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In the early hours of Easter Monday 2009, 114 people were arrested near Nottingham to prevent a suspected protest from taking place.

Accused of conspiracy, the 114 were advised by solicitors to remain silent on details of the case in public and to answer 'no comment' to all police questions.

This booklet of recollections follows the thoughts of one of the arrestees. It examines the power and pitfalls of a 'no comment' stance in political and personal contexts, which stands in marked contrast to activists' reputation for 'speaking out'.

The stories piece together memories that explore the traumatic imposition of silence, from returning to a city full of memories, to childhood illness and adult role-play, to the police interview room. They are a highly personal attempt to work out when silence is appropriate, and the times when it might be better to speak up.

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This booklet takes its name from the excellent Anarchist Black Cross defendant's guide to arrest, which can be found online at www.ldmg.org.uk

No Comment



on the pros and cons of keeping mum

By Nor

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NO COMMENT

On the Pros and Cons of Keeping Mum.



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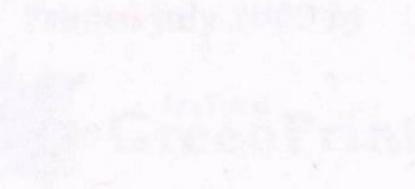
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CONTENTS

These stories are dedicated with love and solidarity

To the other 113

*To the city of Nottingham, which has taught me so much
And above all to the friends who made it safe for me to talk.*

Mr Nice is as devious as Mr Nasty is. He or she will offer you a cuppa, cigarettes, a blanket. It's the softly-softly approach. It's bollocks. "*No comment*".

Anarchist Black Cross

No Comment: The defendant's guide to arrest

"There is something subversive about this garden... a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently."

Margaret Atwood

The Handmaid's Tale

CONTENTS

In Custody

At Play

In Custody

Back Home

In Custody

At Play

In Custody

Back Home

Bad Sex

At Play

Bad Sex

At Play

Back Home

IN CUSTODY

Was Eleanor handcuffed? he said. It's the first question I remember. Yes - and compliant from the get-go, my man replied.

As the custody sergeant noted this down I smirked, but also felt proud. I thought that I would tell this story to Justin.

Compliance is my default mode of operation. I raised my hands higher than necessary, when he asked, and settled gracefully into the handcuffs. I stood up straight, I looked him in the eye - as if this scene were consensual. As if it were real. I knew how to carry myself, and looked upon him with faint disappointment when I realised that he did not. It would all seem less stupid if he would at least pretend to enjoy it. He blurted out my suspected crimes and entitlements so hastily they barely registered, and I leant in close to hear. His eyes were urgent, glowering and nervous. I knew his heart was beating faster than mine - or I know it now, now that I think about it. He stared through me, to avoid seeing me, to avoid tripping over his words. I took him through his training. The cheap uncomfortable handcuffs took some adjustment.

I knew that soon I'd need to piss. I always go before a scene. But like I said, this wasn't one I'd planned. And the last I saw of my arresting officer was there at the desk, both of us dwarfed by the custody sergeant, realising in the lighted reception area that we'd shared some midnight intimacy which must now end. He reported on my docility with such innocence I wanted to laugh. And I was handed over. He disappeared; a cog. I was shown to my cell.

AT PLAY

When I was lying there I moaned. Not moaned – made those painful sounds, those Stop! Stop! And don't ever stop! sounds, that there isn't a name for. Justin's eyes were closed; listening.

Afterwards, in the cool expanse of my monitor, he said in perfunctory serif letters. I needed release. Adding, Of course I really enjoyed the act of giving you pleasure. Odd that he used this word, I thought. It didn't seem to describe what he'd done. Pleasure. Wasn't it a violation, an attack, his relentless fingers? But of course it was pleasure. Of course I moaned.

Admitting that, though, would mean I owe him something. A sad disappointment settled over me – I thought this was the one place I could be selfish. I thought it was the one place I wouldn't have to be selfish. Where it would be given to me, whether or not I wanted it. I didn't like his introduction of the word Pleasure. It was too explicit. Like a disclosure, like a searchlight. I was being held accountable.

IN CUSTODY

When I was in the cell I looked around. I had almost chickened out; I almost hadn't asked that he open my bag again and give me my book. I hadn't felt like reading, then. It doesn't bear thinking about.

It is hard to write about a cell. It is an emptiness, a horribly enclosed emptiness. Can you believe, I spent those remaining night hours looking forward to my interview. I knew it would come. It was like an anticipated treat, a trip to the park.

In the meantime I sat on my gym-mat mattress, gazing up at the CCTV camera, and felt grateful for my middle class upbringing. I could do this; I'd had the training. I could behave myself convincingly and arrange my thoughts so as to keep myself sane. I could amuse myself, in my head. My private thoughts could allay the impact of the indisputable walls: above, below, right, left, front and behind. I could have a surreptitious wank, under my book. I could read.

BACK HOME

It's weeks since it all happened, now. I know now when it ended; I remember the almost imperceptible, almost orgasmic release of stepping into the fresh air and seeing daylight.

Afterwards it was like a party. We were beaten down and we loved one another. Someone brought samosas. I was washing up at the time, so I got the Psst, and the first hot pick. He might as well have been some maiden offering me her cornucopia, this samosa-bringer, the way he tilted the open box in towards me and grinned. That's how it felt. (I wonder, did they make 114 exactly?)

But this is about coming home. I should remember the sunshine and the camaraderie – and I do – but it is not enough. Something has lain itself down under my consciousness that I can't shake off, now that I am back in the real world. It's what prompted me to seek counselling, what prompted me to write it all down. It's over now and I am safe at home. So why have I been so fragile since my release, so close to sadness? What little hidden buttons have been pressed?

IN CUSTODY

Just as I had begun to attempt sleep, someone came and told me they needed my DNA. It was a kind gentle lady who came, and I followed her in my rolled-up trousers and knee socks like a groggy child. She told me it was 8am, but as there was no daylight in the network of low corridors I had no idea if this was true. There were more of the kind gentle ladies in the little room we went to, and they took all kinds of samples.

One of them giggled, We thought it was an April Fool's, when they said we've got over a hundred for you! as she prepared the swabs. I sat there and looked, at the least, unimpressed. I was too tired for this. Mostly I just stared at the floor. They were tired as well and kept fucking up the paperwork; by the time they'd done the swabs properly my mouth was dry and sore inside my cheek where they'd scraped at it repeatedly. I was sick of sitting there with my mouth open, inventing ways to pretend this situation was in any way ok. It's surprising how much effort it takes not to cry. But they were used to dealing with the beaten down and exhausted; they led me gently through everything. My fingerprints were next, and it was a man who took these. They didn't just want my fingerprints though, they wanted the whole of each hand. Each section was taken separately, pressed firmly by the man's palm over mine until they appeared on screen. The very surface of my skin resisted this humiliation and I was forced to stand there as he pressed harder and harder, joking – the fucker – about how it wasn't usually this difficult. When the picture on screen was complete I looked at it in dismay, and refused to sign where he asked me to.

As I was sat down and my irises thoroughly photographed, one of the kind gentle ladies continued chatting to me. No comment, no comment... then she asked if I was right or left handed. Without a thought, I answered. It would have been the easiest silence, the easiest lie, and I didn't take it! This is the most important, most intimate piece of information – and I had given it to them without the slightest hesitation. I hate them for having it, and even now I curse myself for giving it over so easily.

AT PLAY

Justin talks too much. Loudly, nasal. He talks quickly and he interrupts. I realise I have always been suspicious of those who talk too much, throwing their power around for all to see.

He confessed early on that it unnerved him. This self containment of mine, this inscrutability. That it made him uncertain and tongue-tied; paranoid. Horrible as it seems, I greeted this news gladly.

We met via clothes pegs and floggers. He knew the ways of the body – of my body – well. He was mean. I joked that he'd make a good copper, though later took it back. He was too intelligent. He enjoyed it too much.

I assumed he wouldn't remember me. When we sat on his sofa later he looked me in the eye and said, You're lovely. Still, I knew he spoke like this to everyone.

When I read his confession, therefore, I found my footing. I made him nervous. I had some power, after all.

IN CUSTODY

The man who came to fetch me was large, brisk and accusatory. This wasn't what I'd been looking forward to. He said we'd throw the leftovers of my breakfast in the bin on the way out, and he made it sound violent and threatening. Offering no choice but compliance, he stepped out of the cell and held the bin open. Reluctantly I dropped in the leftovers I'd been saving.

When I was brought out to the reception area a clump of fat, angry looking men in suits loitered around the bank of desks. These weren't the uniformed officers administering our detention. Now, we were in the business of interrogation. I knew they were trained in making me talk, and I started to shake. The threat of violence hung about them like a swarm.

Thankfully it was a fairly nondescript man who led me away to the interview rooms. He peered into each one, and my spirits lifted when we'd gone down the corridor and failed to find one free. I imagined them full of my friends, staying silent. This bridewell wasn't designed to take in a horde of political prisoners all at once. We filled it, overfilled it. They had bitten off more than they could chew and we overspilled, messily, everywhere. Ha.

I knew my task was easy but still I couldn't stop shaking. I sat down with my plastic cup of water and said no offence, but I'll be giving a no comment interview... Oh that's fine the man said as he shuffled papers, people think it offends us but actually it's much easier! Much less work!

Still, when I kept my word he was flummoxed. Out we went again, to the front desk, and quite openly in front of everyone he admitted he was clueless. By now the others were au fait with the process and wanting to show off. Oh yeah, mine were silent too. Quite common it is, these days. My interviewer shook his head, laughing. Never had that before, not even in terrorist cases! he ejected. Wouldn't even confirm her name!

At the next desk along stood a fellow prisoner. I'd seen him the night before, of course, though I never spoke to him. He was waiting, too, what for I don't know. Slightly dishevelled, like me. Boots without laces, like all of us. An endearing little sign. We made eye contact and held it as long as we could, savouring each other. He looked over at my interviewer – Neil Fountain, I remember the name because it was so ridiculous – and watched as my aborted tapes were sealed up and signed, fresh ones issued. Then he looked at me with the raised eyebrows and up-side down smirk of congratulation, giving me a small nod. I knew that seeing how easily I'd confused this man was a reassurance to him. But he was also encouraging me, with his warm brown Irish eyes. (Was he Irish? I don't know. He looked it. Were his eyes even brown, come to think of it?) He was saying, silently, I'm impressed. He was saying: Well done.

We had some power, after all.

We know the interviews are an attempt to get us to incriminate ourselves, in the absence of any other useful evidence. So we stay shtum, and during the process we entertain ourselves with whatever thoughts are necessary to take our minds off what we are doing. Like a dentist's appointment, staring up into the lights. Like bad sex.

BACK HOME

I am sitting in the small room with the benevolent woman, staring out at the beautiful high trees in the April sunlight.

I am trying to answer her question. It can't have been my upbringing, I say: my parents were very supportive. Not convinced by this answer, she probes: What does that mean?

Well. Maybe they weren't always supportive of things I did, but always of *me*. She takes me off on a tangent about my mother. Could you talk to her? she asks.

BAD SEX

My mother's line was that waiting until marriage couldn't do any harm, but rushing things may entail lifelong regrets. Regrets that might only surface, she warned, when I finally met the right person.

If it was now, if it was the me of now, with new counselling skills and old anger, I might have retorted: Is that a regret you felt? Because I know she didn't wait. My father told me so. I feel derisive about her deception, now. Back then, when I found out, I can't remember what I felt. It was more painful than derision. How stupid of her, to assume this precocious girl on whom she was passing judgement was still a hypothetical. When I was much younger she'd appeared unannounced in my sexual life to chastise me for touching myself; now, she reappeared to ensure I didn't touch anyone else either. But it wasn't so hard to deal with – by this point I too was adept at deception.

Still, this little chat was an attempt to open up some channel between us. She wanted to know what was going on. She sensed that I was maturing, drifting, and she wanted me to talk. Instead, of course, her investigations guaranteed my silence on the matter from that point on.

AT PLAY

When I was little I thought I wanted to be a doctor. I know now where that comes from, just as the counsellor suggested helpfully that. Perhaps you enjoy working on the helpline because you are providing for others the kind of listening that really you want for yourself – you just don't know how to ask for it.

In hospital, everything was prearranged. My name was up on the board on the morning of the operation, and the nurses made me feel special. There was an abundance of toys in the children's ward, and we were encouraged to play freely. We were given little cards detailing our treatments and after every one, we got a beautiful little golden star. We were treated like royalty. When the time came for me to go under, a blue-clad team wheeled a bed in for me. I climbed up into it and lay down straight away, rather self-consciously. It's ok, they said smiling, you can sit up until we reach theatre! I sat up again, blushing. And so I was wheeled along the corridors, through those doorways sealed with flapping sheets of clear plastic that I ducked from, and all the way they spoke kindly to me and filled me with a great sense of excitement. Nothing whatsoever was asked of me. If I wanted to I could have said nothing at all (as in fact I think I did). And I had nothing to hide from these people – in fact, they appeared to me as the guardians of a thrilling secret realm ruled by the erotic. For them the investigation of the body in shadowy rooms was something important, even ceremonial, done with diligence and precision.

BAD SEX

My mother was wrong.

If I had waited, I'd have regretted it already. Not to mention the pleasure – that goes without saying. It's the bad sex I'm really grateful for. And it happened in this city, above one of these streets. Here, where I return again for another difficult coming-of-age. I didn't know it would be here. How funny. So when they let us out of the bridewell I knew exactly where I was, and my delight at the open air mingled with a sickly feeling in the pit of me. This city always brings on a wistful nausea.

* * * *

After it happened, I wrote it all down somewhere. In some hurried notebook, meaning to copy everything neatly into my diary. I put it off. I lost the notebook.

I don't remember it now. Even the next morning, blankets had come down over my memory and everything save the before and after was gone.

I remember the after in painstaking slow motion. The way, poised in the open doorway, he asked a final time if I was ok. The way I looked up into his face and lied, again. The way I watched in despair as his figure disappeared down the stairs, as he didn't once look back, as he was gone.

I remember the paintwork on the bannister, in the awkward corridor where I stood in my pyjamas as if I had just washed up on shore. As if I had just been hit. I remember being immobilized by horror at what I had just allowed to happen.

In films, when the sweethearts finally consummate their love, there is a device that is used to reassure us that the painful ritual is not violence. The hero gazes down (it is always down) into the face of the heroine and he says – whispers – Are you ok? And she says, Yes. She always says yes.

AT PLAY

I've learnt not to make premature assumptions about clinical requirements. As I waited for Justin to come in I was sitting up, and I only lay down when he told me to. By the time I was crying out, I think he had discarded his white coat and come to sit with me on the bed. His hand, for sure, was no longer encased in latex. Later he would explain. I didn't really feel like a doctor any more – the roles seemed to slip away until it was just you and me, and that was nice.

BACK HOME

I am getting better at trusting Justin, even when he has no white coat on. Eventually I would come to tell him about Nottingham and the trauma that happened there – a trauma brought on by my own silence. I am getting better at speaking, at not relying on the fragile self-defeating power of refusing to comment. I have come to understand why his mention of pleasure freaked me out, why I was so attached to his detachment, why I didn't want him to speak of his desire because I feared that my own, left unspoken, would get trampled.

I was amused when the counsellor brought it all back to my mother – what else would a counsellor say, after all? And how she painted a picture of the little interview room and our family's kitchen table, mother-interrogator sitting opposite, quizzing me about desires that I knew must remain secret. I am learning that my lovers are not my mother, that they are not gathering evidence to use against me. What a shame I did not realise this sooner, when I was first in this city those years ago.

And what a shame that I could not speak with Neil Fountain as a human being too, that he insisted on his ridiculous role with its reels of tape and stilted scripts and Anything you fail to mention now which you later rely on in court...; that sitting there with my shivering cup of water I had no choice but to fall back on my old fail-safe, "No Comment".