

Sunday

EMERGENCY services logged the incident shortly before nine that October Sunday morning. ‘Disturbance, Victoria Street,’ typed a duty clerk.

A white youth wearing hoodie, jeans and trainers had driven his Ford Ka into, more accurately through, the windows of a Pakistani airline office. Those windows had advertised immodest fares to the subcontinent. ‘Fly your dreams,’ purred a logo. ‘Brushed by magic.’ Smash.

The little car plopped through the shopfront neatly enough. As in other things there was a moment of delay before the bang blew down the street scattering litter, leaves, sparrow-song. This was followed by the trill of burglar alarms from adjacent premises. The explosion had set their clappers going, yackadacka, whoop-doop, clang-clang.

The youth emerged from the wreckage unhurt save for minor damage to his left leg. Having pushed open the Ford’s dented door, he alighted, closed-circuit television pictures suggested, with hip-hoppity excitement. He sprayed pink graffiti over the walls – ‘airline slave trade’ and ‘stop Muslim rape of young British girls’. A libel lawyer might prefer ‘alleged rape’ but our perpetrator was no student of defamation law. To the airline’s image of a pretty woman partly veiled he added a handlebar moustache not unlike

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that of the Pakistani president. His message concluded with a graffiti tagline of an elaborate M, the tail ending in a cross.

The incident may have occurred near New Scotland Yard but the boys in blue were slow to arrive. Come, come. The croissants served in the Yard canteen of a Sunday morning bear comparison with those found in the most chichi arrondissement of Paris. No Yard officer was immediately available to attend the emergency. That task fell to a patrol car from south of the Thames, which welcomed the chance to activate its siren and have a burn through central London at this quiet hour.

The patrol car arrived to a scene of disarray and fire. This sort of thing was common enough. The national crisis had seen riots in most cities. Flames danced round the Ford. The police saw the youth run from the scene. One of the officers gave pursuit on foot while the other spoke into her collar microphone and summoned the fire brigade. We leave her to her duties and follow the sprint between the driver of the Ford and the first constable.

Athletics fans would have enjoyed this contest – scampering underdog versus long-legged officer of the law. The latter ran well, confident in his police-issue shoes. The driver of the Ford was limping and seemed lost. First he turned right, then left, runty nostrils lifting as though to scent the breeze. His feet struck an uneven beat, one splaying in moderate pain. The distance between hare and hound shortened. In the ears of the prey there rang panic. Under his breath he cursed the Christian God from whom his generation had drifted.

The policeman was closing on his quarry when the youth spotted a crowd leaving the Church of Alleluia Jesus! (previously St Michael and All Angels, Westminster). He saw hugging. A few children held orange balloons with the slogan 'Rise to God'. A man carried a guitar. The service had been taken by a stout, bearded curate in his early thirties. An old woman was taking her leave. The youth, hurtling onwards, nearly managed to bypass the

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little gathering but his shoulder clipped the man of the cloth, who was pushed into the old woman. She clattered to the ground.

Our tearaway could have kept running. He could have shouted obscenities. Instead he stopped and said ‘sorry, sorry’. The priest checked an instinct to respond with anger. The youngster was holding out his hands. Take my troubles, Lord.

One of the church organisers muscled over – a big guy. Tattoos.

‘I need help,’ blurred the youth. ‘I’ve done something. Please.’ He cast over his shoulder towards the policeman. ‘My girl’s been taken by the Muslims. Please.’ He now spoke to the old skittle on the ground. ‘You OK, darling?’ The boy took one of the old woman’s purple-veined hands and gave it a squeeze of concern.

The policeman was thirty yards away and the hunted youngster had no other hole. He darted left. ‘Just a minute,’ cried the priest. But the lad was gone. Up a flight of steps he scuttled, under the arch.

The Church of Alleluia Jesus! may from outside have been a forbidding prospect but its Victorian interior was admired even by secularists. It had a musical reputation, though the organist resented liturgical changes and still referred to it as St Michael’s. The brown floor tiles were spotless. The chairs, which had recently replaced pews, were numbered. New hymnals – *Worship Songs for Here and Now!* – were stacked under the exhortation ‘Jive for Jesus!’ Tambourines, triangles and wrist bells were in a box marked ‘Help Yourself’ Tins had been stacked for the food bank. The leaflets on display in a rack contained yet more exclamation marks and photographs of families with white teeth and clean fingernails. A poster listed charity helplines. Rape counselling, debt, sexual infidelity, Aids: these and other horrors were addressed in words of no more than three syllables. Never let it be said that the world’s ills did not darken the doors of Alleluia Jesus! and its banjo-billy outreach programme.

Blue and purple light shone through a stained-glass window depicting St Michael with th’ angelic host. A hint of communion

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wine flavoured the air. In this noiseless pod our joyrider screeched to a halt.

Outside, the policeman shouted: 'Where did the little sod go?' His language caused a frisson of displeasure among the churchgoers. The policeman whacked his walkie-talkie, which was proving uncooperative. 'Bugger,' he said. On the throng a froideur fell.

'Now look here,' began the tattooed church organiser, quite the Alpha Course male.

'That kid I was chasing,' snarled the policeman. 'Where'd he go?' Quislings at the back of the crowd pointed to the church door. The policeman had made his walkie-talkie work and was shouting to his station that the suspect had been located to a church and that he was going in to effect an arrest. Had he been on his own he might have said 'nick the bastard', but not under the gaze of these buzzards.

'Out the way,' said the policeman.

'Wait!' said the stout young priest. 'Let us say a prayer. Let us link hands and ask God to guide us. Speak to us, Lord!' The police station chose that moment to respond via the walkie-talkie. The churchgoers closed eyes and jibbered, as though saying their three times table.

Inside the church, our hare pondered its options. There were three exits. One was the south door, through which he had entered. The others were the big west doors, which looked as though they were never used, and near them a small northern door. He noticed the used communion chalice standing on an altar whose candles were still burning. As he glanced right and left, two eyes watched silently from the organ loft's mirror.

The policeman barged past his onlookers. The northern door was ajar and his sleuth's eye spotted that the bell ropes were swaying. He hastened to the door and saw that it gave on to a small garden which led to an alley. At the end of the alley he looked left and right, ran to a junction with the road and thought he saw a form

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slip round a distant bend. ‘Sod it.’ He grabbed his walkie-talkie and reported that the suspect had escaped towards Pimlico. As the policeman left he stated loudly to the curious parishioners that he expected a patrol car to be round in case the slippery suspect returned.

The church organist descended the spiral staircase under his loft. He scuttled away, head down, without speaking to the congregants. Organists were like that.

Later a television crew arrived and interviewed the priest – the camera focusing on his hairy hands, fingers yellowed by nicotine. The item went out that evening on the local news. Pakistan’s High Commission had expressed concern at the attack on the airline office. Muslim leaders said arranged marriages were their cultural right, beyond question. Viewers heard the priest say that the suspect ‘ran into the church and found the back door’. Technically, this was not a lie. The young man had found the back door and opened it a fraction. To have claimed that he had left the church would have been a different matter. Had he been asked if the driver of the Ford Ka had indeed disappeared in the direction of Pimlico, what would the answer have been? Would he have told the truth?

Pastor Petroc Stone, evangelical minister, was not entirely sure.

MORE than a hundred miles to the west, key turned in ancient lock. Evensong was done for another week. The *Nunc dimittis* had been sung by a congregation of four. Two votive candles flickered near the end of their wax.

Sunday’s rhythms near complete, a cassocked figure pocketed the key and trudged through the graveyard, whistling at a dog. Tombs were tumbledown, molehills here, grassy tufts there. A whirl of twigs and dust danced in the dying day. Was that a chorus line of elves doing a country jig? Did sprites skip, kicking crackly leaves? Ash boughs creaked like bones.

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Father Tom Ross had preached on acceptance. He had kept it to five minutes. Sadness was God's tithe and we must succumb to it as wood to the Almighty's lathe. Ross had struggled to persuade himself. He often did. There was just enough light in the grey-streaked sky to see the graveyard's familiars: a seventeenth-century squire 'buried with his belov'd wyfe, dyed nexte day from greefe'; a miller, suffocated in flour after being mangled in his wheel; infant twins from the time of Waterloo, martyrs to fever; and an RAF pilot, veteran of Bomber Command. His grieving widow – Ross's mother – had stood by that grave, shivering in her maternity coat as the coffin ropes lowered her man to eternal rest. The airman's grave was speckled by lichen and had lifted at one corner.

Ross was stooped, balding, in his mid-sixties. His mouth had a slight overbite and his grey eyebrows straggled behind some pale spectacle frames. He cut a crumpled figure, scuffed by disappointments. The last hymn had been *The Day Thou Gavest* and the final verse hung in his mind: *So be it, Lord; thy throne shall never, Like earth's proud empires, pass away.* Humming, Ross lowered his chin and gave it a bit of trombone. To the graveyard's occupants he said 'soft night, beloved', pausing at his father's grave. He pulled in his robes against the cold and was comforted by the whiff of mothball. Moonlight would soon silhouette the trees, owls would hoot, foxes yowl. Nobody else was out. In the approaching season of souls, the quick shuddered for the dead. Terrier Barney yapped and Ross clutched the prayer book. This was the longest graveyard in England – the most haunted hundred yards in the kingdom, the pub landlord told tourists.

Behind Ross, as darkness claimed its dominion, a hinge squeaked. Without sign of any hand, the locked church door opened. A draught made the flames on the two candles bend hard. Then – was that with an audible 'pouff'? – the flames died and

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the door closed with a slam. In the lych-gate yew an owl stood sentinel, spooking only those who believed.

Ross ambled homeward. He never liked Sunday nights after Evensong. The prospect of another week at Westminster wearied him. The political world, all those stressy strivers, was so untrusting and restless. Ross was chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons and he knew some Members regarded him as a carefree non-combatant, unburdened by their insecurity. They did not know about Calvert and his latest demand. They did not know the acid juices of the doubting parson.

His ancestral house was just beyond the next dip, half hidden by round-shouldered hills. Mobile telephones never worked here. That suited Ross for it helped him to escape. Prayer book in pocket, he loved to take Barney for walks through Bluebell Wood, past the disused cottage whose roof had been destroyed by ivy and sycamore saplings. Once a roof went, structures soon collapsed. From Bluebell Wood it was a short distance to the church where he could inhale the ageless air and feel free. Barney would sniff round the graveyard and lie at the airman's grave, chin to the grass. Like any terrier, Barney loved to dig and would vanish down holes; yet he never dug in the graveyard. Inside the church Ross would make sure everything was orderly for crowds that never came. He would brush bat droppings off the hymnals and check the donations box, usually empty. Bringing his key chain out of his corduroys, he would think of a statue he saw in a Tuscan church of a strong-necked, bearded St Peter holding the remarkably simple key to Heaven. Perhaps its very simplicity was indeed the key to Heaven: lack of complications, the detritus of other lives.

In the darkness Ross could smell the chimney's woodsmoke. It hung above the house, as it must have done over the huts of primitive ancestors before Roman days. The same scent snaked up the nostrils of Norman serfs and left its tang on Tudor tunics.

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It stung the eyes of medieval martyrs as they writhed at the stake.
The cremation smoke of unborn men would smell the same.

Barney skittered ahead and was waiting when Ross pushed on the boot-room door. Theresa called from her study: 'I did boiled eggs ten minutes ago.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Oh well, don't bother.' Her tone was terse. Lunch had not gone well.

'No, I will,' said Ross. 'You went to the trouble.' Still robed, he sat at the age-blackened table. Theresa had laid a place for him with salt cellar and a slice of margarined bread. The eggs stood under felt cosies designed like mitres. Andrew had made them when he was a child, back when there was hope Daddy might make it to bishop. Ross lit a candle in a silver stick and bowed his head, the light bouncing off his knobbled pate. He muttered a grace, removed the cosies, poured a mound of salt and decapitated the eggs with one vicious swipe. He drank two schooners of burgundy and one generous scotch.

In bed he failed to complete many crossword clues. Theresa had switched off her light and was staring at the ceiling. 'Calvert rang,' she said, her tone dull.

'On a Sunday?'

'He wanted to know how you were. I said it was time you retired.'

'Not you as well.'

'He said he knew this debate was an imposition but they're worried about Dymock.'

'They're right to be.'

'He was all over my radio this morning, that man, talking about his favourite records. They might have spared us Dymock on a Sunday.'

'The Left is entranced by him, even though he's a brutal egomaniac who preaches the law of the jungle.'

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‘Calvert said they need to raise the profile of the Commons chaplaincy. This debate will do that.’

‘Well he can sod off.’

‘Tom!’

‘They can all sod off. Get someone else to do it – one of those ambitious women, one of the soundbite gang. That’s what they need to fight the secularists. It’s not my sort of thing. I’m not modern enough.’ A moth flew down from the light and landed on the sheet beside him. Ross whacked it with his right hand. What had one second been a living creature with wings, antennae and head was reduced in the next to a smudge of dust.

The burgundy and scotch gave him a bad night; nothing new in that. The long-case clock on the landing woke him when it struck midnight. Theresa was snoring and he resented her oblivion. His mind raced – to Calvert, this debate, the row at lunch, the imminent arrival of his housemate in London, some young evangelical priest from what had once been St Michael and All Angels. Good days were becoming rare. He feared the driven secularists with their glib certainties, their litany about reason, as if human logic was a match for celestial force. They stoked public anxiety and had all the easy, ironic tunes.

His legs felt so heavy they must soon drop through the mattress and dangle below the springs, useless, flaccid. He glowered at the blackness until, shortly before three, he found some sleep.

THE altar cloth’s side flap was pushed aside and a pale, youthful face checked for trouble. Coast clear. The interior of the London church of Alleulia Jesus! was not entirely dark. An orange glow of street lights penetrated its higher windows.

The young man straightened his spine. His foot hurt. He limped down the nave and bumped into a flower-stand, which clattered to the floor. Next he collided with a drum kit and cymbals. Christ! A bloody drum kit in church? His third collision was with a

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pyramid of food bank tins. He felt an urge to laugh but that only made him want to pee. He blipped the mobile and used its light to reach the vestry and its lavatory.

Through the window he could see that a police patrol car was parked under a street lamp.

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CLUNK went the door, sealing Ross into Theresa's Rover for the start of his hateful weekly journey to London. Herefordshire never looked clearer than on Monday mornings, gossamer pearling the grass. A spider had strung a web from the top of an apple tree to the handle of Theresa's wheelbarrow. It had made a leap and trusted the breeze – an act of instinct or faith.

Theresa drove. She was faster than Ross, quicker at junctions. He sat in the front passenger seat, hands flat on knees. Thorns littered the verges, for this was the season when farmers trimmed the hedges. The fields had been levelled and the countryside was starting to smell of death. On the car radio the headlines reported the police investigation of a suspected racist attack on the Pakistani airline office in London. Soon a wheezing rabbi was offering a bland homily laced with Americanisms.

'So you'll say no to this debate, then?' Theresa asked her husband, turning down the radio. Ross sighed. 'Tell Calvert to get lost,' she persisted. 'It'll make you feel happier.'

'I don't know,' said Ross, sucking his front teeth. He removed his glasses and gave his eyes a hard rub.

'Ambition is pointless at our age, darling.' Theresa, who at sixty was in fact five years younger and a good deal more sprightly than Ross, yanked down on the gearstick when she said 'pointless'.

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She was never much good at silences. ‘I mean it’s not as if we make pots of money from London. You hate town. You’re near retirement age. Why not just tell the Speaker you’ve had enough?’

‘I don’t just do it for the money. Or from ambition.’

‘Andrew is pretty much launched now. This new venture of his sounds promising.’ Andrew, their son, had started running adventure-training courses for youngsters. ‘We don’t need much money.’

‘Aldred is a friend of the Dean and he asked me to do the Commons job. It’s an honour for the county. They wanted to give me something.’ The chaplaincy to the Speaker had fallen vacant five years ago and Speaker Aldred, the local MP, recruited from his city’s cathedral. The Dean had been glad to suggest Ross. He had blocked Ross from being made Precentor for he lacked tact and sobriety. Ross was just not political enough; so he had been sent to Westminster.

Theresa indicated right at a crossroads. ‘You’re stressed about this debate,’ she said, looking beyond Ross to check for traffic.

‘There’s more to life than happy,’ snapped Ross. ‘Parliament matters. Anyway, I’d forgotten about that ruddy debate. Thanks.’ The red soil of the fields flitted past the Rover’s windows. ‘The atheists are on the rampage and now our son has joined them. He used to love church.’

‘He was a boy, darling. Now he’s a man and he has to work these things out for himself. He’ll come back to it.’

They ate away at civilisation, these people. Worship songs, pauses for thought: Ross turned off the radio, no longer able to tolerate such rubbish. Centuries of devotion boiled into a sixty-second platitude by a wheezing rabbi with a transatlantic accent and mother complex. Anglicanism was being expelled from the courts and hospitals. No one queried the Muslims. Yet the risibly moist Church of England was attacked for being dogmatic and misogynistic – even while Islam forced women behind the veil. Ross felt besieged.

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‘You can’t take all the world’s troubles on your shoulders, darling,’ said Theresa.

‘What am I meant to do? Let some trashing moderniser be Speaker’s chaplain? What would our fathers have thought of that? But I’m no good on a stage. It feels like a trap. Such a bloody awful title. Big Faith Debate. A big debate? Or a big faith?’

‘Forget I mentioned it.’

‘Why can’t we have small faith? Why must everything be big and garish? Doubt belongs as much to us as to the atheists. Without doubt there would be nothing noble about belief.’

‘If it’s a trap, tell Calvert to get lost.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Last night you said you would. Look, we’re almost there now.’

‘Bloody Calvert.’

‘You keep saying he’s only a marketing man,’ said Theresa.

‘National Dean of Communications, whatever that means. But he knows everyone. He’s modern. He’s trouble.’

They arrived at the station. Ross extracted his bag from the Rover’s boot, closing it with a ‘bye then’. She offered an unreturned ‘love you’ and in her mirror watched him trudge to the ticket office. Later, tidying his clothes, she found he had forgotten his Westminster security pass.

When Ross reached Paddington, he and the other passengers were greeted in the concourse by pretty girls in tight t-shirts, eyes popping. ‘Reason Week,’ they cooed. ‘Wanna badge?’ They looked half frozen in shorts and high heels.

‘Reason Week?’ said Ross. Was it reasonable to wear so few clothes on a cold day? He himself wore a scarf over his clerical collar.

Magnetism, animal allure, smell: Nature contained more mysteries than the Book of Revelation. Reason dictated that a parson his age should not waste time talking to advertising-agency hotties promoting an Augustus Dymock stunt. Yet Ross was still

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drawn to them. The girls soon moved on, repeating the sales patter to the next wave of wan commuters coming through the ticket barriers. They swooped like gulls. 'Hi there. Wanna badge? Reason Week! Hi, girlfriend. Wanna leaflet? Have a great day.'

The leaflet advertised a secularist gig, singles nights, a rally, a world record attempt atheist get-together. Ross read the small print. 'Reason Week is a trademark of the Thought Foundation Ltd.' Perhaps the Church should register God as a trademark.

Already these commuters had to remember train times, passwords, meetings, office protocols, lists, rules: who wanted more reason? They were assailed by factual hassle. Yet atheism's termites gnawed at ancient, unspoken certainties which remained now but as struts on a burnt pier. Was more Reason wanted? Beauty Week might come as a relief. Reassurance through Tradition Week. Love Week. Someone with energy might mount such a defence but Tom Ross's bones hung loose in his skin. Confrontation exhausted him.

PETROC Stone bought his usual cigarettes but also toothpaste, shaving cream and cheap razors. The old Afghan who ran Ruby Street's corner shop invariably complimented him on his beard.

'It got blacker when you were in Kashmir, Pastor Petroc.'

'Maybe, Mohammed.'

'All that curry.'

'Yeah.'

The newspaper front pages carried a blurred photograph of the Ford Ka driver under headlines 'Do You Know This Man?' Mohammed rambled on about how the holy men back home wore beards to make them look ancient and wise. Maybe Pastor Petroc too was wise? This morning, Petroc thought not.

Mohammed examined the shaving foam with sorrow. 'It's not for me,' said Petroc. The old man was relieved. A man of Pastor Petroc's girth would not be improved by going clean-shaven.

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‘Ma’salaam.’

‘See ya, Mohammed.’

Many market stallholders already knew Petroc, though he had been vicar of Alleluia Jesus! just a few months. ‘Fancy an apple, vicar?’

‘Thanks, mate.’

‘Hello there, Petroc.’

‘Gloria! Have you been taking care?’

‘Course not.’ Dirty laugh.

‘You find a new flat, Pastor?’ asked a hairdresser, stepping out of his shop to ask the question. Petroc’s old place had been condemned.

‘Yes. The Church has found a place near Vincent Square. I’m going to be sharing with the chaplain to the Speaker of the Commons, no less.’

‘Oooh.’

On Petroc pressed, past the chippie, the mobile-telephone shop, the bookie, the halal butcher – he knew them all. But he did not know this youth with the clipboard and tabard.

‘Hi there, I’m Zac, can I grab two minutes?’ It was a boy, big teeth and yellowy curls, a street charity seller. He had a slight squint, which did not entirely mar his beauty.

‘What are you selling, Zac?’

‘We’re letting people know – oh, hang on, you’re a vicar.’

‘Yes.’ Petroc kept his tone informal. Despite his bulk and the thick beard, he was still young enough to be able to pull off the youth routine. He asked the boy again: ‘What are you selling?’

‘It’s not exactly selling.’

Petroc took a leaflet from his hand. ‘Reason Week. Ah, the Thought Foundation.’

‘See? It’s not really for you.’

‘No,’ said Petroc. ‘Nor should it be for you, Zac. If I wasn’t in a hurry I’d tell you about God’s love and what that can do for

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you. But I can tell you're not fully committed to this negative stuff.'

'You can?'

'Your eyes. They are kind eyes.' He looked into the boy's imperfect eyes. The boy looked away. Petroc said: 'God loves you, if you would only let him. You're better than this atheist sales stuff, Zac. Does your mum know you're doing this?'

'My mum? I don't see her much.'

'Your dad?'

The boy shuffled his feet. 'Yeah, he knows. He's . . .'

'Such a male thing, atheism.'

'Priests always used to be men.'

'Good point! But we have changed and it has improved us. Look, I wish I didn't, but I have to go. Open your heart, Zac. Let your eyes see the possibilities of the unknown. Maybe we'll meet again.'

A passing van tooted and Petroc waved. Yes, they all knew Pastor Petroc with his donkey jacket and sucked-to-the-filter fags. Even the pimps. He was direct with them – told them straight that they were wrong. It was the same with his services, which were smiling, modern, blunt. He served up Biblical sermons laced with social action and moral renewal. He spoke of global warming alongside the fires of Hell. He attacked sloth and City excess. He endorsed Christian love, railed against loose sex. Depravity and faithlessness would get you in the end. It was surprising how much denunciation you could get away with if you delivered it with glottal stops and the odd nod to Wittgenstein or some philosopher whose name was familiar but work unknown. If you made it sound modern – if you said 'yeah?' every few breaths – you could bludgeon your way into the Twitter generation. Atheists thought this was the age of Reason but it was the age of Assertion. Reason demanded too much time.

Services at Alleluia Jesus! were upbeat – even when talking about death. The teenage band would bash away on the drums and

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former Army corporal Derrick, all muscles and tattoos, would play electric guitar. Derrick would point to Heaven during hits such as *Search the Tomb* and *Bethl'em Callin'* and the syncopated *Tarsus Taxman Saul Saw the Light*. Congregants would sway their arms in the air and close their eyes. In his loft, organist Mark would stare bleakly at his shelf of sacred music and wonder how much longer he could tolerate Petroc's modernity.

At Alleluia Jesus! services, blessings were dispensed like toffees. At the sign of the peace, Petroc would kiss the women at least three times, especially those with false teeth and whiskers. He shook the men – gripped them – by the hand. Younger lads were given a playful punch on the shoulder. To lead an evangelical church was not so different from being a politician. You had to suspend inner reserve, forget you were English, vibrate – tingle! – with the zeal of the Lord. Dem bones dem bones, why, alleluia Jesus.

The new regulars were loudly enthusiastic and told themselves that they were restoring vitality to the Church. It did not occur to young Petroc that others would be deterred by such insistent whooper-doopyery, would find the gleaming certitude unpersuasive because it exceeded their own fumbling faith. Totalism was the default setting for the new Church. Petroc was no pioneer – there were many more zealous than he – and he would not question this new Establishment. He considered himself a Christian, not an Anglican. He was a member of a team, not a lone Protestant.

At a market stall he bought nylon pyjamas for five pounds. The money would only have ended up in his gut otherwise or in some collecting tin. Petroc and cash were never long wed. He bowled along, forward to fate. A police incident van was parked near the church and officers were handing out notices seeking information about the airline office attack. The airline had offered a reward. ‘Had one of these, Reverend?’ said a policewoman.

‘I have.’

‘We don’t want him coming back.’

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'Second comings? That's my line of business!'

Inside the church, it took a moment for Petroc's eyes to adjust from the outdoor glare. Mark was just finishing a practice session. After dribbling through the next service's happy-clappy hymns he ended with a defiant few verses of *My Song is Love Unknown* and some top-volume Buxtehude before descending the spiral staircase from the organ loft. Mark played at various churches. Not all of them were as yippety-yea as this one had become. With a scuttle and grunt, he left. Only when Petroc was sure the organist was not returning did he approach the altar saying: 'It's just me. I've brought some stuff so you can wash.'

THERESA Ross's trug was full. This young tree at the top of the garden was always last to surrender its tart, rough-skinned apples. October wasps ignored them but once these russets dropped, worms fell to work. Theresa brushed tiny, pink maggots off one of the apples. Fruit went the way of all flesh.

'I'll have to stake you before next year, little tree,' said Theresa. 'You are stooped, like your owner.' She straightened her back and felt a pang at the sight of swallows on the telephone wire above the lane. Soon they, too, would be gone and the dead season would set in for months. She ran a hand through the branches. Satisfied that every last apple was picked, she wandered down to the house and whistled for Barney. The terrier skittered down from the log pile where he had been ratting.

Barney did not notice, as he passed the tree, that two large apples had grown on the very branches his mistress had just checked.

THE fugitive under the altar was called Matt. He accepted the shaving gear and toothpaste and said: 'Thanks, Father. Here's your phone.'

'Keep it longer if you want. And don't call me "Father". I'm not that sort of priest.'

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‘What sort of priest is that?’

‘High. Well, not high in the sense you’d understand. Did you call your family? They’ll be worrying.’

‘I texted my sister,’ said Matt.

‘You need to tell your parents.’

‘They’re not talking to me.’

‘They’re angry about the car?’ asked Petroc.

‘Nah, they haven’t been talking to me since I took up with Bashirah.’

‘Bashirah?’

‘My girl. The one who was sent to Pakistan.’

The previous night the boy had spoken about his girlfriend. Officialdom normally asked incessant questions; social workers, teachers, benefits officers, cops, they were all the same. This pastor just smiled and listened. Matt had talked about how Bashirah hadn’t wanted to go. They forced her, screaming, kicking. Said he wasn’t good enough for her. ‘She had to find a Muslim boy. But I’m not Muslim. I’m English.’

‘Muslims can be English,’ said Petroc.

‘Infidel, they called me. Non-believer.’

‘There are plenty of those, Matt.’ The story of Bashirah’s fundamentalist father reminded Petroc of his recent time in Kashmir as a missionary. Matt was impressed that the vicar knew something about the sub-continent. He wanted to know if it was hot there. What would Bashirah be eating?

Matt himself was bolting some breakfast, suppressing indigestion. ‘My sister’s found some lawyer,’ he said. ‘What are these things?’

‘Pilchards. The ladies of the congregation always donate them to the food bank. Pilchards and, look, tinned custard. Not to be combined.’

Matt sucked his fingers. The apostles would not have had dainty manners. St Peter would have wolfed down broiled fish and honeycomb and burped afterwards. Table etiquette at the Last

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Supper – now there was a sermon. They had arrived hungry, for a feast. Jesus told them he was leaving. The food must have dried in their mouths, the wine still wet on their beards.

‘Something I want to ask,’ said the boy. He looked at Petroc. One of his eyebrows had a stripe shaved into it. ‘You think I can, like, stay here a bit? This lawyer my sister has found. He says I could ask for “sanctuary”?’

‘Does he now?’

‘Reckon I can doss here a day or so?’

‘You might want to reconsider that after the All Stars have had a rehearsal.’

‘What are they like?’

‘Noisy. Drums, ukuleles, triangles, electric guitar. I may be singing. *Jailhouse Rock*. Probably the last song you want to hear right now.’ Petroc grabbed hold of a candle-stand and impersonated Elvis with a microphone. Matt laughed. Petroc threw him the shopping bag containing the pyjamas. ‘Here. You might find these useful. I’ll need to talk to the church but so far as I’m concerned, you can stay.’

AUBURN Olga, haloed by sunlight, distributed a list round the penthouse board table. London sparkled below, the Thames a silvery flatworm. She had not been in England long – not yet long enough to find this view boring.

A hedge-fund guy, two lawyers, a pension-fund man plus trade unionist Sheila Henderson sat at a coffin-shaped table with a dazzling top. Olga stood near the door. She knew she would not learn all their names. Prominent at the table was a figure with hair as white as Elijah. Augustus Dymock’s hair had long been that colour and it was no indicator of his age – he was a mere fifty-four, and fit at that. He sat serene in his stereotype. Newspapers had labelled him the ‘Don of Doubt’ and this, pleasingly, had stuck. He watched with rehearsed amusement, tapping his fingertips against

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one another. It was a look he had perfected during countless magazine photo sessions. Emperor Augustus, Ayatollah of Atheism, Dr Reason: each interview brought some new epithet. Olga knew Dymock all right. She was his frisky lover.

The meeting's participants started to read the list. The hush was broken by the occasional chink of coffee cup on saucer and the gut-rumbles from a man in a Jermyn Street shirt and chunky cufflinks. Gordon Greenhill, bullish, over-cologned, sat directly opposite Sheila Henderson, the better to admire the trade unionist's front. His eyes were slightly hooded and one had a flaw on the upper lid, a worm cast of skin.

The penthouse was on the nineteenth storey. Up here one might have felt close to Heaven had Dymock's Thought Foundation not cancelled Heaven. As Dymock had told Olga, Heaven was a myth for primitives, childishly superstitious. How could a place exist without title deeds and a report from a chartered surveyor? Rational proof: that was Dymock's demand. At the Thought Foundation, truth was only that which could be boxed and measured. Truth was something you could enter in a game of animal, vegetable or mineral and thus show to exist. Such a solid concept could also, therefore, be destroyed. It could be burnt. Truth could never inhabit some higher plane, for that might demand faith, and faith, come on, was away with the fairies.

Grey-eyed, with pale lipstick and a few freckles on her pert, twenty-something nose, Olga held her head at an angle conveying sullen allure. The auburn hair cascaded over one shoulder and she gave it occasional shakes, each time with a lick. She was a sporty proposition and knew it.

Sheila Henderson said: 'This is a list of churches.'

'Today's churches, tomorrow's luxury homes,' said Gordon Greenhill, he of the gut. 'It's the Jesus Jackpot, love. Invest now in Greenhill Homes and your union of moaning public-sector workers makes a packet.'

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The occasional gull rose on the building's swirling thermals, trusting in its ability to remain aloft. What cold eyes birds had, as soulless as those of the fish they gobbled. Gordon Greenhill's hooded gaze glistened at Sheila.

'I'm not your "love", thank you,' said Sheila. The unions were full of apes like Greenhill.

The windows reached from floor to ceiling. Olga edged round the table, her hourglass figure brushing against Dymock's back. Were she a seagull, she would never wish to look down, for that would make her feel dizzy. She would keep this irrational fear to herself, though. Logic. Reason. The Thought Foundation demanded it every moment. She would not dare to cross Dymock, not yet. She had a sick father in Moscow to support and this position was lucrative.

'Gentlemen, lady,' began Dymock. Just the one lady? Did Olga not count as one? Dymock addressed the meeting: 'Now that you have had a chance to skim the list, let's walk through the highlights. Gordon.'

Greenhill stood. 'It's an impressive portfolio, some of the finest sites in town,' he said. 'The Church of England is a power when it comes to property assets. Lights down, please.' Olga twisted the dimmer nipple to lower the blinds and lights. Dymock took no notice of her.

'From Paternoster Square,' said Greenhill, 'to Marble Arch, Sloane Square to Regent Street.' Images flashed on a screen – photographs of St Peter's Church in Sloane Square, All Souls', Langham Place. 'That last one, imagine. Loft spaces for BBC executives? But I'm not going to start with the obvious ones. Look at these.' He clicked on another image: a broad, colonnaded church. 'Hoxton, St Jude's, tiny congregation, big potential. Mature trees line the communal garden.'

'The graveyard,' explained Dymock.

'Graves and their contents will be reassigned. Imagine residents'

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gardens, a barbecue area, a grass tennis court. See this artist's impression.' The room's occupants murmured approval. Dymock took a sip of herbal tea.

'I'd need turn-around times, how fast from acquisition to sales revenue,' said the hedge-fund man, looking only at his mobile. 'Presumably we have to bung a few grand in sweeteners to Church leaders.'

'Not at a local level,' said Greenhill. 'A little persuasion money may be required for Church suits at national level but I don't envisage much. Already I have surveyors at some of the sites. Their arrival helps create local unease, an expectation of change, and they give us feedback on local attitudes to planning. Next slide: St Teddy's, Acton, described as a community church because they have tried to share their building with the community. It hasn't worked. Never does. The church committee is dying to be euthanased. The inner suburbs carry almost no political dangers – no marginal seats, so ministers seldom intervene on planning.'

'Next picture: Holy Trinity Church near Shepherd's Bush. A church hall big enough to make an arthouse cinema. Public-benefit test will be a cinch. St Anselm's, Hampstead, spacious, solid Victorian job. Empty. There's no one now to use it. Not in Hampstead.'

'Some of our best supporters live in Hampstead,' said Dymock. 'All those direct-debit Fabians keen to salve souls they don't believe in. Hampstead *surges* with Doubt.'

'Most of them with second houses in Tuscany,' muttered Sheila Henderson.

'Here's a map of London,' continued Greenhill. 'Each red cross is a church. Not all are deadbeat causes. The evangelicals have an irritating habit of starting satellite churches but they are fighting on too many fronts. Let me filter out the churches which are still doing OK.' He pressed a button. Thirty per cent of the red crosses disappeared. 'And let me give you a snatch of the rural

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beauties. Here's one in Kent, two minutes from a high-speed rail connection to St Pancras. Worth zilch as a church but an easy five mill' as residential units. West Oxfordshire: a wool church, could make several weekend homes. The congregation fits into one pew. And just in today, this one near the Welsh border. They say the graveyard is haunted – 'the most haunted hundred yards in the kingdom'. I already have informal interest from a London club looking for a rural retreat.'

Dymock, from his throne, said: 'Property is a public obsession and the moral case is unanswerable. Henry the Eighth dissolved the monasteries.'

'The inner suburbs are where we start,' said Greenhill. 'National media couldn't care about them. The only people who live in inner suburbia are office cleaners and their mugger children.' Sheila Henderson bit her scarlet lip.

Dymock added: 'And in the shires, planning officials tend to hate their posh residents. We will play the social justice card.' Greenhill laughed.

'There's nothing comical about social justice,' said Sheila.

'Is it moral for a Church to waste so much precious land?' said Dymock. 'They are in a position, here, to aid economic growth.'

'Nationalise the churches!' said Greenhill.

'Now you're talking,' said Sheila.

'No,' said Dymock. 'Establishment is already a form of nationalisation. We will privatise the churches. We will realise their assets to create public good. We need the financial strength of venture capitalism and the campaigning power of the unions. Without you both, we will not defeat centuries of superstition. We will create jobs and new homes. Private profit and social benefit in tandem. Commercial gain can be shared by the unions if they invest. Any questions? No? Olga – the fruit sorbets.'