

He caught my eye as he walked along carrying a small but worn suitcase. His clothes were crumpled, as if he'd slept in them. I guessed the young man to be about 15.

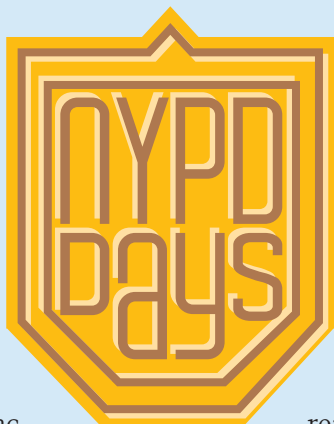
As a police officer in New York City, I was trained to be on the lookout for the unusual. This day I was in the radio car, replacing another officer on vacation. (Rookies didn't get to ride very often; most days were spent walking a beat.)

I turned the wheel of the car toward the young man. His right hand carried the suitcase and his left hand swung loosely at his side. "What are you doing?" asked Brian, another rookie and my current partner.

"Something's wrong," I responded. "People don't carry suitcases to Central Park. I'm gonna check him out."

I pulled the car alongside the teenager, but he kept looking straight ahead, avoiding

BY JIM MCDEVITT
ILLUSTRATED BY LEO PANTS



OFFICER JIM
RECEIVED
HELP FROM
A SURPRISING
SOURCE.

eye contact. "Hey, hold it there," I called out. The young man stopped but didn't say anything. He looked scared.

"What's your name?" I asked, stepping out of the car.

"Jerome," he said weakly.

"Do you have some identification, Jerome?"

He set down his suitcase, reached into his back pocket, and took out a wallet. That's when I detected tears in his eyes. He removed a school identification card and handed it to me. It read, "Jerome Nathanason." The card was issued by Fairfield High School in

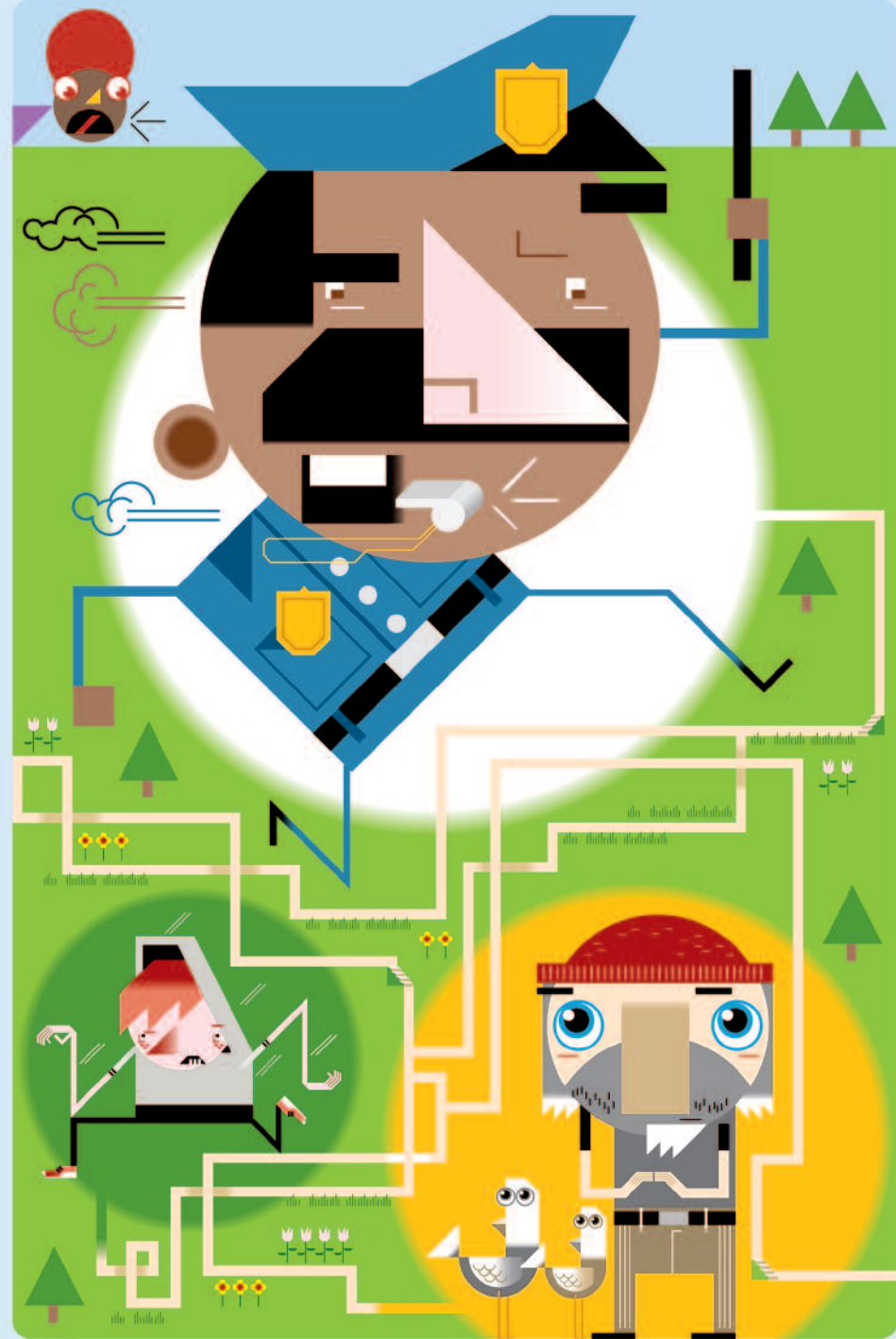
Princeton, New Jersey, a long distance away. He was 15.

"You're a long way from home, Jerome," I said. "What's in the suitcase?"

"Just clothes."

"How about opening it up so I can take a look, Jerome?"

"OK." He snapped open the latches and lifted the lid,



revealing a pair of shorts, socks, and one shirt. He appeared to be a runaway. I closed up the suitcase and had him empty his pockets on the hood of the police car.

All the way to the station house Jerome denied being a runaway. At the precinct we went to the back room where we keep a book of alarms. I started going through them, looking for Jerome's name. Sure enough, five minutes later I found the alarm; it was four days old. I copied the phone number for the Princeton Police Department and called them while Jerome sat talking to my partner. Now the teen was resigned; he'd be going back home. After I'd gotten his parents' phone number, I tried dialing it. His mother answered the phone and started sobbing when I told her that her son was all right. She'd been worried sick ever since they'd had an argument and he ran away. Her prayers were answered, she said. Then I put the young man on the phone and watched discreetly as tears started rolling down his face. I pretended that I didn't notice.

We completed our paperwork and left the young man with the desk officer. It was a

good feeling, reuniting a family. I hoped they'd be able to work out their problems. This time no one had been hurt, but it's not always like that when a boy runs away from home.

The next day I was on the park post, or "beat," again. I passed elderly people reading books or newspapers while sitting on park benches.

I didn't have much experience making arrests. My experience was with lost children at the zoo, injuries, or issuing an occasional ticket.

Recalling the desk officer's recent words about purse snatchers, I imagined how a real purse snatcher might look. Dirty. Unkempt. Smelly.

I passed tennis courts filled with players. Suddenly a dog dragging his leash came running toward me, chased by an elderly man. As the dog dashed by, I clamped a foot down on his leash. The grateful owner came running up out of breath. "Thank you, Officer. Rusty has no sense. He pulled out of my hands as he was chasing a bird. I was afraid he was going to run in front of a car. Thank you so much," he repeated.

"No problem, sir," I said, handing him back the leash. I was sure that if Jesus had been there, He would've done the same.

My beat was the length of seven city blocks, with two playgrounds in the middle. One playground contained two basketball courts, now filled with teenagers. The other park was for young children, and it was equipped with slides and swings. Passing the swing area, I spotted a man standing close to the woods. He looked dirty, as if he'd been sleeping in the park all night. He fit perfectly the image I had formed of a purse snatcher. I walked over. His back was to me as he watched pigeons busily scooping up pieces of bread from the ground.

"Excuse me, sir. May I see some identification?" The man turned with a puzzled look on his face.

"Did I do something wrong, Officer?"

"No, just checking your identification. We've had some purse snatches in the park recently . . ."

The man's bright-blue eyes looked hurt as he reached into his back pocket for his wallet. He handed me an out-of-state driver's license.

"Where are you—" Suddenly a woman's screams from the playground area stopped me midsentence. Returning the driver's license to the man, I turned toward the screams and ran toward the playground. A woman lay on the ground, an elderly man holding her head in his arms and pointing. Women with frightened eyes clutched young children and yelled, "That way! There are two of them!"

I ran in the direction where they pointed, and turned the corner onto a crosstown roadway. Out of the corner of my eye I saw feet. I reached out, grabbing hold of an ankle. The person struggled to get free but tumbled off the eight-foot-high wall onto my shoulder, causing us both to crash to the ground. I grabbed the assailant by his sweatshirt. He stopped struggling. He appeared to be about 15 or 16 years old.

Just then the person I'd earlier suspected of being a



purse snatcher dashed by. He didn't have the purse.

Meanwhile, grasping the current suspect by the sweatshirt, we started walking back toward the playground. The victim now stood brushing herself off, still shaky from the incident. As we walked toward her, she looked up and asked, "Did you get my purse back?"

"No, ma'am. Is this one of the purse snatchers?"

"Yes," she said, nodding, "but all of my money is in the purse." Then she started sobbing.

Just then the man with her pointed and said, "Here comes the



other one—and your purse!"

I turned to see the man whom I'd earlier suspected of being the purse snatcher. In his grasp was another teen, along with the victim's purse.

"Here ya go, Officer," the man said. He handed me the purse.

Looking at the person being held, the woman cried out, "That's him! That's the other purse snatcher!"

I handed the purse to the woman and took the other young man by the arm.

"It's all here," the woman said after counting the money in her wallet. A smile came over her face. I turned back to the man whose identity I'd been so mistaken about. "Thank you, sir," I said genuinely.

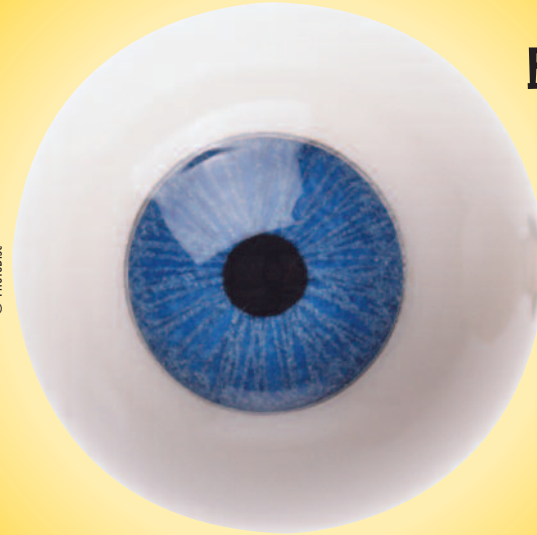
He nodded as a big smile crossed his face.

After making a request for a squad car, I turned to get the name of the man who'd saved the day, but he was gone.

That man helped stop a crime and taught me a lesson: Don't judge people by the way they look or dress. It's what's in a person's heart that counts.



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Eye Stretcher

BY RICHARD LATTA

Look at the following lines. Do they mean anything to you? Hint: Tip the page away from you, then hold your eyes at the bottom of the page and look up the page toward the top. Answer on page 21.

