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Act 2 - Court 3

by Ivor John

He could see, through the barred opaque window in the tiny shared cell a bright day outside, sunny even. For five weeks now, he hadn't been outside of Chelmsford Prison. Being on the Remand Wing, meant that the prisoners or detainees as described in the bundle of photocopied documents he had been given, could wear their own clothes rather than the grey tracksuits and black plimsols which the convicted prisoners wore. Instead, they all wore blue denim jeans and T shirts. Belts and shoelaces removed.

Remand prisoners were kept separate from convicted prisoners, the remand wing did not have an exercise yard, so they never saw daylight, other than filtered through the thick perspex windows. Even after just five weeks inside, it was easy to lose track of time. With nothing to differentiate days other than the television, during the occasional periods of association. Mostly he was banged up in his cell, which for the first couple of weeks, he had shared with Anton, a black guy from Stratford who was in for an assault. They had got on well, but Anton had been sentenced and moved to the wings. Yesterday, the screw on the landing had told him he was going to court the next day.

'It's the Crown Court, Paterson, Chelmsford I think. So you'll be moved to the wing when you get back, enjoy your fucking freedom.'

He had told the screw to 'fuck off' and had been banged up in his cell as a consequence. Ordinarily the cells doors would be open and they could sit on the landings to talk. Unlike him, most had done time before and told him what it was like on the wings.

'You've got lifers mate, murderers, loads of the fuckers, they ain't going nowhere and they don't give a shit. Half the fucking wing are off their fucking faces on spice.'

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That morning the screw came to my cell, "Get you shit together Paterson, you're on your way." We walked along the landing to the gate at the end. He unhooked his bunch of keys from his belt and opened it. Another prison screw held it open, locking it closed after we had gone through. Concrete steps and another gate and we were at the reception. A large, white tiled room, cubicles down one side. Brightly illuminated by strip lights on the high, concrete ceiling. All down one side of the room, a reinforced plate glass window allowed prison officers inside to view the activity in the reception area. One at a time, prisoners, nearly all boys in their teens, early twenties, stood in a white circle painted onto the concrete floor, as a screw felt the waistband of their jeans, and their pockets, while another ran a metal detector wand over them.

After my turn, I told to go to the window, where I was shown a large clear plastic bag, sealed with a numbered HMP. "Sign there, your stuff will be in the van."

The bag contained the things taken from me when I had arrived at the prison. 'Can I have my smokes?'

"You can't smoke in the court. If you ask in the court cells, they will give you a patch."

I was handcuffed and led roughly through another gate, unlocked as we approached. There was a prison van parked which I climbed into. I was locked into a cubicle, a little smaller than a public toilet. It seemed a long time whilst I could hear other prisoners being put in the van, before it started to move. The only view I had was through a very small, black glass window, but I could see that we were driving through the large wooden prison gates.

I joined the other occupants of the van, banging the walls and shouting as we drove. "Screw, screw I am going to be sick!" "Screw, I need a piss!" They never answered and the noise made no difference to the prison officers, whom we couldn't even see.

At the court I was taken out of the van, searched again, and put in a cell. "Can I have a smoke?" The court prison officer, a young woman, in her twenties with pink hair, both arms with a full sleeve of tattoos, told me politely, there was no smoking, "I can get you a patch, anyway your solicitor is waiting for you."

I was taken to a locked gate. She shouted through to an unseen colleague, "Steve, can you take this one through to the legal visits room." The gate was opened from the other side, along a short corridor leading to a locked metal door. Taking a key from his belt he unlocked the door and directed me in.

This part of the court was completely different from the concrete floors, blue painted walls and metal gates of the cell area. For a long time I did not move from dark, wood panelled hall while the gaoler made a call from a phone, fixed to the wall. Putting the phone down, he unlocked the door at the other end of the hall.

"Ok go in." It was a small room, with a metal table with two chairs each side. All bolted to the floor. I didn't recognise the man in a suit who welcomed me into the room, waiting for the door to be locked before he spoke. Offering me his hand to shake, "Good morning, I have been instructed by Andrew Holt, your solicitor to represent you."