

Prison Reform Trust Writing Competition 2018
Short Story
INSIDE OUT

Officers don't carry property bags: not for prisoners they don't. So it might've been the sight of two of them totting bags that caught my eye. Certainly wasn't the old guy shuffling along behind them: all bent and shrunken with a walking stick in his hand and something odd about his clothes. When I looked closer I saw his shirt was open and that he had to keep tight hold of his kecks to stop them falling down.

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"Shepherd! We're gonna put Mr Fergusson in with you. He's a bit ..."

The screw paused while she searched for the P.C. term "*doolally*". I let them leave then offered him my hand.

"Hi, how you doing? I'm Vern or Vernon." Automatically his hand shot out as he snapped into the well-rehearsed ritual of a *hail-fellow-well-met* executive to junior handshake. The sort which are firm and brief. Even his voice confident:

"Fergusson, Peter Fergusson. M.D. for Beddoes you know, the logistics people." Then the poise collapsed and he looked around in confusion. "Must apologise old chap for not wearing a tie. Extraordinary young woman took it off me downstairs! just a moment ago. Cheeky popsie told me to *be a good boy*."

"Oh dear. So is it Pete? Peter?"

"Errr — perhaps Mr Fergusson would be more errr ..."

"Fine and would Mr Fergusson like a cup of tea?"

"Ohhh, kind of you old chap, but I'll have to be getting on soon. I seem to have lost my wife. D'you think the chambermaid might help?" I filled the kettle: this could take a while.

"Chambermaid?"

"Popsie who just left."

"Miss Cassatt? She's the S.O.."

"Is she? Is she? Ah!" From which I guessed he'd never heard the term before. "Appalling service anyway. Look at how they've just dropped my luggage on the floor. Won't be getting a tip from me if that's their attitude, I! can! tell! you!"

"Tea? Coffee?"

"Not for me old chap. I'll have to be getting on — I've lost my wife you see, and she'll be getting anxious if I'm not there to deal with people." I made him tea. "This room! D'you think they know I'm Fergusson, *Peter Fergusson* down here with Beddoes? The logistics people you know. What my wife's going to make of it I couldn't say." He looked lost, so I sat him down on the closed toilet lid and passed him a cup.

"Perhaps we could phone her?" He frowned.

"Well there we go again. Extraordinary thing! This young popsie downstairs, took my tie and shoe laces then she stole my phone! *Cheeky young mare!* I said to her, you'll be getting a very stiff letter from our travel people. Not at all the sort of service I'd expect if you're looking for repeat business. Need to buck your ideas up young lady."

"Dear me." He gave a satisfied grin and took a sip of tea. "Mr Fergusson — you do know you're in prison don't you? That this is prison? That you're an inmate? A prisoner?" He looked bewildered, then:

"Yes! MacNeice explained. Prison. Got the form — somewhere." He bent and searched the bags. It was only as I watched doing this while struggling to keep his trousers up and his shirt closed, that I realised what the problem was. He had all his clothes on inside out! I was just about to say something when he handed me his court papers.

"Peter Alden Fergusson — seventy eight — charged with murder — sentence — life — to serve at least twelve years." I was thrown. "You murdered your wife?"

"Yes. She wouldn't listen you see. Refused to bring my work suit. Some nonsense about retirement. I got very angry with her. Do you think we could phone her? Because you know she worries if she doesn't hear from me."

"She's dead."

"As you say, yes indeed she is. I was very very angry with her. Just a quick call old chap? Just to put her mind at rest."

"She ..."

"She'll be worrying you see." I didn't know what to say. He looked so desperate that I tried to change the subject while I had a think.

"You've got your shirt on inside out mate. How about you let me give you a hand there hey?" I thought he might complain, but he seemed used to it: raising his hands and saying:

"Reach for the sky like a good little boy!" It made me shiver. The shirt came off over his head and I reversed it before handing it back

"Thank you old chap." He took it by the collar and pushed a sleeve back through the armhole.

"Why are turning it inside out?"

"Needs to be reversed you see. Then it looks right in the mirror when you've got it on."

"Ahhhh."



Still needed time to think, so I left him sipping his tea and went off to stores. Picked him up a couple of tee shirts and some jogging bottoms. Thought about some bedding but: *he needs to be in Healthcare*. So knowing that Spikey was in the office I went across and knocked. He listened then shrugged his shoulders.

"Not sure they'll take him, but I don't mind having a butchers if you think it'll do any good."

At the cell, just for a second I thought he'd fallen over. Till I saw the ripped bags and realised that his watch was gone. Spikey took out his radio and called a health emergency in. I could see blood and, scared that he really hurt, I knelt down. Turned out to be a broken nose and when I touched him he opened his eyes and smiled:

"Ah, it Astley isn't it. I wonder old chap, you — you — you haven't seen my wife have you?"