

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

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# The Manual of Detection

Jedediah Berry

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## About the Book

In this tightly plotted yet mind-expanding debut novel, an unlikely detective, armed with only an umbrella and a singular handbook, must untangle a string of crimes committed in and through people's dreams.

In an unnamed city always slick with rain, Charles Unwin is a humble file clerk working for a huge and imperious detective agency, and all he knows about solving mysteries comes from filing reports for the illustrious investigator Travis Sivart. When Sivart goes missing, and his supervisor turns up murdered, Unwin is suddenly promoted to detective, a rank for which he lacks both the skills and the stomach. His only guidance comes from his new assistant, who would be perfect if she weren't so sleepy, and from the pithy yet profound Manual of Detection.

*The Manual of Detection* defies comparison; it is a brilliantly conceived, meticulously realised novel that will change what you think about how you think.

## About the Author

Jedediah Berry was raised in the Hudson Valley region of New York State. His short fiction has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Best New American Voices* and *Best American Fantasy*. *The Manual of Detection* won the 2010 William L. Crawford Award. He lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he works as an editor at Small Beer Press.

# The Manual of Detection

Jedediah Berry



## ONE

### On Shadowing

**The expert detective's pursuit will go unnoticed, but not because he is unremarkable. Rather, like the suspect's shadow, he will appear as though he is meant to be there.**

LEST DETAILS BE mistaken for clues, note that Mr. Charles Unwin, lifetime resident of this city, rode his bicycle to work every day, even when it was raining. He had contrived a method to keep his umbrella open while pedaling, by hooking the umbrella's handle around the bicycle's handlebar. This method made the bicycle less maneuverable and reduced the scope of Unwin's vision, but if his daily schedule was to accommodate an unofficial trip to Central Terminal for unofficial reasons, then certain risks were to be expected.

Though inconspicuous by nature, as a bicyclist and an umbrellist Unwin was severely evident. Crowds of pedestrians parted before the ringing of his little bell, mothers hugged their children near, and the children gaped at the magnificence of his passing. At intersections he avoided eye contact with the drivers of motor vehicles, so as not to give the impression he might yield to them. Today he was behind schedule. He had scorched his oatmeal, and tied the wrong tie, and nearly forgotten his wristwatch, all because of a dream that had come to him in the moments before waking, a dream that still troubled and distracted him. Now his socks were getting wet, so he pedaled even faster.

He dismounted on the sidewalk outside the west entrance of Central Terminal and chained his bicycle to a lamppost. The revolving doors spun ceaselessly, shunting travelers out into the rain, their black umbrellas blooming in rapid succession. He collapsed his own umbrella and slipped inside, checking the time as he emerged into the concourse.

His wristwatch, a gift from the Agency in recognition of twenty years of faithful service, never needed winding and was set to match—to the very second—the time reported by the four-faced clock above the information booth at the heart of Central Terminal. It was twenty-three minutes after seven in the morning. That gave him three minutes exactly before the woman in the plaid coat, her hair pinned tightly under a gray cap, would appear at the south entrance of the terminal.

He went to stand in line at the breakfast cart, and the man at the front of the line ordered a coffee, two sugars, no cream.

“Slow today, isn’t it?” Unwin said, but the man in front of him did not respond, suspecting, perhaps, a ruse to trick him out of his spot.

In any case it was better that Unwin avoid conversation. If someone were to ask why he had started coming to Central Terminal every morning when his office was just seven blocks from his apartment, he would say he came for the coffee. But that would be a lie, and he hoped he never had to tell it.

The tired-looking boy entrusted with the steaming machines of the breakfast cart—Neville, according to his name tag—stirred sugar into the cup one spoonful at a time. The man waiting for his coffee, two sugars, no cream, glanced at his watch, and Unwin knew without looking that the woman in the plaid coat would be here, or rather there, at the south end of the concourse, in less than a minute. He did not even want the coffee. But what if someone were to ask why he came to Central Terminal every morning at the

same time, and he said he came for the coffee, but he had no coffee in his hand? Worse than a lie is a lie that no one believes.

When it was Unwin's turn to place his order, Neville asked him if he wanted cream or sugar.

"Just coffee. And hurry, please."

Neville poured the coffee with great care and with greater care fitted the lid onto the cup, then wrapped it in a paper napkin. Unwin took it and left before the boy could produce his change.

Droves of morning commuters sleepwalked to a murmur of station announcements and newspaper rustle. Unwin checked his ever-wound, ever-winding watch, and hot coffee seeped under the lid and over his fingers. Other torments ensued. His briefcase knocked against his knees, his umbrella began to slip from under his arm, the soles of his shoes squeaked on the marble floor. But nothing could divert him. He had never been late for her. Here now was the lofty arch of Gate Fourteen, the time twenty-six minutes after seven. And the woman in the plaid coat, her hair pinned tightly under a gray cap, tumbled through the revolving doors and into the heavy green light of a Central Terminal morning.

She shook water from her umbrella and gazed up at the vaulted ceiling, as though at a sky that threatened more rain. She sneezed, twice, into a gloved hand, and Unwin noted this variation on her arrival with the fervency of an archivist presented with newly disclosed documents. Her passage across the terminal was unswerving. Thirty-nine steps (it was never fewer than thirty-eight, never more than forty) delivered her to her usual spot, several paces from the gate. Her cheeks were flushed, her grip on her umbrella very tight. Unwin drew a worn train schedule from his coat pocket. He feigned an interest in the schedule while together (alone) they waited.



How many mornings before the first that he saw her had she stood there? And whose face did she hope to find among the disembarking host? She was beautiful, in the quiet way that lonely, unnoticed people are beautiful to those who notice them. Had someone broken a promise to her? Willfully, or due to unexpected misfortune? As an Agency clerk, it was not for Unwin to question too deeply, nor to conduct anything resembling an investigation. Eight days ago he had gone to Central Terminal, had even purchased a ticket because he thought he might like to leave town for a while. But when he saw the woman in the plaid coat, he stayed. The sight of her had made him wonder, and now he found he could not stop wondering. These were unofficial trips, and she was his unofficial reason; that was all.

A subterranean breeze blew up from the tracks, ruffling the hem of her coat. The seven twenty-seven train, one minute late as usual, arrived at the terminal. A pause, a hiss: the gleaming doors slid open. A hundred and more black raincoats poured all at once from the train and up through the gate. The stream parted as it met her. She stood on her toes, looking left and right.

The last of the raincoats rushed past. Not one of them had stopped for her.

Unwin returned the schedule to his pocket, put his umbrella under his arm, picked up his briefcase, his coffee. The woman's solitude had gone undisturbed: should he have felt guilty for being relieved? So long as no one stopped for her, her visits to Central Terminal would continue, and so would his. Now, as she began her walk back to the revolving doors, he followed, matching his pace to hers so he would pass only a few steps behind her on his way to his bicycle.

He could see the wisps of brown hair that had escaped from under her cap. He could count the freckles on the back of her neck, but the numbers meant nothing; all was

mystery. As he had the previous morning, and the seven mornings before that, Unwin willed with all the power in his lanky soul that time, like the train at the end of its track, would stop.

This morning it did. The woman in the plaid coat dropped her umbrella. She turned and looked at him. Her eyes—he had never seen them so close—were the clouded silver of old mirrors. The numbered panels on the arrival and departure boards froze. The station announcements ceased. The four second hands on the four faces of the clock trembled between numbers. The insides of Unwin's ever-wound wristwatch seized.

He looked down. Her umbrella lay on the floor between them. But his hands were full, and the floor was so far away.

Someone behind him said, "Mr. Charles Unwin?"

The timetables came back to life, the clocks remembered themselves, the station resumed its murmuring. A plump man in a herringbone suit was staring at him with green-yellow eyes. He danced the big fingers of his right hand over the brim of a hat held in his left. "Mr. Charles Unwin," he said again, not a question this time.

The woman in the plaid coat snatched up her umbrella and walked away. The man in the herringbone suit was still waiting.

"The coffee," Unwin began to explain.

The man ignored him. "This way, Mr. Unwin," he said, and gestured with his hat toward the north end of the terminal. Unwin glanced back, but the woman was already lost to the revolving doors.

What could he do but follow? This man knew his name—he might also know his secrets, know he was making unofficial trips for unofficial reasons. He escorted Unwin down a long corridor where men in iron chairs read newspapers while nimble boys shined their shoes.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace we can talk in private."

"I'll be late for work."

The man in the herringbone suit flipped open his wallet to reveal an Agency badge identifying him as Samuel Pith, Detective. "You're on the job," Pith said, "starting this moment. That makes you a half hour early, Mr. Unwin."

They came to a second corridor, dimmer than the first, blocked by a row of signs warning of wet floors. Beyond, a man in gray coveralls slid a grimy-looking mop over the marble in slow, indeliberate arcs. The floor was covered with red and orange oak leaves, tracked in, probably, by a passenger who had arrived on one of the earlier trains from the country.

Detective Pith cleared his throat, and the custodian shuffled over to them, pushed one of the signs out of the way, and allowed the two to pass.

The floor was perfectly dry. Unwin glanced into the custodian's bucket. It was empty.

"Listen carefully, now," said Detective Pith. He emphasized the words by tapping his hat brim against Unwin's chest. "You're an odd little fellow. You've got peculiar habits. Every morning this week, same time, there's Charles Unwin, back at Central Terminal. Not for a train, though. His apartment is just seven blocks from the office."

"I come for the—"

"Damn it, Unwin, don't tell me. We like our operatives to keep a few mysteries of their own. Page ninety-six of the *Manual*."

"I'm no operative, sir. I'm a clerk, fourteenth floor. And I'm sorry you've had to waste your time. We're both behind schedule now."

"I told you," Pith growled, "you're already on the job. Forget the fourteenth floor. Report to Room 2919. You've been promoted." From his coat pocket Pith drew a slim hardcover volume, green with gold lettering: *The Manual of Detection*. "Standard issue," he said. "It's saved my life more than once."

Unwin's hands were still full, so Pith slipped the book into his briefcase.

"This is a mistake," Unwin said.

"For better or worse, somebody has noticed you. And there's no way now to get yourself unnoticed." He stared at Unwin a long moment. His substantial black eyebrows gathered downward, and his lips went stiff and frowning. But when he spoke, his voice was quieter, even kind. "I'm supposed to keep this simple, but listen. Your first case should be an easy one. Hell, mine was. But you're in this thing a little deeper, Unwin. Maybe because you've been with the Agency so long. Or maybe you've got some friends, or some enemies. It's none of my business, really. The point is—"

"Please," said Unwin, checking his watch. It was seven thirty-four.

Detective Pith waved one hand, as though to clear smoke from the air. "I've already said more than I should have. The point is, Unwin, you're going to need a new hat."

The green trilby was Unwin's only hat. He could not imagine wearing anything else on his head.

Pith donned his own fedora and tipped it forward. "If you ever see me again, you don't know me. Got it?" He snapped a finger at the custodian and said, "See you later, Artie." Then the herringbone suit disappeared around the corner.

The custodian had resumed his work, mopping the dry floor with his dry mop, moving piles of oak leaves from one end of the corridor to the other. In the reports Unwin received each week from Detective Sivart, he had often read of those who, without being in the employ of the Agency, were nonetheless aware of one or more aspects of a case—who were, as the detective might write, "in on it." Could the custodian be one of those?

His name tag was stitched with red, curving letters.

"Mr. Arthur, sir?"

Arthur continued working, and Unwin had to hop backward to escape the wide sweep of his mop. The custodian's eyes were closed, his mouth slightly open. And he was making a peculiar sound, low and whispery. Unwin leaned closer, trying to understand the words.

But there were no words, there was nothing to understand. The custodian was snoring.

OUTSIDE, UNWIN DROPPED HIS coffee in a trash can and glanced downtown toward the Agency's gray, monolithic headquarters, its uppermost stories obscured by the rain. Years ago he had admitted to himself that he did not like the look of the building: its shadow was too long, the stone of its walls cold and somehow like that of a tomb. Better, he thought, to work inside a place like that than to glimpse it throughout the day.

To make up for lost time, he risked a shortcut down an alleyway he knew was barely wide enough to accommodate his open umbrella. The umbrella's metal nubs scraped against both walls as the bicycle bumped and jangled over old cobblestone.

He had already begun drafting in his mind the report that would best characterize his promotion, and in this draft the word "promotion" appeared always between quotation marks, for to let it stand without qualification would be to honor it with too much validity. Errors were something of a rarity at the Agency. It was a large organization, however, composed of a great many bureaus and departments, most of them beyond Unwin's purview. In one of those bureaus or departments, it was clear, an error had been committed, overlooked, and worst of all, disseminated.

He slowed his pace to navigate some broken bottles left strewn across the alley, the ribs of his umbrella bending against the walls as he turned. He expected at any moment to hear the fateful hiss of a popped tire, but he and his bicycle passed unscathed.

This error that Pith had brought with him to Central Terminal—it was Unwin's burden now. He accepted it, if not gladly, then encouraged by the knowledge that he, one of the most experienced clerks of the fourteenth floor, was best prepared to cope with such a calamity. Every page of his report would intimate the fact. The superior who reviewed the final version, upon finishing, would sit back in his chair and say to himself, "Thank goodness it was Mr. Charles Unwin, and not some frailer fellow, to whom this task fell."

Unwin pedaled hard to keep from swerving and shot from the other end of the alley, a clutch of pigeons bursting with him into the rain.

In all his days of employment with the Agency, he had never encountered a problem without a solution. This morning's episode, though unusual, would be no exception. He felt certain the entire matter would be settled before lunchtime.

But even with such responsibilities before him, Unwin found himself thinking of the dream he had dreamed before waking, the one that had rattled and distracted him, causing him to scorch his oatmeal and nearly miss the woman in the plaid coat.

He was by nature a meticulous dreamer, capable of sorting his nocturnal reveries with a lucidity he understood to be rare. He was unaccustomed to the shock of such an intrusive vision, one that seemed not at all of his making, and more like an official communiqué.

In this dream he had risen from bed and gone to take a bath, only to find the bathtub occupied by a stranger, naked except for his hat, reclining in a thick heap of soap bubbles. The bubbles were stained gray around his chest by the ashes from his cigar. His flesh was gray, too, like smudged newsprint, and a bulky gray coat was draped over the shower curtain. Only the ember of the stranger's cigar

possessed color, and it burned so hot it made the steam above the tub glow red.

Unwin stood in the doorway, a fresh towel over his arm, his robe cinched tight around his waist. Why, he wondered, would someone go through all the trouble of breaking in to his apartment, just to get caught taking a bath?

The stranger said nothing. He lifted one foot out of the water and scrubbed it with a long-handled brush. When he was done, he soaped the bristles, slowly working the suds into a lather. Then he scrubbed the other foot.

Unwin bent down for a better look at the face under the hat brim and saw the heavy, unshaven jaw he knew only from newspaper photographs. It was the Agency operative whose case files were his particular responsibility.

"Detective Sivart," Unwin said, "what are you doing in my bathtub?"

Sivart let the brush fall into the water and took the cigar from his teeth. "No names," he said. "Not mine anyway. Don't know who might be listening in." He relaxed deeper into the bubbles. "You have no idea how difficult it was to arrange this meeting, Unwin. Did you know they don't tell us detectives who our clerks are? All these years I've been sending my reports to the fourteenth floor. To you, it turns out. And you forget things."

Unwin put up his hands to protest, but Sivart waved his cigar at him and said, "When Enoch Hoffmann stole November twelfth, and you looked at the morning paper and saw that Monday had gone straight into Wednesday, you forgot Tuesday like all the rest of them."

"Even the restaurants skipped their Tuesday specials," Unwin said.

Sivart's ember burned hotter, and more steam rose from the tub. "You forgot my birthday, too," he said. "No card, no nothing."

"Nobody knows your birthday."

"You could have figured it out. Anyway, you know my cases better than anyone. You know I was wrong about her, all wrong. So you're the best chance I've got. Try this time, would you? Try to remember something. Remember this: Chapter Eighteen. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Say it back to me: Chapter Eighteen."

"Chapter Elephant," Unwin said, in spite of himself.

"Hopeless," Sivart muttered.

Normally Unwin never could have said "Elephant" when he meant to say "Eighteen," not even in his sleep. Hurt by Sivart's accusations, he had blurted the wrong word because, in some dusty file drawer of his mind, he had long ago deposited the fact that elephants never forget.

"The girl," Sivart was saying, and Unwin had the impression that the detective was getting ready to explain something important. "I was wrong about her."

Then, as though summoned to life by Unwin's own error, there came trumpeting, high and full—the unmistakable decree of an elephant.

"No time!" Sivart said. He drew back the shower curtain behind the tub. Instead of a tiled wall, Unwin saw the whirling lights of carnival rides and striped pavilions beneath which broad shapes hunkered and leapt. There were shooting galleries out there, and a wheel of fortune, and animal cages, and a carousel, all moving, all turning under turning stars. The elephant trumpeted again, only this time the sound was shrill and staccato, and Unwin had to switch off his alarm clock to make it stop.



## TWO

### On Evidence

**Objects have memory, too. The doorknob remembers who turned it, the telephone who answered it. The gun remembers when it was last fired, and by whom. It is for the detective to learn the language of these things, so that he might hear them when they have something to say.**

UNWIN'S DAMP SOCKS squelched in his shoes as he dismounted in front of the broad granite facade of the Agency's office building. The tallest structure for blocks around, it stood like a watchtower between the gridded downtown district and the crooked streets of the old port town.

South of the Agency offices Unwin rarely dared to travel. He knew enough from Sivart's reports of what went on in the cramped taverns and winding back lanes of the old port's innumerable little neighborhoods to satisfy his curiosity. Occasionally, when the wind was right, he would catch a scent on the air that left him mystified and a little frightened, and tugged at him in a way he could not easily have explained. He felt as though a trapdoor had opened at his feet, revealing a view onto something bottomless and unknowable—a secret that would remain a secret even at the end of the world. A moment would pass before he could place it, before he knew where the scent had come from. Then he would shake his head and chide himself. Seeing it so rarely, he often forgot that it was there: the sea.

He brought his bicycle with him into the Agency lobby, where the doorman allowed him to keep it on rainy days. He

could not bear to look at the clock on the wall behind the front desk. His lateness, Unwin knew, would necessitate a second report for the benefit of his supervisor. It was Mr. Duden, after all, who had only recently filed for the presentation of the wristwatch—and did Mr. Duden not expect him to continue to exhibit the virtues that the wristwatch both acknowledged and embodied?

As for this so-called *Manual of Detection*, good sense dictated that he refrain from reading any part of it, including the page ninety-six to which Detective Pith alluded. Whatever secrets the *Manual* contained were not intended for Charles Unwin.

Only one dilemma remained. How to explain his presence at Central Terminal that morning? The coffee story would not do: a blatant falsification, brought to dwell perpetually in the Agency archives, a stain in the shape of words! Yet the truth was hardly appropriate for an official report. Best, perhaps, to write around that hole in the story and hope no one noticed.

The elevator attendant was a white-haired man whose spotted hands shook when he moved the lever. He brought the elevator to a halt without glancing at the needle over the door. “Floor fourteen,” he said.

On the fourteenth floor were three columns of twenty-one desks each, separated by clusters of filing cabinets and shelving. On each desk a telephone, a typewriter, a green-shaded lamp, and a letter tray. The Agency neither prohibited nor encouraged the use of personal decorative flourishes, and some of these desks flaunted a small vase of flowers, a photograph, a child’s drawing. Unwin’s desk, the tenth in the east row, was free of any such clutter.

He was, after all, the clerk responsible for the cases of Detective Travis T. Sivart. Some argued, though never too loudly, that without Detective Sivart there was no Agency. The point was perhaps only somewhat overstated. For in bars and barbershops all over town, in clubs and parlors of

every grade, few topics could generate more speculation than Sivart's latest case.

The clerks themselves were by no means immune to this fervor. Indeed, their devotion was of a more personal, indwelling nature. In newspapers Sivart was "the detective's detective," but on the fourteenth floor he was one of their own. And they did not need the newspapers for their morsels of information, because they had their Unwin. During the processing period, his fellow clerks would quietly note the drawers he frequented, the indices to which he referred. The bolder among them would even inquire into his progress, though he was always certain to give some vague and tantalizing reply.

Some of those files—in particular *The Oldest Murdered Man* and *The Three Deaths of Colonel Baker*—were discussed in clerical circles as paragons of the form. Even Mr. Duden alluded to them, most often when scolding someone for sloppy work. "You like to think your files stand up to Unwin's," he would proclaim, "and you don't even know the difference between a dagger and a stiletto?" Often he simply asked, "What if Unwin had handled *The Oldest Murdered Man* that way?"

The theft of that three-thousand-year-old mummy was one of Unwin's first cases. He remembered the day, more than fifteen years earlier, that a messenger delivered Sivart's initial report in the series. It was early December and snowing; the office had fallen into a hush that seemed to him expectant, watchful. He was still the newest employee on the floor, and his hands trembled as he turned Sivart's hurriedly typed pages. The detective had been waiting for his big break, and Unwin had silently waited along with him. Now here it was. A high-profile crime, a heist. Front-page news.

Unwin had sharpened pencils to steady himself, and sorted according to size all the paper clips and rubber bands

in his desk drawer. Then he filled his pen with ink and emptied the hole punch of its little paper moons.

When he finally set to work, he moved with a certainty of purpose he now considered reckless. He tweaked organizational rubrics to accommodate the particulars of the case, integrated subsequent reports on the fly, and casually set down for the first time the identities of suspects whose names would recur in Agency files as certain bad dreams recur: Jasper and Josiah Rook, Cleopatra Greenwood, the nefarious bilquist Enoch Hoffmann.

Did Unwin sleep at all that week? It seemed to him that Sivart's progress on the case depended on his ability to document it, that the next clue would remain obscured until the previous was properly classified. The detective produced notes, fragments, threads of suspicion; it was the clerk's job to catalog them all, then to excise everything that proved immaterial, leaving only the one filament, that glowing silver thread connecting the mystery to its only conceivable solution.

Now he could remember nothing of his daily existence in those weeks except the accumulation of pages beside his typewriter and of snow on the windowsills, then the surprise of a fellow clerk's hand on his shoulder at the end of the day, when all the desk lamps but his own had been extinguished.

Unwin disliked hearing mention of his old cases, this one in particular. The Oldest Murdered Man had grown into something beyond him, beyond Sivart, beyond even Enoch Hoffmann, the former stage magician whose mad will had been the cause of it all. Every time someone spoke of the case, it became less the thing it was: a mystery put to rest.

For twenty years Unwin had served as Sivart's clerk, sequencing his reports, making sense of his notes, building proper case files out of them. He had so many questions for the man, questions about his philosophies of detection and the finer points of his methods. And he especially wanted to

know more about The Man Who Stole November Twelfth. That case represented the end of an era, yet the detective's notes on it were unusually reticent. How exactly had Sivart seen through Hoffmann's ruse? How had he known it was Tuesday and not Wednesday, when all others in the city trusted their newspapers and radios?

If Unwin had ever passed the detective by chance in the halls of the Agency offices or stood beside him in the elevator, he did not know it. In newspaper photographs, Sivart appeared usually at the edge of a crime scene, a raincoat and hat hung in the gloom, his cigar casting light on nothing.

UNWIN WAS SOOTHED by the harmonies of an office astir. Here a typewriter rang the end of a line, a telephone buzzed, file drawers rumbled open and closed. Sheaves of paper were tapped to evenness against desktops, and from all quarters came the percussive clamor of words being committed eternally to crisp white expanses.

How superb, that diligence, that zeal! And how essential. For none but the loyal clerks were permitted to dispatch those files to their place of rest, the archives, where mysteries dwelled side by side in stark beauty, categorized and classified—mysteries parsed, their secret hearts laid bare by photographs, wiretaps and ciphers, fingerprints and depositions. At least this was how Unwin imagined the archives to be. He had never actually seen them, because only the underclerks were permitted access to those regions.

He removed his hat. On the rack by his desk, however, another hat was already set to hang. It was a plain gray cap, and beneath it a plaid coat.

She was seated in his chair. The woman in the plaid coat (she was not, at that moment, in the plaid coat, yet somehow, astonishingly, she was no less she) was seated in his chair, at his desk, using his typewriter by the light of his

green-shaded lamp. She looked up as though from a dream, forefinger paused over the Y key.

“Why?” Unwin wanted to ask, but then her eyes were on him and he could not speak; his hat was glued to his hand, his briefcase filled with lead. That feeling seized him—the feeling that a trapdoor had opened at his feet and that the slightest of winds could push him in. But it was not the sea that dizzied him; it was the clouded silver of her eyes, and something on the other side of them, just out of sight.

He walked on. Past his desk, past the clerks whose typewriters went silent in midsentence at his approach. He knew how he must appear to them—addled, shaky, unsure: not the Unwin they knew, but a stranger with Unwin’s hat in his hand.

He did not know his destination until he saw it. Few besides Mr. Duden himself ever approached the door to the overclerk’s office. The glass window, of the opaque kind, was uncommonly so. Before today Unwin had only glimpsed the door from afar. Now he set his briefcase down and raised his fist to knock.

Before he could, the door swung inward and Mr. Duden, a round-headed man with colorless hair, said quickly, “Pardon me, sir, there seems to have been a mistake.”

Unwin had never been “sir.” He had always been “Unwin,” and nothing more.

“Yes, begging your pardon, Mr. Duden, there has been a mistake. I arrived several minutes late today. I shall spare you the details, since all of them will go into my report, which I would like to begin writing immediately. From this I am prevented, however, by the presence of another person at my desk, using my typewriter. Measures had to be taken, no doubt, because I am so late to work.”

“No, begging your pardon, sir, you aren’t late at all. You just don’t . . . That is, I was informed that—how to put it?—that you’d been promoted. And while of course we’re pleased that you’d think to come down here to visit your old

colleagues, sir, it is against Agency policy for . . . well, for a detective, you know, to communicate directly with a clerk, without the intercession of a messenger."

"Agency policy. Of course." Already this was the longest conversation he had ever had with his supervisor, except for an exchange of memoranda regarding the allotment of shelf space among the occupants of the east row that had transpired some three years earlier, but that was not, strictly speaking, a conversation at all. So it was with great hesitation that Unwin asked, "But you and I may speak freely, may we not?"

Mr. Duden glanced about the room. No one was typing. Somewhere a phone rang unheeded, then succumbed to the general silence. Mr. Duden said, "Actually, though I am the supervisor of the fourteenth floor, I, too, am—technically speaking, that is—a clerk. So this conversation is, you see, against Agency policy."

"Then I suppose," said Unwin, "that we should terminate the exchange, in keeping with policy?"

Mr. Duden nodded with relief.

"And I'm to find my new desk elsewhere in the building?"

It pained Mr. Duden to say, "On the twenty-ninth floor, perhaps. Room 2919, according to the memo I received."

Of course, an interoffice communication! With such a missive as his guide, Unwin could follow the trail back to its source and settle the matter in person. Though to ask for a memo directed to his superior would be rather unorthodox, Mr. Duden believed that Unwin outranked him now, so he could not refuse the request. But then, to take advantage of his superior's confusion would be to employ the very misunderstanding he wished to dispel. Imagine the report he would have to write to explain his actions: the addenda and codicils, the footnotes, the footnotes to footnotes. The more Unwin fed that report, the greater would grow its demands, until stacks of paper massed into walls, corridors:

a devouring labyrinth with Unwin at its center, spools of exhausted typewriter ribbon piled all around.

Mr. Duden saved him from that fate, however, when he produced the memo for Unwin's perusal without being asked.

To: O. Duden, Overclerk, Floor 14  
From: Lamech, Watcher, Floor 36

An employee under your Supervision, Mister Charles Unwin, is hereby promoted to the rank of Detective, with all the Rights, Privileges, and Responsibilities that position entails. Please forward his Personal Effects to Room 2919, and proceed according to Protocol in all regards.

The bottom of the memo was adorned by the Agency's official seal, a single open eye floating above the words "Never Sleeping."

Unwin folded the paper in half and slipped it into his coat pocket. He saw that Mr. Duden wanted it back, to keep it for his records, but the overclerk could not bring himself to ask for it. It was better this way—Unwin would need to incorporate the memo into his report. "I assume that the woman at my desk," he said, "whose name I have not learned, will carry on with my work, the work I have been doing for the last twenty years, seven months, and some-odd days."

Mr. Duden smiled and nodded some more. He would not say her name.

Unwin returned the way he had come, avoiding the eyes of his co-workers, especially those of the woman seated in his chair. He could not help glimpsing the plaid coat, however, hanging where his own coat should have been.

IN THE ELEVATOR three men in nice suits (black, green, and navy blue) were speaking quietly among themselves. They regarded Unwin's arrival with scrupulous indifference. These were bona fide detectives, and Unwin did not have to be a detective himself to recognize the fact. He stood with his



back to them, and the elevator attendant hopped off his three-legged stool and closed the door. "Going up," he announced. "Next stop, floor twenty-nine."

Unwin mumbled his request for the thirty-sixth floor.

"You're going to have to speak up," the attendant said, tapping his own ear. "What floor is it that you want?"

The three detectives were silent now.

Unwin leaned closer and repeated, "Thirty-six, please."

The attendant shrugged and threw the lever. No one spoke as the needle rose past fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, but Unwin knew the detectives were watching him. Were these three in communication with Detective Pith? He had been watching Unwin for some time, long enough to know that he went every morning to Central Terminal. And if he were watching, others could be watching, too—and not just while he was at the office. Unwin felt as though the Agency's unblinking eye had turned upon him, and now there was no escaping its gaze.

It might have been watching that morning eight days before, when Unwin first saw the woman in the plaid coat. He had woken early, then dressed and eaten and left for work, failing to realize until he had descended to the street and gone partway to work that most of the city was still sleeping. He could not continue to the office—it would be hours yet before the doorman would arrive with his ring of keys—so Unwin had wandered in the near dark while delivery trucks idled at storefronts, and streetlamps winked out overhead, and a few seasoned carousers shuffled home, arms over one another's shoulders.

It seemed like a dream now: his passage through the revolving doors of Central Terminal, the cup of coffee from the breakfast cart, the schedule plucked from the racks by the information booth. All those trains, all those routes: he could purchase a ticket for any one of them, he thought, and let himself be borne from the city, let the reports pile up on his desk forever. The mysteries assigned to Sivart now were

hollow compared to those of earlier years. The Rook brothers had gone into hiding after November twelfth, and Cleopatra Greenwood had fled the city, and Enoch Hoffmann had performed with quiet precision the cardinal feat of magicanship and caused himself to disappear. The city thought it still needed Sivart, but Unwin knew the truth: Sivart was just a shadow, and he himself a shadow's shadow.

So it was that he found himself standing at Gate Fourteen with a ticket for the next train into the country, no clear plan to return, checking his wristwatch against the four-faced clock above the information booth. Even to him his behavior seemed suspicious: a clerk rising early, acting on whims, purchasing a ticket for a train out of the city. What kind of motive would anyone from the Agency assign to such behavior? They must have pegged him as a spy or a double agent.

Perhaps this promotion was not an error, then, but a test of some kind. If so, he would prove himself above suspicion by maintaining that it was an error, could only be an error. He would prove that he wanted his job, that he was nothing if not a clerk.

He had not boarded the train that morning after all, had not gone into the country. The sight of the woman in the plaid coat had stopped him. She was a mystery to him, and mystery enough to keep him from leaving. So long as she was there each morning, he would wait with her, and so long as no one appeared to meet her, he would return to work: that was the unspoken bargain he had struck with her.

Still, these detectives in the elevator were watching him—intently, he felt. He tapped his umbrella against the floor while humming a few bars of a tune he knew from the radio, but this must have looked too calculated, since humming and umbrella-tapping were not among his usual habits. So instead of tapping, he used his umbrella as a cane by gently and repeatedly shifting his weight onto it and off it again.

This was a habit Unwin could call genuine. But employed as a distraction, it seemed even to him a very suspicious-looking contrivance. He had not read a word of *The Manual of Detection*, while these detectives probably knew it front to back, knew even the rationale behind Samuel Pith's assertion that operatives must have secrets of their own.

The attendant brought the elevator to a halt at floor twenty-nine, and the three detectives brushed past, then turned. The one in the black suit scratched a rash above his collar, glaring at Unwin as though he were somehow the cause of it. The one in green hunched bulkily, a dull, mean look in his half-lidded eyes. Navy blue stood in front, his mustache a crooked line over his lip. "That's no hat to wear to the thirty-sixth floor," he said.

The other two chuckled and shook their heads.

The attendant closed the door on the detective's thin scowl, and again the needle climbed upward. From above came the creaking of machinery; steadily the sound grew louder. When the door was opened at last, a chill wind escaped from the elevator shaft to play about Unwin's ankles. His socks were still damp.

The corridor was lit by yellow light fixtures shaped like upended tulips, and between them were doors without transoms. At the opposite end of the hall, a single window permitted a rectangle of gray, rain-ribboned light.

"Thirty-six," the attendant said.

In the memo Lamech had identified himself as a watcher. That title was unfamiliar to Unwin, but the intricacies of Agency hierarchy could not be entrusted to just any employee. There were clerks innumerable, with underclerks beneath them and overclerks above, and then the detectives, those knights-errant upon whose work so much depended, while everywhere at once scurried the messengers, lower in status, perhaps, than even the underclerks but entrusted with special privileges of passage, for their words, on any particular day, could originate in the

highest halls of the Agency offices. And dwelling in those halls? What shrewd powers, with what titles? On that, Unwin did not care to speculate, nor do we now, except to this extent: on the thirty-sixth floor, behind doors marked by bronze placards bearing their names, the watchers performed what duties were entrusted to them.

The seventh door on the right (Unwin counted thirteen to a side) bore the name he was looking for. Unlike all the others, this door was ajar. He knocked gently and called through the opening. "Mr. Lamech?"

No response. He knocked harder, and the door swung inward. The room was dark, but in the column of light from the hall Unwin saw a broad maroon rug, shelves of thick books with blue and brown spines, a pair of cushioned chairs angled toward a desk at the back. To one side was a great dark globe, and before the window loomed a bald and massive globelike head. On the desk a telephone, a typewriter, and a lamp, unlit.

"Mr. Lamech," Unwin said again, crossing the threshold, "I am sorry to have to bother you, sir. It's Charles Unwin, clerk, floor fourteen. I've come about the matter of the promotion. I believe there may have been some kind of error."

Lamech said nothing. Maybe he did not wish to speak with the door open. Unwin closed it and approached. As his eyes adjusted, he began to discern a heavy-featured face, shoulders wide as the wide-backed chair, big unmoving hands folded over the desk.

"Not your error, of course," Unwin amended. "Probably a transcriptionist's typo or a bad connection on one of the older lines. You know how things get when it rains, sir. Fits of static, the occasional disconnect."

Lamech regarded him wordlessly.

"And it has been raining on and off for days now. Fourteen days, in fact. More rain than we've had in quite some time."

Unwin stood before the desk. "It's a matter of poor drainage, sir. Bound to interfere with the lines."