

The Dread Zone

Why child-snatchings and shark-gnashings keep us aswirl in anguish, in spite of statistical reality.

By Jim Gorant

I'm standing in the department store flipping through racks of shirts. My 3-year-old daughter stands next to me singing little songs she learned in school. The sounds she emits are the white noise of parenthood, a sweet and lilting background hum so constant it barely registers. It takes a moment before I notice it has stopped. I turn to look. She is gone.

I begin to move through the racks, saying her name. Gently at first, my voice rising into a question at the end. There's no response and I hear my tone shift, become more forceful, calling her. My eyes switch from the floor to the main aisles that cut through the store. I scan for anyone running from the area, any sudden and panicked movements. I listen for little peeps of protest or cries of help. I'm picking up speed and searching out the nearest exit when - "Boo!" - she pops out from behind a row of sport coats, laughing a little.

I can feel the blood slowly return to my face as my adrenaline-fueled heart pounds in my chest. I force a smile and pat her on the head. "You have to stay near me in the store, sweetie," I say. "You have to stay right next to Daddy." I'm trying not to say that in those 10 seconds she was out of my sight a whole world of unpunishable cruelty has already befallen her. I'm trying not to say that she has scared me in a way that no movie or book or threat to my own safety could.

Or has she? For her, this is just another little game that we're playing. One we have played before and one of dozens she invents every day. She's doing nothing different. What has changed is me, my perception that to let her out of my sight for even the briefest instant is to invite tragedy.

In fact, even keeping her in sight may not be enough. Last summer a virtual Brownie troop of young girls were snatched right out from under their parents' noses - off their front steps, out of their bedrooms.

We know them all by name. Danielle van Dam, the 7-year-old taken from her bedroom in a San Diego suburb. Five-year-old Samantha Runnion, stolen from her front yard kicking and screaming in northern California. Cassandra Williamson, a 6-year-old St. Louis girl, and Elizabeth Smart, the 14-year-old from Utah, both vanished. Then there's Erica Pratt, the feisty 7-year-old who was taken from her front step in Philadelphia but managed to escape after chewing through duct tape and breaking a window.

With the sudden explosion of publicity about these cases, one couldn't help but assume they were part of a growing trend. After all, everyone from Katie Couric to Diane Sawyer weighed in on the subject, trotting out a well-rehearsed cast of criminal experts, crusading parents of past abductions, and grieving relatives of the presently missing. The message on all fronts was the same: Even if you're a good, attentive, careful and law-abiding parent, this not only could happen to you, it's becoming ever more likely that it will.

But as with the shark-attack scare of summer 2001, the statistics don't really back up the phenomenon.

"The so-called stranger-abducted child is a rare occurrence," says Georgia Hilgeman-Hammond, executive director of the Vanished Children's Alliance in San Jose, Calif. In fact, in October the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency issued

its new National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART), which offered the first statistical update on the occurrence of child abductions since the original NISMAART study in 1990.

According to the new data, each year about 58,000 children under 18 are victims of a nonfamily abduction, in which they are detained by someone other than a family member or close family acquaintance. Of those, 92 percent are returned within 24 hours and 99 percent are unharmed. Of the small percentage remaining, an even smaller number of children fall prey to "stereotypical" stranger abduction, in which they're snatched by a complete stranger who does not intend to release them. How small a number? About 100 a year.

By comparison, the 1990 study found between 200 and 300 annual stranger abductions, meaning that the incidence of these crimes has actually gone down by 50 percent or more over the last decade. Moreover, consider that guns kill about 950 children every year, 925 more fall to heart disease, and about 575 are killed in pedestrian accidents. So literally, your child is nine times more likely to have a heart attack and five times more likely to be killed walking down the street than to be abducted and killed by a complete stranger.

Considering there are approximately 70 million children in the United States, the typical child has about a 1 in 700,000 chance of being kidnapped and harmed by a stranger, while he or she has a 1 in 187 chance of being seriously injured or killed on a bicycle. In other words, if you want to protect your kids, don't worry about leaving the windows open at night, just get rid of the bikes.

How can this be?

I remember one particular night in late July when I lay tossing in bed until well past midnight, my head filled with images of one of my kids being pulled into a car or carried into the night with a rough and unloving hand clasped over his or her mouth. Over and over I imagined how I would react, what I would say, where I would look, what I would do to the creature that made off with my baby.

No matter what I did, though, I could not foresee a way to keep my children safe, and I'd end up shaking the images from my mind's eye and starting over again, each time hoping I could imagine some way - a trick, a secret loophole - that would allow me to undo the damage or prevent it from ever happening in the first place. By 3 a.m. I found myself standing in their bedroom doors, watching them sleep for a few minutes before returning to my own bed to search the ceiling for comfort.

Earlier that night, my wife and I had watched one of the TV newsmagazines - Dateline or 20/20 or one of the like. The show rehashed the details of all the scariest cases, performed dramatizations showing how easy it is for would-be abductors to make off with children, and in a brief but heavily promoted segment at the end gave pointers on keeping your own kids safe. Nowhere did it mention the actual statistics on childhood abduction.

As a journalist, I realize that the news media constitute a business that survives by getting people to pay attention. But the breathless sensationalism and overt fear-mongering of the show seemed overwrought and unnecessary. But as more and more media outlets fall into the hands of huge corporations, with their bottom-line approach to business, things like sales, ratings and profit margins have an increasing role in what news is presented and how. Forget the responsibility envisioned in the First Amendment - news is now entertainment. Just put the fannies in the seats and sell the ad space.

At the same time, I'm aware that the approach only works in conjunction with our collective behavior. It was I who turned that show on, and I who sat through the whole thing. I had 300 other channels to choose from and no one had a gun to my head. In that sense, the media are a reactive forum.

In other words, news organizations don't create these stories; they don't look to tap into people's fear of sharks.

The more likely scenario is that one extraordinary shark attack story occurs and the national media pick it up. There's a reaction. A blip on the ratings meter. The story has touched a nerve, generated a response. When another shark attack story appears, producers and editors, as well as the audience, are already sensitized to the subject, so they run with it.

The next thing you know, it seems as if sharks have suddenly become very aggressive.

To at least a certain degree, the media function as a mirror we hold up to ourselves. The subjects that become major topics of media attention are those we respond to. If these stories represent our irrational fears - after all, the chances of being attacked by a shark are even slimmer than the chances of your child's being abducted by a stranger - it makes sense that their irrationality would be reflected in the degree of media coverage.

The image we see, though, is not always an accurate reflection. The relatively recent emergence of 24-hour cable news networks and Internet news can create a distortion in the image. These news outlets often participate in a form of "narrow-casting," in which they churn one big story over and over in order to keep viewers involved.

Even if only a small percentage of the total audience tunes in for this nonstop analysis, it's enough of a ratings boost for these perpetually viewer-starved outlets to justify sticking with the story.

"They need that 'story of the day' that gets all the airtime," says Jim Naureckas of the New York-based watchdog group FAIR, "because if viewers get hooked, they'll stay with it longer instead of just dropping in for a few minutes to catch the headlines. That kind of coverage can certainly give the impression that something is going on that is not."

Within days of my near-sleepless night, my wife and I sat down with our 3-year-old and counseled her on how to react when approached by people she doesn't know. Our speech was taken right from the tips offered on TV that evening. To this day we quiz her on the proper answers to questions such as, Can you help me find my dog? and, Do you know where the ice cream store is?

Given the benefit of time and hindsight, I see that this may simply be the way practical information gets disseminated.

"Any story needs three elements in order to exist: importance, interest and impact," explains Dwight DeWerth-Pallmeyer, director of communication studies at Widener University. "Telling people how to avoid child abduction is an important story. But if you just run it, no one's going to read it. It needs these sensational cases to give it impact and raise interest in order to make way for the important story that lies beneath."

In fact, when it comes to recovering missing children, the media are one of the most effective tools out there, spreading the alert far and wide, with pictures. "Media attention has been a great help," concurs Ben Ermini, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, in Alexandria, Va., which publishes booklets teaching parents how to work with the media. "I think the focus is a good thing. I have 103 active nonfamily abduction cases right now that I'd love to get just as much attention for."

Hilgeman-Hammond and the Vanished Children's Alliance actually provide media training to relatives of the missing to help identify a media angle so they can get their story in the news and keep it there for as long as possible. And while these activists recognize that their efforts to manipulate the media contribute to the false perceptions and increased fear, they justify it as doing as much as they can while they have the spotlight.

"If nothing else," offers Ermini, "the recent attention made parents more aware, and it was instrumental in promoting the Amber Alert system." The system, named in honor of a slain Texas girl, enables local law enforcement to almost immediately broadcast news and information about the recently abducted over a web of radio and TV stations, and in some states even on electronic billboards along area highways.

Likewise, after the 2001 shark scare, marine experts were able to get on the air to talk about how to avoid an attack and what to do if you are attacked, and even to make the point that rather than an evil menace, sharks are actually an increasingly endangered species. The net result was increased awareness and knowledge among the general public.

Interesting as that may be, it does not truly address the larger questions of why. Why do these stories make their way into the headlines and then stay there so long? Why as an audience do we seem to crave the drama, pain, fear and repugnance that come with such tales? Why do I watch those shows that I know are full of sensational bloat?

The answer may simply be human nature. It's part of our psyche to be at once enthralled and repulsed at the grotesqueries that fall outside everyday life. "If you look back 100 years you'll find similar good-vs.-evil stories playing out in the headlines," says Carolyn Kitch, an assistant professor of journalism at Temple University. "The idea of ordinary people being attacked by some unseen, lurking evil has a strong narrative appeal." On a more specific psychological level, the reasons are multiple and complex, but many of them have to do with both involving ourselves in the drama and distancing ourselves from the distastefulness of these acts.

For starters, we watch out of sheer compassion, to see whether everything will turn out all right. If not, will they at least find the killer? We can take some refuge in justice.

We also scour the details to see whether there's something about the victims that differentiates them from us. Danielle van Dam's parents had an open marriage? They were doing something wrong, they brought this on themselves. This won't happen to us because we're not like that, we think, a phenomenon known as victim blame.

At the same time, there's risk telescoping, which like an actual telescope makes more remote possibilities loom larger. After a well-publicized plane crash, people tend to drive more despite evidence that they have a greater chance of being killed in a car. Something about the terror and carnage of the plane crash makes it seem more immediate, while the very ordinariness of car accidents makes them appear less likely.

On a larger scale, people also look to find a pattern in these events as a way to make sense out of the seeming randomness, and they often succumb to the crowd-mind effect, in which their emotions are influenced by the larger group around them. This is the same reason a movie seems funnier or sadder in a crowded theater than it does when you're watching it alone at home. It is in these joint expressions of emotion that we define ourselves as a society. When we all react so vehemently to child abduction - or presidential philandering, or whatever - we're reasserting the idea that this is still an affront to our collective values, which can be both cathartic and reassuring.

Still, there remains the question of why certain stories catch fire at certain times. In the case of shark attacks, the summer of 2001 followed the rerelease of *Jaws* in celebration of the 25th anniversary of its debut, and saw the wild popularity of *Close to Shore*, a best-selling book about a series of shark attacks at the New Jersey Shore in 1916. Both of these events primed the shark- attack pump.

Child abduction had no such pop-culture build-up, but it did emerge in a quickly changing world. Remember, the Danielle van Dam story broke last year on Feb. 1, not five months after 9/11 and weeks after the last of the anthrax attacks. "The media typically portrays women as victims," says Temple professor Kitch, "especially young girls, who are a symbol of our innocence."

Right or wrong, most Americans view our country as innocent of global misdeeds - and yet literally while we were sleeping, and walking down the street, and playing in our yards, an unseen and still-lurking evil swooped down upon us, robbing us of our innocence and filling us with fear.

Could it be that in a post-9/11 world, child abduction serves as a perfect metaphor for our collective anxiety about terrorism?

I don't know (although I like the idea), but I am certain that the coming summer will bring another long-running story that distorts our perception of reality by oversaturating us with something that touches a collective emotional chord - the market demands it.

No matter how gruesome a specter rises, though, you can be sure that it will be a ghost of our own making, and that after a short period of marvel we will summon all the psychological tools we can muster to cut it down and sweep it away.

In the meantime, I'll keep my children close to me in the store, I'll make them play in the backyard, and it will be a long time before I let them walk to school alone. I will physically and emotionally cling to their presence more dearly.

Is that such a bad thing?

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