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“MOTHER’S INTUITION”

GOD HAS BLESSED all mothers with two special gifts: the privilege of bringing new life into the world, and the gift we often call “mother’s intuition” or “woman’s intuition.” A mother can pick her child’s cry out of a crowded room and know whether he is hungry, angry, or hurt. Or without even turning around, she can sense her child is up to something. Doubtless, any mother will tell you that sometimes she gets it wrong. But mothers share a special bond with their children that men sometimes cannot comprehend. Aside from observing the miracle of this gift at work in my wife with our three children, I have never witnessed a more obvious testament to a mother’s intuition than the tragic case of Kali Ann Poulton.

Kali was a beautiful, blond four-year-old, full of life and promise before she was kidnapped and brutally murdered by someone Kali and her mother knew. I share this story with the utmost respect for the woman who lost her beloved child to an undetected child predator.

On the warm spring night of May 23, 1994, Kali begged her mom, Judy Gifford, to allow her to go outside to play on her Big Wheel. The apartment complex, a quaint and well-kept cluster of two-story buildings nestled in a forest of large maple and oak trees, was teeming with activity thanks to the beautiful weather. Judy was

placing inserts in magazines she was to deliver that evening. The small amount of money this single mother made from her second job was to pay for a family trip to Disney World the following summer. As Judy put the flyers together, Kali became increasingly anxious to go outside. She was looking forward to going to McDonald's after the deliveries were completed. Her mom had promised to get her a snack there and allow some time to play in the outdoor children's play area.

Spring fever was getting the best of both of them, so Judy finally relented and allowed little Kali to go outside and sit on her Big Wheel. She firmly instructed Kali to stay right in front of their apartment door where she could keep a watchful eye on her as she hastily completed her task. Within minutes, Judy was ready to load up the car and begin her deliveries. When she called out to Kali, her daughter did not answer. Judy found no sign of her daughter when she checked outside their apartment. Panic-stricken, Judy immediately began calling out her daughter's name and carefully scanning the apartment complex grounds. Concerned neighbors began to assist with the frantic search, but still there was no sign of the young child or her Big Wheel.

About twenty minutes into the search, Judy spotted her neighbor Mark, who had moved into the complex approximately six weeks earlier with his girlfriend and their eighteen-month-old son. Mark was carrying his son to the playground area. Judy noticed his high-top sneakers were untied. She asked him if he had seen Kali. Mark responded "no" and continued walking. Soon the police were called, and two nightmares every parent fears crystallized: one, a beloved child was missing, and two, no one had a clue where she was.

Patrol deputies and command officers coordinated a physical search throughout the night for the missing girl while detectives from the Monroe County Sheriff Zone A Substation interviewed the girl's parents, their friends, and family members for additional information. At 4:00 a.m. the incident was re-classified from a missing person investigation to a kidnapping investigation. This triggered an escalation within the Monroe County Sheriff's Major Crimes Unit, which consisted of three investigators: Investigator

Thomas Passmore, myself, and our supervisor, Investigator Sergeant Gary Caiola. I remember Sergeant Caiola's chilling words from his phone call that morning. "A four-year-old girl has been missing all night," he said. "And it doesn't look good."

Shortly after our arrival, Investigator Passmore and I interviewed Kali's mother. I asked Judy whom she thought we should consider as a potential suspect, but she couldn't think of anyone. Then I asked her if anyone had recently moved into the apartment complex who had shown an open affection for Kali. "There's this guy named Mark who just moved in about six weeks ago," she responded. "He gives me the creeps." She shared how she and Kali had first met Mark and his son at the apartment complex playground several weeks before. On two or three different occasions, Mark had complimented her on how beautiful Kali was. During one of those encounters, Mark asked Judy if she thought Kali would tell her if someone tried to touch her in an inappropriate way. Judy responded, "Yes" and felt very unsettled by his odd question. Soon after this conversation with Kali's mother, Investigator Passmore and I made contact with Mark.

Mark Christie had a criminal record, but nothing related to crimes against children. He grew up in the village of Hilton, New York, and as a youth, he was considered to be a bit of a punk who walked around with a chip on his shoulder. Based upon our initial contact with him, that chip was still firmly in place. We interviewed Mark with the assistance of another colleague, Investigator Bill Connell, for several long hours one evening, but he maintained his innocence, denying any involvement with Kali's disappearance. All three of us were convinced he was lying, but we didn't want to spook him into seeking an attorney, which would make us lose out on any opportunity for a second interview. A second interview would be critical if Mark had kidnapped or murdered Kali, but a defense attorney would never allow his client to help the police locate a victim's body unless the prosecution granted very serious concessions or total immunity. It was excruciatingly painful to let Mark Christie walk away from us that day.

Mark maintained his silence for approximately two and one-half years. Except for Investigator Passmore and me, nearly everyone discounted Mark as a viable suspect because Judy had seen him near the play area with his son so shortly after her daughter went missing. Thousands of calls, none of which I ever considered a workable lead, were investigated by an army-sized task force of detectives and federal agents. Many potential suspects were interviewed. Many were interrogated in vain. Not one witness or lead was ever produced. I never lost hope, believing relentlessly that every case is just one phone call away from being solved, no matter how bleak the circumstances. We knew we just had to be patient and prepare ourselves to recognize and act on a pertinent phone call if one ever, at long last, came in. Investigator Passmore and I maintained a low-key, casual relationship with Mark. Mark knew he was our chief suspect, because we told him we were ready to talk about getting Kali back to her parents whenever he was ready.

Mark and his family eventually moved from that apartment complex to another complex located in Wayne County, which borders Monroe County on the east. On August 9th, 1996, our break came: we learned that during an argument with his wife the night before, Mark had blurted out that he killed Kali. This admission sprung from a desperate attempt to gain sympathy from his wife, who had decided to leave him due to his strange behavior. Thanks be to God, Mark's wife immediately left with their son and drove to her father's house, where she promptly called 911. As promising as this lead was, it did not guarantee a conviction at trial that would send Mark to prison. Mark had not given his wife any specific details of what had occurred. Her testimony would be challenged in a pretrial hearing because in New York State such an admission to one's spouse is considered protected and privileged. It was critical to interview him before an attorney became involved and slammed the door shut on us.

On that particular day, I was working alone. After I learned Mark might still be at his residence, I immediately drove halfway across the county to speak with him. Upon my arrival, Mark's mother met me at the front door. She was infuriated by my presence,

shouting that Mark was going to see his attorney and not going with me. Mark appeared dejected as if he had already resigned himself to his fate. In spite of his mother’s objections, Mark agreed to get a cup of coffee with me, provided I transport him to his attorney’s office afterward. Mark sat in the front seat of my unmarked police car beside me, un-handcuffed. He said he would tell me everything I wanted to know after he spoke with his attorney. I replied that any lawyer worth his weight in salt would not allow him to speak with me about what happened with Kali. “Her parents will never find out exactly what happened to their baby,” I told him. “Or if she suffered.”

“She didn’t suffer.” Mark responded.

“I hope not.” I said.

As we drove back toward Rochester, I suggested we get some lunch. Mark liked that idea, saying he was “starving.” We settled on an Italian restaurant by the name of Roncone’s on Lyell Avenue in the city. Once seated, Mark ordered Chicken Parmesan with spaghetti, while I ordered linguine in red sauce with sausage. As we waited for our food to arrive, Mark and I sipped our Cokes and ate freshly baked Italian bread. Something about the casual, comfortable atmosphere of a family style Italian restaurant puts people at ease. The smell of a good pasta sauce and the sharing of fresh bread can make would-be adversaries become friends.

Mark stated how he felt badly about what he had done to Kali. He said he had been living a nightmare ever since, haunted by Kali’s face on missing child posters all over the country. Over the two and one-half years that Kali had been missing, the case had been featured prominently on local and national news and talk shows including *America’s Most Wanted* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Knowing Mark to be a person who liked to feel in control, I attempted to appeal to his pride. I told him he had beaten the police, fair and square. Mark opened up to this praise just as I had hoped: he said he didn’t want to sound like he was bragging but thought the way he eluded us by getting rid of the Big Wheel was “pretty ingenious.” I feigned agreement and told him I thought it was indeed an amazing feat. A

short time later, he asked me if I wanted to know how he “pulled it off.” His ego was getting the better of him. Keeping a sober tone and a casual expression, I responded, “Sure.”

Mark warned me he would only discuss the Big Wheel and would not talk about what happened to Kali. “You don’t have to share anything with me that you aren’t comfortable sharing,” I reassured him. Mark informed me that the Big Wheel was in his apartment for three days after he killed Kali, and the police had missed it when they searched his apartment. I asked him how that was possible. He explained how he had cut the Big Wheel into tiny pieces and hid it in various places; he knew the police would not have legal grounds to search for such small items. Because time was of the essence to locate the missing little girl, Mark knew the police would attempt to search every apartment under the “exigent circumstances exception” without a search warrant. The exception allowed the police to look for a missing child to preserve the child’s life, but not for evidence of a crime. The search of each apartment thus had to be limited to spaces a child’s body could be concealed in, but nothing smaller. This entailed searching rooms, closets, underneath beds, storage bins, and crawl spaces. Most of the apartment searches were completed with the occupant’s consent. If the occupant was unavailable, the search teams were accompanied by an apartment complex manager.

Mark said he hid the pieces of Kali’s Big Wheel in articles of clothing, which were stored in drawers and cabinets, concealing them so well that even his wife never found a single piece. Remarkably, Mark accomplished this before his wife returned home from work the very same night he murdered Kali. When he needed to sneak the Big Wheel through the police roadblock at the apartment complex entrance, Mark placed the tiny pieces in several small duffel bags and put them in the passenger compartment of his vehicle. Mark said that seven New York State Troopers were at the roadblock when he passed through with Kali’s Big Wheel. He thought his heart was going to jump out of his chest when he handed the keys over to one of the troopers, thinking the

police were going to search his entire vehicle and everything in it. However, they never asked to see what was inside the duffel bags. Once through the roadblock, Mark drove to each of the four corners of the county and got rid of the pieces.

Our food was delivered to us, and Mark and I continued to talk as we ate our lunch. It was surreal. Here we were, sitting among sixty other patrons eating their lunch, talking about one of the most brutal crimes anyone could ever commit—the rape and murder of an innocent child.

Mark told me he had read a “big book” on police interrogation and was impressed with Investigator Passmore and me after he read it, since we did everything *by the book* when we interviewed him the first time. I asked Mark if he was close to confessing to us that first night. He said no, because he had too much to lose with his wife and young son. I noted that we could see his obvious affection for Kali and were surprised he was so open about it at the time. Mark explained that he “owed Kali that much.”

What a warped sense of logic, I incredulously thought to myself. Mark then acknowledged how he felt badly for making the police work so hard over the past few years. Playing along with his attempt to display his sense of honor, I thanked him for having the courage to come forward and relieve us of this enormous burden. I sensed he was emotionally vulnerable that moment, so I asked him if I could propose to him what I thought happened with Kali. He knew my partner and I had always suspected him, but lacked proof. Mark welcomed my theory, so I began:

“Mark, I believe that Kali ended up riding her Big Wheel up to your apartment, probably hoping to play with your son. You must have been outside and happily invited her inside your apartment. While she was inside, something must have happened that wasn’t supposed to happen. So, you grabbed your son and ran outside to collect your thoughts and figure out what to do. While you were in the play area with your son, Judy Gifford found you while she was searching for Kali. The encounter with Judy provided you with a solid alibi. You returned to your apartment and retrieved Kali’s

body, placing it in some type of bag or suitcase. You then quietly carried her to your car and drove out of the complex with your son at your side before the first sheriff's deputy was even on the scene.”

Mark looked across the table at me and smiled faintly as we sat in silence for a moment. “You’re very close,” he acquiesced. I assured Mark that Judy and David, Kali’s father, would be very grateful if he could share at least some details about Kali’s death. I asked him if there was any other person who could provide us with those details, but he said no, he was the only one.

I remarked as to how baffled I was that no one had observed him leaving his apartment with such a big bag or suitcase. Mark explained that a lot of people were around at the time, but he was insignificant to them and had thus gone unnoticed. Appealing to his pride again, I commended Mark for keeping such a low profile and cool head, and for thinking so clearly and quickly under such great pressure. He admitted that Investigator Passmore and I were very close to getting him when we had paid a visit to him that past March at the department store where he worked, but how he then quickly realized we possessed nothing new on him. He shared how he thought about Kali every day and how he had been trying to think of a way to retrieve her body from where he had placed it after the murder—a cooling tank in the building where he worked as a security guard at the time. Mark had feared that Kali’s body would eventually be discovered and the police would be able to immediately connect him to it.

Allowing him to stay in control, I patiently told Mark it was his decision and his alone whether he wanted to tell me what happened. I encouraged him to consider that although he knew he didn’t mean to kill Kali, if he didn’t tell his side of the story, he would be looked upon as a child-killing monster. I led Mark to believe that Kali’s death wasn’t his fault. Yet nothing could be further from the truth; it was simply a technique to make him feel more comfortable talking about his despicable deed. Minimizing a criminal’s culpability is a common interrogation tactic, but sometimes it can come across as patronizing and backfire.

Mark then asked me how much prison time he was looking at. There was no minimizing this aspect, and he knew it. I told him at least twenty-five years, adding that I would be surprised if he was ever released from prison. Mark protested that it was unfair he would have to do a life sentence away from his wife and son. He had been living his own nightmare over the past few years, and he felt that alone should count for something.

I countered that the general public wasn’t going to care about him or his suffering but that ultimately he had to come to terms with himself, his family, and God. He then offered to tell me how he killed Kali if I would arrange for him to see his wife and son. I promised to arrange it. He had finished his lunch by this time, but I was still eating.

Mark started out again by saying that Kali did not suffer. I then proceeded to ask him how he killed her.

“I strangled her,” he answered, “but I didn’t do anything to her.”

“You mean, you didn’t have sex with her?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he answered.

I knew he was lying. All I could think about was how afraid that poor little girl must have been during her last moments on this earth. I found it absolutely astonishing that her killer was upset he wasn’t going to be given special consideration for his perceived “suffering” over the past few years. Though I had lost my appetite, I just kept picking away at my lunch and asking what happened that night, making certain I didn’t appear too eager for his answer. Mark said that Kali rode over to his apartment on her Big Wheel and asked if she could play with his son Alex. Mark knew her mother would not approve of Kali going into his apartment, so he let her in and placed her Big Wheel in the kitchen so that no one would see it next to his apartment door. Mark said that Kali went upstairs with Alex to Alex’s room and started playing with his toys while he went into his bedroom across the hall.

About ten minutes after Kali’s arrival, Mark heard Judy calling out her name. He got nervous, fearing he would get into trouble for having Kali in his apartment. Mark said that Kali walked across

the hall into his bedroom at that time. Seeing the little girl in his bedroom, he panicked and strangled her to death. He maintained that he felt like he was dreaming during the entire event.

I personally believe Mark was actually molesting little Kali but got spooked by her mother calling out to her. The sound of Judy's frantic voice calling out must have cut him like a knife through the open windows of his apartment. I don't believe he panicked at all. I think he made a cold, calculated decision to kill Kali to keep her from telling her mother what he had done to her. But I knew I wasn't in a position to push him about the rape while we were in the restaurant. The only way Mark would keep talking to me was if I let him stay in control of the conversation. Many child predators never admit to raping a child because it reveals just how very sick, twisted, and evil they really are. This murderer was attempting to rationalize his despicable actions as a panic response to what Kali's mother *might do* if she found her daughter in his apartment. I felt like saying, "Mark, that is an absolute lie, and you know it!" Honestly, I would have said it using far more vulgar and graphic language. But I didn't. In these types of cases it is imperative to keep one's emotions locked away in order to achieve the real goal—legal justice.

Mark said he carried Kali's body downstairs and placed her on the dining room floor. He then went outside with his son to collect his thoughts. While outside, he saw Judy in the playground area as she was searching for her daughter. When the panic-stricken mother asked him if he had seen Kali, he coolly replied, "No." Knowing he now possessed an airtight alibi from the victim's own mother, Mark returned to his apartment and realized it wasn't a dream when he observed Kali's body lying on the floor. He placed her body in a laundry basket, covered it up with a blanket, carried the basket to his vehicle, and placed it in the trunk. With his young son accompanying him, Mark drove to the Nor-Tel Company on Humboldt Street in Rochester, where he was employed as a security guard. He drove around to the back of the building and placed the laundry basket outside of the rear door to the utility room. He then drove

with his son around to the front and went inside the main entrance. Mark told the two security guards on duty he had left something important at work and came back to pick it up.

While carrying his own child, Mark walked to the back of the building and retrieved Kali's body through the rear exterior door of the utility room. He then climbed to the top of an enclosed 30,000 gallon tank filled with liquid coolant, opened the hatch door and dumped Kali's body inside the tank. I asked Mark if he had cut Kali's stomach open to prevent her body from floating to the top of the tank.

"No," he replied. He explained how he had found a piece of heavy metal equipment in the utility room and tied it to Kali's body to weigh her down. I asked Mark if he had kept Kali's clothing or the blanket in which she had been wrapped. He replied that he got rid of everything, including the clothes basket. Mark added that he left Kali's earrings in her ears.

"It should have never happened. It was a waste," he offered.

"You're right, Mark." I responded. "It should never have happened."

Mark's eyes had become glassy. We sat in silence at our table for what seemed like a long time as the other patrons sat around us, oblivious to what had just occurred.

I paid the bill and Mark left a two-dollar tip. Afterward, I drove him to my office. Mark sat in the front seat where he still remained un-handcuffed. I had to maintain that he was neither in my custody, nor under my physical control until we reached my office at headquarters; otherwise, his verbal confession could be ruled inadmissible. Once we arrived in my office, I gave him the phone and he called his attorney. He was arrested that night and charged with the murder of Kali Ann Poulton. A year later, Mark Christie pled guilty to the murder and was given a sentence of twenty-five years to life in prison. He is serving out that life sentence in the custody of the New York State Department of Corrections.

Had it not been for Judy Gifford's gut feeling or intuition, her daughter's killer might have never been identified and brought to

Seducers Among Our Children

justice. Mark had an airtight alibi so he was not considered a viable suspect by the majority of the thirty-member investigative task force of local, state, and federal investigators. In fact, most of the other investigative teams went so far as to eliminate him as a suspect on the grounds he did not have the means or the time to commit this crime. Had it not been for her mother's intuition, most likely Investigator Passmore and I would not have placed him in our sights.

When we hear of a disturbing crime such as this, we are shocked and fearful. We may keep a more watchful eye for a while even though we don't really know exactly what we are looking for. Intuition is a powerful force. However, when we sense a red flag or "get the creeps" about someone, it is easy for our minds to rationalize it away as paranoia, prejudice, or the illogical product of having a bad day. After all, who wants to believe a neighbor, trusted friend, talented coach, gifted teacher, loving family member, or caregiver is not what they appear to be? We quickly become ashamed of ourselves and choose to ignore our gut feelings. Every parent subconsciously weighs the potential risk to his or her children against the benefit of a particular outing, experience, or relationship. However, living in a constant state of paranoia and locking our children away is not the right answer.



KALI ANN POULTON

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