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Opening extract from
Blame

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Dedicated to prison reformers everywhere,
campaigning for those who are *not to blame*

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SPEAKING IN SPIKE: SOME PRISON SLANG

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Ant	Abigail Norton Turner
Basic	Removal of privileges
Bax	Go away
'Bin	Cell – short for cabin, the cells of the Spike
Bingo	A riot
Bug group	Resistance group (from German <i>Bug</i> meaning prow, strut)
Castle	Holloway Prison
Collar	A strutter parent on day release, allowed to work with their wages paid to the state so as to repay their debt to society sooner
Cons	Convicts; what strutters call all non-strutter prisoners
<i>Dixam pas</i>	Leave us alone
Doing a six	Serving a six-year sentence
Ghetto penthouse	Top-floor cell
Happy Hour	The hour before <i>Correction</i>
Heritage crime	A previously undetected crime committed by your parents or grandparents for which you are held responsible
Hunchies	Non-strutters
IR/Indoor Relief	Prison-organized work
Jammer	Home-made knife
Jug up	Meals
Ladies/	
Ladies of the Castle	Prisoners in Holloway
<i>Molopaa</i>	Dickhead
<i>Na</i>	Hey! How are you?
<i>Naa</i>	Hey! Good, and you?
Pat down	Body search
Pol-drone	Police drone
POs	Prison officers/guards
Rub down	Cell search
Screws	Prison officers
SHU/bloc/box	Single Housing Unit – solitary confinement
Solo	A strutter in prison without any family
Spike	The family wing of Her Majesty's Prison London
Spikeout	On release or escape from HMP London. Anything that is 'outside'
Strap/handle	The tag worn by strutters
Strutter	Someone found guilty of heritage crime. The term comes from the altered posture and gait of those wearing the plastic and steel tag, placed in the small of the back
Village	Pentonville
Villagers	Prisoners in Pentonville

The girl with the pudding-bowl haircut crawled out of her bedroom, edging her way to the banisters. She lay flat on the carpet and peered down into the hall. She watched as a white man in a smart coat half steered, half carried a black woman through the open front door. She heard the opening and closing of car doors and, behind her, the shuffling of her brother's small feet.

'Get down,' she said, and he lay next to her, copying her exact pose, pushing his face against the white wooden slats. He too had a straight fringe, the rest of his hair cut to the same length. They looked at the packed suitcases, some bursting with clothes which had spilled out onto the tiled floor.

'Are they going away again?' he whispered.

'Looks like it,' she muttered.

'Where are they going?'

He felt her shrug.

They both tensed as they heard their father walking back from the car. He strode into the hall and scooped up the piles of loose clothing, shoving them into one of the suitcases. He disappeared through the door again, and the girl realized he would return just once more to pick up the two remaining cases. Then they would be gone.

Hardly breathing, they heard his every step. They heard him

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curse their mother, heard the thud of the cases as he threw them in the boot, heard him humming an old hymn tune as he walked back to the house.

'He's happy,' whispered the boy.

'He's drunk,' whispered the girl.

He stood in the doorway and looked around, a man unmistakably taking his leave. He caught sight of his children staring at him from the landing, and froze.

The girl and the boy froze too, breath held, hearts pounding.

She wasn't sure how long this moment lasted, but when he eventually stepped inside, her chest was bursting.

The man picked up the cases, looked once more at his daughter and then at his son.

'You'll be fine,' he said, then turned and walked out of the house.

1

She knew she was late and she knew she was in trouble.

She'd feasted on double cheeseburger and fries: beef, pickle, Monterey Jack cheese, bread, ketchup, fried onions.

She'd also enjoyed the café's wifi; trawling and posting on all the banned sites she could find.

And the final treat – she'd even managed a few minutes hidden in her old garden, staring at her old house. Her fake ID, debit card and phone were safely buried back there too.

Everything had been timed, every moment of freedom accounted for, but these boys had messed it all up. Whatever the reason for their delay, Ant now needed to hurry. She was beginning to worry that she'd missed them altogether when, finally, she heard them coming.

There were just two of them, both rangy, loud and full of swagger. She didn't need her vantage point behind the stinking industrial-sized bins – you could have heard their bragging streets away. She felt the steel handle of the bin lid in her hand and crouched lower.

The two Year Ten boys strolled down the cut-through to the park. Ant's whispered count was to four, the numbers spoken instinctively in her Haitian Creole.

En, de, twa, kat.

She stepped out into the alley. In six silent paces she was behind them, in step, grinning. This was her favourite part, *the anticipation*. This is what she did, and it felt good every time. Her agitation and six-o'clock deadline forgotten, she pulled her hood over her shaved head and leaned in close.

'And what have you done today?' she hissed.

The boys whipped round and a wall of steel hit them. The crunching sound of metal on bone rang through the alley and they dropped like stones, hitting the tarmac hard. One was out cold; the other rolled around clutching his bleeding nose. Eyes wide, he tried to scuttle backwards, to put some distance between him and his attacker.

And then she was on him. Sitting on his chest, she placed a hand on his broken nose and pressed. If her other hand hadn't been over his mouth, he would have howled. He tried to punch and kick her off, but she pressed harder and he stopped.

She leaned forward till her mouth was next to his ear. 'I said, *what have you done today?*' She watched as he tried to work out what he was supposed to say. His eyes flitted over her, and she saw him recoil. Ant smiled; it wasn't her goose tattoos that had made him react.

'I know . . . a girl! And a halfie too! Under all that blood, I actually think you're blushing.' Keeping one hand on his nose, she edged up his chest. She knew she was taking too long and forced herself to speed up. 'Last time: *what have you done today?*'

The boy finally found words. 'Dunno what you mean!' he shouted. They came fast now. 'Been at school, haven't I? You want my timetable or something? ICT, maths, English, all that stuff. You're like that advert . . .'

Hurry up, Ant.

She pressed down again and he squealed. 'You have French today?' He nodded. 'Were you a good boy, Sean? Did you *behave?*'

The boy combined horror that this crazy girl knew his name with a frantic nod.

'So you didn't call your teacher "strutter filth" like you did yesterday? And you didn't threaten his family like you did yesterday? And you didn't cut his clothes like yesterday?'

Really hurry up, Ant.

With her free hand, she felt in all his pockets. She found the knife and held it dangling from her fingers.

'You take it!' he gasped. 'It's not mine anyway.' The knife disappeared into her hoodie and she leaned forward

again till her face was right above his. She could smell cigarettes and chocolate.

‘Thanks. I’ll find a safer home for it.’ She pressed down on his nose and felt him arch beneath her. She was whispering now. ‘And if you *ever* threaten Mr Norton again, I’m coming straight back to find you and your pathetic friend.’ She nodded at the other boy, who was still out cold. ‘Clear?’

Sean nodded furiously. She lifted her bloodied hand and wiped it on his T-shirt.

‘So, *what have you done today?*’

‘Nothing. Done nothing.’

‘Good boy.’

Now run, Ant.

She ran.

She threw the knife into a bin as she passed and heard the boy shout, ‘You’ll go to prison for that!’ And even though she knew she *really* shouldn’t, she turned round and sprinted back. She knelt down again.

‘That’s the whole point, Sean. *I’m already there.*’

2

As she ran out of the alley, Ant cursed herself. The job was done, but she had always known how long she could be out for; known when she had to be back. And she had blown it. Anyone who saw Abi Norton Turner run for the Underground station knew that she wasn't merely in a hurry – everyone in London was in a hurry; she was in danger. There was a mania to the way she tore along the street. Her eyes were fixed on the traffic lights, calculating light changes and gaps in the crowds. She yelled at anyone who was, or might be, in the way. Most froze when they saw her coming, a few edged aside. One oblivious headphone-wearing tourist was sent sprawling as he stepped into her path, her free hand hitting his shoulder hard. There were no apologies, no glances back. Ant barely heard the curses that were hurled her way.

A memory of her kid brother alone in his cell, bruised and miserable, came to her.

Not separation. Not this time.

When the pavements were too full, she took to the road. Using the gutter, she accelerated past the beggars and shoppers, some of whom watched her with alarm, instinctively glancing back down the street looking for a pursuer. Hers was the speed of someone running for her life.

She saw the red and white Underground sign. Two minutes to the platform, thirteen minutes' journey time in total, on two trains, ninety seconds to the prison . . . It wasn't possible.

A crowd of students wandered across the station entrance, then hesitated, apparently lost.

'Out of the way!' yelled Ant, sprinting across the road, her voice all that was needed to create a path to the steps. She took them three, four at a time, smacked her pass on the barrier and ran for the escalator. 'Coming down!' she shouted, and most of the commuters shuffled right to let her come by.

She jumped, squeezed and pushed her way down to a man with a buggy who blocked her way. He glowered at her, daring her to challenge him. She hesitated. Then, to the man's astonishment, she climbed onto the moving handrail and tightrope-walked past him, then leaped for the ground.

A train was in – she could hear it. There'd be another in two minutes, but that would be two minutes too late. She rounded the corner – its doors were still open, but the

beeping sound meant she had seconds before they slid shut. She cursed as she swerved past more slow-moving tourists but their vast trundling luggage briefly hemmed her in. In the split second it took her to side-step the cases, the train's doors closed. She cursed again and tried to prise the doors open. On the other side of the glass, a teenager in a Ramones T-shirt dug his fingers into the rubber edges and pulled. The doors opened a few millimetres and Ant plunged her hand into the gap. She had some traction now, and between them, she and the Ramones fan edged the doors apart, forcing the driver to open them again.

Ant crashed into the Tube carriage. She ignored the stares from her fellow travellers – some irritated, others perturbed by this sweat-soaked crazy girl who had just joined them – and nodded her thanks to the Ramones guy.

She took great lungfuls of air, her chest heaving; then bent down, hands on knees. *'Please stand clear of the doors,'* said the automated message, and Ant just had time to grab a rail before the train lurched away from the platform.

'You in trouble?' said the Ramones boy.

Ant, her eyes closed, nodded. She was grateful, but didn't want a conversation.

'You a strutter?' he persisted.

Startled, she opened her eyes. A few passengers edged away from her, disgust etched on their faces. She flashed him a warning. The boy retreated and stared out of the window, but Ant was annoyed she'd been spotted.

Am I really that obvious? Even without the strap?

She had assumed that, free of her debilitating tag – currently in her brother’s bag – she would move just like anyone else. Then she felt the sweat pouring from her and answered her own question. It had nothing to do with how she was moving. If you were as desperate as this, two stops from the biggest new prison in Britain, then yes, you probably did look like a strutter.

The train was slowing, the platform sliding into view. Through the glass, Ant saw the crowds waiting to board her train and readied herself for the scrum.

Running was impossible. As she jumped out of the carriage, she met a wall of travellers who weren’t about to get out of the way of a diminutive girl in a hoodie and trainers. She shoved, pushed and swore, but was moving at barely walking pace. With each hopeless half-shuffle she felt her brother fall from her grasp, her foster parents disappear. No Mattie, no Gina, no Dan. She had learned to pick her battles. Ant had thought that this revenge mission was small-scale. Achievable. Fair. She had been right too, but if she wasn’t back for inspection, then everything changed.

Desperation seeped into her mind. *Do something drastic, do something crazy.*

Ant screamed – a wailing banshee howl that made the whole platform stop and look. Those who could see her backed off as far as possible, and she screamed again. As this shriek was delivered to a near-silent station, the effect was dramatic.

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A path cleared for her and she ran, taking the steps in enormous leaps. Where new crowds threatened her progress, she screamed again. Steps, escalator, sprint, Ant flew towards the Piccadilly Line. In the enclosed walkways that linked the Underground system, her yells and threats bounced off the tiled walls.

The platform was busy with the usual number of construction workers – all with their tell-tale prison security passes still visible – but she could still choose her spot. If she stood by *that* poster, she would be right outside the lifts at the next station.

She knew the poster well. It showed a troubled-looking man in an armchair being questioned by his two young children. The caption read: *Daddy, what did our family do before the Depression?* It then dissolved into a smiling suited man holding up a pledge card. Underneath a bold *Your past is your future!* were the five ‘Freedom Questions’.

Ant knew them by heart:

What have you done today?

Have you talked to your parents?

What have you inherited?

What are you passing on to your children?

Is your family now, or has it ever been, a criminal family?

If the ad hadn’t been on the wrong side of the tracks, she’d have thrown something at it.

As the sound of the approaching train filled the platform, she suddenly realized she wasn’t the only strutter in

trouble. Never having done this trip so close to inspection, it had never occurred to her that she might have company. Ahead of her was a small group standing apart from the crowd. Or rather, the crowd stood apart from them.

There were five in total: exhausted, sweaty, fearful. Three men, two women. She knew they were strutters from the way they moved – the way hands constantly shifted to the small of the back. She was used to this inside, but out here Ant saw again how the restricted, robotic nature of their actions set them apart. The strap had originally been intended as both a punishment and a tag, but it changed the wearer's posture and gait, and had given the new prisoners their nickname. When Ant had had the plastic and steel belt fixed in place around her lower back, she swore she'd never be comfortable again. To ease the pressure on her spine, she had been forced to stand straighter, to walk taller. To strut.

Some adapted; others couldn't. Stealing the stapler-like key that removed a strap had been the best five minutes' work of her life. She just needed to put the strap on again before the assessor arrived. If she had the strap-key with her now, would she offer it to the others? Maybe. Would they take it? Probably not; they all had families to return to, beatings to prevent. If any of them failed to show, they knew the punishment.

They were straining towards the train, one of them actually waving it in, trying to make it come faster. Every instinct told Ant to stay separate, stay hidden in the crowd. If she recognized them, they would recognize her, but she

had learned not to trust anyone. They were all strutters, all on the same side, but apart from her brother and maybe her foster parents, she had faith in no one.

All the same, she knew that she was out of time and out of options. She needed to be standing where they were standing, and if that meant five more people knew that she had been Spikeout, then so be it. As the train slowed, she joined the strutters. They turned in surprise, but the arrival of the train meant nothing was said. As it stopped, they approached the doors together. The doors slid open, and they stepped aboard together. There were seats free but they all stood. Ant noticed everyone look up as they got on, then hurriedly get back to their screens.

She glanced at her companions. They were known in Spike as *collars* – the member of the family group designated for outside work. It was sold as a privilege, but it was a financial necessity – too many key workers were being lost inside the prison network. This way the family were punished and the state took the salary. Any abuse, any lateness would be punished. The whole family could expect to be separated. A petite woman with a huge backpack looked close to collapse. In a previous life Ant would have offered to help, even carried her pack for her. But such generosity belonged to the past. Next to her, a lad barely older than her banged his head against the metal handrail.

We might all be strutters, thought Ant, but you're supposed to be out and I'm not. And you get to go in the front entrance.

The tannoy broke the silence again.

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‘The next stop is Caledonian Road. Alight here for the HMP London, formerly Holloway and Pentonville Prisons.’

Ant swallowed hard. So this was it. The final sprint. Like runners waiting for the gun, they crowded round the doors, leaning against each other for support as the train slowed.

‘Out of the way!’ called the headbanger, waving his arms frantically.

She glanced at his watch before she got off the train.

Ninety seconds.

The barrier was open.

The two women turned left to Holloway, the men turned right for Pentonville. Spike was dead ahead, but Ant sprinted for the side road and glanced skywards. At least the guard drones were somewhere else – presumably at the main entrances, counting in the stragglers. She was sure any footage could be ‘lost’ if necessary, but it would be one less problem.

The thirty-second siren wailed from somewhere inside the walls and dread flooded through her. She had always known that six o’clock was the cut-off, the time the assessor would visit her cell. She had to be there . . .

Security tunnel one rose in front of her, looping from the prison a thousand metres down the hill to a cavernous metal building with grooved, windowless walls. It sat like a grounded container ship looking down over a sea of dilapidated housing.

Home sweet home.

The two old prisons had effectively become a single

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huge prison, joined by massive walkways, vast fences and new-build construction. Ant weaved her way around the cranes and diggers. The guards' station, all glass and concrete, was straight in front of her, surrounded by three-metre-high fencing. She saw a guard look up, frown, then smirk. From under her top she pulled a swipe card with ID attached; the photo showed a short-haired man in his twenties and the name B. MACMILLAN. She lunged for the electronic keypad, stabbing the card through the slot and picking out digits as fast as her shaking hands would allow. The gate sprang open and she tore down the rubble-strewn path that ran alongside the tunnel.

'Cutting it fine again, Ant!' called the guard, laughing. She just had time to give him the finger before crashing into a security door.

3

Day 788

My favourite things RIGHT NOW:

Drawing pictures with Gina.

Found a butterfly on 4. Flew off.

Also hot again and I'm invisible. Went 1hr 38m without anyone seeing me.

Ant seems mad again.

Things I want: games, wifi, friends.

It was only a minute after six when Ant reached the 'family annexe' of the new, sprawling HMP London. It had soon been nicknamed 'Spike', the name often given to Victorian workhouses. A prison within a prison, the midpoint between the requisitioned Holloway and Pentonville was now Britain's first family prison. The vast hollow shell

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now housed eight levels of accommodation, stacked on top of each other like decks of a ship. On the top level, a locked and gated bridge linked it to the prison offices. Elaborate scaffolding and metallic walkways, sometimes called the spirals, framed and connected the eight floors, each holding ten portakabins – the family cells of the annexe. They had originally been considered temporary holding areas, but two years on there was no sign of any upgrade.

Forty-three families and twenty *solos* served their time here, with sentences varying from five years to thirty. Electronic boards outside each cell showed the names of the inmates, the heritage crime they had been found guilty of and their punishment. If you tapped the screen, it displayed your case history, details of the offences your parents or grandparents committed and how they had escaped punishment. If you tapped again, it ran a film called *Paying the Price*, which explained how the last global Depression had devastated whole countries. How an ‘undeserving few’ had survived – but had now been caught and were no longer part of the ‘national community’.

No one tapped.

Drenched with sweat, Ant barely noticed the greenhouse-like heat she had returned to. Continuous summer sunshine heated the prison like an oven, the extensive use of fans and de-humidifiers on every floor ineffective against the radiating metal walls.

It was 6.01. One miserable minute out, one Sean-the-bullying-schoolboy minute out.

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Please, Grey, go somewhere else first. And please take your time, she thought.

Ant stopped in a stairwell, breathlessly listening to the sound of the Assessor and his team giving a family a lecture. They'd reached the cell at the far end of the first floor. The two youngest children spilled out onto the deck in tears. They caught sight of Ant and she swiftly put her finger to her lips; they got the message. They were only ten and eight but had learned that Ant was usually on their side, gave the assessor a hard time and could get them stuff. She waved them back into their cell and they understood. A distraction was needed.

As the high-pitched whine that the little girl had made her speciality filled the annexe, Ant dashed up the steps. She was exhausted but still fast. At sixteen, she was short for her age, but wiry and strong and well used to darting around the levels unnoticed. The screws knew, but the screws got paid. Ant ran the length of the deck, bent double. She reached the steps to the second and third floors, adrenalin and fear powering her weary muscles.

Cell 33. The fifteen-metre-long cabin ran lengthways along the third deck, its door open for assessment as the rules dictated. Through one window she could see her brother Mattie, and Dan, her foster father, sitting quite still, apparently not talking. She caught a glimpse of Gina peering round the door; her foster mother, attention caught, nodded briefly – relief flashing across her face – and spoke into the cell. Mattie and Dan jumped up – Ant

knew what was happening now. She looked briefly at the other cells, counted to four, and ran.

‘They’re thirty seconds behind me,’ she exhaled in a whisper as she leaped through the door. Gina was poised with the strap held in both hands, her face taut with concentration. Ant’s little brother looked happy and cross at the same time; Dan, she knew, would be furious, so she didn’t look at him at all. She had already turned her back to Gina, pulling her hoodie and soaked T-shirt up above her waist. She watched the doorway as she felt the three-part strap snap into place. Gina wasn’t as fast as Mattie at re-strapping, but now wasn’t the time to mention that.

 Ringing, clanging footsteps on the stairs.

‘They’re coming! Lock it in!’ hissed Ant. She felt Gina push and twist; then the end clamps tightened into her flesh.

‘You’re done!’ whispered Gina. ‘Lose the hoodie.’ It had served its purpose of disguise, but now, in the sweltering conditions of the prison, it looked ridiculous – a red flag to the authorities – and Ant threw it on her bunk. ‘Table, next to Mattie,’ said Gina, pulling Ant’s T-shirt back over her strap. ‘You’ve been working on German verbs, *geben* and *essen*. Go!’ and she pushed Ant towards the open textbooks, just as Assessor Grey, short and stiff, with wire-framed glasses, appeared at the top of the stairs. He glanced quickly at the ten cells, narrowed his eyes and chose the family in cell 31 to visit first.

Ant, Mattie, Gina and Dan all breathed a sigh of relief.

‘OK, we have a few minutes,’ said Gina. ‘But once

he's come and asked his stupid questions, let's get him out as soon as we can. We don't argue, we are not difficult, we don't swear.'

'Why do I get the feeling that was aimed at me?' muttered Ant, writing as many German sentences as she could think of in her book.

Dan leaned over from the other side of the table. 'Capital M for *Mittag*. And we'll talk about what happened today once Grey and his lot have gone.'

Ant carried on writing and said nothing.

Mattie hooked his arm through Ant's and she ruffled his thick curly hair without looking up. 'We were worried,' he said. 'Where were you?'

'It's like you're my fifth parent,' she said. 'And you're eleven years old.'

'But I didn't know!' he whispered hoarsely. 'If you hadn't come back . . .' His voice caught and he buried his face in Ant's neck. She put her pen down and hugged him.

'*Mwen sonje'w*,' he whispered, resorting to the Creole slang their mother had taught them. Originally they had used it to keep secrets from their father; in prison they used it to keep secrets from everyone.

'*Mwen mem too*,' she whispered back. 'I missed you too. But I came back and I was doing good stuff.' She glanced at Dan. 'Honest.'

Mattie let her go. 'Your "good stuff" is usually bad,' he said, but he was smiling. Ant grinned back. 'Thought so,' he muttered.

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There was a tense silence in the cell as they waited for the assessor and his team to finish in 31. Dan polished and repolished his glasses, Gina played endlessly with a strand of brown hair until Ant inhaled sharply.

‘Look busy, Death-breath on his way.’