

# An "Impossible" Murder in Arlington?

BY ROBERT J. WATSON

Devotees of detective fiction (like this writer) are familiar with a favorite plot device: a killing that takes place under circumstances that, at first, seem to defy rational explanation. The corpse is discovered in a room completely sealed from the inside, or in the middle of a snowfield with no surrounding footprints, or in some comparable situation. The keen-witted detective (usually, of course, an amateur) astounds the reader by eventually unravelling what appeared at first to be a wholly insoluble case. The late John Dickson Carr made a specialty of stories of this type.

Many Arlingtonians may not be aware of an incident that, to those who read about it in the newspapers at the time, suggested just such a story. It happened in December 1954 and involved a young woman employed by the supersecret National Security Agency, who was living in the Arlington Towers apartments, then under construction.

The unfortunate victim was found dead in her apartment on a Monday, killed by a shotgun wound – in the back. The door was locked and fastened with a chain which had to be cut through with a saw before the police could gain entry. Tests of similar chains in nearby apartments, according to the press, "showed they could not be put in place by someone leaving the apartment." The only other means of access to the apartment consisted of windows, 30 feet above the ground and securely locked. It was quite in the best tradition of detective fiction, albeit a real-life tragedy.

The police, after investigation, concluded that this baffling incident was the result of an extraordinary accident. The fatal shotgun, recently discharged, was found in the apartment. The victim herself had purchased it, apparently as a Christmas gift for someone in her family. For some inexplicable reason, she loaded the gun and, it appeared, laid it on a nearby table. She then accidentally knocked the gun off the table. A manufacturer's tag, still attached to the trigger guard, "could have wedged momentarily," so the police theorized, "between the table edge and the gun in its fall, exerting enough pressure on the trigger itself to cause the gun to fire."

Such was the official version of this sad event, based on a careful examination of the apartment and a retracing of the dead woman's movements. It is no doubt the correct one. To those with a fanciful imagination, a macabre alternative may suggest itself: a diabolical murder (perhaps involving

espionage – since the victim worked for a hush-hush government agency) by someone who, after committing the horrid deed, proceeds to hide out in the apartment through the weekend, alone with the body, until the police break in, then, while their attention is fixed on the dreadful scene before them, unobtrusively sneaks out and makes his (or her?) escape. At any rate, here is a plot ready-made for some aspiring writer. The entire story can be found in the *Washington Post* for December 15, 1954.

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