

# The 7 minutes of chaos and confusion that led to the police shooting of Juston Root

By [Dugan Arnett](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 22, 2020, 5:32 p.m.

It was a dreary Friday morning in early February, and as William Thompson, a Brigham and Women's Hospital security guard, radioed in an illegally parked car, he suddenly sensed someone watching him.

The stranger in the long coat had seemed to appear out of nowhere.

The man approached, seemingly agitated by Thompson's radio, and began to ramble nonsensically about law enforcement. He asked if Thompson was calling 911. At one point, the stranger opened his coat to reveal what appeared to be a handgun in his waistband — though, oddly, the gun seemed to be clear, transparent.

Soon, the stranger's mood lightened, and the brief exchange ended as bizarrely as it had begun: with the man extending his arm, clasping Thompson in a handshake.

The interaction left Thompson shaken, and so, as he watched the man return to his vehicle — a silver Chevy Volt — and drive away, he decided to radio it in to hospital security.

The call would spark a stunning series of events, seven minutes of mayhem that would shut down a hospital and neighboring communities, prompt an all-hands response from four law enforcement agencies, and leave a hospital parking attendant with a gunshot wound to the head. It would end with the man in the long coat, a 41-year-old with a

long history of mental illness and a habit of carrying fake guns, dead in a barrage of police bullets.

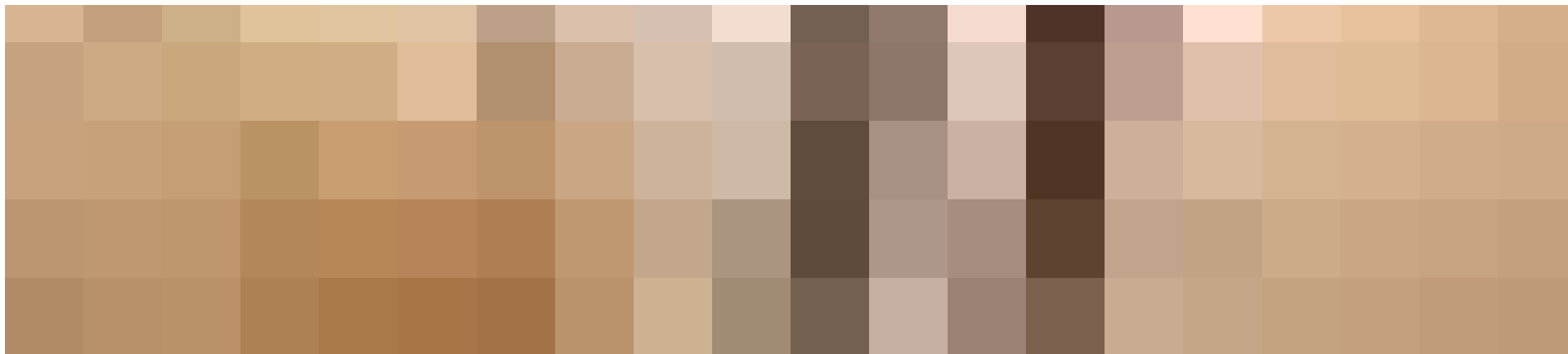
It would also leave some unanswered questions: What exactly happened here? And why?

Weeks later, Norfolk District Attorney Michael W. Morrissey sought to settle the matter, ruling the police shooting of Juston Root justified, apparently closing the book on the chaos of Feb. 7.

But a vast trove of documents recently released by Morrissey's office in response to a Globe records request provides the fullest picture yet of the frantic events leading up to Root's death, and make it clear how murky the circumstances remain. This account — drawn from hours of body camera footage and police radio traffic, as well as dozens of witness statements — intimately details a seven-minute stretch of confusion and misinformation, sheds new light on the mindset of Root and the officers who approached him, and examines the sometimes contradictory evidence Morrissey was left to sort through in reaching his conclusion.







Boston Police Department officer David Godin shot 41-year old Juston Root on Feb 7 in Brookline, after he pulled a replica firearm outside Brigham and Women's Hospital.

To cite just one lingering anomaly: Morrissey in his seven-page report concluded that “more than one officer yelled ‘gun’ ” before they opened fire. But in the documents released to the Globe, only one of the six officers involved acknowledges using the word “gun” themselves. That officer was wearing a body camera that did not record her uttering that word. Meanwhile, other police radio transmissions capture another officer yelling “drop the gun” after the shooting.

In the months since, many have filled the gaps of that day with their own sense of its meaning, a kind of real-life Rorschach test. To police, it is a stark example of the dangers inherent in the job — the very definition of justified force. To those critical of law enforcement, it is another case of overreaction by officers ill-equipped to deal with the mentally ill.

And to the family of Juston Root, it is an unthinkable tragedy, one that exposed what they see as police missteps, errors they hope will never be repeated.

\* \* \*

The police radio crackled to life that morning with a warning: *Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Look out for a man*

*with a gun.*

Around 9:20, Boston police Officer David Godin wheeled his cruiser onto the scene and saw a familiar face flagging him down, Brigham and Women's security guard Troy Askew.

Askew explained that a man had just pulled a gun on him.

Godin, a 13-year veteran of the department, circled the block and eventually parked alongside a silver Chevy Volt. The car was empty, but a witness pointed the way, and Godin took off, boots pounding the rain-soaked pavement.

Seconds later, as he turned a corner, he encountered a man in a long coat running right toward him.

"I'm law enforcement! I'm law enforcement!" the man yelled, according to Godin, and then tried to direct Godin to continue the pursuit further up the street.

Godin didn't move. And as the two men came within a few feet of each other, both warily drew weapons at almost the same time — Godin a handgun, the man some sort of pistol.

Godin fired, stumbled backward, and fell to the ground — believing, he would later say, that he had shot Root.

Across the street, another Boston police officer was just exiting his cruiser. Officer Michael St. Peter looked over and saw a man with a gun standing over another person he didn't immediately recognize as an officer.



Boston Police investigation of shooting outside of the Brigham Women's Hospital on Feb. 7. JONATHAN WIGGS/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Assuming the shots had been fired by the man later identified as Root, St. Peter ordered him to drop his weapon. And  
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/09/22/metro/shots-fired-7-minutes-chaos-confusion-that-led-police-shooting-juston-root/>

Assuming the shots had been fired by the man later identified as Root, St. Peter ordered him to drop his weapon. And

as Root ran past Godin, St. Peter opened fire, causing Root to crumple to the ground.

For a moment, St. Peter believed he had mortally wounded Root. But seconds later, Root pulled himself from the pavement and, limping badly, continued toward a nearby vehicle.

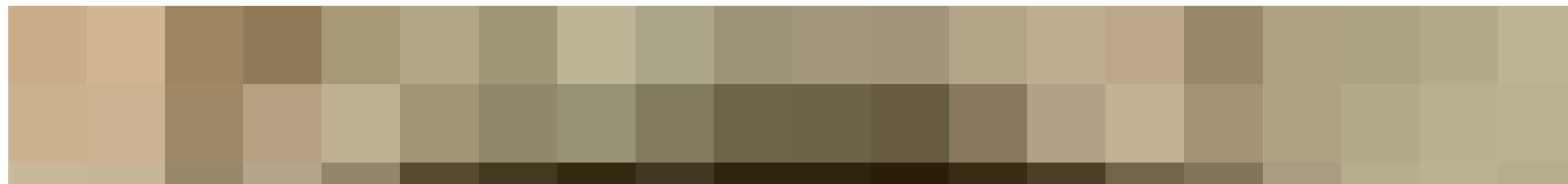
Without a clear shot, St. Peter watched as Root entered his Chevy Volt and drove away.

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In the hours before the strange and violent events outside the Brigham, Juston Root sat in his Mattapan apartment, stared into a camera, and expressed various concerns, offering a small window into the mental health troubles he'd dealt with for decades. The video was later discovered by law enforcement and included in the files obtained by the Globe.

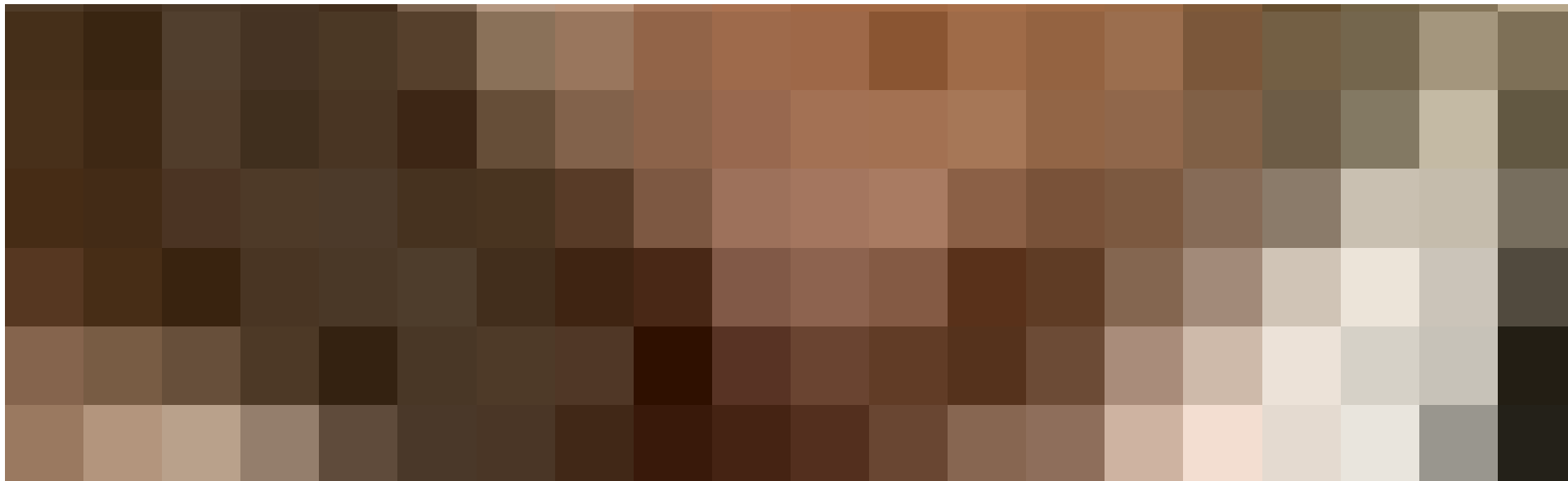
Root's issues had first surfaced late in adolescence; he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizoaffective disorder around the age of 19. Though he could go as many as three or four years without a flare-up, his sister Jennifer Root Bannon said, other times he struggled deeply.

More recently, he had become preoccupied with law enforcement. He carried a replica police badge. His jacket was adorned with CIA and NASA pins. A year earlier, he'd been treated by health care specialists after showing up at a Boston police station, claiming to be a CIA operative who worked closely with Vladimir Putin.









Juston Root JENNIFER ROOT BANNON

Now, as he spoke in a calm, lilting voice into the camera — sirens briefly blaring in the background — Root noted his respect for police officers and called for compassion in moments that someone might be in distress, rather than immediately dialing 911.

“Because . . . people hear things, and all of a sudden, [authorities] come storming in places, and they don’t really know what’s happening a lot of the time.

“And that,” he said, “can . . . cause a lot of bad things to happen.”

\* \* \*

Officer Brenda Figueroa’s heart was pounding.

She’d been eating yogurt in her cruiser, an hour or two into her shift in Mission Hill, when the call came in from dispatch. A young officer in her second year with the Boston Police Department, Figueroa flipped her siren and lights

and hurried toward the hospital.

She hadn't made it far when another call came across her radio: "Shots fired."

This type of dispatch sparks adrenaline, concern, resolve, fear. Across the city that day, it caused police to drop what they were doing and head toward the scene. Almost immediately, cruisers began to follow Root's car, officers glued to updates coming over the police radio, and primed for whatever awaited.

But almost from the start that day, the partial — and sometimes incorrect — information being piped out to police would cause significant confusion. In perhaps the most glaring inaccuracy, an unknown person reported at one point that an officer had been shot.

"I think he just shot a cop," someone can be heard saying in a recorded police transmission.

"He just shot a cop?" someone else responds.

"Yeah."

Figueroa did not yet know that the 15 shots fired that morning had all come from police weapons. She didn't know that the person wounded, a hospital parking valet, had been shot not by Root, but hit by an errant police bullet. Or that the gun Root had flashed that morning was, in fact, a plastic paintball gun — which police later recovered in his car.

All she knew, as police radios bleated with increasing urgency, was that shots had been fired, someone was hurt, and the supposed gunman was driving away.

Nearby, in another cruiser in close pursuit of Root, Officer Joseph McMenamy grew impatient. It was strange, he later

told investigators, that police cruisers were trailing him at just 30 to 40 miles an hour.

“It seemed weird to me that we’re just following him, just waiting for him to make the move,” McMenemy recalled.

Sensing an opportunity, McMenemy entered the oncoming lane of traffic on Huntington Avenue, which he said was unusually clear of traffic. He accelerated past the three police cruisers in front of him and pulled alongside Root, ramming the driver’s side of the small, compact car in what’s known in police parlance as a “PIT” maneuver, a pursuit intervention technique.

Though the move goes against BPD policy and is viewed by some as highly dangerous — since 2016, such maneuvers have resulted in [at least 30 deaths and hundreds of injuries nationwide](#) — it appeared, for a moment, to have the desired effect.

The Volt skittered to a stop, and McMenemy sprang from his cruiser, gun drawn.

But Root was able to push his car through the scrum of vehicles, and once again, he was off.

This time, he moved quickly.

Traveling west on Route 9 toward Chestnut Hill, he weaved in and out of traffic, flying through intersections at speeds reaching 90 miles an hour.



The scene along route 9 in the Chestnut Hill area after the chase and shooting of Juston Root. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Nor far behind, a half-dozen police cruisers gave chase, sirens blaring.

But as he approached the busy Chestnut Hill intersection of Route 9 and Hammond Street — some 3 miles from the hospital — he suddenly lost control.

Striking multiple vehicles, the badly damaged Volt spun wildly, flying sideways through the intersection and traveling 50 yards or so before finally easing to a stop near the entrance to a bustling commercial shopping plaza.

The door swung open, and Root stumbled out.

\* \* \*

The woman was unsure what, exactly, she was seeing.

Parked at a nearby Star Market, passing time before a doctor's appointment, she had just witnessed the tail end of a car accident. She then watched the driver stagger a few yards and collapse near a mulched strip in the Star parking lot.

A former EMT, she jumped from her car and sprinted toward him.

The man was clearly in distress. He was bleeding profusely and clutching his chest; later, she told the Globe she assumed he was having a heart attack. His eyes, she recalled, were rolled back in his head. She put her hand to his shoulder to comfort him. He was gurgling — the sounds, she believed, of a dying man.

When she heard sirens arrive a few seconds later, she thought they were coming to help him.

Instead, officers with guns drawn ordered her to run. One later acknowledged kicking Root to the ground.

“Get down!” Figueroa shouted at Root.

“Get on the [expletive] ground,” yelled another officer.

“Put your hands up! Stay down!”



A recording from a body cam of a police officer during the shooting of Juston Root. NORFOLK DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (CUSTOM\_CREDIT)

What happened next is unclear. Though Figueroa was the only one nearby with a working body camera, the footage is largely obscured by her own arm, as she pointed a gun at Root.

Days later, in their official statements to investigators, the six officers would say that they saw Root — in some position

between standing and on the ground — reach inside his jacket, near his chest. Some would say they saw what appeared to be a gun.

Three would say they heard officers command Root to drop the gun. “We were all trying to beg him to drop the gun; ‘Drop the gun! Show us your hands!’ ” Figueroa told investigators five days later — though no such command can be heard in her body camera footage.

One civilian witness — an employee of a concrete company who’d pulled into a nearby parking lot — recalled hearing someone say “he’s got a gun.” Meanwhile, a doctor on his way to work told investigators he saw Root turn toward officers and reach under his coat.

Whatever happened on that patch of mulch in Brookline, it ended three seconds later.

Some witnesses would recall hearing only a handful of shots. Some, closer to a dozen.

In fact, officers fired 31 times.

\* \* \*

It took Norfolk District Attorney Michael Morrissey a month to complete his investigation into the shooting.

On March 9 — citing what he called “the consistent narrative of events” that emerged from law enforcement interviews, video footage, audio recordings, and civilian witness statements — Morrissey found that “the use of force by police in Brookline was objectively reasonable and justified.”

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Root's family, buoyed by a nationwide reckoning over police abuses, would go on to file a wrongful death civil suit in federal court against the City of Boston and six officers — five Boston officers and one state trooper — involved in the Brookline shooting. Among the accusations: excessive use of force, assault and battery, and negligent training and supervision.

The trove of documents released late last week underscores the messy nature of fact-finding in the aftermath of a police shooting.

State Trooper Paul Conneely — one of the officers who claimed to have heard someone shout “gun” before opening fire — told investigators that as he and Figueroa were handcuffing Root immediately following the shooting, he saw a gun in Root's right hand.

In her own interview with investigators, Figueroa said she couldn't recall where she'd observed the gun following the shooting. Two Brookline police officers, meanwhile, would say they witnessed the gun — later determined to be a BB pistol — fall from Root's chest area as his body was being turned over.

It remains unclear what kind of weight investigators gave to [these discrepancies](#).

Clarity, much less certainty, seems unlikely.

Of the six Boston police officers who fired shots that day, only Figueroa was wearing a working body camera during the shooting. When asked by investigators why he wasn't wearing his body camera, Godin, who shot at Root outside the hospital and in Brookline, replied, “I just didn't have it on.”

This answer seemed to suffice; investigators did not broach the subject again.

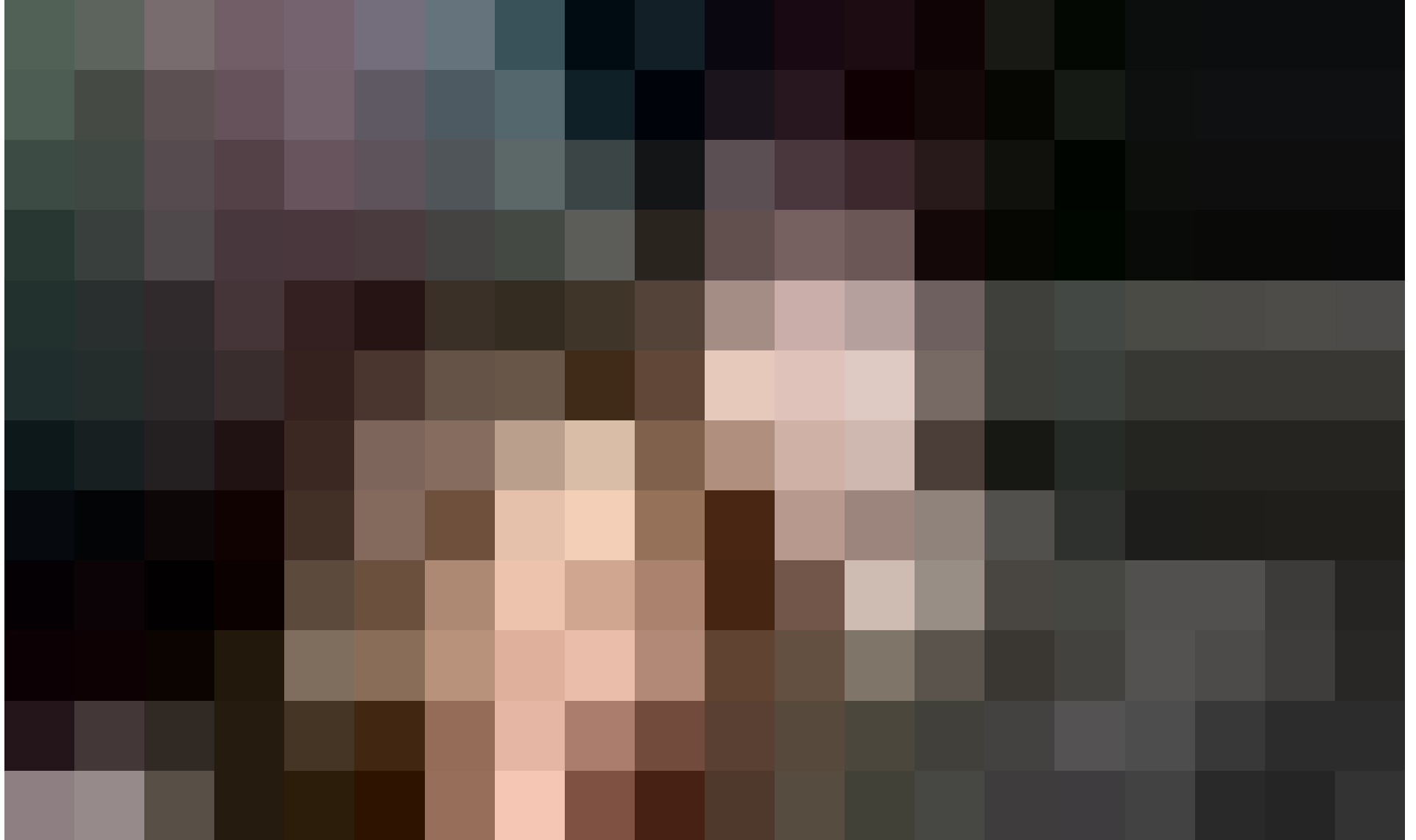


In a statement to the Globe, Morrissey's office said it wasn't possible "to identify and understand all of the words being shouted" amid the yelling and bedlam. "Some police commands are clearly audible. Other commands are reflected in civilian and law enforcement interviews conducted after the incident."

"The conclusions drawn and findings made were a compilation of the totality of the circumstances which included video, audio, police and civilian recordings and statements," Morrissey's office said.

The Boston Police Department declined to comment for this story, citing an ongoing investigation. Morrissey — facing calls from the Root family to reopen his investigation or turn it over for independent examination — has stood by his findings.

For their part, Root's family has been unable to move on, poring over video footage of the minutes leading up to the shooting, searching for insight.



Juston Root, right, and his sister Jennifer Root at her 40th birthday party several years ago. JENNIFER ROOT BANNON

“I still feel like I don’t have the full truth,” says Root’s sister. “I’m not going to stop until I have the full truth.”

AS FOR THE FORMER EMT, THE PERSON CLOSEST TO ROOT IN HIS LAST FEW MOMENTS, SHE WONDERS NOW THINGS MIGHT VE GONE differently. What if paramedics arrived before police? What if she'd been able to get to him sooner, maybe administer CPR?

She still remembers the last words she said to him, in those final moments before police told her to back away, before the gunfire.

"I just held his cheek as I was letting go," she said. "And I said, 'I'm sorry.' "

*Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report.*

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