

# Once Upon a Time in Metropolis

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This is a true story that happened in a city we'll call Metropolis. It could be any one of several dozen cities in the United States. On a smaller scale, perhaps, it could have happened in any of hundreds of towns and communities around the country. The story is generic, although it happened to one 10-year-old boy we'll call Jeremy. Names have been changed to protect the innocent and the guilty.

Jeremy had epilepsy and diabetes, as well as a severe speech impediment. One day he ran away from school, the Metropolis Center for Children with Special Problems.

"Personnel from the school began the search themselves and did not notify authorities until later that evening. The child's mother was not even notified until she contacted the Center when the school bus did not show up," reports an observer/participant in the search.

Once notified, the Metropolis police "conducted a preliminary search using tactical teams and police K-9s. The media was also given information about the missing boy, and his picture was broadcast on all local TV stations, along with requests for information regarding the boy.

The next day, Day 2, media coverage continued, as did limited searches by police around Jeremy's home. When someone reported seeing Jeremy at a drive-in theater 5 miles from his home and 15 miles from the Center, "a cursory search was made, but no efforts were extended to the heavy brush and caves nearby. Some footprints were found and tentatively identified as the missing boy's. At this point, a few untrained volunteers had joined the search, but no trained personnel had been contacted."

Police also investigated a burglary at the Center, where several cans of food had been stolen from the kitchen. "This information was not given to searchers by the police; it was discovered in a later interview at the school," they said.

Because Jeremy required daily insulin injections, doctors were growing concerned. They estimated he would go into a coma in two days without his medication, which he administered himself.

As media coverage escalated on Day 3, a local SAR-Dogs handler learned of the incident, and SAR-Dogs volunteered to help. "When the police were contacted, they could not even state who was in charge of the efforts, let alone where the search was taking place. A news reporter was finally tracked down, and she advised the search was centered around the boy's home."

From Jeremy's home, SAR-Dogs handlers were sent to the Center. "The school was empty except for the teacher, the director and some family members. No search was being conducted. A SAR-Dogs member interviewed all persons present and conducted a hasty search of the immediate area." Handlers eventually learned the search was concentrated at the drive-in theater.

"The first of many psychic reports was received, but did not pan out. An investigator was dispatched to check for possible sighting in a nearby shopping center; the results were negative."

SAR-Dogs arrived at the drive-in, where "again there were no search efforts in progress." After a delay the theater manager directed handlers to the footprints discovered the day before, and told them that a retarded boy, "pretty close to Jeremy's description," hung around the theater every weekend begging for soda and candy.

As the dog teams were getting ready to deploy, others arrived on scene: Volunteer fire department Bloodhounds (who, like SAR-Dogs, had offered their services), Metropolitan police officers, a volunteer communications team, and the media. "There were several family members (two aunts and an uncle) who gave conflicting stories regarding the boy; his mother and sister were not available to be interviewed."

SAR-Dogs began an extensive search of heavy brush, cliffs and caves around the theater, while the Bloodhounds, working from scent articles, hit what their handlers described as a "hot trail." The hounds lost the trail in a cemetery, picked it up again and finally lost it for good in a park across the street from the cemetery. SAR-Dogs cleared these areas, finding nothing.

"The Little Muddy River goes right through the middle of Metropolis. In the heart of the city it forms a brush-choked, isolated strip of unusable land. It runs through a large urban park, through midtown (and within about two miles of Jeremy's home), next to steel mills, junkyards, trailer parks, near the drive-in, and finally out of the city. That was the search area by this time, two days after the boy's disappearance."

One handler learned that Jeremy referred to the Little Muddy as "his river" and was always talking of going there. Tributary Creek flows near the Center, and a psychic described Jeremy in a cultvert that closely matched one giving access to Tributary Creek. SAR-Dogs with a police officer began checking the creek, and found "some strange footprints, one a tennis shoe and one bare." One of the dogs also alerted on the rain-swollen creek.

When officials contacted a local dive recovery team for a boat to follow up on the alert, the entire dive team joined the search. So did a helicopter crew. SAR-Dogs made an intensive search along the bank, finding more footprints and a coat (not belonging to Jeremy) under a bridge near the previous alert. One dog alerted near a lowhead dam, and a second dog confirmed the alert. Divers were unable to find anything and at 4:30 in the morning efforts were terminated for the night.

A little later on Day 4 police and volunteers continued searching the creek and school with no results. That evening, SAR-Dogs and divers rechecked the area of the previous night's alerts while VFD Bloodhounds again checked around the school. No new clues were found.

## Flood of reports

Day 5. "Due to the heightened activity around the search, media attention was great. Information about Jeremy and his picture were broadcast five or six times a day on TV, the newspaper carried it as a feature story, and the radio was broadcasting reports every 30 minutes. The police department was getting pressure from citizens, media, and city administrators. Sightings of Jeremy were pouring in from as far as 250 miles away. Psychic reports flooded police switchboards, ranging from 'Jeremy was abducted by a man in black' to 'he's hiding in a basement laughing at you.'

"Then the police made perhaps the biggest blunder of the search. They instructed the media to send out a plea for volunteer searchers to join in the efforts, to which about 500 responded.

"These volunteers marched single-file down the banks of Tributary Creek, destroying any possibility of finding clues. They descended on the park, canvassed door-to-door, and frightened one poor little boy to death by chasing him over three blocks, mistakenly thinking he was Jeremy. They worked without supervision, let alone management, and became more of a problem than a help. There were even individuals who had seen the SAR dogs working on TV and came out with household pets (including a Pit Bull), thinking their dogs were also capable of searching."

Recognizing the need for more trained (emphasis on *trained*) searchers, SAR-Dogs suggested that the National Search and Rescue Coordination Center at Scott Air Force Base be asked to provide resources "to cover the miles and miles of brush, water, caves, cliffs and houses where the boy could be hiding." The RCC agreed to provide all needed resources if the request was approved by the law enforcement agency in charge of the search. "The captain in charge refused to approve the request with no explanation offered."

Meanwhile, the local dogs teams continued rechecking likely areas. "Aside from meeting a few hundred untrained foot searchers, no luck."

With temperatures dipping into the high 30s at night and light rain, searchers wondered how Jeremy was surviving the

elements. Even more pressing: How was he surviving without insulin?

Metropolis Police announced they were calling off the search as of 5 p.m. on Day 5. They considered Jeremy's disappearance an abduction.

Sometime before 5 p.m., a group of Marines footsearching around Tributary Creek found "more of the strange footprints, one tennis shoe and one bare, leading from the creek to some houses, as well as where someone had spent the night under the bridge and used the coat found by the SAR-Dogs team as a blanket." The footprints were fresh. --

All available dog teams, divers and communications units responded to this site. "There was some confusion because of the announcement that the search had been officially called off, until the search manager advised of the new evidence. The media arrived in force. About 300 volunteers from the day's searching, most of them intoxicated, also gathered at the scene. The command post became a circus of epic proportions."

VFD Bloodhounds began running the trail leading from the footprints. SAR-Dogs and divers began a water/drainage search.

"Despite explanations that the dogs needed an area clear of people to work in, the crowd of volunteers became angry that they were standing around doing nothing. They finally decided the water was the place to look, and marched off single-file destroying the track and disturbing the dogs in the boat.

"A Bloodhound handler reported there was 'no doubt in his mind' that he was on Jeremy's trail, and it was fresh." Somehow, information on the hound's location and direction of travel was never communicated to other searchers for backup.

If massive media coverage hadn't been enough to ensure a flood of "rubberneckers and volunteers," a \$1,000 reward probably added to the problem.

There was an interlude to the search involving a junkyard bordering the river, which diverted a much-needed dog team from the creek area. On arriving at the junkyard, which Jeremy reportedly frequented and where he had possibly been sighted, this volunteer dog team was put on standby while "every K-9 officer in Metropolis was called in to search. No find was made. The SAR-Dogs team was never allowed to enter the area.

"At the evening debriefing it was decided that Jeremy was indeed up and moving, and that the foot searchers were scaring him so he was constantly running

from the search area. It was also decided that the question of where he was getting food, insulin, and shelter needed to be answered. The next night's activity would revolve around interviewing his sister, to whom he was very close."

## Radio silence

Day 6. There were fewer volunteers on hand. Police officers checked out hot spots and possible sightings. Strict radio silence regarding the location of search activities was now the rule, to prevent the volunteers from converging on any new report. SAR-Dogs personnel went to Jeremy's home to talk with his mother. "The police and media surrounding her had made this impossible up to now. The mother was most helpful and answered every question. She was sure some of Jeremy's medicine was missing, but she did not know how much."

It was decided to stay out of the search area that evening, in hopes Jeremy would calm down.

SAR-Dogs and VFD Bloodhounds checked some abandoned houses near where the hounds lost the trail two nights earlier. Inside the square block of empty houses awaiting demolition, handlers found articles of clothing, stashes of canned food, and human waste. The Bloodhounds wouldn't start a trail away from the houses. "The handlers were unsure if it was because the dogs were tired of constant searching, if Jeremy had simply not been there, or if the area was just too contaminated by the dogs, police and footsearchers who had been through there earlier."

That evening an investigator located Jeremy's sister at an aunt's house. Describing her brother's seizures, the girl concluded "and then he puts his shoe back on."

Further questioning revealed that Jeremy's seizures caused one side of his body to shake harder than the other, and he would lose his right shoe. "More investigation showed no one had previously reported this phenomenon. The strange footprints that were discovered were of a bare right foot with a tennis shoe on the left. This seemed to confirm the footprints found near Tributary Creek were

Jeremy's."

The footprints seemed to lead to Jeremy, but no new clues of his activity had been found since Day 5. "The decision was made to again stay out of the area for a day, to wait and see."

On Day 9, dog teams and divers returned to the water for a concentrated effort. "The water was very high and moving fast. A dog alerted in the water several times, but divers were unable to locate anything in the polluted, murky, brush-filled water. The search continued all day with no success. It was decided that operations would be terminated unless and until more information was received. We were pretty sure Jeremy was either dead or out of the area completely."

The weather improved, and water in the Little Muddy River basin returned to its normal low level. Three weeks after Jeremy's disappearance, a hiker discovered the body of a young boy. It was positively identified as the body of Jeremy. Cause of death: Drowning. The body was found along an unnamed tributary to the river, about a quarter-mile upstream from Tributary Creek. The dive team, which is very familiar with the Little Muddy, advised that the river "is filled with holes, eddies, lowhead dams, abandoned storm drains and pumping stations, junk cars, and tons of trash and brush. When the water was as high as it was during the search, the boy could have been anywhere along the river."

Some years ago there was a search that was very much like this one in many ways. The boy was named Dennis Martin, and he disappeared in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Unlike Jeremy, Dennis was never found. It wasn't for lack of trying. As many as 1,400 (mostly untrained) volunteers turned out at one time, over a 16-day period, and they tromped the meadows to muck. No, it wasn't for lack of trying. It was for lack of knowing how.

National Park Service people learned a lot from that search, and they were big enough to try to teach others who might be in the same situation what they'd learned.

They were brave enough to say "we blew it."

The Dennis Martin search became the Bad Example of why they had to develop the "Managing the Search Function" (MSF) course in conjunction with the National Association for Search and Rescue.

MSF stresses things like:

- Thorough, on-going interviewing and passing all pertinent information on to search planners and to the searchers in the field;
- Trained searchers who find clues rather than demolishing them;
- Follow-up on clues the searchers find in the field, and follow-up on information the interviewers learn in their investigation; and
- Putting it all together to solve that classic mystery, the missing person.

MSF (and other courses with different names but the same content and message) had traveled a lot around the country. In places where the agencies that be promote it, it's making a difference. Searches are generally ending sooner and happier. In other places, SAR dog units and other volunteer (i.e., unpaid professional) groups sponsor the course, bring in instructors — and find that the class is made up mostly of volunteers. They're talking to themselves.

Where are the agencies, the people this course is aimed at? Do they think search and rescue doesn't happen in their city, or their county, or their state? It just happened again, in Metropolis.