

# NO PEACE FOR THE WICKED

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by Martin Edwards

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**A**t first I don't realise that I am dead, let alone that someone has murdered me.

The truth begins to dawn after I wake. I feel lightheaded and glance at the time. Five o'clock! Sun streams in through the patio windows. I'm lying on the living-room settee, not my bed. I'm a poor sleeper at the best of times, but for once I've dozed off in midafternoon.

I have a vague memory of a mysterious dream, of melancholy paramedics carrying a body on a stretcher out through my own front door. They have thrown a sheet over the deceased, but I recognise the floral slippers peeping out from beneath the makeshift shroud. They are identical to a pair which were an unwanted present from my nephew, Malcolm. I wear them around the house when I can't be bothered to put on anything nicer.

Surely that corpse can't be mine? What are strangers doing in my home? There are laws about trespass. I should know; I used to be a bailiff.

An English widow's bungalow is her castle. Especially in Autumn Shades. It's not so much a retirement village as a rural idyll populated—at least in the brochure and online video tour—by friendly, vibrant, and unusually attractive senior citizens enjoying undisturbed tranquillity.

The current president of the U.K.'s legendary Detection Club, Martin Edwards received the highest honor in British Crime writing in 2020, the Diamond Dagger Award. He had previously won a Best Short Story Dagger and a Dagger in the Library award. And that's just for his fiction. For his scholarly work *The Golden Age of Murder* he received the Edgar, Agatha, and Macavity awards. †

The marketing guff waxes lyrical about the restaurant, bistro, vitality pool, putting green, steam room and sauna, hair and beauty salon, craft room, cinema, and gym complete with cardio wall. All the talk is of independence, community, and exciting new friendships. Not an intimation of mortality to be found, provided you overlook the sinister references to peace of mind coming from the availability of support and personal care 24/7 “as your needs change.”

My late husband Dave was a builder. After he fell off a ladder—trying to fix the roof while the sun was shining, a pastime advocated by politicians but dangerous with a broken rung—I sold our house and moved here, to the end of a cul-de-sac called Sylvan Fields. I didn't see it as

a one-way ticket to the grave. Plenty of life in the old girl yet.

Now, though, I feel dizzy, and somehow not myself.

A key rattles in the lock, and I go into the hall. A large mirror hangs on the wall and, out of habit, I check to see that my hair is tidy and see . . .

Nothing.

I'm simply not there. Surely I'm not still dreaming?

I'm not one to panic, but I tremble as the front door opens. Val, my next-door neighbour and closest friend, marches in. Why didn't she ring the bell?

"Hey, Val, don't mind me!" I say, unable to resist a touch of sarcasm.

She doesn't mind me at all. In fact, she ignores me altogether and heads straight for the kitchen. She goes to the wall cupboard and grabs from a top shelf the jar of homemade chutney that she brought last weekend. I haven't touched it, because, to be honest, I can't bear the jams, marmalades, and assorted preserves she constantly foists on me. Her heart is in the right place, but Waitrose do these things so much better. I donate Val's offerings to the food bank. One has to do one's bit for those less fortunate than oneself.

She presses the jar to her formidable bosom like a film star clutching an undeserved Academy Award. Her relief is as plain as the nose on her face. It's a large, curving nose which reminds me of the eagle in *The Muppet Show*. Once I upset her by asking if she'd considered surgery. Pardonable curiosity between friends, but she took it badly.

"What's up?" My tone is provocative. She's never had the nerve to say so, but I know she hates it when I poke fun at her. Like the little boy in *Alice*, I only do it to annoy, because I know it teases. "Don't tell me you were afraid you'd poisoned me!"

Again she takes no notice, as if she

hasn't heard. I need to make sense of what is happening, so I block her exit from the kitchen.

She walks straight through me.

It takes a lot to shock me, but I defy anyone not to be shaken by the discovery that they no longer exist in human form.

A tentative knock on the door. Val stops in her tracks. A look of panic crosses her excessively powdered face. She tries to stuff the jar of chutney up her jumper, before wisely thinking better of it. Buxom is all very well, but there are limits.

Again a key sounds in the lock. This time Trevor comes in.

Trevor, my other next-door neighbour, who also has a key to the bungalow, "just in case." Trevor, whose proposal of marriage I turned down forty-eight hours ago. A retired pharmacist, he dispenses nuggets of homespun wisdom as liberally as he once dished out antibiotics. As well as plenty of other pills, according to malicious gossip.

How bitterly I regret pretending to be interested in his views on politics, climate change, religion, foreign travel, sport, and everything else under the sun. He interpreted civility as fawning adoration. The prospect of an eternity of listening to him drone on is as enticing as a lifetime of penal servitude in North Korea. He takes rejection badly, since he labours under the delusion that he is quite a catch. I suspect he had an eye on my nest egg. Dave suffered from a chronic phobia about paying tax, and he left me very comfortably off.

I put my hands on my hips and stick out my tongue.

"Trevor, what's wrong?" Val demands.

He shakes his head. "For a moment, it was like Polly was there, standing right next to you. Gave me quite a turn. Ever so spooky."

He says this without irony. I groan, but neither of them hears.

"Oh, Trevor, don't upset yourself!" Brazenly, she squeezes his hand. "You need time to grieve. It's not surprising that . . . your mind plays tricks."

"I thought I smelled her perfume."

The eagle nose wrinkles. "That awful scent of hers was so strong, traces are bound to linger, even now they have . . . taken her away."

Trevor makes a sobbing noise, but his heart isn't in it. His eyes are dry. They glint with calculation.

"That jar of chutney?"

"Oh, this?" She looks at the jar with its cellophane covering as if startled to find it in her free hand. "It's freshly made. It . . . seems a shame to waste it."

He looks at her thoughtfully, and Val releases his hand.

"So what brings you here?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm on a similar errand." He coughs. "I gave Polly some stuff for the garden."

Her eyes narrow. "Some kind of pest killer?"

"Actually, yes. She was having trouble with wasps."

This is the first I've heard of it.

Val says, "I see."

"In the circumstances, I thought . . ."

"Yes, of course." They look into each other's eyes. "We don't want any misunderstandings. People getting the wrong end of the stick."

It's bad enough to discover that I'm dead, but I'm rapidly coming to the conclusion that I'm the victim of foul play. Never mind the aches and pains of age, I've always been as fit as a flea. If I'm destined for an early grave, it's because someone decided to send me there.

Trevor puts his hand on her shoulder. "It must have been dreadful for you, coming in and finding her like that. I know you two were very close."

Val dabs at the corner of her eye. "Such a terrible shock! I thought she'd died in her sleep. Mind you, she didn't look at peace. Not that she ever did. I don't wish to speak ill of the dead . . ."

"Perish the thought!" Trevor says hastily.

". . . but she did have a hide like a rhinoceros."

I feel my temper rising. Perhaps I am thick-skinned, but you need to be robust if you work as a bailiff and you're married to a tiresome philanthropist like Dave.

"I hate to admit it," Trevor says, "but you're not far off the mark. Polly was a . . . character."

"You can say that again. When I rang that nephew of hers to break the news, he couldn't believe she'd gone. He thought she'd outlast us all."

The two of them giggle like conspirators. Malcolm is my late sister's son. Both his parents died in a plane crash last year, leaving him as my only close relative. He had a spell in the police, but that didn't work out. Since then he's drifted from job to job. I fell out with him when he didn't pay back some money he'd borrowed, but a few weeks ago he finally paid up. Since then he's made quite a fuss of me. Says he regrets his previous "poor choices," and mixing with "the wrong crowd." The truth is, I've always had a soft spot for him. In some ways, he reminds me of myself.

Val purses her lips. "I suppose he is her heir."

"I expect so." Trevor sounds forlorn.

"Of course," she adds, "it would have been different if the two of you had got married."

"Oh," Trevor says. "There was never any chance of that."

This is a shameful lie, and I let out a shriek of rage. Trevor twitches with anxiety. He claims to be a sensitive

soul; unlikely as it seems, perhaps there is something in it. He seems aware of my presence in a way that Val does not.

"Seriously?" She can't help smiling. "I thought the two of you were about to name the day."

He shakes his head. "I was happy to help Polly out in the garden, but that's all there was to it as far as I was concerned. She became possessive. Read too much into simple acts of generosity."

Val peers at him like a quizmaster awaiting an answer to the million-pound question. "When you took her to that cottage for the weekend, I was certain . . ."

"I'm partial to the Cotswolds," he says defensively. "I simply mentioned that a spot of company was always welcome, and she invited herself. She really was rather bumptious. Not to mention demanding."

Outrageous! He begged me to go along. As for *demanding*, I don't recall any complaints, except when he thought the neighbours were eavesdropping. I was only trying to boost his morale. He'd paid for the trip, after all, and he isn't one to put his hand in his own pocket. I was simply fulfilling my side of an unspoken bargain. Paying my dues. With hindsight, I reckon he saw that weekend as investing for the future. He talked a lot about investments, actually. Interrogating me about what I did with my money. Recommending this fund and that. His favourite motto is: "You have to speculate to accumulate."

"That's not the way Polly told it," Val says.

"Polly! She looked after number one." He bites his lip. "Very different from you, if I may say so. I always admired the way you put up with her rudeness and bad temper."

Val lowers her eyelashes and

murmurs, "She wasn't easy, God rest her soul."

"You can say that again." He swallows. "She treated you like dirt. Accepted your generous gifts and then sneered at you behind your back."

"She did?"

He sighs. "When I pleaded with her to treat you with the respect you deserve, she lashed me with that sharp tongue of hers."

"Polly never appreciated you. I used to tell her, he's a highly educated man, a walking encyclopaedia. Any woman would be thrilled to find such a soul mate." Val simpers. "Especially at her age."

Disgraceful. She's barely twelve months younger than me. And though I say it myself, she's worn much less well. Too much homemade jam, if you ask me.

"You're very kind," he says. "You're . . . all the things she never was."

Including *alive*, I reflect.

Val grabs both his hands. "You poor love. You need someone who appreciates you."

He treats her to what I'm sure he believes is a soulful gaze, but before he can declare undying devotion, there is a knock on the door. Guilty as sin, they spring apart.

"Hello?" says a muffled voice through the letter box.

"The nephew?" Trevor whispers.

Val calls out in a bright tone, "Come in!"

As Malcolm crosses the threshold, he finds himself in an embrace that knocks the breath out of him.

"I'm so sorry, dear!"

Val's voice quivers with emotion. She really is a first-rate actress. I had no idea.

"Thanks." Malcolm frees himself from her grasp. He's pale, but he gives Trevor a knowing look. "Nice to see you again, matey."

Trevor looks uncomfortable, which I find puzzling. I didn't even realise they were acquainted. Neither of them has ever mentioned the other to me.

As they tuck into tea and biscuits, I loiter by the patio window. To say I'm inconspicuous is an understatement. Even Trevor seems oblivious to my presence.

"How do they think she died?" Malcolm asks.

"An overdose of some kind," Trevor says authoritatively.

I'm appalled, but Val merely nods.

"Heartbreaking," she moans. "I'm devastated. Truly devastated."

"You're not suggesting . . . ?" Malcolm begins.

Trevor interrupts. "I'm sure it was an accident. Polly had great trouble in sleeping. She must have taken something by mistake."

Val nods. "She was very careless. And hopelessly untidy. The state of that kitchen!"

"I suppose she got confused. Easily done."

"She was getting extremely forgetful, poor pet," Val says.

"Is that so?" Malcolm asks.

"I'd swear to it!" Val launches into a wildly exaggerated anecdote: "Only the other day . . ."

Disgusting! I refuse to listen. There's nothing wrong with my memory. Occasionally it suits me to feign amnesia about a shopping trip or an afternoon out, when I can't bear to spend any more time in her company. But to elevate a handful of excuses and white lies into some kind of incipient dementia is positively slanderous.

"There will need to be an inquest," Malcolm says.

"Formality," Trevor assures him. "Box-ticking bureaucracy. I play golf with the coroner, he hates stirring up trouble. Too hurtful for those left behind to mourn. What

happened to Polly is sad, but perfectly straightforward."

"A tragic mishap," Val says.

"To err is human," Trevor pronounces, "but unfortunately it can have fatal consequences."

Malcolm rubs his eyes, prompting Val to touch his hand in a gesture of sympathy.

"Don't upset yourself, dear."

"Polly was a remarkable woman." Trevor has a faraway look in his eyes, as if he's composing a eulogy.

"Bubbly and fun-loving," Val chips in.

Trevor outbids her. "Heart of gold."

"She knew her own mind," Malcolm says with masterly understatement. "She had bags of spirit."

And now I *am* a spirit! Helpless and invisible. Is there nothing I can do?

I think rapidly. At least I can solve my own murder.

The work of a bailiff wins you few friends, but it teaches you a thing or two about getting to the truth. Seeing through hard-luck stories, concentrating on what really counts. And I believe in people paying their debts.

The snag is that I have no memory of my last waking hours. I can't believe I suffered an accident. And I'd never take my own life. No question, someone helped me along the path to kingdom come.

But who?

Malcolm watches the others. He must wonder what they are doing here, but is there more to it? Does he suspect either of them of hastening my end?

Val asks, "What will you do with the bungalow, dear?"

He feigns indifference. "Oh, I don't know. It's too soon. Can't live in a retirement village, can I? This place will have to be sold."

"Makes sense," Trevor says. Why does he look pleased?

Time is short, I'm convinced. When Trevor first walked in, my presence definitely made an impression on him, but I'm fading fast. If I'm not quick, I'll go to my grave without knowing who killed me. I must find out and make sure they get their just deserts.

Who had a motive?

The prime suspects are drinking my tea and scoffing my custard creams.

Val detested me, and was jealous because Trevor hoped to marry me. She wants him for herself.

Trevor was furious when I turned him down. But is there more to his anger than simple pique?

His reference to an overdose makes me wonder about drugs. When Malcolm was in the police, did he hear those whispers about Trevor supplying addicts? Given his taste for risky speculation, perhaps he needed the money. And it's interesting that he's dimly aware of my presence—is this a sign of a guilty conscience?

What about the murder method?

I've never made a secret of my insomnia, or that I take lots of stuff to help me sleep. To cover up a murder, why not suggest I took an overdose? Either deliberately—the grieving widow who never settled in her new home—or by mistake—the disorganised old bat with a memory like a sieve.

Val might have seasoned the chutney with something toxic. Trevor may have found a way to introduce pest killer into my diet.

Malcolm coughs. "Excuse me a minute. Tummy trouble. Must be the shock of hearing the news."

He dashes out of the room, and I follow. One advantage of my phantom state is that locking the bathroom door doesn't keep me out. As soon as we are both inside, he opens the large cabinet on the wall, where I keep my medicines. Like most residents in

Autumn Shades, I have a formidable list of repeat prescriptions, and the shelves overflow with packets and bottles. He takes a bottle of my sleeping pills off the shelf and replaces it with an identical bottle from his pocket.

Breathing hard, Malcolm looks in the mirror. I'm at his side, purple with anger and a sense of betrayal. In the glass, I see only his crooked mouth, forming in a grin of triumph.

We return to the living room, to find Trevor enveloped in the capacious folds of Val's embrace.

"The poor chap has lost the love of his life!" she says to excuse herself. "He needs a hug. The simple warmth of human contact. The pain must be almost too much to bear."

I scream and try to give her the human contact she deserves by pulling her hair. But it's impossible. She can't see me or feel the touch of my fingers.

Whodunit?

Chances are, they're not sure themselves, but Malcolm's jiggery-pokery with the medicine bottle is the most practical method. Has he dabbled in illicit drugs? If he owes Trevor money, the proceeds of the bungalow sale would come in handy. Especially if Trevor himself is in hock to local drug barons.

Inheriting my house and money would solve Malcolm's problems. He had to move fast, in case I married Trevor.

I'm so glad now that I never got round to changing my will in my nephew's favour. Before he tried to worm his way back into my good books, I bequeathed everything to the food bank. It was the least I could do, after inflicting Val's rubbish on them.

Trevor stirs himself. "I don't mind saying, I'm rather peckish."

"You need a decent meal," Val

advises. "Do you good. Shall we go for a bite together?"

"The bistro?" he suggests.

"Let's try that gourmet restaurant in town. Push the boat out. It's a sad day, but life goes on. We can toast Polly. It's what she would have wanted."

Nothing of the kind! But I can't see myself becoming a spectre at the feast. I feel dreadfully weak.

"I'll get on my way," Malcolm says.

"Can I offer you a lift?" Trevor says.

"Cheers." They exchange glances and I guess they intend to talk about money. The repayment of a debt.

I follow them outside. Trevor's car is in the drive, and they all jump in.

As he switches the engine on, I understand the truth.

They all set out to kill me. Only Malcolm succeeded, but morally each of them is a murderer.

They ought to pay.

I step out into the road, in front of the car, my hand raised.

Horror flashes into Trevor's eyes. He's seen me!

Or at least something.

He swerves and the car crashes into a spreading oak, centrepiece of Autumn Shades's environmentally friendly planting scheme.

As the car explodes into flames, I feel myself slipping away into nothingness.

The death of a ghost.

I've collected my last debt, and my conscience is deplorably clear. It's simply not true that there's no peace for the wicked. I won't be tormented by their spirits. Just as Dave never haunted me after I sawed through that rung of his ladder. ●

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