

CHAPTER ONE

Before we vanish into Satan's gaping mouth, Bex wants to get something straight.

Sitting beside me in a very small car, she says, 'So your new book's going to be about the supernatural. Which you don't believe in. At all.'

'It's already riling people,' I tell her. 'Did you see the bust-up yesterday?'

She scrunches her face. 'Why can't you accept that social media isn't a part of my life?'

'Because I don't believe you.'

'Last time I looked, in about 2009, social media was one big room full of people not listening to each other, shouting, "My life's great!" I doubt this has changed.'

'So why are you still *on* there?'¹

Bex makes her frustrated, dismissive noise: the sound of a

1 Jack very rarely named specific social media sites in his books. According to his agent Murray Chambers, this policy was his 'revenge' against sites who refused to pay him for name-checking them – *Alistair*.

brief, chaotic catfight. ‘I have *profiles*, Jack, so old friends can catch up, but I don’t read anything. Social media makes me think less of people. I’d rather not know all the self-obsessed shit in their heads.’

‘How selfish of you.’

‘Won’t this book be kind of *short*? Just a great big atheist travelling round the world saying “Bullshit” a lot?’

I frown at her underestimation of the concept. ‘Obviously I’m going to keep it rational. But I’ll also keep a completely open mind. Social media’s full of people who think ghosts are real, so I’ll give them a chance to guide me in the right direction. I’ve got this ongoing list of hypotheses for paranormal phenomena, which I’m calling SPOOKS. That’s short for—’

‘I think I can do without knowing.’

‘And when the book’s done, I can at least tell all the mad believers, “Look, you had your chance to convince me and you blew it.”’

‘How very magnanimous of you.’

My hopeless love for Bex intensifies when she employs long words and sarcasm together. Long-time readers will recall her as the late-twenties fitness instructor I’ve known and shared a flat with too long for anything to happen between us. They’ll also know I’ve found it challenging to listen to her banging men in an adjacent bedroom. This may explain why my books tend to involve travel. (By the way, she doesn’t bang loads of men. She’s not like that. She’s been seeing a guy called Lawrence for six months, even if he is a smarmy chinless loser. And he is.)

I can openly discuss this love of mine because Bex doesn’t actually read my books. ‘Jack, I *live* with you,’ she once said while we half watched *EastEnders* and fully ate Chinese food

on our big fat yellow sofa. 'I don't actually need to read these books. Why would I want to relive you overdosing on coke in our toilet?'

Apart from making the mistake of not reading my books, Bex is the most sensible person I know. In truth, I always seek her approval on my book ideas. Which makes me want to win her around on this one.

A burst of power makes our very small car rattle and hum. We roll forwards with a creak.

'So,' she says. 'How was Greece?'

'Italy,' I say, forced to raise my voice as people start squealing behind us. 'It caused the big bust-up. I did a bad thing and got yelled at by an exorcist.'

'On Halloween. Perfect.'

'Then I saw this weird YouTube video.'

Bex processes all this information. As our car gains speed, she settles on a question: 'What video?'

'I'll tell you after this.'

And into the mouth we go.

So I'm deep in rural Italy, over twenty-four hours ago. The first stop on my epic journey into the supernatural world, which will see me visit a combat magician in Hong Kong, a ??? in ??? and a ??? in ???, not to mention a ??? in ??? (*Eleanor: I'll fill these in later, once I know who I'm actually meeting and where I'm going. If I forget, you can do the honours.*)

I am about to enter a church.

The ancient building sits isolated and forlorn on a hill that becomes a sheer cliff face on one side. Hurl a stone from up here and it vanishes halfway down, caught by the twisted, arthritic fingers of bare trees. This church, this stone sentinel,

keeps watch over dense woodland and clustered hills that mark the horizon.

Inside, it is functional, relatively bare bones. There are still a few of the usual looming statues calculated to intimidate and belittle, plus a few glistening symbols of opulence and power. Yet the most elaborate feature is the stained-glass window in the back wall, shot through with winter sun.

I always think the beauty of stained-glass windows is wasted on a church.

Everything is so quiet and serene, you'd scarcely credit the fact that in ninety minutes we'll need an ambulance.

Arriving half an hour late at 1.30 p.m., I barrel in looking windswept and interesting. Eighty-year-old Father Primo Di Stefano greets me with a stiff smile and matching handshake. Sporting a large black frock, he is flanked by two frosty aides, who are both short and stocky, in black shirts and grey trousers. The only real visual difference between these two is that one has facial hair, so let's call them Beard and Beardless. I also have a handy Italian translator at my disposal, named Tony. So he'll be Translator Tony, obviously. Despite his werewolf-hairy hands, a monobrow crowning shifty brown eyes, and teeth you could ride a Kawasaki between, Tony's the only halfway personable guy here. We bond over a cigarette outside, when he admires my brass Zippo. A dull, tarnished old thing these days, but it does the job.

Di Stefano does not run this church. To all intents and purposes, the priest is a guest here, like me. One of the Pope's most trusted foot soldiers, he is based in Rome and has travelled many miles to commandeer the place on a mission of mercy. Specifically, he has come to drive the Devil out of a thirteen-year-old girl with the use of words, gestures and a

great deal of biblical *Sturm und Drang*. This man claims to have carried out over two hundred exorcisms. As a purely incidental side effect, this has provided him with material for a lucrative string of books detailing his crusades. The titles include *At War with the Devil*, *My Lifelong Battle with the Antichrist* and of course *Satan & I*. That last title is my favourite, like a wacky sitcom. 'In this week's episode of *Satan & I*, Father Di Stefano attempts to throw a house party for friends, only for his mischievous flatmate Satan to slay them all while denouncing God!'

Bitterly cold winds sail up and down the aisle as Father Di Stefano, Translator Tony and I literally pull up a pew for a chat. We have time to kill before the subject of the priest's latest ritual arrives.

Exorcism can be traced back through millennia to the dawn of civilisation. Right from the word go, man was all too keen to ascribe sickness, whether physical or psychological, to evil spirits. And of course people from the ancient Babylonian priests onwards were all too keen to present themselves as exorcists. As saviours. The most famous was allegedly Jesus Christ, who couldn't get enough of it.

Di Stefano considers exorcism more vital than ever in the online age. 'The internet,' he tells me via Tony, 'has made it much easier to share information, but not always good information. People experiment with Ouija boards and get themselves in trouble. And then they call us, asking for help.'

This man has the lived-in face and manner of a mastiff dog. There is not the faintest flicker of humour in his dark eyes. He is barely tolerating me. His aides hover within earshot, which always irritates me during interviews. I ask for them to move further away, but the request is rudely ignored. I soon discover that Di Stefano's hearing is poor when he wants it

to be – when I ask a challenging question, for instance. At other times, when I say something he wants to pounce on, his ears sharpen the hell up.

Di Stefano has granted a fair few interviews over the years – most notably when he’s had a new book out – but as far as I can tell, no journalist has been allowed to watch him perform an exorcism. Today feels like a concession to the modern media, a canny PR exercise: if the Church is seen to be helping people, it stays relevant in the eyes of the world. And if there’s one thing religion should be worried about these days, it’s relevance. There’s no question that converting Jack Sparks would be quite the coup.

I can’t help but picture Di Stefano conducting an exorcism with an entirely straight face, then bursting into uncontrollable fits later on, the moment he shuts his front door behind him. Just *hooting* at the nonsense he gets away with on a daily basis. But there’s undoubtedly a very serious side to all this. After all, Di Stefano deals with often quite severely distressed people of all ages (except babies, seemingly. Babies are so consistently insane that it’s hard to tell if they’re possessed, unless they start floating about). The lion’s share of these people arguably suffer from some form of mental illness, or have experienced abuse.

‘That is true,’ allows Di Stefano, to my surprise. ‘Very often we realise, you know, that a person does have a mental illness or there is some other history there. In those cases, a demon is not to blame after all. When this happens, of course, the person will be sent for the correct treatment. The need for an exorcism is actually very rare.’

‘How can you tell when an exorcism is required?’ I ask.

Di Stefano looks down his nose at me, regarding me like the rank amateur I am. His stare is unyielding, those eyes dead

as a cod's. 'You get to know the sign of a true demonic possession,' he says. 'You can feel it. The feeling is completely different.'

So far, so vague. 'How *exactly* does it feel when it's a real demon?' I persist.

'The air feels . . . thick,' he says, with distaste. 'And black, like oil. It is . . .' He rubs his forefinger and thumb together as he searches for the word. Then he exchanges rapid-fire Italian with Tony, who provides the word on the tip of Di Stefano's tongue: 'Oppressive.'

'Also,' the priest continues, 'you can see it in the subject's eyes. The eyes, you know, are the windows to the soul. You can see who, or what, is living inside.'

'How do you know it isn't all in *your* head?' I ask.

That mastiff face crumples. No mean feat when your face is already a sponsored crumple-thon. He doesn't enjoy this line of questioning, no doubt because it could just as easily be applied to religion as a whole. Still, he gamely indulges me. 'As far as I know, I am perfectly sane. So are my exorcist colleagues. The things we have seen . . . the way people have behaved with demons within them . . . this is no make-believe.' He gestures around the church. 'You will see today, I think.'

'Have you seen *The Exorcist*?' I ask.

'The movie? A long time ago. I don't remember too much about—'

'Are exorcisms anything like that?'

'Sometimes they are,' he says wearily. As if anticipating my next question, he adds, 'But you know, exorcism existed for a long time before that movie. The movie took its cue from exorcisms before it. But I must say, I have seen things far more terrible in real life.'

I lean forward, quote-hungry. 'Could you give me an example?'

Di Stefano recalls a middle-aged single mother in Florence who would cry blood. Her skin turned sickly green and broke out in open sores. When he tried to expel her demons in an attic room, she whispered the Lord's Prayer backwards as she gouged out one of her own eyeballs with a rusty antique spoon. Di Stefano (then a mere assistant, in the late seventies) and his exorcism instructor restrained her, encased the eye in ice and rushed her to hospital. Despite a five-hour emergency operation, the eyeball could not be reinstated. Still, Di Stefano claims that they eventually exorcised the demon from this woman, who was reunited with her children.

When pushed for his very worst memory, he reluctantly dredges up the 2009 case of a ten-year-old boy in Milan. As he speaks of this boy, his full-bodied voice becomes little more than a murmur.

'The first time I tried to exorcise him, he laughed in my face, as he broke each of his fingers one by one.'

'Just the fingers on one hand?' I ask, genuinely curious. 'He couldn't do both, right?'

Di Stefano glares at me, as if I'm trying to be funny.

He bows his head. 'I could not save him. The demons had such a firm hold. I think they wanted to make a point, to scare me away from my life's mission. During exorcism number three, the boy smashed his face against the corner of a glass table, blood everywhere. In number five, he threatened my nieces' lives. He said he would cut all the skin from their faces as I watched, then force me to eat it.'

Translator Tony pops a square of nicotine gum into his mouth.

Di Stefano takes a moment to compose himself. ‘Two nights later, I had one of my visions.’

Ah yes, Di Stefano’s famous visions. His books are full of them. These visions physically root him to the spot and flood his mind with astonishing psychic sights. Interestingly, he rarely seems to tell anyone about them *before* their real-life counterparts occur. Why, it’s almost as if he pretends to have had the vision in retrospect.

‘In my mind, I saw the boy murder his sleeping stepfather with a hammer, then jump out of the window. And this actually happened, thirty minutes later. The boy, he jumped ten floors down to the busy road. Such a terrible, terrible . . . People said he screamed blasphemy as he fell.’

Satisfied that I can’t come back with a smart answer to such a grim story – or worried that I might ask for more information about that stepfather – he stands, ending our cosy chat. He needs, he says, to pray and mentally prepare.

As I leave him to kneel before the altar, I wonder how many exorcisms actually take place in churches. Aren’t the possessed supposed to burn up when they walk through the door, or at least protest and writhe around? Have these people never seen *The Omen*?

I open my notepad and review the SPOOKS List I’ve created . . .

THE SPOOKS LIST (Sparks’ Permanently Ongoing Overview of Kooky Shit) (Full disclosure: I had to ask social media’s hive mind to help with the ‘K’ word. Prior to that I only had ‘Kreepy’, which simply wasn’t good enough.)

People claim to have witnessed supernatural phenomena for the following reasons:

- (1) They're trying to deceive others
- (2) They've been deceived by others

Those, then, are the only two *viable* explanations as I see them, in top-down order from most to least likely. It won't surprise you to learn that I don't consider 'Ghosts are real' to be a viable hypothesis. Neither can I entertain the notion that people can be deceived by their own minds to the extent that they 'see' a ghost. Not without the use of LSD, anyway, and in such cases the drug is clearly the mother of total delusion. I should know this better than most, after the incident with the dive-bombing spider-geese.²

What I'll be looking to do, both here today and throughout this book, is to fit everything I see to one of the two explanations above. Should neither of them fit, I'll potentially add a third explanation to the list.

That's highly unlikely, I'm saying, but let's get stuck in.

Thirteen-year-old Maria Corvi arrives on foot, alongside her fifty-something mother Maddelena. The frigid Halloween air converts their breath to vapour. They live somewhere off in all those forbidding woods, which offer few helpful footpaths. During the last hour and a half of my drive out here, I saw neither towns nor villages – just the occasional run-down cottage or cabin set far back from recklessly winding dirt roads. If this little church ever served a bustling community, then such a thing has long since dissolved.

² *Jack Sparks on Drugs* (Erubis Books, 2014), p.146 – *Alistair*.

At first sight Maria doesn't strike me as demonic. Neither is she all cute-as-a-button smiley like Linda Blair's *Exorcist* character Regan MacNeil, who was one year younger. Maria Corvi radiates the sullen nonchalance of your typical teenager who's doing her best to mask fear. Look closer and you see that, like her mother, Maria is quietly desperate. The pair are decked out in the same plain, practical blue smocks and boots they wear for their work as farm labourers. Maria is pretty and worryingly thin. Gaunt, too, and those dark-ringed eyes suggest sleepless nights. Her unwashed black hair hangs halfway down her back.

Apart from a splash of grey up top, Maddelena is so self-evidently Maria's mother that they could be nesting Russian dolls.

I watch Maria carefully as she crosses the threshold into the church. Her flesh does not burn and she does not shriek. She does, however, bring a hand up to her throat and swallow hard, as if resisting the urge to be sick. Catching my eye awkwardly, almost shyly, she looks away and continues with her mother towards Di Stefano as if nothing has happened.

The priest greets Maria and Maddelena by launching into a formal speech in Italian. It reminds me of company reps who read legal tedium over the phone, while you play Candy Crush and say 'Yes' every thirty seconds. It very clearly confirms, no doubt partly for my information, that Maria and her mother have agreed to this rite. The Church, stresses Di Stefano, would only force such a thing on someone if they had harmed others or were deemed to be at risk of doing so.

'Please do not be afraid,' he tells the women. 'Today, Maria, you will be free of the negativity that has no business within you.' I later learn that 'negativity' is a euphemism the Church

often employs. They claim it helps to avoid leading the subject through the power of suggestion. Which seems unusually sensible of them.

Maria nods, her expression neutral. I can't tell whether she believes in this stuff, or is going through the motions for her mother's sake. Did Maddelena find an Ozzy Osbourne album on Maria's iPod and hurriedly dial the Vatican's 1-800-DEVILCHILD hotline?

Di Stefano briefly explains why I'm present. Then he leads Maria to the strip of dusty floor that passes in front of the altar. Her mother signs legal papers handed to her by Beard (oh yes, legal papers – the Church likes being sued about as much as any other multinational corporation). Then he and Beardless usher her, along with me and Translator Tony, to our designated pew five rows back from the front.

Maddelena chews what's left of her fingernails while Tony translates her. 'I know this has to be done. But . . . she is my baby, you know? I do not understand. Why has Satan chosen her?'

It doesn't seem the right time to tell her Satan doesn't exist. Or indeed to ask if, you know, Maria might just be your average teenager who seems a bit nuts – especially against the backdrop of a quiet rural expanse like this. Instead, I ask what led Maddelena to hire an exorcist.

'Maria started to sleepwalk,' she says, never taking her eyes off her daughter as Di Stefano gives the girl a final briefing in hushed tones. 'Or at least I thought she was sleepwalking. In the middle of the night I found her standing outside our home, at the edge of the clearing . . .'

Maddelena flicks her eyes around the church before continuing. 'She was naked, in the freezing cold. I thought she was

asleep, so I said to her, “Maria, please wake up.” But she turned her head, with her eyes wide open. And she smiled. I’d never seen a crazy smile on her face like that. She said to me, “I *am* awake.” And then . . .’

Maddelena looks set to cry, but steels herself. When she lowers her voice, Translator Tony follows suit. ‘*And then . . .* she slapped my face and said, “*You* wake up, you Christ-loving whore, before I rip out your fucking heart.”’

After that night, Maria’s nocturnal wanderings escalated. Maddelena claims she tried locking both of the house’s external doors and hiding the keys, but still her daughter managed to break out. One time, Maddelena and a search party of friends found Maria a mile away from home, in the dead of night. She was writhing around, naked again, covered in the blood of a deer that she’d slain with a butcher’s knife taken from the kitchen.

‘She was laughing when we found her,’ says Maddelena with a shudder. ‘After that, I felt so lost. I knew that only the Church could help with something like this. The old pastor who owns this church helped me make contact with Father Di Stefano in Rome. The good father sent an assistant to meet Maria, then it was decided that a blessing would be best.’

Another euphemism, there. It’s so much easier to agree to a blessing than an exorcism. When I ask if Maddelena ever considered medical help for her daughter, her face suggests that she trusts doctors and science about as much as I trust priests and religion.

‘If this does not work, then *maybe* . . .’ she says, as if that really would be the last resort.

★ ★ ★

I'm unprepared for the transformation of Maria Corvi. I just didn't expect this skinny kid to have it in her.

Sitting on a simple, creaky wooden chair in front of the altar, she appears withdrawn but compliant, her head bowed, hands clasped on her lap. The only small sign of any real emotion comes when she glances over at her mother. I would place good money on it being a look of resentment. A look that says, 'Happy now? I'm doing it.'

Maria's mother doesn't seem to interpret this look the same way. She smiles back encouragingly and wrings her bony hands in anticipation, as if her daughter is about to audition for *The X Factor*.

Father Di Stefano stands before Maria, an ancient leather-bound Bible spread across his palms. Beard and Beardless position themselves at either far side, hands behind their backs.

Di Stefano reads interminable passages from the book. His words echo darkly around the ceiling. Maria looks embarrassed, as if wondering what she's supposed to do. It's weirdly hypnotic. Thanks to a late night out in Rome, my eyes lose focus and I drift into a dreamlike state . . .

Maria's whole body goes electric-shock rigid. Her eyes bulge and her hands and feet shoot out in all directions. I can't see her toes from here, but her trembling fingers are spread wide. She holds this bizarre position for no more than a second before the chair beneath her gives way, breaking with a loud crack.

Maria falls to the ground, her back arching awkwardly over the pile of broken wood, her body limp. I shake my head, disappointed that the all-powerful Church has resorted to age-old slapstick ruses like sawing halfway through chair legs in order to jazz things up. Coming next: Maria and Di Stefano

attempt to carry a piano up a tall flight of steps, with amusing consequences.

Beside me Maddelena gasps, a rosary gripped tight in one hand, the beads fit to burst. Beard and Beardless dash in and examine the lifeless girl, while carefully removing the pieces of chair from beneath her. They return to the sidelines: twin roadies who scurried on to fix a rogue microphone stand during a gig.

Di Stefano switches his attention from the Bible to the prone teenager. 'I am addressing directly the spirit that dwells within Maria Corvi,' he says. 'Speak your name, before I have cause to do so myself.'

On the word 'myself', something dramatic happens. Something that, I'll admit, is harder to explain than the magical breaking chair.

As a kid, I owned what is generally referred to as a thumb puppet. A small wooden donkey standing on a cylindrical base, its tiny constituent parts joined by string. When you pushed your thumb up inside this base, it made the donkey collapse. On the withdrawal of your thumb, the donkey would spring back up into its former rigid state.

Maddelena cries out in shock as Maria Corvi springs up from the church floor like my donkey used to. Her heels remain on the ground, but the rest of her rises fast, as if hoisted by some invisible pulley system. Unlike my donkey, Maria remains loose. Her body appears boneless. Eyes shut, she drifts from side to side as if underwater. I stand and peer over the pews, spotting that she's now up on her tiptoes. It doesn't seem possible for a human being to achieve this stance, or at least to maintain it for so long. Her centre of gravity is not so much *off* as non-existent. The magician David Blaine would take notes.

Father Di Stefano, of course, is not fazed. He's seen all this stuff many times before. Truth be told, he invented it. Because as he repeats his exhortations for the evil within Maria to speak its name, the truth hits me. Remember Jim Carrey's character in *The Truman Show* – the guy who discovers that the world around him is artificial? All of this is one big set-up, for my benefit. It's a feeling journalists will know well on a smaller scale: the sense that you're no longer a non-influential observer of events, but instead the spark that brought them about.

If Maria Corvi isn't an actual actress, then she and her mother have surely agreed that she will become one, no doubt in exchange for a better life. (*Eleanor: please don't kick off about libel here. I really can't be dealing with another debate like the one about Katy Perry and the bag of . . . well, you know.*) The arrangement of the pews and the space before the altar resembles audience and stage, with stage managers Beard and Beardless lurking in the wings. After all, what has the Church always been about, if not an audience flocking to watch a performance? And of course here I am, hemmed in several rows back – all the better to stop me seeing this propaganda display from the wrong angles.

Maria's eyelids flick open, revealing that her eyes now swim with some cunningly applied yellow dye. Nice touch. She's still up on her tippy-toes, and I now suspect that her conveniently oversized smock harbours some kind of body harness. Her lips stretch back over her teeth to form a sickly grin. When she speaks, her voice is lilting and childlike, in direct contrast to her words. 'You cock-sucking prick,' she tells the priest, thereby fulfilling the minimum post-Friedkin quota of fellatio mentions during an exorcism. Translator Tony lowers

his voice reverentially as he continues to whisper her words in English: 'You fuck children and yet judge me?'

Maria's laugh is slithery. If a snake could laugh, it would sound like that.

This Maria, if that really is her name? She's good.

To a man like Father Primo Di Stefano, child abuse accusations, whether from entities alive or dead, are water off a duck's back. Delving into his robes, he produces a sturdy, old-school wooden cross with a Christ figurine on it.

When he presents this trump card to Maria, it's as if she's being made to look directly into the sun. She lashes out at the priest and the cross, her fingers cramped into claws. Di Stefano takes a step back, while Beard and Beardless hurry in to restrain Maria, each gripping an arm. She struggles against them with surprising force and sends Beard tumbling to the ground.

'Maria is ours,' she says. Her voice is now deep and throaty, but punctuated by freakish high notes. 'We are her blood. Her flesh, her bones, her guts. We have freed her soul. By hurting us with your trinkets, you only hurt her.'

Di Stefano steps back into the fray, his cross to the fore, bellowing, 'That is a sacrifice I'm prepared to make in order to secure her freedom.'

I wonder how Maddelena feels about Di Stefano taking that decision into his own hands. To my consternation, she seems okay with it. Oh, hey, she's in on all of this anyway. Just playing along with the script.

And so it goes on. Yellow-eyed Maria verbally abuses Di Stefano, spits, shrieks and generally misbehaves. Di Stefano remains devout and steadfast. He brandishes his religious iconography as a pepper-spray threat and mentions Jesus Christ at

least three times per minute. Translator Tony struggles to keep up with them.

Now. Here's the thing. It's a universal truth that laughter becomes more insanely delicious the more wrong it is.

Taboos are funny. They just are. When you're absolutely, definitely not supposed to laugh, that's when laughter is all the more potent and combustible. As scarily inevitable as a sneeze, or an itch you just *have* to scratch, no matter how demented you'll look.

You might be sitting among heartbroken folk at a funeral. You might be sitting behind a TV news desk, staring into a camera and telling the world about the latest genocide.

Or, as in my case, witnessing a faux exorcism.

Surely I can't be the only man on earth who considers *The Exorcist* a comedy. Even when I first saw it as a child, in the late eighties, the film provoked far more chuckles than shivers. Friedkin's po-faced seriousness really tickled my ribs. 'The power of Christ compels you!' became something to yell at other kids in the playground with a big grin.

As the action escalates, so does my urge to laugh at it. This whole charade is so very deadpan that laughter is the only sane response. Part of me *needs* to laugh, in order to exorcise myself of these ridiculous characters. And while I'm genuinely overcome by mirth, there's no doubt that my laughter will also be a statement. Because people's enduring belief in conveniently invisible devils makes the work of science so much harder. It slaps a leash on progress and encourages backward thinking.

In 2012, while appearing on a TV show in the Dominican Republic, US magician Wayne Houchin unexpectedly had his head set on fire by a man who reportedly believed him to be

a voodoo practitioner. In 2013, a YouGov poll found that over fifty per cent of Americans believe in the Devil and exorcism. And earlier this year, in his documentary about ‘gay cures’, British doctor and TV presenter Christian Jessen encountered American teenagers who genuinely thought homosexuality was caused by demonic infestations.

Belief in the concept of Satan possessing children has led to murders around the world. Sometimes these murders are deliberate: kids have been burned and buried alive. Such things are straight out of the Dark Ages. Other deaths have resulted from misguided attempts to get those imagined demons out, often by one of those maverick exorcists. In the Philippines as recently as 2011, an anorexic girl named Dorca Beltre starved to death during a botched five-day exorcism.

And so we must laugh at this medieval crap. It is our duty to do so.

My laugh explodes out of me in a great belly-pumping blast, amplified by its own inappropriate glory.

Bex is still shrieking as we bash our way out through Satan’s mouth, which frames the entrance and exit.

A simple ghost train transforms her into a distressed damsel. Every single time, her frightened koala arms grasp me as nylon cobwebs brush our faces and gurning ghouls spring up left, right and centre.

The Hell Hotel sits in a tangled web of gaudy light bulbs, roller-coaster tracks and crazy crane-like rides at the far end of Brighton Pier. When we’re both home and need a catch-up, this is our ritual: ghost train, then pints, then chips. I’ve checked into the Hell Hotel more times than I have into *actual* hotels. So has Bex, and yet it never seems to lose that primal power

over her. I, on the other hand, simply appreciate the ancient gear-grinding mechanics that propel our car through darkness. This visit feels extra special, being our first since I got out of rehab a few weeks back.

We stroll back along the pier's charmingly uneven floorboards, heading for Victoria's Bar stationed halfway along it. To the west, the horizon is ablaze. Gulls soar overhead, seemingly carried against their will by freak winds – the kind that can jump down your throat and steal your breath. Bex takes her wild red corkscrew hair in both hands and reins it in with a scrunchie.

'I don't think I've ever asked you this,' I say. 'I know you're not exactly religious, but you *do* think there might be a God. So do you actually believe in ghosts?'

'If you accept the possibility of God, then you have to accept the possibility of ghosts. Because you just never know, do you?'

'Well, that's the thing. Thanks to science, we *do* know.'

'How can we know what happens after death? It's death! The great unknown. But we can't imagine having no consciousness; feeling nothing forever.'

'What do you feel while you're asleep, though?'

'I dream.'

'Good for you.' I'm about to explain the burden of proof and the truth about so-called near-death experiences on the operating table when a new urgent query consumes her: 'Anyway, what happened in Italy?'

I tell her about the Laugh, on the way to the pub. Whenever Bex laughs, or even smiles, she holds one hand over her mouth because she wrongly thinks her teeth are too big. 'You're a bad man. So where does the YouTube video come into it?'

'I'll get to that. Give me a chance!'

‘Okay. So. You laughed during the exorcism . . .’

‘Yes,’ I say, revving myself up into a clickbait headline. ‘And you’ll *never believe what happened next.*’

Jason Arnopp

Alistair Sparks: 'There follows a series of text messages exchanged between Jack and myself during the week prior to his trip to Italy.'

28 October 2014

Hi, Jack. Long time, etc. Hope you're okay.
Heard from Murray the Agent earlier – I'm
pleased you're out and starting a new book.
What's it about?

Oh please, like you really care. Don't talk
about me behind my back.

Of course I care, Jack.

Have you become a born-again Christian or
something?

Despite everything, there's no need for things to
be unpleasant. What's the new book about?

HA, 'despite everything' – thanks for reminding
me. It's about ghosts. Now fuck off.

Really?! Why ghosts?

(Jack never replied.)