

# OPPENHEIMER'S DEMON

GEOFFREY SIMMONS

# T – 34 HOURS

**00:19 EDT**

**St. Joseph Island, Ontario Province**

A large white cargo van with two men inside approached the front gate of the J&J Lumber Company of Ontario, Canada. In the back were two compact tactical nuclear missiles. Each was covered by a Faraday tarp. Both missiles were mounted on a narrow launch system. They were primed and ready to fire. That is, given the right code. They had been transferred from a Liberian freighter to this van at an isolated spot where James Bay meets Hudson Bay.

The van looked as if some teens had taken it mudding. Its windshield was dotted with smashed insect carcasses, and there were various splotches of dry and moist dirt, except where the windshield wipers had struggled to make their semi-circles. Curtains in the back hid their cargo. The license plates were stolen.

A lone guard was working inside a brightly lit security booth, located about fifty yards off a country highway used mostly by log trucks and J&J personnel. The area was hilly and thickly forested. On a moonless night under the tree canopy, a hiker wouldn't be able to see his hand in front of his face. On this night, it was uncannily quiet, barring the occasional hoot from an owl or the howls from a wolf pack. A few homes dotted the distant hills. Barring one faraway porch light this evening, one wouldn't know that people even lived nearby.

The guard was an older man with a gray crewcut, former military and retired RCMP. Although he was busy checking some papers on a countertop, he heard the van leave the asphalt and start down the gravel road toward him. It was a straight shot to the J&J front gate.

J&J Lumber was a huge Canadian operation with several mills across Canada. This mill covered ten acres, laid out along St. Marys River and Lake Huron. Over 7,000 ships passed by them each year, on their way to retrieve forest products from the countryside beyond Lake Superior and take them to foreign ports. J&J was located relatively close to Sault Ste. Marie but southeast of the Locks. This location saved international lumber ships time and money, avoiding slow passage through the Locks.

The road in was hemmed in by the forest. Mostly Douglas firs, but there were a few oak trees and a rare cedar. During the day one could see tons of bright yellow Scotch broom bushes, especially now in the spring. At night, however, they were black like everything else along the road. The crackling sound of tires on gravel broke the silence. It sounded a bit like a popcorn popper.

Without looking up, the guard automatically unsnapped his side-arm. This wasn't a high-risk gig. Twice in ten years he had to lock himself inside the booth when a black bear ambled by with her three cubs. Once a big cougar had lunged at the window. As he told his bar buddies, until that moment he had thought he was immune to jump scares. But human threats? There were none. During his ten years working at J&J, there had never been a single incident. There was no money around. Every piece of equipment was too large and cumbersome to take. Business deals were handled elsewhere. Here, they only handled paperwork and logs. In theory, a thief could show up with a log-hauling truck and load them all up, but so far, no thieves sufficiently industrious had stepped forward to attempt such a labor-intensive heist.

So he figured the van pulling up was probably just lost. But something about it did strike him as unusual.

The driver's window started down.

"Be right with you," the guard called, and let his hand rest on his sidearm.

"No problem." The driver's eyes studied the mill beyond. He spoke with an accent, but those two softly spoken words didn't reveal much. He had short black hair, drastically shaved along both sides. His left elbow rested on the open window; the size and shape of his arm said serious weightlifter.

Sticking out beneath his short sleeve was a multi-colored tattoo of a coiled dragon.

The passenger remained silent. He was cut from the same mold—muscular with a similar haircut, T-shirt, and tattoos. The two men did not look friendly.

“Hang tight,” the guard said. He locked the top drawer beneath the counter and put the lone key inside his shirt pocket.

“No hurry,” the driver answered, although his fingers told a different tale.

The guard could hear the driver impatiently tapping on the steering wheel. Still, he assumed they were lost. That was the usual reason people came to the booth at night. The lights from the security booth stood out like a beacon.

“You know how it goes at shift change. All kinds of loose ends to tie off. I’m just coming on duty.” The guard exited the booth and approached the vehicle. “Evening shift always assumes I’ll clean up their mess.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

The guard stayed cautiously out of arm’s reach and bent down to get a better look inside the van. “How can I help?”

The driver glanced at him. The passenger still didn’t look his way.

“We got turned around somewhere,” the driver said. “Got off the main highway and never found our way back.”

“That happens. Where you headed?”

“Sault Ste. Marie.”

“You guys are way off track. GPS not working?”

“Must not be.”

“You need Highway 17, the Trans-Canada Highway. It’s a good bit away from here.”

The driver didn’t reply.

Beyond the closed gate the gravel road continued along a downward slope, ending at a long T-shaped pier and a broad expanse of black water. A half-moon hung low on the horizon, insufficient to show the acres of floating logs to the left of the pier, or the well-worn dinghy gently rocked by small waves.

The sawmill complex was surrounded by a chain-link fence, open only at the security entrance and the entrance to the pier. Just past the guard shack a white modular office trailer stood to the left of the gravel road. There was one light on inside. Farther down on the right were three immense buildings, dark inside. Every building had small exterior lights. Near the large

buildings stood three giant cranes, two looming pyramids of sawdust, and several huge stacks of cut logs, all the same size and ready for shipping.

The guard still felt uneasy but couldn't pinpoint the reason. He decided to hurry them on their way. "I've got some maps," he said, turning back toward the guard booth. "Sketched them myself and copied them on the company's copy machine. On their dime, not mine."

"Not mine" were the guard's last words. A suppressed shot from the driver's FNX-45 Tactical struck him high in the back and sent him careening forward toward the security booth. A single burst of air loaded with blood ushered from his mouth. He was probably dead before his head slammed against the metal strip at the entrance.

The driver's partner quickly exited the van, came around the front of it, pulled the guard out of the way, and entered the security booth. The OPEN button was exactly where he expected it to be. A motor whirred. The fence rattled as it rolled to the left. He dragged the guard's body to the other side of the fence and behind a thicket.

The van rolled forward.

"The other guard's in the office," the one who had been riding shotgun muttered when the driver pulled even with him. "I can see the top of his head. He's probably sitting. Doesn't seem to have seen us."

"Don't assume there's not another out making rounds."

"Right."

As the one on foot approached the front door of the modular office, gun drawn, the driver punched a button on a burner phone.

"Yes." The man's voice was raspy and curt, and followed by a cough.

"We're in," the driver said. "Everything is going as planned."

"As it should. We're about a mile offshore. Can you see our lights?"

The driver strained to see. "Yeah, maybe. Not sure. There are a few lights in your general area."

"No matter. We will dock as soon as you tell us you are ready. Everything OK with your baggage?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Ready for transfer."

"I want the whole place—I mean everything: every building, every pile, every twig—burned to the ground. And everything around the mill."

"Shouldn't be hard. This forest's been dry for a long while. That'll keep someone busy tonight."

Meanwhile, inside the office the driver's partner had found the other security guard. It was a woman, heavy-set, kind of young, with a brownish-blond

ponytail. She was doing some sort of paperwork at a desk. Her back was an easy target. Perhaps she got a quick view of the intruder's reflection in the window. Maybe she even heard the muffled shot.

He walked back to the driver to report. "Just the one," he said.

"Take a hike around the property. Make sure there's no one else hanging around, then meet me at the dock." He handed his partner a box of incendiary devices.

The partner shrugged assent and made his way around the J&J property, tossing incendiary devices inside every building and onto every roof. He found no other guards. The only living beings he encountered were two cats and a fox that vanished as soon as he glimpsed it.

"We're good," he told the driver.

The driver flashed his headlights in the direction of the approaching vessel, a cabin cruiser. He flashed the lights three times followed by a long pause and then three times more. A moment later, there was a matching response.

## **23:45 CDT**

### **Near North Side, Chicago**

"Now what?" Glenn Winders surfaced from sleep and groped for his phone on the nightstand. Whatever it was, it likely involved getting out of his warm bed and, worst case scenario, hours of walking around dead bodies, filming the scene, measuring every inch and angle, taking statements from distraught family members, questioning witnesses, consoling loved ones, and keeping first responders from trampling evidence.

The way the DA job worked is that he distributed consolation, never the other way around. The best he would get was "How you doin'" as he walked into the office. He once shot back that, actually, it had been a thoroughly lousy night, and the desk jockey, still tapping away at his keyboard and not even looking up, had responded, "Great, that's great. Glad to hear it."

People didn't listen.

"Winders," he answered, managing to sound less grumpy than he felt.

"Lieutenant Czarnicki, Chicago PD. Sorry to wake you, sir."

"No problem. Always here to help." He forced himself to be nice. After all, the crime wasn't the officer's fault. "What's up?"

There had been a bloody gang fight on the South Side. Five had been killed and eight others were either admitted to the closest emergency department, en route to a more distant hospital, or already in surgery. The victims

were all bad characters, many well known to the police. The folks from the coroner's office had not yet examined the dead. They might not bother. Every night was the same in Chicago. The city had basically surrendered to the gangs.

At the words "all gang members," Winders felt relief. He wasn't as far gone as some of his fellow cops, who thought *good riddance* any time a gangbanger went down. But it was a relief to learn that none of the deaths were innocent bystanders. An elderly couple. A mother. A child.

As he sat on the side of his bed listening to the particulars, which were always similar, his gaze fell on the framed pictures on his dresser. The family photo had been taken seven years earlier, just before his marriage imploded. In the photo Amy was only eight and Brunhilde, as he now called her, was actually smiling. Her real name was Brenda but after the divorce he had started calling her Brunhilde, the man-hater. All her gears had gotten stuck in bitch mode, which made no sense given that she was the one who had cheated and still had gotten most of the settlement. Definitely a Brunhilde.

Plus, there was the difference in religions. She was a non-practicing Christian, and he was a non-observant Jew. Soon after they had separated, she seemed to have developed an antisemitic bent. While they were married, she had been, if anything, strikingly the opposite. Perhaps, he guessed, her present anger had spilled over to hating "anything Glenn." There had been a few innuendos and some thinly veiled comments. Nothing blatant. After some angry words with Brunhilde, who denied all, he discussed antisemitism with Amy. He kept her mother's name out of it, but made sure Amy understood that those kinds of comments were unfounded and meant to be painful. He also pointed out that half of Amy's heritage included being one of God's chosen people.

He emphasized the word *chosen*. Not the stuff of being superior to everyone else. Or Godlike. But he felt it was important she know that her ancient relatives, who had walked through the Red Sea on dry ground, were chosen to deliver God's laws, like the Ten Commandments. Hate for that message had morphed through the centuries into "shooting the messenger" in various ugly ways. Sometimes it was throwing bricks through windows, sometimes killing millions. Judging by history, that threat would linger, and Winders wanted his daughter prepared.

"One guy was shot three times in the head, stabbed once, plus kicked repeatedly," Lieutenant Czarnicki continued on the other end of the line. "They absolutely did not want this guy getting up again."

"A shame," Winders said reflexively.

So there in a silver frame the three of them sat, smiling on a balcony in the Italian Riviera sun. Winders hated that photo. He left it up only out of deference to Amy, who deserved to feel that at some point her parents had loved each other.

The officer on the phone was still tallying the dead and wounded. "His girlfriend, I think she was his girlfriend, got shot in the pelvis. Bleeding like stink out of ..." He broke off, cleared his throat. "She's on her way to Stroger Junior Hospital. One of the female paramedics packed her—you know, her insides—to try to stop the bleeding."

"Was she pregnant?"

"I don't think so."

The faint interest Winders had felt evaporated.

The other pictures across from him were of his English girlfriend, Madison. One was her in her British Airways flight attendant uniform. Another was Madison toasting drinks with him at a party. A third was Madison at the island of Mykonos. She was coming out of the ocean in a skimpy bikini.

"One guy had a shotgun. Injured a lot of folks."

"Sad," Winders murmured.

His two dogs were beginning to stir. Sammi, his rescue mutt, liked to burrow under the covers on Madison's side whenever she was away. Micah, a pedigreed, nine-year-old German Rottweiler, was asleep at the foot of the bed, where he was supposed to stay but rarely did.

The last two photos on the dresser were of Glenn and Amy. One was recent, and he thought Amy looked beautiful in it, while she saw only flaws—her long brown hair was slightly frizzy, and if you looked closely there might be a shadow of acne on her chin. She tended to turn that one face-down anytime she was in his bedroom.

In the other photo they were on a camping trip and Amy, a preschooler, was sitting on his shoulders. Her expression was that of a child who knew that all was right with the world. Ever since the divorce, Winders had been trying and failing to inspire that look again, though he knew it was gone forever, as was the man he had been in that photo—younger, happier.

Now his dark hair had hints of gray, and of course it was shorter, always neatly trimmed. Now he had a more distinguished look, which at least helped him with jurors. That, and the fact that he was a sharp dresser. Had to be when going up against the defense lawyers with their tailored Italian suits.

Winders was the youngest Cook County state district attorney the county had ever had. He was also the only DA who had both an MD and a JD. As DA, he wasn't required to carry the homicide beeper, but the major crimes group was shorthanded, he felt sorry for them, and so he agreed to help. Also, they had family and kids. He mostly just had dogs.

"One guy got run over," the cop was saying. "Front and back left-side tire tracks from his head to his chest and abdomen and out his pelvis. Everything was squeezed out of him like toothpaste."

"Nice image. Thanks for giving it to me."

"Yeah, sure." Apparently Czarnicki missed the sarcasm, or didn't care, because he went on. "One guy almost had his head chopped off. We held it in place until the paramedics got there."

"Very thoughtful."

"He actually kept talking. Didn't make much sense. But at least he could talk."

"Sounds like a fun night."

"Not really. There was also—"

Winders broke in. "You know what? Let's save further details for your reports, and I'll read them all first thing in the morning, before I head out the door. Before the reporters have a go at me."

"Yes sir. Just letting you know what happened. We're required to notify your office. It meets the Three-and-Six."

"I know. Of course. Thank you. Send me your reports ASAP in the morning."

In past years, one of the prosecutors from the DA's office would be notified of all murders and of any exceptionally serious or hideous crime in the county. But in the years following the COVID pandemic, ghetto lawlessness plus being swamped with perpetual investigations had brought on the so-called Three-and-Six Rule. The rule was mainly to give the DA's office a break. While they had made some meaningful inroads against violent crime during Winders' tenure, the DA staff level was at bare bones, and they couldn't afford to lose any more prosecutors.

The rule was, don't call the DA unless three or more people had been killed in a single violent incident, or unless a homicide had taken down a celebrity, council member, law enforcement officer, or other government employee. The exception was if the victim was under six years old. The cut-off age had once been under ten, but too many kids under ten were dying from gunshots at night.

There were too many old people dying in Chicago to do autopsies on all of them. Nowadays the only ones “posted” had holes in their bodies where holes shouldn’t be, or something else suspicious about the death. An especially large inheritance and/or a huge estate might also prompt one. Winders had insisted on one when his father died with no warning over lunch. After all, the man had made more than a few enemies in his forty-plus years as a Chicago cop. But it turned out he was murdered by years of chili dogs and donuts.

The phone call over, Winders studied his feet and debated whether he needed to go to the scene of the bloodbath. There was no point, really. The lead detective on the case was competent, and the persons arrested would close ranks, admit nothing, insist they knew nothing, blame everything on the dead, and ask for a lawyer. The usual lawyer.

In cases like this the coroner usually told the law enforcement on the scene to pile the bodies up in the cooler, tag them, and shut the door tight when they left. If the coroner didn’t even bother to show up in a case like this, Winders didn’t need to. He had Amy through the morning, and he coveted their breakfasts together, all too infrequent thanks to the terms of the divorce settlement. Plus, he didn’t want to go to that morning’s court fight exhausted.

Winders lay back on his pillow. Counted sheep. Around thirty, the sheep split into two gangs and started fighting.

He sat up, shook his head vigorously, and lay back down.

The more he wanted to go to sleep, the worse it got. His mind wouldn’t shut off. He had too many problems and not enough hands to juggle them.

Even though his office was short-staffed, he would have to ask an assistant DA to leave. The man had been semi-stalking a female staff member, and she was threatening a lawsuit against the office. Plus, a criminal with a long rap sheet had filed a complaint with the state AG office, saying Winders’ office had withheld exculpatory information. Plus, the new governor had released a flurry of prisoners. Some were rapists. Some had killed. One had threatened revenge against the Winders family. Plus, there were impossible county budget cuts and overwhelming caseloads. Time constraints and budget constraints were forcing plea deals like never before, even in cases where they had the vicious bastard dead to rights.

And his personal life wasn’t any better. Brunhilde was being especially nasty again over custody issues. His heroin-addicted twin sister had never met a drug she didn’t like or a junkie she didn’t adore. His mother had three moods—needy, needier, and let’s-pull-the-lifeguard-under-with-me-while-I-drown

needy. His mother's fifth husband, whom Winders thought of as his *step-monster*, was a violent drunk.

The DA's job was mainly administrative and political. He was supposed to be a government PR person and an untitled CEO, COO, and CFO for his department. Usually, Winders' assistant DAs handled court cases, but Winders took major cases and ones that simply rubbed him wrong. Like this one, involving a drunk who had crashed a stolen car into three children on their way home from school, killing two of them and badly maiming the third.

Which was not a topic designed to help him get back to sleep.

He rolled over and scratched both dogs, Sammi and Micah, behind the ears. Encouraged, they cuddled even closer.

Feeling their unconditional love, he closed his eyes again and tried to sleep.

**00:45 EDT**

**J&J Lumber Company, St. Joseph Island, Ontario Province**

The large cabin cruiser neared the mill dock. Only one light was on. Although the boat was barely rocking, Ichiro Nakamura struggled to keep his balance. He was a frail old man who at the best of times had to lean hard on the cane in his left hand. But he watched the fires with childish glee. Not because he had anything against the J&J Lumber Company, but because this was another step forward in a plan stretching back decades.

Nakamura was a retired nuclear physicist from the University of Tokyo. Even though the evening was warm, he was wearing a knit cap and a fully buttoned Navy peacoat. He was smoking a cigarette that had been lit from the previous cigarette, which had been lit from another cigarette, and so on, back to the moment he had gotten out of bed that morning. The tobacco-stained fingers of his right hand trembled as he flicked the ashes overboard.

"It might be a little rough," one of his crew members commented. "Maybe you should sit down."

Nakamura took one last drag on his cigarette and dropped it overboard, freeing that hand to grip the side of the boat.

"I'm fine," he said. "Keep going as you are. We need to stay on schedule."

As they closed in on the J&J pier, Nakamura's face became more and more illuminated by the raging fires. He almost looked like the character Two-Face, an enduring enemy in the Batman universe. His face seemed to

have had a line drawn straight down the middle, from his hairline to the nose, across his lips, down his chin and even his neck. The right side of his face was normal, the wrinkled skin of an elderly Asian man. Everything on the left side was severely scarred from burns. Much of the skin looked like a stiff, glazed-over, pale brown plastic coating with a few odd-looking nubbins on his scalp and spots under his chin.

His left eye socket was empty. He wore glasses with a darkened left lens. Despite the cutaneous carnage, his left ear looked normal, like an island. It too was a prosthesis. The entire lobe was a plastic piece that could be tightly stuffed into the ear canal. The left side of his nose was also a prosthesis. The snap-in type. When he was much younger, he would remove one of his prostheses, or take off his glasses, to scare irritating kids, bullies, and unwanted company.

His left hand was half gone. The thumb had remained intact, but the burn scars made it stiff. The four fingers on that hand were stubs, but, fortunately for him, he was right-handed. Other than deep nicotine stains and swollen joints from arthritis, his right hand looked and worked almost normally.

Beneath his clothes, the skin on the left side of his body looked much like the left side of his face, including his left scrotum and left buttocks. His scrotum had one plasticized testicle. The inside of his right leg and the outside of his left had also been burned.

He hurt everywhere, every day, all day long, and needed his pain meds at least every four hours. His body was like a clock. It knew exactly when it was time for more pills. He used narcotics for pain, tranquilizers for sleep, and alcohol for both. Yet the physical disabilities were not his worst problem. Daymares and nightmares plagued his existence. Recurring anxiety attacks from PTSD were his constant companion. Seeing someone around him having a good time with their family was intolerable. He hated what had happened to him. Even more, he despised the people and institutions that caused his suffering. He relished the idea that they would soon pay.

The flames destroying J&J Lumber called to Nakamura's mind the day he could never forget. On August 6, 1945, when the first atomic bomb detonated over Hiroshima, he was barely ten years old. His home had been about three miles from ground zero, a term he only learned to use years later. Many of his friends and family lived closer.

That morning had begun simply enough. It was a typical school day, and yet it became a day with no end. He could still see his parents leaving with his three-year-old brother. His mother had planned to drop off

his father at work and then go shopping. Nakamura's father had been a bookkeeper. Nakamura sometimes wondered if either parent had heard the Enola Gay flying over before they were vaporized. He had seen several shadows of people burned onto the sides of buildings. One pair might have been his mother and little brother.

When his parents left, his teenage sister Aiko was making his lunch. She didn't have to leave for work for another hour. They had an older brother, but he was far away in the army. Fighting somewhere for Japan, officials said, and that was all the military would disclose. Maybe their brother was in China, or Guam, or even the United States. His family had not heard from him since he had shipped out.

Nonetheless, they remained convinced he was well. No news must mean good news. The emperor had assured everyone that the United States was a weak, soft, decadent country. And the US was losing badly.

Going to summer school had always been enormous fun for Nakamura. Attending classes and after-school activities were things he looked forward to. He had truly best friends. That is, until that day. From that day forward he had no close friends.

He had left home at 08:12 and walked toward the bus stop three short blocks away. When he saw the bus coming, he quickened his pace. A half dozen of his classmates and some of their parents were already waiting. Some were hugging goodbye. His best friend, Banri, was waving to him, urging Ichiro to hurry up.

But then Ichiro realized he had forgotten his lunch. He turned back and raced home, thinking he had enough time. Getting food at school could be a problem. That is, food he liked. He quickly grabbed the lunch from the kitchen counter, gave a shout out to his sister, slammed the front door shut behind him, and ran as fast as he could back toward the bus stop. If Aiko answered him, he didn't hear her.

He had barely reached the first street crossing when—

It was as if the sky had been ripped open and hell poured forth. A blinding flash of light and a great roar struck him from the side and slammed him into a wall. His back hurt; his legs couldn't hold him up. He could barely see out of one eye, and there was a God-awful ringing in his ears. He could actually feel air from every exhalation going out through holes in his eardrums. The ringing and most of the hearing loss that followed would last a lifetime.

And then everything went black.

The bomb had been named Little Boy.

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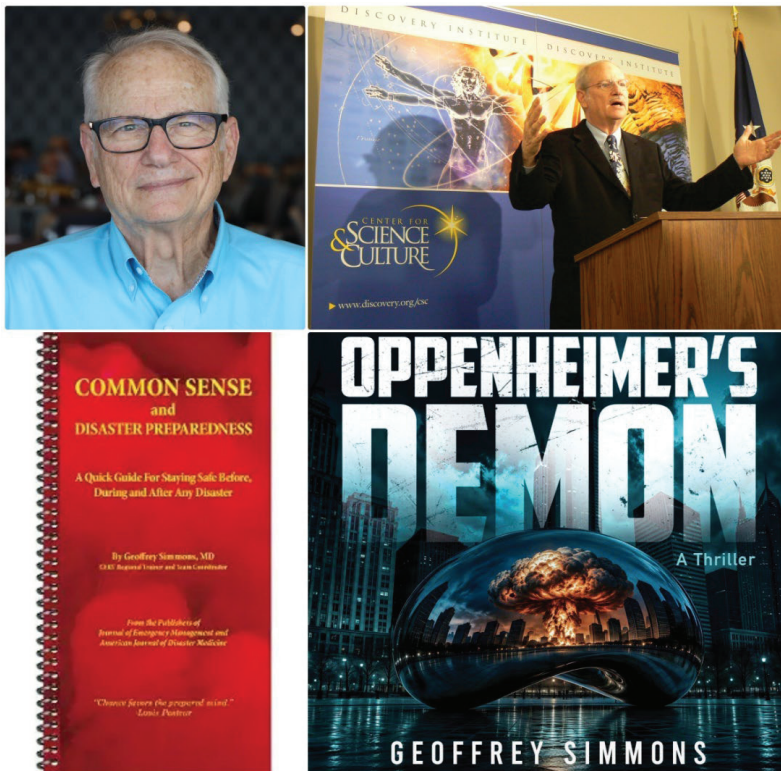


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