

Detective Reuben Wasserman had a messy desk. It was the messiest in the Department. He had never cleaned it, and, over time, it piled up with memos, with yellow pads of scrawled theory, with sticky notes and While-You-Were-Out slips, with napkins and paper plates from lunches, with waxed paper from Penn Station. Sometimes people who were talking with him at his desk would set something down and, later, remember and come back to get whatever it was. The excavation of such items was always delicate, usually lengthy, and occasionally, unsuccessful. It was only worth the effort for particularly important items (someone's glasses, for example). The detective found his arbitrary organization system ideal. He knew where everything was, by instinct, or intuition, or memory, or something, and everyone else left his things alone.

According to an inscription in its back panel, the desk was made by Steelcase in 1962. It had a symmetrical drawer configuration, three drawers per side that got smaller from bottom to top. Each side had a file drawer, a medium-deep drawer, and a shallow drawer. The lap drawer was missing. The detective had removed it when he started the job, on the first day of April, in 1978. The left-side file drawer contained a folder for each of the major cases the detective had investigated from 1978 to 1989. Complete records were stored elsewhere, the detective only kept the important notes he had made throughout his involvement with each case. He limited his collection only to homicides, wrongful deaths, missing persons, and significant robberies. The right-side file drawer contained similar cases and files from 1990 through 1994.

The medium-height drawer on the left side of the desk held snack and coffee accessories. He had a box of plastic spoons, twenty or so straws, forty plastic stir sticks, and two mugs that held packets of sugar and non-dairy creamer. The mug containing sugar packets was a souvenir commemorating his team's 1983 championship in the departmental softball league (he had played right field and had been a notable hitter). He had accidentally stolen the non-dairy creamer mug from the continental breakfast of a Holiday Inn in Boulder, Colorado when he was staying there for a forensic science convention in 1987. He had been talking with a colleague while drinking coffee from the hotel mug, and had walked out of the dining hall, unaware he was still carrying it. Then he and some buddies from the Department went for a drive in the rental car. It was only when he turned the car in at the airport that he realized he had taken the mug. At that point it was too late to return it, so he dropped it in his attache and brought it home. After the trip, he never drank from that mug. It became exclusively a container of non-dairy creamer packets. The mug he actually drank from was one his daughter had painted as part of her program. It was a white mug with some brightly colored pictures of hot air balloons, a flower, and a dog. It said, in Lee's writing, "i love dad," and sat on top of Reuben Wasserman desk.

That same drawer contained several packets of instant hot cocoa, a metal spoon, a fork, and a stack of paper napkins compiled from various fast food restaurants. It also housed an ever-growing collection of hot sauce from Taco Bell. Reuben Wasserman always saved extra hot sauce packets from Taco Bell. He never used them later. The detective was vaguely aware of this asymmetry, but he didn't afford it much thought-time. The collection continued to grow.

The middle drawer on the right side was a locking drawer, and Reuben Wasserman kept it locked. He was the only person who had ever seen it open since he started the job. He had only opened it twice, once in April of 1978 and then again, briefly, in January of 1990. That second time, he unlocked it, slowly slid the metal casing halfway out, then closed and locked it again without anyone noticing.

The top drawer on the left side was a shallow drawer. It contained blank pads of paper and blank sticky notes, blank spiral bound notebooks and, at the bottom, a stack of blank white typing paper.

The topmost drawer on the left side was also a shallow drawer. It was Reuben Wasserman's junk drawer. It contained an unopened box of paperclips, pencils broken in half, a miniature plastic slinky that had been the toy in a McDonalds Happy Meal, a pair of scissors, a plastic ruler, a stapler, stray paperclips, a crushed cardboard box that used to contain paperclips, stale rubber bands, some blocks Lee played with when she came to visit, several additional Taco Bell hot sauce packets, a short wax candle, three unmatched keys that had come with the desk, a molded piece of plastic that looked like it may have been part of an overhead projector at one time, a travel-size bag of Kleenex, two sealed Handi-Wipes, a bottle of Visene, and plastic key caps from a computer keyboard (the R, the M, and the L). Also in Reuben Wasserman's junk drawer were carryout menus from China Buffet, The Great Wall, The Jade Garden, Dragon City, China Palace, Chins, Nanking Inn, and Kim's Oriental Restaurant. These eight menus were by far the items most frequently retrieved from inside Reuben Wasserman's desk. He kept most of what he regularly used on its surface.

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Since September 5, there had been a flurry of additions to the desk. The first was a notepad containing seven pages of scribbled notes about a missing person named Sherman Brocius. The first sign that Sherman was missing, as far as Reuben Wasserman could tell, was that he didn't come home from his first day of eleventh grade. His parents wondered where he was that evening. They tried, unsuccessfully, to locate him by phone. When the sun came up the next day and Sherman still hadn't come home, they called the police. Reuben Wasserman was made aware of the report, but Detective Boyle was assigned to the case. On the afternoon of September 6, the second day of Dayton Public Schools' 1994-95 session, when a second missing person report came in for another boy who attended the same school, Reuben Wasserman took over both cases. At that point, he still hadn't guessed that more would be reported missing. The first two boys were friends, and Wasserman's most likely scenario was that they had run away as a prank. He questioned the parents of the boys. He questioned some of their classmates. But by Friday of that same week he had abandoned his assumptions from Tuesday. It became the Department's top case. Five boys from the same school, who were all friends, had all been reported missing during a five day period, one each day for the first five days of the school year. By Thursday morning extra security was in place at the school. As late as Wednesday morning, Reuben Wasserman still entertained kidnapping as a potentially viable explanation of the disappearances. But at 2:37 on Wednesday afternoon, when the school's principal, Francis La Sota, called the police with the name of a third boy who was as yet unaccounted for, Wasserman's thoughts on that changed. When he heard the name of the potentially missing third boy, and it was a name that several of the students had mentioned was a friend of Sherman Brocius, it became difficult for Detective Wasserman to imagine that the boys themselves had not orchestrated their own disappearances.

By noon on Thursday, police had been informed by the school, after they communicated with the family, that a fourth boy, Ed Vernick, was unaccounted for. Coverage by local television news channels qualitatively switched from being mildly, to incontrovertibly, frenetic. After that,

parents started keeping their children home from school. At the suggestion of the Department, Francis La Sota cancelled classes on Friday. That didn't stop it, though. The fifth kid who disappeared did so from the dining room of his home in Kettering. His parents knew he was a friend of the other boys. They told him he had to sit at the dining room table all day. They locked the glass doors on both sides of the room (just to be safe), but when the kid's mother went to check on him, the room was empty.

On the next Friday, Wasserman was wondering where five high school boys could have possibly been hiding for a full week without anyone seeing them. He was wondering how they had convinced themselves, or how someone else had convinced them, to run away from their homes. He wondered if someone really had managed to kidnap or coerce (and then maybe kill) five boys who knew each other socially. For each of these scenarios, he wondered why it might have happened that way. Five boys were missing in five days and kidnapping was out of the question. There was every reason to think, if only due to their temporal structure, that the cases were related. There was no evidence to suggest foul play. It was just that five children disappearing from their parents' homes and on the way to and from school wasn't the expected course of events.

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Wasserman obtained warrants to search the boys' lockers and bedrooms. It took weeks to sift through all their junk. He found a King James version of the Bible on Ed Vernick's desk (almost all of Revelation had been highlighted). He found eight condoms under John Wright's pillow. He found all sorts of things that meant nothing to him. He found some things that amused him. He found a few things he was afraid to touch. In the end, though, the most interesting thing he found was the stack of books at the bottom of Sherman Brocius' locker. Most of them had been checked out from various branches of the Dayton and Montgomery County Public Library. All of the library books were overdue. Places were marked with unruled three-by-five index cards. The books, from top to bottom of the stack, were: "Psycho-Cybernetics," "The Snake Biters," "Ultimate Penalties: Capital Punishment, Life Imprisonment, Physical Torture," "Dangerous Properties of Industrial Materials," "Boas & Pythons, and Other Friendly Snakes," "A-Z of Snake Keeping," "Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers: A History of Torture and its Instruments," "The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation," and "Castle" by David Macaulay.

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It was the Monday of the third week of school that the hands turned up. Some mourners (a doctor and his wife from Kettering), saw them and notified Sam Clay, an employee of the cemetery. Sam Clay personally verified their report before calling the Department at 2:30 that afternoon. Detectives Wasserman and Boyle and two officers arrived at Woodland Cemetery approximately ten minutes later. Mr. Clay led them to the scene. There, from a reflection pool that served to memorialize someone named Imogen Barker Hill, Detective Wasserman recovered two severed hands. Forensics classified them as having belonged to a Caucasian male between the ages of 14 and 18. They had been separated from the forearms with a serrated blade. There were two puncture holes five centimeters apart on the thumb of the left hand. They found traces

of venom in the blood. The venom was from a *Crotalus scutulatus scutulatus*, or Mohave Desert rattlesnake. DNA comparisons showed a correlation between the hands and samples taken from the parents of one of the boys. Presumably, they were the hands of Sherman Brocious, the first one missing.

After the hands were found, Wasserman put 24-hour security on the cemetery. He expected more hands to show up. He even half-expected them to be discovered one pair a day for the next four days. But that week, there were no calls from new sets of frantic parents. No more hands were found. Subsequent interviews with classmates suggested no fruitful leads. There was nothing new for Reuben Wasserman to think about. He was stuck with five missing children, nine frantic parents, seven nervous school administrators, and one pair of human hands being saved in a jar in the city morgue.

By Thursday of the first week, Wasserman and his partners had talked with eight children who had known or been friends of the missing boys. They had a list of ten more they wanted to talk to. The children told Detective Wasserman that Sherman Brocious worshipped the devil. They said he constantly talked about Jesus. They said he made jokes about setting cats on fire. They said he had started a cult. They said he never showered. They said he was gay. All Detective Wasserman could tell for sure from the bizarre and contradictory interviews he held with acquaintances of the missing boys, was that Sherman Brocious was the center of an intimate and close-mouthed group, and that everybody else at the school hated them.

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The names of the boys, in order of their disappearance, were: Sherman Brocious, Bruce Mitchell, John Wright, Ed Vernick, and Paul M. Legris.