

The Mysterious Case of Bill Gatston-

Bill Gatston washed up on the beach one day, many years ago, right outside the Sjøtelle lighthouse. The police report states he was found by Mary Gatston when she woke up and went outside around 6am to check for mail. She heard crying coming from nearby and assumed that a mother and her baby were having an early morning walk on the beach. According to Mary and her husband Bill this is not quite so uncommon. The lighthouse was located in quite the picturesque spot: the top of a hill overlooking the surrounding area, so it was fairly often that people came up from the town to have picnics or the like. Unfortunately, it is private property owned by the government and so trespassing is strictly prohibited. Mary had to deal with this a lot. She set off in the direction that the crying was coming from, with her prepared speech in mind politely telling them that they couldn't be here, that there was a very nice spot they could go just further down the shore where they could get just as good of a view, etc, but when she came into view of the shoreline she saw that there was no mother, no father, no brothers or sisters. It was just Bill, little baby Bill, couldn't have been more than one year old. He was laying face-up in the sand, dangerously close to the surf, each wave gently stretching out under his little body with each outmost stretch before finally sinking down into the sand and back to the sea.

The police arrived at exactly 7:10 am. Mary said that she didn't call right away because she was so shocked. She immediately grabbed the baby out of the sand, brought him home, woke up her husband and told him everything. It was the husband, Brendan Gatston, who finally suggested that Mary call the police. Sjøtelle is a small town,

insulated from the rest of the world by a fairly narrow strip of sea. The sort of town where everybody knows everybody else. The police department consists of just one man: Arnie Torvaldson, and from the documents I have found on him it seems that he does not have any official police certification or training. This is not too uncommon for small towns either. Usually a trained officer will settle in a town, train a few people to help out or be a replacement, but never finish the proper paperwork needed to make everything official. Things can continue on like that from generation to generation until the only truly deputized officer was at the turn of the century. What *is* unusual is that Arnie never had any mentor, as far as I could tell. From all accounts it seems that he just decided one day that he would be the town's police chief. Nobody objected, there was no acting police in town at the time, so he ordered himself an official looking hat and uniform from the mainland and got right to work.

Mary called at 6:45 AM, according to Arnie's write-up. She knew that Arnie wouldn't be at the police station so early in the morning so she called his house. She explained everything in a calm and collected manner, having had the better part of an hour to process the event. Arnie listened as if through a fog, having just been woken up. He politely listened to everything that Mary had to say, still laying in bed, and assured her that everything would be fine and he would be over in a just a second. Forcing himself out of bed he began his daily morning routine as if nothing were the matter, immediately forcing all thoughts of the phone call to the back of his mind. It was only until half-way through breakfast that he started thinking about it again. He couldn't quite recall if it was the tail end of a dream or if it had really happened. It certainly didn't seem very plausible, a baby washing up on shore, and Mary's tone was so calm and relaxed, it couldn't

possibly be real. Just to put his mind at ease he decided to go pay them and visit and make sure everything was okay, even though he told himself that it had all been a dream. Beyond the shadow of a doubt.

As I first arrived at Sjøtjølfjord, sailing in on the morning ferry, I couldn't help but think about myself as little baby Bill Gatston. I knew nothing about Sjøtjølfjord, I had never spoken with Arnie, but here I was, washing up on the shores near the lighthouse. About to become intimately involved with the Gatston family.

I had been assigned the role of leading investigator in the investigation of the sudden disappearance of Bill Gatston.

The first person I interviewed was Brendan Gatston, Bill's father. We sat down together in Arnie's office. I didn't have a space of my own, other than my drab hotel room and I wanted a familiar and relaxing environment for people to tell me their testimonies. Still, Arnie's office certainly wasn't my first choice for the job. It was very messy, papers strewn about everywhere. For a man who did no official paperwork (not being an official police officer) I wondered what he could possibly be doing to require so much paper. I later learned that he took notes on *everything*. Conversations he had, people he saw at certain times of day, places where they usually went, almost entirely mundane descriptions for every day of the year. While generally against police protocol, I could not officially punish him for any of it, as he is, as I stress, not a real officer. I gave him a good talking to-making clear the intricacies and protocol around police surveillance, but got no concrete assurance that he would stop. In any case his notes were immensely helpful in my investigation, when they weren't totally mundane.

Besides all the paper there was an intense smell of coffee and cigarettes, but not as if he had smoked and drank coffee in his office everyday. It was more as if coffee had been applied in a generous coating to every surface and cigarette butts built into the walls. I can only imagine where the stench came from, as I never saw him smoke.

So this was my environment as I sat down to ask Brendan about his son. I wanted the whole story, not just the events of that day. I wanted to who Bill was, what his family life had been like, his place in the community, every tidbit of information I could get my hands on. I was a total outsider to Sjattleford and needed to do a lot of catch-up very quickly. I started my tape recorder and let Brendan talk.

It's interesting to see how different people react to getting interviewed, especially on police business. The majority of the time, as soon as you press that record button on your tape recorder any sense of conversation is sucked out of the room. The other person, no matter how talkative they may be, will only speak when you ask them a question, and most of the time all you're going to get is a simple yes or no. Bill was the exact opposite. He didn't even wait for me to ask my opening questions: name, age, place of birth, that sort of thing. As soon as the tape started rolling, he started talking.

The first thing he said was that he never wanted to name him Bill. Bill was his father's name and as far as he was concerned it was cursed. Bill Sr had, in every sense of the word, lived a mean life. Born with nothing, he was effectively raised by the streets far away from Sjattleford. Grueling factory work from a young age had all but destroyed his back when he was twenty. Unable to find work he made a living scamming tourists and fools with various schemes and cons. Still, he never had much money, as it was always petty cash.

Bill Sr's best catch undoubtedly was Ada Wolby, a decently well-to-do gal from a prominent family. He lied and cheated his way into bed with her and completely sank her reputation by getting her pregnant, demanding a marriage, and immediately skipping town. Ada and baby Brendan moved as far away as they could. The tiny island of Sjattleford seemed just about as remote and distant as you could get. There Bill Sr would never be able to find them, the trail of debtors that he left in his wake would never catch up to them, and their reputation would have a fresh start.

Brendan lived a good life in Sjattleford. His mother got a decent job working for the government and Brendan met Mary when they were both eighteen. They got married a year later. Brendan took Mary's last name- Gatston, to erase the last remnant off his father from his life.

So why did Bill Gatston end up with the name? It was Mary's insistence. Several days before little Bill Gatston had washed up on the shore a call came from a hospital all the way across the country, near Brendan's hometown. They'd had a hell of a time trying to find any family members to contact, and they had actually called looking for Ada, who lived in the lighthouse before Brendan and Mary got married. Mary picked up the phone that day, heard the doctor say that they had unfortunate news for Bill Sr's wife. Mary had never heard her husband talk about his father, and only briefly about his mother. She listened as the doctor explained the various procedures that they had tried, the operations considered, the treatments suggested, all leading up to the fatal conclusion:

Bill was dead.

Mary nearly dropped the phone, not so much from shock but from confusion. Ten feet away Brendan sat in his recliner, newspaper in lap, snoring loudly. But the voice on the phone didn't give her any time to think.

"What do you want us to do with the body?"

Mary said the first thing that came to her mind. Throw it in the ocean. Then she hung up.

What else could she do?

Several days later when she found the baby laying on the beach the name must have burst forth from the back of her mind: Bill. Without consulting anyone, without telling anyone, without even making the conscious decision herself, she started calling the baby Bill. It just seemed natural. That was the end of that.

Marry and Brendan offered to take care of the child until its parents were found. Arnie did the best he could, I'll give him that, but after several months it became clear that it was a lost cause. If little Bill's parents were even still alive anymore, they weren't looking for him, Arnie said he filled out some paperwork with the Gatstons for adoption, but I never found any records of it. What did find, however, was an impromptu retroactive birth certificate for Bill Gatston, created shortly after his appearance on the beach. It listed no birth height or weight. No know parents. Unknown city of birth. The only line with any real information was the name. BILL written with a sure hand in bold. GATSTON tacked on afterwards, with a different pen, on a later date.

At the end of our first interview Brendan was kind enough to offer me a tour of his house, so I could see where Bill grew up, to which I naturally accepted. Needless to say, I

was going to have to get a look at the inside of their house someday, and it's much better to get a look with permission than to have to muck about with search warrants or the like. Besides, I wanted to get out of Arnie's room as soon as possible before the stench started seeping into my clothes.

Bill's room was very tidy and mostly empty. He had not lived there for several years, since graduating from school, and most of his things had naturally been transferred to his new residence. To tell the truth, Bill's old room may have been the least informative part of the house for my investigation. Far more helpful were the random alcoves and corridors where day-to-day life had played out for the Gatston family. Here were the curtains that Bill had accidentally set fire, here was the spot where little Bill had broke his ankle. Here was the cupboard where Bill tried to hide anything that from his parents. Each place had it's own little story, a brief view into what it had been like for Bill to grow up here at the lighthouse.

One specific detail stood out to me: many of the drawers and cabinets had padlocks on them. I asked Bill about this and he told me an interesting story. Bill, as a child, was quiet and a bit skittish. When he was scared he had certain places in the lighthouse where he liked to run and hide. Brendan showed me his favorite one, nestled in between an antique dresser of Mary's and a coatrack full of dusty old garments piled on top of each other. I could see why the kid liked it. It looked cozy. This was Bill's retreat when his parents had company over, or when he had done something wrong and was worried of getting caught.

At times, it was as if Bill was drawn to this spot by magnetism. It was his path of least resistance, his natural resting state. He liked it there. It was safe. Brendan wasn't so

keen on it. He worried about Bill, but he figured: what could he do? Bill was just a kid, and he'd grow out of it with time. Kids do lots of strange things.

Then one day Brendan came home early from a supplies run to the mainland. Brendan has a routine for everything. All tasks down to a system. Once every month he takes the morning ferry over to the mainland, buys certain things that he can't find in Sjøtjøtford, and comes back on the evening ferry. On this particular day, Brendan was able to find everything very fast, and caught the afternoon ferry back to Sjøtjøtford, even taking some extra time to pick up a cake for Bill, whose 8th birthday was coming up.

When he got home he heard Bill rustling around in his usual hiding spot and thought to surprise him. I hate to say, but I don't think I've ever heard the phrase "I thought I'd surprise him" and had it end well. There's a reason why invites say "RSVP" rather than "surprise me". There's a reason why surprise attacks are especially lethal. So, in the interest of time I'll won't pretend that's it shocks anyone that when Brendan quietly snuck up to the coat-rack that Bill was hiding in, holding his cake in one hand and pulling back the veil of coats with the other, that Bill was anything but surprised to see his father, and that Brendan was anything but surprised to find what his son was doing.

Nope. There was Bill, sitting on the floor, holding one of his mother's pearl necklaces. Torn in two so that he could easily grab each individual pearl off the strain and pop it in his mouth like it were candy.

And I'd have to say that the father and adoptive son were remarkably in tune with each other that day, for at the same time that Bill dropped all the pearls he was holding, only to go scatter across the floor, Brendan also dropped the cake he was holding, right onto Brendan. It must have been like looking in some twisted mirror. Brendan, mouth

agape, words falling out of his mouth to plop meaningless on the floor, part of no greater sentence or thought, just as Bill's mouth fell agape, either in shock or to explain himself, pouring out each individual pearl, once part of the greater whole that was Mary's necklace.

When Mary got home she looked through her remaining jewelry collection. Throughout his years of hiding amongst those coats Bill had found time to devour five pearl necklaces, two pearl bracelets, three sets of earrings, a silver brooch, and a pair of Brendan's cufflinks. They scolded Bill severely, making it clear that this sort of behavior was not normal, not tolerable, and certainly not affordable. As always, after being told off, he wept and went running to his hiding spot. The next day Mary checked her jewelry and found one of her rings missing. After that they put locks on all the drawers in their house. What else could they do?

In a strange way I feel like I understand young Bill though. Who, as a young child, wouldn't see a glistening shiny pearl, so perfectly round and spherical, like a blueberry or a piece of candy and not think it looked delicious? I myself could envisage a satisfying crunch to a handful of pearls, although I can't imagine them having a good taste. But I digress, that's not entirely the point.

I suppose I should talk a little bit about the incident itself. When I was assigned the case, before I even arrived in Sjjattleford, I was given the investigation folder containing all known information and leads so far. It was not much. A few witness statements that didn't amount to anything significant, a file on Brendan and Mary, a missing persons report. That

was it. No official documentation on who Bill Gatston was, except that he was apparently related to Brendan and Mary. No police connections in Sjøttleford. No leads on who to talk to. The most useful thing was a newspaper clipping on Bill's discovery on the beach all those years back. The description only raised more questions. Eye-witness reports said that there was a confrontation between Bill and another resident- Ms Beatrice Langsley, a long-time friend of Bill Gatston. What they were arguing about was not stated in the report. The two were talking in the middle of a common street, not yelling but enough to be a heated conversation. And right there, in total broad daylight, with people focused in on the heated debate between these two youngsters, Bill Gatston vanished into thin air.

The ones closest to the incident as it occurred said that it was very sudden, but completely undramatic. There was no bright flash of light, no puff of smoke, no crack of lightening. The most there was was something akin to a gulping sound before Bill was seemingly erased from existence. Nothing was left behind. No clothes or hair. Nothing. It was a complete disappearance. In one second there was Bill, looking rather flummoxed by the sudden confrontation with Beatrice Langsley, a dumbfounded look on his face. The next instant he was gone. There was no great sense of disaster or surprise, but one of mild confusion. Befuddlement. People stood around, blinking their eyes, wondering if it was a trick of the light. After a couple seconds people looked away and went back to their business. It may seem strange, but what could they do?

The only one to report the incident was Beatrice Langsley herself. She told the local newspaper, and the local newspaper told us, the police.

The brunt of the information in the folder was about Sjattleford. The town was formed in the 1800s by a lost Danish explorer, sailing down the western coast. Tired of following the coastline, searching for signs of civilization, he decided that he and his crew would land and settle on the small but picturesque spit of land that came to bear the same name as the town and the explorer himself: Sjattleford. The impromptu settlers beat out a decent living from the island. They planted orchards, grew crops, domesticated and raised cattle. Rumors even state that the local annual tulip festival that the island is famous for began during this time of colonization. Unfortunately, with no women as part of the crew the settlers had no means to repopulate. When pioneers from the Oregon Trail finally found them, 40 years down the line, there was only one man left alive of that original crew. He spoke no English, and the pioneers spoke no Danish, but he offered them the abandoned houses and farms, which they graciously accepted. The new generation moved into a village on the cusp of being a ghost-town.

Mary's family claims to trace their lineage all the way back to that last danish sailor. For the past nine generations her family had been born in Sjattleford and stayed for their entires lives. According to Mary, her family has worked as the lighthouse keepers for several generations, ever since it was built. Her mother raised her in the lighthouse and Mary naturally took it over when she retired. Mary's mother had been raised in the Lighthouse, and the same with her mother. Perhaps Bill would've taken over the lighthouse, had he not disappeared. I can't help but think that that was on Mary's mind when I spoke with her.

Mary was the second person I interviewed, after Brendan. Several weeks had passed since the incident, and I could tell that thoughts of her son still lingered in her head. It's obviously very difficult for a parent to lose a child, and sometimes in missing person cases, where closure may never come, it can be even more difficult for the families. A person may stay missing for the rest of their lives, or may be dead already, leaving the family to hold onto false hope for far too long. To prevent any readers from sharing the same unfortunate fate as I feared for Mary, I'll tell you right now: Bill Gatston never reappeared. Nor do I believe that he ever will, but I have my own reasons for thinking that, and I'll get to that later.

By the time I first interviewed Mary I had already spoken with Brendan several times. He and Arnie were my guides to Seattle during my first week there. He was gracious enough to offer the lighthouse as a meeting place for our later interviews, and so by the time we sat down together for an interview I had already talked with her a few times off the record. Our conversations weren't much, hardly going beyond polite exchanges. She seemed reserved, distant even, like she was always thinking about something else. Strangely enough, when we sat down together for her testimony she was far more composed, more focused. She spoke as if she had rehearsed what she was going to tell me for some time, but wasn't nervous, far from it. It was just that she had spent so long thinking about Bill and his disappearance.

The first question I asked was if she had been there when Bill had disappeared, a pretty standard question, I was trying to get the straight facts of the case, pin down a common story that everyone agreed on, even a simple version. Mary said that she hadn't been there, she had been out on the beach when it happened, but she had seen it.

Multiple times, in fact. For weeks before and after the incident Mary had the same dream. She saw Bill Gatston standing in the middle of town, talking with Beatrice Langsley. She saw the moment when Bill, flustered, and as if with a shrug, phased from existence. She saw everyone else who was there, could name them and give details: what they were wearing, what they were doing beforehand.

This wasn't the only dream that Mary was having either. She saw other memories of Bill, at different stages of his life. Every night he became just a little bit more transparent, like a ghost almost. On the night before the incident she said she dreamed that she was many years older, in her 80s. She went into town and there was Bill, standing on the street corner where he would eventually disappear. Bill didn't look a day older. It was the day of the Tulip festival and everyone was out. Everywhere she looked she could see people she knew milling about. They were all older too. She could see that some of them had married, some were raising families. She saw the faces of new children that she did not recognize. People were bustling about, all smiles, stopping by to chat or say hello, and there in the middle of it all was Bill Gatston, looking like the kid at the party with no one to talk to. Alone and scared. When Mary woke up she felt sick to her stomach. She went down to the beach, to the spot where he found Bill that day so many years ago. She sat and waited for the news that she knew was coming. Hours later, when Brendan found her and told her the details of the incident, that Bill had disappeared, she said nothing. She already knew. Had known for weeks. There was nothing she could do. She only sat there and stared out to sea.

The next day when I saw Brendan I asked him where he had been when heard about what happened to Bill. Strangely enough, before that moment, Brendan had been having a great day. One of those days where everything just seems to pass by without a hitch. He had slept in late, lounged about for most of the day, reading and watching TV. One channel was running his favorite movie, completely ad-free. What luck.

From what I could tell, life at the lighthouse could be pretty dull. There was very little to do at most times, but proper protocol dictated that somebody be there at all times, especially at night, in case anything went wrong. Brendan and Mary had to find ways to pass the time effectively and Brendan was the self-proclaimed master of it. There were piles of books scattered around the house, boxes of jigsaw puzzles in the cabinets, and Brendan watched enough TV that he could hold a conversation on just about any sitcom run in the past 10 years. He had a particular fondness for *Melrose Place*.

So I hope that sets the scene for when Brendan, still in his pajamas and bathrobe, picks up the phone from the local newspaper asking if they could get a quote for the story they were going to run tomorrow on Bill's disappearance. Brendan had no clue what they were talking about. Nobody had told them about Bill. Everyone had assumed that he'd know, that there was no way somebody else hadn't already called them and delivered the bad news. In a way they were partially right, since Mary apparently knew before anyone, even Bill. But poor Brendan must have been the last person in town to hear about Bill disappearing several hours earlier that day.