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**Creator(s):** Smith, A.

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I would like to begin with a couple of disclaimers, warnings perhaps. Firstly, because parts of this paper will be in the form of a first person memoir of prison experiences some of the language used will be at best vulgar at worst obscene. I have edited to some extent so as to ameliorate some of the things I hear which make even me shudder but much still remains. So, be prepared. Secondly I am a very recent and perhaps a rather approximate academic who still operates in the mode of prison, of journalism and of fiction. My notions of truth may not be those of the academy.

This account of my early experiences of prison has grown not from the experiences themselves, they are gone, but from the notebooks and journalism which were almost coeval with them. When the experiences happened to me I had little understanding of them; it has been the re-visiting of the experiences through the construction of narrative which has produced an understanding. I say, 'understanding,' rather than knowledge because the intractable problem for me, and for anyone engaging in this kind of phenomenological approach, is that experience is fleeting and that however detailed an examination we make of the phenomena they are never wholly observed. Observation itself is always in a process of becoming a second, third, fourth retrospective glance. Making this narrative has stabilised my experience, perhaps stabilised at the risk of falsifying. But who is to say? Perhaps all that we ever mean when we make a claim to knowledge is that we have produced a stable narrative. For those of us writing affectively about social and emotional experience, things which happen not to be the case or even deliberate falsehood, such as the way in which I have included dialogue that I do not altogether

remember, is no bar to producing a stable narrative or to regarding that narrative as true. What is a stable narrative relies, in my case, upon an aesthetic and ethical relationship with the text. Perhaps I am making a story, telling the tale, for the sake of creating stability rather than seeking stability as an indicator of something further? The opportunities for bad faith and deception are not lacking but they are avoidable.

I shall attempt to make an answer to the question: 'What is prison like?' Of course, none of us knows, in a way communicable to others, what anything is like and so we are forced into the making of narratives. If I am a good narrator then prison is at my mercy; I can say what I like about it and make others believe that what I say is the truth. So, now I say that I remember my first, twelve year old, experiences of prison and my claim to know is based upon the responses which are provoked in myself by my own narratives by my capacity to convince myself.

Where is this deceiving/stabalising/reliable narrator. He was, and still is, a teacher in a prison and thus occupies a site which is alien within the prison. This site has its discreet values, freedoms and constraints which are distinct from those of prisoners, officers or any of the agents of government deployed within the prison establishment. It is quite possible for teachers to abandon this site and adopt the values of any of the others. When this happens the teacher is reduced to a mere technician or perhaps even an accomplice or an informer. Part of the role of the teacher as alien is to bring into the prison the ordinary daily discourse of civilised society, discourse which in prison is quickly lost. The narrator, then, is within the situation he observes and represents but he is not a part of it. He is within captivity but not a captive. All of the roles of captivity are

available to the teacher should he falter and choose to occupy them.

Ironically it is the teacher's status as an alien, as other if you like, which allows him the same access to the governor as to the officer as to the prisoner. The teacher's otherness is valued by all of these because it validates them, takes each of them seriously and in good faith in an environment where contempt is the common mediator of many, if not most, of the contacts between people.

I find the prison narratives that I write to be hugely problematic. My narratives, I think of them very humbly as stories, existed firstly as events in Her Majesty's Prison Wellingborough, a closed prison housing about seven hundred men where I have been employed, for a few hours a week, for the last twelve years. For twelve months of that time Dr Ben Crew of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology was embedded in the prison for the purpose of making an ethnographic study. This is now published as *Prison* by Wallen Press. It is a disciplined, measured, scientific account of the life of the prison. The sixty odd stories I have written often referring to the same people and events as Crew were driven by my desire to sell work to a newspaper. As the dreadfulness of the comparison dawned on me I was at first shame faced and took refuge in the boast that they were good stories well told but then a new dawning revealed to me that I could be polemical and campaigning, I could take sides and pursue a social and political agenda in ways that an academic might feel to be improper. This position was encouraged by The Guardian which has a long term commitment to prison reform and a history of reporting from within the system. It was though my first encounters with prisoners which

set the point of view and the values which have directed my prison writing.

On the phone Jean, who was then the Education manager at HMP Wellingborough seemed quite pleased that I was willing to start work at the prison straight away. I was a freelance writer at the time and the money would be handy. 'I'll meet you at the gate,' she said. 'Just tell the officers to give me a call in Education. Bring some ID.'

I showed the officer my passport. 'Education?' he said, flat faced, serious. There were four of them, white shirts, black ties and epaulettes, behind the armoured glass; they could take me or leave me. Then, there Jean was, across the air lock, behind the second heavy metal gate. She was a tiny dark woman and I thought, how could she protect me? I could see her talking to the officer on her side of the door. She pointed at me, stabbing her finger and laughing. The officer on my side gestured me through and I heard the sharp click that released the lock. I shook Jean's tiny hand.

'Got to be quick,' she said, 'the men are a bit early.' There were more gates, five of them, and a quick glimpse of lawn and flowerbeds, tall metal fences topped with wire, a tall, brick cell block, numbered windows. Then we were, suddenly, in a corridor full of noise and men. How could Jean protect me? What use could she be? She clapped her hands, 'Come on, come on then, let's have you in your classrooms.' Like a bossy middle class infants teacher with some raggy-arsed kids. The corridor emptied as she chivvied and nagged her way along. 'You're in here,' she opened the door to a bare classroom, 'You'll be alright with this group, they're nice.' Nice? Why were they locked up if they were nice? 'Dean,' she said and a

dark, good looking man, about thirty, stood up from his desk and gave her a Hugh Grant smile. 'Look after Alan will you?' And she was gone.

'You the teacher mate?'

'That's what Jean says.'

'Yeah, she's a bit scary when she's on one.' And everything was suddenly normal, just like that, with Dean pulling me into a rueful male alliance against the bossy women.

I don't know why I did it but it was the best move I could have made: I shook everyone's hand and we introduced ourselves: Mr. Williams, Mr. Knight, Mr. Ericson... and I asked if they would mind if we used Christian names. It was a good way of ridding myself of authority. There is, in prison, a massive distorting weight of authority pressing onto every relationship and I knew, straight away, that not only did I dislike it but that I didn't have it in me to join in its exercise. On the one hand I wasn't strong enough to pull it off and on the other I wasn't insecure enough to need it. It was one of those very rare moments when you see something clearly.

There were six of them and we sat around in a circle and talked about Hamlet. 'You know,' said Michael, 'this Ophelia, she strikes me as the sort of heroine that Jane Austen might have written about.' Of course she was. Why hadn't I thought of that? But someone was already talking about the tragic dimension that just wasn't there in Austen. Except in a domestic sense, someone else said. And there I was, out of my depth, delighted, not believing my luck. I was only with that group for a month, until their regular teacher came back, but they turned me inside out.

Prison is where the demons are isn't it: degenerate, violent, predatory? Yet here I was in the heart of it with Jane Austen and Shakespeare. I was ready for my cup of tea at break but Michael made a bee-line for me and I could see that there was something that had to be said, something that he wanted to make clear. 'I am not,' he said, 'a criminal.' I could think of nothing sensible to say. I certainly wasn't going to tell him that he was; I could see what eight or nine years of prison gym had done for him. 'I am a decent person. I do not cheat or rob or tell lies. I am a murderer.'

'Well, that's all right then,' said Dean, and a very strange moment passed.

This was 1998 before it was usual for cells to have electricity and certainly before in-cell television was commonplace. Men like those in my Hamlet group would read their sentences away: a book a day, more at weekends when there was lots of bang up. 'Every man should do prison,' Dean told me. 'It's a very revealing thing. When you're on your own in the dark and it's three o'clock in the morning and you can't sleep and you've got years of it ahead of you, that's when you find out about yourself. That's when you find out who you are.'

'No, I don't want to do that, Dean.'

'You should, you should.'

He made me see, straight away, how dreadful prison was and how absurd any talk about the softness of the system: the populist, suburban rubbish about holiday camps and criminals doing better than ordinary hard-working people and so on. I was already, on my first morning, developing a preference for robbers and villains and addicts; wickedness

and vulnerability seeming all at once to be more attractive than the mean spirited moral penny pinching of the lower middle class. Of course all of this dissolves the minute I talk to my wife. At lunch she gives me the pitying look of someone who's heard this kind of thing before. She thinks I'm off my head. Gwen, who teaches literacy in the prison, puts it like this: 'I dread my daughter coming home with someone like Dean. I mean, he's such a nice chap, he'd just charm you into submission wouldn't he? He's lovely. And then he'd get into some scrape and he'd be doing seven years again and everybody would think that he was a hero for not grassing on his mates and he'd write lovely letters and pass his A levels and it would be just awful.'

I could see why the officers might become quite negative about the prisoners, after all some of them are quite difficult, and equally I could see why the prisoners didn't think too well of the people who banged them up at half past eight, searched them, wrote reports on them and so on. Being a teacher leaves you nowhere to stand, makes you an agreeable hypocrite shifting on the shifting sands of the prison. It began to dawn on me that this was a large part of my value: that I had nothing to do with prison. I had the opportunity to bring with me into the prison a bubble of the ordinary world and keep it intact for us to live in, intact, without authority and without making judgements. My values were a world apart from the values of the prison. My starting point, that people were good, was enough to mark me out as a fool, a fool that I was willing to be. These contradictions have never been resolved and as the first weeks went by and I met more and more of the men, more of the officers it was difficult not to agree with everyone's contradictory opinions.



For weeks I assumed that Jim in the Education Office was just that: the bloke in the office, someone who went home for his tea.

'You silly bugger,' Helen told me, 'he killed his wife.'

'Well,' I said, 'he seems a nice enough bloke to me.'

'He is,' she said.

Jim was in his sixties, an engineer with a lifetime of directing major projects behind him. 'Before this, Alan, I don't think that I'd ever had so much as a parking ticket. Then at fifty six I get a life sentence.' Anybody doing a maths qualification came to Jim. In fact the son of one of the officers got a lot of help from Jim with his A Level. Distance learning, of course. He worked in the office with Dereck. Dereck was doing English in my A Level group and everybody took the piss out of his thick Brummie accent. He had had a firm which imported furniture from the Far East and he had rented out a space in one of his containers to someone who was a bit dodgy and now, four years later, it had all gone: house, business, car, wife. Not even the officers could see the sense in locking him up and they let him have a cell up on the Lifer Wing where the inmates were a bit older, a bit more stable and respectable. He had struck up a really unlikely friendship with Des who was doing an enormous sentence for armed robbery and they were planning how they could clean and decorate the new cell. The preoccupations of many of the men were with these sorts of ordinary, domestic things. Most of all, for men like these, there were standards of respectability for which they strived, which made life possible.

When Les turned up he had a thin, scraped air about him. He was a small, skinny Welshman who looked as though he had been too cold for

far too long. Les had very low expectations of the future: 'If I get my parole, I'd like to have a dog. Be nice that.' A couple of the other men had sent him along to show me some writing that he had done. He had been watching some sparrows out of his cell window and had made up a rough ironic love story about them. It sounds a bit soft, but it was lovely writing, a real tough guy tour de force. Les had been in jail, At Her Majesty's Pleasure, since he was sixteen. He had started off in YO1 and had come to us after seven years in Dartmoor. 'I was really scared, you know, but my Mam and Dad they've been there for me all the time. When I was first in I tried to get my Mam to bring me some drugs in. I can't believe it now. She said: "If you love me, Les' you'll never ask me that again." I was a bit of a prick wasn't I?'

'I'm not a big bloke, Alan, and I knew I'd get it. First week in YO1 and this big black guy comes into my pad and he says to me, "I'll be round to see you Friday when you get your canteen." I was shittin myself. I thought, no fuck this. If I let this get started, I'll never see the end of it. Friday comes, and I'm waiting for this guy and he comes into my pad. I was shittin myself. "What you got for me?" he says. Christ Al, he was humungus. I made myself do it. "I've got fuck all for you," right in his face, "so fuck off." You know what? He fucked off. I was a bit lucky mind.'

Les palled up with Matt, a smart North Londoner, a really tough looking bullet of a man in his mid-twenties who would arrive for class with books under his arm and dead keen.

'When you're in prison you get clean, get fit, get some education. That's what I told Beefy.'

'Hello,' said Beefy and we shook hands.

To get called Beefy in jail you really do have to be beefy. There are high standards of beefiness. Beef never came to my class, he always went to Carole for Sociology and he was quite an asset. In fact he became our hero. Carole had been talking about homosexuality and had presented it as being at least morally neutral. One thing led to another and then one man, enraged, was on his feet and making for her. Beefy just stood in his way.

'It was absurd,' Carole said, afterwards, 'he just couldn't get round Beefy, you know the size of him.' He could have hit Beefy, but who in their right mind would? Every time he tried to get at Carole, Beefy just took half a step to the side and wouldn't let him. Never raised his hands, just stood there. The bloke ran out of steam in the end, he just deflated and sat down. Even so it made me think of the effrontery of going into a prison and asking the men to read poetry and settle down with a book. But that, of course was just another lesson in how prison was ordinary, not especially wicked, and when I managed to step away from my prejudices and think about it, much much more pleasant than the schools and colleges I had worked in. In the days when I had been a schoolteacher I had always been rather ill at ease with being an authority figure; sit up straight, get your books out, do this, do that. All that sort of thing was out of the question on the inside. Well, it was for me. For the women teachers it was different. I was amazed at the levels of compliance they achieved by being martinets. The inmates called them 'Miss' and gave in to what I saw at first as outrageous tyranny: 'I am not having you come into Education in shorts, absolutely not,' 'You do not run in the corridor,' 'Excuse me, I think that I'm speaking? Thank you. That's better.'

But, of course, everyone knew that their teachers would always go the extra mile for them, that teachers would organise books and videos and tuition.

Gordon was a good example of this. He was new in Cat C and he came to one of my literature classes. He looked dreadful; he looked ill and defeated as though gripped by a desperate slow motion panic that had pulled the flesh from his bones. When he spoke he was hesitant, apologetic. He told me about how he had done something terrible and that it was only when he was years into his life sentence that what he had done suddenly struck him.

'Before, I didn't care. When I was sentenced, lified off, I didn't care. I sat in the cells at the court, read the paper, had a smoke. The officer said: "You alright?" "Yeah," I said, "why shouldn't I be?" that's what I was like. Then, years in, I had a nervous breakdown. Proper breakdown. It dawned on me what I'd done. Bit strange really.'

Gordon was quiet in class but if I asked him directly about something he would always be thoughtful and sharp. We had been reading Larkin's poem, *Water*, 'If I were called in / to construct a religion / I should make use of water' and Gordon said: 'I did a certificate in Theology a couple of years back. Don't see how I'll ever do anything with that do you?' And then he told me about his half finished OU degree, abandoned years ago.

'You should get back to it.'

'How can I? Too late now.'

'What were you doing?'

'Social sciences.'

'Do you want to do it?'

'Too late, Alan, left it too late.'

I saw Jean at break and asked her if there was anything to be done. She picked up the phone. About half an hour later she came and interrupted us. 'Gordon?' he looked up like a surprised ghost, 'I want you. Come on, come with me.' When he came back he had the bewildered look of a man being blown before a storm.

'I'm doing OU,' he said.

'Starting when?'

'I've started. I don't know how she's done it.'

'It's best to keep out of her way Gordon.'

Gordon vanished into his OU degree, went off to Carole's sociology class, got some computer skills and read everything. Before his degree was completed he went off to a Cat D, open prison, got a job on the out. He was still glum, still saying: 'I've got no illusions, you know, who's going to have anything to do with me?' A couple of years later Carole was invited to his graduation. He got a First.

I could see that Les and Matt were plotting something, 'What's going on then?'

'You don't want to know, Al.'

'Oh.'

'Just planning for when I get my D,' said Les.

'I said I'd buy him a present,' said Matt. 'I've got a few bob.'

'Don't tell me, I don't want to know.'

'Course you don't.'

'He's gonna buy me a prostitute,' said Les.

'I'll buy you two if you like.'

'Would you?'

'Course I would.'

'Two prostitutes.' Les's face had gone a bit dreamy. That'll be alright Al, don't you reckon?' He had been away for at least twelve years.

'Do you think that two will be enough?' I asked.

He looked a bit thoughtful. 'You taking the piss are you?'

I left them to it.

'Let me know when you get your first leave,' I could hear Matt saying, 'I'll book a hotel.'

Within weeks most of my first group, the Hamlet group, had melted away. Someone had been released, someone else off on a course to do with sentence progression, someone off to D Cat. I found it odd. There had been a feeling of intimacy in the group and now men were missing but not missed. Everyone faded quickly in the bustle of getting through sentences and the stages that sentences fell into. One of the guys said: 'There are no friends in prison just lots of people you know, lots of acquaintances.'

But then there was David, another pal of Les's. We were standing in the corridor and I said to him: 'You'll be going home soon won't you David?'

'No, not now, not for a bit.' He had had a four year sentence and had been perfect; he should have been away on licence.

'What's happened?'

'Fucked up didn't I.'

Les butted in. He was staring hard at David. 'I tested positive, for opiates,' he said.

'You'd have been in the shit,' David said.

'So, he said it was him that had spiked my tea, that I was an innocent victim.'

'They'd have knocked you back to a B Cat,' David said. He turned to me. 'He'd have had years to do on top, being a lifer. They'd have had him back in B Cat. Fucking ridiculous. Me? They only took a few months off me.'

I don't suppose that after David's release they ever saw each other again. Not long after Les made it to his D. I hope he did okay with the prostitutes.

The first few months in prison were very disconcerting. Quite early on I did a course in Prison Craft. Prison Craft sounded very odd to me but the two officers who ran it made their points in a worryingly persuasive way. Entering a prison as a teacher, especially a part time teacher means that you bring in with you all the ordinary attitudes of a respectable middle class life and, far from being alert to differences, the assumptions of the 'out' continue seamlessly in to the inside. Someone might say to you: 'Alan, could you just drop this into the post for me? And I might ordinarily say: 'Yes, of course.' Reflection might tell you that this might be problematic but as ordinary people with ordinary lives this is the kind of reflection that we don't go in for. 'Then,' said the officer, 'you might find yourself posting quite a few letters or bringing in a bit of chocolate or "a little parcel my mate on the out's got for my birthday,' and then you're so far into deceiving Security that they'll have you doing all sorts.' I was a bit

disbelieving about this. Sounds a bit melodramatic, I thought, but I did make a point of explaining in class just how respectable I was. 'You can't tell me that,' I would say, like a startled virgin, 'I'm a respectable middle aged man.' I would bang on about how much I detested drugs, how I believed in law and order and following the rules. I always called the officers, 'officers' and never 'screws' and always demonstrated that I was on first name terms with them and that some of them were my friends.

Prison Craft.

I was still shocked, though, when teachers were caught out: the middle aged lady who did the soft toys class, the new basic skills teacher, the elderly Christian lady who helped out in the chapel. I'm still not sure about the details of any of these instances because Security can be surprisingly discrete and humane at times. I was only asked once to post a letter, a birthday card for Alitair's dad, and I refused. I felt rotten about it and years later, writing this, I still do. Alistair was a nice bloke doing a first sentence for something to do with drugs and I was sure that he was perfectly genuine and had asked a favour as an ordinary person might ask. He was an ordinary person, not a criminal by any stretch of the imagination, No-one would mind having him home for tea. But, I told him, no, and we were both embarrassed and, I think, somehow ashamed.

Prison has a dreadful, poisoning effect.

Attempting to avoid this effect is one of the reasons that people take sides. It is easy and understandable for an officer to say: 'ninety five per cent of these bastards are just scum,' and for prisoners to say the same thing back. There had been some sort of confrontation between one of the officers and a prisoner and Matt had stepped in, taken the guy



away and talked to him, made him see sense. The Principal Officer on the wing had wanted to write on Matt's record that he had , 'come to the help of an officer in danger,' thinking that it might do matt a bit of good, I suppose. It was a thank you. Matt was outraged, 'I don't want that in my record. I wasn't helping that bastard. Help them, you must be joking, fucking disgrace. I was helping my mate.' When he told me this I was non-plussed and faced with this bewilderment of mine he took a bit of time to explain things to me. Then, I told him how well everyone had behaved: he had intervened, his pal had listened, the officer didn't press things, the P.O. wanted to say thanks. 'Fucking bastards.' But, nevertheless something had happened and someone like me, so out of place, needed to be there to point it out. I could see that my colleagues were doing the same sort of thing. We were coming into the prison trailing clouds of respectability, civilians, not part of the game.

Education was and is the politest part of the prison. The women teachers are referred to as 'Miss,' and then, after a little while in class, a few weeks maybe, people begin to use first names. Male teachers set their own, blokey, parameters, first names are usual from the outset. When a new man comes into my class, I shake his hand and call him Mr. Whatever and ask him if he minds using first names. This is not quite so simple as it seems. What I am doing is importing some outside behaviour into the inside. This is how I might well behave on the outside and it begins to set normal habits of behaviour for social relations between normal adult men. I am, too, ridding myself of some of the authority that a prisoner might expect to encounter in prison and I am offering him a little bit of the authority that choosing implies. I am not sneaking up on

the guys in doing this; I tell them, straightforwardly, why we shake hands in my class, why we speak to each other as we do. This does not come as news to them but taking the time and trouble to make these things explicit makes the value system of my respectability a little bit more worthy of consideration and that consideration speaks to notions of identity and self worth, both of which can be a little bit ephemeral inside prison. It started in that first Hamlet class that stroke of good luck when I shook Dean's hand. I've been shaking hands ever since and everyone who comes into my room gets a handshake when they arrive and when they leave. We always thank each other for the morning that we have had.

In the past I had, at times, been a schoolteacher and for me one of the most grating aspects of schools was the authority that I was expected to exercise over my pupils. One of my first thoughts in the prison was that my authority over men who were bigger fitter faster and younger than me might turn out to be a little bit theoretical. What was I going to do: lines, detention, get in touch with their mums, clip round the ear? Matt in particular got very annoyed with me: 'Come on Al, use your authority. You need to assert yourself here.'

'No Matthew, I have no authority at all. It's your class; you're all grown men, why should you listen to me? I don't want any rights over you. All I can do is offer you things.' And there they were, listening. 'Should we have a quick look at page thirty-eight? What do you think?'

They knew what I was up to, of course they did. We all conspired to make it possible for me to be in charge, well, partly in charge, without there being an intrusive hierarchy in the room. It was all a bit two faced because I relied on the fact that, mostly, I knew more than they did and I

could play the cultural conjurer, pulling clever rabbits out of the hat. I was doing my stuff one Thursday afternoon, reading Hamlet and giving a commentary on the text when Norman stopped me. Norman was built out of a series of cubes, a bit like Mr. Strong but stronger.

'You don't think we can read this for ourselves do you?' You think we're thick.'

He stopped me dead and we looked at each other. The class sat back and watched, interested.

'You're right,' I said, 'got that one wrong didn't I?'

'Yeah you did, didn't you?'

'Sorry.'

'You should be careful about thinking people are thick.'

'Don't rub it in Norman. Just read it yourself if you want to.'

'Don't know if I do.'

'Oh for God's sake.'

Then, he read it; read it beautifully in a buttery Black Country accent. In fact, given that Shakespeare came from the Midlands it was how he might have read it himself. Try it, if you can do the accent, it sounds great.

I didn't realise at the time how much good I had done myself; Norman had had a little bite at me and I had had a little bite back. After that he always came and sat at my side and read a lot and I didn't have to worry about authority for quite a while. He was the sort of man who came with his own quiet atmosphere. Ginge got me on my own one day.

'You know what he's in for don't you?'

'None of my business Ginge.'

But Ginge thought that it was and he was obviously enormously impressed and bursting with the story 'He was in a big fight in a pub, real wild west punch up and at the end he was last man standing. Everything in the pub smashed to little bits, so he gets himself a drink and stands at the bar. The police come and try to get him out and he says, no, he's just having a peaceful drink and the coppers didn't fancy the job at all and so in the end they just threw a great big police alsation in. Norman killed it. Bare hands, just killed it. Two years he's got. Fucking doggicide AI, that's what he's in for.'

When I saw Norman again I couldn't resist the odd remark about careers in animal welfare that he might consider and there was a bleak second or two when I thought that I might have gone too far. He gave me a little smile, rather rueful, rather modest. Norman was released a couple of weeks before his GCSE exams and he promised faithfully to go to his local FE College to sit them. I don't suppose he did.

Prisons are quite special places for some people. They are a sort of time out from the hurly burly where some things become uniquely possible. Matt took his mantra, get clean get fit get some education very seriously. There was no ulterior motive in Matt's focus on education; he steadfastly did all the useless "fluffy" subjects: Literature, Drama, Philosophy, History. He took the English as far as A level. There had been a biggish group coming along to class and going through the texts and joining in the discussions. In fact I was surprised at just how much interest there was in really close reading, sometimes from guys who couldn't actually read. Only Matt and Adrian did the exam. ( Adrian foolishly let it slip that his local paper had denounced him as a 'Dealer in

Death' and so acquired an unfortunate nickname) At the end of the last paper they stood up and, very solemnly, shook hands with each other and then with me.

'I never thought I'd do that.'

'No, never.'

It left me a bit shocked; I hadn't realised what a mountain we'd been climbing.

Matt was due for release before the results came out but I was sure that he had at least, at very least, passed. 'What are you going to do then?' I asked him. 'You could do something at college; get a job.'

'Fuck off, Alan,' he told me. 'A job? Some poxy minimum wage job? Listen, if I get up the motorway to Oxford or Cambridge with a carful of drugs for the posh kids I can make forty thousand quid a week, eight grand a day. Course I'm gonna get a job.'

There wasn't a lot to be said. Except that I found myself saying: 'Well, for God's sake, just take care that you don't get caught. You don't want to come back in here do you? You get caught again and you'll get an enormous sentence, won't you? Well, won't you?'

What was becoming of me? This wasn't what I should be saying. I knew that. I should have been telling him about the evil of his ways, counselling virtue and hard work but there I was, committed to him getting away with it. He hadn't talked me into this, there hadn't been any effort to seduce me onto the Dark Side but I had been listening to lots of stories, lots of accounts of criminal adventure all told from an intensely personal point of view. When there's a villain in a film: *The Italian Job*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Rififi* or in a novel like *Day Of The Jackal* isn't

there always a part of us that wants the bad guy to get away with it? When a crime narrative streams out from the gangster's point of view or there is a first person account from a hit man or a pirate, don't you just want the respectable world to crumble, the cops to fail? Perhaps it's just me, perhaps I'm easily led. Perhaps narrative is more powerful than morality.

From where I was, and am, sitting inside the Leviathan of state education, crime can look a lot like freedom. In crime there is no admin, no report writing, tax-declaring, no bureaucracy to serve. On the other hand there is prison. But, I had learned that prison is ordinary, had long passages of simply being ordinary life in its routines and perspectives. Everytime that I say to someone that I teach in a prison there is a reaction: is it dangerous, is it violent, nasty, sordid? I suppose that it can be at times but most of all it is ordinary and most prisoners are, mostly, ordinary. Or at least this is how it begins to seem.

Prison is a place to sit and listen, a place to abandon the truth and value the story, a place where the only judgements are writerly judgements.