

## CORPUS CHRISTI

When Ellory opened his eyes it was still pitch black. He tried to stretch but he was confined by walls all round pressing against him. Wooden walls. He was in a box. Some kind of crate maybe. A *coffin*? He hammered against the walls, kicked at them. Heart pounding, adrenalin pumping. He launched himself against one wall, it didn't give. He hurled his weight against the other wall – as it swung open he remembered he'd crawled into the wardrobe to sleep when Pia brought one of her clients back. He fell to the floor. The dull thud of a hangover was drubbing at the inside of his head. He scrambled out, feet sliding on the clothes he'd pulled off their hangers to make a bed. He pushed himself to kneeling then carefully, to standing.

Pia was lying on the bed foetally, naked on top of the crumpled sheets – catatonic. She looked like one of the starving African babies they'd saved pocket money for during Lent. One penny per square box on the back of the Good Shepherd envelope. For each penny you got to move your 'baby' – a paper cut-out – one step up the twenty-four steps to heaven. His always languished at the bottom. He looked at Pia's skeletal arms and legs, protruding ribs, disproportionately large head, sunken cheeks. Blue-veined lids filmed over her bulging eyes. Unlike the starving babies, the skin that stretched over Pia's fragile bones was graffitied with track marks and bruises. She looked like a

damaged fledgling fallen from its nest. He hated her sometimes. Her thigh had a dribble of dried blood on it – so she'd scored last night. No sign of her punter. Ellory glanced at the bedside table – a wodge of notes. He shoved them into his back pocket. As he turned away from her, he nearly tripped over a plate of food, congealed tomato pasta or something. There were dirty plates and glasses, cartons and empty bottles spewed across the floor. Papers, Pia's clothes, dried vomit. He despised this dump. He picked up some plates and a glass to put them in the sink but instead, smashed them all into the bin. He loathed himself. When did the rot start, how did he sink to this putrid level of existence? Grabbing a dirty rag or a towel from the back of the door he headed out along the corridor to the shared bathroom.

The shower had never worked so he stripped off to wash at the basin which was tide-marked with rings of greying scum. A pair of soiled underpants lay crumpled on the floor below. He rooted through the bin looking for discarded bottles of shampoo – an old habit from boarding school. An inch or so of water sluiced around the dregs and he'd have enough to wash his hair and run the suds over his face and body. No luck today, the calibre of tenants in this place had really dropped. He filled the basin with cold water, submerged his head and face, rubbing at his skin, running his fingers through his hair. Then he splashed water all over himself, taking pleasure in its coolness against his hot skin. He stood at the open window hoping for a faint breeze, drip-drying,

feeling cleansed but temperatures in Genoa had reached the high thirties and the air was unnaturally still. Even here down by the docks where their one room apartment squatted over an ancient colonnade there was barely a draft. The ships sagged in a green-hazed foul smelling sea – "...and slimy things did crawl with legs upon the slimy sea." Sin and repentance, Fr McGillicuddy said. One of the good teachers, passionate about literature. There wasn't one boy who failed English lit. in his class. Ellory pulled his clothes over his still wet body, his shirt clinging to his skin. The floor was covered in water – he put one foot on the discarded underpants and wiped the excess off with them, kicking them into a corner as he walked out the bathroom.

He left his towel hanging on the door handle of their bedsit and made his way down the three ramshackle stone flights to the street. The druggies were shifting around the cafe in the shadow of the colonnade, checking out the uneasy tourists who'd come to the end of Via San Lorenzo and found themselves unwittingly down by the docks and the dodgier part of town.

Ellory lowered his head, turning the corner up into town. He felt his pocket for the bulge of notes. Slipping off the main thoroughfare he dodged up the side streets to the Turkish shop that sold out of date lager and cheap wine.

Ozgun, the taciturn owner, crammed a loaf and a bottle of red table wine into a thin white plastic bag. When Ellory realised there was still money left over, he bought a bottle of single malt. Ozgun raised his eyebrows, Ellory

tapped the side of his nose. Abelour – his father's favourite. Couldn't spare Ellory pocket money or give him shampoo each term but he was never short of money for drink.

Ellory pulled the stopper out of the whisky bottle with his teeth as he left the shop, glugging the amber nectar in long thirsty gulps. He pushed the cork back in – he'd savour this bottle, take it up onto Piazza Raffaele de Ferrari, and sit in the shade to drink it. He made his way along the narrow back alleys and tight streets lined with high rise tenements. Washing, grimed by dust and heat, was dangling precariously from drying racks attached to the windowsills. Was that drying your dirty washing in public? He smiled and saluted the clothes with his bottle of whisky.

With each step towards the Piazza he was getting hotter, the sweat dripping down the inside of his shirt. He pulled it up to wipe his face and neck. Without thinking, he took another long glug of the whisky then jammed the stopper back in – he would save the rest for the square. An old man was lolling on a doorstep, head tipped back against the closed door, mouth open, snoring. One of his shoes was missing. Ellory's father had died alone in a room above a shop – one hardbacked chair, an orange crate for a table with a bible on it. Empty whisky bottles strewn around the floor – cheap brands, not even single malts. He wasn't found for nearly a week. He'd inherited a four-storey Georgian townhouse in Chelsea where Ellory had grown up – he drank the lot, as his aunt

said. Ellory swigged from the bottle again. When the whisky stopped flowing, he held the bottle upside down, shaking the last few drops into his mouth. He looked sadly at the empty bottle before tossing it away.

He found himself on Piazza Valoria, a nondescript square of peeling stuccoed walls and shops with their metal shutters pulled down – except for a small bookshop called Bookowski. A fan of the writer, Ellory was drawn in. He'd read *Factotum* over and over until his battered copy disappeared during one flight from an irate Sicilian landlord. He *was* Henry Chinaski. The more often he read it, the more he believed the character was based on him.

The bookshop wasn't much to look at from the outside, just a double doorway punched into the wall, decorated either side with graffiti. Inside it was pristine, with artfully disarrayed books on white bookshelves running around the walls. Some were new, some second-hand. He jingled his pocket, guessing he had four or five euros left, maybe he'd find a good book in which to lose himself. The two young assistants eyed him with shallow smiles. He could feel them watching his progress around the shop. He swung round to face them, smiling his most benign smile but lost his balance and lurched towards the bookshelves. The two girls stepped forward, arms out, then relaxed as he righted himself. Back in Chelsea they'd had a library, crammed with books. He'd loved that place, read everything from astrology to philosophy, from eighteenth century novels to medical reference books. All gone now. Every single book. He

wandered round the shop for a while, trying to keep his balance, picking up books at random, reading the spines. He couldn't find anything in English and although he could get by in Italian, thanks to Pia, he didn't have the patience to read a novel in the language. He left the shop, raising an imaginary hat to the girls, clutching at the doorframe to stop himself falling.

Wandering the maze of alleyways that he would never know his way around despite nearly ten years living in Genoa, he found himself walking back towards the Via San Lorenzo. It was sweltering. He took off his shirt, using it to wipe the sweat off his body, then tied it round his waist. He stopped and listened. There was intermittent chanting, prayers being intoned. A speaker crackled and fuzzed into life and he could just about hear a choir singing. He hurried, staggering towards the main street, coming out between the cathedral and the Chiesa dei Santi Ambrogio e Andrea. There was a religious procession headed by a few raggedly marching Carabinieri, then a host of priests in various coloured vestments. They were followed by an aging order of the Knights of Malta. They must have been sweltering under those heavy velvet robes. Behind them two old nuns were pushing a pram with a large amp tied into it – the source of the singing he guessed. He stopped just as the procession drew to a halt. In front of him, eight men were carrying an enormous wooden platform on which a huge ornate monstrance was placed, sheltered under a heavy brocade canopy. Evidently as heavy as it looked because four priests and a couple of

Knights bowed out from under it as six more stepped into their place. The men who emerged were sweating, rubbing their shoulders, wiping their foreheads, smiling with relief. The round glass window at the centre of the monstrance showed something white behind it – the Host. It must be the feast of Corpus Christi. The word, transubstantiation, crossed his mind – a word that had travelled light years from his youth. From a clear bright forgotten world to this alien landscape. Transubstantiation. Bread and wine into body and blood. A magic word filled with the promise and hope of change, of an altered state. Ellory was ten years old again, glowing on the altar in his pristine white Alb. His pure scrubbed face, his unadulterated soul and body. His father in his smart Saville Row suit beaming at him from the front bench. His whole life, bursting with potential, stretched out ahead of him.

Ellory realised he was clapping wildly, oblivious to the stares of the priests nearby. When the hymn finished the procession moved off again, slow, stately. He bowed his head as the monstrance approached, beating his chest; *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. When he looked up, the monstrance had passed. Behind it strode an imperious young priest bearing the archbishop's crozier. He was eyeing Ellory suspiciously. Ellory was suddenly aware he was naked from the waist up, and in front of the archbishop. He ripped at the knotted shirt around his waist trying to unravel it but the whisky had rendered his fingers useless. He dragged the screwed up piece of cotton over his shoulders,

covering his nipples with his hands. The young priest glanced back at the Archbishop and stepped between him and Ellory who was swaying, dazzled. The archbishop looked straight ahead. As he approached, Ellory dropped to his knees, his cheap plastic bag smashing against the stone pavement. He let go of it and clasped his hands together in prayer, face raised. A trickle of red wine began to ooze from the bag and spread out across the street at the feet of the archbishop.