

## Introduction

### The 'crime of passion' myth

*Vincent*

Murder, perhaps more than any other crime, is the crime of ordinary people.

Vincent is ordinary. He has never sought to be otherwise. His three-bedroom semi-detached house on a pleasant urban street in a nice northern town is well maintained, as is his ageing four-door estate car – precious emblems of the life he considered any man could expect. He claimed his entitlements and nothing more.

Yet, here he stood, silent and still in the darkness, dissatisfied, staring at the bland office building, waiting. He gripped the long, sharp knife tightly in his hand. For any minute now she would emerge from the door, and he was ready.

Donna's pace was brisk. Her keys had been in her hand since before she exited the building where she worked. She didn't want to hang around in the dark car park fumbling for them in her bag; she was confident but cautious. She clicked the electronic key and watched the lights of her car flash. She breathed a sigh of relief that she was at the vehicle, safe. But before she could get the door open, Vincent struck the first of many blows, plunging the knife deep into her chest. Donna died quite quickly, but Vincent kept going. On and on, inflicting thirty-eight stab wounds to her body.

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It is over a year since that day, and Vincent and I sit opposite each other on hard wooden chairs separated only by a battered old table as we prepare to speak about the murder of his wife, Donna. Vincent is serving a life sentence for that murder. Without remorse, shame or guilt he tells me in fairly hushed tones that throughout his life he has been a victim; no one ever listened to him, and no one put him first. Just for a second his watery brown eyes fill with tears of self-pity. But I am here neither to pity him, nor to condemn him. I am here to find out if he could have been stopped.

Studying people like Vincent – people who decide to kill their wives, husbands, children, partners – is something I have been doing for many years. I study them not to treat or rehabilitate them, but to find ways of preventing others like them from killing. I would not be involved in helping Vincent reintegrate into society for example, nor would I counsel him.

Vincent was not a routinely violent man; he was not considered an abuser before he killed Donna. But he was controlling, and it was this control that revealed the danger he posed to her.

I look at him closely, hunched against the grubby magnolia paintwork that is like camouflage for him, though he is not chameleon-like; he does not change and adapt. And perhaps that is part of his problem: his utter inflexibility. It just so happens that this tired, drab room, in a crumbling grey prison, is his perfect milieu.

We are often shocked when a killer is unmasked. 'But he was such a nice guy,' friends and neighbours will say. I imagine Vincent's neighbours describing him as a quiet man who kept himself to himself, a man who was not overly friendly, but no trouble. They certainly would not have marked him as a potential murderer.

We like to think that we would know a murderer if we met one, that there would be an identifying 'mark of Cain' that our finer instincts would recognise: someone different from us, someone we are unlikely to encounter in our day-to-day lives. But when we consider that two women are killed in the UK by their partners each week, three a day in the USA, and around five a day in Mexico, then this idea starts to fall apart. These women have not only met a person capable of murder, but may have moved in with or married them. In 2020 in the UK the intimate partner homicide rate more than doubled after lockdown restrictions were enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic and similar rises were noted across the globe.

In Mexico in March 2020 there was a call for a general strike by women in outrage at the ten women a day killed in 'femicides'; in the UK the new Domestic Abuse Bill has seen campaigns for changes in homicide defences that justify intimate homicide, like 'rough sex' strangulation; in late 2019 in France, where they have one of the highest rates of intimate homicide in Europe, there were nationwide rallies held accusing the authorities of turning a blind eye (using the hashtag *Nous Toutes* or *All of Us*); in late 2019 South Africa declared femicide a national crisis, with the government reporting that a woman is murdered every three hours in the country; Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries to live for women and such is the problem that in 2019 the Chief Justice announced 1,000 extra courts just to deal with violence against women. There is increasing international recognition of the problem of intimate homicides, a problem borne mainly by women and perpetrated mainly by men.

The killers are too often assessed by their status as husbands, boyfriends or lovers rather than as dangerous criminals. There is an assumption that either the killing is contained and wider society is not at risk, or that it is in some way justified. In my experience neither is true. There are links between domestic abuse and wider crime, there



are links between domestic abuse and other forms of homicide, and there are many cases where more than one partner is killed. For example, Theodore Johnson was convicted of murdering Angela Best in 2016 but had killed two previous partners, one in 1981 and another in 1993; Robert Trigg was convicted of killing Susan Nicholson in 2011, and had killed a previous partner in 2006; Ian Stewart was jailed for killing Helen Bailey in 2016 and is also charged with murdering his first wife in 2010. Children are sometimes killed, or others who may become targets, like new partners or family members. Think of Alan Hawe, who killed his wife Clodagh and their three children Liam (thirteen), Niall (eleven) and Ryan (six) in Ireland in August 2016, or Janbaz Tarin, who killed his partner Raneem Oudeh and also her mother Khoala Saleem. Raoul Moat attempted to kill his former partner Samantha Stobbart, and succeeded in killing her new partner Chris Brown in July 2010. He also shot police officer David Rathband in the face, blinding him. PC Rathband died by suicide in February 2012.

We tend to give some killers in the public eye or in fiction a certain degree of charisma; they can become pseudo-celebrities, their names tripping off the tongue as if they were rock stars. But these figures bear little resemblance to the most common kind of murderer – the killers we are most likely to meet. These killers' names are rarely remembered, they serve sentences shorter than most of us would imagine, and they are part of our communities, working alongside us, living right by us, just like Vincent.

Vincent is a killer. He became a killer the day he murdered Donna. Before that he was just a man, but with the hidden potential to plan and execute a murder. Even now, sitting in this prison, he is essentially still the Vincent he always was. The Vincent who lived and worked among us. So the real conundrum is to try and understand what brought Vincent out of the shadows.

*'I just snapped'*

Vincent sits very quietly in front of me. He has a lot of hair for a man in his late fifties but it's not well kept, like his shave is clean but not close. He gives no clues that he is capable of such violence. Unlike some of the other violent men I have met, Vincent appears to lack that veneer of self-assurance: he is not commanding any space; he does not speak loudly. It would be easy to forget that he had planned the killing of his wife well in advance, and he had executed that plan efficiently and quickly. Donna was taken completely by surprise, with no chance to defend herself as she tried to get in her car. After the brutal and merciless attack, he let her fall to the floor and called 999 to confess. It is not unusual for killers like Vincent to call the police, or a friend, and immediately admit what they have done.

When Vincent was arrested he told the police: 'It was like a red mist came down, I just snapped' – giving the impression that he had grabbed a knife and stabbed Donna in a spontaneous fit of anger. But when talking to me he says: 'Nobody is listening to me; they just don't want to know how things were affecting me. . .'

'I will listen to you,' I say.

And that is exactly what I do, very carefully.

Vincent has had plenty of time to reflect on his violence, so I jump straight in to let him know exactly why I am there.

'I'm here to try and find out if anything could have been done to stop this,' I say to him, mirroring his quiet and gentle tone.

'I am the real victim,' he answers, 'but no one can see it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I had plans, you know – I was going to retire, I was going to get a smallholding and just grow my own food, maybe have some chickens. It's not like I didn't say anything.'

'So what happened?' I asked

'What always happened,' he replied. 'What I wanted never mattered – still doesn't.'

He is quiet for a while and I let the silence linger.

'No one comes to visit me, no one,' he says glumly. 'My kids, they don't want to speak to me. They don't understand. They can't see how it was. They think I'm the bad one. It's not fair.'

Vincent cannot understand why people are not on his side. Despite claiming that no one listens to him, he has been given ample opportunity to tell his story as part of the trial, and he has been talking to forensic psychiatrists as part of his defence that he 'just snapped'. What he is actually complaining about, it seems, is that no one is standing in solidarity with him. No one is saying: 'Yes Vincent, you were entirely justified in killing Donna' – and that upsets him.

'Can you understand why people might stay away, why your children might stay away?' I ask.

'It's always like this, it always has been,' he responds. 'No one takes my side, no one sees how things affect me. It just proves my point, really. I was losing everything and no one cared. She was leaving, and where would that leave me?'

I don't want to challenge Vincent's version of events. That is not my purpose. He had already spent considerable time preparing his story about what happened that night in preparation for his trial. That fiction might even have become a kind of truth for him.



I am quite happy to listen to Vincent talk about how he thinks of himself as a victim, because the more he talks, the less likely he is to draw on his rehearsed words. I also believe that he honestly feels he is a victim. I believe that he may have experienced any number of humiliations and rejections over the years. This, for him, is not just a flurry of excuses; this is who Vincent is. The interesting thing for me is not to forensically interrogate each example of rejection Vincent gives me, but to recognise the enormous role rejection and humiliation have had in modelling and shaping his internal system of status and justice. Everyone experiences humiliations and rejections; the difference is how we deal with and perceive them.

‘Even my mother, she didn’t like me. She never treated me right,’ Vincent tells me. ‘It’s been like it all my life, really.’

Vincent has not yet mentioned Donna by name; he is talking much more broadly about past rejections. He then moves on to more recent injustices.

‘They told me I couldn’t have an allotment. I tried to tell them in court how it was, but it’s like it didn’t matter.’

To Vincent it is all unfair: the criminal justice system, the mental health services, his friends and family not visiting. They all seem to him to be against him; he feels powerless to make people respect and agree with him.

But it is his inability to empathise that is the most telling. He cannot understand why his grown-up children do not want to visit. It does not seem to occur to him to wonder how they would feel about a man who murdered their mother. It is all about him. Without realising it, he has revealed a key aspect of himself, in his own words.

We learn to spot people who might present a threat to us, not necessarily by just looking at them, but by their patterns of behaviour and the way they talk about things. That is why such a substantial part of my work is listening – but more importantly, perhaps, letting people talk. There is a difference. As I let him talk, Vincent expressed in his own unpractised words what propelled him, thus allowing me to work out where the brakes might have been best applied.

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For millennia we have rationalised the killing of spouses with the idea of a ‘crime due to passion’ – the *crime passionnel*. This idea neatly explains the seemingly inexplicable killing of a loved one. It encourages us to believe that people might kill their lovers or spouses in spontaneous fits of jealousy or rage, having discovered, say, some extramarital affair or terrible betrayal. This can seem plausible because most of us have experienced some rejection, or a relationship ending that was particularly painful. We can imagine how some people might, in those circumstances, lose their rationality and ‘just snap’ or ‘lose it’ by doing something completely out of character. It is certainly the way many of these murders are explained in the media and in murder trials. Similarly, we can also believe that men who routinely beat their partners in what appear to be fits of uncontrollable anger might one day take it too far; death may be the result, even if it was not intended.

So of these two dominant and seemingly simple and plausible explanations, which fitted Vincent? Had he discovered Donna *in flagrante* and responded in the heat of the moment to his overwhelming feelings of jealousy?

The facts do not support this. Vincent had ambushed Donna when she was doing something perfectly normal – coming home from work. He chose his time and place; he chose his method. He had time to think and plan; he had time to be rational; he stood in the dark car park silently waiting for her. He made the decision to do what he did. This was not a spontaneous loss of control. Neither was Vincent routinely violent to Donna. This was not ‘one beating too far’.

So was Vincent the exception that proves the rule? No – as in most things, Vincent was average. He had now become your average wife killer.

Once we move past the idea that these murders are ‘spontaneous’, we can start to challenge the idea that they are unpredictable or beyond analysis and forensic understanding. Intimate partner homicide is, in fact, one of the more predictable forms of homicide. That predictability forms the basis for my eight-stage Homicide Timeline.

### *Solidarity*

By saying he just snapped, Vincent suggested that stabbing his wife to death was a crime of passion. He was expecting that everyone would assent to this and believe him.

When I met Vincent, I was with a colleague. She had struggled with the notion that she would have to shake hands with him. She did not want to touch Vincent; not out of disgust, and not out of fear, but out of solidarity with Donna. She remembers his hands very well from that meeting – can still describe their large and gnarled appearance as if he were sitting before her now.

I was studying a case once where a man murdered a teenage girl who was on a school exchange trip in the UK. The girl’s mother sat through the trial of her daughter’s killer, a known sex offender, who was eventually convicted of that murder. At the end of the trial a lawyer from the defence team sent her a note that said: ‘I promise I never touched him, I did not even shake his hand.’ Like my colleague, the lawyer felt discomfort out of solidarity.



However, in my experience, in cases of intimate partner homicide, solidarity with the victim is much less in evidence than solidarity with the killer. Media reports often look for a sympathetic angle to try and explain what happened (*'he loved her so much he killed her in a fit of passion'*) and this is what Vincent was expecting. However, when the victim's real story is heard, and the brutality of the violence is clear, solidarity with the killer becomes more difficult. Unfortunately, the victim's story is often lost from the official record – their experiences go unheard because they are no longer with us and cannot share their story.

'She was wrecking my life and no one cared,' Vincent tells me.

'How was your life being wrecked?' I say.

'She was leaving me, and she did not care how that left me.'

An obvious question might have been: 'How did killing her make things better for you?' But he was not trying to make his situation better when he killed Donna; he was righting a perceived wrong. This was punishment.

The fact that Vincent did not try to cover up his crime is also telling. It seems a contradiction, because Vincent called the police to confess and he appeared to take responsibility for what he had done. But admitting to doing something is not the same as accepting that what you have done is wrong. Vincent had been expecting people to think he was right, to stand in solidarity with him. He felt justified. His sense of injustice was more important than Donna's life.

Vincent does not have a mental illness – he can rationalise and function the same as anyone else. It is not even that his belief systems differ in any significant way from the society he lives in. His explanations for Donna's murder are not outlandish or bizarre; they are, in fact, what we see in press reports and legal defences all the time. They are a mix of what Vincent thinks will attract sympathy and his own sense of outrage that his needs were not prioritised by his victim.

This man was not routinely violent, so we need to look deeper, at other behaviours that are common to these killers. Talking to Vincent is only the start of the process for me; I have found that when it comes to identifying danger signs and recognising patterns, it is the people around the deceased and the assailant who will have some of the most interesting and useful information. For this reason, I spend a lot of time talking to families and friends of killers and their victims, to police officers and probation officers – anyone who knew the killer before they killed. What I have learned is that the danger signs are not always what we might expect.

Vincent was shown, by those who knew him, to be a man with noticeable 'eccentricities'. These 'eccentricities' were not considered to be dangerous, and no one described him as threatening. However, they were all about control – and focused on Donna in the main, and also their children.

### *Three questions*

Once a relationship has been formed, the instincts we have that something is not quite right can too often be minimised. There can be seemingly plausible explanations for every potential danger sign – explanations that contrive to make us question whether they are danger signs at all.

There are three questions to ask when considering whether someone's behaviours are a problem in a relationship, as articulated by victim advocate the late Ellen Pence. First: are these behaviours part of a pattern? Second: is this pattern making someone change their daily routines or choices? Third: is someone fearful as a result of these patterns?

In answer to the first question, Vincent's family told me he was a man who had routines, and there was one they all spoke about. He had a particular liking for soap operas, and one in particular. He watched it compulsively. But he insisted that his family watch it with him. Everyone had to be at home before the theme music started, they had to watch together, and they had to stay to the end.

Second, we know that Donna had to change things she was doing on a daily basis to placate Vincent and fall in with his routines. She made sure she was always there for the start of his favourite programme, no matter what else was going on.

Third, Donna was fearful of the consequences of challenging Vincent. She complied because not complying was not worth it. They all complied to keep the peace.

There were no reports that he ever beat or hit Donna, though we cannot know for sure. Donna never said anything to suggest this; there were no unexplained injuries. However, there were lots of threats to kill himself – a concerning behaviour when used to control people.

Just because Vincent was not openly violent does not mean Donna was not frightened of him. At one point, about ten years before her death, Donna had said she wanted a divorce. She told her friends that soon afterwards some things started to go wrong with her car. A friend found that the brakes appeared to have been tampered with. She took the car and got it fixed, but she didn't tell the police. She did tell others she thought Vincent was responsible.

She told him that she had had the car fixed, and that she would get it checked over regularly now, because she was worried it could happen again. She said to Vincent she thought it was local youths; she did not accuse him. Nothing else happened to her car. Whether or not her fears were founded, this proves she thought him capable of deliberately hurting her. Donna's fears would have been generated through previous experience of Vincent, and knowing what he



is potentially capable of.

I would never have got this information from Vincent – the fact that his wife and children had to slavishly follow his routines, and were monitored daily. He would never divulge it if he had tampered with her brakes.

I asked him if he remembered Donna's brakes being tampered with. He denied any memory; in fact, he looked hurt at what I was clearly implying.

This presents its own challenges for my work. Vincent is the one who, despite his claims he is not listened to, will have a defender in court – just for him, to put his side of the story – and, if necessary, to attack Donna's character. Donna has been silenced by death. Victims' families have, in my experience, few opportunities to set the record straight, or to get their loved one's story heard; families can be accused of lacking objectivity, but that accusation is rarely directed at the killer. It is Vincent who is considered the more interesting and deserving of a platform. It is a real disparity that creates difficulties in trying to prevent future homicides. The criminal justice system does not always publish victims' accounts or make their voices central to proceedings, and I believe we find out the real dangers through listening to them.

Friends and family knew that Vincent and Donna's marriage was not good and that they were not happy. Putting together a jigsaw after the event often reveals patterns and risks that seem to become clearer with hindsight. But hindsight and foresight are just different sides of the same coin: they share the same information. The difference is when that information is recognised or identified. So the signs that identify whether a marriage is merely bad or dangerous are, more often than not, there, waiting to be seen. Certainly, it was considered by many that Vincent and Donna were in a bad marriage, but that does not capture the reality. The reality is that Vincent was in a bad marriage; Donna was in a dangerous one.

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It is important when hearing about cases of homicide, where those realities are over-layered with so many complexities, to never forget the real trauma of real people suffering the worst of pain. I am thinking about Donna and her loved ones as I write this. I think about how she walked to her car that night as usual, thinking she was safe, but before she could even open the car door Vincent had stabbed her, furiously. No talking, no arguing, no warning. Donna fell where she was – that is where the police and paramedics found her.

Homicide adds an extra inescapable layer of pain for those left behind, and we should not underestimate the trauma that creates. Vincent seemed incapable of appreciating the pain he had caused to his children, thinking only that they should understand *his* pain.

The trauma rebounds on professionals too. Most people working in areas of death and loss often need 'clinical supervision' to allow them to reflect on the disproportionate amount of distress and threat they may observe and experience, and to try and navigate their way through it; it is impossible over time not to be affected or changed by it.

The first time I encountered a dead body I was with the same sergeant who accompanied me to that first domestic violence call. He had sought me out as soon as this call came in: it was protocol to get new officers out to such situations as soon as possible. I was very anxious by the time we got there, though trying my best to hide it. I knew instinctively that I would leave this call a different person.

The body was upstairs, and my trepidation increased with each step that brought me closer to it. My sergeant waited downstairs. I pushed open the bedroom door where I knew the corpse to be, and stepped in. My heart was pounding. I felt spectacularly ill-equipped to handle the experience.

The deceased was a young man in his early twenties. He was suspended in a bedroom cupboard by a bed sheet that was tied around his neck. It looked as though he had been there for some hours. I felt an overwhelming urge to hold him, to comfort him. I do not know how long I stood there: it may have been five seconds; it may have been five minutes.

It was part of my job to ascertain if there were suspicious circumstances before he could be cut down and taken away. I could hear his mother downstairs, screaming – a deep primal scream that I will never forget. I could imagine my sergeant trying to calm her, and in a way I was glad I was upstairs. Later, when I went back down – as I eventually had to do – I said something very stupid that reflected my inexperience. The young man's mother was imploring me to explain why her son would kill himself: why would he do this ... had she failed so badly as a mother ... was he in so much pain? I just wanted her to be healed, so I said: 'Perhaps it wasn't suicide...' It was a simple but terrible attempt to help her.

She stopped crying for a second, and her face contorted as she took a step towards me.

'You mean he was murdered?' she screamed.

I did not mean that. I was trying, in my own clumsy inexperienced way, to suggest it could have been an accident. I thought it would help. Murder was so much worse for her than suicide, and I learned a lot about humility as a result of her response. She wrote a letter to my superintendent about me, and a week or so later I was called to his office and he read it aloud. I cannot remember the actual words she used, but I remember she apologised for the way she had shouted at me; I have never felt less deserving of an apology.



It was distressing for Donna's family to learn how she died, and it was important for them to have some answer to the question: why? Why was she murdered?

There is a problem-solving principle known as Occam's razor which, broadly speaking, claims that the simplest explanation is probably the right one. People will generally seek what appears to be the most plausible account for anything, and murder is no exception. However, what seems simple or plausible can change. Vincent told his story in court – but how much can we rely on court testimony to tell us what really happened? Juries like plausible explanations and Vincent would have tried to mitigate his actions and present the most sympathetic story in the most believable way.

In our adversarial justice system the best-argued story may win, and very compelling arguments can be based on discriminatory beliefs or misinformation. Sympathetic rationalisations and victim-blaming are common and can impact on the way we interpret and respond to stories of control or violence. In our court system there are only two parties to proceedings: the accused person and the state. The victim does not have specific representation. It is expected that the state will represent the victim, but the state has limits put on what they can say, and the way they can say it, because they must maintain some objectivity. We should not comfortably assume the state and the primary victim are one and the same thing. This actually leaves the victim with no particular dedicated defender in the way there is one for the defendant, and there are fewer limits placed on the defence advocate. This is one of the reasons that perpetrator stories and defences are more visible.

The danger is that what is said in court often becomes our official historical narrative, and we then try to learn from something that has little basis in fact. This is why I made the decision to talk with Vincent and some other killers – exploring why they give the explanations they do – rather than focusing on whether the explanations themselves have credence.

Vincent travelled through the eight stages that make up the Homicide Timeline. At every stage someone noticed something – not always something that they could necessarily explain as dangerous, but something that unsettled them. People like Vincent go through these stages because of the way they are, who they are, or who they have become. He did not go through those stages because of the way Donna was, or the way she behaved. This was all about Vincent.