

AFTER THE COPS

by Greg Stolze

Brett Carleton wanted to cross his arms, but he didn't. His wife Consuela had told him, that morning, to be relaxed and open at the job interview. They'd brought him a coffee, but he wasn't drinking it.

"So... lost your job after the Cop Wars?" the woman on the other side of the desk asked

"Yeah. Yes," Brett replied.

"Which side were you on?"

Brett's hands, on the table, closed up, not quite into tight fists. He covered the right hand's scarred knuckles with the left, the hand with the wedding ring.

"The losing side," he said at last.

#

"I didn't get it," he told his wife that night, at dinner.

"Oh! Well, at least they didn't string you along," Consuela said, frowning.

"They didn't *tell* me but... y'know, I didn't. I could read the interviewer."

"You could? Was it like you expected, some guy with a man-bun and an ACAB t-shirt?"

"That was a joke," he said, winding noodles on his fork. Meat was so expensive, these days. Even with the supplement checks, they only had it with half the week's dinners. Connie sometimes joked that they'd become budgetarians, instead of vegetarians.

"So what was he like then?"

"She. A bean counter."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Like at the DMV or something. Just some woman with a pencil and a spreadsheet, deciding on my life."

"You could do something else," Consuela said, pouring herself more wine.
"We're OK. We saved. No kids."

"My pension's gone, Connie."

"I know, Brett."

They argued tepidly and had make-up sex that was barely more conclusive.

Three days later, Brett was working in the garden when he got the call. They were willing to give him a trial period as a community servant.

#

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir." Brett gave his new boss a firm handshake. When the other man looked down, Brett realized he wasn't crushing back. He eased off.

"Edgar Weems," the man said, peering up at Brett. "Please, come into my office."

"So you're the chief now?"

"No. There is no chief, no sergeants or captains. I'm the manager."

"Right." Brett scratched the back of his head. "Do we still call it the shop?"

Edgar smiled a little. "Yeah, we call it that. Just not a precinct or a station. Moving away from military terminology, trying something more modern."

"Sure."

The office was plain. One wall was a window over the parking lot. Opposite it was a bookshelf. Behind the desk were tall filing cabinets made of some blue material, a composite or ceramic. There was a slight open space between them, right in the middle where Edgar's ergonomic chair waited. It had a diploma, a few certificates, and a photo of Edgar shaking Barack Obama's hand.

"Public safety is different now," Edgar said, sitting and gesturing for Brett to do the same.

"I'm aware, sir."

Edgar stopped and narrowed his eyes. Brett looked back, impassive.

“We’ve demobilized a lot of standard patrol officers, replacing them with specialized community service agents.”

“A full workshop instead of a single multitool,” Brett quoted.

“You’ve done your homework. Some of it, at least. You were a uniformed officer, previously. One use of force complaint.”

“Which was deemed unfounded,” Brett said, quickly.

“So many were.”

“In my case, I...” Brett looked away. “If you want to hear my side of it, let me know. No charges were brought. The arrest stood and the DA got a conviction.”

“I’m well aware. But I’ve got a lot going on and I am not running the new system to get the same bad outcomes that dragged down the old one.”

“I was not one of those cops,” Brett said softly.

“I wouldn’t have let them hire you if I thought you were. The bad fact is, *nobody* wants to be on anything resembling a police force right now, except the same people who shouldn’t have been on the old ones—the gun nuts, the racists, the power-trippers and profiteers. We have tons of former police applying for jobs and not nearly enough of anything else we need. So we take what we can get. Today, that means you.”

Brett said nothing, lips tight.

“Our divisions are Mental Health, Dispute Resolution, Addiction Relief, Vehicular Safety, Distress, and Violence Response. Which do you think we’re putting you on?”

“I’ll go wherever I’m needed.”

“What do you think you’re most qualified to do?”

“Traffic or the violent one, I suppose.”

Weems smiled thinly. “So many ex-cops lean towards Violence Response. Let’s see how you do in VS. I think you’re getting fitted for a uniform in a few minutes.”

#

The Vehicular Safety uniform was an incandescent yellow jumpsuit. An identification code ran across his torso and down his left leg in big, black, sans-

serif numbers. Instead of a badge, his left pectoral housed a combination radio and camera. He rode a matching yellow motorcycle with a lightbar. Instead of a gun, he carried a ticket pad.

During his months in yellow, Brett put up with a lot of back-talk and jokes. Partway through, he started to loosen up. People were less respectful, sometimes just plain rude, but most were either resigned or ingratiating.

He only got a few good stories to tell Consuela—drivers who tried to flee, or who simply refused to pull over. In those cases, he kept pace with the lights on until a drone could arrive from a nearby regional office. Most of them flew, while a few just rolled on the ground, cutting off the rogue vehicle, locking on to the engine block and frying the spark plugs with a targeted electromagnetic pulse. Brett's job was then to watch the immobilized vehicle until Mental Health could show up to talk, with Violent Response hanging back but ready. If the driver fled on foot, he was to coordinate the pilots remotely controlling air cameras to keep an eye on the runner until, again, Mental Health could talk them down.

The Mental Health uniforms had the same design, only it was teal with warm golden numbers. Violent Response was navy blue and white.

Traffic officers like him were nicknamed “lemons” or “bumblebees.” Mental Health personnel were “talkies,” “mentals” and, less commonly, “hannibals.” Violent Response got shortened to “vipers.”

#

“I’m seconding you to Mental Health,” Orielle DuChamps told him after four months on the motorcycle. She was Edgar Weems’ replacement.

“Ma’am?”

“I know, you don’t have the training, but neither does anyone else. You’re going to be in a strictly support position, clear?”

“I... don’t think I am. Clear, I mean. No disrespect ma’am, but... I’ve only got ten hours in the de-escalation classes.”

“Understood, but in your... previous life, there was the Detchek arrest. You talked down two armed men with hostages.”

He blinked. “They didn’t really want to shoot anyone.”

“Most people don’t. Do you *want* to stay on traffic? It’s a bomb-ass cycle, I’ll give you that.”

“No, I’ll, I’m a team player. You need me in MH, I’ll do MH.”

“You’re going to drive Valerie around and do what she tells you. Can you handle that?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She frowned. “This whole ‘yes ma’am, team player’ business was part of the old-boy cop thing, the ‘thin blue line, never let down the side, no snitching’ culture. I’m not here for that.”

“I just want to do the job right.”

“Hm.” Her face became a little less severe. “I do like how ‘yes ma’am’ sounds, I can see how your old captains and chiefs got real comfortable with that.”

#

“You must be Brett.” Valerie didn’t even come up to his shoulder. She had a puffy hairdo, honey-brown with a little grey in some of the roots. Her nose had a plastic brace over it and both her eyes were purple-bruised.

“Valerie Firestone? Pleased to meet’cha.”

“Orielle tells me you were a police officer before the reforms,” she said as she showed him which desk in the open-plan office he was going to use. He frowned. It was tiny, like the one he’d had in traffic. He was expected to have all his materials off it at end of shift, when someone else would use it.

“Back before the Cop Wars, yeah.”

“You call them that? Interesting.”

“Sure. What did you do?”

“Psychotherapy.”

“Wow. Full MD?”

“No, no. Psychology, not psychiatry. Can’t write scrips.”

“I’m not drug seeking. So, what’re we doing today?”

“Driving to Benford. West sector’s ours, you familiar with it?”

"I was poli— er, monitoring traffic in the southeast corridor by the highway, but I can find my way around."

"Good. You'll get used to it." She had a crooked smile, but it was nice.

At the motor pool, she went to the passenger side of the teal subcompact without asking. Brett adjusted the driver's seat all the way back.

"I hear MH might be moving more towards plainclothes?" he said, tugging at the cuffs of his jumpsuit. It was too small for him.

"Some already are, but I'm afraid we're going to be in these a while longer. I hate these collars, they make my neck look weird."

"Hey, at least yours reaches your ankles."

"Yeah, they really lowballed your size there. Anyhow, they like having the teals out. The idea is, people see them and it reduces the stigma of mental illness or depression."

"Is that working, you think?" He signaled and pulled into traffic.

She shrugged. "There aren't many people who are thrilled and delighted to have a crazy car pull up at the house."

"That what they call this? Well, lotsa people weren't exactly clapping and, like, popping champagne when the old black 'n' whites showed up."

"Those old cop cars had cultural power though. Decades of TV and movies, *Adam-12* through *CSI*. 'Copaganda' told people to trust a Crown Vic with turret lights. These things? No cachet."

"No what?"

"No social juice. Though, well, some people are fine with 'em. Preferable to those armored humvees."

"Sometimes you gotta carry a big stick."

"Not very often, in my experience." She looked away and folded her arms.

#

They spent their first day checking in on some of her previous calls. Brett sat in the car while Valerie went in to talk to a teen who'd made some suicidal gestures. He got invited in for tea (which he did not drink) while a whiny woman

complained about her Addiction Relief assignment and pushed Valerie to try and get her case reassigned to Mental Health. Then they visited Albert Marlborough.

Valerie sighed as they drove towards the Marlborough apartment. "Perhaps we should pull over. I'd like to brief you, this one is troubling," she said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Albert is the one who broke my nose," she said.

Brett twitched to look at her, wide-eyed. "All right, I know things have changed a lot but shouldn't he—and pardon my language—go down for that shit?"

"It's complicated."

"Is it though?" Brett said skeptically.

"Albert is generally nonviolent. If I'm any judge, he hit me by accident, it wasn't volitional."

"How does one accidentally break a cop's nose?"

"I'm not a 'cop,' remember?"

Something about Valerie's cold expression made Brett lower his voice. "Well, you know him and I don't. He was... doing what, exactly? What can I expect?"

"Albert is low-functioning, poor verbal skills, some bipolar features. He was upset and acting out when I went to try to de-escalate."

"And how'd *that*... OK, sorry, sorry. I'll listen."

"He didn't know me and he went into an intense physical state. A tantrum, you might call it."

"A tantrum."

"I didn't want him to self-injure while he was so beside himself, so I got closer to try and keep his head from hitting anything hard. I was trying to get his arms, but his elbow caught me in the face, and that just upset him more."

"I'm sure."

"It did!"

"I'm not being sarcastic!"

"Perhaps I'm projecting then. It was upsetting. Certainly I, um... yeah."

"Is this why the cap—is this why Orielle wanted me to partner up with you?"

"It seems likely."

"OK, so... uh, how you want to play this?"

"Excuse me?"

"What can I *do*? Give me a lead and I will follow that. I don't want to wait in the car."

She sighed. "Don't be intimidating. Honestly, the worst thing about the old policies was the *fear*. Cops wanted everyone to be so scared of them and then couldn't understand why no one came forward with information, why everyone got squirrely and combative. People still don't trust us."

Brett folded his arms, looked away, and turned red. "Play it softly, sure. Nice, or neutral?"

"Friendly, if you can manage it."

He gave her a squinty little grin. "You tell me. Did it work on you?"

She gave that crooked smile in return. "It worked just fine, Brett."

#

'Just fine' could also describe the visit with Albert, which was also a visit with his mom, brother and sister. Brett smiled and made nice and listened as Valerie answered questions about community services for Albert and asked some of her own about his diagnosis, medications and past record.

Brett kept his eye on Albert, who was twenty-two, large, and didn't like eye contact. On their way out, Albert limply shook their hands and mumbled something to Valerie, which made her smile.

"What did he say?" Brett asked.

"He apologized."

"Are you sure?"

"I choose to think so." She squinted at him. "You uneasy with Albert?"

"I... ah, never mind."

"Say it. Better out than in."

"I didn't like the way he kept his hands behind his back."

"What?"

"Look, if I can see your hands, I know you don't have a weapon. It's that simple."

"Has anyone ever hidden a weapon from you and then attacked you with it?" Valerie asked.

"Three times."

"Oh."

"...and I know this guy wasn't, like, *faking it* to get us off guard and then go stab crazy but... I dunno. I guess I didn't know it entirely."

"Suspicion can rattle back and forth between people."

"That it can. Still. He didn't break your nose this time so... call that a win?"

"Good enough."

That was when the radio announced a code. Brett instantly groaned as Valerie frowned.

"Which one is that?" she asked. "I'm still trying to get them memorized."

"It's a domestic. We take that, right?" He shifted the car to drive as Valerie took the radio.

"It could be," she said. "It sounds like we're closest. The Distress units are tied up at some boat thing, and Dispute Res has that big east-west community summit."

"Vipers?"

"Gearing up but staying back."

As they parked in front of a ranch house with a freshly resurfaced driveway but dying shrubbery and a patchy lawn, they could hear raised voices from inside. Brett couldn't make out words, but he heard a man and then a woman.

“Was this anonymous?”

“Yes, probably a neighbor,” Valerie said, nodding. “Database says the Vercour family, Todd and Adele. Two children. Casseopia is eleven and Victor is six.” She showed him their drivers’ license photos on her tablet.

“Great. You want the front door or the back?”

She frowned. “Let’s approach side by side. If someone runs out the back, we’ll keep an eye.”

“You want me to get the drones in?”

“Not yet, let’s just... knock.”

Brett did, and Valerie called out “Hello, we’re from community resources. May we come in?”

“Go away!” the male voice replied.

“Is this the Vercour residence?” Brett asked.

“We don’t need you here!”

“Can I speak with Mrs. Vercour, please?”

There were lowered tones from within, and then a woman’s voice said, “Can you come around back? The kitchen door’s unlocked.”

Brett’s hands strayed towards his side as they walked, but he no longer had a gear belt, no gun, no taser, no baton. He gritted his teeth.

“Yeah, just come on in,” the man said as Brett reached the back.

Todd Vercour wasn’t a big man. He was balding, barefoot on a kitchen stool, scowling, and holding a double-barreled shotgun.

“Todd Vercour? Could you put the gun down, please?” Valerie said.

He narrowed his eyes. “Which cops are you then? The crazy doctors, or the not-quite-firemen or what? I know you’re not the gun guys, they don’t get sent to talk.”

“We’re all community servants,” Valerie said, edging slowly inside. “You’re the home owner?”

“For now, I guess.”

Brett followed. The kitchen was fairly large, but an island in the middle made it crowded. Todd, on his stool with his gun, was at the far end, beside another doorway into a hall. To Brett's left, an open arch led to a dining room.

“Was that Mrs. Vercour who invited us in, then?” Brett asked.

“Yeah, that was her.”

“Where's she then?”

“Went to the bathroom.”

“Ah.”

“Again, Mr. Vercour, could you put the shotgun down, please?” Valerie said. She'd moved in to the left of the island. Brett stayed to the right, keeping his back in the corner, turning to keep an eye on the door through which they'd entered, listening to his radio as the numbers estimated times until Dispute Resolution and Violent Response units reached the site.

“Let's call this a D-20, over,” he said, keeping his voice casual.

“What's that then?” Todd asked.

“Ongoing discussion,” Brett replied, though in fact the code was a request to get a Distress unit closeby in case of injuries.

“We can really wrap it up, we're... we're fine.” A woman slowly entered the kitchen from the far end. She looked like the driver's license photo of Adele Vercour.

“Can we ask what was going on here?” Brett asked. He was splitting his attention between the man's gun and the woman's lower lip. It was swollen. As she moved nearer, he could see a tiny shining patch on it—raw flesh from a recent split.

“What business is that of yours, huh? We're in our own home, you just barge on in here and ask questions?” Todd said. “I thought the reason we fired all the cops was to be done with, like, intrusion and harassment.”

“We were invited inside,” Valerie said quietly.

"Well, you can consider the invitation withdrawn. I'm fine, you can see her, she's fine. You don't need to come any closer," he said sharply as Brett got marginally nearer to the gun, but still outside of grabbing distance.

"I'm not, it's OK," Brett said, making a little eye contact but not staring, keeping his face carefully neutral.

"I get that you feel like we're intruding, but there was a call, a complaint." Valerie's voice was quiet and steady. "We're here to find out the reason for that. We heard some shouting before we came inside. You two?"

"Our neighbors are pains in the ass. Snitches. Always looking for a reason to complain about us."

"That sounds rough. It's hard when you can't trust the people around you," Valerie replied. "Have you considered consulting with Dispute Resolution to try and improve that?"

"Sell it elsewhere, no one here's buying."

Adele took a couple timid steps towards Valerie. "See, what happened was? Our son Victor, he's six? Well, I was, er, in the kitchen cooking." She glanced at her husband. "And I almost spilled some hot food on him? Scalding, really. So we were, were upset, and we yelled. Because we were startled? That was all."

"Poor little guy, is he all right?"

"He's fine," Todd said.

"Why don't I speak with him, as long as I'm here?" Valerie said. "I might be able to help him process and maybe learn to be safer in the kitchen."

"Or, you could just go." Todd's nostrils were starting to flare.

Brett looked at him and sighed. "Mr. Vercour, I'm not accusing you of anything, but take a moment to think how this looks from the outside, OK? There's noise, enough to alarm the neighbors. And hey, I get it, kids are loud and unpredictable, there's surprises. Sure. But when we show up, you have a gun in your hand. And there's no scalding food in the sink or on the counter."

"Are you calling my wife a liar?"

"Nah, nah, just trying to understand."

"You have two children... is that right, Adele?" Valerie asked.

"Cassie's at a friend's," the other woman replied, eyes down.

Todd got off his stool and pivoted to glare at Valerie as she moved a step closer to Mrs. Vercour. "What're you doing now?"

"I thought Adele and I might go speak to the boy."

"Oh no, you don't need to poke around and snoop the house. I get enough of that from the internet. You want to sniff around? Get a warrant." Todd scowled, rolled his eyes and then yelled. "VICTOR! Get in here!"

"How old's the kid, then?" Brett asked.

"He's six."

"Six." Brett looked at the shotgun, nodded at it a little and raised an eyebrow. Todd grudgingly broke it open and put the cartridges side by side on the counter.

"Happy now?" he asked, as he set the weapon next to its ammo.

"Thank you," Valerie said, as a little boy with a red face and a pout came into the kitchen.

"As you can see, he's fine." Todd was pretty red himself. He was breathing heavily and his hands were clenched in fists.

"Hey there," Brett said, squatting down, but the child ignored him, advanced to his father and punched him in the leg with a wordless cry.

"DAMMIT VIC YOU LITTLE—!"

Brett's eyes widened as he saw Todd's foot come up and draw back. He stood, moving to intercept, but Valerie was quicker, dropping to pull the child out of the way and catching the kick herself, right in the ribs.

"Son of a—!" Brett encircled Todd's arms and torso, slamming him backwards to the stove as the child started to wail.

"Stand down!" Brett barked, spittle flying to fleck Todd's ear. "Stop resisting!"

Then a piercing tone filled the kitchen, a wordless keening, and he looked at Adele. The noise was coming from her. She had the gun and was fumbling with a shell.

"YOU BETTER KILL ME!" Todd yelled, in tones so grim they sounded inhuman.

“VALERIE!” Brett bellowed.

Mrs. Vercour got the shell in and closed the gun. Brett tried to wrestle Todd away, but the man was trying to get to his wife, trying to escape the grip, struggling and snarling and beyond all reason.

The barrel of the half-loaded gun came up, pointing at both Todd and Brett. It was a side-by-side, the kind of thing you'd use to hunt fowl. But the shells were deer slugs.

Valerie stepped between Adele and Todd and said, “No!”

For a moment the women locked eyes. Then slowly, Valerie reached out, pointed the gun towards the ceiling, and took it away from Adele.

“She’s crazy!” Todd shouted over the child’s cries and the wife’s sudden sobs.

“Come outside,” Brett replied, pulling the man along and then easing up as he felt Vercour relax a little, stop struggling and move with him.

“She’s crazy,” he said again, lower.

“We really don’t like that word ‘crazy’,” Brett replied as they went into the backyard.

#

An hour later, they were back at the station, side by side at their tiny desks, collaborating on an incident report.

“What do you think’s gonna happen to them?” Brett asked.

“I don’t know yet. It’s a real shame that we have to take the children out.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t safe. Might as well leave the kids in a burning house. I’d give you even odds over whether it’s mom or dad who...”

He glanced at Valerie’s expression and trailed off with a mumbled apology.

“It’s sad,” she said.

“It’s very sad,” he agreed. “Any word on a grandparent or uncle or aunt or something?”

“An MH non-patroller is seeing who’s available.”

They were quiet for a moment. He leaned over and gently suggested a spelling correction.

“What do you think should have happened?” Valerie asked.

“Hm?”

“You seem disapproving.”

“I don’t disapprove of you or... or of anything, really. I mean, I disapprove of the Vercours, I guess.”

“So then what do you think we should do with them?”

“Well, in the old days, you point a gun at a cop, you go to jail.”

“If you survived.”

“Sure. Punch your old lady, go to jail.”

Valerie looked at him flatly and Brett looked away.

“Sometimes that happened,” he muttered, frowning.

“Do you think the Vercours would be better after they came out of prison, then?”

He sighed. “Yeah, I get the point, prison is not a place everyone comes out of less crazy than going in, but... I mean, actions have to have consequences.”

“Their kids have been removed. That’s a consequence. They’re in custody. We’ll be dropping by, both scheduled and unannounced, at their home and workplace until they’re deemed stable. That’s a consequence.”

“That’s supposed to make them *more* sane?”

“We’re not trying for confrontations with them, and we have to let them know that. We have to root for them to get better.”

“Do you think everyone can? I’ve met people who were evil. And I go to church, I don’t use that word lightly. There are folks who will hurt you whenever they can get away with it, even without any gain. The hurt is their gain.”

“How many? How many of these moral disasters have you encountered, more than once? How many were you seeing in their worst circumstances?”

“More than I’d like.”

“But they’re outliers, Brett. It’s mostly just desperation, or a failure to find a better way—those are the faces of crime, almost always. Am I wrong?”

“I’d add cruelty. Why’d Todd there give Adele a busted lip, because he was desperate? What’s the better way for him?”

“I don’t know why he did it, though it sounds like they’re in financial distress.”

“Convenient,” Brett said.

“Oh come on! You’ve been behind on bills at some point right? There’s nothing convenient about it.”

“No, I mean it’s a convenient excuse. I think he hit her because power. I think he wanted to.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Lots of people do cruel stuff to exercise power, you’re right about that. The hard work is getting them to imagine better options, better ways to feel like they matter.”

“Does everyone matter?” Brett asked.

“I think so.”

“Wow.”

#

That night, as he grilled up thick slabs of marinated tofu, Consuela brought him a beer.

“So how was your first day as a Mental Health agent?” she asked.

“If I say it was crazy, are you going to laugh?”

“Crazier than traffic?”

“No comparison. Let me tell you about my partner Valerie—you’d like her. Real soft spoken, former psych therapist, very ‘let’s use our words’ type.”

“And she’s walking the beat now?”

Brett cackled and flipped their dinner. “I saw her take a loaded shotgun off someone today. I think she’s just fine.”