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## In the Provinces

by Ivor John

Paula looked at the list she had been handed, briefs she had been allocated by the clerk for January. From the 11th she had been given a five day listing at St Albans. A section 18 grievous bodily harm with intent. A CPS job, so she was prosecuting. Ordinarily she disapproved of being given cases, particularly longer ones, outside of London. Preferring Snaresbrook and the Bailey. Particularly the Bailey being close to her chambers, St John & Sedgwick in Clerkenwell. But five days in St Albans was most welcome as it was near home and would save her the train journey into town.

Nevertheless she would challenge the senior clerk, knowing that he wouldn't change the listings, but to make the point not to give her work in the provinces. Heaven forbid she would be defending rapists in Bristol. Staying in an austere Travel Lodge for a fortnight.

"Christopher you arse, next months listings, you've put me at bloody St Albans, is there nothing at the Bailey? You know I prefer cases in town."

"But you live in St Albans Paula. I thought you'd be OK with it. It is a CPS job, and you usually like them. Anyway it has to be a silk, they have insisted. I had put it down for Bernard but he's doing a tribunal the week before and it may over run. I can see if Simon is free but he has taken himself out of the diary."

“No don’t worry Chris, I’ll do this one. Have we got the briefs yet? I know what CPS are like. I don’t want to get them two days before. They have a habit of that. I want a pupil with me though.”

A conference was arranged a week before the hearing, which would be the first time Paula saw the papers. Bundles of statements and paper exhibits in several A3 buff envelopes, which were brought to chambers by a harassed looking CP solicitor who carried them in a rucksack. He explained in detail his train journey from Stevenage.

Even though Paula was one of the four silks at St John & Sedgewick, she had a pokey office on the third floor. The leather topped desk too big for the space which was lined with shelving lined with copies of Archbalds, Criminal Pleading and Evidence from 2002 and piles of papers tied with pink tapes, waiting for annotation and filing.

Meetings were generally hosted in the more opulent meeting room in the basement. Windows offered out to a small damp courtyard, a concrete staircase led up to a fence and locked gate to the pavement. As conferences dragged on, it was easy to become distracted by watching the legs of the pedestrians walking past toward the nearby Barbican Centre.

Paula moved some filing boxes, so that Ian, the CPS solicitor could unpack the case papers and spread them out. Julia her pupil helped place the piles. Paper exhibits, each identified with specific reference number. Mobile phone bills, medical records, doctors’ reports. Several albums of photographs, spiral bound into A5 sized albums, again with exhibit labels. Julia picked an album and flicked through it.

The first few pictures showing the aggrieved, a man in his early twenties, standing face on, then from behind and left and right profiles. They were taken presumably in a medical room in a police station, there was a measure fixed to the wall behind him. Taken a few days after the incident, looking pale and in some discomfort. In each successive picture he gradually pulled down the waistband of his trousers whilst pulling up a grubby white T shirt, it was like those packs of pictures you flick through to show a crude animation.

Gradually he revealed a florid scar, crossing from his side, across his abdomen to below his waistline. It had happened only a couple of days ago, and a row of flesh coloured stiches snagged his skin each side of what was clearly a significant wound.

More alarmingly pictures of him from behind showed a small injury where the weapon, a large kitchen knife had emerged. Paula looked horrified. Against the wound had been placed a paper ruler showing empirically the extent of the injury.

“Oh goodness, that's awful,” Julia said, putting the album down and picking up another. This time showing a backstreet in Luton, firstly from a distance and then zooming in with each shot to an area outside a small supermarket. In some an article lying on the pavement was indicated by a numbered marker. A footprint, apparently in blood, several feet from the scene of the crime.

The scene itself had several numbered flags. Although it had been cleaned up by the time the photographs had been taken, the pavement was clearly blood stained. Other photographs, in the exhibits pile, had clearly been taken on various mobile phone cameras.

“Can we look through the interview notes Ian?”

He handed Paula the papers, clipped into a cardboard folder. Several pages of questions and answers.

“He didn't say much Paula, his solicitor told him to go no comment. Page 5, I think at 11:34 is interesting, the interviewer has shown him the CCTV footage, look at his reply, ‘He was fucking asking for it, playing the fool, tosser’.