



*"Weirdly touching . . .
A vivid account
of the two-way warp
between extreme faith
and madness"*

HELEN GARNER

VISIONS

Kevin Brophy

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*All characters in this book are
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≡ THE PIN

I'm twelve now, and I've been told that I'm an intelligent child, as though I might not be intelligent when I become an adult. The nuns at primary school told me that I should always be good. I was intelligent, maybe cheeky enough to ask why I should be so good.

For your mother and father, the nun said, not paying attention to who was asking the question. I have no father. I might have a father, but whether I'm good or not won't interest him. It's only myself and my mother at home. They say she can't control me, but they don't realise how well I look after her.

I have no father, I told the nun. She was an old one, and she looked at me then, as if something puzzled her. She told me that my father in heaven, God The Father, was the best father anyone could have.

And what is the best thing I could do for him? I said.

I didn't like the thought of my father being as far away as heaven. She laughed at me then, and shrugged.

You could be a saint, she said.

I've been told about heaven, and I know there's no easy way to the best of it. I collected holy cards, to see what I

could learn from them. In each one it seemed to me that the saint looked either stupid or mad. None of them looked like me. None of them had freckles or wrinkles or uncombed hair. Blue eyes, combed hair, and mad thin mouths seemed to be what made a person saintly.

In every card there are beams of yellow light coming from above. But I think heaven would really be a dark place. The dark is best for feeling warm and dreamy. And we close our eyes to pray.

It's in the dark when I hear God, singing to himself, I think. In this dark heaven there would be no holy pictures, and saints could be recognised by the special way they touched everyone. I could be wrong about this, of course, but there are some things I can't help thinking.

Father Morris won't help me be a saint. I've asked him, and he laughs at me. He says, you're just a girl, Margaret, wait a few years. There are so many things they won't tell me because I'm a girl, so that already I'm living in a darkness. I must discover everything myself.

I've noticed the way some of the saints have wounds in their hands and feet. I've read about ones who said they could only become saints by doing violence to themselves. When I asked Sister Veronica about this, she said someone has to suffer for us sinners.

When I ask my mother why she kicks the dogs, she also says: someone has to do it.

Sister Veronica says that great suffering increases our ability to feel joy. This is the reason heaven is so much more nice, and real, for the saints. But of course none of this makes much sense. How can a bleeding person be a perfect person?

There are things that are not explained to me. Sister Veronica just says the first thing that comes into her mind and expects me to be satisfied. My mother keeps things from me too. She won't say where my father is. She won't talk about him, and she thinks I can't remember him. But I can. I can remember his huge hands lifting me up, far into the sky. And him saying, you're perfect, Margaret!

I can remember that. But if I told my mother she'd say I

was making it up. There are a few things, like this, that I can't tell her because she becomes so upset and worried.

She's wearing flowers again, all over her dress, those pink daisies and bright green stems. Her arms are out and she bends forward, looking for the pin she's dropped on the floor. I can see the pin and I'm waiting for her to find it now. I'm waiting for her face to relax and her fingers to stretch and take it up off the floor. It looks big now and shiny waiting for her there. She's going to kneel on it. Yes, she's jumped to her feet, she limps a little and rubs her knee, and she has the pin in one hand. She holds it out away from her body. It looks strong and beautiful, but cold from its silver outside to its centre.

You, she says, get out of here. You're under my feet.

She's speaking to me. I watch her put the pin in the bowl with the rotting fruit. The apples go brown on their sides and the oranges turn green and furry and smell quite good.

The pin will rust in there, mother.

Go on! she says over her shoulder as she leaves the room. She's angry at me as well as the pin. I rescue the pin from the bowl and wipe it. It shines against my hand and it's smaller than I thought it would be. I can stick its cold point into the surface of my hand lightly so that it hangs there. I'll carry it in my hand where it will prick me but only when I decide.

I listen to my mother near the back door kick one of the dogs. She's saying something too, about their smell. My mother doesn't like dogs, she says she would never own a dog; dogs are dangerous. She doesn't know where these dogs come from, and when she complains to the council they promise to remove them but they don't. She feeds the dogs in case no one else does. And no one else does. I don't mind the dogs being here. I like the way they growl and whisper together in the backyard and then come to sit up against the back door.

She shouts and kicks at the door, opens it and tries to kick the dogs. The dogs run back into the yard and sit together.

If you're going out, put something warm on. Do you hear

me?

Yes, I'll wear the blue jumper (and carry this pin).

What?

Pin.

What?

Nothing. Do you want me to throw the fruit out?

No, no, just go out and play.

I don't want to play, but I can be remarkably obedient. I can amaze God with my goodness sometimes.

My mother has come outside too, with her flowers stretching round her. She's pushing some stray hair back behind her ear and staring at me. I can see her face clearly. I like her face, but when I tell her this she says it used to be beautiful. She keeps her lips red and sticky. She waves at me and calls: I'm going to see Father Morris at the church. That's where I'll be.

She's going to see him about the funeral. My grandmother died and so my mother is going to use the priest. Father Morris has soft eyes that leak in the wind, and when he can he crushes me against his black robe. One of the dogs in the yard is as black as this and it presses itself against me too.

The dogs have managed to put some small scratches on my shins. I stand between them jabbing with a sharp stick until they are so angry, so hurt and so in love with me that they drag at my legs, biting and scratching. I know I shouldn't do this, but all of us, the dogs and myself, we become excited.

I close my hand over the pin, so that I'm almost crying out from the way it pierces my palm. I'm sure that when Sister Veronica said some matters are mysteries, Margaret, she only said this because she doesn't have the courage to find things out for herself.

But I don't know if it's courage or curiosity that makes me do what I do. I suppose I would have lost interest in this matter if Jesus hadn't begun visiting me. I have wanted to ask him why he chose me, but I'm afraid he'd just say he has to visit someone — and it happens to be me. *He* keeps things from me too.

And these visits from Jesus are another thing I can't tell

my mother. She's already worried that people think I'm unusual or something.

But sometimes, when I'm near Jesus, somehow every part of me becomes perfect and complete. I would like to know why he's doing this to me. I suppose I have been thinking that I can become a saint.

I've been reading about one saint who gave all her food to the poor, and then used to go out at night to kiss the wounds of these poor people. She said this was the only way she could find perfection. She said it was like kissing Jesus himself. If she felt anything like the happiness I feel with Jesus sometimes, then I can't say she was crazy. But I think she was. If I was to be a saint, I'm sure I could find some way of being perfect that's not as disgusting as that.

The pin is doing well in my hand. I stand on the street, where small trees are lined up outside the houses. I can see Oscar, Phillip and Tom. Oscar is called Scar. He is dancing in the middle of the road. Phillip and Tom are watching him with their mouths open as though they have been watching for a long time now and have forgotten about everything but the dance. Scar is somersaulting, and his arms send him spinning in a neat circle. A handkerchief is coming out of his pocket. His head beats at us so that we think we can hear the music. His feet are bare, stabbing down at the asphalt, out into the air.

His handkerchief falls onto the road, and I can see that Phillip and Tom want to pick it up. The spell is broken. Scar stops dancing and picks up his handkerchief. He looks at me, then Phillip and Tom look at me too. They walk across to me while I lean against our front fence. It's wooden and painted white. It makes a comfortable creaking noise when I lean against it. As though it is leaning against me.

Hello, Scar says.

I squeeze the pin tightly inside my fist. I can feel its point slide into the flesh of my palm so that I sense how thick and gristly my hand is. The sudden pain makes me open my hand, and Scar notices the line of blood already there. He bends forward and carefully takes the pin out. He holds it between

thumb and finger, out from himself. Phillip and Tom stare.

What's this for? Scar says.

Well I don't have a proper wound, I tell him. The Son Of God has five. One on each hand, one on each foot and one in his side.

How do you know?

I've seen them.

Yeah, well you're not the Son of God. What he does is his business.

Phillip and Tom nudge each other; they laugh at me. They run away along the street and shout back at me: Soft in the head! Soft in the head!

Scar wipes my hand with his handkerchief. He tells me that I should be careful. You should be more careful, Margaret, he says. Then he licks the handkerchief to wipe every stain from my hand.

My head feels floaty. The pain has been replaced by a small sickness in my stomach, and this way my head floats away from everything.

Scar has an ugly head. Sometimes he kisses me, with his ugly head up against my face. When he does our noses bend across each other's faces. Sometimes he sniffs when he finishes kissing.

I leave him and go back inside the house, to my bedroom where I can stand at the window and stare out into the yard at the dogs that sit together near the back fence. They can see into my room from there. Usually I close my curtains before I lie on my bed. The ceiling of my room is white, and sometimes when I lie on my bed I imagine that my body is as white as my ceiling.

My body is small and soft, and I can't help poking at it. And at first the part I poke turns even whiter then suddenly it's pink. I want to press harder to discover just how soft my body is.

She wants me to wear this necklace. It's a family treasure, she says. She clips it carefully round my neck. The medallion, stamped with the Virgin's face, places its cold cheek against

me.

Mother, I'm going to care for the sick. I'll take them my dinner, and those pills you have, and the green bottle of brandy.

No you're not.

I can tell from the way she uses her voice that she's treating me like a child. She tests the clip, pulling at the necklace, as though she's considering seriously whether the necklace is perfect.

You don't understand, I tell her.

I understand enough. And you don't fool me. Don't move. You think I'm silly, don't you.

Of course I don't, she says, and spins me round to face her.

She looks at me, appreciating the work she's done, her hands on her hips, elbows stuck out towards the corners of the room. But her elbows aren't sharp. She is round and soft. And as I run out of the house her words are like ink that spreads out into blots on thick paper.

And don't you dare get dirty! she says. Don't sit down, and remember to come back here when Mary arrives. You know much she likes you.

Her cousin Mary is a nun. She's tall, she has pencil-rubber grey eyes, and sometimes pimples on her face. Her face is white, and stiff. Every time she comes to see us, she smiles at me and tries to kiss me. On the cheek. Then she stares at me, and says I'd be happy in the convent. Her eyes move up and down, rubbing out everything around me.

As I skip along the front of our house the necklace bounces against me. A dog barks in the yard. Scar and the others are at the bottom of the Carr Street hill looking for frogs or something under the bridge. Scar climbs up the steep bank to me. Tom calls him back, but he ignores this.

Scar says no one wears medals like that any more. We walk along the top of the creek bank, and he swings my hand a little, and though he's ugly I like to stare at him. He's not strong, but he might be strong one day. He lifts my palm up near his face and examines it.

You haven't been stabbing yourself again?

No, Jesus said I should wait until he instructs me in how to suffer.

Don't talk like that, Margaret. You sound crazy.

Well, I'm not. An important part of my pain is to be misunderstood.

What?

An important...

It's your visions again. They'll get infected.

He knows there's no use in arguing with me. His hands push against mine now, covering their painful wounds. In fact I've been fasting for five days now, secretly putting my meals aside. Jesus did suggest that I should do something for the poor.

Scar's the same as everyone else. He thinks I'm making it up. But how could I invent that feeling of happiness? It was forced on me.

I rush home to be in time to welcome my mother's cousin. Mother adjusts the medal on its chain. She pulls at the collar of her own dress and shouts at the dogs when they rub against the door. Her shouting makes them whine.

Sister Mary arrives at exactly morning tea time, with a friend who is also a nun. Her friend is short and silent except for some breathing, and after a while some eating noises. Sister Mary takes my hand, and I let it lie there. I might crush her dusty hand if I squeeze. She bends over me; the thought comes into my head that she wants to bite me. I hear her creak, and I can smell the folds of her black habit. Her knuckle-sized rosaries knock against my head so that I step back. My mother pushes me forward. The wet eyes of the other nun stare at me but I'm sure she can't see me clearly. She chews one of my mother's biscuits.

Sister Mary scrapes her hand across my cheek. When she talks to my mother she holds Mother's hands too. Her words are fierce and exact: there is of course opportunity for generosity...

My mother nods. There is an untidy wisp of hair falling across her forehead. The silent nun picks up two biscuits and

one of them disappears inside her habit as she takes a bite out of the other one.

Sister Mary is tall and thin and dry. She is a desert, if a desert could be a nun. She looks at my mother, small and fat and untidy, and afraid of dying. The silent nun's eyes water as Sister Mary accepts the cup of tea my mother offers.

My mother agrees to everything Sister Mary says. My mother's words are small round pools on the floor. I'm sure that the Son Of God laughs at her.

The breeze pushes leaves and paper back and forward over the street. The breeze has nowhere in particular to go today. It spins round the trees like a child as I say small prayers to the Virgin, to Joseph, to the Son Of God, and sometimes even to the Father. But I have a feeling that God The Father is a bit deaf, or forgetful.

Scar comes round the corner on his bicycle, leaning over dangerously, with his face pushing out into the wind. The bicycle is blue and smooth, and Scar's body clings to it. His legs, its thin frame, the whirring, make me think a giant insect has skidded down on this street. He stops next to me and steps off the bike, letting it fall to the ground.

I can see that he's trying to check my hands for wounds again. I put my hands behind my back. I tell him I'm going away one day to the convent with my mother's cousin, the nun. No one will prevent me from being saintly there.

You don't want to be a nun, he says.

He must have had a shower or a bath before coming out today. His hair is wet and stuck to his head, making him even more ugly than usual. There are bumps in his head above the ears.

I tell him I do want to be a nun, and anyway I'm in God's hands.

You won't have any friends there.

I won't need friends.

Can I come to see you?

Yes, sometimes.

I don't want to.

He picks up his bicycle quickly and slings his leg over it and pedals away before I can ask him to stay. Then he stops near the corner. The bicycle wobbles till his leg comes out at an angle to steady it. He turns back, stands there staring at me.

I'm going soon, I shout at him.

He finds a stone on the road and throws it at me. It lands a little to my left.

I don't want to go to the church or sit under the trees, so I climb over the fence into our yard where the dogs open some of their eyes to look at me. Outside the back door old bits of meat and crusts of dried milk stick to their food bowls. There is an insect inside one of them, pushing with long black feelers. It might be the same black and red one I saw in there yesterday. Like the dogs, the insects come here too.

One of the dogs has followed me and I can hear it there on the outside step rubbing itself against the door and whining softly. Inside, my mother is peeling potatoes. She slices quickly round them, under running tap water, and I can smell her body here in the kitchen with the food. She smells of being locked inside on rainy days. Her tight dress is a grey woollen one that slides up her thighs when she sits. Her legs are thick with blue marks and some lumps.

She makes me want to rule the world. If I ruled the world I would make a law that everyone should have thin strong legs, like the insects. I would order everyone to leave food out for dogs too. The prime ministers of every country would have the same name. And the police and the priests would put money in our pockets at night.

My mother always runs out of money. Now she slices the potatoes in four and drops them into the saucepan of boiling water. I ask her an old question.

If I could be anything in the world, what would you want me to be?

You know I like you the way you are.

You always say that. Can't you imagine me as something else?

I don't want to, dear.

How do you imagine me?

What? Margaret, you're off in the clouds again. I don't know what's going to become of you. I worry too much, I know, but you can be so hard to understand.

What do you want me to become then?

I don't know, I just don't want you to do anything silly. So is this what you imagine? That I could do something silly?

Margaret, you know I haven't got an imagination.

The dog on the step scratches at the door. My mother pulls it open and hitches up her dress a little to kick the dog, but it dodges her foot.

The dogs come from Satan.

She shuts the door hard and tells me to stop making up stories.

I'm not.

I don't care, just stop talking like that. You worry me Margaret. You know that Father Morris has arranged the funeral for next Wednesday and that I expect you to behave for it — Margaret, are you listening to me?

She's chopping carrots on the board with loud chunky noises. I think my mother might be in love with Father Morris, she might even want to kiss him sometimes. I've seen how people can fall in love, from films and from photos in the newspapers, and I know how hypnotised these people look. My mother might be glad that Grandma died. It gives her a chance to go to Father Morris's lounge room, where she can sit on one of his high-backed wooden chairs. They have red cushions. Both of them sit on the red cushions, their knees almost touching.

I stood in the garden outside the window and watched them once. He gave her some money, and I wanted him to hug her, or just a kiss, but he made the sign of the cross and showed her out of his beautiful lounge room. I think it is his habit to give money to widows.

The carrots are thrown in with the potatoes.

Will you cry at the funeral, Mother?

She looks at me. Of course, she says.

Will I cry?

She doesn't know the answer to this one so she pretends she hasn't heard me and takes some hamburger meat from the freezer. It is mostly grey with some white fat-lumps and green flecks of onion. I can smell it already.

Oscar threw a stone at me.

She hears this and steps across to me, touches me on the head, on the cheek, the arm, softly. She is so spongy that she could touch me heavily and I would still feel it as softness.

Where did it hit you?

He missed.

I'll speak to his parents, he shouldn't do that to a girl. This neighbourhood, she says.

She drops the hamburger meat into the pan on the stove and it hisses. When we sit down to eat our meal she watches me mix the potato with the tomato sauce and the blackened piece of hamburger meat. The marks of the fat and the green onion have gone. She says, it's overcooked, isn't it.

I don't know, it's all right.

I decide that I will eat this meal for her.

She worries about the food, and her legs. I have asked Jesus to appear to her, to tell her not to worry.

After the meal she takes the plates away.

I'm going out to play with Scar now.

You be back before dark, you hear.

He's still standing at the corner. We climb under the fence at the back of the sock factory and he kisses me. We lie down and press our bodies together until we're forcing each other's breath in and out. He's warm, his warm hand rubs me so that my stomach curls inside. I've watched a leaf burn like this. I can hear the grass bending under us.

You don't want to go to that convent, he says.

I want to be a saint. I can't help it.

He's closing his eyes, he doesn't want to listen to me.

I want to be a sailor, he says with his eyes closed.

When my cold hand is inside his shirt he jerks away from me. Soon he'll take it off and the moon will turn him white. I will look at him carefully, like a scientist. I've seen his light

hair down between his legs, where it looks as though it will never take hold properly.

I want to be a saint, I repeat. It depends on what stories you've heard. My mother told me lots, and she couldn't know which ones would swallow me.

Stories can't swallow you, he says. What are they, alligators?

Could be. Or whales.

He touches my neck. Isn't there anything else you'd like to be? he says.

Yes. I'd like to rule the world.

I hide my meals under my bed because I'm not sure where to find the poor. I've asked Jesus, but he doesn't answer this question. There are many questions he ignores. It's safe to leave my food under the bed because Mother doesn't clean under there. At night soft slugs crawl onto the mounds of food and I pick them off, sometimes crushing them accidentally because they're so full of juice. Their colours are all shades of brown, they're always silent and moving in their way that looks so painful. I don't know how they come into my room because I've closed the window and jammed clothing under the door. I've dreamed they come in the air as dry and small as dust, and grow inside my room by taking the juice from the food. In the dream they grow inside me too till I can feel them squeezing slowly round my insides. I thought they would eat me.

The food under my bed grows fine green and black moss. Sometimes, when I shift it, the odour makes my body want to vomit everything out. My body is shocked by the food, but I like the changes of colour and surface on it. I think my body doesn't realise that I've decided to be a saint. I don't know how to make my body understand.

Your body will submit, Jesus said to me once.

He appeared to me without warning last night, and his body looked bruised and sticky. He said that someone had been spitting at him. He looked at my hands and I showed him where I had pricked my feet too. This made him smile