

**W**EDNESDAY. Visit Johnny in C wing. C is for sex-offenders, segregated from other prisoners for their own safety. Johnny is 70, an educated, intelligent man.

"I'm a paedophile," he announced grandly on our first meeting. His life story, written with undeniable wit and perception, explores his preference for B.O.Y.S. (Bloom Of Youth Syndrome). Even though I'm a woman, he tolerates my editing attempts. A cheery screw unlocks the cell, calls out: "Johnny Rotten?"

Johnny performs a pantomime leap from his bed. "I deny everything," he cries. "I demand to see my solicitor."

Jack, an earnest ex-miner with elastic features, shuffles up behind us, clutching a jotter.

"Watch him!" warns Johnny. "He'll bite you!" adding, *sotto voce* "If he's got his teeth in."

Pass through electronically-controlled gates and into the women's high-security unit. At last, after weeks of persuasion, Margery shows me her poems and stories.

"Come in. I won't eat you."

She drags out a huge file, filled with pages, each neatly inserted into a plastic folder. She hands me her favourites, watches as I read. They are fantastic, full of intensity, startling images, grotesque originality.

"Nobody'd believe I'd written them," she says, jerking her head towards the door. I ask if she wants me to put some in our in-house magazine. She shakes her head. I suggest copying them.

"Wouldn't trust these to the photocopier."

I propose we submit some to literary magazines. She laughs, begins to stow them away.

**T**HURSDAY. Discuss rewrites with Colin, of descriptive piece about his children. Until recently, Colin ripped up anything that he'd written of a "creative nature, but in the past two weeks, he's produced several fine pieces, dense with gloomy imagery. By his own admission, he has the features of a hard-man, yet somewhere lurks the soul of a poet. We amend his work. The description ends with children's laughter reverberating round a swing park, the air echoing to their calls. The pain of rewriting and talking about the piece brings him to the verge of tears.

Prison paradox: amid his anger, exists infinite tenderness.

The class is visited by a group from a nearby art college who want to set up a project in the prison. The inmates are eloquent, polite. Colin explains the difficulties in attempting such a scheme, given the restrictive circumstances prisoners are subject to.

"Hey," says one of the visitors, tapping a cigarillo at a regulation ashtray. "It's not easy being an art student. You know?"

A tense session with Paul, a huge, intelligent man, convicted several times for violent offences. Normally cheery and attentive, today he is surly, rejecting all attempts to discuss his poems.

"What's the point? You don't criticise me properly. I'm sick of being patronised."

I try to explain that it's important to be constructive, to point out both good and bad in his work. I swallow back my frustration, devastated that I've let him down, angry that I'm upset.

**F**RIDAY. Brave the 9am walk through E wing en route to another part of the jail. E is for men convicted of non-sexual offences, burglary and the like, yet I feel less comfortable here than anywhere else. It is slop-out time. Men creep along the landings with covered plastic buckets, loiter in doorways. The air is heavy with smells. As I pass one group, someone simulates the sounds of approaching orgasm with disconcerting accuracy.

In mid-class on C, a call goes out that clean kit is available. Johnny exits, re-emerges in a 1970s denim suit.

"The 50-shilling tailor has arrived," he announces from the doorway, then poses in the aisle between desks.

Paul apologises for moodiness. I promise to be a harder critic. Relieved.

**S**ATURDAY. Awake to my constant companions, self-doubt and procrastination. I write in the mornings, a-bed: fortuitous as there's a nest in my chimney and scant other means of heating this vast room. To cheer myself, decide my heroine will bake bread and write erotic poems.

Parental visit, dinner at their hotel. Half-way through the meal, my father puts down his cutlery and addresses me.

"Your mother has taken to singing along with piped music in restaurants." Mum pauses for a moment to listen. He continues. "She assures me it is entirely involuntary."

After all these years, he's only just noticed.

**S**UNDAY. Work on reviews then into forest, to gather deadwood, in the vain hope that chimney will be

cleared. At least I'll get warm sawing logs.

**M**ONDAY. Impromptu class for some lads on remand who, for reasons I never get to the bottom of, can't attend their cookery lesson, in which they are allowed to eat the products of their labours. All are miffed, as today it was to be spaghetti bolognese. They demand to know my opinion on everything, particularly the judiciary and feminism. Lenny notes my celtic features.

"Have you got a bit of Irish in you, miss?"

"Please, my name's Jane."

"A-reet Jane," he says, all a-twinkle. "Would you like a bit of English in you?"

Exasperated, I set a tame writing exercise, a description of their idea of paradise. For a while there is much chewing of pens and scrubbing-out. I begin to relax. Then Gary throws down his pencil.

"Miss, how d'you spell 'cocaine'?"

"Way-ay miss," all the pens go down, "how d'you spell 'horniest'?"

"Geisha, miss?"

"Erotic-est?"

**T**UESDAY. To Norwich, my regular PhD supervision and anthology launch. Curse British Rail. Alas, I've become intimate with Peterborough Station over the months, and can only applaud the author of the train graffiti who, below the notice asking customers not to flush the toilet in stations, has inscribed the words "except Peterborough".

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