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-and-

Virginia McCullough

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**Sentencing Remarks of Mr Justice Johnson  
Crown Court at Chelmsford, 11 October 2024**

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 In June 2019 you murdered your father, John McCullough, and your mother, Lois McCullough. You have pleaded guilty to each of those offences.

**2. The facts**

2.1 You are 36 years old. You are the youngest of 5 daughters. In June 2019 you were still living with your parents. All of your sisters had long since moved out of the family home. Your mother was 71. She suffered from anxiety and agoraphobia and had traits of obsessive compulsive disorder. Your father was 70. He suffered with ill-health. He had hypertension, type-II diabetes, hypercholesterolaemia and glaucoma.

2.2 You did not work and did not have any regular income. You received payments from your father and they relied on you to deal with some of their financial arrangements. You stole from your parents, and secured loans in their names without their knowledge to increase the amounts you could take from them. You spent money gambling online and shopping. You lied about how the losses that they sustained were incurred. You said that they had been subject to fraud by others, or that there had been banking failures or that they had been hacked. You invented police and corporate investigations with promises of repayment, but which were always subject to delays. You lied to your parents about having employment when you did not. You lied that you had certain medical conditions which you did not have.

2.3 From March 2019 you started to contemplate killing both of your parents. You say that was because you felt trapped and you wanted to be free from them. The reality is that you were trapped only by your own dishonest behaviour. You must have appreciated that it was only a matter of time before your thefts and dishonesty would be discovered. By 17 June 2019 you were almost £60,000 in debt.

2.4 That evening you placed a cocktail of prescription drugs in their drinks. The following morning you found your father dead in his bed. Your mother was also in bed. You had not put so many drugs in her drink and she had not drunk all of

her drink. She was still alive. You had a backup plan for that scenario. You put that plan into effect. You hit her over the head with a hammer. Her last conscious moment was the realisation that you, her daughter, had launched a murderous attack on her. She asked you what you were doing. She suffered defensive injuries as she fought for her life. You stabbed her with a knife 8 times, including 7 stabs to her chest, resulting in her death.

- 2.5 That morning, you went to the GP for help with a cut to your hand. You had sustained that cut whilst stabbing your mother, but you said it was the result of an accident when cutting vegetables. Then you went to Chelmsford town centre to buy items to use to conceal your parents' bodies.
- 2.6 The following day, 19 June, you pretended to be your mother to obtain a new credit card and PIN number. You then used that card to buy clothes and jewellery for yourself.
- 2.7 You set about concealing the bodies. You placed each of your parents in a sleeping bag that you had purchased on 18 June. You then placed your mother in a wardrobe that you then sealed up with tape. Later, you partially obstructed the wardrobe with breezeblocks. You placed your father in a makeshift mausoleum constructed from breezeblocks.
- 2.8 For 4 years and 3 months after you had murdered your parents, you pretended that they were still alive. That started right from the day of their deaths. That afternoon you sent a text message from your mother's phone to one of your sisters. The message was "your dad and I are at the seaside in Walton this week. Mum x". Then, that night, another message "Good night. Mum. x" You continued to send such messages over the following months and years. You even spoke to one sister pretending to be your - and her - mother. You used a large number of different SIM cards to contact your siblings and others pretending to be your parents. You sent pre-printed birthday cards using an online service. You took your parents' pension payments amounting to almost £136,000. You telephoned your father's pension company, pretending to be him. You also spent money on their credit cards, and opened new credit cards in their names and spent money on those. You used their bank accounts and took their winter fuel payments. The total amount you took was almost £150,000. You made calls to the police, pretending to be your mother, complaining about trivial matters. You made calls to your parents' GP pretending to be your mother. You are described by one of your sisters as having always been a compulsive liar. That description is clearly justified, but it hardly captures the elaborate, extensive and enduring web of deceit that you spun and maintained over months and years.
- 2.9 In September 2023, your parents' GP alerted the police. He was concerned that he had not seen them and that their appointments were repeatedly cancelled. A police officer spoke to you by phone. You gave an intricate but untruthful account that your parents were travelling.
- 2.10 On 15 September 2023 officers attended at your home and arrested you on suspicion of murder. It was inevitable that they would discover the bodies of your parents and your responsibility for their deaths. What happened next is

caught on their body worn video. You admitted, in a matter of fact manner, that you had murdered your parents and told the officers where they could find the bodies.

- 2.11 The impact of your offending is vividly described by Lois McCullough's brother, Richard Butcher, and by three of your siblings. They have each explained in clear dignified and moving terms the terrible effect that your crimes and deception have had on them and their families.

### **3. The starting point**

- 3.1 Parliament has said that where the seriousness of a murder is exceptionally high then a whole life order should be imposed. That means that the offender will spend the rest of her life in prison. Parliament has said that the murder of two or more persons, where each murder involves a substantial degree of premeditation or planning, is normally an offence where the seriousness is exceptionally high such that the starting point should be the imposition of a whole life order.

- 3.2 I am sure that these offences involved a substantial degree of both premeditation and planning. You had considered killing your parents over a period of 3 months. In that period you accumulated a large amount of prescription drugs. In May 2019 you bought a knife as well as implements to crush and separate tablets. You put small doses of the drugs in your parents' lunch to test their effect. You drugged your father's drink two days before the murders in order to use him as a guinea-pig. You had a primary plan, which was to use drugs to cause their deaths. And you had a backup plan, which was to use murder weapons if your primary plan failed.

- 3.3 It follows that the starting point is that a whole life order should be imposed. That is subject to consideration of the aggravating and mitigating features of the case, and an overall assessment of the sentence to be imposed.

- 3.4 Aside from the fact that there were two murders which both involved substantial planning and premeditation, there are a number of aggravating features.

### **4. Aggravating factors**

#### *Murders for gain*

- 4.1 I am sure that a substantial motive for each of the murders was your intention to avoid your parents discovering that you had been stealing from them and lying to them, and to enable you to continue to take monies that were intended for them. The murders were therefore done in the expectation that you would gain financially as a result of your parents' deaths. They were murders "done for gain". As Richard Butcher put it, you think more of money than you do of humanity.

#### *Domestic context and abuse of trust*

- 4.2 Your economic abuse of your parents amounted to domestic abuse within the meaning of the Sentencing Council's overarching guideline. The murders took

place in that context. Further, your parents were entitled to feel safe in their own beds and in their own home. They were entitled to feel safe from their daughter. Your conduct amounted to a gross violation of the trust that should exist between parents and their children. That is a significant aggravating feature.

*Vulnerability*

- 4.3 Your parents were not of advanced old-age. They were able to take care for themselves and they were not particularly vulnerable. But they were, to some extent, vulnerable because of their age and because of your father's ill-health. As their daughter, and someone who they trusted with their finances, you were in a position of trust in relation to them. You had a significant level of responsibility towards each of them, and they were each entitled to rely on you. These are each aggravating features. However, they are also linked to the domestic context, and there is a considerable degree of overlap. I take account of the overall impact of these factors in increasing the seriousness of the offences, rather than artificially compartmentalising and then adding different overlapping aggravating factors.

*Concealment of bodies*

- 4.4 The fact that you concealed your parents' bodies for so long and maintained the deceit that they were both still alive, is a substantial aggravating factor. It robbed them of dignity in death, and it no doubt substantially increased the distress and suffering of your siblings.

*Use of weapons*

- 4.5 You used a hammer, and then a knife, to assault your mother. The fact that many murders involve the use of a weapon does not mean that this is not an aggravating feature. It is.

**5. Mitigating factors**

- 5.1 As to mitigating factors, you accuse your parents of conduct which might be said to involve some emotional and other neglect when you were young. Your sisters do not support everything you say. But in any event, you were in your 30s when you killed them. Any difficulties in childhood do not begin to explain or excuse what you did. It does not amount to significant mitigation. Nor does the fact that the domestic arrangements at home may not have been entirely straightforward.

*Mental health*

- 5.2 I have the benefit of extensive medical evidence, including reports from experts instructed by both prosecution and defence. At the time of the offences you had developed symptoms of personality disorder and autistic spectrum condition. You may also have had mild depression. Since the offending, you have developed some psychosis. These factors amount to personal mitigation and they are relevant to the impact that custody will have on you. You also have some physical difficulties which I likewise take into account. The autistic

spectrum condition may also explain the matter of fact way in which you admitted to the murders when you were arrested. It is suggested in one of the reports that you might have thought that you had a binary choice between living with your parents and killing them, and that this is likely to have been a consequence of autism. However, the evidence compellingly shows a financial motivation for killing your parents, rather than feelings of being trapped in the way that you describe. None of the experts suggest that your autism is responsible for your general dishonesty or for stealing from your parents, or from reaching the position where your dishonesty was likely to be uncovered. And even if your autistic condition had a narrowing effect on the choices that you thought were available to you, you nevertheless made a free deliberate and conscious decision to murder your parents. None of the experts suggest that decision was motivated or caused by your autistic condition.

- 5.3 In the light of my assessment of the evidence, and in particular the reason for the offending, there is no scope for a finding that your mental health substantially reduces your culpability. On the contrary, there was no impairment of your ability to understand the nature of your conduct, to form a rational judgement and to exercise self-control. These were considered acts of aggression following months of thought and planning.

*Previous good character*

- 5.4 You have no previous convictions. However, before you murdered your parents you stole from them and committed fraud against them over a considerable period of time. Your lack of previous convictions only has limited weight in mitigation.

*Admissions*

- 5.5 You initially lied to the police when they called you in September 2013. But when they arrived at the house you made full and frank admissions. You provided PIN numbers and passwords to enable the police to interrogate your digital devices. You did not answer questions in interview, and you did not indicate guilty pleas in the Magistrates' Court, but you did plead guilty when you were first arraigned. Your admissions and cooperation with the police amount to significant mitigation.

*Remorse*

- 5.6 You claim to be remorseful for your offending. You admitted the offences and gave the police and the medical experts detailed accounts. You have pleaded guilty. And there are some indications from recorded calls at around the time of the offending that you felt sorrow at what you had done. I accept that there is a degree of remorse in the sense of feelings of guilt and sadness and a recognition and acceptance that what you did was very wrong. But there is also a considerable element of self-pity, and any feelings of remorse are largely overshadowed by your failure to take practical steps to demonstrate any remorse by handing yourself in to the police, and instead spending years covering up what you had done and spending your parents' pensions.

5.7 That said, you recognise and accept that you will be sentenced to imprisonment for life, and there are signs that you are making productive use of your time in custody.

## **6. Whole life order, or minimum term order?**

6.1 A whole life order is a sentence of last resort that is reserved for crimes of exceptional seriousness. In borderline cases, or in cases where there is any doubt, a minimum term order is likely to be the just disposal.

6.2 In the present case, a whole life order is the starting point. Having regard to all the circumstances of the case, including your immediate admissions to the police and your guilty pleas when you were first arraigned, this is not one of those cases of the most exceptional seriousness where a whole life order, as a sentence of last resort, is required. I therefore impose a minimum term order. That means you will remain in custody for at least the minimum term. Once you have served the minimum term it will be for the Parole Board to decide whether and when you should be released. If you are ever released from prison you will be subject to a licence, and the potential of recall to prison, for the rest of your life.

6.3 If you had been convicted following a trial, I would have imposed a minimum term of 40 years.

6.4 I do not give you full credit for your pleas of guilty. That is in part because it is a factor that has already been taken into account by not imposing a whole life order, and in part because you did not indicate a plea of guilty in the Magistrates' Court. I reduce the minimum term for the plea of guilty by 4 years to 36 years.

6.5 You have spent 389 days on remand, reducing the minimum term to 34 years and 341 days.

6.6 I impose the statutory surcharge in the sum of £170 or such other sum as is required by law.

## **7. Sentence**

7.1 Virginia McCullough, I sentence you to imprisonment for life.

7.2 I impose a minimum term of 36 years less the time you have spent on remand.

7.3 That means that you will remain in custody at least until you have served the minimum term. After that it will be for the Parole Board to decide whether you are safe to be released. If you are released, you will remain on licence and will be liable to be recalled to prison, for the rest of your life.