

The Drug Raid

“Bastard says he won’t be taken alive. We’ll see about that.”

The Sheriff is repeating himself, maybe for my benefit, maybe for his own.

“He may wish we don’t take him alive.” The State’s head Narc is in the driver’s seat, figuratively and literally, and the Sheriff snorts in agreement from the passenger side.

Their guns fill the wide bench seat between them.

In the back, Rick and I exchange frowns. We knew what we were getting into when we joined this raid, but I thought the threat would come from the man we hunt, the man cops call the Hippie, the one whose marijuana farm is well hidden in these hills. Instead, the immediate threat is the road.

The head Narc, in from the state capitol, where roads line up in predictable grids on flat land, is trying to prove he can outrace hillbillies. When I cruise these hills for pleasure, my modest sedan meanders the curves, accommodating my year-old daughter in her baby seat. The Narc’s Crown Vic uncoils the curves, swaying over the center line, the transmission complaining as he powers up the hills. And then skids down them.

And to top it off, the rain falls so hard he might as well give up on wipers. They only interrupt the sheeting action.

It has to be worse for the two cars-full of cops behind us, fighting our road spray along with the downpour and not wanting to slow down for fear of falling behind. Obviously police, in cars so plain “unmarked” marks them, the drivers’ egos override safety concerns.

Surely the Hippie is snug indoors. I don’t know what it takes to tend a marijuana crop, but this clearly isn’t the day for it. He probably doesn’t plan on a violent visitation today, either.

The front seat of this car simmers with firepower to match the cops’ attitude. And Rick and I are armed as well, with weapons the cops value almost as much as their guns: my reporter’s notepad, Rick’s camera. The cops seek a prize in this marijuana-growing Hippie. But I doubt they care as much about stopping his operation as about *being seen* to stop his operation. The victory, for them and for the Prosecutor, will resound from the front page of the county seat’s newspaper. I am a conduit for the political will of the moment.

A car comes toward us, a small coupe, its pace more than a meander, less than a race, reflecting the habit of someone who pushes it on these turns every day. We see it ahead, lose it on a curve, and watch it continue on past.

Within the second, horns blare behind us, and the Narc and the Sheriff are yelling, “Was that him?” The answer struggles through the car-to-car radio static. The street narc, the one who made the deal this day hinges on, screams an affirmative.

The head Narc slows, his curses interspersing frantic ideas on what to do next. Cops behind us want to turn and chase. Rick, the pessimist, gives me a look that says no story today, should have covered Rotary, would have been safer.

I want this story, but I start to be relieved. I don't quite buy this raid. I don't see how growing mary jane in an abandoned field is different than the moonshining these guys glorify as part of the good-old days.

And I worry about the legality of this arrest. Growing marijuana doesn't carry enough of a penalty, it seems. The street narc behind us managed a painstaking operation to get his hippie buddy to sell him the smallest criminal amount of cocaine. So all this can be justified. So the prize meets the public's expectations for funding and re-electing the men in front of me.

The head Narc is saying he can get us to the farm before the Hippie can get to a phone—some fifteen minutes behind us at Mill's Corner. The Sheriff is yelling into the radio, ordering up a roadblock.

When horns blare again.

I can't imagine where he found the space to turn—or the courage—but the Hippie is beside us. I study him in the brief moment when his coupe is no more than a foot away from my window. His long hair flares as turns his head to appraise us. I see the frown, imagine I can see the jaw clench. I wonder in the instant if his threat of not being taken alive means causing a fatal collision. It would be easy for him to simply turn into our car.

In the next instant, he pulls ahead of us. Passing three cop cars on a downhill curve in flailing rain, the man is heading to his farm, gambling on getting there before us. To do what? Hide something? Warn someone? Surely not destroy a crop. He couldn't begin to set it afire in this weather.

We slam back against our seats as the Narc accelerates. Whatever the Hippie plans to do depends on his beating us to the farm, and it's obvious to me, if not to him, that the Narc won't let that happen.

The Hippie's car is skidding and screaming. I can hear the engine protest and the tires rebel as he shifts gears. They get louder as the Sheriff rolls his window down.

Spray assaults us in the back seat, but the Sheriff's next move blocks most of it. He has his .357 magnum in a two-handed grip, both arms out the passenger-side window, elbows wedged against the wet-slick door.

The Narc shifts to the center of the wide front seat. He uses the end of his shotgun to force the wing vent open and aim the barrels outward, the tips barely balancing on the frame as he reaches back to steer the car with his left hand. He accelerates even more into the oncoming lane beside the Hippie.

The Sheriff screams "pull over now" between curses and deprecations. I am struck by the anger I hear. Maybe the boast that he won't be taken alive makes the Hippie an insult as well as a challenge. Or maybe it's just adrenaline on the Sheriff's part.

Because we will find out any moment now if the Hippie is serious about not being taken alive.

The cars do bump, on the Narc's initiative, and the Sheriff's gun could shatter the coupe's windows point-blank. The Hippie swerves toward a wide spot—a patch of grass that will allow his car to be no more than half on the road—and hits his brakes hard. The Narc brakes hard as well and angles to a stop blocking the coupe a split second after the Sheriff is out the door.

The Narc bolts from the driver's side and aims his shotgun at the coupe's windshield as the car behind us clears our rear bumper by inches. Rick cranks his window down and tries to shield his lens from the rain to get his shots.

At least a half dozen cops surround the coupe, shouting orders, guns drawn. I squirm at Rick's shoulder to get a glimpse and can tell the Hippie is simply staring at them. He opens his door, and I see nothing in his hands as cops jostle to pull him out. I hear later that he has no gun on him or in the car. He has only an agile coupe and the need to take the risk. Those were his weapons.

Cops slam him against his car, handcuff him, and shove him toward the last police car. His long hair begins to stream water onto his T-shirt. I follow the group's progress and try to hear what is actually being said in all the brassy talk. I want to see the Hippie's face when he recognizes the street narc. The narc's reaction, as he realizes his own risks have paid off, I can picture.

Back in our car, the head Narc and the Sheriff try to dry off and calm themselves and speak to me in appropriate quotes. They pause every sentence or so to say "damn" in a release of tension. At some point, the Sheriff says "sorry" to me in apology. Which is funny. A female reporter who will go on a drug raid has heard cops cuss.

They cuss again as they pull up to a run-down ranch house. No one appears at door or window. I hear a shout of "cops!" that I take to be from the Hippie, but only the once. I turn but can't see how they have silenced him.

Officers rush to the front and back of the house. Shotgun again in hand, the Narc hammers on the front door.

The response is slow, and his hammering intensifies until the door opens. He shoves a shadowed someone, and the drama unfolds inside, out of my sight. We wait as requested, but the Sheriff quickly appears to gesture us in. Most likely, he wants Rick. But I'm not sitting here any longer.

I take in a living room in disarray. It gets worse as deputies search by tossing and dumping. The Sheriff has disappeared into another room, from which voices emanate. Some are high-pitched. And scared and angry.

The Sheriff reappears to stand in front of me.

He swallows and waves his hands before he manages to explain that, of the people inside—who were still asleep mid-morning—three are women. Problem is, they aren't exactly dressed, in his words. And he wants me, as the only other female present, to watch over these women while they find clothes, make sure they don't . . . He shrugs and I want to know what he fears. Will they look for a gun? Will they try to escape through a bathroom window?

But, I accept the task. As I watch the women kick possessions on the floor, I absorb their anger and fear. I can't answer most of their questions. They dress to their satisfaction, which is my satisfaction. The cops can enforce higher standards if they care to.

More cars appear to load up the unexpected haul of prisoners. Cops are trying to figure out who the Hippie's guests are, but they're not getting straight answers. Maybe they're also asking the Hippie. I wonder what he's thinking as he watches these people—friends, I suppose—marched out of his house in handcuffs to match his own.

I am pleased to head back to town, to my typewriter. And to my baby daughter and husband.

The chase, frankly, is a great story, the start of the public's apparent fascination with the affront of an alien Hippie—probably from California, the gossip says, although his only id is in-state—and his desecration of their countryside.

The headlines continue for weeks. Every charge, every statement, every boast, every legal maneuver, is grist for my unsettled mill.

I write and write, stoking readers' anticipation of the trial until, two months later, it begins.

The Hippie enters the courtroom, and I'm surprised to see his hands are now cuffed in front of him. As if someone fears he might yet carry out his boast. The cuffs are the only clue this man is the Accused. With his new, short haircut, and neat jacket, trousers, tie, he could as easily pass for a young professor at the university.

I sit at the press table each day for the three days of the trial, taking in the Hippie's perpetual, puzzled stage-frown and his insistence that he has gotten religion while awaiting trial. Makes no difference, of course, to the court. Gets a snicker from the bailiffs.

He recognizes me from the raid, must have seen me going and coming from his house, and watches me occasionally, puzzlement perhaps real, as the trial proceeds predictably.

And ineluctably.

The street Narc is happy to describe negotiating with this dangerous druggie. The Hippie's defense attorney tries to get at whose idea the cocaine purchase really was, while the Hippie himself does a poor job of radiating Christian forgiveness.

But the feeble attempts to claim entrapment on the cocaine charge fade.

The head Narc is happy to take the stand and editorialize for the prosecutor about the sins inherent in a field of mary jane.

The Sheriff wants to talk about the attendant hippies asleep in the ranch house. He implies moral corruption and shrugs off the defense's outrage.

Neither the defense nor the prosecution asks why the Hippie returned to the farm that day, why he didn't simply speed away from us, head for the state line and states beyond.

I think about it a good deal.

The guilty verdict takes no more than an hour or so. But, of course, no one attempted to find a jury that hadn't been reading my stories for weeks.

On the day the Hippie is sentenced, he looks at me directly. I don't look away. He sighs and pulls his attention to the Judge, who smiles for the crowd as he pronounces the sentence: thirty years. The longest ever given in this county, maybe in the state, for a drug offense.

I'm not surprised. The Prosecutor was smug when he gave me his prediction. I can only watch as the congratulations circle the courtroom and the former hippie is led away. Thirty years. For growing weed. And for being in the wrong place at a time politically right for the State.

And maybe, maybe for trying to warn friends. I wonder if any of them, perhaps one of the women I watched, will visit him over the next thirty years.