

Chapter Seven

At home again I found I was, contrary to expectation, excited as I anticipated the move to Jayfield's Corner; more optimistic about every aspect of it than I had been previously. By all accounts it was a fascinating place in idyllic surroundings. Malcolm and I and the children would have our own rooms on the first floor, with a private bathroom and some basic equipment including a kettle, toaster, small grill and microwave (a very modern piece of equipment at the time), all of which would enable us to have our own breakfast and snacks when we wished. It would be a perfect combination of privacy and communal living with folk we loved.

For now I was overjoyed to be among my friends again and in my own home. After such unremitting exposure to the plainer hospital environment, everything outside appeared so colourful, lush, green, varied and, in the house, so delightfully cluttered with ornaments, bric-a-brac, houseplants, books and toys.

I was happy to be back in the fellowship again. Christian love poured over me from all sides; I was brimful with it. My emotions were in a near-permanent state of agitation, shifting and stirring just below the surface. I became less inhibited in public worship, happier to raise my arms and sway and clap to the music instead of just watching other people do so.

My emotions where Bruce was concerned were set against the backdrop of this general intoxication. They were

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nicely camouflaged. I was spared the bother of having to examine them.

I had begun consciously to view Bruce as desirable since his visit to me in hospital, perhaps because we'd met and talked together, just the two of us. My attraction to him caused an unexceptional encounter to become distorted, exaggerated into something significant and exciting.

I thought Malcolm was pleased to have me home, but he didn't say so; that wasn't his way. He was clearly overjoyed to have me back in his bed, and his trembling excitement still stirred a response in me, but I found myself more aware of his clumsiness. I wondered: was it me he loved, or merely a body?

The fact that I was greeted home by flowers from Bruce and Michelle, and a box of groceries from Mary and Alec, didn't help, for Malcolm's welcome was the washing machine in pieces—in the interests of improving the spin cycle. Thus I managed to live with, even justify, my double thought-life of mild discontent at home and desire in another place.

I would find myself speculating about Bruce's life before I knew him, and his life now with Michelle. I was being foolish, and part of me knew it. My mind would turn away guiltily for a moment, but I was bewitched, and my thoughts would be drawn back. They roved around their favourite subject, dreaming up details of his hidden life, testing out their credibility: What did he like for breakfast? What was his favourite music, reading, TV programme? Did he like gardening or sports? Where did he sit in the evenings after dinner? Did he cuddle his wife on the settee, or choose a solitary favourite chair?

I would have plenty of time to find answers; he and Michelle would be at Jayfield's Corner too. And I would have more energy to spare when Mel was released from her cumbersome plaster and that aspect of daily life could return to normal.

The only real hindrance now to my comfort and sense of

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harmony and compatibility within the fellowship was Denis.

He was a strong leader, had been our pastor for three years now. Initially I had liked his assurance, but lately it had begun to seem like arrogance. The honeymoon was over. Now he was the cloud in a clear blue sky, a chill wind on a balmy day.

There were a few similar clouds, one or two cool breezes. I found a couple of other members of the fellowship difficult to love, or even like. Such was life. It was impossible that every person within a community was going to be a perfect match. The problem wasn't insuperable. It would be overcome.

Before this hurdle, though, I had another to clear. There was the tricky question of whether or not I had been 'baptised with the Holy Spirit'.

It had become an issue. I wanted my life with Jesus to be more fervent and effective. As I understood it, being baptised with the Holy Spirit was the answer. So Denis had laid his hands upon my head on Easter day and prayed that the Holy Spirit would fill me.

You may think that should have been the end of the matter. I wanted it to be. The way I saw it, if I *had* been baptised with the Holy Spirit, my Christian life should now be on a new, higher plane, full of devotion, obedience, discipline, enthusiasm, love, joy and peace.

But was it? Did I have the fullness of the Holy Spirit?

I was torn between on the one hand taking it on faith that I had it, possibly in the teeth of evidence to the contrary, and on the other, looking honestly for verification of this new, special, fervent Christian life in the way I lived and felt and prayed.

When I eventually decided that I must take the latter course and look for verification, in fact that the two things—evidence and faith—should ideally coexist, I had to admit to doubts about whether I was in any way a different kind of Christian from the one I had been before.

The clear issue seemed to be that, *if* I'd been baptised

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with the Holy Spirit, I should speak with tongues. Most people in the fellowship seemed certain about this requirement. This was easier to test. Did I or did I not speak in this smooth, flowing and, to normal physical senses, incomprehensible language?

Well, I didn't.

The thing is, I wished that I did. I would become aware of it as an inadequacy, and if I didn't *naturally* think about it a great deal, Denis saw to it that I was constantly reminded. He wanted to 'have this issue sorted out for everyone once and for all' before we went to Jayfield's Corner, and with this in mind he had arranged a meeting at the home of two members of our fellowship: Rachel and Dick. Rachel needed no 'sorting out', but Denis said he wanted the support of individuals who had 'already been blessed'.

There were plenty of those.

It was a cool early summer's evening when Malcolm and I made our way to the meeting. We walked, because Malcolm had the clutch of our ancient Ford Cortina in pieces on the garage floor. It was raining hard and we had to share a small ladies' umbrella, because Malcolm wouldn't buy another one. He claimed never to use umbrellas. This was one of Malcolm's petty economies that irritated me from time to time, especially that day as we moved forward uncomfortably, hips bumping, necks craned away from the dripping spokes. We were glad to reach the warmth of Rachel and Dick's home.

Two hours later, however, I was longing to get back outside in the cold.

The atmosphere in the room was charged with expectant excitement. The air was warm and thick with it, even without the effects of the fire and the moisture and warmth of so many bodies in one room. I sat next to Malcolm on the floor near the door. I would have liked to open the door further into the chilly hall but was concerned that my movement might break the spell.

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Malcolm's face was filmed with perspiration, like a very fine mist. He glanced sideways at me, then put his arm round my shoulders. We were going into this together.

Rachel stood before us, close to the fire and with her back to it, her stocky frame absorbing the heat, apparently comfortable and relaxed as always in spite of her layers of clothing and thick, wrinkled tights. While Denis spoke she stood with her feet apart, hands in the pockets of her torn pinafore, scanning the seated figures. She looked to me like a fishwife, anxious to pick a fight.

“And so you see, it's clear from the Word,” said Denis, “that we can all be filled with the Holy Spirit, and not only that, but we should *all* expect to receive the gift of tongues. This is a gift that we can *all* claim and it's a sign that we're full to overflowing.” He smiled his crooked smile with his eyes half shut as if seeing a brimful cup and feeling the cool water spilling down the sides. It was a particularly pleasant picture in this heat, and I closed my eyes to share it.

“Now you can not only be filled, as I believe some of you may be already, but *you should also receive the sign.*” Denis banged his clenched fist onto an imaginary surface five times in rhythm with his words, leaving us in no doubt as to what was expected.

Rachel looked around nodding and smiling in a knowing sort of way, wisps of dark-blond hair clinging damply to her forehead and cheeks. A few others nodded, mainly, I guessed, already members of the club. I leant closer to Malcolm, thankful not to be the only non-member and particularly to have my husband a non-member with me. I prayed that we would both join together.

When I thought about it, all the non-members in this room were, in a way, members of another club—the ones who *didn't* speak with tongues. I knew though, that I was in an even more exclusive club than that, one of which unfortunately even Malcolm was not a member—a club within a club, so to speak—the club for those who didn't speak with tongues even though they had already received

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the laying on of hands. This club was a little *too* exclusive though; more of a downtrodden minority. The precise membership was mere speculation, for we didn't share our problem with just anyone—or in my case with anyone at all, even Mary.

Members of this most exclusive group were now leaving it by the minute as Denis made his way around the room, laying his hands on the heads of first one, then another, his face thrown up to the ceiling dramatically, Adam's apple jiggling up and down in time to his words. Rosamund, his wife, had joined him, often kneeling down beside the subject with her hand on a shoulder or arm.

I was dizzy with excitement and apprehension as they drew nearer; I bowed my head from the too bright lights, screwing my eyes shut to stop them from twitching in a way I wasn't used to. Rachel's sitting room was always too hot, too brightly lit, too full of furniture (chrome, and scarlet and black PVC) that in its turn was too gaudy and too grubby. The excesses of these surroundings seemed to be swelling and becoming more threatening as Denis drew nearer, causing me to shut them out as completely as possible, curled up with my hands over my face, thankful for Malcolm's arm more firmly round me.

There was a lot of noise by now as one after the other spoke, some quietly, others loudly. Marcus—mid-twenties, unemployed, single and a very committed new member—had suddenly tipped over backwards, causing me to look up at the disturbance. He was rolling around on his back, knees up to his chest, like a playful puppy, and half-laughing as a spate of sounds issued forth. His long greasy blond hair tickled my leg as he rolled and rollicked before me. The exhibition was embarrassing, not my style at all, but Denis merely smiled, saying, "Praise the Lord! Ecstasy of the Spirit! Joy! Joy!" as he passed on.

Two young girls who hadn't been attending the fellowship for long were next. One was kneeling with her face in her hands and a curtain of waist-length dark hair

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falling forward, obscuring most of her. Denis laid his hands upon her and prayed the same simple words that he had done for each person: “Be filled with the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus.”

Her shoulders heaved as Denis began to speak with tongues quietly. The girl was either sobbing or laughing, I wasn't sure which. Her friend's contrasting spiky auburn hair was nodding and bobbing beyond as she also laughed/cried—Rosamund had dealt with her on her own as things happened more quickly. The red-haired girl looked up to the ceiling, eyes rolling as she laughed, while tears streamed down her face.

“Help!” I thought, “I won't have to do that, will I? Or roll around on my back like Marcus?” I was a stickler for conformity.

The din was increasing and one or two others were laughing now, or hugging each other. They were mainly the more extrovert types, I decided, though a clear line couldn't be drawn on the basis of personality. Nonetheless, when I thought about it, Marcus *was* a dreadful show-off, and the two girls were so young and impressionable, and occasionally whispered or sniggered at meetings, so maybe they were just giggly or a bit unbalanced or something, rather than singled out for special blessing.

“Still, I must be part of this,” I thought. “I certainly will not react quite so excessively—I know that—but I *do* want to receive the gift of tongues. There'll be something wrong with me if I don't.”

What was it Denis had said? “It can be in your control,” and, “you just open your mouth and speak or start saying anything very fast to get you going—even a nursery rhyme will do.” He'd chuckled as he said that and there had been an uncertain answering titter, so I wasn't absolutely sure whether I should take this seriously. I was thankful though that the uproar was now sufficient that no-one, except possibly Malcolm, would notice if my first words were “Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall,” if I got really stuck.

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My heart thumped hard against my rib cage as Denis and Rosamund approached. I was half-thankful that Denis hadn't hedged this subject of the haves and have-nots but was confronting it head-on, and half-sorry that I had to face up to it now it loomed so close.

Denis took Malcolm, while Rosamund knelt before me and took a few deep breaths before placing her hands gently on my springy red hair. I wished she would press more firmly, as I needed to feel the contact. My hair was so wiry that it was like a resilient mattress between us.

Nothing appeared to be happening, beyond a certain faintness as my fear heightened. My anxiety to receive this gift increased as Malcolm let forth a stream of ecstatic utterance: "A shee caala sha coora, lana me taa shee cala maa ..." and on and on. Some sounds were repeated frequently, but all with a poetic lilt and beauty.

There was no sign of Malcolm's usual slight stammer and I knew that this had happened effortlessly to my husband; he was far too shy and retiring to have got started under his own steam. In fact, if I were honest, I had probably been banking on his quiet, unobtrusive nature interfering, to the extent that I might have the first opportunity to speak out and not be left behind—he mustn't gallop too far ahead.

Malcolm knocked my ear hard as he raised his arm above his head, unaware of what he had done or of anything around him.

"Don't be put off," said Rosamund. She placed a hand over the afflicted ear. "Just open your mouth and speak out!"

I opened and closed my mouth a number of times and then realised that I was holding my breath. I let the breath out and moved my tongue and a few whispered sounds came out.

"That's it! Keep going!" encouraged Rosamund, touching me more firmly now to encourage me further.

With relief I continued to speak, and as far as I could tell

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it sounded pretty much like everyone else. I had a strange, slightly bubbly feeling inside that was coming out through my ears and eyes and nose and mouth.

It was quite good.

“What did you think of it, Malcolm?” I asked when we got home.

Malcolm stood before the fireplace, hands in pockets, rocking on his heels, looking coy and boyish, smiling as though containing a very big laugh—clearly holding in an excitement that was almost too much for him.

“It was great, wasn't it?” He grinned more broadly. His brown eyes twinkled below his rich brown curls. I had an extremely handsome husband.

He laughed. “It was like an electric shock, or something, and I didn't know what I was doing at all. I really never expected that to happen.”

“Nor did I,” I replied.

I was unsure what I had most expected not to happen. I felt curiously low. I smiled back nonetheless, to draw us together, uncertain whether I could catch up with him.