

# THE QUESTION OF THE BEFUDDLED JUDGE

An Asperger's Mystery

By Jeff Cohen

The door to the office opened.

I walked the Honorable Franklin Pierce Adamson, presiding judge in the criminal division for Middlesex County, New Jersey. The judge was a tall man, approximately six-foot-two, and solidly built. He was not wearing robes, but a business suit, and his face had an expression that I believed might signal concern, which seemed incongruous. On the two previous occasions I had met the judge his manner had been gregarious. He had told me three jokes and I had understood one of them.

I glanced at my associate Ms. Washburn, who was seated to my left. She clearly had also noticed the judge's change in demeanor and was, I knew from almost constant observation of Ms. Washburn's expressions, also puzzled.

I stood up, which I have learned is customary when either a woman or a man of some authority enters a room. "Good morning, your honor," I said.

"Mr. Hoenig," he answered, nodding, then looked to my left. "Ms. Washburn."

"Hello, judge," Ms. Washburn responded. "We were wondering why you called this meeting. Is something wrong?"

The judge did not answer directly. Instead, gesturing that I might resume my seat, he took his own chair behind the impressive wooden desk bearing his nameplate. "If I understand your business, Mr. Hoenig, you answer questions for a living. Is that correct?"

It was and I acknowledged as much with a nod. I wondered if the judge was about to question my work because many people I have met have heard the explanation of what I do and then asked what my *real* job might be. But that was not Judge Adamson's concern, apparently.

"I think perhaps I need to avail myself of your services," he said. "But I need to ask you my question privately." He glanced in Ms. Washburn's direction.

That was odd. "Does your question involve the event on Saturday?" I asked.

"Not directly, but it might have some implications."

I looked at Ms. Washburn. "Anything you wish to ask me you can ask with Ms. Washburn present," I told the judge.

He regarded me for a moment. "Not this time, I think. It has legal implications, Mr. Hoenig, and I don't want to involve anyone I don't have to."

"It's okay, Samuel." Ms. Washburn stood and patted my arm as she walked by my chair. "I'm sure the judge has his reasons." She probably also knew that I would tell her whatever Judge Adamson had to say when she and I were alone again. She walked out of the room and closed the door softly behind her.

"I am not certain that was necessary," I told the judge when Ms. Washburn had left.

"I am protecting her from any possible consequences of this matter," he said. He picked up a paper clip from his desk and ran his finger along the metal surface as if tracing it. "You see, the question I need to ask you could get both of us into a great deal of trouble. If you don't want to hear any more than that, I will understand."

The air in the office, despite its fairly luxurious decorations, smelled musty. I could tell despite my having a rather deficient sense of smell. County offices are like any other kind of

government offices; they are often underfunded and frequently in older buildings. I considered what he had said.

At the moment, the judge had some leverage over Ms. Washburn and myself. But there was also a sense of deep distress that made me want to find out more. “What is your question?” I asked.

“Mr. Hoenig, I am asking you if Jordan Proctor is guilty of murder.”

I had read some news reports about the man in question but the judge’s question was confusing. More to the point, it was confusing that he would ask it.

“Your honor, aren’t you presiding over Mr. Proctor’s trial?” I asked.

The judge looked me directly in the eye, something I try to avoid with anyone except Ms. Washburn. “I am,” he said.

“And if I am not mistaken, the trial is very nearly completed,” I continued.

Judge Adamson nodded in the affirmative. “Today is Thursday. There will be closing arguments tomorrow, and I will be expected to deliver a verdict by Monday.” I had read the defendant’s public defender had requested a bench trial rather than one with a jury.

It made no sense the judge would be asking an outside professional for a determination in a criminal case. “Are you not directed to make your decision based strictly on the cases as the prosecution and defense have presented them?” I asked. Perhaps there was some legal technicality in such matters of which I was not aware.

“Yes,” Judge Adamson responded. “That is precisely what I am supposed to do. But in this case I believe there might be mitigating circumstances that the defense is choosing not to present and I think my rendering the wrong verdict could conceivably send an innocent man to prison for the rest of his life. I feel I have an obligation to investigate that possibility.”

“You would be acting outside the criminal justice system, and asking me to do the same,” I noted. “That could result in prosecution for both of us, and at the very least to you being removed from the bench.”

“Yes. That is why I am giving you the option of refusing to answer the question, although I would ask that you not divulge the details of this conversation with anyone. Not even Ms. Washburn. And you would not be able to ask the New Brunswick police or Middlesex County prosecutor’s office about the matter because officially you would not be looking into it.”

I regarded his face but it was showing me nothing, which is not unusual for me. I did wish Ms. Washburn was in the room to help me interpret Judge Adamson’s expressions, but understood now why he had insisted she not join us in this conversation.

“Why me?” I asked in an attempt to postpone having to accept or reject his request. “Surely there are private detective agencies better equipped to discover what you need to know.”

“I believe there is something you can bring to the inquiry,” he answered quickly. No doubt the judge had anticipated my question. “Mr. Proctor does not answer questions directly. He prefers to talk only about stringed instruments. He does not make eye contact.”

The description was clear enough for me to extrapolate the judge’s meaning. “You believe he exhibits behaviors on the autism spectrum and you know I do as well,” I speculated aloud. “So you think I will understand his mindset. Let me warn you, your honor, that all people considered ‘on the spectrum’ do not behave or think in the same patterns.”

He nodded. “I get that. But it might help you to understand more quickly because time is of the essence.”

“I imagine you cannot pay my usual fee for answering the question because that would be a misuse of county funds,” I said.

“Yes, that’s true.” The judge allowed himself a small smile, realizing I had in theory agreed to answering his question. “But you can consider your answer my fee for presiding over your... event.”

“Ms. Washburn and I are scheduled for Saturday,” I pointed out.

“Well, that doesn’t give you much time,” Judge Adamson answered. “If you want me to marry you two, you’d better get to work.”

When I met Ms. Washburn in the hallway she seemed unusually anxious. “What was *that* about?” she asked.

“I believe the judge was correct,” I told her. “I should not include you in researching this question. It is best you know as little about it as possible.”

Her eyes narrowed. Ms. Washburn does not like my working without her knowledge of the question, and I had not done so in the years since she’d entered my office as a client and left it as a trusted associate. “Why not?” she asked.

“Because it is better you stay out of prison,” I said.

“Samuel...”

“Will you drive me back to the office?” I asked. “I have very little time and a great deal of work to do.”

Initial research online, coupled with an encrypted file the judge had sent to my inbox, did not deliver much in the way of new information. Jordan Proctor had been arrested three months earlier in the home of Liam McManus, an adjunct assistant professor at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Mr. McManus was lying dead on the living room floor with severe head trauma. Jordan Proctor had been discovered by police holding a tire iron that had borne traces of Mr. McManus’s blood and fragments of bone from his skull. The arrest had taken place

immediately. Jordan Proctor had refused to answer questions, insisting instead of speaking only about a missing Hofner electric bass that had once belonged to Paul McCartney. That especially caught my eye, as the music of the Beatles is among my “special interests.”

For the intervening months Jordan Proctor had spoken only about stringed instruments and *The Great British Baking Show*, a program I have not seen. It did not seem to have any significance in the murder case.

While the police considered it obvious that Jordan Proctor had killed Liam McManus with the tire iron, I knew things are often not as they seem. But a previous incident regarding Jordan Proctor and Mr. McManus had indicated there was some animosity between the two.

McManus, who had been teaching a class in music history that Jordan Proctor was auditing, had mentioned in class that the historical myth of the emperor Nero playing a violin while a fire consumed much of the city of Rome was incorrect, in that the violin would not be invented until the Eleventh century. Mr. McManus suggested Nero had been playing the cithara, a large wooden instrument that could have had any number from four to seven strings, as the fire destroyed the city.

According to others in the class, Jordan Proctor had become “enraged” when Mr. McManus had made this assertion, feeling that the cithara itself was somehow being disparaged. He insisted that Nero was playing no musical instrument at all when the great fire broke out, being some thirty-five miles away at the time. Contemporary historians, I discovered, seemed to bear out Jordan Proctor’s account, saying Nero had in fact returned to Rome and tried to implement rescue measures to little avail.

The argument reached high levels of intensity and ended with Jordan Proctor rushing the podium and trying to push Mr. McManus away, according to Rutgers Police reports after the fact.

Mr. McManus had reported to the campus security force that Jordan Proctor had sent him threatening emails and text messages afterward, insisting that Mr. McManus vindicate the cithara from a nefarious place in history, which Mr. McManus refused to do.

The day of the murder, Jordan Proctor had apparently decided not to attend the music history class, according to other students. Because he was not a matriculated undergraduate, Jordan Proctor sometimes did not attend the classes he audited because he was working at a music shop on Rt. 18 in East Brunswick at the time the class was being taught. The police report indicated Ethan Messenger, the owner of the store had been contacted, but reported that Jordan Proctor had not come to work that day despite having had a shift scheduled.

I sent a text message to Judge Adamson on a line he'd requested I use, which I assumed was not a traceable number, perhaps a "burner phone." I requested he find a way that I could speak to Jordan Proctor in county jail that day. In a few minutes the judge had said he'd told the authorities in charge that I was a relative of the prisoner and should be allowed a brief visit. Then he sent another text warning me not to make any further requests regarding county officials.

Rather than ask Ms. Washburn to drive me to the jail, I got in touch with my friend Mike the taxicab driver, who has agreed to transport me when he is not busy and I need a ride. Mike was available, and even with Ms. Washburn giving me curious looks, I was in his taxicab and on the way to the county jail in North Brunswick, New Jersey within a half hour.

"Are you nervous?" Mike asked me as soon as I had buckled the harness and settled into his taxicab's impeccably clean seats.

"I will be closely watched by the prison guards," I answered. "I have no reason to believe I will be in any danger."

“You’re getting married the day after tomorrow!” Mike said when we were stopped at a traffic light. Mike knows I prefer the driver pay attention only to the road when I am a passenger in his or her vehicle. “A lot of people are nervous when the day is that close.”

“I have known Ms. Washburn for four years,” I answered. “If I were not certain marrying her is a wise thing to do, I would not be doing it.”

Mike chuckled. “You are you, Samuel, and nobody else is,” he said.

“That is true of everyone.”

Mike parked the taxicab at the entrance to the county prison and said he would wait until I returned. He was playing music that was not made by the Beatles from his cellular phone as soon as I closed the rear door and walked to the building.

Once the visitor protocols had been observed I was ushered into a small room with a table and two molded plastic chairs. I considered standing for the entire interview but decided that would probably put Jordan Proctor in an uneasy state of mind. I needed him to be as clear-headed as possible when we spoke, as this would likely be my only chance to talk to the alleged murderer.

While I waited for the guards to bring Jordan Proctor into the room I considered what Mike the taxicab driver had asked me. *Should* I be nervous before marrying Ms. Washburn? What was there to be nervous about? It was true that I would be moving out of my attic apartment in my parents’ home and into Ms. Washburn’s townhome but most of my possessions had already been transferred and I was familiar with the floor plan of my new home. It was our hope that we would eventually be able to buy another residence but since I was Ms. Washburn’s employer the state of our finances would not change significantly upon our marriage. What was



the need to be nervous? Was my autism spectrum disorder (which I still thought of as Asperger's syndrome) causing me to miss some danger I was not considering?

My thoughts were redirected when Jordan Proctor was ushered into the visiting area. He was a slightly built man, in his mid- to late twenties with unkempt hair and a blank expression (Dr. Mancuso calls it a "flat affect" in our sessions), wearing an orange jumpsuit. His hands were cuffed together, and as soon as he was in position the guard who led him in attached the cuffs to a metal ring on the table between us.

"Is that necessary?" I asked the guard. I had hoped Jordan Proctor might be more relaxed than he appeared. He looked around the room with sharp, quick movements, as if assessing whether there were threats he might not be seeing at first glance.

"Jordan tends to get a little... agitated," the guard said, then he turned and walked to a corner of the room, ostensibly to give the two of us some privacy in our conversation.

I forced myself to turn my attention to the task at hand. I looked Jordan Proctor in the eye despite my preference to avoid such looks. I don't like to see another person's face as they look at me; it leads to my wondering what that person might be thinking and distracts me from what I am trying to accomplish.

In this case I was attempting to get some information about Liam McManus's murder from the man accused of committing it. I had no preconceived notions of Jordan Proctor's guilt or innocence but needed to clarify some points that only he could illuminate.

"Allow me to introduce myself," I said to him. "I am Samuel Hoenig."

"Paul McCartney's original Hofner bass, in the violin style, has been missing since sometime in 1969, possibly from Guitar Wizard," he said. "There were rumors it had been found in Ottawa in 2016 but they turned out to be false."

“I understand,” I said. Technically it was true that I did, but the context was somehow lost on me. Of course, I have had many conversations with people who are considered *neurotypical* and they have clearly believed my demeanor and my speech to be difficult to comprehend. “But right now I need to ask you about Liam McManus.”

“It was the original Hofner bass he played on the first two Beatles albums and their first single, *Love Me Do*,” Jordan Proctor said. “He ordered it especially because he is left handed and the bass could be adapted. He said he bought it because it was cheap.”

People with behaviors classified as on the autism spectrum frequently prefer to talk about their intense interests more than any other topic. I can be an example of that practice myself. But this was different; Jordan Proctor was not simply lecturing on his interest. He was refusing to acknowledge the subject I was trying to discuss. He was not trying to divert the conversation to something he found more comfortable. He was trying to deny there was anything else to discuss.

He was terrified.

There is a level of anxiety that is normal in all humans, and those of us considered to have a “disability” or “disorder” might be more susceptible to its effects because we are aware that we sometimes act in ways the majority of the population might find odd or upsetting. We learn at an early age to be wary of setting a foot wrong, as the saying goes. But in Jordan Proctor’s case right now, he was not worried about upsetting me. He was simply afraid that anything he said could, as the officer arresting him had no doubt mentioned, be used against him.

It occurred to me to use one of my interests which happened to overlap with his. “What is your favorite Beatles song?” I asked. It’s a technique I often use to help assess a person’s character, and while it would be useful in that capacity with Jordan Proctor, I had a second

purpose in mind: to get him to stop saying only what he wanted to say and respond to what I was asking.

Immediately I could see the tactic had achieved its goal. Jordan Proctor stopped and looked briefly at me, thinking. "*I Will*," he said.

*Unrealistic romantic*, I thought. But there was more to it than that, and it was a surprising choice for Jordan Proctor to have made.

"Because it's the song where Paul McCartney doesn't play the bass at all," I said.

"That's right. He sings the bass part instead."

Now Jordan Proctor was engaging in conversation. I would have to move the focus toward the murder of Liam McManus, but it would need to be a very gradual process. Doing so too quickly would simply send Jordan Proctor back into a recitation of facts about the loss bass and probably other stringed instruments.

"Interesting. Are there other songs on which one of the other Beatles plays the bass, or did he always take that role?" I knew the answer, but needed to keep Jordan Proctor feeling like he was in control of our talk.

"Yes," he said. "John Lennon played bass on *Dig It* and *The Long and Winding Road*. And George Harrison played it on a few, including *Birthday* and *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*."

The last title gave me exactly the interrogatory opening I needed. "Yes, he did," I agreed. "That's a strange song, don't you think?" I don't think it's especially odd but others have told me in the past that they hold that opinion.

"Why?" It was good that Jordan Proctor was asking questions. The authority in the conversation, then, could be transferred to me.

“Because the lyric is about a young man who kills three people with a blunt instrument to the head for no discernible reason. Don’t you think that’s difficult to understand?”

Jordan Proctor dropped his head down, his chin resting on his upper chest. “I don’t think it’s hard to understand. They were all treating him badly.”

“Not the first one,” I pointed out. “She was a woman he had asked out on a date and he came to her house and killed her. I don’t understand that at all. Do you?” I believed that if I could place Jordan Proctor in a fictional situation that was similar to the one he found himself in the night Liam McManus was killed, he might be able to speak metaphorically and lead me toward an answer to Judge Adamson’s question.

The accused murderer took a moment looking at the floor of the visiting area, which was unadorned cement. He glanced at the handcuffs on his wrists but did not react visibly. He looked everywhere in the room but into my face. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to come up with a plausible lie or if the truth was too difficult for him to face.

“Maybe she did something bad,” he said.

“Like what?” I was pressing, but realized my time with Jordan Proctor was probably going to end soon. The guard in the corner was looking at us and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “What could she have done that warranted killing her with a hammer?”

“She asked for the wrong thing. I don’t know,” Jordan Proctor said. “I wasn’t there. It’s not my favorite song, anyway. It’s a piano song.”

“The piano is a string instrument,” I pointed out.

“It’s not the same.”

The guard took a few steps toward us. I had no time to waste. “Were you there when Liam McManus was killed?” I asked.

His head dropped down again and his eyes closed. “The ancient lyre was not plucked with the fingers, but played with a plectrum, or pick. It can have four, seven or ten strings.” I would get no more information about Liam McManus’s death from Jordan Proctor.

When the guard came to unlock his handcuffs and lead him away, he looked down at me. “Don’t feel bad,” the guard said. “He doesn’t say much that isn’t about guitars and harps and stuff.”

“Does he ever talk about anything else?” I asked, careful not to be specific.

The guard helped Jordan Proctor stand. “Once in a while he yells out a woman’s name. Tina, I think.”

Jordan Proctor winced at the mention of the name.

I decided it would be best not to engage Jordan Proctor himself so I asked the guard, “Who is Tina?” in the hope that his charge would feel compelled to respond.

But the guard just said, “Beats me,” and led Jordan Proctor away.

I related the story of my interview to Mike the taxicab driver when I sat down in his taxicab’s rear seat again. I had explained the situation to Mike, who can sometimes offer very helpful insight and advice, but I had not mentioned Judge Adamson or explained who my client might be. The less such information was disseminated the better.

“You think Tina is some woman that maybe this Liam guy stole away from Jordan?” he asked.

The thought had not occurred to me, as there had been no mention of a woman in any of the judge’s documents about the McManus murder. “Until I find out who she is there is no point in speculating about what role she might have had in this incident,” I said.

“So how will you find out who she is?” Mike started the taxicab’s engine. He drives a Prius, so the sound of the motor was very slight.

“I believe I will speak to some of Jordan Proctor’s coworkers. Can you take me to a music store in East Brunswick?” I settled back in the seat.

“You’re lucky I’m on a night shift today, Samuel,” Mike said as he put the taxicab in gear. “I’m not going to get rich driving you around.” Mike refuses to charge me for my rides.

Rt. 18 Music, a small store in a strip mall on a busy highway, did not have a very imaginative name. This reflected the style of the shop itself, which crammed its space full of instruments, mostly electric guitars hung on the walls in patterns that maximized the area, turning them sideways. More guitars fit on the walls, but very few of them could be displayed face out, making it more difficult for potential buyers to see what they might be seeking.

The owner, a man in his thirties by my estimate, was named Ethan Messenger. He was immediately disappointed to learn that I was not a potential customer, and the usual explanation of my work followed with the usual misunderstanding on the questioner’s part. It is not easy to tell people you own a business called Questions Answered, and less so to convey what it does, although the function is clearly stated in the business name.

“You’re a detective?” Messenger asked.

“No. I answer questions. And the question I am trying to answer right now is whether Jordan Proctor killed Liam McManus.”

“How would I know?”

“I don’t expect you to know,” I assured him. “I am asking in order to establish a more complete picture of Jordan Proctor’s character. Was he a reliable employee?”

“Yeah.” Messenger looked around the store, watching the two people separately perusing the merchandise and the one sales representative behind the glass counter, who at the moment was playing a game on his phone.

“Did he get along well with the other employees?” I asked.

“I guess.” Messenger was obviously not going to be an especially eloquent or generous source of information. “He’s kind of weird.” I let that comment pass, as it could just as easily apply to me and millions of others like me.

It seemed there was little I was going to find out in the store so I employed what I believe in American football is called a “hail Mary pass.” “Is there a woman who works here named Tina?” I asked.

Messenger looked as if I’d guessed correctly that he has some terminal disease. His eyes widened for a brief moment and he drew in a sharp breath. Mike the taxicab driver, standing behind me and observing, later told me he hoped Messenger did not play poker for money because his expressions would give away every card in his hand.

“Tina keeps the books,” the manager said with one exhalation.

“May I speak to her?” Perhaps Tina knew why Jordan Proctor called out her name at random intervals.

“She’s not here.” Messenger was watching a young man who clearly wasn’t going to buy anything based on his reaction to the price tags he was examining. It was a way of avoiding the conversation we were having or looking me in the eye. I use the technique myself when I can.

“When will she be in?” Messenger’s attempts to avoid discussing Tina were convincing me she had vital information I should try to obtain. “Will I be able to speak with her? It’s quite important.”

“She’s not coming in today,” he said, as if that ended the discussion. “Look, I have customers here. I need to get back to work.”

“You have two people walking through the store, one of whom is clearly not going to spend any money today and the other who is talking with your reluctant clerk about buying some strings for an acoustic guitar. So you don’t have any pressing business right now. Why don’t you want to discuss Tina?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now why don’t you leave? I can’t help you.” Messenger’s mouth was puckered and his eyes were narrow. He was trying to keep out everything he didn’t want to deal with at this moment.

“It’s very important that I find Tina quickly,” I insisted. “Can you at least tell me her last name?”

Now the manager did make eye contact and it was my turn to look away. “Messenger,” he said. “Tina Messenger. She’s my wife.”

Messenger insisted his wife had no role in the McManus murder (“I don’t think she ever even heard of the guy, let alone met him”) and barely knew Jordan Proctor. Upon my suggestion that it would be better if I could hear this from the woman herself, he snarled and said, “Get a warrant. Until you do, get out.”

“I am not attempting to implicate your wife in any wrongdoing,” I assured him. “I have very little time to answer this question and my own marriage could be jeopardized if I fail.” Perhaps that exaggeration would put Messenger in a more charitable state of mind.

“You want to implicate someone?” Clearly the man had not understood what I’d said. “Implicate McManus’s himself. From what I read, he was a jerk and pissed a lot of people off.”



This was information that did not appear in any of the judge's files, which was not very odd. Police reports do not assess a person's character. But Jordan Proctor had been angry enough to rush Mr. McManus while he was teaching.

While we got into the taxicab Mike said he wondered if Liam McManus was married, but the judge's files indicated he was not. I did not know if he was romantically involved with anyone.

"I think it's important you find Tina Messenger," Mike said. He sat in the driver's seat and buckled his harness. "Where to now?"

"The Questions Answered office."

Ms. Washburn greeted me with a kiss when we arrived, but also kissed Mike the taxicab driver on the cheek, which I have learned is a sign of platonic affection. I have been instructed not to be jealous when I see her do so, but I needed no such warnings. I might not understand social cues but I have seen them in practice for my entire life.

Mike told Ms. Washburn he was leaving me in her hands and left in his taxicab to begin his evening shift. They talk about me that way, but it doesn't really mean they see me as a burden. I've been told it is playful teasing. I accept that is its intent.

"What did you learn about Jordan Proctor?" she asked in a tone I knew she meant to sound casual.

"How did you know what I am researching?" I asked.

She sat down behind her desk in the converted pizzeria we use as our office. I would need to complete thirteen circuits of the room while raising my hands above my head in ten minutes to maintain the exercise regimen my research indicates is optimal for a man my age and condition.

But now I stood and watched the woman I would marry in less than forty-eight hours resume her workstation and smile at me.

“You had a confidential conversation with Judge Adamson, who was in the newspapers all week presiding over the Proctor trial, and who has to render a verdict very soon. And then you take off with Mike to interview people and you come back with a mark on your shirt where the visitor’s badge must have been at the county jail. But you were gone too long for just that, so you must have stopped somewhere else along the way.”

I looked at her with admiration. “You have learned quite a bit since the Question of the Missing Head,” I told her.

“I had a good teacher. Now, what can we do to answer the judge’s question?”

I told her all I had discovered during the day and Ms. Washburn listened carefully, nodding at various spots as if to acknowledge that what I had done was the correct thing. “I believe we need to locate Mr. Messenger’s wife Tina and question her,” I said. “But I suspect she is not living in his house at the moment. He seemed quite upset by the mention of her name and was especially ill at ease when I asked where she might be. His mouth twitched.”

Ms. Washburn smiled. “You’ve learned a lot about reading people’s expressions,” she said. “I guess we make a pretty good team.”

I would have liked to kiss her for an hour or so but there was no time. “I suppose we do. So let’s answer the judge’s question and have him perform our wedding on Saturday.”

She grinned but was already intent on her computer screen. “It should be easy enough,” she said.

“What should?” I walked to my desk, to the right of Ms. Washburn’s, and sat down.

“Finding Tina Messenger’s parents. I just have to get a wedding announcement so I can figure out her maiden name.”

“Her parents?” I asked.

“It’s where a wife goes when she leaves her husband,” Ms. Washburn told me.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ms. Washburn’s parents live in Michigan but were flying in for our wedding the next day.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She did not look up from her screen, and I felt no need to explain myself. I have realized that Ms. Washburn understands me very well, but doesn’t always know when I’m joking. My sense of humor, apparently, is filtered through my autism spectrum behaviors. It’s not an easy concept. “Okay. Tina Messenger’s name at birth was Christina Van Dyke, and we got lucky. Her parents live in Edison, off of Oak Tree Road.” She stood up. “Let’s go.”

I hesitated. “Shouldn’t we let them know we’re going to visit?” I asked. “This will be awfully abrupt. What if they aren’t home?”

“If she’d hiding and we alert her we’re on the way to ask about Liam McManus’s murder, do you think she’ll stay put and wait for us?”

We were in Ms. Washburn’s car in less than a minute.

Guided by the Global Positioning System on Ms. Washburn’s iPhone we arrived at the home of Robert and Laura Van Dyke in sixteen minutes. At the front door to the split-level home that bore the style of the 1960s, I hesitated and watched Ms. Washburn. She knows I am reluctant to touch a doorbell, particularly when I am not wearing gloves. She watched me for a moment, said, “Okay, but next time it’s your turn,” and rang the doorbell.

In thirteen seconds the door opened and a man of approximately fifty-six stood in the doorway. He looked at Ms. Washburn, then at me, then back at Ms. Washburn. "Can I help you?" he asked. It was the proper question. If he'd asked, "*May* I help you?" he would have been asking permission to do so. In this case, the issue was whether he was capable of assisting us even though he did not yet know what our goal might be.

Ms. Washburn did not answer, but looked in my direction. I extended my right hand. "Allow me to introduce myself," I said. "I am Samuel Hoenig and this is my associate Ms. Washburn. We represent Questions Answered, and we are trying to locate Tina Messenger, who we believe is your daughter. Do you know where we might find her?"

The man I presumed to be Robert Van Dyke looked at my offered hand with an expression of confusion. I was glad he did not accept it, as I do not enjoy touching strangers. "My daughter isn't here," he said quietly.

Ms. Washburn, perhaps understanding that my social skills have improved but are still not as keen as her own, took a step to her right to attract Mr. Van Dyke's attention. "Can you tell us where she is?" she asked. "We're not with the police. We don't want to get anyone in trouble. We just have to answer a question."

"I don't know where she is," Mr. Van Dyke said. "She and her husband live in Sayreville. Go try there."

"May we have the address?" I asked.

"No." Mr. Van Dyke closed the door, keeping us out.

Ms. Washburn looked at me with an expression of helplessness. "I guess that's it," she said.

“I don’t think so.” I reached over and rang the doorbell again. Then I reached into my jacket pocket for a small bottle of hand sanitizer and rubbed some on my fingers.

Mr. Van Dyke opened the door again but now it was not difficult to read his face: He was angry. “I’m going to call the police if you don’t leave,” he said. “My daughter isn’t here, and if she were I still wouldn’t let her talk to you. She’s done nothing wrong. Leave her alone.”

He slammed the door again.

“A man’s life is at stake!” I shouted, although that was not technically true. New Jersey has not executed a prisoner since 1963, and abolished capital punishment in 2007. But a life in prison is not a pleasant prospect either, and Jordan Proctor could face such a sentence if Judge Adamson found him guilty.

It appeared that did not matter, since Mr. Van Dyke did not open his front door again. In fact, the lamps in his front room were turned off, which I assumed was a signal that no further advances would be welcome.

There seemed little point in ringing the doorbell again, although there was no guarantee that Mr. Van Dyke had been telling the truth about his daughter’s whereabouts. Three cars parked in his driveway seemed to indicate three people in the house, and one of them very well might have been Tina Messenger. Still, without permission we were simply private citizens asking to be admitted and being denied that admittance, which was entirely within the rights of the homeowner. Ms. Washburn and I headed back to her Kia Spectra and she began to drive back to Questions Answered.

We did not speak again until Ms. Washburn pulled the car to the side of the road and shifted it into park, which I had not been expecting. I’d been told that some people liked to

express physical affection in parked cars but had never done so myself. Perhaps Ms. Washburn felt it would be a good idea to do so before we were married. I would follow her lead.

But I was mistaken about her intentions. “Maybe we’re looking at this the wrong way,” she said, and I took a moment to realize she was discussing the Liam McManus murder. “You said Jordan Proctor would only talk about Paul McCartney’s missing bass guitar until you got him to talk a little bit more about the Beatles in general. Why would he be so fixated on that one bass?”

“Jordan Proctor has autism spectrum behaviors and his strongest interest is in string instruments,” I replied. “It makes sense that when he is under stress he concentrates on those interests.”

“Sure. I’ve seen you do it. But why that one instrument? I’m sure he could think about things like harps and violins. The argument he had with Liam McManus was about a cithara, you said. Why isn’t he just thinking about that?”

I considered her question but it seemed less than relevant to our research into the judge’s question. “The subject is a very famous instrument and has been missing for more than fifty years,” I said. “Those are elements that make it interesting. Jordan Proctor can immerse himself into speculation about its whereabouts and forget his own predicament. It’s possible he actually killed Liam McManus over the cithara argument and is using the McCartney bass to avoid thinking about that.”

Ms. Washburn gave me a skeptical look. “You don’t think Jordan killed McManus over the idea that a cithara.”

She knew how to read my thinking. “No. I don’t. I have not yet reached an answer, but I consider it unlikely that Jordan Proctor killed Liam McManus at all.”

“So then, why is Jordan fixating on the McCartney bass? Why does he yell out Tina’s name when we’re not even sure they know each other? What is Jordan Proctor trying to tell us?” Ms. Washburn was not trying to make a point; she was asking questions to which she did not know the answers.

But as she so often does, she managed to clarify my thinking. “Please drive back to the Questions Answered office,” I said. “I can do some research on my iPhone, but you know I prefer not to divert my eyes from the road.”

Ms. Washburn put her foot on the brake pedal and shifted the car into drive. “You’re not driving,” she noted before she started driving.

“I don’t think that’s relevant,” I said.

We arrived at the office in twelve minutes and I immediately rushed to my workstation. Ms. Washburn, keeping up by walking rapidly behind me, asked breathlessly, “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes. See if you can determine the name of Liam McManus’s father. No. His grandfather. And find out when the McManus family immigrated to the United States, and from where.”

She sounded puzzled but I did not look at her. “Okay,” she said.

I began my work by identifying the name Guitar Wizard. A simple Google search would bring up too many unrelated results so I specified my search on a more specific engine devoted to fans of the Beatles, which I know of from my own special interest. As I suspected, the words, capitalized, brought some important information but I would need Ms. Washburn’s input before I could put my theory into its proper context. If I was correct – and it seemed I should be based on what I’d discovered – the next task would be to determine how it might be related to Liam McManus’s murder.

Ms. Washburn was as reliable as ever. Even before I could swivel my chair to face hers, she was already reporting her results. “Liam McManus is a first-generation American, the first in his family to be born here,” she said. “The family immigrated to New York in 1980, and he moved to New Jersey three years ago. In addition to teaching on an adjunct basis, he also worked as a consultant to a publisher of music, Tones Publishing, based in New York City.”

The timing was working out and I knew Ms. Washburn had more to tell me so I stayed silent. “His grandfather, Sean McManus, was born in Dublin, Ireland but moved to London in 1961,” she continued. “He did not immigrate with the family and died in England four months ago.”

Things were falling into place but there was one last vital piece of information. “Did Sean McManus ever work for the Abbey Road studios or a business in London called Guitar Wizard?” I asked.

Ms. Washburn looked at me questioningly, but knew well enough to turn back and input more information into her computer. She took longer than I would have expected and gave me an answer that was equally difficult to anticipate. “No. He never did.”

My theory seemed to have been disproven and I felt that I had to start at the beginning once again, with only a day to give the judge an answer. But Ms. Washburn then added, “But his grandmother, Irene McManus, did. How did you know that, Samuel?”

I hadn’t, obviously, but I had no time to explain that to Ms. Washburn because the bells left over our entrance by the previous owners, San Remo Pizza, rang and we both looked up.

A woman in her mid-thirties, small and walking slowly, came into the office and looked toward Ms. Washburn first. “Is this Questions Answered?” she asked. I am often surprised by the



number of people who do not notice the sign I had drawn and placed in the front window. Ms. Washburn says I should get a “professional” one, and perhaps I will.

“Yes,” Ms. Washburn told the woman. “Do you have a question we can help you with?”

“No,” the woman said. That was somewhat confusing. If she had no question, why had she sought out a business that answers questions? “I was told you were looking for me. My name is Tina Messenger.”

That explained the way she had encountered us. “Come in,” I said in what I hoped was a soothing voice. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Samuel Hoenig and this is my associate Ms. Washburn.”

“Janet,” Ms. Washburn said, extending a hand to Tina. Ms. Washburn gave me an odd look I could not decipher. I made a note to ask her about it when Tina had left.

Tina took Ms. Washburn’s hand for a moment, then sat in the client chair in front of Ms. Washburn’s desk when she gestured toward it. “I’m so glad you came to see us, Ms. Messenger,” Ms. Washburn said.

“Tina,” the other woman corrected. “I wasn’t going to come. You know, I was in the house when you talked to my father. It was when you said a man’s life was at stake. I knew what you meant, and I couldn’t not answer you.”

“I suspected as much.” I walked over to lean on the edge of my desk and see Tina Messenger more closely. I did not want to intimidate her, so I leaned back and made sure to use a quiet voice. I also did not mention that I’d spotted her car in the driveway of her parents’ home.

Ms. Washburn decided to engage Tina directly, which was probably wise. “Mr. Hoenig saw your husband today and got the impression things weren’t going so well between you two. He didn’t seem to know where you were staying.”

Tina's face took on a closed tone. "He knows where I'm staying, all right. I wish he didn't. I might have to go somewhere else soon."

"Is this about the money your husband was diverting out of your business' account?" I asked.

"How did you know about that?" Tina's eyes were wide. I noticed Ms. Washburn, too, had an expression of surprise on her face.

"It was speculation, but it made the most sense of any explanation. I imagine it was quite a bit of money."

Tina Messenger nodded. "It was three hundred thousand dollars, and it wasn't just that. Ethan was going to mortgage our house and the business to get more." She looked at Ms. Washburn, searching for understanding from another woman, it seemed. "It wasn't the money. Well, yes it was the money, but it was more about him not telling me what he was doing. And that's when I found out about Liam McManus."

I understood now; the plot was coming into focus. "How did your husband know Mr. McManus?" I asked.

"At first through Jordan," Tina answered.

"Jordan Proctor," Ms. Washburn said to be certain we were discussing the same man.

Tina nodded again. "Jordan works in the store, and he and I got to be friends a little. So I guess he must have told McManus that we sometimes deal in rare instruments, although we don't do that very much."

"And Liam McManus was in possession of a very rare instrument indeed, wasn't he?" I said.

Tina diverted her gaze and looked toward the machine that dispenses bottled water for me and soft drinks for Ms. Washburn, left over from the San Remo days. “That’s what he said. I never saw it.”

Ms. Washburn sat back in her office chair. “Liam McManus had Paul McCartney’s missing Hofner bass,” she said, seemingly to herself.

“Indeed,” I concurred. “And he wanted to sell it to your husband, didn’t he, Tina?”

Tina’s eyes narrowed. “Not really. I think he told Ethan about it because he wanted to be impressive, you know? The college professor who knows all about music and has the most famous missing instrument in the world. But once Ethan found out about it, he wanted to buy it and the price kept going up.”

“I don’t understand,” Ms. Washburn said. “If Liam had the bass all this time, why was he just selling it now? It’s been missing for fifty years. How did Liam get hold of it?”

“Consider what you just found out in your research, Ms. Washburn,” I said. “You have all the information you need.”

Tina looked back and forth between the two of us, wondering what we might have meant. She didn’t have the answers to the questions I was asking, but I knew that Ms. Washburn did.

“You mean Liam got the bass from his grandmother? *She* stole it all those years ago?”

“It fits the facts best,” I answered. “Irene McManus worked for Guitar Wizard, a firm in London in the 1960s that was famous for being the place the Beatles, particularly Paul McCartney, would have their instruments maintained and repaired. McCartney brought the bass in to Guitar Wizard in 1969 because it needed some repairs. It was not the bass he was playing most of the time anyway, but it was worn and required some attention.”

“I don’t understand,” Tina said. “His *grandmother* gave him Paul McCartney’s bass? Didn’t they suspect something when it vanished from this repair place she worked at?”

“It didn’t,” I said. “It’s well documented that the bass was returned from Guitar Wizard with the repairs having been done. But part of Mrs. McManus’s duties would have been to work with the Abbey Road studios, where the Beatles recorded. And that wouldn’t have been a place from which she could have taken the instrument because it was always being watched.

“But in 1969 the Beatles weren’t working at Abbey Road. They were recording and filming *Let It Be* at Twickenham Studios in London. Security wasn’t as tight there and if Mrs. McManus had to come by to pick up or deliver a guitar for repair, and it was at a time the band wasn’t working, she would have had access.”

“But how did it get to Liam?” Tina asked.

Ms. Washburn gestured with her right hand, indicating she had worked out the answer. “His grandfather died four months ago,” she said. “Irene died in 2004, but Liam’s grandfather Sean stayed in London and lived until this year. Irene must have given him the bass, possibly decades ago, and maybe they thought they could sell it or ransom it but it became too famous and they couldn’t surface with it. So when he died Sean willed the bass to his grandson here in New Jersey.”

I turned my attention to Tina. “What happened the night Liam McManus died?” I asked. “Were you there?”

“Mr. Hoenig, I’m not going to get anyone in trouble. I wasn’t there when Liam died. I know that he was meeting with Ethan that night and was supposed to show him the bass for the first time. But I didn’t see what happened.”

“Why was Jordan Proctor there?” Ms. Washburn asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know why he calls your name at times in prison?” I asked.

Tina looked slightly embarrassed, if I read her face accurately. “I was probably one of his only friends,” she said. “And even I didn’t know him very well. He’d probably call me if he got in trouble because he thought I could help. He didn’t call me the night Liam McManus died, though.”

“But your husband came home that night without the bass, is that correct?” I asked.

“I never saw it,” Tina said. “Ethan hasn’t talked to me much since that night, but he muttered something about Liam not wanting to tell him where it was.”

I closed my eyes. “Ms. Messenger, are you afraid of your husband?”

Tina didn’t answer but her eyes welled with tears.

“All right. Is there somewhere you can stay other than your parents’ house?”

She looked even more unhappy. “Not really.”

I looked at Ms. Washburn and she nodded. “I know a place,” I said.

My mother and father were not prepared for Ms. Washburn and I to bring a guest with us for dinner, but they understood Tina’s plight and agreed she could stay in my attic apartment for a few days. I had effectively moved into Ms. Washburn’s townhome anyway and the room was sitting empty. My mother had made a pot roast for dinner. Tina seemed quite pleased with the idea after calling her father and explaining that she was going to be staying elsewhere for a while out of concern for her safety. From what I could hear from a few feet away, Robert Van Dyke was not in favor of the plan, but finally seemed to understand it was for the best.

“You should consider this home,” my mother told Tina. “Do whatever you would normally do. If you want to stay upstairs in Samuel’s room, you don’t have to worry about us.”

My mother is extraordinarily understanding of people whose circumstances are not considered the norm. She does not judge.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hoenig,” Tina said.

“You call me Vivian.”

Tina smiled for the first time since she had arrived at Questions Answered. “Vivian,” she said.

“I’m afraid Ms. Washburn and I will not be able to stay for dinner,” I told Mother.

Her eyes took on a concerned quality. “Where are you going?”

“To jail.”

The ride to Middlesex County Adult Correction Center included a phone call to Judge Adamson’s burner phone, which he answered immediately. The call did not last long.

Ms. Washburn, as Mike the taxicab driver before her, stayed in her car while I entered and went through the protocols to get to the visitor area. Jordan Proctor was already there, his hands cuffed to the table. He did not look at me as I sat down.

“Paul McCartney’s Hofner bass is missing,” he said by way of greeting.

“No,” I said. “Liam McManus had the Hofner and he was going to sell it to Ethan Messenger. Now there’s very little time. Tell me why you were there the night Mr. McManus died.”

“It’s been missing since 1969,” Jordan Proctor said.

“It has been in the possession of Liam McManus’s grandparents since 1969 until a few months ago when Mr. McManus received it from London. I think you knew he had it. So tell me why you were in Mr. McManus’s home the night he was murdered.”

“It was brought to Guitar Wizard and then returned. It vanished after that.”

I considered what would jar my mind if I were in such a state, and there have been times when I have retreated that deeply into an interest in order to avoid unpleasant circumstances. It doesn't happen very much anymore, but before I met Ms. Washburn it was something I had to learn to manage.

"I have the bass," I said.

Jordan Proctor, who was clearly starting to state the next fact on the subject, froze and stared at me. He took a long pause. "No, you don't," he said.

"I do. I have it and I'm going to send it back to Sir Paul. But you have to tell me how Liam McManus died. Why were you there?"

"How did you get it?"

"Mr. McManus gave it to me before he was killed," I lied. "He wanted me to keep it safe, and I have, but I don't know what happened to him. Now. Tell me. Why were you in Liam McManus's home the night he died?"

"You don't have it. It's been lost for fifty years."

"I have it and I'll show it to you."

His eyes widened visibly. "I can see it?"

"Yes, but you have to tell me first. Is that why you were in Mr. McManus's house? Because he was going to show you the bass?"

"Let me see it."

"After you tell me. Not a moment before." I folded my arms across my chest and settled back in the chair, projecting what I hoped was a determined but relaxed attitude.

"Mr. Messenger said he was going to buy Paul McCartney's missing Hofner bass from Liam," Jordan Proctor said. "He said if I came with him I could see it."

“Of course. Did he bring the tire iron into the house from his own car?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Where’s the bass?”

“Later. How did the argument start?”

“It was about the money. Liam wanted six million dollars and Mr. Messenger didn’t have it. Then Liam said he didn’t want to sell the bass at all and he was going to keep it for himself. He said Mr. Messenger couldn’t ever have it no matter what. And Mr. Messenger got mad.”

“So he hit Mr. McManus on the head with the tire iron. Where did it come from?”

Jordan Proctor scratched his head, perhaps thinking of how Liam McManus had been assaulted. “I don’t know. It happened real fast.”

“How did you end up holding the tire iron when the police came?”

“Mr. Messenger said I had to call nine-one-one and tell them somebody was dead. I was scared and sitting on the floor, and he said I had to do it or he’d hit me too. So I called and then he gave me the metal thing and left. I sat there until the police came.”

“Good. Now if you want to see the bass, you have to promise me something,” I said.

“What?” Jordan Proctor looked wary.

“Some more police officers are going to come and talk to you tonight. You can tell them about the bass, but don’t tell them I have it because we want it to go back to Sir Paul. And the biggest thing of all: You have to tell them the truth. Do you agree?”

“Then I can see the Hofner bass?” Jordan Proctor said.

I would have to figure out a way to show him something similar. “Yes,” I said. I felt guilty about lying but I reminded myself that I was helping Jordan Proctor avoid a lifetime in prison.

“Can I hold it?”



I called the police from my cellular phone as soon as I left the jail. Ms. Washburn heard my account of the conversation with Jordan Proctor, then drove us back to my parents' house. By the time we got there Ethan Messenger had been arrested and the county investigators were on their way to interview Jordan Proctor.

Tina Messenger thought she'd like to spend at least the one night in my attic apartment, until she was certain her husband would be detained indefinitely. My parents agreed, and Ms. Washburn and I had some of the leftover dinner before heading back to her townhome.

I did not involve Judge Adamson in the conversation. He would have to make no ruling. The county dropped its case against Jordan Proctor the next day. I arranged to have a bass guitar brought to Jordan for him to examine, but he knew it was a fake and told the police I was a liar.

As of this writing the Hofner bass has not found its way back to Sir Paul McCartney.

Judge Adamson did fulfill his obligation. He arrived at the spot we'd reserved in Johnson Park in Piscataway on Saturday.

With my father Reuben by my side (at my mother's insistence) and Mike the taxicab driver serving as witness, Judge Adamson looked out over the small group, which included Ms. Washburn's parents, my mother, Ms. Washburn's cousin Evelyn as her matron of honor and several of Ms. Washburn's friends.

"Samuel, do you take Janet to be your wife? To be her companion and her support, to love her and comfort her, to stay with her and cherish her for the rest of your lives?"

It was the easiest question I'd ever had to answer. "Yes," I said. There was a small titter from those attending.

The judge turned toward Ms. Washburn. “Janet. Do you take Samuel to be your husband? Will you help him and defend him? Will you be loyal to him and understand him? Will you love him and cherish him for the rest of your lives?”

Ms. Washburn smiled a lovely smile. “I will,” she said.

“Then given the authority I am afforded in this county and state, I declare that you are wife and husband, husband and wife,” the judge said. “Samuel, if I were you I would kiss the bride.”

I did as the judge suggested. Then I stood and looked at my wife.

“Ms. Washburn,” I said.

“Samuel, for goodness sake,” my wife said. “From now on you have to call me Janet.”

**THE END**