

True Cop Story

A Finger-Width from Death

By Jane Eden

When Deputy Michel Yocum of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department made a routine traffic stop recently, he had no indication that scant moments later he'd be staring down the wrong end of his own gun barrel.

The suspect got out of his car and came back to the patrol car with an easy walk. A call to the station and routine questions revealed the suspect had numerous moving violations and was a recent parolee, driving without a current license. However, he remained friendly throughout questioning, even after Yocum asked him to put his hands on the hood of the car.

Things changed abruptly however, when Yocum opened the back door of the police car and linked the suspect's hands behind his back intending to transport him to the station.

The previously cooperative man twisted free of Yocum's grasp and with a spinning kick, knocked him up against the squad car with a thud. In a split second, Yocum regained his balance and squared off against his opponent. However after only a brief scuffle, the man broke free a second time and ran down the street and up the driveway of a nearby house.

Yocum ran after the suspect while simultaneously trying to contact dispatch to request backup. No one replied. Yocum followed close on the heels of the suspect along the edge of a chain link fence and overtook him just as he crashed through a gate in the fence. Both men tumbled into a private backyard locked in a boiling tangle of close quarter combat. At 5'9 inches and 170 lbs., Yocum was young and fit, but his opponent at 6'4" and 220 lbs. had a significant advantage. Yocum had his work cut out for him.

Immediately, the suspect grabbed for Yocum's gun, and realizing the danger, Yocum fought to keep his gun holstered.

"At that point, I realized I was alone," says Yocum. "Dispatch hadn't answered. Nobody knew I was on a traffic call, and nobody knew I was in a backyard."

He triggered his radio several times as he fought, but still no answer. In scant seconds,



the suspect managed to pull Yocum's gun from his holster.

Adrenalin pumping full force, Yocum struggled to keep the barrel pointed away from his body. Before he knew it, both men lost their balance and tumbled to the ground. Twice Yocum heard the click of the safety release as the suspect unlocked it. Twice he managed to summon the strength to relock the safety. Repeatedly the suspect tried to take aim and shoot him. Yocum could feel his energy fading fast, but he fought on in desperation. He knew his time was running out.

With quick insight, Yocum stuck his finger behind the trigger to prevent the gun from firing. The suspect continued to pull the trigger crushing his finger in an attempt to shoot Yocum. He could feel the bones cracking, but he held on. Better to lose a finger than to have his brains splattered all over the backyard, Yocum thought.

When he couldn't get the gun to fire, the suspect began to punch the cop viciously in the face and head. His fists were huge. Each punch made Yocum see stars, but he held on. In the struggle, somehow he managed to release the magazine from the Beretta, and he saw it falling as if in slow motion toward the mud. So did the suspect. He loosened his gasp on Yocum and made a grab for the magazine. Yocum saw his chance. He bit the suspect viciously on the forearm. Much to his amazement, the suspect didn't even react. Yocum's head throbbled from the intense blows he'd sustained. His vision blurred. He could feel himself losing consciousness.

"I have an eight-month-old son at home," says, Yocum. "The thought of my boy grow-

ing up without me brought tears to my eyes."

He told the suspect twice, "I don't want to die. Let go of my gun and run." But the suspect didn't respond. The sounds of sirens in the distance halted Yocum from falling totally unconscious. "Suddenly, I woke up for a second, and my vision cleared. I kicked the guy in the groin," the Deputy explained. "I knew I hurt him."

The suspect fell backward with the force of Yocum's kick and released the gun. Yocum managed to regain control of his weapon. He fired hoping he still had a round in the chamber. He did.

"I heard the gun blast. I saw the muzzle flash. And I heard a bone-crunching thud when the bullet hit his chest," he says.

On television the suspect usually falls after he's been shot. But in real life that's not always the case. With the suspect still standing, Yocum's felt his sight fading and could tell he was about to lose consciousness. He recalled his police training about how criminals often fight on long after they receive fatal wounds, sometimes because they are high on drugs, sometimes due to adrenalin. He didn't know which in this case, but as he felt himself going under, Yocum aimed and fired one last round. The last thing he heard was the suspect hit the ground before Yocum himself collapsed.

Yocum survived the ordeal and was eventually taken to St. Francis Medical Center and treated for a concussion, multiple lacerations and a badly crushed finger. The suspect was pronounced dead at the scene. ❁



Michel Yocum