Bulrushes

Dust and ashes though I am, I sleep the sleep of angels. Most nights nothing wakes me, not til I'm ready. But my sleep was ragged that night and pierced in the morning by someone calling to me in fear. A voice hissing, urgent, through the grille, 'Father, are you in there?'

'Carter?' Even in a grog, I knew this voice well. 'What's the matter?'

'A drowned man in the river. Down at West Fields. I – I was down at the river to see about clearing a tree that's fallen across it. A man there in the water, pushed up against the tree like a rag, Father.'

'Is he dead?'

'Dead as anything I've ever seen.'

I'd slept that night on the low stool of the confession booth with my cheek against the oak. A troubled night's sleep, very far from the angels. Now I stood and pushed my skirts as flat as they'd go. Outside looked dark; it could have been any time of night or early morning, and my hands and feet were rigid with cold. I shifted the oak screen enough to let myself out of the booth – which isn't even a booth as such, but an improvised thing made of props and drapes – and there was the flushed, worried, candlelit face of Herry Carter.

'Went to find you in your bed but you weren't there,' Carter said, words tripping. 'I wondered if you might be here.'

I wanted to tell him that I didn't usually sleep upright in this booth, I didn't know what had happened exactly that made me do it that night. But Carter had the look of somebody who couldn't care less, he only wanted to get back to the river.

'Maybe there's a chance for Last Rites,' he said, with lips set sullen and thin.

'You said he was dead.'

'But if we could get a bit of holy wine down his dead throat – '

A dead throat isn't amenable to wine, I thought, but thought without saying.

'If we could do at least that,' Carter said, 'maybe he could have died a half-decent death. Otherwise – '

Otherwise his fate would be ugly, and his time spent hanging like a lifeless rag off a fallen tree would seem like a happy memory. Herry Carter was right to wish for better. So we two left the church and ran.

The first thing I noticed was the wind, which was strong, bitter and easterly. It was coming up to dawn and the sky had the slightest of light. We ran down the track towards West Fields, which is nearly a mile away and much of it diagonally across the ham. The river itself takes over two miles to cover the same distance. Myself, alb flapping heavily in the wind like a sail, bottle of holy wine sloshing in my right hand, holy oil in left, quick-moving, if breathless and with thighs full of fire. Like a deer, my father used to say, with a wink, because he liked to shoot deer. Carter, young, short, strong on his legs, blond hair blown sideways, trouser knees hardened with another day's mud, all plain, buttery boyhood. He sprinted ahead with his arms pumping.

The ham was flooded, but not as much as it had been; the wind seemed to have pushed the water back into the river. Above

us a huge, fast sky that'd be blue when the sun rose, and everything but the wind was wet – the track, the grass, the earth, our feet and ankles, the tree trunks, the nests and the fledglings within. My toes were frogs in a swamp. When we reached the boundary of the lush grazing land at West Fields the world got wetter – sodden sheep with shivering lambs, cows paddling upland in herds trying to find drier ground so that they could eat without having to drink, Townshend's horses standing four-square in bog with their muzzles resting on each other's drenched flanks. Only the wind itself was dry, dry and so cold, and blowing away long days of rain.

'There,' said Carter, and he pointed off towards the river seventy or eighty paces ahead. 'I left my axe to mark it.'

Not much of a marker; with its blade rammed into the river bank, it barely stood a foot above the ground. You'd have needed a marker to find it. But Herry Carter had young eyes and his mind was focused on nothing else, just that axe, and that bit of river that had delivered up a poor old rag of a dead man. Carter upped his pace with the wind at his back and was there near the axe, striding this-way-that-way along the bank, ankle-deep in water by the time I caught up.

'It's gone,' he said. Desperate-sounding man, a rasp working at his voice. 'The body. It was there.' *There* being the fallen tree, in the crook of a branch. The river was high and fierce and roiled around that branch; nothing could have stayed in place there, nothing. Not a man's body, not even a cow's body. How could Carter have thought it would? But then, what could he have done? He couldn't have rescued the man on his own.

'Where's it gone?' Carter was saying, over and again. Rushing up and down like a sheepdog. Then he stopped, looked plain at the water and his tone fell flat. 'Where's the body gone? It was right there.'

My once-white alb was soaked and muddy almost knee-high and I felt something like defeat, because I'd have to ask Carter

now, and I didn't want to have to ask. I'd wanted to see for myself. The words came to my throat and stuck and wouldn't be dislodged with any amount of swallowing. I'd have looked anywhere to avoid the sight of his pitiful, aimless running. Anywhere: downwards, upwards. Upwards, to the stars that were fading with the dawn.

When I looked back at Carter finally, he was to my left, twenty yards downstream, standing knee-deep and thunderstruck by a thick cluster of bulrushes leaning in the wind. Only then, coming closer, did I see he was holding something of brightish green, a piece of cloth or clothing, which he lifted feebly. A shirt.

'Found this there,' he said, a curt flick of his hand towards the bulrushes. 'Just hanging there.'

So then I didn't even have to ask the question I hadn't wanted to ask, because the shirt made it clear who the drowned man was. We both knew who owned it; even in the poor light, that shirt belonged to one man only. Everybody else had beige shirts or brown or grey, of a wool that had never managed to look unsheeply. Nobody else had one of good linen that had once been as green as the swaying meadow of flax that gave rise to it. Faded now, yes, but all the same it was a fine Dutch shirt. Even before Carter found the shirt, from the moment he saw the drowned man, he must have known it was Newman. How many other poor, bloated dead men could there be floating down this river? How many other men disappeared into it three days before?

But it's our nature to deny what frightens us, and it's not wicked or dull. Isn't there always a bright, willing part of us that keeps hoping that what we know isn't true? Carter tried to fold the shirt into a neat and reverent square – Newman had led an ordered life, even if his death was disorderly. The shirt was too wet to hold shape and went loose and roomy in his hands. With some mumbling he bid his fumbling fingers to fold

it again, and again it fell slack. Then he shoved it in the waistband of his trousers and ran downstream along the edge of the bank, howling Newman's name, splashing through water that was pink with the first glint of sun.

Oh, to throw the holy wine and oil into the river! Bad enough that the dead man didn't get to confess, but what hope was there for him if he couldn't have a drop of wine in him? Carter was right, it might even have been enough to have it in his mouth, on his lips. A cross of oil on his forehead. And now there was Carter, possessed by demons, up and down the bank and the wind was unkind and constant and our legs were soaked, and the day had a despairing mood.

Soon Carter came back, panting and angry, and he sank to a crouch.

'It's gone,' he said, not for the first time. 'He's gone.'

'He'll be halfway to the sea by now,' I replied – which we knew wasn't possible, but the point was the same. After the five bends and two oxbows past the village the river straightens and quickens, and with days of rain it was as rapid as a cart downhill, with no regard for things in its way. Carter nodded, and crumpled into himself.

A boy, really, and a good one at that. One who'd had the spirit knocked out of him that morning. Newman was his friend and a father figure, and in the three days since he'd drowned, Carter had dabbled with the notion that though his friend had died, he might still be alive. After all, the body hadn't been found. If a dead body disappeared, then so did death itself, so Carter seemed to think, and I'd been touched by this optimism, even if it was made of crooked timbers.

That river was cunning and of too many moods – throwing itself thickly over a dead man so that we couldn't say our dignified goodbyes. This was the second time I'd run to its banks to find Newman's body, and the second time I'd failed. By my estimations, if nature thwarts you more than once in

the same endeavour, you may have to start wondering if it's something other than bad luck – but I didn't drive this point home to my friend. 'Be strong now, Herry,' I told him, and affection drew my hand to his head. We stayed like that with our backs braced against the wind, and my alb, despite the mud and wet, flowed keenly outwards and forward. The bulrushes bent and hummed. Even in my despair, I liked it that the wind made them do that.

We went back across the fields. In that direction my skirts flowed out behind me like a bridal gown while the cassock underneath slapped at my shins – and I beg pardon for talking so much about what was happening at my lower leg, but so would anyone whose skirts weighed the same as two buckets of water and behaved like something living. I was ashamed to be feeble and wheezy from a fever the month before, and string-legged. I knew the sight of my hair in this wind – a mass of dark, wild curls around the tonsure. I was the one who looked possessed now, not that Carter was paying any attention. He, like me, had set his whole cause against the wind, which was hurling itself at our chests.

Carter's face was stone and refused conversation. He refused even to look at me. In the improved light, and moving slower, I could see better the cut in front of his right ear that he got a few days before; he slipped while fixing the roof of the church porch and caught it on a piece of slate. It was a sharp slash the length of half a finger and I didn't like the redness and depth of it, the slight greenish weeping and conkerish swell.

We reached the track again, where it forked left to the bridge and right to the village. We turned right. There was a pair of hands pushing me forward, away from that half-built bridge where Newman, we supposed, drowned, and when I glanced

that way the clouds were thick old brutes, whereas ahead they were high and sparse and turning fair.

Then the sun: a bronzy song rising unseen behind Oak Hill, the long woody ridge we also call the Lazy Dog (sometimes just The Dog, if we're lazy). The ridge runs along the north-east edge of Oakham, which means the new sun can never be seen from the village, but its light spreads a wide glow over the trees on the ridge, as it did in that instance; a glow that starts small and hot, and turns cool, rosy and vast, in a way that always made me think the sea was just the other side. Off the open ham the wind had less fury and we walked together in silence, Carter reaching behind him from time to time to make sure the shirt was still in his waistband. I wanted to comfort him, but how, without prayers and parables? They were all I had. It was clear Carter didn't want any of that. Grief had made him angry and impatient.

'That cut,' I said, 'by your ear. Doesn't look to be healing.'

'It's healing,' he said.

'To me it looks worse.'

'It's better than yesterday.'

'I don't think it is.' He forged on ahead, short of temper, long of stride. I said, 'I don't like the look of it much.'

'Then I say don't look.'

And he stopped, there at the corner by the birches that were festooned with rags once bright, and knelt on the stones of the track. In front of him, in the longer grass, was a dead dog. He turned to me, turned back. 'Was that here when we came?'

'I didn't see it,' I said, 'but it must have been. We were running, we wouldn't have noticed.'

It was sunrise and I had first morning prayers to give, then confession to take, and I couldn't linger over a dog. But Carter put a hand to the dog's ribs. 'Cold as clay,' he muttered. Yet it had a healthy black sheen that made it look like it would get up and run, and we'd have been convinced

it would, if not for the lolling tongue and lack of breath. Mostly, when you see a dead dog – or a dead anything – you can assume it starved or was beaten, or was hit by a galloping horse, or dropped dead through age or demoralisation. This one looked thin but not starved, not beaten, not injured, not old, in fairly good humour. It just lay as though dropped from above.

'Wouldn't we have noticed it?' Carter said, his hand flat on the animal's side.

'It was still dark.'

'And we were running.'

'We were frantic.'

For a few moments we stood, and my grip was tight around those small bottles of oil and wine; we'd both been so jittered by this thing with Newman, and now we patrolled like sheriffs over the corpse of a dog as if it was a strange or sinister thing.

'It might – ' Carter tried, 'I might – ' He put his hand to that shirt and was tugging at it. 'Maybe I was mistaken about what I saw in the river earlier.'

'No,' I said. 'No.'

'I might not have seen a body caught in that tree, maybe it was just a shadow – people are going to say that maybe it was just a shadow.'

'And the shirt?' I asked. 'Was that just a shadow?'

'But you said it yourself, you said it – it was still dark. If we didn't see a dead dog that *was* there, maybe I *did* see a dead man that wasn't?'

I didn't want to upset Carter, but there was something to be said for facts. 'On Saturday dawn a man was seen tumbling down that river, Herry,' I said, as kindly and clearly as I could. 'It was Robert Tunley who glimpsed him and he said it might well have been Newman. Newman hasn't been seen since and he's the only man missing from the village. We know it's unlikely

to have been an outsider who drowned. God knows we don't get many passers-by.'

Because there were no outsiders, because the river cuts us off. But this wasn't the time for lamenting our fallen bridge, much as the urge rose in me.

I put my hand on his shoulder. 'And now a body washes up downstream – '

'Not far *enough* downstream,' Carter appealed. His foot prodded at the dog's belly. He shrugged my hand away. 'You can see how lively the water is – in three days a body would've got much further.'

'And you can see the journey it would have to take, round the oxbow at Odd Mill, the other at Burn Wood, a body could get lodged anywhere along there, hooked on fallen branches, run against banks – '

Carter turned his shoulder from me. 'People aren't going to believe me when I say I've seen Tom Newman's body, it'll be me who's the laughing stock.'

'You found his shirt,' I said. 'You have it there. What are people going to say about that?'

We stood without words, and it was cold. His shoulders were dropped so low my hands almost went to lift them and my arms to go around him in comfort. Forget what others think, I wanted to say. You saw what you saw – others don't matter. I clutched the bottles to me; the wind whipped and rattled through the birch copse. Such sadness then swept me, and I didn't know how trees kept enthusiasm for growing, when the wind, rain and snow harassed them all winter like that.

It was by some wordless consent that Carter and I began moving, prompted perhaps by the smell of cooking fat that came faint and fleeting. It might have been imagined because it came only once, for a moment, but all I knew suddenly was eggs, was bread scooped into the warm fat of the previous

day's bacon, and with one smell I gained a horse's hunger. Carter might have felt hungry too because he sped up and walked at a pace I couldn't match in those heavy, wet vestments. By the time we were at the village, I was some thirty paces behind.

Carter raced towards his home, a quick pelt from the church. Probably wanted to show his wife the shirt and get her to wash it, so he could hang on to it, some sorry keepsake and trinket of a giant love that'd gone from him, swept up like a twig in a crow's beak.

'Carter!' I wanted to offer to anoint the shirt at least, though it was a blunt idea, anointing a piece of old linen. 'Herry! Herry Carter!' But Carter didn't respond. He was holding the shirt above his head and waving it about as if there were people to see him.

Go ahead and suffer then, I thought – not cruelly. Men and women clasp to their right to suffer, and sometimes it's better to let them for a while. I would mention Newman again in Mass and arrange to have that tree cleared from the river. Not that day, though; that day the hours were going to pass before we knew it; I needed half an hour's sleep. Try not to dream of that body getting dragged downstream, try not to be heart-broke over how savage death is. Think only of the pink light on the bulrushes where the shirt was found, and think only of how good it was that the shirt was found there, *there*, in the gentle holiness of the bulrushes; it was the best of all possible signs, and if a man had to die such a violent and unresolved death before disappearing as if swallowed into the whale, at least something of his appeared draped – caught, held, salvaged, saved – in that crowd of rushes, like a man who had fallen back into the arms of his people.

Was the light on the rushes even pink? Maybe not, but in my heart it was now and would always be. There in my thoughts,

on the way home, was my sister's voice wise and soft: *The tongues and pens of men must fall silent in wonder*. Why I should have heard this I can't say, except that I was tired and sad and glad and angry and comforted all at once, and when I opened the door to the church I let myself cry over Thomas Newman, and was surprised by how long it took for the tears to stop coming.