

# Part 1

# 1

## THE BARREL KILLER

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Julie Turner was just 40 years old when she went missing in Yorkshire one summer evening in 2005. She was known as an attractive mother of two, and lived in Sheffield. On Tuesday, 7th June at about 6 p.m. she left her home to go shopping with Howard Simmerson, a man she had been having an affair with for 4 years. When she left home her partner Darren knew that she would be with Simmerson. Julie was not discreet about her relationship, and neighbours often saw his Mercedes in the vicinity as he picked her up or dropped her off. The couple even used to collect her children from school together.

Simmerson lived in Creswell, Derbyshire, which is about 20 miles south of Sheffield. By 11 p.m. that evening Julie still had not returned and Darren was getting increasingly worried. He decided to drive down to Simmerson's house. The Mercedes was parked outside, but the house was in darkness and there was no sign of Simmerson. In frustration Darren drove back home. Four hours later, at 3.22 a.m. on Wednesday morning, he finally reported Julie as missing. Inquiries were made at local hospitals, and family members were contacted, but there was still no trace of Julie.

The following afternoon Darren received a mobile phone text, as follows:

**Stopping at jills, back later need to sort my head out**

Darren could not understand this text as he was not aware of anyone called Jill, Julie never texted on her phone, and he did not know the mobile number from which the text was sent. Moreover, he knew that Julie was always concerned about her children, and would never go anywhere without telling them where she would be.

Later that evening he and several members of his family went to Creswell again. A fire was burning in the grounds of Simmerson's home and the two men spoke. Simmerson was somewhat dismissive and Darren left Creswell no wiser as to Julie's whereabouts. The following day Darren received another message on his mobile phone:

**Tell kids not to worry. sorting my life out. be in touch to get some things**

The next day at about 2 p.m., police officers visited Simmerson at his business premises in Chesterfield. He was not in the office and a member of staff contacted him on his mobile telephone. One of the officers spoke to Simmerson who stated that he could be back in the office in half an hour or so.

After some considerable delay, a further call was made to him asking how much longer he would be and he explained that he had been held up by roadworks. He arrived at about 3.30 p.m. in a Ford Ranger vehicle.

The officers found him helpful. He was quite open about his desire that Julie should leave Darren and live with him. The officers requested that he hand over his mobile phone. He actually had two – one exclusively for his contact with Julie, and the other for his business.

On one of the phones there was a message, apparently from Julie, received the previous evening:

**Sucker.im stopping at my friends.guess who. why do you think i wanted to rush back. dont bother looking for me.**

Looking at these phone texts there is not much to go on. In cases involving written or word-processed texts – instead of mobile phone texts – you usually have anything up to a dozen letters, each several hundred words long. Even samples of that size are not always easy to work with, and you will often hear linguists complaining of 'sample size' as being a factor in preventing identification. However, by comparison with the present case, a sample of that size seemed luxurious.

Nevertheless, there are several points of possible similarity. One interesting feature of the mobile phone texts is the use of a full stop instead of a comma: 'Sucker.im stopping at my friends.' In this situation we would expect a comma rather than a full stop after the word 'sucker'.

In the meantime, police had found a five-page letter from Simmerson at his home. They seized the letter. It did not appear to be addressed to anyone. In it there was mention of a gun he wanted to buy from someone

called 'Mike'. From the letter it appeared that Simmerson intended to kill himself and Julie.

There were several examples in the letter of a full stop being used as a comma, just as in the text example above:

*Well. a week on Since my first letter of disaster*

*Oh god what a tangle. but she is not getting away with my life*

On its own, however, this feature offered little help: this is because there is no way of estimating the frequency with which people would use a full stop instead of a comma. All I could say was that it *seemed* rare. I didn't know *how* rare.

There was little else in the phone texts. However, I was interested in the word 'sort', as seen in the two phone texts above:

**Stopping at jills, back later need to sort my head out**

**Tell kids not to worry. sorting my life out. be in touch to get some things**

I asked officers for a copy of the interview tapes, and listened to them carefully for several hours. There was very little. Then, just when I was about to turn the tape off for the day, I heard one of the officers ask a question about the relationship between Simmerson and Julie, and why the couple were not living together since it seemed to be something they both wanted. Simmerson replied:

*She was on heavy medication and she said when she'd got her head sorted out and sorted her life out then it would happen.*

This stunned me and I had to play the section several times to make sure I had really heard what I thought I had heard: 'head sorted out . . . sorted her life out'. The two phrases 'sorting one's head out' and 'sorting one's life out' are actually quite unusual: one reason for this perhaps is that not many people would actually admit to their life being so bad or difficult that they would have to 'sort' it out. Certainly, 'sorting things out' or 'sorting everything out' are not uncommon, but 'sorting' one's *life* out and 'sorting' one's *head* out are much rarer. At the time I found only one instance of 'sort my life out' in a 100 million word corpus (a collection of language). There was also one instance of 'sorted his life out',

and no instances of 'sorted my life out' or 'sort his/her life out'. There were no instances of 'sort ~ head out'. Google gave 23,000 instances of 'sort my life out' and 600 of 'sort my head out', showing the latter to be extremely rare.

What was even rarer was the co-occurrence of both phrases in one document, that is, sorting out one's life and one's head. Seventeen occurrences on Google makes the combination almost unique. The other interesting thing to note is the sequence: in the phone texts the earlier text refers to the *head* being sorted, the later text refers to *life* being sorted. This is the same sequence as in the interview: 'head sorted out . . . sorted her life out'. Thus, not only do we have the same two elements in the interview as in the (separate) texts, but they are in the same sequence.

Of course I was aware that we were dealing with differences between written<sup>1</sup> and spoken language, and that we were dealing with two mobile phone texts rather than one – but, even so, it seemed too much like coincidence. I reported back to the detectives leading the inquiry that in my view there was a high probability that Mr Simmerson was the author of the mobile phone messages. They concluded from this that the chances of Julie coming back were extremely remote. What had been a missing person inquiry soon became a murder investigation.

The search for Julie or her body now intensified. Officers spent hundreds of hours searching the countryside between Creswell and Sheffield, while a whole team was tasked with looking at CCTV videos of all the businesses in the area. They also contacted many of Mr Simmerson's friends and clients. An image which popped up repeatedly on CCTVs several days after Julie's disappearance was of a silver-coloured Ford Ranger being driven around with an oil drum on the back of the vehicle. Coincidentally, on the night Julie disappeared Simmerson had asked a client of his if he could bury an oil drum on his land – he claimed it contained several weapons which he did not want the police to know about. The client refused. At the same time as his affair with Julie, Simmerson had also started a relationship with another woman, in fact the 20-year old daughter of his client. As the oil drum sat on the back of his Ford Ranger, he seduced the girl in her father's barn. The oil drum was eventually traced to a scrapyard. Inside was the body of Julie Turner. She had been shot through the head.

Confronted with the fact of Julie being found in the barrel that he had had on the back of his Ford Ranger, Simmerson claimed that Julie had found the gun in his glove compartment and shot herself accidentally. However, he appeared to have forgotten the letter he had written

only a few weeks before Julie's death, and seemed somewhat shocked when confronted with the references to guns and shooting, including the following:

*Julie am afraid doesn't seem concerned about the money prob. aprt from spending it. I love her dearly but I can see it coming to the final shot to finally be together. I am sane writing this and just waiting for the machine to carry this out.*

*Mike, is taking his time to fetch this gun(?) and I am not sure which one to go for? either, hopefully are quick and easy.*

Hence, Simmerson's request to purchase a gun from 'Mike' was already known to the detectives before they found the oil barrel, as well as his despair over his financial situation and the fact that he blamed Julie for it. For this reason, the officers did not believe that Julie had shot herself. The jury did not believe Simmerson either, and nor did any of Julie's family or friends. On 8 November 2005, less than 6 months after Julie's death, he was sentenced to life imprisonment at Sheffield Crown Court by Mr Justice Pitchers, who recommended a minimum term of 25 years. When he was sentenced Simmerson showed absolutely no remorse for Julie's death and no emotion at the sentence he received. The mobile telephone which had sent the texts was never recovered.

### Note

1. It may be more accurate to refer to phone text language as a hybrid mode: it has properties of both written and spoken language.

## 2

### THE BICYCLE MURDER

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It was just 10 minutes past midnight on Friday, 5 May 2007 when Stephen Green left his place of work at Dunstable, in Bedfordshire on his bicycle. A single man of 50 years of age, Stephen, a former soldier, was popular in his community. He began making his way home and arrived at the Lewsey Bridge underpass near the M1. For those familiar with the area it runs between Buteley Road and Ravenhill Way in Luton. It was here that Mr Green was set upon by a gang of youths, robbed and left to die after being viciously kicked in the head.

Initially, there were no clues, but the bicycle was examined and a fingerprint was found on one of the tyres. This fingerprint led to a young man who, in turn, was known to be connected with several others with whom he regularly drank and took drugs. Their mobile phones were seized and it was noted that a number of texts had been sent between one of the phones and another phone at about the time of the robbery. The process of triangulation of signals was then applied and a mobile phone belonging to one Darryl Bennett was found to have been sending texts from the area of the crime at about the time the attack was thought to have taken place. However, by the time Bennett's phone was seized all of the texts had been deleted from it, and were only to be found on the phone of his girlfriend, Trish (not her real name), as incoming messages.

For some reason the time of receipt of incoming texts was not recorded on Trish's phone. So, although the time at which mobile phone texts were sent was recorded, there was no way of knowing when incoming texts were received. Hence, the sequence of the incoming texts could not be established automatically. In addition, it seemed that Trish had deleted some of the texts – perhaps not intentionally. The task for forensic linguistics was to see whether the texts could be placed in sequence – in other words, to attempt a reconstruction of the conversation from fragments. This was not helped by the texts being in a very local 'teenspeak' mobile phone dialect – in fact it was more like a group idiolect, a kind of slang that seems to have grown up around the core group of youths