

*Ipoh, Malaya*  
*Wednesday, June 3rd*

FORTY-FOUR IS AN UNLUCKY NUMBER FOR CHINESE. IT SOUNDS LIKE “die, definitely die,” and as a result, the number four and all its iterations are to be avoided. On that ill-fated day in June, I’d been working at my secret part-time job at the May Flower Dance Hall in Ipoh for exactly forty-four days.

My job was a secret because no respectable girl should be dancing with strangers, despite our services being advertised as “instructors.” As perhaps we were for most of our customers: nervous clerks and schoolboys who bought rolls of tickets to learn to foxtrot and waltz or do the *ronggeng*, that charming Malay dance. The rest were *buaya*, or crocodiles, as we called them. Toothy smilers whose wandering hands were only deterred by a sharp pinch.

I was never going to make much money if I kept slapping them off like this, but I hoped I wouldn’t need to for long. It was to pay a debt of forty Malayan dollars that my mother had incurred at a ruinously high interest rate. My real day job as a dressmaker’s apprentice wasn’t enough to repay the money, and my poor foolish mother couldn’t possibly come up with it by herself; she’d no luck at gambling.

If she’d only left statistics to me, things might have turned out better as I’m generally good at numbers. I say this, but without much pride. It’s a skill that hasn’t been very useful to me. If I were a boy, it would be a different matter, but my delight in working out probabilities when I was seven

years old was of no help to my mother, who'd just been widowed at the time. In the sad vacuum of my father's passing, I spent hours penciling numbers on scraps of paper. They were sensible and orderly, unlike the chaos our household had descended into. Despite that, my mother kept her sweet vague smile, the one that made her look like the Goddess of Mercy, though she was probably worrying what we'd eat for dinner. I loved her fiercely, though more about that later.

THE FIRST THING THE DANCE-HALL MAMA TOLD ME TO DO, WHEN I was hired, was to cut my hair. I'd spent years growing it out, after teasing from my stepbrother Shin about how I looked like a boy. Those two long braids, neatly tied with ribbons just as they'd been all the years I'd attended the Anglo-Chinese Girls' School, were a sweet symbol of femininity. I believed they covered up a multitude of sins, including the unladylike ability to calculate interest rates on the fly.

"No," the Mama said. "You can't work for me like that."

"But there are other girls with long hair," I pointed out.

"Yes, but not you."

She sent me to an alarming woman who snipped off my braids. They fell into my lap, heavy and almost alive. If Shin could see me, he'd die laughing. I bent my head as she clipped, the nape of my exposed neck frighteningly vulnerable. She cut bangs in front and when I raised my eyes, she smiled.

"Look beautiful," she said. "Look exactly like Louise Brooks."

Who was Louise Brooks anyway? Apparently, a silent movie star who was wildly popular a few years ago. I blushed. It was difficult to get used to the new fashion, in which flat-chested tomboys like me should suddenly become popular. Of course, being in Malaya and on the far outskirts of the Empire, we were sadly behind in style. British ladies who came East complained of being six to twelve months behind the London fashions. It was no surprise, then, that the craze for ballroom dancing and cropped hair was finally hitting Ipoh, when they'd been in full swing elsewhere for quite a while. I touched the shaved nape of my neck, afraid that I looked more like a boy than ever.

The Mama, shifting her large bulk practically, said, "You'll need a name. Preferably English. We'll call you Louise."

SO IT WAS AS LOUISE THAT I WAS DANCING THE TANGO THAT AFTERNOON of June third. Despite the faltering stock market, our bustling town of Ipoh was giddy with the rush of new buildings built on the wealth of tin and rubber exports. It was raining, an unusually heavy downpour for midafternoon. The sky turned the color of iron, and the electric light had to be switched on, much to the dismay of the management. Rain drummed loudly on the tin roof, which the bandleader, a little Goanese with a skinny moustache, tried his best to drown out.

The craze for Western dancing had led to the mushrooming of public dance halls on the outskirts of every town. Some were grand affairs, like the newly built Celestial Hotel, while others were no more than large sheds open to the tropical breeze. Professional dancers like myself were kept in a pen, as though we were chickens or sheep. The pen was a section of seats separated by a ribbon. Pretty girls sat there, each with a numbered paper rosette pinned to her breast. Bouncers ensured that nobody approached us unless they had a ticket, though it didn't stop some men from trying.

I was rather surprised that someone asked me to tango. I'd never learned it properly at Miss Lim's dancing school, where, as consolation for being forced to leave school by my stepfather, I'd been taught to waltz and, more daringly, foxtrot. The tango, however, wasn't taught. It was too risqué, although we'd all seen Rudolph Valentino dance it in black and white.

When I started at the May Flower, my friend Hui had said I'd better learn it.

"You look like a modern girl," she said. "You're bound to get requests."

Dear Hui. She was the one who taught me, the two of us staggering around like drunkards. Still, she tried her best.

"Well, perhaps nobody will ask," she said hopefully, after a sudden lurch almost brought us down.

Of course, she'd been wrong. I quickly learned that the kind of man

who requested the tango was usually a *buaya*, and the one on that ill-fated forty-fourth day was no exception.

HE WAS A SALESMAN, HE SAID. SPECIALIZING IN SCHOOL AND OFFICE supplies. Immediately, I recalled the crisp cardboard scent of my school notebooks. I'd loved school, but that door was closed to me now. All that remained was the idle chatter and heavy feet of this salesman who told me that stationery was a steady business to be in, though he could do better, he was sure of it.

"You have good skin." His breath smelled like garlicky Hainanese chicken rice. Not knowing what to say, I concentrated on my poor trampled feet. It was a hopeless situation, since the salesman seemed to think that the tango consisted of striking sudden and dramatic poses.

"I used to sell cosmetics." Too close again. "I know a lot about women's skin."

Leaning back, I increased the distance between us. As we made a turn, he jerked hard so that I staggered against him. I suspected he'd done it on purpose, but his hand made an involuntary movement towards his pocket, as though he was worried something might fall out.

"Do you know," he said, smiling, "that there are ways to keep a woman young and beautiful forever? With needles."

"Needles?" I asked, curious despite thinking this was one of the worst pickup lines I'd heard.

"In western Java, there are women who stick very fine gold needles into their faces. All the way in, till they can't be seen. It's witchcraft to prevent aging. I met a beautiful widow who'd buried five husbands, said to have twenty needles in her face. But she told me that you must remove them after death."

"Why?"

"The body must be made whole again when you die. Anything added must be removed, and anything missing replaced—otherwise your soul won't rest in peace." Enjoying my surprise, he went on to describe the rest of his trip in detail. Some people were talkers while others danced in

sweaty-palmed silence. On the whole, I preferred the talkers because they were absorbed in their own world and didn't pry into mine.

If my family discovered I was working here part-time, it would be a disaster. I shuddered to think of my stepfather's rage, my mother's tears, as she'd be bound to confess her mahjong debts to him. Then there was Shin, my stepbrother. Born on the same day as me, people used to ask if we were twins. He'd always been my ally, at least until recently. But Shin was gone now, having won a place to study medicine at the King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore, where native talent was being trained to combat the lack of doctors in Malaya. I'd been proud, because it was Shin and he'd always been clever, yet deeply envious because between the two of us, I'd scored higher marks at school. But there was no use thinking about what-ifs. Shin never answered my letters anymore.

The salesman was still talking. "Do you believe in luck?"

"What's there to believe?" I tried not to grimace as he trod heavily on my foot.

"You should, because I'm going to be very lucky." Grinning, he took yet another turn too sharply. From the corner of my eye, I noticed the Mama glaring at us. We were causing a scene on the dance floor, staggering around like this, and it was all very bad for business.

Gritting my teeth, I scrambled for balance as the salesman unleashed a dangerously low dip. Undignified, we teetered. Arms flailing, grabbing at clothes. His hand cupped my buttocks as he peered down my dress. I elbowed him, my other hand snagging in his pocket. Something small and light rolled into my palm as I snatched it away. It felt like a slim smooth cylinder. I hesitated, panting. I should put it back; if he saw that I'd taken something, he might accuse me of being a pickpocket. Some men liked to make trouble like that; it gave them a hold over a girl.

The salesman smiled shamelessly. "What's your name?"

Flustered, I gave him my real name, Ji Lin, instead of Louise. Worse and worse. At that instant, the music ended, and the salesman abruptly released me. His eyes were fixed beyond my shoulder as though he'd seen someone he recognized, and with a hurried start, he was gone.

As if to make up for the tango, the band launched into "Yes Sir, That's My Baby!" Couples rushed the dance floor as I walked back to my seat.

The object in my hand was burning like a brand. Surely he'd come back; he still had a roll of dance tickets. If I waited, I could return what I'd taken. Pretend he'd dropped it on the floor.

The smell of rain blew in through the open windows. Unnerved, I lifted the ribbon separating the dancers' seats from the floor and sat down, smoothing my skirt.

I opened my hand. As I'd guessed from the feel of it, it was a thin-walled cylinder made of glass. A specimen bottle, barely two inches long with a metal screw top. Something light rattled inside. I stifled a cry.

It was the top two joints of a dried, severed finger.