

# The Shawl-Requiem (Unsent Letters)

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*In my words shuffle madness sloughing their skin,*

*Of enslaved words in beds, above the din*

*Scudding and drifting in waking dreams*

*In seas raging*

*Seemingly seems*

*I had so much to say.*

J. Alfred, Head Servant

Dear Lady X,

That was her last lie.

It never used to be like this. Where once the hickory closet doors would have been left open, inviting the light from beyond the tall sash windows to weave around the swaying velvet curtains, allowing the screams of children in delight to emanate from the courtyard, they were now shut. Where once I was a fixture in her dining and sitting room, shown off to new guests, now I was confined behind closed doors. Where once I could see her in her entirety, I now bore witness only to her parts. I saw her wrist, her elbow, her shoulder—glimpses through the closet's slats.

Once, the light proudly illuminated the closet's collection of pheasant-feathered boas, mink-trimmed overcoats, and rows and rows of shoes that lined the closet: ballroom shoes; day shoes; and check-patterned saddle shoes; now there was only darkness. It was as if I were forgotten. Or no longer fashionable.

I am pinned, my forewings stretch to the brink against this wall, vying for attention in a closet for every occasion. I press against the murmuring walls, and hear the nearby sounds of doors opening and closing. The shadows beneath the door pause. The Baroness whispers to the maidservant, Anastasia X.

*Will she come for me?* Only the candlelight, like a secret, unopened letter slides under the door. The closet door is opening.

The doors open themselves up, revealing the slim, curved, porcelain legs and the red, padded, and tufted velvet armrests of the armchair—its delicate curves trimmed in gold. Reaching across the table, her slender, pale hands grip the handle of a pink, gilded hairbrush.

She is alone. She brushes her hair. Long strands fall beyond her bare collar bone and chest, straddling her pale meadow. A single mischievous lock circles her bosom's delicate white petal, and lays its head down in her lea, facing her blossom and her exposed cherry stamen.

There were times when I'd wished I did not care; when I'd wished that every time the door creaked open that my heart would not become unhinged from my chest, hoping that today I would be in her arms. When we first met, I had been resting behind the shop's counter, like a prized possession, the envy of all onlookers peering through the front display window who greeted all who entered.

She was different then. She gleamed while I looked up at her from the counter. She ran her fingers through my small, curly tassels, my wiry, laced edges ran along her nails and skin, curling through the

space between her palm and fingers. The tips stood on end, excited by her touch. She inspected me, stretching her arms wide, discovering and savouring every inch of me. She purposefully pulled me towards her neck—the place where I belonged. And then she stopped. *The first time should be special*, she must have thought.

I lie here waiting — readying myself to assume my place like a puzzle piece.

I see the sun rise and fall. Again. And again. And although days arise anew, they remain like the ones that had preceded it. Is this what I am consigned to? Does Love know nor past nor future? There is only the present? A state from which I can't escape? She is pacing outside the closet. *Talk to me. Talk to me. That's not what I meant at all. Open the door. Let me explain.*

Recently, one day was especially unbearable. As if emotions rose from the raging depths, I tried to suffocate every memory I ever had of her. I buried my face in the adjoining lace mittens, my lungs filling with her scent. I tried to erase her memory, but this achieved little more than inspiring a yelp.

It seems her scent is an ocean I repeatedly tread - where I bob indefinitely, endlessly choking for air.

I heard the shoes snicker, ridiculing me. It was easy for them; they had had their moments with her, their waltzes, their walks, their strolls on the beach, laced together and flung over her shoulder. They had their uses. And even if it were not for prolonged periods, their existence still served a purpose—she could wear the boots when the snow came, the boa during the fall masquerade. And me? I was just an accessory in her unexplored wardrobe, one of the things to be thrown on to hide her nakedness; things of no lasting consequence, left to find affection elsewhere. The flame that was once burnt bright between us when we first met, almost all but extinguished with the passing years.

At first, my closet counterparts had tried to understand; they had smiled genuinely, had listened attentively. To them it was curious; they all got to leave in varying degrees but I did not. I was never

removed to be dusted or inspected to see if my tassels had possibly frayed, requiring repair. I freely admit they did try to understand. They recounted similar stories, or stories that they thought were similar, evidence that it was common to be neglected – a happenstance from which no one was exempt.

Before her, I had been in a blissful sleep, fulfilling my duty against the shop wall. But she had awakened something. Something I had not felt in a long time. She had made me think—one might laugh at the thought of it, as it may come out all wrong; it always comes out all wrong with her—that I could be more to her than this shawl.

The fur boa was especially sweet. Playfully, she teased and tickled me, deliberate distractions designed to save me from the disappointment of not being taken out. She would always brush against me, to see if I were asleep. We would talk for hours when the others slept. Once, convinced that I dozed, she nestled close. I did not stir. I maintained my passive breathing, pretending I was unconscious. During another evening, the Baroness, as she had demonstrated so many times before, she placed the pink comb at her table, and her right hand had anointed her cheeks. She had stared at the mirror, and gently padded powder on her face as if she were administering a sacrament. With her ritual complete, she stepped away from her *altar* and left the room.

Late that night, while the others were asleep, she returned.

She shuffled in slowly. Her head drooped and her shoulders followed passively.

We were alone. But how could I say anything? She was sad. Uncoiling quietly, with neither a glance nor a word, she undressed carefully, lifting her left arm first, drawing out her gown from one side, before she completely snaked out of the dress. Hanging up her gown with care, she pulled down gently on the shoulders, so it rested evenly and unwrinkled on the hanger. Next she slid out of her girdle, folding it over her arms and placing it on the armchair just outside the closet. She pulled her

clinging stockings from her legs. They held on. *Don't let go*, I whispered to the stockings. And then with a snap, she released them, folded them meticulously, and returned them to the drawer just under me. Her forearm grazed my tiny hair.

The saddle shoes stirred from the noise. A single eye peeked from beneath the evening dress that hung above, and examined me. I remained still and stoic, giving the impression that I was unaffected, even though I longed for her touch. The shoe must have decided that the evening was already quite overwrought with sentiment for, after I had spent all my time inspecting the shoes with watchful eyes, I did not notice the lady had hung up all her remaining things, rather I bore witness to the indifferent shoe falling into a deep and peaceful sleep.

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The following evening, the *Baroness* opened the closet, and retrieved a neatly folded yellow roll of fabric. She unwrapped each corner carefully, her fingers pinching the fabric until a stack of papers and photographs were revealed. She walked over to her bed and sat down, her knees sticking out from beyond the closet's frame. She pulled the ribbon holding the uneven stack closer to her chest. She sat still, and her posture remaining the same.

Ostensibly, having found the strength, she leafed through the yellowed stack, and carefully sifted through it until she got to the middle—as if this were its true beginning. Quietly, she searched each paragraph until she paused at a particular passage. She whimpered softly. Behind her, on the window, the shadows of dripping rain cast a veil over her face. The stern panels segmented her features and drew lower, covering her quivering lips, but not the gentle weeping that escaped from her trembling mouth. The shadows of rain plopped atop the plaster ceiling like clumps of earth, covering the white panel. The darkness spread, further covering the room. Her posture was stiff and magnanimous, as she, masked by the pattering pane, coiled entirely into its pages.

There was a soft thud. On all fours, she fell to the floor weeping, her head beyond my view. I had something to say. But she was praying. She sought refuge. I was no scoundrel. Anything I had to say would have to wait.

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It is night time and from the closet, I see her pale reflection in the window - it is pale like an apparition. Her reflection wiggles and shakes its neon dress and unravels into the distant sea. Lights from the city flicker effortlessly, like streaking eyes shooting down the deserted retreats and shadow-filled streets - the multiple, luminescent eyes of a forest glaring and glimpsing at solitude's echoless step. But today I find that she is not alone. She is never alone. There is something I need to ask her.

I can see her reflection of alabaster arms and wrists stretched across the table, a statue muttering over the rising steam of her tea. Occasionally, I hear her male visitor. She flicks her hair – her waterfall of honey, brushing it out of her face - in this place - where her hair is honey and her lips are velvet petals— a supple velvet that changes shades when it is smoothed by another's lips. Soon her memory is like the din that rises from the tea cups and spoons; nothing more than the clattering whisper of a measured spoon. And I can no longer look into that formless reflection where the longing coils around my neck and wrists and ankles; the tightening snap that gently fetters me along, making me think that I am free, and then the pull and the tug when I stray to the fence, trying to see what is on the other side - to see what is beyond this twilight that wiggles and pulsates and shakes its dress, and unravels into the sea.

Once, through Fate's hands, she left in such a rush that she did not notice the closet door was left half-opened. This left the slightest of openings through which I could see the outside walls, almost like a secret gap between two curtains on a stage. Like a child, I held onto the tips of these flapping curtains and scrunched the fabric around my face, as if they were the tails of a buttoned petticoat.

She danced. She had just returned, having not yet undressed. Holding her hand slightly upwards, she twirled and glided as if she were skating on memory's clear and reflective surface. Prancing and floating with something invisible, something permanent, smiling at each step with her *special* dancing partner. And from pinched ruffles within the closet, I joined her. I mimicked her twirling and her spinning. I danced with her every step. I focused on the gleam in her eye—sharing in an unspoken happiness that I did not understand, but felt. Through the space I could see her in her entirety. In the past, my observations had seemed to be limited only to parts of her: her peach elbows; her cherry blossom, her left ankle; her right knee; a forearm; pursed lips; a single, welling eye. But now she was complete, a fragile being full of hope. Between her pirouettes, she noticed the open door. The magic ended with a single push, her body already turning away, giving the impression that her left hand's sole task was to thwart my view. I could see her glowing shadow as if it were dancing with the candlelight—defying the laws of nature. *Could I defy?* I continued to watch the dance through the horizontal slats, my imagination filling the gaps. But they were merely shadows - like shadows in a cave.

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Today is my chance. Summoned at last, I will tell her what I had always meant. *Will I find strength in the moment? Do I dare?* I am just a shawl, *designed* only to be draped around her neck and wrists, whether I ever do so or not. I am what I am. I am a shawl. Can I ever be more?

Anastasia X., her maidservant, dutifully led me outside the closet. My head flung back as I watched the inverted ceiling and closet, its occupants drifting farther away, as I bounced up and down with each of her steps. I could not distinguish any of their looks. Was the Boa happy or just sleepy? Were the saddle shoes thankful? Was the fur coat pleased, or simply turning its affection now towards the nightgown? And as I bounced against the servant's shoulders, and the room began to disappear, I could not help

taking a long look, keeping an inventory of the room—wondering if it would remain as it had been last—even though I knew I would not return in the same manner as I had left.

And there on the bridge at Arc's Pinnacle, the Baroness stood, her hair natant in the night sky, glistening like beach-marooned seaweed in night's dark ocean. The stars rippled; her alabaster arms flung around him; clinging tight, like new leggings.

The moonlight highlighted her hair, her strands a sheer fabric catching the twilight. And like a crescent moon, she hinged open, allowing the light to escape between their pressed bodies. Her arm extended out, entreating us to come closer. Having been provided a better vantage point, I could see that her male companion provided no proof, no features that suggested that he was any different from all the others—the others whose faces had quickly dissipated like the steam from the tea they had all shared once. He had that same far-off look when they embraced. If only I could thrash the lout! What was so different? He failed even to smile; surely she had confirmed if he indeed had teeth! But something was different. Today I had been summoned. Today, I had left the room. He whispered something in her ear as we were just steps away; she smiled the same smile I had seen that night we had danced. Maybe he was different. Should she know? Should I say something? If only I had the time. If only we were alone. Gently, I was transferred from Anastasia's hands to the Baroness'.

The Baroness had surely made her choice! As my body extended, and the moment approached, I stood paralyzed, my tassels extended excitedly towards her finger tips. I envisioned my silk caressing her peach elbows; my tips weaving through her blossom, my essence curling around her mermaid-like hair, my truest self exposed to her bare nape—to her naked self; contact with all the parts of her that had flashed before me in waking dreams; where I would wake crying, the words that I longed to say still on the tip of my Hypnagogic tongue: That I was more than the tassels she saw. More than the gleaming silk that had once attracted her. More than the intricate golden weave, stitched meticulously into the white



silk. I was a fragile shawl, loose threads, longing to hold her and for her to hold me and say the words that had eluded me for so long. And as she reached out, she turned away to capture his ill-timed question. I leapt into wind's gentle arms—enflamed and swept away.

I rested my head peacefully under the wind's calming song, rocking gently back and forth. Completely still, I was placed down on the chilly bed below, the current pulling me along. The water spread wide, cradling me, as I drifted under nature's indifferent breath. Maybe in death's cold caress, I would find the love I had so longed for. I could hear him comfort her, "I would find you a thousand just like it."

Anastasia, grabbed my arms tightly and immediately pulled me away from the bridge. I struggled to get away. I could feel the rage rise within me. Like a great venom, it coursed through my veins, causing my lips to curl, and my face to contort. My gaze widened. My eye balls extended from my skull in a mercurial frenzy as if a devil took hold of me - my boiling blood pressing against my skin. Like the teeth of a thousand vipers poking me teasingly, I scratched all over, chasing the pointed tips. A single stream of water flowed from my retina to my nostril. And as a pressure rose in my chest, so to did the words from my heart, words that would speak of my disappointment, words that described my feelings of neglect; words that cracked this glacier that had paralyzed me for far too long. Having shaken Anastasia's grip, I staggered towards the Baroness, the atrophy dissipating with each new step. And then, as if I were seized by a claw of ice, I stopped short of the Baroness, instead falling to a knee. She thought I was congratulating her. With a look of acceptance and completed duty, she accepted by resignation as I watched my gift to her claimed by the icy cold and dragged under the water.

I wondered if during tea, and clashing cups, she ever spoke of me? A comment in passing? A gentle memory? Or was I the punch line of the joke? I imagined our cup of tea. I sipped from that dream and what could have been. I could see the granules of sugar spread on the saucer; the steam rising from the lipstick-stained tea cup; her manicured fingers holding a scrunched kerchief.

And although I am in a new house and I serve a new Lady, If I could start all over, I would have told her everything. I would have held nothing back. I would have found a way. And that has made all the difference.

Your dutiful servant,

Alfred J.