

## **NOLAN**

**by Bistra Velichkova**

translated from the Bulgarian by David Mossop

“Inspector, the accused is here now, shall I bring her in?”

The inspector raised his head and cast a tired look at his secretary. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and nodded almost imperceptibly in approbation. A young girl entered the room. It was Nolan.

“Nolan Jameson Miller. When she was 16 she had tried to ruin the reputation of the “Ferrum College” school, where she was studying in Virginia. She was the ring leader and set fire to the school. She intended to completely destroy the school building. At the age of 18 she had been arrested for stealing items of clothing and shoes from shops and shopping malls, and for the theft of books in the state of Alabama. Because it was her first crime in another state, she was not charged for it. At the age of 21, she was arrested as an adult for the theft of expensive computer equipment in New Orleans, Louisiana. She claimed she needed the money to buy books. She was charged with minor misdemeanours and put on "probation", the lowest level of punishment she could be given. The next levels would have been complete incarceration and life imprisonment”.

The inspector closed the file and looked at the girl with an expression of boredom.

After the inspector’s last words, Nolan smiled daringly and said:

“Life imprisonment ...” She said with a wry smile, “Aren’t we all condemned to life imprisonment in this world?”

The inspector looked at her and replied, “Nolan, do you feel like you're in prison?”

“Well at the moment, yes, especially when I’m here talking to you. This is a prison, isn’t it?” She replied jokingly.

The officer didn’t pay much attention to the Nolan’s carefree tone.

“Look, if you don't commit any crimes in the next year, you won't have to come and see me so often”.

“Are you joking? I’ve got so used to you that I can’t imagine not seeing you! Won’t you miss me?!” Nolan laughed out loud.

“Yes, of course, I will. But on the other hand, if we don’t see each other, that means that everything is going well!” The officer replied.

“Why? What's not going well now? I reckon everything’s perfect!”

“Well, I suppose so, but you're only 22 after all, and you're on probation. Your whole life's under a microscope... and if you commit the smallest misdemeanour, we'll have to go the next level of punishment... And I don’t really want to...”

“Well why don’t we just go to the next level, it’ll be like developmental for me! I don't want to spend my whole life just with probation - that's such a weak punishment!”

“Well, I suppose so. Probation’s something like a trial period, during which we have to observe you and make sure you don’t deviate and break the law”.

“Ah, a trial period. Like when you start a new job and you’re on a trial contract and if you don't mess things up, they'll give you a job?!”

The officer said nothing for a while and then replied,

“Yes, something like that...”

“So when my trial period’s up, what job are you going to give me?” - Nolan paused and then went on, “a job like.... ideal citizen of the United States of America, or something like that?”

The inspector looked at her seriously in silence and then said, “Let’s go to the questions I have to ask you, because time’s getting on, Nolan...”

“All right then, if you want I can start straight with the answers, because I know them all by heart.

“How was your last week? Did you feel the urge to take anything from a shop, without paying for it?! Have you drunk any alcohol?!”... To be perfectly honest, you haven’t got any imagination with quizzes like that. Why have you never asked me what my favourite book is or my favourite film, for example?!”

“Nolan, tell me how was your week? What did you do? Did you work in the restaurant?”

“Are you really interested Inspector Bill, or are you just doing it because you have to?”

The probation officer sighed and looked down mechanically at the pile of sheets of paper on his desk and Nolan's file. Without looking at the girl he said,

“Of course, I’m interested in you, Nolan. For the United States it's important to know how the life of every individual American is going. In this case it's your life I'm interested in and whether you can live as a free and worthy citizen.”

Nolan shook her head in a sign of disbelief, picked up her pack of cigarettes and lit one.

“Smoking’s not allowed, Nolan!”

“Is that counted as a breaking the law?!”

“To a certain extent, yes!”

Nolan took a long drag on her cigarette and continued talking,

“Have you never broken the law, Mr. Bill?”

“No, never!”

“Not even when it comes to your wife?”

“What you do mean?”

“Have you never broken the law when it comes to your wife?”

“I don’t understand!”

“Have you never got off with other women, other than your wife? You know what I mean?”

The inspector looked embarrassed.

“That’s not breaking the law. It doesn’t say that anywhere in the law!”

“Except in the Bible!” Nolan smiled.

“Yes, but that’s not an official document in court”.

“Why does everything have to be an official document ... The whole of life is just a string of official documents for you - birth certificate, passport, school report card, driving licence, school certificate, university degree, police file... Is that life?”

“Nolan! Put your cigarette out!”

She took a last drag on the butt and nervously stubbed it out in the ash tray. She sat back in her chair and looked at the inspector mockingly from the other side of the desk,

“Come on, fill the forms out and let's get it over with! It’s been a great week. I’ve been going to work regularly. I've had no urge to steal or to kill people. Alcohol and drugs are

completely alien to me..." Nolan suddenly stopped and then said, "Why don't you just photocopy my previous confessions?! You can just change the date and everything will be OK, won't it?!"

"Nolan, you know this is a procedure we have to go through".

"Procedure! Why don't you just listen to me for while? Everything's a procedure and documents, and laws... Where's the person in all this?!"

"The person in question is undergoing a punishment which we don't want to develop into complete incarceration".

"Do you think I'm a criminal, Inspector Bill? Look at me! Look at the clothes I'm wearing! Look into my eyes and tell me with a hand on your heart, that I'm a criminal".

"No, Nolan, look..." The Inspector started uncertainly. "No, you're not a criminal... but you have to understand that all these petty crimes you've committed up to now suggest that you may turn into one!"

"And don't you think that you might also have criminal tendencies? Is it just because you're upholding the law that makes you think you're not a criminal, is that what you think? If you ask me, I might be the one on probation, but I've got more freedom than you, because the way I see it you look like you've been given a life sentence here. You've been sentenced to ask the same questions all your life here in this cage and to make definitions like "deviation from the law". You ask all sorts of people about what they've been doing, and it's only God up there who can say whether they're right or wrong... Just because you've been given the job of inspector here doesn't give you the right to..."

"Nolan, calm down! Nolan!" The officer interrupted her emotional outburst.

"... Just because you've been appointed as inspector here, doesn't give you the right to mess about in people's lives and make decisions for them. What is it that makes you think you can tell who will turn out to be an upstanding and worthy citizen and who won't?! Everybody decides for themselves and are right about themselves..."

"Nolan, I understand... but that's the system and that's how the country works... I don't want to..."

"I don't really care..." Nolan interrupted him abruptly.

The sudden moment of heavy silence was broken by the creaking of the office door

timidly opening. It was the secretary.

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