1

I work hard to make myself invisible – a pair of jeans and old sneakers, a black sweatshirt and jacket, a woollen hat and Buff scarf – but the Harry Potter specs let me down. I've not got another pair. *Jesus*. I tell Jay. He smiles and says he was going to put me in 'uniform' anyways and tosses me a zipless grey hoodie. It has COBRA's snakehead logo and CHILDREN ONLINE BATTLING REAL ABUSE in large letters on the back. Explains our presence to local gangs, he says, who may otherwise take us for rival hoodlums. His wife, Saz, smokes non-stop. Our destination is a shithole.

'That's a lot of masturbating right there,' Jay says as he gestures at his 'paedo-pack' in the backseat. 'There's four DVDs in here with 20GBs of evidence and printouts of all the correspondence between the suspect and the hundred kids he "pulled in" to watch him doing it on Facebook.'

Saz tells me they handed this evidence to the police months ago, but the police never acted on it. 'Something isn't right about this predator,' Saz says, 'but police don't say what it is.' What they did tell us is not to 'sting' tonight's suspect because if we do, *we* will get arrested instead. It is why Jay will hold tight to his 'paedo-pack' seeing as we may need to do a runner.

Saz shows me a screenshot of the suspect's face. He looks young and Mediterranean. Has she told other team members that I'm there only to observe? I ask. Yes, she says and tells me not to worry;

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that she's told their security detail to keep an eye out for me 'so he knows to protect ya, just encase'.

Too anxious to do any serious academic work in the hours before meeting up with Jay and Saz, I scoured recent news coverage of paedophile hunting instead. I read about the suffering of families who were as stunned as anyone to discover what was happening under their roofs. I read about suicides following public spectacles of humiliation. What I didn't know was that at least one of these would be happening on my watch and nor that they follow an upward trajectory, from a dozen suicides between 2017 and 2020 to seven in 2022, and ten in 2023, not counting any unsuccessful attempts.[1] I read about cases of mistaken identity; about the suspect who bit the tip of a hunter's finger clean off. About how hunters themselves are vulnerable to attacks online and know it. About how they use Article 24a[2] of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act to justify a 'citizen's arrest' (a term that has formally been replaced by 'arrestable offence') and often do so inappropriately.

I read about a predator avenging himself on the hunter who exposed him by telling the police that she posts home-videos of herself abusing her own children, and so why not arrest her instead. So, the police came knocking one afternoon. She said the sight of the police at her door made her sick to her stomach and she barely made it to the toilet. Did the police not know that the predator had sworn to exact revenge on her, and that this is what revenge in the hunting community looks like?

I read about a survivor of abuse who'd helped to convict twenty-eight paedophiles only to discover a doctored photo that showed him calling for a lowering of the age of consent to 6 years of age. I looked at the photo. Frankly, the doctoring looked like a botched job: a slogan saying 'paedophiles are people' had been photoshopped onto a placard that originally said much the opposite. But the damage was done. Using Twitter, trolls called for the hunter to be hanged for his sins. In response to complaints, Twitter merely said that the trolls' actions hadn't constituted a violation of rules against abusive behaviour, so there.[3]

I wrote an email to the dean of my university department and also to my police contact, warning them not to be

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surprised if I ever fell foul of similar tactics and telling them I'd be out with hunters for the foreseeable future. The police were quick to reply, wishing me good luck and reminding me that I have their number should I feel the need to debrief anything I witness. My dean told me I'm crazy.

I cracked open the window ever so slightly as I drove to the small town where Jay and Saz told me they live. I hadn't been given an address and, after an hour of driving, pulled off the road to text Jay for directions. I figured that information would be dispensed on an as-needed basis and so bided my time, tuning the radio into a comedy programme to take the edge off. Half an hour later, I pulled into a suburban cul-de-sac to see Jay rummaging in the boot of his hatchback. He gave me the biggest smile and why not get in the backseat of their car?

During our drive they brief me on what will happen on arrival in London.

JAY HUNTER

I'll knock on the door and tell him that we're from a childhood protection team and is there any chance he could step outside so we can have a chat. At that point people usually go into shock and so that leaves you with a couple of minutes to do whatever you want to do, and once they start talking the real shock comes when they suddenly realise that we're not police. I will ask him if it's okay if I link arms with him and that the guy on the other side links arms with him, and so when we get their permission, and then we've got an arm each and he's not going anywhere. If he says no and gets agitated, then obviously we won't grab him by the arms but what we do is have me stand in front and Vince, our head of security, behind him, so they've got a bit of an obstacle in case they do a runner –

SAZ DECOY

When it's my turn I tell him that I am going to be filming him and if they start becoming agitated, I just reassure them that no harm is being done to them. And then I say, 'You will be arrested,' and I know the others take the

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mickey of me because I get predators to look at my face because while they're concentrating on me, they're not concentrating on anyone else, and so I keep telling him to 'look at my face, look at my face' –

JAY HUNTER
Tonight will be live streamed –

SAZ DECOY
Because police have done nothing for four months, but they've threatened to arrest us and so we're putting this out to the public because it's disgusting –

JAY HUNTER
And if they do decide to arrest me it's all out in the public domain and so we've got Vince to live stream my arrest –

SAZ DECOY
We call him the Facebook Flasher. They all get names because that's how you remember them. It's not the nudity that gets you. It's what they say they want to do to a child. And some things of the things they say they want to do; it makes your stomach churn –

JAY HUNTER
Remember that bloke we caught in Deptford?

SAZ DECOY
We got given the sting and I read it and, I'm not gonna lie, I was like, really? We're going out for this? But Jay said, a chat's a chat and so we arranged to go and pick him up at his house. The boys went up to the door and there was an old lady there who was his mother and said he was out with his wife in the town. We didn't want to wait for him to come back to the house because of how old she was, and we wasn't going to give her a heart attack or anything, and so we agreed to go into town and try and find him there. And so we saw him shopping in town, and so the boys approached him, and I took his wife to one side, and then while we were interviewing him, he actually admitted that he is a paedophile, that he's been doing it for many years. He said he was in a ring and named all the other people in the ring –

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JAY HUNTER
Then, when the police came, they said that the chat logs don't look much, and so I said that he's just admitted everything in a live stream, and that said he's in a ring –

SAZ DECOY
They released him the next morning. The detective laughed at me and said there's no real kids involved, and I said, 'Are you for real?' and then the detective told us he confessed because he was intimidated. I said, 'You clearly haven't watched the video, have you?' I said 'I want you to re-arrest him, and you have 48 hours before I put this out live'–

JAY HUNTER
So we put it online –

SAZ DECOY
I did give them an extra twenty-four hours just in case and put a warning on there to say this is upsetting because for people that are survivors, they was reliving what was happening to them. We were apologising that we had to put this out but if police do nothing, what do you do?

JAY HUNTER
As far as predators are concerned, they're talking to real children –

Tonight's predator has a particular compulsion: he likes being watched by kids while knocking one off and has been at it for over 300 consecutive days. Jay and Saz tell me of another predator like that, who filmed himself 'at it' with vegetables. Because of this, the decoy no longer eats vegetables and refuses to go down the vegetable aisle when food shopping.

'Fucking idiot,' says Jay, who's had to view all sixty-four videos in putting together the evidence pack.

Having left our car in the parking lot of a supermarket, we walk into a nearby housing estate. Jay tells us to stay out of sight as he and Vince walk up to one of the apartment buildings and press the suspect's bell. When no one answers, they push every single button on the intercom until told by one irate occupant that the suspect isn't

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at home and, no, he hasn't seen him around for a while now and, no, he doesn't have any idea where he could be, and could they please go away.

Not one to give up easily, Jay uses a trick of the trade: he phones the suspect pretending to be a package delivery driver needing to confirm an address. But the predator tells him he doesn't remember ordering anything and hangs up. So Jay texts him to say that the package will be sent back to the warehouse if he does not confirm his address. Jay says that the predator is onto us, and so the hunt is on.

'His brother was arrested a few weeks ago,' Jay says, 'and done for weapons possession and so our predator doesn't want to be found.' To hear that the brother has also been picked up is news to me if not quite the surprise I thought it would be to the rest of the team. They have long suspected that predators' families are often implicated beyond what they let on.

Jay meanwhile has other tricks up his sleeve and suggests we head back to the car for a sandwich and Red Bull and for him to talk us through Plan B. The popularity of VPNs had made it difficult to locate suspects, Saz says, but that there are no limits to how ingenious hunters are. Once, she says, they identified a suspect's location by way of two distinctive trees that were in a photograph by the predator posted online and, on the satellite version of Google Maps, had looked just as distinctive. On another occasion, they wore hi-vis jackets and marked off a bit of road and pretended to start roadworks while doing reconnaissance in a neighbourhood they were sure contained the suspect. On yet another they told everyone they were following up on an insurance claim for a road traffic accident and going door-to-door asking if anyone knew where a certain so-and-so lived. It is how we once ended up with a wife ratting out her husband, who happened to be watching TV in the living room behind her. The point is that they will do what it takes to get predators off the streets, Saz says, 'so they can harm no children no more'. She tells me all this as we walk back to the car.

Plan B involves a night drive across London to an address where, Jay says, the parents of the suspect's girlfriend live. There isn't much to be gained by trying the suspect's parents seeing they may be

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in on it, and so Jay figures we might as well aim for the girlfriend's family instead. Even if it means coming up empty-handed, her parents will want to know what their daughter's boyfriend has been up to. And so, an hour later, Jay and Vince knock on the door of an end-of-terrace in a neighbourhood like any other.

When a middle-aged man opens the door at last it's red faces all around. The woman we are here to protect isn't a young girl but the man's elderly mum, and no, she doesn't have a boyfriend, and yes, her last name is a common one in Greece, and no, he doesn't think it okay to take one's chances and turn up unannounced. To have found two women sharing the same name in a city of nine million isn't quite the discovery Jay had hoped it to be.

Police meanwhile are 'blue lighting' the neighbourhood. Jay, Saz, Vince and the rest of the team make their escape to regroup a few minutes later for smokes on a nearby street corner. No one is in a hurry to go home even though it is now midnight, and they all know it will take at least another couple of hours to get home. Police do a couple of drive-bys and, at one point, slow down for a closer look. One of the hunters makes a half-turn away from the road and towards a garden wall. 'Can't afford to be seen by the Old Bill,' he says.

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