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No place to hide?

An online manhunt ends when food, of course, gives man away in New Orleans

Sunday, September 27, 2009

Chris Rose

Part of New Orleans' mythic allure has always been its reputation as perhaps the best place in America to vanish without a trace.

Throughout the centuries, runaways, cons, deadbeats, fugitives, draft dodgers and serial killers have found New Orleans an accommodating location to drop out, start over or simply disappear.

The city's isolated geography, wildly divergent indigenous cultures, transient population and workforce -- and the flexible, sometimes non-existent moral, social and civil codes -- make for an ideal setting in which to fall off the planet.

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The question is: At the dawn of the 21st century -- this era of finely calibrated artificial intelligence, highly attuned and interconnecting technological systems, omniscient cross-linked databases and software tracking devices that pinpoint a freckle on the nose of a child from two galaxies away -- can a law-abiding citizen still go incognito anywhere on the planet, even in New Orleans?

Evan Ratliff thought so. A 34-year-old freelance writer from Brooklyn, Ratliff became an Internet sensation during the past month as the subject of an international manhunt that electrified the blogosphere and ended last week when he was "apprehended" right here in the Big Easy.

Ratliff's disappearing act and subsequent discovery were designed to prove a point, a very topical and somewhat disconcerting point: In this Digital Age, crime cameras, magnetic stripes, IP addresses, GPS devices and various software-tracking programs make it nearly impossible to as much as pick your nose without some computer somewhere making a permanent electronic archive of the incident.

In a historical context, this phenomenon used to be called Big Brother. Now, it's called Life.

As the "virtual" world expands with astonishing velocity, obliterating all boundaries that once offered individuals a modicum of privacy, the "real" world -- this physical space we so tenuously occupy -- gets smaller every day.

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Ratliff's adventure began with a story he wrote for WIRED magazine, a must-read periodical for the Net Generation. The story was about a guy named Matthew Sheppard, an Arkansas man who -- in an effort to escape looming debts and criminal investigations -- enlisted the aid of his Labrador retriever to distract his wife while he jumped into a river and faked his own drowning death.

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The story chronicled the difficulties of pulling off a vanishing act in the Information Age. Our every financial transaction, meal, car trip, text message or e-mail is monitored and electronically collated by gargantuan information systems, which makes it tougher -- and considerably less romantic -- to go on the lam these days than it was back in the days of Bonnie and Clyde.

As a follow-up to the Matthew Sheppard story, Ratliff and his editors at WIRED concocted their own modern-day manhunt challenge: Ratliff dropped out of sight. WIRED offered a \$5,000 reward to the digital sleuth who could find him within 30 days.

The contest rules stipulated that Ratliff would not go into hiding in a cabin in the mountains of New Mexico or somewhere similarly remote. He was to simply go about his unremarkable daily routine -- albeit with a little more travel and impulsive spending than usual. The point was to see how exposed and vulnerable our actions and whereabouts are in the conduct of daily life.

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WIRED published a photo of Ratliff and a brief online profile: "Likes beaches, dive bars, live sporting events and used book stores," etc. Readers were challenged to take this information, input it into whatever sophisticated computer programs they could access and track him down.

A seemingly innocuous detail in Ratliff's profile -- that he suffers from Celiac disease, which means he cannot eat wheat or any wheat byproducts (flour, for instance) -- would end up costing him his "freedom."

Wouldn't you know it? Food would be at the core of solving a real-time international spy thriller in New Orleans.

To win the contest, the pursuer had to take a photo of Ratliff and tell him the secret password that would indicate his capture. The password was "Fluke," which happens to be the name of Matthew Sheppard's black lab.

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Ratliff officially went "missing" on Aug. 15. His activities were immediately picked up by pursuers as he wandered all over the map. He started in San Francisco, went to Las Vegas, then to Venice Beach, Atlanta, Memphis and Salt Lake City, where he took in the World Cup qualifying soccer match between the United States and El Salvador.

Digital detectives had tracked him to the stadium; they knew he was there. What they did not know was that he shaved his head. He was invisible in the crowd and safely eluded capture.

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Thousands of amateur detectives joined the pursuit. And some real detectives, too: \$5,000 is no chump change.

Geek squads logged phone calls and text messages, monitored Ratliff's Twitter and Facebook accounts, intercepted ATM and credit card receipts as fast as he made the transactions. The widespread but anonymous acts of domestic espionage pretty much serve to confirm the growing sense that personal privacy is a quaint relic of the 20th century, kind of like black-and-white TV and rotary-dial phones.

Still, Ratliff avoided capture. His pursuers organized into a Facebook group called The Search for Evan Ratliff. While thousands actively searched for Ratliff, tens of thousands more turned "Where's Evan?" into a riveting spectator sport, signing onto their social networks for daily and even hourly Evan updates.

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Interest in the contest spilled into the mainstream media as cable news shows covered it and the pre-eminent social and political columnist, Leonard Pitts, weighed in on the matter, wistfully noting:

"In an amazingly short time, technology has utterly rewired our sense of what it means to be in touch," he wrote. "Am I the only one who finds it hard to remember the days when you'd follow a road just to see where it went and nobody knew where you were, nobody could reach you, and that was fine?"

As days turned to weeks, a group of employees from a software company in Seattle -- calling themselves The Vanish Team -- emerged as the most formidable search team. The company is called NewsCloud, and its primary interest is social network development, but they used the WIRED contest as a platform to launch a new software package with very impressive features: It could track not only what flights Ratliff was booking, but what seats he was sitting in.

.....
 Funny, but twice during Ratliff's adventure, he truly did seem to disappear completely from his pursuers. His phone and computer communications fell silent. His ATM and credit card activity ceased. No one knew where he was.


Not coincidentally, both times Ratliff succeeded in disappearing, it was in New Orleans. Early on in the contest, he spent a whole week here, reveling in his anonymity, undisturbed by teeming masses.

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Although slightly paranoid, he slipped into the languorous rhythm of the city. He perched on barstools at Mimi's in the Marigny and the Apple Barrel bar on Frenchmen Street, whiling away the afternoons and counting the days to victory.

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It should be noted at this point that if Ratliff was not found within 30 days, he would be awarded the \$5,000 prize.

"New Orleans seemed like the perfect place to disappear," Ratliff told me. "I kind of had this romanticized vision of it. It seems like new people are just kind of accepted into the fold and as long as you don't do anything wrong -- nobody asks you any questions."

To nudge the game along, Ratliff's editors at WIRED began assigning him tasks that would force him into public view. Contestants were able to monitor these communications. After leaving New Orleans but returning once more, Ratliff was assigned to attend a book reading. Any book reading would do; his choice.

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It could have been any book reading anywhere in the country, but a slight tear in Ratliff's cloak of anonymity began to reveal itself. The Vanish Team's insanely aggressive search software identified what seemed to be Ratliff's fingerprints in a Web site in New Orleans. It was the site of a pizza joint -- Naked Pizza.

The Vanish Team knew it was closing in when the software reported that the browser that appeared to be Ratliff kept returning to the Web site's dietary page . . . the page that explains the benefits of Naked Pizza's gluten-free pizza crust.

Gluten-free, as in: Wheat free.

They had Ratliff in their sights.

The Vanish Team contacted Naked Pizza owner Jeff Leach, an admitted tech geek who happened to be following the story online. Leach set up a 24-hour watch at the pizza shop on Claiborne Avenue, but nobody showed.

When the order for Ratliff to attend a book reading was posted online, Leach checked the newspaper. That night, New Orleans author Tom Piazza was to read from his novel, "City of Refuge," at Garden District Books. The reading was set for 7 p.m. It was 5:30. Leach drove to the bookstore and waited.

A scraggly looking guy came tooling up on a bicycle. He and Leach locked eyes. Leach drew his cell phone like a pistol from a holster. He snapped a picture. He said:

"Fluke."

The chase was over.

That was Sept. 10, the 25th day of the WIRED contest. Ratliff has had plenty of time to ruminate on the experience; he is writing a personal account of the adventure for the December issue of the magazine. Meantime, he considered lessons learned.

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"As for the big picture questions, I'm still mulling it over," he said this week. "I have learned that it doesn't take long for the creeping psychological trauma of a vanishing act to force you into a lapse of discipline that will get you caught."

The lack of discipline came with a distinctive New Orleans flavor: too much time on a Web site looking at pictures of food.

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Columnist Chris Rose can be reached at chris.rose@timespicayune.com. Comment or read past columns at nola.com/rose.

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