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A Sad and Simple Story

AFTER I LEFT THE CHURCH and Pamela left me, I got a job as a school teacher. I did this for two years and then said to hell with it. I'm thirty-two, now or never, and went to medical school. This was back in the days when the British government paid your tuition and gave you just about enough to live on as a student.

I'm an old man now. I don't feel old. Only when I inadvertently catch my reflection in a shop window, or notice that dismissive look in the eyes of younger people. I walk the dog three miles on days I'm working and five miles other days. I sold my practice four years ago, but I'm still medical director of an old folks' home, which occupies me two mornings a week.

My dog's a golden retriever-labrador mix. But wait a minute, I'm getting off topic. This is not about my dog, or the old folks' home, or being a doctor. What I want to do is set down how it happened. The sad and simple story of how Nick Shawcross became the hinge of my life.

I had a church in Ashton-under-Lyne, in Lancashire. The Rowley Street Primitive Methodist Chapel. Although the three branches of Methodism—Wesleyan, Independent, and Primitive—had been united since 1932, my chapel proudly maintained its original name, with its tradition of public preaching, working-class membership, and involvement in the trade union movement. My father and both of my grandfathers had been Primitive Methodist ministers.

Ashton is on the west slope of the Pennines. The clouds sail in from the Irish Sea, actually not so much clouds as an unbroken ceiling of cloud, and precipitate as soon as the land rises. So it seems to be raining all the time, making the cobblestone streets slick and glistening. Everything was black from the smoke of house and factory chimneys. We're talking the late 1950s. The buildings, the trees, the rain, the laundry if you left it out too long, the inside of your nostrils. You didn't need to smoke to get lung cancer. And when the wind blew from the southwest, you got the smell of

tobacco for free from the Gallaher factory, where they made Senior Service cigarettes.

I met Nick Shawcross at a Billy Graham crusade. I'd seen him before; he ran the butcher shop we patronized in the market square. We'd never spoken; he'd be at the back cutting up the carcasses and you were served by a girl at the counter. He didn't look like someone who'd return your greeting on the street. But there he was, coming forward when Billy Graham gave the Invitation, with the choir singing "Just as I Am, Without One Plea." Tall, well-built, black hair, late twenties, handsome in a way.

It was the last night of the crusade, and there must have been three hundred people in the congregation. Billy Graham wasn't there. His sermon was brought in by land-line from London. The dozen or so converts were guided to the big room behind the hall to meet up with counselors. I was one of the counselors, but I wasn't needed because there were only two male converts. Pairs were huddled together, some of them on their knees, some in tears. Before the end of the session, each counselor identified the individual's nearest church, and the denomination with which he or she would be most comfortable, and that was how Nick Shawcross was referred to me.

It was close to ten o'clock, so we spoke for only a couple of minutes. I congratulated him on his Decision for Christ, and asked if he'd like to come round for a chat later in the week. He had a very direct gaze, and I thought I could read a lot in his eyes: interest, hope, relief, an element of something like surprise.

He dropped in to the manse on his way home from work a couple of days later.

"Were you army?" I asked. I'd put in my two years in the Manchester Regiment. I'd ended up in the Education Corps, but I thought I could still recognize an infantryman.

"Gloucesters, padre."

I hazarded a guess. "In Korea?"

"Yeah. That was when things first went wrong. You've heard of the Imjin River? We were all that stood between the Chinese and Seoul. It was bloody chaos. Trying to pull back before they closed the ring. No food or water, batteries dying in the radios. That was where my buddy got killed. You know how it is in the army, you have a lot of friends but one special buddy. He was the best friend I ever had. The sergeant said, Leave him. We were strapping the wounded on the sides of the ambulances. I said, We can't leave him. The sergeant said, Leave him. That was when something inside me broke. After that I started having blackouts. I got a medical discharge. Bitter, I was bitter. I didn't care about nowt."

I may have forgotten some details, but that was the essence of his story. We chatted for a while. Pamela brought in a pot of tea. He told me about his wife and daughter. It was clear that he adored them, especially the daughter. He said his parents had been Methodists, and as he lived only a few streets away, he'd like to attend my chapel. I urged him to set aside a few minutes every day as a "quiet time." Before he left, I gave him a Bible, which I inscribed, "To Nick, with my sincere good wishes," along with a verse of scripture. I got his address for my card file, made sure he had my phone number, and said a brief prayer with him before he left.

He started attending chapel regularly. The first time, he came with his family. White shirt, dark blue suit. His daughter was about four, a little blonde girl. She sat between Nick and his wife. If she became restless, he'd hold her on his lap. The church had a strong tradition of fellowship, and many people came up after the service and welcomed the three of them. We were holding a potato pie supper that week to raise money for new carpeting, and everyone pressed invitations on Nick and his family. You don't see a lot of smiles on the street in the north of England, but once people accept you, there's a warmth you don't find elsewhere.

I stood at the chapel door shaking hands with people on their way out. Nick's wife was a little reserved. She was petite, pretty, but her eyes didn't meet mine the way Nick's did. And her lipstick was too bright.

While Sunday morning services were fairly conventional, on Sunday evenings I had introduced an old fashioned prayer and praise meeting, with a period of free prayer, a time for witness, and plenty of Sankey and Moody gospel songs. We had some great voices, including a few Welsh tenors and basses, and instead of the organ, we used a piano, which Pamela played. I should say that Pamela was an outstanding pianist, though she played nothing but hymns. She'd been a student at the Royal Conservatory of Music when she was converted at the age of eighteen. She quit the Conservatory to train as an evangelist: the Primitive Methodists were one of the first denominations to give women equal status in the ministry. I asked Pamela once why she no longer played classical, and she said giving up worldly music was part of what she understood as Sacrifice.

Nick came to the evening service by himself a month or so after we'd first met. In moments of conversation, I'd got to know him a bit better. He told me his blackouts had stopped, and he'd been able to get off the epilepsy medication. Of course now, many years later, I realize he almost certainly wasn't epileptic, but was suffering from PNES—psychogenic nonepileptic seizures, which have no organic basis, but are the result of stress or trauma. He certainly should not have been on phenobarbital, or phenobarbitone,

as it was then called, which is a depressant. But in those days PNES was almost always misdiagnosed.

After the evening service, we all got together in the parish room for tea and biscuits. When the clock read eight, I said, "Who's coming fishing?" Half a dozen of us walked down the few hundred yards to the market square. The *Palais de Danse* was closed on Sundays, and the cinemas ended early, so this was where young people hung out on Sunday evenings. They wandered around in pairs or small groups, the boys and girls checking each other out, and if things went well pairing up for some quick satisfaction in a back street doorway, or getting into a good fight. They were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, earning three pounds a week in the mine or the mill. By the time they were twenty they'd all be married, and by the time they were twenty-five, they'd be middle-aged.

We found our usual space at one side of the square, outside the café that during the day served tripe and cow-heels, and started off with "Are You Washed in the Blood." The only accompaniment was a concertina played by one of the Welshmen, but even in the open air we sounded good. Most people ignored us, but a few stopped a little way off to listen.

I kicked off with my two-minute introduction, and then a couple of others gave their testimony. We weren't attracting much attention. Looking back on it, the whole scene seems macabre. The young people milling around the empty market stalls, groups of boys catcalling girls, girls turning up their noses, the weird yellow light of the sodium vapor street lamps, the blackened streets and buildings, and a drizzle beginning to fall. Nick moved next to me and asked quietly if he could speak.

As Mary Honeywell ended her testimony, of how she found Jesus when her baby died, I felt a moment of discouragement. Here was a young woman speaking of the most heartbreaking event of her life, and her words were dissipating into the wet night air and the indifferent crowd. Then Nick stepped forward.

"Where are you lads going to be in two years?" he demanded. His voice was magnificent. If he had never made sergeant, that was the British army's loss. There was a visible pause among the people in the square. "Let me tell you where I was ten years ago. I was in a British military prison in Japan. I'd socked an officer in Korea. You never walked in that place. You never stood still. You went everywhere on the double. You weren't allowed to talk. Bread and water three days out of four. Sadistic red-hats. Square-bashing eight hours a day. With a pack filled with fifty pounds of stones."

The young men in the crowd began to move closer. All of them were facing military service within a couple of years. "One time I had to stand outside the barracks all day, on the double, full pack, facing the wall," Nick

was saying, “and everyone who came by, I had to shout, I am a bucket of shit!” He went on to talk about his bitterness, and how his life had changed. “I’m a butcher, and I could stick the little lambs without a thought. And I could have done it to a child. Any one of you, I could have taken the knife and stuck you, and never turned a hair. Lads or lasses. But now Jesus has taken that burden from me. There’s nothing in my heart now but love. For everyone. For all of you.”

On a really good day, we’d get maybe a couple of people to come back to the chapel. That evening more than a dozen, including some young women, came back. All they wanted was to hear more from Nick. He held them transfixed. He talked about the night-time human wave attacks by the Chinese, thousands of them screaming and carrying burning torches, charging straight into the Gloucesters’ designated killing zones, until the gun barrels were glowing red-hot and the dead were piled six deep. If this makes him sound strident or aggressive, I’m doing him a disservice; his mode of speaking was thoughtful and intense, and not ungentle.

“You think going in the army will make a man of you. It won’t. You go in a sinner, you’ll come out a sinner, but worse. Taking Christ in your heart is what makes a man of you. Or a woman. Don’t wait. Do it now.” He was a better evangelist than I would ever be. We got two new converts that night, and two more started coming regularly to the church.

Then one Sunday Nick didn’t show up. You don’t want to give the impression you’re checking up on delinquent attenders, so I waited until Thursday, when we bought meat for the weekend. Nick wasn’t at the butcher’s. An unfamiliar man was working there. I asked about Mr. Shawcross. The girl looked uncomfortable. “He’s not here,” she said.

The butcher looked up, and stepped forward, the cleaver in his hand. “He’s in trouble wi’t law.”

I wasn’t about to ask for details in front of a line of customers. I went straight to Nick’s place. It was a terrace house in a long row of two-up, two-downs, doors opening to the street, outhouse in the back yard. They’d been built a hundred years ago by a mill owner for his workers. At that time he was considered a philanthropist.

There was no answer when I knocked. A woman two doors down was stoning her doorstep, using a block of soft white stone to remove the day’s layer of grime. “They’ve gone,” she said. Where? She shrugged. “Bonnie little lass she was, the wee one.”

I headed for the police station. “He’ll be in magistrate’s court tomorrow,” the sergeant said. “Theft. One carton of cigarettes. He burgled the tobacconist next to his butcher’s shop. Six months back. We wouldn’t have known who did it, but he came in last week and told us.” Nick had been

released on his own recognizance, and was staying with his sister in Burnley. Address, but no phone.

Burnley was forty miles away, and I didn't have a car. There was nothing for it but to show up in court the next morning.

The magistrates' court was in the town hall, a large chamber paneled in oak. Little light came through the windows, which looked as though they had not been cleaned since the place was built. There were three magistrates on the bench, two men and a woman. I knew them all slightly. Solid northerners in their fifties and sixties, none of them lawyers, putting in their forty days a year on the bench without recompense. For the first half of the morning the court dealt with traffic offences. After evidence in the last case, the justices retired "to consider sentence," which I knew meant to get a cup of tea.

The duty solicitor came into court just before the magistrates returned. I had time only to give him the rather formal letter I'd prepared the previous night requesting the opportunity to testify on Nick's behalf. The solicitor glanced at it and nodded, then the clerk of the court called out, "All rise," and the magistrates came back in.

When Nick was called, he entered the court and marched to the dock, wearing his Sunday suit, his face grim and determined. The traffic spectators had all left and I was alone in the public seating. There was no sign of Nick's wife.

When the charges were read and Nick was asked how he pleaded, he said, clearly and firmly, "Guilty, your worship."

The prosecution was conducted by a police inspector. Immaculate dark blue uniform with shining silver buttons. It did not take him long to put the facts to the court. Mr. Shawcross had been employed at Pritchard's High Quality Butchers for three years. Six months ago he had burgled the tobacconist shop next door, which was also part of the Pritchard chain. He'd gone up to the roof of his shop and entered the tobacconist's through an unlocked skylight. He'd taken one shipping carton of cigarettes, containing 400 packs of cigarettes, retail value approximately £50. He himself didn't smoke. He'd hidden the cigarettes at the back of the meat freezer. A couple of months later, he'd got rid of them one night at the town dump. Last week, he had walked into the police station and confessed to the burglary. The inspector did not call any witnesses.

The duty solicitor was in his sixties and had the demeanor you often see in private detectives and journalists nearing retirement: that nothing on earth will ever surprise them. In his address to the bench, he spoke of his client's service in Korea, his medical discharge, and the fact that he was epileptic. Mr. Shawcross had already made financial restitution for the theft,

and but for his confession the crime would have remained unsolved. He had lost his job, and his wife had left him.

I was called and sworn in, and the solicitor asked me to tell the court what I knew of Nick Shawcross. I spoke about his sincere change of heart in recent weeks, and the impact he was having on young people drawn to the chapel. The solicitor then summed up the case for the defense, recommending, in view of the clean criminal record and good character of the accused, an absolute discharge.

The magistrates went into a huddle with the clerk of the court. Nick was ordered to rise, and the senior magistrate issued the sentence: six months' imprisonment, suspended for two years.

We went to a café between the court and the railway station. There was half an hour before the next Burnley train.

"I was expecting to go to jail," Nick said. "Expected that when I went to the police station the first time. Knew it wouldn't be like the glasshouse. Could have done it, easy, if she'd stood by me."

"Where is your wife?"

"Don't know, exactly. Gone to London. She never felt right about my conversion. Couldn't accept that I'd confessed to the theft. Said I was too stupid to live with. Well. But to take my kid away ..."

"You miss your little girl badly."

"Ay. Badly." We were silent for a while. I noticed that a slight frown had taken up residence in his forehead. He told me he was on the dole, and it was going to be difficult to get work without a reference.

"Has this shaken your faith, Nick?"

He thought for a little. "I don't think we can understand the mind of God, padre." It seemed he was going to say more, but he stopped there.

"Come and stay with us, Nick," I said. "Till you find a new position. We have a spare room. You can come and go as you please. Be a pleasure to have you." But he said his sister was expecting him back, and he'd stand a better chance of a job where he wasn't known.

I gave him a carbon copy of the letter I'd given to his solicitor. "I'll give you a reference any time, Nick. Just give me a call. I'll let you know if I hear of anything down here."

I went to the cotton mill, where the crash and rattle of the looms could be heard from the street, and a sign said, "Wanted, Roving Tenters, Cotton Winders, Card Room Workers." They said they were hiring only people with experience. I tried the cigarette factory, and they said they'd let me know when they had a vacancy. I talked to one of my elders who was manager of the iron works, and he said their insurance would not allow them to hire people with a criminal record.

Although the manse was on a side street surrounded by terrace houses and mills, a half hour's uphill walk brought you to edge of the moors that stretched across the spine of England into Yorkshire. Depopulated since William the Conqueror put their rebellious inhabitants to fire and the sword, the moors had for eight centuries been the domain of heather and sheep, and if Mondays were fine, I would try to set time aside for a long hike. Pamela found this a bit self-indulgent, I think, and rarely accompanied me. She was at home when I returned one afternoon, about a month after Nick's trial.

"Nick Shawcross called," she said.

"Sorry I missed him," I said. "Did he leave a number?"

"No, he was calling from a phone box. Just wanted to speak with you. I said you'd be in soon, he'd be sure to reach you if he called around six."

"If he doesn't call back, I think I should go up there. I'll rent a car from the garage before they close."

"What about the carpet?"

"Oh my gosh." I sat down at the kitchen table. The long-awaited chapel carpet had arrived, a beautiful royal blue, and a team of a dozen volunteers were all set to lay it this evening. I knew they wouldn't do the job in my absence. And if we didn't do it today, it wouldn't be down for the Flower Festival next Sunday.

"Why don't you go up tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think that would be best."

But the next day I got a call to take a funeral for a sick colleague. I sent Nick a note, and after that I thought, well, he knows how to reach me, I'll wait until he calls again. And then—forty years later, it still hurts to confess this—I began to forget about Nick Shawcross.

One single tragedy known to us personally will have more impact on our lives and our beliefs than the ten million atrocities in whose shadow all of us live. That is not a hopeful thought for humanity. It was not that I lost my belief in the existence of God, but in his mercy. And if God is not merciful, does it really matter whether or not he exists?

I keep the newspaper cutting in my wallet. Laminated in plastic. I've photocopied and replaced it a few times over the years. To remember Nick, and to keep myself forever humble.

Mr. Nicholas Shawcross, thirty, a scrap metal collector, formerly of Ashton-under-Lyne but living in Burnley, was found dead on Tuesday morning last week by his sister, Mrs. Jean Ogden. Mrs. Ogden said her brother had been depressed in recent weeks. He was taking phenobarbitone for an epileptic condition, and had apparently overdosed. The coroner's verdict was that Mr. Shawcross had taken his own life while the balance of his mind was disturbed.

