

Jeth Dubbins

A thin gruel of light dribbled through lead-lined skies as though in the hands of some tight-fisted accountant. On the street below the angry swelling crowd reflected angry swelling clouds.

P.C Wenner peered grimly out through the back window of the unmarked Ford Transit. The glass was almost opaque; smog-stained like a smoker's finger but there was no mistaking the size of that crowd. Hundreds of the bastards now. Where the hell were they all coming from and why didn't they have jobs to go to? There was going to be a storm today all right. And its name was shit. 'Come on then,' he sighed, digging Davis in the ribs. But the man seemed reluctant to drag himself from the safe, warm womb of the van. Davis was a hot-head. On any other day he'd have been quivering like a Red Setter, desperate to get out there amongst all that adrenaline and suppressed rage. But today he sat listlessly chewing on a greasy fried egg sandwich.

'I 'ain't finished my breakfast yet.'

Wenner gazed at his partner with little warmth. Anyone prepared to inflict a fried egg sandwich on his colleagues in the cramped confines of a Ford Transit was a man devoid of finer feelings and not to be pitied. 'Take it with you,' he snapped. Wenner flipped the catch on the rear doors and stepped down onto the road.

The crowd was oddly muted as though holding its breath. Hundreds of hard, pitiless eyes watched in silence as the two uniformed policeman emerged from the parked van. No longer a disparate group of human beings, it had somehow metamorphosed into a single predatory organism. The heat shimmer emanating from so many closely packed bodies might easily be mistaken for a visible aura of menace.

Wenner put on his helmet. A tiny bead of sweat sneaked its way down his spine and sought refuge in the waistband of his trousers. Beside him, Davis fingered his truncheon. 'See that one over there, Terry, the hippy with the beaky nose and the long hair? What wouldn't I give to...'

'Shut it, Davis,' hissed Wenner. 'Just follow me and keep it shut.'

Some twenty yards away a slight, middle aged figure crossed the road and entered a side door to the stately Victorian Gothic structure.

Once again Jeth Dubbins had passed unnoticed and now he sat patiently on an uncomfortable wooden bench partially obscured by the cloister shadows. His face expressionless; a monochrome blur of a face like a toddler's pencil sketch. Dubbins gazed up at the buttery stone finials and ornate flying buttresses with little interest. Architecture wasn't really his thing. Stick insects were his thing - much underrated creatures with astonishing sex lives. As Jeth Dubbins well knew, they could and frequently did go at it all night. And after today he was looking forward to spending more time with his Phasmidae. He had plans.

The heavy double footfall of two uniformed constables interrupted his reverie. 'Ah yes, Gentlemen...'

Wenner fell back a step, clutching his heart. 'Jesus Christ.'

Dubbins smiled. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to...'

'You gave me a right start, you prat.'

'I'm so sorry, I was merely...'

Wenner sat heavily on the wooden bench, dismissing any further apology. 'Nah, s'alright really. My fault. Just didn't notice you sitting there like that. All quiet.'

Dubbins fiddled with the catch of his soft brown briefcase to mask his discomfort. He was used to it after all these years. Nobody ever noticed him. But that was what made him the man he was.

Wenner winked, friendly now. ‘No harm done eh? Apart from taking ten years off my life, that is.’

Dubbins offered up a soft grey hand. ‘Nice to see you again Constable Wenner...and of course, young Constable Davis.’

Wenner shook it. It was like squeezing a damp mitten. ‘It’s just that we’re all a bit on edge this morning Mr ...ah...Dublin.’

‘Dubbins, but as I always say, please call me Jeth.’

‘Jeff.’

‘Jeth.’

‘Yes. Anyway. It’s a weird one today Mr Dublin. Not exactly...run-of-the-mill, this one.’ Davis slapped Dubbins on the knee, leaving a bright yellow egg stain on the grey worsted. ‘I hope you’re being paid double for this one Mr Dublin,’ he chortled.

Dubbins stared at the policeman, genuinely perplexed. It had never occurred to him to ask for more money for doing the same thing. ‘My remuneration will be the same as it has always been. No more, no less,’ he replied primly.

Davis shrugged.

There was a brief uncomfortable silence punctuated by the distant resentful murmur of the crowd outside, like a choppy sea.

‘Difficult, you say?’

Davis snorted by way of response. Wenner waved a warning finger, silencing his colleague.

‘Oh dear,’ said Dubbins mildly, ‘and I did so hope that my last day on the job would be an easy one.’

‘Your last day?’

‘Indeed. I retire today Constable Wenner.’

‘Well, happy...ah...’

‘Given that it is my last day, could I break the rules and ask what all the fuss is about? What did he do?’

Wenner sighed. ‘You know I can’t tell you that Mr Dublin. But you could always pick up a newspaper though. And then you’d see...’

Dubbins smiled and shrugged. Current affairs weren’t his thing either. ‘Ah well, ignorance is bliss as they say.’

Wenner’s placed a beefy hand on the man’s shoulder. ‘I don’t know if I approve of what you do Mr Dublin, but I suppose someone’s got to do it. So, rest assured, whatever happens out there today, I’ll do the right thing by you. And so will Constable Davis. We’ll do our duty, I guarantee that...’

Dubbins had no response. He swallowed back tears. This man, this pillar, had voiced a point of view. It didn’t matter that it was mildly disapproving, it was a point of view, it was a...

Wenner's radio squawked into life. He listened briefly to a voice in the static before nodding gravely. 'They're ready, Mr Dublin.'

Dubbins opened his little briefcase for the last time and withdrew a meticulously folded square of grey wool.

‘There he is.’

‘Kill him.’

‘Lynch the bastard...’ The crowd outside the Old Bailey roared like a wounded lion. Brickbats and bottles filled the air like confetti as the mob surged. True to their word, the two uniformed constables took the brunt of it at the rear of a flying wedge as they guided the little man towards the waiting van.

Dubbins was blind but not deaf and he could hear the clicking of the motor-drives as press-hounds closed in for the kill. Jeth pulled the grey wool tighter over his face. No point getting careless, even if it was his last day. He was Jeth Dubbins and for the past twenty-eight years he’d provided a unique and useful service. Today, for one last time he was, as he’d always been: the decoy; the red herring. The man beneath the blanket.