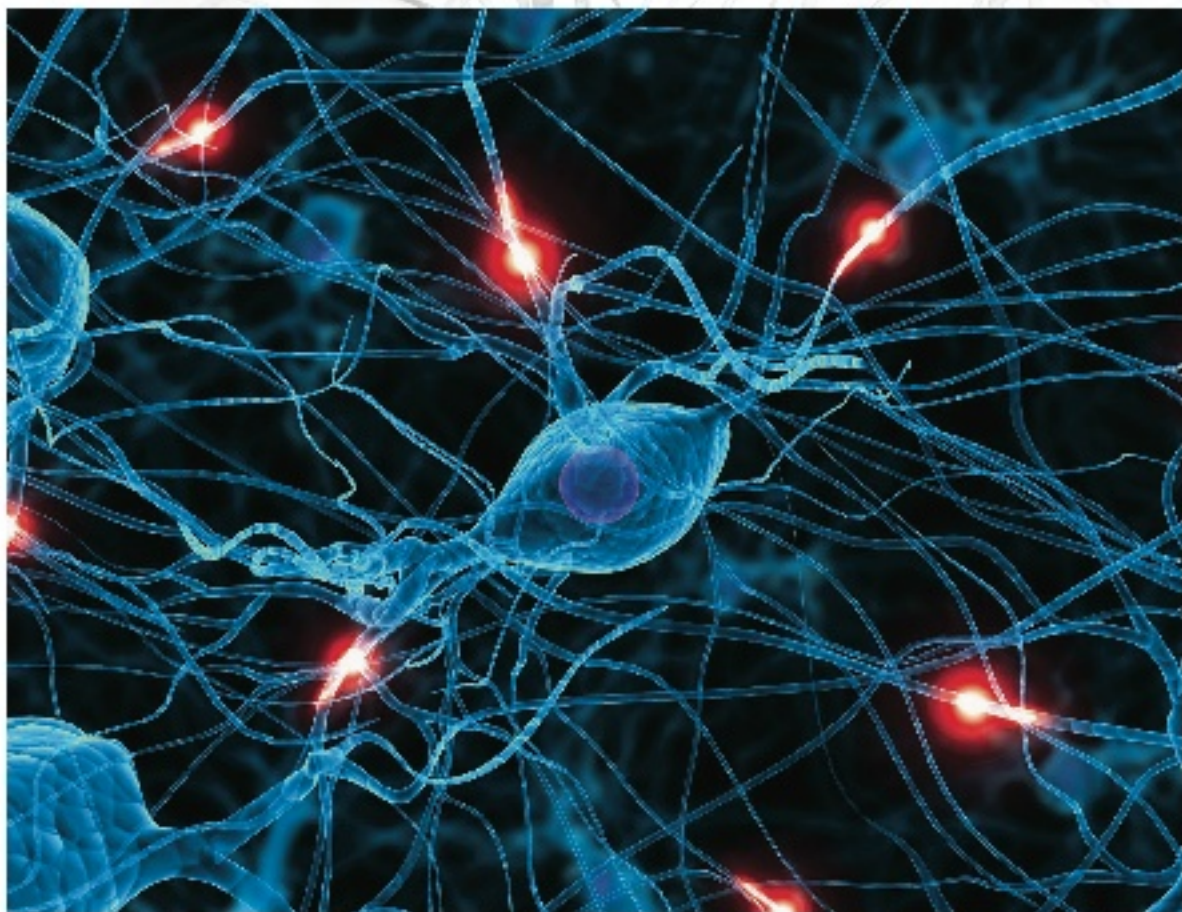


CONNECTIONS



JOHN G. SCHIEMAN



During a three week period in March, 2018, a number of young children were admitted to various emergency rooms around the United States. Each child had supposedly fallen victim to severe trauma resulting from a unique accident that had placed them in a comatose state.

None of the children possessed identification. No one reported any of the children missing. They never received hospital visitors.

The tragic events befalling each child were seemingly disconnected...or were they?

Connections

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CONNECTIONS

JOHN G. SCHIEMAN

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First Edition

Chapter 1

Surviving the Cold

March 02, 2018, 6:15 AM

“Emily! A hit-and-run accident report just came in over the Emergency Com. It’s at the corner of Harvard and Beacon streets. Let’s go!” shouted Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) Willy Parker to his newly assigned partner Emily Williams.

William “Willy” Parker had been an EMT for five years in the Boston Medical Emergency System. He was African American, stood six foot, one hundred eighty pounds, and sported a shaved head. He had a great personality. Everyone loved him. He loved his job and that was reflected in how he conducted himself every day on the job. Willy was the consummate professional. There was no one better suited for the role than Willy Parker. He treated every casualty with care and respect, often times, making post-operative, hospital visits to the injured he had delivered to the emergency room.

Little was known about Emily Williams. She had been an EMT for less than one month and had recently been assigned to Willy’s shift that very week. From what he was able to discern, Emily was an extremely private person. She didn’t talk much about her background. As a consequence, Willy knew very little about her, other than what had been provided on the application intake form.

“C’mon Emily. Get a move on!” yelled Willy anxiously.

The Emergency Medical Services (EMS) vehicle darted from the station twenty-two seconds later with siren blaring and lights flashing.

It had been an exceptionally cold winter in Boston that year. Fortunately, for the residents of that magnificent city, there had been very little snow accompanying the frigid weather. The intersection where the accident took place was massive. A number of major banking offices were visible in every direction. Harvard Street was maintained four lanes of traffic, Beacon Street had three. Traffic was backed up in every direction. Commuter railroad tracks were positioned parallel to Beacon Street. As the EMTs approached the accident scene, they observed a casualty victim lying prone on the street. A lone man knelt close to the body.

“Oh shit!” said Emily. “It’s a child. The hit-and-run victim is a child.”

Emily didn’t need or want that kind of dreadful experience during her first full week on the job, not a case involving a child.

Willy glanced at his partner with looks that could have killed.

“Get it together! These situations involving kids are the hardest. I know that. Get through this day and the rest of your career will be smooth sailing. I promise you that from my personal experience.”

“I don’t know. A kid, why me? Why this day?” replied Emily as her entire body tensed up.

Willy felt his body tensing up as he turned toward Emily with anger reflected in his eyes.

“Hey! This isn’t about you. This is about that child lying in the street. Get your shit together!”

The pulsating blue and red lights atop the sea of police and emergency vehicles on the scene were blinding. The entire intersection had been sealed off with black and yellow police tape. Barricades had been erected adjacent to the young child’s body. The

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traffic lights in both directions were blinking red. Further down each street, police cruisers blocked access to the intersection.

Patrolmen, wearing bright yellow emergency vests, were visible everywhere. The few looky-loos who braved the cold that morning were being interviewed by the cops. The sight of the near-frozen breath that emanated from the mouths of the interviewees presented an eerie spectacle.

Willy cautiously weaved his vehicle through the gauntlet of barriers and parked directly in the middle of the intersection, further blocking traffic in all directions. Willy Parker threw on his grey and yellow EMS winter coat, grabbed his medical duffle bag, and leapt from the vehicle. As Willy hit the pavement, his attention was immediately drawn to a smashed, black and white, ten speed bicycle lying on the side of the road. His initial impression was one of surprise. The bike appeared to have suffered very little visible damage.

This was only his second hit-and-run call involving a kid on a bike, despite what he had said to Emily only seconds earlier. His mind briefly flashed back to that earlier case. The rear wheel of the bike had been severely mangled and the entire frame was bent in multiple locations. The bike that was lying on the pavement before him had no such damage.

Willy's eyes were drawn to a cracked, black and white bicycle helmet that rested less than five feet from the bike. Willy quickly surmised that the kid had most likely been wearing that helmet when he was struck by the vehicle.

The young boy was lying on his back on the blacktop, with his left arm twisted above his head. His eyes were closed. Willy observed a small amount of 'frozen' air escaping from the boy's nostrils. He took that as a positive sign that the boy was still alive. The injured kid was well-dressed so Willy ruled out the possibility that he might be

dealing with a homeless situation. The expression on the boy's face looked eerily peaceful to Willy.

During his initial EMT training, the sessions that had been presented by the Boston Detective Squad emphasized the importance of being observant at an accident scene. Willy took that suggestion to heart and was one of the best at providing accident details.

"Sir, is this your child?" asked Willy to the man leaning over the boy.

The man had a dog with him that he held in close quarters so as not to touch the boy. Willy took the dog to be a Golden Retriever, although he couldn't be exactly certain. The dog sat calmly at the man's side as Willy narrowed the distance between himself and the man. The man continued to gaze upon the boy as he responded to Willy.

"No sir. I was walking my dog on Harvard Street when a dark colored SUV ran the light and hit the boy," the man paused as he pointed to his left. "The driver made no attempt to slow down or stop. I ran to the boy immediately to see what I could do."

The temperature that morning had been twenty-one degrees. The ground was bone dry. Although Willy's only responsibility that morning was to save the young child, he briefly turned his head in the direction where the man was pointing with his index finger. Willy promptly discerned that there were no visible skid marks on the road which substantiated the man's claim that the car hadn't slowed down as it traveled through the intersection.

The man who had come to the boy's aid wore a heavy grey topcoat, a black scarf wrapped tightly around his neck and face, and a black brimmed hat worn low on his brow.

"Did you make any attempt to move the boy?" asked Willy

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“No sir. I just tried to keep him warm and out of any further harm. That’s when I called 9-1-1,” said the man with a trembling voice, partially reflecting his anguish for the boy’s condition and partly due to the extreme cold.

“Sir, please stand up and move back. Let us do our job,” replied Willy as he struggled to make direct eye contact with the man.

Willy and Emily knelt down alongside the boy. With speed and precision, they proceeded to ascertain the boy’s condition and administer the appropriate emergency treatment.

“Son, can you hear me?” whispered Willy.

There was no response.

Willy glanced at Emily, who now had tears streaming down her face.

“Listen to me carefully. I feel your sorrow. It’s in me too. We can’t let our accident victims see our fear or our sadness. We are often times the only thing between life and death for them. We must be strong for them. Never forget that.”

“Get the stretcher from the back of the van. We need to get this child to the emergency room ASAP,” shouted Willy.

As Emily rushed toward the van, Willy looked up toward the man for a brief second as he continued to do what he could for the young boy.

“Do you know who this boy is?”

“No sir, never seen him before,” replied the man.

Did he say anything to you?” pressed Willy.

“No sir! He never said a word,” said the man emphatically.

“Can you describe the SUV that hit him; the color, the make, anything? Asked Willy.

“No sir! I only recall the color was dark, maybe black. It was early. Everything happened so fast. The lighting was too dim to see the car clearly,” replied the obviously distraught bystander.

“Did you get a license plate?” fired Willy.

“No. As I said it was too dark and it all happened too fast. I was shocked at first. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The young boy flew off the bike upon impact. It didn’t look real to me...more like something out of a movie. Besides, when I came to my senses, my only concern was to focus on the condition of the boy,” said the shaken man, half repeating himself.

“I understand,” replied Willy.

The man’s dog began to whine and pace back and forth.

“He’s got to do his business. I need to walk him,” said the man as he began to walk down Beacon Street.

Willy shouted to the man as he began to walk away.

“Hey. I need your full name and address.”

“Hold on! I’ll be back in a moment,” said the man as he continued to walk further down the street.

Willy noticed that the dog was preparing to squat just as Emily was returning with the stretcher.

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“I called it in. We should go the Boston Children’s Hospital now,” said Emily.

Boston Children's Hospital is a four hundred bed comprehensive center for pediatric health care. As one of the largest pediatric medical centers in the United States, Children's offers a complete range of health care services for children from birth through twenty-one years of age. The main campus was less than a half mile away on Longwood. There was no better facility in the entire city to help the injured boy.

“Good work. Help me lift the boy onto the stretcher. I’ve secured his back and neck. He ready for transport,” said Willy.

The EMTs collapsed the wheel supports on the stretcher until it was at ground level. Once the boy was safely on the stretcher, Willy and Emily raised the device until the wheel supports locked into place.

Willy momentarily forgot all about the man and his dog. He and Emily braced the boy’s neck a second time, made sure that the straps were secure, and then gently rolled the child to the ambulance.

Willy suddenly remembered the man and his dog. He turned his head toward Beacon Street for a brief second, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

“Where the hell did that guy with the dog go?”

“I don’t see him,” said Emily from her elevated vantage point inside the vehicle. “Look. We can’t wait. We have to go now.”

“You’re right,” replied Willy as they lifted the “still motionless” boy into the back of the EMS van.

“You drive,” shouted Willy. “I’ll stay with the boy and monitor his vitals. Besides, I need to take some notes while the information is fresh in my mind.”

Emily crept into the vehicle’s cab, activated the flashing lights and siren, hit the accelerator, and headed toward the hospital. Willy pulled a small notepad from his inside breast pocket and feverishly documented everything he could remember about the accident scene.

“Damn strange. Why didn’t that guy stick around? I mean, he called it in. He stayed with the kid. Why didn’t he stick around?” Shouted Willy rhetorically from the emergency vehicle’s rear compartment.

Emily just shook her head in confusion.

The EMS van entered the E.R. bay with sirens blaring. A full trauma team was poised and waited by the door. The second the emergency van pulled to a stop, the head doctor began barking questions to the EMTs and orders to his staff.

“What can you tell me?” asked Doctor Henry Jones.

“Not much Doc. The injured child is a young boy, most likely the victim of a hit-and-run accident. I’m fairly certain the boy had been riding a bicycle and was wearing a protective helmet when he was struck. His vitals are on the low side, but steady. Breathing has been stable at seventeen breathes per minute. Pulse has been a constant at seventy-one beats per minute. We administered only one liter of saline drip in route, no meds, He’s fully hydrated at this point. The boy has remained unresponsive the entire time,” replied Willy.

“We’ll take it from here. Good work Willy,” said the doctor.

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Doctor Jones had recognized Willy from his years of exemplary service and took comfort in the fact that the boy had been in good hands.

“Nurse, let’s get the boy into the E.R., examination room number one stat!” shouted Jones.

Willy and Emily followed the stretcher into the hospital. Everything was different when the victim was a child. Everyone worked a little harder and felt the impact more deeply. The EMTs remained in the waiting room as they silently said a prayer for the boy’s recovery.

“What’s the boy’s name?” shouted Jones from the examination room.

“We don’t know. He never spoke to us. I checked his pockets for ID, but there wasn’t any,” replied Willy.

“He looks to be around fifteen or sixteen, don’t you think?” asked the Doc.

“I’d say so,” replied Emily, speaking for the first time. “I have a younger brother about his age. I agree.”

For the first time since Emily had been assigned to his unit, Willy began to understand the reason for Emily’s tears that morning. The situation hit home for her.

“Doc, we are going to stick around here for a few minutes. We’ll be in the waiting area if you need us,” said Willy.

“I understand,” replied Doctor Jones. “As soon as we know something, I’ll send someone out.”

Doctor Jones rushed into E.R. number one as one of the nurses returned the stretcher to the EMTs. Willy and Emily took a seat in the waiting area.

“Emily, you want a coffee?”

“No thanks. Get one for yourself though.”

Willy shook his head as he prepared to respond.

“I’ll wait. Let’s see what happens first.”

Fifteen minutes passed with no word.

Doctor Henry Jones was one of Boston’s finest doctors. At fifty-two years of age, Jones ranked at one of the best pediatric healthcare professionals in the country. Whenever he had a ‘free moment’, he dedicated his time to the E.R. or to “Doctors without Borders” projects.

The exterior, electronic entry doors of the emergency room bolted open as a man walked in the direction of Emily and Willy.

“Willy, good to see you again. I wish it was under better circumstances,” said Detective Barney Aherne.

Detective Aherne was “Boston” through and through. He was a third generation Irishman with the brogue and ruddy complexion to match. He loved the Celtics and Bruins to a fault. He also loved his beer and was a frequent visitor to the Publick House tavern at Washington Square, voted one of Boston’s finest bars.

“Who’s the cutie with you? I don’t think we have met?” asked Aherne.

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Aherne was forty-five years old, twice divorced, and on the prowl. Anyone could see that Emily was too young for him and that he was not her style. Everyone, but Aherne apparently.

“Detective Aherne, this is Emily Williams. She just started this tour of duty on Monday,” responded Willy.

“Nice to meet you Emily. Sorry about my earlier comment,” said the detective as he extended his hand to her.

“Nice to meet you too detective,” responded Emily abruptly, with no interest in continuing the dialogue.

Sensing he had gotten off on the wrong foot with Williams (something he did frequently), Aherne turned to address Willy.

“What can you tell me about the hit-and-run? Any witnesses? Anyone see the vehicle?” fired the detective in rapid succession. Willy removed his note pad from the left, front pocket of his EMT jacket.

“The vehicle was a dark colored SUV, make unknown. There was a man at the scene who saw the accident and stayed with the boy. He wasn’t any help in describing the vehicle further,” responded Willy.

“Let me have a run at him. What was his name and where does he live?” followed the detective.

“That’s just it. We didn’t get any of that. The guy was helpful enough, but he had a dog and the dog needed to go for a walk,” said Willy.

“You let him leave the scene? That’s not like you, Willy,” challenged Aherne.

Willy smirked, “Yeah, I know. You don’t need to tell me that I blew it,” replied Willy.

“What did he look like?” challenged the detective.

“I didn’t get a good look at him. A heavy woolen scarf covered the lower part of his face and the hat he wore covered the upper part of his face,” replied Willy, realizing the explanation sounded a little strange after he said it.

“Could he have been the hit-and-run driver? Sometimes, they return to the scene of the crime due to extreme remorse,” asked Aherne.

“We didn’t see any parked cars near the scene and there was the issue of the dog,” replied a sheepish Willy.

“Okay, that tells me something. If he was on foot, then he probably lives in the immediate area. What kind of dog was it?” asked the detective.

“A Golden Retriever, full grown I’d say. What about you, Emily, what did you think?” asked Willy.

“Yes, full grown. It was a Golden,” responded the closed mouth Emily.

“Well, at least that’s something. I’ll canvass the area later this morning and look for a man with a Golden Retriever. Right now, I need to see the kid,” said Aherne.

“He’s still in the E.R. examination room, detective,” said Willy.

“Time is of the essence with these cases. I’m going in there right now,” said Aherne as he motioned in the direction of E.R. number one. Seconds later, the E.R. doors burst open.

“Doc, what can you tell me about the kid?” said Aherne sternly.

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“Hey, you can’t be in here. I’ll speak with you in a minute,” replied Doctor Jones as the nursing staff looked on. They were all familiar with Aherne’s abruptness.

“C’mon Doc. Time is critical here in these situations. Do we have an ID on the kid,” said Aherne as he moved closer to the child.

Without waiting for a reply, Aherne shouted, “This is the kid who was involved in the hit-and-run? Where are his bruises? I don’t see a single one.”

Detective Aherne was gazing down at the young boy who appeared to be in his late teens, at most. His hair was brownish-red. It hung over his ears and down the neckline to his shoulders in the back. The hair was well-cut, not the work of an amateur. His complexion was soft white in color, with a small number of tiny brown freckles on his cheeks and nose. The boy’s medical chart listed his eye color as brown although his eyes were closed at present. The chart also indicated that the boy was five foot, nine inches tall and weighed one hundred, twenty pounds.

As Aherne leaned in to take some pictures with his smartphone, he noticed that the boy appeared to have been well taken care of. His hands were clean and not worn at all. Even his finger nails were well kept. This was not a ‘street kid’. People had looked after this kid. But where were they now and why hadn’t they come to the hospital searching for him thought Aherne?

“I thought the lack of bruising was a little strange at first. He was wearing a helmet. It’s cold that time of morning. He had three layers of clothing. Maybe that cushioned the impact and explains the lack of bruises,” offered the E.R. doctor.

“I’m with you Doc, but there should still be bruises on the hands and around the face. Something just doesn’t feel right,” said Aherne.

"The boy wore gloves. That probably protected his hands. Hey. You're the detective. That's your business. I'm the doctor. Let me do my job, please," replied Jones.

"Will do," smiled Aherne.

"He's not without his share of older bruises, however. This child suffered a broken right arm a few years ago and there are faint signs of internal stitching on his forehead," replied the Doc.

"I sure hope this child wasn't abused," said the detective, with a note of remorse in his voice. "Let me take a few pictures of the kid for identification. They'll come in handy when I canvass the neighborhood. If that Good Samaritan who was at the scene shows up, give me a call right away. I'll be back later to check in on the kid's condition. Hopefully he will have regained consciousness. "

"I'll certainly apprise you of any updates detective, but this child is in a deep coma right now. The prognosis isn't all that good, so I suggest you stop back in a day or two," said the doctor.

Aherne's face grew sullen. He was a wise ass to be sure, but nobody, not even him, wanted to see a 'damaged' child.

"Okay Doc. I'll stop back anyway. Do your best, I know you will. I just want to catch the bastard who did this," said the detective with conviction in his voice.

The detective had a rough exterior. Everyone knew that about him. But the people who knew him best were also aware that he had a soft spot for cases involving children. Aherne was the best chance this kid had. Everyone who knew him understood that Detective Aherne would not rest until the case was solved.

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Doctor Jones and the entire E.R. team did all they could do for the young “John Doe”. His vitals were stabilized. He received a complete battery of “full body” scans and blood work. No concussion appeared present. In fact, as Aherne had observed, the child didn’t have any noticeable bruises about the head. Everything seemed fine with the boy, with the exception of the fact that he remained in a comatose state.

Willy and Emily remained in the emergency room waiting area for another thirty minutes as they hoped for the best regarding the young child. All the while, Emily paced around the room as she fidgeted incessantly with the ends of her hair. Willy’s emotions were on overload too, but he kept them bottled up inside. Emily’s gyrations didn’t help matters.

“Emily, sit down, will you? You are driving me crazy. We did all we could do. The boy’s going to be fine,” said Willy.

“I got to pee,” said Emily as she disappeared into the ladies room at the far end of the corridor.

Emily walked directly to the sink and twisted the facet so hard it almost broke off in her hand. She cupped the cold water with her hands and threw it on her face. The water didn’t have the desired results. Emily was an emotional wreck and she knew it. She had been on the road to recovery and had been making excellent progress.

“Why did the accident victim have to be a kid”, repeated Emily over and over in her head.

While Emily quickly surveyed the bathroom for other occupants, she pulled the cell phone from her rear pants pocket.

“Eduardo, I need a pick-up,” whispered Emily.

“Didn’t think I would be hearing from you again. Thought you were done with me,” responded Eduardo with a sinister chuckle.

“Fuck you. Things change. I’ll be at your place at seven,” said Emily excitedly.

“Okay baby. I’ll be there. Bring plenty of cash,” replied Eduardo before hanging up.

Emily dried off her face and straightened her hair with her fingers, as best she could before exiting the bathroom.

“You look like shit,” said Willy. “Listen, one of the nurses stopped by. The kid is stable, but remains comatose. There’s nothing more we can do here.”

Willy and Emily exited the waiting room and headed back to the station. They left word to be notified as soon as the boy’s condition changed...for better or worse.

Late that morning, Doctor Jones requested a consultation with Doctor Oscar Markus. Markus was one of the premier Neurosurgeons in the country. Neurosurgery is the medical specialty concerned with the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation of disorders which affect any portion of the nervous system including the brain, spinal cord, and extra-cranial cerebrovascular system.

Markus had truly been a rising star in the medical profession. By the age of thirty-nine, he had already performed what could only be described as “outstanding” work in the operating room. Parents praised him and his young patients loved him. In his spare time, he did considerable pro-bono work. He was also a computer geek of sorts. What he was able to do with a computer defied explanation by the average person, let alone most of his colleagues.

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At the end of the day, no explanation could be found for the boy's coma. His body functions were stable. His heart rhythms were strong. IV bags were attached intravenously to the boy's arm to provide nourishment and liquids. Electrodes were connected to seven vital points around his head to monitor brain function, to record brain patterns to the central computer, and to detect any brain function anomalies.

One of the E.R. technicians was tasked with entering what information they had on the boy into the hospital's missing person database system. Within nanoseconds, the information was electronically propagated to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children system, the Federal Bureau of Investigation Missing Children Database, and every other missing child database around the country. In the past, the dissemination of that information would have taken hours to perform...or not be done at all. The interconnected networks made things much easier for the techs but, more importantly, reunited victimized children with their loved one.

The world, and everyone in it, was being connected by virtue of the worldwide internet. Consider the incredible fact that Facebook™ now contained more than one and a half billion users. Personal privacy has become almost non-existent as individual, personal information reads like an open book.

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Detective Aherne arrived at the scene of the accident minutes later. He immediately spoke with the policeman nearest the 'bagged' bicycle.

"Officer, take the bike to forensics right now. Have them dust for prints and try to lift DNA. Tell them I need a rush on this. I want results today!" said Aherne forcefully.

The cop was aware of Aherne's reputation. The patrolman understood that the detective meant business and gladly obliged.

"You got it, detective."

The police officer placed the bike in the trunk of his cruiser and sped off.

Detective Aherne walked the grid for fifty feet in all directions beyond where the boy had come to rest. The detective was searching for even the slightest clue that would provide insight into what had occurred that morning...there was nothing to be found.

That fact, in its own right, seemed strange to the seasoned detective. There were no paint chips, no broken headlight fragments, no blood...nothing.

Aherne thought to himself, "There should have been something, anything, but not pristine blacktop. Something was off about the entire accident scene".

As he approached the yellow and black tape at the extreme end of the north quadrant, he observed approximately twenty people mulling around the open-air train station.

"Hey! Any of you see anything this morning that might be helpful?" shouted the detective.

His question was greeted with silence as some of the people turned and began walking away.

"Nobody saw anything. That figures," said Aherne in disgust. "Go home! There's nothing left to see here. Let us do our jobs."

Many of those who had remained at the scene finally turned and walked away. The few people who stuck around stared back at the

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detective in defiance. That was their mistake. Detective Aherne would make sure that their asses were hauled into the stationhouse for further questioning.

And then there were the multitude of media reporters and freelance photographers who would remain at the scene no matter what anyone said.

“Officer, see if any of those so-called photo journalists will let us have a copy of their pictures. They could prove useful,” said Aherne.

“I’ll see what I can do, but don’t hold your breath detective,” replied the officer.

Aherne was not dissuaded by the early hour so he commenced knocking on a few doors that were closest to the intersection and had an unrestricted view of the intersection. Some people were rushing to get to work and couldn’t give him the time of day.

The area has a significant population of upper class college students who lived off campus. His incessant banging woke them up, most likely, from a night of heavy drinking. They couldn’t give a shit about his investigation.

After about twenty minutes of banging on doors, Aherne gave up the effort and decided to assign members of the squad to do a thorough canvass of the area later that same day.

He returned to the Downtown Boston Police Station on Sudbury Street that had been his home for the past two years, five months, and seven days.

“Aherne, you look like shit. What are you still doing here? Weren’t you subbing for O’Hara last night on the graveyard shift?” said Tommy O’Malley, his partner for the past eighteen months.

Tommy O'Malley was five years Aherne's junior. Aherne had attempted two feeble, but unsuccessful marriages a few years earlier, both of which ended in horrible divorces. O'Malley wasn't about to make that mistake. He was the consummate player, different girls every night, and one-night stands were fine with him. His brown hair was shaved close to his head and accented his deep brown eyes. For as much as he was a carefree player with the girls, he was the consummate, hardworking detective.

He and Aherne connected almost immediately. They had formed a tight bond during the past year based on mutual trust. The two men complemented one another perfectly, amplifying each of their skills and negating their weaknesses. The partners would do almost anything for one another.

"Thanks partner, I really needed that encouragement. You'd look like shit if you had pulled the late shift too. Hell, you look like shit anyway. Seriously, I caught a kid's hit and run a few hours ago. Not my favorite assignment. The scene felt wrong to me. I let the Captain know that I'd be working a double shift today. There's some things I want to follow up on real fast before the trail gets cold," concluded Aherne.

"How can I help?" Replied O'Malley.

"Have Alex pull all the traffic video for the intersection of Harvard and Beacon streets, from five o'clock today. Ask her to include surveillance footage for all the traffic cams within a half mile radius. Call me as soon as she pulls up the stuff. Okay partner?"

"You got it! I'm on it as we speak," replied O'Malley.

Alexandra "Alex" Parkinson was the precinct's resident computer geek. She was the 'baby' of the team, having turned twenty-three the previous month. She had two years of MIT under her belt before

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she decided college wasn't for her. She wanted a taste of the 'real life'. Her present job definitely provided that experience.

"Larson, you got a minute?" asked Aherne to one of the patrolman assigned to the "House".

"Sure detective, what's up?"

"I want you to grab a few of your fellow officers and canvas the area where a hit and run took place today. The 'Vic' was a young kid. He can't be more than fifteen or sixteen."

That was all Aherne needed to say. Crimes against kids were ranked right up there with the shooting of a fellow policeman.

"The incident took place at the intersection of Harvard and Beacon streets. Search the entire area until you find something. There was a guy at the scene with his dog, a Golden Retriever, I think. I want him found. When you do, bring him in."

"You got it, detective," responded Larson.

As Larson was leaving, Tommy O'Malley returned to his workstation opposite Aherne.

"Partner, you are not going to like this. The traffic cams were disabled this morning. Alex is trying to get to the bottom of it. As of now, we got nothing!" said a soulful O'Malley.

"Shit! You know me. I'm not much for coincidence. Something's definitely not right here. Ask Alex to see if we can retrieve any useful video from the Bank ATM cameras in the area," said Aherne.

"Got it," said O'Malley as he turned and headed back to Alex's workstation.

Detective Aherne pushed back in his chair. He was exhausted from having completed the grave yard shift. He wasn't accustomed to all-nighters and it was already taking its toll. As he sat there, Aherne mentally replayed the hit and run scene over and over again in his head, searching for anomalies.

The mental exercise drew a blank.

Aherne grabbed the phone receiver and placed a call to the forensics unit. It had been his first stop earlier that morning when he arrived at the station.

"Hey, I know I didn't give you guys much time, but did you find anything useful on the bike the officers dropped off earlier?"

"Detective. The bike is clean. I mean immaculate. No signs of wear. No prints, but I guess that could partially be explained because the kid wore gloves. There was no evidence of DNA either. That sort of makes sense. The temperature was probably too cold for the kid to sweat. Still, that bike was awfully clean, almost like someone had 'wiped it'. I checked the serial number. The bike was reported stolen two days ago from one of those promotional displays in front of a department store downtown," replied the tech on the phone.

"Thanks for your help," replied Aherne.

"No problem. I wish I could have been more help."

Another strange dead end in a series of dead ends in those early hours of the investigation. Aherne thought about the implications of what the forensics tech had indicated. After mulling it over for a few minutes, he walked back to join Alex and his partner, Tommy. The detective was anxious to determine if they came up with anything meaningful.

CONNECTIONS

“Find anything?” asked Aherne.

“A Boston Bank ATM camera in the area recorded a blurry image of a white van with the logo, *Fabulous Florals* and a bouquet of red roses, painted on the side panel. It fits the timeline of the accident. It’s the only vehicle we observed that could have concealed a large dog. I couldn’t make out the license, but it’s a Mass plate. Looks like a red headed woman in her forties was driving. The image wasn’t good enough for facial recognition,” said Alex.

“Good work, Alex! Partner, let’s track down *Fabulous Florals*. I can’t imagine anyone would have been receiving a flower delivery at that time of the morning,” said Aherne.

A half hour earlier, the white van in question pulled into the Boston Electric and Telephone parking lot on Dorchester Avenue. The van parked alongside the row of twenty other, identical white vans, with the exception of the logo floral logos on the side panels.

The red headed woman finished wiping down the van’s interior with a bleach soaked rag, removed her rubber gloves, and shoved them into a backpack that rested on the passenger seat. She cautiously exited the vehicle and quickly surveilled the lot for a second time. It was early. The first shift wasn’t scheduled to arrive until nine. The place was devoid of people. The woman carefully removed the magnetic logo overlays on either side of the van. Her action revealed the Boston Electric and Telephone logo beneath. She folded the magnetic floral images and placed them into the large backpack that now rested at her feet.

She opened the van’s rear panel door and removed the Golden. She noticed the overhead surveillance cameras, but was confident that they had been disabled. She exited the main gate and headed into the heart of Dorchester. The area was predictably deserted at that time of the morning. The red head unlocked a dirty, non-descript,

small moving van that had been parked on the street and motioned the Golden to jump in the back. She followed the dog into the van.

Once inside, she (he) removed his disguise and exited the van as a man. He wore dark sunglasses, a wide brimmed hat, and a scarf that partially covered the lower portion of his face. The moving van was a rental that was schedule to be returned later that morning after the dog hair was completely vacuumed from the rear compartment.

March 02, 2018 Approaching Midnight

Doctor Markus examined the positron emission tomography (PET) scan of the boy's entire brain late that same evening. A PET scan is an imaging test that helps reveal how tissue and organs are functioning.

Markus noticed what appeared to be two miniscule shadows, one on the cerebral cortex and a second on the frontal lobe. The cerebral cortex is the outer layer of the cerebrum. It is composed of folded gray matter and plays an important role in consciousness. The frontal lobe is primarily responsible for cognition and memory.

After further examination, Markus discounted the anomalies as just that...shadows.

Doctor Markus was nearing the end of his twenty-four hour rotation at eleven-thirty that same evening. The hospital was unusually quiet for that time of night. Even the emergency room waiting area was empty. Markus activated his computer screen and pulled up the brain scan images for the boy who had been involved in the hit and run accident earlier that day. He felt obligated to analyze those shadowy areas one last time.

It was late. The doctor was tired. As he was shutting down his computer, he accidentally deleted the boy's brain scan images. Doctor

CONNECTIONS

Markus made a notation in his log to cover his ass should the subject come up at a later date.

March 04, 2018

It had been two days since the young man's body was discovered at the scene of the alleged hit-and-run accident. Detective Barney Aherne and his team had conducted a thorough search of the accident scene and interviewed everyone in a three block radius. No one saw or heard anything the morning of the accident although a number of people were out and about at that time of morning.

The bicycle the young boy had apparently been riding when he was struck did not look familiar to anyone who had been interviewed.

Research conducted on the Boston Animal License Database System turned up twenty-three households that admitted to owning a Golden Retriever in the immediate area. As it turned out, the Golden was the second most popular breed of dog in the Boston area. All twenty-three investigations were dead ends. The animal search was widened to additional breeds in the event EMTs got the breed wrong. Nothing panned out there either.

No one within one block of the accident could ever remember seeing a man, with the brief description provided, walking a Golden in the neighborhood.

No one inquired about the boy. No one came to the hospitals or police stations reporting the young boy as missing. The National Missing Children Databases continued to draw blanks.

Pictures of the injured young boy appeared on the front pages of every Boston newspaper. The same was true for every major television news channel. Pictures appeared on the daily and evening

news programs for one solid week without producing any tangible results.

Aherne and his team tracked down the *Fabulous Florals* lead. The only thing that turned up was a small store florist in the Back Bay, but the company was called *Fab Florals* and their delivery van was a multitude of sizzling colors. The proprietor had never heard of a competitor with the name, *Fabulous Florals*.

March 05, 2018

Every automobile repair shop for twenty miles was investigated. The detectives were hoping to discover a dark colored SUV that had turned up during the past few days with front end damage consistent with the hit and run. That phase of the investigation drew a blank.

The cops at the precinct contacted every automobile insurance company that served the greater Boston area and hoped someone might have filled a claim for front end damage...nothing panned out.

March 06, 2018

Detective Aherne arrived at the station house early that morning, exhausted from the week long investigation of the hit-and-run accident that ran into one dead end after another.

“Hey partner. You got a few minutes for me. I’m getting nowhere fast with this young kid’s hit-and-run investigation,” said a frustrated Barney Aherne to his partner, Tommy O’Malley. “I’d like to bounce a few ideas off you and see what sticks.”

“I feel your pain partner. That case is sure a weird one. Let’s take a walk over to conference room three and kick it around,” responded O’Malley.

CONNECTIONS

The two detectives grabbed a cup of 'joe' on the way. The station coffee was lousy, but at this time of morning, at least it was fresh.

"Shoot big man! What's on your mind?" asked O'Malley.

"I got almost nothing to go on. But I do have plenty of questions without answers. With your help, I'd like to do a little speculation. Maybe something will click. We have to figure out what the hell is going on here."

"We have an alleged hit-and-run accident, but there's no evidence that a vehicle was in that intersection. There was none of the usual accident debris, no witnesses, and no video surveillance. I'm beginning to wonder if there was an accident at all."

"Stay with me on this. If that is even remotely possible, then the big question is, 'what was the mysterious man's role in all of this?'"

"I'm with you partner. You think the whole thing was staged?" said Tommy, half declarative, half question.

"Yeah. Sort of. But then that begs the question, 'what was the relationship between the man and the kid?'" responded Aherne.

"Maybe the guy kidnapped the kid years ago and held him captive. Maybe the kid did something wrong or just outgrew the guy's interests. Maybe the guy just got tired of him so he threw him out with the trash," bantered O'Malley in his strongest Irish, Boston brogue.

Barney Aherne sat quietly as he pondered the wisdom of his partner's comments.

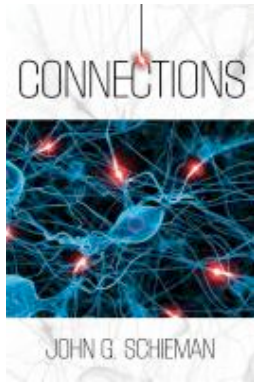
"Okay! Let's say for the moment that you are correct. Then, we are investigating this case all wrong. We shouldn't be looking for a recent missing kid, we should be looking for a kid who matches his

description that vanished ten to fifteen years ago. We've got to open the search nationwide. Yeah, partner! I think you are on to something. C'mon. Help me with the research. Let's hit every national databases."

"Right behind you, partner," retorted O'Malley.

As the hours and days ticked by, the young boy remained in his coma and the investigation was going nowhere fast.

Aherne sat pensively in front of the computer screen as he thought to himself, "Maybe, just maybe O'Malley's wild speculation has inadvertently stumbled onto a plausible scenario for solving the case."



During a three week period in March, 2018, a number of young children were admitted to various emergency rooms around the United States. Each child had supposedly fallen victim to severe trauma resulting from a unique accident that had placed them in a comatose state.

None of the children possessed identification. No one reported any of the children missing. They never received hospital visitors.

The tragic events befalling each child were seemingly disconnected...or were they?

Connections

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