

Elizabeth

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GEORGE



AN INSPECTOR LYNLEY NOVEL

THIS BODY  
OF DEATH

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A NOVEL  
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This Body of Death

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What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me  
from this body of death?

—ROMANS, 7:24

This Body of Death



## BEGINNINGS



Reports from the investigating officers who interviewed both Michael Spargo and his mother prior to charges being filed against him all suggest that the morning of the boy's tenth birthday began badly. While such reports might well be deemed suspect, considering the nature of Michael's crime and the strength of the antipathy felt towards him by police and by members of his community, one cannot ignore the fact that the extensive document written by the social worker who sat with him during his interrogations and his subsequent trial reveal the same information. There will always be details that remain unavailable to the student of childhood abuse, family dysfunction, and the psychopathology that such abuse and dysfunction ultimately engender, but major facts cannot be hidden because they will necessarily be witnessed or directly experienced by those who come into contact with individuals in the midst of displaying—whether consciously or unconsciously—their mental, psychological, and emotional disturbances. Such was the case with Michael Spargo and his family.

As one of nine boys, Michael had five older brothers. Two of these boys (Richard and Pete, ages eighteen and fifteen at the time) as well as their mother, Sue, each had an ASBO filed against them as a result of ongoing disputes with their neighbours, harassment of pensioners living on the council estate, public drunkenness, and destruction of public and private property. There was no father present in the home. Four years prior to Michael's tenth birthday, Donovan Spargo had deserted wife and children and taken up

life in Portugal with a widow fifteen years his senior, leaving a note of farewell and five pounds in coins on the kitchen table. He had not been seen or heard of since. He made no appearance at Michael's trial.

Sue Spargo, whose employment skills were minimal and whose education was limited to a failure to pass any one of her GCSEs, readily admits that she "took to the drink a bit too hard" as a result of this desertion and was consequently largely unavailable to any of her boys from that time forward. Prior to Donovan Spargo's desertion, it seems that the family maintained some degree of external stability (as indicated both by school reports and by anecdotal evidence from neighbours and the local police), but once the head of the household departed, whatever dysfunction had been hidden from the community came spilling out.

The family lived in Buchanan Estate, a dreary sprawl of grey concrete-and-steel tower blocks and unappealing terrace houses in a section of town fittingly called the Gallows, which was known for street fights, muggings, carjackings, and burglaries. Murder was rare here, but violence was common. The Spargos were among the luckier inhabitants. Because of the size of the family, they lived in one of the terrace houses and not in one of the tower blocks. They had a garden in the back of their house and a square of earth in the front although neither of these was kept up for planting. The house contained a sitting room and kitchen, four bedrooms, and one bathroom. Michael shared a room with the younger boys. There were five of them in all, distributed in two sets of bunk beds. Three of the older boys shared an adjoining bedroom. Only Richard, the eldest, had his own room, a privilege apparently having to do with Richard's propensity for committing acts of violence upon his younger brothers. Sue Spargo had a separate bedroom as well. Curiously, in interviews she repeated sev-

eral times that when any of the boys became ill, they slept with her, and "not with that lout Richard."

On Michael's tenth birthday, the local police were called shortly after seven in the morning. A family dispute had escalated to the point of causing a disturbance in the immediate neighbourhood when the occupants of the house adjoining the Spargos' dwelling had attempted to intervene. Their later claim was that they were merely seeking peace and quiet. This is in opposition to Sue Spargo's allegation that they attacked her boys. However, a careful reading of everyone's ensuing interview with the police shows that a brawl between Richard and Pete Spargo began in the upstairs corridor of the Spargo house and grew from the latter boy's unhurried vacating of the bathroom. Richard's subsequent attack upon Pete was brutal, as he was quite a bit larger and stronger than his fifteen-year-old brother. It brought sixteen-year-old Doug to his assistance, which seems to have turned Richard and Pete into allies who then attacked Doug. By the time Sue Spargo waded into the fray, it had spilled down the stairs. When it appeared that she, too, was going to come under attack from Richard and Pete, twelve-year-old David sought to protect her with a butcher knife from the kitchen, where he'd gone allegedly to make his breakfast.

It was at this point that the neighbours became involved, roused by the noise, which they could hear through the badly insulated walls of the adjoining houses. Unfortunately, the neighbours—three in all—came to the Spargo residence armed with a cricket bat, a tyre iron, and a hammer, and according to Richard Spargo's account, it was the sight of these that enflamed him. "Going after the family, they were," was his direct statement, the words of a boy who saw himself as the man of the house whose duty it was to protect his mother and siblings.

Into this developing imbroglio, Michael Spargo awakened. "Richard and Pete was going at it with Mum," his statement recounts. "We could hear them, me and the little ones, but we didn't want nothing to do with it." He indicates that he wasn't frightened, but when probed for more information it's clear that Michael did his best to give his older brothers a wide berth so as to avoid "a thumping if I looked at them crosswise." That he wasn't always able to avoid the thumping is a fact attested to by his teachers, three of whom reported to social workers bruises, scratches, burns, and at least one black eye seen on Michael's body. Other than a single visit to the home, however, nothing more came of these reports. The system, it seems, was overburdened.

There is some suggestion that Michael passed on this abuse to his younger brothers. Indeed, from accounts gathered once four of the children went into care, it seems that Michael was given the responsibility of seeing to it that his sibling Stevie did not "wee the sheets." Without resources as to how this was supposed to be accomplished, he apparently administered regular thrashings to the seven-year-old, who in turn took out his own rage on the other boys further down the line.

Whether Michael abused any of the littler boys that morning is not known. He reports only that once the police arrived, he got out of bed, dressed in his school uniform, and went down to the kitchen with the intention of having his breakfast. He knew it was his birthday, but he had no expectation of the day being acknowledged. "Didn't care, did I?" was how he later put it to the police.

Breakfast consisted of frosted flakes and jam rolls. There was no milk for the cereal—Michael brings up this point twice in his earliest interviews—so Michael ate the frosted flakes dry, leaving most of the

jam rolls for his younger brothers. He put one of these into the pocket of his mustard-coloured anorak (both the jam roll and the anorak becoming crucial details as things developed) and he left the house through the back garden.

He said his intention was to go directly to school, and in his first interview with the police he claims he did go there. This was a story he did not change until he was read the statement made by his teacher attesting to his truancy that day, at which point he changed his story to confess that he went into the allotments, which were a feature of the Buchanan Estate and which were positioned behind the terrace where the Spargos lived. There, he "might've give a bit of aggro to an old bugger working in a patch of veg" and he "might've bashed in some shed door or something" where he "could've nicked some secateurs maybe only I didn't keep them, I never kept them." The "old bugger" in question does verify Michael's presence in the allotment at eight in the morning, although it's doubtful that the small enclosures of raised beds held much attraction for the boy, who seems to have spent some fifteen minutes "tramping them about" according to the pensioner, until "I gave him a right proper talking to. He swore like a little thug and scarpered."

It seems at this point that Michael headed in the general direction of his school, some half mile from the Buchanan Estate. It was somewhere on this route, however, that he encountered Reggie Arnold.

Reggie Arnold was quite a contrast to Michael Spargo. Where Michael was tall for his age and rake thin, Reggie was squat and had carried baby fat well beyond babyhood. His head was regularly shaved to the skull, which made him the subject of considerable teasing at school (he was generally referred to as "that slap-

head wanker”) but, unlike Michael’s, his clothing was usually neat and clean. His teachers report that Reggie was a “good boy but with a short fuse” and when pressed they tend to identify the cause of this short fuse as “Dad and Mum’s troubles and then there’s the trouble with his sis and brother.” From this, it is probably safe to assume that the unusual nature of the Arnold marriage, in addition to the disability of an older brother and the mental incapacity of a younger sister, put Reggie in a position of getting lost in the shuffle of daily life.

Rudy and Laura Arnold, it must be said, had been dealt a difficult hand of cards. Their older son was permanently wheelchair bound from severe cerebral palsy and their daughter had been deemed unfit for a normal classroom education. These two elements of the Arnolds’ life had the effect of simultaneously focusing nearly all parental attention on the two problematic children and burdening what was already a rather fragile marriage in which Rudy and Laura Arnold had separated time and again, putting Laura in the position of coping on her own.

Caught up in the middle of trying familial circumstances, Reggie was unlikely to receive much attention. Laura readily confesses that she “didn’t do right by the boy,” but his father claims that he “had him over the flat five or six times,” in apparent reference to meeting his paternal obligations during those periods when he and his wife were living apart. As can be imagined, Reggie’s unmet need for nurturing metamorphosed into common attempts at gaining adult attention. In the streets, he evidenced this through petty thievery and the occasional bullying of younger children; in the classroom, he acted up. This acting up was seen by his teachers, unfortunately, as the aforementioned “short fuse” and not as the cry for help it actually was. When thwarted, he was given to



throwing his desk, beating his head upon it and upon the walls, and falling to the floor in a tantrum.

On the day of the crime, accounts have it—and CCTV films confirm—that Michael Spargo and Reggie Arnold encountered each other at the corner shop nearest the Arnold home and on Michael's route to school. The boys were acquainted and had evidently played together in the past but were as yet unknown to each other's parents. Laura Arnold reports that she'd sent Reggie to the shops for milk, and the shopkeeper confirms that Reggie purchased a half liter of semi-skimmed. He also apparently stole two Mars bars "for a bit of a laugh," according to Michael.

Michael attached himself to Reggie. Along the route back to the Arnold house, the boys extended their enjoyment of Reggie's errand by opening the milk and dumping its contents into the petrol tank of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, an act of mischief witnessed by the motorcycle's owner, who chased them unsuccessfully afterwards. He was later to remember the mustard-coloured anorak that Michael Spargo was wearing, and although he was not able to identify either boy by name, he recognised a photo of Reggie Arnold when the police presented it to him, along with other faces.

Reaching home without the milk he'd been sent out to fetch, Reggie reported to his mother—with Michael Spargo as putative witness—that he'd been bullied by two boys who took the money intended for the milk. "He cried and was getting himself into one of his states," Laura Arnold reports. "And I believed him. What else was there to do?" This is indeed a relevant question, for without her husband in the home and considering that she was attempting alone to care for two disabled children, a missing carton of milk, no matter how needed it might have been that morning, would have seemed a very small matter to her. She