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INTRUSIONS “HAPPEN,” GOOD POLICE WORK DOESN’T

Home intrusions by homicidal strangers may be more common than police imagine

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. When Patsy Ramsey told officers that she found a ransom note on the stairs that morning, claiming that her daughter had been kidnapped and demanding \$118,000 for her release, eyes rolled. It was the day after Christmas 1996 in Boulder, Colorado. Instead of enjoying the holidays John and Patsy Ramsey were dealing with the abduction of their six-year old daughter, [Jon-Benet](#). Later that day, when a thorough search of the home turned up the child’s body in the cellar, they became the prime suspects in her murder.

Within days the D.A. announced that the parents were under an “umbrella of suspicion.” Why? Mostly because the victim was found in her own home and there were no signs of forced entry. (Not that there had to be, as the house had unsecured windows and one unlocked door, but still...) And the \$118,000 mentioned in the note happened to be the exact amount of the bonus that John Ramsey recently received.

For the next three years authorities pressed for the parents’ indictment. Finally in 1999 a Grand Jury said no. Police washed their hands of the case. Disgruntled officers left the department. Among them was former detective [Steve Thomas](#), who in 2000 co-authored *In JonBenet: Inside the Ramsey Murder Investigation*, a book that suggested the mother accidentally killed Jon-Benet while disciplining her, then tried to cover it up. (He, his co-author and publisher later settled an \$80 million libel suit filed by the Ramseys.)

His wasn’t the first book on the case. One year earlier [Stephen Singular](#) wrote *Presumed Guilty – An Investigation into the JonBenet Ramsey Case, The Media and the Culture of Pornography*. Drawing from his knowledge of the porn industry, he proposed that Jon-Benet’s death was an accident that happened while one of her parents -- probably the father -- was having her pose for pornographic pictures.

Finally in 2001 came the parent’s book, *The Death of Innocence*, which assembled the profile of an intruder from information gathered by lawyers and private eyes. Intrigued by their work, the new D.A., Mary Keenan, hired retired detective [Lou Smit](#) to take a fresh look. His opinion? The cruel way in which Jon-Benet was murdered (strangled with a garrote, then bashed on the head) and the presence of male DNA on

her underclothes indicated that the crime was committed by a sadistic pedophile who was familiar with the Ramseys and knew about the husband's bonus.

Smit's conclusion -- that it *was* an intruder -- was supported by a recent [announcement](#) that matching DNA has been found in a second location on Jon-Benet's underwear, a place that her attacker would have had to grab to undress her. Although the DNA profile has yet to identify a suspect, it ruled out all family members, so the indefatigable D.A. (now known as Mary Lacy) wrote the family an official apology. John Ramsey was happy to be exonerated. His wife Patsy would have been equally pleased; she died from cancer in 2006.

Boulder police now face restarting the investigation from scratch. All the chief would say is that they'd consider it.

Two years after Jon-Benet's murder a startlingly similar incident took place in Escondido, California. On the morning of January 21, 1998 the body of [Stephanie Crowe](#), 12, was discovered in her room. She had been stabbed to death. There were no signs of forced entry and none of the family members said they heard anything. Four days later police brought in her 14-year old brother, Michael. After a relentless six-hour session he confessed. Police then picked up a friend, Joshua Treadway and gave him even harsher treatment. He not only confessed but implicated a third boy, Aaron Houser. (Houser maintained his innocence throughout.)

But in the Crowe case there *was* another suspect. Hours before the murder Richard Tuite, a 28-year old schizophrenic with a criminal record was reported wandering near the Crowe residence. Police were called but didn't find him. The next day patrol officers encountered Tuite at a laundromat and brought him to the police station. They took his clothes, which seemed stained. Detectives, who had already focused on the boys, pooh-poohed any connection and didn't bother sending anything to the lab.

Six months later a judge threw out all of Crowe's confession and most of Treadway's, ruling that both teens had been coerced. Still, he held the boys for trial as adults. He also ordered, on behalf of the defense, that the items taken from Tuite be examined.

In January 1999, as jury selection for the boy's trial got underway, analysts reported that Tuite's shirt was spattered with Stephanie Crowe's blood. Charges against the boys were dismissed. Tuite's case was taken over by the Sheriff's Department and State Attorney General. In May 2003 he was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to thirteen years.

How did Tuite get in the residence? Through an open garage and an unlocked laundry room door. (For a detailed account of the Stephanie Crowe case, up to the boys' clearance, click [here](#).)

Now consider the chilling case of [Vicki Wegerle](#).

It was September 16, 1986 in Wichita, Kansas. Bill Wegerle was driving home for lunch when his wife Vicki's car passed him going the opposite direction; strangely, she wasn't at the wheel. Bill Wegerle found her in their house, strangled to death with a nylon stocking.

Police found no sign of forced entry. Wegerle immediately became the prime suspect. Word spread and people started to whisper. Their two children, who had been at school when the crime occurred, were mercilessly harassed by classmates.

Bill Wegerle was never charged, and neither was anyone else. With the investigation stalled, the family's life, made miserable enough by the loss of a wife and mother, was upended for nearly eight years. Then in 2004 a copy of Vicki's driver license and photographs of the crime scene were anonymously mailed to a Wichita newspaper.

One year later police arrested Dennis Rader, the "BTK" killer, a 59-year old married man and church deacon who had brutally murdered ten Wichita-area women between 1974 and 1991. After being out of the limelight for many years Rader had resumed taunting authorities, sending letters and leaving victims' belongings in public places.

Rader's DNA was matched to scrapings from Vicki Wegerle's fingernails. He said that he got in her house by pretending to be a telephone repairman. (For Rader's description of how he murdered Vicki click [here](#).)

It's not just living with someone that can get you in trouble. On August 12, 1989, Warwick, Rhode Island police discovered the body of [Vicki Cushman](#), a single 29-year old woman in her ransacked apartment. She had been choked and her skull was crushed.

On a table detectives found an unmailed letter she wrote begging her lover to come back. It was addressed to Scott Hornoff, a married Warwick cop.

Hornoff was interviewed. He at first denied the affair, then an hour later admitted it. Detectives believed him and for three years looked elsewhere. Then the Attorney General, worried that Warwick PD was shielding its own, ordered State investigators

to take over. They immediately pounced on Hornoff. Their springboard? Nothing was taken; the killing was clearly a case of rage. Only one person in Warwick had a known motive: Hornoff, who didn't want his wife to find out about the affair. And he had initially lied. Case closed!

Hornoff was tried and convicted. His motion for a new trial was rejected. And there it would have ended, except that in November 2002, thirteen years after the murder and six after Hornoff reported to prison, a local man walked into the Warwick police station and confessed. He was Todd Barry, a jilted lover. Providing details that only the killer could have known, he said he broke into his ex-girlfriend's apartment and killed her in a drunken rage. It turned out that Barry's name had been in Vicki Cushman's Rolodex all along.

Hornoff was freed. Barry got thirty years. But nothing's really ended for Hornoff, who is still picking up the pieces of a shattered life.

Stranger-intrusion killings are relatively infrequent. But police don't investigate "overall" -- they look into individual crimes, each of which is unique. Even when it turns out, as in the last example, that the victim and killer knew each other, it's possible to go terribly wrong.

What's the moral? Don't just look where the light shines. And be very, very skeptical about what you think you know. Here's how ex-cop Hornoff puts it: "After what I saw, there could be 10 witnesses to a crime and unless I saw it myself it would be very difficult for me to accuse anybody, and even if I did, that person would have to convince me that they didn't have a twin."