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## ONE MORE RIVER

That day came and went. Did you wake and check your diary, wondering why the 29<sup>th</sup> March rang a bell? Or were you on the train (booked months in advance to get a cheap seat) heading for London to celebrate our national freedom?

I propose a new term: Brexchatology. Our exit from the EU recedes before us, always imminent, never actually happening. When, Lord? When? Of that hour, no pundit knows, not even the angels in heaven. I have no expertise, no answers for you. Two and a half years have passed, and we are still shaking it all about in the political hokey-cokey unleashed by the Referendum. By the time you are reading this, who can predict which playing field we will be on, let alone where the goalposts will be? All I can do is lift the lid once more on my little experiment, and see what's going on in the fictional Diocese of Lindchester.

Lindchester! Its imaginary lands lie between Lichfield to the south, and Chester to the north. It is Erehwon. Utopia. In the strict sense of that word (pedants, rejoice with me!), which comes from the Greek: οὐ (“not”) and τόπος (“place”). Utopia, literally *no place*.

Ah, but there's no place like home! So let us click together our heels—everything from tatty trainers to burnished brogues (we are a Broad Church yet!)—unfurl our Anglican wings, and head for home. We will zoom back to that very day—calm was the day—of which we spoke at the start of this tale: Friday the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

See how the Diocese lies spread out beneath us! Lambs frisk in green fields under the cooling towers. Hedges are snowy with blackthorn. Every twig is dotted with buds. They look like those magic painting books of childhood, a swish of wet paintbrush and lo! Colour everywhere. Turbines turn, turn. There goes a heron, loping in pterodactyl

stateliness. We wheel over village and town. Feral pigeons explode from a derelict factory, and light winks off every windscreen, every reservoir and puddle, every towerblock. There's the river Linden below us. Sweet Linden, run softly, till I end my song!

Where shall we land? 'The Close, the Close!' you urge. No. It is still Lent, you sybarites. (Or it is where I'm writing this, at any rate.) We are heading somewhere more down to earth, more down at heel. There it is now—Martonbury. But not the Martonbury of quaint butter markets and artisan cheese shops. Not posh Martonbury, where suffragan bishops live with grumpy wives in Tudorbethan mansions. I am taking you down to the edgelands, to that mish-mash of trading estates and abandoned works, where Martonbury struggles briefly to become countryside, before giving up and slumping into the outskirts of Lindford.

And through it all runs the river Linden.

Today, as I weave my own Spenserian Prothalamion for that Brexit bridal day (which is not long), we catch up with an old friend as he strolls along the bank with his golden labradoodle. A carrier bag festival is being held in the trees. Our friend whistles as he walks. *Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod?* Sunshine flashes on his Raybans and diamond ear studs. The dog finds a ferocious plastic bottle and sets about subduing it. *Gather with the saints at the river...* Then—how rude!—the path runs out.

PRIVATE LAND. NO TRESPASSERS.

Private? I'll give you private. There's a padlock on the gate, but he tries it anyway. Open! *Yes, we'll gather at the river!* They go through, and cut across the car park of Cardwell's electrical engineering works. What's he supposed to do—scramble along the bank among the nettles and shopping trolleys? I think not. Do you have any idea how much these trainers cost?

Uh oh. A security guard has spotted them.

‘Oi, mate!’

Our friend turns.

The guard strides across. ‘You’re trespassing.’

‘I *think* you’ll find there’s a historic right of way through here, pal.’

‘No there isn’t. This is private property.’ He points to the sign. ‘Can’t you read?’

A pause.

‘I’m partially sighted, I’ll have you know. This is my guide dog.’

‘What?’ The guard sees himself twice, tiny and dumbfounded, in the Rayban lenses.

He blinks. Looks down at the doodle. The doodle grins, daft as a loo brush, through a mouthful of Lucozade bottle. ‘Look at him! He’s not much of a guide dog, is he?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Neil. ‘I can’t see him, can I?’

The guard makes a helpless gesture. ‘Well. I’m telling you: you’re trespassing.’

‘And I’m telling *you*—historic right of way. Come along, Bear.’

Oh dear. It looks as though Love’s redeeming work is not *entirely* done in the life of Neil Ferguson, reader elect in the Diocese of Lindchester. Oh, he’s a bad man. He knows it. His Big Day looms—the Service of Licensing in Lindchester cathedral—and he’s fretting more about his bespoke hand-tailored-on-Saville Row blue cassock than the state of his soul! *I, Neil Ferguson, hereby promise to endeavour, as far as in me lies, to promote peace and unity, and to conduct myself as becomes a worker for Christ...*

Yes, he’s a sinner. But he’s also a saint. (Aren’t we all?) He will somehow find the grace not to send the cassock back a third time for alterations. (We must thank the Lord that nobody has told Neil about Gammarelli’s, or he’d be making weekly trips to Rome to test their promise to ‘meet any kind of request or need’.)

In a moment Neil will reach the far edge of the car park, repent, and turn round. What is repentance, but the act of turning round, turning round and heading home? He will apologise to the guard for telling whoppers. Then he'll introduce himself, explain about his church's planned community litter pick, and his project to clean up the riverbank, lay proper paths, maybe establish a wee nature reserve?

The guard will be more interested in a slobbery game of wrestling the plastic bottle than in capturing the Ferguson riverbank regeneration vision. But later—as the hours yawn past and nothing happens in his crap job and he aches for his Friday night to begin—his thoughts will keep drifting back to Bear, and the way that gobby little Scot turned round and apologised. And he'll smile.

I sometimes wonder whether the C of E should introduce a licenced dog ministry. Which English heart is not open to a daft dog? How naturally we enthuse to strangers about Duke and Daisy, when to enthuse about our faith would be *death*.

March 29<sup>th</sup> meanders by. There's chiffchaff song, and the first swallows are swooping. Stand under any cherry tree and feel the air thrum with bees. The glass of blessings has been upended on us once more. Spring runs a finger round our souls and everything hums.

All the while, in far off London town, parliament debates and votes, up against the wire, striving to deliver the impossible to the implacable. Day after day, our MPs have stayed at their posts against a backdrop of ridicule and haranguing, of death- and rape-threats, while placarded tribes roar at the gates. And this afternoon crowds will gather in Westminster, like storm clouds banking up, and there will be thunder in the air.

Still, the sun shines. It's shorts weather, sunblock weather. Meteorological irony? Or a care package parachuted in just when we most needed cheering up? Which is it? If we

put it to the vote, we will be divided. We are divided on everything in the United Kingdom. We cannot even decide how to pronounce 'scone', for heaven's sake! Sometimes I wash my hands of us.

All the same, I'm generally glad of fine weather on a Friday, because clergy frequently choose this for their rest day. (Aka, their 'I know it's your day off, but [insert footling problem]' day.) A sunny Friday therefore maximises our chance of encountering our clergy friends strolling along beside the Linden with their beloved hounds.

We will go looking for them. Up, once again, into the trembling air. We will follow sweet breathing Zephyrus along the silver streaming Linden to Lindford. The river path is better cared for here. I wouldn't claim that Lindford has a vibrant café culture exactly, but there are pleasant places to stroll, with clematis trained over iron arches, and so forth. You'll find a handful of bars and restaurants with terraces overlooking the river. This area is popular with the students of ~~Poundstretcher~~ Linden University.

Come with me, to the spot where the river passes through a tiny parcel of urban woodland, where you might even hear a woodpecker, if you are lucky.

There below us now, entering the trees in a state of high excitement, is a second golden labradoodle. Yes, yes, there are other breeds of dog in the Diocese of Lindchester. But a happy accident back in 2016 produced a litter of five, so please re-suspend your disbelief.

This dog is out for walkies with Fr Dominic, rector of Lindford, and his mum. He stoops to unclip the lead. Off bounds the dog on squirrel patrol. She's called Lady (short for Lady Day, of course). This is a choice of name which Fr Dominic has had occasion to regret. He had not considered how female passers-by might react to an angry priest bawling, 'Hey! Lady! COME HERE!'

'Oooh! Are those flags?'

'No, mother. They're carrier bags.'

'Shame. They look like flags. I thought it was a celebration.'

It is, thinks Dominic. We haven't crashed out of the EU today with no deal. Huzzah.

'Enjoy it while it lasts. When you get your eyes done, you'll see litter in its full glory again.'

'If I'm still here, and compost mental,' she says.

He squeezes her arm. 'As you so wisely said yesterday, we can burn that bridge when we get to it.'

'So we can!' She laughs, and begins to sing: '*One more river, and that's the river of Jordan!*'

He joins in: '*One more river, and that's the river to cross!*'

'Oh, my son used to love that song when he was little!'

His chest goes icy. 'And I still do, mother mine.'

'That's what I mean,' she says quickly. 'You love it.'

Last week, for the first time, she hadn't recognised him when he came back from Mass. She made light of it, the way she made light of getting dressed at 3am to go shopping that time. But that 'Who on earth are *you*?' look jolted him out of denial. The assessment is set for the week after Easter. What horror lies on the other side of it? Oh, Lord. This is so crap. Please spare us this horrible, horrible crumbling away, this eradication of all we love.

They pass the place where skeletal bouquets still cling to the fence. A drunken stumble after a student binge? Suicide? We will never know. Dominic remembers the candles lit in his church, the desperate nine-day vigil before the poor body washed up by Martonbury weir. Twenty years old.

They lean on the fence and look down at the sparkling water. From the opposite bank, out of sight behind high brick walls, Dominic can hear clashing and bleeping from the scrap yard. Above that rears the brutalist cliff falls of the university's Fergus Abernathy building. He gazes downstream. Buddleia sprouts out of abandoned stacks. He can see sky through the roofs of empty factories. There are more students than industrial workers in this town now.

'I could always just end it all,' says Mum.

'That's cheating,' he says. 'Like sneaking a peep at the last page of a thriller.'

'Tiddly-widdly! I do that all the time.'

'I *know* you do, mother, and it ruins the denouement the poor author has sweat blood over.'

'Well, hard cheese. It helps *me*.' She gets out her hanky and wipes her eyes. 'The tension's more bearable if you know how it ends.'

'We do know how it ends, darling.' He puts his arm round her and rests his head on hers. How tiny she is these days. 'It ends with us going home.'

'Oh, get away with you. I know it does. I just get frightened about... You know.'

'I know. The verge of Jordan.'

The cellophane on the faded bouquets rustles in the breeze. He can smell the conditioner in Mum's newly styled hair. First solo cut by Star, bless her. He'll be baptising Star and her Mum at the Easter vigil.

In a moment, he'll whistle for Lady, and they will totter to the Rising Sun for a nice spoil-y day off lunch. Light flashes off the ripples. He prays for the repose of the student's soul. Two swans glide into view. Mum will spot them any moment, and he'll pretend they're carrier bags to wind her up.



Oh, don't be frightened, dearest mum. I'll bid your anxious cares subside. I'll be with you on the verge, even if you have no idea who I am. In the distance, he hears Lady barking at another squirrel she will never catch. And just for this moment, even though it's crap, everything is perfect.

Everything is crap, and everything is perfect, in this no-place of mine. Maybe some blueprint still shines through whenever we hold our experience up to the light. Plans for the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, the No Place behind and beyond all our no-places. Small wonder we can't picture it, we who can only think of eternity as time going on interminably.

Star thinks everything is perfect. You remember Star? Star from Hair Works salon, the last minute stand-in Blessed Virgin Mary at the Linford Indoor Market nativity. Being chosen like that (by a frantic Fr Dominic) flicked on a dormant homing device in her, and she slips into the parish church whenever she can.

She's finished work, and she's heading there now, along the banks of the Linden. She's got a bunch of forget-me-nots to put in front of the statue. She'll write some more prayer request slips for the world and Brexit, and for Mum and Dad, for her Baptism, and not forgetting Jack, the homeless guy whose hair she cuts for free, the salon lets her. She has to write it all down because she doesn't know how to pray properly yet. She doesn't really get how it *works*. Like, can you just ask for anything, and it will happen? That doesn't sit right, or nobody would ever get cancer, or starve, or be homeless, would they? But you've got to try.

Sometimes she thinks it's like your prayer is just a tiny cog. It goes round, and then there's another huge huge cogwheel that turns, only you can't see it? You just get the

feeling something big is turning too. Ha ha, like the ancient toy from the 70s dad got down from the loft that time she was poorly, to cheer her up. She'd forgotten about that.

Spirograph? Yes. The big wheel going round and round and you're making flower patterns with your pen? Except ha ha it always slipped and you did a massive scribble. But probably if you practised it would get easier.

Look! Kingfisher! She holds her breath.

Hey, that dream last night—that was so weird. So she's standing in a big circle, miles and miles wide, with a ring of mountains in the distance going all the way round, whichever way she looks. There's other people there, maybe mum and dad and Fr Dominic? And suddenly she's all, Wait—this is a volcano, everybody! We're literally standing on a volcano! And she's panicking, because a cloud of smoke is rising up behind the hills. Only when she looks again, it's not smoke—it's birds. Thousands and thousands of birds. And as she spins round, there's more and more, swirling up, till the whole sky's full of them.

'A murmuration of starlings,' whispers Star.

She wrote them all down once in Juniors. Pride of Lions. Murder of Crows. But *murmuration* was her favourite. She watches the river a little longer to see if the kingfisher will come back. The late afternoon sunshine lights up her candy floss hair like turquoise halo.

The sun is going down over the diocese of Lindchester. Nothing much has happened here today, this red letter day stamped on our brains, when everything was going to change.

We'd hoped that at least we'd know what we were in for by now. Do we have to go one endlessly trying? Can't we just get it over with, even if it's a disaster? Hate spews out in London and across our screens and timelines. We are living on a volcano. If it blows, what

will become of us? This terrible waiting. We can't even ignore the whole thing. Oh, what can possibly lie on the far side of catastrophe?

Blackbirds are singing. Magnolia candles gleam as darkness falls. Streetlights flick on along every street. No, nothing much has happened to my characters. They have walked their dogs, worked, shopped, cut hair, told fibs, repented, prayed, wept. What lies in store for them? I can't tell. Sweet Linden, run softly as I end my song. Even now, your water brims with light, while all around, darkness falls.

Yes, we'll gather at the river. What lies on the far side? Come, we know the answer. Hate will not have the final word. We are Easter people. Turn, turn your little wheel of prayer. Hate will wear itself out. The heavens and earth will wear themselves out.

An owl calls as we make our farewells and head for home. The Linden runs, as all rivers run, towards something bigger than itself. Perhaps we are living on a volcano. But if we look up, we will see that all around us pulse the murmurations of love.

THE END