

Now...

Leaving Do...



“Here comes the guest of honour.”

Andy Scott staggered to his feet at the bar, his bad leg forgotten but the four pints he'd already drunk not. He almost fell over, starting Mick Habergham's leaving do in the vein it would more than likely follow. Billy Hollis managed to keep Ham's partner upright then nudged Bob McFalls. The bar at Ecclesfield Police Station was filling up but Bob was still mourning the death of Leroy, the black and grey cat that had been chasing mice at The Alex public house for eight years. Unfortunately it chased one across Albion Row without looking and was now flat as a pancake.

Ham didn't notice. He was just glad to see his ex partner up and around after the accident that almost ended his career. Glancing around the bar, Ham was surprised to see so many people here already. After twenty-six years in the job he didn't think that many people would remember him, never mind turn up to see him off. Andy regained his balance.

“Bet you didn't expect this many to turn up and see you off.”

“Didn't expect to see anyone. I'd better put more money behind the bar or they'll be closing me down.”

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They shook hands. It amazed him when Andy put into words something Ham had been thinking and it amazed him even more that the young constable still had a kind word for the man who'd left him in the lurch. Ham didn't abandon him of course but he felt that way, not being able to help his partner when he needed it. He touched the hole in his side where the bolt drove through. It wasn't fair that his injury healed up quicker than Andy's but at least his friend should return to full duties before the end of the year. He glanced at Andy's bad leg.

"Don't go walking in the desert. With that limp you'll just go round in circles."

"Don't worry about it. The hole filled in yet?"

"Nope."

"Ah well. Never mind. We've got Shania Twain for you tonight."

"Shiny Twat?"

"The very same. Never was an anagram though."

"Neither was Hamburger."

"Too many T's and not enough H's. But why spoil a good joke for that?"

Piped music filtered through the bar, the sliding doors pushed back to include the police canteen. The wooden floor at the far end was laid with tables forming an "L" in front of the serving counter. White sheets covered the buffet, and the DJ's station was turned off. Booking the bar for his leaving do was Angela's idea. Ham wasn't sure he'd be welcome after the wedding party he'd ruined a couple of years back. The team was working nights and one of the stipulations of using the canteen and bar for a private function was that you returned the room to its normal setting before you left. That meant closing the sliding doors and putting the tables back so the night shift could have their meal in peace. If there were any leftovers they should be put in the night kitchen for the lads, supplementing their pack lunches with chicken legs and

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vol-au-vents. The wedding party did neither, leaving the canteen a shambles and plates of half eaten sandwiches all over the place.

It caught Ham on a bad night. There had been three pub fights and a multi-racial domestic, the worst combination you could get. Men and women getting on under the same roof was bad enough, but trying to get different races together was a step too far. By the time he'd locked up half the relatives he was working on a short fuse. Finding the canteen unusable was the last straw. He stormed into the snooker room - the only place left to eat - and unleashed a very un-Mick-Habergham-like tirade.

That was when he noticed the wedding cake through the bar hatch. It was on one of the tables across the room, surrounded by plates of sausage rolls and mixed salad. Two tiers of circular cake were laid side by side, the rest of it presumably eaten already.

“Well, at least they’ve left us some cake.”

Bob and Billy let out a collective gasp. Billy spoke first.

“You can’t eat a fella’s wedding cake.”

“Course I can. Left it with the other food haven’t they?”

He went into the night kitchen, took the biggest knife he could find, and stormed into the function room. The marzipan and icing took a bit of cutting but eventually he managed a thin wedge of cake that would nicely fill him up. When he returned to the snooker room Andy burst out laughing.

“Fuck me. He’s gone and done it.”

Billy couldn’t speak. Bob covered his eyes. Ham stared them all down.

“Look. It’s bad enough having to deal with the shits we’ve dealt with tonight without having some fuckwit ruin the canteen.”

He waved the plate.

“A slice of the pie’s the least he can expect.”

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“Cake,” Andy said.

“Whatever.”

“Any good?”

Ham took a bite then nodded, his mouth full. Everybody else pretended to look away. The following night Ham got a message to see the sergeant. The bridegroom was the secretary of the club and a personal friend of Team 2’s top sergeant. It took three hours to stop his wife crying and two more to dissuade her from criming it as a theft. Turned out half the cake went missing after Ham took his tiny slice. Ham got wrapped on the knuckles and had to write a letter of apology. Andy grew fat on the cake he took home for a week. The tables were still covered tonight though. Food would be served once everyone was here. Ham steered Andy toward the bar.

“What’ll it be?”

“Pint of Stella.”

He ordered the drink, telling the barmaid to put it on the tab. Andy was halfway to being pissed but the warmth Ham detected had nothing to do with drink. It was the shared experience of life at the sharp end and the bond that forms when a colleague goes down. They both went down on that fatal nightshift and Ham would forever feel guilty at the way things turned out. The friendship was forged in steel. He just wished everyone felt that way. He found himself scanning the crowd but Barney wasn’t there. Probably wouldn’t be coming despite the invitation.

Another flurry of handshakes took his mind off it and Ham was carried away by the duties of the host. Angela helped, organising the bar tab so that everyone had a drink on the house and organising the buffet for later. As the room filled up, Ham filled up as well. All these people just because of him. He bought Andy another pint and began to mingle.

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The gong sounded and everyone fell silent. This was the moment they had all been waiting for, except Ham. The speeches. The food was eaten and the mingling was over and now it was time to face the music. Someone turned the lights out apart from two covering the dance floor. Nobody danced on it normally but it was the only part of the room with wood panelled flooring so it made do. The canteen was a place to recharge your batteries before the second tour, not break into cabaret.

Ham remembered the night of the long knives, his last nightshift, and could visualise the group of Bobbies sitting around discarded Pizza Ranch boxes getting their books straight. Billy and Bob and Andy had locked up at the battle of the Alex Pub, and Ham had gassed Marak Vargo at the Hill Top Hostel. It was a moment of calm amid the storm of a busy night. He could see his stab vest on the chair and couldn't help touching the hole in his side. If he'd worn it after meal they wouldn't be holding his leaving do now.

Johnny Mac, a stalwart from Ham's Scenes of Crime days, walked to the middle of the dance floor and waved Ham to join him. Ham wanted to stay in the shadows. There were more friends in this room than he could have imagined. More friends than he thought he had.

Apart from Johnny Mac there were other faces from his SOCO days. Noel Priest, who offered to lend Ham a thousand pounds when he couldn't afford the deposit on the house, and Dick Gillfoil, who always answered the parting comment of, "See ya Dick," with, "Oh no you can't." Big Dick was even bigger now he'd retired, both him and Noel beating Ham to the pension by five years. Johnny Mac had left the force to work as civilian supervisor for North Yorkshire. Those brush and powder days seemed a lifetime away but not as distant as the other faces in the crowd.

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The old crew from Clayton Woods Police Station were scattered across the country but a few of them were here tonight. Angela tracked them down and for that Ham was extremely grateful. Don Maggot and Stuart Lawrence retired two years ago but both looked well, Stuart completely grey now and Don running to fat but otherwise... Seeing them brought back the sadness of “Nodder” Burton’s accident, and the emotion of the riverside find.

Maggie Brayshaw was as bubbly as ever, although she wasn’t a Brayshaw any more, going through several names before settling with her present husband, a computer salesman from Nuneaton. Cynthia Jones was still Cynthia Jones. Her brief sojourn in the police force as spectacular as her figure, which she had amazingly kept despite running her own beauty products business.

The crowd applauded as Ham searched for another face from the past but he wasn’t there. Johnny Mac called him up and Angela nudged him forward. Reluctantly Ham stood up. The applause grew louder. He stepped into the circle of light and joined Johnny Mac.

“Fuck me sideways.”

The applause turned to laughter. No one from Ecclesfield was surprised at his colourful turn of phrase but those who remembered him from Clayton Wood Police Station in 1976 would have been. The young constable struggling to complete his probation was still being coaxed into the art of swearing back then and Ham wondered where the man who taught him was tonight. He was saddened but not surprised that he wasn’t here. Johnny Mac called the room to order.

“Thank you. Thank you.”

Silence descended and Ham wished he could sit down. John continued.

“I don’t like prepared speeches so I won’t keep you long.”

He kept hold of the paper in his hand, letting the other end concertina to the floor. More laughter. Even Ham was

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caught up in the moment. He felt as conspicuous as a stripper at a vicarage but couldn't help laughing.

"Mick Habbergham, or Fat Boy Slim as he's become..."

A gasp followed by more laughter. Ham sucked his stomach in.

"...may be having to retire early but I am sure he will face this like he has any other adversity in his life. He will take it on the chin, cry "Why me?" And hate every minute of it."

Ham nodded. The crowd loved it.

"It's an understatement to say he doesn't accept change willingly. I remember him complaining when the clocks went back, keeping his watch on British Summer Time for three weeks before getting to work on time."

That wasn't strictly true but he did forget once and got to work an hour early, locking himself in the office until the phone forced him to admit being there.

"When they civilianised Scenes of Crime we tried to put a brave face on it by telling him at least he wasn't out of work. There were lots of people worse off than us. But Ham was having none of that. His favourite saying under those circumstances was, *Just because someone gets both legs shot off, it doesn't make me feel any better about only losing one. I'm still a one-legged man.*"

Ham felt a shiver run down his spine and brushed the patch of burnt skin above his left ear. He adopted that saying in the seventies and the person he stole it from also taught him to swear. He felt a sadness he didn't expect among all these friends, and once again yearned for the one who hadn't turned up. He remembered the good times. He remembered the bad. And even while Johnny Mac recapped on his twenty-six year career, he remembered the summer of '76.

Then...

SUNDAY: 28th May: 2120hrs.



“Go on. Just say it.”

Barney Koslowski looked across from the steering wheel, letting the patrol car go where it wanted, and Ham almost swore when they reached a bend but couldn't bring himself to do it even then. Intuitive hands kept the car on the road. Restrictive morals kept Ham silent.

“Come on. Fuck. That's all you have to say.”

“I can't. It doesn't seem right. I mean, don't get me wrong, I can swear with the best of 'em if I'm angry. Just not...”

That was a lie. Even under severe provocation Mick Habergham could barely manage a “Damn your eyes,” let alone a, “Fuck.” He felt embarrassed about it but that was the way he'd been brought up.

“Fuckin hell Mick. You get your two years in soon. What kind of copper do you want to be?”

The kind of copper Ham wanted to be was a Barney Koslowski kind of copper. Barney was confident, decisive, and took no shit from nobody. Despite the double negative that was the best kind of policeman Ham could imagine. He could smell a thief at a thousand paces and had the knack of

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falling over them the minute he left the nick. Also he was the only member of the shift who still called him Mick, the rest of them subscribing to the Habergham stroke Hamburger anagram shortened to Ham. The fact that he was a little overweight was bad enough but having his workmates remind him of it every time they used his name was actually quite annoying. Not annoying enough for to say, “Fuck,” though.

Barney suddenly laughed and the tension evaporated. That was another trait of Barney’s that Ham aspired to, an infectious laugh that could turn a dangerous situation into Rowan and Martin’s Laugh In. If he had blonde hair and breasts he’d put Goldie Hawn to shame. A couple of years ago Barney was single crewed when he spotted a man wanted for burglary and indecent assault going into his girlfriend’s flat on the Toddmarsh estate. Spotting him was easy; Tommy Green was seven feet tall, almost as wide, wearing black biker’s leathers with chrome studs. If he walked under an industrial magnet he’d be sucked up like fluff up a Hoover. The man was mean, moody, and dangerous. Barney went in alone, pausing only long enough to call for backup. The girlfriend pleaded ignorance.

“Haven’t seen him for months.”

Barney laughed.

“Need to get your eyes checked then. He walked passed you five minutes ago.”

She gave a sheepish grin, glancing toward the bedroom door. Barney took the hint and nudged it open, one hand twisted round the truncheon strap while keeping the other one free.

“Need to talk to you a minute Tommy.”

He walked into the bedroom and sidestepped the door to put some space between him and the bed. Tommy Green was naked on the sprung edged divan.

“Cover up Tommy. I only want to talk.”

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Tommy pulled the covers up and leaned against his pillows. Tension crackled. The bedroom was untidy but Barney spotted the blue handled knife on the bedside cabinet. The big man had used it against the girl's throat while forcing her to eat his meat and it was less than arms reach from him now.

"You know what I'm here for don't you?"

"That scank, Michelle."

He leaned on one elbow, moving closer to the knife.

"Well. Whatever you call her I need to get your side of the story."

"Aint got nowt to say. I'm comfy here."

"Fuck me. I don't believe it."

Barney burst out laughing and for a moment Tommy Green didn't know what was going on. Barney picked up a boot the size of Texas.

"How the fuck do you walk in these?"

He dangled the motorcycle boot from both hands, discarding his peg, then dropped it on the floor. It almost went through to the cellar. The boot was calf length with steel toecaps and six-inch heels wrapped in broad bands of polished chrome. They were solid, square, and encrusted in more studs than the biker's jacket. He laughed again and this time Tommy couldn't help smiling.

"You must need a 650cc just for them. How tall are you?"

He examined the figure beneath the covers, realising that the seven-foot monster they'd been looking for was in fact nearer six.

"Never mind. Get your pants on and we'll have a chat."

And with that the tension was broken. Barney pocketed the knife and made small talk while Tommy got dressed. The transformation when he put the boots on was astonishing, the prisoner towering over the arresting officer. Barney's only concession to safety was the handcuffs. He thought Tommy might balk at that but he came quiet as a mouse. In the end

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it turned out he hadn't burgled the house at all but knew Michelle from school. They'd been engaging in sex games ever since his girlfriend got pregnant and lost interest in porking. Michelle just wasn't keen on swallowing, which he forced to do by holding her nose.

Barney swung the car round in the cul-de-sac and headed back out of the estate. They were due off at ten and it was time to head back to the station.

"You're wasting your time Mick. I'll have you swearing before your confirmation."

Ham didn't answer, building himself up for the end of shift drink. There would be scope for more piss taking then. The radio crackled into life.

"Car Four. Report of a man in the street armed with a dustbin."

"Oh fuck. It'll be closing time soon."

"Make your way to Chelmsford Grove. I'm asking for the van."

"No Coca-Cola for you tonight. Here we go."

Barney flicked on the blue light and floored the accelerator.