

"My memories of Meredith Kercher"



Monique Rivalland photographed by John Angerson in London last month

Published at 5:17PM, October 20 2012

Five years after her friend was murdered, Monique Rivalland can finally see through her despair to the happy times they had together

"Every night, before I go to sleep, I lock myself in my bedroom. I lock the door and all the windows. And each time I do, I am reminded of why.

Five years ago I was 21 and preparing to move to Italy for a year-long exchange. Seven of us from Leeds University, all girls, were to spend the year of our Erasmus study programme in Perugia. My best friend Lina, me and five others: Amy, always sweet and softly spoken; Robin, forthright with a dry sense of humour; Rachel, shy but glamorous; Laura, the top student who was practically fluent already; and Meredith, who lived with a mutual friend in Leeds and had made me giggle in class on numerous occasions.

During our year abroad we were to study both at the University of Perugia and the Università per Stranieri di Perugia (University for Foreigners). The latter is the most distinguished institution in the world for Italian language education. It is housed in a grand 18th-century palazzo with a dramatic orange-pink façade. Inside, the walls are covered in faded frescoes and the rooms are filled with the sort of furniture that seems far too elegant for a school.

The university can be reached from the centre by walking through an ancient Etruscan archway or along a road that curves around the limits of the historic centre. From the outer

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/magazine/article3569039.ece>

side of that road there is a steep drop that gives way to the Umbrian countryside below: miles of undulating green hills broken up by the dirty amber and terracotta roofs of Perugian homes. One of them was Meredith's. She had found a room on EasyStanza, the Italian version of Gumtree. Her flatmates were two Italians and an American called Amanda. Meanwhile, Amy, Robin and Rachel had rented a place together close to the centre, and Lina and I had found an old-fashioned apartment at the bottom of one of Perugia's many steep, cobbled lanes. It looked out over a small courtyard full of white Fiat 500s and the whole place smelt of freshly baked bread from the bakery nearby.

It was September 2007 and, as kindred spirits in a strange environment, the Leeds students clung together. Evenings were often spent chatting, surrounded by local men and women sipping espressos and gesturing extravagantly at one another. We would share stories about embarrassing linguistic mishaps and laugh about people's confused expressions when one of us said something unintelligible.

Perugia has a charm and ornateness typical of Italy, but it also has a rebellious underbelly. Students make up nearly a quarter of the city's population, used heroin needles are a common sight in some of the narrower, less visited streets and punks, the only visible youth culture to speak of, congregate in the town centre. In 2007, they had shaved heads with a long dreadlock, like a rat's tail, hanging down their back. They often had a vicious-looking dog as a sidekick and the ubiquitous white "A" somewhere on their dark clothing.

For us, Piazza IV Novembre, a large, open square circled by bars and cafés, was the place to be. The close-knit international community gathered at nearby Le Chic; within weeks of living in Perugia you could walk into this bar and know almost everybody in there. The first time I went I was introduced to Meredith's American flatmate, Amanda Knox. She was chirpy and confident and ruled that we were only allowed to speak Italian to each other. I had been talking to Lina in English, but when Amanda came over she said, "We're here to learn, aren't we, guys?" She seemed a typically eager American. She had just started working evenings there and introduced me to the owner, Patrick Lumumba. He was laughing and shaking cocktails – everybody knew him.

One night a plan was formed to venture out to a nightclub out of town. I was tired, but reluctant to miss out on something new. Historic centres in Italy tend to have noise restrictions that force late-night venues out of town centres, so the university would sometimes organise coaches to transport hoards of students to them. We all squashed into the coach; some of us got seats, others were standing in the aisle holding on to each other as the bus bumped over the cobbles. Drunk Italian boys were leaning over the backs of their seats trying to chat up the giggling foreign girls. I remember feeling that the whole thing was a bit immature and must have appeared miserable on the dancefloor because suddenly Meredith grabbed me. "Come on, it's not that bad," she said, and swung me into a theatrical ballroom dance through the crowds. She was determined to wipe away my frown.

Food played quite a large part in my stay there. I set myself the task of learning to cook Italian dishes, and once I had perfected the art of a good risotto I invited the girls over for dinner. At the time pumpkins were in season, so I made pumpkin and Gorgonzola risotto, having haggled over the ingredients with the greengrocer on our road, a small, hunched man who would shout at me viciously if I touched anything. To my relief, the dinner was a success. We sat around our table by the wooden shutters drinking local red wines, feeling wonderfully grown-up. We probed Meredith about an Italian boy she had started dating. Her place was split into two separate apartments, the girls on top, and he lived with some boys below. She

was behaving coyly, but she was the first of any of us to find romance, so we were intrigued. Lina had also just got a job on the side as a baby-sitter and was amusing us with stories of her and the toddler's relationship. We had all started to carve out a life for ourselves.

The next week it was Hallowe'en and Amy and Robin's turn to host dinner. Lina and I walked to their flat in our fancy dress, eliciting plenty of comments from local boys. For some reason I went as a black cat with an Afro and bow tie, much to the girls' amusement when I walked through the door. The other girls, including our friends Sophie and Natalie from other English universities, were more conventionally dressed as witches and vampires. They had made bat-shaped paper chains, which they hung over the fridge and all the doors, and "Happy Hallowe'en" was written in orange letters across their shutters. We laughed all evening, predominantly at the food. It was disastrous. The risotto looked more like Ambrosia rice pudding and Meredith was giggling as she held out a tray of the burnt witch-shaped biscuits she had made.

That was the last time I saw her.

The next evening, November 1, 2007, recovering from the previous night's festivities, they all got together to watch a girlie DVD, *The Notebook*, at Sophie's house. I couldn't go because I was packing for a trip to Rome, where I was meeting my boyfriend. But the events of that night are well documented. Meredith left after the DVD, just before 9pm, and walked home. Sophie offered to go with her, but Meredith declined – the journey took just five minutes and she had done it plenty of times before; she didn't need anyone's help.

In Rome the following afternoon, my boyfriend and I were traipsing around the city with our backpacks, looking for a cheap place to stay. My mobile rang. It was Lina. "I don't know what to do," she quivered down the phone. "About what?" I replied. I assumed she'd had an argument with her boyfriend. She came straight out with it. "Meredith has been murdered." "What?" "Meredith. She's been murdered, Mon." She lost reception and her phone cut out.

To this day I find it impossible to speak those words. At the time they seemed so detached from reality. I didn't react. I didn't call Lina back. She didn't call me back. Didn't I have a million questions? What do you mean? How? When? Who told you? What do we do?

I did nothing. I turned to my boyfriend and said, bluntly, "One of my friends has been murdered." It was such a ludicrous thing to say that it almost meant nothing. I just kept walking, staring blankly. Eventually, I sat down on the kerb and called my mother in London, who told me it had already been on the BBC news. I will never understand why, at that point, I had no desire to know more about it. It was as if, by not knowing, it wasn't really happening.

We found a place to stay and went out for dinner. I drank one glass of wine after another. When we got back to the hotel room I went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I stared long and hard at my face and my eyes started to well up. Suddenly, I was overcome by emotion. I held on to the sides of the sink and wept hysterically, all the while watching myself in the mirror. This was really happening.

The next morning, consumed by dread, I called Lina to ask her more about it. Her voice was faltering but her words explicit. Meredith had been stabbed to death in her bedroom. "How do you know?" I asked. Amy and Robin had been calling Meredith all morning because she hadn't turned up to their lecture on Italian cinema. Her phone had just kept ringing. She loved that class and they thought it was unlike her to miss it. Then they received a phone call from

the police to say her body had been found. “Who found her?” I asked. “One of her flatmates called the police,” said Lina. “Do they know who did it?” “No. There was no forced entry, though.” “When did it happen?” “It must have happened when she got home from Sophie’s.” “In her own bedroom?” “Yes.” “What do we do?” “I don’t know. Nobody knows.” Surreal didn’t even begin to describe it.

I was on the phone non-stop that day, to Lina, my mum, the head of Italian at Leeds University, and a diplomat from the British Embassy in Rome, who said: “Please do not speak to any press who may approach you over the next few days.” Then a text from my friend back home: “There is a picture of you and Meredith on the front page of The Daily Telegraph.” I knew I had to get back to Perugia, but I was terrified.

When I got off the train I couldn’t stop looking around at everyone. Where was her killer? Within weeks in Perugia you were waving at the waitress in one café, the chocolatier at another, the boy at the post office – it was a small world. Now I started to question everyone I knew – could they?

That night I couldn’t sleep a wink. I kept staring at the double glass doors in my bedroom, convinced that I was about to see a figure standing there. In the morning we booked the next available flight to London. Most of the other girls from Leeds had already booked theirs and were leaving that day. Unfortunately, we would have to spend another night there.

A little later we found out that Patrick, the owner of Le Chic, had been arrested. Now I thought I could put a face to the killer – my mind flooded with disturbing images of him and her. We meticulously took apart their relationship. How well did they know each other? Why would he have been at her house? Why would he do such a thing? It seemed absurd, but then so did everything.

Slowly, more and more details began to surface. The stab wounds were to her neck; her bedroom door had been locked. The descriptions of the blood and the brutality were grotesque. The pictures of the murder scene were harrowing. It was the archetypal horror story, but this time we knew everyone involved.

In the evening we nervously left the house to buy some food. As we turned into Piazza IV Novembre we saw a vigil taking place. The stone steps in the square were carpeted with flickering candles and pictures of Meredith and the sounds of revelry had been replaced by a sombre silence. We left in shock. We were involved in the tragedy, at least emotionally. It felt bizarre to see so many strangers mourning the loss of our friend.

I was overwhelmed by relief when it was time to get out of Perugia. Just before we said goodbye to the home we had made, we found out that Amanda, Meredith’s flatmate, and her boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, had been arrested and that the police were searching for another suspect, a local man called Rudy Guede. Patrick had been released and was no longer under suspicion. I felt awful for assuming Patrick’s guilt, but we had been desperate for answers. I couldn’t believe it. Amanda was just another one of us – a young girl trying to live the Italian dream. And who was Guede? We knew everyone in Meredith’s circle, but we had never heard of him.

All over the media it was suggested that Meredith had been involved in a sordid sex game with Amanda, Raffaele and Rudy Guede, but something had gone wrong. This made my blood boil. The crime may have been sexually motivated, but not for one moment did I accept

that Meredith was voluntarily involved. For days, even weeks, her virtuous character was devilishly skewed by the press.

It was becoming unbearably complicated the more I heard and read. By the time we got to the airport I was exhausted from constant speculation. Maybe this, maybe that. It is hopeless trying to swallow the death of a friend when you are still trying to understand how and why they died. We became our own worst enemies. As Lina got on the aeroplane, she grabbed a newspaper, one of Italy's biggest daily newspapers, to read the latest. Suddenly, she spotted that a journalist had fabricated an entire story around a comment she had made the previous day to an Italian friend whom we thought we could trust. She had bumped into him after we had turned our backs on the vigil. Her comment was nothing but an expression of grief and disbelief, but she was devastated. "Her parents are going to think I went to the press," she cried, her tears soaking into the pages.

My experience in Perugia made me hate the press. I despised them for their disrespectful story-spinning, but soon learnt that it was inevitable. Whether accurate or not, this was the perfect news story: a pretty British girl alone in Italy murdered during a sex game with another student. When I arrived home to see "Foxy Knoxy" emblazoned across the tabloid front pages, I hit the roof. How dare they eroticise the person who had been accused of taking my friend's life? How dare they?

The weeks that ensued were a blur of grief, outrage, confusion and fear. Guede was found in Germany and extradited to Italy. All three suspects were held in prison, charged with murder and sexual assault, and we found out that it was Amanda who had wrongly accused Patrick in her initial statement. I felt I was being constantly interrogated by people enthralled by this murder-mystery, but I never wanted to talk about it. I only felt comfortable discussing it with those who had been through the same experience. We met up a couple of times, but mainly stayed close to our families.

More than a month after we left Italy, Meredith's body was returned to the UK. On the eve of her funeral, all the girls from Perugia stayed together overnight so we could support each other during what was going to be one of the most emotionally draining days of our lives. We sat down and made a scrapbook of photos of Meredith in Perugia for her parents. We reminded each other of happy moments that had been forgotten amid the whirlwind of anguish. We had shared a short period in her life that remained unknown to those who loved her most.

Meredith's was the first funeral I had been to. I was nervous. I felt like I didn't belong there. I knew nothing of her past. I hardly recognised anybody there – her friends or her family. I'd simply seen Meredith in her last moments of happiness. I saw her joyful in a city that in the eyes of many will for ever be tainted by a monstrous deed. When her coffin was carried in, it was placed in the aisle right next to the row I was sitting in. I looked around and saw despair on hundreds of faces. Tears were streaming uncontrollably. I will always be in awe of the strength with which her siblings spoke. At the wake we presented the scrapbook to her parents, John and Arlene. I couldn't decide whether the gesture was cruel or kind, but in hindsight I'm glad we did it. I only hope that it will one day bring a smile to their faces.

I told myself that I would never step foot in Perugia again, but three months later I decided to face my fear and go back to retrieve my belongings. I could only spend one night there; to me, the city felt eerie and sinister. I left the next morning with a suitcase full of memories of a time that I longed to forget.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/magazine/article3569039.ece>

In October 2008 Guede was found guilty and sentenced to 30 years in prison, later reduced to 16 on appeal, but information surrounding his involvement remains vague. Amanda and Raffaele were sentenced to 26 and 25 years respectively, but had their convictions overturned in October last year after serious doubts were raised over the DNA evidence used by the prosecution in the original trial.

For me, one of the hardest things is that there is still little, nothing even, in terms of an explanation. Perhaps I will never know the truth behind this crime. Perhaps it will always haunt me when I go to sleep at night. But five years on, I can look back to the moments I shared with Meredith with a newfound fondness. They were happy times that I no longer want to be shrouded in sadness and hate."