

Death's Waiting Room

by Clare Fletcher

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I'm sitting in the lounge, pretending to read a large-print Agatha Christie, when that slimy young orderly sidles up to the Matron.

'There's a body in the library, ma'm.'

'Oh, not again, Giles?'

He nods. Matron rolls her watery eyes skyward behind her neat, round spectacles and sighs in exasperation.

'They do keep dropping off there, don't they? Poor souls. Have you closed off the room?'

He nods again.

'Let's clean it up before any of the others get the wobbles.'
she says.

Matron sets a brisk pace and the orderly follows. Their entire conversation has taken place at full volume but when I look around the lounge no one else has reacted. They're engrossed in their bridge, Monopoly, jigsaws and droopy crochet and giant word jumbles. Or, if they're Marguerite Bosman, their own reflection in the darkening window panes.

I'm still learning most people's names but she's easy to remember, forever preening at her perm, eyebrows drawn on a half-inch higher than the real ones. Always touching the chaps on the arm while laughing a laugh someone must have once told her was 'musical'. But forget Marguerite. There's a body in the library. I leave my book on the pouffe and shuffle as fast as I can behind Matron. The Miss Marple stories are always so boring.

I'm in a long hallway, hung with dusty portraits of long-dead landed gentry, with the slightly-off chins and noses of the densely bred. No doubt any paintings of real value were stripped before the family moved out, but it's still an impressive prospect. My slippers shuffle along the carpet, a threadbare but genuine Persian; I just catch sight of Giles turning into a door at the end of the hallway.

I never wanted to come here but after I buried Bill they didn't give me a choice.

'Relax,' they said. 'Let someone else cook and clean for you. Meet some other people with similar interests. You can catch up on your reading, and stroll around those beautiful Sloxley Manor gardens!'

I'll admit I was excited to see the inside of the building. When I was a girl we'd cycle out to the estate from the village and hide in the hedgerows to catch a glimpse of the Sloxley family. They were like celebrities to us: the old Dowager in her dark silks,

the Lord in his tweeds and shooting hat, the Lady draped in furs. She must have had dozens of hats, we decided. We were desperate to see her jewels.

They went the way of so many of their ilk; their grand house crumbling around them, a whiff of scandal, a modern townhouse in the city and a quick sale to developers. They made it the latest in a lucrative franchise of retirement homes, luring us in with the promise of old-world glamour and lush lawns. The curiosity was enough to get us in the door, and that was usually all our sons and daughters needed to put the old family home on the market to cover the astronomical fees and tell themselves they'd done the right thing.

When I peer around the doorframe, at first glance the library is a peaceful haven: stuffed couches and walls lined with books. A huge portrait of the late Dowager Sloxley in haughty profile glares down over one wall of bookcases, the old first editions replaced with Reader's Digest volumes. There's even a fire going in the hearth.

But then I see the toes of poor Wilma's slippers pointing up at the sky, Giles bent over preparing to roll her onto a gurney. She'd be as light as a bird, all tiny bones and a puddle of fine knit wool.

Matron tuts and pulls a sheet over Wilma after they snap the gurney up to waist height. But the sheet catches on the

door frame as they wheel her out past where I've pressed myself behind the grandfather clock. I wish I could say she looks peaceful but her face is contorted with fear.

When Matron and Giles are out of sight I creep into the library. I wonder what Wilma was doing in her last moments, whether she knew what was coming. It's hardly the great unspoken in here – death. Gallows humour is the order of the day, along with a steady stream of laxatives and long litanies of aches and ailments. This is the first body since I moved in two weeks ago but of course it won't be the last. They don't call it death's waiting room for nothing.

Something catches under my slipper and I stumble, suddenly nose to the carpet where Wilma breathed her last. Falls aren't anything to laugh at any more. Each time, I lie there for a moment in stillness, doing an audit of bones and joints, waiting for something to go really wrong. Then I imagine Bill looking down at me (*Get up Vi, you silly woman*) and dust myself off, sheepish. I realise what tripped me, scooping up the tiny shoe from the Monopoly set, and put it in my pocket absentmindedly.

'Poor Wilma,' Marguerite sobs at the breakfast table. Barry Jones puts a leathery arm around her, while Milton Hall offers his hanky from the seat opposite. Spiros arrives with fresh toast for her. Jessica Crank huffs and rolls her eyes. Healthy men

are a precious commodity in here and Marguerite doesn't make herself any friends by monopolising them.

'Cat biscuits!' yelps Annette. She floated free from any tether to reality long before I arrived. I saw her massaging butter into the hallway curtains earlier that morning. We'd both watched the cleaners working over Wilma's room, ready for the next 'client' from the waiting list.

'I don't think I can go into the library alone.' Marguerite snuffles.

'I'll escort you, doll.' Barry's many years of sunbathing have left him looking like a sentient Chesterfield. He still strips down at the first sign of sunshine and lays out on the lawn in his Y-fronts. You'd think he and Marg would be a good match, two randy old goats, but neither of them wants to settle down. He shoots me a wink, then Jessica.

'I'm here any time you need a strong man to lean on.'

'Ridiculous man,' Jessica mutters.

As it turns out, Barry's not much use to anyone to lean on. Less than a week later Marguerite goes into the library and finds him spread-eagled on the floor.

'He seemed to be in rude health,' I say.

'He was definitely rude,' Jessica deadpans. I notice Marg playing with a trinket.

'What's that you've got there?'

'It was in Barry's hand, when I found him,' Marg says. She holds out her palm and it's the dog from the Monopoly set.



Matron senses me hovering outside her office door before I can come up with something to say.

'Something you needed, Violet?' she says, still facing her giant computer screen.

'I was just curious, after Wilma and Barry...'

She turns to give me her full attention then. Takes off her glasses, rubs the bridge of her nose. I would have told you she was in her forties but seeing her this way I realise she's older than I thought. I wonder what it's like for her, spending every day overseeing a cranky bunch of senior citizens, an unrelenting vision of all the boredom and indignity her future eventually holds.

'It can be hard, when you first arrive in a place like this, to be so confronted with how often people pass away,' she says with practiced gentleness. 'Some find comfort in the chapel, or we can help you organise to speak to a counsellor.'

I ask her if there's an investigation when someone dies.

'Of course, there's a lot of paperwork, whenever a client passes. We make sure no detail is missed, out of respect. Best practice is always our mission here at Sloxley Manor.'

'What happened to Barry? He seemed so ... vigorous.'

'I'm afraid I can't discuss details like that. But I can assure you that the doctor said he wouldn't have felt any pain.'

I scuff my slippers at the carpet. I feel like a schoolgirl at the headmistress' office; I can't find the words for what feels wrong.

'Why don't you go and have a cup of tea and a lie down, Mrs Smith? It can be very upsetting when you lose a friend.'



'Pirate knickers! Walk the plank you monkey cutlass!'

Annette's shrieking her nonsense at a more fevered pitch than usual.

'There's a parrot on his shoulder that repeats what he says! Shiver me timbers!'

When it doesn't let up, I follow her voice; I'm not the only one. By the time I arrive at the door of the library, Marguerite and Jessica are also there. We all see Annette shaking Spiros by the shoulders in the big wingback chair.

'Annette' Marguerite coos. 'Leave poor Spiros alone.'

Annette turns and we see that Spiros is no longer with us. His eyes are glassy, those hands that could have fixed anything just hang uselessly. Marguerite flings herself at his knees, keening, which makes Jessica roll her eyes. Giles trundles in with his gurney.

'Back to your rooms, please, ladies,' he says.

We all linger, until he begins to shoo us out. I catch a glint of something beside the chair, drop my handkerchief and make a show of stooping to pick it up. When I un-bunch the hanky back in my room, it's the Monopoly ship.



I don't know who I can trust in here. I wait my turn for the phone booth, dial my son.

'Something strange is going on,' I say.

He's barely listening to me, already congratulating himself for taking the call, calculating how long he can put off a visit.

'People keep dying.'

'Oh, Mum. It's just the sad reality of living in one of these places. People reach the end of their road.'

'I'm just not sure these are natural deaths. Think about it, Brian.' I say. 'It's the perfect crime. No one's surprised by finding a body. There's no investigation. Any possible witnesses are easily discredited.'

'Mum, are you feeling all right? I'll have to call the Matron about your medication.'

'They're leaving clues. They want to be discovered. If no one else is going to investigate, I'll have to do it.'



'Is it always like this?' I ask Milton in the lounge after dinner.

The sun's still streaming in the windows. They feed us in the middle of the afternoon. The meat changes but there are always grey peas stranded in a moat of gravy, around an unnatural mound of mashed potato. It took me a while to figure out what was so unsettling about the potato, until I saw the hairnetted kitchen staff plopping it onto each plate with an ice-cream scoop. Each day as they place the plate in front of me I hear Bill's voice in my head. *I'm old, not a farm animal. Give me something I can chew, for god's sake.*

'How'd yer mean,' Milton says. I lean in, lower my voice.

'Doesn't it seem like there have been an awful lot of deaths, recently? Already there is a new woman in Wilma's room. Deidre. She has a mobile phone with giant buttons, made me look at photos of her slack-jawed grandchildren on it.'

Milton shrugs.

'It's par for the course, love. Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Soon enough, death is just as boring as everything else in here. Now – shall we have a game?' He lifts the lid on the Monopoly box. I turn my shudder into a shake of the head.

'No, thank you.'

'That'd be right. Half the pieces are gone. I refuse to be an iron or a sodding thimble' Milton grumbles, pushing the box away.

'Budgerigar burlesque!' Annette crows.

'I'll have what she's having,' Milton says. 'It's like a bloody five ring circus in her mind. A sight more exciting than this load of busted board games. Poor old Barry and Spiros probably just died of boredom.'

It's got to be some kind of poison, I think. Something that leaves no marks, no trace. Just then raised voices across the room distract us both.

'Stop mooning away at your reflection in the window, you vain old cow!' Jessica yells.

'Excuse me for feeling a little introspective,' Marguerite shouts back tearfully. 'I'm mourning my poor friends, gone too soon. You should try a bit of empathy some time.'

'Mourning a bit of intrigue and flirting, more like.'

'How dare you!'

'Everyone knows they found Spiros with a pocketful of little blue pills,' Jessica says. 'No wonder his heart gave out. No doubt Barry slipped him a few from his stash but I wonder who led him to hope he'd get lucky?'

Marguerite gives a strangled scream and runs from the room as fast as her cane can carry her. So, not very fast. It's an excruciating wait for everyone else in the room to hold off gossiping until she's finally out in the hallway.

'Well, that was better than *Neighbours*,' Milton says.

'Why's Jessica always so surly?' I ask.

'I think she feels the boredom more than most. Apparently she used to be a hotshot chemical engineer, genius level. She's never forgiven her daughter for putting her in here. Sharp as a tack, she is.'

A chemist...

'I wonder if Marguerite needs a shoulder to cry on... Excuse me, Vi.'



It's Milton who finds Marguerite, her precious perm spilling over the writing desk by the library window where she's slumped. He's howling, the tiny silver racecar in his hand, when I get to the library. So much for being bored by death.

Jessica beat me to the library and so did Annette, pausing in her thoughtful licking of the wallpaper to glance at me as I enter.

'Come on Milton,' I say, trying to pull him to his feet.

'Giblets and goblets!' shrieks Annette.

The gurney rolls in.

'Out,' Giles sighs, herding us all into the hallway. Matron eyes me as I go, Milton leaning against my shoulder.

'You're never far from the drama, are you, Violet?' Matron says as she closes the door in my face. Neither is Jessica, I think.

'Good riddance to that preposterous peacock,' speaks the devil.

'She's barely cold, Jessica,' I hiss, as Milton bursts into fresh tears. Suddenly Annette stops and looks me directly in the eye.

'You'll be next,' she mutters, then looks away.

'What?' I gasp.

'A sturdy strap-on!' is her only response.



There's not much conversation at dinner. There are more new faces, people I haven't met yet. What's the point of learning their names? I'm pushing peas around my plate when Milton barks across the table: 'How's the investigation going, Vi?'

That gets everyone's attention.

'What investigation?' Jessica snaps.

'She thinks there's a serial killer,' Milton says. 'And I'm starting to believe her.' There's a ripple of whispers across the dining room.

'Poppycock!' says Jessica. 'What evidence do you have?'

'None, yet,' I have to admit. I force myself to hold her eye. 'But something's not right.'

'Tell em your theory about the Monopoly pieces,' Milton says, before I can shush him.

'Excuse me, I have to make a phone call,' I say, rushing out of the room.



'Brian? Oh bugger, it's Voicemail. Brian, it's Mum. Look, I've been exposed. The killer knows I'm looking for them. I need to figure this out before they take me out. If anything happens ... Don't forget to prune your father's apple tree every winter.'



I have to escalate the investigation. I decide on a stakeout. I stuff a bundle of my clothes under the bedsheets and sneak out into the library. I find a spot behind the wingback chair, against the window frame; some weak light trickles in the window and, once my eyes adjust to the gloom, I find I can see fairly well.

Odd, the fire's still going in here. It makes me drowsy; I don't know how long I doze. A lamp clicks on and I hear Milton muttering.

'Where is it? Matron said she saw my book in here but I can't think when I would have left it.' He shuffles around the room, and I hold my breath.

'Milton. It's late, dear. Let's get you back to bed.'

As Matron walks across the beam of lamplight her profile in silhouette is a perfect match for the portrait of old lady Sloxley looming over the bookcases. I rack my brain trying to remember where I'd have seen her name – a sign on her desk? A nametag? A scrawl on a clipboarded form? Nothing.

'You're a bit unsteady on your feet there, Milton. Take a seat for a moment,' Matron says, guiding him to a chair.

'It's so warm in here,' Milton says.

The heat is making me confused too, my brain racing in circles, trying to catch something just out of reach. A steady stream of new clients taking the place of my fallen comrades; that exorbitant non-refundable deposit.

'Here Milton, I've got a glass of milk for you. That should help you get back to sleep.' She guides the glass to his mouth.

Oh God, I think. I've got to stop her. My legs are asleep. Move, Violet!

Bill's voice comes to me. *It's just Milton, though. He's such a whinger. Get the evidence.*

I pull Deidre's phone from my pocket, fumbling to find the camera. These buttons are ridiculous. Finally I hold it up, framing Matron leaning over Milton in the chair, tilting the last of the glass's contents into his face. I press the button. There's an obnoxious sound and a flash that illuminates the room. Bugger.

'Mrs Smith. I should have known you'd be out of bed. You just don't know what's good for you, do you?'

'What have you given Milton?' I ask, willing my voice to remain steady. His head has nodded down onto his chest.

'You're a very nosy old woman, with some strange ideas,' Matron says.

'I know what you've been doing,' I say. 'I just don't understand why you wanted to be discovered.'

Matron lets out an exasperated sigh that turns into a roar of frustration.

'You never let up, you old bats with your beady eyes. Watching everything, gossiping about everything, nothing but time on your hands. Moping about how bored you are all the time. *There are no new books... Why can't we have a new television... I don't like this vast selection of board games...* Maybe I just wanted to fuck with you all by stealing half the Monopoly set, did you ever think about that?'

'That doesn't really explain the murders,' I venture.

'I hate what they've done to this place. This was a grand house. It should have been my grand house, my birthright. And instead it's crawling with toothless, half-mad geriatrics jumping in and out of each others' beds and rubbing butter into the drapes. It's perverse! It's a disgrace to the Sloxley name!'

She takes a panting breath. I scan the room for escape routes but there's only one doorway. I'll never get past her.

'I figured, if some of the old geezers cark it under suspicious circumstances, they'd have to shut the place down. I never thought it would take this long to be found out. But finally you stuck your neck out too far – and now I have the perfect scapegoat to frame. It's all become too much for you, so this last scene in the library will be a murder suicide.'

She's rushing at me now, with a small vial of something and a rag. I'm trapped. She grabs me roughly, snapping rubber gloves onto my hands, forcing the vial into my fingers.

'Goodbye, Mrs Smith,' Matron says.



I'm on the floor. Oh God, is this it? I run down through my body from head to toe, scanning for pain.

'Get up, Vi, you silly woman.'

It's Jessica, brandishing an iron poker she appears to have just used to cave in the back of Matron's skull. I sit up slowly.

'Milton?'

'He's gone,' Jessica says. 'But I got Matron's confession on tape. Borrowed Giles' iPhone.'

'She's dead?' I ask.

'Should be. Don't worry, we'll get off on self defence. Well, you might be able to try for mental incapacitation. But I'm not taking any chances on having to spend a single day more in a hellhole like this. Come on, we'd best raise the alarm.'

My teeth are chattering. I can't bring myself to move, and I sit there on the floor while she goes out. I sit there while Giles comes in and throws a sheet over Matron, while the sirens scream closer and the blue and red lights wash through the window. They circle around the library's walls like a sickening school dance.



Later, after the court stuff's taken care of and we've moved into a smart little duplex Jessica found with the compensation payout, she teases me about how queasy I was that night.

'You were such a cute little old lady detective,' she laughs, pouring my tea. 'How could you go into a stakeout like that with no plan to defend yourself against the killer?'

'Pardon me for being an amateur,' I huff. 'You made me look like a right tit in front of everyone, too.'

'Sorry, love. I couldn't risk Matron knowing I was onto her. That place was full of loose lips, and not just after the false teeth came out.'

We've got an ironclad contract with our kids that we can't be moved into a home again; savings put aside for live-in nurses if the need arises. And it turns out people like amateur cute old lady detectives if the sales of my not-so-cosy-crime series are any indication. We might still be in death's waiting room, but we get fresh magazines every week. The G&Ts over our Monopoly games certainly help pass the time, too.

Clare Fletcher

Clare Fletcher grew up in regional Queensland, a setting she returns to in her debut novel, a romantic comedy to be published in 2022.

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