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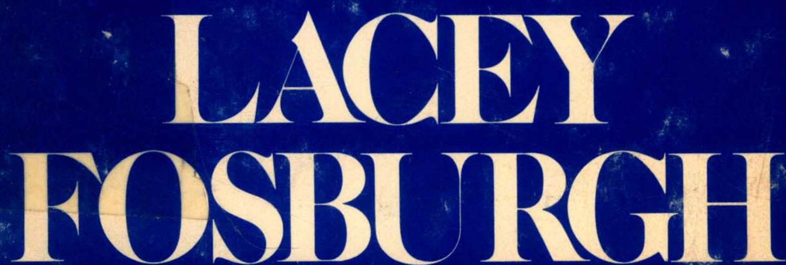
CLOSING TIME

The True Story of the "Goodbar" Murder



LACEY FOSBURGH

TIME

THE TRUE STORY OF THE "GOODBAR" MURDER

DELACORTE PRESS/NEW YORK

Some of the material in this work is based upon articles by the author that first appeared in *New Times* and *Cosmopolitan*.

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Manufactured in the United States of America

To ARTHUR GELB and WALLY TURNER,

for years of support and respect
and their own shining examples there ahead of me.

With much love.

PROLOGUE

I DON'T REMEMBER how I first heard about this murder, but it must have been when Arthur Gelb, then the Metropolitan Editor at the *New York Times,* called my name and assigned me to cover it. All I know is the murder had just happened and that at that time there was only one side to it: Her name was Katherine Cleary and she was the one who was dead.

It was January in New York City and there had been a lot of murders that winter. This was yet another. But while most of the others were ignored by the media, this was not. There was no very good reason why the case of Katherine Cleary was singled out, except the victim was a classic archetype: She was a young schoolteacher, pretty, Irish Catholic, and decent—just the kind of person who should not end up the way she did—and for some reason the media, in its collective sense of outcry, covered her death.

There was another reason the case aroused public interest. It was a mystery. The killer had escaped, and until he was identified and found, the story remained on the front pages. Then, predictably, as soon as the killer was arrested, the media lost interest, and the case of Katherine Cleary vanished as quickly as it had arrived.

But although the case disappeared from the newspapers, the murder itself, from the very beginning, had been the kind of em-

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blematic crime people always remember. It was a story of death and violence, a tale of innocence plucked and life arbitrarily closed, a victim and the slayer, the innocent and the foul. People saw in it the specter of random violence haunting the city streets. The killer was safe, the schoolteacher, the personification of innocence, was dead. It was a mythic tale and it disturbed people who saw in her going an arbitrariness that frightened them, violence unleashed without reason.

At first it was the death of this quiet, compelling woman—and the mystery of her death—that started my fascination with this story. But then, afterward, when public interest in the case was over, and I saw the man who killed her, with his head bent over toward the left and his eyes peering round the sides, I became curious about him, too. I wanted to know why it had happened.

They had known each other less than two or three hours, so why? What had happened? What went wrong?

This has led, three years later, to a book about the lives of these two people. As far as I can tell, everything happened the way I've written it. I was there at the beginning as a reporter for the *New York Times* in New York, walking 72nd Street, talking to police, going to the morgue.

I have researched this material on and off for three years, first, of course, for the *Times* and then for a magazine piece and finally for a book. I have traveled to Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Miami, and since during the intervening years I have moved to San Francisco, I have crossed the country four times in search of more information.

I have talked to virtually everyone mentioned in the story. The family of Joe Willie Simpson cooperated thoroughly. They took me into their house and gave me milk and toast and brought out photographs and letters and talked for hours. They even went back through all the areas of pain and talked about hospitals and money, a rabbit and a cat. I respect them tremendously for this. According to my way of thinking, they honored themselves and their son by telling me what they knew.

Carole Musty, too, on a hot winter night in north Miami, curled up on a couch with a Tab and said as much as she could remember. Steve Levine helped, too, when he leaned back in the shadows of the wooden room where it all started and brought out

his memories. He said it made him wish he could travel in the desert.

At first Danny Murray refused to see me. Then he agreed to meet in a public cafeteria, and there he sat in silence and drank coffee and played with his spoon. Ever so slowly he began to talk, and since then, for the last three years, he has shared as much with me as I think he could and my respect and affection for him are boundless. He realized, I think, that a book about Joe Willie and Katherine would, ironically, give Joe Willie some of the dignity and recognition he had not had elsewhere.

There is one major exception in all this. Vincent and Mary Cleary, Katherine's parents, refused to see me. I talked to them several times on the telephone, not long, but enough to get a sense of their warmth and kindness. I understand their unwillingness to talk, but I regret it: I know there is more to Katherine Cleary than I was able to discover.

I did catch a glimpse of her, but unfortunately many of the people who really knew her chose not to share that knowledge with me. I wish I could do her more justice in the story that follows because I think she deserved it and because I, as a woman, think her drama was one that many women, myself included, have lived. She and the rest of us are pioneers, of sorts, developing our own role models as we go along, with only our own track records to guide us. It's hard, but the fascination of Katherine, of course, is that this was what she was dealing with. She could have done better, but for my part, I wish I knew more about the options and choices she faced.

Out of all this research and time and travel I have written what I call an interpretive biography. To the best of my knowledge everything here is true. After much thought, though, I have changed the names in the story and altered several identifying features. In some cases, I did this upon request and in others, at my own initiative, because I figured the amount of pain this drama caused everyone was sufficient; let the people have as much privacy as they can.

I have described the wind and the fields; I have re-created scenes and written dialogue and said what people thought and felt, and all this is based on factual accounts of what occurred. In addition, a few times I have stepped in where full and accurate

accounts do not exist and created scenes or dialogue I think it reasonable and fair to assume could have taken place, perhaps even did.

What I have done, then, is give myself the liberty to go beyond proven fact to probe the internal and private lives of the people involved in this story. That is why I call it an interpretive biography.

For me this format was essential in order to make Joe Willie and Katherine come alive and tell us, as I think they can, about the violence and loneliness, repression and sadness in all of us. These two people were just trying their best to get to tomorrow, and they didn't always have a lot of luck.

But I don't consider either one of them strange or bizarre. They are, instead, much like the rest of us, and the significance of Katherine Cleary and Joe Willie Simpson is not, therefore, that they are different, or unique, but, rather, that they are familiar.

1

THE ONE-ROOM APARTMENT where she lived was full of silence and solitude. Every now and then a car passed in the street outside or there was the sound of ships in the harbor or garbage cans blowing along the sidewalk. Otherwise, it was still and lonely and cold.

She lay in bed all morning. She was Katherine Cleary, and not very many people knew her name or recognized her face. It was Monday, January first, and she was twenty-eight years old. She was not going to get any older. She was not going to wake up tomorrow morning, and all the privacy and solitariness of her life was slipping away fast.

New York was a cold wintry gray. Harry Truman had just died and the seven Watergate burglars were about to go on trial. It was 1973. There were somewhere between six and seven million people living in New York that day, and what may have been the first murder of the year was about to happen.

It was not yet moments away, but the last hours had begun, and two people who had never met were getting closer and closer. Yesterday they had been thousands of miles apart. Today, they were separated by just three blocks. They had no rendezvous, no common friends, no reason to meet, but in just a few hours they would come together, and just a few hours after that, one would die and the other would disappear.

The night before was New Year's Eve, and Katherine Cleary had spent the hours alone in an apartment fifteen feet wide and twenty feet long. The telephone didn't ring and the doorbell didn't sound. She heard no "Auld Lang Syne" or party whistles, no champagne fizzing or glasses touching. It had just been very quiet.

And now on the holiday morning it was still quiet. Her only companion was a cat who licked her own insides, a cat she watched in fascination and envy, and with even a touch of hate. The cat was luscious and aloof, a female infatuated with her own beauty, and Katherine Cleary, after all, was not.

Her room was a mess, a tumult of clothes and books, dirty plates and rotting food. Underpants and torn stockings, jeans and sweaters and bras were lying everywhere. The dishes stacked in the sink dated back to Saturday night, the thirtieth, when a man called Richard had come. The black frying pan was still caked with leftover scrambled eggs; and yesterday, Sunday, she had waited all day hoping another man would call. He never did. She had started to read *Deliverance,* and had eaten sandwiches and spaghetti.

The book was about the land deep in the southern wilderness where a wild river ran. And on the last full night of her life, Katherine Cleary was carried along, as if by the river itself, by the tale of violence and rape and murder, death and male dreams.

Afterward, when it was all over, the detective named Cooley would look down at her bedside table and tell the men named Kraft and McBride, "Hey, look what she was reading." And he would notice that she might have finished the book if she had not decided to go out instead.

But sometime Monday, January first, Katherine Cleary did get up out of bed and put on her clothes. Three blocks to the south, in his best friend's apartment high on a thirty-second floor, Joe Willie Simpson, in his blue plaid undershorts, awoke about four in the afternoon and got dressed. He talked to Danny and he played with the iguana named Rover. Then sometime later he and Danny went out for dinner.

At about the same time, Katherine decided that she would not stay at home alone, as she had the night before. She would go out

across the street, as she often did, to her own special place of connections—a small neighborhood bar called Tweed's.

2

THE CITY WAS COLD that night and there was no moon. The berths along the Hudson were plated with ice, and wind careened down the streets and passed the corners. The sky was clouded, without stars. It was the kind of night when no one should be outside or alone.

O'Jack, the newsdealer on the corner of West 72nd Street and Broadway, remembered a large dog scruffing up and down, "Looking for a doorway." It came by every night, he said, a hound that had no home. Monday it shuffled down the street, hanging in close to the buildings as if to miss as much of the wind as possible. The *Times* delivery truck came by once, too, O'Jack said, but that was all, except for the dog.

Over there, on Manhattan's West Side, the streets were almost empty, and even 72nd Street, with its all-night delicatessens and places where egg rolls and soup cost less than a dollar, was deserted. It was too cold.

No one stood on the corner reading the early editions or eating hot dogs. There were none of the usual junkies who leaned against the lamp posts like forgotten canes; and there was no one in Needle Park, where, for a decade or more, people found their versions of life in packets of white powder and a shivery sensation in the spine.

It was the beginning of a new year, but the celebration was over. This was January first and it was cold and quiet and the only sound was an occasional taxicab or the subway underneath.

O'Jack remembered the quiet because, blind in eyes, he dealt in the land of noise, and that night, he said, there was none except for the wind. The only action at his place was Long John's all-night talk show and the dog, licking at his glove, and then the sound of him pushing up against the metal doorways as he went off down the block toward West End Avenue.

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Farther down in that direction, where the residential buildings began and the commercial places ended, was Tweed's Bar. It stood on the south side of 72nd Street near the corner of West End Avenue, and all that was visible of it from the street was the pair of steps heading down.

Once there had been a window there, but long ago wooden planks were barricaded over the spot to keep out the cold and the thieves, and just now these planks shook in the wind like an old barn door.

Inside, the wind was leaking through the cracks in the wood and hissing like steam in a radiator. The street was cold but Tweed's was hot and crowded. A mist of smoke hung in the air like urban smog and people, back to back, hip to hip, filled the small channel by the door between the bar and the jukebox. In the back the tables in the long narrow room were full, and by midnight the air was almost rancid. It smelled of liquor and smoke, hamburgers and sweat, and, every now and then, the scent of weed wafted through the crowd like a conversation faintly overheard.

Joe Willie Simpson was there, drinking alone at the bar. Danny had gone home. He said he wanted to start the New Year right. Joe Willie liked the sound of the noise and the feel of the glass. He sat on the stool at the far end, close to the cash register, and listened to the music and the voices in the room and the words inside his head.

His hair was blond, his eyes blue, his face strong and bony.

Afterward no one remembered him.

Katherine Cleary was there, too, drinking alone at the opposite end of the bar. Her long red hair covered much of her face, and her eyes were serious. She may have wished, as she often did, that everything could be different for her, and that she had something like a white lace gown or a penthouse in the sky where people came to dinner.

She sat in the dim shadows of the bar. The pretty profile of her pale face stood out against the dark walls behind her, and she must have looked a bit like a child. In a while, she would move out into the crowd. She didn't want to be alone. But now she was just holding her glass and listening to the noise. Somebody was talking about the day's football game; on the jukebox Leonard

Cohen was singing about "Suzanne, our lady of the flowers," and Katherine might have thought of Easter lilies.

Around her the wooden walls were aging and cracked, and spider plants hung from the ceiling, their green and white trails dangling in the air. There were photographs everywhere, shades of sepia and brown, of a past New York and forgotten people, and they hung somehow permanently crooked, as if they had adjusted through the years to the shiftings of the earth. The place had no air of happiness or peace of mind. It was like a backwater eddy where time and the water were caught, where lost dreams and worry swirled on the smoke.

West 72nd Street isn't Park Avenue and Tweed's wasn't ever the Ritz. There were no linens or expense accounts. Over here at Tweed's there were no bouncers, no checkroom, no uniforms. Nobody ordered Brandy Alexanders and there weren't even any towels in the bathroom. Tweed's had everything the street could offer—there was hustle and tension and high-pitched laughter. Drugs were shared in the bathroom. The hamburger smelled of grease. Drinks were cheap, sex was often cheaper, and no one ever had to go home at night alone.

And so it happened that Katherine Cleary did not go home alone that Monday night. Joe Willie Simpson went with her, and when he left a little while later, the savagery was over, and Katherine Cleary lay twisted on her back on the sheets of the bed. A box of granulated sugar was spilled at her feet and traces of her life were splattered in red all over the wall.

Joe Willie Simpson, a stranger who said he was Charlie Smith, took the elevator back down to the street and disappeared. But before he left, he took a white nylon slip framed with lace from a bureau drawer. He rubbed it along the tables and the doorknobs, the clock by the window, and the can on the shelf where the grass was kept.

Still naked, he stepped into the shower and washed the blood off his body. He would forget to turn off the faucet, and the slow stream of water would run cold and unnoticed for two days. After the shower, Joe Willie put on his shirt and pants and the brown leather jacket he liked so much, and left. He carried the white nylon slip in his hand, and in the elevator he rubbed it

along the knobs and the walls. Later the next day, safe in another place, he threw it down an incinerator chute.

The wind blew through the night, and in the morning the sky was overcast. It was Tuesday, January second; the Christmas holidays were over. Buses and subways were crowded with schoolchildren, and up north in the Bronx, at St. Joseph's School for the Deaf, twenty-eight-year-old Katherine Cleary did not show up for work.

The Catholic sisters assigned a substitute teacher to take her place in the classroom and someone called her home. There was no answer.

At lunch break a friend looked for her as usual in the cafeteria. She was not there, and one of the children said, "Katherine is sick." The friend called her at home, but there was no answer.

Later that night, over in Tweed's, the owner, a man named Steve Levine, thought about her and wondered if she'd come by, but she didn't.

The next day, Wednesday, Katherine didn't come to school, and she didn't answer the phone. Suddenly her absence seemed odd, and the principal sent a teacher down to knock on her door on West 72nd Street.

Now he stood there in the hallway and tried the door. There was no answer. He heard Missy, the cat, inside, meowing. The hallway was dim. One of the lightbulbs had burned out. He stood by the elevator waiting for it to come and then, instead of going back to school, he went to find the superintendent.

"Have you see Katherine Cleary lately?" he asked the man.

"No, not in a while."

"I'm from the school where she works and she hasn't shown up for two days," he said. "Her phone doesn't answer, and they think something could have happened to her."

"I don't know."

"The cat's there. Can you let me into her place to see?"

It was 9:25. They went back up to the seventh floor and the super tried first one key, then the other. They didn't fit. "Sorry," he said.

The third key slipped into place and turned, and as the door opened, Missy, the cat, ran screeching past their legs out into the hall.

3

AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS an emergency call for help was received about a minute later and transmitted electronically to all squad cars in the area and the 20th Precinct on West 82nd Street.

There Detective Tom Cooley took the call. A murder in 253 West 72nd, Apartment 715; victim, a white female.

This was the beginning. He had a pad of paper in his pocket, a .38-caliber pistol at his waist, and with four other detectives—including his partner Louie McBride, and Lt. Michael Kraft—he went south to 72nd Street.

This was the heart of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, an area with one of the highest crime rates in the city and a population made up of all colors and inclinations. There were people here rich enough to have limousines with stereos and refrigerators, while others lived on dog food, starch and welfare payments. The very rich and the very poor lived side by side. People talked about political reform and civil liberties, women worked for day care and equality, and everybody worried about education, yet, tucked in all the corners were other people who were forgotten, overlooked, and depressed.

This was the West Side, and here the fear of crime and violence was as real as the garbage and the dirt. Like a virus, the fear attacked everybody—the old and the lonely, the families with homes and bicycles, and the people like Katherine who were young and single and working.

There had already been one murder down the street and another two blocks north. There had been slayings in an old hotel several streets to the east, and recently a woman had been slashed to death by an assailant who sped off into the night with her pocketbook. The week before, on Christmas Eve, a man was stabbed waiting for a bus up the street on Broadway, and two nights earlier, a block away in another direction, a payroll messenger was shot. He, too, had died.

In the past other young women, some of them schoolteachers,

had been murdered in the area, but, still, Katherine's death was not only the latest. It would be the worst.

Cooley, McBride and Kraft reached 72nd Street and parked outside Two-Five-Three. There they saw the dull gray lobby for the first time, the small shiny elevators with the black buttons, and the hallway upstairs where the murderer had fled.

Inside, they saw what the murderer had left behind.

The small, boxlike room was totally disarranged, as if someone had overturned everything in sight, and right in the center, spread out in the middle of the double bed, was the body of a young woman. She was covered from the throat to the knees with a turquoise-blue silk bathrobe. It appeared to have been thrown over her afterward. Her long thick red hair was sprayed out behind her head like a crown.

Her skin was the awful color of white that meant she was dead, and along the edges of the bathrobe, her neck was covered with a brown chalky substance Cooley knew was blood that had dried for days and then cracked.

Above her head, spread out on the wall like a gigantic mural, was a wild, ragged spray of red. It, too, was blood, and there, where it seeped into the paint, it made an ominous, bewildering picture.

The men stopped in the doorway, stunned.

The woman was lying on her back with her left leg stuck straight out over the end of the bed. Her right leg, spread at a wide angle to the left, was bent at the knee. Her arms were bent at the elbows, and her little hands were at shoulder level with their palms up. They looked as if they had fallen there, exhausted, defeated, after trying to push something away. The bathrobe concealed her nude torso and whatever had been done there was out of sight.

The woman's face was small and delicate, with bruises on both the right and the left cheeks and the forehead. The nose and the lips were severely swollen and purple.

Right up next to her face was a thirty-six-inch-long white cement statue. It was a carving of a woman's face and looked, in fact, like the victim. The two identical faces, one cold flesh, the other cold stone, stared directly at each other, nose to nose.

It was a strange, disjointed scene. The woman's eyes were not

open in horror or shock, as eyes usually are in violent death. They were closed, as if she were asleep. And the woman herself looked lovely, young. Strangely, even with the bruises and the sureness of blood and mess beneath the robe, she seemed graceful and serene.

"Good fucking Christ," Lieutenant Kraft said quietly.

The men began making their way carefully into the room, sidestepping clothes, books, and overturned chairs.

"Hey, look what she was reading," said Cooley, pointing to the book open beside her bed.

"Well," said Kraft giving orders, "we can't touch anything until the lab boys get here." He checked his watch. "Five, ten minutes. That means we don't touch the robe or look at the body, but," he said, gazing around the little room, "let's go over it quick, see what we can find. A weapon, maybe."

He shook his head. He seemed sad, personally affronted by the violence.

Cooley went into the bathroom, on the left of the entrance foyer. The water in the shower was running and he looked around the curtains and behind the door, but found nothing. He left the water on so the handles could be checked for prints.

Outside, on the right side of the tiny foyer, was the makeshift kitchen. Kraft, McBride, and the others–Detectives Flynt and Clines–searched the room, looking for something, anything, that would give them information about the murder or the murderer. Cooley studied the sink, filthy and covered with dirty dishes and pans. There was a knife on the counter. It was a five-inch-long carving knife with a bone handle, but the steel blade had been bent in the middle, almost at a right angle, as if it had pushed against something very, very hard.

"Kraft," he said. "Look at this."

McBride and the lieutenant came across the room and peered down at the shiny metal knife.

"Looks like it's been cleaned off," said McBride.

Kraft agreed. "But let the lab boys have it," he said.

They didn't find anything else. But they looked. The room had one window, about four feet square, a radiator, a rhododendron plant, a Snoopy dog and a Snoopy Christmas card, and several thick fat red candles standing on the windowsill. There were also

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