

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31st

I've decided to try again to keep a diary. What with Dad being killed – and trying to cope with that – and turning Hayley into a human being – I couldn't bring myself to write. But I read somewhere that keeping a journal can help with grief and frankly, at the moment, I am prepared to try anything. Even exorcism . . .

THURSDAY, APRIL 1st

The demons have departed, I hope. Good riddance, and don't come back.

I have been thoroughly exorcised: at least my flat has been. I mentioned to Vanessa (or V as she is in my diaries), my ever-smiling and insanely spiritual best friend, that sleep has been difficult recently. Actually, *difficult* is an understatement. I've been battling unbearable sleeplessness that has me staring wide-eyed through the shadowy gloom at the ceiling for hours at a time. I find myself wanting to take a hammer to my alarm clock, because its hands just crawl around the dial. And then, when I actually drift into a fitful catnap for more than 35 seconds, it jerks me back into consciousness with a deafening clanging that can be heard in Belgium. Come noon each day I'm exhausted. And desperate.

Enter Christian demon slayer V. She has 'discerned' that my flat has been infested by insomnia sleep-devils and she must come at once to reclaim my home as '*Shalom*

territory', where 'peace is truly my portion' and to 're-establish the boundaries of blessing as God did with the land of Canaan.'

My flat is a second floor paradise. It's small, kissed with Victorian charm (lots of stripped pine floorboards, high plaster ceilings and even an original working fireplace) and I absolutely love it. It's tucked in a side street off Frenton-on Sea's windy Promenade. If I stand on tiptoe I can spot the sea from my bedroom window. I do that most mornings. The IKEA Swedish kitsch clashes with the urns and blushing Victorian naked nymphs on my cream fireplace tiles, but it suits me. The burgundy emulsified walls in my sitting-room make the place feel warm and cosy.

Back to my house 'cleansing.' V brought along her assortment of intercessory accessories. She calls it 'the basket of banishment', and it's a serious bit of kit, a vital weapon for an on-fire, warrior princess bride of Christ like her. Mind you, the princess bride part is stunningly accurate when it comes to V. She is head-turningly gorgeous, and unfailingly kind. Kindness is a helpful balancing quality for the slightly mad. She has beautiful shoulder length hair, a figure which wouldn't look out of place on a fashion catwalk in Milan, and amazing teeth. Gleaming white and perfectly straight, V's molars are a wonder to behold.

But gorgeous or not, I still had a fright when she knocked on my front door. I say knocked; she actually pounded on the door three times (with a one second

pause between each thud) as if to announce to the dark spirits within that a divinely-sent bailiff had arrived to evict them.

At first, I didn't know if she was serious or if this was part of some elaborate April Fool. She was dressed all in white (symbolising unblemished purity) with white ultra skinny jeans which looked sprayed on, white *Dolce and Gabbana* sweatshirt, a white puffa jacket, even white furry earmuffs. She had slathered her perfect cheeks with olive oil. (V gets through lots of olive oil when she's banishing). Yes, she loves Jesus very much, and she is barmy. But who am I to talk? This lack of sleep has been getting me down and I'm tempted to do anything for some real rest. I'd even strip naked and sprint down the Promenade if I thought it would guarantee me a full eight hours. Hey, I'd probably do a seafront streak for six.

V decided I should also be dressed in white as a symbolic gesture of something I now can't remember. This intercessory fashion choice was a problem, because I don't have any white clothing. In the past, white has not been very flattering to my ever-so-slightly fuller figure, although these days, my clothes have been hanging off me. So with no white at hand, I had to settle for wearing a crumpled grey T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms. And I wrapped an old sheet around my middle, which made me look like an ancient Roman jogger in a toga.

The 'exorcism' itself was odd. V said we had to permeate the flat with God's music and proceeded to blast an

old Amy Grant CD out on my CD player, which she carried around into each room: lounge, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, toilet – even the airing cupboard got a brief dose of Amy and had to give up its demons, which might be a good thing because the immersion heater's been a bit iffy lately. Apparently V also wanted to bring along some lamb's blood to daub on the door frames, but good old James, her soon-to-be partner in 'God's holy plan of matrimony for the avoidance of carnality and the replenishment of the planet' (as V puts it) managed to talk her out of it. I am soooooo looking forward to being their bridesmaid – and hope I have got over not being able to sleep by then – not much fun being exhausted. And I wish being engaged to V didn't have to mean that James and I cannot be best buddies any longer, but it does.

Anyway, back to tonight's deliverance session. We had to settle for yet more extra, extra virgin oil, rather than slaughter a lamb. V bought the oil from a stall in Frenton market. The Irish stall-owner told her it was made by Sicilian nuns who trampled the olives with their bare feet while reciting the rosary. After we took Amy on tour through the flat, V daubed virgin oil all over my door frames, liberally dabbed the headboard and foot of my bed and then completed the job by daubing the word 'rest' in oil on my forehead, which I'm sure will result in some massive spots by tomorrow morning. Then we sat down for a long time and she held my hands and prayed with me, and as crazy as she is sometimes, it was good to hear words reflecting the tenacity of her faith.

I've found it so hard to pray recently. I can't seem to summon up the energy. Her certainty was both reassuring, and disconcerting. I felt inspired, but excluded. Perhaps one day I'll be able to pray with such confidence. I wonder. I confess that, during the extended prayer, I caught myself pondering the top of V's bowed head and wondering what hair conditioner she uses. Is it one specifically for blonde hair? That's me: my friend is battling the powers of evil and I'm pondering my next trip to Boots.

Not sure why we Christians tend to think that doing spiritual warfare demands that we use Edwardian language and shout, as if Satan is a deaf character out of a costume drama.

'I command you, spirits of restlessness and anxiety, *be gone* in the *Name of Jesus!!*', V hollered. *Be gone?* All sounds a bit *Wuthering Heights* to me. 'Be removed from this place, and be bound now and cast out henceforth into the midst of the sea!'

Apparently repetition is also required, perhaps because evil spirits don't always get the message the first time. 'You have no authority here, I said you have no authority here, I said *you have no authority here!*'

That's when an eerie voice from below spoke. 'I don't have any authority here, but I am trying to watch *Coronation Street*, so can you keep it down?' It was poor old Mr Granger who lives in the ground floor flat immediately below me. He's very sweet and doesn't usually

complain, but was obviously finding the banishing too loud.

V turned her attention to praying specifically for me, which involved her cooing some lovely, gentle words while giving me a good upper back massage in the process.

At last, after about an hour, she announced that the deed was done, and said we should get together for lunch tomorrow to talk. As I hugged her goodnight, I yawned, which she took as a sign of breakthrough in the heavenly realms.

Dear V. It was lovely to have her company tonight. She is a such a bustling presence, making tea, (camomile of course), tutting about the dust, lighting candles, and wafting frankincense-scented sticks around to remind us of the nativity. Am hoping that tonight I will be able to identify with the babe of Bethlehem in his swaddling clothes – and get some good sleep.

Here's to some decent swaddling. Goodnight.

FRIDAY, APRIL 2nd

Wow. Slept like a log last night, although when I first woke up I thought I had been miraculously transported into a Turkish restaurant. Perhaps V's antics did punch a hole in the heavenlies (which is one of the 11,000 things that she prayed for). Either that, or I was so exhausted by the whole intercessory process that heavenly slumber

was the result. Sometimes I wish that answers to prayer came with a delivery note attached, *'This is not a coincidence or something that would have happened anyway. This is a specific answer to the prayer recently prayed, signed, God.'* The same is true when bad things happen; some of my friends at church dash to say that the devil has been at work when life turns rough. The thinking is simple. If it's good, then it's from God. If it's bad, clout the devil. Not sure it's as easy as that. Anyway, I'm grateful for the sleep, whatever its source.

Work uneventful – loads of admin. Had mid-morning coffee break with Laura (best receptionist in the Universe). Wonderful that she became – or grew into being – a Christian recently. No overnight 'Hooray I've seen the light' experience, but started coming along to our church, and has certainly got a real love for God.

'It was amazing and bizarre with it', I said, telling her about the exorcism and trying hard to enjoy sipping the horrid instant coffee that work provides, which I think is made from wood shavings.

'V was certainly thorough. Even my airing cupboard got the freedom treatment. And I did have a wonderful night's sleep – for the first time in ages. But I'm a bit worried. If God has answered V's prayers, do you think that means that he is into all the stuff that she does?'

Laura smiled. 'You do worry a lot. Surely what matters is that you got some sleep?'

'I suppose so. V is lovely but she does some odd things. I'm not sure that I want to be like that – it's just not the way I'm wired. And the little spots on my forehead this morning are proof that I can't take that much olive oil.' Laura nodded.

'We're all a bit strange, aren't we? Just because God works with us, surely it doesn't mean he endorses everything we do?'

Makes sense. She's incredibly wise, considering she's such a new Christian. That sounds patronising, but it's true. Some Christians seem to wait for years to figure out some of the things that she has discovered in a few months. Her wisdom comes liberally sprinkled with uncertainty, which is wonderful. She'll say something profound and then ask me if she got it right. Her hesitancy shows that she's trying to learn as much as she can. Of course, developing wisdom doesn't start when we choose to follow Jesus. Some of Laura's straightforward common sense is true wisdom. God didn't start working in her life when she prayed a prayer of Christian commitment. Big thought to ponder . . .

Wondered if pondering might be part of my sleep problem. I spend so much time agonising over questions that are almost impossible to answer. Perhaps even realising that is an answer to prayer? Or maybe not . . . there I go again.

Laura also impresses me because she seems so contented with her work. She looks like a high flying business

executive as she sits behind our reception counter. Great hair, stylish business suits, perfect nails, she looks like she's resting for a moment on her way to the boardroom. Don't get me wrong – her role is important. As receptionist she's the face of our department in Social Services; the first point of contact for some very distressed people. She's always under incredible pressure, but manages to answer every phone call with warmth as well as efficiency. She welcomes each visitor with a smile that isn't always such a familiar sight in local government offices. It's just that she could have gone for a different career, but seems utterly happy to do what she does: meeting people.

Her one huge weakness is Dave, that awful on/off boyfriend, who apparently is very much off at the moment, thank God. Not sure if they finished because she started coming to church, or if the breakup was coincidental. Laura doesn't open up about him much, which worries me. But I do know that he's moved out, is off somewhere in Europe working (he's a bricklayer), and right now it seems there's no plans for them to get back together. From the snippets I've picked up, that sounds good.

Got together with V for lunch – her usual immaculate self. Have I chosen friends like V and Laura (both more stylish and beautiful than me) in order to punish myself?

Anyway, had light lunch in Marinabean (okay, V did light: salad. I did *almost* light: pizza with salad). We talked about last night's banishment session, and she

was obviously thrilled I'd slept well, but then she popped the question I'd been expecting and dreading. 'Helen, we need to talk in order to get to the roots of this sleeplessness problem you've been having. One good night's sleep is great . . . but we both know that there are some things we need to talk through . . .'

The truth is, getting to the roots of my sleeplessness isn't rocket science; no revelation is needed there (and probably no interference from demons either). I know exactly what is causing it – but haven't wanted to admit it, either aloud or on paper. But with Dad's murder now 18 months ago – is it really? – I'm still struggling to like this town, where it all happened, and to cope with life – and to sleep.

I can't think of a better way to say this, without it sounding disrespectful to Dad – but murder is so un-Frenton. We have the occasional Saturday night drunken punch-ups, and there was a spate of burglaries last year, but Dad's death is the most dramatic criminal event that has ever happened around here. I still try to avoid the High Street whenever I can, and walk very fast indeed when I pass the spot where he died. Everything seems tinged with grey since he went, which is a tragedy in itself, because the very thought of Frenton used to mean sun and blue skies for me emotionally.

Since his death, I've found out that there's no map for grief, no prissy Sat-nav voice telling you where you are in the 'process' as some people call it. Grief isn't a process – that's far too mechanical. I'm not even sure it's

a journey, because that suggests that you feel you're going somewhere, that there's some purpose or clear destination. But since he's been gone, there have been times when I feel like I'm staggering around on a chilly, fog bound moor, looking for him and knowing that he's nowhere to be found. People have told me that he's with Jesus, but I'd like him *not* to be with Jesus, but right here with me, sitting in his favourite chair, sipping a cup of tea. I don't want him off swanning around with angels; I want him listening to me with that absolute attention that no one else has ever given me.

Kristian, that obnoxious boy-band pretty worship leader at church (okay, I still haven't forgiven him for trying to snog me), tried to cheer me up by telling me that it was Dad's time. But I don't get that at all. His time? Does that mean that God operates a stopwatch, and that little children with cancer expire because, like the bloke at the dodgems on Frenton Pier, God calls 'time' and their little lives are cut short? Kristian quoted something out of the Bible – Ecclesiastes – where it says that there is a time to live and time to die, which sounds straightforward enough but then I read the rest of that book; it's the investigative journalling of a rampant hedonist who lived life so large that he makes Hugh Hefner look like a Sunday school teacher. Quotes from his meanderings should be dished out with care.

I suppose one good thing that came out of this terrible time is the *effect* that Dad's death had on Laura. She found Dad's memorial service very moving, and said it was one of the key moments on her journey into faith. As

a Christian, she could see he died knowing what he was living for. Thinking of Laura, this is the point where I'm supposed to celebrate that something redemptive has come out of all this tragedy – and I *am* glad – but to be honest, given the choice between someone being helped by Dad's death and Dad not being dead, I'd choose the latter. I'm not sure I'm supposed to even say or think that. The standard thought is usually that one is glad that, whatever the cost, there is another 'soul' in the kingdom. Trouble is, Dad's in the kingdom of heaven, and I want him to be a kingdom person still here on the earth – with me.

Anyway, when V said that we needed to talk things out, she was obviously wanting to know how I was doing with the grief about Dad. She's my best friend, so we talked and cried together endlessly initially after he died – but it's been a while since we last had an in-depth conversation about it. She wanted an update, which is kind and caring, but I felt too exhausted to get into it right then, so I deflected the question, and said I was okay. And then asked if she had heard the rumour about Robert and Nola, the leaders of our lovely church.

'I've heard that they're on the move, which is awful if it's true.' V stirred her latte, nodded grimly but said nothing, as if she was waiting for a message from the Lord that would confirm or deny the rumour. Her furrowed brow indicated deep concentration.

Thank God for Robert and Nola – they're wise, kind, and generally fabulous. Robert's listening skills are not as

honed as Dad's, but he comes a very close second. What is so helpful is what they *don't* say. I blab on and cry and rant and tell them how utterly angry I am at God and they don't try to fix me; in fact they don't try to do anything other than be there. One of the problems about being a Christian is that there are so many people who are keen to sort you out, give their opinion, or even make statements that are allegedly from God. Obviously V does this to me all the time, but I can handle it because I know that she loves me so much and means well. But Robert and Nola don't try to rush me into 'growth' or 'progress.' It's like they walk with me. Actually, much of the time they stand still with me.

I don't know what I would have done without them: Mum has been wonderful, and her new found faith seems to be helping her, but I don't want to dump all my stuff on her – she's got enough of her own pain without me adding to it. But if Robert and Nola are leaving Frenton and taking up a ministry appointment somewhere else, that is *not* the will of God.

And even if it is, it's not the will of me.

We still need them. The church isn't over the crisis caused by the Hemmings leaving, although it has been much better since they took their hyper-critical sniping off to upset a different set of people. Their power trip at New Wave Christian Fellowship lasted a long time, and you don't get over that immediately. Robert had the courage to take them on – suppose someone new didn't have, and they came back? Although I guess, since Mrs

Hemming got slapped round the face by Mum at Dad's funeral, they would probably be too embarrassed to return to the scene of that encounter.

Although they have left the church, they have not left the area, and I gather they have been spreading rumours about NWCF. Not sure where they are going now – I've heard that they meet with a few other people in their home – perhaps folks who are as spiritually deep (and lethal) as they are. Sorry. Shouldn't have written that. In criticising them for being vicious, I'm being vicious. Weird how we can end up displaying the character traits that we so dislike in others.

Anyway, the blank look on V's beautiful face showed me that word of Robert and Nola's leaving hadn't yet reached her, either from humans or God himself. Perhaps it's not true after all, in which case, hooray. Undeterred by my deflection, V pressed in: 'So, Helen, how are things with you . . . you know, with your dad . . .' I stared into my coffee as if there was something fascinating lurking in the froth, and I wanted to say, that's the problem – I'm *not with* my dad. And that means that everything is still depressing.

Work has been okay. The time off I had after Dad died didn't do me any good at all, even though it was good of them to give it to me – compassionate leave – I suppose it was the least they could do. But all I did was sit around my flat, doing nothing. Yes, I was glad not to have to be a social worker for a while (people would tell me their stuff and all I wanted to do was to scream '*You think*

you've got problems? Try this one – my dad was stabbed to death!') but I didn't know what to do with the time.

V told me that this would be a good opportunity to 'dig a deeper well with the Lord', but I didn't have a spade, and I already have running water. I didn't feel like doing anything that involved intensity or effort, and found myself wandering down to Frenton Pier and plying the slots with twenty pences, and then getting irritated for feeling bad about gambling. I wasn't exactly living it large in Las Vegas, and I don't think God was bothered. The apocalypse isn't likely to be launched because I lost 40 pence on the pier. At least I hope not. Actually, I lost about £3.60.

I got exhausted by the idea that I'm supposed to be processing something. For at least a year, there was a black hole inside me – how was I to navigate through that? Although it's better now, it has been replaced by a slightly hollow feeling. I want to think about Dad, but not feel the pain. It's easier to not go there – it always ends up with the same result: grief.

And Aaron is useless. I can't even define what he is – a vaguely boyfriendish boyfriend? Just a friend? Whatever. Even when he does come round – which has happened a few times – the place seems emptier than normal. My even being with him at all has been a surprise. Since Dad was stabbed (it hurts even to write that) when trying to rescue Aaron from that gang of kids, I found it easy for a while to hate Aaron as well. My reasoning was simple: if Aaron hadn't been on the High

Street that night, then there would have been no trigger to the events that followed. And of course, that is true. But the truth of it doesn't make Aaron guilty of anything, and although it's taken me a while to see that, I've made a start on stopping blaming him, if that makes sense. He still feels guilty, of course, but he doesn't know what to say.

So he mooches around the flat and plays me tracks from his iPod; songs about love, guilt, faithful friendship – he says that the songs can say what he can't. Mostly they make me cry. Just about any music still does. Even the advert for toilet paper with the puppy reduced me into a heap in the terrible few months after Dad went. As for Aaron, I can't figure out whether he likes or loves me, or feels sorry for me, and however many tracks he plays, I can't get our relationship clear in my head. So having him around seems to create a confusing vacuum. And I don't have the first clue what I feel about him.

The case itself remains unsolved. The police have drawn a complete blank; there were no witnesses, and the only one on the scene was Aaron. He says that what with it being so dark, and the kids wearing hoodies, he hadn't a clue who they were or what they looked like. I wish the police could make some progress though – and I hope that they haven't given up. There's something about knowing that my dad's killer is still out there that makes me feel that he's not at rest.

Where was I? Oh yes, going back to work . . . after a week or two of tearful shuffling around doing nothing useful I

went back to work. And there I found, not so much a ray of sunshine, but maybe the vaguest hint of it. Social work can be scary, painful, deeply challenging and occasionally a little bit wonderful. Hayley, one of the long term 'cases' that I've been handling, seems to be becoming nicer (although only slightly) – and – believe it or not – show a bit of interest in God. She came along to Dad's memorial service, and stunned me with a smile. Since then she's been slightly easier to deal with, which is amazing, considering her history. She was removed from her dysfunctional parental home because of the alcohol, drug abuse and occasional domestic violence – her parents seemed to think that Saturday night literally was alright for fighting, and therefore did so – in front of the children. In the end, Hayley's aunt (Mrs Tennant) offered to look after her, and while she is not the brightest spark in the world, (and has complete disdain for social workers, especially ones named Helen), she has at least provided Hayley with some stability while keeping her in the orbit of her wider family. I keep an eye on things because Mrs T is fostering, not adopting Hayley. Call me cynical, but fostering means financial help, and adopting doesn't. But it's better because I get to monitor the situation with occasional home visits. Hayley is seventeen, so in a year will be making her own choices about where she'll live.

Speaking of work, I've a got a new supervisor, a senior social worker called Maeve. She's rather strange – the best way to describe her is *grey*. I don't know how old she is – she could be thirty, but she's so thin, she looks fifty. Her faced is lined and the lines fall most naturally

into a vague frown. She rarely smiles, and everything about her is drab. She was transferred into our department from another borough. I don't know if she's married (there's no rings on her bony fingers), and she's not the kind of person to have anything nearing a personal conversation with. I've tried. Conversation with her is strictly about work. She seems preoccupied with systems and procedures, and gets tetchy if our paperwork isn't completely up to date. Our weekly team meetings – all six of us together, chaired by Maeve – tend to meander, but with little warmth and small talk. She speaks very quickly, and whenever I talk to her, she punctuates what I say by nodding like one of those dogs that sit on the back shelves of cars. She says, 'Sure, sure', which seems like code for 'Shut up, shut up now.'

Speaking of small talk, that's what I did when V pressed me about my dad.

'I'm doing fine with it at the moment V. It's never going to be okay, is it?'

V opened her mouth to speak, and for a terrible moment I thought she was going to launch into a little speech about how one day the angels will sing, the trumpet will sound, and everything will be okay, and that we all need to learn to live in the light of eternity. I think I silenced her with an alarmed look. Dear V. At least she knows when to stop. Mostly. And she does mean well.

Enough for now. I need to have another crack at getting to sleep. I know V's probably going to ask me for a

'praise report' next time I see her (because she does love me), and if I have to concede the 'failure' of sleeplessness, she'll be hot footing around the flat again in her role as an amateur witch-finder general, and probably tell me that she has discerned that my sleep problem is due to a young Christian virgin being sacrificed around these parts. Speaking of Christian virgins, that would be me, still. Too tired to get into that now. Can't stop yawning. Maybe the exorcism is working.

SATURDAY, APRIL 3rd

Slept until noon. Hallelujah, and praise be. Think maybe V should launch a new sleep ministry, perhaps in partnership with a bedding company. Only outdoor event today was a walk on the Prom, spoiled by a low flying seagull that managed to decorate my head. Yuk.

Bumped into James jogging along the Prom. He's so excited about finding V as the love of his life, and ecstatic about the wedding. As we nattered about the arrangements, I found myself wondering – is James a little boring (as I've always thought, which was why I was afraid of ending up with him) or is it that his life had become boring, and now that he has V, he's become a more interesting, alive person? Delighted for them both, but am concerned to admit that I thought that James was looking fine in his running gear . . . Argh – do I fancy him, now he's not available? I spend half my life trying to avoid getting involved with him, and when he's on the verge of marrying my best friend, I start to think he's hot. *What am I thinking?* Naughty girl,

Helen. Stop that right now. Black Lycra is good on him though.

Later

Can't sleep. Middle of the night, so can't call V. Think that my sleep problems may be due to the ridiculously long lie-in that I had today rather than the fruit of concerted demonic attack. Or maybe the mild distraction of surprisingly hunky looking James in Lycra. Is he getting better looking?

SUNDAY, APRIL 4th

Finally got to sleep at 5am and then slept through my alarm clock, so I skipped church this morning; didn't have the heart for it anyway, to be honest. I haven't been very good at going recently, it all seems like so much effort. This afternoon I got a phone call from Robert and Nola, thought at first they were calling to send me on a guilt trip, (which is unlike them, but don't accuse me of being logical), but they wanted to explain that Robert has decided to resign his position as leader of NWCF and they are planning to move up north. So the rumours are true. Fine. I guess they can leave. Everybody else does.

I don't mean that. I don't know what we're going to do without them. They have been such a calming presence in our little community, and a bedrock of support for me. I've said it before, but they are such wonderful listeners, and don't try to fix me. And I love their hugs.