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The Unquiet Dead

Written by Ausma Zehan Khan

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THE UNQUIET DEAD

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*For my parents,
Dr Zehanat Ali Khan
and
Mrs Nasima Khan,
whose love and shining example
are everything*

Let justice be done lest the world perish.

– HEGEL

1

*I will never worship what you worship.
Nor will you worship what I worship.
To you, your religion – to me, mine.*

ESA KHATTAK TURNED HIS HEAD to the right, offering the universal salaam at the conclusion of the evening prayer. He was seated with his legs folded beneath him on a prayer rug woven by his ancestors from Peshawar. The worn red and gold strands were comforting; his fingers sought them out when he pressed his forehead to the floor. A moment later, his eyes traced them as his cupped palms offered the final supplication.

The Maghrib prayer was for Khattak a time of consolation where along with prayers for Muhammad, he asked for mercy upon his wife and forgiveness for the accident that had caused her death. A nightly ritual of grief relieved by the possibility of hope, it stretched across that most resonant band of time: twilight. The dying sun muted his thoughts, much as it subdued the colors of the *ja-namaz* beneath him. It was the discipline of the ritual that brought him comfort, the reason he rarely missed it. Unless he was on duty – as he was tonight, when the phone call from Tom Paley disturbed his concentration.

He no longer possessed the hot-blooded certainties of youth that a prayer missed or delayed would bring about a concomitant judgment of sin. Time had taught him to view his faith through the prism of compassion: when ritual was sacrificed in pursuit

of the very values it was meant to inspire, there could be no judgment, no sin.

He took the phone call from Tom Paley midway through the prayer and finished up in its aftermath. Tom, the most respected historian at Canada's Department of Justice, would not have disturbed him on an evening when Khattak could just as easily have been off-roster unless the situation was urgent.

CPS, the Community Policing Section that Khattak headed, was still fragile, barely a year into its existence. The ambit was deliberately vague because CPS was a fig leaf for the most problematic community relations issue of all – Islam. A steady shift to the right in Canadian politics, coupled with the spectacular bungling of the Maher Arar terrorism case in 2002, had birthed a generation of activist lawyers who pushed back vigorously against what they called tainted multiculturalism. Maher Arar's saga of extraordinary rendition and torture had mobilized them, making front-page news for months and costing the federal government millions in compensation when Arar had been cleared of all links to terrorism. A hastily concocted Community Policing Section had been the federal government's response, and who better than Esa Khattak to head it? A second-generation Canadian Muslim, his career had seen him transition seamlessly from Toronto's homicide squad to national counterintelligence work at INSET, one of the Integrated National Security Enforcement Teams. CPS called on both skill sets. Khattak was a rising star with an inbuilt understanding of the city of Toronto's shifting demographic landscape. At CPS, he was asked to lend his expertise to sensitive police investigations throughout the country at the request of senior investigating officers from any branch of government.

The job had been offered to Khattak as a promotion, his acceptance of it touted as a public relations victory. Khattak had taken it because of the freedom it represented: the chance to appoint his own team, and as with INSET, the opportunity to

work with partners at all levels of government to bring nuance and consideration to increasingly complex cases.

And for other reasons he had never offered up for public scrutiny.

His mandate was couched in generic terms: sensitivity training for police services, community support, and an alternative viewpoint in cases involving minorities, particularly Muslim minorities. Both he and his superiors understood the unspoken rationale behind the choice of a decorated INSET officer to head up CPS. If Khattak performed well, then greater glory to the city, province, and nation. If he ran into barriers from within the community as he pursued his coreligionists, no one could accuse the CPS of bias. Everyone's hands were clean.

It didn't matter to Khattak that this was how he had been lured into the job by his former superintendent, Robert Palmer. He loved police work. It suited an analytical nature tempered by a long-simmering hunger for justice. And if he was being used, as indisputably he was, he was also prepared to enact his own vision for CPS.

What flame-fanning bigots across the border would doubtlessly call community pandering, a fig-leaf jihad. Take anything a Muslim touched, add the word jihad to it, and immediately you produced something ugly and divisive.

But Tom wasn't one of these. Chief historian at the Department of Justice, he was a gifted academic whose fatherly demeanor masked a passion for the truth as sharp and relentless as Khattak's own.

He had called to ask Khattak to investigate the death of a Scarborough man named Christopher Drayton. There was no reason that CPS should have an interest in the man's death. He had fallen from a section of the Scarborough Bluffs known as the Cathedral. His death had been swift and certain with no evidence of outside interference.

Khattak had pointed this out to his friend in measured tones,

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and Tom had let him. When he'd finished, Tom gave him the real reason for his call and the reason it encroached upon Khattak's jurisdiction.

Khattak heard the worry and fear beneath Tom Paley's words.

And into the remnants of Khattak's prayer intruded a series of recollections from his youth. Of news reports, hurriedly organized meetings and volunteer drives, followed too slowly by action. He saw himself as a young man joining others in a circle around the flame at Parliament Hill. He absorbed the thick, despairing heat of that summer into his skin. His dark hair flattened against his head; he felt in that moment his own impotence.

He listened to Tom's labored explanation, not liking the hitch in his friend's breath. When Tom came to the nature of his request, Khattak agreed. But his words were slow, weighted by the years that had passed since that summer. Still, he would do as asked.

'Don't go alone,' Tom said. 'You'll need to look objective.'

Khattak took no offense at the phrasing. He knew the unspoken truth as well as Tom did.

Because you can't be.

'I'll take Rachel.' He had told Tom about his partner, Rachel Getty, before.

'You know her well enough to trust her?'

'She's the best officer I've ever worked with.'

'She's young.'

'Not so young that she doesn't understand our work. And I find her perspective helps me.'

He meant it. But even as he said it he knew that he would work with Rachel as he had done in the past. Withholding a part of the truth, of himself, until he could see the world through the clear, discerning eyes that watched him with such trust.

He knew he could turn to his childhood friend, Nathan Clare, for background on Drayton. Nate lived on the Bluffs

and would understand why he'd agreed to Tom's request. Nate would understand as well the toll compliance would take. But Khattak's bond with Nate had long since been severed. It was a mistake to think Nate still knew him at all.

He'd meant the last words of his prayer to be a blessing asked for his family, in a space he tried to keep for himself, exchanging solitude for solace. Lately, he'd come to accept that there was no separate peace. His work, and the harshness of the choices he had made, bled into everything.

He rose from his prayer rug to find that dusk had given way to dark. He thought of the tiny documents library in Ottawa with its overflowing shelves. He'd spent most of that long-ago summer there, collecting evidence.

And he remembered other words, other blessings to be sought with a premonition of ruin.

They are going to burn us all.

2

I keep wondering, where have all the good friends gone?

RACHEL TOOK HER OWN CAR to the Bluffs. A couple of times when she and Zach were young, their father had taken them to Bluffer's Park for picnics. She remembered the suppressed pleasure in Don Getty's eyes as his son dragged him to the marina to watch the boats. Even then, the park had been filled with immigrants. Children scrambling unsupervised, shrieking with pleasure. She'd been an afterthought, but her Da had taken time over Zach.

She got out of the car, scuffing her runners against the dirt in the road. She had driven around the crescent slowly so as not to miss the house called Winterglass, an imaginative name for the three-story structure settled at the edge of the Bluffs, as much a part of its surroundings as the trees that framed the park or the wind that had worn down the stone over time.

The first and second stories were separated by a horizontal band of stonework that wrapped around the house. Above the white doors, a pediment supported a recessed arch. On either side of the arch, chimneys flanked an elegant arrangement of windows.

On the east side of the house, a balcony set on white columns floated above a ground-floor terrace. The long, curved drive was edged by maple trees, the small garden before the house embroidered by a gathering of roses. A single ornament rested within its diamond-shaped border: a chipped stone eagle balanced on a plinth.

A weathered house and a thing of beauty, its name subtly inscribed on the plinth.

Khattak hadn't given any reason for meeting at this house. He'd provided a short summary on Christopher Drayton, but unless she missed her guess, Drayton's house was at the opposite end of the circle. She'd already called Declan Byrne, her junior team member, for background on Drayton. As far as Dec could tell her, a man had gone for a stroll at night and fallen to his death. An ordinary man leading an ordinary life.

The only drama she could squeeze out of this was the possibility of suicide. Yet the coroner's report had ruled it an accident.

So why was CPS being asked to dig around Drayton, and why had her boss asked her to meet at Winterglass?

Restless, she kicked at her front tire just as Khattak's BMW pulled up behind her.

'Bit upscale, isn't it, sir?' she said by way of greeting. She meant the house, not the car. Her envious appraisal of his car had been documented on previous excursions.

'Hello, Rachel.'

It was too dark out to read his expression. He sounded withdrawn. Fatigued, maybe, though it hadn't dampened his good looks.

And he wasn't gotten up in one of his closely tailored suits. He was wearing black trousers and a dark, fitted shirt. No tie, no cuff links, grappling a string of beads in his right hand. When they stepped under the house's porch light she saw the beads were green agate. He was fingering them in a nervous gesture unusual for him.

'This isn't Drayton's house, sir.'

'No. This is Winterglass.'

Which sounded like he expected the name to mean something to her.

Biting back the temptation to remind him she could read, she

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countered, 'Never heard of it. Did Drayton use to live here?'

She heard Khattak's quick intake of breath, saw the string tighten around his fingers. He turned to face her and, as always before his direct attention, she squirmed a little.

'This is the home of Nathan Clare. I haven't been here in some time.'

'Nathan Clare? *The* Nathan Clare? The writer?'

She was babbling. Everyone knew the internationally acclaimed author. His last book, *Apologia*, had outsold all his previous works combined. He had made a name for himself intervening in national debates on multiculturalism. Every few years his essays would be collected together and published in a volume, cementing his credentials as a somewhat reclusive public intellectual.

She'd heard him on the radio and had liked his voice and his dry sense of humor. She had meant to purchase the book selection he'd endorsed, but time had gotten away from her. That, and her job. She wasn't on duty tonight, but CPS hours were irregular, and she worked at being someone Khattak could rely on.

She felt a little awed at the thought of meeting Clare. Then she grasped what Khattak had just said.

'You've been here before, sir? You know Mr Clare?'

He rang the doorbell.

'Yes. Drayton lives nearby. I thought that Nathan might know him.'

Now she remembered that the writer was also the son of Loveland Clare, a diplomat in the Stephen Lewis tradition, a fact she correlated to the spike in her nervousness.

When the door opened, they were greeted by a tall man with a slim, straight nose and a delicate face and jaw. His straw-colored hair was worn long in the front, obscuring his gold-rimmed glasses: he was the perfect example of Rachel's idea of an English gentleman. He was even wearing a tweed jacket. Well-fitted, she

observed, and though Khattak was tall, this man had an inch or two over him.

‘Esa?’ He sounded shocked.

Rachel’s eyes widened. Khattak hadn’t called to set up the visit?

‘May we come in?’

The man in the doorway stepped back, his attention occupied by Khattak, who offered no identification, Rachel trailing behind them. They were led through an entrance hall with a sculptured staircase to a double-height room that defied her every expectation of grandeur. Or was it grand? At least fifty feet across, something about the room managed to suggest warmth. Its floor was a bleached pine, off-setting furnishings in delicate green and the most elaborate Chinese carpet Rachel had ever seen. Velvet sofas anchored the carpet across from a wall of glass that must have given the house its name. Situated on a curve of the Bluffs, the wall overlooked white cliffs and black water extending over a limitless distance.

She didn’t know where to look first. The blue and white porcelain that shimmered on the room’s tables? The painted white chandeliers suspended between a set of peacock chairs? Or the classical architecture of pilasters and arches that ran the perimeter of the room to support a gallery on the second level? Under a set of casement windows, a grand piano with a raised lid occupied an antechamber that led outside, sheet music scattered across its bench. A silk banner was flung over a nearby chair.

Gawking, she turned back to hear herself being introduced.

‘Sergeant Rachel Getty, my partner at Community Policing.’

Nathan Clare took her hand. She was surprised at the strength of his grip: there was something romantic, almost effeminate, about the elegant bones of his hand. She took a green-and-white-striped chair at his invitation, ducking his assessment of her, knowing the picture she presented to the world. Boxy, square-shouldered, round-cheeked, indifferently dressed.

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When Nathan smiled at her, she said awkwardly, 'You must like music. You don't have any photographs on your piano.'

She'd seen plenty of soap operas where a Steinway served mainly as a repository for antique picture frames.

'Nate believes pianos are for playing.'

The 'Nate' caught Rachel by surprise. Both the nickname and the comment implied familiarity, making her wonder how well her boss knew Nathan Clare and whether that had been a sneer in his cultured voice.

Nathan sat back on the green sofa, watching Khattak string the beads together around his wrist.

'I haven't seen that in a while. Does it help while you're working?'

There was a hint of challenge in his manner.

Sitting next to Khattak, Rachel was able to see the string of beads more clearly. Every now and again, the agate stones were sectioned off by a little marker, dividing the string into segments. It was a rosary or – what was the word Khattak had taught her?

A tasbeih, the Muslim equivalent.

She realized that Nathan was watching her. He had swept the hair from his forehead, and now she could see the hazel eyes behind his glasses, intent but also kind.

'We've come about your neighbor, Christopher Drayton. I was hoping you might have known him.'

'Everyone in the neighborhood did. He was well regarded here, generous with his time. People were shocked to hear of his fall, myself included, but I suppose no one was quite as distraught as Melanie. Melanie Blessant, his girlfriend.'

'You knew him well, then?'

'As well as I know all my neighbors, I'd say. He was an educated man, he enjoyed books, art. He'd been here for dinner several times to discuss various projects he was interested in with mutual friends. On some of the same nights you were invited. He was funding a small museum – something that would interest you. I

can give you a list of the guests, if you'd like.' He rummaged in a small drawer and handed the paper to Rachel.

Khattak brushed it aside.

'Did he often walk by the Bluffs?'

'I believe so, but the people who live here are well versed in the dangers of erosion. It's easy to lose your footing out there.'

'Had you ever seen him from these windows?'

'You know these windows don't face the path, Esa.'

There was a note of chiding in Nathan's voice that took Rachel aback. The tenor of the whole conversation seemed strange to her, the room imbued with an inexplicable anxiety. The tasbeeh was taut around Khattak's hand; Nathan Clare's posture was stiff. That both men knew the source of it was clear: it was Rachel who was in the dark.

Nathan turned to her.

'Do you like the house?'

She couldn't help being caught by the cloudy expanse of lake beyond the windows. Waterfront views were not to be had off the dim streets of Etobicoke, where she lived.

'It's stunning. From the outside, I thought it might be a little pompous, but it isn't.'

She bit her lip. Sometimes she was too honest and in this case probably naïve as well. There were thousands of dollars worth of antiques within the room, pieces she could neither name nor identify, yet all possessed of a consonance that pleased the eye. Things to live with rather than admire. The careless sprawl of music suggested as much.

'You can play the piano if you'd like,' he said, following her gaze.

Rachel couldn't play. Though Don Getty had done well for himself in life, the arts weren't a luxury he'd encouraged his children to indulge in. It was her mother's old recordings she had listened to when her father was out of the house, the needle scratching over Chopin's nocturnes, her mother's favorite

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composer. Part of her mother's life before she'd married Don Getty, as inaccessible to Rachel as her mother's thoughts.

Rachel made her way to the piano, called there by a secret longing. The banner casually placed on the chair beside it looked like a miniature flag, a blue Superman shield imposed upon its green background, the initials CK appliquéd at one corner.

The two men followed in her wake like an entourage, Drayton forgotten.

Khattak reached around her and took the banner.

'You still have it,' he said.

He deposited the tasbih in his pocket, his hands relaxing.

'It was a pledge, Esa. You know that.'

Khattak's gaze switched to the fireplace, taking in the blank space above the lip of white marble.

'The portrait's gone.'

'It was more than time.'

A rectangular space between the white and blue chinoiserie was less faded than the rest of the wall. Something had been there, and again she was the outsider, in the dark as to why they were here at all when they should have been at Drayton's house, searching for indications of homicide.

'I'm sorry, Mr Clare. How do you and the inspector know each other?'

Nathan smiled at her and she blinked. The smile transformed her notion of the introverted writer into something much more visceral. A more than ordinarily attractive male, with glints of light turning his straw-colored hair gold.

'Didn't Esa tell you? We were at school together. We're old Seatonians.' And when she still looked blank, he clarified, 'Upper Canada College.'

Openmouthed, the piano forgotten, she turned to Khattak.

'You went *to school* with Nathan Clare, the writer?'

'He wasn't "Nathan Clare, the writer" then. And we've come about Christopher Drayton, not my unsavory past.'

Nathan grinned at him, the first unforced gesture she'd seen from either man.

'It was unsavory, wasn't it? At least, all the good parts.'

Her eyes lit up at the teasing. Here was someone who might deflate the always unruffled, ever-so-proper Inspector Khattak. She wanted to delve deeper into the mystery of this hidden friend, megawatt writer or not, who must be awash in particularly useful inside information. Despite their rocky start when she'd first joined CPS, she'd come to admire Esa Khattak and to value his opinion. She just wasn't sure that she understood him as well as she'd like to. And if Nathan Clare could help her with that, she wouldn't object.

But the mood died in an instant as Khattak answered, 'Most of the bad parts as well, I'm afraid. I'm sorry to have bothered you. We should go.'

'Sir –'

There were at least a dozen questions she could think of that they hadn't asked Nathan Clare – at least he could clarify the list he'd given them, why he'd had it to hand, and why it even mattered.

'Now, Rachel.'

She scurried along behind him, swallowing a grimace. Whatever brief connection she had felt to the author, Khattak was her boss. Her boss who ignored the question Nathan called after him.

'Did you ever read *Apologia*, Esa?'

And that wasn't a question he seemed ready to answer.