

Dangerous Minds: Criminal profiling made easy

by Malcolm Gladwell November 12, 2007

On November 16, 1940, workers at the Consolidated Edison building on West Sixty-fourth Street in Manhattan found a homemade pipe bomb on a windowsill. Attached was a note: "Con Edison crooks, this is for you." In September of 1941, a second bomb was found, on Nineteenth Street, just a few blocks from Con Edison's headquarters, near Union Square. It had been left in the street, wrapped in a sock. A few months later, the New York police received a letter promising to "bring the Con Edison to justice—they will pay for their dastardly deeds." Sixteen other letters followed, between 1941 and 1946, all written in block letters, many repeating the phrase "dastardly deeds" and all signed with the initials "F.P." In March of 1950, a third bomb—larger and more powerful than the others—was found on the lower level of Grand Central Terminal. The next was left in a phone booth at the New York Public Library. It exploded, as did one placed in a phone booth in Grand Central. In 1954, the Mad Bomber—as he came to be known—struck four times, once in Radio City Music Hall, sending shrapnel throughout the audience. In 1955, he struck six times. The city was in an uproar. The police were getting nowhere. Late in 1956, in desperation, Inspector Howard Finney, of the New York City Police Department's crime laboratory, and two plainclothesmen paid a visit to a psychiatrist by the name of James Brussel.

Brussel was a Freudian. He lived on Twelfth Street, in the West Village, and smoked a pipe. In Mexico, early in his career, he had done counter-espionage work for the F.B.I. He wrote many books, including "Instant Shrink: How to Become an Expert Psychiatrist in Ten Easy Lessons." Finney put a stack of documents on Brussel's desk: photographs of unexploded bombs, pictures of devastation, photostats of F.P.'s neatly lettered missives. "I didn't miss the look in the two plainclothesmen's eyes," Brussel writes in his memoir, "Casebook of a Crime Psychiatrist." "I'd seen that look before, most often in the Army, on the faces of hard, old-line, field-grade officers who were sure this newfangled psychiatry business was all nonsense."

He began to leaf through the case materials. For sixteen years, F.P. had been fixated on the notion that Con Ed had done him some terrible injustice. Clearly, he was clinically paranoid. But paranoia takes some time to develop. F.P. had been bombing since 1940, which suggested that he was now middle-aged. Brussel looked closely at the precise lettering of F.P.'s notes to the police. This was an orderly man. He would be cautious. His work record would be exemplary. Further, the language suggested some degree of education. But there was a stilted quality to the word choice and the phrasing. Con Edison was often referred to as "the Con Edison." And who still used the expression "dastardly deeds"? F.P. seemed to be foreign-born. Brussel looked closer at the letters, and noticed that all the letters were perfect block capitals, except the "W"s. They were misshapen, like two "U"s. To Brussel's eye, those "W"s looked like a pair of breasts. He flipped to the crime-scene descriptions. When F.P. planted his bombs in movie theatres, he would slit the underside of the seat with a knife and stuff his explosives into the upholstery. Didn't that seem like a symbolic act of penetrating a woman, or castrating a man—or perhaps both? F.P. had probably never progressed beyond the Oedipal stage. He was unmarried, a loner. Living with a mother figure. Brussel made another leap. F.P. was a Slav. Just as the use of a garrote would have suggested someone of Mediterranean extraction, the bomb-knife combination struck him as Eastern European. Some of the letters had been posted from Westchester County, but F.P. wouldn't have mailed the letters from his home town. Still, a number of cities in southeastern Connecticut had a large Slavic population. And didn't you have to pass through Westchester to get to the city from Connecticut?

Brussel waited a moment, and then, in a scene that has become legendary among criminal profilers, he made a prediction:

“One more thing.” I closed my eyes because I didn’t want to see their reaction. I saw the Bomber: impeccably neat, absolutely proper. A man who would avoid the newer styles of clothing until long custom had made them conservative. I saw him clearly—much more clearly than the facts really warranted. I knew I was letting my imagination get the better of me, but I couldn’t help it.

“One more thing,” I said, my eyes closed tight. “When you catch him—and I have no doubt you will—he’ll be wearing a double-breasted suit.”

“Jesus!” one of the detectives whispered.

“And it will be buttoned,” I said. I opened my eyes. Finney and his men were looking at each other.

“A double-breasted suit,” said the Inspector.

“Yes.”

“Buttoned.”

“Yes.”

He nodded. Without another word, they left.

A month later, George Metesky was arrested by police in connection with the New York City bombings. His name had been changed from Milauskas. He lived in Waterbury, Connecticut, with his two older sisters. He was unmarried. He was unfailingly neat. He attended Mass regularly. He had been employed by Con Edison from 1929 to 1931, and claimed to have been injured on the job. When he opened the door to the police officers, he said, “I know why you fellows are here. You think I’m the Mad Bomber.” It was midnight, and he was in his pajamas. The police asked that he get dressed. When he returned, his hair was combed into a pompadour and his shoes were newly shined. He was also wearing a double-breasted suit—buttoned.

In a new book, “Inside the Mind of BTK,” the eminent F.B.I. criminal profiler John Douglas tells the story of a serial killer who stalked the streets of Wichita, Kansas, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Douglas was the model for Agent Jack Crawford in “The Silence of the Lambs.” He was the protégé of the pioneering F.B.I. profiler Howard Teten, who helped establish the bureau’s Behavioral Science Unit, at Quantico, in 1972, and who was a protégé of Brussel—which, in the close-knit fraternity of profilers, is like being analyzed by the analyst who was analyzed by Freud. To Douglas, Brussel was the father of criminal profiling, and, in both style and logic, “Inside the Mind of BTK” pays homage to “Casebook of a Crime Psychiatrist” at every turn.

“BTK” stood for “Bind, Torture, Kill”—the three words that the killer used to identify himself in his taunting notes to the Wichita police. He had struck first in January, 1974, when he killed thirty-eight-year-old Joseph Otero in his home, along with his wife, Julie, their son, Joey, and their eleven-year-old daughter, who was found hanging from a water pipe in the basement with semen on her leg. The following April, he stabbed a twenty-four-year-old woman. In March, 1977, he bound and strangled another young woman, and over the next few years he committed at least four more murders. The city of Wichita was in an uproar. The police were getting nowhere. In 1984, in desperation, two police detectives from Wichita paid a visit to Quantico.

The meeting, Douglas writes, was held in a first-floor conference room of the F.B.I.’s forensic-science building. He was then nearly a decade into his career at the Behavioral Science Unit. His first two best-sellers, “Mindhunter: Inside the FBI’s Elite Serial Crime Unit,” and “Obsession: The FBI’s Legendary Profiler Probes the Psyches of Killers, Rapists, and Stalkers and Their Victims and Tells How to Fight Back,” were still in the future. Working a hundred and fifty cases a year, he was on the road constantly,

but BTK was never far from his thoughts. “Some nights I’d lie awake asking myself, ‘Who the hell is this BTK?’ ” he writes. “What makes a guy like this do what he does? What makes him tick?”

Roy Hazelwood sat next to Douglas. A lean chain-smoker, Hazelwood specialized in sex crimes, and went on to write the best-sellers “Dark Dreams” and “The Evil That Men Do.” Beside Hazelwood was an ex-Air Force pilot named Ron Walker. Walker, Douglas writes, was “whip smart” and an “exceptionally quick study.” The three bureau men and the two detectives sat around a massive oak table. “The objective of our session was to keep moving forward until we ran out of juice,” Douglas writes. They would rely on the typology developed by their colleague Robert Ressler, himself the author of the true-crime best-sellers “Whoever Fights Monsters” and “I Have Lived in the Monster.” The goal was to paint a picture of the killer—of what sort of man BTK was, and what he did, and where he worked, and what he was like—and with that scene “Inside the Mind of BTK” begins.

We are now so familiar with crime stories told through the eyes of the profiler that it is easy to lose sight of how audacious the genre is. The traditional detective story begins with the body and centers on the detective’s search for the culprit. Leads are pursued. A net is cast, widening to encompass a bewilderingly diverse pool of suspects: the butler, the spurned lover, the embittered nephew, the shadowy European. That’s a Whodunit. In the profiling genre, the net is narrowed. The crime scene doesn’t initiate our search for the killer. It defines the killer for us. The profiler sifts through the case materials, looks off into the distance, and *knows*. “Generally, a psychiatrist can study a man and make a few reasonable predictions about what the man may do in the future—how he will react to such-and-such a stimulus, how he will behave in such-and-such a situation,” Brussel writes. “What I have done is reverse the terms of the prophecy. By studying a man’s deeds, I have deduced what kind of man he might be.” Look for a middle-aged Slav in a double-breasted suit. Profiling stories aren’t Whodunits; they’re Hedunits.

In the Hedunit, the profiler does not catch the criminal. That’s for local law enforcement. He takes the meeting. Often, he doesn’t write down his predictions. It’s up to the visiting police officers to take notes. He does not feel the need to involve himself in the subsequent investigation, or even, it turns out, to justify his predictions. Once, Douglas tells us, he drove down to the local police station and offered his services in the case of an elderly woman who had been savagely beaten and sexually assaulted. The detectives working the crime were regular cops, and Douglas was a bureau guy, so you can imagine him perched on the edge of a desk, the others pulling up chairs around him.

“ ‘Okay,’ I said to the detectives. . . . ‘Here’s what I think,’ ” Douglas begins. “It’s a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old high school kid. . . . He’ll be disheveled-looking, he’ll have scruffy hair, generally poorly groomed.” He went on: a loner, kind of weird, no girlfriend, lots of bottled-up anger. He comes to the old lady’s house. He knows she’s alone. Maybe he’s done odd jobs for her in the past. Douglas continues:

I pause in my narrative and tell them there’s someone who meets this description out there. If they can find him, they’ve got their offender.

One detective looks at another. One of them starts to smile. “Are you a psychic, Douglas?”

“No,” I say, “but my job would be a lot easier if I were.”

“Because we had a psychic, Beverly Newton, in here a couple of weeks ago, and she said just about the same things.”

You might think that Douglas would bridle at that comparison. He is, after all, an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who studied with Teten, who studied with Brussel. He is an ace profiler, part of a team that restored the F.B.I.’s reputation for crime-fighting, inspired countless movies, television shows, and best-selling thrillers, and brought the modern tools of psychology to bear on the savagery of

the criminal mind—and some cop is calling him a *psychic*. But Douglas doesn't object. Instead, he begins to muse on the ineffable origins of his insights, at which point the question arises of what exactly this mysterious art called profiling is, and whether it can be trusted. Douglas writes,

What I try to do with a case is to take in all the evidence I have to work with . . . and then put myself mentally and emotionally in the head of the offender. I try to think as he does. Exactly how this happens, I'm not sure, any more than the novelists such as Tom Harris who've consulted me over the years can say exactly how their characters come to life. If there's a psychic component to this, I won't run from it.

In the late nineteen-seventies, John Douglas and his F.B.I. colleague Robert Ressler set out to interview the most notorious serial killers in the country. They started in California, since, as Douglas says, "California has always had more than its share of weird and spectacular crimes." On weekends and days off, over the next months, they stopped by one federal prison after another, until they had interviewed thirty-six murderers.

Douglas and Ressler wanted to know whether there was a pattern that connected a killer's life and personality with the nature of his crimes. They were looking for what psychologists would call a homology, an agreement between character and action, and, after comparing what they learned from the killers with what they already knew about the characteristics of their murders, they became convinced that they'd found one.

Serial killers, they concluded, fall into one of two categories. Some crime scenes show evidence of logic and planning. The victim has been hunted and selected, in order to fulfill a specific fantasy. The recruitment of the victim might involve a ruse or a con. The perpetrator maintains control throughout the offense. He takes his time with the victim, carefully enacting his fantasies. He is adaptable and mobile. He almost never leaves a weapon behind. He meticulously conceals the body. Douglas and Ressler, in their respective books, call that kind of crime "organized."

In a "disorganized" crime, the victim isn't chosen logically. She's seemingly picked at random and "blitz-attacked," not stalked and coerced. The killer might grab a steak knife from the kitchen and leave the knife behind. The crime is so sloppily executed that the victim often has a chance to fight back. The crime might take place in a high-risk environment. "Moreover, the disorganized killer has no idea of, or interest in, the personalities of his victims," Ressler writes in "Whoever Fights Monsters." "He does not want to know who they are, and many times takes steps to obliterate their personalities by quickly knocking them unconscious or covering their faces or otherwise disfiguring them."

Each of these styles, the argument goes, corresponds to a personality type. The organized killer is intelligent and articulate. He feels superior to those around him. The disorganized killer is unattractive and has a poor self-image. He often has some kind of disability. He's too strange and withdrawn to be married or have a girlfriend. If he doesn't live alone, he lives with his parents. He has pornography stashed in his closet. If he drives at all, his car is a wreck.

"The crime scene is presumed to reflect the murderer's behavior and personality in much the same way as furnishings reveal the homeowner's character," we're told in a crime manual that Douglas and Ressler helped write. The more they learned, the more precise the associations became. If the victim was white, the killer would be white. If the victim was old, the killer would be sexually immature.

"In our research, we discovered that . . . frequently serial offenders had failed in their efforts to join police departments and had taken jobs in related fields, such as security guard or night watchman,"

Douglas writes. Given that organized rapists were preoccupied with control, it made sense that they would be fascinated by the social institution that symbolizes control. Out of that insight came another prediction: “One of the things we began saying in some of our profiles was that the UNSUB”—the unknown subject—“would drive a policelike vehicle, say a Ford Crown Victoria or Chevrolet Caprice.”

On the surface, the F.B.I.’s system seems extraordinarily useful. Consider a case study widely used in the profiling literature. The body of a twenty-six-year-old special-education teacher was found on the roof of her Bronx apartment building. She was apparently abducted just after she left her house for work, at six-thirty in the morning. She had been beaten beyond recognition, and tied up with her stockings and belt. The killer had mutilated her sexual organs, chopped off her nipples, covered her body with bites, written obscenities across her abdomen, masturbated, and then defecated next to the body.

Let’s pretend that we’re an F.B.I. profiler. First question: race. The victim is white, so let’s call the offender white. Let’s say he’s in his mid-twenties to early thirties, which is when the thirty-six men in the F.B.I.’s sample started killing. Is the crime organized or disorganized? Disorganized, clearly. It’s on a rooftop, in the Bronx, in broad daylight—high risk. So what is the killer doing in the building at six-thirty in the morning? He could be some kind of serviceman, or he could live in the neighborhood. Either way, he appears to be familiar with the building. He’s disorganized, though, so he’s not stable. If he is employed, it’s blue-collar work, at best. He probably has a prior offense, having to do with violence or sex. His relationships with women will be either nonexistent or deeply troubled. And the mutilation and the defecation are so strange that he’s probably mentally ill or has some kind of substance-abuse problem. How does that sound? As it turns out, it’s spot-on. The killer was Carmine Calabro, age thirty, a single, unemployed, deeply troubled actor who, when he was not in a mental institution, lived with his widowed father on the fourth floor of the building where the murder took place.

But how useful is that profile, really? The police already had Calabro on their list of suspects: if you’re looking for the person who killed and mutilated someone on the roof, you don’t really need a profiler to tell you to check out the dishevelled, mentally ill guy living with his father on the fourth floor.

That’s why the F.B.I.’s profilers have always tried to supplement the basic outlines of the organized/disorganized system with telling details—something that lets the police zero in on a suspect. In the early eighties, Douglas gave a presentation to a roomful of police officers and F.B.I. agents in Marin County about the Trailside Killer, who was murdering female hikers in the hills north of San Francisco. In Douglas’s view, the killer was a classic “disorganized” offender—a blitz attacker, white, early to mid-thirties, blue collar, probably with “a history of bed-wetting, fire-starting, and cruelty to animals.” Then he went back to how asocial the killer seemed. Why did all the killings take place in heavily wooded areas, miles from the road? Douglas reasoned that the killer required such seclusion because he had some condition that he was deeply self-conscious about. Was it something physical, like a missing limb? But then how could he hike miles into the woods and physically overpower his victims? Finally, it came to him: “ ‘Another thing,’ I added after a pregnant pause, ‘the killer will have a speech impediment.’ ”

And so he did. Now, that’s a useful detail. Or is it? Douglas then tells us that he pegged the offender’s age as early thirties, and he turned out to be fifty. Detectives use profiles to narrow down the range of suspects. It doesn’t do any good to get a specific detail right if you get general details wrong.

In the case of Derrick Todd Lee, the Baton Rouge serial killer, the F.B.I. profile described the offender as a white male blue-collar worker, between twenty-five and thirty-five years old, who “wants to be seen as someone who is attractive and appealing to women.” The profile went on, “However, his level

of sophistication in interacting with women, especially women who are above him in the social strata, is low. Any contact he has had with women he has found attractive would be described by these women as ‘awkward.’ ” The F.B.I. was right about the killer being a blue-collar male between twenty-five and thirty-five. But Lee turned out to be charming and outgoing, the sort to put on a cowboy hat and snakeskin boots and head for the bars. He was an extrovert with a number of girlfriends and a reputation as a ladies’ man. And he wasn’t white. He was black.

A profile isn’t a test, where you pass if you get most of the answers right. It’s a portrait, and all the details have to cohere in some way if the image is to be helpful. In the mid-nineties, the British Home Office analyzed a hundred and eighty-four crimes, to see how many times profiles led to the arrest of a criminal. The profile worked in five of those cases. That’s just 2.7 per cent, which makes sense if you consider the position of the detective on the receiving end of a profiler’s list of conjectures. Do you believe the stuttering part? Or do you believe the thirty-year-old part? Or do you throw up your hands in frustration?

There is a deeper problem with F.B.I. profiling. Douglas and Ressler didn’t interview a representative sample of serial killers to come up with their typology. They talked to whoever happened to be in the neighborhood. Nor did they interview their subjects according to a standardized protocol. They just sat down and chatted, which isn’t a particularly firm foundation for a psychological system. So you might wonder whether serial killers can really be categorized by their level of organization.

Not long ago, a group of psychologists at the University of Liverpool decided to test the F.B.I.’s assumptions. First, they made a list of crime-scene characteristics generally considered to show organization: perhaps the victim was alive during the sex acts, or the body was posed in a certain way, or the murder weapon was missing, or the body was concealed, or torture and restraints were involved. Then they made a list of characteristics showing disorganization: perhaps the victim was beaten, the body was left in an isolated spot, the victim’s belongings were scattered, or the murder weapon was improvised.

If the F.B.I. was right, they reasoned, the crime-scene details on each of those two lists should “co-occur”—that is, if you see one or more organized traits in a crime, there should be a reasonably high probability of seeing other organized traits. When they looked at a sample of a hundred serial crimes, however, they couldn’t find any support for the F.B.I.’s distinction. Crimes don’t fall into one camp or the other. It turns out that they’re almost always a mixture of a few key organized traits and a random array of disorganized traits. Laurence Alison, one of the leaders of the Liverpool group and the author of “The Forensic Psychologist’s Casebook,” told me, “The whole business is a lot more complicated than the F.B.I. imagines.”

Alison and another of his colleagues also looked at homology. If Douglas was right, then a certain kind of crime should correspond to a certain kind of criminal. So the Liverpool group selected a hundred stranger rapes in the United Kingdom, classifying them according to twenty-eight variables, such as whether a disguise was worn, whether compliments were given, whether there was binding, gagging, or blindfolding, whether there was apologizing or the theft of personal property, and so on. They then looked at whether the patterns in the crimes corresponded to attributes of the criminals—like age, type of employment, ethnicity, level of education, marital status, number of prior convictions, type of prior convictions, and drug use. Were rapists who bind, gag, and blindfold more like one another than they were like rapists who, say, compliment and apologize? The answer is no—not even slightly.

“The fact is that different offenders can exhibit the same behaviors for completely different reasons,” Brent Turvey, a forensic scientist who has been highly critical of the F.B.I.’s approach, says. “You’ve got a rapist who attacks a woman in the park and pulls her shirt up over her face. Why? What does that mean? There are ten different things it could mean. It could mean he doesn’t want to see her. It could

mean he doesn't want her to see him. It could mean he wants to see her breasts, he wants to imagine someone else, he wants to incapacitate her arms—all of those are possibilities. You can't just look at one behavior in isolation."

A few years ago, Alison went back to the case of the teacher who was murdered on the roof of her building in the Bronx. He wanted to know why, if the F.B.I.'s approach to criminal profiling was based on such simplistic psychology, it continues to have such a sterling reputation. The answer, he suspected, lay in the way the profiles were written, and, sure enough, when he broke down the rooftop-killer analysis, sentence by sentence, he found that it was so full of unverifiable and contradictory and ambiguous language that it could support virtually any interpretation.

Astrologers and psychics have known these tricks for years. The magician Ian Rowland, in his classic "The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading," itemizes them one by one, in what could easily serve as a manual for the beginner profiler. First is the Rainbow Ruse—the "statement which credits the client with both a personality trait *and* its opposite." ("I would say that on the whole you can be rather a quiet, self effacing type, but when the circumstances are right, you can be quite the life and soul of the party if the mood strikes you.") The Jacques Statement, named for the character in "As You Like It" who gives the Seven Ages of Man speech, tailors the prediction to the age of the subject. To someone in his late thirties or early forties, for example, the psychic says, "If you are honest about it, you often get to wondering what happened to all those dreams you had when you were younger." There is the Barnum Statement, the assertion so general that anyone would agree, and the Fuzzy Fact, the seemingly factual statement couched in a way that "leaves plenty of scope to be developed into something more specific." ("I can see a connection with Europe, possibly Britain, or it could be the warmer, Mediterranean part?") And that's only the start: there is the Greener Grass technique, the Diverted Question, the Russian Doll, Sugar Lumps, not to mention Forking and the Good Chance Guess—all of which, when put together in skillful combination, can convince even the most skeptical observer that he or she is in the presence of real insight.

"Moving on to career matters, you don't work with children, do you?" Rowland will ask his subjects, in an example of what he dubs the "Vanishing Negative."

No, I don't.

"No, I thought not. That's not really your role."

Of course, if the subject answers differently, there's another way to play the question: "Moving on to career matters, you don't work with children, do you?"

I do, actually, part time.

"Yes, I thought so."

After Alison had analyzed the rooftop-killer profile, he decided to play a version of the cold-reading game. He gave the details of the crime, the profile prepared by the F.B.I., and a description of the offender to a group of senior police officers and forensic professionals in England. How did they find the profile? Highly accurate. Then Alison gave the same packet of case materials to another group of police officers, but this time he invented an imaginary offender, one who was altogether different from Calabro. The new killer was thirty-seven years old. He was an alcoholic. He had recently been laid off from his job with the water board, and had met the victim before on one of his rounds. What's more, Alison claimed, he had a history of violent relationships with women, and prior convictions for assault and burglary. How accurate did a group of experienced police officers find the F.B.I.'s profile when it was matched with the phony offender? Every bit as accurate as when it was matched to the real offender.

James Brussel didn't really see the Mad Bomber in that pile of pictures and photostats, then. That was an illusion. As the literary scholar Donald Foster pointed out in his 2000 book "Author Unknown," Brussel cleaned up his predictions for his memoirs. He actually told the police to look for the bomber in White Plains, sending the N.Y.P.D.'s bomb unit on a wild goose chase in Westchester County, sifting through local records. Brussel also told the police to look for a man with a facial scar, which Metesky didn't have. He told them to look for a man with a night job, and Metesky had been largely unemployed since leaving Con Edison in 1931. He told them to look for someone between forty and fifty, and Metesky was over fifty. He told them to look for someone who was an "expert in civil or military ordnance" and the closest Metesky came to that was a brief stint in a machine shop. And Brussel, despite what he wrote in his memoir, never said that the Bomber would be a Slav. He actually told the police to look for a man "born and educated in Germany," a prediction so far off the mark that the Mad Bomber himself was moved to object. At the height of the police investigation, when the New York *Journal American* offered to print any communications from the Mad Bomber, Metesky wrote in huffily to say that "the nearest to my being 'Teutonic' is that my father boarded a liner in Hamburg for passage to this country—about sixty-five years ago."

The true hero of the case wasn't Brussel; it was a woman named Alice Kelly, who had been assigned to go through Con Edison's personnel files. In January, 1957, she ran across an employee complaint from the early nineteen-thirties: a generator wiper at the Hell Gate plant had been knocked down by a backdraft of hot gases. The worker said that he was injured. The company said that he wasn't. And in the flood of angry letters from the ex-employee Kelly spotted a threat—to "take justice in my own hands"—that had appeared in one of the Mad Bomber's letters. The name on the file was George Metesky.

Brussel did not really understand the mind of the Mad Bomber. He seems to have understood only that, if you make a great number of predictions, the ones that were wrong will soon be forgotten, and the ones that turn out to be true will make you famous. The Hedunit is not a triumph of forensic analysis. It's a party trick.

"Here's where I'm at with this guy," Douglas said, kicking off the profiling session with which "Inside the Mind of BTK" begins. It was 1984. The killer was still at large. Douglas, Hazelwood, and Walker and the two detectives from Wichita were all seated around the oak table. Douglas took off his suit jacket and draped it over his chair. "Back when he started in 1974, he was in his mid-to-late twenties," Douglas began. "It's now ten years later, so that would put him in his mid-to-late thirties."

It was Walker's turn: BTK had never engaged in any sexual penetration. That suggested to him someone with an "inadequate, immature sexual history." He would have a "lone-wolf type of personality. But he's not alone because he's shunned by others—it's because he chooses to be alone. . . . He can function in social settings, but only on the surface. He may have women friends he can talk to, but he'd feel very inadequate with a peer-group female." Hazelwood was next. BTK would be "heavily into masturbation." He went on, "Women who have had sex with this guy would describe him as aloof, uninvolved, the type who is more interested in her servicing him than the other way around."

Douglas followed his lead. "The women he's been with are either many years younger, very naïve, or much older and depend on him as their meal ticket," he ventured. What's more, the profilers determined, BTK would drive a "decent" automobile, but it would be "nondescript."

At this point, the insights began piling on. Douglas said he'd been thinking that BTK was married. But now maybe he was thinking he was divorced. He speculated that BTK was lower middle class, probably living in a rental. Walker felt BTK was in a "lower-paying white collar job, as opposed to blue collar." Hazelwood saw him as "middle class" and "articulate." The consensus was that his I.Q.

was somewhere between 105 and 145. Douglas wondered whether he was connected with the military. Hazelwood called him a “now” person, who needed “instant gratification.”

Walker said that those who knew him “might say they remember him, but didn’t really know much about him.” Douglas then had a flash—“It was a sense, almost a knowing”—and said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if, in the job he’s in today, that he’s wearing some sort of uniform. . . . This guy isn’t mental. But he is crazy like a fox.”

They had been at it for almost six hours. The best minds in the F.B.I. had given the Wichita detectives a blueprint for their investigation. Look for an American male with a possible connection to the military. His I.Q. will be above 105. He will like to masturbate, and will be aloof and selfish in bed. He will drive a decent car. He will be a “now” person. He won’t be comfortable with women. But he may have women friends. He will be a lone wolf. But he will be able to function in social settings. He won’t be unmemorable. But he will be unknowable. He will be either never married, divorced, or married, and if he was or is married his wife will be younger or older. He may or may not live in a rental, and might be lower class, upper lower class, lower middle class or middle class. And he will be crazy like a fox, as opposed to being mental. If you’re keeping score, that’s a Jacques Statement, two Barnum Statements, four Rainbow Ruses, a Good Chance Guess, two predictions that aren’t really predictions because they could never be verified—and nothing even close to the salient fact that BTK was a pillar of his community, the president of his church and the married father of two.

“This thing is solvable,” Douglas told the detectives, as he stood up and put on his jacket. “Feel free to pick up the phone and call us if we can be of any further assistance.” You can imagine him taking the time for an encouraging smile and a slap on the back. “You’re gonna nail this guy.” ♦