

IN A HOT PLACE by David Belbin

They grab you outside the airport. They put a bag over your head.

'Why are you doing this?' you ask.

But if they can hear, they do not answer.

'Where are my friends?' you ask.

You were with two mates. Your plane leaves in an hour.

Will your friends go home without you?

They put you in the back of a van.

'Why don't you search me?' you ask. 'I've done nothing wrong. I've been on holiday.'

They don't reply. They take off the bag and put on a blindfold. They put you on a plane.

When you get out of the plane, you are in a hot place.

'Where are we?' you ask.

Nobody answers. They take off the blindfold. It's dark.

They put the bag back on your head. You find it hard to breathe. At least they can't see you crying. You are hungry, but you're too proud to complain. Now and then they give you a sip from a water bottle. The water tastes old, bitter. The drinking straw hurts your dry mouth.

They put you in a cell. You do not know if it is day or night. All the time, you hear shouts and screams. You do not understand the words. You begin to shout too.

'I was on holiday! I did nothing wrong!'

Nobody comes.

'I didn't have a bomb!' you protest. 'Why did you take me, not my mates? Or did you take my mates too?'

Days pass. They take off the blindfold. At last, the questions begin.

'Why were you there? What did you do? Who do you know? Why were you there? Who did you see? What did they ask you to do?'

The room used to be white. Now the walls are covered in stains. The stains look like blood, sick, urine and worse. The room smells like a toilet. They tie you to the chair and put plastic cuffs around your wrists.

'What am I doing here?' you ask.

'We ask the questions,' they say.

'I've done nothing wrong,' you say.

'Then you have nothing to worry about,' they say.

'I'm only fifteen,' you say. 'I want my parents.'

'Were your parents with you?'

'No. I was with friends. Are my friends here too?'

'No. Did your parents send you?'

'They paid for my holiday,' you tell them.

You want them to know this was all a mistake. You were on holiday. It was only a holiday. You are not a terrorist. You do not want to be a terrorist. You did not meet any terrorists. You do

not want to overthrow anybody. You only want to go home.

'Your parents paid, did they?' they say. 'Then maybe we will bring your parents here too.'

'What am I supposed to have done?'

'You tell us.'

You don't know what to say, so you say 'no comment.'

This is the wrong answer. More men come. They put the hood back on. They began to hit you again. They hit you on the heels. They hit you on the head. They punch you in the tummy. They are hitting you in places that will not bruise. It hurts so much, you wish they would ask more questions. You beg them to ask more questions.

'I'll tell you anything you want to know,' you say.

But they do not believe you. Their questions are always the same.

'Where did you go? Who do you work for? What did you do? Where did you do it? What do you believe? Who do you plan to kill? Who are you working with?'

'I don't want to kill anybody!' you say.

'We all want to kill someone,' they say.

'Why won't you let me go? I've done nothing.'

'We've all done something,' they say.

'I want a lawyer!'

They laugh. 'You don't have any rights here,' they say.

'Where am I?' you ask.

'Nowhere. Tell us who you work for.'

'I don't work for anyone,' you say.

They do not believe you. They take your clothes off. They tie you to a wooden board. They put a plastic bag around your face. It has a hole in it. They pour water through the hole. You begin to gag.

'I'll tell you anything!' you say.

They take the bag off. You make things up. You tell them what you think they want to hear.

They do not believe you. They tie you to another board. They put the bag back on.

'I did it!' you say. 'Whatever you say I did, I did it!'

A lawyer comes to see you. You tell her what happened. You have no bruises, the lawyer says. They are very good at not leaving bruises, you say.

'It took your parents months to find you,' the lawyer says.

'They thought you were dead. What did you do?'

'I did nothing,' you say.

'That's what everyone says,' the lawyer says. 'But they usually have their reasons. What did you do?'

If you knew the answer, you would tell her.

'Nothing,' you say.

'I'll try to get you out,' the lawyer says.

'Don't I have rights?' you ask.

'Nobody has rights here,' the lawyer says.

She goes away. She does not come back. They leave you in a cell for weeks on end. You speak to no-one. But you dream. You have bad dreams. You dream they are right. You really are a terrorist. In your dreams, you understand why people become terrorists. Because you hate people like them.

You are about to turn sixteen, but are not sure when. There are no clocks, no calendar. Then they give you a birthday present. It hurts a lot. You ask to see a doctor. They give you one.

'You seem healthy to me,' the doctor says.

'You say this is healthy? I can't move my arm.'

'You still have your eyes, and your feet are still at the ends of your legs.'

'Are you really a doctor?' you ask.

They hit you again. They ask more questions. They hurt you again. They ask more questions. They hit you with questions. They ask more hits. They question your hurt. They ask you again. You question their hurt. They hit you.

'You are not one of us,' they tell you.

'I am not one of them,' you tell them.

After a long while, a different lawyer came.

'You have human rights,' he says.

You do not believe him.

'People are asking questions about you,' he says.

You ask who these people are.

'Your parents would like to visit you,' the lawyer says, 'but they are not allowed to.'

'I don't want them to see me like this,' you say.

'What did you do to make them take you?' the lawyer asks.

'I was on holiday.'

'Why were you on holiday there?' he asks.

'My friends have family there. We stayed with them.'

'Have you or any of your family or friends ever been in trouble?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'That is the wrong answer,' the lawyer says. 'You and everyone you know have to be innocent. If not, it means you're guilty. That's how the system works.'

'How can I be sure of a thing like that?' you say.

'You have to say what I tell you to say,' he says.

So you say what he tells you to say. And you wait. And you wait. And they ask you more questions. But you can tell they're getting bored.

'Are you one of them? Are you one of us?'

You say 'no'. And you keep saying 'no'. And, after a long time, they get tired of asking you questions. They even get tired of hitting you. And they stop. And they agree to release you, as long as nobody makes a fuss. So you don't make a fuss. And they let

you go.

Your family are very glad to have you home. Your friends are very glad to see you. They're very sorry they left you behind. But your friends have moved on. You're not the same, and neither are they.

You go to college to make up for what you missed. You make new friends. You explain where you were. Some people are impressed. Some ask you to join the fight. You know who the enemy are, they say. You know what they are afraid of. Help us to get them, you are asked. Give them what they deserve.

'What have you got to lose?' you are asked. 'Do you want them to think they won?'

You are not afraid. You say you will think about it. You think about it. You think about it. You're not afraid.

You think about it.

This story is copyright free and may be photocopied, otherwise copied, published online or reprinted freely without seeking the author's permission. Where the story is used in a commercial publication, the author suggests that the publishers make a donation to Amnesty International at www.amnesty.org.uk.