

The Murder of Nora Jones

(A Novel)

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For Sean

“We’re all mad here.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Chapter One

Nora Jones died on Sunday, July the 15th, around midnight. Because the time of death could not be precisely established—a little before or immediately after midnight—nobody knew what date to engrave on her small tombstone. 15th had its supporters, likewise the 16th. Others suggested it should be inscribed only the year of birth and the year of death. Mr Mayflower, the Somerville only funeral home's owner, was the one who solved the problem: he flipped the coin. The supporters of the 15th won. The death certificate recorded this date.

The alleged murder took place at Nora Jones' home itself. She lived all alone somewhere at the middle of Elm Street, in a building some neighbours thought much too large and dear for her own needs.

At the ground floor she'd put together a kind of small office where she used to read in the evening and review her bills. These she jotted down in a ledger bound in leather-cloth covers. Right there she met her Creator, by the light of the small one brass-legged lamp. As the police rightfully assumed, she'd been clubbed over the head with a blunt object. More to the point, with a meat tenderizer, as the coroner would confirm later. The impression of this makeshift weapon was clearly visible on the victim's crushed occipital. For that matter, the officers who came to the crime scene found the meat tenderizer right there, on the manually woven carpet. It was full of blood and a few grey hairs of the late Nora Jones were stuck to it. So there were no doubts that the murder weapon had been found, but they forgot to inform the coroner, too. This one, a gentleman by the name of Albert Holmes, had started on the autopsy as soon as the body was brought to the morgue, since he had nothing else better to do. Somerville was a town not much bigger than a box of matches.

The Chief of Police, Inspector James Finch, was a man with a good many years under his bonnet, waiting his pension as a personal redemption. He wasn't even invited any longer to the reading nights or the small concerts put together on Saturdays by the town's elite. He instantly fell asleep and started snoring, his chin resting on his chest, making everybody feel absolutely embarrassed. When this macabre discovery was brought to his attention, he had just arrived at his office. He raised his hands towards the ceiling, he mumbled something, and then he took his hat and left for the address the restless lady had given him over the phone.

Nora Jones' body had been found on Monday at first light by a friend of hers named Sarah O'Toole. On Friday they'd agreed over the phone to go shopping that day, Jones wanting to buy herself a new coffee-table. O'Toole only wanted to window-shop and to shoot the breeze with the clerks. Once in

front of the house at No. 21, she had rung the bell but no one had come answering. So she went around to the back entrance, where she found the door hanging wide open. This was somewhat strange—she claimed afterwards—all the more so that, in the last few days, “she’d felt an inexplicable heartache and had had very bad dreams”. She entered the kitchen and from there she went to the dining-room.

Nora Jones was sprawled over the desk, as if leaning to close to an item on its surface. The sun rays entering through the wood shutters were cutting the office in two like a lath of light. The gloomy parts looked like a ghost hunkered on the rug. The shaft of light fell exactly on top of the victim’s head. Her almost completely white hair was matted with clots of blood which glistened like a diadem of rubies.

Sarah O’Toole started to scream.

The vast dining-room returned the echo, and when a cat named Sybille, which had sneaked up on her unnoticed, started rubbing itself on her legs, she passed out right away. It must have been a short-lasting faint, for when she opened her eyes, stretched on the floor, the cat was near her face, licking her nose.

Mrs O’Toole couldn’t stand cats. But because she lived in a society of old and young ladies who prided themselves with their love for such felines, she had kept this feeling as a secret. Nevertheless, the truth was that she hated cats, and so when she saw Sybille near her, she smacked it over its black-speckled head. Sybille scampered and made itself scarce somewhere in the bellies of the house, and Mrs O’Toole darted to the phone and called the police.

While she waited the officers’ arrival, she tip-toed as if she were afraid she might wake-up somebody, and took another look at what she already considered to be the dead body of Nora Jones.

The shaft of light had shifted a little. The top of her head was now wrapped in gloom, but light was showing her delicate neck the colour of fresh butter, encircled by the lace collar of her housedress. The ledger in which Mrs Nora Jones used to scribble her accounts was standing wide open. A soft hand was resting on its straw-coloured pages like a wounded bird. Mrs O’Toole asked herself whether she should do something or not. She answered herself that what was now the “crime scene” had to remain as it was, so she needn’t touch any object, much less the victim’s body. And then she asked herself where the beast which had attacked her—for that was her impression—could have escaped. Only later she told herself that the killer could still be in the house, hiding in one of the upstairs bedrooms or in the attic—thus she spared no more time and got out of the building.

The sun was already hanging on the sky like a piece of stale lard, surrounded by a few ragged clouds. The elms which had given the street its name in the days of old had all been cut down a long time ago, but some maples still flanked the sidewalks at uneven intervals. Mrs O’Toole sat in the shadow of one of these and started waiting. The passers-by saluted her and she offered her salute back. She didn’t think anybody had to know what had happened inside her friend’s house. She tried to keep her calm.

The usual ritual followed.

Known mainly from movies, for the last murder had taken place in Somerville back in 1964, when no one presently forming the Police force had yet taken on the uniform, and some had not even been born. Back then, on a day in May, a gentleman by the name of David Cole had accidentally fired his rifle in his spouse's chest.

The full army led by Inspector Finch was comprised of only five people, plus a part-time accountant. The ambulance had been sent from the county, eight miles away, because Somerville had no hospital, only four medical practices, one of which was a gynaecologist's and another of a dentist's.

The paramedics could do nothing else but to declare her dead and wrap the body in a plastic bag. For this they had to wait half an hour, as one of the officers had forgotten the camera at the prentice. Finally, they took photos from every angle and then the body was taken to the morgue.

Mrs O'Toole was still in the house and was gazing disapprovingly at the men in blue suits. They were stepping all over the place, although they should have donned plastic overalls, she thought, so as not to leave any marks. The tenderizer was put into an air-locked bag. Other cops were dusting the door knobs and other places they considered important for fingerprints.

They did not seem too efficient in what they were doing, or at least that was Mrs O'Toole's impression.

"Shouldn't you be more careful?" she asked a young freckled man named Neil.

"What for?" Neil asked back.

"For *clues*, perhaps," Mrs O'Toole answered.

"Which clues?" Neil said wide-eyed. "We have the murder weapon, that mallet over there. Did you hear a mewling? I'm sure I heard a mewling coming from somewhere."

"Mrs Jones has... had a cat named Sybille," she explained. "It's wondering around this place somewhere. But this isn't the point – "

"You think I could have it?" Neil mused. "The cat, I mean. If not, she'll go to the kennel. Sybille is a nice name. I have an aunt named Sybille, she lives in Cardiff."

Mrs O'Toole left him to himself and went out to the yard, her eyes searching for Inspector Finch. She saw him near the gazebo. He was eyeing some garden gnomes and was smoking a cigarette. He sent an unhappy glance to the woman who was striding towards him.

"An awful thing," he said.

"So it is," Mrs O'Toole said.

"We'll have to seal everything shut," the Inspector said hesitantly. "The boys have turned the house upside down."

"Is something missing?" Mrs O'Toole asked waving her right palm to cast away a small puff of smoke the wind had blown in her direction.

“How should I know?” the Inspector cried. “No drawer seems to have been opened by force and there are no signs of rummage. Everything’s in order. We still have no way of knowing what Mrs Jones had in her house. How could we know what Mrs Jones had in her house?” he asked himself aloud, as if the future of the investigation depended entirely on that sole fundamental detail.

“I know what was in her house,” Mrs O’Toole said with self-confidence.

“Ramona knows too, that girl from South America who comes every Friday to clean. If you let me look around, I could tell you if something’s missing. I also know where Nora kept her jewellery. And you have only to check at HSBC to see if she made any withdrawals from her account lately. I don’t think she did, but who knows... She did not keep cash in the house. Not because she was afraid of burglars, because we don’t have burglars around here, but this was a principle of hers.

“But I wanted to tell you something else, Mr Finch.”

“What’s that?” the Inspector asked, slightly apprehensive. “You do know you will be asked to give a statement, don’t you?”

“I think Nora was killed while she sat at her desk”, Mrs O’Toole said gloomily.

“That’s probably the way it happened”, agreed the Inspector.

A skylark started to sing buoyantly in a maple, and the Inspector’s gaze turned involuntarily in that direction. He’d always found the bird-song annoying, except the blackcock’s one.

“It happened last night, for Nora was wearing her housedress. In the morning, when she woke up, after she took a shower, she used to dress in street clothes, even though she had no intention of getting out of the house.”

“Interesting”, the Inspector said. “I think that - ”

“Therefore it happened last night”, Mrs O’Toole continued. “But the light in the house were off. Not even the lamp on her desk was on.”

“Weird”, Finch remarked.

“Who sits at the desk with all the lights off?” Mrs O’Toole asked rhetorically.

“Me,” said the Inspector. “Sometimes I feel better in the dark.”

“Nora had her ledger opened,” emphasised Mrs O’Toole. “She was writing something in it. There are some bills on the desk. Monday is bill-day, so she must have gotten them yesterday. In the evening, she set on transcribing them, like she usually did. She couldn’t have done it in the dark.”

“That’s another pair of shoes,” Finch said, a bit moody. “I thought you meant in general, who would sit at the desk with the lights off—hence my answer. But the killer maybe had a flashlight.”

“I didn’t mean the killer, but Nora”, Mrs O’Toole said patiently.

“Is there an ashtray around here?” asked the Inspector with his cigarette burned to a stub.

“Out in the yard, on the right, you’ll find the trashcan”, Mrs O’Toole offered, studying the intricate design of the broken veins on Mrs Finch’s nose.

The officer named Neil came out with the cat in his arms. The animal had its eyes half-closed and was purring. Neil scratched it under the chin. Mrs O’Toole glared hatefully at the feline.

“Animals without soul”, she said in an almost-whisper. “A dog would have howled and taken running after the ambulance caring its master’s body. And it would have lain by her grave days on end, maybe even weeks.”

She imagined the scene and the tears threatened to fill her eyes.

“Do you want to come to the station now?” she heard the Inspector’s voice behind her. “I could drive you.”

“I came by car,” Mrs O’Toole said full of dignity. “I should have gone shopping for furniture with Nora. Poor her, she wanted to buy a new coffee-table.”

“Poor woman,” Mrs Finch remarked. “Who could have done a thing like this?”

“This is what you will have to find out”, said Mrs O’Toole.

“Maybe the killer is hundreds of miles away already”, the Inspector said cautiously, hope blossoming in his voice. “If you’re all finished, seal everything, Neil. Did you bring enough tape?”

“But maybe he didn’t go too far”, Mrs O’Toole emphasized. “Maybe he’s here somewhere, in the neighbourhood”, she added, horrified.

“Nobody in our community would do such a thing”, Mr Finch said firmly. “Not from around here. We all know each other. No one is a murderer.”

“Maybe so”, Mrs O’Toole replied and righted the cap on her head. “One way or another, somebody did it. Somebody murdered Nora Jones, my friend.”

“We found Mrs Jones’ ladder propped up by the house wall, right there”, Mr Finch said and made a vague gesture. “Maybe the murderer didn’t know when coming that the back door was unlocked and decided to enter through one of the upstairs windows. Where did Mrs Jones keep her ladder, in the shed?”

“Yes”, confirmed Mrs O’Toole. “I have no idea what’s it doing propped up by the wall. Nora didn’t commission any house repairs lately. Can you take fingerprints from the ladder?” she asked, interested.

“No”, the Inspector answered. “Especially since last night it rained with cats and dogs. I woke up around two A.M. to close the bedroom window. Shall we go?”