

Sergeant Friday, Where Are You?

Chris Kridler

My head is full of TV cops. I love “Dragnet’s” unflappable Joe Friday. I’m fascinated by the savvy detectives of “Homicide: Life on the Street.” I’ve guiltily enjoyed the wrangling of lowlifes on “Cops.” An innocent person, television tells me, has nothing to fear from the police.

So when the Maryland state trooper thumped on my apartment door one summer evening, awakening me from a much-needed nap, I was in no way prepared for the impossibility that followed.

“Your car was involved in a hit-and-run accident today,” the burly officer informed me.

“What? Where?” I exclaimed, incredulous. I began to think that this was some kind of nightmare. And it dawned on me that a few moments before, when I’d looked through the peephole and didn’t see him, he had been hiding, as if I were armed and dangerous. I’m 5 feet 4 and about as dangerous as a Twinkie.

“On I-95,” he said. I wasn’t even on I-95, I told him. I managed to glean that the driver of the damaged car had chased the culprit and written down my license-plate number. The officer told me that the victim identified a dark-colored car of my exact model and that a dark-haired woman was driving. Then the cop told me to come outside.

This is it, I thought. I’ll be cuffed. Fingerprinted. Photographed. I meekly asked if I could put on some shoes, then trudged down the stairs after him and into the parking lot. There his cruiser was blocking in my small SUV. Apparently I was a flight risk.

I asked him when the accident occurred. About 1:30 p.m., he said. At the time, I was eating sushi with two co-workers. We had walked to the restaurant. My car had been in the company garage all day. No one else had access to my keys, and I used an electronic swipe card to get in and out. In my shock I forgot to tell him that I’d also paid for lunch with a credit card and could show him the receipt.

Not that he was interested. He pointed out “scuff marks” on my bumper--almost invisible lines probably inflicted by an errant grocery cart, not a 55-mph collision. The trooper charged me anyway. Two of the charges involved leaving the scene of an accident, and a third accused me of failure to control my speed.

Before he left, the officer told me I’d have to show up at district court within three days to set up a trial date, or I’d be arrested. And that I’d better get a lawyer.

A few minutes later I was making hysterical phone calls to my parents and a friend in the auto-insurance business. She shared the unsettling fact that sometimes people seek a scapegoat after wrecking their cars and randomly pick a license plate to report to police.

The next morning I was fuming. First I spent more than an hour at the district courthouse watching guys in shackles getting hauled in and out of bail hearings. I was told that unless I wanted to wait several more hours, I should come back later.

So I went to work and got the name of a lawyer from my boss. I called my insurance company and made an appointment to get the “damage” photographed. That night I was back at the courthouse, where an official told me that it might take six months to get my day in court--and that a conviction could mean two years in jail.

The weeks went by, and the extent of the farce became apparent. According to the police report, the man whose car was hit identified a black SUV. Mine is green. He didn’t identify the model, as the cop had claimed. But he was sure about the license-plate number.

As my court date neared, my lawyer assured me that when the state’s attorney took an early look at the evidence, she would most likely drop the case. The only problem: she was too busy to review the evidence.

So I sat with my parents in the back of the courtroom on the appointed day, watching a parade of drunken drivers, domestic abusers, men caught driving without a license (again), all facing a no-nonsense judge.

As the day wore on, the state’s attorney stole a few moments to talk to the witnesses in my case, including one of my lunch companions and an appraiser from my insurance company. I overheard the trooper tell her he was “just the guy who took the report.” My accuser said he only got a few seconds’ glimpse of the offender. My lawyer showed the prosecutor the receipt and the garage records. At last the charges were dismissed.

Until it happened to me, I didn’t realize how easily a person could be charged with a crime. The burden of proof is on the state, but when charges are made so lightly, the real financial and emotional burden is borne by an innocent defendant. And my suffering was minor compared with that of people who are jailed, even executed, for crimes they didn’t commit.

“You can start breathing again,” the judge told me after I was exonerated.

But now, every time I see a police officer or hear a strange knock on my door, I stop breathing for a moment. I’ll never expect Sergeant Friday again.

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TOPIC: In your opinion, who (or what) deserves blame for Kridler’s unsettling encounter with the American justice system? Be sure to support your thesis with sound arguments and specific illustrations.