

Constable Ashraf Meshal remains the voice of reason. "Look, there's nothing else you can do tonight," he tells Phillip. It doesn't matter what Phillip did or didn't do to that security guard, he and his girlfriend can still walk away. "Just go home. You can come back tomorrow and try to get your money back." The voice of reason.

It's just after 9p.m. and we're all huddled in the parking lot of the Halifax Forum. The ground beneath us vibrates in response to the bass pumping out from the concert. There's a decent Sunday night turnout for the Z103 radio station's event, as a huge lineup of waiting teenagers crowd around each other against the cold. Steve Aoki, or "The Lil Wayne of American Electro House" as he is often called, is tonight's headliner. But Phillip and his girlfriend won't get back inside and if he isn't careful, that won't even be the worst part of his night. They were kicked out; security called the cops, and that's how I ended up here.

Constables Monica Slade and Kathleen Verner were first to arrive. Then us. I'm tagging along with Constable Meshal for the night, a journalism student in search of a good story.

Meshal, still that voice of reason, is doing what he can to make sure Phillip and his girlfriend find another way to spend their evening. If he's successful, it won't be much of a story.

Phillip seems calm too, but Slade joins the conversation again and the mood shifts. His face drops and he becomes noticeably defensive. Meshal reaffirms that what she says goes. Phillip doesn't give up. His feet shuffle forward. The circle of cops tightens.

"You need to step back."

Slade's voice is biting and there's more than a hint of annoyance. The wind picks up again, bringing with it the occasional gust of cold air. Slade's hair is pulled backed into a tight pony tail, with all stray hairs tucked away behind some bobby pins.

"I wasn't doing anything, what the fuck is your problem?"

"You were moving towards me. Step back."

Phillip's girlfriend snatches the cigarette out of his waving hand and attempts to finish it off, despite wearing over sized, sage green gloves. I watch in fascination, half-convinced she's going to singe a hole in her glove. It's dark and the lights from the building don't quite reach past the entrance. It's hard to tell what is smoke, and what is her frozen breath. She's remained silent until now, her eyes red and brimming with tears. When they are, again, advised to go home, she speaks up.

"Why are you being so fucking rude?" Her comment is pointed at Slade.

A slur of words and swears follow from both of them, but the officers remain calm. They inch backwards, a few steps at a time, but their voices can still be heard by the people loitering outside the Forum.

There's a moment when the decision is made. It happens so quickly that if you weren't paying close attention, you'd miss it. The two were given every warning possible and now the officers had no choice but to act.

The pair turn their heads towards each other and bolt down the parking lot, sprinting towards what they hope is a way out.

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“Your first cup of coffee is the most important part of your shift.”

Meshal grins at me and tells me to hop in; the C24 cruiser is his and it’s unlocked. He climbs into the driver’s seat and flips open a computer screen. Its glow illuminates the entire car. We’re logged in as C5AN: central, five, alpha, north. Alpha signifies that we’re the first responding car for any calls in the north end. Hopefully we’ll catch some action on tonight’s ride-along.

Now 39, Meshal didn’t always want to be a police officer. He attended Dalhousie University, and from there transitioned from student to java server programmer. That lasted five years. Although it might sound odd, Meshal longed for more job stability. Tired of being laid off, he found himself training for the RCMP in Winnipeg. “The day they start laying off police officers is the day they have a lot bigger problems.”

The opportunity to take a few steps in a police officer’s shoes isn’t common. They drive past you on the street, or you hear and read about them in the news, but unless you’re a trouble-maker, have been arrested or were the victim of a crime, most people don’t interact with the police. I was looking for a way to squeeze out of my squishy bubble of comfort and take on an exciting assignment, something different from anything I’ve ever written.

It’s just after 7p.m. and while Meshal’s shift will run a full 12 hours, I’ve got the luxury of an exit strategy. I’m glad to see he has no regular partner. I really didn’t want to ride in the backseat all night. When I ask him about it, Meshal explains it’s not uncommon for officers to drive solo on shifts. In fact, every one I meet tonight is by themselves.

We take off in the direction of northern Halifax and within a few minutes we’ve rolled into the Tim Hortons on Young Street. One drive-thru and two coffees later, we pull up alongside Cst. Slade’s car. Her cruiser is sitting at the end of the Halifax Forum parking lot, where some kind of event is taking place. She’s talking animatedly on the phone, loud enough that I can hear her voice before the window is rolled down.

Slade—who has three and a half years with the force—hangs up with an exasperated sigh. “This guy is the biggest moron I’ve ever dealt with.”

“Notice how her accent goes all Newfie when she’s agitated?” I laugh and Meshal introduces me as the journalism student.

“Huh, I hope you don’t have too slow a night.”

The odds don’t seem to be in my favour. It is a Sunday after all. Meshal and Slade discuss last night’s shift. Aside from a greater concentration of drunk women downtown, Slade thought it was pretty quiet. Meshal’s shift was slightly more interesting.

Someone drove their truck into the front of a house and Meshal was called to the accident site after the fact. The vehicle jumped the curb off a main road, ripped up the grass on the lawn and hit the left side of the house. To make matters worse, as the driver tried to get away, they backed into a pole on the sidewalk. A neighbor caught the end of the spectacle and called the police.

“Now I didn’t actually see it or talk to the driver, but you gotta be pretty smashed to drive into a house and then back into a pole on your way out.”

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Our patrol car is making the rounds through the north side. We’ve been weaving in and out of the same streets and residential areas for almost an hour. We pull up to a four-way stop when Meshal seems to notice something. He turns the computer screen towards him and starts typing. It’s our turn to move through the intersection, but instead of going straight, Meshal flicks on his right signal light.

“See that white car in front of us? Their plates are expired.”

We follow the vehicle to the Sobey’s on Windsor Street. Once in the parking lot, Meshal turns on the flashing lights and pulls the driver over. The woman admits this isn’t the first time she’s been stopped because of the plates, but she lost her job a few weeks ago and just hasn’t gotten it done yet.

Back in our car, Meshal looks up her information. She’s telling the truth about being pulled over—it was three weeks ago and she got a ticket. He’s inclined to believe the story and lets her off with a verbal warning. Sometimes you just have to give people the chance to fix things.

As we leave the parking lot Meshal admits he’s not much of a ticket guy. Sure, even he’s been ticketed for parking his truck where he shouldn’t, but that’s not why he became a police officer. “It has its uses though. Writing traffic violations can hamper criminals and get the shitheads off the road so they can’t do their business.”

He believes that a lot of a city’s crime—stuff like property theft—is tied to those “shitheads” and their drugs. Either someone needs the drugs, wants to sell the drugs, or buy something to protect themselves and their drugs.

There’s something about having a job without a routine, one that deals so closely with mankind and where every shift is its own adventure. Meshal originally started his career off in Surrey, British Columbia with the RCMP. But Halifax was still home for him, so he only lasted there a year. That was almost five years ago and Meshal knows he made the right choice.

As we wait for the radio to chirp up with a call, we circle the north end again and talk about the important stuff: hockey and television. We bond over our mutual love for teams that never seem to reach their potential—for him it’s the Ottawa Senators, for me, the Edmonton Oilers. Meshal confesses to recording reruns of Seinfeld, and that all the good shows, ones like Dexter and The Wire are only on HBO. He’s never heard of Glee. I ask him what he thinks about all the crime based dramas, if they’re accurate or if he just avoids them.

“I have no problem with CSI, but it’s the biggest pain in the ass for us. Everyone thinks we should have cases solved in an hour.”

A call comes in on the radio. There’s a man driving around with a bunch of duffle bags in the backseat of a silver, four-door car. He tried to get an employee from Northwood Manor to go for a ride with him. We drop by the building to speak with her. From the woman’s description, he’s an older male who seemed nice enough, but “wasn’t all there.” The description doesn’t help much, but as we load back into the cruiser, Meshal reminds me to keep an eye out for a silver car. I worry we’ll spend the entire evening hunting for a vehicle that we have little chance of finding.

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“Dispatch to Alpha Five.”

There’s a fight breaking out. Actually, there’s two, but one may have been stopped. The radio starts up again, something about a possible structural fire. Maybe we’ll catch some action tonight after all. Meshal looks over at me.

“Everything seems to happen all at once.”

We’re going to check out the concert going on at the Halifax Forum. Meshal’s foot hits the pedal, but he resists the urge to turn on his lights. Then, when a small black car cuts him off, he’s had it. The lights flash and the siren whoops once, partly as a heads up but also in frustration. We stop and start through red lights, finally pulling into the parking lot of the Forum.

There’s a giant line up of teenagers waiting to be let in from the cold and two police cars are parked with their noses facing the entrance. Meshal pulls up next to Slade and rolls down the passenger window. She points out a male and female who are standing with their arms crossed, facing, but not looking at us. Apparently they’ve been lippy and Slade’s patience is running out.

Meshal gets out and the male immediately makes his way over.

“Can I please tell you what really happened?”

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Phillip finds himself trapped between two cars and two officers. He turns and grips hold of the chain link fence behind him. His knuckles are clenched and white from the cold, but he refuses to let go. Meshal grabs him and pulls him off the fence, forcing him to the ground while Verner yanks his arms behind his back to cuff him.

“Ah, FUCK! Fuck, my fucking arm. Get off!”

As Phillip was unsuccessfully trying to climb the fence, Slade caught up to the girl. The screaming doesn’t stop, but she doesn’t resist either. Her head rests sideways on a parked car as Slade cuffs her. She’s got a great view of her boyfriend’s arrest.

The girl falls silent as she is led towards the police cruisers, but Phillip runs his mouth continuously. He’s brought over to our car, and Meshal asks me to open the door. I do so from the inside, reaching over the passenger seat. I can hear Phillip banging his own head against the back of the car. I emerge and his glasses come into view as they fly across the trunk and onto the ground. Meshal puts him into the backseat and I bend down to grab his glasses. I hand them to Verner, not expecting her to just chuck them onto the dashboard of our car before heading over to her own. She’s been on the force for just 18 months.

I climb into the front seat and through the divider, I hear him yell “Where are my glasses? They cost \$180!”

I don’t answer him.

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Phillip's face is pressed up against the plexiglass divider.

"Look me up. Check out my file. You don't know what I've done. Fucking stupid asshole. FUCK. What are you gonna do? You got nothing. What, are you taking me to the station or are you just gonna go beat me in some back alley? You guys don't know who I am. I'm from Bedford! And you, his little woman, with your blonde hair and blue eyes. You're both fucking stupid."

"What are you going after her for? She's not even a cop. Lay off." I also don't have blonde hair, but yes, my eyes are blue.

"Fucking rat pig."

"What, you think you're a fucking tough guy? Big deal, huh? You got taken down by a girl, remember?"

"What, where are we going? You gonna take me somewhere and rape me? Is that the plan?"

"Well now you're getting me all excited."

It's a bizarre situation. I don't know whether to laugh or cry, but whenever I make eye contact with Meshal, I'm inclined to smile and shrug it off. He alternates between countering Phillip's crass comments with a retort of his own, but most of the time just calls him a goof and tells him to sit back. I don't know how he does it, but his attitude makes me feel safer.

We stop at a red light.

"Check your Facebook status: you're a little bitch."

The Halifax Regional Police Headquarters comes into view, one left turn away. Meshal backs into a stall designated for officers carrying out a booking. I get out of the car and he comes over to my side to let Phillip out.

"Sometimes it helps to speak their language. It makes dealing with it easier."

I think he noticed the look on my face.

"Okay, time to get out, Nancy."

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"Sit down."

But he doesn't. Meshal asks again. Nothing. He gives Meshal a defiant look. Every officer in the place is watching the two of them. Meshal bangs Phillip's head up against the wall and kicks his feet out from underneath him, one at a time. The change in his pocket goes flying as he finally slumps onto the wooden bench. As Meshal reads him his rights, he starts to groan and sigh in fake, sexual pleasure.

“Ooooooh. My nut is bursting all over your face.” It’s the reply Meshal gets when he asks Phillip if he understood what he was just told. Another officer is called up to search Phillip before he’s put into a holding cell. Meshal starts to fill out the required paperwork.

We’re standing in a hallway, flanked by two holding cells. There’s a long bench along one wall and across from it, behind a protective barrier, is a small office with a few police officers. The whole room screams high school locker room, complete with the bad paint job and cement floors.

“Can I go into the drunk tank? And I wanna talk to a lawyer.” The officer says they’ll comply with both requests.

I keep my head down, writing away furiously in my notebook. Another officer is hovering beside me, and it takes me a few seconds before I realize it’s Verner. I stop writing, look up and smile at her. She smiles back and eyes at my notebook. “You’re gonna take out all of the swears from our quotes, right?”

The officer continues to search Phillip. First the cuffs are removed. His backpack is taken off and searched before he’s patted down. Phillip attempts to make a joke about how he won’t be needing the beer stashed in it. His shoes are removed and although he asks them not to be, the laces are taken out before they are returned to his feet.

“Please, don’t take my bracelet.”

I look down at his hand. There are three bracelets on his arm. One is the drinking tag from the concert. He rips it off without a second thought. His fingers instinctively toy with a green, rubber one. I meet his eyes and witness an actual tear stream down his cheek.

“Please, it’s for my friend. He died in a car accident. Don’t take it. Please. It’s not like I can hang myself with it. I just don’t....I can’t...please.”

The bracelet is removed and placed with his other belongings. For the first time since I’ve met this guy, the place we’re in isn’t filled with his booming voice. The officer is finished searching him, but Phillip is more compliant. He takes off his shirt and pants without being asked to, but re-dresses himself when actually asked.

Meshal is still finishing the paperwork when Phillip is moved to a temporary holding cell. I watch him pace back and forth. He stops to rest his head against the phone terminal. It seems like Meshal is almost done. Another officer starts to pack up Phillip’s belongings.

“His bracelet. That’s his. It’s on the ground.”

I look down and realize the woman who’s sitting on the bench, waiting to be processed, is right. It’s lying there, rubber and green and likely to be forgotten. The officer bends over to pick it up and piles it on top of the rest of his stuff.

“Having fun yet?” Meshal has appeared beside me. I half smile and wave my notebook at him, but our friend in the holding cell interrupts my answer. He slams up against the see-through wall.

“Yeah, that’s right LAUGH. I’m bleeding on the inside of my mouth because of you, you fucking asshole.”

By now, his girlfriend has arrived with Slade. She tells us the girl calmed down and was quiet the whole ride here. She’s going to hold her over night for breach of the peace. Her boyfriend isn’t as

lucky. It's a Sunday night and because of the late hour (it's almost ten o'clock), there are no lawyers available to talk to him. Cell eight will be his home for the night. And he'll have a court date to look forward to.

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Once we're back in the squad car, Meshal pulls up Phillip's record. He's only 20 but already has quite the file, complete with a mug shot. His hair style hasn't changed much since it was taken, his blonde hair still neatly cropped on his head. Tonight he'll be charged with causing a disturbance and resisting arrest.

"Caution: violent." It would have been nice to know that in advance, Meshal notes.

Phillip will be held until he's sobered up, but after that, it's out of the police's hands. Like anyone else, he's innocent until proven guilty and any number of things could happen before his court date. If found guilty, the judge has several sentencing choices at his or her disposal. There's a number of considerations that go into the decision, including whether or not the defendant has pleaded guilty, accepted responsibility or shows remorse, if they have any prior convictions and victim testimony of the incident. Depending on the outcome, he could face house arrest, be issued a fine, placed on probation or even serve jail time.

Meshal won't dwell on what happens once Phillip, or anyone for that matter, is in the system. He doesn't always like the decisions made by the court, but he knows that it comes with being an officer.

"I don't put too much thought into it after I've done my part. Once it's done, it's done. I put it out of my head and I have to move on to the next one, because there will be a next one."

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Phillip might be sleeping it off in some cell at police headquarters, but our work isn't done yet. The clock reads 10:07p.m and we've still got witness statements to collect. Our car ride is silent for the first few minutes. He breaks it, asking me what I'm thinking. I confess that I never thought the situation would go that far.

Conversations that turn into arrests aren't an every day thing for Meshal, but the weekends or bigger events like the concert sometimes create the right mix of elements. That voice of reason he used—the one that had me convinced Phillip would take the chance to walk away—is part of his training. There's an axiom officers go by.

"You ask people, then you tell them (giving them a couple of chances) and then you make them."

Unlike anyone else in that situation, Meshal has to stifle the natural reaction to fight back. Almost as if he's reading my mind, he then admits that he shouldn't have goaded Phillip the way he did during our ride to the station.

We arrive back at the Forum for our third visit of the night. I think back to Phillip's account of the events. The second we stepped out of the car, he couldn't wait to tell Meshal what happened. As he spoke, the mostly smoked cigarette in his mouth threatened to fall out. His nasty attitude was due

to the fact that he says he paid over \$25 to get inside and when he stepped out to have a smoke, he wasn't let back in.

"Yeah, okay, if you look at the back of the ticket, it says something about that in, like, really really small print."

Phillip told us when he tried to get inside again, the security guys roughed him up, eventually knocking him to the ground. He showed off a small red circle on the right side of his chin as evidence. It didn't even draw blood.

Upon our return to the concert, Meshal and I get another version of the story from one of the security guards. He describes a very different sequence of events, writing down that Phillip became angry and violent when he couldn't get back in, eventually throwing punches and clipping one of the other guards in the chin. They forced him to the ground, with one of the guards using his knee to keep him there. His girlfriend was right there with him, jumping onto the guards from behind, trying to get them off her guy. In addition to the three beers Phillip eventually admitted to having inside, more cans were found stashed in his backpack.

While we wait for the guard to finish writing up his statement, Meshal and I hang out in the cruiser. In the aftermath of what happened, I remind myself why I wanted to do this. My comfort zone was left behind the second I took a step to follow Meshal as he chased down Phillip in the parking lot. Now, almost four hours into my ride-along, I feel like I got a pretty thorough introduction to police work, including a glimpse of what makes up both the cop and the regular guy. All of us, Phillip included, have shades of emotions and while Meshal might police in a world where issues are black and white, that doesn't mean he has to be.

Not every night is like this one. Some are worse, and some are better, depending on how you look at it. What remains consistent is that feeling that pushed Meshal towards policing in the first place.

"You feel happy that you're making contributions that are important to everybody, even if it doesn't feel like you're doing that every day."

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We don't take off for the Forum right away. Instead, Meshal pulls out of the booking parking stall only to drive into another one. He's got a report to fill out and as he types away on his portable computer, I go over my notes. I look up and see that he's gotten a few paragraphs written up, but he's looking at me instead.

"You know what? Now that I think about it, I'll need you to fill out a witness report."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I mean, you were there and you witnessed it, right?"

I realize he's absolutely right. He gets out and fishes through the trunk of the car to find the witness statement forms. Without having actually filled out any insurance forms or the like before heading out tonight, this is the first, real paperwork of my ride-along. A burst of cold air rushes in as Meshal gets back into the driver's seat.

"Here, you can work while I work. Just think about what happened, what you saw, and write it down as if you were telling a story."