

Rogue DDV

Patrolman Mike Densmore stared blankly at the endless stream of taillights. They stretched for at least two miles straight ahead, then curved slightly to the right as they climbed a hill and disappeared over a ridge on the horizon. All traveling at the same speed, all driving in the right lane, and all following the car ahead of them at exactly the right distance. Patrolling the Interstate was pretty boring, which is precisely why it was assigned to junior patrolmen like Mike. Mike was, in fact, the most junior patrolman on his squad, which is why he drew the night duty. On rare occasions he would encounter an old HDV (Human Driven Vehicle) which was taking advantage of the empty left lane and driving above the speed limit. Then he could make an old-fashioned traffic stop and write a ticket. More commonly he would encounter an MID (Motorist In Distress), usually because of a mechanical breakdown in their vehicle. He would stop to make certain a replacement vehicle and a tow truck had been summoned. If the occupants appeared nervous, he would stay with them until the replacement vehicle arrived and they were on their way again. They would be grateful, but it wasn't as if he were taking time away from more pressing duties elsewhere. He seldom had more than one MID event in the same month. Officer Brannigan once had an MID where the man in the car was having a heart attack. He performed CPR and was able to keep the man alive until the ambulance arrived, and the medics took it from there. They got the man safely to a hospital, and a few months later the man came by the station to personally thank Officer Brannigan for saving his life. Nothing that exciting ever happened on Mike's shift. Most of the occupants on his shift were asleep. If they died peacefully in their sleep and didn't hit the Emergency Stop button, no one would know until the car delivered their body to its destination. You sometimes read about that on the Internet. "Limousine Delivers Dead Groom to Wedding" and stories like that.

Mike's car was not actually in the line of traffic. He was travelling in the left lane, which was now reserved for emergency vehicles. He was driving slightly faster than the speed limit so he could check the registration of each car as he passed it. Problems with occupied vehicles were almost unheard of. Well-hidden homing beacons, multiple identification chips, and the transformation of the automobile from a status symbol to an appliance had made car theft an almost nonexistent crime. It was beyond the ability of amateurs, and not worth the risk for professionals. There was, however, a growing problem with stolen or unregistered DDVs – Driverless Delivery Vans. Criminals, especially drug dealers, made widespread use of DDVs. A DDV could be used to move any package from Point A to Point B with virtually no risk to the individuals involved. Sophisticated programmers designed fail-safe circuits which fried the memory if anything went wrong, so even if the police did intercept a DDV they couldn't tell where it came from or where it was going. All electronic identification would be destroyed as well, so there was no way to recreate the route by looking for tolls or refueling stops paid for by this DDV. The DDVs would be painted in a color scheme used by one of the major shipping/delivery companies such as UPS or Amazon, so roadside cameras couldn't be used to recreate the route. Companies were experimenting with holographic ID plates and other ways to clearly differentiate their DDVs from the imposters, but at the moment poser DDVs were a major problem. Criminals had grown so bold they even used them to dispose of dead bodies, stuffing the body into a DDV and programming it to drive to the middle of nowhere and fry its memory. In New Orleans a brazen crime lord had even programmed a DDV to deliver the body of an honest cop to his precinct headquarters, sending a clear warning to the other policemen.

A harsh beep and a flashing red light on the instrument panel interrupted Mike's thoughts. The DDV in the right lane just ahead of him was painted in the familiar orange and white Babson Brothers paint scheme, but the electronic registration number didn't show up on any of Babson's records. Mike pressed the transmit button on his AV harness. "Control, I've got a suspicious DDV in sight. It's painted Babson orange, but the ID doesn't match. Request permission to stop."

"Acknowledged, patrolman Densmore. You are cleared to stop."

Mike flipped the "Pull Over" switch on his instrument panel. He could see the flashing blue light bar on his roof reflect off the nearby vehicles as an electronic "pull over" command was sent to the DDV. The DDV slowed down for a moment as though it was going to pull over, but this turned out to just be a ploy to widen the gap between it and the car ahead of it. Suddenly it shot forward and darted into the left hand lane, ahead of Mike's vehicle. Its lights went out and its ID disappeared from Mike's screen, so he knew it had switched off its locator beacon. Other cars might detect it with their short-range radar when it was almost on top of them, but other than that it was invisible.

"DDV has gone rogue!" Mike almost shouted. "Repeat, DDV has gone rogue. Initiating pursuit." He tried to sound calm and businesslike, but his heart was racing. He'd practiced many pursuits in the simulator, but this was his first live pursuit. He flipped the "Pursuit" switch on the instrument panel and was slammed back into his seat as the vehicle accelerated. "Holy S---!" he thought. This was nothing like the simulator. In the simulator you sat still while images of light poles and signposts flashed by on the side screen. Here he was pressed into his seat, fists clenched with tension, while seemingly passing within inches of real light poles and sign posts. "Any one of those would kill me if we went off the road" he thought. An orange target symbol on his heads-up display stayed centered on the rogue DDV to let Mike know his car was still tracking it with long-range radar.

"Acknowledged, patrolman Densmore. You are now in pursuit." The calm voice of the desk sergeant seemed out of place in the adrenaline-filled patrol car. Nothing was calm in here. Mike's ears were assaulted by the engine noise and wind noise. He heard his tires squeal as they made the "slight bend to the right," and the car almost went airborne as they crested the ridge. Mike had no idea a patrol car could go so fast. Fortunately, traffic in the right lane was responding to his "move over" signal. Vehicles slowed down and pulled onto the shoulder before he arrived, giving his car the full width of the road. And yet, as fast as they were moving, the orange target on the heads-up display showed that the rogue DDV was slowly pulling away from them. The DDV was smaller and lighter than the patrol car. It was more streamlined, having no need for a driver's compartment or a windshield. It also wasn't burdened by the need for crush zones, air bags, and other occupant safety features.

Mike realized there was no way he could catch the DDV, and continuing the chase would just increase the chances of an accident. Already the DDV was approaching the limit of his "move over" signal and was about to reach the point where the right hand lane was filled with cars. Mike was reaching for the switch to turn off the Pursuit mode when a car just ahead of the DDV suddenly swerved into the left lane. Mike could tell by the taillights that it was an older car being driven by a human. The driver was probably just trying to avoid colliding with the car ahead of him that was slowing in response

to the “move over” signal. Since the DDV had no lights and the older car had no collision avoidance radar, the driver didn’t have a clue that he was cutting in front of a vehicle traveling nearly 200 mph.

Time seemed to slow down as Mike stared in horror at the accident playing itself out before him. The DDV slammed on its brakes and tried to swerve around the car, but there wasn’t time. It clipped the front corner of the car, which then shot back across the right lane and plowed into a field beside the road. The DDV was spinning madly in the left lane. Mike had no way of knowing that the dramatic change in the DDV’s speed and the scattered radar reflections from its spinning body had caused the radar in his car to lose track of it. All Mike’s biological brain knew was that he was headed for an imminent collision with the spinning DDV and his patrol car didn’t seem to be doing anything about it. Mike slammed on the brakes, grabbed the steering wheel, and jerked control away from the computer. He swerved around the DDV, dropping his left wheels off the pavement in the process. He had almost wrestled the car back onto the road when his left front tire hit a drainage culvert and flipped the car. Exploding air bags threw his arms back. His right hand was smashed into his face. He could feel the car rolling over and over, seemingly forever. Then he blacked out.

Mike woke up with a start. Everything was brilliantly white, like the exploding air bags. For a moment he thought he was still rolling and he reached out to grab something. His right arm thumped against a bed rail and pain shot up to his shoulder. The pain seemed to bring him back to his senses. He discovered he was in a hospital, covered with white sheets and with bright white lights overhead. His right arm was in a cast. He had bandages on his face, and his right eye was covered by a bandage. A nurse who had seen him thrash when he woke up rushed over to calm him.

“Easy there, cowboy” the man said. “You got banged up pretty good. Nothing serious, though. The air bags smashed your right arm into your face. You’ve got one hell of a shiner on your right eye, but there’s no damage to the eyeball. Your vision will be fine once the swelling goes down. And you’ve got a hairline fracture in your right arm so we put it in a cast. That will heal up in no time. So just relax, and let your body heal itself.”

Mike struggled to speak through swollen lips. “What about the people in the car?” he asked.

“They’ll be fine” the nurse answered. “They were shaken up a bit, and we’re keeping them overnight because they’re both over 70, but it’s almost morning now and they’re sleeping peacefully. That hulk they were driving may have been an antique, but it was big and heavy so the DDV didn’t do much damage. The old man wants to fix it up and keep driving it.”

Mike settled back in his bed and relaxed for the first time since the accident.

“Aren’t you curious about the DDV?” the nurse asked.

Mike just shrugged. “Drugs, I suppose.”

“Not this time” the nurse said. “We’ve had an army of cops in this ward ever since they brought you in. They all wanted to make certain you were OK, and they were all talking about that DDV you chased. People kept coming and going with new developments in the story. Then someone would have to rush off to take something to the lab, or to send something to Washington. The head nurse finally chased them out about an hour ago so the rest of our patients could get some sleep. It seems that DDV you chased was being used in a kidnapping. There was a young boy tied up inside it. He’s fine now, but he wouldn’t have been if you hadn’t taken control of your car. They’ve analyzed the black box recordings from your car, and they know you kept it from slamming into that DDV and killing the boy.”

He paused for a moment to let this sink in. Then he continued. “The other thing the cops were excited about is the fact that the collision between the DDV and the old man’s car broke a circuit board or something that supplied power to the computer. The computer wasn’t able to fry its memory. They think they’ll be able to find out where the car came from and where it was going. They hope this will lead them to the kidnapers.”

Mike’s brain was overloaded. He heard everything the nurse said, but he just couldn’t seem to comprehend it. All he could think of to say was “It was a pretty boring night, until the last couple of minutes.”

The nurse patted his left hand. “Get some sleep, cowboy” he said. “You’ve earned it. You’re a hero.”