



JONATHAN NICHOLAS

WHO'D BE A  
COPPER?

THIRTY YEARS A FRONTLINE BRITISH COP

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Also by Jonathan Nicholas:

*Hospital Beat*

*Kibbutz Virgin*

*The Tragic Romance of Africa*

*Oz – A Hitchhiker's Australian Anthology*

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# **WHO'D BE A COPPER?**

**THIRTY YEARS A FRONTLINE BRITISH COP**

**JONATHAN NICHOLAS**



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*To my wife, Alyson  
For tolerating me.*

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This is a true story

Some names and identities have been changed, omitted, or disguised for legal reasons and in order to protect privacy. Otherwise, it all happened exactly as described.

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*'How many fingers, Winston?'*

*'Four! Stop it, stop it! How can you go on? Four! Four!'*

*'How many fingers, Winston?'*

*'Five! Five! Five!'*

*'No, Winston, that is no use. You are lying. You still think there are four. How many fingers please?'*

*'Four! Five! Four! Anything you like. Only stop it, stop the pain!'*

From George Orwell  
*Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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# PREFACE

I recently completed thirty years as a constable in the British police. I had a very interesting time you might expect and saw everything from petty theft to gruesome murders. But it wasn't all about crime; in fact a huge amount of time was taken up with social work, and still is today. When I joined 'the job' as it is known, it seemed the police were barely accountable to anyone. Some prisoners were often left hand-cuffed to radiators in corridors of police stations all weekend and even then when released they'd say 'Thank you' as they left. This worked pretty well in summer but in winter those old radiators were bloody hot, and the poor unfortunate scallywag would often admit anything after being partially cooked for seventy-two hours.

I worked the front line wearing a uniform in an inner city area for all of those thirty years. Not ten years, or twenty years, but three long decades. It wasn't some sleepy rural backwater either, but one of the most challenging areas of England, in a city with one of the highest crime rates in the UK. Like many British cities Nottingham has become known as a 'multi-cultural' city. But what does that really mean? How much do you really know about the Sikh way of life, the Jews living down your street, or the Muslim family who run your corner shop?

The closest thing to rural policing I ever experienced was The Forest, an incongruous bit of flinty grassy area with a slope on one side in the middle of Nottingham where they usually accommodate the annual Goose Fair. There hasn't been any poaching or cattle rustling, but there have been plenty of occasions when people wandered around with illegal firearms.

I started as a foot beat officer, as everyone did in those days, in February 1984. The miners' dispute began just after this and I suddenly felt as though I'd been drafted into the army. In fact during the dispute we were often referred to as 'troops' by senior officers, which led the media to suspect that soldiers had been employed to assist in the eventual breaking of the strike. The greatest memories I have of the dispute, apart from filling in all the lucrative overtime forms, is of being continually shouted at and verbally abused all day, every day, and that was just by my colleagues. The seeming endless boredom was occasionally punctuated by some very bland packed lunches in flimsy white cardboard boxes, the best parts of which were an apple and a Mars bar. The very long days were usually spent with a dozen other hairy-arsed coppers crammed inside a Ford Transit van inevitably exposed to copious amounts of disgusting belching and farting. There didn't seem to be any lady cops working the dispute, maybe because most ladies clearly didn't possess the necessary hairy bottoms.

After a couple of years walking the beat and almost losing my job for never actually prosecuting anyone, I was sent on a driving course. I then spent the next ten years driving 'response' cars around the city. Working as a response officer means you are usually the first on the scene at almost everything that comes in, day and night, and frequently alone. For me, and for most cops, it is a very rapid apprenticeship. I was told: "If you can do the job here, you can do it anywhere." It was certainly never boring.

In those days we didn't have any sirens in the police cars; I think they were deemed to be 'too American'. As a consequence I frequently drove a small Ford Escort at 80 mph on the wrong side of the road in built up areas in a ridiculously dangerous manner, taking both hands off the steering wheel in order to alternately press the horn, change gear, and flash the headlights, while screaming at people.

to get out of the way. Steering with your knees at high speed while dodging startled pedestrians is not ideal, but this was expected. Such things were done in order to 'make the job work', bending the rules to varying degrees for the sake of expediency. One of my first sergeants told me, "If you have to break the rules, don't worry, you're acting in the interests of justice."

It was known that at least unofficially you were supported and backed all the way. This and other things we did as calculated risks so the job was done as quickly as possible. Today things are very different.

I was enjoying my job and it was very exciting. I was a young man tearing around the city every day in a police car. I worked extremely hard for a long time and I didn't look up until I had a dozen years' service. When I looked around I realised just what an idiot I'd been for being so conscientious. Other cops were getting paid the same as me or more and were actually getting away with half the work. Some thoroughly bone idle colleagues also ended up acquiring quite high rank in the police service, so you clearly didn't always need to work hard to be promoted. It seemed that passing an exam and some impressive use of management clichés in interviews was all it took for some people. You'd see them every few years when you visited headquarters, but they would be another rank higher than when you last saw them, careerist cops who'd never worked shifts or undertaken any proper police work. When you've been in the job long enough you know the true nature of quite a few high ranking officers, and you remember clearly just how idle they were when they were constables.

It was not in my nature to expend endless amounts of energy avoiding work. This was how I saw it; it was quicker and easier to volunteer and just get the job done than otherwise. Not only this, a good reputation as a hard working officer would stand me in good stead, or so I thought. This naïve idea was to be proved wrong much later in my service when I had some very hurtful wrangles with the PSD, the Professional Standards Department. If you can imagine a huge and rapidly expanding department within any organisation whose main raison d'être seems to be to unnecessarily persecute all hard working conscientious cops then this is the modern day PSD. It's the same in every UK police force nowadays. They are a bastard cross between the Soviet Stasi and the German Gestapo, but thankfully nowhere near as well-organised, professional or efficient. They seem to exist only to further their own ends, to create a climate of fear in the workplace, and to counter their own extreme paranoia. They usually operate in pairs and luckily many of them conduct themselves more like Bungle and Zippy from the children's TV show *Rainbow*. But they have the power to destroy people and they seem to relish it.

I spent some time in the divisional control room before these were regrettably closed during one of the first rounds of disastrous budget cuts. I spent some time attached to a burglary team but still in uniform, and this was very rewarding. I've visited the scene of thousands of dwelling burglaries and witnessed the distress they cause. Burglaries are not committed by the starving but by scruffy thieving bastards who want what you've got but they are not prepared to work for it.

My last decade in the job has seen the best of times, and the very worst. I spent most of the time looking after an inner city hospital, thoroughly enjoying myself. I acquired close to £30,000 in grant funding from various sources to help the kids on the nearby council estate stay away from crime and antisocial behaviour with my music club project. I achieved some great results too, and was awarded the title of 'Community Police Officer of the Year' in 2007. The first half of my service saw a huge investment in the British police service, and latterly I've witnessed the wholesale dismantling of the same great service. If it is destroyed much more then there is a real danger it will be lost forever. I can say this because I've seen it; I've worked at the sharp end for thirty years.

Sadly all my energies in the last few years of my service seemed to have been spent defending myself against my own employers rather than doing my job. I was not alone. Many of my honest, hard working colleagues in the police felt the wrath of the PSD. I know one colleague who was suspended

on full pay for *three and a half years* before finally being completely exonerated. Taxpayers kept him at home on full pay all that time, when he could have been at work. I know this might sound bizarre but it's true, and it's very common nowadays. It seems that a hugely disproportionate amount of time, money and effort is spent by police forces across the country investigating their own employees rather than safeguarding the public from child killers, thieves and other scum that continue to wander our streets with impunity.

People I meet in the pub frequently bemoan having to work in a job they hate until their late sixties, and see me with envious eyes drawing a generous public sector pension. But I am one of the last, an endangered species, a cop who has actually reached retirement age. Perhaps I should be stuffed and mounted in the British Museum? It is my prediction that very few people in the police service will achieve this in the future, mainly because they will add ten years to the pensionable service, but if the PSD don't get you then the draconian sickness policy will. You will either find yourself in prison for making a genuine mistake or sacked for stupidly getting yourself injured on duty while perhaps trying to save someone's life.

Books about the police and the wider public sector sell really well, even the very poor ones that clearly haven't been properly proof-read or copy-edited, and particularly those written from the inside. Such books are quite rare because according to the Home Office and ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) serving police officers should not write about their job. Those who do are clearly taking a risk, and many are therefore written anonymously. Even so, they have to keep their scribblings innocent, amusing, vague and inoffensive. I can write what I like, even if it brings the police service into disrepute, because I don't work for them anymore. So, make yourself a mug of coffee, sit back and enjoy the ride.

Jonathan Nicholas, October 2013

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# JOINING

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# RETURNING FROM ABROAD

How did I evolve from a long-haired, tree-hugging hippy to become one of ‘Thatcher’s bully boys’? The process was gradual, involving months of training and a good deal of introspection on my part. Everyone has the freedom to choose their own lifestyle, either to follow a dream, however realistic or ridiculous, or to drift along aimlessly, for years or even their entire life. We all face career decisions of one sort or another when young, and I chose to join the police service, though I’m not entirely sure why. I vaguely remember my father saying something about a good pension, but this never occurred to me when I joined. You don’t think of such boring things when you are in your early twenties. In the latter days of my service my pension was costing me a small fortune in compulsory contributions, a fact that is not widely known.

I didn’t give much serious thought to becoming a cop, or anything else for that matter, though I did have a few vague ideas. I had my share of drifting; from the age of eighteen to twenty-three, when I wandered the globe as a scruffy vagrant traveller, wide-eyed and fantastically naïve, moving from one country to another, my passport folded over in my back pocket. That wonderful document was quite often the only thing I ever possessed. It was all I needed, my ticket to freedom.

I was looking for something positive to do with my life, seeking a reason for it all. This probably sounds like complete and utter nonsense but it’s true. Some people like me develop late and have obscure ideas about what they want to do. In my case these ideas were often muddled by cheap alcohol and drugs, while slumped in some desert *wadi* or lying on an endless Australian beach.

I’d been bumbling along since I was eighteen, drifting around the world living a stateless bohemian lifestyle until I reached the age of twenty-three. Then quite suddenly on a fine New Zealand autumn morning in April 1983 I ran out of inspiration. At that moment while sitting on the clean white sand of Auckland’s North Shore I felt ready to return to the UK and find a career. It wasn’t a kind of epiphany, but more likely a rare moment of clarity caused by not being drunk or bombed off my tits on weed for almost three months. For years I’d lived with no money and no belongings except for a diary, a rucksack and a change of clothes. But I was incredibly happy. I didn’t own anything, but I was free. This was to be the sort of priceless, wonderful freedom I was about to willingly give up for the next thirty years.

My parents were noticeably much older when I saw them again for the first time in years at Heathrow airport. They appeared frail, and this lent some urgency to my situation, as their apparent leap in years made me feel older too. It was good to be back in the UK, but this time I knew I was here to stay. No more brief stops before flying off again to some other exotic hiding place. This was finally the end. The wandering had to stop. But what should I do? I felt like Richard Hannay returning from South Africa in John Buchan’s *The Thirty Nine Steps*. I was home and yet I needed something exciting and interesting to keep me in England.

I lay on a bedroom floor in my parent’s bungalow listening to music, staring idly at the ceiling occasionally turning my head to watch the heavy rain running in tiny riverlets on the window. I watched them compete with one another as they raced down the glass, always an unseen outsider leaping ahead to beat my favourites.

I had been allocated a bed, but preferred the floor, like *Crocodile Dundee* in his plush New York

hotel room; I'd been so used to sleeping on the ground in my vagrant lifestyle that I found a soft bed quite uncomfortable. This was a habit that remained with me for years. The dismal view from the window matched my mood. It was entirely grey, with the tops of nearby trees in spring bud held back, jostling one another constantly in a strong north wind. The sun was gone, and blue sky was nowhere to be seen as though banished into memory. It was a typically cold English spring day; damp, miserable and claustrophobic. The dark clouds covered the ground like a fire blanket, blotting out light as though a hundred miles thick. I was in a place where there were no sun-drenched beaches and blood-warm ocean. Life seemed incredibly vacuous and dull, and I wondered where I'd left my passport.

My brother-in-law Malcolm arrived at the house. My bedroom door was slightly ajar and I could just see him as he stomped in through the front door. He brushed the rain from his sleeves, and noticed his thick glasses and moustache were speckled with raindrops. I knew the purpose of his visit. He'd brought with him an application form for the police, for me. I'd applied for other jobs, but had not thought about a career in the police. Surely I couldn't entertain such an idea? How would I cope with the rigours of a disciplined organisation? I'd been living a carefree existence for so long, how would I fit into such a way of life? Would I be able to?

I'd been an air cadet for years as a teenager, and thoroughly enjoyed it. I'd reached the rank of flight sergeant. Life in a disciplined organisation would not be *entirely* alien, but for the last few years I'd been such a free agent, completely at liberty to do anything I wanted.

Malcolm stepped into the room and handed me the papers.

"Just fill it in and see how you go. If you get in, you wouldn't have to stay. Try it. If you don't like it, you could always leave. You wouldn't be tied in, not like the forces."

I was still lying on the floor listening to music. I knew Malcolm was trying to help, so I nodded probably too casually, and smiled. I sat up and leaned against the bed. Malcolm was a special constable at the time, a volunteer police officer, and he'd picked up the form from the local police station. He disappeared away into the kitchen. I heard him talk to my mother. I sensed that I was the topic of conversation because they glanced in my direction, talking in hushed conspiratorial tones. I heard my mother's voice.

"Is he up yet?" But I didn't hear Malcolm's reply. I'd been home a few months and I still didn't feel right. I took solace in a friend's company and we smoked hash occasionally, but I knew this was the wrong thing to do. I was evading the truth and I couldn't hide forever. The Genesis song *Mama* was high in the charts at the time, and even now it reminds me of those days, with the guilt of it all tearing me apart.

I think everyone in the family, including myself, were disappointed that my great wandering hadn't amounted to much. I'd returned from years of travelling abroad to absolutely nothing, apart from a stack of sun-bleached and very tattered travel diaries. But what good were these? I didn't have any money, and I wasn't any further qualified in anything than when I left. But I'd experienced hardship in many forms, not infrequent and lengthy spells of hunger, some danger, and times of heartache and desperation. I hadn't realised that when you experience real hunger your teeth begin to feel quite erroneous in the mouth, and actually start to hurt, very gradually along with everything else. I'd been very hungry in Athens, and again ten thousand miles away in Darwin. I'd loved and lost; I'd seen some amazing things and had a great adventure. Perhaps more than anything else I had gained a quiet determination to succeed and a self-reliance that would remain with me for the rest of my life.

I scanned the very comprehensive application form. There were twenty or more pages, and it appeared to be a research paper for an edition of *This is your Life*, with me being the subject matter. Starting from birth to the present day I was asked to supply details of *every* address I'd ever lived at, every job, and all incidents which I thought my prospective employers might need to know about. How honest should I be? I'd lived in Australia for a year as an illegal immigrant when my tourist visa

expired. I'd shared a flat in Brisbane with a chap whose brother was a drug dealer on the Gold Coast and we were two of his best customers. Should I tell them? Would they find out?

Should I tell them about the many occasions I sneaked under the fence into Gaza city in 1988, avoiding the Israeli checkpoints to smoke hash with Palestinians on the beach? What about my time in Germany as a labourer when I shared a damp tenement with some Irish and Polish guys? There were times the German police visited us in their smart green uniforms after reports of drunkenness in our slum house, clearly evident to our complaining neighbours. What, if anything, should I tell them about that?

I decided I'd merely list the addresses, and leave it to them as to how far they would check my past activities. If they found out everything and turned me down as a result, then so be it. Thankfully I'd never been arrested anywhere in the world, and never came to police notice, apart from a few minor encounters. On one occasion two Australian cops checked me out when I was hitch-hiking. I was standing alone by a melting road which stretched to the end of the earth, hoping for a lift out of Katherine, south of Darwin. A small group of Aborigines were gathered together in the scant shade of a ghost gum tree near the road and I was contemplating joining them. As usual I was broke, hungry and thirsty. The cops spoke to me in a very business-like, if slightly racist manner, checking my identity and my intentions, before telling me to: "Stay away from the Abbos, mate!"

Another occurred when I was almost caught climbing the Storey Bridge high above the Brisbane River. Almost. The rotten Greek police once ripped open my toothpaste and my last bit of soap at Athens airport, just because I had long hair down my back, a filthy unkempt beard, tatty clothes, and generally malodorous whiff about me.

I was later to find out that during my application process there had been some extensive background checks made on my activities. In the UK, police forces in Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and South Yorkshire were consulted. The Australian police in Queensland visited at least one address I had given on the application form. Two of Joe Bjelke-Petersen's finest male uniformed cops called in at an address in Coorparoo, a suburb of Brisbane where I'd lived for a while. An old friend remembered me and confirmed I'd lived there. It was a good job the cops didn't attend a few weeks later, when the address was raided and my friend was busted for growing a ton of weed in the back garden. Police were also consulted in Jerusalem, but luckily, like all the other places I'd lived in, I never been tangled up with the local law.

For much of the time when I was travelling my hair and beard were very long, so I have to admit I probably did appear to look like precisely what I was: a scruffy, unwashed vagrant, similar to the tattered soul scrambling up the beach at the start of every *Monty Python* TV show. I had become quite wary of authority, and viewed the police – all police – with a mixture of suspicion, fear and, at the very least, indifference. Overall, they were to be avoided.



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# A POLICEMAN CALLS

I filled in the application form in the early summer of 1983 with a degree of casual indifference and sent it off. I hoped it would be the last such repetitive police paperwork I would ever have to spend time on. Sadly of course, it was a sign of things to come.

I heard nothing for quite some time. Then I received a letter briefly acknowledging my application and stating someone would phone in order to arrange a convenient time to visit me at home. Sure enough, a few days later, on a typically blustery June afternoon the doorbell rang and a very tall male officer in his late twenties stood at the door to my parents' bungalow in full uniform. He had a thin, angular face, and he was wearing a long black greatcoat, unbuttoned, but no headgear. I assumed he'd parked a vehicle nearby. A blue *Burndept* radio was slung around his neck inside his tunic, and faint electronic voices chattered occasionally. He introduced himself and I ushered him in. He moved slowly and deliberately like a young Jimmy Stewart and sat rather stiffly on the edge of the sofa. His immaculate black boots looked incongruous on the carpet, and the toe caps shone like glass as though he'd just been on parade. He looked around the room as he spoke, scanning the house and its décor.

"So, you want to join the police then?" he said, rather obviously, smiling at me. He then scowled a little, as if making an assessment of me and looking for some reaction. I guessed I should make some form of positive reply so I offered:

"Yes. I think so. It's a good job, isn't it?" I said, feeling rather stupid. He seemed very polite, unlike the officious German, rude Greek, and brusque, business-like Australian police I'd encountered in the past. I could only half believe I was trying to become one of them, a member of the establishment, having lived on the other side for years.

"Yes, it is. It's not all excitement though. There's a lot of other stuff, boring stuff, things you don't see on the telly." He looked serious and distracted. His radio seemed to be a constant source of irritation, and he tilted his head slightly to one side as though trying to listen to it, like a bird seeking a worm, while talking to me at the same time.

"Yes, I know. It's not all like *The Sweeney*, is it?" and I laughed a little, trying to lighten the encounter. He didn't seem impressed. I remembered the first inklings I'd had of possibly wanting to join the police, years before, sitting in the churchy gloom of a packed television room at Kibbutz Dafna in northern Israel, crowding in with everyone else to watch *The Sweeney* in grainy black and white.

"No. We deal with the same families time and again. It runs in the generations."

I hadn't a clue what he was talking about. What runs in the generations? He fiddled with his radio, adjusting the volume slightly, turning a knob at the side without looking at it. I wondered how he knew which way it was turned. He spoke into it briefly, pressing the small yellow transmit button on the top, as though in response to a request, which I didn't hear, then turned his attention to me.

"How did you know they wanted you, just then?" I asked, genuinely curious. I could hardly hear anything legible from the walkie-talkie around his neck, let alone a name of any sort.

"They just shouted my collar number, see?" and he touched the series of shiny metallic numbers on his right shoulder. He smiled at me. "You get used to it."

I made us both a cup of tea and he gulped his incredibly quickly as though his throat was lined with asbestos. I spoke about my vague knowledge of the police, which amounted to information gained from watching TV shows such as *The Sweeney*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Kojak* and so on. I even had recollections of much older programmes like *Z-Cars* and *Softly Softly*. I remember Bert Lynch, the sergeant in *Z-Cars* standing at a sink shaving in the afternoon. As a child I remember thinking how unusual this seemed because my dad always shaved early in the morning.

I told the policeman about my Uncle Alan who at the time was a detective sergeant in West Yorkshire police. Alan always had a world-weary rudeness about him; a tired knowingness that I now understand had grown from years of repeatedly dealing with society's worst human detritus. I'd heard him speaking to my dad using words like 'cunt' and 'fuck' in conversation, which clearly embarrassed my father. I'd never once heard my own father use such language.

This was the only direct connection I had with the job at the time, apart from the fact that my dad actually seemed more than a little anti-police. He'd based his poor opinions of police officers on some dreadful experiences in South Africa in the 1950s, hardly relevant to modern Britain.

I briefly mentioned some of my travels to the young cop, but he couldn't have seemed less interested, so I didn't raise it again. I remember he told me he'd been to France on a school trip, which was the sum total of his travel experience. I am always slightly bemused when people tell me they've never been abroad, or have never owned a passport. Travel has been such a formative part of my life. Even so, I don't readily discuss my experiences so the absence of them in someone else's life is not a huge issue for me.

I heard a barely audible but peremptory female voice on the cop's radio and he responded.

"Yes. Ten four. I'm not far away. I'll attend that now." He sounded as though he worked for the LAPD rather than a British police force. Nottinghamshire still used 'Ten Codes' radio abbreviations at the time.

"I'll have to go. Thanks for the tea. You should hear from us soon." He stood up and handed me his empty mug. He thrust his right hand at me and I instinctively took it. We shook hands firmly for a few moments. He smiled at me in a manner that I couldn't help thinking was as though he felt sorry for me. I showed him the door; he stepped out and disappeared down the driveway, his long black coat flapping behind him like a cape. It had just started raining heavily. I had no idea as to the real purpose of his visit. He didn't write anything down. It has occurred to me now as I write this, that my visitor has probably long since retired, now a big fat bloke who spends all his spare time tending to his pigeons and supping ale at his local pub. Good on him I say; I've reached that point myself, except for the pigeons. Other than that he's probably dead, poor chap. One of the least desirable police traditions is that many cops die quite soon after retirement.

More time passed. Weeks in fact. I occupied myself as I had the previous few months; reading and writing in my diary. I have always kept a diary, and always will. If you've ever met me – even briefly – then I'm afraid I've probably written reams about you. I write in it every day, even if it's just a few lines. I read Graham Chapman's hilarious book *A Liar's Autobiography*. I read George Orwell's *Down and out in Paris and London*, which I could thoroughly relate to, and his book about the English *The Lion and the Unicorn*. He stated in this book that the British would never allow fascists to march with the goose step on British streets, because we would just laugh at them. I'm not sure this applies any more. I read Miles Kington's book *Miles and Miles*, and *Creator* by Jeremy Leven. An interesting read, even though a lot of it was just pornographic twaddle. Such similar twaddle that now sells millions of copies.

I also read Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, which I found incredibly claustrophobic and disturbing, but brilliant nonetheless. The total distortion of truth by Big Brother, in a world where cameras watch our every move and the government tells us what we can and can't say. I remember

lying on my bedroom floor reading it in one day, only venturing out to use the toilet every few hours, the rain still lashing down heavily against the window. The movie version starring John Hurt and Richard Burton in his last film role before his untimely death was also superb.

Finally in early August I was summoned to attend a huge building in the centre of Nottingham adjacent to the main fire station, known as Central Police Station. It was only the second time in my life I'd been to Nottingham.

Central Police Station was a purpose-built grey brick building with wide staircases and carved stone lions sitting proudly atop sweeping curved bannisters. It was an imposing building constructed in the 1930s and it was in one of the front ground floor offices that I sat the standard entrance exam. This was a straightforward arithmetic and English test which I was relieved to find was quite easy. Various out-of-date recruitment posters hung limply on the walls, clinging on with faded sticky tape as though placed there years before as a perfunctory gesture. The rooms were dark and smelt of polished wood, layers of dust and stale tobacco, like a cheap Spanish hotel.

I was subjected to a very basic medical examination, with the usual coughing and holding testicles routine conducted by a man who I presumed was a doctor, though I don't remember him telling me who he was. There aren't many men who've had my balls in their hands, and luckily his hands were very warm. I was weighed while just wearing underpants (eleven stone twelve pounds) and my height checked. I'd put on quite a bit of weight since my travels came to an end. I was an emaciated ten stone (a hundred and forty pounds) when I returned from travelling a few months before. Food was never a priority for me, and I would frequently substitute a few fags for a meal, in common with many ardent smokers. I was just short of six feet tall, without shoes.

I was interviewed briefly by a red-faced and corpulent uniformed sergeant who had an easy-going manner. I sensed by his age and demeanour that he was probably close to retirement and as such didn't really care anymore. I was told before I left that I'd passed the day's proceedings and I was on to the next stage.

In September I was visited by another cop from the local station in Retford. The sergeant was approaching middle age, probably late forties, and he looked weary and distracted. He seemed relieved when I offered him a cup of tea, and he fell heavily onto the sofa in the lounge as though he planned to stay for the rest of his life. He sighed, smiled and then asked questions about my family. He took out a yellow *Bic* biro and a sheet of A4 paper which he folded over twice and rested on one knee. I didn't know it at the time but his job was to complete a 'Home Surroundings Report', something the young constable had apparently initiated weeks before. He seemed more interested in my dad's greenhouse visible from the window and now packed with ripe tomatoes in final flourish. He asked me if I undertook any of the gardening, and he was clearly disappointed when I said no. He didn't seem to allow his radio to bother him to the extent the constable did.

He finally left after two large mugs of sweet tea, half a packet of digestive biscuits and a tour of my parents' garden. As he walked away I noticed the leaves on the trees above the nearby lane had just started to curl a little at the edges. What little summer we had that year was in full retreat and I noticed a cool autumnal chill in the air. My first winter in years was rapidly approaching.

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# WAITING

For the purposes of researching this book, I took a formal look at my official personal record several times. I say 'official' because there is clearly an official and an unofficial personal record kept for every police officer, though this is denied. I was once at Central Police Station years ago and I blundered almost by chance into the Personnel Office. There were neat rows of files on open shelves and I clearly saw my own collar number amongst the others in numerical order. I reached up to take hold of it but just before I did so, and with my hand barely a few inches away I was shouted at by a female from across the room:

"No! No! You can't! You need an appointment!" she screeched at me in a loud panic, to which I turned and replied in all innocence: "I'm here now; this is my file, surely..." The woman who was the owner of the peremptory shrieking sprang to her feet from behind a desk and quickly forced herself between me and the file, still on the shelf. She calmed down very quickly, probably aware of just how erratic she was behaving and still breathless said to me again:

"You need to give us half an hour, at least. We'll have it ready for you then, okay?"

I looked on, bemused, but returned thirty minutes later to find it laid out across a desk, neatly opened at page one and the date I had joined. I asked to see it again, just prior to retirement, and the same thing happened then too. If they have nothing to hide, as they claim, then I ask you, why would they behave in such a manner? They forget they are dealing with cops, suspicious people who deal with duplicity on a daily basis.

I managed to take a look at all the initial comments made about me on my typed application form. Someone had written on the front of the form by hand: *'Male, 23yrs, single. Much travelled please see attached list – Jewish faith possibly.'* This observation was no doubt made as a result of some time I'd spent working on a kibbutz in Israel. It always amazes me that there is an automatic assumption of Jewishness about this. If you visit the Vatican City in Rome does this make you Roman Catholic? Well, yes, I suppose it might, but a summer spent working in Germany didn't arouse a comment such as: *'Loves Germany – must be a Nazi – possibly'*. I usually keep people guessing, as I decided early on that my religion – like my sexual preference – was my business and no-one else's. However, my religion was listed on the comprehensive form in the bit where it says: *'Religion: C or E'*, so this person was clearly making an inaccurate presumption. The visiting sergeant had written:

*'The applicant is a fairly impressive looking young man of good height and build. He has a good conversational ability and has apparently mixed a very great deal with many types and nationalities. He has travelled all over the world and prides himself upon his independence.'*

He made no reference to the tomatoes in my dad's greenhouse. The sergeant from Central Police Station had written:

*'Did well on day's tests. Very confident with slightly familiar attitude. Mature with broad experience of life through worldwide travels. Speaks well and converses freely.'*

Finally, in summing up, another sergeant had written:

*'Panel felt if he could come to terms with discipline he has a lot to offer the service. His application form is one of the most comprehensive that I have seen and probably gives some insight into his character. I would recommend that he be considered for appointment.'*

In the autumn of 1983 amid widespread controversy the US Air Force delivered dozens of cruise missiles in some highly visible wooden crates to RAF Greenham Common. It was the height of the Cold War, and President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were constantly in the media standing together, reaffirming their determination to protect the Free World by importing even more American nuclear weapons into Britain. I drove by the protesters' 'Peace Camp' surrounding the airbase when I visited a friend in Reading, and saw lots of well-intentioned women living rough in flimsy shelters made from plastic bags.

I was dealing with my own personal battle too: I was trying to quit smoking. It was almost fifteen years to the day in November 1978 when I smoked my first cigarette in the factory at Kibbutz Dafna in Israel, during my first night shift on the dreaded Conveyor. But now I was determined to quit, so I bought myself some stick-on merit stars from *Woolworths* in Retford and made a chart of each long and agonising day without a smoke. It seemed to work. Those were the days before e-cigarettes and nicotine replacements. It was cold turkey and nothing else.

I ran around the village each day and went swimming at night in order to give myself some incentive to become healthy again. I was thin when I was travelling but not particularly healthy. In our very fat-conscious society today people frequently mistake being thin for being in good health, but this is simply not true. I've always run though. I used to run to school. Wherever I travelled if I was eating reasonably well, which wasn't all that often, I'd run.

Caught up in Cold War fervour while waiting to hear from the police, I joined the local branch of the Royal Observer Corps. The primary reason of course was that if the bomb dropped, as it seemed might, I'd know where all the fallout shelters were, and I'd have ready access to them. Every week I would make my way to a secret location in the corner of a farmer's field where there was a very discreet steel hatch in the ground, standing slightly proud of a low concrete base. You'd never have guessed it was there. I'd climb thirty feet down a metal ladder to meet the other members of the team. Amid a huge stockpile of tinned food and bottled water we would play out a possible scenario which we hoped none of us would ever see.

Wherever a nuclear weapon detonated nearby, one of us would have to go up to the surface and place a sheet of radiation-absorbent card in a metal frame, and turn it towards the blast. It was unclear which of us was to do this erroneous task, as clearly whoever it was would have probably been blown to smithereens or at the very least glow in the dark for days to come. The idea was that the direction of the fallout could then be predicted, thereby forecasting where the worst of the radiation would make landfall. This information would then be passed on to the authorities using a black Bakelite telephone. The government would be safely ensconced deep underground of course, as we were, well out of harm's way.

It occurred to me that if nuclear war did happen, the government would survive perfectly intact but there'd be bugger-all left on the surface to govern, just a burning wilderness of ruined buildings and millions of dead people. At the time of course it all seemed very logical. Nuclear Armageddon was a real possibility in those days. In reality, I suspect we would have all just brought our families into the safety of the nearest secret bunker and waited it out, while everyone else on the surface burned to a crisp. This was strongly hinted at by some of the older members of the local Corps, along with the undeniably interesting prospect of being trapped underground for weeks or months with one or two lovely looking young ladies. But even with that thought in mind, I'm very glad it remained at the theoretical stage. One of the most unrealistic elements of disaster movies with an 'end of the world' scenario is they always portray cops and other emergency services carrying out their duties right up to the end. Do you think for a moment these people would abandon their own families in such circumstances?

Finally in December 1983 I received a letter stating I was to attend a whole day of interviews and

tests the following month at the local police training centre. Two days before this letter arrived, on 1 December 1983, a huge car bomb exploded outside Harrods in central London. A warning had been given and the police attended. Four Metropolitan police officers had been approaching the suspect vehicle on foot just as it exploded. They had probably been thinking about grabbing a bacon cob and a cup of tea a few moments before. Three were killed outright, and one survived but lost both his legs. Three members of the public were also killed, one of them an American citizen, visiting London for some Christmas shopping. Ninety other people were injured. The Provisional IRA later apologised for the loss of life, a rather cynical thing to do that immediately makes you wonder why it was done in the first place.

Not only was it the height of the Cold War, but the IRA was involved in their murderous campaign of violence across the British mainland. It occurred to me that if I were to become a police officer I would become a 'legitimate target', as the security forces were known.

I thought of Kiryat Shmona, Kibbutz Dafna in Israel, and all the air raids I'd been caught in when I lived there in 1978 and 1979. Yasser Arafat and his merry band of murderous thugs in the PLO had indirectly tried to kill me several times and had failed. The odds of being hit were slim. So I never gave it another thought.

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# INTERVIEWS AND TESTS

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# EPPERSTONE MANOR

I arrived at Epperstone Manor, the beautiful but discreetly crumbling training establishment belonging to Nottinghamshire Constabulary, at 8.30am, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1984. Epperstone was a typically quiet English village which had a pub, a post office and perhaps a few dozen houses mostly strung out along the main road through the village. There were two short rows of police houses across the road from the manor, used for residential training courses.

When on a training course of more than a day or so you could live there if you wished, in this beautiful quiet village, free of charge. The manor was exactly as it sounds, an old manor house, the size of a small stately home. It was a wonderful building with beautiful views across sweeping lawns and rolling countryside. Rows of crown-topped terracotta chimney pots on the steeply sloping roof were an indication of huge stone fireplaces in each room. There were stag's heads hanging from dark oak-panelled walls, with a wide dark wood staircase, each step of which creaked wonderfully underfoot. Huge oil paintings adorned the walls on very thick picture wire, immaculate red carpets covered all the floors and there was an almost palpable atmosphere of tradition and sense of purpose. This was the focal point of the training establishment and it evoked an immediate sense of awe and respect.

I met six other male candidates, and after a very civilized cup of tea in delicate china cups with the force crest on each side, we were ushered into an oak-panelled room off the main hall. Desks had been laid out, carefully spaced, and we sat down. There were eight places, and seven of us, so maybe one person had changed his mind? We were handed five papers consisting of various written tests: logical reasoning, mathematics, spelling, grammar and vocabulary. There was also a current affairs paper, with questions such as 'What is Greenham Common?'

Half an hour into the tests the eighth, missing candidate arrived. He sauntered into the room smiling rather witlessly, taking his seat in a conspicuously unhurried fashion, looking blankly around as though settling down for a picnic on the beach. I wondered how anyone so remarkably gormless could even apply for the police let alone arrive so late. I assumed that perhaps he wasn't too bothered about it. I assumed correctly because about eighteen months later he resigned.

At 10.30am we had all finished the written tests and were led out of the main doors across a small car park and around the corner towards a row of garages. Opposite these were some changing rooms and showers. We filed inside and were instructed to change into PT gear we'd brought with us from home. There followed a timed run of a mile and a half. This length was quite fortuitous as it was roughly the same distance I'd been running almost every day since I returned home in April.

We stood around waiting for the off like eager race horses, our breath clouding around us in the freezing air. Then at a gentle jog we were led past the huge wrought-iron gates by an instructor who turned right down the main street towards the village. The sky was wonderfully clear on what was a perfectly crisp January day. When I lived in Brisbane I'd occasionally long for a day such as this, just once in a while, during the long, sweltering months of summer.

I noticed permanently shaded areas of grass by the road had become thick frosted spikes and the leafless branches of the trees strained skywards like skeletal fingers, everything utterly lifeless in the middle of winter. The air was so cold it burned the back of my throat like boiling water at every



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