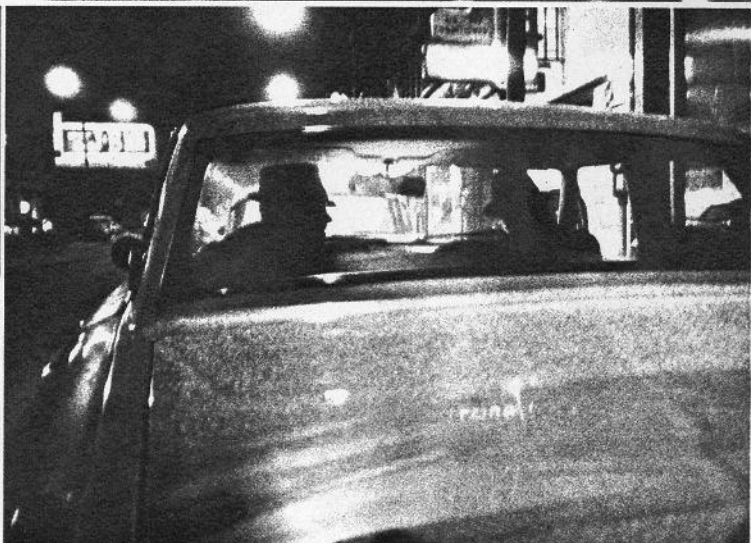


CRUISING

PETER GOLD



a tense and racially explosive tour of duty with a team of plainclothesmen on patrol

reportage BY PAUL JACOBS "HEY, look at that stud walking over there, on the other side of the street. Let's check him out," Frank, the burly cop, says to Charley, the slender one who is driving. From my seat in the rear of the police car, I look over at the sidewalk and see a middle-aged Negro man walking slowly down the street.

"What are we going to check him out for?" Charley asks. "He looks OK to me. He's not bothering anybody."

"That stud doesn't belong on this side of town at eleven o'clock at night. He should be over on the East Side. I think we ought to stop and look him over."

"Well, I don't," answers Charley, and so we ride on, with Frank a little sullen, perhaps because he's been put down in front of me, an outsider who's just riding with the two plainclothes cops and not a part of the team.

In the police department of this large northern California city, the cop driving the car is responsible for deciding what they shall do. But, I think to myself, suppose it had been Frank who was driving, as he'd done the night before; then he would have made the decision to stop even if Charley objected. And Charley wouldn't have pressed his objections, because the relationship between two cops in a police car is a delicate one: Even when one is temporarily in authority, they are still equals who are always dependent upon each other while on duty.

If Frank had been driving, I muse, while the car keeps moving slowly along the boulevard, they would have stopped, looked at the Negro's papers and then let him go about his business. Nothing more would have happened to him, but the police would have earned another increment of hostility and another Negro would have learned, *(continued on page 188)*

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if he didn't already know, that he could be questioned on the street just because he was a Negro.

A few minutes later, Frank, his good nature restored, asks Charley to stop so he can get some cigarettes. We pull up alongside a liquor store and while Frank is inside buying his cigarettes and chatting for a moment with the clerk, Charley turns around on the seat to me.

"My partner's still new in the squad and he's kind of an eager beaver yet. He was a patrolman until a few weeks ago. But he'll learn, he'll be a good cop someday."

Frank gets back into the car and as we slide out into the traffic, the radio cuts in with the dispatcher's voice calling our signal. Frank reaches over for the microphone and returns the call. The dispatcher then recites in a flat, dispassionate voice a report that a group of kids have been reported having a beer party up in a park overlooking the city. Frank tells him they'll check it out and we make a U-turn back toward the park. The dispatcher keeps talking, though, giving us the address of a hall where a big dance is just starting that should be checked later. I can tell from the loca-

tion that the dance is in the Negro section of the city.

In about ten minutes, the police car is riding along the park drive, high above the city. Charley turns off the headlights and I see the city sprawling every which way below us. "They're probably down at the parking lot," Frank says, and Charley grunts in assent as we turn off the main road into a big paved area. There we see cars in a ring, their parking lights barely showing shadowy couples dancing to music from a small combo. Frank turns on the red spotlight as the car moves forward, its headlights on now, too.

As we pull up, the dancers look at us curiously but keep on dancing, without fright. They're white, I see, and they all look like college kids, the boys with crewcuts, walking shorts, sport shirts and loafers; the girls in skirts, sweaters and sneakers. One of the boys steps away from his girl and walks over to the car.

"Is there anything wrong, Officer?" he asks Charley.

"No, we're just checking. What kind of party is this?"

"It's a frat dance. I'm president. We have a dance up here once a year. We've never had any trouble."

Frank gets out of the car and walks over to the side of the lot toward a dark clump of bushes where I can faintly see some figures. We stay in the car, chatting with the fraternity president. Then, another boy, his replica, comes up and speaks to him in a low voice.

"Excuse me," the frat president says politely and goes to the area where we can see Frank's flashlight moving around in the bushes.

"This looks OK to me," says Charley. "I wonder what's keeping Frank."

The frat boy comes back and says, "Your partner seems to be disturbed about something he found over there. Maybe you can help us out."

We get out of the car and walk past couples dancing or sitting on blankets to where Frank is standing, his flashlight shining on a driver's license he holds in his hand, with a couple of boys watching him. Near them is a keg of beer.

"What's up?" asks Charley.

"Well, they've got beer and this kid's put a phony age on his driver's license."

We look at the license and I see that the boy has crudely erased his real birth date and typed in another so that he can pass for 21, the legal age for drinking even beer in California. Charley takes Frank to the side and I can hear them in earnest conversation. They come back and Frank tells the boy whose license he's holding, "OK, we'll let it go this time, but don't ever let us catch you doing it again." Then he takes a pen and writes in the boy's real age on the license. We walk back to the car, get in, exchange farewells with the boys and drive away, some of the couples still confidently dancing, not even looking at us as we leave the lot.

"What the hell," says Charley. "That's just what I was doing at their age."

We drive back into the city and begin just cruising around in the Negro section. The two cops are relaxed in the front seat and one of them is making a wisecrack about the other's driving, just as the police car turns a corner slowly and its headlights pick up a young Negro woman wearing a tight red dress. She's hopping around on the sidewalk, flailing with the sharp heel of a red shoe at a muscular young Negro man. The other shoe is still on her foot.

"You mother, keep your goddamned mothering hands off me!" she screams at the man who, desperately, tries to hold her off from slashing at his eyes. As the police car's brakes catch and the two white cops jump out, the man shouts, "You lousy bitch, if I ever catch you laying up with him again, I'll kill both of you!"

The cops rush over to the struggling couple and pull them apart as I get out of the back seat of the police car and stand by the front fender, watching. "Break it up," they say, "we're police officers." Charley grabs the girl's arm,

pulling her away, while Frank blocks off the man with his own body. We are in the heart of the Negro district and even though the street has been deserted until now, suddenly a dozen Negroes appear out of nowhere, as if they are instant people materialized out of the sidewalks and building fronts.

They stand around, warily watching the tangle of four people as they clash and separate in an intricate ballet of frustrated violence. The girl's voice gets higher and higher while Charley keeps her from getting at the man, and she repeats, over and over again, in a monotonous litany, "I'll kill that mother, I'll kill that mother." Both of them act as if the cops are simply inconvenient physical barriers to having at each other, with the girl leaning around Charley and vainly striking at the man who keeps pushing Frank away.

"Ah, the hell with them both," Charley says, finally tiring of the fight the girl is putting up to get free of him. He lets her go and Frank releases the man. Instantaneously, they fly at each other again, she still shouting, he still trying to keep the wicked steel-tipped heel from his eyes. Once again the police separate them, and this time she kicks Charley in the shin with the foot that still has the shoe on it. He pushes her away and says to her, "Go home and cool off and if you don't quit it, I'm going to arrest you."

Defiantly, she turns and stalks away a few feet. Then she spins and shouts at the Negro man, "I'll kill you if you ever lay a hand on me again! And that goes for you, too, you mother," she screams at Charley.

That does it. Charley lunges after her, grabs her by the arm and shouts, "You're under arrest!" Instantly, the crowd, by this time much larger, explodes. The man with whom she's been fighting starts battering at the cop who is holding him and hollers, "Don't you put her into that car! Don't you put her into that car!" Two others run to help the girl, whose whole body is engaged in a desperate, writhing attempt to free herself from Charley, by now trying vainly to clamp his handcuffs on her. Frank lets go of the man and rushes back toward the police car, with the menacing crowd beginning to move in around it, giving me ugly looks, too. Frank reaches through the open window, grabs the radio microphone and, without waiting for the dispatcher to respond, puts in a hurried call for reinforcement, giving the exact location of the car. I hear the dispatcher say, "Just a minute, I've another call coming in," and Frank shouts back into the transmitter, "The hell with your other call. We're in the middle of a riot here!"

Suddenly, I realize that I am in the middle of it, too, and I probably won't

have time to explain I'm for civil rights before being jumped by the angry crowd. That is when I get really scared, nauseatingly scared.

But in what seems to be only seconds, two motorcycle cops roar up to the scene and I hear sirens getting louder and louder as police cars in the area respond to the call. Only minutes later, four or five police cars are sprawled around the intersection, the red lights on the roofs of the cars turning lazily, the sirens just dying out as the policemen burst out of the doors onto the street. Then the wagon arrives and three cops push the girl, still fighting and screaming, into it, while the other police disperse the sullen crowd, which slowly starts drifting back into the dark hallways.

The two cops and I get back into our car. As we start away, I ask where we're going. "Down to the jail to book the girl," Charley says. "I'm the arresting officer, so I have to be there for the booking."

We drive in silence for a minute or two. "I've lost a button from my jacket," Frank says, fingering his sports coat. "That guy must have pulled it off."

"You're lucky that's all you lost," Charley mutters. "Did you see the muscles on him? He'd'a really creamed you if he ever hit you."

"See his muscles? Christ, I felt them



"Miss Leffler! Do you have a man in your room?"

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when I was trying to hold him back. Christ, he must be a blacksmith. Hey, what happened to your raincoat? It looks like it's split down the back."

"Yeah, it is," Charley answers wearily. "I split it trying to wrap it around that crazy chick. Boy, that's a wild one. I'll bet she does it the way she fights, too. No wonder that guy wants her all for himself."

"You want to try some of it?" Frank asks. "Maybe I can fix you up after she gets out. She'll probably have nice memories of you."

We drive in silence for a few more minutes until we come to the driveway of the jail. Then, as we get out of the car, Charley says to me, "Were you scared back there?"

"Yes. Were you?"

"Yes."

The three of us go into the jail. In the hallway, behind a glass window, a policeman sits who presses a buzzer to let us into a small room where we can watch the door and foyer. The two cops take out their guns, put them into separate drawers in a desk, lock the drawers and put the keys in their pockets. They talk through a public-address system to the men in the booth and to the cops lounging in the foyer, matter-of-factly explaining what has happened. The wagon drives up and we can hear the girl still shouting inside it. Three cops pull her out and rush her through the foyer into one of the detention cells. As they go by, I hear her scream, "He called me a black-assed nigger bitch, he called me a nigger bitch!"

When the three cops come out, back from the cell block, Charley says through the PA system, "Did one of you guys call her a black-assed nigger bitch?"

"Yeah, I did," a florid older officer answers defiantly.

"How come?" asks Charley.

"She called me a white mother. What am I supposed to do, take that kind of crap from her?"

The cops walk out, back to the paddy wagon, and as they go through the door, I hear the florid one mutter, almost under his breath, "Animals, that's what they are, animals. And they want to live next door to us."

After the girl has been booked, the two cops retrieve their guns from the drawers and we walk back to the police car. When the three of us are inside, Frank turns to Charley and says, "Where to, now?"

"Well, we've got an hour to go. I guess we should check out that dance. It must be going full blast by now."

Charley swings the car into the street and looks up, catching my eyes in the rearview mirror. "What's the answer to all this, Paul? What's going to happen?"

I can only reply, "I don't know anymore, I just don't know."

