

Emma Brockes

Visiting Time

I had it all worked out. I'll tell you the truth, I've never been a liar. I'm six-foot six on the left. On the right I'm six-foot four. Broke my leg in a motorbike accident in the sixties, riding pillion. I walk on the slant but I have the advantage of height, which is handy when you're planning on killing a man.

As I saw it, if I went into that prison and I knew roughly how tall it was, and if I could get my hands in the correct position, get my thumbs fast enough under its chin, I could break its neck. I'd worked out where I'd have to stand and how fast I'd have to do it, how long before the screws came in. I never told my wife. I try to keep her in the dark, like if there's a programme on TV about murder, I'll tear the page from the *Radio Times*. We don't discuss it. We haven't referred to it since the day of the sentencing. Therapy whatnot, we don't need reminding. It's how we get along.

20 Before I entered the prison, I went to a church across the road and said a small prayer. Then I walked into the governor's office. I'd seen the murderer standing roughly where that chair is there and I walked over and the governor was there and I asked to use the toilet and I went in and was saying the prayer again and running cold water on my wrists. I was thinking, if you harm it, it's more aggro for the wife. She'll have the police at the door again, don't know if she can take it. But simultaneous I'm thinking, I want it dead. So I come out of the toilet, walk straight towards it and everyone's looking at me thinking this is it, which way am I going to go?

40 There's things flashing through my brain, all the traumas, like how when I was a kid my best mate was killed by a lion. It sounds funny, but it ain't so funny. The teachers said we could venture off round the zoo, so we went to the lion enclosure. We came up the wooden steps and the chicken wire that keeps kids away was all open. Alan, John and Tony got through the wire, but I couldn't get through, I was too big, so they told me to sit there and look after the luggage. I sat on the school bags and watched them through the fence. The boys swung on the ropes that lifted the weights that opened a sheet of metal into the lion's den. Tony crawled through. I'll never forget. He died in hospital. We were ten years old. There's one loss.

The brain can only take so much and then it goes crash. All the teachers told us, honesty is the

best policy, crime don't pay, and all this about the coming of the second prophet. They was all lies; I wish I could sue 'em. If I'd brought up my kids the way the Krays brought up theirs, perhaps we'd be rich. Instead of that, you remain nobody and John ends up getting murdered and John's nothing, but the murderer's likely to come out and be found a respectable job and everything that goes with it.

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After school, I got a job in St Thomas's hospital: maintenance, pushing trolleys. I met the wife and got on a building site as a labourer, then with a stone masonry firm and that's where I was working right up to when we lost Johnny. My epilepsy was just another hurdle; so what, tell me about it, I couldn't care less.

80 John had gone to Waltham Abbey that day to pay for his holiday. His friend had died in April from a brain tumour and, come September, John and his friend booked a holiday to get over the loss of the boy, Richard. So they went to pay for this holiday, which was to be in Norfolk and they came out and were standing at a bus stop. John told us, 'If I miss the last bus home, I'll stay with Jimmy.' So when he didn't come home we didn't get bothered. Then the police came. Valerie collapsed in the kitchen, chipped two tiles. She's got asthma and they had to call an ambulance. Jane our daughter started screaming and ran upstairs. Our son Peter, who's eight years old, was asleep. I had to go and wake him up. I didn't know what to say to him. I half lied. I said would he go to the hospital with his mum. I said John was there and he was unwell.

100 They were standing, the five boys, at the bus stop. Just up the road was a pub called the Queen's Head. These twelve adults had been drinking and came out of the pub and headed to the bus stop to start trouble. This 21-year-old, who had thirty-six previous convictions, stabbed and wounded Jimmy in the stomach. Jimmy got away, into a woman's house nearby, and she phoned for an ambulance. While this was going on, our son tried to defend his friends. He stepped forward and was stabbed directly in the

heart. And he staggered over to a lady who was sitting in a car waiting for a friend and asked her to help me, please help me and told her he'd been stabbed and fell to the ground. She read all this out in court and the murderer's solicitor asked her a question with a big grin on his face and she was in tears. When he asked her a second time, I jumped up in the court and done me nut, I said, 'Well she ought to remember because the last time you asked her you had a fucking big grin on your face.' I was chucked out of court for that. I apologized and they-let me back in.

120 Eventually, it testified and it did everything it could to sound like a bleeding little poor type of character. Bad childhood, bad home. The confidence it had was ridiculous. I have to fight to bring words back now because there's something in the brain that tries to block it all off.

Me and the brother-in-law went to the trial on our own, that way none of my family knows what the murderer looks like. So they could pass it in the street and they'd never know the difference. See what I mean? And that's how it should be, surely.

Every neighbour will tell you their hearts were broken, they miss John. This particular morning, as he run out of the house, there's an old lady coming out with two bags of shopping and John stops and says, 'You don't carry that, I'll carry that.' He would cut sandwiches in the kitchen and take them to the church and give them to men who'd dropped out of society. That's something we live by: do as you're told and stick by the rules. So, all right, we stuck by the rules and look where it got us.

140 We got John a decent funeral. About five hundred came, we had the wake at the fire station and there was the chief there, Doug, he died from a brain tumour at a later date, his son and John were friends.

I decided to go to prison and talk to the boys who were in on minor charges, who hadn't been done for the full violent murder but were heading that way. I set it all up, they was brought into a room with two coffee pots and as many fags as they wanted and they could eff and blind and walk out of the room feeling OK. I was told that when a policeman or a judge comes in, they play them up cos they think they're do-gooders. So it was a case of: how are they going to react to me?

160 We sat there and after they'd given me all their who they ares, I eventually told them who I am. I told them how I wake up in the morning and I think, first of all, where's John? Then I think, it wasn't a dream, it was true, so that means every day we're one day further from John, but that's one day closer to him getting out. The coffee pot didn't get touched; the fags didn't get touched.

They just sort of shut up and listened.

The following month, I'm down there again and I'm in the governor's office and a man comes rushing in, a boy rather, and he's wearing this chef's uniform and he's wiping his hands and he says, 'Bill, I can't stop, but what you said last time is right.' He said, 'I've got a five-year-old daughter and a wife and I'm not coming back in any of these places,' and he thanked me for doing him a favour.

180 Eventually I decided, I wanna meet it direct, John's murderer. Now if I wait until its parole, they'll give it a different name and I'll probably never see it again. I want it now. So I start the ball rolling, push push, five years that went on for, to get the right contacts, MPs, the House of Lords. It was 1986 when it was imprisoned, and it was '91 that I was given the go-ahead to visit it. Restorative justice they call it now. Back then, though, it hadn't never happened before. Letting the families meet the murderer.

Arrangements were made for me to see it in prison. First, I had to talk to these two probation officers, to make sure I was of what they called sound mind and pure intention. There was one there, his name was Brian, and he came up with some right insulting-type questions, but I knew why he was doing it he thought if he could wind me up and suddenly I blew it, he wouldn't let me anywhere near the murderer. Because if I'm in there with the murderer and the murderer's only got to say the wrong thing and I'm up in arms and they've got trouble on their hands. But, of course, I had it worked out different.

200 I don't know where it comes from, but there is such a thing as a guardian angel. I had one there and it was holding me down. It just would not happen. I was managing to find the right answers and this Brian said, I don't get it, every time I get through to you a brick wall pops up. He said, I tear it down and you put up another one. So I said, Don't have a word with me, I'm only the labourer, have a word with the bricklayer. Those sorts of arguments and they're taking notes; Eventually they decided that the best thing in the world to happen is for me to go in and see it for myself.

I had it all worked out. I'm six-foot six on the left, on the right I'm six-foot four. It was smaller by four inches. I could knock it out in a matter of minutes. There's two pressure points in your throat that if you have a go at

220 with enough force you can kill a man before there's time to pull you off, or at least do it brain damage. When I entered the governor's office, the murderer sat back, mister clever and it looked pretty smart, scrubbed shirt and navy blue jumper and short-cut hair and I tell you on the quick who it looked like, you ever seen that O'Sullivan, the very fast snooker player? It looked close to him - and his father was a murderer too, funny enough.

See what I mean, all the stupidity of life? The things you think of. I can be sitting there talking and my wife will say, Do you want a tea or coffee, simple as that. And I have to say, Hang on hang on hang on, what was that again? And she says it three or four times and I'm trying to sort the words out, because inside I'm thinking, 'John is dead.'

I blinked. The light was one of them bright ones, fluorescent, which cut shadows in its face. It was pushed back in its chair, one leg on its knee, small and cocky like. It's not much to look at, narrow shouldered and smirking while it waits for me to say something. I don't say nothing. Its neck's where I'm looking. I'm looking so hard I think I can see its pulse. There's a thud in my wrists and this beat in its neck and I'm still undecided, which way to go? It stops smirking. It shifts in its chair. Suddenly I see my calculations are wrong, I could do its windpipe in half the time or hammer its head on the wall, which is pale and glossy green, like was used in the hospitals. I feel enormous, like a giant, and the bigger I feel, the smaller it looks until I see that it's nothing really, nothing at all, just a badly sewn boy of no fixed identity. I can feel its heart fluttering, its breath sucking in and out and I think, Yeah: at the end of the day that's all it comes down to, the blood going round. I see that it doesn't take much to kill a man. This much we both know.

I put out my hand. 'Luke Slater,' I say. He stands up and shakes it.

260 No I'm sorry, no I forgive you, no call for the priest either way. I feel a huge weight lift off me, like I've jumped ten feet in the air or won a race. 'I've come to let you know we exist, Valerie and me,' I say, soaring. He does a shrug. 'Mr Garrison,' he says, 'you don't understand, I've had it hard too.' He fiddles with the hem of his shirt. 'My life wasn't easy neither.' I let that one settle, then I tell him how I sometimes imagine John is in Australia, how every year I sign his name on it Christmas card and give it to my wife and each thing I say pushes him back in his chair. I'm landing them on him one after another. He says feebly, 'It ain't over for me either, like how am I going to find a job when I get out?' He shifts and his eyes flit about. He tries to get one over by saying about some bloodstains the police never found. I said, You've killed my son and I've shaken your hand. I said,

280 Do you really think there's anything else you can do to see me blow my lid? After that we sit in silence. Then he pushes his chin out and says, 'I'm sorry, Mr Garrison,' like he's wheedling to his father. I say, 'It's too late for that.' When I shake his hand at the end of the visit I feel the small bones of his fingers chafe against each other. His eyes are round and frightened.

At a later date, the probation officer told me that ten days after the visit he still hadn't come out of his cell. He was pacing up and down, punching the bed, saying, 'How can a man come in here and do what he did after what I did to his son?' I never laid a finger, but in a way my hand's still round his throat. I went in there to kill a man, and to my way of thinking that's just what I did: He won't rest in peace. If that's been done properly, telling him how it's been for Valerie and me, then he's gonna wake up in a bit of a sweat now and then, and turn to find me lying there beside him.

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