

Neil was halfway up towards the Fish when he noticed the Father coming up behind.

*"Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe,"* the Father called up to him. He had on his usual small smile, as if there was a private joke between himself and the world. He was wearing a thick puffer jacket, but didn't seem at all warm as he paced briskly up towards him, hands clasped behind his back.

Neil had stopped for a breather; the hill was steep. He braced his feet against the chalky downland turf as he sucked air into his lungs. It had only been a few months since he'd stopped smoking, and his wife was disappointed in him for having given up on the daily press-up challenge, having failed to get beyond fifteen. He could feel the sweat running down inside his police jacket, underneath the vest that gripped his chest. It was not a particularly chill morning, but a silvery mist hung in the air, and had pearled Madge's fuchsias which hung over the narrow path to the iron gate which opened onto the downs.

The Father turned out to look at the bay whilst Neil caught his breath. A slight breeze drifted off the grey sea and dried the sweat in Neil's hair.

"Not the Devil's work, then?" Neil said, wiping the back of his hand across his forehead. They turned to the chalk hill figure above them.

"He doesn't do weekends."

A vast fish was cut into the downland turf, revealing the blazing white chalk beneath. Sinuous and figurative, it had been there since 'time immemorial', recorded by an eleventh-century monk in a local chronicle. The villagers held a ceremony yearly to scour it of lichen and dirt, to ensure the shape remained sharp and clear. This was an event, complete with drunkenness and raucity. During the night someone had, with what looked like a vast amount of purple paint, obscured the fish's eye with a giant letter 'A', enclosed in a circle. Further down, the artist had added little purple-socked feet, on the end of fish legs.

"At least it's not rude, this time," Neil said.

"It seems somehow familiar," the Father cocked his head.

"Have to get Simon and the lads on it again. Christ, I owe them. Sorry, Father." The Father shook his head, still with his amused smile. He turned and recommenced walking up towards the Fish. Neil paused before trudging on, a couple of steps behind. After a minute or two they drew level with it, its form lengthening to absurd proportions as they lost the effect of the hill's foreshortening. Here it was clear the artist had used several layers of spray, circling the fish eye again and again. The paint had bled from the grass onto the chalk, staining it a bright mauve. Neil crouched down, stroking at the grass with his fingers. The paint had mixed with the dew; it came off in his hand. He straightened and wiped it on his trousers.

"Nothing we can't fix?" The Father said. "At least where a few pints are involved."

Neil peered at the grass surrounding for beer cans, crisp wrappers, or earth scorched from a fire. "Looks like they didn't stay."

"I could ask around. I've got visits this morning."

"It's fine. We've got live webcam outside Svetlana's shop now."

The Father leaned in a little, wiggling his eyebrows. "The very eyes and ears of our community."

Neil grinned. "Father."

The Father leaned back. "There's no commandment against jokes."

"Thank God, else you'd also be damned."

They contemplated the scene for a minute. "Well, God willing. Just text me if you need anything. You know, prayers or anything like that."

"If you could put in a word for me on the fags." Neil slapped him on his back as he turned to head up the hill. "Have a good day, Father."

"God Bless."

Neil snapped a couple of photos on his phone and sent them to Simon.