

What Molly Knew

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At first Molly Retief didn't know who it was on the other end of the phone. Tommie had never phoned her before, as far as she could remember. He sounded agitated, his voice shaking. Sarah's dead, he said. What do you mean, Sarah's dead? It can't be. But it was. Molly had never hidden the fact that she didn't like her son-in-law. She blamed him for everything that had gone wrong in her family. She liked to think they'd all been happy before he came along.

"Somebody shot her," he was saying. "In the back of the head. She's just lying there in her dressing gown on the kitchen floor. The police are here now."

That's all there was. What more was there to say? Molly wasn't sure what she should do now. What do you do when your only child is dead? She sat for a moment by the phone, running her fingers over the eczema on her arms. Sarah was all she had left after her first husband had been killed in a car crash near Laingsburg twenty or so years ago. She felt like the world had ended, much the same as she'd felt when Neville died. All the anger and pain that existed between mother and daughter, the gulf of misunderstanding and mistrust, charge and recrimination, was like a balm, a reassurance, compared to this. They had been held together by their differences. They'd lived out their unhappiness and their guilt and their shame in mutual embrace, scratching each other's scabs, never allowing wounds to heal. But they always had each other. And now – what now?

Molly did what she always did. She turned on the kettle, got down the tin of Five Roses tea bags, got the milk out of the fridge. The cat purred from her spot on the kitchen table, as if this were a day like any other, waiting for the saucer of milk that was her due. Why should you change the habits of a lifetime just because your reason for being had come to an end?

While she waited for the slow kettle to boil, Molly took the carpet sweeper out of the broom cupboard and began doing the rugs in the hallway. Housekeeping would keep her busy until eleven, when she allowed herself a break in front of the telly. That's how every day went.

As she was pouring the water into the chipped teapot, she felt a sharp pain in her ribs. She clutched her arms together under her breasts as she sat down at the table. She knew it was Tommie. Who else would kill her? Sarah had no enemies. She had nothing anyone would want to steal. And who could get into a third-floor flat in a secure block in Goodwood? She thought of phoning her husband Rollo at the Autoglass place in Milnerton where he was workshop manager. He should know. But she didn't phone him. She didn't want to interrupt him, especially now that they were short staffed. What could he do anyway? He never got on with Sarah. As a girl she'd resented his presence, the speed with which her mother remarried after her father's death. She'd got it into her head that Rollo was a rival, someone who was out to ruin her and her mother's lives. She never understood how little choice Molly had. Molly was always caught in the middle, trying to keep the peace, accepting the battering she took as the price she had to pay.

And then along came Tommie Nobrega, the psychologist, with his theories and suspicions. Sarah was a nurse aide in the clinic where she met Tommie. Of all the men her daughter could have fallen for... The horrid little man was determined from the beginning to poison her mind. She got it into her head that she'd been victimised, abused, interfered with, and it was all her mother's fault for allowing it. Recovered memory, he called it, as if you can make things up and suddenly it becomes real. All because of her resentments against the man who had always stood between them and destitution. Alright, Rollo wasn't perfect: he drank too much; he stayed out at night playing darts at Wally's Bar in Koeberg Road; he'd visited prostitutes in his time, had girlfriends. And he had a temper, used his fists when he was boozed up, used foul language. The neighbours had sometimes called the police in. But what was she supposed to do? Move out and starve? Go and live in a shelter? At her age?

"It's always the husband," agreed Inspector Duvenage. "Mr Nobrega is definitely top of the list, just between you and me. We reckon he had the opportunity. It happened between seven when she was seen picking up the paper downstairs, and nine when her neighbour came in to see why her door was wide open and found her lying there. The husband says he left at seven thirty to go to work. The neighbours say they heard nothing, though we're still busy going from door to door. No forced entry. That's the thing. The security gate is always closed. So whoever did it must have been known to her."

“I’m sure it’s him,” said Molly. “I never liked him. He filled her head with hate. She only married him to punish me. I never understood what I did to deserve it.”

Molly stroked the cat sleeping on her lap. She looked drawn, worn out. Her brown, thinning hair showed streaks of grey. She was wearing a pinafore over her shapeless lavender jersey. She always wore the pinafore when she was doing housework.

Inspector Duvenage took a sip of tea, holding the cup with his fingers gripping the rim. He checked the ring-bound notebook he held in his left hand. “Mrs Retief,” he said, clearing his throat. “I need to clear up a few things with your husband. I presume Mr Retief is at work?”

“Yes. Why?” The colour rose to her cheeks. “There’s nothing my husband can tell you. I know Tommie will tell you lies, Inspector. He’s trying to shift the blame. He’s been telling lies about us from the beginning. That’s why my daughter didn’t speak to me. He turned her against me.”

“I suspected he might be making things up. They do, you know, when they think they’re cornered. But still, I think I should talk to him. Your husband, I mean.” He scratched his head, looking at the notebook with a frown. “You say your daughter didn’t talk to you, ma’am? Was there any particular reason for that?”

“No, not really. I mean, she was never easy. But it was Tommie who came between us. He seemed hell-bent on destroying us all. Now he’s got his way. It’s wicked, that’s what it is. Wicked!”

She offered Inspector Duvenage another Marie biscuit from the glass plate she’d arranged them on. He declined. He was looking around the room, almost unnaturally clean and tidy, nothing out of place. Modest, but comfortable; old furnishings, pictures on the walls, a few ornaments carefully placed on the mantel. A room used only for entertaining, perhaps. Not that much entertaining went on here, by the looks of her. One of those stay-at-home women, in her fifties, with not much of a life outside these walls. Seemed like a family in which you didn’t expect things to go wrong.

In Inspector Duvenage’s experience, there are two kinds of investigations: Those, the everyday ones, where it’s difficult to sympathise with the victims, people for whom life is cheap and death routine. And then there are those where violent death is as far from the victims’ expectations as it can be, normal, good people living normal lives in homes like this one, whose existence is overturned in an instant for

reasons that no one can fathom. It's at times like this that he finds the job a strain, when he feels he has to nail the culprit just to calm the jangling in his nerves that doesn't go away when he gets home at night. He knows that all citizens are equal in the new South Africa, but he can't help but feel some people's pain more than others'. That's just the way he is, and the newspapers and television people seem to think the same way, to judge by the posse of reporters and cameras outside Sarah Nobrega's flat in Goodwood when he left.

"Mrs Retief, why don't you tell me all about your son-in-law? Where did they meet?"

"I hate it when you call him my son-in-law. I never thought of him as part of my family."

Rollo Retief was a big, balding man with grey sideburns and rolls of fat under his puffy eyes. He breathed heavily and smelled of cigarettes and he needed a close shave. His round face was lined and his skin was yellowish, parchmenty, with little veins near the surface of his large nose. Yellow teeth, yellow fingers too. He didn't look healthy. Nearing retirement age, assumed Inspector Duvenage, and not a moment too soon. Nor was he pleased to see the cop, the way he stared at Duvenage as if he was to blame for wasting his time with enquiries when all these people with their broken car windows wanted same-day service. High crime rates made for good business in Rollo Retief's line of work, but clearly didn't do much for his temper. It was obvious his staff were wary of him, glancing at him with surreptitious looks through the glass partition of his small office to make sure he wasn't watching what they were doing.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't know what I can do to help you," Rollo said when Inspector Duvenage told him of Sarah's death. The inspector was surprised to discover that Rollo Retief knew nothing about it, that his wife hadn't got in touch with him.

"I suppose you'll want to go home, to be with your wife, Mr Retief," he said.

Rollo shook his head. "I would, except we run off our feet here. It's a terrible thing to happen but life must go on. We're short staffed, you know. The buggers come and go. The turnover's terrible."

He sat behind a desk piled with folders and files. It was an untidy place, with dirty cups and glasses and dust on the shelves. Not the sort of office to give clients confidence in the way the business was run.

“When last did you see Sarah, Mr Retief?” asked Inspector Duvenage, pulling the notebook and the blue Bic out of his inside pocket.

“I never saw her. Not since before she was married. She wouldn’t have anything to do with me. Or her mother, either. You know she didn’t even invite her mother to her wedding? She brought that man over to the house when they first got engaged, just to shock us, then there was a big fight and that was that. They sometimes spoke on the phone, she and Molly, but it always ended with a screaming match and Molly in tears for the rest of the day. Sarah was sent to torment her mother. Ever since she was little. The trouble I had from her! Her mother thinks it’s because her father died, but that doesn’t explain anything. Some of these kids these days are just naturally bad. Her mother won’t tell you anything about it, but the boyfriends and the drugs! Molly always had her head in the sand over that girl. She doesn’t know but I paid for more than one abortion. And then she goes and marries that man! I suppose you’ve seen him. Figures, doesn’t it? She was bound to come to a sticky end after that. Thank God they didn’t produce any children, that’s all I can say!”

“She was a nurse, wasn’t she?” asked Inspector Duvenage. “I mean, she couldn’t have been such a bad case.”

“Ja, well...” he shrugged, as if that meant nothing to him.

Not the friendliest, thought Duvenage. A man of fixed opinions, not to be swayed from his antagonisms by the girl’s death. He felt sorry for the wife, putting up with this sad sack of a man, who presumably took his sourness home with him at night.

When Rollo came home, he wanted his supper ready, whatever time it was. It was after ten when Molly heard the Mazda turn into the drive. She hadn’t spoken to anyone all day, not since Inspector Duvenage had been there before lunch. Except for Mrs Henning from next door, who came over to say it was on the radio, and was there anything she could do? Molly said no, it was very kind but she was coping, and didn’t let her in. Trust Mrs Henning to know Sarah’s married name. She seemed to know everything. Rollo didn’t like Mrs Henning, who’d phoned the police before and was always snooping.

Otherwise, it was a day like any other for Molly, except there was a big hole inside her that ached and ached. She'd thought of phoning her sister in Saldanha, but what could Lettie do? Lettie was married to a warrant officer in the navy and lived in a navy house, and thought herself superior. She'd say how sorry she was, but wouldn't really mean it, and that would be that. Her own sons were both qualified and gainfully employed and successfully married, one an electrician, the other an accountant, and that's all that mattered to her. Molly could do without Lettie's smugness right now.

She'd made chops and mash and gravy, the way he liked it, put it in the warmer, and waited in front of the telly. She always laid the table meticulously, just for one, with the linen tablecloth always clean and the pepper and salt shakers and the paper napkins in their container within reach. He came in, smelling of whatever it was he drank and wheezing heavily. He sat down at the table and looked closely at the food in front of him, as he did every night, with a frown, looking for faults. "You heard anything more about Sarah?" Rollo asked after a while.

"No. The policeman said he'd phone or come by if he found out anything more."

Molly sat opposite him and watched him as he ate, ready to fetch whatever he wanted from the kitchen. Sometimes he wanted water, sometimes a beer or the bottle of brandy and a glass, sometimes tomato sauce or chutney. She sat stiffly on the edge of the chair, gauging whether he was in one of his moods or not, relaxing after a while when she was satisfied he wasn't about to explode.

Rollo ate without speaking, smacking his lips and clearing his throat as he always did, shaking his head now and again. Then he said, the fork hanging in the air in front of his mouth, "Jeez, that bastard!" He chewed and swallowed. "I'm sorry to say it, but I knew there was going to be a bad end to all this from the moment she brought him here to show him off to us. You don't marry someone like that if you come from a normal home. I know you cared for that girl, but she didn't deserve you, and if you knew what's good for you you'd be relieved she's gone to her maker. She wouldn't have stopped until she'd destroyed the both of us." He shovelled another forkful into his mouth and chewed away noisily, shaking his head again. "With all her lies. She wanted us both in prison, and you know it. Now at least you can get on with your life without that girl spreading shit about us."

Molly knew better than to say anything. Not that there was anything she wanted to say. She weighed up what Rollo had told her, and thought maybe he's right. He usually was, and even if he wasn't, there was no point disagreeing with him. It wasn't her place to argue with him. After all, he had her interests at heart. He always did have, and even if he didn't express himself with any kindness, he meant well deep down.

"That's what it's all about, Molly," he said as she put the tinned pears and custard in front of him. "What goes around comes around. She only got what she asked for. At least now you can sleep at night without worrying about her, without putting up with her lies and deceit. You're free of all that now. There's that to think about, once you get over the shock and all."

He was in a strange mood, oddly placatory but belligerent at the same time. Disturbed by what had happened today, but unwilling to yield an inch in his self-righteousness about it all. I told you so, so don't blame me for any of this, seemed to be his attitude.

"That husband of hers can rot in prison for all I care," he added, as if to himself, stirring the custard in with the syrup from the tin, as he always did.

Molly felt tears rise to her eyes. She held a tissue to her face, not wanting him to see her in this state. She hadn't felt like crying all day, but now, at such a time, there they were, hot tears welling up and spilling out. She stood quickly and went into the kitchen, busying herself with coffee cups. Rollo didn't like to see her crying. It upset the natural order of things. He didn't like to think there was unhappiness in the house. He had enough on his shoulders without having to put up with his wife getting in the way, demanding attention, implying there was something wrong with the way they led their lives. There were things he expected from a wife, and crying and complaining and carrying on weren't amongst them. When he came in late from the bar was the worst time, the time when things were most likely to go wrong, when she had to be on her best behaviour. Not a good time for tears.

"It hasn't been on the telly, has it?" Rollo called from the sitting room. "The cop said there was a camera crew there, outside the flat."

"I don't think so," Molly called back, trying to sound normal. She wouldn't know. She never watched the news.

Molly was always relieved when Rollo got home and there wasn't a fight. It made everything alright again, whatever the rest of the day had been like. Only today

hadn't been an ordinary day. It was the day her only child had been killed, shot in the back of her head in her kitchen, by her own husband. Molly had been holding it in all day but couldn't hold it in anymore. She sat at the kitchen table and let the tears flow silently down her cheeks. When she took the coffee in, hoping he wouldn't notice her raw face and swollen eyes, Rollo was asleep.

Inspector Duvenage phoned the next day to report progress, or the lack of it. They had collected lots of evidence at the scene, but were still looking for the murder weapon. They'd taken Tommie in for questioning, but so far he was sticking to his story.

"The man is clever," he said, "and he knows how to sound convincing. After all, he has a psychology degree from UWC and knows all the tricks." The inspector counselled patience. He was sure they'd nail him sooner or later.

Then a man called Comrade Titus phoned to say there was to be a memorial event at the Congregational Church hall in Goodwood on Saturday afternoon at three o'clock, and the family would be welcome. Molly wrote it down and sat and looked at the piece of paper. She didn't know what to make of it. She wondered what Rollo would have to say. If he decided he wasn't going, she could hardly go by herself. Molly and Rollo hardly ever went out together, only to the movies sometimes or to the Wimpy or the fish and chips shop for supper over weekends. Not that often, really.

Molly didn't know what she'd wear. She had an old felt hat with a veil she hadn't worn in years, and a pair of good shoes she never wore either. Her floral dress wouldn't do – something more sombre was required. Perhaps the navy woollen two-piece suit, if it wasn't too warm.

"Titus?" Rollo was sceptical, as she knew he would be, when she told him that evening. He sat at the dining table, an angry scowl on his face, looking at the piece of paper he'd taken from Molly.

"Who's he? You didn't ask him who he was? Why didn't you ask him? I suppose he didn't leave a number."

"He was in a hurry. I didn't have time to ask."

"I can just imagine. And what's a 'memorial event'? Is that what he called it? And why's it in the church hall? Funerals are normally in churches."

"It isn't a funeral. They haven't released the body. I think they'll cremate her. The inspector said it's up to the husband. He's next-of-kin."

"Well, I'm not going – that's for sure."

“You don’t think we shouldn’t just show up, just for a short while? It might be my only chance to say goodbye to her.”

Rollo snorted, stuffing pork sausage into his mouth, washing it down with a Castle straight from the bottle, but didn’t say anything more.

On Friday morning, Molly did what she always did on Friday mornings. She went to have her hair done at Mary-Jane’s on Voortrekker Road, followed by a cake and coffee at Nino’s. She saved all the spare cash she had left over after the grocery shopping and spent it on herself. It was her favourite morning of the week. She always felt pampered and special having her hair washed and set, listening to the hairdresser, fat, unnaturally blonde Marcelle, carry on about her mother and her child and her boyfriend and all the small dramas of her life, feeling reassured that other people’s lives were also far from perfect, but that they, too, somehow managed to struggle through.

Marcelle knew not to pry into Molly’s life. She knew her life at home was difficult. The telltale signs were there often enough. It sufficed to ask every week how Rollo was, getting the same answer. “He’s fine. Nothing ever changes with Rollo.” “And Sarah?” “She’s fine too.”

“Did you see that terrible story about that woman in Goodwood who was murdered by her husband?” asked Marcelle, who always read *Die Son*, because it provided her with talking points that kept her going through the day. “Shot in her head, she was, in her kitchen. My cousin lives in the same block of flats, and she says she’s not surprised. She says the husband is one of these illegals from Mozambique. They say he’s half-Portuguese, but he’s more black than white, to judge by his appearance. Can you imagine it, he’s living there in a respectable block of flats in a white area, dressed up in ANC gear all the time, with all these blacks coming and going, having meetings and things? And with a white wife who always looked like there’s something wrong with her, with these dark rings around her eyes. She’s married to one of them, that’s what’s wrong with her! What do you expect? My cousin says people heard him threatening to do things to her, and now it’s happened. So why am I not surprised, hey?”

Molly said nothing. She felt her fists balled tight under the sheet, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palms. A moment later Marcelle said, “You alright, Mrs Retief? You don’t look so good.”

Molly was feeling faint and wanted to go home. Come over all funny, she said, looking anxiously at her white face in the mirror. They called a taxi and Marcelle helped her in, saying she should see a doctor just in case.

When Molly got home, the phone was ringing in the hallway. She sat down heavily and picked it up. It was Inspector Duvenage, just checking in, he said, reassuring her they weren't going to let up until they'd nailed the culprit.

"We're getting some useful information from neighbours," he told her. "You know how it is. Leave them for a day or two to jog their memories and they come up with all sorts of stories. Shake the tree a bit and who knows what falls out. They know nothing when you first ask them, nothing out of the ordinary, just ordinary neighbours, but two days later – then they remember all kinds of things. Did you ever hear they fought a lot, Mrs Retief? Did you ever see her with bumps or bruises?"

"No, I didn't."

Molly didn't want to hear anything more about the subject. She felt a headache coming on. She just wanted to take a couple of aspirins and lie down.

On Saturday morning, Rollo went down to the bar at ten thirty, as he always did. "You better get my suit ready if we going to this thing," he said as he went out the door.

Molly was full of nervous energy after he said that. She got out the suit, a pinstriped, double-breasted thing that probably wasn't in fashion anymore, and a good shirt and the ironing board. She took out his good shoes and polished them, and found a decently sombre tie and sponged it. She then took out her navy outfit and made sure it was clean and free of musty smells and moth holes. It was once in a blue moon they ever got dressed up like this. She rushed through her housework, fixed lunch and then sat and waited with the cat on her lap for company. He'd be smelling of drink when he got in. Pray God he wouldn't fall asleep and forget all about it. Or that there wouldn't be a rugby match on that he'd decide was more important.

But there were no hitches and they arrived at the hall on time. Molly was nervous. She felt Rollo's hackles rising, his breathing getting louder as they parked the Mazda. The first thing they saw on entering the hall was the large ANC banner hanging from the table in front. A steady, echoing buzz of voices arose from the twenty or thirty people there, almost all coloureds and Africans, several in ANC Youth League T-shirts. At the front, surrounded by his friends, sat Tommie, his back

to them. Molly feared Rollo might create a scene or decide to turn around and head home. He stood and stared with that look on his face that warned there was trouble brewing. Then they saw Inspector Duvenage sitting at the back against the wall, well out of the way. He nodded to them.

They sat down, on plastic chairs spread around from the piles stacked against the walls, feeling self-conscious and out of place. Rollo was not one to put up with situations that made him feel uncomfortable. Molly knew she'd take the brunt of his anger once they were home, he'd let rip later, but that was a small price to pay. For her, being here was important. It wasn't her life, but it was Sarah's, and she couldn't turn her back on her now that she was gone.

A young man came up to them, introduced himself as Comrade Titus, and said there were chairs for them in front. Rollo said they were staying put, at the back, out of the way. He was restrained, but Molly could tell that there was real anger in him, violent anger.

The proceedings began. Comrade Titus welcomed them. Heads turned to look at them, two old white people staring back. She looking embarrassed and anxious, he scowling and displeased. Two men and one woman at the head table stood up and spoke in turn, about Sarah, what a committed partner she was for Comrade Tommie and a committed member of the branch too, about the good work she'd done amongst the victims of violence and the homeless. They talked about Tommie as if he was a victim too, about his family that had fought the Portuguese, although his father was Portuguese himself, and about how he'd joined up to the struggle against apartheid oppression in South Africa. Then people were invited to make contributions from the floor. Molly didn't follow much of what was said after a while, keeping a nervous eye on Rollo, who looked red and puffy in the face as if his blood pressure was going through the roof again.

When it was finished, Rollo was out of the hall while everybody else was still slowly getting to their feet. Molly followed him. They drove home without saying anything. Rollo gripped the steering wheel tightly and chewed his teeth. He went through at least two red traffic lights as if his life depended on it. People hooted at him, but he wasn't in a mood to take heed. As she let herself in the house, Rollo sped away, back to the bar, she knew, to calm his nerves and let off steam. He wouldn't be back till late, she was certain of that, and then very likely his temper would come out

and she'd have to put away the breakables. But she was quietly pleased she'd been there, reclaiming part of her daughter for herself, making it known she had a mother.

Molly didn't know why she went out into the unkempt back garden. She might have been looking for dill or parsley left from the lot she'd planted in what had once passed as a vegetable patch. What she found was something else, which explains why she could not recall later what she was doing there. It was a scrunched-up envelope pushed into the compost heap behind the shed. Only a bit of white was visible under the pile of brown lawn clippings that Rollo dumped there when he mowed the lawn. She didn't know why she pulled it out, what on earth she thought she was looking for. Perhaps it was just the incongruity of it, a fresh-looking bit of white paper underneath grass that had been there for weeks, moist and mouldering, disturbed by the cat that had climbed up and rummaged in the warm mulch. Almost as if someone had deliberately pushed it down out of sight, only to be revealed because of a cat's curiosity. She picked it up, shook off the dirt, straightened it out. It was Sarah's handwriting. No question about it. Addressed to Rollo Retief, just the two words on the front of the envelope, the Rs sloping forward and the ls backward. The envelope had already been torn open and there was a letter inside on crinkly airmail paper, a single sheet that had been crumpled into a ball in someone's fist before being reinserted in the envelope and disposed of.

Molly looked around, frightened someone might be watching her. She put the letter in her pinafore pocket and rushed back inside. She sat down at the kitchen table, trembling, and held the thin paper open flat on the tabletop as she read it.

Rollo (it said) –

You know what you did to me as a child and yet you keep on denying it. This can't go on anymore. My own life is at a standstill until I get closure on this issue, which still haunts me and makes my life a living hell. My husband knows all about it. We have decided that you should be confronted and made to own up to everything or else we are going to the police. I have already written a thirty-page statement. So, we are coming, Tommie and me, on Saturday morning to your house at ten for an intervention, where you will have an opportunity to admit the wrong you did me and ask for my forgiveness, failing which I will have no choice but to go to the police and lay a charge. Please make sure my mother is present, because she has to know the truth as well.

Sarah Nobrega

Molly sat and stared at the piece of paper for a while, not knowing what to make of it, thinking maybe it isn't what it seems to be, maybe there's an explanation. Then she noticed the date written in the top right-hand corner – two days before Sarah was killed. She got up, took out the frying pan, found the matches she kept for blackouts, put the letter in the pan and lit it. She watched it take fire, those poisonous words decomposing into blackened fragments, curling up, breaking off, dissolving into ash. She lit another match until there was nothing left of it. She shook the pan out in the garden and washed it in the sink.

Molly set about making supper, cutting up potatoes and tomatoes and carrots for the lamb shank stew. When she'd laid the table and cleaned up the kitchen, she sat down in front of the telly and waited for her husband's return, much like any other Saturday night. Of all the nights of the week, Saturday was the most fraught, the night there was most likely to be a scene. She knew she might end up locking herself in Sarah's old room, as she had often in the past. But whatever happened, she knew that tomorrow he'd apologise, say he'd had too much to drink, and then they'd get on with their lives.