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Dead Guilty

A play

Richard Harris

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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DEAD GUILTY

First performed with the title **MURDER ONCE DONE**
by Elysian Productions at the Haymarket Theatre,
Basingstoke, on 17th March 1994 with the following cast:

Julia Darrow	Catherine Shipton
Anne Bennett	Hilary Crane
Gary	Garry Roost
Margaret Haddrell	Elizabeth Power
Voice of the Coroner	Gerald Sim

Directed by Adrian Reynolds
Designed by Elroy Ashmore
Lighting design by David Ripley

Subsequently presented by Bill Kenwright at the Theatre
Royal, Windsor and the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead,
then at the Apollo Theatre, London from 17th July 1995,
with the following cast:

Voice of the Coroner	Barry Cookson
Anne Bennett	Angela Morant
Julia Darrow	Jenny Seagrove
Gary	Niall Refoy
Margaret Haddrell	Hayley Mills

Directed by Auriol Smith
Designed by Alexander McPherson
Lighting design by Joe Atkins

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(See also page ii)

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CHARACTERS

Julia Darrow

Margaret Haddrell

Gary

Anne Bennett

The Coroner (voice only)

The action takes place in Julia Darrow's small Victorian house in West London

Time — the present

Other plays by Richard Harris published
by Samuel French Ltd:

Albert
The Business of Murder
Is It Something I Said?
Keeping Mum
Local Affairs
The Maintenance Man
Outside Edge
Partners
Party Piece
Stepping Out
Visiting Hour

ACT I

The sitting-room of Julia Darrow's small late-Victorian house in West London

The room is not expensively furnished but attractive, tasteful if a little untidy. There are two archways. One, R, is partly filled by a wooden shelf and cupboard unit, upstage of which is the open entrance to the kitchen, most of which is unseen but in which cupboards, wall units, and a window with venetian blind are visible. The second archway, upstage, leads into a small hallway which in turn leads to an unseen bedroom, R, and staircase, L. Upstage of the bedroom door, a smaller archway gives on to the main door which, like its surrounds, has stained glass windows. To the side of the door, an antique umbrella stand. L, a "broken" wall leads, via what would be french windows, into a glazed conservatory which gives on to the partly-visible garden. Above the conservatory, upstage, is the sash window to a bedroom which has curtains permanently, but not quite fully, drawn

Downstage in the sitting room is a small Chesterfield sofa with assorted scatter cushions and a folded car blanket over its back, a small buttonback chair and a coffee table with a small pile of magazines at one end. The shelf unit is packed with books, ornaments, a CD player and discs and piles of magazines. L of the upstage archway is a small occasional table with ornaments and plants. L of this table is the unseen door into a bathroom. In front of the stairs is a small antique chest of drawers holding a table lamp, telephone and answering machine. There are pictures and prints on most walls. The upstage archway has a wall light at each side

Upstage in the conservatory are a drawing board, draughtsman's chair, a board with notices pinned on it, plan rolls, a medium-sized, somewhat battered portfolio — all the paraphernalia of a graphic designer. There is a somewhat haphazard collection of potted plants. Downstage, two tables have been arranged L-shaped and contain more tools of the trade: a laptop computer, paper, card, a Swan Morton cutting knife, many pencils and pens, a large pair of paper scissors, an anglepoise lamp and a cordless telephone; there are also an opened envelope, a bottle of pills, a Cambridge blue vase holding flowers and an opened bottle of red wine and a glass. Under the table is a waste paper basket

When the CURTAIN rises the stage is entirely dark. Then we become aware of the distant sound of an approaching car. The engine noise gets louder and

louder, there is the sound of tyres screaming, then a crash; the car horn sounds and then there is sudden silence

A spot comes up on Julia Darrow, isolating her in a pool of light. She sits in a wheelchair, looking straight ahead, withdrawn

Coroner's Voice You are Julia Darrow and you live at number 32, Lexham Gardens, SW6.

Julia Yes.

Coroner's Voice As I understand it, you were a business associate of the deceased.

Julia Yes. I'm a freelance graphic designer and John — Mr Haddrell — was the art director of one of the agencies for whom I work.

Coroner's Voice Thank you. Now if you could tell us, in your own words, what happened that night, and, Miss Darrow, I know this must be very distressing for you but please remember that no-one in this court is on trial: we are here purely and simply to ascertain the cause of death.

A moment

Julia We'd been to see a client — in Manchester. John — Mr Haddrell — was driving and everything seemed perfectly normal — we were, you know, we were just talking — about the meeting we'd had — just — making conversation and then — and then he made a sort of — gasping noise and — fell forward across the wheel and the car went out of control and ... the next thing I knew, I was in hospital and, er, sometime later, someone told me that John had had a heart attack. I'm sorry, that's — that's all I can tell you.

A moment

The Lights come up on the room. It is sunny. Anne Bennett is with Julia, standing, Her summer raincoat is lying across the arm of the sofa

Anne (*brightly*) So. How are you?

Julia (*lightly*) I thought that was for you to tell *me*.

Anne (*smiling*) Oh, I see ... it's going to be one of those sessions, is it?

Julia I'll try to be a good girl — promise.

Anne (*sitting on the sofa*) Are you sleeping any better?

Julia If I take enough pills. Not really, no.

Anne And you're still having the same nightmare.

Julia Yes, it's the same one: *I'm driving the car, I cause the crash, I killed him, all right?*

Anne But you know that isn't true.

Julia “So why don’t you say it?” Right, I’ll say it: I wasn’t driving the car, I didn’t cause the crash — it wasn’t my fault — I shouldn’t feel guilty. Right. We’ve done that one. Next.

A moment

Anne How’s the leg — d’you still get a lot of pain?

Julia It depends. Sometimes. Not so much now. They say it’ll stop after the operation. I’ve still got to have one more operation.

Anne Does that worry you?

Julia The thought of another operation? Good God no, I look forward to it, it’s my big treat, I’m hooked. I’ve been wheeled in and out so often they’re making me A Friend Of The Operating Theatre, I get a discount, two femurs re-broken for the price of one and if I’m a really good girl they throw in another couple of nuts and bolts for my pelvis. What is it they say? A healthy mind in a healthy body — well, you’ve got the mind and they’ve got the body. How do *you* think it’s shaping up?

Gary enters through the main door, carrying his key and a small package. He moves confidently into the room, stuffing the key into the pocket of his hooded bomber jacket. He reacts on seeing the two women

Gary (to Julia, of Anne) Oh I’m sorry — I thought you said twelve o’clock the lady was coming.

Anne (lightly) She was — she got her appointments back to front. Hallo — I’m Anne, Anne Bennett. You must be Gary.

Julia You see, Gary? You’re famous.

For a moment, it seems that Gary doesn’t quite know how to take this

Gary I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to butt in like ——

Julia It’s all right, Gary. What did you want?

Gary It’s the 28th; I collected your prescription.

Julia What a memory you’ve got, Gary, and what a little treasure you are. Isn’t he a little treasure? Not only does he clean the house and do the garden, he even remembers when to collect my precious little pills — what would I do without you, Gary? (She reaches up to touch his arm)

Gary (grinning, pleased as punch) She calls me her daily male. Don’t you, Jules?

Julia Yes, indeed I do. Aren’t I the witty one.

Gary That’s because I come in every day — and I’m a fellah. (He indicates the package) Anyway, I’ll, umm — I’ll put it here.

Julia (suddenly sharp) Yes, yes — just put it down and go — you know where the money is.

Gary (*clearly embarrassed at the sharpness, putting the package on the occasional table*) No that's all right, I'll do it next time. See you tomorrow then, Jules — and I really am very sorry for — interfering. (*He makes to go*)

Julia (*wanting to make amends for her sharpness towards him*) Gary, there is something you can do for me while you're here — that is, if you want to.

Gary (*brightening instantly*) Course I do; what is it?

Julia I need something to go to the cleaners; could you take it for me?

Gary Course I could.

Julia Thanks — it's in the bedroom, I won't be a minute.

Gary I'll get it.

Julia (*pulling herself out of the wheelchair*) No, that's all right, I know where it is. (*To Anne*) You don't mind?

Anne Of course I don't mind.

Julia Thanks, Gary.

Julia smiles at him and, walking with a slight limp, exits into the bedroom

Gary, awkward at being left alone with Anne, moves to stand near the work table, absently taking up the knife to tap it on the table as he looks out of the window at the garden

Anne (*aware of Gary's awkwardness and attempting to relieve it*) You're very fond of her, aren't you?

Gary (*awkwardly*) Yeah, well, she's — yeah I am, yeah.

Anne I know she thinks a lot of you.

Gary (*pleased*) Has she said?

Anne Not in so many words, but —

Gary (*suddenly changing tone*) You shouldn't come here, why do you come here, you only upset her.

Anne (*thrown momentarily; then, evenly*) I'm afraid that "upsetting" her is part of the —

Gary She doesn't want you here, none of you.

Anne (*trying to lighten it*) How d'you mean, none of me?

Gary These so-called friends of hers, that's why she stopped 'em coming here, they upset her, she doesn't trust 'em.

Anne I don't understand: doesn't trust them what?

Gary She doesn't trust 'em ... if you really want to know, she doesn't trust anyone. Except me. She trusts me, she doesn't need anyone else.

A moment

Anne Gary — you do know that when she was in hospital she tried to kill herself?

Gary (*frowning and giving a little shrug as though the thought is too painful to contemplate*) Yeah, well ... that's why you should leave her alone.

Anne No, Gary ... that's why I come here.

Julia enters carrying some of her clothing

Julia Sorry, I couldn't find my blue sweater, I could have sworn I put it with the others — you haven't moved it, have you, Gary?

Gary No, course I haven't.

Julia Oh well ... (*She gives him the clothing*) Hang on, I'll give you some money.

Gary No no, give it to me later with the other.

Julia I hope you're keeping a tab of how much I owe you.

Gary (*grinning*) Don't you worry, I won't let you get away with anything.

Julia Anyway ... thanks — you're a love. (*And, whether for her benefit or his, we don't know, she gives Gary a quick peck on the cheek*)

Gary reacts, pleased as punch, glancing at Anne

Go on — off you go.

Gary See you tomorrow afternoon then, Jules.

Julia (*nodding, then realizing; what follows is clearly an off-the-cuff excuse*) No, not the afternoon, I, umm, there's someone bringing me some work over and I don't want to be disturbed.

Gary (*slightly surprised*) We said I'd do the garden tomorrow afternoon — it's in my diary. (*He pulls out his little pocket diary and refers to it during the following*)

Julia Yes I know — sorry — we'll have to change it.

Gary That's all right, I'll come in the morning, 'bout dinner-time, 'bout twelve o'clock — OK?

Julia As long as you're away by half-two.

Gary I could come later if you like — say about —

Julia For God's sake, Gary, twelve o'clock will be fine, now go home — please.

This moment

Gary looks at Anne as if to say "You see what I mean?" and then exits

Julia Why does he always turn a simple yes or no into a twenty-minute conversation?

Anne He's only trying to be helpful. Don't you think?

Julia What I think is that sometimes he's too bloody helpful, sometimes he ... *(But her irritation suddenly subsides)* Look — I'm sorry. I hate the way I am, I hate what's happening to me. I just — I don't know, I just ... *(She sits at the work table, looks out of the window)*

A moment

Anne *(moving nearer to Julia)* There's nothing you want to talk to me about.

Julia *(absently)* Like what?

Anne I sense — I sense that you're very uneasy today. Much more so than —

Julia ... You sense, you sense — why can't you speak like a human being instead of all this half-baked mumbo-jumbo? Look, I'm sorry but I really don't feel up to it today, I really don't feel like talking, I really think you should go — in fact, I really don't see the point of you coming here any more. *(She gets up and moves to stand with her back to Anne, looking out over the garden)*

Anne When was the last time someone came to see you? Not me, not the doctor, not Gary — a friend. When was the last time you had a friend here?

Julia *(looking off)* I've no idea.

Anne When?

Julia I don't need anybody. I never have. I like — sorting things out for myself.

Anne But you do know there's a difference between sorting yourself out and cutting yourself off.

Julia I'll see my friends when I feel more — receptive. Fair enough?

Anne *(smiling)* Fair enough. *(She holds her smile)*

Julia *(smiling too; then)* Please. I really would like you to go.

Anne Then I'll go. *(She takes up her summer coat)* Do I see you next week — yes or no?

Julia *(managing a smile)* If you're prepared to risk it, I am.

Anne *(smiling)* I had one client throw a chair at me.

Julia You should have thrown it back.

Anne How do you know I didn't?

They both smile

Julia Anne ... you're right. There is something. She's written to me. His wife, John's wife. She wants to see me. She wants to talk to me.

Anne Ah.

Julia What good will it do? I mean, for God's sake, I've never met the woman. I — I scarcely knew *him* — what does she want me to say? What can I tell her? He had a heart attack and died, what else does she want to know?

A moment

Anne You see, when we lose someone close to us and we're not with them, we often need to find a way to be part of that death. To — share it.

Julia You're saying I should see her.

Anne I'm saying I can understand why she wants to see *you*. But I can also understand why you don't want to see *her*. Look, why don't we sit down and —

Julia No. I'd like you to go. Really.

This moment

Anne (*taking up her bag*) I'll phone you. And in the meantime ... I suggest that you don't do anything until you and I have talked it through. Agreed?

A moment

Julia nods. Anne gives her a smile and moves towards the front door; Julia remains standing by the work table

Julia But you see the thing is ... (*Whatever she was going to say, she decides against. She shakes her head*) It doesn't matter.

This moment

Anne doesn't pursue it. She exits, closing the front door

Julia stands still for a moment, then takes an opened envelope from under a pile of papers on the table. As she stands looking at it:

Black-out

Julia goes into the kitchen

Margaret Haddrell enters

A small gift-wrapped plant is placed on the coffee table and the wheelchair is set back next to the occasional table. Margaret's bag is set on the sofa

The Lights come up. It is a sunshine-bright day. Margaret Haddrell stands near the sofa, looking out over the garden

From the kitchen, there comes the sound of crockery being set on a tray. Margaret moves to sit on the sofa

After a moment, Julia comes through from the kitchen, carrying a tray of tea things

Immediately, Margaret is on her feet

Margaret Can you manage?

Julia Yes, I'm fine.

Margaret sits. Julia carries the tray to the work table and pours tea during the following

Margaret I'm sorry, that was rude of me. I didn't mean to ——

Julia It's all right. Really. *(She even manages a smile. She is very tense in the presence of this woman)*

Margaret It's a beautiful little garden. Do you look after it yourself?

Julia I did. Before the — before the accident. Now someone does it for me, I just sort of — potter. *(She holds out a cup and sugar bowl)*

Margaret Thank you.

Julia Sugar?

Margaret No thank you.

It's all so stiff, overly-formal. Julia sits at the work table during the following

Margaret I find it very therapeutic.

Julia Sorry?

Margaret Looking after the garden.

Julia Oh. Yes. Do you have a — large garden?

Margaret Large enough. It was one of the reasons we bought the house. Not that John was much of a gardener. Mow the lawn and that was about it. *(She smiles)*

Julia attempts one in return

And this is where you work, is it?

Julia Yes. Well no, not usually; my office — workroom — is through there. *(She indicates)* For the moment I'm not very good on the stairs, so Gary moved my bed down into the office and we brought my bits and pieces out here. Luckily there's a downstairs loo and a shower so ... it could have been a lot worse.

Margaret *(smiling, but then looking more serious)* But you will get better, will you, you will be able to ——

Julia Good God I hope so, although there are times when I really wonder, I don't seem ——

Margaret But in a way — and please don't misunderstand me when I say this — I suppose you could say you're lucky. I mean you could be like John, you could be dead — although that would have been doubly unfair, wouldn't it? I mean it was hardly your fault but then again I suppose you could say it wasn't his, it wasn't as if he was drunk or driving stupidly or something, he was taken ill, no-one could have known that was going to happen to him, he always seemed so ... he always seemed so full of life.

This moment

I'm so sorry.

Julia It doesn't matter, really, I — I understand.

For a moment, they both seem awkward, lost for what to say, but then Margaret changes the subject

Margaret (*brightly*) Gary's your "chap", is he?

Julia Sorry?

Margaret You said Gary helped you to ——

Julia Oh — Gary — no — Gary's my ... well, home-help, I suppose you'd call him. My — daily male.

Margaret Oh yes?

Julia's half-hearted rendition of her "joke" seems to have been lost on Margaret

Julia He's the one who does the garden for me. He was here just before you came, actually. That's why it's looking so — tidy.

Margaret nods, smiles. There is an awkward moment

Margaret Are the flowers from your garden?

Julia Yes. Past their best, I'm afraid. (*She gently touches one of the flowers in the blue vase during the following*)

Margaret Oh no, they're beautiful. And you don't mind cut flowers.

Julia No — no, not at all.

Margaret A lot of people do, don't they? That's why I brought you a plant, I wasn't sure.

Julia Thank you, it's — lovely.

Margaret There's a little label that tells you how to look after it.

Julia Yes. Thank you. (*She smiles*)

Another awkward silence

More tea?

Margaret No. Thank you.

They smile at each other. A moment

Quite — unusual, I would have thought. Having a ... having a man to do one's cleaning.

Julia Yes, I suppose it is really.

Margaret Is he ... you know ... *(She makes a vague gesture)*

Julia Gay? Not as far as I know. No, I don't think so. He knocked on the door one day, looking for work — he'd just been made redundant and he seemed genuine enough so I gave him some bits and pieces to do and, well, one job sort of led to another. Quite frankly, he's been ... well, he's been a godsend.

Margaret How often does he come in?

Julia I pay him for three times a week, but he comes in every day, just to see how I am and do the odd bit of shopping for me. He only lives a couple of streets away so it's not ... it's not too difficult for him. *(And she attempts to say what she's been wanting to say since the woman arrived)* Mrs Haddrell —

Margaret I almost came to see you in hospital but I wasn't sure you'd ... I did look in once or twice — just to ... just to see how you were and on one occasion I very nearly made myself known to you, but ... I didn't want to upset you, I didn't want you to think I was ... Anyway. It was very good of you to answer my letter. I know it must be difficult for you and I —

Julia Mrs Haddrell, I — I really don't know what I can say to you, I really don't know what you — I really don't know how anything I can tell you will — will help.

This moment

Margaret *(standing, preparing to leave)* I'm sorry. I shouldn't have written to you, I shouldn't have come here. It was selfish of me, I should have realized.

Julia I just don't know what I can say to you.

Margaret *(simply)* And I don't know ... I don't really know ... what I want you to say. I just thought — quite selfishly — I just thought that if I could speak to you, you might say something, just something, that would somehow make it ... understandable. We were together for nearly twenty years. We had our ups and downs, of course we did but — you can't live with someone that long without feeling — without feeling so very close. Without feeling — almost part of them. D'you know what my first thought was when the police came and told me he was dead? I thought, I'm sorry, you're wrong, he can't be dead, I would have known. I really did think that — oh, just for a second or two, but — I really did think that.

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