

MURDER!

in Little Grimley

by

David Tristram

Featuring all the usual suspects...

GORDON

MARGARET

JOYCE

BERNARD

and introducing...

SAM
(The Detective)

The detective can be played as male or female,
with a couple of obvious word tweaks.
Either works just as well, just choose your strongest casting option.

This play contains the occasional naughty word. In context and played properly, my view is that it simply serves to heighten the comedy. But I also realise that not everyone is comfortable with certain degrees of swearing, so feel free to soften the odd word here and there to find the right balance for you. No permission needed for script amends on that basis.

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**MURDER IN LITTLE
GRIMLEY**

BY DAVID TRISTRAM

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MURDER IN LITTLE GRIMLEY

Ominous music pervades as Joyce enters the meeting room in darkness. She switches on the lights and starts to organise a couple of chairs, but then suddenly turns and notices a strange large object covered in a dust sheet in the opposite corner of the room. She approaches it, curious but wary. She finally plucks up courage to whip off the dust sheet. Underneath, slumped in a chair, is Gordon. There is an enormous dagger stuck in his chest, his shirt is drenched in blood. Joyce gasps and lets out a blood-curdling scream as she backs away.

Moments later, Bernard comes dashing into the room.

Bernard: Joyce! What's up? I heard the scream from the car park!

Joyce: *(hysterical and barely able to speak, she points to the 'body' with a trembling hand)* Look!

Bernard slowly turns, sees Gordon, and then addresses him calmly.

Bernard: Evening, Gordon.

Gordon: *(instantly coming to life)* Evening, Bernard.

Joyce, equally shocked by Gordon's miraculous recovery, just screams once again.

Gordon: All right, Joyce?

Joyce: What the hell?

Bernard: Well, that was fun.

Joyce: Fun? Fun??

Gordon: Just a little practical joke, Joyce. No need to be over-dramatic.

Joyce: I thought you were dead, Gordon!

Gordon: Yes, but I wasn't Joyce. Happy ending.

Joyce: (*suddenly realising her discomfort*) Uh! I think I've wet my panties.

Gordon: Oh, lovely.

Bernard: Could have been worse, Joyce.

Joyce: You...you two were in on this together!

Bernard: Well, the dagger and fake blood was Gordon's idea. But I added the dust sheet.

Joyce: What on earth do you...you...children...think you were up to?

Gordon: Just demonstrating the power of the genre, Joyce.

Joyce: What are you talking about, Gordon?

Gordon: Murder, Joyce. One of the most powerful and popular themes in the history of theatre. Everybody loves a good murder mystery. So I've decided that murder should be at the core of our next production. Consequently I, your distinguished chairman, am currently writing our very own murder mystery. And what you have just witnessed, Joyce, is the memorable way that it will start.

Joyce: Well, that's all well and good, Gordon. But unforgiveable. So, if you'll excuse me for a moment...I'm...damp.

Joyce heads off to the toilet.

Bernard: I think that went pretty well.

Gordon: Brilliantly, Bernard. Shall we try it again when Margaret comes?

Bernard: That'd be delightful. (*Bernard cracks open a banana and starts consuming it*) So how's the play coming on?

Gordon: Though I say it myself, Bernard, it's a corker. I think I've finally found my forte. Early days, but the plot so far is intriguing.

Bernard: Cut the waffle, can I be the one who gets killed?

Gordon: Why?

Bernard: I'm guessing the dead body won't have any lines to learn.

Gordon: I see. 'Fraid not, Bernard. You can't escape that easily.

Bernard: Why not?

Gordon: Because it's a whodunit, Bernard. Can't afford to waste an actor. So I'm playing the detective...

Bernard: Of course...

Gordon: You play the thick Police Sergeant that makes me look clever...

Bernard: Cheers...

Gordon: Margaret will be the villain...

Bernard: Naturally...

Gordon: And Joyce can be the dead body.

Bernard: I thought you said you couldn't afford to waste an actor?

Gordon: I did.

Bernard: Right, gotcha, so Joyce is the dead body.

Joyce enters, haughtily.

Gordon: Better, Joyce?

Joyce: Yes, thank you. But I presume I don't have to remind you that what you just did was completely childish, dangerous, despicable and, I repeat, unforgiveable.

Bernard: We thought we'd try it out on Margaret as well.

Joyce: (*excitedly clapping*) Oh! Can we?

Gordon: We can, Joyce – all you have to do is just play along like you were seeing it for the very first time. Can you manage that?

Joyce: You know I can, Gordon!

Gordon: No, sadly, Joyce, I don't. But we'll give it a go anyway.

We hear a car pull up outside.

Bernard: Actually I think she's here...

Gordon: Right, positions everybody. Grab the dust sheet, Joyce. And as soon as Margaret is still outside but within earshot of the door, scream, just like before.

Joyce: You can rely on me, Gordon!

Gordon: (*muttering to himself*) No I can't, Joyce, we've been over this.

Bernard: What about me?

Gordon: Keep it simple, Bernard. Bugger off to the loo and finish your banana.

Bernard: Right.

Joyce: Good luck, Bernard!

Gordon 'plays dead' again on the chair. We hear a car door slam. Joyce, clutching the dust sheet, is distracted momentarily by watching Bernard giving her a quick 'thumbs up' as he exits on the opposite side. For a brief moment Joyce's eyes are then screwed tightly shut, as she silently concentrates on practising the next move. Consequently, she doesn't see Margaret enter and give her a bemused look.

Margaret: On your own, Joyce?

Joyce spins round, sees Margaret, and panics.

Joyce: Oh! Margaret. Er...

Joyce then belatedly screams and starts pointing wildly in the direction of Gordon. An unimpressed Margaret turns to see 'the body'.

Margaret: Evening, Gordon.

Gordon: Evening, Margaret.

Margaret: Playing silly buggers are we?

Gordon: Not entirely, Margaret. There's method in my madness.

Joyce: You weren't fooled, Margaret?

Margaret: No, Joyce.

Joyce: But how?

Margaret: Well, for a start, Joyce, when I came in just, you were pretending to be scared, weren't you.

Joyce: Yes, Margaret.

Margaret: Well, pretending is a form of acting, Joyce, and you can't do that.

Joyce: Oh.

Margaret: Besides, I was in the joke shop today buying a present for my niece, and Mrs O'Grady mentioned that Gordon had been in and purchased a rubber dagger and some fake blood. So I suspected that he might be up to something silly. Too early for Halloween.

Bernard enters.

Bernard: Oh, I don't know. The head witch has just flown in.

Margaret: Oh. Evening, Bernard. It is Bernard isn't it? I didn't recognise you without a banana in your trap.

Bernard: What's with all the constant banana jokes, Margaret? I don't eat that many bananas.

A small pause. Then Gordon, Margaret and Joyce answer in unison:
"Yes you do, Bernard."

Bernard: I haven't had one for ages.

Margaret: Bernard. There's an actual banana skin sticking out of your pocket, right now.

Bernard: Yeah, well. I didn't want to flush it down the loo.

Margaret: Oh, very admirable, Bernard. Considering what happened last time you did that.

Joyce: What happened last time?

Gordon: Septic tank blocked, Joyce. Backed up and over-flowed into the car park. You don't want to know the details.

Margaret: Right in the middle of our busiest panto season. Disgusting. Our loyal patrons come here for an evening at the theatre. They do not expect to have to wade through piles of crap.

Gordon: To be fair Margaret, they do.

Bernard: Yes, and who had to unblock the septic tank, eh? Not Lady Penelope here was it?

Margaret: You can sort out your own mess, Bernard.

Gordon: All right! All right...calm down everyone. Shall we get to the business in hand, before we end up with a real-life motive for murder?

Bernard: Oh, I see what you did there, Gordon. Very good.

Margaret: What's he talking about?

Gordon: He's talking about our next production, Margaret. I've decided we should do a murder mystery. Everyone loves a murder mystery. So I have started writing my very own whodunit.

Margaret: Have you lost your mind? We tried doing one of your murder mysteries before, remember? It was called Death in the Toilet, and it died on its arse.

Gordon: That's different, Margaret. I was inexperienced then.

Margaret: And now you're suddenly Agatha Christie are you?

Gordon: Well, though I say it myself...

Margaret: Because no-one else will...

Gordon: This has all the ingredients of a winner.

Joyce: Ooh, tell us more, Gordon.

Gordon: It's called 'The Joke Shop Murders' Joyce, inspired by my recent visit to Mrs O'Grady's. And though I say it myself, it's ingenious. The joke shop proprietor, no less, is found dead – apparently stabbed through the chest by a retractable dagger. Everyone is baffled, until eventually, the case is cracked by the ingenious sleuth, who notices that the retractable dagger mechanism had been tampered with, thus turning the toy into a lethal weapon. The deadly blow is then administered by the hands of an innocent colleague.

Bernard: Eh, that's cracking. Can we write in the dust sheet? That was my idea.

Gordon: Question is, Bernard, how would an innocent colleague who'd just accidentally stabbed someone with a toy dagger instinctively react? Would they scream, crap themselves and call the police? Or would they cover the body with a dust sheet and do a runner?

Bernard: Dust sheet, every time.

Gordon: Fair enough.

Margaret: Mmm. Ingenious sleuth, eh?

Joyce: Yes, you know, Margaret – like Miss Marple!

Margaret: You intrigue me greatly. So I am to be cast as an ingenious sleuth? I admit that does have a certain appeal.

Gordon: Actually, Margaret, it's more Poirot than Marple.

Margaret: How so?

Gordon: Because in this particular case, the ingenious sleuth...is male.

Margaret: (*a thoughtful pause*) I see. Well, good luck with it, Gordon.

Margaret heads for the door.

Gordon: Margaret – where are you going?

Margaret: Home, Gordon. Somewhere I know I'll be appreciated.

Gordon: Margaret, stop! All right. You win. Resistance is futile. You can be the bloody detective.

Margaret: Thank you, Gordon.

Gordon: But it does mean that your police assistant will be Bernard.

Bernard: (*winking*) All right, boss?

Margaret: I do not need an assistant, Gordon.

Gordon: Your character needs someone to bounce off, Margaret.

Bernard: Sounds fun.

Margaret: I am not 'bouncing' off anyone, Gordon. Least of all some banana-munching half-wit who can't even remember his lines.

Bernard: Well that's rich coming from you. I was word-perfect in the panto.

Margaret: That's because you'd only got one line, and you'd painted it on the stage floor, with a Rolf Harris-sized brush.

Joyce: Oh, Bernard. Is that why you were looking down at your feet every night? You told me you were shy.

Bernard: I am shy. And it was two lines, not one.

Margaret: 'Hello' is not a line, Bernard.

Bernard: It had a full stop after it. So yes it is.

Gordon: Margaret, for plot reasons, you've got to have an assistant.

Margaret: Nope.

Gordon: But I've already written half of it...

Margaret: Then re-write half of it, Gordon. And this time use your head. This is a whodunit, correct?

Gordon: Yes.

Margaret: And therefore we have to have somebody who the audience all think dunit – correct?

Gordon: Yes. And that will probably now have to be me.

Margaret: And we also have to have a dead body, correct?

Gordon: Yes, the shop owner - that'll be Joyce.

Joyce: I beg your pardon?

Gordon: We'll discuss it later, Joyce. It's already been decided.

Margaret: So, tell me. There are a total of four people in this society. So if Joyce is the dead body, and two of the remaining three in the cast are the police, it doesn't take a genius to work out which one of us in this whodunit actually dunit...does it.

Bernard: Margaret has a point. If you start with four people, then rule out the two police folk and the dead body, there's only person left.

Margaret: Bravo – give the man a banana.

Bernard: So, when the intrepid sleuth finally reveals who did it, all the audience will say “No shit, Sherlock” and boo us off the stage. No, I’m afraid Margaret’s right on this, Gordon. I can’t be a policeman. I’m going to have to play another suspect.

Margaret: At last, someone here is finally using their head.

Gordon: Not entirely, Margaret, because with your plan there’d still only be a choice of two suspects – me, or Bernard. Correct?

Margaret: So? Two’s better than one.

Gordon: So, then the best we could hope for is that half the audience guesses the wrong suspect, and the other half guesses the right one. Still not very satisfactory, is it?

Joyce: Can I say something?

Gordon: No Joyce, you’re a dead body.

Joyce: But...

Bernard: Have you got a better idea, Gordon?

Gordon: Of course I have.

Margaret: Why am I not surprised?

Gordon: Because, as you rightly pointed out, with my plan, there’s only one suspect. So everyone will guess who did it.

Margaret: Exactly!

Gordon: And everyone will...be...wrong!

Margaret: Explain.

Gordon: Have you ever seen a whodunit, Margaret, where the one who actually dunit, was...the detective?

A thoughtful pause.

Joyce: Ooh!

Bernard: Love it!

Margaret: So let me get this straight. I would be playing the brilliant detective, AND the evil arch villain?

Gordon: Yep.

Margaret: Mmm. When do we start rehearsing?

Lights out.

Infectious upbeat 1920’s music underpins the next minute or so. It’s essentially an all-action time-elapse scene change set to music, featuring stylized and choreographed sequences – Gordon typing scripts on a typewriter, handing them out, Bernard hammering a set panel or other practical tasks, Margaret and Joyce trying out period dresses and hats, some mimed chatting and rehearsal moments, etc.

As the music ends, Bernard, Joyce and Margaret are strutting about anxiously on stage, checking their watches.

Gordon comes rushing in.

Margaret: Where the hell have you been, Gordon? It’s nearly half past seven!

Gordon: Couldn’t help it - I had to dive into the joke shop to have it out with Mrs O’Grady.

Margaret: To have what out with Mrs O’Grady?

Gordon: That silly old bag assured me that the fake blood she sold me washes out easily.

Margaret: And?

Gordon: Does it bugger. Consequently, I’ve ruined a good dress shirt, my best trousers, my favourite tie, a coat and a pair of underpants.

Bernard: I’m amazed you believed her in the first place. You know she’s totally off her trolley.

Gordon: Well, she got what was coming to her. I gave her a right earful I can tell you. Anyway, the bad news is, Joyce, you’re going to have to find a new dress for every performance. Every one of them is going to be ruined.

Joyce: Oh, no!

Gordon: No way round it, Joyce.

Bernard: Couldn’t we just poison her instead of stabbing her?

Gordon: Too late for major plot changes now.

Margaret: What about just smacking her over the head?

Gordon: Later, Margaret. Let’s get the play done first.

Joyce: Charming.

Gordon: Oh, and there’s even more bad news, Joyce.

Joyce: For me?

Gordon: Well, for everyone. Joyce, I'm afraid you're going to have to deliver a few spoken lines before we kill you.

Margaret: Oh, shit – really?

Gordon: I'm afraid so. I realised we needed to establish Joyce's character just a little bit more before she dies, so everybody knows that she runs a joke shop – otherwise the ending doesn't work. Is that okay, Joyce?

Joyce: I'll do my best, Gordon.

Gordon: Yes. That's what I feared. *(Handing her a piece of paper with three typed lines on it)* Here you go then. Disappear up a corner somewhere and start learning. Margaret, you'd best go and get changed.

Margaret: Why?

Gordon: Because this is a dress rehearsal. And you're not wearing a dress.

Margaret: Oh, right. Leave it with me. I have something stunning lined up.

Gordon: Course you do. Right, Bernard. Did you manage to get hold of an authentic period police costume?

Bernard: *(donning a cheap plastic toy police helmet)* Best I could do at short notice.

Gordon: I'm guessing you got that from the joke shop.

Bernard: Yep.

Gordon: And you'll be wearing that with your brown overalls, will you?

Bernard: It's all I've got.

Gordon: Mmm. Not exactly Agatha Christie period drama standard, is it. Oh well, I suppose it'll have to do.

Bernard: Er, Gordon – while those two aren't around. Can I have a quiet word?

They move forward for privacy, but we sense that Joyce is occasionally listening in at the back of the room, concerned.

Gordon: What is it, Bernard? I don't need any more problems.

Bernard: Well, that's sort of what I was wondering. Are you...you know, okay? Everything all right at home?

Gordon: What you mean?

Bernard: Well, I couldn't help noticing...you're a bit on edge. A bit more than normal I mean.

Gordon: I'm not a bit on edge, Bernard. I'm right over the bloody edge, without a paddle. Does that metaphor work?

Bernard: I'm a plasterer, Gordon. I don't know what a metaphor is. But no.

Gordon: My new play is about to be savaged by the critics, and I've just had to chuck two hundred pounds worth of clothes onto a garden bonfire.

Bernard: Yeah. But, it's not just that is it.

Gordon: What do you mean?

Bernard: Well, like, the thing is...

Gordon: Spit it out, Bernard.

Bernard: Something's not right, is it.

Gordon: Explain.

Bernard: Well – for example, you said you've just been to the joke shop...

Gordon: So?

Bernard: But you haven't, have you?

Gordon: Are you calling me a liar?

Bernard: I'd never do that, Gordon.

Gordon: Good.

Bernard: But yes.

Gordon: What??

Bernard: Sorry. But there's something fishy about your alibi.

Gordon: Alibi??

Bernard: For being late.

Gordon: Bernard...

Bernard: Thing is, I also went to the joke shop – about three hours ago – to get the police helmet.

Gordon: What's your point?

Bernard: My point is, when I left, Mrs O'Grady locked the door behind me. The shop's been shut since half past four, Gordon. It's now half past seven.

A pause, underpinned by a sinister suspension of music.

A guilty-looking Gordon backs away, uneasy, tense and distracted, but finally replies.

Gordon: Yes. It was shut, Bernard. But as you know, she lives above the shop. So I just kept banging on the door until she let me in. I..er...I'm afraid I..well, I lost my temper with her.

Bernard: I see. Well, to be fair, she is an annoying old bat.

Gordon: She is.

Bernard: Sorry about your clothes.

Gordon: So am I.

Bernard: Anyway, all I'm trying to say is...I'm here.

Gordon: I know you're there, Bernard, I'm standing right next to you.

Bernard: I mean, I'm here, if you need somebody to talk to.

Gordon: Thanks.

Bernard: *(offering a handshake)* No hard feelings.

Gordon: *(reluctantly shaking his hand)* No.

Bernard: You've er...you've got blood on your hands.

Gordon: *(pulling his hand away)* It was everywhere, Bernard. Look, can we get on?

Bernard: Yes, sorry.

Margaret enters, dressed in a striking 1920's outfit.

Margaret: What are you two whispering about?

Gordon: Nothing, Margaret. Just...ooh...

Bernard: Wow. Margaret, you look genuinely...old.

Margaret: Cheers.

Bernard: I meant the dress – proper vintage. It suits you.

Margaret: I'll take that as a compliment, Bernard. And I see you've also made a special effort with *your* outfit.

Bernard: Fuck off. *(He tosses away the helmet)*

Gordon: All right - let's try it from the top. And this time, Margaret, try not to keep glancing at the script quite so much.

Margaret: It's not my fault that your writing isn't memorable, Gordon.

Gordon and Margaret slowly close in for an eyeball-to-eyeball bitchy confrontation.

Gordon: Thanks. I knew I could rely on you for support, Margaret.

Margaret: I'm, here, aren't I?

Gordon: Sadly, yes, Margaret. You are. And in case you'd forgotten, this is the dress rehearsal.

Margaret: So?

Gordon: So, as well as just floating around like a diva showing off your posh new dress, I'd also like to hear some natural flow to the dialogue.

Margaret: Then re-write it.

Gordon: Don't tempt me. I may decide it should be *your* character that gets stabbed.

Margaret: Well, that's better than dying on stage thanks to the quality of the dialogue.

Gordon is left simmering as Margaret breaks away.

Joyce: What about me, Gordon?

Gordon: What about you, Joyce?

Joyce: Am I allowed to use a script?

Gordon: Have you learnt all your words, Joyce?

Joyce: Is it just these three lines?

Gordon: Yes.

Joyce: Then, no.

Gordon: Okay. Just read them aloud from the piece of paper, Joyce. I sincerely doubt it'll affect your chances of an Oscar. Right, Margaret, from your entrance.

Margaret: Mrs O'Grumbly, what a quaint old joke shop you have here. Might you have a retractable toy dagger I could examine?

Joyce: Like this one perhaps?

Margaret: Perfect. It's for a friend.

Joyce: Be very careful with it, Madame...er...

Gordon: Voyant.

Joyce: Madame Voyant. Or should I call you...Claire?

Margaret: How do you know me?

Joyce: Oh, I read the papers, Madame. And after all, it's not every day that one gets to meet a world-famous, ingenious sloth.

Gordon: Sleuth, Joyce. Sleuth. it's not every day that one gets to meet a world-famous, ingenious sleuth.

Joyce: What did I say?

Gordon: Sloth.

Margaret: Do I look like a sluggish, three-toed, tree-hanging mammal, Joyce?

Bernard: Pretty damn close.

Margaret: Bollocks.

Gordon: You're not helping, Bernard. Go and get into costume.

Bernard: Eh?

Gordon: Put your plastic hat back on – we're approaching your starring moment. Right, where were we? Ah, yes. Sleuth, Joyce, sleuth. Rhymes with truth. Unlike sloth, which rhymes with cloth.

Joyce: Sorry, Gordon, it's my dyslexic eye.

Gordon: Then stop reading, Joyce. Toss away the script bearing those three short lines, and start trusting your memory.

Joyce: It's too early for that, Gordon.

Gordon: No, it's not Joyce. It's twenty to eight, and we open tomorrow night, complete with an audience.

Bernard: Don't bank on that. We haven't sold any tickets yet.

Gordon: Excellent, so we may still get away with this, but nevertheless...

Margaret: Someone may turn up on the door. According to other societies it can happen.

Gordon: Exactly. So for their sake, Joyce, toss away the script.

Joyce: Are you sure, Gordon?

Gordon: Trust me, Joyce. I instinctively know when something just...can't get any worse. So yes, trust me, and trust your own instinct. Go again. I'll prompt.

Joyce: Where from?

Gordon: "It's not every day..."

Joyce: What isn't?

Gordon: That's your line, Joyce. "It's not every day that one gets to meet a world-famous, ingenious sleuth." Say it.

Joyce: Oh. Break it down for me.

Gordon: "It's not every day..."

Joyce: "It's not every day..."

Gordon: "That one..."

Joyce: "That one..."

Gordon: "...one gets to meet..."

Joyce: "That one...one gets to meet..."

Gordon: No, not "one...one" Joyce. Just "one".

Joyce: What?

Gordon: Just say one one, Joyce.

Joyce: I did say one one, Gordon.

Gordon: No, you said "one...one" Joyce.

Joyce: Correct.

Gordon: Which is two ones.

Joyce: What is?

Gordon: One...and one...make two, Joyce. So instead of saying "one one", just say "one"...once.

Joyce: Now you're confusing me, Gordon.

Gordon: (*a deep sigh*) I blame myself.

Margaret: I'm losing the will to live.

Gordon: Let's start again. Repeat after me. "It's not every day that one gets to meet..."

Joyce: "It's not every day that one gets to meet..."

Gordon: ...a world-famous...

Joyce: Oh, yes...don't tell me...

Gordon: I just did, Joyce. Twice.

Joyce: It's not every day that one gets to meet...what was it?

Gordon: A world-famous...

Joyce: A world-famous...tree-hanging mammal?

Gordon: (*finally snapping*) Sleuth, Joyce! Sleuth!

Margaret: Jesus Christ! Can't we just cut to the bit where I stab her?

Bernard: Can I make a sensible suggestion?

Margaret: No you can't, Bernard. That's been proven over many years.

Bernard: Let's leave it there for tonight.

Gordon: Why, Bernard? Do you think we're in danger of peaking too early?

Bernard: No, but I think you're in serious danger of bullying Joyce.

Gordon: I am not bullying, Bernard, I'm directing. I'm the director – it's my job. And in case you'd all forgotten, I'm also the writer.

Joyce: Well it would help if you didn't keep writing tongue twisters, Gordon.

Gordon: For crying out loud, Joyce - it's not a tongue twister. It's a word. A one-syllable word. Sleuth.

Joyce: Ingenious...sleuth, Gordon. Ingenious sleuth. That's two S sounds together. It makes it so much harder.

Gordon: *(now totally snapping and losing it, ranting and waving his arms around)* No, Joyce, you make it so much harder! In fact, you make everything so much harder. You make speaking so much harder...

Bernard: Gordon...

Gordon: You make maintaining a sensible blood pressure so much harder. You make...living...so much harder!

Bernard: *(angry and serious)* All right – that's enough! Calm down, Gordon – you'll blow a gasket. Give her a break!

Gordon: *(ranting)* Fine! Take a break! All of you. Take a break! Break a leg! Break an arm. Break a neck! See if I care. I'm off to the pub to get slaughtered, before the critics slaughter me on opening night. See you all tomorrow. I'm sure it'll be another theatrical triumph.

Gordon storms off, leaving the others in stunned silence.

Margaret: Wow.

Bernard: I think Gordon's a bit stressed.

Margaret: Something's not right, Bernard. Time for a spot of detective work, methinks.

Black out. Music bridge.

Lights up. It's the opening night. A concerned-looking Bernard and Margaret are stood chatting.

Margaret: No, I tried all my usual informants. Nothing. But I'm telling you, Bernard, something's afoot.

Bernard: I think you're right, Margaret. I didn't tell you this earlier, but I reckon he was also covering up something about his visit to the joke shop. I don't know what, but he was clearly rattled.

Margaret: But why on earth would he be trying to....

Margaret stops in her tracks as Gordon enters, and they fall silent, very wary of him. He addresses them seriously and slightly awkwardly.

Gordon: Evening.

Bernard: Evening, Gordon. You okay?

Gordon: Er, yes. Yes I am okay, Bernard, thank you.

Bernard: Good. Only, we've had a bit of a chat and we think...

Gordon: Yes. Thank you. I probably know what you think. *(The others remain staring at him, as if pushing for an explanation)* Look - I'm aware that, perhaps, I didn't seem...entirely okay, to all of you, last night. A little tense, perhaps. More than normal.

Margaret: You can say that again.

Gordon: But, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to just put that to one side now and crack on.

Margaret: Look, Gordon. I was talking to Ryan about this last night. I know it's not your birthday till next month, but we got you something.

Margaret hands over an envelope.

Gordon: What's this?

Margaret: Your present. From Ryan and me. You can open it now.

Gordon: *(intrigued, he opens the envelope, and takes a slip of paper from it)* A Red Letter Day Voucher. Well, this is very kind, Margaret.

Margaret: Hope you like it.

Gordon: *(reading)* "Fifty pounds off your introductory session with JWT Management Associates' award-winning programme 'Seeing Red', the UK's leading...anger management course."

Margaret: They can do miracles apparently. Ryan's boss went on it, and he was a total psychopath.

Gordon: You're too generous, Margaret.

Margaret: Well, probably – but in a way I see it as a present for all of us.

Gordon: Right, well, I'll be sure to book myself in as soon as I've finished my re-hab and speed awareness classes. Shall we crack on now? After all, we still have a play to perform.

Margaret: You mean if Joyce turns up.

Gordon: What - you think she won't?

Margaret: Well, you could hardly blame her if she didn't, could you?

Gordon: She'll be here.

Bernard: We don't have to do this tonight, Gordon. We still haven't sold any tickets.

Gordon: But as Margaret said last night, someone might still turn up on the door.

Margaret: My sister said she might turn up on the door.

Gordon: There you go then.

Margaret: I told her not to.

Gordon: Well, nevertheless, I think it might be good for morale. And if no-one comes, we can just treat it as a rehearsal for tomorrow night.

Bernard: Well, if Joyce does turn up, and if we do go ahead, I have one small request.

Gordon: What's that?

Bernard: The bit where I come on, as the policeman.

Gordon: What about it?

Bernard: Well, call me a stickler for detail, but we've never rehearsed it.

Gordon: Have we not?

Bernard: No. If you remember, we were about to try it last night before you stormed off.

Gordon: Fair cop. *(We hear an outside door slam)* Ah – there's Joyce now. All right, let's just try it once through quickly. *(He checks his watch)* I think we've just about got time. Right, everyone, from the beginning of Scene Two: "Enter the Police!"

Detective enters at the back of the stage. Bemused looks all round.

Gordon: Sorry - who are you?

Detective: Am I interrupting?

Gordon: Well – you're a bit early. Doors don't open till seven. You need to wait round the front.

Detective: *(flashing a lanyard ID)* Oh, no, I'm not here for the play. DI Sam Pemberton. Mind if I come in?

Margaret: Police?

Detective: Yes. Have you got a minute?

Gordon: Well, not really. We're rehearsing.

Detective: Shouldn't take too long. I'm looking for a Gordon Ramsbottom.

Gordon: Oh. Well, that's me.

Detective: Yes, I know. I recognize you from the CCTV.

Gordon: CCTV?

Detective: Yes. We've been dealing with an incident in the village. Quite a serious incident actually. The lady at the joke shop – I believe you know her - Mrs O'Grady?

Bernard: What about her?

Detective: I'm afraid she's been murdered.

A stunned silence.

Gordon: What?

Detective: Can we have a little chat?

Shocked faces all round, Lights to black. Sinister music bridge. Lights back up a few moments later.

Detective: Sorry, you two are?

Margaret: Er...Margaret.

Bernard: Bernard.

Joyce enters in a panic.

Joyce: Sorry I'm late everybody. Car wouldn't start...Trevor had to give me a lift in his Volvo....what's going on?

Bernard: And this is Joyce.

Detective: Well, Margaret, Bernard, and Joyce – why don't you three go and make us all a nice cup of tea?

Margaret: Come on, Joyce.

Joyce: *(stage whisper)* Who's he?

Bernard: We'll explain in the kitchen.

A bemused Bernard, Joyce and Margaret exit.

Detective: Yeah, the thing is...mind if I take a seat? *(Gordon shakes his*

head, still stunned, as the detective takes a seat and gestures to invite Gordon to sit by him) The thing is, Mr Ramsbottom, the CCTV clearly shows you banging on the door of the joke shop at around 7pm last night.

Gordon: Yes, I'd...well, I went to see her. Mrs O'Grady.

Detective: But the shop was shut.

Gordon: Yes, but she let me in. She lives above the shop, you see.

Detective: Lived.

Gordon: Yes. Sorry. I still can't believe this.

Detective: So yes, as you say – Mrs O'Grady let you in. I saw that too. There was no sound on the CCTV, of course. But you seemed pretty agitated.

Gordon: Look, it...it was just something silly.

Detective: I like silly things. Tell me.

Gordon: She'd sold me something. A bottle of fake blood. It was no good, and...well, we had words.

Detective: And about five minutes later you were seen leaving the shop.

Gordon: Yes.

Detective: Which is useful to our investigation. Because the body was discovered this morning at 9am, and our guy puts the time of death at somewhere between around 6pm and 8pm last night. Which makes you pretty much the last person to see her alive.

Gordon: Oh my God. I know how this must look, but...

Detective: Don't worry. Thing is, she never locked the shop after you left. So to be honest, anybody could have just wandered in after you and killed her.

Gordon: Yes, yes of course they could.

Detective: Except they didn't. Not according to the CCTV.

Gordon: Oh.

Detective: So maybe she just forgot to lock up, and somebody snuck in the back door, leaving no trace of a break-in. Or maybe, just maybe, after you left, she was in no fit state to lock up.

Gordon: I never touched her! I swear!

Detective: Relax, I believe you. No, really, I do. You seem like a nice man. Though I must confess, when I was watching the CCTV, I couldn't help noticing. That's quite a nasty temper you've got on you, isn't it?

Gordon: What? No! No...

Joyce, Margaret and Bernard enter with tea.

Detective: Is that something you three have ever noticed?

Bernard: What's that?

Detective: That Mr Ramsbottom here has quite a nasty temper.

Margaret: *(casually)* Oh, Christ yes. *(Glares from the others)* Sorry – have I said the wrong thing?

Detective: Joyce?

Joyce: No comment.

Bernard: Gordon just gets a little bit stressed when he's directing a new play, that's all.

Gordon: Yes, as Bernard says - that's just, well, that's just Joyce.

Detective: How do you mean?

Gordon: I don't mean anything by it, do I Joyce?

Joyce: No comment.

Gordon: Honestly – if you had to work with Joyce you'd shout at her too. Isn't that right, Margaret?

Margaret: What's that?

Gordon: I'm just saying – we all shout at Joyce, don't we?

Margaret: Well, not quite as loudly as you do, Gordon.

Gordon: What?

Margaret: Or as often.

Gordon: Oh, come on, Margaret! Who was it who said "Can't we just cut to the bit where I stab her?"

Joyce: Tea?

Detective: Thanks.

Margaret: And some biscuits.

Detective: Oh, I saw a poster for your new play on social media, by the way. The Joke Shop Murders. Quite ironic.

Gordon: Yes.

Detective: You do realise that this play can't go ahead tonight, don't you? Wouldn't look too good would it, given what's happened. Be seen as a bit of a sick joke.

Gordon: Of course. We'll cancel.

Bernard: We haven't sold any tickets any way.

Detective: Well, I'm sure there's a logical explanation to all of this, and I've no doubt we'll eventually find the killer elsewhere. So let's leave it there for now.

Gordon: Really?

Detective: Yes. Goodnight. Sleep well. *(He goes to leave but then stops just short of the exit, like a latterday Columbo)* Except...ah, yes. I knew something was bothering me. It's just the little matter of the clothes.

Gordon: Clothes?

Detective: Yes, I popped by your house earlier to see if you were there. No answer, so I went round the back. Couldn't help but notice a little garden bonfire. Seemed like you'd been burning some clothes.

Gordon: Yes, erm...yes. There's an explanation for that as well.

Detective: I'm listening.

Gordon: You see, the clothes were blood-stained. I mean I'd got I'd got some blood...fake blood, from the joke shop...all over me, and...this isn't going well is it?

Detective: Not especially. But as I say, don't worry. Because I thought to myself - there's an easy way to sort all this. I'll just take a little sample to the lab. That'll soon tell us if it's fake blood, I thought. So I did.

Gordon: Of course. Yes. Good thinking.

Detective: Yes, it was. Because, as it turned out, it wasn't.

Gordon: Wasn't what?

Detective: Fake. Turns out it was real blood, Mr Ramsbottom. Not only that, it was also an exact match to Mrs O'Grady.

Gordon: No!!

Bernard: Bloody hell!

Detective: Which, as you can imagine, puts me in a rather awkward position. Yes, it could be that the eccentric Mrs O'Grady was in the habit of selling her own blood in little bottles instead of fake blood, but well...that's a bit of a long shot isn't it? Can't see the jury buying that one. So, on the basis of available evidence, I'm sorry to say that, Gordon Ramsbottom, I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Julia O'Grady...

The others are shocked and all join in, talking over each other.

Gordon: No!!! Please!!!

Bernard: This is nonsense!

Margaret: Gordon's no killer.

Joyce: Leave him alone!

Detective: I'm sorry, I have no choice. I'm also arresting you for constant bullying....

Gordon: Bullying?

Detective: ...and for scaring the crap out of Joyce the other day. It was, as Joyce pointed out at the time, totally unforgiveable.

Gordon: But...what? *(Turning to the others)* Is this...is this you lot?

The others look back, baffled.

Bernard: Not us - I swear.

Margaret: On my life, Gordon. We have no idea what's going on.

Gordon: *(turning back to the detective)* Who the hell are you?

Joyce: Gordon, this is my friend, Sam. He works with me.

Detective: *(flashing the lanyard ID again)* And to prove it, here's my library card.

Gordon: You...bastards!

Joyce: I promised myself...that I'd get you back, Gordon.

Gordon: *(flabbergasted)* But...I...you...excuse me, everyone. Sorry. I'm feeling a just little bit...damp.

Bernard: Could be worse, Gordon.

Gordon: I fear it may be, Bernard. Give me a moment.

Gordon exits to the toilet.

Bernard: This was all your doing, Joyce?

Joyce: I thought this time he'd gone too far. Time to teach him a lesson.

Margaret: Well, yes - agreed, Joyce. But why didn't you at least let us in on it?

Joyce: No offence, Margaret, but as you yourself said - pretending is a form of acting, and I needed it to be convincing.

Margaret: Touché.

Joyce: Anyway, thank you for sticking up for me last night, Bernard.

Bernard: No problem.

Joyce: But I can stick up for myself.

Bernard: So I see. That was amazing, Joyce. And as for you, young man – when it comes to playing convincing coppers, I take my hat off to you. *(He removes his plastic helmet).*

Detective: Thanks.

Margaret: Yes, bravo, Sam. He's a very talented actor, Joyce. Why haven't you introduced us to him before?

Joyce: Because he's a very talented actor.

Margaret: Fair cop.

Gordon enters sheepishly.

Bernard: Feeling better, Gordon?

Gordon: Yes, thank you. Let's just say that I'll be adding another pair of underpants to my garden bonfire.

Margaret: Lovely.

Joyce: Are you angry, Gordon?

Gordon: Angry? No, Joyce. In fact, I have just been meditating, upon the throne of life. And my conclusion is...I deserved that. So, no hard feelings. In fact, as the police are here, I think it's confession time. Fact is, last week I had a rather worrying scan at the hospital – it all rather played on my mind and made me far more tense than usual. It seems I took it out on my friends, and indeed poor old Mrs O'Grady. That was very wrong of me, so my apologies to you all.

Joyce: Oh, Gordon!

Joyce runs, blarting, to hug Gordon.

Gordon: Don't be silly, Joyce, you weren't to know.

Margaret: Oh, Gordon, I'm sorry – you can swap your Red Letter voucher for a hot air balloon ride or something. Whatever's on your bucket list.

Gordon: Thank you, Margaret – I might just do that. But before you all start showering me with gifts and tears, let me say that this morning I

received a letter from the hospital, and it was good news, so all's well that ends well.

Bernard: Good for you, Gordon.

Gordon: And so right now, my overriding emotion, apart from sheer relief that I'm not going to end my days in prison, of course, is actually one of pride.

Margaret: Pride?

Gordon: Yes, Margaret. Pride in my little team here. The way you stage-managed this whole thing was nothing short of magnificent. Yes, if tonight proved anything at all, it proved that you lot can act very convincingly indeed when you need to. In fact, Bernard and Margaret, I have to say I thought you two were exceptionally good.

Bernard: That's because we didn't know, Gordon.

Gordon: Really?

Margaret: Nope. I'd love to take the credit. But it was all Joyce.

Gordon: Ah. It seems I've put my foot in it again, haven't I, Joyce.

Joyce: Yes. But that's probably still the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Gordon.

Gordon: Yes, it probably is.

Detective: Well, case dismissed - I'd best be off.

Joyce: Thanks, Sam.

Detective: Pleasure.

Joyce: See you Monday.

Gordon: *(approaching as if for a private word)* Young man - now I've discovered that you do actually work with Joyce, be honest – do you sometimes shout at her as well?

Detective: We work in a library, Mr Ramsbottom. We're not allowed to shout. *(Confidentially)* But, between me and you, I do occasionally have to whisper to her... very tensely indeed. Nice to meet you.

Detective exits.

Gordon: Nice chap.

Margaret: Well, I don't want to spoil the party, Gordon, but...

Gordon: But what?

Margaret: We've got a play to do in half an hour.

Gordon: Oh, bugger! Places everyone!!

Bernard: Relax, Gordon – we’ve not sold any tickets – remember?

Gordon: True.

Margaret: (*peering to the back of the room*) Oh...hang on, scrap that.
Party of three just arrived on the door – looks like we’re on after all.

Gordon: Party of three – anybody we know?

Bernard: Looks vaguely familiar...

Gordon: Oh, dear. One of them is Maureen Connolly – theatre critic from the Little Grimley Gazette.

Bernard: Oh, yes. She hates us.

Margaret: With a vengeance. Especially you, Bernard.

Bernard: Yep.

Gordon: And the other lady is....if she’ll just turn round....oh, shit!

Joyce: Who is it?

Bernard: Mrs O’Grady from the joke shop.

Margaret: And if I’m not mistaken, the muscle-bound, tattooed Hell’s
Angel that’s with her...is her son.

Gordon: I’m not really in the mood for a murder tonight. Anybody fancy the pub?

Margaret: Mine’s a Bloody Mary.

Blackout. Music.