

FRED & ROSE

Howard Sounes

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Howard Sounes was born in Welling, Kent, in 1965. He has worked as a journalist for newspapers in Britain and abroad, and is currently on the staff of the *Daily Mirror*.

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Published by Hachette Digital

ISBN: 978-1-405-51217-6

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Hachette Digital
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London, EC4Y 0DY

www.hachette.co.uk

*In memory of
Betty and Ray Sounes
and Reginald Davis*

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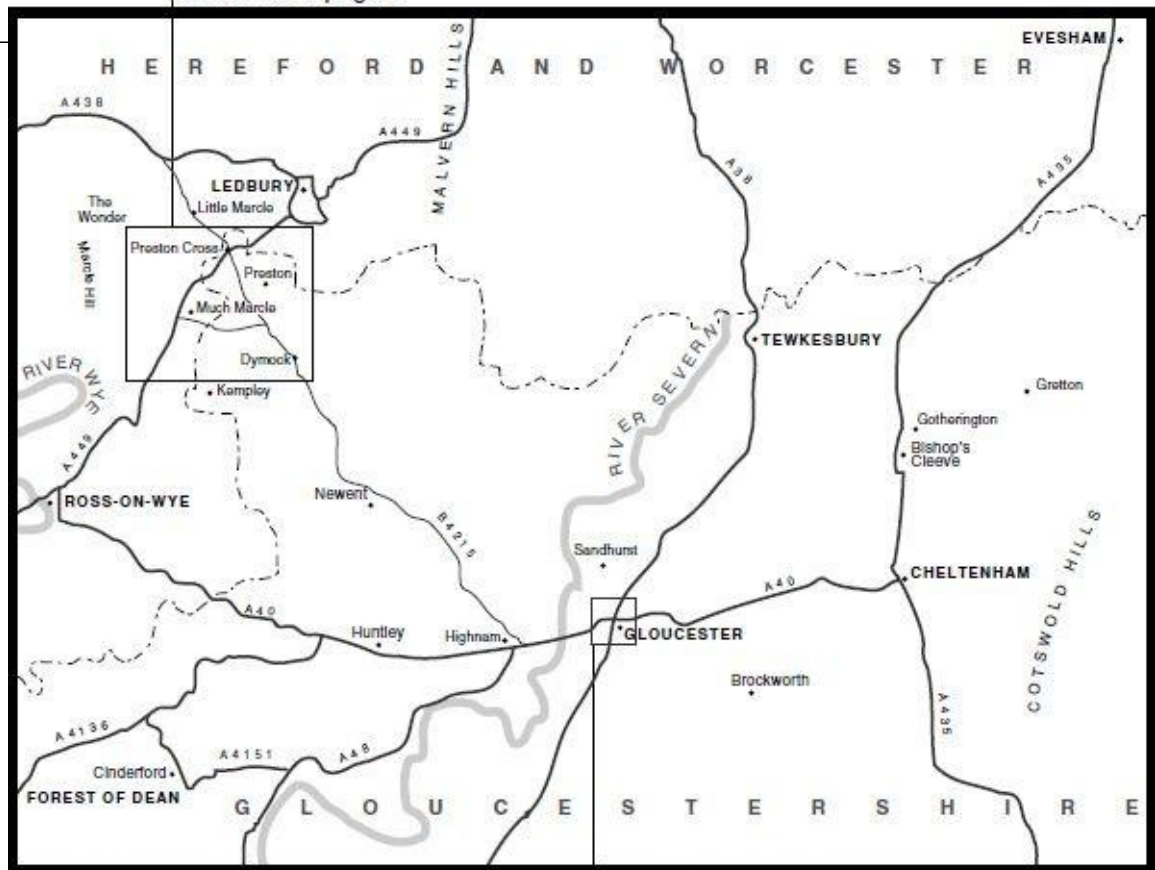
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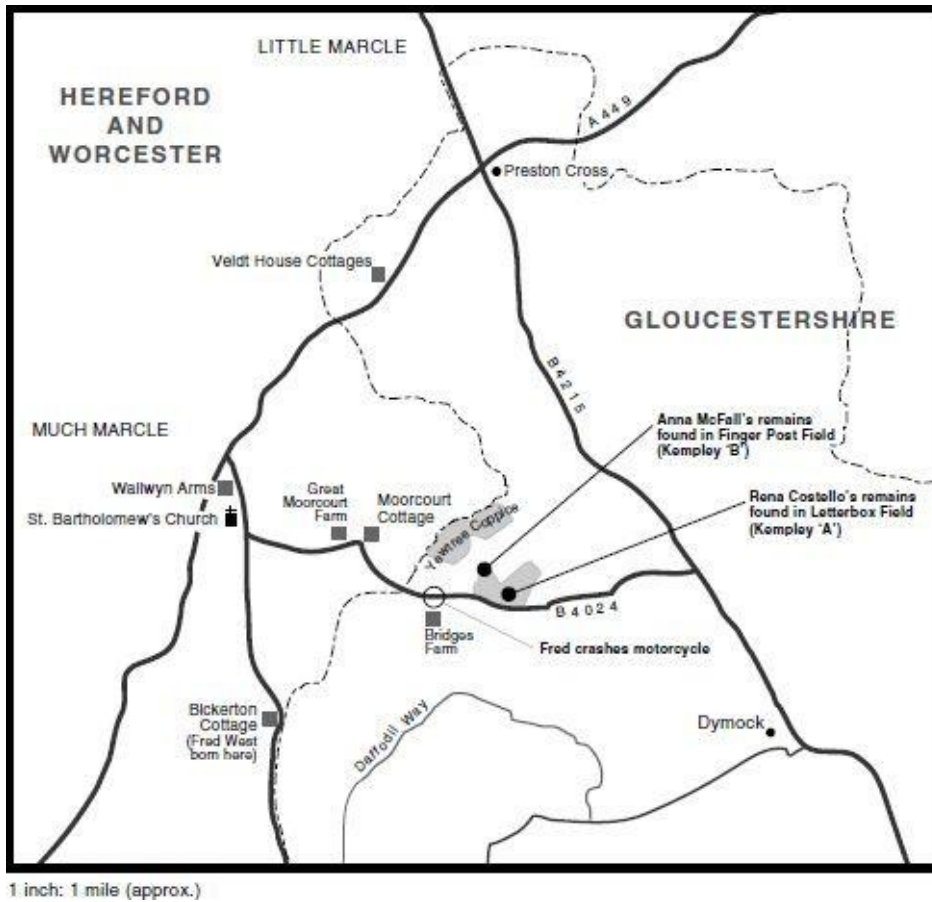
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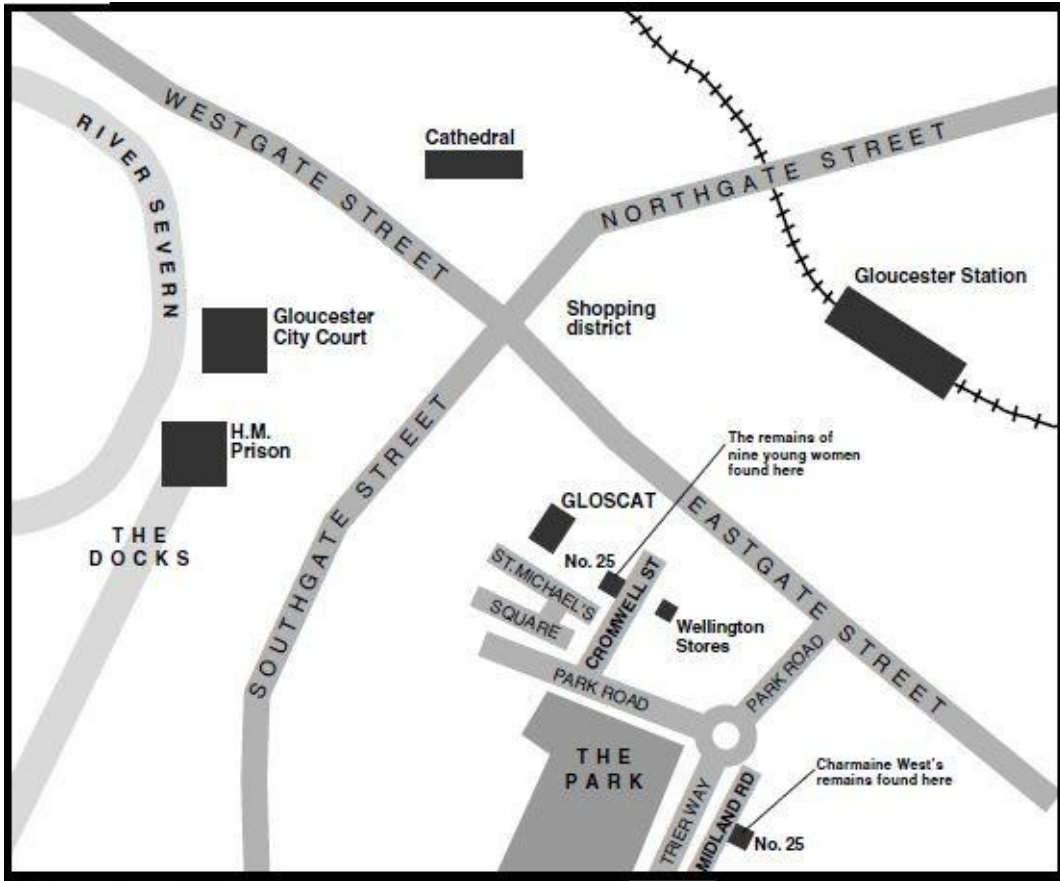
1 inch: 4 miles (approx.)

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The Gloucestershire–Hereford and Worcester border. See overleaf for detailed maps of the boxed areas.



The area around Much Marcle, where Fred West grew up, and where he buried the remains of Rena Costello and Anna McFall.



1 Inch: 250 yards (approx.)

Simplified street map of Gloucester, showing Midland Road and Cromwell Street, where the Wests spent their twenty-four years in the city.

PREFACE

IN THE LAST days of February 1994, articles began appearing in Gloucester's evening newspaper about human remains being uncovered under the garden of a house in the city. The address of the house was 25 Cromwell Street. The bones – for that is all the remains were after several years in the ground – had been tentatively identified by police as those of one of the daughters of the household, a girl named Heather West. She had not been seen alive since 1987, when she was aged sixteen. Her father, Fred West, a 52-year-old jobbing builder, and her mother, Rose, a 40-year-old prostitute, were arrested and questioned about the discovery. Rose was released after a few hours, but Fred was charged with Heather's murder.

It was an interesting case – a man who had apparently killed his teenage daughter and hidden her under the patio – but it was by no means unique. Murders within families, generically known to the police as 'domestic' killings, are relatively commonplace. For this reason, and the fundamental fact that Fred West had been charged – severely limiting what could properly be reported – the investigation at first received little coverage in the national media. The *Daily Mirror*, for example, printed just two short paragraphs on the morning of 1 March, under the headline DAD FACES DEATH CASE.

This situation changed slightly a few days later, when it emerged that the police had discovered the remains of two more young women at Cromwell Street. The story was given more space and prominence in the press, even reaching the front pages under the headline GARDEN OF EVIL. but was still overshadowed by other news.

I was employed at the time as a staff reporter for the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper in London. Just after lunch on Saturday 5 March I took an unexpected telephone call from a police source in Gloucestershire, a person whom I am bound by a confidence not to identify. I was told that, over the last few hours, there had been sensational developments in the 'Garden of Evil' case – developments of which the press were unaware, partly because the police officers attached to the inquiry team had been sworn to secrecy.

Fred West had committed an astonishing number of murders, far more than had previously been suspected. The remains of young women were buried not only in the garden of 25 Cromwell Street, but had been supposed, but also in the cellar of the house; under the bathroom floor; under the extension of a second property nearby; and in fields on the outskirts of the village where Fred West was born. The police calculated there were at least nine more victims to be found, making – with the remains of the three already discovered – a possible total of twelve. An experimental radar device used over the previous twenty-four hours had indicated at least five graves in the cellar alone. While I listened to this incredible information on the telephone, trying to note every detail of what had happened, police officers were using pneumatic drills to break up the concrete floor.

I was told that the dead were probably all young women. The likely victims included lodgers, hitch-hikers, and girls snatched from bus stops. Fred West was talking freely about these girls, and from the casual way in which he discussed their fates, detectives believed he had almost certainly killed many more.

Even in those first few moments it was clear this was to number among the most extraordinary murder cases in British criminal history.

I worked on the story with the *Sunday Mirror*'s crime reporter, Chris House, who was able to corroborate what I had been told. Pondering the introduction to our article, which would appear on the front page, we cast about for a new name for the investigation, a phrase more appropriate than 'Garden of Evil'. We came up with HOUSE OF HORRORS. In retrospect it may not have been the most original idea, but it is the name that has stuck and has been widely used since. It first appeared in connection with the Wests on page one of the *Sunday Mirror* that weekend; following on from the headline was a lengthy article breaking the story of the macabre contents of 25 Cromwell Street, and the existence of the other graves, thereby revealing the true scale of the case.

The remains of several more young women were indeed recovered from inside 25 Cromwell Street over the following days, and enormous media interest came to focus on that plain semi-detached house. Journalists arrived in Gloucester from all over the country, and the world, eager to discover everything about the West family. There had not been such a newsworthy British murder story since 1983, when civil servant Dennis Nilsen was found to have killed fifteen young men. In many ways, the West case was more comparable to that of Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, who had murdered a number of children in the late 1960s.

The following weekend I wrote a second article, this time reporting that the human remains found at the house had been cut into pieces and that there was evidence of sexual torture. A week later I identified the exact location in the fields near Fred West's childhood home where the police were soon to dig for more victims. The front page of the 27 March issue of the *Sunday Mirror* reported that the remains already recovered were not complete: many bones were missing, especially from the feet and hands. This would later prove to be a most unsettling mystery.

It became apparent that such mayhem could not be the work of Fred West alone, although he was the only person to be charged at this stage. It seemed likely that Rose had been as much involved in the murders as her husband, and that it was her appetite for sadistic lesbian sex which had been the motivation for most of the killings.

On 10 April 1994 I reported that arrests would be made regarding sex abuse at Cromwell Street and on 21 April Rose West was brought before magistrates, charged with raping a young girl. It was this that first put her behind bars. On 24 April, I reported that she was being closely questioned about the murders of her daughter Heather and another young girl. The next day, Rose was charged with murder for the first time. On 1 May I wrote that she would now be charged with murdering all nine women found at Cromwell Street, and as the weeks went by, this also happened.

A great number of newspaper articles have subsequently been devoted to this story, but they do not sufficiently explain the murders or the nature of the people involved. To attempt to understand why so many young women died in and around 25 Cromwell Street, it is necessary to learn about the personalities of, and relationship between, Fred and Rose West. Newspapers, and indeed policemen, are never very interested in this. It is enough for them to describe the murderers as 'evil' and 'psychopathic', leaving us none the wiser as to what motivated such violence. But there is relevant information to discover.

In the chapters that follow I have tried to set out the story of the lives of this extraordinary couple as factually and dispassionately as possible. My purpose is not to excuse their crimes, but to help explain *how* Fred and Rose developed into people capable of such behaviour. The reader will notice that there is little personal comment in the main part of the book. I do hold strong opinions regarding all aspects of the story, but have reserved these views for the Epilogue.

NUMEROUS people have helped in the researching and writing of *Fred & Rose*, which has now taken more than eighteen months. I am grateful to them all, but want to thank the following individuals, and organisations, in particular: Fred West's brother and sister-in-law, Doug and Christine West; Rose West's mother, Mrs Daisy Letts; the Editors and staff at Mirror Group, especially Chris House; Alan Samson and Andrew Gordon at Little, Brown/Warner; my friend Karen Tas, for her good advice; Maria; and Gloucester Police, including, most notably, Detective Superintendent John Bennett, who has been as helpful as the restrictions of his difficult job permitted.

THE victims of this case are very many, and are not limited to those dozen young women who are now known to have been killed by Fred and Rose West. The dead all leave relatives and friends who will never be able to forget what has happened. How many other victims the Wests claimed, and the sorrows of their loved ones, will probably never be known. There are also those who have been abused by the Wests as children, or have witnessed the sexual and physical abuse of others. I would like to end by offering my sympathy to all the people who continue to suffer the consequences of these tragic events.

PROLOGUE

THE GULLS FROM Gloucester docks perch on top of 25 Cromwell Street, crying and flapping their wings noisily as Fred West comes home. The birds have nested in the space between the roof and the gutter of his house, and are a constant nuisance. Fred glares up at them as he opens and then closes behind him the black and gold front gate.

He pauses to cast an eye over his property. Fred is extremely proud of this modest semi-detached house, and has made a great many improvements since he and his wife, Rose, moved here twenty years ago. An unusually ornate house sign, fashioned in wrought iron, represents the care he has lavished on the building. *25 Cromwell Street* is picked out in curly white letters set in a black frame. The address is also painted on the black plastic rubbish bins in the tiny front yard.

Some years ago Fred rendered the outside walls with sand-coloured concrete, and this is still in fair condition, although there are dark streaks at the top where rainwater runs down through faults in the Victorian guttering. The three sash windows, spaced one above the other at the front, are hung with net curtains. Their frames are pea-green. Facing Fred is a second pair of iron gates, about six feet tall, painted grey and fastened with a lock in the middle. The key is under a stone.

As Fred reaches down to pick up the key, he sees one of the young student girls from the bedsitter making her way to the local shop, the Wellington Stores. There is a college at the back of Fred's house, and many of the students rent accommodation in Cromwell Street because it is cheap and convenient. Fred earns extra money by carrying out odd jobs for the landlords of these bedsitters, and recently mended a handle on the window of this particular girl's room, so he calls out a cheery hello. His rural Herefordshire accent seems out of place here in the inner city.

The student likes Fred and his wife, as most of the neighbours do. When she was unwell recently and staying home from college, Mrs West offered to visit the chemist for her, saying, 'I'm only a couple of doors away if you need me.' So the girl stops to speak with Fred, and asks after the health of the couple's large brood of children.

Fred says he hopes she has a boyfriend to take her out tonight. If not, she is very welcome to come over to Number 25 and have a drink with him and Rose; they could watch a video together. There is a lewd tone to the way he speaks, and the student can see why some of her friends warned her not to talk to him when he called to mend the window lock. He had made an odd comment then, about having slept with hundreds of women and fathering over forty children. It seemed such an absurd boast that she laughed out loud.

He is not even a handsome man. He has a wide face and distinctive, simian features, a protruding jaw and small crooked nose. His hair is such a dark brown that it appears black, and grows in an unruly clump. Long, old-fashioned sideburns spread down the sides of his jaw. His teeth are badly decayed and one of the two front incisors is chipped, accentuating a gap. Fred is of medium height and limps when he walks. He is slightly overweight around the middle, but despite this appears fit and strong. The student assumes Fred is in his late forties, maybe older. He invariably wears the same navy-blue donkey jacket that he has on today, a dark patterned sweater and blue jeans; his hands are grimy and he has not shaved. But it is his brilliant blue eyes that are most striking.

They say goodbye. Fred unlocks the double gates and carefully locks them behind him again. F

opens the front door, which has been stained dark brown in an attempt to make it look like oak. There is a square glass panel at eye level and a small electric coaching lamp on the wall. A lucky horseshoe is nailed above the door, reminding Fred of the country village where he grew up.

Inside Number 25 there is an odd, fusty smell. The small hallway is painted lime green. On the left is a locked door, and there is another door directly ahead. Fred calls out: 'Rose! Rose!' in his gruff way. There is no answer so he walks through the second door, which leads into his 'tool room'. Apart from Fred's building equipment, there is also a washing machine and spin-dryer in here. He passes through another door and down a step into an open living area, featuring an arched breakfast bar with a Formica surface and stools set before it. There is also a sofa upholstered in green velour, a television and a cream dial telephone on a shelf. The walls are covered with artificial pine boarding speckled with dozens of knots, and there is a wooden pillar in the middle of the room supporting the roof. The extension, and all of the fittings inside, are the result of Fred's passion for DIY.

Several children sit around. Some are white-skinned; others black. They range in age from toddlers to teenagers. They had been chattering amongst themselves, but fall silent as 'Dad' walks into the room, dropping his heavy bag of tools on the floor. 'Where's your mum?' asks Fred. One of the teenagers quietly replies that their mother is upstairs, adding that she is with one of 'her friends'.

Fred takes off his jacket and walks back through the tool room, unlocking the door on the right to the hallway. He locks it behind him again and walks up a flight of approximately seven steps. At the top, Fred turns and climbs a further short flight, taking him up to a landing which leads into another lounge.

There is a large walk-in bar by the window, stocked with a variety of drinks. A mural of a tropical island covers one wall. On the carpet by the sofa are two glasses, still with a little alcohol in the bottom, and an ashtray. A cloud of cigarette smoke lingers.

Fred notices that a video has been left on. The picture is of poor quality – the colours are too bright and there is little definition – but it is clear what type of film it is. A young woman is wearing a bizarre costume made of pieces of shiny black material and straps. Only her eyes and mouth can be seen through holes in the mask she is wearing. A man is touching her from behind, and she appears to be in pain. Fred turns the volume down, but the sound of a woman moaning still emanates from somewhere in the room. It is amplified in a tinny way, as if from the speaker of a cheap radio.

Fred settles himself on the sofa, moving a cushion embroidered with the word MUM, and reaches down to an intercom which is plugged into the skirting board. The intercom has a speaker attachment and he holds this to his ear: Fred can now hear two people having sex in another part of the house. Most of the noise is made by a woman. She is breathing hard and shouting as if she is being hurt. Fred can hear flesh being slapped.

He listens to his wife having sex as the afternoon light fades and everything except the glowing television picture diminishes into gloom. Sometimes Rose makes so much noise that she can be clearly heard even without the intercom. The sound comes from the room directly above the bar. When it eventually stops, Fred puts down the intercom. Momentarily at a loss as to what to do, he decides to move his van round to the front of the house.

Outside, the orange street lights have come on. It is a dowdy, unattractive area, and most of the properties are neglected, with rubbish piled up by the doors. Police sirens wail through the city, and a loud argument can be heard from the upstairs window of one of the bedsitters.

Because Cromwell Street is so central, shoppers and office workers park their cars here. Fred often finds that he has to leave his van around the corner in Cromwell Terrace, and then move it again after six o'clock so it is safely in front of his property before he goes to bed. When he has moved the van, Fred sits in the cab for a moment, watching as the door of his house opens and a small West Indian man comes out. The man looks left and right, quickly, furtively. Behind him in the doorway, a plum

woman with dark hair clutches together a dressing gown of faded pink towelling. The man hurries away in the direction of Eastgate Street, and the woman closes the door.

The fluorescent light is on in the breakfast bar area, making the pine walls appear a queasy yellow colour. Rose is in the kitchen preparing Fred's supper. She is in her late thirties, of medium height and quite fat. Her hair is glossy – almost black – and cut short, but it falls down at the front over her eyes. Rose wears large spectacles with coloured plastic frames, and gold-coloured hoop earrings. Her skin is olive, and a fuzz of fine black hair grows on her upper lip. Apart from the dressing gown, she wears slippers and long white nylon socks. When she turns to get the salt from the unit behind her, she sees that one of the children is sitting on the work-surface. 'Fucking get off!' she yells, striking out with her hand.

'You made a right old row, Rosie,' says Fred – not as a rebuke, but as if he is complimenting her. Rose is at the sink now, opening a bag of frozen peas with scissors. 'He enjoyed it, evidently,' she agrees, nodding to some five-pound notes by her purse. 'Says he is coming again next week.' Fred rolls himself a cigarette contentedly.

Dinner is a simple affair: defrosted food with slices of white bread and a glass of tap water. Fred eats quickly, talking to Rose as he does so about all he has done in the day. He has been at Stroud Court, a home for autistic people near the village of Nailsworth. His employers are paid to carry out maintenance work for the institution. Fred says that, when he was driving back to the depot near Stroud, he saw a woman by the side of the road holding her skirt up for him. He could see 'everything'. Neither Rose nor the children react to this, considering Fred to be 'off in a world of his own'.

He then asks the family if they can guess who he saw as he was driving along Barton Street that evening. Without a pause he answers his own question: 'I seen Heather!' The mention of this name transforms the atmosphere in the room; suddenly, everybody is listening to Fred.

Heather is Fred and Rose's first-born daughter. None of the children have seen her since she apparently left home several years earlier. It is difficult for the younger ones even to remember what their sister looked like, because all her photographs have disappeared from the house. 'I come down Barton Street and there she was. She is a working girl now, mind. She is, what's her name, selling drugs and that. I called out "Hi, Heather!" but I couldn't stop,' says Fred.

The children ask, 'How did she look, Dad?' making no comment about Fred's claim that their sister is a prostitute and a drug dealer. He used to say she was a lesbian, because she never had a boyfriend. The children think Fred is 'sex mad'.

'She looked rough. But she must be making a good bit of money, mind,' Fred replies.

Rose's face becomes flushed, and she glares at Fred angrily. She jumps up from the sofa, snatches his plate and pushes past him into the kitchen, scraping the left-overs into the red pedal-bin by the door. Fred falls silent. He knows how fierce Rose's temper can be, and that she does not like him talking about Heather.

He sits and watches the back of Rose's head. She is standing at the glass doors that lead out into the back garden. Rain is falling, making the coloured patio slabs shiny. It was wet like this when Heather died. Fred's gaze drifts across to the edge of the patio by the fir trees, and then his blue eyes glaze over thoughtfully.

The telephone rings abruptly – it is for Fred. He is called out by one of the local landlords to visit a bedsitter down the street. A bath has overflowed and the ceiling of the room below is ruined; the landlord wants Fred to patch up the damage and then arrange a time to repair the plaster. He will be paid in cash, and Fred is never known to turn down extra work – even on a Friday night – so he goes out.

W^{HEN} he returns home, most of the lights are off and the house is quiet. He turns on the television just in time to watch a late news bulletin. Fred has no patience with most programmes, but always tries to catch the headlines.

Rose is in bed in their room on the top floor of the house. Fred undresses and climbs in beside her, turning off the light. He regrets having mentioned Heather's name today, upsetting Rose, but he thinks they should try and maintain the fiction that their daughter is still alive.

Thinking of Heather reminds him of all the other girls who have died. Fred puts his arms around Rose and closes his eyes.

Faces flicker in his mind like ghosts, and then there is blackness.

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