

STRANGE FITS  
OF  
PASSION



**O**n my book tours, I am often asked a number of questions: Did he really do it? Do I think that she was justified? Did they do it for the money or for love?

Then, inevitably, the questions come around to me. Why do I write the kind of books I do? they want to know. Why did I become a journalist?

My books are about crimes – cold-blooded acts of treachery or messy crimes of passion – and perhaps some think it strange for a woman to be as interested in violence as I am. Or they wonder why I chose a profession in which I have to spend most of my time chasing down unpleasant facts or asking people questions they'd rather not have to answer.

Sometimes I say that my job is like being a private detective, but usually I answer (my standard, pat answer) that I think I became a journalist because my father was a journalist.

My father was the editor of a newspaper in a small town in western Massachusetts. The paper was called the *East Whatley*

*Eagle*, and it wasn't much of a paper, even in its heyday in the early 1960s. But I thought then, as daughters do, that my father knew a lot about his profession, or his trade, as he preferred to call it.

'The story was there before you ever heard about it,' he would say before sending me, his only child and a teenager then, out to cover a theft from a local store, or a fire in a farmer's hayloft. 'The reporter's job is simply to find its shape.'

My father taught me almost everything about the newspaper business: how to edit copy, set type, sell ads, cover a town meeting. And I know he hoped I would stay in East Whatley and one day take over his press. Instead I disappointed him. I left western Massachusetts and moved to New York City. I went to college there and to graduate school in journalism and then to work for a weekly newsmagazine.

But I did not forget my father or what he had said to me. And in the years after I moved to the city – years in which I wrote articles for the newsmagazine, wrote a book based on one of the articles, which brought me a fair amount of both fame and money, and then made a career for myself as a writer of nonfiction books, almost all of which feature a detailed investigation of a complex crime – I have had to ask myself why it really was that I followed in my father's footsteps. Why, for instance, did I not choose architecture or medicine or college teaching instead?

Because I have learned that it isn't simply a matter of the journalist and the facts, as my father believed and would have had me believe and practice, but rather a case of the storyteller and the story – an ancient dilemma.

Precisely, the difficulty is this.

Once the storyteller has her facts, whether they be told to her or be a product of her investigations, what then does she do with her material?

I have thought long and hard about this question. Perhaps I have even been, at times, obsessed with the problem. So I suppose it wasn't so surprising that I was thinking about just this very thing as I sat across the room from the young woman who was perched on the edge of her narrow bed.

I hadn't been in a dormitory room for years – not since my own graduation from Barnard, in 1965. But though the posters on the walls were of rock groups I had never heard of, and there was a telephone and a Sony Walkman on a shelf, the essential facts of the room were not all that different from my own surroundings in college: a desk, a single chair, a bookcase, a bed, a quart of orange juice chilling on a windowsill.

It was February, in the first year of the new decade, and it was snowing lightly outside the window, a gray snow shower that wouldn't amount to much, though the people in this college town in central Maine had not, I had learned earlier at the local gas station, seen the grass since early November.

The young woman sat with her sneakers planted evenly on the floor and her arms crossed over her chest. Not defiantly, I thought, but carefully. She was wearing blue jeans (Levi's, not designer jeans) and a gray cotton sweater with a long-sleeved white T-shirt underneath.

I'd met the girl's mother only twice, but one of those

times had been an important occasion, and I had needed, for professional reasons, to remember her mother's face. The daughter's hair was the same – a deep red-gold. But the eyes were distinctly her father's eyes – dark and deep-set. They might actually have been black eyes, but the light was bad, and I couldn't tell for sure.

Whatever else the parents had or had not given the daughter – attributes and traits I would never know about – they had given her an extraordinary beauty. It lay, I saw, in the mix of the white skin and the red hair juxtaposed with the dark eyes – a combination, I thought, that must be rare.

She was prettier than I'd ever been, just as her mother had been before her. I have what might be called a handsome face, but it's become plainer in my forties. Years ago, when I was in college, I'd worn my hair long too, but now I keep it short and easy.

Because she was a natural beauty, I was surprised that she wore no makeup and had her hair pulled severely back into a ponytail, as if she meant to minimize whatever attractions she had. She sat warily on the bed. I was pretty sure that she would know who I was even though we had never met.

She'd offered me the only chair in the room. The package I'd brought was uncomfortable in my lap, and I felt its weight. It was a weight I'd been feeling off and on for years and had driven a very long way to rid myself of.

'Thanks for seeing me,' I said, acutely aware of the generation between us. She was nineteen, and I was forty-six. I could have been her mother. I was rather sorry I'd worn my

gold jewelry and my expensive wool coat, but I knew that it was more than age or money that separated us.

‘I read about your mother,’ I said, trying to begin again, but she shook her head quickly – a signal, I could see, not to continue.

‘I’ve known who you were for years,’ she said hesitantly, in a soft voice, ‘but I didn’t think . . .’

I waited for her to finish the sentence, but when she didn’t I broke the silence.

‘A long time ago,’ I said, ‘I wrote an article about your mother. You were just a baby then.’

She nodded.

‘You know about the article,’ I said.

‘I’ve known about it,’ she said noncommittally. ‘Do you still work for that magazine?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t exist anymore.’

Although I didn’t, I could have added that the magazine no longer existed because it had been run on a system that had been ridiculously expensive: Writers, based in New York, had traveled widely to report and write their own lengthy features on the most pressing stories of the week. The magazine had not used foreign bureaus, as successful newsweeklies do today, but instead had sent its writers into the field. The expense accounts had been magnificent and legendary and had eventually led to the demise of the magazine, in 1979. But I was gone by then.

Outside her door, in a corridor, I could hear laughter, then a shout. The young woman looked once at the door, then back at me.

‘I have a class,’ she said.

Although her eyes were dark, by then I'd decided that they were not exactly like her father's eyes. His had been impenetrable, and while hers had gravity, more gravity than I'd have thought possible in a girl only nineteen years old, they were clear and yielding.

I wondered if she had a boyfriend, or girlfriends, or if she played sports or was a good student. I wondered if she, too, kept a journal, if she had inherited her mother's talents, or her father's.

'This belongs to you,' I said, gesturing to the package.

She looked at the parcel on my lap.

'What is it?' she asked.

'It's the material I used to write the article. Notes, transcripts, that sort of thing.'

'Oh,' she said, and then, 'Why?'

There was a pause.

'Why now? Why me?'

'I know your mother probably told you what happened,' I answered quickly, 'but in here there is more . . . In here your mother makes a reference to the story she would one day tell her child, and I thought that if she didn't have a chance to do that, well, here it is.'

All week I'd rehearsed those sentences, so often that I'd almost come to believe them myself. But now that the words lay between us, it was all I could do to keep from telling her that this was not the real reason I'd come, not the real reason at all.

'I don't know,' she said, looking steadily at the package.

'It belongs to you,' I said. 'I don't need it anymore.'

I stood up and walked across the small space that separated

us. My boot heels clicked on the wooden floor. I put the package on her lap. I returned to my chair and sat down.

I was thinking that in a short while I could leave the dorm, walk to my car, and drive back to Manhattan. I had a co-op there on the Upper West Side that was roomy enough and had a good view of the Hudson. I had my work, a new book I was beginning, and my friends. I'd never married, and I didn't have any kids, but I had a lover, an editor with the *Times*, who sometimes stayed with me.

My friends tell me I'm the kind of woman who lives for her work, but I don't think that's entirely true. I'm rather passionate about physical exercise and opera, in equal doses, and I've always liked men for their company. But since I decided early on not to have children, I've found it hard to see the point of marriage.

I'd wrapped the package in brown paper and sealed it with Scotch tape. I watched as she undid the tape and opened the package. I had let it begin with the memo. I'd included everything.

'I don't have your mother's handwritten notes,' I said. 'These are my typewritten transcriptions. I've always found it easier to work from typescript than from handwriting, even my own. And as for the rest, it's all here, just as I heard it.'

But she wasn't listening to me. I watched her read the first page, then the second. She had shifted her weight slightly, so that she rested on a hand at her side. I shook open my coat. I suppose I'd hoped that she'd glance at a sentence or two, or would flip through the pages, and then would look up at me and thank me for coming or say again that she had a

class. But as I sat there, she kept reading, turning pages quietly.

I thought about her class and wondered if I should mention it.

I heard another commotion in the corridor, then silence.

I sat there for about ten minutes, until I realized that she meant to read the entire batch of notes, right there and then.

I looked around the room and out the window. It was still snowing.

I stood up.

‘I’ll just go for a walk,’ I said to her bent head. ‘Find myself a cup of coffee.’

I paused.

‘Should I . . . ?’

I stopped.

There wasn’t any point in asking her if I should come back. I knew now that it would be irresponsible not to, not to be there for her reaction and to answer her questions. And then I had a moment’s sudden panic.

Maybe I shouldn’t have come, I thought wildly. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought the package.

But I had long ago trained myself to deal with panic attacks or doubts. It was simple. All I had to do was force myself to think about something else. Which I did. I thought about how I ought to find a motel room now, and after that a place to eat.

She glanced up at me, her eyes momentarily glazed from her reading. I saw that her hand, turning a page, was shaking.

She looked at me as if I were a stranger who had not yet entered her room. I could only guess at what she was thinking, what she was hearing, and what she feared.

Yet I knew better than anyone else all about this particular story and the storyteller, didn't I?

And all about the storyteller who came after that . . .



*The Notes  
and  
Transcripts*



From: Helen Scofield  
To: Edward Hargreaves  
Re: The Maureen English story  
Date: August 2, 1971

I think we can go ahead with the English piece now, and I'd like your OK on this. If you recall, when I last mentioned it a month ago, I thought we were going to have to kill it because I couldn't get to Maureen English, or 'Mary Amesbury,' as she now calls herself. I had gone up to Maine with the idea of interviewing her for the piece. I visited St. Hilaire and interviewed a number of the townspeople there and got some good background material. Then I drove to South Windham to see Maureen. I'd met her only once before. She had left the magazine just before I had really come on board. I'd seen Harrold around, of course. I knew him to speak to, but not much more than that.

Maureen met with me, but wouldn't agree to talk to me. I tried everything I could think of to persuade her, but I just couldn't get her to open up. I drove home feeling pretty disappointed. I thought I had a great story, but without her there were just too many holes.

I started work on the Juan Corona story and tried to forget about the English piece. Then, last week, I received a package in the mail. It's a series of notes written by 'Mary Amesbury.' There are shorter ones, and

then some longer ones. It is, I suppose you could say, a kind of journal to herself and for herself, except that in her notes she is sometimes writing to me. Apparently the tape recorder or my presence in the visitors' room had put her off, but back in the privacy of her cell she was able to write her story down. I think that I must have reminded her of her former life, and that had put her off too.

Actually I'm not sure what it is that she's sent me. I do think, however, that the basic facts are here, and I'm pretty sure I can do the piece with this and the interviews from the others I've already got. I know it's unorthodox, but I'd like to give it a try. I've received just the one package, but she says that she'll be sending others.

I'm quite drawn to this story. I'm not sure why, except for the obvious. It's got a lot of strong, raw elements, but I think that if handled discreetly, it could be a fantastic piece. And I'm not sure that the issues involved in this story have really been dealt with before by the media. That alone seems to me a good reason for tackling it. I think that it's particularly interesting that this could happen to them. I know we were all stunned when we found out what had been going on. And then, of course, there's the inside angle – the fact that they both worked here. I'm thinking of in the vicinity of 5,000 words if you can give me the space.

I should tell you right off that I couldn't get to Jack Strout.

He positively refused to talk to me. But I think the story can be done without my interviewing him.

Let me know what you think. I'd like to get started on this right away.