

CASE NOTES: ALISON

by Stephen Moran

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The Social Worker

The last time I went to see them, the stepfather was trimming a hedge. He looked at me through the garden shears and when I caught his eye, he snapped them shut.

I said, 'Hi, I've come to see how you're getting on with little Alison.'

I know that most people are not happy to meet me in my line of work but as long as I can help the children I don't care. There was no gate, so I walked past him up to the open front door. The mother appeared, looking pale and thin.

'Come in,' she said.

She was in her mid-twenties. He was about ten years older, had done stretches for armed robbery and GBH, and looked the part. She turned off the TV and we sat on the sofa.

'Where is Alison?' I asked.

'She's not here,' she said.

He came and stood in the doorway.

'She's at her Nan's,' he said.

'Oh, I was hoping to see her today. I didn't see her last time either.'

'You just missed her,' said the mother. 'Her Nan picked her up.'

'Where does her Nan live?'

'In the flats,' she said.

'Right, shall we just go and see her there and you can walk with me?'

'No point,' the stepfather said, 'Her Nan has taken her into town for a treat today.'

'Well what time will they be back?'

'We don't know,' said the mother.

I sighed, and put down my clipboard to think. There was a sound like a mouse scuffling above the ceiling. For a minute it crossed my mind that they might be lying and I wondered if I should ask to see the girl's bedroom.

'Okay,' I said, finally. 'Let's try once more! I'll come back next week same time, and please make sure that she's here, because I'm supposed to make sure she's getting on well.'

'No problem,' said the mother. 'You'll be alright next time.'

After I left them I went for a latte. There was time to kill before my next appointment so I did a bit of reading.

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The Consultant

One of the worst cases of scabies it has ever been my misfortune to come across walked into the clinic today.

'Hello! What is your name?' I asked.

'Alison,' the mother answered for the little girl.

'Yes. Yes. Take off her top, would you... Oh dear!' I said. The child was completely covered in scabs.

'You're not a happy bunny, are you?'

The child bowed her head.

'She don't speak.'

'I'm going to write her a prescription,' I said. 'Can you make sure that she uses separate towels, if at all possible. Give this to her four times a day for two weeks.'

I handed the prescription to the mother.

'Now Alison,' I said, 'will you make sure and remind Mummy to give you your medicine, in case she forgets?'

I held up the child's wrists. 'How did she get these marks?' It looked like she had been tied round the wrists and the skin had broken due to the scabies, if that is what it was, (safest to assume).

'She keeps falling down the stairs,' said the mother, 'She does it on purpose.'

I know what you're thinking, but I was already running two hours late with my appointments and some of my cases are matters of life and death. A whole team of people were dealing with this family, according to my notes. The Social Worker would keep an eye on them.

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The PC

It's not the best beat in the world. Put it this way, I wouldn't want my children growing up round here. I drive in from Edgbaston every morning, park behind the station and I hate every minute till I get back into that car and go home to my own driveway.

Whoever thought those open-plan gardens and wooden fronts on the houses would turn into anything other than a slum, well it just beggars belief. Of course the whole place is a playground for joyriders, heroin addicts and hoodies now.

Having said that, it's not the houses themselves that are to blame. I've seen a lot worse. There used to be all two-up two-downs with outside toilets when I was a kid, but we had a more decent class of people. This lot are the dregs. No matter what you do for them or what you give them, they will destroy it. I would say they were animals only I actually like animals.

Then you get the do-gooders – social workers, woolly thinkers, you know the type – like the Moaning Minnie at the case conference. Oh yes, we have to suffer for our few pence. I'm sure that one is some sort of trans-sexual – not sure from what to what though. "Oh, I'm very worried about the Machin girl. I haven't seen her for a month now, and she is on the At-Risk Register." Would you give me a break! Which one of the kids is not at risk down here?

If they think I'm going to dance attendance on some mincing social worker and run around bothering myself over some old scaghead who

neglects her children, or ex-con who cuffs them round the ears, they have another think coming. How can I honestly say I wouldn't knock the little brat's head off if I was in the same position.

You have to feel sorry for them I suppose.

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The Neighbour

It's a nightmare. I'm trapped in this house with her next door on one side who hacks, snorts and snuffles all night. Her bedroom must be right next to mine. The walls are only plaster, gerry-built and mouldy with damp. And if it's not Hacking Alice it's the shouting and screaming from that lot on the other side.

The atomic family they are. Thank Christ I only have my cats. Him – a white van driver, heavy, pasty faced. I tried to greet him an odd time but he wouldn't even acknowledge me, never mind crack a smile. I'm positive he's working on building sites and claiming the dole as well. Somebody came around asking if I'd seen him. The Social probably. At least Hacking Alice on the other side smiles and says hello. You can have a little chat with her, and she fed my cats the week I had to go in for my veins.

You'd expect better from your own but you'd be surprised. Hacking Alice's child died from the sickle cell. It's only the blacks that get it. I was awful sorry for her. I've got used to her hacking now, God help me. What I can't take is the screaming from the other side. A sharp, vicious cow that one, a face that'd turn milk sour. Not short of a few bob either. Bloody big boxes from televisions et cetera et cetera left outside, half the time.

It usually starts with the cow screaming at the child or him about something. And him stamping up and down the stairs. Doors slamming. Then the child'll start bawling. (The atomic family!) She'll start shrieking at the child to shut up till he comes barging up the stairs and then I know there'll be that sound I hate. I tried putting the radio on full but you can't shut it out. It's like lightning when you try to cover your eyes, it still comes through. A sound

like a kettle whistling or a creature, a rabbit being killed. Oh dear Jesus, I wish I could un-hear it. I beg Hacking Alice to start up again or for anyone to come and get me out of here. I just can't take it anymore. I swear they'll be the death of me.

Sorry, I've gone on a bit. You don't want to know, I know. What that child must be suffering. So I knock on their wall, I do, for all the good it does.

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The School Friend

I wish Alison would come back. She used to be my best friend. I never called her Scabby like the others. They hated her because she never talked. But I don't care. I just talk to her and she follows me. I'm like her brother. They don't hassle me because I'm a fighter. They learned their lesson, even the big boys. You have to be a fighter here. We used to play racing and just sitting on the side of the playground. Alison listened and I explained about offside and helicopters and good bits out of books and all like that. I wish she would come back.

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The Head

Think of the successes we have every year, the smiling children on their way to fulfilling careers, the proud parents. Somebody asked me the other day, do I not feel guilty about the ones who don't make it? I answered honestly it would never even occur to me. I couldn't really understand the question, it was something that just didn't apply to me. The way I look at it, without me they'd all fail.

Alison wasn't that special, just another girl with a skin condition. We see them every year. Sometimes they're bright, as it happens, and sometimes they're not. This was a girl who came to us with really the level of a five-year-old, not an eight-year-old. She wouldn't speak or mix with any of the other

children except for one boy whom she followed around like a ... well, like a dog actually. So anyway I called the parents in.

Well! These people! I mean what can you expect? They were almost as inarticulate as the child.

‘Do you read to Alison?’ I asked.

‘That’s what we send her here for,’ he says.

‘She has her own books,’ says the mother.

‘Yeah, she’s a bit too lazy, like,’ says the step-father. ‘She couldn’t be arsed.’

And that was the last I saw of Alison. I sent the parents many letters, and even though they only live around the corner, it seems they didn’t want the bother of answering. So that was that.

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The Priest

We each have our cross to bear, even those who have everything going for them. Jesus felt the nails stab into His flesh, the spear of the cruel centurion that pierced his side and so on. But still I think, when I wake up in the middle of the night, Jesus wasn’t taken as a child, burned, bound, tortured and kept in isolation, denied education. And didn’t he get out of it before the ravages of arthritis and senility too?

Not for nothing do we pray to Mary twice a day. ‘Mourning and weeping in this Valley of Tears.’ She’d know more about what we’re going through, I’d say, than Himself. No use complaining about how it’s all worked out, to the Great Planner upstairs.

‘Suffer little children,’ Jesus said, but that’s only a fancy way of saying ‘Allow them.’ Well to cut a long story short, she’s better off out of it. A blessed release, as they say, but you never get used to the small white coffins. It’s like a song has stopped outside of its home key, and the ache for more can never be salved.

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The Father

I've moved on so far from where I started that I feel like a complete stranger when I go back there. I mean I have three lovely step-daughters all in private school, and my own little son is the light of my life. I fretted over Alison, God knows I did, but my ex didn't want me around. She deliberately shackled-up with the biggest loser, the most violent sod she could find, just to spite me. There's only so much you can take before you say sorry, I have my own life to live.

The world has never been the same for me since that *decree nisi* landed in the hallway. Once, it was everybody helping each other and looking forward to holidays and nice things to come. Now it's all bitter waves that push you off your feet and carry you further and further from home. I couldn't see any way back or any way for Alison to reach me until she grew up. Then maybe if she wanted to, I would certainly welcome her. But it wasn't to be.



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