

CATHEDRAL NO. 3

by Ben Jeapes

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Bilquis

Bilquis Lakhani picked her way through the remains of Coventry, which had probably been destroyed in the name of the same god that she had been brought up to believe in. It was hot in her suit and there were parts of herself that she longed to scratch, but comparing her environment inside with the toxic filth outside, she felt she had the better of it.

She climbed to the top of a pile of rubble and looked about her. A lot of the city was still standing; she had imagined it would be a flattened wasteland like she had seen in pictures of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but most of the buildings here were made of steel and concrete. The city wasn't so much flattened as slumped. A few days ago, it had been a normal, upright city on a bright and sunny day, and thousands of normal men and women and children had been going about their daily business. And then those buildings had been thumped by an immense force that broke their strength and spoiled their clean lines, and those that survived the initial blast were hit by the air rushing back in again.

The older buildings, the bricks and mortar buildings, had crumbled and what Bilquis stood on now was a heap of broken red bricks. She had asked a friend, born locally, how one found one's way around Coventry, and the bright reply had been, 'why, you just look out for the spire of the cathedral- oh.'

Oh indeed, Bilquis thought. No spire anymore. Still, she thought she had her bearings and she set off in a new direction.

David

The wind that gusted through the remains of the roof was made visible by the swirls of poisonous ash that it carried into the cavern of the wrecked cathedral. After the black and bloated cloud that had hung over the city for so long, perhaps the ubiquitous ash would be the next most potent reminder of the calamity.

The ash irritated the man who knelt down in the nave. It swirled down upon him and on the area of floor that he had cleared. It obscured the drawings that he had made there, and though David Stapleton himself knew them by heart, he was concerned that they should look their best for the others who would come to see them.

There was death in the ash but that didn't bother him; he was dying anyway. The city was contaminated and every breath that the man took, every second more that

he lived, only helped his diseased cells to die a bit more. He could feel the rot inside him spreading through his organs. When he coughed – which was often – blood and maybe even bits of lung came out, and he feared that if he coughed too hard his body would fall apart.

He fingered his charcoal lump and studied the sketches again. In his mind he clothed them with three-dimensional reality. He had experimented with so many designs, just like the original architects of the ruin around him. Looking up at the south end of the cathedral (the elaborate clear glass window that had once occupied it entirely now lay in a white pile of a million shattered pieces) he could see the dark shell of the old cathedral, the current cathedral's predecessor. The building he was now in had been built deliberately on a slightly lower level than the original, to indicate humility and reverence for the old ruin. Now the new cathedral had gone the way of the old; how should cathedral number three be built? He turned back to his drawings.

It would be a pyramid, he had decided. Pyra-mid. Pyre. Fire. Coventry died by fire. Again.

Bilquis

This had to be it. Bilquis stood at the bottom of a flight of steps. At the top on her left was the dark stone of a medieval cathedral, and on the right a far more modern, barn-like building, showing yellow stone beneath the burn marks and just about intact. She walked up the steps to it and came to a stone set into the wall at waist height, which according to the inscription was the foundation stone of Coventry cathedral laid by HM Queen Elizabeth II. At any other time the idea would have amused her.

This whole end of the building was open to the elements; she deduced it had once been a large window. She peered into the depths of the cathedral and hesitated. Her local mosque in London was a converted church, but she had never actually been inside a functioning Christian house of worship before.

Bilquis looked about her. Functioning? And she was in pursuit of a story – it wasn't as if she was going over to the other side – so her soul should be safe, and the souls of generations of dead Lakhans back in Bangladesh would not grieve.

She stepped quickly into the cathedral while the glow of self-persuasion lasted.

David

Footsteps crunched in the broken glass. His visitors?

His visitor. A solitary figure was picking its way past the crumpled porch and through the pile of glass into the cathedral. The newcomer's breath passed through the mask's filter with an asthmatic wheeze. He would be invisible where he knelt in the gloom of the cathedral's interior, so the Dean of Coventry cathedral walked into the light to meet his visitor.

‘Bishop Stapleton?’ asked the visitor, voice distorted but clearly female. It had been impossible to tell through the bulky protection suit and the mask that hid the face.

He smiled. ‘Not Bishop, just Dean, and you can call me David,’ he said.

‘David. Ah – right. David.’

As the two stared at each other, David felt a sudden disgust for the visitor’s garb. How dare this outsider wander into the heart of the ruined city, breathing only safe, filtered air, isolating herself from his city’s hurt and pain with the protective layers of the suit? It was a stupid feeling and it lasted only a second until reason took over, so he ignored it.

‘And you are ...?’ he prompted.

‘Bilquis. Bilquis Lakhani ... um ... David.’ The accent was pure south London.

And what did she think of him? An old, stooped, balding man, still in his tattered cassock, with bleeding gums and deathly white skin. ‘And you are a journalist?’

‘That’s right. I’m freelance.’

‘Freelance – oh.’ He knew he sounded disappointed.

‘Hoping for the Times, hey?’ He couldn’t tell if the distorted voice was hurt or making a joke.

‘Oh! Oh dear, no. Sorry. I just thought ... never mind.’ Suddenly he chuckled – a rattling noise which turned into another of his terrible coughs. His vision faded and when it cleared again he was being sat down in a seat. He put a hand to his mouth and wiped away the trickle of blood that he knew would be there.

‘Now, what on earth was that about?’ demanded Bilquis Lakhani.

‘Oh, I just thought, two Brits, chatting about this and that, not at ease because we hadn’t yet got around to the weather, and we haven’t been introduced properly ...’ He tailed off, then remembered her remark about the Times. ‘I’m sorry I sounded ... well, well done for getting here! No, I just hoped that a few more would make it. I have something to say, you see, and the more coverage I get ...’ The words dried up. Suddenly, his great plan was seeming futile.

‘The whole press corps got your message,’ Bilquis said, ‘but none of the big papers could slip away from the press camp unnoticed. The authorities know who they are. But me? I’m just small fry.’

‘I see, I see ... where is this press camp?’

‘Birmingham. Safely up-wind.’

‘Birmingham? My dear girl, you must have walked all day!’

‘They want to keep us well out of the way. But no, I hitched a lift on an army landrover. I, um, borrowed a pass.’

‘Well ... well done,’ David said again. A sense of hospitality, a legacy of civilisation, made him feel guilty. ‘I have some provisions, food and drink, stored away and I would offer them to you, but you’d have to ...’ He gestured at the mask.

‘I understand,’ she said.

‘Oh, good, good ...’ They sat staring at each other again.

‘Do you stay here, now, in the cathedral?’ Bilquis asked. ‘You don’t go anywhere?’

‘No, no,’ David said. ‘The captain of a sinking ship, you understand. My house was flattened, I sleep in my old office.’

‘No family?’

‘Three grown-up children,’ he said quietly. ‘My wife was shopping when ...’

‘Ah. And are there others? Do you ever see anyone else?’

‘A few, a few. I try to provide what comfort I can to any survivors who come in. A few did come, at first. Now they’re all in the hospital camps, to die with dignity. I advised them to go. I sent the cathedral staff away as well. I won’t drag anyone down with me.’

‘But you won’t leave yourself?’ Bilquis asked.

‘No.’ Again they stared at each other, unsure what to say next. ‘Tell me about the outside,’ he said. ‘I haven’t been able to find a working radio since the blast.’

‘The real world?’ The goggles still looked at him blankly but he thought he detected sympathy behind them. ‘Well, um, let’s see. Yes. The mayors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima have sent their condolences. The question now is, do we retaliate? We don’t know who did it but everyone’s pretty sure it wasn’t a foreign power, so the chances are we won’t.’

David shut his eyes. That had been his chiefest fear, his greatest worry. The mushroom cloud that had hung over Coventry, hanging over a hundred other cities. ‘Thank God,’ he murmured. ‘Thank God.’

Bilquis shifted uncomfortably. ‘You said it,’ she said. ‘No, they think it was some terrorist group which somehow got hold of weapons grade plutonium. It wasn’t a proper nuclear bomb, you see, they say. Just a nuclear device. And it wasn’t fired by a missile or dropped, it was planted.’

Now David couldn’t believe what he was hearing. ‘A device? They can split hairs like that? What the hell difference does it make? Don’t they see that a city is dead? That thousands and thousands of people are dead, burnt, mutilated, poisoned, that ... that ...’

‘Hey, hey, hey!’ Bilquis held up her hands. ‘I agree, David! But it’s important. If it were a bomb then the chances are it would have been another country ... get my meaning?’

David took a deep breath. 'I get your meaning,' he said. 'But do they have any idea who ...?'

His visitor took a breath and he thought he detected reluctance. 'Various groups have claimed responsibility and ... the most likely contenders seem to be the Crimson Jihad.' The last sentence came out in a matter-of-fact rush.

'Muslims,' said David.

'Hey! Do you have a problem with Muslims?' Bilquis demanded, and David could tell even through the mask that she wasn't joking.

'Oh, I'm sorry! I'm sorry. No, of course I don't. Some of my best-' He stopped. Bilquis had her hands on her hips and was looking at him, waiting. 'That's even more patronising, isn't it?' he said. 'To say, 'some of my best friends are ... Muslims, Jews, homosexuals, women, all of the above, other, fill in where applicable.' I'm sorry, Bilquis.'

From her stance, Bilquis seemed to be relaxing, slowly. 'For what it's worth,' she said, 'every Islamic group and organisation in this country, and several abroad, including several Islamic governments, have condemned the act. And some of my best friends are Christian, but I don't hold it against them.' He thought she might be smiling behind the mask, until she added: 'despite the gangs of Christians who've been firebombing mosques ever since this happened.'

He bit his tongue on his immediate reaction: to deny that they were Christian. He had learnt the hard way that pat explanations tended not to wash and might not be true anyway. 'Do you think I'm that sort of Christian?' he said.

'Do you think I'm the sort of Muslim who nukes cities?'

'No. Could we rewind and start again?'

The mask's unblinking gaze held him for a moment. 'I think it would be best. You were asking about the outside.'

'Um, yes, I was. How are people taking all this? Apart from, I'm sorry, firebombing mosques?' he said.

'How do you think? Shock, outrage, why didn't the government do something. Seems it tried. They got a warning that a Midlands city would be destroyed and everyone thought it would be Birmingham, so they pumped security agents into the place, each with a surreptitious Geiger counter-'

'-and they missed out on Coventry completely,' David said. 'I wonder if it was deliberate or just fluke?'

'What was?'

'Look,' David said, springing to his feet. He staggered and clutched his chest, and at once Bilquis was by his side holding him up again. He brushed her off.

‘Look,’ he repeated. ‘This is what I called you for.’ He pointed out of the south end of the building. ‘What do you see?’

Bilquis looked. ‘The old cathedral.’

‘Correct! Now, what do you know of Coventry’s history?’

‘I know it was bombed before.’

‘It certainly was. November 1940. The Luftwaffe flattened it. The cathedral was burned out, only the walls and the spire still standing, and the rest of the city was just rubble. They got to us long before we got to Dresden.’

‘And then, after the war, Coventry rose again. They built a new cathedral, this one, full of symbolism about love and forgiveness. German volunteers helped rebuild it. This cathedral stood as proof that the devil can never win. God’s love is greater. Through Christ they could forgive. They could embrace the Germans as brothers and sisters in-’

‘Supposing you don’t believe in God?’ His wife had called it sermon mode, and Bilquis interrupted him just as he was slipping into it. ‘All this becomes meaningless.’

‘Yes, yes, yes, but don’t you see it?’ David said, irritated. ‘This cathedral, a sign of hope. A mighty monument to love. Love! Love, love, love. We must never hate. Never. The Nazis hated, but through love their evil works were defeated.’

‘The invasion of Normandy and the Eastern Front helped, but that’s one way of looking at it,’ Bilquis conceded. ‘And ...?’

‘Come here, come here.’ David beckoned and scuttled further into the cathedral, feeling like some shy little boy showing off a secret.

Bilquis

You’re just not for real, Bilquis thought, but she followed him. David Stapleton stopped at the edge of the clear area where he had been working. ‘Look,’ he said with pride, pointing at some wavery charcoal designs on the floor. ‘The future.’

Bilquis looked and tried to make sense of them. ‘Um ...’

‘I’ll show you.’ Again he pointed out at the old cathedral. ‘The old.’ He waved a hand around him. ‘The new. This one was designed, you know, in a special way. As I said, full of symbolism. Now Coventry needs a new one again. Here.’ He pointed at the sketches on the floor and described his grand scheme for the third cathedral, the greatest of the three.

At first he had pictured a giant dome over the hulks of both cathedrals. The time for humility was past; this new one would not be lower than the other two. It would stand out above them, above the whole devastated city, a proud statement to the glory of God.

Eventually he had realised that the floor plan of a building which already contained two cathedrals would be too ridiculous. He had abandoned that idea reluctantly for the final plan, the pyramid that now lay sketched out in the nave. The third cathedral would stand at the north end of the second. Future visitors to the complex would go from the first cathedral, to the second, and finally to the mighty third.

‘A far greater monument even than this one, Bilquis. I can see the three cathedrals now, in a row. A new, rebuilt, Coventry around them, dominated by this pyramid at the end. The cross at its peak, towering over the whole city ...’

‘David,’ Bilquis said, ‘Coventry is radioactive and it won’t be rebuilt for years, if at all. Not until it’s clean and safe to live in.’

‘I know!’ David snapped. ‘Listen, Bilquis, I know I’m a deluded old man who will die soon.’ He straightened up as best he could. ‘But I am the Dean of this cathedral. I believe Coventry has a message for the world and I must see that someone takes this message to it.’

‘Is that my job?’ she said.

‘Yes.’ His assurance fled him just as quickly as it had come. ‘If you could,’ he added, almost as a plea.

‘How?’

‘Tell the world about this,’ he said, pointing at the floor. ‘Don’t let them forget. I know I’ll be long dead, but you can write. I know how the press can take one small incident and blow it out of all proportion.’

‘Thank you.’

David ignored the comment, or didn’t hear it. ‘You can write a sob story. ‘My talk with last Dean of Coventry.’ ‘Tragic Dean’s hope for the future.’ Aren’t the politicians always saying the church should give a more definite lead? Here’s a definite statement for them. Tell the world, make them listen, make them know. Tell them that I forgive whoever did this. Tell them that Our Lord forgives.’

‘That’s very good of him,’ she said. ‘What gives him the right?’

David looked puzzled. ‘What?’

‘David, you can forgive the bombers if you want, but you don’t have the right to do that on behalf of the people of Coventry. That’s their problem. And unless we missed the headline of the millennium, Jesus wasn’t in Coventry at the time, so how can he forgive either?’

David grimaced. ‘I won’t go into the theology of your last statement. To answer your first point, I don’t claim to forgive on behalf of Coventry, just myself, but I hope my example will move Coventry to do likewise and they must have a new cathedral to tell them this. Tell them, Bilquis. Even if you don’t believe it, tell them, I beg you.’

‘No,’ said Bilquis. It took a moment for David to realise what she had said. He staggered back as though she had hit him. ‘What did you say?’ he whispered.

‘No,’ Bilquis said again. ‘There’s no story. I’m sorry, David.’

‘What do you mean, there’s no story? This isn’t a story?’

‘No, it isn’t. Coventry’s been here before, David, you said it yourself. All those living saints who built this cathedral and forgave the Germans – that was when the story was. And you’re a very saintly man yourself, but ‘Dean of cathedral forgives bombers’ is no longer a headline. I’m sorry. I’m really am.’

David slumped down onto a chair and looked at the markings on the floor. Bilquis wondered if he was finally seeing them as they really were. Pathetic, childish, a futile gesture in the face of Coventry’s tragedy. Soon David Stapleton would die and just one good fall of rain through the holes in the roof would wash the charcoal markings away for ever.

‘That’s not it,’ he said.

‘What’s not it?’ said Bilquis.

David looked up at her. ‘It’s not this lack of a story. You’ve got another reason. Go on, say it.’ He gave a bitter laugh. ‘I’ve been through worse.’

‘If you insist.’ Bilquis pulled up another chair and sat down across it, with the chair back facing him. ‘You’re enjoying this.’

‘How can you say that?’

‘Because you are. This cathedral-’ She waved a hand at the floor ‘-you’ve always wanted to build, and now you’ve got your chance. And I think you’ve always wanted something really big and nasty to happen to you so that you could have a really good forgiveness binge, and now it’s happened. Deep down, I don’t think you do forgive them, but you’ve convinced yourself that you do. So what do you do? Naturally, you build a pyramid. That was irony, by the way.’

David Stapleton sat in silence for several minutes, looking blankly at the floor, and Bilquis began to wonder if she should just leave. She glanced at the indicator on her wrist that showed her suit’s working life; she still had half an hour or so, allowing an hour on top of that to walk back to a checkpoint ...

Then David stood slowly and his gaze drilled through Bilquis’ visor. ‘I see,’ he said. He bent down and picked up a kneeler which he tossed to her. She flinched, but it was only a gentle pitch and she managed to catch it. ‘Give me a hand, will you?’ he said and, with a kneeler of his own, he began methodically to erase the charcoal pyramid on the floor. A quarter of the way through he stopped and looked at her. ‘I said, will you give me a hand?’

So together, they rubbed the floor clean.

If you’re trying to make me feel guilty, Bilquis thought, it ain’t gonna work .

‘Now, we’ll try again,’ said David. ‘Crimson Jihad, you say?’

Bilquis hadn’t said Crimson Jihad any time in the last ten minutes and it took her a moment to work out what he was on about. ‘Um, yes, that’s right,’ she said.

David didn’t answer for a moment. He had his charcoal lump in his hand and he was down on the floor again, sketching. Bilquis frowned. What he was drawing looked familiar but she couldn’t place it.

‘I’ll try and make it a traditional shape,’ he said. ‘Easier to identify.’

That was when Bilquis saw it. ‘Good grief,’ she murmured. He sketched away for another ten minutes and even then the design wasn’t as complete as the former pyramid, but it was obvious what he was getting at. He stood up, wincing, and Bilquis helped him.

‘Coventry’s new cathedral,’ he said. ‘Now, is there a story?’

‘There could be,’ she said, ‘There could be.’ She couldn’t take her eyes off the drawings.

‘I mean, the shape of the building isn’t important, is it?’ he said. ‘Anyone can still worship in it. This is based on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, with embellishments.’

‘Of course, of course ...’ Her time in the suit was running out and soon she would have to leave, but for the time being she was careful to drink in every detail – the carvings, the dome, the minarets – of the mosque that was sketched out on the cathedral floor.