

John Smith and Murder in the Upside-Down City

by Joe Nobel

The upside-down city shocks everyone the first time they see it. John Smith was no exception. He looked out the taxi window upon the skyscrapers hanging down like so many stalactites from the ground above. Or, was it stalagmites? He couldn't remember which was which. The road from the airport passed by farms and suburbs. All the houses clung from the rock above, as did the trees, playgrounds, and fields of corn. But, the city was almost more than his could eyes could absorb.

His taxi rode upside-down on an upside-down road. Grooves with recessed rails just under (above) the surface held the taxi in place with hooks, preventing the cab from plummeting down (up) into the sky. John Smith gaped at the buildings as they approached. His seat belt dug into the crevice between his thighs and belly as he hung upside-down, preventing him from falling up to the ceiling.

“First time to the upside-down city?” his cab-mate asked, who by coincidence,

was also named John Smith, and also by coincidence was the passenger next to him on the flight in.

“Yes,” John Smith answered, too nervous from looking down (up) to the sky and the rolling landscape thirty thousand feet below (above). When the plane had landed on the upside-down tarmac of the upside-down, airport his cab mate John Smith assured our protagonist John Smith that everything was as it was supposed to be. Before the plane could fall up (down), steel meshing shot over (under) the plane keeping it pinned securely to the upside-down ground. Passengers were asked not to walk on the ceiling. Instead, cables at foot and arm length ran the length of the aisle for passengers to grab hold of as they deplaned.

“Here for the convention?” John Smith’s taxi companion, John Smith, asked.

“Yes, what else?” John Smith answered.

“This is the second time the John Smith convention is being held in the upside-down city,” John Smith told John Smith. “It was held here back in ’98. That was my first time. I was petrified. It might sound crazy, but they claim no one’s ever fallen. They don’t even have safety nets or nothin’. People just don’t fall, at least not on purpose. There’s a couple of suicides ever year, I hear, but no accidents. I guess the locals are too fuckin’ scared to let go of the safety lines.”

In a short while, the taxi pulled up to the curb in front of the Astoria Hotel. A bell captain, hanging by his feet from a cable a few inches above the sidewalk, opened the cab door. He guided John Smith out, the John Smith who had not been here before, and showed him how to hang his feet from the cable and to hold on to a second cable three feet above (below) that.

“I’ll get your luggage for you,” the bell captain said. “You’ve got enough to get

used to without holding your belongings.”

Then the other John Smith, the one that had been here before, just swung out of the cab, being an old hand at this.

The hotel lobby was filled with John Smiths lined up at the front desk waiting to check in. John Smith was glad to be away from John Smith. All John Smith talked about was how many John Smiths there were in the world. How they'd all convene on the John Smith convention like vultures hovering over a carcass. To this, John Smith had asked John Smith why he came. John Smith answered that, besides the convention, he had some other business in the upside-down city.

“Name?” the clerk behind the desk asked.

“John Smith,” some John Smith said.

“Let me look that up for you.” The clerk typed something into his computer. The keyboard was attached to the counter with Velcro. “Ah, here you are: room 802. It says you are already checked in. Don't you have your key?”

“No,” John Smith answered. “No key, and I didn't check —”

“Here, let me get a new key-card for you,” the clerk answered. A bellhop will bring your luggage up shortly. The elevators are just around the corner.”

“Um, thanks,” John Smith answered.

“Oh, and one more thing, there's no walking on the ceiling. There's a ten dollar housekeeping fee for every footprint.”

As he left, John Smith heard the clerk ask the next John Smith in line his name and say, “Let me look that up for you. I see you're already checked in...”

When it came to his turn, John Smith took the elevator down to the eighth floor. From there, he used the cables running along the floor as foot holds to make his way

along the hallway. He saw dozens of John Smiths filling the hall when he turned the corner. There were John Smiths of all kinds: tall ones, short ones, fat ones; John Smiths in business suits, John Smiths in cutoffs; long haired John Smiths, short haired John Smiths, and bald John Smiths. There was even the pink-eyed scrawny John Smith with whom he shared the plane and cab, trying to weasel his way through.

“Excuse me. Can I get by?” our John Smith pleaded. “I’m in room 802.”

“So are we all!” A large John Smith turned to John Smith and shook his head. “It looks like the computer put all the John Smiths into the same room.

“But, there must be thousands of us!” John Smith cried.

“Four thousand, three hundred, and eighty seven, to be exact,” Another John Smith said. “Hi, I’m John Smith, the actuary. I’m from Peoria.” That John Smith let go of the safety cable with one hand and reached out a hand to John Smith.

“Nice to meet you,” John Smith said, letting go of the cable with his own right hand with trepidation. They shook hands.

“And, I’m John Smith the axe murderer,” the large John Smith said, offering his own hand. “Retired.”

“Um, pleased to meet you.” Our John Smith shook hands with the axe murderer John Smith. “I’m from Fairlawn, Connecticut.”

A shout came from the door at 802. “This is my room. I got a reservation. Go away.” That angry John Smith slammed the door.

“I’m going back to the lobby,” a John Smith said. Thirty other John Smiths followed him. They all crowded into the elevator and some John Smith pushed the down button, and they descended up to the lobby.

It was now chaos around the front desk, with hundreds of John Smiths clamoring

for their rooms. The clerk kept issuing the same key cards to room 802, insisting to each John Smith that he'd already checked in and this was a replacement key.

"I have NOT checked in!" many John Smiths complained. Nonetheless, the smiling clerk issued them key cards to room 802 and sent them on their way.

When the batch of John Smiths from the elevator descended on the front desk yelling that they all got the same key, the man at the desk cried, "Of course you have the same key, you're all John Smith, you're all the same person, the computer says so. What do you expect me to do!"

"Give us all different rooms, you dope!" one of the John Smiths yelled.

"I can't," the clerk called back. "The whole hotel is blocked off for some kind of John Smith convention."

"See, this is why I hate being John Smith," John Smith, the plane and cab companion, who was the scrawny pink-eyed one, said to John Smith (our John Smith). "You don't know how many times I've gotten mixed up with some other bozo John Smith. I even spent a night in jail because of this name."

"Like I asked, why did you come?" John Smith asked John Smith.

"As I told you before, I have some other business in the upside-down city, if it's any of your business, John Smith." He said the name with derision.

The desk clerk called in the hotel manager, not knowing how to handle so many different people with the same reservation. It took the hotel manager over an hour to get all the John Smiths into their rooms. John Smith got a nice suite on the twenty-fifth floor with a grand view of the upside-down city's business district. He could also look out and see the clouds and vapor trails from jets and the farmland neatly arranged into little square parcels below. He wished he was on the first or second floor where he felt more of

an affinity with the ground, even though the ground was above him and not below. He looked at his bed firmly bolted to the floor above. He wondered how he could sleep on it until he noticed the Velcro straps. He shook his head and felt like crying. He'd never get over his fear of heights here.

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The following morning, John Smith sat in the Astoria's coffee shop. He'd had a horrible night's sleep strapped to his bed. He couldn't turn. He couldn't adjust his pillow; whenever he tried, the damn thing fell to the ceiling and he'd have to climb down on a rope to retrieve it. His coffee arrived upside-down attached to the waiter's tray by Velcro.

"Milk and sugar?" his smiling waiter asked.

John Smith watched the waiter place the coffee on the Velcro'd surface of his table. Plastic wrap over the top kept the coffee from spilling up. He wondered how he'd add milk and sugar. Or, how he'd drink it without spilling the coffee all over his upside-down head. "Um, no thanks," he said. "Can I have a slice of that pineapple right-side-up cake to go." John Smith figured that he'd be able to eat the cake in the privacy of his bedroom and not make a fool of himself like he would if he attempted drinking his coffee upside-down from an upside-down cup.

He could easily distinguish the locals from the newly arrived conventioners by the way they attacked their coffee. The newbies stared at their cups, clueless as he. The locals just put the upside-down cup to their lips, folded back the plastic wrap a sliver, and took a sip.

One of the John Smiths dropped his cup, and it crashed to the ceiling.

The voices in the restaurant hushed as everyone glanced at the broken china and splattered coffee stains up (down) on the ceiling. Then everyone turned back to their

conversations, pretending not to have noticed the faux pas.

John Smith noticed, though. He looked over at the John Smith who'd spilled his coffee and noticed him slumping up in his chair. His arms dangled up towards the ceiling and his head just bobbed back and forth until it came to a stop like a pendulum at rest.

John Smith (our John Smith) made his way with his feet hanging off the cables three inches above the floor to the John Smith's (the one who dropped his cup) table. It took a moment for John Smith to realize that John Smith was dead. He checked for a pulse on John Smith's neck to be sure. He looked up at the ceiling; a hotel worker was already mopping up the spilled coffee. *Poisoned*, John Smith thought. *Another one*.

"Waiter!" John Smith yelled out. "Call the police."

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John Smith sat on a swivel chair bolted to the floor of the upside-down city police footquarters. He strummed his fingers on the armrest waiting for the detective sitting opposite him to look up. The desk between them was cluttered with papers, held in place with magnetic paperweights. A stained coffee cup sat teetering on the edge of the desk with what looked like week-old coffee. A Pink Panther figurine taped to the desk sat prominently in front of his name plaque: Pierre-Augustine Lupoux. John Smith wondered how to pronounce the name: Lou-pox? Or, Lupo?

"So, Mr. John Smeese," the detective said in a strong French accent, "you have reason to suspect zat ze other Mr. Smeese was poisoned, yes?"

"I do," John Smith answered. "I am a detective from the Fairlawn Police Department in Fairlawn, Connecticut." He presented his badge across the desk. "I am on the trail of a serial killer."

"Really?"

“Detective Lupo, there is a John Smith killer on the loose,” John Smith said.

“You must take zat very personally, no?” Lupoux cocked an eyebrow.

“The first John Smith victim was a down-and-out homeless man in my town of Fairlawn. Stabbed to death. No one thought much of it. I was assigned the case in 2000, being the new kid. No clues. No witnesses. No suspects. I was ready to file the paperwork into the cold case file when I chanced upon an article, about another John Smith of Bridgeport who was found dead due to a fall off a highway overpass. At first, the Bridgeport PD suspected a suicide, but this John Smith had much to look forward to. His wife told me that they were planning a trip to the Orient for their 25th anniversary, his business was taking off, and he was expecting grand-children. He didn’t fit the suicide profile.

“Then came the others. John Smith in Poughkeepsie, a cabinet maker, died of carbon monoxide poisoning. John Smith in Schenectady, a paramedic with a crowbar to the back of the head. John Smith of Troy, a teacher drowned. John Smith of Scranton, slipped on a banana peel. John Smith of Toledo, a factory worker who fell into an industrial cake mixer. John Smith of Ann Arbor. John Smith of Kalamazoo. John Smith of Milwaukee who died of a supposed heart attack on a flight from Chicago to L.A.

“The killings then continued on the west coast. First in San Diego. Then Anaheim, Santa Barbara, Carmel. A particularly gruesome killing in Alameda. The list goes on. Portland. Tacoma. Seattle.”

By now Detective Lupoux’s interest had perked up. “But, for what reason iz somebody keeling all ze John Smeese’s?”

“That, I don’t know. But I do know he’s here in the upside-down city at the John Smith convention. There are four thousand, three hundred, and eighty-six John Smiths for

him to chose from.”

“Ziz eez terrible. What would eet do to ze image of our upside-down city! Please one moment, I have to consult with mon capitain.” Lupoux grappled along the handholds in the floor to his captain’s office. John Smith watched their grave discussion from the open door. They looked up at him occasionally as they spoke.

The captain, a stout man named Brubaker, called John Smith into a meeting room along with Lupoux and a half dozen other detectives. They wrote out their facts on a white board; the name of the next victim: John Smith. The next victim’s whereabouts: the Astoria, Biltmore, Charlton, or one of the other hotels in the convention district. They knew nothing about the perpetrator, his appearance or his motives. Only that he was walking among the John Smiths this very moment.

“It’s not much to go on,” Brubaker said, “but, Loopey and Smith, go and find him before he kills again.” The rest of the detectives sniggered.

John Smith looked at Lupoux and wondered what was so funny.

“Zey make joke at you,” Lupoux told John Smith when they were alone. “I am, how you say, unlucky. My last two partners died, shot by ze bad guys.”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” John Smith said. “How many partners have you had?”

“Um, I have had two.” Lupoux shrugged his shoulders.

“This is not my day,” John Smith sighed.

On the way back to the hotel, Lupoux gave John Smith a running commentary about the wonders of the upside-down city.

“And here, we are renovating ze central park. Notice the men planting trees. Zey have to attach the roots just so, so zat ze trees do not pull loose and fall up. And there you see those excavators attached to the ground, they are digging out a new lake. It will have

a water fountain and some fish. A flower garden will be around it. Very nice.”

“But, how can you have a lake upside-down? Oh, never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“And here, we have our stock exchange,” Lupoux said as they drove past an eight story building with an ornate brownstone facade. A pair of gigantic bungee cords, each five feet wide, had been draped under the building and were attached to the bedrock with stakes. “Ze building’s basement is crumbling, and while ze renovations are happening the building his held in place by those. Just in case eet would snap loose.”

John Smith looked out of the upside down window as they drove past.

“And, zere,” Lupoux pointed, “zat is a really great deli. We go zere for lunch, no? And on ze other side of ze street, a good restaurant, if you like Indian cuisine. All you can eat buffet. I take you once for dinner zere, okay?”

John Smith wondered how the buffet trays might be held upside-down to the upside-down tables. And, how the upside-down patrons would serve themselves in their upside-down serving lines.

“And zat is our bowling alley. Very difficult game when ze balls keep falling to ze ceiling, no?”

They returned to the Astoria to find a John Smith lying in a pool of his blood on the ceiling of the lobby. An axe was buried in his back. Hotel security was in the process of clearing the room of all the John Smith onlookers.

John Smith and Pierre-Augustine Lupoux interviewed the John Smiths who’d been in the lobby at the time but no one saw anything. The hotel camera was angled the wrong way and showed only a blurred frame as the axe flew to hit its target. No fingerprints on the axe.

It was a relatively small axe, with a handle no more than a foot long — more like a tomahawk.

“I know where you can get those,” Lupoux said.

John Smith glared at his partner. “Oh?”

“The last of ze mom-n-pop hardware stores. Eet eez at ze corner of Third and D Streets.”

“Go and see if any John Smiths bought an axe like this. In the meantime, I’ll find the Axe Murderer John Smith and see what he as to say for himself.”

“You have an axe murderer?”

“Retired,” John Smith added.

“Be careful,” Lupoux said.

John Smith may have known what the axe murderer John Smith looked like, but he didn’t know what room he was in. A guest list from the front desk didn’t help. He finally set off searching room by room with the help of a hotel security guard with a master key.

They found John Smith, the axe murderer, in room 315. Dead. He lay on the ceiling in a pool of blood.

“Shot in the head,” John Smith sighed.

The hotel security guard threw up (down).

John Smith called the forensics team and told them when they finished in the lobby there was another one up (down) here.

Lupoux returned an hour later.

“What? Another one!” Lupoux said in disbelief. “Do you zink zey have anything in common beside their name?”

“I can’t see any connection. Someone out there is randomly killing John Smiths.”

“Interesting avocation, no?”

“Scary,” John Smith commented. “What did you find out about the axe?”

“I have a list of people who had purchased one since zis convention started. Eet ees: John Smeese, John Smeese, and John Smeese. Zey each purchased one.”

“Oh great, did you get any descriptions?”

“Non. Ze proprietor, eet turns out, ees blind. But, I have called for a sketch artiste just in case he remembers something.”

“That would be as useful as a trampoline in the upside-down city.”

“Oh, we have zose. Ze keeds have zem at school. Zey use zem with bungy cords.”

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John Smith wandered the convention hall, keeping an eye out for anyone suspicious. Without any clues, that’s all he could do. There were John Smith booths to trace your John Smith lineage. There was a John Smith cooking seminar; to teach one how to cook all things John Smith — upside-down. There was even an authentic village Smith, with an anvil, giving a demo on how to work iron.

John Smith watched the village smith John Smith clank, clank, clank his hot iron into shape.

“What are you making?” John Smith asked.

“Gonna be a sword.” John Smith answered.

“Interesting.”

“Got me a grinding wheel, too. But we don’t make these swords sharp. They’re only decorative. But I did have a John Smith here yesterday who wanted an axe he brought along with him to be really sharp.”

“You don’t say?” John Smith’s attention perked. “Describe this John Smith to me.”

“Well, lemme think.” John Smith the smith answered. “Not much to go on. He was an ordinary, everyday kind of John Smith. You know, nondescript.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“Short, kinda,” John Smith put his smithing tools aside and strapped them to his workbench. “Wiry, he was. His hair, too, that was stringy and wiry. Weak faced. Kinda a pushy little dweeb, if you know what I mean.”

John Smith (our John Smith) then remembered what another John Smith had once casually mentioned. He pulled out his cell phone, careful not to drop it to the convention hall ceiling, and called his chief at the Fairlawn, Connecticut, police department.

“I need some info on that first John Smith case. Yes, that vagrant who was later murdered. When he was arrested, did they by chance pick up the wrong John Smith first? Yeah, I’ll hold.” John Smith looked around at all the John Smiths making their ways upside-down to one vendor or another. The hall was packed and he could hardly make out one face from another. “Yes, I’m still here... There was? You say he was locked up for a night before they found the right man? I can imagine that that John Smith was angry, yes. Do you still have his photo on file? Great. Can you send it to my phone? Okay, I’ll be waiting for it.”

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“Lupo!” he said when he caught up with Lupoux. “I know which John Smith is the killer! And, to think, I was sitting next to him on the plane. I even shared a taxi with him.” Then his phone chimed with a message. John Smith looked at the photo he received and shouted “I knew it!” He held out a mug shot of the scrawny pink-eyed John

Smith.

“Why him?”

“He told me how much he hated John Smiths. How there were too many John Smiths. And, that he’d even spent a night in jail because of his name. But he was released the next day, after they found the right John Smith. He, the wrong John Smith, must have held a grudge against all other John Smiths after that. His first victim was the right John Smith, who was killed a few days after he was let out of jail. He, the wrong John Smith, then went on killing other John Smiths all around the country.”

“I have also to tell you something,” Pierre-Augustine Lupoux said. “You remember me showing you where zey are excavating for the lake in the park? Well, I have just gotten a report zat a case of dynamite ees missing.”

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All hands from the upside-down city police department scoured the upside-down city for the dynamite, with special emphasis on the Astoria, where the John Smiths had gathered en masse to hear the closing speeches of the John Smith Convention.

First to speak was John Smith, John Smith the actuary from Peoria. After that, John Smith of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma gave a rousing talk which mentioned the name John Smith no less than eighty-seven times.

John Smith, meanwhile, surveyed the hall looking for the scrawny, pink-eyed John Smith with an axe to grind with all the other John Smiths. Two more axes, to be specific. And a case of dynamite. If John Smith wanted to spectacularly kill John Smiths on a wholesale level, then this was the time and place to do it. It was the last day of the convention. After the speeches, there would be pie; and then the John Smiths would all scatter to their rooms at the Astoria, Biltmore, or Carlton to start packing. Only, there

were no explosives in the hall. It had been thoroughly searched beforehand and the John Smiths all passed through a bomb detector on their way in. So, John Smith must have another, more insidious target in mind.

John Smith watched one of the attendees near the back of the hall stand and grapple his upside-down way to the exit. There was nothing unusual about one or another John Smith coming or going, but this particular John Smith caught John Smith's attention. The John Smith skulked and stooped as he made his way along the footholds, if it is possible to skulk and stoop while making one's way along hanging by one's feet from steel cables imbedded in the floor (ceiling) above. This John Smith wore a long trench coat with the collar turned up and a wide-brimmed hat, hiding his face as much as possible.

John Smith waved to Lupoux, who was keeping watch from the opposite corner. They both grappled along the footholds to the back of the hall even as their John Smith walked through the door.

"That's him," John Smith said when he and Lupoux converged at the door at the back of the hall. "I'm going after him." A thought struck him that moment; he remembered the building held to the ground with bungee cords because of its crumbling basement. "Lupo, get everyone out of here. John Smith is going to blow up the building and send it falling to the sky."

"But, zere weel be panic!" Lupoux protested.

"Think of some way to get them out in an orderly manner. I'm going after this John Smith."

Lupoux looked on as John Smith slid his way along the footholds, chasing after John Smith. He wondering how to empty the hall without thousands of John Smiths

trampling each other and falling to the hall's ceiling thirty feet below. Pierre-Augustine Lupoux scampered to the front of the hall and took the stage, arriving at the microphone a moment before the next speaker in line.

“ello, everybody,” Lupoux said. “My name is ... John Smeese.” The audience chuckled. “I am not from here, but in my country we also have ze John Smeese convention. For thousands of years the John Smeese's have been meeting to share their John Smeese-ness wiz each ozer. Each year, we make a huge parade around ze town. I would like for us to also make such a parade today. We walk down to ze park along Main Street, okay?”

“I would like all you John Smeeses to stand and in a very orderly way, but also very, very quickly, to make a line. We all zen march out ze door. So, now we go, yes?”

Meanwhile, John Smith ran after John Smith. He became frustrated that he was not gaining on the killer and he released his foothold and dropped to the ceiling. A hotel maid tsked at him as he ran by. John Smith also jumped down to the ceiling and ran when he saw John Smith turn the corner and gain on him.

John Smith, with John Smith in close pursuit, slid up a flight of stairs to the lobby and ran out to the street. He “ran” along the street, grappling hand over hand using the foothold cables. A herd of pedestrians making their upside-down way along the same cable blocked his path. He jumped to a trash can bolted to the sidewalk. From there, he grabbed hold of a bench. Using the bench's seat belts, he swung from one end to another, then grabbed hold of the trunk of an oak tree. It was an old, majestic tree, more than a hundred years old, providing shade along the upside-down city's main street. John Smith could barely get his arms around it. He began to slide down to the leafy canopy.

“You've got nowhere left to run,” John Smith, our John Smith from Fairlawn,

Connecticut, said, hanging by the foot grapples in the sidewalk beside the tree. “It’s over.”

“No, it isn’t,” John Smith, the scrawny, weak faced, pink-eyed serial killer John Smith spat back. He jumped, kicking off from the tree out beneath the road and fell skyward.

“No,” our John Smith cried. But he helplessly watched the serial killer John Smith glide across the street, with his trench coat as like a sail. He landed in the canopy of a tree on the other side.

The serial killer John Smith climbed up the tree's branches then shimmied up the trunk until he reached the sidewalk above. He reached for foot cables and upside-downed-himself.

“Is your name John Smith?” our John Smith heard the serial killer John Smith ask a passer by.

The pedestrian shook his head, no.

“Too bad,” the killer John Smith said. Then he turned and ran off, grappling upside-down on the foot cables.

Our John Smith had to run upside-down to the nearest crosswalk and wait for a walk signal to stop the rushing traffic before he could cross. By the time he got across the serial killer was long gone.

Or, so he thought. He heard “Nya, nyal!” from down the street. The serial killer John Smith hung by his feet at the next intersection blowing a raspberry at him.

John Smith ran after John Smith. Then when John Smith saw John Smith approaching, he ran off down the cross street. When John Smith arrived at the corner, he saw John Smith at the next intersection thumbing his nose at him. John Smith ran off

again when John Smith ran after him.

This chase continued until John Smith found himself at the steps of the Astoria one more time. John Smith had led him in a circle. By now Lupoux had emptied the hotel. All the John Smiths were dutifully marching down Main Street, each one shuffling upside-down slowly making his way to the park and slowing traffic on their way. The upside down city police department had cleared the hotel of the few random non-John Smith guests along with the hotel staff, of which none were named John Smith. This latter set was gathered on the sidewalk outside the hotel. John Smith, the serial killer, blended in with the crowd.

John Smith looked desperately for the killer's face among the throng of people. He was bumped and jostled as he made his way along, almost losing his foothold several times. Once, he lost hold completely with one foot and held onto the upside-down city by no more than a toe hold. A kindly arm took hold of him and yanked him up so he could regain his purchase. He looked and saw it was Pierre-Augustine Lupoux.

“Are you all right, mon ami?” Lupoux asked.

“Um, yeah.”

“Good, ze hotel, she is empty. But ze bum squad has not found ze explosives yet.”

“I believe zey are, I mean *they* are, in the basement,” our John Smith said. “He wants to dislodge the building and send it crashing to the right-side-up world below.”

“Diabolique!” Lupoux exclaimed. “I weel hunt down ze dynamite. You just catch John Smeese.”

“No, don't go back in there!” John Smith implored, but Lupoux ran back into the Astoria.

It took John Smith five precious minutes to locate John Smith.

“There he is!” John Smith shouted, pointing at John Smith. “Stop him.”

Five uniformed policemen of the upside-down city controlling the crowd heard him and closed in around the killer John Smith. He ran, but was surrounded and had nowhere to run.

“Back off!” serial killer John Smith yelled. “He held a white detonator in the shape of a small rod in his grip. It was about a foot long with a red button at one end. His thumb rested on the button. “I’ll set it off if you any of you take another step.”

“Take it easy,” John Smith said to John Smith. “Just relax and give that to me.”

“No way!” John Smith replied. “I’ll blow up the building. Just watch.”

“All the John Smiths are out. It’s over.”

“All of them?” The serial killer seemed disappointed for a moment. “Not all of them, surely. Even if it’s so, I’m still going to blow up the building.”

“Now, why would you want to do that?” our John Smith asked. He wanted to keep the other John Smith talking. He looked back at the hotel entrance. He wished Lupoux hadn’t run in.

“I want to see fireworks,” John Smith replied. “I want to go out with a bang. I want to send the rest of these excruciatingly ordinary John Smiths a message: change your dull, ordinary names or else I’ll find you.”

“What do you have against this name anyway?”

“Nothin’!” John Smith said. If he could stomp his feet down and plant them in place, he would have. “Nothin’, except there are too many boring every-day people, without a whit of creativity, using it. The sheer number of John Smiths cheapens the name. And, I don’t appreciate my name being cheapened, Mister John Smith!”

Our John Smith then saw the bomb squad leaving the building. They shook their

heads indicating they didn't find the bomb. Lupoux wasn't among them.

The killer John Smith became so agitated when he saw the bomb squad, he started shaking. He almost dropped his trigger as he fumbled with it nervously.

John Smith saw a moment's opening and lunged at John Smith in an attempt to wrest the controller out of John Smith's hand. He just forgot that when he lunged he would start falling up. He grabbed the nearest thing he could, and that was John Smith. He held onto the serial killer, gripping him around his chest, pinning his arms to his side, and wrapping his legs around the killer's.

The next thing he heard was a deafening blast. The ground shook. He heard a crack, then the painful sound of twisting steel. After a moment of silence there was a scrape and a pop and the Astoria Hotel launched itself into the sky. John Smith looked up (down) and saw the hotel fall towards the terrestrial right-side-up ground below. It spun as it shrank in the distance. It missed a jet liner cruising by below for destinations unknown. Perhaps that plane was coming from the upside-down city, perhaps carrying a few lucky John Smiths that had checked out early.

John Smith tried to shrug him off, twisting and shaking, until he freed his arms and pushed John Smith away from him. John Smith (our John Smith) slipped and slid down John Smith's (the killer's) body until he was holding on by John Smith's shirt collar. His grip was loosening. He didn't have time to worry about anything else, but he saw Pierre-Augustine Lupoux hanging by his hands from a broken water pipe in the crater of what was once the Astoria Hotel.

When Lupoux let go to wave at John Smith, he fell. John Smith thought he saw Lupoux shrug his shoulder in resignation as he fell past.

John Smith's grip on John Smith's neck weakened, and then his fingers loosened,

refusing to obey his commands to hold on. John Smith slipped down John Smith's arm until they were holding each other by the wrist. He noticed that John Smith was holding on to him as tight as he was holding onto John Smith.

“So, what's it going to be, John Smith?” our John Smith asked.

John Smith smiled an evil smile. “Don't worry, I'm not going to let go of your hands.” He looked down at John Smith swinging below him. He laughed.

“Let the police take hold of you and pull me up,” John Smith said.

“Not a chance!” the serial killer John Smith cried. “If anyone so much as touches me, I will let go, and it will be bye-bye to you.”

“We can't stay here all day,” our John Smith said, as calmly as he could. “We seem to be at a stalemate. There's nowhere for you to go, not with you holding onto me. If you let go, these fine officers will have you in cuffs in no time.”

“I told you,” John Smith said. “I'm not going to let you go.”

“No? That's good.”

“No.” John Smith answered. “We're going together. At least I can kill two more John Smiths, you and me.” Without time for John Smith to protest, John Smith kicked his feet free of the foot-holds and the two of them tumbled down from the upside-down city.

Our John Smith saw the land above him recede in the distance, and the spectators looking down at him with disbelief. The wind rushed by, as they tumbled, the upside-down city spun. It mixed with eye-blinks of sky then city. He could see the entirety of the city now, more and more of it with each spin. Soon the upside down countryside and the upside down airport came and went from view. Jet liners below him left their vapor trails in their wakes. All the time the serial killer John Smith held tight on his grip over John Smith's wrists.

The serial killer John Smith shouted something, but with the wind blasting past, our John Smith heard nothing. He could have said, "We die together."

They tumbled together faster and faster until they reached terminal velocity. It seemed for a moment that they were floating. The sound of the air was a freight train rumbling past, deafening in its loudness. But that was the only thing up here: the roar of the wind. John Smith didn't even notice John Smith holding on to him any more.

The next thing happened too fast for John Smith. He saw one of those jumbo jets heading towards them. He crashed into the wing and rolled to a stop a foot from falling off the back end again. His adversary had let go of his grip, and he, too, was sprawled on the jet liner's wing.

John Smith, the serial killer, sprang to his feet and steadied himself. He pulled out his two remaining axes from the deep pockets of his trench coat. Our John Smith had barely a moment to jump to his own feet and dive out of the way. John Smith turned to John Smith again and swung his axes furiously, backing John Smith out to the tip of the wing.

John Smith swung both axes overhand. But John Smith crouched at the last moment and John Smith, with the inertia of the weight of the axes, fell forward over John Smith and off the wing. John Smith could see John Smith tumble in the sky away from him. When the killer was no more than a speck in the sky below him, John Smith made his way back along the wing to the plane's body.

A flight attendant opened the wing door for him, and he climbed into the cabin.

The flight crew stood around him, mouth's open, gaping.

Pierre-Augustine Lupoux was among them. He just shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“You made it too, Loopey Lupo?” John Smith said with a relieved sigh. He pulled out his gold card and handed it to who seemed to be the head flight attendant. “Two one-way tickets for my friend and me to where ever this plane happens to be going. First Class, please.”

End

Thank you for reading John Smith and Murder in the Upside-Down City. I hope you enjoyed my story.

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Be well, Joe