The Interpretation of Murder

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Extract

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In 1909, Sigmund Freud, accompanied by his then disciple Carl Jung, made his one and only visit to the United States, to deliver a series of lectures on psychoanalysis at Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts. The honorary doctoral degree that Clark awarded him was the first public recognition Freud had ever received for his work. Despite the great success of this visit, Freud always spoke, in later years, as if some trauma had befallen him in the United States. He called Americans 'savages' and blamed his sojourn there for physical ailments that afflicted him well before 1909. Freud's biographers have long puzzled over this mystery, speculating whether some unknown event in America could have led to his otherwise inexplicable reaction.

Part 1

Chapter One

There is no mystery to happiness.

Unhappy men are all alike. Some wound they suffered long ago, some wish denied, some blow to pride, some kindling spark of love put out by scorn – or worse, indifference – cleaves to them, or they to it, and so they live each day within a shroud of yesterdays. The happy man does not look back. He doesn't look ahead. He lives in the present.

But there's the rub. The present can never deliver one thing: meaning. The ways of happiness and meaning are not the same. To find happiness, a man need only live in the moment; he need only live *for* the moment. But if he wants meaning – the meaning of his dreams, his secrets, his life – a man must reinhabit his past, however dark, and live for the future, however uncertain. Thus nature dangles happiness and meaning before us all, insisting only that we choose between them.

For myself, I have always chosen meaning. Which, I suppose, is how I came to be waiting in the swelter and mob of Hoboken harbor on Sunday evening, August 29, 1909,

for the arrival of the Norddeutsche Lloyd steamship *George Washington,* bound from Bremen, carrying to our shores the one man in the world I wanted most to meet.

At 7 P.M. there was still no sign of the ship. Abraham Brill, my friend and fellow physician, was waiting at the harbor for the same reason as I. He could hardly contain himself, fidgeting and smoking incessantly. The heat was murderous, the air thick with the reek of fish. An unnatural fog rose from the water, as if the sea were steaming. Horns sounded heavily out in the deeper water, their sources invisible. Even the keening gulls could be only heard, not seen. A ridiculous premonition came to me that the *George Washington* had run aground in the fog, her twenty-five hundred European passengers drowning at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. Twilight came, but the temperature did not abate. We waited.

All at once, the vast white ship appeared – not as a dot on the horizon, but mammoth, emerging from the mist full-blown before our eyes. The entire pier, with a collective gasp, drew back at the apparition. But the spell was broken by the outbreak of harbormen's cries, the flinging and catching of rope, the bustle and jostle that followed. Within minutes, a hundred stevedores were unloading freight.

Brill, yelling at me to follow, shouldered through to the gangway. His entreaties to board were rebuffed; no one was being let on or off the ship. It was another hour before Brill yanked at my sleeve and pointed to three passengers descending the bridge. The first of the trio was a distinguished, immaculately groomed, gray-haired, and gray-bearded gentleman

whom I knew at once to be the Viennese psychiatrist Dr Sigmund Freud.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, an architectural paroxysm shook New York City. Gigantic towers called skyscrapers soared up one after the other, higher than anything built by the hand of man before. At a ribbon-cutting on Liberty Street in 1908, the top hats applauded as Mayor McClellan declared the forty-seven-story redbrick and bluestone Singer Building the world's tallest structure. Eighteen months later, the mayor had to repeat the same ceremony at the fifty-story Metropolitan Life tower on Twenty-fourth Street. But even then, they were already breaking ground for Mr Woolworth's staggering fifty-eight-story ziggurat back downtown.

On every block, enormous steel-beam skeletons appeared where empty lots had been the day before. The smash and scream of steam shovels never ceased. The only comparison was with Haussmann's transformation of Paris a half century earlier, but in New York there was no single vision behind the scenes, no unifying plan, no disciplining authority. Capital and speculation drove everything, releasing fantastic energies, distinctly American and individualistic.

The masculinity of it all was undeniable. On the ground, the implacable Manhattan grid, with its two hundred numbered east–west streets and twelve north–south avenues, gave the city a stamp of abstract rectilinear order. Above this, in the immensity of the towering structures, with their peacock-like embellishments, it was all ambition, speculation,

competition, domination, even lust – for height, size, and always money.

The Balmoral, on the Boulevard – New Yorkers at the time referred to Broadway from Fifty-ninth to 155th Street as the Boulevard – was one of the grand new edifices. Its very existence was a gamble. In 1909, the very rich still lived in houses, not apartments. They 'kept' apartments for short or seasonal stays in the city, but they failed to comprehend how anybody could actually live in one. The Balmoral was a bet: that the rich could be induced to change their minds if the accommodations were sufficiently opulent.

The Balmoral rose seventeen stories, higher and grander than any apartment building – any residential building – had ever climbed before. Its four wings occupied an entire city block. Its lobby, where seals cavorted in a Roman fountain, shone with white Carrera marble. Chandeliers in every apartment sparkled with Murano glass. The smallest dwelling had eight rooms; the largest boasted fourteen bedrooms, seven baths, a grand ballroom with a twenty-foot ceiling, and full maid's service. This rented for the appalling sum of $495 a month.

The owner of the Balmoral, Mr George Banwell, enjoyed the enviable position of being unable to lose money on it. His investors had advanced $6,000,000 toward its construction, of which he had kept not a penny, scrupulously remitting the entire amount to the builder, the American Steel and Fabrication Company. The owner of this firm, however, was also Mr George Banwell, and the actual construction cost was $4,200,000. On January 1, 1909, six months before

the Balmoral was to open, Mr Banwell announced that all but two of the apartments were already let. The announcement was pure invention, but it was believed, and therefore within three weeks it was so. Mr Banwell had mastered the great truth that truth itself, like buildings, can be manufactured.

The Balmoral's exterior belonged to the Beaux-Arts school at its most flamboyant. Crowning the roofline were a quartet of thirteen-foot floor-to-ceiling glass-paned concrete arches, one at each corner of the property. Because these great arched windows gave off the top floor's four master bedrooms, someone standing outside them could have had a very compromising view inside. On Sunday night, August 29, the view from outside the Alabaster Wing would have been shocking indeed. A slender young woman was standing within, lit by a dozen flickering candles, barely clothed, exquisitely proportioned, her wrists tied together over her head, and her throat embraced by another binding, a man's white silk tie, which a strong hand was making tight, exceedingly tight, causing her to choke.

Her entire body glistened in the unbearable August heat. Her long legs were bare, as were her arms. Her elegant shoulders were nearly bare as well. The girl's consciousness was fading. She tried to speak. There was a question she had to ask. It was there; it was gone. Then she had it again. 'My name,' she whispered. 'What is my name?'

Dr Freud, I was relieved to see, did not look like a madman at all. His countenance was authoritative, his head well

formed, his beard pointed, neat, professional. He was about five foot eight, roundish, but quite fit and solid for a man of fifty-three. His suit was of excellent cloth, with a watch chain and cravat in the continental style. Altogether, he looked remarkably sound for a man just off a week's voyage at sea.

His eyes were another matter. Brill had warned me about them. As Freud descended the ship's ramp, his eyes were fearsome, as if he were in a towering temper. Perhaps the calumny he had long endured in Europe had worked a permanent scowl into his brow. Or perhaps he was unhappy to be in America. Six months ago, when President Hall of Clark University – my employer – first invited Freud to the United States, he turned us down. We were not sure why. Hall persisted, explaining that Clark wished to confer on Freud the university's highest academic honor, to make him the centerpiece of our twentieth-anniversary celebrations, and to have him deliver a series of lectures on psychoanalysis, the first ever to be given in America. In the end Freud accepted. Was he now regretting his decision?

All these speculations, I soon saw, were unfounded. As he stepped off the gangway, Freud lit a cigar – his first act on American soil – and the moment he did so the scowl vanished, a smile came to his face, and all the seeming choler drained away. He inhaled deeply and looked about him, taking in the harbor's size and chaos with what looked like amusement.

Brill greeted Freud warmly. They knew each other from

Europe; Brill had even been to Freud's home in Vienna. He had described that evening to me – the charming Viennese house filled with antiquities, the doting and doted-on children, the hours of electrifying conversation – so often I knew his stories by heart.

From nowhere a knot of reporters appeared; they gathered around Freud and yelled out questions, mostly in German. He answered with good humor but seemed baffled that an interview should be conducted in so haphazard a fashion. At last Brill shooed them away and pulled me forward.

'Allow me,' Brill said to Freud, 'to present Dr Stratham Younger, a recent graduate of Harvard University, now teaching at Clark, and sent down by Hall specially to take care of you during your week in New York. Younger is without question the most talented American psychoanalyst. Of course, he is also the *only* American psychoanalyst.'

'What,' said Freud to Brill, 'you don't call yourself an analyst, Abraham?'

'I don't call myself American,' Brill replied. 'I am one of Mr Roosevelt's "hyphenated Americans," for which, as he says, there is no room in this country.'

Freud addressed me. 'I am always delighted,' he said in excellent English, 'to meet a new member of our little movement, but especially here in America, for which I have such hopes.' He begged me to thank President Hall for the honor Clark had bestowed on him.

'The honor is ours, sir,' I replied, 'but I'm afraid I hardly qualify as a psychoanalyst.'

'Don't be a fool,' said Brill, 'of course you do.' He then introduced me to Freud's two traveling companions. 'Younger, meet the eminent Sándor Ferenczi of Budapest, whose name is synonymous throughout Europe with mental disorder. And here is the still more eminent Carl Jung of Zurich, whose *Dementia* will one day be known all over the civilized world.'

'Most happy,' said Ferenczi in a strong Hungarian accent, 'most happy. But please to ignore Brill; everyone does, I assure you.' Ferenczi was an affable sandy-haired fellow in his late thirties, brightly attired in a white suit. You could see that he and Brill were genuine friends. Physically, they made a nice contrast. Brill was among the shortest men I knew, with close-set eyes and a wide flat-topped head. Ferenczi, although not tall, had long arms, long fingers, and a receding hairline that elongated his face as well.

I liked Ferenczi at once, but I had never before shaken a hand that offered no resistance whatsoever, less than a joint of meat at the butcher's. It was embarrassing: he let out a yelp and yanked his fingers away as if they had been crushed. I apologized profusely, but he insisted he was glad to 'start learning right away American walls,' a remark at which I could only nod in polite agreement.

Jung, who was about thirty-five, made a markedly different impression. He was better than six feet tall, unsmiling, blue-eyed, dark-haired, with an aquiline nose, a pencil-thin mustache, and a great expanse of forehead – quite attractive to women, I should have thought, although he lacked Freud's ease. His hand was firm and cold as steel. Standing

ramrod straight, he might have been a lieutenant in the Swiss Guard, except for his little round scholarly spectacles. The affection Brill clearly felt for Freud and Ferenczi was nowhere in evidence when he shook Jung's hand.

'How was your passage, gentlemen?' asked Brill. We could not go anywhere; our guests' trunks had to be collected. 'Not too wearisome?'

'Capital,' said Freud. 'You won't believe it: I found a steward reading my *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.'

'No!' Brill replied. 'Ferenczi must have put him up to it.'

'Put him up?' Ferenczi cried out. 'I did no such –'

Freud took no notice of Brill's comment. 'It may have been the most gratifying moment of my professional life, which does not perhaps reflect too well on my professional life. Recognition is coming to us, my friends: recognition, slowly but surely.'

'Did the crossing take long, sir?' I inquired idiotically.

'A week,' Freud answered, 'and we spent it in the most productive way possible: we analyzed each other's dreams.'

'Good God,' said Brill. 'I wish I had been there. What were the results, in the name of heaven?'

'Well, you know,' Ferenczi returned, 'analysis is rather like being undressed in public. After you overcome initial humiliation, it's quite refreshing.'

'That's what I tell all my patients,' said Brill, 'especially the women. And what about you, Jung? Did you also find the humiliation refreshing?'

Jung, almost a foot taller than Brill, looked down on

him as if at a laboratory specimen. 'It is not quite accurate,' he replied, 'to say the three of us analyzed each other.'

'True,' Ferenczi confirmed. 'Freud rather analyzed us, while Jung and I crossed interpretative swords with each other.'

'What?' Brill exclaimed. 'You mean no one dared to analyze the Master?'

'No one was permitted to,' said Jung, betraying no affect.

'Yes, yes,' said Freud, with a knowing smile, 'but you all analyze me to death as soon as my back is turned, don't you, Abraham?'

'We do indeed,' Brill replied, 'because we are all good sons, and we know our Oedipal duty.'

In the apartment high above the city, a set of instruments lay on the bed behind the bound girl. From left to right, there were: a man's right-angled razor, with a bone handle; a black leather riding crop about two feet in length; three surgical knives, in ascending order of size; and a small vial half full of a clear fluid. The assailant considered and picked up one of these instruments.

Seeing the shadow of the man's razor flickering on the far wall, the girl shook her head. Again she tried to cry out, but the constriction of her throat reduced her plea to a whisper.

From behind her came a low voice: 'You want me to wait?'

She nodded.

'I can't.' The victim's wrists, crossed and suspended together over her head, were so slight, her fingers so graceful, her long legs so demure. 'I can't wait.' The girl winced as the gentlest possible stroke was administered to one of her bare thighs. A stroke, that is, of the razor, which left a vivid scarlet wake as it traced her skin. She cried out, her back curved in exactly the same arch as the great windows, her raven hair flowing down her back. A second stroke, to the other thigh, and the girl cried out again, more sharply.

'No,' the voice admonished calmly. 'No screaming.'

The girl could only shake her head, uncomprehending.

'You must make a different sound.'

The girl shook her head again. She wanted to speak but couldn't.

'Yes. You must. I know you can. I told you how. Don't you remember?' The razor was now replaced on the bed. On the far wall, in the wavering candlelight, the girl saw the shadow of the leather crop rising up instead. 'You want it. Sound as if you want it. You must make that kind of sound.' Gently but implacably, the silk tie around the girl's throat drew tighter. 'Make it.'

She tried to do as she was bid, moaning softly – a woman's moan, a supplicating moan, which she had never made before.

'Good. Like that.'

Holding the end of the white tie in one hand and the leather crop in the other, the assailant brought the latter down upon the girl's back. She made the sound

again. Another lash, harder. The sting caused the girl to cry out, but she caught herself and made the other sound instead.

'Better.' The next blow landed not on her back but just below it. She opened her mouth, but at the same moment the tie was drawn still tighter, choking her. Her choking, in turn, made her moan seem more genuine, more broken, an effect her tormentor evidently liked. Another blow, and another and another, louder and faster, fell on all the softest parts of her body, rending her garments, leaving glowing marks on her white skin. With every lash, despite the searing pain, the girl moaned as she had been told to do, her cries coming louder and faster too.

The rain of blows stopped. She would have collapsed long before, but the rope from the ceiling, tied to her wrists, kept her upright. Her body was now scored with lacerations. Blood ran down in one or two places. For a moment all went dark for her; then the flickering light returned. A shiver passed through her.

Her eyes opened. Her lips moved. 'Tell me my name,' she tried to whisper, but no one heard.

The assailant, studying the girl's lovely neck, loosened the silk binding around it. For one instant she breathed freely, her head still flung back, the waves of black hair flowing to her waist. Then the tie around her throat went taut again.

The girl could no longer see distinctly. She felt a hand on her mouth, its fingers running lightly over her lips. Then those fingers drew the silk tie yet tighter, so that even her

choking stopped. The candlelight went out for her again. This time it did not return.

'There is train *below* river?' asked Sándor Ferenczi incredulously.

Not only did such a train exist, Brill and I assured him, but we were going to ride it. In addition to the new tunnel across the Hudson River, the Hoboken tube boasted another innovation: full baggage service. All a voyager arriving in the United States had to do was mark his luggage with the name of his hotel in Manhattan. Porters stowed the trunks in the train's baggage car, and handlers on the other end did the rest. Taking advantage of this amenity, we walked out onto the platform, which overlooked the river. With the setting of the sun, the fog had lifted, revealing the jagged Manhattan skyline, studded with electric lights. Our guests stared in wonder: at the sheer expanse of it, and at the spires piercing the clouds.

'It's the center of the world,' said Brill.

'I dreamt of Rome last night,' Freud replied.

We waited on pins and needles – at least I did – for him to go on.

Freud drew on his cigar. 'I was walking, alone,' he said. 'Night had just fallen, as it has now. I came upon a shop window with a jewelry box. That of course means a woman. I looked around. To my embarrassment, I had wandered into an entire neighborhood of bordellos.'

A debate ensued on whether Freud's teachings dictated defiance of conventional sexual morality. Jung held that they

did; indeed, he maintained that anyone who failed to see this implication had not understood Freud. The whole point of psychoanalysis, he said, was that society's prohibitions were ignorant and unhealthy. Only cowardice would make men submit to civilized morality once they had understood Freud's discoveries.

Brill and Ferenczi vigorously disagreed. Psychoanalysis demanded that a man be conscious of his true sexual wishes, not that he succumb to them. 'When we hear a patient's dream,' said Brill, 'we interpret it. We don't tell the patient to fulfill the wishes he is unconsciously expressing. I don't, at any rate. Do you, Jung?'

I noticed both Brill and Ferenczi sneaking glances at Freud as they elaborated his ideas – hoping, I supposed, to find endorsement. Jung never did. He either had, or affected having, perfect confidence in his position. As for Freud, he intervened on neither side, apparently content to watch the debate unfold.

'Some dreams do not require interpretation,' Jung said; 'they require action. Consider Herr Professor Freud's dream last night of prostitutes. The meaning is not in doubt: suppressed libido, stimulated by our anticipated arrival in a new world. There is no point talking about such a dream.' Here Jung turned to Freud. 'Why not act on it? We are in America; we can do what we like.'

For the first time, Freud broke in: 'I am a married man, Jung.'

'So am I,' Jung replied.

Freud raised an eyebrow, nodding, but made no reply.

I informed our party that it was time to board the train. Freud took a last look over the railing. A stiff wind blew in our faces. As we all gazed at the lights of Manhattan, he smiled. 'If they only knew what we are bringing them.'