Death of a Murderer

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Extract

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When the news came through on the car radio, Billy sat quite motionless, unable to do anything but listen. He was parked on Norwich Road, outside a place called Glamour Gear. Lying on the seat beside him, sealed in an envelope of transparent plastic, were the ballet shoes he had promised to collect on his way home. The windscreen was starting to mist up, but he could still see out. An ordinary street in an ordinary English town. Friday afternoon. Lights on in all the shops, the pavement wet with rain . . .

He didn't have any particular thoughts about the woman's death. He didn't feel sorry, or relieved, or cheated. It was vaguer than that, and more powerful. The woman had been involved in the murder of at least five people, three of them young children, and she had been feared and hated ever since. Children had been savagely abused in front of her by her own boyfriend, and she had gone along with it; she had even, possibly, tortured one of them herself. The victims' bodies had been buried on a high, desolate moor to the east of Manchester. It had all happened years ago, in the sixties, but people had never forgiven her for what she had done. Never forgiven, and never forgotten. And now she had died, of natural causes, in a hospital twenty miles away. It was one of those heightened moments when you make a

mental note of your surroundings, and yet the whole thing felt oddly muted, scaled down, like watching an explosion through a telescope. Certainly, it never occurred to him that her death might affect him directly; he had no idea, at that point, that he was about to become part of the story.

The phone rang three days later, on the Monday evening, while he was watching a TV programme about the mystery of the pyramids. He would be leaving for work before too long, so he let his wife, Sue, take the call.

'Yes, he is,' he heard her say. 'I'll just get him.'

Eyes bright, almost silvery, she held the phone out to him and mouthed the words *It's for you*. These days there was an exaggerated quality about her that he found bewildering: she would get excited over nothing, and angry over nothing. They had been together for fourteen years, married for ten, and yet he seemed to see her less clearly now than he had at the beginning.

Moving across the room, he took the phone from her and turned towards the window. Though it had already been dark for several hours, he parted the curtains and put his face close to the glass. He could just make out the dim shape of his car, and the low brick wall beyond.

'Billy Tyler here.'

'Billy? Are you all right?'

He had expected it to be one of his colleagues from the police station, but the voice on the other end belonged to Phil Shaw. Billy had acted as Phil's probationer when Phil joined the force in 1992, which meant he'd had to show Phil the ropes, to guide him through those tricky first few weeks. He had known even then that Phil had a good

career ahead of him. They'd got on pretty well, though. He used to have Phil over to the house for takeaways – curries in the kitchen, with plenty of cold lager – or if the weather was fine he would light the barbecue. Now, ten years later, Phil was a detective sergeant.

'You've seen the news?' Phil said.

'Hard to miss,' Billy said.

Over the weekend, he had bought most of the papers, and they had been full of articles about the woman. They had referred to her as 'a sick killer', 'a monster' and 'the devil'; her name, they said, was synonymous with evil. Many of the front pages had reprinted the picture that had been taken when she was first arrested, the picture that had captured so much more than it was intended to, not just the woman herself but the nature of the crimes as well, the atmosphere in which they had been committed. There she was, perfectly preserved, despite the thirty-six years she had spent behind bars: the sixties beehive hairdo, the sullen, bruised-looking mouth and, most potent of all, that steady black stare, so full of defiance and hostility, so empty of regret. There, too, was her boyfriend, the psychopath from Glasgow, who had initiated her into a world of pornography, sadism and murder. And there were the victims. Those little faces – for they were never blown up large, like hers. That old-fashioned, ham-fisted black-and-white. They were lost in time, it seemed, as well as to their families. On Saturday, the *Sun* had published a partial transcript of the sixteen-minute tape that had been played in court. It was a recording of the torture of one of the children, and it had shaken even the most cynical of

reporters. Billy would have been nine when the trial started, and, naturally enough, the details of the crimes had been kept from him. All the same, he thought he remembered grown-ups talking in shocked whispers and glancing at him across their shoulders – his mother's best friend, Betty Lydgate, and Auntie Ethel, and Mrs Parks from next door – and a chill seemed to hang over that part of his childhood, as if, for a while, the sun had been obliterated by dark clouds. After reading the transcript, Billy went for a walk in the woods behind his house, a cold wind rushing through the trees, but he couldn't rid himself of the woman's voice. *Hush hush. Stop it or I will forget myself and hit you one. Will you stop it. Stop it. Shut up.*

Phil Shaw was saying something, though. Billy heard the words 'supervise' and 'operation', and now, for the first time, he understood why Phil might be calling.

'We need you tomorrow night,' Phil said.

He was giving Billy the job of guarding the woman's body. It would be her last night in the mortuary, he said. The funeral was scheduled for Wednesday evening, though no one knew that yet; that information had not been released. He was sorry, but Billy would have to work a twelve-hour shift. They were short on numbers. Still, at least there'd be some overtime in it.

'Will you be there?' Billy asked.

'I've been here since 4 a.m. on Friday when they realised she was going to die.'

Billy could imagine the grim smile on Phil's face. Phil might sound calm, even matter-of-fact – one of his strengths was that he never lost his composure – but he

would be feeling the strain. It was such a sensitive situation. There was so much that could go wrong.

They talked some more about what was being planned and what would be required, then Phil gave Billy directions to the hospital, which Billy jotted down on a notepad next to the phone.

'What is it?' Sue asked, the moment he hung up.

He decided not to tell her, not just yet.

'I've got to work a seven-to-seven tomorrow,' he said, then he went and sat in front of the TV again.

His programme about the pyramids was over.

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'It's just a job,' he told Sue as he left the house on Tuesday evening. 'It's a job, that's all.' But when he saw her mouth fold down at one corner he knew that he had failed to convince her, and he, too, felt that his words had fallen short, that there was something basic, something significant, that he hadn't managed to convey. He couldn't delay any longer, though, or he'd be late.

He turned the key in the ignition with the door open on the driver's side, hoping she might relent at the last minute and give him her approval – he hated leaving for work with an argument hanging in the air – but once he had fastened his seat-belt and shifted into gear he had to shut the door and ease the car out of the drive. What else could he do? Although she was standing only a few yards away, she still hadn't said anything. Her head was lowered, and the brass