

Crossword
A ONE ACT ABOUT MURDER

by

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Crossword

Characters:

Maureen, 70s

Ben, 20s

Time: the present

Scene: Maureen's kitchen, winter morning

A table and two chairs R. On the table is newspaper, pen, teapot, mug. A door L is the back door. USC is a window with kitchen unit beneath. A second door R leads to the hallway and the rest of the house. A stool DSL. Clock on the wall showing 11:35.

Enter BEN

Ben Hello! Anybody in?

He looks around before pausing at the table, looking at the crossword. He picks up the pen and starts to fill in a clue. O/S there is the sound of a lavatory flushing. BEN looks towards door R, begins to move L and MAUREEN enters from door R.

Maureen Oh. Where did you spring from?

Ben Mrs Willis! I didn't / mean to—

Maureen Scared the living daylights out / of me—

Ben Didn't / think—

Maureen You can't just walk into people's houses.

Ben No, / I—

Maureen You're early anyway.

Ben Eh?

Maureen Early. Wasn't expecting you for another half hour or more. Look.
(She points to the clock.) Twelve till two I booked. Flaming supermarkets. Can't get anything right.

Ben I can go away if you like, come back later?

Maureen No you're here now – you better bring it in.

Ben On table?

Maureen Of course.

(MAUREEN moves to fold the newspaper as BEN exits L.)

You've started the cryptic one.

Ben *(Off)* I prefer cryptics. Straight one's too easy.

Maureen Cheeky monkey!

Ben *(Off)* Why d'you book different time anyway?

Maureen Doctor's appointment. Took your advice.

(BEN returns with several bags of groceries, closing door.)

What are those? Run out of boxes?

Ben Oh aye, er, they're upgrading. Won't get new ones for couple of days.

Maureen Typical. Can't leave anything alone can they? Still, how've you been?

Ben Oh you know, usual.

Maureen You look frozen. Look at your hands. Don't they issue you with gloves?

Ben You must be joking.

Maureen Surprised you could hold the pen to write.

Ben Well, had to do one didn't I?

Maureen How do you know how to do cryptics?

Ben Me dad used to do 'em, learnt me basics.

Maureen Complete gobbledegook if you ask me.

Ben They're alright once you know what you're doing. So, what did doctor say?

Maureen Old age.

Ben He said that?

Maureen Might as well have done. Might just as well have added there's nothing we can do for you, you're clapped out and ready for the scrapheap.

Ben Nah, plenty more miles on your clock yet.

Maureen Oh are there? I'm old enough to be your grandmother.

Ben Never! You're younger than me nan.

Maureen How do you know?

Ben Well, you look it any road.

Maureen You're very sweet. Kettle's not long boiled. Suppose you're in a /
hurry . . .

Ben Love one.

Maureen Would you?

Ben Love a cuppa. Or coffee. Ta.

Maureen Oh. Right. Good.

(MAUREEN switches on kettle.)

Ben Well, it's the end of me . . . you're last on me list. Knocking off, so
might as well eh?

Maureen Give us a chance for a proper chat then. You could stay for lunch if
you like.

Ben Oh thanks.

Maureen It does look cold out.

Ben Freezing.

Maureen Still, the van must be warm.

Ben Oh aye.

Maureen *(looking at packet)* What have I got this for?

Ben Don't you want it? I can always take it back. It's no problem.

Maureen No, it's ok, I'm sure I can munch my way through two pounds of
cheese in a week. *(goes back to kettle)* Did you say coffee?

Ben Please.

Maureen Are you in the habit of just walking into people's houses then?

Ben Eh? No! I mean, well—

Maureen Gave me a real fright. Milk? Sugar?

Ben Yes please, two sugars. Didn't want to leave it all on doorstep. For
you to trip over. I were only thinking / of you.

Maureen I'm teasing. You know I'm always pleased to see you. Do you want
to stay for lunch? We can have that liver. Where is it? There's
always too much just for me.

Ben Liver? Ah . . .

Maureen What's up?

Ben I didn't put any . . . I mean, there isn't . . . I think we must be out of
it.

Maureen Typical. I wonder what else you're out of. There's always something
isn't there?

Ben I think it depends when you order. And who's doing packing. Some
of 'em can't read that well. You know, foreigners and that.

Maureen How long have you worked there now?

Ben 'Bout six month.

Maureen How's it going? You seem happy enough.

Ben Ah well, you know, it's a job.

Maureen You've always got a smile on your face.

Ben Just happy to be out and about.

Maureen And it was work brought you down here?

Ben Aye.

Maureen Not a young lady then?

Ben Eh? Oh no. Just work. Don't suppose I'll be doing it forever.

Maureen Big plans eh?

Ben Don't know 'bout that. *(Pause)* When I were little, I wanted to work
for Pixar.

Maureen The DIY place?

Ben No, Pixar. Make computer-animated films. 'Toy Story'?

Maureen Never heard of it.

Ben I love it, me. I wanted to be Buzz Lightyear when I were little. "To
infinity and beyond". *(Pause)* Don't sound same wi' Sheffield
accent. Saw it when I were like five. Fantastic.

Maureen I used to like the cinema.

Ben I still do.

Maureen Worked in the Regal on King Street when I was your age.

Ben The pub?

Maureen Not back then. It was a huge cinema. Had two levels – stalls and circle. The cheap seats were one and six. One shilling and sixpence. About seven pence in new money.

Ben More like seven quid now.

Maureen I remember the first film my husband ever took me to. 'Lawrence of Arabia'. Peter O'Toole, beautiful man. When he picked me up, he looked so dapper.

Ben Peter O'Toole?

Maureen Silly boy. My husband. Ron. He'd combed his hair, shined his shoes, pressed his suit. We'd known each other all our lives, you see. Lived just round the corner. Used to play together all the time. He was the same age as my brother and I used to tag along. Then one day he asked me out.

(Pause)

Best get on.

(She gets up and continues to put her shopping away. BEN looks at the paper. Pause)

Ben Murder.

Maureen I beg your pardon?

Ben One down – it's – "Kill the crows, six letters" – it's murder.

Maureen Why "murder"? *(looking at a tin)* Do you know, I definitely didn't order this. Are you sure this is my order?

Ben Aye.

Maureen Where's the whatcha-ma-callit? The checklist.

Ben *(quickly)* I can take it back. I can take anything back. *(Pause)* It's double meaning – another word for kill is murder and a group of crows is a murder.

Maureen How on earth do you know that?

Ben Oh, you know . . . you pick things up don't you?

Maureen I suppose you do, yes. I get a lot off the internet these days.

Ben Do yer?

Maureen Yes, I do a lot of – what do you call it? – surfing. Ha! Hark at me! Surfing! Makes me sound like something out of 'Hawaii 5-0'.

Ben Hawaii what?

Maureen Before your time. It's amazing how you can walk around places on the other side of the world now. Places I've never been. Places I'll never visit now. Not really.

Ben Still time.

Maureen For you maybe.

Ben And you. You're still young.

Maureen And you're still full of nonsense. *(Pause)* Had a wander round Korea the other day – that's where Ron did his national service.

Ben Your husband?

Maureen *Ex*-husband.

Ben Is he . . . ?

Maureen What? Dead?

Ben Er . . .

Maureen Might just as flaming well be . . .
(Pause)

Ben Can't imagine doing national service.

Maureen Could do with it now. They wouldn't get in so much trouble then.

Ben Who?

Maureen Teenagers.

Ben What teenagers?

Maureen All teenagers. It's on the news every day.

Ben We're not all like that you know!

Maureen You're not a teenager.

Ben No, well, when I were one I mean.
(Pause)

 You got kids?

Maureen Shouldn't you be getting back to work?

Ben End of shift, like I said.
(Pause)

Maureen A son. Michael.

Ben See him much?

Maureen Not recently.

Ben I haven't seen me mum for a while neither. What with her up there and me down here. He local?

Maureen Depends what you call local.

Ben Well, you know – in town.

Maureen Yes. Are you this nosy with all your customers?

Ben It's not nosy. Just interested. I didn't / mean to—

Maureen Is that what they call "customer relations"? Get to know people, pry into their lives, find out all you can about them, find out what they like, what they don't like, what they might like? Then you can go back to your manager and say "I reckon that Mrs Willis, she'd be interested in this or that or something else", then you try selling it to me, forcing it on me when I don't really want it, making me spend money I haven't got.

Ben No, that's not it! I didn't mean anything by it. I just wanted, / you know . . .

Maureen Just wanted what?

Ben I were just being friendly, that's all.

Maureen Well, there's friendly and there's prying.

Ben I don't talk to many people. I find it difficult, what with . . .

Maureen What? What with what?

Ben Nothing.

Maureen Come on, what were you going to say?

Ben No, I just meant . . . with me being new round here, new to this town. I don't know many people. And you at least talk to me when I drop stuff off . . . let me help you with crossword . . .

Maureen I'll talk to anybody.

Ben Most of 'em just grunt.

Maureen Always have done.

Ben Half of 'em don't even let me bring boxes in.

Maureen There's been plenty of other delivery men over the years that I've chatted to.

Ben Alright.

Maureen You're nothing special you know.

Ben I said alright!

(Pause)

Maureen Find it hard to make friends do you?

Ben S'pose so.

Maureen Why's that, do you think?

Ben Now who's prying? *(Pause)* Don't know.

Maureen You seem a friendly enough young man.

Ben I'm alright at small talk. But I don't like talking about big stuff.

Maureen Maybe you're like me – you value your privacy.

Ben Mebbe.

Maureen *(sitting at table)* Ron and I used to have a lot of friends. He was in the police force. Very sociable, the police. Back in the 70s it seemed like we were always round someone's house, having a party.

Ben Oh aye, what sort of party?

Maureen Not the sort you're thinking of.

Ben What were I thinking?

Maureen Don't you play the innocent with me. I know exactly what you're thinking.

Ben I weren't thinking anything! *(Pause)* Keys in middle were it?

Maureen See! I knew that's what you were thinking.

Ben Car keys in pot. That's what me mum said it were like in 70s. She reckoned me Nan and Grandad were into all that.

Maureen Into all what?

Ben You know, swinging.

Maureen We called it wife-swapping.

Ben Ah! So you were into it! Thought there were a twinkle in your eye.

Maureen Don't talk nonsense!

Ben Last party I went to were a mate's eleventh. We went to see 'Monsters Inc'. *(Pause)* Have you always lived here? In this town?

Maureen Born and raised.

Ben You must know a lot of people then?

Maureen Did. Everyone always seems to be moving these days. Lost count of how many new neighbours I've had in the last few years.

Ben I don't know my neighbours.

Maureen Where do you live?

Ben Green Trees estate. Bedsit.

Maureen What's it like?

Ben Oh, you know . . .

Maureen Small?

Ben Could say that.

Maureen It seems to be in the papers a lot, that place.

Ben Aye it's not nice. Lots of druggies, scroungers, you know. Funny name for it an' all – Green Trees. Only green trees are the ones on signs. And they've been covered in graffiti.

Maureen You won't be there forever though will you? I'm sure you'll start working your way up the ladder.

Ben Mebbe.

Maureen You seem a bright young man. After all, you can do cryptic crosswords.

Ben Just a matter of knowing rules.

Maureen Sounds like life doesn't it?

Ben What?

Maureen Just a matter of knowing the rules. *(Pause)* Hark at me, sitting here talking to someone young enough to be my grand— how old are you anyway?

Ben Twenty-three.
(Pause)
Are you lonely?

Maureen What sort of question's that?

Ben Sorry. Fault of mine. Always saying wrong / thing

Maureen What's lonely? I live alone, if that's what you mean.

Ben How long for?

(Pause)

Maureen Ron walked out nineteen years ago. Never spoken to him since.

Ben How long were you married?

Maureen Listen, how long have I known you? Five minutes?

Ben I've been coming here for weeks now. Months.

Maureen Yes, but I don't *know* you do I? Not really.

Ben No, but I thought we, you know, got on.

Maureen And you think that gives you the right to ask me all these personal questions?

Ben I'm sorry. Always putting me foot in it. Mum were always telling me to watch what I said.

(Pause)

Maureen We were married for twenty nine years if you must know.

Ben Must have been tough when he left.

Maureen You don't know the half of it.

Ben I know a bit – me mum and dad split up when I were thirteen.

Maureen Not the same is it? Ever had a girlfriend?

Ben Sort of. When I were younger. Kirsty her name were. Lived next door. We used to play together.

Maureen How old were you?

Ben Five, six.

Maureen Not a real girlfriend then.

Ben She had blonde hair and her mum were always doing it in different styles. One day her mum found me taking a biscuit out of biscuit jar without asking and she told me mum and they had an argument and then I were sort of banned from going round there again. Still saw her at school, like, but it weren't the same. *(Pause)* You didn't answer me question.

Maureen What question?

Ben If you're lonely.

Maureen Why do you want to know?

Ben I were wondering – and say no if you want —

Maureen Thank you, I will.

Ben You don't know what I'm asking yet. *(Pause)* I were wondering if you wanted a lodger.

Maureen A lodger?

Ben Well, you live alone in this big house—

Maureen It's not that big.

Ben Bigger than mine.

Maureen I'm perfectly happy on my own.

Ben Really?

Maureen I've lived alone for nineteen years. Why would I want to change that? Having to worry about where you are or if you're home for tea.

Ben Would you worry?

Maureen Of course I'd worry. When you're a mother you never stop worrying.

Ben I'd be no trouble. Honest. I'll do me own washing, ironing—

Maureen I should think you blessed well would!

Ben And I can watch telly in me room. I'm used to that.

Maureen Why now?

Ben Eh?

Maureen Why are you asking me now?

Ben I hate where I am.

Maureen I'm not surprised.

Ben It seemed alright at first.

Maureen What makes you think I need a lodger anyway? Or want one for that matter?

Ben Nothing really. I just thought you'd like company, you know someone to talk to in evenings. And I could help around house, like. You know, fixing things.

Maureen What things?

Ben Anything. God, you're not making this very easy for me are you?

Maureen Why should I? You're the one who dreamed up this crackpot idea.

Ben It's not that crackpot. Seemed to make sense to me. You on your own, in this big house.

Maureen I keep telling you, it's not that big.

Ben How many bedrooms you got?

Maureen Three. But I need those for when—.

(Pause)

Ben When what? When your son visits? The one you hardly see?

Maureen That's none of your business.

Ben Anyway, he lives in town you said. So why would he stay?

Maureen It's not him I'm thinking of.

Ben He's got kids hasn't he? Sorry, I'm prying again.

Maureen Yes you are. Is that a Northern thing? Prying. Is that what comes of living on top of one another? You live so close in those flaming great tower blocks, you have to know each other's business. You can't help it.

Ben We didn't live in tower block. It weren't like that. We had a nice house, nice neighbours. *(Pause)* Look, I just want somewhere else to live, that's all. Better. Till I sort myself out. *(Pause)* And it'll be extra money for you.

Maureen I'll think about it.

Ben And I can help you with crossword more. I'll even learn you cryptic.

Maureen Who says I want to learn cryptic?

Ben But you'll think about it?

Maureen If you stop going on about . . . things that don't concern you.

Ben Thanks. You won't regret it.

Maureen I haven't said yes yet.

Ben Can I give you me mobile?

Maureen Why don't I just ring you at work? Or tell you when you deliver next week.

Ben Can't you tell me sooner? I might not . . . be delivering next week.

Maureen Holiday?

Ben I wish.

Maureen You do still work there, don't you?

Ben What? Course I do. What makes you say that?

Maureen Wait there.

(MAUREEN gets up and exits through door R.)

(Off) Where's the van?

Ben Round corner.

Maureen What corner?

Ben I meant down road.

Maureen *(entering)* What's going on?

Ben Nothing!

Maureen Are you in some sort of trouble? Well?
(Pause)

Ben I don't work there any more.

Maureen You— But what about the shopping? Where— Did *you* buy it? *(BEN nods)* As a bribe I suppose. Thought you'd buy your way into this house, is that it?

Ben No! No, I didn't! I just wanted to do you a favour, that's all.

Maureen Why on earth would you want to do that?

Ben I like you. I were just being friendly.

Maureen Why did you lose your job? I thought it was virtually impossible to sack anyone these days.

Ben It's not impossible. I didn't do owt wrong if that's what you're thinking.

Maureen So why then?

Ben They just said they didn't need me . . . it were seasonal.

Maureen And without a job you might lose your home is that it?

Ben Summat like that.

Maureen Well, why didn't you say?

Ben Don't know really.

Maureen Can't have you on the street can we?

Ben No.

Maureen I'd need references.

Ben Course.

Maureen After all, I hardly know you.

Ben Aye, course.

Maureen I could sort out the back room for you. You'd like it up there – looks out over the garden. And you can have friends over.

Ben I just want somewhere that isn't the street.