

FIRST TOUR

Sunday: 22.35 hrs

Mick Habergham didn't know this would be his last shift when he swung the patrol car into Pelham Terrace. He knew it was the last night of the week and he was due two days off, but other than that he still had four years left to retirement. The way his stab vest was irritating his neck, retirement couldn't come too soon. But tonight? No, he wasn't expecting that.

“What's the number again?”

Andy Scott looked across at his partner and sighed.

“How long you been in this job, Ham?”

That was Mick's nickname. Ham. He was a big man at six feet three and slightly overweight. Considering how much he ate it was surprising he wasn't as big as a house side, prompting Andy to rename him Hamburger instead of Habergham. Not exactly an anagram but close enough for the police canteen. Most of the shift hadn't realised that renaming Shania Twain, Shiny Twat, wasn't an anagram either but it always got a laugh. So, Hamburger it was, and since policemen like to shorten everything it became Ham.

“Long enough to forget the bloody house number,” Ham said.

“Seventy-nine.”

Ham flicked the headlights to full-beam and the cobbled street came into sharp relief. There were two streetlamps but neither threw out much light. The four remaining houses were back-to-backs, the rest just piles of rubble, so that narrowed

Colin Campbell

down the search. In this part of town you were lucky if any of the streets survived at all and Pelham Terrace was a weedy, overgrown wasteland clinging onto life on the outskirts. At just gone half past ten on a Sunday night there were still a few lights on and music hammered out of the end house near the railway lines. It echoed back off the retaining wall that blocked the cul-de-sac and disguised the fact that there was a twenty-foot drop at the other side.

One night a burglar had been chased out of that house by an irate Greek carrying a machete, climbing over the wall to escape. The only piece of luck he had that night was that the Inter-City express had been cancelled, otherwise he would have been mashed to pulp instead of just breaking both legs. The Greek was glad too because he nearly climbed after him before remembering where he was. The trains had been keeping him awake for two years.

“Can’t hear the dog barking, so that’s a good sign,” Ham said.

“You know it’s just waiting for you.”

“Yeh, well I’m still a probationer don’t forget. You should go in first.”

That wasn’t strictly true because Ham had completed his two years’ probation twenty-four years ago. With twenty-six done, he had more service than the rest of the shift put together but sometimes the police force did funny things to you. Like flopped you lower than whale shit at regular intervals. He had spent the last fifteen years as a Scenes of Crime Officer, coming out twelve months ago when the force civilianisation programme caught him. He’d escaped the tenure policy when the Chief Constable decided that SOCO was so specialised that the obligatory five-years-and-you-were-out didn’t apply, but they got him with the flying leg sweep. Took the feet right from under him.

After fifteen years away from front line policing he needed extensive retraining and got none of it. Thrown in at the deep end he knew less than the rawest recruit and had to relearn

everything he'd ever known, and then some. Computerisation, scrambled radios, Police and Criminal Evidence Act. And stab vests. Not to mention taped interviews and the complete re-vamping of the prosecution file system. No, it was a jungle out there and he was back at the bottom of the food chain. He had to ask about everything twice and even then he couldn't remember it all. Including the house number.

"What was the number again?"

"Christ. Sixty-nine."

"Seventy-nine. Sixty-nine I'd remember."

He wound the window down to get a better look at the house numbers. There were none. The music battered its way into the car, some unintelligible garage music you could make without any talent or musical instruments. The air outside was as warm as the air in the car, giving no respite at all from the heat of the night. It made the stab vest even more uncomfortable and he vowed to take it off after meal.

The car drifted along the street and Ham checked the windows for signs of life. This was the part of night duty he enjoyed, the voyeuristic aspect of life on the beat. Not peeping Tomming but looking through the windows into another world. Another life. It had always fascinated him as a child when he'd watched buses from his bedroom window at night. You could see them running across the valley and once it was dark their interiors stood out against the dappled streets. Inside that glowing tube were a dozen lives intermingled by that single journey, each one touching the other if only briefly. They were projected onto the world like anonymous movie stars on the silver screen.

On night patrol the same thing applied to the windows he passed. He was on the outside looking in, a dark presence pulling back the curtain on someone else's world. Some of those worlds he became involved with, even changed, like the one he was about to invade now, but how many went by untouched? How many people did he meet without meeting, and how many lives did their lives touch? It was fascinating. In the

Colin Campbell

cold dead hours of night you were God. Tonight however it was the warm dead hours and he still couldn't find a house number.

The street was long enough to have a number seventy-nine but three-quarters of the houses had been knocked down. God knows why because nothing had been built in their place, leaving an overgrown patch of weeds and rubble where the other fifty-odd homes had been. The surviving block of houses were at the far end near the retaining wall, four at the front and four at the back. The first house looked like a shit tip; its small paved yard strewn with building materials, a wheelbarrow, two shovels, a cement mixer, and an aluminium ladder that was chained to the drainpipe. It was the scruffiest house on the block and therefore most likely the one they were looking for.

Ham shone his Maglite at the door and could just make out a dirty squidge that was the number. Seventy-nine. Of course it was. Of all the houses to choose from, why pick a clean one when you could have a roach motel instead. Judging from what the complainant had said, this was par for the course.

After turning out from briefing, Alpha Two were sent to their first message of the evening before catching their breath. Dog bite. Complainant wants seeing before eleven o'clock. Ham struggled into his stab vest despite the heat of the night, settling for shirtsleeves instead of his Nato jumper. Andy loaded their bags into the boot and off they went. The report was three days old but there had been no free units to attend until now. That meant the poor fella was going to be pissed off as well as bruised.

As it turned out he was more pissed than pissed off. Both he and his wife were nursing glasses of red wine while the husband handed a sheet of homework back to his ten-year-old son. The son's extended forehead and curly blond hair reminded Ham of the *Village of the Damned*. While they waited for the lad to settle at his makeshift desk in the corner, Ham wondered what time the little devil went to bed? Maybe he

had taken control of the adults like the kids in the film, ruling with minds so powerful that they had protruding foreheads and shocking blond hair. An identical boy, only a couple of years older, popped his head round the corner wearing a grandfather dressing gown from the 1950s. He was obviously the ringleader because he simply glared at his parents then left the room.

“Right.”

The man set his stall out for a long tale. He leaned forward, skewering Ham with eyes that had already started to redden and lose focus. He jabbed a finger at Ham’s knee. Ham disliked him at once and wasn’t at all surprised that a dog had bitten him. He felt like biting him himself.

“Happened on Thursday night, picking my daughter up from babysitting.”

Ham recoiled at the prospect of a daughter lurking somewhere in the house and prayed that, unlike her brothers, she looked more like the mother. That would be small consolation however, since her mother looked like an inebriated owl, with fish-eyes and glasses you could make a table top out of.

“Now I don’t want any trouble down there, cos my daughter needs to go back and, well, the bloke takes a drink. Know what I mean?”

Ham knew what he meant but doubted he would be in the same league as these two. In that he was wrong.

“Came out to see I was all right and grabbed the dog lead. Got a bit mad when it jerked and nearly spilled his beer. I heard someone inside say, eh-up Marco, he’ll be after suing us.”

Andy glanced across at Ham and they both saw the claim form going in to Claims Direct or one of those accident hotlines that were advertised on TV.

“Someone at work said I should report it to the police so you’ve got a record. Bit right through my trousers and drew blood. Spent two hours at the hospital getting a jab.”

Boy wonder interrupted.

Colin Campbell

“It was this kind of dog wasn’t it, Daddy?”

He held a brass ornament of an Alsatian up for inspection. The look in his eyes made Ham look for voodoo pins and tufts of hair.

“Yes, son. Great big Alsatian. Took a chunk out of my leg.”

He pulled the right leg of his trousers up above the calf. There were three small puncture marks and a slight bruise but nothing you could describe as a chunk missing. It mustn’t have done his trousers any good though. The man read Ham’s mind.

“Didn’t leave a mark on my trousers. But I don’t want any trouble. Got the impression they were Gyppo types. Fly-by-nights. Don’t want them having a go at my daughter when she babysits round the back.”

The finger prodded Ham’s knee again. Ham was becoming convinced that the man deserved more than a good bite, when Andy stepped in and asked for the address. With calm professionalism he extracted the address, description of the dog, and the fact that a teenage girl had been walking the dog when Mr Prod came out of the alley. The temptation had proved too much and the dog lunged at him, taking its pound of flesh. The girl wasn’t strong enough to hold it back, and there you go. Dog bite. Andy turned the whole thing around and Ham almost fell at his feet in praise.

“I can tell from talking to you that you don’t want to go through with a full report. You know, photographs, doctors’ statements, give evidence in court and all that. But what we can do...”

He leaned forward as if keeping a secret, suckering the man into believing this was for him.

“...is go round and have a word with this fella. We’ll start by telling him that you don’t want to make a complaint, which you could do, but just want him to be more careful with his dog.”

“Yeh, that’s right.”

“It could bite someone younger,” his wife chipped in. “A child.”

“Yeh. We don’t want that,” Mr Prod said. Andy agreed.

“Of course not. If we can stop that from happening then we’ll have achieved something. So, we’ll tell him to keep the dog muzzled when it’s out, and that you don’t want to push the matter because you still need to go down there. That you don’t want to make things awkward for your daughter, but just want them to be aware of the dangers.”

“Yeh.”

Now the man began to think this was his idea and felt proud of himself.

“I just want them to keep the dog under control. That’s all.”

Andy stood up and checked his watch. The man suddenly looked worried.

“You’re not going round now are you? Wouldn’t want him getting narked, because like I said,” he tapped his watch. “At this time of night he’ll have been on the beer. I think he spends most nights drinking.”

Mr Prod didn’t see the irony of saying this while knocking back his vin rouge.

“Don’t worry,” Ham said. “Like my colleague said, we won’t let on that this is something you want to do. You simply had to report it to protect the children in the street.”

A good start to the night. Not exactly inbred but definitely a strange family. Ham was just glad they escaped without having to see the daughter. Some nights when you were on patrol you could come across completely sane and reasonable human beings. Victims of crime, key-holders for burgled premises, or sensible crooks that threw their hands up when caught and yelled, “It’s a fair cop, gov.” On the evidence of their first call this wasn’t going to be one of those nights.

Looking at the upended wheelbarrow and the ladders chained to the drainpipe, Ham knew the night was about to take a turn for the worse. The first of many lives he would interact with after seeing them through the window. If a man’s eyes are the windows to his soul, then the windows of the

Colin Campbell

night are the eyes into another world. On the other side of that glass was a complete set of lives, with their own histories and network of connections that Ham didn't even know existed. Before tonight was over, one of them would end his career.