

# The Tinder Box

Minette Walters

Published by Pan Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# One

Daily Telegraph - *Wednesday, 24 June 1998*

## **Sowerbridge Man Arrested**

Patrick O'Riordan, 35, an unemployed Irish labourer, was charged last night with the double murder of his neighbours Lavinia Fanshaw, 93, and her live-in nurse, Dorothy Jenkins, 67. The murders have angered the small community of Sowerbridge, where O'Riordan and his parents have lived for fifteen years. The elderly victims were brutally battered to death after Dorothy Jenkins interrupted a robbery on Saturday night. 'Whoever killed them is a monster,' said a neighbour. 'Lavinia was a frail old lady with Alzheimer's who never hurt a soul.' Police warned residents to remain calm after a crowd gathered outside the O'Riordan home when news of the arrest became public. 'Vigilante behaviour will not be tolerated,' said a spokesman. O'Riordan denies the charges.

*Monday, 8 March 1999, 11.30 p.m.*

Even at half past eleven at night, the lead news story on local radio was still the opening day of Patrick O'Riordan's trial. Siobhan Lavenham, exhausted after a fourteen-hour stint at work, listened to it in the darkness of her car while she negotiated the narrow country lanes back to Sowerbridge village.

*'O'Riordan smiled as the prosecution case unfolded . . . harrowing details of how ninety-three-year-old Lavinia Fanshaw and her live-in nurse were brutally bludgeoned to death before Mrs Fanshaw's rings were ripped from her fingers . . . scratch marks and bruises on the defendant's face, probably caused by a fight with one of the women . . . a crime of greed triggered by O'Riordan's known resentment of Mrs Fanshaw's wealth . . . unable to account for his whereabouts at the time of the murders . . . items of jewellery recovered from the O'Riordan family home which the thirty-five-year-old Irishman still shares with his elderly parents . . .'*

With a sinking heart, Siobhan punched the Off button and concentrated on her driving. *'The Irishman . . .'* Was that a deliberate attempt to inflame racist division, she wondered, or just careless shorthand? God, how she loathed journalists! Confident of a guilty verdict, they had descended on Sowerbridge

## THE TINDER BOX

like a plague of locusts the previous week in order to prepare their background features in advance. They had found dirt in abundance, of course. Sowerbridge had fallen over itself to feed them with hate stories against the whole O'Riordan family.

She thought back to the day of Patrick's arrest, when Bridey, his mother, had begged her not to abandon them. 'You're one of us, Siobhan. Irish through and through, never mind you're married to an Englishman. You know my Patrick. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Is it likely he'd beat Mrs Fanshaw to death when he's never raised a hand against his own father? Liam was a devil when he still had the use of his arm. Many's the time he thrashed Patrick with a stick when the drunken rages were on him, but never once did Patrick take the stick to him.'

It was a frightening thing to be reminded of the bonds that tied people together, Siobhan had thought as she looked out of Bridey's window towards the silent, angry crowd that was gathering in the road. Was being Irish enough of a reason to side with a man suspected of slaughtering a frail bedridden old woman and the woman who looked after her?

'Patrick admits he stole from Lavinia,' Siobhan had pointed out.

Tears rolled down Bridey's furrowed cheeks. 'But not her rings,' she said. 'Just cheap trinkets that he was too ignorant to recognize as worthless paste.'

'It was still theft.'

'Mother of God, do you think I don't know that?'

She held out her hands beseechingly. 'A thief he may be, Siobhan, but never a murderer.'

And Siobhan had believed her because she wanted to. For all his sins, she had never thought of Patrick as an aggressive or malicious man – too relaxed by half, many would say – and he could always make her and her children laugh with his stories about Ireland, particularly ones involving leprechauns and pots of gold hidden at the ends of rainbows. The thought of him taking a hammer to anyone was anathema to her.

*And yet . . . ?*

In the darkness of the car she recalled the interview she'd had the previous month with a detective inspector at Hampshire Constabulary Headquarters, who seemed perplexed that a well-to-do young woman should have sought him out to complain about police indifference to the plight of the O'Riordans. She wondered now why she hadn't gone to him sooner.

*Had she really been so unwilling to learn the truth . . . ?*

## THE TINDER BOX

*Wednesday, 10 February 1999*

The detective shook his head. 'I don't understand what you're talking about, Mrs Lavenham.'

Siobhan gave an angry sigh. 'Oh, for goodness sake! The hate campaign that's being waged against them. The graffiti on their walls, the constant telephone calls threatening them with arson, the fact that Bridey's too frightened to go out for fear of being attacked. There's a war going on in Sowerbridge which is getting worse the closer we come to Patrick's trial, but as far as you're concerned it doesn't exist. Why aren't you investigating it? Why don't you respond to Bridey's telephone calls?'

He consulted a piece of paper on his desk. 'Mrs O'Riordan's made fifty-three emergency calls in the eight months since Patrick was remanded for the murders,' he said, 'only thirty of which were considered serious enough to send a police car to investigate. In every case, the attending officers filed reports saying Bridey was wasting police time.' He gave an apologetic shrug. 'I realize it's not what you want to hear, but we'd be within our rights if we decided to prosecute her. Wasting police time is a serious offence.'

Siobhan thought of the tiny, wheelchair-bound

woman whose terror was so real she trembled constantly. 'They're after killing us, Siobhan,' she would say over and over again. 'I hear them creeping about the garden in the middle of the night and I think to myself, there's nothing me or Liam can do if this is the night they decide to break in. To be sure, it's only God who's keeping us safe.'

'But who *are* they, Bridey?'

'It's the bully boys whipped up to hate us by Mrs Haversley and Mr Jardine,' wept the woman. 'Who else would it be?'

Siobhan brushed her long dark hair from her forehead and frowned at the detective inspector. 'Bridey's old, she's disabled, and she's completely terrified. The phone never stops ringing. Mostly it's long silences, other times it's voices threatening to kill her. Liam's only answer to it all is to get paralytically drunk every night so he doesn't have to face up to what's going on.' She shook her head impatiently. 'Cynthia Haversley and Jeremy Jardine, who seem to control everything that happens in Sowerbridge, have effectively given carte blanche to the local youths to make life hell for them. Every sound, every shadow has Bridey on the edge of her seat. She needs protection, and I don't understand why you're not giving it to her.'

'They were offered a safe house, Mrs Lavenham, and they refused it.'

'Because Liam's afraid of what will happen to Kilkenny Cottage if he leaves it empty,' she protested.

## THE TINDER BOX

‘The place will be trashed in half a minute flat . . . You know that as well as I do.’

He gave another shrug, this time more indifferent than apologetic. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but there’s nothing we can do. If any of these attacks actually happened . . . well, we’d have something concrete to investigate. They can’t even name any of these so-called vigilantes . . . just claim they’re yobs from neighbouring villages.’

‘So what are you saying?’ she asked bitterly. ‘That they have to be dead before you take the threats against them seriously?’

‘Of course not,’ he said, ‘but we do need to be persuaded the threats are real. As things stand, they seem to be all in her mind.’

‘Are you accusing Bridey of lying?’

He smiled slightly. ‘She’s never been averse to embroidering the truth when it suits her purpose, Mrs Lavenham.’

Siobhan shook her head. ‘How can you say that? Have you ever spoken to her? Do you even *know* her? To you, she’s just the mother of a thief and a murderer.’

‘That’s neither fair nor true.’ He looked infinitely weary, like a defendant in a trial who has answered the same accusation in the same way a hundred times before. ‘I’ve known Bridey for years. It’s part and parcel of being a policeman. When you question a man as often as I’ve questioned Liam, you get to know his wife pretty well by default.’ He leaned



forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands loosely in front of him. 'And sadly, the one sure thing I know about Bridey is that you can't believe a word she says. It may not be her fault, but it *is* a fact. She's never had the courage to speak out honestly because her drunken brute of a husband beats her within an inch of her life if she even dares to think about it.'

Siobhan found his directness shocking. 'You're talking about things that happened a long time ago,' she said. 'Liam hasn't struck anyone since he lost the use of his right arm.'

'Do you know how that happened?'

'In a car crash.'

'Did Bridey tell you that?'

'Yes.'

'Not so,' he countered bluntly. 'When Patrick was twenty, he tied Liam's arm to a table top and used a hammer to smash his wrist to a pulp. He was so wrought up that when his mother tried to stop him, he shoved her through a window and broke her pelvis so badly she's never been able to walk again. That's why she's in a wheelchair and why Liam has a useless right arm. Patrick got off lightly by pleading provocation because of Liam's past brutality towards him, and spent less than two years in prison for it.'

Siobhan shook her head. 'I don't believe you.'

'It's true.' He rubbed a tired hand around his face. 'Trust me, Mrs Lavenham.'

'I can't,' she said flatly. 'You've never lived in

Sowerbridge, Inspector. There's not a soul in that village who doesn't have it in for the O'Riordans and a juicy titbit like that would have been repeated a thousand times. Trust *me*.'

'No one knows about it.' The man held her gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes. 'It was fifteen years ago and it happened in London. I was a raw recruit with the Met, and Liam was on our ten-most-wanted list. He was a scrap-metal merchant, and up to his neck in villainy, until Patrick scuppered him for good. He sold up when the lad went to prison and moved himself and Bridey down here to start a new life. When Patrick joined them after his release, the story of the car crash had already been accepted.'

She shook her head again. 'Patrick came over from Ireland after being wounded by a terrorist bomb. That's why he smiles all the time. The nerves in his cheek were severed by a piece of flying glass.' She sighed. 'It's another kind of disability. People take against him because they think he's laughing at them.'

'No, ma'am, it was a revenge attack in prison for stealing from his cellmate. His face was slashed with a razor. As far as I know, he's never set foot in Ireland.'

She didn't answer. Instead she ran her hand rhythmically over her skirt while she tried to collect her thoughts. *Oh, Bridey, Bridey, Bridey . . . Have you been lying to me . . . ?*

The inspector watched her with compassion. 'Nothing happens in a vacuum, Mrs Lavenham.'

‘Meaning what, exactly?’

‘Meaning that Patrick murdered Mrs Fanshaw – ’ he paused – ‘and both Liam and Bridey know he did. You can argue that the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his father as a child provoked an anger in him that he couldn’t control – it’s a defence that worked after the attack on Liam – but it won’t cut much ice with a jury when the victims were two defenceless old ladies. That’s why Bridey’s jumping at shadows. She knows that she effectively signed Mrs Fanshaw’s death warrant when she chose to keep quiet about how dangerous Patrick was, and she’s terrified of it becoming public.’ He paused. ‘Which it certainly will during the trial.’

Was he right, Siobhan wondered? Were Bridey’s fears rooted in guilt? ‘That doesn’t absolve the police of responsibility for their safety,’ she pointed out.

‘No,’ he agreed, ‘except we don’t believe their safety’s in question. Frankly, all the evidence so far points to Liam himself being the instigator of the hate campaign. The graffiti is always done at night in car spray paint, at least a hundred cans of which are stored in Liam’s shed. There are never any witnesses to it, and by the time Bridey calls us the perpetrators are long gone. We’ve no idea if the phone rings as constantly as they claim, but on every occasion that a threat has been made Bridey admits she was alone in the cottage. We think Liam is making the calls himself.’

## THE TINDER BOX

She shook her head in bewilderment. 'Why would he do that?'

'To prejudice the trial?' he suggested. 'He has a different mindset to you and me, ma'am, and he's quite capable of trashing Kilkenny Cottage himself if he thinks it will win Patrick some sympathy with a jury.'

Did she believe him? Was Liam that clever? 'You said you were always questioning him. Why? What had he done?'

'Any scam involving cars. Theft. Forging MOT certificates. Odometer fixing. You name it, Liam was involved in it. The scrap-metal business was just a front for a car-laundering operation.'

'You're talking about when he was in London?'

'Yes.'

She pondered for a moment. 'Did he go to prison for it?'

'Once or twice. Most of the time he managed to avoid conviction. He had money in those days – a lot of money – and could pay top briefs to get him off. He shipped some of the cars down here, presumably with the intention of starting the same game again, but he was a broken man after Patrick smashed his arm. I'm told he gave up grafting for himself and took to living off disability benefit instead. There's no way anyone was going to employ him. He's too unreliable to hold down a job. Just like his son.'

'I see,' said Siobhan slowly.

He waited for her to go on, and when she didn't he said, 'Leopards don't change their spots, Mrs Lavenham. I wish I could say they did, but I've been a policeman too long to believe anything so naive.'

She surprised him by laughing. 'Leopards?' she echoed. 'And there was me thinking we were talking about dogs.'

'I don't follow.'

'Give a dog a bad name and hang him. Did the police *ever* intend to let them wipe the slate clean and start again, Inspector?'

He smiled slightly. 'We did . . . for fifteen years . . . Then Patrick murdered Mrs Fanshaw.'

'Are you sure?'

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'He used the same hammer on her that he used on his father.'

Siobhan remembered the sense of shock that had swept through the village the previous June when the two bodies were discovered by the paper boy after his curiosity had been piqued by the fact that the front door had been standing ajar at six thirty on a Sunday morning. Thereafter, only the police and Lavinia's grandson had seen inside the house, but the rumour machine described a scene of carnage, with Lavinia's brains splattered across the walls of her bedroom and her nurse lying in a pool of blood in the kitchen. It was inconceivable that anyone in Sowerbridge could have done such a thing, and it was assumed the Manor House had been targeted by an outside gang for whatever valuables the old woman might possess.

## THE TINDER BOX

It was never very clear why police suspicion had centred so rapidly on Patrick O'Riordan. Gossip said his fingerprints were all over the house and his toolbox was found in the kitchen, but Siobhan had always believed the police had received a tipoff. Whatever the reason, the matter appeared to be settled when a search warrant unearthed Lavinia's jewellery under his floorboards and Patrick was formally charged with the murders.

Predictably, shock had turned to fury but, with Patrick already in custody, it was Liam and Bridey who took the full brunt of Sowerbridge's wrath. Their presence in the village had never been a particularly welcome one – indeed, it was a mystery how 'rough trade like them' could have afforded to buy a cottage in rural Hampshire, or why they had wanted to – but they became deeply unwelcome after the murders. Had it been possible to banish them behind a physical pale, the village would most certainly have done so; as it was, the old couple were left to exist in a social limbo where backs were turned and no one spoke to them.

In such a climate, Siobhan wondered, could Liam really have been stupid enough to ratchet up the hatred against them by daubing anti-Irish slogans across his front wall?

'If Patrick is the murderer, then why didn't you find Lavinia's diamond rings in Kilkenny Cottage?' she asked the inspector. 'Why did you only find pieces of fake jewellery?'

MINETTE WALTERS

'Who told you that? Bridey?'

'Yes.'

He looked at her with a kind of compassion. 'Then I'm afraid she was lying, Mrs Lavenham. The diamond rings were in Kilkenny Cottage along with everything else.'