

A Question of Love



Arthur pulled his chair closer to the table - nearer to the chaplain. He could never feel comfortable in interviews and the sparseness of the chapel room, together with the possible curiosity of the prison duty officer, squashed his words before they even formed on his lips. It was like that with visiting. Arthur had had to summon a great deal of courage to get here. Nobody associated him with anything religious, though he was neutral, never against church services and not foul-mouthed like a lot of others in the prison. There were bound to be questions on his floor about a visit to the chaplain, but there was something he liked about the man and he was desperate to talk to someone - someone who may understand.

Arthur cast furtive glances around the quiet, bare space while the chaplain waited patiently for him to begin. Yes, it was the same as visiting time; those embarrassed silences, even with Jane. All the words he had practiced during the week would not come as he wanted them to. He fumbled with them and then it did not seem right; it was not what he meant, so he went quiet and the time was quickly gone and the words too.

At last Arthur began by trying to explain that to the chaplain. His voice was barely above a whisper. He wanted to speak about love. It sounded effeminate, mushy in these surroundings. *She said, I love you. I'll always love you.* he blurted out.

Tell me, the chaplain encouraged Arthur.

It was Jane's last visit .. last week. I ran out of words. I panic when the time's running out. She just looked at me, smiled and said it ... 'I love you.' I knew she meant it. After all I've done to her! She's still coming. She still says it. I don't know why, but it struck me different. Then she said, 'Arthur. Do you still love me?'

'Yes, 'Cos I do,' I said, like I always do, but this time something inside me thought, I do. I really love her. Then visiting was over. She blew a kiss from the door and she was gone.

The chaplain's questioning smile spurred Arthur on. He knew there was more.

I can't get it out of my mind. I've got her photograph pinned on the wall, but this is like a picture of her face with me all the time. I keep thinking how she could easily have left me, all the while I've been here. She comes as often as she can, and every time I see it in her face. She trusts me, she cares about me, she knows the real me. Her face is always gentle, but this time it looked sort of hurt when she asked me that question.

Arthur, looked hard at the chaplain, wanting to be sure he didn't think it all a bit of a laugh and wanting to know it was all right to go on. The way seemed clear.

It reminded me of my Mum. I was about seven or eight at the time. It was a Saturday and Dad had promised to take me to the match. He came home too late and was too drunk to even knock Mum about.

I just rushed out and wanted to shout at everybody I saw and kick every stray dog in the street. Fortunately most of the fellas were at the match, but it was a hot day and lots of the women were out there. Some shouted back at me and then others started calling Mum. Mum came out and shouted louder than them or me. I rushed through the door, Mum slammed it behind us, more in anger at the neighbours than with me. She understood. I turned round and threw myself at her, sobbing like a baby, 'I'm sorry Mum.' When I stopped, she sat down with me, and talked. I don't know now what else she said, but I do remember her saying, 'Arthur. Just remember this, I love you. I don't always like you. But I'll always love you.'

Arthur met the chaplain's smile. You know, he said, *that changed me, till I got in with the wrong crowd again and again and again ..* He paused ... *Do you think Jane and me can change things if I really love her like she loves me?*

Arthur, the chaplain said. I believe love is the most powerful force in the world. Jesus changes things by love. It meant a cross and suffering for him, but through that he's still changing the world and its people for better. The only thing he says is that we have to respond to love. Like you and Jane. You have to realise what her love has cost her and then .. Give it back! He leaned across the table, Write and tell her what you've told me, and when you see her next, you get in first. Just you say 'I love you.' The words won't get all jumbled up, I promise you