On March 23, 1994 the medical examiner viewed the body of Ronald Opus and concluded that he died from a shotgun wound to the head. Mr. Opus had jumped from the top of a ten-story building intending to commit suicide. He left a note to that effect indicating his despondency.

As he fell past the ninth floor his life was interrupted by a shotgun blast passing through a window which killed him instantly. Neither the shooter nor the decedent was aware that a safety net had been installed just below at the eighth floor level to protect some building workers and that Ronald Opus would not have been able to complete his suicide the way he had planned.

Ordinarily, a person who sets out to commit suicide and ultimately succeeds, even though the mechanism might not be what he intended, is still defined as committing suicide. That Mr. Opus was shot on the way to certain death, but probably would not have been successful because of the safety net, caused the medical examiner to feel that he had a homicide on his hands.

An elderly man and his wife occupied the room on the ninth floor, whence the shotgun blast emanated from. They were arguing vigorously and he was threatening her with a shotgun. The man was so upset that when he pulled the trigger. He completely missed his wife and the pellets went through the window, striking Mr. Opus.

When one intends to kill subject 'A' but kills subject 'B' in the attempt, one is guilty of the murder of subject 'B'. When confronted with the murder charge the old man and his wife were both adamant. They both said they thought the shotgun was unloaded. The old man said it was his long-standing habit to threaten his wife with the unloaded shotgun. He had no intention to murder her. Therefore, the killing of Mr. Opus appeared to be an accident; that is, the gun had been accidentally loaded.

The continuing investigation turned up a witness who saw the old couple's son loading the shotgun about six weeks prior to the fatal accident. It transpired that the old lady had cut off her son's financial support and the son, knowing the propensity of his father to use the shotgun threateningly, loaded the gun with the expectation that his father would shoot his mother. Since the loader of the gun was aware of this, he was guilty of the murder even though he didn't actually pull the trigger.

So the case now becomes one of murder on the part of the son for the death of Ronald Opus.

Now here comes the exquisite twist. Further investigation revealed that the son was, in fact, Ronald Opus. He had become increasingly despondent over the failure of his attempt to engineer his mother's murder. This led him to jump off the ten-story building on March 23rd, only to be killed by a shotgun blast passing through the ninth story window.

The son had actually murdered himself, so the medical examiner closed the case as a suicide.
Present this story to your students and ask for comments. There are many clues within this story that suggests to an observant reader that it was in fact a work of fiction. This story, used as an introduction to crime scene investigation demonstrates two key aspects when trying to determine the sequence of events when a crime is committed, how evidence can be used to recreate a probable description of what most likely occurred, evidence can be manipulated or an inaccurate picture of events is created, and that investigating a crime scene requires critical analysis and thinking out of the box! Clues will create hypothesis, which will have to be proven through the collection of evidence and through interviewing witnesses to determine what most likely happened.

On March 23 the medical examiner viewed the body of Ronald Opus and concluded that he died from a gunshot wound of the head caused by a shotgun. Investigation to that point had revealed that the decedent had jumped from the top of a ten story building with the intent to commit suicide. (He left a note indicating his despondency.) As he passed the 9th floor on the way down, his life was interrupted by a shotgun blast through a window, killing him instantly. Neither the shooter nor the decedent was aware that a safety net had been erected at the 8th floor level to protect some window washers, and that the decedent would not have been able to complete his intent to commit suicide because of this...

Obviously the story’s main selling point is irony, which is also a promising clue as to its veracity. In urban legends, suicide attempts **always** have an ironic outcome – as in the familiar (but untrue) tale of the man who was fired from his job and leapt from his office window intending to kill himself, only to land on his former boss on the sidewalk below, killing the latter instead. The impact of the story in both cases derives from the "poetic justice" brought about by a freakish coincidence – perhaps too freakish to be believable.

Ordinarily, a person who starts into motion the events with the intent to commit suicide ultimately does so even though the mechanism might be not what he intended. That he was shot on the way to certain death nine stories below probably would not change his mode of death from suicide to homicide, but the fact that his suicide intent would not have been achieved under any circumstance caused the medical examiner to feel that he had homicide on his hands...

Note that regardless of whether it’s true or false, the story is lent credibility by the fact that it's told from the point of view of a medical examiner trying to determine whether a crime was committed or not. From this point on, it reads much like a detective story.

Further investigation led to the discovery that the room on the 9th floor from whence the shotgun blast emanated was occupied by an elderly man and his wife. He was threatening her with the shotgun because of an inter-spousal spat and became so upset that he could not hold the shotgun straight. Therefore, when he pulled the trigger, he completely missed his wife, and the pellets went through the window, striking the decedent.

When one intends to kill subject A, but kills subject B in the attempt, one is guilty of the murder of subject B. The old man was confronted with this conclusion, but both he and his wife were adamant in stating that neither knew that the shotgun was loaded. It was the longtime habit of the old man to threaten his wife with an unloaded shotgun. He had no intent to murder her; therefore, the killing of the decedent appeared then to be accident. That is, the gun had been accidentally loaded...
**Accidentally loaded? By whom was the gun loaded? The plot thickens...**

But further investigation turned up a witness that their son was seen loading the shotgun approximately six weeks prior to the fatal accident. That investigation showed that the mother (the old lady) had cut off her son’s financial support, and her son, knowing the propensity of his father to use the shotgun threateningly, loaded the gun with the expectation that the father would shoot his mother. The case now becomes one of murder on the part of the son for the death of Ronald Opus...

**Except for one last, perfect ironic twist...**

Further investigation revealed that the son became increasingly despondent over the failure of his attempt to get his mother murdered. This led him to jump off a ten story building on March 23, only to be killed by a shotgun blast through a 9th story window.

The medical examiner closed the case as a suicide.

This is a great story – so great that we want to believe it, we hope it’s true, however outlandish the "facts" presented may be. The question we must ask ourselves in our investigation is: mightn't it be too good to be true?

We do have some leads to follow. The most promising – the fact that the story is attributed to an actual human being, former AAFS President Don Harper Mills – I'll save till last. Before we track Dr. Mills down, let us analyze some elements of the story itself, which, for all its seeming gem-like perfection, does suffer a few inconsistencies.

As noted earlier that the narrative depends on irony for its impact. From a dramatic standpoint, the irony, in turn, depends on the order in which significant bits of information are revealed.

Remember how we were told near the beginning that Ronald Opus had left a suicide note? That is a critical detail, because 1) it provides evidence of intent, and 2) it specifies the only plausible source for the information we are later given concerning Opus' motivation for attempting to kill himself (i.e., he was despondent over his failure to cause his mother to be murdered). But notice that while we're told at the outset that the note exists, we are never let in on what it says. Why? From a storytelling perspective, the reason is obvious: it would give away the ending. Here's the logical problem that creates: although we didn't have access to that information from the beginning, the medical examiner did – which means that the long, detailed investigation leading up to the climactic revelation of Ronald Opus's identity is nothing but a red herring.

Furthermore, at a critical juncture in the story we are informed that it was, in fact, the elderly couple’s own son who loaded the murder weapon. However, since it is still too soon at that point to reveal that the son and Ronald Opus, the shooting victim, are one and the same, it is likewise too soon to reference the suicide note. Since the information has to be attributed to someone, we are told, most implausibly, that "a witness" had seen the son loading the gun six weeks earlier. But, realistically, who – other than his own parents – would have been in their apartment that fateful day to observe Ronald Opus loading shells into the shotgun?

Such inconsistencies give us ample reason to mistrust the story as it was told to us, so finally let's go to Don Harper Mills, past president of the American Association for Forensic Sciences, for the final word. As you might
imagine, Dr. Mills has been queried thoroughly and frequently regarding the Opus case since the story broke on the Internet in 1994. In 1997 he came clean to the press about it:

"I made up the story in 1987 to present at the meeting," he told the London Daily Telegraph on March 2nd, "for entertainment and to illustrate how, if you alter a few small facts you greatly alter the legal consequences."

Anticlimactic, isn't it? Unfortunately, that's as much reality as there is to be found behind the Opus story. Seven years after it was made up, the text of Mills' speech, sans disclaimer and with the date revised, found its way onto the greatest rumor mill ever invented and continues to circulate there to this day. How many thousands (or hundreds of thousands) of people have read it and believed it, we have no way of knowing. At least you and I have the advantage of knowing it's not true... for whatever that's worth.

Case closed on another urban legend?

Probably not.

Sources:  http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/weekly/aa072097.htm
http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/rronaldopus.htm

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