

Senior Sergeant Gordon 'Laney' Lane walked slowly through the drizzling rain on the evening of what would be not only his last day as a cop, after thirty seven years of service, but also, the last day of his life.

Since he first joined up, as a rookie, at age twenty three, following in his father's footsteps, he had seen a lot of changes in the Police Force, and not all of them good. In fact, hardly any of them were good, he believed. The times had changed a lot, and not really taken old timers like 'Laney' with them into the 'Brave New World'.

In his day, walking on his 'beat' he could give a misbehaving youth a good 'clip around the ear' and send him home crying, then his father would give him another one to make sure he had learnt the proper respect. These days, when a party got out of control, those same thirteen, fourteen and fifteen year olds threw rocks, empty bottles and even Molotov cocktails at the police. Respect, oh no, no way, not any more. That was a joke, and as non-existent as a sixteen year old virgin in King's Cross on a Friday night. Laney, for one, was sick and tired of the bullshit that came with wearing a coppers uniform.

These days it was all about political correctness, you were expected to call the drunken louts sir as you helped them into the back of the paddy wagon, while they swore at you and called into question your parentage. It was about trying to subdue meth heads that wanted not only to fight, but to kill you, and had the strength of three men to make it easier for them to achieve that goal. It was about kids stealing cars and driving on the wrong side of the road so the cops had to break off a chase so innocents weren't hurt, but the joyriders carried on doing as they liked. Worse, it was making a good bust, then spending hours doing

paperwork, making sure all the l's were dotted and t's crossed, only for the bastard to be let out with a warning by a lily-livered judge who thought the perpetrator was just misunderstood, or had had a tough upbringing.

The job was fraught with domestic disputes almost nightly that threatened to spiral out of control, as an irate husband who thought it was just fine to beat his wife senseless, and then turn on the attending police for having the temerity to try to break it up. It was trying to avoid being bitten by a drug addict, who could have aids, or hepatitis A, B, C or whatever letter you added to it these days. It was about being verbally abused, or physically assaulted, and risking your life every single shift. Quite simply the job sucked, and sucked the life out of good officers.

And, the final irony, the last nail in the coffin of modern policing? Everyone wanted more police, except nobody wanted higher taxes to pay for them. And the public certainly didn't want more police officers if it meant being caught speeding or going through a red light because they were running late for work. Oh no, you can't have too many on the spot fines for a 'user pays' society, or actual crime breakers and offenders paying for more police officers to provide a visible deterrent, no; that was just revenue raising. How dare police hide speed cameras in trees, and use unmarked cars to catch hoons and drivers who just don't care about the safety of other people on the roads.

While Laney had been able to stay married, and not be tempted to put the end of his service pistol in his mouth and pull the trigger, the divorce and suicide rate among serving police officers, and those recently retired, was catastrophically high. But did anybody really care about that when they could just bring more officers over from the UK, or Ireland? They

kept coming over in droves to replace locals, because if we thought it was bad here, try being a copper there. For them, it was almost like a working holiday.

And, if you did something wrong, made an error in judgement, lose your temper and hit some ignorant, loud mouth insulting thug back? The law itself then came down on you three times harder than it did on a criminal, and where was the justice in that? Imagine being a cop, doing your best, but then making one mistake and they send you to jail with a lot of people you put in there; life wouldn't be worth living, the criminals would make sure of that.

Of course he could have applied to have become a detective, over the years he had had his chances for advancement, but he just didn't want to wear a suit and look like a dickhead. Laney wanted 'real policing' and in his day, 'real police officers' wore a uniform. People used to respect they were there to help, and by their visibility alone it would lower the crime rate. In the old days you could walk the beat, meet the local shop owners, who might give you a leg of lamb for your Sunday dinner, or a spare packet of smokes, a half priced hamburger for lunch, or other ways to show their appreciation. Did they have to do that? No they did not; they just wanted to say thanks, Gordon, for helping keep the crime rate down in our area. Slowly beat cops had been phased out, and the muggings, break ins, and violent crime incidence had increased.

Of course, now, walking the beat alone was a thing of the past. These days you had to wear a stab vest and watch out for any stray, extremist, who might want to behead a copper who was just trying to do his job. To try to uphold the law, every time you left the station, was sometimes a very dangerous thing to do, simply because we are infidels in our

own country, he believed. Naturally though, to voice that opinion out loud, was deemed to be racist; no-one should get Laney started on being racist, when he didn't think he was.

Really, was it any wonder it was hard to attract young people to want to join the police force any more? If you could stop them playing violent computer games long enough they probably wouldn't pass the physical exam, or they would fail the drug test for smoking too much weed. Where was it all going to end, he, wondered several times a day.

Laney stopped under an overhang while the drizzle turned to a short, sharp downpour. He hitched his belt holding the pistol, handcuffs and Taser back over his hips, and adjusted his rain poncho while looking up and down the street, just in case that rabid extremist was out and about looking for a victim to sacrifice to Allah.

So, life sucked being a cop, but after a life time of service, what else was he going to do? He and his wife, Joyce, had raised two kids, and put them both through university. One was now a doctor working in a Brisbane hospital, while the other was a mining engineer and worked one month on and one off, in the Sudan. But on his month off he usually spent it in Thailand, or Bali with his Asian wife, so on average he saw his children only if he went to see them these days, and that meant very, very rarely.

It hadn't always been that way of course, they used to want to visit home, and did frequently, but then Joyce had had her stroke, and though she fought the good fight, and clung on for three long months, a second stroke hit her, even harder than the first and took her away from Laney, and their two children.

She had been the light of his life, the constant that kept him balanced, his rock, if you will. He had never been unfaithful, and never had any desire to, though he could have quite

easily, in his younger, fitter days. Back then his six foot three frame was fit and rippling with muscle, rather than the fat that he had taken on of more recent times. And, he had to admit; he had cut quite a figure in his uniform back then, and did attract the ladies' attention. But though he could have, and even once or twice thought about it, he never strayed, Joyce was more than enough woman for him.

In the last ten years of their marriage, he couldn't remember a single argument they had had. Maybe they did have them, but if they had, they were resolved quickly. Arguments weren't permitted to fester below the surface, and be brought up later as a weapon in the next disagreement. No, both believed in the old saying that their parents believed in too; that you should never let the sun go down on an argument, and bed was for loving and sleeping, not fighting.

The rain was easing, and he set off once again, down the city street he had once patrolled, to his date with destiny. He knew he was going to die that night, and he was fine with it, because it would actually *mean something*. At sixty years old, to him, it was important that he stood up for something, and then, when he met up with Joyce again, as he thought he most certainly would, he could look her in the eye and she would understand.

He had never been able to forgive himself that Joyce had been alone when the stroke hit. She had been in the laundry, washing his clothes after he had been on a fishing trip with Roger and Wilf, two other cops he knew, and had come back late on a Sunday Night, with two very nice Flathead, and a smaller Bream.

He had gone off to work, as per normal the next day, and Joyce had set herself her daily tasks of cleaning, which she did religiously, and washing his damned fishing clothes,

which he knew stank to high heaven of mud, fish blood and worms. They had one of those brightly coloured plastic laundry baskets to hold the dirty clothes in, and when Joyce said hello to her stroke, she fell across it, and crushed it. If there was a blessing, it was she had fallen that way and the basket had cushioned her fall; else she could have banged her head. Mind you, in the three months that followed of seeing Joyce like a vegetable, unable to talk properly, or even feed herself, he sometimes wondered if it would have been better for her to fall the other way. It would have been quicker, and more humane. She had been such a strong woman, to see her as she was in that last three months she lived, was heartbreaking.

The doctors told Laney to hold on to hope, that's sometimes people came back from worse strokes than Joyce had suffered, but Laney doubted it. She dribbled constantly, and looked at him out of her one good eye and looked so pitifully sad. He knew there was no way back for her, and deep down, he hoped she wouldn't come back permanently like that.

In need of constant care; she couldn't wash, feed or clothe herself, she couldn't even go to the toilet, and where was the dignity in that kind of life? A woman so strong and proud shouldn't have to live a vegetative life. She, who had raised two beautiful sons and who had never missed one of their sports carnivals, or prize giving's, as they had grown up. While Laney had been working shifts it was Joyce who took them to football training, was there to wipe their tears, and cheer their successes, it just wasn't fair that she had been struck down so young, way too young.

Laney felt the tears in his eyes as he remembered how the kids rallied round, and spent as much time as they could with her, in her dying days. And then, how heartbroken they were at the funeral, how they wished they hadn't moved away, but spent more time at home, while they could have, and enjoyed their mother more. But real life gets in the way,

and after the funeral, they both went back to their lives, saying they would return as soon as they could, but since they buried Joyce he had seen James twice, and Rupert, named after Joyce's paternal Grandfather, three times.

They used to call him often, make sure he was ok, and coping on his own, and of course he told them he was doing just fine. Secretly though, he wept most nights, alone in his bed that Joyce and he used to share. Tears that were born out of loss, boredom, and misery of what his life had become, once he lost his whole reason for being; Joyce. He didn't want to be a burden to his children; they had their own lives to lead, so he pretended he was in a good head space, and they believed him, so they called less, and less, and even less as the months turned into years.

For a while he did come good, got back into fishing, but then came, what he called 'The Chelsea Incident', and that, really and truly summed up how shitty life had become, not just for Laney, but for everyone, in what football commentators loved the call 'the modern era'.

Chelsea Graham lived with her parents on his street, and he had watched her grow from a spotty faced, pigtailed skinny girl, to a young and beautiful women. Chelsea was always polite, always called them Mister and Mrs L, and always said it with a smile; she was a gem. When she finished school she knew what she wanted, and she used to speak to Laney all hours of the day and night to pump him for information about the police force. She wanted to study criminal psychology and work as a profiler, or with the prisoner parole board. She was drawn to crime like a moth to a flame, and how ironical it was that it had been crime that took her life away.

While she went to university to study for her double degree, she worked nights on the cash register at the local small, family owned supermarket. She was working on the night that three thugs burst in and demanded the money from the till. Being such a good person she tried to talk them out of it, show them they didn't have to turn to a life of crime, that they had other options. One hit her across the face with something, thought to be part of a fence picket, while another slashed at her with a straight razor.

She opened the till, distraught, and terrified, and the three masked young men ran off into the night with the grand total of three hundred and twenty six dollars. But Chelsea recognised them, two of them had tattoos and in the scuffle she had seen them and knew who they were. Because she knew two of the men it followed that she knew the other, who always hung around, and made up the terrible trio, as they were known.

They hung out with some other no hopers at Rosie's Seven Eleven, where in a side room they had some old fashioned pin ball machines, and space invader type consul games. It was there the three of them were arrested, based on Chelsea's statement, and right then, was where things went from bad to very bad, to even worse, for Chelsea.

Between them, their parents could afford a decent lawyer, who argued that Chelsea couldn't possibly identify the third man just because he hung out with the other two. That simply wouldn't fly once it got to trial, and the judge agreed and ordered his release. Next the lawyer presented affidavits from tattoo parlours within a ten kilometre radius that said the tattoos in question were not personal, but very, very common. It was estimated that in the preceding five years in excess of two hundred similar tattoos had been engraved on young men, all of similar build and height.

Without a confession, and as each gave the other an alibi, it came down to Chelsea's word and the tattoos, The judge threw out the charges, and released the men, and once again, as far as Laney was concerned, it proved what a mockery the law had become.

A week later, Chelsea was walking home after work, as she had for months quite safely, when she was set upon by three men who dragged her into the bushes in a park. She was then repeatedly raped, before they strangled her, and left her naked, for her body to be found by a jogger the next morning.

The offenders wore condoms and had not left any DNA or any other evidence, and naturally, there were no witnesses. Everyone knew who had done it, of course, but the three men were supposedly in the Seven Eleven that night. Numerous witnesses, mainly their friends, saw them there, though Rosie herself couldn't be sure they were there all night. Her murder eventually was put into the 'Cold Case' file and it was then, that Laney decided enough was enough; it was time to make his stand, and then go and be with Joyce.

So here he was, on his last shift, walking his old beat, heading toward Rosie's to make amends for a beautiful life that had been taken too soon. He walked past the old butcher shop that had been closed down for a number of years; the supermarkets had made it too hard for him to stay open. On the other side of the road was the take away Chinese Restaurant, with mesh and steel bars over the windows, which gave testimony to how the neighbourhood had deteriorated.

Earlier in the afternoon Laney had put into the mail box two letters to Rupert and James, explaining his actions, and asking them not to judge him too harshly. He told them

about Chelsea, sure that they too would remember her freckly smiley face as a child, before they left to go and build their own lives, and forge their futures.

Senior Sergeant Gordon 'Laney' Lane had no regrets; it had been a good life, no matter how you defined it. He had been a good husband, and father, and an honest cop who had given his whole life to doing good for other people, now it was time for it to end.

He looked through the window of Rosie's Seven Eleven, and saw the three men leaning over a brightly coloured pin ball machine chiming out AC DC's Highway to Hell, and Laney thought that was very appropriate. He took off his rain poncho, and straightened his hat. He drew his revolver from the holster and stepped through the door, to the sound of a buzzer announcing his arrival.

The sound of four gunshots rang out through the damp night air, and then two minutes later, a fifth. It was after all, Laney's last day.

The End

Stephen B King