

AUTHORED FEATURE – THE BOY IN THE ATTIC – DAVID MALONE

On a windy June afternoon in 1973 only child John Horgan was left in the care of his teenage neighbour while his mother went to visit a friend in a Dublin hospital. Nothing unusual in the fact, except that the young neighbour was a Satanist.

Months earlier, the sixteen year old had hidden overnight in the local Catholic church where by moonlight he approached the altar and stole the silver communion chalice. While his parents were listening to an appeal from the parish priest for its safe return at Sunday Mass, the teenager was building a shrine to the Antichrist in the attic of his family home. Access was through a false panel cut into the top of his bedroom wardrobe.

In the weeks leading up to that June afternoon in the village of Palmerstown, the boy – Lorcan Bale - conducted experiments on the effects of pain infliction, firstly on rats and rabbits, later on dogs. Locals would subsequently report that their pets kept going missing. As the summer solstice approached, he came upon the idea that he needed a human child for a satanic ritual.

On that breezy Thursday, seven year old John was happy to be looked after by the older boy. Like any young lad, he wanted to explore the world around him, and the teenager appeared to be a willing playmate. Not only was the innocent youngster unaware of Lorcan Bale's descent into the occult, but he was equally in the dark over the fact that his own name was on *The List*. With John's mother not due home for another hour, the teenager took the young boy to the fields at the rear of the house, telling him they were going to look for rabbits. It was a short run across the field to the far hedge, and the rabbit hole that had been pre-selected for the attack. John, just a shade over four feet tall, squatted on his hunkers and peered into the hole. Seconds later, a club landed on the back of his head, immediately extinguishing John Horgan's short life. Bundling the boy's warm lifeless body into a brown hemp sack, the young killer carried his victim to his own home, up the stairs through the wardrobe and into the attic. John's body was carefully removed from the sack, disrobed, spreadeagled and attached to the rafters. The black mass could begin.

After the alarm was raised by John Horgan's frantic parents, a police search backed up by local volunteers was launched. The fear was that the young boy may have wandered off, perhaps in the direction of the River Liffey that flows towards Dublin. The killer even assisted in the search. Under informal police questioning, cracks emerged in his story and as darkness fell, he led them to the attic. First to peer through the hatch was a young police officer; the sight of the little boy naked and posed in a cruciform style to the rafters, has haunted him ever since..

Uncovering this terrible sequence of events has not been easy: as a television producer who spends much of my time making crime documentaries, I can safely say I know my murders. This is not a boast of which I am overly proud; it just goes with the territory. Right now, I am spending most of my waking hours amongst criminal gangs, producing an upcoming TV series in the UK. While many of them are without doubt dangerous, curiously many criminals are also very likeable.

Over the years, I have met several killers - including a number who have murdered more than once - and to me at least, their most surprising characteristic is their ordinariness. The man who you might brush shoulders with on the bus, may years earlier have killed a gangland rival, yet he will show no outward sign of his crime. This normality, I believe, is at the core of our interest in the mind of a killer.

Just before last Christmas, I was working with an television production company, considering some ideas for future documentaries. One thought, which sadly never advanced much beyond first base, sent me on an Internet newspaper search for historic murders, beginning in 1960. The brief was to look specifically at Ireland. There were a number of killings reported in the '60s and early '70s that had already been well documented so would be of little interest to today's audience. The Northern Ireland troubles were just beginning, so many of the reported killings were in Belfast, Derry and surrounding counties.

Working in sequence through each month, and about an hour into the trawl, I was drawn to a small article on a page largely devoted to the shipping news in, of all places, the Montreal Gazette. The paper's date was 18 June 1973.

'YOUTH CHARGED WITH MURDER AFTER BOY, 7, CRUCIFIED'
was the headline.

The article read: *Dublin (UPI Agency). Police reported Saturday the arrest of a 16-year-old youth as a suspect in the slaying of a 7-year-old boy found crucified on the rafters of a neighbor's (sic) attic. Officers identified the victim as John Horgan of Palmerstown, County Dublin. He was found dead Thursday night in the attic of a neighbor's (sic) home several hours after his father Terry Horgan alerted police that his son was missing. Police engaged in the search found the boy's nude and battered body with the help of tracker dogs.*

'The body was nailed by the hands to the attic rafters in a crude form of crucifixion,' a police spokesman said. 'It was a pretty sickening sight.'

At first, I simply did not believe that 'The Boy in the Attic' murder had taken place in Dublin, Ireland. This was simply because I had never heard of the case – 'crucifixion' is a word that is hard to forget. After making a few calls it was clear my journalist colleagues were equally in the dark. The consensus was that if such a bizarre murder had indeed taken place in Dublin, it would be well known as one of the darkest chapters in the nation's history. Finding this disturbing account in a Canadian newspaper with no links to any of the Irish papers suggested that perhaps this was not an Irish story at all, that the killing may have happened in Dublin, Québec, which is a tiny district a few miles west of Montreal. Could this French-speaking suburb have been the site of the shocking killing back in 1973?

After a few transatlantic calls, this theory quickly proved a dead end so I took a walk to the National Library of Ireland, next to the parliament building in Kildare Street. The National Library is one of my favourite places - a treasured institution where, given enough time, one can discover just about anything concerning the country's history. The expert staff pulled out rolls of microfiche displaying photographic reproductions of the newspapers from June 1973. After about an hour of shuffling from date to date, there it was: a small story in *The Irish Independent* dated 15 June 1973. Above the article was a photo of the victim, a fading black and white image of a smiling fair-haired boy wearing a smart jacket with a ribbon attached, perhaps his Communion outfit. The snapshot of the little boy, his face filled with joy, stood in terrible contrast to the words below it: 'BOY (7) IS FOUND DEAD.' The lurid details in the *Montreal Gazette* about 'a crude form of crucifixion' were absent from this article, and its statement, 'it is believed the death was accidental', placed doubt even on the possibility of murder.

I could never have imagined that this humble report would be all that the world knew of these broad-reaching, dark, strange events – happenings much

stranger than anyone could possibly have guessed from the bare smattering of words they had been granted in the newspapers of the day.

Next stop was the National Archives, where records of coroner's court hearings are kept. A death such as this would surely have been the subject of an inquest – open court hearings that are a matter of public record. It took a week to find the file, and its content left no doubt: the report in the Irish Independent had to be immediately cast aside. This death was most definitely not an accident.

Not only was the murder barely reported at the time, the few, thin accounts that had been published were inaccurate and entirely missing many key, crucial facts. Finding the full story has been a long, difficult and at times frustrating task. It would not have been possible at all without the testimony of those people with direct recall of the case. In journalism, the practice of gathering disparate pieces of information and analysing how they might fit together is known as 'collecting string'. I learned that this was a case with many defects: material evidence was removed from the crime scene by a senior Catholic Church cleric; the case had dark occult overtones, an appalling murder committed by a teenager who believed himself to be a Satanist; the boy was discovered in an attic, at the centre of an elaborate 'shrine'; the inquest into the death of the little boy was finally completed more than three decades after the murder as a direct result of my investigations; and a question mark still rests over why the killer's punishment appears not to fit the crime.

In the course of researching "The Boy in the Attic", I tracked down the little boy's killer, Lorcan Bale, the eldest of five children and a neighbour of his victim. After his release he stayed in Dublin for a short time, then vanished into thin air. I made some inquiries and became certain he had moved abroad. America or Australia seemed likely options for someone trying to rebuild their lives, but the authorities there said there was no way a child killer would ever be issued with a visa. So he had to be somewhere in the EU where an Irish passport allows you to live and work freely. I got a lead that someone of his name was working as a church warden in a European capital, so I went there and attended his church. He wasn't there, but his name was on a plaque on the wall. Eventually I found out where he lived and knocked at his door.

It was a Saturday morning, we met outside his apartment building and sat on the wall. I told him about the book, and about the upcoming inquest into the death of the little Horgan boy all those years ago – we talked for about 15 minutes about his former school Coláiste Mhuire in Dublin's Parnell Square. We also spoke about his family, though he shied away from talking directly about the murder. He later told me he had a wife and that he had to discuss this with her. I'm not certain how much she knew – if anything - about his background as a

satanic child killer. Today he has a very ordinary office job and at the weekends helps out in a nearby church in an administrative capacity. It seems that he has found religion and my instinct is that he is filled with regret, that each day he carries the burden of the terrible events of that summer day in 1973. He has also never re-offended so for that reason and because he has a wife who is unconnected to any of this, the book does not say what country he lives in, what job he does nor does it publish a contemporary photo of him. I believe that his crime was the ultimate trespass, but that Lorcan Bale has also served his time and has spent decades making a genuine effort to atone.

Finally and most importantly, I would like to mention the victim's family. Though the Horgans are aware this book is being written, it was not initiated by them – and nor, indeed, was it welcomed. We have exchanged respectful letters, and though they did not wish to be interviewed, I have spoken with a number of people familiar with them, then and now, and received an overwhelming impression of a remarkable couple, good people in every sense of the word, whose conduct at the time of the murder showed a level of Christian compassion surely beyond the capacity of most people.

I could not tell this story without also conjuring the time and place in which it happened, and '70s Ireland was a very different country to today's progressive European nation. Some readers will find this book sparks vivid memories of a lost era; other, perhaps younger, readers may find the landscape very unfamiliar indeed. The writing of "The Boy in the Attic" has been a remarkable journey, and the story is one that I hope others will find as fascinating and compelling as I do.

"The Boy in the Attic" is released by Mainstream Publishing.