**Jailhouse, Jailhouse**

The prison was ready for a riot and by dinner-time everyone knew it. They were just waiting for George Cannon to get it going. By half-past six the noise was rising in the canteen and no-one was caving in. The prisoners got braver and the more threats the warders made, the less they mattered. It was so loud now that they couldn’t talk to each other andGeorge watched them check for their whistles and truncheons.

Then he jumped up onto a table, stretched his arms out wide and shouted:

“Riot!”

George stood there for a second, his face looking up at the lights, his eyes closed, a joyous smile on his face. Then as a ferocious chorus of cheers answered him, he skipped heavily down the long table, punching the air. He jumped and turned in mid-flight, he listened for the laughter and the rumble of boots on the floor. He kicked up his legs like a can-can dancer and saw the raging delight on the men’s faces. Then they started their riot. George had no idea what it was about.

He usually liked prison, sometimes he loved it and only hated it when there was nothing to do. He hated sitting down for dinner and having to remain sitting, long after he’d finished his food. He hated the TV room, because watching TV was doing nothing. George’s body needed to move all the time, even if it was just repeatedly walking around the prison while the others had a smoke or played cards.

The other thing he needed was noise, to check that the world was still working. So he ran his plate against the bars of the cells, grinning in delight at the awful rattle. The warders and the other prisoners shouted at him to stop, but he loved the shouting too. The building was full of echoes and reverberation, so he went into the showers and howled like a jackal. He got into fights, usually because someone was furious at the noise but sometimes just because there was nothing else going on. There was no softness on George’s body, so he won most of the time, but even the fights he lost he enjoyed. It didn’t mean he wouldn’t be coming back for more.

“You’re not at it again Georgie? I told you to stop didn’t I? You can’t say I didn’t tell you.”

Another fight. If he won this time there would definitely be yet another, what the opponent would think was a decider; if he lost, he might still come back another hundred times. At first Mr Perry, the chief warder, tried to talk to him, but now seemed to have given up. Mr Perry always looked tired, because he had cancer, or his wife did, maybe they both did. George had seen them once when he was working in the garden. They were walking across the open fields, dressed up against the cold. They looked grey and weak and George didn’t know why they would wish to go on living like that. He wanted Mr Perry to forget about his wife- he thought it probably was her who had the cancer- and run like George would have done, run across the miles of flat fields until his whole body thumped with exhaustion. Then get up and run again, into the blank sky and to the North Sea where he could swim in the cold rolling water.

Mr Perry had tried to talk to him about his childhood. George never had a mum or dad. He had no idea where or when they had gone. He’d had a lot of foster mums and dads and they all hated him- not cruel hate, just natural, ordinary hate for a boy so full of dangerous stunts. He broke everything and terrorised the other children and he never stopped.

“Stop it!”

He heard that a lot and he loved it. When they said it he stood on his tip-toes, looked up at the ceiling and laughed in triumph. He hadn’t needed anyone else, he was a riot all by himself: leader, gang member, spectator.

But he ate his food, so the foster mums were really pleased for the first ten minutes that they met him. He ate whatever they gave him and asked for more. Then as soon as he had finished he was bored and started to kick the table and then kick the other kids and within half-an-hour everybody hated him. So he left. The last family was no different to any of the others and he knew that the next wouldn’t be either, so he ran off when he was just into his teens and lived anywhere. He liked breaking into houses, he liked fights and stealing food. It was a grand life for a boy who looked like he was eighteen and was free of everything.

George leapt off the table once the riot was underway and started to destroy the canteen. The warders were overpowered for now so it was rapid, easy work. The tables, chairs and windows all went first, then he led a group into the kitchens. George hadn’t been allowed a job there. They had to rip the cooker out, that was the hardest part, then they could smash up everything. It would mean more months inside, but George liked the prison so that was alright. He’d get solitary, which was fine. He was happy to be here for more than his year.

He had got the year for assault, except it wasn’t assault, it was a fair fight and a good one too in his opinion. It happened in an Indian restaurant. He didn’t usually go into restaurants or cafés because it meant he had to sit more or less still while he waited for his food, but he liked Indian because he could taste it properly and it always came quickly and it was easy to eat. So he went in and ordered and sat there drumming his hands on the table and breathing in and out very heavily. On the next table there were three men and a woman. They looked smooth and soft, all of them. The men were trying to flirt a little with the woman, looking at her with their pleasant smiles and talking like they wanted to be younger than they were.

“The guy from London who was in the meeting this morning saw you in the canteen. Said you were a babe, a real babe.”

“Well we all know that, look at her. We don’t need someone from London to tell us that.”

“Well you’re lucky to have me then aren’t you?”

“To have you? Now is that an offer?”

“No. You’re getting cheeky, you boys.”

“Do you want a fuck?”

The last one was George and it was a question he used a lot. He hated hanging around, especially if it was hanging around for nothing, like these soft guys were.

“Do you? Do you want a fuck?”

They were all scared, though George was asking the question without too much aggression. They would have sat there for hours in silence, but luckily for them the waiter had heard him.

“What’s happening?”

He was big for an Indian and looked like he could be in a film waving a cutlass around or cracking open skulls with a club. George had never fought an Indian before.

“She doesn’t want a fuck. She won’t get one off these lot. Is my Madras ready?”

Before George had finished the sentence he was being dragged out by the Indian, who was clearly up for a fight. Why wouldn’t he be? Going back and forth with dishes of food all night, it would have driven George crazy too. So he felt some friendliness towards him as they started to punch each other. Good heavy punches, no holding back. George was impressed. For a second he could look through the window and see the sad cases at their table, looking down at their plates. The woman was crying and the men looked like they might be about to as well. He held onto the Indian, rubbed his cheek against the thick, soft beard and pulled at the turban, wondering what was really underneath.

The Indian was good, too good in the end because he would have won if he’d fought as dirty as George. When a thumb was rammed into his eye, the Indian stepped back, howling, and then it was easy for George to take his time, to choose a position and punch him against the restaurant window. The big man in his lovely coloured turban fell back and the glass shattered and rained down over him. It looked spectacular and George leaned back to take in the wonder of it all. He was so entranced that it took him by surprise when the Indian heaved himself back up, like he was rising from the dead, and with a final surge of energy smashed his lacerated fist into George’s mouth. So when the police came, George was still semi-conscious and the Indian was bleeding everywhere and gasping desperately. A perforated lung and some other nasty business, which kept him in hospital for six months and sent George to prison. It had been a fair fight though, or nearly fair. But prison was alright, definitely alright when there was a riot on and George was the star turn.

When everything had been smashed up, George went up on the roof. This was what happened in riots. He didn’t know why, any more than he knew what the riot was for, but he was sure this was what happened. So he scrambled up and he danced like an idiot and courted the crowd down below. Hundreds of police had arrived by now and the other prisoners were split up but not yet locked away. They cheered as he threw down slates, took off his shirt and conducted the shouts of “Georgie, Georgie!”

Mr Perry had a megaphone and gave out warnings to come down but he didn’t even sound convinced by himself. Then the fire engine came and the ladder was raised. No-one came up to get George because they knew he might do anything, like kick a man off a ladder just for the thrill and the cheers he would get. When he had run out of things to do on the roof he got onto the ladder, pulled and pushed at it for a while to make it swing dangerously over the crowd and then came down. They jumped him immediately, Mr Perry even taking the lead. With five men on top of him George was beaten for the moment, but he really needed to keep the drama going, so he embraced Mr Perry more tightly and kissed his neck. For a moment Mr Perry seemed to just let him, but then he shouted “No!”. So George laughed his screaming laugh and bit him. It was a deep bite, a mouthful of flesh and there was warm blood in his mouth. Mr Perry howled. George had made him come alive: now maybe he could run across the fields, away from this wife and the cancer, to the sea. Towards the screaming of the gulls and the cold dark water.

They got George to stop biting by banging away at his head with their truncheons. He laughed as he was escorted away, he threw back his head and laughed. The warders and the police and many of the prisoners were looking at him with different kinds of horror. George kept dribbling blood and grinning with delight. He looked at the faces, the grimaces and the shaking heads. What was wrong with them? He laughed all the way. What in the wonderful world was wrong with them?