**THE TWO BROTHERS**

Andrew Rivers had been priest of the same parish since before either of his daughters was born. Both daughters were home for Christmas; Jessica, the elder, had just told the family over Boxing Day lunch that she was getting married to a woman, and Andrew felt as young and as empty of wisdom as when he had first stepped through the vicarage door. He sat for a few moments, then could only think to say that he was going out for a walk.

Leaving the vicarage he started northwards, away from the edge of the town towards Court Farm, until he reached the pond where sheep drank for most of the year. On Boxing Day walks when Jessica and Janice were little they used to throw stones at the ice on top, starting with fragments of grit and working up to larger and larger rocks. Fractures would arrow across the surface and make them squeal. He paused to drop a pebble but it made no impact, skidding a few inches over the ice.

He continued to walk. The pressing facts – who exactly this woman was, how long she and his daughter had known each other, whether there could still be any possibility at all of children – Emma would uncover while he walked, and he would come home to Jessica unburdened in the corner chair, her slippers askew on the floor and her legs curled beneath her.

“I’m glad you could tell us, Jessica,” Emma had said. There was a tiny, shining blush high on each of her cheeks. “Mummy’s spent too long in the oven,” the girls used to say, gleefully, when they were small and the blushes appeared. “She’s going to burn to a crisp.”

“Your father will want a little time to let the news sink in, I expect,” Emma went on. “But as long as you’re happy, and safe – ”

“ – safe? I’m getting married, Mum. I’m not exactly shattering the boundaries of convention.”

“*Alright*, Jessica.”

A mound of dung steamed at the far side of the field. The farmhouse, picturesque in summer when hollyhocks and roses stood up against the windows, now hunkered under cloud, its sills prodded by bare twigs. As Andrew stood looking at the house the front door opened, and one of the Broom brothers stepped outside. He waved, then immediately bent forwards and clapped a hand to the small of his back. It was the elder Broom. Andrew crossed the field towards him and in a moment was on the hard mud of the farmyard.

“Happy Christmas, Vicar. Saw you from the kitchen.”

“Merry Christmas, George. The back giving you trouble?”

“Ah...” George straightened, but kept his hand against the bottom of his spine. “Cold makes it worse. Are you coming in?”

“I was just walking, actually. Boxing Day walk. We always used to do it when the girls were young. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s no intrusion, always welcome. We’ve mince pies left. From the shop though, Dilys is laid up in bed.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” George was already inside the tiled hallway, holding the door open behind him, and Andrew hesitated only for a second before following. The air was no softer in the hallway than it was in the yard, but the sitting room was chilly rather than cold. Low flames scuttled in the fireplace. A television was loud in the corner and the younger Broom, deep in a faded armchair, sprung to his feet and held out his hand as Andrew came in.

“Thought I heard you. Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas, Ben.”

“There’s mince pies in the kitchen. And tea?”

“Oh well, yes, please.”

Ben aimed the remote control at the television and turned off the sound, then bounded from the room, and Andrew lowered himself beside George on the sofa. The two men sat without speaking as George adjusted a rug over his lap. Sheep bleated, but through the window only empty fields were visible, and the grey shank of the valley rising up to the east.

“I used to see you,” said George after a while, “On Boxing Days, out with Emma and the girls.”

“Yes, we always walked this way.”

“Every year we wondered which of the girls was which, all wrapped up in their hats

and coats. Seemed like they was always shooting up, one then the other...”

Andrew smiled. “Yes, it was a bit like that. Janice was taller than Jessica for a couple of years, then Jessica took over again – now they’re much the same.”

“How old now?”

“Heavens. Jessica is twenty-nine, Janice twenty-seven.”

“Well, well. They don’t come out walking with you any more?”

“Goodness, no. They don’t even always come home for Christmas. This is the first time in a few years they’ve both been here together.”

“Couldn’t get shot of you for Christmas, could we, Ben?” said George as Ben rattled through the door, tea-tray held out before him. “Not even if we wanted.”

“What’s that?” Ben set down the tray on an unsteady table and handed Andrew a cup and saucer, and a plate with mince pie in a foil dish.

They ate and drank, Ben occasionally glancing at the television and then shifting his gaze back to the fireplace. Andrew thought to ask about the animals, the crops, but even after all these years he was unclear about how, exactly, the Brooms organised their seasons and what should be happening now, at the base of winter.

A scrape across the floor above reminded him: “Dilys,” he said. “I’m sorry, I quite – how is she?”

George raised his eyes towards the ceiling. “That’ll be her, going to the bathroom, I expect,” he said. “She can just manage that, but not the stairs. Can’t come down to join us. She can’t be out of bed for long.”

“Would she like me to go up and see her?”

“Oh no, not while she’s poorly. She wouldn’t want visitors.”

“As her parish priest, though, not as a visitor – just to give her my blessing, and Christmas wishes, perhaps.”

“No, no. She wouldn’t like it. She likes to be left alone.”

“Has she seen a doctor?”

“I’ll call one tomorrow if she’s still under the weather.”

Ben plucked a second mince pie from its foil and crumpled the dish into a tight ball, which he tossed up and down in his hand. Andrew looked up for a long moment at the ceiling. “Alright,” he said. “Well, thank you for the tea. I’d better get going. You will give Dilys my best wishes, won’t you, for a speedy recovery?” As he pulled himself out of the sofa’s clutch George began to fold the blanket on his knees, but Andrew held out his hand. “Don’t get up,” he said. “I’ve disturbed you enough. I’ll see myself out.”

“It’s no disturbance, Vicar,” George said, although he made no more effort to stand. “It was good to see you. Happy Christmas to Emma and the girls.”

Ben nodded.

“Yes,” said Andrew, “and to Dilys.” Closing the door to the sitting room behind him he found that the passage was entirely dark, and slowly felt his way over the tiles to the front door with his arms out to his sides. As he reached the door and moved his fingers across it to the latch, he heard the television strike up again in the sitting room.

He had not wanted tea. On the sides of the valley the tree-trunks and branches were indistinct, and if he were to walk as far as they used to – another mile northwards – it would be dark before he was home. It was better to turn back.

From the farmyard he stared out over the fields at the route they used to take, and as though in front of him could see Jessica in her red overcoat and Janice in her pink one, jumping together on the stiff grass. The ends of their scarves span out around them, and long woollen plaits streamed from the hats that Emma’s mother knitted them for Christmas, every year, without fail. “What can it be?” the girls used to tease each other, squeezing the soft parcels in their thin crumpled paper.

“A rat!” said Janice.

“But squashed,” said Jessica, “Squashed flat.”

“Jessica!” Emma said. “Grandma would not give you a squashed rat for Christmas.”

“She would, she has! I can feel its tail.”

He let himself in through the back door and looked around for his slippers, but they were not where he had left them. In his socks he crossed the floorboards and lightly pushed open the door to the living room.

At the table, Emma and Janice sat face to face above Snakes and Ladders. Janice tapped her counter across the board and shrieked, slid the counter down. “Aha!” said Emma, and snatched up the dice.

Janice caught her father’s eye at the door and sat up straight in her chair. “Hello, Dad,” she said brightly. “Nice walk?”

“Yes thank you,” he said. “Emma, have you seen my indoor shoes?”

“By the front door – I put them there for you.”

“I came in the back door.”

“Well, they’re by the front.”

Slippers on, he returned to the living room. “Did you see Jessica?” Emma asked.

“See her? Where?”

“She went out for a walk, not long after you did. I thought you might have gone the same way.”

“I went up past the pond, Court Farm direction.”

“Yes, that’s the way she said she was going.” Emma jigged the two dice in her closed palm.

“I stepped into the farm for a bit, had tea with the Brooms.”

“You must have missed her, then.”

“Roll, Mum!” said Janice.

There was no light left in the sky by the time Jessica returned to the vicarage. She ran a bath as Emma started the evening meal, then descended the stairs smelling of shampoo, her face and hands flushed. She settled herself in the corner chair opposite Andrew with her torso curled and her feet tucked beneath her hips. Janice sat on the sofa, reading without looking up, and after a moment Jessica stretched down to where a newspaper lay folded on the floor. Over the top of his book, Andrew looked from Jessica to Janice, and back to Jessica.

The telephone began to ring in the hallway. After a minute the living room door opened, and Emma leant around the doorjamb. “It’s Court Farm,” she said. “Ben Broom.” She beckoned with her head towards the hall, and Andrew pulled himself to his feet. In the hallway, the telephone receiver sat flatly in its cradle.

“It’s Dilys,” said Emma in a quiet voice. “She’s very, very ill. Ben says a doctor is with them, but they think this is it. They want you there.”

He lifted his coat from its hook on the wall.

“How long will you be?”

“I don’t know. It depends. Go ahead and eat.”

“I’ll save you some. What shall I tell the girls?”

“Tell them what’s happened, why not? They’re grown up now.”

He kissed her, high on her forehead at the hairline, before he opened the back door into the garden. A stalk of light separated the curtains of the living room where his daughters sat; Emma stood on the step with one hand raised. He unlatched the gate and took the direction he had taken earlier that afternoon, out from the town and northwards along the centre of the valley floor towards Court Farm.

At the farmhouse door Ben met him and led him through the hallway, cold as the fields, to the sitting room. The television was still on, but silent once again. George was sitting on the sofa with the blanket over his knees, and as Andrew entered he stood, the blanket slipping to the floor.

“The doctor’s with her, upstairs,” said Ben quietly.

George stumbled into the centre of the room, the blanket tangling around his ankles, and Andrew stepped forwards to meet him. George reached out to take his hand.

“Shall we go up, George?”

“Come on, now,” said Ben. He bent to tug the blanket from his brother’s feet, then placed a hand on his shoulder and guided him into the passage. Andrew followed the two men up the staircase, a low twist of hunger in his stomach.

A dim light shone from the upper floor, tipping the shadows of the brothers over him as he climbed. Their progress above him was slow; they placed two feet on each step like children, and leant in towards each other so that what little light there was seemed balanced between their shoulders, like a thing that could be dropped. Behind them Andrew tried, though he could not, to fill the stairwell.