

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

If you think TV and movies make police work sound like fun, well, it is. Sometimes. I spent several years on the job, and as I've mentioned before, it can be dangerous and disgusting, but you sure as hell wind up with some great stories. I mean, they weren't great for everyone involved, but that shouldn't stop us from laughing at their stupidity.

People Tell the Worst Lies

As a cop, 99.999 percent of everything you hear and probably 80 percent of everything you see is a lie. If I had to come up with the most common lie, it would have to be "These aren't my pants." In virtually every case where someone gets shaken down and drugs or guns are found on them, their immediate excuse is "These aren't my pants." Apparently there is a circulation of ownerless pants going around, with people just grabbing them off of a communal pile before leaving the house.

However, there are grander lies, lies that are told in the hope that if you seem confident enough, I might believe you. One night I took an assault call at an apartment. Apparently a neighbor pushed my complainant down the stairs, and the complainant reacted in the way that people who have been pushed down stairs tend to react. So, I went and knocked on the door of the suspect's apartment. No answer. About a minute later, I heard a woman scream.

One swift kick to the door later, we had the husband prone and handcuffed in the living room, and I found his wife in her bedroom with a fresh wound on her head. Head wounds bleed a bunch, by the way. The sheets on her bed were covered in blood. The floor had blood on it. Her clothes. Just blood all over. We got her an ambulance, and I asked her what happened.

"Nothing."

"Um, no. You're bleeding from the head. There's blood everywhere. You can't say that nothing happened."

"Really, nothing happened."

So I asked the husband.

"Oh, nothing happened. I was baking bread."

Dude, she's got a head wound, and I could hear her screaming from out there. And I can see your kitchen from here. You weren't baking bread.

"Yes, I was baking bread. I scream at the bread when I bake it. It's a Greek thing."

Oh yes, he went to jail.

One particularly enterprising gentleman told me that he was hiding from Bigfoot. He told me this after I found him hiding in a woman's apartment -- a woman who thought he was a particularly boisterous raccoon and called us to "get rid of it."

Which leads me to ...

The Best and Worst Calls Involve Animals

We once got a call that two men, dressed in boxers and a Speedo, were bothering some peacocks. Now, if any of you have experience with peacocks, you know that they don't take crap from anything.

My partner didn't know much about big birds, so I had to explain on the drive over that this would be a self-correcting issue. Sure enough, before I'd even finished the explanation or moved one street closer to the call location, a new call came in:

"Two naked males being attacked and chased by feral birds."

I've answered dozens of "dangerous animal" calls, including some where children were bitten by these "dangerous" animals. In every instance, save one, the dogs behaved exactly as I would hope a dog would behave. The call sheet from 911 would read: "Feral pit bull in alley, caller afraid dog will eat his children" (yes, a real concern). I would show up, see the dog, pull out my sad little control baton, and say, "Who wants to fetch?"

Invariably I would then have to deal with the uncontrolled fury of a really happy dog.

In the cases where dogs did bite someone, it was generally because that someone was annoying the dog, trying to intimidate the dog, or just trying to break into that dog's home. It's almost never the dog's fault, because dogs are miserable at a far lower rate than human beings.

Case in point: We had two burglars break into a house once and "accidentally" steal, among other things, a Chihuahua hiding in a shoebox. They tossed the "loot" when we started chasing them, and the little dog didn't survive. Well, those boys wound up doubling down on their felony charges: Burglary is already a big fat F, and so is animal cruelty. We also stuck a charge of criminal mischief on their record for the "value" of the dog, because sometimes people deserve to have salt poured in that open wound.

The Cool-Looking Gear Is Stupid

One of those little things that only a former cop would get upset about is when news reports talk about SWAT teams in "full riot gear" bursting into places. Riot gear is usually a big padded section of armor and a helmet designed to keep falling bottles from hurting too much, and a key part of "riot armor" is that big plastic shield you see at actual riots. What riot armor isn't very good for, and why *The Walking Dead* needs to suck it up and quit taking Damascus' product placement money, is moving around.

This isn't really "street riot" equipment so much as jailhouse equipment (which makes sense, since that's where they found the stuff in the show). That's the gear you wear if you have to haul someone out of a

prison riot. It's stiff, and the hard exterior is fun for taking hits for you, but actually functioning in it is sweaty, sweaty work. That's because riot gear is for making a human wall, not for moving around.

Also, it's not bulletproof, so I have no idea why they were wearing it during a shootout. Ironically, it's easier to move around wearing "soft" (National Institute of Justice Level IIIA) armor under a rifle plate than a full riot armor system, and movement is everything when you're in a situation that necessitates body armor. (Note: Body armor will not help you if you decide to stay in one spot and soak up all of the bullets.)

Speaking of which, bulletproof vests do not breathe, which means you sweat constantly when wearing them. Over time, the material is ruined by sweat and/or water. Also, did you know that they have a lifespan of about four years? And that you can shorten that if you live somewhere hot, because you're constantly sweating into it? Yeah, let's see them include that plot point in a cop movie. ("Oh, thank his stars, he was wearing his vest! Oh, wait, the bullet went right through because he didn't check the expiration date.")

A Search Is Like the Slowest, Most Intense Game of Hide and Seek Ever

First of all, chasing people is actually a surprisingly awesome part of the job. I have the legs of an Oompa Loompa and was clearly never meant to run, but chases are a hoot. There's a primitive, dog part of your brain that makes you love chasing, and police are allowed to do that. It's socially acceptable. If you're a businessman or a barista and you see some dude running down the street, you can't chase him. But cops sometimes get that chance, and it's just *the best*.

But then you have the slow, tedious version of this that is a building search. This is where you slowly check every possible hiding spot big enough to house a human. Your average building has hundreds of those. Once we got a call from some federal agents guarding an unnamed bigwig in my city. A door had been left ajar at this huge building. We had to go room by room, opening every cabinet, closet, locker, anything big enough hide a human being. It took forever, and in the end it turned out that some janitor had left the door open by accident when he went home. We found this out because we were still clearing the place when he showed up for work the next day. And we still had to finish clearing the rest of it before we could let him in.

And you have to check everything, because I've found suspects hiding everywhere from under desks to water heater recesses in the maintenance closet to ice chests in the break room. And we have to open them, one at a time, gun at the ready (you have no way of knowing who is in this building and what they might be carrying until you check, and it's considered bad if he's got a gun out and you don't). We busted a stash house once with no running water, so they'd torn a hole in the floor of one closet to use as a toilet. During the bust, one guy decided that would be an ideal hiding place. We found people in rafters, a guy in a fridge, closets, everywhere.

Here's a Pro Tip: When hiding from the police, choose the absolute nastiest hiding place you can imagine. Dry-clean-only uniforms exist and are a total pain (oh, and ask the dry cleaner politely if they'll get out blood, feces, fleas, and so on. See how that goes), so cops tend to not want to get disgusting

unless they have to. It'll definitely cut down on your odds of being found. I've gotten fleas twice from the nasty places I've had to search. And we just accept that our (expensive) boots should never go home with us.

But if you are caught, surrender immediately. Procedure demands that we get you out of there. I've had to taser people out from under garbage dumpsters. One guy tried to hide by locking himself in his car, which can end up leading to a SWAT call. We were able to pre-empt that by spraying pepper spray in the A/C vents. One ambitious gentleman got himself PepperBalled off the top of a piece of construction equipment. One guy was in the middle of the living room -- all he'd done was overturn the couch and hide underneath it, as if we'd take one look at an overturned couch and not check under it.

If you're thinking that guy was probably drunk, well, that brings me to ...

YouTube Loves Drunks, but We Hate Them

Once upon a time, a dude in a Jaguar decided to pass my patrol car ... via the sidewalk. As funny as that sounds, catching drunken drivers can be an unholy pain in the ass. When you smell liquor on his breath, you're signing away hours of your life to testing and booking. I didn't have to deal with that too much because I was never a DWI Squad person -- the DWI system is special.

You'd think that drunken people almost spot themselves, but no -- like murderers and drug dealers, they get their own police. It's actually a huge industry. The whole process behind deciding whether a driver is drunk has become so elaborate that it necessitates specialists. The point being, if you're driving hammered, there are cops around with literally no job but to catch you.

And you would be amazed at the things intoxicated people survive. One fine spring night, two young women were on their way home from a party where, despite their age, they may have imbibed a bit more than their systems could handle. Witnesses tell me that their little sports car was traveling around 100 mph when it left the highway, went up an exit ramp, and tried to make it into the U-turn lane without loss of speed.

Now, in this particular city, the median is decorated with these really big concrete boxes filled with bushes or trees to trick people into believing every inch of dirt hasn't been paved over twice. And it just so happens that huge concrete boxes are heavier than tiny sports cars. The two collided, and believe me, that girl was pissed at her now-totaled hot rod.

She was probably more upset, however, when she looked over at her passenger and saw that her lady friend had not been wearing her seat belt, and that inertia had taken her by the hand and led her out of the car via the front windshield. She hadn't fully made it out, which might be why her (dumb) friend tried to pull her back inside. Fortunately for the passenger, a witness happened to be an EMT driving home. He saw this stupidity happening and proceeded to dive-tackle some sense into the driver, who had dragged her passenger out of the vehicle at this point.

Just to cap the whole thing off, the passenger initially refused ambulance transport. They took her when she fainted, one step later (she lived, by the way).