

December 3, 2013

Just one item today. [Vanity Fair](#) had a riveting account of a private detective's hunt for a man he believed was a serial rapist. This is a story about someone who is good at his job. Which is how you know it's not about the miscreants in DC.

From the start, it was a bad case.

A battered 21-year-old woman with long blond curls was discovered facedown in the weeds, naked, at the western edge of Miami, where the neat grid of outer suburbia butts up against the high grass and black mud of the Everglades. It was early on a winter morning in 2005. A local power-company worker was driving by the empty lots of an unbuilt cul-de-sac when he saw her.

And much to his surprise, she was alive. She was still unconscious when the police airlifted her to Jackson Memorial Hospital. When she woke up in its trauma center, she could remember little about what had happened to her, but her body told an ugly tale. She had been raped, badly beaten, and left for dead. There was severe head trauma; she had suffered brain-rattling blows. Semen was recovered from inside her. The bones around her right eye were shattered. She was terrified and confused. She bent English to her native Ukrainian grammar and syntax, dropping pronouns and inverting standard sentence structure, which made her hard to understand. And one of the first things she asked for on waking was her lawyer. That was unusual. ...

... The police detectives did what they could at the hotel, combing the woman's room for evidence, interviewing hotel employees, obtaining images from all of the surveillance cameras for the morning of the crime, going over the guest lists. The hotel had 174 rooms, and so many people came and went that it would have taken months working full-time to run checks on every one of them, something beyond the resources of a police department in a high-crime area like Miami-Dade. The sex-crimes unit set aside the file with no clear leads, only more questions. After several weeks, "we were dried up," recalled Allen Foote, the detective handling the case.

So the action was all headed toward civil court. The hotel engaged a law firm to defend itself from the woman's lawsuit, and the firm eventually hired a private detective named Ken Brennan to figure out what had happened. ...

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The detective was struck by something else. His suspect was entirely collected. Cool and calm, entering the elevator with the woman, exiting with the suitcase, pulling it behind him out to the parking lot, then strolling back less than an hour later. Brennan had been a cop. He had seen ordinary men caught up in the aftermath of a violent crime. They were beside themselves. Shaking. Panicky. If a man rapes and beats a woman to the point where he thinks she’s dead, and then hauls the body out to dump it in the weeds, does he come strolling back into the same hotel as if nothing happened? An ordinary attacker would have been two states away by noon.

What this man’s demeanor suggested to Brennan was chilling.

*He’s good at this.
He’s done this before. ...*

,,, Brennan was stubborn. He was now months into this effort to identify and find the man responsible for raping and beating a woman he had never met. There was no way that what he was being paid for the job was worth the hours he was putting in. Nobody else cared as much as he did. What the hotel’s insurers really wanted, Brennan knew, was for him to tell them that the victim was a hooker, and that she had been beaten by one of her johns, which would go a long way toward freeing them from any liability. But this wasn’t true, and he had told them at the outset that the truth was all they would get from him. Detective Foote was openly skeptical. He had given Brennan all the information he had. He had more pressing cases with real leads and real prospects.

But Brennan had a picture in his head. He could see this big man with glasses coolly going about his business day to day—smug, chatting up the girls, no doubt looking for his next victim, comfortable, certain that his crimes left no trail. ...

Vanity Fair

The Case of the Vanishing Blonde

After a woman living in a hotel in Florida was raped, viciously beaten, and left for dead near the Everglades in 2005, the police investigation quickly went cold. But when the victim sued the Airport Regency, the hotel's private detective, Ken Brennan, became obsessed with the case: how had the 21-year-old blonde disappeared from her room, unseen by security cameras? The author follows Brennan's trail as the P.I. worked a chilling hunch that would lead him to other states, other crimes, and a man nobody else suspected.

by Mark Bowden



Private investigator Ken Brennan (foreground) and retired Miami-Dade police detective Allen Foote.

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A battered 21-year-old woman with long blond curls was discovered facedown in the weeds, naked, at the western edge of Miami, where the neat grid of outer suburbia butts up against the high grass and black mud of the Everglades. It was early on a winter morning in 2005. A local power-company worker was driving by the empty lots of an unbuilt cul-de-sac when he saw her.

And much to his surprise, she was alive. She was still unconscious when the police airlifted her to Jackson Memorial Hospital. When she woke up in its trauma center, she could remember little about what had happened to her, but her body told an ugly tale. She had been raped, badly beaten, and left for dead. There was severe head trauma; she had suffered brain-rattling blows. Semen was recovered from inside her. The bones around her right eye were shattered. She was terrified and confused. She bent English to her native Ukrainian grammar and syntax,

dropping pronouns and inverting standard sentence structure, which made her hard to understand. And one of the first things she asked for on waking was her lawyer. That was unusual.

Miami-Dade detectives learned that she had been living for months at the Airport Regency Hotel, eight miles from where she was found. It is one of those crisply efficient overnight spots in the orbit of major airports that cater to travelers needing a bed between legs of long flights. She was employed by a cruise-ship line and had severely cut her finger on the job, so she was being put up at the hotel by her employers while she healed. The assault had begun, she said, in her room, on the fourth floor. She described her attackers as two or three white men who spoke with accents that she heard as “Hispanic,” but she wasn’t certain. She remembered one of the men pushing a pillow into her face, and being forced to drink something strong, alcoholic. She had fragments of memories like bits of a bad dream—of being held up or carried, of being thrown over a man’s shoulder as he moved down a flight of stairs, of being roughly violated in the backseat of a car, of pleading for her life. Powerful, cruel moments, but there was nothing solid, nothing that made a decent lead. When her lawyer soon after filed a lawsuit against the hotel, alleging negligence, going after potentially deep corporate pockets, the detectives thought something was fishy. This was not your typical rape victim. What if she was part of some sophisticated con?

The police detectives did what they could at the hotel, combing the woman’s room for evidence, interviewing hotel employees, obtaining images from all of the surveillance cameras for the morning of the crime, going over the guest lists. The hotel had 174 rooms, and so many people came and went that it would have taken months working full-time to run checks on every one of them, something beyond the resources of a police department in a high-crime area like Miami-Dade. The sex-crimes unit set aside the file with no clear leads, only more questions. After several weeks, “we were dried up,” recalled Allen Foote, the detective handling the case.

So the action was all headed toward civil court. The hotel engaged a law firm to defend itself from the woman’s lawsuit, and the firm eventually hired a private detective named Ken Brennan to figure out what had happened.

Foote was not pleased. It was usually a pain in the ass to have a private detective snooping around one of his cases. Brennan was right out of central casting—middle-aged, deeply tanned, with gray hair. He was a weight lifter and favored open-necked shirts that showed off both the definition of his upper pecs and the bright, solid-gold chain around his neck. The look said: mature, virile, laid-back, and making it. He had been divorced, and his former wife was now deceased; his children were grown. He had little in the way of daily family responsibilities. Brennan had been a cop on Long Island, where he was from, and had worked eight years as a D.E.A. agent. He had left the agency in the mid-90s to work as a commodities broker and to set up as a private detective. The brokering was not to his taste, but the investigating was. He was a warm, talkative guy, with a thick Long Island accent, who sized people up quickly and with a healthy strain of New York brass. If he liked you, he let you know it right away, and you were his friend for life, and if he didn’t ... well, you would find that out right away, too. Nothing shocked him; in fact, most of the salacious run-of-the-mill work that pays private detectives’ bills—domestic jobs and petty insurance scams—bored him. Brennan turned those offers away. The ones he took were mostly from businesses and law firms, who hired him to nail down the facts in civil-court cases like this one.

He had a fixed policy. He told potential employers up front, "I'll find out what happened. I'm not going to shade things to assist your client, but I will find out what the truth is." Brennan liked it when the information he uncovered helped his clients, but that wasn't a priority. Winning lawsuits wasn't the goal. What excited him was the mystery.

The job in this case was straightforward. Find out who raped and beat this young woman and dumped her in the weeds. Had the attack even happened at the hotel, or had she slipped out and met her assailant or assailants someplace else? Was she just a simple victim, or was she being used by some kind of Eastern European syndicate? Was she a prostitute? Was she somehow implicated? There were many questions and few answers.

Vanishing Act

"I used to be a cop and a federal agent," Brennan told Detective Foote, introducing himself at the Miami-Dade police sex-crimes-unit offices. Foote had long strawberry-blond hair, which he combed straight back, and a bushy blond mustache. He was about the same age as Brennan, who read him right away as a fellow member of the fraternity, somebody he could reason with on familiar terms.

"Look, you and I both know there's no fucking way you can investigate this case," Brennan said. "I can see this through to the end. I won't step on your dick. I won't do a thing without telling you about it. If I figure out who did it, you get the arrest. I won't do anything to fuck it up for you."

Foote saw logic in this and did something he ordinarily wouldn't do. He shared what he had in his file: crime-scene photos, surveillance footage from the hotel security cameras, the victim's confused statement. Foote had interviewed a couple of hotel staff members, but they hadn't seen a thing. He'd gone about as far as he could with it. He thought, *Good luck*.

The insurance adjuster had fared no better than Foote. As Brennan reviewed the adjuster's detailed summary of the case in early November of 2005, eight months after the victim had been found, it was easy to see why. The woman's memory was all over the map. First she said she had been attacked by one man, then three, then two. At one point she said their accent might have been not Hispanic but "Romanian." There was no evidence to implicate anyone.

The hotel had a significant security system. The property was fenced, and the back gates were locked and monitored. There were only a few points of entry and exit. During the night, the back door was locked and could be opened only remotely. There were two security guards on duty at all times. Each exit was equipped with a surveillance camera. There was one over the front entrance and one over the back, one in the lobby, one at the lobby elevator, and others out by the pool and parking lot. All of the hotel guests had digital key cards that left a computer record every time they unlocked the door to their rooms. It was possible to track the comings and goings of every person who checked in.

Brennan started where all good detectives start. What did he know for sure? He knew the victim had gone up to her fourth-floor room at the Airport Regency at 3:41 A.M., that she had used her key card to enter her room at about the same time, and that she had been found at dawn in the weeds eight miles west. Somewhere in that roughly three-hour window, she had left the hotel. But there was no evidence of this on any of the cameras. So, how?

The victim was colorfully present on the video record, with her bright-red puffy jacket and shoulder-length blond curls. She had been in and out all night. After months of living in the hotel, she was clearly restless. She made frequent trips down to the lobby just to chat with hotel workers and guests, or to step outside for a smoke, and the cameras caught her every trip. She had gone out to dinner with a friend and returned around midnight, but she wasn't done yet. She is seen exiting the elevator at about three in the morning, and the camera over the front entrance catches her walking away. She told investigators that she had walked to a nearby gas station to buy a phone card because she wanted to call her mother back in Ukraine, where people were just waking up. Minutes after her departure, the camera catches her return. The lobby camera records her re-entering the hotel and crossing the lobby. Moments later she is seen entering the elevator for her final trip upstairs. A large black man gets onto the elevator right behind her, and the recording shows them exchanging a few words. The police report showed her entering her room 20 minutes later, which had led to much speculation about where she was during that time. The victim had no memory of going anywhere but directly to her room. Brennan checked the clock on the camera at the elevator and found that it ran more than 20 minutes behind the computer clock, which recorded the key swipes, solving that small mystery. After she entered the lobby elevator, she was not seen again by any of the cameras.

The surveillance cameras were in perfect working order. They were not on continually; they were activated by motion detectors. Miami-Dade detectives had tried to beat the motion detectors by moving very slowly, or finding angles of approach that would not be seen, but they had failed. No matter how slowly they moved, no matter what approach they tried, the cameras clicked on faithfully and caught them.

One possibility was that she had left through her fourth-floor window. Someone would have had to drop her out the window or somehow lower her, presumably unconscious, into the bushes below, and then exit the hotel and walk around to retrieve her. But the woman showed no signs of injury from such a drop, or from ropes, and the bushes behind the hotel had not been trampled. The police had examined them carefully, looking for any sign of disturbance. It was also possible, with more than one assailant, that she had been lowered into the grasp of someone who had avoided disturbing the bushes, but Brennan saw that such explanations began to severely stretch credulity. Sex crimes are not committed by determined teams of attackers who come with padded ropes to lower victims from fourth-floor windows.

No, Brennan concluded. Unless this crime had been pulled off by a team of magicians, the victim had to have come down in the elevator to the lobby and left through the front door. The answer was not obvious, but it had to be somewhere in the video record from those cameras. "Needless to say, the big mystery here is how this woman got out of the hotel," read the summary of the case prepared by the insurance adjuster. It was a mystery he had not been able to crack.

Brennan penciled one word on the memo: "Disguise?"

He began studying the video record with great care, until he could account for every coming and going. Whenever a person or a group arrived, the camera over the front door recorded it. Seconds later, the entries were captured by the lobby cameras, and then, soon after, by the elevator cameras. Room-key records showed the arrivals entering their rooms. Likewise, those departing were recorded in the opposite sequence: elevator, lobby, front door. The parking-lot cameras recorded cars coming and going. One by one, Brennan eliminated scores of potential suspects. If someone had left the hotel before the victim re-entered her room, and did not return,

he could not have attacked her. Such people were eliminated. Those who entered and were not seen to leave were also eliminated, and likewise anyone exiting the hotel without a bag, or carrying only a small bag. Brennan eliminated no one without a clear reason, not even women or families. He watched carefully for any sign of someone behaving nervously, or erratically.

This painstaking process ultimately left him with only one suspect: the man seen entering the elevator behind the victim at 3:41 A.M. He was a very large black man with glasses, who looked to be at least six four and upwards of 300 pounds. He and the woman are seen casually talking as they enter the elevator. The same man emerges from the elevator into the lobby less than two hours later, at 5:28 A.M., pulling a suitcase with wheels. The camera over the front door records him rolling the suitcase out toward the parking lot at a casual stroll. He returns less than an hour later, shortly before dawn, without the bag. He gets back on the elevator and heads upstairs.

Why would a man haul his luggage out of an airport hotel early in the morning, when he was not checking out, and then return to his room within the hour without it? That question, coupled with Brennan's careful process of elimination, led him to the conclusion that the victim had been taken out of the hotel inside the big man's suitcase.

But it seemed too small. It looked to be about the size that air travelers can fit into overhead compartments. But the man himself was so big, perhaps the size of the bag was an illusion. Brennan studied the video as the man exited the elevator and also as he left the hotel, then measured the doorways of both. When he matched visible reference points in the video—the number of tiles to each side of the bag as it was wheeled out the front door, and the height of a bar that ran around the inside of the elevator—he was able to get a close approximation of the suitcase's actual size. He obtained one that fit those measurements, which was larger than the bag on the video had appeared to be, and invited a flexible young woman whose proportions matched the victim's to curl up inside it. She fit.

He scrutinized the video still more closely, watching it again and again. The man steps off the elevator rolling the bag behind him. As he does, the wheels catch momentarily in the space between the elevator floor and the ground floor, just for a split second. It was hardly noticeable if you weren't looking for it. The man has to give the bag a tug to get it unstuck.

And that clinched it. That tiny tug. The bag had to have been heavy to get stuck. Brennan was now convinced. This is the guy. No matter what the victim had said—that she had been attacked by two or maybe three men, that they were "white," that they spoke with accents that sounded Hispanic or perhaps Romanian—Brennan was convinced her attacker had to be this man.

The detective was struck by something else. His suspect was entirely collected. Cool and calm, entering the elevator with the woman, exiting with the suitcase, pulling it behind him out to the parking lot, then strolling back less than an hour later. Brennan had been a cop. He had seen ordinary men caught up in the aftermath of a violent crime. They were beside themselves. Shaking. Panicky. If a man rapes and beats a woman to the point where he thinks she's dead, and then hauls the body out to dump it in the weeds, does he come strolling back into the same hotel as if nothing happened? An ordinary attacker would have been two states away by noon.

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The “Mercury” Man

Brennan called a meeting at the hotel on November 17, 2005. The owners were there, the insurance adjusters, and the lawyers—in other words, the people who had hired him. They met in a boardroom. On a laptop screen, Brennan pulled up the image of the large man pulling his suitcase off the elevator.

He said, “This is the guy that did it. That girl is inside that suitcase.”

There was some snickering.

“How do you come up with that?” he was asked. Brennan described his process of elimination, how he had narrowed and narrowed the search, until it led him to this man.

They weren't buying it.

“Didn't the victim say that she was attacked by two white guys?” one of them asked.

“I'm telling you,” said Brennan. “This is the guy. Let me run with it a little bit. If you're willing to give me the resources, I'll track this guy down.”

He told them that it was a complete win-win. The hotel's liability in the civil suit would go way down if he could show that the woman had not been attacked by a hotel employee. “What could be better?” he said. “Think how good you'll look if we actually catch the guy responsible. You'd be solving a horrible crime!”

They seemed distinctly unmoved.

“Look at how cool this guy is,” he told them, replaying the video. “He just raped and beat a woman to death, or thinks he has, and it's not like he's all nervous and jittery. He's cool as a clam! Tell me the kind of person who could do such a thing and be this nonchalant. This ain't the only time he's done this.”

A discussion ensued. There were some in the room who wanted to find the rapist, but the decision was primarily a business calculation. It was about weighing the detective's fee against a chance to limit their exposure. Brennan didn't care what their reasons were; he just wanted to keep going. Old instincts had been aroused. He had never even met the victim, but with her attacker in his sights, he wanted him badly. Here was a guy who was walking around almost a year later, certain he had gotten away with his crime. Brennan wanted what all detectives want: the gotcha! He wanted to see the look on the guy's face.

It was close, but in the end the hotel suits decided to let him keep working. Having overcome their skepticism so narrowly, Brennan was even more determined to prove he was right.

The hotel's records were useless. There were too many rooms and there was too much turnover to scrutinize every guest. Even if the hotel staff remembered a 300-pound black man with

glasses, which they did not, there was no way to tell whether he was a registered hotel guest or a visitor, or if he was sharing someone else's room. Even in cases where they photocopied a guest's driver's license, which they did not do faithfully, the image came up so muddy that there was no way to make out the face.

So he went back to the video. Now that he knew whom he was looking for, Brennan scrutinized every appearance of his suspect, at the elevator, in the lobby, at the hotel restaurant, at the front door. In one of the video snippets at the elevator, the suspect is seen walking with a fit black man wearing a white T-shirt with the word "Mercury" on the front, which meant nothing to Brennan. His first thoughts were the car company, or the planet, or the element. There was nothing there he could work with. The manner of both men on the snippet suggested that they knew each other. They walked past the elevator and turned to their right, in the direction of the restaurant. So Brennan hunted up video from the restaurant surveillance camera, and, sure enough, it captured the two entering. As Brennan reviewed more video, he saw the big black man with the other man quite frequently, so he suspected that the two had been in town together. The man in the T-shirt had an ID tag on a string around his neck, but it was too small to read on the screen. Brennan called NASA to see if they had a way to enhance the picture. He described the camera and was told that it couldn't be done.

Again, back to the video. In the restaurant footage, the man in the T-shirt is momentarily seen from behind, revealing another word, on the back of the T-shirt. The best view comes in a split second as he sidesteps someone leaving, giving the camera a better angle. Brennan could see the letter V at the beginning of the word, and O at the end. He could make out a vague pattern of script in the middle, but could not be sure of the exact letters. It was like looking at an eye chart when you need stronger glasses; you take a guess. It looked to him as if the word was "Verado." It meant nothing to him, but that was his hunch. So he Googled it and found that "Verado" was the name of a new outboard engine manufactured by Mercury Marine, the boat-engine manufacturer.

There had been a big boat show in Miami in February, when the incident happened. Perhaps the man in the white T-shirt had been working at the show for Mercury Marine, and if he had, maybe his big friend had, too.

Mercury Marine is a subsidiary of the Brunswick Corporation, which also manufactures billiards and bowling equipment and other recreational products. Brennan called its head of security, Alan Sperling, and explained what he was trying to do. His first thought was that the company might have put its boat-show employees up at the Airport Regency. If it had, he might be able to identify and locate the man in the picture through the company. Sperling checked, and, no, Mercury's employees had stayed at a different hotel. Brennan racked his brain. Had any of the crews who set up the company's booth stayed at the Regency? Again, the answer was no.

"Well, who got those shirts?," Brennan asked.

Sperling checked and called back two weeks later. He said the only place the shirts had been given away was at the boat show's food court. The company in charge of food for the show was called Centerplate, which handles concessions for large sporting events and conventions. It was a big company with employees spread across the nation. Brennan called the head of human resources for Centerplate, who told him that the company had put up some of its people at the Regency, but that it had hired more than 200 for the boat show, from all over.

“Somebody has to remember a big black guy, 300 pounds at least—in glasses,” said the detective.

A week later, the man from Centerplate called back. Some of their workers did remember a big black man with glasses, but no one knew his name. Someone did seem to recall, he said, that the company had initially hired the man to work at Zephyr Field, home of the New Orleans Zephyrs, the minor-league baseball team in Metairie, a sprawling suburb. This was a solid lead, but there was a bad thing about it: Hurricane Katrina had devastated the city just months earlier, and the residents of Metairie had been evacuated. It was a community scattered to the winds.

Good News, Bad News

Brennan was stubborn. He was now months into this effort to identify and find the man responsible for raping and beating a woman he had never met. There was no way that what he was being paid for the job was worth the hours he was putting in. Nobody else cared as much as he did. What the hotel’s insurers really wanted, Brennan knew, was for him to tell them that the victim was a hooker, and that she had been beaten by one of her johns, which would go a long way toward freeing them from any liability. But this wasn’t true, and he had told them at the outset that the truth was all they would get from him. Detective Foote was openly skeptical. He had given Brennan all the information he had. He had more pressing cases with real leads and real prospects.

But Brennan had a picture in his head. He could see this big man with glasses coolly going about his business day to day—smug, chatting up the girls, no doubt looking for his next victim, comfortable, certain that his crimes left no trail.

Katrina was the bad thing about the New Orleans lead, but there was also a good thing. Brennan had a buddy on the police force there, a Captain Ernest Demma. Some years earlier, on a vacation to the French Quarter with his kids, Brennan had risked his hide helping Demma subdue a prisoner who had violently turned on him.

“The guy had broken away from me,” Demma recalled, “and out of nowhere comes this guy in a black jacket flying down the sidewalk, who runs him down, tackles him, and held the guy until my men could subdue him. He was fantastic.” It was the kind of gesture a cop never forgets. Demma dubbed Brennan “Batman.” New Orleans may have been down for the count, but when Batman called, Demma was up for anything.

The captain sent one of his sergeants out to Zephyr Field, where the club was working overtime to get its storm-ravaged facility ready to open the 2006 season. Demma called Brennan back: “The good news is: I know who this guy is.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“His name is Mike Jones, there’s probably only a million of them, and he doesn’t work there anymore, and nobody knows where he went.”

Still, a name! Brennan thanked Demma and went back to the Regency database, and, sure enough, he found that there had indeed been a guest named Mike Jones staying at the hotel when the attack occurred. He had checked in on February 14, seven days before the rape and

assault, and he had checked out on the 22nd, one day after he was seen rolling his suitcase to the car. The full name on his Visa card was Michael Lee Jones. The card had been canceled, and the address was for a Virginia residence Jones had vacated years earlier. He had left no forwarding address. Brennan lacked authority to subpoena further information from the credit-card company, and the evidence he had was still too slight to get Miami-Dade police involved. The phone number Jones had left with registration was a number for Centerplate.

But the trail was warm again. Brennan knew that Jones no longer worked for Centerplate, and the people there didn't know where he was, but the detective thought he knew certain things about his prey. Judging by the nonchalance he showed hauling a young woman's body out of the hotel stuffed in a suitcase, Brennan suspected that this was a practiced routine. The Centerplate job had kept him moving from city to city, all expenses paid, a perfect setup for a serial rapist with a method that was tried and true. If Jones was his man, then he wouldn't give up an arrangement like that. If he wasn't employed by Centerplate anymore, where would somebody with his work experience go next? Who was facilitating his predation now? Brennan got some names from Centerplate and went online and compiled a list of the food-service company's 20 to 25 top competitors.

He started working his way down the list, calling the human-resources department for each of the competing firms, and one by one he struck out. As it happened, one company on the list, Ovations, had its headquarters in the Tampa area, and Brennan was planning a trip up in that direction anyway, so he decided to drop in. As any investigator will tell you, an interview in person is always better than an interview on the phone. Brennan stopped by and, as he can do, talked his way into the office of the company's C.O.O. He explained his manhunt and asked if Ovations employed a 300-plus-pound black man with glasses named Michael Lee Jones.

The executive didn't even check a database. He told Brennan, who was not a law-enforcement official, that if he wanted that information he would have to return with a subpoena. All the other companies had checked a database and just told him no. He knew he had finally asked in the right place.

"Why would you want someone working for you who is a rapist?" he asked. He was told there were privacy issues involved.

"Get a subpoena," the executive suggested.

So Brennan got a fax number for Ovations and called Detective Foote at Miami-Dade; before long a subpoena spat from the machine. It turned out that Ovations had an employee named Michael Lee Jones who fit the description. He was working in Frederick, Maryland.

The Interrogation

Michael Lee Jones was standing behind a barbecue counter at Harry Grove Stadium, home of the minor-league Frederick Keys, when Detective Foote and one of his partners showed up. It was an early-spring evening in the Appalachian foothills, and Foote the Floridian was so cold his teeth were chattering beneath his mustache.

When Brennan had called him with the information about Jones, Foote was impressed by the private detective's tenacity, but still skeptical. This whole effort more or less defined the term

“long shot,” but the name and location of a potential suspect was without question the first real lead since the case had landed on his desk. It had to be checked out. The department had a requirement that detectives traveling out of town to confront suspected criminals go as a team, so Foote waited until another detective had to make such a trip to the suburbs of Washington. He got the detective to agree to take him along as partner. Together they made the hour-and-a-half drive to Frederick to visit Jones in person.

Foote had called Jones earlier that day to see if he would be available. The detective kept it vague. He just said he was investigating an incident in Miami that had happened during the boat show, and confirmed that Jones had been working there. On the phone, Jones was polite and forthcoming. He said he'd been in Miami at that time and that he would be available to meet with Foote, and gave him directions to the ballpark.

Jones was a massive man. Tall, wide, and powerful, with long arms and big hands and a great round belly. His size was intimidating, but his manner was exceedingly soft-spoken and gentle, even passive. He wore clear-rimmed glasses and spoke in a friendly way. Jones was in charge of the operation at the food counter and appeared to be respected and well liked by his busy employees. He was wearing an apron. He steered Foote and the other detective away from the booth to a picnic area just outside the stadium.

As Foote recalled it later, he asked Jones about meeting women in Miami, and Jones said he had “hooked up” once. The detective asked him to describe her. “I only have sex with white women,” Jones said.

Foote asked if he had had sex with anyone at the Airport Regency, and Jones said no. He said that the woman he had had sex with in Miami had been working at the boat show, and that they had hooked up elsewhere.

“Any blonde women?,” Foote asked.

“No.”

“Foreign accent?”

Jones said the woman he had sex with in Miami had been German.

Foote was not making Jones as a suspect. The big man acted convincingly, like someone with nothing to hide. The detective was freezing in the evening air. Foote preferred coming right to the point; he was not given to artful interrogation. Besides, he felt more and more as if the trip had been a waste of time. So he just asked what he wanted to know.

“Look, I’ve got a girl who was raped that week. Did you have anything to do with it?”

“No, of course not!” said Jones, appropriately shocked by the question. “No way.”

“You didn’t beat the shit out of this girl and leave her for dead in a field down there?”

“Oh, no. No.”

“Are you willing to give me a DNA specimen?,” Foote asked.

Jones promptly said he would, further convincing the detective that this was not the guy. Do the guilty volunteer conclusive evidence? Foote produced the DNA kit, had Jones sign the consent form, and ran a cotton swab inside Jones’s mouth.

He called Brennan when he got back.

“I’m telling you, Ken, this ain’t the guy,” he said.

“No, man, he’s definitely the fucking guy,” said Brennan, who flew up to Frederick himself, traveling with his son, and spent time over a three-day period talking to Jones, who continued to deny everything.

Months after he returned, the DNA results came back. Brennan got a call from Foote.

“You ain’t gonna believe this,” said Foote.

“What?”

“You were right.”

Jones’s DNA was a match.

Brennan flew up to Frederick in October to meet Foote, who arrested the big man. It had been 11 months since he took the case. Foote formally charged Jones with a variety of felonies that encompassed the acts of raping, kidnapping, and beating a young woman severely. The accused sat forlornly in a chair that looked tiny under his bulk, in an austere Frederick Police Department interrogation room, great rolls of fat falling on his lap under an enormous Baltimore Ravens T-shirt. He repeatedly denied everything in a surprisingly soft voice peculiar for such a big man, gesturing broadly with both hands, protesting but never growing angry, and insisting that he would never, ever, under any circumstances do such a thing to a woman. He said that he “never had any problems” paying women for sex, and that he “did not get a kick” out of hurting women. He did admit, once the DNA test irrevocably linked him to the victim, that he had had sex with her, but insisted that she was a “hooker,” that he had paid her a hundred dollars, and that when he left her she was in fine shape, although very drunk. They showed him pictures of her battered face, taken the day she was found.

“I did not hurt that girl,” Jones said, pushing the photos away, his voice rising to a whine. “I’m not violent.... I never hit a fucking woman in my whole fucking life! I’m not going to hurt her.”

Brennan asked him why a man would roll his suitcase out to the parking lot and stash it in his car at five in the morning, two days before he checked out of the hotel.

“I couldn’t remember if we were leaving that day or the next day. I wasn’t sure.... For some reason, I thought, Fuck it, it’s time to go.”

Brennan was able to trip Jones up with only one small thing. Jones said that his suitcase had only his clothes, shoes, and a video game in it, but when the detective noted the extra tug Jones

had needed to get it off the elevator, Jones suddenly remembered that he had had a number of large books in it as well. He said he was an avid reader.

When Brennan asked him to name some of the books he had read, Jones could not. He could not name a single title.

But Jones was unfailingly compliant, and his manner worked for him. Even with the DNA, the case against him was weak. He had ample reason for not having volunteered initially that he had paid a woman for sex—he had a prior arrest for soliciting a prostitute—so that wouldn't count against him, and if he had had sex with the victim, as he said, it would account for the DNA. The fact that Jones had willingly provided the sample spoke in his favor. In court, it would come down to his word against the young woman's, and she was a terrible witness. She had picked Jones out of a photo lineup, but given how foggy her memory of the night was, and the fact that she had seen Jones before, unlike the other faces she was shown, it was hardly convincing evidence of his guilt. Her initial accounts of the crime were so much at odds with Brennan's findings that even Foote found himself wondering who was telling the truth.

Miami prosecutors ended up settling with Jones, who, after being returned to Miami, pleaded guilty to sexual assault in return for having all of the more severe charges against him dropped. He was sentenced to two years in prison, an outcome that Brennan would have found very disappointing if that had been the end of the story. It was not.

Three More Hits

Brennan never doubted that Jones was a rapist, and given what he had observed, first on the surveillance video and then after meeting him in person, he was convinced that sexual assault was Jones's pastime.

"This ain't a one-fucking-time deal," Brennan told Foote. "I'm telling you, this is this guy's thing. He's got a job that sends him all over the country. Watch him on that video. He's slick. Nonchalant. He's too cool, too calm. You'll see it when you put his DNA into the system."

The "system" is the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). The F.B.I.-administered database now has well over eight million DNA offender profiles. Local, state, and federal law-enforcement officials routinely enter DNA samples recovered from convicts and from the scenes and victims of unsolved crimes, and over the years the system has electronically matched more than 100,000 of them, often reaching across surprising distances in place and time. It means that when a DNA sample exists a case can never be classified as entirely "cold."

Michael Lee Jones had left a trail. The Miami-Dade police entered Jones's DNA into CODIS in late 2006, and several months later, which is how long it takes the F.B.I. to double-check matches the system finds electronically, three new hits came up.

Detective Terry Thrumston, of the Colorado Springs Police Department sex-crimes unit, had a rape-and-assault case that had been bugging her for more than a year. The victim was a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman who had been picked up early in the morning on December 1, 2005, by a stranger—a very large black man with glasses, who had offered her a ride and then talked his way into her apartment and raped her, holding his hand tightly over her mouth. Thrumston

had no leads, and the case had sat for two years until DNA collected from the victim matched that of Michael Lee Jones.

There were two victims in New Orleans. One of them, also a blonde, had been partying in the French Quarter a little too hard, by her own admission, and very early on the morning of May 5, 2003, she had gone looking for a cab back to her hotel when a very large black man with glasses pulled his car over to the curb and offered her a ride. As she later testified, he drove her to a weedy lot and raped her. He pressed his large hand powerfully over her face as he attacked her, and she testified that she bit his palm so hard that she had bits of his skin in her teeth afterward. When he was finished, he drove off, leaving her on the lot. She reported the rape to the New Orleans police, who filed her account and took DNA samples from the rapist's semen. The case had sat until CODIS matched the specimen with Michael Lee Jones. The other New Orleans victim told a similar tale, but failed to pick Jones's face out of a photo lineup.

Jones, it turns out, had been in both Colorado Springs and New Orleans on the dates in question. So in 2008, as his Florida sentence drew to a close, he was flown to Colorado Springs to stand trial. It was a novel prosecution, because the Colorado woman had died in the interim, of causes unrelated to the crime. As a result, Deputy District Attorney Brien Cecil had no victim to put on the stand. Instead he fashioned a case out of two of the other rapes, calling as witnesses the Miami victim and one of the New Orleans victims, both of whom supplemented the DNA evidence by pointing out Jones as their attacker in the courtroom. Cecil argued that their cases showed a "common plan, scheme, or design" that was as much Jones's signature as his trail of semen.

The New Orleans victim proved to be a very effective witness. Her memory was clear and her statements emphatic, the outrage still evident six years later, along with her chagrin at the poor judgment she had displayed that night. The Miami victim, on the other hand, was every bit as bad on the stand as the Miami prosecutors had feared. One of Jones's lawyers made much of the different stories she had told police. Her struggles with English further confused matters.

Jones pleaded not guilty to all charges in the Colorado case. He argued through his lawyers (he did not testify) that the sex had been consensual, and that the woman claiming rape had been a prostitute. But where jurors in Colorado might have been able to accept two prostitutes in different states at different times unaccountably filing rape charges after turning a trick, and in both cases immediately describing their attacker as a huge black man with glasses, they clearly choked on a third. There was no evidence that any of the victims were prostitutes. And then, of course, there was the DNA.

Michael Lee Jones is serving what amounts to a life sentence at the Fremont Correctional Facility, in Colorado. He received a term of 24 years to life for one count of sexual assault with force, and 12 years to life for the second count, of felonious sexual contact. He is 38 years old and will not be eligible for his first parole hearing until 2032. The state estimates his term will last until he dies.

His Miami victim won a \$300,000 settlement from the hotel and the hotel's security company.

Ken Brennan is back doing his private-detective work in Miami. He is enormously proud of the efforts that have locked Jones away. "The cases they got him on, they're just the tip of the

iceberg,” he predicted. “Once other jurisdictions start checking their DNA files on cases when this guy was at large, I guarantee you they will find more.”

So far his hunches have been pretty good.