

The Box-Shaped Mystery

By

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'The Mystery remains box-shaped, at once a prison and a refuge. Its four walls are, roughly, a Crime, a Mystery, an Enquiry and a Conclusion with an Element of Satisfaction in it.' Margery Allingham

Prologue

Andrew Sharp is lying on his back on his wife's comfortable bed, staring up at the ceiling. Just for a moment. He needs to get on but thinking about a box-shaped mystery is making him giddy. His mind is racing over what kind of shape that box might be. A shoe-box shape is his first thought but a hat-box offers interesting possibilities. He goes via box-room and box-set, from box-bed to coffin before deciding the box will find its own shape as the story evolves.

Except that he can't see how the story can evolve until he has solved the riddle of what could be at once a prison and refuge, in that precise order.

I

A prison and a refuge

He would have preferred it to be the other way round. It is easier to imagine scenarios where a refuge might become a prison. He thinks about castles, churches, monasteries, a nunnery, all refuges until put under siege. But it doesn't have to be so big, so ambitious. He thinks about a cave – or, yes, a hole in the ground. In Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*, the dastardly Major Quive-Smith turns the aristocratic protagonist's cramped underground refuge into a prison.

But then he reminds himself that he is getting muddled. It is no point thinking of the thing the wrong way about. He needs something that is first a prison *then* a refuge.

He thinks about it as he gazes out of train windows, flooded fields flashing by. He ponders it staring into the middle-distance in pubs and cafes, both raucous and placid. And he dwells on it in his dwelling – he

no longer believes in homes – staring up at the empty ceiling in his own bedroom.

He sleeps on it, trusting his subconscious will come up with the answer. It doesn't. He drinks on it – a half bottle of whisky – but when he wakes he doesn't know where he is, never mind what he's been trying to figure out.

He writes down the phrase 'a prison and a refuge' repeatedly. He wonders if he can cheat and turn it into a useful anagram, especially as he can see the word Gun in the jumbled up letters. But the best he can come up with, using the weapon, is Gun Deafens Prior, which is not much of a crime. He is amused by the possibilities of Gnu Deafens Prior but only because it reminds him of the anthropomorphic talking elk in an old Flanders and Swann song.

When the solution comes it is in a flash of something like electric, jolting through his veins. The solution is on a single line on a credit card bill. It refers to payment for accommodation at a luxury hotel called the Oxford Castle.

It actually is a castle but the truth is the rooms are all in the former Oxford gaol in the castle grounds. The rooms are cells. To be sure the cells are stylishly decorated, with comfortable beds and expensive unguents in their en suite wet rooms, but they are, nevertheless, cells.

On its website, the hotel has the tagline: 'Your Refuge from the Modern World'. He has it, in the right order: a prison and a refuge.

II The Crime

Contemplating the crime, the box immediately assumes an odd shape. He assumes the walls of the box-shaped mystery – the crime, the mystery, the enquiry, the conclusion – will be of equal length.

But he can describe the crime in a sentence.

He kills his wife and her lover.

It is the obvious crime. Predictable even. And there lies the problem. He will be the first one the police will come looking for. There is no mystery to it. The enquiry will not be lengthy, the conclusion equally brief. He can see a hat-box shape emerging – but only for a cocked-hat.

Then he realises he is confusing the crime with the motive. The motive for a crime always turns out to be predictable, banal even, once it

is revealed. Edgar Wallace's list of reasons for murder pretty much covers it: envy, jealousy, contempt, greed, despair, revenge.

It isn't the motive for the crime that needs to be interesting. He shouldn't get so hung up on that. *That* is life. Where he needs to be unpredictable, extraordinary even, is in the method.

He knows that writers of serial killer novels develop increasingly outré methods of torturing and murdering people, each one more distasteful than the last. But he is nostalgic for The Golden Age. Violence, if there is any, should take place off the page. The consequences of violence might appear on the page but only in opaque terms. No entrails hanging off the picture rails in a blood-bedewed bedroom for him, thank you very much.

He needs an unusual method of murder. More, he needs to find something inexplicable in it. An apparently impossible killing that will foil the stolid copper or the talented amateur. (Pronounced *amateur* because he or she will probably be posh.)

He realises his thinking is pointing in only one direction: toward a locked room mystery in which the manner of the murder is impossible to divine. And, with another flush of electricity through his veins, he realises there can be no better, more impregnable locked room than a prison cell. Hard to enter, impossible to leave. Even if that cell does now offer a wet room and chocolates on the goose-down pillows.

III The Mystery

The man and the woman are found lying side by side on the bed in the hotel room that had once been a cell.

According to the hotel staff who, with the assistance of three or four strapping guests from the adjacent rooms, have been obliged to break the door down, the door was locked and bolted from the inside. There is no other possible means of ingress or egress. The small square windows in the main cell and the en suite do open but only as far as the prison bars cemented into the exterior wall.

And, even so, they are not of sufficient size for other than a child to squeeze through. Since the room is on the top floor that child needs first to have scaled forty feet of a sheer prison wall.

CCTV footage later confirms that no child or any other creature has attempted or achieved such a feat. It would have been pointless anyway. The window bars are closely examined and are set solidly into the thick stone walls. Even if someone with the agility of an ape – or an

ape itself, *pace* Edgar Allan Poe – had clambered up the wall, that person could not have entered the room via the windows.

But all that thinking comes later. On the day, the crime looks open and shut.

The staff are alerted when one of the guests telephones to say there is the most enormous row going on in the room and cries of: ‘Help, murder!’

There is no sign of a struggle, however. The room is undisturbed. The one suitcase in the room is packed: it is shortly before checking out time. There are no marks of violence on either corpse.

They are both fully clothed, lying on top of the covers, their heads close together on the pillows. Two chocolates on the pillows have slipped into the depression their heads make and lie nestled, somewhat incongruously, between his left and her right ear.

There are two empty syringes on the bedside table. A handwritten note lies face down on the floor beside the bed. One of the staff later claims to see it flutter from the table in the rush of air when the door bursts open.

The immediate assumption is of a double suicide by means of something in the syringes. But the note says otherwise.

It is written by the woman. She has signed it Barbara. Her full name is Barbara Sharp, according to the driving licence in her handbag, living at an address in Summertown, Oxford. According to the electoral roll she shares it with an Andrew Sharp. Who is not the man by her side. He is one Trevor Evans, a visiting academic. Single.

Mrs Sharp writes, in a rather neat hand, that she has given her lover an overdose of insulin because he has been unfaithful to her and told her their affair is over. She has then given herself a similar overdose because she can’t bear the thought of life without him.

Case closed even before it is opened.

But, hang on, how is this a locked room mystery? If Mrs Sharp did it, and she is dead in the locked room too, then there’s no mystery.

This is Andrew Sharp’s problem. He knows there is a mystery but he is the only one who does because he has planned too well. He has inadvertently strayed from the template. The box has no shape whatsoever now since he has committed the Perfect Crime.

IV

The Enquiry

Andrew Sharp ruefully accepts that nobody will ever be perplexed by how he killed his wife and her lover and got out of a cell locked from the inside because he is the only one who knows they were murdered.

He has worried that leaving the chocolates between their heads might have given pause for thought to an astute investigator – the couple was checking out, not in – but he doubts there will be an investigator sharp enough to wonder.

He ponders the detective: will he be made to measure or off the peg? He thinks made to measure unlikely. That usually requires an eccentric investigator with quirks that make him or her inimitable and lovable (and ripe for TV adaptation). But are there any unexploited quirks left?

Off-the-peg, it could be the loner cop with drink and relationship problems and questionable taste in music. But Sharp prefers the Golden Age, where policemen are usually stolid, unimaginative and uniformly without hinterland, playing straight men for the talented *amateurs*.

And, to be honest, he actually prefers his detectives to be cyphers, existing merely to convey the development of an ingenious plot.

As it turns out, no *amateurs* are staying at the hotel at the time of the crime. Enter, instead, Inspector Blank and Sergeant Even Blanker. These aren't their actual names, of course, but, really, who cares about either of them? They are functionaries who don't exist when they're not investigating.

Of course, just because his name is Blank does not mean the Inspector is also Thick. (Though Sergeant Even Blanker probably is.) Indeed, Inspector Blank is a man in search of mystery. He doesn't want the mundane, the cut-and-dried. He's a stolid policeman but if we knew of his yearnings he might yearn to be a gifted *amateur*.

He doesn't know there's anything wrong when he arrives on the scene. He's just following procedure. He collects his evidence patiently. But he notices little things.

For example:

'You say you were alerted to a violent row?' he says to the receptionist at the hotel.

'A man phoned,' she replies. 'I sent a couple of porters to investigate. They broke down the door.'

'The name of the man who phoned, if you please.'

'I don't know it. I didn't think to ask.'

'The room he called from then.'

'It wasn't from a room. He called on his mobile.'

Inspector Blank winces at the word 'mobile'. We don't know why but might hazard he is a man out of time, preferring a simpler age of trunk calls and telegrams and three postal deliveries a day.

'The number?'

She hands him a piece of paper. He looks at the number written on it and looks in his notepad.

'The call came from Mrs Barbara Sharp's phone, which was in her handbag when she was discovered,' he says to his sergeant.

Sergeant Even Blanker gives him a sharp look.

Then:

'You broke down the door?' Blank says to the porter.

'There was a gang of us. Guests from along the corridor and Robert the other porter.'

'Hard was it?'

'I'll say – it's an old cell door, you know. Not a lot of give. My shoulder is bruised to buggery.'

Blank nods at the porter. 'I'll need the names of the guests that assisted.'

'Not sure I can help there,' the porter says. 'It was all a bit of a melee, you see.'

'Did any of them say they'd heard the sound of a row?'

'Only the row we were making calling into the room and trying to open the door.'

'Indeed,' Blank says to his sergeant. His sergeant gives him a sharp look.

On a landline:

'Doctor – what news do you have for me?' Blank says.

'Massive heart attacks, both of them. Consistent with an insulin overdose.'

'Which one of them was the diabetic?'

'Neither.'

Later Blank is standing in front of a strapping fellow.

'You helped break the door down?' Inspector Blank says.

'Thought I'd give a hand. It was locked and bolted.'

‘I doubt it,’ Inspector Blank says to his sergeant, who gives him a sharp look.

‘I beg your pardon?’ the strapping fellow says, overhearing. ‘Have you seen the ruddy big prison keys they use to lock the doors in the hotel – you know, because the rooms were once cells? Well, I can assure you there was one of them blocking the keyhole on the other side.’

‘How many of you went into the room?’

‘All of us I suppose. A half a dozen people – more came in from the corridors, attracted by all the palaver.’

‘Indeed,’ Blank says to his sergeant, who doesn’t look up from his notepad.

Now, standing on the doorstep of a house in Summertown:

‘So, sergeant, our man is by all accounts personally unglamorous with the unglamorous occupation of printer. He is, however, a diabetic.’

The door opens.

‘Mr Andrew Sharp? We’re sorry for your loss though I’m not sure condolences are in order.’

Sharp smiles.

‘I think you’d better come in.’

V

The Conclusion

‘He did it,’ Inspector Blank says. ‘I know he did it. I just can’t prove it to within a reasonable doubt.’ His sergeant is looking at the ceiling. ‘If only one of the other guests or hotel staff had recognised him. But nobody recalls seeing him.’

Blank taps his teeth with his pencil.

‘But you’re probably wondering how, sergeant. Easy. His wife tells him she is away on business and leaves him at home. He knows the truth – that she is checked into the Oxford Castle with her lover. He has probably known for some time. Probably been reading text messages.’

Blank looks up at the ceiling.

‘He would need to threaten them to make them compliant. A gun. You’re wondering how he would get hold of a gun. Easily. People just do. I’m not concerned with that. If you need an explanation: he’s a

printer. He could knock a replica up quickly enough on his new 3-D machine.

‘He walks from Summertown along the river and canal towpaths, anonymous in ubiquitous baseball cap and jeans. He goes into the hotel round the back – via the public entrance to the castle. It is almost check-out time so he knocks on their door pretending to be a porter come for their luggage.’

Blank pauses to order his suppositions.

‘One of them opens the door. He barges in, waving his gun. He forces them to lie on the bed. He injects the man first, I fancy, then his wife. He waits until he is sure they are dead then leaves the note on the bedside table. Oh, yes, it is his note. He has written it perhaps days before, copying her handwriting. Finally, before he leaves the room he uses his wife’s phone to call down to reception about the murderous row going on in the room.’

Blank seems to run out of steam. He puts his hand to his head as if in pain.

‘But I know what you’re thinking, sergeant. After he’s done the dastardly double deed and made the phone call how does he get out of a room that is found locked and bolted from the inside some minutes later? Well, it never was bolted. The bolt we found on the floor was just to distract us – there was no sign on the door it had ever been affixed there. And think, man, think! What prison cell have you ever been in where the bolts are on the inside? We’re trying to keep them in, aren’t we, not them keep us out?’

Blank subsides again.

‘But there I have reached my outer limit. The door was definitely locked – I saw the broken hasp hanging off the door frame myself from when it burst open. I have no clue as to how he got out of the room, leaving the door locked from the inside. It is quite what Sherlock Holmes would have called a three-pipe problem. Alas, I do not smoke.’

And with that Blank and his sergeant are motionless, both looking up at the ceiling, equally blank.

Epilogue

An Element of Satisfaction

Blank never lays a glove on Andrew Sharp. Oh he has it figured out pretty well but he can't see how Sharp gets out of the room. With the rest of the stuff he is on the money: Sharp scours text messages and credit card bills to track his wife's affair. He makes a 3-D gun, pretends to be the porter, makes the phone call on his wife's phone and so on.

What Blank misses is that, after the murder, Sharp never leaves the room.

Well, not never, just not immediately. He is against the wall behind the door when they start battering it down. No way they will succeed – God knows what metal that door is made of – without his help.

Sharp has already half unscrewed the hasp on the door frame. When he figures they have got enough of a sweat up he suddenly unlocks the door then steps back against the wall.

None of them think much of it later but the door bursts open so abruptly four of them pretty much pitch halfway across the floor, carried by their own momentum.

Sharp turns the key in the lock of the open door again and, as the men are staring at the two bodies in the bed, steps out behind them as if he has just come in from the corridor. Then, as others do come in, he slips away.

A box-shaped, locked-room mystery *and* a perfect crime. Sharp is pretty pleased with himself. Or would be if he could figure out why he is still lying on this bed, looking up at the ceiling.

Then he gets it. He first came across this thing in *Pincher Martin* by William Golding. Ambrose Bierce used it years earlier in a story about a man being hung. It doesn't have a name but it is a particular sort of surprise twist. Pincher Martin relives his life as he thinks he is clinging to a rock awaiting rescue when actually he is in the water in the seconds between shipwreck and death by drowning. The man being hung believes the rope has snapped and he has gone home to his wife in the seconds before his neck, not the rope, breaks.

Sharp knows about it. He just hasn't expected to *be* it.

When he lies down on his wife's bed in their home in Summertown, whilst she lies down in the Oxford Castle hotel room with her lover, he expect to die almost instantly from the massive insulin overdose he's given himself. Then she will return home and find him there and that will teach her.

But then he's caught up in his box-shaped mystery, which goes on for ages – except that it doesn't. He realises this instant that it is all happening *in* this instant, before the insulin hits his heart and kills him.

Except the insulin doesn't kill him. He is still alive. He can't move a muscle but his eyes are open and he's staring at the ceiling. And

now he's staring at the startled face of his wife who has come between him and the ceiling as she bends over him on her return home.

He realises what has happened. The overdose isn't enough to kill him. But it is enough to put him in a coma.

He's relatively young and healthy. He could be like this for years. And years.

A lot of time to think about other ways he might kill his wife and her lover. Time to refine his methods and make that box-shaped mystery into all kinds of different shapes. He gets an element of satisfaction from that.

Ends