

Beyond Redemption?

“You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom ... All these are the beginning of birth-pains.” Matthew, Chapter 24, verses 6 - 8.

‘There’s is still no pulse.’

‘Let’s try again. This time, 2,000 volts please.’

The doctor placed the two slabs of the defibrillator on the chest of Mr Jones. Then came the familiar, high-pitched sound of that miraculous power of one human being’s capacity to resurrect another. With a tiny click the charge was released as the elderly man’s chest jerked on the operating table.

‘No,’ said the nurse. The beep from the ECG machine remained fatally constant.

‘I think we will stop now,’ decided the doctor.

Making such a decision was never as easy as it looked. Life was to be preserved at all costs, yet you always in the end considered the health of the patient, their prognosis, their level of suffering, their age and your previous experience. Within seconds. The unspoken trust required for our race to survive is often blind, enormous and fragile, don’t you think?

Mr Jones belonged to a unique generation in which so much had been achieved by so few. In his late teens he was fighting in the sodden trenches of Northern France and he had been present during the famous Christmas when the German and English soldiers temporarily stopped killing one another.

When peace had broken out he trained as a doctor at the University of Cambridge, married Elizabeth with whom he brought two daughters into the world, and then trained as a pilot at the start of the Second World War. In 1945 he had dropped hundreds of bombs over Hamburg, Berlin and Dresden and after the war he returned to working as a consultant doctor in St Thomas’s hospital, London.

By the time his three grandchildren were born, Mr Jones had seen the introduction of more technological developments than any previous generation: the motor car, electric trains, jet aeroplanes, colour television, telephones and fax machines, hoovers, washing machines and defibrillators. He summed all this up with a rather skeptical diagnosis: ‘The growth spurt of a mentally ill child.’

If anyone had told him at the age of sixteen that all this was going to happen during his lifetime, he would never have believed it. 'Harder than believing in God,' he used to say to his daughters, 'who may also exist, even though we can't see Him.'

Yet this short story is not really about Mr Jones. Yet it will have a lot to do with his favourite question as to whether our creations will redeem us or destroy us. 'Will the gun ever triumph over the pen?' as he used to put it.

It will be about existential questions and how we become who we are. It will be about freedom and race, crime and punishment, love and trust, belief and truth, and the highest highs and the lowest lows of what it means to be human.

As the narrator I will tell you the story, but like all narrators, there will be times when I will pretend not to know something so that you can use your imagination to complete elements of the story for yourself. Just as you might do with an unfinished sketch.

As the author, of course I know everything since the characters are my creation. Even then, however, I admit that I am not entirely in control. For you will bring your own life into the story, discerning things I never meant to be there, inserting new layers of meaning, and so together creating an unpredictable kaleidoscope of thoughts and feelings.

The real story begins and ends with a group of friends and siblings. Three are the granddaughters of Mr Jones, the consultant doctor who has just died on the operating table, and the other two are also siblings: Ida and Jamal, the children of a north African family whose parents came to the UK as refugees in the 1950s.

Ida, Jamal and Jane, the youngest granddaughter of Mr Jones, all met one evening in a pub in Broad Street when they were studying at Oxford together. Ida was reading PPE at Jesus College and had a keen desire to become a journalist. Jamal was that Exeter College reading French and German, with no real idea of what he wanted to do in later life, and Jane was at Christ Church reading law.

Jamal came back from the bar with another round of drinks and Jane lit a cigarette.

'Show me what you do today I'll tell you who you will be twenty years from now,' remarked Ida, looking intently at her brother, who was already on his third pint of real ale.

'That's only true if you carry on doing it,' said Jane, taking a long, deep drag on her *Marlboro*.

'Exactly,' added Jamal as he poured the whole glass of lukewarm beer into a large plant pot directly behind him. He got up, returned the bar and bought a large grapefruit juice with ice. He never drank alcohol again for the rest of his life.

Jane gave up smoking too. She paid £200 to go to a hypnotist and within six weeks she had stopped completely. Yet she didn't do it out of fear of cancer or wanting to save money; she did it because she wanted to impress Jamal, with whom she had fallen in love.

Jamal liked Jane too. She was clever, witty, had beautiful, clear skin and she had a very athletic, attractive body. Precisely his type. He loved it when she raised both arms behind her head to re-arrange her hair pins, revealing her shaven underarms and the contours of her lightly tanned biceps. Yet Jamal did not want to get bogged down in a long-term relationship at university. He had lost his virginity at sixteen and had two intense relationships behind him already. Each time he had got bored after just a few months. Trading off his freedom for sexual satisfaction was at the moment too high a price to pay.

Jane had instinctively picked this up and so she played it very cool, almost as if she weren't that interested in him. Her mother had also encouraged her to save herself for the right man, likening her body to a beautiful apple. Every sexual relationship was like taking a bite out of the apple, until, by the time the right man came along, there was nothing left to enjoy. A powerful didactic image whose veracity, like that of all didactic images, depends on your moral standpoint.

So Jane and Jamar settled for a kind of student role-play. They went for the occasional walk together along the moonlit River Isis, they ate together in a local Indian restaurant a couple of times and twice they stayed up late in her room drinking wine and talking about the literature Jamal was reading. Yet each time she parted from him with a brief affectionate hug, as if she were his sister. No kiss, no glint in her eye, no ambiguous comments. On the surface so cool and indifferent.

Inside, however, she was passionately in love with him. As she sat in the library making notes on legal case studies, she would frequently drift off to think about him.

She thought about his intensity: he was so passionate about everything he did and thought, from literature to rowing. The way he had given up alcohol or beaten up three drunken students one night who were sexually harassing a young woman in Turl Street. He was bound to be like that as a boyfriend too, she mused. He was also intelligent, caring and good-looking. She adored his large brown eyes, his shiny black hair and his perfect teeth whose whiteness was accentuated by his dark brown skin. She spent hours meditating on his broad, square shoulders and imagining what it would be like to snuggle up naked under his arm with her head resting on his chest. That warmth and security. That heavenly smell of a clean man's sweat. Especially his.

Once when she was thinking about him, she glanced up at the stained-glass window next to her desk. There was a picture of a small lamb with a sword pierced through its bleeding heart. Somehow, from this moment on, she was desperate for Jamal to take the initiative.

Then, one warm summer afternoon, they took a picnic and went for a long bike ride together up Headington Hill out into the Oxfordshire countryside. They found a perfect spot in a farmer's field that had been recently planted with carrots and potatoes. There was also a bank where they could lay down their bikes and later lean back to lie in the sun. And next to where they placed

their blanket was a tiny stream, a gully filled with clear water that bubbled its way over the tiny stones in its path.

They ate and talked. Jane wanted time to slow down. She concentrated on how his mouth formed each word that he uttered. She became wonderfully unsettled as he suddenly took his t-shirt off in the heat.

‘Moments like this are pretty intense, aren’t they?’ he said, avoiding her gaze.

‘I mean, you and me,’ he continued, ‘the sun, food and wine, fresh air, nature, the sound of the water in the stream, the breeze in the trees, the birds and stuff. Then I look at my home town and my parents, and it’s all so boring, so predictable, so *not* intense.’

‘Yes,’ said Jane. ‘But maybe your parents don’t recognise or seek intensity in the way that you do, so they are happy the way they are.’

‘Erm, well, I can’t help it, Jane. I feel as if I was born with the need to fly, even if that means flying dangerously, like a moth around a candle flame. And this place doesn’t help, either.’

‘How do you mean?’ she asked.

‘That pressure that Oxford puts on you to *be* somebody. To *do* something with your life. To achieve something that will go down in history. Look at how many prime ministers, actors, journalists, and writers this place has churned out. Don’t you feel that pressure too?’

‘No,’ she replied, ‘I believe that those who try to achieve everything at once in life end up ruining their life altogether.’ Hoping to impress him, she was in fact quoting an enigmatic character from a play she had studied at ‘A’ level. A mad woman in an old people’s home who always spoke the truth.

Yet with this one sentence, her pretence at indifference was now at an end. Unambiguously, she lay down on the bank next to the bikes. She raised both arms and began playing with her hair clips. Jamal liked the way her thin, white bra-straps contrasted with her pale-blue vest and lightly tanned skin. He too forgot his determination to avoid a relationship and lent across and kissed her. Compared with the girls of his teens, Jamal noticed that Jane felt different, more mature, more serious. Her touch, her smell, the taste of her moist lips provoked an exquisite and extreme arousal in him. He undid his belt, ripped open the top three buttons of his jeans and lay down on top of her, eager for her to feel his erection pressing against her pubic bone.

For her, it felt as if every nerve ending in her body was being charged to capacity. He was so much more beautiful here in this field than in her meditations in the law library.

As she felt his bare chest overlaying her breasts, she listened to the stream and stroked his naked back. She could smell the perspiration from the effort with the bike ride. *His* perspiration. Priceless, unique, erotic nectar. It was like being passionately embraced by a theophany of love.

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As Jane immersed herself in Jamal's kisses in the heat of the afternoon sun, her middle sister Catherine was back at their parents' home in West London holding a heated discussion about the consequences of her relationship with her boyfriend, Jude.

Catherine adored her grandfather and wanted to be a doctor from an early age. Her grades at A-level had not been quite good enough to study medicine, yet she was so determined to do so that she camped outside UCL for a week and fought to convince the senior professor of the medical department that she would make a great doctor. In the end, the professor gave her a place.

She was now in the summer term of the first year and doing better than all of the other medical students in the group. However, in the Easter vacation she had slept with Jude, a young, working class, unemployed man from the East End of London, born next door to a brewery in Brick Lane. The two of them had got carried away one Friday night after a disco, and after just one occasion of unprotected sex, Catherine was now pregnant.

'Well, you can't carry on studying *and* have a baby,' growled her disorientated father.

'Well, maybe Jude could look after the baby during the day?' suggested Catherine.

'Him!' retorted her father. 'He couldn't even organise a piss up in a brewery!'

'George, please,' added the beleaguered mother, who seemed to have spent half her life bouncing between husband and daughter, like a referee in a wrestling match. They were simply too alike. She could always see the storm clouds building on the horizon. 'It's not easy being a lightning conductor,' she used to moan.

'Maybe *I* could look after the baby?' she dared to suggest. Catherine shook her head and the father tutted.

'Have you thought about an abortion?' he asked.

'Yes. I have spoken to two friends who have had one. One says it's straightforward and it was the right decision. The other says it was awful, has nightmares and needs therapy. I've decided that I want to have the baby, whatever happens,' she concluded.

'You should have been born a man,' said her father, 'then we wouldn't have all this bother.'

At that moment her oldest sister, Becky, came into the room and asked what all the shouting was about.

'It's making me all stressed,' she moaned.

Becky had also begun studying medicine, at Leicester University, but she had had to give up during the first year as she suffered from manic depression.

'Your sister is pregnant,' said her mother calmly.

'Oh, Katie. That's amazing news! I am *so* pleased for you! I'm going to be an *aunt*, then. Have you got a name yet? When is it due?' she asked with increasingly racing enthusiasm.

'Hey, then maybe we could go into town and buy some clothes for the baby?' she added. It was pretty obvious that Becky had stopped taking her lithium again.

Nonetheless, Catherine thought it was not such a bad idea since it would be a break from the tense atmosphere at home. Apart from which, shopping with Becky when she was high could be quite fun.

They left the house ten minutes later and caught the tube to Oxford Circus. Becky was wearing dark purple Dr Martin boots, white knee-high socks, a green Dirndl skirt, an orange shirt, black leather tie, a red beret and a blue jacket. She never wore make-up.

Today she looked pretty and artistic, trendy and alternative. Her antics started in the tube. In the next carriage to the sisters was a class of primary school children on their way to the National History Museum. Becky, suddenly inspired, gave Katie her jacket and beret, went up to the window in the door between the carriages and pretended to hang herself with her tie from the roof of the train. She let her body swing from side to side and rolled her pupils upwards so that you could only see the whites of her eyes. Soon, some of the children in the next carriage spotted her and started screaming hysterically. By the time the teacher looked to where the children were pointing, Becky had disappeared. This mysterious incident will probably loom larger in the children's memories than any of the dinosaur skeletons they were to see later that day in the museum.

The two young women raced from shop to shop. First Carnaby Street, then on to Regent Street and Oxford Street. They tried on some of the most expensive clothes London had to offer, of course with no intention of buying anything. In those shops Becky would pretend to be very wealthy, speaking in Jane's Oxford accent, and in others she would either be a poor, working-class girl or an eccentric party type, adopting Jude's twanging Cockney.

In one very alternative shop, Becky bought a t-shirt. It was chocolate brown with three small yellow, weird little robot figures on it, each one different. Underneath were the words: 'It is okay to be you.' As Becky stood at the till to pay, in front of her wearing large dark *Rayban* sunglasses was Madonna. As discreetly as she could, she managed to get her autograph and slipped it into her shopping bag. Catherine just couldn't believe it.

After two hours the younger sister was exhausted.

'Shall we have a break now?' she suggested hopefully.

'After John Lewis. I want to try on some perfume and make-up,' replied Becky.

'But you never wear make-up,' commented Catherine.

'I know, but I might do for your wedding,' said Becky, grabbing her sister by the hand.

Katie, who had not got that far in her thoughts, spluttered, 'I am not sure Jude is the marrying type. To be honest, I am expecting to bring the child up on my own.'

They rushed into John Lewis. As they opened the glass doors there came that wonderful warm rush of perfumed air that hits you in the face whenever you walk in to any department store. Becky was keen to visit most of the stands: Dior, Givenchy, Yves St Laurent where she tried a wide range of mascara, lipstick, eyeliner, eyeshadow, blusher until her whole face was covered in a complete clash of different coloured make-up. Then she tried on some Chanel No. 5 perfume.

'It smells just like cat's pee,' she announced loudly to the posh shop assistant. Becky moved on swiftly, leaving Katie standing opposite the Chanel lady, red in the face with embarrassment.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'My sister is not well and has forgotten to take her medication.'

After several more hours shopping, the sisters decided to eat in Chinatown.

'I love that duck in those very thin pancakes,' said Becky. 'My favourite restaurant is here somewhere, on the left. It's called something like Fuk Yoo,' she laughed.

By the time they were eating their duck, Becky had finally come down to earth, but thank goodness not into depression. They talked a lot about Katie's future.

'Why wouldn't Jude marry you?' enquired Becky.

'I think he's more into shorter term relationships and wouldn't want to get tied down. It's partly his background.'

'Then why did you sleep with him?'

'Oh Becky, I don't know! We met at a disco and I thought he was really cute. We just ended up in bed.'

'And you a doctor! Well, I hope you do find a husband because it would be nice for your little son to have a dad,' added Becky.

'That's a bit sexist. How do you know it's a boy?'

'I just do ... Oh God!' she suddenly exclaimed, looking down into her shopping bag. She wanted to try on her new t-shirt before they left the restaurant.

'This isn't my bag. Look at *this*,' she said, holding up an elegant, petrol blue cashmere cardigan.

'I have swapped bags with Madonna!'

'Oh my God!,' squealed Catherine. 'Does that mean she's got your weird t-shirt?'

'And her own autograph,' added Becky, as they both shook with laughter.

They paid the bill and left. As they made their way home after the meal, they decided to go for a walk along the Thames.

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Much further down the river, where it is known as the Isis, Jane had invited some of her law student friends around for some snacks, wine and beer. Jamal was there too, but he was soon bored by all the conversation about law tutors, legal jargon, all-nighters and sad students in the college who didn't study law. Jamal kept looking over at Jane, who was sitting next to the other young women. Occasionally, she would glance across at him. She looked so pretty in the candlelight. He wanted to make love to her. Properly this time. It was already midnight. He hoped that the others would soon get up and go. Then they could be alone.

As if they had read his thoughts, all of the other male students suddenly got up, having agreed to go across into Tony's room opposite. With his focus on Jane, Jamal had not been listening to what they were about to do.

In Tony's bedroom there was a kind of trap door that opened up to reveal the bedroom of the accommodation below. In reality, it was a fire door so the students could escape in case of a fire. Directly under the fire door lay James, a very shy, academic loner, who was now fast asleep. As planned, the law students quietly lifted up the door, undid their flies and laughed as they began urinating over the sleeping history student below. Jamal walked in and was not impressed.

'Stop it!' he shouted at full volume. 'Now!'

All bar one of the young men stopped, more out of shock at Jamal's thunderous reaction than obedience, but Tony carried on. Jamal flew across the room and pinned Tony up against the wood-panelled wall and punched him in the face and stomach until his body collapsed on the carpet. There was blood coming out of Tony's nose and mouth and his flies were still open with his dribbling penis exposed.

James woke up, covered in urine, as the young women ran in to see what all the commotion was about. Jane arrived first and had seen the rage with which Jamal let loose on Tony. She had never seen anything like it. She was scared of him, all of a sudden.

The social event was clearly over. Some of the male students helped Tony while the young women collected their bags from Jane's room and left in silence.

As soon as they had all gone, Jamal laid down on Jane's bed. He gestured for her to join him. She walked over to him, nervously.

'You scared me for a moment back then,' she said.

'I know. I'm sorry, but it was *so* unjust. One day our friend Tony, the Right Honourable Anthony Brown, QC, MBE, will be sitting as a judge over people, condemning them to 15 years imprisonment. While he gets away with pissing on some poor, defenceless student.'

Jane cautiously approached the bed and stood motionless, staring at the man she loved.

He pulled her on top of him and then rolled over so that she was underneath him. They kissed. He was so strong, yet so very tender.

He got up, stripped off to his underpants and went and got some candles from the communal living room. Meanwhile, Jane took off her clothes and waited for him under the covers.

He climbed back into bed and began kissing, stroking and massaging her body in the candlelight. She closed her eyes as his kisses moved from her breasts to her lower stomach. For her, the overwhelmingly beautiful experience of the next half hour is very hard to describe, especially when he finally penetrated her.

The next morning Jamal left Jane fast asleep in bed and arranged to meet his sister in a café in Oxford market. Although he was very tired, having sex with Jane had thoroughly energised him.

‘You okay? You look as if you’ve just got out of bed,’ Ida asked.

‘Yeah. Work good. Rowing good. I beat someone up last night, who absolutely deserved it ... and I’m going out with Jane,’ he replied.

‘I wondered when that was coming. You be careful not to mess her around, okay? She’s my friend,’ advised Ida.

‘I’ll try not to. And what about you? You still don’t have anyone special in your life?’

‘No. Not really. I’m too focused on my work right now. Relationships just drain you of time and energy,’ she said. ‘Have you thought about where you want to spend your year abroad?’

‘Yes, I’ve applied for France, with Paris is my first choice. My spoken German is stronger so I thought I’d better go to France.’

‘Probably a good idea. And if you do get Paris, I promise to come and visit you. End of term next week. I’m looking forward to the summer.’

They paid for their drinks and walked through the market towards the High Street and parted company.

During the summer vacation Jane and Jamal arranged to see one another as often as possible, usually in London somewhere. About halfway through the holidays Jane’s parents wanted to meet Jamal so she invited him to come and stay for a few days. They lived in a three-storey, terraced house in Fulham. Once Jane’s father had got over his initial fears and prejudices, he soon grew to like Jamal and found him to be an intelligent, well mannered young man. It was hard to dislike him. Jane’s mother and sisters also liked him and Becky, who was still rather high at that time, was even a little jealous of Jane for having such an attractive boyfriend.

After lunch Jane and Jamal went for a long walk, grateful for some time alone after the exigencies of the whole getting-to-know-one-another routine over a long lunch. They discussed too

their frustrations about having to sleep separately but concluded that it was best for them to respect Jane's parents' conservative views about sex outside marriage. And especially in view of Catherine's unexpected pregnancy.

Nonetheless, Jamal was not that surprised when, at about 2 am that night, she climbed under the duvet with him on the sofa in the front room. She fervently kissed him on the lips and then quickly moved down to kissing his chest and stomach until her head was, for the first time, between his legs. She seemed agitated, more turned on than previously. Maybe it was because she was worried about getting caught by her parents and so wanted to move quickly, he thought to himself. Her zealous activity brought things very quickly to a climax.

But, just as he was ejaculating, the living room door opened and Jane came in. She turned on a table lamp.

'What the hell is going on here?' she asked in an angry, suppressed whisper.

She ripped the duvet back to find Becky's moist face between Jamal's legs, her hand still clasping his erection. Jamal was so taken aback that he didn't know what to say.

'It's my fault, Jane,' pleaded Becky. 'He didn't even know. He thought I was you. *Honestly.*'

With the most painful look on his face, Jamal nodded towards Jane in an effort to confirm that this was the truth. Jane simply shook her head and walked out of the room. Becky got up and pulled the duvet back over Jamal.

'Sorry,' she said and she too left him to contemplate the bizarre events that had just taken place.

The following morning Jane and Jamal decided it would be best if he went home earlier than planned. Already breakfast together with Becky and her parents had been torture. They gave the excuse that Jamal's father was not well.

That night also marked the end of their romance. Jane simply could not get out of her mind what had happened between Jamal and her sister. She was not able to share her lover with anyone. Her idea of love was exclusive, like her mother's image of the bitten apple. She knew that she would have seen Becky's face between his legs every time she made love to him.

From Jamal's perspective, he decided that what happened, even though it really had not been his fault, was a relief. He knew of course that at some point he would lose interest in Jane and this encounter with Becky had provided a way out.

Back in Oxford Jane and Jamal hardly saw one another any more. He threw himself with characteristic passion into his rowing and, this term, German Romanticism. On the invitation of a friend, he also started going to the mosque on Fridays. Jane spent most days back in the library trying to concentrate on her work. Occasionally she would look up at the lamb with the sword pierced through its bleeding heart. She thought she knew what it meant now.

One afternoon, when she was especially missing Jamal, she took a bike ride back to the field where they had first kissed. She sat down on the bank and wept, actually wanting her sobbing to make the pain more intense, as a kind of masochistic therapy. She looked down at the small gully where the water had been: once there was a river, she thought to herself, now there's a stone.

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That year after Christmas, the preparations started in earnest on the arrival of Catherine's and Jude's baby. During the six months leading up to the birth, so much had happened in the Jones' family.

Shortly after her sexual encounter with Jamal, Becky began taking her medication. She became low and went into hospital with depression. Catherine's baby developed hydrocephalus and the doctors could not reassure her even as to whether the baby would live. Yet to her parents' surprise, she was still together with Jude.

One Sunday Catherine arranged to visit Becky in hospital for an hour or so. For the third time in her short life she had been sectioned and so was not allowed to leave the hospital - mainly for her own safety.

When Jane got there, Becky was in a much better frame of mind than Catherine had anticipated. Whenever Becky was depressed, she was like a teenager. The whole world revolved around her. When she was well, she took a genuine interest in others.

Today, she was very concerned about her sister's baby.

'Do you think you and Jude would cope if your little boy were born brain-damaged? You would have to feed him, change him, bath him for the whole of his life, and with none of the wonderful feedback that normal babies give their parents to make the hard work worthwhile.'

'I am sure we would adapt to the situation and find joy in a different way, you know, in the small things.'

'You mean, like you've had to do with me?'

'Oh Becky, *please,*' replied her sister, taking her by the hand. Becky smiled and kissed her sister.

'Would you do me a big favour?' asked Becky.

'What?' queried Catherine cautiously.

'Would you come to church with me this morning, here in the hospital? It starts in ten minutes and lasts about three quarters of an hour. I'm in the mood but don't want to go on my own.'

'Oh, Becky, I'm sorry. I don't think so. It's not really my scene. Maybe another time?'

But ten minutes later Becky and Catherine were sitting in the second row of the holy communion service in the hospital chapel. When it was time to take the bread and wine, Becky dragged her sister to kneel down with her and the other members of the congregation on the wooden knee-bank in front of the altar. Although she was not at all a believer in God, Catherine was shocked when she heard some of the other members of the congregation bread praying out loud to the devil while they were taking the bread and wine. The priest either didn't notice or was ignoring them.

'Are they all completely mad?' Catherine asked Becky after the service, still very disturbed by the event.

'Well, a few certainly come from the psychiatric wing like me, and some will be schizophrenic, so what do you expect?' replied Becky, who then wisely changed the subject for the last few minutes before her sister had to go.

On her way back to meet with Jude for Sunday lunch in a pub, Catherine kept thinking about the unorthodox church service.

'If there *is* a devil,' she thought to herself, 'I mean, just say for one moment that there *really is* a devil - then surely that could mean that there really is also a God. And if the devil is making our baby sick, then maybe God can make our baby better?'

She shared her thoughts with Jude over lunch. Although he couldn't agree with her logic, he had nothing against her going to see a priest the following week.

On the Tuesday Catherine met with the only friend she could think of who went to church and believed in God, and on Thursday they went to see her pastor. He prayed for the baby, laying his hand on her stomach, and he gave Catherine some leaflets about the Christian faith.

In the weeks that followed the baby's hydrocephalus really did begin to get better, so much better that the doctors even began to question whether the child would be born with any brain damage at all. Not only that, but Jude had found a job and Jude's real father, who had left home when he was four years old and whom he had never seen since, had passed away and left him almost £100,000 in his will.

So, Catherine and Jude moved into an apartment in the East End which they were now decorating in preparation for the arrival of their baby. Perhaps not surprisingly, and if only out of gratitude, Catherine started going to church with her friend.

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It was at this time that Jamal's interest in Islam was also on the ascendant. As well as attending the mosque on Fridays, he started praying three times a day and began brushing up his

Arabic and reading the Quran. The self-imposed daily and weekly routine suited his need for order and structure, and studying Arabic and the teachings of the Koran provided him with a new intellectual challenge. The preaching in the mosque also appealed to both his idealism and to his need for excitement and stimulation. To his need to find a cause worth dying for, and then to give his life to it.

As he reached the end of his second year, Ida took her finals in PPE and got a First, and Jane took up smoking again and spent most of her time hanging around with the other law students. Catherine gave birth to a healthy baby boy. They named him Ben. Becky came out of hospital and started writing short stories, and Jamal prepared to go and spend a year in Paris.

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In the course of his year there many people came to visit him. That is always the case if you end up in a city like Paris, London or Berlin. You could almost open up a B & B and become a tour guide.

In the late autumn, as promised, Ida came to see him. They visited all the main sights together, especially the museums and art galleries, and went for a meal in a Moroccan restaurant in St Michel after their visit to Notre Dame.

As always, she wanted to know how her younger brother was doing.

'Great,' he replied. 'Paris is an amazing city. My French is coming along very well. I've got lots of friends here. I've found a good mosque where Muslims actually believe in God and live out their faith and ... and ... the food is ... yummy!' he enthused, tucking into his lamb stew with chickpeas and couscous.

'And how about your new job?' he asked.

'Oh, it's brain-numbingly boring, to be honest. But at least I always knew it was going to be. It's like that in journalism. You start out reporting on mothers' union meetings in the provinces and work your way up to being editor of a national newspaper in London.'

'Would you still not stoop to working for *The Sun* in order to get to the *Daily Telegraph*?'

'No way. There *are* limits, Jamal.'

Jamal smiled at his sister's commitment to principles. It was something they held deeply in common.

'These papers,' she went on, 'are used to manipulate the voting public in order to get them to vote for a particular party without remotely understanding or questioning the reasons why.'

'Yes,' Jamal interrupted, 'but you always used to say to me that when freedom of the press dies, so does democracy. You can't say you want freedom of the press and then disapprove of the

press that emerges from that freedom. By working for a tabloid you could begin to change content and so better achieve your aim of educating the masses. Where *you* are planning to work, your readers are already of your opinion anyway.'

'Oh my God. You're not *that* naive, are you?' asked Ida, becoming more animated.

'You must surely know that you can only change things from the top down. It's all down to leadership and management.'

'That's not necessarily true. In Britain the laws are beginning to change due to the influence of the Muslims on the street. And here in France they had the French Revolution where the grassroots people changed the course of the nation.'

'That was a bloodbath, though,' snapped Ida. 'The UK achieved democracy without a bloody revolution.'

'The only reason there was no bloodbath in Britain is because the English are too bloody submissive and apologetic,' he quipped.

'What? Too ...'

'In Paris,' he interrupted, 'if you want to know who is English in the supermarket, you ram their ankles really hard with the shopping trolley, and if they turn round and apologise, you know they are English.'

'Very funny,' replied Ida, keen to get the argument back on course. 'Well, at least Britain is a *democracy*.'

'Democracy?' shrieked Jamar, 'With a royal family? With unelected Lords and Anglican bishops in the Houses of Parliament? With an outmoded two-party system based on slanging matches between opposing benches and a government that can move electoral boundaries just before an election in order to increase its number of MPs? A democracy without even a whiff of proportional representation? No, Ida, certainly *not* a democracy. Get real. At best a sham democracy in the hands of an oligarchy. I thought you'd studied all this stuff and even got a First?' he provoked.

'And what's *your* solution?' she replied almost shouting, 'An Islamic State in which Muslim clerics rule the nation?'

'We Muslims need to wake up to the oppression of the West and do something about it. That's why you need to work for the *Telegraph* or make it as a newscaster. You need to reach the movers and shakers so that the laws begin to change as more mosques get built. *Der Weg ist das Ziel!* The end justifies the means.'

Since a few of the people in the restaurant were looking unnerved by the heated argument about sham democracy, Islam, oppression, mosques and now even exclamations in German, the siblings decided to calm down and change the subject. One of the remarkable aspects of their

relationship was that they could say what they wanted to each other without things getting personal. Intellectually, they loved to fight, but deep in both their hearts there was something else at work.

The next morning Ida went on her own to the Place de la République and sat down in the sunshine. It was there and then, admittedly provoked by Jamal, that she made the decision to specialise in European politics in her journalistic career. Once she had made a decision at this level, she knew that she was resourceful enough to make it a reality.

As she left Jamal later that day, she hugged him, look him in the eyes and said, 'My darling brother. Last night you were very straight with me, and it helped. Now it is my turn to be straight with you. I have just one fear for you, and it is this: that you have no fear. If I could give you just one piece of advice in case my plane crashes, it would be to stay away from the radicals. They are looking for young men like you to be a powerful weapon in the Jihad.'

He lyingly nodded and kissed her goodbye. It was already too late.

Just six months later, Jamal was arrested by the French police, along with eight other young men from his cell, on account of his involvement in the murder of twenty-two Jewish men, women and children in an attack on a synagogue in northern Paris. He was put on trial, found guilty and sentenced to six years in prison. He was never able to return to Oxford to complete his degree.

* * *

Towards the end of Jamal's time behind bars, Becky called in to visit Catherine who had recently started work in an old people's home.

'How's work, Katie?' asked Becky as they sat down in the kitchen over a cup of tea together.

'It's *such* fun,' she replied, 'even if it is physically and emotionally draining at times. You never know what's going to happen from one day to the next.'

'Last week, for example, Mr Marriott - he's a lovely old man in the early stages of Alzheimer's - had seen a programme on the television about quick snacks in the microwave. So he tried out egg and beans on toast but forgot the instruction about pricking the raw egg with a pin before putting it in the microwave, so when he cut into it to enjoy his new snack, the egg yolk exploded everywhere over him, the table, the walls, the window and radiator. It took me hours to clean up the mess!'

'Oh, bless him,' commented Becky.

'Then there is Mrs Williams. She's the one who always covers the television with a towel when she gets undressed at night because she thinks that the newsreader can see her. I called into her room on Tuesday and she had, no kidding, about fifty bananas in her room. She explained that

it was because of the war. Bananas were being rationed and she needed them for her children. It's such a shame, because everything she says makes sense but it's all jumbled up and in the wrong chronological order.

'And what about Ben and Jade?' asked Becky.

'Ben is doing really well. He's learning his numbers and the alphabet. He *loves* school. And Jade has got a new job with London Transport. The hours are long but the pay is good. It's funny, Becs, the only thing I ever wanted from a husband was long-term peace and security, knowing that he wouldn't always be having sex with other women and stuff. But with Jade, it's turned out to be even better than that. And since we've become Christians, he's also stopped drinking and the money's under control. It's all your fault for taking me to church that time in the hospital. Anyway, enough of me, how's you?'

'Erm, good, I think, replied Becky. 'My first book of short stories is selling well and right now I'm working on a play. It's about two lesbians bringing up a little boy together.'

'And relationships-wise?' asked Catherine, wondering whether the play could be a projection of her sister's real-life wishes.

'No. A few flings but no one special. I only need men when I'm high,' she laughed ominously. 'Mum told me Jane's got a new boyfriend. John. Sounds like he's really nice.'

'Yes,' said Catherine. 'A bit less complicated than Jamal, thank goodness. I'm pleased for her.'

'You know he's being released from prison in the next few weeks?' asked Becky.

'Yes,' replied Catherine. 'Jane told me. I still can't understand what got into him. What drove him to kill those innocent people. Still, I hear his sister's doing very well for herself.'

* * *

Indeed Ida had, during these last six years, worked her way out of the provinces to become European affairs correspondent for *The Guardian*. It was an acceptable compromise, so she maintained, on her way to *The Telegraph*. For even highly principled people sometimes justify an uncharacteristic decision with an appropriate narrative.

Today she had been asked to cover a parliamentary debate on the U.K.'s financial contribution to the European Union. As she listened to the government and opposition firing derogatory arguments backwards and forwards, she knew that the decision reached would be rhetorical and racist, not political. International politics had to begin with linguistic and cultural understanding, she reflected.

So, in the conclusion to her report on today's debate, she wrote: 'If we can never truly see anything outside of our own cultural, linguistic, historical worldview, how can we ever hope to

agree a meaningful way forward as a group of nations together? Barbed-wire fences run through our hearts before they appear on our borders.'

Later that year, Ida was awarded Journalist of the Year for her eloquent, well-informed and provocative articles and editorials. Eventually she was offered a promotion to become the deputy editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. It was on condition, however, that she change her political standpoint on both the EU and immigration.

She took a day off, travelled back to Oxford and went to all her favourite locations. She wandered around on her own and thought long and hard about this amazing opportunity in the rarified atmosphere of the academic city. On her way home on the train to London, she wrote her reply to the Chief Editor of the *Telegraph*, fatefully turning the job down. She wrote to her brother too, and told him what she had done.

* * *

After his time in prison Jamal spent another year in Paris since it had now become his home. No one except his sister had come to visit him in prison and none of his friends from the UK had attempted to write or to keep in touch with him. It seems that there are some human beings whose crimes make them beyond redemption. There is to be no dialogue with them, no cure or healing, no therapy. If there is no capital punishment available, then these people should be locked up for life, for their punishment, for the safety of society and of course as a deterrent to others.

Yet being locked up for six years, isolation from friends, the absence of therapy and the presence of other radicalised and rejected young men, made prison the ideal environment for the growth of Jamal's commitment to a destiny-fulfilling cause. He decided to join with some of his new associates in going to Syria to be trained how to form strategic, terrorist cell groups, and how to fight properly, with fists and guns, with Kalashnikovs, Molotov cocktails, bombs and explosives. And like all converts, Jamal and his companions were even more fundamentally committed to the cause than the men who trained them. Martyrdom was now their glorious goal.

Sometimes I wonder whether the issues of freedom of movement, cultural pluralism and radicalised, religious belief have already taken over from money, sex and power in determining the fate of the human race.

* * *

By the time Jamal and his friends returned from Syria a few years later, the face of Europe had undergone some significant changes. Many nations had adopted the Euro, the number of

countries belonging to the EU had increased from nine to fifteen, and the Berlin Wall had fallen. For Jamal, the fall of the Wall was a living example of grassroots people effecting major historical change, but the growth of the European Union he saw as another attempt of the West to strengthen itself against Islam. As in the narrative of the birth of Jesus, the poor, deluded eastern Magi were once again having to bow down and worship the superior western God. And he wasn't going to stand for that.

* * *

And as the West prepared for celebrating the birth of their God, Catherine, who was busy dedicating her daytime to the geriatrics in the old people's home, was about to have an epiphany of her own.

'Oh God!' exclaimed Mr Marriott. 'Damn, damn and damn again!'

'What's the matter then, dear?' asked Catherine, adopting a tone as if she were talking to her young son, Ben.

'I've dropped my pen in the toilet again,' announced Mr Marriott, coming out of his bathroom with his trousers still around his ankles.

Catherine stopped dusting the television set and walked into the compact, pale green bathroom. Mr Marriott's fountain pen was indeed floating on the lumpy surface of his faeces. He had not flushed the chain.

'I'm sure I can fish it out for you again, Mr Marriott,' said Catherine, now in a more matter-of-fact tone.

As she came back into his living room and handed him the washed fountain pen, she asked him whether he wanted her to put up some Christmas decorations.

'It's only two weeks away now, you know,' she added.

'No, thank you.'

'Oh, go on, you old Scrooge!' she said.

'I can't see the point if no one comes to visit me, can you?'

'Well, I'll come and visit you, and I have a few friends from church who would visit you too. They could even pick you up and take you to our Christmas service, if you like. There's mulled wine and mince pies afterwards. Really tasty!'

'No, thank you,' he replied, 'and you want to be careful with all that Christian stuff. I wrote a book about it twenty years ago, called the "*Psychology of the Sect*".'

As Catherine had said to Becky, in this old people's home you really didn't know what was going to happen from one moment to the next.

'Here, you can borrow a copy if you want,' he said, handing her the book from his shelf. She turned the book over in her hand and quickly read the summary on the back cover:

'In this razor-sharp book, Dr. Marriott researches and explains the fascinating journey from unbelief to becoming a member of a religious sect. With great lucidity he charts the key moments:

- *personal crisis*
- *initial contact and then friendship with a member or members of the sect*
- *conversion (defined as a radical decision to accept a promised better life in exchange for present dissatisfaction)*
- *changes in circumstance interpreted as the fulfilment of the promises from the sect's sacred book*
- *changes in behaviour and lifestyle based on self-fulfilling prophecy*
- *consolidation of strong adherence to the sect through the inebriation cultivated by ongoing worship (music), preaching (the rhetoric of exhortation) and community (group therapy).*

Dr Marriott also convincingly analyses what type of person is likely to be attracted to a sect, which aspects differentiate a sect from mainstream religion and he disturbingly predicts the inherent dangers of increasing religious fundamentalism in an increasingly pluralistic world.'

And all that, she thought to herself, from a man who can neither microwave an egg nor fish his gold fountain pen out of his floating excrement.

'It looks fascinating, Mr - I mean - *Doctor* Marriott. Thank you. But I'll leave it for now as I'm not sure I will have time to read it, what with my job and Ben and everything.'

'Yes, you be careful, my dear. That's precisely a symptom of your situation too. You can't and don't want to read anything that might rock the status quo of your belief. Once you accept the main thrust of the meta-narrative, you have to accept *all* of it. You reach the point where you'd rather believe the unbelievable and the objectionable, such as a loving God banishing all non-Christians to suffer in eternal hell, than to face up to the fact that your faith is not the certainty of things not seen but a refusal to believe what is seen. Your desperate desire for meaning destroys the truth of who you really are.'

Catherine put down her duster and stared at the old man. She had not been so disturbed since the day she heard the patients in the hospital praying to the devil.

'That's what happened to me for decades,' continued Dr Marriott, pointing at Catherine with his fountain pen. 'And when the big personal crisis came - the death of my unhealed wife - everything imploded and I lost my faith. I got thrown out of the church and every friend I had disappeared by putting obedience to the sect above personal friendship. That's the psychology of any sect, my dear. If I had become a Muslim, I would probably have got involved in the Jihad. The *outcome* may look different, but the *process* is exactly the same. And both are equally tragic,' he concluded gravely.

'Mr Marriott!' she exclaimed, now even rather indignant, 'you are surely not trying to put evangelism on the same level as terrorism?'

'Not at all,' he replied, 'and neither am I making any moral judgements. But these different means are used to the same end: the conversion of the whole world to *my* God, for the glory of *His* name.'

* * *

And it was for the glory of God's name that Jamal and his friends were now plotting their next exploit of faith, an act of martyrdom that would put their faces on the front of every newspaper and on every television screen in the world. They had, on the instructions of their leaders, made their way to London via Hungary in order not to draw attention to themselves from the police. They were to form five cells, from Earl's Court in the west of London to Forrest Hill in the south east, to get jobs, to settle into the local community and to await further instructions.

It was at this time that Jamal received his first invitation to a so-called Oxford gaudy - a evening meal back at his college for former students. He thought it would be interesting to see what had become of everyone, who had aged well, who had not, and who had made something of their lives and who had not. The current prime minister, a graduate of Exeter College, would also be there.

When Jamal replied and paid for his ticket, however, he received a polite letter from the Rector asking him not to come. The invitation had been an administrative error since 'he had not actually graduated due to unforeseen circumstances'. He shared his frustration with his sister over coffee in a café near her office at *The Guardian*. He was just finishing the crossword as she came in.

'They are meant to be among the most clever and educated people on the planet, yet they treat me as if I am beyond redemption.'

'And are you?' asked Ida.

'You're my sister. You know me better than any one. What do *you* think?'

‘The moment you believe that even one human being is beyond redemption, you are lighting your candle at the funeral of the human race.’

‘Exactly, that’s the central problem of all humanity,’ he moaned. ‘Ausgrenzung statt Aufklärung.’

‘Exclusion instead of enlightenment,’ said Ida softly.

‘Shit, that’s impressive. How did you know that?’

Ida lent across the table, kissed her brother, smiled at him and left. A few minutes later, Jamal left too, forgetting to pay the bill, and leaving his pen on the table. As he opened the door, a gust of wind blew over an illuminated Christmas tree that was standing in the entrance to the café.

* * *

A few miles away Catherine came back up to Mr Marriott’s room with some Christmas decorations for him. Although increasingly perturbed by his atheistic convictions, she became even more determined to share God’s love with him anyway.

‘Everything you said about God the other is all very clever,’ she said, as she was hanging up the decorations, ‘but it pre-supposes that there is no God at all and that faith in God is no more than a psychological delusion shaped by the random events in my life.’

‘Apart from omitting the important role of social control, language and narrative, you’re getting there. Well done. Carry on,’ invited Dr Marriott.

‘Well, I *do* believe in God, and that He exists as sure as we are together in this room right now. And I believe that He still loves you, even though you have stopped believing in Him.’

Even while she was speaking these words, outside there began a violent hailstorm in which hailstones literally the size of grapes started banging against the elderly man’s window.

‘You see?’ said Catherine triumphantly, ‘He’s just letting you know that He still there!’

The weary old academic did not reply. Instead, he sat down, picked up his copy of *The Guardian* and stared at the main headline on the front page: ‘German doctors may have found a cure for Alzheimer’s’.

* * *

As God pelted His hailstones onto the window of the terrorists’ flat in Earl’s Court, Jamal’s cell was receiving its final instructions for the bomb attacks planned across the capital city of Great Britain. The five London-based cells each had a different target. The first four were to be hit during

the two weeks either side of Christmas. The five targets were: a synagogue, a pentecostal church, a meeting room in Whitehall, the offices of *The Guardian* newspaper and one further, top-secret location that would only be revealed after the first four locations had been attacked.

Jamal felt a numbing shudder, like a steel knife in his windpipe, when he heard the name of *The Guardian*. He knew what this meant, but he couldn't ask to switch cell due to the way they had been trained to work together in small groups in Syria. So, in the next few days, he had to decide whether to run away, to commit suicide or to kill his own sister in cold blood. At the end of the day, he knew he had no choice.

It was Friday. He went to the mosque one last time.

* * *

Just two days later, Catherine was over the moon with excitement. After fifteen years she had managed to persuade Becky and Jane to come to church - on the last Sunday before Christmas. Her two sisters had never got on that well, and since the so-called 'Jamal incident', they had hardly exchanged word.

Catherine knew that only God could heal the rift between them. To her delight, the sermon that Sunday was all about forgiveness, peace and good will to all people on earth. It felt as if God had it all set up in advance. A spectacular, spiritual ambush.

'When you realise just how much God has forgiven you,' she told both of them enthusiastically over coffee after the service, 'you are then able to forgive others. And when you do forgive, you discover that the *real* prisoner who has been set free is not the person who has offended you, but *you!* Isn't that *so* amazing?'

The plan was to go to church first and then to go and have Sunday lunch with their parents. Their mother was already busy preparing their favourite meal: roast lamb.

Tragically, however, all three sisters were standing near the front of the service with Jade and Ben when the bomb went off. None of them could have survived the devastating force of the enormous blast.

Two days later the largest synagogue in London was attacked, this time with guns and grenades. By now not only London and the UK, but also much of Europe and the rest of the world was in shock and mourning.

Millions of flowers were laid and candles lit. For several days, London was shrouded in grief. Churches preached peace and forgiveness and said prayers for the nation. In the mosques the Imams distanced themselves from these barbaric attacks that had nothing to do with Islam. On the

television and in the press, along with many shocking images, were comments about international unity, bravery and attacks on democracy.

The headline of the *Daily Telegraph* on Wednesday morning read: 'Where next?'

While *The Guardian's* headline boldly proclaimed: 'The gun will never triumph over the pen.'

* * *

Ida was sitting at her desk at 7 am on Friday morning, drinking a strong, black coffee and scribbling some notes on her jotter. She hadn't slept properly for five nights in a row. She had never been so busy in all her life: faxes, telephone calls, photographs, articles, editorials and several interviews on television. She was covering the emergency summit of the European Heads of State that had been called in response to the terrorist attacks in London. They were to meet on Sunday 1st January in a conference room in Whitehall. The security operation alone involved over 100,000 police officers and soldiers.

It was very likely she would get to interview many of the European presidents, prime ministers and chancellors.

Ida was so busy that she wasn't even able to answer her mobile when Jamal called her. She just remembered thinking that it must have been important because he rang three times. Later, when she went to get another coffee, she glanced out of the window towards the Moroccan restaurant on the corner of the street opposite her office. Ida smiled as she fondly remembered her meal with Jamal in St Michel. She was dialling his number as the cluster bombs went off. She died on the way to hospital.

* * *

Jamal and his friends re-grouped with the members of the other four cells in readiness for the politicians' bloodbath planned for Sunday in Whitehall. The risks were enormous but many were planning to die anyway. Only those young men assigned to the final attack on the secret, fifth target were meant to survive Sunday anyway.

What neither Jamal nor the public ever got to know, however, was that the Secret Service had known about the plans of this group of terrorists all along. The CIA, NSA and the British Secret Service had been meticulously tracking their communication and movements since they left Paris and had to come to London via Hungary. The government had to make the tricky decision to allow the attacks on the church, the synagogue and the offices of *The Guardian* to take place in order to lure all of the terrorists into a trap on the Sunday.

So the bomb attack on Whitehall was completely thwarted. Although some of the terrorists managed to escape, the majority were captured. Jamal was one of those captured.

Meanwhile, the UK Prime Minister announced on television that democracy, unity and freedom had triumphed. He thanked the army, the police, the secret service and the other Heads of State for their unwavering support. He seemed to have no awareness of the fact that the source of this current wave of European unity was the same source that will one day bring about its absolute disintegration.

Eight months later, the interest in the trial was enormous, producing nearly as many emotions and political and religious commentaries as the tragic events themselves. Jamal received life imprisonment, 30 years for the murder of the innocent civilians and 20 years on account of terrorist activity. Condemning him for one of the most heartless and despicable terrorist crimes in the history of the UK, the Right Honourable Anthony Brown, QC, MBE, sentenced him to life imprisonment with a stipulation that he never be released from prison.

As for the terrorists who escaped on that Sunday in January, they met up again to re-form their cell and they are currently working on the secret fifth target, planning an even greater act of terrorism that will shock the world and become a future byword for all terrorist activity. And this foretaste of Armageddon will change the way all of us live our lives.

Forever.