

Armchair Detective

by Maeve James

Runner Up: Body in the Library category

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Armchair Detective

I am the ultimate armchair detective, drenched in mystery. Murder is my happy place.

I breathe in the stuffy air of my small apartment. A battered old bookcase sits pride of place, stuffed to the gills with boxsets of Endeavour, Sherlock, Inspector Lynley, Midsomer Murders, Death in Paradise and more. A single bed is pushed into the far corner, the covers a tangled nest in the middle, all colour washed out of them.

I shift in the sagging pleather of my ergonomically designed computer chair which I still manage to slump in and roll from one computer screen to the next. The one in front of me is crowded with loading programs and text. A nightmare of a code that fights me at every step.

I roll back to my other screen and move my novelty mouse-shaped controller to click play. An old episode of Midsomer Murders, the one with the body in the library and the total tally of five deaths.

Which is by far not their most deadly episode. Midsomer County has similar murder rates to real-life London. How is anyone still alive?

I tap on the glass of the fish tank on my desk. It's about the same size and shape as a videotape. Inside glass beads sparkle and nest the roots of a lacy aquatic fern. The fronds shudder as they're pushed aside by a brilliantly daft fighting fish.

"Look alive Captain Fabulous. Your favourite bit is coming up." With a flamboyant flutter of his fins, he turns in the wrong direction.

As I watch the episode, a street and pub look familiar. I google where the episode was filmed. One fan site identifies it as a street in Southford, which is only a few miles away.

I open Google maps, one of my favourite time killers. I bet we've all used it to snoop on the neighbours, or stalk an ex. When I hang the little orange man over a street, I always give him an extra shake, like a terrier with a rat. Then drop him into place and see through his eyes. A snapshot of the world through a thousand blinks of time.

Southford is a typical storybook English village that puts on a bit of a show for the tourists, then complains about them behind their

backs. A canal cuts through the middle of town, visitors can perch on the footbridge and enjoy a chocolate cone from the ice creamery.

I step down one road, past a row of Tudor houses, then follow the canal out into the little woods. The light quality of the images makes me think that it's early, just light enough to drive without headlights.

I swivel upwards and the sky is a hard smoky colour like a fire has just been doused, clouds on the verge of a rainstorm. I take a swig of my sugar-free cola and glance over at my belligerent code. It looks like some progress has been made, but I turn back to the dark, bush-cramped lane out of town. I jump ahead, double-tapping McSqueaky. I pass a van parked in an overgrown spur and continue on.

A few more clicks and I spy a small object on the road. I try to draw a bead on it. You can see some hilarious things on Google maps. I've seen images of convicts on the run, people making faces, and animals that fall afoul of the image stitching process. Best I can guess, this is a shoe, purple and sparkly with a heel that makes my calves ache just to look at it.

"Look Fab. It's a shoe. Some idiot dropped..." I swivel the camera back around and move forward, but my eye catches sight of something in the dark verge of the road. It's gone in an instant and

I lean closer to the computer and jerk the mouse around to try to get the right view again. It can't be. I grind a knuckle into my eye and I exhale through my teeth. There, almost hidden from view, was a man. A man turned away from the road, drags a burden into the brush. A burden with pale legs and a purple strappy shoe on one foot.

I sit back, my heart doing a frantic tap dance in my chest. It had to be a mistake. Or a prank? Or had I stumbled upon my detective origin story. But how cold was this case? I look at the bottom of the screen, the date of the photos was two months ago. I bring up another page and google missing persons in and around Southford. There are too many. I search for a few moments, then return to the map.

"I need more information," Fab agrees with a flick of his tail. I focus back on the scene in the copse, move up the road, then come back down. Nothing out of the ordinary. I glance at my fish.

"You got any ideas?" Fab pushes through the fronds of the aquatic plant as he drifts from one side of the tank to the other.

"Very helpful." I track Fab's movements for a moment before it hits me. How did he get there? He must have transported the body somehow. I doubt he managed to get there on a pair of Heelys.

I jump back to the white van. I can see that it has signwriting on it. But it is angled away from the road and the numberplate is blurred.

I try to approach from a different angle, I squint at the business name and logo. The logo is green and blue, and makes me think of a mutant swan. I sigh and sit back. This van might not even be connected to the man and woman in the trees, but it's my only clue so far. One more click of McSqueaky and I cry out in success.

"Dan's Pool Cleaning Service." I read. "Good call Fab."

I type the business name into the search bar and click on the website. The logo, not a mutant bird after all, was a tropical leaf and waterfall motif. I scan the business blurb and frown. The happy banner claims that Dan services all of Nottingham and Mansfield. "That's 50 miles away." I mumble to myself. "What is he doing in Southford?" Fab doesn't know either. I flick back to the maps, zoom out and change the view to satellite. I sweep over the entire town of Southford like a determined drone, and when I finish, I am convinced that the van belongs to the murderer. There is not one single pool in Southford for Dan to clean.

"That's not suspicious at all, is it, Fab?" I mutter. Fab turns a circle in agreement.

"Let's find out a bit more about Dan." I click through to his Facebook profile. Which is a waste of time, as I spend the next twenty minutes looking at before and after pictures of pools he's cleaned, and of the many coffees he's drunk. It's just a business account, and I'm not going to find anything incriminating in his

business model. I need his personal account for anything juicy. I try a general search for Dan in the Southford area.

“Well, that was a dumb idea.” Fab swishes at the thousands of Dans’ the search vomited up.

“Going to need a last name.” I return to his business page and try the contact me section. No dice there. His contact details are under the name Dan the Man.

“What a tool.” Fab blows out bubbles in sympathetic horror. I scroll through the photos again and begin to sift through the comments on his pictures.

“Bingo!” I cry. Fab blinks.

“Look at this comment.” I point it out on the computer screen and read it aloud. “My pool has never looked this good! Hughsie, you are a marvel! Smiley face, water drop, smiley face. His last name must be something like Hugh or Hughes.”

My fingers twitch above the keyboard, but stop when Fab lurches towards his reflection in the glass.

“Oh. I suppose he could employ different workers. That puts a spanner in the works.” I tap an irate finger on the desk and twist my mouth to the side. McSqueaky brings me back to Dan’s homepage, I click the About Us tab and scan the overenthusiastic history of the business.

“There!” I point towards the text. “Owner operated since 2008. Stop being obstructive.” Fab tosses his fins at me.

I add Hughes to my search for the Dans’ of Southford. That narrows the field but not enough. I review the photos on business profile again. The hands holding the cups of coffee are Caucasian. What else? Left hand. There’s a wedding ring. Dan is married. Or was. Could the body be his wife? Always suspect the husband! I scroll and scroll, photo after photo blurs before my eyes. There’s got to be more!

Fab swishes in his tank and I pause. The picture is of a pale green pool with a glass barrier around it. I rub my tired eyes and lean closer. A reflection in the glass. Dark hair, stubble, muscular. And a tattoo across his collarbone. I find him in the list of Dans’ on Facebook.

Dan’s personal account is a classic late thirty-something, former fitness enthusiast, who also enjoys a pub on the weekends because YOLO, you know? I roll my eyes at Fab. He is as unimpressed as I am. Dan is trying much too hard, and is barrelling towards a cracker of a midlife crisis, or a murder? Same kind of desperation I suppose.

I focus in on his wife. She is a mousy little thing, that smiles up at her much larger husband, and almost never looks directly at the camera. These are the photos he chooses to show the world. And not a single one of them focusses on his wife.

“I pity her if she’s dead.” I tell Fab. “And I pity her even more if she’s not.”

I discover her name is Eloise, and change to her personal account. She belongs to those who post regular meals, and funny animal videos. I look for the latest picture that includes her in it, a boozy brunch with girlfriends, and know she is not the woman being dragged into the bushes. She was alive and well two weeks ago.

I return to Dan’s account. I can’t trawl through all his followers. I frown. He wouldn’t keep following someone he had killed, would he? It was possible they were not close, but the balance of probability is that you would be murdered by someone you know, rather than a complete stranger.

Fab beats against the side of his tank twice.

I shoosh him.

“Quiet. I’m thinking... Maybe his wife knew her too... and then it would look suspicious if he tried to get her to unfollow her as well.”

I turn McSqueaky back to Eloise’s page. She has lots of followers too. I really don’t want to go through all of them if I don’t have to. That would take forever! I glance across at my other, non-murder occupied screen, and note the finished code waiting for a prompt. “Nope.”

Eloise has fewer personal photos than she has followers, so I turn there first. I remember the pale legs caught in the maps photo and note down any Caucasian woman. I pay more attention to attractive women around Dan’s age bracket. The statistics are good for a crime of passion. Love, as always, at the top of the list of motives. I discount the women with recent proof of life posts, and note down those with private accounts to check later. I am convinced that, like the Midsomer episode that has long since finished, I too, will find the body in the library. My library is just one of photos, rather than books.

I take a break from sleuthing to fuel up and grub around the fridge for another cola. It’s not a sugar-free one, but I shrug and pop the top. Can’t expect me to keep with a diet when I’m on the trail of a murderer. Not like I’m going to win *The Biggest Loser*, anyway. I slather some toast with butter and open a bag of crisps then drop back into my seat.

Fab stares at my plate.

“I didn’t forget about you, little fatty.” I sprinkle colourful granules through the slot of his rectangle.

I shove crisps into my mouth with one hand, careful not to get grease on McSqueaky, and scroll through months of Eloise’s uneventful, unfulfilled life. There’s the odd trip to the beach,

though I'm not convinced she ever gets her feet wet. There was a trip to Spain, but the comments were just complaints about the food and the heat. A few wistful pictures of her sister's kids. A quick check shows me her sister is not the victim. You never know with sisters and husbands.

Fab spots her at the same time I do. Tall. Slim. Blonde. But it's the purple dress that really steals the show. A tight sparkly number that you could only pair with matching heels. It's one of those awful grainy party photos. The flash has caught a moment that I'm sure most would have preferred to have been lost in the dark. Eloise and the woman have an arm around each other's waists. Mouths wide in shouted lyrics, and eyes closed to better feel the beat. Dan is caught in the background, his gaze fixed on the woman in purple. I narrow my eyes at him.

"Gotcha."

No one is tagged in the picture, but I scroll through the comments until I find one lecherous comment about how "hot" Jenny looks in that photo. I go into Eloise's followers. There are two Jennifer's, but it's clear that it's blonde Jenny I'm after, not Grandma Jennifer.

Her last post is as clear as a tombstone. A stark black background with simple white text. "After extensive consideration, I have

decided to do a social media detoxification. Do not expect to hear from me. Please respect my privacy, and do not attempt any communication. Thank you." I check the date on the post and a zing of excited horror thrills up my spine.

"Two months Fab. The day after the Google maps photos were taken. Can't be a coincidence."

I scrutinise Jenny's posts. She posted regularly, and widely. It seemed like she entered any giveaway competition she ever came across, posted daily selfies, and immortalised every yoga pose in every conceivable angle of sunlight.

She had a reasonable amount of followers, and never left a comment uncommented on.

"Thnx babe", and "your so swt", and "Luv u!!!"

Something ticks in my brain, as I roll through her posts. Then I realise. Jenny never writes a full word, if an abbreviation or a typo will do. I flick back to the detox post. It sounds stilted and formal, and not at all how Jenny expresses herself.

"He must have accessed her phone after he killed her and tried to cover his tracks." Fab swishes his tail in outrage. I add the name Jenny to my missing persons search, but there is nothing conclusive. His misdirection may have worked. But not anymore. Not on me.

I methodically work my way through Jenny's documented life, to glean every possible fact about her from the images and idle comments.

Twenty-five years old. Only child. Grew up in Suffolk. Likes dogs. Hates coffee. Worked in a cafe. Worked in a pharmacy. Worked in a hotel. Worked in a... you get the idea. With all this chopping and changing, it would be very possible for her to fall through the cracks of her friend's attention. Alone and young, popular in a shallow way she disappeared with hardly a ripple.

I flick my eyes around my tiny apartment and the scattered belongings. Everything in a serving size for one. The only items with a dedicated place, my murder shows.

"But I'm not alone at all." I scoff.

Fab assures me that that is correct. I shake my head and return to my mission.

I am ready. I'd changed out of my fuzzy tracksuit bottoms into my favourite galaxy patterned dress and red leggings. I rub dry shampoo through my too-many-days-unwashed hair and coil it into a messy knot. Fab watches me as I tuck the essential items of detection into a hessian tote bag. Latex gloves, notebook and pen, novelty magnifier, evidence bags, handkerchief, and phone charger. I slip my feet into my ballet flats and look back at Fab.

"I'm leaving you in charge Captain. If I'm not back by nightfall, alert the authorities."

Fab stands to stoic attention.

The bus drops me off in the Southford Main Street, just across the canal from the ice cream shop. I cross the cobbled footbridge over the lazy waterway and treat myself to a chocolate cone. The I pull up Google maps to orient myself and start down the roads I'd explored earlier. It takes a lot longer to walk, than it does to navigate by little orange man. The afternoon sun is warm and I soon have sticky sweat patches under my arms and down my back. I pull the back of my dress away from my tingling skin. My breath scratches at my throat as I bend down and rest my hands on my knees. It can't be much farther than this!

After a moment to catch my breath and let my heart rate slow down, I follow the hedge road until I recognise the overgrown spur where Dan's murder van was parked. Not far now. The adrenaline spike moves me a lot faster, and soon I reach the stretch of road where I first spotted Jenny's lone shoe. I take out my tablet, where I have many screenshots of where the dark monstrous figure is dragging Jenny into the trees. I cross reference the pictures to the surroundings, until I am sure that I have the right copse of trees to enter. One with a pale scar where a branch was ripped off, and to

the left, a half-rotted stump wallows in fallen leaves. I scour the ground for footprints, but any marks of Dan and Jenny's path are long since obscured.

I square my shoulders and narrow my eyes in what I know is a heroic fashion and stride into the gap between the bushes. Mud laps over the sides of my flat shoes and I squeal as the cold muck seeps between my toes. Gritting my teeth, I push past the wet branches and step over the puddles as best I can. I move by instinct, taking whichever direction would allow the space for the murderer to move the body. As I get further into the trees, I start to notice parallel marks in the softer parts of the ground, that could be drag marks, and sharper impressions that I think must be the edges of footprints, blurred but not fully erased under the canopy of trees.

The swampy smell grows stronger and leads me to the banks of the river. No longer constrained by concrete sides, the canal path has widened and seeped into the surrounding soil. The water looks heavy with muck, slow and laboured as it struggles to flow. Without much movement leaves mound in wet piles, with flashes of metallic crisp packets and cans peeking through. I spot the tarnished handlebars of a bike sticking out like the Titanic's iceberg.

I look for any signs on the bank, but everything is a muddy, squelchy mess. I look both upstream and downstream, then shrug and choose downstream, thinking that Dan's instincts would have moved him away from town.

I push past a drowned tree, that leans like a drunken man across the bank. The sharp branches scrape bloody lines across my arm. I recoil and grip my arm. My breath hitches as hot tears invade my eyes. My hand shakes as I rub my wrist across my eyes and nose. I hiccough as I turn to fight my way back to the road. This is pointless. I can't search the whole woods. Not so heroic after all.

Then I picture Jenny. So young, so alone. Stolen from the world, and the world stolen from her, for no reason other than a man's pride or entitlement. For two months, no one had missed her, and it was only by complete chance that I had stumbled across her tragic end. I couldn't just leave her out here. Heroism restored, I steady my breathing, and continue on shaky legs.

The smell changes. Before it had been dank and off-putting, settling heavily in my nose and throat but staying there. Now it has a sharpness to it, that slices down my throat, clutches my lungs and turns my stomach into a nervous jittery mess.

I cough, but nothing clears the rich, fetid smell from my senses. I dig out my handkerchief and mash it to my face, to replace the decay with the scent of my washing detergent. It clears it for a moment, but then the two scents mingle. I pinch my nose closed, filter my breath through the cloth, and can move again. There is a larger pile of leaves and detritus at the edge of the water, than has collected upstream. I tiptoe closer, then step flat-footed to avoid slipping in the mire.

I slip the latex gloves over one hand and then the next, changing the hand over my mouth so it's never uncovered. I start to shift the layers of wet muck from the pile. At first, I'm an archaeologist, but I soon abandon the cautious investigation. I scoop with my one free hand and fling aside the sodden handfuls. Until I find... What I'd expected to find.

It was her foot, still in her shoe. The purple sequins peeked through the grime. Her toenails still had polish on them. But that was the last recognisable feature. The flesh had sloughed off in meaty sections, and bared bones to the open air. Insects swarmed around and in the decayed flesh that had once been a vibrant silly girl who deserved better.

I stagger back in a visceral horror I had no idea I was capable of. My shoe suctions into the mud and my foot comes out of it. I lurch and my other foot slithers out from under me. I land in the cold mud, and slide closer to the body under the leaves. An unreasoning scream tears straight from my gut. I push away from the bank, turn and vomit into the sludge. Tears drip from my face. I go to wipe them away. But my hands are covered in mud, all the way up my arms. I hear low unintelligible sounds. I'm making those sounds. What am I saying? The mud stirs into patterns as I slide my limbs around in a panic. I force myself back up on my feet. I turn and run. A mindless, graceless, can't-be-here-anymore flight.

I crash through the last stand of low bushes. I fall to my knees on the bitumen. My red leggings shred. My skin does too. The mud that still clings to my arms stems the bleeding from dozens of jagged tears. I tug what's left of the latex gloves from my hands and throw down my tote bag. Blurry eyed and snotty, I pull out my phone. "999. What is your emergency?" "I found Jenny's body." I gasp out. "Dan killed her. I have proof. Please help. Southford." That's all I can manage before I drop the phone and curl up in a tangle of muddy limbs and shredded ideals.

I was the ultimate armchair detective. I wish I'd stayed there. Murder is not a happy place.

Maeve James

Maeve James lives in the stunning Southern Highlands of NSW, where she devours books in the cosy winter evenings by the fire. Not all of her adventures are of a literary nature, however, and Maeve is always on the lookout for her next one.