

A Voluntary Shot to the Face

Summer 2018

Today is a big day at Police School. It's the last day of our Officer Safety Training (OST) – a five-day physical class involving applying handcuffs, handling weapons and learning self-defence. We're hoarse from yelling 'GET BACK' at each other and our instructors as we hone our new techniques. To celebrate completing OST, we're going to be sprayed in the face with CS tear gas.

CS gas, chlorobenzalmalononitrile, is a chemical weapon which is illegal and classed as a firearm in the UK. The police would only use it as a tool of last resort in the most extreme circumstances, in other words, when there is a threat to an officer's life. The chemical leaves those sprayed with it incapacitated by pain and temporarily unable to see. Now is our chance to experience first-hand exactly how that feels.

I am not at all sure about this.

I'm just not clear why our tutors want to spray all the new recruits in the face with this stuff. I fear we may be the butt of a sick joke. I've asked a lot of questions and the line I get back most is, 'It's voluntary but everyone does it,' to which I think, 'If it's voluntary, why would anyone do it?' It puts me in mind of YouTube clips of lads tasing each other for the LOLs except this is a bit more like Russian roulette – some people react very badly to CS

gas, skin blisteringly badly. I've tried to stage a rebellion, suggesting to my fourteen classmates that we might all opt out, but the peer pressure is impossible to shift. Apparently, since this practice was introduced no one has ever refused to take part.

Until now.

At the eleventh hour, just as everyone else goes to change and get ready to head down to the car park where it's to take place, I announce to the staff that I'm out. This doesn't exactly go down a storm. Nath, one of my least favourite classmates, sneers 'Don't be a pussy.' There are a few attempts made to persuade me back into the fold but I stick to my guns – I just cannot see how knowing first-hand what being sprayed with CS gas feels like would inform my use of it in a life-or-death situation; I already know it's horrific.

Grudgingly, the course leader tells me that if I'm really not going to do it, I can carry the first-aid bag and stand on the sidelines. I hadn't counted on being made to watch – I'd hoped I could stay up in the classroom – and I feel a pang of survivor's guilt. I've saved myself but left the others behind to endure this fate. Surely that's not right?