

Lightbulb Man
and the Burger King

Campbell

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Dan Polatc pulled the unmarked police car up to the speaker before he realised the drive-thru was closed. The large red, white and yellow Burger King sign was still lit above the entrance but the serving windows were dark. He reversed into a parking bay and got out. It was probably better to go inside. Using the drive-thru brought back too many memories. He could see the counter staff agitating the fries but no customers, hardly surprising at quarter to midnight on tonight of all nights.

He shrugged his civvy coat shut, feeling naked underneath without his baton and cuffs. The absence of radio noise reminded him that he was out of reach and he missed the constant barrage of immediate messages the rest of the shift were busy dealing with. Somewhere in the distance a police siren started up as if to prove the point.

He glanced up at the night sky, the star field hidden by a blanket of cloud that was pregnant with winter promise. Christmas had passed without the white stuff but tonight was a different story. Cold and breezy, and looking like snow. Not the best night for a milkshake but under the circumstances it seemed like the most appropriate way to toast the New Year. Anything to get him out of the station where he'd spent the last hour clearing out his locker.

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The poster Sellotaped inside the locker door read,

Dan was a nice lad,

Until they mentioned Toller Lane...

The two cartoons accompanying the words showed a caricature of Dan Polatc in the top left corner followed by an axe-wielding maniac at the bottom. The maniac was actually Jack Nicholson in “The Shining” but that was because Jill couldn’t manage two Dan drawings in one day and in any case she’d never seen Constable Polatc looking anything but placid so how could she characterise that?

Dan stood in front of the open locker and wondered where to start? He hadn’t realised just how difficult his last day was going to be but clearing his locker should have been the easiest part. It was proving to be anything but. There were actually two lockers, a full length one for hanging uniform and outdoor clothing and a top locker for whatever you didn’t use that often. Dan’s top locker held his PSU bag, a blue denim holdall with his riot gear and stab vest. The last few years of his service he’d been in plain clothes, still with the shift but a sort of halfway house between uniform and CID, so the blue bag had stayed put.

He ignored the top locker for now, concentrating on the narrow shelf above the hanging rail in the main locker. A peel off desk calendar was hooked to the wall with the last day of the year still attached. Dan glanced at his watch. 11pm. Only an hour to midnight. There wasn’t a calendar for next year. He wouldn’t need it. This was his final shift before retirement.

Thirty years and soon it would be goodnight Vienna.

Most of the controlled items had already been returned; the stack of completed pocket books, the CS spray, his side-handled baton and rigid handcuffs. Even his radio and harness had been handed in so he couldn’t even hear the rest of the shift chasing their tails on a typically busy New Years Eve. They were working full nights but Dan had been dropped back to 5x3 as a concession to his leaving. It wasn’t much of a concession because he’d rather have worked alongside them one last time. Leaving the station while they were still on the streets felt a bit like skulking out the back door. No farewell handshakes. No pats on the back. No goodbyes.

Without the tools of his trade he felt like a driver without his seatbelt. He’d done that once early on, flying out to an immediate in

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a patrol car while he rolled about in his seat on every bend. He was rolling now and had to steady himself against the locker door.

Then he saw the flip album that Mac had given him three months ago, the leather bound photo album confirming why he felt so empty.



The first picture went way back, a faded colour print from 1976. Two bobbies in the report writing room of an ancient police station. Bob Maggot sat with his tunic unbuttoned at an Imperial typewriter, a cigarette burning in the ashtray beside him. Keith Hellas leaned against the wall next to a notice board that had a Photofit of some long forgotten criminal. His tunic was fastened but he still managed to look like he'd just got out of bed. A peaked cap with its distinctive chequered headband and Police badge sat on the windowsill. The picture was a catalogue of what had changed in the modern police service. There were no more typewriters and no more tunics and it was almost a sacking offence to be caught smoking in the police station. The days of having a fag while you one-finger-tapped your crime report were long gone, and only inspectors and traffic officers wore peaked caps.

Dan wallowed in nostalgia, that sweet sorrow of remembering better times that weren't really better at all. Just different.

The album was for six by four prints but many of the early photos were three by threes. They were all in colour but a different colour to the modern digital images, a muted colour fading towards blue as the red bled away, much as the memories had faded until the photos brought them back.

The second picture was of Dan with his driving instructor on Snake Pass in the winter of '79. They were standing next to an unmarked police car in a snowdrift and Dan suddenly remembered how he'd almost failed on the spot when he'd skidded into the dirty white wall. The ploughed snow was piled at the side of the carriageway, blasted and pitted by the grime of the road. The instructor had taken pity on him and not mentioned it in his report, and Dan had passed third in his class at the end of the course.

There were a couple of Polaroids of Dan in his SOCO days; leaning against a car he'd just examined in the police garage, or pretending to dust a window with his squirrel brush, his civvy jacket covered in silver powder. But it was the photos of the shift outing to Alton Towers that brought home another truth.

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Big Mac. The burger king.

Dan upended the waste bin he'd been intending to dump his rubbish in and sat down. Mac was the reason he was in plain clothes, and the reason he felt so empty after four years together.



One of their first jobs as the shift Crime Managers had almost burst Mac's cool, calm and collected bubble. The complainant for the theft from dwelling was North Country Housing, an organisation that provided low rent accommodation for low rent tenants, and it was difficult to tell who were the biggest crooks. The bedsit came furnished but only a moron would consider the furniture fit for human usage.

And only a bigger moron would steal it when he left.

Two phone calls and a visit to North Country Housing came up with a forwarding address, another sign they weren't dealing with a criminal mastermind, and by the time they were knocking on Tom Witty's door a plan had been formulated. If they got the right answers this could go away, reducing national crime statistics and reforming an offender who hopefully wouldn't be so foolish again.

Witless Witty answered the door and the gormless look on his face told Mac this was going to be a cakewalk. The teenage girl tucking the baby into its cot made it even easier. Mac sat on one of the stolen chairs and smiled then spelled it out the way it was.

"Right. Let's get one thing straight. With a bit of goodwill here you won't have to go in the cells. Won't even have to be arrested. If you tell me the truth."

Either Mac's friendly manner fostered trust or Witty was truly witless because he confessed everything in thirty seconds flat. Bottom line, they had no money, a new baby, and North Country Housing had been ignoring their pleas for an upgrade, so he took the furniture when he left as compensation.

Dan kept quiet. This was Mac's show.

"Okay. This is what you're going to do. You are going to take the furniture to the housing office and apologise. I've had a word with them and they'll withdraw the complaint. I'm off until Monday. Then I'm going to check with them."

Here's where Mac tried to show his inner steel, his voice dropping an octave as he leaned into Witty's face.

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“And you’d better have done it by then or I will be one pissed-off-person.”

Dan almost burst out laughing. Pissed-off-muthafucka he could have understood but Mac didn’t have a good mothafucka in him. He was too polite. The pathetic gratitude on Witty’s face made it all the more amusing. Outside, Mac saw the funny side as Dan choked back the laughter.

“Did I really say that?”

Dan nodded.

“You is one bad-ass-mutha-person.”

“Fuck off.”

Okay, so he wasn’t that polite. Following Monday all the furniture had been returned and the report written off. Genuine mistake. No Crime.

Sitting on the upended waste bin Dan felt a prickle of sadness even as he was smiling at the memory. They’d shared many a laugh during their four years together but the interview tape hidden behind the photo album was the only hard evidence.

And it had been Dan’s fault.

Mohammed Rashid was a university student and clearly not involved in the credit card fraud linked to his home address but they had to interview him anyway, so they’d arrested him one night and taken him to the police station. Both Dan and Mac could smell the cannabis in his living room but chose to ignore it. This was a *let’s-get-this-shit-off-my-workload* scenario. There was no need to complicate matters. The fact that Mohammed was stoned out of his head was a minor inconvenience and something they could brush over in custody. Straight to interview. No cell. Refuse charge. Lift home. Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.

In the back of their car Mohammed was all wide-eyed innocence as Dan made small talk and Mac kept his eyes on the road. It was raining hard and the headlights of oncoming cars threw dappled reflections over Mohammed’s face. He was smiling, almost giggling.

“Ooh. I’m in your world now officers.”

Dan smirked at Mac but kept up the conversation.

“Ever been to a police station before?”

“Nnoooh.”

A red traffic light changed to green and the colours filled the car, exploding off a thousand raindrops on the windows and twinkling in Mohammed’s eyes.

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“Wow. This is beautiful.”

“Glad you like it.”

Mac glanced across at Dan, who couldn't help smiling at the prospect of a serious interview with this space cadet. Mac stifled a giggle of his own. This was surreal. By the time they reached the back yard of the custody suite all three were having such a good time that Dan had to put his foot down.

“Okay Mohammed. Serious now.”

Mohammed blurted out a strangled laugh. Dan snapped at him.

“Serious! Come on. Straight face.”

Mac barely held it together while they explained the circumstances to the custody sergeant. Credit card fraud using Rashid's name. Goods delivered to his address. Communal entrance. Arrested to interview. Custody authorised.

They made it to the interview room before Mohammed set them off again.

“Ooh. I'm really in your world now aren't I?”

Dan turned away, tears forming in his eyes as his stomach tried to push another fit of giggles out through his mouth. Mac clamped his jaw tight shut. He explained the interview procedure and pointed out the microphone, prompting Mohammed to look at it as if it were the Koran.

Dan could see that Mac was struggling to keep a straight face.

“Mac. No laughing on interview. Suck it in.”

And that of course was fatal. Once the tapes were running Mac made the introductions and only got as far as the caution before Dan had to turn away again, his stomach hurting from holding back the laughter. Tears ran down his cheeks. Mac saw the move and the caution degenerated into a strangled cry as his voice climbed the scales to a high-pitched squeal. Dan exploded, his laughter made all the funnier because he was trying to hold it back. Mohammed simply stared at them.

Playing the tape back later there were long pauses between questions interspersed with bursts of laughter and strangled giggles. At one point Mohammed took over.

“Come on officers. What's the problem?”

More giggles as Mac tried to brush it off but his voice wasn't recognisable any more, the words not forming because he was laughing so much.

“This is one of them hidden camera things innit officer?”

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Mac managed to hold on long enough to ask very brief questions then he terminated the interview, apologising through the tears. After they'd dropped Mohammed back home they quickly wrote the crime off and prayed the interview never had to be played at court.

Sitting on the upended waste bin Dan felt his throat constrict. He couldn't help it. Thirty years of his life were about to come to an end and more importantly the best four years of that had already finished. Three months ago. He flicked to the last photo in the album. Mac and Dan standing at the open door of the Crime Managers' blue Astra. Mac had told him he was leaving to start his own business but neither of them knew just how final that leaving would turn out to be.



Dan pushed open the Burger King door and went inside, his eyes automatically going to the drive-thru window. He could just about see the speaker outside where customers placed their orders. Mac's voice drifted across the chasm of time.

"What do you want, Lightbulb?"

"I want to know why Blockhead calls me Lightbulb."

"Is that banana or vanilla?"

Dan pushed the memory aside and walked to the counter. The tables were empty and looked as if they'd been cleaned hours ago. How many people come out for a burger on New Year's Eve? The fryer looked up from agitating his fries. Dan couldn't make out if he was startled at having a customer or irritated at being disturbed. He seemed to be enjoying the therapy of stirring, like stoking the fire or watching waves crash onto the beach.

The wall clock showed five to midnight.

A chill bristled the short hairs on the back of Dan's neck and he glanced over his shoulder but the door was closed. The restaurant empty. Dan felt uneasy but put it down to having his last milkshake on his last ever tour of duty.

Or it could have been something else.

His copper's nose for trouble itched and he almost sneezed. He and Mac had shared that intuition and he knew he shouldn't ignore it but tonight was different. Tonight there was no Mac. And tonight he was no longer a copper. Almost. The fryer stood waiting with a spatula in his hand. Somewhere in the back a young girl in an apron packaged burgers and slid them in the top of the servery. Outside

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something white fluttered in the darkness. Just one or two. The fryer broke the spell.

“Yes? What’ll it be?”

Dan didn’t need to look at the colourful photos above the counter. Mac had been the one for having a burger between meals, that’s why they nicknamed him the Burger King, but for Dan it was always the same.

“Banana milkshake please.”

“Medium or large?”

Back in the car again. Mac asking him the same question. And Dan giving the same answer.

“Medium or large? What the fuck happened to small? How can you have a medium if there’s no small for it to go between?”

Mac ignored the question and replied into the...

“Medium,” Dan said. “No. Make it large.”

For four years he’d been having a medium banana shake. This being his last night he decided to push the boat out.

“Yes. Large please.”

The fryer looked disappointed that he wasn’t having fries.

“Anything else?”

Dan shook his head and laid exact change on the counter. The fryer shouted the order to the girl in the back even though he wasn’t exactly busy himself. There must be a pecking order even at Burger King. The lad was probably duty manager tonight. Milkshakes were beneath him. When he looked out front again his eyes suddenly grew large and the false smile froze on his face. Dan felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck again only this time he heard the door swing shut.



“Don’t any fucker move.”

Desperate eyes stared out beneath beetled brows. The scruffy overcoat hung in folds across bony shoulders, almost reaching the ground and hiding a pair of trousers that Dan would have bet his pension had holy knees. Scuffed black trainers completed the picture of a life that had begun on the bottom rung and gone downhill from there. The eyes darted between Dan and the duty manager but all Dan could look at was the knife in the intruder’s right hand, knuckles wrapped so tight around the handle that all the blood was driven

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away. He waved the knife towards the colourful photos above the counter.

“Double cheeseburger meal and a chicken deli wrap.”

The duty manager was frozen to the spot. The knife flicked towards him.

“Now.”

Suddenly he reverted to being the fryer, no more in charge than Trigger was in charge of The Lone Ranger. He didn't know where to start.

“W-w-what drink do you want with that?”

“Banana milkshake. Medium.”

The fryer looked nonplussed.

“Milkshakes don't come with meal deals. Just Pepsi or Tango.”

The knife flashed at the fryer, light glinting off the blade.

“They come with whatever I say they come with.”

The fryer dropped the spatula and it clattered on the tiled floor. He picked it up, holding it by the wrong end.

“Do you want to go large?”

“Fuckin' right I do.”

Angry eyes turned from the fryer to Dan and there seemed to be a hint of recognition in them. The anger turned down a notch but Dan had never seen the man before. He was concentrating on the blade and wondering just how stupid you'd have to be to rob a Burger King with a butter knife.

The man directed his attention to the fryer again, his voice dropping an octave, as it became a whisper that everyone could hear.

“And you'd better do it. Or I will be one pissed-off-person.”

Then Dan realised just how witless some people could be. Anyone who would steal North Country Housing furniture was certainly dumb enough to use a butter knife as an offensive weapon. Dan held his arms wide apart, palms up. Non-threatening.

“Tom Witty? That you?”

Witty swung the knife in Dan's direction, the posture all aggression but the knife completely laughable.

“Tom. You gonna butter your burger with that?”

The knife wavered. He might as well have been threatening Dan with a whoopee cushion. The fryer didn't seem to notice because he handed the meal deal bag to Witty then stepped back. He wasn't going to get buttered over a double burger and fries. Milkshake or no milkshake. Witty gripped the knife tighter. Dan was acutely aware of the lack of radio traffic. The lack of a radio altogether. Not to

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mention the lack of any protective equipment, gas, or cuffs. He tried to think what Mac would have done.

“Okay Tom. Here’s what you’re going to do. You are going to give the burger back and apologise. I’ll have a word with them and they won’t make a complaint.”

To the fryer.

“Will you?”

The fryer shook his head.

“And you’d better do it. Or *I* will be the pissed-off-person.”

Nobody moved. The fryer kept his distance. The girl stood transfixed behind the servery. And Dan kept his hands outstretched. Witless Witty slowly began to move backwards away from the counter. Dan lowered his arms.

“And I mean *really* pissed off.”

Witty stopped. He looked uncertain. The knife arm sagged as if the blade was too heavy and he let out a sigh that emptied his lungs.

“Your partner was good to me. To us. But there’s no more us. Just me.”

“Yes, well. There’s no more us for me either. Mac’s gone.”

He was surprised just how much saying it out loud made it real. He’d been living denial for the past three months and even clearing out his locker hadn’t brought the truth home as much as telling Witless Witty. It also broke Witty’s resolve. He handed the meal deal back, turning his wrist over as he dropped the bag on the counter. Dan saw fresh scars on the heel of his hand and wondered what possessed a man to chose such an inadequate weapon for attempting suicide. And what made him such a bad shot that he missed his wrist altogether.

The tension vanished as soon as the bag was down. The knife was no longer a threat, just a symbol of another futile attempt. The fryer became the duty manager again, all jumped up self-importance, but Dan stepped in quickly before he demanded that Witty be arrested.

“Add that to my milkshake. How much?”

He paid the extra then handed the meal deal to Witty. The wall clock clicked over to midnight.

“Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year.”

The counter staff were just happy to see the odd couple heading for the exit, Witty holding the door open for the retiring policeman. Winter cold-snapped them both awake as their feet crunched on a

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thin covering of snow. Heavy flakes fluttered white in the floodlights of the car park. Dan waved towards the blue Astra.

“Come on, you’re in my world now. Want a lift?”

Witty nodded and this time Dan held the door open for him.

“More pebbles on the beach you know. Smarten yourself up you can always find another.”

“Maybe. But you’ll never get your partner back. I’m sorry. How did he die?”

Dan started the engine and suddenly realised how badly he’d taken Mac’s leaving. The suddenness of it. Was that really how it appeared?

“Die? He didn’t die. Left the job to start a mortgage business. Three months to my retirement and the bastard fucked off and left me. How bad is that?”

The car skidded then settled on its way out of the car park. It seemed appropriate that his last act as a policeman should be helping someone instead of arresting them. It was what he and Mac had been doing for the last four years anyway. Preventative policing. He just hoped he’d have more success tonight than Mac did the last time.

“That’s twice we’ve let you off. Three strikes and you’re out.”

Witty smiled as the car headed off into the night.

“Maybe. But not by you.”

Behind them the Burger King sign went out.

“What will you do once you’ve retired?”

The headlights dwindled into the distance. Dan thought about it a moment while he sucked on his milkshake then smiled.

“I think I might re-mortgage.”