

Contents

Prologue	1
1. The House of Politicals	17
2. The House of Reformation	45
3. The Field	75
4. The House of Correction	97
5. The House of Pain	107
6. The House of Exotica	135
7. The Interstices	157
8. The House of Love	183
9. The House of Redemption	203
10. The House of Trust	239
11. The Great Hall	265
Epilogue	275

Prologue

Prison is a whispered horror; a reason offered for mysterious disappearances; a bugbear used to threaten misbehaving children. No-one grows up without a deeply ingrained dread of 'going to Prison': the force of that capital letter is like a knock on the door in the middle of the night. The place was born centuries ago, but the walls and keeps, the towers and ravenous dungeons built by ancient despots have been found expedient by all manner of later regimes. Each generation has added its own contribution to that ever growing penitential city. Prison cannot be found on the map, though there is an area, a wide plateau of empty heath, that attracts no tourists. Pilots learn that the airspace above this land does not exist. Prison is an open secret, frankly acknowledged by none but understood by all. It is a dark reassurance to those who crave order and stability, an insult to those offended by that which is furtive, unaccountable, unlit.

Edwin Norris squinted at the road ahead, which shimmered in the heat. As the taxi climbed onto the heath, hundreds of buildings began to emerge from the hallucinatory flood, ancient spires and towers breaking the ranks of more prosaic tiled roofs. In the centre of his view, a knot of trees on a hill softened the jagged skyline. Looming over the shoulder of the rise was a pitched roof whose distance he could not judge clearly but which must have covered a very large building indeed. The structures below the roofs did not come into full view, as the next thing to appear was a drab stone wall. This extended so far to the left and right that he could not tell whether it had reached a corner or simply stretched to the limits of his vision. As they approached, the city he had glimpsed hunkered down behind its cordon.

Prison

They were heading for a squat tower that, he presumed, contained the South Gate: his point of entry into the mysterious world of Prison. The road opened out to form a small yard in front of the tower. The taxi driver swung his vehicle around to face away from it before stopping. Norris began to sweat as soon as he stepped out. The landscape round about had obviously suffered in the ongoing heat wave: the grass and heather were bleached and withered.

‘I’ll call when I need a ride back,’ he told the driver.

‘Yeah, sure,’ replied the man without much conviction.

The moment Norris had handed over his money, the taxi sped off, leaving him in a cloud of dust. At the railway station in the nearest town, it had been difficult to find a driver who would admit to knowing that this place even existed, or if it did that it was anywhere nearby. It had taken him almost an hour to locate someone prepared to take his money. Even then, it was only the promise of a large tip that had induced the man to let him into his car, to set off up the road signposted ‘Works unit only’ which had brought them to the gate. Dusting down his suit, he turned towards the source of the drivers’ aversion.

Norris was a big man, not far short of two metres tall, yet the wall was over three times his height. It was topped with broken glass. The barbican that interrupted it enclosed an arch large enough to let vehicles through but which was plugged with a rust-stained iron gate. Within this a wicket opened onto a void. Above the main aperture there was a series of five arched windows. The lower panel of each one was tipped inwards a short distance. A dark male face lingered for a moment at the rightmost one, eyeing him up, then retreated into the room beyond.

He walked up to the wicket and stepped through. Enough daylight followed him to reveal that the inner end of the arch was also blocked off with a matching iron gate, this one without any subsidiary opening. He waited for a moment in that gloomy cavity, absorbing its refreshing coolness. Half way along the wall to his left, a doorway gave onto a dimly lit spiral staircase leading up. A notice board on a wooden stand had been placed

nearby. This bore an arrow pointing towards the opening over the words 'Visitor's Centre'. Norris went up. He emerged into an office that filled the upper part of the tower.

The visitors' centre was bright with sunlight, the air in it baked dry. It contained two desks – one to his left facing the windows, one directly opposite him – and a shabby sofa to his right. There was a faded rug on the stone floor. On a filing cabinet in the corner between the two desks, an electric fan struggled against the heat. A two bar electric fire, its flex wound around it, was tucked into the other corner. There was no sign of the models, maps, posters and guidebooks that such places usually offered. A young blonde woman wearing a plain white blouse sat at the desk to his left. She looked up from a style magazine as he came in and offered him a half-smile. At the other desk, the man he had seen at the window was busy with some paperwork. The woman spoke: 'Can I help you?'

'Edwin Norris. I have an appointment, though I'm afraid I'm a bit late. Trouble finding a taxi.'

'That's alright, Mr Norris. From the *Trumpet* isn't it? Take a seat and someone will be along soon to give you the tour.'

She went back to her reading without using her phone or doing anything obvious to let anyone know that he had arrived. He sat down on the sofa and prepared for a long wait. Just to the left of the woman's desk, as he looked at it, he noticed a white-painted wooden door. He tried to position himself with what he hoped was an insouciant charm. He had been an enthusiastic, if not particularly talented, sports player at school. Though distinctly out of condition now, he still imagined that he presented an impressive bulk. His generous blond fringe hid the fact that his hairline had started to recede. He had a bag of peppermints in his jacket pocket. He took it out, untwisted the top and got up to offer the sweets to the woman. Her expression brightened but she glanced at the supervisor before deciding. He gave the slightest shake of the head and she replied: 'No, thank you.'

Prison

Norris returned to his seat, took a mint for himself and replaced the bag.

‘Do you have a map of this place I can take with me?’ he asked, his words distorted by the sugary pebble in his mouth.

‘Oh no, the availability of maps might aid escape attempts,’ she said primly. The man at the other desk shook his head without looking up and rounded the gesture off with an affected sigh. Norris ignored him, indulging a flippant mood while he waited for his real investigation to begin.

‘So, what’s it like working in Prison? Do you have a lot of fun?’

The supervisor cut in: ‘Gaoler Tudge will answer all your questions.’

A few minutes later the white door opened and a stocky man with a fat neck walked in. He looked about fifty. He wore a dark blue uniform and heavy boots. The jacket was done up with a row of brass buttons. Norris had been hoping the uniform would include a military style cap. He had wanted the gaolers to wear preposterous headgear, like the officers of some posturing tyrant’s army, but he was disappointed: the man’s unruly mop of greying brown hair was uncovered. He nodded briefly to each of his colleagues then turned to the visitor.

‘You the reporter?’ he asked in a nasal and contemptuous tone.

Norris stood up. He was nearly a head taller than Tudge, who scowled up at him with dark, suspicious eyes. Apart from florid patches on his nose and ears, his face was puffy and grey. His hair was speckled with dandruff, as were the brocade-trimmed epaulettes on his jacket shoulders. Norris introduced himself and offered his hand. After a moment of hesitation Tudge took it, briefly.

‘This way,’ he said and ushered him through the door so briskly that he had no time to say anything more to the staff of the visitors’ centre. The door led to a short passage cut through the rear wall of the gate tower. From there, a metal footbridge stretched the thirty metres or so to another door in the side of four-storey brick blockhouse. A parade of similar buildings

stretched away to the right, their line meeting the line of the wall in the distance. To the left, however, was a black citadel, an almost windowless keep, obviously centuries old, which must have once stood alone on the heath. Beyond it was ranged a series of sheds and warehouses as characterless as the blockhouses, making the tower stand out like a rotten tooth. High walls ran to the outer walls from each end of the blockhouse ahead, enclosing the canyon formed by the two buildings. The ground below them was untended and overgrown; the air filled with the chirruping of grasshoppers. They crossed the gangway and entered the blockhouse.

The internal layout of the building soon had him confused. Their route was continually interrupted by unexpected turns and dog-legs, or ascents and descents on flights of stairs that did not seem long enough to reach from one storey to another. Tudge set a fast pace for such a heavy man but Norris was reluctant to ask him to slow down, afraid it would make him seem somehow lazy or weak. They passed doors marked with half-comprehensible signs like 'HoPol Requisitions', 'HoPol Payroll' and 'HoPol Zone 4 Deputy Assistant Governor'. They encountered several men and a few women in blue uniforms, some of whom Tudge exchanged brief greetings with. Norris realised at one point that the epaulettes on all their jackets were not real but just printed onto the fabric. He had to suppress a snigger.

After a few minutes they emerged onto a catwalk that crossed the narrow fissure between the blockhouse and the citadel that he had seen earlier. Although they had actually travelled hardly any distance from the South Gate, they had somehow made it to the top floor of the blockhouse, which put them just below the roof of the old keep. He had time for a glance to left and right. To the one side lay the open ground behind the wall, beyond which the parched heath stretched away into haze. On the other: a glimpse of water almost directly below; a sense of receding rows of uniform blocks; something more jagged beyond them; beyond that, the high roof he had seen earlier.

‘This is what you’ve come to see,’ said Tudge as he led the way into the dark granite. They went down spiral stairs, passing several landings on the way. Norris suspected that they had moved below ground. The stairs ended in a windowless room about four metres by six. A solid metal door stood opposite. Tudge beckoned him in with an expansive sweep of his arm that began high, indicating the levels above, and finished by swooping ominously towards the floor.

‘Welcome to my office,’ he said, grinning widely.

Norris looked around, slightly disconcerted by the gaoler’s sudden show of bonhomie. His smile seemed forced. His office was plain but, apart from the lack of a window, comfortable. As well as the inevitable desk, computer and filing cabinet, it offered a coffee machine, a sofa just like the one from the visitor’s centre, a television set and an occasional table with some pornographic magazines on it. Clearly Tudge’s work involved periods of tedium.

‘Now what would you like to know?’ asked the gaoler.

Norris took out a notebook and fountain pen. Tudge seemed to sneer at this but he was not going to be side-tracked into an argument about his old-fashioned taste in writing tools.

‘In essence, the readers of my newspaper, like all taxpayers, want to know what their money is spent on. Yet the government won’t even officially admit that Prison exists, let alone provide accounts.’

‘I can’t help with that.’

‘Of course, of course. But our readers also believe that penal justice, to be effective, needs to be enacted with a certain standard of decency. The aim is reform, not retribution. So, although I certainly want to hear your own story,’ he said, trying to be ingratiating, ‘I’d like to look around the cells first. You know, get a feel for the conditions the prisoners are kept in.’

‘No problem. I think we do good work here.’

Now that he was on his own bit of territory, Tudge seemed to have relaxed a little. He picked up a bunch of keys

and a heavy-duty torch from his desk. He punched a code into a numeric keypad next to the steel door. This swung back to reveal a rough hewn passage through solid rock. The walls glistened with damp. The gaoler had already taken several paces into the corridor before turning to wait for his guest.

Norris stepped uncertainly into the opening. The moist air smelt infected. He curled his lip in annoyance: a drop of water from the ceiling had smeared the name 'Tudge' in his notebook. The other man moved on, looking back over his shoulder to beckon him forward. It was refreshing to see someone who took a real pride in their work, Norris thought sardonically. As the gaoler conducted him down the dank passageway that formed the main thoroughfare of his domain, he began to describe his charges with a proprietor's enthusiasm.

'Now here we have Count Beaufort, noted connoisseur of decadence and depravity. When he arrived I kept him manacled hand and foot, lashed his back until it was raw and made him eat off the floor, to see how much he liked it.' Tudge turned to him and shrugged. 'Turned out the little dribble-pisser did like it, so I treat him just like any other prisoner now.'

Norris was shocked by his frankness but managed to conceal it. He remembered the startled, sallow face that had filled the newspapers a few years previously; remembered the leader writers crowing over the disgrace of the junior minister who clung to an aristocratic title that had been abolished a generation before. So this was the 'good work' Tudge had spoken of? He placed his hand against the heavy wood door.

'Can you open this? I'd like to meet some of your inmates.'

'All in good time. I think you should get an overview first.'

Norris was unhappy about the other man setting the agenda but decided to keep his peace for the moment. They moved on, following a row of low power bulbs that dangled from a cable strung along the ceiling. They passed two unlit side passages before the gaoler gestured towards a tiny grille that marked the existence of another dismal cell.

Prison

‘Skeffington Fanshawe. A pamphleteer. Alone now, though he was originally incarcerated with his partner in crime. They had that peculiar kind of friendship which was based on mutual loathing.’

He was not sure what Tudge was talking about, but while he struggled to work out his meaning, the gaoler had moved on and had been continuing his narrative.

‘...a tragi-comic fellow, this, always spouting communitarian theories.’

‘Why is he imprisoned?’

The gaoler regarded him with dismay. ‘Because he was always spouting communitarian theories.’

They carried on walking. The light was fading. Ahead of them, he could see that the bulbs ran out before the passage ended. For the first time, Tudge showed an interest in his visitor. ‘Of course it’s not really my place to question things, but I was wondering why a man like yourself would have such an interest in our work?’

Norris was happy to explain. ‘It started a couple of months ago when I was getting some quotes from the crowd outside a film premiere. There was a girl there who looked very glum next to her friends. She told me that, the week before, some men had taken her stepfather away. She was afraid they had taken him “off to Prison”. I’d heard all the usual stories, of course, but it was the first time I’d knowingly met anyone directly involved. It made me go off and look into it. When I found out how little was really known, I realised there was an opportunity for me to do some serious investigation.’

‘Well you’re quite the pioneer. We don’t usually get much interest from the media.’

Before he could wonder about this, Norris caught the undertone of Tudge’s original question. ‘A man like myself?’

‘You don’t really need to work, do you? You inherited money when your parents died.’

He was too offended by these blunt personal references to wonder why Tudge was so well informed about him. ‘I’m not

sure it's any of your business, but do you think I should be some kind of dilettante? Frittering my life away in self-indulgence? Giving nothing back to Society?'

Tudge muttered to himself. Norris thought he heard the words 'showbiz gossip' and felt himself flush. 'I suppose not,' the gaoler said out loud, turning away. He gestured towards the next door. 'Now in here we have the Anarchist. He's been here so long that, to be frank, we've forgotten his name. So has he, in fact. Whoever he was, he must have been a right bad seed, because there are these two extra locks on his door, see?'

Norris nodded in agreement. He did see. He saw that conditions in Prison did not so much fall short of decent standards as exist without reference to them. And this hidden world occupied an area as large as a fair-sized city. The thought gave him a sharp sensation of vertigo, as if the ground in front of him had suddenly fallen away and left him at a cliff edge before a yawning void. He hoped his report would make a difference. But there was another feeling exciting him too: to his senses, the foetid stench of this dungeon was the smell of the scoop that would make his name as an investigative journalist.

At the place where the bulbs ran out, the gaoler switched on his torch. He led Norris down a narrow and uneven flight of stairs. The corridor terminated in a heavy steel door blotched with rust.

'Now this last cell is one I've given special attention to. We're next to the service canal here. I call it the Water Garden – my little joke.'

He opened the door and let Norris stand at the threshold to examine the room beyond. He guessed that the 'service canal' meant the water he had seen earlier. The walls were not so much dripping as leaking. The only natural illumination came from a small skylight at the very top of the opposite wall, a long way up. He felt a firm shove in his back.

'In you go!'

For a moment the thoughts in his mind lost their coherence. Only as the door thudded shut did he come to his senses and realise that a trap had been sprung. Now that he was

Prison

caught in it, he realised how obvious it had been. Norris was too sophisticated to drum his fists on the door and demand to be let out. Instead, he instinctively reached for his mobile phone. However, under that historic weight of stone there could be no signal.

A document had been pushed under the door. There was a peephole in the steel which snapped open then, a black void in which he inferred rather than saw a human eye. Gaoler Tudge was talking to him. ‘These are your confinement papers. You have a pen. Read them and sign where marked. I’ll pick them up later. I guess Society doesn’t appreciate what you’re giving back to it.’

The aperture in the door snapped shut and Norris was alone.

*

Daylight was fading when the hole in the door of Edwin Norris’ cell opened again. He had pushed the papers back under the cell door without even looking at them. Now Tudge was thumping the door with his fist.

‘These papers aren’t signed. Are you trying to bugger me about, Norris?’ he roared.

‘I’m not about to consent to my own imprisonment. I’ve done nothing wrong. And please call me Edwin – I bear no personal grudge.’ He had decided to adopt a strategy of polite non-cooperation as a first resort. Tudge was scornful.

‘I don’t fraternise with the inmates, Norris. Do you think I want to mix with the likes of you? Would you be in here if you’d done nothing wrong? I’ll teach you not to bugger me about.’

He began a reply along the line that he was within his rights but the peephole had snapped shut.

In the hours of his confinement, Edwin had had plenty of time to become familiar with the geography of his cell. Measured by his own paces, the floor was about four metres by three. Looking up, the ceiling was roughly three times his

height. All in all, it was more like a pit than a room. The door was in the middle of one of the long sides, the window set at the top of the wall opposite. This opening allowed some light in but the wall was too thick to let him see anything outside from his lowly position. As well as the peephole, the door contained a larger hatch near the bottom. Neither could be opened from inside. He assumed the hatch was for meals, though he had not been given any. At one of the narrow ends of the room was a low, short and thin bench with a meagre foam rubber mattress on it. A wide hole in the floor had been excavated in one of the opposite corners. The walls themselves seemed to have been cut into the foundations of the tower. They were made of irregular stones – rubble probably – fixed in concrete. All of them were damp but beneath the window a ceaseless succession of drops swelled to the point that they broke free and dribbled to the floor. To supplement this steady seepage from the canal, every time a barge passed by, the bow wave overflowed the base of the window and flooded the floor of the cell. This had happened four times already that day. At least he had a flush toilet, he had thought.

Night fell. The top half of his cell was illuminated with a cold glimmer of moonlight but Edwin remained in a literal pit of gloom. He had been hoping that he could get himself released that day but now he accepted that he really was going to be confined overnight. This meant that he would eventually need to do more than urinate into the hole in the corner. He decided to put that moment off until the morning, scrunched himself up on the bench and settled down to sleep.

He was woken by the clatter of the door being unlocked and opened. It was still night. He looked up into the blinding light of two torches being shone straight at him. As he lifted his hands to shield his eyes, he felt a kick in the stomach. His automatic convulsion made him tumble off of the bench. The torches were put down where he had been lying and hands began to wrestle his jacket off. Roaring with anger, Edwin forced himself onto his feet and tried to stand upright but he was weighed down by someone who had wrapped one arm around his torso, pinning his left arm against his side, and their other

arm around his neck. He could feel warm breath on his left ear and cheek. He reached his free arm around and jabbed at his attacker's head. He was rewarded with an exclamation of 'My fucking eye!' but with no relaxation of the grip on his body.

'Crack his head on the wall, Mitchum, you tosser.' The speaker was Tudge.

Edwin felt the arm around his neck first tighten then force him forward to crunch his face into the cell wall, the jagged stone gouging his skin in several places. A moment later a wild pain exploded between his legs. Eyes filling with tears and blood, he collapsed to the floor where he took another boot in the solar plexus. He was rapidly stripped naked. As he got his breath back, he heard the two men discussing their booty.

'This is a really class weave,' said Mitchum. 'Can't we leave this off the list as well?'

'Lemon-face won't believe he came here naked. Just put down "suit" and I'll substitute something from the charity shop.'

'You know all the tricks Mister Tudge.'

The two men's faces were monstrous in the torchlight: Tudge bulbous and heavy, almost melting, Mitchum thin and ratty. Mitchum helped himself to a mint. Tudge was trying on the jacket of Edwin's suit. He lifted his face to the ceiling. It was the only way he could do the jacket up: when his head was level, his sagging chin completely covered the collar. He noticed Edwin looking, threw over a clip-board with papers and a ball-point pen attached.

'Can't issue your prison clothes unless you sign your confinement papers,' he said, then added, with heavy emphasis, 'Can't authorise any *meals* either.'

Defeated, Edwin signed. Tudge took his clip-board back then emptied a jumble of clothes from a plain carrier bag onto the bench. The two men began stuffing Norris' own clothes and possessions into the bag. Edwin sat on the edge of the bench and felt his face. His hand came away smeared with blood. He noticed an absence of movement. Tudge and Mitchum had finished their packing. Now the gaoler had his address book in

one hand and was leafing through it with interest. He flicked the pages steadily, quickly scanning each spread. In his other hand he held Edwin's mobile phone. Immediately fearful for all the people he knew, dreading the thought that others would be sucked in after him, he pushed himself upright, snatched the phone and little leather-bound book from the gaoler's podgy fingers, dashed across the cell and dropped them into the hole in the corner. They disappeared with an obscene slurp.

For a second time, his balls were squashed by a leather-shod foot. He slumped to his knees, reaching forward with both hands to steady himself. His right hand found only emptiness. As he teetered over the orifice of the latrine a heavy hand took a tight grip on his hair and pushed his head down. He felt a leg wedge itself between his own legs, trapping him.

'That's it Norris, you fucking get them back. Mitchum: get some light over here.'

The smell rising from the pit made him retch. The illumination revealed a slimy shaft descending to the featureless dark of a liquid surface about a metre below.

'Come on!' Shouted Tudge, forcing his head further down. He stretched his arm out as far as it would go but the water was just out of reach.

'I think they're gone, Mister Tudge,' said Mitchum quietly.

Edwin felt his head pulled up by the hair and Tudge punched his face where it had already been bloodied against the wall. He heard footsteps, the crackle of thin plastic, the sound of a man spitting. He felt wetness on his scalp. The two men left without saying anything more. After the door slammed shut, he was left in darkness again.

In the morning he felt his face. The bleeding had stopped but there were half a dozen large, rough scabs on his right cheek and forehead. Not thinking about the state of the canal water, he rinsed his wounds using the sluice from the first passing barge. He looked through the clothes he had been given. A pair of grey canvas slacks with an elasticated waistband. A kind of long-sleeved jerkin for a top, light blue, with a row of buttons that

Prison

reached half way down the chest. Edwin frowned as he examined this: it seemed familiar. Then it came to him: the man Mitchum had been wearing a top like this, only green, whatever that implied. Two pairs of boxer shorts: one canary yellow, the other with blue and green stripes. Black canvas shoes, lace-up but without laces and a size too large. He dressed.

When it had been light for a couple of hours, the eyehole in the door slid open. Tudge ordered him to sit on the bench. When he had done so, the hatch towards the bottom the door opened and a tray was put through. This had attachments that hooked over the bottom of the opening. The hatch closed, locking the tray in place. Tudge told him that he would collect it in half an hour.

Edwin had to get down on his knees to see what he had been given. There were two slices of white bread, a banana with a black-spotted skin, a mug of water, and a pack of five travel tissues. When he took the bread he discovered a note and a sachet containing an antiseptic wipe between the slices. The note was terse: ‘Sorry about the face. Advice – don’t antagonise Tudge, he’s a right sadist. Don’t even talk to him – he’ll think you’re a time-waster. Hang on for a month – things should improve.’

A month? After which, things would merely ‘improve’? It began to dawn on him that his treatment was not some pointed, sadistic warning designed to give him a good scare. He was incarcerated for real. Maybe for good. Now he wanted to scream and plead and hammer on the door but his fear and hatred of Tudge stopped him. He curled up on his meagre bunk and lay there numb with fear.

There was a second delivery later that day: a bowl of thin noodle soup, a wooden spoon, more bread. That was how it went every day: bread and nearly rotten fruit for breakfast, bread and soup for dinner. The tissues arrived every three days: not nearly often enough, in other words. Once, fed up of folding the paper to tiny patches, he got down on his hands and knees by the hatch when his dinner tray was being collected and asked

for more. Tudge crouched down in the corridor outside and scowled at him. His jowls were quivering.

‘You’re a cheeky cunt, Norris.’

Then the gaoler jabbed his hand through the opening at Edwin’s face, drawing blood from his nose. The apple that came the following morning was alive with maggots. After that, he heeded Mitchum’s advice.

As the days passed, Edwin reproached himself ever more bitterly over how easily he had been trapped. For weeks he had badgered ministries and departments and offices for information. Maps, accounts, inventories, rosters, regulations, policy documents: he had demanded them all, always adopting in his calls and letters an attitude of righteous indignation. He could not have telegraphed his appetite to be the author of a damning expose more clearly. When he had finally been contacted by an anonymous official and offered a special interview and tour, he assumed his persistence and bravado had won through. What had he imagined he was going to do – close the place single-handedly? All the while, he had jealously kept his pet project secret from colleagues and friends. When he had called his editor the day before, he had told him that he was following up a rumour about a big international singing star entering the country incognito. No-one was going to beat him to the scoop; now no-one would know what had happened to him. He vacillated between self-pity and shame over the worry he would cause. What would people’s speculation be: accident, abduction, suicide? ‘Maybe he’s ended up in Prison,’ some might mutter under their breath, but would anyone dare to follow that thought up?

The hot summer faltered and the nights became cooler. Edwin marked time by the waxing and waning of the diffuse light from the window. No direct sunlight penetrated at any time of day. The cell filled with the miasma of his own waste, emanating from the hole in the corner. His clothes and growing beard became ever dirtier and itchier. He tried to keep fit by doing press ups and pacing the meagre area of his cell but his diet was too poor to sustain much effort. He lost weight and

Prison

began to develop a stoop. The pervasive damp seeped into his lungs, so that his breath wheezed in and out, and his sleep was continually interrupted by coughing fits. He thought about the prisoners in the other cells he had been shown and tried to imagine living the rest of his life just as he was then. As long as he could remember, he had prided himself in following a guiding principle of trying to take a positive view, no matter what – the universe might not owe him a living but he would always find a way to make something of his existence. Now for the first time he was on the brink of abandoning optimism. If it had not been for Mitchum's gnomonic message, he would have fallen into complete despair. However meagre the promised improvement turned out to be, it gave him something to look forward to. He counted the days.

On the morning of his thirty-first day of confinement, there was no rattling of the hatch, no meagre breakfast. Instead, the cell door swung open and Tudge stood there. The gaoler did not look happy.

'Your appraisal month is up,' he said. 'Unfortunately, you were missed. Take this and put it on.'

Tudge handed him an identity card in a plastic wallet with a clip for attaching it to clothing. The card featured a picture of him in the suit he had arrived in: when the photograph had been taken, he had no idea. It also bore the name 'E Norris' and a serial number: HoPol Z4-405637. Edwin was full of questions: 'Do you know who asked about me? What did they say? What do they know?'

'Don't know, don't care. All I know is that you've been transferred to a new cell and been granted half an hour's exercise per day and social rights. Starting now. Pick up your spare underwear and come with me.'

Edwin picked up the grubby boxer shorts and followed the glow of Tudge's torch back up the narrow stairs, his loose shoes slapping on the wet stone as he tried to keep up.