

A grainy, black and white photograph of a person in a dark jacket looking down at a glass on a tray. The person's face is partially obscured by shadows. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

# JOHN

A true story.

This isn't based on a true story, this is a true story. Every word.  
Names have been changed to protect the innocent, the guilty...  
and the culpable.

Anthony tapped the steering wheel with the index finger of his right hand. He glanced at the red digits of the clock as another minute clicked by and turned his eyes to the rear view mirror to check whether John was approaching from that direction.



It had been the strangest ‘journey’ as people call life events these days. New views on a life – lives – that were far removed from his usual horizons. John had been emotionally adrift when they first met. An innocuous meeting sparked by a chance conversation. Outside the soup kitchen in the gloom of a January early evening. If Anthony hadn’t spoken then, none of anything would have followed. And even so he had walked past John, clocking him and then turning his head to look over his shoulder, the glance between them both prompting a question, maybe a statement from Anthony. “Alright?” The small figure hadn’t answered and for some reason Anthony turned back. “Are you OK? You look cold.”

John stared back. Small in stature, maybe early thirties. Obviously far from looking clean, obviously cold, obviously scruffily dressed. The most obvious things and the location told an instant story. “Did you get something to eat? Something to eat in there?” Anthony flicked his head towards the soup kitchen double doors that opened as another ‘customer’ left with hurrying footsteps, took the steps down two at a time and seemed to be on some sort of a mission to get somewhere. The doors swung shut as both men in this new engagement watched the third man stride purposefully down the pavement away from the building. “Did you get something to eat?” John looked back towards Anthony and considered the question silently for five seconds or more.

“Yes mate. Yes I did.” John was unconvincing in his reply and pulled his stained jacket closed around his chest, hitched the rucksack a little further up on his shoulders. He looked at this stranger with his strange question suspiciously. This time the silence of five seconds was thrown back to

Anthony to consider. “Enough?”

What?”

“Did you get enough to eat? In there.”

The suspicion in John’s face deepened and he frowned, before glancing each way along the street as if searching for the speediest getaway. He watched the third man stride away along the damp pavement, illuminated then darkened as he passed under a street light, illuminated then darkened again as he strode past the bright shop front. “Why are you asking?” “I...I was just concerned. Concerned that you’d had something to eat. Something warm maybe. It’s cold out here.” John held his suspicious stare at Anthony and remained silent. Anthony took in the close cropped hair, receding a little. The even features, now almost juvenile looking it seemed to him. The creases in lines down each side of a slightly bulbous nose darkened with a residue of grime. John reached down to his waist and fumbled with the two sides of the zipper on his jacket. He tried to match up the two sides of the zipper without looking and aimed to push one side into the other three or four times before lifting the flaps out a little and joining the two mechanics of nylon, then pulling lines of zipper teeth as far up towards his neck as they would go. Anthony saw the darkened finger nails, more grime on the jacket and baggy, ill fitted jeans. Brown, scuffed trekker boots laced loosely, overlapped by frayed denim. John hitched his rucksack a notch further up his shoulders.

“Yeah. Yes I’ve had something to eat. They’re good in there. Though...”

Anthony considered whether that was the end of the conversation and began to turn away. “Though when they’re busy there’s never enough.” The conversation obviously hadn’t ended and Anthony flipped between turning away and ending on a ‘never enough’ note which wasn’t his problem. “What have you had?” John snorted an almost imperceptible laugh, looked at Anthony and then back towards the double doors. He turned back. “Soup. It’s a soup kitchen. And bread. Some bread.” Anthony had walked past those double doors countless times, seen the ‘customers’ go in and come out. It was a local soup kitchen he knew, but he had never considered that it might only serve soup – and bread. But then he had had no reason to consider anything

about it other than it was, of course, worthwhile. A good cause. Good for the community. Why had he stopped and asked the first question this time, when it would have been easier to pass by with his head down, shielding from the cold as he always did?

“Just soup?” A pause. “And bread.”

This time John flickered a grin. Stupid, stupid question. Anthony considered his options. He had started the exchange. It was not for him to walk away now and continue his walk home to warmth and something more than bread and soup. There had to be a token to give him his alibi for walking on and he fumbled in his trouser pocket searching for change, assessing with the fingers of his right hand how much there was in there. John saw the movement and looked towards where the fingers tumbled change and waited for the withdrawal of a hand with anything to hold out his palm to. For a second the expectation slid, but Anthony took his hand from his trouser pocket, lifted his overcoat away from his chest a little and transferred his right hand inside the two layers of overcoat and suit pocket before pulling out his tan leather wallet and opening it with the thumb on his left hand. Two ten pound notes, one fiver. The calculations: a tenner too much, he pinched his fingers around the five pound note and slid it from the wallet. He folded the note in half between his finger and thumb in one movement and pushed it through the air towards John. “Here. Just a little,” compulsion to excuse his choice of the lower denomination, “Maybe you could get something...something else to eat. If that’s what...if you’re still hungry.”

John took another five second pause. “Thanks. Thanks mate. But if it’s alright with you I’ll put it towards the shelter. It’s twelve quid a night, but I can get the rest somehow.” Anthony executed his own pause before taking a ten pound note out of his wallet and adding it to John’s outstretched hand. John scrunched the notes into his palm. “Thanks. Thanks mate.” Anthony turned and headed for home and warmth and food. ‘Mug,’ he said to himself as he hitched the collar of his overcoat up around his neck.



He’d learnt, didn’t want to get caught again, so Anthony, for the next three evenings, crossed the road before he had to walk in front of those double doors again. He felt that he had set a precedent and didn’t want to have to hand over a tenner again. Or more. Head down, collar up, he strode along the opposite pavement, just his eyes swivelled towards the double doors. The light from inside slid down the four wide steps reflecting on either damp or rain sodden tiles. And, on a few occasions over those nights, he had perceived movement. Mottled shapes moving against the yellow light inside, or a hunched figure going in. Or coming out. The silhouettes were always consistent. Hunched and laden with a rucksack, sometimes straddled with other loads that, from his side of the street, looked like rolled sleeping bags. Always men, he perceived. Although it was sometimes difficult to tell. If there were any women, or girls, he reasoned that they wouldn’t be wearing dresses against the cold and so he wasn’t sure.

On the fourth night, staring at his shoes in the dazzle of reflected light on a pavement congealed with running water, rather than averting his eyes sideways, he kept his head down against the arrows of rain. To his right he caught the glimpse of a shape melded into a narrow shop doorway and glanced, startled, at the figure almost completely shrouded in the overhanging shadow. Just the feet spilled over with light, brown trekker boots darkened at the toes with rain, the first few inches of darkened, ragged jeans with blue denim showing above darkened, soaked fabric. Anthony involuntarily increased his stride and steered away, still startled. Two paces past the doorway he stopped and half turned, took two more steps and stopped again. The figure shifted a little, leant forward out of the doorway as the half light of the street sent a dull illumination down one side of its face and body. But the familiar boots and ragged jeans had already identified soup kitchen man. Easy to walk on, head down. Quickened steps in the rain. But Anthony himself, he knew, was also already identified. He turned back and took the few steps to face into the shop doorway and shadowed figure. Hands sunk deep into his overcoat pocket, Anthony knew that he was on the hook now. That to turn again was not viable. He had committed.

“Hello mate,” John said.

This was a violation, a pet hate. To be called ‘mate’ by somebody he didn’t know, had only communicated with for a few seconds days before. ‘Don’t

call me mate' was on his lips, but then no need. This wasn't work, this wasn't one of his staff or a supplier with a poor sense of protocol. Manners. Anthony took just a couple of seconds to shrug off his annoyance. And a couple more to reconcile that his thought was unreasonable, unfair in circumstances that were totally beyond his previous experience.

"Hi. How are you doing?" Woefully inadequate, bordering on stupid, certainly inappropriate. But what else to say in the seconds that had committed him again? He couldn't turn away now. John shrugged his rucksack up his back a little and stirred the damp collection of property around his feet with his boot, pushing two plastic carrier bags towards the rolled sleeping bag deeper into the doorway. He stared silently and pushed the green baseball cap further back on his head, gripping the peak and leaving his finger and thumb in place for a second or two before pulling it back down further towards his eyes, shading them pointlessly. Anthony couldn't see the grime on the cap, just the white letters that proclaimed NY. But he knew in those seconds that it would be grimy and that this man had never been to New York. He couldn't see the eyes now, completely blackened under the peak. It scared him a little and he took a half step backwards. He didn't know this man, but the man knew that he carried cash with him. Anthony checked left and right to assess any help should it be needed. But then checked himself again for being unreasonable in the moment, perhaps a twinge hysterical. He took his hands out of his overcoat pockets just in case and took the half step back towards the man in the doorway.

Again, "How are you doing?" Something had to start a conversation, however banal.

John stepped out of the doorway on to the pavement and pushed his belongings back into the relative dryness with his heel. Anthony reversed his step forward instantly.

"I'm...I'm OK. Could you...? I had a good night's kip the other night. Well at least dry. It's never a good night's kip in the shelter. Any shelter. You have to keep your eyes open a bit you see. Never know who's in there. It's better when your mates are there too. Better if there's two or three mates. Then you can take turns to watch out. In case...because... Been down behind the supermarket since then." John flicked his head backwards into the doorway.

"Got myself a little tent and a sleeping bag. Just...just that they're always wet. Always wet. That's the problem. It's good in the shelter. That's the best thing...you can dry things. But you have to watch out. Bastards will nick anything. You have to watch out." John grinned, amused at his own little observation. Anthony saw the yellow teeth below the arc of the shadow of the cap, one completely missing, one shortened to half its length, broken jaggedly. "If you could...? I've got eight quid, just a bit short. Just a fiver and I can try and get in the shelter. One of them. Some will be full, but I can try. A fiver will be enough. I can dry my things."

Anthony searched for a reply. He was too far in now and couldn't walk away. He should have kept his head down, taken another route home. His search for a reply, or an alternative to this confrontation, brought that single word searing through the few seconds of silence. Home. Where he would unlock the door, pour a glass of wine, kick off his shoes and advance into his own warm and dry and well fed existence. He was on the hook of course. Again.



John looked around the McDonalds. "They wouldn't let me in here if I was on my own," he said to Anthony. He dipped a handful of fries into the little cardboard pot of ketchup and stuffed them into his mouth, leaving a residue of red on his lips at the corners of his mouth. Anthony looked around and knew that what John had just said was right. He sipped his black coffee and looked around himself. Just a few customers in there, less than the number of staff behind the red, gold and stainless steel counter. Staff and customers alike studiously avoiding looking towards them, just the odd half glance that showed distaste at the ragged figure with his collection of belongings pushed under the red plastic table. Anthony himself could understand that. His own distaste for John's appearance, his animalistic eating, surfaced but was then suppressed. "Don't let them bother you," he said, knowing that it surprised himself that he was here under these circumstances. John finished his Big Mac and sucked nosily on the remains of the milk shake, trying to Hoover the dregs from the bottom of the cardboard container. "I won't," John said, then belched as noisily and openly as he could muster just – as Anthony knew – to reinforce the disdain around them. John slouched back in his chair and grinned the gapped and broken toothed grin that Anthony had become used to in recent weeks.

“Thanks Tony.”

“Anthony.”

“Thanks Tony.” John grinned again. Weeks had been divided into trying to understand and care, trying not be annoyed at the almost arrogant attitude that he had witnessed in rotation from John. Sometimes helpless and childlike, sometimes bordering on aggressive. Anthony clung on to the hope that he could meld the helplessness with part confidence distilled from arrogance. Because surely that would mean a lifeline to this man who had led a life revealed over those weeks and maybe he could help a little. A man who was on the precipice of continuing down the same path or learning that there was an alternative. In truth, he slowly accepted, he was lauding himself on trying to change a life, whilst wondering why he was trying. If he'd just walked past in the rain that night, things would have been much simpler and he wouldn't have bought himself a cornucopia of problems which he knew nothing about. Still, he was trying to do some good, if only to appease his conscience and, he had to admit, find a fascination in a world which he knew nothing about. He had listened and wondered how this man's thirty or so years had spiralled. How much of that spiral was self-induced, how far from that spiral John really, really wanted to be. He surely could have helped himself if he had wanted to. But self-help was nowhere within the mind and soul of this young man who, it had soon transpired, was out of prison on license.

But then, given the life which he learned that John had endured, breaking out of the spiral would only be achieved with offering a different perspective. John, because he had no knowledge or experience of anything other than his own life, thought – or assumed – that his path was normal. In care by twelve years old, in prison by the time he was seventeen years old. In and out of prison for the subsequent decade or more. Petty crime, in a steady stream with associated violence. Violence, uncatagorised or avoided, which worried Anthony because he soon came to recognise that it was an ever present, revealed fleetingly through light grey eyes with a dark streak. He sensed that John was holding the dark streak in check because he knew that he was on to a good thing. Someone who would feed him, keep him out of the cold with donations, someone who would take him into places where he would not be admitted alone. And sometimes, though rarely, John

would take the opportunity to shower and clean up at the local swimming baths. At those times, when an aberration entered John's hard and fast routine of doing nothing other than travelling between groups of friends who applauded their petty crimes as wins, just part of the game, John would appear wearing designer t-shirts and periodically replaced trainers, the shabby brown trekker boots having been consigned to an unknown place. Clothes and shoes that were pristine, shop fold creases still visible on shirts, trainers that were barely scuffed on the soles, let alone the uppers. When questioned about where things had come from, the attempt at innocence was that he had been 'given them.' The unanswered question was whether he, or a friend, had stolen them. The grey eyes claimed that his story was true, the dark streak in the eyes said – with the accompaniment of a smile – you know I'm lying, but just go along with it.

When, eventually, Anthony asked him what he had been in prison for this last time he replied casually, “Sexual assault. But it could have been worse. It was rape originally, but they downgraded it. Knew they'd never make it stick.” Anthony flinched, but tried not to show his disquiet, even disgust at this casual comment and flippant disregarding of anything other than escaping a judgement which was, in John's lexicon of responsibility, fair play. And he was shocked to a realisation of the man and his world that he had somehow involved himself with when John added, “There's a restraining order against me. But I'll be OK in a couple of months because it expires.” Anthony frowned at the implication, that John felt the woman would be 'fair game' again shortly. “Don't you...don't you dare go near her,” he almost hissed back at John. “You're out on license. You have a couple of years to go.” John realised that he had stepped over the line with someone who was good for a feed and a few quid and stifled the smile that had appeared on his pronouncement, almost with pride, that the implications expired along with a restraining order. He averted his gaze and wiped out his smile as Anthony stared in silence, but the grey eyes, for once, would not meet his.

Then sometimes, when they met so that Anthony could tender compassion with money or food, John's eyes stared and his manner was twitchy, hyperactive. On the second or third occasion Anthony asked directly if he was using drugs. “No...No, no, no. Not drugs. Just weed. That's not drugs,” and smiled despite trying to suppress an emotion that was not of his making, that was not of nature. “Weed isn't drugs.”

“John...you’re on license. Do you want to go back there again?” John just grinned and turned his baseball cap back to front. It was all a big joke really. “Plenty of weed inside. Easy.” His grin was stuck in place. Anthony pushed back the chair in the café, scraping it nosily on the tile floor and turned to walk out. It had all been a mistake, he should never have tried. What a fool to get involved. He turned back to raise a finger, point it at John and explode with the truth that had revolved in his mind over those seconds, the anger and frustration, but he saw just the top of a newly acquired baseball cap and a head hung lower than he had seen it before. John reached out and took hold of the half empty mug of tea and slurped a mouthful in the shadow beneath the peak of the cap. From the darkness beneath the peak came the words forced slowly and aimed at the table top, rather than back at his provider, “Don’t...don’t...threaten...me.” Anthony recognised that a line had been crossed and that he had crossed it. An innocuous and just line, but one that didn’t fit into the other man’s mind. He stood, finger still raised, then pulled the chair partly back under the table and sat down again opposite the lowered head. He mouthed to himself a line that someone had once said to him. ‘To every complicated question there’s a simple answer. That is inevitably wrong.’



The number on the screen was unfamiliar, unknown, not in the address book. Anthony hesitated. Another annoying call trying to sell him something he didn’t want. But for some reason he hesitated, pointed his index finger towards the red button and then stopped. ‘No. If it’s important they’ll leave a voice mail. If it’s not important they’ll leave a voice mail and I can block the number.’ Decision made. Anthony put the ‘phone down on his desk face down and turned back to the desktop screen, scanning the long, packed lines of words, trying to find the place where he had been disturbed. But he picked the ‘phone up again and waited to see if the little red circle pinged onto the voice mail icon. He stared and then maybe a minute later the tiny red dot crystalised as he looked. He dabbed the play icon: ‘Hello Anthony. You don’t know me, my name’s Julian. I’m the chaplain at Marshall Prison. John Simpson has given me your name and...and number. John’s back with us again I’m sad to say. Could you give me a buzz back please. You may have this number on your ‘phone, but if not it’s...’

Anthony looked at the incoming calls log. Unknown Caller ID. Anthony stared at the call log. ‘What’s John up to now?’ he asked himself silently. ‘Didn’t sound like his voice, too measured, too clear. But whoever it was should have known that his number wouldn’t show up. And that would be typical of John...or one of his dodgy mates. Maybe a scam.’ But then the realisation, the likelihood of the call and its origin left a physical sinking feeling in Anthony’s gut. He hadn’t seen John for a couple of weeks. Unusual, but not unprecedented. During the past two or three months John had disappeared for a couple of weeks, once or twice. Visiting mates in Newcastle, visiting mates in Stoke. To be honest Anthony had been glad of the break. He’d tried his best. John had phoned him at unlikely times, to the point where Anthony regretted ever giving him his number. ‘Just in case,’ he had said. Sometimes it had been three or four times a day and Anthony had had to tell him not to ‘phone him during the day, whilst he was at work. “Why, what are you doing?” was the ridiculous question, but then the realisation had come that he knew now that John had never worked, never had any kind of a job. Bizarre as it seemed to Anthony, the question had been genuine. John couldn’t work out that work meant actually doing something with a structure. Doing something that meant distractions were just that. Distractions. And inconveniences. Barely in school since before he was taken into care, in and out of prison for most of the subsequent years. No. He had never had a situation when you couldn’t or shouldn’t or mustn’t make a ‘phone call. The world in which he had always existed was one that everybody in his field of acquaintances, his ‘mates’ had no reason not to take any call that came in. So simple, so logical when you could implant yourself mentally into that revolving world of crime and trickery and prison. Anthony had even – in a moment that he instantly realised was rash – offered to buy a ‘better’ phone than the cheap but serviceable Argos rectangle of plastic that was John’s go to tech. And that of all his mates. It hadn’t been like John to refuse anything, but he did so on that occasion with a smile. “You’ll be able to have a look at jobs on a decent ‘phone, things like that,” Anthony had proffered. A simple reply. “I don’t want a job. Don’t want to work.” Again the mindset that Anthony was learning. Out of prison, with something resembling a home address, John could claim benefits. The address didn’t have to be completely real, as long as cursory enquiries could be made, as long as mail could be collected occasionally, as long as somebody confirmed that the address was correct if they knocked on the door. “Though he’s not here at the moment.’

“Besides,” John had said with that ochre, broken toothed grin, “them ‘phones can tell people where you are. Them phones can track you.” Of course, part of the complete logic of somebody living the life that they had been dealt, or chosen, or couldn’t escape from.

So it wasn’t unusual that Anthony hadn’t seen him for a couple of weeks. John had told him that he had an ‘address.’ Had registered that he had an address and very soon the benefits would come in again. Anthony wasn’t encouraged by that pronouncement, even if it meant that perhaps John wouldn’t be on the streets, maybe wouldn’t be hungry. Although he knew by now that there were other things that would consume whatever benefits were paid. But it was unusual that John hadn’t ‘phoned him for a couple of weeks. Although it was also a relief, allied to the hope that he had moved away completely...maybe Newcastle or Stoke. Anywhere.

Anthony dialled the number from the voice mail. ‘Hello. Julian speaking.’”

“Is that...? Oh, hello. You’ve just left a voice mail...a voice mail about John. John Simpson.”

“Ah. You must be Tony.”

“Anthony.”

“Yes Anthony. John...John tells me that you’ve been providing some help for him for the past few months. But...well...as I said unfortunately he’s back with us now at Marshall. Been here since...since last week. About ten days actually. I’m sorry to bring you the news if you didn’t know.”

“No. No I didn’t know. Why...what’s happened, why is he back...?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that. Well not officially or...or fully. I’m sure you understand. But I think you knew that he was on license from his sentence. Had...had about eighteen months to run. To go. Well all I can tell you at this moment – and only because John asked me to give you a buzz – is that he breached the...the terms of his license and so...”

Anthony felt the confusion of relief that something new hadn’t happened

and total frustration that every word of the past months had been useless. John didn’t deserve the help he had given to him. The help he had tried to give him which had gone nowhere. Stupid, stupid. Breaching his license. The simplest of the simple things he had to avoid doing.

“Why...why did he ask you to ‘phone me?” Anthony spoke the words at the same moments that he regretted asking the question along with regretting he had even replied to the voice mail.

“Well...well he’s asked me to ask if you would come and visit. He has...it seems he has nobody else to visit him and...and visits make such a difference to...to the guests.” Anthony was glad that he wasn’t face to face with Chaplain Julian. Glad that he couldn’t see the smirk on his face at the irony of the word ‘guests.’ But here he was. Another moment when he could – should – have shrugged his shoulders the same as that wet January evening. He had tried. Maybe he even understood better about John’s world now. How somehow it was all self-fulfilling. The instinct not to get involved was pushing at his mind and his sensibilities and he almost felt surprise when he heard himself saying, “Yes. Yes I’ll do what I can. If there’s anything I can help with.”

“That’s very good of you Tony. Anthony. I’ll need to write to you at your home address. There’s...there’s a little form to fill in. Very simple. Just needs some more details. Just...just your National Insurance Number and so on. So on. If you can fill it in and post it back to me then we’ll have the confirmation. Your identity. I’m sure you understand. Just a procedure. Then John can organise a visitor’s order. And...and the form will also give him permission to telephone you. He has to have ‘phone numbers verified before he can use one of the prison phones you see. I’m sure you understand. Understand why.”

Anthony said goodbye and dabbed the red button with his index finger. He swivelled around from his desk and continued to stare at the ‘phone. This was a dimension which he hadn’t anticipated. One he didn’t like. One that he had committed to. John was the prisoner. But they were checking up on him too.





Anthony hesitated, sheltered in the porch in front of double doors. He took two steps back and looked up at the sign over the porch: 'Visitor Centre.' Banal statement. But then what else could it say above the doors to this stand alone building which resembled, from the outside, some sort of doctor's surgery or health clinic. He was aware of somebody standing behind him, that he was blocking the way. Half turning he saw a woman, a young woman holding the hand of a boy child, maybe six or seven years old. "Sorry." Anthony stood aside and pulled the left hand door open, holding it for the woman and child to walk through. "Thanks love," she said and ushered the child through in front of her, arm across his shoulder. Anthony stood holding the door open and looked behind him, hesitating. He followed the woman and child into the harsh space, taking in the sounds and neon ceiling flood of light. Benches in two rows down the centre of the space, one wall clothed in lockers, some with half open doors, most closed shut. He stood just within as the door which he had held open swung shut behind him and a pang of panic made him frown as he tried to work out what he was supposed to do in this block of a room, populated by figures which seemed blurred by constant activity, nobody, it seemed standing still or sitting still. All in the act of making ready, sure in their activity. Anthony tried to assess. Maybe twenty people, adults. Maybe ten or more children, gabbling with each other, or hunched over small screens of light. Assess. Take in. Just two or three men. Adults. Mostly women. Mostly young women. Two young men, one older man. Much older. Noise of gabbling, noise of locker doors slamming shut. Scratch of keys being pulled from locks. So noisy. Everyone – adults and children – familiar with where they were. Anthony was acutely aware that he had no sense of familiarity, no idea what his next move should be, conscious that his unfamiliarity was being assessed and noticed with glances from the adults in the room. He clutched the folded piece of paper in his hand and searched around momentarily for his next move; he had to move, not moving bred second glances towards him. The woman who he had held the door open for was standing closest to him, pulling the jacket of the child from his back, tugging the arms out of the sleeves. Jacket freed, she shook the arms out fully and rolled the black and red fabric into a loose ball, tucking it under her arm. "First time love?" Anthony was relieved at the intervention. "Yes... Yes it's my first...first visit."

"It can be a bit scary can't it?" The child identified a young face familiar to him and ran to the other side of the room. Anthony looked at the woman.

Young, maybe early twenties. He was surprised at his assessment, almost embarrassed. She was clean, well dressed...if not well dressed in terms of what he was used to. Jeans, black long sleeved jumper revealed as she removed her own pink puffer jacket, rolling it into the one she had removed from the child. "Just take your visitor's order to the desk there. They'll check it, then check you in and give you a key. A key to one of the lockers. You... they'll ask you to sign for it. The key. Take off your outdoor stuff, empty your pockets and – everything – then lock it away. The only thing you can take in is your key."

Anthony felt bailed out by a stranger. Relieved that he had not had to ask someone what to do. Revealed his naivety. "Thanks. Thank you." Across the room two uniformed attendants sat behind tall perspex screens, one man, one woman. A queue of three or four people stood in line before each blue shirted attendant. Anthony balked inwardly at the normality of it all. Just a simple queue, but not one that he had witnessed before. Almost like corner shop queues, people chatting as if this was normal. But then he told himself, this is normal. This is just not a world I am used to. And so many children. This too is a world they are used to. Anthony joined the left hand queue, one person shorter on this side. Mentally: but they must be having time off school. This is a weekday. Their schools must give them time off to visit their...? A note given to teacher: 'Johnny won't be in school today, he's visiting his father.' And how many times, how often do they visit, take time off school? The queue shuffled forward until Anthony stood in front of the blue shirted woman behind the perspex. He slotted the folded piece of paper across the desk through the small rectangular aperture. She looked up at him and smiled. "First time visiting love?" Anthony nodded. "You'll soon get used to it." Anthony shuddered inwardly. 'How many times must these people – these children – go through this routine? How many times over how many years?' The woman ran the tip of her blue biro down the list on the desk in front of her. "John Simpson?" Anthony nodded. The woman smiled and handed him a silver coloured key on a thick blue rubber band. "Just leave your jacket in the locker. Empty everything out of your pockets, 'phone of course, loose change. Everything. Just the key you can take in with you." Anthony nodded. "Thanks." As he stepped aside, he searched for the number on the blue band; 78. His heart felt a momentary space of desolation as he walked towards the bank of lockers, shrugging his own jacket off his shoulders and rolling it up into a ball. Car keys, loose

change, 'phone. Check again. Jacket pushed into the space, bits and pieces rattled onto the locker floor. Door eased shut, key in lock, turned once to the right, key pulled out. He looked at the blue rubber band with the number 78 in white flaking ink sitting in the slightly hollowed out shapes of a number 7 and a number 8. Clasp it into his fist he searched for the next move. A few minutes to wait and he couldn't just stand there looking as conspicuous as he felt and so he walked the three or four steps to the benches and sat. Two women to his left, chatting as if in the doctor's surgery. Small groups of familiarity around the room, chatter and noise from the kids. To his right the one older man in the room. White, dishevelled and wispy hair. Black trousers, not jeans, the distant history of pressed creases visible apart from around the knees. Somewhere between a beard and not having shaved for days patchy around his cheeks and his chin. Incongruous blue sweat shirt with some worn and unreadable legend fading across the chest. The older man head down, not conversing. Attitude weary and worn down. Contrasting with the noise and chatter around him. Anthony wondered what story he had to tell. Anthony felt conscious that his own appearance could not mark a greater contrast than to his neighbour. Minutes ticked away and then, at the opposite end of the hard room, a door opened and was pushed back wide by, this time, a fully uniformed prison officer, who stood back as the visitors moved in a slow wave towards him.

He held the door back, right arm extended to hold it in place and nodded to most of the visitors with a gesture of recognition as they filed through in their familiar routine. The children themselves recognising that this was the time to comply, to stay quiet. An instinct borne out of this familiarity with this familiar routine. Inside the door another prison officer headed the file until the last person passed through – Anthony had chosen a midway point in the line, not to be last – and then the first door was pulled shut, enclosing the crowd in the next room. The file stopped to queue again.

The first young woman in the queue stepped forward in her familiar routine, stepping forward from the child who had just released her hand. She stepped onto a small platform and a female prison officer ran her hands along her shoulders, down her torso and inside her thighs. "Shoes please." The woman kicked off her shoes, the female officer picked them up and examined them, turning them over before dropping them back onto the small platform for the woman to slide her feet back into. A male officer

ran a metal detector inches from the woman's body in sweeping arcs and then clicked a small torch in his other hand. The woman opened her mouth and the torch examined inside right to left, top to bottom. Maybe just one minute for the whole routine, Anthony assessed, mesmerised by the seeming cruelty and degradation, trying to take in and remember the part that he would have to play as the queue shuffled forward. The dog wagged its tail, held on a leash to finish the process as the woman stepped forward off the small platform. "How are you doing Lucy?" The female prison officer asked with a smile. "Not long now." Lucy nodded, then turned to wait as her small boy child stepped familiarly onto the platform.



Inside the inner waiting room the benches were upholstered. Everything else was the same, interrupted conversations continued. The man with the wispy white hair took a seat away from the rest. Anthony selected a place on a bench apart from the regulars. 'Security all needed,' he told himself. 'What did you expect?' He looked around and saw despair turned into normality as the children re-convened and bubbled around in ones and twos. Another queue began to form. The same constituency as the first, but this time in front of a glass door, manned again by the male and female officers. But this time the male officer was behind the glass door. No. Behind the glass door that was behind the glass door. A click and the first glass door opened. Three women and two small children, a boy and a girl, walked through. The door closed behind them and clicked again. Then the door inside the door opened and they walked through. Just three or four or maybe five a time through this 'air lock.' Another routine that startled Anthony. That visitors had to be admitted to the inner, secure sanctum in small and controlled groups. Maybe, he thought, so that no rush could happen, or maybe even be planned. So that the inner sanctum could be sealed off at any time, the human group of adults and children couldn't execute a mass rush towards the inner prison, but to what end would they do that? Break in as a motley group and overwhelm the prison officers? But then, he realised and reasoned, that would be prevented by this 'air lock' that could only accommodate a handful at a time and, of course, both the doors could not be opened at the same time. Secure. No rush for freedom. Or no mass break out. Total control.

Inner sanctum, another queue, another routine before the interred could meet with the free. Small glass pad set into another desk top, flickering blue light issuing from somewhere deep within the desk. Right hand placed flat onto the glass pad, fingerprints scanned. The only key to allowing the outward journey the corresponding fingerprints. 'They have my address, they have my ID, now they will have my fingerprints,' Anthony thought. But as he stepped forward the prison warder grinned, as if reading Anthony's thoughts and recognising that he didn't fit into this world. "Don't worry sir, we don't keep them on file." Was that a joke or was that the only concession to humanity that this half hour of process conceded to? Anthony wasn't sure either way.

Anthony, the wispy haired man and the now familiar ensemble were allowed to push through the next set of double doors themselves. And as Anthony walked into the cavern, the noise assaulted his ears instantly.

His memory flew back through decades to the school dining hall, incessant competing chatter reverberating off hard walls, chairs scraping back on hard tiled floor. Everything in sight was hard. Everything within sound was hard. The high ceiling criss-crossed with metallic ducting, spanned with suspended fluorescent tubes. Harsh. Hard. Across the space small, hard topped formica tables with one, two, three chairs, plastic curved chairs with one piece integrated seat and backs. No sense or organisation to the sight or sound of the visitor meeting hall. Prisoners standing looking across to the door that Anthony had just walked through, or stepping forward to throw an arm around a woman, stoop to gather up a child. The man with the wispy hair stood looking around, trying to find the subject of his visit. Anthony ranged left to right and there, towards the far corner, John stood, right arm raised in recognition, wide grin on his face. Anthony picked his way through the islands of basic furniture towards John and held out his hand, then recoiled slightly as he saw two arms reached towards him aimed at encircling his shoulders. Too familiar Anthony thought, I don't want people to think we're related in some way. No. Just a caring social call. Maybe, he half hoped, everybody else would think he was some sort of social worker if he maintained a singular distance amongst the other reconciling families. He half shrugged John's arms away and sat purposefully to show his intention and encourage the prisoner to sit too. John sat and leaned forwards across the table, still grinning.

"Well."

"Well what?"

"Well I didn't think I would be seeing you in here John. I...I'm surprised. I thought that you were really going to try. Going to try this time." John shrugged, still grinning. "I did try, just the coppers. I knew that they wouldn't leave me alone." He looked around through the noise. "They said that I'd breached my license. They were always going to look for some sort of excuse. Mind you they nearly didn't find me. I mean I was in...I was where I was supposed to be. But I saw them coming. I knew that they'd find some excuse to fit me up. So when I saw them I dodged it out of the kitchen window. Jimmy saw them coming down the street. That's where I was staying. Jimmy's. When I looked out of the window they were just walking down the street looking at the door numbers. Two of them. I knew they were looking for me so I dodged it out of the kitchen window. Jimmy was peeing himself laughing. Because I just got behind the bins."

John paused and looked around the cavernous room, re-living the moment that was all part of the game. "Couldn't go anywhere though. Don't really know why I hid behind the bins. They were always going to find me. It was funny really. Don't blame Jimmy for laughing. Think he might have even told them where I was because they came straight through the house into the yard. They started laughing too when they saw me. Best you can do John? They thought it was hilarious."

Anthony looked back across the table towards John. "You must have done something. They don't just..."

"No. I mean they said I had, but I hadn't. It wasn't me."

"Done what John?"

"That bird. The one that had a restraining order. I mean they didn't make it stick, so they were always going to have another go. She said that I'd been on her Facebook, left a...left a message. But it wasn't me. Don't know who... I think maybe she did it herself, just to get to me. I mean, a restraining order means just keep away doesn't it?"

Anthony looked at John expressionlessly, trying to work out whether this was the workings of a simple, damaged mind. Whether John had actually sent a message. Whether he really thought that doing so was harmless. “You should have known better John.” “I didn’t do it.” The black streaks flashed across John’s eyes. Not a good start, Anthony thought. What to say next, admonishing in any form wasn’t going to work and anyway that wasn’t why he was here. So why was he here? Maybe even curiosity, although he had expended such time and energy on trying to understand this man, this world. A hopeless task, he knew, from the outside looking in. But now he was on the inside and he felt much more uncomfortable than he thought he would. He looked around. To the far side, through the noise, a small counter was manned by what he presumed were two volunteers. Presumption because the man and the woman, middle aged if there is such a definition, wore ordinary clothes, not even the blue shirts of the reception desk people. But then amongst the surprises was that the inmates all wore street clothes too. He had thought that there would be a nominal ‘uniform’ of, at least, those neutral grey track suits that prisoners on the telly seem always to wear. No. John, like all the others, wore a sweatshirt and track suit bottoms. Sweatshirts mostly bearing images of every vestige of normality, if there is such a thing. Pictures and words that said Florida, other places around the world that he doubted they had ever visited. But maybe they had. Why should he assume that people hadn’t holidayed? Or been to a concert and bought the merchandise, because travel and music seemed to be the predominant themes. John at least looked clean. John’s clothes at least looked clean. The only other times that Anthony had seen him in clean clothes, the source of those clothes had been dubious to say the least.

“Can I buy drinks over there?” Anthony nodded towards the small counter. “Yep. And chocolate.” “Do I just go over and buy them?” John looked amused. “Yep. Sure. How else do you think we can get a brew?” “Do you want a brew?” “Yes, sure. And...and a Mars bar too. How do you think you’re going to pay for them?” Anthony instinctively felt for his trouser pocket, for the coins that should be there. Coins that had been left in a locker far behind. Such a small deprivation, but a shock of the lack of normality. John’s grin returned at his visitor’s momentary realisation that this was not his world. “Show them your key and you can get one round of drinks free. And one Mars bar.”

Anthony twinged at the assumption that he would provide, even in here – and for free. But then of course it wouldn’t do for prisoners to be wandering around ordering drinks – and Mars bars. Even if they were given free. This was the routine of course. Visitors use their allowance, prisoners consume. He pushed the chair back – the scraping of chair legs on tiles lost in the din. “Tea?” “Yes. Two sugars. And a Mars bar.” Anthony threaded his way through the occupied tables and chairs. As he walked towards the counter he scanned the people and situations and assumed various situations. This was, he now knew, a Category B prison. He had looked online. The offences leading to imprisonment in a Cat B (conscious that he was now even using the jargon) were violence, arson, firearms, drugs, robbery – and sexual offence. That, of course, was why John was in a Cat B. ‘Rape reduced to sexual assault.’ And the idiot had broken, despite his denials, the conditions of his license. But what stories, what circumstances lay behind these small individual clusters of people? People who he wouldn’t have glanced at twice on the other side of these walls. Anthony did a double take. At the table to his right a man wearing a yarmulke. Wife and child leaning in listening to him talk through the noise. What could be the story of a religious Jewish family leading to this tableau? But then he shrugged inwardly at the thought that any group in society was exempt from folly and retribution.

“Tea and a black coffee please. And a Mars bar.” The man behind the counter smiled, as comfortable in this environment as Anthony wasn’t. “Sugars?” “None in the coffee, I don’t know about the tea. Two I think. But I’ll take some sachets with me if that’s alright.” “We have to put the sugars in here,” the man said, as he filled two paper cups from tall silver jars. “Oh. Two sugars in the tea then please.” The counter man pushed plastic lids onto the cups firmly, and slid them towards Anthony, then placed a Mars bar alongside them. Anthony turned the key fob towards him, unsure as to how this transaction should be completed. The man smiled, recognising of course that this was new territory for this particular visitor. “That’s fine mate,” and gave the two cups a small nudge further towards Anthony.

Back at the table John ripped open the black packaging and bit more than a mouthful of chocolate, chewing with his mouth half open and managing to grin at the same time as eat. ‘Manners still terrible’ Anthony thought, ‘but why should they be improved in here?’ John picked up the paper cup and

slurped tea through the hole in the lid before taking another bite, seeming intent on finishing his snack before resuming any conversation. Anthony prised the lid off his coffee and took a sip as he waited. Over John's shoulder he was aware that a uniform approached and a prison officer leant in towards him, placing both hands flat onto the table top before saying quietly, "Can you put the lid back on sir." The uniform turned and moved away as Anthony pushed the lid back in place, feeling told off, admonished as if by a teacher at school. John swallowed his second mouthful of chocolate and released a full grin towards his visitor. "They'll think you were going to drop drugs in and then swap cups with me." Anthony tried to assimilate the actions and the assumed intent of so normal a thing as taking the plastic top off a paper cup. A second moment of shock internally. No loose change in his pocket, assumed intent of wrongdoing. This was not his world. A world where the assumed intent of every action was wrongdoing.



This was different. Very different. A year had passed, the Cat B routine had become familiar. Any sense of change in John sketchy. It had been another 'phone call. This one had thrown him even more than the first, all that time ago. Thrown him because the woman had said, "Hi, this is Lizzie. The Chaplain at Gorse Edge. Gorse Edge prison." Anthony had thought that he had a mental grip on prison, prison officers – and prison chaplains. But a woman chaplain at a men's prison? Another ingrained assumption broken apart. Lizzie told him that John had been moved from Marshall Prison to Gorse Edge. On his last visit, John had told him that he hoped to be moved to Gorse Edge. Telling him with a grin that he'd got used to Marshall. "Food's OK," he had said, "Made some good mates in here." Of course Anthony had refreshed on his knowledge of prison categories: Cat C 'Have had a previous sentence of twelve months or more for violence, arson, drug dealing, threat of violence or sex related offences.' He wondered why arson was always second on the list. It certainly wasn't alphabetical, but surely there can't be that many people who go around setting fire to things? He had never asked and probably never would do now. So John had been moved to Cat C and John had told Chaplain Lizzie that I had been visiting him – had been his only visitor – and had asked Chaplain Lizzie to let me know he had been moved. And would I be going to visit him at Gorse Edge?

She explained that John was now in the last year of his sentence and the decision had been taken to move him away from Marshall Prison, that the Governor there had reported that he might benefit from a 'softer' environment. That he might be more likely to 'rehabilitate.' That having at least one person visit him would help with 'rehabilitation.' That, although he did have a sister and a brother, he had had no contact with them for many years. That she was concerned that when he was released – without an outside contact – 'rehabilitation' would be less likely. Anthony was snared, he felt. But then he rationalised that it was the job of Chaplain to smooth the way and that this particular Chaplain had only one 'resource' to count on. Not that Anthony had intended to abandon John. Not that he had even considered what would happen to him when he was released. Not that he wanted to continue with the responsibility, which John had seemed to take for granted so much. Maybe small breakthroughs had been made, but the dark streak in John's eyes still flared on occasions. Anthony had never managed to decide whether John was stringing him along or did appreciate the support before and during prison. Or whether agreeing to more contact was opening the door for minor exploitation. Anthony thought back to that first encounter, when he had handed money over to John and called himself a 'mug' as he had walked away. His choice had been made then. He was never sure in the following times whether he was still being a 'mug.' And yes, he was curious. To experience the next layer of incarceration in society was – maybe – intriguing. And yes maybe John, in his own way, could find a clearer path. Could find any path at all. And so Anthony had agreed to visit and there had been some formalities, but much less onerous than his first admittance to Marshall Prison.

Chaplain Lizzie had also suggested an informal visit to start with. Out of formal visiting hours, where maybe she could meet with Anthony and John together, just to chat through things. This sounded good, but Anthony knew that he was being vetted by the Chaplain. After all, despite the handing over of personal identification and information, he could be the ringleader of a drugs cartel. Or an arsonist. Still, this counted as a better proposition. Arrangements had been made and Anthony waited in the reception area of Gorse Edge. Not the visitors' reception centre that he was used to by now and still not welcoming or luxurious in any way. Just not as intimidating as at Marshall. He stood as Chaplain Lizzie walked through from a back room. The first shock had been that the Chaplain was female, the second

shock, this time in person and not over the 'phone, was that she was much younger than he had thought she would be. Shoulder length straight blonde hair, 'designer' glasses, hands tucked into black trouser pockets, regulation black shiny shoes. Blue regulation shirt of course, but stark half circle of ecclesiastical white dog collar around her throat. Without the dog collar and without the part prison uniform, dressed in a business suit and carrying a briefcase, Anthony judged that he would have walked past her in the street. Just another professional person going about her job. Prison, he had learnt, breeds false perceptions for no reason.

The Reverend Lizzie McConnell smiled warmly, said "Hi" and offered an outstretched hand. "Good to meet you. John's told me a lot about you." Anthony tried to recover from – or disguise – his surprise. And then told himself instantly that the past year should have knocked any pre-suppositions out of his mind. Anthony had stood to shake hands and then sat again as Lizzie sat on one of the green upholstered bench seats opposite him. "I...I hope it's good. What he's said about me." "Yes, of course. I know that you've been his only support. Support from outside that is. I did ask him if he wanted me to try and contact his brother, or his sister. But he said no. It's been years since he'd seen either of them. His mum and dad too. Even longer. He's not had any contact with either of them since he was a teenager. It was barely contact when he was in care, but since his first spell inside he's not had contact with either of them. That's...well that's fifteen years or so, so I think we can safely say that they're out of the picture. And to be honest, from what little he's told me about them, I think that's best."

Anthony stumbled mentally about what to say next. To continue some sort of dialogue. Without calculating the implications he said, "What...how did you end up being a Chaplain. In a men's prison?" Lizzie smiled, a question she had no doubt been asked countless times before. "Well I was a bit wild myself in the dim and distant past. I mean, I won't go into detail, but I guess I just got sick of it. Or I had an epiphany..." Lizzie smile again and wrapped both her hands around her knees, fingers interlocked. She leant forward a little. "But somebody helped me and that sort of made me see in another direction. He...he was a clergyman, introduced me to the Church and I sort of fell out with my old way of life and plunged into another. Eventually training, then a job as a curate and then as a curate in prison. A different prison to this one. Then fully fledged Chaplain. I've been here about four

years now. It can be..." Anthony waited for the word 'challenging' but the word 'entertaining' followed. Lizzie smiled more broadly, understanding that Anthony hadn't expected this word. "I get to know the guys and by and large they're OK. I think I get off a bit lighter because I'm a woman, they do...most of them...do show respect. For most of them even showing respect to somebody is a new experience. It helps in all sorts of ways. We don't push religion down their throats. That's up to them. Some do come to the Chapel, although I'm pretty sure that most don't continue that after they leave us."

Anthony threw the word he had been expecting into the mix. "It must be challenging?" "Yes of course it is. Otherwise there wouldn't be any need for us at all." "Do they treat you any differently to the...the male Chaplains?" "Most of the time." Lizzie sat back in her chair and paused. "But I've been called a cunt and spat on more times than I care to remember. It's not a cake walk being locked away. Compared to Marshall things are much more relaxed here. But the common denominator in all prisons is that to survive you have to be as aggressive as the next person that's locked up, who nine times out of ten think that they shouldn't be in prison anyway. John's been pretty good with me, but I've seen his aggression in certain circumstances. As I said, that's the only way to survive this atmosphere most of the time."

Anthony was shocked at the forthrightness of the Chaplain, intrigued at her delivery of harsh realities with a continuous air of the matter of fact. And a mischievous smile which, he recognised, was at least partly borne of his own discomfort.

"What I'm trying to say Anthony, is that inmates can never, never be taken at face value. I've sat in on too many parole hearings to mention and listened to a desperate human being sounding like a perfect reformed angel. And then walking straight back into an environment where to be seen as soft is the worst thing that they can do. Jekyll and Hyde. They have to make the next man fear them to a degree otherwise they're lost. They'll be the victim. Whatever form that takes. It's ingrained"

Anthony was silent, taking in the words which, he recognised, were a form of gentle tuition from somebody who had infinitely more experience of this world than he had managed to accumulate in so short a time.

“Shall we go through?” Lizzie stood and took a step or two back towards the door she had just come through. Anthony hesitated, waiting for the search formalities to begin that he had become so used to. She was aware that Anthony hadn’t taken the steps behind her and looked over her shoulder, understanding. “Don’t worry, they’ll think that you’re a solicitor.” Lizzie smiled again. “A Chaplain with a solicitor has a free pass.” Anthony was aware of three, maybe four uniformed officers just a few paces away, who ignored their passage through the door with the keypad, four digits punched to open the short cut. Anthony followed the Chaplain down a short, windowless corridor as she said without turning. “We’ll go down to my office and I’ll go and collect him from the wing whilst you wait there. I think it would be good to meet in the chapel. It might make Prisoner Simpson see the light.” Anthony was aware that Lizzie was smiling at her own joke, no doubt used a thousand times before. She turned the handle on a scuffed white painted door and stood back to let Anthony in, holding the door ajar with an outstretched left arm across it. He walked into the small, cluttered office, sparsely and basically furnished; standard issue imitation wood desk, two steel chairs this side of the desk, green upholstered office chair on unseen wheels behind the desk. “I’ll be a few minutes Anthony. It takes a lot longer to get a guest off his wing than it does for us to come in here. I’ll be quick as I can.” “No...no rush,” Anthony replied, thinking instantly what an anodine reply. Nowhere to go, even if there was some urgency. He sat on one of the steel chairs facing the desk, then scrawped it sideways a little to take in the claustrophobic surroundings.

A minute or two passed as Anthony looked around him and then the sound of a door opening in the next office along. Slight sounds of movement behind the thin walls and then a voice; one half of a telephone conversation. “Mrs Barlow? Yes hello. This is Chaplain Graham from Gorse Edge. Yes. Hello. How are you? Yes. Good, good. I’ve just been to have a chat with Dave and...I’m sure you know...he’s struggling with things here. Very low. Yes, very low. He’s asked me to ask you if you could make arrangements to come and see him and...maybe bring the children along too. He’d really appreciate that and I think it would help...help to improve his...his mental state. As I said he’s struggling a great deal.”

Seconds of silence.

“Yes, yes I appreciate that.”

More seconds of silence.

“Well...in that case...in that case if not, if he could perhaps make arrangements to speak to them. Just a ‘phone call. Just for a few minutes.

Silence.

“Yes, yes I understand. Well maybe you could just have a think about it for a little while and...”

Silence.

“No, no I quite understand.”

Silence.

“I’m sorry that you feel like that but...yes I quite understand. Well, I’ll go back and see him now and let him know that I’ve spoken to you, that you...”

Silence.

“Yes I understand. I’ll let him know what you’ve said.”

Silence.

“Yes Mrs Barlow. I’ll let him know. Thank you.”

Anthony visualised a hand replacing the receiver in the next office and the Chaplain leaning back in his own office chair, staring at the polystyrene tiled ceiling, calculating and dreading conveying the request back to the sender, who would undoubtedly be sitting in his cell, hands beneath his thighs, waiting for the Chaplain to return. Anthony’s mind raced back to the children in Marshall, separated from their father, but still able to visit him and him to see them, if only for an hour every few weeks. This small audio, eavesdropped drama penetrated his soul and he held his breath, lest his eavesdropping be exposed. As he heard the door in the next office open

and then close, he breathed again, turning his hands over in his lap and staring at the upturned palms, before interlocking his fingers and leaning back in his own chair. Anthony felt the tiny pain of watery tears formulating in the corner of his eyes. Not heavy enough to spill down his cheeks, but heavy enough to make him conscious of despair. More minutes passed.

Lizzie startled him as she opened the door vigorously, holding it open again with her left arm. “John’s in the Chapel. We’ll go over.” Anthony followed the Chaplain a short way back down the corridor and then through another scuffed white door, this time with no locking keypad. They walked into daylight, a yard as big as a tennis court, surrounded by an impenetrably high wire fence and across into another door. The Chapel was sparse, maybe six rows of chairs fixed together in a semi-circle to form pews. Anthony took in the light, dimmed and much softer than anywhere he had experienced in all this time. Christian tableaux painted on each wall left and right, crude and, he assumed instantly, created by inmates. A simple white table cloth covered a trestle table on which stood a stark wooden cross, maybe a metre tall. To his left, seated, head down, hands in his lap, John was sitting. As they entered he looked up and grinned.

“Tony mate. Tony.”

This time Anthony left him uncorrected. He was perturbed at the ordinariness of the greeting. As if this was a bar or a bus station where a chance encounter had occurred. He had expected, in some way, for John to have at least an outward sign of being contrite. But then, he instantly told himself, this was an improvement. John had moved onward a little, if only from one confinement to another less harsh. He was here to encourage – and, he reminded himself – to be vetted by Chaplain Lizzie. Anthony wondered what words would be written by the Chaplain about him – and this informal visit – in John’s case file. Would he get good marks in this particular exam?



Anthony swung the car into a vacant parking space. Even this was better than having to street park near Marshall Prison, or park in the NCP and walk for ten minutes. Gorse Edge, being on the edges of the City, had its

own car park and he glanced to left and right as he turned the ignition off. Ten, maybe twenty cars parked in two rows opposite each other. He assessed. The majority decent, but cheap runabouts. More than a few high spec and newish. And yet this was the visitors’ car park; staff had their own facility signposted and around the back of the building through a barrier. He wondered (and immediately dismissed his thoughts as prejudice) how many of the expensive cars were paid for by illicit means. Male family member in prison for whatever crime and family visitors arriving in style. Anthony picked up the envelope from the passenger seat. John’s surname, wing number and prison number written in a juvenile hand under the broken open glued flap. He had worked out – since John had been writing to him in that same juvenile hand – that envelopes were read by the staff before being posted and then the sender’s prison details concealed when the flap was glued down. That way the postie had no way of knowing that a letter had originated in a prison.

He took out a sheet of A5 lined prison issue paper. At the top was a printed instruction about including your ‘previous home address’ when writing to Members of Parliament. Obviously a less than uncommon practice in trying to seek justice – whether rightly or wrongly. Below that statement, again the words followed by a dotted line to be filled in: Number, name, wing. Anthony had smiled at John’s writing his own address at the top of the letter as HMP Gorse Edge. But he guessed that HMP addresses were really the only ones that John had written for more than a decade. Basic juvenile words and spelling. John’s lack of education and learning difficulties were obvious. Spelling almost phonetic. At least he had tried. A visitor’s order had arrived separately and Anthony had folded and tucked it into the small envelope with John’s last letter. He took it out and checked the date and time for the tenth time. It was still difficult and, he found, embarrassing to a degree to possibly be seen as a relative or friend of a prisoner.

Embarrassment would be doubled if he had the wrong date, even though he knew that it was correct. He re-read John’s letter and his request: that he bring a Bible in for him. Anthony had smiled when he read this for the first time. Two possibilities. Lizzie had succeeded in indoctrinating him or he was trying to indoctrinate Lizzie. But it was a straightforward request and, searching the shelves at Waterstones, he had selected a ‘Youth Bible,’ because, he figured, if John really did want to read it, the language level



would be better suited to his literacy level.

Anthony folded the visitor's order, picked up the blue jacketed Youth Bible and got out of the car. He had been appreciative of the initial informal meeting. The first at Marshall had been uncomfortable to say the least and he had been detected as a first time visitor instantly. This time he had that experience and the informal visit to build on. The waiting area was busy, the congregation of visitors identical to that at Marshall: almost entirely women and small children. The children playing and running around together still shocked Anthony, in that it was entirely normal for them. Ingrained into their day to day. He queued at the registration desk, just two women before him, chatting with familiarity. The prison officer was, Anthony was sure, one of those who had barely glanced when he and Lizzie had gone into the prison by the side door. This time the demeanour was different. He didn't speak as Anthony handed the visitors order over the desk to him and he ran his eye and his pen over the approved list. He didn't speak when he had ticked the box and pushed it back across the desk. Anthony hesitated and the man glanced up. "I...John Simpson asked me to bring this in for him, is that OK?" The man didn't look at the Bible as John proffered it for him to look at. Instead he held John's gaze – and question – unfathomably in limbo for what seemed a disproportionate amount of time before shifting his gaze to the blue, hard backed cover. He took it from Anthony and looked at it quizzically, turning it over front and back. "John asked me to bring it for him," he repeated, not sure whether the surly silent man had heard him. Another silence. "There's a library," the surly man said. "He can get a Bible from there." "I...John has learning difficulties...reading difficulties. It's a Youth Bible. I thought he would be able to read it more easily. It's..." Anthony had exhausted any line of explanation or persuasion that he could think of.

The surly man exaggerated his facial expression to one of complete distrust or misunderstanding and turned the Bible over in his hands again. He riffled through the pages, obviously convinced that something dubious was concealed and then held the book up to his eye and peered through the gap along the spine. Anthony tried to stop a smile appearing that could be interpreted as a smirk. If he were trying to smuggle anything in, the spine of a Bible wouldn't exactly be a master plan. But then at Marshall he had been told to put the plastic top back on a paper cup in case he dropped drugs into

a cup of tea. Still...

The surly man said that he couldn't take it through with him, but he would make sure that it got to the prisoner. He scribbled on a yellow post it and stuck the yellow square more aggressively than necessary onto the cover of the book, before pushing it to one side and gesturing 'next' with a flick of his hand that both dismissed Anthony and beckoned forward the next visitor. Anthony allowed himself the smile as he turned away, thinking that the Bible would undergo a much more thorough forensic investigation before – if at all – being passed on to John. He had heard that at Marshall, children's drawings, posted to their fathers, had been coated with Spice and so on receipt all the prisoners had to do was roll them into a tight tube and smoke them. Ingenious, Anthony had thought. But to paint drugs onto the pages of a Youth Bible, that would be an audacious plan.

Anthony sat and eavesdropped conversations as he waited for the large wall clock to tick towards three. Conversations which almost entirely revolved around and between visitors about how suchabody had been stitched up, about how the courts, the police, or probation, or social services hadn't been doing their jobs properly. Familiarity between visitors used to the surroundings and used to the people they were seeing regularly, every week or so.

The formalities were similar if less aggressive. This time an allowance of two pound coins to take through was granted. At Gorse Edge subsidised tea and Mars bars had to be purchased and anyway, if a pound coin or two found its way secretly under the tables, then it wasn't exactly a bullion smuggling plot. Yes the search, yes the scanner, yes the dog and – worst of all Anthony thought – the examination of the inside of the mouth with a torch. But no air-locks and, somehow, a seemingly less aggressive regime. Although at the desk a row had broken out because a young woman, maybe early twenties, had tried to check in with fashionably ripped at the knees jeans and had been told by the surly man, "You should know better Christine." Apparently ripped jeans are the perfect fashion accessory to allow concealment of who knows what and to then transfer who knows what beneath a plastic table top. And Anthony, when the hour arrived and the queue to the inner sanctum began to take shape, was shocked again as further down the queue a small baby was gently laid on the top of the desk and its nappy opened

and inspected – just to make sure.

John stood as Anthony walked through the double doors. He waved and grinned, Anthony weaved between the visitors finding their men and the standard plastic topped tables. This time, in these surroundings, he didn't shirk the hug that John offered, reaching up a little to encircle Anthony's shoulders a good six inches higher than his own. Tea and Mars bars purchased, the hour included John's work in the laundry, his new mates, his hopes for an even earlier release. All delivered with grins and occasional snorts of laughter. Anthony looked around him. The still large canteen was softer than at Marshall. The hard, harsh echoes not dominating everything. Tables and chairs more widely spaced, privacy of conversation therefore more readily achieved. John saw that Anthony was taking in the surroundings. "It's cool here isn't it? Better than that other place. I mean, I don't expect things to kick off here. It does though, sometimes. Not every day like... It's always been like this." Anthony returned his look to John. "Always been? Have you been here before? You didn't say, not in your letters or anything." "I was here about five years ago. Just did six months." Anthony opened his mouth and was about to ask why, but instantly thought better of asking. "But I came in when I was a kid too. Visiting. Visiting my brother." This time Anthony asked the question before he had time to stop himself. "What was he in for?" "First time was GBH. And then..." Now it was the turn of John to stop himself. A list of his sibling's convictions was not, he thought, a way to encourage support from Anthony. He took a different and equally damaging tack, snorting a laugh as he ran on, "My sister used to smuggle drugs in for him in her bra. A right laugh." He snorted again.

John pulled back, sensing that he had said too much and in the wrong way. He was right. A sense of the hopelessness of the whole situation clouded Anthony's mind. Of the hopelessness of so many that he could see as he ranged his view around the visitors and the tables and the children and the limited hour. Around the cups of tea and the Mars bars. Heard the scrambled but muted sound of talk being snatched for maybe sixty minutes once every two or three hundred hours of life outside these walls and fences. Men trying to condense every question, mundane or otherwise, into such short a time. Their visitors trying to catch and absorb every word, maybe to be processed later, through the subsequent stupefying hours before the next visit. Anthony's mind flickered back to the eavesdropped half conversation

from the Chaplain in the next room those weeks ago. The man who was the subject of that half overheard conversation would not, Anthony presumed, be in this room now. Instead he would no doubt be sitting on his hands somewhere within a hundred metres or so, behind more walls and fences. With not even the solace of this hour every three hundred hours. Anthony shuddered a little at the thought as John grinned again.



Chaplain Lizzie had 'phoned to let him know that John had been approved for release. Still under license until the end of his official term but, given that he had breached his license once, to get a further few months off the time until his full sentence was served was a bonus. To John at least. The Chaplain explained that John had been behaving well. (Anthony wondered whether the Youth Bible had made him see the light...but he doubted so.) That a day had been set in two weeks' time, but that she was concerned that John had told her that his brother would be picking him up. She didn't know any details of how contact had been made and, above all, was concerned that a long lost brother with a very doubtful past had any sibling concern other than a bad motive. Chaplain Lizzie said that she hoped that Anthony would be there, that in all honesty she wanted somebody else there when John was released and that she wasn't going to let John's brother off the hook if he did turn up. "You've not seen me when I swing into action," she had said. Anthony wasn't sure exactly what she meant, but had learnt that this woman charged with spiritual guidance had no fear of confrontation. Of telling it like it was. He remembered her words: 'You have to be aggressive to survive.' Besides, she had told him, there are things that John needs to do and he'll definitely need some guidance – and transport.

Anthony swung into the car park at 9am. This time an otherwise empty car park. John's release was officially scheduled for that time, but Lizzie had told him that it could take a while to complete the official discharge paper work. And that 'a while' could mean anything. Anthony swung open the door to the visitors centre...which was also the release exit he presumed. Two prison officers looked up from the clip board they were poring over. One he recognised as the surly man whom he had seen on previous visits behind the desk and who had suspected him of some sort of Bible larceny plot on his first visit. This time he smiled, demeanour completely different than at

visiting times and asked if he could help. Anthony told him that he had a meeting with Chaplain McConnell and post-surlly man said that he'd call her, to take a seat.

Anthony looked around the room, deserted other than for the two prison officers, one still examining the clip board closely. The surly man picked up the 'phone. "Visitor for you Lizzie. Yes, I will." He put the 'phone back on its base and said, "She'll be with you shortly Sir." Hmm...one attitude for visiting times, another for out of hours visitors Anthony thought. And called me Sir. 'You have to be aggressive to survive' came back to his thoughts again. Chaplain Lizzie appeared through her door, same demeanour as the first time that they had met. Hands casually stuffed into regulation uniform trousers. Smiling. She shook hands with the out of visiting hours visitor and they sat facing each other on the upholstered benches. She leant forward in what Anthony saw was her reassuring and slightly confidential pose, legs crossed, fingers of both hands entwined around her knees. "Glad that you came. Good of you to come. Main thing as I mentioned is that John told me his brother was picking him up. I mean I doubt that he'll turn up... especially here..." She smiled and Anthony recognised that even though before her time at Gorse Edge, John's brother was more than familiar with the place and probably the prison officers. "No. I understand why. John's told me his brother's also been a...a guest." "On several occasions," as Lizzie raised an eyebrow and her face creased into an amused look. "So I don't think he'll turn up. If he does I'm pretty sure that he'll just cart John straight off into some sort of drugs dealing. He's been in here for that...as well as other things. If he does I'm not sure how I'll deal with it, but safe to say I'll give him a good grilling. Hopefully that won't happen. Hopefully he won't turn up."

Chaplain Lizzie leant back on the upholstered bench and put one arm across the back of the seat. "I just want John to do the right things in the right order today and I'm relying on you to make sure that they happen. Is that OK?" "Well I'll do my best, but this is new to me." "John relies on you. You're the only bit of...of stability that he has. He's been OK the last few months, it's just that he can be a bit erratic. Up one minute and then that streak of anger. I'm sure you know what I mean." "Yes, I've seen glimpses of it." "It's not unusual. I know it's a lot different here than at Marshall, but these guys are still locked up and it's natural that things build up. But

hopefully he'll just take this chance that's been given to him. Take this chance because he's running out of options. I've talked to him about that and of course he says he understands. That he won't let me down. Of course I've told him that if he does cock up again it'll be himself that he's letting down. I've said that a thousand times and at least half the time I see people back in here within a few weeks. It's almost a bonus if it's months." Lizzie shrugged her shoulders, still smiling and said, "That's just the way it is." She looked at her watch.

"It shouldn't be long now. There's three guys on release this morning. Three including John. They'll have to do the paper work on all of them before they let them out. Shouldn't be long. But I'm pretty sure that the other two don't have anybody meeting them and...and that I'll be seeing them again soon. Standard routine is that they just go straight back to the ways that brought them here in the first place. Because nobody is meeting them I'm pretty sure that they won't have anywhere to sleep tonight. So what do they do? They'll get their discharge allowance...seventy-six quid...and then head for the nearest pub or somewhere they can get a quick fix. Few hours later they'll probably have just enough for a night shelter for one night...if they can find one and if they'll be let in if they've been drinking. Or worse. So what do they do? Nick a couple of things to try and sell, park on a pavement and beg? There's nothing out there for them. At least in here they've had somewhere to sleep and been fed. It's just a merry go round."

Anthony listened intently. It hadn't occurred to him that prisoners were given an allowance when they were discharged, although how else could they get through the first day or even hours?

"But there are things that you can do to help John. So that he can hopefully help himself a little." Lizzie paused and this time Anthony leant forward, hands on his own knees. "It's all got to be done in sequence and the right time and the right place isn't easy for most guys. It wouldn't be easy if they had somebody ferrying them around, but when they have to get on buses then they probably won't bother even trying to turn up where they should be."

"OK. Just tell me what needs doing."

“First thing is John needs to check in with his Probation Officer. No, not the first thing. The first thing is that he needs a contact number. He claims that the police nicked his ‘phone when he was arrested. That’s a standard line. There’s no point reporting to his Probation Officer if you can’t leave a contact number and I presume that you don’t want that number to be yours?” The smile turned into a grin. “No, not recommended. So if you could take him straight from here to a ‘phone shop he can buy a cheapo with his allowance. That’ll get him started. He’ll probably call it a ‘burner,’ that’s just habit, but he’ll get a pay-as-you-go number to give to the Probation Officer.” Anthony nodded. “Then to the Probation Office, John will have the address. He’s had the same Probation Officer for most of his time here at Gorse Edge and at Marshall. She’ll have his file of letters and replies with him. It’s safe to say that he hasn’t been pleasant with her at times. But again that’s standard. They’re used to it. They just see Probation Officers as extensions of the ‘screws’ here. Just that they’re on the outside. Then to the Housing Department, it’s in the Town Hall, I’ve checked. They should be able to help with temporary accommodation. Council’s have to find some sort of accommodation for released prisoners. Doesn’t always work, but it’s the best bet. The only bet in some cases. John could have tried to apply whilst he was in here, but he had absolutely no background of living anywhere since he was in care. He just wasn’t interested even when help was offered. All OK so far?”

Anthony nodded.

“So, allowance in his pocket for a ‘phone, check in with probation, then try and find somewhere for him to stay. It’ll be pretty obvious that he will be classed as homeless if they don’t find him somewhere and that’s definitely what Council’s don’t want on their patch. And good luck. I hope all that works out. For John’s sake.”

Anthony nodded again.

“Now, I’ll go and see how the paper work is going.” Chaplain Lizzie went back through her door and Anthony sat back on the upholstered bench as the door swung closed behind her. The two prison officers were still engaged with the clip board and barely glanced towards him as he waited.

Half an hour, Chaplain Lizzie had poked her head round the door and told Anthony that it wouldn’t be long. “No sign of the brother?” she asked or stated. Anthony shook his head. He was relieved, because to be in some form of ‘custody’ battle was not what he needed in the middle of all this. “Good. That’s that concern out of the way.” Lizzie ducked back within her door. Anthony looked at his watch and then cross checked with the large clock on the wall. Another fifteen minutes and a gaggle of three men seemed to burst through the doors at the back of the reception area. ‘End of term’ Anthony instantly thought, then realised that this wasn’t just the last day of school. They babbled across each other, chatting like excited children. He assessed in those few seconds. Three men, all – unusually – shorter than average. All around the same slightly under average height as John. John slightly stockier. He had expected big, hardened criminal looking types. Physically scary men, but then instantly reasoned with himself ‘why should they look scary?’ In fact the derogatory word ‘puny’ flashed through Anthony’s psyche as they continued to babble amongst themselves. Each carried a black bin bag. Their possessions. Probably, from what he had learnt, their only possessions. Apart from seventy-six quid of release allowance. John saw Anthony sitting on the upholstered benches. He grinned. Surly prison officer stood from behind the desk and folded his arms, surveying the scene. Prisoners, albeit on their way out of the doors, brought back the alter ego in him. He frowned as if disapproving of the high spirits.

Chaplain Lizzie emerged again out of her own door and walked towards the group. “Good luck, stay out of trouble. I don’t want to see you again. Remember what we’ve talked about.”

Anthony was astonished when all three said, “Yes Miss. Thanks Miss.” A show of respect that seemed completely out of line with what he had expected – being aggressive to survive. The analogy with last day of school grew in Anthony’s mind and his amusement was barely concealed. The three men ignored surly prison officer, surly prison officer stared at them silently. Lizzie walked over to where Anthony was sitting and he stood. “Took a bit longer than I expected, but that’s not unusual. Sorry you’ve had to wait.” “That’s OK.” “John is booked in to see his Probation Officer at eleven, I’ve checked the notes. So probably best to go straight there, just check in and then go and find a ‘phone shop. She’ll give you an appointment a bit later. Give you time to sort one or two things out.” “OK.”

“Right chaps, off you go.” Chaplain Lizzie shook hands with each in turn and then said a ‘good luck, stay out of trouble’ mantra again. All three again: “Thanks Miss.” As she turned to shake hands with Anthony her expression was one of resignation, displaying what she had told him, that in reality this probably wasn’t the last time that she would be seeing them. But her one word “Thanks” to Anthony revealed a thought that maybe, with some support, she might not see John again. There were two options Anthony thought: John stays out of trouble or he goes back to Marshall Prison and the merry go round starts again.

Chaplain Lizzie tucked her hands into the pockets of her uniform trousers and watched as Anthony, John and the two other men exited through the double doors to the car park. The tryst of three still babbling excitedly. Anthony opened the boot of the Volvo and nodded to John to throw his black bin bag in there. He reached up to close the boot and hesitated. “Where are you two going now?” One, “Into town.” The other, “To me mams.” “How...how are you getting there?” “Bus. On the bus.” Anthony drew back from offering lifts, that would be another door to commitment opening and anyway he had to get John to the Probation Office by 11. “I’ll give you a lift up to the bus stop. Chuck your bags in here...better make sure you know which is which.”

John took his rightful place in the front passenger seat, the other two in the back for the half mile or so to the nearest bus stop. “Cheers mate,” as they bundled out and took two of the bin bags from the boot. “Make sure they’re the right ones,” Anthony repeated through his open window, but two babbling men, hoodies, jeans and flimsy nylon jackets, didn’t reply as they slammed the boot shut and stood at the kerb waiting for a gap in the traffic to cross to the bus stop. Anthony caught a glimpse of them crossing in his rear view mirror as he pulled away. “Mates of yours?” he asked. “Not really. I mean I’ve known them for years, but they’re not mates. Not really.” Their paths must have crossed, Anthony surmised, in various ways during John’s years. “Right. We’ll go straight to the Probation Office, check in and then go and sort you a ‘phone out.” John, with no competition now from two other men, sat quietly and looked out of the side window for almost all of the half hour drive.



Anthony parked close by the Probation Office. They both got out of the car and John walked around to the boot and opened it. The black bin bag was dropped onto the pavement and John pulled out the same worn and stained rucksack that had held his possessions the first time that they had met. Reaching into the bin bag he pulled out a tangled bundle of clothes and stuffed them roughly into the rucksack. Next out was a pair of trainers, ADIDAS, blue stripes stark against the new white. A final ‘acquisition’ Anthony surmised, before his recall to Marshall. John sat on the pavement, unlaced the shabby brown trekker boots he was wearing and pushed the pair into the rucksack before putting on the shoes which seemed – in their brightness – a stark contrast to the frayed jeans and clean but over worn hoodie and denim jacket. Anthony mentally questioned whether to go to see his Probation Officer with ‘trade mark’ shiny white, newly off the shelf trainers was wise. But then not his place to challenge John about such decisions. John stood and stamped down with each foot in turn, as if bedding in footwear which appeared to be at least two sizes too big. John grinned. Finally he took a blue cardboard file from the bin bag, stuffed with an array of paper work that appeared in danger of cascading out, some pages creased and half folded over in their receptacle. He tucked it under his arm, screwed up the bin bag and threw it back into the boot before slamming the lid shut. Anthony flinched a little at the thoughtless use of the boot of his car to deposit rubbish.

John walked purposefully towards the door of the Probation Office, leaving Anthony a couple of steps behind. The last couple of minutes had perturbed Anthony a little. New white trainers, thoughtless deposit of rubbish...but more than that John’s attitude had morphed somehow from the almost childlike, hollow demeanour into something else which he had not seen before. John normally shuffled along in a hesitant kind of way. Now he strode towards the door of the Probation Office, before pushing it open and walking through without breaking stride. Inside, two lines of metal framed chairs stood along the walls to left and right. Two men, one middle aged, one maybe late teens, sat at one wall. At the other a woman who Anthony gauged to be in her early thirties. One of the men – the oldest - sat with his head down, hands clasped, elbows propped on his knees. The other with his legs stretched out, almost lying in the chair with his hands clasped behind his baseball capped head staring at the ceiling. The woman sitting with legs crossed, track suit bottoms with NIKE in too large letters in

white along one leg. Matching white sweat shirt over check shirt with the collar turned up. All three turned towards John as he threw the door open. Anthony reached out as the door began to swing shut in his face and saw John's strides as he ploughed towards the reception desk and the woman sitting behind it, telephone in her left hand and right hand spreading sheets of paper on the wood effect surface looking for whatever relevant fact was needed. She paused and looked up, before continuing her telephone conversation, relevant fact now found. "Yes 3.30. County Court, Room 17...yes she knows. She's here now. I said that I would 'phone you just to confirm. She seems to have lost her letter about it...yes I'm sure she will be. She's eager to get this sorted out. Yes I will. Bye." John didn't pause for her to replace the receiver. "Mrs Dooley." "Do you have an appointment?" "Yes. 11 o'clock. That's now. It's 11 o'clock." Anthony stood three paces behind John, mesmerised by the change in attitude from the grinning, boisterous man whom he had collected from prison less than an hour before. 'They have to be aggressive to survive.' 'They think of Probation Officers as screws, just on the outside.' Lizzie's words came tumbling back to him. But he hadn't expected this. "If you can give me your name and take a seat..." "Mrs Dooley." This time the aggression growing. "If you can give me your name and take a seat." "John Simpson. Mrs Dooley knows who I am. She knows that I have an appointment. I'm not going to sit and wait." Anthony saw John shuffling from foot to foot, with his whole body tensing somehow, although he couldn't see his face. "I'll go and check with Mrs Dooley. If you can just..."

The woman gave up on her third attempt and disappeared through a swinging door behind her. John danced from foot to foot and then dropped his rucksack onto the floor beside him, blue folder still in his right hand. Anthony glanced at the other people waiting, sitting as he was sure that they had been asked to do. All three were watching John, glad of the diversion. The NIKE woman looked amused. Maybe a minute later, John still performing his agitated dance from foot to foot, the woman reappeared through the swinging door and said, with practised calm, "Mrs Dooley is busy right now. Something unexpected. She'll be free in about an hour, but said that it would be best if you could make it back at 2 o'clock." John snatched his rucksack from the floor and swivelled, almost colliding with Anthony, before striding back out into the open air. Anthony raised his hand momentarily to the receptionist, attempt at a gesture of apology and

turned to stride after John. Three strides along the path outside the Probation Office door he reached forward, gripped John's right shoulder and swung him round. John stumbled against the wall and Anthony closed in, closer than he had been since the compliant hugs in Gorse Edge and lowered his face towards the smaller man's face. "Don't...don't go in there... go anywhere with that attitude when I'm with you. What do you think you're doing? Just what?" For the first time Anthony saw a shock of fear in John's eyes. Eyes that were devoid in that moment of the dark streak that had flashed before. The fear wasn't physical, it was the intense shock of surprise. John muttered a word, two words, unintelligible. More an exhalation. Anthony didn't know what the words were, didn't care. "This... there's no reason to be like that. What do you think you're doing? Do you want me to drive you straight back to Gorse Edge and throw you through the door. Because I will." He pushed John away with both hands and saw his shoulders bounce back against the brick wall. "I will."

"She's...she's...she's a twat, that Mrs Dooley. She's never liked me. Never done anything to help. See...see these letters..." John raised the blue folder and shook it in Anthony's face. And then deflated instantly, shoulders hunching down a little against the wall. Realisation swamping him that he had only one ally, he dropped his folder holding hand to his side, dropped his chin to his chest. "I only...she..." "I don't care. I don't care what you think or what you have to say. These people are here for you, because you've cocked up mightily in your life. They don't owe you anything. You owe them." The words came to Anthony again. 'You have to be aggressive to survive.' He had become the aggressor, but the object of the aggression was somebody else surviving. He pushed John back against the wall again, dismissively, not harshly this time. "They don't owe you anything," he hissed.

Anthony took a step back, controlled his breathing, which he was aware he'd been short of in his own anger. "Right. We'll go and get you a 'phone, then we'll go to the Town Hall, then we'll get back here for 2. OK?" John nodded, his head still almost clamped to his chest. Anthony turned and strode off purposefully, aware that John was following a couple of paces behind, but didn't look back. He wanted to demonstrate that he would keep walking, whether John followed him compliantly or not. He was pretty sure that there was a Carphone Warehouse in the shopping centre and headed

towards where he thought it was. He didn't look back. Ten minutes later he stopped outside the glass doors of the showroom and only then did he turn to look at John. "Right. Let's go and sort a 'phone out." John nodded silently and followed him in. Anthony stood back and let John approach the bored looking guy behind the counter, wating to see how he would handle this next conversation. As always in the new world he was experiencing, John's words took him by surprise. "I just need a cheap pay-as-you-go, charged up mate. Just come out of prison and I need a cheap 'phone." The bored looking guy looked at John, then at Anthony standing a few steps behind, then back at John. "Errm..." This wasn't the kind of enquiry he was used to. He turned to the locked cupboards behind him and moved three or four boxes around, before placing a box on the counter and opening the cardboard flaps, taking out what was obviously a cheap rectangle of black plastic. "This one do? It's...it's an Alcatel. Not got a camera or anything. In fact...it's a basic phone and it's..." He was lost for a sales patter. "How much is it?" "Nineteen ninety nine and that's...that's with two hundred minutes of talk time." He waited for a reaction. "And five hundred texts. All included in the price. You can top it up and..." Again he was lost for words. "That's fine." John reached into his rucksack and pulled out a small brown envelope, prison issue allowance. He began to pull notes from the envelope and Anthony stepped forward. "I'll get that John." The bored man looked uncomfortable as Anthony took out his iPhone and jiggled it to let him know that he would be paying with it. Anthony heard John snort his now recognisable and stifled laugh. "He's not my dad, if that's what you're thinking!" The bored man shrugged away his embarrassment and Anthony wondered just what he was thinking. Would it dampen his own embarrassment if he said that he was John's social worker? But then decided best to leave it without explanation and leave the shop as quickly as possible. The bored man took out a SIM card from the packaging, flipped open the back of the 'phone, inserted it and held down the power button for a few seconds. The small screen glowed. "This is your number," he said, holding up a small card, "I'll put it in the box and..." "No need for the box mate. Just the phone." John reached forward and took the phone in his right hand, taking the number card along with his new toy. He slipped the card into the back pocket of his jeans and jabbed buttons as Anthony held his iPhone to the card reader, waiting for the ping. The bored man watched the receipt gurgitate from the top of the card reader, tore it off and showed a moment of confusion as he decided who to offer the small slip of paper to. John reached out and took

it. "Thanks mate." He turned and walked back towards the glass doors. This time Anthony followed, glancing back at the bored man who had made his quickest, least profitable and most confusing sale of the day.



"Right. Now we're going to the Housing Department in the Town Hall. And don't forget. They don't owe you anything and that's exactly what you'll get if you go in there with the attitude you showed at the probation. Just explain things properly and...and calmly." John nodded, cockiness again vanished. Anthony tried to compute the changes in demeanour, attitude and words. One minute almost hyper, the next almost a subdued little boy. The words came to him again: 'In prison you have to be aggressive to survive.' But was this something that John could control? What was his real persona? Did he just turn the aggressive attitude on like a tap? John nodded again, just a small dipping of his head, but eyes not meeting Anthony's. "Right. Let's see what they can do. For you." Anthony pushed open the left hand swinging door as John pushed open its right hand partner. Two steps inside, doors swinging shut behind them, both men halted and assessed the scene, worked out their first move. Anthony surveyed the scene with another shock to his senses. He wasn't sure in any way what he should have expected. New scenes of what to him was completely foreign ground had become part of his experiences over the previous couple of years. Maybe he had expected a quiet and orderly office, desks, chairs, people working at their daily tasks. But again another stark waiting room. To his right a bank of desks pushed together creating a barrier, but with screens between each desk which he presumed were a nod to some privacy of conversation, 'booths' with housing officers on one side of the barrier, a single chair facing on the opposite side. And facing the bank of booths a line of the same steel framed, shabby chairs, seats and backrests clad in burgundy imitation leather, most worn in part with foam upholstery peeping through tears. Anthony shuddered a little inside at how squalid this scene was. How many squalid scenes he had now witnessed. But more than the squalid surroundings he was shocked by the collection of stories which, he was instantly sure, represented people in despair, with no roof to go home to. Who were at their last resort. Maybe a dozen people, including two women, each with two small children either sitting squashed up with them on the steel backed chairs, or standing as close to their mothers as they could force themselves.

Women on their own, spanning the ages from very young to ageing. Men on their own, spanning the same generations. Each adult with a bag, a suitcase, a rucksack, a couple with just black, bulging bin liners. Worldly goods, Anthony mouthed silently to himself.

From the nearest booth a woman, maybe in her early twenties, casual, jeans, t-shirt with a UNICEF logo emblazoned across the chest, came forward and smiled. "Hi there. How can I help?" Anthony put his hand on John's back and prompted him gently to step forward. The 'threat,' it seemed, had worked. John explained quietly, release earlier in the day. Told to go to housing, explain that he had nowhere to stay. No, no money apart from his release allowance. No, no previous permanent address. No benefits. Yes, from the area. No, no relatives. UNICEF listened, nodding in response to each answer from John. "Well if you can take a seat John, we're busy as you can see." UNICEF nodded around the room. "I'll get somebody to have a chat with you, see what we can do. Do you have your release papers? And... and details of your Probation Officer?" John nodded, Anthony marvelled at the Jekyll and Hyde performances. "Come on, we'll sit over here." The booths provided only token privacy and Anthony sat with his head down, unavoidably eavesdropping on varying levels of desperation. This office would, he was sure, close at five along with the other departments of the Town Hall. Four, maybe five hours to help with the instant needs of a dozen men, women and children. Or what was the alternative? But he was struck most by the defeated voices, explaining, each in turn, how they had come to this point in their individual lives. Desperate to take any help that could be offered. After all, for tonight at least, what was the alternative?

The people shuffled through the booths, telling their stories. In the inner sanctum of the booths, advisers listened and replied softly, trying to assemble parts of the stories that they were being told. How things had come to this. The standard routine, Anthony soon observed, was for the advisers to listen, ask the talkers to wait a few minutes whilst they went away to check through a few things. On their return they sat and leant forward confidentially, explaining the options, what accommodation could be found for them for that night at least. They pushed unknown sheets of paper across the desks to the stranded, pointing out unknown details, sheets of closely detailed information, which Anthony presumed were the 'official' version of their entitlements. In turn the people listened, looked at

the papers, nodded. In turn the advisers stood and leant forward to shake hands, wish 'good luck, be in touch if needed.' In turn the people picked up their assortment of belongings, nodded to their kids to follow, trooped back out of the double swinging doors through which they had entered with no hope at all, perhaps now with a thin solution in papers they had been given. John's turn and he was nodded forward to a booth by UNICEF, a booth occupied by an older woman, air of experience but with the same non-uniform casual clothes that Anthony assessed or assumed were a conscious choice to deliver a relaxed two-way dialogue with dishevelled, some grimy, desperate people. Quiet conversation, Anthony heard John's key words. John's interviewer looked across at Anthony and John half turned to nod in his direction. The woman beckoned Anthony to join them and UNICEF appeared instantly to slide a second chair into the confines of the booth, so that he could sit in on the rest of the conversation.

"Hi. You're Tony, John tells me." Anthony deferred his objection. "He tells me that you've been helping him. Helping him along for quite a while. I asked him if he thought it would help if you sat in, he says that's OK. I've told him that I'll note that he has agreed. Confidentiality, I'm sure you understand." Anthony nodded. "I'm sorry that you've had to wait. Both had to wait. I have to ask this, but I probably know the answer. Just have to note that I've asked. There's no possibility that John could stay with you tonight is there, just to give us time to try and sort out some accommodation?" Anthony hoped that she hadn't picked up the momentary flinch at the thought of this and instantly projecting in his mind what it could lead to. "That's fine. I understand. You're not a...not a relative after all. Just had to ask. Well John's in a bit of a bind of course. But we'll do our best to try and help. I've got the background and the paper work that John's given me. If you'll just bear with me for a few minutes there are a few things I have to check." Standard routine Anthony now recognised. They both sat in silence for those few minutes, each uncomfortable in his own way. The woman returned and sat back down in her chair. "John tells me that you have to go back and see his Probation Officer. Is that right? Yes, in...in about an hour. Well I think the best thing to do is come back after that meeting and that will give me chance to make a few more enquires about what accommodation is available. I don't want to...to promise too much John, but I feel fairly confident we can sort something out."



Anthony was relieved that John had behaved impeccably, but wondered how he had summoned up an air of humility. As they walked the route back to the Probation Office he resisted a lecture on how people helped, understood as long as they weren't faced with aggression. He hoped that the humility – whether real or false – perpetuated with Mrs. Dooley. As they reached the doors Anthony placed a hand on each of John's shoulders, considering a word or two in advance of the meeting, but judged that just the gesture had fired a reminder or a warning that John understood and he stayed silent. This time the seats ranged against each wall were empty. And this time, "I've got an appointment with Mrs Dooley. John Simpson." The receptionist didn't flicker at any previous encounter and Anthony recognised that she'd seen it all before. This was her day to day. John took three steps towards the chairs and dropped his rucksack on the floor beside him, placed the blue folder of papers on top of it and then, with a second thought, opened the top of the rucksack and pushed it roughly into the collection of clothes inside. Anthony sat beside him.

Another woman appeared through the door behind the reception desk. Again a surprise to Anthony. Again younger than he had imagined. This time smartly dressed in a dark blue business suit, hair pulled back tightly off her face and gathered in a bun. She nodded at John, didn't speak and then looked inquisitively at Anthony. "This is..." John hesitated. "This is Anthony. He's been helping me with a few things." The woman nodded again. "Do you want Anthony to come through whilst I have a chat with you?" "If that's OK, yes. Yes please." Again an internal bewilderment from Anthony. Was this the parole board attitude that Chaplain Lizzie had told him about? Or was this a lesson learnt finally? The Probation Officer held her fob against a pad alongside a door between the chairs and a click allowed her to push the door open and hold it wide for both men to enter. This time softer furnishings. Upholstered seats, still with an air of dilapidation, but no desks, no symbols of formality. Anthony and John sat, the Probation officer sat opposite them and placed her own folder of papers on her knee, opening it and smoothing down the orderly file. She looked down at the file and turned papers over before smoothing down the sheet she had been looking for and then looked up at John. "Before..." John had begun first. "I'd just like to...to say sorry for the letters that I've sent to you. I..." Anthony glanced to the right at John and then looked back to Mrs. Dooley for reaction. He was sure that internally her reaction was the same as his. A confusion at change

of attitude. Neither of them showed any visible reaction.

"Well...well thanks John. That's a good start and it's appreciated. It's good to see that you've been released early. That you've earned it. But you know the consequences if you breach bail conditions again." John nodded. "The Housing Officer has been on the phone, I believe that they're trying to help with somewhere for you to stay." John nodded. "She's pretty sure that they can help, although time's getting a bit short. So we'll just go through some questions...some simple questions...and then make arrangements for you to call in each week and see me for a few minutes. Is that OK?" Again a nod. "But you must let me know where you are staying...if they manage to sort something out...and I'll have to just confirm that with Housing in the morning. Meanwhile you have a 'phone now I understand." John held up the black plastic rectangle. "Can you give me the number. I need that before I can sign off that you've reported in to me this afternoon." John reached into his jeans back pocket and took out the card with his number on, handed it across the gap to Mrs. Dooley. She wrote a note on her file and handed it back to him. He put it back into his pocket. "Good. So just a few more questions and copies of your release papers and so on."

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Anthony stopped John by putting both hands on his shoulders as the exit door swung shut behind them. This time a gesture of 'well done' and not 'don't you ever.' No need for words he thought. The ensuing hours since they had last stood in this spot had surely been a lesson learnt. As they walked back to the Town Hall John's assumed air of humility dissipated. How much, Anthony wondered was 'parole board' control or genuine realisation? Humility gave way to some sort of exaggerated chatter and Anthony hoped that a balance could now take control in John's mind and emotions. As they walked back into the Housing Department he said just one word to John: "Remember."

This time the seats were empty. Housing, probation. Morning activities Anthony rationalised. UNICEF appeared behind the booths, recognised the pair and gestured for them to take a seat. Two minutes and the Housing Officer came into the now deserted waiting room and dragged a seat around to face them. "Well John. We've had some success. There's a flat available,

just one bedroom, but a nice kitchen lounge area. But the best news is that I've arranged that you can stay there for eight weeks. That'll give you a start and it will qualify as an address for benefit payments." She paused and looked for approval. "There's no rent to pay for those eight weeks, but after that, when benefits come through, you'll get some housing benefit. Can't say it will cover all the cost of the rent, but we'll monitor where you are up to and...I hope not...but even if you have to move on somewhere after the eight weeks it'll give you chance to get settled. And for us to look into things a bit more." Again a pause. "Is that OK for you?"

John nodded, humility persona installed. "Yes. Thank you." Anthony looked across at the housing officer and then back to John. "That's brilliant. Thank you. I'm sure that John really...really appreciates it. Thank you." Anthony perceived the genuine flash of pleasure that the woman was experiencing in helping the helpless. And wondered whether that pleasure was counterbalanced by inevitably having to tell some that nothing could be done.

"Now it's late," she glanced at the clock on the wall. "And we close in an hour. But a colleague of mine has said that he will meet you there with the keys, but it will be about six. And he's taking a welcome pack to leave with you. Some bedding and a basic food parcel. There's a kettle and some pans and so on in the kitchen. Are you OK for getting there?" She looked at Anthony. "It's a bit of a drag on the bus. Two buses and they're a bit unreliable and you need to get there for six." It was, of course, a statement of confirmation that Anthony would drive him there and of course he agreed. The last leg. She copied the address on a page in her notebook, tore it off and handed it to Anthony. He looked at it and nodded. "Thank you... Thanks for all your help." John's tone of thanks was borne of humility that the day had seen help from ranks of people. From a prison chaplain to his Probation Officer to this woman who spent her day trying to house the helpless. Such a good lesson taught and learned. That to be aggressive to survive wasn't the only way. That maybe, just maybe, a new course was set from the lessons learned.

Anthony breathed a sigh of relief as the doors of the Town Hall closed behind him and his charge. So intense a day, the sigh of release made him realise how much he needed an hour's respite himself. "A good result John.

Very good. Look, I need to dash off and sort something out." (No, I need a break from all this.) "You've not had a drink or anything to eat all day." Anthony took what he hoped would be the final ten pound note out of his wallet. "There's a caf. over there. Go and get something and I'll see you back here in an hour. Here at the car. That'll be about right to get to the flat for six, with a bit of time to spare. So we're not late." John took the ten pound note without a word. He must be exhausted too, Anthony reasoned. So intense for both of us. John looked left and right before crossing the road towards the café and hitched his rucksack over his shoulder without glancing back. Anthony pressed the button on the key fob and heard the doors of the Volvo click open. He eased himself into the seat, exhaled with an exaggerated, supplementary sigh and turned the key in the ignition. 'Just a drive around. Just a park up for half an hour. Just a break before the last leg. Just some time to consider whether he should have taken that other tenner out of his wallet in the rain and cold all that time ago. But surely it was.' He checked the traffic and the Volvo pulled away from the kerb in the opposite direction to the café.



Anthony tapped the steering wheel with the index finger of his right hand. He glanced at the red digits of the clock as another minute clicked by and turned his eyes to the rear view mirror to check whether John was approaching from that direction. He sighed with a growing realisation. Ten minutes to five and he had returned to the same parking bay. The red digits of the clock had turned over ten minutes. Then another ten... Then...

Mistakes. John had the mobile number on a card in his jeans back pocket. Anthony had the address on a folded piece of paper, torn from a notebook. Neither piece of information in the right hands. Five thirty. Five forty five. Six. Just another ten minutes to make sure. But by then a realisation. Nothing's changed. Nothing could be. Check the rear view mirror one last time. Off the leash again. Only an hour for temptation, with a release allowance and a ten pound note to supplement the cash. But too much temptation. Too much of an opportunity. All for nothing.

Anthony turned the key of the Volvo, checked the traffic and pulled away from the kerb in the direction of home.