**A Murder of Crow Witnesses**

**by James McCarthy**

It was the bloody chopped heart that enticed them down from the trees.

Edgar came first, landing a few feet away before strutting in to snatch a piece. Nala was second, claiming the choicest morsel for herself. Recent fledglings Boris and Bela descended next but kept further away, eager for food but nervous of the woman. Finally, Karlova swooped in. One of last year’s brood, she had stuck around to help her parents raise Bela and Boris. Karlova landed closest to Dr Jane Watts and deliberately placed the item in her beak down in front of the zoologist. Dr Watts smiled when she saw the offering but stayed upright, not reaching for it yet. However, she tossed an extra large scoopful of pig’s heart Karlova’s way.

This dawn ritual had been playing out for a year now in this pocket of woodland several miles southwest of Cambridge. The treats Jane brought varied: different kinds of nuts, dried or fresh fruit. But once a week she liked to offer these carrion crows their favourite food: animal offal. Watching their delight on this fateful morning, Jane felt that deeper spiritual connection which comes when humans and animals interact closely.

It was Nala who noticed the man first, with Edgar following her stare into the deeper shadows. Then Jane heard his soft movements. Turning, she saw him aim a double-barrelled shotgun at her. Ignoring her pleas, he squeezed both triggers. Shot tore through Jane’s face, body and legs. She dropped, terribly injured. As four crows flew off in alarm, Jane realised that one lay dead beside her. “Karlova...” Meanwhile, the man reloaded, stepped over Jane and...

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Detective Sergeant Shane O’Donald was, above all, a details man. Others in CID respected and resented him in equal measure for his desire to tally every last loose end. It was partly why they nicknamed him “Awkward”, though his initials DS SOD suggested it too: awkward sod from the murder squad.

Built like a rock, O’Donald had working class smarts that would gnaw away at incongruous or unusual details that didn’t fit any comfortable narrative some lesser talented detective might be peddling. And so it was that one detail would pique DS SOD’s curiosity when he arrived at this murder scene shortly after the uniforms finished taping it off.

A dog walker had chanced across Dr Watts’ body an hour after the shooting. The murderer hadn’t even attempted to move or hide her. Moreover, a lone used shotgun cartridge had been left nearby.

Had the perpetrator panicked and fled? O’Donald thought not. The fact the shooter had reloaded and discharged again from closer range didn’t smell like panic to Shane.

However, it was neither the cartridge nor unhidden body nor rapid arrest of a suspect that lingered in O’Donald’s mind when he finally attempted sleep twenty hours later. No, it was the sight of four crows huddled round that dead crow near Dr Watts’ body. Because, for all the world it seemed to Shane, those imposing black birds were mourning it.

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Alan Smith became chief suspect immediately. He owned and farmed the land adjacent to the wood. He was a loner with a history of confrontational behaviour. For more than a year he’d been locked in bitter dispute with Dr Watts, sending her increasing angry, erratic emails and then berating her in person. And it was all about carrion crows.

Smith claimed that successive generations of crows had preyed on his poultry operation. He’d been shooting them for years but could never quite eradicate the pests. Jane Watts, who lived a mile away, contested his claim that the crows did “serious damage”: a legal requirement of his licence to shoot them. As a prominent academic, she’d forced DEFRA to withdraw its permission. Smith was furious. Battle lines deepened between them.

As news of Jane’s murder spread, police were inundated with calls telling them about Smith, including from his own relatives. Arriving at the farm, detectives quickly discovered evidence of his culpability: Smith’s Spanish AYA double-trigger side-by-side 12-gauge shotgun (which forensics showed had been fired that day); his Ely Grand Prix cartridges (matching the one at the scene) containing an ounce and a sixteenth of number 6 shot (identical to that which killed Dr Watts); Smith’s work boots matched footprints leading to and from the scene; Smith’s Land Rover whose tyre treads left fresh impressions beside the wood; burnt clothes in a charred oil drum by Smith’s storage barn. And electronic investigation of Smith’s smart phone established that its location had moved from his farm an hour before Estimated Time of Death and returned soon after it.

Smith’s alibi was that he’d been asleep the whole time. He’d gotten drunk the night before and the first he knew of any murder was when O’Donald and team forcibly entered his locked property and found Smith apparently unconscious in bed.

On a scale of presumed guilt, Cambridge CID and the Crown Prosecution Service had Smith down as an Eleven out of Ten.

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At first, Shane had no tangible reason to disagree. Why would he want to peg back the department’s clear-up rate when this case was in the bag? And yet.... Shane’s mind wouldn’t stop raking over tangential details such as: had those four crows actually been mourning their dead family member?

Looking through Jane’s archive of phone videos and sketchbooks, Shane realised she’d named that particular bird Karlova. And in a box, Shane found small ‘gifts’ from Karlova to Jane. There was a pearly button, a snail’s shell, a ring-pull, a golden paper tack and various pieces of coloured glass. Jane had lovingly bagged, dated and labelled each offering. Shane picked up what he guessed was Jane’s most treasured possession: a small single-piece, smiling Lego face. And for just a moment he had a sense of the adult zoologist reconnecting to her inner child whose heart has just opened to the wonders of nature.

“Do crows grieve?” Shane later asked Jane’s friend and colleague Dr Zena Boulaye at Cambridge University’s Faculty of Biology.

“We don’t know either way for certain yet. But what you saw wasn’t primarily about grieving.”

“What were they doing then?”

“Holding an inquest. Trying to figure out the cause of death so they can avoid a similar fate in the future.”

“Really? They do that?”

“They do. Studies show how effectively crows change their behaviour in response to a danger. Chatham, Ontario is on a crow migration path. A few of its citizens used to shoot the birds as pests. In response, other crows assessed the situation and raised their flying altitude to get out of range.”

Shane smiled, fascinated. He loved hearing information like this.

“Corvids are among the most intelligent organisms on Earth. But that intelligence has developed differently to primates like us. Our neocortex helps with our advanced cognition. Crows have densely packed clusters of neurons instead: one and a half billion of them, as many as some monkey species. It’s an example of convergent evolution. Different organisms independently evolving similar traits.”

“What can crows do then, that you’d regard as intelligent?”

“Oh, plenty. Reason out cause and effect. Understand water displacement. Fashion tools for use. Deploy social ostracism to punish their selfish peers. Reward people who are nice to them.”

“Like Jane and these ‘gifts’.”

“Exactly. They also hold lifelong grudges against whoever’s nasty to them. They even pass these on to other crows as a warning.”

“You mean they recognise people?”

“And actively scold anyone they don’t like. You could say they’re very astute judges of character. We’re still discovering how astute. Some of the guys at the University of Washington work in this field.”

Shane fell silent. His neocortex was already reanalysing Dr Watts’ murder with Dr Boulaye’s information. *Crows remember people*...

Re-examining the remains of clothing found burnt at the farm, Shane realised there was no mask or scarf that might have hidden Smith’s face.

Piqued, O’Donald reviewed Smith’s guilt in conjunction with information he was hearing from a trusted criminal informant. As a consequence, he began to suspect three different co-conspirators might be responsible for Jane Watt’s murder.

How to prove it?

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Shane formulated a plan, every part of which was risky. But that was its appeal too: wanting to prove his radical thinking was correct.

First he had a friend in facial reconstruction make a mask of Alan Smith’s face.

Then, having quietly persuaded a sceptical detective to come and video on her phone, Shane went to the wood to find the crows with the mask in his bag.

Edgar, Nala, Bela and Boris were high in the trees. Shane scattered peanuts and eventually the birds descended to feed. Shane had never appreciated how sleek and beautiful carrion crows are, how characterful. Then he slipped on the Smith mask.

The effect was instantaneous. They recognised “Smith” and all rose, agitated, at once. All four scolded “Smith” with Edgar and Nala swooping in repeatedly to drive him away. Shane’s fellow detective’s scepticism was severely dented.

Could Smith really have shot Dr Watts? If he was barefaced that morning, why hadn’t the five crows reacted immediately in the same way? Why didn’t they take flight at this guy who shot them as vermin? Why did Karlova stay on the ground when the gunman appeared and so get shot and killed alongside Jane?

And if Smith wasn’t the culprit, who was? Who else had access and opportunity to make all the evidence “fit” Smith so perfectly?

Detective Inspector Hughes was aghast when Shane showed him the video and outlined the next stage of his plan. But Hughes knew Shane wouldn’t stop working to prove his theory. And, if Shane was right, they were prosecuting an innocent if highly unlikable man while Jane’s true killers were enjoying the fruits of their murder.

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With Smith in custody, his two grown up sons had moved into his farm, ostensibly to keep it running. Relations between father and sons had been souring for years.

Tommy (the eldest) regularly visited his father and had been there the night before the murder, but he was working at a supermarket the morning it happened. Younger Lenny had no alibi except that he was home with girlfriend Hazel. Both would claim they were having sex. And their phones’ location services did show them at home when Jane was killed.

But Tommy, Lenny and Hazel had histories of drug dealing, theft and violence. And whispers picked up by Shane’s CI suggested they needed money and coveted their father’s farm. Cunning enough to know that if they killed Alan Smith suspicion would fall on them, Tommy had often heard his father vent fury at that crow-loving bitch Dr Watts. Might Tommy not have reasoned that her death could be the solution to his and his brother’s problems?

Two things cracked the case.

Firstly an extensive electronic eavesdropping operation was secretly put in place at the farm and over the trio’s phones.

Secondly, O’Donald mischievously got a detective to pose as a reporter and ask Lenny and Hazel to comment on rumours the police were using crows as witnesses to the murder. In private, Lenny and Hazel couldn’t help discussing the possibility. Once they got talking, their conversation validated Shane’s theory that Tommy had drugged his father that night, stolen and copied the farmhouse keys, that Lenny had gone to the farm very early the next morning (without his own phone), put on his father’s clothes, gloves and boots, taken Alan’s phone, shotgun and ammo, and driven the Land Rover to the woods. And there, he shot and killed Dr Watt before arranging all the evidence as proof of Smith’s guilt.

The trio were guilty.

Shane’s favourite moment occurred after they’d been arrested, confronted with the evidence and charged with murder. “What do you know? You don’t know shit,” Lenny had yelled.

“Oh yes, I do,” Shane had smiled back. “A not-so-little bird has told me everything.”