

Things I Learned as a Cop (That Movies Won't Show You) – PART ONE

Hollywood gets police work wrong probably more than any other profession. One of the side effects of that is, for instance, that I get to watch multiple drunk/high people demand to be let out of jail because we failed to read them their rights (it doesn't work like that). It's kind of funny the first few times. I'd imagine the corrections officers didn't find it as funny as I did.

Anyway, I used to be a cop, and what I learned on the job is that it is far more ridiculous than any fictional portrayal. You're seeing people at their most insane/stoned/naked, all the time. So let me tell you ...

There's a Reason We Stay Out of Some Neighborhoods

There's an apartment complex in every city that cops just don't go into without lots of backup. I always imagined it was because those places were littered with armed gangsters, but that's just a part of it. What really keeps police out of a neighborhood is all the people who absolutely do not give one lonely, mountain-dwelling crap about the law. Here's an example:

I was cruising about one night and saw this drunken guy riding a horse through the streets, rolling through every lane, clopping into oncoming traffic. I turned on my lights and tried to pull him over. He decided to run away on horseback. I went after him, with my partner patiently explaining that I'm a moron. The horseman headed for that apartment building, the one our own protocols dictate that any officer who goes inside is always to be accompanied by at least three other officers.

He stopped the horse inside, possibly assuming that no officer would follow him for drunk driving a horse. Well, I sure showed him. We pulled up, and I leaped out of the car to grab the rider. The guy, in keeping with the old joke, immediately assured me that "The horse is sober."

But the guy was not, and wacky circumstances don't grant you license to endanger yourself and others while under the influence. I knew I wasn't getting horse registration off this guy, so I started to book him, at which point this little old lady came up and asked why I was arresting Horse Guy. I began to explain that he was drunk driving, and that horses do count as vehicles under the transportation code, when some random dude ran up and punched the old lady in the head.

Punching little old people is a felony, or at least it should be, so my partner and I chased the assailant through the complex. He vanished somewhere into the labyrinth and was lost to us, so I made my way back to the car, hoping maybe the lady knew who he was. But she had vanished, too. And so had the drunken rider. The horse, however, had been left behind.

No one deals with horses. Animal control didn't have the right facilities to house one, our station sure as hell didn't, and not even my sergeant knew what to do with it. I called a towing company and said I wanted a flatbed to move an abandoned horse, and was dismissed as a crank until I pointed out I was using the police-only number and that I did have a horse that needed to be ... impounded. Or something. In the end, we just moved it onto some grass and hoped it knew how to get home.

So that's why you don't go into those parts of the city alone. Stuff like that happens.

There's Just So Much Male Nudity

One night I was on patrol, alone, when a call came in from a nearby house alarm. I figured it was nothing -- they're usually dogs setting off a motion sensor or the wind or something. But I got there and saw a terrified woman clutching a terrified 6-year-old boy, and their front door was wide open. I asked what happened.

"I don't know, I woke up and the door was open, so I grabbed little Timmy [I don't remember his name] and we ran outside. But my husband won't come out. We've been yelling his name and he won't come out."

This freaked me out. Images of this dude being carved up by some serial killer filled my head (hey, I've seen the same horror movies you have). So I told my backup to hurry (I try to learn from said movies) and just ran in with my little pistol (but not enough, apparently). I yelled the guy's name and identified myself as police. I found the bedroom door locked, and with no response from inside. I kicked the bedroom door down.

This guy was in bed with his Bose headphones on and porn on the screen, just ...yeah.... and completely unable to hear a word.

I asked, "Are you OK?"

Blank look.

"Is anyone in here?"

Blank look.

I told him to put some pants on and I moved to check the walk-in closet, and then the bathroom, just to be sure. I didn't tell his wife what I'd found him doing. The guy took his sweet time putting his pants on, then thanked me and offered a friendly handshake, which I declined.

On another occasion, a guy showed up naked at the front door of a female acquaintance and shouted "I'm gonna rape you!" He pinned her down on her bed, at which point she began kicking his balls. When he let go of her arms to try to pin her legs, she reached down and started punching his balls. Eventually she got all four limbs into the act, just wailing on his nuts until the signal reached his brain that it would be better to leave.

Finding him was fairly easy; he was the guy who had walked back to his hotel room wearing only a cowboy hat and briefs. After all he did, we still offered to let him put on pants before being hauled off to jail. His response? "**** pants."

Kicking in Doors Doesn't Look Like the Movies

I have kicked down way more doors than I ever thought I would, and I can tell you that the movies get that whole action completely wrong.

At no point should you ever stand directly in front of the door. There's a reason the area in front of any doorway is called things like "the fatal funnel" and "Don't bloody stand there." Doors aren't bulletproof, and if some bad guy behind the door hears you kicking at it, he's going to shoot your face. The goal is to give it a good donkey kick, standing off to one side with your back to the wall, so only your leg is in front of the door. Then kick backward, right under the knob.

And as always, it often plays out far more stupidly than it does in the movies. I've had an idiot try to block the door by bracing it with his hands (only to get crushed between the door and the wall behind him when he realized, too late, that the laws of physics were against him).

Another guy fortified his door, which of course wasn't apparent from the outside. We were there because the guy was high and his girlfriend called saying he was suicidal (we're compelled to stop people from killing themselves, no matter how shitty they're acting).

I kicked the door. Nothing. We tried a sledgehammer as an impromptu ram. Nothing. We called the fire department and borrowed their pry bars. Nothing. They broke out the Jaws of Life (and it's nice to see a firefighter's face light up like that) and we tried to peel the door from the frame. So we peeled the entire wall of his apartment away to get inside, only to see that all three hinges had been welded shut, the door locks had been welded shut, and he'd also welded a metal pole to a brick of steel behind the door and mounted that pole into the floor.

He wasn't happy to see us, but wasn't charged with anything (remember, we were there to stop him from harming himself, and fortifying your home isn't a crime). If I'm making it sound like you run into a lot of idiots in this job, well ...

The Sight of Police Lights Turns People into Idiots

Myth: Cops use their emergency lights whenever they want, often just to have an excuse to break traffic laws.

Truth: Vehicles log when an officer turns on his lights. So someone abusing this will have to explain to an annoyed fleet sergeant why he keeps running down his batteries for no reason.

And while you'll often hear complaints of police speeding just for the fun of it, in my home state (Texas), protocol sets our maximum speed at 80 miles per hour, regardless of emergency light use. We have instances where we turn on our lights to try to get to an emergency call and have people pass us on the highway due to the fact that everyday commuters routinely exceed the maximum set speed limit for police.

Now, in theory, a police car with its red and blue flashing lights on should be able to clear the path -- everybody knows to pull off the road, or at least clear a lane, when they see the lights and hear sirens. But some people see the left lane open up and rush over there, completely oblivious to the cop car racing toward them (yes, a lot of wrecks happen this way). Pedestrians don't pay attention either. It seems like the general attitude is "Oh, lights! What's the stupidest thing I can do right now to ruin everyone's day?"

Even more puzzling is what happens when the vehicle is sitting still with the lights on. Despite the fact that those lights are carefully designed to be bright enough and annoying enough to get even the most jaded commuter to pay attention, people crash into parked, lit up police cars constantly. We've actually been reduced to having two officers on foot shining strobe lights at drivers who don't seem to notice the blindingly bright blue/red flashing lights sitting in the middle of the road ahead of them.

Then, of course, there are the people who will pull up, over the road flares and around the traffic cones, and demand that I move. In most instances, they're just dumb. Telling them "No, something's going on" will usually make them curse at you while they turn around to find another way home. But once, at the scene of a house where a suspect had barricaded himself inside with a gun, I had a guy pull up to our perimeter and was not dissuaded by my assertion that I was literally the only thing between him and gunfire, and that he needed to leave.

It was only when things escalated to the point that I had opened his car door and was preparing to restrain him that he decided to see things my way. Maybe he thought the whole thing was an elaborate prank?

You'll Get Attacked by the People You Least Expect

The first person to attack me was an 83-year-old lady who thought I was an alien. A couple called us, saying she'd knocked on the door and they'd let her in. When it became clear that she was in the middle of some psychotic episode, they called the police. While we tried to figure out where she came from, she decided to punish our extraterrestrial selves via feeble punches. She was 5 feet tall and rail thin, so we had the luxury of just waiting for her to tire out.

Another time a (drunken) woman of impressive size decided to pick a fight with a wooden door. I'm not sure what you're picturing in your head, but it isn't ridiculous enough. She trash talked the door. Punched the door. Tried to scratch it with her fingernails. Kicked it in the shins. She fought dirty, as far as door fighting went. She felt the door was keeping her out, which is kind of the point of doors, but didn't realize that the door she was fighting wasn't actually her door. Some terrified person was inside that door, afraid that whoever was outside screaming and pounding might make it inside to them.

Unfortunately, things escalated when apartment security arrived, followed by myself. Our young lady decided that security was a more sporting target and tried to fight them. I'll never know why she did that, but I intervened and got to add four more scars to my hand when she bit me.

On another occasion, I was attacked by a drunken man in a wheelchair with little nubs for arms (we wound up just letting that guy go, mainly because we had no idea what to do with him).

Finally, my police career actually came to an end after a 19-year-old broke my leg. I was in the violent crime unit, and this kid had tried to murder his mom with a kitchen knife. We couldn't find him, it was three in the morning, and we decided to go eat at Taco Bell. Laugh all you want, but don't for a minute pretend fast food isn't the first thing you'd get after chasing a violent teenager around until the wee hours of the morning. Anyway, the kid turned out to be sleeping right behind the Taco Bell. (Police work!)

I cuffed him, but they decided to take his restraints off while we booked him. So while he was in the county jail, this now-unrestrained kid punched the booking officer. I tackled him, and in the ensuing fight he wound up wrapping his body around my leg and SNAP, I had two bones where there should only be one.

And that was enough of that.