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Entering The Devil's Dungeon

by Karl Kozlowski

It was the last thing I expected on a Tuesday night, walking out of a supermarket in Chicago's swank Lincoln Park neighborhood with six plastic bags in my hands:

First, there was the sickening, dizzying fear as a stranger demanded my money, grabbed my shirt and threw me to the ground. Then the surreal realization that God was watching out for me in His own bizarre way, as my skull bounced off the milk carton that had hit the pavement behind me. And the almost giddy rush that came with the knowledge that if this punk had had a gun, he'd already have pulled it on me. And the inner wisdom that if I could just fight the thug off for 10, 20, 30 more seconds, someone would see me and save me.

After all, I was at a normally busy intersection. I was 100 feet from a bustling 'L' station, and there were lights everywhere from the street lamps. I knew my mugger must have been crazy, but he screamed like a kindergartner fighting off a bully: "I only have a dollar! I only have dollar!" More absurdly, I flailed at him with my groceries, whacking him in the back with my orange juice carton and slapping him upside the head with my lettuce as tomatoes rolled onto the pavement around me.

Enter the screeching tires and bright headlights of a sport-utility vehicle, then, the sound of a door thrust open and a man screaming, "Get off him! I'm a cop and I've got a gun!" All I could see were the bright headlights, with no emergency lights or sirens to assure me that this was a patrol car. But at least my attacker was off me. He sprang up in terror and started to run. Then I heard the quick thud of his body hitting the ground and I leaped to my feet, grocery bags still in hand. My attacker was down, a knee in his neck and a shiny silver gun pointed at his temple. The man who was on top of him was (as self described) a 5 1/2 -foot-tall Puerto Rican, wearing shorts and a straw hat straight out of Huckleberry Finn.

"Get this hat off my head and call 911!" he screamed, and I was too stunned to do anything else. I called in the police cavalry, a fleet of squad cars arrived and my mugger was taken into custody.

The man who had rescued me was an off-duty police officer. His name was Andres Zayas and, as I later came to realize, he may have saved my life. These events are not without irony...

I was making a career for myself as a reporter for Chicago's alternative weeklies. I had written exposes on Chicago's police brutality and Illinois state prison abuses. As the son of a man who had spent his first 31 years suffering under the Communist police state in Poland, I had a healthy skepticism of authority and a wariness of police power.

More specifically, I was a 28-year-old guy who had spent several Saturdays over the years attending traffic school because of a spotty driving record. My disdain for the police was in no short supply...

For the next four hours, we talked on Zayas' home turf: inside the 18th District police station, then located on Chicago Avenue. Zays made sure I was calm and collected about my brush with danger, but once assured, he laughed as he described the incident to other officers.

"You shoulda seen this guy! He looked like a lobster about to get dropped in a pot of boiling water!" Zayas laughed. He commented on the fact that I never dropped my groceries, no matter how tense the moment. He had me recount the funny parts of my story to other officers as they arrived for their shifts.

By the time I was free to go, I realized we might become friends. Zayas had given me his police business card and written his cell phone and pager numbers on it. "Call me if you need to talk," he said while shaking my hand goodbye.

I wanted to talk, all right - to better understand what had compelled me to be so skeptical of the police and to learn what compelled Zayas to become a police officer. We talked a few times by phone, but it was nearly five months later that we met up for a ride-along as we covered his shift in his assigned district, the 19th.

"Some might say making that arrest off-duty was a chance. I guess it was a chance, but I heard you screaming for help," said Zayas, as we rolled through the neighborhood streets and alleyways along his North Side patrol route. "What am I gonna do? Forget the fact that I'm a police officer? As a human being I can't stand back and ignore that."

Zayas was 38 and spoke with a calm assurance that still fell far short of cockiness. It was the voice of an older brother offering wisdom to his younger sibling, a man imparting life lessons to his children - fitting because he was the divorced father of two young sons. He recounted tales of officers injured or killed in off-duty emergencies, but he still felt assured that his training and his gun would provide him the upper hand he needed. He said the one thing that could shatter his confidence in the line of duty was finding children who have been harmed or were in danger.

He also informed me that my attacker had been out on parole for armed robbery. He told me that my attack may have been humorous in some of the details, but was deadly serious in its intent. He told me that I was the first person my attacker had been caught with when he didn't have a gun. It gave me a long, silent moment of pause.

Andres Zayas was born in Ft. Benning, GA, the son of a machinist and Vietnam veteran and a banker mother who moved to Chicago when he was just a few months old. He grew up seeing police officers as heroes, men and women who stepped in where others feared to tread to do good for society.

"As I grew older, I wanted to know what lay beyond the 'Police Line Do Not Cross' tape that separated the cops from the public," he recalled. "I took a constitutional oath to defend my country in the Navy first, and then I took a state oath to defend the citizens of this city. I believe in this wholeheartedly, even if that makes me a die-hard romantic. There are a lot of policemen who are like that."

Zayas liked rooting out trouble instead of waiting for it to come to him. He believed that if you waited for the dispatcher's call to come, it was sometimes too late for the victim. He called driving down alleys and side streets in a quest for criminals "entering the devil's dungeon."

And on that ride-along, we came across potential trouble. At the Lathrop Homes public-housing development near Diversey and Damen, he heard loud pops coming from inside a building. Just as I asked him what he intended to do about it, Zayas revved his engine, hopped a curb and tore across a stretch of grass before jolting to a stop at one of the residential entryways. Two young boys stood in the doorway, but Zayas jumped out of the car and darted past them in pursuit of another person who had just begun a dash up the stairs.

He ultimately found that kids were popping off firecrackers, but in those breathless minutes between Zayas' running into the building and later emerging safely, a thousand scenarios flashed

through my mind: "What if he got shot? What if all hell broke loose? How would I possibly help him the way he had helped me?"

And I knew that I was pretty much helpless, just as I had been while flat out on the street with my attacker. I realized that it took a special type of person to go into fearsome situations without any fear, and that it took countless hours of training in the intangibles to know how to handle these situations in the right way.

"A policeman has to be a sociologist, a psychologist, teacher and counselor. And all of these different professions are tied in," said Zayas. "Above all, he has to be an attorney -- to know the law and apply the law. But being a policeman isn't arresting people all the time. Sometimes all people want to do is cry on your shoulder, and you have to let them do that."

As we continued driving and the day turned to night, Zayas told me of the fear his parents had each time he put on his uniform, of his concern for survival, and setting a good example to his own sons, and of how frustrating it is that many people brand all police for the few instances when cops injure or kill without apparent reasons.

For along time, those "many people" included me.

But the words that stuck in my mind were perhaps the hardest for him to speak, as this humble, fearless, ultimately decent man asked us to remember that there's plenty of cops like him who are good guys trying to do the right thing.

"The favorite part of my job, and it doesn't happen often, is when someone says to you, 'Thank you so much for your assistance,' or 'Thank you for finding my child,' after he was missing a few hours," said Zayas. "Very seldom does it happen that they thank you, that someone comes up and says, 'If it wasn't for you, who knows where I would have been.' But you come to expect that."

So I close this column with these words to Officer Andres Zayas as he enters the devil's dungeon every day: Thank you for doing your job.