

Comeuppance

A Novel by Julie Kushner

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For my Mom, who has talked me off the proverbial Revenge Ledge more times than I'd care to admit.

Prologue

Stop me, if you've heard this one before . . .

It's about a guy, who's in his late twenties, early forties, mid-fifties, thirty-something. He's tall, short, average-height, thin, paunchy, massively obese. He's bald, blonde, ginger-headed, dark-haired. He's a doctor, lawyer, construction worker . . . a cashier at CVS.

He's coming home late from work. He's had a Crap Day . . . *always* a Crap Day. His boss yelled at him. He was denied a promotion. He spilled coffee all over the front of his shirt. Someone took his parking space. While he was walking to work, a pigeon shit on his forehead. But now he's coming home, and he's . . . *happy*.

He's frigging ecstatic, because he's going to see *her*. You can see it in his body language . . . the way his slumped shoulders gradually straighten, as he makes the trip from the driveway to the front door. It is as if a weight is literally being lifted from his body. And all that pain, aggravation, and frustration that he was feeling, just moments ago? It's replaced with anticipation . . . with *hope*.

"Marianne, I'm home," he calls out from the entrance foyer. (Her name is almost *always* Marianne. We'll get to why, in a bit.)

She doesn't answer. She *never* answers. But he knows she's home, because her car in the driveway . . . or her coat is on the chair in the living room . . . maybe he can even smell her perfume lingering in the air.

He rushes up the stairs (or down the hall, if his home has no stairs). He's already starting to remove his clothing, as he travels . . . loosening his tie, unbuttoning his shirt, removing his lab coat, ripping off that ridiculous uniform vest, with that awful nametag that scratches against his chest, whenever he bends down, or moves too quickly.

You men just can never *wait*, can you? Take a load off, why don't you? Sit down . . . have a beer . . . catch the end of the evening news. But *no*, it's all

about the sex . . . *always* about the sex, which makes what's about to happen so much worse (or *better*, depending on your vantage point).

He smells it, before he sees it . . . that *scent*, which is equal parts acrid and sweet, intoxicating and nauseating, overpowering and subtle. That smell causes a stirring below his belt . . . a Pavlovian dog response . . . one that he will, for sure, be beating himself up over, later . . .

He hears her heavy breathing . . . her moans increasing in urgency and ecstasy. And he wonders, not without a twinge of bitterness, whether she's started without him . . .

Then, he sees it . . . the *Ass*, toned and tanned, bouncing rhythmically on the light blue bed sheets, which *she* purchased on sale at an Outlet Mall, just a few months back. It's a *male ass*, and it's most definitely not his own . . .

"Oh God, [insert Poor Schlub's name here]! This isn't what it looks like. I can explain," Marianne pleads, as she tugs a plaid comforter over her bare chest.

The *Ass*, meanwhile, is tripping all over himself, trying to find his pants, which are usually under the bed, but sometimes, oddly enough, end up hanging over the door knob, like one of those Do Not Disturb signs you see outside hotel rooms.

Do Not Disturb, indeed . . .

"How could you?" He asks . . . his voice -thick with barely held-back tears - is almost a whisper.

She shakes her head, eyes wide, like saucers, unable to answer . . .

"Get out," he says softly.

And when she doesn't move immediately, his sadness is replaced by an untenable rage. "GET OUT," he yells, knocking from the nightstand some personal item of hers . . . a jewelry box or vase . . . a framed photograph taken of her when she was in college.

Marianne and The Ass rush out the door in various states of undress, his hand cupped across her body, so as to provide her with some vestige of modesty, as she makes her way back out into the world.

He's left alone on the floor, picking up the pieces . . .

As Marianne and the Ass make their Great Escape, they spot my car waiting in the driveway. Marianne gives me a coy wink, and the Ass offers me a, rather goofy, thumbs up. (He was hired for his *ass*, after all . . . not his brains.) I offer a stiff nod in response, as they silently slip into the backseat, their hands cupped over their mouths to stifle their giggles.

(When we hired Marianne last year, she was an out-of-work actress, whose claim to fame was being cast as the understudy to the fourth lead in some off, off Broadway play that had something to do with nurses. She'd also twirled a baton, while wearing a white skirt, in a tampon commercial at the age of 13. This work isn't quite as glamorous as all that. But at least she gets health and dental insurance.)

My client is in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead at an unseen object in the distance. Her eyes are glazed, but dry. I turn toward her, and ask her if she's OK. "I feel *nothing*," she says tonelessly.

I imagine that when they hire me, these women (or men, in some cases) think they'll feel elation, once it's all over . . . or at least some form of closure . . . a "just desserts," sort-of ending to a chapter in their lives they would just as soon forget, but know they will always remember.

Yet, they always feel nothing . . .

You would think a response like that would make me question my line of work. But it doesn't. After all, I'm not really doing it for them. I'm not even doing it for myself. My reasons for doing what I do are much bigger, and more complicated, than that.

My name is Faye Weaver. And I'm a Karma Cop . . .

Chapter 1 – Faye

“Sometimes Bad Things happen to Good People, honey.”

That’s what my mom said to me, while she was lying in the hospital bed that had been her home for the past two weeks . . . tubes coming out of every orifice of her body . . . a flimsy blue gown clinging to her ghostly pale skin, as the cancer slowly ravaged her from the inside out. She was 36-years old. I was nine . . .

My parents were *Good People*.

My father had worked for “The Factory,” since he was 15. (To this day, I still don’t know exactly what it was that they made.) Even as a teenager, every penny he earned went to his family. He was the oldest of six kids. The day after he graduated from high school, he started working there full time.

Aside from the charcoal grey jumpsuit that comprised his uniform, my dad owned exactly five shirts, all in varying shades of blue, each purchased at Walmart on sale for \$7.99. And yet, he insisted that my mother use the entire paltry sum of money he earned each year for his Christmas bonus to buy me new school clothes, so the other kids wouldn’t make fun of me for being poor.

Before my mom got sick, she was a kindergarten teacher at the local elementary school, who always smelled like milk and chocolate chip cookies. All her students called her “Mom.” When she was first admitted to the hospital, many of them sent her hand-drawn cards with the words “Get Well Soon,” scribbled in crayon across the front. I hated those cards.

Two months after my mother was diagnosed, my dad was laid off from his job for missing too much work. A month after that, the bank foreclosed on our house, and we had to move in with my grandparents . . .

Today, my dad lives in a small studio apartment uptown, and works for the U.S. Postal Service. He never remarried . . . or bought new shirts. (Well, maybe he did. I don’t know. They look the same to me.)

He still wakes up early every Sunday morning, like clockwork, and goes to Church. My dad is still a *Good Person*. A lot of *good* it's done him . . .

My father thinks I work for a "Charitable Organization." I'd like to think that's not entirely a lie

When you're a kid, you're taught to believe in Happy Endings. Good is ultimately rewarded. Evil is always punished. The prince and the princess will inevitably live Happily Ever After. And no matter how dark and unfair things might seem in the middle of the story, everything always evens out and rights itself, by the final page.

It's not always true, of course. Fate, while good intentioned, can be fickle, and, sometimes a little bit lazy, when it comes to giving people what they truly deserve. The day my mother died was the day I stopped believing in God, and started believing in Karma. From age 9 on, I relentlessly pursued justice, at home, on the playground, and in the classroom. I hungered for it. I needed to know that it existed.

When I graduated from college, a career in law seemed like a logical next step. Unfortunately, I found law school just as disillusioning and artificial as those childhood fairytales, where the hero always slayed the dragon and got the girl. Sure, all those laws, statutes, and principles sounded great on paper. But in practice, it always seemed to be the "rich and the powerful," not the "good and the righteous," who got to live in the big castle at the end of the story.

I dropped out of law school two weeks into my second semester. Two weeks later, I accepted a job at KC, Inc. The rest, as they say, is history . . .

Except, it's not. Because, if it was, this would be *end* of the story, rather than the beginning of one . . .

* * *

After I drop Marianne, The Ass, and my client off at their respective homes, I drive over to the office to fill out the necessary paperwork. When I get there, I am not surprised to find all of my coworkers' cars still parked in the lot. Us Karma Cops keep pretty late hours. It's kind of the nature of the business . . .

“And so our sassy heroine returns to her cave, having successfully slayed her last Demon of the Night,” narrates my obnoxiously good-looking colleague (who has, on more than one occasion, been mistaken for the actor Ryan Reynolds) as I enter the office.

“Shut up, Sam,” I say with a grin, as I head to my cubicle, and slip out of my non-descript black peacoat.

Sam Rochester is a colleague of mine. And more recently, he’s become kind of my best friend. This is despite the fact that we have almost nothing in common. Not to mention, I’m pretty sure that, had I met him under any other circumstances, I would hate his guts.

By the time I reach my chair, Sam is already precariously perched at his usual spot on the corner of my desk, his ridiculously long legs stretched out over the side. He sits there so often, that when you look closely at the wood, you could kind of make out this small indentation that’s roughly the size and shape of Sam’s left butt cheek. To me, sitting like that looks massively uncomfortable. But Sam never seems to mind.

“So . . . another Revenge Sex case?” Sam asks sympathetically, as he offers me a sip of his Hot Cocoa. (Sam’s way too much of a Big Kid to drink coffee, like the rest of us “adults.” So, it’s always Hot Cocoa for him . . . sometimes with marshmallows.)

I nod dejectedly, as I gratefully accept the Hot Cocoa mug, relishing the oddly soothing feeling of the warm frothy liquid as it tickles my upper lip. “I don’t know why Dempsey continues to assign them to me, when he knows I hate them so much,” I gripe, returning the sugary beverage to Sam.

“You hate them, huh?” Sam says with a smirk. “Why? Do they leave you . . . *unsatisfied*?”

I throw a blue pen at Sam, which leaves a telltale dot of ink right at the center of his forehead. “Ow . . . so *violent*,” he says, with a childish pout, as he rubs tenderly at the spot with his thumb, which only serves to make the stain worse.

“Another Revenge Sex case, Faye? Who did you use as Bait?” Mick DiSimone inquires loudly, from his desk all the way at the other end of the

office. (Mick is the kind of guy who never quite learned to grasp the concept of an “inside voice.”)

“Marianne,” I reply with a shrug.

Though we actually have about five or six “Bait Girls” on payroll, I almost always use Marianne. She’s pretty, but not intimidatingly so. Plus, she has that doe-eyed, helpless, look about her that guys seem to like . . .

“Ooh, Marianne,” Mick replies, licking his lips lasciviously, as he leans back dreamily in his chair. “I would totally be willing to have my heart ripped to shreds for a chance to have a few go-arounds with her.”

I roll my eyes. And Sam laughingly shakes his head.

“Excuse me,” chirps out a high-pitched voice from the other corner of the room. “Would you guys mind giving the lewd talk a bit of a rest? I just had dinner.”

The voice, of course, belongs to Mary Sue Hart, or, as most of the guys in the office like to refer to her, “The Nun.”

“Aw, I’m sorry, Mary Sue,” Mick coos sarcastically. “What did you have for dinner? A microwaveable Jesus Wafer?”

Mary Sue scowls, and puts on her headphones, clearly having found Mick’s comment too juvenile to merit a response.

Mick chuckles, as he props his feet up on his desk, “I thought she was going to tell me to go to Hell,” he muses. “Then, I realized she probably figures we are all destined to end up there, anyway.”

I turn my attention back to Sam. “So, when you texted me before, you said you were working on something good. Care to share?” I ask, as I casually begin to click through my e-mails.

Sam’s eyes light up, like he’s been waiting all day for me to ask him this question. “OK. Here it is. My new client is . . . *wait for it* . . . Jim McNestor.”

“Jim McNestor,” I say incredulously. “As in . . . *Virtuosity’s* founder, Jim McNestor? As in, the guy who’s company ate Facebook, Jim McNestor?”

“The very same,” he says, with a confident half bow. “Come on, admit it, you’re a little jealous of me right now.”

“Screw *a little*. I’m *a lot* jealous of you,” I reply, leaning over to slap Sam congenially on his thigh. “What exactly does he want you to do? Take down one of his competitors?”

“Ahhh, see *this* is where it gets weird,” explains Sam. “He actually wants me to humiliate this guy Ben Redman, who used to bully him, back in high school.”

I look up, thoughtfully, tapping my forefinger against my lower lip. “I don’t think that’s so weird,” I reply.

“I don’t know. I mean the guy became a billionaire at age 25. He’s dating some model. He has over two million followers on Twitter. Why would he still care about some dude who was mean to him almost ten years ago?”

I look at Sam pointedly. “High school can be *seriously* scarring,” I note. “You don’t get it, because you were probably Mr. Popularity, when you were there.”

Sam juts out his lower lip, feigning insult. “I was *not* Mr. Popularity,” he retorts.

I narrow my eyes at my friend, fold my arms across my chest, and wait . . .

“OK . . . so I may have been Prom King, and played a few varsity sports. It doesn’t mean anything,” Sam argues futilely.

I scoff. “Are you kidding? In high school? It means everything! A rich, good-looking, guy like you? They probably built a plaque in your honor, after you graduated.”

“You think I’m good looking?” Sam asks with a wink.

I smile and roll my eyes at him. “What I’m saying is, you have *no idea* what it was like to be an unpopular, bullied, kid in high school. That kind of pain doesn’t disappear, just because you aren’t there anymore. It sticks with you.”

Sam shrugs, still unconvinced. Then, he gives me this sort of sideways look. “Who were *you* in high school?” He asks, with a sly smile.

I shrug my shoulders. “I was the girl who sat behind you in English for four years. And yet, she was so utterly forgettable that you still didn’t even know she went to your school.”

“But we grew up in two completely different towns. You couldn’t have gone to my school,” Sam jokes.

I glare at him. “You know what I *mean*,” I insist.

Sam nods and rises from my desk. But before he leaves, he turns back to face me. “Just so you know, Weaver. If you were sitting behind me in English class for four years, I would definitely remember.”

I have to turn back to my computer quickly, so he doesn’t see me blush. *No wonder Sam was so popular in high school.* I think to myself, shaking my head. *He’s a TOTAL player . . .*

The buzz of the intercom on my telephone breaks me out of my reverie. “Hey Faye, would you mind stepping into my office for a minute? I have a new assignment for you,” says the voice emanating from the metal box in front of me.

“I’ll be right in, Dempsey,” I reply, rising from my chair.

As far as bosses go, Dempsey Bartlett -- KC, Inc.’s founder, CEO, and resident “Big Cheese” -- is pretty much as good as they come. He lets us keep our own hours, and doesn’t bug us too much about socializing in the office, provided all of our paperwork gets filed on time. Plus, last year, for Christmas, he bought us all iPods. Granted they were “refurbished” iPods, and mine broke about two weeks after got it. But it’s the thought that counts, right?

Dempsey seems kind of distracted by something on his computer. I have to knock twice on his door to get his attention. When he looks up at me, he seems to have momentarily forgotten why he called me in, in the first place. “Faye,” he says with a friendly, if slightly confused, grin, “Come in! Have a seat.”

As kind and generous as Dempsey is, he's still my boss. And I find I can never be entirely comfortable, while sitting in his office. I settle gingerly into one of his lounge chairs, and fold my hands in my lap, like an errant child, whose just been summoned by the Principal.

"Tell me something, Faye," Dempsey begins, looking up at me for the first time since I've entered his office. "What would you think about KC Inc. as a reality television show?"

Dempsey's such a generally jovial guy that sometimes it's hard to tell whether he's joking or serious. This is one of those times . . . "Um . . ." I begin gingerly. "I think it would be kind of ridiculous . . . sir."

"Why?" Dempsey asks, looking slightly insulted. (I guess he was serious after all.) "You don't think what you do for a living is interesting?"

"No, no! That's not it at all," I assure him nervously. *It's just that I think all reality shows are ridiculous.* "What I mean is, I think that kind of publicity could potentially . . . jeopardize *your business interests.*"

"Really," Dempsey muses, rubbing his chin contemplatively with his thumb and forefinger. "It's funny you should say that, because I was thinking a reality show could be just what this company needs to take it to the next level, financially. I mean, look at that *Cake Boss Guy*. He's got this tiny, sneeze-and-you'll-miss-it, shop in Northern New Jersey. But now, thanks to that show, thousands of folks wait on line for hours, just to get a bite of one of his cannolis."

I briefly entertain the idea that "get a bite of one of his cannolis" might have been a euphemism for something a little less "sweet." But, ultimately, I decide to let the notion drop. I figure that one awkward conversation with my boss is more than enough for one day.

"That's true," I admit. "But . . . remember that TV show Punk'd?"

"Yeah, absolutely," Dempsey says, perhaps with a bit more excitement than the pop culture reference merited. "That's the show where they played pranks on celebrities. It used be hosted by Ashton Kutcher. And then that Bieber kid took it over."

“Right,” I reply. “Well, if you recall, they had these like two or three guys and girls who were always responsible for performing the pranks. I mean, they’d dress them up in different wigs and costumes, but they were always the same people. And that was fine for season 1, before the episodes actually aired. But come season 2, it became pretty obvious that the celebrities were faking their reactions. Why? Because everyone recognized the pranksters.”

“I remember that,” Dempsey relents thoughtfully. “I think I see where you’re going with this.”

I lean forward in my seat, and take a deep breath, before continuing to speak. “Listen,” I begin pragmatically, “all I’m saying is that the success of your business depends on a certain amount of . . . anonymity for your employees. Something like a reality show? It might adversely affect that.”

Dempsey cracks his knuckles pointedly. “Faye, I appreciate your candor. You’ve given me a lot to think about. And I will certainly take your suggestions under advisement,” he offers.

“Thank you,” I say, already rising from my seat. “Um, is that all?”

Dempsey chuckles gregariously. “No, no! I’m sorry. That’s actually not the reason I called you in here. I wanted to give you your next assignment.”

“Oh,” I reply, breathing a sigh of relief, as I settle back into the chair, eager to return to a more comfortable topic of conversation. “Of course.”

“How much do you know about Hannah Marrow?” Dempsey inquires, as he leans forward to hand me a folder.

“That’s the young woman who was killed in her apartment, during a botched robbery,” I answer, having remembered seeing the story on the news a few days ago. “They recently caught the guy who did it, didn’t they?”

“They did,” Dempsey confirms, looking impressed with my knowledge of local news. “He’s still waiting to stand trial. Anyway, her father came to the office to meet me this morning.”

I'm not surprised. Family members whose loved ones are victims of homicide often come to KC Inc. seeking justice. "Did you explain to him that we . . ." I begin.

"Don't kill people?" Dempsey finishes my sentence for me. "Yeah, I made that pretty clear. But he still insisted on paying our full retainer, and scheduling a consultation. I'd like you to meet with him tomorrow morning."

I bite my lower lip uncomfortably. "Listen, Dempsey, I can't even imagine the complex range of emotions this man is experiencing right now. And my heart goes out to him, it *really* does. I'm just not sure I'm going to be able to help him."

Dempsey rises from his seat, and begins to take a leisurely stroll around the confines of his office, as he speaks. "Faye, you know that this job is not only about effecting justice. It's about offering people *closure*, and helping them to begin the healing process. Sometimes that entails elaborate schemes of vengeance. Other times it just means being a good listener."

"OK," I reply, trying to hide my uncertainty, as I head toward the door. "I'll make the appointment."

"Good," Dempsey says, patting me gently on the back. "I knew I could count on you."

I contemplate leaving without saying anything else. But, in the end, I just can't resist. "Dempsey," I inquire. "Why me?"

Dempsey smiles. "Because, Faye, you're the most empathetic Karma Cop I've got. It's why I assign you all those Revenge Sex cases you hate so much . . ."

"Empathy," I reply with a grin. "Remind me to get that turned off."

When I emerge from Dempsey's office, I hear shouts coming from the back corner of the room. "Don't fuck with me, Sam. I know you did this," Mick growls, his jaw clenched in a firm hard line, his hands curled into fists.

"Dude, I swear I had nothing to do with it," Sam exclaims, his hands raised in a placatory gesture.

“You think everything’ a big fucking joke, don’t you Rochester?”

“Mick, I’m telling you, I didn’t . . .” Sam pleads.

“Hey, hey,” I interrupt, stepping in between the two men. “Would someone please tell me what the Hell is going on?”

“Why don’t you ask your *boyfriend*?” Mick seethes, as he shoves a piece of paper into my chest, and storms out of the office, knocking over a desk chair, in his wake.

I un-crumple the piece of paper, and examine it carefully. It contains a message, written with a mixture of magazine cut outs, and what appears to be human blood. Pasted to the bottom of the page is a picture I can only assume is of Mick, when he was about ten years old. The photograph has been shot through with a bullet, leaving a sizeable hole, right where young Mick’s forehead used to be. The message on the letter reads as follows:

Karma may be a bitch, Mick. But you’re a dead man!

Want more *Comeuppance*? Pick up your copy today at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

