

A Very Unfortunate Officer

One

Denver, 1985.

This was before he found even that little kernel of fame in the department, before he'd ever unsnapped his holster.

It was a night that was windy the way it got in Denver sometimes, where once in a while a tumbleweed would blow in from the riverfront and past the dress stores and the steak house downtown.

He was walking through the trade center block. Later it would be hard to remember. He got to where he could hardly bend his brain far back enough to remember how they used to get out of the cruisers and walk.

It was late, almost too late for another coffee. He could have one more, but if the cup didn't touch his lips inside the next hour he'd be up the entire day.

He was thinking about where to stop off when his hat blew off in the wind. He reached up to clap it on his head, but the air tore it away. He ran after it. He was still a pretty good runner, even with cop shoes and one hand holding down his belt.

He would be thinking about his high school 4X800 meter relay team as he chased his hat across the street, into an alley, and right into a small group of men. The hat would keep blowing down the street when one of the men, a man in shorts and no coat would pull a gun from his waistband. The officer would raise his weapon and the two would fire. The officer's shot would hit home, pinning the man with no coat against the bricks before he kneeled down and breathed blood.

Two

Denver, 1988

The officer was on Speer Boulevard, trailing behind a swerving powder blue truck. He got right up behind it. The truck jerked to the gutter, then faded back to the center line. He watched it dance that way a couple times and that was enough. He flipped on the lights. The powder blue Ford took a lazy turn and mashed a wheel into the curb before it stopped.

The officer stepped out with a flashlight. He was searching his pocket for a pen when the driver's side door on the truck popped open and the driver slipped towards the ground, held part way up by the seatbelt.

The officer was thinking about a time when he helped a girl into a car after they met over drinks and then got to know each other over too many. Her head was plastered on his shoulder. Her breath was hot and sour with scotch when she breathed into his mouth. After he set her in a friend's car he helped her light a cigarette, and then her friend drove off.

He would be thinking about the cigarette she was smoking, a long thin one with a purple leaf printed around the filter. He would be thinking how he'd never seen anything

like that before when the driver of the powder blue Ford would come to and pull at a shotgun cradled between his legs. He would rack it back once, but before it was level the officer would fire twice and spray the man's lower jaw and neck over the dashboard and into the glass.

Three
Denver, 1993

It had been so hot the last few weeks. Even at night you couldn't cross two lanes of blacktop barefoot.

He got into the habit of stopping by a 7-11 every night for a Slurpee. He tried to avoid the clear cups with the dome tops, filling up a regular soda cup or even a Styrofoam coffee cup with Slurpee. It wouldn't look right to see a cop drinking something cherry red, he thought.

He went back to the car and sipped at it. He liked how the straw got cold too, brought the cold right into his lips.

He stopped and was checking his lips in the mirror, trying to wipe off some of the bright red color when he got a call about a domestic disturbance where he would end up shooting woman through the chest as she threatened a half naked man with tears running down only one side of his face.

Four
Denver, 1997

He'd just come to work and was thinking about a movie he saw over the weekend. The movie played with time travel, and he wondered if that could ever really happen. He was imagining what a time machine would look like. He started off by wondering what he would change if he could fold and unfold time however it looked best, but that didn't make him very happy and he settled back into thinking about a mechanical chair or maybe a glass sphere with cracks of lightning rushing around inside.

Before he would make it inside from the parking garage, a man would jump out from behind a green BMW. The man was looking to kill someone else. Not the officer. Another officer who had slept with the man's wife. The officer had never slept with anyone's wife, but the man would still raise a pistol to knee height before the officer shot him through the neck and he fell to the concrete, holding his hands on the hole so hard it looked like he was strangling himself.

Five
Denver, 1997

All the red and green Christmas lights on the Governor's mansion were switched on a couple of days ago, and up and down the block there were men in ladders lassoing light strings around tree tops with long poles.

He liked the lights at night. He was still on nights and was happy he didn't have to see all that mess of the wires during the day. That just didn't look the same, he thought. And it ruined it, he thought. Seeing all those wires clipped and stapled to the tree trunks was like having a magician show you step by step how he turned a rag into a dove.

He walked towards the front of the art museum where he always checked the doors. He didn't know why anyone would want to break in there. It would be like something out of a comic book. Heist at the Art Museum! So he was as surprised as anybody when he pulled the big curved handles and the doors opened, the little brushes on the bottoms scraping rock salt off to the sides.

He stopped inside. He'd pulled on those doors who knows how many times, but this was the first time he'd been inside. There was a painting on his right of a woman, but she was blue and made out of all the wrong kinds of shapes. He felt sorry for her. Before he would get a chance to move closer or see the wall card that told something about the artist, he would hear a shot. He would drop to one knee and fire back at the sound, striking the other man in the hip. He would walk towards the man, holster his own gun and pick up the other man's gun, emptying it and tilting it down to check the pipe three times before he was satisfied and pushed the talk button on his radio.

Six

Denver, 1999

After a handful of liquor stores were held up near Tejon the Captain put some of the department's best shooters on stakeout. Pistol instructors, guys who knew their way around shotguns from quail hunting, and the officer.

He was paired with Marzo. Marzo was a good guy who maybe talked about football too much, but that was okay. The two of them were jammed in behind the desk at a convenience store. The owner put a badly outdated Kool cigarette poster up over part of the glass to hide the officers.

They sat on top of newspaper stacks for hours, for nights. They talked about everything. They talked about dogs, which ones were the best ones, and they talked about football. They talked about the new Captain and how he looked pretty worn out already, and they talked about football. Night after night the talk went on this way until the sun started on another day's work yellowing posters, and the big Saudi Arabian man who ran the store during the day scooted them out with coffees and sometimes paper bags of donuts.

Into the second month they started doing crosswords in the old newspapers from the floor. They had to keep the noise down so customers wouldn't hear them, and because the old man who ran the shop at night was some sort of crossword savant. The officers would argue a four-letter word for profit, or try to figure out the currency in

South Africa, or the name of a small nation, and the man would stop stocking cigarettes long enough to shout, "Ah, for the love of...It's Dubai! You've never heard of Dubai?!"

They filled in the five boxes and started whispering over a four-letter land on the Arabian Peninsula starting with "O". Before they could hash it out, a 17 year-old boy with a Beretta would slam his way into the store and hold the old man at gunpoint. The officer would kill the boy when his two bullets smacked him center mass and shattered his ribs, shredding his chest with shards of bone. The officers would later find a bullet fired by the boy lodged in a can of mixed nuts. The officer would keep the bullet for a couple of days, thinking it was something he was supposed to do. But then on his first day off he would wake up early and sweep it off his desk and into his palm and carry it over to the trash.

Seven
Denver, 1999

He was walking through a mall when he saw the old woman. He almost didn't believe himself. But he walked up close and tilted his hat back on his head, and sure enough it was her. Miss Fortune. The same kind he remembered. You haven't aged a day, he said. He looked around, but nobody was paying any attention. Not a lot for a cop to do in the mall mid-day.

He pinched a quarter out of his shirt pocket and Miss Fortune came to life. She moved her mannequin hands over her crystal ball. Then she laughed, that same laugh that used to scare him when he was a kid. Like she knew. The paper fortune clicked out at the bottom and he read it.

You will find true love when you least expect it.
Lucky Numbers: 4, 14, 16, 82, 305

He pocketed the fortune and headed outside.

He would take a couple steps before a shot clipped the stone wall next to him. He would fall backwards into the revolving door, but not all the way down. A piece of stone would ruin his left eye. He would pull his pistol and look around the corner.

Another man with another gun.

The officer would pull his arms up from the shoulders. Breathe out.

He would think about hitting the man, imagining the bullet traveling true into the man's chest.

He would think about the way his ears would ache.

He would squeeze off a tear, the last one his left eye would ever produce, thinking. Thinking, just enough left in me to break one last time.

Denver, 2001

After some time he took up hobbies that he thought men his age were allowed to do. His landlord said it would be okay if he replanted and tended the large square planters around the building. He pulled out the weeds and the old dead roots, and then he dug into the dirt. And he kept carving out shovelfuls of ruined earth until he got to where the soil was rich and dark like a slice of German cake. He turned the soil. He planted sunflowers that first year. Not for any reason other than he liked them. And he liked to think they would attract animals he would see from his window.

The sunflowers would end up a bad choice. Between the animals and the people on the block it wasn't long before every flower was destroyed, the last one holding out until he watched a boy pull the head off it and punt it into the side of the next door building. But this would all happen before he learned about bulbs and splitting plants and low-profile growers like Baby's Breath that maybe didn't show quite as nicely but did a better job staying out of trouble.