

## I

The day they cut Mrs McKechnie, not much else happened in West Byfleet. Not much happened in Pyrford either, or even in the whole of Guildford. It took a week's hard work to fill the crime page of the *Guildford Advertiser*, and even then it was mainly soft-collar, middle-class stuff: company frauds, menopausal shoplifting, dog-licence evasion; occasionally there was a disco scuffle, though most of the kids were too scared of forfeiting their YC membership for that. So when they cut Mrs McKechnie, you'd expect the *Advertiser's* story on page seven to have led with this fact; but it didn't. It led with the other thing the men did, the afterthought, the nasty, sick thing which even Big Eddy, with his sense of humour, didn't really approve of. That tells you something about journalists.

When Rosie McKechnie opened the front door of 'The Pines' in the middle of an August afternoon, she thought it was the gasman. Anyone else would have thought the same. When you get to the front door, see a shortish figure through the stained-glass panelling, undo the catch, and immediately hear the word 'Gas', you naturally think it's the gasman. You don't think about how long it was since you last had your meter read.

The little man came through the door fast, with his head down, and butted Mrs McKechnie hard in the

left breast. Then he pinioned her arms to her sides and simply stood there holding on to her. She felt a sharp, continuing pain in her breast; she looked wildly down at the top of the little man's head and saw that his hair was covered in gauze; she looked up towards the open door and was nerving herself to scream when the second man arrived. He sidled in, closed the door gently behind him, put his finger to the flat, fleshy area which was all that the stocking mask showed of his lips, and went,

'Shhhh.'

She felt calmer when he did this; then, suddenly, she felt very frightened indeed. She opened her mouth to scream, and at once the second man was by her side, his hand clamped over her face.

'Now, no mouth, Rosie,' he whispered, 'no mouth. We don't want mouth. We don't need mouth. Understand?'

She understood. She had little choice. One man was cracking two armfuls of ribs; the other was nearly suffocating her. She swivelled her eyes downwards and could only see a stockinged head against her pearls (*Oh God, my jewels*); sideways, and she could only see a powerful forearm and a blur of brown pullover. She was alone. Mrs Brennan, the char, had left at twelve after dropping her weekly bottle of scent; the only other living thing in the house apart from the three of them was Godfrey, the cat.

The tall one was speaking again, straight into her ear.

'Now listen, Rosie, an' I'll tell you what we're doing. Or rather, I'll tell you what we're not doing. We ain't gonna kill you. We ain't gonna prong you. We ain't gonna hurt you. We ain't gonna steal nothing – well, not unless we see something we *really* fancy. Understand?'

He loosened his grip on her face; she began to open her mouth, changed her mind, and simply nodded.

‘Good, Rosie, and no mouth, like I said. Now, we’ve only come to do one thing, and when we’ve done, we’ll go. A’right?’

She nodded again.

‘But we don’t want you interfering with us, so I’m afraid we’re going to have to tie you up a bit. A’right?’

She nodded. Her jaw hurt from the tall man’s hand. The little one hadn’t spoken at all, merely held on with a sort of silent frenzy which reminded her of her courting days.

‘What I’m going to do first is let go of your mouth, take this fucking mask off, and tie it round your eyes so we won’t have to bother about you identifying us. Now, you could scream’ (he always seemed to be just ahead of her thoughts) ‘but if you do, I’ll make sure your dentist gets a good month’s work, darling. So – no – fucking – mouth,’ he repeated slowly.

Then he softly let go of her face, moved behind her, ripped the stocking off his head, and quickly bound it round her eyes.

‘Well done, darling. Now, the little fellow’s going to take off his mask now, and put it round your mouth, ’cos we may have to go round the house a bit, and we wouldn’t want to have to run back and shut you up.’

She felt her arms being released, and then just stood there, blindfold, as the two men bound her mouth. The stocking pulled her lips back harshly at the corners, then pressed her tongue back and seemed to fill up her entire mouth. It tasted nasty. One of the men knotted it firmly at the base of her skull.

‘Sorry about the Brylcreem, darling,’ said the tall man. He seemed to be the only one who spoke. ‘It was Brylcreem or dandruff. We should of offered you the choice. Not too tight, is it?’

It was; it hurt at the edges of her mouth; it felt as if her lips were being split open. She nodded her head up and down.

‘Oh, a bit tight, is it? Sorry about that, Rosie, but you must appreciate our problem. It just wouldn’t do its job if it was any looser. Tell you what, this’ll make you feel better. Other blokes who are in our line of work, what they do is, they fill your mouth up with cotton wool first. Not nice. Tickles the back of your froat. Makes some of them frow up their stomachs. Heard of one case, some old geezer frowed up his stomach and choked to death on it. Nasty. Not nice, was it?’

He was clearly addressing the little man, who gave a grunt. Then she heard a soft tapping noise. From the tall man’s reply, she worked out that the little one must have been tapping the face of his watch.

‘OK, mustn’t let the grass grow under our feet. Hang about a sec, Rosie, don’t go away.’

They left her for a couple of minutes, then came back and propelled her into what she worked out was her lounge. They sat her down in a wheel-backed dining chair which one of them must have brought from the kitchen. Then she felt her ankles being tied together with some thing that wasn’t rope. Finally, they bound her hands.

‘Now, that’s two pairs of best nylons, Rosie. Best Marks and Sparks. Autumn Beige we picked for you. Thought that was the sort of shade someone like you might wear.’ It wasn’t, but why this familiarity anyway? If they’d come to steal something why didn’t they just get on with it? But they couldn’t just have come to steal, else why would they have bothered to find out her name? How did they manage to come on one of the two afternoons when she didn’t regularly have friends round, or go out to bridge?

Had they been watching the house? They must have been. And what the hell did they want? How long would it be before Brian came home? Maybe they were after Brian for some reason? No, they couldn't be – they wouldn't have come so early if they'd wanted Brian.

The tall man with the quiet voice with bits of London rough in it was still going on about the stockings.

'Two pairs of frees, Rosie. Better than having the Fuller's brush man round, isn't it? I mean, if you don't like the shade, you can always give them away, can't you? I should look on the nylons as the silver lining to this little business, Rosie, I really would. An' as I say, if they don't fit you, they might fit Barbara, mightn't they? Yes, I think they might fit Barbara.'

Rosie McKechnie didn't know anyone called Barbara. She might have known a Barbara or two in her teens or twenties, but she didn't know anyone called Barbara now. She was in her late forties, and couldn't remember meeting a Barbara for twenty years. So why had the man repeated the name? It sounded so deliberate.

There was a pause. When the tall man started speaking again, his tone was almost apologetic.

'I'm afraid we come to the hard bit now, Rosie. You see, we had to tell you a little lie to begin with, just to get you to cooperate. Well, two lies, actually, I suppose. I mean, we aren't from the gas, either.'

He paused again. Rosie was suddenly very frightened indeed. Her body told her she was frightened. She felt a trickle of pee come from her, then stop.

'It's a'right, we ain't gonna kill you, we don't deal in that. We ain't gonna prong you, neither, though, if you'll allow me to say so, Mr McKechnie's a very lucky man. But I'm afraid we're gonna have to cut you just a little.

It'll hurt a bit – there's no way we can avoid that, but we'll try and make it hurt as little as possible. I mean, we're not sadists, you know. And the boss did make his instructions very clear. So it won't be as bad as it could be.'

Rosie McKechnie began to cry into her blindfold. She was sure they were going to cut her face. The face that Brian had picked out from the chorus line of *Ahoy There!* on a foggy evening in November 1952. He'd picked it out from the sixth row of the stalls, despite the fact that she was wearing a matelot suit and had a silly cap on her head with a red bobble on the top of it. In France, Brian had explained to her, girls go up to sailors and ask if they can touch their bobbles for luck; the price is a kiss. When Brian had arrived backstage with a bunch of Michaelmas daisies and asked if he could touch her bobble, she hadn't understood; or rather, she thought she'd understood all too clearly. But he hadn't meant that, as he'd explained to her over dinner. And that was when he first called her 'My little chorus girl'. Now his little chorus girl, the one he'd picked out from the sixth row, was going to have her face cut. She knew it.

'Time for Stanley, I'm afraid,' said the tall man softly. Stanley: that must be the little fellow's name; she'd better remember it. 'Now, Mrs McKechnie,' (he had suddenly become formal) 'what we're going to do is make a little cut, just a nick really, round about your shoulder.' Thank God – they weren't going for her face. 'Now it'll hurt a bit, but you ain't going to bleed too hard, few stitches, eight to ten I'd say, and, well, no backless dresses for a while, but you'll be surprised how quickly you'll get over it.'

She waited. There was nothing else she could do but wait and see what happened next.

What happened next was that the little man dug in his pocket and pulled out a thick, heavy lino-cutting knife with a retractable blade. It was gunmetal blue, and had a little serrated catch on the top which, when you slid it forward, brought the blade into view. At a sign from the tall man, he walked out of the lounge, down a corridor past a few framed theatre bills, and into the kitchen. He didn't notice Godfrey sitting on the dresser; but Godfrey certainly noticed him.

Godfrey was the McKechnies' large, paunchy, grey-haired tom cat. A big, swaggery, macho cat with firm ideas about territoriality. The sort of cat who would pin females up against the wall and accuse them of being frigid if they wouldn't submit. Even in the feline world, where selfishness and cunning are cardinal virtues, Godfrey was an outstandingly mean cat. Other cats fought shy of him; some of the smaller local dogs had been seen crossing the road to avoid him; not even his owners really liked him. They gave him everything he needed and stayed out of his way as much as possible.

As the little man passed the dresser, he heard a sharp, sibilant hiss. He turned and saw Godfrey. The little man thought he knew his way round cats, and he reached out a hand to tickle Godfrey's chin. Godfrey didn't like his chin being tickled; he didn't really like humans coming near him. As the hand approached, he slashed at it with his right paw.

Godfrey kept his claws in good trim. Three white lines appeared on the back of the man's hand; after a few seconds they seemed to pop, and beads of blood appeared. The man looked at his hand disbelievingly. He stood there and glanced slowly round the kitchen. When his eye fell on the fridge-freezer, he suddenly shot out a

hand and grabbed Godfrey by the neck before he could move, walked quickly across the kitchen, pulled open the door of the freezer section, threw the cat in, and slammed the door. He turned, and looked round the kitchen again: bar area, concealed ceiling lighting, stainless-steel surfaces, gadgets everywhere; a cooker with an eye-level spit-roaster. He nodded to himself.

Then he walked over to the sink and ran the cold tap. First he washed the blood off his hand, and held it there for a couple of minutes to try and stop the bleeding. After that he filled a kettle and set it to boil. When the steam began to rise from the spout, he took his blue knife, unsheathed the blade, and held it in the steam for about a minute.

When he got back to the lounge the tall man was looking impatient for the first time that afternoon. The back of the woman's dress was now open.

'Took yer time.'

The little man held out his right hand and spoke the only two words Rosie McKechnie ever heard him say.

'Focking caht.' It was a lighter voice than the other man's with a strong flavour of Irish in it. A few fresh beads of blood were beginning to pop on his hand as he took the knife in his right hand, laid his left flat on the middle of the woman's back, bent her forwards, and made a sudden but careful vertical incision in her right shoulder a couple of inches away from the strap of her bra. The pressure on the knife made the blood run again from the little man's hand; automatically, he brushed it off on the back of the woman's dress.

The tall man was speaking again.

'Three inches. The boss said three inches.' Rosie was bent right forward now, hunched with pain. 'And three



inches it seems to be.' He crouched down beside the gagged woman and spoke to her almost gently. 'Lean back, love, you're only making yourself bleed more like that.' She sat up, trying not to pull on the wound. 'Eight to ten, you'll need, I reckon. Maybe twelve. You'll be OK. We could give you some drink if you like.'

She shook her head. She didn't drink spirits; never had. A glass of brandy now was more likely to make her throw up than the taste of hair cream from the little man's mask.

'We'll be off soon,' said the tall man.

The little man took the knife back to the kitchen to wash it off. He turned on the cold tap, held the blade under it for a minute or so, dried it on a J-cloth, and returned the knife to his pocket. Then he put his hand under the tap again, though the blood by now had almost stopped coming. With his handkerchief he dabbed dry the three parallel red weals on the back of his hand, and walked across to the cooker with the eye-level spit-roaster. He turned one of the switches to Full, and then wandered thoughtfully across towards the fridge-freezer.

Back in the lounge, the tall man was loosening the stocking over Mrs McKechnie's eyes.

'Now, if you shake your head a lot, this should work itself off in a bit,' he said. 'Sorry we can't do more for you, but you must understand our position. We gotta do what the boss says. It isn't worth anyone's while not doing what the boss says.'

She heard the sound of the little man returning from the kitchen.

'All cleared up in there?' the tall man asked, and got a grunt in reply. 'Yeah, I've wiped here as well,' he went on, and then turned towards Rosie McKechnie for the last time.

‘Well, so long, Rosie, we’ll be off now. Oh, and, er, hope the stockings fit. Fit someone, anyway.’

A few seconds later the front door closed quietly. Mrs McKechnie felt her dress wet to the waist with her own blood. She scarcely had the strength to shake the gag free from her eyes. Eventually it fell off, and she found herself staring out of the window at her back garden. At least, she thought, they haven’t cut my face. At least they haven’t taken anything. At least they haven’t smashed things out of malice, like burglars are supposed to do. But then, were they burglars anyway? Brian would be home in a few hours; he would be able to tell her what had happened; to tell her why.

When Brian got back from London he thought his wife had burnt the dinner again. A heavy, slow, red-faced man, he stood in the hall puffing from his walk from the station, uncertain whether to go into the kitchen or the lounge first. From the kitchen came a pungent smell of burning, though somehow it wasn’t the charred-dinner smell he’d had to get used to over the years; it was something odder, sharper. It smelt as if mattresses were being singed. From the lounge he could hear muffled sobs: Rosie blubbing again about having spoiled his dinner. Her tears always disarmed whatever irritation he felt on these occasions.

Brian was a considerate husband, and he headed for the lounge rather than the kitchen. A few more minutes’ charring wouldn’t make much difference. Then he saw Rosie tied to the chair. He rushed across to her and was about to put his heavy arms around her when he saw the blood. He untied her mouth gag, then freed her wrists and feet. As he held her head between his palms and kissed her on the cheeks and forehead, she looked at him

with the eyes of a lost child and couldn't manage a word. After a minute or so of this traumatised silence he went to the phone and called his private doctor; then he called the police. As he put the phone down and walked back towards her, Rosie suddenly spoke.

'Who's Barbara?'

'Barbara? I don't know. Why?'

But she merely replied, 'Who's Barbara?' in a distant voice.

McKechnie frowned and hurried off to try and rescue what was left of the dinner. Barbara was the name of his current mistress. But she was a mistress of only a few weeks – how could anyone have found out? And why bother? What had it got to do with his wife being assaulted? Why were the Georgian candlesticks still safely on the lounge table? Why had nothing been touched?

When he reached the kitchen, he discovered there was something in the house which had been touched. What was revolving slowly on the eye-level spit-roaster was definitely not Brian McKechnie's dinner.