

## Our Blessed Town

“Who would kill a child?” the whispers swirled through the snow-covered streets of the small town.

“He was such a solemn child,” muffled words echoed off cold brick walls, and circled round heavy kitchen tables. “Strange child. You know how orphans are. Him and her, both. Talented, yes, but strange. And now, only she remains.”

The mayor called for an assembly. His voice reverberated from the cracked plaster arches of the town’s modest church.

“The body of Rohan Lovelace was found early this morning, lying by his unfinished mural. His life was taken by another.”

Silence among the pews. None were startled. Cold winds and careful whispers travel swiftly.

“Rohan had been working day and night to finish our mural. In winter. I told him ‘Child, no ill if it’s not done in time,’ a boon for our town, our anniversary. Commissioned to our most talented artist, only fourteen years of age! That one of us can commit such cruelty is grave disgrace. How can we still say we are a blessed town?”

Assenting nods drifted towards the altar.

“I’ve sent word to the Viscount to deploy men of law. They will arrive once the roads are clear of snow.”

The pews exhaled quietly, it would be weeks before the Viscount’s men arrived.

“While we wait, Father Vernon has offered to look into the matter.”

The pews stirred, questioning. The priest was a new-comer. How could he be trusted?

“I promise to do my very best to find the sinner,” Father Vernon said.

“I’d like to aid,” a voice rose.

“Luisa?” the mayor asked.

“It is the murder of my own twin brother.”

The child must be in shock, the priest thought. Though she didn’t seem that way. She looked younger than her fourteen years, a waif of skin and bones. Yet she stood unwavering.

“Child, you cannot help,” the mayor said.

“Why not?” she asked, impassionately.

“You’re not an official of the law.”

“Neither is Father Vernon.”

No tongues clicked. She meant no offense, it was just her strange ways.

“As his sister, you aren’t impartial.”

“I am familiar with the method of evidence. If my help is of no good, it is certainly of no harm, and Father knows not the town.”

Kerchiefs and flat caps bobbed in dim agreement.

“I’ll take the night to consider your offer, Luisa,” said Father Vernon, relieving the mayor from a decision he did not wish to make.

#

Early the next day, Luisa appeared at the priest’s doorstep. He recalled what Sister Avery had told him about the twins, her wards. That they were solemn and determined children. That Luisa was uncannily bright, and learned. That Rohan was a savant. Since the age of four he’d been silently sketching with a God-gifted talent.

Luisa was but a child, but help would be needed. He invited her to accompany him, and the two paid a visit to old Widow Chambers, whose house was across the street from the mural.

“He began but two moons ago,” old Chambers told them when they arrived. “Here every day, in the wind, in the snow. From sunrise to dusk, with his little lantern. Free of fear up that ladder. A special child.”

“It was you who found him dead?” said the priest.

Nodding, she blew her nose, eyes red. “A hot cup of tea and my fresh-made biscuit every morning, I used to bring him. You know how he was, he just bowed his head.”

“My brother was a mute, but he understood everything said to him,” Luisa said to the priest..

“Yes he did, dearie,” Chambers patted Luisa’s shoulder. “I could always tell by his good eyes he was grateful. I saw him arrive early in the morning yesterday. Up he climbed to continue the paintwork. An hour later I stepped out to bring him the tea. Right away I saw the lantern knocked sideways on the ground. I knew some manner of thing was wrong. Then I saw his body,” she gave a great heave, “I dropped the tray, and ran to his side. In the snow, he was already dead.”

The three walked over towards the wall. The mural depicted a scene of summer days, of the town’s life. The market. People going to and fro. Familiar faces of townfolks, looking younger by a decade, perhaps more. A prominent figure featured. That of a lady in nobility fashions, her belly swollen with child, holding unto a wooden bar. Beneath it, the grey stone of unpainted wall. The woman’s face an empty oval still.

“He was close to done,” the widow said. “Mayor was here two days ago, to congratulate him on his splendid work. But now never to be finished...” she sobbed into her handkerchief.

Several large paint buckets were lying in disarray. One had spilled over, its contents made hard by the cold. A little mound covered with snow. The priest kneeled down and swept it, exposing a footprint cast into frozen red paint.

“Mind showing us your boots?” the child asked.

The soles were not the right match for size, nor pattern.

“Pity you would suspect an old widow,” they heard her mutter as they walked away.

“She had no reason to do it,” the priest said.

“None we know of. Yet we must inquire.”

#

The town doctor opened the door as they walked down the narrow path to his house.

“I have been expecting you, Father,” he said, giving Luisa a sore look. “This might not be for you, child.”

“I will persist.”

“As you wish,” he said and led both out the back, to a small unheated shed. Inside, on the table, was Rohan’s body. Luisa closed her eyes momentarily. When she opened them again, she stepped closer and looked at her dead brother’s corpse.

Rohan’s eyes were turned upwards. His face, usually calm, placid, even, was contorted in purple dread. Around his neck were red finger marks.

“What can you tell us of the killer?” Father Vernon asked.

“It’s no easy task strangling a strong lad, but see, he took a fall first,” the doctor pointed to marks around the elbows and knees. “They had pushed the ladder, most likely, and came upon him as he was recovering from the fall.”

“You say ‘them’.”

“It was more than one person,” he pointed at marks around the wrists and ankles.

“The thumb sizes are different. At least three, I’d say. Such cruelty. How will we be able to say we are a blessed town?”

Before leaving, Luisa asked the Doctor for a look at his boots. Then shook her head.

They walked back to the commons.

“Has anyone ever been violent towards Rohan?” the priest asked.

“Most left him be. Every place has a thug, even our blessed town. Trayver has been known to taunt Rohan, but his malice is not lethal.”

“Perhaps a mild jab had gone too far,” the priest suggested.

“If you’d like to ask, we’ll surely find him at the inn.”

“Let us head there. Tell me, child, why do you all say the town is blessed?”

“Do you know towns round these parts, Father? We are a blessed town. Here, to each a horse, a few highland cows, or a herd of long-horned sheep. To each a wide plot of land, no debt, no hunger, no tyranny from a castle lord. Other towns are not like that. We are indeed blessed.”

“Who is the lord in the castle on the hill?”

“None, for it stands empty. Lord, lady, and their boy and baby girl died by the hands of highway rogues, more than a decade past, on their annual trip to the Viscounty. We are a long way off, and the old Viscount has yet to announce a new lordship for us. It is a blessing. The deceased castle lord was a harsh and demanding man, they say. All before my time. The town put forward its own to govern public interests. Our mayor. Clergy as yourself hold the duty of keeping the Viscount informed, his tithe provided.”

“What of your last clergy, Father Titus?”

“He was full of knowledge. He often brought me to the abandoned castle’s library, to read the tomes. Said for lack of guiding parents, I shall inherit the greatest genius of the world to guide me. He passed away in the fall, at seventy years of age.”

“Who were your parents?”

“We were left, day-old, on the church steps by wanderers, Sister Avery said. She took mercy. Gave us shelter, and sustenance. Father Titus gave us scripture. To me, he gifted science, logic, and knowledge.”

“What of your brother?”

“He is special. Was,” she caught herself. “Never cried, never laughed, never said a word. But he took it all in, and if you gave him a thing to mark upon, and a tool for the marking, he could draw the most ravishing semblances. Incredibly lifelike. You saw for yourself. All from memory. Rohan had no imagination. He drew what he saw.”

“What of you? You have your own uniqueness, from what I can tell.”

“Father Titus said it is a blessed affliction from the Lord. My memory is iron-cast, I know not how to fear. I bow to no social order, unless it is full of sense, I embrace logic, and am a stranger to emotions. I cannot tell a lie.”

“An interesting assortment of character.”

“This is none of my choosing, it is how I was made.”

They arrived at the inn. Outside, a large lad of seventeen was tending to a dangerous looking horse, with harsh words and harsher whip snaps. Luisa pointed at him.

“Trayver,” Father Vernon had a strong voice in him, after all.

“What?”

“Step here, let the horse be.”

“It needs to be broke in.”

“Continue later. I have questions to ask.”

“We do.” Luisa added.

“Ask then, and be quick.”

“What were your whereabouts, early yesterday morning?”

“Up at my Pa’s barn, with the cows. As always.”

“Did you pass by Rohan’s mural?”

“That ugly thing? What for?”

“For some other form of horseplay, perhaps?”

“Don’t got what you mean. But I didn’t go there. Ask Ma, she walked into town with me after milking, got me some new boots, see here?”

The priest looked at Luisa. She shook her head.

“Where are the old ones?”

“Lost them playing Checkers with the boys the other night,” he said sheepishly, “Ma gave me a good beating, but said I could get new ones for an early holiday gift. Made me say my blessings too, be grateful we have coin and all. Also no sweet oatmeal for a week for me.”

“Who won the boots?”

“Don’t recall, but Almer asked for them. Gave me some chewing weed in exchange.”

“Almer? The innkeeper?”

“Only one I know.”

They entered the inn. Almer was seated on a stool, polishing a pair of boots.

“Good afternoon, Almer,” Father Vernon said.

“Father, child,” he nodded.

“Are these the boots from Checkers?”

“Trayver been yapping? Yes. They are.”

“Mind showing us the bottoms?”

Almer turned them around.

“These are freshly tarred,” Luisa said.

“True enough. Just this morning. I tar all my boots. Keeps the cold out,” Almer raised his foot showing them those he had on.

“What do you need another pair of boots for?” the priest asked.

“Why does anyone? Mine were getting old,” he pointed to a large tear on the side.

“Where were you, early morning yesterday?”

“Right here. That is, until Widow Chambers came round, hollering about Rohan. Terrible thing. Went to help her, fetched the mayor, helped Doc haul the stiff, all frozen up. No offense, child.”

“None taken,” Luisa said.

They asked him a few more questions, and left.

“He seems a likely suspect,” Father Vernon said.

“I don’t believe him and Rohan had mutualities. Rohan never socialized, or drank. As you yourself said, Father, Almer had no reason to do it. None we know of.”

“Yet we must inquire,” Father Vernon replied.

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In the evening, Sister Avery brought supper to his room.

“Sister, you are distraught,” he’d only known her a short time but she seemed ill at ease.

“He was like my own child, Father. I know I am not meant to mother, as Our Lord’s bride. Yet I cannot help but mourn.”

“Rest, and I will pray for you.”

He was not sure if it was the day’s toil but hers was not the motherly grief. She seemed as troubled as the rest of them, as guilty.

The next morning, the priest said, “We go to the castle, Luisa.”

“What for? There’s no townsfolk there to talk to.”

“For things I would like to know more of.”

The castle was cold and silent. The walls still featured grand images of the lord and lady. Father Vernon looked at them as if urging them to speak. He read at length through the ledgers, and went down the stairs, where he found smashed rows of coffers, standing empty. He climbed upstairs to the lord and lady’s bedroom. A boy’s room. A babe’s nursery.

Luisa followed him silently.

When they returned, he asked the mayor to summon all.

Father Vernon stood upon the small chancel as if to give his weekly teaching, of which he has had the chance to deliver near none.

“I came to your town just recently. Sent to replace your much beloved Father Titus. And now, this tragedy befell us. I will tell you this: I do not know who among you did the deed.”

The tension in the pews dissipated.

“But I know why.”

The whispers hissed.

“Perhaps the deed was done by the innkeeper, trusted man of few words. Perhaps by the mayor, who was first to understand the unfolding catastrophe. Or the ever watchful widow. It matters not. Here is what matters. That this you all knew of Rohan and Luisa Lovelace: he painted what he saw, she tells no lie.

“Perhaps the mayor was the one to note Rohan’s mural was a childhood scene, rendered in perfect recollection. The woman is the lady of the castle. It is no mere wooden bar she holds. Completed, it was to be a baby’s strolling bassinet. Rohan the baby, observing. Luisa was not a twin, but a younger sister, yet to be born.

“Why were the siblings not told they were noble heirs? For the same reason this town is blessed by riches. There was no deadly trip to the Viscount. There was a tyrant lord, and a township killed him and wife. You spared the toddler and infant. You put them under the care of Sister Avery and Father Titus.

“Every single one of you is a sinner. All are part of that first murder, for you all benefited what was in the castle’s coffers, and shared it amongst yourselves. It is no Lord’s blessing, but your own blood-smearred hands.

“And now you realized Rohan’s mural will show what he saw, what you all knew. Luisa would understand, for she knows the lady’s face from her castle visits. She knows her brother proclivities. Perhaps she may not care, for she is her own strangeness. But she would not tell a lie to a new priest, or a curious official. The blessing would have ended.

“I do not know which hands choked the lord and lady. I do not know which held down and strangled young Rohan, so that he could not complete the mural. But this I know: you are all to blame. Your town is an orphan child, let loose to run wild, bereft of morals. I condemn you all!”

The hushed voices grew louder throughout the sermon, to a roaring choir.

Then, quiet.

“Who would kill a child? Who would kill a man of the clergy?” the voices questioned, whispering once more.

“We would, if that is what is needed to keep our blessed town just so,” the voices answered. Satisfied with the reply, long arms reached out round Luisa and the priest, ready to leave the red finger marks.