

“A *GRAVE MISTAKE*”

**BY
STEVE ALDOUS**

Ruth Lester sat up in bed, switched on the lamp and shook her husband out of his slumber.

‘Harve, wake up.’

Harvey Lester snorted into consciousness and rubbed his eyes. ‘What time is it?’

‘I think Freddie’s still outside.’

Harvey reached for his watch on the bedside table. ‘Jesus, it’s three o’clock.’

‘Freddie’s still outside,’ Ruth prompted more urgently.

‘Cats are night creatures. Where do you expect him to be?’

‘I don’t think I unlocked the cat flap so he can come back inside. Will you go and check?’

‘You woke me up to go and unlock the cat flap?’

‘Go on, I’m not dressed.’

‘Well, I’m not exactly in my morning suit,’ said Harvey reluctantly getting out of bed and pulling on a pair of shorts.

He padded out of the bedroom and made his way down the stairs to the

kitchen. Turning on the light he could see the cat flap was bolted. He walked over, slid the bolt aside and put some cat food on a saucer. When he got back to the bedroom it was in darkness. Ruth was silhouetted against the window.

‘Stop worrying. He’ll come in when he gets hungry. I’ve put some *Yum-Tums* out for him,’ Harvey said getting back into bed.

Ruth stiffened and shushed him. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

Ruth stared intently out of the window trying to locate the source of the noise. ‘Harve, it’s Mr. Potter. What’s he doing up at this time?’

‘Stop being nosey and come back to bed.’

‘He’s sixty-five, Harve. He shouldn’t be out at this time.’

‘What? We have a curfew now? “No-one drawing their pension is allowed on the street past midnight.” Leave the guy alone and come back to bed.’

‘He’s putting something in the boot of his car,’ she whispered and narrowed the gap in the curtain so she could not be seen. ‘It’s wrapped in tarpaulin.’ She gasped as something slipped out of the package. ‘Was that a hand? Harve, it looks like a hand.’

‘What are you talking about? I warned you not to eat that strong cheddar so late at night.’

‘It’s a body,’ she said excitedly as she watched Mr. Potter hesitantly glance back over his shoulder.

‘So you think easy-going Mr. Potter, a retired bank manager, got bored of the quiet life and become an axe murderer?’

‘Shush and come and see. Quickly.’

Harvey reluctantly got out of bed and joined his wife at the window. He could see George Potter's balding pate reflected off the street light as it emerged from below the boot lid of his car. He could also see the tarpaulin wrapped bundle inside.

'He's just packing some things into his car, that's all,' he said matter-of-factly.

'At three in the morning?'

'Maybe he walks in his sleep - like your Aunt Lucy from Bristol. Remember that time they found her on top of the Clifton Suspension Bridge eating a bowl of fruit.'

'I've never seen him outside at such a late hour before.'

'That's because we've always been asleep. For all you know he could do this every night. Maybe he goes to his allotment and does some stargazing.'

Ruth was suddenly excited. 'His allotment. That's it! He's taking the body to his allotment... to bury it.'

'What body?'

'His wife's body, of course.'

'Listen to yourself. You think he's got his wife's body in there? Why would he kill his wife?'

Ruth hesitated at first but then was sure. 'For the insurance.'

'I don't think Mutual Life of London pays out to widows in the event of them murdering their wives.'

'Remember, I said to you I hadn't seen Mrs. Potter at the shop for a couple of weeks?'

‘And...’

‘Well, don’t you think that’s suspicious?’

‘Maybe she’s going to that new café further up the high street. I hear they make a better Cappuccino. You guys really need to get your act together.’

Ruth paused and tapped her lips with the tip of her finger. ‘It *must* be his wife. Who else would he kill?’

‘Maybe he’s working his way through a list.’

‘You think so? I’ve always thought he was a bit strange... you know... aloof,’ said Ruth.

‘I was joking,’ said Harvey, walking back to the bed. ‘Leave the man alone and come back to bed.’

‘Harve, he’s getting into his car.’

Harvey rolled his eyes as he heard the engine start and Mr. Potter’s car reverse off the drive. ‘So, he’s going for a drive. It’s not a crime.’

‘He’s going to his allotment, Harve. He’s going there to bury his wife’s body... I’m sure of it.’

Ruth pulled on her dressing gown and a pair of pumps.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m going to take a look.’

‘At what?’

‘His house. Are you coming?’ she said marching from the bedroom.

Harvey listened to Ruth’s footsteps pound down the stairs and then heard the front door open. A few fidgeting seconds later he got out of bed, walked over to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

He watched Ruth as she tip-toed up the Potters' driveway and peered in through the lounge window. She was struggling to make out anything inside, so she edged along the front of the house and tried the front door.

The door opened.

'Jesus!' cursed Harvey.

He quickly pulled on a t-shirt, a pair of trousers and his slippers then hurriedly made his way downstairs and outside. He crossed the street and walked up to the open door.

'Ruth,' he called in a loud whisper into the darkness.

There was no answer.

He eased his head through the doorway and called for his wife a second time. A tap on his shoulder made him lurch. He turned to see Ruth's excited face.

'She's not here.'

'Jesus, you nearly gave me a coronary,' said Harvey catching his breath and clutching his chest.

'She's not here, Harve,' repeated Ruth as she marched purposefully back toward their house.

Harvey closed the Potters' door and followed her back inside. He found her pacing up and down in the kitchen.

'Should we call the police?' she asked.

'And tell them what?'

'About the murder.'

Harvey threw his arms up in despair. 'What murder?'

'She's not there, Harve.'

‘That doesn’t mean she’s been *murdered*. She’s probably away... with family or something... it does happen.’

‘She told me they don’t have any family, Harve,’ Ruth said and picked up the phone. ‘We need to call the police.’

‘We’ve nothing to tell them. All we know is Mrs. Potter is not at home and Mr. Potter has driven off in his car with some refuse in his boot.’

Ruth contemplated for a moment then put the phone back down. ‘We need evidence.’

‘What sort of evidence? Did you see anything in the house?’

‘Well... no.’

‘Then there isn’t any evidence.’

‘There’s the body he’s taken to bury in his allotment.’

‘All you’ve seen is an old man put a package into the boot of his car. The rest is down to your imagination. It was probably a telescope or something.’

Ruth looked sternly at her husband.

‘It wasn’t a telescope,’ she said insistently. ‘I can tell the difference between a telescope and a body, Harve.’

They bounced their argument back and forth for half-an-hour before they were finally distracted by the sound Mr. Potter’s car returning. Ruth ran into the lounge and eased the curtain back slowly. She watched him get out and walk around to the boot. He opened it and pulled out a shovel.

‘Harve. In here quickly.’

Harve walked through to the lounge.

‘He’s just taken a shovel from his boot,’ said Ruth.

‘He’s got an allotment,’ said Harvey. ‘Maybe he was planting vegetables.’

‘At nearly four in the morning? I’m going to find out for sure.’

‘No, no.’ Harvey said, shaking his head vigorously.

‘Harve, what can it hurt? If I’m wrong then I’m wrong and nobody will know. But if I’m right...’ she smiled challengingly.

‘You *have* been taking your tablets, haven’t you?’

Ruth ignored him and looked back through the window. ‘Come on, he’s gone.’

Harvey sighed resignedly. ‘Okay, if I take you up to the allotment and show you there’s nothing there, will you promise to let this drop?’

‘There’ll be something there, Harve... and it’ll be Mrs. Potter.’

Ten minutes later they were turning down a gravel track in their Ford Mondeo. Harvey stopped the car at the entrance to the allotment site. The moonlight provided some illumination and they glanced around the shadowy rows of huts and greenhouses spread loosely across the gentle hillside.

‘Get the torches and the shovel,’ said Ruth.

Harvey opened the boot and tested a pair of torches against his hand. He pulled out a large shovel and joined Ruth at the gate. He leaned the shovel against the fence and turned to face his wife.

‘I feel like those grave robbers at the beginning of *Frankenstein*,’ he said. ‘How do we know which allotment is his?’

‘I brought Mrs. Potter up here once, when Mr. Potter had forgotten his packed lunch. His plot is up here to the left. Come on,’ she said shining her

torch ahead and leading the way.

They struggled up a muddy incline and then along the second row of allotments.

‘Ask yourself how he managed to lug a dead body up that slope on his own... at his age?’ puffed Harvey.

Ruth ignored him and led them further along the row before stopping at the third fenced allotment. She swept the site with her torch. The fencing was waist high and made of chicken wire. A small hut sat proudly in a corner of the site. She opened the gate and ran over to the front of the hut and tried the door.

‘It’s locked.’

‘Of course it’s locked. He doesn’t want burglars breaking in during the middle of the night.’

‘Look around.’

‘What for?’

‘Clues. Disturbed ground. *Anything.*’

Ruth set off along the perimeter, shining her torch across the ground. Harvey shook his head and reluctantly trudged diagonally across the allotment, cursing under his breath. Suddenly his left foot sunk into the ground a few inches. He shone the torch on the spot. The soil was loose. His heart began to pound.

‘Ruth,’ he said warily.

‘Have you found something?’

‘I don’t know. Fetch the shovel.’

Ruth looked hurriedly around. ‘I thought you had it.’

Harvey shook his head. ‘I must have left it back at the car.’

‘Don’t move from that spot,’ said Ruth. ‘I’ll go and get the shovel.’

Ruth hurried back down the slope and made her way to the site entrance. She stopped suddenly as she saw another car had parked behind their Mondeo.

It was Mr. Potter’s car.

She crouched down and slowly edged her way to the side of the gate. She couldn’t see Mr. Potter. She leaned against the fence and let out a sigh of relief.

‘Mrs. Lester?’

Ruth shrieked and stood bolt upright.

‘Are you all right?’

Ruth turned to face the deep shadowy features of George Potter’s face lit from beneath by her torch light.

‘Oh, Mr. Potter, it’s you.’

Potter looked confused. ‘What are you doing here at this time?’

‘Doing here...? We, erm, I... well... stargazing!’

‘Stargazing? Do you have an allotment here?’

‘No... I mean, yes. We just got one. Harvey’s really into studying the stars and when I saw your allotment the other week I mentioned it to him. He thought it would be a great place to set up his telescope. He loves astrology.’

‘Astronomy,’ corrected Mr. Potter.

‘Yes, astronomy.’

There was a short, uncomfortable, shuffling silence. It was broken by a distant call from Harvey.

‘Ruth, have you got that shovel yet? I think we’re onto something here!’

‘Was that your husband?’

Ruth hesitated briefly. 'Yes.'

'Then that must be your shovel over there by the gate.'

'Yes, I came back for it.' Ruth's mind was racing. 'Harvey's just levelling out the ground to position the telescope.'

Harvey called out again. 'Ruth, did you hear me? I said I think we're onto something here!'

Mr. Potter squinted at the distant torchlight. 'Looks like you're up near me.'

Ruth laughed nervously. 'Yes, it's the aspect we liked most. It gives us wonderful views of the night sky.'

'Let me give you a hand with that shovel.'

'No, that's all right.'

'I insist,' he said picking it up and setting off up the incline.

Ruth hurried after him, calling out to her husband, 'Harve, you'll never guess who I bumped into... Mr. *Potter!*'

There was a clatter as something fell to the floor.

'Oh, Mr. Potter,' came Harvey's concerned and distant response, 'the gentleman who lives across the road?'

'Yes,' called back Ruth. 'I was telling him how we'd just bought an *allotment* here!'

Potter finally arrived at the gate to his plot and was greeted by Harvey on the other side.

'What are you doing on *my* allotment?' Potter asked.

'This is *your* allotment?' said Harvey, 'I thought this was ours. Ruth, didn't you say this was ours?'

‘I must have got it wrong,’ replied Ruth.

A dark, suspicious frown suddenly formed on Potter’s face. ‘You’ve followed me here, haven’t you?’

‘How could we have followed you?’ insisted Harvey laughing nervously. ‘We were here before you.’

‘The first time,’ said Potter, his voice now displaying a hard edge.

Ruth felt a chill run down her spine.

‘Yes,’ she said.

Harvey threw her a look that would have flattened an elephant.

‘You’ve buried her, haven’t you?’ Ruth demanded.

‘Buried who?’ said Potter looking confused.

‘Your wife. Over there.’ Ruth pointed at the ground where Harvey had been standing.

Potter thought for a moment and then smiled, it seemed, in relief. He tossed the shovel to Harvey.

‘Go on, dig it up and see for yourself.’

Ruth stomped over, grabbed the shovel from Harvey and started digging. The ground was soft and it didn’t take her long to reach the tarpaulin bundle.

‘Harve, help me with this.’

Harvey helped Ruth free up the bundle, whilst continuously glancing warily back at Potter who stood smugly by the gate with his arms folded.

Ruth pulled at the tarpaulin. It was surprisingly small – much smaller than she had thought – and light too. She lifted the bundle out and rested it on the lip of the hole. There was something limp inside. Ruth’s skin ran cold as she

imagined a human arm or part of a leg. She unravelled the tarpaulin with her heart in her mouth. As it folded back on itself the content was revealed – a mess of mangled fur, broken bones and congealed blood from a gash in the head.

It was Freddie.

Harvey stood back. ‘Oh, my god.’

Ruth gasped and threw her hand to her mouth.

‘You killed our cat!’ she shrieked.

Potter walked over to them looking puzzled.

‘This is *your* cat?’

‘Yes,’ said Ruth, tears beginning to flow, ‘and you killed him.’

‘What happened, Mr. Potter?’ asked Harvey.

‘I didn’t even know you had a cat,’ he said absently. ‘I found it at the side of the main road tonight when I came back from visiting my wife... she’s in hospital. It must have been run over by a car or something. There was no identifying tag, so I brought it here to bury it.’

‘Your wife’s in hospital?’ said Ruth almost absently.

‘Yes. She had a fall in town and broke her ankle.’

Harvey threw Ruth his *I told you so* look.

Ruth started to cry. ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Potter... I’m so sorry. I’ve got this all wrong.’

‘Yes, really, we’re sorry. We’ll take Freddie if that’s all right,’ said Harvey.

‘Of course,’ said Potter with a sympathetic smile. ‘And I’m sorry about your cat. If I’d have known...’

They walked through the gate and out of the allotment then down the incline

– Ruth sobbing all the way into the sleeve of her coat.

Back at the car, Harvey opened the boot.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Ruth.

‘Putting Freddie in the boot.’

‘I want to carry him,’ Ruth said then her expression suddenly changed and she stopped crying. ‘Doesn’t it strike you as odd?’

‘What?’

‘Why come all the way out here just to bury a cat?’

‘Because the man cares,’ said Harvey, exasperated once more.

‘He never mentioned his wife’s accident before.’

‘He’s a private man, why would he?’

Ruth shook her head. ‘He’s hiding something.’

Her face suddenly became excited again and she ran over to Potter’s car and flicked open the boot.

‘Harve, come here.’

Harvey rushed over to Ruth and looked inside. There were more packages wrapped in tarpaulin. The top package was almost perfectly round, like a giant wrapped cabbage. Ruth started to unwrap it. Whatever was inside was heavy.

They both jumped back as a head rolled out.

It had a colourless, bloodless face. An old woman’s face.

Ruth turned to Harvey. ‘Call the police.’

The following day, Detective Inspector Peter Rogers sat opposite Ruth and Harvey in their living room and sipped his tea.

‘A sixty-five-year-old man with a heart condition wasn’t going to get very far. We caught up with him hiding behind some hedges at the top of the site. He’s confessed of course.’ said Rogers.

‘Why did he do it?’ asked Ruth.

‘The oldest reason in the world, Mrs. Lester, the love of another woman. George Potter may have retired, but he was still having an affair with his former assistant. She was embezzling money from the bank and they planned to run away together. His wife found out about the affair and when she confronted him Potter flew into a rage and strangled her. He stored her body in a deep freeze in the cellar of their house, whilst he figured out what to do next. She was too heavy and bulky for him to move easily – so he had no choice but to chop her up and bury her piece by piece around his allotment. We also found two Airplane tickets – one-way to Rio.’

‘And Freddie?’ asked Harvey.

‘Apparently your cat kept sniffing around... digging at the air vents around the cellar. Potter caught him last night and took to him with a shovel.’

Ruth took in a sharp breath.

‘Jesus,’ said Harvey.

DI Rogers put down his cup then got up and shook Harvey’s hand. ‘Well, thanks for the tea. I’ll stop by again when we have details of the trial. Good evening, Mrs. Lester.’

Ruth nodded an acknowledgement and Harvey let Rogers out and watched as the police car drove away.

When Harvey returned he found Ruth standing at the window looking

through the slightly parted curtains. She turned to face him, her expression uneasy.

‘Harve,’ she said excitedly. ‘There’s a light on over at the Potters’ house.’

‘The police probably forgot to turn it off.’

‘But it wasn’t on a few minutes ago. I’m sure of it.’

Harvey walked over to his wife and looked across at the Potters’ empty house. A woman’s silhouette appeared in the window and then the light suddenly went out.

A cold chill ran down their spines.

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