

The Accused

by Ivor John

Soon after the barrister had left, two detention officers unlocked the door to the cell I had been in now for, it seemed several hours. They were chatting casually between themselves as one of them took some keys, on a long silver chain from his pocket. Speculating whether or not Tottenham beat Liverpool on Saturday. The younger of them, told me to put my hands in front of me, without interrupting their banter. Clipping a pair of handcuffs round my wrists, he pulled at them to check they were secure. On being satisfied he tapped me on the shoulder, indicating I should walk out of the cell. We walked towards a large blue painted metal door, flush with the wall. The other officer, much older, wearing a grey cardigan over his white uniform shirt, unlocked it.

The door accessed a concrete staircase, with breeze block walls. Bare, and windowless. No attempt to brighten it up, apart from stark strip lighting fixed to the high ceiling, which was also concrete. The only features I could see, were small green signs every so often with luminous arrows, another 'First Aid'. The staircase was too narrow for us to walk together. The older man went ahead, the other indicated for me to go next. He locked the door behind and caught us up.

Our footsteps echoed around us, and the older man's laboured breathing was amplified by the bare concrete walls. After three flights, we arrived, one behind the other, on a narrow landing with another locked blue metal door, a sign said 'Court 2' in red lettering. Another sign, with smaller writing instructed to 'ring bell and wait'. The younger guard pushed a door bell. The older man took off his cardigan, and hung it on a hook on the wall. Then he took his keys again and unlocked my handcuffs.

The door was opened from the inside by a woman wearing a grubby black gown. I followed her up a few wooden steps into a dock the court. She went quickly through a gate at the side, latching it behind her. The dock was made of solid dark wood which matched the panelling inside the court. But a partition of thick, clear perspex went up to just below the ceiling. I sat down on a hard wooden bench, at the back of the dock. The older guard, I had gathered his name was Derick, sat down beside me. The other, Neil, leaned casually against the perspex panel carrying on their conversation, as if I hadn't been there.

The woman who had opened the door announced loudly to the people sitting in the court, that Judge Brown was on his way. Several of them sat up, and tidied piles of books on benches in front of them. I could see the duty solicitor, who had visited me in the cell, downstairs. He took a small, scruffy wig from a briefcase and put it on his head, with very little care.

It was straight, but it didn't seem to bother him. Another barrister, at the other end of the bench, had a large bundle of files, piled in front of her, as well as her books.

A door opened behind the raised bench at the front of the court, and a small man walked in. Judge Brown, presumably. After a short conversation with a wigless man in a lounge suit, he asked the two lawyers if we were ready to bring in the jury. Clearly neither objected, and the usher, in her scruffy robe, opened a small gate in another dock to the side of the judge, larger and without a perspex screen, and went through a door at the back. She came back a moment later, followed by the jury. Twelve men and women, members of the public, law abiding, citizens, lined the dock. Some of them, older men, retired probably, wore jackets and ties. Others, more casually dressed, had apparently gone through their wardrobes, trying to find clothes which they imagined would be appropriate for a juror in court. They mostly looked confused or bored. Unlike the other people in the court, they were less comfortable with the environment. After a while, sitting there, they started to look around. Realising that I was the, accused, I could see them, peering across the court at me. Some of them openly, others, avoiding eye contact.

So far, I had scarcely been acknowledged by any of the players in this scenario. Now, I felt like some kind of exhibit, as they sat there, examining me. Trying to avoid looking arrogant, I looked back at them. Then I spotted her. The woman in the green jacket. She was several feet away, but I knew her. I was sure. It was Shirley, who I used to work with. I had liked her and I think she liked me. I watched her for a while, looking at her mannerisms. I was certain it was her. But surely she would have had to have told the court that she knew the accused? Disqualified herself. But obviously, she hadn't. Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her? Well I recognised her. Surely this must help me.