



## Living In Sin

a short story *by* Ian R MacLeod

I can still remember the last burning.

I was ten or maybe less. Too young to understand, but I knew it was something special. The priests chanting and the crowds pushing to see the man bound to the stake above the heaped pallets, old carpets and paraffin-soaked newspapers. Everyone straining to catch some kind of understanding from his face, wondering how it must feel. And then the procession of torches up from the back of the tennis courts where the park keeper had his hut. The special darkness of the smoke lifting above the congregation and the hamburger stalls and the football pitches and the lines of coaches parked behind the houses. Everyone trying hard to stay quiet and listen for the screams that never came. My mother snatched my hand in the press of bodies, whispered that to God the smoke was like incense, he breathed it as the purest air. Took all that was bad into his great holy lungs and turned it into good. Pity the poor sinner, but pity more us poor mortals who must remain in the shame of our knowledge.

I've been living in sin with Annie these past twenty years. We're almost respectable. She's a non-destructive tester at Matsi Plastics on the industrial estate and I started work there in sales, trying to get shopkeepers to stock the cheap icons we produce. Then I decided that shift supervisors had it easier, wandering around the shopfloor, telling people what to do. The follies of youth. But that was how I met Annie, watching her between the vats and hydraulics with her white overalls stained yellow from the processes they use, then catching glimpses of her calves as we all knelt for blessing in the works chapel on the "A" lunch shift. Her hair was mostly red then, strands of it falling down from under her protective plastic cap in a way that seemed pretty to me. I was separated from my wife and living alone, in my late twenties and already drinking too much and putting on weight, losing my hair. My early marriage had failed even before it began, and Annie's story wasn't much different. We started flirting, dating, going out for drinks. We fell in love.

Of course, we both knew that there was no chance of the Church granting annulments to the marriages that tied us, or blessing our union. But there was never any direct discrimination against us. We rented our two bedroom terraced house across the road from the church of Saint Anthony's almost as easily as anyone else might have done. The neighbours were friendly enough, sympathetic even. They nodded to us each morning as we all trooped yawning in our slippers to church for Matins. They let me borrow tools every winter when our pipes burst and chatted over the hedge in spring. In the early days, Annie's hands often used to bleed from stigmata after we had made love. But that diminished, in honesty probably as our own passion lessened. Still, even after May was born, our chimney was licked by lightning every time there was a storm.

Annie having May changed a lot of things. Kneeling at the pews of Saint Anthony's at Evensong whilst she was pregnant, we had prayed frantically that our baby would be ordinary. But still we were as surprised as anyone when our prayers were answered. Who had ever

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