

Church Going

It was the third church of the day.

As he pulled up on the verge at the bottom of the path, Jamie said, 'We can have a day off churches tomorrow, promise.'

I laughed, as though to imply that I was more than happy to continue going round churches all week if that was the plan. In fact, I'd indeed had enough. At each one, Jamie did his best to communicate enthusiasm for the unique features, the stone font, the original pulpit, the pre-Reformation stained glass, but I remained untouched. None of those things impressed me as either feats of engineering or works of art, and I didn't feel anything spiritually either. At church number two, that morning, there'd been some frescoes that were more than five hundred years old, but all you could make out were indistinct shapes that reminded me of nothing so much as the stains that'd been left on the kitchen ceiling after the boiler leaked that time.

But we couldn't not have a look at this one. Apparently, it was the only surviving example of Saxon something or other in the county. Or was it the country? Jamie had told us when we were on the way, but I'd tuned out.

As he strode off, Helen linked my arm and said, 'You will say, won't you? You know what he's like, he'd happily spend the whole week going round churches.'

'It's fine,' I said. 'Really. It's just nice to...you know...'

She nodded slowly, as if she did know, and then said, lightly, 'I'm determined to get him to stop at that interiors shop next time we go past.'

The interiors shop didn't really interest me either, but I smiled, and we followed Jamie through the low gate in the hedge. Jamie wasn't religious, but he was an architect and, although as far as I knew he specialised in designing charmless public facilities with slices of

bright coloured plastic stuck on the front and asymmetrical windows, he enjoyed looking round old buildings, admired the craftsmanship. Helen liked the social history side of it, and spent a lot of time reading the inscriptions on monuments, and wondering how someone with a surname like that had ended up here, and saying wasn't it sad that all those children had died so young. I tended to get distracted by things like the single glove left on the back of a pew for the owner to retrieve, the incongruous technicolour posters for Water Aid projects and charity goats, the pathetic, Sunday school pictures blu-tacked up in the darkest corner, Jesus recognisable by the brown crayon lines of his beard, or the comments in the visitors' book, veering between praise for the wonderful atmosphere and complaint about the lack of toilets. All the stuff that just served to pile on the melancholy, that was what I noticed.

But even I could see this one was unusual. The stone arch over the single wooden door was carved in angular patterns, zigzags that had a 1970s look about them. Jamie was saying something about how it was a style that was common in North Africa and how there'd been debate about how it might have happened that workmen in Worcestershire had imitated it. Maybe a North African had found his way here and shown the locals how? I could see what Jamie meant: a memory came to mind of when Sean and I went to Morocco. The tiling in the medieval baths we'd visited had had a design like this.

Jamie said we should have a look at the windows before we went inside, and as I hesitated, about to go to the right, he smiled and said, 'Not widdershins', and set off to the left. I remembered this from another trip we'd had. Apparently it's bad luck to go round a church anti-clockwise, though I felt like saying to him, it didn't work, did it, following that rule, it didn't save me from bad luck, didn't stop probably the worst thing that could happen from happening. But I remained silent and complied. We edged our way round through the long grass, still wet from the morning's rain. The sun was trying its best in the thin, not-yet-up-to-full-power way of April.

‘Each of the windows, they’ve got the signs of the zodiac carved above them, see?’
Jamie said.

Helen was interested by this, asked Jamie if it was surprising that they should appear so early, and in such recognisable form. They walked ahead of me, trying to figure out which was the Archer, which the Water Carrier. The windows were high and the carvings even higher, and I soon got tired of craning to see and wandered off in among the gravestones, very old ones on this side, mossy and illegible, but round the corner there were a few that were much more recent, shiny and black with gold lettering, one with fresh flowers in an urn, the storybook version of a churchyard butting up against the reality of loss.

Or so Helen perhaps thought, because when she saw me looking at those red roses, she came and put her hand on my arm and said, ‘Shall we go inside now?’

She said it in the voice that she used, I believed, to indicate to me that she was there if I wanted to talk about how I was feeling. I gave her the weak smile that was intended to communicate that I appreciated the sentiment, and followed her meekly, wondering how she’d react if I did tell her how I was feeling, if I broke our unspoken, unspeakable pact.

Sean wouldn’t have liked it, but I gave in to his mother’s wish for him to have a grave like those ones, with a black headstone and gold letters. He would have said it was naff, but I decided it was the least I could do for the poor woman, and in any case, didn’t have the energy to argue. She seemed to welcome being tasked with organising the funeral; it kept her busy. All I had to do was choose what to wear, get myself there, play the part. The municipal cemetery was a ten-minute drive from her house, and she kept telling me this, that she liked the idea of Sean being close by so that she could go and visit him. Thinking about where he would be laid to rest seemed to distract her from the questions of where he’d been going when he’d crashed and how he’d come to take that stuff that probably made him too drowsy to keep his eyes open. She seemed utterly incurious about that.

With its orderly rows stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see, that cemetery had made me think of a supermarket car park, packed full on a Saturday afternoon.

Helen and I went in. At first the interior seemed very similar to others we'd seen, not just that day but on other trips like this one: two very short rows of wooden Victorian pews and, at the back, a carved wooden screen, also, I knew even without having been consciously paying attention to Jamie, a Victorian addition. There was no sign that it was in regular use, no hymn books or embroidered kneelers. It was probably the sort of place that only got opened up when someone local decided it'd look good in their wedding photos.

Jamie had walked the three or four paces up the aisle, and was looking up at the ceiling. Helen and I looked up as well. Earlier in the day, at church number one, we'd seen an angel roof, the beams carved with wings and faces, impressive for its ingenuity if nothing else, I had to admit, but the vaulting here was stone, and there was none of the fancy carving we'd seen around the doorway or the windows.

It was cold, a damper, more penetrating cold than you'd expect given how relatively mild the day had been.

Jamie was up on the altar now. There was what looked like a plain wooden table in the middle of it, but he seemed to be examining it quite intently, and then he looked up at the ceiling again.

'Come and see this,' he said.

Helen had drifted off towards a memorial tucked away in the corner opposite the door. I walked across the uneven herringboned brick floor and up the steps to see what had caught his eye this time.

There was a large mirror fixed onto the table. The church with the angel roof had had mirrors in a rack by the door, and you could use them to see what was up there without getting a crick in your neck. It was a neat idea, had provided me with two minutes of

amusement, not least because those mirrors had reminded me of the ones the hairdresser uses to show you what the back looks like.

This one had a wooden frame and was bolted down at the corners, and at first glance I felt slightly vertiginous, because although the rest of the building was whitewashed and rather bare, the ceiling over the altar was painted in a design that echoed the zigzags around the door, and the colours that had been used, bright red and mustard yellow, seemed unfaded and fresh, so that when I looked into the mirror, for a moment it was as if I was looking down a kaleidoscope. I had to resist the urge to take hold of the edge of the table. The mirror appeared to magnify the image of what was above, and I felt a strong desire to look away.

‘What’s that all about?’ I said. ‘Bit brash, isn’t it?’

‘Like being in a tent, you know, a circus tent, or something,’ Jamie said.

I looked up, then looked down again.

‘If you stand here,’ he said, moving round to where the priest might stand during a service, ‘there’s....come and see,’

I went and stood next to him.

‘See,’ he said.

I couldn’t see what he meant. The pattern looked the same. He tried pointing and then laughed because of course the reflection of his hand and arm blocked what he wanted to show me.

‘Here,’ he said, and he moved so that I could stand in the place where he’d been standing, and then the pattern reflected in the mirror suddenly resolved itself into a face, a face with a yellow tongue and eyes, flames licking around it, a huge, disembodied, devilish head.

‘Bloody hell,’ I said, and he said, ‘Well, yeah,’ and we both laughed.

‘What is it?’ said Helen, coming up onto the altar.

I stepped back and let her take my place at the table. She looked, took a moment, as I had, to see what it was, then was as surprised as I'd been.

I was prompted to some mischief.

'You know, Sean, he could never see stuff like that, you know, optical illusions, the duck that's a rabbit, or those magic eye pictures, that's what that reminds me of a bit, he could just never get them to look like anything. But he had astigmatism, I wonder if that was why?'

They fell silent, and then, almost immediately, Helen said, 'Yeah, I remember him saying his contact lenses cost a fortune.'

This was the way of dealing with the situation that we'd evolved now, eighteen months on. We'd reached the stage where it was permissible to mention Sean and for it not to derail the whole conversation. They'd taken the lead from me, of course; of course they had, it was worst for me, and it was only right that I should be the one to set the tone, set the pace, as we advanced through the seven stages of grief. Or was it thirteen? It depended on who you read.

You could argue that it was worse for Helen, if you were in full possession of the facts, as I was. I certainly did my best to make it worse for her, in subtle ways, like making odd comments such as that one about Sean's eyesight, and not so subtle ways, like accepting their invitation to come away on holiday with them, because we could still have fun, couldn't we, even though it was no longer the four of us, just we three?

Jamie had stepped away from the altar table and I saw him looking at the little carved door that led into the pulpit, but he didn't go up there. Perhaps he was remembering that thing that Sean did once or twice when we were in empty churches like this one. He'd go into the pulpit and deliver a hell-fire and brimstone sermon, leaning energetically over the lectern, gesticulating and rolling his eyes at an imaginary congregation, inveighing against fornication

and scarlet women. Once he adopted a broad Yorkshire accent to do this, another time, an Ian Paisley twang. Sean had been raised Catholic and though he'd given it up when he was a teenager, he found churches of other denominations very stark and plain, no pictures to look at when you got bored, he used to say, and those tatty old military standards, what were they all about, and a church wasn't really a church unless it smelt of incense. In Spain, once, he made obscene suggestions to me in a confessional, him on one side of the grille and me on the other. It was like some low rent porn film but that was the point, it was funny, it was fun. Despite everything, we had a lot of fun, me and Sean.

I couldn't imagine Jamie and Helen making obscene suggestions to each other, whether in a confessional or not. Jamie had always struck me as somewhat sexless; it wasn't just that he did nothing for me in that department, I couldn't grasp what anyone else might see in him either. He was slight, fair, looked like he never needed to shave. Helen, I could see why she might seem appealing, unselfconscious about her height, never flaunting her hourglass figure, but managing to communicate to you that it was there, underneath the hand-knitted-looking jumpers and sensible waterproof coats and straight-legged cords from Marks & Spencer.

Yes, you could see what the deal was with Helen. Sean, he'd evidently seen what the deal was.

I asked him straight out once, not long after he'd introduced me to them, his oldest friends, asked him if he fancied her, if there'd ever been anything between them, and he'd said, God, no, of course not, Helen and Jamie had already been together when he'd first got to know them, they were that mythic couple who met in the queue to register on the first day at university, stayed together and got married a month after graduation.

I didn't press him, but even at the time, it struck me that saying they were already together when he met them didn't quite answer my question.

Helen had led Jamie away from the altar and they were walking down the aisle. She was pointing towards the memorial she'd been looking at earlier. Jamie was on her right. If they'd just got married, he would have been on her left. Was that bad luck, walking down the aisle the wrong way round, like going widdershins?

I drifted back to the altar table. As I approached, the mirror seemed grey and empty. I tipped my head back and looked up at the ceiling, felt that vertiginous rush again, not unpleasant this time. I stepped closer, and the reflection filled the mirror again. Now I was reminded, not that I needed reminding, of the mirror that hung on one of the staircases at that place we'd stayed in Shropshire, that was an old rectory as well, like the place where we were staying here. It had a flight of stairs at each side of the sitting room, and we joked that we had a wing each, Helen and Jamie on one side, Sean and me on the other. Except for when I glimpsed Helen, her image in that mirror echoed shadowily in the glass panel of a door down below, and when I crept closer, I caught sight of the reflection of something I wasn't supposed to have seen. There she was on the wrong staircase, the wrong side of the house. There they were.

Bring hellfire raining down on the whore of Babylon, that was the type of thing Sean would say when he was pretending to be a preacher.

I stood on the spot that made the shapes up above resolve themselves into a face. I wondered at the pointless ingenuity of it. Helen and Jamie had fallen silent. When I glanced at them, Jamie was leaning forward, shining the torch on his phone at the lettering on the plaque, trying to decipher it. But Helen was looking at me. When she saw me looking back, she flicked on her usual bland smile, though not before I caught her previous expression – horror, fear, disbelief, a little of all of those.