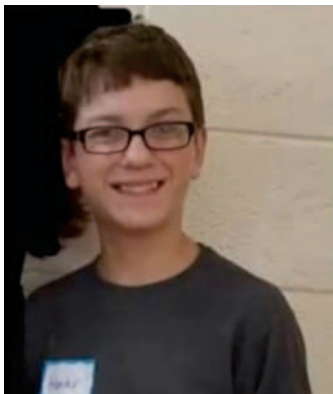


# Psychic Detectives and the Tragedy of Harley Dilly

An Ohio boy's disappearance from a small town around Christmas 2019 was a genuine mystery. It eventually garnered the attention of national news media—and psychics.

BENJAMIN RADFORD



Harley Dilly

Investigations into the accuracy of psychic detectives in locating missing persons are typically conducted by skeptics after the fact. One benefit to examining psychic detective information is that it's often falsifiable (when and if the missing person is recovered). A Tarot reader or medium, by contrast, may give a client generic messages about how dead loved ones are looking out

for them but rarely give specific information that can be validated. Predictions are rarely revisited and critically examined (by either clients or psychics), and in the rare cases they are, it's typically to cherry-pick and retrofit a few "hits" out of a sea of misses to inflate an accuracy rate.

I've researched many psychic detective cases over the years (e.g., Radford 2010), and in 2011, as a sort of investigational experiment, I followed a high-profile missing persons case as it happened. Holly Bobo, a young nursing student, had last been seen being led into the woods near her Tennessee home by a camouflaged individual. As the case unfolded, I gathered information not only on the investigation itself but also on visions provided by psychic sleuths about Bobo's whereabouts and circumstances. Several high-profile psychics, including Sylvia Browne and Carla Baron, offered information about Bobo, though—predictably—the psychic information did not lead to Bobo's recovery (Radford 2011).

Following a missing persons case contemporaneously has several benefits for an investigator, including the ability to document information both as revealed in press accounts and by psychic predictions; it also prevents the deleting or altering of incorrect information by psychics after the fact—that is, after details of the investigation have been borne out through police work or journalism. It is not hard to simply delete or retroactively tweak wrong information once the victim has been recovered, the circumstances are known, and a perpe-

trator has been identified. Missing persons cases are often literally a matter of life and death, and if there's any subject topic in which psychics could be practically useful and benefit victims, it's this.

## Harley Dilly's Mysterious Disappearance

In early January 2020, I began to follow news reports of a fourteen-year-old boy named Harley Dilly of Port Clinton, Ohio, who was last seen a few days before Christmas 2019, on the morning of Friday, December 20. Harley left for school shortly after 6 a.m. but never arrived and didn't come home that night. His parents, Marcus and Heather, assumed he was out with his friends, as had been the case before. But when Harley hadn't returned by the next night, Marcus called the Port Clinton Police Department. An extensive investigation began on Monday. The public was asked to look for him: a white male wearing glasses with brown hair, weighing 100 pounds and about 4 foot 9 inches. His disappearance was especially concerning because he had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism, though he was high functioning.

When asked about the delay in reporting his son missing, Marcus said Harley had previously gone from school to a friend's house overnight. Occasional family conflicts had led to Harley leaving the house and staying with friends, sometimes for a day or longer. He normally carried a cell phone but had recently broken it and was angry that his parents refused to replace it. Police questioned Harley's friends, one of whom described what Harley was wearing the last time he saw him: a maroon coat over gray sweatpants. Detective Ron Timmons said that they had obtained a surveillance camera image showing Harley crossing the street in front of his house at 6:08 that morning.

Because of the circumstances and Harley's disability, police soon called it a missing persons case. Parents, friends, and police shared alerts on social media and put up posters around the small town. After another week without success, the FBI was called in to help, and the story attracted national publicity, including on the A&E network and *Good Morning America*.

The fact that Harley hadn't been found yet led many people to assume he'd been kidnapped. After all, if he'd simply

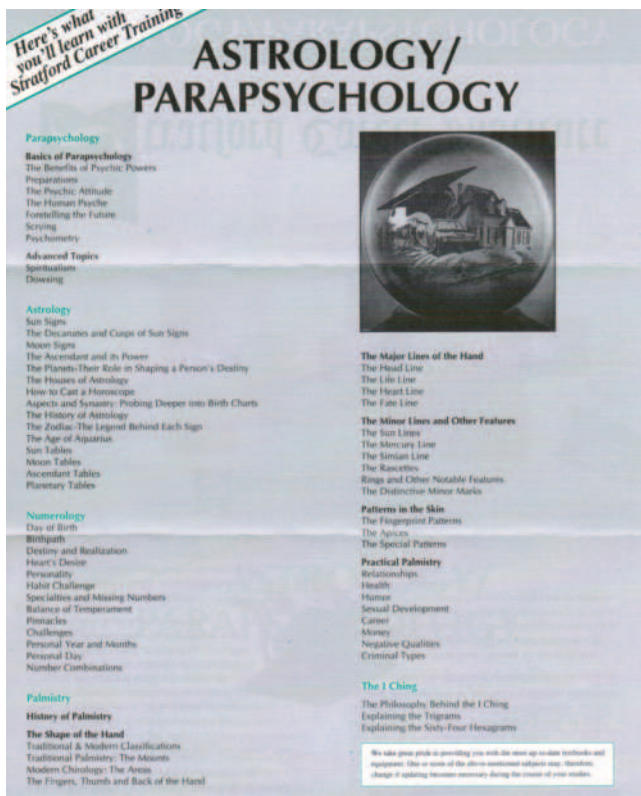


Figure 1. Stratford Career Institute coursework for Astrology/Parapsychology. From the author's files.

wandered away or been injured or killed in an accident, surely his body would have been found by that point. A fourteen-year-old boy on foot couldn't have gotten far alone, and in a small town he would have been noticed and recognized. Port Clinton has a population of about 6,000 people and covers an area of less than three square miles; it's on the shore of Lake Erie, and the nearest large city is Toledo, about forty-five miles away. An online poll in mid-January asked people following the case to offer their opinions about what happened to Harley. Out of the 185 people who responded, by far the most common assumption (nearly 75 percent) was that Harley had been abducted by someone he knew or an online predator. About equal numbers thought he had been killed in an accident, ran away, or committed suicide.

The search continued with tracking dogs, foot patrols, and helicopters. A \$20,000 reward was offered for information leading to his return, but the money didn't help. No one was holding out for cash; there just were no leads at all. It seemed he'd simply vanished, and it was a genuine mystery.

### Enter the Psychics

As the case drew national attention, the Port Clinton Police Department got tips from across the country. While rumors swirled and searches continued, several psychics offered information about the Dilly disappearance; the two most prominent were Jane Voneman Duperow (also known as Jane Voneman, Jane Voneman-DuPerow, and Psychic Jane) and Brian Ladd.

### Jane Voneman Duperow

The author of several books and a YouTube series, Duperow describes herself on her website:

I am one of the top psychic and Mediums in the U.S. because of my rare gift that no other psychic or medium has. ... My clients are 100 percent satisfied. ... I do Psychic readings and I listen to my spirit guides and higher power to help and guide you. I am clairvoyant, so I see visions, also I am clairaudiant, so I hear words or full sentences from your spirits on the other side. I channel your loved one's who have passed. My fees are \$100 per private consult and I also offer phone readings. I accept cash or credit cards. I can also help find missing people or objects. (Duperow 2020)

On her Facebook page biography, Duperow notes that she "studied Astrology/Parapsychology at Stratford Career Institute," graduating in 2005. Stratford is an unaccredited correspondence course school often described as a diploma mill. Stratford no longer offers the course, but I was able to find the curriculum in my files (see Figure 1).

Whether asked by concerned citizens to help search for Harley or prompted by a vision, Duperow posted this on her website on January 6:

He was walking to school the day he went missing ... I am writing this because I really want to help locate the boy with my intuitive abilities, so I am writing what I pick up in visions thus far: 1) Harley Dilly is on a couch gasping for air ... 2) Grey Ford vehicle; 3) My spirit guides said he took a half day off the day before and left during his science class, or something having to do with science; 4) Vision of a possible perpetrator is a man with a go tee [*sic*] and facial hair, good looking man, around late 30s, middle forties, mustache also; 5) Another vehicle involved, a Lincoln Continental ... he was put in this car, so he either went in this car willingly or was abducted.

In a second post, Duperow offered a much more extensive reading, condensed but verbatim here:

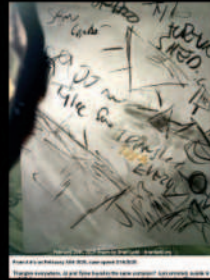
I have read for thousands of people per year and most of my clients say I am very accurate and I have gifts to share to the world ... I feel that something having to do with information from Harley's science class or what he did during half day around that class could help the police ... I picked up another vision of a white office building kind of up on a hill. The office building looked like it had black windows so you could not see inside the building. Kind of like the windows that they sometimes put in medical buildings. The building was a big one and then I saw the numbers 101. I felt like this was an office room number. ... He went with a man. I know this to be true because I saw a vision of a male when I meditated on it again. The man has a go tee and lot's of stubbles like he had not shaven. He was sort of good looking male and that is all I picked up on it as far as who Harley went with ... I also saw a vision of some cement blocks of some kind. Like four of them in the ground. The kind that are usually near water. ... I did see a vision of a boat, but I don't think he is in water, I feel that someone who goes fishing or knows boating though. This may also just be a vision of the search and rescue team ... I heard that the Psychic male [Brian Ladd] who does the drawings and art work is pretty good and had solved one case so I am stating that he does pick up accurate information. I did not match up with anything that he said, but with both of our work together possibly something may add up, especially the red truck that



Dream number 12734 15 February 2020 3  
psychic prediction  
652 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12730 14 February 2020 5  
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Dream number 12736 15 February 2020 5  
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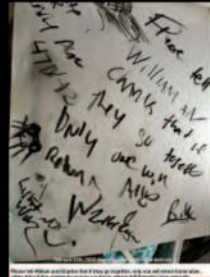
Dream number 12731 14 February 2020 6  
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208 VIEWS TODAY



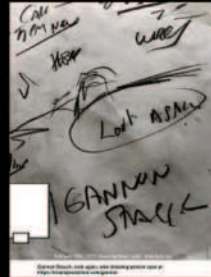
Dream number 12735 15 February 2020 4  
psychic prediction  
197 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12728 14 February 2020 3  
psychic prediction  
176 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12745 17 February 2020 5  
psychic prediction  
141 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12750 18 February 2020 5  
psychic prediction  
119 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12726 14 February 2020 1  
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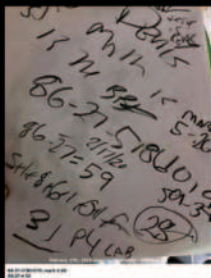
Dream number 12729 14 February 2020 4  
psychic prediction  
109 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12733 15 February 2020 2  
psychic prediction  
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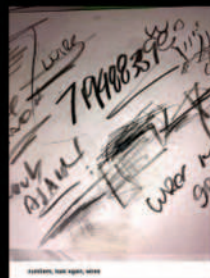
Dream number 12727 14 February 2020 2  
psychic prediction  
100 VIEWS TODAY



Dream number 12744 17 February 2020 4



Dream number 12752 19 February 2020 2



Dream number 12732 15 February 2020 1



Dream number 12724 13 February 2020 1

Figure 2. Art from Brian Ladd offering information about missing persons.

people in the town of Port Clinton now focus on lo'ts. He also said some things about Walmart. ... I did pick up the name Ramsey. ... I pray that Harley is still alive and safe and will return home.

In sum, Duperow offers visions of a gray Ford; a red truck; a Lincoln Continental that Harley was driven away in; an attractive male abductor in his thirties or forties with a goatee and/or mustache and/or stubble; the name Ramsey; science or a school science class; the boy on a couch trying to breathe; a big white office building on a hill with darkened windows; the number 101, which might be an office number; four cement blocks in or on the ground, possibly near water; a boat; someone involved with boats or who fishes; and a Walmart. She also endorsed information provided by another psychic, Brian Ladd.

### Brian Ladd

A biography posted to Brian Ladd's website states:

Psychic Brian Ladd uses his visions, dreams to accurately predict future events. His online dream diary contains over 20,000 documented dreams, lucid dreams, and remote viewing cases. To date, over 3,000 dream predictions ... have come true, with more and more every day. Brian has personally worked on hundreds of missing person cases since 2006 with a success rate of around 45%. Brian ... was diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder in 2011, and some say this "illness" maybe the reason why so many of his dreams have come true. (Ladd 2020)

A January 13 post on his website noted, "Harley Dilly case, I will be posting new dreams every day at until Harley comes home to his family."

Unlike Duperow, Ladd uses sketches and scribbles to depict his stream-of-consciousness psychic visions, prophecies, and impressions. He photographs and posts them to his website, offering little explicit interpretation but inviting visitors to his website to study them for useful information.<sup>1</sup> Ladd sometimes writes brief captions to the images he posts and, in two cases, offered seemingly specific information about the missing boy: a December 30 post says, "Harley Dilly, under porch, Walmart, more numbers" along with a crude sketch of what seems to be a male face (it's not clear if it's supposed to represent Dilly, an abductor, or someone else); see Figure 2.

He also posted an image of a second person with the caption: "This is getting serious and I'm going to do some more work on this case tonight, will have a map location tomorrow and hopefully, this man's full name." The implication seems to be that the person Ladd drew is Harley's abductor or at least someone involved with the disappearance. No name seems to have emerged, but on January 11, Ladd posted an image titled "Harley Dilly search map," including a Google map image with two circles on it, an area near the lake: "Data from 5 dream sketches last night ... this is the area that needs to be searched again ... it's in Port Clinton Ohio"; see Figure 3. In one post, Ladd writes, "Harley Dilly found safe, this is the



Figure 3. A map from psychic Brian Ladd indicating—wrongly—where he thought Harley Dilly would be found

place, the same place!!! Harley Dilly located, numbers, cctv.”

In sum, Ladd offers mostly ambiguous sketches and scrawls, but a few concrete, falsifiable claims emerge: that Harley Dilly had been abducted by a male; that the boy would be found (or had been) under a porch and would be located in or near the area Ladd indicated on a local map; that Harley or his abductor had some connection to Walmart; and perhaps most importantly (for the family and community) that the boy would be “found safe.”

### Harley Dilly Found

Harley Dilly’s body was found nearly a month after his disappearance, on Monday, January 13. He was in the chimney of a vacant house across the street, only a few hundred feet away from his home.

Searchers had already looked around the house several times, but as the home—a private residence being remodeled—showed no sign of forced entry, there was no reason to enter it. All the windows and doors were locked, and police dogs didn’t find Harley’s scent near the entrances. It’s not uncommon for later searches of previously screened areas to yield smaller, important clues. This is not due to investigative incompetence but instead how searches work: initial searches were for a teenage boy presumed to be lost or injured; searchers did not—and could not have legally—searched inside private homes (occupied or not) without probable cause and a search warrant. When exhaustive searches don’t produce results, you conduct a deeper and more narrowly focused investigation to see what might have been missed.

When police entered the home, they found Harley’s jacket and glasses next to a brick chimney and soon discovered his body stuck above. Police and the coroner determined that the death was an accident. Harley had been exploring the abandoned property and decided to climb on the roof, using an antenna tower next to the house as a ladder. Once at the top, he removed his glasses and jacket and tossed them down the chimney; they slid down to the floor and eventually alerted searchers to his body. He then climbed down the chimney—either for adventure or mischief—where he got stuck where

This investigation was done as part of my podcast *Squaring the Strange*, with cohost Celestia Ward and guest Kenny Biddle each tackling other missing persons cases; for more, see “Testing Psychic Detectives in Real Time: Parts 1 and 2” (episodes 116 and 117), and Biddle’s May 18, 2020, online column “Investigating Psychic Predictions in a Missing Persons Case” (at <https://skepticalinquirer.org/exclusive/investigating-psychic-predictions-in-a-missing-persons-case/>).

it narrowed to nine by thirteen inches, and he suffocated to death (Chiu 2020).

Harley’s parents were blamed by many on social media for having waited a day to call police. The time of death was difficult to determine, but it’s likely that he died sometime on Friday, the same day he disappeared. He was probably dead even before anyone knew he was missing. Hindsight is 20/20, but calling the police sooner wouldn’t have saved him.

### Revisiting the Psychics

With the circumstances of Harley’s death established, we can revisit the information and visions provided by Duperow and Ladd. It’s clear that none of their information saved Harley’s life or even helped anyone locate him after he died. Both Duperow and Ladd suggested that he was alive at the time of their readings and visions, but in fact he was dead long before they got involved.

All the information they gave was false: There was no abductor, no male with a goatee driving a Lincoln Continental, a gray Ford, or any other vehicle. Harley Dilly was not under a porch, or at a Walmart, or in the area Ladd had circled on a map. Nobody related to his disappearance was named Ramsey. There was no boat and no office building, with or without the number 101. The visions and predictions were wrong in every significant detail.

I interviewed Det. Ron Timmons of the Port Clinton Police Department, who was involved throughout the search for Harley Dilly. When asked about the role that psychic information played in the case, he replied:

There were several psychic tips that we received. None of those tips led to the location of Mr. Dilly. Several were followed up on to the best of our abilities. Sometimes with the tips you can’t follow up on it, when they say, you know, “it’s close to the water” or something like that ... or “it’s in a field” and they can’t give us any more information, so we couldn’t check up on all of them. But the ones that we could, we checked up on to the best of our ability. None of them led to any further information in the case. (Timmons 2020)

I asked Timmons about Brian Ladd’s Google map image describing where in the small town Harley would be found, and he confirmed that the department had seen it. “That was the wrong location. The location he showed was northwest, on the water compared to where the Dilly family lives, maybe five blocks south of the water, and it was maybe four or five blocks to the east of the location that he was describing.” Chief Hickman monitored social media and filtered through many people contacting the police with “claims and messages received from Facebook that psychics said this or that, and he would send them out to the larger investigatory group as part of our tips.”

Timmons emphasized that police don’t want to discourage anyone from submitting tips, regardless of their origin, and that they were indeed followed up on, to the degree possible. In other words, it’s not as if the police refused to consider or investigate information offered by psychics, and that’s why Harley wasn’t found sooner. Instead, the actionable infor-



Figure 4. The house where Harley Dilly was eventually located

mation *was* taken seriously—as all plausible and potentially useful information must be, regardless of the source—and the information turned out to be fruitless and false. When the psychic information is specific enough to follow up on, it turns out to be wrong. When the psychic information is too vague, it’s difficult or impossible to follow up on; the vague predictions were especially frustrating and useless. For example, as for the psychic vision that Harley would be found “near water,” Timmons noted dryly, “We’re on a peninsula, so, um ...”

In the end, those submitting tips about Harley’s disappearance were sincere and well-meaning:

They thought it might have been a benefit to us, which ultimately was not true. It’s like anything else, with the tips we received here. ... We’re getting [eyewitness and psychic] tips from all across the country that we have to follow up on. ... When you look at the tips, the guy [described as possibly Harley] was six foot tall, and our Harley was four foot nine, things like that. They’re all well-meaning people trying to help the investigation. (Timmons 2020)

After Harley was found, one skeptic replied on Jane Duperow’s blog, “Oof wanna take another guess?,” and Duperow did her best to salvage what she could of her reading: “I did see cement block as I said in the one paragraph” (Harley died in a brick chimney, not one made of cement blocks). She later added, quite remarkably, “Also I told the police he was in a house right around his neighborhood. I just forgot to list [it] in the blog.”

Amid the sea of unhelpful and flat-out wrong information about Harley Dilly’s disappearance, there’s a single detail that could possibly be interpreted as having been at least partly validated. Duperow said that the boy was “on a couch gasping for air.” This is of course factually wrong. Dilly was never on a couch gasping for air. But he was likely gasping for air in the tight chimney space where he suffocated. How impressive is this “gasping” detail (assuming we cherry-pick and blithely ignore the clearly wrong other half of this vision)?

It might seem like a hit until we consider all the scenarios in which a missing person could plausibly be gasping for air. These include Harley being out of breath being chased by his abductor; being strangled or drowned; having an asthma attack; being chloroformed, gagged, or placed in a confined space; or any number of other scenarios. Had Duperow said the boy was “in a chimney gasping for air” or even “in a tight space gasping for air,” it would have been far more impressive and useful.

In this tragic case—as in so many others—psychics failed when they were needed most, offering ambiguous, worthless, and simply false information to police and searchers. Most people would find it unethical to contact police with random hunches, ideas, visions, and “information” about missing persons, but people who believe they have intuitive or psychic powers feel an altruistic obligation to do so. Until and unless those visions are scientifically validated and proven, they do more harm than good. ■

#### Note

1. Brian Ladd’s approach of offering art instead of words has two effects. On one hand, it is more ambiguous than information given by many psychics. This ambiguity offers a far wider latitude for interpretation and thus an increased likelihood of retrofitted “accuracy,” because something in the pages and pages of shapes, numbers, scrawls, and so on could in theory later be seen as correct. A simple box shape could, for example, later be interpreted to be a field, house, barn, or other structure that a missing person was (eventually) found in, on, or near. Much of what Ladd produces is indecipherable scribbles and doodles, which police and searchers—even those who may believe in psychics—would rightfully dismiss as being incoherent and unhelpful. Hours spent trying to decipher what a line or symbol (or even a word) might mean are hours not spent on the ground searching for the lost boy. It also places the burden of interpretation on others, in the tradition of Nostradamus; the idea is that he’s the psychic genius who’s seeing divine truths and important revelations contained somewhere amid hundreds of scribbles and sketches—but he’s too busy or important to sort out the wheat from the chaff and make sense of it. By Ladd’s own admission, he’s 45 percent accurate in his information locating missing persons. Taking him at his word, even if what he says is true—and it clearly is not—over half the time he’s wrong.

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