

Dibcek
by Donald Hiscock

Karel Dibcek woke up and thought for a moment that he was still in Prague. He lay warm inside the duvet, his head covered and his eyes still closed, listening for the familiar sounds of the trams and the car tyres skidding on the cobbles as they took the bend outside his apartment window. But it was quiet. He had slept deeply, more deeply than he had slept for weeks, and now he was coming to in a strange room. As soon as he let go of his lids and opened his eyes he remembered where he was. He propped himself up on an elbow and looked at his wristwatch on the bedside table, not sure whether it was still set to Prague time or British Summer Time. Either way, it was much later than he was expecting it to be. He got up and went straight to the window, pulling back the curtains on a clear morning somewhere in Southampton.

Karel remembered that he had stayed up late talking and drinking with his host and old friend, Carol McLeod. He was in England partly on business but also for a short, enforced holiday. It was typical of Dibcek that he couldn't work out which part was supposed to be pleasure and which part was work. Certainly last night he had put quite a few hours into pleasure. This was very welcome, after one of the most gruelling few months he could ever remember working at the police station on Rybna on the edge of Prague's old town.

Carol had invited him to stay at her house as soon as she picked up the email saying that her friend would be in the country. She said that she insisted that he stay, and for as long as he liked. He was grateful. The moment he walked through customs and appeared in the melee of Heathrow arrivals she was there waiting for him with one of those cardboard signs the driver's carry and on it she had written 'Mr Gumshoe'. He was very pleased to see her. He was also very pleased that he had accepted his commander's offer of leave. "Get out of Prague for a while," old Smenic had growled.

So that's why he was pulling back the curtains and looking out over the docks, down Southampton Water to a power station in the distance. He was five floors up in Carol's new apartment. When he went out to the kitchen he found a note propped against a cereal box. Carol said that she would be back from London around eight. He was to make himself at home. She had left him a map of the city with her apartment block circled in red. She underlined the word 'Rest' and signed her name playfully with a 'K'.

He showered, dressed and then flipped through The Guardian on the counter top. He felt that he should put in a few calls to forensics in Winchester but he stopped

short, looking at Carol's note. She was right. He had done the business bit; it was now time for the pleasure. He went straight to the back of the newspaper and found himself looking at the classified football results. He was searching out the Bristol Rovers score. It was something he always did when he had the time to scour English football news. As he child he had an uncle who had told him tales of his time working in Bristol. The name had stuck and when he wanted to adopt an English football team just as his friends at school were talking about Manchester United and Liverpool he formed an emotional attachment with Rovers. He noticed that they had lost. Nothing had changed, he thought to himself. The same was true for Carol.

Carol had been married to his best friend until his death from cancer over ten years ago. She moved back to England and took a job up a post as a psychologist. It was Carol who had helped him through when he was trying to help her with the loss of her husband, their friend. She was always the strong one. She had helped him through his divorce too. And for the past few years she had been helping Karel with what she firmly believed was clinical depression. But he laughed this off. He always tried to change the subject. Even so, he secretly depended on her. He was glad that email had been invented and become so easy to use in recent years. He was no good at letters or returning phone calls, but there was definitely something easy about typing in a few comments and sending it off. Carol was good at replying promptly to his long and rambling messages in poor English. In fact, he kept the copies. Sometimes, late at night on Rybna, he would trawl through them, using them as a reference guide for whatever it was that was troubling him at the time. It didn't matter what he dipped into, he could always find some nugget of wisdom from Carol.

Today she had written in her note: "I got you Coco Pops because I know you have a sweet tooth. You also have a sweet mind, only it needs a bit of a therapeutic floss. Don't attempt to do any police work today. I have pulled the phone wire out, got the building under surveillance and have got in some Charles Bronson movies from the video shop. Eat crap and be merry. Back at eight." Karel admired her clear handwriting.

Carol was right. He told her this many times the previous evening when they sat up late drinking their way through the bottle of vodka Karel had brought with him from Prague. Yes, she was right about the fact he worked too hard. Yes, she was right that he had done everything he could in trying to solve this case by coming to England. Yes, she was right that he shouldn't get so personally involved in his work. Yes, she was right that he needed a rest. Yes, she was right he was probably depressed. Yes, she was right that he should have another drink.

Carol was right, he thought, as he fiddled with the spare key that she had left for the apartment. He rubbed his eyes, trying to move what felt like grit from the sockets. He felt the muscles in his thighs tighten as he rose from the kitchen table. He stretched. Since he had been awake he had grown more tired. He yawned. He told himself that this was probably a good sign. It was what Carol said would happen. He would start to feel all the tiredness that he had been pushing back. He needed to let it come through. He had to stop and let that happen. Dibcek, though, did what he always did when he felt that he was slackening off. He sought out more work. He found a number in his mobile phone and pushed the call button.

“John? It’s Karel,” he said. “I’d like to take one more look at those papers.”

“Whatever for?” replied Inspector Graham from Hampshire Constabulary.

“I’m uneasy about that statement.”

“We’ve been through this yesterday. There’s no more we can do. Thanks for everything.”

“I need an address.”

“Look Karel,” said Graham in a gentle tone, “we’ve been through this. Just enjoy your holiday. Looks like you’ve got some good weather for it.”

“John. Give me the address of Phillips.”

“You mean Phillipson?”

“Yes. I need to speak to him again.”

Dibcek felt the weariness edging away after he had persuaded Inspector Graham to let him have the address and listening to the affable Scotsman tell him how stupid he was being and that if he got into trouble it would be his own bloody fault and that with two tides a day the River Itchen might be a good place for the body of an obsessive Czech detective to end up if someone wanted to get rid of him. Yes, he had heard words like these before. So what? He moved quickly out of the apartment, clutching the street plan Carol had kindly left for him so that he could enjoy a day of sightseeing. He wasn’t sure what Southampton had to offer, but it had to be better than the grimy parts of Prague that the tourists never saw.

He knew that he could do no more, but he just had a feeling about Phillipson. That’s all it was. How many times had his hunches got him out of trouble? How

many times had one simple uneasy feeling about something, something that he couldn't explain properly to anyone else, helped him out of a difficulty? He had been asked many times to talk in front of an audience at the police academy in Prague about detection and its logical processes. But he always refused. When asked by his boss he always said that he didn't realise that logic was ever part of his job. Dibcek knew that he was often breaking the rules, but what mattered to him was getting results, and if that meant acting purely on instinct at the crucial times then that was just his style. It was a style that had also nearly driven him crazy.

It was Carol, the evening before, he remembered, who had called him crazy. Except when she said it he felt worried, because she was saying it in the way that meant he was mad, or about to go mad. She was playing with a euphemism, whereas when most people back home said that he was being crazy they just meant he was being stupid. Carol was warning him, as a close friend. He had to be careful out there, she said. "Of your mind".

He found the address of Phillipson with the aid of the map's street index. It was the other side of the city, in the Chilworth district. He could have taken a taxi, but it was a still, anti-cyclonic day and it was just right for walking. The air felt fresh and it made a change from the heavy, hot air that had been hanging over much of Bohemia all summer. And besides, he could do some sightseeing along the way. And then he wouldn't be lying when Carol asked him that evening what he had done with himself all day.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do when he got to the house. All he knew was that he felt he should go there. He just wanted to see for himself what the house of a respectable city accountant looked like. He wanted to see what the house a man connected with the drugs that had found their way on to the streets of Prague looked like. He wanted to see where someone responsible for the death of an innocent tourist caught up in a gang slaying in Prague lived.

He knew that Phillipson was a link in the chain of events that had kept him busy for the last several months. But there was no evidence that would stick.

"I happened to be in England and just passing through your neighbourhood so I thought I'd call in to say hello," he said to himself, wondering how he could justify knocking on the door of Phillipson's house. And then what would he say? "You have the right to remain silent" just as they said it in the movies. "Don't move. I have one heck of a large hunch inside this jacket and it's pointed at you Phillipson"? Or he could just do what a Charles Bronson character would do and pistol-whip the guy until he confessed. But Dibcek guessed that this probably wasn't the custom in Hampshire, just as it wasn't in Prague. Not for the last few years anyway. And besides he wasn't carrying a gun, just a banana that he had picked up from the fruit bowl on his way out of Carol's flat. Just in case, he told

himself. He was prone to moments of hypoglycaemia and something like a banana was a good standby. Not exactly police issue, he knew, but it could make all the difference between being able to give chase or to stand feeling weak and wobbly against a doorframe. “OK Phillipson, don’t make me use this banana, so just do as you are told.”

Dibcek walked away from the city centre and onto an area the map showed as a common. He walked along the edge of woodland, close to the rushing traffic. He could hear the city around him, but his attention was drawn to squirrels darting out across his path, coming bravely close as if they expected him to feed them before rapidly scuttling back up into the trees. He was not alone. The paths across the common were busy with walkers and roller bladders. It was like walking through Letenské Sady in Prague except without the view over the city.

Carol was right, of course. He was grateful for her concern. It was good of her to insist that he stay with her and not in the hotel that had been booked for him. She said that she knew he would spend most of his time working, drinking and simply not getting any rest. She said it as though it was the most important thing for his recovery. That’s how she described it, his ‘recovery’. Last evening he asked her what he was supposed to be recovering from even before the first vodka had hit their stomachs.

“You know perfectly well,” she had said. “And if you don’t know then you are a pretty hopeless case. Actually, if you don’t know what I’m referring to then you are utterly stupid. I don’t have stupid friends. And nor do you, so you know what I mean. If you don’t listen when you are here right now in front of me then I don’t know what’s going to become of you Karel Dibcek.” He shut his eyes and leaned back. He knew he was trapped, but he was also very glad. Of all the ways to be trapped, this was the best. He settled back in her new armchair smelling the leather and listening to her voice crackle like the lightning he could see out of the picture window that was randomly splitting up the evening sky over Southampton Water.

Carol, yes, had told him what he already knew. But it didn’t hurt to be told by a friend. He knew, last night, that he was being told by the best friend he had. Maybe, if he admitted it, she was the only friend he had. It was her sense of humour that he enjoyed. He sometimes wondered why she had never re-married. She was very attractive and she had a way of making people laugh. Even Dibcek. Staring for a moment into the murky waters of a pond on the common and aware that the banana in his pocket was probably not going to last the day as the heat was building up, he remembered the joke Carol had started the evening before about fish.

“If you have a philosophical fish,” she said brightly, leaving a short pause to get Dibcek’s full attention, “then does it live in a think tank?”

She had to explain the reference to think tank, which made it seem funnier. She laughed at him laughing at her. It was at moments like this that he noticed how white her teeth were. Another attractive feature, but uncommon, as far as he was concerned, in British women. Fine cheekbones, blue eyes, a good sense of humour and attention to dental detail made for a combination, in his mind, of the ideal woman. But his admiration of her attractiveness passed as quickly as it had arrived when she forced him into an observation on fish. He struggled to come up with:

“What do you call a fish out of water?”

“I don’t know, but you don’t have to phrase it like a question. Just tell me, don’t ask me,” she said.

“Oh shit,” he said. “I’ve forgotten the answer.”

“The punchline,” she offered.

“Yes, the punchline.” He laughed. She laughed. There was a flash of lightning.

“Dead?” she guessed. “Do you call it dead? Or just uncomfortable? Or is it more subtle than this?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I really can’t remember. It’s probably a combination of both of what you have just said.”

“Karel,” she smiled, “that’s a crap joke.”

And then he had a brilliant stroke of luck. He genuinely misheard her, so said:

“Carp joke?”

“Now you’ve got it.” She laughed and left to get more ice for the vodka. “You’ve got the hang of it now,” she shouted back from the kitchen.

“Carp?”

“It’s a fish, stupid.”

Karel was looking for carp on Southampton Common when it occurred to him that he was, indeed, wasting his time by walking up to Phillipson’s house. But he

was quite enjoying the sunshine, now that it had broken through and was feeling strong through the thinning strands of his hair, so he decided to walk on. He would catch a bus back to the city centre, if he could work out which one, and how you bought a ticket.

Carol was right. He didn't laugh enough. He asked her how she knew that he hardly ever laughed. She said that you didn't need to be an expert to pick up on the fact that someone's face had got stuck into a permanent frown. She said she heard a crack when he started laughing. She said that it sounded like his jaw or probably his cheekbones adopting an unusual position. She said it was the sound of bones settling.

Carol had made him laugh. What he was worried about now was finding her attractive again. They had been through that before. Dibcek would be the first to admit that he found it difficult to separate friendship with a woman from attraction. But this was never a problem when you were perpetually miserable. Or clinically depressed as Carol described it.

When Dibcek got to Chilworth he noticed the large houses, some with security gates. This felt right. He knew that someone like Phillipson would need to live in a neighbourhood like this. Many of the houses he walked past seemed ugly or had been made ugly by excessive ornamentation. He often wondered about the English and their taste for elaborate exterior decoration. Even the rich. But then again, he thought, perhaps those who have grown wealthy on the backs of the poor are always ugly. It had nothing to do with looks.

Phillipson's house was a large building set back from the end of a cul-de-sac, partly obscured by a glade. It dominated the other houses around, even though they were large as well. Dibcek knew he had arrived at the right place because he heard a car approaching behind him. He didn't look round because he could tell by the way that it slowed right down and didn't overtake him that it was a police vehicle. He got to the locked gate and stared at the entry phone. There was no name. He could see security cameras on the fence posts. For a moment he almost relished the challenge of getting in unnoticed. It was not beyond him, at least he could do it under the cover of darkness. But that was a challenge he could do without. An image of Carol flashed into his mind. Then he turned round. The blue unmarked police car had remained at a distance. He looked across to see if he could recognise either of its occupants. But they just looked like regular cops. They could have been some of his own men, he thought. Europe must be shrinking if you can't tell one detective from another wherever you go he said to himself as he crossed over to the Ford Mondeo.

He waved before he got to the car. A window came down. He didn't recognise the policemen. They didn't smile, but they obviously knew who he was. He waited for them to say something, but they didn't say anything. He liked their style. He made a mental note to incorporate this into his next training session at the academy. Wear a fresh cologne, be clean shaven, look relaxed but look vacant. Look vacant but deadly. In a stylish kind of way. This, he thought, might be important for a country ready to join the European Union.

He put his hand on the car's roof and bent his head down so that he was close to the sweet smelling chin of the detective riding shotgun. Still no reaction.

"What a beautiful day," said Dibcek, smiling. "A beautiful day to be out seeing the sights."

"Can we be of any assistance sir?" asked one of the detectives.

"I'm not sure," said Dibcek, turning back to give the house one last glance, just to satisfy himself, at least, he had seen it. He thought for a moment, aware that his attendant colleagues would be in no hurry to press him for an answer as they were obviously highly trained members of the patience squad. He made a mental note to remember this, because he might be able to make Carol laugh when he admitted later what he had been up to during the day. He could tell her he was busted by the Patience Squad, after a slow speed pursuit. The thought of Carol laughing gave him an idea.

"Can we give you a lift?" asked the other detective.

"Yes please," said Dibcek, beginning to open the rear door. When he settled into the seat he looked at the back of the detectives' recently shaved necks and said into the rear view mirror, meeting the driver's eyes:

"Can you drop me off at one of those shops that sells inflatable fish. I think I walked past one earlier today," said Dibcek sinking back into an authoritative style now that he was seated in the back of a police car with two young officers at his beck and call. "Take me somewhere like that. But you can go slowly. It's a beautiful day and I want to take in some of the sights."

"No problem sir," said the driver as he moved slowly away from the house.

"Show me some of the sights please on the way," said Dibcek, relaxing into the back seat, waiting for the air conditioning to build up.

Even if he closed his eyes for a moment on the journey back to the city centre he knew that he definitely wasn't in Prague.