

The Sergeant

My little pre-shift pep talks have gotten more and more common of late. Especially after Floyd. And a local one, too, a month or so later that summer (same deal: white cop, black victim) over in Mantua, that got a little lost in the national headlines (2020 had a way of doing that) but brought more of the same locally—more protests, more looting, more fires, more homeless overrunning public spaces, more assaults and attempted assaults on cops, more resignations and early retirements within the Department, more skeleton squads than I’ve seen in my twenty-three years on the Force.

They’re rarely planned, these speeches; it’s something I decide during roll-briefing, something I see in my squad’s faces—more than your usual fear and agitation, more doubt—about a war they didn’t sign up for. I’m not up there to flex my power. Just a few words, a tip, a little advice if you will. Two minutes of your time, I’ll tell them. These days the Department needs something more than another white guy in a white shirt barking orders, a swinging dick manly man, a Frank Rizzo wannabe, reviewing procedures and strategies, ignoring emotions, before sending his soldiers off into battle.

There always looking up at me, my boys (and girl) in blue—normally my morning squad, up all night with friends or young kids, eyes fighting sleep—ready to listen, it seems, just enough to properly mock me the second they pull away and start patrol. Most of my cops are far too young and stubborn to open their minds. Many were bitter the day they got on. Blacks stole their bikes as kids, stole their neighborhoods, are now, bit by bit, stealing the whole damn thing. To them, I’m an idiot liberal with no kids and therefore no clue about how the real world works. They call me “Sergeant Snowflake” (someone didn’t realize I was on a group text a few years

back.) In truth, though, I'm just the row-home, Catholic-school kid that many of them are (I'm in a twin up in Somerton now and it doesn't quite feel right; too much natural light, *way* too much lawn to cut). I'm simply a person with a pair of eyes, in a line of work (which I'm thankful as hell for) that has opened those eyes a little bit wider. That's all. I certainly have no allegiance to one political party or the other, nor do I sit around and watch CNN, the way they think I do, the way the vet cops likely tell them I do. I even mow my own lawn (the Last of the Mowhicans my wife calls me)—and what's less snowflake than that? I've simply lived is all. My experience has brought me here. A childhood spent in constant fear of my cop dad; an adulthood, as a cop myself, immersed in streets paved by paternal crime of a different kind. They don't know a thing about me, really, my cops. They're even wrong in thinking I have no kids: my German Shepherd, our Brenni girl, is just as important to me as their Emmas and Aidens are to them. They don't know, either, what my niece and nephews bring me, that I've attended enough Little League games, hundreds through the years, to realize my vision of this world is a whole lot clearer than many of the goons who've been granted the precious gift of procreation. And my wife. They know I'm married of course, that Dawn and I volunteer our time once a week in a neighborhood often described as "ground zero" of Philly's (and even the nation's) opioid epidemic: me in plain clothes, Dawn with a packet of photos—"before and afters"—and business cards we'll offer pretty much anyone we come across (Our cards—Dawn's cards—are almost as common a discarded item on the Kensington sidewalks as syringes are.) They know all this, my cops; we'd been on the local news a few times, Dawn and I, as well as the TV show *Intervention*. There might've even been mocking watch parties on the big screen down at the FOP for all I know—likely there were. And other nicknames, countless others, nicknames and inside jokes I'll never be privy to—for me, for us, stupid ones, recycled cutups, I'll assume, stock expressions for the

most part (Sergeant Snowflake it's fair to guess was their high point of originality.) *Outkicked his coverage* is something they'd say—"no shot Joeflake can handle that." They know what she looks like—they've seen her pic on Facebook at the very least. And the few who've met Dawn like Dawn—everyone likes Dawn. But these kids—especially these kids—they sure as shit don't *know* my Dawn. No one does. Her strength and perspective, her patience and resilience . . . her courage. No one but me.

These kids, though, sitting there half asleep, awaiting my words of wisdom, watching me sip a cold or even empty mug of coffee, watching the nervous sweat pour down my forehead (I sweat "like a pig" Dawn likes to joke), watching me grip the sides of the podium for dear life to help quell the tremors I'll sometimes get in my fingers before I finally decide to say what I want to say—they worry me, these kids. I'm as scared *for* them as I am *of* them. They remind me of me in my pre-Dawn days (aside from their sleeves of tattoos and these Hitler-youth haircuts that need to hurry up and go out of style). Most are just a few years out of the Academy, early- mid-twenties, frontal lobes still blooming, tossed here in this third-world part of town. (This is how it works: the vet cops get rewarded, so instead of having their experience in the thick of it, they're coasting on mountain bikes down Main Street in Manayunk or lounging in their cruisers blocking an intersection for a concert or charity walk on the Parkway. Only assholes like me choose to spend the last quarter of their career actually working the job they signed up for.) There will be a few of these young cops, or so I tell myself, whose narrow views will widen with time, have a rough go at some point on or off duty and realize the anger wasn't only bad for their lives but that the puzzle pieces, what's fueled this rage for as far back as they can remember, were actually an illusion—a delusion. Most, though—and you always have a strong hunch who your shoo-ins are—will get angrier and angrier, till it's time to retire, "get the hell out of this

piece of shit city” as many long-serving officers often phrase it, for the burbs or The Shore or a cabin in the Poconos where they’ll pretend to be mountain men yet scarf down Wawa Sizzlis every morning for breakfast. Most will get even grumpier in retirement, miss the Department dearly—the set schedule, the like-minded buddies to bitch to, reminisce with about parties and Friday night football games and pretty girls they shared kegs of Milwaukee’s Best (Beast) in the woods with thirty thousand years ago. They’ll yearn for the days they were constantly in people’s prayers, called heroes for getting up and going to work, “putting their lives on the line,” in recent years especially, with bullseyes on their backs, cell phones in their faces. In retirement, they’ll fall right in with the rest of the crowd, lazy, close-minded know-it-alls who escape in politics and sports and Hollywood plots with anti-conservative undertones they’re too dense to catch. Between skin cancer lancements and early-bird specials, they’ll labor around the golf course, the best of the best equipment and accessories—Ping and Polo and Pro V1—replacing what they truly want but have long passed them by. And their wives, blind loyalists like my own mom most certainly was (Mom never seemed to smell the perfume on Dad’s clothes or the booze on his breath after all those late-night “overtime hours” he was constantly grabbing for “the family’s, financial gain”)—these wives, too, their little first-lady running mates, will remain their greatest allies, stand right by their hubbys’ sides, every step of the way, silent partners serving their masters, only speaking to agree, pursing their lips and shaking their little heads when their potbellied provider begins to bitch—about fake news and cancel culture and kids these days—*allergic and addicted*, identifying as who- or whatever the fuck they want; about their own kids, *those ungrateful shits*, never visiting, only showing their faces when dropping off the grandkids; about illegals and refugees and Hilary belonging in prison; about whatever Tucker Carlson is bitching about. Most of their time, though, regardless of the how beautiful a backdrop their

retirement offers, will be spent alongside the sad realities that will follow them to bed every night and be there again when they stare into the mirror for a morning shave—their dark, glooming thoughts. *Why did I ruin my prime with planning my retirement? With being obsessed with saving money? And being so angry all the time?* I picture lots and lots of praying as well. Most of these hate-filled men have extraordinary strength in the Lord Almighty.

These guys—and the very large majority are indeed men—the good Christian cops nearing those miserable days in paradise, are the ones I’ve had my biggest issues with over the years, cops in my age range who’ve been for decades now affronted by the fact I’m not the bigoted racist that they are. They gave me the nickname “Serpico Joe.” Back in the nineties, I testified against a cop, a sweet, sweet guy from the 26th, a sergeant pretty popular in the Department, who had a habit of raiding flop houses, for the fun of it, holding black prostitutes at gunpoint while he masturbated above them. (Though the media spun it and spun it till they found the perfect angle, I don’t think the color of the girls’ skin was the story—this jerkoff, pun intended, certainly held no prejudices when it came to his gross abuse of power.) The fallout, for me, other than the semi-clever nickname, wasn’t so severe. No one ever really crossed me too harshly. I’m a bigger guy, 6’3”, was a pretty decent athlete in high school, considered to be pretty tough in my day (which follows you around forever, as funny as that might seem); therefore, most of the jabs over the years have been light or done within a group, where bullies of all ages can often be found hiding. Sometimes though, someone will have a few too many drinks at a wedding or retirement send-off, get a bit brave at one of those Christmas squad parties I do my best to show my face at and throw a haymaker at the lone “libtard” in the room. I’ll counter back at times, often in jest; I, too, can certainly bust a little balls. I might lean in, offer a wry smile, a face of feigning interest, then ignore the comment altogether and ask, squinting

inquisitively, how their necks are feeling from all the young ass they gawk at for forty hours a week. Or, “Hey,” I might say, “mind me asking: How’s your fat ass get on and off a bike?” I keep it light. There have, however, been some noteworthy exceptions.

“Slavery was over a hundred and fifty years ago—fact!” a guy, a cop, barked at me once, a few years back, the summer the George Floyd mess had every badge from North Philly to the North Pole ill at ease to say the least. “Some of us can’t let that simple fact soak in.” We were over the FOP, a wedding, a second wedding of a guy I’d graduated grade school, high school, and the Academy with (the thin blue wives club isn’t always a lifetime membership). The remark came towards the end of cocktail hour, less than an hour after Dawn, as she does before all these events, warned me of being goaded into any political-type arguments. What was different about the scene here, other than the fact that people were actually gathered together minus the face coverings or COVID restrictions of any kind, something I hadn’t seen in a social setting in a good six months at that point (this was their show of protest: many—most—of the cops I’d come across amidst the pandemic were against the virus’s precautions for an array of reasons ranging from conspiracy theories to advice from celebrity experts, Aaron Rodgers, Kirk Cameron and the like to—and this one’s my personal favorite—“I don’t let anyone tell me what to do,” an ironic stance to say the least coming from civil servants who are sworn to serve and protect the laws of the land on behalf of the safety of its people)—what was different that night, other than this pre-pandemic ambiance, was the way in which the attack was carried out: I wasn’t in the same conversation as these five gentleman—the guys were in front of Dawn and me in a sort of circular formation beside a makeshift bar on wheels—yet they were well aware of me, provoking me—or attempting to—by speaking inordinately loudly while making certain points. It was if they’d arrived at a juncture where the booze was really kicking in and their circle jerk needed

some opposition in order to make them feel like victors. Their subject—a few minutes earlier they had been calmly exchanging Bitcoin and crypto tips, a meeting of track three minds, kids who'd once shown up drunk to their SATs now showing off their virtual currency sophistication, when suddenly, due to who knows what, anything with these guys, their subject changed, their volumes lifted, which Dawn and the other couple we were chatting it up with could quite obviously hear as clearly as I could—their subject, a real favorite of theirs, had become about race, how the county's violent crime was committed disproportionately by blacks, which the media, the circle all agreed, conveniently left out every single day when murders and rapes and carjackings dominated the headlines. “Yet when a cop,” one of track three's finest said with his palms raised, his face, which I couldn't see, presumably matching his sardonic tone—“when a white cop—oh, when he shoots—jus-ti-fuckin'-fiably in almost every fuckin' case—when *he* shoots a ‘black man’ . . . oh, then it's ‘POLICE SHOOT BLACK MAN’ above a pic of little Tyrone at his kindergarten graduation.” They'd been energized, just like that—you could certainly hear it in the pitch of their voices, and the cackles and the belly laughs . . . I saw it too. I had myself a longer look than they deserved—I couldn't look away. Fat middle-agers suddenly moving like younger men again. On the balls of their feet. Smiles galore, they came closer together, a huddle now; they gripped and slapped each other. It brought to mind the scene from the movie *The Accused*, the horrific scene where a bar full of downtrodden hillbilly types are suddenly inspired by the idea of gang raping Jodie Foster. They waited, though, this revitalized pack in front of me, always careful, always watching out for some easily-offended snitch on the other team looking to entrap them. One of the waitresses who walks around with trays stopped at the circle to offer horderves. She may have been part black, a light-skin, or Puerto Rican maybe. “Hmm, I'll have one of those bad boys, sweetheart,” I heard one of them say. Regardless of her

race, whatever likeness she had to being black, to possibly being *offended* by their topic, they stared at her ass, all of them did, as she walked away. And then, after some seconds digesting her, still staring, nibbling their treats as this light-complected member of a dark race had disappeared through the kitchen's swinging double doors—they were off! One by one they went, firing away, remarks they'd tried out on their wives maybe, or squad partners, tidbits they'd heard at the precinct or the bar or on the golf course, recycled junk they'd pawn off as theirs:

“My favorite's when the shooters are black, which is . . . let me see—always the fucking deal in street shootings—it's just, ‘MAN SHOT’—and no mention of race within the entire article.” “Dude, how 'bout the carjacking last week—the one up in Tacony where they shot the Amazon driver . . . They had a fucking video—a video—the news *showed* it—dude was as black as your suit—yet in the Channel 6 article, they forget to mention—oopsie—that the perp—a guy at large at that—was black!” “Not the most “woke” thing to say, ya, know—the truth.”

“Welcome to America, Jimmy. Black privilege: you kill someone and they aid your getaway—our mayor and district attorney are the head honchos behind this ‘woke’ shit that—” “Dude, you can't say ‘head honcho’—it's an offensive term?” “Towards fuckin' who?” “Indians probably.” They laughed as one; a few used the time to pick their pigs in a blanket off their napkins and stuff their faces once again, others sipped their drinks, searching, it seemed, for fodder, more lines that might get laughs, searching and searching their repertoires, for more poison they'd been spoon fed and that no dose of new knowledge could ever modify. “Seriously, though . . . To withhold the true description of the perp, a stone-cold killer, who's approaching your vehicle, pretending to ask for fuckin' jumper cables, ready to execute you for your Honda CRV . . .” “Guess they just assume we know the perp's a black dude . . . Let's be honest, better chance of the Eagles starting a white cornerback than a carjacker being white.”

The guy doing most of the talking that night (the guy with the cornerback-carjacking comment that had his buddies in stitches) was Steve Brannigan, a bald oaf of a dude who seemed to think this cocktail hour was a case race in high school—and Steve looked to be way ahead of the pack, a few lagers past his limit, despite a body that seemed built to carry a bubble or more of beer. Brannigan, a guy I'd played some softball with, competed against in a rotisserie baseball league way back before the internet existed, he was the one who brought me into this directly. With the aid of the booze and the jolt of confidence his buddies' laughs had likely brought on, Steve turned and began directing his remarks in my direction, as if summoning me into the circle, inviting me over to their let's-play-pretend Fox panel to represent the other side of the aisle. He was amazed by some people's (my) "lack of common sense," some people's (my) "refusal to call, literally, a spade a spade." "This is the problem," he said, "you're called a racist these days if you simply state facts . . ." Even braver now, he began to leave the circle, move my way, his slur detectable, his tone aggressive, louder, more than a posturing? From the corner of my eye—I was talking to someone next to me and refused to acknowledge Brannigan directly, give him an ounce of satisfaction, any indication I had one morsel of interest in his pathetic, unprompted display here—that fat, red face of his kept creeping closer and closer.

What annoyed me a little bit extra that night, made things all a little less tolerable, a little harder to just roll off my back, was that Dawn was right there with me, standing beside me. Dawn doesn't drink and despite what she told me and despite how elegant she looked amongst the crowd (far and away the prettiest, most confident smile in the wedding hall), I knew she felt uneasy being around the booze and the way people acted when they were swimming in drinks. Then, on top of that—this. School yard shit. Yet there she was, smiling her smile, calming me—she could feel my tension; I knew this—we know each other like Stockton and Malone once did.

Her way of calming me, this night at least, was to put her arm around my waist and caress the bottom of my back, over and over, a massage of sorts, every time she felt my patience may have reached its limits and I might decide to head on over, have myself a little chat with these fine officers. Her tapping fingertips were a Morse code of sorts: *Take it easy, Joey. Not worth your time, Joey . . . Stay right here, Joey; stay with me, OK? OK? Stay!* Which is what she was doing as cocktail hour was winding down—caressing, Morse coding (she was Stockton, I was The Mailman) while Steve had stood there, stopped about midway between our crew and his, only feet away, and gotten even louder, more blatant, obnoxiously loud, like a goon dad lambasting a referee at a youth sports game. “Some guys,” he said, his final punctuation, or so it seemed, one last shot at a badgering that wasn’t working—“some guys—some *sergeants*—just don’t have the best relationship with facts.”

The thing about guys like Steve and “facts” is that they use them, truths, to summarize a topic, as if one true statement within the topic, one fact that fits their narrative puts an argument to bed. I’ve seen plenty of examples in my twenty-three years. With all sorts of subjects. Sports especially. How Brady is unquestionably better than Manning (Peyton) because he has more titles, and the same can be said for Jordan over LeBron . . . and Jack over Tiger (this one they broadcast ad-nauseam since the white guy is the winner). I once saw a fist fight break out between two cops, on duty, in the precinct parking lot, over an argument involving two old-time players that neither guy was old enough to have ever seen play. I’ve heard cops spit facts on everything from animal attacks (“Ya ever see a shark’s fin swimmin’ up near ya—Don’t. Fucking. Move.”) to brain surgery, as if they’d ridden the El to UPenn after their shifts, took night classes in Blockley Hall, instead of yelling at the Phillies game over a beer an inning before jerking themselves to sleep. And when it came to blacks and violence (the fact du jour this

evening, one they were likely parroting from someone on their side of the media—the good side—the fair and balanced side): because blacks committed sixty percent of all violent crime yet made up just fourteen percent of the population (a fact), this made blacks more violent than whites by nature, made the black race—and certainly not cops—our greatest domestic threat, made the media (our second greatest threat) a disgrace for not only neglecting to address this but for painting said race as oppressed and victimized and profiled, for letting them get away with murder, literally in some cases . . . and bringing it all back to slavery, which, as Brannigan was now announcing, hands cupped around his mouth as he shouted, “. . . was over a hundred and fifty years ago—fact!”

He was walking away, back to his buddies, having just mumbled his parting shot about “some of us,” me, not letting that simple fact soak in—that’s when I excused myself, smiling as I headed towards Steve and his strapper buddies—they were sipping and munching, obese hyenas, in their size fiftysomething-wide suit coats. The volume of the room lowered with each step I took. I heard my own shoes smacking the floor. I could only assume I was sweating, “like a pig,” as I narrowed the gap between Brannigan and me, but my nerves were not the reason why. All hesitation had been wiped clean. I was ready for a fight. I had my wife’s permission. (Dawn’s fingers, her Morse code, had played a different tune—*Fuckin’ go! Go! Go!! Get ‘em!* her taps were telling me—while Steve had stood there alone, firing away at close range, having decided to leave his platoon and go rogue. *Sic fat pig!*)

“Hey, Steve. Steve! How about the Indian Wars—the American Indian Wars—are they over?” He turned, faced me. The circle had broken apart—they had abandoned their comrade just before he’d made it back. “And the atomic bomb—that was done, I guess, on . . . August what—ninth was it?—of forty-five, Steve? You’re the historian. And climate change is over—that was

all fake news, I guess, right?—since we had that blizzard back in March. How ‘bout that BP oil spill . . . Remember that? Next fishing trip you boys take down the Gulf, maybe, I don’t know, maybe ask the little fishes, before you start cookin’ em up, ask ‘em if that’s all done with.” He was punching-distance away now, Steve, and his face—his mouth was open but nothing was coming out—looked as I’ll assume it did in grade school when the math teacher first introduced algebra, the Xs and Ys that weren’t the numbers he was used to adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing to a simple solution that followed the equal sign. I was actually waiting for him to squint and scratch his bald head and raise his hand. “Or, Steve,” I said—I was trying to simplify this like a teacher might do for a kid who learns better through examples, though it was clear that Big Steve needed nothing short of an exorcism to quiet the thoughts white male pundits—or Tomi Lahren, their newest favorite—for more ways than one—had implanted in Steve’s tiny brain. —“Steve,” I attempted again, “hang on, hang on, Steve . . . Steve, *Steve*, listen a sec, try and imagine your life—how different it might have been—had your grandparents had no bank account—weren’t allowed one. Think of it that way, Steve. Think of the ripple effect.”

That incredulous look again. *What’s this bank account business? Tucker’s never mentioned that.* He wanted to swallow, it seemed, but decided against it, as it would clearly reveal how nervous he’d become in discovering that the guppy bait had reeled him in a great white. Instead he did what losers so often do, blowhards with nothing left in their tanks of regurgitated hot air, a tactic, as easy a tell, an admission of defeat, as you’ll ever see—like skunks knowing they stand no chance in a fair fight thus resorting to spraying you with liquid fear—guys like Steve do one of two things: they either elevate their voices or they smile. Steve smiled.

Steve had a son, I remembered that, a kid a bit older than my oldest nephew. College-aged I figured by now. So I tried again: “Does your son work?” I said, and after Steve proudly, confidently told me, still holding that smile, his son was a caddie over at Torresdale Country Club, I told him, as calmly as I could, that many—most—black kids that work jobs like those at nineteen or twenty, they aren’t doing it for book money or beer money or to get their dads off their asses—they are there to pay for their entire lives . . . “And when your entire life, Steve, is worth, what is it, seven-twenty-five an hour . . .? Maybe, I don’t know, you start contemplating the risky, ‘illegal’ alternatives that compensate a wee bit better.”

“Always an excuse.”

“A *reason* you mean, Steve—a consequence.”

“How about pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and working twice as hard.”

I looked at Steve, the inner tube beneath his bed-quilt of a suit, his swollen face that resembled the guy I’d known in his twenties and thirties wearing a prosthetic jawline of fat. I think I chuckled a bit, almost told him that I knew him in his younger years—he could barely pick himself off a bar stool, let alone pull himself up by whatever these proverbial bootstraps were. *Twice as hard* for you, Steve, I didn’t say, would have ended in a heart attack—no kid as fat and drunk as you, you fat fuck!, could have ever done “twice as much” as *anyone* other than maybe gobble down ten-cent wings at the Sheffield Tavern. I could have carved him up so hard he’d have urinated his Yuenglings right there on the floor in front of me and his buddies (who, by the way, were as silent as friends watching a wife or girlfriend storm into a bar and berate their bro, their chum, take his manhood in the middle of a fantasy football draft.) I came closer, pretending not to notice the rest of the room, the dozens of other guests quietly creeping nearer and nearer to try and hear what fat, drunk Steve was saying to Serpico Joe. Close enough to take

hold of one of Steve's chins, grip it tight then knee him directly in his dick, I put my arm around this fat monster, gripped a firm hunk of shoulder fat, smiled, and told him we'd have to just agree to disagree on this one, pal. I tapped my glass of Diet Coke to Steve's lager. And after I called for the bartender to bring us two shots of Black Haus, even referred to the liqueur by the nickname I knew the Steves of the world did—"Two shots of section eight"—Steve was so surprised that his nervous smile and slits for eyes that had said he wanted to cry or shit himself were wiped clean by an air of confidence that hadn't been visible, let alone imaginable during the minute or so I treated him like the overgrown toddler he was. Maybe he took this, my "agree to disagree," as some sort of victory, a draw—I doubt Steve ever won a single thing in his life—and he could later tell his pals, on the beach maybe, lounging there in a big ole straw hat to protect his fat, freckled head, a lager in hand, a thin blue line flag whipping in the Wildwood wind, tell them all about the time he'd gone toe to toe with Serpico Joe.

Steve's son I don't believe followed in his father's footsteps and became a cop (I always pictured Junior Brannigan as the character Spaulding from *Caddie Shack* blowing through Steve's retirement to develop a newfangled, first-of-its-kind ap to help make Americans even lazier), but my officers—these kids who sit in front of me at roll with their beautiful heads of hair and smooth faces, mustaches that make it seem as if they're playing pretend, locked and loaded, fully equipped, they believe, with a full arsenal of what they need—these kids might as well be Steve's offspring. In my three squads, I have just two non-white officers. Two of forty-five. As Steve's facts stated, most of the violent crime—the carjackings . . . the shootings . . . the armed robberies and rapes—are committed by minorities (a fact indeed), predominately blacks, making my district, most of the Department, one giant conflict of interest, cultural incompetence that's scarier than the loaded guns in our holsters. And no, that's no one's fault. It's no one's

fault that he's white or he's black or he's blind or full of distorted vision. It's not your fault, either, when your father shows up drunk to your Little League games and screams at coaches and follows the ump to the parking lot, then smacks you around on the car ride home, calls you chicken shit and fagot and Josephine, makes you take a cold shower, sits there on the toilet seat, berating you still, to be sure you don't turn the faucet warmer "because losers don't deserve warm showers"—it's not your fault that you're dealt a father like this, whose ghost greets you every morning, shows up throughout the day and haunts you and shrinks you and pisses on your hopes . . . , and it's not your fault if your dad, well, never showed up at all, and your role models and mentors and heroes are rappers, drug dealers, and gang bangers.

And no, I never said I was the god of all things right and wrong. I'm certainly no pro in anything other than maybe the cheesesteak egg rolls that Dawn tells me I make better than any restaurant we've ever been. Like I said: just a person and his experiences. My opinions, though, what's in my soul as unequivocal truth, maybe that can impact someone—no, I'm certain it can—and I know this as well: I know that life ain't easy, not for a kid who's been swallowed by the streets with little or no family to steer him home, not for a cop hoping, praying like hell to get home safely when his shift is through. Life, like gravity, is pulling us down—every day. But love—love is right there too. Even those incapable of giving love themselves, even those folks can be loved at any moment, any second of life, which in turn—and I really believe this—can generate change in ways that many only thought possible in dreams and fairytales. It's as contagious as any single element in this life of ours, love is; I believe that too. There's *power* in love! When love hits someone, consciously or not, it stores itself somewhere deep inside you, somewhere no TV talk-show host or political pundit or family member's ignorant or non-existent upbringing can ever get to. Love is the ultimate ripple effect. Love, as I know firsthand, can turn

two unhappy people happy; in love, like a math equation, two negatives equal a positive (something, I'm sure, the Big Steve Brannigans of the world would have a hard time understanding).

I don't tell my squads this. Not these words exactly. Ripple effects and math equations. *The power of love* sounds too Huey Lewis or Celine Dion to be taken too seriously. I withhold, as well, the details of *my* story—the means behind my mindset—for reasons that most of us can't so easily explain how we've arrived somewhere confident and free where everything came together. When a story's yours and only yours, no one else can ever really feel its power.

And there's one more thing I know. Or I think I know: regardless of how out of touch or blindly left-winged these officers see me as, my words have a way speaking a little louder when I'm wearing this white uniform (that too their minds were trained to believe via those who came before them); therefore, I'm always sure to keep on using my platform, my remaining time behind the podium—to keep promoting what I believe, in every ounce of my soul, is an essential, *the* essential, requisite to happiness. It's why I'm still here, a sergeant in a district that patrols an area nicknamed 'The Badlands', a district that responds to dozens of shootings per day, a district where there are more people living in poverty than there are police officers in the entire city (trust me, this too is a "fact"); it's why I'm not on a bike or ogling in a cruiser with a pair of dark shades on counting the days till I jump ship and flee for the beach or the mountains. My purpose is here, in this uniform, supervising fellow human beings, many of whom still have loads of room for growth—the folks in laundered blue uniforms and the ones with jeans falling off their asses just the same.

As I ready myself to speak, fourteen, fifteen faces staring up at me, I sometimes feel like an inspirational speaker at a high school assembly—an ex abuser of some sort who knows that

what he's about to say means nothing to the kids staring back at him, that because there's no mandatory quiz at the end, he might as well be talking to a crowd of cardboard cutouts. But he says what he has to say anyway—and so do I. As I begin to speak, I don't use the ubiquitous tricks that many public speakers are known to employ: I don't picture my officers naked or pick out one in the middle of the room and focus my eyes on his or hers. No. It's Dawn I see. I see her down under the El, heading towards my car, a mid-high zombie trot (Dawn of the Dead was her nickname within my district, the 26th then, and pretty much all of Fishtown and Lower Kensington circa '91), the way I'd pass her by day after day after day just as cops today pass addicts, as if they're stray cats, and then how one day I didn't, how I stopped, on one of the hottest days of the year, as Dawn burned her bare feet on a blacktop you could have fried an egg, and how I stretched across my Chevy's upholstered bench seats and rolled down the passenger window and I asked her, like she was human, if she felt like taking a ride and grabbing a pair of shoes . . . “Kmart”—I pointed across Alleghany Avenue—“a pair of jellies or something . . . my treat.” It soothes me to see this scene, makes it easier to preach about the courage of going against the grain, against the mob mentality that most of us were raised on, a mentality, an outlook that has closed so many roads in so many walks of life, taken freedoms from people without their having the faintest fucking clue. Seeing this scene is my solace—every single day I see it, at one point or another I do. I see it, as they say, like it happened yesterday. I see my car door open. I see my Dawn get in. I see my reason for being alive.