Vanessa Ma
CRWR 12112 Final Assignment

The Lusted-After Organized Lust Killer

Foreword

Get ready to be brought back in time.

In this brilliant piece, “The Lusted-After Organized Lust Killer,” Vanessa Ma teleports the reader into Chicago of the 1930s and 1940s, where “pastel blue suits” and “floor length navy skirts” cling to the bodies of “youthful hopefuls seeking a better life.” If this story acted simply as a descriptive narrative of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, it would exceed expectations. However, Ma delivers much, much more. She raises the stakes for the reader, magnificently combining this imagery with fantastic character development and an exploration of the true nature of Chicago and, more generally, society.

In forming the character of William George Heirens, Ma uses every implement in her writer’s toolbox. She realizes that Heirens is the driving force of her story, and plans his character with the precision of an architect. Indeed, she traces his origins down to their roots, leaving no stone unturned and expanding upon subtle, yet important, details of his childhood—akin to Erik Larson’s portrayal of H.H. Holmes in *The Devil in the White City*. Ma creates a believable—at times even relatable—character around which her story pivots.

While the description of Heirens’ makeup is the focus of the first half of the story, the second-half shifts to an introspective look at Chicago. Ma pegs—rather shrewdly—the efficiency of Chicago as a crucial element in her narrative. The writer makes clear in the Afterword that “[t]angible production burgeoned and bludgeoned its counterparts” in Chicago at this time. This strive for production causes both the police and the *Tribune* to accuse Heirens of murder. Ma brilliantly sees these factors and turns the Heirens case into a prime example of how the strive for efficiency can actually lead to inefficiency; acting only under the incentives set before them, the police and the *Tribune* caused an inefficient outcome: they imprisoned the wrong man. Thus, Ma leaves a reader with not only a brilliant story, but also with a conclusion that will one to question the structure of their own society.

Michael Vetter

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June, 1938

He was lurking by the grocery store again. It was a beautiful Chicago summer's dusk, the sun hung low in the sky, a robust spherical fireball that shot pins and needles into the eyes of the viewer, and imparted a green-purple imprint on the crusty pavement each time he looked down from the brilliant view. There were no clouds in sight, and the streets were devoid of people – he had perfected the art of timing his wanderings to the few minutes post weekday rush hour.

The next dashing couple stepped out of the grocery store – pastel blue suit, ironed linen shirt and polished dress shoes that glistened in the final rays of gold. Stiff lapels turned towards tanned shoulders encased in a frilled white shirt tucked into a floor length navy skirt, gently billowing. Underneath the wide-brimmed hat, rosy lips parted in a laugh as stubble dipped behind her silhouette to where he thinks her ear must be. He memorizes the lines, the careful orchestration of colours and shapes, the elegance tinged with an air of frivolity that his family had never, and could never achieve.

His family was all he knew. Growing up in a secluded, cramped apartment in Evanston, he delighted in exploring his own little world of precarious objects and parts. When he had been old enough to walk, he would squint at the bright glare on the grimy windows and silently inquire about the outside, queries quickly discarded in favour of prying apart the next clock that wound down, the worn, broken radio mother garbage-picked but claimed, with a faltering smile, that she had bought from the store.

Carefully, he perched the gadget on the rickety dining table, and took to it with his father's limited set of wrenches and screwdrivers. Carefully, he would delicately set the screws in a tidy pile, wedge the tip of the smallest screwdriver between the two shells encasing the set, and crank the handle down inch by inch. His world, infinitely more mesmerizing than that bright glare from the window, appeared before his eyes. The carefully labelled parts, organized slots for wires and coils and knobs and gears brought a calming effect upon him even as mother's cacophonous symphony transitioned into a din of shattering ceramics and shrill voices – cue father's hungover, dishevelled reappearance. He cradled the set in his arms and brought his face as close as he could to the cool metal interior, until his eyes crossed from the proximity and the metal shell shielded his hearing.

This knowledge armed and informed his understanding of the world and its parts. Ironically, he was driven outside not out of curiosity, but out of hatred for the inside. He never worried what his mother would say – she worked too many hours to know, and if she knew she was too exhausted to care. He was not dim – he understood what she made, his father spent immediately on alcohol and unscrupulous friendships. His blood used to boil at the first crash of glass against wall, but now he would simply shiver, stand up, and walk out of the door. Chaos permeated his household, a state that was not within his control. He would seek his control, his reassurance, elsewhere.

At this corner of the street, he could people watch away from ogling onlookers and without guilt. It was an intersection, and he figured no one would stay long enough to notice a 11 year -old boy with an arm curled around the thin metal pole of a street light. He met passers-by, people who had a clear purpose that was not this strip of town nor him, but they never met him. He would observe their shapes, their bodies, their gait and posture, their expressions and dress, committing it all to memory. He also wondered about their destinations and origins, concocting theories and narratives for them. The beauty of creating stories about people was not lost to him – he could never be wrong, since he could never confirm nor deny his

predictions, and his world was as vast as his imagination was deep. It was boundless, malleable, and he much preferred it to the whitewashed walls of his family's apartment.

Catching the door at it swung shut, he stepped into the grocery store. He nodded to the man at the register, who returned a cheerful smile and asked about his day.

"I'm fine. How is business for you?" He responded, clear and courteous.

"As well as it could be," the shopkeeper shrugged and shifted in his seat. They spoke briefly about the recession, and the boy listened intently to his complaints of the administration, the economy, and the landlady. He was a frequenter of the place, browsing the racks for hours on end. He was also a loiterer, pains of a child in a family without an extra penny to spend. The storekeeper remembered him – how could anyone not? He was polite, bright, and showed more interest and understanding than any other boy his age. Everyone in Lincolnwood who had the pleasure of meeting him, remembered him.

He enjoyed the organized, stacked and labelled shelves, the smell of brand-new packaging, the bright colours and the certainty of walking to the candy shelf and finding Wrigley's gum, the first item on the third tier. It was one of these fateful days as he lingered near closing time that the storekeeper approached him, offered him a job at the register, and gave him a stick of gum for the road.

He loved calculating the prices and organizing the notes and coins in their little denominated slots. Numbers, certainly, were dependable. Once, though, he accidentally gave a young man with ruffled hair and flushed cheeks two dollars' change instead of three for his sack of potatoes. By the time he realized his mistake, the man had run two blocks down the intersection. He shrugged, lifted a dollar from the register, and left it in his pillowcase for two weeks before he dared take it out again.

As he ironed out the note between his fingertips, he felt an odd exhilaration. His first secret from his family. The first inkling of an identity to be sculpted underneath the blossoming Chicago skyline, and not within the suffocating walls of his Lincolnwood home.

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June 1942

The name William George Heirens was first inked into the books of the Chicago Police Force[1]. Arrested for breaking into a basement locker in an apartment near his home, he was charged for ten counts of petty burglary and sent to the Gibrault School for Wayward Boys in Indiana. The effortless act of lifting the single, sweat-stained dollar note from the register had opened the floodgates to a life of serial theft. The incriminating evidence for his crimes were not difficult to find – an unused attic near his home housed his own catalogued and organized, fully stocked shelves: neatly stacked guns, radios and cameras lined the wall shrouded in perpetual shade, and carefully folded furs, suits, female brassieres and male undershorts made individual piles on the remaining stretch of wooden floor. Despite his poverty, he never sold what he stole. After all, you never miss what you never had.

It came as a surprise that his act went unnoticed for years before – it really shouldn't have. Chicago was a city characterized by its potential for prosperity, a reputation corroborated by her hard-working residents. A locked door was an unusual phenomenon, income flowed in easy for most, and the new mattered more than the old. A lost possession did not amount to much – any item was easily outdated, and did it matter that it was no longer accessible? After all, it had already been possessed.

William performed excellently at the correctional centre. He passed with flying colours in his classes, and gained friendships as he offered academic help to his peers. Picking up wrestling for the first time, he quickly learnt the skills of the trade and made up in speed and agility what he lacked in bulk, strength and demeanour. He was soon set free.

[1] Petlin, Adam Higginbotham Alessandra. "The Long, Long Life of the Lipstick Killer." GQ. April 30, 2008. Accessed January 19, 2018. https://www.gq.com/story/william-heirens-lipstick-killer-chicago.

June 1943

Back in his Lincolnwood home, William was re-arrested for larceny and sent to St. Bede Academy. Aboard the prison bus, he curled his knees into the seat, peering at the policemen through the tinted glass, cringing as they snickered and guffawed at rumours that the boy masturbated as he assessed his options of furs and silverware.[2] Closing his eyes, he fought to breathe evenly and deeply, breathing a sigh of relief as one of the big men stamped out his cigarette and clambered into the front seat. Though he put up a fight upon arrest, part of him was secretly glad to be re-inducted into the rehabilitation system. At least within a community of transient juvenile delinquents, he was told no lies, and even the most hateful boys had a scheduled departure date.

St. Bede Academy was operated by Benedictine Monks.[3] He expressed a heretofore unknown passion in mathematics, biological and social sciences, and passed examinations almost effortlessly. Just as he charmed the hearts of his neighbours, he similarly softened the hearts of his instructors, who recommended him for a bachelor of science degree at the University of Chicago to actualize his dreams of being an electronic engineer.

[2] 999popular. "William Heirens (The lipstick killer) - Serial killer documentary." YouTube. August 05, 2017. Accessed January 19, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srC97k7r1Xk.
[3]

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September, 1945

Arriving on campus, William was accosted with all sorts of uncertainties that simultaneously fascinated and irked him. From spending most of his juvenile day-to-day alone, he was plunged into the complex, ever-evolving social circles of hormone-riddled college students grappling with their personal, professional and physical development. Being two years younger than most was not helpful in his assimilation. Observation quickly informed him that two demographics of male students topped the social hierarchy – the fraternity brothers, who showered their dates with delicatessen, drink, fitted them in the heights of fashion and paraded them at dinner parties; and the courteous and contemplative individuals that slayed hearts through quiet elegance and honed skill in the mundane day-to-day.

Without the financial clout to become the prior, William made it his goal to become the latter. His dedicated quest brought along unexpected positive externalities, as a fellow Economics student would say. Attending ballroom dancing classes forced him to re-evaluate his understanding of control over his physical capabilities, chess taught him that rules of a game did not hold inherent value – decisions held the power, and that is the one unbreakable rule. The Core prodded him to refine his framework for the analysis of individuals and groups, thinking of events not as imaginative chronologies but a series of motives informing actions. He struggled with coursework, but was industrious and caught up quickly. Within a year, he had attained the reputation he craved – girls would gather on the floor and whisper, gesture or unabashedly point at the “handsome, smart” boy whose invitation to a dance – be it the foxtrot, waltz or tango – was priceless. His dating life flourished and blossomed.

But fall is mesmerizing and deceiving, her colourful reds and yellows telling nothing of the biting winds and blizzards to follow. As much as Chicagoans pray it doesn’t, winter must come. And come it did.

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January, 1946

The snow could not blanket the monochromatic monstrosities of Edgewater, Illinois. The flaxen apartments stacked atop each other were cloaked in grime, built with architectural bent for practicality, whose creators intended them to be used, not seen, grotesque constants in sunshine, rain, sleet or snow. Snow. The snow plough sputtered and shuddered along the sidewalk, setting its blade on the temporal pristine white, like toothpaste, leaving mustard concrete in their wake.

The hypnotic peace imposed upon the troubled Edgewater township was not felt in the Degnan household. Six-year-old Suzanne Degnan had vanished from her bedroom in the Degnans' first-floor apartment, and a ladder was found leaning against her open window. No footprints – the snow of Chicago was a common accomplice in the city's myriad of disappearances and silent untimely deaths. Police officers stood stoutly by the front yard, and within the house, silence reigned. Mrs. Degnan steepled and un-steepled her fingertips, her best attempts to discreetly glance out the window every minute thwarted by sobs that inadvertently crawled up her throat. Mr. Degnan paced in the living room by the roaring fire burning into the last of its coals. Occasionally he stopped and traced his steps. Betty, older sister to Suzanne, sat curled in an armchair, peering at the scene between the cracks of her fingers.

The sun dipped beneath the horizon when the officer outside the door abruptly shifted. Another bundled officer approached in a brisk walk. Their heads huddled briefly and then they broke into a run. Sirens sounded within seconds. The empty, quiet street exploded into cacophony. Within fifteen minutes, the chief was seen scaling the heavy three steps that led to the Degnans' front door. An anonymous phone call had reached the Chicago police, suggesting their search for the young girl be directed down into the sewers. A frozen head was found in a nearby storm drain. Suzanne Degnan was dead.

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The city of Chicago read about the 1945 murders in the *Chicago Tribune*.

The first was Josephine Ross. Her daughter found her dead in their apartment in June. She was repeatedly stabbed, her head was wrapped in a dress, and dark hairs were clutched in her fist. In an almost morbid fashion, she had been bathed post-death, and her wounds had been covered with adhesive tape. Apart from her, nothing else in her apartment had been touched – the perpetrator stole nothing.

The second was a divorced lady by the name of Frances Brown. The cleaning lady found her dead in her apartment, attracted to the scene by a loudly playing radio. She was repeatedly stabbed, and had also been bathed, her valuables untouched. But most terribly, on her wall, in red lipstick, was the furtively scrawled message: "For heavens/Sake catch me/Before I kill more/I cannot control myself". The *Tribune* dubbed the murderer "The Lipstick Killer", a name that wove itself almost immediately into the city's household vocabulary.

And now, the Degnan enigma. Following the discovery of her head, investigators separately found her torso, arms and legs underneath cast-iron manhole covers around the neighbourhood within the next few months, and the discovery of the "Murder Room" struck fear into all the hearts that heard – a neighbouring basement laundry room was found with 4 tubs, blood stains still on the drains. That fateful day, Chicago locked its doors, but the damage was done. The city called for retribution. By April, over 370 suspects were questioned and released – no trial ever came of the investigations. The city was restless.

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In the Gothic *Tribune* tower overlooking the Chicago river, George Wilson sat with his head in his hands in a dimly lit office. Nearly every industry delighted from the post-war era – the industrial revolution was well under way, families were reunited, and young men's hearts no longer raced at the sight of draft boards. Wives no longer scoured the daily papers for news on the war, businessmen needed only look at their storefronts to reassure themselves of roaring sales and skyrocketing profits. What is more, Christmas loomed, and with it the infectiously felicitous holiday spirit. In a time of peace, development and general merriment, journalism faced a crisis. *There was no news.*

George sat back in his chair in the empty office. His co-workers had long since returned home, the articles due tomorrow neatly piled in the copy room, each only a slight variant of some fetid article in the past week. He looked over his sheet of haphazard thoughts: Controversy – Politics – Narratives – Story? ~~Relive the war?~~ Vanishing? Murder?

Vanishings were commonplace in the windy city, whose borders daily witnessed an unstoppable exchange of youthful hopefuls seeking a better life with urban veterans honed in the stockyards, ready to scale greater heights. Authorities were rarely instrumental in tracking down the missing or feared dead, and why bother? Most had no family, and those that did were readily resigned to the inevitable.

Murder was a thought. The murders of Josephine Ross and Frances Brown spiked *Tribune* readership significantly, and the reporters fortunate enough to have been delegated the authorship of these incidents had shot to instant journalistic fame. Unfortunately, the police force, riddled with iniquities and red tape, brought no suspects or evidence to the table, and the star reporters' journeys swiftly ended. And yet, George longed for the fleeting fame.

His gaze shifted, as it always did, to the bronze engraved plate on the door to the editor-in-chief's office. How he longed for Robert to notice him, his value, his writing! And secretly, how he hoped to daily carry his briefcase into that beautiful office overlooking the Chicago river! As though sensing the heat of his dreams, the door opened and Robert McCormick stepped out, purpose in his step. "Time to get to work, gentlemen," he boomed, his charisma emanating towards the listening desks and chairs, "the missing Degnan was murdered, the family is distraught and furious – and this isn't a death that's going away."

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CRWR 12112

June 1946

By the summer of 1946, the Degnan murder was no longer a new topic. Life had to move on, and William needed to appear presentable in his date of the week. Being from the North Side of Chicago, he took savings bonds obtained through recent serial burglaries, armed himself with a revolver, and took the L up north to cash in the bonds for his date. The post-office was closed, and resorting to old habits, he found an unlocked door to a nearby home and crept in. He concentrated his vision on the countertop, coat rack, dining table – places that experience informed were common locations for spare cash. As he took a dollar note from a wallet lying on the island, a loud yell made him jump, and his heart began racing as furtively moving silhouettes registered in his peripheral vision. Fumbling the dollar note, he dropped it and ran out of the apartment, up the fire escape of a nearby building, and found himself in a brawl with two police officers. He pulled the gun, an intimidation tactic only to ensure his getaway. The officer fired thrice, and as William jumped on him, he heard a deafening ring in his ears, and his vision blacked.

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When he awoke, he was strapped to a hospital bed, and a naked bulb hung in his room. He shifted his head and had to suppress the urge to scream in pain – he clearly needed more anaesthetic for his head injury. He groaned audibly, and registered voices outside his door growing in volume. To his surprise, no medical personnel enter – only policemen.

In the days to come, he was relentlessly interrogated for his involvement in the three murders that had woven themselves into the forefront of the city's consciousness. Somewhere in his mind, he registered that these procedures were not so much "questionings" as "rants" – the officers presumed his guilt, concocted ridiculous stories of how he had come to know the women, how he had committed the act, then proceeding to ask him why he did so. Despite his intellect and training in the art of discourse, he had little more than binary affirmative and negative responses to the questions, for they gave him no chance to elaborate. The irony of higher education's inability to serve the most basic need of communicating to survive did not escape him.

When questioning failed, he was subjected to no sleep, shots of sodium pentothal, a spinal tap, and beatings. His life alternated between stretches of pain and dizzying stupor, both experiences resembling drowning, or at least what drowning would probably feel like – he thankfully (or not) could not confirm it. His rationalities and consciousnesses began to run together like the sickly green of the Chicago River on St Patrick's Day – if he let his defences down enough, images of his slender fingers closing around Josephine Brown's foreign face and bulging eyes would flash across his mind, interspersed in the guttural screams ripped from his throat. Once a week – perhaps even less, counting days was difficult – he would sit up to peruse a book, or whatever his parents brought him. He remembered reading somewhere that sodium pentothal was also widely used as a component in lethal injections. At times in his interrogations, he wondered if the drugs would kill him first.

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In the sun-filled corner of the *Tribune* tower, Wilson sat on the edge of his seat. The paper, no, *he* was having a field day. Bill Heirens was the third, and by far the longest held suspect for the crimes of the Lipstick Killer, and he had fought tooth and nail for the authorship of the boy. The police had released allegedly matching DNA with fingerprint evidence, and 9-point

accuracy scores on handwriting samples with the Degnan ransom note. He could almost taste the glory – it was one publication away – and he was determined to get it, no matter what.

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The next day, Bill Heirens sat, bleary-eyed, dishevelled and distraught, in front of his attorneys. The *Tribune* sat, waiting jeeringly, on the rickety table propped over his legs on the jail hospital bed. The headline was "The Heirens Story! How he killed Suzanne Degnan and 2 Women!"

He sighed in resignation and gazed intently at the farther diagonal corner of the table, a few inches shy of where the paper sat. Each time he had been well enough, and attentive enough to read, he had stoutly refused the newspapers – he had done enough people analysis to know that his case would be given full media attention, at the very least until the hearings were all over. He did not want to inspect himself through the caricatures others had made of him. Perhaps – no, he *knew* – it was because they would convince him of what they wanted to be true. He was so close to the tipping point anyway.

"I doubted I'd like the sound of the headline. It's 37 columns, you say?"

"Yes, all written under the guise of your supposed 'confession'."

Bill shifted, cradled his head in his arms, and his elbows trembled inadvertently. The fabrication took up the front page and one of the inner spreads – his blood chilled as bright red on concrete gray, white on gaunt skin, little limbs in sleeves soiled with blood and sewage floated into his vision. The line between nightmare and memory were growing increasingly blurred, and it took every ounce of willpower, every waking minute, to separate the pristine truth from the gossip and grime the world threw onto his head. Asleep was when he was at greatest risk – not of officers or other inmates, but of himself and his subconscious' unrivalled powers of persuasion. He fought to swallow his sobs – How he wished it would all just end! Was his innocence worth the price of his sanity? Despite his hypothetical freedom, could he walk a day on the streets without being sidestepped or thrown looks of disgust? How many more cycles of questioning and torture separated him from these sickly white walls and the sunny afternoon outside? Could he hold his ground until then?

He sighed, and the tears began rolling down his cheeks. He looked at his attorneys – one looked staunchly away, one sat rooted to his seat, unable to move. His breath wavered. Years later, he would look back upon this moment when he first considered admitting to crimes he did not commit.

Afterword

Heirens died during incarceration, in 2012. Before he died, his name had already been irrevocably linked to the "(Suzanne) Degnan murder" in the many records of serial killers who traipsed the Earth. Within the monochrome walls of the Dixon Correctional Centre, he was C06103, a string of letters and numbers too easily forgotten; but in the minds of those he has touched and worked with in within his time behind bars, he lives on as the Illinois inmate who did the most – not just time, but also for the prison system and the society at large.

Ever the intellectual, Heirens dedicated much of his time behind bars to learning. He is still very much the child that sought control via possession of items, and now manifests itself in the possession of knowledge. Aside from being the first inmate to earn a college degree, he is a certified tailor, television mechanic, painter, and jailhouse lawyer. Hundreds of inmates have received his counselling, and over nine have fought and received parole due to his expertise. He also developed the educational and library system that currently exists in all Illinois prisons.

The world has progressed by leaps and bounds since Heirens' conviction. When Heirens began his term behind bars, the term "serial killer" had not yet been coined – the year of Suzanne Degnan's death marked the ninth birthday of Robert Ressler, who would grow up to become a famous FBI officer who first dubbed the innocuous criminal class. Nor had the existence of the Miranda warning been in place, or the rigorous common law against press fabrication and overinvolvement in judicial proceedings.

Despite all the process made on paper, what has the city of Chicago truly learned from the story of "The Lipstick Killer"? The culture of modernity implores the human to fetishize productivity. The days of industrial revolution lead to financial security of the masses, possession and the ability to spend at will masqueraded as empowerment, whilst the desire for economic stability enslaved persons and communities. Tangible production burgeoned and bludgeoned its counterparts, until its definition had thinned from the creation of insights in all shape and form, into the precise science of generating enablers for hedonistic consumption with immediate, addictive gratification. "Goal-oriented", "quantifiable results" and "tangible impact" became buzzwords of the era - all enrichment, and all intellect became a means to an end. This mindset was what prompted the adoption of the Reid Technique, and the printing of speculative press – the city was working at maximum capacity to search for the perpetrator, and should no man be found guilty, all processes would have been for naught. Heirens was simply the unfortunate scapegoat, a placeholder to validate the productivity balance.

Perhaps this explains the average person's fascination with serial killers – for this is a man whose actions do not yield tangible, graspable ends, whose purpose in life is to strip others of their most base possession: their life, and more crudely their labour time, and lost productivity. We pursue this subset of people with a sort of morbid fascination, enacting thousands of online databases towards the analysis of unsolved killings for the slightest trends, profiling after profiling attempt to classify killer psyches into the most bizarrely specific categories[4]: "visionary", "mission-oriented", "hedonistic", "power or control". Perhaps the human race subconsciously seeks to weed out those which do not conform to the norm of basing an ideal life on economic production, but perhaps it is mesmerized by the

[4] Holmes, Ronald M. *Contemporary perspectives on serial murder*. Thousand Oaks: Sage publ., 1998.

individuals that have broken out of the trance and produce nothing more than the stories of their lives.

And yet Heirens, though not a serial killer, offers nothing more than the story of his life. It is made all the more powerful due to the sensationalized, speculative and wholly untrue versions of his personal narrative that were printed in 1946. He offers merely a life story that is simple and ungarnished, and the controversy accorded to it is circumstantial, not inherent in its fabric. It is not a story written for the reader, but to the reader, as a warning and heed. Yet as capitalism rears its ugly head, the essential business of any industry lies in knowing your target, and presenting the consumer with what he wishes to see. News articles are ever shortened, lacking depth of analysis, and reading material has reduced to lists and 140-character constrained announcements. In this sense, are we ready to believe William Heirens, or do we continue to lust after the notion of an organized lust killer?

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