**Caron Parrett, Purbeck u3a  - 'Maureen'**

Maureen didn’t like to think of herself as a curtain twitcher. Her habitual spying provided more of a community service. Noting the neighbours coming and goings gained nuggets of information. Mr Jenkins walked past her cottage at precisely 7 am each morning for his morning paper. The one time he did not, she rang 999 and he was found slumped on the kitchen floor. Staring out behind her lace nets, she saw Martin roar off in his yellow sports car. Ah yes, Martin and Mandy, lottery winners and her neighbours of six months, who prior to moving in caused months of noise and disruption. Digging up old Bert’s vast allotment, replacing it with the largest swimming pool she’d ever seen – that is, from her vantage point atop her bedroom chair.

On the day they moved in, Maureen took round her homemade apple pie, introduced herself and hoped to be invited in to see the designer kitchen, bathrooms, and fitted wardrobes, which she knew had been installed. All this she had gleaned from workmen only too happy to talk as she supplied copious lemonade drinks and ginger biscuits.

The following day Mandy returned her glass pie dish and mentioned their housewarming party would take place the following Saturday. No invite for Maureen was forthcoming, However, Mandy said they would try not to be too noisy, especially after midnight.

The morning of the party, Maureen watched as delivery vans arrived and departed. A marquee was erected. Then Bob’s disco van arrived, his name detailed on its exterior, complete with flashing lights and dynamic sound system. Bert’s apple orchard, felled and flattened, now housed a giant bouncy castle and slide. On and on the vans kept coming, mobile ice cream kiosk, mobile fish and chips, “Drinks R Us”. Maureen wondered just how many people they’d invited.

Later that day, she looked down upon the many scantily clad women, the beery men and the boisterous children noisily jumping into the pool. She might have felt less annoyed had she been invited to dip her toes in the cool water, partake a fish and chip supper with an ice cream and flake to follow.

A couple of weeks later, Martin knocked on her door holding a large bird cage. “He’s an African grey parrot” he announced. “We’re off to Marbella and wondered if you would look after Sqwark. He’s supposed to talk but I haven’t heard a word out of him, think we ended up with a duff”. Eats fruit, nuts and vegetables. I’ll leave a couple of boxes on your doorstep”. “Oh, and here’s £50 for your trouble”. Maureen took the notes he proffered and led him to her sewing table. Muttering his thanks, Martin plonked down the cage and left. “Hello Sqwark”. No response. Maureen tried again - same result.   It was not until later that evening, dozing in her chair that she awoke to the distinct voice of Martin in her room. Confused, she looked around, then heard once again: “02102-554330 Majestic Wine. Usual Order, 40 Cambridge Drive. Debit our account.” Sqwark’s mimicry was astounding.  Not one to miss an opportunity Maureen picked up her well-thumbed yellow pages directory, obsolete now but occasionally useful, and searched for both the company and number. There it was! Picking up her old telephone, she dialled the number and held out the receiver towards the bird. As if on cue, Sqwark obliged a third time. “Well,” thought Maureen, “let’s see what happens tomorrow”.

She kept vigil behind her nets until a “Majestic Wines” van pulled up next door. Rushing out, she explained that her neighbours had been called away to visit a sick relative and asked her to take in any deliveries for safe keeping. He promptly lifted a couple of boxes into her hallway and hastened away to his next delivery. Ripping off the parcel tape from both boxes Maureen was delighted to find 12 bottles of red wine and 12 of white. Tee total due to financial constraints, Maureen could now have a tipple or two with her meals and smiled as she placed one Sauvignon Blanc in her small fridge.

 At 8pm, counting the stitches on her knitting needles, she frowned when Sqwark shrieked loudly “Monsoon Indian Nights 02103-775661 Usual order, 40 Cambridge Drive. Debit our Account.” The intonation and accent matched Martin’s voice perfectly. Maureen dialled the number and repeated the process as the evening before. She’d not had a curry in years, and eagerly awaited next day’s delivery. She was not disappointed.  The aluminium boxes just kept coming, the young man reassured her that this was the usual order for her neighbours, and suggested she place them in her freezer if they were unsure how long they would be caring for their relative. Once inside, Maureen marvelled at the array of exotic dishes: Tandoori Chicken Balti, Vegetable Biriani, Lamb Tikka Masala, King Prawn Korai, Chicken Jalfrezi, Onion Bhaji and more. Dividing up the contents between her “meals for one” containers, fourteen generous portions were created. Placing all but one in the freezer, she placed the last in her fridge.

Deciding to make a cup of tea, Maureen rose from her chair but stopped when she heard Sqwark shout “Guilty Pleasures”. Writing down the number that followed, she dialled and held out the receiver to Sqwark to repeat the now familiar instruction. Thoughts of strawberry gateau, profiteroles, chocolate cake, ran through her mind.

Next day, Maureen opened the wine bottle easily, thankfully a twist off top, and filled her glass to the rim. The steaming Lamb Tikka Masala made her mouth water. The curry was delicious, and so very hot!! Pouring herself another glass of chilled white, the fire in her mouth abated. Before she knew, the whole bottle was empty. Giggling to herself, she wobbled unsteadily as the doorbell rang. A large pink box with the letters GP sat on her doormat. Maureen struggled to lift it in.

Kneeling on the floor, with a glass of merlot replacing the white, she carefully untied the string, removed the tape and delved inside. To her dismay, she found clothing and underwear, high heeled black boots, oils, a whip, something that whirred when she pressed the button, and a pair of handcuffs. “Oh well, she thought – I’ll have some fun”, taking another glug from her glass.”

She closed the curtains, stripped off to her underwear and tried on the policewomen’s outfit. “Hic, you’re under arrest Sqwark” she laughed hysterically. Adding the boots to the ensemble she tottered precariously round the room. A ripping sound preceded the snap of a heel and Maureen tumbled to the floor. The skirt, a size too small, split to the waist. Dazed, Maureen placed the hand cuffs over her wrists, and all too easily snapped them shut.

Maureen awoke to Sqwark repeating the phrase “You’re under arrest”. Her head throbbed. Looking around, the gravity of her situation became clear, and she began to sob loudly.  Shuffling sideways on her bottom towards the cage, she picked up the whip in both hands and reaching up managed to flip the cage door open on her third attempt.  Sqwark flew down beside her. He began pecking at the catch until eventually the release mechanism clicked and she was free. He nestled into her shoulder as tears of relief flowed. They sat like that for some time, Maureen stroking his feathery head, Sqwark nuzzling his beak into her neck.  She whispered to him “You helped me escape; I will do the same for you.”

Placing the £50 in an envelope, she sealed the reverse, wrote on the front “So sorry, Sqwark fell off his perch and did not recover. If you don’t need the cage, I have a friend who could use it.” From Maureen.”

Having placed the envelope through their door, Maureen anxiously awaited their return.

A couple of days later the yellow sports car appeared on their driveway. Maureen was outside trimming her azaleas when Mandy came out clutching a small chihuahua, the dog wearing an identical outfit to hers and a diamond encrusted collar. “Meet Sugar, isn’t she the cutest little thing? Fits into my Chanel bag too. Give Mummy a little kissy”. Maureen apologised again for Sqwark’s unexpected demise and asked if they would be getting another parrot. Turning away, Mandy replied “No way, stupid bird never spoke. Mummy’s got her little Sugar now” she said, straightening the bubble gum pink glittered hairbow in the dog’s hair and showering her head with little kisses.

Maureen smiled as she carried on snipping and pruning