



# **MURDER FORETOLD**

**Performances by  
Chapel Arts Creative Writers**

**Buxton Festival Fringe  
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# Madam Marie

Simone Hubbard

As Madam Marie looked into her crystal ball, she whispered, ‘Murder  
foretold:

I see a man or woman – no, wait, alien - they are young and ... er ...  
old.

I see a kitchen knife - it’s been hidden away.

There’s a man and woman chatting in a café.

It’s a bit blurred,’ she muttered, rubbing the glass.

‘In Scotland I see a troubled lass;

Many plots twisting and turning, a man washed ashore;

And in the distance, I hear a man snore.

I see a group of women knitting;

Murderous thoughts one is committing.

A group of people having dinner at a table.

There’s a chair – no, a stool - it looks really unstable.

I see a hammer, harpoon, laser gun.

And now I hear the violin concerto by Mendelssohn,

And talk of what lies below

A suspicious neighbour's patio.

There’s a plant in the wrong hands.

“Will someone just kill me?” a woman demands.  
I can see white suits, maybe a forensics team,  
And one young woman with low self esteem ...’

So sit back and relax and hear the tales unfold  
And enjoy our stories of Murder Foretold.

# Postcode Lottery

Caroline Vallance

‘What on earth are you doing, Brenda? You’ll injure yourself.’

Derek sighed as he took in the sight of his less-than-nimble wife perched on a tall wooden stool that she must have carried up from the breakfast bar. She’d positioned it on the upstairs landing by the back window and was peering through her bird-watching binoculars in the direction of the yard of an end terrace that backed on to their garden. Only a narrow alleyway separated what was once deemed working-class housing from the smug middle-classes. They were now part of a postcode they dreaded entering for insurance quotes.

‘Just trying to see what’s going on.’ There was a ping and she let the binoculars fall and swing around her neck as she scrutinised a new message on her phone. ‘Jane says the police are outside Druggie Pete’s again and this time there’s a couple of white vans as well.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call him that, love. It’s not very nice.’

‘Well, neither is he, or his girlfriend, or his brother. That bloody pit bull was outside again barking half the night, but I can’t see it now.’

‘It’s not a pit bull, it’s a Staffordshire bull terrier. I didn’t hear any barking.’

‘Well, you wouldn’t, would you? Bloody earplugs in. You wouldn’t need them if we didn’t have a drug dealer squatting in the street behind. Cars coming and going at all hours, rubbish and needles in the park; wouldn’t dare let the grandkids play in there if they came to

visit. Mavis reckons it's only a matter of time before there's a murder. No wonder no one can sell a house at the moment. The Fosters have had theirs on eighteen months and not so much as a time waster.'

'They're not squatting, love, you know that. I checked on the Land Registry. Old Mr Harris was his dad, left it to him in his will, all above board and legal.'

'We should have got them out when we could. You were no bloody help. Wouldn't have a camera fitted. John offered to do it for you and the Residents' Committee would have clubbed together to buy it. No one else has the view we have. Bloody jobsworth. "Would be an invasion of privacy, overlooking a public right of way, we'd have to put signs up; let them know." I'm not surprised the Fosters don't speak to us now.'

'But it's true, I checked on it and it wouldn't have been admissible as evidence. The Fosters didn't speak to us anyway.'

'Then when they cut the gas and electric off, that could have been it. With this cold weather they wouldn't have lasted long, but no ... off you trot, giving them a paraffin heater out of the shed. Mavis said she's seen you chatting to that Pete, petting the dog.'

'They're neighbours, you have to get on, help each other out in bad times.'

'You're too soft by half, you are. Don't want to cause a fuss. Spineless bugger! My dad always said, "Don't know what you see in him, no backbone," and he was right.' The stool wobbled violently as Brenda retrieved the binoculars.



‘I just like to treat people fairly, give them a chance. It’s not like we’ve seen anything illegal after all. Not got anything we could go to the police with.’ Derek moved forwards to steady the stool with a firm hand.

‘Wait! Oh my God! There are forensics people in the back yard. Two of them in those white overalls and covers on their shoes like in CSI Miami. They’ve gloves on, they’re photographing things and moving stuff. Must be a really big drugs bust! They must have arrested them all! Haven’t seen them since Thursday now I think about it. That’s two days. I wonder if they’ve done a bunk, been tipped off. Doesn’t matter, wherever they are, that’s them out. Won’t be coming back here in a rush. Thank goodness for that! We can breathe again. Do you think they’ll confiscate the property? It’d be up for auction. Jane might be interested, for her Jack: he’s a builder. I bet he could make a nice place of it. Enough room for an extension.’

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, love. Careful! Stop wriggling, you’ll have the chair over!’

‘I’m just trying to see what’s happening. The back door’s open. One of the forensics people is coming through with something.’ She swung violently to the left and the stool was briefly on two legs before Derek grabbed it. ‘One of the vans has just come round to the back.’ She abandoned the binoculars again momentarily to message on her phone. Just as she finished, it pinged. Brenda’s hand shot to her mouth and she looked at Derek. ‘Jane says they’ve just brought out a stretcher with a body bag on it, going into the big van. Oh my

God! Another as well! That's two! Overdose, do you think? Bad drugs, perhaps, if it's both of them? She says the dog was taken by a handler early this morning.'

'Oh dear,' Derek sighed, 'I suppose that's one of the risks of that sort of lifestyle.'

Brenda was back with her glasses.

'One of them's carrying something to the van now; it's a couple of feet tall, with a handle ... It's that old paraffin heater! You know, the one you gave them, Derek. The one you were cleaning up. I wonder ... you don't think ...'

Brenda twisted on the stool. It wobbled and her arm flew out, but there was no one there to steady it, no one there to grab on to. As she flailed in the air over the stairwell her shout of 'Derek!' went unheeded. He was already outside talking to the policeman who was keeping the public away at the end of the street.

They both heard the crash and Derek ran frantically round to his front door, but it was too late; Brenda lay twisted at the bottom of the stairs, her neck at an impossible angle.

There are a couple of "For Sale" boards up now. The Fosters' place sold a few months ago. Pete and his girlfriend died of carbon monoxide poisoning; faulty heater, apparently. It might have been his dad's, they reckon. Probably found it and didn't realise it was lethal.

Poor Derek. He's been trying to make a new life since Brenda died. They say he's bought a place in France, moving there when the house sale goes through. Got a decent price for it after all.

# Murder Foretold

**Pete Stelling**

This is a phone (*holds up phone*). We or most of us have one. Other versions of modern technology carry chips, circuits of Elec trickery that create algorithms, AI, that keep us up to date with the future. All relating what is and what is not good for us, also telling us that we have to have this that and the other to improve our lives.

This could foretell or predict our future actions, deeds, in what we do.

Siri, Alexa to some degree, have a small control. Free thinking then becomes “old hat”: ‘It must be true because Facebook, X, Instagram and many other platforms say so.’

However, I have the answer! I did not glean it from any of the aforementioned. It is aliens! Yes, extraterrestrials that walk among us freely. Look at the person next to you. Do you really know where they came from? Our pets, dogs, cats, even the humble goldfish, all living things are suspect. Any creature, any insect that lies dormant: prime suspects.

It is said that we never live more than six yards from a rat, that rats and cockroaches would survive nuclear Armageddon.

And the question I put forward is: what is their purpose? Control? Domination? Do they want to inhabit our world in the future?

I spoke last year about how a bunch of allotment holders grew their crops with the help of the local farmer’s manure, and how the said

farmer had disposed of two poachers on his land with no apparent consequences. This year it is the prediction of such events.

How do we spot the activity of the ET in our midst? Any of your neighbours doing anything unusual? Something happening that you're not quite au fait with or aware of? Does the cat look at you differently? Cats especially worry me because they are so independent creatures. They can and will survive without human intervention. I'm very suspicious of cats. Bees and other pollinators; are they in control? If they died out, we would be up that creek without a paddle. I weigh up all these possibilities.

Let us go back to the technology. Who invented these chips and circuits? We know who developed them for huge profits, when you go home to-day ask Alexa. The Chinese, a very ancient and inventive race: who is to say the electronics produced there do not contain a dormant chip that will in the future spring into life, taking over the world.

I'm going home later and I'll dig out my multi-faceted ray gun. You see, the only person who can reliably foretell a murder is the murderer.

# Ashes to Ashes

Sarah Lionheart

*Two people in a coffee shop:*

**Kathy:** Have you ever thought how you would murder somebody without leaving any evidence?

**David:** The icicle through the heart, kind of thing? Or do you mean poison that leaves no trace?

**Kathy:** Sounds like you HAVE had thoughts about this. Who have you been tempted to bump off, David? Go on, tell me.

**David:** Sounds more like it's you who's been pondering this, Kathy. Do I need to feel worried?

**Kathy:** Oh no, don't worry, it's not you.

**David:** Oh! So it is SOMEONE.

**Kathy:** Oh, not just one.

*Long pause, whilst Kathy sprinkles sugar on her cappuccino.*

*David shuffles uncomfortably.*

**Kathy:** Well, maybe just the one would do, the rest don't bother me so much.

*Another pause. They both sip their coffee.*

**David:** I frequently wanted to throttle my kids when they were teenagers; does that count?

**Kathy:** I am being serious here.

**David:** That's what's worrying me.

*Kathy sighs.*

**Kathy:** I wouldn't do anything, of course. I couldn't. I might want to. But the guilt would get to me.

**David:** Just tell me, Kathy, what has this person done to bring you to this?

**Kathy:** Oh, they haven't done anything to me, it is what they have done to others that bothers me. This person has no conscience, no sense of guilt. He just belittles people, crushes them, finds out their weakness and homes in. It's cruel. It really is. I can't bear knowing how he is and letting him continue.

*They sip their coffee.*

**David:** Could you, you know, tell someone? Warn people? Even tell the police?

**Kathy:** Oh, he's far too clever for that. He covers his tracks, he always look so innocent, saying it was nothing to do with him, he can't help it if people are too sensitive etc, even tries to pretend that he was actually trying to be helpful.

**David:** Jesus, Kathy. Do I know him?

**Kathy:** I don't think so. No, I'm pretty sure you don't.

**David:** I know I shouldn't ask, but it's to do with your work, isn't it?

**Kathy:** I can't say David. I'm not allowed.

**David:** Oh, you can if he is becoming a very real threat to someone.

**Kathy:** What, tell the police he is going to bully someone else until they break? I can just see how seriously they will take that. Not.

I don't know. I feel I have to do something, for the sake of other people, but I just don't know what.

**David:** I can always ask Maureen, she still works at the station. Coercive control is a possibility maybe.

*Kathy looks dubious.*

**David:** Shall we talk about something else, Kathy, like the latest film we could go see?

*So they do, and then go on to chat about the usual things, and eventually leave.*

*Next Week: same place, same time.*

**David:** You look happier, Kathy.

**Kathy:** Do I?

**David:** You didn't do it, did you?

**Kathy:** Do what?

*Pause*

**Kathy:** Oh, David, really, how could you?

**David:** I was just checking.

**Kathy:** Work's just been better this week, that's all. And my migraine went - you know, one of those which keeps throbbing for days.

**David:** Did you hear about that man who hanged himself? On Tuesday?

**Kathy:** No. What happened?

**David:** Well, nobody knows. There was no warning. No note.

**Kathy:** Poor man. So sad when these things happen.

**David:** Maureen says that his clothes were covered in ashes.

**Kathy:** Really? Fascinating.

**David:** And his sister says that he always feared being burnt. Dying by fire. Had dreams of simply ending up as ash. Ash was his phobia. His dreams were of ash falling on him, then he would die a horrible death.

**Kathy:** Hummmm, how awful.

**David:** And his sister said he was in therapy to cope with it.

**Kathy:** Ah.

**David:** You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?

**Kathy:** Me? Look - just because I'm a therapist doesn't mean ...



# **Do You Know Who You Are?**

**Stephanie Billen**

Someone here will soon commit a murder. Don't ask me how I know. Let's just say it takes one to know one. You could call it a gift of mine, this ability to see right through you to the demon soul inside. The fact that you are all women, indeed women of a certain age, gives you all a cloak of invisibility. No one would expect such an act from any of you. Indeed no one expects anything at all from you. You are all, like me, supposedly past your sell-by date. You are sixty-odd but "look amazing for your age". That's the nicest thing anyone will ever say to you and see how it is barbed with malice. No one will ever say it to your male counterparts because they still have agency and potential. They still have time to run the country, for God's sake. But you ... Your only job is to do your best to look significantly younger, and that's a particularly futile task. Never mind; it keeps you busy and stops you interfering in all those important jobs performed by your "better" halves.

Is it the permanent crease in the middle of your forehead that hints at your violent thoughts? But no. Each one of you has that particular furrow of concentration as you bend down over your knitting. For much as you talk while knitting - sorry, gossip, because clearly what you say has no importance - it takes all your attention to complete these complicated patterns. Or is it how you stab into each tiny hole or strangle the wool, once, twice, even three times round the second

knitting needle? Not that either. That would hardly narrow it down, would it?

They call it a knitting circle, this Friday afternoon pastime, held in a cold upstairs room of a community art gallery. All you ageing female participants pay £5 a head to watch replicas of yourselves knit. Today you play with balls of yellow and blue acrylic as you create hideous sweaters for baffled Ukrainian refugees. The gallery is short of volunteers so the most officious of you all - the one who thinks to bring communal chocolate biscuits - has been given a special key to get in. She has carefully locked you all in so that no passerby can interrupt you.

Is it her? My goodness, you are impatient. What, do you think you have to be particularly organised to be a murderer? Or do you think she is dangerously high on sugar? I fear you are on the wrong track entirely. Let's take a break. Let's consider where you are. You are on the top floor in a room with peeling wallpaper and Formica tables stacked in a corner. A small electric heater blows to minimal effect other than to disturb a thin curtain that is semi-drawn across the activity room's huge window with its dizzying view across rooftops. Along the corridor there is a closed, but not locked, door leading to store-rooms where canvases, boards and freakish mannequins are stacked against walls and pigeon poo leaks from holes in the roof. There is one steep staircase down to the main door, just one escape route, assuming you had a key.

You are assuming of course that it is body language that is giving one of you away. People always think this, that one twitch of an eyebrow or tightly crossed leg is in any way significant. You cannot imagine that anything revealing is being said, but I know better. I know to listen. And now I have your attention. You, singular. You, the would-be murderer. I have caught your devilish eye. You are thinking: ‘What did I do? What did I just say?’ Perhaps you are unaware of what you are capable of achieving. You think of yourself as a simple tricoteur, observing the wickedness of men, a direct descendent of one of those old market-women knitting away as they watched the slicing guillotine at the Place de la Revolution.

What was it you said again? Those words, almost drowned out by someone’s clinking teaspoon and the roaring heater? ‘My other half’s got the kind of snoring where you stop breathing for a moment.’ Then that pause. ‘It wouldn’t take much ...’ And that’s the part where you stopped talking but I kept listening, listening to your silence, hanging on to it in my mind even as the rest of you nattered off into night terrors, talking in your sleep, falling out of bed ... Oh, how you all laughed. All except you. Because you’re still thinking, aren’t you? I didn’t say I knew when you were going to do it, because you’re not sure yourself, are you? But I do know that you are even now planning your delicious widowhood, here in the safety of this harmless knitting circle.

If only I could help you decide. But then you’ve never listened to a word I say ...

# A Preference for Dogs

Mark P. Henderson

Cosimo says I'm his oldest friend. Indeed, I know him too well for comfort; I relish his drawling cynicism and cutting insights but I can never guess his thoughts or predict his actions. His inscrutability cloaks a generous spirit along with a devious mind and lethal proclivities. There's no denying the attraction; it's exhilarating to be guided blindfold over what might prove to be the edge of an abyss. What, I wondered, did he have in store today?

After lunch and drinks we retired to his drawing room to enjoy the discreet view over Holland Park. Then, *à propos* of nothing obvious, he drawled: 'The more one gets to know of men, the more one values dogs.'

'One of your quotations?'

'Toussenel, *l'Esprit des Bêtes*, 1847.'

'Thought you didn't like dogs, Cosimo.'

'From which you may draw an inference.'

He selected a CD. The sound of a violin soared from the speakers.

'What in Hades is that?' I demanded.

'Mendelssohn, violin concerto. Menuhin's final recording. Excuse me a moment.'

He left the room and re-entered two minutes later, tall and straight, wearing disposable gloves and carrying claw hammer, plastic bag and second-hand mobile phone. A predatory smile enhanced his profile;

tanned complexion, narrow jaw, high cheekbones, coal-black eyebrows, hooked nose. Women tend to find him irresistible.

‘I didn’t know your taste in music –’ I began.

‘Listening to this concerto has evolved from obligation to pleasure.’ His smile widened but grew no warmer.

‘Obligation?’ I prompted.

‘Quite simple. Enqvist loves Mendelssohn’s music to the point of obsession. He plays recordings of this concerto *ad nauseam*.’

So what, I wondered? Why would Cosimo ape Enqvist’s alleged musical fixation? He hated Niall Enqvist even more than he hated dogs. I doubted whether his antipathy had arisen when Enqvist shot Big Clive in the back because he hadn’t liked Big Clive either.

‘Bear with me.’ Cosimo scrutinised his Rolex and switched on the mobile phone. When he spoke again his voice was a perfect simulacrum of Enqvist’s nasal squeak: “This is it, McConnell. You won’t know when – today, tomorrow, the next day – and you won’t know where – the street, your car, your house – but you’ll be dead. Nothing you can do ’cept make your will”.’

He ended the call, put the phone into the plastic bag, smashed it to pieces with the hammer, sealed the bag, set the hammer down beside his chair and took off the gloves. I felt my jaw dropping.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘your facial expression suggests a learning difficulty. When you leave my humble abode, which I trust won’t be too soon, will you be so kind as to take this bag of broken

phone and fling it into the Thames? Avoiding witnesses would be desirable, though not essential.'

I took several deep breaths and then asked why he'd phoned McConnell pretending to be Enqvist. McConnell was another of the people he hated, but why pretend that Enqvist was threatening him?

'Because McConnell paid me to.' Cosimo sighed. 'Needless to say I didn't need the money, but that was the fifth phone this week.'

My puzzlement continued until Cosimo explained that McConnell intended to kill Enqvist but didn't want to be charged with murder.

'Ah. Light begins to dawn. You've made five phone calls pretending to be Enqvist and McConnell's recorded them, so when he kills Enqvist he can claim self-defence.'

The first movement of the concerto ended. Cosimo closed his eyes as the slow movement began.

'Charming, is it not? Congratulations on your inference.' His smile returned, more predatory than ever. 'The police couldn't pin the Big Clive murder on Enqvist; insufficient evidence. In particular, they couldn't find the gun. That's because it was in my safe.'

With studied calm, I asked whether the weapon was still in his safe. He chuckled.

'Of course not. I gave it to McConnell.'

My mind turned somersaults before it managed to grasp the scheme: Enqvist would be told that McConnell had his gun and would grass him to the police, so he'd break into McConnell's house to take preventative action; McConnell, who'd expect him, would shoot him;

then he'd create evidence of a struggle, phone the police feigning distress, tell them the man who'd been making threatening phone calls had broken in and his gun had gone off ...

'The police would be there in minutes,' I breathed. 'Blue lights, SOCOs, forensics ... And they'd wrap up the Big Clive case.' I shook my head. 'But Cosimo, McConnell doesn't have the wit to concoct a scheme like that.'

'He received guidance during the planning stage.'

I leaned back in my chair and tried to relax. The bag full of broken phone grinned at me. Cosimo went on relishing the music.

'Is this really going to happen?' I demanded. 'When?'

Cosimo glanced at his Rolex again.

'About an hour and a half ago,' he drawled.

# The Child Ballard

David Orrett

She'd begged him not to, but even she knew that there would come a day for him to take his place at the front of the whaler manning the harpoon gun. Today was that day. She pulled her shawl around her, feeling no warmth from the sun as she walked down to the pier head to wait with the other women for the boats to return. His boat was the first to round the headland, the men pulling hard on the oars to battle the strong currents of the Pentland Firth. Eventually they reached the safety of the natural harbour.

The men pulled their catch on to the slipway, John looking proud at the two large grey seals he'd taken with his first shot. Kathryn walked over to the two seals, knelt, stroked them, rose and slowly turned and headed for home. She'd take no part in the desecration of their bodies. John was puzzled at her reaction but he began cutting the blubber from the seals.

The door opened on their house some hours later. Kathryn was sat staring into the peat fire crackling in the hearth, shivering.

'Kathryn, what's the matter? Everyone was shocked by your reaction to the seals.'

She looked at him, her eyes red from crying.

'Sit down, John. I have something I need to tell you.'

He pulled up a chair next to her.



‘What I have to say happened when I was eighteen. Mother and Father had died the previous winter and I was all alone in the croft, facing destitution. One morning I was out searching on the shoreline for driftwood and plovers’ eggs when I saw something further along. At first I thought it was a dead seal, but as I got closer I realised that it was man. He was naked and injured. Fortunately, he was able to walk, so I covered him and helped him to the house and laid him down in my parents’ bed. His side was badly bruised. I tended his wounds, but he developed a fever and I feared he would not survive. For three days his body was burning up and he was in and out of consciousness, but eventually the fever subsided and he was able to eat. As his strength returned he began helping around the croft. He would collect seabirds’ eggs from the cliffs and go out fishing at night, never failing to come back with a net full of mackerel or haddock.

As the days became months we began living as man and wife until I fell pregnant. Our son was born in April. We called him Ronan after his father. For the next three months we were blissfully happy watching our son grow, but as the days lengthened I noticed a change in his father; he became listless and would stare out to sea in the evenings as if something was calling him.

As we lay in bed on Midsummer’s Eve, the man told me of his true nature: a man on land, a seal in water; a Selkie. I at first refused to believe him but he eventually convinced me and told me that he needed to return home tomorrow as he had lived too long as a man. He next told me that he would need to take our son to sea one year

from now or else he would become ill and die. He spent the rest of the night comforting me as my heart broke. In the morning we walked to the beach where he kissed me and our child and walked into the sea and swam out of my life. As I stood there, the head of a seal appeared bobbing in the waves, looking at us as if to say goodbye, until it eventually disappeared beneath the waves.

During our time together we had made enough money from the sale of the fish for us to live comfortably. The next year passed far too quickly with my son, watching him grow, taking his first steps; I feared the day his father would return. As promised, on Midsummer's Eve, his father returned as I sat in front of the fire singing to our child. As we sat there playing with Ronan he told me of his home, Sule Skerry, a tiny island far across the water to the west, dominated by a lighthouse with very little shelter from the wind and storms that lashed the land almost constantly; the reason he spent most of his time at sea.

As the evening wore on, Ronan began to get drowsy, so we decided it would be best to put him to bed and give us time to ourselves. The morning would see me lose my son to the sea, one year after losing his father. I was mistaken in thinking things could get no worse until he told me of what was to become. Troubled, he told me I would marry, that the man I married would be a gunner on a whaler, and that the first shot he fired would result in the death of both him and my son. I said I would never marry, but he made me promise that I would

go on living my life and not regret the time we had together; that their deaths could not be prevented.

When the sun rose we walked down to the shore, where I kissed my son and his father and cried as they disappeared under the waves. I slowly walked back home and packed my few belongings. As I packed, I found a bag of gold that he had left. Packing that as well, I shut the door and never returned to the croft.

I never saw them again until they were hauled on to the slipway.

# No Green Fingers Here

Ann Orrett

I hear them, the whispering ghosts  
Of the withered and the dead.  
'Murderer, beware my friend.'  
The ex enlightened flora of my living room.  
As I place the new arrival on my window sill  
The silent fall brown leaf portends.

Carefully chosen, nicely wrapped.  
Given so kindly.  
Its upright emerald leaves  
Brushing gaily the showy blooms.  
Placed aesthetically.  
A well used, ivy printed pot.  
Full of joy and hope.

And yet, no others gather here.  
An empty auditorium  
For the dancing bright plant.  
Framed green on painted wooden stage.  
Spotlighted, dazzling  
Curtains open, awaiting applause.

It looks through glass towards the light,  
A plethora filled garden  
Sparkling blue, purple, white,  
Outside with dainty centres and blousy red.  
They seem to nod and shout  
"Excel today for life be short,

Tomorrow dead!”

And still it blossomed,  
Tried its best, until one day,  
Though dearly loved,  
Dark leafed with ruby golden edge,  
A shriven crispiness remained.  
Its pot removed and stored,  
To take its place on compost wait  
Where the murdered congregate.

# **It'll Be the Death of Me**

**Stephanie Billen**

It's coming, I know it.  
Coming for me.

Time starts galloping,  
Keen to get away,  
And I'm being dragged along  
Bumping over the rocky earth.

Then Mirth mucks in,  
Laughing out loud,  
Throwing stones at my ego,  
Slowing me down.

It's murderously funny  
My time on this planet  
My futile attempts  
To endlessly plan it.

This Place will be the death of me.  
This inhospitable world,  
It's too hard,  
I'm too soft

And I feel so anxious  
Catching my breath  
Gravel in my face  
Gazing up at outer space ...

So Love me why don't you?  
Make me feel better,  
But not too intensely  
Nor too on-the-fencely.

Is it Love that will kill me?  
Or this Place or God?  
Do I need to believe  
Lest You force me to leave?

Why do I fear  
That Someone here ...

When I'm doing so well  
On my rickety ride,  
Feeling so high right now,  
This minute, this second ...

But it's galloping past  
I was first, now I'm last.  
It was You all along.  
Time, you're the worst.

# Under the Hammer

**Simone Hubbard**

Someone here will soon commit a murder. It wasn't the usual Monday afternoon activity. Daisy cast her eye round the room for some inspiration, half thinking about who might be murdered and who'd finished their lunch, and was ready for a drink. She was fast learning that it was all a juggling act, a far cry from what she thought this job would entail. She would make two teas and two coffees, then she'd make the thickened version for Sybil with its added goodies. She was hoping that someone would come and help with the residents who were struggling to eat their lunch.

Last week Daisy had switched the TV off, citing that it was distracting the residents from eating. This lasted for all of thirty minutes after great distress was caused. Near normal service was resumed when her supervisor compromised and let her put a music channel on. 'And as soon as they've finished their food, you can put the TV programmes back on. They like routine and we know where we're up to. Under the Hammer - lunch, Dickinsons Real Deal - afternoon nap, Tipping Point - afternoon brew, Pointless - tea time.'

She had the knack now of mixing Sybil's drink, which looked nothing like a cup of tea. She'd dish out the now slightly cooled drinks first.

'Will someone just kill me?' came a loud shout from Edna.

'Oh no,' thought Daisy, not one of Edna's rants!



‘I hate you, mother! Why have you put me in here when it wasn’t even me? I get the blame for everything.’

Daisy went over with Edna’s tea and tried to calm her down.

‘Here Edna, I’ve brought you a nice cup of tea,’

‘Poison more like, you’re all trying to poison me.’

‘Now, Edna that’s just silly. Look, I’ll drink some first.’ Daisy produced a straw and put it in the drink. She’d just pretend and hopefully allay Edna’s worries. ‘See, Edna, it’s fine.’

Edna was obviously unconvinced. ‘It’s them, the government, they’ve put you up to this, trying to poison us all.’

Daisy had heard her Dad cursing the “bloody government” with the endless misery it inflicted on everyone, but she was pretty sure they weren’t poisoning Edna. She didn’t have time to reason with her, though. No one had appeared to feed Sybil yet and that was Daisy’s priority. Sybil was the most fragile of all the residents.

Unsurprisingly, Sybil’s puréed lunch was now cold, so she’d now have to blast it in the microwave for thirty seconds. This would give her enough time to dish out the other drinks. She never thought she’d be timing herself to do a task in thirty seconds. As she delivered the other three drinks she heard a worrying sound from the microwave. She cautiously opened the door to find most of the purée had left the plate and was now splattered on every surface inside the wretched machine. Her mother’s words of wisdom now permeated through her head: ‘You need to cover food in the microwave, Daisy, and next time

you don't, you can wipe up the mess!' This was her baptism of fire. She quickly reached for some kitchen roll.

'That's funny,' she thought as she glanced round the table; one of the murder weapons was missing. She was sure they'd all been put back after last week. George was a natural, he'd murdered Gladys effortlessly.

Before she had time to work out what item was missing an alarm sounded. 'This is all I need.' She glanced at the alarm panel. It was the fall mat in room seven. She told herself not to panic; someone else that would go and investigate and in any case she shouldn't leave the room. She took Sybil's thickened insipid tea across to her. Sybil was asleep. Daisy gave her a gentle shake.

'Sybil love, I've brought you some tea.'

Sybil was dead to the world. Nothing new there. Daisy switched the TV back to its programmes just as the news was starting. After last weeks humiliation of not knowing who some high profile politician was she decided to at least watch the news headlines. She was familiar with the headline of today. It was a murder trial that had been shown on the news quite a lot. Daisy had been puzzled by it because the victims were defenceless poorly babies.

'What a confused muddled up world,' she mused.

She could see that Sybil was stirring a bit.

'Horrible noise,' Sybil said putting her hands to her ears.

‘Yes, Sybil, it’s an alarm, nothing for you to worry about. I’ve brought you some tea, and then I’ll bring you some lunch. Are you hungry?’

She shook her head. ‘Horrible noise,’ she repeated.

Daisy could hear her supervisor shouting her. ‘Daisy, can you pop to room seven and make sure it’s just Albert’s wife that’s stepped on that mat again?’

Poor Sybil was going to end up having her lunch at tea time at this rate. As she trotted out of the lounge, Edna started with her rant again.

‘Will someone just kill me ...?’

Daisy arrived at room seven and knocked on the door. No one answered, but why would they? Most people in this place were deaf.

She opened the door, praying that Albert wasn’t on the floor, or his wife for that matter. Thankfully, he was in his chair and his wife was reading to him.

‘I’m just checking you’re OK, because the mat alarm sounded.’

‘I’m sorry dear, that was me, I was only on it for a few seconds.’

‘OK, not to worry,’ Daisy replied, rushing back to the lounge.

As she reached the door she momentarily froze at the scene that greeted her.

Edna was lying face down, motionless in a pool of blood, the plastic hammer from the table beside her. Daisy pressed the emergency call button and rushed to Edna’s side. She couldn’t feel a pulse.

‘There’s been a murder,’ George announced in his best Taggart voice.

# Someone Here Will Soon Commit a Murder

Ann Orrett

There was a slack-jawed silence round the dinner table as Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade played quietly in the background. Dessert forks poised, like a freeze frame from Downton Abbey.

A large piece of coffee and walnut cake dropping on to the edge of a small side plate, flipping it so high it knocked over a wine glass, broke the moment.

'Well! That's scuppered my plans, then!' laughed Arthur.

Cheryl stood up. 'Sorry, I'll get a cloth.' She touched William's shoulder on her way to the kitchen.

'I don't know how to follow that.' Arthur hated silences. He filled in any conversational gaps with expanding polyurethane clichés. He looked at Pauline for help to fill the chasm that seemed to be swallowing him whole. Pauline ignored him, finished her cake, picked up the plate and followed Cheryl into the kitchen.

'So, are you going to tell us how you came to your conclusion, William? I can't seem to relate it to our previous conversation concerning holidays.'

Caroline waited for a response.

She rolled her eyes and continued to eat her cake. What a stupid man.

'I thought I'd just throw it out there and see what I hooked.'

'What, if anything, do you think you hooked?' retorted Caroline.

William smiled. 'An interesting comment from Arthur, at least.'

Arthur was embarrassed.

‘I don’t think Cheryl was too keen on it either. I thought we were going to end up with a bun fight over dessert.’ Dylan gave a wry smile. ‘I’ve seen you do something similar before, William, at school.’

‘Recreating a childhood prank then, William? Are you expecting a smack from Matron after we leave?’ queried Caroline.

It was William’s turn to be embarrassed.

Caroline hadn’t met William before. In fact, she didn’t know anyone else there, other than Cheryl. She had been invited to help “enhance the conversation”. She looked over at Dylan; an intriguing man, who was also finishing his cake. She looked him up and down and concluded that although he was wearing jeans and a tight shirt, they fitted him well. His jacket was a modern woollen tweed in sage purple. His face was odd, though. Although she liked the pearl and gold earring in his right ear. His forehead was sun-kissed but his lower face was pale in comparison. He’s shaved off a beard. Mmm.

Cheryl and Pauline returned from the kitchen with coffee and a cloth.

Dylan looked up, aware he was being scrutinised. He became a little uncomfortable as Caroline did not avert her gaze the instant their eyes met. Pauline handed him a coffee. He thanked her and looked back to where Caroline was seated. She was in conversation with

Cheryl. She wasn't young but had the aura, experience, instinct and dress sense calculated to make an impression.

The dinner invitation was something he'd looked forward to after the recent death of his father. Now he wasn't so sure. William was being ... William.

Arthur was knocking back the wine and telling tall tales of escapades he and his children got up to on holiday. He was also trying to flirt with Caroline. She was having none of it. Dylan thought she was worth saving and stepped up.

'How do you know William and Cheryl?'

'I don't really know William, but Cheryl and I are part of a craft group who meet up on a Thursday in a room behind the craft shop on Market Street. It turned out we were both ex-art teachers and we hit it off straight away. We run a small printing workshop, for children in the summer and short courses for adults the rest of the time. We aren't making a fortune at it, but it keeps our hand in. I recognise that one on the wall as one of Cheryl's. It's based on prayer mat patterns.'

They walked to a wall full of different images: drawings, canvases, prints, and photographs.

'She had a solo show in town and sold quite a few.'

'Are these all Cheryl's?'

'Not sure. Cheryl, are these all yours?'

Cheryl came over with a top-up coffee for each of them.

'Not all of them. There are some from people I was at art college with. We swapped after our degree show. There are two of William's

photographs on canvas. There's a whole boxroom full of the ones that didn't make it. It took us ages to decide which ones we wanted in here.'

William joined them.

'Why don't you have a rummage upstairs, Dylan? I'm sure you'll be able to use some for the newly decorated walls of the old house. I'm sure Cheryl won't mind. Will you?'

'No. I think that's a great idea. Caroline will enable you sort the wheat from the chaff. The boxroom is upstairs at the end of the landing.'

William walked over to where Pauline and Arthur sat drinking silently.

'Shall we retire to the lounge?' he asked.

'Do you need a top-up?'

Pauline stood and poured herself another sweet white wine. Arthur thought he might need another coffee.

'Would you like a cappuccino, Arthur?'

'Do you know, that is just what I fancy, Bill. Thanks'

'William, I'm going to stack the dishwasher.' called Cheryl. 'I'll see you shortly in the lounge. I'll have a cappuccino, too.'

Cheryl collected the detritus from the table and exited towards the kitchen. William picked up another mug and started the coffee machine.



Eventually, Dylan and Caroline re-joined the others in the lounge with a collection of prints and canvasses. They looked through the artwork while Cheryl outlined their provenance.

‘When are you going to put them up?’ she asked.

Dylan explained: ‘Caroline is coming round on Wednesday to help me make an educated start.’

‘It’s always better hanging with two,’ said Caroline.

‘Well, there you go, William! Is Wednesday soon enough for your murder?’ Pauline asked dryly as she downed the last of the Monbazillac. ‘Which of them will you be hanging?’

# **Murder Mystery Game**

**Julie Harratt**

Someone here is about to commit a murder. Well, I suppose that is the general idea of a murder-mystery dinner event. The village committee holds them twice a year. It's always a great charity fundraiser. If I'm honest, the idea is beginning to get a bit tired now. With the same cast of amateur actors, same hotel venue and thirty or so paying guests, it's not hard to spot the likely victim any more. But I play along. The food is, as usual, excellent, so certainly worth the rather hefty ticket fee. Everyone chats and catches up with all the news from our small village. We rotate around the table after each course. This gives us an opportunity to chat with the "actors" as well as the other guests, and to try and work out the plot and who the likely victim will be. We all eat with one eye on the diners, waiting for someone to clutch their throat and fall dramatically, stone dead, to the floor. However, murder by an arsenic-laced lamb cutlet to cover up some fraudulent business activity was the plot played out last time, so I think it's unlikely they will repeat a similar scenario.

We sit next to Melanie and Simon for the first course. They have lived in the village for about six years now, so still "incomers" by our village standards. There are clearly some tensions in their relationship. Melanie used to be quite confident and outgoing when they moved here as newlyweds. Bit of a whirlwind romance, I believe. I can't help but see that the skin at the side of her beautifully painted nails is chewed and sore. She comes across as quite nervous

and a bit too eager to please. But I suppose with twin boys and Simon's rising career in finance, life must be stressful. I notice she glances at Simon before accepting a top-up of wine. Hope there's not a problem there.

Simon is quite charming, but a bit of a flirt. He seemed to enjoy himself last year, a little too much when he was questioned by a very attractive young actor who played a policewoman. This time, the same actor is playing Lady Rose, the daughter of the earl whose dinner guests we are supposed to be. So, no sexy uniform for Simon to comment on or risqué "You can handcuff me any time, officer" comments. I must admit that if David had behaved like that, even after thirty-five years of marriage, I would have had something to say. Melanie just looked on, quite detached and distant, and said nothing.

All the actors survive the dinner. Frank, who's playing the Earl of Westlake tonight, is normally the detective, who pitches up with his team after the body is found. I think he is more suited to the detective role; he's really hamming it up as the earl, lots of dialogue about the size of his estate and his ungrateful grasping children. I think I know where this is going.

We decide it's time to mingle a bit and move around the hotel until one of us, no doubt, happens upon a body. A small group of us decide to get a coffee in the hotel bar. One of the usual actors is serving. I point this out and offer my opinion that he could be tonight's victim. Melanie agrees enthusiastically. Simon shuts her down, pointing out that the lad always works there and he's unlikely to be part of

tonight's cast. I think Simon is probably right, but is there really any need to be so scathing? Poor Melanie. I feel a spark of irritation at his patronising dismissive tone. No words from Melanie, but her face says it all.

We split up to check out the other areas of the hotel and see if we can chat with a few more of the "actors". A few of us are in the Lavender Suite when we hear a piercing scream. Game on! We all hurry to the balcony from where the scream seemed to come.

Well, there's a clever change to the format! A rather dishevelled Lady Rose is standing on the balcony with Melanie. Lying on the concrete below is Simon. That was a good twist, and they have certainly upped the props budget this time. That blood pooling around Simon's head looks incredibly real.

# The Clairvoyant

Sarah Marshall

The clock had been tormenting her for three hours and fifty-six minutes. She wanted, needed, this day to be over already; but in true Sod's Law fashion, when she wished the time away, the seconds seemingly took far longer. Sue sat up in the double bed she shared with her snoring husband Paul. The coffee she'd been sipping was no longer having the same buzzing effect on her, and her eyelids were starting to droop. *Stay awake, stay awake*, she repeated in her head; rubbing her eyes and gently slapping her cheeks to rouse herself. She couldn't risk falling asleep, not today. She needed to be watching over Paul, for the next twenty hours and ... two minutes.

The night that the clairvoyant had read Sue's future, she and Paul had got drunk on red wine in their hotel bedroom. Her hubby hadn't wanted to come into town that day, so she'd left him reading his book by the pool whilst she wandered the stalls and markets, and 'Madame Marie's Fortune Telling Booth'. That evening, over a bottle or two of Merlot, they'd howled with laughter as she described the eccentric Madame Marie and recalled her predictions. The more glasses they drank, the more ridiculous the fortune telling seemed. Especially the one about Paul's death. How could anyone predict the year someone was going to die, never mind the exact date? To the newly-married couple, July 11th 2024 had seemed so far into the future that they could make fun of it. They'd never spoken of it since that night. She guessed Paul had long forgotten what Madame Marie had said; but

she, she was never quite able to shake it off. When her daughter had announced the arrival of her firstborn - a boy - she'd had to pretend her gasp was due to joy, not fear. Later, she'd managed to convince herself that it had been a lucky guess; the clairvoyant had a fifty-fifty chance of predicting the gender of her first grandchild. And the odds of correctly guessing that they'd move out of London were equally as high, even if it had seemed unlikely at the time. But now, as she stood making more coffee in the kitchen of the home she and Paul had shared for these past twenty years, she started to wonder, once again, if the lady with the colourful ribbons in her hair had indeed seen her future.

She'd hidden the kitchen knives at the back of the pantry yesterday. Just in case. But now as Sue stood in the dark, with the comforting sound of her beloved snoring in the upstairs room, all she could see was further danger. So many possible ways that Paul could die. What if he crashed his car? What if he burnt himself on the hob? With mug in hand she wandered the dark rooms, unplugging hazards and hiding potential accomplices to death.

For a day that she'd been unknowingly dreading since her much-regretted long-ago encounter with Madame Marie, it went remarkably smoothly. When Paul had eventually awoken, she'd convinced him to stay in bed a while, to read his book and eat the breakfast that *she'd* prepared: porridge and tea; he couldn't choke on that. Then, when he'd headed for a shower, she'd easily persuaded him to take a bath with her instead; he was less likely to slip in their tub, and she could

watch over him too. He'd got rather excited as they sponged each other's backs, but she couldn't risk him having a heart attack, so she managed to curtail his advances by talking about the garden. Lunch was soup, again prepared by her; and when Paul started tying his shoelaces and making noises about driving into town, she got the chess board out and asked him to teach her how to play again. After three decades of failing to encourage her to enjoy his favourite pastime, he couldn't say "No" to this first and only sign of interest. So it had been an afternoon of chess and "Star Wars", and cups of tea - but no biscuits - brought to him by Sue whenever he so much as glanced toward the kitchen. By the time the chimes of the six o'clock news rang, Sue was beyond exhausted but becoming more hopeful. Only six more hours to get through, to get Paul through, and then she could tell him what day it was, remind him of the prediction, laugh with him about it. Just another six hours.

And it was whilst she was thinking this that it happened. Pain, unbearable pain. Like an elephant was sitting on top of her chest; squashing her, pressing her, squeezing all the life out of her.

'Paul...' she managed to murmur, before the lights seemed to dim and the darkness swooped in.

'We're nearly there love, you hang in there.'

The darkness and the elephant had momentarily lifted, and although her eyes were too exhausted to open fully she could just make out bright lights and a green figure sitting beside her and touching her, his warm hand resting atop hers.

‘There’s only another five minutes and you’ll be at hospital,’ the warm hand spoke again as the two of them swayed to the left and then quickly back to the right. An ambulance, she guessed; I’m in an ambulance. Gees. For a while she lay there, listening to the siren and the warm hand talking to another hidden voice; too confused, too tired, too weak to think of anything or wonder what was happening to her.

‘No, it’s July 11th, ’cause yesterday was my Mum’s birthday.’

July 11th. Fuck. Those two words instantly slapped her into full alert. It all came swarming back: the clock, the hidden knives, the bath, the chess, the pain. She’d been protecting Paul, so how was it that she was the one now seemingly en route to hospital? Could it be that Madame Marie had guessed the correct date but the wrong person, she pondered? Was it her death the old lady had foreseen, not her husband’s?

‘Her heart rate’s up to 278.’

She could feel the elephant again, the darkness again; but instead of fear engulfing her, strangely she felt calm, relieved, ready. She couldn’t stand the thought of a future without Paul, but if she went first then she wouldn’t have to.

‘Paul,’ she murmured aloud.

‘Don’t worry, Sue, he’s gone ahead. He couldn’t find his car keys so he got a lift in a taxi. He left before us so he’ll meet you there.’

Sue closed her eyes again, ready to welcome sleep or heaven, whichever wanted her. And the ambulance continued its race, past



Sainsburys, past Waterstones, past McDonalds. And past the roaring inferno of a recently crashed taxi that only minutes earlier had, ironically, been en route to hospital.

# The Crystal Ball

Pete Stelling

My partner passed over recently; a sudden occurrence.

The reality of living alone put me in a right state. Lots of advice from neighbours, friends: move on, have a good cry, take a holiday. I was never at a loss for things to do.

I sat at the laptop one evening Googling: “Séance near me”. I typed it in for a couple of reasons. Yes! There was one in the nearest town and the next meeting was in three days.

Never having attended, I did not know what to expect. Evidently it is a type of religion, where prayers are said and hymns are sung before a medium gets involved.

There was a collection. As the tray came round, I inadvertently put in a £10 note that was caught up with my change. The offering tray was whipped away faster than a rat running out of a drain; not that I would have had the courage to retrieve my mistake.

The medium started to call out a name. ‘Your brother is safe in the Paradise he deserved.’

A woman in the opposite aisle shouted, ‘Is there a message?’

Before the medium could reply to that, he cried: ‘Who here seeks an answer to a burning question? Lucy, Lucy! You are soon to make a discovery!’

I thought no more about it until I arrived home. I was just a little sceptical about the evening's proceedings. Then it came to me: 'Was that you he meant, Lucy Crystal Turner? Does the medium know?'

No. I convinced myself it was not me.

The following day I decided a long walk would do me the world of good. I loved the flora and fauna of the countryside where I could disappear into my own thoughts. Living close to the Peak District, I decided to park at Mam Tor and have a quick walk to the summit. From there the vista would provide me with a nice circular walk. Looking over the Hope Valley, I made my mind up to descend.

The path was well trodden, wet and muddy in places, my boots squishy squelching where the non-porous rock held the water in puddles. Eventually, on reaching the valley floor, I turned left then right on to the path that would lead me to the National Trust hut, where groups of outward bounders relished Spartan living; although, to be fair, the accommodation is clean and the kitchen modern enough to provide a semi-decent chef with decent victuals.

It was this same path I'd taken just before my husband passed. Among the various wild flowers in full bloom for this time of year, one plant in particular, very rare, dwells here among the plantains and grasses. I'd picked it on that last visit.

As I approached the car park where I would bear left, Jacob's Ladder walkers taking the right path, a group were exiting their vehicles. A couple of the male walkers glanced that little bit too long. I don't think I'm all that attractive. My figure is good, though, so it

wasn't rocket science to know what went through their minds. If only they knew!

My path led up to the hut, and slightly beyond it was the path I would take back to the summit; then left up the path the Metal Micky Channel 4 logo used to walk, back to the car park and home.

Two days later I was back at the Mam Tor car park. This time my path was towards the Blue John mine. I stumbled over a loose stone, unusual in colour, grey and pitted. Recognising this as a geode, I looked around for a larger stone to crack it open.

I found a good heavy piece of millstone grit and my efforts were rewarded. Inside was a perfect faceted crystal. I popped this into my rucksack and continued onward. My route was over past Rowter's Farm and on to Peak Dale.

As I descended into the dale, I saw to my right a shimmering mist within a small group of trees. I deviated to examine this phenomenon. There, in the middle of the copse, was what Star Trek would describe as a wormhole. Curiosity got the better of me. I entered. A voice called out: 'We know your secret'.

The medium's voice at the séance. Astounded, I replied, 'What do you know?'

'We know,' the voice the voice came back, 'we know you used *Toxophilia belladonna* to poison your husband.' The voice continued: 'We know everything.'

'What do you want me to do?' I asked.

'Give us the crystal, Crystal.'

I was about to hand over the crystal from my rucksack when the hypnotist woke me.

‘Ms Ball (*that’s my maiden name*), I’m afraid I have to alert the authorities. You have just told me about a murder ...’

# **Doris, Ethel, and Fred – A Murderous Conversation**

**Anne Cawthorn**

*Doris is the elderly neighbour of Ethel and Fred. They have been neighbours for years and meet up every day for a gossip and a cuppa.*

*Doris's husband Bert died six years ago.*

\*

*Doris is just coming into the kitchen carrying a packet of cakes. She joins Ethel, who is seated at the kitchen table.*

**Ethel:** Hi Doris, come in and sit down.

**Doris:** Where's Fred? He normally joins us.

**Ethel:** Well, he's lying low at the moment 'cause I've just given him a rollicking and I've told him if he doesn't buck up I'll murder him!

**Doris:** Oh, poor Fred. What did he do?

**Ethel:** What didn't he do is more like it. He just sits around and watches me doing everything. So, I just lost my rag. He'll be down in a bit after he has licked his wounds.

Did you ever feel like murdering your Bert, Doris?

**Doris:** Oh, all the time. In fact, if he hadn't died when he did, I think I would have been done for murder. It was probably a relief to both of us when he finally popped

his clogs from that heart attack. Saved me from killing him and ending up in jail for the rest of my life.

*They both laugh. Fred walks in and they both turn to look at him.*

**Doris:** Hi Fred. I wondered where you were.

**Fred:** I'm sure Ethel must have told you she was about to murder me, so I decided to beat a hasty retreat.

**Doris:** Very wise. My Bert used to do that all the time, because as you know I'm bit more volatile than your Ethel.

**Fred:** Oh yes, he used to tell me. *(Laughs)* Yeah, I remember him sneaking round here lots of times when I was in my shed. He'd say he was hiding from you, Doris. But not to say anything. *(Fred touches his nose as he says this.)*

**Doris:** I always wondered if he'd been round to see you.

**Fred:** That's why men have sheds to escape to and have private conversations with other downtrodden men.

**Ethel:** I'll give you downtrodden, Fred!

**Fred:** You see what I mean, Doris? I rest my case.

*All laugh*

**Ethel:** I never realised you wanted to murder him as often as Fred said.

**Doris:** Don't get me wrong, I miss him, but he was such an argumentative sod and of course I had to argue back. So yes, there was nearly a murder on many occasions.

**Fred:** That reminds me of a limerick:

Oh, hell, Ethel wanted me dead,

Murderous thoughts in her head.  
A knife through the heart?  
A poisoned jam tart?  
She forgave me later instead.

**Doris:** Not bad, Fred.

*Ethel starts to peep into the bag Doris left on the table.*

**Ethel:** What's in the bag, Doris?

**Doris:** I've just been down the road to Jason Foster's. He has lovely cakes, so I thought I'd treat us.

**Fred** (*rubbing his hands*): Oh, lovely!

**Ethel:** So, other than buying cakes, Doris, what else have you been up to?

**Doris:** Not much really. (*Pauses, then smiles*) Apart from (*pauses again*) ... Well, you know the chap from the posh bungalow at the bottom of the road?

**Ethel:** Yes.

**Doris:** Well, he has been chatting me up.

**Fred:** How do you know he was chatting you up, Doris?

**Doris:** Listen, Fred, I might be old and not much of a catch, but I know when somebody's trying to give me the 'come on'.

*Ethel leans forward and appears very interested.*

**Ethel:** Is he the one whose wife died a few months back?

**Doris:** Yes, that's the one. He normally keeps himself to himself. I don't remember him talking much when his wife was alive. But he started to hang over the fence



chatting when I was in the garden. Then, after a while, he started trying to invite himself in for a cup of coffee.

**Fred:** You never told us about this, Doris!

**Doris:** It was while you were away.

**Ethel:** And did you invite him in?

**Doris:** I did invite him in one day - against my better judgement, mind - and that's when he sort of started to say we should go out a bit together.

**Fred:** What did you say, Doris?

**Doris:** I didn't really know what to say, what with him being so smart and posh and all. I did think it was a bit odd. What do you two think of him?

**Ethel:** Not much. You know what the neighbours call him?

**Doris:** No, what?

**Ethel:** AB

**Doris:** What does that stand for?

**Ethel:** Well, A stands for arrogant, and I'll let you guess what the B stands for!

*Doris looks puzzled for a moment, then laughs and they all join in.*

**Fred:** That calls for another limerick, Doris.'

Our man of the moment, AB.  
Must have thought we fell out of a tree,  
The air it was full,  
Of dust from a bull  
'Cos we're smarter than he is, you see.

**Doris:** Is that what you think, Fred?

**Fred:** Worse than that. He joined us in Rems the other Monday night at darts and dominos. A few of the lads asked him to join in, but he said he didn't normally play pub games.

**Ethel:** Why go, then?

**Fred:** That was what we thought. After the games were over, he joined us for a pint, and then went on and on about what he did at work and how much money he had.

**Doris:** Did the lads believe him?

**Fred:** Funny you should say that, Doris. When he left, old Sam the farmer, who'd just sat there listening and taking it all in, said 'Can anybody smell something?'

**Ethel:** And could you?

**Fred:** No, but he slowly leaned back in his chair sniffing, saying, 'Bullshit, the man was talking bullshit'.

*They all laugh.*

**Doris:** I don't always believe what he's saying. Some of the stories he comes out with don't seem real.

**Ethel:** That's exactly what I think, especially when he's bragging.

**Fred:** Well, Sam went on to say that he puts him in mind of the song by Kirsty McColl.

**Ethel:** I remember that one. It goes something like, 'There's a guy works down the chip shop swears he's Elvis and he's a liar and I'm not sure about you!'

**Doris:** So, do you reckon he's a bit of a con man, then?

**Ethel:** Yeah, and actually some people can't work out if his wife died or if she was murdered, because nobody saw her for a while and nobody saw her go to hospital, or if there was a funeral or anything.

**Fred:** You know, he could have killed her and buried her under the patio.

**Doris:** Don't joke about it, Fred. A lot of people are saying that.

**Ethel:** You have to admit, though, Doris, he does he seem a bit spooky.

**Doris:** I don't know if it's spooky or creepy or what, but can you imagine me getting friendly with him and moving into his bungalow?

**Ethel:** Yes, and then him killing you and hiding you under the patio alongside his wife!

*All laugh.*

**Doris:** It's not funny, because the more I talk to him, the more I think the rumours could be true!

**Ethel:** (*turns to Fred*) Fred, put that kettle on so we can have a cuppa and one of those cakes Doris brought round whilst we discuss this further.

*Fred gets up and flicks the kettle switch, then turns and recites a limerick he has just made up.*

**Fred:** This man was a bit of a con.  
We found out his real name was Ron.  
When he tried out his scam,

We sussed his flim flam  
Then blew him away. Buttered scone?

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Are you interested in joining our creative writing group? If so, please contact Mark at [markpaulhenderson@outlook.com](mailto:markpaulhenderson@outlook.com)

**Front Cover by Ann Orrett**





CHAPEL

