

CHIMERAS

For him the walls would always be covered with blood. The blood of innocents never quite rubs away. This innocent would not be hell bound or suicide-level restrained, in spite of the slashed wrists and patient collection of her own sample in the coral and pistachio-toned bathtub. Porcelain knobs, round and puffy, definitely from the fifties, and a smooth-as-porcelain mint green with a drop of coral tub. Complete with delicate, ornate, feet.

Her parents had money, and they spent it on their best chance.

She was not their best chance, actually; they would never use so crass a term to describe their only daughter. It was just that she was so well behaved, so obedient, eyes always downcast, even as the 21st century dawned. You cannot breed the submission out of them, a wise and knowing judge insisted, but he had not counted on the wire-snap of Ms. Lucretia.

To steal a little, Ms. Lucretia was the daughter of That Emily. You know, "A Rose for Emily?" The body may have been decayed dust and the dent in the pillow beside it faint, but Ms. Emily kept those shades drawn for a reason. She knew when and how to hide a pregnancy and steal away a child. Lucretia was born in secret without a scream on either side, mother or child, and when Ms. Lucretia found out that all her mother wanted was for her passion, her love, her breath to go on--well, Ms. Lucretia drew herself in real tight. Horses knew no reins like the ones Ms. Lucretia created for herself, but that was after years of trying. Years.

Years of wanting to understand this mother she could only visit on certain Sundays, whom she could not even blink at in church--when she was allowed to attend that church--a mother whose home was all dust and ashes and preservation of some mystery she eventually was horrified to understand.

And so she waited.

She waited for those who were as she had been. Quiet. Submissive. "Never spoke above a huff." She waited for them. Chose the string. The particular piece of wire. Plucked it, tuned it, stretched and honed it. Then, when the target least expected, snapped it like a twig.

Miss Vivian tried to be typical. To fit in. That was how and why he smelled her blood, knew he'd failed. He was on the hunt

now, but he'd need help. Ms. Lucretia was no sole man's task. He needed more than a male shapeshifter's knowledge of the female body; he needed a woman like himself. One foe he knew; the ally was still in question. He stood at the lunchroom door and watched. Nothing. Not a whisper. No glimpse of white, flutter of wing. No vision drawing his eye to a corner.

Then, like a slow searing ache, eye strain. Oh to go to a real library and pour over ancient manuscripts with fanciful meticulous drawings that were stories in themselves and yet only the first letter of a chapter!

They would have nothing like that here. Nothing.

But up he went. He needed to at least be elevated, and not by his own power. That last job, and its loneliness, had worn him out.

It was a typical high school library, not even a very good high school. Good books here, others for slow readers, an elementary phonics set for the viewed as hopeless so they were, the particular shade of yellow stained wood that screamed "high school card catalog" even in the Library of Congress. It was everywhere, that damned yellow stain.

Except behind the desk. Behind the desk and slightly out of his field of vision there was, perceptible through thick but not opaque glass, a sliver of mint green dress. Long. Safely below the knee. Flat heels. Comfortable attractive shoes, brightly colored. He waited for the face. He had not waited for a face in centuries. She paused. Had he not been caught in his own suspense, he would have sensed her fear. She walked to the desk as one would to her doom. When she looked up at him, the customary words did not come.

He could not believe her beauty. She had yet to see a vision. But there he was.

What was new was the absence of nausea. She was literally struck dumb by his appearance. She knew immediately he was too handsome for her. A shorter, thicker, younger, more Hugh Grant handsome than Gregory Peck handsome. Not so earnest. Much more anal. Not an actor--though she found out later that acting was a dream from a first life. Old and deep scar. That's why the wise and knowing judge blinded her to his pain at first, for exactly seven months distilled into six days. She saw his beauty, the

kindness in his eyes, only later remembered the crestfallen spirit when she looked up at him in panic.

He reached forward and took her hand. The bolt of pain made her eyes fly open. Like the time she'd slipped and crashed elbow-first into a cement wall unaware that she'd also hit her head. The pain had been so intense she'd peed her pants, but her face remained immobile as she evaluated the degree of injury. She could move it, so no break. Nurse's daughter.

He took her other hand. The bolt of pain was someone else's, she knew he could not do it alone, she sensed the furtiveness that was his real soul, untouched for centuries but could wait, knew this young person, this Vivian, demanded both their attention, a female of whatever he was, and she knew that she was it.

Her kind at last.

Later he would test her. Again and again and again. Should she love him? Had he forgotten, in all his years of loneliness, how to love? She'd always fallen too easily. Always. And he was unfathomable, requiring of her instinct, acting on instinct. She'd never trusted her gut in love, never listened to it.

But that first touch: beyond the pain that was their mission, instant union. Who would believe her? Did he? He would never fess up. That centuries' old wound. Later. Later. Now it was the blood on the walls only they could see, and the soul in calculated torment that threatened the whole school.

Ms. Lucretia started an ordinary day. Eye of newt in her coffee, wolf bane in her muffin. Ate them slowly, with pleasure, deliberateness, on her finest everyday china. She denied herself nothing in terms of creature comforts except the obvious: husband, children, normal connections with people, a life of sweaty sheets, mussed hair, sated longing. All denied.

So she had her coffee and muffin, rinsed her plate, cup, saucer, spoon, knife; replaced the milk and butter in the refrigerator, planned her day. Fifth period was to be the high point. Fifth period she would explode Miss Vivian.

Were this a comical world, the idiosyncrasies of Ms. Lucretia and Miss Vivian would be of one seam. The difference lay in the lines drawn between and by, money and insanity. The

commonality of no time for love. Miss Vivian's parents loved her by having no time for her teenage years; they scrimped and saved and worked themselves to death for her college fund, first car, first house. She was to be a great catch and completely self-sufficient. The man who won her would have to win her heart first, then pass their acid test of whether he deserved a share of her money. They dreamed big for her, slaved for her future, but did not talk much to her.

She became latchkey with no latch. She had no idea what she was to receive.

She only knew that she was awakened with one call of her name at seven a.m. She had to be out of the shower at seven-twenty-five, out of the bathroom, dressed and fed by eight-fifteen. Lunch bag, book bag, and at the door by eight-twenty-five. Five minutes grace in case she was particularly scatterbrained one morning and left something upstairs. She worked hard at not being scatterbrained. The look of disappointment was too soul-crushing.

Dropped off in front of school 8:45 exactly, no time for carpools, then off they went to white-collar six-figure enslavement in Asian skin. They talked to each other at night, in whispers, hushed tones before sleep. In the morning they meditated before and after the disposal of their prize at school. Once she was safely on the school grounds, they prepared for the DMZ of their workdays.

Miss Vivian did not talk much as she had never learned the skill. Her last grandmother died, and happiness and conversation evaporated from the house like a faint scent pleasantly remembered. The skill, quite simply, atrophied. She did not know her parents loved her. She perfected the art of silence, staying out of the way, and observation. She was not training to be an artist or a tortured soul. Unaware, she was training for invisibility and inconsequence. The opposite of all her parents' dreams.

Only Ms. Lucretia saw.

His touch made her think of London rain. Never having seen the Thames, she felt the consistent persistent malignancy a London downpour could be. "Wet you through and through" would have new meaning. And as they ran off to sweep up Asian blood and rescue fragmented Vivian soul, she felt the rush of all she'd missed

as he held her hand: London rain, playing piano, voice lessons, jazz singing, his presence: body, soul, spirit, listening, rapt, at her back, awaiting her every word.

But what had he? And how would they find each other in the middle of the mission *this* time? It was all so confusing. Wanting him, feeling him, seeing him without eyes, his sudden presence, absence, the sense that he never really left her side after that first encounter in the library. Her new feet, trying to navigate so much, all this, *and* save Miss Vivian. Something had to give.

Fifth period dawned too quickly. Demolition days always passed in a rush of anticipation no matter how she tried to ice them down. Not quite adrenaline in her veins--something akin to freon. It could stoke an air conditioner or kill you.

She knew it would be today. Asian America one oh one. Miss Vivian would think she was prepared. Ms. Lucretia's lizard eyes always surprised her target right before the strike of the match, the push of the button, the click of the detonator.

"The Chinese railroad."

It was a statement. Confusion masked as puzzlement crossed a few faces.

Miss Vivian never felt the cold claw on her back.

"Is there a Chinese railroad here in the States?"

Blink. Lizard lids closed.

"Where are the internment camps for white Americans?"

Vivian didn't know whether to sweat or sit up very straight. She was smart, smart as a whip, and knew this was a cruel joke being played on many of her ancestors and herself, the only Asian in this particular environment.

Ms. Lucretia never looked at her. Not once.

"We've already discussed 'quarters' for former slave own--owners of the enslaved. Where are the prisons for American war criminals of Korea, Vietnam, Nagasaki?"

Vivian's expression never changed though the break of history, too much history, twisted, rushed in on her. Ancestors' versions of atrocities. White atrocities. Black atrocities. Yellow atrocities. Never red. Members of her family. Quiet. Silent. Clipping articles. Prop 187. Japanese apology. WWII reparation leads to further press for Japanese apology and Japanese money. Candles lit for Asian market imbalance. Money sent home. New

relatives off the boat each month. Silence. Clippings. Scrapbooks of memories. Pieces of minds. A fragmentation, she realized, within her own home. She did not know the people in her own home. Strangers. They worked, fed her, waited for her report cards, nodded or smiled. Hid their exhaustion. Murmured behind bedroom walls.

But Ms. Lucretia was twisting the truth back onto the victims, and she the only Asian here. All her ancestors rushing in on her to speak. Crowding her mouth. She gagged. What was she trying to say? Caww – caught in a lie--that was it. Ms. Lucretia was lying, again. Ms. Lucretia twisted a lot of things, she realized now. Nose to the grindstone, she'd thought it was to make them think, to test them.

Today she saw the lizard eyes clearly.

She gathered her books, papers, secret candies, pencils, penbox, prepared to leave forever. She stood.

"Liar."

The other students gasped, looking from Vivian to Ms. Lucretia, and back again. Miss Vivian tossed her long black hair over her shoulder, filled her arms with her belongings and exited while Ms. Lucretia mentally calculated the ramifications of a next move.

Meanwhile, Miss Vivian was in the midst of a new freedom. She walked out of the door, ancestors clamoring in her ears, shouting orders, shouting bravo, eliciting instructions. She was furious, happy. Keeping up had kept her voices down. But with one stroke the school and Ms. Lucretia had been stripped of stripes, left back. She was on her own now. Where would she go? The cacophony was getting a little taxing.

Home, of course. It was the middle of the day. If a latchkey kid couldn't go home, where could she go? She didn't think during the furious pace she maintained on that last walk home from school, but when she reached her front door, she walked in and wanted a vein. So many. Japanese Korean Filipino White Red Samoan Hawaiian; the majors. No Chinese, strangely. She would have to swim through them, but they were taller, stiller, so hungry, so expectant, *waiting for her*. She just wanted a quiet bath, to think, to wash the school out of her hair.

She shouldn't have thought. Still standing at the front door she felt it close behind her, her mind envisioning a closed

bathroom door. They panicked. Each felt their only chance for voice withdrawing, so shoving, pushing commenced, knives were drawn, wings ripped, limbs pulled then evaporated. Spirits hobbled, reached, fell. No sound. They had mouths, but did not speak.

Vivian ran. Ran as her ancestors had. Ran to a bathtub that reminded her of the one in *The Joy Luck Club* (film version) in which the precious baby boy had been washed. Her mother had bathed her in it. The last story told to her before she no longer needed stories. Schoolwork began to eat away at story time. Another demand. She plugged her ears. They were screaming, moaning, demanding, all in her ears and yet outside of her head there was silence. Only vision. Her books were thrown, dropped, slipped, "disappeared," and she slammed the bathroom door, turned its lock, shoved the ivory hamper in front of it, and flew to the tub furiously turning the hot water tap.

Clothes took off in every direction. Hair was freed, then flung down. She jumped in as if diving into an ocean, didn't feel the scald.

Waited.

The librarian had never felt so alone. He had left her with the dead body. No angels, no light; not even Andrew to escort the poor child home. She wasn't really a suicide; she had just wanted some peace and quiet.

The librarian wanted to tear with her teeth the soulless souls who had rushed in on this child. They should have known better! Infidels. But they were desperate, wounded, hungry, starved. A soul to retrieve from hell? She wasn't sure. He'd left her here. Alone. With the body.

It'd been a long time since she'd seen a dead body up close and personal. Brand new seventh grader fresh in her candy striper uniform. First day in ICU they saw how she reacted when somebody died, her calm curiosity, and the other wards had fought to get her.

Her struggle had been different, her history uncommon. Her first voice had been her grandmother's, and they had come one at a time, very peaceably, with no requests; only support, loving suggestions, pats on the back, "lie down" when she pushed herself too hard. She knew her grandparents, all three of them, were the

first guard and so they protected her, always had. She felt their love, even as sometimes, with her three decades of chronological age, she cried for their human presence.

Now a new entity.

Him.

They were somewhat alike, but different. He knew more, but needed her--maybe only for this assignment. And he was profoundly lonely, which he was afraid to tell her.

She looked at the body in the tub. Once a soon to be beautiful girl. Hair freed, she was stunning. She even had a dramatic way of lying in the tub, wrists linked, to collect her own small drops of blood. Tiny for thirteen, she had not bled much. It hadn't taken long. Once the soulless souls saw what they had done, they shuffled away. Heads down.

One of the wrists was still slightly pink. The blood finally coagulated. She touched, and then laid her hand there. What a warm pain, a soft pink pain, a depthless sorrow. No one had ever reached out to this far-too-quiet child, only the soulless ones who rushed her too quick. No one told her stories of the Moon Crone or She Who Created The First Council At The Beginning of the World or even asked her which ice cream she preferred. Her parents bought Neapolitan.

The pain was warm and pink and pleasant. It would neither lessen nor grow stronger. Eventually it would be drowned out by louder, red-hot pains. Pain similar to hers. But she had spoken out, had yelled, and when no one had believed her, she had quietly published and left town. Working in the library had let her be close to other screams, other versions of ignored truth, other stories weepingly told. She had thought these her only visions. And then, one day, him.

She pressed Miss Vivian's wrist harder and yes, wait, there was a hole in this pain through which she could see. He turned to her, surprised, not sure how she had gotten there. She realized he didn't know she wasn't fully there, only looking through a porthole with her eyes and ears. He turned back to Ms. Lucretia. Funny how he did not worry about her; just accepted, expected, her competence. She liked that.

She, too, turned to Ms. Lucretia, but the hate blinded her. The lizard eyes blinked in her direction, Ms. Lucretia's neck actually snapped as she turned her head, she was born of a dead man you

know, and the assault, the red bricks the librarian had so loved as a child flew at her head, stakes aimed at her eyes, she shrank, ran, threw back the girl's arm.

If the rigor mortis had not fought her, her human form would have slipped from the edge of the tub and she would have hit her head.

"Got you."

He was there, cradling her, checking for bumps and bruises. Later she remembered the worried look in his inner eye.

That memory, many cases later, was why she decided never to leave him.