

I'm going to say this now, before we get started. You won't like it, but trust me, I've done this more times than I care to punish myself remembering. In a case like this – a kid – nine times out of ten it's someone close to home. Family, friend, neighbour, someone in the community. Don't forget that. However distraught they look, however unlikely it seems, they know who did it. Perhaps not consciously, and perhaps not yet. But they know.

They know.

* * *

20 July 2016, 2.05 a.m.

Canal Manor estate, Oxford

They say homebuyers make up their mind about a house within thirty seconds of going inside. Well, take it from me, the average police officer takes less than ten. In fact, most of us have come to judgement long before we're through the door. Only it's the people we're judging, not the property. So when we pull up outside 5 Barge Close, I have a pretty good idea what to expect. It's what used to

be called an ‘Executive Home’. Perhaps still is, for all I know. They have money, these people, but not as much as they’d like, or else they’d have bought a genuine Victorian house and not this reproduction version on a raw new estate the wrong side of the canal. It’s the same red brick, the same bay windows, but the gardens are small and the garages huge – not so much fake as downright forgery.

The uniform posted at the front door tells me the family have already done the obligatory search of the house and garden. You’d be amazed how many times we find kids under beds or in wardrobes. They’re not lost, they’re just hiding. And most of those stories don’t have happy endings either. But it seems that’s not what we’re dealing with here. As the Duty Inspector told me an hour ago when he woke me up, ‘I know we wouldn’t normally call you in this early, but this late at night, a kid that young, it feels all wrong. And the family were having a party so people had started looking for her long before they called us. I decided pissing you off was the least of our worries.’ I’m not, actually. Pissed off, that is. And to be honest, I’d have done the same.

‘Out the back’s a bombsite, I’m afraid, sir,’ says the PC at the door. ‘People must’ve been traipsing up and down all night. Bits of dead firework everywhere. Kids. Can’t see forensics getting sod all out there, sir.’

Great, I think. Effing fantastic.

Gislingham rings the bell and we stand at the door, waiting. He’s shifting nervously from one foot to the other. Doesn’t matter how many times you do it, you

never get used to it. And when you do, it's time to quit. I take a few last gasps of fag and look back round the close. Despite the fact that it's two in the morning, almost every house is glaring with light, and there are people at several of the upstairs windows. Two patrol cars are parked on the scrubby bike-tracked grass opposite, their lights throbbing, and a couple of tired PCs are trying to keep the rubberneckers at a decent distance. There are half a dozen other officers on doorsteps, talking to the neighbours. Then the front door opens and I swing round.

'Mrs Mason?'

She's heavier than I'd expected. Jowls already forming and she can't be more than, what, mid-thirties? She has a cardigan on over a party dress – a halter-neck leopard-print job in a dull orangey colour that doesn't go with her hair. She glances down the street and then wraps the cardy tighter about herself. But it's hardly cold. It touched ninety today.

'DI Adam Fawley, Mrs Mason. May we come in?'

'Can you take your shoes off? The carpet's only just been cleaned.'

I've never understood why people buy cream carpet, especially if they have children, but it hardly seems the moment to argue. So we bend over like a couple of schoolkids, undoing our laces. Gislingham flashes me a look: there are hooks by the door labelled with the family's names, and their shoes are lined up by the mat. By size. And colour. Jesus.

Odd, though, what exposing your feet does to your brain. Padding about in socks makes me feel like an amateur. It's not a good start.

The sitting room has an archway through to a kitchen with a breakfast bar. There are some women in there, whispering, fussing about the kettle, their party make-up bleak in the unflinching neon light. The family are perched on the edge of a sofa far too big for the space. Barry Mason, Sharon and the boy, Leo. The kid stares at the floor, Sharon stares at me, Barry's all over the place. He's got up like the identikit hipster Dad – cargo pants, slightly too spiky hair, slightly too garish floral shirt not tucked in – but if the look is landlocked at thirty-five, the dark hair is dyed and I suspect he's a good ten years older than his wife. Who evidently buys the trousers in this house.

You get all sorts of emotions when a kid goes missing. Anger, panic, denial, guilt. I've seen them all, alone and in combination. But there's a look on Barry Mason's face I've not seen before. A look I can't define. As for Sharon, her fists are clenched so rigid her knuckles are white.

I sit down. Gislingham doesn't. I think he's worried the furniture might not take his weight. He eases his shirt collar away from his neck, hoping no one notices.

'Mrs Mason, Mr Mason,' I begin. 'I understand this must be a difficult time, but it's vital we gather as much information as we can. I'm sure you know this already, but the first few hours really are crucial – the more

we know, the more likely it'll be that we find Daisy safe and well.'

Sharon Mason pulls at a loose thread on her cardigan. 'I'm not sure what else we can tell you – we already spoke to that other officer –'

'I know, but perhaps you can just talk me through it again. You said Daisy was at school today as usual and after that she was here in the house until the party started – she didn't go out to play?'

'No. She was in her bedroom upstairs.'

'And the party – can you tell me who came?'

Sharon glances at her husband, then at me. 'People from the close. The children's classmates. Their parents. Her kids' friends then. Not hers. Or theirs.'

'So, what – forty people? Would that be fair?'

She frowns. 'Not so many. I have a list.'

'That would be very helpful – if you could give it to DC Gislingham.'

Gislingham looks up briefly from his notebook.

'And you last saw Daisy when exactly?'

Barry Mason still hasn't said anything. I'm not even sure if he heard me. I turn to him. He's got a toy dog in his hands and keeps twisting it. It's distress, I know, but it looks unnervingly like he's wringing its neck.

'Mr Mason?'

He blinks. 'I dunno,' he says dully. 'Elevenish maybe? It was all a bit confused. Busy. You know, lots of people.'

'But it was midnight when you realized she was missing.'

‘We decided it was time the kids went to bed. People were starting to leave. But we couldn’t find her. We looked everywhere. We called everyone we could think of. My little girl – my beautiful little girl –’

He starts to cry. I still find that hard to handle, even now. When men weep.

I turn to Sharon. ‘Mrs Mason? What about you? When did you last see your daughter? Was it before or after the fireworks?’

Sharon shivers suddenly. ‘Before, I think.’

‘And the fireworks started when?’

‘Ten. As soon as it got dark. We didn’t want them going on too late. You can get in trouble. They can report you to the council.’

‘So you last saw Daisy before that. Was it in the garden or in the house?’

She hesitates, frowning. ‘In the garden. She was running about all night. Quite the belle of the ball.’

I wonder, in passing, how long it is since I’ve heard anyone use that phrase. ‘So Daisy was in good spirits – nothing worrying her, as far as you knew?’

‘No, nothing. She was having a lovely time. Laughing. Dancing to the music. What girls do.’

I glance at the brother, interested in his reaction. But there is none. He is sitting remarkably still. Considering.

‘When did you last see Daisy, Leo?’

He shrugs. He doesn’t know. ‘I was watching the fireworks.’

I smile at him. ‘Do you like fireworks?’

He nods, not quite meeting my eye.

‘You know what? So do I.’

He glances up and there’s a little flutter of connection, but then his head drops again and he starts pushing one foot across the rug, making circles in the shagpile. Sharon reaches out and taps him on the leg. He stops.

I turn to Barry again. ‘And the side gate to the garden was open, I believe.’

Barry Mason sits back, suddenly defensive. He sniffs loudly and wipes his hand across his nose. ‘Well, you can’t be up and down opening the door every five minutes, can you? It was easier to have people come in that way. Less mess in the house.’ He glances at his wife.

I nod. ‘Of course. I see the garden backs on to the canal. Do you have a gate on to the towpath?’

Barry Mason shakes his head. ‘Fat chance – council won’t let you. There’s no way he got in that way.’

‘He?’

He looks away again. ‘Whoever it was. The bastard who took her. The bastard who took my Daisy.’

I write ‘my’ on my notepad and put a question mark next to it. ‘But you didn’t actually *see* a man?’

He takes a deep breath that breaks into a sob, and he looks away, tears starting again. ‘No. I didn’t see anyone.’

I shuffle through my papers. ‘I have the photo of Daisy you gave Sergeant Davis. Can you tell me what she was wearing?’

There’s a pause.

‘It was fancy dress,’ says Sharon eventually. ‘For the children. We thought that would be nice. Daisy was dressed as her name.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m not with you –’

‘A daisy. She was dressed as a daisy.’

I sense Gislingham’s reaction, but don’t allow myself to look at him. ‘I see. So that was –’

‘A green skirt, green tights and shoes. And a head-dress with white petals and a yellow centre. We got it from that shop on Fontover Street. It cost a fortune, even just to hire it. And we had to leave a deposit.’

Her voice falters. She gasps, then clenches her hand into a fist and pushes it against her mouth, her shoulders shaking. Barry Mason reaches across and puts an arm round his wife. She’s whimpering, rocking backwards and forwards, telling him it’s not her fault, that she didn’t know, and he starts to stroke her hair.

There’s another silence, then suddenly Leo edges forward and slips off the sofa. All his clothes seem slightly too big for him; you can barely see his hands for his sleeves. He comes over to me and gives me his phone. It’s showing a still from a video. A still of Daisy in her green skirt. She’s a beautiful child, no doubt about that. I press Play and watch for about fifteen seconds as she dances for the camera. She’s brimming with confidence and exuberance – it radiates off her even on a two-inch screen. When the video stops, I check the tag – it’s only three days old. Our first piece

of luck. We don't always get something as up to date as this.

'Thank you, Leo.' I look up at Sharon Mason, who's now blowing her nose. 'Mrs Mason, if I give you my mobile number can you send this to me?'

She waves her hands helplessly. 'Oh, I'm hopeless with those things. Leo can do it.'

I glance at him and he nods. His fringe is a bit too long, but he doesn't seem to mind it in his eyes. They're dark, his eyes. Like his hair.

'Thanks, Leo. You must be good with phones for someone your age. How old are you?'

He blushes, just a little. 'Ten.'

I turn to Barry Mason. 'Did Daisy have her own computer?'

'No way. The things you hear about with kids online these days. I let her use my PC sometimes as long as I'm in the room with her.'

'So no email?'

'No.'

'What about a mobile?'

This time it's Sharon who answers. 'We thought she was too young. I said she could have one for Christmas. She'll be nine by then.'

So that's one less chance of tracking her down. But this I do not say. 'Did you see anyone with Daisy last night, Leo?'

He starts, then shakes his head.

‘Or before that – was there anyone hanging around? Anyone you saw going to or from school?’

‘I drive them to school,’ says Sharon sharply. As if that settles it.

And then the doorbell rings. Gislingham flips his notebook shut. ‘That’ll be SOCO. Or whatever we’re supposed to call them now.’

Sharon looks at her husband, bewildered. ‘He means forensics,’ says Barry.

Sharon turns to me. ‘What are they here for? We haven’t done anything.’

‘I know that, Mrs Mason. Please don’t be alarmed. It’s standard procedure in a – when a child goes missing.’

Gislingham opens the front door and lets them in. I recognize Alan Challow straight away. He started on the job a few months after I did. Hasn’t aged that well. Too little on top, too much round the waist. But he’s good. He’s good.

He nods to me. We don’t need the pleasantries. ‘Holroyd’s just getting the kit from the car,’ he says briskly. His paper suit is creaking. It’s going to be hell in that thing when the sun comes up.

‘We’ll go upstairs first,’ he says, pulling on his gloves. ‘Then start outside as soon as it’s light. No press yet, I see. Praise be for small mercies.’

Sharon Mason has got unsteadily to her feet. ‘I don’t want you poking about in her room – touching her things – treating us like criminals –’

‘It’s not a full forensic search, Mrs Mason – we won’t be making any mess. We don’t even need to go into her room. We just need to take her toothbrush.’

Because it’s the best source for DNA. Because we might need that to match to her body. But this, again, I do not say.

‘We will be making a more extensive search in the garden, in case her abductor has left any physical evidence that might help us identify him. I trust we have your agreement to do that?’

Barry Mason nods, then reaches up and touches his wife’s elbow. ‘Best we just let them do their job, eh?’

‘And we’ll be arranging for a Family Liaison Officer to attend as soon as possible.’

Sharon turns to me. ‘What do you mean, *attend*?’

‘They’ll be here to make sure you’re kept informed as soon as we get any news, and to be on hand in case you need anything.’

Sharon frowns. ‘What here? In the *house*?’

‘Yes, if that’s OK with you. They’re fully trained – there’s nothing to worry about, they won’t be at all intrusive –’

But she’s already shaking her head. ‘No. I don’t want anyone here. I don’t want you people spying on us. Is that clear?’

I glance at Gislingham, who gives a minute shrug.

I take a deep breath. ‘That is, of course, your right. We will designate a member of our team to be your point of contact, and if you change your mind –’

‘No,’ she says quickly. ‘We won’t.’

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Oxford’s News @OxfordNewsOnline 02.45

BREAKING Reports coming in of considerable police presence on the Canal Manor development – no further details as yet . . .

Julie Hill @JulieHillinOxford 02.49

@OxfordNewsOnline I live on Canal Manor – there was a party last night and the police are here now questioning the neighbours

Julie Hill @JulieHillinOxford 02.49

@OxfordNewsOnline No one seems to know what’s happening – there are about 15 police cars

Angela Betterton @AngelaGBetterton 02.52

@JulieHillinOxford @OxfordNewsOnline I was at the party – it’s their daughter – apparently she’s gone missing – she’s in my son’s class

Julie Hill @JulieHillinOxford 02.53

@AngelaGBetterton Oh that’s awful, I thought it must be drugs or something @OxfordNewsOnline

Oxford’s News @OxfordNewsOnline 02.54

@AngelaGBetterton What’s the little girl’s name and age?

Angela Betterton @AngelaGBetterton 02.55
@OxfordNewsOnline Daisy Mason. Must be 8 or 9?

Oxford's News @OxfordNewsOnline 02.58
BREAKING Reports coming in of possible child
#abduction in the Canal Manor development.
Sources say an 8-yr-old girl is missing from her home

Oxford's News @OxfordNewsOnline 03.01
If you hear more on the Oxford #abduction tweet us
here – bringing you Oxford local news and more
throughout the night

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Just after three the media team ring me to say the news is out, and we may as well make the best of it. Twenty minutes later the first outside broadcast van arrives. I'm in the kitchen; the family are still in the sitting room. Barry Mason is lying back on an armchair, his eyes shut, though he's not sleeping. When we hear the sound of a vehicle drawing up he doesn't move, but Sharon Mason rises from the sofa and looks out of the window. She sees the reporter get out, and then a man in a leather jacket with a mike and camera. She stares a moment then glances in the mirror and reaches a hand to touch her hair.

'DI Fawley?'

It's one of Challow's team, halfway down the stairs. A girl, but I think she must be new because I don't

recognize her voice. I can't see her face either, what with the hood and the mask. Contrary to what they'd have you believe on telly, forensic fashion is far more chicken-packer than TV CSI. They drive me crazy, those sodding shows – the last thing a real forensics officer would ever do is contaminate a crime scene by flicking their bloody hair extensions about. The girl beckons to me, and I follow her up to the landing. The door in front of us has a neat plaque announcing



Daisy's Room



and a piece of paper stuck to it with Blu-Tack saying

KEEP OUT!!

in large untidy capitals.

‘We’ve got what we need,’ she says. ‘But I thought you would want to see the room. Even if we don’t go in.’

When she pushes open the door I understand what she means. No kid’s room ever looked like this outside of a sitcom. Nothing on the floor, nothing on the surfaces, nothing shoved under the bed. Comb precisely parallel with the brush. Soft toys sat in a line, staring at us with their small beady eyes. The effect is more than a little disconcerting. Not least because the boisterous, bubbly child I saw on the video footage simply doesn’t fit with a room as preternaturally neat as this. Some empty rooms echo with the people who once inhabited

them. But this is the emptiness of absence, not presence. The only sign she was ever here is the Disney poster on the far wall. The princess from *Brave*, alone in the forest with her defiant bright red hair, and across the bottom in big orange letters *CHANGE YOUR FATE*. Jake loved that film too – we took him twice. It was a good message for kids – that it’s OK to be yourself; you just need the courage to be who you really are.

‘Horrible, isn’t it?’ says the girl beside me, breaking into my thoughts.

At least she has the tact to keep her voice down.

‘You think so?’

She’s taken her mask off now and I can see her wrinkle her nose. ‘Talk about over the top. I mean, absolutely *everything* matching like that? No one likes their name *that* much, believe me.’

And now she mentions it, I see it. It’s all daisies. The whole bloody lot. Wallpaper, bedspread, curtains, cushions. All different, but all daisies. There are plastic daisies in a green pot, and a bright yellow daisy headband hanging on the dressing-table mirror. Glittery daisy hairslides, a daisy lampshade and a daisy mobile hanging from the ceiling. It’s not so much a bedroom as a theme park.

‘Perhaps she liked it that way?’ But even as I’m saying it I’m not buying it.

The girl shrugs. ‘Maybe. What do I know – I don’t have kids. Do you?’

She doesn’t know. No one’s told her.

‘No,’ I say.
Not any more.

* * *

BBC Midlands Today

Wednesday 20 July 2016 | Last updated at 06:41

Police appeal for help in search for missing Oxford girl, 8

An 8-year-old girl has gone missing from her home in Oxford. Daisy Mason was last seen at midnight on Tuesday in the garden of her family home, where her parents Barry and Sharon Mason were holding a party.

Daisy is described as blonde with green eyes, and was wearing a flower fancy dress with her hair in bunches. Neighbours say she is outgoing but sensible, and is unlikely to have gone willingly with a stranger.

Police say that anyone who sees Daisy or has any information about her should contact the Thames Valley CID incident room on 01865 0966552.

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By half seven the forensics team have nearly finished in the garden, and uniform have started another search

of the area in and round the close, every movement watched, now, by a bank of hungry TV cameras. There's the canal as well, but I'm not even going to think about that. Not yet. Everyone is going to assume this girl is still alive. Until I say so.

I stand on the tiny patio looking down the back garden. There are scraps of burnt-out firework littered across the flower beds, and the dried-up summer turf has been trodden to scrub. That uniform was right: chances of a decent footprint, or anything else remotely useful, practically zero. I can see Challow down by the back fence, bent double, picking his way along the undergrowth. Above his head, a balloon is caught in the bushes on the towpath, its silver streamer rippling gently in the early air. As for me, I'm desperate for a fag.

The canal curves slightly here, which means the Masons' garden is a little longer than most of those in the close, but it would still be pokey for that many people. I can't decide if it's the swing in the corner, or the crappy pampas grass, or just the lack of sleep, but it's unnervingly like the garden we had when I was growing up. Boxed in with all the other identically dreary houses in a dismal ribbon development that owed its entire existence to the Underground – a stop on the final stretch, thrown down randomly in what had once been meadows, but were long since concrete by the time we lived there. My parents chose it because it was safe, and because it was all they could afford, and even

now I can't argue with them on either score. But it was horrible, all the same. Not a place of its own at all, just 'south' of the only thing resembling a real town for miles around. The same town I went to myself – to school, to my mates' houses, and later, to pubs and to meet up with girls. I never brought a single friend home; I never let them see where I really lived. Perhaps I shouldn't be so hard on these Canal Manor people: I know what it's like to feel you're on the wrong side of the glass.

At the bottom of the Masons' garden the barbecue is still smouldering, the metal giving tiny clicks as it cools. The chains of the swing are bound together tightly with duct tape, so it can't be used. There's a stack of garden chairs, a gazebo (folded) and a trestle table with a gingham cloth (also folded). Underneath, there are green cool boxes labelled BEER, WINE, SOFT DRINKS. There are two wheelie bins on the patio behind me, the one for recycling gaping with cans and bottles, the other stacked with black bags. It occurs to me – as it should have done straight away – that Sharon Mason has done all this. The tidying, the folding up. She went round this garden making it presentable. And she did it after she knew her daughter was gone.

Gislingham joins me from the kitchen. 'DC Everett says nothing useful from the house-to-house so far. No one we've spoken to who was at the party remembers seeing anything suspicious. We're collecting their

camera photos though – should help with the timeline. There’s no CCTV on the estate but we’ll see what we can find in the surrounding area. And we’re checking the whereabouts of known sex offenders within a ten-mile radius.’

I nod. ‘Good work.’

Challow straightens up and waves us towards him. Behind the swing, a fence panel is loose. It looks solid from a distance, but push it hard enough and even an adult could squeeze through.

Gislingham reads my thoughts. ‘But could someone really get in, take the kid and get out without anyone noticing? In a garden this size, with that many people about? And the kid presumably struggling?’

I look around. ‘We need to find out where the gazebo was and how big it is. If they put it across the bottom of the garden, it’s possible no one would’ve been able to see that hole in the fence, or anyone going through it. Add to that the fireworks –’

He nods. ‘Everyone looking the other way, lots of bangs, kids screaming –’

‘– plus the fact that most of the people here were parents from the school. Bet you any money the Masons had never met some of them before. Especially the fathers. You’d need balls of steel, but you could walk in here and pretend to be one of them and you might just get away with it. And people would actually *expect* you to be talking to the kids.’

We start up the lawn towards the house. ‘Those

photos you're collecting, Chris – it's not just a timeline we want from them. Start ticking off their names. We don't just need to know where people were, but *who they are.*'

* * *

At 7.05, out in the close, DC Everett is ringing at another door. Waiting for it to open, waiting to fix her professional smile and to ask if she can come in and speak to them for a moment. It's the fifteenth time she's done it now and she's telling herself not to be irritated that she got lumbered with the house-to-house, while Gislingham gets to be inside the only house that matters. At the heart of things. After all, you can count on the fingers of one hand the times a child abduction turned on *What the Neighbours Saw*. But to be fair, some of these people were actually in the Masons' garden when their daughter went missing. Though considering how many potential witnesses were in that small space, Everett's had little of any real use thus far. It was 'a nice party', 'a pleasant-enough evening'. And yet at some point in the middle of it a little girl disappeared and nobody even noticed.

She rings again (the third time) and then steps back and looks up at the house. The curtains are pulled back but there are no signs of life. She checks her list. Kenneth and Caroline Bradshaw, a couple in their sixties.

They could easily be on holiday before the schools break up. She makes a note next to their name and goes back down the drive to the pavement. One of the uniforms comes up to her, slightly out of breath. Everett's seen her about at the station, but she's only just out of training at Sulhamstead and they've never actually spoken. Everett's trying to remember her name – Simpson? Something like that. No – Somer. That's it. Erica Somer. She's older than most new recruits, so she must have done something else first. Rather like Everett, who has a false start in nursing to her name. But she keeps that one quiet, knowing that all it would do is give her male colleagues one more excuse to make her the one to break bad news. Or knock on bloody doors.

'There's something in one of the bins – I think you should see,' Somer says, gesturing back from where she came. She's straight to the point, no nonsense. Everett warms to her at once.

The bin in question is on the corner where the close turns in from the side road. A forensics officer is already there, taking pictures. When he sees Everett he nods, and the two women watch while he reaches into the bin and pulls out what's lying on the top. It unpleats like a snakeskin. Flaccid, empty, green. Very green.

It's a pair of tights, ripped at one knee. And small enough for a child.

* * *

*Interview with Fiona Webster, conducted at
11 Barge Close, Oxford
20 July 2016, 7.45 a.m.
In attendance, DC V. Everett*

VE: Can you tell us how you know the Masons,
Mrs Webster?

FW: My daughter Megan is in the same class as
Daisy at Kit's, and Alice is the year above.

VE: Kit's?

FW: Sorry - Bishop Christopher's. Everyone round
here just calls it Kit's. And we're
neighbours, of course. We lent them the
gazebo for the party.

VE: So you're friends?

FW: I wouldn't say 'friends' exactly. Sharon
keeps herself to herself. We talk at the
school gate, like you do, and sometimes I
go jogging with her. But she's far more
disciplined about it than I am. She goes
every morning, even in the winter, after
she drops off the kids at school. She's
worried about her weight - I mean she
hasn't actually said so, but I can tell. We
had lunch once in town - more by accident
than anything - we bumped into each other
outside that pizza place on the High Street
and she couldn't really say no. But she ate
next to nothing - just picked at a salad -

VE: So she doesn't work, then, if she runs in the mornings?

FW: No. I think she did once, but I don't know what. It'd drive me mad, being stuck indoors all day, but she seems totally absorbed in the kids.

VE: So she's a good mum?

FW: I remember all she talked about at that lunch was what great marks Daisy had got for some test or other, and how she wants to be a vet, and did I know which university would be best for that.

VE: So a bit of a pushy parent?

FW: Between you and me, Owen - my husband - can't stand her. You know that phrase about sharp elbows? He says she has *scythes*. But personally I don't think you can blame anyone for wanting the best for their kids. Sharon's just a bit more obvious about it than most of us. In fact I think the Masons came here in the first place for the schools. I don't think they can afford to go private.

VE: These houses aren't exactly cheap . . .

FW: No, but I just get the feeling things are a bit tight.

VE: Do you know where they lived before?

FW: Somewhere in South London, I think. Sharon never talks much about the past. Or her

family. To be honest I'm a bit confused why you want to know all this - aren't you supposed to be out there looking for Daisy?

VE: We have teams of officers searching the area and checking local CCTV. But the more we know about Daisy, and the family, the better. You never know what might prove to be significant. But let's talk more about last night. What time did you arrive?

FW: Just after seven. We were one of the first. The invite said 6.30 for 7, and I think Sharon had actually expected people to come at half past. She was really on edge when we got there. I think she might have been worried no one would turn up. She'd gone to huge trouble about it all - I told her, everyone would have been happy to pitch in and bring stuff, but she wanted to do everything herself. It was all laid out on the tables in the garden, under cling film - that stuff is so horrible, don't you think, I mean -

VE: You said she was on edge?

FW: Well, yes, but only about the party. She was fine later, once it got going.

VE: And Barry?

FW: Oh, Baz was the life and soul, as usual. He's always very sociable - always finds something to say. I'm sure the party was his

idea. And he dotes on Daisy - the usual dads and daughters thing. He's always picking her up and carrying her about on his shoulders. She did look very sweet in that flower get-up. It's sad when they grow out of the dressing-up phase - I wanted Alice to wear fancy dress last night but she point-blank refused. She's only a year above Daisy but now it's all crop tops and trainers.

VE: You must know Barry Mason pretty well?

FW: I'm sorry?

VE: You called him 'Baz'.

FW: [*laughs*] Oh Lord, did I say that? I know it's awful, but that's what we call them, well some of us. 'Baz 'n' Shaz'. Short for Barry and Sharon, you know? But for God's sake don't tell Sharon I called her that - she absolutely hates it - blew her top once when someone let it slip out by mistake.

VE: But Barry doesn't mind?

FW: Seems not to. But he's pretty easy-going. More so than her. Not that that's difficult.

VE: So when did you last see her - Daisy?

FW: I've been racking my brains about that. I think it was just before the fireworks. There were lots of little girls running about all night. They were having a whale of a time.

VE: And you didn't see anyone talking to her -
or anyone you didn't recognize?

FW: There weren't many people there I didn't
know. I think they were all from the
estate. At least, I don't remember anyone
from the other side.

VE: The other side?

FW: You know. Over the canal. The posh lot. You
don't get them slumming it over here very
much. But in any case, as far as I remember
Daisy spent the whole time with her friends.
Adults are pretty dull when you're that age.

VE: And your husband - Owen? Was he there?

FW: Why do you want to know that?

VE: We just need to know where everyone was -

FW: Are you suggesting *Owen* had something to do
with it, because I can tell you right now -

VE: Like I said, we just need to know who
everyone was at the party.

[pause]

It's possible we may have found the tights
Daisy was wearing. Do you remember if she
still had them on when you last saw her?

FW: I'm sorry, I really can't remember.

VE: And she didn't fall over or hurt herself at
the party, as far as you saw?

FW: No, I'm sure I'd have remembered that. But
why do you ask that - what difference does
it make?

VE: There was blood on the tights, Mrs Webster.
We're trying to find out how it got there.

* * *

At 8.30 I'm in the car, parked round the corner in Waterview Crescent, which is definitely one notch up on the property pecking order – three-storey townhouses, and even, would you believe, a couple of stone lions on plinths at the entrance. I'm eating a pasty someone has brought over from the petrol station on the main road. I can feel my arteries clog just looking at it. But there's a press conference scheduled for ten, and if I don't eat anything I'm going to be light-headed. And while I'm at it, the car is a Ford. In case you're wondering. And I don't do bloody crosswords either.

There's a tap on the driver's window and I wind it down. It's DC Everett. Verity, her name is – I told her once, with a name like that she was destined for this job. And she won't give up looking for it either – the truth, I mean. Don't let that stolid appearance fool you – she's one of the most ruthless officers I've ever had.

'What is it? What did Fiona Webster have to say?'

'Plenty, but this isn't about that. The old dear at number thirty-six. She saw something. A couple of minutes after eleven, she says. She's sure because she was about to phone the council nuisance line about the noise.'

I remember what Sharon Mason said about people

reporting you. Perhaps I misjudged her – you're not paranoid if your neighbours really are shits.

'So what did this Mrs –'

'Bampton.'

'What did Mrs Bampton say?'

'She says she saw a man walking away from the Masons' house with a child in his arms. A girl, and she was crying. In fact more like screaming, the old lady says. That's why she went to the window in the first place.'

I'm shaking my head. 'It was a party. How do we know it wasn't perfectly innocent – that it wasn't one of the fathers on his way home?'

If I'm pushing back it's not because I doubt what she's saying, it's because I really don't want this to be true. But her cheeks are pink – she's on to something. 'Mrs Bampton says she couldn't see the man's face at that distance, so she can't give us a description.'

'So how does she know it was a girl he had with him?'

'Because she was wearing fancy dress. She was wearing a *flower outfit*.'

* * *

Thames Valley Police @ThamesValleyPolice 09.00

Can you help find Daisy Mason, 8? Last seen on the Canal Manor estate #Oxford Tuesday midnight.

Any info call on 01865 0966552

RETWEETS 829

BBC Midlands @BBCMidlandsBreaking 09.09

There will be a police press conference at 10 a.m. this morning about the disappearance of 8-yr-old Daisy Mason

RETWEETS 1,566

ITV News @ITVLiveandBreaking 09.11

BREAKING: Oxford police to detail the search to find 8yo #DaisyMason at 10 a.m. Will give details of sighting of possible suspect

RETWEETS 5,889

* * *

For the first fifteen minutes, the press conference was pretty uneventful. The usual questions, the usual non-answers. ‘Early stage of the investigation’ – ‘Doing everything possible’ – ‘Anyone with information’. You know the drill. The audience was edgy – knowing this could be big, but lacking an angle and going in circles. The possible sighting had provoked a momentary flurry, but without either a photo or a description it wasn’t adding up to much. One of the usual suspects tried to elbow herself into the limelight with a pretty crass attempt to make it personal (‘DI Fawley, are you really the appropriate officer to lead a child abduction investigation?’), but everyone else steered clear. I was checking my watch – they’d just about had their allotted quarter of an hour – when someone at the back got