

GO AHEAD, DAYTONA

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Go Ahead, Daytona* is a collection of essays meant to explore the experiences and lessons learned through law enforcement. It juxtaposes hope with cynicism and encourages the reader to explore his or her own biases through the lens of a narrator believing police work is something to be lived down, rather than up. The essays depict struggles with hypocrisy, sex, homelessness, violence, moral ambiguity, and self-awareness.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must thank the family and friends that have supported, molded, and helped create the person I've grown into. Furthermore q!A, one person among them deserves the lion's share of praise. It's a cheesy, cliché bromide, but it must be said: Dayana, my wife, this is for you, without whom I could not have succeeded. You are my muse, my rock, and my reason for all that I do.

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## CHAPTER ONE: JADED

I'm a cop. Or, I was one—hell, what's that old bromide? "Once a Marine, always a Marine." It's the same for police officers.

Retired, fired, expired, or resigned: the profession's jadedness is transcendent and everlasting. I'm condemned to host it. To own it. To wear it like a badge.

Whether or not that shield is a mark of pride or a scar of ignominy varies by the day, but, assuredly, it was pinned to my chest by the interactions I had with the citizens of the friendly city of Daytona Beach.

Citizens like the gentleman who once visited the front desk to report an auto-theft. *His* theft of an auto, to be precise: he took a dealership car out for a test drive and never looked back. He journeyed for several hundred miles with his destination being the sickbed of his estranged, dying son. Terminal cancer had taken away his option to wait for a better time and, devoid of resources, fate forced his hand. I would have done the same thing, I think, by making things right with my child before the opportunity passed. This man even returned the car to the offended dealership with a full tank of gas and a fresh carwash before taxiing to the police department to surrender to the law.

A law that, against my wishes and moral understanding, demanded I arrest him. I know not what became of this man; though, it's likely he served the majority of his inevitable felony sentence of *up to fifteen years*.

Or a citizen like the lonely chap who'd elected to end the misery of dame-deprived evenings with a lotion bottle. He managed to get his "littler self" stuck balls-deep within by the time we arrived, and, much to his chagrin, every sworn woman in the department dropped by for

a look-see. He'd at last gained female attention, albeit not in the fashion he desired. Polaroids of his lotion-bottle-incarcerated member floated about briefings for months after. I laughed hard and long among my fellow officers, but alone in my squad car I couldn't shake a painful sense of loss for that man. His eyes were vacant coffins for his soul, and each time I made fun of the loneliness that pushed him to such lowness a little piece of my humanity withered.

Or, perhaps a citizen such as the profusely bleeding thief; the paragon of intellect who decided to smash in a storefront window with a vacuum cleaner, laying his arm open with blood spurting fiercely enough to make any Hollywood FX firm green with envy. I tackled him after a foot pursuit and received a facial masque of blood for my efforts. He told me he had HIV and guffawed with delirious insanity. The laughter didn't last long. I shut him up with my fists, a method I would come to find immensely reliable for solving conflicts. Nevertheless, modern medicine is a wonderful thing, and I remain HIV negative to this day—despite other indiscretions.

Among the most memorable was the nut-job braggart who raved about his ninja and nunchaku skills in the main lobby of the precinct. He gave what had to be the first-ever drug-induced frantic Ninja Turtle impression inside a government building. Impressive as it was, I cut it short with my Taser. All the ninjutsu in the world fails under the harrying crackle of electricity.

Curiously, one of the citizens that resonated with me the most was one of the simplest.

A common cigarette thief.

A kid. Seventeen, stupid and trying to do what he thought correct.

The loot was to be for his dying, lung-cancer ridden grandmother. She was, as he explained, and I would later see, on the verge of death, and smoking had been one of the few things in life that never abandoned her.

Always comforted her.

I talked the gas station owner out of pressing charges and bought the cigarettes myself, but not for him. I couldn't give smokes to a kid.

That's illegal.

But I could take them to his dying grandmother. Grant her one last act of benevolence on behalf of a stranger and her son. The damage from a lifetime of smoking was done and it wasn't like keeping the old bird from one more pack would extend her life in any meaningful way. Hell, I've often thought that people able to choose how they go are members of a fortunate elite. Most will die miserable, lonely, long-suffering deaths confined in hospital beds, fed shitty food by shittier people under the shittiest circumstances.

I spoke to him on the ride to his mother's home. I told him about how I, despite being a cop, had done the same things when younger. He didn't look at me for quite a while, but when he finally did, I found myself gazing into a familiar weariness. Everything about him carried the weight of the world: from the threadbare tatters of his heather hoodie to the unkempt scramble crowning his head, everything on him was, in every sense of the word, jaded.

At this kid's age I wasn't near as morally inclined; I was just an asshole acting on a bet: eleven years old and with little to do, my friends dared me to steal a pack of smokes. It was unspeakably easy, so much so that I'd keep at it well into my early teens, and I made quite a bit of money selling pilfered smokes to friends.



I told him it wasn't too late to stop doing stupid things because if I had been caught I wouldn't have been sitting next to him. I wouldn't have been able to tell him that life is full of untapped potential—if, and only if—he could stop risking the big picture for the little one.

He and his grandmother thanked me for not letting him screw up.

For stopping him from mistakes that could have had long lasting consequences.

For preventing him from *being* me, in hopes that one day he would have the opportunity to become *like* me: still jaded and world-weary, but willing to take an extra step for someone in need of a basic human compassion—a willingness to give attention to a minor player in the greater game of life.

## CHAPTER TWO: BOWLING FOR BUMS

From behind the wheel of my patrol car I took in the dim glow radiating from Daytona's beachside. The radio crackled to life with Officer Byrne's request for nightly stats. Ten minutes until seven AM—right on schedule. I switched frequencies to the free-talk channel. It's the sanctuary where cops spoke plain English instead of code. Unmonitored and unrecorded, it granted liberty to be oneself.

"3Charlie61, I'm on Tac."

"Whatcha got for me?" Byrne asked.

"One felony, two reports, eleven misdemeanors, eight tickets."

"Eleven?"

"Eleven."

"Holy shit, Hughes. The hell were you doing?"

"Went bowling for bums."

Six months and twelve hours earlier, I crossed the breach of the Daytona Beach Police Department to report for the night shift. Fetching a cup of Folgers<sup>1</sup>, I stowed myself in the back of the briefing room nearest the stone-age computers and away from the mass of badges awaiting their assignments. The briefing room maintained much the same visual appeal as a third-world hospital: wobbly folding tables, gouged linoleum, chipped paint, campy motivational posters, jaded people. Dick and fart jokes replaced meaningful conversation and occasionally crept into

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<sup>1</sup> Brewed from the finest reused coffee grounds and, if flavor served as any indicator, reclaimed toilet water.

the subject matter of briefings<sup>2</sup>. The first few months out of field training landed me under the supervision of Sergeant Palavino and, right in the middle of his briefing—a prattling list of things to do we were already aware of—he’d asked I stay behind. Every cop in the room did a slow, seated pivot and stared at me as if I’d Tex-Mex farted.

Once all were dismissed, Sgt. Palavino brought me into his office gesturing toward a seat. He looked me over for several moments before speaking a single bone-chilling word.

My name<sup>3</sup>.

The tone said the rest: I’d fucked up.

I braced for the worst, but he instead asked how I was adjusting, and making sense of things as a new officer. Up until this sphincter-taxing moment I’d believed all was well, but being asked such a question was nothing less than a baptism of doubt. I sat silently.

“Your productivity is a little low,” he said.

Still unsure how to respond, I stared ahead, and not at anything in particular; a plaque on the wall read: praise in public, correct in private.

Correct in private.

Fucking hell...

He patted my shoulder, likely to comfort me—my expression must have resembled equal parts constipation and fear. I didn’t realize it back then, but I regularly made life and death

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<sup>2</sup> I once lost fifteen minutes of work time as we guffawed about a man who’d gotten his penis stuck in a lotion bottle. To be fair, the jokes often told themselves. A lotion bottle—seriously.

<sup>3</sup> Like parents, police officers have unique, soul-rending power when calling one’s proper name. Even as a cop, it took years before I wouldn’t slam on the brakes of my squad car when a fellow officer popped into view.

enforcement decisions with long-term ramifications, yet I couldn't legally buy a beer or purchase a handgun. There needs to be a minimum age to police and it ought to be well over nineteen. Nonetheless, even at twenty years old, the absurdity of a certain word hit me.

Productivity.

Police officers don't produce anything. We didn't then and they still don't now. I've heard arguments that lawmen produce safety, which is more than specious. Safety isn't made, it's learned, but that's beside the point. No, he meant exactly what I thought he did. He wanted me to make arrests.

As in manufacture.

Fabricate, or, in police parlance, produce.

"I need you to go out there and earn your keep. I need you to show the LT<sup>4</sup> that you do more than sit on your ass. I need you to produce." He punctuated each need by pointing: outside, then at the lieutenant's office, and finally at me. I was being indicted on charges of sloth.

I felt like an absolute twit but voiced my objections. I was working a zone that, absent drug enforcement—which I wasn't comfortable pursuing, yet<sup>5</sup>—contained little mineable crime. I couldn't create arrests. I had to find criminals; I had to catch them in the act, follow up on leads, and close cases. I expected Sgt. Palavino to commiserate. Surely he'd understand that I couldn't generate activity to reap.

I was wrong. He showed me the light.

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<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant.

<sup>5</sup> Despite having never smoked marijuana until I left police work, I never had anything against it or those that used. I felt guilty every time I arrested someone for weed then grabbed a six-pack on the way home. At 20. Cops are seldom carded.

“Hobos,” he said.

“Come again?”

“John, John, John,” he said, shaking his head and smiling. “You need to go bowling for bums.”

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Inevitably at parties, the subject of one’s profession arises. It’s also inevitable I get asked about quotas<sup>6</sup> the instant my past as a cop surfaces.

Is it a thing cops had to fulfill and did I meet mine?

The first part of the question is rhetorical; it’s the latter part my interlocutors are interested in: the implication being quotas are bad and I’m an asshole if I met it.

Truth be told, I’m a bit of an asshole despite quotas.

My response is always front-loaded with snark, and on the occasions when the question is paired with “...and have you ever shot anyone?” I offer to begin with my interrogator. I never get away with saying it absent a corrective rib jabbing from my wife’s elbow. Inevitably, I explain it anyways. All I ever want from these gatherings are a cordial and some hors d’oeuvres, but wives, it turns out, have the same soul-rending name-calling power as cops and parents. I’m forced into a police-themed conversation at my hosts’ or guests’ behest.

Short answer: no. There are no quotas.

Though technically accurate, it’s practically incorrect. Granted, there were no target numbers of monthly arrests, tickets, or reports; there remained a latent expectation to perform on

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<sup>6</sup> And donuts. And shootings. I wish I had a truthful story about a donut shop shootout that fulfilled an actual felony arrest quota. Alas, that would be bullshit, but great television.

par with others. This is especially true in comparison to the opposing nightshift's production<sup>7</sup>. Certain geographical zones got exceptions. For a few areas in the sticks, absent aggressive enforcement of jaywalking on bears, one arrest per night was all but unheard of. But not every officer was fortunate enough to patrol the richest, whitest, woodsiest, golf course laden areas of the World's Most Famous Beach. Most were assigned to the hood<sup>8</sup>. Failure to produce in these criminally-rich locales was a sin of sloth because police philosophy declared the hood was never without crime. This could only be true if prostitution, drug usage, and homelessness counted; absent these victimless crimes, it wasn't that bad. Hell, it's been argued that criminalization of the previous activities actually produced crime—this is conveniently self-fulfilling for organizations in need of justifying their existence, but I digress.

I left the chat with Sgt. Palavino knowing two things. I needed to bowl for bums, and I needed to figure out what bowling for bums meant. Comical juvenile imagery aside, I had no clue but couldn't ask Palavino. In the rookie mindset, asking a supervisor for assistance equaled an admission of ineptitude, so I asked veteran cops. Some gave target numbers, a few told me I

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<sup>7</sup> The competitive atmosphere got outright silly at times. We had all the sensationalism of reality TV absent the cameras. Contests sprung up for greatest number of arrests, tickets, and closed cases. Some officers entered into side bets against the opposing shifts. Supervisors couldn't approve of these games, but they sure as hell went out of their way to ignore them. My favorite of these games was prostitute bingo. Were it not for my inability to find a transsexual dwarf call girl, I would've won a toaster. One might attribute these shenanigans to unbridled boredom, and that may be a factor, but I think it's an inevitable consequence of daily dealings with the absurd. There's only so many times one can encounter the rare before it becomes banal.

<sup>8</sup> Let's not mince slang here. Political correctness says "areas of highly concentrated minorities and the socioeconomically disenfranchised," but straight talk translates as blacks and the poor.

couldn't be punished for failure to produce, others advised I pad numbers with bullshit reports<sup>9</sup>, but the best advice of all: be average, collect a check, go home.

All sage advice, really, but the majority ignored the bums question. Senior cops advised me to drop it despite what Palavino said. They argued for a long, simple career.

I ignored the advice and for the rest of my tenure became "that guy." When most officers were calling in one, two arrests per night, I was calling in baker's dozens. I'd set the bar high, exposing myself to a world of scrutiny. I fucked with the bell curve and—with the exception of a few officers—wasn't thanked for it. Moreover, supervisors demanded I continue the high-level of activity. It ended up elevating into more and more aggressive enforcement.

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An hour out of that fateful briefing, I'd already driven up and down every street in my zone, checked every business, and driveway within the tight box created by Brentwood, Mason, G.W. Engram, and the railroad tracks. I found another officer ducked out behind the stores of a strip mall and parked window-to-window to vent my frustration. The officer, Johnny Guilford, laughed at my predicament from beneath his thinning gray locks. This offended me. All my attempts to produce fell flat while he guarded the ass of a K-Mart sipping coffee and sucking Marlboros.

"Big John! You look worried. What's with the long face?"

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<sup>9</sup> Such as with insane citizens, for whom every creek, thump, bump, or rustle is a burglar, arsonist, murderer, rapist or burglar-arsonist-murderer-rapist. These folks are universally ignored save for Officer Lazy in need of a report stat. As a consequence, Officer Lazy validated such fears causing an infinite cycle of bullshit calls and bullshit reports. An officer once responded to an anonymous act of shitting into a pool. He launched a full investigation into the turd's owner, documenting "the dregs remained in a state of wallow at the bottom of the pool." Understandably, detectives declined to follow up on the mystery crap caper.

“That obvious, huh?”

“You’re new. If you didn’t look worried, I’d be nervous.”

I explained about Sgt. Palavino’s recommendation I go bowling for bums. He looked at me for a moment before cracking a grin.

“Never bothered to ask what it was, eh?”

I looked away.

“Here,” he said, handing me a thick, dog-eared and coffee-stained packet, “I want this back when you’re done.”

It was pages of addresses, each with Guilford’s marginalia. Dates and numbers: Dec. 18, +1, unreliable; Dec 25, +2, reliable. St. Peter’s list pales in thoroughness. Each location had every arrest listed by date creating a bizarre spreadsheet of hobo-farming locations.

He’d handed me his copy of the city’s “Trespass-Arrest” list. I’d heard of it before but paid no mind, as it had never seemed like a useful tool<sup>10</sup>. This was a program in which citizens and business owners could empower police as representatives of their properties. If the address had clearly visible “no trespassing” signage, I could hook-up anyone on the property, no questions asked. The program had limits requiring reasonable expectation the premises be vacant in order for an arrest to stand. Most subscribers gave time frames, essentially asserting “arrest anyone found here between x and y o’clock.” It seemed like the perfect tool to make the stat-hungry supervisors happy, but most cops ignored the homeless. They were for last minute stats. One

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<sup>10</sup> Arguably, it never was or will be. It is used primarily to harass the homeless. Unless one’s definition of useful is the habitual screwing-with of the least privileged members of society. It did little to improve the conditions of the residents of Daytona Beach—of which the homeless ought to be, but are never, included.



arrest here, one there. These places were rarely enforced out of a desire to not interact with the homeless. Something I already fully understood. Those that could come over their initial revulsion were met with a bountiful harvest of alcohol and urine-scented arrestees. Such offers were the few and the un-proud.

“It’s gold, Big John. Photocopy it and happy hunting<sup>11</sup>.”

“What do I do with the people I find?”

“The *bums*,” he corrected. “Arrest them. Write them tickets. They won’t pay, most get petty warrants, and you, my friend, get all the stats you need to make the powers that be happy.”

This is true. And once arrests start, they become cyclical. Most bums are issued NTA’s<sup>12</sup> that they never pay or go to court for. These get turned into warrants that get turned into arrests that generate stats. No probable cause necessary. No actual police work necessary, either. Just a good memory of the local hobos and a current list of warrants. Arrest, release, repeat.

With the list in hand, I slipped back into memories of field training and of my first encounter with a bum. Field training is an awkward phase in any officer’s career. Some never shake the wavering state between legitimate lawman and understudied pretender and, as such, rookies tend to live in a state of perpetual paranoia, not entirely self-induced, but largely justified because cops are universally stunted in terms of a socially-proper comedic sense. Scatological

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<sup>11</sup> This expression often concluded our briefings; this is not the scary part. This wasn’t said with jocular machismo or figurative bravado—it was literal. We were expected to be hunters of men. Criminal conduct? Largely incidental.

<sup>12</sup> Notice to appear. Officers can, for certain offenses, convert bodily arrests into what is essentially a ticket.

humor and dick jokes are crème de la crème—rookie mockery is icing on the cake. I was not immune to the ritual of christening by embarrassment, and mine came in the form of a homeless man: Michael Dewey of Volusia County fame<sup>13</sup>.

During my earliest weeks on the road, one of my Field Training Officers and I found Mr. Dewey sleeping on a public bench. Technically that's incorrect. The FTO noticed Mr. Dewey. I was content to drive by in search of an actual crime, an opinion I voiced. After I had received enough corrective counseling to make Gunnery Sergeant Hartman blush, I parked the squad car parallel with the hardened criminal. My FTO kicked Mr. Dewey in the shoe causing him to jerk upright. He mumbled a few words of greeting before dragging a slobbery hand across his alcohol-reddened face. Before me sat an altogether pitiable man: short, starving thin, elderly, and to my assessment, deeply in need of medical attention.

Despite the rude arousal, Mr. Dewey was all smiles. He greeted my FTO by name and asked for mine with an extended a hand. Pre-programed since childhood with Southern manners, I reached to reciprocate. My FTO's slap to the back of my braincase halted me. Mr. Dewey shrugged and reached for an unopened 32 oz. Natural Light sitting atop his nearby backpack. I tried to stop him but my efforts were again halted. The instant Mr. Dewey opened the bottle my FTO snatched it and poured it out on the sidewalk. He commanded I glove up<sup>14</sup> and take Mr. Dewey into custody. Extracting surgical gloves from my belt pouch, I caught a wry smile played

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<sup>13</sup> As of August 2014 Michael Dewey has well over 125 arrests logged into the Volusia County Branch Jail's website. The dates are wide in range, but I'm no doubt responsible for a large percentage of them.

<sup>14</sup> We carry gloves for two reasons: 1, people are nasty, and 2, rule number 1 is always in effect.

across the observing officer's face. I brushed it off as glum satisfaction and went to cuff Mr. Dewey behind the back. He too wore a shit-eating grin.

"Oh no, Officer," Mr. Dewey said, "I've got terrible shoulders. Can't they be in the front?" He looked to my superior and both traded nods. This again registered as curious but was dismissed as well.

"Of course. Be kind to the man, Officer Hughes. Cuffs in front."

We brought our charge to the trunk of the squad car where I intended to search him for weapons, drugs, bombs, or booze. Mr. Dewey was quite clean for a homeless person. I understood the blatant prejudice in that thinking and would learn to admire the few people in his condition even remotely prudent with hygiene<sup>15</sup>. Once at the trunk, Mr. Dewey did all the work for me: he placed his hands on the car, spread his feet shoulder width, and waddled back into an off-balance lean—the textbook search position—all without a single order. This was an experienced arrestee. After a word of appreciation, I grabbed for his waistband and latched onto something squishy. Being an officer since breakfast, I imagined I'd found the drug haul of the century. I yanked it to me and received a veritable arterial spray of shit to the chest and pants.

It was a goddamned colostomy bag.

Mr. Dewey, dripping scat from the stoma in his side, laughed heartily with my FTO. I was mortified and entertained thoughts of shooting them both on the spot and sometimes wonder if I

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<sup>15</sup> Sadly, Mr. Dewey allowed this aspect of himself to fade away over the years, giving way to a grumpy reclusiveness. Mr. Dewey is deceased now, and though I never saw him after I left law enforcement, I was somewhat fond of him. Disgusting prank aside, he wasn't a bad person, just a victim of bad choices, bad circumstances, and a society more concerned with foreign entanglements than its own people. He died August 31, 2011. His last arrest was August 11, 2011 and aside from a few memories in the justice system, Dewey has no legacy.

would've gotten a reduced sentence. Had I acted on that whim, future generations of attorneys could have made appeals to the colostomy defense (or the dung dodge).

“Oh fuck, Hughes. I didn't know it'd fucking spray you! That was rich!” my FTO said between bouts of belly laughter. Despite hating him, I felt slightly relieved at the notion that my hazing was over. I went into police work knowing I'd have to suffer through some inane social-acceptance ritual and figured this was it (I was wrong, as juvenilia never stops with cops). The one thing the *Lethal Weapon* series of films got right was that ill-timed jokes and lowbrow humor are intrinsic to the profession. Word would spread about what happened to the rookie, and over the course of the following months an extra crap joke would be told at every briefing in my honor, but at that moment, dripping with diarrheic shit, all I wanted was a clean uniform, a good puke, and to never touch a bum again.

Before I knew it, Mr. Dewey squatted at his knapsack, un-cuffed, and rummaged around for a replacement colostomy bag. The FTO handed me a box of baby wipes. Sadly, baby wipes do as much for shit-stained polyester as Bush's speeches did for his legacy. I spent fifteen minutes ineffectually wiping tarry turd curdles from my uniform as Mr. Dewey received his NTA.

The following week my FTO and I arrested Mr. Dewey twice.

I made sure to avoid his goddamned colostomy bag.

It burst in my car during the second arrest.

Yours truly had to clean it.

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With Guilford's list in hand, I had the most powerful tool of stat generation I'd ever come to know<sup>16</sup>, and over time I'd add my own findings to it. I'd note the best locations in the city to find the disenfranchised, disowned, and dislocated. Of the thirty officers on my shift, five hunted bums. The places the others ignored were our first targets: abandoned homes, isolated stretches of railroad, partially demolished or condemned buildings, patches of woods, distant riverbanks, city parks at night, etc. I roused bums from sleep, interrupted their smoking, cut short their screwing, eating, fighting, surviving. Sometimes—rarely—I'd catch one doing something other than trying to live. Committing an actual crime.

There is no doubt the homeless engage in crime. In a sense, they're forced to. Even a well-disciplined dog steals food to ward off starvation, and oftentimes such crimes are only born by society's greater neglect of the homeless' condition. Nonetheless, what the homeless were doing and why they did it never came into consideration; the prevention of crime ran second to the proliferation of stats. My ability to track down and legally arrest societal dregs grew so honed that supervisors, dispatchers, and coworkers sometimes called me the “bum hunter.”<sup>17</sup>

I'm not going to say officers outright fabricate charges—I never did— but we would write some extremely creative arrest affidavits. The difference between a push and a strike is only a leap of the imagination and a stroke of a pen away—it's also the difference between misdemeanor and felony. My moral compass should have kicked in, but by this time the needle

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<sup>16</sup> Traffic radar excepted: one month, as a challenge to myself, I issued over one hundred speeding tickets. Still, my statement stands. Tickets are civil infractions and they don't count as “arrests” although they sometimes lead to them. The TA list is still tops for arrests.

<sup>17</sup> This was said with a horribly distorted impression of Steve Irwin. If allowed a slight digression, I was on shift the day his death notification made the newspaper headlines. I cried for an hour in my patrol car at the loss of this amazing man.

continually spun through shades of gray. Sgt. Palavino wanted stats and I gave them. He wrote my evaluations and I came to like the thrill of the chase. My small circle of transient trappers and my friends found anecdotes of my exploits humorous. I'd managed to divorce moral sense from policing and, to this time of writing, will sometimes lose sleep thinking about the sheer volume of lives interrupted, or damaged, at my doing. The state is under similar stress from such aberrant policing: in Volusia County alone, only fifty individuals are responsible for 6,000 arrests in the last few decades with an estimated expense of \$12 million<sup>18</sup>; moreover, every time I made an arrest it ran \$2,000 by the time they'd see a judge—that's lowballing it<sup>19</sup>. Homeless people were expensive tally marks, nothing more. Despite the cost to the city—which the administration at the department *must* have been aware of—I was still encouraged by my bosses to make these arrests. So much so that I was declared an unofficial expert in the subject and trained in the use of ATVs to better facilitate my through-the-woods bum roundups. Supervisors placed new officers with me that I might show them the ins and outs of being *proactive*. As an ingratiating suck-up, I leaped at the opportunity. My evaluations looked pretty good as a result.

About midway through my tenure, the brass asked me to train another post-FTO officer, Martin James, a former metalworker and Bostonian expat, in the finer arts of productivity. For

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<sup>18</sup> That's \$200,000 a head. This could've easily housed, fed, and educated each one of these people so they could reenter society as a productive members. Sadly, this can't happen in a culture firmly anchored to the belief that one's only path to success is through hard work. I'm skeptical of this claim: if hard work alone brought financial gain then the tribal women of Africa would own the wealth of the Cayman islands. Society must readjust its position, or the plight of the homeless will continue to drain resources, eventually metastasizing to the already shriveling middle-class.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Daytona Beach News Journal, one individual, Robert Mathis, has been arrested 230 times since 1983 and cost the state over \$460,000; Charles O. Starks, 369 and \$720,000.

the next several shifts we rat-packed (when two or more patrol cars follow one another around while hunting) as I showed him the highlights of the trespass arrest list. He seemed uneasy about harassing the homeless, but I assured him it grew easier with practice<sup>20</sup>, completely missing the subtext of his scruples. I thought he voiced practical objections, but I would later learn they were moral. His hesitation would soon be vindicated.

Fancying myself a teacher, I planned to take him by all of the most successful spots. Up until that point, we'd hit a barrage of simple arrests from my list (I'd returned Guilford's and got one of my own). The last stop of the day was at a little known, less visited, park just off the campus of Bethune-Cookman College. BCC students used it for outdoor performances, and the park's three-walled stage served as excellent makeshift shelter during the night. Its relatively waterproof structure made a wise choice for thinking urban outdoorsmen, but only if they tucked themselves into a corner to keep the wind, rain, and lazier cops at bay. Barely a few feet inside the park's gates we spotted a telltale lump of man and rags, wedged into a corner. Martin and I clambered onto the concrete stage, and as we approached the bum I recognized him and gloved up.

"This one's a special kind of crazy," I said.

"Why?" Martin asked, taking my lead and awkwardly forcing his sweaty hands into latex.

"He'll have a bottle around his neck. Ask about it, but don't open it."

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<sup>20</sup> The fact that I had to assert this should have red flagged the entire premise of what we were doing.

Martin knelt down to shake the man awake but looked back at me with reddened eyes. The man's smell, a delicate bouquet of feces, urine, and evaporated beer, bit at our noses. "This is fucking gross."

"You get used to it," I said, pointing impatiently.

"Dude. Police. Get up," Martin said as he kicked the man's bare soles.

The bum drug himself upright like a zombie and, still seated, cocked his head freakishly clockwise before speaking. "The hell you need?" His voice sounded like grinding pavement stones.

Martin explained about trespassing, but must have caught sight of the one-pint glass bottle suspended from his neck by a leather thong. A semi-opaque liquid the color of rust and egg yolks swished about with his every movement. Chunks drifted in and out of view.

"What's in the bottle?"

"Piss and orgasms!"

Martin retched. I'd dealt with this man many times before and took to calling him Voodoo. During prior arrests, he claimed to keep his essences for religious purposes<sup>21</sup>. Martin ordered the man to stand and requested he take the bottle off. This incensed Voodoo in a way I'd never seen before. I always made him leave the bottle behind, but I suppose he disliked losing his collection after every arrest and had reached a breaking point. When Martin went to handcuff Voodoo, he pulled his hands away and shoved my student. Without thinking twice, I unholstered and deployed my Taser. One probe struck Voodoo in the chest, but the second hit his baggy rags.

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<sup>21</sup> It's in my nature to look up such things and a quick consult with Google revealed he wasn't lying. There are myriad resources describing (and advocating) for the usage of bodily fluids in ritualistic "magic."



Flapping around ineffectively in the tattered cloth, the Taser probe couldn't make a full, debilitating circuit, but it stunned Voodoo just enough for me to kick him in the gut with my steel-toed boot. He doubled over and I continued my attack, spiking my knee into his thigh before dropping him flat with a hammering fist to the upper back. Voodoo was tough and tried to crawl away. I dropped a knee onto his spine and began wailing away at his body with my Taser-free fist<sup>22</sup>.

“Stop! Stop! He’s done. He’s good,” Martin yelled, grabbing my cocked arm.

I backed off to reload and holster my Taser.

Voodoo allowed Martin to cuff him, though not until he threatened to sic me on him again. I wrote my end of the paperwork and left Martin to take care of the arrest and transfer to the paddy wagon<sup>23</sup>. We didn't meet up again until after lunch<sup>24</sup> at a Seven-Eleven for free coffee and Copenhagen. Martin was extremely uneasy and fidgeted like I'd never seen him do before. We leaned against the hood of our cars in silence for a long time, but, when he finally spoke, I understood his discomfort.

“John. You went all Matt Hughes<sup>25</sup> on that guy.”

“Thanks.”

“It wasn't a compliment. It felt wrong. What if you'd seriously hurt him?”

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<sup>22</sup> There's a two fold reason. Firstly, when someone is resisting but isn't a legitimate threat, it becomes hard to justify clobbering head-shots; second, bruises and damage to the body are much easier to creatively explain in the course of a tussle. I suppose there is a third: resistant arrestees just pissed me off and I responded with quick, overwhelming force. It worked ridiculously well.

<sup>23</sup> I've been told this is racially insensitive. I don't care. I'm Irish.

<sup>24</sup> “Lunch meant 2am for me.

<sup>25</sup> A professional welterweight MMA fighter. We're unrelated.

“Excuse me?” I nearly swallowed my tobacco in surprise.

“Did you have to beat on him? He’s nutty, not dangerous.”

I slammed my cup on the hood and spat. “The man’s a hobo! He’s worthless. Contributes nothing but filth and crime. Why would I give two shits?”

“He’s still human, man. Someone’s son, dad, brother... you know?”

I froze.

I wanted to retort, to quip something witty and learned, but I had nothing. Every time I felt on the verge of responding, I’d stutter. Layers of cognitive dissonance were peeling away. Something had penetrated the amoral armor I’d erected around my work and for the first time in a long while, I’d second-guessed my actions.

It hurt.

I don’t remember what I said or did for the rest of that night, but I finished up and made it home. In the shower, where most of my deepest thinking happened, I continually wrestled with waves of guilt. Up until that point I’d been robotic: anything supervisors asked of me, propriety be damned, I would have done. Anything another officer would have asked I’d have done. I went to bed thinking I’d wake up and all would make sense. It didn’t.

I could have witnessed an officer in a bad shooting and I would have creatively written the officer into exoneration. Why? What we did was necessarily good, right? It had to be, didn’t it? No officer would do something beyond his power that wasn’t somehow correct; the ends had to justify the means. My parents and society had taught me to believe—to know—that the law and the police were unquestionably good, but I could no longer square the circle of blind enforcement that led to my dehumanization of an entire group of people. I went to bed numb.

The keystone of my worldview cracked and in the subsequent years, the foundation of my outlook on life slowly crumbled. I began to question everything.

I want to say things got better. I want to say that those events allowed me to grow and improve as a human being. I want to say that I resisted enforcing policies contraindicated by minimal human decency, but I can't. The process of shedding one's shit-colored glasses is slow. I still arrested the homeless, and though I stopped hunting them with zeal, I still didn't help them. Partially, out of a lack of ability to actually do something and partially out of a desire to keep my job. These were people. People in need of help. People in need of services, and though I knew it, I could do little more than offer \$2,000 all-expenses-paid trips to the world's shittiest hotel; three hots and a cot seemed pithy enough to justify my continued arrests, reduced though they were. I thought long and hard about what I did for a living. I spent hours, days, and weeks attempting to justify to myself the reasons why I, and the police in general, willingly participated in such backward enforcement. I wasn't serving and protecting them and I was beginning to want out. It wouldn't be until years after my separation from the force that I'd come to understand the reason why the homeless are pushed away.

Money.

It's always about money and even when it's not, it still is.

Daytona is a tourist town. The city's moniker proudly proclaims it so: The World's Most Famous Beach. No business owner wants the homeless hanging around in front of all the money—I mean, tourists. Bums sully the city's image. They dispel the illusion that life in Daytona isn't entirely made of NASCAR, Bike Week, beaches, booze, and boobs. In the

preceding decades, homeless people were dumped on other towns<sup>26</sup>. They'd be loaded in the backs of squad cars and driven to Ormond, Port Orange, South Daytona, Holly Hill, or Deland and told to "Head south, head north, head west. Head anywhere but Daytona." It sent the implicit message of what the police were there to protect and it surely wasn't people.

Not all people.

I wrestled with my conduct and lost long ago. There is no context that absolves how I treated the homeless. No church rite, no Presidential pardon, and no philosophical justification. I stood by, or participated in, countless abuses of human decency and ethics. I am the sole Atlas of those ignominious deeds.

But shittiest part? Everything I did was legal. It flirted with the edges of lawfulness but never crossed the line.

Daytona is the 7th most dangerous city in America<sup>27</sup> and yet significant portions of its officers spend their time in coffee shops, well-lit parking lots, or bowling for bums. There is a small comfort that I can assess my own misconduct as the result of a jaded, diseased outlook on humanity inflicted by insider police culture. There can be no more concrete evidence of the department's villainous mindset than by examination of its practices.

There has been a push from thirty-three American cities to implement laws prohibiting feeding the homeless, and among them, Daytona Beach has voiced violent agreement. In 2014, a family-run ministry led by Debbie and Chico Jimenez made it point to help end hunger for the

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<sup>26</sup> This practice stopped not because the large-scale displacement of people is immoral, but because other towns complained about the steady influx of homeless.

<sup>27</sup> This is according to the FBI Uniformed Crime Report for 2012. Little has changed since I was there.

homeless. They held weekly feedings at Manatee Island Park, but the police fined them for the philanthropy. Essentially, the homeless are thought of as little more than animals; their argument can be summarized like this: feeding them breeds dependency on private organizations, damages public parks, and scares off patrons.

It's the last part that truly perturbs me.

Scares off patrons.

When the media questioned local business owners about the philanthropy, their response was appalling: "You don't do that in your tourist, beautiful area like this and where you have children and park and dog parks with things with families and things to do (sic)<sup>28</sup>," said the business owner, who did not want to be identified. "And I just don't think that is place you want to do something like that (sic).<sup>29</sup>"

The inculcation of loathing for the disenfranchised runs deep in the minds of Americans. The manager's actions, the patrons' inaction, the opinions of the business owners in Daytona Beach explain it all. The city is a mere reflection of the minds of its denizens and the morally bankrupt fines went uncontested. This implicit approbation clearly supports the ragged barbarity of my former profession and adds another layer of guilt upon my conscience. Society's hesitance to place the interests of others before themselves couldn't be clearer than in their support-by-

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<sup>28</sup> This is the exact syntax presented in the source article.

<sup>29</sup> From Mynews13. Article written by reporter Joel Schipper, Last updated May 14, 2014. I must give the reporter credit as he did attempt to find opinions on both sides of the nonexistent moral conundrum in an effort to present a fair and balanced assessment of an unfair and unbalanced social issue. I corroborated these opinions over time and have concluded that people largely blame the homeless for their homelessness. Anecdotally, this blame is disproportionately strongest amongst white, conservative males, but I reiterate, this is technically anecdotal—and painfully true.

inaction of my former employer's backward behavior. Once cannot take serious a promise to serve and to protect when entire swathes of people are intentionally left hungry while their rescuers are fined.

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One day, six or so years after I left law enforcement, my wife and I sat down at a McDonalds for a burger. Our children were in school and the day was ours, so we decided to make the best of the rare free day and break our diet. Despite the fact that McDonald's menu is almost entirely fixed—the occasional McRib or specialty burger excluded—and I've had the same items to pick from for over twenty-five years, I still took my time. I could have anything I wanted, a luxury I now acknowledge.

Dayana, my wife, chose that transient McRib. Myself? I went classic and asked for a Big Mac. While waiting for our food, a homeless man entered and approached the register furthest from us. How did I know he was homeless? As prejudiced and judgmental as this sounds, he smelled and looked it. He wore an overstuffed camper's rucksack replete with scuffs and grit. The man's beard was a long, tangled mess as wiry and unkempt as his slight frame. He riffled through weather-beaten jeans and a holey jacket for change, pulling out a few coins here, and few coins there. Dayana and I leaned against the innermost wall by the soda fountains waiting, while he was in the farthest of the four ordering lines. Within moments, the all the customers in the line next to his moved to a new one.

He stood alone, oblivious and still digging for change, but not unhappy. He grinned, slapping a handful of quarters on the counter. "A number one, please!"

The clerk wrinkled her nose and leaned back. She didn't touch his money; instead, she mouthed something to her manager, an atypically petite older woman. She came out from behind the register bar and stood before the man. Her head leveled off at his nipple line, and he looked down at her, smiling.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Charlie—"

"You have to leave," she interrupted. "Customers are..." she looked around at the wide berth given Charlie before continuing, "unhappy with your presence."

"Unhappy with my... I'll just buy my food and leave. Okay?"

"No, sir. You will just leave." She pointed a slender finger toward the exit.

He left. Without a word, or even grabbing his change. He simply turned and left.

Dayana swiped his money from the counter and went after him. I amended my order with additional number one and took it outside.

Charlie refused to take his own change from Dayana, and, after much convincing, he accepted the number one. We talked. Mostly about meaningless shit, but he told us his story. He and his wife had it out, so she booted him and him arrested for domestic battery. Injunction. Lost job. Nowhere to stay. Didn't/couldn't get notifications for divorce court. Lost his car. His last income tax and returns were too great for government assistance so he roughed out a year on savings. Once they ran out he found himself working odd jobs just to eat. He slept in a tent stolen from Wal-Mart yet still made time to visit friends.

He checked out books from the library. Read the paper. Watched movies via free Wi-Fi at coffee shops on his pay-as-you-go phone. He had a debit card and wore glasses for minor astigmatism. An abandoned bicycle carried him from A to B, and he took the bus when he could

afford it. In every way save for living inside four walls, he was a normal guy. We parted with a handshake.

Outside of us, no one in that restaurant stood up for Charlie. On the drive home, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if the person I was years ago had met him. What if it was my mother?

At our house, we each went our separate ways: Dayana to the study to coil up with a book and me to the office to write. All the while I wrestled with the notion that no amount of purchased meals could ever repair the harm I unleashed on so many lives. I still want to do more but realize there are limits to my corrective capabilities. I still lack the money to make any real change, and though I regularly correct my friends' assertions and ideas about the homeless, I am content to stop it there.

It deeply wounds me, but I have to take care of my family first. I have to look to my obligations and in the end, my desires to repair the damage of my youth fall aside. I allow the suffering homeless to receive a minimal amount of time because I'm too busy doing what is most human: taking care of immediate kith and kin. I think back to that day in the shower, emotionally falling apart and I realize distance breeds apathy. I do what I can now when I can. I still hurt, but I embrace the pain as reparations. It's getting easier to shelve the guilt with the costs of living.

I'm doubly damned then, it seems, not merely for once thinking like a cop, but for continually thinking as a common human.



### CHAPTER THREE: THE NAKED TRUTH

Officer Rosmar sat adjacent me in the passenger seat puffing furiously at the dying ember of a cigarette. He swore when it burnt his stubby fingers, pinched firmly on the filter, causing a release; the dropped cherry solicited a rambunctious bouncing around as it burnt yet another hole in his car seat. Rosmar inevitably found the ember, and his composure, defenestrating it with nonchalance.

I used to startle at this.

Startle rapidly gave way to wonder. Wonder at how he hadn't yet lit aflame the borderline out-of-policy walrus-stache that dominated the bulk of his face. Singed, yes. But a proper fire? Undoubtedly a matter time.

Smokers have to be admired for raw devotion alone. One glimpse of nicotine-yellowed fingertips or charred whiskers and it's safe to assume this person would brave hail and rain for a smoke. Still, I'll never grasp the logic of smoking adjacent a forest of facial hair, nor will I begin to appreciate the pungency of my passenger's beard flambé. Regardless of personal preferences, I was stuck with the wizened chimney<sup>30</sup>. In field training<sup>31</sup> one does not pick their trainer nor does one pick the method of instruction and one definitely does not pick their rites of passage.

Or the lessons learned.

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<sup>30</sup> Cops tend to have an unhealthy attachment to tobacco. Of course one could argue there is no valid attachment, but I'd disagree: Native Americans and myself are prime examples. It's holy for the former and prevented the latter from homicidal, aggravation-fueled rampages. Skoal™ deserves a letter of appreciation: their fine product likely prevented a spree of luddite slayings capable of making Stalin blush.

<sup>31</sup> FTO is both a person (one of several) and a span of time hereafter written as FTO: though crucible, trial, and hazing are equally apt synonyms.

Lack of freedom to choose aside, Rosmar was a bargain. Before the weeks of his tutelage, I was the designated, improvised spittoon (read: Styrofoam cup stuffed with a napkin) porter for another officer, Hendrickson: a squat, bald fireplug of a man with a permanent Copenhagen plug in his lip. My role as chaw-sludge Gunga Din came in twelve-hour shifts. To his credit, his spit darts hit true with no spillage every time—at least until the cup brimmed full. The resultant impact would ripple the viscous gob into overflowing. High-speed chases? Don't get me started; I should have bought stock in hand sanitizer.<sup>32</sup>

One fateful night (aren't they all?) serving as officer Rosmar's trainee (whipping boy), he elected to teach me the proper methods of handling "extra patrols"<sup>33</sup> at strip clubs, and I'm not going to lie: for the first time since field training began, I was excited to learn something.

Daytona Beach is known for three things: NASCAR, beaches, and debauchery. Of the three, the first and last provide financial stimulus, the middle, venue. Those very beaches launched the beginning of my training, specifically at Sharkey's lounge. Sharkey's had all the hygiene and hominess of *From Dusk Till Dawn's* Titty Twister. Once we'd drank our ocular fill of low-rent skeeze, it was onward to breasts of greater repute, i.e., Molly Browns, only to then terminate at the crème de la crème of bouncily bared bosoms: Lollypops.

Learning came primarily in the monkey-see-monkey-do form, and I picked up on a few key steps of a successful walk-through foot patrol in a Gentle ma—Titty bar.

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<sup>32</sup> This is by far the least of my troubles with other's tobacco spittle. As a PSA, I must advocate for not drinking from a soda can of the same brand as a friend's preferred makeshift spittoon. Especially while sharing a desk. One can get distracted and grab the wrong can...

<sup>33</sup> An extra patrol is police speak for a focused look at a particular location, or establishment. These are typically areas with great amounts of crime or specific security concerns, such as homes where homeowners have received recent threats, etc.

1.) Drive to a boobie bar, obviously. Exit patrol car with style, which means no adjusting of the uniform, and absolutely no adjusting of the rapidly maturing boner fueled by elevated expectations. A shift of the leg will align the smaller self adequately. Integrate such step into normal stride imperceptibly for maximum efficiency.

2.) End up shift stepping so many times it comes across as short-bus.

3.) Manually adjust anyway.

4.) Begin ineffectively nonchalant walk toward titty-bar.

5.) Cast a casual glance at the human mountain hired as a bouncer. Ponder how he manages to live with an eight-hour erection every day. Enter.

6.) Ineffective leg shift followed by manual readjustment.

7.) Attempt to look at everyone, both genders, for at least five seconds to avoid looking like a raging pervert.

8.) End up staring at the first set of areolas in sight.

9.) Sweat with such volume your armpits merit a mention on the weather report.

10.) Attempt to look at someone else. Begin staring anew.

11.) Leg shift. Manual adjust.

12.) Leave. Nod at Mt. Bouncer.

13.) Immediately act like an eleven-year-old peeking at dad's dirty magazine: "Dude, did you see those!?"

We made sure to hit all of Daytona's finest establishments, but I wouldn't come to realize the futility of the adjustments in above how-to until my wife and I would later engage in amorous role play—naughty cop kind of stuff, myself in uniform—revealing there is absolutely

no hiding male excitement in the form-fitting polyester of police trousers. Another revelation: boners in strip clubs are signs of appreciation, not unlike silent clapping at golf games. They're expected and well-received markers of viewer satisfaction.

After exhausting our eyes at every beachside lair of lasciviousness, Ofc. Rosmar explained he'd saved the best for last.

The Love Bar on the mainland.

Sounds good. Love. Who doesn't want some love, and after the earlier sights I couldn't begin to imagine how this could be so much better.

I chauffeured us westward over the Speedway Bridge while he juggled a cell phone and a cigarette. Rosmar's perpetually alternated between the phone and smoking so the slight, uncharacteristic terseness of: "On the way," "Set it up," "It's time," etc., went ignored. I rationalized it as FTO business.

"We're on the way" should have been a hint something was afoot, but the obvious sailed clean over head.

Coming off the bridge, Ofc. Rosmar directed us north along the inter-coastal waterway then to the rear of the buildings facing Beach St.—one of the few well-maintained areas of the city. Cutting through the back lots, four police cruisers popped into view. All parked in a fanlike spread facing the back of the Love Bar. Their occupants roosted on the hoods inhaling cancer from their brand of choice. I pulled among them, parking askance and ruining the aesthetics of their formation. Their presence during a routine patrol of a business should have been hint number two; three should have been the eagerness of every officer present to see me get inside

the Love Bar so they could “have a discussion.” I’d much rather have stayed there, sucked on some Skoal, and learned how to properly socialize within the clique.

That wasn’t about to happen and the whole cadre pushed for me to get inside the Love Bar.

I was hesitant to go in, especially since this was the only strip club of the evening that I’d be entering through the back door. That, most of all, struck me as odd. Ofc. Rosmar detected my hesitation and walked me to the door. He opened it<sup>34</sup> to reveal a gaping darkness speckled with distant flashes. The pulsing rhythm of club music and pot smoke rushed out, and before I could muster the will to move forward on my own, Ofc. Rosmar shoved me in and shut the door.

Darkness gave way to dimness as my eyes adjusted.

I thought about going out the way I came in, but I didn’t have it in me to violate my FTOs orders. I was, and still am, overly obedient to those I grant authority over me.

I walked down a thin corridor toward strobing lights and presumptions of more under clad, gyrating hips attached to ample, swaying breasts. Instead, I exited a hallway sandwiched between two knee-high platforms and was immediately surrounded by men in microkinis. The path back to the door was now crowded with Adonis-like men and, I as searched for a path of egress, I found myself nose to sausage with the on-stage talent. Several more men joined the stage dancers on either platform and I found myself walking a veritable gauntlet of dicks. I thanked the universe for being a nose-breather attempted to remain closed-mouthed and stoic.

I felt like a mutton chop in a sea of piranhas.

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<sup>34</sup> Hint something was amiss number 5: What strip club leaves their back door unlocked from the outside? What business of *any* sort doesn’t secure auxiliary doors?

The walk out was slow, thanks entirely to the army of men twerking with wild abandon. I'd considered pushing them aside but was left with some confusion as to where to put my hands to accomplish this. I opted to weave through the crowd and as I made it to the front door received a parting swat on the ass. Apparently, I'm encouraged to "Come back anytime."

Outside, I was greeted with rapturous applause, hoots, and blinding camera flashes. A man grabbed me by the shoulder giving it a "good 'ol boy" squeeze. It was Ofc. Rosmar. The smell of immolated facial hair gave it away. It was also the first time he'd made any physical contact with me whatsoever. Up until this point, I hadn't even received so much as a handshake. Plenty of disappointed looks, though.

"Stripper Hughes," Ofc. Rosmar said. "How'd you like the bone-smoking joint?"

It was that moment when time proverbially froze, and despite my youth<sup>35</sup> I understood the complete gravity of my response; officer's careers are made or broken in these moments. My reaction would forever color the treatment I'd receive from the alpha-male, straight majority of my peers. I had to calculate my response.

"You cock-suckers just wrecked my wood for months!" I said. "You know how many tits I'll have to see to scrub my eyes clean? Oh, Rosmar, I saw your son in there. Apple not falling far from the tree, eh faggot?"

"You're all right," he said.

"Heh. Fuck you too."

Ofc. Rosmar extended a hand as did every other officer present. I took them all.

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<sup>35</sup> I was 20.

“Welcome to Daytona,” was the general sentiment of the evening and along with implication was that I’d finally made it.

Academy training. Departmental training. It all meant nothing. My status as an officer only came the moment the group accepted me.

Photos of my grand exit appeared at the next week’s briefings.

For all shifts.

I was home.

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So lets stop here a moment and consider the purpose, or meaning, behind that wasted shift. There is absolutely no need for “extra patrols” of nudie bars. Fights seldom happen and the previously mentioned mountains of muscles have friends working with them. Bouncers monitored the drunks and love-sick (more like lust-sick) admirers: any conflicts are resolved via Hercules clones ejecting the rabble. Police presence was simply gratuitous. Simply put: the night was wasted.

Wasted from a patrol-effectiveness standpoint.

This isn’t the strangest or worst part either. Cops waste time on a regular basis. During the first few weeks of training, a sergeant told the entire body of new hires that he, and most supervisors, only expect one hour of genuine work per shift.

One hour out of twelve.

That’s a mere eight percent of a workday devoted to actual work. This initially sounded generous. In the latter part of my tenure, I’d come to discover this was not only unreasonable but flirted with excessively demanding.

Ofc. Rosmar had planned the entire Love Bar scheme. He, in collusion with several cops, arranged to trick me into looking at a bunch of dicks in banana hammocks.<sup>36</sup>

Those phone calls on the way over the bridge? They weren't to other cops. Not all of them; some were to the management and dancers of the Love Bar. It's the reason the backdoor was unlocked, and the reason the male talent concentrated onto the stages adjacent the hallway. They'd been tipped off and eagerly conspired to mess with a rookie. It would explain the reason why I had the attention of the entire bar.

But why?

Just for fun?

Social cohesion?

I posit both. Almost every group I've ever participated in had some ritual of induction or right of passage. Failure to endure relegated one to outsider status. Completion granted the corollary. This bonding through common experience is the principle reason most LEOs<sup>37</sup> tend to grow, and remain, close to one another, especially when things go south. This trust, this unspoken bond of covering for your fellow lawman, is known as the "thin blue line."

It is this that allows cops to violate their oaths and suspend enforcement for one another. Generally speaking, it's understood that cops don't write each other tickets. This manifestation of the line is called "professional courtesy," and though it translates to special privilege, the

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<sup>36</sup> Not all of them were actually *in* the hammock. Several were free-range despite the city's ordinances against nudity. And, to be clear, I've nothing against gay people or gay bars. I'm just not a fan of peckers in my face.

<sup>37</sup> Law Enforcement Officer. Each letter is pronounced individually: ell ee oh. It does not sound like the Zodiac sign. Cops hate that.



public is generally accepting. It's much the same way firemen provide better treatment, and more energetic responses during calamities befalling their own. For the majority of cops, it remains benign: fixing tickets for friends; calling a cab instead of making a DUI arrest; correcting minor thefts for the teenage sons and/or daughter's of friends, etc. No one gets hurt, lectures are given, but arrests and penalties are avoided. However, like most things, it gets taken too far and the "thin blue line" has become carte blanche for cops to get away with egregious harm. All in the name of brotherhood.

Most curiously, my protection under the thin blue line preceded my cock-laden ritual of induction. It took many years to realize, but the basic protections afforded were earned the moment I pinned a shield to my chest. But full protection, that took an act of complicity, communal abuse that I'd unknowingly been baptized in within my first few months. I was protected long before I was socially accepted.

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At the very beginning of my career, even before FTO, I was assigned to the city's special events substation: an area of cargo crates converted into jail cells, fenced with razor wire and jointly operated by corrections officers<sup>38</sup> from the Volusia County Branch Jail and Daytona PD. The intake—a gated sally port—lay at the rear, off of Root Street with a similarly enclosed main entrance at the opposite end off of Ballough Road. The whole structure itself was set off the north end of Beach Street, proximal to the masses of arrests going on in order to facilitate ease of delivery. The goal of special events like Bike Week, Biketober, Turkey Rod, Soundcrafters,

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<sup>38</sup> Hereafter known as COs.

Black College Reunion, Spring Break, etc., was, let's not mince words, to make shitloads of arrests and, by the same token, shitloads of revenue.

The method: ordinance violations.

Said violations carried a fine, payable right there at the substation, from the low 100's to the mid 250's.<sup>39</sup> Failure to pay meant spending a night in one of several puke-stained, urine-scented shipping containers, packed sardine-style and mono-gendered, before being whisked off the following morning for first appearance before a judge. The judge typically did the gavel-banging thing and declared time served with little, if any, fines. This represented an expense to the city. The goal wasn't to muddy up the courts with petty crime, after all, it was to invoke as much misery and despair as possible to convince people to purchase their immediate release and the chance to continue the party without an arrest record.

That's right. If one was arrested during the substation's operational time frame, they could buy their way out with no record. Certain misdemeanors were even capable of being downgraded into ordinance violations in order to "sell" the idea of the buy-here-pay-here escape from a criminal record concept, and it worked exceedingly well. Despite being little more than legalized extortion that used the impatience, gullibility, and dehumanizing conditions it foisted upon arrestees.

The substation even had its own ATM readily available for those of sufficient financial means.

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<sup>39</sup> I left many years ago and though I don't care to check, I'd wager as of 2014 these "prices" are at least in the low 300s.

Drunk, drugged, agitated (often all three) then poked, teased, and manipulated, many arrestees often lost control and fought. These were treated as one part entertainment and one part overdue justice. In the instances where arrestees weren't money-mill fodder (i.e., party goers), and were actual criminals, domestic abusers, for example, the COs would provide "attitude adjustments."

These fine services were free-of-charge, naturally.

It must be noted that boorish attitudes were not necessarily required in order to merit an adjustment. Cadres of CO butt-kickers sometimes prophylactically rained healthy doses of clobber on arrestees until the ambiguous moment when the victim "learned their place" or the COs had "made their point."

The only point ever made—that I could figure out—was that a handcuffed and/or outnumbered person didn't have a glimmer of a chance against multiple linebacker-sized men.<sup>40</sup> It was much later explained to me why this occurs. Inmates destined for extended jail residency would often buck-up to the guards shortly after arrival. The COs developed a sort of sense for who would and would not challenge the law of the jungle and administered instructive whoopins' to demonstrate who's boss. According to CO anecdotes I'd collected, this works well.

I tried it once, and I've no doubts about its effectiveness though it left a bitter taste in my mouth. It was also my first encounter with the "thin blue line."

One night at the substation, the COs and cops were playing cards (tax dollars at work) while babysitting the arrestees when a patrol officer pulled into the sally port with a slovenly

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<sup>40</sup> It was always the men. The female COs didn't engage in these kinds of attitude adjustments, and though I'd never seen what took its place, having been married a decade, I'm all but sure it is far worse than any beat-down.

arrestee bearing an uncanny resemblance to Chad Kroger. He'd been arrested for possession of an open container of alcohol. That's right: he was taken to a detention facility for holding an open beer in public. Oh, the horror. As could be expected, Kroger was pissed and I couldn't be sure it was from the absurdity of the charge, or the fact that, in the arresting officer's words, "The fucker looks like a mix of dirty Jesus and Nickleback's singer, so we fucked with him hardcore." That statement did not make it into the legal arrest affidavit.

It was my turn to process this inmate—i.e., take remove his possessions, search him, and place him in a cell—though I'd have volunteered anyways. I was losing the game badly and already owed the crew lunch, any method of dodging another hand came as a godsend. I sped away from the game and gloved up. Since I was new, three officers came with to extract the man from the patrol car. I opened the door and got a good look at the man; he did indeed look like a bizarre mix of Kroger and Anglo-Saxon Jesus.

"Buddy," I said, "Let's have an easy time of this and you'll be out soon."

He ignored me, so I figured I'd appeal to the spirit of the events.

"C'mon, let's get you processed and you'll be back out there, balls deep in no time.

This was, apparently, much more motivating. He got out.

I took his elbow in my gloved hand and we escorted him across the substation to the male processing area. During the search procedure, I gave the speech.

"Turn around so I can uncuff you. Good. Have a seat on this wooden bench. Remove your shoes and sit them aside. Neatly. Thank you for your cooperation. Stand up, turn and put your hands on the wall. Excellent. Before I search you, tell me if you have any guns, knives, razors, lazars, phasers, missiles, or rockets hidden on your person. No? Excellent. Spread your

feet and hobble backward. That's good. Don't move until I ask you to do so. I'm going to search you now, remain still. Very good. Let me see the bottom of your left foot. Right foot. Great. Now stand tall, turn, and face me. Open your mouth and stick out your tongue. Using your fingers, lift your upper lip and expose the gum. Bottom lip. Excellent. Presuming you don't shit out a key or weapon and attempt to use it, you should be fine. Put your shoes back on. Come with me. You will be staying here until the terms of your release are negotiated."

I gave this talk hundreds of times, but I didn't get far with this guy. The instant his cuff's came off he tried to punch me.

Or push me. Or place his hand on my chest.

I can't remember nor would I have cared. Muscle memory took over, and I threw him on his ass. There was a horrifying snapping sound and milliseconds later, three badges dog-piled Kroger-Jesus, thumping the daylights out of him. They were so wild they hit their own many times. Several "same side!" yells indicated the mistakes. When the mass of tangled bodies ceased its thrashing, a bruised, bloodied, and broken-wristed Nickelback-Christ lovechild lay on the floor. He made it clear he was hurt, shouting, "Man, ya'll broke my shit," while holding his deformed wrist.

I'm confident the wrist-locking throw I used caused the damage. I confessed this in whispers to Samuels, another new Daytona hire, but long-time LEO from out-of-state. He pulled me aside and corrected me.

"Nah, Hughes. That happened in the pileup. One of us must've fell on it."

"Samuels, it was me. I wri—"

"Happened in the pileup. Fell on it."

“No, it—“

He grabbed my shoulder offering a stony look. His voice was calm. “Pileup.”

I knew not to press any further. I wrung my hands.

“You tackled him, we jumped on. Must have broken in the tussle or the fall. He’s facing battery LEO. He gets ten years. We go home and fuck our wives. Capisce?”

I stared on in silence. Processing—nay, accepting—the intentional alteration of the truth tore at me. I didn’t know what to do. Something in me wanted to voice the truth, but I surely didn’t want to lose my job because I’d overreacted. But the untruth felt...wrong.

Samuels continued: “That’s what you’ll tell risk assessment when they arrive.”

“But, that’s—“

“Precisely what happened, according to the three of us. Were we all wrong? Or was it a case of an unreliable rookie?” He smiled. “One who can’t keep his facts straight in a time of crisis?” He squeezed my shoulder again. “The truth is not set in stone, son. It’s collaborative. It’s subject to change and made, then remade. We build the truths that protect each other while giving justice to the deserving. Understand?”

“Yeah. Thanks for setting me straight.”

“You got it!” he said, releasing my shoulder with a final, fatherly pat. He pulled a pack of Newports from his shirt pocket and, with ridiculous style, flicked a lone cigarette into the air, catching it with casual flair. “Want one? Took ‘em off a bum a few hours back. New pack, too!”

I accepted the offer and we went into the sally port to smoke. The other officers took care of broken Jesus and his paperwork. Though I hadn’t then learned the term, the “thin blue line” came through for me that night. This line has become so deeply ingrained in police culture that I

often distrust the very recollections of my own memory. I'd almost violated the most sacred trust in law enforcement, but I'd come around. Years later, I look back and wonder if my truths were actually "the truth." I can never be sure.

It clicked, and I'd gotten it. Not exactly then, but later. Much later.

Message finally received.

10-4.

All the later razzing was just in good nature. Honest jest. I could have reacted badly to the cocks-in-face at the Love Bar. I could have refused to hold Henrikson's cup. I could have failed at any number of initiations save this one. But I passed. I was fortunate, such that it came so early. It came when my understanding, and even respect, of the truth, was nascent. In practice, the truth was outsourced to the group; truth functioned as what best served the ambiguous spirit of the law—the letter of it be damned.

Every officer faced this test, and it separated the wheat from the chaff: those that can be trusted, those who can't. What the general populace conceived of the thin blue line was as irrelevant as it is incorrect. The line does many things for the group even beyond the promotion of cohesion, trust, and unity.

It has morphed into its own, living entity. It is extant before and outside the law, despite the wishes of those it weren't. Like any living entity, it evolves over time, and, quite simply, it is that which is the source of the officers' strength, and the font of their corruption.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RISIBLE REPOSE

I walked around the corner of a typical single-family suburban home, replete with little picket fence shrubberies and a yipping non-dog.<sup>41</sup> Sergeant Adams, or rather, Detective Adams, my current supervisor, was first on scene, busy and apparently having a gay old time of it, giddily chortling like a child. This is a man for whom the concept of “good times” had long since faded, yet there he stood, garage door opener in hand. Chortling.

The day prior, I had pulled him over as he left The<sup>42</sup> Bar three sheets to the wind. I had scolded him for this carelessness but he countered with a series of very credible threats to fire me if I didn't drive him home and have his car towed. I felt bad for the man, but I couldn't hook him up for DWI. He was too much a mentor to me, plus he'd gone through a messy divorce that he'd never recovered from. I'd heard him laugh at some weird shit before, but the peculiarity of his laugh that morning was unsettling.

“John, John, John,” he said, waving me over, “This is fucking classic. You need to see this!”

After a brief adjustment of my gun-belt, I acquiesced his request. Truth be told, I wanted to see just what had so uplifted the spirits of my normally somber mentor. The radio gave out the nature of the call: death by hanging. That made it likely a suicide, but the inclusion of the garage as a mechanism was, curiously, left out of the call description. As was what the victim was wearing...

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<sup>41</sup> I hate this image of the halcyon American dream: it does for the image of the ideal home what Twilight did for vampires.

<sup>42</sup> He had a favorite haunt, and in honor of that, it was The Bar as far as he, or anyone else was concerned.



Spitting a wad of Copenhagen<sup>43</sup> and phlegm, I pointed to the closed garage door and asked what the deal was.

“Press this,” he said, placing the garage-door opener in my hand, “And,” he paused, making spirit fingers as he walked away to smoke, calling over his shoulder, “Be amazed!”

I stood there for a minute, contemplating the remote control, turning over the tiny black box in my hand several times. What in the hell could possibly be on the other side? What could solicit this reaction from the Sergeant who had seen it all?

I shrugged my shoulders. “Fuck it,” I spat, jabbing the button with a dramatic flick.<sup>44</sup>

The garage door trembled to life. Its metal innards squealed as it climbed guide rails and, slowly—excessively slowly—the door inched its maw agape like a boxer testing a freshly punch jaw. He came into view.

Initially, the poor fellow appeared downright graceful. Timed with the majestically slow heaving of the opening door, the lifeless form of a middle-aged man drew erect, hoisted by an intricate suspension system webbed through the garage and into a single rope coiled about his neck. His corpse swayed delicately from side to side, stippled with jaunty pops from the trembling door’s rumbling ascent. This quivering lent and orgasmic flair to the whole event, and embracing the laws of Newton, he’d achieved and appreciable swing. He wore black, crotchless

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<sup>43</sup> Dipping is one of the most disgusting habits imaginable. Picking ones nose and ass in rotation is less vile. It does, however, relieve stress and calm agitated nerves like nothing else and is largely the reason why greater than two-thirds of the force were devoted dippers, snuffers, and chewers.

<sup>44</sup> As guilty of this as I am, I’ve long wondered why people make these insane gestures. Who hasn’t, upon dealing with the frustration of a dying TV remote, stood up and furiously waved the thing around like a wizard casting a spell?

leathers with a whalebone corset that compressed his chest into a feminine hourglass. An apple-sized gag ball dominated his face and rigor mortis had set in granting quasi-permanence to the death grip he maintained on his erect member<sup>45</sup>. Beyond the gag ball, the delicate flush of skin could be seen beneath his gothic makeup. Dr. Frank N. Furter couldn't have imagined a death of such darkly erotic magnificence.

I clenched the remote in my outstretched hand, frozen, jaw slack, dribbling Cope slobber.

I pressed the button and watched the macabre ballet in reverse.

Then pressed it again.

And again.

Detective Adams returned, clapping my shoulder. He took the remote from my extended hand, activating it for one more round. We stood there for a while watching him sway.

Ruminating.

With his arm still draped across shoulders, my voice returned.

“Suicide?”

“Nope.” He jauntily rocked from heel to toe, a subtle signal to guess again.

“Murder?”

“God no...poor bastard died whackin' it.”

My color must have drained because I felt oddly cold. I couldn't begin to grasp the idea of death by masturbation—it didn't compute.

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<sup>45</sup>It was on there *good*. He had fully enclosed the whole thing—shaft and balls—in a Herculean cock-grip, causing the whole package to take on the likeness of a swollen, bruised wurst resting atop a similarly contused pillow of ball-sack.

Detective Adams sucked his teeth like a nervous father preparing to have “the talk.” He explained at length<sup>46</sup> the process of autoerotic asphyxiation with his usual bluntness:

“Some people choke themselves then beat their shit. They nut and releasing the choke all at the last second.”<sup>47</sup>

I offered little more than a low grunt.

“Dipshit dropped the remote before he could let himself down.” His gloved hand slapped the remote back onto my naked palm. “Might want to wash your hands when you’re done with the show.” He clapped me on the shoulder once more before walking away. “He managed to do the former part of his hat trick before dropping the opener, so... yeah.”

I dropped the remote, wiping my hand on my pants. My eyes never left the gentle sway of the recently departed.

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Weeks later, I got dispatched to a “traffic crash.” Dispatchers are, characteristically, vague, though through no fault of their own: most callers don’t provide great details, or are too excited to provide them clearly.

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<sup>46</sup> And I mean at length... He went into pulley systems, weight loads, techniques of hypoxic “bone polishing,” etc. You name it, he’d seen it, and his explanation grew in tempo and vigor the longer he carried on. It would hardly be a surprise to learn that Adams had some weird Saran-wrap, toe-sucking, lawn-gnome, traffic cone, C-clamp, fire poker, redheaded hooker, butt-sex fetish.

<sup>47</sup> Fast forward to June 2009, and this method of death assumed the colloquial moniker of the “Carradine method.”

A call for a “medium-sized dog” running about the street would inevitably end with me, and several other badges, attempting to wrangle a one-hundred-eighty pound Great Dane to the ground with a catch pole.

Four-person fight at Brentwood and Pine? More like a twenty-man WWE royal rumble.

Being dispatched to a crash meant, at least in the loosest sense, a motor vehicle was possibly involved, but it was just as likely that a three-legged moose could’ve head-butted a Vespa.<sup>48</sup>

The situation looked grim, and from the edge of visibility a semi, parked slant, dominated the road. Closer inspection revealed a blast of motorcycle parts shooting out from the truck’s rear bumper. The truck seemed to have shat out a digested motorcycle-and-rider sandwich, and, to the untrained, that assumption would seem logical. The truth is much more frightening: this dude slammed into the rear of the semi with such force that the equal and opposite reaction literally blasted him backward as a mist of meat chunks and bike parts.

I squatted down to get a better look at the remnants when dispatch decided to update me.

“This is going to be a THI<sup>49</sup>.”

*No shit?* “Yeah, already figured that out central<sup>50</sup>. Send the van.”

The department went to work, with the lead investigator taking notes, and those of us trained in THI assisting—taking measurements, documenting debris patterns, figuring out the

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<sup>48</sup> Seldom were calls actually as dispatched, like the gentleman whose penis was stuck in side a lotion bottle—dispatched as a “loud music” complaint.

<sup>49</sup> Traffic homicide investigation.

<sup>50</sup> This is how we referred to dispatch. My own call sign was Three-Charlie-Fourty Four for a large part of my career. I’ve committed typing it. It gets monotonous.

road's coefficient of friction, etc. I'd tasked a few of the newer officers with a couple of crucial tasks, such as gathering witness testimony, diverting traffic, removing rubber-neckers, and finding the motorcyclist's head.

We knew he had a helmet on. Fragments of its venting shunts littered one of the debris clouds. The head, however, was another matter. The absence of skull chunks in the blast cones indicated his melon remained unpopped, so it had to be nearby.

Fifteen minutes into the great headhunt, an officer approached with what looked like a giant lime-green football cradled underarm. It oozed a slow but steady trickle of sickly red from the bottom. He held it aloft, addressing our Yorick: "Good sir, I have brought thee hence. Alas, I knew ye not."

I didn't get the fucking reference.<sup>51</sup> He was being an ass as far as I was concerned, but he then brought the helmet under his arm and flapped the visor up and down.

"Hey officer," my colleague said, moving the visor in rhythm with each syllable, "I was taking a nap in the field over yonder, and I seem to have... lost myself!"

I didn't react. I didn't know how to react, and nearly every cop on the scene had gathered around. I think I stuttered impotently, but he cut me off.

"BWA-HA-HA!" he laughed, flapping furiously and arching his back in imitation belly laughter. Without skipping a beat, he threw a perfect underhand spiral to my center mass.

"Alas, care for him well."

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<sup>51</sup> Literature didn't become much of an interest until later in life. I'm still living this under-read embarrassment down among the more educated of my inner circle.

It had begun. Whether for my fumbling catch, or the fact that I looked repulsed at the head-projectile, every cop on scene came by to offer commentary.

“Hey, Hughes, I see you just got a little head there.”

“What’s it like getting head while working?”

“Expect any head today?”

“Wife know you’ve been getting head on the side?”

“Uhhh, Hughes, brave new world and all, but d’you normally let dudes give you head?  
‘Cuz I know a guy....”

The jokes weren’t all that funny<sup>52</sup>, and it distracted me from working. I must’ve betrayed my stoic, because the on-scene Sergeant came over and waved the jokesters away.

“Guys, guys, come on. Officer Hughes is working and this is clearly eating at his feelings. Y’all are being huge dicks,” he said. “We shouldn’t be disrespectful to the dead.”

“Thanks, boss,” I said.

I knelt, sitting the head to the side of the main debris field, and took a few more notes.

He knelt adjacent, watching me scratch data into my pad.

“Hughes?”

“Boss?”

“Next time another officer gives you head at work I’ll have to write you up. Do that stuff in private.”

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<sup>52</sup> In hindsight, it is hilarious, but only because it’s cops dealing with horrific shit in the way they know best: humor. Is it funny for the victim, for the family, or for society? No. It’s actually quite horrible that we find it funny, yet if we didn’t, well—I don’t know if many on that call could deal with it any other way.

“ ... ”

He slapped me on the back before walking off, trailing laughter.

I shook my head before resuming my work.

*I seem to have lost myself...*

I chuckled under my breath.

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About a year later, my zone partner, a delightfully thick woman named Kellie, and I worked a natural death<sup>53</sup> at a nursing home. The deceased was well into her eighty-eighth year and the death came as no shock to the nursing staff or the family. At her age, and with her laundry list of ailments, the family had long since made peace with the absence of their loved one and had been simply waiting for her to pass.

I can't judge them for the sheer utility of their premeditated indifference and must slightly digress to discuss something of a similar situation I've faced, albeit nearly ten years after Kellie and I first stepped into that nursing home. Despite all my brushes with death, I've kept a certain distanced practicality regarding any matter governed by Thanatos.

A long-time friend of the family found herself in a nursing home<sup>54</sup>, much to my mother's grief. This woman, Irene, had been a constant source of enjoyable agitation in my younger years and, despite the fact that she bore a frightening resemblance to the grandmother from the

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<sup>53</sup> Presumed natural, I should say. A large number of old-farts expire in nursing homes each month, but I'd learned to investigate them all as if they were the lynchpin piece of Castle episode. CID—criminal investigation division, aka detectives—had a somewhat remarkable reputation for uncovering elder abuse and it was renown I wished to further promulgate.

<sup>54</sup> These are really dying homes or pre-funeral homes, and are one of the two saddest places I've ever visited, the other being a children's oncology ward.

*Dinosaurs* sitcom, Irene always managed to keep her mind and her tongue spry. When mother and I visited her in hospice for the first time, the vibrant mind had faded.

Her tongue still waggled with the same gusto and confidence as before, though now her lessening breath robbed her of articulation.

Gibberish.

“Irene,” Mom would say, “We’re here for you. So is David<sup>55</sup>.”

I recall taking her hand, stroking it, as I looked upon the cracked and broken shell before me. A stream of random words issued from her lips and I was left standing in the nonsensical wake of a failing mind. She—Irene—was gone.

I held her hand and felt her squeeze back but merely the activation of muscle memory. The Irene I knew and loved was dead. I’d made peace with this and on each visit looked upon her shell as little more than a reminder of a biting wit that served as a whetstone for my own comedic compass.

Sometimes I think I got it wrong. I’d already declared her dead despite her body remaining alive (confused, but conscious). Did I have it right?

Regardless, the reason for the callousness likely has something to do with the flippancy of a large segment of Dayshift police.

Depending on perspective, I had the great (dis)privilege of working with dayshift for this call. I’d either wanted to make bank by pulling someone else’s shift, or I was working some special event’s overtime—I don’t really remember that detail. The day-shift ghouls were out and

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<sup>55</sup> My middle name. Preferred by family, loathed by me.



it would be a matter of minutes before one or more showed up to check out V-1<sup>56</sup>. I had scant moments to check the body before the inevitable fuckery.<sup>57</sup>

Sure enough, as I was rolling an eyelid onto a pen to search for petechia<sup>58</sup>, a ghoulish motorcycle cop, Nolan, burst in. He was appreciably taller and had been sun-kissed so long he'd begun to metamorphose into a raisin.

"There it is," he said, yanking his aviators off with Hollywood flair. Nolan clipped them to his shirt pocket then approached the dead as carefully as one would a napping child.

I drew back. It's common knowledge that motormen like to join in on investigations and "fun" calls to break the monotony of writing traffic tickets all day. There are obscure laws to enforce, mind you, like one that prohibits cutting through corner lots (usually gas stations) to avoid congested traffic control devices, but they still just write tickets all damned day.

Nolan leaned down and picked her up. Rigor mortis had not yet fully gripped her tiny frame, so she resembled a stiff-off-joint marionette. With her cradled, he spun and danced about the room for a good thirty seconds. Kellie and I each raised a single eyebrow and stared. The deceased's baby blue robe gracefully whipped about her feet with each spin, bob, and dip.

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<sup>56</sup> V-1= victim 1, V-2 = victim two, etc. We spoke in such terms to de-emphasize the human element in policing matters. It actually worked well as a coping mechanism. On a subconscious level, its better to have to write a report acknowledging the loss of V-1 than Marybeth Anna Grimes—sister, mother, aunt, daughter, or whatever.

<sup>57</sup> Nightshift got the Lion's share of the absolutely screwed-up things. Dayshift had to whet its appetite by milking every fucked up little detail they could find. Misery doesn't need company, perversity does.

<sup>58</sup> These are small red spots caused by burst blood vessels, usually from choking, and are a common sign of death by suffocation or strangulation. This old bird had none, nor any trauma, so unless the autopsy yielded a chemical anomaly, she died of natural causes.

Nolan had been known as a little off-center, but this was beyond anything I could've expected.

Once the dervish dance ceased, he returned her to nearly the same position of repose: resting supine, hands folded on her stomach, and sheets tucked just below her palms. He beamed at us. “The old gal deserved one last dance.”

I recovered from what I just saw as Nolan moved for the exit, and halted him with a question: “One last dance, eh?”

Half turning in the doorway, he smiled, nodded, and said, “Don’t we all deserve a last dance?”

Kellie went to the deceased and corrected her position, placing her weathered hands one atop the other over her chest. It was the iconic position of final rest. Nolan had left, but Kellie asked the woman a rhetorical question of her own: “Was it good for you too?”

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I am no longer a police officer, but little has changed. Absent arrest powers, an elevated ego<sup>59</sup>, and a sense of purpose, I had been stumbling through life job by job while never truly feeling settled and happy. Post-police work, I found a home teaching martial arts—a temporary home—and though I still worked random jobs, a few things remained constant: people still behaved strangely; the superficial is never the actual, and death still brought out the honesty of a person’s character.

Honesty tended to come out on the grappling mat rather quickly. It’s hard to keep oneself reserved when spending several nights a week allowing others punch, kick, throw, choke, and

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<sup>59</sup> Actually, I’ve still got it according to my wife.

otherwise beat the living shit out of each other. Lifelong friendships—open, and honest ones—formed out of the trust required in training for so long and so hard. One such individual, a student of mine named Mirko, suffered the loss of his ex-wife. Organ failure of an indeterminate cause was fingered, but Mirko carried suspicions of drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>60</sup> Both were, after all, the principle source of conflict leading to their separation.

That being said, he asked me to attend the funeral of a woman I hadn't met more than in passing. She came by the dojo a few times to pick up their son, Conrad, but aside from noticing how pretty she was, and the immense love she had for her son, I couldn't assess much about her. I went there solely to support my student and friend.

The funeral service was standard, as far as funeral services go. The officiant led the mourners and friends of the deceased through hymns, long speeches about the transient nature of human life, and spiritual matters that I, frankly, didn't care for. They spent thirty minutes highlighting her life: marriage to Mirko—never mentioning their separation—the birth of their son, completing ultrasound tech school, her loving nature, and all the positive hoopla that, aside from Mirko and the U. tech, is standard Hallmark Card tripe for funerals.<sup>61</sup>

“She was taken too soon,” someone said.

“She was loved by all who met her,” the new associate pastor declared.

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<sup>60</sup>The instant I typed this I felt its sarcasm. That old canard about the joys of having an ex-wife off herself, or being free of the burden, is far overdone. I've known several people, Mirko included, for whom love continued to bloom beyond separation. I feel bad that the person he loved was kept away not for a lack of reciprocal affection, but at the hand of addiction.

<sup>61</sup> This funeral, at least, didn't try to proselytize. The last funeral I attended was that of a Spanish family, and I had to all but adamantly declare my atheism to be allowed out of the church without accepting Jesus in two languages.

“No one left the conversation without feeling better about themselves,” another person said between sobs.

Such bullshit.

After fifteen minutes of absurd platitudes, I slumped in my pew. However, when Mirko took the mic, I sat up out of respect. He was going to say the same things as all the others, but he was a friend, so I joined the crowd as a wide-eyed participant. Then, he blew us all away.

“I’d like to say a few things that may be a little—offensive,” he said. “Not all the memories I have with Raquel were good. She wasn’t the perfect person everyone thought her to be though I loved her more than anyone here could fathom.”

He wiped away tears as his voice cracked and continued.

“She cussed too much, ate too much, drank too much, and did drugs... lots of them. She farted in bed, hogged the sheets, and seldom cooked—”

I lost it. My donkey-like braying pulled a one-sided smile out of Mirko. The rest of the group laughed with me and he went on to deliver the best, most honest, most powerful eulogy I have ever heard. I left feeling like I’d actually known Raquel, flaws and all. Now, in some small way, she lives on in my mind because of Mirko’s honesty. Perhaps this is why cops, firefighters, EMTs, soldiers, and other first responders treat death with a flippancy that mortifies the general public. Perhaps, just perhaps, we have come to terms with the knowledge that a life worth living is a life worth laughing with, laughing at, and laughing for.

Mirko, you would have made a fine cop.

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More than any other brush with death, the dance with the dead lingered with me. It isn't that they all, in some way, didn't carry weight. Not only did I have to unpack the psychosis of Nolan's logic, I had to wrestle with the fact that I agreed with him. Agreed with him in all but his timing. I too would like a last dance, but I'd like to enjoy it. The ups and downs of life are themselves the ultimate rides and, having just bought a new car for the first time in my life at 31, felt like a tremendous obstacle was overcome. I'd achieved something. Were the long march of my existence a video game, I would have unlocked an achievement.

Life isn't a game, though, and before long—a week, to be exact—the novelty of the new car wore off and it was just another thing amidst a series of ordinary things. In fact, nothing has made such a lasting impression as to be a “dance” remembered. The birth of each daughter, the touch of a new lover, each should be transformative and awakening experiences yet all fall short in memory.

I wonder what ride the old woman held in her imagination before her final breath. What memory or hope sent her off to oblivion?

I often wonder what memory will comfort me when it's my turn.

I wonder what the most memorable ride will be.

I hope it's funny, and I hope the antics of my life enrich others long after I am gone.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SPRING BREAK

I sit on the hood of my squad car, sipping coffee and sucking a plug of Copenhagen. From my perch in the parking lot of a beachside Seven-Eleven, I take in the spectacle of scantily-clad pedestrian gridlock. It's Spring Break Daytona, 2005, and I'm an island of sobriety in a sea of drunken revelers three hundred thousand strong. I spot an attractive young lady wearing a blue thong and matching top—essentially bare-breasted. Based on the wobble in her gait, I figure it isn't Evian in the water bottle she keeps taking long pulls from. *What the hell*, I think, and sit back to enjoy the show.

As she weaves by, I turn my head to keep her swaying hips in sight, but something else catches my eye: the 7-Eleven door flings open, and a young, man holding a case of beer on his shoulder like a boom box, runs out.

It's Heineken.

He's got good taste, and given the fact it's Spring Break, I'd typically dismiss the sight as apropos. People don't normally huff their booze like a sack of mulch, or sprint with it, but he could be rushing back to a party in a desperate attempt to seduce some under-clad girl with his speed and alcohol-obtaining prowess. Just as likely, he might be so overtaken with a hormonally induced need to impress girls that his body is locked in overdrive. Perhaps it's just the zeitgeist of spring break, and he's merely another character in the city.

However, a new dimension arises as I watch another young man run out the door, hot on Heineken Guy's heels.

I consider revising my initial working thesis and take a sip of coffee. Fools often enjoy the company of peers, I reason, so I blow it off.

Then a woman in a Seven-Eleven smock follows, screaming: “Stop him!”

A new working thesis develops, one that doesn’t require a professional consultation with Sherlock Holmes.

I groan, looking into the half-finished cup coffee and suck at the fresh plug tucked under my lip.

*Fuck me.*

I drop the coffee and haul ass.

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Three hours ago, just before 7:00 P.M., I began my shift seated in the briefing room, mulling over my career choice. It was the main building on the mainland side—the arrhythmic heart of the force. Its age showed. Tattered pro-union posters littered cracking walls. The posters’ corners dog-eared, limp like the men in uniform mindlessly shambling through tours of duty. Wanted posters, most several years old, many already cleared by arrest, were push-pinned one atop of the other in a wall-wide fresco of criminal gazes. A man in a motivational poster stands at the crest of a mountain with his prosthetic leg gleaming in cliché beams of sunlight. He appeared triumphant. It was meant to explain how courage could surmount all obstacles; courage is probably the reason he lost his leg. The few computers present are outdated. Some used floppy disks while others struggled to load Google. The front desk had a typewriter.

A goddamned typewriter.

The main police department of the “World’s Most Famous Beach,” still had that fossil at the front desk, but that’s not all. I was younger than my service weapon; half of my ammo wore a coat of rust, and my squad car was a ’95 Caprice with only half its blue lights operational.

Sadly, this was one of the better cars in the fleet, and Officers from the opposite shift fought over it. That service weapon of mine, a Glock 17, was, according to the range master, one of the better-kept weapons despite the fact I had to play Kentucky windage<sup>62</sup> at the range. The legs of the briefing room's foldout tables buckled and wobbled, as did most of the officers seated at them: half were alcoholics, and the others used the same drugs they arrested people for. The 'thin-blue-line' kept us silent. It was no different than on the streets. Snitching on an officer constituted the *ultimate* taboo, so we grew myopic to the corruption and the abuses of drugs, power, brutality, and bullshit arrests. We fixated on our jobs, communal loathing of the supervision, and shared annoyance for citizens under our care.

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Barely two years into Law enforcement and the job lost its luster. To say it merely "fell short of expectations" was tantamount to thinking Hitler only "slightly naughty." Growing up, mom and I religiously watched COPS on TV and I fell in love with the idea of fighting crime and solving mysteries.

Actually, I fell in love with the notion of kicking asses and taking names. I'd gone in already having felt the rush of putting boots to butts. I had to—or so I told myself—because I got picked on as a boy. Constantly. Despite being a large kid, I was damned goofy. And ugly: My acne came in so complete that I couldn't wipe sweat from my brow without covering my hand in popped-pimple puss. Add my pizza-like skin to a slight case of the fatties and I'd learned to accept invisibility in the presence of girls, ire in the presence of boys. With each new school I

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<sup>62</sup> The gun's sights are off. But the armorer insists otherwise. I had to aim slightly right and down to hit my mark, and though I got good at it, it still pissed me off.



attended, I had to establish my “dangerous pariah” reputation. Bullies would think me an easy mark, but my martial arts lessons paid off. A bully’s bloodied nose or two and I was left alone; this was not the case for those smaller and less capable of protecting themselves.

Perhaps I sought out the career because part of me wanted to beat down bullies. If not the actual ones of my past, for I’ve entertained those fantasies, then the ones that tormented some other voiceless, invisible kid.

But even this isn’t wholly accurate. As aforementioned, martial arts held a special place in my heart and I think the real reason I wanted to be a cop was so I could use those skills on a day-to-day basis.

That’s it.

Point blank.

The real reason.

I wanted to punch the deserving face; I wanted to do it with karate, and I wanted to get paid in the process. I wanted to be Supercop.

Unfortunately, the only names I took were written down in lifeless, boring reports, and the only ass I kicked was my own for wasting scholarship money and time on the Police Academy. Still, I got some perks from the job: I didn’t get traffic tickets, and sped anytime I took the wheel; I got to play with weapons most civilians will never hear of; once in a while, I got to use my combat training and, as a direct side effect, was granted instant badass points at any martial arts school I attended. Finally, the geniuses at Krispy Kreme opened up a shop directly across the street from the department. I picked up a dozen glazed on the way home every other

shift for my pregnant wife and our unborn second child. I've heard every cop and donut joke possible. Some were actually funny.

The announcement of the night's zone assignments yanked me from my thoughts. Sergeant Palavino handed them out, doling out little slices of hell like some diabolical auctioneer. The old timers and seasoned cops were sent West. This included the zones with the Halifax Humane Society, Pelican Bay, and the LPGA neighborhoods: real highbrow, well-to-do, curtsy and bow, butlers-get-the-door kind of rich folk. Crime hardly occurred out there and a mannequin could have effectively patrolled them.

Then he announced the zones for the beachside. This is where I, along with the other rookies, was assigned: Atlantic avenue and surrounding neighborhoods—Dante's inferno. I was placed in circle eight, doomed to wallow in shit for the night, and the neighboring hells received their own rookies too.

It made perfect nonsense. Why not put the most inexperienced, nervous, and hair-triggered officers in the most rough and tumble spots of an extended special event? The greenest of the green got to deal with the transvestites, hookers, vomit-covered hobos, alcohol-poisoned teenage corpses, sobbing rape victims, massive melees, pileup crashes, and rampant public fucking. What could possibly go wrong?

I walked out of the room and past the front desk en route to my squad car, waving farewell to the front desk officer as he busily clacked away at the electric typewriter. He was a veteran: too old to escape to a new career, but smart enough to work his way to the front desk.

I adjusted the seat of my car, slid Cope under my lip, and drove off.

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Just as I pulled into my base of operations, a Seven-Eleven far enough from the chaos of the main strip to allow breathing room, Central<sup>63</sup> dispatched me to a noise complaint. The main roads were gridlocked. It's not hard to imagine why. One bikini-clad girl slows traffic; a hundred thousand stops it cold. Having learned the hard way during my first few months on the job, I wove through the grid-like back streets.

Pulling up to the RP's<sup>64</sup> house, I saw an old woman, easily in her eighties, standing at the edge of her driveway wearing a fuzzy green robe. She rubbed her hands together frantically, as her banana-shaped body waddled about. She was surprisingly spry for her age and nearly clambered atop me before I left the car.

"Why are there so many people hootin' and hollerin'?" she asked, her voice a wavering crackle.

"Because you live in a party town ma'am. It's Spring Break."

"Can you make them stop?"

"No, Ma'am. They bring revenue."

She paused for a moment. I hoped she took the hint: I couldn't do shit about it.

"Can't you just go arrest them."

"No."

"Run them off?"

"No."

"Talk to them?"

"You want me to talk to *each one* of the Spring Breakers?"

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<sup>63</sup> The name for our dispatchers.

<sup>64</sup> Reporting party: it's how cops/dispatchers often refer to citizens who call 911 for aid.

“Well, yes?”

“Ma’am. I’ll do my best.”

“Oh thank you, officer,” she said, grasping my hand with her wiry fingers, while giving a toothless smile. “You’re so much nicer than the other officers. They said they couldn’t do anything for me.”

“I’m different,” I said and drove off.

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Moments later, I am in the Seven-Eleven parking lot enjoying a hot cup of coffee and a fresh pinch of Copenhagen.

I watch the crowd shamle about and realize these people actually do bring the city revenue though it’s not from buying beer, renting hotels, patronizing restaurants, or anything so innocuous. This event, by its nature, encourages people to violate city ordinances.

Expensive ordinance violations.

And lots of them: open container, disorderly conduct, spitting on the sidewalk, urinating in public, distributing handbills, loud car speakers, revving of engines, showing one’s tits, twat, or twig, etc. The city even allows the police to charge certain low-level misdemeanors, i.e., actual crimes, as ordinance violations.

“Encourages” is disingenuous. Supervisors demand they be so charged.

Because fines.

I’m no actuary, but for the sake of argument consider the following: Over sixty cops work the event. Each one grabs, on average, five to ten ordinance violations per night. Violators go to an especially constructed temporary holding facility to get locked up unless they fork over

\$253 or \$103, depending on the offense. These people are desperate to get back to the party. Most pay and those that don't are released a day or two later with a slap on the wrist, no lasting record, and a lost weekend.

In just five days, cops make the city roughly three to six hundred large. It's legalized extortion.

This is my noble duty.

Chances are while I'm making nice with grandma, my zone partners were harassing the partygoers. Elsewhere in our zones, a burglar smashes a window; some thugs crown a young woman, dragging her into an alley; a girl quaffs a Bill Cosby beer, and a crew of men throw a motorcycle into the back of a truck and haul it to the nearest chop shop. All of this is made possible because the city wants one thing before all else.

Money.

Safety is a tertiary concern.

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By the time my coffee cup hits the ground I am in my car and on the Heineken thief's tail. They juke around the corner and the chase is on.

The thief runs down the street with his buddy in tow and I speed by, pulling into a power slide, blocking his path. I explode from my car and plow into both boys mid-street. The impact blasts the case of Heineken from his grasp and we crumple into a mass of tangled limbs. I'm the first to pull free of the dog-pile and drag the former Heineken beer holder away, wrenching him into a facedown arm lock. I "pin" him by perching on his face with a knee mauling his head and neck. I can't cuff him.

Not yet.

His buddy is just a few feet away, standing from the ground after the pileup. I know if I attempt to cuff the thief I'll be vulnerable.

From my kneeling, face-smashing position, I break leather on my Taser and train it on the buddy's torso.

"Don't get up! Stay down or fry!" I yell.

He doesn't hear or pretends not to and finishes pushing up from the ground, body set to run, and lurches forward.

I have seconds.

A moment.

Any more hesitation and he will close the gap and kick, punch, stab, or bite before I can adjust.

I press the trigger.

The Taser sparks to life with a familiar "pop," followed by the satisfying crackle of electricity. The young man turns into a statue mid-stride before toppling to the ground.

I adjust from kneeling to standing on the thief, who grunts indignantly, as my boot waffle-prints his face and neck, so I can better assess the Taser's deployment.

I speak but am cut off by the approach of the smock-clad clerk. Between gasps of air, she chides: "What the fuck did you do that for?"

"He . . . uh . . . is a bad guy?"

"I yelled for help," she says, leaning on her knees, "and he," she points to the tasered, "was chasing that thief."

I look toward the Good Samaritan. He embodies stereotypical spring break rabble: board shorts, scruffy, unevenly tanned, and red-eyed. He looks like enough of a douchebag to merit Taser-ing for tragic fashion sense alone, and underneath his mop of ocean-salted locks he wears most shit-eating grin I've ever seen.

"Dude! That was effin' Sweeeeeeet!" he says.

I cock my head to my shoulder mic. "Central, send a supervisor."

"Dude, can I take these out?" the Good Samaritan asks, pointing to the Taser probes jutting from his chest and stomach.

"No." I pinch the mic again. "EVAC too..."

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While waiting for my supervisor and EVAC, I cuff the thief and stow him in my car. Despite being jail bound, he yuks it up, because, as he puts it: "You lit up the good guy."

The Seven-Eleven clerk and Good Samaritan made it a point to tell every passer-by about my fuck-up. Likewise, it's clear their new focus is my ineptitude when I read their written statements. They're nearly illegible, except for the bit about a cop zapping the help. That bit is pure calligraphy.

Sergeant Palavino and EVAC arrive simultaneously and the former is already rubbing his balding head in frustration before he exits the car door. The dappling of silver in his remaining hair glitters in the light of the streetlamps. He's already served a load of "I need a supervisor" calls this night, and I am one more bone-up in a long chain of lesser bone-ups. He throws an arm over my shoulders in a fatherly, "I'll kick your ass later when not in public," fashion.

“Son, did you fuck the fat chick?<sup>65</sup>”

“Well, I...”

“...”

“Yeah,” I say, hanging my head. “Fucked her good.”

For a moment, he says nothing and pulls a lone cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket. He takes a few long, contemplative drags.

He looks at the guy handcuffed in the car, then at the Samaritan getting Tazer probes plucked from his chest, and finally at the clerk, who now stands on the sidewalk holding the busted case of Heineken.

He lets his cigarette roll back and forth in his fingertips. “How in the fucking fuck did you happen to fry the wrong guy?”

My explanation failed to calm him. His nostrils flare and billow smoke like an angry bull huffs steam. He didn’t agree with my split-second decision, and, according to his thinking, all cops should have the reflexes and gun-slinging prowess of the Waco Kid and Neo combined. I entertain the thought of telling him he’d have done no better but quickly quash the idea. I’d prefer to keep the tenuous threads my job hangs from intact.

“You handed this man a blank check!” he says, burying his face in his palm. “The department is getting sued for this, mark my words!”

“I don’t think he’s going to do that,” I say.

This gets me a raised eyebrow,

“Go ask him yourself, but he seems . . . happy.”

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<sup>65</sup> I shouldn’t have to translate the meaning of this, but it means to ‘screw up royally.’



Sgt. Palavino glares but acquiesces.

We arrive at the Good Samaritan's side just as EVAC finishes probe removal. He's seated on the ground and one of the medics literally jerks the probe from his chest with the same tearing sound as blowing out the seat of one's pants. Another paramedic passes a clipboard to me requesting that I witness the Taser victim's "refusal of transport."<sup>66</sup> Taser victims rarely need hospital treatment. I sign it and EVAC clears out.

Sgt. Palavino kneels down in front of the Good Samaritan. "Son, may I ask if you are ok?"

"Fuck me, man, I'm GREAT! They even let me keep 'em!" he says, extending an open palm where both Taser probes rest.

"You're not upset?" Sgt. Palavino asks.

"WHAT. Hell no! Ya'll just gave me a ticket to tons of pussy!"

Sgt. Palavino and I trade looks.

"We actually need to take those probes as evidence," I say.

He closes his hand gently, retracting it like he has the One Ring in his palm. "But... I need them!"

Sgt. Palavino gives me a sidelong look and nod.

"This is your key to an awesome weekend? I ask, pointing to the hand holding the probes.

He nods while hip thrusting the air and biting his lower lip.

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<sup>66</sup> This is to cover EVAC's butt. They treat hangnails like gun shot wounds in order to prevent lawsuits, and I signed, thereby agreeing that the young man made his own decision not to go to the ER.

“Then, you write a statement declaring you’re willing to testify, in person, and the reason you were Tasered was that you heard, but failed to comply with, my order to stay down. Do that and I’ll let you keep one probe.”

His eyes light up. “Deal.”

Sgt. Palavino pats me on the back and walks a few paces away to light another cigarette.

“But I want a pic, too.”

“Huh?”

Sgt. Palavino leans to me, and whispers, “Just do it. I don’t care about media policy at this point. His admission prevents a suit and puts your fat chick on a starvation diet.”

“You have yourself a deal, young man!” I say, shaking his hand.

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I’m twenty-nine now, and I sit on my bed, looking through old photographs. Inevitably, I find the ones of me in uniform and I remember the Good Samaritan. I remember that somewhere out there, a man has a picture of us: his arm over my shoulder as we pose, with me, Taser at the ready, acting like the badass warrior I fancy myself to be, and he, grinning that same fool grin from the tasing. We both wear the same toothy grins, but for different reasons

I hope that photo got him what he wanted. Still, I did something much better with my life: I’ve moved on.

I now teach Karate, and my noble quest is realized: I empower those who suffer like I did to take charge of their own fates.

I punch faces at tournaments, but not because my opponents deserve it; I punch them because they do the same for me in the pursuit of perfection.

But that isn't even the best part.

I haven't "fucked the fat chick" for a long, long time.

## CHAPTER SIX: MEDITATION ON TESTICLES AND BREASTICLES

My wife, Dayana, and I watched Marvel's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* a few nights back<sup>67</sup> and it sparked a discussion, largely philosophical, and ending with the declaration that a certain male character should have punched a certain woman. In the face.

This demands context.

In this particular episode Ward, a statuesque male-badass, is on a train, undercover. He is made, as there would be no drama otherwise. Another man and a woman from the criminal tech organization Ward is infiltrating pursue him to a sleeping car. A fight breaks out. Ward spends the next few minutes beating the dog shit out of the male aggressor while merely defending himself against the woman. He leaping-punches the male unconscious then catches the kick of the woman. Standing there, holding her leg, he cocks a punch for the face but stops. They both stare at each other in this pseudo, fourth-wall-breaking social commentary before Ward uncorks a body shot, dropping her.<sup>68</sup>

"What a bunch of bullshit!" Dayana said.

Before I could ask what, she cut me off mid-thought.

"He should have cold-cocked her in the jaw!"

I agreed and we finished the show without further upset.

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<sup>67</sup> I was partially tempted to give an exact date, but I feel that Marvel, DC, and their comic kin are the mythology of the contemporary age; therefore, timeless.

<sup>68</sup> For the non-fighter reading: body knockouts are oft opined worse than the traditional cerebral concussion variety. Why? For the latter, one wakes with a jaw ache; the former, one never blacks out and is privy to all the pain of debilitating ectopic discharge. In short, it sucks more.

However, for the non-fighting population, i.e., most of America, it sends the ridiculous message that a woman is so weak a "mere" gut punch can take her out; the men though, they need face punches.

Later on, I began to think on this. I like to consider myself, to at least some extent, a feminist. I think men and women are, and should be, equal in as many ways as possible, or, in as many ways as are desired by the individual.

Why shouldn't we be?

I brought the Ward scenario up with several friends. My expectation was unanimous agreement. Instead, I was the dissenting opinion.

"He was right not to hit her in the face."

"You don't hit women."

"What kind of man hits a woman?"

After collecting my jaw from the floor, I took note of these objections (among myriad others).

It is at that moment I realized the entirety of my background and internal culture is foreign to my peers. Women have always, in my mind, been equal to men, and if I ever had any doubts about this, my wife helped correct them by simply being who she is.

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Before meeting Dayana, I went through a series of failed relationships. This is an obvious tautology; any relationship that does not end in marriage is, by most social markers, a failure if one accepts the ideology that a relationship's endgame is long-term pairing (i.e., something roughly equivalent to marriage). Nonetheless, these relationships were failed from inception not

because I wasn't ready for commitment—I wanted to settle down since my late teens<sup>69</sup>—but because the ladies I dated were “them.”

Non-martial artists.

Girly-girls.<sup>70</sup>

I have a natural bias against that type. The ones that show up to the weight room of a YMCA clad in an outfit with a price tag comparable to a car payment; the ones that have a full work-over of prom-ready makeup with pristinely arranged tresses; the ones so perfumed it sets off the allergies of half the gym; the ones that step on a treadmill and walk for an hour, gossiping and caterwauling about the latest trends in TV and pop culture. Those that violate the sacred sweat and blood of the gym.

Them.

Of course, there are flavors of “them.” They aren't all the inappropriately clad, fish-out-of-water-in-the-gym types. Some spend the entirety of their dates on a phone, texting. Others substitute meaningless small talk about the inconsequential in lieu of substantive conversation.

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<sup>69</sup> I brought every girl I dated to see my mother within the first couple of dates. Of the few that made it past this harrowing experience, only Dayana explained to me just how obtuse that practice was. In fact, if it weren't for the fact that I was a martial artist and a pagan (at the time) she would have bailed.

<sup>70</sup> I must clarify something here: I don't think that “girly girls” are less than in terms of worth, societal value, or equality; they just aren't my cup of tea. While I do think everyone, regardless of gender, owes it to himself or herself to obtain a minimal level of fitness and combative capability, I don't think just because a woman prefers to wear skirts, and is a pacifist she is less equal than her more bellicose counterparts. I treat this the same way I view republican affiliation. It's perfectly defensible to hold those views, but I think—on a purely personal level— that there are vastly better choices.

Others throw punches with limp wrists, kick with floppy feet, and exclaim, “Oh I could never hit someone!” after being asked what they would do if attacked.

Them.

Some were the kind that sat on the sidelines and watched the things that mattered most to me. I’d take one of them to Kokopelli’s, the rough-and-tumble sweatbox of a gym where I practiced Jiu Jitsu, and they’d find their way to the only soft spot—a raggedy old couch—to sit and watch. Some didn’t even do that. They’d stand and play on their phone while I grappled<sup>71</sup>. Then, during the car ride home, would have the stones to ask if the woman I’d wrestled with for one round of a fifteen-round practice meant anything to me.

“Yeah, it meant she wasn’t a fucking sideliner afraid to get down and fight! It meant she’s tough and strong, and can protect herself! It meant she was functionally useful!”

In hindsight, that probably wasn’t the kindest way to say, “You no longer interest me and I think we should see other people.”

After dating so many of “them” I’d decided (with age-appropriate angst) there wasn’t anyone out there for me. The girls of Kokopelli’s were taken, so I stopped dating and declared a policy of strict bachelorhood until I found the perfect one.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> I remaining “clean” received any level of priority then sitting on the furniture was not in one’s best interests.

<sup>72</sup> I made a list of what “the perfect one” included: likes martial arts, knows about martial arts, likes to read, IQ over 120, likes video games, likes movies, somewhat nerdy. Nowhere on my list did I mention a requisite gender, and I even tried to go “gay” for a time. It lasted all of as long as it took to realize that I don’t like penises. Not even my own. I tried hard to make the leap to the sausage side of the aisle—they had all the qualities I sought—but just couldn’t square the circle of the unfavorable genitalia. It was at this point I realized sexuality is not a choice. I would never again entertain the idea that someone could simply choose “not to be gay.”

I spent six months single before I met Dayana during an afternoon class at Kokopelli's. I know I mentioned before I'd mostly written off the women there, but, at least, a portion of this had to do with the anti-romantic ambiance of that gym. The flooring consisted of threadbare shag, faded blue, and layered in select spots with millimeters' thin rubber matting; the walls carried the dim yellow of cigarette stains; two large dogs ran freely about; and the odor of the place was a boner-killing bouquet of canine, sweat, balls funk, and testosterone<sup>73</sup>. It was the last possible place anyone could begin to contemplate romance. Despite the downright unpleasant miasma in the gym, Dayana lit a spark in me I'd long believed extinguished.

She sat in a chair, wrapping her fists in preparation for training, and, not only was she wrapping them, she was doing it properly and smiling about it. I wanted to speak to her, but my first attempt more resembled a mime waving howdy.

Despite having moving lips and a functional diaphragm, I couldn't form words. Content with a mere hand waving, I wrapped my own hands on the less-embarrassed side of the room. A fellow martial artist witnessed my failed suave and laughed.

The head trainer paired me with Dayana for that day's training. This was an odd practice. By odd, I mean that in the three years I'd been training there I'd never seen a male-female pairing for training. Something had to be up, and to this day, Dayana and I suspected he saw our furtive glances and played matchmaker. Nonetheless, I found myself holding my glove-covered hands aloft as she punched them in rhythm to the trainer's staccato commands. We talked during

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<sup>73</sup> Anyone who thinks testosterone doesn't have a smell has never been in a barracks or a fight gym. After the sweat is washed away, toilets are scrubbed, and linens changed a smell of masculine juvenilia—something between bravado and poor judgement—lingers. It's indescribable in the concrete sense, but once one has caught a whiff...



these exchanges, i.e., during the course of, thereby demonstrating a level of comfort such that we could punch with full intensity and discuss banalities, itself another enticing piece of evidence that she was a serious martial artist. Most people can't focus when punches are being thrown their direction, but we could.

“So, tell me about yourself. Hobbies?”

Punches collided with my open gloves. Whap! Whap!

“Reading.” Whap! “This.” Whap! Whap! “You?”

“Ah,” Whap! “Not all that much,” Whap! “Games, I’ve been into Harry—“ Whap!  
“Potter lately.”

Whap! Whap! “I love Harry Potter!”

Such went the majority of the hour. At one point I went to tap her stomach to remind her to hollow her core during a move and accidentally palmed a tit through my glove. I turned red enough to be visible from low orbit.

“You’ve been wanting to do that all day!” she said, taking the accidental grope in stride.

I made word-like sounds. Actually, Pentecostals might have been able to interpret the bout of tongues babbled, but Dayana giggled at the honest mistake and, after class, wrote her number on my glove. I never thought unintentional boob gropes to be effective number fetchers, but made it a point to let any future sons know.<sup>74</sup>

I didn’t call her. Not for a solid month. I think I was intimidated, to be honest. I always wanted the opportunity to date an assertive, strong woman, but when the opportunity presented

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<sup>74</sup> As it turns out my testicles are unilaterally devoted to synthesis, maintenance, and projection of X-chromosome gametes. In short: I make girls.

itself, I didn't immediately jump on it. My best friend, Andrew (essentially an adopted brother), described the enormous pussy I was being and took matters into his own hands at the end of the month-long wait. He snatched my phone from me, dialed Dayana, and passed back. On speaker. After an uncomfortably long pause, I asked said: "I'd like to train with you again. When are—"

"I really don't want to train. Let's have coffee."

"Coffee?" I looked at Andrew. A rain forest of humidity sprouted in my armpits.

"It's a beverage, goof. You'll love it."

"I don't know when I'm free next, but—"

"You're free tomorrow night."

"Oh. Ok. Yeah. I am."

"Joe-Muggs in the Books-a-Million. See you at eight."

Before Andrew could congratulate me with a pat on the back, I tackle-hugged him. \

In less than a year's time, we married with a pagan handfasting.<sup>75</sup> She had no father figure give her away at the ceremony—hers had passed when she was four. Regardless, she wouldn't have had one anyway. Not because she lacked for strong men in her life, but because, as a matter of principle, she wasn't giving herself to me, she was joining with me as equals.

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<sup>75</sup> It's fairly similar to a "church wedding" only this is the neo-pagan version. Long story short: we held our hands with palms pressed together as a cord tied them in place. Prayers and overt symbolism ensued followed by cake.

Up until this time, I had gone through life with the understanding that women were essentially equal to men, but I learned the hard way that even in the martial arts community, my thinking represented something of a rarity.

We kept martial arts training a common thread throughout our marriage and when we moved in together we relocated to a new dojo, Premier Martial arts. Within six months, we had so thoroughly proven ourselves that we were asked to lead classes. We did for a while then moved on. Work pulled us away.

Soon thereafter we went to another school to train. A few months later we were both, again, asked to take over a few classes and teach. We did, but work and life again managed to pull us away.

Pretty much immediately after we found yet another school, Tiger Martial Arts, we were asked to open up a new location for them as head instructors. This led us to the morning of the instructor certification.

We ran through forms<sup>76</sup> together then separated for the next component: breaking slabs of red paving stones<sup>77</sup> set atop cinderblocks. One for each fist via a hammering blow as we dropped to a single knee. I smashed through mine without issue. Phillip, our instructor, quite literally gave me a single pat on the back prior to the break and a nonchalant “You got it.” I gathered no audience despite the packed room.

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<sup>76</sup> Preset patterns of kicks, punches, blocks, and movements designed to instill understanding of movement through repetition.

<sup>77</sup> Concrete is normally used, but the instructor forgot to pick them up the day before so he went to a Lowe’s on his way in. They only slabs in stock were reddish stone ones. They are also 140% harder than concrete. We weren’t told until much, much later.

During Dayana's turn to break it was quite different. The forty-ish students in the room, Philip, and a cadre of assistant instructors gathered around to offer advice.

"Drive your weight through."

"Hit with gravity, just as the knee touches."

"Focus<sup>78</sup>."

*She got all the support and help in the world, but I didn't?* We were both training for the same qualification, and she even had one black belt rank higher than me at the time! Hours in training didn't factor into their reduced confidence in her abilities—or their increased enjoyment of her successes. It was her gender. As if somehow that affected her ability to whack a stone with enough power to break it, or, if she succeeded, made it all the more remarkable than just another male doing it.

She crushed the slabs, as literally dozens of women had in that very school, and hundreds of thousands do every year in training halls across the globe.

The next portion of the test, sparring and self-defense, received similar treatment, but the bias was even more obvious. Here's the setup: Philip and one of us squared off in the center of the gym's five thousand square foot mat. He punched, kicked, or grabbed with the full intent of bopping us in the face or immobilizing us. We had to respond with a single defensive movement.

That was phase one.

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<sup>78</sup> Most martial artists hate this word. Being told to "focus" is like being told to listen harder. It's useless advice.

Phase two was a one-on-one fight for a full minute. The rules were few: no biting, groin strikes, eye, or throat attacks. The attacker swapped out for a fresh one every minute, so the defender faced a constant stream of unwinded foes.

Our final measure was group combat: four people would continually attack us for three minutes swapping themselves out on the minute just like the previous session. After the unarmed melee, we took a break and went at it again, albeit with weapons. We used whiffle ball bats; training knives; and plastic, padded chains to simulate common “street” weapons. The absence of guns was intentional: no one is going to go Matrix against four armed gunmen and beat them down with mere fists. We were nothing, if not realistic about the limitations of our abilities.

My combative test component held nothing peculiar. I whupped on my instructor and training partners and didn’t take any “lethal” blows from the weapons combat. I did it by staying on the offensive and actually attacking them, which was rare. Most will move around defensively—dodging wherever possible—and inevitably get ganged up on. My performance was, at the risk of sounding hubristic, exceptional. However, that was the expectation, and the crowded dojo more-or-less ignored the spectacle.

Dayana, on the other hand, drew the attention of every eye in the room, filling the perimeter of the mat—standing room only. It was clear from the start that she was being pussyfooted with: in phase one, Philip threw only one, overly slow punch with the rest of his attacks being grabs. Where he would have attempted to yank me across the mat, Dayana received a slight tug.

The second portion felt the same. Her sparring partners didn’t attack with much gusto. Well, the female ones did, but the males continued to kick softly, and swing unrealistic slaps for

the top of her head. She responded with quality, though pulled, punches and kicks. Probably content to treat them only as roughly as they treated her.

During her breather, I asked her why she sparred so docilely: “They are playing around with you. This isn’t a challenge for you. Hit them. Hard,”

“I don’t want to offend them.”

“You won’t.”

Dayana became herself during the group melee. She superman-punched the first directly in the face; swept the feet out of another, then proceeded to chase and beat the stuffing out of each male partner the instant they stood.

Philip joined for the group weapons sparring. I don’t know what was going through his head, but he had the vibe of “teaching her not to get overly cocky.” He paced in front of her like a caged lion, whiffle-ball bat in hand, before the round. The other armed students stood behind Philip as he charged, howling. He swung at her leg and I don’t know what happened next, but, after bodies collided into a tangle of limbs, Dayana was the one holding the bat. Philip looked puzzled. She shrugged, clobbered him with it, and then chased down the rest of the fleeing mob while bonking them over the head.

It’s safe to say she outperformed me in the multiple-opponents-with-weapons round. I’m damn proud too, and that moment has earned considerable mileage in subsequent conversations.

Philip thanked her too, but, unlike so many others, he admitted his bias: never in a million years would he have thought a woman would be able to handle herself like that. This is an extremely common sentiment for Dayana, but Philip was never forthcoming with the why, nor was I in the mindset to ask. In fact, my giving a damn about the equality of women was a

relatively recent thing, and asking people for the reasons why they behave as they do was even more recent.<sup>79</sup> I never realized the extent to which American culture didn't operate under the assumption that women are equal to men.

Something similar happened years later when a good friend of ours, Joe, challenged Dayana's abilities. This time, however, we got an explanation.

Joe was a long time grappling student of mine, and as loyal as the family dog. He'd followed me across three different martial arts schools, and, to this time of writing, still asks for me to open another gym in which to roll<sup>80</sup>. One of Joe's trademarks, aside from gruff, blue-collar humor, was the entertaining banter he and Dayana engaged in. He'd claim he could "whup her butt," because she refused to participate in the grappling-only classes.

"I hate rolling on the ground with a bunch of sweaty dudes," she explained, "It's not my thing."

"You're just a wuss," Joe would say. "Wimpy woman."

"This wimpy woman could kick your butt," she'd joke back.

He'd drop into a wrestling stance and say: "Well, come on and let's see!"

Lather, rinse, repeat. They wrote it off as dojo humor until the evening Joe actually attempted a takedown on Dayana. Despite being caught off-guard, she managed to sprawl, stuffing him into the mat, before pancaking him onto his back and then straddling him like a

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<sup>79</sup> I didn't fancy myself a "writer" beyond the most technical use of the word: I could string an interesting sentence together, but fuck-all if I really ever stopped to make deep observations or take rigorous notes.

<sup>80</sup> Grappler slang for spar.

schoolyard bully. Joe couldn't escape, so she rained mock blows in anticipation of surrender. She accepted it with a wry, "How do you like me now?"

Joe rolled away and stood. "Damn, John. Gotta keep the woman in-line. Who's the boss in your house?"

Joe was joking. Half joking. I asked him what he meant and received a slowly fading explanation as he realized I didn't follow his reasoning: "You know..." he said with an uneasy laughing, "the man's suppose to lead the household. God's the head of man. Man's the head, y'know, of the wife. Wife is head of the children."

I didn't know how to respond, so I called the class to the mat, using that segue to escape the miasma of awkwardness permeating the room. I wasn't in the mood to confirm my atheism at my business or alienate a paying customer, but his explanation was telling.

Much of the entire culture surrounding the belief in male superiority comes, largely, from religious thought. The more I thought about it, the more I noticed elements of such thought impacting American culture.

Not that long ago, my father lit himself on fire. I considered making up a cool story, something to with an experiment gone awry, but he merely attempted to burn a bunch of garden rubbish in a pit. He poured gas and let it sit too long then tossed in a match.

Boom.

He went to Orlando Regional Medical Center's burn ward for a week before being allowed to convalesce at home under the once-daily supervision and bandage changes of a home-care nurse.



A week into Dad's home care, Dayana and I visited while the nurse changed Dad's bandages. Mom asked my wife and me how to properly address thank-you notes to well-wishers and friends. One pair of them, Celeste and Larry B—, took it upon themselves to cover mom's mortgage for the month. It helped offset the financial loss of caring for dad's injuries and the time he spent out of work.

"Should I just put the address on the envelope," Mom asked, "or do I write to Mr. and Mrs. Larry B— above it?"

I didn't immediately catch the subtle misogyny, but I responded with typical sarcasm: "Mr. and Mrs. Larry? Celeste change her name when I wasn't looking?" I turned to leave the room, content with my snark, and wholly unaware I'd made a cultural commentary, but Dayana—infamous among my family for her complete lack of a filter—keyed up on it. I'm unsure if she took it as the beginning of my own tirade and wanted to join in, or if she wanted to tear mom a new one on her own.

"What is that bullshit!" she said.

The nurse took a brief, surprised look at Dayana's outburst, then resumed changing dad's leg bandages without a word.

Mom startled so much she dropped her pen.

My kids popped their heads into view from the adjacent room.

The cat yawned.

"That's a crock of shit! Why does Celeste lose her identity to Larry? She's reduced to an abbreviation? Why the hell not 'Mrs. and Mr. Celeste Bedenbaugh!'" She didn't wait for an

answer and stormed out. I followed after her, but heard the nurse ask, “Does she do that often?” before I left earshot.

Later that evening after the nurse left, I sat in the living room watching Cops re-runs with mom. We drank the drink of her people, as she calls it: Diet Coke and Canadian whiskey. Her face looked heavy, like the weight of the world pulled on each jowl, and I knew it stemmed from a combination of concern for Dad’s health and irritation at my wife.

“Why did Dayana blow up about the address?” she asked.

“Because it’s not right, or fair, for a woman to have to relegate the sum total of her identity to the man she marries, Ma.”

“Speak English, David<sup>81</sup>.”

“I am, Ma.” She glared at me. I shimmied deeper into the couch cushions. “Ma, why should Dayana have to be Mrs. John Hughes?”

“Because she married you.”

“Okay then. Why shouldn’t I just be Mr. Dayana Tejeda?”

“Because you’re a man.”

“That’s not a reason, ma. The courthouse made sure Dayana filled out her own information for the marriage license. I couldn’t do it for her. She’s her own person. I’ll ask again. What about being a male requires Dayana to be ‘Mrs. John Hughes’?”

Mom looked at me like I had two heads. “Because the Bible says so!”

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<sup>81</sup> David is my middle name. Mom *always* called me David, even when I decided at eleven to permanently, irrevocably, and forever be known as John, and for no other reason than I never felt much like a “David.”

“Mom, the Bible doesn’t say thou shalt become Mrs. Name of your husband. Besides, we are not Christians. Why would I follow the rules of that book?”

“But the B— are Christian,” she said. Frowning at the implication Dayana and I weren’t.

The argument went back and forth for an hour, and nothing I said could convince her that women have—or even should have—rights to their own names and identities. For her, the man should be the head of the household. I argued for change, such that people need to move past older, outmoded thinking and reason themselves into a newer, better understanding of gender politics. She appealed to tradition: “That’s how it’s always been. And how it should be.”

“So just because we did something for a long time, that makes it right?”

“Well... yes.”

“Well, Mom, we used to own slaves, women couldn’t vote, we shat in outhouses, and married off children as pre-teens, but sure, let’s go back to the way things have always been.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said. “Don’t you want your daughters to grow up with traditional values?”

“Absolutely not, Mom. Absolutely not.”

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One of the things Dayana and I both appreciate about *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is its spread of characters. Diverse personalities are represented, and, for the most part, it dodges common casting tropes. Granted, the majority of “combative” characters are male, but that is changing: the most effective fighter on the show is Agent Melinda May. She’s double the combatant Ward is, and much to my pleasure, routinely smashes Ward’s gender hang-ups. Consider: of the list of characters regular to the show, the two most devoted to combat, Ward and

May, end up in a relationship together. From the scenes shown, it's also clear that May is the one in charge of the bedroom as well, and by that I mean she's the one doing the fucking, not the other way around. Not to get all lit critty, but this seems like a subtle nod toward feminist thinking deflating the old standard. It's also entirely possible I've read too much into a comic-book themed TV show.

Our mutual attraction to the show and these characters could also be a reaction to similarities we observe in our own lives. Dayana prefers swords to bouquets any day. Case in point, she's authoring a book featuring a male protagonist who is a master swordsman. Instead of doing online research into getting medieval, as most would do, she got hands on. We purchased practice swords: full-purpose, hit-things-hard, practice weapons. We also nabbed "armor," i.e., motocross chest plates, lacrosse gloves, football helmets, and skating joint guards.

Our research grew into something of a neighborhood sensation. Picture two fully-grown adults clad in hodgepodge armor beating the stuffing out of one another in the front yard. We live adjacent to a school and had veritable crowds of children gather to watch during their walk home. For the weeks of "research" parents began to adjust their child pickup spots to the area where the "Frankenstein's knights" decided to bash each other's skulls in<sup>82</sup>.

For literature.

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<sup>82</sup> Ahem. The ridiculous amount of fun had was entirely incidental. Consequently, I learned that Dayana is a much better duelist in single sword combat, but I dominate when allowed to have a shield. This is vital information for surviving the inevitable zombie-crisis in post-apocalyptic America.

Regardless, combat is consistently on our minds and it's a normal practice to point out the toughest looking people around us and hypothesize how we'd "stop the threat." It was I Spy for martial arts nuts and went something like this:

I point at someone and say, "Dayana, big guy. Six-four, black shirt. Go."

"He favors his right knee," she announces, "Probably a stress injury, so I'd attack that first, plus he carries his wallet in his back left pocket meaning he's probably southpaw, so he'd fight right hand forward making my left kick to the liver reliable if I drew his hands to the right. You?"

"I'm thinking he's carrying concealed. The bulge at his left kidney is a giveaway, plus he's got two black clips poking out from just under his belt. That has to be an IWB or one monstrous phone case.<sup>83</sup> I agree on the southpaw, so I'd approach from the right flank, cup the mouth and nose as I kick out his right knee. When he paws at my hand, I'd go for the disarm."

"Good eye," she says. "Partner takedown?"

"Of course."

"He's taller so absent surprise, and, presuming he attacked first, I'd have you engage from the front—evenish reach and all—while I stick to the gimping strategy and continually punish that knee from the flank."

"I'd make sure to keep his attention, even attacking a little recklessly to keep him from reaching the weapon."

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<sup>83</sup> Inside the waistband holster. I omitted the word "holster" in the dialogue because it's never stated during such discourse. It's part of the dialect of, what my friends have termed, "ammosexuals." In other words, it's the label given to people like me, by people for whom combat is not the idea of a novel time. *Suum cuique pulchrum est.*

Simultaneous high-fives and a loud “Boo-Yah!”

Our hypothetical assailant hears the commotion and looks; we give ebullient waves and say hello as we pass by.

No shit, this is how we pass the time in Wal~Mart shopping lines.

But this kind of combative foreplay pays dividends. Despite being called “paranoid,”<sup>84</sup> by many friends and associates, our lifestyle has paid off on several occasions, especially once in the often cinematically captured home-invasion scenario. Most people I know dread the bump in the night. And by dread I mean, “soil-oneself scared.”

We heard that bump one night, and it wasn’t just the refrigerator’s icemaker, or cooling metal popping on the porch, or a random raccoon wanting in.<sup>85</sup> Dayana was a far more attentive sleeper than I could ever hope to be, so when she shook me awake and said, “Arm yourself,” I took it seriously. With liquid smoothness and silence, we slid from our bed, retrieved, loaded, and chambered a round in our pistols, snatched our flashlights, and stacked up. I took point then leapfrogged position through the halls, clearing the house room by room. As we made it to the main hall, we heard scuffling feet and the sound of the door banging into the wall. The intruder fled.

Looking at the situation from the would-be burglar’s perspective, hearing the telltale clack-clacks of a firearm chambering a round followed by a set of steady footfalls and lights

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<sup>84</sup> I prefer “prepared.”

<sup>85</sup> Our house has regular incursions of the fuzzy little bandits. I think it’s our Mediterranean diet, but they seem to be chomping at the bit to rush in and pillage the kitchen garbage. We’re animal lovers too and have lost many jackets to their claws as we tackle, wrap-up, and eject them garment and all.

closing in must have been pants-shittingly terrifying. Most criminals are cowards by nature, and I hope he took the message to heart and recants his ways.

Un-fucking-likely, but if anything, the burglar will think twice about future attempts on my home.

We didn't bother the police. They'd document the incident, pull a shitty fingerprint or two that wouldn't lead anywhere off the doorknob, and recommend an alarm system. We just secured and double-checked all of the doors and went back to bed.

We occasionally talked about it among friends, and when we did, someone would inevitably ask, "But weren't you scared?"

"Motivated by purposeful fear" is my normal response, Dayana's is usually about the benefits of fear and anger and the fight or flight response with regards to something evolutionary and yada yada (I've come to understand that's what happens when you ask an anthropologist about such things). Then the dumbest thing of all usually follows. Buddy-Doe-Eyes will say something to the effect of "Well I couldn't have done that. I would have hidden in my room."

I don't have to say what I want to because Dayana beats me to it. Every time.

"Then you'll be raped or dead, but, at least, it will happen in the comforts of your own home."

In these moments, I smile, glad I did not partner with one of "them."

## CHAPTER SEVEN: TRIGGERS

We approach the school with weapons drawn, three officers and myself back to back in a diamond, moving and scanning. It is December 2006, and the sun sits scant degrees above the horizon with its rays illuminating the frozen dew crunching beneath our boots.

“Central, 3-Charlie-44 and others 10-97,” I call into my shoulder mic.

“Copy, 3-Charlie-44,” Central acknowledges before demanding radio silence on the channel.

In unspoken unison, the four of us drop a hand to our belt radios and lower the volume to its minimum. Our weapons remain trained ahead, our forward pace steady, our individual gazes each locked into one 90-degree wedge. One officer guards the front, two the sides, one the rear. We have become a single organism: a team on the hunt for an active shooter.

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Years later, the view from beyond my teacher’s desk consisted of two rows of concavely situated student desks—double parenthesis—each filled with a teenager diligently attempting to dodge work. Most had ill-concealed cell phones in laps, pockets, behind books, or even, for the bold, in plain view on their desks. It was a common scene in most high schools and a predictably maddening one for teachers.

I’d learned to give the faculty lounge a wide berth, much in the same way as the police department’s, if only as a prophylactic against the ossification of another form of jadedness. Teacher’s lounges were bastions of bellyaching and mean-spirited bitching about student behavior. The staff said, in jocular tones, that they hated selected students with the sentiment being something to the effect of: “If they were on fire and I had a glass of water, I’d drink it.”



Some worked up enough quixotic optimism to seek an ultimately futile meeting with a child's parents<sup>86</sup>. Some resorted to imagined violence against their worst offenders.

Such imaginings, however, could take a dark turn<sup>87</sup>.

I've killed each of my students a dozen times. Well, not each. The weak ones, tiny and effete, weren't considered: they could be struck down with minimal effort. The powerful, the athletic, the large, the borderline (often actually) mentally ill got maimed every day.

A single student, in particular, had been subjected to enough imagined slayings to fill the body count of a small war. One day, as cocksure as ever, he sauntered into my room wearing his typical lopsided smirk. He kept his tight curls finely picked and his athletic accomplishments had built a body of taut muscle draped with well-sunned skin.

He respected me, though. Why I never learned. Maybe in some trite, "Lifetime Original Movie" fashion I filled a gap in his life. He's vented about parental abuse, long since halted by state intervention; he's cried on my shoulder when subjected to female rejection; he's confided in

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<sup>86</sup> Most parents seem to be incapable of instilling discipline in their children. Teens will spend more than half their time attempting to use their phones in class then wonder why they failed. Mom and Dad will, instead of blaming their little shit-head for not paying attention, demand to know why I didn't correct the misconduct. At some point, the onus for behavior shifted from the individual and landed squarely with others. No one gave me this memo.

<sup>87</sup> There's this idea in the public consciousness that teachers are all delicate, prim, proper human beings when reality is quite the opposite. Teachers' lounges are full of bawdy humor, inappropriate sexual comments, spoken wishes for certain persons—administration and student alike—to take a long fall off a high bridge...essentially, it's the same atmosphere as any break room. No one expects to hear their aged, junior-grade math teacher discussing the "amazing increase of sensation" she got from using the Durex vibrating cock ring, but they do, and it's made infinitely worse by the accompanying pantomime and sound effects.

me his faults and fears, and I listened and advised. I treated him fairly and, one could even say, kindly.

Undeservedly.

He was a threat to others: a quick-tempered bully with a chip on his shoulder—a hoodlum which needed a single trigger, and I had his mean-spirited number since the moment he approached me on the first day of class to ask about dating<sup>88</sup>.

As he walked in, I took note of a curious lump in his shirt at the hip: clearly the printing of a poorly concealed firearm. He walked up to a student sitting mere feet from me, and within moments of jabbing his finger angrily at her—she had rejected him—he reached for the weapon.

As he brought the pistol up, I seized it and spiked him in the face with it. His grip weakened as his septum cracked, and I tore the pistol away, punching his throat with my free hand. I felt a subtle pop as his hyoid broke. He collapsed forward, grasping his throat as I hammered the gun onto the base of his skull, crushing the life from him<sup>89</sup>—

“Mr. Hughes?”

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<sup>88</sup> Students presume their teachers want to talk about these things. I have no idea why, but, out of the blue, this trouble kid starts asking me how, in utterly fucked-over English, he could convince a girl to “smash.” I figured out what his unlettered, slang-suffused vernacular meant rather quickly and promptly let him know any woman worth having would appreciate a good brain.

He settled for the women that, by my definition, weren’t worth having. This form of settlement likely led to his own genesis and is the centerpiece of my “stupidity is aggressively replicative” theory.

<sup>89</sup> Is such a hammering blow fatal? Yes, potentially. At the very least the victim would be momentarily insensate, and open to further attack.

“Yes, Keith,” I said, standing and shaking his right hand. Waistband looked clear—no printing, and he had given me his dominant hand willingly. His other held the shoulder strap of his backpack, itself half-open, spilling over with crumpled loose leaves.

“You have a minute before class to help me with yesterday’s notes?”

I nodded and directed him to put his backpack in the rear of the room. On his way to the bag shelf, he called over his shoulder about the girl he was dating. He voiced concerns over being five dates in with no “play.”

I dropped the pen I had clenched icepick fashion in my left hand onto my desk and sat down. Waves of relief washed over my left forearm as I massaged out the tension, simultaneously thankful I retained a subconscious muscle memory geared toward self-defense yet was disgusted that I so inappropriately indulged, or rather, teetered, on the cusp of bringing these mental flights into fruition. Instead, I breathed deep and focused on the issue at hand.

“She’s not ready. She doesn’t have to be, Keith,” I said, “that’s her choice.”

“Man, that’s fu—”

I cut him off with a look.

“—frigging lame.”

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Late in April of 2004, the crisp air of winter gives way to a cold, clammy wave of humidity, and it is my first night of field training with what has to be the harshest FTO in the history of Daytona Beach PD: Lyons. His head stands hardly five feet above ground, but his shoulders are as broad as he is tall. The moonlight bounces off his polished scalp with candle-

like brightness as his right elbow maintains a permanent square angle to support the makeshift spittoon<sup>90</sup> he carries.

“Morning, fucker. Get in the fuckin’ car. Passenger-fucking-side,” he says.<sup>91</sup>

I slide in as if the seat is coated with glass. The last thing I want is to set off the little time bomb of vocabulary-deficient hate and vitriol. The first hour crawls by without a word, just a pervasive, penetrating silence. He drove, dip-cup in one hand, steering wheel in the other, for an apparent eternity. I do my best to learn the layout of the city as he drives, but the oppressive aura of disdain radiating from Lyons makes all concentration, at best, fleeting.

“You’re a young fucker. The fuck you play in school?” he says at last. His question is more declarative than interrogative. He “knows” I participated in sports, and, thankfully, I don’t have to disappoint him.

“I wrestled, sir.”

“Did you now? And fuck-off with that *sir* shit. You’re a fuckin’ cop. I’m a fuckin’ cop, right?” he says, using his sloshing dip cup as a pointing device.

“Uhh...yes?”

“The fuck you mean ‘yes?’ Say it with your stones. I’m a fuckin’ cop!”

“I’m a fucking...”

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<sup>90</sup> In addition to all the positive things Lyons taught me, the creation of the “standard issue chaw cup” wasn’t among my wife’s favorites. It is a Styrofoam coffee cup stuffed with one or two loosely packed paper towels in order to minimize spittle spillage. Later, I’d move up to the Pepsi bottle, similarly stuffed, but sealable.

<sup>91</sup> He really talked like this. He claimed inculcation from the military, and back then I bought it; having later undergone a soldier’s training, I called ``shenanigans. The dumb fucker simply had a tragically reductive vocabulary.

“Fuckin’!”

“Fucking cop!”

Lyons slides his Styrofoam spittoon in the cup holder then claps a brick-like palm on my shoulder. It feels like Marvel Comics’ the fucking Thing giving an attaboy.

“Yes, you are. Now, first rule. *They*,” he pauses, pointing out the windshield with a sweeping gesture, “fucking aren’t.”

I furrow my brow and squint. For the very first , he softens his gravelly voice then tells me, in a fatherly tone: “It’s us versus them, John. The few of us, all of *them*.”

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I don’t want to pretend I’m an outlier. Many police officers and soldiers demonstrate clear thoughts, or, at least, subconscious behaviors reflective of their training. Cops, even when off-duty, don’t knock on a door while standing directly in front of it; they sit at the backs of restaurants and face the entry in order to have clear access to the exit; they stand with their weapon-side hip bladed away from people while talking—even when unarmed; this is all normal and even, truthfully, safe behavior for anyone. What I never know, and few will speak about, is if their tactical thought stops there. Does it stay in the realm of safety or does it go on the offensive? Ever since police training, I have grown well aware that what happens inside my head is stone-cold fucking nuts, and I fear my mind is uncommonly warped.

It’s not just my students, though. I have a neutralization strategy for every person I meet.

The trucker at the bar, burly, booted, and thickly built.

The frat boy with a pocket-clip knife improperly fixed for a fast-draw.

Every passing stranger that has pissed next to me at a urinal...

Everyone gets a moment of my time. Everyone gets analyzed. Everyone gets nestled somewhere within the shallow gulf separating thoughts and actions.

Everyone.

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We clear the school's main gate as we move into the courtyard. It's quiet. Squirrels, birds—nothing moves as if in anticipation of what is to come. It's at this moment I consider those next to me. I'm on "left-side" duty of the diamond, meaning my eyes never leave the 90-degree wedge to the left of our group. If the team takes fire, we keep formation while the officer(s) with visual contact neutralize the threat.

This set-up is doomed to fail. It's predicated on the competence of each member. I am taught to ignore the gunfire coming from by flank because the officer facing it should be able to neutralize it, but I don't trust *anyone* to that degree, and, with this bunch, I feel particularly justified in my concern; nevertheless, this is how we are trained and this is how we move.

The officer on point, Carmen<sup>92</sup>, has failed to pass any range qualification on the first attempt for the last twelve years. She couldn't shoot her own foot with a shotgun much less use her pistol to hit a moving human being.

Johnny, a rheumatic sexagenarian, guards the right. His ability to sprint in and out of cover is, to put it mildly, suspect. At least he hits what he shoots at.

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<sup>92</sup> We qualify by shooting a 40 round course of fire. I always shot in the high 30s, averaging a score of 37-39. I'm not Billy the Kid, but I reliably hit my target. Carmen, on a good day, pulled 18-23s, and had to spend all day practicing to pull it above a 32 (80% accuracy, and the mandatory minimum), only to have her skill degrade a week later.

Flip, an alcoholic with a manual steadiness measurable on the Richter scale, has rear guard

I'm confident in my own abilities—I perform on or above standards during all training modules, but am now forced by fate to all but accept doom at the hands of these incomp. I decide to keep an eye on the forward wedge anyways. Halfway across the parking lot, gunfire sounds from beyond the grassy field beyond the front office building.

All drop to a crouched stance and abandon the diamond formation in a mad dash to a nearest stucco and brick corner. We end up single file with our backs to the wall. I'm third in the stack—Flip is second, Carmen is fourth—while our geriatric comrade leans in and out of cover, firing back. I can't safely aid him from this position.

“Hey, Johnny, eyes on?” I ask.

“Brick, wall. Hundred feet ahead.”

I peel off to circle around our cover building, intent on catching the shooter in crossfire. Flip grabs my shoulder. “The fuck you going, Hughes?”

The beery reek of his breath half gags me and I'm simultaneously pissed that he has his job, yet endeared at his concern. I shrug free. “I'm going to try to kill this fucker.” I roll my shoulder free and gesture. “Help Johnny keep him pinned.”

Johnny bangs out half a dozen more rounds.

Flip tells Carmen to follow me, but I'm already moving. She keeps close judging from the sounds of her footsteps. The buildings provide enough cover for us to move, undetected, well beyond the shooter and approach at a slight flank.

With eyes on my mark, I wait for a pause in Johnny's suppressive fire. The shooter pops up during Johnny's lull, as expected. My target is oblivious to my presence with his attention fully engaged on Johnny and Flip, so Carmen and I storm the shooter's position dumping several rounds into his back from thirty feet away. He drops like a stone and my momentum carries me forward to the point where I'm practically on top of him with my Glock aimed at the back of his prone head. He doesn't move. Carmen slips up from behind me, kicking his pistol aside before she kneels and cuffs him.

Carmen screams along with the cadence of a second shooter's automatic weapons fire. I dive for cover on the other side of the wall the downed shooter hid behind mere moments prior, and, mid-jump, catch sight of a rifle-wielding man leaning out from the corner of the building some thirty yards ahead. Having been in motion toward us when Carmen went down, Flip and Johnny scramble for cover at nearby buildings.

I look alternatively at Johnny and Flip. Johnny changes magazines. Flip taps his mag and throws me an "ok."

I yell for Carmen but get little more than a groan under the drowning thunder of an assault weapon.

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My students were aware of my police background and constantly asked questions about law enforcement. I typically didn't mind the curiosity, but, during the opening quarter of my second year teaching junior English, many students took a keen interest in the problem of school shootings and in the commonly proposed "solutions" to the same—particularly the Republican solutions.



“Mr. Hughes, you should have a weapon on you at all times, don’t you think?”

“Well...” and thus began a metric shit-ton of equivocation.

Teaching must necessarily be apolitical, particularly if the goal was to teach critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, I struggled to keep my politics free of my instruction and had to walk on proverbial eggshells while explaining my position. I dodged such topics wherever possible, but not on the topic of firearms. More weapons in schools didn’t make them any safer.

My students were shocked to hear this from me, but they didn’t consider all the factors. I won’t bore with excessive statistics, but well-trained combatants, soldiers, guards, etc., frequently panicked during combat and shot with incredible inaccuracy. Case in point: of all NYPD shootings from ’90–’00, on the best year, cops shot with twenty-five percent accuracy. My dept. issue Glock 17 carried eighteen rounds fully loaded, meaning only four or five rounds would ever hit their target<sup>93</sup>.

I can’t think of any other assessment of that data save that it is abysmal.

I explained how having 170+ faculty blasting willy-nilly at any and every perceived threat would accomplish nothing but horrors, namely:

- One—errantly strike children,
- Two—inform an active shooter, who’s already willing to die, where people are,
- Three—freak the fucking cops out when they arrive and are attempting to figure out which Yosemite Sam is the “active” shooter,

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<sup>93</sup> I like to think I am a badass, as most cops and soldiers do. We somewhat have to, because accepting that we aren’t would render us shaky-kneed husks in the face of combat. Sometimes, ignorance is a combat multiplier.

- Three (b)—lead to the deaths of “good guys” as cops can’t tell the armed defender(s) apart from the “active” shooter(s).

Basically, such polices would be more detrimental than beneficial, and, at this point in the discussion with my students, I will mention a few teachers (by name) who have no business holding a Nerf gun, much less a firearm, and receive agreeing nods.

That was the politically proper thing to say, and what I delivered to the impressionable, witless sponges seated parabolically<sup>94</sup> in front of me.

What I felt, however, was different.

I, and the other former officers and soldiers should be lethally equipped. We could engage with an active shooter almost instantly. We could effectively ensure the safety of students and staff while still making tactical decisions—informed, effective, and practiced decisions. The liberal argument was such that armed teachers made things worse; however, having a shooter waltzing about uncontested until officers arrived was already about the worst possible scenario. Fuck accuracy—wouldn’t a 25% chance of stopping guaranteed kills be worth the risk? The conservative argument placed me at the forefront of my students’ protection and though I’m liberal in every other regard, I agreed with this one conservative position: a fighting chance is better than lying down and taking it.

I thought this, then stepped back and reflected on the fact that I hadn’t yet moved out a militarized/aggressive mindset; it bothered me that I wouldn’t suffer a moment’s hesitation

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<sup>94</sup> I’m the only teacher on campus that has the classroom desks arranged in two open parentheses facing me. I like to call it my “stage.”

before harming another, or putting a bystander at risk for the mere the potential of neutralizing an enemy.

I was unsure how to feel about this aspect of myself.

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“He’s peeling back!” Johnny calls out from behind cover.

Carmen pushes up to all fours and growls, “Fucking get him!” as she crawls to the other side of the brick wall, collapsing with her back pressed into it. Her face is a mix of agitation and grief.

Flip and I rush out of cover with Johnny in tow all firing steadily in two-second intervals. The hail of bullets forces the rifleman to duck down into a long, open hallway. We clear the gap, cutting the corner carefully to avoid ambush and steadily walk, weapons trained downrange. My allies each have their zone as we advance in a tight wedge.

Flip covers right; Johnny, center; myself, left—again.

Confidence soars: Carmen is not permanently down, the shooter is pinned, and adrenaline pushes us forward. To my happy surprise, this team is actually on the ball.

Then the proverbial shit hits the fan: a three-round burst blasts from the right, and I catch Flip fall in my peripheral. Johnny freezes in the open, and I see the rifleman leaned around a corner some fifty feet away. Johnny breaks his panic and turns in to a blur of backward motion. The retreat leaves me exposed. I curse, more at Johnny and Flip than the shooter, and charge headlong, firing wildly as I close the distance.

The shooter startles for a sliver of a moment then empties his rifle.

I empty my magazine into him then ditch the weapon and spear tackling the shooter. We transform into a tangle of flailing bodies wrestling for dominance. The area around my bladder throbs but I ignore it through gritted teeth and pin my foe to his back with my knee. I've locked my grip onto his rifle, intent on making it my own. He clings on, but my knee digs into his sternum and after slamming the weapon's hand guard into his neck several times, I tear it free. Maintaining the pin, I haul the rifle overhead as my stomach burns, transforming battle focus into a blind rage. Another voice, amplified by megaphone, calls out before I smash the stock into the shooter's masked face: "Halt! Cease exercise! This drill is over."

I lower the rifle, breathing heavily.

The rifleman struggles to remove the knee from his chest before stripping off his training helmet and giving me the stink eye. "Th' fuck offa me!"

I clamber back to two feet, wobbling. The pain in my bladder is constant and I strip my headgear off to better inspect. The thick plastic visor partially fogged over, preventing me from seeing the neon-pink, asterisk-shaped paint splatter scant inches above my pecker<sup>95</sup>.

The rifleman stands. I vaguely recognize him from another shift, but not so well I can place a name to the face. He bows up to me. His nose hovers inches from mine. He isn't thinking clearly: I nearly beat him senseless with his own rifle, and now he's challenging me.

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<sup>95</sup> We trained with gunpowder rounds called Simunitions. They're marketed as safe and pain free—a complete crock of shit. The impact is allegedly felt but not "painful" with proper gear. Shitty, second-hand helmets and neck guards were the only protective gear we used and I was struck directly in the bladder with a higher-velocity rifle round with only a thin layer of polyester to blunt the impact.

The range master separates us. He points his megaphone at the other guy and his clipboard at me, and he's pissed—mostly at me. “Why didn't you drop when shot as per simulation rules?”

I justify my actions by explaining I'd only drop from lethal shots, and try to flip the argument by bitching about my teammates' incompetence.

“Were they?”

“Flip didn't notice his target and Johnny retreated instead of advancing on the hostile.”

“This round would have likely killed you,” he said, pointing at my crotch and the sim-round's leavings. He made marks on the clipboard

“Immediately?”

“We'll no, but—”

“Then he'd go with me. Mission completed<sup>96</sup>.”

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That first night out, Lyons, pulls a van over in the middle of 41 zone—the shitty end of the mainland's north-side—and has the driver at the hood of his patrol car. I stand by, observing. Soaking it all in.

I notice absolutely nothing strange about this guy. Baggy pants, medium build, brown hair, lightish eyes. Pretty basic.

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<sup>96</sup> Whether or not I could have tackled and wrested a weapon from someone while gut shot is another matter. I like to think I could, but then again, I'd like to think I wouldn't get shot in the first place. This is another time, just like with the issue of accuracy, that imagination and belief is infinitely better for courage than reality.

Lyons needs to step away and run his ID, so he calls me over to search and watch the guy. I waddle over to do as I'm told.

"Put your hands on the car, spread your feet and walk back so you're leaning on your outstretched hands," I command. He complies and I search him. Textbook performance but all I find is a pack of cigarettes. He'd already handed Lyons his ID. His Native Spirit smokes are on the hood of the squad car, along with his Bic, so I resume the watching.

The van driver seems a little warm, despite the cool evening; sweat streams down his forehead and his cheeks are flush. He is a little antsy too, looking to and fro, shifting his weight from heel to toe, left to right, but it makes sense when cops are on scene. I rationalize it as the common anxiety people feel when cops are around<sup>97</sup>.

The guy asks if I can pass his smokes to him. Being polite, I reach out to grab the pack when my vision explodes into sparks and stipples of color. Lyons yells, but I can't discern anything concrete over the ringing and throbbing in my head. Flailing, my hand lands on tire tread and I realize I'm flat on my ass.

By the time my vision clears up and I return to my feet, Lyons had managed to wrestle my pugilist into handcuffs and stands before me holding the prisoner's behind the back restraints.

"You okay, Hughes?"

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<sup>97</sup> Lyons knew what all this movement was, but I was too green. This guy was about to rabbit. The sweating was nerves, not out of general cop anxiety, but because of an outstanding warrant; the shifting was a subtle hint at his body's readiness to flee; and his looking around was to spot the best avenue of escape. I should have noticed all that just like I should have noticed his clenching fists forecasting the punch.

His words barely register as I step forward and uppercut the prisoner in the stomach. He doubles over, coughing.

Lyons laughs approvingly, like a father chuckling for joy at the sight of his boy smacking a homer in Little League.

The prisoner stands, smirking with defiance and I loose another punch into the pit of his stomach. This one lands harder than before and he drops to both knees spraying the ground with vomit. He shudders and wheezes between heaves, but I don't care.

I can't<sup>98</sup>.

I snatch a handful of his hair, twisting his head so he's looking up at me from his knees. Lyons seizes my raised fist before I uncork another blow.

Lyons shakes his head.

The prisoner has enough.

Lyons unhands my wrist the same moment I release my grip.

"He's fucked. Let him be," Lyons says. "Now, do you see what I Fuckin' mean? Us and them? Are you ever going to trust them again? You going to drop your fuckin' guard again, turn your back and service these shits by handing them smokes and nursing their bullshit wounds?"

I shake my head.

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<sup>98</sup> I'm not only frightened that I entertain the idea of violence on a regular basis, but also that I have no in-the-moment concerns about its application. This isn't unique to myself either, and I have watched several cops swing on with glee in their eyes. I wonder, sometimes, if I have ever worn a sadistic smile in times of violence. The answer worries me.

Lyons escorts the prisoner to the patrol car's rear doors while explaining the concept of creative report writing. None of this business ever happened, he explains. The guy knew he had a warrant and got so nervously sick he threw up. My bruise? I hit my head on a rail earlier in the shift. I "sucked it up like a man and never reported it." Shit happens.

As the prisoner goes to sit, Lyons shoves his head into the doorframe letting out an "Oops." After the whack, he shoves the rest of him in and slams the door.

"Such a fucking klutz, that guy. Someone like that must trip all over the fucking place. No wonder his stomach hurts," Lyons says with a wink.

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At the end of my workdays, I like to sit at my desk and take care of the business my students prevented me from finishing. It's typically the same shit: the following day's lesson plan; tardy referrals; notes in the GradeBook about which student fucked off all class (this portion took a while); which student spent all class on the phone; which student is allowed by the state to essentially do nothing and pass because they qualify for the overused and overblown umbrella of "exceptional student education" services; and which student is a ball of festering ass destined to pollute the gene pool and to foment further fuckery in the world.

But I'm not bitter.

I'm realistic.

Oftentimes, I linger so long the after-hours custodian<sup>99</sup> comes by and cleans while I finish. He's a nice guy. Immigrant. Portuguese. Speaks all of three English words. Works hard.

"Roberto, thank you for cleaning."

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<sup>99</sup> Don't call them janitors. They loose their damned minds.



“Thank you, sir.”

“Roberto, how was your day?”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Roberto, I killed the Pope with a hippopotamus’ cock while masturbating to Disney princess monologues.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Great guy. He always listens to what I have to say.

He came in today, and I attempted more futile conversation. Nonetheless, I learned a little more about him from watching: Married—wears the ring—and for a long time. He’s darkly tanned except for where the band sits; it’s easily several shades lighter. He’s right-handed based on the wallet in the same back pocket. He also uses his right hand at the top of the mop reinforcing the observation about his handedness. He’s hurt his left knee at some point as hinted by the limp, likely from soccer, or some other sport as indicated by his older yet athletic frame; additionally, he’s suffering from the early stages of arthritis in his hands based on periodic massages he pauses to administer to his knuckles and fingers.

Superficial shit. I’d like to deduce a little more about him, but the Sherlock nonsense is just for the movies. Watching him actually grants very little.

As I left, I wondered how he’d attack were he to snap. I tossed my backpack on, eyeballing him.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. I smiled back and chuckled, walking past him, exposing my back to someone who is, essentially, a complete stranger. One I’m completely alone with.

I’m getting better, I think.

After all these years, my trust of them slowly returns. Besides, if the shifty fucker makes a move, I'm going for the bum knee.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: ZOMBIE

I've been thinking a lot about the zombie apocalypse. Not that there is ever likely to be one, but I work in public education, so it is natural to consider the metaphorical connection zombies bear to my "clientele." My students are, for the most part, mindless, slovenly beings, with a singular desire to feed. Correction: the drive to feed is singular. The hunger that growls for satisfaction is trifurcated.

Aggression, food, and sex.

Or as I've come to know it, slightly reordered: fighting, feeding, and fucking.

Then again, aren't these the things that drive everyone? The rock bottom essentials, according to Maslow, are nearly satisfied by my rather curt reimagining above; all that is missing is, in the same vulgar tone, drinking, shitting, sleeping, breathing, and staying warm. I grant that some people will find the aggression/fighting element of the hunger arguable, but not by anyone who's experienced people en masse. I mean thoroughly experienced people en masse—I'm talking about a Discovery Channel "Crikey there's a band of wild humans engaged mating rituals" level of *au naturel*, en masse unbridled human animal. It's more noticeable in my students; perhaps, because they haven't had enough practice satisfying their base impulses in societally approved ways. To be honest, I haven't mastered such methods either.

People tend to feed aggressive expression in many ways, and the marker of an allegedly more mature mind is often the manner which this particular aspect of the hunger is sated: dancing, extreme sports, weightlifting, fencing, boxing, are all viewed as civilized methods of expressing or relieving aggression. Despite the general understanding that people should rise

above the desire to harm others, not all do because not all can. Sometimes, controlled satisfaction of the hunger doesn't cut it.

Some people can't get by on mere sex; they must fuck.

Some people can't simply enjoy food; they must feed.

Some people can't alternatively sate aggression; they must relish the fighting.

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When first offered a job as a high school teacher, it was for journalism. Not being in a position to bargain<sup>100</sup>, I took the job. Journalism is, oddly, an elective course without a grade-level or English proficiency requirement. I had freshmen sitting next to seniors, as well as fluent native English speakers adjacent young people incapable of coherently requesting to use the restroom. Journalism is a specialized form of English, yet I had class period after class period of students who didn't understand the use of a period and/or considered capitalization conventions entirely subjective and proceeded to "artfully" apply upper-case letters in the Jackson Pollock style. Maddening was but one in a long string of adjectives describing my mental state. Add these frustrations to the fact that I replaced another teacher eight weeks in and my stress level teetered just below "fuck-it-all" on a daily basis.

Luckily for me, another teacher's "fuck-it-all" meter had hit tilt long ago. Mrs. Johnson was on her way out, intent on returning to the "calmer waters" (her words) of the real estate industry, and, if I weren't in the process of drowning in my own classroom, might have noticed

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<sup>100</sup> I subbed for four years before getting the offer. Teaching full-time, or, being a "real teacher" (as it is often demarcated) had been a personal goal for the duration of my substitute service. Besides, putting food on my table—good, non-EBT food—wiggled its way to the forefront of my priorities.

she planned to leave before the second quarter ended. She referred to her kids as “those witless cunts,” and wasn’t being sardonically facetious.<sup>101</sup> With little ceremony and no announcement, she emptied her classroom over a weekend.

This left a vacancy in the senior English department. I applied, but since I’d been practically teaching since breakfast, didn’t put much stock in getting the position over more experienced applicants.

And I was right. I didn’t get it.

Johnson abandoned—there really is no other word for it—a “college readiness” classroom which meant her job had been to prepare students for college (this is one of the rare instances in public education where something is exactly what it sounds like). The powers that be bumped a junior grade teacher into Johnson’s old classroom and offered me the now-vacant junior English position.

Goodbye journalism<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Most teachers, at least those in my circle, speak with a level of uncomfortable, politically incorrect honesty about students, but this diminution is almost always out of frustration. Our kids generally aren’t truly stupid; they’re lazy. Mrs. Johnson erected no such veneer in her speech. For her, these kids were died-in-the-wool assholes. She had to leave. Not so much for her sake, but for her students.

<sup>102</sup> Actually, this was one of those serendipitous moments that worked out brilliantly for all involved. The English teacher I replaced, Blanco, happened to be married to a journalist. An underemployed journalist—which is the norm now, sadly—so, voila! He took the Journalism job and shit fell perfectly into place. Too perfectly, and it left me uncomfortably concerned that some hitch lurked about the metaphorical corner.

“Rule number one for surviving *Zombieland*: cardio. When the virus struck, for obvious reasons, the first ones to go were the fatties,” Jessie Eisenberg’s character, Columbus, informs us in the opening scene of *Zombieland*. On screen, a portly fellow, obviously in distress, runs screaming as a decrepit, albeit adroit, zombie pursues, hot on his heels in the middle of a football field. Tubby gets tackled, and his neck is mercilessly bitten open as the zombie gorges on ribbons of flesh snarling savagely the whole time.

My wife and I laughed out loud in the theater.

So did the fat couple to my right and the elderly couple below.

The natural question: “What the actual fuck is wrong with us?” We, mind you, the whole theater, found the murder and consumption of another human being funny.

Fucking hilarious, actually.

The humor stems, I think, from a cold and bitter truth. One that appeals to a darker humor, which, I note, is enjoying a meteoric rise in popularity.

Culture is no longer governed by the principle of “survival of the fittest.” Human intellect subverted the rules of nature such that those poorly fit for survival could lean on the greater intellect, skills, or pity of other humans to thrive or abrogate genetic disadvantage(s). I’m oversimplifying the shit out of this, but evolution works on a few basic driving forces, one of them being “fitness.” This isn’t a literal fitness, the lack of which kills our portly friend in the above scene, but refers to one’s ability to cope with the obstacles of the environment. In the case of the fat guy, the fitness he needs is a literal fitness and the lack of such leads to his death.

Bring this back from the film and apply to modern life. Add zombies. What happens?

Fatties die. They would represent the slowest, most non-combat fit of the population and in the case of an aggressively violent, invading force—like zombies—would easily be the first to go.

The prevalence of the bespectacled further demonstrates the inversion of the “fittest” concept. Before the invention of glasses, the visually challenged shouldered a tremendous burden to their survival, much less the passing on of genes. This holds especially true for very early humans. I think of my vision before modern correction and consider: were I to be on the African savannah, spear in hand, facing down a charging lion, I would most assuredly be lunch. My myopia was such that I couldn’t distinguish the differences between objects moving about in areas of relatively similar color.

Glasses removed this disadvantage and the numbers of people with vision disorders surviving long enough to pass on their blind-ass genes climbed. Sixty percent of the world needs some form of vision correction.

A dash of cynicism chased by a modicum of thought reveals many more evolutionary “disadvantages” thriving into the modern day. Society has annulled the limiting factors evolution formerly imposed. People with all manner of undesirable traits can, on the backs of others, make it to breeding age and “successfully” reproduce, spreading and magnifying the frequency of undesirable qualities nature formerly kept in check. This is just the tip of the iceberg, though. The zombie mythos can easily be read as a societal longing for Darwinism. It’s a frightening implication. Those that find appeal in such entertainment subconsciously, I suspect, do so believing they’d be one of the few fit for survival.

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A side effect of the classroom shuffle meant I missed a normal year of teaching English. Specifically, I lost a half-year's worth of junior curriculum and a lot of valuable "feeling out" time that first-years normally get. This included half of my "grace period." New teachers are expected to dork up (that's what new professionals do) considering most fuck-ups are minor, forgiven, and corrected. Being denied that half-a-year of padding made year two feel like tightrope walking while holding cats.

Half blind and highly frustrated, I waded into the second year with no small measure of trepidation. The absence of experience was murder to my confidence. Teaching is a cumulative practice of finding and retaining what works while excising what doesn't; still, I had my fellow teachers to lean on.

Except when I didn't.

The teachers in my department were great, and we jived in many ways, but, unlike other PLCs<sup>103</sup>, ours didn't sync up with each other. Most of the time we did our own thing, which works for a team of seasoned teachers, but my newb-self needed to piggyback off of them. I had no problems admitting greenness (I still am), and, more often than not, I created lesson plans aimed at intellects and abilities beyond my students' reach. This led me to erroneously believe they were far dimmer than they actually were.

In terms of my team, the teaching fates gifted me the following colleagues:

1.) The Broman: the teacher closest to my age and the only other sausage in a hallway of clams. That description of the hallway's gender makeup was his. He never escaped the collegiate

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<sup>103</sup> Professional Learning Community: teacher-speak for the cadre responsible for a subject—or closely related subject—at a specific grade level. Mine is junior English.



bachelor mindset, has tremendous commitment issues, and hero-worships a distorted image of his father. He's a paradox: the team-oriented loner. The cat. He loves to help, but at the last minute and on his own terms.

2.) The Cat Lady: a divorcee out of touch with young people in every conceivable way. Despite her kind demeanor, competence, and genuine care for her students' success and wellbeing, she just couldn't relate. She also harped on dress code, something I give no shits about (likely due to my generation), which was a losing battle.

3.) The Stereotypical Bostonian Expat: She's proudly Bostonian, will inform anyone of her tendency to cut others off or talk over them and then immediately proceed to cut off or talk over them. Her kids are the honors bunch, and all her PLC contributions are geared toward students with a modicum of responsibility and IQs at, or above, normal. To put it as my Southern family would: those ain't my students. This made the majority of meetings futile exercises in listening to how best teach honors kids. The shittiest part is that her ideas are truly good—if one teaches AP or college coursework.

So, in terms of newbie teacher support, I'm on my own an uncomfortably large portion of the time. That isn't to say I'm literally alone. I'm given help, but it's not what I need and I'm too proud to confess this to my colleagues. I'm sure they'd give me the extra help if I'd just ask.

Pride is a bitch.

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In an episode of television's *The Walking Dead*, Michonne finds herself surrounded by a horde of shambling “walkers.”<sup>104</sup> She tries to hide, to blend in, but, after a brief flashback, something in her snaps and she draws her sword, dispatching dozens with deft strokes. Bodies cascade around her, raining heads bisected or cleaved cleanly from shoulders. She pauses for a second after each decapitating arc like a still frame from an old samurai film. Her movements—the violence—is artful, and she looks serene.

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Despite going it on my own, I had very few discipline issues my first year, less in the second. By “discipline issues,” I mean actual classroom disruptions and outbursts. I don't punish my kids for foul language, cell phones, or what not, not like the other teachers do.

Except tardies, because show up on time or fuck you<sup>105</sup>.

Each year we spend the first week doing ice-breakers and getting-to-know-you exercises. During this week, I make it known that in order to use swear words effectively one must be intelligent. They must come across artful, and young people don't yet have that ability. So, for the language portion, I make them a deal. If their uses of vulgarities are artful, poignant, non-derogatory, infrequent, and generally appropriate given the subject matter, I won't refer them to

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<sup>104</sup> All zombies are different, and in “The Walking Dead” they are decaying, ponderous but, absent brain destruction, immortal. They are also called any and everything but “zombies.”

<sup>105</sup> Seriously. Almost none of them have actual issues keeping them from class. No adult responsibilities, no familial obligations, no medical problems. The only one—one!—that does made it known early in the year. At this point, I'm agitated because each late little shit means I have to repeat all the missed instructions.

Building 3—the discipline office. This year, I’ve only written one referral for foul language, and the class, as a whole, agreed that particular instance wasn’t artful.

I also cover my background as a cop and a soldier. Swearing and these professions go hand-in-hand. I tell them stories about difficult arrests, gunfights, training, stupidity, and what it means to be an officer. I hold little back and carefully embellish these accounts. I have a dual purpose:

1: I want them to develop a healthy understanding of how law enforcement works and teach them how to safely handle an encounter with the police.

2: I want to make sure they are scared shitless of me.

It may sound counterintuitive, but the more afraid of me they are, the more they respect me.

Just like fire drills and tornado drills, the school has active-shooter drills within the first week of class. Part of the curriculum, sadly, is how to survive an armed lunatic on campus. For active shooter drills, I have my students group into the far back corner of the room and I tell them these precise words: “shut up or die.” I turn the lights off and then stand to the side of the door so I’m not in front of the window. We’re on the second floor, so my children know not to worry about the windows in the back of the room. They aren’t a practical method of shooter entry, so ducking in the far corner places them out of sight and the line of fire.

Once we get the all clear over the PA, students return to their seats. Then the hands pop up.

“Mr. Hughes, why were you by the door?”

“Yeah, when we did the drill in Mr./Mrs. So-and-so’s class, they hid in the back with us.”

“I stand by the door,” I say, as I write the day’s learning goal on the board, “because I am going to mercilessly murder anyone that makes it through.”

I look over my shoulder at them as stoic as possible and allow a pregnant pause. They turn to each other exchanging what I presume are “what-the-fuck” glances. “Then,” I continue, “because the state doesn’t allow me to have a firearm at work, I am going to take theirs, shoot the intruder in the head to make sure I did the job with my hands thoroughly, then hunt and kill every other threat on campus. You will sit here, locked in the room until I return. Are we clear?”

I get nods. I get a few stares.

“Great! Now let’s consider the symbolism of *The Great Gatsby* and how Fitzgerald’s usage of such symbolism depicts the failing of the American dream.”

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I participated in a handful of mass melees during my tenure with the Daytona Beach Police Department.

Legit melees. Battles, like scenes from *Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, or *Troy*. The clearest in my memory had the most obscure impetus of them all. I think it began as a domestic dispute, something trite like sexual infidelity, and, like WW1, each side’s allies dog piled, lemming-like, until the cops arrived to see people beating the snot out of each other.

Every time I retell this story at parties, I get askance glances when I describe the event, but Royal Rumble doesn’t even come close. The call came out as a disturbance in the midst of one of the more populated low-income neighborhoods. No exact address, just a general area. This irked me, because calls like this usually ended after a twenty-minute hunt for a fight that wasn’t happening, or had long since finished. My ire turned into surprise. I heard the mob the

moment I drove into the neighborhood with my patrol car's windows lowered. The brawling gave the impression of a great wave undulating with the tide.

I left my patrol car at the edge of the melee and gave the location to Central<sup>106</sup>. Several cops had also radioed on-scene but I couldn't see them. My immediate surroundings resembled an ocean of undulating punched, or soon-to-be-punched, faces, with a few sets of brawlers lingering on the outskirts of the herd—the nearest of which engaged in a furious grapple. One powerbombed<sup>107</sup> another and something in me took over. I spear tackled the powerbomber, knocking him out, then waded into the crowd punching faces, throwing people, and planting as many firm boots to chests as I could find targets. Cutting a path through, I noticed a line of officers on the other side not involved in the rumble, hit an about face, and went back in. Each cop I met inside the mosh nodded and grinned with a proud sense of warped brotherhood then resumed fighting.

I took a few licks along the way, but it didn't stop me. Them either. People I'd kicked away, thrown down, or coldcocked got up and rejoined within moments. The whole event empowered its participants with what, at the time, seemed a near preternatural resilience as all shrugged off savage blows.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Dispatch.

<sup>107</sup> A wrestling move in which someone is hoisted overhead, legs facing the lifter, then slammed to the ground back first.

<sup>108</sup> Adrenalin is a hell of a drug. At least that's what I chalk it up to. Anyone that received my hardest strike didn't stand back up and, were I to take a similarly pure blow, would have probably been down for the count too. However, the kinds of damage that would pause normal people, the kind that would make the average person stop and think, *Nah, I don't want any more of this shit!* went ignored wholesale.

The rumble ended with little circumstance. Despite the veritable bacchanalia of violence, everything fizzled out as if by mass agreement. Like a flock of starlings, we moved in synchrony. The fighting unanimously and simultaneously stopped. DBPD interviewed several combatants and not a single one knew the reason for the fight. They were swept up in the momentum, and, to my recollection, almost no one went to jail. The people, several cops included, needed to satisfy the hunger, and, with it sated, much like in the aftermath of regretfully poor sex<sup>109</sup>, we bumbled about wondering why we'd done it in the first place.

Years later something about the event seemed to stand out: most of the cops present did not participate in the melee, and almost all of the sideliners were older. Not elderly, but thirties or forties. Mature, so to speak. Those of us in the brawl? Early twenties. Age, it seems, is correlative with willingness to satisfy the hunger with raw, unadulterated violence.

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Perhaps the appeal of the zombie apocalypse is that it inverts the normal expectancy of violence. In the modern civilized world, violence is an aberration of socially normative behavior. Much in the same way people play video games, watching zombie fiction allows people to sate needs to exact violence—raw fighting—and the process of unleashing all that violence through fantasy keeps people, for lack of a better word, normal.

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<sup>109</sup> As much as it's joked about in TV and film, many times I've looked across at the person I'd just slept with and wondered, *why the hell did I just do that?* Was my brain so randy it ignored any aesthetic standards I'd previously held unalterable? How could I even perform when utterly unattracted? Fuck, repulsed even. No, I just gave in to the hunger. Time to slink out of the sheets, escape to home for a long, self-loathing shower.

Consider the state of modern video games. With few exceptions, the modern game industry is predicated on the mass murder of sentient creatures. *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, *Fallout*, etc., all represent a fantastical way to satisfy the powerful urge to fight. It's hard to think of alternate reasons for the popularity of such hyper-realistic violence. In essence, such games are mass-murder simulators, and one game, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, literally forces the player to take an active role in a terrorist event: during the stage "No Russian," the protagonist (controlled by the player) participates in an airport massacre in which panicked civilians scramble for their lives.<sup>110</sup> Some attempt to drag the wounded to safety leaving trails of smeared blood; others attempt to crawl away similarly leaking vitae; but all can be halted in their tracks by a well placed headshot or a couple of body shots replete with blood spatter and realistic ragdoll physics<sup>111</sup>. The thing is, I play these things too, and despite my understanding that it's little more than interactive fiction—and hardly realistic (most of the time), largely symbolic, I don't know why I find them so fun! Seeing as my video game taste is incredibly similar to my students', I got their opinions on the matter.

Near the end of the school year I began to talk with my students on a personal level. This sounds odd, I admit. One would think I'd do this at the beginning of the year. I want to, actually,

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<sup>110</sup> To be fair, this stage is made optional by its developer: Infinity Ward. There are multiple graphic-content warnings prior to the stage and the stage itself can be completed without ever shooting a civilian. Still, the option is there.

<sup>111</sup> There are entire teams of programmers devoted to developing better "ragdoll physics," which is the depiction of human bodies collapsing and moving about in a realistic way while being beaten, shot, hit by cars, caught in explosions, etc.

but it's difficult to do that with the state demanding so much material be covered and they be fully prepped for the large battery of tests foisted upon them annually—it's all bullshit.

Well, half bullshit.

I can work around the curriculum, but time-sucking black hole that is test prep makes it impossible to adequately get to know each of my 125 students as individuals, but I'm digressing.

After the completion of finals, I get about two weeks of time where casual conversation became curriculum so inquired about their gaming proclivities. Sure enough, violent games dominate in popularity. That much is a no-brainer. Each *Call of Duty* iteration smashes previous sales records despite the franchise's sequels being little more than minor graphical refinements and a few new weapon choices. When asked why they enjoyed these kinds of games, the typical teenaged response consisted of some variation of the sentiment: "They're fun!"

I questioned this Socratically<sup>112</sup> and a few things became clear: such games are more fun because they would "never actually get to experience doing those things in real life."

"Doing those things."

Things in the game *Grand Theft Auto*—where stealing cars, running over pedestrians, shooting-up banks, or fucking and killing prostitutes is the goal? Like never get to experience the horror of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and shooting up an airport full of innocents?<sup>113</sup> This

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<sup>112</sup> This is the best questioning method for children, hands down, and they hate it. Understandably so, as it's the adult version of repeating "why?" It forces them to understand the reasons for their thoughts and actions. In addition, the questioning often demonstrates flaws in their own reasoning: It's the kind of light bulb moment that makes my shitty pay appear somewhat worth it.

<sup>113</sup> When this released the media went nuts—understandably so. I'm all for freedom of artistic expression and games that push boundaries, but damn do I have mixed feelings on this one.



weirded me out, especially upon learning most took part in the optional airport massacre. I asked if they knew that stage optional. They all knew.

I pushed further, and the most vocal of the group explained that, though they knew such things were morally wrong<sup>114</sup>, it was all for the story, and, sometimes, like with horror movies, it needs to be visceral to fully appreciate the gravity of the event (my wording, not theirs). They made parallels to roller coasters and how pseudo-danger pushes adrenalin despite knowing they're actually safe. Things were going good at this point when the bell rang, prematurely terminating the conversation.<sup>115</sup> The left and I sat down to log attendance—I'm one of the oddballs who enters roll the end of the period—when the same students I'd been talking with threw my door open, saying, "Mr. Hughes, you need to do something about this."

At the doorway, the view beyond the students revealed the telltale mob gathering around a fight in the hallway outside my room. I pushed my way through the dense ring of teens and saw two students engaged in a shitty facsimile of a mixed martial arts fight.

One student was on all fours; the other sprawled out atop him, chest to back throwing punches at the bottom boy's head. The kid on the bottom had taken a shot—wrestling lingo for an attempt to grab the legs and pull his opponent to the ground—and had failed, leaving him exposed. This was before my now co-teacher, Mr. Broman, took the adjacent room, so I found myself at the dead end of the hallway with three dainty female teachers standing in their

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Brings up the old canard that just because something can be done doesn't necessarily mean it should.

<sup>114</sup> I'd goddamned hope so.

<sup>115</sup> I didn't get to make my retort: Rollercoasters and hostage situations aren't anywhere near each other on the moral spectrum. That's like comparing apples to assholes.

doorways watching. They looked at me, expecting for me to do something while the bottom kid bled. I didn't have time at the moment to be annoyed how they stood by with their thumbs in their asses while waiting for a male teacher to break it up.

Every delayed second equaled another punch landed. I had a choice: wait and let the beating continue, or somehow halt a brawl between two teens not much smaller than myself, and do it without hurting them. I thought I'd left these fucking decisions behind when I left Daytona.

I fought the urge to treat the top kid like the powerbomber from Daytona and spear him out of his socks. The circumstances were different, and if I gave into the hunger for violence, then I would be no better than the unrefined children cheering the fight on. I wouldn't be the role model I'm paid to be, or, more importantly, that they needed. These kids acted like churls because they hadn't been exposed to enough basic decency. They reminded me of myself, years ago, badge on my chest, succumbing to the hunger in the absence of someone to show me better. Even back at the melee, the senior officers just watched. When all was said and done they called me brave. Tough. Fearless.

No one said what needed to be said.

They didn't tell me the harder, more mature thing to do was to stop the violence, not join in. They didn't help me contain the hunger; they fed it. They didn't tell me how to be more than a series of animal instincts.

When I stepped forward, several students stepped back, including a few that had tried to kick the combatants. No contact yet, but the crowd seethed mere moments away from joining the brawl.

The top kid pulled his arm back for the umpteenth time and I caught it. He was stunned at the sudden inability to throw another punch, that much came across on his face. Before he could react, I slid the seized arm into a gooseneck wristlock and stood him up. The bottom kid—well, my wife spoke of a very ancient technique her grandfather used on her, and not having, or wanting, to hurt him, I used it.

The bottom kid stood once the pressure came off his back, and that gave me the opportunity to lock a three-finger and thumb pinch grip on his ear. For extra measure, I cranked that sucker a full 90 degrees. Damned if he didn't lurch onto his tiptoes in a hurry. Both were, actually. In all appearances, I walked over and grabbed each kid who, magically, seemed to walk on embers in an odd cantering motion as I escorted them through the crowd and into my room.

Once inside, I released the ear-lock (for lack of a better name) and demanded bottom child sit.

He complied with little hesitation.

I didn't have to even look at the top kid before he offered to take a seat, so I let him. I figured I had about two to three minutes before the campus advisors and school deputy arrived. Two to three minutes to do what I had needed all those years ago after the big brawl in Daytona. I gave the kids a look, took the desk between them, and began the most important conversation I had that year.

They were not zombies, in fact, far from it, and, even if for just that day, I could show them the hunger and how to recognize it, then they had a fighting chance of controlling it in the future.

Agency. Understanding and agency are the vaccines against the zombie apocalypse and it gets administered in classrooms the world over.

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