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A WALK TOWARD THE BEAST

New York NAMBLA Conference

As my cab honked its way along the New York City streets, I stared out the window at the crowds on the sidewalks and tried to talk down the apprehension rising inside me. Don't get me wrong: I have known fear, and I have felt the temple-pounding rush of adrenaline pumping through my body. But this evening, a sense of anxiety enveloped me. The sensation was unlike anything I'd experienced in my more than two decades of undercover work for the FBI. This case was going to be the toughest I had ever tackled, for reasons I didn't fully understand... yet.

It was a clear Friday evening, Veterans Day weekend. I was in New York to infiltrate an organization known as NAMBLA: the North American Man/Boy Love Association, a society of men who professed sexual attraction to young boys. The plan looked simple enough in the operations order but seemingly impossible to orchestrate; I would pose as an aging pedophile, work myself into a position of trust within the organization, and gain criminal admissions from its members—admissions that would lead to successful federal prosecutions.

But as the time neared for me to make my debut with NAMBLA, things were looking anything but simple. I was unable to view the group I'd be infiltrating with anything other than revulsion. How could I pretend to actually be one of them—without becoming physically ill or physically violent? I wasn't sure I knew the answer.

During my career with the FBI, I successfully targeted some of the

most treacherous criminal groups in America: La Cosa Nostra; the Russian, Sicilian, and Mexican Mafias; Asian organized crime groups; black street gangs. In the early eighties I was the undercover agent in the Los Angeles Mafia family case that resulted in the imprisonment of L.A.'s top fifteen mobsters. I had worked street gangs. Picture a white man in South Central L.A. buying rock cocaine from convicted felons and known killers. While undercover, I shot two drug dealers who attempted to turn our \$400,000 cocaine transaction into a "rip." As the undercover agent in more than twenty administratively approved operations, lasting anywhere from several days to more than three years, I have successfully posed as a drug dealer, contract killer, residential burglar, degenerate gambler, international weapons dealer, and white-collar criminal.

But tonight I was about to spend the weekend playing the role of a "boy lover," or "BL," as NAMBLA members refer to themselves. It was quite a journey that had brought me here, and tonight marked the next step in the FBI's efforts to target men who preyed on boys. NAMBLA was real—much more than an episodic joke on *South Park*. The group was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary and I was going to be present for that celebration. After all, I was a dues-paying member.

San Diego, 1980

My tour of humanity's dark side began in earnest back in 1980, just after I left the Marine Corps. I spent four years as a judge advocate, serving as prosecutor, defense counsel, and an appellate review attorney. Regardless of how glamorous they make the JAG corps look on TV, the military courtroom lacked the excitement I hoped it would bring. I worked on trials running the gamut from unauthorized absence to murder, but the cases were never "whodunnits." The decision always came down to whether the confession was admissible or the search was legal. For me, the excitement waned quickly. The 150 trials in which I participated did, however, prepare me for my work in the FBI. Better than most, I knew what was necessary to get a con-

viction. Often those requirements had nothing to do with Bureau-imposed administrative hurdles. Following bureaucratic regulations with no evidentiary value was never my strong suit and no administrator ever accused me of being procedurally pure.

After suffering through three years of law school and four years as an attorney in the Marine Corps, I knew the courtroom was not where I wanted to be. Neither did I aspire to spending the rest of my life tethered to a desk, drafting wills, divorce decrees, or other legal documents. The FBI, known for its recruitment of lawyers and accountants, proved to be a near-perfect fit. I would be getting paid to play cops and robbers, something I did for free as a kid. Never in my twenty-six-year career did I ever question my decision to join the Bureau. Sure, I had bad days, but knowing the next call might put me on the thrill ride of a lifetime made the momentary frustrations easier to handle . . . usually.

Hollywood envisions every FBI agent assuming an undercover identity and capturing crooks with some sophisticated ruse. In fact, very few FBI agents ever remove the suit coat and loosen the tie. Today, the FBI carefully screens every agent seeking to work in an undercover capacity. Few are selected, and fewer still successfully navigate the difficult path to undercover certification. From that small number, only a handful continue to accept undercover roles throughout their careers. For those who do, it can mean the most exhilarating challenge anybody could ever hope for.

But in 1980, receiving an undercover assignment was as easy as raising a hand. I was looking for excitement, variety, and, above all, a way to avoid being tied to a desk. Undercover work seemed the perfect means to all my ends. I wanted to enter the world of Serpico; I wanted the thrill of the chase and the satisfaction of the hard-earned collar at the end. I was fortunate enough to have a supervisor who encouraged me to pursue my dreams. And so it was, in 1980, after about six months in the Bureau, I found myself on my way to meet Dave, my first undercover target.

As the time for the meeting neared, my heart was pounding and

my knees were shaking—less from fear than excitement. Still, I knew I needed to get my emotions under control; Dave was an accomplished criminal, and if he spotted the knees, my undercover career would be short-lived.

The San Diego office identified Dave as a subject through wiretap surveillance and an informant's tip. We were investigating an art theft ring and Dave was a major player with connections to the Bonanno crime family in Arizona. As is often the case in undercover work, Dave would end up taking us in directions we never anticipated.

My cover was pretty weak and not at all well thought out: I would be Bob Bourne. I kept my real first name, but took the last name of the character from Robert Ludlum's famous novels. My persona was that of a nouveau riche high roller. I would let Dave know I had made a bundle in real estate and was looking to invest in Western art, which we knew from surveillance to be his specialty. Dave would have bargains to offer simply because his inventory was hotter than the proverbial two-dollar pistol.

Dave was lean and athletic; he trained as a long-distance runner. His training served him well, since one of his favorite MOs involved escaping on foot from snatch-and-grab jewelry heists. He would research the shooting policies of local police departments to determine whether they were authorized to shoot a fleeing felon. After selecting his target area, he would fly into town, wearing a three-piece suit and carrying a ring with an empty setting. He would locate a jewelry store near the airport and wave the ring at the unsuspecting sales staff, asking to see stones that fit the setting. As soon as the clerk set a case of stones in front of him, Dave would grab the case and run, knowing police weren't likely to shoot. By the time a patrol unit arrived on the scene, he was back at the airport waiting for his return flight, now holding a pocketful of diamonds.

We set up an office front in San Diego's Sorrento Valley, a commercial/industrial area north of the city. It was the perfect ruse. The tech agents divided the oversized office into two separate units; a sliding bookshelf straight out of a Hollywood movie scene concealed the

hidden room where my backup agents operated the audio and video recording equipment that monitored every meeting. Comfortable deep rich leather furniture, a fully stocked wet bar, and walls adorned with Western art prints provided a relaxed atmosphere in which to conduct business. Dave and his confederates never displayed much curiosity about what I did at the office, but several of my fellow tenants complained to the building manager that something suspicious was occurring on the second floor. I'm not sure if they were alarmed because I really sold myself as a criminal, or if I was just sloppy. In any event, I successfully lured Dave and his associates to the office, and as I waited for him to arrive for our first meeting—my first face-to-face experience undercover—I took deep breaths, said a couple of prayers, and tried to control the riptide of emotions surging through me.

As it turned out, the meeting was short and rather uneventful. Dave never noticed my knees and we actually hit it off. Our conversation was rather innocuous, but the important thing was Dave left believing I had money and was willing to buy at a five-finger discount. I came away with a stress headache and a lingering adrenaline jag. What a thrill to have successfully completed my first undercover meet! The target believed me—and I believed myself! I was a junky for the jazzed-up feeling, and I continued to chase that buzz throughout my career. I was invincible, or at least so I thought, and during that abbreviated meeting, I realized I had found my niche in the law enforcement world.

In reality, Dave and I had a lot in common: he neither drank nor smoked; he exercised regularly and was in great shape. I was an experienced runner having had competed in over a half-dozen marathons, completing several in less than three hours. Dave wasn't much of a talker, so running dominated much of the discussion during the several months I spent targeting him and his associates.

Starting out as a young agent was a blessing rather than a curse. I had yet to pick up the cop lingo. Cops said, "Have a good one." Bad guys said, "Later." I also didn't have the J. Edgar Hoover, everything-is-either-black-or-white mindset. As I learned throughout my career,

the skills needed to successfully work undercover were self-taught, consisting mostly of common sense seasoned with lessons from the street. No school could adequately prepare you for the job—at least no school sponsored by the FBI. In fact, I tried to avoid such schools and seminars. Too often, I found that the rules promulgated by the various departments and agencies boxed you into a specific type of character that could easily be detected by the bad guys. My unorthodoxy proved valuable throughout my career as I negotiated with criminals from every culture and economic stratum. My best teachers were the informants I interacted with and the bad guys I arrested.

Shortly after meeting Dave, I saw the investigation hit pay dirt: he had a painting he had recently “acquired” and was looking to quietly dispose of it at a price well below its true market value. Just like something out of a TV crime drama, Dave showed up at the office with the painting, valued at more than fifty thousand dollars, and we negotiated a “fair” price, all on surveillance video. It was as simple as that. The Bureau put up the funds and with sufficient green, I became Dave’s new best friend.

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LIVING IN THE SHADOW WORLD

Working undercover means more than donning a wig or growing a moustache. Despite what many FBI administrators think, it's not just a name change, a phony driver's license, and an untraceable credit card. The small cadre of successful undercover police officers and federal agents know it means being "one of them" without becoming one of them. It's one thing to immerse yourself in a character; it's another to be consumed by a criminal persona. Operating undercover means living with duality and praying you will recognize the ambiguous line between who you really are and the imposter you have become. It means adopting an alter ego antithetical to the real you and exploring the darkest side of humanity. It means being an actor in the ultimate reality show: one where there are no retakes—a drama where a botched line, a missed mark, or a dropped cue could mean instant death.

The FBI didn't instill a warrior ethos in its undercover agents. There was no secret handshake or written code of conduct. Heck, I'm still waiting for my secret decoder ring. We were part of a very loose brotherhood of single-minded individuals who seldom came together as a team. On only a few occasions did I work with another undercover agent posing as my confederate. More often than not I worked the high wire alone. Success depended upon individual ability, not the strength of teammates.

Much of my strength came from my family. I have been blessed with an understanding wife and two supportive children who have

seen me through the difficult assignments. We often joke that I've been married to the same sweet, wonderful person for more than thirty years, yet she's tolerated life with a half-dozen personality changes and a variety of shady characters.

So who would choose such a life? It's not for everyone. The risks are enormous, physically and psychologically. The rewards are only personal, certainly not monetary; the pay's the same with or without a disguise. This life can mean wildly unpredictable working hours and bizarre assignments that interfere with any sense of normalcy. The skills are typically intuited rather than acquired through training. You need to be autonomous and creative, yet remain a Bureau team player. Stress comes from all sides: from the FBI as well as the bad guys. Both sometimes make demands almost impossible to fulfill. For most of us who've lived in the shadow world, the primary motivation for working undercover is a sense of purpose—a strong, unyielding belief in right and wrong, a belief that the personal rewards and the sense of accomplishment far outweigh the risks. But regardless of the motive, there's a collateral benefit only an undercover agent can appreciate: when you have placed your life in harm's way and have successfully convinced the bad guys you *are* one of them, you experience a high few other experiences can top. I know of no comparable thrill.

After my first successful purchase, Dave became even more open about his activities. After all, he had just sold me a painting he stole from a Scottsdale, Arizona, art gallery and the police never pounced. What was not to like?

One afternoon, I met Dave for lunch at an ocean-side bistro. He brought along one of his associates, a penny stock manipulator from Salt Lake City. Although Dave and I had engaged in several criminal deals, Dave never asked me my last name and I never offered it. When his friend asked the question, I played the typical crook game and avoided an answer. Many times in my dealings with the bad guys, even in cases lasting months or more, we never exchanged last names.

Criminals figure the less the other guy knows, the less chance he'll have of ratting you out if he gets snatched.

It was another area where I had to be careful. As an FBI agent I knew a great deal about my targets, but I had to compartmentalize what I knew as an agent and what I only "found out" while working undercover. To say something that came from an intelligence briefing and not from the lips of the bad guy could spell instant trouble, if not death.

However, Dave's buddy insisted on knowing my name. Finally I said, "Bourne—you know, like the book." Then I turned to Dave. "See, the book *The Bourne Identity* is really about me. I'm with the CIA."

Both of them let out a hearty laugh. Dave said, "Just as long as you're not with the FBI, what do we care?"

Although several agents in the San Diego office had undercover experience, most of it was the controversial targeting of radicals in the sixties and seventies. No one had worked the type of crime we were investigating so I didn't really seek the guidance of the older agents. Our efforts at targeting Dave were rather simplistic, almost naïve. I never had a good game plan and we seemed to be playing it by ear, allowing Dave to drive the investigation based upon whatever crimes he willingly discussed.

I did, however, get an enlightening look into the bureaucratic world of the FBI. At that time, all first-office agents not assigned to what the FBI called the "Dirty Dozen"—twelve large offices the Bureau had trouble filling with voluntary transfers—were subject to transfer after six months in their first office. San Diego was not on the Dirty Dozen list, and sure enough, orders came through for my transfer to Los Angeles, one of the offices on the list. Even though I was directly involved in an undercover assignment and had successfully targeted a proven, righteous thief, Washington was unwilling to allow me to stay in San Diego until the case played out. The Special Agent in Charge of the San Diego office worked out an arrangement with Los Angeles to keep me beyond the six months, but L.A. was unwilling to

commit to an indefinite period of time. In fact, Los Angeles “needed” me as soon as possible for some undisclosed investigations being conducted by the “Hollywood” FBI. Despite efforts by San Diego, L.A. demanded that I report.

What made the transfer even more distressing was the fact my wife was seven months pregnant with our second child. Still, the Bureau was unrelenting. L.A. just had to have me and I had to report. We prepared for the move and I prepared Dave for my transfer.

I learned early in my undercover work to lie as little as possible. Cases are blown and agents get killed over the little lies, not the big ones. In my undercover role, I was married and my wife was pregnant. I stayed with those facts as part of my scenario.

One afternoon, while sitting in my undercover car equipped with recording devices, I explained to Dave the story I concocted. He knew my wife was pregnant. With tears welling up in my eyes, I explained that my wife had developed “inverted placenti.” The medical condition caused previous miscarriages and the doctors ordered complete bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy. In addition, I told him the most accomplished doctor familiar with this malady was in Indianapolis. It was going to be necessary to take her back to Indiana for hospitalization to save the baby. As a result, our near-daily meetings would have to be curtailed. Then I began to cry. Dave looked over at me, believing the tears, and patted me on the knee. With all sincerity, he asked me if I “believed in prayer.” I was stunned by the question. At no time in our relationship did we ever discuss religion.

I said nothing, but Dave went on. “I’ve been studying this religion called Christian Science. You can call them up and they can pray for you over the phone and heal you.”

I kept quiet, but turned my head away from Dave and bit my thumb, trying to keep from laughing.

“I’m seriously thinking of taking up the religion,” Dave said, “once I give up stealing.”

I bit harder, hoping my shoulders weren’t shaking—or if they were, that Dave would think I was overcome with grief.

But as I later reflected on the conversation, I was touched. Dave was genuinely concerned with the health of my wife. Few agents ever expressed such feelings to me. When I later shared the story with an older agent, he went running to the supervisor, expressing concern that I was getting too close to my intended target and might cross the thin, blue line. The agent was wrong. I wasn't even close to switching sides, but it also taught me a valuable lesson about being cautious in sharing my true feelings with other agents. It was just the first instance of the double bind I would find myself in more than once during my career. A comment misinterpreted by an FBI supervisor could end your undercover career just as quickly—though, admittedly, not as violently—as a slipup in front of a bad guy. As a result, I often couldn't talk to anybody about what I was going through. Naturally, I couldn't tell the bad guys about the stress of pretending to be someone I wasn't; similarly, I couldn't give my supervisors—or even the FBI shrinks I had to see every six months for mandatory psych profiling—the whole story about what a particular case was doing to me emotionally. In other words, whether I was sitting in a room full of bad guys or sitting at a table with my Bureau managers, I was playing a role for somebody. Only with my family could I occasionally and selectively allow my true feelings to show.

As my wife and I prepared for the move, Dave dropped another bombshell. He had recently “acquired” fifty antique clocks worth more than \$500,000, as well as gold, silverware, furs, and place settings valued at more than \$300,000. The acquisition was the result of a successful Tucson burglary. I expressed an interest and we began negotiations. One afternoon he brought several clocks to the undercover office, allowing me to examine them so I could determine if I might know of an interested buyer. Again, the meeting was caught on tape as I examined antique clocks valued at more than my entire net worth.

Dave floated back and forth between California and Arizona. Following this most recent burglary he invited me to join him in Scottsdale to view the stolen silverware and place settings. I flew over on

a Friday afternoon and that evening we met for dinner at an upscale Italian restaurant. Dave invited several of his mob friends to join us. It was a great meal with interesting conversation; each of the guys around the table tried to top the last with brags about criminal exploits. There was lots of laughing and good-natured ribbing, and as the dinner concluded I said I'd cover the tip. I threw a one-hundred-dollar bill on the table—which, by the way, earned me a butt chewing from a Bureau accountant when I got back to San Diego and vouchered my expenses.

One of the mobsters invited us to join him at his office down the street, where we continued our conversation. Our host was already pretty drunk, but once we settled in his office he pulled out a silver tray and started cutting lines of cocaine. I remember thinking it was like a scene from a movie, only this was real. He grabbed a razor blade and began to chop at the coke, breaking it down into several fine, powdery lines, each a few inches in length. I was about to face my first true test as an undercover agent.

Drug use by undercover agents is only justified in a life-or-death situation and I had never been educated on how to handle this problem. Remember, I was the guy who just raised his hand for this assignment. I never attended the soon-to-be-required undercover certification school, and I certainly wasn't interested in putting any powder up my nose. My head was spinning as I tried to think of a response that wouldn't "blow" my cover.

As our host continued to make lines of coke, he presented me with another problem: he opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled a revolver from beneath several well-read porno magazines. As he laid the weapon on the desk next to the tray, my heart began to pound. I thought for sure those around the table could hear the deafening thumps now roaring in my ears. I did my best imitation of a nonchalant onlooker, but inside I knew I was walking through a minefield.

Of course, there was a method to our host's madness, even if he was three sheets to the wind. If everybody did a line of coke, he knew no cops were present. One by one the guests used a rolled-up hundred-

dollar bill to snort the white powder. When it came my turn, I passed, trying to make my body language say it was no big deal.

But he didn't want to take no for an answer. He demanded I join him and his friends, suggesting only a cop would refuse. He then picked up the gun and pointed it toward my head.

With all the bravado I could muster, I looked him in the eye and with profanity-laced eloquence told him I was allergic to all "-caine" products. I couldn't even take novacaine at the dentist. "I'll do your lousy line if you want," I said, "but you might as well call an ambulance, because when that crap hits my system my heart's gonna freaking stop. Good luck explaining it to the medical examiner." Or words to that effect.

Dave, who was on my left and was next in line, came to my rescue. He wasn't about to put anything up his nose either. Our host relented and put the gun back in the drawer. I drew a slow, shaky breath, hoping everybody else was too drunk or coked up to care.

The rest of the evening was uneventful, and Dave and I negotiated a fair price for the stolen silverware, adding an additional count to the growing list of criminal charges.

Not long after the Scottsdale incident, my home phone rang, late one evening. It was Dave, calling collect from jail. He had been arrested for possession of a kilogram of cocaine and was being held in the Orange County Jail in Santa Ana, California. In light of his refusal to do a line in Scottsdale I was surprised by the possession arrest. Dave asked if I could help "raise bail." I promised to do all I could and immediately called my case agent. With a series of calls throughout the night, we were able to "raise the bail" to \$1 million. I know that wasn't Dave's intent, but you have to admit, we did follow his spoken request to the letter.

The next day, as we continued to insure Dave would not be released, my wife became an important part of the investigation. Although the FBI was not new to undercover operations, we lacked some of the sophistication developed during the course of my career. For one thing, cell phones were nonexistent at this time. The number I provided the

bad guys was merely a “cold” number at the FBI office subscribed to by my undercover company. I would have calls to that number forwarded to my home so there was no way anyone could identify where I lived, yet I would always be accessible. While I was in the FBI office, working with other agents on Dave’s arrest, my wife received a call at home. I had forgotten to stop the call-forwarding feature on the office cold phone, and my wife, unsuspecting, answered the phone. The caller asked for me. She said I was “at the office.” When the caller asked for that number, my wife had the sense to ask who was calling. The caller identified himself as a friend of Dave. Fortunately, she kept her cool and asked the caller for a number and told him I would call him later that evening. Had she not been so perceptive and instead given him the number of the FBI office, the case would have ended as soon as somebody at the Bureau answered the phone. My wife was developing the street smarts of an undercover agent. We also learned from that incident, and once we moved to L.A., we had two phones installed at the house. My children called them the good-guy phone and the bad-guy phone; I was the only person allowed to answer the bad-guy phone.

So there was Dave, my first undercover target, sitting in jail, no doubt trying to figure the circumstances by which his bail had gone up to a million dollars. As bad as his short-term prospects were, his long-term prospects were about to get even worse.

A subsequent search of Dave’s storage facility resulted in the recovery of over \$1 million in stolen property, including the antique clocks. Dave was sentenced to ten years in prison, after pleading guilty to charges of transporting stolen property across state lines. I never learned if he took up the Christian Science religion. And thanks to a very savvy case agent who negotiated the plea, Dave never learned I was an undercover agent. He and his associates thought I had slipped past the long arm of the law.

Operation Ruffcut, as we named the investigation, was only beginning and continued without me when I transferred to Los Angeles. Dave’s

arrest allowed me to bow out gracefully. We closed the Sorrento Valley undercover office and reopened one in another section of San Diego. Other undercover agents replaced me, targeting Dave's associates, and took the operation beyond anything we ever dreamed. Building upon my initial contributions and the continued outstanding work of the other undercover agents, the FBI broke a major interstate theft ring specializing in heavy equipment, art, gems, and weapons. In addition, the agents identified a cocaine trafficking ring operating out of Denver; over thirty individuals were indicted when everything was said and done. I was saddened by my inability to be a part of that portion of the investigation, but proud of my efforts at getting the investigation started and allowing it to proceed with such success. More importantly, I had become an undercover agent and was successful in my first foray into the criminal world.

New York NAMBLA Conference

As we weaved through molasses-slow New York traffic, the ever-constant blaring of horns and what I assumed to be curses in Arabic from my Middle Eastern cab driver interrupted my mental preparation for the NAMBLA encounter, but the moment of truth was quickly approaching. He pulled up in front of Grand Central Station, and it was time for me to meet my "fellow" pedophiles.

I hobbled from the cab using my crutch—my cover identity involved being a handicapped, "grandfatherly" type of independent financial means—and began the long walk around the train station. Even though the invitation said we would be meeting at 6:30 PM in the lower-level dining concourse, I wanted to be fashionably late. I continued walking around the upper level, with its fifty-plus retail specialty shops, and admiring the 125-foot vaulted ceiling, painted to resemble the evening sky. I ducked in and out of shops as commuters hustled home for the weekend. They were seeking refuge after a long week of labor; my job was just beginning

I glanced at my watch; it was well past 6:30. It sounds like a tired,

B-movie cliché, but I really did say to myself in a barely audible voice, “It’s showtime!” More than twenty restaurants encircled the lower level, our prearranged meeting spot. I had no idea for whom to look or what to expect. Other than a few grainy photos of suspected or known members I found on the Internet, I wasn’t even sure I would be able to identify the group.

NAMBLA wasn’t the Mafia, so I wasn’t looking for Al Pacino look-alikes congregating in a corner. Nor were they members of an outlaw motorcycle gang “flying colors,” or an L.A.-based street gang like the Crips or Bloods, adorned in their respective blue or red. Instead, NAMBLA was an organization of men seeking to legitimize their sexual attraction to boys, and most members sought to hide their affiliation. What if I couldn’t identify the group? What if they had already identified me as a special agent with the FBI and this was all part of an elaborate scheme to expose me as an undercover agent? Even if that were true, I didn’t feel my life was in danger, not on this assignment. No, the risks of this investigation were far more subtle than dodging bullets.