A Guilty Victim

The body was found in a drainage ditch that led across empty moorland between Kibblethwaite and Hollum. Nobody ever went there, save eager bird-spotters hoping for a glimpse of a whitethroat or a fieldfare, and on the map it was simply a white blank with widely spaced contour lines. Even the nearest road, that between Kibblethwaite and Hollum, ran a good mile away and the few meagre paths that twisted across it were little more than rabbit tracks. Bleak and barren was the spot: A lonely place to die.

But there the body was found. Grey and gruesome in its rotting features, it lay beneath a covering pile of peat and loose vegetation, slowly decaying into the land. Indeed, it would not have been found had it not been for the recent heavy rains and an environmental science student conducting college fieldwork had not stumbled across it.

Craig raised an eyebrow when he heard the news. It was announced mid-week on local t.v. and he actually found it quite comical, for a film crew, clad in winter woollies and wet weather wellies, had traipsed across the boggy land to stand engulfed in swirling fog just to show viewers the macabre scene. The reporter himself, obviously a city boy fresh out of quads and cloisters, would have looked more at home on a bowling green, struggling, as he did, against a whipping wind which tore at his umbrella.

'Idiot' Craig thought, 'look at him. Don't know his arse from his elbow.'

'Here, at this desolate spot,' this young reporter gravely announced holding his microphone like a stick of rock, 'a heinous crime has been committed: A murder. Alas, the victim was a young woman whose body was thrown into that ditch over there, then hastily covered up and left to rot. By whom, when and why is not yet known, but the police are anxious to get to the bottom of this callous, barbaric act and bring the perpetrator to justice.'

'Good Lord,' Craig muttered, 'he thinks he's acting out Hamlet!'

The reporter then turned to conduct an on-the-spot interview with the Chief Investigating Officer. This was a large, hardy-faced, broad-shouldered man named 'Chief Inspector Andrews' who in that matter-of-fact voice common to all senior police officers, blandly announced that it was a routine affair and that forensic evidence would be needed to establish a cause and time of death.

'But can you give any idea of who committed this dastardly deed, and why or how or when this sinister affair occurred', the young reporter pushed.
The Chief Inspecting Officer eyed him coldly:

'Who? No I can't. Why? No I can't. When?', he puckered his lips and drew in a breath, 'no, I can't. The state of decay is too far advanced. How? Well, that's another matter'.

The reporter jumped in. 'And?'

This time the Chief Inspecting Officer sucked in his cheeks for effect:

'Well, it appears that the victim was struck on the forehead by a heavy object.'

'Then you can confirm that it's a murder?'

Chief Inspecting Officer Andrews distinctly began to dislike this young man:

'Well, I would say that it's quite unlikely that someone came all this way off the beaten track, just to lie naked in a ditch and commit suicide by hitting themselves over the head with a heavy object, wouldn't you?'

Craig had to laugh at that one: 'Yeah, you tell 'im, Guv. Bloody dickhead.'

Nevertheless, unperturbed, the reporter continued:

'Naked? Then, it's a sex crime? A woman?'

'Yes, it is a women and at this stage we can rule nothing out. But neither do we issue off-the-cuff speculations. The investigation will follow normal procedures and a press conference will be held as soon as the results of the autopsy are known. Thank-you.'

And with that he turned and left, shaking his head. Then it was back to the studio.

After that, Craig lost interest in the news. He drew his tin of beer to his mouth, took a sip and turned over a page of his motorcycle magazine to drool over the latest, gleaming, high-powered dream-machines. But his mind was elsewhere and he threw the journal down on the coffee table, lifted off his stockinged-feet and stood up with a stretch.

He was a tall man whose head almost touched the ceiling. And with his wisp of reddish-brown hair that fell over his brow, his freckles, and his pointed dimpled chin, girls generally found him quite attractive. But it was his deep blue eyes that really charmed them: They were irresistible for the adventure that beckoned within. Suggestive of sensuous secrets to be shared. Tempting as the taste of hidden fruit. Exciting as passion blended with danger.
In reality, though, Craig was a quiet man with no mysterious traits, apart from being a bit of a grouch, and when the girls found this out they were even more enchanted for nothing is more thrilling than taking safe risks. In fact, Craig could have had a lot of success with women if he hadn’t been so shy.

Craig paced around his bedsit room wondering whether or not to go out. In the background the news droned on and then the weather forecast warned of snow, after which adverts came on, to be followed by a sports quiz. All very mundane. He even paused a moment to look at the clock ticking on the wall. Then he looked away.

The telephone rang and he looked back at the clock.

‘Nine-twenty,’ he silently moaned, ‘who the hell is it at this time? Mum?’

It was mum.

‘Hi pet,’ she announced. He hated being called that.

‘Yeah. Hi Mum’.

‘You alright?’

‘Yeah. About to go to bed, actually. Thought I’d have an early night.’

‘You seen the news?’


‘Did you see about the body on the moors?’

‘Yeah. What of it? Nothing new. Those places turn up their dead from time to time.’

‘But, don’t you think...?’

‘What?’

‘Well...you know...’.

‘No mum, I don’t know.’ His mum’s indirectness could be irritating sometimes.

‘Well...’ she repeated

‘What?’ he echoed, this time a bit more annoyed.

‘You know.... Jennifer.’
A cold, glacial shiver shot down his spine.

'Jennifer?' he managed to reply before a wave of nausea hit him in the stomach. He felt his knees dissolve and stumbled back onto the sofa. Then he lay there feeling the room around him spin with his mother calling to him from his hand which still gripped the phone.

'Craig! Craig pet, are you there? Craig!'

He finally responded.

'Yeah, yeah. I'm here.'

'You o.k.?'

'Yeah. Guess so.'

'Well?'

He blew out slowly as images of Jennifer danced before him. His only real love. The only one who’d really understood him. He’d met her in a car park, of all places, when he’d opened his car door and slightly dented hers. She’d been annoyed, of course, and he’d offered to pay. But then, something between them happened: That chemical exchange. That magical moment of meeting a kindred soul. The dented door was then somehow forgotten and he’d shown his bravado, for once, by inviting her out to lunch. It had all been so natural.

'Look, Mum,' he answered, 'I know you mean well, but please don’t.'

'But it was all so strange, Craig, how she just suddenly disappeared; went off the scene like that. I mean, you two were so close....I never did understand.'

Craig heard his mother begin to sob on the other end of the line.

'No, mum. Please!' He commanded.

'And it was about that time your brother, Brian, moved away,' she continued, 'and you’ve never really spoken to him much since. That whole episode was so bizarre. It changed you, you know.'

'No it didn’t mum. I’m still the same boy. Still the same Craig who needs to be told to wash his hands before eating and not to use his sleeve to wipe his nose.'

'No Craig. You changed.' Her sobs slackened off as she pulled herself together. 'After Jennifer left, you started drinking and smoking heavily, and your language took on a
real filthy tone. You used words in front of me that you never would have if your father had still been alive. Then you started frequenting those girls on the wrong side of town and lost your job at the dairy.'

'Mum! Please!' Craig beseeched, 'Stop it now. Of course I changed. Jennifer ripped my heart out when she left. She tore it up and threw it away. I'd have died for her, mum, done anything, really, mum.'

'I know Craig,'

'I'll never forgive her.'

'I know, pet. But where did she go?'

'Who cares where she went? She started hanging around with that dodgy casino lot...and then left. Frank at the dairy reckons he saw her once in Leeds... But you know all this.'

'Yes, I do. But I still hurt for you.'

There was a long pause, with both Craig and his mum breathing together into the phone.

Then quietly he whispered: 'I still love her, mum.'

In saying that, Craig felt tears running down his face and with a great overpouring of grief he wept as pain rose up from the depths of times past, wracking through his body. His mother could hear him and she wept too.

'Craig! Craig!' she cried down the phone, 'Oh, I'm sorry, pet. I just wondered, that's all.'

'Well don't,' he cried, wiping his nose on his sleeve, 'let sleeping dogs lie. The Jennifer story is past history. Dead and buried.'

'But you're not at peace, Craig.'

'I was - until you rang.'

'Oh! I'm sorry, Craig. I'm sorry. Ok. I'm going now. Shall I pop around tomorrow?'

'No mum. I'll come and visit you in a couple of days.' He sniffed, still her little boy.

'Ok. Craig. Sleep well then, pet'. And she put the phone down.
Craig lay still for a while thinking. Then he pulled himself upright and reached for his beer. It was empty. He stood up, stretched his back again and went to fetch another from the fridge. But on route he changed his mind and turned to the whisky bottle instead.

Inspector Andrews cleared his throat and a silence descended. Looking out over half-moon glasses, his eyes surveyed across the crowded room. At the back, television cameras pointed towards upon him. In the front, sat rows of journalists, pencils at the ready. And at the sides stood more journalists, the room was that full. He glanced left and right, checked his colleagues were ready, nodded to his adjoint, Inspector Slater, and took a sip of water. Good, all eyes were upon him.

'Thank-you,' he announced. 'This press conference concerns recent investigations into the body found on the moors last Thursday sixteenth of February.'

He paused, saw all were listening, and continued.

'The autopsy report confirms that the body was that of a women aged about twenty-five years old. She was killed by being struck on the forehead by a blunt instrument. Possibly a large stone. Furthermore...'

He stopped, and so did the sound of scribbling pencils. Then he continued:

'Furthermore, dental records and DNA analysis have revealed that the woman's name was 'Jennifer Sanders', formerly resident of Kibblethwaite. Close relatives have been notified. We are now appealing to anyone who knew this person to come forward. All information will be treated with the utmost confidence.'

He took his glasses off his nose. 'Any questions?'

Hands shot up and Inspector Andrews picked one out with his glasses.

'Tom Hamilton, The Gazette. Can you give us any more information on Jennifer Saunders?'

'Yes, indeed. This information is now posted on the press release web-site.'

'But in brief?'

'In brief, Jennifer Saunders lived in Leeds until five years ago when she moved to Kibblethwaite to take up a secretarial job at Mattocks, the insurers.'

'Thank-you.' Andrews pointed to another raised hand.
'Howard Porridge, East Moorland Times.' A couple of sniggers were heard at the mention of his name. 'I believe the victim was found naked. Was this a sex crime?'

'That could not be established by the autopsy. The body had too far decayed.'

'And when did this take place?'

'Sometime between eighteen months and two years ago.

'But was she not reported missing?'

'Apparently not. Her parents divorced ten years ago and Jennifer had had little contact with either of them since - only phoning about once a year. Both knew she was in Kibblethwaite, but neither came to visit. Other relatives, apparently, were completely in dark about her movements.'

A voice from the back spoke up: 'Titmarsh, Good Ridings Broadcasting News. Inspector Andrews, how soon before we catch this rotter?'

Andrews was visibly taken aback by this uninvited question. His eyes scanned across the back rows and came to rest on the face of the twit who had interviewed him on the moors.

'Excuse me?' he threw back in a sombre tone, regarding the reporter darkly.

'This scoundrel. How soon before justice prevails and he is rounded up?'

Andrew kept his calm.

'The investigation shall follow correct procedures. We hope, of course, to reaches a swift conclusion, but we greatly rely on the public's co-operation.'

'Oh yes, we'll smoke him out alright,' replied Titmarsh, 'we'll unmask the fiend.'

Andrew noticeably turned a tight-lipped red. Even his ears and neck became flushed with colour. He took another sip of water and glared at the young man:

'No more questions,' he abruptly announced and left the stage.

Craig looked grey and haggard. From inside his flat, with the curtains permanently drawn, he followed the investigation, wishing it would all go away. It was too painful. The wound that had taken eighteen months to heal, was now re-opened. His mother visited once, told him to have a shave and instantly started tidying up by
throwing out the beer cans; carrying dirty plates out into the kitchen, and collecting dirty washing. But she was soon told to leave.

Then, of course, it wasn't long before Chief Inspector Andrews came knocking on his door. Craig hadn't wanted to answer it at first, but when the knocking became insistent he had. Then their eyes first met: The cold, steely eyes of Andrews and the deep, blue eyes of Craig. Whatever Andrews saw in Craig's eyes he didn't say, but he sure looked long and hard.

'Mr. Craig Roberts?' he finally asked breaking the silence. Craig nodded. So did Andrews.

'It's concerning Jennifer Saunders. Can I come in?'

He showed his ID and his colleague behind, Inspector Slater, did the same. Craig nodded, turned and led the way inside. Andrews and Slater followed, exchanging looks whilst casting their eyes around the flat.

'Sorry, it's a bit of a mess,' apologized Craig, 'I can't think straight at the moment, what with this news about Jennifer. The doctor's put me on tranquilizers to help me sleep.'

'I understand. This is just a 'routine enquiry', as we say. That's all. We'd just like to establish a time-line for Jennifer's disappearance and then we'll be on our way. Can you help us there?' Andrews was following the softly-softly approach.

'Oh, I'm not sure exactly, but some time in summer. July or August. Don't know anymore,'

'But you do remember her disappearing?'

'Oh, yes. Sure do. Out of the blue. She just took off.'

'Didn't you find that a bit strange?'

'Strange? It tore me to bits. She meant everything to me.'

'But you didn't report it?'

'No'

'Why not?'
Craig knew this would happen. The police would dig and dig until he said things he didn't want to say, for there were sides to Jennifer he preferred to keep hidden. He paused...

'It wasn't the first time,' he then blurted out. There was a silence whilst Andrews and Slater took in this admission.

'I see,' Andrew gently noted, 'and did she often 'disappear'?'

'No!' Craig tried to retract, 'no. Just a few times.'

'And when did she start to disappear?'

'After she got in with the casino crowd.'

Slater discreetly slipped his notebook out of his top pocket, then a pencil out of his inside jacket pocket, and made a note.

'I see,' Andrews reflected again, 'and did she disappear for long?'

'A few days. A week at the longest.'

'But the last time was different,'

Yes. She didn't come back. How was I to know she'd been murdered? I always thought she'd just gone off with someone else and ditched me. Now I find out...I find out...

His head slumped forward and he sat himself down on a pile of motorcycle magazines stacked on a chair. Andrews and Slater stood quietly waiting for him to continue. Finally, wiping his nose on his sleeve, he added:

'I so loved that girl,'

'Despite her occasional 'disappearance' with the casino crowd?' Andrews forwarded, 'Yes!'

Slater, holding his pencil to his mouth, then added

'Tell me something, how did that first happen?'

'What?'

'That Jennifer got in with the 'casino crowd'. Did you go there together?'
'No.'

'Then why?'

'My brother.'

'Your brother?'

'Yeah, he took her. He's friends with them down there, and she liked it.'

'But you never went?'

'No. Not my thing.'

'So, how come your brother took her?'

'I was working nights, he dropped around, Jennifer was bored and he took her,'

'And you saw nothing strange in that?'

'No. He was my brother.'

'And when was this?'

'Over Christmas - new year time, I suppose.'

Slater scratched his head and made a note. Andrews took over:

'O.k. Craig. Thank-you for your help. I'm sure all this been most upsetting for you. Is there anyone we can contact for you? I mean, you don't really want to be spending this time alone, now, do you?'

'No, it's alright, thanks. I'm not really good company for anyone at the moment. It's just all so hard to take in. Anyway, my mum's just up the road.'

'O.k. As you like. But we'll call in again soon, just to see how you are.'

Andrews nodded to Slater, they turned and left.

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It was a hot summer's day towards the end of July and the air shimmered in oppressive heat. Nothing stirred. The earth, baked hard, cracked open in jagged fissures where winter's streams had run, and grasses browned and drooped their heavy heads.
Craig knew these places well. He often came up here when he wanted to be alone. He even felt that they were his for no-one else ventured out amongst the bracken and trod through the purple heather; just the rabbits and shrews that occasionally darted across his path passing from one patch of undergrowth to another.

But Craig had not been up on these moors since the day that Jennifer had disappeared. He couldn't face them. They knew the dark secret. And when he saw dark clouds rolling over them from a distance, he felt their anger and understood their threat.

Craig reached for his whisky bottle and poured himself a large, comforting draught.

'Jennifer, Jennifer, Jennifer, my love,' he intoned holding his glass up to the light, 'whatever happened to us? I thought we both had felt the same.'

The liquor felt warm as it slid down his throat. Golden and smooth, it smothered him in a sweet-smelling odour which rose up out of his glass and swirled around his nostrils. He could feel his senses being pulled inside its fumey haze. It dulled the senses, eased the loneliness, dissolved the sadness.

'Oh, Jennifer,' he implored, 'did you never know how much I loved you?'

He had taken Jennifer up on those moors just that once, to show her that private part of his soul. He remembered the ride up there on his motorbike and how she'd hugged him tight round the waist. Then they'd rambled along trails beneath the open sky as two tiny figures lost upon the infinite, barren vastness.

'God, I miss her,' he mused, swirling the whisky around his mouth, 'why did she have to die? Why did she do it? It's like she was playing Russian roulette, cocking the gun then pulling the trigger. But what did she expect? I could have handled her inconsistencies. I did. I was obsessed and obsession ignores deceit. But that!'

He drained his glass in one large swallow.

'Deceit. Yes, all was deceit. A pretence and a betrayal. Her pretence and my betrayal. Or rather my delusions, for I knew nothing of it until...'

Craig poured himself another large slug of whisky, his head pounding as dormant memories rose up from the grave. He remembered so well that ride out to the moors and Jennifer looking so beautiful in her light summer skirt and her t-shirt rolled up so that her mid-riff showed bare. And he remembered her firm tanned legs strolling effortlessly in front with her shoulders rolling and her hands brushing against the ferns.
'Deceit,' Craig cried out to himself, 'betrayal and deceit. But how was I to know?'

He stood up out of his chair and started pacing around the room, feeling fury enter his drink. And he raised his fist to the ceiling, blasting the heavens for all the evil brought upon him;

'Why me, hey, why me?' he directed upwards aloud.

They had walked on in this manner, as giggling lovers, until reaching a soft grassy patch beside a drainage ditch. And there they’d lain down together and looked into each other’s eyes blending love and passion. Craig could recall it all now, her close-cropped black hair and her moist lips; her dark, brown eyes and her thin, slender neck.

'I love you,' he had declared, to which she lovingly smiled,

'I want you,' he had confessed, to which she lovingly rubbed his arms and arched her back.

'Sh!' she said, 'don't talk. Just take me.'

And so he had. Yes, it was an instinctive, lustful, carnal act in the wilderness of the moors and yes, it was an earthly fulfilment of base desire, but for Craig it was also an exchanging of souls and a sharing of hearts.

'And then what did she do,' spurted out Craig, still in disbelief, 'whilst we were becoming one, she suddenly opened her eyes and pushed me off like she was bewitched.'

He reached for the whisky bottle and refilled his glass. Then he carried on talking aloud.

'Her eyes were then suddenly different. Cold like a dead fish; hard and spiteful'

He continued to pace the room, ranting in recalled wrath.

'What is it?' I said to her, what's up?'

'Just get off me," she had replied,'

'Why?'

'Get Off!

'But tell me, what is it?'
'O.k. she had said. I just much prefer your brother as a lover. You're a brute.'

Craig stopped in his rant and his tracks. He remembered his white rage as her words had sunk in, and the dawning realisation of her past disappearances. Then, without a thought, and in a crazed frenzy, he had picked up a rock and thrown it with full force at her head.

Craig slumped down in his armchair, breathless, mouth agape; the full horror of his crime re-lived. He saw her body convulsing whilst he stood there watching, motionless in terror. Then it was still and the full shock of what he had done hit home. He had sat beside the body in fear and mourning for hours as the sun declined, and then he buried it in a makeshift grave after the sun had set believing no-one would find it up there. Then he returned home, alone.

Dirty.

Ugly.

Defiled.

Stained with evil.

And he believed others could see it on him too: That others could see the stone in his hands and the blood on his face. And so he withdrew into himself and for solace he shared the company of the street girls in Leeds. They didn't care who or what he was.

In time, Jennifer faded from local memory. The casino crowd, of course, barely noticed her absence, although Craig's brother moved away in grief and suspicion. It was all incomprehensible to him. Even Mattocks, her employers, enquired not too hard, presuming she'd just moved on to some other job without giving notice: Some young people are like that.

And that was eighteen months ago.

But now, all was back in the open.

Craig reached again for the whisky bottle and filled his glass half-full. He needed to be drunk; to be anaesthetized from the tormenting memory.

'I'm sorry, so sorry,' he cried into his glass, wishing he could dive into the liquid.

Then, spying the bottle of tranquillisers on the coffee table that his doctor had prescribed, he picked it up and regarded it for an instant.

'Why not,' he thought, 'I've nothing to live for now.'
He shook out all the pills and quickly threw them down his throat. He had, he felt, no other choice.

'Oh, unhappy, calamitous day,' Titmarsh droned on the next evening's news. 'Two lovers dead, one by his own hands. Craig Roberts, who lost his love Jennifer Saunders to some brutal moors murderer, last night took his own life in despair. This, indeed, is a sad, sad day for Kibblethwaite. Let's just hope his sweetheart's slayer is soon caught for such a bounder deserves a sound lashing. Bring back the gallows, I say.

Inspector Andrews, watching at home with his wife, groaned.

Phil