

Plummer Hughes, P. (2012) 'Visiting Room' [Saturday Short Story], *The Journal* (Newcastle), 5<sup>th</sup> May.

"Mum, you're sitting on the wrong seat. You have to sit on the green. The remand prisoners sit on the blue."

He takes my hand and rests it on his remand jeans and looks at me. I know he thinks I've put on weight in my middle age. He tells me I should take up jogging. I sit awkwardly on the hard plastic stacking chairs. The room is noisy, with screaming children and male voices. It's stuffy and full of smoke.

"Do you get enough to eat? I brought some money if you want something from the snack bar."

"Chocolate. As many bars and kinds of chocolate you can buy. Please."

I make my way through the clumps of families. I look and sound middle class, out of it. At the counter I buy seven different kinds of chocolate bar and two cups of tea.

"Thanks, mum. How's everything?" "Much the same. I'm still doing ten hour days and year nines are impossible but what can you do? They searched my hair when I came in here today and my mouth! What's it really like here, Chris?" "I'd prefer a cell on my own - the other guy's scary. Even the warders keep their distance. Mind you, he had me shaving his head today. The cell stinks of cigarettes."

I look at his handsome face. Smiling. A row of perfect, even white teeth.

"Matt phoned. When he's home next weekend he'll come and visit. I've sent you in a Bible and arranged a daily paper to be delivered."

"Not the Guardian? I'll be a laughing stock. The swotty black guy."

"But there are so many pages you'll have lots to read."

"And why the Bible? Do you think I'm evil?" He looks at me with serious intent and I look back.

"No," I say quietly, "you got in with bad company. Has your Dad been to see you?" "Yeah, he came with Mark. I expect a lot of people'll come and visit me at first but if I get put away for a long time the novelty will wear off." I know I won't be one of them, backwards and forwards to have my mouth and shoes checked in a queue with the families of some of the kids I teach. He wolfs down the chocolate as the time is near. I wonder at the demons inside and think of my own guilt. Who's ever a perfect

parent? "No lawyer been to see me, Mum. I'm just a legal aid case. No bucks." The siren goes and Chris marches back, turning to look as he goes through the door. I blink back tears. Outside the prison a heron flies overhead, the slow wing beat against a sharp blue winter sky. There is still frost on the grass and tiny shoots of snowdrops are beginning to crack through the heavy soil.

There are photographs of Chris on the mantelpiece - Chris as a baby with his teddy, Chris in a white ruffled shirt and shorts making his first holy communion, Chris in the school football team, Chris in sixth form with his hair in short dreads doing the rootsy thing. I open a bottle and as the liquid slides down my throat, small tears slip down the side of my nose till I can taste the salt mixed with the metallic of cheap red wine. I wake up in the night sweating and panicked. A bad dream? I wonder about Chris in his cell. Is he safe? Is he suicidal? I writhe until, exhausted, I fall asleep, Rags, his dog, snoring at my feet. Apart from being quieter than usual, my colleagues at the school wouldn't know I was being eaten alive from inside. I catch myself listening more carefully to what the kids have to say, trying to understand what is behind their anger. \*\*\* "Didn't you think about what would happen if you got caught, Chris?" "Obviously not. Have you come to lecture me?"

"You've had so many opportunities. Camping in France, books in the house, encouragement to admire black role models. Why were you hanging around with those dossers?" "I can't cope if you're going to come and preach at me. And why can't you give Dad a lift here?" He tells me about the useful things he's learning, like how to heat up a can of baked beans by tearing off a strip of bed sheet, twisting it tight and lighting it so that it smoulders slowly under the can. I know he's an adult but I go and see his lawyer in the downtown offices, with their ripped plastic seating and dust covered desks. The lawyer's red sports Jaguar is parked outside on the pavement. He has no idea who I'm talking about when I mention the name.

"Mrs Powell, there was a knife involved and one of the other defendants claims that Chris was holding it. It's not looking good." "But he insists that's not true. He went along for the ride. He's got no previous record." "But he's been hanging out with these guys. Perhaps he's been involved in other stuff and not got caught." I wonder whose side he's on. And I wonder if Chris is telling me the truth. "Aren't you going to the prison to discuss the defence? Who are the jury going to believe? The mixed race youth from a single parent family or the local white working class boys?" "Mrs Powell, this isn't a TV show. The next hearing will be about bail. I'll speak to him at the courts before he goes before the magistrates." I walk home thinking about the thin line between those who are guilty and those who obey the law. How many times have I driven over the From 44 limit? I pay workmen in cash as it's cheaper because they won't pay tax on it.

And Chris has grown up in what used to be called genteel poverty shored up with credit card debt. When I take the rubbish out my breath makes smoke in the air.

I spot a falling star. Perhaps its light is a million years old. Perhaps it fell before pterodactyls turned into herons. What are they for, these glittering stars, so remote and ancient shining on our messy lives that fall out like a bag of old clothes at a jumble sale? At school a boy takes a clock off the classroom wall and hides it under his coat, denying all knowledge of it. I throw the blackboard wiper in his direction. My head of department takes me into her cupboard and makes me a cup of tea. "What's the matter, Julie? You've great rings under your eyes."

"The teacher, the thief, the beloved son, the useless father. Chris is in big trouble." She listens while I tell her the story but she looks at her watch constantly and tells me to go home and rest. I drive home through a low fog that traps all the factory flares, smoke and car lights so that the fog is actually red, like driving through hell. I have to have a drink to do what Chris wants me to do so that when I phone his father my speech is slightly slurred. "Winfield, we need to talk about visiting Chris." "We do, we do." "I wouldn't be calling you normally, as you know, but he wants to see more of you and I keep thinking about all the young men who commit suicide in prison." "Well, being black ain't going to help him..."

Babylon got him in its clutches." "This isn't about scoring points. God knows, you haven't bothered much about him in the past." "You think I don't know?" "Let's quit sparring and sort this out." \*\*\* I pick him up outside his house, turning my head so I won't have to see whatever woman is there. We drive to the prison in silence. I feel as though I will suffocate in the enclosed space of the car with my ex who I haven't seen for twelve years. There's the usual long wait for the visitors' numbers to be called so it is impossible not to make small talk about his brothers and sisters and my brothers and sisters. Chris beams when he sees us both. "Hey Pops, hi Mum. Cool shirt, Pops." Winfield smooths the silk of his hand-painted shirt in which the orange blazes into mauve and purples, like sunset over a lagoon. "

Y' have to dress to the occasion, boy. No, seriously, Chris, you've got yourself in a real mess. We'll do what we can to support you. I know your mother is doing her best." Years of sarcastic comments rise like bile but I force them down. Chris and he chat about members of the Jamaican family I don't even know. The laugh about a TV show I don't watch. His father never once talks about the case or the charge or the possible outcomes. I find myself joining in some of the laughter but also feeling shocked by his casual tone. As if it wasn't the end of the world for Chris. As if he didn't know what his life would be like if he was found guilty. I watch them both. It's a long time since I've sat so close to Chris's father. I can see how they share expressions. How deep-set their eyes are.

I'm suddenly aware how alike they are as people - careless, reckless and capable to sudden swings in mood. But I get a strange pain too as, despite myself, I remember happy times when Chris was small. The parties we used to give, friends and relatives round a table groaning with food. Outside there's a bright blue sky, the

clean smell of frost, branches dazzling with sunlight on ice. "Julie, let me take you for a meal. There's no reason to be enemies now. The boy needs us both." He takes my hand and I think he's gone into automatic flirting mode now and try to pull away. "Have you got time from your other offspring?" "Saint I'm not. You did a good job as a mother. Boy, all those exams! You mustn't worry yourself too much. He's got to live with his mistakes. I've made mistakes too. I made a mistake in the way I treated you. I regretted that so many times in my life." Into my head uninvited comes the scene of our first meeting at a wedding.

We're dancing cheek to cheek and I can smell the incense of his skin and he invites me to visit his favourite aunt and have some soul food. The sunlight hits the grey strands in his hair. Look what life turns you into if you're not careful. You learn to count the wrongs and nurse them, feed them with your own compost. All I ever wanted was intimacy and trust. And I thought I had that with my son. I thought we talked about everything and I thought I had tamed his father's wildness out of him. One tear falls down my face like a chip of star. "OK. A meal." "We'll talk this through, Julie. More than anything he needs a lawyer who's on the ball. Get him a softer sentence of sorts." "He was there. He got involved." "I know. I know about wildness. Maybe he needs to go home." "Home?" "To the country. My cousins in Port Antonio, far from Kingston. They're still there, living the simple, good, clean life. Up at dawn, fishing, farming, to the market, Church on Sundays."

"Then why aren't you like that?" We are both pulling our coats tighter to our bodies in the cold. I put my hands deep in my pockets. I still feel drawn to him, still find him attractive, but the cold stone of how he treated me lies on my tongue. "You were very jealous. Possessive - and possessive of Chris. It drives people away." I felt I would choke on the cold stone. My hands tightened into stones in my pockets. "Let him fly, Julie. He's making a mess, I know, but maybe he'll come back - and come back stronger."