

The Client

by Nicky Winder

‘So how angry were you when you killed the brothers?’

‘Very.’

‘I see.’ And the solicitor regarded his new client with faint interest. Normally there would be some attempt to disguise unsavoury emotions. The figure seated in the chair opposite, whose face and character seemed to be equally unpleasant, was making no such effort.

‘And you want to plead not guilty?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Right.’ There was an uncomfortable pause, during which the solicitor looked at his client’s sharp features, caught his eye, and hastily looked away again. He pretended to study the cream-coloured walls around him, devoid of anything as frivolous as artwork, and rallied himself for another attempt.

‘But how... I mean why... I mean...’ Diamond-sharp, and wily as they come after twenty years of defending killers, the solicitor was suddenly out of his depth. He wasn’t sure why; couldn’t pinpoint what it was about this particular client that disturbed him so profoundly, but there it was. He sighed.

‘Tell me again why you did it?’ His words took on a quality that was perilously close to whining.

His client looked at him contemptuously, and his voice came out as an ugly snarl. ‘They deserved it. They didn’t belong. Coming here, taking our houses. They had no right.’

‘But...’ The solicitor thought of various arguments he could use, arguments in which words like ‘tolerance’ and ‘diversity’ and ‘harmony’ featured quite prominently. Then he

noticed his client's expression, now hovering between annoyance and ferocity, and the arguments crept out of his mind, unarticulated.

'So let me get this straight. You killed them one after the other? With a gap between the killings?'

'That's right. The first one, he got planning permission and started building a house right next to my property. I wasn't having that.'

'But couldn't you have spoken to him? Written to him? I mean, there was no need to... You didn't need to use violence.'

'Yes, I did. It's the only language his kind understand.'

'But to knock down the walls like that, knowing he was inside. Don't you feel any remorse?'

'Of course not. They're just animals. Not fit to live.'

'What about his family, though?'

'What about them? Get rid of the lot of them, I say. Don't want them breeding. Too many of them as it is.'

The solicitor had heard similar views before, had even read versions of them in certain so-called newspapers, but never had he heard anyone speak of a fellow creature with quite so much venom. He tried once more.

'Look, Mr... How can you plead not guilty? You said you killed him. You said you felt angry with him.'

'*Very* angry,' corrected the client.

'Right. So...?'

The question hung in the air as the solicitor recalled the details he'd read of his client's case. The first victim had been a cheerful, law-abiding citizen, who'd only recently moved out of his mother's house and was enjoying his independence. Not overburdened with

intelligence, perhaps, but with a certain naïve optimism that turned out to be sadly unfounded. He had received a generous gift from a local resident, but this had proved his undoing. Details of his untimely end had been painful to read. A parent himself, the solicitor had sympathised – as far as his rational, world-weary nature would allow – with the mother’s sorrow. The guilt she must feel, at having despatched her son into a world that would treat him so cruelly! Close-ups of her grieving face were plastered across the papers, and the solicitor was moved by them. But that was after the loss of her first son. When the second died in similar circumstances, her expression seemed to shift from despair to blankness. Who could begin to understand the depth of her sorrow? What seemed to make an intolerable situation even worse was that the bodies hadn’t been found. Yet there was no doubt that the killer sitting opposite knew where they were. On impulse, the solicitor leaned forward and spoke again.

‘What did you do with them? Why couldn’t the police find the bodies?’

The client sat back in his chair and a look of satisfaction spread across his face.

‘I ate them.’

The solicitor considered himself a man of the world but, even so, he felt the room suddenly spinning, and came closer to fainting than he had ever done before. Images that made him regret the hearty breakfast he had enjoyed a few hours earlier filled his mind, and he would have paid a great deal of money to erase them.

‘But... Why?’ He was not prepared to ask ‘How?’

‘I told you. They deserved it. Taking our jobs. Living on hand-outs. Eating and eating, like there’s no tomorrow. Pigs, they were. They didn’t deserve to live.’

The solicitor fell silent. A detail he had read about the victims’ family came back to him – there was a third brother. He felt suddenly cold. ‘Wait a minute – the police have let you out on bail until the trial, right?’

‘That’s right,’ said his client, smiling. ‘Plenty of time to get their other brother too, though the police don’t know that. And if you tell them – well, let’s just say I have plenty of friends.’

The solicitor suddenly noticed his client’s long nails, and imagined them closing around his throat. He stared at the teeth, the powerful jaws, and swallowed hard.

‘I won’t say anything, really I won’t. But this third brother – surely you won’t do the same as...’

‘As before? Sure I will.’

And the solicitor remembered more about the third brother and how, unlike his siblings, he was building a house made of bricks, with a big chimney so he could have an open fire.

The client interrupted his thoughts: ‘You don’t think it’s a good idea?’

The solicitor felt uneasy. With the air of one about to launch into a detailed explanation, he paused, looked him in the eye and said, ‘Not very.’