

LETTER FROM DETROIT
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THE HIT MAN'S TALE

How an honors student became a hired killer.

BY NADYA LABI

Vincent Smothers at Michigan Reformatory, where he is serving a sentence of fifty to a hundred years. "There's no atonement," he says. "I've taken people away from people who love them."

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEC SOTH / MAGNUM

Vincent Smothers thought that it would be a job like any other. In the summer of 2007, he told me, his friend Marzell Black asked him for a gun for his mother's boyfriend. Smothers didn't sell guns, and he told him so. A few months later, Marzell amended his request, saying, "That dude who was looking for a gun? He asked me how much he would have to pay to kill somebody." A murder Smothers could handle. "Marzell wasn't the killing type," he said. "I told him, 'That's not something for you to do. I'll talk to him and see what this is all about.'"



Smothers drove Marzell in his black Jeep Commander to a gas station on Detroit's East Side, the rougher part of a rough city. As they waited in the parking lot, a bald black man opened the rear passenger-side door and got in. It was the boyfriend, whom Smothers knew only as Dave. Staring intently at the back of the seat, he explained that the target was his wife; he was leaving her and didn't want her to be alone. "Who says that?" Smothers asked me, his reedy voice rising with indignation. We were in a visiting room at the Michigan Reformatory, a prison in Ionia. "Tell me she's fucking the neighbor or that she killed your baby five years ago. But don't tell me you don't think she can be alone."

Smothers is six feet one, with caramel-colored skin and wavy black hair. He has sixteen tattoos on his upper body. Among them are three in memory of loved ones; his nickname, Vito, emblazoned in red on his back; a rebus that spells out "I never hesitate"; and, in Gothic letters, "LOST SOUL." By the age of twenty-six, he had killed at least a dozen people, most of them drug dealers. As he saw it, he was simply hastening an inevitable conclusion. "When you grow up in the hood, you learn: if you sell drugs, you're going to end up one of two things—in jail or dead," he said. "Those are the results of that life." As for women who got in the line of fire, he reasoned, they'd benefitted from the trade. "When you flock to the ballers"—the nouveau riche of the hood—"you get what they get when it's your turn." But he had never set out to kill a woman, much less a civilian with no connection to the trade.

Smothers wasn't sure he should take the job. A year earlier, he'd fallen in love with Cecily Blok, a nursing student with a two-year-old daughter, and they were about to get married. She knew what he did for a living, and she wanted him to find a different line of work. The truth was, he was tempted to kill Dave, on principle. "Somebody that think like that don't deserve to live," he said. But the job was easy and the money good.

When Smothers met with Dave again, the day after Christmas, he hadn't decided what to do. As he waited in his Jeep in a parking lot, with a .40-calibre pistol held under his right thigh, Dave walked up from behind, in Smothers's blind spot, and sat in the rear passenger seat. Smothers noted his stealthy approach and thought, Cop trick. He tightened his grip on the pistol. In the back seat, Dave said that he would call that evening and pretend to place an order for takeout, then take his wife to a CVS pharmacy nearby. "When I'm going in, you go in and kill her," he said. He handed Smothers gloves and protective sleeves to keep the gunpowder residue off his arms, telling him to throw them away after the murder. He warned him to get rid of the gun and told him that if he was caught he would gain nothing by snitching. By the time Dave left, Smothers felt sure that the job was legitimate—and that Dave was a cop. Now that Dave knew who Smothers was, he couldn't say no.

Smothers waited in his Jeep at the CVS until the call came, just before 9 P.M. A few minutes later, Dave drove up with his wife and walked into the store, nodding slightly. Smothers walked over to the car, broke the passenger window with a tire iron, and, to give the impression of a robbery, demanded the woman's purse. She screamed and reached for something—her seat belt, Smothers guessed. "She was screaming and fidgeting, doing what, I wasn't sure," he said. "I didn't wait to find out." He shot her in the head, four times, and she slumped over the middle console. "Even before I pulled the trigger, it was different," he said. "I thought about how wrong it was, and I was fighting myself about whether to do it."

Later that night, Smothers felt compelled to return to the scene, by then crowded with police cars and news vans. A cop pulled him over, and Smothers produced a fake I.D. and papers showing that the Jeep belonged to Cecily's father. The officer explained that a witness to the crime had seen a similar Jeep, and then waved him on. At home, Smothers learned from the news that Dave was Sergeant David Cobb, of the Detroit Police Department. His wife's name was Rose.

For the first time, he felt that he'd killed an innocent. "I crossed a line I had been saying I wouldn't," he said. When he started out as a hit man, he didn't care whether he lived or died. But now he had a wife, and a stepdaughter who looked up to him. When he told Cecily, she was furious; she had thought that he wouldn't kill a woman. As she later said to the police, she was "mad that Vincent did it, mad that Vincent told me, and mad that I knew." Smothers wasn't sure that she would ever forgive him. But he knew that he wanted out.

Smothers grew up in a tight-knit family on Detroit's East Side. The fifth of eight siblings, he was close to his father, Willie Frank, a black man from Mississippi who preferred to be called Sonny, even by his children. Sonny scrambled to make a living; at times in his youth he had reportedly resorted to pimping. During Smothers's childhood, he specialized in home repairs. He had met Smothers's mother, Mary, a twenty-one-year-old nurse's aide of Polish descent, on a blind date in 1971. Mary wanted to get away from home, so when Sonny proposed she said yes. At first, Sonny's mother had misgivings about the relationship; she and her husband had fled Mississippi after Emmett Till was killed for flirting with a white woman. But they allowed the young couple to move into a three-bedroom house they owned on Vinton Street. Sonny built a high wooden fence around its large yard, and tended a garden full of tomatoes, corn, and strawberries, which shared space with car parts and broken-down machinery that he was fixing.

When the Smothers family moved to the block, there were about twenty houses on Vinton Street. Now only four are standing. For the past few decades, people with means in Detroit have moved in one direction: north of 8 Mile, the road that divides the predominantly black city from the affluent, mostly white suburbs. Between 2000 and

2010, the population south of 8 Mile fell by a quarter, to 713,000; eighty-three per cent of those who remain are African-American. Among the decent homes in Smothers's neighborhood are others so burned-through that they are mere outlines—a wooden beam suggesting a structure, a pile of rocks that might have been a porch. A row of tires marks the edge of an overgrown field, where the Smothers home once stood, and a yellow handwritten sign in an empty lot across the street asks, "Will the last person to leave Detroit kindly turn out the lights?"

From a young age, Smothers helped his father, learning plumbing, electrical work, painting. "He was good at everything," Mary recalled. "It was like he learned instantly, like he already knew what to do." Sonny took the family to the movies, and went fishing with the boys; Smothers remembers stalking a deer with a bow and arrow at a campsite near Big Rapids. "My dad was very active in our lives," his younger brother Steven said. "We did a lot of things—gardening, ice skating, flying a kite. He wanted us to be better for ourselves. He didn't want to show love, but he showed it in his own way."

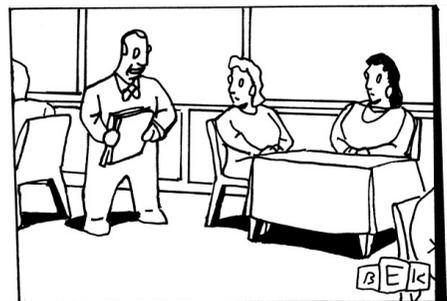
Sonny was strict. He expected the children to work hard and didn't abide smoking or drinking, though he'd done his share of both, and had also used crack. When the kids transgressed, he disciplined them with switches, extension cords, or the plastic rods used to close Venetian blinds. Twice, he cut off the ponytail of Smothers's younger sister, Keilea, as punishment; the second time, his aim was off, and he sliced into her scalp. Mary tried to protect the kids but she feared Sonny, who beat her frequently. "They say you should take your kids and go, but I couldn't do that," Mary said. "I had nowhere to go."

In 1989, Vincent's brother Neshon, then fifteen, ran away, and the police found him wandering the streets. After extensive bruising was discovered on him, he was taken into protective custody. Sonny refused to allow Vincent and his older brother Dion to be examined, and they, too, became wards of the state. Smothers, then eight, was desperate to go home. "Me and my father were extremely close," he said. "Children gravitate toward authority, and to me the better parent was my father."

At twelve, Smothers was allowed to return home, and he earned a spot at one of the city's top magnet schools. But it was far from home and from parental oversight, and he often skipped class. A year later, the family's home burned in a woodstove accident; he helped rebuild it and began attending nearby Charles F. Kettering Senior High School, walking back and forth with Keilea, who was a year younger. He was an honors student, with high marks in Spanish and biology. Kenneth Taylor, a teacher at Kettering, said of the family, "I think there was a genuine desire on their part to have a better life."

"Can I overwhelm you with a menu?"

Smothers had five close friends who also came from stable homes, a rarity in a neighborhood where many children didn't know who their father was. "We were, like, the good kids," he said. "Bad kids start stealing cars at twelve or thirteen, doing weed, shooting at people. We came from solid backgrounds that kept us from those things. If you came home smelling like weed smoke, you had some explaining to do." Smothers had a car, a red Chevy pickup truck, which conferred status. The friends played basketball and hung out near the Packard plant, the blighted shell of an automotive factory that looms over the neighborhood. One of the friends, Barry Morton, remembered a back-door play he perfected with Smothers, who would cut to the basket for an easy lob: "There was not a park we wouldn't take over."



But in the late nineties the family started to flounder. Sonny received a diagnosis of a rare type of lymphoma. Smothers's brother Dion stopped attending school and began selling drugs, and Sonny kicked him out. Around Christmas of 1997, Dion burgled a house in the neighborhood. The man who lived next door, Grady Hudson, was close to the house's owner, and he threatened Dion, "I'm going to whup you every time I see you." Sure enough, each time he spotted Dion after that, he chased him.

One evening the next April, Hudson hosted a barbecue. Around sunset, as he worked the grill and downed Miller Genuine Draft, Dion and a friend pulled up in a white van. Hudson spotted Dion as he went inside and, after a tense encounter with his friend, pulled two revolvers out of the pocket of his hoodie. When Dion emerged, Hudson glared at him and raised a gun. "There ain't but one bullet in the gun—I ain't looking for a shootout," he told me. "I didn't want to shoot up, because I know whatever comes up goes down," he added. "I decided to cut it into the dirt in front of the Smothers house."

As Dion scrambled into the van, Hudson fired, and he heard a scream: Keilea had followed Dion out to say goodbye. Hudson saw her fall, clutching her stomach. "I dropped my gun and ran to her," Hudson said. "I'm pulling her shirt, trying to see where she's hit. I see a little bitty hole in her stomach." Twelve hours later, Keilea died, at the same hospital where her father was being treated for cancer. When Smothers learned of her death, he went upstairs to tell Sonny, who wept and said, "I never got to say sorry about her scalp." He died eight months later. Hudson was sentenced to forty to sixty years in prison for second-degree murder.

Smothers stopped going to school, and his grades slid to C's, D's, and F's. He'd committed petty crimes before, like stealing food from a grocery store, but now his infractions turned serious; he missed graduation day because he'd spent the night in jail for stealing a car. He considered becoming a marine, but instead he got a job making air-conditioning and heating ducts, while he continued his criminal sideline. After two more arrests for stealing cars, he was imprisoned for a year and a half.

When he was released, he returned to his job, working his way up to foreman and earning sixteen dollars an hour. He said that he tried to set an example, once finishing a task that normally took an hour in twelve minutes. In 2003, his left hand, which he favors, got caught in a machine that flattens steel, and he lost mobility in all the fingers but the thumb and index—the two he needed to fire a gun.

If Smothers had been born fifty years earlier, he might have been a company man, helping build the cars that propelled Detroit's growth. But at the turn of the century the dominant business in many parts of town was drugs. Marzell, who dealt crack, told me, "I viewed dealing as bad, but it's, like, an option because it's all you know and all you see. Some guys make a nice living doing it. You see all those better things on television and you want to escape." Smothers had a puritanical streak—he didn't smoke, take drugs, or drink to excess—and he mostly steered clear of the trade. But he wasn't averse to robbing the places where drugs were sold.

Smothers says that he turned to crime because he became "callous" after losing the "two people closest to him"—a somewhat self-serving explanation. But Sonny's death left him with little guidance, in a difficult environment. "Detroit is two underclasses below low-class," he said. "Living paycheck to paycheck is underclass. The people in Detroit haven't seen a paycheck. When I got out of prison, I started seeing everybody with credit cards for the first time. But it was Bridge Cards, for welfare." Smothers and his friends were ambitious and talented—the "élite," as Marzell put it. They wanted to get ahead, and crime seemed like the fastest ticket. In one ten-minute robbery, Smothers said, he

made a hundred thousand dollars—the equivalent of three years' salary from his day job. Charlene Handelman, his twelfth-grade English teacher, said, "He wasn't the first of my honors students who turned to murder-for-hire."

In 2005, one of Smothers's basketball buddies introduced him to Leroy Payne, a laid-back, goateed black man in his thirties who liked to shoot dice in high-stakes street games. According to Smothers, Payne worked for DeLano Thomas, a dealer on the East Side who had a predilection for flashy accessories: luxury S.U.V.s with neon headlights, diamonds on his watch and on a pendant worn around his neck. DeLano, in turn, worked for someone whom Marzell described as "real heavy": Adarus Mazio Black, one of the biggest drug suppliers in Detroit.

One day, while Smothers was chatting with Payne and some other men, someone asked, "How much would you kill someone for?" Smothers didn't take the question that seriously. "I looked into how I would do it and gave a price, not thinking it would be agreed to," he said. Payne met his price, Smothers said, and, a couple of months later, Smothers walked up to his first victim and shot him dead. Fifteen minutes later, he was home. "Emotionally, it didn't affect me," he said. "It wasn't, like, 'Wow, I just killed someone.'"

Smothers expected Payne to short him. "I'm still doing my day job," he said. "I'm thinking, Even if they want me to do it again, if all my money isn't there I won't do it again." (Smothers later told the police that he charged five thousand dollars for a typical hit, but other people I talked to suggested that the fee was closer to twenty thousand.) After the hit, Payne met him and handed over a shoebox. All the money was there.

The following year, Smothers's bosses asked him to take a three-dollar-an-hour pay cut; he quit and struggled to find a comparable job. "It's hard to find a job when you're a felon," his friend Barry Morton said. "He needed money, and his mind started playing tricks." Smothers never considered himself a hit man. "Who has a list of people they want taken care of?" he said. "That doesn't happen in real life." But killing became his steady line of work.

Marzell told me, "I think he tried it, and the better he got at it the more intriguing and enticing it became to him. It was a mental exercise for him, for sure. The homework, the plotting. The deed of the murder itself." For most assignments, Smothers said, Payne gave him the target's street name and an address, along with a description of the target and his vehicle. The address was a starting point; dealers rarely stay at a location for long. They also keep their guard up, typically emerging from their cars and their homes with a gun at the ready. Smothers looked for a moment of vulnerability. "When you drive up to your house, you turn your car off. You look around, make sure nobody is around, pull your door handle, push the door open with your foot, and lean over to grab whatever is sitting in the passenger seat," he said. If someone Smothers was following had stopped at McDonald's on the way home, he would inevitably reach for the bag of food on the way out of the car. "That moment you lean over, that's the moment you get killed," Smothers said.

In the summer of 2006, Smothers was hired to kill a dealer named Adrian (A.D.) Thornton, who had been feuding with Payne's boss, DeLano Thomas. In 2000, DeLano's crew allegedly stole some marijuana from A.D. and shot him and his girlfriend. In retaliation, A.D. and his brother killed one of DeLano's people. Now word went around that DeLano had put a fifty-thousand-dollar bounty on A.D., and a similar one on his best friend, Motorhead.

Weeks earlier, Smothers had killed another of A.D.'s friends, catching him as he smoked a cigarette on his porch. A.D. was harder to trap; he switched cars frequently, and sometimes disguised himself with a dreadlocked wig. Smothers determined that he spent most of his time at a drug house, and began to conduct surveillance. "In the hood, you can't pull up on the block and sit in the car," he said. "People think you're either police or you shouldn't be there. You've got to be able to get close without them suspecting you of anything." He joined in pickup games at a basketball hoop next door, where the local kids played.

On stakeouts, Smothers cultivated a benign impression. He has a ready smile, a frame that looks too skinny to hold muscle, and a voice that tends to squeak when he's amused or saying a favorite phrase, like "Be for real!" He sometimes wore suits and, in the suburbs, brought along his dog, a ten-pound Maltese-poodle mix. "If you're out at three in the morning, walking a dog that fits in most women's purses, people drive right by you," he said. When he was tailing A.D., he got as close as possible. At a liquor store near the drug house, he once held the door for Motorhead. "The closer you are to a person, the more you can tell," he said. "Their reactions, their fear level. People who are afraid are dangerous." Motorhead barely noticed Smothers. "He looked at me like I was a peon, like I wasn't a threat to him," he said. "That's a good thing."

One day in August, as Smothers was watching, A.D. emerged from the house, laughing and talking with Motorhead. In the street, a group of kids were heading for the basketball hoop, and Motorhead barely noticed a tall light-skinned man among them. In later testimony, he noted Smothers's methods: "When you fixing to do something to a guy . . . you plan to hit him when the crowd is moving, so it was, like, blended." As he jumped off the porch, he heard gunfire, and felt himself get hit: he took several bullets to his stomach, two to his head, and one through his arm. A.D. ran for his white truck, parked ten yards away, where his girlfriend was strapping their baby into a car seat. He was dead before he could get there.

"Stop staring!"

Smothers said that Payne paid him the same day, before either man learned that Motorhead had survived. "I saw Motorhead's brains," Smothers told the police. "I couldn't believe when I heard he was alive." Gunfire can be capricious, he told me; his sister was killed by a single, misfired shot, while people like Motorhead "eat bullets." Smothers said that Payne wanted to make sure he didn't repeat the mistake: "That's why the other scenes needed to be so gruesome after that."



At the end of 2006, Smothers met Cecily, a pretty twenty-two-year-old "red bone"—someone of mixed ancestry whose light skin has reddish undertones—with a penchant for high heels. The first time they hung out, he told her what he did for a living, and she didn't believe him. By the time she did, they were in love. In three months, they were engaged. They went to the movies and restaurants, but more often stayed home, cooking elaborate meals and bonding over housework; Smothers liked that she kept things clean. They rarely argued, though Cecily had a jealous streak. Once, while they were shopping for groceries, he sneaked away to surprise her with flowers, and she read his evasiveness as guilt over another woman; she realized her mistake when she returned to the Jeep and found the flowers inside. "I never needed to lie to Cecily," Smothers said. "She knew what I did, and I didn't cheat."

In his crowd, dedication to a single woman was unusual. As one East Sider explained, most successful criminals “have a wife, baby mamas, and girls on the side.” But Smothers had grown up with his parents’ model. “They didn’t have one of those book romances, but I know my father loved my mother,” he said. He moved with Cecily to a small row house in Shelby Township, a suburb north of Detroit. “I would love to live on the block I grew up on,” he said. “But there aren’t places in Detroit worth living in.” They began to decorate, buying new furniture and a big flat-screen TV.

While Smothers settled into domestic life, the police were tracking his employers. In March of 2007, a special agent with the Wisconsin Department of Justice unlocked the padlock of a storage unit in Milwaukee, which contained a single blue plastic bin. He opened the lid, and found shrink-wrapped wads of bills totalling \$1.13 million. The unit’s owner admitted that he’d stolen the money from drug dealers and outlined an elaborate scheme: twice a month, two tour buses travelled from Chicago to Detroit, to be loaded with money, and went on to Tucson, where the money was exchanged for marijuana. If the police stopped the buses, the drivers and passengers were paid to say that they were setting up for a band in Las Vegas.

The buses were traced to DeLano’s boss, Adarus Mazio Black, who fled to Tucson. “Black became obsessed with concealing his identity,” J. Michael Buckley, the assistant U.S. attorney in Detroit who prosecuted him, said. “He had multiple aliases, surgically altered his fingerprints and his face. Those are the three ways that law enforcement identifies people, and he changed all of them.”

The buses were searched in April of 2007, and a federal complaint identified two people who had coöperated with the investigation as bus drivers. The next month, Smothers said, Payne hired him to kill two bus drivers from Chicago—an act of retribution, Buckley believes. DeLano made a plan to summon the drivers to a park in Detroit, but Smothers thought that the area was too crowded, so he had the men ordered to a spot around the corner. A few blocks from the meeting place, his car broke down, and he continued on foot, calling Payne to tell him that he would need a ride. While Smothers was on the phone, he saw the drivers, who had pulled their car over to the side of the road. One of them, an elderly black man, was leaning over the open hood, and Smothers, holding his phone to his ear, walked up and asked if he needed help. “Naw, young fella,” the man replied. Smothers took out a pistol and, without hanging up the phone, shot him in the head, and then shot the passenger through the windshield. As he walked away, he told Payne that he was ready to be picked up.

Five months later, federal agents traced Black to California and arrested him. (He was later convicted of drug trafficking.) The feds knew that Black was at the top of Detroit’s drug hierarchy and that DeLano was his right-hand man. “DeLano was the enforcer, dealing with payments,” Ernest Wilson, a sergeant in the Detroit Police Department, explained. “Everything DeLano did was to make sure nobody double-crossed Black.” The police didn’t know who Smothers was, but they were only two steps away.

Smothers took pride in his discipline. Growing up, he cleaned the toilets at home. At his air-conditioning job, he said, he arrived early and stayed late. When a crew was ransacking a dope house, he was the first inside: “I know I’ll look around every corner. I’m going to have my own back.” Before carrying out a hit, he did his homework, he said. But as the money flowed in he began relying on others and making costly mistakes. In the summer of 2007, Smothers was hired to kill a dealer named Pooch. He brought an accomplice, and the hit went awry. Pooch was killed, but two women were shot in the head: the teen-age mother of Pooch’s child, and a friend of hers, who survived. Smothers faulted his accomplice for shooting the women and for leaving the job half-finished. “The police don’t care about drug dealers,” he said. “But you kill and maim two eighteen-year-old girls with infant children, that don’t make no sense.”

He took care not to target bystanders—he didn't believe in killing for free—but his collateral damage was mounting. At the end of the summer, he told me, he spent a month on Runyon Street, staking out the home of a marijuana dealer named Michael Robinson, and concealing his intentions by playing baseball in the street with a friend, Ernest Davis. Late in the evening on September 17th, Robinson was sitting in his living room with a neighbor, Valerie Glover, and three other friends. Big Mike, as he was known, had a job working for the city, and liked to cook and to entertain; he had invited his guests over that night to watch the Redskins-Eagles game. Around 11:25 P.M., during the fourth quarter, Smothers began to conduct "recon." Wearing dark clothing and a ski mask and carrying an AK-47, he said, he went up on the porch and approached the storm door to test if it was locked, thinking that he wouldn't be heard over the television. Davis, also standing on the porch, saw a silhouette in the front window. As Smothers reached for the storm door's handle, a man opened the inside door.

The man turned to say something. Smothers saw Robinson sitting in a love seat, with a pistol on a table beside him. "Before he could turn to get his pistol, I shot him," he said. "Ernest shot the silhouette there in the window." Glover later testified that she said, "They shooting in here!" Bullets struck her elbow and thigh, and she fled to the hallway. Smothers stepped into the living room, "gun blazing," he said. Glover took three more shots in her back, and crawled into a bedroom, where Robinson's seven-year-old son was sleeping. When the boy sat up, she told him to lie back down, while she hid under his bed.

"It was unfortunate that they were there and the door got opened when it did," Smothers said of Robinson's guests, adding, "Everything was not according to plan—it was chaotic." He "secured" the living room, handed the AK-47 to Davis, and followed the woman. "I was making sure there was nobody else in the house who was a threat," he said.

When he entered the room at the end of the hallway, Robinson's son was awake in bed, saying, "Daddy."

"Who back here? Who back here?" Smothers asked.

Glover said she was under the bed.

"Where the shit at?" she recalled the shooter saying. "Do you know where the shit at? Because I'm 'bout to kill you." She said she didn't know, and he backed off his threat, telling her to be quiet. Smothers checked the basement, and found marijuana plants. As he moved around the house, he heard gunshots: "Ernest making sure everyone was dead." When the police arrived, around midnight, they found the bodies of three men and a woman; Glover and the boy were the only survivors.

Three months later, Smothers killed Rose Cobb, the policeman's wife, and afterward he couldn't get her out of his mind. The case was in the papers: the officer, David Cobb, was arrested and questioned, and not long afterward he hanged himself in a suburban park. For years, Smothers had murdered with little compunction. His work as a hit man had been contingent on a careful ethical dodge: he didn't believe that he had the moral high ground but, as he saw it, neither did his victims. Of Pooch, he said, "He was a pedophile, having sex with a fourteen-, fifteen-year-old. Don't say I killed one of Detroit's greatest citizens." He experienced Rose Cobb's death differently. "I don't remember the other ones, but I can still see her moving, screaming, stuck in that seat belt," he said.

He decided that this would be his last job. Killing someone he deemed innocent had upended his sense of himself. And he had another incentive, too: Cecily was pregnant. That spring, she gave birth to a girl, whom they named Keilea, after Smothers's sister. He began to envision a safer life, but he couldn't see a way out. "It's a situation where, in a sense, you can't stop," he said. DeLano, who had ordered most of the killings, was still at large. "Though the dude didn't know me, it wasn't like he couldn't find out who I was," Smothers said. "You never want somebody with that knowledge in the shadows."

Smothers said that he "became unavailable" to the people who wanted to hire him. But if he was going to retire he'd need money to support his family, and former hit men have thin résumés. Smothers went to lie low in Frankfort, Kentucky. He and Davis had got an enticing tip: a local dealer had buried five hundred thousand dollars in his yard. "This is the out," Smothers said. "This is half a million dollars." They devised a plan to kidnap the dealer and take the money. Wearing a suit, Smothers approached the dealer in his driveway, saying, "Excuse me, I'm with the homicide division, and I'd like to talk to you." Sensing danger, the dealer backed away and got a neighbor's attention. Smothers retreated, saying he'd return with another officer; he never went back.

"Our nap time doesn't roll over, so everybody ends up taking it all at the end of the year."



Smothers told me that after Cobb he never killed again, but his crisis of conscience had come too late. In April, he returned to Detroit to be with his family.

It was a risky trip. Through a source, Smothers had seen a police warrant for his arrest: he was wanted for the hit that had killed Pooch and his girlfriend. He had heard that her friend had survived, and he suspected that she had identified him. He was partly right: she had picked his picture out of a photo lineup. But, as he learned later, he was likely in the lineup because he had been given up by a friend of his. A man named Charles Malone had been arrested for selling drugs, and had talked to the police about Smothers's exploits. In a confidential proceeding, he testified that he saw Vito jogging away from where the bus drivers were murdered. He added that Smothers later told him about the hit. The prosecutor asked, "Did this seem odd to you that he was telling you about all this?"

"No, ma'am."

"So you two are that close?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Does he like to brag about what he does?"

"Yes, ma'am."

One morning shortly after Smothers returned home, he was cooking breakfast for Cecily when he realized that he was out of grits. He put the bacon in the oven and stepped outside with Keilea, making his way toward an opening in the fence alongside his yard that led into the parking lot of the grocery store next door. Before he could get there, a policeman drove up, drew a gun, and ordered him to the ground.

Smothers didn't want to lie down with the baby, so he asked if he could hand her to Cecily, who had come out of the house. The officer wouldn't let him. As Smothers knelt and then sat awkwardly on the gravel, more police pulled up and pointed their

guns. When an officer approached, Smothers handed her the baby and ducked into a police car. Over the radio, he heard an order to arrest Cecily.

Ten hours later, he was at the Schaefer police station, in Detroit, in a room with a square wooden table and two black plastic chairs. He had been brought in to talk with Ira Todd, a member of the city's Violent Crimes Task Force.

"What's going on with you, man?" Todd asked.

"Nothing much," Smothers answered quietly. A video of the interrogation showed him folding himself into the seat, his hands cuffed behind him. His hair was dishevelled, and he had thin sideburns and a mustache. He was wearing shorts and a black T-shirt.

"I've been talking to a lot of people about you, my friend," Todd said, as he set up a camera to take pictures of Smothers.

"O.K."

"You've got troubles."

"O.K."

"Major troubles. I figure you already know that," Todd said. "We know that you are, per se, a hit man, a contract hit man," he went on. "We know that you and somebody else were responsible for trying to take out three people—one girl that lived and she pointed you out."

Smothers listened.

"We know that you killed a cop's wife," Todd continued. "We know that the cop hired you." He said that Cecily had told the police about Rose Cobb's murder, and was showing them weapons that Smothers had asked her to stash. But she had also emphasized that he was a great father to their children. If he cooperated, Todd would talk to the prosecutor on his behalf.

"I'm willing to talk to you about everything," Smothers assured him. He asked what kind of trouble Cecily was in, and Todd hedged, telling him that asking her to hide weapons was a bad idea. If Smothers talked, he said, "I give you my word that we'll look out for you." Smothers cut him off, making clear that he wasn't worried about himself; he wanted to make sure Cecily didn't end up behind bars. "I can do forever," he said. "But I couldn't live with myself if she wasn't able to raise those two little girls."

Over the next twenty hours, Smothers talked. He combed through his memory, trying to keep the order of his hits straight. Toward the end of the interview, he mentioned the killing on Runyon Street.

"Did you hit somebody in there?" an officer asked.

"Yes," Smothers responded.

"Male or female or what?"

"Three guys and, I believe, there was a female in the house." Smothers described the scene in detail, mentioning that he had talked to a young boy before leaving with two thousand dollars, half a pound of marijuana, and a .40-calibre pistol—the one he said he later used to kill Rose Cobb.

“I really believe that Smothers was giving me the one-hundred-per-cent truth,” Todd told me. The information that Smothers gave about the eight other hits checked out. Todd has interrogated several hit men, but, he said, “Vincent was the first one I ever talked to who seemed human. You literally walked away saying, ‘Oh, my God, what happened to this kid?’”

As Smothers was finishing his confession, he asked to use the bathroom, and a sergeant, Michael Russell, escorted him there. Smothers told me that Russell said, “You said you did the Runyon job. That’s impossible. We got the guy.” (Russell denies having the conversation.) Surprised to have his confession second-guessed, Smothers gave details, mentioning the people in the living room and his discussion with Glover in the back room. “He looked flabbergasted,” Smothers told me. “He said, ‘A kid confessed to it.’” Seven months before, a young teen-ager named Davontae Sanford had told the police that he was responsible for the killings. “I said, ‘Wow, that’s really messed up,’” Smothers told me. “He wasn’t there.”

Last December, I met Sanford, with his lawyer, in a small booth at Ionia Correctional Facility. At nineteen, he is a broad-shouldered young man with a drooping right eyelid. He told me his story from behind an iron grille.

At 1 A.M. on September 18, 2007, he was in his living room when his mother, Taminko, returned from the store and mentioned that something had happened on Runyon Street, two blocks away. When he probed for details, she told him not to worry about it and admonished him to stay inside. Late-night Detroit was dangerous for a kid like Davontae, who was fourteen, blind in one eye, and immature. “He didn’t have a fourteen-year-old’s mind,” Taminko told me. “He still watched cartoons and played with his sister’s dolls.”

That night, Taminko left the house again, and Sanford stepped outside and walked up the street. News vans had gathered, and two detectives were following a police dog through the neighborhood. One of them, Sergeant Russell, flicked his flashlight on and off, and Sanford stopped to talk. He mentioned that his uncle was a cop, and when Russell’s partner said that he knew his uncle well Sanford grew expansive. He told the detectives that he knew who was responsible for “whatever it was that had happened on Runyon.” As they questioned him, he said that four of his friends had committed the crime, and that he’d seen one of them running through his yard as he fled the scene.

Russell was skeptical. Sanford’s details didn’t line up; among other things, he had said that he and his friends met before the crime at a nearby diner, which Russell knew had gone out of business. He picked up Sanford the following evening and brought him to the police station. There Sanford told police that he had participated in the killings. His confession included a sketch of the living room where the murders took place, accurately placing the bodies where they were found.

Sanford had grown up rough on the East Side. According to Taminko, Sanford’s father beat her, even when she was pregnant, and he was in prison by the time Sanford was born. Taminko was hooked on crack and, by her own account, not the most attentive parent. Her mother was also an addict, and her brother, who dealt drugs, was killed in his home in 1999. One night in 2006, when Sanford was staying with a cousin, Taminko was burned in a fire at her house. When I met her, the short sleeves of her print shirt revealed a network of keloid scars on her arms.

Taminko moved Sanford from home to home, and he attended seven schools in almost as many years. When he was eight, he was hit in the face with an egg and subsequently lost the vision in his right eye. He was a poor student, and by the time he was in fourth

grade Taminko had enrolled him in special-education classes. “We had to see psychiatrists and social workers,” she said. “They classified Davontae as emotionally impaired.”

At Osborn High, where Sanford was enrolled at the time of the murder, a security guard recalled him as an attention-seeker with a tendency to “overdramatize.” Sanford didn’t appear to belong to gangs at the school, like All ’Bout Money and the 7-Mile Bloods, but he talked as if he did. “He would say he got into a big fight and he had a gun and all this ammo, and it wasn’t true,” the guard said. “He just talked a lot. We would tell him to stop doing that—stop claiming things that aren’t true.”

As Sanford was questioned by the police, he changed key aspects of his story. At first, he laid the blame for the crime on the four friends. Later, he named a different group, including a cousin and the cousin’s friends. It wasn’t until his arraignment, he told me, that he fully understood what was happening. “They was reading every charge. Every charge was, like, ‘Life. Life. Life.’ That’s when it really kicked in,” he said. “They serious.”

In an interview with a court-appointed psychologist, he said that his confession was false. But at his bench trial, six months later, he changed his story again. Before the prosecutor finished presenting his case, Sanford pleaded guilty to four counts of second-degree murder. Taminko said that he had been pressured by his lawyer, Robert Slameka, who she later discovered had been disciplined fifteen times by the Michigan Supreme Court. “Our lawyer told us to take the plea,” she told me. “He said they had too much evidence on my son. But later we realized the evidence didn’t exist.” In the trial, Valerie Glover, the woman who had survived the shootings, testified that Sanford’s voice sounded like the one she’d heard from under the bed. “He didn’t have any bass in his voice,” she said, of the shooter. “He just sounded like a kid.” The prosecution seized on this as evidence that Sanford was the shooter; later, Glover was played a recording of Smothers speaking and agreed that the voice might have been his.

Neither the police nor the prosecutors believe that Sanford’s confession could have been false. But scholars have uncovered at least two hundred and fifty false confessions in the past two decades, and recent studies have found that minors are two to three times as likely to confess falsely. “Interrogations are all about manipulating the suspect’s perception of the benefits of confessing, while making the suspect think there are attendant harms if he doesn’t confess,” Steven Drizin, the co-founder of the Center on Wrongful Convictions of Youth at Northwestern University School of Law, which filed an amicus brief on Sanford’s behalf, said. “The process preys on the vulnerabilities of juveniles, who are naturally bad at assessing and weighing risks.” They often confess, he said, because they just want to go home.

“No, it’s not prewar—yet.”

Sanford never testified on his own behalf, but he told me that, during the interrogation, Russell pulled out a silver digital camera and showed him pictures of the crime scene. “I could see dead bodies,” Sanford said. “He showed me closeup pictures and far-back pictures. One guy in the closeup pictures had his mouth open. I’ll never forget that.” (Later, Russell denied showing Sanford pictures, but at the preliminary hearing he said that it was his “general practice” to have photos of the scene.) Sanford also said that Russell’s boss joined the interrogation and



produced the incriminating sketch. “He drew the couch and everything. He said, ‘Draw where the bodies are at,’” Sanford said. “Once I drew where the bodies was, he called the other detectives in and said, ‘Y’all see that?’”

Despite the problematic evidence, Sanford made a rational choice by taking the plea. At trial, the judge, Brian Sullivan, pushed both sides to plead. Even though the defense never presented its case, Sullivan remarked at sentencing that, had Sanford not agreed to a plea, he likely would have sent him away for life. As it was, he sentenced him to thirty-seven to ninety years in prison.

A couple of weeks later, Smothers confessed to the Runyon murders, but the Detroit Police Department showed little interest in re-opening the case. He was charged with all the killings to which he had confessed, except the four on Runyon Street—and, according to information given to his defense attorney, Gabi Silver, the police interrogated him extensively about every murder other than those four. “Nobody ever came in on the Sanford case,” Silver said. “The implication to me is loud and clear: ‘We already got somebody.’ They knew it was a whole can of worms.” Sanford was assigned an appellate attorney, Kim McGinnis, an energetic forty-seven-year-old who had earned a Ph.D. in pharmacology before switching to law. Neither the police nor the prosecutor informed her of Smothers’s confession; she learned of it months later, from a local TV newscaster. At the end of 2008, she filed a motion to withdraw Sanford’s guilty plea, and requested a new trial.

Smothers was fighting his own legal battle; Silver was trying to get his confession thrown out, arguing that the police had promised illegally that Cecily would not be charged if he cooperated. Before a hearing one morning, three officers escorted Smothers, in handcuffs and a yellow jumpsuit, to a cell in the bullpen where prisoners wait to be transported to the courthouse. An inmate in another cell called out, “Wassup?” Smothers didn’t recognize him, so he ignored the greeting. The other inmate was young and had a droopy right eye that made Smothers think he had Down syndrome. After a moment, Smothers remembered hearing from guards that the kid who caught his case was slow; it was Sanford.

A couple of weeks later, the two met again in the bullpen. Sanford introduced himself as “the guy who got locked up for those murders on Runyon,” explaining that the police had seen him in the neighborhood, talked to him, and arrested him. Sanford recalled that Smothers told him, “I’m the one who did the shooting on Runyon. You’ll be going home soon. Don’t worry about it.” Smothers wasn’t what Sanford had expected. “He didn’t seem like a killer,” he told me. “He didn’t come off tough. He came off real kind. Everything about him was quiet.” He thanked Smothers for “stepping up.”

But Smothers wasn’t ready to step up, not entirely. In the spring of 2009, Michigan’s Court of Appeals ordered a hearing to determine whether Sanford was innocent, and Smothers was called to testify. He discussed with Cecily whether he should; she was firmly against it. He had nothing to fear from DeLano Thomas, who had been killed earlier that year, in absurd fashion. He had gone to see an estranged girlfriend, and when he arrived—his neon headlights announced his presence, the girlfriend said—she was having sex with an eighteen-year-old, who was so afraid of DeLano that he killed him preemptively. But if Smothers named his former associates in open court he risked being seen as a snitch; he and his family could be put in danger. Besides, Smothers told himself, his confession had established Sanford’s innocence, so the authorities had no choice but to release the kid. In July of 2009, he pleaded the Fifth.

The proceedings of Sanford’s innocence hearing went on for more than two years, and provided a great deal of exonerating evidence. A key witness—a neighbor who saw the shooters as they were fleeing—testified that one was “five-eleven,” close to Smothers’s

height, and the other was a little shorter, “but not as much as six inches shorter,” Sanford’s height. Ballistics evidence showed that cartridge casings at the crime scene matched a .45 linked to Smothers, and that bullets at the scene had been fired from the same AK-47 used in another Smothers homicide; experts disagreed about whether additional AKs were used. Smothers’s account largely matched that evidence; Sanford had confessed to shooting in the window with a mini-14. The evidence was persuasive enough so that Nancy Diehl, the former chief of the trial division for the Wayne County prosecutor’s office, which has jurisdiction over Detroit, argued that the plea should be set aside. But even though the county prosecutor conceded, “There are aspects of the People’s case that elude explanation,” she refused to allow Sanford to withdraw his plea.

As Smothers awaited his own trial, he was placed on twenty-three-hour lockdown at a jail in Detroit. He read books, learned some chess moves from his neighbor, a man named Phillip Zabawa, and spent time scrubbing his cell and the communal areas. Smothers’s cell happened to be positioned across the catwalk—a six-foot-wide passageway between cells—from a TV, and he rigged a string and two spoons over a pipe so that he could change channels from his cell. Zabawa described the contraption as a “minor feat of mechanical engineering.”

The police have shown little interest in large parts of Smothers’s confession. There is no evidence that Payne, DeLano, or Davis was ever questioned about any of Smothers’s murders. (Payne, through his attorney, proclaimed his innocence, and suggested that Smothers was fabricating the allegations. Davis did not respond to a request for an interview.) When I asked Smothers why he thought no one else has been arrested for his crimes, he responded, “Because the police think what I do—that the streets clean up themselves.”

On December 26, 2009—the anniversary of the day Smothers’s father died, and of Rose Cobb’s murder—Zabawa was lying on his cot, absorbed in a book, when he heard a rustling noise from Smothers’s cell. The prisoners had toilets in their cells, and Zabawa wrinkled his nose at the smell. “Hey, dude, put some water on it,” he yelled to Smothers. He got no response, so after a minute he asked again, “Hey, how about a courtesy flush?”

A female guard doing her rounds looked down the catwalk, then opened the gate and rushed forward. Her partner jumped onto a table on the catwalk, and climbed the bars of Smothers’s cell to reach him. He was hanging from a pipe, with his bowels emptied; he had fashioned a noose out of two large plastic garbage bags. The partner sawed through the plastic with a pocketknife while the guard, a small woman, tried to prop up Smothers. She couldn’t support his weight, and he fell down with a thud.

Smothers failed to kill himself: his heart stopped, but the guards and E.M.T.s revived him, and, he said, he spent about a week in a coma. When he returned to his cell, his chess game was still good, Zabawa said, but his consciousness seemed altered. Now thirty-one, Smothers spends his days quietly, often reading. He admires “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” and Elie Wiesel’s “Night,” and he’s read more than a hundred romance novels. “I like books that stir my emotion, in a good and a bad way,” he said. He talks to his mother almost daily and to Cecily often, though he has encouraged her to find someone else.

Zabawa speculated that the near-death experience “brought home to Vito what he did to the families” of his victims. The following summer, Smothers pleaded guilty to eight murders, and was sentenced to fifty to a hundred years in prison. He declined to address his victims. “There is no atonement,” Smothers later told me. “I’ve taken people away from people who love them. I can’t give them back. By my sister being killed, I understand that level of pain and hurt.”

Like many who have crossed paths with him, Smothers doesn't know what to make of himself. He feels that he is "not a bad person, in the sense I'm not an asshole," even though he did some of the "worst things imaginable." His punishment is just, he said: "I think society would take a hit if someone with my criminal past was to be free." At times, he feels overwhelmed by the years ahead of him, and regrets that his suicide attempt didn't work. He talks longingly of the day when "I run across whoever will kill me."

As he reviewed his crimes, he told me, "I can't do nothing to change nothing." But he has thought often about what might have happened if he had testified at Sanford's hearing. He wanted to help however he could, but was still reluctant to take the stand, so, at the end of 2010, he devised a partial solution: if he waived his attorney-client privilege, his lawyer could testify about what he'd told her. Judge Sullivan would not allow it.

Last February, Sullivan ruled against Sanford, refusing to set aside his plea. While he agreed that Smothers's statement to the police offered "a plausible version of what happened," he described the ballistics evidence as "unexplained." He also noted that Smothers had twice invoked his right not to speak on Sanford's behalf. "I was skeptical about testifying," Smothers said. "But the more I hear about what they continue to say and lie about, it makes me want to testify that much more."

After Smothers first confessed, Sanford's lawyer, Kim McGinnis, told him that he'd be out by his seventeenth birthday. He's nearly twenty now, and his defense has been largely unsuccessful. In January, McGinnis filed a motion to allow Smothers to appear in court; the judge refused. So Smothers took his last available option: he wrote a detailed affidavit stating that he was contracted to kill Michael Robinson on Runyon Street, and insisting that he had no connection to Sanford or his family. It is now up to Michigan's Court of Appeals to decide whether his account calls Sanford's guilt into question. But Smothers is still hopeful that he has done some good. "I look at it as, I'm saving somebody's life," he told me. "He's not guilty. Maybe it's time for him to go home." ♦

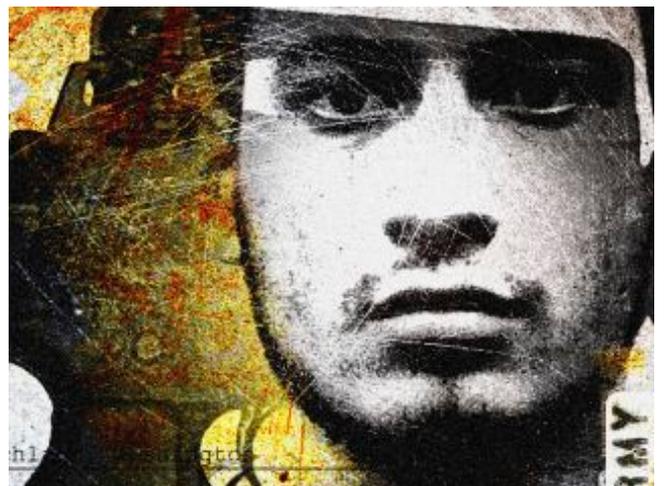
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