he said with certainty. 'I was lucky to escape.'

'But you've so many good stories from when you were a kid.'

'That wasn't Redwood,' Simon said. 'That was the guys. We have some great memories, all right.' He started to laugh. 'It was so stupid; one time we dared Sean to knock on a door and say that he was a door-to-door salesman, at the age of fuckin' 12, and that he was selling doors. So fuckin' stupid, but we laughed our guts up. Ollie was so nervous, though. He thought we'd get into trouble with the guards for impersonating a salesman!'

'Poor Ollie.' Beverly giggled before taking a sip of her warm tea.

'Yeah, poor Ollie.'

'You should go, Honey,' Beverly said.

'You've been meaning to for a long time, especially after his mam passed. It was Pat's mother, right?'

A lot of Simon's guilt came from not making it to Patrick's Mother's funeral the year before. She had died from cancer quite suddenly, but Simon was in New York at the time for his art. Patrick's other friends were able to make it, but the best Simon could do was a phone call to pay his respects. Simon was extremely apologetic and Patrick sounded understanding of the situation, but Simon still felt terrible nonetheless. The phone call ended like most of their interactions would since they drifted – they would both say “gotta go, but we should meet up soon . . .”

Life is like that sometimes.

'You have my permission,' she joked and kissed his cheek. 'Go, enjoy yourselves.'

'I will, then.' He kissed Beverly back.

When Christmas came and went, and the New Year rolled on by with the ticking of the clock, it was finally January the 7<sup>th</sup>. Simon was sitting in the back of a taxi (he didn't think this would be the type of party you could drive home after) and the night was falling fast with the lazy January sun.

'What has you comin' to Redwood?' Joseph Ennis (Simon spotted the name next to a photo ID on the dashboard) the taximan, had asked. 'Not much to do here, really. Visiting family?' Joseph (or Joe to everyone who knew him) could've been a detective, Simon thought.

'Meeting up with some old friends,' Simon said. 'It's been a long time.'

'Ah, a reunion!' He declared.

'That's it.' Simon looked out the passenger side window at the passing amber street lights as they made colourful trailing

tails.

Simon was taking a trip down memory lane as Joe drove him through the town of Redwood. Simon was sad to see the old local book store, that he had visited many times as a young boy and teen, was boarded and the doors locked with chains.

*That's a pity*, Simon thought. He bought a book on Vincent Van Gogh paintings there when he was thirteen years old, and that really influenced him in his artistic journey. Nothing lasts forever. Simon recalled walking into that bookstore, the smell of old books ambushed his nose, for the first time. Simon had always had some interest in books but had never bought his own. He had saved some money up after a birthday and decided to investigate the bookstore. The old lady behind the counter (Simon could not remember her name) greeted him with a kind smile. She was not only happy to see a customer, but also a young boy of the first Playstation generation.

'Are you lost, young man?' The old lady asked with care and curiosity.

Simon was a little shy. 'Can I have a look around?' He thought she wouldn't want a young boy gawking around the shop, like he was doing something wrong.

'Of course you can!' She cheered.

It was like a healthy version of a kid in a candy store for Simon. That's when he bought the book on Van Gogh. It was the colours that attracted his attention, of course. Simon bought the book, making the old lady's day—

'Why'd ya leave?' Joe the taximan asked, bringing Simon back to reality.

'Sorry?'

'Redwood,' Joe said. 'What made ya leave?'

'I outgrew it, I suppose. I needed a change of scenery.'

'I can understand that. Especially if you want a job that isn't in retail, barwork or even as a taximan.'

'I didn't mean to offend you—'

Joe laughed. 'Lad, I'm not offended. To each their own, ya know! Plus, you spend your life getting offended by little shit, then your whole life would be filled with little shits.'

'That's a good way to think, Joe.'

'Life's too short, lad.'

'Everything comes to an end,' Simon added.

'That's right,' Joe said as he pulled over. 'Just like this drive.'

Simon was a little surprised how fast he had arrived. He'd kind of enjoyed his conversations with Joe. Part of the job as a taximan was to know how to talk; make the journey enjoyable. If you're a real good taximan, the passenger will talk like speaking to a therapist. 'Here you go.' Simon handed him a fifty euro note, which was ten euro more than the fair. 'Keep the change.'

'Thanks, lad! You have a good night.'

'You, too.' Simon shut the car door and stepped out onto the path.

He was back in his hometown, but felt like a stranger. He once knew all the faces and they all knew him. Simon and his friends were the local boys and they knew pretty much every other kid. Now, he might as well have been an alien.

Before Simon knocked on the front door he took a look around at the street where he used to play as a young lad. It was a cul de sac, and each house had a large oak tree out front creating a tunnel sensation. Those trees grew with Simon in the years passed. There was a wall where the road ended that seemed to have gotten smaller. Simon and his friends used to hang out there and mess with match sticks. He can almost hear Pat's mother screaming as she found them playing with fire one day. But boys will be boys. Simon wondered if there were any kids messing with matches in that same spot now. He actually hoped there were.

Then he started to knock on the front door. Patrick answered it in seconds with a

smile stretching from eye to eye.

'Hey! Glad you could make it,' Patrick cheered and pulled Simon in for a warm hug.

'Would'nt miss it, Pat,' he said as he patted his old friends back. 'I like what you did to the place.' Simon shot his eyes around Patrick's home which actually hadn't changed at all. The house belonged to Patrick's God-fearing mother who had sadly passed away the previous year from the big C. She was a religious woman and made sure to go to mass every Sunday. Never missed a mass until she was unable to leave her bed. Patrick had no siblings or a father (who had never been around since he went to buy a pack of cigarettes when Patrick was four years old) so, the house was all his.

'You know me, Simon,' Patrick said. 'I don't like change.' He cracked his knuckles, a nervous habit Simon had almost forgotten. 'Anyways! You're the first to arrive so I guess we'll be waiting for the others. Want a drink?'

'Absolutely. Hard to believe it has been



ten years,' Simon said as Patrick poured two small shots.

'Time really flies . . .' Patrick said, his back to Simon and his head bowed over the glasses.

Simon picked up on Patrick's slight morose tone, but thought nothing of it.

'Do you think everyone will show up?' Patrick sounded worried.

'Ah, yeah,' Simon said. 'That's if Jason hasn't been arrested for knockin' someone out!' He laughed but then considered the possibility of that being true.

They drank their shots and both laughed as Simon almost spat it right back out. He was never much of a drinker and has probably been years since he had had a shot.

'Same ol' Simon!' Patrick lightly punched his shoulder.

Then there was another knock on the door. Simon was left alone in the sitting room while Patrick went to let Sean Davis inside. Simon was really amazed at how much things

changed in Redwood, but Patrick's home was pretty much the same except for his mother's cross that used to hang above the sitting room door. There was a discoloured shaped of the cross like the outline of a body at a crime scene. The smell of cigarettes and coffee was still there, soaked into the furniture and walls. Patrick's mother was an avid user of both those smells.

That made Simon remember trying to have dinner at Patrick's when they were boys. The word *trying* came to mind because Patrick's mother decided it was a good idea to light a cigarette at the dinner table. She held it between the tips of her fingers, pointing it away from the boys as if that would help. The greyish smoke trailed upwards, at first like a string, then it broke up into a smoky cloud above them. Simon was too shy to say anything and Patrick was visibly embarrassed with a cracking of his knuckles, his mother slapped his hand to say (quite hypocritically) that it was a bad habit. So, they tried to avoid

dinner at Patrick's from then on.

Sean Davis came into the room with a cheeky grin and a fake mustache clipped under his long nose. Simon couldn't help but laugh at Sean's ridiculous joke. He always had that effect whether the joke was good or not.

'It's good to see you, Sean.' Simon stood up to shake his hand.

'Wish I could say the same to you, you big ugly goat!' Sean hollered and pulled the formal handshake into a hug. 'I'm kiddin', you're a beautiful specimen . . . want to marry me?'

'Sorry, I'm taken,' Simon couldn't stop the laughing. He was glad to see his old buddies again.

'How's the missus doin', by the way?'

'She's great—'

'Can't believe she let you out!' Sean burst out a laugh from the back of his throat.

'Yeah, yeah, old ball and chain shit,' Simon sneered with a grin. 'You're just jealous!'

'Damn right I am! Oh it is good to see you both.' Sean took a look around. 'Where's the others? Don't tell me I missed my chance to be fashionably late!?'

'Still waiting on Ollie and Jay,' Patrick said.

'Well, Ollie's probably in virgin school and Jay's probably beating up the president,' Sean said.

'That makes no sense,' Simon said.

'I'm rusty . . .'

The three of them laughed together.

'So, what's the occasion, Pat?' Sean finally asked without a joke and Simon realised he never asked that question himself.

'Well,' Patrick clicked his knuckles. 'I'm leavin', and I just wanted to say goodbye to Redwood the right way.'

'Good thinking, Pat! Where you goin'?' Sean asked.

'I don't really know yet,' he said. 'I'm just getting the ball rolling, ya know.'

'Well, fairplay to you, Pat,' Sean said.

'You're the only one of us left in Redwood so it's nice to see you getting out.'

'I'll miss it,' Patrick said. 'We all grew up here.'

'Yeah, loads of good times,' Simon said.

'Do you remember when we had a war with the kids from Oakwood?' Sean wondered aloud.

'Oh shit, yeah!' Simon laughed. 'It all started 'cause they came over to Redwood to take some wood from a skip for a bonfire on Halloween. We were like twelve or something.'

'Yeah, that's it!' Sean cheered.

'They egged our bus stop,' Patrick interjected.

'Then Jay egged their houses,' Simon added.

'How did it end?' Sean asked. 'Did it even end? Should we go egg their houses?'

'No, no it ended, remember we had a big battle on the field between our towns and one of the youngest lads got hurt when he tripped

over himself trying to run. We called a truce and played football instead. Even signed a peace treaty,' Simon said this with good recollection. It was all flowing back to him with the help of the smells in the house and on the street.

'Funny that you say that . . .' Patrick said as he left the room with a suspenseful look in his eyes. He returned very quickly with a scroll of paper in his hands. 'Look at this!' Simon had noticed that Patrick had kept this close.

'No way!' Both Sean and Simon said simultaneously.

The scroll was a little worn and torn but the writing (with some spelling errors) was still clear:

### PEACE TREATY

*We declar the war between Redwood and Oakwood to be offishally ended on the account of Daniel O'Brien getting hurt in the battle of the*

*football field.*

*Let there be peace between our towns and  
each keep a copy of the treaty to remember this  
battle for generations to come.*

*Leaders signitures*

*Jason Woods of Redwood*

*Barry Farrell of Oakwood*

Simon could almost feel the summer heat on his skin from that day of the great battle on the field. The thin paper of the treaty felt delicate in his hands as he reminisced. It was like remembering the life of someone else thinking back to those days. Simon couldn't help but even feel alien to his own memories.

'This is pure gold!' Sean held the treaty with care as if he was holding a genuine historical document. To them it was.

'We have to get it framed,' Simon said.

'Good idea,' Sean said just as there was

another knock on the door.

After hearing a little laughter at the door, Patrick then came back to the room accompanied by Oliver Foy, the nerd of the group. But Both Sean and Simon were speechless at the sight of Oliver. He wore contacts instead of thick Buddy Holly glasses, his teeth were perfect thanks to the awful braces he wore all through his teens, his hair was full and thick and still on his head (unlike most of Sean's, and Simon's has thinned out a little, too).

'Damn, Ollie,' was all Sean could say.

'It's good to see you guys,' Oliver said, putting his hands nervously in his pockets. But even that nervous habit made him look good.

'You look fucking sexy, bro!' Sean finally said and they all laughed together. 'How? When did you? How?'

'I've been looking after myself and I run a lot.'

'Ah yeah, that's it, I don't like to run,'



Sean said.

'What've you all been up to?' Oliver quized.

'Well, Simon's an artist who got married (I never got invited to that wedding, by the way).' Sean half joked. 'Pat's moving away, going on an adventure, I'm going on tour this summer for the first time, and who knows what the deal is with Jay.'

'Wow, what's the tour?' Oliver asked.

'It's a comedy gig,' Sean said. 'Finally got my solo.'

'That's brilliant!' Oliver cheered.

'You're into comedy?' Simon teased.

'Go fuck yourself, Picasso!'

And they laughed together again.

'What about you, Ollie?' Simon asked.

'I've got my own business going after I made a bit of money developing apps. Boring shit. But now I'm doing what I love and working for no man.'

'That's the dream,' Sean said.

'What's your business?' Simon asked as

he noticed Ollie's hands free themselves from their pockets, getting over those initial nerves.

'It's a retro store,' he said. 'We sell books, radios, vinyl records, old treasures. A lot of people actually really love that kind of stuff and they're always willing to pay. We've some rare finds and they go for big money—

'I'm sorry to interrupt this exciting conversation . . . but, drink?' Sean made the universal hand gesture to taking a drink.

'Sure, why not?' Oliver said with a smile.

'Jesus, I'll be dead by the mornin',' Simon said as he winced. 'All right then, but then we have to wait till Jay shows up.'

'Yeah, when the pig flies through that window,' Sean said, pointing to the front room window.

Then there was a knock on the front door. They all went silent. Sean's eyes went wide open.

'Where's my flying pig!?' Sean huffed like a spoiled child in a candy store.

Jason Woods entered the room while

they laughed at Sean's joke.

'What's so fuckin' funny?' Jason asked as he stood in the doorway with a black eye and a shaved head. He was also a little overweight, but not dangerously. The room went quiet. Then it erupted once more in laughter as Jason couldn't fight the smile on his face. 'It's so good to see you all again, guys.'

'Where'd you get that shiner, Jay?' Simon asked.

'Ah, just a fuckin' bucket fell on me face on the building site last week.'

'You're not serious?' Sean shouted. 'You were beaten up by a bucket!'

'Come here, you!' Jason tried to playfully grab Sean into a head lock but he wiggled away from his powerful grip as he giggled. They felt like those kids again. After all this time and all those years of growing up, they're still those same young boys who played war with the kids from Oakwood.

'So, we're all here,' Patrick said. 'It really

is good to see you all, and how much we've all changed—'

'Ollie's a sexy beast!' Sean cheered.

'You haven't really changed, Sean,' Patrick said. 'Except for having no hair.'

'Ah here!' Sean snapped but everyone laughed. 'That's too far.'

They always teased each other like brothers would ever since they were kids. The best group of friends were always like that. Sean was quite the prankster as a child and he developed the need to make people laugh. That was the reason for the ridiculous fake mustache he wore earlier.

They would continue to tease, joke and reminisce throughout the night. Patrick's home was like a time machine, and they all got a chance to rewind the clock that night.

### 3

It was a wonderful night to remember but it would come to an end. Sean and Oliver

shared a taxi home, Jason walked to catch the late night bus and Simon was waiting for his own taxi to show (he'd hoped for Joe again).

'We have to do this again, sometime,' Simon said as Patrick stood with him at the front door. He actually meant it, but couldn't help but feel insincere while saying it. Like saying "We should do this again sometime" after a bad date. It was like being made feel guilty walking through a metal detector in an airport; knowing you don't have a gun, but your eyes still shift to the security as they watch.

'Yeah,' Patrick said. He seemed distant.

'I really enjoyed it, Pat.'

'You can stay if you like,' Patrick said. 'There's a spare bed—'

'Nah, I should be gettin' back,' Simon said. 'Maybe another time.' He meant it, but really wanted to be home in bed with Beverly that night.

'Yeah, that'll be good!'

Simon's taxi had arrived, and so he gave

Patrick a brotherly hug. It was a different taximan, of course, but he actually opened the door for him to get in.

*He'll be getting a generous tip, too,* Simon thought.

Simon looked back out the window as the taximan started to drive. He could see Patrick still standing in the doorway, so he waved him goodbye. Simon had no idea that that would be the last time he ever saw Patrick alive.

#### 4

Simon was very serious about having another get-together, so, he made sure to plan the next one himself. Once Simon got home he kissed Beverly and started to plan. They'll probably go out to eat at some Italian restaurant this time.

*My treat,* he thought.

The next day, Simon was awakened by a phone call he would never forget. It was Sean

Davis, comedian extraordinaire. Only this time his voice was serious and shaken.

'Simon,' he said. 'Are you sitting down?'

'Sean, what is it?'

'It's Pat . . . he's gone, man.' Sean started to cry uncontrollably, so much that Simon wanted to jump into the phone and hug him so tightly.

'What do you mean?' Simon knew what he meant, but he just didn't know what else to say.

'Patrick's dead, Simon,' he cried. 'He hung himself.'

Simon left his body. He could almost see himself sitting on his bed, staring lifelessly at his mobile phone. None of it felt real. It was like he fell into one of those terrible TV show dramas and had to think of his next line.

*Who's watching this show?* He wondered.

'Are you there, Simon?'

'Sorry!' Simon came back. 'I'm just in shock. I've so many questions, Sean.'

'Yeah, me too. But this might answer

some of yours: I found him . . . hanging . . . I found him, Simon. I thought it would be a good idea if we had another get-together, so I went back to Pat's this morning to organise something. But it looks like he had plans of his own.' Sean started to bawl some more.

'Where are you, Sean?'

'I'm at his house; the guards had some questions for me so they wanted me to stick around.'

'Right, stay there,' Simon said. 'I'm coming to you.'

## 5

Simon, joined by Beverly, pull into Patrick's home – Patrick, the guards and the ambulance all now gone. Standing outside, looking lost, was Sean Davis. A lone crow bellowed from the street light across the road, peering its beady eyes down upon them.

'Sean,' Simon called as he jumped out of the car.



Sean sat alone against the stone wall and smoked a cigarette in the cold air. As soon as their eyes met, they both started to cry. Sean held Simon with a tight grip. They needed to get it out of their system.

'You must be Beverly,' Sean said as she came closer. 'Have you . . . got any sisters for me?' He finally joked a little. That hug had helped somehow.

'Can we go inside?' Simon asked.

'I don't want to, Simon.' He looked serious again. 'Not yet.'

'We'll go get a coffee,' Beverly said.

'I'll rather a hot chocolate to be honest.' He tried to joke more for Beverly's sake. Joking was his defence mechanism.

'Did you call the others?' Simon asked Sean as they got into the car.

'No, just you, Simon. I could only call you.'

'Don't worry,' Simon said. 'I'll call them.'

'Get them to meet at the café,' Beverly said.

'Will do.'

6

Sean warmed his cold hands around his mug of hot chocolate as they sat at a large table as they were expecting more to arrive. The café was quiet with just the three of them inside. It smelled a little like Patrick's home to Simon. The coffee smell and the cigarettes from the smoking area outside. He feared what that house would smell like now.

Oliver Foy entered the café and came straight over to the only table with people sitting around. He looked angry as if there was someone to blame for this horrible nightmare.

'I don't know what to say . . .' was all Oliver could say.

'There's nothin' you can say, Ollie,' Sean said as he stared into the mug in his hands.

Oliver turned to Beverly and gave her a kind hug. 'I wish we had met under different

circumstances, Beverly.'

'Same here,' she said.

Oliver took a seat. Even now he looked handsome in the morning light as it beamed through the window of the café.

"Who are you and what have you done to Ollie?' Sean joked as he finally looked up from his mug. 'You're too damn good looking!'

At first there was no laughter. But they joined in a pained symphony of laughter and tears in the café as it was all they could do.

'What was Pat thinking?' Sean finally asked, but no one could answer.

Simon knew that question was going to haunt his dreamless nights as soon as it was asked. He looked out onto the street and noticed how much had changed here over the years. A lot of Redwood has actually changed dramatically, unlike what Simon observed at Patrick's home. Patrick never liked change. He said it himself.

'Is there something we could've done?'

Sean added to the tough questions.

'Stop that, Sean,' Beverly said. 'None of this was your fault. Patrick did what he did for his own reasons.'

'But why?'

'Did he leave a note or anything?' She wondered aloud.

'No, not really,' Sean said. 'Just a piece of paper that said "Goodbye, my friends" on it. The guards took it.'

'Why did he say that?' Oliver added. '*Friends?*'

'Does he blame us for something?' Sean asked, staring back into his mug.

'No,' Simon said. 'He threw a fuckin' goodbye party for us. We thought he was moving when he said that he's leaving . . .'

'But he was planning to kill himself,' Oliver said with a morose look in his eyes.

'Fuck sake . . .'

Sean stood up and went out for a smoke.

'Whatever made him do it happened before the party,' Simon said.

'What good would it do, though?' Oliver asked. 'This is messed up.'

'Where's Jay at?' Simon changed the subject.

'Late again,' Oliver said. 'Is he going to be okay?' He pointed his head over to Sean having a smoke outside. 'He found Pat . . . That's gotta mess you up.'

'You should go talk to him,' Beverly said.

'I don't know what to say.'

'Don't say anything, just be with him.'

And so Simon did just that. He stood outside with Sean in silence. Sean seemed to appreciate it. Sometimes words aren't the answer. Any artist should know that.

'I'll never get it out of my head, Simon,' Sean finally opened up. Simon listened. 'The way he hung there, swinging, his eyes were popping out of his head, like they were looking . . . accusing me. I see it every time I close my eyes.'

Now Simon could speak. 'The wound is fresh, Sean. I know it feels awful. I can't say I

*know* how you feel after finding Pat, but I can say you're over the worst of it. We'll remember Pat for who he was; all those memories we have. He lives on through us.'

'Thanks, Simon,' he said.

Then they sat together in comfortable silence once again.

As the hour ticked by they decided to leave the café. Jason Woods never showed up. They'd return to Patrick's home. Sean waited in the car with Beverly while Simon and Oliver went on inside. That was where they found Jason, sitting on the couch with his head in his big hands. His eyes were red and his face was almost purple.

'Jason, you're here,' Simon said.

'What the hell happened?'

'Patrick . . . killed himself.'

'I know that!' Jason shouted. 'I mean why!'

'I don't know, Jay.'

'He was fine before,' Jason said. 'How we know it was suicide?'

'The guards—'

'AH FUCKIN' PIGS NO SHIT!' Tears began to flow in Jason's eyes.

Simon has known Jason since they were kids and knew not to take his shouting personal. It was how he coped. Sean coped by being listened to, Oliver coped by trying to blame someone or something, Jason coped by shouting. How does Simon cope?

'I'm sorry, Simon,' Jason said. 'I just don't know what to do.'

'It's all right, Jay,' Simon said. 'I don't blame you. It's all a big fucking shock to us all.'

'Fuck,' Jason said as he looked out the window. 'Is that your wife in the car? Shit I'm a bloody mess.' He rubbed his reddened eyes, reminded by his black eye from the sting. 'Wish we could be meeting under different circumstances.'

'Don't worry about it, Jay,' Simon said. 'She'll be happy to meet you.'

'It's weird, isn't it,' Oliver interjected

while he was taking a look around. 'Feels like a long time ago when we were here last; was just yesterday.'

'A lot has changed since then,' Simon said.

When Sean built up the courage to come back into the house, Beverly walked patiently along his side. Sean came inside, eyes on his feet, refusing to look up at the stairs where Patrick had been hanging, swinging like a pendulum.

'Why are we *here*?' Sean asked to no one in particular. He really didn't want to be in the same place that Patrick decided to end it all.

'I want to figure this out.' Simon announced for the first time. 'I want to know why and I'm sure you all do, too.'

'That's a dangerous game, Simon,' Oliver said. 'I mean, I'd like to know, too, but sometimes you can't imagine what goes on in someone else's head. Especially if they're depressed.'

'Was he *depressed*?' Simon asked.



'No, he killed himself because he was as jolly as fucking Santa Claus!' Sean snapped.

'Well, I'm just trying to figure this out,' Simon said. He slunk back into the chair, Beverly on the arm rest with her hand on his shoulder.

'Figure what out?' Sean asked. 'He killed himself . . . in this house.'

'I'm kind of with Sean on this, Simon,' Oliver said. 'Nothing good can come from this.'

'I'm with Simon,' Jason said. 'If someone's at fault, I want them to pay.'

*Same old Jay*, Simon thought.

'I don't know about you guys,' Simon said while standing up from his seat. 'I'm going to take a look around.' Simon left the room, now silent, until Beverly asked if anyone would like some tea. If Patrick's kitchen was empty, she'd pop out to the store.

'I'll have something stronger,' Sean said, half joking.

Simon stood alone in Patrick's old bedroom. What Simon found interesting was the fact that Patrick chose to stay in his old childhood room, rather than take the larger guest room or his mother's old room which had an ensuite.

*He never did like change.*

The room still looked like it belonged to the Patrick from their young days. Simon found that very peculiar for a twenty-nine year old man. His bed was unmade and his clothes lay on the floor in a bundle, never to be worn again. There was a laptop on a desk with a poster of a collection of Marvel super heros. So many memories in this room and Simon didn't know what to do with himself, standing in his old friend's bedroom filled with memories, most of them gone with Patrick.

Seeing this room was difficult for Simon. It made him think of Patrick as the young boy

he met one summer day when he first moved to Redwood. Patrick was the new kid on the block. Simon remembered him slowly approaching while he played football with Jason, Sean and Oliver.

'Can I play?' Patrick asked so timidly as he found the courage to get closer.

Simon and the others thought it was quite funny as they could see Patrick inching closer for such a long time. But they weren't unkind. They played together and gained another member to their little posse that warm summer.

Simon approached Patrick's laptop as it sat atop the wooden desk. He flipped it open and turned on the power. Simon was caught breathless at the image that instantly popped up onto the locked screen. It was the five of them huddled together, wearing costumes and smiling at whoever it was taking the photo. Simon felt a sudden and uncontrollable feeling of anger towards Patrick.

*He's a bastard for killing himself?*

But the anger was quickly replaced by guilt. Simon never made it to Patrick's mother's funeral the year before. He was the only one of them who didn't go. He was stuck in New York at the time for his art.

*All I did was call him on the phone.*

Didn't Simon notice Patrick acting a little strange on the night of the reunion? Patrick had asked him to stay the night while they had waiting for a taxi, but Simon refused.

*Patrick would be still alive if I didn't leave . .*

'I remember that,' Sean said as he entered the room, snapping Simon out from his deep thoughts. 'That was our last trick or treat we had together. Apparently, we were too old for knocking on doors and asking for sweets the next year. I say that's bullshit.' Sean let out a little laughter.

'I have a confession,' Simon said, with a guilty look on his face as he looked down on his feet. 'I actually went trick or treat the next year, on my own—'

'You sonofabitch!' He shouted with a smile he couldn't hold back. 'Betrayal!'

'I felt too embarrassed to tell you!' Simon defended.

Sean showed his disapproval with tutting noises and shaking his head. Then he said: 'Me, too . . .' His eyes were wide and his grin was large. They both laugh again, forgetting the tragedy that befell.

Not for long.

They went silent as they both stared at the old photo of their last trick or treat (together).

'What's the password, you think?' Simon moved the cursor around the space under ENTER PASSWORD.

'Try Redwood,' Sean said.

PASSWORD INCORRECT.

Then a hint popped up underneath. It said two words: LOOK UP.

Sean looked on the ceiling with confusion. Simon thought for a moment, then looked on the Marvel poster on the wall. He

typed Marvel, but got nothing. The laptop displayed a last try warning, or they'd be locked out.

Simon thought again for a moment. Sean hunched over his shoulder, holding his breath.

'His favourite super hero . . .'

Simon typed in Spiderman and then pressed enter, expecting to see a PASSWORD INCORRECT and a lock symbol. Instead, the laptop instantly opened up Patrick's desktop. The desktop was messy with files scattered here there and everywhere.

'We're in!' Sean cheered.

Simon didn't know where to start on that disorganised desktop. Then Sean made a suggestion of clicking onto Facebook. At first, they thought they'd have another signing in issue, but they were lucky; Patrick never signed out. They could see Patrick had over four-hundred Facebook friends and zero followers. He rarely posted, save a few Youtube links of songs that he liked.

'He never posted, but Facebook was on his Favourites tab . . .' Sean stated.

'He was on it a lot,' Simon said. 'I'll check his messages.' And both Sean's and Simon's hearts sank with falling feeling in the pits of their stomachs. Patrick had very little messages coming in, many going out. But the thing that hit them the hardest was Patrick's unreplyed messages to Simon, Sean, Jason and Oliver.

Patrick: Hey man! How's it goin'?

Sean: (No reply).

Patrick: This is funny! (Followed by an attachment of a parrot making kissing noises).

Simon: (No reply).

Patrick: This is an interesting read. (He attached a link to an article about a young boy named George Eastwood who had woken up from a deep coma and the doctors were sceptical he'd ever wake).

Oliver: (Seen but no reply).

Patrick: You free for a call, man?

Jason: (No reply).

'I'm never on Facebook,' Simon said with crystals forming in his eyes. 'I always hated it.'

'Same here,' Sean agreed. 'Did we . . . leave him behind?'

'What?'

'We all left Redwood. It looks like he was trying to reach out to us.' Sean stood back from the laptop.

'No,' Simon said. 'A few unread messages on Facebook means nothing; we kept in touch other ways as much as we could. We have our own lives. If you think this has anythin' to do with his suicide you can forget that! And we didn't *leave* him behind; we grew up – outgrew Redwood I guess. He understood that.'

'Well . . . we didn't help whatever his situation was, did we?'



Simon didn't answer; only looked back at all those unanswered messages. He closed the Facebook window and went back to the messy desktop.

'Don't tell the others about this,' Simon said.

Sean didn't argue with that.

As Simon and Sean browsed through the files on the desktop they found many photo albums of the old days. It was bittersweet. Patrick (all of them) looked so happy. They watched them all age (from young boys into young men) before their eyes as they flicked through the photos. Every now and then they'd giggle like kids as they were reminded by funny memories by certain pictures. They recalled going bowling together, at a place called Pin Ball Wizard, for Jason's birthday and Oliver threw himself down the lane with his heavy bowling ball. He never let go of the ball and he was quite a small teen; a very late bloomer (but he bloomed very nicely in the end, so all is well). Sean remembered

laughing so hard that night, he peed a little. Then both Patrick and Sean were the jokes that night.

Oliver and Jason eventually decided to join Simon and Sean in Patrick's room while Beverly went out to the store to get lunch for everyone.

'What have we here?' Oliver asked as he entered the room.

'Pat had kept all these photos,' Sean said. 'Just having a look through them.'

'Ah yeah, I can't forget that one,' Oliver pointed to the album with all the bowling alley pictures.

'Same,' Sean said, holding his hand over his embarrassed eyes and pinching the top of his nose.

'That's when you got the nickname, Pampers!' Jason clicked his fingers. 'You wet yourself laughin' too hard.'

'Fuckin' forgot about that nickname.' Sean hung his head in shame and chuckled.

'Pampers rises once more!' Oliver

announced like an old BBC news host from the black and white days.

'You can shut the hell up with that,' Sean said. 'Right now.'

Jason shook Sean by his shoulders and showed of his teeth with a grin.

Simon then spotted another file. It showed mainly pictures of them all in school and year book photos. They glanced through them, remembering old classmates. Then they remembered Barry Murry – known as Baz – and his friend Karl Butler, and how they used to bully Patrick whenever they got the chance.

'Those pricks,' Jason said, grinding his teeth. 'They probably caused this.'

'I don't think so, Jay,' Oliver said. 'Patrick was fourteen when they were givin' him trouble. That's so long ago.'

'They really gave him a hard time,' Sean added. 'Pat told me they used to wait for him after school to follow him home and throw stones at him. I seen him with a black eye one time; wouldn't tell me at first, but he

eventually said Baz did it.'

'Yeah, but, then Jay kicked his fuckin' ass and got suspended for it.'

'I was lucky I wasn't kicked out of school all together.' Jason stood with pride.

'I remember Pat being pretty weird,' Sean said. 'Even after the bullying stopped.'

'Did they actually stop?' Simon asked no one in particular.

Jason thought about it then said: 'Yeah, they definitely stopped.'

'What was he acting weird for then?' Sean asked.

No one answered.

Beverly called from downstairs that she had come back with chicken fillet rolls; couldn't go wrong there. They all sat in the dining room and ate their rolls while reminiscing about those old days when Oliver slid down the bowling alley and Sean earned the nickname: Pampers. Sean didn't mind. It was a good distraction. Simon took a glance around the table. His old friends and the love

of his life, Beverly, having a little meal together and talking about old times. But he couldn't help but notice that empty chair across the table. He held back the tears as best he could, but his eyes sparkled in the light while he made himself smile while Sean talked about trying to forget the unfortunate nickname he was bestowed many years ago.

*Why did Patrick have to go?*

# The Funeral

## 1

The sun glistened in the January rain and the cold was biting with vengeance as Simon flipped up the collar on his black coat; Beverly linked onto one of his arms. The dark clouds bursting with a shower set the mood while Patrick was laid to rest. There were a few familiar faces at the funeral (besides the obvious Sean, Jason and Oliver) and some that he once might have known, but changed over the years. Despite the numbers, the closest people to Patrick at the funeral were Simon and the others which pained Simon's heart.

*We were off living our own lives, he thought as he watched the coffin vanish into the earth. The tawnting thoughts seemed to poke at a wound saying This is your fault. You did nothing to prevent this from happening. Was*

*he not your responsibility? You're selfish for leaving Redwood—*

Then he felt Beverly's comforting hand squeeze his gently. She brought him back from the dark as she seemed to always be good at. Nothing needed to be said as he looked into her hazel eyes, looking like honey in the sunlight as it broke through the thick clouds, and felt that love and support getting him through this hard time.

The five of them were the only ones left standing over Patrick's grave as people rushed for shelter from the rain.

'Goodbye, Pat,' Oliver said.

They eventually joined the rest of the funeral guests indoors. Food was available for those who wanted, but Simon didn't feel hungry. His black coat dripped from the rain as he hung it over the back of a chair. He looked around him, wondering who many of these guests were. Did they know Patrick? Then he wondered if he knew Patrick himself.

*Can you truly know someone? He*

wondered.

Simon brought himself back from deep within his mind and studied the faces around him. He spotted someone with a slight resemblance, so maybe they were cousins. They tend to drift apart faster than old friends as you grow older, so he assumed they weren't very close. Simon approached an older woman who sat alone.

'Hi,' Simon said. 'How did you know Patrick?'

'He was my nephew,' the old woman said, but without emotion; only a statement.

'Are you his mother's sister?'

'I'm Mary, Eileen's sister,' she said, so that was a yes.

'It's nice to meet you, Mary.' Simon held out his hand to shake.

The old woman met his eyes and said: 'Will you put the kettle on, Patrick?'

Simon dropped his hand. He knew exactly what was wrong. Poor Mary had a bad case of Alzheimer's disease. He didn't see



the need to tell her that he wasn't Patrick; only gently placed his hand on her shoulder and made sure to get her that cup of tea.

Simon's fears were a reality. There didn't seem to be anyone at the funeral that really knew Patrick.

*Did I leave him behind?*

Then Simon felt Beverly's loving hand take hold of his elbow. He never felt so lucky to have Beverly in his life. She was a real crutch during this terrible time. Simon promised himself there that he'd never take Beverly for granted ever again, never argue over something so stupid, never forget an anniversary, never forget to send her flowers and to tell her that he loved her every day.

'I love you,' Simon said.

'I love you, too, Honey,' she replied and kissed his lips.

To Simon, it was as sweet as honey.

Jason was searching for Simon among the funeral guests. He grabbed Simon by the shoulder and turned him around.

'Simon,' he said. 'You need to see this.' He sounded out of breath.

'What is it?'

'There's no time to explain.' Jason was already rushing outside. Simon followed.

Standing next to Patrick's grave was an old man. He looked down upon the dirt with regret and longing.

'That fucking prick!' Jason growled as he charged for the old man. It happened so fast.

The old man stood back with fright while Jason shouted words that could not be understood. Oliver, Sean and Simon rushed forward to hold Jason back. It took all three of them with his bull-like strength. Eventually, they got him to calm down enough to explain.

'That's Pat's dad,' Jason said.

The other's were silent for a moment.

'How can you be sure?' Oliver finally asked.

'I know him from photos.'

'It's true,' the old man said. 'My name's Thomas.' He held out his hand but no one took it. He brought it up to scratch his head instead.

'Why you here?' Jason snarled.

Simon didn't like Thomas either, but he thought that Jason's anger was unusual, even for him. Thomas left Patrick long before he even moved to Redwood. Simon guessed this was Jason looking for someone to blame. So, Simon thought it was a good idea to take Thomas away from Jason.

'Want to take a walk with me?' Simon asked Thomas.

'Sure,' he said, glancing watchful eyes back at Jason.

Simon and Thomas walk along the graveyard, the rain had stopped completely and the wind whispered through the towering, leafless trees. The branches waved like ancient bones of giants.

'I'm not a bad guy,' Thomas said,

pleading to be heard.

Simon said nothing.

'I've made bad decisions, yes,' he continued. 'But I'm not a bad guy.'

'I don't know you,' Simon said, which meant he didn't know Thomas was a bad or good person, but could be either. But life isn't black and white.

'Were you his friend?'

'Yeah,' Simon said trying not to think about how they had drifted over the years.

'Do you know why . . . he . . . ' Thomas couldn't make himself say "committed suicide".

'No, I don't.'

'D'you think I . . . might be to blame?' Thomas's eye began to well up.

*You didn't help*, Simon thought but did not say. Why cause someone more pain? So he said what was most likely true: 'It couldn't have anything to do with you, Thomas. He was so young when you left, he only knew you from photos.'

Thomas looked like he heard what he wanted to hear. It didn't really please Simon to see that, for some reason. It made him want to act out like Jason; maybe give Thomas a big slap across the head.

'I wish I could turn back time,' Thomas said.

'You and me, both.' Simon had had enough of Thomas's company. 'Look, Thomas, I'm not going to stop you visiting Pat's grave, but right now it's best you don't. You're not very popular back there.'

Thomas thought for a moment, but looked like he understood and didn't argue. 'You want to know why I left all those years ago?'

Simon felt his inner Jason ready to explode. 'I really don't Thomas,' he said. 'Whatever it was, you thought it was more important than Pat. We're done here.'

And Simon turned away returning to the others. Thomas was left standing in the graveyard alone and full of regret. But he was

only feeling that regret because now he was alone and old. Only when his actions affected him did he start to feel that regret. He was selfish and always will be.

### 3

Mostly everyone started to leave the funeral as the day went on. Then Sean spotted a familiar face standing just outside, peering in.

'Is that Scott somethin'?' Sean pointed out to the others.

'Scott Fields,' Jason recalled with a pained look in his eyes.

'I remember him,' Simon said. 'He went to our school.' Simon waved to Scott but he turned and walked briskly away.

'That was weird,' Oliver said. 'Guess he doesn't want to come in.'

'Don't blame him,' Sean said. 'These places are depressing!'

'Want to go for a drink?' Oliver asked

everyone as he stood up from his seat.

'That's the best idea you've ever come up with, smarty pants,' Sean said, and Oliver didn't take it as a compliment. Oliver got him back with a light punch in the shoulder.

'First round's on you then, Sean,' Oliver said.

'Children,' Simon said like he was their father. 'No messin' or no one's getting a drink.'

#### 4

They all got their drinks despite Simon's fatherly threat. They stopped at The Red, a bar they used to frequent a lot when they were old enough to buy their own alcohol.

'Jesus,' Sean said as he searched his surroundings. 'When's the last time we were all here?'

'It was before I left for Art College,' Simon said.

'Yeah, some use that was.' Sean grinned.

'That was the last time we were all

together,' Oliver said. 'Before Pat's reunion . . . goodbye party.'

They all let that soak in for a moment. Simon, playing with one of the coasters on the table, remembered how much his friends supported his decision to leave Redwood to pursue a career in art despite their sadness. They all knew it was something he had to do.

'Just don't go cutting off your ear,' Sean had said once.

All those memories were flowing in like river through a broken dam. Simon could see the waitress that Oliver had a crush on when he was eighteen. Her dark hair was always tied in a bun, crystal-blue eyes and her sleeves were rolled up on her white shirt so they wouldn't get dirty. Simon could not remember her name. They used to coach Oliver into talking to her, but he never did. She was far out of his league back then. His hair was a greasy mess and his face was littered with acne. If only she could see him now.

Simon could smell the old spilled drink



at the bar and that reminded him of the fight Jason got into when he defended a girl from some pig of a man who didn't understand the meaning of the word no. Tommy, the barman didn't even blame Jason for the glasses breaking and made sure the guards called to the scene knew that. Jason wasn't charged that time and even got a free drink from Tommy the next night. Turned out the girl was Tommy's neice.

Simon couldn't see Tommy working at the bar now. He wondered what became of him over the years; maybe (hopefully) he retired.

'To Patrick,' Sean said, holding up his drink.

'To Patrick,' everyone else said in return.

'Anyone remember the name of that waitress?' Simon asked.

Oliver's face turned scarlet.

'You mean the one Oliver fancied?' Sean suggested. 'Her name was Delilah!'

'That's it!' Simon cheered.

'What's this?' Beverly asked. 'Who was Delilah?'

'Okay, okay,' Oliver held up his hands in surrender. 'She used to work here many years ago and I had a crush on her. The guys made fun of me.'

'That's mean!' Beverly said, but laughed.

'I never built up the courage to talk to her other than saying "Can I have a Coke, please" in a broken teenage voice.'

'You hadn't a chance,' Sean said.

'Yeah, and you did?' Oliver pointed his finger.

'Well, you should have seen Simon trying to chat me up,' Beverly said. Simon jumped in his seat.

'Why, Bev?' Simon laughed.

'I felt sorry for you all laughing at poor Ollie,' she said.

'Please continue,' Oliver said and they all listened closely.

'Well,' Beverly said. 'He was studying art and I was studying digital media. He came up

to me one day and asked if he could paint my portrait for an assignment of his. I said, "why me?" he said the most corny line about his assignment being to capture beauty in the things you see throughout your day. I said he could paint me from a photo if he liked – I was really nervous. But he said that it had to be in person, that it had to be real. It was corny . . . but it worked.'

'He painted you like one of his french girls!?' Sean interrupted.

'Shut up, Sean,' Oliver said, seeming to be interested in this story; maybe taking notes.

'He painted me,' Beverly continued. 'Fully clothed! And it was a wonderful painting. He saw things in me that I never even noticed was there.'

'Well, that's not embarassing for Simon at all,' Sean said. 'He's so damn romantic! Paint me next, Simon!'

'I guess the next round's on me, then.' Simon tried to change the subject. He didn't

know why he found the story a little embarrassing, but he did. But he'd never regret doing all those "corny" things because they led him to marry the love of his life. He'd do it all again in a heartbeat. Then he realised he hasn't been corny with Beverly in a while. He hoped he wasn't taking her for granted. So, Simon came back to the table.

'I'm not embarrassed,' Simon said. Everyone looked at him but he was focused on Beverly's eyes. 'I don't care if I'm corny or say things that aren't realistic, like "I'm going to love you until the end of time" or "I'm going to tell you that I love you every single day" or "I want to paint your portrait again and again and again". I could paint your beauty from memory, with my eyes closed. Why is all that corny or unrealistic? I want to show you how much you mean to me and I never want to feel the sting of regret. I love you with all my heart.'

No one said a thing. Even Sean was quiet for once in that moment. Beverly's eyes were

watering and her lips quivered as she began to smile. Simon took her hand and he kissed her like he'd never kiss her again. It may be unrealistic, but he wanted to kiss her like that more and more.

*Never let go of this thought.*

# The Chaplain

## 1

They were leaving The Red that late evening. It had cleared enough to reveal the stars and the moon. The stars were like specks of glitter scattered across the dark sky and the moon was glowing down on them like the spotlight of a stage. Across the street were a group of teenagers laughing and walking to the next place to chill. Simon saw his past in them and wondered of their future. Would they be attending one of their friend's funeral in a few years to come?

Scott Fields tapped Simon on the shoulder. Scott was thin and short, and wore round John Lennon glasses on the tip of his pointed nose. He was wearing a suit with a crooked tie.

'Scott,' Simon said with surprise. 'I saw you at Pat's funeral. Why didn't you join us?'

'Can we talk, Simon?'

Simon was a little drunk, but not so much that he couldn't think straight.

'Just you and me?' Scott pleaded as he spotted the other come out from the bar.

'Sure,' Simon said. 'Give me a minute guys,' he called back as he walked around the corner with Scott Fields.

Scott brought him to a quiet bench under a tree with overhangin branches. Scott seemed to be having trouble working up the courage to speak. Simon wondered what it could be that made him so afraid. He also wondered why Scott wanted to talk to him about whatever the issue was.

'You okay, Scott?'

Scott took a trembling breath inwards. 'I . . . think I know why Pat did it.'

Simon couldn't really understand what was going on, but he seemed to sober up completely in that moment. 'What do you mean, Scott?'

'You have to realise how difficult this is

for me—'

'It's okay, Scott,' Simon said with a calming tone. 'Take your time; tell me when you're ready.' Simon was always good with people like that, always gentle.

'It happened fifteen years ago,' Scott said, his voice shaking with his hands. 'In school, I was held back one day for detention – can't remember why – but I was walking down the hallway to use the toilet. That's when I saw him.'

'Saw who, Scott,' Simon said. 'Patrick?'

'Yeah, but he wasn't alone. He was coming out of Father Paul Coffey's office.'

'What are you saying?' Simon didn't want to hear the rest but he had to ask.

'I heard the door unlock before they came out, Simon,' Scott continued, now looking down on he feet. 'Patrick had been crying.'

'But that doesn't mean anything happened,' Simon denied. 'He was seeing Father Paul Coffey because he was getting



bullied by Baz and Butler.' It sounded stupid to Simon as he said it.

'I know it's hard to understand,' Scott said, he was shaking no more. 'Everyone loved Father Paul.'

'I'm sorry, Scott, but how can you be sure?'

'He . . . locked the door on me, too.' Scott's head craned over and his hands raced to his eyes as he started to cry.

Simon was speechless. He couldn't help but feel guilty after denying Scott's confession at first. That was just an initial reaction of denial; he didn't want it to be true. But it was.

Simon placed his hand on Scott's shoulder for comfort. He had no idea what else to do or say.

Scott let out an hysterical bit of laughter as Simon watched. 'I never told anyone that before. I should've said something, maybe Pat would be alive—'

'No, Scott,' Simon said. 'This is all on Father Paul, not you. You were fourteen years

old.'

'Yeah, but I wasn't always fourteen,' Scott cried. 'Why didn't I ever say anything?'

'Because you were abused, Scott. That was fucking messed up what happened to you. Whatever happened with Pat wasn't your fault. Trust me.'

## 2

Father Paul Coffey was the school chaplain at Redwood Community School. A chaplain is a member of the clergy, of course, attached to a private chapel or institution; in this case, a school. They were meant to provide a listening ear and give spiritual support to everyone, including pupils, parents and staff.

Patrick Sweeny was only fourteen years old when he turned to Father Paul Coffey while being immensely bullied by Baz and Butler.

Patrick was brought up to both respect

and fear a clergyman as his mother was always deeply religious. So, he put the trust in Father Paul's hands.

Patrick knocked on his office door so timidly. He would avoid eye contact with Father Paul as he entered the room and took a seat.

'What can I do for you, young man?' Father Paul sat back with his hands linked together over his large stomach. That came in handy when he played Santa Claus every Christmas for the school; his white beard helped, too, when he let it grow out. He was clean-shaven when Patrick came to his office.

Despite Patrick's built-in fear of a clergyman, he felt he could trust Father Paul Coffey. He was different to other priests. He was cool, he was funny and everyone liked him, even those who weren't very religious.

'I wanted to talk to you, Father,' Patrick said, still looking at his shoes as they barely reached the floor as he sat.

'Ah, son,' Father Paul said. 'Call me Paul,

or even Coffey if ya like. Just think of the drink!' He laughed, almost a little like Santa Claus again.

'I've a friend who—'

'I see, the famous I've-a-friend-who,' Father Paul said. 'What's he got up to this time?'

'Well, it's me,' Patrick confessed. 'I'm having some trouble with some bullies.'

'Oh really? Would you like me to do something about it? Who is it?' He sat forward, his chair creaked (or screamed from his heavy weight).

'No, please,' Patrick said, finally looking him directly in the eyes. 'I need to deal with this without telling on them.'

Father Paul thought for a moment and agreed. 'You know, sometimes a bully is just looking for a friend.'

'Not these guys,' Patrick said. 'What do you think I should do, Father?'

'Well, I'd much prefer that you told the teachers . . . but then again, it could turn out

better if you stood up to them. Sometimes they respect that. Might get a black eye but they won't bully you again . . . maybe.'

'I'm afraid,' Patrick's eyes fell to the floor again.

'Listen, Patrick,' Father Paul said. 'If you see them coming, just come straight to me, if they wait for you after school, I'll drive you home. They'll hardly beat up a priest!'

'They might,' Patrick joked and Father Paul actually laughed. Whether it was a real laugh or not was another story.

'Come to me anytime you feel down, son. I'm always here for you.'

And the predator marked its prey.

Patrick would revisit Father Paul and talk about the bullies without giving away names. Patrick found himself talking to him about pretty much anything and everything. From his dad leaving to fancying a girl named Laura Smith and how she never really noticed him. Patrick never even told Simon or the others about Laura Smith.' Father Paul was

special to him. Father Paul was almost a father figure. Patrick trusted this man.

Then one day, Patrick could see Baz waiting for him outside the school. Baz was alone which was more terrifying, as somehow Karl was a sort of string on a kite, holding Baz back from going too far. Karl was a bully but he knew when things were too much. So, Patrick ran back into the school, hoping and praying that Father Paul hadn't left yet. Patrick was out of luck . . . Father Paul was still sitting in his office, just about to leave.

'Father! Father!' Patrick was out of breath in a panic.

'Hold on, son,' Father Paul said. 'Calm down. What's the matter.

'It's Baz,' Patrick said, still breathing heavy. 'He's waiting for me outside.'

'So he's your bully,' Father Paul realised. 'Listen, son, I'll take you home. I just have something to do here first. Take a seat.'

Patrick pulled up a chair and was happy to wait for Father Paul to finish whatever it

was he had to do.

Then Father Paul locked the door of his office.

A young boy named Scott Fields got detention for calling a teacher a bitch after he wouldn't answer a question as to why he had not homework finished from the night before. It had been the second time that week. He sat in a classroom with a handful of other students in detention. They were accompanied by Mr. Johnson, the P.E. teacher. Must have pulled the short straw that day to be left watching the trouble makers. Although, *watching* was hard to say as he was possessed by the pages of a book called 1984. Scott didn't know that one just yet.

Scott noticed that his bottle of water was emptied and he still had another half hour of detention left. Scott raised his hand, but Mr. Johnson was lost in his book. Some other kids started to giggle.

'Sir,' Scott called.

'What is it?' Mr Johnson woke up from

his trance.

'Can I go to the toilet.'

'Yeah, go, but hurry back.' He went straight back to his book.

Scott hated this school. The teachers were assholes and the other kids were, too. He especially hate walking up this hallway alone. The floors were lined with sticky carpets and the lockers were too small for most of their oversized books of nonsense. But the thing he hated the most was walking passed the Chaplain's office. That was where it happened; the worst moment of his life. Sometimes he told himself it wasn't real, that it was just a terrible nightmare. Who'd believe him anyway? Certainly not Mr. Johnson.

Then Scott's nightmare was once again awakened by the sound of that lock turning in that particular door. It was the door to Father Paul Coffey's office. The door creaked open, Scott was frozen in place, and Patrick came out looking like a zombie, pale with red eyes. Father Paul's hand was placed tightly over



Patrick's shoulder. Scott knew that grip. It was a nightmare all right, just a real one.

'How're you, son?' Father Paul said to Scott.

Scott felt a warm sensation in his pants and it trailed down his right leg. He pissed himself with the fear.

Father made a tutting noise and showed a grin that was normally kind and jolly. Now it was souless and cruel. 'Better clean up yourself, son.'

Scott ran and didn't look back. He went back to telling himself it was only another bad dream. It wasn't real. It can't be real.

But no matter what Scott told himself, he knew the truth. It tortured him for the years to come. He only felt a little relief sitting on that bench under the tree with Simon. After all these years and after many more detentions and suspensions, he finally told someone what was wrong. And he told Simon, a stranger really, of all people. But Scott could sense there was something good about Simon.

He was a listener.

### 3

That January rain started to make another appearance while Simon sat with Scott on that bench. Simon could see the others watching from a distance. They were eager to find out what Scott had told him. And as Scott offered in the details, they told them what had happened. It seemed easier for Scott to talk about the second time. He was no longer hiding from the truth. The truth was shit, but it did more damage to lie.

Scott offered they come to his home instead of getting hotels. They couldn't go back to Patrick's old house as the key had to be given to the bank, the new official owners. So, they all gladly accepted Scott's offer.

### 4

Jason was happy to sleep on the couch,

Sean in a sleeping bag on the floor, Oliver in a spare room as he beat Sean in Rock, Paper, Sissors, and Simon with Beverly in another guest room. They just had to sleep off the drink from the evening at The Red before they even thought about discussing the horrible truth they had learned from Scott Fields.

Simon was gifted with a throbbing headache as the sun beamed through a gap in the curtains. He was never much of a drinker, that was for sure. Scott treated Simon to a glass of water, but had asked for a painkiller. Beverly told him that a paracetamol wouldn't work for a hangover; he was still relatively new to the hangover life. Simon even topped it off by saying, 'Never again.'

Simon felt a lot better after he had had breakfast and more of that natural water.

They all sat around Scott's dining table, each waiting for someone else to start the dreaded conversation. It looked like no one would talk for a moment. Then Jason kicked it off.

'We have to find Father Paul,' he said. His elbows rested on the table, his arms making a triangle shape as his hands lock together. 'Make him pay.'

'Is he even still around?' Simon asked Scott, the only one currently living in Redwood.

'No,' Scott said. 'He was given a parish so he moved.'

'Where to?' Simon continued to question.

'He was moved to Castlevue, I think.'

'Moved between two towns,' Sean said. 'Who knows how many kids he fiddled.'

'It's not funny, Sean,' Oliver said.

'I'm not joking.' He looked a little offended that it was even suggested.

'We'll have to tell the guards,' Beverly said.

'What help will they be?' Jason slumped back in his seat.

'Well,' Beverly said. 'They might not have been any help when we were kids, but now it'll be different; the Catholic Church doesn't

have the same hold on people as it used to.'

'I want to deal with him myself.' Jason grinded his teeth.

'Then you'll go to prison for murder, Jay,' Simon said. 'We have to report him to the guards.'

'And he'll get out on bail or something!' Jason stood up, knocking his chair back but not so much that it fell over. 'I need to take a piss.' Then he left the room and shut the door to the downstairs bathroom.

There was an awkward tension for a moment.

'It's how he copes,' Sean said to Scott. 'He doesn't really mean that he wants to murder the man.' Sean looked a little uncertain.

'I don't blame his frustration,' Scott said. 'Father Paul's a different kind of evil. He knew how to push certain buttons; make you afraid. He made me do things . . . I can't say. Whatever you think he did, just multiply it by ten.'

Beverly couldn't hold back those silent

tears while Scott spoke.

'I've wanted to kill Father Paul for so many years,' Scott continued. 'But I'd become something he made me if I did that. I couldn't let him win. Even after the abuse in his office, he was abusing my mind, changing it. I didn't care about my life until I decided not to let him win. And talking to you,' he turned to Simon. 'I really felt something I hadn't felt in a long time. That was hope.'

'What made you come to me?' Simon asked Scott.

'After I heard about Patrick's suicide I broke down,' he said. 'I couldn't hide from it anymore and I talk you'd want to know what happened all those years ago; he was your friend. And you seemed approachable. There's something about you that is real.'

Beverly knew what Scott was talking about when he said that Simon had a sort of approachable quality. It was what made him so easy to talk to; he was always a good listener. He didn't need profound statements

that were groundbreaking in the search for the meaning of life. All he had to do was listen and maybe give some advice every now and then.

'Sometimes it feel like something just takes control of you' Scott said. 'I normally wouldn't have the confidence to talk to strangers. This was something that was supposed to happen in order to make things right.'

'Well,' Simon said. 'I think you're not giving yourself enough credit. I think the strength came from within you.'

'Thank you, Simon.'

'Jason's takin' a while isn't he?' Oliver interjected as he glanced to the bathroom door.

'He's probably havin' a number two,' Sean said, squeezing his nostrils closed.

Oliver made his way to the bathroom door and gave it a gentle knock expecting to hear Jason shout back that he was in there.

No answer.

'You okay in there, Jay?' Oliver called.

No answer again.

Oliver looked back to the others now that they were watching with interest.

'Come on, Jay,' Sean said. 'Want me to wipe?'

No answer, and this time it worried them. Jason was always quick to put Sean in his place when it came to his jokes.

Oliver knocked one more time while he slowly turned the knob, swinging the door open. Jason was gone and the bathroom window was wide open.

'He's gone,' Oliver said. He wrinkled the space in between his eyebrows at the confusion.

'You can't be serious!' Sean leapt from his seat to see for himself. He was shock to see it was true.

'Why would he go?' Oliver wondered aloud.

'Father Paul,' Simon said.

Everyone went temporarily quiet.



'You don't think . . .' Beverly muttered.

'Why else would he sneak out the bathroom window,' Simon said. 'He's goin' after that priest.'

'We have to spot him,' Oliver panicked.

'Why though?' Sean let his thought splip out of his mouth. 'The priest deserves it.'

'But Jason doesn't!' Simon was stern and put Sean back on the right path. 'So, we have to get there before him. We have to find Father Paul.'

'Where is he again?' Oliver asked Scott.

'He's in Castlevew,' he replied. 'Shouldn't be hard to find him; just look for a church.'

'We have to call the guards,' Beverly said.

'But what if Jay's already killed the pedo-priest?' Sean asked. 'Then the guards would be arresting Jay.'

'That's why we have to leave now,' Simon said. 'He can't of gone far without his car.'

Scott threw his car keys to Simon and said: 'You drive mine.'

With Simon driving, Beverly, Sean, Oliver and Scott all packed into the passenger seats like baggage on a plane. The car started with instant ease. Simon loved to drive an automatic.

Beverly took the time to call the guards while she sat in the back seat with Sean and Oliver, leaving out the part about Jason on a mission to kill; she only told them about Father Paul Coffey and his terrible crimes.

It was a long time since Simon drove from Redwood to Castlevew so Scott was his navigator. Scott didn't want to be the one to drive. He was comfortable giving directions. He was just too nervous about where it was they were driving; who it was they were driving to. Driving would be too much stress on him right now.

Simon tried to think how Jason would get to Castlevew. The possible options were

bus which was terribly slow (he hoped that was his transport of choice), or there was always an option of getting a taxi which would have him choking the priest's lights out in the next ten minutes.

They drove passed The Red, their place of gathering every saturday night when they were eighteen years old. Now that Patrick was gone, they'd never go there as a group ever again. Then they passed the bowling alley, Pin Ball Wizard; the famous alley that Oliver went sliding with his ball and Sean earned the nickname, Pampers, he was desperate to forget. Simon realised they'd never bowl there again as a group. Then they passed the football field where they had a large battle with the kids of Oakwood and Daniel O'Brien got hurt so they made peace. All those memories were long ago, and Simon's memories of Patrick would always just be memories. He didn't want to lose Jason, too. Father Paul Coffey wasn't worth it. Simon drove as fast as he possibly could, cursed

when a red light wouldn't change quick enough, and shouted when someone moved too slow ahead of him. He didn't have road rage, but he was raging. It was a side Beverly never really saw in him before and she was worried for him.

A car horn cried out after Simon overtook a slow mover. The other drivers just think he's a speeding asshole, but they didn't know the importance of where it was he had to be.

*You are now leaving Redwood* said a sign as Simon started to go over the speed limit.

'Slow down a little, man,' Oliver said. 'We want to get there in one piece.'

'Father Paul might be in a few pieces!' Sean joked nervously.

Simon did as he was asked but still kept a steady enough speed. They couldn't afford to be late.

'What is Jay thinking?' Simon let out in frustration.

'Don't think he is thinking,' Oliver said. 'He's always been a hot-head.'

'But this is different,' Simon said as he took a turn, following Scott's directions. 'I can feel it!'

'I don't know, Simon,' Sean said. 'He's changed since we were kids, we all changed.'

'Patrick never changed,' Simon said, so forlornly.

# The Punishment

## 1

They pulled over outside the church of Castlevew. The town lived up to it's name as an anient ruin still stood across from the church. There was still no sign of any guards after Beverly had called in the ride over. Simon wondered if the people of this town had any idea that their local priest was an evil pedofile. He guessed some of the children knew it too well.

Simon rushed to the large wooden doors of the church but they were locked shut.

'God must be on break,' Sean said as he caught up to Simon.

'I'll try the back.' Simon didn't wait for a reply as he flashed around the church grounds, passing a graveyard that was probably as old as the castle across the way. Moss cover most of the gravestones and even

peices of the church were falling apart.

Simon found that a back door could be pushed open if he tried hard enough. A cloud of dust fell upon him as he clambered inside. The church was dark and didn't look in good condition at all. Simon's footsteps echoed in the surroundings as he came to the altar. A large statue of Christ on a crucifix was hanging on the wall above the altar; his eyes were forsaken as red paint dripped from the palms of his nailed hands. Simon was never really religious as he considered it to be quite frightening when he was a child. The idea that some being created them and wanted them to do or act how he wanted or you'd go to Hell, was very petty. Simon was a good person and didn't believe that having a glorified cult behind you would make you one. Father Paul Coffey was proof of that. Although, Father Paul most likely had no beliefs; only used it as a feeding ground.

There was no sign of anyone in this church and it looked like it had been locked

up for some time; maybe for maintenance that would never be funded.

As Simon climbed back out he was spotted by an old groundskeeper who came strolling over.

'What has ye commin' 'round here, lad?' The groundkeeper wasn't necessarily old but his face was wrinkled and his teeth were gapped.

'I'm sorry,' Simon said as he dusted himself down.

They were quickly joined by the others.

'Must be somethin' in the air today,' the groundskeeper said. 'Everyone tryin' to get into the old church.'

'What do you mean,' Simon said. 'Was there someone else here before us?'

'Yeah, a big fella,'

'That's Jay!' Sean's eyes looked like they'd pop from his sockets.

'Did you see where he went?' Beverly asked the groundskeeper.

'Well, I told em where to go,' he said. 'He



wanted to know where Father Paul was at. I laughed 'cause this church has been closed for God knows how long. And so, I told, see, Father Paul says mass in the community hall in the town centre. If ya don't find him there, he'll be home. He lives right next to the centre in a bungalow, can't walk very far these days, so, the closer the better, see. Why's everyone lookin' for Father Paul?'

'He's been touchin' the kiddies.' Sean shocked the groundskeeper.

'Jesus Christ!' The groundskeeper yelled.

'We have to go,' Simon said. 'Thank you.'

They left for to continue their search, leaving the groundskeeper with his shock.

## 2

They decided to split up. Sean, Oliver and Beverly headed to the community hall while Simon and Scott made their way to Father Paul's bungalow. Simon believed they were at the bungalow because it wasn't a mass

day, so the community hall would most likely be filled with teens playing basketball or whatever it was they organised for weekdays. Then he had a horrible thought of Father Paul Coffey cheering on the kids from the sideline while they played sports. Some deep, dark part of Simon wanted Jason to kill the priest and that scared him.

Once Simon and Scott reached the priest's bungalow, they could see that the front door was ajar. Simon looked to Scott with worry as he quietly pushed the door open.

'I can't go in,' Scott said.

'It's okay, Scott,' Simon said, understanding how difficult this might be for him. 'I can go.'

Simon walked through the hallway, stepping on broken bits of glass and kicking a larger piece across the floor by mistake.

'Jay,' Simon called from the hallway. 'Jay, are you here?'

There was no answer.

Simon moved further in until he turned left into what would be the sitting room. The door creaked and cracked as he swung slowly open with the push of Simon's hand. Sitting in a large lounge and a bloody eyebrow was an old and frail man with a white collar, the kind a priest would wear. Sitting across from him with his head craned over and his fists tight and bruised was Jason.

'Jason,' Simon said.

Father Paul Coffey looked ancient and withered. There was a walking stick on the floor next to him, he could not walk without. On the mantle top were a number of different prescription pills for whatever illnesses this old man suffered from.

*He deserves worse.*

'He needs to die, Simon,' Jason finally said.

'Yeah, looks like it'll happen without your help, Jay.' Simon came a little closer to him.

'What are you doin' in my home?' Father

Paul asked. 'Is he a mad man?' He pointed a chubby but frail finger to Jason.

'You shut the fuck up!' Jason shouted as he kicked the chair next to him. Father Paul flinched.

'Jason,' Simon said. 'We all want him punished for what he did, but we don't want you to suffer for it.'

'I've been suffering my entire life!' Jason cried and Simon was coming to a realisation. It suddenly made sense why Jason would act out in certain ways when they discovered what had happened to Patrick in that office.

'He got to you, too?' Simon asked.

'He *got* to me, yeah.' He stared with hatred at the old priest. 'I went to you for help! I never knew he did it to Pat, too. I was before Pat. Getting into trouble with the teachers a lot so they suggested a little bit of God wouldn't hurt me. Maybe a few prayer for a troubled boy would set him straight. The very first day, he locked me in his office with him and wouldn't let me out till I sucked his

cock . . .' His voice cracked here. 'He made me believe I'd be in trouble if I said somethin'; that no one would believe a word I said. He said it was a serious offense to accuse a man of God. To accuse him was basically accusing God! I was terrified. I couldn't sleep, but when I did, I had nightmares. It happened all through my junior years . . . and I actually felt thankful to see other juniors comin' in every year . . . more chances he'd leave me alone. How fucked up is that!?' Jason turned to Simon, his eyes red with painful tears.

'Lies,' Father Paul spat from his chair. 'God-fuckin-help-ya!'

All Jason could do was let out a primal scream so painful. His face was as red as a stop sign and his eyes widened with rage. It actually shook Father Paul for a moment.

'You *are* mad!' Father Paul showed his realisation and his lip quivered. 'Why aren't you helpin' me, son?' He turned to Simon.

'I'm not here to help you,' Simon said. 'I'm here to help Jason.'

'You both'll be put away for this!' Father Paul sneered.

'I have to kill him,' Jason said, his voice was cracked from all his shouting.

'No you don't, Jay,' Simon said, on the verge of begging. 'We can't lose you as well as Pat. Don't do this, please.' Simon didn't know what else to say. No one really ever prepared him for a situation like this. Was anyone ever really prepared?

'He doesn't have the balls, son,' Father Paul said. It looked ridiculous coming from an old, frail man dressed like a priest.

Simon knew what Father Paul was doing; he was coaxing Jason to actually kill him. Father Paul Coffey used to be a highly respected member of the community, and people would do as he commanded. But now he was a weak and sick old man with no church and very little turning out to mass on Sundays. Time had not been kind to Father Paul. A lot had changed in those ten to fifteen years and now he was in pain, both physically

and mentally. He wanted Jason to relieve him of that pain.

'Don't listen to him, Jay,' Simon gently pulled his arm back to turn him around.

'He doesn't deserve to live!' Jason snapped.

'That's true,' Simon said. 'But you don't deserve to go to prison.'

'I don't deserve this!' Father Paul shouted but no one listened.

'He wants you to kill him, Jason,' Simon said. 'Can't you see that? He's nothin'. . . and he's in pain. He wants an easy way out but was always too weak to do it himself. You're his ticket out of this life. Don't let him win, Jay.'

Jason only looked to the floor as if he was judging the situation and finally listening to Simon.

'Don't give him what he wants,' Simon continued.

The thinking was over. Jason lowered hands by his sides and took two steps back to

stand next to Simon. Then Sean, Oliver and Beverly came through the door. Simon was surprised to see that they were joined by Scott.

'What the hell is this?' Father Paul shouted as best he could which wasn't much. Everyone ignored him.

They were all relieved to see that Simon had done it. Jason looked it, too. Jason had felt like he had overcome something dark and powerful right then. He had come face to face with evil and lived to tell the tale.

### 3

The guards had finally arrived, their lights flashing and the crowds gathering. Father Paul Coffey was escorted, in a wheelchair, into a police van, and people were taking pictures. He tried and failed to cover his face with his jack out of shame. But Simon knew that shame came from being caught, not from the crimes he had committed.



Simon spotted a group of five young boys, on their bikes, watching from the sidelines. They reminded him of a certain group of boys who would cycle to the bowling alley on the weekends and spend their hard earned payments from mowing lawns and washing cars. They were never good at bowling, that was for sure. But it wasn't about bowling; it was who they were bowling with. Simon would never let go of those memories. In a way Patrick Sweeney still lived. It's a corny thing to say, but Simon doesn't care about something sounding corny anymore, especially when he means it. Simon believed Patrick would live on through him and Jason and Sean and Oliver.

# The Picnic

## 1

The July sun was warm on Simon's skin as he lied on a picnic blanket. The grass had been freshly cut in the park so the smell was strong, itching at Simon's nose a little. He lied with his head back and looked up to the large blue sky with spots of white, fluffy clouds.

'That one's shaped like a puppy,' Beverly said as she fell down beside him.

'I don't see it,' he said.

'Look,' she said as she took his hand, using his own finger to point out the shape. Simon wasn't looking. He couldn't take his eyes away from Beverly. 'See it?'

'Yeah,' he said, not talking about the cloud. 'I see it.'

Sean came to spoil to moment. 'It looks like a dick!' He hollered. Simon threw and empty Coke bottle at him but Sean dodged it

with ease.

'Missed me, missed me, now you gotta kiss me,' Sean jeered like a child.

'That's it-' Simon jumped up and tackled Sean to the ground.

Beverly rolled with laughter. Their clothes were marked with slashed of green from the grass and they wrestled until Jason and Oliver rushed over to join them on a pile-on. Beverly rolled her eyes at the boyish messing around. They quickly stopped and brushed themselves off. Sean was out of breath and was eager to sit back down on the blanket. They still might act like boys, but they certainly didn't have the same energy.

Beverly dealt out the sandwiches like a deck of cards and the devoured them in minutes. They still had the same appetite as growing boys, but it was easier to put on the weight.

Then they were joined by another. It was Scott Fields. He looked a lot better since they had saw him last; still wore his John Lennon

glasses though. His eyes were brighter, had put on a little healthy weight and did a lot more smiling.

'Glad you could make it, Scott,' Simon said. 'You look good!'

'Yeah, thanks,' he replied. 'Ollie's been givin' me some tips.'

'Don't you see gettin' sexier than me, too!' Sean shouted.

'Woops,' Scott said. 'I already was!'

Scott was blending in well with the group. The sad thing was that Simon thought that he reminded him of Patrick sometimes.

*Was that a sad thing?*

Simon would always miss his friend, Patrick. That was always going to be there. But he was glad that he was able to help Jason and Scott. Simon often wondered if anyone else that he knew had been abused by Father Paul Coffey, or even by another abuser. You never really would know unless you were told. And Simon learned how difficult it would be for someone to tell what had

happened to them.

Now Father Paul Coffey would die in prison. That was the least he deserved. Simon recalled seeing a famous photograph in the papers and news media platforms of Father Paul being escorted out of his bungalow in Castlevew. He looked defeated, and that made Simon happy. The title on one article that Simon found was **They're At It Again** which referred to the Catholic Church and the countless amount of cover-ups and abuse over the years, inflicted upon boys, girls and women. Yet somehow, the Catholic Church took no responsibility. Simon was never religious. He didn't think believing in a god was a bad thing. But he gathered that, maybe, believing in a god and having a religion were two different things. A sport can be a religion, a career can be a religion, a cult can be a religion. For Simon, art is his religion. You just have to make sure your belief in your religion doesn't make you toxic—

'Still lookin' at the clouds, Honey?'

Beverly brought Simon back from his daydream.

'Yep, sorry,' he said, sitting back up.

'Let's make a toast,' Sean said.

'We've no drink,' Jason pointed out.

'Use these.' Beverly handed out paper cups of Coke.

Jason sniffed his drink to find it was just Coke. 'That'll do,' he said.

'What are we toasting to?' Simon asked.

'To us,' said Sean.

'To us,' they all replied, holding up their paper cups and pouring them down their throats.

**THE END**

For information and support for people who experience mental health difficulties contact [info@mentalhealthireland.ie](mailto:info@mentalhealthireland.ie).