

THE LONG,

LONG LIFE

OF THE

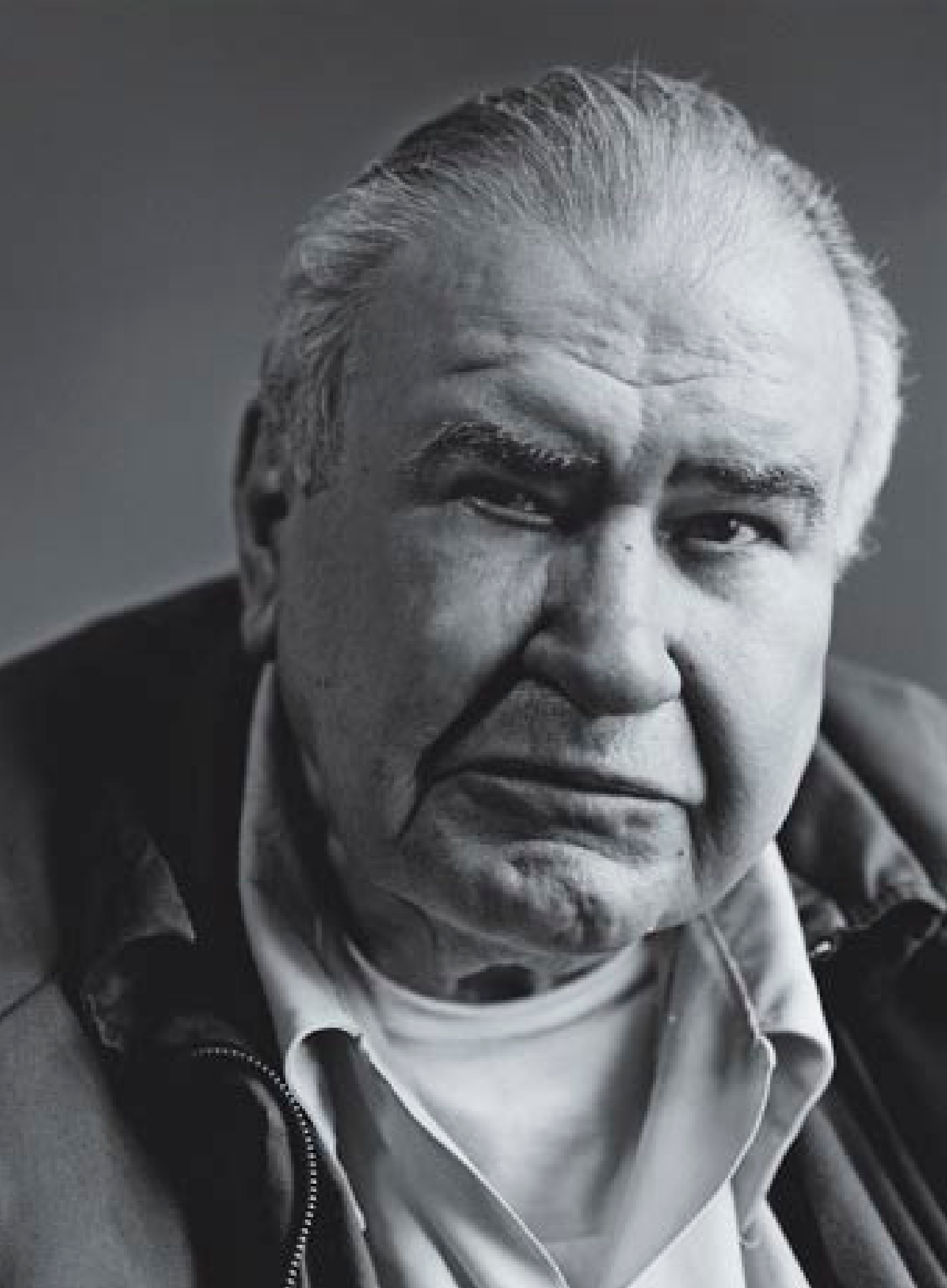
LIPSTICK  
KILLER

BY ADAM  
HIGGINBOTHAM

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
ALESSANDRA PETLIN



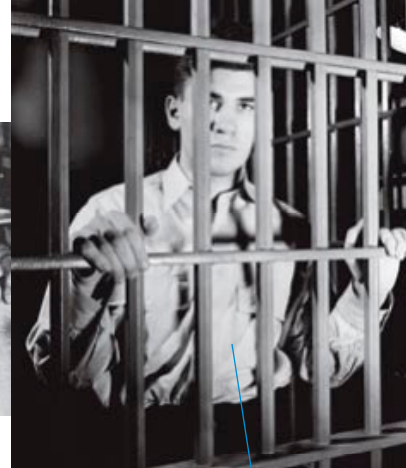
WHEN **WILLIAM HEIRENS** CONFESSED TO THREE OF THE GRISLIEST MURDERS IN CHICAGO HISTORY, HARRY TRUMAN WAS IN THE WHITE HOUSE AND THE NIGHTLY TV-NEWS BROADCAST HADN'T YET BEEN INVENTED. AND NOW, SIXTY-TWO YEARS LATER—AFTER MUCH OF THE EVIDENCE AGAINST HIM HAS FALLEN APART—HE'S STILL BEHIND BARS, PRAYING FOR AT LEAST ONE FREE DAY OF ADULT LIFE BEFORE HE DIES



THE MESSAGE SCRAWLED  
IN LIPSTICK ON  
FRANCES BROWN'S WALL.



HEIRENS SIGNS IN AT  
COOK COUNTY JAIL AFTER  
FIVE BRUTAL DAYS  
IN POLICE CUSTODY.



HEIRENS BEHIND  
BARS, ONE MONTH  
AFTER HIS  
CONFESSION.

BILL HEIRENS IN A POLICE  
LINEUP, SUMMER 1946.

## IN THE SILENCE

OF VISITING ROOM FIVE,  
NUMBER C06103 SITS IN HIS  
WHEELCHAIR AND STRUGGLES TO  
REMEMBER THE LAST TIME  
HE CELEBRATED HIS BIRTHDAY.

His hair, once so thick and dark that it was used to identify him from witness statements, is still combed straight back from his forehead but is now thin and gray. Sometimes, when he pauses to search his memory, his mind skittering back over the many years he has passed in this place or in others much like it, his good eye will flicker downward toward the plastic table in front of him, or he'll twiddle his thumbs or scratch his belly where his worn, grubby blue shirt strains at the buttons. But for now, he remains motionless.

Two weeks ago, he turned 79, and that passed unnoticed: "No different from any other day.... Nothing happened," he says, his voice heavy with resignation. "Just grew another year older."

And the birthday before?

"Uh, 78. Let's see.... Where was I at? I wasn't here. I wasn't here yet...." He considers the problem a little more, but the details—which part of the penal system he'd been in a year ago, and how long he'd spent there—elude him.

When I ask how long he has spent locked up here in Dixon Correctional Center, a cluster of low buildings ringed with razor wire out in the wind-scoured nothingness a hundred miles west of Chicago, he simply gives up.

"Oh, I don't know," he says. "I didn't keep track of it.... It's gotta be written down somewhere."

Illinois Department of Corrections records show that prisoner C06103, William George Heirens, DOB 11-15-1928, was transferred to Dixon on April 8, 1998. But if the months and decades have become blurred for the old man in visiting room five, it's hardly surprising; these past ten years are only a fraction of the time he has spent behind bars. The longest-serving inmate in the United States prison system, Heirens so far has been continuously incarcerated for sixty-one years and eleven months: a man buried alive.

## THE FIRST OF THE MURDERS DIDN'T EVEN MAKE THE

front pages of the Chicago papers. On the afternoon of June 5, 1945, 43-year-old Josephine Ross was found dead in her home on the North Side of the city, stabbed four times in the throat. Her wounds had been covered with adhesive tape and her head bound in a skirt. The blood-splattered apartment had been ransacked, but police found no fingerprints and no obvious motive.

The body of 32-year-old stenographer Frances Brown was discovered six months later on the morning of December 11, in the bathroom of her apartment at the Pine Grove Hotel. Brown had been shot in the head and stabbed with a bread knife that had been driven into her neck with such force that the blade emerged through the other side of her throat. Her body had been stripped naked and rinsed of blood, her head wrapped in towels. Police found themselves once more hampered by a lack of evidence; the apartment had apparently been wiped clean of fingerprints. But this time, someone had left a message for them: On the living room wall, written in an odd, curling hand using Brown's own red lipstick, were the words **FOR HEAVENS SAKE CATCH ME BEFORE I KILL MORE I CANNOT CONTROL MYSELF**. It was a detail custom-made for Chicago's sensationalist press—they splashed across their front pages the shocking work of the murderer they christened the Lipstick Killer.

The third crime was the last, and the most savage—overnight, the city was paralyzed with terror. At about seven thirty on the morning of January 7, 1946, James Degnan discovered that his 6-year-old daughter, Suzanne, was missing from her bedroom in their apartment, in a wealthy enclave on the North Side. Degnan called the police, and by 10 A.M. forty-five men were on the scene: reporters, press photographers, detectives, and a patrolman at the corner, directing traffic. Searching Suzanne's room, cops found a crumpled note telling the family to prepare a \$20,000 ransom, not to notify the police or the FBI, and to wait for word from the kidnapper. It wasn't long before this was revealed as a cruel ruse: At 7 P.M. that night, Suzanne's severed head was found less than a block away, floating in a sewer catch basin, blue ribbons still tied in her hair. During the next few hours, the child's legs and torso were recovered from separate locations in sewers nearby.

Those who were children in Chicago at the time still remember Suzanne Degnan's murder as a turning point in their lives. "It changed the innocence of neighborhoods where people had taken for granted that they could have unlocked doors and walk alone at night," says Robert Ressler, the former FBI profiler often credited with coining the term *serial killer*, who was a 9-year-old living in Chicago at the time. The events of that summer inspired Ressler to become a criminologist, and the Degnan murder itself became a key element in his landmark theories about serial homicide.

As the gruesome details of the murder went out on the wires, the Degnan case became the first national crime sensation of the postwar era. The Chicago police questioned thousands of men and women and arrested many suspects. With each arrest, state's attorney William Touhy announced that they had definitely found their man. They took in the 65-year-old janitor from the building where Suzanne was dismembered and tortured him for two days



HEIRENS AND HIS MOTHER, PHOTOGRAPHED AT HIS COLLEGE GRADUATION, 1972.



HEIRENS WORKS ON HIS LANDSCAPE DRAWINGS AT THE MINIMUM-SECURITY VIENNA PRISON.

before releasing him when he refused to confess. Months went by, and the police exhausted what leads they had. By the start of summer 1946, a few smudged prints found by the FBI on the ransom note were all they had left to go on. Still, William Touhy would not be thwarted. “This is one crime,” he announced, “that is going to be solved.”

#### DESPITE HIS DIMMING MEMORY AND THE OCEAN OF TIME

that has passed since, Bill Heirens says he can still remember exactly what he did on June 25, 1946. It was a day of celebration: His uncle had just returned from the war, and thirty members of the family gathered to welcome him back to the Heirens home in Lincolnwood. It was also the last full day of freedom Bill Heirens would see in the twentieth century. He was 17.

In many ways, Bill apparently enjoyed a happy childhood in Chicago. He was a bright boy with a precocious interest in fixing things who was fond of drawing and telling his younger brother science fiction stories about rockets and space travel. But by 17, he was also an experienced petty criminal known to the Chicago police. He was only 12 when, as a grocery delivery boy, he stole for the first time: After accidentally shortchanging himself with a customer, he made up the difference by reaching through the crack in a chain-locked apartment door to lift a single dollar bill from an open purse inside. After that, stealing became easier, and burglary developed into a habit. Today he says it was motivated by the need for money. “We weren’t very well-off financially—the folks weren’t,” he tells me. “And it’s something I learned to do early, and I just kept on doing it.” Yet it also seemed compulsive and irrational, the things he took from other people’s homes a random shopping list of the valuable and the useless: radios, cameras, and guns but also handkerchiefs, cocktail shakers, and men’s undershorts. He was arrested for the first time in June 1942, at the age of 13, for breaking into a basement locker in an apartment near his home. At the time, Heirens told his parents he got the idea for the burglaries from radio programs and comics—he thought it would be exciting.

Found guilty in a juvenile court of ten counts of burglary, he was sentenced to spend a year at a semi-correctional school in Indiana. Back in Chicago the following summer, he was arrested again and this time sent away to a private school in Peru, Illinois. But in both places, he proved a good student, and at 16 he won a place at the University of Chicago as part of an experimental scheme open to gifted students; he enrolled for a bachelor of science, hoping to become an electronics engineer. He moved to the campus and made himself busy: He learned to dance and play chess, bought a radio phonograph, and began a collection of South American and clas-

sical music. He found the course work difficult, especially with the distractions of a newfound social life—and a series of girlfriends. And by Christmas 1945, two weeks before Suzanne Degnan went missing, Bill had returned to his old habits, breaking into strangers’ homes to steal whatever he could lay his hands on.

On the muggy afternoon of June 26, 1946, Heirens set out for the post office to cash \$1,000 in savings bonds, bought with money taken in previous burglaries. He needed cash for a date with his girlfriend, and because he planned to carry so much money, he put a revolver in his pocket. When he found the post office was closed, Heirens decided to get the cash he needed by burglary, in a building where he had stolen before, just a few blocks from the Degnan house. He had just lifted a dollar bill from inside an open apartment when a tenant spotted him. Heirens ran up the back stairs of a nearby building; cornered by two policemen, he pulled the gun.

There is disagreement about what happened next. Officer Tiffin Constant’s statement records that Heirens pulled the trigger but the revolver misfired; Heirens denies that he ever tried to shoot the policeman. But Constant fired three times with his own revolver, and Heirens leapt down the stairs at him. As they struggled, off-duty officer Abner Cunningham, still in his swimming trunks after a day at the beach, arrived on the scene. Picking up a stack of three flowerpots, Cunningham smashed it repeatedly over Heirens’s head. By the time the third pot shattered, Heirens was unconscious.

Heirens’s head was stitched and bandaged, and he was taken to the police hospital at the Cook County Jail, where he was strapped to a bed. He feigned unconsciousness but heard someone say he was a suspect in the Degnan case—and felt his fingerprints being taken. Meanwhile the police raided his parents’ house, his room at the university, and a locker at an El station and discovered the haul from his many previous burglaries; cops in rotating shifts of three hovered at his bedside, asking the apparently comatose boy how he killed Suzanne Degnan. No attorney was called.

On the third day, he heard that his prints had been matched to the ransom note, and the state’s attorney announced that the police had arrested Suzanne Degnan’s murderer. Heirens’s name was immediately hurled into the headlines of the Chicago papers, starting a press frenzy that would go on for months. The police became determined to extract a confession: “I don’t see how we can miss on this one,” Police Commissioner John Prendergast told the *Herald American*. “He knows he did it and he knows we know he did it.”

Still tied to a bed, Heirens was encouraged to talk—first by a male nurse pouring ether on his genitals, and later by a detective punching him in the stomach. The cops insisted that Heirens was responsible not only for the killing of Degnan but also for those of Frances Brown, Josephine Ross, and two other women whose murders had never been solved. Heirens was grilled relentlessly under a blazing spotlight: The details of the Degnan murder were repeated to him again and again to prompt him to explain why he had done it. Still he refused to confess. On the fourth day, two psychiatrists arrived, and he was injected with sodium pentothal—“truth serum.” Held in a state of semiconscious delirium, Heirens was questioned for three hours while the assistant state’s attorney sat out of sight behind a folding screen. On the fifth day, he was given a spinal tap, ostensibly to determine if he was “malingering”; no anesthetic was given. “I screamed for the first time,” he later told Dolores Kennedy, his longtime friend and author of the 1991 book *William Heirens: His Day in Court*, “and I kept on screaming.”

In prison more than thirty years later, typing the manuscript of an autobiography he never finished, Heirens would look back on the sodium pentothal interview as a turning point: “For the first time,” he wrote, “I thought of taking the blame for the murders I was accused of.”

#### AT 79, BILL HEIRENS IS NOT ALWAYS AN EASY MAN

to talk to. His memory, once sharp and vivid, isn’t what it once was. He says he often thinks about the terrible things they claim he did, but there’s much he just can’t recall: The *(continued on page 200)*

# RUNOVER

places and the people are sometimes confused; names and dates are frequently beyond him.

My visits with Bill in the Dixon Correctional Center are tightly controlled by the Illinois Department of Corrections. Each must be cleared in advance and continuously monitored by a corrections officer. Dixon—classified as a level-three prison, or high-medium security—currently holds just over 2,000 prisoners and is home to the best medical facilities in the Illinois penal system. And although it includes the Health Care Unit, which holds geriatric convicts, including Heirens, it bears little resemblance to a hospital or retirement home. Beside the prison helipad, a sign in large red letters announces: **INMATES APPROACHING INCOMING AIRCRAFT WILL BE SHOT.**

Heirens himself can be guarded and cantankerous. And perhaps because his experience with the Chicago press has made him distrust reporters—"I think they're willing to sell out their mother if they could," he assures me—he's sometimes obstructive and often impatient with details he thinks are stupid or "oddball." "I can't see you're going to get much out of this," he confides at one point, his good eye flashing out an unmistakable semaphore of irritable disdain; at another he simply observes that all these questions are boring.

And for all the undoubted misery and injustice of his experience, Heirens reveals neither anger nor frustration, but an impregnable front of stoicism. Eventually, I ask him why he never complains.

"Well," he says. "I complain, but it doesn't do no good.... I've come to live with it."

But do you think you deliberately play it down—do you think it's something you do because you've been inside so long?

"No, no—I'm mad as hell about it. It isn't something I can..." He trails off. "It doesn't happen to very many people."

In all his time inside, Bill Heirens has talked to many men serving long sentences for murder: some who admit they did it, others who say they didn't. Some handle it well, others badly; to many, the reasons and legal mechanisms that led to their incarceration remain a mystery. They never understand why they were condemned to spend their lives in a cell or why they haven't been released. Some spend all their time cursing the people who put them there. "And that," Heirens tells me, "doesn't do 'em any good."

Heirens says he understands exactly how he came to be in prison and who was responsible: "But there isn't anything I can do about it. I just keep in mind there must have been a reason for all this. And I do think that God had a reason for the whole mess that I'm in. He's trying to teach all humanity a lesson from it."

**AFTER BEING** intermittently tortured and held without food, sleep, or ac-

cess to an attorney for five days, Heirens was finally indicted for assault with intent to kill, robbery, twenty-three counts of burglary, and three counts of murder on July 12, 1946. He was transferred to the county jail, where lawyers hired by his parents explained that for the burglaries alone he faced life imprisonment.

Reporters camped outside the Heirens home and each day filed stories linking him with apparently damning evidence of the three murders: His fingerprints were matched to ones belatedly found at the scene of the Brown killing; his handwriting matched that on the ransom note. The firestorm of public opinion raised by state's attorney Touhy, the police, and the Chicago press reached a peak of intensity on July 15, when Heirens heard over the radio in his cell that he had given a confession, reproduced in full by the *Chicago Tribune* under the headline **HOW HEIRENS SLEW 3**. A *Tribune* reporter had apparently gone ahead and concocted a "confession" from existing information about the crimes, and the other Chicago papers reprinted it as fact. To his parents, Heirens continued to insist on his innocence, but he knew that if he came to trial in a city already convinced of his guilt, there could be only one outcome: "I would be tried and convicted and executed," he says. "I would get electrocuted."

The state's attorney offered him a deal: In exchange for a confession to all three murders, he would be spared the chair and would receive three concurrent life sentences, with a chance for parole in twenty years. Two weeks later, after being kept in solitary confinement and repeatedly rehearsed in the details of the crimes by his attorneys, Heirens was ready to confess. But when the day came and he faced Touhy across a courtroom, Heirens again denied knowing anything about the murders. Furious and humiliated, the state's attorney adjourned the hearing and told Heirens's attorneys that the deal was off: Now his confession would get him three consecutive sentences, life terms to be served end to end.

Heirens could see no alternative but a full trial—and with it, the inevitability of the chair: "The thing is," he says now, "once you're dead, there's no clearing things up. When you're alive, you still have a chance to prove that you weren't guilty. So I was better off being alive than being dead."

"If there's nothing else to do," he told his lawyers, "let's do it."

And so on August 7, 1946, after spending forty-two days in custody and making three attempts to commit suicide, Heirens confessed to the state's attorney how, in the course of two botched burglaries, he had stabbed, shot, and killed Frances Brown and Josephine Ross and gone on to strangle and dismember Suzanne Degnan. On September 6, he was manacled to a dozen

other prisoners and prepared for the drive to Joliet, escorted by the chief of the county highway police and by nine deputies armed with shotguns. Before he left, reporters asked Margaret Heirens to kiss her son good-bye for the cameras. "Be a good boy," she whispered. "Mind the regulations."

**HEIRENS BEGAN** his sentence at Stateville, the maximum-security prison that housed Chicago's most dangerous criminals. On the day of his arrival, a crowd of more than 300 people and a dozen press photographers gathered to catch a glimpse of the handsome teenage killer. Inside, he had his head shaved in the prison barber-shop. "Wouldn't it be something," he asked watching reporters as his heavy black curls fell to the floor, "if I said I didn't do those things now?"

At first there was nothing about prison itself that frightened him. He recognized that the looming penitentiary walls were just something he had to get used to. "I was young, too—and this was all new to me," he says. "I hung around with the older prisoners, and they helped me understand what was going on. The frightening thing is losing your friends and relatives on the outside. That's the thing that scares you. You don't have that guidance anymore." The older convicts taught Heirens to smoke, explaining that it would help him to do his time. ("By the time you get lit up and blowing smoke around, getting over the dizziness—well, you've served some time already," he says.) They also told him to drink plenty of water and walk slowly. Water is good for you, and walking quickly just attracts attention. "That was all the advice they gave me. From there on, you pick up on your own what's going on."

Warden Joseph E. Ragen—an obese martinet known by the inmates as Meatball—maintained discipline with a network of informers, a thicket of rules laid out in a rule book given to every inmate, and tower guards with .30-caliber rifles who regularly practiced their marksmanship. As a result, Stateville was one of the safest places in the country to do time. And the authorities, it seems, made sure the other inmates never laid a finger on Heirens. "Well, no," he says when I first ask him if other inmates had abused him. "I guess they expected that. And Warden Ragen frowned on that. He would be notified if anything like that was going on."

You were a good-looking 17-year-old boy sent to a maximum-security prison in 1946—and nothing happened to you?

"Oh no," he says. "No—I didn't get raped like everybody thought I would be."

Mail began arriving for Bill almost immediately, much of it fan mail from strangers but also a long letter from his girlfriend, Joann, who reminisced about their time together and brought him up to date on what his friends were up to: "I think of you

often, very often,” she wrote. “I don’t worry because I know you can take care of yourself.” Bill asked his mother to give Joann his class ring, and Joann promised to send a photograph the next time she wrote. He never heard from her again.

By the end of his first month at Stateville, Bill still felt harassed by the continuing attention of visiting reporters and psychiatrists, and was overwhelmed by isolation, hopelessness, and the grim future he saw stretching ahead of him within the rigid routines of Warden Ragen’s clockwork penology. He had heard from other inmates that if he could get himself into the psychiatric division at Menard—a distant sandstone fortress overlooking the Mississippi River on the state border with Missouri—conditions would at least be less regimented. So he spent one afternoon on yard exercise collecting five large stones, which he threw as hard as he could at the corner tower. This stunt got him expressed down to Menard. There, the first five years of his sentence passed listlessly as he adopted the monotonous routines of the lifer. He played pinochle and handball in the yard and worked in the library and the laundry. Transferred into the general population, he found himself locked in his cell from 4 P.M. to 7 A.M. every day. He listened to classical music on the radio and captured the cockroaches that swarmed through the old buildings of the penitentiary. He made little hats for them that he glued to their heads before releasing them to run around the gallery; there was nothing else to do.

It was at least three years before he first witnessed real violence. He was waiting in line one afternoon to be shaken down after a work detail when another inmate ran across the yard, fell on the man standing next to Heirens, and began throwing punches into him. Only when he saw the blood did Heirens realize that they weren’t punches: The man had an ice pick in his fist. “He was bleeding pretty good,” he says. “I guess he was trying to puncture his heart. But all he did was make holes in him, and not in a vital place.”

I ask him what he felt when it happened.

“Uh, nothing,” he says. “Nothing I could have done about it. I didn’t even know he was being stabbed.”

But you weren’t frightened—or alarmed?

“No. Because it wasn’t happening to me. It was happening to somebody else.”

**TODAY HEIRENS** is one of thirty terminally ill and geriatric patients in the Health Care Unit at Dixon Correctional Center. He shares a room with Jack, who works in the prison greenhouse but has to be careful because he’s recently been fitted with a pacemaker. Their room—not a cell—is twenty feet square, and there is a window but no bars.

“They haven’t come around to putting bars in yet,” Bill says. “But no one’s going

to go out the window, anyhow; it’s too far a drop, and if you drop out the window, there’s no place to go. And the guys out there are too old to escape. Heck, I even have trouble just walking to the wash-room.”

Bill says that because of his health, he’s glad to share his space with another man: He needs someone to help him get up when he falls. He’s recently had an operation to remove one cataract from his left eye, but another makes him all but blind in his right. In all his 62 years in prison, Bill says, he’s had a total of only six cellmates. “I kept cell partners a long time,” he says. He can’t really say who the best one has been: “Some of them had different things that were good. All of them, you miss when they go, because you’ve been with them for so long.... When a guy goes home...it’s like a relative died.”

Few paroled inmates want to maintain ties with the life they left behind inside. Even if they do, it’s all but impossible: Once released, they are forbidden from contacting those still serving time, either in person or by mail. Bill has never really gotten used to this abrupt spiriting away of the people he gets close to. One day they’re with you almost all the time; the next they’re gone, never to be heard from again. “It makes you do hard time then.” Over the years, it’s something that’s discouraged him from making friends: “‘Cause you know what’s gonna happen. One day they’re gonna go home. And you’re gonna be left here.”

**ON NOVEMBER 22**, 1963, Bill Heirens was working as a clerk in the tailoring shop back at Stateville Penitentiary when the news came over the radio that President Kennedy had been shot. Heirens had just turned 35 but had already spent more than half his life in prison and would soon be known by the other inmates as Old Man Bill. He had long since learned to keep to himself and adhere to the advice given on the third page of Warden Ragen’s little blue rule book: “Above all, do your own time.”

Heirens has insisted upon his innocence almost from the moment his sentence began, when he realized that if he recanted, the grilling—the beating and the torture—wasn’t going to start all over again. When he first arrived at Stateville in 1946 and psychiatrists were still regularly questioning him, Bill asked an orderly what they would do to him if he told them he hadn’t murdered anyone.

“Well, kid,” he replied, “I don’t give a damn one way or another. And now you’re in prison for it, nobody else will care one way or another, either.”

In 1949, at the suggestion of a jailhouse lawyer he’d met on yard exercise, he began to prepare a petition to win a hearing to re-examine the evidence and circumstances of his sentence. It took him three years, and in November 1952, Heirens traveled to court

in Chicago, where nearly forty witnesses testified at a ten-day evidentiary hearing. But in the end, his petition was denied. As he sat in the back of the car returning him to his cell, he broke down and cried.

It was the beginning of more than forty years of litigation during which Heirens attempted to win the right to a new trial or to have his conviction overturned or his sentences reduced—or as he had originally been promised, made to run concurrently. He brought legal actions and petitions before state, federal, and appellate courts and over the years learned enough about the law to win parole for many of his fellow prisoners. “A lot of them I got out that way,” he says. “And it made me feel good. It didn’t get me out, but it got them out. So I had something to show for my time.”

He says he could have escaped if he’d wanted to. There was the time back in Menard, in 1947, when he found himself alone in the yard on a foggy day; nobody even knew he was there. He could have climbed the wall and gone. But Heirens always knew his case was too hot. If he’d tried anything, the whole country would have been out looking for him, so he’d never have gotten far. Besides, he says, “I was always thinking of getting out other ways.”

In the ’50s and ’60s, the penal system still emphasized rehabilitation over retribution, and eventual release on parole—even for a man serving three consecutive life sentences—did not seem totally impossible. So after four years of marking time in Menard, he picked up his education where he had left off. He started with a correspondence course in college algebra and began to spend every penny his parents sent him on tuition, to prepare himself for the day he might be released. Back up at Stateville, he enrolled in vocational school for radio and TV repair, first as a student and then as an instructor. He developed interests in calligraphy, line drawing, and watercolor painting. In January 1965, he completed courses from the Pennsylvania State University College of Agriculture, covering Home Lawns, Propagation of Plants, Shrubs for Home Grounds, and Landscape Planning for Small Properties. Later that same month, he appeared for the first time before the Illinois Parole and Pardon Board, requesting clemency on his sentence. He told them he hoped to be released in five years, or perhaps ten. His petition was denied.

In 1966, having spent twenty years in prison, Heirens was deemed by the parole board to have served out the first of his three life sentences, for the murder of Suzanne Degnan. He still had two more to serve, one after the other.

**“IT WAS POLITICS,”** Heirens says now, “from the get-go. When a crime happens, people want it solved right away, and they don’t care how it’s solved.” He insists that if only the police and the state’s attor-

ney had taken their time, they could have found the real killer—"instead," he tells me, "of picking on somebody else."

Yet there are those who remain convinced that the old man in visiting room five at Dixon is the monster responsible for the atrocious crimes committed in 1945 and 1946. As part of his FBI profiling work on serial killers, Robert Ressler interviewed many of the most infamous murderers in United States history—Charles Manson, David Berkowitz, Ted Bundy—and he visited Heirens twice, in the late '70s and in the early '80s. "It was very exciting to see the guy that I was so fascinated by when I was a kid," he tells me, "kind of like seeing a baseball or football hero. Heirens was an antihero to me." Ressler remains certain that Heirens was once a psychopathic killer. "He's kind of a pathetic old man now. I have no doubt that releasing him would not be dangerous to society. However, it's the magnitude of his crimes that keeps him in prison. He did some horrible things."

But after so many years, it's simply too late to prove whether Ressler's convictions are well-founded. Six decades after his confession, almost all the evidence that helped put Bill Heirens in jail has been discredited. The fingerprints connecting him to the crime scenes may well have been planted. Independent experts have shown that his handwriting matches neither the Degnan ransom note nor the lipstick scrawl on the wall of Frances Brown's apartment; indeed, veteran newspapermen in Chicago say that the message of the Lipstick Killer wasn't written by the murderer at all but by a reporter who arrived at the scene before police and decided to add an extra twist to the story. In the meantime, the decay of physical evidence has placed the case far beyond the reach of DNA analysis. The surviving fingerprint evidence is locked in the vaults of the Chicago Police Department, and the state cannot be compelled to surrender it for retesting.

"I am not persuaded by his guilt," says Steven Drizin of Northwestern Law School's Center for Wrongful Convictions, who has worked on Heirens's case for the past seven years. "I tend to lean toward his innocence, but I recognize that I can't prove it."

**IN NOVEMBER 1975**, Heirens turned 47. He had spent almost thirty years inside, and the skinny, handsome teenager was now a paunchy middle-aged man. Three years earlier, he had become the first convict in the state of Illinois to graduate with a college degree; he was accompanied to the ceremony by two prison guards. His watercolors—European landscapes of places he had never seen, drawn from postcards and pictures clipped from travel magazines—sold well in penal art shows. He'd finally been reclassified as a minimum-security prisoner and was given a job on the Stateville Honor Farm, where

fruit and vegetables were cultivated beyond the prison walls. But with Warden Ragen now long gone, the prison was a dangerous place, in the control of warring Chicago street gangs. Offered a transfer to Vienna, an experimental new prison in the gently rolling farmland near the Kentucky border, Heirens took it. The institution had no guard towers—not even a fence—and was organized more like a college campus than a prison. Inmates were known as "residents," could move freely around the complex wherever they liked, and wore civilian clothes. After more than three decades in prison blues, it took Heirens a year before he could comfortably pick out outfits each day. "It took me a while," he told Dolores Kennedy, "to get the hang of it, picking the right color combinations."

And there was something else different about Vienna: It was a coed prison. For the first time since he was 17, Bill Heirens regularly found himself in the company of women. Some female prisoners took advantage of the freedoms of Vienna by selling naked photographs of themselves for \$5 each and, occasionally, simply selling themselves. Although punished with the loss of good time and a return to segregation if discovered, there were men at Vienna who managed to have sex with the women prisoners. Bill, however, was not one of them. He hasn't had sex with a woman since he got inside. "Didn't have any outside, either," he says. "I could be made into a pope and I'll have the celibacy taken care of."

Every fall he worked on day release, picking apples at a local orchard. He trained as an EMT and worked on an ambulance in the community. Outside, in a small garden, he began to grow flowers. He also spent a lot of time in the law library. "I was pretty knowledgeable on the current law, which changes all the time," he says. "But if you get it at the right time, you win."

And in 1983, after years of litigation over the interpretation of parole law and time served, he did: U.S. Magistrate Gerald P. Cohn ordered that Heirens be released, on the grounds that he had been rehabilitated. Heirens began, finally, to make preparations to begin life as a free man. He arranged employment at the orchard and a trailer there where he could live.

But the court's decision rekindled the blaze of publicity that had surrounded his case in 1946. In Chicago, then state's attorney Richard M. Daley and seven former police superintendents formed the Committee to Remember Suzanne Degnan; Degnan's surviving sister Betty collected signatures from local politicians on a petition to keep Heirens behind bars; the state senate passed a resolution against his parole; and Magistrate Cohn received death threats.

In 1984 the U.S. Court of Appeals reversed the decision, and Heirens remained in prison.

In February 1990, Heirens once again at-

tempted to win a postconviction hearing. In denying his petition, the presiding judge pointed out that nearly forty-four years had passed since Heirens had pleaded guilty and that everyone else involved in sending him to prison was long dead. "As is with life," he concluded, "all litigation has a beginning and, of necessity, an end. The end for William Heirens has long since passed as far as these claims are concerned."

With all other legal means exhausted, parole remained his last hope for release. Meanwhile, as the prison system grew gradually more overcrowded and violent, the experiment at Vienna neared its end. In 1994 a fight between gang members from the Gangster Disciples and Metropolitan East St. Louis ended with inmates uprooting six-foot cedar fence posts from the grounds to use as clubs. The following year, DEA agents removed the Gangster Disciples' leader, Larry Hoover, from the Honor Dorm he shared with Heirens and convicted him of running the gang's drug-dealing operations from Vienna.

By the time Heirens left in 1998, sick with the diabetes that would soon confine him to a wheelchair, Vienna had become a penitentiary just like any other. But to Bill Heirens, it seems that life beyond the walls has changed in the same way it has in prison: Everyone has been made to suffer because of the acts of a few individuals, and people today have less liberty than they did in 1946. "If you're given so much freedom," he says, "eventually that freedom will be taken away."

**THE FILE HELD** on Bill Heirens at the Illinois Prisoner Review Board offices in Springfield, Illinois, is more than two feet thick—a bureaucratic monolith of ragged, yellowing statements, letters of support, rebuttals, and appeals for executive clemency. Transcripts of parole-board meetings record its members remarking on Heirens's impressive record of rehabilitation more than forty years ago; in 1975 they told him "you have done beautiful things." They also warned Heirens not to expect release until the public's memories of the killings of Ross, Brown, and Degnan were finally buried. "There are just too damn many people that remember this case," one panel member said in 1965. "You have to just allow time to be in your favor on this."

But neither time nor his model record is apparently on Heirens's side. Although the number of people who remember the Lipstick Killer continues to dwindle, Betty Degnan, who was only 10 years old when her younger sister was murdered, has vigorously opposed every parole application Heirens has made since 1983. Now 72, she claims to remain terrified that the half-blind man in the wheelchair at Dixon might one day be set free. "There can be no sense of security if he gets out," Betty's younger brother James said last year.

And whether Heirens was truly responsible for the murders of Degnan, Brown, and Ross apparently no longer matters to those now considering his parole. “I don’t know that they really care so much about his guilt or innocence anymore,” Steven Drizin says. “I think they’re just invested in keeping him locked up for the rest of his life.”

On August 2, 2007, the Illinois Prisoner Review Board denied Bill Heirens parole for the thirtieth time, voting 14–0 against his petition for release. “God will forgive you,” board member Thomas Johnson said afterward, “but the state won’t.”

Heirens’s case is due to be considered by the PRB once again in June this year. Board member Craig Findley says that Bill is unlikely to be released; there hasn’t been a single vote in his favor since 2001. “Heirens is radioactive,” he says. “The protest has been as vigorous today as it has been for many years.”

Privately, even some of those who know Bill Heirens best admit that he is almost certain to die in the Health Care Unit of Dixon Correctional Center.

**BILL HEIRENS GETS** very few visitors these days. “Early on,” he tells me one afternoon in November, “there was quite a few. As time went on, well, my family died away, so I don’t get to see them anymore. Old friends—I still get to see some of them....”

A couple of times a year, three old classmates from high school will drive over to Dixon together; Dolores Kennedy comes from Chicago whenever she can. But almost everyone else is dead.

In many ways, he says, he knows that his life has been wasted. There are a lot of things he’d like to have done if he hadn’t been arrested in 1946. He could have gotten in on the ground floor of solid-state electronics or become an inventor; he’s had a few ideas that he thinks could have made him rich. Or maybe he’d just have started a business: “Right at that time is when pizzas were starting. Going into the pizza business would be good as a starter.” Above all he regrets not taking advantage of the chances he had as a teenager, that he became a petty crook. “Everybody, when they’re a kid, they have curiosity. But with me, it took a wrong turn.”

Bill says that he’s never considered any of the prisons he’s been in as home; that’s how you become institutionalized. “My home was outside. If I talk about going home, it would be outside.”

He’s still expecting to get out sometime soon. He says he’d like to travel, to see the wilderness and the cities. He plans to take a transcontinental railroad trip on one of those trains with an observation car. A prisoners’-aid group has already agreed to buy him the ticket; all he has to do is get his feet on-board. He’ll eat well, too. “I’d try different foods,” he says. “Lobsters. Never

had a lobster. Don’t know what a lobster tastes like.”

He knows there’s a lot of catching up to do. In prison he doesn’t see anything of the world outside except what he watches on the news and in the movies. He spends much of his time in his room watching the Discovery Channel and, at night, Turner Classics. Over the years, he’s even caught the odd prison movie. In the middle of his PRB file, in a binder of documents supporting his application for executive clemency in 2002, there’s a copy of an e-mail message from a former inmate who recalls one in particular: Back at Vienna, he came upon Heirens sitting alone in front of the dayroom TV, watching *The Shawshank Redemption*. The scene just beginning showed Brooks, the geriatric prison librarian, finally being released after fifty years in Shawshank Penitentiary. Brooks tries to make it on the outside, but after all those years in a cell, he finds nothing in the world but loneliness and alienation, a menial job, and a room in a halfway house. As the scene ends, his feet dangle at the top of the frame, an institutionalized man killed by freedom.

“Bill,” the message reads, “could not have been watching more intently.”

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