

Happy Birthday, Dr Lucius

Dr Lucius was a scary man, but he was not the murderer.

This was unclear to his guests. He was the first to be found crouching beside the doctor, who had a knife wedged between his shoulder blades. The entire room stared at him in petrified silence, until the doctor's wife fell to his side with a long, loud cry - rather like that of a banshee. Everyone in the room stared at Dr Lucius, whose angular cheekbones and beady black eyes sank into his face with the jaundiced light.

The whole room took a wary step back in congregation. He looked back at us with a stony expression, tainted with guilt.

"It wasn't me," he said in a grave tone, the lights fittingly flickering and momentarily turning off. Nobody breathed. The wind heaved through the hall and let off a mild whistling sound, like a gentle scream. I felt a churning in my stomach, and my heart began to thump like a sledge hammer in my chest. I looked around myself. There was no evidence that Dr Lucius was the killer. Any one of the guests could be wielding a knife in their dinner jackets, and I wouldn't know until its blade was buried deep into my gut.

"Prove it!" a shaky Mr Devon exclaimed, shivering and standing in front of his wife in a feeble attempt to protect her.

"And how do you suggest I do that?" Perfectly in time with the end of his sentence, the lights switched off completely for a good two minutes. A tremendous cry rattled through my ears and shook me to the core. It was only natural for this to start a commotion. Small whimpers escaped the lips of those seeking to escape, but I feared they wouldn't make it past the doorway without having their throats sliced open.

The lights came back on as people began to reach the door.

Dr Lucius was dead.

That was enough evidence. The killer was still among us. And that killer was planning a bloodbath; the doors to the ballroom had been bolted shut. Nobody held back their cries when they hammered their fists against the great oak door, driven by panic and surging with adrenaline. The commotion was too much; I stood on a large windowsill and watched as terror-driven women lanced chairs at the door, and panic-stricken men threw their weight into the hinges. It was funny what fear did to them; not only half an hour ago they were standing about, politely gossiping and delicately sipping champagne. At this rate, the killer wouldn't have to do any of the killing. The chairs were rebounding off the door and knocking people out cold.

Like a plug had been pulled from the bottom of a bathtub, the people began to drain out of the hall. I scrambled towards the small oak door in the furthest corner of the room which had been pried open. Due to my meagre physique, I found no difficulty in squeezing past the frantic crowd, all scrambling for their lives. Many already lay in pools of their blood.

My sprint down the corridor was a blur. It was cold - I remember that much as vividly as if it were yesterday. The icy breath of death whipped my cheeks and stripped my arms of their warmth. There was no colour. No light. Nothing to guide myself. Nothing could save me.

There were screams. Loud cries like sirens in black waters. As I ran with my life at my feet, I felt the cold, jagged hand of something that could not possibly be human brush along my shoulder. A small cry left my mouth, but I wasn't aware of my own screams until its echo reached my ears. I saw only three faces, in progression. The first was that of the friar's, pale with terror and cracking into a long, soulless cry. And next I saw a pretty face with dark lipstick, slouched on the floor with no life in her eyes. The last face I saw before stumbling into the storm was a man with a kind face, falling heavily to his knees with the blade of a knife deep in his chest.

I didn't stop running until I reached the edge of the cliff. Before me, a fallen bridge. Behind me, I was too afraid to check.

My chest inflated and deflated aggressively as the realisation that I couldn't leave hit me harder than the belligerent wind. Trembling faster than I had ever seen anything move, I turned slowly to face the castle.

There was a trail of bloody bodies emerging from the small door at the foot of the castle. The body of Mrs Carson, my neighbour, lay at my feet with a scream engraved in her face. Her familiar eyes were gone. In their place were two gory holes. I couldn't find the power to let off so much as a

breath. I was not so much afraid that my neighbour had been brutally mutilated, more so that the killer had been no less than a metre from me only moments ago.

I was numb. My skin bore no colour and my fingers twitched uncontrollably. Each breath I took induced a sharp pain in my chest. I could no longer tell if my heart was still beating. I closed my eyes for an eternity, hoping and praying that I'd wake up from this sickly dream, at home and in my bed with the sound of my snoring father close by.

I opened my eyes and almost screamed.

In the doorway leading back into the castle there stood a crippled figure. An old man, clearly brandishing an immense knife.

He began long, slow strides towards me. Menacingly quick for a man of his figure. He waded through the tall, black grass and was hardly dissuaded from his task by the blistering wind. Only ten metres from me, he held his knife up, poised to kill. From then, I remember nothing but the wet grass brushing my cheeks and the snarl that erupted from the man's lips.

And yet here I sit, recounting my story to a young man with whom I share my hospital ward.