

THE FETE OF LITTLEWHIPPINSHALL

in the style of

MICKEY SPILLANE

The streets were as empty as whore's heart, but it was early, far too early. The sun has risen before I had, but then again it had something to get up for. Since retiring from the force the only alarm bells I heard ringing were the ones inside my head and this morning there was more jangling than a disturbance in a cutlery drawer.

The face that stared at me from the bathroom mirror wasn't the face I wanted to see. It was old, sad and had more lines than an underground map. The eyes were dark and sunken and if, as they say, they are the windows to the soul, then they needed a good wash. Years of looking at the arse end of crime, the bodies and the blood, had muddied them and it would take more than a damp cloth and a squeegee to clean them. I once had what was refereed to as a 'Roman Nose'. Bold, straight, powerful. Now thanks to one too many slaps in the kisser and too many nights with the likes of Johnnie Walker, Jim Beam and friends, it was now more of a 'Roaming Nose'. Red and bloated and spread across my face like a dried up sponge. My teeth, I must admit, were perfect. A couple of rows of pearly whites that shone like a beacon from the darkness of my haggard mug. They grinned back at me now, as they bobbed about in the water that filled the glass on the cracked tiled shelf underneath this mirror of deceit. I could go on and point out the scars and where a mop of thick, black hair used to be, but the steam from the hot tap guessed I had enough and obliterated the

scene with a dull pearlescent coat of grey condensation. I didn't know who felt better, me for not having to look or the mirror for not having to reflect.

The toasted popped its load. A slice of blackened bread, scorched beyond recognition and consumption by a faulty toaster that I was going to get rid of. The thing is, some mornings it could produce a golden slice of nourishment and on those morning its demise was given a pardon. Giving it another chance to rehabilitate itself into normal breakfast society was from a side of me that believed there was good out there, no matter how well hidden it was under a blanket of false promises. A belief, that if given the chance to rectify past misdemeanours things would get better. A belief, that in most cases, was returned wrapped round a brick and chucked through my window with a note that proclaimed me a loser. The toasted toast shattered like my hopes as it missed the bin and hit the floor. I'd clean it up later. Much later.

The milk was off and bits floated on the surface of my coffee like snowflakes on a freshly dropped steaming cowpat. I was pouring it down the sink when the front door bell groaned tunelessly. I wanted to ignore it, like I wanted to ignore the day. I tried to ignore it, rinsing the cup under water that travelled up rattling pipes in intermittent gushes. The bell groaned again, this time followed by a rap of sharp knuckles on soft wood. Perhaps if I ignored it, the owner of the persistent pounding would go away, but like most things I've tried to ignore in my life, they rarely ever go away. They'd lay in wait for me and

just when I think it's safe... Wham! There they are, jumping at you from the cover of ignorance. It's not worth ignoring the inevitable, like retirement, like death, they're going to get you in the end, no matter how deep you bury your head in sand, they'll be there to kick you up your butt.

'Oh Eric, I'm glad you're in. I need your help.' So what's new I thought as I stood before Primrose Hill. Primrose was a big woman of Michelin Man proportions. She had more curves than a Swiss mountain road and as much blubber as a Japanese whaling boat. Today that mass was encased in a green frock that had random prints of flowers and birds scattered over it. She looked like the Yorkshire Dales. A straw hat that was missing a donkey sat a top a friendly face.

She didn't wait for an invite and was making the cushions on my sofa gasps as she sat down and I closed the door.

'My, it's a beautiful morning.' She said as she adjusted her dress, pulling out material that had been trapped between layers of flesh. 'It's the sort of morning that makes one feel good to be alive, don't you think?' I nodded silently; she didn't want to hear what I was thinking. 'I love summer, don't you?' she continued as she smoothed her frock over her two bowling ball sized knees. I just gave another silent noncommittal smile and said, 'How can I help you, Primrose?'

She did that tilting her head to one side thing that made me think of how Princess Diana may have looked if she had overdone it on the meat pies and

kebabs. 'Well Eric, you know that today is the annual Littlewhippinshall village fete.'

Oh, how I knew it was today. The sense of dread had begun to ferment in my gut long before the posters had appeared on tree trunks around the village like some unwanted fungi. The silent smile returned to my face as Primrose continued with the sort of enthusiasm I didn't want to catch.

'Well I've just popped round to make sure that we can count on your expertise in the arts and crafts tent again this year? Your presence is always appreciated by the committee.'

As much as it was appreciated, the feeling wasn't mutual. Ever since I had handed in my badge eight dull years ago, left the smoke and retired to this village in need of a life support machine and news had got around about my previous employment, my 'expertise' had been called upon continually at this time of year. At first, when Primrose, a couple of pounds lighter and with a body mass index that didn't equal that of Anglesey, asked, I thought it was to be a judge. I was taken aback for a couple of seconds but then brought back to earth like a space shuttle with a missing landing gear when she went on to explain that my title was to be 'Head of Security'. Yeah, that was my first reaction. Why on earth would you need security in the arts and crafts tent in a village where the nearest they ever got to a felony was at the monthly scrabble tournament in the church hall? At first I declined, but Primrose was a persuasive woman. It's been eight years since and neither of us has ever talked about what happened that night to

change my mind. Like that night, I'd probably hate myself even more in the morning, after what I was about to say, 'Not this year, Primrose.'

I watched the normally happy face droop in to an expression normally associated with a stroke victims. 'I'm sorry.' Was meant as apology, but I think there was too much relief in my voice to make it entirely convincing.

'But Eric, we need you.' Primrose voice wavered. 'It's important, especially in this day and age. Security is paramount.'

'I know Primrose, but...' She wasn't listening.

'What with terrorism and terrorists carrying rucksacks of whatever around every corner, it's no longer a safe place. We're living in the shadow of death every day. These people, these evil people are out to destroy our way of life, of everything we hold dear.'

'That's as maybe' I thought to myself, but I couldn't see a cell of Al-Qaeda coming down to the Littlewhippinshall fete to cause death and destruction in amongst the homemade fondue fancies and knitted Santas. I would have said that aloud, but Primrose was still painting a bleak picture and she was using broad brush strokes and pots load of assumptions.

'It's not only the terrorists; it's the criminals, the murderers, the muggers, the rapists, the serial killers and teenagers. All bent on spoiling it for others. Oh Eric, we need you. Eric.' She gave me 'That' look. 'Eric. I need you.'

I looked away. I wasn't going down that bumpy road again. I apologised and the waterworks started. It was wasted. I was immune to women's tears. Too many had been shed in front of me in the past when I had to break the news

that her husband, son, father, lover was resting in peace, or in some cases 'pieces' down at the morgue.

'Look Primrose, don't you think you're over reacting at bit.' was my only offer of comfort. 'It's an arts & craft tent on a village green in a village so off the beaten track that even the most sophisticate sat-nav would have a job to find.'

'Village green, busy shopping arcade, city centre.' she sobbed, 'It doesn't matter to 'Them', they have no respect for life.'

'And even less respect for jams and displays of funny shaped vegetables' crossed my mind, but I kept 'stum' and held fast on my refusal.

Primrose never said goodbye, she just up'd and left. I felt like a rat, but I knew I had done the right thing. In fact I realised more than that. The art and crafts tent didn't need me. Littlewhippinshall didn't need me. Primrose 'wanted' but she didn't need me. Above all I didn't need them; it was time to move on. Back home. Back up in the smoke where I could end my days as that mad grizzled ex-cop who lived alone and that kids made wild, frightening stories up about. Not die in a village that was already dead. Head of security at a village fete, I ask you?

I had drifted off in to an afternoon sleep brought on by the hypnotic boredom of televised snooker and one too many tumblers of cheap label malt. The banging on the door sounded like it was coming from inside my head, but it didn't take long to realise, someone outside wanted to get in real quick. I heard Primrose

calling my name as I turned the latch. The door was pushed open with such force that the safety chain I was unclipping was ripped from the frame

‘Oh Eric’ screamed Primrose ‘I told you we needed you.’

I was tired. I was flippant. ‘Why has some terrorist blown up a Victoria Sponge?’

‘No.’ Primrose fell into my arms and my knees buckled. ‘It’s the vicar, he’s been murdered.’

END

(1,800 words)