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Hellbent

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Part One
Crime and Punishment

Chapter 1
The Ice-cream Van of the Apocalypse

OK, so you've probably been told that there's nothing to be scared of about dying. And as for being dead, well who the Hell cares? In school you either get some happy-clappy, failed priest of an RE teacher with moist hands and greasy trousers who tells you that everyone gets to go to Heaven; or there's Mr Hep Cat Sociology with a wisp of Rizla stuck to his lip, who thinks he's shocking the kids when he says that when we go we go, no God, no Devil, no bullshit about punishment or reward – not even the hippie stuff about joining the stars or becoming one with the universe, just a big black nothing, for ever.

Well, they only say that because they don't know. But let me tell you something. Let me tell you right now. I *do*. Dying hurts. And being dead hurts.

Hurts like Hell.

I know.

So how do I know?

Let me go back a bit. Back to The Fart. The Fart of Ill Omen. The Fart of Doom.

I sit behind Phil Gilroy in biology. I say 'sit', but I mean '*sat*'. Phil's a fat boy. A proper fat boy. Fat from his toes to his ears. In some places his fat is soft and doughy; in some places solid as a melon. But everywhere his fat is fat. He talks about his 'glands', but the reason Phil is fat is because he eats too much, and what he eats is fat. Phil's a pie man: steak and kidney, mince and potato, cheese and onion, whale and

bacon, lemur – put it in a pie and Phil eats it – toying with it first perhaps, as if it was a mouth organ or a fine cigar, but then down she goes. No one's ever seen Phil eat anything except pies. His favourite is a pork pie heated in a microwave until the filling liquefies to the consistency of warm snot. He then nibbles a hole in the crust, throws back his head and drinks the jellied slime like a South Sea islander gulping fresh coconut milk. Nothing green, nothing hinting at goodness, vitamins, minerals or roughage, has ever, to anyone's direct knowledge, passed those glistening, greasy lips. You don't need an A-level in biology to realize that the delicate coils and intricate curlicues of the human digestive system aren't made to take that kind of punishment.

Hence The Fart.

Well, I'm all for farts but there are limits. Sadly there are also limits to how many Tangerine Tossheads with cider chasers you can drink. My limit is one, but the night before, me and Johnny Hall, heavy mascara thickening our bumfluff into an entirely unconvincing imitation of maturity, had conned ourselves into a pocket-money-draining three and a half down at the Spleen and Marrow. It was great. I wasn't even sick. Then.

So the next day I'm feeling a might squiffy, but milking it for whatever kudos I can. I've spent all morning bragging about my hangover, which impresses the boys and, whatever they say, the girls too – perhaps even the pure and lovely Melissa Curtain, delicate as a snowdrop, gentle as a fawn and with the largest breasts not only in 4J, but also in the *whole of Year 10*. I'm feeling a bit rough, as I say, but it's all under control. Mr Akroyd's droning on about the formation of cartilage, or photosynthesis, or Charles Darwin's favourite finch, or something equally fascinating, and I'm sketching out an elaborate chariot drawn by a team of harnessed sperm when I realize that something is happening in front of me.

One of Phil's enormous buttocks is beginning to rise, like some grotesque Zeppelin. The cheek itself seems to expand: a great black sail slowly filling in a freshening breeze. A black sail as fatal to me as the black sail of the returning Theseus was to his father Aegeus. (Get used to it, I'm full of that kind of shit, as you'll find out.)

Everything slows down. I want to shout 'No, Phil, no!' but all that comes out is a whimper, a *mneu, mneu, mneu.* And then it begins.

This was not the usual fat-boy's fart, that familiar piping piccolo, a strangulated whine that has the local dogs running in circles. At first there comes a low murmur – a rumble from the double basses. Then the cellos join in, and the violas. This was going to be big. And then comes a great, crashing crescendo from the brass, a bellowing, braying dissonance, and a hammering from the timpani, booming like the End of Everything. And then she dies away, the roaring tempest now a gentle lapping of waves on the shore, the sucking and sighing of passion spent.

Another time I would have led the applause, called out '*Encore, maestro*', carried the bouquet, offered to manage him: together we'd break America, tour Japan. But for my hangover and, as I feared, the stench. The air became hazy; eyes began to water. There was a palpable wave of heat just before the stink reached us. A connoisseur would have found cabbage, egg and possibly asparagus underneath the too-brash, mouth-puckering tang of shite, but I smelled only death, decay and madness. I was losing control. It was coming. It was here.

Yaaaargh chggh chggh yaaaargh.

I puked on Phil Gilroy.

The Body of Christ is a dump. We all know that: kids, parents, teachers, the rats in the beck that runs along the side of the

school, the pigeons that shit on the roof. Built for the massive council estate that surrounds it like a foetid womb, The Body gets the kids nobody else wants: the thugs, spacks, drongos, bozos, dildos, queers, Cnuts and killers. And that's just the girls. It also happens to be the only Catholic school in the town, so it also gets a few relatively normal kids whose parents were stupid enough to put RE lessons and saints' days above such fripperies and foibles as GCSEs. I suppose I'm one of those: aberrantly normal, brutally unaggressive and idiotically unstupid. My friends are the same and we live in the top set. It's all relative, of course. Our top set, 4J, would have any other school calling in the riot squad with tear gas and rubber bullets.

The Body looks like a Bulgarian nuclear reprocessing plant. The bits that aren't stained concrete are asbestos. It lies alongside the beck like a squalid drunk, breathing in the stinking air that drifts off the brown foamy water. But it was my school, and I carried for it the sort of fondness that you can develop for a trusted and faithful verruca of long acquaintance. And it had, of course, the advantage of not being home.

So I've puked on the boy Phil. A full-blown late-period Jackson Pollock. Black and yellow bile flecked with the usual vivid greens and intense orange. You could read anger in there. Perhaps a yearning for the lost mother. Pain; vulnerability; carrots.

You could tell that Akroyd wanted to hit me. Veins stood out on his forehead; his hands, as if of their own will, felt for my neck, and a brown fang showed beneath his slack lip. But I was safe – I'd puked, and that meant I was ill, and that meant that he couldn't touch me. The rest was easy: the sick bay and then home for me; the launderette and a bottle of Dettol for Phil; to be followed for both of us by a place in

school folklore. Phil knew that immortality was his, and if he hadn't still been in a state of shock I think he would have thanked me.

So I'm walking home, replaying the morning's events. Chucking up has made me feel a lot better and I'm contemplating the Snickers bar in my hand. I live a dreary two kilometres from the school. It's raining. It's always raining. The houses all along the streets had once been council-owned but were now all bought up and pathetically customized. Once a decent and honourable uniform red brick, they now disport themselves in obscene variety: pastel colours, stone cladding, mock Tudor beams, wattle and daub effects, battlements, even the occasional moat.

It's probably about now that I should mention Scrote. Scrote's my dog. To say that he's a mongrel only hints at the bizarre mix of genes that made him what he is. Part Jack Russell, part Doberman, part poodle and part wombat. I've always thought that at some time in his ancestry a dog-owner became altogether too friendly with his pooch, so perhaps part person too. That would explain a lot.

We used to let Scrote roam the street during the day. There wasn't a bitch in the town he hadn't sniffed, shagged and dumped; not a dog that hadn't lost an ear, or an eye, or a testicle to Scrote. What a guy. He should have gone to our school. But he could sometimes be an affectionate dog, waving a paw and wagging his tail, snuffling up for a kiss, licking enthusiastically at your face.

Now Scrote could smell a Snickers from two or three kilometres away; he could hear the rustle and tear of the wrapper from even further – through brick, lead, concrete, even the thick and smoky air of our town. To me he flew. Over walls, across roads, through gardens he came, swift as a greyhound, relentless and dogged (if you'll excuse the piss poor pun) as a pitbull with a child's leg in its mouth.

So. I'm walking along with a mouth full of sugary chemical goodness when I see Scrote tearing towards me. *He's not having it* is all I can think. I turn, step out into the road. Then I see it. The shame, the horror, the ignominy. I'm about to be run down, flattened, squished and well and truly shafted by an ice-cream van. Give me a Morris Minor, a Citroën 2CV, a milk float, a bastard Sinclair C5, but please, God, no, not an ice-cream van.

Chapter 2

Me, My Mum, My Dad, My Sister and the Angels of Avalon

Before I tell you what it's like to die I should tell you a bit more about who I am . . . who I was. Bugger, this tenses thing is starting to annoy me. You'll have to cut me a little slack on my nows and my thens, which are all mixed up, with new thoughts and old memories squished together like breasts in a Wonderbra.

But whatever else has changed, I still have a name: Conor. Conor O'Neil, if you want the whole thing complete with a folderol bow and a hey-ninny flourish of my elaborately be-plumed hat. I'm sixteen years old and still a virgin. Now that *really* hurts, and I know what hurting means. I'm quite tall, quite thin and quite good-looking. Well, of course I think I'm gorgeous but I don't want you to think that I'm vain.

I'm also dead, but we'll come on to that later.

So, what am I like?

It might help if I tell you about my mum and dad, and my sister. So what does my dad do?

My dad's a failure. He fails. He's a loser. He loses. Don't get me wrong, he's a nice bloke and I sort of love him, but for all that he's useless. He used to be a college lecturer – he was a philosopher or something. Mum tells me he was brilliant, had stuff published – articles in magazines called things like *Phenomenology Now!* or *The British Journal of Aesthetics* or *What's New in Hermeneutics*. The house is still full of his old books, the pages all scored with multiple underlinings and

cryptic notes ('half-arsed neo-Hegelian obfuscation' sticks in my mind for some reason).

But it all went completely poo-shaped for Dad somewhere in the early nineties. It might have been me. Dad started to go a bit funny after I was born – post-natal depression or something. He carried on, getting gradually stranger, losing the friends he had, letting people down, generally screwing up. Then, a couple of years ago, he gave a lecture to two hundred students stark bollock naked and got the sack. Well, not really the sack – retirement on the grounds of ill health. Now he makes things out of wood and cries a lot.

My mum's a different kettle of ballgames. She's a fox, or so my mates tell me. She's got blonde hair and wears nice clothes – sexy clothes. She's a solicitor and earns megabucks. She probably has affairs – I would if I was married to Dad.

Dad never hit me when I was a kid. Mum took care of that, like she took care of everything. She didn't hit us very hard, but she did something worse than that – they call it 'withdrawing affection'. She had a look she used to give us that could do serious damage – I'm telling you; that look could knock planes out of the sky.

My sister Cathy is like all sisters everywhere. A sweet-natured innocent child, exquisite in taste and sensitivity, ever solicitous, kind, generous, eager, faithful, loving. Yeah. That *was* sarcasm, in case you were wondering. She's two years younger than me and a complete squealer. Mum loves her more than me because she's just like her.

Cathy doesn't go to my school. Mum decided to pay for her to go to a posh school. That was a blessing in one way, but a slap in the face in another. Not that it bothers me.

We live in the last of the decent houses before you get to the estate. It's only a tiny notch up, but a notch is a notch. Dad was brought up on the estate and he doesn't want to move. Mum hates it so they'll probably move quite soon. You

can't really blame her. There's not much point in burgling the houses on the estate. The only things worth nicking are the tellies and videos, and everyone's got them already, so why go to the bother of thieving another? So all the local lads go for the houses like ours – people rich enough to have *some* decent gear, but too poor, too lazy and too stupid to get a burglar alarm system. We've been done three times. It wouldn't be so bad if they didn't routinely shit on the carpet. All you ever find is the one pristine turd, as neat and delicate as the first one ever laid.

What else about me? Well, there's always the Angels of Avalon. A touch ironic now, that name. The Angels were me on rhythm guitar, John Moody on drums, 'Fingers' Fairs on keyboards and Paul Conway on bass and vocals. Paul owned all the gear and we practised in his cellar. John was good-looking but, in the way of all drummers from the dawn of time, not very bright (One drum short of a roll? One stick short of a pair – why not make up one of your own?). Fingers had funny, tufty blond hair that made him look like a puppet from a Saturday morning kids' programme. Paul was plain ugly: his chin receded so much he could scratch the back of his neck with his bottom teeth. But he was cleverer and funnier than anyone else I'd ever met.

The main thing to remember about the Angels is that we were shite. We only ever played one gig. The school disco. What a disaster – the *Titanic*, Lockerbie, the First World War – forget it, you're just not in the running.

The Angels started out as a punk band called Simple Harmonic Motion. After a couple of albums (we're talking virtual albums here, not the real thing) we turned reggae. Then it was jungle, acid jazz, hip hop. It all sounded the same – shit. God knows how we managed to talk the headmaster into letting us play at the Year Ten disco. He must have

thought he was being particularly *progressive*. And therein lay the problem. Paul had just discovered his dad's prog-rock record collection – Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Pink Floyd, and yes, Yes. The rest of the band were against it, but Paul insisted that we perform his rock symphony *Scenes from the Tapestry of Life's Rich Ocean, Parts I–III*. This was supposed to form sides five and six of our ground-breaking triple album *Sheathing the Sword of Nemesis in the Body of Woman*. The idea was that we should all record our solo parts in a different country. I bagged Switzerland. Fingers was stuck with England, and only agreed if he was allowed a purpose-built château and a female butler specially trained 'to please'.

Anyway, *Scenes* was originally scored for a full symphony orchestra with a chorus of two thousand naked virgins, but we had to make do with the school brass band and my sister Cathy (fully clothed) on backing vocals. As soon as the opening trombone and triangle duet began, the missiles started to land. The school disco was a big deal for us and there must have been a hundred and fifty kids there, and that means a lot of Coke cans, oranges, hairbrushes, knives and used condoms. We knew that time was short and that this was the only chance we'd ever have to play our instruments at full blast, so that's what we did. Cacophony is a lovely word. Imagine it being screamed into your ear by a tone-deaf elephant with a lion chewing its bollocks. We got detention and the band split up, but it was good for us while it lasted and good for the world once it stopped.

So there you have me. I'm quite brainy, quite funny, a bit of a tosser – but you're supposed to love me. If you don't, then either my lying isn't as good as I thought it was or you're cleverer than I think you are. Oh yes, there's something else about me. I touched on it earlier. I'm dead.