

‘God does not decide who should live or die.’

The diary was closed.

Madge Simpson heaved her lumpy body out of her armchair and padded over to the window. Behind the net curtains at 19 Portia Close, she watched, avid for a glimpse of her new neighbour.

She knew it was only the one neighbour; he wasn't married, or co-habiting, but all alone. She knew because she'd been watching, as usual, unobtrusive but omniscient behind her ivory curtain, absorbing all the details.

It had been empty for months, the house, and such a shame. The Drummonds would have left it immaculate, Madge knew. But then they just moved out, so unexpectedly, without a word to anyone.

Though, thought Madge, it wasn't really surprising. She knew the rows they'd had, she'd heard them from the back garden a time or two. Terrible shouting, and once she'd heard pots or glasses being smashed. She was going to ask Colin, her husband, to go round, but he just gave her one of his strange looks.

After they'd gone, she'd peeked through their windows, and would have gone round the back, if the side gate hadn't been firmly locked.

Madge had made this reconnoitre early one Sunday morning, when Colin was still wrapped in the flowered duvet, and he and the rest of the street were snoozing soundly.

She had waddled round surprisingly quickly. She had to be back before Colin woke up. Not that he'd reprimand her anyway, he'd never do that, but he'd give her one of his funny looks. He was very close, was Colin. Sometimes she didn't know quite what he was thinking. Still, he seemed happy enough, most of the time; though early retirement had hit him hard. He didn't get under her feet all day though, like most husbands did when they had left their work. They just didn't seem to know what to do with themselves, and who suffered the most? Their wives, of course. But no, she couldn't say that Colin was one of those sort.

It was hard to say what he was like, come to think. He did everything she asked him to, around the house. He had no vices, she was sure. He didn't even drink. She'd nothing to worry about on that score. Nor did he pester her for sex; though, she thought wistfully, she sometimes wished he did. When she was reading her torrid novelettes in lonely isolation, she occasionally felt a stirring deep in her groin. But she was a white,

barren, ugly woman, reduced to reading pages filled with fiery flamencos in sunny Spain, and steamy siestas with stud-like *senors*. So it was not surprising that, all the while, Colin slept deeply beside her.

But, when she was not reading, what then? How could she dispel the tedium of her humdrum existence? She did it by acquiring an over-zealous interest in her neighbours' lives.

Now, this new man next door, he was very intriguing. His name, she had found out by chance, was Vince. She only knew *that* because she'd forced it out of him. She'd gone up to him as he was moving in, held out her hand and said,

Hello, I'm Madge. Welcome to Portia Close."

He'd given her a strange look and replied tersely,

"Oh, right. Vince. Sorry, got to get on."

He hadn't shook hands, but that just deepened her resolve to find out everything about him as soon as possible.

He had a definite aura of mystery. He was tall and thin with a saturnine face and a definite absence of wrinkles around his eyes. It seemed to indicate to Madge that he rarely smiled. She hadn't seen anyone visit him; no-one had helped him move in, except the professional removers of course. And, even more strangely to Madge, when she went round again with offers of help, she was snubbed on the doorstep.

When she indignantly reported these proceedings to her husband, all he could say was,

"He's obviously seen you watching him. He might think you're spying on him."

"That's awful, I'm only taking an interest. I think all neighbours should be more...neighbourly." She looked at him sourly. "And it wouldn't hurt *you* to go round and say hello. He'd open up to you, man to man. You could find out why he's alone."

But, surprisingly, Colin for once, dug his heels in.

"No, I'm not going. Leave the poor bloke in peace. He's probably got rid of one wife. He more than likely did her in, if she was anything like you!"

Madge wasn't as shocked by Colin's outburst as she should have been. She was too busy reflecting on what he had said, and she decided he was right. Vince definitely looked the type to be a wife-murderer.

In fact she didn't realise just how much till later.

Colin had gone to the golf course, and Madge was at her usual spot behind the net curtain in the bedroom.

Vince pulled up in his car, but as he got out a strange thing happened. He suddenly stopped dead and stared straight up at Madge in the window. She jumped back; though afterwards reason told her that he couldn't have seen her behind her screen of starched lace. Then he had gone, indoors presumably.

What a strange thing, thought Madge. She shivered. Those dark, almost black eyes had the cold, cruel gaze of a shark.

It was on a Saturday in early autumn when Madge realized she couldn't stand the situation any longer. Vince had been living in the house for two months now, and disappointingly Madge knew as much about him as when he had first moved in. She must know more. Then, something happened which gave her the opportunity she was waiting for.

She was in the back garden, dead-heading some roses, when a flickering light caught her eye. It was coming from the wild part of the garden, right down at the bottom. She seldom visited this part; it was just an overgrown, nettle-ridden jungle as far as she was concerned, a weeds' paradise. Here were all manner of Nature's nasties: hogweed, thistles and bindweed, poison ivy and ragwort. Even hemlock, though she always used to call it mother-die when she was young. Her friends used to say that if it was brought into the house, their mothers' would die a terrible death. It made her shudder to even think about walking amongst it, or the rest of the wilderness. Many of the weeds were taller than she was, and it all smelt rank and full of decay and dead things. However, the dancing light, like a hypnotist's eyes, was fascinating her. Whatever could be causing it? It was reminiscent of a mirror reflecting the sun. Slowly, she walked towards it.

Colin had built a waist high fence as a boundary for the wild garden. He said it would keep the two parts separate, and help stop the uncultivated plants (he meant weeds! Madge thought) encroaching on the (to her mind) more *civilized* flora - which it did very well. Madge reached the small gate and swung it open. She hesitated, then began to wade through the weeds towards the point where the light had been. The long, wet grass and stalks slapped and wrapped her legs, but she persevered. Infuriatingly, the light kept appearing then disappearing from sight as she threshed her way along. Finally she saw it - a piece of fine silver-coloured chain, like part of a necklace. How it had got there Madge didn't know, but it had caught on the old fence panel in the furthest corner, where it separated her garden from her neighbour's, Vince, and was swinging in the breeze. Now the panel was sloping inwards, only slightly, but big enough for a person, say Madge herself, to squeeze through. Slowly she pushed the gate open.

Help, she thought, as she struggled against thick laurel and an intense barrier of bushy plants. The garden next door was even worse than hers! Everyone must be going in for this 'wild gardening'; it was all the rage in these green, eco-friendly days. And it seemed to her that maybe they were the perfect excuse for the lazy gardener.

But perhaps she was wronging Vince. It could be that he just hadn't had time to sort out the unruliness that the Drummonds absence had caused. Anyway, soon she could be finding out much more about this enigmatic man.

However, for the moment she had to get back to her own life. Colin would soon be back from golf and would be very surprised if his meal wasn't at least partly ready.

That night, Madge tossed and turned in her marital bed. She had tried reading her novel - 'The Boss and his Plaything' - but unusually it hadn't soothed. She turned over for what felt like the hundredth time and looked at Colin's profile in the semi-darkness. He lay flat on his back, fast asleep and breathing gently. Madge gave a sigh of sadness, for what should have been and was now lost.

But then she heard a sound which drove all thoughts of her failed marriage out of her head. It was Vince's car, pulling up in his driveway.

Quick as she could, Madge slipped out of bed and waddled across to the window.

Vince had backed his car as closely as possible to the side gate, and seemed to be creeping about, trying to be as noiseless as possible. Once, he stood and looked up and down the street, and even glanced up at Madge's window. Again, she gasped and jumped back in alarm, and Colin stirred and moaned in his sleep. Cautiously she peeped out once more. Vince had opened the boot of his car and was pulling out a large object wrapped in black plastic. It looked suspiciously like a body!

Madge watched spellbound as Vince dragged it through the side gate. He was surprisingly strong for his slim build. Minutes later, he came back through the gate and locked it. Wiping his brow with a handkerchief, he stood and looked up and down the street again before letting himself into his dark, silent house.

Breathing heavily, Madge climbed back into bed beside a still-sleeping Colin. She was no longer restless, but filled with a sense of purpose. She knew that somehow tomorrow she was going into Vince's back garden and have a look into his garden shed. Because, when he had taken his object through the gate, she had heard the sound of his shed being unlocked and then locked up again. She was determined to find that body!

The next day, Madge was on tenterhooks waiting for her chance. She was so shaky that Colin nearly didn't go to the golf club.

“No, better stay at home today. Looks like rain anyway.”

He was looking her up and down. “You don’t look so good,” he continued.

“For heaven’s sake!” Madge snapped. “Stop peering at me as though you were a medical student. I’m fine, go to your game.”

As soon as Colin had set off, still protesting, Madge puffed up the stairs to watch for Vince’s exit. She knew he usually left the house at this time, though annoyingly she was ignorant of his destination.

He was late, she really thought he wasn’t going to emerge. Then she saw him, his figure wiry in black trousers and leather bomber jacket, getting in his car and setting off down the road.

Madge had never moved so fast. Puffing and panting, with fear as well as exertion, she hurried out of her side door and round to her back garden. The threatened storm was beginning to break. Big, fat, wet drops fell and squashed themselves on her skin.

She wobbled as she hurried down the garden path, past her beautiful flower beds, usually full of late summer colour and scent, but drained now by the glowering sky. She reached the wild garden, and desperately pushed her way through the green wetness till she got to the hidden gate in the corner.

Pushing it open, Madge squeezed through the gap and threshed her way through the bushes on Vince’s side. Eventually she reached the lawn, and stopped as she saw her objective - the shed.

It was locked, as she knew it would be, but hopefully the spare key would still be in the same place as the Drummonds used to keep it - just under the roof space.

It was!

Hurriedly now, and with many anxious glances towards Vince’s side gate, She unlocked the door and entered the cool dimness.

Madge blinked as her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. Spades - and what did he need *them* for, he didn’t do any gardening - and a rusty mower, sacks of compost. And, propped in the corner, a large object wrapped in black plastic and fastened with sticky tape.

At first, Madge couldn’t move. Even though she had seen what she expected to see, she felt paralysed with fear. Slowly moving forward, she reached out and touched the bag. Strangely, it felt hard inside. *Rigor mortis*, she thought, queasily. With a dry mouth and shaking hands, she began to peel off the tape.

When she heard the voice behind her, she thought she would die from shock. The

words slammed into her brain like bullets.

“Well, you couldn’t rest, could you, Madge? You had to stick your meddling snout in where it wasn’t wanted. All right, so now you’ve found her. I knew you would eventually.”

Madge somehow dredged up the strength to turn round. Slowly, slowly, her world as much in chaos as the garden outside, she faced the owner of the voice. Standing in the doorway of the shed was Colin, her husband.

But this was a very different Colin. He looked taller, more masterful. His face was at once hard and merciless.

“Colin! What are you saying?” Madge’s voice was a thin squeak.

“With your usual nosiness, Madge, you’ve found me out. Well, I must say it’s a relief in one way.”

“A relief? Found out what?”

“Don’t try and save yourself now. It’s too late. You know I killed Jane and put her body in here.”

“Jane? Jane Drummond?” Madge thought at that moment that she had lost her mind. She could only stare at her husband open-mouthed.

“Yes, that’s her. The bitch!” Colin spat venom. “She was blackmailing me, the cow. She was the lowest of the low, Madge. Jane asked for all she got.

“She came on to me, here in this garden shed. That was the first time. Then, later, when I wanted to end it, she threatened to tell you.”

“Oh, God, Colin, what have you done?”

Colin seemed to drag his gaze from a long way away and focussed on his wife for the first time.

“Don’t think I’m in love with you, Madge. In fact, I’ve grown to hate your fussy, bossy ways. But I want your money, and my lifestyle. Think I’ve been playing golf and going to meetings every day? Think again! I’ve been gambling, Madge, and I owe money, and lots of it. I’m in too deep to make a fresh start now. So, Jane had to go.”

Madge gasped.

“And now you’ve got to go, dear, dear Madge. Sorry, I’ll try and make it quick. But it’s got to look like an accident, otherwise - no insurance.”

Colin gave a funny, high-pitched snort that Madge realised was a laugh, and she knew at that moment that her husband must be completely mad. The strain of his deception and Madge’s subsequent discovery must have sent him over the edge of

sanity. She knew there could be no reasoning with him.

“Are you going to beg for your life, Madge? Jane did, much good it did her.” He laughed again as he edged nearer, a horrid guttural sound now.

Strangely, Madge tried to think of the last time she heard her husband laugh properly, but couldn't. How sad and decayed their relationship had become. All those wasted years, two people stuck together by habit, and for what? Life, she thought ironically, was too short. Too short for her, that was for sure. Because, as these thoughts sped across her mind, Colin was edging nearer, his eyes glittering manically in the dusty gloom. Madge knew her life was over. She closed her eyes slowly. But then, a miracle happened.

Colin threw back his head, his eyes staring wide with shock. Then he pitched forward, to reveal Vince, standing behind him, baseball bat in hand.

As he fell, Colin knocked over the object that was wrapped in black plastic, straight onto Madge. An arm fell out across her, and she just screamed and screamed.

Afterwards, when the police had been and gone, statements made and many tears shed; when Colin had come round just in time to be confronted with the sight of burly detectives and ambulance men, Madge and Vince sat with cups of tea in Vince's front room.

He'd insisted that she come round and wait for her sister from Yorkshire to collect her. He hoped, he said, she wouldn't feel threatened by him or his house, in spite of such unpleasantness now associated with it.

In truth though, Madge was feeling much soothed; Vince's sitting room was ablaze with colour and comfort, and chintz, ornaments and shaded lamps abounded. And he'd explained about the black parcel which he'd taken so much trouble to conceal from prying eyes.

“It's a mannequin, my wife used it for her dress-making. When she died, and I'd decided to move, I'd left it behind, you know, with some more of her stuff. I had to finish clearing the house, so I brought it here, though I don't know what I'm going to do with it. And because it was so late, I didn't want to wake the neighbourhood.”

Madge, listening to the comforting sound of Vince's voice, let his words wash over her. Of course, she still felt ghastly after her ordeal - who wouldn't? But now, sipping her tea, she began to regale Vince with tales of Colin's misdemeanours in the past.

“Of course, with hindsight, I realise now he was a wrong 'un,” said Madge, through tight lips.

“Really?” Vince offered her another digestive.

“Oh, yes. He’d always have an eye for other women. And he could be very sadistic. I could never have a pet again after I caught him tormenting my poor cat once, though he swore he hadn’t. And, when it disappeared some time afterwards...well, I had my suspicions.” She glared darkly into space, then looked sad.

“Apparently, the police think that Jane’s murder took place in our back garden, in the wild part, that is. That’s when her chain came off.”

Vince looked puzzled.

“She had a silver chain around her neck. Whe...when Colin murdered her among the weeds he moved her to the shed at first, where she couldn’t be seen. But, later that night he covered her with plastic, and...and now he’s disposed of her somewhere and the police don’t know where. Colin has lost his mind, he keeps saying that the body is still in the shed. Oh, it’s so horrible!”

Madge covered her face with her hands.

“What about Mr Drummond?” asked Vince.

“George? The police say that he thought Jane had run off with a man, she kept threatening to. So he got out quickly, to save face.”

She wiped her eyes.

“What am I going to do now, all on my own? I’ve never been one for my own company.”

“Well, get a job,” said Vince. “You’re still a young woman.”

Madge blushed, then said slowly.

“I could help out at the animal sanctuary. Maybe I could even have a cat again.”

She looked at Vince with eyes filled with hope, instead of despair.

Later, when Madge’s sister, who could have been her twin, they looked so similar, had arrived and whisked her off to Yorkshire for an extended stay; Vince took a key from the kitchen drawer and opened the door to the cellar. He switched on the light and descended the stone steps. Unlocking a large trunk, he took out a tool-box and opened it under the bright light from the bare bulb.

He picked up one knife after another and caressed its cold, clean steel.

Well, now he was in a new area, and as yet no-one knew him. It was time now, he’d had long enough to suss it out. And he’d already been lucky. He’d spotted the mannequin in a skip when he was driving past, and had gone back that night to retrieve it. He knew it would be helpful when he brought back real bodies. It would put nosy



neighbours, such as Madge, off the scent. He needed to play God again. Now, though, thanks to Madge and Colin, he'd got to relocate.

Putting away his knives, he next took out his diary and a pen, and looked up his last entry.

'God does not decide who should live or die. *I* decide.

After a minute's thought he wrote,

'Madge can live: I have spared Madge.'