

## “The Sin in Hymns”

As I slouched toward the church, my hangover made each step reverberate with dull pain. It ran through each leg and up my body, into my brain. I remembered – as best I could with fractured memories – the start of last night and the drinking and how happy I’d been. This morning’s weary ache was the other side of that coin, the result of my inability to stop when things were as good as they’d get. I’d never been able to handle much drink.

It was raining, and the heavy, dark clouds were low over my head. The air was thick, threatening a storm, but at any minute the clouds might move on and let the sun out. This was early Autumn weather, when you could never tell what it was going to do. The forecast was for a break in the rain later, but the forecast could always be wrong.

I cheered up as I began to see people going to the same place I was headed for. They were all in groups, talking happily. Their clothes weren’t formal but were reserved and tidy, all clean jeans and shirts tucked in, low heels and long skirts. Many of them carried a book each, probably copies of the King James’ Bible or maybe that horrible New International Version. I say horrible for the desecration of language it contains. I’m no traditionalist, but the King James’ version is a thing of art. You can take a good thing too far, and the effort to make the Bible more accessible had removed what I loved most about it: its poetry and poise.

These churchgoers seemed sociable, and that’s what I had come for. I had become lost along the way, had taken two wrong streets and had to ask for directions, but I was here now. As I neared the church building, on the other side of the street, I examined its exterior for clues about what was believed inside. I’d asked around a little, and the consensus among those who knew was that this church was not a home to fundamentalism or creationism nonsense. The building was welcoming enough. It looked like it had been a warehouse once and had been renovated to use the large windows for light and exposed girders to imply simplicity. The minimalist style contrasted with the decor of the Christianity within, posters of smiling faces and brightly coloured banners announcing ‘You’ve been saved!’ and ‘Give Him your problems!’

I waited for a break in the Sunday traffic, and then I crossed the road. I noticed now a man leaning against the large wooden sign for the church, just outside the car park. He looked younger than myself, maybe in his late twenties. Something about him stopped me looking away, maybe his dark eyes, or it could have been his skin, a light brown tone I found smooth and attractive. He was kissing his fingertips, I thought, until smoke escaped his curled hand and I realised he was smoking. He lowered the cigarette and leaned his head back to blow a smoky stream into the air, as if contributing to the clouds above. He looked up at the grey sky as I approached him and the church. As I neared the car park, he looked over at me.

‘It’s a shitty morning,’ he said, apparently to me. ‘Let’s see how it plays out.’

I assumed he was talking about the weather. I said, ‘It’s supposed to get better.’

‘It’s not *supposed* to do anything. It just does or it doesn’t, you know?’

I had nothing to say to that. I looked toward the church, but I didn’t know what to say.

‘You going in there?’ he asked, gesturing with his cigarette.

‘Yes.’

‘Save me a seat.’ He returned his cigarette to his lips and his eyes to the sky.

I only thought about this strange exchange for a few seconds before I walked through the doors of the church and was swallowed into a noisy mass of people. Many of them, I noticed, were relatively young. We were in a large foyer, off of which led a corridor into what looked from here like an even larger room. Around me, people were discussing the week, today’s weather, there were a few references to prayers being answered, smiles all

around. I wandered and listened and watched. A group of young women, maybe in their late teens, were looking out of the window at the man smoking outside. They were chatting in gossipy tones. There were no actual giggles, but it was clear there was a guilty excitement at seeing this man here. A skinny man with grey hair was also watching the man outside with a pensive, possibly apprehensive stare.

I was approached by a man my own age, a tall guy wearing a Led Zeppelin tee shirt underneath a smart, grey blazer. His hair was heavily gelled and I noticed a broken tooth when he smiled broadly at me.

‘Hello! I’m Daniel. I don’t think we’ve met.’

I shook his hand and said, ‘I’m new to the city, this is my first time here.’ Daniel was still gripping my hand, and our conjoined arms went up and down as he spoke.

‘Well, it’s great to see you. What made you decide to come along this morning?’

I pulled my hand back as casually as I could. ‘I’m what some people call a cultural Christian. I thought church might be a good place to meet people. I don’t really know anyone in the city yet, except for work colleagues.’

‘What do you do?’

I filled him in on the basic details of my move here, but I didn’t want to talk about myself. I already knew my own story, and I’d come here to meet others. I noticed Daniel glance at the man outside and smile at seeing him.

‘Do you know that guy?’

Daniel smiled. He did a lot of that. ‘Oh, that’s Aria.’

‘He was chatting to me before I came in.’

‘Yeah, Aria will talk to anyone, he’s very easy-going like that. He’s full of big ideas and enthusiasm – it’s like wherever he goes, excitement follows him. He speaks his mind, does Aria, and doesn’t like to do as he’s told.’

Possibly seeking common ground with Daniel, I said, ‘Neither did Jesus.’

Daniel grinned at me. ‘Too right. And everyone gets on with Aria. But to be honest I don’t know if many people get close to him, he always seems to be on the move. He’s been away for a while actually, and he must have just got back. I’m glad he’s here.’

‘He’s usually a church-goer?’

For the first time, Daniel’s smile dropped, but he quickly regained it. ‘He used to be. He stopped coming here a few years ago. But Christ goes with you, wherever you go. I’m sure Aria still has a relationship with God. And you?’

The sudden turn of the conversation onto me, along with the fact that I hadn’t prepared myself for answering questions like these, made me hesitate. I was saved by the flow of people moving out of the foyer to go down the corridor, into the other room.

‘Ah,’ Daniel said, ‘looks like it’s time to go in.’

I followed him along the throng of church members. The other room was a large space with high ceilings, a room full of light from strong overhead spotlights and tall windows with views of the grey day outside. The walls were yellow, which added to the effect of warmth and light inside. Coloured banners were draped from the exposed girders high above. A wide stage lined the wall to my right. To my left, rows of metal foldout chairs were facing the stage. There were enough seats here for maybe two hundred or more people, and each seat was quickly occupied. I departed from Daniel, who went to talk to the musicians tuning instruments on the stage, and I found a seat in the back row. I took my damp jacket off and hung it over the back of the empty seat next to mine, saving the spot for Aria.

Everybody was now sitting, except Aria, who had yet not come in. A middle-aged man stood at the microphone at the front of the stage before the congregation. He wore green khakis and a beige jumper over a white shirt, which reminded me of a teacher I’d had at

school. He spoke into the microphone as those seated murmured to each other, he told us that things would be starting soon, asked if we were all comfortable. The murmur dissipated, but before the man could speak again, Aria walked into the room. A few whispers went through the congregation, and I noticed heads turning to watch Aria stroll through the room toward me, but mostly people tried not to make their interest noticeable, turning away if he looked at them and pretending politely to be having a chat with their neighbour.

I took the chance to examine him more thoroughly as he came toward me. I looked for clues of what others were seeing in him and what Daniel had told me of him. Aria had long, fine, deep black hair that was pulled back tightly into a small bun. His hair was as dark as his eyelashes, which were also thick, a combination that made it look as if he was wearing eyeliner. He was uniquely effeminate, but there was also a masculine wildness about the way he stalked through the room, tall and staring down at everyone seated. There was something of a manic glint in his eyes, which I hadn't seen before. His mouth turned up on one side in an almost smile, framed by a cropped beard. He was dressed in a grey suit with a black waistcoat and a brown neckerchief, a darker shade than his skin.

He took the seat I'd saved for him, and the service proceeded. The man at the microphone identified himself, 'for newcomers', as the pastor. He introduced the worship team, six musicians including a beautiful, folksy-looking woman who led the singing into the first song. Everyone stood, except for Aria, who stretched his legs out, one foot over the other. I decided to stand because I didn't have the self-confidence to defy a whole room of people. The music was unexpectedly modern, there was even a brief bass-solo after the first chorus. Aria tapped his foot to the beat and seemed quite comfortable observing the rest of us.

Into the third song, I became uncomfortable with a recurrent theme in what was being sung. These hymns seemed to be about the inherent sickness of humans, a void within us that they tried to patch up with sentiments that soothed, concerned only with what felt good and the truth be damned. Besides, I didn't think we were as vile as they apparently thought we were (without God), I thought we were neutral – a bit of this and a bit of that, but basically somewhere between good and evil.

After a fourth song, the congregation sat down, and the pastor took to the microphone again. Aria had removed his blazer and rolled his shirtsleeves up to the elbow. I noticed an elegant tattoo on his forearm, a grapevine in black ink, made up of fine lines. I'm not a 'tattoo person', but his was quite beautiful. The pastor began his sermon, or maybe they didn't call it that here, maybe a sermon was only given at a more conventional kind of church. This speech had an informal air to it, with members of the audience encouraging him with calls of, 'Amen!' This talk, like the hymns, made a synonym of 'self-acceptance' with 'self-disgust', and 'nuance' seemed to be synonymous with 'nihilism' in the pastor's eyes. He raised questions only to demonstrate that he had answers, but the answers, in their simplicity, missed so much out.

An hour passed. I didn't take in much more of what the pastor said, I simply relaxed in the atmosphere and warmth, allowing the headache that had lingered from this morning's hangover to subside. Eventually, the pastor offered prayer to any takers and announced that there would be tea and coffee and biscuits afterwards, all were welcome to stay. Coffee sounded good, and so did the idea of company. These were people who seemed decent enough.

Aria wandered off before I could start up a conversation with him. He seemed to flow into groups of people, taking up conversation easily, and then moving on to a new person or group. I noticed that often he didn't have to go to other people, people seemed to be drawn to him. There were a few people who followed him to new conversations once he'd swept them up in the wake of his charisma. I went down the hall, returning to the foyer where I accepted

a coffee offered to me. As I tasted the bitter, metallic brew and looked for sugar to sweeten it with, someone tapped my shoulder. It was the older man I'd seen watching Aria earlier with such mistrust, or it might have been disdain.

'Hello, we haven't met. I'm Jeremy.'

We shook hands, and he got straight to what he wanted to say.

'I noticed you were sitting with Aria. Do you know him very well?'

'Not at all, I just met him today.'

'Right, right. I hope he didn't put you off our church – or try to.'

'No, of course not. Is that something he's likely to do?'

Jeremy grunted and did not elaborate to let me know what the grunt meant.

I said, 'So you must know him then.'

'I used to ... He was a regular with our church some years back, but he became an atheist. But he's like that, always moving on from things, never sticking anything out. He's volatile.'

'Volatile?'

'Oh, all right, maybe not volatile. But he's up-and-down, has mood swings, and his attention doesn't stick to anything. My daughter – that's her over there, with the blond hair – she calls it *romantic*.'

'What do you call it?'

'I call it being a moody over-thinker.' Jeremy seemed to catch himself, realising that he probably shouldn't be saying this, least of all to a newcomer to the church. 'Obviously, he'll always be welcome, and God will always love him.'

I looked over at where Aria had been talking to Jeremy's daughter and others, but he had gone. I began to feel disappointed, but then Aria was suddenly at my side. He had a shiny blue pack of cigarettes in his hand, and he asked me, 'Do you smoke?'

'No, I don't. But I'd be happy to go outside with you if you're having one.'

He nodded, and he turned to lead me out of the church. Jeremy said to him, 'You know, cigarettes will kill you.'

Aria smirked, a tiny smile he tried to hide to himself, then murmured, 'They might just be keeping me alive.' He saw me watching and waved his hand, frowning. 'Don't read too much into that.'

He seemed to be pre-empting something he thought I might think or say. It was like a game of chess, and he was looking at all the pieces and thinking ahead, trying not to be caught out. I followed him out to the car park. He leaned against a low wall that separated the last parking space from the sidewalk and the road.

'I was told you've been away somewhere.'

Aria lit his cigarette with a flame that flickered in the wind, and after he'd taken a few puffs, he said, 'Tehran. I'm Iranian-English, and I'd never been to Iran. So I figured it was time to get there. I've been everywhere else, so why not see if I've got any roots there that matter to me?'

'Did you find any?'

He closed his eyes as smoke drifted around his head. 'Nothing's ever going to keep me in any one place. I like to move, you know?'

'You said you've been everywhere – including Iran now, obviously ...' I gave the sentence the inflection of a question, wanting to hear more.

'Yeah, when I was younger I sort of lost my mind for a while. I travelled the world, drinking my way through cities and dead-end jobs. I lived on every continent, except Antarctica – not enough to drink there.'

We laughed together. He asked if he was smoking too near me, but I told him I was fine.

‘So I started working as a barman in different places, and somehow I developed a love of fine wine and a respect for alcohol that calmed my drinking a bit. But I still do it, I still get drunk, but now it’s about the freedom and the creativity it can offer. There’s less nihilism in it.’

The pastor had come outside with a mug of coffee. I realised my coffee had gone cold. He came over to us, asked how we were doing, and though he was being friendly, the intrusion slowed the conversation to the safe crawl of small talk. After an awkward pause, the pastor said, ‘So what brings you here this morning, Aria?’

Aria shrugged, but there was a cheeky smirk in his eyes. ‘Every so often, I like to check I’m still an atheist.’

The pastor laughed. I had to respect that. He asked, ‘So church isn’t for you at the moment?’

‘Christianity is ...’ He looked at his cigarette. ‘It’s like cigarettes. Some people need them, some people don’t. Some people get sick because of them, other people don’t. If it gets you through the day ... Just don’t blow your smoke in my face, you know?’

‘Do you need cigarettes to get through the day?’ I asked.

‘Some days. I don’t always smoke, it’s usually when my mind’s away. It goes into itself for a while, thinking things over. Then it all comes out, and I can’t keep it in, I have so much energy and enthusiasm. Then it goes back into itself and things get ... dark, for a while.’

‘So where are you now?’

‘Not sure. Between the two.’

The pastor tipped back his head to finish his coffee, then tilted it forward and looked into the emptiness of his mug. He asked if either of us would like another drink, we both declined, and the pastor went back inside.

I said to Aria, ‘There’s a problem in your analogy of Christianity with smoking.’

He frowned. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, they both might help deal with life to some degree, but smoking doesn’t inhibit your ability to keep exploring, it doesn’t preclude certain answers that don’t fit with your current worldview. The way they seem to interpret God puts a stop to asking certain questions and getting certain answers.’

‘I like you. You’re right, I was wrong.’

He held out his cigarette, now almost just the butt, and examined it. He seemed to decide there was enough left on it for a final drag, took it, then dropped the butt to the ground and stamped it out. He looked at me with a serious frown – I felt like I couldn’t keep up with his mood, the lightness in his voice a moment ago had gone again as he said, ‘Do you ever feel like things are scripted? Like a character in a play doesn’t know he had no choice to say what he said. You ever feel like that?’

‘Wouldn’t that need a writer?’

He shook his head as if I’d misunderstood. ‘Maybe. But the writer doesn’t have to like us, you know? Anyway, we know it’s all fixed, stuck in place with laws like gravity. All we can do is introduce some randomness into it.’

‘I thought we were scripted?’ I said. I was trying not to be distracted by the small group of teenagers that had begun coalescing on our conversation, hanging onto the edge of where we stood. Daniel came out as well, standing nearby and listening in.

‘In the big picture, yeah. I’m talking about day-to-day shit.’ He lit up another cigarette. ‘If I have a dozen conversations with a dozen strangers in a day there are going to be patterns and clichés, stuff everyone says, the boring stuff. But if you get those people drunk or stoned or mugged or something unusual, you’re more likely to get something you didn’t expect from them.’

I couldn't say I was following him exactly. Some of what he said contradicted other things he said. But he shook his head, just as I was thinking this, and he said, 'I don't know. I'm just trying to work it all out.'

'Wouldn't working everything out remove the randomness? Wouldn't that be boring?'

He smiled then and stabbed his cigarette in the air at me, saying with approval, 'Good fucking question.'

Some of the young people hanging around the edge of our conversation frowned disapprovingly at Aria's vocabulary. Daniel smiled into the distance as if he hadn't heard the word. There was a discordance between the conservative ideology and the rock-concert trimmings. Something seemed strange in so many young people with such traditional ideals, some of which (to do with dress and their visible distaste at certain words Aria used) belonged to my grandparents' generation. But maybe that was just me. I asked Daniel about it.

'I don't think it's an unhealthy marriage. We have traditional beliefs, sure, but we have a progressive approach. We've got to reach contemporary culture.'

'But can you change a timeless message? Isn't the Bible unchanging?'

'Yes ...' He looked confused. 'I'm not sure what to say. I haven't really thought about it before.' Then the confidence returned and he asserted, 'But we're not relativists or anything like that. We do believe in the unchanging truth of God. Do you know that Buddha said he was still searching for the truth? And that Muhammad said he pointed to the truth? But Jesus said, "I am the truth."'

'So you're after certainty?' There was an undertone of ridicule in my voice that I couldn't help. Maybe I was irritated by the preachy tone Daniel had suddenly adopted. But he didn't seem to notice my scepticism.

'I think that's what everyone is after, deep down.'

Aria flicked the top of ash from his cigarette. 'Not me.'

Daniel smiled. 'Are you certain of that?'

'Touché.'

Jeremy was approaching us, glaring at Aria and staring at the blonde woman he'd identified earlier as his daughter. Maybe she was younger than she looked, maybe she was in her teens. She was leaning into the conversation we were having, standing close to Aria and looking at him admiringly. Jeremy joined us and made the effort to appear friendly. Aria extinguished his cigarette under his shoe.

'I'm staying with friends at the moment,' Aria told me. 'We're having some people over tonight for wine, and we'll talk about life, religion, politics – all the things we're told not to discuss in polite company. Do you want to come along? And Daniel, you're welcome as well. And you too, of course.' He was smiling at the blonde teen.

'No, you'll be busy,' Jeremy told his daughter.

'How about you guys?'

I told him I would be there, if he gave me directions.

'Great. And you, Daniel? Jeremy?'

Jeremy shook his head and guided his daughter away, under the guise of her mother needing to see her 'inside the church, now'. Daniel said he'd love to come along. He and I arranged to meet here that evening so he could show me the way.

The evening came, and I met Daniel outside the now closed up and darkened church. I'd brought a bottle of Rioja for Aria, a Spanish wine I thought he might like. We went down some back roads and side streets and came to the house of Aria's friends. On the quiet street, lit by orange streetlights, we stood and looked at the house. The curtains were drawn, but light escaped at the edges. Voices could be heard, laughing and loud, talking across other

voices. It was a narrow, two-storey house squeezed cosily between larger houses. Ivy covered most of the front of the buildings. I'd heard that ivy could be terribly damaging to brickwork, but I found it appealingly romantic.

I knocked at the door, and Aria answered a minute or two later. His hair was out of the bun, loose and wavy, wildly falling on his shoulders and bouncing around as he slapped my shoulder and ushered us in. His eyes were gleaming with a teeming brain clearly working away behind them.

'Great to see you both! Come in, come in, don't bother with your shoes.'

I slipped my shoe back on. Aria was alive, his eyes were wide and infectious with enthusiasm. 'You brought a wine – Gran Reserva, fantastic! I was thinking about this the other day, that in this country it's the custom for guests to bring a bottle of something for their host. But when I was in Iran and people had me as their guest, lots of them had their own booze, illegal of course, and they were eager to share it with me. Some of them didn't even drink alcohol themselves. Strange, these differences, you know?'

Aria told us to give him one minute, promising to return with something for us, and I had a chance to glance around the house. Daniel and I were standing in a narrow hall that had a staircase at its end. To my left and right were open doors – the door on my right opened into a kitchen, the door to my left led to a front room. The adjective that resonated in my mind as I took the in space and its decor was 'cosy', but as I noticed details, I thought the words 'nostalgic' and 'artistic'. There were bookshelves everywhere, though not all of them contained books; some of the shelves held trinkets, dusty photo-frames, ornate boxes, a brass compass. Pot plants adorned every space on any shelf they could. There were two Chinese Evergreens in this hallway, and a spider plant draped itself over the top row of books on a tall bookcase. A grey tabby cat prowled around the legs of the other guests.

I looked at the names on the nearest shelf: Hemingway, Fitzgerald – both Scott and Zelda – then a collection of titles by Orwell, then Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Joyce, and then it moved into philosophy with Nietzsche, Sartre, Derrida, Montaigne. There was a round side-table next to me with a stack of books on it. I picked them up and, as I looked at the book on the bottom of the pile, something flat and pink fell out of it. Daniel wasn't watching and stepped on the pink thing. I picked it up and saw that it was a flower that had been pressed between the pages of the book. Aria returned and noticed what I held.

'I'm sorry, it fell out, and I –'

'I forgot I'd put that in there. Don't worry about it! Dionysia, that's what it is, I got it in Tehran from an old woman – Don't look so worried! Shit happens, and there are other flowers, you know?'

'What's this?' I asked as he handed me a glass of something dark and sweet smelling.

'A cocktail I made in Barcelona. Try it.'

I sipped the liquid, which slid, sticky, down my throat and made me purse my lips. It was sweet first, then sharp at the back of my tongue, then gave a kick as it hit somewhere halfway down my throat. It was good and I said so. A short and stocky woman appeared behind Aria.

'If that's one of Aria's it will be good. The man's an artist with alcohol.'

'Thank you, Donna. Daniel, here's one for you.'

'No, thank you. I'd rather not drink alcohol. Thank you, though.'

The woman stared at Daniel and spoke to Aria. 'Who are these strangers you're bringing into my home, one of whom doesn't drink? I'm kidding, I'm Donna and you're welcome here. Who are you?'

We introduced ourselves, and she gave us both firm handshakes with a soft hand. I liked her already, but I couldn't say exactly why. She was direct, and maybe I liked that. She had brown hair that was cropped and messy on top. I guessed that she was in her early fifties.

There was a purple tie around her neck, and she wore what looked like a green smoking jacket. There was a smouldering cigarillo pinched between her fingers.

‘Great to meet you both,’ she said. ‘But seriously, why don’t you drink? Are you a recovering alcoholic?’

Daniel laughed. ‘No, no. I just don’t like the effect it has.’

Aria said, ‘The effect is the best part, after the taste, of course. You’ll be missing out on the full experience of the evening, the atmosphere, the way conversation flows.’

‘But the experience isn’t really real, is it? It’s the product of alcohol changing the way your mind works. And it might be enjoyable now, but *I* won’t be having a hangover tomorrow.’

‘All right, leave him alone,’ Donna said. ‘Let’s get in there.’

She took us through to the front room. There were about a dozen people here. There was a couple lounging on a leather Chesterfield sofa (I knew the style because it was the one I wanted and couldn’t afford for my new flat), and the woman had her legs over the man’s lap as he drank wine. Standing behind them was a group of men who seemed like professors of something, with their smart blazers and the way they listened intently or gesticulated as they made a point. They were talking about a book. I thought one of them said *Lolita*, but I couldn’t hear everything they said over the talking of all the other people wandering the room, drinking wine.

Aria began pointing out people in the room. ‘Over there is Lucy, lovely woman, and that’s Rebecca. And that’s ...’ I was losing the names as he went through them. I was distracted by taking in their faces and the patchwork of overheard conversations and the music. Aria nodded toward a man in the corner who was ignoring a younger woman telling him something. ‘You see those two? He’s married, but he has a thing with her. They think nobody knows but –’

Donna slapped his arm with the back of her hand, an affectionate, motherly act. Aria shrugged.

‘Blame the drink.’

‘Your big mouth takes in a lot of alcohol,’ she said, ‘but it doesn’t need any to speak your mind. Cass! When did you get here?’ Donna went off into the room.

I noticed a large gramophone on a table at the back of the room. The music I heard wasn’t coming from it, though. The music was coming through a set of speakers connected to an MP3 player. But the gramophone, an impressive and elegant machine, awed me.

‘I love the style of Donna’s place, it’s a great atmosphere in here. Who painted those?’

I pointed to a row of canvases with impressionist paintings (or maybe surrealist – I don’t know much about that kind of thing) that were propped up against the wall.

‘Alice, Donna’s partner. Yeah, I like it here too. But just for a visit, I couldn’t live like this.’

‘Like what?’

‘Trapped in an era that’s long gone. Paris at the turn of the last century, the bohemian scene. I mean, it’s great but has its limitations. Donna doesn’t read anything published after the fifties. This is her thing, it works for her, but I feel like she’s missing out on so much of worth in contemporary culture, you know?’

‘The MP3 player?’

‘Mine, but the music was her choice. Cab Calloway, you like him?’

‘I’m a big fan, actually. I didn’t think anyone else still listened to him.’

I’d finished the cocktail, so Aria took the empty glass and handed me a full glass of wine. God knows where he’d got it from, maybe he’d had it all along and I hadn’t noticed. Then he was drinking his own glass of wine, which I hadn’t seen in his hand before, and I

wondered if he was pulling them out of his sleeve. I listened in on a nearby conversation about Freud, Nietzsche, and God. There was a joke, and the man and woman laughed. Daniel was talking to somebody behind me. I thought that maybe I should venture out and find a conversation for myself.

There was a pause as the Cab Calloway album ended, and a moment later, something new began to play, something I'd never heard before. There were sharp notes on an acoustic guitar, and then a woman began to sing in a voice that stopped me – it stopped me drinking, stopped me thinking, I couldn't hear the noise of others talking, all I could listen to was this woman expose her soul through her singing. She sung of a lonely road, on which she travelled but had no idea where to. I put down my glass on a shelf next to where I was standing. I wanted to be alone with this music.

Aria passed by me and I grabbed his sleeve. 'Who is this? The music.'

'You've never heard Joni Mitchell?' He was shocked.

'I've heard *of* her ... This is ...'

Aria understood. He stood with me and listened. He told me to listen closely to the next part. Maybe it was the effect of the drink, maybe it was something in the music, but I was so taken with her voice that I forgot to pay attention to the words. But Aria offered his ideas.

'She *hates* him, but she *loves* him, and then there's this self-denying aspect of her love, but she acknowledges it. That's looking life in the eyes and not shying away, you know?'

I didn't answer, but Aria must have sensed my awe. He said, 'I'll lend you my CD copy of the album.'

'Thank you.'

Time went by, maybe an hour, maybe more. The wine was flowing with the conversation, I was alive and happy to be, excited and inspired. I was quite drunk. Eventually, Daniel found me and said that he had to leave.

'It's late, I have work first thing tomorrow.'

'So do I,' I lied, 'but *life* is happening here.' I was more drunk than I'd realised.

Aria joined us and said, 'I was thinking that you're new to city, maybe I could show you some of the places I know. We can explore the city.'

'That would be great, so great.'

'Okay. I'm away most of this week, but I'm back Saturday night. How about on Sunday? I'll be free at least until lunchtime, maybe longer.'

Daniel interrupted. 'I was hoping to see you at church again. You're both invited back, of course.'

I was rattled by the division here, maybe more than I should have been, but I didn't like having to make what seemed to be an awkward decision. Besides, I wasn't sure which I would rather do. 'Tell you what, tell you what ... I'll decide when I'm sober. I'll take your number, Aria, in case I decide to go with you. And I know where the church is if I decide to go there. How's that?'

They agreed that seemed a good idea, and Daniel thanked Aria and Donna before leaving. I began to feel unsure on my feet as I wandered in and out of different conversations with people. I spoke with a woman for maybe ten minutes before I realised I'd been calling her by the wrong name. Later, when someone I hadn't yet met asked me my name, I took a moment to remember if I had a name. Before I got a taxi home, I threw up in Donna's toilet.

Aria looked amused as he helped me to my feet, out of the house and into the taxi.

'I've been there before, my friend. In the morning, coffee and a cigarette always helps me. Do you smoke?'

'I don't know,' I mumbled. Aria raised an eyebrow.

‘All right. Well, if you find out you do smoke, have a cigarette, you know?’

I got home and into bed and slept.

The week went by, and I spent most of it inside my flat. I justified this at first by telling myself I needed to furnish my home, but it came to a point where I was going to have to go out to find the things I needed. So I put it off, staying safe in my flat. I don’t know why I thought of it as ‘safe’ – did I think it was ‘unsafe’ out in the city, out in the world? Maybe. Everything was unfamiliar. But staying in became boring by the end of the week, and by Sunday morning, I was ready to go out.

I shut my door and assured myself the key was in my pocket. I zipped up my jacket – the weather had become more bitter during the week. The wind sharpened my mind, woke me to the world. I considered my options: church with Daniel or exploring with Aria. I set off down the lonely road. The world was ahead of me.

'The Sin in Hymns' is taken from the collection "Burn the Pages"