

Beauty's Story



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PROLOGUE

23rd June 2006

Beauty

I was scratching myself for I'd begun to itch all over... it was all I could do to get my thoughts in order.

"And you never thought to tell me this before?"

"I'm sorry, okay," Theo began.

"And so should you be, you lying conniving back-stabbing bastard!"

With each word, I'd flung an item at him. He ran round the kitchen playing 'dodge crockery', and then I went after him with two of the largest white dishes screaming, "Get out, get out of my life, now, get out..."

"Beauty, I'm sorry, we can work this out."

The more he said that, the angrier – and louder – I got. Then he stopped running and turned to face me. "Now put those dishes down or else..."

"Or else what? You'll call the police? You are the police, so arrest me, you bastard."

"Beauty! Stop it!"

Now he was holding my arms. I was screaming, "Leave me alone," as I wriggled, trying – and failing – to free myself from his grip.

He was shaking me. "Stop it! Stop it, let's talk this through." He was shaking me. Vigorously. Whipping my head back and forth; he kept shaking me, even as my screams gradually petered into a whimper...

CHAPTER 1

New Year's Eve 2000 (31st December 1999)

Beauty

I know the every imperfection of my face: the skin that is too tight, too dry, too pinched and too sallow; the lines that have suddenly appeared around the eyes – eyes that are too cloudy to be brown, that display some form of dirty, gritty grey-green. These eyes are so quick to mist, even now, as I attempt to apply some make-up to cover up the material facts, so that I can appear normal at Mel's.

I really wanted to be home this New Year's Eve. We're on the brink of a new millennium and I want to be home. Or at least with Theo. But like all hardworking police officers, he's had to go to work. Not only are they concerned about the usual drunken fracas that tends to attend New Year's Eves' gatherings, there seems to have been some increased anxiety over something or other, which of course Theo will not share with me – after all, he doesn't want me to bother my pretty little head over his work issues (his words, not mine). I'd read in the press about the hijackings in Kathmandu and the fears about terrorists and end-of-the-world cultists. But no, we don't discuss such matters...

So anyway, he's gone off to work. I'd considered joining the Thameside party parade, but of course Theo objected. So I'd resolved to eat and sleep myself into the New Year until Mel barged in. It was at times like this that I regret the key-sharing deal we struck a few years ago.

“Why are you still in bed at this time of day? And

why are you not picking up the phone?”

I come back from a baby-chasing dream to see Mel glowering, arms akimbo, frowning her questions at me. I'd given birth to the first baby of the millennium in an ambulance, but she sprouted wings and attempted to fly away as I held desperately to her ankle... aarrgghh!!!

“Good morning to you too,” I managed.

“That’s not good enough, Beauty, it’s not morning, it’s way past 2pm and I’ve been trying to reach you all day.”

Pulling myself into a sitting position, I shrugged, “Well, it was you who taught me that morning starts when you wake up, right? So it’s my morning, whatever the time might be.”

“Okay, if you insist. I’m glad to see your humour returning – you had me worried though. I know you haven’t been the same since...”

“Don’t. Please. I’m fine. Really.”

I see her bite her lips. But... I don’t want to talk about it. At least not with Mel. It’s enough that I have to dream about them almost every time I get a shut-eye. I want to talk with Theo. But he’s hardly home. Even when he is...

Anyway, so that’s when I fall in line with Mel’s plan to see in the New Year at hers, along with her Joshua and Ashleigh. “Daisy and Rob will be there also,” she threw in almost as an afterthought. At least there’d be no strangers tonight, she promised, and it’s good to spend this evening with family and friends.

“I totally agree. But Theo won’t be there,” I pouted.

“Theo is doing what he has to do, Beauty, and you know that.”

“Yes, I do,” I nodded, thinking I might as well ‘grow up’.

“Then act like you do. See you later then?”

“Sure, Sis. I’ll see ya!”

With a hug and a kiss, she was gone like a breeze.

So here I am. I’ve been trying to get ready in the past hour or so. I’m really not in the mood... but I should at least appear presentable. Which is difficult if your eyes betray you at the drop of a hat, every now and then. Which is difficult if your hair has a mind of its own and the kinks just seem to get more stubborn when you can least afford the time or the humour. Which is difficult when you can’t find what to wear because of the rapid and frequent change in your body composition, because you can’t decide what suits you and what doesn’t, and because your master cheerleader is not around to give you a second opinion. And because you now hate to shop.

Eventually I decide on a pastel, tie-dye, silky, layered, green skirt with a matching blouse. The elasticated waist covers a multitude of sins, as does the smocked bodice top that could be mistaken for a maternity blouse. The hem of the skirt is just shy of my ankles, the only part of my anatomy along with my wrists that don’t seem to alter in size. Taking a step back for an overall view, I decide that I am content.

My silver Mary Janes with a matching handbag, chunky fashion beads and a pair of small hoops complete the façade. I choose to carry these in my day bag and walk to Mel’s in my comfy boots.

Deciding on a top coat was usually easy. But not tonight. My favourite ones were bought by Theo. If he won’t be with me, then I won’t take a piece of him along. I opt for my faithful black ski jacket.

The 15 minutes to Mel’s should lift my spirit. She is right. I could do with getting out of the house more... this

may be the beginning of a New Year's resolution. I whisper a "thanks, Mel", pick up my bag and, on the spur of the moment, decide to take out my mobile phone, leaving it behind on the coffee table.

New Year's Eve 2000 (31st December 1999)

Melody

I look forward to the day when I can move into a house, with spacious rooms, with at least two receptions and a kitchen that can actually hold all my white goods and myself, Joshua and Ashleigh at one and the same time. And a garden – oh to be able to host garden parties...

"What a lovely evening, Mel," Daisy cuts in with a smile, while hanging on to Rob to ensure her stagger doesn't actually result in a fall. It's the first time all evening I've seen her without the swirling red in her goblet. This time she has a variety of bites on her plate. She says she finds the *chinchin* incredible and the *puff-puffs* absolutely divine. I'm glad I threw these Nigerian delicacies into the mix of mini quiches, sausage rolls, salmon fritters and buffalo wings. The carrot and celery sticks made a good contrast in taste and colour – and so far, that seems to be the main purpose they have served, just like the accompanying hummus.

"I'm glad you're having a good time, darling, only a couple of hours to go now."

"Certainly. And this is the only time in my life that I'll welcome in a new millennium. Thank you so much for making it such a special evening."

“Oh don't fuss, Daisy, the pleasure really is all mine.”

And it was. If they hadn't come round, I'd have been stuck in this flat with the kids – not that I'd never left them home alone before, but would certainly not have wanted to do that on a night like this. I'd have had no adult to banter with as has been the bane of my existence for ages now. I'd have had too much time to think about all that is wrong in my life and I'd have either drunk or cried myself to sleep and missed out on a real, positive experience. And Rob and Daisy are a pleasure to watch, a picture of all that can be right in a relationship. Just like Beauty and Theo, except that because of Theo's line of work, it's difficult to get him into social settings like this, and it's hard for Beauty sometimes. Today, for example.

I'm glad she's here though. But I've been so busy entertaining that we haven't had a chance for a sisterly chat. Now might be the time because since everyone seems satisfied with eats, drinks and dancing, it's winding down a bit. Josh and Ash are in my bedroom on the PlayStation; Daisy and Rob are huddled on one of the two-seater sofas and Beauty and I on the other. The TV is screening parties from across the world but mostly focusing on our own Trafalgar Square and the Millennium Dome.

“So! How did you come up with a New Year party idea at such short notice?” Beauty brings me back from the scenes of jollity.

“When I woke up this morning to the recollection of my last half-hour at work last night, I knew if I didn't do something quickly, the rest of the year and the beginning of the next would be pretty miserable.”

“Really? Tell me, what happened?”

“I don't know that I should – it will be like pouring

water over a nice little fire.”

And it would have been. Just the thought of it even... the pushy bosses, the heaving shop floor, the winding queues and the fretful fitful customers. And the one who said to his spoilt little girl – five or six at the most – “If you don’t behave yourself and be a good girl, in 10 years’ time you’ll be out of my house and you’ll end up as a checkout girl. And then, you tell me how many Barbie dolls you think you can buy then!”

Beauty was nudging me. “Hey! Wakey wakey! Where did you go just then?”

“Work,” I mutter. “I beg your pardon, I’m back now.”

With a smile I pick up my wine glass, swirl it around before taking a sip and recalling how the rest of my time there was spent serving with a plastic smile frozen on my face. I tip my raised glass towards Beauty and say, “Well, you know, the customer is always right,” and down the rest of its contents.

“Anyhow, I’m glad you’re here. And you’re well. I’ve got a lot to be thankful for. Josh and Ash, they get on so well together, they are doing so very well, they make me feel several inches taller. In another hour, we’ll be in another year, another millennium... may all our dreams come true.”

“Hear, hear! May all our dreams come true!” Rob echoes.

“And what are your dreams for the New Year, Rob?”

It’s really good to see Beauty reaching out again. Rob beams our way, hugging Daisy even tighter, her little red head bobbing in delight. “We are hoping that the year 2000 is the one that sees us as parents – by this time next year, may we be gathered together with one or even two

little ones in our midst.”

“Let’s drink to that,” Beauty announces, passing round the wine.

By now the children are back in the living room, with red grape Schloer in their wine glasses, everyone chattering and watching as one by one the nations of the world burst into the new millennium – the Eiffel Tower display was spectacular by the way – and the countdown begins with Big Ben. As the last second is counted in and we join the screaming revellers – friends and strangers hugging one another in Trafalgar Square to the backdrop of the most extraordinary fireworks display I ever saw – I cannot help noticing Beauty wipe away a tear. And I think I know why. Theophilus Babafolue.

New Year's Eve 2000 (31st December 1999)

Theo

There is something about this night that is different from every other New Year’s Eve. And I’m sure it’s much more than the fact of an approaching new millennium. It’s almost as if a whole new world were boding. Impending. Threatening, even. Would it have to do with the heightened concern expressed during the *Operation Dolphinoes* brief last week, repeated again this morning?

It’s been a quiet evening – quiet in the sense that there’s been no major incident. Simon and I have strolled around the precincts of the Greenwich Peninsula and all we could see were people. Normal, regular, happy, some drunk and over merry, but regular ordinary people. Her

Majesty is to open the Dome later tonight so I cannot afford to allow my senses to lull – which can happen with too much introspection.

Tony Blair has already set the Millennium Wheel rolling when he fired a laser beam across the Thames a few minutes ago. A pity the wheel has to roll empty while over 200 guests are bound to be downcast at having had the ride of a lifetime cancelled at the 11th hour. However, safety first. Always.

“It all feels normal to me, Simon, what do you think?”

“Was thinking the same, mate. Yet, in a few minutes, it will be a new year, a new century, a new world.”

“Which we still have to keep safe. For Queen and Country.”

“For Queen and Country,” Simon echoes before we knock knuckles, an act which seemed to lighten my steps.

We walk briskly towards the Greenwich Observatory. I want to be able to call Beauty as soon as possible after midnight. I know she’s not too happy when I do long shifts especially on important days like this. But this comes with the territory. Especially on a night such as this. She knows that. And she agrees that it has much better prospects than the traffic warden by day and security guard by night life I was leading some seven years ago. So yes, she understands. And she’ll be fine...

And I feel better that she’s safe and warm at home, not wobbling along in the midst of drunken revellers down the Thames in the name of celebrating the new millennium with spectacular walls of flames. And I’m glad I was despatched to the cordoned-off part of Greenwich. We’ve only had to encourage a few disgruntled restaurateurs whose grouse is that business is slower than your average

Friday night. I smile at the recollections of our little chit-chat: "Safety, my friends, safety first, always."

Now that the official celebrations are over – Her Majesty's on her way to Balmoral and the Blairs are back at Number 10 – it's time to call Beauty...

The millennium bug didn't bugger my phone – or did it? I'm surprised that she hasn't called – not one missed call from Beauty, and not one text, yet I've got loads from so many others including Mel. Oh well, I'll call her before responding to any of the others...

She is such a light sleeper, why isn't she picking up? And no, I don't want to leave a voicemail, not on the mobile, and certainly not on the landline. I'm sure she's okay, or else Mel would have said something...

It isn't till I get home and find her phone on the coffee table and see the well-dressed bed that I panic...

Beauty knows 'the every imperfection' of her face. Will she ever know the joys of motherhood? Of marital bliss? How are her relationships? Will she ever take pride in her own self?

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Rita Ese Edah is passionate about helping people overcome barriers. A mother of three, playing with the family pet dog and crocheting random pieces help her to unwind from the stresses of daily living.



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