

3. The Night of the Murder

Thursday 6 March began as a quite ordinary day at Lily Volpert's shop in Bute Street. There was only one assistant at work that day – another had walked out the week before after a disagreement with Lily and her mother Fanny,⁷⁰ and the third was ill. But otherwise everything was normal.

Just after lunch, Lily gave her mother £336 to take to Lloyds Bank in Mount Stuart Square, to be paid into her account. It was the previous week's takings, and had been counted on Sunday evening. As usual, the money and the paying-in book were put into a blue handbag, which Fanny carried the two thirds of a mile to the bank.⁷¹

At about 5.30 Doris Miara went into the office area in the shop, to look in the drawer of the desk. She was trying to find an old school report of hers, to show to her daughter Ruth, who was to take a scholarship examination the following week. When she looked in the drawer, she noticed that there was about £200 there.⁷²

A school teacher, Bernard Sullivan, came to see Ruth about the examination at about 6.15. Doris spent about ten minutes with them, and

⁷⁰ South Wales Police, witness statements file 1, pages stamped 14 and 15.

⁷¹ Notice of further evidence, Doris Miara and Fanny Volpert. Lily may have been worried about the attempted burglaries, but evidently she thought Tiger Bay in broad daylight was perfectly safe. She had no fear that her elderly mother, walking alone with hundreds of pounds in her bag, might be robbed.

⁷² Notice of further evidence, Doris Miara. The estimates of the amount of cash in the drawer vary. In her original statement, Doris said she'd been to the drawer on Monday or Tuesday and had seen £50-60 in pound notes there. So on the basis of the daily takings until Wednesday, she estimated that about £120 was missing. It wasn't until June that she remembered having seen £200 on Thursday. That included a float of about £100 which Lily kept, and which Doris had forgotten to tell the police about. But a week and a half later she made a third statement, saying she couldn't be sure how much was in the float, because Lily often lent money without security to people she trusted (it seems that Lily's unofficial money-lending activities may have caused some embarrassment to her family). She was sure only that the amount in the drawer was over £100. At the trial she was asked what she'd seen in the drawer on Tuesday. She said she thought there had been between £150 and £200 there (perhaps she was thinking of what she'd seen on Thursday when she answered). She added that the money was kept there mostly in pound notes, though in cross-examination she agreed that there were usually some ten shilling notes too, though not many (transcript, pp. 24 and 26).

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then sat reading the South Wales Echo in the dining room while they talked upstairs.⁷³ When the assistant, Dorothy Brown, left the shop at 6.30 everything was normal.⁷⁴

Some time before 7 o'clock a regular customer called Phyllis Hassan Bekhit called at the shop. She wanted to buy a quilt, and Lily said she would order one for her. Then Phyllis stayed to chat to Lily and Fanny for a while. Phyllis remembered a "coloured man" going into the shop and buying two collars and – she believed – a belt. She thought he had paid with a £5 note.

At around 7, Doris went out into the shop. Lily was serving a customer then, so Doris went over to join Fanny and Phyllis, who were at the other side of the shop near the stock room. When Lily had dealt with the customer, she joined them too. Later a little girl named June Saleh came in and bought a yard of ribbon.⁷⁵

(From this point on, the police in 1952 presented a different version, but on the evidence it was clearly a false one. The sequence of events is discussed in more detail in the Appendix.)

When Doris heard Bernard Sullivan coming downstairs with Ruth at about 7.50, she went into the dining room to have another word with him. Then Lily said to the others that it must be going on for 8 o'clock, and Phyllis decided she'd better go home and cook her husband's supper. After she went out, Fanny saw Lily close and bolt the shop door behind her. Then Fanny joined Doris, Ruth and Sullivan in the dining room.⁷⁶

But just outside the shop, Phyllis met a 12-year-old girl, Joyce Blackmore, who was running an errand for Marian Simin, Phyllis's neighbour in Angelina Street. She told Joyce to hurry, as the shop was about to shut. Joyce ran to the door, saw Lily inside and called out to her. Lily

⁷³ Further statements of Doris Miara and Ruth Elaine Miara, 19 March 1952; statement of Bernard Sullivan.

⁷⁴ Statement of Dorothy Mary Brown, 6 March 1952; Western Mail, 7 March 1952 (edition 4B, held at Cardiff Central Library); further statement of Fanny Volpert, 19 March 1952. Fanny thought Dorothy had left at about 6 p.m.

⁷⁵ Further statement of Doris Miara, 19 March 1952; statement and further statement of Fanny Volpert, [7] and 19 March 1952; statement of Phyllis Hassan Bekhit. Again, there is a minor discrepancy with Fanny's timing – she thought it was about 7.15 when Phyllis arrived.

⁷⁶ Further statements of Doris Miara, Ruth Elaine Miara and Fanny Volpert, 19 March 1952; statement of Phyllis Hassan Bekhit. When she made her first statement [on 7 March] Fanny thought that she, Doris, Ruth and Lily had all gone into the dining room together. But in her second statement, she said that when she went in Doris and Ruth were already there, that Lily came in a few minutes later, and that she didn't remember Sullivan leaving.

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agreed to open up again, and unbolted the door to let her in. At the time, the police were told that Joyce had gone to the shop for cigarettes, but that Lily didn't have any. But apparently that was just a cover story. Marian Simin ran an illegal gambling house, and she'd sent Joyce to buy a pack of playing cards, and also perhaps to redeem a ring that had been pawned.⁷⁷ But in any case, her business didn't take long, and as she left she saw Lily lock and bolt the door behind her.⁷⁸

After a short conversation with Doris and Fanny in the dining room, Bernard Sullivan was ready to go home. He went out into the shop and talked to Lily briefly, and then tackled the door. He undid the top bolt, but she told him the bottom one was fastened as well. When he managed to get out, he closed the door behind him, but didn't see whether Lily locked up again. He wanted a trolley bus, but wasn't sure where to catch it, so he went up to a "coloured man" standing in a doorway on the corner of Sophia Street, and asked him if that was the right place. They both got on a bus a couple of minutes later.⁷⁹

Evidently Lily didn't lock the door, but followed Sullivan out and stood in the porch for a while. Perhaps she wanted to make sure he waited in the right place for the bus. A man who lived in Loudoun Square, Daniel Sheehan, walked past with three friends. They saw Lily standing at the door and she said good evening to them. The men had just left the Freemasons' Hotel, and were on their way to the Oxford Hotel in the city centre, where

⁷⁷ In the 1990s, Joyce said there were a lot of mistakes in her original statement (statement for Mattan's solicitor, 26 September 1996 – copy held by South Wales Police; interview for *Black Britain*, 1997). She said then she'd been sent to the shop for playing cards, and this is confirmed by another statement made in April 1952 by a merchant seaman, Ali Mohamed, alias Amberis, who had been in Marian Simin's house that evening (South Wales Police, witness statements file 5, page stamped 197). Joyce also said she'd been sent to redeem a diamond ring, and that Lily had got it out of the safe for her after going into the back room for the keys. That's not so easy to reconcile with other evidence, because there were four people in the dining room at the time, and none of them mentioned Lily having gone in there for the keys. Doris Miara also told the police that the safe was never opened while the shop was open. But there's no doubt that Marian Simin had borrowed money from Lily, because an undated letter from her was found, asking for a loan of £5 "for a gamble tonight" and acknowledging an existing debt of £25 (South Wales Police, bundle 3(j), part 1, pages stamped 111 and 112).

⁷⁸ Statements of Joyce Blackmore and Phyllis Hassan Bekhit; further statement of Joyce Blackmore; statement of Marian Simins (her name is spelled with a final "s" throughout the records relating to the case, but in other records it is given as Simin).

⁷⁹ Further statements of Doris Miara and Ruth Elaine Miara, 19 March 1952; statement of Bernard Sullivan.

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they'd arranged to meet Mary Tolley, with whom Sheehan was living,⁸⁰ and her friend Margaret Bush, who also lived in the same house.⁸¹

Soon afterwards, at about 8 o'clock, Mary Tolley and Margaret Bush arrived and found Lily still standing in the doorway, just inside the porch. As it was raining, Mary wanted to buy a scarf, and asked Lily if the shop was still open. Lily said she was about to close, but would serve her if she was quick. They went inside and Mary bought a cheap scarf for 8 shillings and 11 pence, paying 5 shillings and promising the rest in the morning. Then Margaret asked whether Lily had any size 7 shoes to fit her, and also whether she'd kept some shoes she'd ordered previously for her children.⁸² But as she wouldn't have the money until the morning, she arranged to call back then. Mary also bought a box of matches and a packet of hair grips, which Margaret paid for. As they were leaving, Mary asked what time it was, and Lily looked at her watch and said it was about 8.05. She said she was going to close the shop now. The two women left, and waited for a bus into town outside Sam On Yen's Chinese restaurant on the corner of Sophia Street, leaving Lily standing on the doorstep.⁸³

Mary would later tell the police that while they'd been in the shop, a Somali had come in and asked for cigarettes, but had left in a temper when Lily said it was too late to serve him. Margaret hadn't seen or heard anyone come in, though she eventually agreed that if a man had come in while she was talking to Lily about the shoes, she wouldn't have seen him because she had her back to the door.

⁸⁰ Further statement of Mary Eileen Tolley, 14 March 1952; police report, 26 March 1952.

⁸¹ Draft statement of Daniel Dennis Sheehan.

⁸² Her initial statement says "shoes for the children" and Mary Tolley's says "for her little boy and girl." But at the magistrates' court she said they were for her child, and a police report dated 26 March 1952 says they were for her little girl. The children's shoes would become significant later, when the police came up with a theory about how the murder was committed.

⁸³ Statements and further statements of Mary Eileen Tolley and Margaret Laurie Bush.

[Illustration not included in sample for copyright reasons.]

4. Plan of Tiger Bay, with places of interest marked (adapted from the 1909/1947 Goad Insurance Plan).

It must have been almost immediately after the women left that Esther Williams passed the shop on her way from her home, 25 Loudoun Square, to a whist drive at the Bute Town Community Centre.⁸⁴ Lily was still standing in the shop doorway, and asked Esther where she'd been, as she hadn't seen her for a long time. Esther explained that she'd been very ill – laid up in bed

⁸⁴ Officially the Bute Town Community Association, at 213 Bute Street. The George Cross Club for Maltese merchant seamen had occupied a temporary building there until the previous year (South Wales Echo, 3 February 1951), and its replacement was still known locally as the George Cross Club.

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for a fortnight with bronchitis and complications. After perhaps a minute's worth of conversation, Lily sent her on her way, telling her not to get wet, and to be sure to go back and see her when she wanted something from the shop. So off Esther went, head down in the driving rain. When she got to the Community Centre, about a hundred yards away, the clock said 8.08.⁸⁵

Now, apparently, Lily decided that the day's business really was done, and closed the shop again. But as she usually did at this time of the evening, she left the lights in the shop on. Then she went through to join Fanny, Doris and Ruth in the dining room, and drew a curtain part of the way across the glass panel of the door. She couldn't draw it all the way, or the curtain hook at the end would have come off the rail. Then she spent about a minute washing her hands in the kitchen.⁸⁶ Finally she sat down to eat her supper, but no sooner had she picked up her knife and fork than the doorbell rang persistently.⁸⁷ Thinking it might be children, Doris looked through the gap left by the curtain covering the glass panel, and saw a man standing outside the shop door, which also had a glass panel. With a sigh, Lily got up from the table and went out to deal with him. Fanny also looked through the glass panel and saw the man at the shop door. He was holding a torch, and both Doris and Fanny assumed he wanted to buy a battery for it. The time was between 8.05 and 8.10.⁸⁸

A little later, still between 8.05 and 8.10 by the clock, Ruth went to the door and looked out through the glass panel. She saw Lily holding the shop door, which was practically closed. A man was standing talking to her, partly in the shop and partly in the porch. The description she later gave of the man was different from the ones given by her mother and grandmother.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Statement of Esther Williams.

⁸⁶ Further statement of Ruth Elaine Miara, 19 March 1952; statement and further statement of Fanny Volpert, [7] and 19 March 1952. When she made her first statement, Fanny thought they had all gone into the dining room together. In her second, she said Lily went in "a few minutes" after she did herself. Ruth thought Lily had gone into the dining room two or three minutes after Fanny. But apparently the gap must have been at least five minutes.

⁸⁷ The doorbell rang through to the dining room (police report, 26 March 1952). Sound didn't carry easily between the shop and the dining room, because the door between the two had a rubber draught excluder round it (trial transcript, p. 27).

⁸⁸ Statements and further statements of Doris Miara, Ruth Elaine Miara and Fanny Volpert, 7 and 19 March 1952; trial transcript, p. 23. In their first statements, Fanny said Lily sat down to eat at about 8.05 and Doris said the doorbell rang between 8.05 and 8.10.

⁸⁹ Statement and further statement of Ruth Elaine Miara, 7 and 19 March 1952; further statement of Fanny Volpert, 19 March 1952. In her first statement, Ruth said

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At about 8.15 Doris glanced through the glass panel again. She didn't see her sister, and thought she might have been busy in another part of the shop. But she could see that the shop door was closed.⁹⁰

Soon after that – probably around 8.18 – a local businessman, Harold Farnell, was driving down Bute Street on his way to the Conservative Club in Burt Street. He noticed the lights in the shop were on, which struck him as unusual, so he slowed down to take a closer look. He then saw that the shop door was standing halfway open. But he didn't see anyone about, and continued on his way to Burt Street.⁹¹

Finally, probably around 8.20,⁹² another late customer arrived at the shop. William Archbold, who lived in a lodging house a little way down Bute Street, saw the door open and a light on⁹³, and went in to buy some cigarette papers. He stood just inside the door for three or four minutes, trying to attract someone's attention by shouting "Shop," tapping the glass and stamping his feet. But there was no answer. Then Archbold looked round to his right, and was horrified to see Lily's body lying in a pool of blood. Immediately he pulled the door to and walked briskly – he was lame and couldn't run – to Bute Street police station, just over 200 yards along the road to the north.⁹⁴

this was not very long after Lily went into the shop; in her second, a few minutes after.

⁹⁰ Further statement of Doris Miara, 19 March 1952. Doris said that she looked into the shop at about 8.15, as she was showing Ruth how to dance in high-heeled shoes. Ruth said that her mother danced with her about five minutes after she herself had looked into the shop (which had been between 8.05 and 8.10 by the clock).

⁹¹ Statement of Harold Farnell. Another man who passed the shop in a taxi also saw the door standing open, but his timings were less precise than Farnell's (South Wales Police, witness statements file 1, pages stamped 35 and 36).

⁹² That was the time he gave in his statement, made an hour later, and it seems about right (see Appendix). The earliest press reports said 8.10 (South Wales Echo, 7 March 1952; Western Mail, 8 March 1952), while at the magistrates' court, he said first that it was between 8 and 8.30, and then that it was 8.10-15, and ended by saying "I am not certain of the exact time."

⁹³ At the trial, Archbold said there was just one light on inside the shop (transcript, p. 33). In his statement and deposition he'd said "The lights in the shop were on as usual" and "The usual lights were on."

⁹⁴ Statement of William James Archbold; police report, 26 March 1952; trial transcript, pp. 32-34.

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5. William Archbold, the man who discovered Lily Volpert's body (South Wales Echo, 7 March 1952).