

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Death by Misadventure

by Evan Watts

EXTRACT

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ACT ONE

The living area of a small apartment. There are three doors. One at the back of the space leads to the outside world. Hanging by this door is a jacket. The door, stage right opens to a bedroom and the door opposite, opens onto the kitchen/bathroom.

Late on a summer evening. The light is gradually fading. JAY sits on the floor in front of a television. There is a framed picture standing up on top of the television. Beside him is a half full whisky bottle, an empty glass, a cigarette packet and an ashtray full of butts. Throughout this opening sequence he is constantly changing the channel on the television. The sound is very low. He has to sit very close to hear it. He turns the television off. He exits to the kitchen/bathroom with the glass and returns with it full of ice. He pours himself a drink. He picks up the portrait.

A light goes on in the bedroom. He hides the portrait. He picks up the packet of cigarettes. It is empty. He searches in the ashtray and retrieves a crumpled butt. He rolls it out and lights it.

KAY stands in the doorway, stage right. She has slept in her clothes. Silence.

KAY: I thought you'd given up.

JAY: So did I.

KAY moves across the space and exits to the kitchen/bathroom. She turns on a light. The sound of running water.

KAY (*off*): What happened? I thought you were out for the evening. Get stood up?

JAY: You could say that.

KAY (*off*): You should have woken me. I'll never get to sleep later.

Silence. KAY enters with a glass.

JAY: What do you think of the kitchen?

KAY: Very nice. For a second I thought I'd wandered into someone else's apartment.

KAY hands JAY the glass.

You were going to save me some.

JAY examines the glass.

JAY: This is out of the bathroom.

KAY: Does anything pass your attention? A little toothpaste might take the edge off that stuff. Just pour.

JAY gets up, with glasses, and exits to the kitchen/bathroom.

It's me that has to drink out of it.

JAY (*off*): We need some ice.

KAY examines the bottle.

KAY: We only bought this yesterday.

The sound of running water. KAY grabs the cigarette packet.

Thanks a lot. I was saving those.

JAY (*off*): This bathroom is a swamp. When was the last time you cleaned in here?

JAY enters with glasses and ice. He pours.

Every time I go in there I swear something black and gooey is about to leap out and grab me around the throat.

KAY: 'The Creature from the Blue Bathroom'. Anything else you'd like to draw my attention to while you're at it? Obviously the bed isn't that comfortable either.

JAY: I just wasn't tired.

KAY: Do you ever sleep? (*Silence.*) You don't have to stay here. I just thought it might be easier. Better than sitting alone in some hotel room. I'm sure you could find one with a better television.

JAY: There are other places I could stay.

KAY: I wouldn't want you doing anything you didn't want to. (*Silence.*) You giving up smoking just means you smoke mine instead. Why don't you do us both a favour and give in to the demon. Then I won't have to support both our habits.

JAY: It's just not a good time for me to try this.

KAY: Stop torturing yourself. Give in. What harm can it do? It can only kill you. (*Pause.*) Why don't we do something.

JAY: Like what?

KAY: Go down to the beach.

JAY: It'll be pitch black out there.

KAY: Wouldn't want to drag you away from the TV. Something interesting might come on. *(Pause.)* Ever swim in the sea at night, naked?

JAY: Didn't you see the movie.

KAY: The water'll be beautiful and warm.

JAY: You know what I think about swimming in the sea.

KAY: It's a clean beach. It doesn't smell. You'll enjoy it once you're in.

Silence. KAY finishes her drink.

JAY: I guess it must be your turn to get the ice.

KAY exits to the kitchen/bathroom with the glasses.

You can go if you like.

KAY *(off)*: I hope you left detailed instructions where everything is now. It was chaos but at least I knew where I saw things last.

JAY: Once I get started it's hard to stop. I thought you'd be pleased.

KAY enters with ice. JAY pours them both another drink.

KAY: I do appreciate the hard work. It's just that I feel like a stranger in my own kitchen. *(Silence.)* Not that I'm telling you what to do but isn't it about time you went back to work? They're going to be wondering what happened to you. It's been a month.

JAY: I know how long it's been. I've checked in. They're coping without me.

KAY: Is that good or bad?

JAY: They're not happy about it. I've done my share in the past. They can cover for me for a change. You thinking of branching out into business management? *(Silence.)* I thought you were going for a swim.

KAY: Excuse me for loitering in my own home. I've disturbed you have I? I am so sorry. Do you mind if I finish my drink?

Silence. KAY exits to the bedroom. Silence.

JAY downs his drink. He turns the TV on and flicks through the channels.

(Off.) Nobody is going to see us. We're not a secret any more. *(Silence.)* You've got to get out. It'll do you good.

KAY enters dressed in a swim suit and jeans. She has turned the light off in the bedroom.

This is your last chance. *(Pause.)* I know why you're like this. Going to have a drink with a friend? I don't think so. You went to see your wife. You had a big evening planned. Only she wasn't having any of it.

JAY: Don't talk to any strangers out there.

KAY: You even had a shave. Must've been a special occasion.

JAY: Especially strangers with wide grins and big appetites.

KAY: Anybody would have to be more interesting than you, when you're in this mood. Who knows. I might get lucky.

KAY goes to the door.

Do I have to take a key? Are you planning on going anywhere?

Silence. JAY pours himself another drink.

I'll take that as a no.

KAY exits.

JAY goes to the door centre stage. He has his glass of whisky in his hand.

JAY: It wasn't her I went to see. It was my daughter.

EM *(off)*: *(From the kitchen/bathroom.)* Ice?

JAY: *(Pause.)* Sure.

EM *(off)*: It's a comedown, I know.

EM enters with a cube of ice held in tongs. She places it in his drink.

It took me ages to get it looking half decent. Place stank. It'll do in the meantime.

JAY: You didn't have to shift out of the house. You could've stayed there as long as you liked. It would've been cheaper.

EM: If you really want to know, I got sick of you just dropping around all the time. It was either change the locks, and that didn't seem right, or move out. This way at least you have to ring first. That's if they ever get around to connecting the phone.

JAY: You could've said...

EM: I knew you were going to say that. The fact is, I did. Many times. It didn't seem to make any difference. You just don't listen. I said no when you asked for that framed portrait but I can't find it now. No means no. I want it back.

JAY: It just got misplaced in the shift. It'll turn up.

EM: I mean it. *(Silence.)* I don't know where she is. She knew you were coming.

CHARACTERS

JAY, a middle aged man.

EM, a middle aged woman, Jay's estranged wife.

ELLE, their teenage daughter.

KAY, a young woman, Jay's lover.

JACK, a young man, an intruder.

SYNOPSIS

This play explores the nature of a narrative genre, the psychological thriller. It is my belief that these stories are conceived out of specific needs within the author himself (they seem to come almost exclusively from male writers) and this play asks questions of why, and for whom, such stories are written.

Death by Misadventure, (like such films as Cape Fear, Fatal Attraction, Presumed Innocent, Desperate Hours, etc.) revolves around adulterous acts. These acts - this betrayal - unleashes a monstrous force. At the beginning of Death by Misadventure, Jay has left his wife and daughter to live with his lover Kay. In keeping with the thriller genre, the unleashing of the central figure's bodily desires, means that a 'monster' is also released. For example, in the film of Cape Fear the release from jail of the rapist, Max Cady, is linked to Sam Bowden's supposed infidelity with a court colleague. In the book (originally known as The Executioners), the 'monster' Cady's release is linked with Sam's growing awareness of his teenage daughter's sexuality. In this genre, the author divides the male psyche into two figures, the monstrous body and the controlling authorial mind. A lot of time and energy is spent, however, trying to disavow such a link. I would say this is the work of such stories. The need to lay forbidden desire, firmly at the feet of an/other, is a strong one.

The intruder Jack, is the malevolent force in Death by Misadventure. If Jay can put an end to Jack's reign of terror he may be able to reclaim his family, eliminating the guilt he feels for leaving them. Indeed, to destroy the 'monster', the ruptured family *must* reconstitute itself. When the 'monster' is finally repressed (they never seem to truly die) the final stage of rebinding is completed. The family is brought together by the shared horror of their experiences. In the thriller genre this is the only possible ending for otherwise the story would have no point. If the monstrous body is not repressed and the family not brought together then the work of the story has not been done. In Death by Misadventure, I have sought a resolution that allows for other possibilities.