

Luke stepped out of the church into the brightness of a fresh, clear day. It was mild for Christmas week, a bit breezy but pleasant. He felt, if not completely absolved, at least a little easier in his mind.

At theological college he had been quick to seize on the idea that occasional sins of the flesh, while they were to be regretted, could be regarded as venial, not as serious as lack of faith. Only once in the months of his priesthood had he been guilty of fornication (he felt a shiver of distaste at the word, but he had to face up to his sin – a very recent one); he had repented of the action, tried not to remember it (because the memories were exciting, almost like sinning again, and also aroused his vanity) but at the same time he realised that the important thing was to strive to rise above the lusts of the flesh, to feel the joy of the divine spirit infuse his body and soul. And he was determined never to give way to lust again. Doubt, on the other hand, was a much more serious matter. This is why he had approached his confession so tremulously. He was surprised how mild Father Smithies had been.

He glanced at his watch. At half past twelve he was due to have lunch with his sister and small nephew at The Rising Sun, but he had other things to do first. He walked briskly to the local Sainsbury's, and selected a large boxed Stilton cheese. Anne, his sister, would like that. He smiled at the plump lady sitting at the checkout. She was wearing a jumper with a bright red robin on it and had a coronet of sorts in her hair.

'You look very festive!' he said.

'More than I feel, I can tell you!'

'Sometimes you have to fake it to make it,' he said with a twinkle, 'Merry Christmas!'

The look the woman at the checkout gave him was cold and hard. He suspected the reaction would have been different had he not been wearing his clerical shirt and 'dog collar'. Did the laity not approve of priests trying to understand their lives, including the fleshly appetites and the occasional inconveniences, discomforts and compromises that side of life involved?

As someone who had had a career before the Church, Luke suspected he had more experience of sins of the flesh than most of his fellow priests. He had risen to some eminence

in the world of investment banking – not in the very top rank, and he was glad to remember that although he had regularly reached his targets, he had managed to do so without mirroring himself in the kind of suspect deals which had brought the banking sector into such disrepute – but he knew the life of fast cars, conspicuous over-consumption, and over-indulgence better than most.