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SF PERUSALS

Bull in a China Shop

by G. B. Gilford

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH

FOUNDED 1830

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BULL IN A CHINA SHOP was originally published in ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, and selected as one of the best mystery stories of the year for inclusion in the anthology BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF 1957, published by E. P. Dutton and Company. When it was performed as one of the ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS television series, the cast featured Estelle Winwood as Hildegarde, Elizabeth Patterson as Birdie, and Dennis Morgan as O'Finn.

THE SCENE

The short scenes at the police station are played in front of the act curtain, without scenery. The main setting represents the old-fashioned parlor of 909 Sycamore Street, a boarding house for ancient females.

THE CAST

(in the order of their appearance)

DENNIS O'FINN, *Detective First Class*

MISS HILDEGARDE, *the landlady*

MISS BIRDIE

MISS AMANTHA

MISS LUCY

MISS NETTIE

MISS ELIZABETH

KRAMER, *Detective Second Class*

FIRST STRETCHER BEARER

SECOND STRETCHER BEARER

JANE ROGERS, *reporter for the Herald-Globe*

JOHNSON, *police fingerprint expert*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Bernard Gilford is a Missourian by birth. He was educated at Rockhurst College and the Catholic University of America, and earned his doctorate in theatre at the University of Denver. After serving three years as a B-29 navigator in the Pacific area of combat, he returned to the teaching profession and has served on the faculties of Rockhurst College and Saint Louis University, where he now conducts graduate courses in theatre arts. He is widely experienced as a director and has acted professionally for television. Dr. Gilford devotes most of his spare time to writing, and has sold more than fifty stories to national magazines. He is a frequent contributor to ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS, the top mystery series, and to other network television programs. One of his stories, JOY RIDE, was recently purchased by Allied Artists Pictures Corporation. Dr. Gilford is married to the former Martha Campbell of Kansas City. They have four children.

ACT ONE

(Lights come up on the apron of the stage, with the act curtain closed. DENNIS O'FINN is revealed in the light. He is a well-built man in his forties, with a winning Irish smile and personality. He is wearing a plain business suit and hat. He speaks directly to the audience.)

O'FINN. My name is Dennis O'Finn. Ah, that's a familiar name to you, isn't it? You've seen it in the papers. Well, I'm here to tell you, it was all a pack of lies. Well now . . . maybe not all of it was lies exactly. There were a few murders. But there was a great misunderstanding about my part in it. As you can well see, I'm not nearly as handsome and charming as the newspaper stories made out. I'm just an ordinary Irish cop. O'Finn, plain-clothes detective, first class, attached to Homicide Division. And I'm forty years old, for Heaven's sake. And a bachelor besides. So I couldn't have gone on being a bachelor for forty years if I was so handsome and charming, now could I? Well now, you can see for yourself. The whole thing probably started with a scene that looked something like this. . . .

(The lights go out on the apron. In the black-out the curtain rises, and when the stage lights come up, we see an interior. It is the old-fashioned parlor of the house at 909 Sycamore Street, a boarding house for ancient females. There are six of these females altogether, and they are all here at the moment, all shapes and sizes, but they have a few things in common. They are all old, lonely, and a little queer. There is MISS HILDEGARDE, the landlady of the establishment, MISS BIRDIE, MISS AMANTHA, MISS LUCY, MISS NETTIE, and MISS ELIZABETH. Note that they are all "Misses." There is a certain similarity in their apparel too. They are all wearing dresses which were in style about forty years ago, which was the time when the ladies themselves—if they ever were—were in style too. At this moment they are all clustered about the window. MISS ELIZABETH is standing on a chair, and so towers over the rest. She has a pair of binoculars, and is peering out.)

AMANTHA. Elizabeth, what's he doing now?
ELIZABETH. He's in his undershirt.
BIRDIE. Can you see the strawberry mark on his shoulder?
ELIZABETH. I certainly can. Clear as day.
AMANTHA. Oh, let me see.
NETTIE. No, Amantha, it's my turn.
BIRDIE. The binoculars belong to me, don't forget.
ELIZABETH. But your eyesight is bad, remember, Birdie dear. I can describe everything to you, can't I?
BIRDIE. But I want to see for myself.
ELIZABETH. He has such wonderfully big muscles in his arms. Do you know what he's doing now?

NETTIE. What? Tell us. For pity's sake, tell us.
ELIZABETH. He's doing calisthenics, that's what. And he's using dumbbells or something. They look awfully big and heavy.
NETTIE. That's what gives him the muscles.
ELIZABETH. Oh, yes, he's awfully strong. He's lifting the dumbbells and swinging them around, as if they didn't weigh anything at all.
HILDEGARDE. (*Tugging at ELIZABETH'S skirt*) Elizabeth, give me those glasses. I want to see this with my own eyes.
ELIZABETH. (*Not budging*) I'm describing it to you, aren't I?
HILDEGARDE. But I want to see.
ELIZABETH. I got here first.
BIRDIE. But they're my binoculars.
HILDEGARDE. But you're looking through my window. Because this is my house. Now give me a look or I'll . . .
AMANTHA. We should all have a turn.
LUCY. Just knock the chair out from under her feet, that's the thing to do.
BIRDIE. No, no, you might break my binoculars.
ELIZABETH. (*There's an unmaidenly scuffle around the chair, which ELIZABETH interrupts by lowering the glasses and turning to the rest of them*) It's too late. He's stopped his exercises, and he's disappeared. (*They all turn away from the window in disappointment, and disperse around the room, where they sit in glum silence. ELIZABETH climbs down from the chair. Having just communed with the Great Spectacle, she is not so glum.*) Oh, it was a grand sight though.
AMANTHA. But you were so selfish about it, Elizabeth.
ELIZABETH. Amantha my dear, in these days of a man shortage, one has to be selfish.
HILDEGARDE. Elizabeth, I should have you evicted from my house.
ELIZABETH. Come now, Hildegarde. You wouldn't evict a good paying boarder, and you know it. You need the money too badly.
HILDEGARDE. I could replace you with someone who isn't so man-crazy. Maybe a widow instead of an old maid like you.
ELIZABETH. Hildegarde, then you'd have to throw everybody out. They're all old maids here. And they're all just as man-crazy as I am.
AMANTHA. I'm not man-crazy! I have a motherly feeling toward Mr. O'Finn.
NETTIE. And I have a sisterly feeling.
BIRDIE. My feeling isn't sisterly. (*She giggles.*)
LUCY. My feeling toward Mr. O'Finn is as if he were a dear nephew of mine. In fact, I'm going to make out a will and leave him my money.
HILDEGARDE. Rubbish. You don't have any money, Lucy. You're a month behind in your rent right now.
AMANTHA. Oh, stop this wrangling.
NETTIE. (*Sweetly*) We might as well wrangle. We don't have anything else to do till tea time.
AMANTHA. Well, I say we ought to be doing something more constructive.
LUCY. Such as what, Amantha?

AMANTHA. Well, I'll confess something. I'd like to get a better look at Mr. O'Finn.
LUCY. We've sat on the porch, and watched him go in and out of his apartment, haven't we?
AMANTHA. Yes, I know, but that's still clear across the street. That isn't very close. I'd like to get . . . real close to him sometime.
BIRDIE. (*Squeals in delight*) Oh, yes, so would I. Real close to him. We don't even know for sure what color his eyes are.
NETTIE. But how are we going to get close to him?
ELIZABETH. We could go for a walk on *his* side of the street, just about the time he's due to come home. After all, we do know his schedule pretty well.
HILDEGARDE. But we don't know his schedule to the very minute. There we'd be, walking up and down in front of his apartment house. People would think we were picketing.
LUCY. And we couldn't do it every day.
NETTIE. Then the only thing left is to go visit him.
BIRDIE. (*Horrified*) Nettie, *nice* ladies do *not* go visiting gentlemen.
NETTIE. All right, you figure it out then.
HILDEGARDE. The real nice thing to happen would be for Mr. O'Finn to come visiting *us*.
BIRDIE. Oh, I'm afraid I'm going to swoon, just imagining it.
LUCY. But how can we make him come visiting us?
ELIZABETH. We could sit on the front porch, in our best clothes, and look real attractive.
AMANTHA. My dear Elizabeth, you've been sitting out on the front porch for weeks, and Mr. O'Finn hasn't even glanced at you. You even sat out there during that chilly spell, and caught your death of cold.
ELIZABETH. Well, the trouble was, you know, that I can't afford any pretty new clothes in the latest styles.
LUCY. The trouble is, Elizabeth, that *you're* not very pretty.
ELIZABETH. Lucy, how dare you!
AMANTHA. Will you hush up and listen to me? We've got to do something to *make* Mr. O'Finn come to visit us. We must remember that bachelors are naturally shy. I'm convinced he won't come here unless we *arrange* it somehow.
BIRDIE. Oh, yes, let's arrange it!
NETTIE. But how?
LUCY. If he was a plumber, we could stop up the sink.
AMANTHA. But he's not a plumber.
LUCY. Or if he was a glazier, we could break a window.
AMANTHA. But he's not a glazier. And he's not a carpenter or a painter, or an electrician. Or anything convenient. He's a detective.
BIRDIE. Well, why don't we throw away my pearl necklace, and report it stolen?
ELIZABETH. Your *imitation* pearl necklace, you mean.
AMANTHA. It doesn't make any difference anyway. Mr. O'Finn works for Homicide. That means he wouldn't come here unless somebody died.
NETTIE. Well, how can we arrange for that to happen?

(*All six of them sit silently, staring at one another, while the curtain descends slowly. When the curtain is down, the lights on the apron come up again. O'FINN is revealed. He speaks again to the audience.*)

O'FINN. Well, that's approximately how I imagine it started. I didn't have an inkling about it at first, of course. All I got was a routine report. My sidekick Kramer took it on the phone. Then he came in and told me about it. This is Kramer right here. Detective second class.

(*KRAMER enters onto the apron from the wings. He is another plain-clothes detective, a little younger and smaller than O'FINN. He is only a detective second class, so he has a slightly deferential attitude toward O'FINN. He is carrying a notebook, and consults it as he speaks.*)

KRAMER. Hey, O'Finn, we got a little job. Report of a death at 909 Sycamore.
O'FINN. That's my street. Must be right across . . .
KRAMER. Coincidence, huh?
O'FINN. What kind of death?
KRAMER. An old lady. Some other old lady phoned in. Wanted to speak to you, in fact. Said they knew a Detective O'Finn was in Homicide. Then when I told her you were my partner and we always worked together, she seemed satisfied. But then I asked her, wasn't it a natural death? An old lady, and all that. And then she said she wasn't sure about that.
O'FINN. Well, we'd better go out and take a look. . . .

(*Lights go out on the apron. The curtain rises in darkness, and then the lights go up again on the stage, at 909 Sycamore. Five of the old ladies are intact, but the sixth, MISS ELIZABETH, lies dead on the sofa. She is arranged somewhat like a corpse in a coffin, except that her get-up is gay, not somber. She is wearing MISS LUCY'S flowery hat, MISS BIRDIE'S pearl necklace, MISS NETTIE'S feather boa, and carrying MISS AMANTHA'S beaded bag. The five ladies stand around the corpse admiringly.*)

AMANTHA. I think that just about does it. Doesn't she look pretty?
HILDEGARDE. I must admit it was very generous of all of you to give her your best things to wear.
NETTIE. Well, she deserves it, doesn't she? After all, if it wasn't for her, we wouldn't be getting this chance of meeting Mr. O'Finn.
LUCY. And besides, it's her *last* chance of meeting Mr. O'Finn.
BIRDIE. So she ought to look her best, I agree. That's why I sacrificed my precious pearls.
LUCY. And my hat is really becoming on her. She used to try to steal it to wear on Sundays, you know. But I forgive her now.
NETTIE. But don't you think my feather boa looks the prettiest of all? I don't know what I'll do without it. They'll bury her in it, I suppose.
AMANTHA. Yes, I'm afraid they will. That's why I took my money out of the beaded bag I gave her. She won't need money any more.

BIRDIE. Oh dear, all those pretty things gone to waste. No . . . no . . . I didn't mean that. Elizabeth must look proper. This is the biggest moment of her life.
(*The doorbell rings.*)
NETTIE. Oh, that's him! It must be him!
BIRDIE. I'm going to swoon. I know I'm going to swoon.
AMANTHA. You mustn't do that, Birdie. This is Elizabeth's big moment, not yours.
HILDEGARDE. Now everybody line up nice and orderly. We can't have Mr. O'Finn think he's visiting a houseful of magpies. Everybody behave themselves. We simply must make a good impression.

(*They line up in a sort of reception line, with ELIZABETH on the sofa as the last one in the line. The line bends, as it were, when it gets to ELIZABETH, however, so that anyone proceeding down this line would not notice ELIZABETH right at first. HILDEGARDE goes to the door and opens it. O'FINN and KRAMER step inside.*)

O'FINN. This is the house where a lady has just died?
HILDEGARDE. Yes, this is the house. I'm the one who called. I'm Miss Hildegarde Hodge. This is my house.
O'FINN. Well, my name is O'Finn. And this is my partner, Kramer. Now where's the body?
HILDEGARDE. First, you must meet my guests.
O'FINN. Guests?
HILDEGARDE. My permanent guests. They live here, you see. Now this is Miss Nettie.

(*O'FINN and KRAMER begin to go down the line. Nobody pays any attention to KRAMER. But each lady in turn grasps O'FINN'S hand possessively and is loath to let go. He is so confused that he submits to their scrutiny.*)

NETTIE. Oh, he does have big muscles. I can feel it the way he's holding my hand.
AMANTHA. Hush, Nettie. And it's time to let go of his hand anyway. It's my turn.
NETTIE. Oh, all right. How are you, Mr. O'Finn?
O'FINN. Well, I'm fine. But I came here to see . . .
NETTIE. This is Miss Amantha.
O'FINN. (*In a submissive daze now*) Miss Amantha . . .
AMANTHA. Oh, you dear boy. You look a little run-down to me. Have you been eating the right things?
O'FINN. I beg your pardon . . .
AMANTHA. Bachelors very seldom have a balanced diet, cooking for themselves and eating out.
LUCY. (*Sharply*) Amantha!
AMANTHA. Oh, yes. Mr. O'Finn, this is Miss Lucy.
O'FINN. How do you do, Miss Lucy?

LUCY. (*After a long, soulful, mournful stare*) You remind me of Herbert.
O'FINN. Who?
LUCY. He was a young fellow I knew. But he's dead now.
O'FINN. I'm very sorry.
LUCY. Oh, that's all right. I've gotten over it.
O'FINN. Well, I'm glad to hear that.
LUCY. It was forty years ago.
BIRDIE. Lucy, I would like to be introduced to Mr. O'Finn.
LUCY. Oh, yes. Mr. O'Finn, this is Miss Birdie.
O'FINN. How do you do, Miss Birdie? What's the matter? What's wrong?
BIRDIE. I feel like swooning.
O'FINN. Well, somebody get a glass of water or something . . .
BIRDIE. Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to. Amantha said I mustn't. Not right at first anyway. She said it wouldn't be fair to Elizabeth. So maybe later, Mr. O'Finn. Will you catch me if I do?
O'FINN. I guess so. . . .
BIRDIE. That's a promise then. And don't you forget it. Now, this is Miss Elizabeth.

(*O'FINN sees the corpse for the first time. He snaps out of his daze. He and KRAMER both cross to the corpse, and take a long look.*)

KRAMER. O'Finn, are you sure she's dead? She kind of looks like she's asleep. Kind of smiling . . .
BIRDIE. Oh, she's dead all right. We wouldn't have given her all those pretty things to wear if she were alive. She was kind of mean and nasty sometimes when she was alive.

(*O'FINN bends over, takes the corpse's pulse. There is a silence.*)

NETTIE. Isn't this exciting? Too bad Elizabeth has to miss it.
LUCY. Maybe she's not really so very far away. She's not missing it unless she has to.
O'FINN. (*Stands up*) I'd say she's dead all right. No pulse. And she's cold.
BIRDIE. Oh, yes, I noticed that when I put the pearls around her neck.
O'FINN. When you what?
AMANTHA. We all dressed her up. That's why she looks so pretty. We wanted her to look her best for the occasion.
KRAMER. What occasion?
NETTIE. Receiving gentlemen, of course.
KRAMER. (*Looking helplessly at O'FINN*) Of course . . . sure . . .
O'FINN. (*Assuming command*) Okay now. Let's all sit down and talk this over. (*Most of them accept his invitation.*) Kramer, get on the phone and get the wheels working. There is a phone, isn't there?
HILDEGARDE. It's out in the kitchen.

(*KRAMER exits to the kitchen.*)

O'FINN. Now, what I'd like to know first of all is this. Miss . . .
HILDEGARDE. Hildegarde. You may use my first name.
O'FINN. Thank you. Now, Miss Hildegarde, whatever gave you the idea you ought to phone the police about this matter?
HILDEGARDE. (*Pauses and consults the other ladies with silent glances*) Because Elizabeth died under suspicious circumstances.

(*KRAMER re-enters and nods knowingly to O'FINN.*)

O'FINN. Just what was suspicious?
HILDEGARDE. It was so sudden. Dear Elizabeth was in the best of health. Then at lunch time she began acting queer.
AMANTHA. She turned kind of pale. Looked like she was getting sick.
HILDEGARDE. And then suddenly she complained of cramps.
LUCY. And then she just keeled over.
O'FINN. Did you call a doctor? (*Nobody answers. He notices the secret glances passing among them.*) Did anybody call a doctor?
AMANTHA. No, we didn't.
O'FINN. (*Amazed*) But surely you must have seen the lady was in a serious condition.
NETTIE. Well, we talked about calling a doctor.
O'FINN. You talked about it!
NETTIE. But then we decided it wasn't any use. Poor Elizabeth was already too far gone. We wanted to let her die in peace.
LUCY. You see, Mr. O'Finn, we sort of knew . . .
O'FINN. You sort of knew what?
LUCY. (*After much hesitation*) That it wasn't any use calling a doctor. Elizabeth had been poisoned.
O'FINN. (*To all of them*) Did you all think this lady had been poisoned? (*A chorus of solemn nods.*) *Why* did you all think she'd been poisoned? (*No reply, only cat-who-swallowed-the-canary glances among the ladies.*) Look, I asked a question, and I want an answer. Why do you think she was poisoned?
BIRDIE. (*To the other ladies*) Isn't he masterful?
LUCY. He has a strong voice just like Herbert's. Whenever Herbert shouted at me like that, it sent chills up and down my spine. I haven't had chills for forty years.
BIRDIE. Do you have chills now?
LUCY. I certainly do.
O'FINN. Now see here. You ladies don't seem to realize how important . . . I'm a police officer, and I'm here to investigate a homicide. And it's just been suggested that this lady was poisoned. Now I want to know more about that!
HILDEGARDE. (*Chidingly*) Mr. O'Finn, you are raising your voice unnecessarily. Perhaps you have misjudged our ages. None of us is deaf.
KRAMER. (*Beginning to enjoy the situation and O'FINN'S frustration, he mocks his partner*) Oh, yes, Mr. O'Finn, watch yourself. And none of your station house language here, either. There are ladies present.

O'FINN. (*Wrathful*) All right, Kramer, if you're so smart. You ask the questions. See if you can get any answers.
KRAMER. Don't look at me. You're the boss.
BIRDIE. That's right, Mr. O'Finn. And we won't answer any questions unless they come from the *boss.*
O'FINN. Well, somebody answer my question then.
HILDEGARDE. What do you think, Mr. O'Finn? You're the detective. Do you think she was poisoned?
O'FINN. My dear lady . . .
HILDEGARDE. (*Interrupting, to the other ladies*) Did you hear that? He called me his dear lady.
O'FINN. (*Trying to ignore these sallies*) We will not know whether poison caused the death until there's an examination of the body. It will take a doctor to do that. But now I think there'd better be an examination.
NETTIE. Oh, but we already know.
O'FINN. (*Pouncing*) Why do you know?
NETTIE. Somebody had to die.
HILDEGARDE. Nettie, please. Let Mr. O'Finn find out for himself. It won't be any fun if we tell him everything.
O'FINN. (*Exploding*) What is all this? You all know the lady was poisoned. You seem to know a lot more than that, in fact. Like *how* she was poisoned, for instance. Well, somebody had better talk.
BIRDIE. You mean a third degree?
NETTIE. With bright lights in our eyes?
LUCY. I'm first.
HILDEGARDE. Why should you be first?
LUCY. (*Darkly*) Because I know more about the people in this house than anybody else. And I could tell Mr. O'Finn a thing or two about everybody.
AMANTHA. It'll be lies. All lies. You never tell the truth, Lucy.
O'FINN. Stop it! Stop it! (*He takes KRAMER aside and they talk in low tones so the ladies can't hear.*) This place is a booby hatch. I've got to get out of here.
KRAMER. But maybe there's something to it though. They all say the dead one was poisoned. There must be some truth to it.
O'FINN. Not if they're all crazy. And I swear they are. The live ones are the ones who ought to be examined. (*The doorbell rings.*) I'll get it. That's the boys from the morgue. (*He goes to the door, opens it, and admits two white-coated men carrying a stretcher.*) Hello, boys.
FIRST STRETCHER MAN. You got something for us?
O'FINN. Sure have. On the sofa over there.

(*The five ladies immediately arrange themselves as a straight line of mourners, standing downstage of the sofa, between ELIZABETH and the audience. Behind this screen, the two white-coated men put ELIZABETH on the stretcher and carry her out. After the exit of the corpse, the line breaks up, and the ladies follow the stretcher to the door. They*

alternate between dabbing at their eyes with their handkerchiefs and using their handkerchiefs to wave farewell to ELIZABETH.)

BIRDIE. Good-bye, dear Elizabeth.
AMANTHA. Good-bye.
NETTIE. Have a good time . . . Oh dear, what am I saying?
(*The ladies turn back into the room.*)
LUCY. She might be having a good time where she is now. But I doubt it.
AMANTHA. Lucy, you must be more charitable to the dead.
HILDEGARDE. She owed me a week's rent. That's what I just said good-bye to.
BIRDIE. (*Giggling, with a glance at O'FINN*) But, Hildegarde, isn't it worth it?
O'FINN. Well, ladies, we'll get a report from the coroner, and then we'll see if there's anything to this business about poisoning. If there is, we'll be back.
AMANTHA. You mean you're going? You just got here.
O'FINN. There isn't anything for us to do here, ladies. We don't know whether poison was involved. And none of you will answer questions. So we're wasting our time. Come on, Kramer, let's go. (*He starts out.*)
HILDEGARDE. Please, Mr. O'Finn! (*To the other ladies.*) Are we going to let him leave? We've made preparations, you know.
AMANTHA. Oh, yes, the preparations. You can't leave, Mr. O'Finn.
HILDEGARDE. But Mr. O'Finn is quite right. The police do have to work in certain ways. And he doesn't know for sure yet that there's been a murder.
O'FINN. Did you say murder?
HILDEGARDE. Yes, that's what I said.
O'FINN. But even if the lady was poisoned, it could have been suicide or an accident.
NETTIE. (*Giggling*) It wasn't an accident.
O'FINN. Say, you sound like you know it wasn't an accident.
HILDEGARDE. Girls, if we want Mr. O'Finn to stay, we're going to have to give him a little hint.
AMANTHA. Yes, he'll find out anyway after they've examined Elizabeth. So I think it's quite fair to give him a little hint now.
O'FINN. Okay, okay, you've hooked me. What's the little hint?
AMANTHA. (*After a pause to glance at the others*) Well, there's poison in the house.
O'FINN. There is? What kind? Where?
LUCY. On a shelf in the kitchen. We all know where it is. Rat poison.
KRAMER. Say, O'Finn. There's usually arsenic in rat poison. And remember what they said happened to the dead one? Sounded like arsenic symptoms.
O'FINN. Go get it, Kramer. (*KRAMER exits to the kitchen.*) Well now, we'll soon see about this.
BIRDIE. Yes, we'll see. This gets more exciting all the time. I might swoon at any minute, Mr. O'Finn.

KRAMER. (*Re-enters with a can*) There was rat poison in this can. But the can's empty now.
NETTIE. There, you see. The rat poison is what killed Elizabeth.
O'FINN. Was the can full?
HILDEGARDE. It was about half full yesterday. I remember because I sprinkled some of it in the basement.
O'FINN. Wait a minute now. Let me think. You said the dead lady started acting sick about lunch time. Symptoms from arsenic poisoning begin to show up after about half an hour to an hour. That means she ate or drank something a little bit before lunch. Did she?
HILDEGARDE. It's a strict rule in my house that there's no eating between meals. My boarders get enough for their money as it is. I can't afford to be feeding them between meals.
LUCY. But we all know, Hildegarde, how Elizabeth was about that rule.
NETTIE. Yes, she cheated.
AMANTHA. She'd sneak into the kitchen sometimes, Mr. O'Finn, and get herself an extra cup of tea.
O'FINN. Kramer, go and see if you can find the tea. And see if there's a cup . . .
AMANTHA. Oh, there won't be a cup. She always washed her cup.
O'FINN. Okay, Kramer, just the tea. And we'll take that along with us. If there's arsenic in the tea, we've got a clue.
BIRDIE. Oh, a clue, a clue. Girls, isn't Mr. O'Finn clever?
O'FINN. Ladies, are you trying to make fun of me?
AMANTHA. (*With obvious sincerity*) Oh, dear Mr. O'Finn, we wouldn't make fun of you.
O'FINN. I'm beginning to wonder.
KRAMER. (*Re-enters from kitchen*) Here's the can. There seems to be a white powder mixed in with the tea. We can give it to our chemist to analyze though.
O'FINN. (*Goes to KRAMER and speaks softly*) I'm beginning to think there may be a murder case here after all.
KRAMER. Kind of looks that way, doesn't it?
O'FINN. (*Turning back to the ladies*) All right now, ladies, let's be calm about this thing. Mr. Kramer and I have come to a tentative conclusion—depending on examination of the corpse and the tea, naturally —that a murder was committed here.
BIRDIE. Oh, I'm going to swoon. Mr. O'Finn says there's been a murder.
NETTIE. Don't bother swooning, Birdie. You already knew there was a murder. We *told* Mr. O'Finn, didn't we?
HILDEGARDE. How dare you, Lucy? Mr. O'Finn is a detective. We just gave him a clue, and he figured it out for himself.
NETTIE. Oh, that's all right. Mr. O'Finn, I beg your pardon. You figured it out for yourself.
O'FINN. (*To KRAMER, but loudly*) They're toying with me, Kramer. They're playing games. Hold me back, or I swear by all the saints, there'll be another murder any minute.

BIRDIE. Isn't he cute when he gets mad?
O'FINN. (*Roaring*) Stop it! Stop it! Stop it, I say, or I'll throw you all in the clink!
NETTIE. (*Clapping her hands*) Oh, wouldn't that be fun!
O'FINN. Kramer, this is out-and-out defiance of the law. Call the station and tell 'em to send the paddy wagon. I'll arrest the whole bunch of 'em for obstructing justice.
LUCY. (*Sadly*) Oh, we're going to take a ride, and I let Elizabeth wear my best hat. What on earth will I wear?
KRAMER. (*Goes to O'FINN, and speaks softly*) Losing your temper and threatening won't do a bit of good with this outfit, O'Finn. Now calm down, won't you?
O'FINN. Calm down, is it?
KRAMER. Maybe they're just trying to get your goat.
O'FINN. And they're doing a good job of it. (*Back to the ladies, making a supreme effort to be calm.*) All right now, let's suppose for a moment there was a murder. Who did it? (*There is no reply, but a number of half-suppressed giggles.*) Isn't anybody going to confess?
AMANTHA. Oh, no, Mr. O'Finn, you'll have to find out for yourself.
NETTIE. But you can do it, because you're a detective.
O'FINN. All right, let's put it this way. You all seem pretty certain there was a murder. Do you all know who did it?
BIRDIE. I don't.
NETTIE. Neither do I.

(*The other ladies shake their heads solemnly, but there are also a few more giggles. O'FINN goes to KRAMER again and speaks softly.*)

O'FINN. What do you make of it? Are they holding out on us?
KRAMER. I don't think so. But you never know. I wouldn't put anything past 'em.
O'FINN. Then we've got a funny situation. They all agree there was a murder. They all knew about the poison. And they know one of them did it. But nobody—except the guilty party—knows who.
KRAMER. But they seem anxious for you to find out who did it.
O'FINN. (*Back to the ladies*) Let me ask you all this. You all agreed that Elizabeth was in the habit of breaking the rules and sneaking a cup of tea. Did anybody else ever sneak a cup of tea?
HILDEGARDE. There's no one else that I know of for sure. But I didn't trust any of them.
O'FINN. Then anybody else could have been poisoned.
BIRDIE. Oh, that's right. I never thought of that. And isn't it a good thing we all drank cocoa for lunch, as we always do?
NETTIE. We all had a close call, didn't we?
AMANTHA. Well, it was a chance we simply had to take. But I'm glad it wasn't I who drank the tea. Because then I'd have missed all this.
O'FINN. Hold on now. Hold on a minute. I'm getting a little more of the picture now. Nobody knew there was arsenic in the tea until after Elizabeth started getting sick. But then you all figured out she'd been poisoned. It was just as if you were all *expecting* a murder to happen.

NETTIE. (*Slyly*) You might say we were hoping.
O'FINN. (*Trying not to be distracted by such confusing remarks*) And on top of that, the murderer put arsenic in the tea without knowing who would be the first to drink it. Maybe the odds were on Elizabeth, but the murderer couldn't be sure she'd be the first to drink that tea. As if the murderer wasn't concerned about whom she murdered, but just wanted to commit a murder.
AMANTHA. (*Clapping*) Oh, he's getting warm.
HILDEGARDE. See, I told you he could do it.
LUCY. I think he's as clever as my Herbert was.
AMANTHA. *Your* Herbert? He was never yours that I know of.
LUCY. (*Clasping her heart*) He's always been mine. I hold him right here . . .
O'FINN. Ladies, ladies! Let's stick to the subject, shall we?
HILDEGARDE. Girls, listen to Mr. O'Finn.
O'FINN. Thank you, Miss . . .
HILDEGARDE. Hildegarde.
O'FINN. Yes, Miss Hildegarde. I was saying that the murderer didn't care who she—it had to be a "she," I presume—whom she murdered. That means she didn't have anything particularly against Elizabeth.
NETTIE. But I'm glad it was Elizabeth who drank the tea.
O'FINN. Why are you glad Elizabeth drank the tea?
NETTIE. Because she'd never let anybody else look through the binoculars . . .

(*There is a shocked, embarrassed silence among the ladies. NETTIE understands then the slip she has made. She looks down, blushing. O'FINN senses that there's something important here.*)

O'FINN. What's this about binoculars?
HILDEGARDE. (*Rising and starting to exit*) Oh, I left the kettle on the stove.
O'FINN. Oh, no, you don't. You don't go changing the subject on me like that. What about the binoculars?
HILDEGARDE. (*To NETTIE*) You had to go and give it away. Shame on you.
NETTIE. I'm sorry. (*Starts to cry.*)
AMANTHA. It would have to come out sometime, Hildegarde. Mr. O'Finn is such a clever detective, he'd be sure to find out.
BIRDIE. (*Goes and gets the binoculars, and gives them to O'FINN*) Here they are, Mr. O'Finn.
O'FINN. (*Takes them, but now that he has them, he doesn't know what to do with them. He uses them to look around the room*) Well, what did you look at with this thing?
BIRDIE. (*Giggling*) Don't make us tell you that, dear Mr. O'Finn.
O'FINN. Kramer, have you got any ideas?
KRAMER. Well, you don't use binoculars to look at things inside a house usually. You look at something outside.

O'FINN. Outside? (*He goes to the window and uses the binoculars to look out.*) The only thing I can see is . . . say, you can see my apartment windows from here. . . .

(*There is a veritable gale of giggles. O'FINN turns back, puzzled at first, then angry.*)

HILDEGARDE. Girls, you all must help me in the kitchen now.

(*Embarrassed and looking for an escape, they all run out to the kitchen, still giggling. KRAMER collapses laughing into a chair. O'FINN approaches him.*)

O'FINN. What's so funny?
KRAMER. O'Finn, don't you get it?
O'FINN. No, I don't.
KRAMER. Oh, you're a modest man you are, Dennis O'Finn. You just don't realize what a lady-killer you are.
O'FINN. Cut out the double talk, will you?
KRAMER. (*Rises and stands back to look admiringly at his partner*) Well, why shouldn't you be? Where is there a finer specimen of manhood than an Irish cop? And a bachelor cop at that. And just the right age, too. You have middle-aged dignity. A true man of distinction.
O'FINN. Look, I've had enough teasing for one day. . . .
KRAMER. Oh, but the teasing is just beginning. Can't you see beyond your nose, my darlin' Dennis? The poor old things have nothing to do all day but sit around. And one of 'em has a pair of long-distance specs. So they amuse themselves by spying on everybody within range. And what do they see across the street? The beautiful features and body of O'Finn. They're all in love with you.
O'FINN. Shut up!
KRAMER. But it's a plain fact. They're in love with you. And they say to themselves, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get a closer look at him? So they ask around, and they find out you're a detective in Homicide. Now, think a minute, Dennis boy, what would you do if you wanted to make a Homicide detective come to your house?
O'FINN. (*The truth dawning*) It's a dirty lie!
KRAMER. You underestimate your charm, Dennis my lad. These ladies are so in love with you that one of 'em committed a murder to get you to come here to investigate it.
O'FINN. (*Stricken*) Oh, no!
KRAMER. Oh, yes! The very fact that they were all delighted with the fact that there was a murder proves it. And the other fact that the murdering lady didn't care who she murdered—just dumped the arsenic willy-nilly into the tea can. They just had to have a murder, that's all. And you're the motive, O'Finn.
O'FINN. (*Grabs KRAMER by the lapels*) You tell this story to anybody in the department, and there'll be another murder. I'll kill you with these bare hands.

KRAMER. (*Unafraid*) How does it feel, O'Finn, to be the object of such criminal devotion?
O'FINN. I'll refuse to handle this case, that's what I'll do.
KRAMER. And what excuse will you give the Captain?
O'FINN. (*Crushed, O'FINN lets go of KRAMER*) Oh, the saints preserve me! What will I do?

(*The ladies march in from the kitchen. They're carrying a teapot, cups, saucers, trays of biscuits, etc., all the paraphernalia of a tea party. They're all ecstatically happy.*)

HILDEGARDE. We're having a party, Mr. O'Finn.
AMANTHA. I hope you drink tea, Mr. O'Finn.
LUCY. Don't you worry, Mr. O'Finn, we opened a fresh package of tea. There's no rat poison in this.
BIRDIE. And I baked the biscuits, Mr. O'Finn. There are *two* for you.
LUCY. Yes, Mr. O'Finn can have Elizabeth's biscuit.
HILDEGARDE. (*Hinting*) But there isn't any for Mr. Kramer.
KRAMER. Well, I can take a hint, I guess. Dennis my boy, I just don't have the appeal you have. And I've got to get back to headquarters anyway. And if anybody asks about you, I'll just tell 'em you're here investigating a murder. Ta ta, old chap. And don't drink too much tea. It's terrible strong stuff.

(*KRAMER exits, leaving O'FINN surrounded by the LADIES, who have sat down in a little circle. HILDEGARDE is beginning to pour. Curtain.*)

ACT TWO

(Lights come up on the apron of the stage. O'FINN and KRAMER are there. KRAMER is walking toward O'FINN, as if just entering the room.)

KRAMER. Well, it's official. Just got the word from the Doc. Miss Elizabeth Ellsworth died of arsenic poisoning. There was enough arsenic in her to kill a dinosaur. Say, that's a good comparison, don't you think, O'Finn? Dinosaur. Prehistoric. That's the way you might describe all those old ladies. They're prehistoric.
O'FINN. Don't say that in front of them, Kramer.
KRAMER. Why not?
O'FINN. It would hurt their feelings.
KRAMER. So what?
O'FINN. Well, I don't want to be mean to them. You know something? This may sound kind of funny to you. I realize that one of them seems to have committed a murder, and the rest of them are kind of glad she did. But even so . . . well, they're not really bad old girls.
KRAMER. Just kind of "touched," you mean?
O'FINN. Well sure, but they're kind of sweet. . . .
KRAMER. O'Finn, you sound like their love is being requited.
O'FINN. I didn't say I was in love with 'em.
KRAMER. But you're getting a soft spot in your old Irish heart for 'em. So I suppose when you find out which one of 'em put arsenic flavoring in the tea, I'll have to make the arrest.
O'FINN. When I find out! How am I ever going to find out? Kramer, do you realize what the situation is? The old girls are pretty smart. They committed a murder so a detective would come to their house. So now they're not going to be dumb enough to give the thing away. They want the investigation to go on and on. They don't want it to stop. They're nice as pie to me, but they don't give the slightest co-operation in answering questions or things like that. So I don't have any more idea of who committed the murder than I had when it started.
KRAMER. A dead end, huh?
O'FINN. Absolutely a dead end.
KRAMER. So what are you going to do? Put it in the Unsolved Crime file?
O'FINN. Kramer, I have more pride than that.
KRAMER. Well, you're not going to dump it in my lap.
O'FINN. I didn't say I was. I have a little strategy worked out.
KRAMER. Like what?
O'FINN. The ladies just love to have me there, asking questions and things like that. But they don't give me any sensible answers. They're always changing the subject. Well, so I think the best thing to do is

leave 'em alone. Let 'em stew awhile. Maybe then they'll be willing to cough up a clue just to get me back.
KRAMER. O'Finn, you're a genius.
O'FINN. That I may be.
KRAMER. But your strategy better work quick. The Captain will get the report about the arsenic, and then he'll be asking you what the explanation is.
O'FINN. I'll have the answer, Kramer. Right now I think I'll go home and rest my weary bones. The dear girls know where I live. If any of 'em want to spill any beans, they know where to find me.

(*The lights go out on the apron. In the black-out the curtain rises, and then the lights come up again on the stage, at 909 Sycamore. Four of the ladies are on stage, and the fifth, MISS HILDEGARDE, is just entering from the kitchen.*)

HILDEGARDE. Well, I called up to check, and that reporter will be here any minute.
BIRDIE. Oh, Hildegarde, do you think we're doing the right thing? It seems kind of mean.
HILDEGARDE. Do you know any other way to lure Mr. O'Finn back here?
BIRDIE. No, I suppose not. And it has been rather lonesome without him. It was just yesterday and yet it seems like he's been gone a long time.
AMANTHA. Yes, I miss Mr. O'Finn terribly. This house doesn't seem the same without him. How do you ever suppose we got along without a man around all these years?
LUCY. We didn't. Now I see how empty our lives were.
AMANTHA. But, Lucy, you always said you had Herbert to think about.
LUCY. But I must admit it now. Herbert didn't compare to Mr. O'Finn.
(*The doorbell rings.*)
HILDEGARDE. That must be the reporter now.

(*She goes to the door and admits the reporter, who to the ladies' surprise, is feminine. JANE ROGERS is in her late twenties, very chic and rather good-looking, a typical career woman sort. She walks into the room and looks around in some amazement.*)

JANE. Am I in the right place?
HILDEGARDE. Well, that depends. Who are you?
JANE. Jane Rogers. From the *Herald-Globe.*
HILDEGARDE. You're the reporter?
JANE. That's right. I'm not the regular crime reporter, if that's what you're wondering about. I cover the human interest stuff and the crackpots. Right now I'm working in the crackpot department, I guess you'd say. The editor told me there was somebody who was protesting about lack of police protection.

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