

Tuesday

Phil Wittle was the someone in the police station I could talk to. We hadn't met through work but had found ourselves sharing a jacuzzi at Spring Harvest Christian convention earlier in the year. I'd been a bit wary of going back to Butlins after the cold March of four years ago and I vowed to have a soak in the hot bubbles at least once a day. Some of the teaching had been as crude as the accommodation, but the atmosphere had given us all a boost for the whole year. I thought Jane needed a lift and perhaps some direction. It was good, and, after singing until my lungs hurt one evening, I thought I'd keep my vow with the jacuzzi. Phil was there already luxuriating in all his six foot seven inches, welcoming me with 'How do you tell a buffalo from a bison?' before shouting the answer - between gulps of Brummie laughter - 'Yer can't wash yer 'ands in a buffalo', and splashing his enormous hands in the water. He couldn't believe that I was from Brum too, with my accent.

When I had cajoled him to move over, we settled down happily and went around together for the next couple of days. He claimed he went to the seminars for *Guardian* readers before teaming up with me, but I didn't remember seeing him there. Since then we'd met up for lunch a few times and had prayed together in the Cathedral once when he'd been in the middle of a paedophile investigation. He had said he felt so contaminated by the evil in people that he needed to pray, and I'd said I'd come with him. He was a member of a strong Methodist church in

Shirley and, more importantly, worked at the Central Police Station.

I rang Phil and asked him if he was free for lunch. He asked me what trouble I was in and didn't believe me when I told him it was about a friend's son.

I didn't know whether to ring Mohammed or not, feeling nervous about talking to him. When I thought of talking with Philippa again I wanted keenly to reply to the local Law Society summer tea party invitation. I recognised this as my usual ploy to veer away from the urgent, important and nerve-racking into the not urgent, not important and easily achievable. (At least I know some of the theory of efficient working.) I breathed a quick prayer and then thought it could be easier to call in later at Mohammed's office, especially as the sun was shining despite the miserable forecast

Over lunch at the top of the Palisades, Phil asked 'what's up with your friend's son then?' making quotation marks in the air and winking with the words 'your friend's'.

'Honestly,' I said, emphasising the words, 'my friend's son Jason has been questioned about the car accident involving Mohammed Khan's son and his girlfriend.' Phil looked up and now looked serious. 'Jason used to go out with the girl, Lizzie. According to his Dad, Jason's been treated a bit roughly and he's asked me, to ask you, to go easier on him.' Phil is too sharp for playing games.

'You've come to the right man,' said Phil. 'I was put on it today, one of a posse. Yes siree. And we gun-toting modern sheriffs like nothing more than blasting our pistols at the floor to make them darn suspects dance.'

'Phil,' I said gently and slowly, appealing to his friendship. 'You know I am not someone who thinks you lot are forever taking the law into your own hands, whatever the media impression.'

'OK. Fair cop!' It was good to see Phil smile cheekily again. 'I just think we are like teachers today, you know they can't come down on any naughty child without a nannying parent complaining about their poor Johnny.'

‘I know all too well. You should talk to Jane. Yes, I know there’s asking hard questions which is what you are meant to do.’

Phil nodded slowly. ‘And asking Jason Jennings hard questions is all we’ve done. OK?’ He looked at me steadily.

‘Thanks Phil, you’re one of the good guys.’ My mission to Will completed, I relaxed, ready to change the topic.

Phil leaned forward. ‘I can tell you now, because you’ll hear it tonight, that it’s not looking like an accident at all.’

‘OK...’ I replied slowly, ‘so..?’

‘So he wasn’t driving that fast either.’ Phil leant back again and looked up at me, half challenging.

‘Not reckless driving, but something else?’ It was like encouraging a witness to speak in their own words.

‘Something crocked, by someone who knows his spanners.’ Phil folded his arms in a challenge.

I winced and sighed inside. But there was a challenge inside too. ‘Just keep looking, Phil, beyond the end of your nose. OK?’

‘OK...’ It was Phil’s turn to nod slowly. I couldn’t tell if he was accepting a fair challenge, or telling me to leave him alone to do his work.

I wanted to keep to the subject but not challenge too much more. ‘There’s quite a few of you on the case then?’

‘Oh yeah. Top priority now. And everyone wants to get in on it. Birmingham crime’s not usually so spicy.’

‘Or so juicy for the media. Part of me wishes I wasn’t so involved.’ And part of me was surprised at myself insisting that I wasn’t just one of Phil’s ‘everyone.’

Phil smiled and shook his head. ‘Field day or what? *The Birmingham Express*’ll make hay for a whole year.’

‘And the nationals – unless there’s a royal tiff, so the poor journalists don’t have to leave London.’ We happily moved on to bemoaning the Londo-centricity of the nation, and to comparing our newspaper and reading preferences. At Spring Harvest we had both rashly signed up subscriptions to *Christianity* magazine, and were surprised to be both still looking forward to the next edition. The magazine says it’s about ‘Real life. Real faith. In the

Real World.’ The story we were engaged in didn’t feel altogether real.

With one of my pledges to Will fulfilled so painlessly, I decided to go for the second straight away. Walking up Temple Alley, I didn’t know what to think. Avoiding Philippa would be best, maybe I should have tried to visit in her lunch hour? Our encounter yesterday had left me feeling stirred up, like having eaten a hot curry when I was expecting lamb stew. But maybe she was feeling the same, and it wouldn’t be right at least to try to put things right. A helping of cool yoghurt was what both of us needed. I smiled at the thought of me acting cool and smooth and caring.

‘Ah, Mr. Jeffery!’ Philippa’s voice was confident and bright and expectant. ‘Twice in two days.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘You’ve come to see..?’ She put her hands down on her desk, sat upright, and focused her brown eyes at mine. Her red lips pushed forward a little, shaking her head slightly as she waited for my reply to her question.

‘Yes, erm,’ I cleared my throat and tried to make my voice deeper and cooler than usual. ‘Yes, erm, both of you, of course. It would be good to touch base with Mr. Khan – and ... also with you.’ I returned her smile and looked her in the eye. I told myself that I was being brave.

Philippa touched her necklace. ‘Well, in that case, I’ll just give Mr. Khan a little buzz to let him know you’re here, and, while we’re waiting, you can fill me in too. You intrigue me Mr. Jeffery.’ She motioned to me to sit on a gold settee while she rang through to Mohammed. I sat down, near one end of the settee and, nervously, smoothed the seat next to me.

Philippa stood up, ran her hands down the back of her skirt to unruffle it, and came and sat on the settee. There was an uncomfortably short gap between us; she turned to look towards me. Surprised, I wanted to withdraw my hand from the settee next to her, but didn’t want to offend. Nor did I want to let her know how nervous of her I was.

‘You know,’ Philippa said, putting her hand on the settee near mine, ‘those flowers really touched me. It’s not every man who notices a secretary, let alone thinks about her feelings.’

‘Well,’ I said, still trying to keep cool and smooth, ‘I’m not every man, and you’re not every secretary. You touched me. You brought something out of me. I didn’t want to just leave you high and dry.’ I felt I was a film star floundering with a bad script. Philippa just looked at me, encouraging me to continue. ‘I mean, I realised that you were upset, rightly so, and I thought the least I could do was soothe you in some way.’

‘Well, you succeeded, masterfully,’ Philippa replied, touching her fingers onto my hand lightly in what I took as thanksgiving.

‘Erm, yes,’ I cleared my throat again, ‘And today I just thought I could carry on where I left off yesterday. Let you know it wasn’t just a one off. If we’re going to be seeing each other more, I wanted you to know that I’m serious about getting on with you, so to speak, as best we can.’ Why I didn’t say anything about this being a business relationship, I don’t know.

‘Thank you, David,’ she said, giving my hand a warm squeeze. ‘You’ve really bowled me over again. Two lovely surprises. I’m more than happy to, as you say, get on with you more.’ She squeezed my hand again briefly and then lifted her hand to her hair. She brushed over her ear and shook her head a little, looking at me all the time.

I felt puzzled and it must have shown, for she, in return, looked playfully puzzled at me. I tried again to look cool, looking at her and nodding seriously. ‘Who knows how much we’ll be seeing of each other?’ I paused feeling that that wasn’t quite the right comment. ‘Depending on Mohammed entirely, of course.’ Maybe a little joke was needed. ‘He may not want to be solicited by me?’

‘Rest assured,’ said Philippa as she stood up to answer the phone, ‘that we are both more than happy with your services so far. You’re the lawyer with the little extra which counts for a lot.’ She went behind her desk and, picking up the phone, leant forward towards me.

I was glad that Mohammed was free to see me. I told myself that maybe she had noticed the extra kindness which was supposed to be our Christian witness, but this didn't feel quite right.

'David,' Mohammed smiled bravely. 'Thank you for your card, so thoughtful. May God hear our prayers, and may I introduce you to Frank Gatley, an old friend.' His arm directed me to a man with thick grey hair, a thin muscular face and green tweedy clothes. Mohammed was as usual very smart, in pinstripe dark blue with one of his striking ties, a slightly more sober one today than some days.

'Thank you for coming, David,' said Mohammed. 'It is good to see a trustworthy man in these difficult times. I trust that you and your family are well, and that my dear aunt will soon be able to have her beautiful flat. She needs to find some peace.'

'It's good to see you too, Mohammed. Please reassure your aunt that she will soon be able to have a home where she can be herself. We should be exchanging contracts in two weeks. But I wanted to come and say how sorry I was to hear about Tariq and Lizzie. It must have been terrible for you all.' Mohammed bowed briefly. 'How are they? Do you have any news from the hospital?'

'The hospital hardly tell us anything. My son and his fiancée are in intensive care, fighting for their lives, and the doctors won't talk to us until tomorrow. They won't even let us see them properly.' Mohammed's voice was even but deeply determined.

This was a bit much to take in all at once. Was Lizzie really engaged to Mohammed's son? Were the doctors really trying to keep him at arm's length? Mohammed was certainly angry, while managing to appear pleasantly polite.

'I am sorry to hear that the hospital aren't being as helpful as they could. It must make it worse for you. Of course you want to be with your son but intensive care do have strict visiting times.'

'Thank you for your understanding, David. We all want to be with Tariq and with Elizabeth. The nurses are very kind and hard-working, but they don't know him as we do. He needs his

family now, to speak to him, to remind him of happy times, to sing his songs, to pray for him.' Mohammed looked straight at me with sad, moist eyes. I admired the way he could bring emotion and argument together: a well-integrated man. I just looked back nodding a little, seriously. After a moment Mohammed continued. 'You here don't have everything right, but I can say this to you, David. Other people aren't always so sympathetic.'

I wondered if he glanced at Frank then, and then wondered if Frank had been trying to 'talk sense' to him about not kicking up a fuss with the hospital. Frank looked a bit cross himself, and I thought I'd better try to have a word with him if I could, to help him to go easy on Mohammed.

'You're right, Mohammed, we do tend to leave things to other people too much. Even praying with people in hospital we leave mostly to the clergy.'

'Healing isn't all about strangers doing things to people's bodies. We also need our family to bring peace to our soul while we fight for life.' Mohammed was a surprisingly poetic businessman.

'And the doctors too often treat family as ignorant people who are almost irrelevant. We're at the receiving end of that sort of attitude too - and we put up with it too much.' Mohammed bowed slightly again. 'I expect Lizzie's parents are going through much the same as you. You must have met them now - especially as you say Tariq and Elizabeth are engaged.' I wanted to say that I knew Lizzie but thought it better to wait a bit for Mohammed to get a bit more off his chest

'Elizabeth's mother is a good woman. But they don't see things in the same way as we do, and they don't have the same pressure that we have. Too many people are accusing us of terrible things, of Tariq being drunk. He never drank alcohol. The way of Islam meant too much to him for that.' Again Mohammed wasn't pretending that he wasn't deeply sad and angry. But he still spoke in a measured and gentle way. 'These were two good young people celebrating their engagement and

attacked by a jealous lover. The car was sabotaged, it must have been.' He raised his head and looked me in the eye again.

'I know what you're talking about, and...' I drew a long breath. 'This may come as a surprise to you, I know who you're talking about. Elizabeth's old boyfriend is the son of some friends of ours at church. He used to bring her to church sometimes. I've known Jason for years. He's not the sort to take revenge like that.'

To my surprise Mohammed smiled. 'Allah be praised!' His ways are all good. Here we have a good man of the law who is at the centre of all this. I pray that you will be able to bear the truth when it comes out.' He paused, maybe wanting to let the implications of this sink in. This did not seem to be the time to challenge his assumption and I could not think of anything to say.

Mohammed continued. 'But it is a comfort to know that you know all these people. Have you been to the hospital? No, of course not.' He looked down and then raised his head to face me with a winsome smile. 'David, please go. Go with your priest. Pray for these good young people who have been so cruelly attacked. You see if they will tell you that Tariq had no alcohol in him at all. Maybe God will be merciful and give us strength to fight all our enemies.'

I thought this was bit extreme, but it occurred to me that the real 'enemies' were death, and everything that stood in the way of the truth - as he saw it. I was about to say that hospital visiting was not my forte, having only seen the inside of the Nuffield as a patient, briefly, four years ago. But something told me not to be so reluctant. Perhaps I could find out something about the drinking? Goodness knows how but, despite Mohammed, it might help Jason.

'Mohammed, I will pray, and if it's OK with you, I would like to see them in hospital with Paul, our vicar. We will pray for their recovery and for us all to be guided to the truth.' I paused to draw strength as I felt that now I needed to look Mohammed in the eye. 'Tariq can't have been drunk, I understand that. I don't think Jason can have had a hand in it either. We'll pray for you and all your family too.'

Mohammed bowed his head slowly, recognising the seriousness of what I had said. 'You please take your priest. I think you said at some time that he has some power in this way. And if Tariq knows that your priest has had a hand in his improvement maybe he won't be so extreme. David, thank you for coming. I will remember what you have said. Please let me know how you find them.'

'I'll be in touch.' We embraced and I smiled at Frank as I turned to go, half inviting him to come with me.

Frank stood up and went up to Mohammed, with an outstretched arm. 'Goodbye, old boy. Good will come out of this some way, mark my words. I'll be thinking of you.' They shook hands and Frank left with me.

I persuaded Frank to have a cup of coffee at one of the many American-Italian coffee shops that seemed to have suddenly opened in every street in the centre of Birmingham. In some ways these places are a strange throw-back to the old coffee houses of history. They also seem to mark a certain point of modern prosperity - when people are happy to pay good money for a good cup of coffee. I'm in between the generation who find it hard to spend so much and the generation who relishes at last being able to drink well in nice surroundings, with newspapers and settees. Frank didn't quite fit into the place, the bright colours made his clothes seem almost mouldy. But he seemed happy to talk.

I asked him how he came to know Mohammed. He said he'd known Mohammed from when he was born as he had met his father in the army. He'd helped the family come to this country. He spoke warmly of Mohammed's father as a 'character' who had 'got into trouble with some old customs' and needed to leave for the 'safety of a civilised country'. Mohammed's father had been proud to be British, said Frank, and wanted his children to be proudly British too. Frank seemed to have had a part in this, or at least he thought he did. He also told me more about what had happened.

Tariq and Lizzie really had got engaged. The Khans had known about it for a month, and, before it went public, the

couple went out for a celebration meal. They had come out of the restaurant in a playful mood, with Tariq swooning and laughing, so that people thought he was drunk. Frank didn't think so, 'too proper to enjoy his booze, not like his grandfather...' Then the car had crashed.

'It could have been the car failing - these Japanese cars aren't all they're cracked up to be.' Frank spoke with distaste. Then he raised his forehead looking as though a new thought had suddenly struck him. 'Or could it have been that jealous young man, the one who's an expert mechanic?'

I wondered if Frank had heard me say that Jason was a family friend or if he was choosing to ignore it. He gave me a card as we left, asking me to get in touch if there was any way he could help 'old Mohammed'. I watched him walk stiffly away and thought that Mohammed was kind to keep up with this old friend of his father's. What I couldn't believe was that Tariq and Lizzie hadn't been drinking. Lizzie could let her hair down and get tanked up like a good modern girl. 'Temperance' isn't in their vocabulary. Tariq must have been well inducted into beer at his public school. If it wasn't alcohol, it must have been something less legal.

Back at the office Rose greeted me warmly and primly. Rose is a thin woman with outsize glasses, short grey hair and a gift for efficient filing and Sunday School teaching. Her memory is phenomenal, she likes things to be right, and she can see the child in everyone. This means she can disarm hardened criminals and patronise self-important estate agents. Rose has been our secretary for sixteen years. She was well established when I arrived twelve years ago, so that I have always treated her with friendly respect.

'You've had phone calls.' Rose could still make it sound almost like I was such a lucky boy. At least now she used sticky notes like everyone else, instead of just remembering as she used to.

'First, the lawyer acting for the vendor of Mr Khan's aunt's flat wants to talk about a problem that has cropped up.' I sighed. 'Second, Will Jennings asked you to ring him at work. Third,

Paul phoned just to say you were on his mind. Fourth, Mrs Bright wants to go over the divorce proposals again as she has been talking with her friends and they have advised her to make sure her position is secure.' This meant that she had been thinking for herself and wanted more money. 'Fifth, a Mr Smithson would like to know if he can talk to you about creating you a website. And I really need to tell Paperbiz today what we want to do with the photocopier.'

That made five things which needed me to think hard. I decided to go for the other one, the most intriguing one. I rang Paul, with the excuse that as a vicar he would probably be out later.

'Paul, thank you for ringing. Would you believe I was talking about you this morning? Yes, you probably would, you're used to this sort of thing.' One of Paul's habits is to say nothing when you expect him to say something. Sometimes he can also say something when you think he would say nothing – a habit which has led him into trouble a few times. But for now the only response I had was a slight, interested 'Ummm.' I continued. 'Could you come with me to the QE some time today please? I want to go and see Jason's ex, Lizzie, and her new man in intensive care.' Another pause for a response that did not come. 'I know the boy's father through work. We were talking this morning and he encouraged me to go and to take you with me. He's a good Moslem, open to other possibilities too.'

Now Paul spoke without hesitation. 'That's why I had to phone you. I wondered why. And I have to come with you to the QE. Can we meet there at five o'clock? I'll ring IT first so they're expecting us.'

For once I did then tackle the job I least wanted to, and rang Ryan Hollings, my oppo for the aunt's flat. Ryan is young, breezy and remarkably successful, a bright star in the Birmingham law scene, according to some.

'My client finds herself in an awkward position.' Ryan sounded like he was in court. 'One of her neighbours in Sandringham Gardens has a cousin who is now on his own and he's just decided he would like to live in Sandringham Gardens

himself. He's in a bit of a state after his wife's death, and my client's neighbour is quite desperate to arrange a move for him. My client naturally wants to help her neighbour who she has known well for a number of years. She's very sorry that she didn't know about this before putting the flat on the market, but she really does want to sell to the neighbour to help him and his cousin. It's not a question of money or anything else, as I'm sure you understand, but we will have to withdraw from our negotiations with your purchaser. Isn't it frustrating how things work out sometimes?'

'Oh yes, Ryan,' I said through clenched teeth. 'Thank you for letting me know. I'll await your confirmation in writing. Goodbye.'

I might have believed young Ryan if I hadn't heard this kind of story before, and if he hadn't mentioned 'money or anything else'. His fake reassurance pointed me to what I suspected was really going on. The neighbours had got wind that the flat was being sold to an Asian woman, who then whipped themselves up into a frenzy of fear, much helped by them all being *Daily Mail* readers. They would be telling each other how this alien would probably have her enormous family visiting at all hours, including several illegal immigrants sleeping on her floor, and would cook enormous pots of fierce curry that would defeat any air freshener in any of the nine flats. They had banded together against this appalling threat to their entire way of life and young Ryan had found them a way to fend off this enemy. Once Mohammed's aunt was off the scene the 'cousin' would suddenly change his mind ('you know how important it is for people in bereavement not to make hasty decisions') and the flat would reappear on the market looking for a nice white buyer.

The law can't really do any more than indicate what should be done - people will usually find a way round it if they want to. I wondered what I should tell Mohammed. He was enough of a friend for me to want to tell him what I was thinking but I wasn't sure it would do him any good. The only way of proving this would be to hire a detective to try and find this supposed cousin - but that wouldn't prove enough. Mohammed was valiant

or stubborn enough to give it a try but I couldn't see him achieving anything.

Mrs Bright made me feel uneasy. She wanted me to advise her according to her own ideas of what she was entitled to, but unfortunately these ideas were unrealistic. I wanted to tell her to stop being so selfish and accept that life would never now be what she had hoped it would be with a rich husband, but I was acting for her and had to try at least to follow her instructions. I steeled myself, phoned her and said that if she wanted to consider changing the details which we were beginning to agree with her former husband we would have to meet and go through it all properly, which could, of course, add to her total costs. I left it for her to contact me if she did want a thorough review, suspecting that she was mean enough not to want to pay me any more.

I then held off the photocopier salesman, asked Rose to find two comparable quotes and wondered what I would do now that the scheduled work on the flat was unnecessary. I phoned Philippa and arranged to see Mohammed the following day because of the problem that had arisen with the flat purchase. I also asked her to let Mohammed know that Paul and I were going to the hospital later. I decided to ignore Mr Smithson. That left only Will.

'Thank God you've phoned, David.' More drama. It's not easy being Will's friend. 'It's Jason again. Don't know where he is. Paul's not seen him today. Went out this morning with that little rucksack looking full. But his lunch was still on the table. Where's he gone? Look could you pray for him? Could you tell Ginnie for the Prayer Circle - I don't know what to say.'

Not many people would ring a solicitor at work to ask them to pray. That's what warms me to Will. I told him I'd come round later with Jane if she was free, and then I did actually pray. The sun was shining low across the room, making it look bigger. I thought of Beryl's helmet and asked God to keep my mind clear and free as I seemed to be in the centre of all this. I couldn't think of what else to say so I just thought of them all and said the Lord's Prayer.

Parking at the QE Hospital is always a nightmare so I took the train. Paul was already at the door to intensive care but said he hadn't been there long. It was good to see him wearing a dog collar for a change, although I wondered if bringing his large Bible with him would be a bit threatening to some people. He buzzed and explained and a nurse came out to see us.

'Mr Khan and Miss Edwards are in a very serious condition,' she said. 'They have members of their families with them now, so I'm afraid it's not convenient for you to come in.'

'That's a shame,' said Paul. 'Do you know how long they will be here? We could wait a while?'

'Tariq Khan's father specifically asked us to come today,' I said. 'I'm afraid the family will be a bit put out if we can't see them. Please could you go and ask the Khans if we could have a word with them?' The nurse grimaced a little and then smiled and went to talk with them.

'That's rather hard-headed of you,' said Paul approvingly, as though he was seeing a side of me he hadn't registered before.

Tariq's mother came out with two of Tariq's sisters. She was a large woman in a bright green sari and extensive jewellery, with two very slim girls in smart suits. 'You must be David Jeffery. I'm very pleased to meet you. Let me introduce myself - Raisa Khan. And you must be David's vicar - pleased to meet you.' Raisa spoke in perfect Home Counties English with a hint of a plum in the far corner of her mouth. Paul shook her hand, looking a bit bowled over by this determined friendliness. 'Mohammed has so much wanted you to visit,' Raisa continued. 'He'll want you to come in and pray with poor Tariq - and Lizzie too. This place can be so soulless.'

Raisa ushered us into the unit past the helpless nurse. It was spacious and open-plan with fewer beds than I had expected, each with a small crowd of attendant equipment. Tariq was lying on his back with his muscled brown chest uncovered except for the heart monitor pads and wires. His face looked calm and still.

Raisa looked tenderly at him. 'He's not giving up' she said. 'Sometimes he smiles like he used to when he was very little, sleeping on the sofa when he had German Measles. Often he's

striving. He's trying, you know, trying to stay with me.' The girls hugged each other gently. 'Please will you pray for him?' This was all easier than I had expected, and certainly better than my memory of visiting a couple of home group members in hospital before. The routine then seemed to be half an hour of awkward chat followed by an offer of prayer which felt something of an intrusion.

'Yes, of course,' said Paul. 'When we pray for people we usually like to talk with them a little beforehand so that we agree what we're praying for. Obviously I can't talk with Tariq himself, so is it all right if I ask you a question?' My heart sank a little, as I wished Paul would just get on and pray. He was the professional after all. I had heard that there was a new 'model' of prayer ministry on which he was keen and which involved some cross-questioning. I hoped that Raisa could cope with this, despite her appearance of powerful competence. She agreed readily.

'How do you need God to come to Tariq?' Paul asked. 'What is it that Tariq needs now and how could you imagine God coming to meet that need? Maybe you could put it in a picture somehow, imagining God coming and doing just what you want him to do?'

Raisa was not thrown by this cross-questioning, but was soon in full flow. 'Oh when Tariq was little I used to cuddle him and warm him whenever he was ill. He was such a skinny little boy, so full of energy and life. But when he was poorly he just lay still, very still, and he shivered - even with duvets and blankets he still shivered. I used to hold him in my arms until I could feel him going warm again, until he could move his legs or his arms a little, and then I knew he would be fine. That's what I want to do for him now. I want to hug him and make him feel loved and warm, but I can't even put one arm around his chest without the nurse coming and asking me to keep away.'

Raisa paused and looked round. Paul nodded, again in his 'say nothing' mode. So it was up to Raisa to continue. 'They're very good and kind and I suppose they're right. I don't want to smother him, but sometimes I wish he didn't have all these wires and machines and I could just hug him. But maybe God can do

that for me now? I have been to the Mosque and made special offerings for my Tariq. My family are going every day with special gifts. Perhaps God will come and make Tariq warm again? Could you ask God to come and do that for him?’

‘Yes, we can all ask,’ said Paul, ‘and we will ask. We’ll ask God to come and be mother to Tariq, to wrap his arms around Tariq and make him feel warm and safe. We’ll just ask. We don’t make offerings for our progress. Jesus told us just to ask. God doesn’t come because we pay him to come. He just comes because he loves us, but he does wait to be asked. I’ll ask him to come and be mother to Tariq - and do you think you could ask too?’

Paul paused and looked at Raisa who seemed to be going along with what he was saying. I wished Paul would look at me so he could see signals for him to stop this rigmarole and get on with the prayer. But he carried on his way. ‘What I’d like is, if I say a short prayer first, and then you ask, out loud, for God to come as you have said, to do for your Tariq what you can’t do for him. I’ll then agree with you. Then we’ll wait a little, and stay quiet and wait for God to come. Sometimes we need to give God that time for him to work in. As we’re praying quietly, if you’re aware of anything, please let me know. If something comes into your mind or you feel something somewhere, please let me know and we can welcome whatever it is that God is doing. Is that OK?’

Raisa looked straight at Paul with large moist eyes. She looked uncomfortable, but couldn’t refuse. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m sure you know best’

‘Thank you,’ said Paul. ‘Let’s pray.’

I closed my eyes and listened to Paul inviting the Holy Spirit to come and guide us, not knowing what Raisa and her daughters would make of this. Then Raisa did pray, a lovely mother’s prayer to God the Merciful and then Paul prayed with tenderness, asking God to be mother to Tariq. This seemed a strange mixture - could Allah ever be thought of a mother? Then there was a silence. All I could hear were the bleeps from the machines, several all at once, quite soon after Paul’s prayer,

which seemed worrying, but, as no one came to do anything, I assumed it was all OK. I did take a peek at the machines, just to check, and thought I could see Paul looking at them too, but I quickly shut my eyes again and tried to concentrate.

‘Shash kial a ho, no rana ka.’ Paul was praying quietly, or rather singing quietly in tongues. My heart sank again. Why couldn’t he just stick to English, here of all places? He actually sounded quite good for Paul, and he didn’t go on too long thank goodness. I hoped Raisa would just think of it as some ancient mystical chant. There was another silence punctuated with bleeps and some fidgeting from the sisters. ‘Thank you, dear God, for coming to Tariq. Thank you for his fingers relaxing. Please keep coming and keep warming him.’

I wondered what sort of imagination Paul had and opened my eyes to check if anything was moving. Paul was just looking at Tariq and smiling sort of wistfully. And Tariq’s fingers were moving gently, backwards and forwards in a contented sort of way. Then his right leg stretched out a little and Paul thanked God for that. Then he smiled a little and Paul thanked God for that. Raisa was looking at Tariq now with a little stream of tears down one side of her face. ‘Let’s just pray and thank God for coming as we asked,’ said Paul, and we did.

‘Thank you so much,’ said Raisa. ‘How can we ever repay you? God has heard your prayer, I’m sure. Thank you.’

‘Sometimes when we pray God shows us things.’ said Paul. ‘What was it like for you when we were praying quietly?’

‘I don’t know if I was imagining it or not,’ Raisa sniffed a little and drew breath, ‘but I thought I saw an angel standing behind Tariq. He was right behind him over his head, leaning forward with his wings stretched out. It was bright and lovely, but probably wishful thinking.’

‘No’ said Paul. ‘That was real. That was for you. That’s a picture God has given you to help you to pray for Tariq. When you pray, remember that angel and ask the angel to be there with Tariq, and bless him. The angel’s wings will do for him what you cannot do now.’

‘Yes,’ said Raisa quietly, almost whispering, ‘yes.’ Then she brightened up. ‘Now you must pray for our poor Lizzie too.’ She took Paul’s arm and led him to the other side of the room. I followed. Raisa bustled over to the opposite side of the spacious room and clasped the hand of a strained, stiff, middle-aged woman in a blue woollen suit. Next to her was a young woman with bright orange hair and a nose stud.

‘Patricia, my dear,’ Raisa effused, ‘This is Paul, a wonderful man of prayer who has come to bless our dear children.’ Patricia pulled her hand away and looked warily and suspiciously at Paul.

‘Hello’ said Paul. ‘I’m Paul Cooper, the vicar at St Luke’s Braydon. David here knows Mr Khan, Tariq’s father, and he asked us to come and pray. I don’t think I’ve met you before but I have met Lizzie. She came to St Luke’s a few times with Jason Jennings.

‘Oh, that boy’s church,’ said Patricia. ‘Religion’s never done her any good.’

Something made me speak up. ‘We do understand your concern for Elizabeth, Mrs Edwards. She was such a bright and talented girl. We couldn’t imagine her staying long at St Luke’s - or with Jason Jennings. This must be such a trial for you and your daughter.’

Patricia dabbed her eye with a little white handkerchief, sniffed and said ‘Yes, well...’

‘I’m Meg, and I am her daughter, Liz’s sister. Hello.’ Meg offered me a handshake, thrusting out an arm, with several bangles, in a rough mint coloured striped jumper.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ I said, and then looked at Paul, not certain what to do next.

Raisa smiled enthusiastically ‘Come, let us pray for our dear Lizzie.’ Mrs Edwards winced and Meg said she was just about to go off and get a drink. She picked up a shoulder bag and left.

‘I’m sorry if this is an intrusion, Mrs Edwards,’ said Paul. ‘We can just pray for Elizabeth in church if you would prefer. But I think it could help you too if we were able to pray here.’ Patricia nodded and looked around.

‘Thank you, Mrs Edwards’ I said. ‘We know this is a very hard time for you.’

‘When we pray with people,’ said Paul ‘we usually talk with them first to work out how we’re going to pray.’ Patricia raised her eyebrows. ‘Could I ask you a question please?’ She just looked at him blankly. She too wanted him just to get on with it and get it over. ‘How do you need God to come to Elizabeth?’

Patricia burst into tears. ‘Oh God!’ she said, ‘How am I supposed to know? You pray for her, vicar.’

Paul looked taken aback by this sudden emotion. ‘That’s fine. I’ll say a prayer for her, asking God to come and touch her with the hand of Jesus. Then we’ll pray quietly for a while and I’ll round it off when it seems right.’

He turned to Lizzie, her oxygen-masked face framed by fine blond hair, lying perfectly still. I closed my eyes and listened again to Paul praying, wondering what Patricia Edwards was making of all this. Paul did pray that God would come and touch this daughter of his with the hand of Jesus. Then there was a silence in which I could hear Mrs Edwards rustling in her handbag.

‘O God the Merciful, the All Seeing, the All-Knowing,’ Raisa broke the silence with an impassioned prayer ‘Give us help, we pray. Send your angels of mercy and light to dear Lizzie, O God, O God.’ Mrs Edwards started coughing and spluttering. The machines started bleeping more and a nurse ran in to look at them.

‘Please! Could you just give the patient some space?’ She stared at us, her jaw set angrily. ‘I’m going to have to ask you to leave.’ She turned to Patricia and put a hand gently on her arm. ‘Just for a minute or two.’

Meg was sitting out in the corridor turning a necklace around in her hands. She looked up at us. ‘You were quick, not much you could do for her then?’

Mrs Edwards smiled at her daughter. I felt accused by her. Raisa walked with us to the hospital entrance, thanking Paul again, and making excuses for Mrs Edwards.

Paul offered to drive me back into town to pick up my car. I very much wanted to talk with him. I was worried about all this prayer for God to hold Tariq in his arms and to send his angels. It sounded like he was going to die. I thought too that we had put Mrs Edwards' back up seriously and couldn't see what to do about it.

Paul was phlegmatic. 'I can see what you mean about Tariq,' he said. 'And I can't say you're wrong. I don't know whether he is going to die or not. We just ask God to come and he does what's best. But when Tariq's hand started moving I thought personally that he wasn't going to die. And Mrs Edwards must have a history somewhere - perhaps some awful institutional religion. That's put her right off. We'll keep praying for her and trust she'll soften. Perhaps if Lizzie gets better she'll think better of God. This could be God's way of drawing her to himself.'

'Unlikely,' I thought, but all I said was 'Let's hope so. That daughter's a hard nut.' Paul just replied 'Mmmm.'

Jane wanted to know all about what had happened at the hospital. It was nice to have her so interested, as the fascination of conveyancing had long since died in her. She looked bright, perky even, and had made a nice meal of salmon and mashed potato just for us. I didn't ask if this was the special offer of the week, although it probably was. Emily and Nicola were out at a Youth Fellowship evening planning for the autumn house-party and Peter was staying with a friend. We had candles over dinner and looked forward to a summer night's stroll afterwards.

I had reached the end of us praying with Tariq, and our plates were half empty when the telephone rang. Jane wanted to me leave it but I couldn't. It was Mohammed.

'David, please forgive me for interrupting you at home. I needed to say "Thank you so much" for taking your priest to pray with Tariq and Lizzie. Raisa has told me all about it. It is so good to see her hopeful again. I don't understand about these things but I know how much it has meant to her, and seeing her so comforted and positive again means a lot to me. I am so grateful, David.'

I was a bit taken aback by the rush of gratitude, and didn't quite know what to say. 'Oh Mohammed, it was good to meet your lovely wife, it was good to pray with her. We try to believe that they are in God's hand now and he will do what is best for them.' I didn't want them thinking that Tariq was healed now but I couldn't exactly say I thought he might well die.

'We trust that the doctors will do what is best too. Did they say anything about alcohol in his blood? They won't tell me a thing - they only say that's a matter for the police. I don't mind them talking to the police but I need them too to talk to me. I am his father.'

'I'm sorry Mohammed, we didn't have a chance to talk with them. But I'm pretty sure I know what the answer is. I don't know why I didn't say earlier.' I had hoped not to have to talk about this so soon.

'You don't sound very positive.'

'No. The truth is that very probably no-one will ever know. To have a blood test for alcohol the person has to give their consent, which Tariq clearly couldn't do.'

Mohammed exploded. 'But... but surely the police can ask for this kind of testing. The hospital have to do what the police tell them. It is a critical piece of evidence. Don't tell me that no policeman even thought of asking. That would be too much.' I was glad that I had not heard Mohammed angry before.

'In this country, Mohammed, the police can't order the hospital to do anything. The hospital will only take a blood test when the patient gives their consent.' I was also glad now that I wasn't experiencing his wrath face to face.

'But they knew as soon as I saw them in the morning that a blood test was vitally important. We are his parents for goodness sake. They could have taken a test then.'

'Even you cannot give permission on behalf of a next of kin. They still needed Tariq to agree for himself. It's the law.'

'No wonder your papers are full of criminals who go unpunished. Even the innocent cannot justify themselves according to your law. It is a miracle your policemen ever get anyone to do anything if they always need their permission first!'

Although he was still fighting, his voice wasn't as biting as before.

'It's a complicated balance of authority and freedom and it's not perfect by any means.' I tried to speak gently. 'In this instance it would have been better to test him, I can see that.' I paused, hoping that would be the end of it.

'Yes indeed. No proof. We just have to find other ways of proving his innocence. I know you can't solve everything David. Thank you again for going with your priest man. At least Raisa is now at home and more settled. Thank you for that.'

Jane understood my dilemma. I didn't want to encourage Mohammed too much, as I still thought, mostly, that Tariq was going to die, maybe with Jesus somehow, but still die. I couldn't even reassure Mohammed that he'd be 'all right', for that probably meant he was going to live. What if he didn't? What would Mohammed think of our God then? Yet I couldn't dismiss the real sense that we all had that God had come close to Tariq, and that did make a difference. Jane assured me that I had said the right things, and we were soon talking about the children and what we could do at half term. Our bowls were half empty of summer pudding when the telephone rang again.

Will was frantic. 'David, I need someone to talk to. You've got to save Jason. He's taken it all on himself, tried to kill himself and left a damn silly note. It's a mess, a complete mess.' Jane had come to stand with me by the telephone: she told me to go, with a kiss on my cheek. Driving through the rain I couldn't believe what Will had said. If Jason had attempted suicide it made him look guilty. They say most murders are committed by someone the victim knows. But not Jason the floppy. However hard I tried, that idea just wouldn't fit into my head.

This time it was City Road hospital. The A&E reception had a sprinkling of people sitting in little huddles. Will was the only one pacing up and down, near the doors to the treatment rooms. The receptionist was keeping an eye on him. Will turned to me crushed, hardly able to look at me. He slumped into a chair.

'It can't be, it can't be Jason, it can't be.' What could I say to that? He bowed his head as though the effort of believing what he wanted to believe was too great.

'Tell me what happened, Will,' I said as gently as I could.

'Jason was off on his own again. Not at work - you know. Turns out he went down to Pond Wood on his own. Hose through the window. God!' Will turned towards the wall stiffening his lips. For a moment neither of us could speak.

I breathed deeply and dared to ask 'What happened?'

Will breathed deeply too and shut his eyes. 'An old couple saw a hose going along the side of the car and pulled the door open. He hadn't locked it. Can't have been serious. You think?' His bloodshot eyes appealed to me.

'He always was sensitive.' It seemed pretty serious to me. Suddenly I saw an opportunity to lighten Will's mood. 'God knows where he gets it from.' If Jane had been there I wouldn't have said it. Later, Will enjoyed telling people it was nearly the end of our friendship. Now he shuddered and then carried on.

'And God knows what they were doing there - something to do with their dog running off. Anyway, they called the ambulance. The worst is, they found this on the seat by him.' Will handed me a white paper with Jason's spidery writing.

'There's nothing left for me here now. I can't live thinking about Lizzie and how I drove her to him, and into the hands of those mad, harsh people. If only I could have loved her better, stronger - but I don't feel I can love anyone. I just don't have it in me. I caused all this. I just wanted her to get frightened and back away. But now she's damaged and it's all down to me. I can't bear it and it mustn't ever happen again.'

'He was more distraught than we thought,' I said.

'How can he think it was all down to him?' wailed Will. 'He's just made it look like he was responsible for her crash, but he can't have been.' Will was wringing his hands and then clenching them and pinching his knees. 'Stupid boy. We've just got to make sure the police don't see this. They'll stitch him up for attempted murder, crime of passion or whatever. That'll please the paki business man - which is all they're after.'

‘Will,’ I said, trying to look him in the face. Will’s prejudice shocked even me and all I wanted was to get him to turn his mind to something else. ‘Calm down, you’ve had a bad shock. This note doesn’t say that Jason had anything directly to do with the car crash. You have to concentrate on loving and supporting Jason now, not trying to have a go at other people. It’s not what I would usually say but we need to pray. Come on Will. That’s something we can do for Jason. Let’s go to the chapel - there must be one here somewhere. I’ll go and tell them what we’re doing.’ To my surprise he let me lead him away.

The chapel’s dark brown wood was a shock after the polished greys of the rest of the hospital. It felt churchy and medical at the same time, remarkably quiet. I just sat Will down to one side on one of the cushioned wooden chairs, sat next to him and, with an apology that this really wasn’t my thing, just asked God out loud to help Jason. I don’t really approve of people putting across a point to other people through prayer, but this time I felt I had to. ‘Lord, please help Will to realise that he needs to call on you to help Jason, to look for your help and follow your ways.’ I didn’t think I could quite add ‘ways of kindness and forgiveness’ but that’s what I thought.

Will grunted and slumped and let out a few tears. ‘Thanks, David,’ he sniffed. ‘You will keep praying won’t you? I can’t think straight.’ Will was a bit calmer as we walked back to Casualty, but straightened his back tensely as we sat waiting again. Quite soon Jennifer came out, almost as confident and calm as ever, but with one side of her hair tousled and dark bags and tired wrinkles by her eyes. Will rushed up to her and they hugged and talked. Then Jennifer came over to me.

‘Thank you so much for coming, David. They think he’s going to be OK.’ She smiled a brave smile.

‘That’s a relief.’

‘He’s still in a coma, but the convulsions have stopped and his heart seems to be strong.’ I could hear the nurse’s words in hers. ‘He’s breathing fine with the oxygen and he looks OK, not at all pale or strained. The doctor said that someone his age and fitness should recover from this without complications, thank

God. I think it's all right for Will to come in now. Thank you so much, David.'

I knew when I was being dismissed, and grateful to think only of white cotton sheets and a firm mattress, rest for my body and mind which had had enough. It was good to be able to share with Jane my pleasure that I did seem to have been a help to Will also. She had been praying for us too, and had been baking a cake for Will and myself. It was a good sleep that night.

Thank You

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