

Chapter Six

DEADLY WEAPONS

One of the first knife attacks I investigated occurred in a seedy hotel room on the Granville Street Mall. In response to a radio call, we entered the room through an unlocked door and discovered a female victim apparently unconscious in her bed. The sheet was neatly pulled all the way up over her head as if someone had already decided she was beyond hope. I didn't see any reason for optimism either when we uncovered her. There was hardly any blood flow from the deep stab wound to her chest, which was definitely not a good sign. As well, her face was totally drained of color and I couldn't tell whether or not she was breathing.

I leaned over her seemingly lifeless body while we awaited an ambulance and asked what seemed at the time to be almost a rhetorical question, "Are you there?"

Her reply seemed to come from somewhere very far away, as if she were disembodied and speaking from a different level of consciousness. The words were barely audible, and it gave me an eerie feeling just being in the same room. All she said was, "Janet did it."

The doctors who saved her life at the hospital later explained that the stab wound had penetrated her heart; she must have been balancing precariously between life and death while I spoke to her. Janet, the suspect, was arrested outside the hotel room just after our arrival. In fact, I could hear her screaming hysterically in the hallway as the victim was being placed on a stretcher. The suspect and the victim were close friends before the incident, and we later discovered Janet had stabbed her in a fit of jealousy over a man they had both been dating.

By the time the case came to court, the happy-go-lucky victim had made a complete recovery and showed no signs of the traumatic wound she had sustained that night. That made it difficult to illustrate to the judge just how serious her injuries had been, and how close she had come to dying.

The kitchen knife used in this assault was recovered at the scene. It had been driven into her chest with such force that the blade had bent to one side at almost a ninety degree angle. I thought this was graphic evidence of the brutality of this vicious, unprovoked attack. The suspect had stabbed her friend while she was sound asleep, so there was no possibility of claiming self-defense. Obviously the judge felt differently about this case, however. Although she was convicted, she was only sentenced to a few months of probation.

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When it comes to offensive weapons, most people probably consider a revolver far more dangerous than a knife. It may have something to do with the fact that people think of knives as kitchen utensils, while anyone who has ever watched TV is familiar with the prominent role of firearms in violent acts. Everyone knows the damage a gun is capable of inflicting, but it's

difficult to picture a knife as an effective weapon until you have actually observed its handiwork in person. In Canada, knives are used in more homicides than any other weapon.

There are many factors that combine to make knives the weapon of choice on today's crime-ridden streets. Most importantly, it is usually perfectly legal for criminals to carry knives, at least until they use the knife to stab somebody. Certain prohibited weapons like switchblades are, of course, illegal, but police must have evidence that a knife is to be used for an illegal purpose, or that it is concealed for an illegal purpose, before proceeding with criminal charges. Firearms are a little harder to obtain and more likely to land a criminal in jail for weapons charges.

Despite their benign image, there is no question that knives are deadly weapons. A stab wound to any particular portion of the anatomy is at least as potentially lethal as the damage wrought by a bullet. As well, it is difficult for investigators to prove that a particular knife was the actual weapon used in an offense, while specific firearms can often be linked to suspects or their shooting victims if a bullet is recovered at the scene of the crime.

There is another important difference. A criminal must be within arm's reach of his intended victim in order to do any damage. That makes a knife attack a very personal and deliberate matter, and usually poses some degree of risk to the aggressor.

A street policeman encounters knives almost every day, since most street criminals carry them either in their pockets or in sheaths on their belts. The prevalence of knives in combination with the already volatile atmosphere that exists at night in high crime areas such as skid road bars can only aggravate an already dangerous situation. For instance, fights that used to be settled with fists now tend to be resolved with potentially lethal stab wounds, inflicted in the heat of the moment.

The jail staff always get upset when a prisoner who should have been searched during the arrest process arrives at their booking desk in possession of a knife or any other weapon. Everybody makes mistakes, and I made mine one day during a cursory search of a cooperative prisoner after arresting him for public drunkenness. As I completed the frisk and assisted him into the back of the paddy wagon, my partner suddenly grabbed both his arms and jerked him back onto the sidewalk. He had noticed something I'd missed.

After pushing the prisoner securely up against the side of the wagon, he reached under the young man's T-shirt and pulled out a wicked-looking butcher knife. It had been concealed inside his belt, in the small of his back. Had he used the knife to slash someone while being booked into the jail, I would have been responsible. Mistakes like that can happen to anyone, but I vowed then and there never to let it happen to me again.

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I learned another valuable lesson late one night in the West End. Two of us were talking to a gentleman as he was sitting in the driver's seat of his car. We suspected there were outstanding warrants for his arrest on impaired driving charges, but there was no reason to believe the stop was anything other than routine.

He was polite and cooperative, although at first he denied having any identification papers on him. Then he changed his mind, stating calmly that he remembered hiding his driver's license under the front seat so no one would steal it. He was not much of an actor, and I knew immediately that something was wrong. As he reached under the seat, we both instinctively grabbed him and pulled him bodily through the car window. There were no papers there, of course. We did find a sharp hunting knife directly under the driver's seat, as well as a loaded rifle hidden under the back seat.

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I spent five minutes one afternoon watching a prostitute literally holding herself together. She was sitting calmly in a chair, but from the amount of blood seeping through her clothing, I knew she was seriously but not fatally injured. She explained that a trick with a paring knife had slashed her when he suddenly went berserk in her hotel room just a few minutes earlier. There was no sign of him by the time we arrived.

After confirming that he had left the hotel, I asked her to show me her wounds so I could brief the ambulance attendants when they arrived. She first moved her right hand from where it was grasping her left upper arm, thereby exposing a gash that extended deep into the muscle tissue. She was squeezing the two sides of the incision together to staunch the blood flow. Fortunately her left hand was still functioning well, despite the injury to the upper arm, because she was using it to put pressure on another vicious wound, this one on her thigh. She also had a shallow cut to the abdomen, and a "defense cut" on the palm of her hand where she had tried to protect herself from the suspect's knife. If she had fainted before having a chance to call the police, she would surely have bled to death in a matter of minutes.

She survived her injuries. I talked to her briefly at the trial several months later after the suspect pled guilty to an assault charge. The suspect's friends from his alcohol treatment program gave glowing testimonials in his defense, so the judge chose to ignore his violent criminal history and merely suspended his sentence.

The outcome of the trial did not seem to surprise her. When I asked her how she felt about the suspended sentence her attacker had received, she explained that the same thing had happened after another incident several years earlier when she was attacked by another customer. The courts, she had long ago decided, placed little or no value on the life of a prostitute. She fully expected this suspect to attack yet another unsuspecting hooker the next time he fell off the wagon, as he seemed to enjoy such behavior. I had no reason to disagree with her. That is the way the justice system operates.

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It is difficult to imagine anything more disturbing than the eyes and the facial expression of a seriously-injured child. I was called to a home in a quiet neighborhood one afternoon to investigate a report of a stabbing. The people who met me at the door were hysterical. There were several adults simultaneously screaming and yelling in my direction, so I had to calm them down first in order to locate the victim. They eventually led me to the bathroom, where a tiny preschool-aged girl sat in a half-full bathtub,

bleeding from several vicious stab wounds in the area of her vagina. She was crying quietly, obviously in shock.

I ordered her mother to lift her out of the tub and place her on a bed in the next room. I then grabbed a clean sheet and bunched it up so she could clamp it between her legs because I wanted to apply pressure on the wounds while we waited for an ambulance.

The child regained her composure quickly, and soon began reassuring her mother that she was going to be okay. I could not help but be impressed by her pluck under such nightmarish circumstances. I managed to get her talking about the attack as we loaded her into the ambulance. She told me she had been stabbed several times with a pocket knife by someone she didn't know but had seen before around the neighborhood. She had no idea why this person suddenly decided to attack her. By the time she left for the hospital, where she eventually made a complete recovery, we had obtained an excellent description of the suspect from her.

The suspect was later identified as a mentally-disturbed juvenile from the neighborhood. He was eventually arrested by detectives and charged. He already had a history of committing violent acts against other children, despite his tender age, and was probably doomed to continue this cycle of violence. It is doubtful that a brief period of incarceration in a juvenile facility and cursory treatment by whatever experts were available to counsel him would be of much benefit. Only after he reaches the legal age of adulthood will he finally be incarcerated for any reasonable length of time, and of course by then it is too late to change his deviant criminal behavior anyway. The criminal justice system as it exists today is next to useless when dealing with juvenile offenders, and I can only hope that eventually something will be done to rectify the situation. I'm not holding my breath.

We attended the second floor of a skid road hotel to check a report that someone had been knifed. By following a trail of fresh blood we finally located the victim, a young native male well known to us for his drug involvement. He was in very bad shape with serious stab wounds in his back. He was obviously not long for this world.

Although I have watched several people die in the course of my police duties, his death throes were by far the most grotesque and shocking. He was thrashing around on the floor like a freshly-landed fish, and the agony he was experiencing defies description. He looked like he was screaming, but incredibly no sound emerged. It was as if the torment was confined somehow inside his body.

Although his eyes flashed from side to side, I doubt he was aware of our presence at that stage of his suffering. There was absolutely nothing we could do to help him until the ambulance arrived. There was something I felt obliged to do as a police officer, however, even though it was a thoroughly disagreeable task. I leaned over him and repeatedly asked who had stabbed him. I was hoping for a dying declaration from him that could be used in court against his attacker, or at least some clue about the identity of his assailant to give us something to work with. Had he been sentient and able to talk, there was no doubt in my mind that he would also have understood

he was dying. This knowledge on the part of the victim is one of the elements that must be proved in order for a dying declaration to be admissible later in court. Unfortunately, he didn't, or couldn't, say anything to me.

I helped the ambulance crew carry him downstairs. Although all of his vital signs were lost the moment his body tilted downward during the descent, the attendants did manage to bring him back to life temporarily. I accompanied them to the hospital, and like many such trips this one was a series of loud noises and jarring sensations as the siren blared and the car accelerated and swerved violently through traffic. I did my best to help as the paramedic, balancing himself against the wild gyrations of the ambulance, worked feverishly to keep the victim alive. There was little he could do.

Upon arrival at St. Paul's Hospital, the victim was rushed into the emergency room where doctors made a valiant attempt to save him. One of the stab wounds had penetrated his heart, and his condition deteriorated rapidly. As a last resort, the doctor opened up the victim's chest cavity and massaged his heart. The technique didn't work and he was pronounced dead shortly thereafter.

After the incident I was the subject of some good-natured abuse from other officers who had witnessed the one-sided conversation. They chided me for pestering him during the waning moments of an active criminal career, but it was something I felt was necessary at the time. Had the attempt worked, the statement would have been invaluable evidence if a suspect was ever arrested and tried for his murder.

I often ended up loitering in the emergency room at St. Paul's Hospital, watching the staff work on seriously-injured victims from incidents I was assigned to investigate. I never ceased to be impressed by their obvious dedication and magnificent teamwork. There was a standing joke amongst policemen that if you wanted to avoid the extensive paperwork involved in a typical homicide investigation, you should arrange for your stabbing or gunshot victim to be sent to St. Paul's. If there was even a spark of life left by the time the victim arrived at the emergency ward, the staff would inevitably work some kind of miracle. Assault reports were far easier to write than homicide reports, and you didn't have to make those troublesome notifications to the next of kin.

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After a busy night shift, I was parked on the 1100 block of Granville Street writing a report when I noticed a very large individual staggering in my direction, clutching his midsection. As he approached my car, I recognized him as a notorious pimp and strong-armed. I knew this very unpleasant individual had been responsible for rolling countless numbers of tricks lured up to hotel rooms by his wife, a prostitute who was presently in jail. He was a typical bully who truly enjoyed hurting the people he robbed.

I jumped out of my car and grabbed him as he tried to walk past me. As I did so, I discovered he had been stabbed in the abdomen. I was not at all sympathetic to his plight; in fact, I was sorely tempted to just ignore him and drive away. However, I knew that wherever he wandered at that time of the night, people would be calling 911 to report an injured person. I offered

to put him in an ambulance, but he looked around to find various street people standing nearby watching and immediately began playing a macho role for the benefit of his audience. After screaming obscenities at me, he tried to wander away.

When an individual refuses treatment for serious injuries, there are few easy options. In his case, I would cheerfully have allowed him to proceed off into the sunset, but the circumstances obliged me to take some action. I stopped him again and informed him that an ambulance was on the way and he would have to ride in it to the hospital or risk trying my patience. He still put on a bit of a show for the street people as we waited for the ambulance, but his resistance deteriorated as blood loss gradually sapped his energy. As soon as he was safely inside the ambulance where he could not be seen by his fellow denizens of the night, this particular tough guy promptly broke down in very unmanly tears and repeatedly asked the famous rhetorical question, "Am I gonna die?"

The trip to the hospital was punctuated by laughter from everyone but our victim. The sight of this vicious criminal whimpering in fear now that the shoe was on the other foot amused me so much that I had to leave the treatment room to avoid disturbing the attending physicians because I couldn't stop laughing. Unfortunately for society, fate eventually chose to award him many more years of criminal activity.

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I was parked in the 300 block of Columbia Street one night, watching the criminal element at play. Without warning a black male, in obvious difficulty, stumbled into the side of my police car. I shone my flashlight on him to assess his injuries, and quickly filled a page in my notebook trying to catalog the different wounds while we waited for an ambulance.

He had stab wounds to the front and rear of his torso, and serious cuts on the back of his head, the left side of his neck and over his left eye, as well as widespread bruising to his face. He had come up from Seattle, he explained, to meet his fiancée's family. They were members of another ethnic minority, and they had collectively taken exception to his particular birthright. As a family they spontaneously decided to cancel the engagement by murdering him with a barbecue skewer and a wine bottle. In fact, his future mother-in-law was among the attackers.

Luckily, he somehow managed to escape before they could kill him, although they made a sincere effort to finish the job. He survived his injuries after hospital treatment. Subsequent cross-examination at a trial several months later revealed that he had been less than candid with us that evening, withholding certain embarrassing details about his own behavior that night which might have influenced our handling of the case. As a result, the entire unhappy family was acquitted of all charges. Ironically, he married his fiancée anyway, despite the fact that he still had good cause to fear for his safety whenever he met her family on the street. I always pictured him as the epitome of husbands with serious mother-in-law problems.

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Another stabbing victim managed to get my attention with several blasts on his car horn one evening as I walked into the front of the police

station. He emerged from a late model luxury car to display a fresh slit in his abdomen, the result, he said, of picking up a female hitchhiker. He claimed that she had stolen thirty dollars from him as well. That made it a robbery. I gave my radio operator a description of the female suspect while the victim was being placed in an ambulance, and two alert beat policemen picked her up five minutes later at a nearby street corner where she was already looking for another customer.

The investigation went well until I interrogated the suspect. She readily admitted responsibility for the stabbing, but stated it had occurred accidentally during a struggle with a trick who had tried to steal back his money after failing to climax. Her story almost had the ring of truth to it, so when I attended the hospital to interview the victim I was already a little suspicious.

He stuck to his original story that he had been robbed by a hitchhiker he'd innocently picked up in the skids, even after I pointed out inconsistencies in his recollection of the events. He denied that any act of prostitution had ever taken place, or that he had tried to obtain a refund from the hooker by using force. I had him put his version of the story in writing and then sign it.

It was the kind of case that is very troublesome to take to court, in that I knew neither the victim nor the suspect was telling me the whole truth about the incident. Because there was enough evidence to forward the charge to prosecutors, I had to leave it up to a judge to determine what really happened.

There was no doubt that he'd actually been stabbed by our suspect. She admitted that much. On the other hand, it was obvious that the victim was lying, at the very least about soliciting the prostitute. Since he could not be charged with an offense simply by admitting that he'd solicited her, I couldn't understand why he didn't just tell me the truth. The motive eventually emerged in court when he reluctantly showed up with his wife in tow. She obviously didn't know about his nocturnal dalliances yet. She was there when the threads of his story inevitably unraveled under cross-examination.

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Even a trip to jail to do paperwork could prove interesting. One night as I was walking by the holding cage where recently-arrested prisoners wait to be searched and booked into cells, I heard a slurred voice cry out, "Hey pig, I've been stabbed and I need help!"

The other prisoners sharing the cage with him quickly shuffled as far away from him as possible. I stopped and explained to him in terms he could easily understand how I felt about being compared to other species. When I asked him if he was telling the truth, he reluctantly opened his jacket and showed me a large incision in his stomach that had exposed some of his innards. He explained that he hadn't mentioned the injury to the officers who arrested him for causing a disturbance because he didn't think it was important at the time. Now he was beginning to worry about dying, so he wanted his wounds treated.

He did survive, but he refused to explain how he came to be stabbed in the first place. This reluctance to assist the police in their investigation is surprisingly common when dealing with street people. Sometimes they do not wish to violate the convict code, which says you never squeal to the cops about anything. In some instances, the victim intends to settle the score himself if he survives his injuries. Nevertheless, it is always nice to have a policeman present during critical medical treatment, if for no other reason than to offer the uncooperative victim an opportunity to unburden himself at the last minute if doctors deliver bad news regarding his life expectancy.

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Knives are commonly used in street robberies, although a firearm is probably far more menacing. Up close, however, a knife with a prominent blade can be very frightening when it is held by someone with evil intent. I have taken reports from several wide-eyed robbery victims who showed me a red mark on their throats where some robber had pressed the point of his knife for effect. It takes a very brave or foolish person to ignore that kind of intimidation.

I recall interviewing a female prosecutor who had just been robbed outside the parkade exit to a department store one Christmas Eve. Her description of the suspect was fairly sketchy. On the other hand, it was obvious from her detailed depiction of the six inch dagger he waved in her face that she would never forget her view of the robber's weapon from close range.

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Every emergency call on the radio was preceded by a warbling alarm tone to get our attention. When the alarm sounded one quiet Sunday afternoon, I learned that someone had just used a knife to rob a West End drug store. I was working an East End car, so I had no reason to get involved in the investigation. Because nothing much was happening in my area, I decided to cruise the Chinatown district, looking for anyone matching the robber's description. Because there are so many ways to leave the West End, the odds of him heading my way were slim. Furthermore, his description was rather vague and seemed to fit many of the people I passed on the street. The only good news was that he was wearing white pants instead of jeans.

After a frustrating hour of driving through Chinatown traffic, one individual I spotted hitchhiking at Keefer and Main caught my eye. As I drove up he made a determined effort to pretend he hadn't seen me, but his attempt to look nonchalant was instead translated into an unnaturally stiff stance. When I finally approached him he became more and more nervous.

Then when I stood directly in front of him, questioning him aggressively, he fell into the trap of attempting to answer all my questions as quickly as I could put them to him. I just increased the pace, cutting off his answers immediately when I sensed he was attempting to mislead me. After circling around the issue of where he had been for the last few hours, he made the mistake of admitting that, yes, he had been inside that particular drug store earlier that afternoon. He hadn't noticed any robberies taking place, he stated innocently, and he tried unsuccessfully to act as if he was shocked that I would accuse him of doing something illegal.

That admission, coupled with his resemblance to the suspect description, was enough reason to handcuff him and put him into a lineup at the police station. When I searched him, I found a knife in his pocket that was similar to the description of the weapon used during the robbery. I also seized some money from his wallet, which happened to be the same amount stolen from the drug store. A positive identification by witnesses completed the case, and a check of his criminal record disclosed that this was not the first time he had committed a robbery.

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When I first joined the force, I covered a dog squad member who was following a getaway car from the scene of a holdup at a West End hotel. The suspects had used a knife to rob the desk clerk. I was the only car available to assist in the area, and since there were several suspects inside the vehicle, we were particularly careful about where and how we stopped them. By pulling them over in the middle of an elevated viaduct, we could be relatively sure the occupants wouldn't be able to escape until we sorted out the situation.

The stop was done by the book. We pulled in directly behind the vehicle and, at gunpoint, ordered the occupants to exit one at a time. Before the first passenger had a chance to open his door, however, an unmarked car from another patrol area screamed up the viaduct ramp the wrong way and screeched to a stop beside the suspect vehicle. Two policemen in plainclothes emerged from their car, ran up to the passenger door and yanked it open. They then pulled the closest occupant out, bundled her into their car, and left the scene before the brake dust from their sudden stop had settled. We were left with the rather anticlimactic task of sorting out the rest of the prisoners ourselves.

What had transpired, we found out later, was the result of pressure from their boss to produce an arrest that night. After stealing our prisoner, they had simply booked her into the jail under their badge numbers in order to collect credit for the arrest. She would have gone to jail anyway, at least until we sorted out who was actually involved in the incident, but of course their arrest procedures were outrageously flawed. Every time anyone suggested compiling meaningless arrest statistics as a way of monitoring a policeman's productivity, I used this case as an example of why any form of arrest quotas was a bad idea.

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Although possession of a switchblade is clearly illegal, there wasn't a crook in Vancouver who couldn't find some unlawful use for a knife which they could open with one hand, if for no other reason than the dramatic impact. Street people used to attempt to circumvent the law by modifying a standard folding knife so that a flick of the wrist would snap the blade out and lock it into place, ready for use. Years ago, the courts used to accept criminal charges against people carrying these modified knives as long as one quick flick of the wrist was sufficient to expose the blade. The only catch was that a policeman had to be able to demonstrate the illegality of the weapon in front of a judge in court.

As a result, on some of the less civilized streets in our city, it was not uncommon to see officers flapping their arms wildly away from their waists as if they were brushing off angry hornets. Each weapon had to be tested individually on the street before an arrest could be made, and some policemen worked up a sweat before they discovered the exact wrist motion necessary to flick the blade open. When the case made it to court, the knife had to open the first time or the charges went nowhere.

In the hands of criminals, these flick-knives posed an obvious danger to potential victims, but they also caused more than a few police casualties. Testing them to determine how easily they opened was a science mastered only by a few expert witnesses, and the rest of us often lost control of the knife during the demonstration. I was once struck in the stomach with the handle of an open flick-knife as it spiraled through the air, and I know of one incident where a courtroom demonstration ended with the flick-knife embedded rather dramatically in the judge's bench.

We were on our way to a coffee shop one noon hour when we overheard a policeman we knew ask for an ambulance over the radio. When the radio operator asked him for more details, he mysteriously refused to explain his request. Something about the way he talked led us to believe he was in some kind of trouble, although he definitely didn't ask for any assistance during his conversation with the operator. That just made us even more curious, so we made our way to his location as quickly as possible.

We found him standing on a busy street corner, putting pressure on the inside of his thigh to stem the blood flow from a knife wound. It was self-inflicted, the result of testing a folding knife that worked all too well, and he had been too embarrassed to ask for help over the air.

I will never forget the horrified look on the face of a middle-aged female witness who approached me as we put the officer in an ambulance. She was in tears, and obviously extremely moved by the sight of an injured policeman. "Excuse me, but is he going to be okay? I have to know." I wanted to reassure her, but because I was in a hurry I didn't. It was rude and it was a mistake. In retrospect, I regretted not stopping to explain what had happened because of her sincere concern and the fact that we have so few fans as it is. Fortunately his injuries proved to be fairly minor, but all it takes is one nick of the femoral artery to bleed to death in a matter of minutes.

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Three of us were waiting outside a business premise in Chinatown for the owner to attend after a false alarm. It was after midnight and the street was quiet. While I was busy talking, one of the officers with me wandered away without saying anything. I turned around to find that he had crossed the street and was approaching an elderly Chinese gentleman walking toward him in the dark. I followed the policeman across the street to find out what was going on.

From my angle I could see the elderly gentleman suddenly pull something shiny from inside his coat. I just had time to grab his wrist as he jabbed a long and very sharp butcher knife in the direction of the other policeman's stomach. Between the two of us we managed to wrestle it out of

his hand without anyone being hurt. It was not as easy as I would have expected. Although the gentleman was very old, at least in his seventies, he was still surprisingly strong.

Because he could not speak a word of English, we were relieved when an Asian male stepped out of the darkness on his way to a parking lot. We needed help. "Can you please translate for us? I don't know if he speaks Mandarin or Cantonese."

The young man grinned. "I'd love to, except that I'm Japanese."

We were soon approached by a responsible member of the Chinese community who helpfully offered his assistance as a translator. It turned out that the elderly gentleman liked to walk late at night, even though he had been strong-armed several times recently. The alert policeman had heard something metallic hitting the ground across the street and walked over to investigate. We learned through the translator that the old man had accidentally dropped his knife on the sidewalk. The knife, he stated with a grin, discouraged all but the most aggressive of robbers. Because his eyesight was poor now, he had mistaken the uniformed policeman for a strong-armed, and he decided to defend himself from this perceived threat the same way he always did, by pulling out his knife.

Even a bullet-proof vest would not have helped this policeman very much, had he been wearing one. All of us had heard the story of a protective-vest salesman demonstrating the effectiveness of his product in front of a room full of law enforcement officials. He had successfully used the vest to protect himself from a pistol bullet, but when he had a volunteer from the audience stab him with a knife, the blade penetrated his vest and he died.

The Chinese community was usually pretty good about taking care of its elderly citizens. On this occasion, our translator cheerfully volunteered to see that the gentleman got home safely, even though he had never met the man before. We thanked him and went about our business, grateful for a happy ending to what could have been a disaster.

My partner and I dropped by a rundown hotel just off Granville Street one evening in an attempt to locate a fugitive. When we walked into the second floor hallway, we found wall-to-wall wet blood trails everywhere we looked. There were a couple of large pools of blood still coagulating on the floor. The biggest looked like it contained nearly half a pint. More dramatically, there were grotesque blood smears and bloody hand prints on the walls and around almost every door in the corridor.

It was obvious that someone was in imminent danger of bleeding to death. Because there had been no recent ambulance calls to the address, we were relatively certain our victim was still somewhere nearby. We began knocking on doors in an urgent attempt to find him before it was too late.

When no one responded, it was clear we would have to start breaking down doors in case the victim was already unconscious. A supervisor who dropped by out of curiosity asked us to try knocking on all the doors one more time, primarily because he was anxious to avoid having to write reports on the inevitable damage that would result from wholesale kick-ins of every

room on the floor. We did so, and our efforts were rewarded when a bloody apparition finally stepped out into the hallway and shouted in our direction. "What the hell do you want?"

He was literally covered in blood from head to toe. The flesh around one eye was hanging from the socket, supported by his bloody glasses. There were a number of deep stab wounds to his face and several more elsewhere on his body. Although his injuries obviously required emergency treatment, he drunkenly refused an ambulance ride to the hospital.

We had a good look around his room while waiting for him to change his mind. My partner found a bloody paring knife in the sink. It was liberally coated with fresh blood, like everything else in the room. As best we could tell, the victim had apparently been stabbed during a drinking party around his kitchen table. He must have wandered drunkenly up and down the hallway looking for help, and then finally returned and flopped face down onto his bed. Blood had soaked right through his pillow, blankets and mattress, and was pooling under the bed even as we watched.

We finally convinced him to visit the hospital. Once the blood was cleaned off his face, we were able to recognize him as a drunk we had arrested several times before. He survived his injuries, which was not surprising because the derelicts we usually dealt with were a hardy breed from decades of living on the streets. Their battered bodies could often absorb a tremendous amount of abuse before succumbing to the inevitable pitfalls of their chosen lifestyle. Many had interesting stories to tell about their backgrounds, but only if you talked to them before they consumed their first bottle of the day. Our victim never did tell us what actually happened that night, either because he didn't want to incriminate a friend or because he couldn't remember.

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I remember listening to a veteran officer reminiscing about his career just after I joined the police department in 1975. He had plenty of the usual war stories to tell, but one of the things he said surprised me. In over thirty years of police work, he claimed, he had never drawn his service revolver except at the range during annual qualification. He was the exception to the rule, even in those gentler times, and any policeman who works the streets today knows that only too well.

While firearms are not nearly as common here as they are in the United States, Canadian criminals still have no problem equipping themselves with as much firepower as they want. Idiotic gun registration laws will do nothing to change this.

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My first potentially-dangerous gun call began with a routine license plate check of an Ontario car I was following. The radio dispatcher informed me that this particular vehicle was on file, associated to a group of jail escapees from eastern Canada. The antiquated paddy wagon I was driving was on its last legs, so I had my hands full just trying to follow the suspect vehicle through the crowded West End without losing it. I also had to decipher the street signs I was driving past in almost total darkness so cover

units could locate me if I managed to pull the car over. There were at least four occupants, so I preferred not to try arresting them on my own.

The suspects made no attempt to lose me, but instead turned into a parking lot on a dark side street before my cover units had a chance to arrive. Nothing happened for about thirty seconds. I blocked the only exit from the lot with my wagon and waited for them to make the first move. I knew there was a good chance they were armed, so I had to be prepared for the worst.

I was still attempting to give the radio operator a better description of my location when suddenly all four parties in the car simultaneously opened their doors and began to exit the vehicle. Several cars from my district were on their way to cover me, but so far they were nowhere to be seen. I had to do something instantly or face the humiliating fate of losing all the suspected escapees.

I jumped out of the wagon, pointed my service revolver in their direction and threatened in a loud voice to open fire unless they all got back into the car immediately. Amazingly, they all complied without any sign of resistance. I saw the passenger in the front seat duck down for about thirty seconds, but I couldn't tell what he was doing. After cover arrived and all the suspects had been arrested without a struggle, I took a good look through the car for any evidence the passengers might have hidden. I came up empty.

We determined that one of the parties inside the car had nothing to do with the escapees, so he was sent on his way. We had to keep the other three in custody until we could determine which of them was wanted because they all lied about their names and criminal records. I transported them to jail where a strip-search of the prisoners led to the discovery of a handgun magazine containing several rounds of ammunition in one of the suspect's socks.

I remembered seeing him crouch down under the dash on the passenger side as I waited for cover, so I searched the interior of the car one more time. I still came up empty. We had reason to suspect that the car was stolen since its Vehicle Identification Number was obscured, so we had it impounded to the police garage for safekeeping. I asked the detectives to tear it apart in order to locate the weapon I felt certain was still hidden somewhere inside the car. The next day, after an exhaustive search, they finally located a .32 semi-automatic pistol jammed deep inside a heater vent under the dashboard. The detectives found my fingerprints inches away from the weapon. When I had reached in to search the heater, I had not gone quite far enough. The escapees were sent back to prison in Ontario. I never did find out why they decided not to attempt another escape while I waited for cover units to arrive.

* * *

I often hear police officers described as trained observers. That involves making observations, perhaps during the investigation of a crime scene, and then accurately reproducing those observations later for reports or for use inside a court room. A good street policeman will often see things of relevance to his work that a civilian might miss or misunderstand. Unless

he has reason to focus his full attention on a specific individual, most cops during routine patrol tend to develop the habit of constantly scanning their surroundings for anything out of the ordinary. For instance, a male officer giving directions to a tourist while standing on a busy sidewalk will probably be paying more attention to his surroundings than to the person he is talking to, unless, of course, that person happens to be an attractive female tourist.

It is of course important for police officers to keep their eyes open at all times, although there is a tendency to relax a bit while on a coffee break, or while interviewing crime victims after the suspect has left the scene. I learned that particular lesson one evening during my second year on the job. I spent five minutes talking to a landlord who wanted to report an altercation he'd had with one of his tenants earlier that night. The interview went well until the policewoman that covered me on the call suddenly reached over and pulled a semi-automatic pistol from the front of the landlord's belt. It had apparently been displayed there prominently throughout our conversation. It was not loaded. He explained that he was wearing it for protection around the building because of unruly tenants. I resolved to pay more attention to my surroundings in the future.

* * *

One of the most valuable and disheartening lessons a young police officer learns is that pointing his service revolver at a suspect does not necessarily command the kind of respect they might anticipate. On television cop shows, a glimpse at the hero's gun is usually sufficient to control even the most unruly of suspects. In real life, it turns out, many of the people a police officer runs across have a tendency to ignore all forms of authority, even at gunpoint. Some of these individuals are drunk or drugged, others suffer from some form of mental illness, and more than a few lead such a troubled existence that they could care less whether they live or die.

Early one summer morning, just after daybreak, I covered a supervisor who had just arrested an impaired driver. The supervisor asked me to process the driver, who was still sitting in a truck parked across the street, while he investigated another incident that had occurred nearby. I approached the impaired driver and asked him politely to step out of the pickup truck to talk to me. He responded by drunkenly informing me what I could do to myself.

As I leaned into the cab to repeat the request in a more forceful manner, he became increasingly hostile. I was about to drag him out when he informed me that he intended to shoot me and then began rooting around under the driver's seat as if searching for a weapon. As I drew my service revolver and pointed it at his head, I yelled for him to put his hands on the dash where I could see them.

The supervisor returned upon hearing the commotion and told me to keep my voice down because there were tourists nearby who might complain about my language. I continued yelling at the suspect, who just ignored me as he rummaged around the truck's interior, screaming repeatedly that he planned to kill me as soon as he found his gun. I went so far as to use my left index finger to direct his attention to my service revolver, which was still

pointed at his head, while explaining that if he emerged with anything in his hand I would shoot him. He was not impressed by my threats.

I finally got tired of waiting for him to come to his senses. I reached inside the cab when he wasn't paying attention and dragged him out by his hair. I holstered my weapon as I forced him down to the ground and handcuffed him with a little help from the supervisor.

As soon as the suspect was safely inside the paddy wagon, we checked him on the computer and discovered that there were warrants for his arrest originating from another jurisdiction. He had been involved in a break-in several days earlier where several rifles and handguns were stolen.

However, a thorough search of the truck turned up no sign of the weapons. The only intelligible statement we got from our suspect was that he'd forgotten the stolen guns were no longer under the seat because he was too drunk to think straight at the time I arrested him. He refused to tell me where he had cached the stolen firearms, of course, so I left it to the detectives to investigate further.

* * *

A similar incident happened to me a few months later as I was driving through the skid road area with a civilian ride-along in the passenger seat. We were assigned to check a report of a man sitting inside a nearby bar with a handgun concealed in his belt. The reportee, a bartender who was still on the line to the communications center, supplied us with a detailed description. I memorized it as best I could while we sped toward the bar.

We drove to the front of the building to keep it under surveillance while awaiting cover units. As we pulled up, we heard over the radio that the suspect was about to leave the bar through the front door. Seconds after the broadcast, the door opened and a man who matched the description perfectly stepped outside. My eyes were instantly drawn to a conspicuous bulge that was clearly visible under the left side of his jacket. He walked westbound, and then north along a side street, ignoring our marked car.

Other police cars began pulling into the area, and I noted with relief that the street he was walking along was otherwise clear of pedestrians and traffic. I parked my car about twenty feet behind him and stepped out. After taking cover behind my car door, and urging my ride-along to stay low, I yelled at the suspect to put his hands up.

He turned in my direction and looked at me sullenly as if I was interrupting something. I told him that my service revolver was pointed directly at him, in case he couldn't see it because it was dark. He made no attempt to respond to my requests. I warned him repeatedly that he would be wise to do as he was told. Instead, he ignored my orders and continued to stare at me blankly.

Within a very short time the suspect was surrounded on two sides by police. They were positioned to cut off his avenues of escape while at the same time not creating a crossfire situation where police on one side would be shooting in the direction of other officers. I yelled at the suspect repeatedly while unashamedly using the type of street vernacular I hoped he would understand. I had to convince him that I was serious because I knew what would happen if he did something stupid in front of this many

policemen with their service revolvers pointed his way. I did everything I could to persuade him to raise his hands and surrender, but he only responded with an occasional obscenity directed at me.

A dog squad member arrived and took up a position nearby in case the suspect decided to run for it. We maintained the standoff situation for several minutes until finally the suspect turned abruptly and started to walk away. The police dog instinctively grabbed him by the leg and several officers then pinned him to the ground so that he could be safely searched.

We found a container of margarine under his jacket. There was no weapon. We asked him why he hadn't cooperated and he immediately launched into a tirade of indecipherable gibberish, the product of a very disturbed mind that was incapable of understanding what had happened. We released him and sent him on his way. Witnesses inside the bar still swore that they'd seen the suspect concealing what looked like a gun in his belt. We searched the table he had been sitting at, and double-checked the bushes he'd walked past on his way out the door, but the gun they thought they'd seen was never recovered, if indeed it ever existed in the first place.

Had he reached under his jacket for any reason, I'd have been faced with a difficult choice. If I waited to see if he had a real gun, he would have time to get off the first shot. On the other hand, if I protected myself by shooting him as soon as it looked like he was about to pull a weapon from his belt, I would risk killing an unarmed man.

I was involved in several similar situations during my career as a policeman. Often we had only a few seconds to decide whether or not to shoot. In the end I always made the right decision, although often that was due more to good luck than anything else. When facing an individual who might be armed, the consequences of poor judgment, or just plain bad luck, are truly frightening to contemplate.

Ironically, I was notified weeks later of a citizen complaint made against me as a result of this incident. One of the residents of the block, a woman who had once served as a secretary to one of the department big shots, had witnessed the confrontation that night and wanted to complain about my vulgar, offensive language. She had even provided a verbatim transcript of my futile attempt to talk the disturbed man into surrendering. I was impressed by her accuracy and thorough note-taking, because she managed to capture most of the esoteric words I used, as well as many of my favorite combinations of obscenities, blasphemies, vulgarities, expletives and imprecations, phrases that had taken me years of diligent practice to master. Her complaint concerned only my vocabulary, and no mention was made of the fact that I had almost shot what had eventually turned out to be an innocent man. The complaint went nowhere.

* * *

We received information from a reliable informant that the caretaker of a West End boarding house was in possession of a sizable amount of drugs. According to the informant, the caretaker guarded his room with several firearms, one of which was said to be a sawed-off shotgun.

My regular partner was off on vacation leave, so I obtained the assistance of two other officers I trusted. Armed with a search warrant, we

managed to get in the front door of the house without any difficulty. We had to stop there to regroup, however, because the drug dealer, in a fit of paranoia, had removed all room numbers from the dozen or so doors inside his building.

We decided to knock on doors one at a time in order to locate the correct suite the hard way. We were rewarded with a response from one of the first we tried. A male voice inside asked who we were. When I attempted to fool him by using a fictional name, he promptly informed us that he had a shotgun trained on the door and would blow our heads off if we tried anything stupid. At least we knew we were at the right address!

Understandably reluctant at this stage to kick the door in, we informed him that we were police officers, and that we had a search warrant for his suite. There was a long pause, and then I heard a deadbolt unlock from inside. The handle turned quietly, and from where I was standing beside the door I could see that it now stood ajar. This was not my favorite way to execute a search warrant! When I opened the door the rest of the way with my service revolver, I was greeted with the sight of a twelve gauge shotgun pointed directly at my head from several feet away. Fortunately the suspect chose to lower his gun after a moment of indecision rather than opening fire. He was handcuffed so we could search his apartment.

The shotgun he had pointed at me was not the sawed-off weapon we were looking for, although it was loaded and ready to fire. The only other weapon we found inside was a loaded .22 rifle with its serial numbers filed off. Since the law making it illegal to possess a firearm with the numbers obscured hadn't been enacted at the time, the rifle had to be returned to him. Our firearms specialists couldn't raise the original serial number to find out whether or not it was stolen.

We couldn't find any sign of the drugs we were seeking either, although we searched as thoroughly as possible without tearing up the floorboards and walls. Our suspect had just emerged from a Quebec prison where he'd served a lengthy sentence for robbery and kidnapping. When we began our search, he went berserk and tried to snap his handcuffs by flexing his muscles. The intensity of his anger was frightening to witness, and he made it clear he now wished he'd pulled the trigger when he first saw me.

We charged him with a firearms offense. We eventually lost the case in court, even though he admitted on the stand that he was an active drug dealer as well as the landlord of the boarding house. The defense lawyer argued that his client needed weapons to defend himself from thieves because of the large amounts of money he habitually kept on the premises from selling drugs and collecting rent. A gullible judge bought the story.

Occasionally, when nothing interesting was happening on our beat, my partner and I would stop and talk with some of the derelicts and street people who frequented the Granville Street mall. It was surprising how often these individuals would provide us with useful information, but it only worked if we treated them with respect and then asked them the right questions. Many were active criminals who would never overtly help the police unless there was something in it for them. As well, there was usually a lingering fear

of being labeled a police informant, although almost all crooks snitch to the police at some stage of their criminal career. However, if the conversation was steered in the right direction and nobody else was within hearing distance, even the most stubborn crooks would occasionally yield good information.

Gun cases were always my favorite, so I usually asked potential informants when they'd last seen a firearm. There were plenty of guns to be found throughout the underworld, and any crook foolish enough to brag that he had an illegal gun in his possession soon became the subject of rumors on the street. When these braggarts actually produced a gun in front of bar patrons to prove their virility, it was not uncommon to find that at least one member of his audience later informed a policeman of what he had witnessed. Some of the people we talked to had actually seen an illegal gun in the recent past, but were too addled or stupid with booze or drugs to remember enough to be of assistance to us. However, sometimes our extra effort paid off.

One of the people we talked to was flattered that we would take the time to listen to what he had to say. After a little coaxing, he informed us that he had just seen a sawed-off shotgun the night before. An individual he'd been drinking with had shown it to him when they went to his hotel room for a nightcap.

Our informant was able to provide us with the suspect's name and address. Another police department supplied us with interesting details from the suspect's background. A gun store in their area had been broken into and our suspect was apparently one of a group of would-be desperadoes who had been responsible. They had stolen enough firearms and explosives to fight a small war, but the RCMP had moved quickly and recovered most of the stolen property. Unfortunately, there was not enough evidence to justify charges against this particular suspect so they had to settle for running him out of town.

The gun was no longer there by the time we arrived. However, we found a box containing five rounds of twelve gauge magnum shotgun shells in his room. One round was a deer slug and the other four contained heavy buckshot. The crooks in those days used to refer to this combination as a "professional load" when it was used in a pump shotgun. The slug was held ready in the chamber to be used to blow a locked door open. The buckshot rounds, containing a dozen or so of the largest lead pellets you could buy, were used next to sweep the room clean of any occupants unlucky enough to be found inside.

We never recovered the sawed-off shotgun, although we were certain he had it stashed somewhere nearby. Unfortunately, nothing short of torture would have convinced him to turn the weapon over to us. We applied as much pressure as we legally could, finally offering him immunity from weapons charges if he would simply hand the gun over to us, just to get this vicious weapon off the streets before someone got hurt. He still refused, although he wouldn't give a reason for turning down our deal.

We made it abundantly clear to him that our extensive and wide-ranging investigation of his criminal activities was only beginning, and

although we weren't planning to run him out of town on a rail, he might later wish we had. He thought about that for awhile, and just as we were about to leave he decided to tell us about the person who'd sold him the ammunition. He had seen several handguns in the back room of the man's business when he purchased the rounds, and he willingly gave us a complete description of the man and his associates.

Because the informant was of dubious reliability, there were insufficient grounds to obtain a search warrant to seize the handguns, even though this was before the restrictive new constitution was forced upon us. We decided to simply walk into the suspect's business and sweet-talk him into letting us see the back room somehow.

Our suspect was not hard to identify, as he was confined to an electric wheelchair with a disability that left him the use of only the fingers of his left hand. He was obviously in poor health when we dealt with him, and he admitted that he didn't expect to live much longer.

The suspect willingly admitted to possessing the handguns, and then showed us where they were kept. He didn't seem too worried, probably because he knew full well that in his frail condition he would never have to face criminal charges anyway. We seized three working handguns, one of which was a particularly deadly-looking derringer. The guns, he explained, had been taken in trade for certain services he had provided in the distant past. He claimed he kept them there for his own protection, although in his present condition it is doubtful he could have fired any of them. There were indications, however, that he rented guns out to bikers for special occasions.

As we were about to leave with his guns, he asked us for help with a problem that had been bothering him for the last month. A man he'd hired as a part-time nursing attendant had taken one of his nicest handguns home with him after spotting it in a drawer. The attendant claimed that the firearm was broken, and promised that he would return it as soon as it was repaired. Our suspect realized now that he'd been ripped off. He felt that a little revenge would be in order, so he gave us the nurse's home address.

We agreed to investigate further, and eventually obtained a search warrant for the attendant's home after we verified that he still lived there. Our warrant was successfully executed early the next morning when we treated the occupant to an unusually rude awakening that ended with his arrest. We recovered a loaded Ruger .22 caliber pistol from his closet and charged him with possessing an unregistered, restricted weapon.

Like many crooks who get their hands on an illegal firearm, the first thing the attendant did when he got it home was to test fire it to see if it worked. We found a bullet-riddled stick of firewood that had served as his target, good evidence that he knew the gun was in working order. It was not an earth-shattering case, but we were pleased nevertheless to take these four handguns off the street permanently.

* * *

My first sergeant was from the old school of policing. He liked nothing better than to encourage the new people on his squad to arrest bad guys, and we learned a lot about police work from him. He came to us one night at the beginning of our shift to pass along details of a homicide that had just

occurred in another jurisdiction. The victim was a drug dealer who had frequented our beat before his untimely demise. Because we worked that area, he said matter-of-factly that he expected us to come up with an informant and solve the crime. It was, to say the least, a tall order for two inexperienced beat cops.

My partner and I started checking the beer parlors, talking to anyone who might have known the victim. The most we expected to come up with was an unsubstantiated rumor, because word of the homicide had undoubtedly already reached the bars. As a result of luck and persistence, however, we managed to locate an individual who had been a close friend of the victim. He eventually agreed to talk to us.

After a private conversation during which he tried to feel us out to see how much we already knew, the informant finally relented and told us about the murder. He admitted that he and the victim had worked together on several recent drug deals. As a result of his close association with the victim, and his knowledge of the victim's associates and enemies, he had been able to piece together details of the homicide even though he was not present when his friend was executed. He knew why the victim had been murdered, which type of gun had probably been used, and where the suspects lived.

We told the sergeant what we had learned, and then transported our informant to the nearby detachment responsible for investigating the murder. As much as we would have liked to arrest the suspects ourselves and present the investigators with a complete package, we knew it was best handled by the detectives assigned to the case. They seemed quite pleased to hear what we had done for them, and the informant's story was quickly verified as truthful and accurate. Unfortunately, the investigators never bothered to get back to us to express their appreciation, or even let us know the outcome of their work.

For my partner and I, the worst part was losing a potential source of crime information, because the best way to identify crooks and make quality arrests was through street informants. Consequently, the last thing we wanted to do was hand over a knowledgeable informant to another force because we knew only too well that we would never hear from him again. Our sergeant was impressed by our work, however, and that made the frustration a little easier to live with.

* * *

My partner and I were in the middle of investigating a motor vehicle accident when we heard an interesting-sounding gun call on our channel. We wanted to cover the call, but there was no way we could leave the accident scene at the time. It was a mess. An impaired driver had run a red light and struck an ambulance making an emergency run down Georgia Street. The ambulance then skidded, knocking down a metal lamp post and wrapping its front end around a tree. Miraculously no one was hurt, but it took us several hours to process the impaired driver and complete the reports at the station.

The first thing we did after returning to our area was to ask around about the gun call. The details were sketchy. A young man had apparently walked into one of the skid road hotels while carrying a sawed-off rifle inside his belt. The desk clerk noticed his gun and called the police as soon as the

suspect and his friends left. The assigned unit had obtained a brief description from the clerk but had failed to locate either the suspect or the gun during an extensive search of the area. The members told us they'd been given a direction of travel by one of the street people they interviewed as they tried to retrace the suspect's escape route from the hotel. Unfortunately, after following the directions, the trail had grown cold. They soon realized the street person had deliberately misled them, but by then he had disappeared.

Because the incident had happened on our beat, my partner and I decided we would start our own investigation and attempt to recover the gun. We returned to the hotel and found a bystander who denied knowing the suspect but reluctantly admitted that he recognized one of the individuals who had walked into the hotel with the suspect. After some initial difficulties, we eventually came up with an address for the gunman's friend. The friend was sound asleep at three in the morning when we dropped by unannounced to interview him.

This individual was not eager to help us at first, but after some aggressive coaxing he finally provided us with an address for the gunman. We paid this suspect a late-night visit as well, and eventually recovered a sawed-off .22 rifle from a hiding place near his room. The weapon had been shortened considerably by sawing off most of its barrel and stock. It was now a very lethal and easily-concealed package, complete with a loaded 10-round clip of ammunition.

The case was not without its problems, and we never did get a conviction. Our young suspect subsequently distinguished himself in later years by committing a host of violent acts, including slashing a man's throat with a butcher knife. We took some consolation in the fact that at least there was one less gun on the street.

There was one loose end. Our colleagues had mentioned a street person who'd sent them in the wrong direction by feeding them false information. During our interrogation of the suspect, he spontaneously boasted to us that he was still carrying the sawed-off rifle inside his belt when the officers assigned to the call approached him on the street and asked him if he'd seen anyone matching the description of their suspect. The officers indignantly denied that this was the case when we mentioned it to them later. We believed them, of course. After all, they were both trained observers.

* * *

I was working alone one evening when an informant my partner and I had developed approached me on Granville Street. He was a heroin addict and his wife worked the streets as a prostitute. He was having difficulty containing his excitement, because he truly enjoyed the challenge of putting a case together for us. According to his story, his wife was servicing a trick in her hotel room as we spoke. He had arranged the date for her, and then monitored the sexual activity from outside the room to make sure his wife didn't get hurt. The client was not one of her regulars, and all he knew about the man was that he had just entered Canada as a tourist.

Ten minutes earlier, his wife had slipped out of the room for a breath of fresh air during a lull in the activity. She informed her husband then that the trick was in possession of a loaded pistol. She explained that he seemed depressed and had told her he intended to commit suicide later in the evening after one last fling. As far as she knew, he'd stored the handgun in the glove compartment of a rental car which was presently parked at the rear of their hotel.

The trick would be up in the room for at least another hour, according to our informant's wife, the prostitute, so I was hoping I'd have plenty of time to prepare for the arrest. I located the proper vehicle and waited thirty feet away for another unit to cover me. Two policemen from my shift drove up a few minutes later. We were just discussing how we would handle the arrest, secure in the knowledge that we had at least an hour to prepare ourselves, when a man walked past us in the darkness and began unlocking the door of the rental car we'd been staking out. As usual, things had not gone according to plan.

We rushed over and grabbed him just as he was reaching toward the dash. The three of us frantically pulled him out of the driver's seat before he could do something we would regret later. I didn't start breathing again until he was safely handcuffed. I reserved the privilege of removing the semi-automatic pistol from its hiding place in the dash for myself. It was fully loaded with one round in the chamber and a full clip. All it would have taken to fire it was one squeeze of the trigger.

The informant poked his head around the corner, curious as to the outcome of his tip. In order to conceal his role in the affair, I went through the charade of manhandling him while he in turn acted as if he was concerned that the trick's rights had been violated. This kind of play-acting seemed melodramatic at times, but I had to make every reasonable effort to protect his anonymity. His life was at risk if his fellow criminals discovered he was providing the police with information.

* * *

A gun call that almost ended disastrously for me occurred during an otherwise quiet day shift. The communications center had received second-hand information that someone inside an apartment at a Barclay Street address was in possession of a high-powered rifle. He had apparently threatened to use it to kill his mother's new boyfriend, who was due to arrive there shortly.

We volunteered to check out the rear of that address in case he tried to escape via the back door. Other policemen with shotguns, part of what used to be called the Special Weapons Squad, were assigned to attend the front of the building where they would locate the suspect's suite and, if necessary, kick his door down. This was before the Emergency Response Team existed, and the Special Weapons members, armed with 12 gauge shotguns, had only a few hours more training than the rest of us. Consequently, we felt just a little bit safer at the back because that meant there would be an entire building between us and any potential shootout.

Somebody mentioned over the police radio that the building we were looking for was probably the Barclay Manor, a well-known boarding house on

Barclay Street we had driven past hundreds of times. I had even stayed there once years ago when I was hitchhiking across Canada. We were certain we could identify Barclay Manor from the rear, so we were confident that we had nothing to worry about until we could actually see the building. After checking the rear for potential escape routes, we planned to take up defensive positions behind cover and wait for the confrontation.

What could go wrong? The two of us, in full uniform, walked nonchalantly down the lane in search of Barclay Manor, but there was no sign of it in that block. We started to retrace our steps, certain now that either we must have been given the wrong address by the dispatcher or we had inadvertently walked down the wrong lane.

It was that fixation we had with finding Barclay Manor which almost cost us our lives. We immediately realized how badly we had screwed up when we caught sight of a man holding a rifle in the second floor window of an apartment building, fifty feet away. He was leaning out through the window, pointing a rifle directly at us. Obviously we were in the correct lane after all! We learned later that he'd been tracking us in his rifle sights the entire time we strolled blissfully down the lane. The address we'd been given for the boarding house was in fact correct, but it was not the address of Barclay Manor, which was actually a block away. Somebody had guessed incorrectly, and we had not bothered to question his false assumption.

In the movies, one has only to seek cover behind a picket fence or garbage can to avoid sniper fire. In real life this does not work since a bullet fired from a high-powered rifle will easily penetrate concrete walls and even pass through entire houses. We had nowhere to hide, so we sought cover as best we could beside a garage and aimed our puny little service revolvers in his direction.

He was still pointing the rifle at us, but for some reason he chose not to shoot. When we shouted at him to drop the gun, he ducked momentarily back inside the apartment. We broadcast details of our situation over the portable radio, and waited for his next move. Perhaps this might have been the best time to run for better cover, but neither of us considered it.

Seconds later he returned to his original firing position in the window and pointed his rifle in our direction again. We ordered him to drop his gun, but he still ignored us. In a gunfight our revolvers were no match for his rifle. Even with little or no firearms experience on his part, at close range it would have been easy for him to shoot at least one of us. That meant that at least one of us would probably die. Even worse, because our revolvers were far less accurate, and our issue ammunition was notoriously ineffective, he would probably get off more than one shot before we managed to disable him.

In my opinion, we would have been legally and morally justified had we chosen to use deadly force to end the situation. We decided to wait him out. It is difficult to explain why we decided not to shoot. In my case, I felt the best chance of both of us surviving was to hold our fire. It was a classic standoff, and I could only hope that he would, in the end, decide to surrender.

It was as if the suspect was reading my thoughts. Without any warning he suddenly let the rifle drop to the ground and then placed his hands on the window glass beside him in response to our shouted commands. Within a matter of seconds he disappeared from sight as the policemen at the front of the building kicked his door in and pulled him away from the window. As he was being taken away in handcuffs, he boasted quietly that he could have killed us both had he really wanted to, and he was right.

The rifle turned out to be a .303 Lee-Enfield, purchased earlier that week. We recovered it beneath the window where he'd tossed it. We were lucky. A shiny, brass .303 round that had been sitting in the chamber was clearly visible because the impact had driven the bolt half-open. The magazine had nine more shells in it, and the safety was off, ready for firing. All he had to do was aim and pull the trigger. We never did find out why he decided not to shoot.

We confiscated the rifle as evidence, of course, and charged him with the appropriate firearms offenses. Two years later, because of a bureaucratic foul-up, I was notified that the rifle would have to be given back to the suspect unless we could show cause as to why it shouldn't be returned. At first I thought it was a bad joke, but according to the memo that was the current procedure I was obliged by law to follow.

The suspect had pled guilty to a firearms charge the day after he was arrested. Unfortunately, a mistake had been made somewhere along the line and the prosecutor had not arranged for the rifle to be destroyed, even though the order should have been made at some stage in the proceedings.

I wanted to make certain that this weapon would never be returned to the would-be sniper, so I spent an entire shift going through old reports and writing new ones. I discovered that he had been sentenced to probation as a result of this incident and ordered to report to the probation staff the next day. He never bothered to show up, and nobody knew where he had gone.

Because of a bizarre but not uncommon legal technicality, he could not be charged with breaching the conditions of his probation, so there wasn't a warrant out for his arrest. In order to be found guilty of the breach offense, it was essential that his probation conditions, which included a requirement that he report regularly to his probation officer, be fully explained to him. This should have happened the first time he appeared at the probation office, which of course he never bothered to do. Consequently he never even served the token sentence meted out by the courts, and he could not be arrested now. I finally managed to have the rifle destroyed, but only because he had disappeared from the face of the earth and could not be contacted. This incident was just another example of how the modern criminal justice system often functions.

* * *

I have become accustomed to watching futile debates between gun control advocates and representatives from the National Rifle Association. The issue of gun control is recycled every time there is a massacre in the United States or Canada. The same old tired arguments are dusted off by each side to prove the merits of their position, and the show is always

introduced by the latest homicide statistics and graphic photos of some of the more gruesome multiple murders.

It is hard for me to relate to the extreme positions of either side, and it is unfortunate that the issue seems to allow no room for a realistic compromise. If I had to single out any argument that I believe is valid, it would have to be the gun lobbyists' call for longer sentences for individuals using firearms during the commission of a criminal offense.

When faced with news of a particularly vicious murder, many people feel more comfortable blaming an inanimate object for insane acts that, in truth, defy logical explanation. Then they can avoid confronting the reality that a fellow human being actually pulled the trigger and killed someone. The gun control issue is probably the best example of how society prefers to deal with the symptoms of a problem, rather than the causes.

Of course we will never impede the flow of arms to criminals, no matter how restrictive we make firearms regulations for honest gun owners. If society were to make a sincere effort to deter and punish criminals, the gun control problem would effectively take care of itself, requiring only a few housekeeping rules to regulate sales and possession. I do believe that a mandatory two-week cooling-off period before the delivery of a weapon might delay some people bent on self-destruction, but over the long run, no lives would be saved. Registering all firearms is a terrible waste of money because it does absolutely nothing to make citizens or police officers any safer.

I find it impossible to understand how people can argue that disarming citizens will deter the use of firearms by criminals. Most citizens, like most journalists and editorialists, are appallingly ignorant about crime and criminals. A national columnist, in a poorly-reasoned piece on gun control, generously conceded that police should be allowed to carry guns, with the exception of those officers on traffic duty. Traffic officers in the real world do police work and write tickets, so it is difficult to comprehend why they should not be allowed to carry their service revolvers.

I loved the story of the nationally-syndicated American columnist who vehemently advocated strict gun controls. This is the same man who then used an illegal, unregistered handgun to wound an unarmed trespasser in his yard after the young man tried to take a midnight dip in his swimming pool. Nothing could better illustrate the hypocrisy of those in the media who would lead us by editorial rather than by example.

* * *

Because every call a policeman attends is different, each incident must be approached with an open mind. Complacency and false assumptions can lead even the most experienced policeman to handle a call incorrectly, with potentially disastrous results.

I had just returned to work one autumn afternoon after several weeks of vacation, and I was feeling very mellow and relaxed. The call that welcomed me back to the violent reality of police work began routinely enough. I heard a one-man car ask for a cover unit to check a suspicious vehicle he wanted to stop in the East End. He mentioned something about a vehicle resembling the description of a getaway car involved in a string of

corner grocery-store holdups that had started just before I left for vacation. I was nowhere near his location, but because no one else was available, I volunteered to help out.

As I was en route, I heard him inform the radio operator that there were two Asian males in the car. In the back of my mind, I made a tenuous connection between his description of the car and its occupants, and a brief summary I'd read in the crime bulletins about another series of holdups. My recollection was that knives had been used during these robberies, and I was sure the vehicle description I'd read was significantly different. Anyway, I decided that this was probably a false alarm, and even if it wasn't, the worst we were facing was two suspects armed with knives. Because of my complacent approach, I started my part of the investigation with a less than professional attitude.

By the time I arrived on the scene, the suspicious vehicle had pulled into a parking lot, and the passenger had already emerged to enter a nearby restaurant. The driver was still sitting quietly behind the wheel, ogling us nervously in his rearview mirror.

The other police officer and I left our cars and stood nearby for a short while, waiting for the passenger to return so that we could talk to both of them at once. There were no other cars nearby to cover us, and we did not want to split up unless it was absolutely necessary. As a result, we chose not to follow the passenger into the restaurant.

After waiting a couple of minutes, we finally ordered the driver to step out of his car. We did a quick frisk as he walked up, just sufficient to make sure he wasn't armed, and then asked him a few vague questions. We wanted to find out his background, but we didn't want to frighten off the passenger.

I did a cursory search of the car for any obvious sign of weapons but found nothing. At this point the passenger finally emerged from the restaurant and calmly approached us. Neither of them looked or acted like crooks, so our guard was down right from the beginning. We talked to them for several minutes until another search of the driver turned up several rounds of .38 ammunition in his pants pocket.

Then, belatedly, I realized what we were dealing with. It was like waking up to the sound of your smoke alarm beeping. We handcuffed them both and then began a more professional investigation. Much to my chagrin, I soon discovered that handguns had in fact been used during the holdups they were suspected of committing. I should have asked at the time of the call, but hadn't. Beneath the driver's seat of their car, an area I had hastily searched earlier, we found a loaded revolver hidden under newspapers. The passenger had just been released after serving time in a penitentiary for armed robbery, and the driver turned out to be a member of a notorious local youth gang. We lodged the two of them in jail for robbery and weapons charges and requested that detectives follow up the case.

When I came on duty the next day, I happened to be in the same neighborhood on another call so I stopped by the restaurant the passenger had visited briefly. Neither of us had thought to check it out the day before. The owner approached me as soon as I walked through the door and asked

indignantly why the two suspects we'd arrested had already been released from jail. Citizens involved in police cases inevitably question the fact that suspects we arrest always seem to be released on bail immediately, even before the ink dries on our reports. I started giving him my standard explanation about the system being flawed, until I realized there was something else he wanted to get off his chest.

He informed me that the suspect who had walked into his restaurant yesterday, the passenger we had waited for outside, had returned to the restaurant today. In fact, he had just left the area as I pulled into the parking lot. According to the owner, the suspect had spent several minutes inside the men's washroom again, exactly as he had done the day before while we'd waited for him outside. The owner became suspicious this time and entered the men's room to find out what he was up to. He was just in time to watch the suspect remove an object that resembled a handgun from above one of the panels of the false ceiling and hide it inside his jacket. Now I knew that both of them had been packing handguns yesterday. We never found the second weapon.

The entire episode was mishandled from the very beginning, and as the senior member present, it was my responsibility. It was sloppy police work, and it could have got us both killed. I can only speculate that the two crooks must have planned to rob the restaurant or, in keeping with their usual method of operation, the convenience store beside it. Fortunately, when the first police car pulled in behind them, they evidently decided to try and bluff their way through a routine stop rather than opting for a shootout.

* * *

Family disputes are often cited as the most dangerous calls police officers have to attend. When members of a family start fighting amongst themselves, the result is a highly volatile situation that is prone to get out of hand without any warning. I attended thousands of them over the years. Most of them were resolved without incident.

I had wasted an entire day in court before coming to work on afternoon shift, so I was already very tired by the time I was assigned to cover another officer at a family dispute call one evening. The fight between a husband and his wife was still in progress when we arrived; their children looked on helplessly at the sad spectacle. The husband was Chinese-Canadian and the wife a native Indian. Judging by the hostility we witnessed between them, their marriage was all too obviously on the rocks. In fact he had just left hospital after recovering from stab wounds inflicted by his wife during their last serious argument. She had been charged with wounding and released on bail. Their marital situation had not improved since the incident, even though they subsequently reunited under the same roof in a final, acrimonious attempt to iron out their differences.

We immediately separated the two combatants. I ended up talking to the female half of the problem. She was intoxicated and quite obnoxious. After listening to her drunken, repetitive complaints for awhile, I just tuned her out. She developed an intense dislike for me, a feeling that was soon mutual. When we brought the husband and wife together in the same room in an attempt to arrange a temporary truce, the fireworks promptly began

again. I could see that the husband was nervous about something, and I also noticed that there seemed to be some by-play on the side between the wife and her older daughter. However, I was dead tired and eager to finish off the call so I ignored the indications that something was wrong.

Fortunately, the policeman with me was a little more alert. He sensed that we were missing something and investigated further. As a result, he ended up seizing a handgun the wife had stolen from her husband earlier that night. At some point during our call, their older daughter realized that her mother had secreted the .32 revolver in her purse. Rather than telling the police what was happening, she waited until her mother's attention was focused on me, removed the pistol from her purse, unloaded it and then hid it until we asked her to hand it over. The husband admitted that he too had guessed she had his pistol in her possession, but he had hesitated to tell us about the weapon because he didn't want us to send her back to jail.

It seemed that everybody in the house had sensed imminent danger except me. I could only speculate that extreme fatigue had switched off the internal warning bells that invariably alerted me during other potentially dangerous situations. It was not one of my better moments.

The weapon was properly registered in his name, and therefore perfectly legal. However, we convinced him that, under the circumstances, it would be best for all concerned if we stored it downtown at the police station until they sorted out their family problems. That was where the matter ended, at least as far as we were concerned.

* * *

I attended a family trouble call where the wife phoned in to say her estranged husband was presently parked in front of their house. She had been told he had a gun with him and was about to break in and kill his family. We were able to arrest the husband outside the house without anyone getting hurt. No weapons were recovered at the scene.

We discovered that police had been there many times before as the husband's mental state gradually deteriorated over the last couple of years. Other officers had previously seized his extensive collection of hunting rifles and handguns after his wife found him one night in a closet, huddled under a blanket and mumbling nonsense while he held the barrel of one of his shotguns inside his mouth. On this occasion we could only put him in the hospital after arresting him under the Mental Health Act. We had to hope he could be treated there and cured somehow before he got another chance to carry out his threat to murder the rest of the family.

This type of case is one of the most frustrating situations a policeman can encounter. The criminal justice system can do little to solve the problem of an individual with a mental illness who threatens to kill someone. The law offers few practical options in this case, although the wheels of the justice system are soon set in motion after an offense is committed. Everyone may be aware, for instance, that an abusive husband intends to murder his wife, but how can a judge sentence him to jail when he hasn't committed a crime?

Jail is not always the best alternative for dealing with a family dispute anyway, because sentences are usually short and the offender is released well before the expiration of his full sentence. With or without treatment, the

offender often emerges with even more bitterness and problems. Jail does not soften the hatred created by a marriage gone wrong, and with many individuals all the counseling in the world is wasted.

* * *

I had parked behind a battered, older model pickup truck while attending a routine call late one evening. While returning to my car, I noticed movement inside the rear canopy of the truck and stopped to investigate out of curiosity. Because it was dark there, it took me a few seconds to discern the silhouette of a man lying amongst piles of debris. I decided to knock on the rear window to rouse the occupant to see what he was up to.

It was not until after I had politely coaxed the elderly man out of his cramped quarters that I noticed the rifle lying beside him under his sleeping bag. It was loaded and the muzzle was pointed toward the tailgate where I was standing. I demanded an explanation, and he replied that he kept it for protection in case someone tried to break in.

He sounded a little strange to me right from the beginning, so when he began talking about the sensors and implants inside his head reacting adversely to various microwaves in the area, I was not surprised to find that he had a history of mental illness. It was fortunate that he had decided not to use the rifle on me, because in his confused state he could easily have panicked and squeezed off a round in the general direction of my face. The weapon was seized and subsequently destroyed with his consent.

* * *

My partner and I played an insignificant part in a case with interesting ramifications. Our role began when we arrested a man wearing a cast on his arm while he sat inside a restaurant frequented by drug traffickers on the Granville Street mall. There were outstanding warrants in his name for possession of a sawed-off shotgun. After we lodged him in cells we did a little research into his background.

By reading through the police reports, we discovered that the charge originated as a result of a motor vehicle accident. The suspect had been driving a borrowed car through Vancouver when he broke his arm after colliding with another vehicle. Police and an ambulance crew attended and sent him off to the hospital. The staff there noticed that he seemed in a big hurry to get the damage to his arm repaired and leave.

The investigator eventually checked inside the suspect's car to dig out the vehicle registration for his report. He found a sawed-off shotgun hidden in the back seat. Before the officer could make his way to the hospital, the suspect walked out of the emergency room and disappeared into the night. Since the policeman had already obtained the suspect's name and date of birth from his driver's license, a warrant was sworn out for his arrest, the same one we executed after picking him up inside the restaurant a couple of days later.

There was a punch line to the story. We were subsequently informed by detectives that this motor vehicle accident had come at a very opportune time for some unnamed Vancouver underworld figure. The detectives learned through an informant that the suspect had come to town to fulfill a contract killing with the sawed-off shotgun. He was apparently on the way to the

victim's house to complete the terms of that contract at the time of the collision.

* * *

There is often a great deal of confusion during the initial investigation of a complicated gun call. Sometimes you can never be certain of what has actually happened until some time after the dust has settled. I was involved in one incident that illustrates the difficulty of sorting out fact from fiction.

Two groups of Asian men were gambling inside an upstairs apartment on one of the busier East End streets. One group thought the other group of card players was about to rip them off. Someone pulled out a small handgun as the game began to break up. A fight ensued and several shots were fired as two individuals were being chased up the street. The shots missed their intended victims, and fortunately no innocent bystanders were hit.

Numerous police units attended after neighbors called 911. I stayed a block or two away from the area where the shots had been reported until further information was forthcoming because none of the reportees seemed to know exactly what was happening. While I was waiting in a nearby lane, a witness informed me that someone firing a handgun had gone northbound in this same lane only five minutes before I arrived. Judging by the five minute time delay, common sense dictated that the suspects were long gone because anybody involved in a shooting would never stick around after hearing police sirens approaching. I radioed what I'd heard to other units in the area and proceeded down the lane in case there was a shooting victim laying somewhere in the darkness ahead.

At the other end of the lane I saw two Asian males standing at the well-lit rear of a restaurant. Hoping that they might have seen something, I asked them the classic "which way did they go" question. They wordlessly pointed north so I continued my way down the lane, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

Suddenly there was a commotion over the police radio; a unit shouted that he'd just found the suspects getting into a car one block west of my location. By the time I arrived, the suspects were already in custody. A puzzled supervisor was trying unsuccessfully to unload the semi-automatic pistol while officers around him ducked frantically out of his line of fire.

After the firearm was safely stowed in somebody's trunk, I took a closer look at the suspects and noticed with a shock that they were the same two helpful souls that had sent me off in the wrong direction back in the lane. Since they had been arrested with the gun in their possession, there was no doubt they'd had it with them when I talked to them earlier. I saw no reason to clutter up the investigator's report with mention of my embarrassing close encounter, so I decided my services there were no longer required and left.

* * *

One of the cardinal rules I always followed as a policeman, especially after consuming copious amounts of coffee, was never to pass up a clean washroom. Whenever I ignored that rule, I inevitably found myself assigned to a call where I'd be stuck for hours, miles away from the nearest facility. It was a little-known subsection of Murphy's Law.

Late one evening we had a report of a possible robbery in progress at an all-night convenience store just outside our area. According to the dispatcher, the suspects had been seen watching the store earlier that evening. The reportee had just observed them don their ski masks in preparation for a holdup. Because it wasn't taking place in my area of responsibility, and since it was the end of a very long evening shift for me, I did not immediately head that way. They had lots of coverage already, and I was anxious to go home.

I changed my mind when I heard a unit chasing the suspect vehicle as it fled the scene of the holdup. He informed the dispatcher that the suspects were shooting at him from the rear of their van as they made their getaway. The chase continued until the robbers piled up their vehicle and fled on foot. One of the two suspects was immediately caught by a police dog, and a thorough search began for the other.

I volunteered to take a position on the north side of the area where the other bandit was supposed to be trapped. I stood near some trees to wait and watch in the shadows. The dog track was not going well and thirty minutes later the search seemed to have stalled. In fact, it was beginning to sound like the suspect has somehow eluded the police dragnet.

I could not leave my position until the dogmaster decided it was time to give up the search, but I started feeling a new sensation on top of the night time chill. An overflowing bladder was triggering an urgent need for the appropriate response. I checked to make sure nobody was looking, stepped further into the dark shadows of the nearby tree line and watered somebody's shrubs. By the time I was cleared to head home twenty minutes later, only a few diehard searchers remained in the area.

When I arrived for work the next day, I looked up one of the officers assigned to investigate the robbery and asked him what had happened with the search after I left. He reported that they finally collared the last suspect just ten minutes after my departure. They found him hiding amongst some trees on the south side of the search area. As he described where they had made the arrest, I realized that the armed robber could only have been hiding in the very bushes I'd watered.

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[Chapter 6 – Deadly Weapons](#)

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