

## A Good Clue

By Heather MacKenzie

“Beulah fell over the dead body and...”

“Beulah? Why name a character in a story Beulah? Sounds like a cow’s name.

“Do you want to hear the murder story I’ve written for this writing competition or not?”

Wayne considered his wife’s question, decided honesty wasn’t always the best policy and lowered the newspaper he’d been reading.

“Of course, Donna dear, wasn’t it me who said once we retired you should finish that online writing course? Go on, Beulah was tripping over a corpse and was about to do something, scream, faint, vomit? I hope it isn’t vomit. You know I’m not good with vomit. When the cat sickens up on the carpet...”

“There’s no cat sick and it’s a ‘body’, not a ‘corpse’ Wayne.”

“Oh, so the body isn’t dead then?”

“Of course the body is dead. How can you have a murder without a dead body? I just didn’t write ‘corpse’. Really, Wayne, keep up with the story.”

“To be fair, I’ve only heard the first few words of your story. Where is it set by the way? Here in Kalbar? Brisbane, Sydney? On a windswept island in Bass Strait? You could make a name up, I know, you could call it Wayne Island. No, wait. How about a ruined mansion in a vineyard next to an old cemetery? Lots of old cemeteries around here. Spooky and dramatic setting in one. Don’t they say setting is important for a story? Now the body...I think you should make it clear the body is dead not just fainted or passed out drunk.”

“They? Who are ‘they’? I was the one who did the writing course.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m really keen to hear your story.”

“Well, if you’d shut up and let me read it to you, we might get somewhere. Now keep in mind the course said ‘arrive late in the story, get out early’. It’s supposed to give the story pace; apparently long scene descriptions bore readers.”

“Yes, well, not boring your reader sounds like excellent advice for a writer. I know, how about this for a short in and out: Tallulah...”

“Beulah.”

“Right, Beulah falls over the dead body in the cemetery, recognizes the knife sticking out of, sorry, does the dead body have a name?”

“Silas. And I haven’t agreed to a cemetery by the way.”

“A trifling detail. Right, the knife sticking out of Silas’ back. Actually, where does the apostrophe go? Is it Silas then an apostrophe then an ‘s’ or Silas with just an apostrophe and no extra ‘s’? Your readers will be confused. I know I am, let’s call him Rupert instead. I had a rat called Rupert when I was a kid.”

“A rat? Forty years we’ve been married and you never told me you kept vermin for pets.”

“Rupert was not vermin I’ll have you know. He could even do tricks. He’d do anything for a bit of vegemite on toast.”

“Ugh, well that’s my breakfast toast ruined forever. Let’s get on, the story’s only a first draft at this stage so names don’t really matter. But what’s this knife you’ve got sticking out of Si-Rupert’s back?

“It’s a clever way of getting out of the story early like you wanted.”

“What?”

“Well, Petula, sorry, Beulah recognizes the carved handle of the oriental knife when she trips over the body.

“Oriental? What, the knife’s marked ‘*Made in China*’ is it?”

“No, the knife’s ornate, maybe a dragon with emerald eyes writhing around the handle, definitely from China, Japan, someplace exotic anyway. Not Kmart. It could be one of a matched pair hanging on the Colonel’s study wall. Yes, that would get a clue right into the beginning of your story.”

“What clue? What Colonel? There is no Colonel in my story. There’s a bus driver called Jeff but I don’t think he’d have an oriental dagger stuffed in a back pocket.”

“Well, perhaps Jeff has a Great Uncle Harold who travelled to deepest, darkest China and ...”

“It’s Africa, Wayne.”

“Africa Donna? Why set the story in Africa?”

“No. You said ‘deepest, darkest’ that goes with Africa not China. You’ve always been geographically challenged.”

“Rubbish, I have a perfect sense of direction.”

“Then why do you keep losing the car in shopping centre car parks?”

“That’s not my fault; they just don’t put up proper signs. Do you know, the other day I was looking for a street sign...”

“Look, can we get back to the story *I’m* writing for the competition? It’ll be over before I finish my story at this rate.”

“Right, the body with the knife.”

“Why are you obsessed with this knife, Wayne?”

“You want to get out of the story quickly, don’t you? Isn’t that what you said? Tallulah....”

“Beulah.”

“Beulah recognizes the knife, then when everyone is assembled in the Library...”

“Wait, what Library? I thought you were in a vineyard or a cemetery?”

“Oh, bummer. But there has to be a Library to announce the murderer’s name. Maybe in Uncle Harold’s ruined mansion next to the vineyard next to the cemetery. You can’t get everyone together in the cemetery to do that, can you? That setting is too easy for the killer to leg it and get away.”

“Wayne, have you actually read any crime stories? Recently, I meant? Anything written after say, 1960?”

“Well, no. I used to read Mum’s Agnes Christie books. There was always a Library in her books, though I do remember something about a train.”

“Agatha not Agnes.”

“Agatha, Agnes, what’s in a name? Didn’t that old English bloke say, “petunias by any name would smell as sweet’?”

“English bloke, what English bloke?”

“Rattlespear? Shergar?”

“Shergar was a horse that was kidnapped in England a very long time ago!”

“Surely that would be ‘horsenapped’ then?” Wayne assessed the rising colour of red in his wife’s face and hurried on. “Um, you know, he wrote plays, Ramona and Juliet? The Big Storm? King Lure?”

“Romeo and Juliet? The Tempest? King Lear?”

“Yes, you could be right. Also, the one about the woman having trouble with her washing.”

“You’ve got me there, Wayne. When did Shakespeare write about washing?”

“Some woman kept saying ‘Out dammed spot’. We did it for my school play. I played Fleabane until Mrs. Donaldson, our English teacher, decided that I’d be better as the Fourth Witch.”

“There was no Fourth Witch in Macbeth.”

“Macbeth, the Irish play, that’s right but there definitely was a fourth witch you know, Donna. The one who had been struck dumb after accidentally swallowing a cane toad so couldn’t say anything. I was allowed to gesture though. Mrs. Donaldson said my gesturing was like nothing she’d ever seen on stage before and she’d directed proper plays not just school stuff, you know.”

“Give me strength! Anyway, I can’t use your knife to identify the murderer even if all the suspects are infesting this Library of yours.”

“Whyever not? It’ll make a short, snappy story. You’d be in and out like Finn.”

“Flynn. Errol Flynn!”

“I thought his name was Rupert, really you’ll be confusing the judges with all these name changes.”

“Listen carefully, Wayne. There is no knife, wreathed with oriental dragons or not.”

“But why?”

“Because Rupert was not stabbed. He was poisoned.”

“Oh, I see, that’s a whole different cuttle of fish, isn’t it? Wait, you could have a character called Nick.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why Nick?”

“You’ll like this one, Donna.”

“I know I’ll regret this, but tell me, what does Nick do in the story?”

“It’s a play on words. Very funny. The judges will appreciate it.”

“I’m waiting.”

You’ll love this, it’s really good. The character is called Nick.”

“Oh, heavens, yes, I’ve got that. Just tell me.”

“Rupert is the murderee and Nick is the murderer. Do you say Rupert’s the murderee’ I wonder? If there’s a ‘murderer’ surely there’s a ‘murderee’?”

“No, there’s no such word. Just. Get. To. The. Point!”

“Alright, keep your hair on. The title of the story would have to be, wait for it... ‘*Ask Nick*’.”

“What? Ask Nick what?”

“Rupert whispers to Tallulah as he is dying ‘*Ask Nick*’ and there’s a character called Nick, or the Colonel’s dog could also be called Nick I suppose if you wanted to throw a red mullet into the mix. It’s a clue.”

“I’ll throw this laptop at you in a minute. What does Rupert mean ‘Ask Nick’?”

“That’s just it, he’s not saying ‘Ask Nick’, he’s saying ‘Arsenic’. Rupert, the murderee, I’m sure there’s such a word, is poisoned with arsenic by the murderer who happens to be Nick. Hey, where are you going? I’ve got more ideas for your story.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“Don’t you want to read me the rest of it?”

No, Wayne, I do not want to read you anything, possibly ever again.”

“Well, don’t blame me if you ignore my literally insights and don’t win your competition. Every murder story needs a good clue you know.”