

Setting: The upstairs room over a town-centre pub. There is an exit Upstage Right and a window Downstage Left. Tables and chairs are set Down Left and Down Centre.

MIRIAM and MARGARET are seated at the table Down Centre. There is a flask of tea on the table and an open plastic box containing gingerbread. MIRIAM has just finished a piece of gingerbread and licks her fingers. MARGARET is knitting a baby garment in a vivid-coloured wool.

MIRIAM: That was a wicked piece of gingerbread, Margaret! I must have a go at that.

MARGARET: I'll give you the recipe. It never falls flat. *(She holds up the knitting.)* I'm not sure about this colour for a new baby. What was I thinking?

MIRIAM: It's good. It's unisex. Pink girls and blue boys are boring. So she's expecting again is she?

MARGARET: Who?

MIRIAM: Her next door to you, the wappy slapper.

MARGARET: Miriam!

MIRIAM: Well! Four kiddies and four absent daddies!

MARGARET: No, it's not for her. This is for the Hospice shop. I bought enough of this wool for a dozen.

MIRIAM: Nice one!

MARGARET: Oh, I don't know.

MIRIAM: They'll fly off the shelves. Trust me.

MARGARET: *(resumes knitting)* And yes, she *is* pregnant again.

MIRIAM: How sweet! I feel so privileged to be a taxpayer. Sterilisation should be compulsory for sponging slappers like her.

MARGARET: Miriam! She's not a bad girl, she's just not very bright, and I don't think she's ever known what a decent man is.

MIRIAM: Well, she's never likely to find out now, is she?

(DAVE, wearing winter over clothes, pokes his head in and enters Upstage Right. He looks around and begins to back out again.)

DAVE: Sorry

MARGARET: Can we help?

DAVE: I think I've come to the wrong place. Sorry.

MARGARET: What are you looking for?

DAVE: The er, book club. I was told first and last Monday every month, above The Tavern.

MARGARET: That's us. Come in. Come in.

(DAVE enters reluctantly.)

DAVE: Am I too early?

MARGARET: No, no. Come and sit down. *(She offers the flask.)* Cup of tea?

DAVE: No thanks. I was going to buy a pint but there's nobody behind the bar. In fact, there's nobody down there at all. *(He unfastens his coat.)*

MIRIAM: Pub prices.

MARGARET: The manager's gone out, but there should be a girl on.

DAVE: No.

MARGARET: She's probably nipped to the loo. Try again in a minute.

MIRIAM: I always bring my own.

MIRIAM produces a can of lager from her backpack which she opens and drinks from.

MARGARET: *(offering the cake box)* Gingerbread?

DAVE: *(sitting at the table Downstage Left)* No thanks.

MIRIAM: She made it herself.

DAVE: Oh... *(He wilts under MIRIAM'S gaze)* Well, just a small piece then. *(He takes a piece.)* Thanks. *(Still under MIRIAM'S gaze, he feels compelled to take a nibble.)*....lovely... it's very nice.

(MIRIAM nods her approval.)

So, just the three of us is it?

MARGARET: There might be some latecomers. *(She continues to knit but begins to speak in a higher pitch, clearly and slowly.)* Is there anything at all you expect from us?

(DAVE looks startled, then self-conscious. He clears his throat and also speaks differently.)

DAVE: I was rather hoping that Mr.Dostoevsky might be – sorry – *would* be - on your approved reading list.

MARGARET: The Brothers Karamazov?

DAVE: No. Crime and Punishment.

MARGARET: *(putting down her knitting and speaking normally again)* Well, that's the formalities over. Welcome to the er book club.

DAVE: I got it right then?

MARGARET: You did. I'm Margaret and this is Miriam..

DAVE: *(shaking hands with them)* Dave.

MIRIAM: Margaret's one of the founder members.

MARGARET: Hello and welcome, Dave.

MIRIAM: Who put you onto us?

DAVE: Demis Pandropoulos. He had the chip shop on the Ladyvale Estate.

MARGARET: Pandropoulos? I don't think I –

MIRIAM: - the Greek fella - hooligans smashing his shop window and driving away his customers.

MARGARET: Oh yes! I remember him. A nice man. Very polite.

MIRIAM: He's not been to a meeting for ages. Did he sort it then?

DAVE: No. I heard his wife had a nervous breakdown and he took the family back to Greece.

MARGARET: No! What a shame!

DAVE: It was a few months ago when he told me about the er book club and gave me the code, so I wasn't sure if it had been changed, or even if you were still meeting here.

MARGARET: It's funny you should say that, because according to our rules, the code should have been changed some weeks ago, but we were just waiting for attendances to pick up again first.

MIRIAM: Hah!

DAVE: I must say, after what Demis said, I was expecting to see a full house.

MARGARET: There were thirty-two members at our July meeting.

MIRIAM: Thirty-two caped crusaders, all totally committed to re-claiming the streets. There was no holding 'em. Testosterone city!

DAVE: So... where are they?

MARGARET: Well, people don't like turning out these cold winter nights, do they?

MIRIAM: They don't like turning out. Full stop.

DAVE: What happened?

MIRIAM: Well I said there was no holding 'em, but that was only 'till it came to volunteering for patrols. Then you could have heard a mouse fart. And once they finally realised that Rambo wasn't up for it, they just dropped away, one after the other.

MARGARET: They did organise a town patrol, after those late-night attacks on women.

MIRIAM: But the attacks all happened on the Ladyvale estate, not in the town.

MARGARET: Difficult though, with no buses to the estate after seven.

MIRIAM: Because of attacks on bus drivers. I said we should have tackled that one first.

MARGARET: And the cost of petrol was a bit of an issue.

MIRIAM: Don't defend them, Margaret. You're too nice. There was one excuse after another. Basically, the lot of 'em were one big fat waste of space.

MARGARET: Not all. Leon and Jeremy are still doing the town patrol.

MIRIAM: Why am I seeing a pair of chocolate teapots?

MARGARET: Leon says they've defused lots of situations.

MIRIAM: Leon knows we can't prove they haven't. Listen. I've twigged those two. They're only in it for the expenses. It's a free night out, a quick stroll round the market place, beer and chips and then home. We are being taken for a pair of mugs. Seriously, I really think it's time we thought about winding this up.

(DAVE stands and starts to fasten his coat.)

MARGARET: You're not going already are you? Oh don't go.

DAVE: It sounds as if there's no point in staying, really.

MARGARET: Give it a chance. It'll pick up again with the light nights.

MIRIAM: Margaret, nobody's interested.

MARGARET: He is.

MIRIAM: Why's that? Burgled? Beat up? Vandalised?

DAVE: Not me - Demis Pandropoulos. I'm here on his behalf. Why should a decent man be driven out of his home and business by a handful of brain-dead kids?

MARGARET: That's very commendable of you, Dave.

DAVE: Not really. I was sorry to see his chippy close. His haddock was the best for miles around.

MARGARET: The secret's in the batter.

DAVE: He said it was all in the timing, from the second the fish hit the oil.

MARGARET: Both probably.

MIRIAM: So you're here because you miss your fish and chips.

The lights dim and a Spot comes up on DAVE. We are about to hear his thoughts. So while he speaks to Front, MARGARET and MIRIAM stay perfectly still and when the conversation commences again, it is as if it had never been interrupted.

DAVE: If only! No, the reason I'm here is because I'm a coward and I can't live with myself. That's the head and tail of it. The times I've longed to hear somebody say, "Don't blame yourself, Dave. It's not your fault." How I'd love to hear that, but I never will because nobody knows about it, except for Demis... I was the only customer in his chippy, and he was happier than I'd ever seen him. He dropped my haddock into the fryer and says, "Hey Dave mate, we goin' to sort out da scums for good and always." and he tells me he's been to a couple of meetings of this underground vigilante group, absolutely

convinced that the scums were about to be disciplined. Maybe it was because of that, combined with the couple of drinks I'd had, that I heard myself telling him about *my* experience. His grasp on English was never great, so I don't think he really understood all I was saying... perhaps that's why I told him.

Work this one out. They give nothing, they take everything and they cause untold misery, so how is it that all those work-shy, drunken, drugged up, moronic low-lives can quite happily live with themselves, while someone like me struggles for just a little peace of mind? It just doesn't ... hah, I was just about to say that it doesn't make sense, but in a way it does because you can't be decent if you don't have a conscience and conversely you can't have a conscience if you're not decent. Oh, steady on Dave, you're turning into a bit of a philosopher – but it doesn't help, does it?

Sometimes I imagine telling Janette and she hugs me and says, "Dave darling, *you're* not to blame", which is pretty ridiculous because she always blamed me for everything – that's why she left me.

No, it's a fact, that I've got to learn to live with - there's no sympathy for cowards. Oh people may pretend it, "You can't blame yourself, Dave" they'll say at the same time as they're thinking, "Yellow belly, spineless gutless yellow belly." I couldn't stand that. Easy for them of course, because none of them ever found themselves in that position. Why did it have to be me?

The Spot goes off and the lights come up to Full again.

DAVE: Why not? It's as good a reason as any. The law failed Demis. It's time we started defending the victims, instead of the criminals.

MIRIAM: Public birchings. That would knock the swagger out of 'em. They wouldn't be so keen for round two after that.

DAVE: It's time they learned that punishment's not just a word.

MIRIAM: Dark alley. Dark night. Just enough fist to grab their attention.

DAVE: It's like the jungle out there. They're getting away with murder.

MIRIAM: And Margaret knows all about that.

MARGARET: It was never actually proved, Miriam.

MIRIAM: And never likely to be. Her husband was walking home, minding his own business when he was mugged and he died. The police did nothing and the arseholes that murdered him are still walking about as free as birds.

DAVE: What about the witnesses?

MARGARET: It seems there weren't any.

DAVE: Then... how do you know he was attacked?

MARGARET: He told me. He came home, walked through the door and said, "I've been mugged." Then he just dropped down dead. That's it. He wasn't injured. It was a heart attack. But he'd never had heart problems before.

MIRIAM: All it takes is a knife at your throat or a gun at your head.

DAVE: And is that why you started the er book club?

MARGARET: It wasn't my original intention. I just needed to talk. I couldn't sleep or eat, not while whoever had ruined my life was still getting on with theirs, as if what they'd done to my Eric was nothing... as if *he* was nothing. Did you hear about that schoolboy who was attacked and left in a coma for weeks?

The lights dim and a Spot comes up on DAVE. We are about to hear his thoughts again. As before, MARGARET and MIRIAM stay perfectly still.

DAVE: Hear about it! I was there! It was eighteen months ago, Friday the thirteenth of June. All those nights shifts I'd done before. All those times driving to work along the same street, stopping at the same time at the same set of traffic lights. Seconds earlier and the lights would have been on green and I'd have been gone. The street's empty, not a soul about. I'm tapping along to a Quo CD – Paper Plane, then *Bang, bang*, there's this screaming face against my window, acne, bum fluff, *bang bang bang*. I'm so shocked I'm screaming back until I realise he's terrified, he's shouting for help, and the instant I twig, there they are charging round the corner, six or seven of 'em, making for him like a pack of hyenas. Quick, get in the passenger side. Get in kid. You're safe with me. I could have said it, but I didn't. I put my foot down and jumped the lights just as the first braying whoop went up behind me.

Half an hour later they rushed him into A&E. He wasn't recognisable apart from his two-tone Nike jacket which I had to cut off him. It was some awful kind of poetic justice that had me assigned as his one to one in ICU over the next few weeks. There was some doubt about him ever regaining any sight... and may God forgive me, because I can't forgive myself, there was a part of me that hoped he wouldn't, but he did, some limited vision in one eye, enough to recognise me. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He recognised me. I knew it every time he looked at me. When he eventually went home, his mother gave me a huge box of chocolates. She kissed me and

called me her hero... and he never said a word. I gave the chocolates to the kids' ward and I've binned the Quo CD. I never want to hear Paper Plane again

The Spot goes off and the lights come up to full and the conversation resumes where it left off.

MARGARET: Do you remember the incident?

DAVE: I think so. You read about these attacks all the time, don't you?

MARGARET: But in that instance, they actually *caught* his attackers, only for them to walk away from court, laughing, freed for lack of evidence. I contacted the boy's parents, just to let them know I understood what they were going through. Apparently, so did lots of others, and before I knew it, my living room was heaving with people crazy for some sort of justice. Then somebody hired this room in town, and before I knew it, my tea and sympathy sessions had turned into a vigilante group, fronting as a book club. Suddenly we were no longer impotent. We were active, positive, in control. There was even talk of going nationwide. Of course, it was all out of my hands by then. I was just enjoying the company.

MIRIAM: Well, you weren't to know they were a bunch of wankers.

There is the sound of a drunk shouting and swearing in the street. MIRIAM crosses to the window and looks down.

MIRIAM: The sight of that! Pissed as a newt! He's all over the place.... Ugh! Now he's throwing up in the optician's doorway.

MARGARET: Can you imagine the poor woman who cleans there, turning up in the dark in the morning, still half asleep?

MIRIAM: Ooh no! The dirty sod!

MARGARET: What's he doing?

MIRIAM: You don't want to know, but that cleaner's got her work cut out tomorrow. *(She turns away from the window and there is a pause.)* So, what's to do?

MARGARET: Miriam, you're right. It's time to call it a day.

MIRIAM: It won't make any difference to us, will it? We'll still be friends won't we?

MARGARET: That's the only good thing to come out of it. I'm so sorry you've turned out for nothing, Dave.

DAVE: I suppose I can find other ways to be useful.

MARGARET: But what if people *do* turn up again?

MIRIAM: I'll tell the manager that the book club's been dissolved, and give him a notice to put up downstairs.

MARGARET: Should we take out an advert in The Chronicle?

MIRIAM: Margaret, nobody's been near for weeks. They're not bothered. Come on, let's leg it.

DAVE: You're not *walking* home, are you?

MIRIAM: We only live ten minutes away.

MARGARET: Me that way, (*she points L*) and Miriam that way. (*She points R*) But she always sees me home first.

DAVE: There's all sorts out there, and that rapist is still on the loose. Aren't you scared?

MIRIAM: Not as much as he'd be. (*She produces a large pair of scissors from her backpack, flexes them, then puts them away again.*) I can look after myself, *and* Margaret.

There is the sound of a woman screaming in the street, swiftly followed by the sound of a man screaming. A rape alarm starts sounding. MIRIAM and DAVE go to the window and look out.

MARGARET: What's happening?

MIRIAM: I can't see. It's on this side.

Footsteps are heard pounding up the stairs and LEON bursts in UR. He wears camouflage gear and, except for his eyes, a balaclava covers his face. He carries a club.

LEON: Quick! Come quick! Jeremy's been blinded.

MIRIAM: What?

LEON: (*still gabbling through the balaclava*) It's Jeremy. Quick! He can't see.

MIRIAM: (*exasperated*) Will you take that bloody thing off your face!

LEON: (*snatching off the balaclava*) Jeremy can't see. A woman's squirted a spray in his eyes.

MIRIAM: Why?

LEON: This drunk was bothering her, so we went to help.

MIRIAM: Like that?

LEON nods.

You pillocks! No wonder she panicked. Put that away for a start. *(to MARGARET)* I'll be back in n a minute.

She hurries out UR, and after struggling to replace the club in a back pocket of his combats, LEON, seeing she has gone, and unsure of what to do, follows her out.

MARGARET: *(calling after him)* Good work, Leon. *(to DAVE)* See? They are trying. I think Miriam's been a bit hard on them.

DAVE, keen to get away, stands and starts to button his coat.

DAVE: Well, it's been nice to meet you, Margaret.

MARGARET: I wouldn't go out there just yet, Dave. You might get dragged in and the last thing we want is to attract the police.

DAVE: You don't seriously think there's much chance of *that*, do you?

MARGARET: Normally, no, but you know how Sod's law works. They haven't tumbled us so far, but just as we're about to fold...

DAVE: I'll give it a few more minutes then. *(He unbuttons his coat again and sits. The rape alarm stops.)* Will she be ok?

MARGARET: Miriam? Oh yes! She'll have it all under control. She's a born leader, that girl. If she'd joined the army when she left school, she'd be a field marshal by now, and yet, and I don't think she'd mind my telling you this, she had a very deprived childhood. She more or less raised herself because her mother was an alcoholic of dubious morals who kicked Miriam out as soon as she didn't attract dependent's benefits any more, but instead of going under she got qualifications, a good job, and her own flat.

DAVE: They say what doesn't kill you makes you strong.

MARGARET: Exactly. Lessons learned at your mother's knee took on a whole new meaning for Miriam. She's probably the most principled person I've ever known, and yet, and I don't think she'd mind you knowing this, she's got a criminal record..

DAVE: Really?

MARGARET: For assault. As usual it was another case of justice turned on its head. Three girls tried to steal her phone, and she retaliated with a few well-placed smacks. One of them reported her and lied.

DAVE: Typical.