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Act 3 - Court 3

by Ivor John

Beside Chelmsford Crown Court, there is a service road off New Street. You would hardly notice it except for during the hour or so each morning and afternoon when the prison vans arrive from HMP Chelmsford or sometimes, occasionally from HMP Bronzefield a woman's prison. A single, blue painted wood door, with a small perspex window framed in aluminium, opens to a bare concrete passageway. The blue door, you could easily imagine, would let you in to the back of a shop perhaps. Into the storeroom where there would be piled up stock in cardboard boxes. In fact it is the door court staff use. The admin staff take a door off the passageway, where it widens out to a staircase to the courts and the offices.

If you continue along, you go around a sharp bend in the corridor and then to a plain wooden door. The small dome of a CCTV camera fixed to the ceiling above. On the frame beside - a doorbell. This is the way in to the court detention area. Eighteen small concrete cells, leading off of a small seating area. This is where the gaolers in their uniform of white shirts, black trousers and navy blue jumpers, sat on dilapidated chairs between tasks. The supervisor in a small office to the side. Clear plastic bags piled on his desk, sealed HMP contained the property of the detainees. Remand prisoners who had been brought to the court for hearings.

The gaolers were an eclectic group of people. A lot of them, middle-aged men, fit back in the day but often flabby, carried their military service on their faces. Regimental tattoos visible behind their rolled up sleeves.

But there were also women and young girls, who would look more at home in an office or a supermarket checkout. Each had a bunch of metal keys fixed to their black leather belts with a chain. Long enough that they could reach the locks, without having to unhook them.

They sat in the chairs or in the supervisor's office, arms folded, making sardonic comments to each other or to whomever came in. Mostly solicitors, occasionally nurses, probation officers. They all seemed to know each other and all knew the theme of the banter.

'So what happened to West Ham at the weekend Pete, wankers,' a solicitor in a suit and brown leather brogues commented to a middle-aged gaoler who was drinking milky tea from a mug. 'Fuck off Simon, Tottenham didn't do any better.'

The supervisor, sitting in the office, the wall in front of him papered with clipboards. Tapping on a computer keyboard with one hand, phone handset in the other. He was still holding the phone when he shouted, 'The first van is just pulling into the bay, there's five on including a cat A. He has a violent marker'. Several of the gaolers stood up, without as the supervisor unlocked the metal gate which led to the secure bay where the prison vans unloaded.

The prison staff unlocked each of the cells in the vehicle one at a time. Waiting while the court staff, walked them, handcuffed, into the building. Waiting until they were inside before unlocking the next. Taking the next prisoner the gaoler, recognised him, as they often did. Recidivism was common and most of the gaolers knew most of the prisoners and visa versa.

'Fucking hell Paterson, you haven't been out long,' he said in actually quite a friendly if exaggeratedly resigned manner, 'what is it this time, burglary or the gear?'

'Oh fucking hell, not you, not you staff if you don't mind Paterson. Can I have a fag in the yard?'

'Two of you for Saunders, he's the cat A, keep the cuffs on him until he's locked up.'

Two of the gaolers went back out to the van to get the last of the prisoners. One of them, an ex guardsman, took hold of the chain on his handcuffs as the prisoner climbed out of the van. 'He did not look like anything special at all,' he thought. Not like he could have killed somebody. But he had seen many murderers, and none of them were very special.