

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.



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BROTHER
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*FROM MY BROTHER

FARRAR STRAUS GIRoux

PERSONAL HISTORY

COP DIARY

Anything can happen when you walk a beat. But even with the brawls, rapes, and hits it still has a way of feeling like a neighborhood.

BY MARCUS LAFFEY

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 unfamiliarity at hearing your own voice on tape. Is this me? They were cold, and the metal edge pressed keenly against the bone if I moved, even when they were loose. The catch of the steel teeth as the cuffs tighten is austere 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 they're on the correct pair of hands, no one should get hurt. Barring an unexpected kick or a bite, the story's over: no one's going to lose 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 belt—stare at 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 screeching tires, with their guns drawn. You haven't seen the old man rocking on a stoop 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 tattoo 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-

bility of cutting open a human being, it should be awesome and new, no matter how necessary the operation, no matter how routine. A police officer who takes away someone's freedom bears a burden of at least equal gravity. Let me tell you, it's a pleasure sometimes.

I WALK a beat in a neighborhood of New York City that is a byword for slum. Even if the reality of places like the South Bronx, Brownsville, and Bed-Stuy no longer matches the reputation, and maybe never did, these bad neighborhoods are still bad. Children still walk through three different brands of crack vials in the building lobbies. People still shit in the stairwells. Gunshots in the night may have become less common in my precinct, but many people, young and old, can still distinguish that hard, sharp crack—like a broomstick snapped cleanly in half—from fireworks or a car backfiring.

The genuine surprise is how wholesome and ordinary this neighborhood sometimes seems, with its daily round of parents' getting kids ready for school, going to work, wondering if a car or a coat will make it through another winter. Life in the projects and the tenements can be just the way it is in suburbia, except that it takes place on busier streets and in smaller rooms. Sometimes it's better, in the way that city life, when it's good, is better than life anywhere else. In the summer, you can walk through the projects beneath shady aisles of sycamore and maple, past well-tended gardens and playgrounds teeming with children. There will be families having cookouts, old ladies reading Bibles on the benches, pensive pairs of men playing chess. Once, I went to the roof of a project and saw a hawk perched on the rail. Always, you can see Manhattan in the near distance, its towers and spires studded with lights, stately and slapdash, like the crazy geometry of rock crystal. There are many days when I feel sorry for people who work indoors.

The other revelation when I became a cop was how much people *like* cops. In safe neighborhoods, a cop is part of the scenery. 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 banging out, sometimes they're planning something more ambitious, and you're a sign that this wild night's not going to 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 binoculars 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 only 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. The radio is constant and chaotic, a montage of stray details, awful and comic facts:

"Respond to a woman cornered by a large rodent 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, bluejeans, 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 lulls and then sudden convulsions as pickup jobs and radio runs propel you into a foot pursuit, a dispute, or a birth. When the actions over, the world can seem slow and small, dearily confined. 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,



Nothing has as strong an effect on a cop as the word "gun"—guns can turn nobodies and wanna-bes into bad men in an instant.

"How much do you weigh?" and "Are you a gang member? Really! Which one?" And you hold hands, for a few minutes, as you take prints—each fingertip individually, then four fingers together, flat, and the thumb, flat, at the bottom of the card. A lot of people try to help you by rolling the fingers themselves, which usually smudges the print; sometimes that's their intent. Crackheads often don't have usable prints: their fingers are burned smooth from the red-hot glass pipe. Junkies, as they're coming down, can go into a whole-body cramp, and have hands as stiff as lobster claws. Perps collared for robbery or assault may have bruised, swollen, or bloody fingers. You try to be gentle, and you wear latex gloves.

When you print a perp, you're close to him, and because you're close you're

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 nuanced complexity that is itself somehow sublime, like a martial art. If for example, you arrested a man for hitting his girlfriend with a tire iron and then found a crack vial in his pocket, the paperwork would include a Domestic Incident Report (for follow-up visits by the domestic-violence officer); a 61, or complaint, which describes the offense, the perp, and the victim; and an aided card, which contains in-

formation 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

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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 arrests that cops hope and train for like athletes, and in this felony 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 misadventure. 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 assaults 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 limber and strong and sweat-soaked, as 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 staying on that floor 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 bitten clean through his tongue, clipping into it a precise 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, kindly handed him the closest receptacle he could find—a plastic pitcher half filled with urine, which splashed back as he vomited, and made him vomit more.

I'd worked almost twenty-four hours by the time we got back to the precinct, when a detective 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 catch—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.

WHADDAYA got? This is what the boss—usually a sergeant—asks when he arrives at a scene, to make a decision or review one you've made. You tell him, I got a dispute, a matched pair of bloody noses, a shaky I.D. on a chain snatch; 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

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appraisal of a jumble of allegations concerning injuries, insults, histories, relationships between neighbors, brothers, lovers, ex-lovers, lovers again—all this with roots of enmity as tangled and deep as those among Balkan tribes. You say, "No, I just need to know what happened *today*." The outpouring 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. Brawls 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 piece, 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 notched 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-eight 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 say he ain't goin' back for nothin'!"

"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 had found out that they'd awakened the neighbor's baby. "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 I.D. I discreetly put my location and condition—"Holding one"—over the air and gently asked George for a lengthy, time-killing version of events. Even when plentiful



"You know what, Ira? You've had a rough day. Don't make me part of it."

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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 wanted a brawl. He began to shake, and to bellow "I did not hit her!" and "I am not going back to prison!" We managed to coax 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 fiancee, and who also had a child by him, happened by and joined in, shaking her head in disapproval of Jocelyn. But I still had a complainant, an I.D., a fresh injury, and no choice. And when George admitted that he "might have knocked her down," I didn't feel bad about bringing him in.

At the precinct, George alternated between brooding reveries 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 murmured urgently. "I know people who rob every day. I know people who sell guns, sell machine guns. I know people sell you a grenade, man, I could help you out."

Short of gunfire, nothing has as strong an effect on a cop as the word "gun." Guns are unique in their ability to change nobodies and wanna-bes 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, legally sworn—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 roaches. 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.

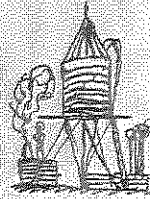
As it turned out, however, nothing came to pass. Jocelyn dropped the charges, and even came down to Central Booking to take George home. He was elated as he left, telling me, "Watch, I'm gonna get you a gun collar!" Laughing, I called after him, "Give me your number," and waited to see his reaction. He hesitated, then came back and gave me his beeper 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 to assaults and robberies who wouldn't come forward. I called him once or twice, and my call was never returned.

You often start with these cheesy collars: dice, blunts, trespass. It's not what you signed up for, being a glorified hall monitor, if "glorified" is the word. "Public urinator at two o'clock!

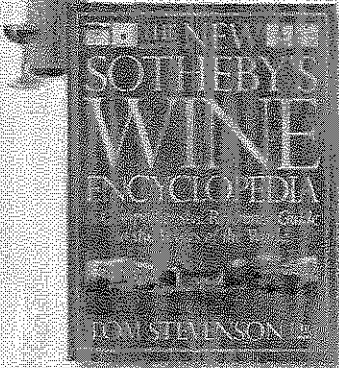
Let's move in!" But it's part of the job, so you do it—preferably with the discretion you are empowered to exercise. If a group of guys are hanging out smoking marijuana and I'm walking by, one of two things tends to happen. Either

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, guys?—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 "Fuck the police!" and they decline to heed my



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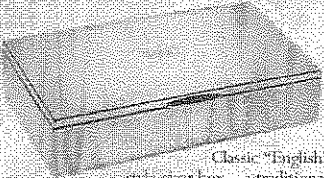
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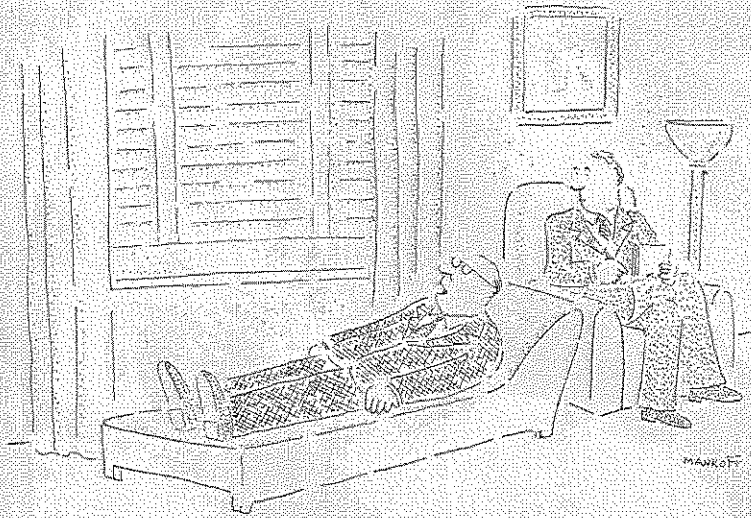


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"Frankly, I've repressed my sexuality so long I've actually forgotten what my orientation is."

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 out 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 summonses. 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 I'm concerned, tonight they've lost their street-corner privileges. And now and then you find a prize, 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 are less the bearer of bad news than the proof of it. More often, you become bound up in lives

that are dismal and grim: parolees and their teen-age girlfriends, thugs, drunks, and junkies, E.D.P.s taking too much or too little for their pain. Other people you never get to know, even 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. His 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 manic kitten darted amid the piles of clothes and rubbish 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

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with a lady friend. Both were completely drunk, and demanded in unison, "We loved him! We was his family! Let's have that TV!"

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 . . . Mrs. Jones?"
 "No." But thanks for asking.
 "When will he be 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—"

"He's 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 some—"

"Dead, dead, dead. He's stuck to the floor six feet away from me, guy. 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 fiddled with the locks. We had ample time to find out about the family.

"Is there anyone—someone he isn't



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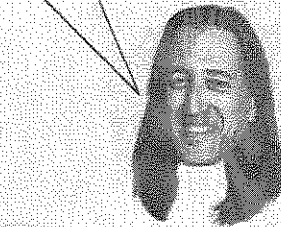
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mad at—who could talk to him, get him to open the door?" I asked.

"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 coat hanger, 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'd just remembered, and said, "I had a three-year-old—she died. She was pretty." She paused again, then said, "I wish that faggot 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 beeper rather than phone numbers. His mother picked up a skimpy pair of gold satin shorts, held them up to her substantial waist, and said, "Who wears these? Not me!"

What friendly or fatherly advice was there to offer? "I didn't peddle my ass when I was thirteen, young man, and now I have a cushy civil-service job." We drove downtown without saying much, and I haven'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's all no good. My daughter, she says she's just gonna get somebody to take care of him."

I told her that if he was beaten he'd probably take it out on her anyway, and again she saw I 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 sweet deal. "What do you think?"

"Lady, you noticed that I'm wearing a blue hat, badge, 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 flimsy grasp of reality. 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 fiancée, Toni. 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 shoved her once it was because she said she'd have him arrested if he ever left her. A cop witnessed that, he added, and we'd have to find him. He had a letter, in which she made that threat: 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,

PERSONAL HISTORY

"Do you have information about robberies, homicides, guns, arson, hate crimes, chop shops, terrorism?" I've had people say, "Chop-chop? What chop-chop?" But when George's turn came he said, "Yes," "Yes," "Yes," "Yes," "No," "Yes," and "What was the last one?"

As it turned out, my prisoner was the Rosetta stone to scores of violent felonies, past and planned. George told us that people approached him to do hits and robberies almost every week. The narcotics king of Atlanta wanted to open night clubs in the city, for dancing and dealing, and had been asking 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 pockmarked Dominican 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 detective to pick a card, any card—but only one. The detective chose the robbery planned for that night. The exchange was remarkably business-like: 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 freedom. Though it seemed shabby, and even 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 jobs. George's efforts at moral understanding had a rote, calisthenic 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'd 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 flu, an argument, a bad horoscope, or an arrest. The next night was Halloween, when the robbers could even wear masks without attracting notice. The detective 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 sneers and choked-back sobs. As I put him 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 grownup.

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 my 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 aback at the vehemence of the assistant D.A.'s reaction. "Did you see that poor woman? I've never seen such fear!" she



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Take away these eyes, little colored stones,
this totem 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.
Nor those warmed-up leftovers, memories,
nor kindness, like an evil little parakeet.
Take the inductive reasonings and the racks
where the washed and ironed 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 drizzle 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 Kessler.)

said. "I really want to put this guy away!" She had tears in her eyes.

Ordinarily, I would have been delighted with the response. Time after time, I've brought in assault cases, from domestic violence more often than not, and seen them dealt down to next to nothing. At last, I'd met a blazing champion of the downtrodden, and it couldn't have happened at a worse time. My peculiar mixture of motives made me uneasy, but I genuinely felt that her reaction was naïve and awry. There are times when my heart breaks for people; this wasn't one of them.

After Toni signed the complaint, I spoke to another supervising D.A., who sent me to another detective. This time, however, the detective reacted as I hoped, saying that we had to move, immediately, and do whatever possible to get to the Brazilian. But when I retrieved George from his holding cell, it looked as if the case had, again, fallen apart. He'd barely slept or eaten, and he was talking in crazy circles, saying that he could go back to jail and wouldn't care, and then that he'd never go back because he hadn't done

anything. Once, he broke down—crying, with his face in his hands—and I thought we had lost him. We moved between paying him sympathetic attention and allowing him moments of privacy; we fed him; we let him call his sister to talk. "Think about your children!" I said. Let me tell you, we were ruthless. Finally, he came around and told us what he knew.

George didn't know if the Brazilian had testified or was scheduled to; if he was an informant or was just suspected of thinking about turning. The Brazilian ran narcotics for another dealer, who was in prison; the dealer suspected that his employee had betrayed him, and had ordered the hit. The fee would be six thousand dollars—half on agreement, half on completion. George also knew the name and address of the Brazilian, because he'd seen a video as a kind of prospectus for the hit: footage of the block, the apartment building, the apartment. In the last ten seconds, the Brazilian himself appeared in the video, stumbling unsuspectingly into the frame on his way home. All this George knew

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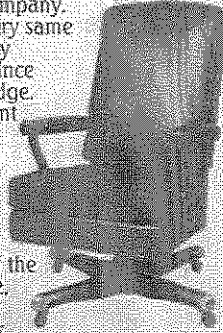
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because he had been asked to do the hit. Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, we worked on the deal. The D.A. wanted to know if anyone could I.D. the Brazilian as a witness or an informant; calls went back and forth between cops and prosecutors, word went up the chains of command, across agencies and jurisdictions. We were determined to prevent a murder, but the D.A., in particular, was terrified of another one, whose headline would read, "D.A. FREES PAROLEE, GIRLFRIEND SLAIN." He had Tom 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's 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 shred of evidence, the detectives started calling around and reporting back to us whatever they turned up.

"The D.E.A. has a Bosnian named Kiri, wants to know if it's your guy."

"F.B.I. has a Corio, from Naples."

"Naples, Florida, or Naples, Italy? Never mind, forget it, but keep taking anything close—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, enter a batterer's program, and agree to bring them the videotape the next morning. George gave an address in Manhattan, and a half hour later D.E.A. agents were on a 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; his own. The hit had been scheduled to take place that very night, it turned out, but the killers were spooked by the police presence.

And so it finally proved to be a good day's work, though not without its questions and compromises. A life 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," he said. Every week or so, I still run 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 aided case came over the air. Aided are among the most frequent jobs, usually entailing an escort of E.M.S. 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, spacious rooms, the rank, ripe odor of decomposition grew stronger, and when an expressionless teen-age girl directed me to the last bedroom I was thrown less 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 crackling sound as she was unpeeled from them. She had once been a hefty woman but now looked less slimmed down than deflated: her breasts were empty, pressed 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 popping off like broken watch springs. There was rodent 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 let out a breathy moan as she was rolled over, feeling pain wherever 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 girl: "Who takes care of this lady?"

"Well," she said, with a pouty, 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 feed her?"

"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 aided, but when the teen-ager approached the door a no-longer-crying E.M.T. told her, curtly, "You want to visit Grandma? Take the bus."

Back at the precinct, it took some time to figure out how to write the complaint—for, 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 keystone 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 affront to how far we've come from the hardscrabble west of Ireland and the docks of Hell's Kitchen. For the next generation to pound a beat might mean that his grandchildren would not try cases in the Supreme Court but instead make their livelihood digging potatoes with a stick by the crossroads outside Ballinrobe. Ah, *acushla machree*.

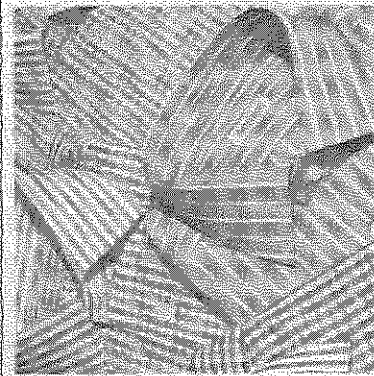
Now, after a few years on the job, I have my own war stories. On weekends, I'll sit back, lift up my feet, and tell my girlfriend, "I took a bullet out of a lady's living room. It must have been shot from Jersey. It went through the glass, and stopped on the sill. It landed there like a sparrow." Or "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 home with an intact skin and 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, the perp, 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 so, 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 out on weekends and there's another cop there—at a wedding or a cookout or 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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