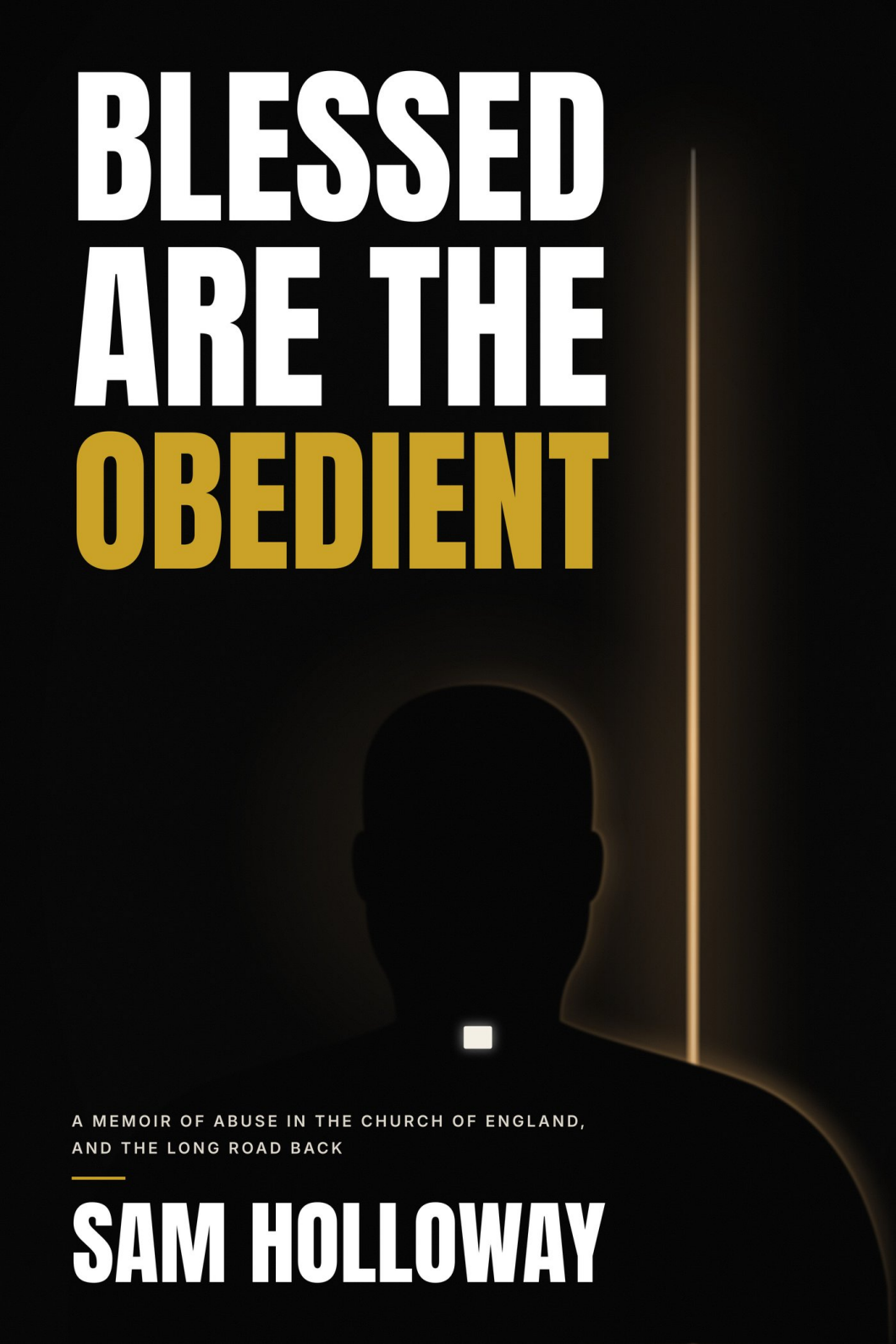
BLESSED ARE THE OBEDIENT



A MEMOIR OF ABUSE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, AND THE LONG ROAD BACK

SAM HOLLOWAY

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If this book raises issues for you, support organisations are listed at the end.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This book describes the sexual abuse of children, including grooming, physical and sexual violence, and their effects on mental health. Please read it at your own pace, and look after yourself. Support organisations are listed at the end of the book.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a true story.

The abuse at the heart of it happened to me, and so did the years of silence, the fear, the shame, and the long, slow work of recovery that followed.

To protect my anonymity, and the privacy of others, I have changed names, places, dates and other identifying details.

The man in this book has never been convicted of any crime. Nothing in this book is intended to identify any living person.

"People can't help if they don't know."

PROLOGUE

I was awake before the birds again. Three hours' sleep, maybe less. I lay there for a while, watching the ceiling turn from black to grey and listening to her breathing beside me, slow and even, one arm flung up over her head the way she sleeps. Then I gave up the way I always do and got dressed in the dark so I wouldn't wake her. I've got good at that. I know which floorboard on the landing creaks and which drawer sticks, and I can do up my laces by feel. I left a note on the kitchen table: *Gone for a walk. Back soon. x*

It was cold enough to see my breath, which I like, because it gives me something to watch. In for four, hold, out for six.

The village was still asleep. A fox crossed the road ahead of me and didn't bother to hurry, and somewhere a car door shut before everything went quiet again. The streetlights were still on, buzzing faintly, and the pavements were wet from rain in the night, so every lamp had a long orange reflection lying underneath it. A milk float would have been out at this hour, once. Now it's just me and the foxes, and sometimes a delivery van.

I walk a lot at this time of the morning. My therapist suggested it, years into all this, when I told her that lying awake in the dark was the worst part of the day. "Then don't lie there," she said, as if it was that

simple. It turned out it nearly was. Walking doesn't make me sleep. But it means the hours I'm awake belong to me, instead of to him.

The road bends past the church, the way roads in English villages always seem to. I stopped, as I sometimes do now, and looked at it properly: the tower, the old stone darker where the rain runs down it, the porch door worn smooth at the handle by hundreds of years of hands. It's beautiful. I can say that now, though for a long time I couldn't.

It isn't his church. It's not even in the same county. But they're all a bit his, still. The same square tower, the same dark yew leaning over the wall, the same noticeboard by the gate with a list of service times and a poster for a coffee morning. My body doesn't know the difference, even when my head does.

I didn't go in. I almost never do. But I stood there and let myself look, and I noticed my hands weren't shaking.

Then footsteps behind me. Quick ones, getting closer.

Everything in me went tight. My shoulders came up round my ears and my heart started going as if I was the one running, and I spun round faster than I meant to. It was a jogger in headphones and hi-vis, red in the face, lifting a hand as he went past.

"Morning!"

"Morning," I said.

Who goes jogging at half five in the morning, in the dark? Someone with worse problems than mine, I told myself, and that helped a bit too.

I watched him go and went back to my breathing. In for four, hold, out for six. Quietly, so only I could hear, I said the words my therapist taught me: *You're here. It's now. You're safe.* It took about a minute. It used to take all day.

He'll never know he did that, the jogger. He'll have forgotten me before he reached the end of the road. To him I was a bloke in a coat outside a church, and that's all I was, which is how it should be. That's one of the things I've had to learn: that most people coming up behind you are just people, going somewhere, minding their own business. The odds are always on their side. I'm still learning to believe it.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. *You OK? x*

She'd woken up and found the note. She always does. I stood there and typed *Yes. Coming home. Put the kettle on x* with my thumbs, and it was true, all three parts of it, which isn't something I could always say.

I looked at the church one more time, then turned round and walked home to her.

I'm not fixed. I still don't sleep properly, and I still can't stand with my back to a room. But I'm here, and I'm going to tell you what happened, all of it, because for most of my life I didn't tell anyone.

I'm going to tell it as two people, because that's how it feels. There's the boy, who doesn't know yet what's coming and who tells it as it happens, in the only words he's got. And there's me, nearly forty, who knows everything and can't change any of it, and who keeps stepping in to explain. I've tried to let the boy speak for himself as much as I can. He waited a long time to be heard.

I was ten years old the first time he took me into the vestry.

People can't help if they don't know.

PART ONE

BEFORE

1

The Christmas Service

The new house smells of paint and other people.

There are still boxes in the hall with KITCHEN and BITS and DAD'S STUFF DO NOT OPEN written on them in thick black marker, and every time I walk past the one that says DO NOT OPEN, I want to open it. I never do. I'm not that kind of boy. I'm the kind who reads the sign and does what it says, and then lies awake wondering what's inside.

Chris opened it on the second day. It was full of old copies of a magazine about roofs. He was so disappointed he didn't even bother to tape it back up, and Dad found it like that and said "Hmm," and taped it up himself, and wrote DO NOT OPEN on it again, underneath the first one, in case we'd missed it.

We moved in October, when the leaves were coming off the trees and sticking to the car windscreen like wet cornflakes. Dad got a new job, and the new job meant a new town, and the new town turned out to be a village, which Mum says the way you'd say "a pony" or "a

swimming pool", as if it's a present she's been saving up for us. There's a post office that sells sweets in big plastic jars, a pub called the Plough with a picture of a horse on the sign, a bus stop where the bus only comes twice a day, and a church at the top of the hill with a square tower you can see from my bedroom window.

At night, when everything else is dark, the clock on the tower is lit up from inside like a moon that's been put in the wrong place. I lie in bed and watch the hands move. I've never lived anywhere you could see the time from your window before.

I'm ten. My brother Chris is thirteen and thinks that makes him the boss of everything, including the PlayStation, the front seat of the car and the last Penguin biscuit. He's got a new bedroom at the front of the house with a sloping ceiling, which he says is because he's the oldest. Mine is at the back, small and square, with wallpaper that has tiny blue boats on it that the last people must have put up for a baby. Mum says we'll paint over it. We haven't yet.

I don't mind the boats, really. I count them when I can't sleep. There are four hundred and twelve, if you count the ones that are cut in half at the edges.



I miss our old house. I don't say so, because Mum is trying so hard, and because Dad's new job is the reason we're here and he comes home tired and quiet and sits with his tea going cold. But I miss it all the time, in a dull way, like a tooth that's nearly stopped hurting but you keep putting your tongue on it.

I miss our old road, where you could hear the trains at night. I miss my old school, where everybody knew me and I didn't have to be new.

Most of all I miss Matthew Reilly, who lived three doors down and was my best friend from when we were five. We used to do everything together. On my last day he gave me a Liverpool keyring and said, "Write to us, yeah?" and I said I would.

I wrote to him the first week. I did it at the kitchen table on paper from Mum's writing pad, with lines, and I told him about the church clock and the bus that only comes twice a day and the boats. I drew him a map of the village. Mum gave me a stamp. Every morning for two weeks I ran downstairs when I heard the letterbox, and every morning it was just bills and a catalogue and something for Dad from the council.

He never wrote back. I don't think he was being horrible. I think he just forgot, the way you forget things when you're ten and someone isn't there any more. But it made me feel like I'd been rubbed out. Like I'd moved away and the space where I'd been had closed up straight behind me, the way water does when you take your hand out.

Chris doesn't seem to miss anything. By the second week he knows a gang of boys from the estate who play football on the rec, and he comes home with mud up to his knees and new swear words that he says under his breath so Mum can't hear. "Bellend," he says to me, very quietly, on the landing, as if he's trying it out. I don't know what it means. I don't ask, in case it's something I'm supposed to know already.



At my new school I sit next to a boy called Danny Firth, who smells of salt and vinegar crisps and doesn't talk. That's fine, because I don't talk much either. On my first day, our teacher, Mrs Lomax, asked me to

stand up and tell the class something interesting about myself, and I stood there with my face going hot and my mind completely empty, and in the end I said, "I've got a brother," and sat down again. A girl at the back laughed. Danny didn't. That was when I decided I liked him.

The first few weeks are the worst. At break time everybody already knows where to go. The boys who play football go to the field. The girls who do handstands go to the wall. The boys who swap things go to the climbing frame. I don't know where I'm supposed to go, so I walk round the edge of the playground slowly, as if I'm going somewhere, as if I'm looking for someone in particular, and when I get back to where I started I go round again. If you keep moving, nobody can tell you're on your own. I work that out on the second day.

At dinner time I eat my packed lunch as slowly as I possibly can, so there's less time left over afterwards. I eat my sandwich in tiny bites, round the edges first, then the middle. I peel my satsuma in one long piece. I read the back of my crisp packet until I know it off by heart. The dinner lady, who has a moustache and is called Mrs Duckworth, says, "Come on, slowcoach, the rest of them have gone out," and I say sorry and eat even slower.

It takes three weeks for Danny to say anything to me. When he does, it's at break time, by the climbing frame, and what he says is, "Have you got Shearer?"

I haven't. Nobody has. But I've got a shiny England badge, a gold foil one, that I got in a packet from the newsagent's in our old town, and when I bring it in the next day, Danny looks at it for a long time, holding it by the very edges so he doesn't smudge it, and then gives it back very carefully, and after that we're friends. We don't really talk even then. We just stand next to each other at break and swap stickers and sometimes he gives me a crisp.

It's enough. After that, I've got somewhere to stand.



I'm a quiet boy. Everyone says so. Teachers write it on my reports, in among the other things: "a quiet, polite, hard-working boy", "always does as he is asked", "a pleasure to have in the class". Mum reads them out at the kitchen table in a proud voice, and Dad says "Good lad," and I feel warm all over. Being good is the thing I'm best at. I'm not the fastest at football, and I'm not the funniest, and I'm definitely not the best at singing. But I'm good. I do as I'm told. I say please and thank you. I don't answer back.

I keep a sort of score in my head. It isn't written down anywhere, but I know what's on it. Saying thank you to the dinner lady. Tidying my room without being asked. Holding the door for the old man at the post office. Every good thing goes on the list, and when the list is long enough I feel safe, like I've got money in the bank. When I do something wrong, like the time I broke the glass on the kitchen door with a tennis ball, I feel sick for days, and I have to do lots of extra good things to fill the hole back up.

Chris doesn't keep a score. Chris doesn't seem to care at all. He gets told off three times a day and just shrugs and says "Whatever" and goes upstairs. I don't understand how he does it. When I get told off, it feels like the floor's gone.

"Respect your elders," Grandad used to say, tapping the side of his nose. "That's all you need to know, son. Respect your elders and you won't go far wrong."

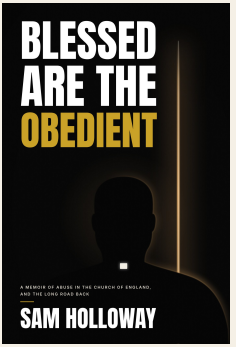
Grandad died the winter before we moved. He was Dad's dad, and he smelled of Imperial Leather soap and Polo mints, and he could make a ten pence piece come out of your ear. He's the only person I

ever saw make Dad laugh properly, with his head back. I think about him a lot, especially now, when everything's new and nobody here knew him. It feels like the things he said are mine to look after.

So I do. I respect my elders.

KEEP READING

You've reached the end of the free sample. The rest of the story is in the book: forty-six chapters, from a village in the north of England in 1996 to the long road back.



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- Press and enquiries: sam-holloway.co.uk/press

IF YOU NEED SUPPORT

If anything in these pages is happening to you, or happened to you, please tell someone. It doesn't matter how long ago it was.

IN THE UK

- Emergency: 999
- NAPAC (adult survivors of childhood abuse): 0808 801 0331
- SurvivorsUK (men and boys): 0808 801 0332
- NSPCC (worried about a child): 0808 800 5000
- Samaritans (any time): 116 123

IN THE US

- Emergency: 911
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text): 988
- RAINN (sexual assault hotline): 800-656-4673
- SNAP (survivors of clergy abuse): 877-762-7432

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