

Seventeen

That Sunday was the third Sunday in a row that I went to All Souls Church. I took Johnny with me, because I felt it was the right thing to do. He knew where we were going as soon as we stepped out the front door. I had to tell him to slow down so I could catch up. I didn't even know that he knew what day it was. But he must have known. One small thing like that makes you wonder how many big things have been missed in his life. Just because he can't talk.

The usual priest wasn't there, which left peace-be-with-you man almost in charge. There was a new priest who said he was just visiting for the day. He said some of the things in the service, including the part where they don't read but just look at you and tell you about the readings. Peace-be-with-you man did all the readings and said lots of the things the priest normally says. When it was time for the peace-be-with-you part, he came near me to shake people's hands. Someone called him Gordon, so I no longer had to call him peace-be-with-you man in my own mind. He had a bit of a stoop when he walked, not that I can talk, so to speak. He came right up to me and looked at me, and I stared at the mole under his eye, which still looked like it was ready to drop off. Then he said, 'Peace be with you' and I remembered

him doing it exactly the same way at St Peter's. Both times he spoke quickly and moved on straight after saying it. I don't know if he recognised me. He must have. People don't forget me when they see me. But he didn't say anything. I thought to myself, this is someone who killed a person, even though he probably didn't mean to. I started shaking, but he went straight back to the altar and I managed to calm myself down, which made me proud.

I knew he had lit the fires. How else could he explain why he was at St Peter's. If he was innocent, then he'd probably be thinking the same thing about me. How could I have been at St Peter's on the day of the fire? But I had gone to court, he hadn't. Maybe he already knew that.

If he did light the fires, what was I supposed to do? I could tell the police, but what would they do? I needed some more information. I needed to know why he lit the fires. Once I knew that I could tell the police because then they would have a reason as well as a person to arrest.

I looked around at the other people in the church. Bruce and Pat had come to sit next to me, which was very nice. It's not often that people choose to sit next to me. Johnny hummed in tune with the hymns, even though he kept going after the organist had stopped. The crying woman was up the front again. She didn't cry quite so much that day, but she still wasn't smiling. There were about twenty other people there.

I recognised a few of them from around the traps, which was one of Alfie's favourite sayings. I never really knew what that meant, around the traps, and I still don't, but it sounded like the right thing to think.

One of the lessons that Gordon read that day got me thinking. It was the third reading of the day from a book called Matthew. It was called a reading, but Gordon seemed to know it by memory, as he shut his eyes half way through saying it.

Just as the weeds are gathered up and burnt in the fire, so the same thing will happen at the end of the age: the son of man will send out his angels to gather up out of his kingdom all those who cause people to sin and all others who do evil things, and they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will cry and grind their teeth.



After Gordon said all that, anyone who knew what I knew would have been certain that he had lit the fires. Now I just needed a chance to prove it to someone. I didn't want to go back to jail, so I couldn't go to the police. I just needed to follow my instincts a bit. And my instincts told me that I needed to meet some of the people Pedro had written about in his diary.

I watched the crying woman at the front. I liked her, and I liked Bruce and Pat. I looked at the sheet that we'd been handed as we came in. It thanked Pat for providing the flowers in the church and a

woman named Marjorie was thanked for cleaning. That made me think for a minute about the cleaning woman at St Peter's. I hoped she was all right, after having to talk about seeing me there. I hoped she had something to do now, too, with her church being burnt so badly.

Then I saw something that gave me an idea. It just said, 'VOCAL meeting on Wednesday at 7 p.m. Meet Gordon Robinson in the narthex.' That was it. I'd seen the word 'vocal' in Pedro's diary, and knew it was the next piece in the puzzle. I didn't know what a narthex was, but I presumed it was at the church.

When the service ended I tugged at Johnny's shirt to tell him it was time to go. The crying woman walked past us and nodded at me, which I really liked. I thought a lot about that afterwards. She had a very pretty face and reminded me of my mother in some ways. They both had light coloured hair with a little swirl at the front. I needed to know more about her.

As we left I picked up every notice that I could find. I thought anything might help me work out what Gordon was up to. I took about eight pieces of paper which I would study carefully when I got back home.

Bruce patted me on the shoulder as I walked out and he also gave Johnny a little tap on the back of his head. I think Johnny liked that because he turned and went straight up to Bruce and hummed to him. Bruce didn't quite know what was happening, but he

didn't jump back like a lot of people do. Most people think Johnny's about to hit them or something, because he comes so close.

I went to my room as soon as we got home and I looked at the notices. One talked about a prayer group meeting with members of some other churches, one said the women's auxiliary was raising funds for a new vacuum cleaner. Then I saw one with VOCAL on the top, and it said:

Victims of Clergy Abuse Linkup (VOCAL).
As part of an ecumenical commitment to address the harm caused to parishioners in the past, this group, which meets monthly, is committed to sharing the experiences of those people who have suffered injustices at the hands of members of the clergy. If you fall into this category and would like to share your experiences and support others like you, please come and attend one of our meetings, which are on the first Wednesday of every month. We promise a supportive atmosphere which focuses on helping each other to come to terms with things that have happened.



I didn't think I should take Johnny to the meeting, because it was probably going to be a pretty quiet one and he doesn't keep quiet very well. So when Wednesday came around I just went down to the

church on my own at ten minutes to seven, and I carried the VOCAL notice so that I could get directions to the narthex.

It turned out the narthex was just the entrance of the church, which made me feel a bit silly. Never mind, I thought, I had important things to do. I stood there on my own for about five minutes, but then people started to come in. Gordon and two other people came in at seven o'clock and they said hello to me. I nodded to them and showed them my card.

Gordon didn't recognise me from St Peter's, which I found amazing, but he said that he'd seen me at church recently. He said I was very welcome to be there and that the people with him were Mark and Margaret. Two other people came to the meeting. The crying woman was there, whose name I discovered was Julie. Also a woman named Trisha came. I'd never been at a small meeting like this one where I was the only one who had trouble doing things. When I was at Kew we used to have lots of these things where we would all sit around and look at each other, but that was different. Here I didn't know what to expect.

We all sat in a circle on orange plastic chairs. Gordon looked a bit like a bird. An emu, in fact. He had a little bit of curly hair on his head and he had a small beakish nose. He also wore gold cufflinks which caught the light when he moved his hands. Maybe that's why he didn't move his hands very much. They lay crossed on his lap while he spoke.

‘Let’s get under way. Red here is new to the group, so let me quickly explain what we’re doing. As part of its response to the sexual abuse issue that has infected churches and come to light in recent years, the church has established these VOCAL support groups. As the others here know, I am a trainee priest and I have been asked to chair this group. The others also know that I am sceptical of the church hierarchy’s motives, as I think the existence of these groups is more about the church pointing to something being done, rather than the church actually doing something substantive. We can perhaps come back to that later. But, Red, for your purposes, what we do here is talk about our experiences and share stories. We have to trust one another. Last meeting Mark spoke. Today we were going to concentrate on Julie and Trisha. Julie, would you like to begin?’

Before Julie started I stood up with my camera and went to take a photo of everyone. But Gordon said, ‘Red, I don’t think that’s appropriate.’ I actually got a picture of him when he was saying that, which is funny when you think about it, and Mark and Julie were also in the shot in the background. I sat back down and put the camera under my chair.

‘Sorry Julie,’ said Gordon.

Julie looked more and more like my mother every time I glanced at her. Thankfully, she didn’t sound like her. She had quite a deep voice.

‘As you know, my husband Gareth died over a

year ago, and it is my certain belief that he took his life because of the abuse he suffered when he was a child. I know that he had begun meeting with this group some time ago, but obviously the issues seemed insurmountable to him. I come here as a way of honouring his memory, and to ensure the abuse he suffered doesn't go unnoticed. He would have wanted me to be here.'

'Yes,' said Gordon, 'a couple of us met Gareth a number of times, and I should add that we were shocked by his death.'

'You may not know this,' said Julie, 'but I only found out about the abuse a month before he died, and I didn't even know he was coming here. But you all probably know more about it than I do. I guess that's why I'm here. I need to learn about it too.'

'Thank you,' said Gordon. 'From memory, and please correct me if I'm wrong, Gareth's abuse dates back fifteen to twenty years ago. The principal at his school had become friends of the family and went away on family vacations. Gareth was in the school confirmation group and the family were very involved in the local church. It seems hard to imagine now, but the man slept in Gareth's bedroom even when he was as young as ten and used to fondle him and get him to do things to him.'

'Yes, that's pretty much what he told me,' said Julie.

I could see Mark shifting in his seat. I often do that

when I know that it's my turn next to do something. I get quite nervous as well.

'You probably know,' said Gordon, 'that the principal was removed from the school that Gareth was at and is now working in another profession.'

'Yes, Gareth told me that, but he was only removed because someone else complained. Gareth never said anything, he told me, until he started coming to these meetings.'

'Would anyone like to say anything to Julie?' Gordon asked.

'Same m.o. as mine and Paul's abuse,' said Mark.

'Paul is Mark's brother, who's not here today,' said Gordon to me. I nodded.

'Not because he doesn't want to be here,' Mark added. 'He's currently living at her majesty's pleasure. He couldn't handle it anymore. I must admit I'm finding it tough myself. Those fuckwits.'

Pedro wouldn't have liked hearing that word. I looked at Gordon, but he didn't do anything. There must be new house rules at the church, I thought to myself.

'Yes, Mark, that's why we're here,' said Gordon, 'to get things out in the open.'

'Didn't help Gareth much, did it,' said Mark looking blankly into the centre of the room.

'No, but you'd be hard pressed to say that Gareth's unhappiness was caused by talking about his experiences. It was those experiences themselves

that caused his grief. In any case, you all know my feelings on this. I think the perpetrators have gotten off far too lightly. I'm here because of that belief.'

'Doesn't the church have to be forgiving?' said Julie. 'That's what I've been getting from the local bishop.'

'Yes,' said Gordon, 'once there has been a full and frank admission of what has happened, an acknowledgement of the damage that's been caused, and contrition. Then we can talk about forgiveness. Until then, forgiveness takes a ticket in a long queue.'

I just kept nodding whenever anyone spoke. They could see I was following most of what was said, even if I couldn't say so.

'What was the name of the school?' asked Trisha.

'St Michael's primary,' said Julie.

I stood up as soon as Julie mentioned the name of the school.

'Yes, Red?' said Gordon. 'Did you want to say something?'

I shook my head and sat back down.

'Wasn't there a fire there the other day?' asked Trisha.

I looked at Gordon, whose eyes were moving so fast between looking at everyone that it was like he was watching a tennis match.

'Yes,' said Julie, 'I did read about that.'

'Trisha,' said Gordon loudly before clearing his throat, 'it's time we heard from you.'

‘Not much to tell,’ she began. Trisha had four earrings in one ear and none in the other. I wondered whether she preferred sleeping on the ear that didn’t have earrings. Then I smiled as I thought about her going for a run and going around in circles.

‘Is something funny, Red?’ asked Gordon.

I shook my head and looked at the floor. Trisha started twirling each earring in turn, which I thought was probably a good thing for her to be doing.

‘Some of you already know my story. But I’ll say it again for Red and Julie’s benefit. I trusted a man at the church I’d been going to. He wasn’t so much the priest as the priest’s assistant. I was a teenager and this man helped with my confirmation and everything, and ran a youth group. We all thought he was cool. He encouraged us to play guitars and stuff at church services, took us on camps. I was fifteen, and asked him about premarital sex, because I was going out with a boy. Then he started talking to me all about sex, how it was sacred in the eyes of God, how sex involved not just the participants but God as well. Then he convinced me to have sex with him in the church, of all places, so that God could watch. He said he was ensuring that God would watch over me.’

If I was a betting man, which I am not, I would have bet that Trisha’s church back then was St Mary’s. That was the church that had been set alight on September 8th when I was in jail. Pedro never

mentioned Trisha in his diary, that's why I missed it. I was lucky that Trisha had started coming to VOCAL and that her old church had been lit, because I would still be in jail if all that hadn't happened.

My thinking stopped when Mark asked Trisha, 'Would you say the priest turned you into a lesbian?'

'Is that meant to be funny?' said Gordon.

'Not at all, I'm serious. 'Cos I know you have a female partner, I'm just wondering if the priest did that to you, in a way.'

'How am I supposed to answer that?' asked Trisha.

'You're not,' said Gordon. 'Mark, that was insensitive. I think you owe Trisha an apology.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it as a bad thing,' said Mark. 'I think my experiences made me have sex wherever and whenever I could. I used to masturbate all the time as a kid. That's pretty much under control now, but my whole sex life has been affected. I think it's what sent Paul to prison, too. There's no forgiveness from me. My bloke's now long gone, but until the church properly apologises to us, with compensation, I'm holding onto a grudge.'

Gordon raised his hand. 'We're still talking with Trisha, is there anything anyone would like to say to her?'

'What did he make you do?' Mark asked. 'Forced to smoke his pipe, were you?'

Trisha's face shook for a few seconds until she was able to bring it under control. I sometimes do that

when I think about disgusting things, like what Rav's been up to during a tantrum.

'As I say,' Trisha went on, 'things that I'm not able to discuss with you. But I must say that I feel a terrible weight has been lifted from me by being able to name the harm, as my psychologist has said. And I thank you for listening.'

No one said anything.

'Does anyone have anything else to say to Trisha?' asked Gordon.

I stood up again.

'Red,' said Gordon, 'would you like to say something?'

What I wanted to say was, 'Why is everyone here talking about sex stuff all the time?', but what I actually did was hold out some photos for everyone to see.

The first one was the shot I had taken of Debbie at the Southern Swingers Dance. Gordon knew who she was and said, 'Yes, I've met Debbie, is there something you wanted to share with us, Red?'

Then I showed a photo of Pedro and me, my favourite one. Gordon looked like he'd turned white all of a sudden. 'Would you excuse us for a minute, everyone, I just need a quick chat with Red.' Mark, Trisha, Margaret and Julie stood to leave, but I held onto Julie's sleeve as she walked past, and Gordon said, 'I think we should be alone' but I shook my head and held onto Julie's sleeve.

‘Ok, Julie would you please stay with us, let me explain.’

When Mark went to walk past I also grabbed onto his sleeve.

‘Fair enough,’ said Gordon. ‘Why doesn’t everyone stay?’

We all sat down and Gordon took the two photos. He held up the one of Debbie. ‘This is Debbie Raleigh, a young woman who used to be a parishioner at St Mark’s. She left after it was discovered that the priest was involved in a relationship with her. She is intellectually disabled. That priest was this man, Pedro Almore, who later moved here to All Souls.’ Gordon reached for the photo of Pedro and me. ‘I suspect that Pedro may have also been interfering with this gentleman, Red. Is that right, Red? Is that why you’re here?’

It wasn’t, but it was close enough, so I nodded. I was actually there because I wanted to see whether Gordon knew who Debbie was, which he obviously did.

Pedro certainly knew who Debbie was. This is what he wrote about her in his diary.

Debbie has a rare beauty that I suspect is rendered invisible to most by her disability. I saw that beauty and ignored her disability. That was my mistake. It is a terrible thing for a stronger person to take advantage of a weaker person merely in order to satisfy

some selfish physical desire. I hate thinking of my relationship with Debbie in that way, but in truth, that is what happened.

Some who have shunned me say a physical relationship between an intellectually disabled adult and someone without a disability is the same as a relationship between a child and an adult. I reject that entirely. Children will one day become adults, so we can justly say we are protecting them until that time. But if we stop intellectually disabled adults from having relationships with others who are not disabled, from whom or what, in the end, are we protecting them? I guess it is from people like me, who confuse physical desires with love. How weak am I.



I sat there in front of Gordon and the others and didn't know what to do. I kept thinking about the fires and about Pedro.

Gordon kept asking about Pedro and me.

'Did he give you special cuddles, Red?'

I couldn't remember Pedro cuddling me. We'd hugged sometimes, and they were special to me, so I nodded.

'Do you feel angry about Pedro?'

I certainly did, I wanted him there, so I nodded.

‘Where did you meet Pedro? Was it when he was at St Mark’s, or here at All Souls? Or somewhere else?’

I actually met him at Kew but he was at All Souls Church then, and he was just finishing up being a priest. I nodded toward the cross behind the room we were sitting in.

Gordon looked for a minute to the roof. ‘It was here at All Souls that you met, was it? Good grief,’ is all he said, then he shut his eyes for a moment.

‘I’m terribly sorry to hear that,’ said Julie.

‘Yes, we all are,’ jumped in Gordon. ‘That is terrible news.’