

ON THE ISLAND

It may sound strange to you but once upon a time I had a reasonably contented life as a chartered accountant in Sunningdale, Surrey. I lived in a detached, four bedroom house with my wife, Angela, and our two daughters, Chloe and Petula. One night, for no explicable reason, my front door was kicked in at around three'o'clock in the morning by several armed men and I was confronted by a burly Scotsman with a beard and a rather brusque manner about him who identified himself as a police officer. It was at this moment that I was told I was under arrest for reasons which, he claimed, would later become apparent. As it turned out, everything subsequent to that night was the start of my new life, my life out here on the island.

I suppose in some ways it's very ironic, given that I still think of myself as a fairly staunch Tory, especially when it comes to law and order matters. I can only really put this down to an extreme case of cognitive dissonance. The reality, however, is that after being arrested, I was handcuffed, placed in an unmarked car and driven to a police station where I was detained for over a day without any adequate explanation other than that "enquiries were ongoing." Of course, I requested to speak to my solicitor – a chap I knew from the Rotary Club whose sister also happened to be good friends with my wife – but I was told on more than half-a-dozen occasions that he was unreachable. I also made several strenuous demands for a phone call so I could speak to my wife but was repeatedly told by a police sergeant that the station's phone line was out of service.

Naturally, I became extremely agitated about what appeared, in my mind, to be pure prevarication but the strategy – which, I might add, was a very successful one – was probably designed to render me both bewildered and exhausted. Eventually, I woke up, still handcuffed and wearing an orange jumpsuit, in the back of a twin engine Cessna flying over a murky-looking sea. Admittedly, that such a thing could even happen would have seemed completely impossible to me in my old life but I've since learned that it actually happens far more than you might think.

Like every prisoner, my first introduction to life on the island was through the Admission & Orientation Department which is run by Sister Beverly. As you know, Sister Beverly is probably one of the kindest and most well-adjusted of the PO's on the island. I think her quaint, motherly qualities also serve her very well in this role. Nevertheless, I did try to stress to her that I thought there'd been some mistake: some miscarriage of justice or breach of human rights, if you will.

“Don't worry yourself, pet,” she said to me as she began measuring my chest and waist with a tape measure, “These things have a way of sorting themselves out.”

“No, I don't think you understand,” I told her, “I know my rights and, besides, I need to be back in Surrey. I've got a very important meeting with a client on Monday. You can't do this! It's not on, you know!”

“Oh it'll be fine, pet,” she replied patting my shoulder, “You'll be back in plenty of time for your meeting.”

That was about twelve years ago although it's rather difficult to judge the passing of time here especially as, for us prisoners, watches, diaries or calendars are strictly prohibited. Funnily enough, in Dr Batholomew's physics lessons at boarding school I could never get my head around what Einstein meant by time being relative but once you've settled in here you understand it perfectly well.

After I'd been given my grey regulation prison clothing, I was taken by two prison officers who marched me off down a corridor to one of the wings where new inmates are moved when they first arrive. It was a very spartan cell with mouldy walls, two bunk beds, a small sink and a bucket. It was on that day I also encountered my first cellmate, a man called Reg Stanley, who I later discovered was a sociopathic, cannibalistic killer from Bromley in South London. Apparently, his modus operandi was that he would mutilate the bodies of his victims and then, after disembowelling them, feast on their internal organs. I actually found him a perfectly amenable fellow and we used to joke sometimes, saying he was “a man after my own heart.” Sadly, Reg passed away a year or so ago. Bowel cancer. A terrible business really but very ironic in many ways, as I'm sure you'll appreciate.

As with most inmates, my first few weeks here were very traumatic. I slipped into total depression, believing any positive resolution of my circumstances to be quite impossible but eventually I gave up on hoping for release and just resigned myself to my incarceration which, paradoxically, cheered me up no end. As Reg pointed out to me later, freedom, just like time, is very much a relative concept and, in many cases, also highly overrated (especially amongst the rather self-righteous civil liberties brigade.) Nowadays, I'd argue that there's a lot to be said for a regimented lifestyle and, besides, routine has always played a fairly important role in my life. Of course, you still have to keep both physically and mentally active. I used to play a lot of golf in my previous life but here on the island I rely mainly on press-ups, sit-ups and an occasional jog around the prison yard. Likewise, to keep mentally alert Reg lent me a couple of books containing Sudoku puzzles. He used to say if he didn't do a couple of puzzles every day he'd go completely insane. Now he's passed away, I prefer to occupy my time doing the mental accounts of fictitious companies, calculating their tax liabilities, depreciation on assets and so forth.

I think it was at the end of my second or third week that I was summoned to see Dr Daley, the prison's chief medical officer and consultant psychiatrist, as he was interested in seeing how I was settling in. This was before I had given up all hope, you understand, so, as you might imagine, it was quite a fraught meeting.

“But I'm telling you, I'm bloody innocent!” I kept yelling as he took out a stethoscope and asked me to breathe deeply.

“Yes, of course, you are,” he said in a calming voice, “Everyone's here is innocent, you understand. Even Reg and he's murdered rather a lot of people.”

I didn't find his response at all comforting at the time but over the years I suppose I've warmed to Dr Daley's rather dry sense of humour. I then asked Dr Daley how long I would be detained on the island and he asked me to sit down and explained to me that everyone on the island was incarcerated for the term of their natural life. He further pointed out that, as a doctor, he found this phrase somewhat baffling since all

life was, by definition, natural although he did concede he was nit-picking slightly. (On that occasion, I wasn't particularly interested in any quasi-philosophical discussion on the matter but during subsequent meetings we've had many a good chinwag about ethics, metaphysics, theories of mind, psychology, parapsychology, anthropology, history of art and, of course, stoicism.)

He also disclosed to me that he had actually signed a contract for life to work as the island's chief medical officer and, due to the need for complete secrecy about the existence of this institution, had also made a solemn promise never to leave. At the time, I could scarcely believe it, telling him that such an agreement was completely preposterous and probably unlawful – or at least a restriction of trade, citing *Mitchell v Reynolds* (1711) – but his answer was that, in his experience, there was a genuine scarcity of jobs for life in the medical profession.

Still seeking to redress what I perceived as an injustice, I then asked the doctor if I could possibly write letters whilst I was on the island, telling him that I intended to write to my wife, my solicitors and the European Court of Human Rights regarding my situation. He agreed that this would be very therapeutic for me but then confessed that the island had no postal service as such. (It's still something which is quite a bone of contention among inmates.)

“It could still be quite cathartic for you though,” he said, “You know, I'm really interested in alternative therapies. These days I believe there's far too much reliance on pharmacology.”

I think I might have asked him at this point if he was quite sane as I remember him chuckling and pointing to a sign above the door that read: “You don't have to be mad to work here but it helps.” Then – and I'm still rather ashamed to admit this – I became quite violent and tried to strangle Dr Daley and he had to call a nurse to administer some anti-psychotic medication. We laugh about it now but I imagine at the time the experience was quite unnerving for him.

Unfortunately, the incident with Dr Daley led to a visit from another inmate by the name of Billy Bonds who in time you'll no doubt meet. Bill effectively acts as a sort of unofficial enforcer for the prison, handing out the odd punishment beating here and there which, generally speaking, the authorities turn a bit of a blind eye to. He's very adept in this role and the wide gap in my smile is a testament to this fact. I must admit on that score I did not enjoy our first encounter. That said, if you stay on his good side he can be a perfectly good egg and is extremely knowledgeable about the art of pugilism. Of course, you have to be aware of the need for complete harmony in an environment like this. Even small disputes can really fester amongst men who spend such long amounts of time together in close proximity. In this sense, Bill really has everyone's best interests at heart and, as you'll discover in time, he is not a man without warmth or generosity of spirit.

One final word about the governor of the prison, Mr Humphreys. You'll spot easily him as he tends to wear spectacles, a bow tie and yellow waistcoat, I can't say I have a lot of time for him really as I find his manner very pompous. I should warn you that he is extremely verbose, suffering from some form of verbal dysentery and is completely incontinent with his use of adjectives and adverbs. I've been summoned to appear before him on a couple of occasions, I suspect simply because he wanted to someone to talk to, and was subjected a logorrhoeic monologue about the value of corporal punishment. In this regard, I think he sees himself as an old-style Victorian crusader in the mould of say William Gladstone or Charles Booth and perhaps this is why he and Billy Bonds appear to see eye to eye on so many matters. I know he is a huge fan of Russian literature – Dostoevsky, Chekhov and the like – but, personally, I've always suspected him of being something of a dilettante. He spends a great deal of his time in his study reading but once a year he likes to deliver a lecture to the inmates in the refectory. Last year's theme was ecology and its implications for horticulture in tropical climates. Most of us agreed it was all a bit of a waste of time as we have no garden here and, although largely temperate, it can get jolly chilly in the winter particularly as we have no central heating on the island.

I appreciate at this stage you're probably rather concerned about your family and the possible trauma that might be experiencing. I would urge not to worry too much. In time, they will probably forget and move on. That may seem far from an ideal state of affairs to you now but you have to appreciate that they also to have get on with their lives. Also, forgetting is really one of the great consolations in life. In this regard, perhaps you could ask Dr Daley if he would kind of enough to lend you his copy of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy which I found very helpful in coming to terms with my fate. Forgetting, you see, is a great solace. Imagine for a moment a life without the capacity to forget and I'm assure you would agree that this really would a life sentence, the most inhuman punishment known to man.