

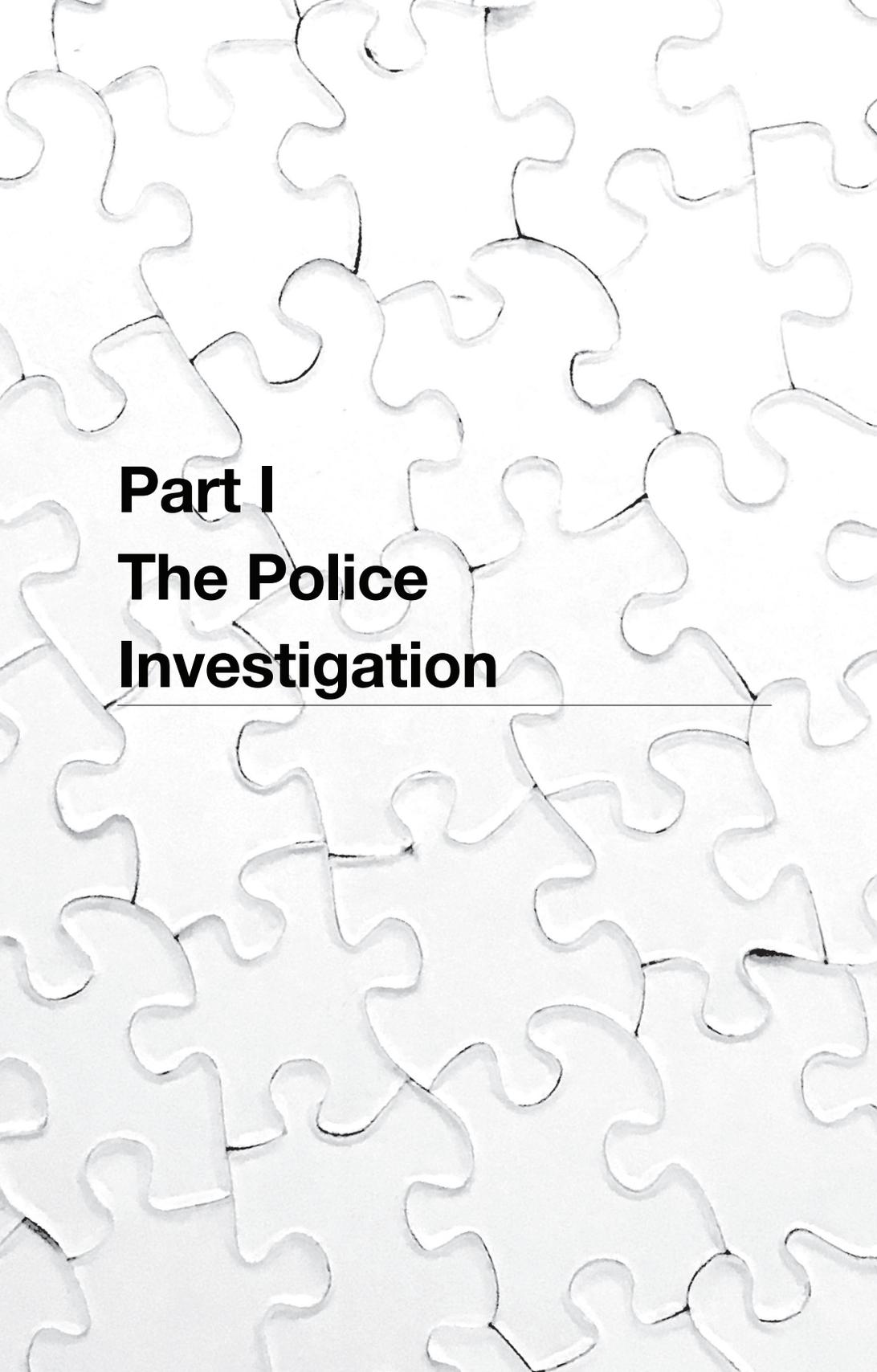
Rachael Brown

TRACE

Who killed
Maria James?



SCRIBE
Melbourne • London



Part I
The Police
Investigation

June 1980

He doesn't know it yet, but this one will bury its hooks into him.

He arrives at 736 High Street, Thornbury, with a lot more to prove than the other detectives. This is his first homicide case. Ron Iddles takes mental photographs of the crime scene. *Click*. The front window: every square inch plastered with book jackets. *Click*. Bookshop interior: shelves upon shelves of second-hand books. *Click*. Lounge: two empty coffee cups on a table. Another small table with a broken leg. *Click*. Kitchen: chopping board on a counter. Beside it, a dirty footprint. Nearby, an open cutlery-drawer. *Click*. Bedroom one: a red rotary-dial telephone, the receiver out of its cradle. A turntable with a pile of LPs, the majority of them Elvis. *Click*. Bedroom two, across the passage: the victim, female, at the base of a bed, head closest to the door, legs pointing towards a wardrobe. Right leg bent at the knee, right calf and foot pointing outwards. The victim's shoes have been kicked or taken off. Multiple stab wounds, to the chest, neck, and back. Hands tied with twine. No apparent bruising on the

wrists. One pillow at the victim's head, and another at her feet. Heavy blood stains on the carpet and on a corner of a bed quilt. Some smearing further along the carpet, and on the wardrobe. A lock on the back of the bedroom door.

Ron Iddles is 100 per cent certain of two things. The killer is someone the victim knew and was originally comfortable with. Frenzied attacks usually point to a relationship—possibly an intimate one, but definitely some kind of connection. The coffee cups, too, back up this theory.

This end to Maria James's life is the start of Ron Iddles' dream job. He's waited for this break since he was a boy rushing through his milking and hay-carting chores on his parents' dairy farm in Victoria's north-west so he'd be in time for *Homicide*. He used to sit glued to the 1960s TV series, in awe of actors John Fegan and Leonard Teale, who would march down the steps of Victoria's Russell Street police headquarters in their pork-pie hats and proceed to solve cases every week in under an hour. If it wasn't *Homicide*, it was *Columbo*, the seemingly forgetful but cunning American TV detective. From him, adult Ron has borrowed his trademark crumpled jacket. He's bought himself a London Fog overcoat, so through all the dark nights to come, Ron will be the one in off-white amid a sea of black and blue.

He cut his teeth on the mean beat of Collingwood, where the only people who moved after 1.00am were crooks, police, and prostitutes. Here, as a green 19-year-old, he took on the feared members of the Painters and Dockers Union. And he drew a line that would come to define the rest of his decorated career, shooing away a bribe from a local justice of the peace to 'fix something up'. Compassion would later bud in various shades of grey, but in terms of duty, his world has been black and white from the get-go.

Now a plucky 25-year-old, Ron has a lot riding on this homicide job. The core crew members are his boss, Senior Sergeant Brian McCarthy, then Sergeant Jack Jacobs, Senior Constable Roland Legg, and himself, Detective Senior Constable Ron Iddles. R. Iddles. Riddles—a befitting name for a mystery-solver. For now, his job is to find out who killed Maria James.

April 2016

1.00pm Coroners Court w Ron

— Diary note, 21 April 2016

I lean over the crime scene photo-booklet in a stark white meeting room at the Coroners Court of Victoria. Its thin cardboard cover is in Victoria Police blue, and the 25 photographs slide along a plastic binding-comb. The early photos are interiors of the second-hand bookshop at 736 High Street, Thornbury. Next to a sign, ‘Tales of war and adventure’, novels jostle on the shelves—piles and piles of them, stacked not with their spines out, but flat, so more can be crammed into the heaving bookcases. These and the book covers plastering the front window choke the room.

The store’s counter has a sign in front, ‘No smoking’. A little note, ‘30 cent exchange’, hangs beside a door with a white curtain separating Maria James’s bookshop from the home she lived in with her two young sons. Behind this door, and down a passage, is the kitchen, where everything

is in meticulous order, except for a cutlery drawer that gapes like an open mouth. On the kitchen bench, an onion sits on a chopping board, beside a newspaper cutting about an upcoming dinner dance. Hanging from the wall is a wilted fern and a banner with the proclamation, ‘Mothers are the most wonderful people in the world.’

Off the passageway, on the left, is the bedroom of 11-year-old Adam, Maria’s youngest son. Boats sail across the wallpaper. On a dresser is a Bata Scout shoebox—school shoes perhaps?—a stack of Elvis records, and a mirror with a magazine cut-out of the crooner’s face taped to it. Underneath is a red telephone, the handset resting idly beside it. In the bedroom opposite there’s a sea of 1970s floral, on the bedspread, curtains, and wallpaper. All mismatched. Darker blotches add new blooms to the carpet and quilt. Elvis Presley looks on from a framed photo on a bedside table. Above the bedroom door is a reprint of Gustav Klimt’s painting *The Kiss*. And below Klimt’s testament to lovers lies Maria James, at the base of her bed.

I wince at Maria’s bruised face in the autopsy photos. Her left eye is slightly opened; the right, swollen and closed. Her skin looks puffy and translucent. Her scalp is missing some clumps of her dark hair. I wonder whether this was the killer’s doing, or the pathologist’s. I’ve seen post-mortem photos before, during my days as a court reporter. Some days, during those grim prosecution sessions aimed at swaying a jury, I’d look; other days, I’d drift. Common journo distractions were newspapers, Sudoku, doodling, or scratching one’s initials into the Supreme Court media desks. I have no doubt this would have looked disrespectful to those crammed into the rigid wooden pews of the public gallery. But once you see, you can’t unsee. And these pictures can creep into your dreams,

so sometimes it's best not to look.

Today I have to, because a seeming contradiction in this cold case has inspired my promise to Maria's sons that I'll look into it. A promise, for two boys, now middle-aged men, who've lived in a holding pattern for as long as I've been alive. It's promises that can be our undoing, I'll later learn from Ron Iddles. For now, as I look at all the white crumbs on Maria's black jumper, which turn out to be her white shirt peeking through the slashes in the wool, I make her a silent pledge that I'll do my best.

When Ron arrives to walk me through this final photo album of Maria James's life, he says he can't look at these photos through the same sentimental prism I'm using. My sad crumbs are his priceless clues. 'I see that as part of a jigsaw puzzle,' he tells me. 'If I looked at that in some other way, I don't think I would've lasted 25 years.' He's been a constant figure at police doorstops throughout my career as a journalist with the ABC, but I've never worked with him personally. He's 61, burly, and he wears that appraising stare, synonymous with any cop. But there's a gruff warmth about him, a reassuring presence. He's known for his no-bullshit approach and his compassion towards victims, families, and even crooks.

'Most aren't bad people,' he tells me. 'They just make bad choices in life.' He has a certain knack. I've watched a killer go to water in an interview room when Ron put a hand on his shoulder and said, 'It's a big burden to carry, don't let it eat you up.' The killer dragged his chair forward, put his hands around Ron's, and confessed. I remember a fellow journalist commenting, 'If I had anything to confess, I'd confess to Ron'.

The lines on Ron's forehead and around his piercing blue eyes read like a diary of those 60-hour shifts he's spent at

horror scenes. And there's something of myself I recognise in him—sheer stubbornness. But this has made him a divisive figure within the Victorian police force. Ron is part of the old guard, a copper who'll buck the system by releasing information if he feels it'll help a case. Some of the new guard, however, would prefer that the force's information, and secrets, remain internal. Many of my colleagues lament that over the past decade the force's media-liaison unit has morphed into more of a shield than a channel. Which is why I need Ron. He's approaching retirement from his position as secretary of the Police Association, the police union. It'll mean handing in his badge—number 18150—for good. He should be daydreaming about fishing trips with his son off the coast of Cairns, or bike rides, or, finally, getting some decent sleep. Instead, he's graciously fielding questions from me, about his very first case, which still grates like hell.

June 1980

Ron Iddles' crew moves into the ill-fated bookshop on High Street, hoping the walls might talk. Or that the locals will. The thinking is that the detectives' presence might encourage people to drop in with information about the stabbing. Sixty-eight wounds. Christ. This tells Ron that the killer's emotions have outrun their intelligence. It was unplanned, he suspects, but furious all the same. He's seen death before, but this is something else. And the force doesn't employ cleaners, so each time he walks past the bedroom he sees the victim's

blood soaked into the carpet.

For this Homicide rookie, it feels very strange for his crew to be treating this house like their own. A woman has been viciously killed in here, and they're going about their lives as if it's all normal. They're using her cutlery, crockery, kettle, even the outside barbecue for dinners, as they usually don't knock off till 22:00 or 23:00 most nights. Then they go home, shower, maybe chat to their wives, pass out, and return by 07:00 to do it all again. His crew has turned the dining table—a billiard table with a board perched on top—into their communal desk. It's now a nest of paperwork being peered over by detectives sporting brown suits and moustaches.

Ron spots Mark James, the victim's 13-year-old son. Mark and his little brother, Adam, have been shipped off to live with their dad, but Mark's occasionally allowed back in for clothes. Ron quietly wonders about Mark, what he's making of all this, of his house being commandeered, his home forever lost.

March 2016

I am grateful for what you are doing. Thanks.

— Text from Mark James to Rachael Brown, 14 March 2016

The 49-year-old version of Mark James sits beside me in his lounge-room, south-east of Melbourne. Each time he moves, the leather of the sofa creaks. The room's bare, save for a

photo beside the TV of his younger brother, Adam, and his late mother, and his voice bounces off the floorboards. Mark has painful memories of his childhood home. He tells me that during one of his visits back, in those early days, he saw something no kid should ever have to see.

‘There were a couple of times that I was let back into the house, and I was strictly told not to go into Mum’s bedroom. Well, telling a 13-year-old that is almost like an invitation, and I opened the bedroom door, and all of the furniture was gone but there were blood stains all over the carpet. That was very distressing.’

This bloodied image has never dulled. ‘Just about every day, Mum is on my mind. It’s painful that there’s no resolution. Our mum was taken away from us, and I think with a little extra effort we could get an answer as to who the murderer was.’

Mark has a round face with soft features and his mum’s brown eyes. He has a heavy-set stature and an ambling way about him—the way he moves, the way he speaks—but it’s loaded with graciousness. He adored his mother. She was the daughter of immigrants whose Italian roots were infused in her cooking and sometimes her temper. Mark smiles, remembering an incident when he was nearly knocked off his bike during his morning paper-round. The driver did the courtesy of ferrying Mark home, only to be ripped into so ferociously by Maria that he probably regretted his courtesy more than his poor driving. Mark says she’d have done anything for her boys. Her other love was Elvis. ‘I think “Kentucky Rain” was her favourite,’ Mark says. The mournful song tells of an anxious man’s search for his missing love. *Kentucky rain keeps pouring down, and up ahead another town that I’ll go walking through.*

As for their little town, Mark has warm memories of growing up in Thornbury, in Melbourne's north. Before its wine bars and eateries appeared during the gentrification of the nineties, it was an unromantic working-class suburb—one full of battlers. But Maria had the safety net of the bookshop, which originally belonged to her parents-in-law. Mark says when his parents separated in 1978, his dad, John James, left the shop to Maria so it would provide an income for her and the boys. And Mark says he loved curling up with a book in there.

'I used to read the Biggles books, which were about a flying ace, a pilot, that my dad had read as well and encouraged me to read. As well as those books, I loved the science-fiction books, particularly the very colourful pictures of spaceships on the front covers. Sometimes I would wander in at night times, and when Mum and Dad went out. And when my cousin would come over, we'd actually use the bookshop as a little play area.'

Mark looks sheepish for a second. 'At the time, a lot of newsagents and bookstores started to have light, even heavy, pornographic magazines, and in order to compete, Mum put a box of these in the corner and covered every one in plastic so that they couldn't be opened. So she had this porno box.' Mark laughs at his 13-year-old self. 'I used to, at two in the morning, sneak into the shop, and I couldn't open the books up and have a look because they were all in plastic, but I could see the covers, and I was shocked enough.' In a small way, this little bookshop showed Mark the world. 'There would be customers coming in: sometimes they would talk to me, and I would see my mum interacting with them. That's an opportunity I had because Mum had a bookshop. Without that, I would be a less interesting person.'

After that day in 1980, this home, his anchor, became a foreign world of fingerprint dust and police tape. Mark doesn't think the detectives knew he'd snuck into his mum's bedroom, but saying goodbye was important to him.

'That was my home for 13 years. I needed to reconnect with the place before I could let it go. And I really wanted to take more of my possessions, more of my toys, the things that were in my bedroom.'

This is only the second time we've met. Earlier in the year I'd called Mark, asking for his blessing to do a journalistic deep-dive into the cold case of his mum. Because in 2014 a best mate and colleague, Kerri Ritchie, told me that a witness had made an explosive police statement. 'You should keep in touch with Ron Iddles,' she told me, as she headed off on maternity leave. 'It could be big'. So I did. And nothing came of it. Ron Iddles was at the Police Association by then, so he was off the case that had frustrated him for all those years, and he was stumped as to why this witness's statement had never seen the light of day. This also niggled at me—enough for the Iddles baton change that's now landed me in Mark's sparse lounge-room. I don't know it yet, but it will become all-consuming. There's the murder, and then things get dark.

I want to review his mum's case through a podcast. I feel this intimate medium will allow for sensitive treatment. But some true-crime podcasts treat crime like a spectator sport. Maria James's story should be both forensic and respectful, so my early caveat was getting Mark's blessing. Had he said no, I wouldn't have pursued the case. That was the line I drew. I'd imagined that, after all the news stories over all the years, Mark might be lugging around fatigued surrender. He'd most likely be wondering whether he'd be let down all over again. But he's on board. So here we are.

‘Even though it’s been so many years—I mean, we’re talking about 36 years—given modern forensic techniques, including DNA, I’m certain that if enough resources are thrown behind it [the cold case], they could definitely find the killer,’ Mark says.

He’s confident that an ABC podcast could revive interest in dusty files about his mum, which sit in boxes in a police storage room alongside the unfinished stories about another 280 Victorians. Mark has a desperate hope about him, the sort of hope that either fuels people or breaks them. But, like Ron Iddles, he has an unwavering conviction that there’s someone in the community who holds the missing puzzle-piece. It’s just a matter of finding them, and tugging on their conscience.

Mark James speaks so fondly of Ron, whom he met as a 13-year-old when he was getting under the heels of those detectives at his dining table, throwing questions at them.

‘I wasn’t upset that they were there. I was encouraged that something’s happening, they’re doing their job, and gee, wow, there’s a lot of police here, they’re taking it very seriously. I was probably a bit annoying to them sometimes, coming up and talking, [while] they were trying to do their job.’

Ron’s been a constant in Mark’s lifetime of upheaval.

‘Ron stayed in touch, and how he kept in touch with me, I don’t know. I mean, I moved address and always would forget to tell Ron, but Ron would find me and stay in touch, and he would say, “We are still looking at certain suspects.” And he was the source of encouragement for me—I guess probably the only source of encouragement, that maybe one day there could be a solution.’

What a thing to carry from your teenage years. When I was a kid, I remember dressing up with my best mate, Sarah, for a

school-costume day. Detectives Brown and Puttick we were, with trench coats and crudely made cardboard name-badges. We used to patrol the local neighbourhood for mysteries to solve. But when we saw a knife lying in someone's garden one day, we decided the job might be over our heads. I think that's about the time all the girls changed their career ambition to dolphin trainer. But here's Mark, his trajectory severed so cleanly from mine with 68 flashes of a blade.

He revisits that day all the time. He's just back from his daily paper-round for the local newsagent, Terry Gannon. His mum's at the stove, cooking the boys scrambled eggs, their favourite breakfast. She turns from the stove and asks something strange.

'She said to me in a very kind of solemn and unusual way, "If anything happens to me, make sure Adam is looked after." She actually made me promise. And she was looking anxious and worried. And that was the second time. She'd said it to me on the weekend as well. It was something out of character. Mum cared about us very much, and she would never put that kind of burden on us.'

Now, in hindsight, her plea chimes ominously. 'She would do anything for her children, and she was quite perceptive. If something was wrong with Adam or me, she would know about it before we even said anything.' But at the time, Mark just thought she was being a bit weird. So he promised, scoffed his breakfast, and headed off for his weekly school excursion to the local bowling alley. His mum, as she did every day, walked his 11-year-old brother, Adam, to the bus stop. Because he had cerebral palsy and Tourette's, he went to a special school. Maria put Adam on the bus and waved him goodbye.

17 June 1980

John James returns to Fitzroy Town Hall, where he's the town clerk. He'd forgotten his glasses, so had to quickly duck home to get them. Back in the office, his secretary, Isabella Fabris, tells him his ex-wife just called. John and Maria James have been separated for about 18 months now, but they're still on good terms—they were childhood sweethearts, after all. He's remarried, and lives with his second wife, Patricia, in North Fitzroy. But he still sees Mark and Adam every weekend for fishing and skiing trips, cinema excursions, and city lunches at Italian cafés. He's left Maria his parents' bookshop to run, and she seems happy, dividing her time between the shop and her boys.

John dials his old house. Maria answers and says, 'Hang on, please,' so he waits on the line. He hears a muffled discussion in the background. He thinks it might be an argument, but he can only really make out Maria's voice. Then he hears her give a yelp—more of a startled noise, he thinks, rather than a fearful one. There's more one-sided conversation; she almost sounds like she's giving directions. It must be someone she knows, someone she's confident enough to argue with. Then there's silence—several minutes of it. John starts to get a bit edgy, so he whistles into the phone to get Maria's attention. Nothing. Then her voice gets a little louder. After about four minutes, she yelps a second time. John's now sure that something is wrong. He tells Isabella he's worried, that he needs to check on Maria, that he'll be back soon.

He jumps in his car for the 15-to-20-minute journey

through Northcote, and arrives at the bookshop around 12.10 to 12.20pm.

He finds the shop locked up. He knocks, and buzzes the doorbell, but there's no reply. So he heads round the back, down a little lane off Mansfield Street that leads to the backyard. The back door's locked, too. Weird. He knocks and calls out. Nothing. He feels around for a spare key that Maria sometimes keeps in the laundry. It's not there. He heads back around the front. Again, no response. Then back again. Futile. He drags a ladder around the front, and peers over a wall that seals the gap between the bookshop and the neighbouring 'Celia's', a clothes shop, to see if he can get in that way. No good. Something is very wrong, but John can't work out what. When he drags the ladder back, he notices Maria's car. This usually means she's home.

On his fourth lap, he notices a curtain move, on the door behind the shop counter that separates the store from the residence. John races around to the back. Meanwhile, at the front door, Michael Mel, an architecture student who's hoping the bookshop has a magazine he needs for his studies, peers through the window. He, too, notices the curtain move, and then remain still, but he can't make out a figure or face. Mr Mel gives up and walks off. On the next of John James's panicked laps, he hears the front buzzer going. There's a man with a dark complexion and short black hair at the door, carrying a green folder. It seems that no one is having any luck in raising the bookseller's attention. John James runs into Mrs Rennie's place, which butts up against the lane, to call his ex-wife. But the line's engaged—the phone is still off the hook.

John is now desperate to get in any way he can. He remembers the side window, where he'd installed an

air-conditioner, and he climbs in, crawling over the kitchen bench. The house is in darkness. The whole place seems cold, and he feels a terrible sense of dread. He calls out, but gets no reply, so he takes a knife from the cutlery drawer, and unlocks the back door as an escape route. First he checks the lounge room. Nothing there. Then he creeps down the hallway. He glances to his right, into Adam's bedroom. Then he turns to his left and switches on the light to Maria's bedroom. He sees her on the floor. Her eyes and mouth are open, and there is blood everywhere. He's too late.

As John James's heart pounds in his ears, the killer is most likely a breath away, hiding behind the door. Had John walked into the bedroom, he might've been the second victim. But he backs away, horrified, and rushes out the back door to the neighbour's place to call Triple 0. As he waits for police, he paces up and down the back lane, thinking, *What the hell happened? How am I going to tell the boys? I should've got here sooner. How am I going to tell the boys?* Up and down, up and down. On one weary lap, he comes to the front of the bookshop, and notices someone in there. It's a woman, casually perusing the shelves like it's any other Tuesday. As he anxiously shoos her out, she tells John she'd found the bookshop door unlocked. She'd also noticed that the door from the shop to the residence was ajar. Had it been a few minutes earlier, they'd both have seen him—a man running from the direction of the bookshop who was nearly hit by a passing car as he sprinted across High Street and down Hutton Street towards the railway line. He has a small head start. Or, possibly, a huge one.