**Lord Lucan and the Mystery of the Missing Letter***The Sunday Telegraph, October 10, 2004*

**Thirty years ago, the 7th Earl of Lucan vanished after killing his children’s nanny. *James Fox*, who gained the confidence of the Lucan set to investigate the story, reveals a final piece of evidence which – until now – he has kept secret.**

Around this time 30 years ago, the 7th Earl of Lucan was planning to murder his wife, Veronica. He was embarking on what was to become one of the greatest murder mysteries in British history. For my part, I was in my late twenties, working as a writer on a Sunday newspaper, my marriage collapsing, but with no thoughts of murder. Yet within weeks I was thinking of little else.  
 I can no longer remember why I was assigned the story of Lord Lucan’s attempt to kill his wife and his subsequent disappearance. I knew something about the people in his “circle”: rich gamblers and socialites such as John Aspinall, James Goldsmith and Mark Birley. One of their set, Dominic Elwes, was a friend of a friend. Not much of an entrée – but, as it proved, it was enough.   
 My notebooks are still with me. And they include one piece of evidence that I have kept to myself for all those years – a note of one last message from Lord Lucan which will inevitably rekindle speculation about his actions on the night he vanished. I must examine honestly why I kept it quiet, as I must throw some long-hidden light on another bitter legacy of the story – the suicide of Elwes, shunned by his one-time friends in the Lucan set, who blamed him for the article I wrote.  
 My piece exposed, among other things, the ruthlessness and contempt for other which characterized Lucan’s circle. It caused a sensation when it was published, in the *Sunday Times*, on June 8, 1975. I took a certain pride in the way I penetrated and described that privileged patrician world, united against outsiders to protect one of their own. Yet something troubles me. I saw myself as a journalist set on revealing the truth. But the long-forgotten scrawls in my notebook tell a different tale. Like some of Lucan’s friends, I too kept something back in my account of the story.  
 Early in October 1974, Lucan had already told his friend Greville Howard – now Lord Howard – how he was going to commit the murder. His wife’s body would be dumped in the sea. Lucan wanted to kill his wife because he had lost his children to her in a custody case, despite evidence in court of Veronica’s emotional instability, and he was convinced that they would come to harm under her care. Having planned a perfect murder, he evidently believed that he would never be caught. Lucan was drinking more heavily than usual in these weeks.

He would often arrive drunk at John Aspinall’s Clermont Club in Mayfair, where he gambled every night.  
 On October 11, he borrowed an ageing Ford Corsair from his friend, Michael Stoop. Stoop was less cliquey than the rest of the Lucan in-crowd. He played gold with Lucan and partnered him in backgammon tournaments.  
 On Thursday November 7, believing that it was the nanny’s night out, Lucan used his latch key to his house, waited in the basement and lashed out at a female figure. He killed the nanny, Sandra Rivett, who had stayed in with a cold. When Veronica came downstairs he hit her with almost equal violence.  
 The sequence of events that followed is familiar from the innumberable books which have since fed an insatiable public appetite for the Lucan case. Veronica ran to the pub. Lucan tried to alert a neighbour, then got into Michael Stoop’s car and drove to the house of his friend Mrs. Maxwell Scott, a barrister who lived in Uckfield, Sussex – the last time he was seen.  
 He made two calls to his mother, concerned about the children. He wrote letters, setting up a cover story in which he claimed to have surprised an intruder in the house: two were to his brother-in-law, William Shand Kydd. Mrs. Maxwell Scot posted them for him. Lucan then wrote a third to Michael Stoop, alluding to a “traumatic night of unbelievable circumstances”. It included the astonishing line, “I won’t bore you, except when you come across my children please tell them that you knew me and all I care about is them.” The words have a goodbye ring. When Stoop received the letter he passed it on the police, telling them he hadn’t kept the envelope or noted the postmark.  
 Mrs. Maxwell Scott, who died three weeks ago, said that Lucan left her house at 1.15 a.m. telling her he wanted to get back to London. She waited for 48 hours before contacting the police. On Saturday, two days after the murder, Michael Stoop told the police about the car he’d lent to Lucan. It was discovered on Sunday parked in Norman Road, Newhaven, 16 miles from Mrs. Maxwell Scott’s house. A lead pipe, wrapped in sticking plaster, identical to the murder weapon, was found in the boot. A pad of Lion writing paper was on the seat. Neighbours said that it had been parked there sometime between 4 am and 8 am. What had Lucan been doing between 1.15 am and the time his car found?  
 Simple, says Veronica Lucan, who covers the subject on her website, [www.ladylucan.co.uk](http://www.ladylucan.co.uk); he must have been sleeping in the car. I can well believe her. He would have been exhausted. There was no evidence that Lucan had driven it to Newhaven – in fact, one of the policemen on the case, Det. David Gerring, who believed that Lucan had an accomplice in his movements, said in 1993: “I don’t think he ever went to Newhaven. Only the car did.”  
 I was always sure Lucan got to Newhaven, his last stop before taking his own life, and that all the theories about his escape into exile were idle speculation. But it’s taken me 30 years to uncover the reason for my certainty.

Four weeks ago, while looking in old files, I came across notes of one last letter that Lucan wrote. It was to Michael Stoop, and was much shorter than the three other letters made public at the time. Stoop showed it to me when I interviewed him in early 1975 in his London flat. My scribbled notes record: “smallish paper…no envelope….keys in glove compartment…in Norman Street (or Newham St)…please forget you ever lent it to me….burn envelope”. I could not believe I still had it, let alone had found it, almost by chance. But what was its significance after all these years?  
 Lucan had been attempting to reunite his borrowed car with its owner. His mistake about the proper name of Norman Road sounds like his own. If someone had parked it for him and reported back to Lucan, he would have been more precise. It seems clear that Lucan parked it himself and he was being polite, observing club etiquette. “Please forget you ever lent it to me,” shows Lucan was not thinking straight. The car, after all, was covered in blood. But “burn envelopes” seems significant. When you read “burn envelope” the first thing you do is examine the postmark. And “burn envelope” suggests that Lucan needed time. He was not about to walk into the sea the morning he left the car in Newhaven. He had a plan.  
 Why didn’t I use Stoop’s letter in my article? I knew Stoop hadn’t shown it to the police. I felt at the time that he didn’t know the significance and didn’t want to alarm him, or to harden up any implied promise of confidence – I would go away and think how to deal with it later. If I’d shown my note of Lucan’s letter to Stoop to the police at the time, three months before publication, all my hard won contacts would have been blown. Yet if I had sat on it until publication. I would have been seen to have withheld information in the previous weeks; and so, of course, would Stoop.  
 The car had been found by the time Stoop had the letter, so perhaps that was why he hadn’t seen the significance of it. But to read “burn envelope” after all these years made me start. Stoop *must* have noticed something on the envelope: what could it have been? I had to talk to Stoop, the last man Lucan trusted, again. He would, I calculated, be 83: his memory might be as fallible as mine, but it was worth a try.  
 I finally managed to track him down last week, at a chess tournament in Guernsey. Our telephone conservation was brief. I reminded him of the letter: “I think I did show it to you, rather foolishly,” he said. He told me that he hadn’t noticed the envelope, hadn’t even looked at it. Nor had he done what Lucan asked – burn it. “I just chucked the thing in the wastepaper basket as far as I remember.” And the postmark? “I didn’t look, no.” I told him I had decided to write about it. “I just wish you wouldn’t,” he said. And hung up.  
 It’s unsettling to go back to the strange and jittery atmosphere of 1975. Among the Lucan crowd inside the Clermont, led by Aspinall and Goldsmith, there was a feeling of bitterness and siege, and outside there was something approaching class war. The miners had forced Heath into the three-day week late in December 1973. Who ran the country? The Government or the unions?  
 When Wilson took over shakily in March 1974, with a Left-wing cabinet, many of the Right, and most of Lucan’s friends, saw themselves in a pre-revolutionary situation. Colonel Bill Stirling had formed his private army, to cross picket lines and “run the country” in case of a Communist takeover. Michael Stoop volunteered. So did my own stepfather, who was deputed, in White’s, to command the Isle of Wight ferry. I wrote at the time that Lucan’s views “had appeared to be degenerating under pressure, from paternalistic feudalism to the extreme Right-wing – views echoed by many of his friends”.  
 As a former Etonian, I had distinct advantages in covering the story, according to Lucan’s friend. Charles Benson. I duly launched into a round of cocktails and lunches, beginning with Dominic Elwes. A man of extraordinary comic gifts, he was jester to the Clermont world, while being vulnerable dependent on their approval. That lunchtime, we reeled about in helpless laughter as he took flight with speculation and satire. He described the Clermont world of gambling in its William Kent building in Berkeley Square, in the most romantic terms as a “hyper-civilised, patrician kind of life”. It’s ethos, he said presciently, was “concerned with power and success and to a certain extent survival. Anybody who has fallen by the wayside is dismissed.” He offered to paint the Lucan set and I fixed a commission on behalf of my magazine for £500, his first step in a fatal connection with my article.  
 Through Elwes, I reached most of the key players. I got the impression that they rarely spoke to anyone outside their group. Charles Benson, then Scout, racing correspondent of the *Daily Express*, claimed later that the idea was for me to write a serious article about Lucan which would “help to ensure him a fair trial if he ever turned up” – in other words a “write-up” which would show how his wife had driven him to an act of madness. It was naïve of Benson, as a journalist: the coroner’s inquest, which opened just after my piece was published, showed that the forensic evidence against Lucan was indisputable. Spin from the Clermont would not have made any difference.  
 It was the language that was such compelling copy, at first. Aspinall, who couldn’t stop using the word “genetic”, described Lucan “as a figure like myself born out of his own time…He was genetically endowed as a warrior.”  
 Charles Benson described “Lucky” Lucan as “very Right-wing and he never compromised in front of people. He would talk about hanging and flogging and foreigners and niggers equally to shock and get a reaction.”  
 In the months between the disappearance and the inquest, Lucan was becoming something of a popular hero, despite the overwhelming evidence of murder. He had “fallen on his sword”, driven to it by the acts of his wife, a madwoman; these were the lines you heard on the street. But as I listened I began to see the story differently. I also got close to the police.  
 Det. Chief Supt Ranson, in charge of the case, was a quiet, mild man, largely unprovokable by what he saw as the arrogance and condescension of many of the Lucan set, who dined out on stories of the coppers’ social discomfort searching stately homes.

His partner, Det. Gerring, a thick-set bruiser, later fired for being rude to his superiors, had a great love of food. There was no doubt that Lady Lucan was aggressive and unbalanced. But the police played me tapes that Lucan had secretly made of telephone conversations with Veronica – who had a long history of psychiatric illness – in which he played to his friends. Other evidence, including anonymous threatening telephone calls to her on a line only he knew, made it clear that he was trying to drive his wife into madness or suicide.  
 “He pinned all his hopes on the deterioration of her condition,” one of his friends admitted to me. “Veronica would retreat into private psychiatric hospitals. There were beatings too, and some of this must have come up in the custody proceedings when Lucan lost. “He did beat her up once or twice,” Aspinall told me. “Not surprising, with a wife who’s behaving badly. Eventually your temper frays and you give her a few blows or something.”  
 I didn’t know how to get to Lady Lucan. She was under contract to the *Daily Express*. So I door-stepped her in Lower Belgrave Street one day in March. I said I wanted to get her version of events. She was dressed in a little black velvet two-piece suit. The house was freezing cold; she was clearly hard up. I remember her being lucid and very polite. On a subsequent visit she re-enacted the scenes of the fatal night as if her mind had shut out the horrors. I never doubted her story, which had too much uninventable detail in it, and, Ranson told me, she never changed it from first interview to last.  
 Gentlemanly correspondence between editors got us round the *Daily Express* contract and Lady Lucan sold us rights to her family albums. Its pictures came out, with other photographs, blazed across the pages of the *Sunday Times Magazine* in June 1975, the day before the inquest opened. The piece caused uproar in Lucan’s world, a world considered impenetrable by other journalists and even, at times, the police. My article certainly swung the mood towards some sympathy for Veronica Lucan – and the forgotten nanny, Sandra Rivett. The story was changing and the Clermont set did not look good.  
 But what really outraged John Aspinall, Jimmy Goldsmith and Mark Briley were the photographs illustrating the piece – not the innocuous Lucan family snaps from Veronica’s album, but a cropped picture of Lady Annabel Birley (now Goldsmith) on the magazine cover, sitting closely and apparently intimately beside Lucan, taken in Acapulco in 1973. There were other pictures inside from that house party, which included Elwes. And then there was Elwes’s painting, which showed the Lucan set, including Jimmy Goldsmith, in cartoonish poses.  
 Lady Annabel told me last week that he was infuriated by the cover photograph. “Jimmy was a particularly jealous man,” she said. He was further enraged that Elwes had colluded in the article and included him in the painting without telling him. “Anything that went on between the walls of the Clermont club in that little gambling set, I think it’s all meant to be highly confidential. Nobody was meant to know who was there and what happened,” she said.

Mark Briley, owner of Annabel’s and mark’s Club, was “infuriated” at the cover, mostly because Robin Birley, his 16-year-old son, was teased about the picture at Eton. Goldsmith complained to Aspinall. In their anger at this penetration of their inner sanctum, they leapt to the conclusion that Elwes had sold the Acapulco photographs and turned on him. Robin Birley wrote to him saying that he had “wrecked my life”. Elwes sat up all night writing a reply, denying that he had given me photographs. Then Mark Birley sent him a formal letter banning him from both his clubs. He also sent writs for outstanding bills. Jimmy Goldsmith sent him furious and terrifying messages.  
 The court jester had been excommunicated. It was bullying of the most primitive kind; his tormentors wouldn’t listen to any evidence that he hadn’t done the deed. And it became obvious to many of his remaining friends, including Benson, that he couldn’t have been the source. No one on the holiday remembered him taking pictures; he was even the subject of many of them.  
 Elwes was given to black depression; he had made at least two previous suicide attempts, and other family and financial problems were besetting him. He became distraught, at times incoherent. Elwes and Benson both tried to contact me.  
 I would have moved heaven and earth to get Elwes off the hook – but I didn’t know what was going on. For some of the crucial weeks that followed I was abroad in the eastern Cyclades in Greece, far away from telephones. I heard nothing more until Elwes committed suicide in late August leaving a note which read, “I curse Mark and Jimmy from beyond the grave. I hope they are happy now.”

I regret it badly. Had I known about Elwes’s predicament I would certainly have revealed the source of the Acapulco pictures at the time. Twenty years or so ago, in exasperation at the continuing myth that Elwes was to blame for them, I did reveal the source in the letter page of the Spectator, but nobody seemed to notice – except Lady Lucan.  
 The pictures had been lying about in Lady Lucan’s house and I had taken them along with her photograph albums, with her consent. She left a message on my answering machine after this revelation saying: “You know what we do with foxes. We break their necks and break their backs.” She didn’t leave her name, but I would recognize her voice anywhere.