

2001.

Date : 27 November

Target : Fem

Age : 20-30

Pickup : London railway station (Int or Ext)

Site : TBA

Method : Hands only (weapon permitted to subdue if necessary)

** * * **

Nicklin watched, unblinking as the two of them walked hand in hand towards him across the station concourse.

She was perfect.

He was still clutching the book he'd presumably been reading on the train and she was finishing a sandwich. The two of them were chatting and laughing. They kept moving. They looked straight at Nicklin but didn't see him. They weren't looking around for anybody. They were not expecting to be met.

He was sitting and sipping from a can of Coke, gazing casually towards the departures board every few minutes. Just another frustrated traveller monitoring the delays. He turned his head and

watched them as they passed him. They were probably heading for taxi, bus or tube. If they were getting a cab then he'd settle back and wait for someone else. Annoying, but not the end of the world. If they were planning to continue their journey by public transport, he would follow.

He was in luck.

Still holding hands, the two of them stepped on to the escalator leading down to the underground. Nicklin put his half empty can on the floor beside him and stood up, hearing his knee click loudly. He smiled. He wasn't getting any younger.

He reached into his coat pocket for the chocolate bar he'd bought earlier. Moving the knife aside, he took the chocolate out and began to unwrap it as he moved towards the escalator. As he stepped on behind a backpacker, he took a large bite, and after checking that the two of them were still there, twenty feet or so below him, he glanced out through the vast windows towards the bus depot. The crowds were thinning out now, the rush hour nearly over.

It was just starting to get dark. On the streets and in houses.

Inside people's heads.

They took the Northern line south. He settled down a few seats away, and watched. She was in her

early thirties, he thought. Tall with dark hair, dark eyes and what Nicklin thought was called an olive complexion. What his mum might have called 'a touch of the tarbrush'. She wasn't pretty but she wasn't a dog either.

Not that it mattered really.

The train passed through the West End and continued south. Clapham, he guessed, or maybe Tooting. Wherever...

The two of them were all over each other. He was still looking at his book, glancing up every few seconds to grin at her. She squeezed his hand and on a couple of occasions she actually leant across to nuzzle his neck. People in the seats around them were smiling and shaking their heads.

He could feel the sweat begin to prickle on his forehead and smell that damp, downstairs smell that grew so strong, so acrid, whenever he got close.

They stood up as the train pulled into Balham station.

He watched them jump giggling from the train and waited a second or two before casually falling into step behind them.

He stayed far enough behind them to be safe, but they were so wrapped up in each other that he could probably have walked at their heels.

Oblivious, they drifted along in front of him towards the station exit. She was wearing a long green coat and ankle boots. He was wearing a blue anorak and a wooly hat.

Nicklin wore a long black coat with deep pockets.

On the street ahead of him, with the gaudy Christmas lights as a backdrop, they were silhouetted against a crimson sky. He knew that this was one of the pictures he would remember. There would be others, of course.

They walked past a small parade of shops and he had to fight the urge to rush into a newsagent for more chocolate. He only had one bar left. He knew that he could be in and out in a few seconds but he daren't risk losing them. He'd get some more when it was all over. He'd be starving by then.

They turned off the main road into a well lit, but quiet side street and his breath grew ragged as he watched her reach into her pocket for keys. He picked up his pace a little. He could hear them talking about toast and tea and bed. He could see their joy at getting home.

He slid his hand into his pocket, looking around to see who might be watching.

Hoping it wasn't a flat. That he'd get some privacy. Praying for a bit of luck.

Her key slid into the lock and his hand moved across her mouth. Her first instinct was to scream but Nicklin pressed the knife into her back and with the pain came a little common sense. She didn't turn to try and look at him.

"Let's go inside."

Tasting the sweat on his palm, feeling the piss run down her legs, she opens the front door, her hand flapping desperately, reaching down to her side for the one she loves. For the only one she cares about.

For her child.

"Please..."

Her voice is muffled by his hand. The word is lost. He pushes her and the boy through the doorway, hurries inside after them and slams the door shut.

The toddler in the blue anorak is still holding tight to his picture book. He looks up at the stranger with the same dark eyes as his mother, his mouth pursing into a tiny, infinitely confused 'O'.

ONE.

A little after nine thirty in the morning. The first, grey Monday of December. From the third floor of Becke House, Tom Thorne stared out across the monument to concrete and complacency that was Hendon, wishing more than anything that he wasn't thinking clearly.

He was, unfortunately, doing just that. Sorting the material in front of him, taking it all in. Assigning to each item, without knowing it, emotional responses that would colour every waking hour in the months to come.

And many sleeping hours too.

Wide awake and focused, Thorne sat and studied death, the way others at work, elsewhere that morning, were looking at computer screens or sitting at tills. It was the material he worked with everyday and yet, faced with *this*, something to take the edge off would have been nice. Even the steamhammer of a hangover would have been preferable. Something to blunt the corners a little. Something to turn the noise of the horror down.

He'd seen hundreds, maybe thousands of photos like these. He'd stared at them over the years, with the same dispassionate eye that a dentist might cast over X-rays, or an accountant across a tax return. He'd lost count of the pale limbs, twisted or torn or missing altogether in black and white ten-by-

eights. Then there were the colour prints. Pale bodies lying on green carpets. A ring of purple bruises around a chalk-white neck. The garish patterned wallpaper against which the blood spatter is barely discernible.

An ever expanding exhibition with a simple message: emotions are powerful things, bodies are not.

These were the pictures filed in his office, with duplicates stored in the files in his head. Snapshots of deaths and portraits of lives lived to extremes. There were occasions when Thorne had gazed at these bodies in monochrome and thought he'd glimpsed rage or hatred or greed or lust, or perhaps the ghosts of such things, floating in the corners of rooms like ectoplasm.

The photographs on the table in front of him this morning were no more sickening than any he had seen before, but keeping his eyes on the image of the dead woman was like staring hard into a flame and feeling his eyeballs start to melt.

He was seeing her through the eyes of her child.

Charlie Garner aged three, now an orphan.

Charlie Garner aged three, being cared for by grandparents who wrestled every minute of every day with what to tell him about his mummy.

Charlie Garner aged three who spent the best part of two days alone in a house with the body of his mother, clutching at a chocolate wrapper he'd licked clean, starving and dirty and screaming until a neighbour knocked.

"Tom..."

Thorne stared out into the greyness for a few more seconds before turning back resignedly to DCI Russell Brigstocke.

As part of the major reorganisation of the Met a year or so earlier, a number of new squads had been established within the three nascent Serious

Crime Groups. A unit consisting entirely of officers brought out of retirement had been set up expressly to investigate cold cases. This unit, quickly christened the Crinkly squad, was just one of a raft of new initiatives as part of a fresh and supposedly proactive approach to fighting crime in the capital. There were other squads specialising in sexual assaults, violence against children and firearms offences.

Then there was Team 3, Serious Crime Group (West).

Officially, this squad was devised to investigate cases whose parameters were outside those which might be investigated elsewhere - cases that didn't fit anybody else's remit. There *were* those however, who suggested that SCG (West) 3 had been set up simply because no-one quite knew what to do with Detective Inspector Tom Thorne.

Thorne himself reckoned that the truth was probably somewhere half way between the two.

Russell Brigstocke was the senior officer and Thorne had known him for over ten years. He was a big man who cut a distinctive figure with horn-rimmed glasses and hair of which he was inordinately proud. It was thick and blue-black and the DCI took great delight in teasing it up into a quiff of almost Elvis-like proportions. But if he was a caricaturist's dream, he could also be a suspect's worse nightmare. Thorne had seen Brigstocke with glasses off and fists clenched, hair flopping around a sweat-drenched forehead as he stalked around an interview room, shouting, threatening, carrying out the threat, looking for the truth.

"Carol Garner was a single mum. She was twenty-eight years old. Her husband died in a road accident three years ago, just after their son was born. She was a teacher. She was found dead in her home in Balham four days ago. There were no signs of forced entry. She'd arrived back at Euston

station at 18.30 on the twenty-seventh having been to Birmingham to visit her mother. We think that the killer followed her from the station, probably on the tube. We found a travelcard in her pocket.”

Brigstocke’s voice was low and accentless, almost a monotone. Yet the litany of facts simply stated was horribly powerful. Thorne knew most of it, having been briefed by Brigstocke the day before, but still the words were like a series of punches, each harder than the last, combining to leave him aching and breathless. He could see that the others were no less shocked.

And he knew that they had yet to hear the worst.

Brigstocke continued. “We can only speculate on how the killer gained entry or how long he spent inside Carol Garner’s home, but we know what he did when he was there...”

Brigstocke looked down the length of the table asking the man at the other end to carry on where he had left off. Thorne stared at the figure in the black fleece, with shaved head and a startling collection of facial piercings. Phil Hendricks was not everybody’s idea of a pathologist, but he was the best Thorne had ever worked with. Thorne raised an eyebrow. Was there yet another earring since he’d last seen him? Hendricks was fond of commemorating each new boyfriend with a ring, stud or spike. Thorne sincerely hoped that he would settle down soon, before he was completely unable to lift his head up.

Dr Phil Hendricks was the civilian member of the team. He would be there at the beginning, obviously, as the discovery of a body was almost certainly what galvanised the team in the first place. The body that would yield to the knife ; the story behind its journey to a cold steel slab, whispered in secrets, revealed by its dead flesh and petrified organs. These were the pathologist’s areas of expertise.

Though he and Hendricks were good friends, from this point on, in the context of the investigation, Thorne would be happy if he did not see him again.

“Based on when we know she got on a train from Birmingham, we think she was killed somewhere between seven and ten pm on the twenty-seventh. She’d been dead for something like forty-eight hours when she was found.”

The flat Mancunian accent conveyed, with a simple precision, the tawdry and banal reality of genuine horror. Thorne could see the unspeakable thought in the faces of those around the table.

What were those two days like for little Charlie Garner?

“There were no signs of sexual abuse and no indication that she put up any significant struggle. The obvious conclusion is that the killer threatened the child.” Hendricks stopped, took a breath. “He strangled Carol Garner with his bare hands.”

“Fucker...”

Thorne glanced to his left. Detective Sergeant Sarah McEvoy stared down at the file in front of her. Thorne waited, but for the moment it seemed that she’d said everything that was on her mind. Of all of them, she was the officer who Thorne had known for the shortest time. And he still didn’t know her at all. Tough, no question and more than capable. But there was something about her that made Thorne a little wary. There was something hidden.

The voice of DC Dave Holland focused Thorne’s thoughts again. “Do we think he targeted her because of the child?”

Thorne nodded. “It was her weakness. Yes, I think he probably did...”

Brigstocke interrupted. “But it isn’t really significant.”

“Not really significant?” Holland sounded thoroughly confused and looked across at his boss.

Thorne shrugged and threw him a look back. *Wait and see Dave...*

It was just over a year since Thorne had first begun working with Dave Holland and he was at last starting to look like a grown-up. His hair was still far too blond and floppy, but the features it framed seemed set a little harder these days. Thorne knew that this was not so much to do with age as experience. Wear and tear. The most wholesome and guileless of faces was bound to cloud a little, when confronted with some of the things the job threw up.

The change had begun during their first case together. Three months in which Thorne had lost friends and made enemies, while Dave Holland grew closer to him, watching and absorbing and becoming someone else. Three months that had ended with the slash of a scalpel, in a blood-drenched attic in South London.

Holland had learned and *un-learned* a great deal and Thorne had watched it happen, proud yet saddened. It was an argument that he had with himself on a regular basis. Were they mutually exclusive? The good copper and the good person?

Learning a degree of desensitisation was all very well but there would be a price to pay. He remembered a warning poster he had seen in a dentist's waiting room : the graphic image of a lip bitten clean off by a patient “testing” the local anaesthetic. You could bite and bite and not feel a thing, but it was only a matter of time until the anaesthetic wore off and then the pain would certainly begin.

The numbness would wear off too, for those who Thorne watched getting through their days inside their own brand of armour. Whether manufactured

in their heads or from a bottle, it would surely wear off one day and then the agony would be unbearable. This was not Tom Thorne's way and despite the bravado and bullshit that he'd learned, he instinctively knew that it wasn't Holland's either.

The good copper and the good person. Probably *not* mutually exclusive, just fucking difficult. Like one of those things in physics that is theoretically possible but that nobody has ever seen.

A silence had settled briefly across what was laughably described as the conference room. It was actually little more than a slightly bigger office, with a jug of coffee and a few more uncomfortable plastic chairs than normal. Thorne considered what he knew about the man who had killed Carol Garner. A man who liked, who needed to be in control. A coward. Perhaps not commanding physically....Christ he was starting to sound like one of those forensic psychiatrists he thought were so overpaid. What he *did* know of course, was that this killer was far from ordinary. Extraordinary, and with a greater *potential*, than Holland or McEvoy yet understood.

Then of course there was the *why*. Always the why. And, as always, Tom Thorne didn't give a flying fuck about it. He would confront it if it presented itself. He would grab it with both hands if he could catch the killer with it. But he didn't *care*. At least, not about whether the man he was after had ever been given a bicycle as a child...

McEvoy was shifting on the chair next to him. She had finished looking through her file and he could sense that she had something to say.

"What is it, Sarah?"

"This is horrible, no question...and the stuff with the kid, it's very fucking nasty, but I still can't quite see why it's us. As opposed to anybody else. I mean, how do we know she wasn't killed by someone she knew? There were

no signs of forced entry, it might have been a boyfriend or an ex-boyfriend...so, why us? Sir.”

Thorne looked towards Brigstocke who with the timing of an expert, lobbed another sheaf of photographs into the middle of the table.

Holland casually reached out to take a photo. “I was thinking the same thing. I don’t understand what makes....”. He stopped as he took in the image of the woman on her back, her mouth open, her eyes bulging and bloodied. The woman lying among the rubbish bags in a cold, dark street. The woman who was not Carol Garner.

It was a dramatic gesture and meant to be. Brigstocke wanted his team fired up. He wanted them shocked, motivated, passionate.

He certainly had their attention.

It was Thorne who explained exactly what they were up against. “What makes this different, Holland” - he looked at McEvoy - “what makes it *us*, is that he did it again.”

Now, it was as if the previous silence had been a cacophony. Thorne could hear nothing but the distant echo of his own voice and the hiss of the adrenaline fizzing through his bloodstream. Brigstocke and Hendricks sat frozen, heads bowed. Holland and McEvoy exchanged a horrified glance.

“It’s the reason we know he followed Carol Garner from Euston station. Because as soon as he’d finished killing her, that same day, he went to Kings Cross. He went to a different station, found another woman, and did it all over again.”