

ONE MORE MINUTE

This is a superb piece of writing, so much so it's not clear if it's fact or fiction. The talented writer captures the small intimate details of a husband and wife's relationship, their family life and his interaction with work colleagues, all highly effective as it builds up to a tragic ending. ADJUDICATOR

Lionel Mulally

IT WAS 9.20 pm on a crisp Autumn evening in late September in Dublin City. Garda John Doyle was on Charlie Bravo 3, the Garda Policing District motor cycle. A native of Co Longford, he had been working in Dublin with *An Garda Síochána*, the national police service, for twenty five years. He was out on patrol and close to finishing up his tour of duty at 10 pm. The traffic on the city streets had eased but, as usual, there was still a regular amount of traffic and people milling about. He drove along the streets, the main thoroughfare and side roads, checked the local parks and school areas and drove by the local shops who were starting to roll down their shutters and close for the night. At Newcomen Avenue, a blue Astra car suddenly took a left turn quite wide and without indicating causing the car travelling behind it to brake suddenly and the driver to sound the horn. A no-left turn sign was posted at the junction. John easily accelerated slightly on the motor cycle, a standard Garda issue Honda Deuville, white in colour with panniers either side housing the Tetra Radio set. He turned after the Astra car and signalled the driver to stop. As he did so he radioed his District Garda Station. "Charlie Bravo 3 to Control, registration check please." He smiled as the answering voice with its soft Cork accent started with "Yerra for God sake John, it's nearly ten o'clock. What are you doing stopping cars at this hour?" It was a similar conversation they had every day. As John alighted from the motor cycle, he kicked the stand in position and turned the engine off. He noticed that the driver of the car had stepped out of the car and was walking towards him. The driver of the Astra was a small man, wearing jeans and open necked shirt and blue jumper.

John smiled to himself as he removed his helmet. He held to the theory that the driver getting out first to walk back when stopped did so to distract the Garda and try to put him off checking the car too closely. 'A sure sign that his tax was out' he thought. Mark at the Garda Station radio console came back with details of the car, who the registered owner was and with the current tax and insurance details. The driver of the car approached John. "How-e-ya Guard" he said, "did I do something wrong?" John explained about the wide turn, no indicator being used and the 'no left turn' sign. He asked to see the man's driving licence and went around to the front of the car. Peter Reilly was the name given "Your tax is a bit out, Mr Reilly" he said. "Five months!" "I know", Peter Reilly replied "but I don't have the car that long", John looked at him squarely in the eye and replied, "you have the car currently insured. You have it insured for the last nine months and you are the owner of this car for the past three years". The driver reddened. The Station had told John there was no outstanding warrants for the driver and that neither Peter Reilly nor the car had come to any attention before. "I tell you what" said John, "get the car taxed tomorrow, bring it up to the Station at 2 o'clock just to show me that it is back-taxed and there won't be a prosecution."

"Ah thanks Guard" Reilly answered, the relief evident in his voice, "I'll do that". John gave him his name, explained where the Station was, and told him to be there for a quarter to two. John mounted his motorbike and returned to the Station. He completed the Log Book for the motorcycle leaving it ready for the night unit. His friend Mark met him at the door. They had worked together for almost ten years

now and were the more senior members of the unit that they were attached to in the station. Despite working almost fifteen years in Dublin himself, Mark still had a musical Cork accent. He asked John was he going for 'one' after work. "No thanks" replied John "not with a six o'clock start. I will leave it tonight." He greeted the night unit as they came in and headed down stairs to his locker and changed out of the protective leather biker gear. He drove home. Traffic was light on the route home, street lights casting their orange and yellow glare along the road. Buses half full as he passed them collecting from the stops on the route. The journey home would take just over half an hour on part of the N4 to a small housing estate in Kildare. On the way he smiled as a Bruno Mars song was played on the radio. Stopped at traffic lights, he discreetly texted his wife. He did this whenever this particular song was played.

"Your song on the radio" he wrote. "Bruno Mars. He's singing about you again!" The line he referred to in the song was about her smile, and how the world would stop and stare when she smiled! Arriving home, John parked in the driveway of his house. Opening the door he noticed his wife and eldest daughter in the living room watching the TV. He ruffled his daughter Sharon's head asking had she all the homework done as it was nearly her bed time. She shushed him, "it's a good part in the film", she said "give me a minute." His wife, Maria, smiled up at him, "Claire is in bed" she said, "if you want to look in at her. All grand with you?" "Ah yeah, all quiet. I'll leave you to your film" he said and walked out to the kitchen. There he boiled the kettle and made himself a

mug of tea. The film ended and his daughter said good night and headed up to bed. Maria got up, tidying up around before she headed up to bed too. "Garry rang earlier" she said. Garry was their eldest child, 21 years of age and was working in a Solicitor's office in London. "He was in great form" said Maria. A new girl on the scene and all she added. John smiled as she made her way up stairs. "I'll be up in a minute" he said. He sat down with his tea and flicked through the channels on the TV and glanced through the local newspaper. After getting some sports results, and the headlines, he washed the mug, put it away, locked up the house and, turning off the lights went up the stairs. He looked in on his daughters rooms, Claire already in a deep sleep and Sharon just snuggling down into her quilt. After a small chat about school, the film she had watched and plans for the weekend, he finished with a 'goodnight pet' and closed the door gently behind him. Not all the way though as he knew she still liked the door ajar a little with some of the landing light coming into the room.

Maria sat reading with the side light on. Glasses perched on her nose, dressed and ready for bed. He brushed his teeth, readied for bed himself and hopped in beside her and read a couple of pages of his own book. It was almost midnight. "I'll try not to wake you in the morning" he said as he switched off the light. She smiled as she switched off hers. "You never do" she said. "Will we go somewhere for the weekend?" she asked. "Ah that would be nice" he replied. "Maybe down to see your folks?" He moved up behind her in the bed and placed his arm around her. "Tractor position?" he asked laughingly. She laughed quietly. Tractor position was where she moved over to him, her back to his chest and he lay close to her, his arm around her, holding her hands, as they drifted off to sleep. He smiled as he remembered when she first called it the tractor position. They were younger then, and hadn't been together too long when he tried to snuggle up

close to her and asked her to 'reverse back' into him. She laughed and said 'you make me sound like a tractor'. 'Yes Deere' he had replied ! It had become their little joke. Twenty six years late, he still remembered the first time he held her like this. Her skin warm against his. Her skin flawless. A freckle on her right shoulder. He remembered it all so clearly. That first time he had held his breath and wished that time would stand still for that perfect moment. It was still as clear and strong to him now as it was then. He had closed his eyes that time wishing for time to freeze and stay that way for just one more minute. He had felt his heart beat, felt hers beat too through his chest and no words were exchanged or needed to be. The sun through the curtains that day seemed brighter at that moment. The birds singing outside seemed sweeter and clear. He remembered most of all, the warmth he felt as he was close to her, his hands around her waist joining hers, holding her close to him. He knew then that he loved her and always would. The feelings from that time were still as strong now. He smiled now and still treasured that moment. Kissing her gently on the shoulder, he listened to her soft breathing as she slept. He loved the 'tractor position', the warmth and safety of it. He remembered then, strangely nostalgic for him for no reason, the first time he had fallen for her too. He was in the central bus station, waiting to collect her from the bus that had just arrived. He'd spotted her through the crowd. It was still a 'Wow' moment ! The navy trousers and checked heeled shoes, long auburn hair over a white blouse and long blue cardigan. He even remembered what she wore ! Their first date ! His first thought was that he was so out of his depth with her. But they had stayed together and he knew she had made him a better man, the man he wanted to be, and he loved her for it. He turned and drifted to sleep himself.

He awoke at 5.15 am to the alarm beside the bed. Gently he made his way

to the bathroom and, after shaving and dressing he started to leave the room. He glanced at Maria. He smiled as she was still asleep. After going down stairs in his stocking feet where, after a small bowl of cereal he left the house, locking the door behind him. He got in the car and drove to work. Traffic was light and the orange glare from the street lights seemed to reflect the chill from the early morning mist. He arrived at the Garda station as the night unit were finishing up and making their way home. He dressed in the uniform again and joined his friends for the morning parade. Mark was there, tired looking. "I should have stopped at one", he groaned. John smiled. "You'll never learn" he said. "Where do you want to go for breakfast?" asked Mark. "Would the hotel suit you?" answered John, "around half eight !". After the Sergeant had paraded them and updated them on the night's events he dispatched them to their beats and duties. John, as usual was on the District motor bike. "Now lads", said the Sergeant "it's Mickey Money day today. The Children's Allowance is due. So the Post Offices will be busy later. Throw an eye on them a few times during the day. Community Guards, make sure you call in and see the Post Masters and staff and make sure all is ok. Bike and cars, make sure to drive by regularly." When the parading had finished, John took the keys to the motor bike and headed out. He drove around the District. It was twenty past six and the area was quiet. The signs of people beginning to wake were around him as bedroom lights stuttered on and cars, windscreens still misted slightly, began to populate the roads. Traffic was only starting to get busy. None of the Post Offices were opened at this stage, but John drove by them anyway. At twenty to seven he drove along Newcomen Avenue. Up ahead a silver BMW turned left suddenly, no indicator used, and took the turn wide. John could see the head and backs of four men in the car. Odd, he thought for that hour of the morning. He followed the car, and putting on his lights and siren signalled it to stop. As he did so he radioed the Station for a registration check. Mark's voice

answered "Ah for God's sake John. I'm only after getting my coffee. Give me a minute. I haven't warmed up the computer yet." John smiled. "You're always whinging. Sure isn't this what we get paid for! I'll give you a second so and give you the registration details in a minute." John started to get off his bike. As he did he noticed the passenger's door of the car opening. He started to smile to himself again but then thought it a little off as he realised it was the passenger who got out. The passenger started to walk towards him, with his head down slightly. Strange, thought John. As he straightened up the bike and turned to meet the passenger, he saw a flash. Sudden pressure on his chest took his breath away and he seemed surrounded by a thunderous noise. John felt nothing but realised then he was staring up. He could see the tops of the telegraph poles and the wires, the grey and beginnings of white clouds overhead. Turning his head he could see the man walk back to the car, sit in, and the car drive off. There was a noise in his head now, like rushing water. He heard other foot steps and saw a woman run to him and look down at him. He saw her mouth move, saw her look around, scared, her hands at her mouth and then he blinked. When he opened his eyes another had joined her. John placed his hands over his chest and felt the warmth there. For some reason he thought of Maria. He closed his eyes and the thought of their first tractor moments together came to him. He smiled. He saw the way she would flick back the loose lock of hair from her forehead, how she would look at him over her glasses, the smile she had for him, how he would still, to this day, stop and stare. He thought of the warmth he felt from her as he held her close with his arm around her. He remembered again, that first time holding her close to his chest, feeling the warmth of her. He could feel it now. He remembered then holding his breath and hoping that feeling and moment would last forever or even for one more minute. He gripped his

hand and, closing his eyes, held his breath. He felt that moment last.

Superintendent Alan McKeon awoke as his phone rang just after seven am. That's not a good sign he thought. Answering it, it was the Detective Inspector, Ken Faye. "Morning Super" he said "I have bad news" The Superintendent was immediately awake. "What is it?" he asked. "a Garda was shot this morning" he said. "John Doyle, the biker on Unit B. He was shot this morning, about half an hour ago." "Jesus" answered the Super. "Paramedics were working on him but he is dead" continued the Inspector. "They are taking him to hospital now but all his vital signs are gone". The Superintendent could feel his blood freeze. He knew John Doyle well. They were the same age, had only been a few months apart in Templemore, and had worked together on and off over the years. Alan knew Maria and John's kids. "What happened?" he asked. "I'm not sure" said the Detective Inspector. "Eye witnesses say a man got out of a car that John had stopped and just walked up and shot him. We have a brief description, and we will get CCTV when the shops and businesses open. You had best get on to the Press Office. RTE and other media outlets are already aware and are itching to run the story. We haven't told the family yet. Can you get onto the Press Office? I asked them not to put it out yet." "I'll do that" replied the Super. "Can you come and meet me at their estate. I know where John lives, I know Maria. I'll tell her myself." The Superintendent dressed quickly, rang the Superintendent in the Press Office, gave brief details of what had happened, and requested that the media not mention the incident until the family are informed. The Press Officer answered that RTE and others were already on to him and were intending to run it in their 8.00 am bulletin. Alan drove to where John lived and met the Detective Inspector at the entrance to the Estate. It was twenty five to eight. The Inspector was pale. Alan was too, but a job had to be done. They

walked quietly up to the door, and stopped in the porch. The estate was starting to wake with lights at bedrooms on, children heading for buses to school and others for work. Inside the house they could hear the normal morning sounds. They could hear Maria shouting up for Clare to get up for school. They could hear the radio in the background and the ping of the microwave. Ken moved to press the door bell. Alan stopped him. "No" he said. "As soon as we ring that door bell it will change her life forever. Let's give her one more minute of normal life".

He looked at his watch and watched the seconds go by. They stood silently. They could hear the sounds inside. The radio was on. A shout up the stairs then for someone to hurry up, that breakfast was ready and on the table. The ping of a microwave again. Normal stuff. Twenty seconds gone. They watched as a neighbour left their house to cycle off. The neighbour curiously glanced their direction as she cycled away. They saw a car drive by in the distance. Forty seconds. The shout inside again for breakfast on the table and to "get down now!"

The second hand completed its circle on his watch.

Ken rang the door bell. Inside Maria heard the bell and thought it odd. She wondered if one of the neighbours was looking for a lift. Cleaning her hands in a towel, she walked towards the front door. She opened the door and started to smile as she recognised Alan and then stopped. Both were serious looking, pale. Maria's hands went straight to her mouth. "Oh my God" she exclaimed. "No. It can't be. Don't tell me! Not John!" Claire and Sharon stopped on the stairs as they heard the fear in their mother's voice and looked puzzled at the men at the door. Alan could feel a lump in his throat. "Can we come in Maria?" She felt her legs go weak and stepped back. Ken and Alan stepped in and closed the door to the world behind them.