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Death Beat

*Drink themselves to death, okay.
But the Commissioner was awful
tired of these skid-row slob
being strangled every other night . . .*

BY DAVID C. COOKE



DAMN lousy shame," the man said. "Hell of a stinking thing. Guy's not safe on the street any more at night."

The cop looked at him, from his rundown shoes with their split seams to his unshaven face and bleary eyes. "On your way, vag," he growled, "before I run you in. This area's closed up, nobody supposed to be on the street."

The man laughed hoarsely. "The strangler, huh? You'll never catch him. He'll get another poor wino tonight."

"Not tonight he won't," the cop said. "We got the area blanketed. You slob's want to drink yourself to death, that's okay. But the commissioner, he don't want you strangled."

The man laughed again. "Commissioner, shumissioner. A jerk. Must be, putting a monkey like you

on this beat. Death beat, that's what it is. Guy gets knocked off every other night. Been going on now two weeks."

"That's right," the cop said. "Two weeks. Tomorrow. But there won't be any more. He tries anything to-night, it's a bullet in the guts."

"Hal"

"The captain says shoot. Shoot to kill. Orders right from the top brass. He won't have a chance."

They walked along together, the cop swinging his nightstick, looking into dark doorways and alleys, looking up at dirty windows, keeping his eyes open, the man across the sidewalk from him, walking unsteadily, breathing heavily, too much booze running through his body and brain.

"You won't find him," the man said. "Too smart, that's what he is. Too smart for a bunch of dumb cops."

The cop stopped his measured walking, looked at the man. Soused to the gills, reeking of rotgut and sweat and filth. An ugly running sore in the midst of a healthy society. Better off dead. Hell, the strangler was doing the city a favor knocking off the scum and slime. But that's not what the commissioner said. These murders have to be stopped, he said, or some heads are going to go rolling. Good cops for lousy bums. Break one, let the other live. What kind of sense was that? The city had a clean-up drive on. Well, wasn't the strangler doing

his bit, wasn't he doing more than anybody else to clean up the city? And for what he was doing they had orders to shoot to kill.

Kill the strangler. Definite orders. But no laws to stop this wreck of what used to be a man from tailing along, insulting him. Rough him up and you get laced down, maybe a day or two off without pay. Justice.

The cop walked along the dark street, his footsteps slow and measured. He remembered, when he'd been a kid, how this was once a respectable part of the city. Not fancy, maybe, but peopled by fine, decent families like the Andersons, the Greens, the Whitsons. He used to live here himself, played in the streets. It was a nice place then, a place where it was fun to go out at night and run over to Schinholtze's candy store for some licorice or a water ice.

A fine and decent place. Then, so slowly you could hardly notice it, the cheap saloons came in, creeping up from the slums of Cherry Street where the rattaps were being torn down for a low-rent housing project. And with the saloons came the bums, following like a pack of mangy dogs after a bitch in heat. That was the death of the neighborhood. They killed the neighborhood as surely, if not as quickly, as the strangler was now killing her.

One by one the old families moved out, going uptown to escape what was happening. It didn't take

long before they were all gone. All except the Whitsons who had hung on to die on this strange street they had once loved, hoping in vain for another change, one for the better, that never came.

He stopped and tried the door to Poppa Steinman's clothing store. The sign said it was Steinman's, but Poppa had moved out years ago. Now, instead of hand-rolled linen handkerchiefs and pure silk ties, Poppa's old place sold second-hand suits for five dollars, threadbare overcoats, battered hats. You could also get a bottle of green smoke for fifty cents under the counter, or a stick of marijuana or goof balls. The cop knew all about it, but he didn't care. Like the strangler, the owner of Poppa Steinman's old place was doing the city a favor by killing off the scum.

"You won't get him, stupid," the man said again. "Not you or the whole damn force. He's too smart."

The cop stopped again, his eyes cold and impersonal. He slapped the nightstick into his hand, wishing he could use it just once but knowing he couldn't.

"I told you to beat it, crud," he said, his voice now as hard as his eyes. "I'm not telling you again, slop-head. Tie a can to it, get the hell away from here."

The man made a ribald noise. "I'm sticking right with you, copper. Where you go, I go. The strangler's smart, and so'm I. He won't touch me with a cop by my side."

"Okay," the cop growled, more to himself than the vag, "tonight tag along and be damned."

They walked on down the street, the black, lonely street where the cop had once played stickball and marbles, where he'd splashed around in his bathing trunks in the summer when the firemen turned on the hydrant to cool the steaming asphalt, where he'd slid gleefully on the ice and snow in the winter.

All dead dreams that could never come back. Memories of fun and laughter and clean living and clean friends like Bill Anderson, Bob Whitson, Ike Green and plenty of others too. And now, blotting out all those wonderful times, burying them under a layer of fetid dung, the filth and stagnation.

But thank God it was nearly over. Just tonight, then a night off, then another beat. A beat in a different part of the city, a clean part of the city, where he would see clean people and clean living and have clean thoughts. He turned into an alley to check the back door to a shop, and the man shuffled along behind him. Suddenly he stopped, his senses alert. There was someone else in the alley. It was too dark to see, but he had heard something, a sharp indrawn breath or the scraping of a shoe.

One hand drew the gun from its holster. He flicked the switch of his flashlight with the other, his finger tense on the trigger.

The pale beam pinpointed a derelict on the ground, his tongue blue and swollen between white lips. Dead.

And standing above the body, Bob Whitson.

Bob said, "He was going to be the last one." The cop had never before heard such resignation in any man's voice.

"Kill the bastard," the bum demanded. "Kill him, damn you. He's the strangler!"

"Why'd you do it, Bob? Why in hell'd you do it?"

"You ask a question like that? You—saw with your own eyes what scum like this did to our street?"

"Shoot him. Goddamn you, shoot!"

"I hate them for it, every bastard one of them," Whitson said. I'm moving out tomorrow, but I wanted to get one more. Just one more, and then the end."

"Damn you to hell, *shoot!*"

The cop turned it over in his

mind. The killings had to stop; that's what the commissioner said. And when he gave an order he meant it. If they didn't stop, the heads of a lot of good cops would go rolling.

But they were over. He had Bob Whitson's word, and that was good enough for him. They had known each other long enough. had laughed together enough times. had played in the streets together enough years.

Still, he had his duty to perform. He was a good cop, had sworn to uphold the law. He couldn't jeopardize his name or record.

He turned and squeezed the trigger, then again, smashing the bum back against the brick wall, spilling him face-down next to a garbage can.

Slowly he holstered his gun. "Had to do it," he said quietly. "Caught him killing another one, and he tried to run. You saw it."

"Sure," Whitson said. "Sure, I saw it. You'll get a medal, Al."

