

The Panopticon

I'm an experiment. I always have been. It's a given, a liberty, a fact. They watch me. Not just in school or social-work reviews, court or police cells – they watch everywhere. They watch me hang by my knees from the longest bough of the oak tree, I can do that for hours, just letting the wishes drift by. They watch me as I outstare the moon. I am not intimidated by its terrible baldness. They're there when I fight, and fuck, and wank. When I carve my name on trees, and avoid stepping on the cracks. They're there when I stare too long or too clearly, without flinching. They watch me sing, and joyride, and start riots with only the smallest of sparks, they even watch me in the bath. I keep my eyes open underwater, just my nose and mouth poking out so I can blow smoke-rings – my record is seventeen in a row. They watch me not cry. They watch me lie like an angel, hiding my dirty feet. They watch me, I know it, and I can't find anywhere anymore – where they can't see.

It's an unmarked car. Tinted windows, vanilla air freshener. The cuffs are sore on my wrists but not tight enough tae mark them. They're too smart for that. The policeman stares at me in the rear-view mirror. This village is just speed bumps, a river, and cottages with window blinds sagging like droopy eyelids. The fields are strange. Too long. Too wide. The sky is huge.

I should be playing the birthday game, but I cannae, not while there's witnesses around. The birthday game can only be played in private, a secret – or the experiment will find out. What I need tae do is memorise the number stickered inside the police car's back window. It's 75999.43. Close my eyes, and say it in my head tae make sure it's memorised. I get it right first time.

We drive over a wee bridge. I want tae jump in that river – the water's brown but I'd still feel cleaner after. I once slept in the forest for ten days. It was nice, nae people, mostly. The odd paedo on the warpath like, so I had tae watch but when it was safe, I bathed in the rapids. I washed my knickers and t-shirt in the current every morning – then dried them on rocks while I sunbathed.

I could live like that. Nae stress. Nae windows or doors. We must have had a summer that year. I was only twelve then. Twelve and fucked, but not as fucked as now.

The policewoman lays her hand on my arm. She's dealt with me before. She cannae see my nails are gouged into my fist. I didnae even notice until I uncurled my fingers, and saw red half-moons on my palm.

I hate. Her face. Her big feet. I hate the way the policeman turns the wheel. This nowhere place. There's nae escape. My cuffs chink as I smooth down my schoolskirt – it's heavily spattered with bloodstains.

We drive by a huge stone wall, up tae a gateway framed by two tall pillars. On the first there's a gargoyle – someone's stubbed a fag out in his spout. Glance up at the other pillar, there is a winged cat crouching down on it.

My heart starts going, and it's not what's waiting at the end of the drive down there, or three nights with nae sleep in the cells. It's not the policeman smirking at me in his mirror. It's a winged cat – with one red eye and a terrible smile.

I'm trying not tae let the policeman see me look up but I have tae turn my neck and glance back. There's yellow lichen growing all over the cat's stone shoulders. I cannae slow my heart down now. That's what the monk sent. A tiny drawing of a winged cat, that's all. One winged cat, in pencil – no note. He sent it from the nuthouse tae my social worker. Helen's gonnae make me go and see him, as soon as she gets back.

A real stone winged cat!

It's stunning. His wings would be a couple of metres wide if he unfolded them. I'll draw him later, alongside my two-headed flying kitten, and a troop of snails on acid – wearing top hats, with spirally eyes and jaggy fucking teeth.

A sign for *The Panopticon* is nestled in trees with conkers hanging off them. A leafy arc dapples light onto the road, it flickers across my face, and in the car window my eyes flash amber, then dull.

The Panopticon itself looms in a big crescent at the end of a long driveway. It's four floors high, two turrets on either side and a peak in the middle – that must be where the watchtower is.

'They'll not be scared of you in there,' the policewoman says.

She undoes the chain from her belt tae my cuffs. I scratch under my ponytail, then my leg. I've one of those wandering itches that won't settle.

There is birdsong. The smell of wet grass filters in the window – bark swollen by rain, mulch, autumn, a faint wisp of wood fire. The car pulls away from the leafy canopy into a sudden glare of sunlight and the policeman snaps his sun visor down but he doesnae need tae, clouds are already racing down from behind the hills. A light drizzle glitters in the sun. There'll be a rainbow after this.

Files marked *A. Hendricks: Section 14 (372.1)* are stacked on the front seat. My knees are itchy now. Funny things knees, knobbly hunks of bone. The car stops outside a sign for the main entrance. In the car park there are six shan cars, and a minibus with *Midlothian Social Work Department* emblazoned on the side.

Windows are open on the third floor but only about six inches – they’ll have safety locks on so they dinnae get jumpers. Three girls hang out, although only their heads and arms fit through. They’re all smoking away, and giggling tae each other.

The top floor is barred and boarded up. I bet there’s petitions tae close this place down already, people from the village writing letters tae their MPs. Mr Masters is right. He told us all about it in history – communities dinnae like no ones.

Mr Masters said, in the old days, if a woman didnae have a husband or a family but she still did okay? People didnae like that. If there wasnae a male authority figure tae say she was godly – then they thought she was weak for the devil. Bound tae be bad. Or even if her crops were doing well, better than the neighbours, or she wasnae scared tae answer back? Fucking witch. Prick it, poke it, peel its fingernails off and burn it in the square for the whole town tae see.

My shoes are tiny next tae the policewoman’s, and my heartbeat’s too fast. I’m beginning tae shrink, shrink, shrink, again! I hate this. Everything recedes at the speed of light – the policeman, the car, even the white sun – until all that’s left is a tiny pinprick for me tae stare back at the policeman. He’s saying something. His lips – move.

Gouge my nails back intae my palms.

‘Aye, they’ll have you up on that locked fourth floor in nae time at all, Anais.’

Prick. Fuck off wankstain. Stop looking at me. Just breathe, breathe, breathe until the shrinking begins tae give.

The lassies are craning out their windows, trying tae get the first look. They’ll know already, about the riots, the dealing, the fires, the fights. They’ll know there is a pig in a coma.

At the middle window the dark-haired lassie is laughing. She's got a curly moustache drawn on her upper lip. Next tae her is a small blonde with a pixie haircut, she's letting a long glob of saliva drool down, but it's still attached tae her mouth. The lassie at the end is wearing a baseball cap.

A shoelace hangs off the bar on the blonde girl's window, but there's nae fag on it – just an empty knot. Curly moustache is smoking it. Each Unit does that. We tie shoelaces tae the windows, so you can swing your fag, or joint, or whatever along after lights out.

'Aye, you're no gonnae be the smart cunt in there!' the policeman states.

Focus on his face. It'll help tae keep the shrinking back. He's got green eyes, a squint nose. The hair on his neck and forearms is thick as a fucking pelt. You're giving me the boak fuck-pus. He's loving this. They've wanted me banged up away from town and their stations, for how long? They think if they put me far enough away then I cannae get in trouble. Aye. Okay. There's still buses ay. I'm not behind locked doors yet.

The policeman is looking at me in his rear-view mirror. He gave me a stoater of a slap yesterday. Old radgio el fuckmong I call him, old cunt-pus himself.

'Smile Anais,' he says 'it's a palatial country house this!'

He gestures at the unit. It looks like a prison. It was one, once. And a nuthouse. He smirks again. I wish *he* was in a fucking coma.

Police dinnae know we compare notes just as much as they do. We know if there's a psycho in a Unit, or a right bastard polis who'll always batter you at the station. We know if somebody has been stabbed or who's on the game, or which paedos in town will lock you in their flat and have you gangbanged until you turn fucking tricks. We send e-mails, start legends – create myths. It's the same in the nick or the nuthouse: notoriety is respect. Like, if you were in a Unit with a total psycho and they said you were sound? Then you'll be safer in the next place. If it's a total nut that's vouched for you, the less hassle you'll get. I dinnae need tae worry about that. I am the total nut.

We're in training for the proper jail really, ay. Nobody mentions that but it's a statistical fact. That or on the game. Most of us are anyway – but not everybody. Some go tae the nuthouse. Some just disappear.

The policeman unbuckles his seatbelt and checks there's nothing worth choring on the dash.

'Here we go,' he says, opening his door.

One of the girls whistles, long and low.

'Less of that, aye,' he glares up.

'I wasnae whistling at you pal,' she says.

The baseball cap lassie spits.

'Dinnae give your mind a treat, we meant the hot one!'

They're still giggling when he rams his hat on and clicks open my door. The policeman guides me up, hand on my head, turns me around – beeps the car alarm on.

The blonde girl lets her long globule of saliva fall away. The police walk either side of me. I keep my shoulders back, my gaze even – almost serene. I dinnae walk with a swagger, just a certainty.

As we reach the main door, I look up and it passes between us – the glint. It's strong as sunlight and twice as bright. They can feel it in me. It can start a riot in seconds that glint. It could easily kill a man. It'll probably kill me one day. I need tae rein it in cos they really want me locked up, in a secure unit, permanently, and that glint'll get me in there if I dinnae watch what I'm doing, ay. I give the lassies my sweetest smile and lift an imaginary hat as a salute.

'Ladies!'

The blonde girl grins at me. The policeman takes my elbow and steers me under the porch where they cannae see. He rings the bell and I stamp my feet lightly, once, twice. I already know what it'll smell like in there. Bleach. Cleaning products. Musty carpets. Crappy wood. Grey stuff. Cheap shite. Every unit smells the same.

There's wire through the front windows but not the side ones. They'll be easier tae smash. I try tae breathe easy but I want these fucking cuffs off. I'm feeling claustrophobic and my neck aches. I'm fucking starving. I want a milkshake and a Big Mac.

The policeman rings the bell again. My heart's going. I've moved fifty-eight fucking times now but every time I walk through a new door I feel exactly the same – two years old and ready tae bite.

It's open plan inside. Nowhere to hide. That sucks. The Officer in Charge waddles toward us. She's got a shiny bowl cut, stripy socks, flat red shoes, and a ladybird brooch on her cardy.

'Hello, hello, you must be Anais. Come in officers, please come in. Did you get lost?' she asks as she ushers us through the door.

'Noh, we're later than intended, sorry about that. We didnae want tae hold Anais' transfer up but it couldnae be helped,' the policeman says.

He smiles and takes his hat off. He's such a two-faced fuck.

'We thought Anais was arriving yesterday,' the Officer in Charge says.

She witters tae the polis and I trail along behind them, turning around once, twice, looking at every single detail. It's important tae place where everything is from the start. So nobody can walk up behind you. Well. Other than the experiment, but there's nothing that can be done about that. Walls and doors dinnae mean jackshit tae them.

The whole building is in a big curve, like the shape of a C, and along the curve on the top floor are six locked black doors. On the two landings below there are another six doors on each. They have been painted white, and none of them are closed. I heard they dinnae close the doors in here except after lights out. It's meant tae be good for us, ay. But how? How is that good? Even from down here you can see bits of people's posters in their rooms, and a kid sitting on a bed, and another one putting on his socks.

Each of those bedrooms up there used tae be a cell. Helen told me that, I could tell she wished they still fucking were. Embedded in each doorframe there are wee black circles. That must

be where the bars were sawn off. I wonder why they kept nutters in cells? I suppose it was so each of them could only see the watchtower, they couldnae see their neighbours. Divide and conquer.

Kids begin tae step out of their rooms and look down. I count them out the corner of my vision – one, two, three, four, five. A boy with curly hair and glasses begins tae kick the perspex balcony outside his door. I dinnae look up. There will be time for all the nice fucking hellos and how do you dos later.

Right in the middle of the C shape, as high as the top floor, is the watchtower. I look up. There is a glass window going all the way around the top of the tower. You can't see in that glass, but whomever, or whatever, is in there – can see out. From the watchtower it could see into every bedroom, every landing, every bathroom. Everywhere. It's fucking creepy.

My social-worker said they were gonnae make all the nuthouses and prisons like this once. The thought of that pleased her as well, I could tell. She reckons she's a liberal, but really she's just a cunt.

This place has experiment written all over it. It stinks of new paint – everything magnolia. If I ever get my own flat I will never have a magnolia wall. In fact, if I built a house I'd never have a square room. Not fucking one. These carpets are cheap cord shit, and everything smells like crap deodorant, or stale fag smoke – or manky fucking soup.

At the end of the main room, opposite the door to the office, there is a wee ornate wooden door. It looks like one of the only original things they've not trashed in here. I will investigate what is through there later. This place would have been nicer once, more gothic. It's been social-work-ised but, so it looks cheap as shit.

The police have come tae a halt outside the office door, and the Officer in Charge is in there, she's trying tae tie up the staff's changeover before they take me in.

Scan the ground floor. Tap my feet. Clink my cuffs together until the policewoman leans over and says: *Stop*.

The ground floor is mostly open plan, lounge tae the right of the main door, and opposite that four tables make a dining space in the corner. Three doors lead off the main room, probably tae the laundry, interview rooms, maybe a games room – if that’s a pool table I can see through there! There’s a telly screwed tae the wall so nobody can chore it. The DVD player will be in the office, same reason.

Finally the Officer in Charge opens the main office door. She must have been waiting on the staff finishing their meeting, but as we walk in it’s obvious they’ve not managed to.

‘Anais, sorry, I didnae introduce myself properly. I am the Officer in Charge, my name is Joan. D’ye need a drink or anything?’

‘No.’

She looks at the police and they shake their heads. The office is full, there’s too many staff. I dinnae like this. I want a hole under the ground tae live in. Or a treehouse. Somewhere nobody can see me. I feel bare, like my skin’s missing. My skin doesnae even feel like mine half the time. They shouldnae be putting me through a handover with this many staff in here.

‘Anais, this is Eric, he is our student at the moment. This is Brenda, this is Edward, and this is your support worker, Angus.’

They all nod in turn, smiling. Edward has a frizzy ginger mullet and wee round specs. Slick. Ginger isnae the problem (all the hottest girls are redheads) it’s not even the frizz, it’s the tone, it’s an angry, pissy orange – waist-length mullet. Why would anyone do that? The student prick is trying tae dress like he’s a casual. Twat. Brenda appears to be on prozac and valium, her eyes have that glazed dullness about them. My support-worker guy, Angus, has long green dreads and knee-high Doc boots.

‘I do apologise, you will need to excuse us but you caught us in between shifts. We were hoping tae try and finish the changeover before you arrived,’ Joan says.

The policeman puts my files down.

‘Without disclosing anything directly, of course – can you verify that Anais has been released without charge?’ she asks.

‘We haven’t charged Miss Hendricks but she is under investigation. We need her school uniform in this. You’ll need tae do it as soon as we leave, don’t give her the opportunity to tamper with possible evidence.’ The policeman hands her a clear plastic bag with a label on it.

‘D’ye not normally do this at the station?’

‘Anais cited many, many regulations while she was detained. These included her right to only have her clothes removed, for a full search, if she had a female member of social-work staff present. She has this stipulated on her file.’

‘Why’s that?’ Joan asks.

‘There were previous allegations from Miss Hendricks about treatment during searches. We did try tae get her social worker but she was apparently abroad, and we, of course, are only concerned for Anais’ well-being, so we decided tae wait until we brought her here.’

‘That’s not a problem, Officer.’

Old skelp-your-pus sounds well convincing, I almost fucking believe him myself.

‘I’ve arranged for our lab technician to come out tomorrow. She’ll do the final tests and collect Anais’ uniform.’ He shifts from foot to foot.

‘Can you at least tell us if the police officer’s condition is stable?’ Joan asks.

‘For now.’

‘It is a coma though?’

‘An acute coma.’

‘Is she expected to come out of it soon?’ Joan asks. She’s not looking at me. All the staff are carefully not looking at me. Except the student. He’s fucking fascinated.

‘No, she’s not, they don’t know if she will.’

‘But you didn’t charge Anais?’

‘No. We’ve no actual evidence that Miss Hendricks was responsible for the assault. Not yet.’

Joan puts the plastic bag in her drawer and signs a release form.

I hold my hands out and the policewoman unlocks my cuffs. It feels so good tae be able to rub my wrists. Imagine a bath, that would be too good. A great big fuck-off thing on legs with a huge window next tae it, and bubbles, and views of the sky. Imagine a bathroom like that with fluffy white towels and a bolt on the door.

Joan ticks more forms for the police, then they leave. Crusty reaches over tae shake my hand.

‘Hello Anais, I’m your support worker, Angus. I’m really pleased to meet you.’

‘Hiya.’

‘Are you no gonnae take a seat, Anais?’

I sit down.

The police get intae their car, doors slam. The sky is azure out there now. Azure means blue. It’s nothing tae do with Aztecs. The police trundle up the drive. Smell ye later wankstains. The statues on the pillars are stark against the sky. The gargoyle’s telling the flying cat a secret. His wings lift in the breeze.

‘So Helen, it is Helen your social worker?’

I nod and Joan continues.

‘Good, Helen is due to arrive in a couple of days. She is really, really sorry that she is still being held up but it is completely out of her control, apparently, and she wanted me tae pass on her apologies.’

The cat’s wings flex, just lightly.

I sit up straight and stare, it definitely moved, or it could be a flashback. There’s nae tracers though. I get the flashbacks a lot lately. I’m beginning tae worry I didnae really make it back from my last bad trip.

Mental note – quit tripping on schooldays. Keep it for special occasions: bar mitzvahs, pancake Tuesday, or even fucking Easter. Jay told me gangsters used tae dip their pinkies in liquid LSD so they were permanently tripping, but the clever bit was, if they got done they only went tae the nuthouse. It's because if you're permanently tripping, you're legally classified as insane. In the States, even if you only take acid like ten times or something, they still reckon you're certifiable. They'd think I was well gone.

Where's all my shit? It's not in this office. I hope nobody's chored anything. I asked for something – other than bin bags – tae move my stuff in once.

'What would you like, Anais?'

'Matching Italian leather suitcases? Designer. Vintage if possible. And a trunk, a big old leather yin with my name on it.'

They thought I was being wide. Tae be honest, I would have settled for a fucking sports bag. I'm not paying for one though, I've better ways tae spend my cash.

'Your room is 49. The fourth floor is *totally* out of bounds for all clients right now. You will have access tae arts groups and counselling through your support worker. We practise a holistic approach tae client care at the Panopticon,' Joan says.

She's been talking at me the whole time I've been sat here.

'Holistic?'

'Aye, that means we take into consideration all the needs of our clients.'

'All of them?'

'The ones we consider healthy.'

'Is it healthy getting locked up twenty-four hours a day like?'

'You know why secure units are necessary, Anais, and you are not locked up in the main unit anyway.'

'Sound. Why am I not getting put up in the secure unit on the top floor?'

‘We cannae actually place anyone in the secure unit yet, there have been delays because there’s asbestos in the roof. The whole Secure Unit has been postponed until we can resolve funding issues.’

‘Right.’

My heart beats fast, fast, fast. This is a score. I was sure they were gonnae get me locked up on the top floor straight away. This buys time. Maybe I’ll not be dead for my sixteenth birthday. I’d rather be dead than locked up twenty-four seven cos if that happens – the experiment will have finally, totally, fucking got me.

‘Am I definitely getting put up there when it opens?’

‘Well, let’s hope you dinnae get placed in the new Secure Unit when it opens, Anais. But if you do at some point in the future, then you would actually be in one of the best small Secure Units in the UK.’

‘Spiff fucking spoff.’

She just looks at me.

You dancer. It’s not open yet. Thank God, thank Jesus and Mary and Buddha. The student is fascinated. Subtle much? He wants tae measure me up – turn me around, knock on my head and peer inside my ear tae see what’s marching around in there. What a fucking womble.

‘Are you gonnae ask me if I did it?’ I ask him.

He doesnae know where tae look.

‘No, Anais! We are not going tae discuss it here,’ Joan stands up.

‘Aye? Well *he* obviously wants tae, he wants tae so bad he needs putting on a leash.’

‘That’s enough, Anais,’ she snaps.

She’s big, Joan. If she sat on you in a restraint or in a riot you’d fucking feel it. Mental note – avoid bowl cut next time there’s a riot.

Mullet's reading a book in Chinese. He has skinny legs and knobbly fingers and the way he holds his shoulders urnay what let me know. It's just something that's there, I cannae explain it but I can usually tell on sight these days.

Mullet doesnae do adults.

No way. I'd put fucking money on it. Sometimes I think they should take me around schools and kids' clubs, like a sniffer dog but not for drugs – for paedos. They'd never believe me though, if I told them? Hello, my name's Anais Hendricks and I can tell a paedo on sight – usually. Aye right they'd believe me! I can though. I can tell if a lassie's been abused just by looking at her. They wouldnae believe that though, ay. There's nae point in telling them. Not about that. Not about the dreams. Not about flying cats.

Joan has twenty different religious icons up on the office wall behind her.

'Nae witch?'

'You have a religious preference, Anais?'

'Pagan. Three parts witch, white obviously, well sort of!'

She stares back at me, taps her nails on the desk twice.

'Obviously,' she says.

'Seriously, Joan. I'm a white witch, I promise, cept on Sundays.'

'I shan't ask why not on Sundays.'

'Best not.'

'Well, we'll see what we can do, Anais. I'm sure there's a pagan symbol we can find tae put up for you. We dinnae want you tae feel excluded. I know you've moved a lot. Maybe it's time tae settle down?'

I'm dizzy. I hate. Her red shoes. His ginger mullet. Paedos, polis, sniffer-dogs, Chinese books, tits, dirt, the colour yellow, icons, cord fucking carpets. I'd rather be dead today but I'm not, I'm fifteen and fucked.

‘Wanker,’ I whisper tae the student as I get up. He stands with his soft posh hand on my files and looks hurt.

Joan nods and the student lifts up the pile of my files and puts them on her desk.

‘Brenda will show you tae your room. If you have anything sharp on you it will be removed. And please, do not tell the other residents what you are in for!’