

The First Two Pages: “Can’t Buy Me Love” by Vaseem Khan

From *Happiness Is a Warm Gun*:

Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of the Beatles,

edited by Josh Pachter (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Vaseem Khan

I’m a Brit, of a particular age, so the Beatles are part and parcel of the cultural DNA injected into my chromosomes during the long climb towards adulthood. I’m not quite old enough to have witnessed the hippy revolution (thankfully!—the idea of being seen in public in purple velvet flared trousers brings me out in a cold sweat), but having discovered in myself a teenage affinity for “olden day” music—think doo-wop, Sam Cooke, Elvis—I became a devoted fan of the Fab Foursome well before my twenties had drawn to a close.

So when Josh Pachter approached me to ask if I’d like to pen a story based on a Beatles song, I responded with the bear-like eagerness the aforementioned Elvis might have shown if offered a peanut-butter-and-bacon sandwich.

The story itself was whispered into my ear by the song “Can’t Buy Me Love.”

I have a professional interest in modern crimes. For the past seventeen years I’ve worked at University College London’s Dept of Security and Crime Science, managing research projects that seek to tackle the activities of latter-day criminals. The rise of cyber-crime has been relentless, enabled by our high-tech, hyper-connected Brave New World.

But the old truism is still valid—the weakest link in the chain is the human.

Romance scams rely on our vulnerability, our all too human desire for companionship, affection, love, and our willingness to trust when someone holds out those cards to us. A certain school of thought suggests that with so much publicly available information concerning such skullduggery, we should be warier. But the truth is that we never learn, as the opening to my story indicates.

It's amazing how stupid people can be. You'd think that with the endless warnings, the conveyor belt of online dupes you hear about on the news, they'd be aware—or at least attuned to the possibility that they're being scammed.

But that's human nature for you. We're a trusting species. We live in hope—and hope, they say, makes fools of us all.

But my tale is more than a salutary lesson. It's about a conman and his victims and the consequences of our actions. You might call it a revenge story—there's a certain savage sweetness to the denouement—but it's more than that.

I've always been intrigued by crime fiction that explores the moral fallibility of humankind, that “humanises” criminals—in the sense of painting them as real people (rather than caricatures of evil), with motivations that are sometimes clear, sometimes ambiguous. It's why I'm a fan of shows such as *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*. Evil perpetrated by “ordinary” people, in oftentimes extraordinary environments.

The mountebank at the heart of *my* tale is an ordinary man, albeit one with a particular set of skills and a clinical clarity to the method he employs in pursuit of his crimes.

I'm a professional conman. There are, of course, those in my line of work who take things too far, get greedy, make silly mistakes. But there are rarely second chances in this business. When you fall, you fall hard. Some never get up again.

That's why I've always been careful. Every mark vetted, every step measured. I have a tried and trusted formula, and I don't deviate from it.

The most important lesson I've learned?

Always be ready to walk away.

Victims too play a large part in my story, and I make no bones in how I depict them. Victims can be stupid, or intelligent, or any shade in between. Any one of us—in the right circumstances—can fall prey to the scam artist, to the smooth-talker, to the well-executed con. But romance scams are more egregious than most, in that they target those who might be nursing that most corrosive of human hurts—loneliness.

It's the elderly, the lonely, the destitute who tend to fall into my net. Those for whom the Internet is still an enticing world of stimulation and opportunity.

Men are far more common than women. The widowers, and the ones whose wives have walked out on them, slamming the door, screeching off in the family sedan, one final kick in the nuts. Once they pick themselves up off the floor, they get a second wind.

This time, they promise themselves, I won't make the same mistakes. This time I'll be in charge. I'll control the script.

And here is where the rubber meets the road, where the world of modern tech meets our all-too human frailties. As I explain in my tale, this type of crime

is increasingly enabled by the advent of the Internet, and social media, and online communities, and now, artificial intelligence-enabled fakery. When these elements coincide, the scene is set for all manner of subterfuge.

I can pretend to be anyone. If there's one skill I have, it's the ability to inhabit the skin of my avatars. Tall, short, black, white, long hair, short hair, dressed like a nun . . . I can be anything they want me to be. Their darkest desires, their hidden fantasies made flesh.

Ah, the wonders of modern technology.

The technical term is “deep fakes.” But to those of us who wield the wand—the wizards behind the curtain—it's just code. Lines and lines of code.

And finally, the motivations of criminals—and their victims—have always fascinated me. I studied economics at undergraduate level. One of the things one learns post-Economics 101—i.e. out in the real world—is that most individuals are not “rational actors” as defined by classical behavioral theory. We do not act in ways that should be (relatively) easy to predict based on “optimal” courses of action. This applies equally to victims of crime and to those who commit crime.

In a sense, the victims of romance scams often aid in their own downfall—and, no, I am by no means victim-blaming!—by acting in non-rational ways, often ignoring that tinny alarm bell sounding at the back of their heads, in favor of the siren song of the heart, triggered by a pleasing (fake) photograph, a romantic story, and that most heady of scents: the belief that someone out there, in this big old—and often cold—world of ours, might desire us.

Besides, half the work is done by the mark. They want me to be real. They need me to be real. I am the answer to their prayers. I am exactly what the doctor ordered, the balm for their broken hearts.

Why do I do it? It's not as simple as you might think.

Like the Beatles sang, I don't care too much for money. In my case, it's the thrill of the chase that gets me off.

Cruel and unusual punishment? For the simple crime of trusting? Yes.

Sadly, that is the world we live in. Trusting in others *can* be punished. And, unlike in my story, it is very rarely the case that these faceless monsters of the deep are brought to book for their dark deeds. In the real world, cyber-criminals more often than not get away with it, to cast their dark spells over others.

So, beware, dear readers. Arm yourselves with awareness, information, anti-viruses, and safety protocols. Safe surfing!

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Vaseem Khan is the author of two award-winning crime series set in India, the Baby Ganesh Agency series set in modern Mumbai, and the Malabar House historical crime novels set in 1950s Bombay. His first book, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, was selected by the *Sunday Times* as one of the 40 best crime novels published 2015-2020, and is translated into 17 languages. In 2021, *Midnight at Malabar House* won the Crime Writers Association Historical Dagger. Vaseem was born in England, but spent a decade working in India. In 2023, Vaseem was elected the first non-white Chair of the 70-year-old UK Crime Writers Association.