

EXCERPT FROM "The Chapel In the Middle of Nowhere"

SETTING: An isolated chapel, converted to a house.

TIME PERIOD: Contemporary

CHARACTERS, in order of appearance

MOYA BENTHAM Younger than Martin Hazlitt's wife. Slightly hippy-ish in manner of dress.

MARTIN HAZLITT Married to Mariella. He is dressed for the play's party in office suit and tie.

MARIELLA HAZLITT Wife of Martin. Dressed prettily in a party dress.

'MIF' DOYLE A young man. Casually dressed.

MARK DAVIES Younger and better looking than Martin Hazlitt. Despite his announced profession (management consultant) he should not be dressed any more affluently or confidently than Hazlitt. Just an average suit and tie.

MHAIRI O'CONNOR Aged late 40's to mid-50's. Alluring appearance, with a good figure. The name, Mhairi, is pronounced "VAR-ee"

MAUREEN MAGUIRE Sister of Michael Maguire (who is referred to in the play) Age late 50's to early 60's. In contrast to Mhairi, is a very ordinary looking woman.

No character is required to be of any particular nationality or ethnicity.

(Excerpt from Act I, Scene 1)

The action till now: Members of a benign but fading and dysfunctional religious cult, "M", have been preparing a party in an isolated chapel that has been converted to a private home. They are awaiting the arrival of guests. Management consultant, Mark, a new member of the cult, who is visiting from another area of the country, has just arrived.

HAZLITT Ah. It's our new boy! Am I right? Mark Davies? (*Shaking MARK's hand*) Mmm! Friendling!

MARK Mmm! Yes.

HAZLITT I'm Martin Hazlitt, the Local Overseer, and this is Mif Doyle, one of our ordinary members.

MARK (*Shaking MIF's hand*) Mmm! Friendling!

MIF Hi!

HAZLITT Sit down, Mark, please.

MARK Sorry I'm late. I stopped to help a man whose motorbike had broken down. Gave him a lift to Hallby. We got stuck in a traffic jam at a road-block.

MIF Sure you didn't pick up the escape man?

MARK Who's that?

MIF It was on the radio. They said he was from an asylum and dangerous.

HAZLITT Did they!

MARK Seemed fine. The man I picked up. Said he was a musician. Perfectly normal.

MIF It's the normal ones you have to look out for. You might have given a lift to the "crazed axe murderer".

(MARIELLA enters from the corridor, carrying a tray of food)

HAZLITT Did you hear it on the radio, Mariella? About the escaped mental patient?

MARIELLA Mif, we've done that joke.

MOYA Joke?_ Oh! I get it! Remember he told us he was going to see *The Mousetrap*?

(ALL, except MIF, look blankly at MOYA)

MOYA You know. The famous Agatha Christie play. That's how it starts. A radio announcement about a dangerous lunatic. I went with a girl-friend. Three people get murdered and you'd never guess who did it.

MIF My seeing *The Mousetrap* is pure coincidence. There was a radio announcement. Why do you think there's a road block?

HAZLITT Checking for drunk drivers, probably.

MOYA If you think about it, Mif's like a character out of Agatha Christie. She always has these slightly deranged young men; "sensitive" is the word she uses to describe them. They're the ones you're supposed to suspect of homicidal tendencies. *(Leaving by the corridor)* Though, like you, Mif, they always turn out harmless, to be pitied rather than feared.

MARK *(Considerately changing the subject)* Mariella, I forgot to tell you when I arrived. Maurice Tanner asked me to convey his good wishes.

MARIELLA We like Maurice.

MARK The first member I met when I joined M some months ago. I agree. A most pleasant man.

MARIELLA Excuse me. I have to help Moya bring in the food. *(She leaves by the corridor)*

MARK *(Looking around)* Your house has very unusual architecture, Martin, almost like a church.

HAZLITT It was a church. A small chapel, anyway. It's a conversion job, done by the original owners, about ten years ago.

MARK Who was the chapel for? There's no nearby village. All you see from the road is forest one side, steep hills the other.

HAZLITT I don't know the answer to that.

MARK So it's a mystery, then. "The Chapel In The Middle Of Nowhere". Nobody knows who built it or why.

MIF I'd say it dates back to medieval. There was a leper colony, isolated from civilisation. They built the chapel as a penance.

(MOYA enters from the corridor carrying food. MIF kneels down and blocks her way, over-acting the character of a begging medieval peasant)

MIF "A penny for our church, my fine ladye and mind you don't touch my terrible, rotting sores"

(MOYA kicks MIF away roughly with her leg. MIF makes a mock cry of pain. MARIELLA enters from the corridor, carrying a tray of food)

HAZLITT It's much later than medieval. Fake gothic. Probably built by a 19th Century philanthropist. An open door for the weary traveller.

MIF The perfect cover for religious manipulation. An open door, but once you're in, you're in on their terms.

MARIELLA I feel that, when I'm out walking. It's oppressive in here sometimes; the rooms smell musty, of old chapel, so I go out. I walk right up into the hills. From up there the chapel looks cosy and inviting, and I think, "Yes, you'd like me back, wouldn't you? To swallow me, to deny my existence?" If it could talk, it would be saying, "Welcome to my world. All are welcome here. There are no preconditions. Just enter. You are free to be yourself, though of course, I know a higher truth. I'll be disappointed if you don't share my truth also." Eventually I will have to escape this place before it suffocates me altogether!

What happens next: The party gets underway with games and story-telling, until the arrival of an uninvited stranger, the seductive Mhairi. At first, her presence enlivens the occasion but then events go downhill. First a fight, then a more sinister turn towards murder. The aim of this play is to "out-mousetrap" "The Mousetrap", with an astonishing ending nobody is expecting.