



MURDER YOUR
EMPLOYER

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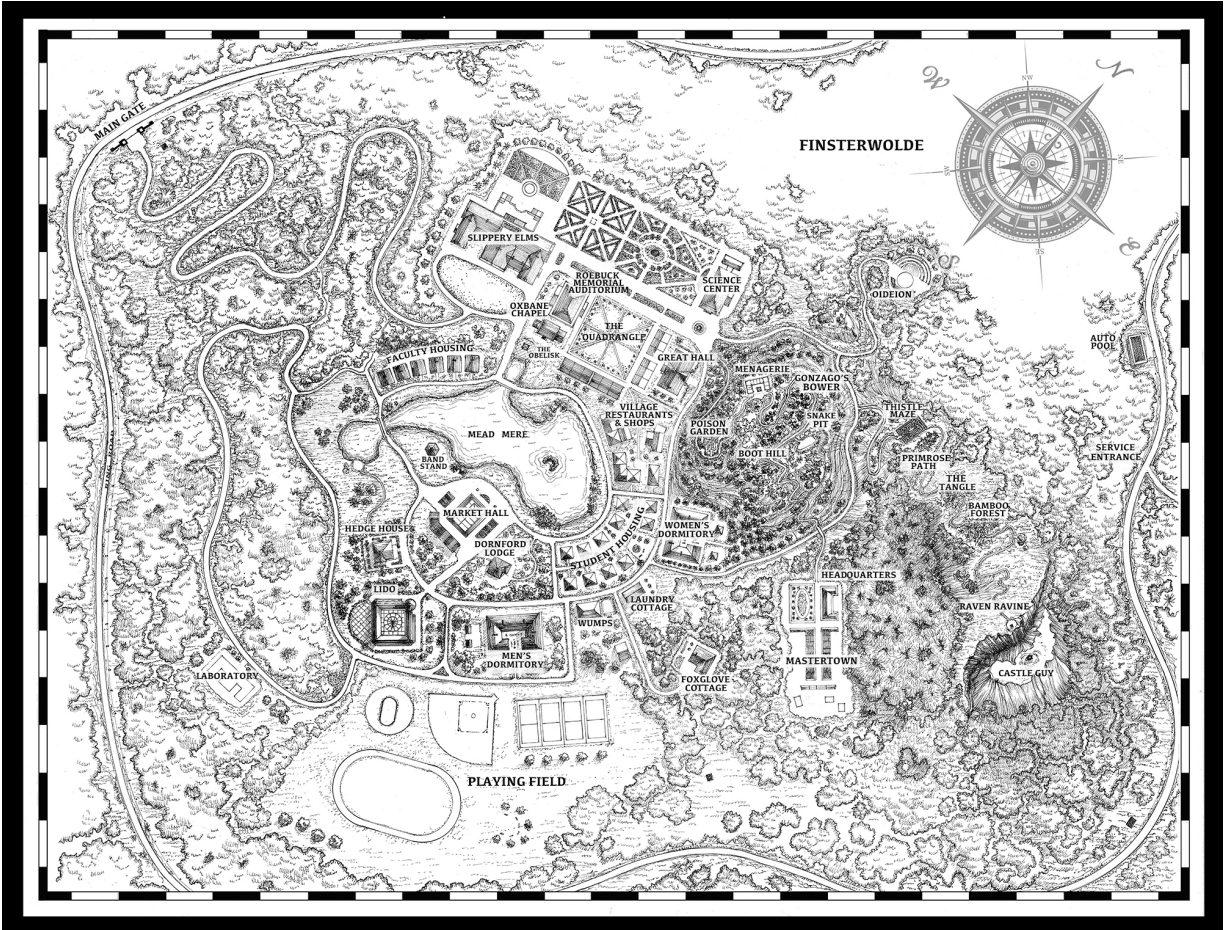
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THE
MCMASTERS GUIDE
TO HOMICIDE

RUPERT HOLMES

EDGAR AWARD WINNER



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THE
MCMASTERS GUIDE
TO HOMICIDE

MURDER YOUR
EMPLOYER

from the chronicles of Dean Harbinger Harrow

The McMasters Conservatory for the Applied Arts

Dean of Admissions and Confessions

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To the Unknown Deletist

Long may you never receive the credit you so richly deserve

Terms of the Applied Arts

DELETION Our preferred term for “murder” [*vulg.*], although some younger staff have lately adopted “omission” as less austere. Note that while “to delete” is our verb of choice, we do not use “to omit” as an alternative.

EXECUTIVE Preferred term for the individual whose deletion (as in “execution” [*vulg.*]) is due to your initiative. We believe the term “victim” is far too subjective and may not fairly take into account your history and motivation. Although scholars may occasionally use the word for the sake of clarity in a lecture or textbook (such as this), we discourage it in conversation, for if one’s conversation has been recorded, the word “executive” sounds infinitely preferable to “victim” when played back in a court of law. Please note that **TARGET** is also acceptable.

EXECUTOR This means you, if all goes as intended. Please note that McMasters places the stress on the second syllable (“ex-ZEK-cu-tor”). Nothing betrays a novice on campus more than calling themselves an “ex-e-CU-ter.” This is appropriate only if you hope to be a cowboy.

DELETIST A McMasters graduate whom the conservatory has deemed capable and worthy of performing their target’s deletion, or who has already successfully done so.

HOMICIDALIST An unacknowledged executor of the past who managed to succeed in his or her deletion(s) despite the lack of a McMasters education. These noteworthy but regrettably unnoted

amateurs have been given posthumous honorary degrees acknowledging their groundbreaking contributions. Distinguished names on this list include Mrs. Bess Weiss (Bess Houdini), Buffalo Bob Smith, first lady Lucretia Rudolph Garfield, Colonel Harland David Sanders, Her Majesty Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom and Empress of India, Dale Carnegie, and Joan Sutherland.

THE ENEMY This term is *never* used to refer to your target. Rather, it applies to those forces who conspire against the McMasters graduate. Under this heading we include police on the local and state level, the office of the district attorney, and scientists and technicians working in forensic laboratories other than our own. We do refrain from using this term in reference to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as we count so many of their number as alumni.



Death is better than slavery.

—Harriet Ann Jacobs
Author and abolitionist

Agreed. But whose death?

—R. M. Tarrant
Dean of McMasters, 1937–41

*It is simplicity itself to fire one's employer. All it takes is some
kindling and a match.*

—Guy McMaster
Founder

Foreword

So you've decided to commit a murder.

Congratulations. Simply by purchasing this volume, you've already taken the all-important first step toward a successful homicide of which you can be proud, one that would gain you the admiration of your peers, were they ever to learn of it.

This book will see to it that they don't.

Until now, the first-time deletist had few options beyond stumbling blindly in full view of the law. For the sincere and well-intended amateur, courses of study (not to mention the most basic of textbooks and tables) were unheard of. Ask any librarian for a book on criminal investigation and you will be cheerfully directed to 363.2, where sturdy volumes on forensic science and the analysis of evidence await. Ask the same librarian for a book on how to facilitate the demise of your CPA and you will be warily directed toward the exit—or more likely, a security guard will be directed toward you.

Considering the consequences of failure, the McMasters Conservatory for the Applied Arts has for years been the only sensible path for the aspiring expirer. Yet up through the present day the McMasters discipline has been out of reach for all but the well-to-do. After all, it's difficult to obtain a student loan for a school that not only denies its own existence but teaches its students how to deny other people theirs.

Lamentably, McMasters receives no underwriting from such often-generous sources as the United States government, despite so many of our alumni being highly placed there. Thus, McMasters is forced to go it alone, a necessity regrettably reflected in our tuition fees.

On the plus side, room and board at the conservatory has long maintained a coveted (if unpublished) three-star rating in *Le Guide Michelin*.

For years I have urged our trustees to allow me to share some of the basic tenets of McMasters with select members of the discerning public. Its existence in the form now before you represents a lifelong dream: that of placing in your hands, bluntly, an “instrument of peace” to facilitate a Rest in Peace for your intended target. It is my fervent hope that the lessons contained herein will take you beyond the realm of fairy-tale daydreams and help you achieve the true-life happy ending of a deserving someone.



Everyone says “I could just kill so-and-so,” and yet few do anything about it.

For those who consult this guide because you are not yet certain if murder is your best option, I would say that such a decision should never be made lightly. Homicide, after all, is a life-changing event, *not the least for your target!* Before moving forward, you should ask yourself what has come to be known at freshman orientation as the Four Enquiries.

#1: Is this murder necessary?

In short, is there no other remedy? How quickly some turn to what they believe is the easy solution without exploring alternate possibilities. Are you murdering your CEO without first attempting to woo his son or daughter? How foolish you would feel, having committed your “crime” with all its risks and travails, only to learn there’d been no need. This would surely be overkill, in the most literal sense of the word.

#2: Have you given your target every last chance to redeem themselves?

Search your mind. Have you offered your target the opportunity to change their ways and lead a new and improved life? You will sleep better the night after your

murder if you know that, on the day before, you gave your target every chance to wake the next morning. If they refuse to reform, you can proceed with a clear conscience. After all, when the behavior of another person leaves you no choice but to kill them, their murder is simply involuntary suicide.

#3: What innocent person might suffer by your actions?

Do not ask for whom the bell tolls. Ask who would mourn in hearing it. If answer comes there none, then more power to you (especially if you are planning an electrocution). But conversely:

#4: Will this deletion improve the life of others?

At the end of the day, when our work is done, may every McMasters alumnus be able to say that the world has been left a better place because their adversary is no longer in it.

If you can answer Enquiries #1, #2, and #4 in the affirmative and #3 with “none,” then I encourage you to read on with my full approval and the wish that our founder once voiced to me: “May the only justice you face be poetic.”



After much discussion and reflection, we believe we can best steer you down the weedy garden path of the McMasters Way by allowing you to vicariously follow in the footprints of past students. ***Be advised:*** Not all those figuring in these narratives met with success, and under no circumstances should you embrace any approach without first learning the outcome of their missteps. Among the success stories of death over life that follow, we also seek to show you where mistakes led to failure, for which a McMasters student can pay as grim a price as they ever intended for their target.

Since the anonymity of our graduates and staff is always a foremost concern, we will where possible avoid using the real names (or adopted aliases) of our

student body, even though in revisiting the mid-twentieth century—which many consider to be the halcyon days of dear old McM—most of those who might be at risk from such revelations are now well beyond the reach of the law. Where I am concerned, Fate has been unfathomably charitable, granting me health, time, and several bright-eyed assistants to help reconstruct the scene of so many crimes, with my own copious notes from the period bridging any gaps in my memory.

Bear in mind that hereafter I will be cloaking my normally ebullient personality within the guise of an anonymous third-person narrator (though I would be the first person to cry “’Tis I!” given half the chance). On those occasions where my narrative may seem to stray into the omniscient, revealing the inner thoughts or private moments of others which I could scarcely have witnessed firsthand, rest assured I am most frequently drawing upon both the shared confidences of those directly involved (often in my role as their faculty advisor) and the incisive reports of the conservatory’s recruiting and field agents. And where I write about those most odious to the McMasters *weltanschauung* (worldview), I will attempt to disguise my personal disdain by speaking in as academically detached a manner as I can sustain.

Some may argue that relating examples from the years following the Second World War does not properly prepare one to commit a contemporary homicide. To this I would answer that although the science of our enemy has advanced, the underlying principles of a McMasters deletion are as timeless as the haiku of Issa, the prison sketches of Piranesi, or Beethoven’s last quartets. Indeed, opening the door to the Golden Era feels like a gust of fresh air has blown away the stale, cold-blooded calculations of current forensic science or, as we call it, “stuff and nonsense.”

You should not be surprised if those who figure in this volume were previously unknown to you. We at McMasters take considerable pride in our lack of notoriety. Consider the legendary homicidalists of ages past: Nero, the Borgias, Dr. Crippen... even the unconvicted Lizzie Borden. Think for a moment. What do all these supposedly great killers have in common?

Answer: You’ve *heard* of them! Shame, and for shame!!! If you take away but one thought from this preamble, let it be that the successful deletist is the

unacknowledged deletist! I cannot begin to tell you how many McMasters graduates at this very moment illuminate the worlds of entertainment, sports, and politics. I cannot begin to tell you because if I did, they would all be on trial for their lives. It is a frustrating but necessary tribulation for our conservatory that we may never boast of our plethora of successful alumni. A common saying on campus is, “Wherever a murder goes unsolved, there goes a McMasters graduate.”

Not everyone is suited for this discipline. Some wish for glory and recognition. They crow of their crimes, write letters to the press, or leave behind any number of heavy-handed clues, simply begging to be caught. We shun and discard such applicants at McMasters! Should you yearn to be infamous or, masochistically, punished—despite all our best efforts on your behalf—then you should proceed no further.

In this volume we will explore a few delights of our labyrinthian grounds: the half-timber shops and dining spots nestled around the impressive Mead Mere Pond; our lyrical gardens of the decorative, culinary, and poisonous variety; our sparkling fountains and gleaming esplanades, sunny swimming lido, Thistle Maze, playing fields, quaint faculty homes, and the dense forest called the Finsterwolde. However, this tome is not intended to serve as a guide to the campus. (The popularly priced *Illustrated Guide* is always available at the Little Bookshop-off-the-Quadrangle, Mussel’s Tuck Shop, and the Student Union, cost partially refundable upon the book’s mandatory return at graduation.) Rather, it is my modest attempt to replicate the McMasters campus experience for those engaged in home study, via the experiences of past alumni as they came to first understand our methodology and perspective.

Let me close by stating with fervor (we do not like to use the word “conviction”) that along with the many practical lessons to be learned at McMasters, there are rich philosophical insights to be gleaned as well, whether you spend your time with us on the conservatory grounds or here in this volume. During the course of your tutelage, I hope you will come to better understand and appreciate the remarkable frailty of all life... and that you will learn to live each day as if it might be your enemy’s last.

Concerning the Focus of This Volume

In the billions of years during which Life—an indispensable ingredient to Homicide—has been teeming on this earth, from that momentous primordial dawn when one bold amoeba set foot on land with the intent of becoming either a chicken or an egg, it was understandable that the strong would have dominion over the weak. But in recent millennia, flying in the face of Darwinian precepts, we have evolved into a planet where the *un-fittest* not only survive but often flourish, holding sway over their betters in a social order where dim-witted, dim-wattled employers all too often lord it over their considerably brighter subjects. We at McMasters call this perversion of nature’s intent “the devaluation of the species,” and no modern pestilence is more pernicious in our overview than the Sadistic Boss. It is with pride that McMasters offers a powerful helping hand (or leg up) to those under the thumb (or heel) of such oppressors.

Thus, although the majority of Earth’s surface is covered in water, there are also a great number of shoe stores, many of which are staffed by one owner, one employee, and a person at the register named Jackie. Each night across the great globe, shoe-store employees return home to their mates and ruin each other’s dinner and digestion as they ritually review the latest indignities inflicted by the reviled owner-boss, a despot who occupies more of the couple’s conversation than Mr. Hitler occupied in the talks at Yalta.

Of course, repressed rage and seething resentment toward one’s ostensible superior is by no means limited to shoe-store personnel. It is the stuff of naval mutinies, prison riots, and convent life.

When discussions grow heated even as the fire burns low in the paneled study of the Faculty Residence, we frequently compare case histories of past disasters, triumphs, and near-misses in search of a unifying theory for the McMasters Method. At such times, I often find myself voicing the sentiment that in all of perdition there is no more unpredictable force of nature than the sadistic employer.

To quote Kipling: *We know what Heaven or Hell may bring, but no man knoweth the mind of the King.* It is important to remember Kipling, if only because none of us are ever likely to meet anyone else named Rudyard. And

nowhere in the McMasters syllabus is there a deletion that better embodies the concept of individual sacrifice for the greater good. Topple a despotic monarch in the days of feudalism and a hymn of thanks was sung by indentured servants across the farmland—from serf to turf, as it were. Such remains the case today.

In this volume, I have chosen three students from the same graduating class to lead you by example through the challenges and pitfalls of deleting an employer who lords it over you. Their names are Cliff Iverson from Baltimore, Maryland; Gemma Lindley from Haltwhistle, Northumberland, England; and a woman who for the moment we will refer to as Dulcie Mown, late of Hollywood, California.

We will commence with Mr. Iverson, since he was a sponsored student (his tuition being paid for by a patron) and as such, he was obliged to maintain an ongoing journal of his education so that his benefactor, unknown to him, could be kept aware of how Cliff's matriculation was proceeding (and his patron's investment was maturing). Because of this, we are luckily able to use entries from young Iverson's journal to share with you firsthand the experience of attending McMasters. We shall focus on Gemma's and Dulcie's unique experiences a bit further along in this volume. *A somber note:* Sadly, lessons taught by that cruel mentor Failure are often the most bitterly learned and vividly remembered. Therefore, I advise you in advance that *not all three students* exemplified here will meet with success in their respective missions!

I will add that one of these three arrived on campus with less knowledge of our conservatory than even you currently possess. For while you have displayed unerring judgment in selecting this volume, and clearly aspire to the McMasters discipline with premeditation and at least a modicum of malice aforethought, such was not the case for young Cliff Iverson, who began his studies here in a state of ignorance which I could hardly call bliss.



FROM THE JOURNAL OF CLIFF IVERSON

Although I don't consider myself particularly vain (except perhaps for considering myself more often than I should), I was pleased to have conceived such an expert murder, especially since I'd never previously considered committing one.

My first year at Caltech I had initially pursued a dual major of aeronautic design and English literature, which was sort of like going to Juilliard to study piano and field hockey. As a man without a penny or parent to my name, I was quickly notified that the more-than-generous scholarship I'd been awarded was to develop my budding skills at design and not for any designs I had on deathless prose.

I imagine there are a lot of people out there like me who discover they have a skill at something they like rather than love. But most of us have to earn a living, which is probably why there are any number of accomplished urologists in the world. (And if my sponsor who is reading this journal happens to be an accomplished urologist, thanks for your kindness up until this last sentence and I'll start packing my things now.)

Eventually Caltech led me to MIT, which led me to aircraft manufacturer Woltan Industries, which led me to homicide. This was not entirely MIT's fault. I don't even blame Woltan that much, except for their

choice of senior executives, one being my supervisor Merrill Fiedler, who needs to die.

Please understand that by nature I oppose all senseless killing... but in Fiedler's case, murder makes perfect sense.

I have no idea if you know me personally, dear sponsor. If you don't, let me simply say my looks have been described by some as studious and by my myopic aunt as handsome, but this matters little where this journal is concerned, for on the day my relationship with McMasters began, my face was concealed by an unfashionable fedora with its brim pulled low, a wig and false beard of straggly gray hair, and a pair of MacArthur-style sunglasses, at a subway station in Midtown Manhattan. My tall frame was cushioned like a department store Santa by a long vest of padding that amply filled a trench coat four sizes larger than my own.

I maneuvered my newly cumbersome form as daintily as Oliver Hardy doing a soft-shoe with Stan Laurel, passing through the gauntlet of a turnstile and down concrete steps onto the subway's uptown platform, and discovered with satisfaction that my target was standing exactly where I'd wanted him to be: Merrill Fiedler, a crisply groomed success story in his early fifties, in town on business for Woltan's Baltimore plant, where he'd been my supervisor. He was currently thumbing a magazine by a newsstand at the south end of the platform only a few yards away from me, precisely as I'd managed to contrive. I needed Fiedler positioned on the platform where uptown trains entered the station. At the far end, the train would already be braking to a halt and might not deliver an instantly lethal blow.

I know. I'm such a nice guy.

But it was the train that would kill Fiedler, I told myself for the hundredth time, knowing this to be the shabbiest of self-deceptions. I had all the intent of a killer but not the soul. Guns, knives, poisons... these were murder weapons, all of which I'm too inexpert or squeamish to wield with any guarantee of success. But I'd also ruled out poisons and all other arms-length methods that had sprung to mind, for they seemed too calculated and detached, requiring the meticulous planning of a certifiable psychopath. Then the notion of giving Fiedler one good, hard shove had come to me. Yes, I could probably manage that, particularly after having to restrain myself from doing so for the last three years, each time Fiedler savaged another helpless employee. A shove, a push, a jostle seemed very

unlike an act of murder. It was simply what might happen at the beginning of a good old-fashioned barroom brawl, before someone in authority called out, "Now-now, boys, there'll be none of that here!" One justifiable shove for all the demeaning, degrading insults and condescending sneers Fiedler flayed and spewed in all directions each workday.

The telling difference would be that this particular shove would occur while Fiedler was standing at the edge of the platform as the IRT train bulleted into the station.

It was the train that would kill Fiedler.

I had also further reasoned that shoves don't have to be registered with the authorities. One can't test-fire a shove and trace it back to its origin, there's no entry wound revealing its angle, nor does it leave telltale residue. Yes, I might leave a bruise mark, but the oversized leather gloves I was wearing would conceal the size and shape of my hands, not to mention my fingerprints.

In its oafish way, it really was a pretty well-constructed murder method. To any witness on the platform, I was a bulky man in a trench coat at least fifty pounds heavier than my real weight, face obscured by my hat brim, dark glasses, false gray hair and beard. Sure, maybe I looked laughable, a man who might even be remembered by witnesses, but certainly not anyone who resembled myself. I peered over the top of my sunglasses, wondering who such witnesses might be. A few steps away a drab, slouch-hatted man with features and complexion as hard and dark as onyx was waging a duel of wits with a Chiclets vending machine. An elderly nun stood alongside the stairs I'd just descended. A short, muscular fellow directly to my left licked the tip of a pencil stub while laboring over a tabloid's crossword puzzle.

A piercing metallic squeal sounded from somewhere down the tunnel like a tin pig being dragged by a chain through a steel slaughterhouse. I could hear my heart now and feel it pulsing in my wrists and temples. From my research I already knew that this ear-splitting screech occurred eleven or twelve seconds before a train on the northbound track burst into the station. If I were really going to do this unthinkable thing, it had to be now. My target would never be more perfectly in place, thanks entirely to my own ingenuity.

How I wished at this moment I could whisper in Fiedler's ear the same words I'd spat at him on that last degrading afternoon in the Woltan employee parking lot. I'd approached my car to discover Fiedler standing at its rear, arms folded and security guards at his elbows. They'd clearly forced open the trunk and spread out for display the sober black-and-yellow-striped folders reserved for Woltan designs, whose removal from the premises was forbidden. Scattered atop them were a litter of American Communist Party pamphlets laid out for my peers to see, as if the parking lot was hosting a rummage sale. Fiedler had planted them, of course, and he informed me in his most officious voice that I was in breach of the Industrial Secrets clause in my contract, Jacek Horvath and I were no longer employed by Woltan, a report had already been telexed to New York and Munich, and I'd soon be thoroughly discredited and persona non grata in the industry.

I heard my voice but didn't recognize it. "The things you do to people, Fiedler..." I flailed. "One day you'll get what's due you." Yeah, that sure showed him.

"I have gotten what's due me," Fiedler answered evenly. "That's why they made me your boss. And sometimes those in charge have to do unpopular things. Surgeons cut people open. Generals order men to their death—"

"We're not patients or soldiers!" I yelled. "We just work here. And when we took our jobs nobody said, 'Incidentally, the real reason we're hiring you is because we have this one executive whose ego takes priority over the well-being of everyone else.' It isn't as if the company had been searching for a house bully and you came highly recommended. Someday I hope it gets knocked into you how you made decent people dread going to work." I looked at the other employees hovering by their cars; they all seemed to have taken a sudden interest in their shoes. At least Cora wasn't seeing this low point in my life... but of course, that was only because her own life was over.

"The results speak for themselves, and for me," Fiedler replied with maddening self-assurance. "We're number one in the region."

"Anything good we did on the job would have happened without you. The 1950s are going to be boom years for companies like Woltan, all you've achieved is making life harder for all of us!" I moved to square off with him but the security guards blocked my way. "Woltan's a good fit for you, but

you'd be as happy running a prison or a hospital, you wouldn't care. You just need to be The Boss."

But now, on the subway platform, Fiedler had no security guards, and the train would soon be upon us or, more importantly, upon Fiedler. The curved rails leading from the subway tunnel into the station were beginning to glow where the long beam of the front car's headlight was hitting them. I was about to become a murderer.

Who'd have thought my life would have come to this? The only law I'd ever knowingly broken was white wine with steak... What would Cora think of me, in this ridiculous costume and about to do this unspeakable thing? I shook off second thoughts by picturing the horrified passengers on the W-10, that Id designed, as its cabin suddenly went dead quiet, its electrical power as lost as every soul on board, its stabilizer locked and gently tipping the plane's nose toward the ground ten thousand feet below. If I hesitated now, surely I'd never have this chance to save them again.

My intended victim was looking down the tunnel, impatient for the arrival of the train that would kill him. I eased up behind him, my brain madly replaying images of the damage he'd already done or might do. Push him. For Cora, for my friend Jack Horvath found dead in a filthy city park, for every unlucky worker whose life Fiedler had ruined or spirit he'd smothered, for the children who might fly on a W-10 someday trusting their parents had known what they were doing when they'd purchased their tickets. Rage built in me until it was not now just about Fiedler but all that was wrong in the world, with the remedy requiring nothing more than ramming this pompous peacock as the train rocketed into the station.

No longer in control of what I was doing, I lowered my shoulder and drove my body into Fiedler's left side like a halfback making a crucial block. With that impact, I joined the ranks of those who have killed, from Cain to soldiers defending their homeland, from the guard pulling the switch at Auburn prison to children stepping on centipedes, some with society's blessing and monuments built in their name, others cursed by their species and deposited in unmarked graves.

The angle of my shove did not let me see Fiedler's face, and I ricocheted away like a carom shot in billiards as I heard cries of alarm. I felt strangely uninvolved in what had happened, my only thought now being to vacate the platform, rush up the stairs through the nearest turnstile and, as per my

plan, head for the revolving door on the far side of the station into the understaffed bargain basement of Brandt's Department Store. Once inside, I threaded my way through a maze of haberdashery display tables and entered a portal leading to the men's changing rooms. Inside one of the tiny cubicles, I pulled the gloves from my hands, stripped off my coat, beard, wig, and padding, brazenly leaving them on the wooden bench beside me. In the unlikelihood that anyone would connect these clothes with the regrettable accident on the subway tracks, they surely couldn't be linked to me, as I'd purchased each item at different Army & Navy stores around the city only the day before. I allowed myself two seconds to straighten my hair and appraise my demeanor in the changing room's mirror. Not the face of a killer, I thought. No triumph in my expression, just the sadness of knowing my life would never be the same.

I left the changing room and feigned passing interest in a display of wool ties as if I had all the time in the world, then deftly stepped onto the escalator up to the ground floor. A breathless salesman sprayed me with a sample of cologne, but I shrugged him off with a breezy "Not today, thanks!" and allowed the store's ever-revolving door to scoot me out onto the sidewalk. Face down, I entered the thick of seething pedestrians, all with missions of their own but surely none like the one I'd just completed. I envied them their easier burden, my newly minted secret being a leaden knapsack I bore to the grandly outmoded Van Buren Hotel and Ballrooms where I was staying. Once in my room and more exhausted than I'd ever known, I fell upon the thin blanket on my undersized bed in what could best be called a swoon, and slept with the solace of knowing I'd committed a perfect murder.



A few minutes later, the phone in my room rang.

I reached for the receiver, reassuring myself that absolutely no one on earth knew I was registered at this hotel, so the call could not be personal. "Yes?"

"This is the front desk, Mr. Williams." (Williams had been the blandest name I could think of after Smith or Jones, easily forgettable unless one's first name was Ted.) "Some detectives from the police are on their way up

to see you. They said not to tell you, but I'm doing so as a hotel courtesy. Should they ask, I didn't tell you."

I heard the rolling back of the elevator door down the hall and, before I could imagine a more innocuous reason why the police would wish to visit a stranger to New York only a few minutes after he'd murdered someone, I heard three not very polite pounds on the door, followed by "Police, Mr. Iverson! Let us in."

Jesus, I thought—I have my spiritual moments given the right circumstances—they know my real name! My mouth went instantly dry as if a cup of flour had been tossed down my throat. How, how could they possibly know who I was? The only other way out of the room was the fire escape to the street eight stories below, and with flight being evidence of guilt, I summoned all the bravado left in me and discovered there was none. I felt both corners of my forced smile twitching like a jumpy nerve as I opened the door. "Yes?" I asked, striving for the puzzled tone of a model citizen.

I found myself inspected by a charcoal-faced man in a slouch hat and gray suit. His cheap tie looked like an obligatory birthday gift from an unloving wife. He showed me a billfold designed solely for the purpose of displaying a badge bearing the seal of New York City. "Captain Dobson," he said, saving me some reading. "This is Sergeant Stedje."

Stedje was a short, muscular man inadequately contained by the seams of his rayon suit. He sported an identical tie to the captain's, indicating either that he was having an affair with Dobson's unloving wife or that they'd bought their ties at the same store from a display labeled "None Over a Quarter." The handle of a police revolver peeked from behind his left lapel where it nestled uneasily in an ill-fitting shoulder holster.

"Where were you the last hour or so?" Dobson asked without preamble.

Despair set a place for itself at the table. Was it always this easy to catch a murderer? One sentence in and we were already at the opportunity stage. "At the newsreel movie theater in Grand Central."

"What did you see?"

I pretended to search my mind. "Uh, Tom and Jerry cartoon, newsreel, travelogue about Morocco, Three Stooges, short subject on glassblowing."

"Anyone see you there?" asked the sergeant.

“No, I’m from out of—wait.” Trying to sound spontaneous, I moved to the tiny dresser across from my single bed. “There,” I said, pointing to my watch, wallet, and a fragment of thin red cardboard. “I still have my ticket stub.”

Dobson had not taken his eyes off my face, but it seemed safe to assume he didn’t have a schoolboy crush on me. “Were you planning to ask why I want to know where you were?” he asked with genuine curiosity. “See, usually when I ask someone for an alibi, they want to know why.”

“Well, I assume there’s been some crime committed in the hotel and you’re talking to all the guests,” I said casually. “But yes, I would like to know what this is about.”

Dobson picked up the ticket stub. “Someone pushed your boss into the path of an IRT subway train today.”

“My God!” I reacted. It may not have been the very best reading anyone’s done of that line.

“You must really have enjoyed the Three Stooges,” he continued. “I don’t know many people who save their ticket stubs as souvenirs. If you’d found it in your pants pocket with some lint attached to it, I’d understand. But there it is, proudly sitting with your watch on the dresser when there’s a wastebasket right next to it. Why would you hang on to it, unless you wanted proof of your alibi?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t you ever emptied your pocket, found an old gum wrapper, and didn’t throw it away?”

“No, not really,” said Dobson. “But maybe that’s me. And maybe this is you.” From his breast pocket he produced a larger translucent envelope containing a pair of MacArthur sunglasses identical to those I had bought the day before.

So I was sunk. If Dobson knew enough to show me those sunglasses, then he had me dead to rights. I wondered if they planned to arrest me here and now. I sure would have liked a last beer before going to prison. I doubted they had beer in the death house. Certainly not draft. Suddenly, life imprisonment and a job in the library sounded like a vacation in sunny Madrid.

My eyes went to the hotel room window.

“There’s a man posted at the bottom of the fire escape,” Dobson mentioned helpfully. “Now about these glasses. And your... disguise.” His

voice put the word in quotes. “See, a good disguise is shaving off a beard you’ve had for five years. Or if you’re a nun, wearing lipstick and eye makeup. Even just looking ho-hum is pretty useful. If I ask someone for a description, and they say average, I have no idea what to do with that. But if they say a man wearing sunglasses on a subway platform, in a padded coat, fedora, and false whiskers... well, I may not know what you look like, but if I can find your disguise, I’ve got you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You bought a ticket at the newsreel theater early this morning, watched until the hour of short subjects repeated itself, got into your clever camouflage, somehow lured Fiedler onto the subway platform—I’ll give you an A for that—then you did your nasty little deed and raced into the basement level of Brandt’s to lose your disguise. Ever hear of shoplifters?”

Sergeant Stedge answered the question for me. “Brandt’s has. People pinch something, step into a changing room to remove the price tags, and hide the goods on their person. So the store will post operatives posing as shoppers near the changing rooms, to watch for customers who exit a little larger than when they went in.”

Dobson explained, “But a friend of mine, Dave Vlastnoff—retired cop, works for Sentry Security—saw a bulky, bearded man enter an otherwise empty changing room and a minute later the lone occupant departed clean shaven and a lot lighter. He followed you up the escalator and, pretty brilliantly, sprayed you with a new cologne that’s available only at Brandt’s.”

I managed to bleat, “I’d like an attorney.”

“So would my kid sister but she settled for a plumber,” answered Dobson. “By the way, in your eagerness to remove your mystifying disguise, you must have taken your gloves off first, leaving a pristine print on the sunglasses’ right lens. So: a man in a ridiculous disguise pushes your former employer into an oncoming train, your fingerprints are on the glasses and in the cubicle where you removed the clothes, a professional security guard followed you from the changing rooms to here, and by the way, we’ve had a police Labrador brought to the lobby who’s decided he loves the cologne you were sprayed with and can’t wait to meet you.”

“The name is Wanderlust,” Stedge offered helpfully. “The cologne, I mean. The Labrador’s name is Roscoe.”

I sat on the bed without realizing I’d done so. “I have nothing to say.”

“I do,” said Dobson. “You’re under arrest for the attempted murder of Merrill Fiedler.”

“Attempted?” I bolted to my feet. “He’s not dead?”

Dobson and Stedge looked at each other with infinite pity as I realized the words “He’s not dead?” could be used against me in a court of law. Despite the miraculously good news that I’d evaded the electric chair, the nearly-as-bad update was that I’d be going to prison for attempted murder while Fiedler was alive and free to be a menace to the world.

Dobson consulted his sidekick. “Coupled with the physical evidence and obvious premeditation, what would you figure he’s got coming?”

Stedge’s shrug threatened the stitching of his jacket. “Maybe twenty years, and if you ask me, it ought to be without parole. I mean, amateur killers are a danger to the public. Somebody could get hurt.”

I decided I’d nothing to lose and, adopting a look of defeat, held out my wrists to Stedge, right atop the left. “Go ahead, cuff me,” I said with what I hoped sounded like resignation. Stedge seemed to approve my wisdom and, as he reached for a pair of handcuffs in his pants pocket, I lunged forward and my already outstretched right hand yanked Stedge’s .38 from the loose nest of his shoulder holster. “Okay, both of you freeze and I won’t need to hurt you,” I warned. “Now I’m backing out of this room with the gun pointed at the doorway, and you’re staying here while I take the elevator to the lobby.” Actually, I planned to take the fire stairs to the second-floor ballroom, which surely would require access to the hotel’s kitchen, and from there to a service entrance onto the street. But there was no need to tell them that.

Stedge gently counseled, “Uh, the safety catch is on, Cliff.”

I reflexively looked down at the gun as Dobson interjected, “No, the sergeant’s pulling your leg. Revolvers don’t have safety catches.”

Stedge disagreed. “Smith and Wesson Model 40 does.”

“That’s a grip safety.”

“It’s still a safety,” said the sergeant, adding, “Oh, and Cliff? The gun isn’t loaded. But the captain’s is.”

I turned to see Dobson with an identical .38 trained on me. Dobson explained, “The sergeant likes to make his empty gun a tempting prospect. Trying to steal an officer’s weapon is further evidence of guilt.”

I pointed the gun toward the bathroom and pulled the trigger. Its click was humiliating.

“Give my sergeant back his weapon and we won’t mention this awkward incident in our report,” Dobson suggested.

I handed Stedje his gun. “I was never going to shoot either of you,” I said, as if they might wish to understand me better. “There’s only one person in the world I want to kill, and I thought if I could get away from you, I might have a second chance.” I looked at their passive faces and mumbled, “You can’t understand.”

“Sure we can,” said Dobson. “Fiedler’s a thug who controls and manipulates everyone around him for pleasures sadistic or sexual, or for successes that boost his career. Sometimes he can pull a hat trick and score all three. He’s robbed you not only of your promising career but also of a woman you had a thing for and a friend you genuinely liked. And he’s covering up a major defect in a modification he made in your design that sooner or later could result in a terrible end for a lot of innocent people. What else could lead a decent guy like you to attempt murder?”

I was stunned. “How... could you learn all that just in the time since—”

“Oh, we’ve taken a personal interest in you for weeks. We were on the platform when you pushed Fiedler.” He nodded toward Stedje. “The sergeant here was the heroic passerby who yanked Fiedler away from the tracks.”

I looked at Stedje and said, bitterly, “I guess I should have tried to kill you first.”

The two men apparently found this amusing, but then Dobson inquired in a more serious tone, “So tell me, Cliff: No regrets for what you did?”

I tried to retrieve a remnant of dignity from this fiasco. “Only that I didn’t do it right.”

Dobson’s response was yet another surprise. He hit me between my shoulder blades with the flat of his hand, like a congratulatory slap on the back. “That’s the right attitude!” he enthused. “You gotta get right back on, just like falling off a horse.”

“Which is a great way to kill someone, incidentally,” added the sergeant in a helpful manner.

They both looked almost pleased with me, as if I’d successfully completed some unholy hazing ritual. I sputtered, “What... what kind of

policemen are you?"

"The best where you're concerned. Excommunicated."

"The badge you showed me is fake?"

"Real but expired. Eighty-Third Precinct out of Bushwick."

Stedge took a tiny gunmetal flask from his breast pocket. "A man we had in custody also expired, that's why we got defrocked," he explained. "He was a wealthy child molester who went free by paying off the right jurors. We were driving him back to his estate in Alpine, New Jersey, but he stopped in Edgewater, because that's where people stop when they fall off the Palisades cliffs." Stedge smiled as if this explained everything, stepped into the room's tiny bathroom, and took a tumbler from the sink.

"So... you're not going to arrest me?" I asked, feeling a multitude of angel feathers brushing my face as I rose from an abyss into radiant light. "What about Fiedler?"

"I showed him my shield and explained there's been a rash of subway shovings," said Dobson. "Told him we were hot on the heels of the perpetrator."

"Which we were," said Stedge, pouring the contents of the flask into the tumbler.

"Then I'm free to go?" I asked in disbelief.

Dobson's features became dour again, obviously their default position. "And try to strike again, just as ineptly? The hell with that. You're in desperate need of some schooling."

The sergeant produced a half-pint bottle of Early Times from his hip pocket and topped off the tumbler's unknown liquid with a generous slug of the bourbon. He stirred the contents with his pinky and handed me the murky bathroom glass. I stared at the tumbler and commented, "And so beautifully presented. How do I know it's not poison?"

"You don't. You just have to take our word," Dobson acknowledged.

"Shame on me for doubting you after all the minutes we've known each other!" I said, scolding myself. "Then again, if you'd handed me poison a moment earlier when I thought I was under arrest, I probably would have drunk it."

"It's a kinder version of a Mickey Finn," explained Dobson. "With our assistance, you'll just be able to make it through the lobby and into a cab. After that, you'll be leaving everything to us. Down the hatch."

Foremost in my mind was that Fiedler was still living, but also living in ignorance of my desire to kill him. If I refused to do what these ex-cops said, they could turn me in, and that would be the end of that. Better to give Dobson and Stedge the impression that I was cooperating, find a way to break free, and take a second stab at killing Fiedler, perhaps literally. I drank the potion with the abandon of a Dr. Jekyll who's just learned that a fortune has been bequeathed to any man named Hyde.

"Oh, and when you wake," added Dobson, "your head will be bandaged so you can't see where you are. Don't panic. When new students regain consciousness, they sometimes think they've gone blind, or worse."

What was he talking about? "Students...?"

"All in good time," said Dobson. "You're getting a reprieve."