

MOTIVE FOR MURDER

Two one-act plays

by Elizabeth Poynter

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**POYNTERVIEW
PLAYSCRIPTS**

These two plays may be performed together or separately. They are both suitable for either studio or main-house production. The roles in *Nor Hell a Fury* could potentially be performed by the same actors as the leading three roles in *Murder By Proxy*

MURDER BY PROXY Harold comes second to Charles in everything, even with the woman he loves. But then Charles is arrested for murder, and suddenly Harold has the power to get his own back ...

NOR HELL A FURY Claire has gone from one unrequited love to another, all her life. Now she finally can't take it any more ...

SAMPLE

MURDER BY PROXY

Cast

HAROLD ROSS late 30s. Wears spectacles. Rather hesitant, lacking in confidence. Quiet and neat.

ISOBEL LAMBERT late 30s. A university graduate, a woman working in a man's world. Intellectually successful, but unsure of herself as a woman.

CHARLES KEYNES 30s. Self-confident, arrogant, puts other people down without realising (or caring) how much he is hurting them. He needs to be credible as a seducer and a success in his career, yet obnoxious enough that the audience sympathises with Harold.

INSPECTOR BRENT older, probably 50s. Very quiet and calm. Accent less upper-class than the above.

'LORETA' 20s. Very made-up. A chorus-girl. More successful off stage than on. Yorkshire accent.

Scene

Charles and Harold's office in the advertising company they both work for. Two desks, facing each other, centre stage. There is a telephone on one of them. A filing cabinet UR. A coat stand near the door, which is UL.

Synopsis

Scene 1 9 a.m. on a Thursday in spring
Scene 2 The following Monday morning
Scene 3 Two days later
Scene 4 Several months later

Time c. 1935

Scene 1

Nine am on a Thursday. As the curtain rises, HAROLD is seen taking off his hat and coat and hanging them on the coatstand. He then moves to his desk (the further of the two from the door), sits down and begins work. All his movements are neat and precise. He takes out pen and paper, looks at yesterday's notes, and sighs. There is a knock at the door and ISOBEL enters without waiting for permission.

HAROLD Oh, good morning.

ISOBEL Hello. Not interrupting a brainwave, I hope?

HAROLD No, no. I've only just started.

ISOBEL What are you working on? I've got Astra handcream. Why oh why does old man Jarratt always give me the cosmetics? *(Crossing beyond his desk. She moves about the room and at some point perches on the other desk)*

HAROLD Well, because you're a woman, I suppose.

ISOBEL That's about as far as his feeble brain will take him. The fact that I'm a woman who doesn't actually use cosmetics - well, not more than a little face powder - seems to have escaped his attention!

HAROLD *(small laugh)* I don't think Jarratt would notice a thing like that. I doubt if he's ever really looked at a woman.

ISOBEL In any case, any good copywriter will tell you, we all write best about the things we feel detached about. I mean, look at young Purvis. Absolutely potty about health foods and fads, yet put him to write a slogan for those vitamin drinks Alsops brought out, and he comes up with nothing usable. Why? He cares about them too much; in fact, he's a tedious monomaniac on the subject.

HAROLD Well, yes, he does rather go on about it. Not just health food. He buttonholed me at the Christmas party to talk about the evils of drink!

ISOBEL Purvis all over. No sense of occasion. But look at the copy he produced for that ghastly 'port-wine style drink' of Prout's last year.

HAROLD It was rather good.

ISOBEL Good? It was inspired. Inspired by what I don't know, since he never touches the stuff.

HAROLD Well, I've just got the Crunchie-Munchie thing as usual. Same time every month. I really can't think of anything new to say.

ISOBEL Oh? I rather thought you'd have landed the McAllister contract. You've been here longest, after Cartwright and the old man, and it is rather a plum.

HAROLD No, they gave it to Keynes. (*nods to the other desk*)

ISOBEL Again?

HAROLD What d'you mean, again?

ISOBEL You know precisely what I mean. You've got at least five years' seniority over him, but every time we get a really juicy contract, he gets the copy. It's happened at least three times since I joined the firm, and from what I hear, it's been going on longer than that.

HAROLD (*miserably*) You mean, people talk about it? I hoped they wouldn't notice.

ISOBEL Some hope. This place is an absolute gossip factory. (*pats him on the arm*) Look, I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said anything. But it gets my goat. You're first in every morning, and usually last out, and I don't believe you've ever had a day off sick even. But it's ten past nine and where is he?

HAROLD I know. I don't know how he gets away with it.

ISOBEL He's the sort who always does get away with things.

HAROLD He's always been the old man's blue-eyed boy, right from the start. Can't put a foot wrong.

ISOBEL You need to stand up for yourself occasionally. Go and talk to Jarratt - or if not Jarratt, Cartwright. He's a decent sort.

HAROLD Oh, no, I couldn't. It would seem so... like a kid at primary school: "Miss, Johnny's got TWO sweets and I've only got one, and I got all my sums right, and he pinched Betty in the cloakroom this morning."

ISOBEL (*laughing*) Well, I suppose.

HAROLD The really annoying thing is he's good. He has - flair, I suppose you'd call it.

ISOBEL Yes, that cigar thing of his was rather clever. He's got brains, I admit. Peterhouse, wasn't he?

HAROLD I believe so. He came up later than I did. And we didn't exactly mix in the same circles. I hear he was a rowing blue.

ISOBEL He would be. Got a First, too, I suppose?

HAROLD No, a two-one. Only swots and creeps gets Firsts. (*consciously*)

ISOBEL (*realising she's put her foot in it*) Ah. Well. Anyway, what I really came in for was to ask you...

CHARLES breezes in. He has a piece of sticking plaster across the back of his left hand.

CHARLES Morning all.

ISOBEL Good afternoon.

CHARLES Late, am I? Well, so would you be, my girl, if you'd had the night I had. Astounding I'm here at all, really. (*He shrugs out of his coat, hangs it up, and throws his hat at the coatstand. If it lands true, great. If not, he should pick it up, dust it off casually, twirl it on his finger and then hang it up.*) No idea how I did this (*taps the sticking plaster with his other hand*) Absolute blank! And what a head I had this morning! Breakfasted on Alka-selzer and black coffee.

ISOBEL Well, don't sound so pleased with yourself. You might get more work done if you confined your riotous living to the weekends.

CHARLES Do I detect a hint of jealousy?

ISOBEL I assure you, I don't **envy** you your hangover in the least. Or am I supposed to be jealous of your latest conquest, whoever she may be?

CHARLES Ah! (*taps his nose knowingly. To Harold*) What a woman, eh? Ticks me off for misusing the English language **and** for immorality, all in one sentence.

ISOBEL It was two sentences, actually. Well, I'll be off. I'll speak to you later, Harold.

HAROLD Oh, yes. Yes.

Exit Isobel.

CHARLES (*laughs, but he is genuinely annoyed*) One day I'll have the last word with dear Isobel. She does like to make a good exit, doesn't she?

HAROLD (*stiffly*) Miss Lambert is very intelligent.

CHARLES Oh, yes, I'm sure she was a great success at Oxford. With the dons, at least. Probably less so with the male students.

HAROLD What do you mean by that, exactly?

CHARLES Don't get on your high horse, old man. I don't mean anything, except a fellow doesn't care to be ticked off all the time in that schoolmarm kind of way.

HAROLD She never ticks me off.

CHARLES Yes, well, she wouldn't, would she? You never do anything tick-worthy. What a dull life you must lead. (*maliciously*) Speaking of which, how are you getting on with the Crunchie-Munchie thing?

HAROLD Oh, well, I'm not, really. (*sighs*)

CHARLES I should think you could churn that stuff out in your sleep by now. You know, I had quite a bright idea in the wee small hours about this McAllister thing. Not that I was sleeping, exactly. Lola, her name was. Or was that last week? D'you know, I think it was. I distinctly associate Lola with brunette, and last night's was definitely a blonde. I wonder what she can have been called?

HAROLD I wish you wouldn't do that.

CHARLES What? Forget their names? But they really are forgettable, old man.

HAROLD I wish you wouldn't talk like that about women. If they could hear you . . .

CHARLES But they can't. Really, old chap, you're as bad as La Lambert with your moralising. In fact, it really is high time you two made a match of it. You've been hanging on her every word like a lovesick pup for months.

HAROLD (*outraged because this contains an element of truth*) I have not! I mean, I have a great deal of respect for her. Oh, damn you, Keynes!

CHARLES I don't know why you don't just ask her out. She obviously likes you; she's always popping in here for a chat. Invite her to one of those insufferably highbrow concerts you're so fond of. You could hold hands in the back row.

HAROLD (*hates having his feelings trampled on like this*) Keynes, I'm warning you . . . (*but he cannot think of a suitable threat*). Oh, just stop it, will you? Let's get some work done, for heaven's sake.

CHARLES (*amused*) Touch a nerve, did I? What a fellow you are, making such a meal of it all. The woman's - what? - at least as old as you are, and probably never even had her hand held. She'd jump at it. I've met these academic types before. All theory and no practice. An absolute pushover.

HAROLD Keynes, if you don't stop it, I'll, I'll...

CHARLES What? (*leans over him, mocking*) What will you do, little man? (*laughs contemptuously, dismissing any possibility of threat from Harold*) You know, if you're not going to make a move, I might have a go myself. It would make a change from the Lolas and Tallulahs, and probably work out cheaper.

Harold leaps to his feet, but before he can do anything, there is a knock at the door and Isobel returns, carrying an envelope with some coins in it.

ISOBEL I say, I forgot that I'm supposed to be collecting for the old man's retirement present. All contributions welcome.

CHARLES (*to Harold*) See what I mean? (*Harold has to suffer this in silence rather than explain the remark to Isobel. Charles fishes in his pockets*) How about a button? (*He offers her one*)

ISOBEL No, thank you. I should have said, all reasonable contributions welcome. Other people seem to be giving about five bob.

CHARLES (*whistles*) Not sure I can run to that at this stage of the month. Had rather a lot of heavy expenditure lately. (*He winks at Harold*)

HAROLD (*quietly taking out his wallet*) Here you are. (*He gives her a ten-shilling note, which she puts in the envelope*)

CHARLES (*after making rather a production of searching his pockets, produces some coins and drops them into the envelope*) Well, that's me cleaned out, I'm afraid. It'll be bread and cheese this weekend.

HAROLD I'm sure it'll be the best cheese.

CHARLES (*cannot tolerate even this little rebellion from his victim*) Well, of course, I can see why you gave so much. Old man Jarratt has done so much for you, hasn't he? What's your salary now? Almost as much as mine, isn't it? And all those exciting contracts, like Crunchie-Munchie. You must be bursting with gratitude.

HAROLD (*He cannot take any more. With dignity, he stands up. He is close to tears*) Excuse me. (*He hurries out*)

ISOBEL You really are an absolute swine sometimes, Keynes.

CHARLES It's not my fault he's such a sensitive beggar. And he does ask for it. Go on, admit it. He's about as exciting as... tapioca. Sometimes I just have to provoke him, just to get a bit of excitement around here.

ISOBEL He's a nice man.

CHARLES Is that the height of your ambition? A nice man?

ISOBEL I wasn't talking about me.

CHARLES No, you never do, do you? (*close to her*) What exactly goes on behind that cool certain exterior?

ISOBEL (*unsettled*) I'm not particularly certain.

CHARLES And how about cool? Does the ice ever melt?

ISOBEL Don't be corny.

CHARLES It was rather, wasn't it? Sorry. I'm not used to talking to a woman with brains. But I really want to know. (*He has taken her hand and is stroking it*) What are you like when no-one can see? Do you sit behind closed doors reading Proust and Huxley, or is there a woman there, a real woman who wants to love and be loved?

ISOBEL (*mesmerised despite herself*) Charles, don't.

CHARLES I don't think you really mean that, do you? Isobel.

Curtain/ blackout

Scene 2

The following Monday morning. Harold is sitting at his desk, writing. Enter Charles.

CHARLES Phew! What a wind! My hat blew off in Harley Street and nearly went under a bus. *(He takes off his hat and coat and hangs them up)*

HAROLD Mm. The forecast says it could reach force 10.

CHARLES That'll be nice.

HAROLD Where've you been, anyway? It's a quarter to ten.

CHARLES Oh, I had a doctor's appointment. Don't worry, the old man approved it. I wasn't bunking off.

HAROLD None of my business, if you were. I just wondered where you'd got to, that's all. As a matter of fact, Miss Lambert was in earlier, asking for you.

CHARLES I'll bet she was.

HAROLD I beg your pardon?

CHARLES *(settling himself at his desk)* Well, old man, after our little chat last week, I thought, why not? Nothing to lose, after all, and having given up five bob of my hard-earned to buy a gold watch for old man Jarratt I couldn't really afford my usual haunts this weekend. Lolas expect supper at the Savoy. So I turned on the charm with La Lambert, and what a good move that turned out to be!

HAROLD That... Did you? I mean, I never thought you were serious. You said she was always ticking you off.

CHARLES Not on Saturday night. Putty in my hands. You know, I thought she might be a bit of a goer under all that starch, and boy, was I right!

HAROLD *(does not want to hear this; he rises and crosses to the filing cabinet to hide his face from Charles)* I don't think you should speak about a colleague like this.

CHARLES Oh, don't be like that. I say, if you're thinking I've queered your pitch, don't worry about it. If anything, I've done you a favour. Got her nicely warmed up for you.

HAROLD *(swings round to face him)* You - cad! She thinks - I'm sure she thinks - you meant something. But it was just like all your chorus girls, wasn't it? Isobel isn't like that. She doesn't... she doesn't...

CHARLES Oh, I can assure you, old man, she does. She did.

HAROLD I don't believe you. *(He doesn't want to)*

CHARLES Well, if you ever get the opportunity, look out for the little mole just below her left breast. *(laughs)* But I don't imagine you ever will, will you? Old man?

They stare at one another. There is a knock at the door. After a pause, it is repeated.

HAROLD *(shouting)* Come in! *(INSPECTOR BRENT enters)* Who are you?

BRENT Good morning, gentlemen. Which of you is Mr Charles Keynes?

CHARLES I am. And you are?

BRENT Detective Inspector Brent, sir. From Scotland Yard.

HAROLD Good heavens!

CHARLES And what do you want with me? I know one of your chaps caught me speeding the other day, but that hardly warrants Scotland Yard.

BRENT No, sir. I'm investigating the death of a Miss Laura Jones last Wednesday night. You may have read about it in the newspapers.

CHARLES I don't know any Laura Jones. And when I read the papers I usually confine myself to the sporting pages.

BRENT The young lady worked at the Bluebird variety theatre. Her stage name was Lola Montez.

CHARLES How very original!

HAROLD Lola!

BRENT That means something to you, does it, sir?

HAROLD N-no. That is, I may have heard the name mentioned.

BRENT By Mr Keynes?

HAROLD Well ...

BRENT *(to Charles)* I believe you do frequent the Bluebird? Your name was known to them.

CHARLES Among half a dozen other places. Oh, all right, I knew the girl. Saw the show a couple of times, went backstage and invited her out for a drink, if you must know. What of it?

BRENT When precisely was this?

CHARLES I don't know. About a fortnight ago.

BRENT Not last Wednesday?

CHARLES No! I wasn't even at the Bluebird last Wednesday. I was - well...

BRENT Yes, sir?

CHARLES Look here, this is dashed awkward. I was at a club, you know the sort of place, and they were serving drinks after hours.

BRENT And the name of this club?

CHARLES I'd rather not say. You can't possibly prove I was with this Lola girl, because I wasn't.

HAROLD Look, perhaps I'd better leave you to it. *(He starts for the door. Brent stops him)*

BRENT No, I'd prefer it if you stayed, sir. Oh, I'm sorry, I'd better have your name, just for my records.

HAROLD Ross. Harold Ross.

BRENT Thank you. Perhaps we could all sit down and have a little chat? Unless, of course, you'd rather come to the Yard *(to Charles)*

CHARLES Naturally I wouldn't. Oh, all right, sit down. Have my chair, I'd rather stand. *(Brent sits on Charles' chair, Harold on his own, and Charles leans against the filing cabinet)* How did you get on to me, anyhow? I'll swear I never left anything at her place.

BRENT So you admit you visited the young lady's digs?

CHARLES Once.

BRENT That would explain any fingerprints we might happen to find there.

HAROLD But you can't have matched them to his fingerprints! I mean, they can't be on record. He isn't a criminal.

CHARLES *(sarcastically)* Thank you for that, old man.

BRENT No, I meant, if any of the prints we've found should happen to match those of Mr Keynes. We 'got on to you', sir, by the cheque you signed at the Savoy grill on the 17th of last month. Miss Jones had mentioned to her friends at the theatre that she had had

supper there, and the staff remembered her quite well. She was a rather striking young lady.

CHARLES Less of the 'young lady', inspector. I mean, between you and me and the gatepost, she wasn't quite what I'd call a lady.

BRENT Possibly her choice of profession was rather unwise. However, her father was the vicar of Enningham in Dorset. He is, understandably, very upset.

CHARLES Oh, Lord!

HAROLD Inspector, was she - I mean, how did it happen? You surely wouldn't be investigating an accident like this?

BRENT That's right. I gather you don't read the papers either? She was murdered all right. Strangled in her room. Unfortunately her landlady is not very what you might call solicitous. When she didn't see Miss Jones on the Thursday, she just assumed she had stayed with a friend. It wasn't until the Friday morning, after she had failed to turn up for the show on Thursday night, that one of the cast came looking for her and the body was found.

HAROLD That's terrible. Poor girl.

CHARLES Yes, poor girl, but why do you think I had anything to do with it? I may have taken her out a couple of times, but I was hardly the only man in her life.

BRENT That's not what her friends at the theatre say. According to them, she was 'a good girl', whatever that means, and only had one man she saw regularly.

CHARLES Well, it wasn't me, and if they told you it was, they're liars.

BRENT Unfortunately they don't know his name, only that he was 'a proper gentleman, who went to the university and everything'. She was very secretive about him. They were under the impression that he might be a married man.

CHARLES Well, I'm not.

BRENT No, sir. But you work for a very respectable firm, who probably wouldn't be very keen on your having a relationship with a chorus girl. Wouldn't you agree, Mr Ross?

HAROLD Well, yes, the old man - Mr Jarratt is rather straightlaced, I suppose.

CHARLES I might keep it quiet. I don't say I wouldn't. But I wouldn't murder someone to do so. That's ridiculous!

BRENT Not even if she told you she was pregnant?

Pause.

CHARLES (*shaken*) Was she?

BRENT It appears so.

CHARLES All right. I can see it looks bad. But really, inspector, I never saw her last week. I was with someone else entirely. Little blonde number. Harold here will back me up. I told him all about her. Didn't I, old man?

HAROLD You said you thought she was blonde, yes.

BRENT Thought?

HAROLD He said he couldn't remember. Don't you remember, Keynes, you came in with a dreadful hangover on Thursday.

BRENT I see. And what was her name, this little blonde number?

CHARLES (*after a pause*) I can't remember.

BRENT Oh, I'm sure you can do better than that, sir. You won't tell me the name of the club you were in, and you can't remember the name of the girl you were with. It doesn't look good, does it?

HAROLD He's under no obligation to tell you anything. Isn't a man innocent until proven guilty, under the law?

BRENT Well yes, that's true, sir. However, a good alibi always helps.

CHARLES Well, I haven't got one. At least, I suppose I'll have to tell you the name of the club. But whether they'll back up my story I can't say. It's their licence, after all. (*He scribbles a name and address on a piece of paper and gives it to Brent*) Here, this is where you'll find them.

BRENT Thank you, sir. Ah, yes, I've heard of them. Very hot place, so I've heard.

CHARLES It's not bad.

BRENT And you claim you were there until - what time?

CHARLES (*hesitates*) I'd say, about two. Yes, about that.

HAROLD No wonder you overslept on Thursday!

CHARLES (*viciously*) Oh, be quiet! The inspector isn't interested in my unpunctuality. (*to Brent*) I took the girl, the blonde that is, back to my place. Not my usual practice, but she said her landlady was a bit of a dragon. Saw her into a taxi when I left the next morning, about 8.45.

BRENT I see. Well, that should clear you nicely, sir, provided we can find the lady in question.

HAROLD What time - I mean, do you have any idea when Miss Montez - Miss Jones - actually died?

BRENT We know she left the theatre shortly after 11 pm. The medical evidence suggests she was dead within a couple of hours of that, but of course, since her body wasn't found until Friday, there's some margin for error. Still, if Mr Keynes really has an alibi for the whole of Wednesday night, he has nothing to worry about. *(to Charles)* We'll try to trace your blonde friend, but it would certainly help if you could give us a little more to go on.

CHARLES Well, I can't. As I say, I never saw her place, so I don't even know where she lives. I don't believe I ever heard her surname, even. She answered to one of those daft names they think will look good in lights.

HAROLD You thought it was Lola, don't you remember? Perhaps it was something similar.

BRENT *(to Harold)* Mr Keynes actually told you he'd been with someone called Lola that night?

HAROLD Well, no, I mean, yes, at first, and then he realised he must have got that wrong because Lola was dark.

CHARLES *(furious with him)* I was hardly at my best that morning. I'd only had about three hours' sleep, after a rather unwise number of cocktails the night before.

BRENT I see. *(rising. Harold rises too, out of automatic courtesy)* Well, I'll have this checked out. But meanwhile, Mr Keynes, I advise you not to do anything foolish. We'll be in touch.

Exit. Charles turns on Harold.

CHARLES Well, thank you for the support, Ross! I suppose I might have known a spineless creature like you wouldn't have the nerve to stand up to the police.

HAROLD What did you expect me to say? I couldn't lie to him.

CHARLES Why the hell not?

HAROLD Well, because, because ... he wouldn't have believed me.

CHARLES No, he probably wouldn't, at that. You aren't even capable of telling a convincing lie, and you work in advertising! What a useless creature you are.

He slams out of the room. Harold sinks back into his chair.

HAROLD My God!

Curtain/ blackout

**ORDER THE FULL PDF TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS.
READ THE FIRST TWO SCENES OF *NOR HELL A FURY* BELOW.**

SAMPLE

NOR HELL A FURY

Cast

CLAIRE around 40, middle class, casual clothes. A career woman, outwardly confident and determined, but with hidden insecurities.

DAVID 40s. Good-quality leisure clothes, well-styled hair. A professional man, intelligent and well-read. Warm and sympathetic.

SCOTT mid-30s. More working-class accent. Articulate and charming. Has a tendency to offer more than he can give.

Scene

Claire's conservatory. A couple of garden chairs and a coffee table, with another table or work surface upstage. Entrance L from the house and DR from the garden.

The play takes place over a period of time; this could be shown by Claire perhaps changing her tops between scenes.

This play is quite static: we need to be taken into the world inside Claire's head.

Synopsis

Scene 1 After lunch one weekend

Scene 2 A week or so later

Scene 3 Several weeks later

Scene 4 A week or so later

Scene 5 Several weeks later

(The timing is not precise; time of year is fairly unimportant)

Time The present

Scene 1

After lunch one weekend. David is sitting R.

DAVID *(apparently talking to himself)* So I think in the end we've decided on Umbria. I know we've done it before, but this villa belongs to Cheryl, you know, so we get mates' rates, and to be honest, I don't feel like risking Greece* until things get more settled. You know?

*[*depending on the current political / economic scene, another country could be substituted here]*

CLAIRE *(enter L carrying 2 mugs)* You're probably right. And you speak Italian now, don't you?

DAVID Well, I get by! I couldn't manage an actual conversation, but I can buy a loaf of bread. *(He takes a mug and sips)*

CLAIRE It makes a difference though, doesn't it? I mean, I know there's two of you, so when things go wrong it's not as stressful, but it would still be awkward in some places without the language. I must've told you about that time I had a blow-out on a mountain road - one of those really twisty ones - in the Pyrenees? Miles from anywhere. There was this rock in the road, I saw it in loads of time, should have gone round it but it would've meant going rather close to the edge and it was about 1000 feet down.

DAVID Lovely!

CLAIRE Exactly. So I tried to straddle the thing, and of course I'm in a rental car so I totally misjudge it and wham! Big hole in tyre. And no comments about women drivers!

DAVID I wouldn't dare. I don't think you have told me this one. What did you do? I know how to change a wheel in theory, but it's tricky with a rental car.

CLAIRE I never even try - the nuts are always tightened with some sort of machine and I haven't got a hope of getting them off, not to mention the jack is often the flimsiest thing out. Well, this was before I had a mobile but someone had lent me one, someone at work who didn't like the sound of me driving round on my own.

DAVID So you rang - well, whatever the French equivalent of the AA is?

CLAIRE That's just it, no. This phone was supposed to recharge from the car, but it didn't, it was just dead. I'd carefully found out the number of the breakdown service before I went, but no damn good without the phone. So I stood in the road and flagged down the next car - this wasn't exactly a frequented route, I had to wait at least five minutes, which felt like an hour.

DAVID I can imagine. And did they have a phone? I bet there was no signal anyway in the mountains. That's always the way, just where you need it most.

CLAIRE You could be right, but I never found out, because - guess what? - he comes back with, 'Sorry, no phone' - this was a few years ago, not everyone had one then - 'but I'm a mechanic - I'll just scoot off and get my tools and be back in about ten minutes.'

DAVID Jesus, you have all the luck!

CLAIRE Yeah, and I'm sure some of it was just woman on her own thing, you know? But I do wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been able to speak a bit of French.

DAVID It must have been fairly clear what the problem was.

CLAIRE But I wouldn't have known why he was driving off again. And actually, you know how snirty the French are about their language. Even if they do speak English they often refuse to. He might just have shrugged and left me to it.

DAVID Is snirty a word?

CLAIRE Oh, shut up!

DAVID Well anyway, how about you? Have you decided where you're going this year?

CLAIRE Probably nowhere, with this new house. It's partly financial; you know the mortgage is stretching me a bit.

DAVID Well that's a shame, though. You love travelling. Can't you manage something cheap?

CLAIRE I'd rather save this year and do something good next. Anyway, there are so many jobs to be done in this place, that's really keeping me busy.

DAVID It does rather feel like you just get one thing fixed and then two more pop up.

CLAIRE Yes, it's a bit more than I anticipated. My old place was a lot better maintained. But... *(her phone, which is on the table upstage, beeps for a text received)*

DAVID Is that your phone? Good heavens! Wonders will never cease.

CLAIRE I'll just check it if you don't mind. *(rises to look at the phone)*

DAVID I don't believe it. Who is it who goes on about mobiles taking over our lives, and boasts she never switches hers on except to check the battery?

CLAIRE Well, I really only got it for emergencies. Because I do so much solo driving.

DAVID *(points)* That wasn't an emergency. Sounded suspiciously like a text. I didn't think you even knew how to text.

CLAIRE I'm not very good at it. Can't do all those abbreviations and things. But it's how Scott mainly communicates. I used to email him, but he doesn't check it every day.

DAVID This is Scott you met at the gym?

CLAIRE Who else do I know called Scott?

DAVID I don't know. But then I didn't know you texted. You might have a whole secret life I know nothing about.

CLAIRE Idiot!

DAVID So, is there something I should know about this Scott?

CLAIRE Don't be daft. He's just interesting, and how often do you meet an interesting person? I mean, someone you're not just happy to chat with if you happen to meet them, but actually want to know better?

DAVID Unless you want to get into their pants? Hardly ever, I suppose.

CLAIRE That's it, exactly. You make friends when you're young, and then most people settle down and have families. It's really hard if you don't - if you're not - if you don't fit that pattern. And when you do meet someone you've got to be so careful, because if you make a move they assume it's a come-on and you don't see them for dust. Especially if you're a woman. Men don't like women to make the first move.

DAVID Right. And Scott hasn't backed off?

CLAIRE It's weird actually. I mean, a few of us used to have coffee sometimes after the class. And he and I got talking and it was when I was in the throes of moving here, and he had a mate who was an electrician and I needed this place checking. I thought it might need rewiring, in fact.

DAVID Yes, I remember. You said the bloke gave you an estimate and actually in the end charged less than he'd said, because he got it done quicker than he thought.

CLAIRE Right. And he seems to know what he's doing, too. Anyway, Scott was going to text me his name and number, and I said oh, I don't use a mobile, can't you email it, so he did and somehow we started chatting by email. I mean, I write a page and he writes a paragraph, but he does answer. They changed the time of the class at the gym and I can't go any more, so we could easily have lost contact, but we haven't.

DAVID Well, that's good, isn't it? Why d'you say it's weird?

CLAIRE We've actually communicated more in writing than face to face. He knows all kinds of stuff about me, but we've only actually talked a handful of times. It's just - odd.

DAVID The way the world is going, though. So many people now meet on the internet, maybe never actually meet face to face.

CLAIRE Yes, but I wouldn't personally set out to do that. You don't really know someone at all, do you, that way? I'm not just talking about all the sinister stuff, men

pretending to be teenagers to groom kids or whatever; I mean, if you only see written text, it's so open to interpretation. How much of what you think you know about that person is really in your own head?

DAVID I guess that's the danger of technology. One of them. People use texts and emails and chat rooms to substitute for conversation, and it's not a substitute, it's a different medium.

CLAIRE Yeah. Anyway. Scott's mum was really ill down in Somerset, and he went off down there and didn't have an internet connection - he doesn't have a Smartphone, hates them apparently. So I learned to text so I could send him a message hoping she was OK, and somehow we seem to have moved over to texting. I don't like it as much as email because you can't say much.

DAVID Sounds a bit serious. You're sure he's just a friend? You're not a person who changes her behaviour for other people much.

CLAIRE David, sometimes I hate you.

DAVID Because I know you too well? (*fake American accent*) Fifteen years and countin' honey.

CLAIRE You're right, I'm a bit set in my ways, but that goes out the window if I fancy someone. Honestly, it did just start that I found him interesting. But you're right, it's more than that.

DAVID And is he interested in you?

CLAIRE I don't know. I can't tell, so probably that means no. But the fact is, he's straight and he's single, and only a few years younger than me. How often does that combination come together? People I fancy are always completely impossible, and he's not. And he turns me on like no-one has for years.

DAVID From what you've told me though, you've not got much in common. He doesn't sound to have your level of education for one thing. Haven't you always criticised movies where people 'fall in love' without having one damn thing in common?

CLAIRE I'm not looking for a partner for life. I just want someone, for a little while. You've got Jules. You don't know how lonely it gets.

DAVID I've been there, believe me. But that's the price you pay if you won't settle for second best.

CLAIRE Scott isn't second best. It's not like that. He's just . . . God, he's just devastating! And it's been such a long time, and I really want someone to want me . . . But, as I say, I absolutely can't tell what he feels. He responds to my emails, sometimes we text back and forward several times a day, but it all comes from me. He doesn't initiate anything. And so I have to be really careful, you know? Calculating how long since I last contacted him, is it too much? And I just don't know if we're building something or he's just being kind.

DAVID Well, love, that's something you need to find out, isn't it?

CLAIRE I know. But I can't just ask him.

DAVID In an email, maybe? That would avoid the embarrassment.

CLAIRE Yes, I suppose. But I'm not sure I want to do that. I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

Blackout

Scene 2

Claire runs a vacuum cleaner over the floor. Switches off, rubs her back and smooths her hair.

CLAIRE *(to herself)* OK, bathroom clean, floors done, kettle just boiled. Good thing really he texted he was running late. *(Looks round and finds a bit of floor she missed, cleans it and switches off again. Sighs and sits down on the edge of a chair.)* Right, so, the new 'Starsigns' movie. He can't have seen it yet - it's only just opened in the UK. End of next week, that's enough time that he's probably not already fully booked, but not too far ahead - he doesn't plan ahead that much. *(She is very tense, and breathes deeply to calm herself.)* OK, come on woman, take it easy. It's just - if he says no I'll have to wait at least three weeks before I can suggest anything else. At least. Oh, for god's sake, pull yourself together! *(The doorbell rings.)* Right!

Exit L, returning shortly followed by Scott. He is dressed for doing odd jobs.

SCOTT I'm dying for a coffee. Black, one sugar.

CLAIRE OK. Make yourself at home.

Exit L. Scott wanders about, poking at things. He is naturally curious in a superficial way. Re-enter Claire with one mug.

SCOTT Thanks. Sorry I was late. Had a lousy night last night and couldn't get my shit together this morning.

CLAIRE It's OK. I'm getting used to it. *(quickly, in case he takes this as criticism)* Anyway, the trees aren't going anywhere.

SCOTT I've brought a few tools. Yours look like something out of the ark.

CLAIRE Well, I wouldn't have enough use for power tools so I've mostly got pretty basic stuff. Though actually, with this house, it might be worth investing in some more things.

SCOTT Nah, I've got all sorts. I can always come over if you need anything doing.

CLAIRE Thank you.

SCOTT I've lost that list I made the other day. Typical! What was there urgent apart from these trees?

CLAIRE The trees aren't exactly urgent. They're just a bit big for me to manage by myself, and I get knackered really quickly using a saw. Pathetic, I know.

SCOTT You sure you want to get rid of them? It's some nice greenery.

CLAIRE Scott, they're leylandii! Boring green, and if I leave them they'll grow to a ridiculous height. I want to put in a range of different shrubs, including some colour.

SCOTT Well, it's your garden.

CLAIRE The other thing outside is those steps down from the patio. They're really dodgy, the stones are just loose.

SCOTT Have you got some cement?

CLAIRE Yes, I bought some. That quick-setting stuff.

SCOTT Oh, no, you should never use that. You're much better mixing your own. (*He is always very sure in his opinions.*)

CLAIRE Oh, well, never mind. I can probably manage that myself, actually. The other fairly urgent thing is the door to the spare room. That's happened since you came before so it wouldn't have been on your list.

SCOTT What's wrong with it?

CLAIRE I took it off to paint it and the wood round the hinges is really splintered. I tried to put it back but now it won't shut properly. I don't know if it needs new hinges or what. It could just be me doing it by myself - you know how hard it is to hold a door in place and screw in the hinges at the same time.

SCOTT I'll have a look at it. Probably just needs a bit of adjustment. Although if it was fitted by Bob the Builder it might always have been a bit crap.

CLAIRE Bob the builder?

SCOTT The DIY enthusiast who sold you this place.

CLAIRE Oh, right. Yes, Bob the Bodger might be a better name.

SCOTT (*grins*) Right. Can I have another coffee before we start? Sorry, I live on this stuff.

CLAIRE Sure.

She takes his mug and exits L. He takes out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, goes to the exit DR, opens the door and lights up, standing in the doorway and blowing smoke out into the garden. Claire returns with his coffee and puts it on the table.

SCOTT You not having any?

CLAIRE I wish I could, but I've had to cut down. Partly I tend to get stress headaches, and then my period pains have got a lot worse lately, and cutting down on the coffee seems to help with both of those. I used to have 4 or 5 cups a day.

SCOTT I get through more than that. Can't you just have it a bit weaker?

CLAIRE The whole point for me is to have it really black and strong. I really miss it. I still have one - what's the breakfast equivalent of post-prandial? - anyway.

SCOTT Sorry - post prandial?

CLAIRE (*embarrassed, though he is not*) Er, after-dinner. Post as in post mortem. There ought to be a word for after breakfast, but I don't know what it is. Anyway... So what have you been doing with yourself?

SCOTT Oh, you know, same old same old. I was down in Leicester at the weekend, staying with my mate. It was his birthday.

CLAIRE Good party?

SCOTT Oh, don't ask! He's a whisky man, we were trying out all these different malts he's got. My head the next morning felt like someone had stuck a pickaxe in it.

CLAIRE (*laughs sympathetically*) Well...

SCOTT Yeah I know, my own fault! That was the Friday night, and then the party was Saturday. I was going to just have a couple of beers, but you know how it is.

CLAIRE Mm.

SCOTT (*At some point during the next speeches he stubs out his cigarette and comes to fetch the coffee*) That was nothing to his stag night. Five - no, six years ago. We got *absolutely* hammered. I'm amazed he made it to the church, and the stag do was the week before the wedding! (*Claire laughs appreciatively*) Not one of those where you all hop on a plane and fly off to some place with cheap booze - I think that's bollocks. But his dad ran a club so we got it wholesale prices. Runs, I should say - he's still going strong.

CLAIRE I never really get stag nights. I mean, as you say, a lot of people go off for a weekend or something now, but it used to be just the night before the wedding. Why would you want to get totally trashed, probably feel queasy all through the ceremony?

SCOTT Well, it's about your last night of freedom, isn't it?

CLAIRE Oh, come on! That's a terrible attitude! If men see marriage as some sort of prison, why do it? They do have a choice.

SCOTT It's a big change in your life though, you've got to admit. Well, as far as I can see, never having been married.

CLAIRE Have you never - come close to it?

SCOTT (*slowly; he doesn't readily confide*) I lived with a girl for a couple of years, in my early twenties. I'd have done anything for her, so if she'd wanted to get married, we would have. But she was too self-centred.

CLAIRE Ouch!

SCOTT No, it's true. For example, our first Christmas, I spent a fortune on a coat for her, real leather, a proper label and everything. And I wasn't earning much - well, I still don't. And she just got me some Black and Decker multi-tool - no, it wasn't even Black and Decker, it was some own-brand rubbish, which I know for a fact didn't even cost her twenty quid.

CLAIRE Presents aren't just about money though. And maybe she came from a family which didn't spend a lot at Christmas. Mine doesn't, for instance.

SCOTT No, if you're in love, you buy something that matters. You put thought into it. It wasn't just that, anyway. She always did what *she* wanted. And in the end what she wanted was to leave. She just up and went one day, and I came home to an empty flat.

CLAIRE Wow, that's a bit brutal.

SCOTT Yes, well, I got over it. Matter of fact, the next girl I was serious about ended up with my best mate.

CLAIRE The one in Leicester? What's his name, by the way?

SCOTT Pete. Yes, him. So that was another reason for me getting out of my skull at his stag do.

CLAIRE God, that's a difficult one. But you're still mates?

SCOTT Oh, yes, we go way back. And they've split up now, anyway. It was a bit awkward for a year or two when I went to stay, but nowadays we're pretty much back where we were. (*Abruptly, putting down his mug*) Right, what about these trees?

CLAIRE (*thrown by the switch; she was enjoying the confidences*) Oh, yes, the trees.

SCOTT We'd better get on with it.

CLAIRE OK. I'll get my jacket.

Exit L. Scott sorts through his toolbox. Claire re-enters with a cagoule or similar.

CLAIRE Before I forget, you know we were talking about sci-fi the other week? Do you fancy going to the new 'Starsigns' movie? Only I really don't enjoy going to the cinema alone.

SCOTT I'm not really into 'Starsigns'. It's a bit pretentious.

CLAIRE Oh, well, it was just a thought. It's got good reviews.

SCOTT When were you thinking of?

CLAIRE It starts playing up here on Sunday. I was thinking towards the end of next week. Thursday or Friday maybe.

SCOTT Can't do Friday, but Thursday would be OK. Text me on Tuesday to remind me - you know what I'm like. (*Exit to the garden*)

CLAIRE Yes! Thank you god! Whoever you are!

She follows him. **SAMPLE ENDS HERE**

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