



NIGHT DUTIES

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For the Christmas edition I thought that you might appreciate a break from the burdens of professional regulation – here is a piece written in 1986 about my experiences as a Duty Solicitor in and around Coventry.

Bells rang in my head and I reached out for the light. The phone had beaten the alarm, as I'd known it would, and I fell across the cold bedroom to stop the ringing in my head.

"O'Malley from Stoney Stanton Road".

I grunted in recognition.

"We've got a suspected burglary here – says he's one of yours – want to check it out?"

I said I'd be over if I could dig the car out of the snow.

"Oh yeah. You want an indecent exposure too?"

"Too cold for that", I said, "but thanks for the offer".

It was 2.15am. My head was throbbing. I decided against the work suit and fell into jeans and sweater instead. My mind raced over the evening before. A Law Society Dinner. I thought of my charming companions and the fascinating legal talk – costs ratios, time recording, partner gearings. I was on duty again so the lemonade had flowed.

"Wait there, miss, sarge' doesn't usually allow visitors".

"I'm a solicitor, not a relative".

"Sorry, love".

I cursed him under my breath and made a mental note to look out for him in any cross examination.

It was 2.40. My body wanted sleep. My hands were cold from scraping the ice off the car. The open window had been the best chance of staying awake, but I'd risked frostbite in doing so. The car had steamed up anyway.

2.40 in the morning and here I was in a waiting room designed to break the will of the most anxious relatives to stay there. I drew on my last cigarette and then regretted it. The all night petrol station didn't stock my brand. The constable at the desk was still worrying whether I was a solicitor or not. The only other occupant was a large woman of 45 or so. Try

as I might I couldn't avoid her attention. Did I know where she lived? She was supposed to be cooking her supper but had forgotten where she lived. I observed that she hadn't been drinking and that the biting cold of the night had not broken through her crimplene trousers and acrylic cardigan.

"Geeze", I muttered to myself "I could be worse off".

Sleep. It's all I wanted. Would the senior partner be impressed that I was out again? I wondered when his steady probate practice had last taken him out on a night like this.

3.10, and another sergeant appeared. By now, I knew how to lock a pushbike, who was wanted for questioning in the West Midlands and the colouring system on a Colorado beetle. The poster told me to bring the potato vermin into the station if it affected my crop. I made a note to do so. The sergeant headed towards my ample neighbour.

"You the solicitor then".

She explained that she didn't know where she lived.

He glanced towards me and our eyes met.

"At last, officer"

"Oh, I'm... sorry". There was one word on the sergeant's face and that word was embarrassment.

"I've seen you in court haven't I?"

"You sure have". My mind slipped back two or was it three weeks. Fendick's not guilty plea to riding a pedal cycle in a pedestrian shopping arcade. This man was mean.

At last I was in the cells alone with my client. Fortunately for me he had seen the inside of many a police station so we chatted about the right to remain silent, legal aid, the Bail Act and related topics. He said he always liked to hear it from me. We arranged to meet some other time about his divorce. This was not the time or place.

In the clear at last. The indecent exposure had gone home with a warning. Someone had produced a street map to see if the other punter could remember where she lived.

It was 4.20 in the morning.

The car had iced up again. ■