

>>>Reuters

>>>Wednesday, 15 May 2002, 16:17 GMT 17:17 UK

>>>Filed by Connie Burns, Freetown, Sierra Leone,  
West Africa

### **Spate of brutal killings**

Four months after President Kabbah announced an end to Sierra Leone's bloody civil war a spate of brutal killings in Freetown threatens to undermine the fragile peace. Police blame former rebel soldiers for the savage murders. Attacked at intervals since peace was declared in January, the five victims were found raped and hacked to death in their own homes.

A government source said yesterday, 'The killing of these women bears the trademark ferocity of the rebels. Sierra Leone has just emerged from a decade of savage conflict, and police believe a group of dissidents is responsible. We call on everyone to put an end to bloodshed.'

Detective Inspector Alan Collins of Manchester CID, who is in Freetown as part of a British training force, points to the serial nature of the murders. 'It's difficult to say how many people are involved at this stage, but the evidence suggests the crimes are linked. We are looking for a disturbed individual, or group, who acquired a taste for killing during the war. Rape and murder were commonplace then, and violence against women doesn't stop just because peace is declared.'

>>>Reuters

>>>Tuesday, 4 June 2002, 13:06 GMT 14:06 UK

>>>Filed by Connie Burns, Freetown, Sierra Leone,  
West Africa

### **Three suspects charged**

Three teenagers, formerly members of Foday Sankoh's RUF child army, were charged yesterday with the murders of five women. They were arrested after the attempted abduction of Amie Jonah, 14. Ahmad Gberebana, 19, Johnny Bunumbu, 19, and Katema Momana, 18, were caught and detained by Miss Jonah's family when the girl's screams alerted a neighbour.

A police spokesman said the teenagers were badly beaten before being handed over to the authorities. 'They caused great distress to Miss Jonah,' he said, 'and her father and brothers were understandably angry.' Fear has been rampant in Freetown since the gruesome discoveries of five murdered women. All were raped and disfigured by machete wounds.

In two cases identification was impossible. 'They may never be named,' said Detective Inspector Alan Collins of Manchester Police, who is advising the enquiry team. 'The civil war saw nearly half of this country's 4.5 million population displaced and we've no idea which region these women came from.'

He confirmed that a request for a British pathologist to provide expert assistance has been withdrawn. 'I understand that Gberebana, Bunumbu and Momana have provided the police with full confessions. Investigators are satisfied they have the right men in custody.'

The three teenagers were given medical treatment before being transferred to Pademba Road prison to await trial.

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# Paddy's Bar

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# One

I DON'T KNOW if that story was picked up in the West. I believe some interest was shown in South Africa, but only because rape and murder had been high on that country's agenda for some time. I was transferred to Asia shortly afterwards, so I never learnt the outcome of the trial. I assumed the teenagers were convicted because justice, like everything else in Sierra Leone, was subject to economic restrictions. Even if the court went to the expense of appointing a public defence lawyer, confessions of guilt, with graphic details of how each victim was murdered, would attract a summary sentence.

I know Alan Collins was troubled by the indictments, but there was little he could do about it when his request for an experienced pathologist was refused. He was in a difficult position – more an observer than an adviser – with less than two weeks of his secondment left at the time of Amie Jonah's abduction, and the youths' descriptions of their crimes effectively sealed their fate. Nevertheless, Alan remained sceptical.

'They were in no fit state to be questioned,' he told me. 'Amie's family had reduced them to pulp. They'd have said anything the police wanted them to say rather than face another beating.'

He was also troubled by the crime scenes. 'I saw two of the bodies in situ,' he said, 'and neither of them looked like a gang attack. Both women were huddled in the corners of the rooms with their heads and shoulders sliced to ribbons and defence wounds to their arms. It looked to me as if they were trying to

protect themselves from a single individual who attacked from the front. A gang would have been slashing at them from all sides.'

'What can you do?'

'Very little. No one's been interested since the youths confessed. I've written a report, pointing up the anomalies, but there are precious few doctors in Freetown, let alone forensic pathologists.' He smiled ruefully. 'The thinking seems to be that they deserve what they get because there's no doubt they were trying to abduct young Amie.'

'If you're right, won't the killer strike again? Won't that exonerate the boys?'

'It depends who he is. If he's a local, then probably . . . but if he's one of the foreign contingent –' he shrugged – 'I'm guessing he'll export his activities elsewhere.'

It was that conversation which increased my suspicions of John Harwood. When he was first pointed out to me in Paddy's Bar – Freetown's equivalent of Stringfellows – I knew I'd seen him before. I wondered if it was in Kinshasa in 1998 when I was covering the civil war in the Congo. I recalled him being in uniform then – almost certainly as a mercenary because the British army wasn't involved in that conflict – but I didn't think he'd been calling himself John Harwood.

By the spring of 2002 in Sierra Leone he was dressed in civvies and had a bad reputation. I saw him in three fights while I was there, and heard about others, but he was never on the receiving end of the damage. He had the build of a terrier – middling height, lean muscular frame, strong neck and limbs – and a terrier's ferocity once he had his teeth into someone. Most of the ex-pats gave him a wide berth, particularly when he was drinking.

At that time Freetown was full of foreigners. The UN was coordinating efforts to put the country back on its feet, and most of the ex-pats worked for the international press, NGOs, religious missions or world charities. A few, like Harwood, had

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private contracts. He was employed as chauffeur/bodyguard to a Lebanese businessman, who was rumoured to have interests in a diamond mine. Once in a while the pair of them vanished abroad with heavily armoured cases, so the rumours were probably true.

Along with everyone else, I tended to avoid him. Life was too short to get involved with loners with chips on their shoulders. However, I did make one overture during the six months I was there when I asked him to pass on a request for an interview with his boss. Diamonds were a hot topic in the aftermath of conflict. The question of who owned them and where the money was going had been a bone of contention in Sierra Leone for decades. None of the wealth was fed back into the country and the people's resentment at their grinding, subsistence-level poverty had been the spark which ignited the civil war.

Predictably, I got nowhere near Harwood's boss, but I had a brief exchange with Harwood himself. None of the local women would cook or clean for him, so most evenings he could be found eating alone at Paddy's Bar, which was where I approached him. I said I thought our paths had crossed before, and he acknowledged it with a nod.

'You're bonnier than I recall, Ms Burns,' he said in a broad Glaswegian accent. 'Last time I saw you you were a little mouse of a thing.'

I was surprised he remembered my name, even more surprised by the backhanded compliment. The one fact everyone knew about Harwood was that he didn't like women. It poured out of him under the influence of Star beer, and gossip had it that he was in the tertiary stage of syphilis after contracting it from a whore. It was a convenient explanation for his aggressive misogyny, but I didn't believe it myself. Penicillin was too freely available for any westerner to progress beyond the primary stage.

I told him what I wanted and placed a list of questions on the table, together with a covering letter explaining the nature

of the piece I was planning. ‘Will you pass these on to your boss and give me his answer?’ Access to anyone was difficult except through a third party. The rebel fighters had destroyed most of the communications network and, with everyone living in secure compounds, it was impossible to blag your way past the guards without an appointment.

Harwood prodded the papers back at me. ‘No to both requests.’

‘Why not?’

‘He doesn’t talk to journalists.’

‘Is that him speaking or you?’

‘No comment.’

I smiled slightly. ‘So how do I get past you, Mr Harwood?’

‘You don’t.’ He crossed his arms and stared up at me through narrowed eyes. ‘Don’t push your luck, Ms Burns. You’ve had your answer.’

My dismissal, too, I thought wryly. Even with a score of ex-pats within hailing distance, I didn’t have the nerve to press him further. I’d seen the kind of damage he could do, and I didn’t fancy being on the receiving end.

Paddy’s was the favoured watering-hole of the international community because it remained open throughout the eleven-year conflict. It was a large open-sided bar-cum-restaurant, with tables on a concrete veranda, and it was a magnet for local hookers in search of dollars. They learnt very quickly to avoid Harwood after he hurt one so badly that she was hospitalized. He spoke pidgin English, which is the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, and cursed the girls vilely in their own tongue if they tried to approach him. He called them ‘devils’ feathers’ and lashed out with his fists if they came too close.

He was rather more careful around Europeans. The charities and missions had a high percentage of female staff, but if a white woman jogged his arm he always let it go. Perhaps he was intimidated by them – they were a great deal brighter than he was, with strings of letters after their names – or perhaps he

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knew he wouldn't be able to get away with it. The less articulate black girls were easier targets for his anger. It persuaded most of us that he was a racist as well as a woman-hater.

There was no telling how old he was. He had a shaven head, tattooed with a winged scimitar at the base of his skull, and the sun had dried his skin to leather. When drunk, he boasted that he'd been in the SAS unit that stormed the Iranian embassy in London in 1980 and the scimitar was his badge of honour. But, if true, that would have put him in his late forties or early fifties, and his devastating punches suggested someone younger. Despite the strong Scottish accent, he claimed to come from London, although no one in the UK ex-pat community believed him, any more than they believed that John Harwood was the name he had been born with.

Nevertheless, if Alan Collins hadn't made his remark about the foreign contingent, it wouldn't have occurred to me that there might be more to Harwood's violence than anyone realized. Even when it did, there was nothing I could do about it. Alan had returned to Manchester by then and the murders of the women had quickly faded from memory.

I ran my suspicions past a few of my colleagues, but they were sceptical. As they pointed out, the killings had stopped with the arrest of the boys, and Harwood's modus operandi was to use his fists, not a machete. The tenor of their argument seemed to be that, however despicable Harwood was, he wouldn't have raped the women before murdering them. 'He can't even bring himself to *touch* a black,' said an Australian cameraman, 'so he's hardly likely to soil himself by dipping his wick into one.'

I gave it up because the only evidence I could cite against Harwood was a particularly brutal attack on a young prostitute in Paddy's Bar. A good hundred people had witnessed it, but the girl had taken money in lieu of prosecution so there wasn't even a report of the incident. In any case, my stint in Sierra Leone was almost at an end and I didn't want to start something

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that might delay my departure. I persuaded myself it wasn't my responsibility and confined justice to the dustbin of apathy.

By then I'd spent most of my life in Africa, first as a child, then working for newspapers in Kenya and South Africa, and latterly for Reuters as a newswire correspondent. It was a continent I knew and loved, having grown up in Zimbabwe as the daughter of a white farmer, but by the summer of 2002 I'd had enough. I'd covered too many forgotten conflicts and too many stories of financial corruption. I planned to stay a couple of months in London, where my parents had been living since 2001, before moving on to the Reuters bureau in Singapore to write about Asian affairs.

The night before I left Freetown for good, I was in the middle of packing when Harwood came to my house. He was escorted to my door by Manu, one of the Leonean gate-guards, who knew enough about the man's reputation to ask if I wanted a chaperone. I shook my head, but protected myself by talking to Harwood on my veranda in full view of the rest of the compound.

He studied my unresponsive expression. 'You don't like me much, do you, Ms Burns?'

'I don't like you at all, Mr Harwood.'

He looked amused. 'Because I wouldn't pass on your request for an interview?'

'No.'

The one-word response seemed to throw him. 'You shouldn't believe everything people say about me.'

'I don't have to. I've seen you in action.'

A closed expression settled on his face. 'Then you'll know not to cross me,' he murmured.

'I wouldn't bet on it. What do you want?'

He showed me an envelope and asked me to mail it in London. It was a common request to anyone going home because the Leonean postal service was notoriously unreliable. The usual routine was to leave the package open so that the

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bearer could show Customs at both ends that there was nothing illegal in it, but Harwood had sealed his. When I refused to accept it unless he was prepared to reveal the contents, he returned it to his pocket.

'You'll be needing a good turn from me one day,' he said.

'I doubt it.'

'If you do, you won't get it, Ms Burns. I have a long memory.'

'I don't expect to meet you again, so the situation won't arise.'

He turned away. 'I wouldn't bet on it,' he said in ironic echo. 'For people like us the world's smaller than you think.'

As I watched him walk to the gate, I was curious about the name I'd glimpsed on the envelope, 'Mary MacKenzie', and the last line of the address, 'Glasgow'. It flipped a switch in my memory. It *was* Kinshasa where I'd seen him before – he'd been part of a mercenary group fighting for Laurent Kabila's regime – and the name he'd been using then was Keith MacKenzie.

I must have wondered why he'd assumed an alias, and how he'd acquired a passport as John Harwood, but it wouldn't have been for long. I spoke the truth when I'd said I didn't expect to meet him again.

## Two

TWO YEARS LATER, in the spring of 2004, I recognized him immediately. I was on a three-month secondment to Baghdad to cover the rapidly deteriorating situation in Iraq, which was about as long as any newswire journalist could take the stress of the unfolding shambles. Editors around the world were demanding instant copy since the publication of photographs showing US soldiers abusing prisoners in Abu Ghraib jail.

It was a dangerous time for Westerners. Civilian contractors were being targeted for hostage-taking and execution, and private security firms were recruiting ex-soldiers by the thousand to bodyguard them. Iraq had become a bonanza for mercenaries. They were paid double what they could earn anywhere else, but the risks were enormous. Shoot-outs between private security agents and Iraqi insurgents were common, but they rarely hit the headlines. Discreet veils were drawn over the incidents to protect client confidentiality, for as often as not the client was the US government.

In the wake of Abu Ghraib, with the coalition lurching from one public relations disaster to another, a charm offensive was launched to mitigate the damage done by the ‘torture’ photographs. This involved bussing the press corps to different types of detention and training facilities with promises of full and free access. Being cynical hacks, few of us expected to hear anything that wasn’t ‘on message’, but we went along for the ride just to escape the claustrophobia of our fortress hotels.

There was no venturing out on the streets of Iraq alone at

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that time, not if we valued our lives and freedom. With an al-Qaeda bounty on every Western head – and women being targeted as potential ‘sex slaves’ after Lyndie England’s part in the prisoner abuse – press accreditation was no protection. Baghdad had been dubbed the most dangerous city in the world and, rightly or wrongly, women journalists saw rapists round every corner.

One of these PR tours ended at the police academy, where they were pushing out five hundred newly trained Iraqi policemen every two months. The coalition authorities had briefed their people well, and we received the same human rights spiel at the academy as we’d heard everywhere else. The buzz phrases of the moment were: ‘in accordance with the law’, ‘clarified chains of command’, ‘absolute commitment to humanitarian principles’, ‘proper checks and balances’.

They were fine-sounding sentiments, and honestly meant by the smart young Iraqi who pronounced them, but they were no more likely to prevent future abuse than the Nazi Nuremberg trials or the inquiry into the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. If I’d learnt anything from my forays into the world’s conflicts, it was that sadists exist everywhere and war is their theatre.

Thoroughly bored, I glanced through an open office window as the press crocodile wound around the main building. In the centre of the room, several uniformed dog-handlers, with Alsatians on leashes, faced a man in civvies with his back to me. I’d have known MacKenzie’s bullet head anywhere from the winged scimitar tattoo, but he turned as his listeners’ attention was drawn by the voice of our escort and there was no mistaking his face. More out of surprise than any desire to speak to him, I came to a halt, but if he recognized me he gave no sign of it. With an impatient scowl, he reached for the handle and jerked the window shut.

I caught up with the guide and asked him about the civilian with the shaven head. Who was he and where did he fit into the chain of command? Was he training Iraqis to handle dogs? What

were his qualifications? The guide didn't know, but said he'd find out before I left.

Half an hour later, I learnt that MacKenzie was now calling himself Kenneth O'Connell and was a consultant with the Baycombe Group – a private security firm that was providing specialist training at the academy. When I requested an interview, I was informed O'Connell was no longer on the premises. I was given a phone number to call the next day. As I made a note of it, I asked the Iraqi what O'Connell's speciality was. Control and restraint techniques, he told me.

The phone number turned out to be the Baycombe Group's main office which was inside a fortified compound near the bombed-out United Nations headquarters. I was given the immediate run-around when I asked for an interview with O'Connell, and it took a further week to set up a general interview with BG's spokesman, Alastair Surtees. I assumed Mackenzie was making his point about 'good turns' and, if so, I was supremely indifferent to it. In terms of what I planned to write – a hard-hitting piece on the calibre of personnel these firms were recruiting – I expected Surtees to be a lot more forthcoming than a Glaswegian bully who changed names whenever it suited him.

I was wrong. Surtees was urbane and courteous, and as tight as a drum when it came to giving out information. He told me he was ex-British army, forty-one years old, and had reached the rank of major in the Parachute Regiment before deciding to join the private sector. He reminded me that the agreed interview was thirty minutes, then filled the first twenty with a slick presentation of his firm's history and professionalism.

I learnt very little about BG's sphere of operations in Iraq – other than that they were wide-ranging and almost exclusively concentrated on the protection of civilians – and a great deal about the type of men that BG recruited. Ex-soldiers and policemen of the highest integrity. Tired of this spin, I asked if I could speak to an individual operative in order to hear his story at first hand.

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Surtees shook his head. 'We couldn't allow that. It would make him a target.'

'I wouldn't use his real name.'

Another shake of the head. 'I'm sorry.'

'How about Kenneth O'Connell at the police academy? He and I know each other, so I'm sure he'll agree to talk to me. The last time we met was in Sierra Leone . . . the time before in Kinshasa. Will you ask him?'

The request clearly came as no surprise to Surtees. 'I believe your information's out of date, Ms Burns, but I'm happy to check.' He eased a laptop across the desk and punched up information on the screen. 'We did have an O'Connell at the academy, but he was transferred a month ago. I'm afraid you were wrongly advised.'

I shook my head. 'I don't think so. He was there a week ago because I saw him.'

'Are you sure it was Kenneth O'Connell?'

It was such an obvious question that it made me laugh. 'No . . . but it's the name I was given for the man I saw. In Freetown he was calling himself John Harwood, in Kinshasa, Keith MacKenzie.' I lifted an amused eyebrow. 'Which makes me wonder how you can vouch for his integrity. What name did you vet him by? He's had at least three to my knowledge.'

'Then it wasn't O'Connell you saw, Ms Burns. He was wrongly identified to you.' He tapped at his keyboard. 'We have no Harwoods or MacKenzies on our books, so I suspect the man you saw is with another firm.'

I shrugged. 'I asked the Academy twice if I could do an interview with him – once that afternoon and again a couple of days later when I got through to their press office. On neither occasion was I told that Kenneth O'Connell wasn't employed there any more . . . which I should have been if he was transferred a month ago.'

Surtees shook his head. 'Then they haven't kept their records up to date. As I'm sure you're aware, everything's fairly chaotic

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in Baghdad at the moment.’ He closed the lid of his laptop. ‘We’re meticulous about *our* records, so you can rely on the information I’ve just given you.’

I drew a Pinocchio doodle on my notepad so that he could see it. ‘Where’s O’Connell now? What’s he doing?’

‘I can’t answer that. Company policy re our employees is no different from Reuters. Complete confidentiality. Would you expect anything less?’

‘Then talk generally,’ I encouraged him. ‘What qualifies a man to teach restraint techniques to raw recruits in the most dangerous capital in the world? Knowledge of the law? A long and honourable career with Scotland Yard? A period in the military police, even? He appeared to be instructing dog-handlers, so I assume he has experience in that field? What sort of qualities does it need? Patience? A good control of his temper?’

He folded his hands on the table. ‘No comment.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because your questions relate to a specific individual and I’ve already described the sort of people we recruit.’

I extended Pinocchio’s nose. ‘You must think very highly of O’Connell, Mr Surtees. He’s one of your few employees who’s *not* working in the private sector . . . or *wasn’t* until a week ago. I’m assuming the coalition only takes consultants with scrupulously clean records?’

‘Of course.’

‘So you checked O’Connell thoroughly?’ Surtees nodded. ‘What’s his background? Where was he born? Where did he grow up? With a name like that he ought to be Irish.’

‘No comment.’

I watched him for a moment. ‘When I knew him in Sierra Leone, he said he’d been with the SAS unit that stormed the Iranian embassy in London. Is that what he told you?’

Surtees shook his head.

‘I knew it was a load of baloney,’ I said amiably. ‘That embassy siege was twenty-four years ago and the unit was chosen

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for its experience. O'Connell would be a good fifty now if he'd been one of them . . . unless the SAS was recruiting teenagers in the late seventies.'

'I'm not denying or confirming anything, Ms Burns – ' he tapped his watch – 'and you're running out of time.'

I turned over a page of my notebook and did a quick sketch of MacKenzie's feathered scimitar, showing it to Surtees. 'He told one of my colleagues that the tattoo on the back of his head is a symbolic interpretation of the SAS winged dagger . . . it's his personal tribute to a crushing victory over Islamic fundamentalists. Do you think it's appropriate for a man who holds views like that to train Iraqi policemen?'

Surtees shook his head again.

'Meaning what? That he never trained them . . . or it's not appropriate?'

'Meaning, no comment.' He unbuckled his watch and laid it on the desk. 'Time's up,' he said.

I tucked my pencil behind my ear and reached for my kitbag. 'He's working in a sensitive area. Control and restraint techniques are used to immobilize dangerous or violent suspects, and we've seen some graphic images of what happens when uneducated sadists end up in charge of detainees. I'm sure you recall that dogs were used to terrorize the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. It may not bother you if we have a repeat of it – you'll wash your hands of it with some creative record-keeping – but it'll bother me.'

The man smiled slightly. 'I'll leave the creative side to you, Ms Burns. I'm afraid I'm too slow-witted to follow your imaginative leaps from the misidentification of one of our employees to my being personally responsible for what went on in Abu Ghraib.'

'Shame on you,' I said lightly. 'I hoped you had more integrity.' I stuffed my notebook and pencil into my kitbag. 'MacKenzie's a violent man. When he was in Sierra Leone he couldn't restrain himself . . . let alone teach others how to do

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it. He had a Rhodesian ridgeback patrolling his compound which was even more aggressive than he was. He trained the dog to kill by throwing stray mongrels at it.'

Surtees stood up and held out his hand. 'Good day,' he said pleasantly. 'If there's anything else I can help you with, feel free to phone.'

I pushed myself to my feet and shook the proffered hand. 'I can't afford the time,' I said equally pleasantly, tossing my card on to the table in front of him. 'That's my mobile number in case you feel like talking to *me*.'

'Why would I want to?'

I rested my kitbag on my hip to fasten the straps. 'MacKenzie broke a drunk's forearm in Freetown. I saw him do it. He took it between his hands and snapped it against his knee like a piece of rotten wood.'

There was a short silence before the man gave a sceptical smile. 'I don't think that's possible, not unless the bone was so brittle that anyone could have done it.'

'He wasn't prosecuted,' I went on, 'because the victim was too frightened to report him to the police . . . but a couple of paratroopers – *your* regiment – forced him to pay some hefty compensation. You don't get broken bones set for free in Sierra Leone . . . and you sure as hell don't get benefit if you can't work.' I shook my head. 'The man's a sadist, and all the ex-pats knew it. He's not a type I'd choose to instruct raw recruits in Baghdad on how to do their jobs properly . . . certainly not in the present climate.'

He stared at me with dislike. 'Is this a personal thing? You seem very intent on destroying a man's reputation.'

I walked to the door and flipped the handle with my elbow. 'Just for the record, MacKenzie's victim was a half-starved prostitute who weighed under six stone . . . and I bet she did have brittle bones, because every cow in the country had been slaughtered for food by the rebels and calcium-rich milk was a

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luxury. The poor kid – she was only sixteen years old – was trying to earn money to buy clothes for her baby. She was tipsy on two beers which another customer had bought her, and she jogged MacKenzie's elbow by accident. As retribution, he dislocated hers and fractured her ulna by wrenching her arm open and snapping it backwards across his leg.' I lifted an eyebrow. 'Do you have a comment on that?'

He didn't.

'Have a nice day,' I told him.

\*

In the end I never wrote the piece. I managed to get an interview with a bodyguard from a different security firm, but he'd only recently left the army and Iraq was his first freelance operation. As my original idea had been to show how demand for mercenaries far outweighed supply, with compromises being made in the vetting of recruits if numbers were to be met, a single novice didn't make a story. Also, the public appetite for 'war' stories was wearing thin. All anyone wanted was a solution to the mess, not more reminders that the coalition's grip was slipping.

With the help of a translator, I toured Iraqi newspaper offices and went through three months of back copies, looking for stories about raped and murdered women. Salima, the translator, was sceptical from the outset. 'This is Baghdad,' she told me. 'The only thing anyone's interested in is death by suicide bombing or, better still, acts of sadism on the part of the coalition. Women are raped all the time by husbands they never wanted to marry. Does that count?'

I pointed out that it would take twice as long if she conducted a running commentary all the way through.

'But you're being naïve, Connie. Even assuming a European could get close to an Iraqi woman without being spotted – which I don't believe – who's going to report it? Some parts of Baghdad are so dangerous that the Iraqi journalists won't go

into them – it’s not as if the bombing and shooting have stopped – so how’s the death of a single woman going to grab anyone’s attention?’

I knew she was right, so I don’t know which of us was more surprised when we came across the first story. It was headlined ‘Rape on the Increase’ and was a statistical account of how the rape and/or abduction of women had risen from one a month before the war to some twenty-five a month afterwards. Based on a Human Rights Watch report, it pointed to the dangers women face when the moral and ethical bases of society are shattered by war.

‘It says that rape was rare under Saddam because it was a capital offence,’ Salima told me, ‘then suggests it was the disbanding of the police force at the start of the occupation that put women’s safety in jeopardy. This will interest you.’ She followed the text with her finger. ‘“With thugs and bandits running lawless districts, women are forced to cower in their homes for fear of their lives and honour. Disgracefully, this is no protection. Fateha Kassim, a devout young widow, was found raped and murdered in her home last week. Her father, who discovered her body, said it was the work of animals. They destroyed her beauty, he said.”’ She looked up. ‘Is that the kind of thing we’re looking for?’

I nodded. ‘It sounds like a carbon copy of the Sierra Leone killings.’

‘But how could he have got at her?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s part of the excitement. If he was in the SAS, he’d have been trained to move around without attracting notice. Perhaps he goes in at night. Alan Collins said the crime scenes in Sierra Leone suggested the women had spent some time with their killer before he took the machete to them.’

The second story, the only other one we found, was from a different newspaper, dated a month later. It was buried in the middle pages under the headline ‘Mother Dies in Sword Attack’, and was very short. Salima translated: ‘“The body of Mrs Gufran

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Zaki was discovered by her son on his return from school yesterday. She was brutally slain by blows and cuts to her head. The attack was described as frenzied. Police are looking for her husband, Mr Bashar Zaki, who is said to suffer from depression. Neighbours say he had a sword, which is missing from the house.”’

We looked for a follow-up to see if Bashar Zaki had been arrested, but the story had been overtaken by the events at Abu Ghraib jail and there were no further references to it. Nor did the murder of Fateha Kassim feature again. It was difficult to know what to do after that. There was no mileage in the women from an international point of view, so I didn't mention them or my suspicions of MacKenzie to Dan Fry, the Reuters bureau chief in Baghdad. We were snowed under with more immediate disasters, and shortly afterwards Salima, the only other person interested, was sent south to Basra with another correspondent.

More out of frustration than with any real expectation of a response, I unearthed my two pieces from Sierra Leone and had them delivered, along with Salima's translations of the articles on the Baghdad murders and a covering letter, to Alastair Surtees at the Baycombe Group. I also emailed them to Alan Collins via the Greater Manchester Police website. Surtees's only reply was a printed compliments slip, acknowledging receipt of the documents. Alan's, a week later, was rather more encouraging.

‘My best suggestion,’ he wrote in his email, ‘is to contact DI Bill Fraser or DS Dan Williams in Basra. They're doing a similar training job to the one I was doing in Freetown. I've forwarded your email and attachments to Bill Fraser to bring him up to speed, and will add his e-address at the bottom. No guarantees, I'm afraid. If the coalition sectors are acting independently, it will be difficult for Bill to intervene in Baghdad, but he should be able to give you some useful names higher up the chain of command. Meanwhile, be a little wary who you talk to. MacKenzie's inside the loop if he is/has been working with the

police, so he'll have no trouble finding out who's accusing him. And even if your suspicions are wrong, you already know he reacts violently when he's crossed.'

His advice came too late. By the time I received it, I'd changed my hotel twice and my bedroom three times in as many days. It's hard to explain how the constant invasion of your space can destroy your equilibrium . . . but it does and it did. The door was always locked when I returned, and nothing was stolen, but the deliberate rearrangement of my possessions frightened me. On one occasion I found my laptop open with my letter to Alastair Surtees on-screen.

I had no proof it was MacKenzie – although I never doubted it – but I couldn't persuade the hotels to take me seriously. It was impossible for a non-resident to enter guests' bedrooms, they said. And what was I complaining about, anyway, when no thefts had occurred? It was simply the chambermaid doing her job. My colleagues merely shrugged their shoulders and quoted the 'thief of Baghdad' at me. What else could I expect in this god-awful city?

The only person who might have taken my fears seriously was my boss, Dan Fry, but he'd chosen that week to go on R & R in Kuwait. I thought about phoning him and asking if I could transfer to his flat, but I was afraid I'd be even more isolated there than in a hotel full of journalists. There was no point in going to the police. Obsessed with suicide bombers and hostage-takers, they wouldn't have given me the time of day. And in any case, I thought Alan Collins was right. The police were the last people to talk to.

I didn't sleep. Instead I lay awake, clutching a pair of scissors, and watching the door with burgeoning paranoia. After four nights of it I was so exhausted that, when I returned to my room after a press conference to find my knickers with the crotches cut out, my nerve snapped completely and I applied for immediate sick leave on the grounds of war-induced stress and mental breakdown.

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I hadn't spent more than two months in the UK since I'd left Oxford in 1988, but in Baghdad in early May 2004 all I could dream about was soft summer rain, green grass, narrow hedge-lined lanes, and fields and fields of ripening corn. It was an England I barely knew – drawn as much from fiction and poetry as real life – but it was the safest place I could think of.

I can't imagine why I was so stupid.