

THE LONG CLOSE CALL

Before knocking on the door to that dim, neglected house, Detective Inspector Jarvis took stock of his surroundings.

In doing so, he found nothing to suggest that, thirty years from now, this part of north London would become fashionable, that each of these houses would be worth upwards of three hundred thou, or that a future prime minister would live a couple of blocks from here.

Elsa opened the door, her nine year old son, beside her. It was one of the few times in her life that she had willingly allowed the police to enter her home, and the fact that her husband wasn't simultaneously trying to escape it via the back made a pleasant change.

There was something of the 1940s icon about her face, the suggestion of a starlet who had aged before her time. She had long put Jarvis in mind of the movie star, Jane Russell, and whenever he spoke to her, he tried to ensure that nothing of what he felt for her was betrayed by his tone of voice.

She led him into a room where the furniture was sparse, and her youngster flopped down on the carpet, sorted through Lego that lay on a rug, and started to play with it.

Earlier, he had built a small box, the bricks white, the roof green, and when he picked it up, something within it rattled, the boy instantly quelling the sound by holding the box very still.

Jarvis had seen this room on many an occasion over the years, most recently some weeks ago when he and a team of officers had called in search of the boy's father, George McLaughlan. It had been a fortnight before Christmas and Elsa had been pinning paperchains to the Anaglypta walls. Now, it was early January but the paperchains remained, their sticky links covered by a film of dust, their colours having faded from their former garish hues.

In seeing those simple, home made decorations, Jarvis recalled that Elsa had been helping her son to make them, gluing the links, or holding the chains while he stapled them together. That would have been about the size and shape of their Christmas, and his heart went out to them.

As a rule, he had no time for the wives of criminals, or at least, no time for those who made excuses for their predicament, but Elsa made no excuses. *I've made my bed, Mr. Jarvis.*

He could relate to her straightforward acceptance of personal responsibility, but couldn't help wondering why she felt it her duty to lie on that bed for the rest of her life. He'd once said, "You don't have to stick it,

Elsa. Nobody would blame you if you cut free of George and made a new life for yourself.”

He then asked how a girl of her decent working-class background had managed to get involved with a man like George in the first place, a man who, when she met him, had already served a sentence for armed robbery, a man who was bred in the Gorbals and whose background was so far removed from her own, Jarvis couldn't imagine how they had come to meet.

“Nobody forced me,” said Elsa. “I wanted him. Thought I could change him, you see.” She smiled at her own stupidity. “How many women have you heard say that?”

Plenty, thought Jarvis, who now took his eyes off the paperchains and focused on Elsa's face, finding that this, too, seemed drained of all colour, a washed-out, careworn grey.

There had often been times when he'd longed to give her husband a piece of his mind. What stopped him was the knowledge that if he did, George would somehow find a way to take it out on Elsa. Besides, he'd be wasting his breath. Men so totally devoid of any sense of responsibility towards their families rarely changed their ways as a result of being told a few home truths. “You phoned the station,” he said. “Asked me to drop by,” and Elsa, referring to the older of her two sons, replied, “Tam's gone off somewhere. He hasn't come back.”

“Gone off where?”

“Glasgow.”

“When?”

“A fortnight ago.”

A *fortnight*, thought Jarvis, and Elsa added: “He went down by train the day before the storm.”

Jarvis knew well enough that Glasgow had just been hit by one of the worst storms in living memory, and his concern deepened. There had been deaths in the poorer parts of the city where roofs that were rotten with age had crashed down on the tenement dwellers below. “What was he doing there?”

“Trying to find his dad.”

Good luck to him, thought Jarvis, who had been trying to find George for the past six weeks. “Any particular reason?”

“We needed money,” said Elsa, simply, and she didn't have to elaborate, Jarvis could picture the scene. With Christmas coming up, and with George on the run from police, it was understandable that either Elsa or Tam would try to get hold of him on the off-chance of getting some money out of him. “Any luck?” he said.

“I've no idea,” said Elsa. “He took Robbie with him, but Robbie came back on his own.”

Jarvis now spoke to Robbie. “Did Tam find your dad, Robbie?”

Robbie kept his head bowed, clicked a small white brick into place, but didn't reply.

Jarvis tried again: "Why didn't Tam come back with you?"

"You're wasting your time," said Elsa. "I can't get a word out of him."
"Robbie?" said Jarvis, who crouched down low and spoke to the boy very softly.

He straightened as Elsa said: "What do you think I should do – report him missing?"

Jarvis wasn't sure. Tam was sixteen so, unless they had reason to suspect he had come to harm, the police weren't likely to do anything more than make a few enquiries. There were, after all, more adolescents living on the streets of central London than the authorities knew what to do with.

"It isn't like him," said Elsa, and Jarvis, who knew Tam well, couldn't deny she was right. When the family had first moved to London, with Tam twelve and Robbie five, Jarvis had been part of a team that was sent to the house in search of stolen money.

Elsa had hovered in the background, an arm around each of her boys, Robbie too young to understand, but Tam clearly traumatised by the way the police had come smashing into their home.

There had been a model ship in the room, something Tam had made out of matchsticks salvaged from gutters and ashtrays. It had taken up most of a table that Elsa no longer had, the delicate rigging complex, the varnish applied with care, but an officer had crushed the rigging, had jabbed a fist through the hull, and watching Tam crack as his ship was torn apart had really got to Jarvis. "This is no place for the lads," he'd said. "Let me take them out," and Elsa had nodded her consent, unable to speak, George in an upstairs room, shouting the odds as another of Jarvis' colleagues read him his rights.

An hour later, he'd returned the boys with ice-cream round their mouths, and the day after, he'd turned up on the doorstep with boxes of matches, and glue. Too hamfisted to help, Jarvis had simply watched as Tam put the model back together, and later, when Jarvis was leaving, Tam had mumbled something along the lines of, *You're all right*.

Jarvis had wanted to tell him that most coppers were all right, but that unfortunately, they had a job to do, a job that was often unpleasant for all concerned. He had wanted to add that if men like his dad would refrain from committing armed robberies in the first place, it wouldn't be necessary for the police to descend on anybody's house with a view to taking it apart, but he'd kept these thoughts to himself.

Now, he reflected on the fact that, despite her circumstances, Elsa had so far managed to bring up the boys as law-abiding, responsible individuals. She didn't deserve to have problems with them, though what people deserved and what they got were often two different things: even so, he would be disappointed if Tam was about to start causing her concern. He

would also be surprised, for he reckoned he knew which of the lads sired by villains would eventually cause problems, and in his view, the McLaughlan boys were cut from a different cloth. “Supposing something’s happened to him?” said Elsa, and because he had no answer for that, Jarvis replied with a question intended to extract some practical information: “When did Robbie come home?”

“The day after the storm,” said Elsa.

“And how did he get back to London?”

“Same way he got down to Glasgow in the first place – by train.”

Jarvis was staggered that any trains had managed to run from Glasgow the day after the storm and said so, adding: “What were he and Tam wearing?”

The look that crossed her face made him hasten to reassure her that he only needed to know in case it became necessary for him to put out a description of Tam, and Elsa described the usual clothing of jeans, jumpers and shoes, none of it remarkable, and none of it likely to jog anybody’s memory in the event of a description being circulated.

“What about jackets, or coats?” said Jarvis.

“I can’t remember.”

Jarvis left it at that for the moment. “Where were they planning on staying while they were down there?”

“Iris.”

That made sense. George was rumoured to have fled to Glasgow following an armed robbery that had gone badly wrong, and it would be logical for Tam to assume that his grandmother, Iris, might have some idea where he was. After all, Jarvis had recently paid her a visit for precisely that reason.

It had been his first ever visit to Glasgow, and Jarvis recalled a dock stacked with cargo, streetwise gulls stealing food from a wharf, and some kind of iron bridge across the Clyde estuary. It had been a five minute walk from the red, sandstone tenement where George’s mother had raised her lethal offspring, and when Jarvis had poked his nose into the smaller of two rooms, he had imagined how, in childhood, George and his brother, Jimmy, had slept nose-to-tail on a shake down bed, the mattress infested by fleas. The mattress was still in situ – a writhing, living thing, the material striped in blue and white, like a milk-jug.

Iris was a big woman, her features hardened by years of deprivation. Jarvis had questioned her, and had quickly ascertained that she wasn’t afraid of the police. At least, she wasn’t afraid of *him*, but then, he must have seemed soft by comparison with some of the animals Strathclyde had in its ranks.

Jarvis had returned to London suspecting she knew where George was, but he had also come back convinced that it would take more of a man than him to get it out of her. He was about to ask Elsa whether, in her view,

George was still in Glasgow, when Elsa added: "I told our Tam he was wasting his time. Iris wouldn't tell him anything, even if she knew."

"Why not?"

"She'd be worried in case the police got it out of him."

"Does she know that Tam didn't come back to London?"

"She says it's news to her."

"Do you think she's telling the truth?"

Elsa had to think about that. "I can't see why she'd lie," she said. "Not to me. And why hasn't he been in touch?"

She had a point, thought Jarvis.

Elsa added, "She said they stayed with her the night, and then they set off early for the train."

"How early?"

"Sixish."

"What time does the express leave for London?"

"About one o'clock."

Jarvis didn't say anything to that. It would have taken no longer than thirty minutes to get from the Gorbals to Glasgow's Central Station. Therefore, they'd obviously gone somewhere in the hours between leaving the tenements, and Robbie catching the train. Since Tam had gone to Glasgow to look for their father, it made sense to assume that they'd probably spent the morning trying to find him. Whether they'd found him or not was a different matter.

He turned his attention to Robbie, who was still playing at his feet. He hadn't said a word since Jarvis got there, and he seemed, to Jarvis, unusually withdrawn. It had been the coldest January in Glasgow since records began, and if what Elsa had said about what they were wearing was true, neither boy had been dressed for the weather. Kids could sometimes be very withdrawn when they were sickening for something, thought Jarvis, who wouldn't have been surprised if Robbie was starting with pneumonia. He said, "has Robbie shown any sign of illness since coming back?"

Elsa didn't seem too sure what he meant by that, and Jarvis elaborated: "Has he run a temperature, had any time off school?"

She shook her head.

"I'd get him to a doctor, just to be on the safe side."

He crouched down by Robbie, and reached for the Lego box. Throughout his conversation with Elsa, he had heard the occasional rattle coming from that box, and he was curious. "Can I see your box?" he said, and, without looking at Jarvis, Robbie handed it to him.

Jarvis took it and shook it gently. "Mind if I look inside?"

In the absence of a response, Jarvis tackled the lid. It was jammed down hard on the Lego, and he had to force a fingernail under the hard green plastic in order to get a purchase and flick it away. He did it a little more

forcefully than he had intended, and the box fell apart in his hands. Pieces of Lego fell from his fingers, and among them, a small golden crucifix.

Reflecting that it was the very last thing he would have expected to fall from the box, Jarvis stooped to the carpet and picked it up.

It was old, and very plain. It was also of very high quality, and it had a feel about it, as if it had been –

A word came to mind, a word he couldn't replace with anything more appropriate. It had been *blessed*. Whatever this crucifix was, it was worth a bit, and he suddenly had a vision of it tumbling out of a safety-deposit box in some bank or other. George had a habit of keeping things that took his fancy. On more than one occasion, it had proved an expensive peccadillo, the evidence having been found, if not in the hull of a model ship, then in a hiding place that was equally ingenious, though no less detectable for that.

A chain had also fallen out of the box and Jarvis picked it up, finding it inappropriate for a cross of that size and weight. It was broken, which didn't surprise him. One good yank would have been enough to snap it, thought Jarvis, who was considering what to do for the best with regard to the crucifix: he would have been well within his rights to pass it on to the Antiques Squad to check against their records, but he gave it back to Robbie – he couldn't say why. Maybe he just felt that he could do with something in his life, something that was blessed, as if a little of whatever it was that had blessed it might rub off and improve his lot. In catching Elsa's eye, he saw a glint of gratitude that he hadn't deprived him of it. "You keep it safe," he said. "Don't go selling it – hear me?"

Robbie took it from him. The *look* that crossed his face. It sent a shudder through Jarvis, and it was then that he realised something had happened to Tam.

"Robbie," said Jarvis. "Where's Tam?"

The boy made no response, and in that moment, Jarvis wondered how many other lads of nine had ever had cause to wear the expression that Robbie was wearing now. It was if he knew that, notwithstanding the charade with the game of Lego, his childhood was over, that he carried a secret of such magnitude, it had hauled him out of childhood and into the grown-up world where secrets aren't merely a game, but a matter of life and death.

He curled his fingers around the cross as if attempting to burn it into his flesh, to hide it forever within himself – something to draw strength from in the years and trials to come.

"Robbie...?" said Jarvis.

The boy looked up at him, the cross clutched tight in his hand, but he didn't say a word.

"Robbie?"

Nothing.

— : —