

OIS (Officer Involved Shooting)

2023

The Beginning

It's that time of night in Party City: the noise seems crystal clear but there are so many sounds I can't differentiate or focus on any one in particular; it's just loud, tinny, mixed with laughter, music, screams. The traffic plays background rhythm with cars and horns, the urgency of emergency vehicles, all of it spiced by the heavy air—oh, so heavy—with the smell of booze.

The lighting is almost as loud as the sound: bar lights, blinking kiosks, street lamps, headlights, cell phones and colorful fashion. Women in slit dresses and butt-cheek shorts, sneakers and stiletto heels; men in gangster pants, bandanas and side-cocked baseball hats. This is the flood after last call in Party City.

The cops are on their toes. We scan and play dodge-the-dumb-ass drunk who wants to converse in slurred nonsensical circles with any cop not quick enough to avoid their approach. This is the dangerous intoxication time, the one to two hour period where hordes of inebriated twenty-somethings stumble aimlessly through the streets. I scan, we all scan, then jump into action as fights explode inside the mass of drunkards. There's puke, blood and spittle mixed with the stench of booze and over-sprayed cologne and perfume. We run from one episode to the next. Ambulances are on scene with medics treating the seriously injured, the overdosed, those who have aspirated their vomit. The lights and sirens of police vehicles blaze by as they head from one call to another.

Four cops struggle with a mostly naked drunk. It's all they can do to heft him into the back of the car as he squirms, kicks, and screams like a man being flayed. Back at the station, it takes all four cops to get this wild man into the cell.

The violent chaos of Party City goes on for hours. It is in this environment where I touch the arm and stare into the eyes of a twenty-one-year-old man who within a few short hours will be shot to death by one of us.

Where

A tiny strip of land, only about a mile long. Sand and shrubs with no trees to speak of, and no dunes really. The Atlantic Ocean is one long block east of the town center. Three blocks to the west, there's the bay—more water. Many of the houses and stores are still rustic beach-shanty-type cottages, built before cable TV, cellular

communications, and air conditioning. Places with wrap-around screened porches cooled by breezes off the ocean. In recent years, many of these homes have been replaced by modern three-story, five-bedroom, five-bath, balcony-adorned McMansions. Intermixed everywhere are the mid-sized concrete motels and condos. In the summer, cars are parked along every inch of roadway.

The town is split by the only major north-to-south highway running the entire length of the state. Coastal Highway, which runs through Party City's center is a major source of congestion during tourist season. On beach afternoons, traffic in both directions comes to a standstill for miles.

This highway not only splits the town but is also home to its commercial district. The speed limit drops from 50 mph to 25. Stop lights every two blocks. The strip is crammed with hotels, condos, kitschy souvenir stores, restaurants, a liquor store, bars and convenience shops. Drunks stumble back and forth at all hours; skateboarders and bicyclists weave in and out of the traffic. Families loaded down with gear trudge to the beach, little kids dragging their feet and crying, towels dangling from their necks and blow-up rubber duckie floats around their waists. Throngs of college kids saunter about in board shorts and string bikinis showing off their washboard bellies and perfectly tanned rear ends—a testament to the beauty of youth.

There's nothing unusually spectacular about the place during the day. Just beach time with families, groups of friends and couples sitting under umbrellas and watching the kids, laughing, maybe sipping a few beers. Breezes carry that musty, salt, there's-nothing-like-it smell of the ocean. Kids build sand castles and dig up sand crabs. Hard bodies pose, lovers walk hand-in-hand, children whine for ice cream. Mom, Dad, uncles, and grandmas grab lunch under the striped awning of a seaside grill. Waves boom in the distance; the life guards' whistles shriek. It's no different from thousands of summer resort towns. For the cops, day-shift is a Barney Fife type of police existence: speeding tickets and parking complaints, a lost child, a fender bender, the occasional domestic dispute,

One mile long and—tops—a half mile wide, yet this placid, beach resort, Mayberry-seeming town by day transforms, after dark, into a mini Beirut—yes, a war zone. Why, at night, is there an epidemic of debilitating assaults? Why are so many armed with guns? Why are disputes so often settled with stabbings?

Booze and dope certainly are catalysts that grease the bag pipes of violence, like Danny Boy at a funeral. But there's so much more to the night time tumult than just intoxicating substances.

Who

There are the college boys—dopey looking with too long un-kept hair combed to one side, Sketcher’s slip-on sneakers and a Who-Gives-A-Fuck-U Sweatshirt (Penn State, Drexel, U of D, whatever). But the night time crowd isn’t just college boys. Mixed in are the local blue collar hard-working and hard-partying Eastern Shore hillbillies, with their loud monster trucks, T-shirts, unlaced boots, tight jeans and a love of guns and apple pie (yeah, baby!) A big ole’ dip under the front lip, and yes, *puntang* on the mind along with a “I don’t take no shit” attitude. Add in the older, trade union guys from nearby Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Western Maryland who have come to the beach for their one-week vacation and take pride in their concealed carry permits. And then you’ve got your Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMGs). They stake a claim too. They’re welcome as long as they don’t break the “Innocent Civilian” rule, which is simple: don’t beat up innocent civilians. The Pagans were welcome until they broke the rule; now they’re not, though they still roar through town with their cuts (sleeveless denim or leather vests with club patches sewn on). The “Thunder Guard” also roll in on many summer nights. A Black motorcycle gang that ride sport bikes along with Harleys, they congregate in the parking lot of a massive bar whose owners refuse to allow a police presence on their property.

We’ve also got the street gang members and their affiliates. Street gangs, like OMGs, are normally provincial in nature, sticking to their turf, pissing on their own fire hydrants. Rivals generally don’t cross paths except for business or by accident. But to hell with turf and provincialism. Male hormones rage, lubed on an array of dope and booze. The lure of attractive drunken women has blurred the borders.

On weekend nights, the warring parties all come together in the no man’s land of “Party City.”

The Bar

It amazes me the amount of trouble that comes out of this one bar. A rickety clapboard structure, it’s the cliché of a beat-up old beach bar found in thousands of beach towns. The kind of bar where sand litters the creaky beer and barf-stained wooden floors. On weekend nights when the place pulses and bulges with drunken human flesh on the move, it’s hard to see the kitschy-looking walls all plastered with a quarter century’s worth of ocean themed paraphernalia.

Picture it: A snake of a line, four to five people wide, stretching around the block to get into the place. It’s just not that big. The owner makes it bigger in the winter by erecting a circus tent across the front but roomy it isn’t. Crammed ten deep at the bar, men and woman wait to order drinks. The smell of booze soaks the air. By midnight

drunks are slumped on the benches out front; lost, delirious, can't-find-their-way-home types, puking on their sneakers and then tumbling forward onto the sidewalk to lay in their vomit.

A Time to Act

I think about the times throughout my career where some heavy shit got dropped on my doorstep—no parachute, just dropped. The summer day I was called to an old boarding house owned by a hoarder, whose tenant, distraught after being jilted, was on the phone with the State Police Crisis Management negotiator. Dispatch said he had a pistol to his head and his negotiation with State Police consisted of “fuck you, fuck her, fuck everybody.” State Police asked me, since I was the Sergeant in charge, “You want to shut down the area and wait for the Special Operations Team?”

“Are you fucking nuts?” I said. It was July, the town packed. “We’ll handle it.”

We had plenty of summer seasonal officers on duty but my corporal and I were the only professionals. We squeezed through the first floor, down a narrow trail walled by towering stacks of ancient newspapers and magazines, and crept up the stairs to the second floor. At the door of our suicidal jilted lover, we could hear him yelling through the phone at the negotiator. “Motherfucker, fuck that bitch, I have a gun to my head and this is on her.”

My corporal looked at me. “Sarge,” he said. “I don’t like this. We got no cover here.”

“I know, dude, I know.” I motioned him to the opposite side of the door, put my finger to my lips and knocked.

A pause, then “*What?*” jilted lover said.

“Pizza,” I called.

Another pause. “I didn’t order pizza.”

“Sorry, dude, the order was for here.”

He opened the door. I grabbed him by his hair and pulled him toward the floor as my corporal slammed him from behind and took him down. Zip, snap, drop, and done.

I tell this story to illustrate that situations present themselves to cops, intense possibly life-altering situations, and we have to act NOW, which means that in many instances the time for worry occurs *after* the event.

That was the case in Party City on March 17, 2022 sometime shortly after mid-night.

Or Maybe This is the Beginning

A bouncer approaches me in front of The Bar. The bouncers there wear ballistic vests—and for good reason. The bouncer points to a young, muscular, stockily-built Black male standing a few feet from me, encased in the crowd of departing bar patrons. “You need to stop that guy,” the bouncer says. “He’s been flashing his pistol around in the bar.”

That quick: the night shifts.

Until that moment I’ve been shucking and jiving with the other officers making a presence at closing time. We typically stand behind a barricade separating sidewalk from street. These barricades keep the concentrated blocks of staggering drunks leaving The Bar from getting waffled in traffic as they migrate to new destinations. The barricades also give the cops room to assess possible trouble and move toward it without having to squash through the shifting sea of inebriated souls.

I’ve just “dodged” an annoying drunk, and am feeling a little guilty (but not that guilty) at passing said drunk onto one of my fellow officers. Closing time is the worst time, the potential for trouble increasing exponentially with a thousand aimless disoriented drunks dumped on the street all at once. So when the bouncer grabs me and points out the armed man, it takes me a second to comprehend what he’s saying. Then the gravity of it hits. *Really, man?* I think. And then, *Fuck, why me?*

But that’s it, no more pondering the potential danger. I snap into tactical mode and start moving toward the subject, already forming a plan of approach, analyzing the best way to make contact. As I move, I grab Dylan’s arm, jerking my head toward the suspect. “Follow me,” I say. “That guy’s got a gun.”

Making Contact

Instinctively, I try to slow my breathing. There’s so many people, and an air of confusion with the noise, the bustle of it all. It feels like a thousand conversations are going, all of them unintelligible except for the one in my head.

The guy’s moving away, walking south down the sidewalk from The Bar. His build reminds me of a wrestler’s. His skin is very dark, a deep ebony brown, his hair wild and longish in tight two-to-three-inch braids. He’s flanked on both sides by two twenty-something White guys. One is tall and lanky with curly long brown hair, a