

Tabitha

The night of the murder had a strange drawn-out quality, but the days that followed were worse: a subdued numbness set upon the Faculty that none of us could shake.

None had known the woman particularly well--although she had indeed brought us tea every mid-morning and fruit cakes in the evening. And now, of course, she was *dead*.

Was one of my fellows the murderer? Most of us had been present on the night that the murder occurred. And so we each played the night over and over in our minds: to whom we had spoken and at what times and we recounted these astonishingly dull details with astounding accuracy to the local constabulary.

As it went, none of us were arrested for the crime. And little by little the lounge once more began to fill up in the afternoons. Drinks and conversations were had (though we never spoke about *the murder*) and one afternoon the big oak door opened to reveal the arrival of a new tea lady to replace the one we had... lost.

Tabitha was both a little too young and a little too pretty to be competent at serving tea. But of course some of the men enjoyed trying to dazzle the young miss with the details of their latest experiments in which Tabitha, strangely enough, did not seem particularly interested.

Some of us felt sorry for her, but more than anything we were intimidated by her. Each of us scientists--men of books and learning--were frightfully inept (or so it seemed) at being in the company of a beautiful young woman.

We joked with the girl, but only a little. And we had all been shaken up by the police interviews such that we were, all of us, extremely eager to be seen "doing right" by the girl at every possible opportunity.

We fell over ourselves in our eagerness to pour our own cups of tea and we rushed to hold open the door any time Tabitha needed to pass through it. Most of all we tried to make certain that all of our interactions with her took place within view of our colleagues, such that none of us was ever alone with the girl for an extended period in case any unfortunate event (such as, for example, a murder) were to occur.

As such, to find oneself accidentally alone in the corridors with Tabitha gave rise to a peculiar sensation not unlike someone running their fingers gently across your scalp whilst simultaneously squeezing your stomach like an inexperienced bagpiper.

I remember the first time that it happened to me.

"Professor Fitzgerald," Tabitha said, looking up with wide brown eyes.

I fumbled with my papers. "Yes m'girl?"

"Professor Fitzgerald," she repeated. "You seem to be a *very important* man. May I ask what it is to which your studies pertain?"

I blinked, not once: but twice, because that was not what I had been expecting her to ask. Nor would I have been willing to hazard a guess.

"I, uh..." fumbled with my words. Perhaps if she looked away from me for a second I would be able to collect my thoughts and form a coherent sentence, but *she just kept staring*.

We laughed about it later, of course; my colleagues and I.

Alexander-in-Tweed slapped me on the back and he said:

"At least she's served us biscuits since, so none can claim you murdered her!"

"Can you believe that she actually asked about your research, as though she could possibly hope to understand such a thing?" chortled Old Nelson Red Nose.

"Now, now," said Alexander. "Just because she is beautiful doesn't mean she is stupid," and then he added: "She was sent to us by the nearby Finishing School as some sort of... punishment, was she not? Perhaps we could offer to put on classes for the other girls. Offer to broaden their understanding of the sciences, if you catch my drift."

"Foolishness," said Old Nelson. "That school teaches nothing but comportment and tea-pouring, and the girl has already proven to be inept at the latter. She would never understand the sort of work we do here--no woman would."

Science is the domain of great and powerful men such as me, I thought in Old Nelson's voice. That was, after all, what he was really saying.

"You'd have as much luck teaching a mouse to do mathematics," said Mortimer Longface.

"Or a tortoise to sing," said Old Nelson.

"A butterfly to swim," said Mortimer.

Doubtless they would have continued on with such stupidity for some time longer had I not interjected. I glanced across at Alexander and he looked back at me. He might have nodded, or I may have imagined it, but in any case I said:

"The boy is right."

Nelson and Mortimer both sat with their mouths open and their eyes twitching, as though daring me to continue speaking.

"Women have just as much right to an education as men. Perhaps they will even be able to bring some new thinking to the table. I propose we each draw up a selection of lectures on the fundamentals of our respective fields and invite the young ladies of the finishing school--and perhaps even their old schoolmarm--to attend."

Nelson and Mortimer looked flabbergasted; suddenly neither man could find the ability to speak. I would hear it from them later, no doubt. Across from me Alexander smiled and took a sip from his teacup.

Extended Ending

The evening was cold. Tabitha double-wrapped her scarf around her face and pressed on. She had wanted to ride a bicycle to the Facility, but the school marm had expressly forbidden it. “And besides, Tabitha, how are you supposed to wear a dress *and* ride a bicycle,”

That was the sort of limited thinking that Tabitha would frankly have expected more from the men at the facility, but she supposed that the old men would have been less than impressed if she started showing up wearing riding pants instead of her more... traditional garments.

Still the crisp air was pleasant enough in its way, she supposed. The deep dark blue of night crept in as she made her way between the fields and down the laneway that lead to the finishing school.

The lights of the school were blurry, magnified by the mist, the building looked unreal, Tabitha thought and the thought was satisfactory to her. It blazed fiercely beneath the cold sky.

Inside she was greeted by the school marm whose name was Agatha, but who coloured fiercely if you were ever to call her by it. No, her name was school marm, Tabitha reminded herself, at least until the specified time in the specified place.

But the specified time was indeed some way off yet, so Tabitha entered into the building and headed for the upstairs bedroom that she shared with Dilly in order to shrug off her wet clothes.

“There’s stew in the kitchen,” School Marm yelled after her. “Feed yourself,” and then the impressively robust woman stomped away. Tabitha smiled.

In their room, Dilly was studying and not up for conversation. Tabitha changed into a set of modest pajamas and then she went to the kitchen and served herself a bowl of stew and a chunk of crusty bread. She ate alone, her spoon clinking against the silence and she thought of the men at the Faculty.

They were stupid, she was forced to admit. Or... if not stupid than... ignorant. Certainly ignorant. That old Professor Fitzgerald who she had spoken to alone in the corridor was more polite than most and Alexander was friendly enough (she was almost certain that the younger Professor preferred the company of his own sex).

After dinner she retired to the front reading room, which was a good deal smaller than the reading room at the Faculty and contained a much more limited spread of books to read. Tabitha picked up a book about history without so much as glancing at the spine and sat upon a red ottoman with her legs crossed reading from a random page.

Outside was cold and still, such that when the clock struck nine it startled her awake. The last thing she remembered reading was something about a battle between the Romans and the Gauls. History usually fascinated her, but her time serving tea and cake was clearly taking its toll.

She left the book atop the ottoman (now the title could be seen clearly, it was Rigel's History of Civilisation, Vol. 3) and went to the mantelpiece. Arranged atop the mantle were dozens of animal figurines: felines and elephants and monkeys. One of these statues had a head that revolved and Tabitha did so, turning the head of a jackal so that it faced towards the wall.

There was no satisfying click as the head turned into the correct position, no tell-tale rumble, but Tabitha could tell at once that she'd performed the simple act correctly by the way the hairs on the back of her neck stood suddenly on end.

The cold night outside the window seemed indistinct now and from the road the finishing school would have barely been visible at all. A moment later, should an outsider have been watching, they might have seen it vanish completely (despite the fact, of course, that was impossible) as Tabitha lowered the lamp in the front room.

She stepped out into the passageway beyond the reading room and headed for a non-descript brown door that was usually locked but which had no keyhole. She turned the knob and stepped down into darkness: then light. Beyond the door was a curtain and through that curtain she had entered into a room of monitors and machines.

Another "student", Maisy, sat in a seat nearby, large headphones over her ears, listening intently and adjusting a dial on the radio-set in front of her every now and then. Tabitha waved to her, but Maisy was too-distracted to wave back. She ignored Tabitha and jotted something down on a notepad.

At the back of the room Agatha was smoking a cigarette. The smoke had nowhere to go and Tabitha winced. "Do you have to?"

"Well I can't smoke up there," said the School Marm with a shrug.

"Any news?"

Agatha snuffed out the cigarette in a dark green ashtray and called Maisy over. When it became apparent that Maisy was too involved in her listening to

"The man, Alexander, I believe he is *homosexual*," said Maisy as she placed the headphones down.

"My, what a scandal," said Tabitha, rolling her eyes.

"It is useful information," said Agatha. "That could be used against him, should it be necessary."

"And *should* it be necessary?" asked Tabitha.

Agatha grunted. "That all depends," she said.

“We have good news,” said Maisy. “From earlier tonight—I assume when it was on your way here—how was the walk, by the way? Is it cold out?”

Tabitha nodded. Agatha snorted and told her to get on with it.

“They’ve discussed inviting some of the girls to the Facility for lectures,” said Maisy.

“Why that’s... marvellous,” said Tabitha.

“I’d really prefer to stay on the radios...” said Maisy, turning white.

“I know you would, which is precisely why I’m sending you,” said Agatha. “It will be good to get you out of this box, it’s hard to breathe in here.”

“Maybe if you’d stop smoking those disgusting cigarettes,” said Tabitha. “You know you’re not *really* our school-marm, don’t you?”

“I may not be your school marm,” said Agatha, very slowly and deliberately stopping to take another cigarette from the packet in her dressing-gown. “But I am still your superior. Maisy, Dilly and Tabitha all three of you will attend to the Faculty tomorrow, Tabitha introduce them as your friends,”

“They *are* my friends,”

“There are no friends in spy-craft,” said Agatha, puffing out a voluminous cloud of smoke. It gave off a silvery sheen. Behind them one of the radios began crackling. Maisy almost fell over herself in order to thumb the switch that would silence it.

“What is it?” said Agatha.

“It’s a message from HQ,” Maisy was writing as she listened. A moment or two later and she was done, she held the note up for the others to read:

INVERSE T-WAVES DETECTED

MANIFOLD STORM IMMINENT

“We have to stop them,” said Tabitha. “And soon.”