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Written by A. K. Benedict

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THE BEAUTY OF MURDER

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ORION

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THE BEAUTY OF MURDER

Prologue

The beauty queen lies dead on the carpet. Her arm is bent above her head as if still waving to the clapping crowd. Blood blooms beneath her. Her once-white dress is a mess of red.

Kneeling next to her body, I count the stab wounds and am soothed, like a sleep-seeker numbering sheep. Her stomach has been punctured twelve times; her sternum slashed seven or more; her palms gape open where she tried to defend herself before life left her and she exsanguinated on the carpet.

The man I have not seen in thirty years stares down at the body. Last time I saw him he had white smile lines etched into his tanned skin. They radiated out like the spines of a sun dial. He is not laughing now. 'Can you help, Jackamore?' he asks.

I stand and fold my arms. He cannot hold my gaze. 'Beg me,' I say.

He chews his lip. He stares at the photos on the mantelpiece.

'You always were a coward,' I say. 'Now beg me.'

'Please hide her, Jackamore,' he says. He eyes drop and I know he is mine. 'I beg you.'

The sky is in livor mortis when I leave the house. Black and blue-bruised clouds pool over the Cambridge skyline. I weave through the streets scouting for where and when to put her. I stop outside Great St Mary's. Evensong soars and beauty dies: this is the time to be alive.

The Philosopher

Two raindrops race down the pane. One straggles behind and I will it to win, pressing my fingertip to the glass and dragging down, but it takes the long route: bumping into other drops, joining them into a constellation, then tearing down and reaching the sill a second too late. Outside, on the grass, a willow tree head-bangs in the wind and a girl runs alongside the Cam, the skirts of her ball gown scrunched up in her hands.

Two jabs come from the room below. I stomp twice on the floorboards and wait for the door to slam, boots to clomp up the stone staircase and Satnam to poke his head round the door.

‘Thought you’d never finish,’ he says, wandering in and dropping two four-packs of lager on my notes. ‘It’s only a lecture, you’ve given them before. It’s not as if anyone will go.’

‘It’s my first lecture *here*,’ I say. ‘I want to make a good impression, prove to the faculty that they were right to take a risk on me.’

‘It’s Friday night in Freshers’ Week, my furrowed friend: we should be out watching newbies stumbling out of the Matriculation dinner and throwing up in the fountain. It’s tradition.’

‘And what’s Cambridge without tradition?’

‘Exactly.’ Satnam slumps into the baggy sofa and opens a can away from him. A blob of foam flops onto the carpet. ‘Whoah, when did you get that?’ he asks, pointing at the ‘What-the-Butler-Saw’ machine against the wall.

‘I rescued it from the back of a junk shop in Bridlington. I got it delivered this morning.’

Satnam sidles up to it with some suspicion, slides an old penny off the

top of the machine and pops it in the slot. He bends and peers through the peephole. He twists back to me. ‘Well that’s not very erotic,’ he says.

‘No, but it’s erratic. You’re lucky it worked at all.’

‘Don’t you have enough crap in here already?’ he says, sweeping an arm around my study. ‘No wonder you’re always losing stuff.’

‘Crap?’ I look round at the tussle of books and the rocks and stones on top, the collected bones and teapots and other things Dad won’t have in the house and I can’t bear to get rid of. ‘These, I’ll have you know, are highly sought after, extremely rare artifacts.’ That’s not true, obviously. Besides, my rooms are too small for all of it, especially the larger pieces, and I like the jumbliness – I get less lonely. Satnam is a minimalist, with a spreadsheet for his bedsheets. He won’t even look at Bandit, my one-armed, tufty, badly-taxidermied bear, who guards the door to my bedroom.

It’s parky in here. I hadn’t noticed while working, now the bottom of my nails are inky blue. I walk over to the gas fire and twist the knob till the middle bar sparks up.

Walking back to the window to close the curtains, I open my can and watch two more first years hurry under the window. ‘Don’t you wish you were starting out again?’ I ask.

‘Are you saying I’m old?’

‘You’re not young.’

‘I’m younger than you.’

‘I think you can stop counting those eight months now,’ I reply.

‘When have you ever known me to give up an advantage?’

‘Never.’ On the first day of school I sat down next to Satnam and accidentally knocked lemon squash over his comic. I took it home, pegged out the pages for him in our back yard and fastened it back together but, thirty years later, he still says I owe him. And *now* he’s found me this job: he’ll be bringing that up when we’re in a retirement home as a ruse to make me fetch his cocoa. And all he did was email me the details.

‘Why would you want to go back anyway?’ he says. ‘I knew nothing when I arrived.’

‘And now of course you know...’

‘Everything.’ He grins and plonks his feet on a box of books. ‘That, matey, is obvious to all.’

‘You can write my lecture for Monday. Seeing as you know everything.’

‘I could,’ he says, sweeping his can around, loftily. ‘But I only bother with subjects that count. Physics, proper physics, none of your *metaphysics* crap, and darts. They are the only things you need.’

‘Not love, then? Understanding?’ I root around in my head for other essentials. ‘Parkin? And don’t dismiss metaphysics. I’m an empiricist as much as you. I only trust evidence.’

Satnam sniggers. ‘Yeah, right. Love is Chemistry and therefore not my field, not that I’d say no to love in a field with, say, that girl with the blue hair from Starbucks. Or the sexy librarian in the UL, she’s a good eight, nine from the arse of a whiskey glass. But sex is different. Love involves hearts and hammering them. Not even *you* can fix them.’ Satnam gestures to my tool box by the jack-in-the-box with the snapped latch. I like to mend broken things. ‘No,’ he continues. ‘The requirement for love, understanding and parkin is, can be only felt by poor souls who are crap at darts. Such as yourself.’

‘I managed a nine dart finish in The Black Heart yesterday.’ I also had a nine dart beginning and a fifteen dart middle but I won’t mention that.

‘You got those flights I gave you?’ he says.

I search in my desk drawers, pick up folders, flick through books.

Leaning forward, he sighs and plucks a tin out of his back pocket. He holds it open: inside are six darts, a retractable pencil and a gold-plated fountain pen. He hands me three and points to the dartboard he bought me as a moving-in present. ‘See if you can beat me then. Loser goes out for kebabs.’

‘Go easy on the chilli sauce,’ Satnam shouts down the staircase, his voice rebounding off stone.

I can’t resist a bet. I don’t even really like kebabs – the meat pillars make me think of a grotesque music box with a lamb ballerina

pirouetting and dwindling to tinny hits – but it’s the challenge, the surge in adrenalin.

My umbrella bucks and buckles as I turn the corner into Sepulchre College’s Great Court. It gives up and twists insides out. The wind has a knife to my throat and is pick-pocketing my bones. Satnam warned me that Cambridge greets newcomers with cold open arms but I thought he was being soft. I’ve lived in Yorkshire, Dublin, San Francisco and Manchester: I can talk about chills and rain in fifty different ways, about dirty rain and light rain and rain that gets you unaccountably wet, about cold Winter days that make you feel that you’ll never be warm again, but Cambridge already has me shivering in my bed. And it’s only the beginning of October.

I run, head down, following the yellow reflections of lamp-posts on the wet path, down past the chapel, the college hall, the library with its one light on for students up late and alone on a Saturday. I’m at that best stage of drunkenness, where my legs don’t feel like they belong to me but somehow they still keep going. I wheel on through the arched walkway that resembles the ribcage of a skeleton lying on its back and, as I look up and see the city’s skyline, elation fizzes through me. I’m in a big stone film set and someone has been barmy enough to employ me. Things could be much worse.

Angela, one of the porters, stands by the door within the towering gatehouse. She looks up at me and grins. ‘Evening, Dr Killigan, you’re in a good mood.’

‘I’m on a kebab mission. It’s going to be dangerous but I believe I’m the man for the job. Can I get you summat?’

‘I’m no fan of kebabs,’ she says, stepping from one foot to the other and rubbing her hands. ‘Don’t go to the Death Van. I know someone whose brother had to have his bowel removed.’

‘Ouch.’

She nods. ‘I’ll get rid of that if you like,’ she says. After a moment, she points at the umbrella.

It hangs its head, raggedy and sad.

‘I’ll keep it, ta,’ I reply.

The rain stops, clouds back away to reveal a half-full moon as I walk down Smoke Lane, the narrow passageway that comes out next to the Fitzwilliam Museum. Stumbling, I grab at a bollard. The street takes a while to right itself around me. I may have more drunkenness than I thought. At least no one's looking, aside from Miranda, the missing beauty queen. She smiles from the curling posters in the shop windows, holding the skirt of her polka-dotted white dress; the Miss Cambridge crown slightly wonky on her head. She disappeared a year ago, hours after winning the title. The national press has forgotten about her now, so had I till I arrived and spotted the shrine to her in the netted window of The Red Shoes Tea Shop: her picture propped against a cake-stand; a replica of her crown on the top tier. In the window of the newsagents there's a hand-written plea from her parents to remember her. I look closer at the picture. The missing – dead and alive at the same time. My shoulders shrug in a shiver. Images of Ma float in my head and my heart clenches. This is why I shouldn't drink.

In the market square, students and townies with damp hair mill around skeletal stalls; a girl perches at the end of one trestle table with a boy between her legs, his hands on her back, her fist in his hair. I feel a pang that isn't in my stomach.

Two fast food vans chug away either side of the market: one, apparently, is the Death Van, the other the Van of Life but no one really knows which. Both smell of burned onions and armpits. I join the one with the shorter queue, it's a risk but at least death may come quickly.

'One burger, please mate, and a doner and chip pitta with extra chillies. And a Flake.' The chocolate's for me, it's affection in a yellow dress. 'I don't suppose you know where I can get some parkin?' This is parkin weather after all, makes me think of eating hot slabs of it out of woolly gloves on Bonfire Night.

The vendor wipes the back of his hand across his head, peels paper from a pale frozen meat patty and slaps it on the hot plate. 'Should be alright, this time of night – I know the warden and he's in the Arms,' he says.

For a moment I wonder if, in East Anglia, a county so flat there must be something going on underneath the surface, ginger cake can only be

found at night, and is guarded fiercely by a dragon-clawed warden. Then I twig, and the image bursts. ‘Oh, I don’t drive,’ I say. ‘I’d only crash. Thank you, though.’

The man shrugs. He tears pittas and shovels in fries, teases out strands of lettuce from a tub.

I smother Satnam’s doner with chilli sauce, then squeeze on some more. The loser’s revenge. I place the bottle down and a girl with a dark bob picks it up, dousing her veggie burger as if putting out a fire. A wine bottle peeks out from under her arm.

‘I wouldn’t,’ she says, nodding at the kebab. She screws her nose up and the tiny green stud in her left nostril eases out.

I imagine gently nudging it back. ‘Neither would I. Not that I couldn’t take it: I’ve got the constitution of an ox, no twelve of them – twelve oxen. Yes. At least twelve. A box of oxen.’ I waggle a finger in my ear, which has suddenly got very itchy. My face is hot. I have an umbrella gripped between my knees.

‘It’d have to be a very big box,’ she says, nicking a chip and dabbing it in the correct order of sauces: mayonnaise, tomato sauce, then chilli, then garlic.

‘I’m Stephen Killigan,’ I say.

She nods. ‘I think it’s a drove, herd, span or team of oxen. Or yoke if there are just two.’ she says.

‘That’s one of the more logical collective nouns. I prefer the absurd ones.’

‘Like a sleuth of bears?’

‘A murder of crows.’

‘A buffoonery of orangutans.’ We grin at each other and a spark of excitement flares in my stomach.

Three drunken, blazer-wearing students bray past us, arms slung round each other’s shoulders. One stops to vomit in the gutter. ‘Should be a buffoonery of students,’ I say, stacking up the polystyrene boxes. I pocket the chocolate and tuck the tattered umbrella under my arm. We move to the side of its van, out of the way of its fuming exhaust. ‘What are you studying?’ I ask.

Her eyebrows jolt. ‘I’m not a student.’

‘I just thought...’

Staring at me, she takes a wide bite of burger and throws the rest in the bin. Then she balances the wine bottle on her palm and walks away.

How did that happen? Brilliant Killigan, brilliant.

Glass smashes behind me. The students in drinking society blazers stand round the girl. One of them loops his scarf around her neck.

The kebab vendor turns his back and rearranges meat in the freezer.

When I arrived here I was invited to join the Sceptres, Sepulchre’s drinking society. I went to one meeting but it seems to involve getting pissed and doing all the silly things students do, only in striped jackets, and without women. The girl tosses the scarf in a puddle. She looks around, folds her arm tight into her body and steps back onto the neck of the smashed wine bottle. Her shoes are like my sister’s ballet slippers.

I walk towards her, my heart starts running.

‘I’ve seen you in the library,’ the one with the scarf and the roundest head says.

‘Well done,’ she replies.

‘Come on, come back with us. We’ve got access to the cellar.’

I tap him on the shoulder. ‘Can I come? Sounds like fun.’

He glares round at me, his eyes crazy-paved with blood vessels. He stares at the threads waving out of my coat and smirks. Turning back to her, he says. ‘The *wine* cellar. We’ve got the keys.’ He taps his pocket.

‘I prefer attics,’ she says.

‘Go on, you know you want to,’ he says.

‘Dangerous business that, making presuppositions,’ I say, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. My tongue feels too big for my mouth. ‘The trick in my line of work, if you can call it work and that’s a question for another day, if you presuppose that days are made up of hours and hours can be trusted and if you presuppose that there’s such a thing as trust and not just a series of occasions where it hasn’t been proved otherwise, is to challenge presuppositions made in every day life – such as the knowledge of anything– how can she know that she knows something? How can you know that she knows she knows something?’

How can you know that I'm not a figment of your limping imagination? What are you left with? I don't know yet so I suspect you don't. See? I told you it was dangerous.'

'And what's it got to do with you?' he asks. His face is plasticine pink. He stretches it into a sneer.

'That's my brother,' she replies.

Ouch.

'Look,' she says. 'Obviously I'd love to come and be fumbled with, inexpertly I suspect, but my ant farm is having a party tonight and I've promised I'll make the mojitos. Maybe another time. Or not.' She backs away, looks over to me. 'Sorry,' she says then breaks into a run down Petty Cury.

'Your loss, love.' The pinkest one shrugs. 'Probably a lezzer,' he says to his friends. He shifts his weight and turns to me. The other two move a step closer. The only fight situations I like involve games where I possess a sword of truth, not a pile of polystyrene and an umbrella.

I nod at the sodden scarf. 'Which college are you at?'

Pink boy juts his chin. 'John's.'

'Aaah. I'm new, you see – a Fellow at Sepulchre.' The three of them look at each other, two of them step back. 'I've only been here a week so I'm not big on college scarves. As far as I can gather, you wear them to denote pride in your tribe: like football teams but without the balls. Good of you to give yours away.' I grin at him. My upper lip sticks to my gums. 'Must be a Cambridge ritual. I'm learning a lot about those. What's the name of your tutor? I'll let them know how kind you were.'

The pink boy's mouth drops open. His eyes flick from his friends' faces to my fist curled up as tight as an ammonite by my sides.

'Have a chip while you think about it.' I hold out the polystyrene box.

Picking up a handful, he nods at the others then walks away with the exaggerated swaggers of a man trying to say that was exactly what he had planned all along. Halfway across the market, he chokes on a chillied chip.

My heart is still beating hard in my throat. I keep doing that, walking into situations without thinking. That could have gone very wrong. It didn't, but it could have. It wouldn't be the first time.

My legs are wobbly. I need to sit down. Great St Mary's church is to my right, crenellations bearing their teeth at the sky. The gate into the churchyard is open and I slip through, slumping against the side door of the church. Chips spill; kebab slivers slither onto the ground. My head feels like it's been spun on my neck. The hangover must be kicking in early.

Placing my forehead on my knees, I close my eyes. The church bells clang over my head. Half twelve – Satnam will be passed out on my sofa, darts in his hand, cans scattered. I like it that someone is up there in the bell tower, ringing out the signal that you are not alone.

A fox slinks between the railings and stares at me. Its eyes flash yellow. He trots into the bushes where something white shines out of shadow. A plastic bag or something. The kind of something foxes suffocate in. Using the wall to pull myself to standing, I steady myself, still dizzy, then walk over. I reach into the bushes, the brambles bite at my skin. And then I touch it, something cold and rough and flat. Pulling my coat closer round me, I crouch and peer into the brambles.

A face gleams out of the bushes. The mask of a woman's face: large and oval, a gibbous moon with big eyes, curved nostrils, sharp cheekbones, all scored in and painted. The eyes have nothing in them. Dark hair streams out – but the hair isn't attached to the mask, it's underneath.

My hand jerks away.

My knees drop onto a rope snaking out from under a tarpaulin tucked beneath the chin of the mask. I tug.

The tarpaulin crackles toward me. A glimpse of pale material. I keep pulling, gathering the canvas in –

a body
a woman
in a white dress
with black spots
torn tights, red shoes
arms crossed like a saint

around her neck, beneath the mask,
a rope bites at purple skin

The beauty queen's dress. I reach for her hand. Her palm is not cold but nothing beats in her wrist. My fingers are tacky when I lift them away. Holding her arm up nearer to the streetlight, I gently fold back her white cardigan. A letter has been cut out of the pale skin inside her wrist: a curving, embellished 'S', red and raw, the blood sticky. And further up, words have been scratched, jagged and ugly, up to her elbow.

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A chill scrapes cold fingers down my inner arms.

I've heard those words said to me before. This is my fault. All my fault.

I have the same sensation of choked heart-dread as when I fall in a dream and grab at the edges of the bed. Easing my thumb under the mask, my hands shaking, I lift the heavy stone an inch, and place it back. I can't see her. No. I don't want to see her. I know the eyes of the dead

and I don't want to look into hers. That's the coward I really am.

I fumble my phone out of my pocket. No signal. Nothing on the screen at all. I take off my coat and tuck it in around her. 'I'm sorry,' I say.

Running out onto King's Parade, I hold tight to the phone and wait for it to seize a signal. Swallowing down a surge of sick, I turn back to but can't see her; the bushes are in the way of her body. Still no signal. Leaning against Ryder and Amies, I fiddle the battery out of the back and click it back in again. 'Come on, come on,' I shout. One bar, then two. My finger trembles as I dial. Behind the glass plate windows of the shop, academic robes are suspended: graduating ghosts.

The operator answers on the sixth ring.

'Police. And ambulance,' I say. My voice comes out cracked as if I haven't talked for days. 'I've found a body, a woman...outside Great St Mary's ... I think she's the missing girl, you know, the beauty queen. She's been murdered.' The words spill before I stop them. 'This is my fault,' I say.