An Inn Spectre Calls

By

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Characters

Geoff Barton - young, newly engaged to Laura

Laura Daniels - young, newly engaged to Geoff

Anne Sanderson - Laura’s mother

Tom Sanderson - Laura’s stepfather

Mel Barton - Geoff’s mother

Jack Barton - Geoff’s father

Woman - a mysterious figure

Waiter - a waiter

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(A small brightly-lit room of The Coach House Inn. Far Stage Left the much less well-lit corridor outside, which leads Offstage Left to the rest of the inn. It is about 10pm on a Friday evening. There is a suggestion of the wall between room and corridor. The room is for public use, but has no bar. A table and four chairs just right of Centrestage. A couple of used but empty glasses are on the table.)

(Geoff’s parents, Mel and Jack, have been to the inn’s restaurant for a meal to celebrate his engagement to Laura, along with her mother, Anne, and stepfather, Tom. Led by the Waiter, the party enters Stage Left. Everyone is clearly in a jovial mood and they each carry a partly full glass of champagne.)

**Waiter: (Leading the others into the room.)** I’m afraid we’re extremely busy this evening but if you come this way there’s a table free in here. I’ll just clear the glasses for you, then I’ll see if I can find some more chairs from somewhere.

**Jack:** There’s no rush. We’ve been sitting down in the restaurant for the last hour or two. I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs for a while.

(Jack stretches, then immediately slumps into one of the chairs.)

**Mel:** Oh, that was a quick stretch!

**Jack:** Well, you know me, everything in moderation.

**Mel:** Yes, your problem is not enough moderation in some areas and far too much in others.

**Jack:** What’s that supposed to mean?

**Waiter: (Hastily intervening.)** I’ll have a look round the main bar for more chairs.

**Geoff:** Thank you.

(The Waiter takes the used glasses from the table and exits Stage Left.)

**Anne:** I hope he can find some.

**Jack:** I’m sure he will. This place usually starts thinning out about now, you see if it doesn’t.

**Mel:** Well, I suppose you’d know if anyone would, the amount of time you spend in here. Come and sit down, Anne.

(Mel and Anne take two of the remaining chairs.)

**Anne:** Thanks, Mel. And thanks very much to you, Geoff and Laura, for that delicious meal.

**Tom:** Yes, very nice.

**Jack:** Not bad at all.

**Mel:** Especially that lovely soufflé.

**Geoff:** It was our pleasure, wasn’t it, darling?

**Laura: (Taking Geoff’s arm.)** Absolutely.

**Anne: (Raising her glass.)** Well, here’s to you both.

(Mel, Tom and Jack all raise their glasses in a toast.)

**Mel: } (Together)** Congratulations.

**Tom: }** All the best.

**Jack: }** Cheers.

(The Waiter returns with two more chairs.)

**Waiter:** Here we are. Sorry to keep you waiting.

**Tom:** Not at all. Thanks very much.

**Waiter: (To Geoff.)** Should I bring you another bottle of champagne, sir? Some of you seem to be running a bit low.

**Geoff:** What? Oh, no, I think we might want to move on to something else. You can only drink so much fizz. Can I keep my tab going in here?

**Waiter:** Certainly, sir.

**Tom:** No, don’t do that. You youngsters have paid for quite enough for one evening. If we’re having more drinks, I’ll get them.

**Geoff:** Oh no, it’s our celebration; we’ll get everything tonight.

**Tom:** No, I insist! You two have got to start saving for the wedding. And you might as well start now.

**Laura: (To Geoff.)** There’s no point in arguing. He’ll never take no for an answer when he’s got that look in his eye. I’ve come to recognise it over the last two years.

**Geoff:** Okay. Thanks, Mr Sanderson…

**Tom:** Uh! First names remember, now we’re all going to be in the same family. We all agreed on that.

**Geoff:** Thank you, *Tom*. **(To the Waiter.)** In which case I might as well come with you now and settle my tab for the meal.

**Waiter:** As you wish, sir.

(Geoff exits Stage Left with the Waiter. Laura takes Tom aside Downstage Right.)

**Laura:** Thanks, Dad.

**Tom:** That’s all right. After all, it’s only a round of drinks.

**Laura:** You know that’s not what I meant. I meant thanks for being such a good dad this last couple of years since you married my mum. It’s made up for me never knowing my real father. And thanks for making Mum so happy.

**Tom:** It’s entirely mutual. During all those wretched years with Jane I’d never have believed I could be as happy as I am now. Your mother is a wonderful woman, Laura, and having acquired you as a daughter in the same deal has been the most delightful bonus. It makes me so proud just hearing you call me Dad.

**(Laura gives Tom an affectionate peck on the cheek.)**

**Laura:** Did you and Jane never consider starting a family?

**Tom:** We planned to in the early days, but then she inherited all that cash from some distant relative that she’d never even met and she seemed to change. Instead of doing all the things she’d always dreamed of doing, she became obsessed with making more and more money. She certainly didn’t want to spend any on bringing up children. But let’s not dwell on that this evening. We should concentrate on the future, yours and Geoff’s in particular. He’s a lovely lad and your Mum and I are very happy for you. But right now, I’d better get these drinks ordered.

(Laura and Tom return to Mel, Anne and Jack at the table. The conversation is not audible to the Audience but it is obvious that Tom then goes on to make a note of everyone’s drinks order. Meanwhile a pale and mysterious Woman has entered into the shadows Stage Left and waylays Geoff as he returns from the restaurant.)

**Woman:** You must be Geoffrey.

**Geoff:** Er… yes.

**Woman:** Congratulations on your engagement.

**Geoff:** Thank you. Erm… excuse me, but have we met?

**Woman:** No, but I know who you are. I was slightly acquainted with your fiancée but that was some years ago, when she was still at school.

**Geoff:** Oh! How did you know each other?

**Woman:** She assisted me at one time.

**Geoff:** That sounds like Laura. Always ready to help other people.

**Woman:** That’s how you see her, is it?

**Geoff:** I think that’s how everybody sees her.

**Woman:** Really?

**Geoff:** Oh yes. Perhaps you’d like to join us for a drink?

**Woman:** Thank you, but no. I wouldn’t wish to intrude on a family celebration.

**Geoff:** You’d be very welcome.

**Woman:** Not with some of your party, I fear.

**Geoff:** What do you mean?

**Woman:** It doesn’t matter. You are a research chemist, I believe?

**Geoff:** That’s right. How did you know that?

**Woman:** I was told. It must be rewarding work.

**Geoff:** Er… well… I suppose so, yes. I’m with Olafsson and Klein, although I’m hoping to branch out on my own fairly soon.

**Woman:** With your own laboratory?

**Geoff:** Yes.

**Woman:** That will be expensive.

**Geoff: (Becoming a little uncomfortable but striving to remain polite.)** Well… yes.

**Woman:** How can you afford it?

**Geoff:** My mother’s helping me, if you must know. She owns a successful boutique.

**Woman:** A boutique where she used to work as a sales assistant, isn’t that right? Until she inherited it on the death of the previous owner.

**Geoff:** So…?

**Woman:** Oh, nothing. I was just thinking how convenient that was for your family. How very convenient!

**Geoff:** Yes, well… if you’ll excuse me…

**Woman:** Of course, I’m sure we’ll meet again.

**Geoff:** I doubt it.

**Woman: (As she exits Stage Left.)** *Oh*, and don’t expect too much of Laura. She’ll probably let you down in the end. She usually lets people down.

**Geoff:** Now, just you look here…

(Woman has gone. Disgruntled, Geoff turns back to the group at the table but Laura rises and goes to him.)

**Laura:** Are you okay? You look a bit strange.

**Geoff:** I’ve just met a rather weird woman.

**Laura:** I thought I saw you talking to somebody out there. In what way was she weird?

**Geoff:** Well… she… Oh, it doesn’t matter. Let’s not bother about her on our special night.

**Tom: (Calling)** What are you having, Geoff?

**Geoff:** I’ll have a G and T, thanks Tom.

**Tom: (Adding this to his list.)** Right you are. Won’t be long.

(Tom exits Stage Left. Mel rises and takes Jack aside Downstage Right. Geoff and Laura join Anne at the table and talk amongst themselves. During the next few speeches the Woman re-enters Stage Left.)

**Mel: (Quietly but forcefully.)** Jack! You should have offered to go fifty-fifty on the drinks!

**Jack:** Why? Tom offered to get them.

**Mel:** It would have been polite to split the round.

**Jack:** Oh, he’s rolling in it, Mel! Let him fork out for them!

**Mel:** You’re hopeless! We’re not exactly paupers ourselves these days. If we have another round, after this…

**Jack:** What do you mean if? This is a celebration. Our son has finally got himself engaged, and to a very nice and attractive young woman too. I’m certainly going to have a few more drinks.

**Mel:** Just don’t overdo it, all right? And when we have another round, you’re paying for it, got it?

**Jack: (With a sigh.)** Yes, all right. You’ll have to lend me some money though. I wasn’t expecting to be paying tonight so I haven’t brought much cash with me.

(Mel gives Jack a look but then delves into her purse and surreptitiously passes him a couple of notes. Their conversation continues, inaudible to the Audience, as Tom returns and is waylaid by the Woman.)

**Woman:** Hello, Tom.

**Tom:** My God!

**Woman:** Aren’t you pleased to see me?

**Tom:** I don’t understand.

**Woman:** It’s a simple enough question! I just enquired if you were pleased to see me.

**Tom:** Who are you?

**Woman:** Surely you haven’t forgotten me already. After all, we were married for seventeen years.

**Tom:** *Look*, I don’t know who you are or what you want, but one thing I *do* know is that you are not my first wife!

**Woman:** Are you trying to tell me you don’t recognise me?

**Tom:** I’ll admit you look very much like Jane, but you cannot possibly be her!

**Woman:** Why not?

**Tom:** Because she’s been dead for over two years! That’s why not!

**Woman:** Are you sure about that?

**Tom:** Absolutely certain! I identified the body.

**Woman:** I see. That must have been an interesting experience for you.

**Tom:** Interesting? That’s not how I’d describe it!

**Woman:** Let me put it another way. Did you kill me?

**Tom:** What do you mean, kill you? You’re not dead.

**Woman:** Aren’t I?

**Tom:** No, my first wife’s dead, but you’re obviously not!

**Woman:** All right, we’ll play it your way for now. Did you murder your wife?

**Tom:** My wife died of natural causes, heart failure.

**Woman:** Eventually we all die of heart failure. It’s a question of what causes the heart to fail. Poison, for instance.

**Tom:** There was a post mortem. There was no indication of anything untoward.

**Woman:** There are poisons that leave no trace, especially when administered in very small doses over a long period of time. Are you capable of murder, Tom?

**Tom:** No! Of course not!

**Woman:** I think you are.

**Tom:** How would you know?

**Woman:** I know all about you, Tom. And I think you’re capable of killing.

**Tom:** You’re wrong! Jane was not a nice woman and I’ll admit there were moments when I longed to be rid of her, but I would never have had the nerve to kill her.

**Woman:** Did you hate me that much?

**Tom:** I don’t know who you are. But, yes, I came to hate Jane.

**Woman:** Is that why you took up with that tart while you were still married?

**Tom:** If you’re referring to Anne, she is certainly no tart.

**Woman:** So how would you describe a woman who steals away another woman’s husband?

**Tom:** She didn’t steal me away. Jane had already rejected me long before I met Anne. She brought me comfort in my darkest hours. And, believe me, I really needed comfort the way I was treated.

**Woman:** So you tired of me and ran straight into the arms of another woman?

**Tom:** I don’t know why we’re having this conversation. I’ve admitted that I ended up hating my wife, but you’re not her. I identified her lifeless body and I don’t believe in ghosts… so, whatever your game is, it’s not going to work with me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a celebration to get back to.

(Angrily Tom stomps back into the room. The Woman watches him go, then slips Offstage Left.)

**Anne: (Rising)** Are you all right, Tom?

**Tom: (Still a little distracted.)** Yes, yes, I’m fine.

**Anne:** So where are the drinks?

**Tom:** Hmmm? Oh, the waiter said he’d bring them. **(Looking Offstage Left.)** Here he comes now.

**Anne:** Ah.

(The Waiter approaches with a tray of drinks, which he sets down on the table. Anne and Tom resume their seats.)

**Waiter:** Here we are, ladies and gentlemen. Now let me see… two Chardonnays…

(Anne and Laura take the glasses with thanks.)

**Waiter:** One orange juice…

(Mel takes glass.)

**Waiter:** One G and T…

(Geoff takes glass.)

**Waiter:** One single Scotch…

(Tom takes glass.)

**Waiter:** And one large Scotch

(Jack takes glass. The Waiter takes the tray and exits.)

**Mel: (Giving Jack a glare.)** Large?

**Jack:** It lasts longer.

**Mel:** Not the way you knock it back. Well, I need to powder my nose, anyone else coming?

**Anne:** Yes, I will.

**Mel:** Laura?

**Laura:** Yes, okay.

(The Women all rise and head Offstage Left.)

**Jack:** Why do women always do that?

**Tom:** What, go to the ladies in droves? I don’t know; it’s one of life’s great mysteries.

**Jack:** Nearly everything women do is a mystery to me.

**Tom: (With a laugh.)** I know what you mean.

(Anne comes hurrying back.)

**Anne:** Forgot my bag.

(Anne collects her bag and heads back Stage Left but the Woman has reappeared and waylays her. Geoff, Tom and Jack continue to chat amongst themselves.)

**Woman:** I hope you’re enjoying your evening.

**Anne:** What? Oh… yes. Yes thank you.

**Woman:** I believe you’re celebrating your daughter’s engagement?

**Anne:** Well, yes, that’s right. How do you know that?

**Woman:** I became aware of it.

(Anne looks curiously at the Woman.)

**Woman:** Is something the matter?

**Anne:** Er… no. Sorry, have we met before?

**Woman:** I don’t think so.

**Anne:** It’s just that you look familiar somehow.

**Woman:** Perhaps you’ve seen my photograph somewhere.

**Anne:** Maybe, are you famous? Would your photo have been in the papers or anything like that?

**Woman:** Only some wedding photos in the local paper. But that was nearly twenty years ago so, even if you had seen them, you wouldn’t remember them now. And the only other place they’ve ever been displayed is in my home, so it’s hardly likely you would have seen them there.

**Anne: (Suddenly very troubled.)** No.

**Woman:** We had the reception here as a matter of fact.

**Anne:** Reception?

**Woman:** Our wedding reception.

**Anne:** *Oh*, of course!

**Woman:** It’s changed a bit since those days but it’s still a nice place for a celebration.

**Anne:** Er… yes, very nice.

**Woman:** I hope you approve of your daughter’s choice.

**Anne: (Recovering a little.)** Very much. Geoffrey’s a charming young man. Intelligent too… a research chemist, no less.

**Woman:** Really? Any particular branch?

**Anne:** Well, he specialises in toxicology.

**Woman:** *Oh*, poisons? How interesting.

**Anne:** Well, that scientific stuff is all a bit above my head I’m afraid.

**Woman:** Well, tell the happy couple I wish them… all the happiness they deserve.

**Anne:** Er… yes… thank you, I will. Well, do excuse me. I was on my way to the ladies.

**Woman:** Of course, perhaps it’ll come back to you in time.

**Anne:** What?

**Woman:** Where you’ve seen me before.

(The Woman slips out, leaving Anne looking quite frightened. Mel and Laura return.)

**Mel:** Oh there you are, Anne. We were wondering where you’d got to.

**Anne:** Yes, sorry. I got delayed. I’ll see you in a minute.

(Anne hurries Offstage Left.)

**Laura:** Do you think she’s all right? She looked a bit odd.

**Mel:** Probably just desperate for the loo.

**Laura:** Maybe.

**Jack: (Draining his glass and calling loudly as he rises from the table.)** Anybody ready for another one?

**Mel: (Turning to him sharply.)** Already?

**Jack:** You said I should get the next round in.

**Mel:** Yes, when everybody’s finished! Not two minutes after the previous round!

**Jack:** I’ve finished mine.

**Mel:** I’ve hardly started.

**Jack:** Well, I won’t get you one then. Tom?

**Tom:** Maybe just a small one.

**Jack:** What about Anne?

**Tom: (Looking at Anne’s glass, which is still three-quarters full.)** I think she’s okay.

**Jack: (To Geoff and Laura.)** How about you two?

**Geoff:** Same again please, Dad; G and T.

**Laura:** I’ve still got plenty thanks.

**Geoff:** You might as well get one in. After all, you’re not driving and we *are* celebrating.

**Laura:** Okay, I’ll have another glass of Chardonnay then, please Jack. Thanks.

**Jack:** Right.

(Jack heads Stage Left for the bar but is waylaid by the Woman.)

**Woman:** Still knocking back the Scotch I see, Jack.

**Jack:** What’s it got to do with you? Whoever you are.

**Woman:** Quite a lot actually. Your drinking is largely funded by my generosity these days.

**Jack:** What are you talking about? Are you drunk?

**Woman:** No, I’m not drunk, Jack. In fact, it’s two years since I had a drink.

**Jack:** Well, jolly good for you.

**Woman:** A drink of any sort.

**Jack:** Who the hell are you?

**Woman:** What’s the matter, Jack? Is all the booze affecting your eyesight?

**Jack:** There’s nothing wrong with my eyesight.

**Woman:** In that case you should be able to recognise me.

**Jack:** Well, as it happens you do look vaguely familiar. Yes, you look a bit like that woman that my wife used to work with, but you can’t be her. She’s been dead for… oh… a couple of years now, I reckon.

**Woman:** I told you it had been two years since I had a drink.

**Jack: (He regards her levelly for a few seconds.)** Yes, well, it’s beginning to seem like two years since I had a drink. So, if you don’t mind…

(Jack turns away and heads Offstage Left for the bar.)

**Woman:** I’ll be seeing you, Jack.

**Jack: (Without looking back.)** Not if I see you first. **(He stalks out.)**

(Back in the room Laura is a little concerned.)

**Laura:** Mum’s been a long time.

**Mel:** She has rather, hasn’t see?

**Laura:** I’m getting a bit worried about her.

**Mel:** I’m sure she’s all right. Though I did think she looked a bit… distracted when we saw her.

**Laura:** I think I’ll go and find her, just to make sure.

**Mel:** Do you want me to come with you?

**Laura:** No, you stay here. I’ll just have a quick look.

**Mel:** Okay.

(Mel turns to join in conversation with Tom and Geoff as Laura heads for the bar. Yet again the Woman appears and speaks to her. Tom, Geoff and Mel sit chatting at the table.)

**Woman:** So this is your engagement party, Laura? Does your husband-to-be know just how feckless you are?

**Laura: (Turning angrily.)** I beg your pardon? **(She reels in shock as she sees the Woman.)** Mrs Sanderson? But you’re…

**Woman:** Dead?

**Laura:** Yes, at least, I *thought* you were!

**Woman:** Sometimes those who do not die of natural causes return to this world in spirit.

**Laura:** What are you talking about?

**Woman:** I was taken before my time, Laura. Do you know anything about that?

**Laura:** *No*, of course not!

**Woman:** You never liked me, did you?

**Laura:** Are you surprised? You were horrible to me, and then you fired me.

**Woman:** You deserved to be fired. You were slapdash and lazy.

**Laura:** I was fifteen! And you expected me to work like a slave. It was only a holiday job but I needed the money. Mum was struggling to make ends meet and I was trying to do my bit to help.

**Woman:** And I caught you using the boutique’s telephone to call some boy.

**Laura:** For thirty seconds! Just to tell him I couldn’t meet him that evening because you wanted me to work late.

**Woman:** You were telling him a lot more than that. You were whispering and giggling when I found you.

**Laura:** We might have exchanged a few sweet nothings. It wasn’t that great a sin. You could have given me a second chance.

**Woman:** I don’t give second chances. So… did you let it fester in your brain over the years until you decided to get your revenge by poisoning me?

**Laura:** Of course I didn’t. For one thing, where would I get poison from?

**Woman:** Well, you’d met Geoffrey by then, hadn’t you? Geoffrey the toxicologist. Is that why you hooked up with him? To get your hands on some poisons?

**Laura: (Very angrily.)** Of course not! I love him!

**Woman:** Love him? Somehow I doubt it. I think you’re a little tart, just like your mother.

**Laura:** My mother is not a tart, she’s lovely. And Geoffrey’s far too responsible to hand out poison to anyone who asks him.

**Woman:** But you weren’t just anyone, were you? You were an attractive young woman wheedling your way into his affections. And I don’t suppose he put up much resistance. I could tell he was weak when I spoke to him earlier.

**Laura: (Tearfully)** You spoke to him? So you were the strange woman I saw talking to him. Who are you, and why are you doing this?

**Woman:** You know who I am, Laura.

**Laura:** You’re not Jane Sanderson. You do look like her and you know a lot about her but I don’t believe you’re her spirit who’s come back after death.

(Angrily Laura turns to re-enter the room but stops and turns back when the Woman continues.)

**Woman:** You believed it when you first saw me.

**Laura:** No I didn’t.

**Woman:** Oh, I’m sure you did. I could see it in your eyes.

**Laura:** You caught me off guard. But I don’t believe in ghosts, so I know you can’t be her. What I don’t know is why you’re doing this.

**Woman:** I’m doing it to find out exactly what happened to me. And whether you believe I’m Jane or not, I will find out. I’m going to leave you now, but you’ll be seeing me again. And again and again… until you tell me the truth. That’s the only way you’ll ever be rid of me. Think about that.

(The Woman exits, leaving Laura distraught and almost in tears. Geoff notices her distress and hurries over.)

**Geoff:** Darling? Whatever’s the matter?

**Laura: (Between sobs.)** I met this horrible woman. She said some really nasty things about Mum and you. I think she must be the one you told me about. She said she’d spoken to you earlier.

**Geoff: (Furious)** That old witch? *Right*, I’m going to find her and have it out with her.

**Laura:** No, don’t do that.

**Geoff:** Why not? I’m not having her upsetting you.

**Laura:** I’d much rather just forget about it. To tell you the truth, I found her rather disturbing.

**Geoff:** I know what you mean. She’s really weird. Very inquisitive and, well, always dropping snide innuendos.

**Laura:** Did she suggest that she was… in any way… involved in the… supernatural?

**Geoff:** No, why?

**Laura:** She said something about it being possible to return to this world in spirit if you don’t die of natural causes.

**Geoff:** You don’t believe all that old guff, do you?

**Laura:** Not really. It’s just that she does look uncannily like Jane, Tom’s first wife. But she died two years ago.

**Geoff:** How do you know what Tom’s first wife looked like?

**Laura:** One school holiday I got a temporary job in Jane’s boutique, until she sacked me.

**Geoff:** I never knew that.

**Laura:** Did you never meet her? She was your mother’s business partner after all.

**Geoff:** No, I never had the nerve to venture into a ladies’ boutique. And Jane would never socialise with the likes of us. She was Mum’s boss really, although I got the impression that Mum always did most of the work and Jane treated her like a slave.

**Laura:** I can believe that. But, in that case, how come she left Mel the business?

**Geoff:** Mum thinks it was just to stop Tom getting his hands on it.

**Laura:** Yes, that sounds about right. Dad reckons she was intending to switch all her bequests to anyone but him once she found out he was seeing your mother but she died before she could get round to most of them. She really was horrible, wasn’t she?

**Geoff:** She certainly sounds it, but let’s forget about her, and this other woman who looks like her. Tomorrow we can try to find out what her game is, but tonight let’s just enjoy the occasion. *Ah*, here comes the waiter. Let’s have a drink and forget all about Jane.

(The Waiter appears with a tray of drinks. Geoff and Laura follow him into the room and take their seats at the table. The Waiter sets the drinks down on the table.)

**Waiter:** Here we are! One Chardonnay, one Gin and Tonic, one single Scotch, one double Scotch.

**Mel:** Well, we’ve got the drinks, do you happen to know what’s happened to my husband?

**Waiter:** I believe he’s met a friend in the bar, madam. But he told me to bring his drink through to here, so I don’t think he’ll be long.

**Mel:** Has he by any chance got himself another drink in the bar?

**Waiter:** Er… I think he might have, yes.

(The Waiter exits Stage Left.)

**Mel: (To Laura.)** Did you find your Mum?

**Tom:** We’re getting a bit concerned about her.

**Laura:** Oh no! I got distracted. I’ll go and check in the ladies.

**Mel: (Rising)** No, I’ll go. You look as though you need to sit down for a while.

**Laura:** Thanks.

**Tom:** Shall I come with you?

**Mel:** I don’t think they’ll let you in the ladies, Tom. I expect that’s where she is. You could try to drag Jack out of the bar if you like.

**Tom:** Okay.

(Tom heads Offstage for the bar. Mel is about to follow but is waylaid by the Woman. Geoff takes a seat and comforts Laura.)

**Woman:** Hello, Mel. It’s been a long time.

**Mel: (Shaken)** Jane? It can’t be!

**Woman:** Because I died two years ago? That’s exactly what Tom said.

**Mel: (Terrified)** What are you?

**Woman:** What do you think?

**Mel:** Keep away from me!

**Woman:** Oh, don’t worry, I won’t hurt you. Not physically anyway. Actually, I couldn’t if I tried, but you’re going to be seeing a lot of me from now on.

**Mel:** No!

**Woman:** Everywhere you go, I’ll be there. I’m going to terrorise you, but it will all be in the mind. I’m going to get inside your head and you’ll never ever be free of me.

**Mel:** What do you want from me?

**Woman:** I want you to admit that you did it. I want you to admit that you poisoned me. You did poison me, didn’t you?

**Mel:** No!

**Woman:** Don’t lie to me, Mel. I know you did it.

**Mel:** You can’t know!

**Woman:** Oh yes. You see, I’ve spoken to everyone who might have done it and they’ve all reacted in different ways. Some were shaken, some were mystified, some were disbelieving. But you are the only one who has been absolutely terrified. And why are you terrified? Because you are the only one who is guilty of murder. Apart from your son, maybe, no doubt he supplied the poison for you.

**Mel:** *No*, leave Geoffrey alone! He had nothing to do with it.

**Woman:** So you admit that *you* did?

**Mel: (Pause)** All right, I admit it. I did poison you. But I did it on my own. Geoffrey had no idea what I was doing.

**Woman:** Oh, I think he probably did. He works with poisons every day. He’s an expert. Where else would you have got it from?

**Mel:** *Look*, one night I took his keys and went to the laboratory where he works. He’d once mentioned a couple of poisons that couldn’t be traced in the body after death. I found his supply, stole a little of each and I administered minute amounts to you several times a day in those innumerable cups of tea you used to drink at the boutique while I was doing all the work. Geoffrey was entirely ignorant of what I’d done. *There*, so now you know.

**Woman: (Calmly, after another lengthy pause.)** Why?

**Mel:** What?

**Woman:** Why did you murder me?

**Mel:** Do you really not know?

**Woman:** Indulge me.

**Mel:** I hated you. You treated me like a skivvy; you delighted in humiliating me in front of the customers in the boutique; worst of all, you refused to lend me the rest of the money I needed to get Geoffrey his own laboratory. You wouldn’t lend me a measly fifty-thousand. And you had ten times that in the bank, more, probably. You knew I’d pay you back, not that you’d have missed it anyway.

**Woman:** And, of course, you knew that I had, very generously, left you the boutique in my will. You were going to get your hands on it eventually, so you decided to speed matters up a bit.

**Mel:** Very generously? You only left it to me because you didn’t want Tom to get his hands on it.

**Woman:** My husband was getting quite enough from the rest of my estate. I’d have left that all to someone else if I’d found out a bit sooner that he’d been having it off with that tart for years behind my back! But there was no way he was getting the chance to give *my* boutique to that little scrubber!

**Mel:** Anne’s a lovely lady, actually. And I’m sure Tom only started seeing her because you were so beastly to him. They seem very happy together.

**Woman:** How would you know?

**Mel:** Laura told me.

**Woman:** Laura! She’s as bad as her mother.

**Mel:** Laura is a delightful young woman.

**Woman:** Huh.

**Mel:** Why have you come back?

**Woman:** I told you, to hear you admit your guilt.

**Mel:** Well, now you have. What are you going to do about it?

**Woman:** I haven’t decided yet, but you’ll find out soon enough.

**Mel:** Well, do what like to me, but keep away from Geoffrey.

**Woman:** Don’t tell me what do, murderer!

(The Woman exits Upstage Left. The Waiter appears momentarily, looking thoughtful, and immediately exits again. Anne returns to find Mel shaking with fear.)

**Anne:** Mel, whatever’s the matter? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost!

**Mel:** I think perhaps I have.

**Anne:** What do you mean?

**Mel:** It sounds ridiculous, I know, but I think I’ve just had a conversation with a dead woman.

**Anne:** It doesn’t sound ridiculous at all, actually.

**Mel:** Doesn’t it?

**Anne:** Not if it’s Jane you’re talking about.

**Mel:** What do you mean? Have you seen her too?

**Anne:** Yes, I think I have. I never actually met her when she was alive, but I recognised her from a wedding photo I saw on Tom’s sideboard the first few times I went round there. Somehow she seemed to know I’d seen it. It was all rather disturbing.

**Mel:** So you really think it was Jane’s ghost?

**Anne:** She certainly seemed to know a lot about us all.

**Mel:** What does it all mean?

**Anne:** I don’t know, but I think we should get back to Geoff and Laura. We don’t want to spoil their celebration.

**Mel: (Wretchedly)** I killed her, Anne.

**Anne:** What?

**Mel:** I poisoned Jane Sanderson.

**Anne:** Mel! That woman’s unnerved you. You don’t know what you’re saying.

**Mel:** No, it’s true, I loathed her. Day after day she took a delight in humiliating me. Then she refused point blank to loan me some money to help Geoffrey. That was the final straw. So I put an untraceable poison in her tea.

**Anne:** My God! Look, don’t say any more at the moment. Let’s just get through the rest of this evening and then we’ll meet over the weekend and decide what we’re going to do.

**Mel:** What’s to decide? There’s only one thing I can do; make a clean breast of it to the others and then go and confess everything to the police.

**Anne:** You don’t have to do that. Why tell anyone else? I won’t say anything. After all, you’ve done me and Laura a great favour by getting rid of that awful woman, and Tom as well. I know for a fact that he ended up detesting her. He couldn’t stop grinning when he told me she was dead.

**Mel:** Yes, but now she’s come back! And she’s going to haunt me until I’ve been punished for what I did to her, I know she is. I’ll never be free of her unless I end up in jail. Then perhaps she’ll leave me alone.

**Anne:** Listen to me, Mel! Ghosts do not exist. That woman is not the ghost of Jane Sanderson.

**Mel:** It doesn’t make any difference anyway. I admitted everything to her, so she’s got a hold over me. She’s going to haunt me whether she’s a ghost or not. There’s no way out.

**Anne:** Well, promise me one thing, don’t say anything tonight. We don’t want to spoil Geoff and Laura’s big day. I’ll meet you in Starbucks at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning and we can plan what we’re going to do.

**Mel:** We?

**Anne:** Well, you don’t think I’m going to let you go through this all on your own, do you? Whatever you decide, I’ll do everything I can to help. Just promise me that you won’t say anything until after we’ve had our chinwag.

**Mel:** You don’t think it might be better to get it over with?

**Anne: (Forcefully)** No! Now promise me.

**Mel:** Oh, I don’t know. I can’t think straight at the moment.

**Anne: (More forcefully.)** Promise me!

(Before Mel - somewhat cowed, can reply, Tom and Jack return from the bar and see them.)

**Tom:** What are you two up to?

**Anne:** What are you talking about? We’re not up to anything!

**Tom:** All right, don’t get worked up. I wasn’t suggesting you were plotting to steal the day’s takings or anything.

**Anne:** Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap. Mel’s just had a brush with a very unpleasant woman.

**Jack: (Looking around.)** What woman?

**Anne:** She’s gone now.

**Jack: (Solicitously to Mel.)** Are you okay?

**Mel:** Yes, I’m fine now.

**Jack:** Well, come and sit down.

(The conversation continues inaudibly to the Audience as they return to the table. The Waiter approaches from the bar.)

**Waiter:** Excuse me everyone. I know you’re having a family celebration but I wonder if you’d be kind enough to give me a couple of minutes of your time?

**Geoff:** Is there a problem?

**Waiter:** No problem, sir, but, I do feel that I owe you all an apology.

**Geoff:** Not at all. You’ve been very helpful.

**Waiter:** Let me explain. First of all, I should tell you that I am not, nor ever have been, a waiter here at The Coach House Inn, an establishment which is actually owned by my brother. It may surprise you to know that in fact I worked for the local county constabulary before retiring a couple of years ago with the rank of detective inspector. It may surprise you even more to learn that my name is Jefferson.

**Tom:** Jefferson? But that’s…

**Waiter:** The name of the officer who investigated the death of your first wife, Mr Sanderson? That’s right.

(There is general concern, especially from Mel.)

**Waiter:** I’ve been able to come and go unrecognised this evening, even though I interviewed most of you at the time. But, of course, I had a full beard in those days. And anyway nobody ever really notices the waiter, do they?

**Tom:** I can see it now. I remember those piercing eyes. But losing the beard certainly changes your appearance.

**Waiter:** I’ve probably put on a few pounds since we last met as well. Your wife’s death was my final case and I could never quite dispel the feeling that I had missed something during my investigation.

**Tom:** But at the inquest the coroner’s verdict was death by natural causes.

**Waiter:** Indeed it was, Mr Sanderson. And a perfectly proper decision it was on the evidence available, but even so…

**Anne:** Why bring all this up again now, after all this time?

**Waiter:** I’m sorry to cause any distress to you as friends and family members, but Jane Sanderson was a fit, comparatively young woman with no history of heart disease and her death continued to trouble me as I tried to settle into retirement. Then, last summer my wife and I were holidaying in the Cotswolds and we saw an advertisement for a show at the playhouse in Stroud. ‘They Came to a City’ it was called, by JB Priestley, and a picture of one of the actresses caught my eye, a woman called Rebecca Radley… who bore an uncanny resemblance to the late Jane Sanderson.

(The Woman has entered Stage Left and joins the group, causing consternation all round.)

**Woman:** Inspector Jefferson came to see the play and then asked to see me afterwards. He told me he had a plan and wanted to enlist my help. My tour with the Priestley play was nearly over and my agent didn’t have anything lined up for me for a while so I agreed.

**Waiter:** I briefed her on everyone involved… all of you ladies and gentlemen, I regret to say… and I asked her to use her considerable acting talents to see if she could elicit any pertinent facts from any of you.

**Mel: (Distraught)** To trick us you mean!

**Waiter:** I suppose I do. For which I apologise unreservedly. You see, we were thinking how we could engineer meetings between Miss Radley and yourselves, so when my brother mentioned that everyone involved in the case was going to be gathered together this evening here in his hotel… well, the opportunity seemed too good to miss.

**Anne:** Well, I think it’s despicable!

**Waiter:** Yes, you’re right, I see that now. I’m afraid my quest for the truth rather clouded my judgement.

**Mel: (Turning to the Woman.)** And you! You were so damn convincing. You almost had me believing that you were Jane’s spirit! Otherwise I would never have…

**Woman: (Hastily)** Don’t upset yourself, Mrs Barton. Not until you’ve heard the full story.

**Mel:** What does it matter now?

**Woman:** Oh, it matters! Believe me, it matters. Please go on, Inspector.

**Waiter:** The fact of the matter is… Miss Radley, who in addition to her other talents, I have now come to appreciate is a very perspicacious lady, has convinced me that none of you has anything to hide. It seems that the coroner’s decision was perfectly correct. I can only apologise once more for ruining your evening and say that I would be delighted if you would like to book another meal, entirely at my expense, here at The Coach House at some date in the near future convenient to you all in recompense for my unwarranted interference in your lives.

(Mel reacts in amazement. She catches the Woman’s eye and mouths a ‘thank you’ to her. The Woman puts a discreet finger to her lips to signal Mel to silence. There is an uncertain response from the rest of the group, except for Jack.)

**Jack:** Very decent of you, Chief Inspector, we accept.

**Waiter:** It was just Inspector, Mr Barton, and it’s plain Mister now.

**Jack:** Whatever. We’d be happy to have an evening out on you. I take it the drinks are all included?

**Waiter:** Certainly, the least I could do.

**Jack:** Well, I don’t know about everyone else, but I could make tomorrow night.

**Anne:** Let’s not rush things, Jack. Why don’t we leave it to Geoff and Laura to arrange a date? But yes, it’s a generous offer. Thank you, Mr Jefferson.

**Waiter:** Well, I’ll leave you to it. There’s plenty of room in the main bar now, if you’d prefer to move in there. It’ll be more comfortable for you.

**Geoff: (Generally)** Shall we?

(There is a general murmur of agreement. Jack throws his arms round Geoff and Laura and propels them Offstage Left. Anne and Tom link arms to follow, but Mel hangs back to talk to the Woman. The Waiter follows the others out of the room, but lingers in the corridor.)

**Mel:** I just wanted to ask you… why?

**Woman: (After a few moments thought.)** The more I found out about Jane, the more I came to realise what a truly horrible woman she was. And you all seem to be a very happy family unit. I thought… why upset the apple cart?

**Mel:** Just like that?

**Woman:** Just like that.

**Mel:** Well, I’m very grateful to you, Miss Radley.

**Woman:** I can promise you that your secret’s safe with me, have a happy life.

**Mel:** Thank you.

(The Waiter exits to avoid a confrontation with Mel, who is now hurrying after the rest of the group. Once she has gone, the Waiter re-enters and joins the Woman. He takes a bulging envelope from his pocket and hands it to the Woman.)

**Waiter:** Your fee as agreed.

**Woman:** I’m not sure I deserve this. I’m sorry things didn’t turn out as you wanted.

**Waiter:** What makes you think that?

**Woman:** Well, I assumed you were hoping to be able to make an arrest.

**Waiter:** When I set out on this quest I was intending to expose any wrong-doing that I found and put the miscreant behind bars. But the more you discovered the less I felt like taking any action. As you said to Mrs Barton a little earlier, Jane Sanderson seems to have been a thoroughly unpleasant individual.

**Woman: (Taken aback.)** You overheard our conversation?

**Waiter:** Not so much overheard as deliberately listened in, as I managed to do with most of your little chats with the suspects.

**Woman:** I had no idea.

**Waiter:** There’s a very handy laundry cupboard just round the corner. And I was in CID for thirty years, remember. I haven’t forgotten all the tricks of the trade.

**Woman:** So you know perfectly well that I learnt a lot more than I let on to you.

**Waiter:** Of course.

**Woman:** But you led us all to believe that you thought there was no incriminating evidence.

**Waiter:** If I were still on the force I would have had to act on the information I’d learnt but I’m not a copper any more. I don’t arrest people these days. I was hoping to discover the truth, just for my own satisfaction, and I have. So, to use your phrase, why upset the apple cart?

(The Woman and the Waiter smile at each other as the lights fade.)

(Curtain)

Production Notes

Set

A small brightly-lit room on the ground floor of The Coach House Inn occupies most of the acting area with, far Stage Left, the much less well-lit corridor outside, which eventually leads Offstage Left to the rest of the inn. There is a suggestion of the wall between them. There is no bar in the room although it is clearly for public use with a table and four chairs situated just right of Centrestage. A couple of used but now empty glasses are on the table. It is about 10 p.m. on a Friday evening.

Props

Table (Onstage)

Four chairs (Onstage)

Two glasses (Onstage)

Six glasses (Jack, Mel, Geoff, Laura, Tom and Anne)

Two chairs (Offstage)

Purse containing notes (Mel)

Tray of six drinks: two Chardonnay, orange juice, G & T, Scotch, large Scotch (Offstage)

Bag (Anne)

Tray of four drinks: Chardonnay, G & T, Scotch, large Scotch (Offstage)

Bulging envelope (Waiter)