

More True Adventures Of a Private Detective

by John B. Lopes

It happened one Sunday morning. I got a call from a supposed witness who stated he had valuable information pertaining to a series of staged accidents and how these same individuals had pulled a multi-million dollar diamond heist from the Los Angeles Customs Office.

Naturally, I dressed quickly and rushed out to meet this supposed informant—without a weapon, which I later regretted.

The way the morning unfolded is still fresh in my mind today, some 27 years later. I was anxious to get the information the caller said he had—my boss would have been impressed. I had

personally closed six files for our client, which was being targeted by an insurance-fraud ring.

The caller had sounded calm on the phone and nothing in his conversation gave me any cause to be alarmed. Everything seemed as it appeared: A “citizen” had decided to blow the whistle. But as I drove over to the address on a beautiful sunny Southern California morning—top down on my convertible and listening to the local traffic—I had no idea what was about to overtake me.

I had been trained as a Military Police officer during the Vietnam War. It was drilled into us at the Academy: The

two most dangerous situations an officer can get into are a domestic call and a traffic stop. Why? Because you cannot predict human nature. You should always be prepared for anything.

Upon arriving at the address, the supposed informant met me at the corner, and led me to his apartment. He invited me to enter first; again, I thought nothing of it. But in a split second—as I walked over the threshold—I heard a familiar sound and turned quickly to see my supposed informant load a round into the chamber of a nickel plated 32-caliber pearl-handled automatic pistol.

It turns out my informant was not a whistle blower at all—but instead, a member of the insurance-fraud gang.

I was commanded to sit, so I sat on a chair. That didn't work for him. "Sit on the floor over there," he said, pointing to the bathroom doorway.

As I sat, I played it out in my mind several times. What would have happened if I had brought my own weapon? Would there have been a shootout? I had always believed that it was better to be tried by twelve (a jury) than to be carried by six. I thought about it further that morning as I sat in captivity on the floor of the apartment watching a black and white *The Munsters* marathon on an old floor model television set for five and a half hours.

I vividly recall that our meeting took place in the Crenshaw District of Los

Angeles, a part of LA known for many years as "the Jungle" because of its beautiful vegetation and well-maintained properties. Later, the meaning of "Jungle" changed as the area became known for widespread violence. Bodies are still found in dumpsters and in alleys, regularly. In my mind, this was a real possibility for me—to end up in a dumpster—so it was a relief to see the LAPD arrive at the apartment and place me under arrest.

After the police arrived a fabricated witness—a young man approximately 14 years of age—appeared in the doorway and entered the apartment. The apartment was now crowded with four of my captors, two LAPD officers and myself. They were accusing me of burglary. As I listened to the "witness" tell the officers how he had observed me leaving this apartment carrying weapons and a pair of binoculars—items

any PI would normally have in his equipment list—I thought about how glad I was to see the police. I refrained from defending myself in fear of being left with my captors.

I went to jail and was let go on my own recognizance. At the arraignment date, I was told the charges had been dropped. But I did not let it drop there. I called the LAPD arresting officer to ask him how he concluded I was innocent, and what was being done to prosecute my captors for false imprisonment. He replied: "Just be glad you got out with your life."

Today, I do not respond to these types of requests for meetings. If need be, I will meet with individuals at the local courthouse where there are metal detectors in place.

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