

THE PUSHER

John Boston

Detective Mike Rhodes got the call at 1:38 PM on Wednesday afternoon. He was one of four homicide investigators in his precinct. He was also the only certified Traffic Homicide Investigator in the LAPD. Most of the time all he did was sign off on the officer on scene's investigation. They were usually pretty cut and dry. The call was 10-56, a suspected suicide. An elderly woman just stepped out in front of traffic on the busy intersection at Sepulvada and Sherman Way. Rhodes had actually been to the same location only two weeks before to investigate a fatal accident. He ran code until he got there about fifteen minutes later. He arrived on the scene and met up with Sgt. Bannister from Van Nuys PD. He met him two weeks ago when they were both filling out paperwork for the fatal accident. Bannister saw him and waved him over.

"Sgt Bannister, how are you?" he said and shook his hand.

"Mike, we got a good one here. Most of the woman's body is here, the rest of it is down the street. We had to shut down the intersection. We have fifty units here trying to handle traffic and control the chaos."

"What the hell happened?"

"Well, that depends on who you talk to. The victim was Janice Shaw. Seems Miss Shaw was standing at the intersection waiting for the crosswalk sign to change and she stepped out into traffic. Three people were waiting to cross, including the victim. One guy says she just stepped out into traffic. The other guy swears she was pushed. He said she was pushed from behind right into an oncoming bus from Metro. She was killed almost instantly."

"Jesus. Do you have any camera footage?"

"Yeah, our IT guys are trying to pull it right now. LADOT has to do its investigation. They haven't even arrived yet." said Bannister

"Where's the driver?"

"She's over there. Obviously, she's in pretty bad shape. She swears the victim just jumped out in front of her bus."

"LADOT is going to take her for her drug test I assume," said Mike

"Yes, just as soon as they get here."

"Well, I guess it was either suicide or murder. Either way, this pace is going to be a nightmare with rush hour traffic."

"We've got traffic routed around the block. I didn't want to move the body until you got here."

"I'll go talk to the driver."

Mike did his best to calm her down. She was a mess. Between cigarettes and hysterical sobbing, there wasn't much she could say. Her name was Jackie Hermosa, she had been driving without incident for Metro for nearly five years.

"Jackie, this is very important. Did she step out in front of the bus, or was she pushed?"

"You know, my first thought was that somebody pushed her. I really think somebody did push her. I didn't have time to hit the brakes before she went under the bus. Is she dead?"

"Yes, she is."

She broke down into sobs and hugged Mike. He waited with her until her supervisors showed up. He had to get the ball rolling and quickly. He scoured the scene for any evidence. When he couldn't find any, he decided to interview the two witnesses.

One of them was holding a birthday cake for his mother and admitted he was looking at a new corvette as it drove by. He wasn't even looking in her direction.

The other witness said he was watching a homeless man approach them when the incident happened but said he saw her literally dive out in front of the bus out of the corner of his eye.

"But you said she was pushed?"

"Yeah, there's a difference between being pushed and just stepping out in front of something. The way she reacted, it was like she was pushed. It was very.....uncoordinated."

"Well, there were only two of you here. If you didn't push her and neither did you, then who the hell did?"

"There was someone else standing with us on the sidewalk. I only saw him for a split second. He was a small guy but stocky. He was wearing a hoodie, so I couldn't see his face."

"A hoodie? It's almost ninety degrees out here? Where did he go?"

"I don't know. He just vanished. I watched him go around the corner, then he just seemed to vanish."

"Great," said Mike

He walked back over to Sgt. Bannister and filled him in.

"Let your units know to be on the lookout for a small, stocky man wearing a hoodie."

"Did he push her?"

"I don't know. Hopefully, the camera will show us something.

It took Mike over three hours to do his investigation. At this point, it had to be treated as suicide. He took dozens of photos. Sgt. Bannister walked over to him as he was finishing up.

"Mike, the pharmacist at that drugstore just told me he filled the victim's prescription a few minutes before she was killed. He couldn't tell me what drug it was, but that it was for a very serious illness. I'm thinking she might have just decided to end it all rather than try to fight her illness. Who knows what other drugs she was on at the time of her death? She might not have been thinking clearly."

"I don't know Sgt. This one just stinks. We have two eyewitnesses who were only a few feet away from her and neither of them can really tell me much."

"Do you think there was somebody else with them on that platform?"

"I don't know. I've seen perfectly normal intelligent people tell the most ridiculous stories when being interviewed by cops. It's like their brain just short circuits or something."

"Our Captain wants us to get the street opened up as soon as possible."

"We should be good to go in a few minutes."

Mike knew he couldn't do much until he saw the CCTV footage. Bannister told him IT had pulled the camera footage and asked him to come to the Van Nuys station to look at the footage.

He raced over and met with some guy named Tom who handled all of the CCTV cameras in Van Nuys. They went into his office and started watching the camera footage.

"As expensive as these cameras are, I would think the picture would be more clear," said Mike

"They're designed to catch auto accidents, not people standing on the corner," said Tom

Mike and Tom watched the video a few times. The traffic was heavy. Neither of them could be certain she was pushed.

"Wait.....stop it at sixteen seconds and play it back, very slowly."

Tom did as Mike asked.

"Stop! Right there. Go back two seconds."

It was difficult to see, but Mike could see a small figure dart behind the corner. All they could see was that he was wearing a hoodie. Tom wasn't even sure he could see anything.

"I don't know, Detective. Even if you had a suspect, I doubt you'd get a conviction based on just this video. You're going to need a confession."

"Yeah, I suspect you're right, but at least now we know another person was standing on that sidewalk right before she died."

"Yeah, but we don't even know if they were involved."

"I think they pushed her. If not, why were they in such a hurry to leave?"

"I don't know. That's a good point," said Tom as he watched the video again.

Mike showed the video to his Captain and an investigator from the DA's office. He pointed out the guy in the sweatshirt ducking around the corner. Neither of them seemed too impressed.

"I don't know Mike. We can't see him actually push the victim into traffic. We spoke to the victim's family. She had fairly advanced bone cancer. I'm surprised she was able to walk the few blocks to the pharmacy and back to her house." said the Captain.

"We're going to need more than just this, Detective. Give me a suspect, give me solid evidence and I'll back your case one hundred percent, but right now, we don't have either."

"That person wearing the hoodie was running away. Why would you do that?"

"He could have had warrants. Who knows? I need some solid evidence. You're two witnesses weren't much help."

"We need a suspect and evidence."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get both. We're just going to have more dead bodies before that happens," said Mike.

Three days later there was another fatality, this time it was on Wilshire and Veteran, one of the busiest intersections in the whole city. It took Mike nearly an hour to reach the accident scene, as traffic had nearly come to a standstill. He ended up driving on the sidewalk for over a mile to reach it. Mike pulled up to the body and took a look.

It was nothing but controlled chaos. The street had been closed for over a mile in either direction. He knew he had to get to work quickly and get this street reopened.

Lt. Wade Anderson was the area commander.

"What do we have here Lieutenant?"

"A mess is what we got. The victim was run over by not one car but three. I don't even know how that's possible, but that's what happened."

"He's dead I take it."

"Deader than a doornail. I've got the drivers sitting over there. One of them doesn't even have a driver's license and the other claims he can't speak English, so good luck."

Mike interviewed the few witnesses that stuck around. His best witness was a German tourist named Margaret. She spoke excellent English.

"It happened so fast. There were about ten people in line in front of me, waiting for the crosswalk sign to go green. It looked like somebody pushed the old man into traffic. Maybe he just slipped, but it looked like he was pushed"

"How certain can you be that he was pushed?" asked Mike

"Like eighty or ninety percent."

"But not one hundred percent certain?"

"No, as I said, I wasn't really watching him. It happened so fast. I think that man over there was right behind him. He should know for sure."

Mike walked over to a man, who was clearly shaken by what had just happened. His name was Joe Sanchez. Mike had interviewed about Joe Sanchez's in his career, as well as Camila Sanchez and Jose Sanchez. There was nothing he could do. None of them were under arrest. If they didn't want to give their real names, so be it. He doubted any of them would be willing to testify in court. He just needed to know if it were an accident or not.

"Mr. Sanchez, can you tell me what happened?" asked Mike

"Oh, my God.....one minute the old man is just standing in front of me, along with everybody else. It kind of looked like he fell or slipped or something. He was only out in the street for a couple of seconds. That was all it took. That car ran into him at like sixty miles an hour. Then the next car and the one after that. I still can't believe it happened."

"So, did someone push him or did he just slip?"

"I don't know. It kind of looked like someone pushed him. That guy in the sweatshirt might have pushed him, but I'm not sure."

Mike stopped writing and looked up at him.

"Was he short and stocky?"

"Yeah, yeah he was. How'd you know?"

"He's a suspect in another one of these incidents a few days ago," said Mike

"You mean, he's just pushing people into traffic? What kind of an asshole would do something like that?"

"The kind that needs to be stopped immediately," said Mike

Mike filled in Lt. Anderson. There wasn't much to go on. It may have been a simple accident, or it may have been a premeditated murder. Mike took his photos and filled out his report. He interviewed four more witnesses who were not much help. Two said there was a man in a sweatshirt on the curb with them and two said there was no such man around them at the time of the accident.

"Mike, the victim has been id'd as 87-year-old James Honeycutt. He was wearing one of those RFID bracelets on his wrist," said Anderson.

"You mean the kind that dementia patients wear in case they get lost?"

"Yup. We found a dozen missing persons when they were wearing one. Hell of a way to go, at least he didn't suffer.

"Do we have any camera footage?"

"Nope. We have two CCTV cameras right up there that were both down for maintenance at the time of the accident."

"Of course they were. I'm going to take some shots of the victim and then we can have them take the body away," said Mike.

As many times and as many accidents as Mike had been on, this was the part of the job he hated. He moved the tarp covering the victim and took over two dozen photos. The victim looked like he had just been put through a chipper shredder. Mike told the EMTs to take the body to the county morgue and told Anderson they could open the street back up to traffic.

His investigation took less than an hour. He went back to his office and uploaded the photos from his phone into the correct documents. He just couldn't shake the feeling that there was more going on than just a simple traffic accident. The problem was, he didn't have any evidence to back it up. He completed his report the next day and his commander signed off on it. Mike had to rule it a simple traffic accident. The victim's daughter had telephoned Anderson's station and told them that their father had recently been diagnosed with dementia. The bracelet was on his wrist at all times, so he could be tracked. Mike had no choice but to rule it an accidental death. Even if he caught the suspect, it was going to be very difficult to get a conviction based on the evidence he had in front of him. He had to just walk away. He learned early on in his career in law enforcement that you weren't going to win every battle you fought, especially in today's politicized climate. If you went to bat, you had to make sure you were going to win. This was not one of those cases.

Three weeks went by. Mike responded to half a dozen calls, but they were all for accidents involving motorists, not people in crosswalks. He got the call at 3 PM on Friday. His vacation was supposed to start in two hours. The accident was right in the heart of the city near the civic center, right near Bunker Hill. Two uniformed Sgts stopped him and told them they had a BOLO alert out for a suspect.

"Not much to go on. Short guy with a good build. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt." said one of the Sgts.

Mike ran over to the only witness. Mike thought he looked like he was homeless....or in between homes as it was now called. The man's name was Lynn Maltby, he had a state-issued ID card. He seemed focused and intelligent. Mike's first impression was that he would make an excellent witness."

"That kid was pushed. I'm sure of it. He would have pushed me instead of the kid, but I stopped to tie my shoelace. It probably saved my life." said Maltby

"Who pushed him?"

"That asshole in the sweatshirt. I took off after him for a couple of blocks, but that guy just disappeared."

"You're sure he was pushed?"

"I'm positive. I was looking right up at him. The dumb kid has his earbuds in and didn't know anyone was behind him. That guy in the sweatshirt pushed him right into a semi. He must have been crazy strong. the kid flew like five or six feet."

"Can you tell me anything else about the guy in the sweatshirt? Anything, no matter how trivial it may seem?"

"There was one thing. When I bent down to tie my shoe, I saw him walk by me. He had blood on his sneakers. I thought that was odd. I mean, why wouldn't you clean it off? They were expensive sneakers and they had blood stains on them. That's when I looked up and saw him push the kid. I kind of froze for a second after I saw him get hit. I never did get a good look at his face."

"Okay. Stay here. I'm sure I'm going to need some more information from you. Here's my card." said Mike as he handed him his business card.

"I ran after the guy, but I lost him in the marketplace around the corner. I sure wish I could have stopped him. He's going to get away with murder." said Maltby

"Not if we can help it, he won't," added Mike

Mike walked over to the small group of officers. There were two Lieutenants on the scene who were now handling the investigation.

"We have two dozen officers combing the neighborhood. So far, no one has come up with anything matching the description. If he's here, we'll find him."

"Something tells me we won't. This isn't his first rodeo. I think he's done this to two other people in the city." said Mike

The LAPD had to re-open the street and intersection. They didn't have much to go on as far as a description of the suspect. Two motorists stopped and both of them told the officers on the scene that it was difficult to tell exactly what happened. He could have been pushed, or he could simply

have tripped and stumbled. Maltby was emphatic that the victim was pushed. The victim, in this case, was only 24 years old and a student at UCLA.

"Look, I'm not going to lie to you guys. I do have a warrant out for my arrest. I've been hiding on the streets for the past two years. I think it might have been better for me in jail. I'm telling you this, cause I just couldn't walk away after seeing what that guy did. Nobody should just murder someone else and get away with it."

"I completely agree with you, Mr. Maltby. Thank you for your cooperation. Maybe now, some will start listening to me when I tell them we have a madman on the loose."

"Wait? You've been looking for this guy, haven't you?"

"I have, yes. He's wanted in connection with two other of these mysterious accidents."

"I hope you find this guy.....before he kills anyone else," said Maltby as he was put into handcuffs by an officer.

Mike spoke at length with the Lieutenant on scenes. He thought Maltby made all of this up as a diversion. No one else saw a man push the kid.

"Mike, the kid was higher than a kite, with his earbuds in. He wasn't even watching the sign. As soon as we had a description of the suspect, we flooded the neighborhood. We even had units on the metro rails looking for him. We didn't find anything. We can't stop anyone wearing a sweatshirt, we had to have more than that."

"Did he tell you the suspect had blood stains on his sneakers?"

"No, no he didn't."

"How do you want me to file this one? Is it an accident or homicide or undetermined?" asked Mike

"It's up to you, but my guess is that this was an accident. I've seen so many near misses in these crosswalks over the years, I'm surprised this didn't happen sooner."

said the LT.

Mike had a meeting the following morning with the top brass from the LAPD traffic division. He presented his findings. None of his superiors seemed too impressed. They weren't convinced this was anything but routine accidents.

"Mike, when I was a rookie patrolman, I was the first on scene at an accident involving some guy who plowed into a station wagon carrying a bunch of kids on their way to a soccer tournament. Killed two of them. I pull the driver out of the car and ask him why he ran into the other car and he just looks at me and goes: sorry man, I guess I fell asleep. That's what he said. People are dumber than dirt. They do all kinds of stupid things daily."

"Guys, we have multiple witnesses that all give the same description of a person who pushed the victim into traffic. I just find it odd that Maltby gave the same description as the first witness I interviewed."

"Mike, we don't have any evidence anyone was pushed. We don't even have any evidence that this suspect exists. We're understaffed and overstretched as it is. We can't devote any more resources to an investigation to catch a nonexistent suspect."

"With all due respect sir, I think you're making a terrible mistake. I think this suspect is very real and is going to kill again unless we find him first."

"How are we going to do that? Put a cop on every corner in the city?" asked a Captain

"I think this guy is going down a list. I think if we just put a few extra men on some of the busiest intersections in the city, we could catch him."

"Mike, that's not realistic. Look, take the week off. We need you to work traffic control for the Rose Parade coming up. Last year, we had a fatality on the fairgrounds. the chief doesn't want that kind of publicity again. Quite a few high rollers will be in attendance."

"I'm sorry guys, something about this bugs me. I've never felt this way about a traffic incident before. I just think there's more going on here than meets the eye."

"Mike, you can think whatever the hell you want to, just make sure it isn't in your report."

As far as Mike was concerned, this was a done deal. The decision had been made. Even with the eyewitness testimony of Mr. Matlby, he had to file it under accidental death. He was certain the coroner would back his conclusion. they rarely went against the lead investigator's findings. Mike was irate. This was not the first time he was told to back down and change his official report. He knew he had no choice. If he stuck to his guns, he'd have a giant target on his back. He was growing more and more dissatisfied with law enforcement with each passing year. He became a cop to catch people like this mysterious pusher, not gloss over his murders. Maybe a vacation was just what he needed. He just wasn't sure if he would come back after it was finished.

Three months without any more unusual incidents. Mike had been promoted to traffic coordinator for the LAPD. He would just sign off on traffic control plans for major events and work with local and county officials to handle traffic control. He wasn't sure if it was a promotion or a demotion. Either way, he was no longer investigating traffic homicides, which was fine with him. He was almost enjoying being a police officer again.

He lived in the business district in a loft that was given to him by his late uncle. He would most likely not have been able to afford to live in the city on what he made as a cop. All he had to do was pay the taxes and utilities. It even had its own elevator.

He usually took the metro rail home from his office. It was only a ten-minute ride. He worked late that night and it was almost ten o'clock when he arrived at the station. The next train would

arrive at 10:15 PM. He sat down on a bench on the platform and looked through his emails and messages.

He was always aware of his surroundings and noticed two very unsavory-looking individuals not too far from where a group of young ladies was sitting. Mike kept an eye on them while looking down at his phone. He saw them talking and pointing to the ladies. He had both his badge and gun and had done dozens of arrests in his first two years as a patrolman. The men both suddenly turned away and ran up the stairs as a third individual walked up behind the ladies. He could hear the train approaching the platform and stood up. The ladies were completely unaware that there was anyone behind him. Mike wanted the man to see him, but he was looking straight ahead at the ladies.

As the train approached the tracks, Mike began walking towards the ladies. He had a very bad feeling in his stomach that things were about to go south.....and very quickly. He had a feeling he knew who this individual was.....he was wearing a sweatshirt. He was either going to apprehend a killer or get fired. He was relying on his gut and nothing more.

"YOU IN THE SWEATSHIRT! LET ME SEE YOUR HANDS!" he shouted as he drew his weapon.

No sooner had he shouted than both the ladies spun around to look at him. the man in the hooded sweatshirt tried to push the ladies into the oncoming train. Mike had alerted them and they saw the man coming and tried to move. He did manage to push one of the girls, who was grabbed by the other girl, and regained her footing.

"I SAID, LET ME SEE YOUR HANDS!" shouted Mike.

The man in the hoodie ran off the platform and down onto the tracks after the train went by. He was running into one of the tunnels.

"Stay here. I've called for backup. I need you two as witnesses." he said as he ran by the girls.

Mike tried calling 911, but his phone didn't get a signal this deep underground. He knew he should just back off and call in for backup, but he just couldn't let this guy get away. Mike wanted to put handcuffs on him more than anything he's ever wanted in his life. He ran after the man as hard as he could. He knew it was crazy dangerous to follow him down a dark tunnel, but the ends would justify the means. The ends in this case, meant stopping a homicidal maniac. Mike watched him turn a corner. He slowed down and tried to catch his breath. He stopped for a moment before turning the corner with his gun drawn. Mike was now only ten feet from the suspect.

"You're under arrest, keep your hands where I can see them and get against the wall," he said out of breath.

"Don't you remember me, Mikey? Took me a long time to find you. Guess you forgot about me." said the man in the hoodie.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"No, I don't. Now get up against the wall or I'll put a hole in you."

"It was in the spring of 1984. You were just a little thing. Saw you holding a popsicle on the corner in Holyoke. It was just too good to pass up."

Mike froze. He was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts, but moved away when he was a teenager. How the hell did this guy know that? Mike lowered his gun.

"That a boy. So nice to see you again. I've been looking for you. Heard you were a big shot in LA, so I decided to come to find you. Thought I'd have a little fun while I'm here." said the man giggling.

"How do you know me?"

"Mikey.....you forgot already? didn't your parents tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Tell you about the accident. You were almost killed by a drunk driver. He ran right over you. Lucky for you. See, you were too small. The truck ran right over you and never hurt a hair on your head. You are very, very lucky to be alive. No one should be that lucky."

Mike could hear the sound of a train coming up behind him. He'd had enough of this guy. If there was ever such a thing as a justifiable shooting, this was it. Mike fired three shots and hit the man right in his chest. It didn't even seem to faze him.

"Mikey, Mikey.....is that any way to treat an old friend.....you know, it's true what they say."

"What's that?"

"You always remember the one that got away." said the man as he lurched forward and pushed Mike onto the tracks. He was swallowed up by the train and erased from this Earth in seconds.

Unfortunately, the girls on the track never did contact the police. they just figured there was already a cop on the case, so why bother? Mike's body or what was left of it was found days later by a maintenance crew. The driver of the train never even saw him as he went under. The mysterious man in the hoodie had vanished just as quickly as he had appeared. Los Angeles was safe.....for now.