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# Ahead in the Line

Tony White

It was quite nearby, so we walked on foot, two by two. The lane was almost overgrown with nettles and it was hardly even summer. But the land is very fertile round here. Have you heard that expression when they say that 'vines grow wild in all the hills'? Meaning that a man hardly has to lift a finger to live well. But we are not lazy around here. We are an industrious people, they are the lazy ones.

We came to the bridge and the military police were there and they had an APC, but they didn't stop us. They were actually waiting for us. It was like our own private guard; around five hundred of them. Some of them I recognised as Special Units from Winchester. I was in Winchester before. It used to be the capital, did you know that? Not in my lifetime. I mean hundreds of years ago. A thousand, maybe. But I was there once, so I know their uniforms. Even that seems a long time ago. There was a beautiful cathedral there, too. Very famous. It seems like a different age. When I think about that part of the country it seems as if it was always spring and everything was enjoyable and flourishing. The happiness of plenty. Or maybe it's just that I was young, and probably I was in love.

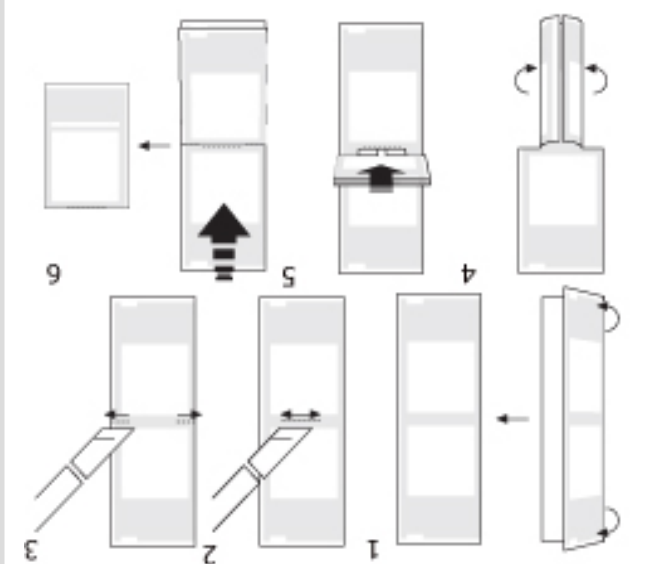
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Author's note: The title of this story is a quotation from Edward Wong and Damien Cave, supplied by the artist Barbara Campbell as a 'prompt' for the story, which was written for Campbell's 1001 Nights Cast (see <http://1001.net.au>).  
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**Ahead in the Line  
 Tony White**

We waited there for a while, by the bridge, but the sun was out and we could have been queuing for a football match, or a concert. We were talking amongst ourselves and someone ahead in the line had a few cigarettes left, so he'd light one and then pass it around, so those few of us nearby would all take a puff, you know we were quite the connoisseurs, taking extravagant puffs from these knock-off cigarettes. But we felt lucky. And we were. Listen. I am still here. Talking to you now.

But we had time to kill and people were telling stories. One man from Bentley, I don't know his name and I missed the beginning of his story, but he was saying, 'My son is a natural. There were not enough men in the town to hold him!' And we all enjoyed this and felt as proud as if he was talking about our own sons.

Someone else told us about a wedding party where they forced the bridegroom and his friends to dig a hole in the earth. Just like that. In his own orchard. At a wedding. Or maybe it wasn't a wedding. Maybe it was a funeral. Well, either way. It's not important. But you know that this is not something you want to happen to you! Believe me, when someone with a gun tells you to

dig a hole you know what the outcome is going to be and what will end up in that hole! But that is a very difficult situation to get out of. You can't talk your way out of that one! Anyway, there but for the grace of God. Do you understand? It means that it could have happened to any one of us. I was almost in tears to think about it.

There was a funny story too. I can't remember. Something about a woman and her daughter. I think the daughter was this guy's niece. Who was wrtches were going from door to door. And they had no respect at all. They would trash your house, but that was nothing. The worst of it was that wives and daughters were not safe.

But this woman tricked one of them. I don't know how, but somehow she flattered him into her confidence, perhaps they knew each other from before. And he knew there was no man of the house, and probably thought he knew which side his bread was buttered. Do you know that expression? He thought he was onto a good thing. And somehow... I can't remember how. Ah! Perhaps she hinted that after all this was over, he could marry her daughter or something like that. And her daughter was quite a prize. Stunningly

beautiful. So she tricked him into thinking that she would let him see her daughter naked, first. As a promise of things to come, I suppose. Anyway, I'm not telling the story very well, but the mother then winked and said to him, 'Listen, big man, if you are going to see her naked, then maybe she ought to see you naked as well.' So he took his clothes off and... She had probably slipped him a mickey also. That's one of our expressions when someone puts Rohypnol in your drink. So he went along with this, and was congratulating himself on what a clever man he was and thinking about the delights that awaited him. But the mother took his clothes and hid them. Did she hide them? I don't know. Maybe he was asleep by that time; drugged. But he was completely naked! And the daughter wasn't undressed at all!

So while he was sleeping, they threw his clothes on the fire and then they locked him in the flat and the two of them ran away. That was it! And there were only women's clothes there; beautiful lacy underwear and things. By the time he woke up, all his friends were long gone, and he had to put on a petticoat. And go looking for the rest of his unit like that!

Sorry, I didn't tell it very well, but it was something like that. It's hardly credible, but apparently it's true.

Anyway, we didn't wait there long. From there they put us up in the secondary school and they told us not to walk around with ID cards. They took our ID cards, for obvious reasons. But nothing much happened. We were lucky. I had to take this mobile phone across the dam. That was about the only risky moment.

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*'Ahead in the Line' was created by cutting up, remixing and re-narrativising fragments from the following sources to create a completely new story:*

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