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Murder Play

A Play

Brian J. Burton

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CHARACTERS

Peter Darrell

Robyn Darrell

Jane Valentine

David Valentine

The action takes place in the living-room of Jane and David Valentine's house in Cornwall

Time—the present

MURDER PLAY

The living-room of Jane and David Valentine. Early morning

There is a fireplace with a mantelshelf in the back wall C, *with windows on each side. In front of the window* L *is a high-backed settee facing away from the audience. Below this, there is a long, low coffee table with bottles, glasses and a handbag on it. There is another settee* RC *with a small table next to it covered with dirty glasses. An armchair stands* DR *against the wall, and above this there is a record player. There is a door* DL, *up stage of which is a mirror on the wall. A full ashtray lies on the floor* C

When the CURTAIN *rises, the room is in semi-darkness. It is daylight outside but the window curtains are closed. Jane Valentine is slumped asleep in the armchair, Peter is lying full length on the settee* RC *and Robyn is curled up on the floor* C. *David Valentine is lying on the high-backed settee out of sight of the audience, apparently asleep. There is a record on the turntable of the record player, which is repeating the run-out over and over again. After a moment or two, Peter stirs, sits up and rubs his eyes*

Peter Christ! (*He looks at his watch with some difficulty*) It's eight o'clock! What the hell? (*He gets up, goes to the record player and turns it off. Then he moves to the window* R *and draws back the curtains*)

The room becomes lighter

(*Turning from the window*) Hey, you lot—wake up! It's eight o'clock. (*He pauses*) I said it was eight o'clock. Did you hear me? (*He moves to Robyn*) Robyn, come on—time to get up. The party's over. Time we went home.

Robyn (*stirring*) Who's that? What do you want? (*She opens her eyes*) Oh, it's you. What did you say? I didn't hear you properly. I was asleep.

Peter Weren't we all? I said it was eight o'clock—time we went home.

Robyn (*sitting up*) It can't be.

Peter But it is, I tell you. We must have been asleep for hours. God, I've got a stiff neck. (*He rubs his neck*) I can't remember a damn thing. Can you?

Robyn (*rising and going across to the mirror* L) I feel like death. And I look like it too. (*She runs her fingers through her hair*) God, what a sight! Where are the Valentines—have you any idea?

Peter That looks like Jane over there in the armchair. (*He goes across to the armchair*) She's dead to the world. (*He shakes Jane*) Hey, Jane—come on—time to get up. (*He shakes her again*) Jane, it's after eight o'clock. Did you hear me?

Jane (*murmuring*) Go to hell!

Peter Jane, it's time to get up. Jane, I . . .

Robyn Oh, leave her, Peter. She's more than likely to be out cold for hours yet. She was in a fair old state, if I remember rightly. Let her sleep it off. It's her house anyway.

Peter You weren't exactly stone cold sober yourself, were you?

Robyn (*moving to the coffee table and collecting her handbag*) Neither were you, if it comes to that. In fact, I don't think I ever remember you so tipsy. (*She goes back to the mirror and combs her hair*) I look as though I've been dragged through a hedge backwards.

Peter You think we should leave her where she is, then?

Robyn I think it would be best, yes.

Peter O.K. As soon as you've finished your face then, we'll be off. I'm not mad keen to stay any longer, are you?

Robyn (*applying lipstick*) No point, is there? I'll be ready in a tick.

Peter Right. Can you see all right? I'll draw back the other curtain. (*He goes to the window* L)

Robyn Thank you.

Peter God knows where our charming host has disappeared to. (*He draws back the curtains*)

The room becomes lighter. As Peter turns away from the window, he glances at the high-backed settee

(*Checking*) Talk of the devil!

Robyn What's up?

Peter I've found him. He's here on the settee.
Robyn Who?
Peter David.
Robyn So what?
Peter I just thought you'd like to know, that's all.
Robyn Not particularly. Leave him, Peter. He might wake up. He's the last person I want to talk to this morning.
Peter I'm with you there—one hundred per cent. (*He moves to the other settee and perches on the arm*) You know, it's incredible, it really is. To look at him lying there, sleeping like a baby, you wouldn't believe what happened last night, would you? It's like some sort of ghastly nightmare.
Robyn (*turning to face Peter*) Oh, it happened all right—it happened—no doubt about that, I can assure you.
Peter But to go about it the way he did. I find that almost . . .
Robyn Do we have to talk about it now? Leave it, Peter, please. We'll talk about it when we get home. I just want to get out of here.
Peter O.K. Suits me. (*He holds out his hands*) Come on then—let's go. (*He rises*)
Robyn (*going to him*) I'm ready. I've carried out some emergency repairs. They'll have to do till we get home.
Peter No-one will see you in the car. Anyway, you look fine.
Robyn Thank you.
Peter Did you have a coat? I can't remember.
Robyn No—only a hat. I left it on that chest thing in the hall.
Peter (*pleasantly*) You and your hats. You have to wear a hat, don't you?
Robyn Of course. I don't feel dressed without one when we go out. That's just me. Come on, then. (*She goes towards the door*)

Peter starts to follow her, then stops suddenly

Peter Do you think we ought to leave them a note or something?
Robyn What—to thank them for a pleasant evening? You have to be joking. No—come on. We might give them a ring this afternoon or something.
Peter I expect you're right. O.K. Home time. (*He moves to the door*)
Jane (*opening an eye*) Where are you two sneaking off to?
Peter (*turning back from the door*) You've returned to the land

of the living, have you? We thought you'd be asleep for a while yet. How do you feel?

Jane Not too bad really—considering. A bit of a head and a pretty ghastly tongue but otherwise fine. You're not going, are you?

Peter It's getting late.

Jane Why, what time is it?

Peter Past eight.

Jane Is that all? What the hell? It's Sunday, isn't it? (*She rises from the armchair*) Look, I'll go and make some coffee. I think we could all do with a cup. I know I could.

Peter (*looking at Robyn*) Well, I don't know. I did rather . . .

Robyn Yes, so could I—a great idea. I'll come and give you a hand.

Jane No, you stay where you are. I can manage. I won't be long —just relax. I'll see if the papers have come yet.

Jane crosses in front of Peter and Robyn and exits

Peter I thought you were in a hurry to get home.

Robyn Another five minutes, more or less, won't make much difference now, will it?

Peter I suppose not. (*He moves* C *and bends down to pick up the ashtray*)

Robyn What are you doing?

Peter Just tidying up a bit.

Robyn I'd leave it if I was you.

Peter Just picking up this ashtray before someone kicks it over.

Robyn Please yourself. (*She puts her handbag on the coffee table, then sits on the settee*) That's odd.

Peter What is? What's odd? (*He puts the ashtray on the mantelshelf*)

Robyn Did you notice that she didn't ask where David is?

Peter No, you're right—she didn't.

Robyn She just woke up, spoke to us and then went off to make the coffee—just like that.

Peter Probably didn't see him there and thought he'd staggered off to bed ages ago.

Robyn Yes—I expect you're right.

Peter I've a good mind to wake the bastard up and tell him just what I think of him.

Robyn Oh, shut up, Peter.

Peter What do you mean—shut up?

Robyn You said enough last night. Give it a rest. Let him sleep.

Peter Why are you springing to his defence all of a sudden?

Robyn I wasn't springing to his defence, as you put it. I just don't want to talk about it anymore.

Peter I think we let him off very lightly. (*He moves to the settee and sits on the arm*) We were far too polite about the whole thing, if you ask me.

Robyn Polite! You got a bit heated, I must say. I would hardly call the way you spoke to him polite.

Peter God, when I think of all we've done for him over the past five years and then for him to treat us like that with hardly more than a word of explanation.

Robyn Peter, please.

Peter No—I won't shut up. What was he when we joined his tin-pot little business? I'll tell you what he was. He was really just a dilettante trying to sell a few way-out arty books which the public didn't want to buy. With our help, it's built up into a thriving general bookshop.

Robyn Nobody's going to deny that. It was very fortunate for him that he met us when he did. He wouldn't have lasted another six months, I'm sure of that. All the same, from what he said last night, he is losing money and he has no alternative but to make some very drastic economies.

Peter I don't see how he can be losing money. It just doesn't make sense; the last few months . . .

Robyn Drop it, Peter—drop it. I'm tired. I don't want to talk about it now.

Peter All right—but just answer me one thing.

Robyn What?

Peter Hadn't you any idea this might happen?

Robyn Not a clue—honestly.

Peter To give us our marching orders—just like that; I still don't believe it.

Robyn I wasn't likely to know anything about it, was I? I was little more than a glorified tea lady but you were supposed to be his right-hand man. You must have realized the profit position.

Peter I hadn't the faintest idea. As you know, I checked the

invoices and passed them to him for payment and I did most of the buying when the reps came in, but that was the limit of any financial control I had of the business.

Robyn Do you think he was telling the truth? Do you think the financial position is as bad as he makes out, or do you think he wanted to get rid of us for some reason and just used the profit business as an excuse?

Peter What other reason could there be?

Robyn I don't know. I was just asking.

Peter Business has been a bit slow lately but it's been worse than it is now, on more than one occasion, in the past. We've always got by before. (*He pauses*) I still can't get over the way he went about it—inviting us round to dinner, getting us half cut then giving us the push.

Robyn Supposing it's one of those dreadful practical jokes of his.

Peter I'd hardly think so. If it is, it's one of the sickest ones he's pulled yet. No—I'm quite certain he wasn't joking last night. He said he'd been meaning to tell us for several weeks, didn't he?

Robyn He certainly got drunk after he'd told us.

Peter He was well away before then.

Robyn Probably needed a few drinks to summon up the courage to tell us.

Peter Who—David? Don't you believe it. Don't let that ever so gentlemanly manner fool you. He's as hard as nails underneath that polished veneer.

Robyn I wouldn't say that at all. I don't think you know the real David.

Peter And you do—is that it? I doubt it very much. I doubt if anyone really knows him—even Jane. He's an enigma.

Robyn I thought she was unusually quiet. She didn't have much to say for herself, for a change.

Peter She'd been well briefed, you can be sure of that. "Keep quiet and say nothing—let me do all the talking"—or something like that.

Robyn I can't think how he came to marry her in the first place —they've little in common.

Peter Attraction of opposites, perhaps. Now, you're much more his type, aren't you.

Robyn Do you think so? I wouldn't have thought so—not particularly.

Peter (*after a pause*) Perhaps he's going to take her into the shop.

Robyn Who—Calamity Jane? Perhaps he is. He'll certainly need somebody for busy periods.

Peter That would be a laugh, that would. She knows as much about books as my left foot. She probably thinks *Roget's Thesaurus* is a rock group.

Robyn That'd make a great name. I'm surprised nobody's ever thought of it.

Peter Seriously though, can you imagine her in the shop?

Robyn No—not really.

Peter I don't see how he can possibly manage on his own.

Robyn Why didn't he just get rid of one of us—why both?

Peter (*rising and moving to the coffee table*) God knows what we're going to do. We'd better start looking in the papers—not that we're likely to find any jobs in the book trade in this part of Cornwall.

Robyn We could always go back to London, I suppose.

Peter Would you want to?

Robyn You know I wouldn't. I've been very happy here away from the rat race. I don't know if I could stand London again after five years in Cornwall.

Peter You might have to. (*He turns towards Robyn*)

Robyn Could we sue him for wrongful dismissal, do you think?

Peter Shouldn't think we'd stand an earthly. If he can prove that he can't afford to keep us on, I should think he's in the clear. I don't know much about how the law operates in these cases but I wouldn't fancy our chances.

Robyn No. (*She pauses*) She's a long time getting that coffee. Do you think I ought to go and see what's keeping her?

Peter Can do, if you like.

Robyn (*rising*) I think I will then. I'd like to get home and get a bath. (*She moves to the high-backed settee*) Sleeping beauty's still well away. That's odd.

Peter What is?

Robyn He's not snoring.

Peter Why, should he be?

Robyn He's lying on his back.

Peter Perhaps he's not one of the snoring fraternity. I don't know; I've never slept with him.
Robyn Shall I wake him up?
Peter Please yourself. I'd leave him if I was you.
Robyn I'll just give him a shake. (*She leans over the back of the high-backed settee and shakes him*) Come on, David—wake up. It's getting late. Coffee's on the way. (*She turns to Peter*) Peter —he looks sort of strange. Come and have a look.
Peter What are you on about?
Robyn He looks—well, I know it sounds silly but he looks—dead.
Peter Don't be bloody stupid.

Jane enters with a coffee-pot and three cups of coffee on a tray

Jane (*as she enters*) He is.
Robyn Is what?
Jane Dead. I killed him.
Peter You what?
Jane I killed him. (*She clears a space on the coffee table for the tray*) Here's your coffee. I couldn't remember if you took sugar so I put in one spoonful.

Jane hands cups of coffee to Robyn and Peter, who take them automatically

Peter Look, I don't think that's very funny.
Jane (*moving to the settee with her coffee*) It wasn't meant to be. Drink your coffee before it gets cold. (*She sits down*)
Peter (*putting his cup on the coffee table*) You're not serious are you, for God's sake?
Jane Of course I am. Would I joke about a thing like that?
Robyn (*putting her cup on the coffee table*) I don't believe it. I just don't believe it. Is this one of David's stupid jokes?
Jane David is dead. I've just told you—and I killed him.
Robyn God! But how, when, why?
Jane One thing at a time. Shall we start with how? I stabbed him.
Robyn But you can't have.
Jane Oh, but I did.
Robyn What did you stab him with?
Jane One of those old-fashioned hat pins—you know, the long

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