

# THOSE WASTED YEARS

The first few pages  
from the forthcoming book  
by John Dexter

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## PART ONE THE DAWN OF UNDERSTANDING

### Chapter 1

The first time I came into his cell he was twenty-three years old. The last time I saw him on that stretch he was ten years older, and so of course was I. Which of us had grown more in those ten years? He, kept in one place, learning only from a limited group of friends and enemies in a visceral soup of nastiness, or I, seeing my five grandchildren spark into life and run on into little characters as though in a play?

There is something enticing about the idea of imprisonment, because we are all of us prisoners. Diana was the prisoner of a marriage. Children are prisoners of education, priests prisoners of their church, clerks of their companies, babies of their mothers, frail old men of their bodies, philosophers of their ideas.

Convicts like Jim are despised by the rest of us just because their imprisonment is somehow different from ours. Yet convicts transported to new colonies grew societies from nothing. Their imprisonment turned into opportunity: release of energy that elsewhere would be stifled.

We want to hear about horror borne by others because we have avoided their predicament, and so can see our different imprisonment as somehow less terrible than theirs. We, imprisoned by our own inadequacies even though not by stone walls and iron bars, we like to revel in the juicy news that others are in pain; pain which must be worse for them than our own troubles are for us.



Brian is a visitor. Why? I have no idea. What a strange way to spend ten years. Hasn't he a family to love him? Why come once a week to the smell of the prison, to feel the scrofulous skin, to hear news of a suicide, to see the evidence of pain on someone's arm, the glazed look of the addict, the failure of the system to improve lives? Perhaps his own imprisonment was worse than mine. I did not have to suffer, as perhaps he did, the occasional outbursts of anger at close quarters from people he liked to think sometimes that he loved.

I at least could think of Sara and our son. I could do nothing for Sara or for the child. But I saw them in my dreams.

I said our son, but he was not mine. He was black or blackish, but Sara and I are white. I do not mind the idea of bringing up a black boy who is not mine. What does it matter? The only question must be, do I love him? Do I find in him some spark of life that warms my heart? Can I take him one day to the park to kick a football? It may be not the woman that I

dream of, but the child. The child I can help grow out of his imprisonment. The child who maybe can grow up without quite so much pain as I. The woman is of less consequence. She will love me or hate me, take me or reject me, as the mood takes her, but the child will be mine to love and I to be loved by him always.

I have another child. She is mine. Her mother was mine for a time. We worked with horses. There were fields and open spaces, smells and grass and hay. I worked with her father. I loved her. But then things changed. I had to find my own way, and my own way brought me here. Now she does not know me. She has another man. He is father to my child and I am childless again. Perhaps that is why I tried again with Sara, yet I know that won't last.

I think I have cancer in my neck. I feel my neck on the right side. There are lumps just below the jaw. Two lumps. I ask Brian. But he can't feel the lumps. Why not? I can feel them. Perhaps that's because I am inside and he is not. I need to see the doctor. I wrote out an app last month but there is a waiting list. Brian thinks I am imagining things. I can tell. I have a good sense for these things. My senses are always alert. I can spot things before most other people. That's what a life in custody does to you. I grew up in care from the age of five. I learnt to look after myself. You have to keep your eyes open. You have to fight for your rights.

I hate the Conservatives. Tony Blair is the best prime minister we ever had.

I tell people I am not on drugs. That is true sometimes. My cell was spun and they found some cannabis. Unusual, because I'm not often caught like that. I even make alcohol from festering stale bread and no-one has ever found that. I have never injected heroin. I hate heroin. You see what it does to people. If they can't get enough inside, then once they're released they go straight back but their bodies aren't used to it any more and they die.

So they found the cannabis. There was a crackdown (not a crack down). You have to have a joke or you'd go mad in here. The governor used to be able to punish druggies himself, but now that's all changed. Now there has to be a hearing with a district judge. So I asked Brian to be a character witness for me. When they marched me in the judge was sitting at the far end of the table, three screws on the left and Brian looking all nice and pretty on the right. He did speak up for me, as I knew he would. I got two days extra on my sentence. So did everyone else.

I'm in for nine. Armed robbery. But I never hurt anyone. I just jumped over the counter in a convenience store.

The doctor said I did not have cancer, just swollen glands. I don't believe him. I should be in hospital. It's not right how they treat you in here. I have as much right as anyone to the NHS. The NHS took over from the prison medical system here last year. It doesn't make any difference. It's the same people. But I do have one good thing going for me. There's a mental health nurse. I see her once a week when she's here. She listens to me. I have OCD and depression. Sometimes they give me medication, but I don't take it. I don't take pills. I don't trust medical people.

I've spent some time on the island. It's strange, going on the ferry. You can't see out easily, especially when it's dark. Then you're bumping onto the ferry and off over the water. My troubles all started on the island. Now they've brought me back here. I shouldn't be here by rights. It's a liberty. They arrested me on suspicion, and shipped me up to the midlands. The jails are all full and they're turning people away. It'll all blow off by Christmas. They're reducing the staff. Lots of the old officers are leaving, because it's getting more violent.

My trouble is I've nowhere to live. They're trying to get me some help, I'll say that for them. There was a woman from a support group here the other day. There's a scheme to get

you fixed up with a loan so you can get private rented accommodation. I'd like to live away from my old enemies, away from my old associates. Perhaps where I was with the horses.

My solicitor is supposed to be opposing the custody. I was recalled because I got caught up in a fight with some drug dealers away from my area. They arrested me along with the others. Then they had to bail me because they couldn't get a fax through to the Home Office that evening. I went back to the hostel. The next day Brian and Melody came round. We went to the job centre. We went into Waterstones to look at a map, to see if I could cycle to a labouring job. The next day the police came round before breakfast and took me off to the midlands. I wanted to go back to where I knew, Wendy and Brian. But they wouldn't. I think they're fed up with me for getting caught again, after they'd tried to help me sort myself out.

They found a bloke hanged on fathers' day. He had killed his son.