

✱ MARCH 1950 ✱

'All fish does bite but shark does get di blame'

WEST INDIAN PROVERB



# 1

The basement club spat Lawrie out into the dirty maze of Soho, a freezing mist settling over him like a damp jacket. He shivered and tightened his grip on the clarinet case in his right hand. He'd best hurry on home before the fog thickened into a 'pea-souper', as they called it round here. The hour was later than he'd have liked; the club had been packed and the manager always paid extra if the band stuck around, keeping the crowd drinking.

'Done for the night?' The doorman leaned against the wall by the entrance, waiting for the last stragglers to leave.

Lawrie nodded. He'd been invited to stop for a drink with the band after the last set but he had somewhere to be. The night's moonlighting had been a last-minute call out. He'd already arranged to take Evie out to the pictures but he needed the money and his name was just getting known around town: *Mr Reliable. Able to fit in with any band at short notice. Call Lawrie Matthews, he's your man; he'll play anything for a shilling or two.*

It might be after three in the morning, but the street was still open for trade. Across the road a couple of girls loitered, hardly dressed for the March weather, their legs bare and their jackets open. They sheltered in a shop doorway, huddled together as they

smoked. One of them called over to him but he pretended he hadn't heard. That sort of entertainment wasn't for him. A few minutes of pleasure taken in a dark piss-scented alleyway could not outweigh the guilt. This he knew.

Even back home in Jamaica, he'd never felt confident in himself, not like his older brother Bennie, but this city forced him even further inside himself. It was a chronic condition, like asthma or arthritis; he could go a day or so feeling perfectly normal and then just a word or a glance was enough to remind him that he didn't belong. He liked working the clubs because he could just play his clarinet and get lost in the music. His fellow musicians respected him; many of them even looked like him. He revelled in the applause that came when his name was shouted out and he stepped forward to give his small bow and a smile, just the right side of bashful. But as soon as he left the warmth of the club, things changed. People looked and decided what he was without knowing a single thing about him. Most of them were well-meaning. Somehow that was worse.

He walked swiftly down to Trafalgar Square, putting on a sprint as he saw his night bus approaching, leaping on the back just before it pulled away and clambering up the steps to the upper deck. He sat down, panting slightly through exertion and relief.

Settled, he looked out of the window at the desolate streets rolling by. The city appeared defeated beneath the weak glow of the late winter moon, which lazily cast its light down on the abandoned remnants of buildings that looked flimsy enough to blow over in the backdraught, if only the driver would put his foot down. Almost five years now since VE Day, almost two years

since Lawrie had landed at Tilbury, and the city was still too poor to clean itself up. Austerity they called it, as if giving it a name made it more acceptable to those struggling to make ends meet.

The double decker wound its lethargic way south of the river and Lawrie tried to stay awake. His eyes were heavy but the draught through the window kept him shivering enough that he didn't nod off. He'd be home just in time to change into his uniform and swallow down some breakfast before heading out again to his proper job.

Jumping off at the Town Hall stop in Brixton, the last passenger left on board, he tugged his scarf up over his chin to ward off a wind that felt like icy needles stabbing against his face. By the time he turned the corner of his street his face was already numb and his gloved hand felt stiff around the handle of the clarinet case. He wiggled his fingers and looked down, checking they were still there.

Home at last; a chip of grass green paint flaking away from the swollen wood of the gate as he swung it open, the rough edge catching his glove. He let himself in the front door, careful to close it quietly behind him. Everyone would still be asleep; he could hear Arthur's less than gentle snores through the thin wood of the door that led to what had been the front room before Mrs Ryan had to let it out for much needed cash. He silently pulled off his shoes and shrugged off his coat, hanging it up by the door, his trilby next to it.

Upstairs in his bedroom he stowed the clarinet safely away at the back of his wardrobe. He trusted his fellow residents well enough, but his mother had always preached that temptation could

befall the best of men. That stick of rosewood had been his father's before him. Irreplaceable. Maybe one day he would pass it on to a son or daughter himself. He'd dared to mention that dream to Evie only a few weeks ago, and her smile had given him hope.

It was a room that his mother would have been ashamed to offer her cook. Besides the wardrobe there was only space left for a narrow bed and just enough room on the floor for his friend Aston to sleep on when he was in town, which seemed to be less often in recent months. The small window, with a view from the back of the house, let in a little bit of light and a lot of draught. Lawrie had rolled up some newspaper and jammed it into the gap between the window and its frame, but that wasn't enough to stop the inside of the glass from frosting over.

His uniform was ready on its hanger, but the cold had stiffened his fingers and it was a slow process; shedding the suit of a professional musician and putting on his everyday postman's uniform. He blew on his hands, trying to get some warmth into them, but he already knew that only a hot mug of tea would work.

Down in the kitchen, he expertly lit the flame on the stove and stared out of the window as the kettle boiled. He fancied he could see the sky lighten slightly as the hour grew closer to dawn. The kettle began its low whistle, and Lawrie lifted it off the ring before it could wake anybody with a full screech. Mrs Ryan would be up early so he made a full pot, tugging the hand-knitted tea cosy around it so that she could have a hot cuppa as soon as she came down. He always let it sit a good long while. He'd never been a big tea drinker before meeting Mrs Ryan, so he'd become used to the way she brewed it. He kept one eye on the time as he clasped

the mug, his fingers softening, the feeling returning, as he sat at the table and enjoyed the silence and warmth of the kitchen.

When the clock hands read half past four it was time to go. Lawrie wrapped up again in his heavy coat and the deep burgundy scarf that Evie had knitted him for Christmas. Reluctantly, he forwent his beloved lined leather gloves for the bobbled fingerless ones that did what they could to protect his precious hands against the elements while still allowing him to work easily. Pausing before unlatching the door, he took an extra few seconds to adjust his postman's cap on his brow before the long, age-speckled mirror, his forehead bisected by a crack in the glass, courtesy of a V-1 that had fallen in the next street in darker days.

'Oi!' Derek, Mrs Ryan's son, stood at the top of the stairs, just out of bed and wearing only an off-white vest and pants. His mother would have words if she saw the state of him. In his hand was a brown paper package. 'Take these over to Englewood, would you? Usual place.' He threw the package down and Lawrie caught it lightly, nodding his consent. More black-market stockings, he guessed. Rationing had made Derek a fortune. He tucked the package away in the hallway cupboard to collect after his shift.

The sorting office was only a ten-minute walk but Lawrie had to be early. He had to be the first to arrive. He glanced up at the house next door as he pulled the front door closed behind him, but Evie's window stayed dark. Not yet five and she'd be fast asleep. Last summer the early dawns had woken her, the sun rising to greet the city as he left for work. He'd pause and wait, turning when he heard the scrape of her sash window opening

up. They'd never speak – she'd hold a finger to her lips and smile down at him worried that her mother would hear, even though she was unlikely to. Agnes Coleridge took sleeping pills and snored louder than any man Lawrie had heard, the rumble audible through the party wall. He'd smile back and Evie would blow him a kiss as she rubbed sleep from her eyes. And even though the dark mornings had put paid to this small joy, he couldn't help but pause for a moment beneath her window. Just in case.

'You!'

Lawrie stifled a groan. 'Sir?' He turned to face Eric Donovan who was waddling down the aisle in his direction, his creased shirt already coming untucked from trousers whose waistband looked to be on the verge of capitulation.

'Get a move on today, boy, you hear? Second lot's gone out late twice this week already.' The words were barked around an unlit Woodbine that perched on Donovan's narrow bottom lip; the slimmest part of him.

'Yessir.' Lawrie had never headed out late, but he'd learned there was nothing to be gained in talking back to the boss.

'And don't forget my order.' Donovan lowered his voice, Lawrie nodding to show he understood. Donovan's sweet tooth kept Lawrie in his good books, Derek supplying bags of white sugar to maintain Donovan's addiction.

Lawrie put his head down and got on with the sorting while his fellow postmen straggled in, the air filling with a cacophony of male voices. Joining in with the general banter cheered him up by the time he'd got his bag packed, hefting it across his back

and adjusting his stance to accommodate the weight. His walk took him back down his own street – past Evie’s house – so he didn’t complain, despite it being one of the heavier routes.

Evie answered the door when he knocked at the Coleridges’, a round of toast in one hand and a shy smile on her face that brightened his mood in an instant. He didn’t deserve a girl this beautiful, not after what he’d done, and yet here she was.

‘Anything for me this morning, Mr Postman?’

‘Always.’ He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips, one eye checking over her shoulder in case her mother made a sudden appearance. He didn’t take it personally that he was forbidden to cross the threshold. He was sure that Mrs Coleridge would have said as much to any man who was wooing Evie. After all, his skin was barely a shade darker than her own daughter’s. Evie’s father had returned to wherever he’d come from without knowing he had a baby on the way, leaving Agnes Coleridge holding a mulatto child. No wonder she had a disposition as bitter as quinine.

‘Evie! Shut that door, will you? D’you want me to catch my death?’ The kitchen door slammed.

‘Don’t mind her.’ Evie pulled the door to behind her and wrapped her arms around her body, a flimsy protection against the cold, standing there in a plain blue cotton dress, navy jumper and her house slippers. ‘You got time for a cuppa? I can bring it out.’

Lawrie adjusted his bag across his back so that there was space for her in his arms, pulling her off the step and holding her tight to keep warm. ‘Not today.’

‘Is it Donovan? You should tell him what’s what.’ Evie fussed with his scarf, making sure his tender skin was protected.

‘I can manage him just fine.’ Lawrie stole another kiss before letting her go. ‘Just one letter today, ma’am.’ She laughed and took it, pressing the palm of her other hand to his cheek. ‘I’ll call round tonight when you’re home from work. You have a good day now.’

She leaned against the doorframe and watched as he made his way up the street, pushing envelopes into letterboxes, just as she did every day, whatever the weather. It was a miracle she’d never caught a cold, but Mrs Ryan reckoned that love did something strange to a body – that if it could be bottled or turned into pills it would make penicillin look like an old wives’ remedy. At the corner, he turned back to wave and blow a kiss. She never went inside until he was out of sight.

Towards the end of the day, as he sat in the police station, he would wonder if in this moment he’d jinxed himself – walking around with that stupid grin on his face as if he were the luckiest man alive.

The morning followed its familiar rhythm. First man back at the sorting office, first back out with the next delivery, smirking at the look of disappointment on Donovan’s face. He had a little gossip with Mrs Harwood as he gave her a hand carrying her shopping bags home and thanked Mr Thomson for a racing tip that he wouldn’t use himself but would pass on to Sonny who loved a little gamble. Lawrie clocked off in the early afternoon, declining the offer to join the others in the pub down the street. He tried to go with them once or twice a week, but only because he felt he should. He liked a game of snooker or dominoes but

he really didn't have a lot in common with these men: mainly married, mainly ex-servicemen, all white. Besides, he still had Derek's delivery to make.

He made a short detour home to pick up his bicycle and the package. Englewood Road was on the south side of Clapham Common, a place that was close to home; that green expanse of open land beneath which he had spent his first few nights in England. He remembered arriving there, that summer of 1948, and wondering how the sun could be so bright and yet so chill. And then they'd led him into the deep-level shelter, laughing at his terror at being underground, and fed him tasteless sandwiches along with the rest of the *Windrush* passengers who were unfortunate enough to have nowhere else to go.

The south side of the Common was busy with traffic, those famous red buses no longer a sight that thrilled him. At weekends the paths that cut across the Common would be much busier: couples strolling, children playing, fathers teaching their sons to sail boats on the ponds or feed the ducks. This was where he'd first set eyes on Evie, and where they'd had their first real kiss the summer before, sitting in the deep grass on a long hot Saturday afternoon. In better weather the air would be full of the shrieks of young children playing games, the chatter of their mothers as they exchanged gossip and pushed their progeny in huge Silver Cross prams that forced Lawrie from the path and onto the grass.

On this cold March afternoon, only the odd dog walker had ventured out. At this time of day he often saw these middle-aged women with their precious pets emerging from the large houses that surrounded the Common to walk their pampered animals in

circles. Their children were grown and their housework managed by a housekeeper or a charlady, someone like Mrs Coleridge who did for a family over on the north side. They came striding along with an entitlement that Lawrie would never possess, letting their dogs off the leash and looking the other way as their beloveds squatted and left the mess for someone else to step in. Just before he reached Eagle Pond, Lawrie looked up and saw one such woman coming towards him, veering to one side as she walked briskly down the centre of the path; there was a Jack Russell trotting along at her heels, and if Lawrie had learned anything in his postal career it was to watch out for those little bastards. The woman stared as he rode past, and he knew that if he looked back she'd be watching him. Making sure he kept moving and didn't hang around like a bad smell.

The lady who answered the door at Englewood Road was no better. Barely two words to say to him, neither of them wasted on thanks, but the money felt comforting in his pocket. Lawrie's cut was twenty per cent, bargained up from ten the year before. Derek needed a trusted delivery man, he'd argued. Someone who didn't look suspicious knocking on a door and handing over a brown paper package. Who better than the local postman?

*Maybe he should take Evie out*, he mused. Not just to the pictures. The boss of the club where he'd played the night before, he'd mentioned a few times that he'd get Lawrie a good table if he wanted to bring his girl along. Lawrie always smiled back and thanked him for the offer, said that he'd let him know. He wasn't sure what he was wary of. There was no shame in playing music for a living. It wasn't as though Evie didn't know what he did

but he liked that she was separate from all that. The women who frequented the club, not all of them but a few, they reminded him of his mistakes. They reminded him of Rose.

He cycled back the way he'd come, recognising the woman he'd seen with the terrier as he drew close to Eagle Pond, but the dog was nowhere to be seen. There was something strange about the way she was moving, and he found himself slowing down. She was pacing up and down in front of the pond, looking for something. Her gait was lopsided and, when she drew closer, he saw that her face was wet from tears that were blinding her. She didn't notice Lawrie until the last moment, suddenly aiming towards him and coming up short as she took him in properly. She held herself rigid, her mouth gasping for air that her lungs didn't seem to want to accept.

'Ma'am?' Lawrie swung his leg and dismounted, making his movements slow so that she didn't spook. 'You all right? Can I help you?'

She looked over her shoulder but turned back to him, fixing her eyes on his uniform. Whatever she'd seen was more frightening than one skinny black man. And there was no one else in sight. 'You – you're... a postman?' Her tongue tripped as she spoke.

'Yes, ma'am. Do you need help?'

She nodded and pointed in the direction she'd come from, a ragged sob creasing her body.

He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary at first. There was the pond, and there he spied the terrier. The small dog was soaked through. Barking urgently at him, it ran back towards the water.

'The pond.' The woman squeezed out the words and he noticed now that her hands were filthy, her coat spattered with mud.

‘There’s something in the pond?’

It was useless. She had begun to shiver, her teeth actually chattering as shock took hold. Lawrie laid his bike down on the grass and headed towards the pond on foot. The dog was still barking in a fury, running laps between the edge of the pond and the path.

‘What you got, boy?’

The dog splashed into the water, checking back to make sure he was being followed. There was a bundle there, a dirty blanket that once had been white. Lawrie crouched by the edge next to a smaller set of footprints that must have belonged to the woman. It didn’t look like much, this wad of sodden wool, but that didn’t stop fear from squeezing his chest tight as he reached out with his right hand, the palm of his left sinking into freezing mud as he tried to keep his balance.

He strained his arm and caught an inch of fabric between two fingers. Pulling gently, the bundle moved closer and he grabbed a tighter hold. The wool was heavy with water. White and yellow embroidered flowers peeked out from beneath the pond filth. Daisies. When he lifted it the bundle was heavier than he’d anticipated, but it wasn’t the weight that sent him crashing to the ground – only sheer luck landing him onto the bank rather than into the water. His heart pounded his ribs so hard that he glanced down at his chest, expecting to see it burst out through his coat, scattering buttons onto the ground.

The blanket lay there on the grass, the bundle coming apart. A baby’s arm had escaped, along with a shock of dark curly hair and a glimpse of a cheek. It could have been a doll, but one touch

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had been enough to convince him that it wasn't. The hand was frozen stiff but the skin gave as his fingers had brushed against it.

Someone had left a baby in the pond to die. A baby whose skin was as dark as Lawrie's.