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Jeremy

I HAVE ALWAYS thought of myself as an ordinary sort of person with an average sort of life; now I'm not so sure. Last year I met a boy called Jeremy and now my life doesn't seem normal or average any more. Perhaps you will understand what I mean if I tell you my story.

I teach seven and eight year olds in a suburban school on the greenish edges of a small, rather dull town. When Jeremy transferred to our school last October I wasn't having a good time with my class. No-one could work out why, but that group of children had been difficult from the day they had started school four years before. As they moved up the school they had become more and more challenging to work with. Taken individually the children were average in behaviour, attitude and ability; put together in a classroom they argued noisily and lacked concentration. Having this class

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was the most difficult job in my school and it was my turn.

A few days before he arrived in the school Jeremy's grandmother had visited the school to explain that he was coming to live with her while his parents 'sorted themselves out'. I never found out what was being 'sorted'. Once Jeremy told me that his grandmother was called Anna and that his father was a carpenter, but that was all I ever discovered about his life outside school. Sometimes, I think it's better not to know too much about a child's background. I find that I get to know a child very well through working with them; they probably learn a lot about me too!

In many ways Jeremy was quite unremarkable. He had dark brown hair which stuck up in all the wrong places, dirty fingernails and scabby knees. In other ways he was quite different to anyone else. I don't think that I ever knew the colour of his

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eyes: sometimes they looked blue, sometimes brown, and sometimes a colour I couldn't give a name to. I don't know if it was because he didn't blink much, or because he always looked directly at the person he was talking or listening to; but I have never felt that anyone has ever concentrated so hard on what I am saying. Any teacher would have been delighted to have such an attentive listener in their class and I was pleased, but this careful listening made me wonder if Jeremy knew things that I didn't know. Was I passing on the right information? Were my facts always correct? Of course these were ridiculous thoughts; how could an eight year old possibly know more than someone who has been teaching for twenty years? Jeremy never contradicted me and rarely asked me any questions. I could have found him irritating, or even disquieting; but I didn't, I felt honoured to have him in the class.

The week before Jeremy came to us had been a difficult one. The class noise level had reached an all time high and the number of squabbles had escalated. Although we had only been back at school four weeks, the benefits of my summer holiday had worn off long ago and I felt exhausted and depressed. I felt very sorry for Jeremy; it's hard moving school and even harder when you're moving into a difficult class. Much to my surprise I found that my concerns were misplaced; Jeremy was not a bossy boy but a natural leader who made friends easily and he soon settled in. It was around this time that something remarkable began to happen; the class began to change for the better.

I can't really remember when or how it happened, whether it was a gradual, or a sudden change; perhaps I was so surprised I didn't really stop to wonder what was going on. But that October the class became one of the nicest classes the school's ever had. Of course there were the odd falling outs, but the children became calmer, more co-operative, more considerate and more peaceful. The other staff said that it must be me, they kept asking me how I did it and I couldn't really tell them what had happened. I was sure that it was

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something to do with Jeremy, how or why I didn't know.

Jeremy was not a particularly academic child. His maths and science were slightly above average, he was good at art and craft (perhaps he watched his father when he was doing his carpentry?). He didn't have a clue about computers; surely they had them in his previous school? When I asked him he said that they hadn't needed them where he came from. I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that. He did seem to know and do some surprising things. When we were preparing for the Christmas play Jeremy was asked to take the part of one of the three kings, he agreed, but looked rather puzzled. During lunchtime he came into the classroom and told me that baby Jesus wasn't visited by three kings. I said that the three kings were part of the Christmas story, he didn't say anything, but looked at me rather doubtfully, saying something about clever men from the east. Later on I had a peep in a Bible in the staffroom, he was right; the three kings don't appear in the Bible. All I could find were 'some wise men from the east'. How did he know that?

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Another odd incident occurred during a class outing. Although we're not a church school, we are required to teach RE and during the Easter term we visited a local church for a tour by the church warden. When we went in I made sure that Jeremy was at the front as he always looks so interested – I moved the children who always look bored to the back in an effort to hide their yawning; it doesn't reflect well on a school. The church warden was an elderly and rather formidable gentleman. Looking at the children's faces I could see they found him rather scary. He took us round the building explaining what everything symbolized and was used for – I was grateful for his knowledge as I'm not the religious sort. The tour ended in the church hall, where the parents had laid on drinks and biscuits; I hoped that the church warden didn't notice the children's faces brighten up at the sight of the food and drink – he wasn't boring at all, but children do enjoy their treats! Before we tucked in he asked if there were any questions; no-one put their hand up, he was too frightening. Some sensible and intelligent questions would make the trip a success. I looked round for my usual question askers. Peter usually had something to say but his eyes were on the floor, so were John's, and

Madeline was looking to see what sort of biscuits we were having. What about... I looked round the crowd for him and my heart stopped beating. Jeremy had gone! Losing a child on a school trip is every teacher's nightmare and it had happened to me in a church!

Taking a deep breath I asked, 'Where is Jeremy?' Silence; everyone looked around them. Another long silence, 'Excuse me,' I said and made my way back into the church, trying not to look as if I was too worried – which, of course, I was. I pushed open the heavy wooden door and saw an empty

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church. My heart sank. Perhaps he was behind a pillar? I stepped into the church and to my relief heard muttering coming from the room I now know to be called the vestry.

The door was ajar. As I got nearer I could hear Jeremy's voice and I breathed a sigh of relief. Anxious to know what was going on I pushed the door open very gently, so as not to be heard. Jeremy was sitting at a small table talking to the vicar and another clergyman wearing a purple shirt. I didn't catch much of what they were saying, but I am sure that I heard the words 'Eucharist' and 'Communion'. I must have made a noise because they all looked up.

'Miss,' said the vicar (looking rather relieved, as though I had let him off answering a tricky question), 'You've got a remarkable boy in your class. He's been asking me the sort of questions that I haven't heard since my days at theological college.'

Too surprised to be angry, I turned to Jeremy. 'Why did you wander off? We need to know where you are on school trips.'

'Surely you must have known that I would be in my Father's house,' he answered. The vicars laughed out loud. I wondered why. Perhaps Jeremy's father was actually a vicar and carpentry was just his hobby?

'You've got a right one here!' chuckled the purple vicar. 'Off you go now; I think your teacher needs you.'

As Jeremy followed me through the church I decided that he had had enough telling off and to be truthful I had found the whole incident so puzzling I didn't know what to say to him. I let him

join the others in the hall and everything went back to normal.

Jeremy left the school as quickly and unexpectedly as he came to it. I was marking books one Friday after school when the headteacher came into my room to let me know that she had just received a call from Jeremy's grandmother. The family had 'sorted themselves out' and Jeremy could go and live with them again. I spent the whole weekend dreading telling the rest of the class and trying to find the right words to say. In the end I told them that Jeremy had left us but that we should be glad for him because he was able to have a new life with his parents. Everyone cried, including me. Some of the children asked if they could have his address so that they could write to him, but we didn't have one and his next school never did get in touch to ask for his records.

Usually when a child spends a short time in a school they are forgotten quite quickly, friendships regroup and settle down into a new pattern. This is not out of spite or dislike, that's the way children are, they move much more quickly than adults. With Jeremy it was different: he is often remembered. Sometimes children say things like: 'What would Jeremy have said about that?' or 'Do you remember when Jeremy did this?' It is as though he is still with us and in some way guiding us. Instead of going back to their old behaviour the children seem to have grown up a bit more, becoming more independent, mature and considerate.

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Jeremy has changed me too. One day during the Easter holidays I walked past the church and on impulse slipped in. There was no-one else there but it was full of Easter flowers and somehow full of the presence of Jeremy. He wasn't behind me, beside me or in front of me, but all around me. Leaving the dark church my eyes were dazzled by the afternoon sun and the world seemed brighter, lighter, and more hopeful than ever before.

■ Jane Stratford

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