

I, SAID THE SPARROW

By
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I, SAID THE SPARROW

CAST

Bishop William Hampshaw
Phoebe, his wife
Helen, their daughter
Betty Hampshaw, William's sister
Jenny, Phoebe's sister
Jake,
Abigail
Molly, William's cousin

Scene One

[The family come in, William (in Episcopal purple shirt and collar), Phoebe, pushed in her wheelchair by Betty, followed by Jenny and Helen. Jake and Abigail follow, a bit embarrassed but good natured. Helen gives Jake a digital camera. The family members are noisy, jovial, as they are about to have a family photo taken. Jake lines them up and they all jostle to get at the back.]

HELEN: *[Laughing and whining in a pretend child voice.]* Dad! Have I got to?

WILLIAM: Just do it. For me. For God's sake, Helen, aren't you proud of what you've achieved? We are. Do it, just do it. For your mother.

PHOEBE: For me? What's that? What should she do for me?

BETTY: Her collar. William wants her to wear her dog collar.

WILLIAM: Betty, don't call it that. Makes her sound like a bitch on heat or something out of a tabloid headline. Clerical dress. Is she a deacon about to be ordained priest next weekend, or not? I thought that was why we were all here, to celebrate.

HELEN: And Abigail's play, Dad.

PHOEBE: Of course, dear. Abigail's play. I wouldn't miss that for the world.

ABIGAIL: It's very kind of you to take an interest, Mrs Hampshaw.

PHOEBE: Nonsense, dear, of course I do. You and Helen have been friends for so long you're almost part of the family, and please drop this silly nonsense of Mrs Hampshaw. *Phoebe*, please. It makes me feel quite uncomfortable to be called Mrs Hampshaw. Has me looking

over my shoulder for the ghost of my mother-in-law. And you must call William William too. *[To William.]* Mustn't she, dear? Jake has got used to our Christian names, and this is the first time he's been up here.

JENNY: What's the play about?

[Embarrassed silence from Abigail. Which is broken by Jake gathering the group for the photo. Abigail is not included.]

JAKE: Could you just get a bit closer? Kind of grouped around Phoebe's chair? Thanks. Hold it there.

[Brief moment of stiffness from all as he takes the photo.]

There. That'll do.

WILLIAM: And one more outside, come along.

[William sweeps them off, leaving Jenny and Abigail in the room.]

JENNY: *[To Abigail.]* Sorry. I didn't mean to be –

ABIGAIL: It's all right. Everyone asks. I think I'm just – well... I don't know. I find it difficult to talk about my stuff... plays...stories... The worst is when I've just started something and people want to know what I'm working on I try and explain and it just sounds awful. It makes it so flat and unreal. And I just want to say read it, or come and see it. If I could do it, make it clear, in a nutshell I wouldn't need to write it. Do you see?

JENNY: Of course. When I'm on holiday I like to take my embroidery and sometimes people come up and look over my shoulder. And they say things like, 'Gosh, I wish I could do things like that.' And it makes me feel guilty in an absurd way.

ABIGAIL: Oh yes. And because they're well-meaning, and genuinely interested you feel kind of rude for wanting them to go away. Or else it makes you think that what you're doing is of no value. Because if you can't explain it, or justify it, then you'd be better doing something that you can.

JENNY: I hope you won't think my brother-in-law rude if he nods off during your play. I doubt if he's ever actually sat down and concentrated on the radio. He has it on sometimes but it's only a background noise to him.

[The others return.]

BETTY: Public announcement, folks! I have to go and do battle with a wayward Aga, I don't know about the Aga Khan but ours is definitely an Aga can't, and then lunch'll be ready in about twenty minutes. If you could just come and give me a hand Helen, dear. And Jenny? Would you mind?

JAKE: Betty, could I be of any assistance?

BETTY: Certainly not, Jake. I wouldn't hear of it. You're guests, you and Abigail. There are plenty of able-bodied people to help. You're here to enjoy yourselves.

[Betty, Jenny and Helen leave.]

PHOEBE: William...?

WILLIAM: Yes?

PHOEBE: I could do with going to the loo.

WILLIAM: Oh, oh, yes, yes, of course.

[William pushes Phoebe out of the room in her wheelchair. Rather clumsily. This leaves Abigail and Jake alone together.]

JAKE: So...? You've known Helen for a long time?

ABIGAIL: *[Tersely. As if she doesn't want this conversation.]* University.

JAKE: *[Resigning himself to a sticky conversation.]* It's a good way to meet people.

ABIGAIL: You make it sound like a singles night at the local disco. I went to university to get a degree.

JAKE: No, no... of course not. I didn't mean... *[Pause.]* I met Helen... well, she probably told you—

ABIGAIL: Across a crowded chancel?

JAKE: Hardly crowded. And not even in the chancel. Humble laity, me. She was in the pulpit and I was in a pew.

ABIGAIL: Tell me something... It was when we lived together shared a flat in Leeds, Helen did some work...with the homeless, did she tell you? No, I didn't think she would. Well, anyway, she went to visit this old man. Repulsive person, he'd raped and killed someone, his step-daughter I think, spent years inside, ended up on the streets. Took an over dose in the end, good riddance as far as I was concerned. But Helen, she went and sat with him for four hours till he died. Gave me the creeps. 'Scary stuff' I said to her next day when she came home. And she looked at me as if I was on another planet. 'It was a privilege' she said, just that, and then she went off and ran a bath. Can you believe that?

JAKE: It means she's in the right job.

ABIGAIL: What?

JAKE: She's prepared to go into the shit with someone.

ABIGAIL: Even if it's shit of their own making?

JAKE: Particularly if it's shit of their own making.

ABIGAIL: *[Baffled.]* Well... She is brilliant isn't she? I mean at sermons and that. Not that I get to hear her often. *[Making an effort.]* She's good, isn't she? I mean at that stuff.

JAKE: Brilliant.

ABIGAIL: Mind you, I don't get to hear her often.

JAKE: No, I suppose not.

ABIGAIL: What with living where I do.

JAKE: No.

ABIGAIL: And with working weekends. Well, some weekends. And then there's the travel.

JAKE: What is it you do? Exactly?

ABIGAIL: *[Sarcastic.]* Exactly?

JAKE: I never knew, Helen never said.

ABIGAIL: Exactly? *[Putting him out of his misery.]* I'll tell you what I do, but I warn you, you won't like it.

JAKE: What's not to like?

ABIGAIL: I'm a psychotherapist.

JAKE: Oh.

ABIGAIL: I said you wouldn't like it.

JAKE: I didn't—

ABIGAIL: No one does. They just go silent and terrified of saying something that will give them away. It's a real party pooper.

JAKE: Mine's not much better.

ABIGAIL: Your turn. I've owned up. What do you do?

JAKE: I'm a social worker.

ABIGAIL: *[Teasing]* Figures.

JAKE: So obvious?

ABIGAIL: 'Fraid so. From the clothes to the church-going. I bet you want to help people, don't you? Make them better?

JAKE: *[Stung]* Is that such a bad thing?

ABIGAIL: Favourite Bible story... Let me see... The Good Samaritan, by any chance?

JAKE: *[Finally losing his temper.]* What is this?

[Abigail realises that she has overstepped the mark. She turns away, agitated and looks out of the window.]