I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying, I was familiar with the act of saving myself. I would write about him.

MY BROTHER
by JAMAICA KINCAID
1997 NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

"Rich, complex."
—Anna Quindlen
The New York Times Book Review

"[Kincaid's] words are not easily forgotten. They sear the mind."
—Elizabeth Mann
The Boston Phoenix: Literary Supplement

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

OVER the past year, more than a hundred people have worn my handcuffs. Not long ago, in a self-defense class, I wore them myself. There was a jolt of dissonance, like the perverse familiarity at hearing your own voice on tape. Is this me? They were cold, and the metal edge pressed fiercely against the bone if I moved, even when they were loose. The catch of the steel teeth as the cuffs tightened is misterly and final, and never so much so as when it emanates from the small of your back. I thought, Hey, these things work. And then, Good thing. Because their intransigent grip means that, once you're on the correct pair of handcuffs, no one should get hurt. Bearing an unexpected kick or a bite, the story's over; no one's going to tear any teeth or blood; we're both going safely to jail, and at least one of us is going home tonight.

The handcuffs are a tool of the trade and an emblem of it, as are the gun and the nightstick. People—especially children, whose eye level is at my equipment—fear them, sometimes with a fearful look, but more often with fascination. Since I hold them from the other end, I regard them differently, just as surgeons don't feel uneasy, as I do, at the sight of a scalpel or a syringe. Police work can look ugly, especially when it's done well; you might see a man walking down the street, untroubled, untroubling, when two or ten cops rush up to him, shouting over sirens and screaming tires, with their guns drawn. You haven't seen the old man rocking on a stool, three blocks away, with one eye swollen shut. You haven't heard his story, his description of the man being handcuffed: coat, color, height, the tarot on his wrist.

The transformation from citizen to prisoner is terrible to behold, regardless of its justice. Unlike my sister the teacher or my brother the lawyer, I take prisoners, and to exercise that authority is to invoke a profound social trust. Each time a surgeon undertakes the responsi-
The other revelation when I became a cop was how much people like cops. In safe neighborhoods, a cop is part of the scene. I used to notice cops the way I noticed mailboxes, which is to say only when I needed one. But in bad neighborhoods I notice people noticing me, and especially certain classes of people—older people, young kids, single women, people dressed for work or church. They look at me with positive appreciation and relief. I am proof that tonight, on this walk home, no one's going to start with them. Sometimes they express that appreciation. The exceptions are groups of young guys on the street (older, if they're unemployed). Sometimes they're just hanging out, sometimes they're planning something more amiss, and you're a sign that this will never happen—not as they hoped, not here. Sometimes they express themselves, too.

When I'm working, I wear a Kevlar vest, and I carry a nightstick, pepper spray, a radio, a flashlight, two sets of handcuffs, and a gun with two extra fifteen-round magazines. A thick, leather-bound memo book has been squeezed into my back pocket, and leather gloves, rubber gloves, department forms, and bandages are stuffed in various other pockets. When you chase someone in this outfit, it's like running in a suit of armor while carrying a bag of groceries. But I'm safe, and it's very rarely that I feel otherwise. All the people I've fought with were trying to get away.

I walk around on patrol, keeping an eye out and talking to people, until a job comes up on the radio. It's constant and chaotic, a montage of stray details, awful and comic facts. "Respond to a woman cornered by a large siren in her living room."

"...supposed to be a one-year-old baby with its head split open.

"The perp is a male Hispanic, white T-shirt, blue jeans, possible mustache, repeat, possible mustache."

The appeal of patrol is its spontaneity and variety, its responsiveness to the rhythms of the street: there will be long bills and then sudden convulsions as pickup trucks and radio runs propel you into a foot pursuit, a dispute, or a fight. When the actions over, the world can seem slow and small, drearily continued. And then you have to do the paperwork.

When you arrest someone, it's like a blind date. You spend a few hours with a stranger, a few feet apart, saying "Tell me about yourself." You ask, vulnerable. You take off the cuffs and put your gun in a locker. Once, I was printing a guy as he found out he was not getting a summons but, instead, going through the system. He became enraged at the desk sergeant, screaming curses and threats, and I wondered if he'd make a run at him or, worse, at me. But I was holding his hands and could feel that they were as limp and loose as if he lay in a hot bath—as if his body were indifferent to the hatred in his voice. So I went on printing as he went on shouting, each of us concentrating on the task at hand.

The paperwork involved in policing is famously wasteful or is a necessary evil, sometimes both. Often, it reaches a масс of complexity that is itself somehow sublime, like a martial art. It's, for example, you arrested a man for hitting his girlfriend with a tire iron, and you've found a credit card in his pocket, the paperwork would include a Domestic Incident Report (for follow-up visits to the domestic-violence office), a VI, or complaint, which describes the offenses, the perp, and the victim, and an aided card, which contains information on the victim and what medical attention she received. The 61 and the aided are assigned numbers from the Complaint Index and the Aided and Accident Index. The aided number goes on the 61, and both the complaint and the aided numbers go on the On-Line Booking Sheet. The O.L.B.S. provides more detailed information on the perp, it has to be handwritten, and then entered into the computer, which in turn generates an arrest number.

You would also have to type two vouchers—both of which have serial numbers that must be entered on the 61 and on the O.L.B.S.—for the tire iron and the crack vial; affix a lead seal to the tire iron; and put the crack vial in a narcotics envelope in the presence of the desk officer, writing your name, your shield number, and the date across the seal. You also fill out a Request for Lab
Exam (Controlled Substance and Marijuana) and attach it to the envelope. Next, you run a warrant check on the computer, take prints, and bring the perp up to the squad room to be debriefed by detectives, who ask if he knows of and is willing to tell about other crimes.

The prisoner is then searched again and delivered to Central Booking at Criminal Court. There he waits in a holding cell until he is arraigned before a judge. At C.B., you photograph the prisoner and have him examined by the Emergency Medical Service, interviewed by the Criminal Justice Agency for his bail application, and searched yet again. Only then is he in the system, and out of your hands. Next, you see an assistant district attorney and write up and swear to a document that is also called a complaint. The entire process, from the arrest to the signing of the complaint, usually takes around five hours—if nothing goes wrong.

There are stories that cops hope will run for like athletes, and in this century Olympics, collars for homicides, pattern crimes, drugs by the kilo, and automatic weapons are considered gold medals. But the likelihood that things will go wrong with arrests seems to escalate with their importance: a baroque legal system, combined with the vagaries of chance, provides an inexhaustible source of recreation. You feel like a diver on the platform, who has just noticed that all the judges are Russian.

There was my rapist, a match for a pattern of sexual assault on elderly women. My partner and I responded to a report that a suspicious person was lurking in the stairwell of a project, one floor up from the latest attack. When the man saw us, he ran, shouting, "Help me! Get a video camera!" We wrestled with him for what seemed like ages; he was lithe and strong and swear-talked, a slippery as a live fish, and was chewing on a rolled-up dollar bill filled with cocaine. He looked just like the police sketch, and also had distinctive green eyes, which victims had described. He had been wearing on that street with his girlfriend until he beat her up and she threw him out, on the same day as the last attack. He was the rapist, beyond a doubt.

At the precinct, he collapsed, and he told the paramedics he'd ingested three grams of cocaine. At the hospital, his heart rate was two hundred and twenty beats per minute, and he was made to drink an electrolyte solution and eat activated charcoal, which caused him to drool black. He was handcuffed to a cot in the E.R., while the midnight pageant of medical catastrophes was brought in. There was an E.D.P. (an emotionally disturbed person) who had hit the ceiling through his tongue, chipping into a perfect impression of his upper teeth. Another E.D.P., an enormous drunk picked up from the streets, was writhing and thrashing as a diminutive Filipina nurse tried to draw blood: "Now I prick you! Now I just prick you!" An old man threw up, and another prisoner-patient, handcuffed to the cot next to him,landed a right hook on his face. One of the detectives from Special Victims called to say that my perp had already been taken in for a lineup, a few days before, and had not been identified as the rapist. This meant that we had to let him go. I'd felt nothing toward my suspect throughout our ordeal, even when I fought with him, although I believed he had done hideous, brutal things. But now, suddenly, I hated him, because he was no longer a magnificent and malignant idiot—he was just some random asshole who had stolen an entire day of my life.

A few days later, I saw him on the street, and he said hello. I didn't. A few days after that, he beat up his girlfriend again, then disappeared. The rapes stopped.

What do you think this is about? This is what the cops usually do—when they arrive at a scene, to make a decision or review one you've made. You tell him, I got a dispute, a match pair of bloody noses, a shaky L.D. on a drug arrest, I got a lady with a stopped-up toilet who thinks I'm gonna help mop the bathroom, I got an order of protection that says I have to throw the husband out of the house, but he has custody of the three kids because she's a junkie and they have nowhere to go; I got twenty-seven facts in front of me, too many and not enough, in a broken heap like they fell off the back of a truck, which left yesterday.

When you arrive at the scene of an incident, you have a few seconds to take stock—to make a nearly instantaneous
appraisal of a jumble of allegations concerning injuries, insults, histories, relationships between neighbors, brothers, lovers, ex-lovers, lovers again—all this with roots of animosity tangled deep as those among Balkan tribes. You say: "No, I just want to know what happened today." The surging of stories can move like a horse race—a hectic and headlong jostling for position, yet with everything moving in the same direction, toward the same end. Or it can turn out to be like a four-car crash at an intersection, where all the drivers sped up to lay triumphant claim to the right of way. Results often conclude with such a profusion of contradictory stories that you simply take the losers to the hospital and the winners to jail.

When we answered an emergency call from a woman whom I'll call Jocelyn (all the names in this story, including my own, have been changed), her complaint seemed to be a simple case of assault; her assailant, George, who was the father of her infant daughter, had already left the scene. Jocelyn moved stiffly and was covered with scuffs and scratches, and one earlobe was caught where an earring had been pulled out. She was surrounded by a phalanx of female relatives who let out a steady stream of consolations and curses, all attesting to George's history of violence. I asked her about her earlobe, and she said: "Oh, that's old," and, looking closer, I saw that it was, and so were many of the marks on her. But then she lifted up her pant leg and showed me a fresh red scrape that covered most of the kneecap, and the course was clear. I asked for a detailed description and got one: "He's about five-eighth and two hundred pounds, a lotta muscles and a bald head. Gonna take a lotta you cops to lock him up, cause he on parole for armed robbery and he says ain't goin' back for nothing."

"Does he have a weapon now?"
"Wouldn't be surprised." When my partner spotted him on the street, I called him over to us, and he came, without delay. "You George?" I asked, and he said that he was, in a clear, precise diction that was unusual for the street. He'd spent his time upstate well. I asked if he'd fought with Jocelyn, and he seemed mildly embarrassed, as if he'd found out that they'd awakened the neighborhood. "Yeah, we did argue, over some stupid little thing."

"Tell you what," I said. "Take a walk with us up there. Let's straighten it out." The only matter to be straightened out was the "confirmatory identification," a procedural nicety in which I was glad to have his innocent cooperation. His lack of concern was disconcerting, and suggested either that her story was shaky or that his reflexes and instincts were wildly askew.

Upstairs, Jocelyn made the L.D. I discreetly put my location and condition—"Holding one"—over the air and gently asked George for a lengthy, tear-filled version of events. Even when plentiful
reinforcements arrived, and his alarm became evident, he didn't give up, but pulled back as someone tried, gently, to take his arm. Given his strength and the dimensions of the Cinder-block hallway where we had gathered, no one ventured a breach. He began to shake, and to bellow, "I did not hit her!" and "I am not going back to prison!" We managed to con him into restraints while he continued to shout, calling for neighbors to tell us what was really going on.

As we took George downstairs, he began to pitch his version of events: Jocelyn was a crackhead; he had custody of their infant daughter; he was angry at Jocelyn because she left the baby alone; her marks were from a fight she had yesterday; lots of people had seen her attack him earlier that day, and would testify that he had never raised a hand against her. On the street outside, one woman—who looked like a crackhead herself—said she had fought Jocelyn last night, and a man said he'd seen George endure Jocelyn's beating him without protest. Toni, whom George referred to as his fiancée, and who also had a child by him, happened by and joined in, shifting her head in disapproval of Jocelyn. But I still had a complaint, an I.D., a fresh injury, and no choice. And when George admitted that he "might have knocked her about," didn't feel bad about bringing him in.

At the precinct, George alternated between brooding raves on injustice and civil, reasonable explanations of his predicament. Then he suddenly assumed a soft-voiced and menacing tone, so that I couldn't tell if he was putting on a mask or dropping one. "I did time, man, time," he muttered urgently. "I know people who go to jail every day. I know people who sell guns, sell machine guns. I know people who make a living as the word goes. Guns are unique in their ability to charge nobody and wanna-be-into-genuinely bad men in an instant. And while there is nothing more serious than apprehending a dangerous criminal, it also seems like boyhood itself when you can spend your days trying to get the bad guys. That was why, if I almost believed George when he told me about Jocelyn, I almost loved him when he told me about the guns."

I tried not to let it show, though. I didn't want to get greedy—to let the balance tip from buyer to seller. Not long before, a similar story—completely detailed, wholly plausible, legal—had led me, along with thirty other cops, some equipped with full-body armor and shotguns, to raid an apartment where we expected to find a crate of semi-automatics but instead found a dildo and ten thousand matches. I knew that if George meant it he'd say it more than once, and for his information to be useful he'd have to be willing to keep talking when he wasn't wearing my handcuffs. So I treated him with consideration—"You got change? I'll get you a soda"—and continued to process the arrest.

As it turned out, however, nothing came to pass. Jocelyn dropped the charges, and I even came down to Central Booking to take George home. He was elated as he left, telling me, "Watch, I'm gonna get you a gun collar!" Laughing, I called after him, "Give me your number," and waited to see his reaction. He hesitated, then came back and gave me his beep number, "I'm telling you," he said.

For a while after that, whenever I ran into George on the street, he would talk to me. The information was always good but never quite useful: he confirmed things I knew, and told me about witnesses who, for some reason, wouldn't come forward. I called him once or twice, and my call was never returned.

"We" often start with these cheezy collars: dice, blunts, trespass. It's not what you signed up for, being a glorified hall monitor, if "glorified" is the word. Public urination at two o'clock. Let's move on! But it's part of the job, so you do it—preferably with the discretion you are empowered to exercise. If a group of guys are hanging out smoking marijuana and I'm walking by, one of two things tends to happen. Either I hear a rapid apology, the blunt is tossed—and if it's down a sewer there's no evidence to recover and no basis for a charge, you follow me, guy—and the group gets a stern word of caution. Or someone decides to lock eyes with me and take a drag, and someone else calls out some cute remark, like "Thank the police!" and they decline to heed my
word to the wise: "Break out, guys. Bounce? No? And in seconds, or in a minute if I decide I want backup, they're all up against a wall. I start going into their pockets, taking names. If someone has I.D., I might run a name over the air, and if there's no warrant for this person's arrest he'll get a summons for Disorderly Conduct at the scene. But most guys like these don't carry I.D., and you take them into the precinct to search them thoroughly, run the checks, and write the summons. Often, someone will have drugs on him, or a stolen credit card. One in five will have an active warrant, in my experience, and fully half will come up on the computer as 'Robbery Recidivist' or as 'Target Narcotic Violator,' which means that they have a number of convictions for mugging or dealing. Maybe they were just hanging out tonight, but, as far as you're concerned, tonight they've lost their street-corner privileges. And now and then you find a piece, like a hard-core felon hiding behind a bottle of Bacardi.

For the most part, the time you spend with people you like and respect occurs at a low point in their lives: they've just been robbed, their child is missing, or their husband has collapsed from chest pains. You're less the bearer of bad news than the proof of it. More often, you become bound up in lives that are dismal and grim: paroles and their teenage girlfriends, druggies and drunks, and junkies, F.D.P.s taking too much or too little for their pain. Other people you never get to know, ever after you've spent some time with them.

The old man lived alone and died crumpled on the floor in a little alley between the bed and the wall. He was wearing a dirty shirt and no pants. The apartment was small and cluttered, and all his clothes were in old suitcases, or were stacked beside them, as if he were packing for a long trip. There were two televisions—one old, one brand-new. A nervous kitten darted amid the piles of clothes and rummaged around the old man's body. Because he lived alone, we had to search for valuables, in the presence of a sergeant, and voucher them at the precinct. We found his military discharge papers, his false teeth, and stacks of pornography. The other cops left, and I stayed. It was my turn to sit on the D.O.A., waiting for the Medical Examiner to have a look, then for the morgue to take him away.

A man knocked at the door and said, "I took care of him. I'm his stepson. He wanted me to have the TV."

I told him to get some proof, and said that until then he should take the kitten. He left—without the kitten—and I turned on the television. Less than an hour later, he returned
with a lady friend. Both were completely drunk, and demanded in unison, "We loved him! We was his family! Let's have that salt!"

I closed the door on them and sat back down. There was a phone call. I waited, then picked it up, hoping that no one who cared for him would learn of his death by accident, from a stranger.

"Is Mr. Jones at home?"
"No, he isn't."
"Is this... Mr. Jones?"
"No."
"Are you sure he's not available?"
"No time soon."
"When should I call back?"
"Can I ask who this is?"
"Mr. Jones had recently expressed an interest in our low-cost insurance policies, and..."
"I'm not interested."
"And who, may I ask, is this?"
"The police. Mr. Jones is dead. That's why I'm here."
"Well, do you think..."
"Dead."
"There may be someone..."
"Dead, dead, dead. He's stuck in the floor six feet away from me, you. No sale."
"Have you considered whether you have all the coverage you need, Officer?"
I hung up and went back to watching television.

Most of the time, the enforcement of the law follows a simple moral algorithm—the sum of what you should do and what you can. If the perp is there, you make an arrest; if he's not, you make a report. If he runs, you chase. If he shoots, you shoot back. The facts, rather than your feelings, dictate the course of action, but the close correspondence of the two is a satisfaction of the job. Sometimes, though, the victims are less sympathetic than the offenders, and an odd bond develops between cop and perp which can emotionally skew the equation.

One woman called to say that her thirteen-year-old son had locked her out of her house; she had obtained a Family Court order that allowed her to call the police whenever she couldn't control him. For over an hour, we knocked, reasoned, and threatened, and finally got the locks. We had just enough time to find out about the family.

"Is there anyone—someone he isn't..."
mad at—who could talk to him, get him to open the door? I asked.

"Oh, he's not mad at me," she said. I let it go.

"Maybe a friend from school?"

"I been tellin' him to go to school since last year," she said, adding that he stopped because the other kids beat him up. Asked why, she said that he wore makeup and women's clothes. My partner went to get a court order, to see if he could work the door chain off. The woman went on about how the boy's father left her, how she worked, how the boy stayed out till dawn. She paused a moment, as if she just remembered, and said, "I had a three-year-old—she died. She was pretty! She passed away, then said, "I wish that lagger never was born!"

My partner got the door open. The thirteen-year-old, a light-skinned black boy with hair dyed a sunny yellow, was dozing. I told him to get some things together, because he was going to a juvenile holding facility now and to court in the morning. By his bedside I saw a list of around twenty names—all men's, and all but a few with deeper voices than phone numbers. His mother picked up a shaggy part of gold satin shorts, held them up to his substantial waist, and said, "Who wear these? Not me!

What friendly or fatherly advice was there to offer? I didn't piddle my way when I was thirteen, young man, and now I have a busy civil service job. We drove downtown without saying much, and I hadn't seen him since.

Another day, on the street, I noticed that a middle-aged woman was staring at me, in the throes of indecision about whether to approach. I went over to her and asked if I could help. "My husband, he beats me, he beats me very bad," she said. I pressed her for details, telling her how, even if I couldn't make an arrest, she could get an order of protection, but she brushed me aside. "No no, that all no good. My daughter, she say she's just gonna get somebody to take care of him."

I told her that if he was beaten, he probably had it out on her anyway, and she said she didn't get it. "I don't mean beat him up," she explained. "I mean take care of him. You know?" She raised her eyebrows, like she was letting me in on a secret deal. "What do you think?"

"Laddy, you noticed that I'm wearing a blue hat, badges, the rest? That I'm a cop. And you want to know what I think about having your husband murdered?"

Before she could ask me to quote a price, we parted, each convinced that the other had only a slimy grub of a real.

A few hours later, another officer and I responded to a call of a "Violent domestic dispute." A burly, middle-aged man answered the door and allowed us in. He was in his underwear and seemed at ease, smiling as he showed us around: there was no one else there, and no sign of a struggle of any kind. Even so, I didn't like him, and the female cop with me had the same reaction, but stronger: he had a corrupt and military air, as if he were an aide to some South American president for Life. As we left, I noticed a photograph of the woman I had spoken with earlier hanging on the wall. She was trying to win our argument, it seemed to me, saying, "Look at him. Look. If this one ended up dead, would you really come after me?"

I continued to have hopes for George. I didn't know if he was much more than a corner hoodlum, but the corners he favored were hot ones. And then he came to my attention again, formally, when he beat up his fiancee. The night before, she told me, George had knocked her down, shoved her against a wall, and confined her in a bedroom when she threatened to call the police. He'd slept at the door of the room, on the floor, to prevent her from escaping. The next morning, he went out and brought her back breakfast, drew her a bath, and then walked her up to her mother's house, where she called the cops.

When I came for George at his job, his rebuttal was as edgily eloquent and semi-plausible as the last time: Yes, they argued, but no, he didn't hit her ("Did you see a mark, a single mark on her?"); and if he had hit her once it was because she said she'd have him arrested if he ever left her. A cop witnessed that, he added, and would have to find him. He had a letter, in which she said that threats we'd have to find it. I told him that I still had to take him in. He shrugged his acceptance, and we left for the precinct.

For the past year or so, it's been procedure to debrief every prisoner who comes into the precinct. Most perps won't talk, and many are as ignorant of the local underworld as they are of portfolio management. A detective asks,
"Do you have information about robberies, homicides, guns, arson, hate crimes, shop theft, terrorism?" I've heard people say, "Chop-chop! What chop-chop?" But when George's turn came he said, "Yes," "Yes," "Yes," "No," "Yes," "What was the last one?"

As it turned out, my prisoner was the Rosettis' store to scenes of violent felonies, past and present. George told us that people approached him to do jobs and robberies almost every week. The narcotics king of Atlanta wanted to open night clubs in the city, for dancing and dealing, and had asked George to run them. A robbery at a bodega was supposed to take place a few hours from now, and he knew the two guys who had planned it, what kind of gun they'd carry, how they knew the owner's brother, a polytechnic Domini-can who carried a .357, and how he was the one to watch, to take out if he moved. One of the two had robbed a meat market a few months ago of five thousand dollars, with at least a grand in food stamps, which they moved through a Chinese restaurant. Most important, he knew about another planned hit; on a Brazilian man, a witness in a state case. He wouldn't say more.

It was as if George spread the deck and asked the detectives to pick a card, any card—but only one. The detectives chose the robbery planned for that night. The exchange was remarkably businesslike: if the bodega robbery occurred and arrests were made quickly, that would be good; if it could be prevented, that would be even better; and either result should be enough to secure George's freedom. Though there seemed shabby and dangerous, to bargain Toni's distress against the safety of a grocery store, it was just that—a bargain. What was left unmentioned was that George would, in all likelihood, be freed by the judge at his arraignment. Toni's case was weak, even terminal, and if history served as a guide the charges might well be dropped. (I had even found the cop who'd witnessed Toni's threats to have George arrested if he left her.) But George was back in the cage now, and he would do what he could to get out of it. It was a line of thought we encouraged.

As calls were made, and the hours passed, George explained that he had no problem giving up people who weren't close friends and who were going to hurt people. He had hurt people himself, and, while it didn't keep him up at night, he thought it a better thing if people didn't get hurt during the job. George's efforts at moral understanding had a rare, catalytic quality. "You think, What if it's your brother, your girl who gets shot in a holdup—how would you feel?"

WHAT REALLY bothered him was that here he had information of great value, and he had to squander it on an domestic-violence charge. "I'm not gonna say all I know," he told me. "What if they grab me with a gun sometime, what am I gonna have left to give?"

It was after dark by now, and the bodega would be open for only a few more hours. There were countless reasons for the robbery: not to take place then—a hangover, a date, the fix, an argument, a bad hemiscope, or an arrest. The next night was Halloween, when the robbers could even wear masks without attracting notice. The detectives passed the information to the borough robbery squad and sent us on our way to Central Booking.

The password had been spoken, but the gates remained shut. I hadn't quite expected that, and neither had George. This meant that he would have to spend the night with the losers, with their foul smells and sad stories, their tough-guy voices and choked-back sobs. As I turned in the holding cell, George leaned close to me and whispered that he wanted to talk. "About the Brazilian?" I asked. "About the Brazilian," he said. I loved that part; it was just like the movies. As they say, this is no job for a grovetown.

There may be no crime more destructive to the criminal-justice system than a hit on a witness: if witnesses won't work, the system doesn't. For several hours, I pursued district attorneys and detectives to peddle any murder conspiracy, but there didn't seem to be a buyer. After midnight, I went home, determined to keep trying in the morning.

Toni arrived at court in the morning looking fresh and rested, and she remained resolute in her desire to press charges. When we were finished, I was taken back to the deference of the assistant D.A.'s reaction. "Did you see that poor woman? I've never seen such fear!" she
CLEARCUT

Take away these eyes, little colored stones,
this corm of a nose, these lips that know
all the multiplication tables and a fine selection of poems.
I give you my whole face, tongue and hair included,
I'll rip out my nails and teeth to complete the package.

These ways of feeling
won't do. Neither the eyes nor the fingers.
Not those warped-up leftovers, memories,
or kindness, like an evil little penknife.
Take the inductive reasonings and the nails
where the washed and mended words are hanging.
Ransack the whole house, everything out,
leave me like a hole or a stump.

Possibly then, when God, that Boy Scout,
and his benevolence are worthless to me,
and I'm no better than some rug that's put up
with its steady dance of shoes for eighty years
and there's nothing left but the warp, a see-through skeleton
whose silver peacocks have been worn away,

it could be, without my voice, I'll be able to say your name,
it could happen, without my hands, I'll be able to reach your waist.

—JULIO CORTÁZAR
(Translated, from the Spanish, by Stephen Escott)
because he had been asked to do the hit.

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, we worked on the deal. The D.A. wanted to know if anyone could I.D. the Brazilian as a witness or an informant; calls went back and forth between cops and prosecutors, word went up the chain of command, across agencies and jurisdictions. We were determined to prevent a murder, but the D.A., in particular, was terrified of another, whose headline would read, "D.A. FREES PAROLEE, GIRLFRIEND KILLS." He had Torni brought back in, to see for himself how she felt, how badly she was hurt, and if she was afraid.

George would not give the Brazilian name without a promise from the D.A. that he himself would be out today. The D.A. eventually agreed that it would be enough if the name checked out. George gave up the first name, which was all he remembered anyway—Kari. With this tidbit of evidence, the detectives started calling around and reporting back to us whatever they turned up.

"The D.E.A. has a Russian named Kari, wants to know if it's your guy." "J.B.L. has a Dutch, from Naples, Florida, or Naples, Italy! Never mind, forget it."

Kari, "Brazilian Kari might be Jamaican Kelly after how many guys are passing along the name."

By sundown, there had been no confirmation, but the D.A. agreed to let George out that night, in exchange for the Brazilian's address, with the stipulation that he accept the terms of the order of protection. All in return for the videotape George had made of the scene and a half hour later. George, alone, went to the cell phone from a car. No one was home, but neighbors confirmed that a Brazilian man lived there, and several said he was a drug dealer. They had a name. The Manhattan D.A. confirmed that he was a defendant in a drug case and a witness for the prosecution in a kidnapping he owned. The hit had been scheduled to take place that very night, but the killer was spotted by the police presence.

And so it finally proved to be a good day's work, though not without its questions and complexities. A lift was saved; by freeing the man who'd been asked to take it. The intended victim was the kind of person I'd just as soon arrest as rescue. But he was alive—at least for a little while longer—and George was his unlikely and reluctant savior.

George picked up his life more or less where he left off. Toni decided to drop the charges, and Jocelyn became pregnant by him again; "Gotta keep trying till I get a son," she said. Every week or so, I still ran into George on the street, and we say hello. I like him, as far as it goes. The feeling is as mutual as it can be, I think, between two people who wouldn't hesitate to shoot each other. As he's a hit man and I'm a cop, the odds of such an occurrence are less remote than they might be otherwise.

It was near the end of my tour of duty, and I was headed back to the precinct when an armed car case came over the air. Addicts are among the most frequent jobs, usually involving an escort of E.M.T. workers to the scene of an illness or injury. When I arrived in the apartment, I could tell from the smell why someone had called. As I walked down the hall, past what seemed to be numerous empty rooms, the stench, a color of decomposition grew stronger, and when an expressionless teen-age girl directed me to the last bedroom I was thrown by the sight of the still, frail old Puerto Rican woman in bed than the four emergency medical technicians working around her. Two were crying.

The old woman was naked, lying face down, stuck to plastic sheets that made a creaking sound as she was unpeeled from them. She had once been a hefty woman but now looked less strained down than stoned; her breasts were engorged, her legs crossed against her chest, and the bones of her hips and thighs were plainly visible, draped with loose, lifeless skin. Maggots crawled on her, inchworming along, and slipping off like broken watch springs. There was recent excrement in the bed with her, and one E.M.T., examining her legs, said, with a horrified intake of breath, "Those are rat bites! Whoever did this to her should go to jail!"

The old woman lay out a breathy moan as for was rolled over, feeling pain where her body was alive. This woman was dying; parts of her were already dead. And she didn't live alone. I turned away, and went to talk to the teen-age.
PERSONAL HISTORY

age girl: "Who takes care of this lady?"

"Well," she said, with a poesy, long-suffering tone, "I'm the one who does most of the work."

"Who lives here? How old are they?"

"Me and my sister and my grandmother. My sister's twenty-three, but she's out now."

"Can you tell me why you didn't feel well?"

"She said she wasn't hungry."

"Why didn't you call a doctor?"

"I'm the one that did."

"Before now, why didn't you call?"

"My mom said not to."

She said that her mother lived in another part of the city. I told her to call her and tell her to go to the hospital. I asked what they lived on, and she said her grandmother got checks and her sister cashed them to run the household.

Ordinarily, E.M.S. prefers to have a relative ride in the ambulance with the adult, but when the teen-age approached the door a no-longer-crying E.M.T. told her, curtly, "You want to visit Grandmother? Take the bus."

Back at the precinct, it took some time to figure out how to write the complaint—folly, while there are many laws regarding the care of children, the elderly are less explicitly protected. I found a misdemeanor in the Penal Law called "Endangering the welfare of an incompetent person," and named the adult sister and the mother as perpetrators. Since there were checks coming in, "Investigate, larceny" was added. And that, I realized, without satisfaction, explained the family's nearly homicidal neglect. The old woman was the key stone of a tidy edifice of subsidies: a large apartment, Social Security, welfare for the teen-age girl. If she went to a hospital or a nursing home, all these benefits would vanish from their pockets. People talk about living from paycheck to paycheck; this family almost let a woman die that way.

Every cop has his gripes and jokes, his epics and anecdotes about life on the job. I grew up hearing them. My great-grandfather was a sergeant, in Brooklyn: a dapper, dangerous figure from the Jazz Age who became Mayor Jimmy Walker's driver. My father was a police officer; briefly, before moving on to federal law enforcement, a law degree, and an M.B.A.—and his brother was a police officer for thirty-three years. My father died before I went on the job, but I think that my decision to become a cop would strike him as an offset to how far we've come from the hard-scrabble west of Ireland and the docks of Hill's Kitchen. For the next generation we have come to a point where we must make their efforts dig it out of a pretty big hole.

Now, after a few years on the job, I have my own war stories. On weekends, I'll sit back, lift up my feet, and tell my girlfriend, "I took a bullet out of a lady's living room. It must have been shot from Jersey. It went through the glass, and stopped on the sill. It landed there like a sparrow."

"Or I talked a runaway into coming home. She was fourteen years old. All I had to do was tell her I'd lock up her boyfriend's whole family if she didn't." At times, the point of the job seems to be to make it worse with an intact skin and it's a good story. The stories are a benefit, like the dental plan. And you need them, like your handcuffs or your vest, to control events when you have to, and to cover your back. If you're a cop, you need a quick tongue, to tell the victim's story. The crowd, the sergeant, the D.A., the judge, and the jury what you're doing, what you did, and why. Are you ready to make a statement? No. Then you just did. You told me you weren't ready. "Police were unprepared to answer," says the lead in the morning paper. Or the gossip in the locker room, or the word on the street. I also hear more than my share of stories. And aside from the odd Christmas party or fund-raiser, I don't hang out with cops from the precinct. My friends who are cops were friends of mine before I went on the job. And most of the people I see regularly have nothing at all to do with police work. The job has enough of me. For five days a week, I stay off the streets unless I'm working them. And when I'm not in uniform I'd just as soon not see blue.

But I also notice that when I'm not on weekends and there's another cop there—alcohol or a cookout at a club—I'll often spend most of the time talking with him. There are things you've done and places you've been that no one else has had to do or see in quite the same way.

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