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Introduction

The end of happiness

The mechanics of the aftermath of a murder are predictable. Almost as soon as a heart stops beating after a violent death the State steps in. If you were to be murdered in Ireland tomorrow the State would dictate what happens to your body in the hours that follow. In most circumstances the people who loved you would be unable to do what might come naturally in reaction to a death.

Your loved ones would be unable to lie down with you, to hold you, to breathe in the smell of your hair and your clothes, to kiss your cheek. Such goodbyes, if they come, would happen much later, after the agents of the State are finished their work.

Instead of a quiet end to your life, the room or field or footpath where you died would fill with strangers – people with a job to do, people who have seen this kind of thing dozens of times before. You would be photographed where you were found, and in the way that you were found. No-one would be permitted to fix your clothes or adjust your hair for the camera. Everything in the room or area would be examined. Men and women in white paper suits, tightly drawn hoods and white covers on their shoes would pick over everything you or your murderer touched, sat on, ate, held or otherwise came into contact with.

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The material under your nails might be extracted to look for evidence of skin cells you might have scraped from an attacker's body.

The temperature of your body could be taken, to help determine when your death occurred. Later on the mortuary table, your body would be subjected to the investigation of the pathologist's scalpel and weighing scales. More photographs would be taken. Notes made. Evidence gathered.

A bruise or graze you might have suffered days earlier from knocking an elbow off a door, or a shin on a coffee table, would be noted in the post-mortem report. No physical detail would be spared or glossed over. If your hair is dyed the pathologist would note the presence of bleach or colourant in the shaft of your hair.

There is nothing malicious in the actions of the professionals who step in when a murder is committed. Not to examine and record in the way they do would be a dereliction of duty. The procedures are necessary to determine the how, the when and the who of a violent death.

Only when all this work is completed, when every clue your body might have to give has been recorded, would the State step back again to allow your family say goodbye. Your body would now be released for the funeral. Often family members are in a haze of sedation, prescriptions being handed down by family doctors in an effort to carry relatives through the public duties of a funeral.

At the funeral there would inevitably be a large crowd. Reporters and photographers might gather, to record the tributes paid from the altar and photograph the coffin being carried out. The gardaí investigating your murder would probably attend, not only as a mark of respect but also as part

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of their inquiry if the murderer has not yet been apprehended.

The investigation into your death would occupy the working lives of several dozen people – senior detectives, ordinary gardaí, forensic scientists, scene-of-crime experts, law officers, typists, office clerks and administrators.

Paperwork would begin to pile up, statements and reports all being compiled into the book of evidence. Somebody in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions would read through all the material. The decision to prosecute routine cases is made by the Gardaí, but in the case of a murder that decision is made only by the DPP. If the DPP decides not to prosecute the person or people accused of your murder, only the investigating gardaí and those in the DPP's office will know why. The reason is confidential and your family will not be told.

Then months, and in the worst case scenario years, will pass before the murder trial begins. The case would be listed as the DPP versus whoever is charged with the murder. Your name and that of your family would not appear on the court record.

Your family may feel their grief is frozen or stalled in a limbo of waiting. They are waiting for the DPP's decision, waiting for the trial to be given a date, waiting for all the legal teams to be in a position to go ahead.

The morning they walk into the Four Courts, your family would be entering the last arena of Irish public life where cameras are not allowed. Apart from shots of judges lining up on the Supreme Court bench, no still or moving pictures are permitted to be taken in the precincts of the Four Courts when the business of the courts is in session.

This place, that most people won't ever see, can be a bewildering world, like a school or a church in ways, with its

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bolted-down benches and arcane rules. In the Round Hall of the Four Courts, knots of people would be talking, the ordinary members of the public easily distinguishable from the suited and gowned members of the legal profession. A tipstaff, with a long stick tapping on the floor, and a polite nodding of bewigged heads heralds the arrival of a judge, walking from his or her chambers to a courtroom.

To your family it might appear that everyone knows where they are going and what they are doing. It would seem that even the most junior barrister has perfected an air of authority and knowledge, along with a brisk swing to their robes.

If your family decided to go to Victim Support, they would meet a court volunteer who will help them through the trial. In the courtroom they would see brass plates screwed on benches, with 'bar only' or 'witnesses' written on them. There would be no brass plates to indicate where your family might sit. In the courtroom huge cast-iron radiators pump out heat. If the court were to be full, by the end of the day the room would be stifling.

Busy legal teams would come and go. At times it would inevitably be difficult to hear or understand what was going on. But if they were not treated with 'efficiency, courtesy and fairness', according to the rules laid down in the courts your family could complain to the Courts Service.

Usually the barrister who is to prosecute a murder case would introduce himself or herself to the victim's family, perhaps explain how the case is to be argued and keep in regular contact throughout the trial.

But niceties apart, as far as the system is concerned, your family would have no role here. They would be bystanders, spectators, bunched in with the general public, the relatives of

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the accused, the groups of school children on tours. The trial would go on in their absence, and there are some legal professionals who would prefer that it did just that. The business of the court is to give the accused person a fair trial.

If that person was on bail they would be entitled to sit in the body of the court, close enough for your family to hear them breathing. The entitlement to the presumption of innocence means that there are no docks in Irish courtrooms. Only the Special Criminal Court has a dock. With its judge-only panel, there is no jury to jump to assumptions because of where the defendant is sitting.

If the defendant is in custody, he or she would sit alongside prison officers, usually on a bench opposite the jury.

In the course of the trial your actions, your reputation and your past behaviour would all be scrutinised by people who never met or knew you. The defence lawyers would earn their fees by trying to persuade a jury that you died for reasons which were beyond the control of their client. As the judge would remind the jury, the job of the defence is not to prove a person's innocence. The job of the prosecution is to prove their guilt, beyond a reasonable doubt.

When the jury finally goes out to consider their verdict, the tension and emotion would be palpable. If a murder conviction is handed down, your family may feel waves of conflicting emotions – relief and emptiness at the same time. The adrenalin that kept them going through the long hours of a trial may have left them drained and exhausted at its close.

After the trial an inquest would be held. If a guilty plea was entered during the trial, your family may have been spared the grisly details of your death. The inquest, designed to ascertain the manner of your death, might therefore hold some

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horrible information that your family has not heard before.

Finally there will be a death certificate. Someone in your family would have to pay the sum of six euro and ninety-eight cents to a registrar of deaths in order to get the piece of paper recording your death.

This is just one of the documents your family would need in order to apply to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal. The tribunal needs a Garda report on the crime; financial details for loss of earnings and expenses; funeral expense receipts; details of loss of support or maintenance. The time limit for making a claim is three months, though the tribunal will bend this rule if your family can give a 'reasonable explanation for the delay'.

In 2002 an average of €53,000 per case was paid out by the tribunal. This includes all awards by the compensation tribunal, not just those to the families of murder victims.

Years down the line, maybe when the healing has started for your family, a phone call might come. It might be a priest or a garda. It might be to say that the person who murdered you has been recommended for release. This phone call might only happen if your family requested notification from the Prison Service. Otherwise they might just see the person who killed you in the supermarket or on the pages of a newspaper.

In the year 2002 there was a sad arithmetic to the murder figures. That year Gardaí recorded fifty-two murders, one for every week in the year. In 2003 there were forty-six murders in Ireland.

The repercussions for the families and friends of those who have died are immense. Clinical psychologist John Donohoe has worked with people bereaved by murder, and was instrumental in setting up the Families of Murder Victims group in

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Victim Support. The grieving process is different in three broad respects than with a natural death, he says:

Murder expands the circle of grief and shock, he explains. In murder and violent death cases the extended family is considerably affected. The healing process for someone to recover in a normal grieving situation is usually two years, as a rule of thumb. For the death of a child or a suicide that rises to up to six years. In the case of murder, between four and ten years is the average. Most relatives consider that a murder is something from which they never fully recover.

The focus for the grief also provides a huge psychological problem. Instead of finding comfort in remembering how someone lived, thoughts about a murder victim naturally revolve around how they died, who was responsible for that death and the consequences of the murder for the killer.

The third unique element in bereavement through murder is that the legal, medical and media professions, and often the public, can all aggravate the experience of the death for the family.

Medical professionals will sedate and prescribe anti-depressants. But grief is not depression, Donohoe argues. Well-meaning people will try to shield a relative from the reality of the murder, advising them not to view the body. For example, May Bishop never saw her daughter Jill after she left the house for a night out on the town with her younger sister. Well-meaning people kept her from saying goodbye and seeing her daughter for a last time.

In such a situation the imagination steps in to fill the gap in knowledge, Donohoe believes. 'The worst realities have limits. Imagination is boundless.' Derek Corbally does not know for certain how his brother Jock died, as his body has

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never been found. Whatever happened to Jock cannot be worse than the things that Derek has imagined.

Media interest can be a slap in the face as far as a family is concerned. As a reporter, I have taken that walk to the front doors of families after the murder of a loved one. I was fortunate to have worked for newspapers and editors who would accept without question when a family declined to speak. I would like to think that the 'doorstepping' of shocked and bereaved people was an opportunity for those families who did want to speak to paint a picture of their loved one that was true and accurate. Anyone who declined usually did so with astonishing grace and politeness.

The grieving process from a psychological point of view involves the processing of memories, Donohoe believes. A nugget of a memory appears in response to some stimulus and the mind works though it, turning it over like a pebble and then dropping it back in the memory bank. Out of the blue a memory can occur – a smell, a song, a sound, a colour or a touch can bring it to life. As time passes and healing occurs, the processing of memories becomes less painful. In the case of a murder this takes longer; for some people the pain is never fully eased.

The least that people who are living in the shadow of a murder deserve is humanity and kindness from those whose job it is to deal with the aftermath of a violent death. Too often these stories tell of times when this humanity was absent in the response of the State.

Ray Quinn sums up the consequence of his wife's murder in a sentence: for him the murder of his wife Joyce was simply the end of happiness. Sometimes people suddenly realise that they are unhappy, that the colour has left their lives. Generally

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it is impossible to pinpoint the moment at which their happiness dwindled. For Ray Quinn, it was the exact moment Joyce stopped breathing. Everything from that moment forward has been coloured by her death.

All of the families of murder victims in this book carry the deaths of their loved ones with them. In certain moments the impact is visible. There is a profound sadness, an unsaid and unsayable sense of loss.

Joyce, Aidan, James, Phyllis, Jill, Sylvia, Patrick, Jonathan, Nichola, Jock, Joan and Noel. Six women, four men and two teenage boys, the eldest Sylvia Sheils at fifty-nine, the youngest James Morgan at sixteen.

No-one has been made accountable for the murders of Aidan Gallagher, Sylvia Sheils and Patrick Lawlor. Mystery still surrounds the deaths of Jock Corbally and Joan McCarthy. The men who were convicted in the cases of James Morgan and Noel Neville are both free, having been released after being jailed for the killings. The man accused of Jonathan Edwards' murder was acquitted by a jury.

Four men are behind bars serving life sentences. They are the killers of Joyce Quinn, Phyllis Murphy, Jill Bishop and Nichola Sweeney.

Outside the prisons the families of those who died serve their own form of life sentence. These are their stories.