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Unanswered Cries: Friends, Neighbors, and Murder in a Small Town

By Thomas French

St. Martin's, 320 pp.

Even in Gulfport, Florida, the sleepy residential town nestled in a nook of St. Petersburg's borders, it was considered only "a little murder." None of the major news determiners fit. Karen Gregory was not famous nor rich, neither pregnant nor powerfully connected, not particularly young nor old. When her body was found in the dried pool of blood from her many stab wounds, the story made page 5B of the *St. Petersburg Times*.

Yet, on the night of May 22, 1984 the 36 year-old graphic artist had a lot to live for. She'd finally been hired as an artist after months of supporting herself as a waitress, she'd left Northern sleet for the Florida sun and sand she loved, and she was about to move in with David Mackey, her boyfriend of over a year. They had just bought a couch, their first purchase together. David, a counselor of Vietnam vets, was up North at a conference, and Karen was moving her things into his house.

Late that night, when Karen's scream reached homes even a block away, no one called the police. Two mornings later, 22 year-old rookie police officer Cheryl Falkenstein found Karen's body so butchered that, after two months of nightmares, Falkenstein left police work.

In June, 1987, George Lewis, a neighbor of Mackey's, was sentenced to life imprisonment for Karen Gregory's rape and first-degree murder.

In June, 1988, Thomas French, a young police and court reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times*, detailed the murder story in a mammoth award-winning ten-part investigative feature series called "A Cry in the Night." French decided not to focus on the unresponsiveness of those who'd heard Karen's cry. This was not a Kitty Genovese story.

Nor is it any moreso now, in its expanded book version. On one level, it is an engrossing tale of murder, beginning with the lurid crime and progressing through the investigation as it adopts and discards suspects. The emerging hero becomes Larry Tosi, the Gulfport police sergeant closing in on the killer not by brilliant sleuthing but sheer doggedness as original witness Lewis, a local fireman, relates conflicting account after conflicting account, ignorant of Mark Twain's advice that when you start to lie you'd better have an excellent memory.

Finally, French wrings the courtroom drama of Lewis's trial, the succession of judges and lawyers and jurors, as the truth gets sliced, probed and sometimes lost while the murdered victim, as so often in rape cases, suffers violation yet again under attorneys' character assassination. On the level of true crime reporting, French, a promising journalist, deftly spins an absorbing case study.

But there's a larger story in Karen Gregory's killing, and French makes certain it seeps through in all its shocking self-evidence. Written in a year when 18,954 murders occurred in America, *Unanswered Cries* becomes a private story of grief, fear and pain, the personal consequences of one murder. The human touches are what stand out most: Karen riding her bike along the beach, Mackey's inability ever to sleep in his house again, the nightmares of friends and family and a rookie cop, Tosi relegated to tiny Gulfport because at 5'7" he was too short for any other police force, the shiny Mercedeses and flashing jewelry of the defense attorneys, a juror wavering when a line of testimony conflicts with something she'd just seen on the television series *Quincy*, Lewis's love for chocolate chip cookies and his two year-old daughter, and his pregnant wife's scream upon his conviction, almost as innocent, anguished and unanswered as Karen Gregory's three years earlier.

In the vivid rendering of one murder and the web of lives it transformed, French tells a story at once commonplace and essential. Because the story of violent death in contemporary America is so unexceptional that its telling risks tedium, for that very reason it must constantly be heard. It becomes particularly valuable when rendered as it is here, laying bare the human implications that distinguish it from the sense-dulling fantasy of big and little screen. Karen Gregory's murder, as Thomas French makes us see, meant that a warm, vibrant woman suffered terror and pain, then vanished forever from the lives of many people who loved her, leaving them only her memory and the echoes of an unanswered cry on a Florida spring night.