

THE EAST HAM GOLEM

By Barbara Nadel

Bright Shiny Things

Displaced

A Time to Die

Web of Lies

The East Ham Golem



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*To all my crime writer friends especially Derek Farrell,
Valentina Giambianco, Quentin Bates, Nicola Upson,
Mandy Morton, Elly Griffiths, Tom Mead and everyone
who leans to the side of the weird*

PROLOGUE

Prague, Czechoslovakia. 1938

‘Rudolf!’

The small, balding man ran over to his slightly staggering colleague and took his arm.

‘My God, you look terrible!’ he said as he led the tall, darker man over to a seat by the window.

Then, calling out to a young man sitting at a desk, he said, ‘Janos! Get Herr Baruch a glass of water!’

‘Yes, Herr Rozenberg.’

The young man left and Levi Rozenberg sat down next to his friend and colleague, Rudolf Baruch.

‘Was it difficult?’ he asked.

His colleague nodded.

‘Did you manage to get anything from Voss?’

Rudolf shook his head. ‘He can’t get anything now,

not even aspirin. They're strangling his business.'

Levi Rozenberg shook his head and then he said, 'All the more reason we need to act fast. Today the pharmacy . . .'

The young man returned with a glass of water, which he gave to Rudolf Baruch.

'Thank you.' He drank and then said to the young man, 'Is everything prepared, Janos?'

'Yes, Herr Baruch.'

'And the family?'

'They want to visit as soon as it's over,' he said. 'I told them to come this afternoon.'

'Good.'

And then the young man, Janos Horak, said, 'Herr Baruch, if you don't mind my saying, you look unwell. Are you sure . . . ?'

'I will finish attending to Frau Zimmer and then I will go home,' Rudolf said and then he stood. 'Levi, are you ready?'

His colleague also rose to his feet and said, 'As I will ever be, my friend.'

And then the two of them left their office and repaired to their laboratory.

ONE

Plasht Jewish Cemetery, East Ham, London. March 2023

‘Is it me, or does everyone think that whoever did this should be strung up by his nuts?’

The group of uniformed police officers standing beside the tall, middle-aged man struggling to keep upright on the uneven ground beneath his feet looked at each other, but said nothing.

“Cause, you see, I find I don’t really give a shit whatever the thinking was behind this – far-right nationalism, religion, madness – I just want to punch whoever did it until his spleen falls out.’

Still nobody spoke. Detective Inspector Tony Bracci was generally a likeable old geezer – family-orientated, friendly, fair. But he had ‘views’ which, if challenged, could land the challenger in a place they wouldn’t like. In other words, Tony had a temper he wasn’t afraid to use.

Looking around the recently desecrated cemetery, he said, ‘Vi’s got family buried here. Don’t know how the hell I’m gonna tell her . . .’

A female officer said, ‘You mean Detective Inspector Collins, guy?’

‘Yes, God love her,’ Tony said. ‘If she was still in the job she’d be effin’ and jeffin’ and kicking your arses to get hold of every Nazi fanboy and would-be *jihadi* in Newham.’

‘So why aren’t you?’ the officer continued.

Tony shrugged and then he said, ‘Where to start these days, Siddiqui? Seems to me there’s some sort of two-for-one deal on extremists these days. Can barely turn round for the bastards. No, it’s SOCO slog for now, see whether we can get anything useful from the site, then house to house where we’ll no doubt learn that no one has seen or heard fuck all.’

He lit a cigarette while all but one of his team dispersed around the group of shattered and desecrated tombstones in the middle of the cemetery. Rather closer to the main entrance than the rest, Detective Sergeant Kamran Shah was minutely examining the most egregious offence against the dead, in the shape of a coffin which had been dug up and its lid smashed. Fragments of what could have been the corpse’s shroud stuck up from the broken lid like tiny off-white sails. If the body of Rudolf Bennett – the name he’d finally managed to make out on the scuffed metal plate once attached to the coffin lid – was to be reburied, it had to go through the hands of a police pathologist first. So Shah, as well as examining the site, was also waiting for Dr Gabor, the latest recruit to the tribe of specialists assigned from time to time to Forest Gate CID. He’d never met Gabor before,

but he'd been told by his boss that the latest 'path' looked about twelve.

Tony Bracci ambled and stumbled his way over to his sergeant and said, 'So what's the score then, Kam?'

'Can't see much without disturbing it, guv. Path phoned to say he wants to transport the whole thing to the lab so he can maybe see why they picked on this particular bloke.'

'I can tell you that,' Tony said. 'Because he was there and because they're twats.'

'Yeah, but . . .'

Tony put a hand on his sergeant's broad shoulder and smiled. 'I know – look for all and any possible motives. Dinosaur I may be, but I'm not stupid. Just pulling your leg, Kam.'

The younger man smiled.

Kamran Shah had joined Forest Gate CID back in 2018 on an accelerated graduate programme. His now-boss had then been a sergeant who had worked with the legendary Detective Inspector Violet Collins. Tall, skinny and foul-mouthed, Vi had retired back in 2019, along with her signature Chanel suits, Opium perfume and famous preference for younger male lovers. What she hadn't taken with her was the dark sense of humour she had shared with Tony Bracci. It was something Kam Shah had learnt to appreciate – especially during the frightening days of the recent Covid pandemic. Like most police officers, Tony and Kam had worked all through what became known as 'the virus', trying, often in vain, to get people to obey the heavy quarantine restrictions that had been in force back then.

Kam said, 'But they are twats anyway.'

‘Course.’

The entrance gates to the cemetery swung open and a black transit van reversed in. When it finally stopped, a young man with flaming-red hair and Harry Potter glasses got out and opened up the back doors. Dr Benedict Gabor, police pathologist and, it was said, a practising pagan, was not a man who waited for ‘inferiors’ to do the donkey work allied to his profession. Pulling a trolley out of the van while two of his mortuary attendants looked on, he nodded at the coffin and said, ‘This our man?’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ Kam said. ‘Called Rudolf Bennett.’

Dr Gabor liked to have names for his ‘people’ where possible. Observing the shattered coffin, he said, ‘Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?’

‘Wonder what?’ Tony said.

‘Why . . .’

‘As I said to Kam here earlier,’ Tony said, ‘it’s because they’re twats.’

Gabor nodded and then said, ‘It’s as good an explanation as any.’

While Tony Bracci and his team were searching Plashet Jewish Cemetery for clues to who had desecrated the site, Private Investigator Mumtaz Hakim was drinking *masala chai* at a house that backed onto the graveyard. The owner of the house, a Mrs Meera Dhawan, had invited her to talk about her younger sister, Lakshmi.

‘She’s what my husband calls an “airhead”,’ Mrs Dhawan said as she crossed one elegant leg over the other. ‘Thirty going on seventeen.’

It was nice to be given a cup of proper home-made *masala chai*. The spice-flavoured milk tea was ubiquitous all over the entire Indian subcontinent – though in the UK, as Mumtaz knew all too well, a lot of British Asians now opted for pre-mixed spice blends. But then Mrs Dhawan was the proprietor, with her husband, of three Indian restaurants across the London borough of Newham, as well as the ‘star’ of a highly regarded Asian cookery blog. Her masala chai was heavy on the ginger, which Mumtaz loved.

‘Maybe,’ Mumtaz said, ‘that is why she is attracted to this much younger man.’

‘You could have a point,’ Mrs Dhawan said. ‘But to want to marry an eighteen-year-old! I mean, who does that?’

‘Other teenagers? If as you say your sister is still behaving like a teenager herself, she may very well find this boy appealing.’

‘Yes, but she’s a lawyer!’ Mrs Dhawan said. ‘I mean think about the optics of that? What on earth will her clients think of her? Lakshmi works with our father at his solicitors’ practice in Chingford. Together with our brother Dev, they have some very important clients, high-profile people in our community.’

Unlike Mumtaz, a Muslim, the Dhawan family were Hindus. Meera and Lakshmi’s father Dilip Dhawan was a well-known and respected solicitor across east London, especially amongst Hindu families. It must have come as a huge shock when the younger of the two Dhawan sisters announced that she wanted to marry a white teenage boy she’d met at the gym.

Shouting voices from the nearby cemetery insinuated themselves into Meera's smart, very grey living room and she looked towards the patio doors. There was no way she could see anything, but the police had been in there since very early that morning and their presence was unsettling – because it probably signified that the cemetery had been vandalised again.

Mumtaz, who had noticed the clutch of police vehicles at the entrance to the cemetery, said, 'It must be worrying for you when people get into the old graveyard.'

'It is,' Meera agreed; then she turned back to Mumtaz and said, 'All this hatred these days. Even levelled at the dead. Just because they were Jewish. I mean look at us. You are a Muslim, I a Hindu, but we get along with each other, we do business, talk like rational human beings.'

'It's men mainly, who do these things,' Mumtaz said. 'Most women don't have time for such things.'

'Oh, that is so true!' Mrs Dhawan said. 'Men and boys chewing betel all day long and talking about politics they barely understand. They want to try raising children, keeping house and pandering to the orders of men like themselves all day long!' Then she shook her head. 'Sorry, Mrs Hakim, ridiculous men are my *bête noire*. Like you, I'm a working British Asian woman who really doesn't have time for the prejudices of men. And I don't just mean Asian men either. I told Lakshmi, this white Christian boy of hers will be no better. I give it a year before he's got her picking up his dirty socks and then leaving her to go down the pub.'

Mumtaz smiled. Her own on-and-off lover was white,

but he'd never made her pick up his socks and he had certainly never left her alone to go to the pub. Lee Arnold, for all his faults, was teetotal.

'Anyway,' Mrs Dhawan said, 'I'd like to find out more about this Danny Hall my sister has taken up with.' She passed Mumtaz a photograph of a slim, dark-haired teenager who wore a slightly challenging expression on his finely chiselled face. 'He lives in Canning Town with his parents and, so my sister says, seven younger brothers and sisters. Given the size of the family, I do wonder whether they're Travellers. But you'll probably find that out.'

Mumtaz bit her tongue. Prejudice against Travellers and Roma was rampant and she really didn't want to get into that with this woman. Maybe Danny Hall did come from a Traveller family, but if he did, so what?

'Danny himself attends that NewVic College doing some course or other – when he's not with my sister,' Mrs Dhawan said. 'His mother cleans for a living, which is honourable, but the father is unemployed. Sick apparently.' She rolled her eyes. 'I want to know whether they're in debt. I don't want my sister used as a human bank and I want to know whether they're involved in crime. I'm not a fool, I know that not everyone involved in crime has a record. I could follow the boy myself, make forays down to Canning Town and ask around about these people, but you're better than I am at all this, and you have contacts.'

Mrs Dhawan was right. Although the next time Mumtaz would be in the vicinity of Plashet Jewish Cemetery, in three months' time, it would be in connection with what the police were doing in there right at that very moment.

By that time, Lakshmi Dhawan and Danny Hall would have been married for three weeks.

The whole process was recorded as well as individual photographs taken, from the time the shattered coffin was placed onto plastic sheeting on the floor. As each piece of broken wood was carefully removed it was numbered, photographed and laid in its approximate place on top of the coffin, but now on a bench. Just removing the lid took over an hour. And when the final piece was removed, Benedict Gabor had to decide whether to remove the shroud in situ or once his team had lifted the whole thing onto his examination table. While the table itself was covered with plastic sheeting, the doctor wanted to avoid any residual clumps of earth and other outside elements contaminating his work area. However, to remove the shroud in situ did mean pulling it from underneath the corpse, which could create damage.

In the end his team of technicians removed the enshrouded body and placed it onto the examination table. Gabor noticed that they struggled with the weight and wondered what, if anything, the body might have been buried with. The only woman on the team, Rosa, was left temporarily breathless.

When she could speak again, Rosa said, 'Weighs a ton!'

Her male colleagues all nodded their agreement while Benedict changed his nitrile gloves and then, with the aid of tweezers, began to pull at one corner of the shroud. From the date on the brass coffin plate, it would seem that Rudolf Bennett had died in 1940 and so he was probably way beyond liquefaction. But even when dealing with

desert-dry skeletons, it was still surprising how fabric particularly could stick to a corpse. And this skeleton was heavy, or something was. As Benedict began to peel away the upper layers of the shroud, he sensed that what was underneath was rather more substantial than a skeleton.

Had the family of Bennett had the body embalmed? And if so, to what degree? When Benedict's own father had died, he had been subjected to a high level of preservation. At the behest of his only surviving sibling, his sister Eszter, the body of Viktor Gabor had been mainly formaldehyde when he'd been buried. Benedict had been surprised. He hadn't thought that Jews were big on body preservation. But then what did he know? With Benedict brought up a Gentile by his Gentile mother, Viktor's original identity as a Jewish Hungarian was, and remained, a mystery to his son.

Benedict asked his team to lift the body while he disentangled the shroud from the underside of the corpse. This happened three times before first the head and then one shoulder came into view. And while the face, as might be expected, was covered by thick if discoloured gauze, there was something about the shoulder that made the doctor take a step back for a moment and breathe.

Benedict recapped. Not only was the corpse unusually heavy, but the shroud appeared to have been wrapped around it in a haphazard way. That, or maybe those who had attempted to remove or destroy Rudolf Bennett had rewrapped him after they'd finished whatever ghastly thing they had done to him. And yet the gauze over the face was intact and, when he pulled at one corner of it, it came away easily.

Benedict looked. Then he blinked several times to make sure that what he was looking at was real. A long aquiline nose dominated a grey-tinged face whose startlingly vivid blue eyes looked up at Benedict with . . . what? Stepping back from whatever this was, Benedict said, 'Christ!'

'What the hell is it, Doctor?' one of the technicians asked.

Quickly, as if more protracted contact with Rudolf Bennett might taint him in some way, Benedict pulled the shroud down to the body's mid-section – and then they all looked, with a mixture of horror and confusion, as the moulded chest of what looked like a tailor's dummy came into view.