

THE VARIANT

JOHN AUGUST



[s a m p l e]

Everyone knew Vincent Lewis. But no one knew a thing about him.

During interviews conducted by federal officers — sober men in dark suits from several departments, some of them secret even to each other — the staff of the Central Library could offer little information about their co-worker, a man who had been shelving books there for nearly thirty-five years.

“He liked to keep to himself,” they said, confusing temperament with necessity: any man hunted by two governments would likely be discreet. But Vincent had perfected the art of unremarkability. You simply didn’t think twice about him. He was the old man with the cart who put books back on the shelf. Full stop. He rarely called in sick, but not so rarely as to seem unusual. He wore no wedding ring, never mentioned a family. He offered no easy avenue for conversation, or speculation, and thus remained undiscussed.

“He was a cipher,” one librarian offered, later admitting her observation only made sense when viewed against the aftermath of January 21. For all his time working at the library, Vincent was neither cipher nor riddle nor mystery.

For example, his mastery of the catalog’s arcane taxonomy went unquestioned. It was simply experience, wasn’t it, that let him do the job more than twice as fast as much younger clerks. In retrospect it seemed obvious why he was so suited to the task — letters and numbers to file away knowledge — but the job also meant he rarely had to interact with the public, running the risk of a random encounter with a person who might recognize him from his former life. His duties were mechanical and solitary. In all likelihood, he spent some days without speaking a word to anyone. (Indeed, several employees assumed he spoke little English, or was mute.)

“I can’t explain it, but he felt like a much, much younger man,” recalled one witness, a college sophomore who had worked part-time at the library. “I mean, he was old enough to be my grandfather, but he had this presence, this energy. You could see it in his face, too. You could tell he used to be really handsome. This one

afternoon, I kept staring at him, trying to figure out what he must have looked like. I'm sure he thought I was obsessed with him or something."

The following day, the college student was fired, accused of petty theft. Fifty-four dollars and two checks from the overdue fines cash box were found in her locker, and while she proclaimed her innocence, she could offer no explanation. Any further curiosity about her co-worker ended that day.

Vincent Lewis was simply and deliberately a fixture of the library. One doesn't notice the dull brass banister beneath one's hand, nor the small clock above the periodicals desk, until these things are missing.

So it was with Vincent Lewis. He went unnoticed until he was gone.

Vincent moved every eight to fourteen months, always choosing a one-bedroom apartment within two stops of the Central Library. Moving such a short distance, he could have kept the same phone number. He never did. He had no cell phone, no cable television, no bill with his name on it. Rent was paid on the first of the month, always in cash.

His one constant was a cat. Over the years, he'd had a series of them, always black, never named. Unlike the gun hidden behind the headboard, or the violin string coiled in his shoe, the cat served no specific purpose other than companionship.

But it was the cat who first noticed that Vincent's carefully structured life was about to collapse.

On the night of January 20, just after three a.m., the cat padded across the living room to the bathroom. It had heard a noise, a gentle scraping, and its predatory instincts took over. Tipping its head to the ceiling, the cat watched as a fine snow of plaster drifted down.

In this neighborhood, a disturbance within the walls or rafters would first lead one to consider rats or other small vermin. Indeed, the building manager had recently placed a sign near the garbage chute warning residents that pizza boxes

needed to be folded and tossed down the chute, rather than left in greasy stacks on the floor. Rats had been spotted chewing on the cardboard. And just five days earlier, Vincent had heard an old Chinese woman complain in Cantonese to her neighbor how a mouse had bitten her granddaughter while she slept.

Insects were another possibility. A small water leak which was finally detected after years of silent dripping had forced the building's owner to replace a section of wall on the fourth and fifth floor. The new wood harbored unseen eggs, which one hot summer day burst forth with wriggling life. In the darkness of the walls, the tiny winged creatures formed colonies devoted to the exploitation and eventual destruction of their home.

But on this night, neither rat nor insect was crawling in the ceiling. Instead, a human foot broke through the plaster.

The cat bolted from the bathroom. The foot — bare and bleeding — rose up and smashed down again, trying to create a larger hole by breaking up the edges. Then hands reached through, ripping at the plaster that dangled by threads. Every action was frantic, but also focused. This person was intent on getting through the bathroom ceiling, no matter what harm to the flesh.

Vincent was awake within seconds. He didn't sit up immediately, but rather let his hand slide up behind the headboard to retrieve his gun. Only when he had it ready did he slip off the far edge of the bed to survey the apartment.

It wasn't immediately clear to him where the sound was coming from. If the bathroom door had been left open a little wider, Vincent would have seen a dark shape drop headfirst through the hole smashed in the ceiling, ripping down the shower curtain as it fell. But the clatter alone was enough to let Vincent know the location. With a few quick steps, he was at the bathroom door, and without even looking inside, he pulled it shut.

He held the handle, listening. He needed to know if it was a person or an animal he had trapped.

More bumps and bangs. The shower curtain rings slid off the hollow metal pole one by one. The heavy lid of the toilet tank scraped as something knocked against it. A click, then light spilled from the crack beneath the door.

Vincent knew then it wasn't an animal.

Silence, then the handle turned beneath his fingers. He let it, stepping aside. The door opened. The intruder took only one step out of the bathroom before Vincent struck with the butt of the gun. A felling blow.

The intruder was a woman. She was at most twenty-five, with a ballerina's body and a junkie's eyes: wild, paranoid. Purple bruises ringed her neck like a collar. Plaster dust clung to her frizzy hair, along with fresh blood from the hit.

Her clothes smelled of sweat and urine.

As she regained her bearings, Vincent leaned over her. Made sure she saw the gun. "Who are you?" he asked.

She crawled backwards on her elbows.

"Uh uh," Vincent warned.

Her cracked lips moved, but there was no sound. Just a wheeze, a rush of air. She pointed at the hole in the bathroom ceiling. She was more afraid of whatever was up there than the man with a gun standing over her.

"Who are you? Who do you work for?" asked Vincent.

She pulled at her fingers, finally sliding off her gold wedding ring. She made him take it. At first, Vincent thought she was bartering it for her life, but then he noticed an inscription inside the band. He tried to read it by the bathroom light, but without his glasses, it was difficult.

He was distracted enough that he didn't anticipate her kick to his knee. As he staggered back, his head hit the doorframe, hard. She flipped over onto her hands and knees, scrambling for the front door.

Vincent had an easy shot: two to the back before she got the deadbolt off, one to the head to finish the job. But even through the sharp pain, he knew he couldn't

fire. Neighbors were undoubtedly awake from the commotion, wondering whether what they heard justified further investigation. The wife in 5D said yes; her husband said no; the divorced insomniac in 5F had already turned down the TV, listening for a second sound.

A gunshot would bring police. Police would ask questions.

He couldn't risk questions.

So Vincent watched as the woman struggled with the locks on the door, finally flinging herself into the hallway and out of his life.

Re-locking the door, he wiped the blood off the gun and put it back in its hiding spot. He sat on the edge of the bed with his reading glasses, checking the inscription inside the gold ring: *tibi in omne tempus*.

For you. Forever.

As it turned out, the police came anyway. A Chinese detective, Ming, sat in a chair across from Vincent as the sky went from black to inky-blue. He was young, and seemed to be conducting the interview from a memorized script.

"Had you seen this woman before?"

"No, no. I don't think so. But I'm not good with that. I don't remember people."

For every question, Vincent produced an answer which felt appropriate for a confused old man disrupted from his routine. He repeated himself, got lost in tangents, and apologized for not being more helpful. He omitted the gold ring and the gun, naturally, but also managed to pull details out of the detective. He could piece together the police's theory about what might have happened based on their interviews with neighbors.

The apartment above Vincent's had been illegally sublet some months earlier, but it wasn't clear exactly who was living in it. Based on equipment the police found, they believed the apartment was being used to cook Church, a street drug with effects resembling methamphetamine and PCP. Even among narcotic specialists, its

users were renowned for obsessive and self-destructive acts — gouging out an eye to appease God, lighting oneself on fire to drive out impurity — so smashing through the floor was not particularly remarkable. The police believed the woman to be a deranged addict. Maybe she thought she was digging her way to Hell.

Vincent took Detective Ming's phone number, and promised to call if he remembered any additional details.

After the detective left, Vincent retrieved his gun, the ring and two passports with different names. He needed to be ready in case he never came back to his apartment.

He worked his normal shift at the library. A cardigan concealed his shoulder holster. He ate his lunch in the break room, heating his sandwich 33 seconds in the microwave until the cheese had just begun to melt.

A few times during the day, he ran his hand along the back of his head, feeling the bump where he had fallen against the doorframe.

At five o'clock, Vincent took the subway three stops downtown. It was beginning to snow, fine crystal grains of ice that felt like sand. He stashed his gun in a coffeeshop bathroom, then walked half a block to the police precinct headquarters. He passed through the metal detectors without incident.

At the front desk, he asked for Detective Ming. The watch clerk dialed an extension, cradling the phone beneath her ear while continuing to sort paperwork. Her long fingernails were a creamy shade of orange.

"She's not answering. Can another detective help you?"

"Excuse me?" asked Vincent.

The clerk assumed the old man was hard of hearing. "DETECTIVE MING ISN'T HERE. SHE'S GONE."

"He's a man," said Vincent. "The detective was a man."

“Detective Ming is a woman. Are you sure you have the right person? The right precinct?”

“No,” he lied. “But his name was Ming, I’m certain.”

The clerk tapped on a computer keyboard, pulling up a directory. “There’s only one Ming in the system, and she works here. Now, can someone else help you?”

Vincent said no, apologized and left.

From a pay phone across the street, he dialed the number the detective had given him that morning. (He had memorized it instantly. Everyone he had met in his profession had an innate talent for recalling strings of numbers. As a boy in Buenos Aires, he had spent summer afternoons flipping through the pages of the phone book, listening to the sound of the digits, trying to force them into meaning. It was only when he was recruited for the War that he realized the value of his gift: codes and ciphers were transparent to him. The enemy could keep no secrets.)

The call went to voicemail, no name given. Vincent hung up.

Replaying the events of the morning, Vincent realized he never saw squad cars, just Ming and two uniformed officers. Impostors, they could have easily intercepted the 911 call if it came from a land line. Vincent himself regularly inspected the building’s phone junction box, which was secured only by two easily-picked locks. Rerouting a cell phone call was beyond Vincent’s expertise, but felt possible.

Everything felt possible, and that was the problem.

If Ming was a fraud, he was likely connected to the woman who fell through the ceiling. She could have been an accomplice, or a captive. While Vincent had never done extended surveillance, he’d heard tales of civilians used simply for their proximity to the target, who were kept as prisoners for the duration — “confinement in place,” they called it. The right drugs injected in the right locations could keep a captive silent for days or weeks, minds reeling and vocal chords paralyzed. Vincent thought back to the bruises on the woman’s neck, and how terrified she seemed of whatever was up there.

Or perhaps she was working with Ming, and this was all a scripted performance. Vincent knew he was being played; he just wanted to know the tune.

By now it was getting dark, and the snow had progressed to true flakes. He silently debated his next action. He could go back to his building, perhaps to search the apartment above his. But first, Vincent wanted to know if there was any official record of a 911 call at his building. If so, someone else likely crossed paths with the false detective Ming.

All paths lead somewhere, thought Vincent, remembering a quote by a Sufian philosopher. And all paths lead home.

He headed back into the police station.

A man was standing at the desk, arguing. He was in his late-20's, lanky with a shaggy beard that was evidently the fashion for his generation. He was sweating along his hairline. As he wiped his brow, Vincent noticed a series of numbers written in ink along the edge of the man's left hand.

A second, evidently higher-ranking clerk was summoned over to deal with him. The man tried to regain calm as he re-explained why he was here: "I got a call saying to come in. A detective said he had new information about my wife."

"Which detective?" asked the supervisor.

"Ming."

The supervisor looked over to the first clerk: "Did you page Detective Ming?"

"Ming didn't call him."

"Someone called me," said the man. "He said his name was Ming, and that he had information about my wife."

"What happened to your wife?"

"I don't know. She's been missing for nine days."

"Did you file a missing persons..."

"Yes. At the 11th precinct."

"That's where you should be, then. Any new information would go through the lead detective assigned to the case. I don't know what else to tell you."

The man stewed in frustration for a long moment, then gave up. He grabbed a worn messenger bag from the floor and walked out.

Vincent followed him.

Four blocks from the station, Vincent stopped beside the man as he waited at a crosswalk. Without making eye contact, Vincent said, "I can help you. Follow me. Not too close."

The crosswalk light turned. Vincent walked ahead.

Returning to the coffeeshop where he'd stashed the gun, Vincent picked a table in back with a good view of the restaurant. Ordered decaf. Examining the menu, he didn't look up as the man entered, spotted him, and sat down across from him.

Vincent glanced at the man's left hand, and the series of numbers written in ink. Noticing the gaze, the man explained, "It's a router number. I fix computers."

"For a company?" asked Vincent.

"For myself. For people. I help people with their computers. But you knew that already."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you know where my wife is. And in exchange for telling me, you're going to ask me to do something."

The waitress arrived with Vincent's coffee. The man asked for one of his own. He smiled politely, but once she was gone, his eyes went dark. He stared at Vincent like he was the Devil's attorney.

"Who do you think I work for?" asked Vincent.

"Caissa. Maybe Fianchetto."

The names sparked fireworks in Vincent's mind, nearly-forgotten players at the periphery of the War who profited by supplying both sides with intelligence and strategic leverage: engineered scandal, intimidation and for the right price, assassination. They were mercenaries with no greater political goal. But one could say the same about Vincent, and the decisions that had kept him alive for the past three decades.

Vincent looked his guest in the eye and told a limited truth. "My name is Vincent Lewis. I work at the library, and I don't know anything about you. I don't even know your name. The reason I asked you to come here is because a man who called himself Detective Ming came to my apartment this morning. But he wasn't a detective, as you and I both now know. There is some reason we are connected. I want to know what it is."

The man studied him, trying to reframe his assumptions. The waitress set his coffee down in front of him.

"I'm James," he said. "James Madden."

"Show me a picture of your wife, James."

James pulled out his cell phone. Clicked through to pull up a photo on the small screen. He handed it to Vincent, who retrieved his reading glasses from his coat pocket.

"Her name is Rebecca. She teaches third grade."

"You said she's been missing nine days?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"She went to the store to get milk for her cereal. She never came back."

Vincent looked at the photo, a candid snapshot of a young woman in love. She had a warm smile and a pleasant roundness to her face. Yet she was undoubtedly the deranged woman who fell through his ceiling early that morning. Whatever had happened in those nine days had nearly destroyed her.

Vincent handed the phone back. "I've never seen her. I'm sorry."

James didn't try to conceal his disappointment.

"Has there been any ransom?" asked Vincent.

James was suddenly suspicious again. "Why do you assume she was kidnapped?"

"Because you do. You thought I was going to ask you to do something. So tell me."

James hesitated, a silent calculation of risk and reward so transparent he might as well have drawn it on a napkin. If Vincent was an enemy, he likely knew everything already. If Vincent was an innocent, he might offer some new information about his wife's disappearance. In either scenario, James gained nothing by silence.

"The day after she disappeared, I got a call to do some work. Said there would be a fax waiting for me at a copy place on 11th. A system they wanted cracked. Do you know computers?"

"No. Not at all," said Vincent.

That was mostly the truth. Given his proficiencies, Vincent found them fascinating. In the early days, when computers cost millions of dollars and filled university basements, he would sometimes spend his lunch break reading articles in scientific journals about the new technology and its possibilities. But by the time a machine had defeated the Ukrainian chess champion, Vincent had resolved to stay away from computers, convinced his interest would leave a trail his pursuers could follow.

"Computer networks are encrypted," explained James. "So if you want to break into them, you have to figure out the codes. I'm good at that. Always have been. I used to do it for the military."

"Which division?" asked Vincent.

"You wouldn't have heard of it. It's off-the-books, black-ops stuff. Some of it is really out there."

Vincent was certain he was talking about RSP, Research and Special Projects. Under its original moniker, Scientific Advance, it operated during the War out of an abandoned mental asylum two hours upstate. Vincent had spent a week there connected to wires and monitors as researchers studied his code-breaking abilities, convinced there was a psychic component. The tests ultimately found nothing useful, and Vincent was returned to his post in cryptography. But it was at SA that he first met the Egyptian physicist whose discoveries Vincent would spend the next three decades hiding.

"So you are told to pick up a facsimile with instructions for the system they want broken," said Vincent, trying to keep the conversation closer to the present tense. "What do they want you to find?"

"Records. Really old records going back to the War."

"About projects? About people?"

"Both. And this one guy in particular: Oscar Acevedo." He pronounced the last name in a Spanish style.

"Did you find anything?"

"No. I mean, I got into the system. I left a back door like they told me to. But there was nothing about this guy in any of the stuff."

Vincent deliberated for a moment, as if futilely wracking his brain. "I don't know what it could mean. I don't understand computers."

"You were in the War, right?" asked James.

"Of course, I fought. We all fought. But it was a lifetime ago."

Vincent and James spent the next twenty-five minutes discussing the young Asian man posing as Detective Ming, as James tried to sort out what connection there might be. Hitting only dead ends, James gave the old man his cell phone number, and made him promise to call if Ming contacted him.

James left just as a bearish man came in from the street, shaking the snow off his hat. He was scanning the restaurant, looking for someone. A woman in a booth waved him over. They kissed, then sat on the same side of the table, sharing a menu. They were in love. A new love, young despite their age.

Vincent watched the couple for several minutes, remembering the beautiful young teacher he had married. Remembering the day she never returned from the grocery store. Remembering what they made him do, promising his wife was still alive.

He remembered the day, thirty-five years ago, that Oscar Acevedo took off his wedding ring and became Vincent Lewis.

He then went to the men's room to retrieve his gun.

But what happens next?

You've been reading an excerpt of *The Variant* — just barely half the story.

You still haven't met René Huisclos, the closest thing Vincent has to a friend. You don't know what Vincent's been hiding for 35 years, or what's going to happen if Fianchetto finds it. Some of the characters you've met so far, well, they're not going to survive.

You can get the whole thing at johnaugust.com/variant

Or if you have a Kindle, get it [right here](#)

About the author

John August is the screenwriter of eight feature films, including *Go, Big Fish, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Corpse Bride*. He wrote and directed the 2007 movie *The Nines*.

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