Mutually Assured Destruction
By Emily Denny

There was a woman who lived on Harvard Street who murdered her husband on a Tuesday just before dinner. She was the kind of person who would borrow your pencil and forget to give it back to you. Something that bothered you, but ultimately could be forgiven. Her husband was the kind of person who would borrow your favorite pen and purposely keep it for himself. They were the kind of family filling emotional voids with new home appliances and expensive wallpaper. The kind of family that went out shopping for groceries together and yelled and caused a big ruckus in the supermarket that the whole store could see and the whole town could hear.

They lived in one of those neighborhoods where the lawns had been rolled out like red carpets for nuclear families of four a piece. The little quarter acre plots lined the freshly paved roads, the houses like dominoes waiting to fall. They were all exactly alike save for color. The woman who murdered her husband, her home was a light yellow.

After the woman – Charlotte Dodson was her name – murdered her husband – Henry Dodson was his name – there was the problem of what she was going to do for dinner. For a while before the police came she sat at the kitchen table, covered in his blood, thinking about what she could cook. There were some green beans in the fridge, she could make a nice green bean casserole. Serve that with a seasoned chicken breast. She wasn’t sure if she had chicken breast lying around. She could always run to the store quickly before she started cooking and pick one up.

It happened the night the world heard about Sputnik, the tiny spacecraft built by the Russians to spy on American civilians. The whole town had been out looking for it in the sky when the Dodsons began one of their usual bouts on the front lawn. There were some choice
words being tossed around about “cheating sluts” and “coming home late” and “shriveled prudish genitals”. Everyone else was out trying to enjoy an unseasonably warm afternoon in October looking for space probes in the sky. Their neighbors had gathered in the middle of the street for the best view, the Millers even brought along their telescope, which the children were taking turns at. Someone thought they saw it move across the moon.

In their own cold, shallow, uninvolved ways no one paid attention to the escalation that ended in Charlotte storming off into the garage, grabbing an axe, and plunging it into her husband’s chest. It wasn’t until Henry’s shrieking blood-soaked screaming pierced the ears of their children that they made a move to call the police.

Charlotte’s children came to her in to the kitchen, binoculars in hand too young to understand what their Mother’s pained expression meant. Somehow they hadn’t heard the screaming above the television broadcast. She smiled and told them they’d get a better view in the backyard, the front yard was no good. “You can’t see the stars from that direction,” she had lied to them. She stood at the counter and watched them in the backyard scanning the horizon. Her youngest son waved, she waved back.

Charlotte was at the kitchen table when the police arrived. She was hunched over at the table wrapped in an old blanket tossing some onions in a bowl of flour. Her frail hands were shaking and her eyes were glassed over. Her make-up foundation was flaking, her red lipstick was fading, one of her pink painted nails chipped when she grabbed the axe.

Helen Walker, who lived across the street with her husband, was among the neighbors gathered in the street watching the police drag Charlotte out of her home. She fought the police as they pulled her to the police car, calling to her children standing in the doorway. Her calls came in breathy exclaims, excuses, instructions, “be good for Mommy”. She smiled at them as
they escorted her past their Father’s dead body. The body was lying face up in the slightly overgrown, un-kept lawn, the axe still embedded in him. You could hardly see all the blood.

“This is gruesome; they’re just going to leave his dead body there?” Helen asked her husband, who was beside her struggling to force a cigarette out of it’s containment.

“Scene of the crime I suppose…” he answered her. He got it loose and put it in his mouth.

“Where do you think Charlotte even got an axe?”

He struggled with the match. “It’s a hatchet, probably Henry’s.”

The police car turned on its lights and made its way down the street. The blue and red lights cast on the Dodson’s bloodstained lawn and the Dodson’s emotionally stained neighbors. Bill managed to light the cigarette. Two police officers were lifting the dead body off the ground and fitting it into a body bag. Another two came from the house, Charlotte’s personal effects held carefully with gloved hands. A gruff voice came from the lawn and said, “Move along folks.”

It was dark by then. Most of the parents had already shuffled their kids inside their matching homes, the sensible ones had shut the curtains and sent them to bed. Of course, the children had all seen it, they had all been there when it happened, that was one of those things that was never going to go away. The best their parents could hope to do was go to bed themselves and hope that in the morning things made sense again.

When all the fuss had started Helen and her husband – Bill was his name – had just finished their dinner. They left so suddenly, their dirtied dinner plates still lay on the kitchen table, a fork and knife crossed atop one of the plates. The meal was still sitting in a pan on the stove.
Helen busied herself cleaning up dinner, if only so she didn’t have to listen to Bill talk about Sputnik or catch a glance out the window at the Dodson’s bloodstained lawn. There wasn’t much left of their house, which was emptying out of personal belongings and filling with boxes. Bill had gotten a job at a nuclear power plant out of state, and there was another matchbox house waiting for them there. The new house was going to have a dishwasher and an icebox.

Bill came up from behind her while she was at the sink and kissed her on the cheek. He worked nights during the week and was heading off for his shift. She made a feeble plea for him to stay.

“We’ve only got a few more nights here you can take one night,” was among her chosen few arguments.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he said, before he walked out the front door. She listened to the car start in the garage, it grumbled when it started, but it always managed.

Helen soaked a sponge in the sink and took it to the kitchen table. She rubbed it down, making the circular motions her Mother had taught her. She glossed over the ash stains where her husband sat because she’d figured out a while ago it was one of those stains that doesn’t come out. She put the sponge back, slipped off the dish-washing gloves and laid them on the side of the sink. She dried her hands on a sheet of paper towel and wiped some of the sweat pooling on her forehead.

She set the kettle on the stove to boil and prepared a mug with her favorite tea bag. Out the front window the patch of grass where the body lay was dark and brittle, indented with Henry Dodson’s final moments. She flipped the switch on the radio and was confronted by a voice: “... there’s no word yet whether or not the soviet satellite has been sent to space with malicious—” She switched the station. “...it seems quite reasonable that one or the other would
get a satellite up first—“She found her way to an Andy Williams song, she let the smooth voice fill the room as she kicked off her shoes and undid her apron. “I’ve made up my mind. To tell you goodbye. But I’m noooo good without you. You buuutttterfly,” she sung along as she bopped around the living room to the music.

She had run into Charlotte at the supermarket just the other day while she was out buying a few groceries. Helen wasn’t the kind of person who freely associated with the kind of person like Charlotte. Helen was book club, Charlotte was PTA. Helen was bridge, Charlotte was Tupperware party. But, Helen also was the kind of person who wouldn’t consider herself a bad person. So she spoke to Charlotte. And a bad person would have ignored Charlotte as she waved her down and invited her into conversation. Helen wasn’t a great person, so she pretended to be caught up surveying an apple when she heard Charlotte call her name the first time. She conceded on the second call.

Charlotte’s voice was like nails on a chalkboard to Helen. It crackled like a dying fire when she talked of her husband and children. She called her over to ask her how things were, it was niceties mostly. Just that other day things were all right for Helen. She was moving clear across the country to a place she’d never been to and didn’t foresee herself liking, but she’d finally gotten around to calling her Mother, and the Ritz crackers were on sale.

Charlotte told Helen that she’d like to “see her for a quick chat” before she moved. Helen smiled and said that she would “like that”. Charlotte responded that she “knew where to find her”. Helen told her it was “nice to see her” and that maybe she’d stop by on “Thursday”. Things were so busy preparing the move and all. Charlotte seemed to understand.

The kettle screeched in the kitchen, Helen continued to bop along to the music and sing along. “I’m crazy about you. You buuutttterfly.” She emptied the hot water into the mug over the
tea bag and heard a knock at the window. She leaned over the sink to see who it was. She smiled when she saw the face outside, her visitor waved to her. She let her inside.

“You know you can use the front door,” Helen told her guest as she helped her out of her coat.

“I like the backyard, helps me feel mysterious,” she replied, slipping out of her hat and scarf. “Besides, what would the neighbors think?”

Helen kissed her visitor, her hair smelled like chamomile. After their lips separated Helen grabbed her head and bent it towards her for a better whiff. She pulled Helen’s hands off her and laughed.

“What are you doing?”

“Your hair smells fantastic.”

Helen’s visitor’s name was Maura, she lived down the street with her husband George. Maura lived in a white ranch style home that Helen had always been a little jealous of. It was one of the homes that had been around before the development was built. One of those lasting relics that reminded Helen that people didn’t always live the way she did.

Maura usually smelled of chamomile. It was a specific perfume that she ordered from a catalogue. The shipping cost more than the perfume, but Maura thought it was worth the expense, if only so Helen would only hold her a little closer.

Helen set another mug with the tea bag and poured Maura a cup too. Maura made herself comfortable at the kitchen table.

“It’s a shame about Charlotte,” Helen said.

“Shame about Henry I’d say.”
Maura fished in her purse for a pack of cigarettes. She adjusted her face to try and best manifest her feelings about the dearly departed Henry without looking like a terrible person. “Eh…” was all that she produced.

“Oh, come on, Maura, have a little decency.” Helen meant it, but she could help but smile at the sentiment which she didn’t entirely disagree with. She brought the cups of tea to the table and sat down. Maura lit her cigarette.

“What do you want me to say?” She picked up the tea and tested the temperature on her lips. “He was kind of an ass hole anyway.” Maura whispered it like it was a secret.

“Can we not talk about it?” Helen asked taking Maura’s free hand.

“We could talk about the space probe.” Helen made a disapproving noise. “Unless you don’t want to talk about that either?”

“Everyone else already has that covered, I think.”

Helen fondled the cup in her hands. She looked down at the steam rising off the tea. Maura grabbed her by the chin and drew her eyes to her own.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“We’re moving sooner than expected. He never liked the neighborhood to begin with and after all this… I mean he just can’t wait to get out of here.”

Maura took a sip of the tea. “You don’t want to talk about space probes and Charlotte Dodson… I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I’m serious, Maura,” Helen said leaning in across the table towards her. “When the hell were you planning on talking about this?” Helen asked, more to herself than to Maura.

They were silent a moment. Maura, beginning to feel the pangs of constriction in the seat, got up and walked towards the living room. There were imprints on the wall where pictures had
been. Ghostly squares dotting an empty room. Helen had always admired Maura’s choice of decorations in her house. It was just the perfect amount of things to make the home look lived in, but not so much that she looked co-dependent on things. To Helen, things were something to make her feel whole. Putting things around the house was nothing but empty calories. In Maura’s home, it seemed, all her things were an extension of her instead of ways to fill holes.

“Is Bill working tonight?”

“If that’s what he calls it. He’s moving offices in a week I don’t see why he has to work so late.”

“More time for us?”

Helen followed her towards the living room. Bye, Bye Love came on the radio. Maura bopped along to the beat as she settled herself on the couch. Helen lingered in the doorway, alternating her hands on the hot mug of tea. Maura gave her a dramatized longing look that made her smile. She pleaded for her to sit down with her. She held out a hand, Helen took it let it guide her to the couch.

“Are you worried about Charlotte?”

“A woman like that… who murders her husband with an axe. What do you suppose they do with a woman like that?”

Maura took a breath, she didn’t have an answer for Helen.

“I just can’t believe she actually did it.”

Helen took the cigarette from Maura and stole a drag. “If I was married to Henry I can’t say I wouldn’t entertain the idea.”

“See? You are just as horrible as I am,” Maura said, it made Helen smile. “If it makes you feel better if we were actually married I would probably never murder you with an axe.”
Maura laughed at her own joke but it was lost on Helen. If they were actually married – that was a loaded thing to say. Maura put a hand on her shoulder and stroked it. She looked at her seriously. “What can I do to make you feel better?”

“Charlotte didn’t deserve that,” Helen said quietly.

“Deserve what?”

“You know what I mean. Is that gonna be us? Are we gonna meet in the cover of night until we lose our minds and murder our husbands?” Maura grabbed her by the head and pulled it to her chest and laid her down there. Helen put her feet up onto the couch and nestled into Maura’s breasts. “I mean… I don’t wanna murder Bill.”

“Oh, sweetie, no one wants to murder Bill,” Maura joked. Helen not only smiled but laughed. Her laughter felt warm in Maura’s ears, necessary almost.

The song on the radio faded out. “You’re listening to KPI Radio, home of today’s latest rag. We’ll be back with our nightly news update after this next song.” The next song was a Johnny Mathis ballad. Helen couldn’t quite come up with the name, she only knew she liked the piano part of it. Maura knew how it went and would play it for her sometimes. Maura’s fingers made the key movements on Helen’s arm.

“If it makes you feel better I’m going to miss you,” Maura said.

“That does make me feel better,” Helen conceded. She took her hand and squeezed it, Maura kissed the top of her head.

They both had something else to say but they didn’t.