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October 15, 1898

Another murder of the foulest kind was committed in the neighborhood of Whitechapel in the early hours of yesterday morning, but by whom and with what motive is at present a complete mystery.

At a quarter to 4 o'clock Police constable Neill, 97J, when in Buck's Row, Whitechapel, came upon the body of a woman lying on a part of the footway, and on stooping to raise her up in the belief that she was drunk he discovered that her throat was cut almost from ear to ear. She was dead but still warm. He procured assistance and at once sent to the station and for a doctor.

- London Times, September 1, 1888

The tattered copy of the London Times had arrived by post from San Francisco only a few days ago. I'd scarcely put it down since its arrival. I'd read it so many times that the paper had gone soft, like old cotton, and the words had emblazoned themselves upon my mind.

Most arresting of all was the single phrase ending the first paragraph, "... by whom and with what motive is at present a complete mystery."

For everyone else, that might be true, but not for me.

My hands trembled a little as I laid the clipping gently in the enameled tin jewelry box, where I had carefully organized a sheaf of articles by date. They were of varying lengths, and the paper quality ranged wildly, from thick expensive rag to paper so thin the light leaked through it. Some articles had cramped text, and others had wide set type spattered with spelling errors and lurid illustrations. They'd come from the street corners of London, New York, Montreal and Toronto, but all had arrived in my possession by way of Miss Rose Fish, a woman obsessed with collecting newsprint, who (according to her brother) was drowning in a sea of broadsheets. The generous and accommodating Rose had sent me twenty-three newspapers in total, and I had carefully snipped the articles that had caught my fancy to assemble my own, more precise collection. All manner of stories filled her tabloids and broadsheets, but I only cared for the ones detailing the rise and disappearance of Jack the Ripper. I especially cherished the ones describing the heinous crimes he'd inflicted upon the wayward women of Whitechapel, ten years ago. Anyone who opened this jewelry box would doubtlessly think me to be a girl obsessed, seized with a gloomy fascination for gore and terror, titillated by murders unsolved.

But they would be wrong. I took no pleasure in reading these words. They were shards of glass. As I read about the women who had been left to die in bloodied pieces in dark London alleys, each detail wormed its way deep into my brain. The lurid stories reduced them to featureless shapes with blunt words like 'whore' and 'prostitute' and 'unfortunate victim', and I could not bear that they been stripped of their humanity, so I committed their names to memory: Martha Tabram, Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, Mary Jane Kelly, Rose Mylett, Elizabeth Jackson.

More and more, on and on, woman after woman. I filled my mind

with them, tried to rebuild them from newspaper rumors and gossip. Maybe only five, maybe thirteen, maybe any number in between.

Or, I suspected with dread, maybe even more, and their names lost forever.

I kept a careful tally of each incident, each missing organ, each slice, gash, and stab, because Jack the Ripper was not a mystery to me. He was a monster, an obsession curdled by self-importance. He was a warning of the path where my own impulses might lead me.

He was my father.

A knock at the door broke my focus. I closed the lid and set the box on the bedside table, and through the wood slats came the puzzled voice of Mr. Fish.

“Lizzie?” he said, "I don't wish to intrude. Are you awake?"

“Yes, sir," I replied, "Please, do come in."

The door opened. He smiled to see me.

Mr. Harris Fish was not the sort of fellow to show happiness openly. The expression sat ghoulishly on his narrow features. He was a hawkish, peevish sort of man, possessing few friends and having no hobbies beyond his beloved island railway line. For the last week, he'd been discussing its future construction with agents of the provincial government, which meant that most afternoons, he disappeared in meetings, debates, and arguments; to the best of my knowledge, his ideas had met with fierce opposition from both sides of the legislative house, and the war had given him a spring in his step and a blazing fire in his bright brown eyes. He came from a long line of railway industrialists, and his brother had amassed a fortune in Australia constructing transportation networks, so I suppose the love of trains resided in his blood, spurred to a froth by fraternal competition. No one would dare call Mr. Fish 'friendly' or 'warm', but neither would they call him 'weak' nor 'easily discouraged'. He was churlish, contrite, and unforgiving of those he deemed as fools, and most of his neighbors knew to avoid him. As thin and unyielding as an iron rail spike, Mr. Fish used his sour demeanor and vast investments to fight battles with the tenacity of a pit dog.

But I was neither an adversary nor an ally in his railway battle, so

he didn't know what to do with me. He lingered in the doorway, unused to having a guest in his house. He'd never married and most people thought that was a blessing -- he'd make a most cantankerous husband. But, while he had only a few close friends, he possessed a very loyal staff, and during the last four weeks that I'd been living under his roof, it became clear that he preferred the company of his housekeeper to any wife or paramour. An unmarried elderly bachelor was often the topic of much speculation, but Mr. Fish didn't seem to give a fig what others thought, and I rather like that quality in a person.

I'd taken residence in one of the attic rooms of his grand James Bay mansion. The series of sparsely-decorated chambers had once been furnished for staff, and now served me quite comfortably. I had a private space with a wrought-iron bed, a full-length mirror, and a chest of four drawers that provided me with far more storage than I needed. A small window looked east over the garden and alley, and another offered a southward glimpse of the sea. At night the room could be quite cold and silent, but with a thick wool blanket and a clay pig warmed by the kitchen stove, I was very comfortable.

He spied the clipped newspapers on the bed and floor. "I've interrupted. You're pouring over the package from Rose. You carry the expression of a pensive scholar, Amaryllis, and your hands are black with printing ink."

I glanced to the remains of the paper, strips and squares scattered like streamers and confetti. "Your sister was very kind to send me these back issues, especially of the London Times. I must write a letter to thank her."

"Don't bother. It will only be lost in the piles of papers towering around her apartment," he huffed, "Really, I ought to thank you, Liz! Rose's hoarding has grown worse with age, but you've been kind enough to put her stacks of rubbish to good use. If my sister's trash aids your research on The London Match Girls' Strike, then so much the better!"

Ah, the match girls. I smiled and mustered my story before I spoke.

"I've learned a great deal, sir," I said. “The prohibition of white phosphorous has not yet come to pass, and those poor girls still work in atrocious conditions. Our work is not yet done!" I brandished my small fist. "I shall not be content until they’ve won their fight.”

Lifting the plight of the lower classes was a noble cause, taken up by many girls my age. It provided a perfect excuse.

“I dare say, the suffragettes are lucky to have you on their side, Lizzie,” he said as his face squished into an ungainly smirk. Then he waved one long hand in dismissal and said, "But, I didn't come to debate the atrocious living conditions of the poor. I came to tell you, you have a visitor."

"I do?"

"Indeed. And you will be very pleased to see who it is." Without waiting for my reply, he turned and descended the stairs, trusting that I would follow.

Because the attic was designed for the accommodation of servants, the rear stairway was steep and dark, and led directly to the kitchen on the first floor. With his long legs, Mr. Fish was able to descend them two at a time, and he reached the bottom long before I did.

I was still only half way down the case when I heard him say, “Here is your guest, Liz, right where I left him."

I thumped into the kitchen as Chen Shaozhu rose from the table.

To see him, my heart lifted from the shadows like a sparrow taking wing. His smile was a ray of sunlight slicing through my gloomy thoughts.

I hadn't seen Shao in five days. I tried not to count the passage of time; I knew he was busy working, building a place for himself in this city, establishing a business network that would provide him with much-needed security, but some things are difficult to ignore. His absence was like a sliver of wood in my thumb: persistent, uncomfortable, and relentless. Now that he stood before me in the sunny kitchen, my eyes ranged over every feature, every nuance, every movement, ravenous for the sight of him.

His plain grey suit had no adornment except for carved bone

buttons, but the simplicity of his clothes only accentuated the handsome features of his face. His blue-black hair had been cut short, except for one wayward lock that persisted in falling over his brow. Mischief sparkled in his eyes. When he smiled, I felt my pulse race.

"*Ni hao, Lei Zi*," he said.

"*Ni hao ma*," I replied, stumbling over the inflection. Up, or down? God's teeth, it was hard to remember!

To Mr. Fish, he said, “Good afternoon, sir. You’re well?”

The man scoffed. “Why waste time asking after my health, boy? We all know, you're here for her.” He lowered his voice theatrically. "And who can blame you? Liz is a far more attractive host than me."

"I certainly agree," said Shao.

Mr. Fish raised his head and yelled through the kitchen doors, into the parlor. "Jess, my girl? Be a dear and make enough tea for all. But I’ll take mine in the study." To me, he cast a wink. "The sun is shining full and bright upon the back porch, Liz. Best to enjoy it before the winter arrives." He strode out of the kitchen, leaving us together, rasping a chuckle under his breath.

Shao and I moved out to the porch. The rich October sunlight cast a honey-thick glow over the dry leaves of the oak trees, and a fresh sea breeze ruffled the last roses in the bowers. There wasn't much of summer left. The season wished to expel one last burst of sunshine before the cold rain arrived. I sat next to him on the top step, not so close to be improper, but I set my hand down next to his, close enough to feel the warmth from his skin. Oh, how I missed him! The mere presence of him made me giddy, and the rational part of my brain scolded my heart for being so ridiculous, romantic, simpering. I tried to stamp down the gallop of my pulse, but then I felt the touch of Shao's smallest finger against my own, and my blood was set racing again.

"How have you been?" he asked. He kept his voice low, but I heard a tension there, as if he was having trouble keeping his own happiness restrained.

"Well enough," I replied.

"You've been practicing your vocabulary?"

"A little," I replied. "But Xi laughs at my accent. I spend most of my time talking to myself in the mirror. Mr. Fish seems very amused by my efforts."

"He's a strange old fellow, isn't he."

"He's been very accommodating," I replied. "And Eddy's a wonderful cook. I think I'm gaining weight."

I saw clearly in his face that he didn't believe me. Mr. Fish's housekeeper, Edwina, was very skilled in the kitchen, that part was true, but I never had much of an appetite these days. Before Shao could press the issue, I said, "What about you? How've you been?"

"The rib still hurts."

"Let's see," I urged.

He faltered. "But the neighbors..."

We might not be able to show affection, but there were loopholes. I mustered up any sense of authority a 15-year-girl can hold, and scowled fiercely.

"I'm your physician, Mr. Chen," I reminded him, then added, "Sod the neighbors."

He chuckled as he removed his grey coat, turned his back to me, and lifted his white cotton shirt.

I ran my palms down the left side of his lean bare torso, where the fierce bruise in the shape of a boot had almost completely vanished. Shao flinched but said nothing. I felt the strong, well-defined muscles covering a brace of bones, each one straight and well-healed.

"Breath in," I instructed.

His rib cage rose evenly. He released his breath, wincing a little.

I let my touch linger, then helped him replace his shirt, but I was reluctant to hide away his handsome form. I ached to wrap my arms around him. I felt so few strong emotions that it was an agony to stifle these delicious desires. However, I leeched any passion from my voice and said, in a most scientific and scholarly way, "I think your pain may simply be the last of the healing process."

He settled back on the step before shaking his head in wonder

and frustration. "Three months!" he snapped. "It's been almost three months since..." The furious words snagged in his throat.

Since he'd been beaten at the hands of vengeful, hateful, spiteful men. I brought my head close to his.

"You're getting better," I reminded him. I ran my fingers over his hand, caressed the small bones of his wrist, let myself take delight in the touch of his skin. "Rib injuries take a long time to heal properly."

"*Pok gai*," he muttered through clenched teeth.

For the last two weeks, I'd barely seen him; his work at Mr. Lim's apothecary shop kept him too busy for social calls, if such a thing would even be allowed between him and me. Shao's infrequent visits to James Bay came in the form of deliveries to wealthy patrons, and when he could spare a moment, he'd drop by the house to see me. He seemed content, very happy with the job he'd secured. I suppose Mr. Lim recognized a valued employee when he saw one, and considered Shao to be an investment worth nurturing, rather than a slave to drive hard. The two of them ran a neat little shop on Herald street, and Shao spent almost every day in the bustling alleys and dens of Chinatown, where he could practice the arts of pharmacy in the company of men who respected him. He'd left English society behind, and after the beating he'd received at the hands of white miners, I couldn't blame him.

But he'd left me behind, too. The thought stung. I missed him terribly.

He straightened his white shirt, turning his gaze to me. "Liz, how are you, really?" he asked, and before I could craft a lie, he said, "You look terrible. You've got shadows under your eyes."

"Newspaper ink, I bet."

"You look like you haven't slept in days. You're as pale as custard."

I shrugged.

How could I tell him he was right – I hadn't slept, I didn't eat – without explaining to him why? Maybe it was better that our lives were drawing apart. With Shao engrossed in his own life, it meant I never had to tell him about mine.

"Have you heard from your father?"

I winced. “No.”

“He left for Europe last August!" he exclaimed, his eyebrows arching in surprise. "And not a single word to you?”

“I don’t wish to talk about it.”

“He’s abandoned you, Liz. *Zao gao*! Does he even know where you are?”

“Stop it,” I hissed.

Shao recoiled, only a fraction, but it was enough: I saw from the look on his face that my own expression had changed. The mask had fractured, the dark beast peeked out. I closed my eyes, willed the warmth of human emotion back into my features.

Since the events of last summer, I'd begun to suffer lapses in my composure, and I hated the flash of rage and sense of detachment that now rose quickly in moments of anger. I feared that those last minutes in my father's company had dredged something sinister from the depths of my soul. I was hardly eager to recognize it. I dared not name it. I felt as if confronting it was tantamount to giving it power, and I didn't want to lose control. With my eyes firmly shut, I struggled to suppress the rising dark -- I struggled to forget how good it had felt to plunge that knife into firm, living flesh.

I am not like him, I thought, banishing the memories to the basement of my soul. *I will never be like him.*

When I opened my eyes, Shao was watching me, concerned and perhaps a little afraid.

I took his hand in mine. “Please," I said quietly, "I don’t want to talk about it.”

We sat for a moment in awkward silence.

Then, Shao stood. He fidgeted, he faltered. “I should leave," he said, "Mr. Lim is expecting me back. I... I only wanted to know how you were doing.”

He didn’t look back as he walked down the stairs and across the lawn, towards the back gate leading to the alley. He’d crossed the garden path and was reaching out for the latch when I called out, “Shao, I’m sorry.”

He paused, turned.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

"For what?"

For not being honest with you. For not telling you everything. For not admitting I killed my own father and dumped his body in the ocean. For lying again and again to you, never admitting you into my confidence, for not trusting you. For ripping your life apart and putting you in harm's way. For loving you.

For everything, really.

My throat hitched.

"I... I don't know."

He frowned, puzzled by my answer, then disappeared out the gate. I heard his footfalls on the hard clay of the alleyway, disappearing towards the harbor.

A light step in the kitchen door caught my ear. I looked up to see Jess, standing in the doorway, holding a silver tray.

She looked much younger than her twenty years, with soft, rounded features and wide-set eyes. There were very few negro people in Victoria, and the complexion of her skin set her apart from other women her age, but I think Jess' childlike face was more arresting than any other difference that divided us. Her body showed every clue that she was older than me, taller and shapely and womanly, but her face seemed so much younger and girlish than mine.

"Um, miss?" said Jess in her soft, timid voice, "Would you still like your tea?"

"No thanks."

She hesitated. Jess only spoke after great thought, and she rarely did anything impulsive. Rarer still was speaking her mind, or telling someone what to do.

"I think you ought to have something to eat, miss," she insisted. "I've made you an egg salad sandwich."

"I'm really not hungry—"

"You're heartsick, miss, nothing more. He's a lovely boy, but he ain't your type, and this heartsickness, it'll pass." She laid the blue-and-white china plate next to me on the step. "Trust me, I been

through it myself." She smiled warmly, and her voice adopted a motherly tone. "Now, I shall not interrupt you as you eat, but I'll be watching you from the kitchen window, miss, and I'll know if you throw it to the birds."

I scrubbed one hand over my face, feeling hollow inside. "Thank you, Jess."

"There's a sing-along at the theatre tonight. You're coming with me."

"I'm not really the musical type —"

"Of course you ain't, miss," she agreed, "You're the type to lock yourself in an attic and turn your back on the people who wish to drag you into the light." She set a cup of tea alongside the sandwich. "I've told Mrs. Thornton to expect us. We'll leave by 6:30, the show begins at seven. We'll be taking the trolley, and Mr. Fish said he'll pay our fare." She gave me a pert smile to show that she would accept no refusal, and before I could protest further, she left.

Her soft, steely resolve brought a small smile to my own lips, and I begrudgingly took a bite of the sandwich. A quick glance at the window showed that yes, she was watching, so I nodded in thanks and continued to eat. I did like Jess, very much; I wonder if she would've allowed me to not like her? She was headstrong in a quiet way, so that she could steer a person's opinion without them even noticing, and she kindly guided Mr. Fish to compromises when her fusty employer and her mother would have otherwise argued. Jess was a soothing spring breeze, and I had liked her since the first moment I met her, on a sunny afternoon in mid-September, only four weeks ago.