The Perfect Murder by Peter James

How do you commit the perfect murder? Victor Smiley and his wife Joan have been married for nearly twenty years. Victor secretly loathes Joan more and more each day. Joan is bored by Victor and his snoring drives her mad. Their marriage has reached crisis point…

Victor decides there is only one way to get Joan out of his life for ever, but he’s about to get a nasty surprise. As it turns out, Victor’s not the only one with murder in mind.

Ten new Quick Reads are published on 4 March 2010, World Book Day. They include:

- The Perfect Holiday by Cathy Kelly (HarperCollins)
- Last Night Another Soldier by Andy McNab (Corgi Books)
- Traitors of the Tower by Alison Weir (Vintage)
- The Perfect Murder by Peter James (Pan)
- Doctor Who: Code of the Krillitanes by Justin Richards (BBC Books)
- Hello Mum by Bernardine Evaristo (Penguin)
- Life’s Too Short: True Stories About Life at Work with foreword by Val McDermid (Bantam Books)
- Buster Fleabags by Rolf Harris (Corgi Books)
- Money Magic: Seven Simple Steps to True Financial Freedom by Alvin Hall (Hodder)
- We Won the Lottery: Real Life Winner Stories by Danny Buckland (Accent Press)

The books cost just £1.99 and are available from supermarkets, bookshops and to download as an e-book via www.quickreads.org.uk

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Chapter One

The idea to murder his wife did not come to Victor Smiley in a sudden flash. Few things ever came to Victor Smiley in a sudden flash. He was a man who always planned carefully. He thought everything through one step at a time.

Bit by bit by bit.

In fact, Victor never made any choice until he had carefully worked out every possible option. It used to drive his wife, Joan, bonkers. It drove her almost as bonkers as his snoring. She joked that one day he would have those words, bit by bit by bit, on his gravestone. She added that he would probably also die bit by bit by bit.

Victor was forty-two, balding, diabetic, with a comb-over and a pot belly. Joan was forty, plump, with a double chin. When they had first met, Joan thought he was handsome and dashing. Victor had thought she was sex on legs.

They lived in a semi in a quiet part of Brighton. The small house had a view across a built-up valley. They could see the green slopes of the South Downs hills rising on the far side. Most of their time these days, when they were at home together, they were arguing. When they weren’t arguing with each other, they argued with their neighbours.

Victor had fallen out with all the neighbours they had ever had. It was one of the many things about him that drove Joan mad. She got mad at him several times a day, most days. Yesterday she was mad at him for buying a television so big it took up half their living room. He was even madder at her for spending a fortune on a new oven. Their old one was quite all right, in his opinion.

Later that evening they had another row, because she wanted to put down a new kitchen floor. He was happy with the one they had. There were years of life left in it, he told her.

Then, during the night, they had yet another row. This time it was because of his snoring. In the early days, Victor never used to snore. Now, almost every night she would wake him to tell him he was snoring. It was like sleeping with a sodding elephant, she’d say.
More and more often she would have to go into the spare room, just to get some sleep. She would drag herself out of their bed, wrap herself in a blanket and crawl onto the hard single bed in there.

They’d met at a jive dancing class at a church hall in Brighton when Victor was twenty-one. He was doing a course in computers at Brighton Tech and living with his widowed mother. Joan was working as a dispatch operator for a taxi company, and lived with her parents. A friend told Victor that dance classes were a great place to meet ‘tottie’. A girlfriend told Joan that dance classes were a great place to meet suitable men.

Victor had seemed very suitable, if a little shy, and clumsy on the dance floor. ‘Two left feet, you’ve got!’ Joan teased him when he went over and chose her as his dance partner for the next set. *Great tits you’ve got, and a stonking pair of legs*, he thought to himself as he struggled to keep his stiffy from nudging into her.

Joan thought he was funny, and sweet, and *very* handsome. He seemed to have a bit of a spark about him. In her view, he was a man who would go places. She ignored the opinion of her parents. Her father thought Victor looked lazy, and her mother said he had greedy eyes.

Victor thought Joan was the loveliest creature he had ever set eyes on. She looked like a Page Three girl. When he was a teenager he used to stick photos of Page Three girls on his bedroom wall and lust over them. Of course, he assessed that she had child-bearing hips. He couldn’t believe his luck when she agreed to go on a date with him. Then later, when he met her parents for the first time, he studied her mother carefully. He had read somewhere that women always take after their mothers. Well, cor, wow! Well into her late forties, Joan’s mother was, in his view, still highly fanciable. So no worries there. Mother and daughter ticked all the boxes.

On their wedding day, Joan imagined that in twenty years’ time Victor would be a highpowered businessman. She thought that they would have four children, two boys and two girls. They would live in a grand house with a swimming pool. Victor imagined that in twenty years’ time Joan would still be slim and gorgeous and they would still be having wild sex twice a day. He thought kids would be nice, so long as they did not interfere with their life too much, especially their sex life!
Instead, Victor was stuck in a dead-end job, and they were stuck in the same modest house they had been in for nineteen years, and no children had come along. They lived alone with their ginger cat, Gregory. The cat did not like either of them.

Joan did not like to face the reality that life might always be like this. They would both be unhappy. What kind of future would this be? They disagreed on just about everything. They even argued most nights on whether to have the bedroom window open or shut. Victor said he could not sleep in a room that was stuffy. Joan said she couldn’t sleep in a room where the air was cold.

The worst thing of all for her was when they went to a restaurant. Going out on Saturday nights had long been a ritual for them, and Joan dreaded these evenings more and more. She always made sure they went with another couple, so they didn’t just sit and bicker at each other. However, these evenings always turned into slanging matches between Victor and Joan so, over the years, their friends dropped away. All except for Ted and Madge, who didn’t have any other friends themselves.

At every restaurant, Victor would spend several long minutes reading the menu, then he would ask the waiter to explain each item in detail. After that he normally asked for something that was not listed. It was almost always the same thing each time: prawn cocktail followed by steak and chips. That was all he really liked to eat. Even if they went for Chinese, which Joan and Madge were keen on, or Indian, which Ted liked even more, Victor would still order his sodding prawn cocktail followed by steak and chips. He would make racist remarks under his breath if they couldn’t do it.

‘Got to have things you can’t get at home!’ he would say loudly. Then, with a wink at Ted, and nudging Madge with his elbow, he would add, ‘Shame they don’t have blow jobs on the menu, because I can’t get one of those at home, either!’

Ted would guffaw and rub Madge’s thigh under the table. ‘We don’t have that problem, do we, love?’ he would say.

Madge would go bright red and say proudly, ‘He’s a randy sod, is my Ted!’

Joan would go bright red and apologize to the waiter. She would have liked to add, *I’m sorry I am here with this fat, balding, smug little man with his horrible comb-over, and his loud suit and*
nasty tie. He was actually thin and quite handsome when I married him! Of course, she never dared.

Instead, she would hiss at her husband, ‘Why can’t you try something else for a change? Be bold for once!’

‘Because that’s what I like,’ Victor would always reply. ‘Why risk having something I won’t like? I could be dead tomorrow.’

Oh God, yes please! Joan would think to herself, more and more often.

It was the same for Victor with books and with television. He only ever read detective stories, and only ever watched detective shows. Sherlock Holmes was his favourite. He had read every Sherlock Holmes story several times. He had seen every film and TV adaptation of his hero. Basil Rathbone was his favourite Sherlock Holmes actor. In Victor Smiley’s view, Basil Rathbone was The Man.

Victor had strong views on everything, including driving. He would never talk and drive at the same time because, as he would tell Joan over and over, that was dangerous. ‘Slow down!’ she would tell him all the time when he drove. ‘Shut up, woman!’ he would reply. ‘How do you expect me to drive with you talking? That’s what’s dangerous!’

Victor smoked cigars at home, but for some reason he did not consider smoking cigars dangerous. ‘Cigarettes, yes, but not cigars!’ he would state. He didn’t worry when Joan told him cigars made his breath smell like a dragon’s. In the early years, when they were in love, that had not mattered to her. She used to tell him then that he was a horny creature, and that she loved his smoky breath. In later years, it was worse on Sunday mornings when he had not shaved since Friday. She said it was like making love to a fire-eating porcupine.

As for Victor, none of the pretty girls in Brighton’s Kitten Parlour ever complained about his breath. They were more than happy to give him all the blow jobs he could ever want. They would also tie him up and spank him, and tell him over and over he was a naughty, naughty boy.

After each visit to the Parlour he would arrive home and crawl into bed beside his sleeping wife (who was putting on weight by the day), and read more detective stories. He would think about the
websites on poisons he had visited during the day, and he would go
to sleep every night dreaming of a happy future.

Victor’s first job had been with a firm near Brighton that made paints
for the car repair industry. Cyanide, a deadly poison, was one of the
chemicals that were used in this process. One night, when he was
working late, he had stolen a bottle of cyanide. For years he kept it
hidden among the cans of weed-killer and other bits and pieces in his
garden shed.

Recently, as he got more and more fed up with Joan, he would
sit in his shed and stare at that bottle. He would dream of using it on
her.

So it was that the idea to murder his wife evolved not over
days, not over weeks, not even over months, but over a couple of
years. However, there was something he did not know. During those
same two years, Joan had begun planning to murder *him.*

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Other resources

The BBC runs an adult basic skills campaign. The first chapters of this year’s books are free to download and listen to on the raw website. Go to www.bbc.co.uk/raw

Free courses are available for anyone who wants to develop their skills. You can attend the courses in your local area. If you’d like to find out more, phone 0800 66 0800

A list of books for new readers can be found on www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk or at your local library.

Publishers Barrington Stoke (www.barringtonstoke.co.uk) and New Island (www.newisland.ie) also provide books for new readers.