

# Sunspangled

The murder of a man nobody would  
want to kill

by

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For Emily and Katie  
Who make my life sunspangled

With thanks to (retired) Detective Inspector Chris  
Dovey for all his patience explaining police procedure

# 1

The young man walking up the stairs with a song on his lips and a song in his heart was being murdered. He did not know it.

There are around seven hundred recorded murders in Britain each year. A sizeable majority of the adult victims live in some degree of fear of being killed. They may be involved in street gangs where fatal stabbings are common. They may have been regularly abused by their partner, suffering a catalogue of injuries before the fatal blow is struck. Even where a murder is committed on the spur of the moment, such as an argument between strangers leading to a fatal assault, the victim will usually sense danger.

Occasionally someone is murdered in the pure bliss of ignorance. As the young man opened the door to the sole bedroom on the top floor of the house, he was blissful. He sensed the joy of the final few weeks of term to come. Exams were over, they'd gone smoothly and there were merely a few introductory lectures to attend, which were setting the groundwork for their final year at university.

There had been a party atmosphere in the Union Bar that evening, with a much higher proportion of the student population out to play. It was a sign of the days to come and he relished the prospect. A life of almost infinite opportunities lay in front of him, but he thought of this only subconsciously. Live in the moment. There were years and decades to decide which of those opportunities to grab.

He emptied his pockets and took off his clothes, throwing them casually onto a chair, and connected his phone to a charger. Had there been anyone there to see it, which there was not, they would have observed a tanned, athletic and powerful body walking naked across the room to the bed. The body of a sportsman in the early part of his prime blessed with good looks and topped with a mop of blond hair.

The day had been warm but still with the freshness of the start of summer. The temperature in the bedroom was pleasant and the window remained shut and fastened. He got into bed, relishing the prospect of every remaining day in June, all of which he would be spending at Middleham University.

He had been blessed not just with looks and intellect, but also with compassion. During his A-level years he had used his free periods to set up and run a voluntary group, which cared for elderly residents in his hometown. At university he had regularly helped man the call line for students with mental health issues, having spent much of the Easter holidays in his first year undergoing training.

Very few of his friends knew about this. Naturally a man who kept his cards close to his chest, he couldn't abide the pious platitudes and self-satisfaction of some of his peers. When the reciprocal adulation began he would flash his bright smile and fade into the background.

The last person anyone would want to kill?

In the few days since exams had finished he'd begun to get an instinct that all was far from well with one of his fellow students. His voluntary work had developed a natural intuition for spotting when people had serious problems. He was increasingly worried about something he couldn't quite define in his mind.

Normally, when he got into bed he would read for a while or lay on his back with his hands behind his head, thinking about the events of the evening. That night he was trying to think about some of his fellow students who he'd spent the evening with and of plans for the next day. He couldn't concentrate and that instinct kept bubbling back up to the surface of his mind. He knew help was needed but he hadn't yet evaluated the problem. Weariness gradually came over him and he decided to tackle the issue in the morning.

He rarely felt tired, often needing plenty of time to get to sleep as ideas bounced around his brain. He yawned and a mischievous thought darted across his mind, which he decided would create a perfect opportunity for good-natured banter at the expense of one of his housemates.

Drowsy now, he turned onto his side and, with a smile on his face, his eyes closed for the last time.

Our lungs contain lots of small, elastic air sacs, which are called alveoli. Each time we breathe, the alveoli absorb oxygen and release carbon dioxide. This exchange of gases is fundamental to our bodies

functioning. The oxygen-rich blood flows to the heart and is pumped round the body, fuelling our organs.

What the young man, who had just gone to bed for the last time, had ingested that evening changed the way his lungs worked. The alveoli were irritated and slowly began to fill with fluid rather than air. This caused less oxygen to be absorbed into the bloodstream and so in turn led to his organs not receiving the fuel they required.

Gradually his breathing became shallower as his heart pumped more slowly. His vital organs were ceasing to function. The pressure on what the previous morning had been a perfectly functioning heart became too great and it stopped. Mark Gower was dead.

*Mark Gower's killer lay exultant in bed, brain racing like a formula one car being pushed to the peak of performance and eyes like dinner plates in the darkness. It felt as if life had been leading to these moments, knowing that this might be the precise second when Mark's life would end – a time not to be wasted by sleeping.*

*Guiding a pathetic weakling along the tracks they would probably have trod anyway was one thing. Destroying a man like Mark would be quite another. The euphoria was intoxicating in a way that made alcohol or MDMA seem like a child's sweets.*

*It was tempting to get up, to run, to make the noise that this gladiatorial achievement so merited. There would be no suspicion so how could you act suspiciously?*

*Too fey to be able to rationalise caution, there was somewhere in the subconscious, a reserve, a self-preservation trigger. No matter, lying in bed with a million thoughts a second rocketing around your brain was exhilarating.*

*Anticipation lapped the mouth like the first taste of a gourmet meal. In the morning Mark's death would surely be confirmed – that knowledge, that certainty might lead to a yet higher plateau of ecstasy.*

*Thoughts swirled for what seemed like hours around a mind suddenly fixated with destruction. Eventually the adrenalin burned out and dreams ensued.*

*A Roman Emperor stood majestically, deciding which Christians should be thrown to the lions.*

## 2

On the morning of Wednesday 12 June 2019, Sam Taylor had known that the chances of anything approaching a lie-in were non-existent, so he had allowed himself to half wake up as soon as Chloe Hartwell got out of bed. He opened the slits of his eyes just a little and watched her walking naked around his bedroom. By any standards she looked amazing and he decided once again that it was absolutely worth it.

Chloe had started keeping a few things in Sam's room as the majority of the nights they spent together were at his rather than her house. The clothes she kept in his wardrobe represented a wide range on the spectrum of sartorial elegance. The previous week they had attended one of the array of summer balls the University held each year. Done up to the nines as Sam put it to himself, she had been *the* head-turner of the night, in a classically elegant way. He had loved every minute of it.

Today was near the other end of that spectrum. They were going to London to join a protest march and Chloe was dressing herself in what Sam privately described as her grunge mode, despite the grunge scene having died out before either of them was born.

Chloe had put on a 'Trump Hands Off Our NHS' t-shirt and was climbing into a pair of jeans, which consisted almost as much of patches and rips as denim. Both were about two sizes too big for her and did a good job of hiding her figure. She put her hair up into what could best be described as a mess and applied some vaguely gothic looking dark lipstick.

Sam's characteristic shrewd stare was on this occasion more libidinous than appraising. Chloe was well used to being ogled, but she was also getting used to Sam's manner of staring piercingly at others, often during conversations, as he assessed what they were thinking.

When she turned to see Sam's eyes on her, the hint of a self-satisfied smile on his lips, her smile was internal. Given that most of Chloe's hair was tied up, the flick of a few beguiling strands that landed over her forehead and eyes was more subtle than usual. The slight pursing

and then opening of her lips that had sent shivers down so many spines was not.

“Time to get up handsome. We’re going in a few minutes. I want to be there early for the coach. You could go and see where Owen is, we’re not waiting for him.” Chloe was, as usual, leaving him in no doubt about the priorities of the day.

Sam got up, sprayed on some deodorant and then dressed quickly in an old t-shirt and faded jeans. This ensured he would not be smartly enough dressed to be out of place, but still distinct from the look Chloe and her mates would be flaunting in London. He went downstairs and, given that it was not the sort of house where the ceremony of knocking on bedroom doors was observed, opened Owen Lloyd’s bedroom door.

Owen was already dressed and ready, looking at his phone, checking various social media feeds regarding the day’s protest. Of the six students who lived at 12 Newton Street, in some ways Owen had changed the most during their near two years at the University. When he’d arrived some had mistaken him for a pseudo-intellectual. Studying for one of the more traditional English Literature degrees the country offers, he had been prone to quoting from obscure texts and using archaic words that nobody understood.

What he also possessed was a rock-hard head for alcohol and as friendship groups were being formed in the first term that had led him to the group that now lived at 12 Newton Street. When they had all been in halls of residence during their first year he had initially been on the edge of the group. His five housemates ranged from decent to very good-looking, and all played sports. Owen Lloyd was neither sporty nor had he any pretensions to good looks, being short, pot-bellied and possessing a mop of unruly mousy brown curls that he had never sought to tame.

On the evenings during the first term when they didn’t go out drinking, they had needed something to do. They sat talking in each other’s rooms in the halls of residence, drinking coffee or tea, occasionally indulging in legal highs. Even amongst a group of academic high flyers they soon realised that there was nothing pseudo about Owen Lloyd’s intellect.



Halfway through their first term at the University, Owen founded the Christopher Wren Club. This was based on the rather pompous conceit that, rather than simply being specialists in their degree subjects, they would be experts in many fields. In practice this involved them each sharing snippets of information they had learnt on their courses, that each deemed would be of interest to the wider group. It soon expanded to cover any subject of intellectual interest. The six residents of 12 Newton Street had been the members of the Christopher Wren Club.

For many undergraduates, starting university is the first time they live away from home for an extended period. The first couple of terms can be the transformation from adolescent to adult, learning in a fair bit more detail about sex, alcohol, drugs and the practicalities of looking after yourself.

As the six made their transition out of adolescence, the proportion of the nights spent in pubs or the Union Bar increased. In consequence, the Christopher Wren Club was quietly disbanded towards the end of the second term of their first year, (somewhat to Owen's chagrin). However, it had helped to form the bond between the six of them and, when houses had to be found for their second year, there was little dissent to the idea that the six would live together.

Owen's transition out of adolescence took the longest of the six because he had the greatest journey to make. Despite the fact that they had all turned twenty in the previous few months, he still retained the teenager's ability to be awestruck by a new element of life. The most recent manifestation was going on protest marches.

Coming from a traditional, middle class family, who dressed conservatively and voted Tory, the concept of student protests became a new avenue for Owen to explore when Sam had started dating Chloe Hartwell. Chloe had been on every protest march organised at the University and attendance had become compulsory for Sam. Chloe had entreated his housemates to participate, but only Owen had been lured.

Sam Taylor yawned and said, "I'd better know what are we protesting about today mate, don't want to be baffed when Chloe is talking to me about it."

"I've just been reading up, it is the underfunding of social care. Teresa May's manifesto in 2017 was to get the people to pay for it directly rather than via government funding. That was before she had to backtrack on the 'dementia tax'. Now she's going, whoever takes over will have to grasp this nettle," Owen replied.

"Right, thanks mate. More importantly, who is providing the beer for the coach trip?"

"You keen to get back on it?" Owen said with a smile. "I fancy a quiet, gentle drink through the day myself. We'll take an Augustinian approach – Lord makes us abstinent but not yet."

Owen's smile broadened, "Don't worry. I checked with MacInnes and he is sorting it so it'll be something decent, not that bloody home brew cider we had last time. I think we're getting dropped off in Bloomsbury again and marching down to Trafalgar Square. Once we are there the different groups will be planning future protests and Chloe will be busy. We ought to be able to get at least a couple in at that pub down on Villiers Street by Charing Cross."

For the previous minute or so they'd heard Chloe calling from somewhere near the front door. Now she shouted that she was leaving, whether they were ready or not. "Once more into the breach..." said Owen with a smile.

Owen and Sam left their house to travel to London and register their brimming disgust at the government's refusal to spend enough money to deal with the social care needs that were due to mushroom over the next couple of decades.

The three students walked along Newton Street towards the campus in unusual silence, and with each step nearer the university all three were increasingly crowded in by their own desires.

For each, the kaleidoscope of those desires in their own mind had been shaken a different way and formed a distinct pattern. For one of them, as that pattern settled, the face of Mark Gower dominated it.

### 3

The chivvy of Sam Taylor and Owen Lloyd by Chloe Hartwell had reached almost hectoring tones by the time it woke Danny Wilson. Then the front door slammed.

Danny woke feeling slightly jaded but given how accustomed they were to large quantities of alcohol, this didn't qualify as a hangover. He reasoned that a couple of pints of water and a cup of coffee would have him firing on all cylinders again.

He got up, stretched and walked downstairs in his boxer shorts to the kitchen. He put the kettle on and downed a couple of pints of water, exhaling strongly as a result of the second pint. He had filled the pint glass a third time for more leisurely consumption when Ryan Sandling walked in, already dressed.

"Morning mate," Danny said, "Coffee? Tea?"

"Have the anarchists gone to change the world?" Ryan responded. Smiles ghosted both their faces. The subject of protesting being a regular topic of debate in the house since Sam had started seeing Chloe Hartwell early in the previous term.

"Coffee after last night thanks," said Ryan, "Large and black." "Anyone else up and around who wants one?" asked Danny. "Doubt it," Ryan replied, showing no inclination to go and ask. "Do you reckon Jack and that Annette are upstairs picking out wedding patterns?"

Danny guffawed, a joyous laugh from deep inside his being. The household was famous throughout the University for laughing, both for frequency and volume. Danny's belly laugh was indicative of his natural inclination to find enjoyment in everyday life. "That lad is smashing it," he said pouring the coffee. Ryan smiled and replied, "Can you imagine what he'll drag in next?"

Sipping coffee, Ryan continued, "I'm going to go up to the campus and get next year's textbooks. You coming?"

"Christ, you're keen," said Danny. "What's the hurry? We've got weeks yet."

“Nothing really,” said Ryan shrugging, “It’s just that the end of term is going to be one long party based on last year, so I’m keen to get all the boring admin done now so it doesn’t reduce valuable drinking time.”

“Sure, why not mate. I’ll chuck some clothes on and we’ll wander up. If I have a look round what’s available today, Mark and I can probably get it done quickly when the final list of third year texts comes out,” Danny said, pausing and then adding, “I’ll shower later before we go out to the bar.” Ryan smiled, “Yeah, that’s a good plan, I’ll do the same.”

A few minutes later they were on the way to the campus. Ryan Sandling, walking unnaturally quickly, was trying to keep his mind in step with his breathing. The tasks ahead, he told himself, he must focus on the tasks ahead. He reminded himself how straightforward they should be.

Danny Wilson was forcing the pace. His body, totally relaxed when he had left the house, was feeling tenser with every step. He had done it again and whilst the previous time all had worked out well, there was no guarantee it would this time. This time he was determined that fear wouldn’t make him look guilty.

## 4

Jack Freeman lay in bed, immune to the hubbub of noise in the house. The first time the front door had slammed he had woken briefly and immediately gone back to sleep. About fifteen minutes later it had slammed again and he had opened his eyes for a few seconds. Remembering that he had no introductory lectures that day relating to his final year's courses he closed them again and slept.

It was some time later that he really woke up. In no hurry, he lay back and thought of the unique events of the previous evening.

A fortuitous meeting really, he'd no idea she had just done her finals. For some reason he had assumed that she was a fresher. It had been as extraordinary as he had hoped and he wondered whether she had been a virgin, a smile playing on his lips.

He tried to remember as much as he could. Eventually he had exhausted his memory banks and got up. The room smelt of sweaty bodies more than sex. Jack opened a window and then swaggered naked across the landing to the bathroom. He turned on the shower and as he waited for the hot water he gave a shiver that had nothing to do with the air temperature. He suddenly felt a need to cleanse himself and having got into the shower he vigorously lathered his body with an excess of shower gel.

A few minutes later he re-entered his bedroom and dressed immaculately in a fashionable t-shirt and tailored shorts. He spent several minutes examining his hair and short beard in the full-length mirror on the inside door of the wardrobe and, satisfied with both, went downstairs.

12 Newton Street was not one of those student houses with a culture of low-cost culinary creativity. Breakfast was usually limited to toast. Butter was generally available and on a good day either marmite or jam. The haute cuisine could be washed down with tea, coffee or water.

Someone had obviously been shopping recently as butter, marmite, jam, milk and sugar were all available. He opted for toast with just a scrape of butter and a sugarless cup of tea. The house was quiet. He

knew that Sam, Chloe and Owen were due to go to London, but where were the others? He picked up his wallet and keys and left by the front door.

He returned about fifteen minutes later and put the kettle on again. He poked his head round Owen's bedroom door just in case. The room was empty. He walked up the first flight of stairs and looked in all of Sam, Ryan and Danny's rooms, which were also empty.

He climbed up the second flight of stairs, opened Mark's door and life duly changed forever.

Jack Freeman stared at Mark Gower's inert form in the bed in the attic of 12 Newton Street. Mark lay on his side, facing Jack as he stood on the threshold of the room. The duvet was wrapped around Mark from the midriff downwards and his body looked rigid.

Studying chemistry, Jack was the only scientist living at 12 Newton Street. Instantly he knew what he was looking at. The horror of an actual corpse froze him to the spot. He was shivering more vigorously now.

He hyperventilated, unable to drag his eyes away from the body. The only thought his brain could process was that this was what a dead body actually looked like.

He walked towards the bed, the few steps seeming to take an eternity, his limbs feeling as if they were those of a puppet on strings being manipulated by a clumsy child. He reached the bed and put his hand on Mark's face, which was cold.

Jack shied away from the bedside. He stared transfixed at the contents of the bed. At what had been a fellow human, someone who breathed, laughed and joked. Who had breathed, laughed and joked with him, Jack Freeman, for nearly 2 years and was now just a heap of flesh and bones, ready to rot.

His brain was scrambled by what he'd seen and couldn't process obvious simple tasks he'd always taken for granted. Was it wise to call the police or should he get as far away from the house as feasible?

Sometime later he walked stiffly downstairs, picked up his mobile and called 999.