It was a night like many others that summer in Melbourne, the kind of gentle January evening everyone enjoys. And Martin Bartlett was doing a favour for his sister. Always good at fixing things, he was hooking up the speaker leads to Susan’s stereo, a task that seemed to elude the high-school teacher and her housemate, Suzanne Armstrong.

The two women, friends who grew up together in the Victorian country town of Benalla, had been sharing the small worker’s cottage in Collingwood for just a couple of months, with Martin a regular visitor. He and his older sister saw each other – or at least spoke – once a week, and he was happy to perform brotherly tasks like this one. He was usually repaid with a home- cooked meal, and this night was no exception; plus, he just liked visiting Sue, as family and friends called her, and this evening had brought his girlfriend with him.

The house in Easey Street was neat and simple, with a patch of lawn in the backyard providing a comfortable backdrop for the blow-up pool the girls would fill with water on hot days for Suzanne’s sixteen-month-old son, Gregory, to play in. Some of the young children in the street would jump into it too, running up the old ‘dunny lane’ along one side of the house and in through the open side gate to join him for a quick splash.

Having successfully fixed the stereo, and enjoyed their evening together, Martin Bartlett left his sister’s house on 10 January 1977, and all was quiet, all was normal. Gregory was asleep in his cot in the small sewing room that doubled as his bedroom, and the two friends were getting ready to watch television. Just before Martin and his partner left, he and Sue made a loose plan to have dinner again soon, while Suzanne chatted to her younger sister on the phone.

Not a hint of anything out of the ordinary that Monday night, then.

Next door, Ilona Stevens and a friend from work at the *Truth* newspaper were playing pool in the back room of the cottage that was the mirror image of Sue and Suzanne’s house. They were sharing a few after-dinner drinks and the easy comradery of col- leagues who got on well, in and out of the office. In the house on the other side of 147 Easey Street, the two properties separated by the short laneway, an elderly woman was getting ready for bed and tending to her ailing husband. Later, unable to sleep, she took up her usual vantage point in her kitchen, listening to the street and the world around it wind down. It was a habit that allowed her to take the night breeze in summer and warm herself by the stove in winter.

In her early eighties, she had lived in Collingwood with her husband far longer than most of the other locals and was entirely at home in this scrappy suburb on the edge of the city.

Like many of the terraced houses in the street, hers mirrored her neighbours’. But it was more basic; there was still a dirt floor in the kitchen, and a side fence of battered palings no more than three feet high. ‘Old Collingwood’, some neighbours would think as they passed. And so Gladys Coventry was, yet she was also perfectly attuned to the rhythms of the street and her ‘twenty-something’ neighbours.

She had seen many things during her decades in Easey Street. What she saw on this particular evening was never officially recorded, and has almost been lost to time.

A few doors up the street, Peter Sellers and a mate had settled in for the evening too, kicking back in front of the TV. The former apprentice jockey was savouring a little late-night freedom before his family returned from a sojourn interstate. What he and his friend heard, hours later, has also never been fully recorded or understood.

Three days later, some sixty hours after Martin Bartlett last saw his sister, as the city’s temperature rose to nearly 33 degrees, Mrs Coventry watched as police swarmed on the cottage next door, and the covered bodies of the two young women were brought out on gurneys. They had been stabbed a collective eighty-four times.

Gladys Coventry saw the female police officer carry Gregory out of the house and into the waiting ambulance, headed for the children’s hospital, as her neighbours huddled on the footpath across the street. It was summer holidays, so local youngster Phillip Perez and his friends were there too, wheeling around on their bikes, not quite comprehending the grim scene unfolding or what to do within it.

Four decades later, five days after the fortieth anniversary of the double homicide that cast an indelible shadow on the city’s soul, a million-dollar reward for new information was posted. But police are still to make an arrest. The killer is still free.

So a 42-year-old question stands, one that disturbs most who lived in Melbourne at the time, including steadfast young journalists: how can two women, not quite in the prime of their lives, die so violently at the hands of a man who just ... vanishes?

The repeated refrain has been that no one saw or heard anything suspicious that night. Or the next night, or the one after that. But Easey Street tells a different tale of the week in January that forever changed the city. And Gladys Coventry could well be its true heart.